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CARDS: A Novel

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CARDS: A Novel

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Lisa Ann Morford

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The Thesis of Lisa Ann Morford is approved:

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University of California, Riversid

*October 2014*

“We have to get rid of those Tarot cards,” Dax said.

“We tried that already, remember?”

Dax had seen a lot of gruesome scenes during his time spent with Rae, but this was by far the worst. He gripped Rae’s hand tightly as they wound through the hotel’s hallways. They needed to find the lobby. And soon. Dax knew he shouldn’t look into the open doors that they passed, but he couldn’t stop himself. He had to check just to make sure. And sure enough, behind each open door: bodies. Mangled, mutilated bodies. Blood everywhere.

They’d woken up, still slightly drunk with sex and sleep and last night’s wine, and had planned on going to the pool, unprepared for what would greet them outside their room. Rae wore a big broad brimmed hat and large bug-eye sunglasses. She looked ridiculous now, in those glasses, and Dax wished she wasn’t wearing them.

Dax felt sick to his stomach. It didn’t matter how many bloody scenes he had encountered—he couldn’t get used to it. And the smell. It was animal and wet and metallic and wrong. They finally reached the elevator and stepped inside. Rae pressed the button for the lobby with one of her tiny fingers. The little circle lit up and the doors slid closed. They both sighed. At least the elevator still worked.

“We have to try again,” Dax finally said. “Or it’s over. We’re over.” His voice sounded jarring, even to himself, against the buzzing emptiness of the elevator air. He was being unfair, and he knew it.

Rae shook her head, slowly, whether in disbelief or disagreement, Dax wasn't sure. He looked at her, this girl who he had only known for a month, but he couldn't tell what she was thinking behind those big glasses.

"We're over?" she said, the words sliding out slowly from her mouth, like she was talking under water. "I'm doing my thing anyway, remember?"

Dax let go of her hand. It was the longest elevator ride of his life. "Right," he said.

"You can't just waltz into my life and start ordering me around," Rae said.

"It's common sense."

"Maybe to you."

"Why do you want to keep them so badly?"

Rae didn't reply. They rode the rest of the way to the lobby in silence.

Finally, the elevator slid to a stop and the doors opened.

The smell, that animal wrongness, hit them first. Rae gasped, and Dax finally felt the nausea catch up to him, like a guest arriving drunk to a party. He turned and wretched into the corner of the elevator. In his stupor he felt bad about the mess he was making, but then he realized that considering all the blood, his puke was probably the least of the hotel's worries. If there were even any hotel staff left, which by the looks of it there probably weren't.

When he turned around, Rae was still standing in the exact same spot, her arms limp by her sides, her body frozen.

Dax really wished she would take those stupid sunglasses off.

He wiped the vomit from his mouth and stepped into the lobby.

It was like something out of a cheesy horror movie, only there was nothing cheesy about it. Mangled bodies spilled over each other onto couches and chairs, behind the front desk, in the check-in line. Blood gathered in dark pools on the marble floors and splattered in bursts onto the walls. Dax's stomach threatened to betray him again. He forced himself to hold it down and step forward, but Rae wouldn't budge.

"I'm getting out of here," Dax said. He grabbed her roughly.

The sound of his voice and the feel of his touch seemed to wake her, and Rae moved quickly, ripped her hat off, and pulled the glasses from her face. She tossed them to the side and they landed in a pool of blood. "I'm coming with you."

"Not with those cards, you're not."

"I can't do it, Dax."

Her long blonde hair tumbled over her shoulders, and her brown eyes pleaded with him. Seeing her eyes made him feel a little guilty, made him remember, no matter how stubborn she was being, that there was another human that was in this nightmare with him.

Dax touched her shoulder, more gently this time. He wanted to draw her close to him and protect her.

"Come on," he said. "Toss them in that trash can. Let's get out of here. Forget this. Start over."

She peeled her eyes away from the carnage to look at him. She shook her head. “They came back to me,” she said. She paused and looked around the lobby again, the silence eerie. “I just can’t do it. It feels wrong.”

Dax’s forehead creased. The only thing that made any sense at this point was to get rid of the cards. It may not fix everything or get them out of this mess. All Dax knew was that it was the most logical place to start.

“You’re being stubborn,” he said.

Rae shook her head, her lips set in a straight line. “You saw what happened before.”

She was right, he had seen, and he was spooked. There was no way he was going anywhere with those cards. Just being near them freaked him out. Maybe what had happened back at the beach had been an illusion brought on by stress. All he knew was that somehow, the cards were connected to all of this. He just wanted to destroy them and get the two of them far away from this mess. “Here, just give them to me.”

“If this is going to work,” Rae said, her chin quivering. “You need to support my decisions. I need to feel validated in my choices.”

Dax flung his arms, exasperated. “Are you keeping the cards?” he said.

Rae didn’t respond. She looked past his shoulder, her eyes set and determined.

“There’s your answer,” Dax said.

He walked away from her and headed towards the lobby doors. He tried not to look at the mess around him, and instead focused on the floor to avoid stepping in any

blood. The sooner he could get himself away from this madness, away from this hotel, and away from those damn cards, the sooner he could think clearly.

He was nearing the lobby doors, and he heard a humming sound. He looked up into the corner of the room and saw a green light blinking, and a video camera moving in slow sweeping motions. He paused, looked back at Rae who was still standing right outside the elevator doors.

“Won’t you come?”

Rae folded her arms across her chest and juttred one hip to the side. Her jaw set, and she glared at him. “Are you really leaving me here?”

“I’m not going anywhere with those cards.”

“Then I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

*Ridiculous.*

The warm morning air felt good, and he stood just outside the doors for a moment to allow the sunlight to wash over him. Out here, everything was still normal. There were people walking into the nearby coffee shop for their morning coffee, cars driving along the road that passed in front of the hotel. There were people, and they were alive. Out here, the world was still right. Dax took a deep breath and touched his pocket to make sure he still had his keys. Once he knew they were there, he headed for his car.

Dax got into his car, started it, and looked back to see if Rae had followed him, but he didn’t see her anywhere.

*Good.*

Let her stay behind. She was only punishing herself. He'd tried to reason with her. Whatever happened to her now was her fault. Her *choice*, as she'd put it. He wasn't going to be responsible for whatever happened to her. He wasn't going to stick around to watch.

He slid the keys into the ignition, started the car, and started driving back towards San Diego. He began to breathe normally again, the farther away he got from the hotel. He began to think more clearly, the farther away he got from the blood.

*March 2014*

Rae was alone in the apartment tonight, the last night. It was mostly empty now, with only the mattress on the floor in the bedroom and a few scattered boxes of her things. All the big furniture had been sold—everything that she and Tom had bought together over the years. There hadn't been any use fighting about who got what. It felt better starting out fresh anyway.

She wondered where Tom was now, not that it mattered. She felt an empty, scraping sensation in her chest. A hollowness. Four years. It felt like such a waste.

And since they had decided to split, everything had happened so fast. The next thing she knew, they had both secured apartments of their own and were taking all the necessary steps to untangle their lives. It was almost funny, how easy it was. After all that time of not being able to imagine a life apart.

In a weird way, she wished he was there now. She wasn't fooling herself—she knew that it was over. But, he'd been her best friend and it felt wrong not to have him there now, spending one last night in this space they had shared for all that time.

Rae pulled a pillow closer to her body. She tried not to think about that night, but it came rushing back to her, so fast she felt nauseated, and she replayed it like she had so many times already. The party. The alcohol. The fight on the way home. The question she asked him that she hadn't dared ask in four years because she was afraid of the answer.

“Are we ever going to get married?”

She hadn't meant to say the words out loud, but she was drunk and almost thirty and they had spent the second half of their twenties together. She had been patient. And honestly, after four years of never daring to broach the question, she felt she had a right to ask.

She hated to be that girl—had spent her life trying not to be *that girl*. As a child, her mother had whispered poison about the world into Rae's ears. She would clean Rae's scraped knees and admonish her, telling her that “women were meant to have quiet and gentle spirits.” They were not meant to run around the neighborhood behaving like little boys. She was to grow up and find herself a good husband, a man whom she would respect and obey.

Rae hadn't liked the idea then—she was never any good at being quiet or gentle—and she didn't like it now.

She was liberal in many ways—she was open minded and unconventional. And even if she didn't agree with something, she was always willing to stay open to new perspectives. Why then, was it so hard for her to be open to an alternative type of relationship? Not that Rae hadn't tried. Throughout her relationship with Tom she had always told herself: Who needs to get married? We're together. That's enough. We'll be like Kurt and Goldie.

What sucked was that she *wanted* those things. She wanted the ring. The dress. The stupid wedding. In spite of all the ways she had fought to reinvent herself, there it was. This completely annoying desire that she just couldn't make go away. It was ruining everything.

Tom hadn't responded. He stared straight ahead into the tunnel of light carved out by the headlights, both hands gripping the steering wheel firmly. They had both been drinking and it was safe to say that Tom shouldn't have been driving. Rae had watched him, her eyes brimming over with drunken tears, and she saw the muscles in his jawline pulse. She willed herself not to speak, to let her question fade into the darkness on the road behind them. *Just be quiet and let it go.*

"That's the response I get?" she said, her voice more shrill than she'd intended. "Nothing?"

"What if there's someone better?" Tom said. The words erupted out of him, like they were coming from some deep, molten place inside of him. He looked at her, his eyes fierce.

Rae swallowed, startled by his burst of emotion. "Tom," she said. "Watch the road."

He looked away from her and pounded the edge of the steering wheel. Rae looked out of the passenger window and felt pain shred through her chest, like she was being ripped open. She cried so deeply and so completely that there wasn't any sound, only tears and ache.

When she was finally able to speak, she didn't look at him. "Do you really mean it?"

"Babe," Tom said, more quietly than before. "I'm just not sure if I ever want to get married."

"Not even to me?"

“Not even to anyone.”

They had driven the rest of the way home without speaking a word. The part that hurt the most was that Rae had never been uncertain about him. She had always loved him with every part of her. Not that she had been perfect. She traveled a lot for work, which was a strain on the relationship at times, and she had a serious stubborn streak. But when it came to loving him, she had never held back.

The moment that Tom said he didn't know if he wanted to ever get married, Rae knew that it was a deal breaker. All these years she had suspected, because Tom never talked about marriage, and she had tried to prepare herself for this moment by trying to be okay with it. But now that they were here and the moment was real, Rae knew that there was nothing she could do to change what she wanted.

This desire for marriage and a family felt like it went against everything she had fought to become. But there it was, a part of her, ingrained. The next morning, Rae in tears, Tom staring stoically out the window, they had both agreed it was probably best to split.

And now as she lay here alone in the bed they had shared together, Rae wondered if she had been wrong and felt the agony of it all over again. Maybe if she had tried a little harder. Maybe if she could have just loved Tom for who he was and been okay with their arrangement. They could have gone on forever, living as they had been, happy and loving each other, if she could have just accepted that they would never marry.

Rae curled herself against her pillow. She didn't just hurt in her heart. She hurt physically in her whole body.

And she hated it. She hated that a man—or anyone, for that matter—had the power to make her feel this way. She didn't want to need anyone. She wanted to be okay by herself. But right now, just at this moment, she wasn't.

*September 2014*

Dax Carpenter sat at his desk, a neat stack of completed internet orders on his right, and a neat stack of orders that still needed to be processed on his left. It was a good system, one he'd been using for ten years, and Dax liked staying organized. He took a sip of his bottled green tea—unsweetened. He was about to reach for the top order on the left, when his backside prickled, like someone was standing directly behind him.

He turned, then jumped when he saw that his boss, Mitchum Doyle, hovered over him. Mitchum had a huge smile on his round pink face. That couldn't be a good sign.

“Dax!” Mitchum boomed and slapped Dax on his right shoulder. Dax winced.

“Afternoon, Mr. Doyle,” Dax said, politely. He wanted to hurry up and get through whatever it was Mitchum was up to. Dax still needed to process fifty more orders before lunch; it was part of his routine.

“Got a minute?” Mitchum said. He winked at him, like they were in a conspiracy. “My office.”

Dax realized that his “having a minute” wasn't really an option. He looked around at the other desks. Some of the other customer service representatives were watching; others were too zoned out at their computers to realize that something unusual was happening. After a quick longing gaze at the stack on the left—fifty more till lunch, a trip to the boss' office was really going to set him back, and he was already starting to get hungry—he sighed and got up from his chair.

They walked past the rows of desks towards Mitchum's office, and Dax was perplexed over what the issue could be. Mitchum didn't seem upset, with his ludicrous

smile, so Dax couldn't have done anything wrong. This was highly unlikely anyway, because Dax was so meticulous with his work. So what was it? What could have his boss beaming with red-faced joy at eleven-fifteen in the morning?

They entered Mitchum's glass-doored office, which smelled faintly of coffee and corn nuts, and Mitchum sat down at his desk. Dax remained standing, awkwardly rubbing his hands together and eyeing the clock. Every moment standing there was another moment behind schedule. And there was nothing Dax hated more than to be behind schedule.

"Please," Mitchum said, extending his hand. "Sit down."

Dax sat.

Mitchum interlaced his hands on top of his voluminous belly and continued to smile in atrociously. "I'll bet you're wondering why I called you in here today."

Dax was, but he thought the answer seemed obvious, so he didn't reply.

"Well," Mitchum said, opening a file that was sitting on his desk. He slipped a pair of reading glasses across the bridge of his nose. "I've been paying attention, Dax."

Dax raised his eyebrows.

"Oh I know, I'll bet you probably thought I wasn't," he said. "I know people think I'm somewhat of a joke around here, but we'll keep that between you and me." He winked, then continued flipping through the pages in the file. Dax looked on the edge of the file and saw his name written neatly across its side: *Dax Carpenter*.

Mitchum continued. "You've been with the company—what?" More flipping pages.

“Ten years, sir,” Dax said.

“Ten years,” Mitchum said, sitting back, shaking his head as if ten years was something to be amazed about. “Ten years. And your numbers. You have the highest numbers of all customer service reps, and one hundred percent accuracy. You know that no one here has one hundred percent accuracy?”

Dax felt his face getting hot. “I care about my work, sir.”

“That much is obvious. And that,” Mitchum said, “is why I’m promoting you.”

“You’re what?”

“I’m giving you a promotion.” Mitchum was beaming; his face seemed to emit a red, Christmas light glow.

“A what?”

Mitchum slammed the file shut and wailed with laughter. “I’m promoting you to head of sales,” he said. “You’ll no longer be dealing with the customers and the orders. Now you’ll be in charge of the entire sales floor. How’s that? It comes with quite a hefty raise, and a yearly bonus, which isn’t insignificant, I might add.”

“You might,” Dax said, absently. His mouth was dry. He wanted to reach for his green tea, but it wasn’t there, because he wasn’t at his desk where he was supposed to be. He was supposed to be halfway through the last fifty orders for the morning. He was supposed to be almost eating lunch.

“Let me tell you, Dax,” Mitchum said. “It’s a shame this hasn’t happened earlier. After ten years with this company, and a record like yours, it’s just too bad. An oversight really. But, no matter. All rights will be wronged!”

“I don’t,” Dax said and his voice cracked. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything!” Mitchum said. “I’m giving you the rest of the day off. Go celebrate, with your lady. Or—I can’t say I know if you have a lady, but no matter. Find one if you don’t!” He was really quite enjoying himself.

“Rest of the day . . .” Dax felt his head spinning. He thought of the stack of orders on the left. They weren’t completed. “I still have work to do.”

“Work?” Mitchum said. “There will be plenty of that tomorrow, when you start your new position. One of the other reps will take care of your work, I’ll just have them divvy it up and we’ll make sure it gets done.”

“Divvy?” Dax said. “I’d really prefer to just do it myself, if you don’t mind.”

“Nonsense!” Mitchum said. “Now you go grab your things, and go on home. And that’s an order!”

Mitchum stood up and came to the front of the desk, where Dax had managed to stand as well. Mitchum shook his hand clumsily and opened the door to his office.

Dax walked through the glass door, dazed. He went to his desk. He picked up his briefcase and reached for his green tea. As he grabbed it, he paused, eyeing the stack on the left, then he shook his head. He avoided the eyes of curious onlookers, and left the building.

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It felt strange to Dax to walk through the front door of his apartment midday on a Monday. It was too bright with afternoon light. He stood just inside his front door, unsure what to do with himself. Then he placed his briefcase in its space by the coat rack. He

hung his keys on their hook by the front door and walked towards his bedroom slowly, the way a man might walk through a stranger's house.

In his bedroom, he eyed his neatly made bed. The pale grey comforter was pulled smooth and taut. He thought about how nice it would feel to undo the covers and slide between the sheets in the middle of the day. He wouldn't though, he knew, the thought was just too strange. His gaze drifted to the treadmill next to his bed, as though there was an idea there, but no. He had already run this morning, and wasn't in the mood for more.

Dax slid his closet door open. He pulled his white polo shirt over his head, and held it with uncertainty. He thought about putting it into his hamper, but he'd only worn it half a day. It seemed to Dax a waste of a good shirt. He found an empty hanger and made space between the long row of hangers boasting white polo shirts. He started to slide the shirt onto the hanger, but his fingers fumbled and he dropped it.

When he bent down to find the shirt he dropped, he realized that it had fallen on top of the box. Dax reached for the shirt. After he picked it up, his fingers grazed the box gently, then rested on top of it. He lingered for longer than he meant to, and when he caught himself, he stood up sharply. He hadn't opened the box in five years and wasn't about to open it now.

He tossed the shirt into his hamper.

Dax realized he was hungry and, after shutting his closet door, went into the kitchen. As he made himself a sandwich—whole wheat bread, Dijon mustard on one slice, low-fat mayo on the other, two slices of turkey, one slice of cheese, a tomato, a leaf of lettuce—he began to relax. Just a little. Admittedly, it did feel kind of nice to be home,

in the middle of the day, on a Monday. It felt a little bit like he was getting away with something bad, a feeling that Dax hadn't experienced since—well, probably since college.

He sat down at his small kitchen table to eat his sandwich, and he started to think about college. And then the next inevitable thought: Theresa.

Theresa was the last thing he wanted to think about right now. But she was always there, hanging around the edges of things, waiting to be brought back to life in his memory. She had been the one who had always convinced him to get out of his comfort zone, to break the rules. It was Theresa who had talked him into trespassing into the library after hours. It had been her idea to fuck in the bathroom at The House of Blues while Jimmy Eat World played on the main stage. It had been her idea to drive on Sunset Cliffs Boulevard in her convertible at midnight with the headlights off.

The sandwich felt suddenly dry in his mouth, and difficult to swallow. He took a sip of water and tried to pull his thoughts back to the present.

It was ridiculous to feel like he was getting away with something, when it wasn't as though he was actually doing anything wrong or breaking any rules—his boss had sent him home, after all. Had promoted him, even. He was being rewarded.

Why didn't it feel that way?

Dax enjoyed his job. Maybe “enjoyed” was a bit too strong of a word. But who really enjoyed their jobs? He was comfortable. He was good at it. He liked knowing what to do, and that he could do it well. He got a three percent raise every six months, so after

ten years with the company, he wasn't doing too badly for himself. It was a good job. It was secure, and it was safe.

Dax ran his fingers through his dark hair, messing up his neatly combed part. For the first time in ten years, he had no idea what to expect tomorrow.

He stared at his half eaten sandwich, and didn't feel hungry anymore.

Every day for the last ten years, Dax had known what to expect. To some, the idea of something new might seem fresh or exciting. But to Dax, the prospect was terrifying. He didn't want to be in charge. He knew absolutely nothing about being in charge. What he knew was processing orders. From the left pile, to the right pile. One hundred and fifty before lunch, one hundred and fifty after. Like clockwork.

He thought about how he had known what to expect every day for the last ten years. He thought he had wanted it that way, thought he had—he thought of the way Theresa's leg had wrapped around him in the bathroom stall, the way her skirt had slid up above her hips, the way her fingers had curled into the flesh on the back of his neck while he'd come into her to the beat of *Salt Sweat Sugar*.

Maybe it was time to live a little. Maybe a promotion wasn't such a bad thing. He smiled, thinking how Theresa would be proud, and how angry she would be at him for his reluctance to accept the position.

Maybe—and this was a serious maybe—maybe he should celebrate.

*Salt, sweat, sugar on the asphalt*

*Our hearts littering the top soil*

*Tune in, and we can get the last call*

*Our lives, our coal*

He decided that he would start by taking a nap.

*2011*

The first time Joshua witnessed sorcery, it nearly cost him his faith. But of course, he quickly remembered the story of Moses, when Pharaoh commanded him to perform a miracle. Moses directed Aaron to throw down his staff, and in the name of the Lord, the staff became a snake. Pharaoh's sorcerers were able to use their secrets arts to turn their own staffs into snakes, but Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. This story comforted Joshua. It reminded him of two things: One, that God's power always usurped man's power. Two, that this man whom Joshua had just watched levitate twelve feet above the earth was a very, very wicked man.

Joshua was thirty years old at the time, and deep in a Mexican village. He had come here after he'd had a very vivid dream in which the Lord had commanded him to leave all of his earthly belongings and go across the border. Prophetic dreams were how God had always communicated with him, ever since he was a small boy. He'd come here with complete faith that the Lord would guide his feet. He had been here for nearly a month, and he was dirty, hungry, and running out of money. He was beginning to lose hope, and chastised himself for having so little trust. He could not rush the Lord. Joshua knew that his resolve was being tested, and he vowed he would not fail.

The Lord had revealed to Joshua in a dream, many years ago, that he was to be a leader during the End Times. Since that time he had been filling himself up with the Word of God, meditating on the scriptures, and preparing himself for the trials and tribulations that were sure to come in the days ahead.

One of the problems Joshua had noticed about being a leader was that it was difficult to be one if no one knew who you were. A man needed followers to be a leader. Joshua hoped that would come with time. It was just a matter of faith and patience. Like Noah building the ark before any sign of rain.

And so it came to pass that one day, while buying a ripe mango from a fruit stand, Joshua noticed a crowd of people gathering in the village square. Joshua handed the vendor his *pesos* and took the mango. He bit into it as he walked, the sweet juices leaking out the corners of his mouth and down onto the tip of his chin. He walked in the direction of the growing crowds, his sandaled feet kicking up dust behind him.

The crowd was thickening and vibrating with excitement. Joshua's Spanish was still very weak, and everyone was talking very fast, so he couldn't make out what they were saying. It was difficult to get through, but Joshua was persistent. When he reached the center of the crowd, he saw what everyone was watching.

A very old man, with weathered brown skin and long white hair that was pulled back into a tail at the base of his neck, was sitting cross-legged. Sitting, that is, on nothing but the breeze, levitating fifteen feet up in the air. His eyes were closed and his palms rested on his knees.

How could this be? What did this mean? How could God allow something like this to happen under his watch?

Joshua bit into the mango again, his teeth tearing into the flesh of the fruit, and he never took his eyes off of the old sorcerer. It took him a minute for him to come back into

himself, to remember the story of Moses and Pharaoh's magicians with their secret arts.

A false prophet—this is what Joshua finally understood the old sorcerer to be.

Still, he saw the way the crowds thronged and pulsed around the levitating sorcerer. The power the old man had over them! He could say anything, and they would listen. He could tell them that the sky was green and the earth was blue, and they would believe. He could tell them to go spreads his message unto the ends of the earth, and they would obey. How much more powerful would this magic be if it were coming through a conduit such as himself, a man with the power and anointing of God to guide him? What this old man possessed was a power very valuable. The kind of power that Joshua needed.

And suddenly, what Joshua saw was opportunity, and fate.

Joshua began to walk towards the sorcerer. He knew what the Lord had sent him to do.

*April 2014*

“The best way to get over a guy is to get under another one.”

Rae’s friend Tammy had said that to her one evening, when they had gone out for drinks after she and Tom had broken up. It had made Rae laugh in the moment, *Oh girl you’re so right*, but in the sober light of day the thought sickened her. A guy was the last thing she wanted. And it was kind of a disgusting concept anyway—to need a man to take your mind off of another man. Rae was more mature than that.

It had been a long time since she had lived alone and she was having trouble adjusting to her new apartment. Plus she’d already been traveling for work, so she had only spent a few nights in her apartment. She had raided Anthropologie and made her apartment as perfectly feminine and bohemian as possible—exactly the way she hadn’t been able to decorate when she was with Tom. Pillows, curtains, decadent bedding. It was pretty and she liked it. But the walls creaked, and the shadows fell at strange angles that her body and mind weren’t adjusted to yet. Often she would wake in the middle of the night and forget where she was. It was unsettling. Alien.

When she was in town, she spent a lot of nights out. Even if it meant going out by herself. Did it make you look like an alcoholic to go sit at bars by yourself? Or at the very least, some kind of loser? She didn’t care, it felt good to be around people. To be in the world instead of locked in her apartment alone.

It was on one of these solo excursions that she met Rick. It was afternoon. Sunshine splashed in through the windows, making the bar feel strangely empty. She was sitting at the bar, sipping a Moscow Mule, when he came in and sat on the other end. He

had a closely cropped beard and wore skinny jeans with a plaid flannel shirt. He started talking to the bartender.

Rae wasn't trying to listen, but the bar was mostly empty, and their conversation echoed. It wasn't like they were talking about anything personal but Rae felt rude eavesdropping, anyway. When she heard him mention that relationships were a drag, Rae interjected before she could stop herself.

She raised her glass and said, "Amen to that."

He looked over at her and smiled. "Rough day?"

"Rough life," Rae said, smirking, and feeling rather witty.

"Tell me about it," the guy said, taking his beer and sipping it.

"I just don't know anymore," Rae said. "If they're worth it."

"What?"

"Men," Rae said, raising her eyebrows.

"Some of us are."

"You all say that."

"Ouch."

"I don't mean it to be rude," Rae said. "It's just an observation."

"Why all the bitterness?" he said.

"I'm not bitter." Rae paused, thinking. "Just burned."

He picked up his beer from the bar and nodded towards the empty bar stool next to her. "May I?"

Rae shrugged. "Sure."

He came over. "I'm Rick."

"Rae."

"Listen, you can't just write off all guys because of one dick," he said.

Rae shook her head. "I'm not writing anyone off."

"What then?"

"Taking a time out I guess," she said.

"Any particular reason?" he said.

"I just got out of a relationship," she said, then blanched. "Yuck. That's so typical."

"How long?"

"Of a time out? Who knows."

"No," he said. "I mean, how long were you together?"

"Oh. Four years."

Rick nodded. "Sounds about right."

Rae finished her drink, signaled to the bartender for another, then took a long look at Rick. He wasn't exactly cute, but he wasn't unattractive either. "Seems like as good a time as any to focus on myself."

"A commitment cleanse."

"What?"

"You know," he said. "Like a juice cleanse. Or whatever. That's what you need."

Rae laughed. "Definitely." The bartender dropped off her cocktail.

"So what do you do?"

“I’m a writer.”

Rick nodded. “Oh, intrigue.”

“You?”

“I manage that Mexican place down the street.”

“Cocinas?”

“That’s the one.”

“You know what I should do?” Rae said, sitting up straight in her chair, beaming with an idea.

“What’s that?”

“Start a blog.”

“Don’t you write already?”

“I mean, for myself,” she said. “A personal blog.”

“Go for it,” he said, a bit disinterested.

“No, listen,” Rae said, touching his arm. “No commitment of any kind for one year. I can date, whatever. And I blog about it. Learn about myself.”

Rick nodded, smiling. “I’m liking it.”

Rae winked. “Call it, ‘Commitment Cleanse.’”

They drank a few more drinks. Rae’s vision went blurry, in that happy-drunk way, where everything starts to look like watercolor. Their voices slurred, their knees bumped together underneath the bar.

Eventually they left together, and though Rae had meant to call a cab, she found her back up against a brick wall in the alley while Rick kissed her. She’d never kissed a

guy with a beard before, and it wasn't completely terrible. His body pressed into hers, and she could feel that his dick was hard. She felt something open inside her, a blossoming of freedom. She had never gone home with a guy she'd just met, and she was curious.

Rick nibbled on her ear and whispered, "I'm just down the street."

Rae pushed him away so she could look him in the face, and nodded. It was bold and probably dangerous and definitely a terrible idea, which was why she wanted to do it so much.

He led her to his loft apartment. When they were inside, he gave her a half-hearted obligatory tour. He showed her the couch and the windows that looked out onto the bar lined street below.

Feeling bold, Rae turned to him. "Where's the bedroom?" she said. It was liberating somehow, playing this role, being this girl that she wasn't.

Rick showed the way, then pushed her down on the bed. He slid her jeans down her legs and pulled off her shirt. He stuck his hand into her underwear and touched between her legs. She heard him groan, the little shudder of pleasure a man gives when he realizes you are wet for him.

He took his pants off. Rae was startled by the sight of his dick, and she was reminded that this wasn't Tom. She hadn't seen any penis but Tom's in the last four years. And Rick's penis was bigger, more red and aggressive looking than Tom's had been. And he was climbing on top of her, looking at her but not seeming to really see her, and shoving himself into her.

One Fourth of July in Ocean Beach, there was a huge fireworks show. It was going to be the most spectacular fireworks show San Diego had ever seen, and people talked about it for months. When the day finally arrived, someone messed up and somehow, all of the fire works went off at the same time. Every last one, all at once. The show was a burst of light that lasted less than fifteen seconds, and everyone just sort of stared up at the sky, their faces, still bright with anticipation, upturned to the cloud of sulfur. All that build up, all that hype, for one big burst of disappointment.

Rae wished that she had taken the cab, and left Rick wondering, and gone home aching. It would have been sweeter in her imagination.

Because, right now, Rick was grunting in a strangely animal way, and he had more chest hair than she had pictured. And it was going to end quickly, Rae realized when she looked at his face and knew he was about to come. They hadn't used a condom and only in this second did it dawn on her how stupid that was. But Rick hadn't mentioned it and Rae wasn't used to asking. With Tom she'd never had to think about safety.

Rae wasn't on the pill because the hormones made her feel terrible. She and Tom hadn't used condoms, because they'd developed a pretty heavy reliance on the "pull-out method" of birth control and had never had a pregnancy scare. Rae screeched, "I'm not on birth control!"

Rick pulled out, quickly enough, Rae hoped, and came on her belly. He looked down at her. "That was close," he said. He sounded annoyed. "Thanks doll." He rolled to the other side of the bed and started snoring.

The snoring was so instantaneous and so ferocious that Rae thought, at first, that he was faking it. Rae looked over at him in disbelief, and she realized that he had, in fact, actually fallen asleep that quickly. Rick's head was tilted back and his mouth wide open. He was out. Just like that.

Rick's sperm was getting cold and starting to congeal on her belly. She got up awkwardly, trying to prevent any of it from sliding down any further, and located the bathroom. She cleaned herself up with toilet paper. She looked at her reflection in the mirror. Her eyeliner was smudged and her hair a tangled mess. She was starting to feel sick, like an early hangover.

When Rae went back into the room, Rick was still out like the dead and snoring fantastically loud. She looked at the bed and felt absolutely no desire to lay down next to him. So, she found her clothes and pulled them on.

Before she walked out the door, she thought about leaving her phone number. She paused, chewed her lip, then decided against it. She left his apartment and pulled the door closed tightly behind her.

*April 2014*

It was cold in the examination room—why was it always so cold? Especially when they knew you were going to be mostly naked? It never made sense to Rae. She thought it would make more sense to keep it warm as a way of offering some sort of comfort. Like, hey, we know you’re about to have your personal space seriously invaded and you’re probably feeling pretty uncomfortable right now, but here’s some warmth so you at least don’t have to freeze your ass off in the process. Or maybe that was the point. Maybe they wanted to make sure the entire process felt completely cold and clinical, and to add warmth would lend too much coziness to the scenario.

Rae shifted on the exam table and the paper beneath her legs crinkled. It smelled like rubbing alcohol in the room, and the florescent lights flickered ever so slightly in a way that Rae found completely maddening. Before a pelvic exam she always tried to relax herself—give herself a pep talk of sorts, telling herself that it wasn’t at all weird that a stranger was about to poke around in her vagina. And even though she knew that these kinds of doctors were all professionals, she couldn’t help but hope that the doctor was a woman. It’s just easier to convince yourself into the *this-isn’t-weird-at-all* mindset when at least the doctor is a woman. You can pretend that you’re part of a network of women all looking out for each other, that it’s some kind of sisterhood for the well being of lady parts.

There was a knock on the door.

“Yes,” Rae said, too quietly at first. She found these sorts of door exchanges to be awkward. She added, more loudly, “I’m changed. Come in.”

It was a middle aged man.

“Thanks for being so patient, Miss Parker,” the doctor said, smiling. A female assistant followed behind him. “I’m Dr. Rosenthal.”

“Sure,” Rae said. She felt her carefully constructed sense of ease unraveling and she grasped at the last few remaining strands of inner calm. *This is so stupid*, she told herself. *It’s Planned Parenthood. He’s a professional, he does this every single day.* It was her own fault she was here. The check up was just a precaution, and she knew that she was doing the responsible thing, but she felt stupid anyway. She knew better than to have unprotected sex with a perfect stranger.

After he asked her a few questions, the doctor instructed Rae to put her feet into the stirrups, and slide forward on the table. He lifted the paper and looked under it. “A little bit more, all the way to the edge,” he said.

Rae scooted forward more and stared at the ceiling. Instinctively her knees clasped together.

“Knees straight up,” he said.

“Sorry,” Rae said. She spread her knees apart, feeling exposed and vulnerable. She didn’t want to look at him, so she stared up at the square tiles on the ceiling.

“Alright, you’ll feel a bit of pressure,” he said. He inserted the lubricated speculum into her vagina, and Rae tried not gasp. It was ice cold.

“Deep breaths, Miss Parker,” he said. The assistant stood behind him mutely, handing him tools when he needed.

Rae felt a strange tingling sensation when the doctor used a swab to retrieve a sample from inside her. She slowed her breathing, trying to relax.

The doctor pulled the speculum out, then he stood over her. “Tell me if you feel any pain,” he said. He inserted two of his gloved fingers into her, and used his other hand to press lightly into her lower belly. Rae didn’t want to look at him, but he was right there, so she fixated on the wiry grey hairs that protruded from the doctor’s nose.

He pulled his fingers out. As soon as the doctor told her, “All set!” and covered her with the paper, she pressed her knees together and shoved herself back up the table, as far away from the edge as possible.

“We’ll call you with the results within a week,” he told her, sliding off the rubber gloves and tossing them into the garbage can. “Any questions for me?”

“No,” Rae said.

The doctor nodded and closed the curtain around her on his way out.

Rae scooted off the examination table, her bare feet touching down on the ice cold floor. After using the paper covering from the table to wipe the cold lubrication from between her legs, she tip-toed over to the chair where she had neatly folded her clothes. Rae got dressed as quickly as she could and went to the front desk.

The large Hispanic woman at the front desk, who was wearing big black glasses and fuchsia lipstick, smiled at Rae when she walked out. “Do you need anything else today?” She paused, and when Rae looked uncertain, she offered, “Condoms?”

Rae signed her name and handing the clipboard back to the woman with the not-unkind eyes, and she said, “Uh, sure.”

*September 2014*

There was a prickling, magnetic pull on Dax's skin. He moved towards the pull, slowly, and then there was a dizzying rush, like being sucked through a tunnel. It took his breath away, like that moment at the top of a roller coaster when you hit the first big drop.

Dax opened his eyes, and lurched. He yanked himself up, grabbed his alarm clock, and stared at it wildly. 8:41. 8:41. He tried to translate the numbers, tried to reconcile what they meant against the darkness of his bedroom. 8:41.

He was late for work.

He reeled. He was never late for work. He stumbled out of bed, tripped over his shoes in the process, and tried to find the light switch. Tried to figure out why it was so dark so late in the morning.

Morning.

It wasn't morning. It was 8:41 *at night*. At night. He sat down on the edge of his bed and touched his heart. It was racing. He wasn't late, it was 8:41 at night and he had just woken from his nap.

Good god. Had he really slept all that time? Dax couldn't remember the last time he'd taken a nap like that. He rubbed his chin with his hand and sat there. He let his heart rate slow down.

He looked at the clock. There was no way he would be going to sleep any time soon. He was wide awake and completely rested.

And he was starving.

Usually, he would cook himself a simple dinner, then spend an hour or two reading before bed. But his current hunger was more immediate than that. And his normal routine just didn't seem to fit with this day. If ever there was a good night for pizza, it was tonight. He figured that he really probably should celebrate his promotion some way other than just taking a really long nap.

He grabbed a jacket and headed out the door, feeling incredibly adventurous for a Monday night.

Luigi's was his favorite pizza shop in Golden Hill, and it was only two blocks from his apartment. Usually he only went to there on Friday nights. It was a reward to himself for a week's worth of work well done and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. He'd read in *Men's Health* that it was good to give yourself some kind of indulgence, so that you never felt deprived. His was a weekly serving of two slices of pepperoni pizza and a cold Heineken.

"Dax," said Frank from behind the counter when Dax walked in. "Is it Friday already?" He looked genuinely perplexed.

Dax shrugged shyly. "No," he said. "It's just a—strange week."

Frank smiled. "It's only Monday," he said. "Pepperoni? Two slices? Or you wanna get dangerous tonight?"

"Nah, pepperoni sounds good," Dax said. "And a Heineken."

"Ah, drinking on a work night?" Frank said, sliding two pepperoni slices into the big stone oven. "Sure you don't wanna try something new? We've got a couple new local brews on tap."

“No, thanks, I think the Heineken will be fine,” he said. After a pause, he added, “Maybe next time.”

“You always say that.” Frank grinned and handed Dax the green bottle.

Dax took the beer and parked himself at his favorite table. He scanned the room. The place wasn't that busy tonight. A couple seated in the corner, deep in what looked to be a very serious conversation. A guy over to his right, laughing hysterically at something on his cell phone.

When he saw the girl who was staring at him, he looked quickly down into the top of his beer bottle. He took a long sip, then set it down. He stared some more, folded, then unfolded, his hands. He couldn't help it—he looked up again. Yep. She was still staring. Shit.

“You should have gone with the nut brown,” she said. She stared at him a moment longer, then looked down at something on the table.

Dax looked over his shoulder. She couldn't possibly be talking to him. He looked at her again, and she was staring right at his face. Though her eyes looked slightly troubled and serious, a smile played at the corner of her lips. “I—the what?” he said.

“The nut brown,” she said again. She gestured towards the glass in front of her. It was filled half way with brown liquid. “Beer. The nut brown is my favorite. Heineken is old news.”

“I don't like dark beer.”

“Have you ever tried it?”

“Well, no.”

“Then how do you know that you don’t like it?” she said. “I bet you would.”

“I just really, well, I like what I like,” Dax said.

The girl smiled. She was small—petite, with pale skin, long, unruly dirty blonde hair, big brown eyes in a small white face. Yet there was something commanding about her, something impressive despite her small size.

“Come here,” she said, still staring down at the table. “I want to show you something.”

“Oh, that’s alright,” Dax said. He didn’t know what to do with his hands, so he took another sip of his beer.

The girl’s eyes lingered for a moment longer on the table, then she lifted them and met his gaze again. “Because you’re so busy?”

“Well, I—”

“Are you meeting anyone?”

“Well, no.”

“So you’re just having dinner and beer by yourself.”

“Right.”

“So come over here,” she said again, patting the table firmly. “Come on.”

Dax was out of excuses, and, even more surprising, he wasn’t that upset about it. The girl was pretty and something about her was magnetic. He *wanted* to be near her. This frightened him, but he sighed and obediently stood up from his chair. He sat down across from her.

“What do you make of this?” she said. She was looking back at the table again, only now that Dax was there, he saw what she was actually looking at.

“Is that a Tarot card?” he said.

“Yeah,” she replied. “What do you make of it?”

“I don’t know anything about Tarot cards.” This was kind of a lie. Theresa had really been into that kind of stuff—she’d owned three different decks. Dax felt a stab of guilt.

The girl put her thumb and index finger on the center of the card. Then she made a little twisting motion that swiveled the card around so it was facing Dax. “You can read, can’t you?”

Dax looked down at the card. He shuddered. On it was a drawing of a skeleton wearing a cape, and holding a lathe. There was a swirl of dark colors interwoven with the skeleton’s ribs. The card he hated most. Theresa had tried to explain to him that it wasn’t actually a bad card, but after that night, it had always creeped him out.

“Death,” he said out loud. He swallowed and closed his eyes, and he was there all over again. He saw the pure joy shining in Theresa’s eyes by moonlight and the darkness of the road without the headlights. He heard the sickening crunch on her side of the car and the pierce of her screams. He pushed the memory away.

The girl nodded. “Yeah,” she said. “But what do you make of this?”

She picked the card up off the table, then added it to the rest of the Tarot cards. She shuffled. She set the cards down, gestured to Dax to have a turn. Dax peaked over his shoulder and looked toward the counter to see if maybe his pizza was almost ready, to see

if there was some way Frank might save him. But Frank just caught his eye, cocked his head to the side, and winked in the direction of the girl.

Reluctantly, he picked up the cards and shuffled them halfheartedly. He set them back down. He cut the deck.

The girl flipped over the top card.

It was the Death card again.

“Where did you learn that?” Dax said.

“It’s not a trick,” the girl said. “At first I thought it was a fluke, but now I’m convinced it means something.”

Dax shrugged. “They’re just cards.”

“Maybe so,” the girl said. “Anyway I ordered them off eBay. They were a birthday present to myself. I just turned thirty.”

“Happy birthday.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I’ve been reading a lot. Death is a good card. It means transformation. New beginnings. Death of the old self to make room for the new.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“I thought you didn’t know anything about Tarot.”

“I don’t know much.”

The girl scooped the Death card off the table and put it onto the top of the stack.

“I’m Rae,” she said, sticking out a tiny hand.

Not quite sure what else to do, Dax reached for her hand. He was startled by the strength of her handshake. He was about to pull his hand away when he caught sight of

the tattoo on the inside of her left wrist. He kept hold of her fingers and turned her wrist upwards. When he got a better look, he saw it was three numbers.

“Six-six-six?” Dax said. He stared at the faded black numbers, incredulous.

Rae pulled her hand away. “Do you have a name?” she said.

“Oh, yeah,” said Dax stupidly. “Yeah. I’m Dax.”

“Dax,” she said. “I like it.”

“What’s with the tattoo?”

Rae raised one eyebrow, and at that moment, Frank brought out the pizza slices and placed them on the table in front of Dax.

*Oh sure, the girl gets saved, but not me. Typical.*

“You two want another round?” Frank said.

Dax looked at his near-empty bottle. He felt warm and fuzzy from the unexpected weeknight alcohol. “Sure,” he said. Why not? He was celebrating.

Rae reached across the table and took one of his slices of pepperoni. Dax watched her as she held the slice up to her mouth and took a big bite. A long string of cheese caught between her mouth and the slice. She caught it between her tiny forefinger and thumb, and pulled. Dax had never seen such a sloppy maneuver look so dainty and delicate.

“Thanks for letting me join you,” Rae said, taking another pull from her glass.

“I’ve had a long week.”

“Me too.”

Rae looked at him. He felt disarmed by the intensity of her stare. It had been a while since he had been this close to a woman, and she was very pretty. “What was long about it?”

“I got promoted today at work.”

Rae’s eyebrows popped up. “Oh, the good kind of long.”

“I guess.”

“You don’t seem too happy about it.”

Dax shrugged. “I’ve been doing the same job for ten years.” His voice was flat.

“Change is good.”

“I like when I know what to expect.”

Rae tapped the stack of Tarot cards. “New beginnings.”

“So what are you?” Dax said, nodding at the Tarot cards. “Some kind of witch?”

“I’m a travel blogger,” Rae said her, mouth full of pizza, a speck of red pizza sauce on her upper lip. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

Dax looked down at the other slice on his plate, like he’d just remembered it was there. He picked it up and started to eat. He almost said something about her eating his food, but stopped himself. “Her” slice was already almost half way gone. Instead, he said, “Travel blogger?”

“The website I work for sends me different places, and I write about my experiences. Reviews and such,” Rae said. She was down to the crust now. She started sprinkling parmesan cheese and red pepper flakes onto her grease spattered paper plate.

Once there was enough for her satisfaction, she used the pizza crust to wipe up as much cheese and peppers as she could at a time. “Normally I love my job.”

“Normally?”

Rae looked up at him, and her eyes narrowed. “It’s fun, but it gets kind of lonely.” She downed the rest of her beer.

“How so?”

Rae shrugged. “I’m always traveling, as you might have guessed. Makes it hard to get close to anyone. People bail.”

“I wouldn’t.” Dax regretted that second beer. It was clouding his judgment. Still, it had been a long time since he’d let his guard down enough to let himself talk to a pretty girl.

Rae averted his gaze. “You know I did nothing for my birthday last week?”

“Aside from buying yourself Tarot cards.”

“Well, yeah,” Rae said, grinning. “Every now and then a girl wants a little direction.”

“Like when she turns thirty?”

“Oh, you’re one to talk. What are you? Forty?”

“Ouch,” Dax said, grinning. “Thirty-five.”

“I was teasing. You look thirty, *maybe*.”

“I can’t remember the last time I celebrated a birthday.”

“The traveling is great,” she said. “But every time I come home, I feel estranged from my friends. And I’m so tired I end up just sleeping most days. So it sort of just passed without me acknowledging it. Well. Other than the cards.”

And then, whether it was the influence of the beer, or the influence of her big, thoughtful brown eyes, Dax found himself saying, “Want to go to dinner on Wednesday night?” he said. “With me? We can celebrate your birthday then. And. Order our own dinners.”

Rae smiled. “Okay, sure,” she said. “But, just laying it out there, I’m kind of doing my own thing right now.”

“Sorry?”

“My own thing,” she repeated. “I’m keeping things casual.”

“We don’t have to go anywhere fancy,” Dax said.

“Casual,” Rae said, reddening. “Nevermind.”

“*Casual*,” Dax said, finally understanding. “Right. Me too.”

Rae shrugged, packing up the Tarot cards and putting them in her purse. She pulled a pen from her bag and started scribbling on a napkin. “Then we’re on the same page,” she said. “See you Wednesday?” She handed him the napkin.

Dax looked down to read it: *Rae Parker. 619-806-6953*. When he looked up, she was gone.

2011

The sorcerer, or *brujo*, as Joshua had come to find out, was a Yaqui Indian named Don Marco. He was white haired and his leathery brown skin was rippled with wrinkles, yet he was surprisingly agile for his age.

Approaching the old man had been one thing. Convincing him to teach Joshua sorcery had been another matter entirely.

When Joshua first approached Don Marco, he had asked him in broken Spanish if he would teach him what he knew.

The old man had stared at him with such clarity that it has almost unnerved Joshua. He had said, “Why don’t you visit my house?” He explained to Joshua how to find his abode.

Hopeful, Joshua had visited the old sorcerer’s home the next day. The old man had served him tea and given him little Mexican pastries. After making polite conversation, Joshua finally took a deep breath. “Don Marco,” he said. “Will you teach me your sorcery?”

Don Marco pursed his lips. “No.”

“You said you would teach me.”

“I said come to my house.”

“It was implied.”

“You inferred it. I did not imply.”

“What must I do?”

“Sit,” Don Marco said. “Enjoy your cake. Drink your tea.”

“But I must learn.”

Don Marco shook his head and tapped Joshua’s chest. “Why do you want to be a *brujo*?”

Joshua paused. He couldn’t very well tell Don Marco that he wanted to learn sorcery so he could carry out his destiny. The pause was enough for the old sorcerer.

“You see,” Don Marco said, nodding. “You don’t even know yourself. Your heart is not ready.”

“But it is!” Joshua said, for a moment welling up with anger that this heathen dared to speak to a chosen of the Lord in such a way. He calmed himself.

“If you were Yaqui, your desire would be proof that your heart was ready,” Don Marco said. “No Yaqui wants to be a *brujo*.”

“Is my desire not proof?”

“You are American,” Don Marco said. “You have too many movies. You do not realize that *brujos* carry much responsibility.”

“I’m responsible.”

Don Marco shook his head. “No.”

And so it went like this, day after day. Joshua visited Don Marco every afternoon. And every day, Don Marco served Joshua tea and a pastry. Every day, Joshua asked Don Marco to teach him, and was not his persistence proof enough? Still, each day, the answer was no.

Don Marco had a lot of connections in the village, and he was able to help Joshua find work. The jobs were often temporary and usually involved hard labor, requiring

Joshua to be up before the sun, but they paid cash and allowed him to sustain himself. And each day ended just the same, with Joshua traveling on foot to Don Marco's home for tea.

Eventually, a year had passed, and Joshua had still not succeeded in convincing Don Marco to teach him sorcery.

One day, during their daily visit, Joshua decided not to ask Don Marco to teach him. He'd had an especially tiresome day and he was too tired to jump through any hoops. Just this one day, he would forgo the humiliation. After all, it had been a year, and it was always the same answer. Tomorrow, he would resume his efforts, but tonight, Joshua was weary.

The sun had nearly set, and their visit was almost over. After swallowing the last of his tea, Don Marco placed the cup into the saucer and looked deep into Joshua's eyes. "So," he said. "You want to be a *brujo*?"

Joshua's head snapped up. "It is important."

"Why?"

"It's my destiny," Joshua said. "I knew the minute I saw you."

"Destiny," Don Marco said. "*Brujos* have much responsibility."

"I won't let you down."

"It's not about me," Don Marco said. "*Brujos* have responsibility to the *world*."

"It is my cross to bear."

Don Marco played with the rim of his cup. “You have given me a year of yourself with no guarantee of a return,” he said, nodding. His wrinkled face crinkled into a smile. “Your heart is ready.”

*August 2014*

At first Rae had thought it was a fluke, but now it was starting to creep her out a little. Well, she couldn't figure out if she was freaked out or in awe, or maybe a little bit of both. It was as if finally, *finally*, after all those years of questions and uncertainty and wanting to know if there was something *more*, she was finally finding out that there was and she wanted to give the knowledge back.

Rae sat on her couch and shuffled the Tarot cards again. It was a complete deck. She had looked over each one carefully, running her fingers across the colorful pictures. She'd read through the little worn booklet that had come with the cards just to get a general idea of what they all meant. It wasn't as though she had a lot of experience with Tarot cards—actually, she had never owned any.

This kind of stuff fascinated her, though. She enjoyed books about spirituality—ranging from Eastern religions to witchcraft to general new age self-help books. There wasn't any one idea she subscribed to; Rae was more of a dabbler. It all made sense, on some level. She had a suspicion that it was all a little bit true, and all a little bit not true. Mixed up bits of truth and fantasy all mashed together to create one big beautiful question mark. That idea might be unsettling to some, but for Rae, there was an awful lot of comfort in it.

No one had all the answers. No one knew for certain. It was the one true thing they all had in common, no matter how hard anybody believed.

Rae finished shuffling the cards. She cut the deck. She had tested this out numerous times—sometimes she cut the deck, sometimes she didn't. It hadn't seemed to make a difference.

When she lifted the top card and flipped it over, there it was again: the Death card, and Rae let out her breath. Why she'd been holding it, at this point, she couldn't tell. It was pretty clear by now that this was just how it was, this was going to keep happening over and over. But it just felt too real, too concrete, too impossible, this magic.

Because it had to be magic, didn't it?

When she was a little kid, she had begged to see something—anything—extraordinary. Begged God, or, if not God, then no one in particular. She would just plead into the air. *Please let me see something to make me believe.* She had wanted, more than anything, to see a miracle. Just one magical thing that would convince her that something else—someone else—existed beyond her. She would have even been happy to see a ghost, or at least evidence of a ghost, like a floating dish or flying silverware or banging cupboards. She wasn't sure why she had always associated ghosts with kitchens, but didn't that seem to always be the way?

*I came home, and all of the cupboards were flung open. Every last one.*

Rae had always wondered how it was that these magical, supernatural, miraculous, *other-worldly* things always happened to other people. People were always telling some ghost story or other, but it never happened to her. And all she had wanted was for it to happen just once.

She stared at the card. *Death.*

Flipping through the little booklet again, she found the description for the Death card again. She must have read it hundreds of times already, but she always wanted to read it again. “You are involved in a major transformation,” she read aloud to her empty, sun sprinkled living room. “This is one of the greatest transformations you have known. You must go through this change alone. You will be reborn into newness, but first you must face your darkest fears. Do not forget, the darkest hour is just before the dawn.”

The words hung in the air, light and heavy at the same time, seeming to echo while they drifted away. Rae sighed. It felt fitting, this card, uncannily so. And she just kept drawing it over, and over, and over. It was the closest thing to magic she had ever experienced.

But the funny thing was, she’d gone so long without magic, that it’s sudden presence in her life was unnerving. What did it mean?

And even though she had come up with her own shorthand for the card’s meaning—“New Beginnings,” she called it—there was an implication of darkness that unsettled her. She couldn’t shake the feeling that somehow, in some way, she was going to be reborn, and it was going to hurt like hell.

*September 2014*

Dax fumbled with the key to his apartment, and realized he was more drunk than he had intended to get. He stumbled through the door and tossed the keys onto the table. Without bothering to turn on any lights, he went into the bedroom.

He stood in the doorway of his room and fished in his pocket, where he had stuffed the napkin from Rae. He pulled it out and examined the black scribbles, swaying from the alcohol. He looked up at the closed closet doors, swallowed hard, and crushed the napkin with his fist before he tossed it onto his bed.

Dax flicked the light on angrily.

“What?” He yelled in the direction of the closet doors. “What are you looking at?”

He ran over to the closet doors and flung them open. He pushed the row of polo shirts and khaki pants to the side until the box on the closet floor was in clear sight. He stared at it briefly, then began to kick it.

When he had kicked a hole into the side of the box, he finally stopped, hunched over, his hands resting on his knees, panting. He leaned back, sat down the bed, his heart thrashing in his chest. He was crying, he realized, and that pissed him off more. He wiped at his eyes angrily.

He stretched his arm forward until he caught hold of a corner of the box, and he pulled. The box made a soft scraping sound on the wood floor while he dragged it over. Dax stared at the top of the box and took a deep breath. For the first time in five years, he opened it.

He smelled her immediately. Or he thought he did. It could have been his imagination. It probably was. He saw her green scarf first. The sight of it made his chest ache. He reached into the box and felt its softness, then pulled and lifted it out of the box, up to his cheek. She had worn it often, sometimes daily. He pressed the fabric to his face and thought he could smell her hair. That had been what he'd loved most. The smell of her hair in the first light of morning, before she was awake, before she had showered. The rich, earthy aroma that belonged to Theresa and no one else. The tears on his cheeks began leak onto the scarf and he threw it back into the box, not wanting his smell to contaminate hers.

He reached down and shuffled through the box. There were a couple of shirts, a worn pair of jeans, some dresses. When he saw the blue one with the big white daisies, he could see her so acutely his breath caught. She was wearing this dress, standing at Sunset Cliff's, her face to the sun and the ocean, her hair blowing in the salty breeze, her arms outstretched with pure happiness. It was a thing she always did—throw her arms up in the air when she was happy. And Theresa was always happy.

It was too much. He threw the dress back down into the box, and right before he closed it, he saw a book that made him pause. It was a Tarot book, that explained how to read the cards. Dax picked it up. It had yellowed pages, and its spine was creased from constant use. Theresa had loved this book and had carried it with her in her bag wherever she went.

And then he saw her in his memory, on the night of the accident, before they went out to the bar. She was sitting cross-legged on the bed, her dark hair piled high and messy

on the top of her head. She'd been shuffling her cards when he walked in the room, and her eyebrows raised mischievously.

"Want to know your fate?" Theresa said.

"You know I don't believe in that stuff," Dax said.

"It exists whether you believe in it or not."

"People don't need to know their futures."

"Fine. I'll do one for me, then," Theresa said.

She finished shuffling the cards, and flipped the top card over. Dax watched her in spite of himself. There was a skeleton on the card, and a lot of black and other symbols Dax didn't recognize. "Death?" he said, reading. "That doesn't sound very good."

Theresa was looking at the card, her chin resting on the one knee she had propped up. "It's not what you think," she said. "It means that something is coming to an end. So it's a kind of death, yes. But not a literal one. Something must die to make room for something new."

"That sounds terrible."

"Terribly *exciting*," Theresa said. "This is a growth card. In the winter, when everything dies, it's not really dead, you know? It's just a cycle. And in the spring, everything grows fresh again, renewed."

Dax laughed. "You really believe in this stuff?"

"I don't need to believe in it," Theresa said. "It just is. The cards tap into a kind of magic that is older than you or me. Older than the cards themselves."

"Gotcha."

“I’m serious!” Theresa said.

“I know you are.”

“Sure you don’t want a reading?”

“I’ll just share your fate,” Dax said. “We can die and be reborn together.”

“You’re mocking me,” Theresa said, fake pouting. “It doesn’t work like that.”

“Why not?”

“The cards can tell,” Theresa said. “Different readings for different people.”

“So you’re telling me, if you had done a reading for me, you’d have gotten a different card?” Dax said.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Theresa said. “It depends on your fate.”

“How would the cards know?”

“Your fate?”

“Who the reading was for?”

“I would hold you in my mind.”

“And the cards just know?”

“They know.”

Dax cupped her face and kissed her forehead. “You’re loony, but I love you.”

“This is good,” Theresa said, holding up the Death card and waving it at him.

“Good things are coming.”

Now, Dax held the book lightly, his hand swaying as though he were weighing it. Finally, he tucked everything back into the box. He closed it and roughly shoved it back

into the closet. He turned around on the bed and searched it for the napkin. When he found it, he picked it up, smoothed it out, and placed it on his nightstand.

He got up to turn out the light, and crawled into bed without taking off his clothes.

*September 2014*

Rae let herself in to her apartment, regretting that she hadn't taken a cab from Luigi's back to Ocean Beach. But the drive wasn't that far, and then she'd need to take a cab back to get her car in the morning, and it just wasn't worth the hassle. *Neither would a DUI* she told herself. Anyway, it wasn't like she'd really drank that much. And she'd made it home all right. She just would be sure not to do it again.

She tossed her bag onto the floor and paused at the coffee table to light the half-burnt stick of incense. She went over to her couch and moved the scattered magazines and books from the cushions, trying to stack them neatly on the coffee table. The stack slumped.

She sat on the couch and rubbed her wrist.

It always bothered her when people noticed her tattoo, and it bothered her that it bothered her. After all, to have it be noticed was kind of the point, wasn't it? *666*. She'd been nineteen, and the tattoo had been a spur of the moment decision after a crazy fight with her unbearably traditional and religious mother. It was like a dare to the universe almost, a bold statement that she didn't believe in any of it. She had marked herself with the mark of the devil as an act of defiance; an act of showing her mother who was in control and of showing the world that it was all bull shit.

Still, it was funny the reactions people had. Looking at her like she was some sort of devil worshipper. Or like she was cursed.

Well, ten years strong and she wasn't cursed yet.

Usually she wore a bracelet or a watch to cover it, just so she could avoid the awkward questions. Still, she couldn't bring herself to think about getting it removed. It was a choice she had made, and maybe she had been young, but she'd made the choice for a reason. She somehow felt that she owed it to her younger self to stay true to that vision.

And what was the vision? Who knows. Maybe it was a world that was awake enough to not be so separate. A world that didn't create these illusory distinctions and classes and cliques. A world that didn't make people feel guilty for being human. One that recognized religion and myth simply as stories told around the world to explain the unexplainable. They were meant to make humans feel less alone, not more so.

Rae stretched and rubbed her eyes. Her body was tired, but her mind was wide awake. She checked the clock. It was nearly midnight, but she wasn't ready for bed. She sighed and allowed herself a moment to think about Dax. He was a bit straight laced, but he was cute and there was something she likeable about him. *Don't*. She told herself, rubbing her tattoo again. *Don't do that*.

Still, she wondered if he would call.

Rae reached for her laptop. She went to her Wordpress Site and opened up her blog, *Commitment Cleanse*.

She started to type.

*April 2014*

Rae wasn't sure how she'd gotten the idea in the first place, but now that she was here, she felt painfully out of place.

Well, maybe she did know how she'd gotten the idea. She'd been thinking about Tom, and how he'd never wanted to choose her and only her forever. She was thinking about how all the pain she'd ever experienced in any relationship was because she had these expectations the some guy would want her to be his one and only.

It felt like a seriously ridiculous expectation these days.

And that's how she'd ended up here. Well, no, that's not it exactly. She'd been at the Hummingbird Café getting an iced coffee, and a girl with long brown hair, low cut paisley pants, and a cropped crochet top had handed her a flyer.

"We're having a potluck this Saturday," she'd said to Rae, fluttering her eyelashes in a way that was undeniably sexual. "If you want to *come*." Emphasis on the last word.

As it turned out, the "we" was the San Diego Polyamory group. Rae was not polyamorous, nor had she ever considered being romantically involved with more than one person at a time, but she chewed the straw in her iced coffee and stared at the flyer. It said that following the potluck, there would be "a group discussion and experiential practices in a touch positive community." It welcomed "spiritually minded polyamorous, polysensuous or polycurious people."

Rae had never identified as any of those things. Yet, suddenly, on reading over the flyer, she did feel curious.

The thought of open relationships was pretty radical. But in the most bizarre way, the idea of it was strangely comforting to Rae. The thought of never having to worry about if someone would stay true. Never having to be too vulnerable. There'd be no more unrealistic expectations. Sure, her hypothetical partner would be free to have sex with other people, but so would she. She could love someone without getting in too deep. And anyway, it sounded like it might make an interesting experience, even if it was just an experiment for her commitment cleanse. If nothing else, it would make a good story.

And now she was at the potluck, and she'd eaten her fill of the vegetarian food, and people around her were standing close together in various clumps. There were about thirty or so people altogether. In one corner, three women and a man were making out.

An older man grabbed Rae's ass when he walked by her, and she must have made a face, because a tall, thin woman with short dark hair stopped him. "Richard?"

He whirled around. "Yes, Layla?"

"Did you ask permission?"

The man looked at Rae sheepishly. "No."

"Oh, it's fine," Rae said. She waved her hand, embarrassed.

"Richard," the woman called Layla said. "Remember. We are a touch positive community, but we accept all levels of comfort here. You always ask permission. Especially when someone is new."

Richard nodded and moved to the other side of the room, where he began to fondle the breasts of another—much younger—woman.

The woman called Layla turned to Rae. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

“The food was very good,” Rae said.

“I’m Layla. I’m sort of the pod-mother around here.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“You’re very new to this lifestyle, aren’t you?”

“Oh,” Rae said. “I’m not sure what I am.”

“We are about liberation,” Layla said. “About wanting *for* each other rather than *from* each other.”

“And having sex with a bunch of people.”

“We believe in sexual freedom, certainly,” Layla said. “It’s not easy. But it’s *so rewarding*.”

“I truly appreciate your hospitality.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” Layla said. “And please. Let me know if you need anything. Or have questions.” She sauntered away towards another room.

The three woman, one man group was really starting to heat up on the couch. One of the girls took her shirt off to reveal a lacy red bra. She slipped her hand up the skirt of the girl next to her, and the man leaned back to watch. They were all laughing and moaning and groping against each other.

The older man from before dragged the younger girl back over to Rae. He touched Rae on her lower back, pulled her close to him. He leaned his face towards hers, white mustache quivering, and Rae put both hands on his chest and pushed gently. The situation was escalating very quickly, and while Rae wasn’t one to judge, she just didn’t

think she was ready to commit to level of openness that something like this would require.

“Aren’t you supposed to ask permission?” Rae said.

The man smiled. “You’re still here, aren’t you?”

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “Got to go.”

She turned around, headed for the front door, and left. Whatever she was looking for, she wasn’t going to find it there.

2011

And so, Joshua's training began. Or so he was informed by Don Marco. To Joshua, it didn't feel like anything that extraordinary. The training was rigorous and often frustrating to Joshua, because it sometimes felt to him as though the training had nothing to do with sorcery. He slept on the stone floor of the old sorcerer's adobe house and ate the old man's simple food. They would spend weeks at a time camping in the desert, with Don Marco putting Joshua through an absurd number of physical tests until Joshua's feet and hands were blistered and his lips chapped and bleeding from the unrelenting heat of the sun.

One sweltering afternoon, after Joshua had spent hours stacking rocks for reasons that, at least to himself, were incomprehensible, he turned to Don Marco in anger. "Why do you torture me so?" Blood leaked from the cracks in his fingers.

The corners of Don Marcos eyes crinkled. Impossibly, he was smiling. Joshua had an overwhelming urge to smack his teacher across the face, which he just barely resisted.

"To see what you are made of," Don Marco said.

Joshua threw a rock down onto the ground. It clattered against other rocks and a cloud of dust rose up from the earth. He held both of his hands, fingers spread wide, in front of his teacher's face, "You see?" he said, spit spraying from his cracked lips as he spoke. "I am made of flesh and blood."

Don Marco knelt down and picked up the rock Joshua had thrown. He held the rock towards Joshua. "Continue."

Joshua folded his arms across his chest. “You promised to teach me your sorcery.”

“Indeed.”

“Are you not a man of your word?”

Joshua was speaking violently into his teacher’s face, but Don Marco did not so much as flinch. He stayed still and calm. He bent down to the earth, picked up a canteen, and handed it to Joshua. “Drink,” he said.

Torn between his irritation at his teacher’s seeming dismissal of his demands and his intense thirst, it took Joshua a moment before he snatched the canteen. He drank greedily, taking the cool water down his throat in frantic gulps.

“Come. Sit.” Don Marco gestured to a spot behind them, where he had spread a blanket.

The two of them sat, and Joshua drank more water.

“There is something that you must understand,” Don Marco said.

“I’m listening,” Joshua said. He was trying stay indignant, but the relief that flooded through him with the water was softening his resolve.

“Sorcery is available to everyone,” Don Marco said. “The universe is made up of energy. When we are born, we can see that energy because we don’t have the filter of perception.” Don Marco laughed here. “All babies are little sorcerers.”

*Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.* The Psalm ran through Joshua’s mind. He felt disgusted by his teacher’s ignorance, but he allowed Don Marco to continue.

“Babies quickly lose their *sight*, however, because they learn from their parents what to perceive and what not to perceive. Feet stay firmly on the ground. Objects don’t float in the air. You can’t make something out of nothing. Parents teach babies the rules of the world, what your people call ‘The Laws of Physics.’”

“If that’s true, why don’t we remember this different—perception?” Joshua said.

“We learn from our parents very quickly,” Don Marco said. “When we are babies, we don’t know what to do with all that *noise*, and so we filter it through our learned perception, and that is how we make the world make sense. What we don’t know, as adults, is that we can shift our perception. We can make it so that we *see* again. But we have to learn new rules. Or rather, learn that there are no rules. The rules are a construct man created to survive.”

“How do you unlearn the rules?”

“It is much like learning to ride a bike,” Don Marco said. “When you are a child, you know one way of balance. You know how to balance your body with your feet connected to the earth. It is the only way you know how to relate to gravity. So, when you try to ride a bike, you will fall, because your body does not know what it is looking for. The point of balance is always there, you just don’t know where to find it. But once you find it, ah, you will always know where it is. That it was it is like to *see*.”

“Will you teach me? To see?”

“*Brujos* have much responsibility,” Don Marco said, his voice going very serious. “The world is made of energy, yes. And this energy can be manipulated, once you see it. But energy is finite. You have heard your scientists say this, yes? The Law of

Conservation of Energy: 'Energy cannot be created or destroyed.' There is not an endless supply. When you make an object appear, you are not making something out of nothing. It is simply transference of energy. Manipulation of energy."

"I see," Joshua said, though he wasn't sure he understood at all. "But what does this have to do with stacking rocks?"

Don Marco nodded, as if to say he was getting there. "You have to give back. Make a selfless offering of your own energy," Don Marco said. "Or the universe will find a way to *take* an offering. If you use too much sorcery without giving enough back, it will throw the world into imbalance."

"Then why do sorcery at all?"

"The world needs magic," Don Marco said. "People need to believe. And that is where we come in. But a true *brujo* has self control, and never takes more energy than he has given. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Joshua said. It sounded like a bunch of nonsense to him, and he was pretty certain that God could create more energy if there was a need for it. He wasn't going to say so, and if all this physical labor would eventually lead to his learning sorcery as Don Marco promised, then so be it.

"Good." Don Marco said. "This is very important."

"I understand," Joshua repeated, feeling irritated that his teacher was drawing out this lesson. He was hot; his hands were stinging; he was hungry.

“There are many ways to pay the debt,” Don Marco said. “Physical labor. Fasting. Meditation. You must make these sacrifices to fuel your sorcery. Otherwise, you’re just stealing. And stealing always has consequences.”

Joshua played at a blister on his hands and was startled when Don Marco grabbed him by the shoulders.

“You hear me? This is imperative,” Don Marco said. “There will be consequences.”

2008

If there was anything Dax hated, it was seeing Theresa cry. Especially when it was because of him. And sometimes, when they were deep in these fights, and she was lost to her tears, he would feel like they were so deep in a hole they'd never be able to climb their way out again. She was upset; she was unhappy; and it was his fault and he'd never be able to fix it, because in order to fix it, he'd have to stop being himself.

Theresa was a wildly emotional person who rode the spectrum of feeling with a deep and abiding commitment. "She wore her heart on her sleeve" some might say. She was vibrant and happy and full of love and passion—but she could easily go the other way, too. It was part of what made her so attractive—that she wasn't afraid to *feel* things. There was a bravery in that that Dax admired, because he knew he would never be able to be as free as she was.

He touched her arm.

"Don't," Theresa said, pulling out of his reach.

They were sitting on her couch, and she was staring out the window.

"I'm sorry," Dax said. He pulled at the worn fabric of the yellow blanket splayed across the back of the couch.

"For what?" Theresa said. She turned her green eyes on him, and they were even brighter and more intense than usual in their pink sockets.

What *was* he sorry for? Their fights were typically beyond him, and during them he often felt the same sort of disorientation as might a person who'd been woken abruptly in the middle of the night. "For upsetting you."

This was obviously the wrong thing to say, because Theresa started crying even harder and shaking her head. “That’s what you don’t get, Dax,” she said. “This isn’t about me. It’s about *you*.”

“But I’m fine.”

“You are not fine,” Theresa said. “Is this what you want? You have so much potential, you know that?”

“Sure.”

“See?” she said. “You aren’t even taking this seriously. That’s your problem.”

“I’m just not sure what I did.”

“That’s it, exactly,” Theresa said. “You didn’t do anything. You never *do* anything.”

“I do lots of things.”

“I’m talking about in life, Dax. *In life*.” Theresa went back to looking out the window, the sobs shaking her shoulders again.

Dax was trying to be patient, really he was, but he could only take so much of her attacking him. This felt personal and completely uncalled for. “Fine. You know what I’m sorry for? I’m sorry I’m not one of those pretentious hipster guys you like so much. I’m sorry I’m too boring for you.”

“That’s not fair.”

“What’s not fair is you looking down on me.”

“I just want better for you.”

“Who are you to say what’s better for me?”

“I want *more* for you,” Theresa said. “Because I love you. And I want us to grow together, not apart.”

“Is that what’s bothering you?”

“I just want to keep moving forward,” Theresa said. “And I don’t want to leave you behind.”

“Then don’t.”

“I didn’t sign up for this.”

This baffled Dax. Everything felt good to him. He was *happy*. He was comfortable. The intensity of the discontent in her eyes and in her voice alarmed him, because he hadn’t been aware there was anything to be discontented with. “I don’t know what I did,” he said again.

Theresa took a deep breath. She grabbed both of his hands in hers and leaned her face close to his. The edges of her nose were pink from crying. “Look, I love you. I do. I just need to know that you’re going to move forward in life. I don’t care about money or anything like that. I just want to see you care about life. Be passionate about something. I don’t want you afraid of failure.”

“I’m not,” Dax said. It wasn’t that he was afraid of failure, exactly. It was just that he didn’t see the point in risking it. Why rock the boat?

“That job will suck the life out of you.”

But Dax *liked* his job. It was comfortable. “I know.”

“Promise me you’ll start looking for something else?”

“Sure,” Dax said.

“You mean it?”

“Of course.”

She kissed him on the lips.

1997

It was, without a doubt, the scariest thing Rae had ever seen. Not that she had seen a lot—she was only thirteen—but still. The auditorium was dark and the performance was almost over, but Rae felt frozen in her seat.

It was a play, although that sounded much too light hearted for what was happening on stage, and it was called “Heaven’s Gate, Hell’s Flame.” Rae was there with her mother, who had driven them three hours to an enormous church to see it. She’d told Rae she was worried that she wasn’t taking her faith seriously, and she wanted her to get more fired up for God.

“I want your faith to be your own,” her mother had said on the drive up, her mouth twisting in that serious way of hers.

The play—that was still the wrong word—had been a series of skits showing various people at the end of their lives. Some were of old Christian men and women who passed peacefully in bed, only to be greeted by Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates.

The worst one, though, the one that made Rae feel like she was going to throw up, was of a group of teenagers. The skit showed one of the girls meet a Christian guy, who offered to say the Sinner’s Prayer with her. She’d blown him off and called him lame and said that she was too cool for Jesus. Later that night, the girl got into a car with her friends to go to a party. There wasn’t a car on stage, of course, it was just six chairs lined up in rows of two to make it seem like a car. So they went to the party, and the designated driver got drunk. On the way home, they got into an accident, and they all died.

Including the girl who had denied Jesus. She'd had the opportunity to give her life to God, and she had turned it down, and she had died that very night. When she tried to enter the Pearly Gates, Saint Peter couldn't find her name. Instead, Satan and his demons came in a burst of red light and black masks to greet her and carry her away, screaming and pleading, to Hell, her new forever home.

Rae felt dazed when the lights came back up to normal and there was a preacher on stage, asking if there were any in the crowd who was touched by tonight's event and would they like to give their lives to the Lord?

Without even really meaning to, Rae raised her hand. Her mother turned her head sharply and stared at her, but Rae just kept looking straight ahead.

The truth was she was embarrassed, because she knew this was exactly what her mother wanted. But, it wasn't, not *really*, and Rae knew that, but of course her mother wouldn't. Because Rae wasn't raising her hand because she'd suddenly felt some urgent need to give her life to the Lord.

Rae was scared that they'd get into a car accident on the way home and she'd die and go to hell before she'd had a chance to figure out if she really believed in any of it. It was a form of self-preservation. She was buying time.

The pastor invited those who wanted to give their lives to Jesus to stand and come up to the front. And so Rae stood, and let herself be carried forward by the momentum of the hundreds of others who were also going to the front. It felt to Rae like none of them were moving forward individually, that they were like a river being pulled forward by

gravity, like they weren't moving of their own free will. Maybe they weren't. It felt like being herded.

When they had stopped moving, the pastor with the microphone smiled down on all of them. He said, "Repeat after me: Dear Lord Jesus, I know I am a sinner, and I ask for your forgiveness. I believe you died for my sins and rose from the dead. I trust and follow you as my Lord and Savior. Guide my life and help me to do your will. In your name, Amen."

When it was over, Rae moved with the current into another room, where there were chairs to sit in. Members of the church were assigned to come over to them. A young man, eighteen at the oldest, in black slacks, a white button up shirt came over to her and shook her hand. His hand was warm and slippery with sweat. He handed Rae a booklet. "Do you want to pray about anything?" he asked her.

Rae looked at him, still feeling odd. "Um, no, I don't think so." She paused. "Should I?"

"It's if you want," he said. He handed her a business card. "Here, take this. If you think of something, you can call. Or come to church Sunday. Pastor Dave likes to tend to his flock."

"Oh," Rae said, taking the card and feeling even more like a sheep. "Do I—is there anything else? Can I go?"

The boy looked nervous. "Oh, sure. You're saved now." He smiled, revealing dark silver braces.

"Thanks."

On the ride home, Rae's mother cried and laughed, telling Rae over and over how she just knew God had directed her to come to this event, and how glad she was she had listened, because now Rae had given her life to Jesus. She went on and on, but Rae wasn't listening. She was staring out the window, watching the world go by, trying to figure out if she felt different.

She didn't.

*September 2014*

“I’m officially stuffed,” Rae said, sitting back in her chair. “Oh, you’ve hardly touched yours.”

Dax shrugged. “It is a little spicy.”

“I thought you liked Thai.”

He tried to remember if he’d ever said any such thing. “It’s your birthday, remember? You said this was your favorite place.”

Rae pouted. “It’s no fun to enjoy a meal all by yourself. I would have rather gone somewhere we both like.”

“Look, it’s delicious,” he said, taking a bit of his curry. “I love it.” He tried to savor it, but there were so many flavors and he wasn’t sure what to do with any of them. And he’d told the waitress spicy level zero and somehow it was still burning his mouth. He hated Thai food.

“More wine?”

Dax wiped his mouth with the cloth napkin. They’d had two glasses of wine already. “It’s your birthday,” he said.

She grinned and wiggled her glass when the server caught her eye. When the server sat two full glasses in front of them, Rae stopped her. “Can I get an order of sticky rice with mango?” she said. “You do like that, right Dax?”

“Of course,” Dax said. He tried to remember if he even knew what it was. He was pretty sure he’d never had it before.

“It’s in my top five favorite desserts,” she said.

So it was a dessert.

“Yes,” Dax said, absurdly. He sipped his wine. Already he had drank more this week than he usually did in a month, and he was really feeling the effects of the alcohol.

“It is very—sticky.”

Rae’s face drooped. “You don’t like it.”

“I do.”

“You don’t have to lie to make me feel better,” she said.

“I just don’t eat Thai that often is all.”

The server set the sticky rice in front of them with two clean forks. Rae reached for her fork greedily, and Dax picked his up delicately, like he was afraid it might bite him.

He watched Rae dip her fork into the dessert—what looked to him like a clump of rice with sliced fruit drizzled with a mysterious white cream. He watched her, and she swirled a bite of rice and fruit into the sticky white mess, and then he could have slapped himself.

“I did this all wrong,” he said.

“What?” She stuffed the big bite into her mouth and fluttered her eyes unnecessarily. “So. Good.” Her mouth was still full. “What did you do wrong? Take a bite.”

“It’s wrong,” he said. He dipped his fork reluctantly into the dessert. “There is no candle.”

“Where?” Rae took another big bite.

“In the—this,” he said, pointing at the plate.

“Why would there be a candle in it?” Rae said. “Aren’t you going to taste it? It’s about to fall off your fork. Get more of the coconut cream.”

“That’s coconut?” he said. “It looks—I don’t really like coconut.”

“You might like this,” Rae said. “Don’t you ever try things?”

He shoved the bite into his mouth and began to chew. There was a sweetness, and the mangos were very ripe, and the rice—it wasn’t that it was bad. It was just too many different things. He liked flavors and textures in neat arrangements—desserts like vanilla ice cream. It was smooth and it was creamy and you knew what it was supposed to taste like. This wasn’t terrible, but it just wasn’t dessert. “It’s good,” he said. He tried to chew all the individual pieces of rice.

“What about a candle?” Rae said.

“What?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “You mentioned a candle or something. About it being wrong.”

“Oh,” he said. “Nevermind.”

Rae looked around the room. “There aren’t candles on any of the other tables.”

“I meant,” Dax said, “in the—rice—thingy.”

“Rice *thingy*?”

“The treat. Your dessert,” he said. “Your birthday.”

Rae finally understood. “A candle!” she said. “In my sticky rice. For my birthday.”

“Yes,” Dax said, sounding defeated. “I forgot to mention to the waitress—”

“Server.”

“What?”

“Nobody says ‘*waitress*’ anymore. It’s sexist.”

“Oh,” Dax said. “The server. I should have told her it’s your birthday.”

“That’s okay,” Rae said. “I ordered before you had a chance to.”

“Wasn’t I supposed to?” Dax said. “You know, earlier. When we sat down. Or before. Or something. Or I should have called in, or—”

“Dax,” Rae said. “It’s okay. Really. This is the best birthday I’ve had in years.”

“I’m just not very good at—birthdays,” he said.

Rae smiled, reached across the table to touch his hand. “I think you’re great at birthdays,” she said. “You’re a little odd, though. Who doesn’t like Thai food?”

“It’s not that I don’t like it,” Dax said.

“I’m just teasing you,” Rae said, laughing. She finished off the last of the sticky rice without offering to see if he wanted any.

He liked that about her, the way she just did things she wanted. Without thinking. Without seeing how it would make other people feel. Not that she was selfish. She just didn’t need to ask permission to be herself. She was in the middle of a sip of her wine when she sat her glass down abruptly. Her face had gone white.

“What is it?” Dax said.

Her eyes were closed now, squeezed tight in her pale white face. She started shaking her head. Her knuckles gripped the table and she made a soft, barely audible whimpering sound.

“Rae?”

Without warning her eyes burst open. “We need to go.”

“Go?”

“Now.”

“But, our wine.”

“Now.”

“I have to pay.”

“For Christ’s sake Dax,” Rae said. “Just throw some cash on the table.”

Puzzled, Dax slipped his hand slowly into his pocket for his wallet.

“Hurry!” Rae’s eyes darted hastily around the restaurant. Her face was flushed pink now, and it looked like she was about to cry.

Still feeling flustered, Dax through some bills onto the table and he hoped it was enough.

Rae grabbed his hand and jerked it towards the front door. Just as they walked outside, Dax turned to look inside the restaurant and he saw their server grab one of the other waitresses and stab her right in the throat with a kitchen knife. Blood sprayed the golden Buddha statue by the hostess stand.

He froze.

Rae tugged at him. “Come *on*, Dax,” she said.

He had drunk too much wine. The sidewalk began to spin and he felt his body loosen. He allowed Rae to drag him and he felt non-human while he followed along behind her meekly.

“Where is your car?”

“My—car,” Dax said.

“Where did we park?”

“I don’t—” Dax started. Rae had been there when he’d parked. Why couldn’t she remember?

“Jesus, Dax, are you even paying attention?”

“That woman—” he said. “She just—that knife.”

“Oh, Jesus, there it is,” Rae said.

“What?”

“Your car. It’s there,” she said. “That’s it, isn’t it?” She pointed.

“Shouldn’t we go help?”

“Help what?”

“Those women. The restaurant.”

“What would we do?”

“Couldn’t we be—witnesses or something?”

“There were plenty of other people in there,” Rae said. “Can you drive? Give me your keys.”

He handed them to her, absently, and they got into his car.

“Your address?”

He looked at her then, the first moment of clarity he'd had in the last ten minutes.

"You want me to tell you where I live?"

"How do you turn your air conditioning on?" Rae said, fiddling with the knobs on the dashboard. "I just need your address for my GPS."

"It's broken," Dax said. "How did you know?"

"That your air conditioning was broken?"

"How did you know to leave?"

"Address?" Rae said.

Dax gave her his address, and she punched it quickly into her phone. She backed out of the parking space and started driving.

Dax stared out of the window and watched the streets pass while she drove. His head hurt. He felt dizzy from the wine. He was not really settling well into his new job—it felt like wearing a shirt that was tailored to someone else. And he had just seen a woman stab another woman. Her own co-worker. In the middle of the restaurant. Without any warning. No warning, except—

"How did you know?"

"I wasn't feeling well," Rae said, looking at the road. "It could have been the curry."

"Are you okay to drive?" He realized it was a little late for this question.

"It was warm in there," Rae said. "And the spicy food and the wine and the sticky rice. I just felt sick."

"You didn't know, then?" he said.

“How could I know she would stab her?” Rae snapped.

“Your face,” he said, thinking back. “You were so urgent. Like you knew.”

Rae turned onto his street and parallel parked his car. Dax was actually amazed that she was able to find a spot so quickly on his street at this time of night. She turned off the headlights and switched off the engine. She kept her hands on the steering wheel, though, and her head collapsed onto them.

“I just had to get out of there,” she said, her voice barely a whisper. With her head still on the steering wheel, she turned to look at him. There were tears in her eyes. “I’m sorry I drove your car kind of drunk.”

“I should have driven us,” Dax said.

“I killed our date. And you were trying so hard.”

“What do you mean, trying so hard?” he said. “It’s not like I’m desperate or something.”

Rae laughed. The sound was sudden. Her laugh was rich and vibrant; it filled up all the empty spaces in the car; it slid up from the depths of her belly and out her throat like warm molasses, and oozed its way into Dax’s ears. He inhaled the sound through his nostrils. And there she was, doing it again. Making him feel like nothing else in the world mattered as long as he got to hear something as wonderful as that.

“It’s cute,” she said.

At the sound of those words, Dax nearly forgot about the woman and the blood.

“You like me,” he said. It was a statement, not a question, and it was a ridiculous thing to

say. With everything that had happened tonight, his most burning curiosity at this moment was over how Rae felt about him.

“I do like you,” Rae said, her voice soft. “But, you know: doing my thing.”

“I’ve never seen anyone get stabbed before,” Dax said. “Have you?”

“I really did have a wonderful time,” Rae said. “Thank you for helping me celebrate my birthday.”

“I didn’t get you a candle,” Dax said. “Or a present. And then to have your birthday end that way.”

Rae sighed. “I travel the world for a living. I’ve seen lots of crazy things.”

“But, murder?” Dax said. “Or, I don’t—is she even dead? We didn’t stay long enough to see.”

“I think you should go inside,” Rae said.

“Oh, right,” Dax said. He looked towards his darkened apartment windows.

“I’m—what a strange night. Strange week. It was nice meeting you.”

Rae leaned across the shifter in the car and gave Dax a long, warm kiss on the lips. He kissed her back, weakly, with a mixture of uncertainty and surprise. She pulled away, looked at him with her nose only inches away from his. “I’m glad I met you. I’ll see you around?”

“When can I see you again?” The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them.

“We’ll figure it out,” Rae said, shrugging lightly. “You have my number, I have yours. And Dax?”

“Yeah?”

“Try not to worry too much about what happened,” she said. “There was nothing we could have done.”

“How are you getting home?”

Rae wiggled her phone at him. “Calling a cab.”

“You want me to wait with you?”

“That’s okay,” Rae said. “You can go inside.”

He took his keys from her and left her standing on the sidewalk. When he got inside his apartment, he didn’t turn the light on. He stood at his window and watched her until the cab arrived. When the car pulled up, she got into the car without looking back.

Dax watched the car drive away, until he couldn’t see the tail lights anymore.

*September 2014*

Rae sat in the back of the taxi and stared out of the window. The cab driver had attempted to speak with her, but she hadn't engaged, so now he was silent, too. She felt cold and wrapped her arms around her body.

She couldn't get the image of the stabbing at the restaurant out of her head. Or, more accurately, she couldn't shake the weird feeling that had preceded the event. The rush in her body, the tingling in the middle of her forehead, the way her body had gone hot and cold at the same time. Even worse, how somehow she had known to get out of there—how had that happened? The look on Dax's face when he had witnessed the violence. Rae imagined she could feel the cards radiating heat from inside her purse.

Rae couldn't shake the feeling of bone-deep cold and shivered.

And what was she going to do about Dax? The kiss still burned on her mouth. It wasn't even that great of a kiss—they'd both been awkward and clumsy. Why had she done that? With everything else going on, the last thing she needed was a complication. But all she had wanted, after this night, was to follow him into his apartment and stay close to him, stay warm.

It was so stupid.

Her attraction to him was growing—she felt more for him now than just the simple curiosity she had felt at first. That wasn't a part of her "No Man Plan," as she had jokingly referred to it on her blog—she could date, she could fool around, but she wasn't allowed to get too attached.

Her blog had garnered a surprising amount of followers in the last few months, and people were unexpectedly supportive of her commitment-free endeavor. She had mentioned Dax once, after meeting him at the pizza shop, and she had planned to give a full recap of their date tonight. But now, as she watched the San Diego city lights outside the cab window, she didn't even want to mention this night. It kind of went against her blog's tell-all, blatant honesty policy, but she didn't care. She wanted to keep tonight just for her, so she could turn it over and over in her mind, weigh it, feel it, try to make some sense of it.

And Dax. She wanted to keep him for herself, too. If she put him on the blog again, she would have to share him with the world. And she wasn't ready to do that yet, if ever. She wanted to hold him close too, keep him safe from the intrusive comments and opinions of Internet trolls.

But, why did she feel so guilty? Her blog had been a huge part of the healing process after her break-up with Tom. These budding feelings for Dax felt like weeds, sprouting first in her heart, then spreading uncontrolled through the rest of her body. It felt like a betrayal, to herself and to the blog, and it felt like weakness.

One year. She was supposed to go one year commitment-free. It had only been six months. And maybe she was getting ahead of herself; it wasn't like Dax was falling all over himself trying to date her and be exclusive or anything. But just the fact that she could feel herself caving, *entertaining* the idea of being with him, made her feel like she was failing. She couldn't even make it one year without a man.

Rae sat up a little straighter in the back seat of the cab. This was silly—she had control over herself, didn't she? It's not like she didn't have any say in the matter. It's not like she had passed some point of no return or something. She would nip it in the bud. She wouldn't call him again. Or see him again. Maybe she'd go back to the poly-amory group, give it another shot. Because she wasn't going to fail. People were counting on her. She was counting on *herself*.

The cab stopped outside her apartment. Rae paid the fee, thanked the driver, and got out of the car.

As she walked up the stairs to her apartment, Rae felt a sick feeling build in her abdomen. Something was wrong.

When she reached her front door, she realized with a lurch of her heart what it was: her front door was half open.

Rae gasped, her pulse racing, the adrenaline making her dizzy. She stood frozen and couldn't decide if she should go inside or not. It was dark inside her apartment.

The smart thing to do would be to stay out, to call the police and let them go inside first. The adrenaline burst through Rae's veins, her fight or flight system activating, and the fight signal won out. Rae pushed the door open and flicked on the light.

Her heart raced faster now, and the sick feeling spread from the pit of her belly outwards, down her legs and through her arms, into her finger tips and up her neck, into her face, out through her eyes and nostrils.

Her entire apartment was in shambles: books shoved off of shelves, drawers opened and over turned, pillows thrown, couch cushions up-ended.

Fingers shaking, Rae reached into her purse and pulled out her cell phone. She dialed 911 and explained the situation. The operator directed Rae to wait outside and informed her that a car would be sent immediately.

When they hung up, Rae stood and chewed the inside of her mouth. She stared down at her phone, then took a deep breath. Without a second thought, she called Dax.

*September 2014*

When Dax arrived at the address Rae had given him, there were already two police cars in the street, their lights flashing. Rae was standing on the sidewalk, her arms wrapped tightly across her chest, talking to a police officer.

Dax rushed over to her, put his arms around her and kissed the top of her head. It was an automatic reaction, one as natural as breathing, and he barely even registered that he should feel slightly awkward about it. The truth was, the minute he had left her outside at his apartment, he had felt a strange sensation of emptiness. He didn't know if it was because of the kiss, or because of the stabbing, or because of Theresa, or what, but what he did know was that the minute he had Rae within touching distance, that feeling went away.

He pushed her away slightly and held her face with both hands. "You okay?" he said.

Rae nodded. "Just a little freaked."

"Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about the incident?" the officer said.

The two turned their attention to the policeman.

"That's all I know," Rae said.

"And you're sure that you don't have any enemies?"

"I told you," Rae said. "No one."

"And you haven't noticed anything strange or unusual recently?" the officer said, looking up from his notepad.

Dax felt Rae grip her purse handle a little more tightly, and he wondered if she was thinking about the Tarot cards. But what would she say, Dax wondered, that wouldn't make her sound like a total loon to these guys?

"Nothing," Rae said, her jaw set. She didn't look at Dax.

The police officer made a couple more notes on his notepad, then flipped it shut. "Alright," he said. "We're going to keep a squad car on the street overnight, watch for any suspicious activity."

"Is there any way to find out who did this?"

"We'll do our best," he said. "What's strange is that you did not report anything as stolen."

"Nothing is missing, that I could tell," Rae said. "Nothing of value, anyway. Laptop, TV, all that. Still there."

"Do you have somewhere to stay for the night? My crew will need to secure your apartment until we've done a complete scan for evidence—finger prints, shoe markings, things like that. It's a long shot but we'll do our best."

"I can go to a hotel," Rae said.

"She can stay with me," Dax told the officer. Then he noticed Rae was looking at him, so he returned her stare. "If you want."

"You'd do that?"

"I'm not making you stay at a hotel," he said. "Not after the night you've had."

Rae's eyes narrowed, and Dax perceived this to be some kind of warning. He guessed that she didn't want him to bring up what had happened at the restaurant. "Okay," she said, her voice softening gratefully. "I'd really appreciate that."

At that moment, one of the other officers walked towards them down the apartment stairs. "Alright, Miss Parker," the officer said. "Officer Jones will escort you inside if you need to get some things. We want to minimize what you touch in there."

Rae nodded, and followed Officer Jones into the apartment.

Dax waited outside. The officers scurried around him and he felt unbearably in the way. Soon, though, Rae was heading down the stairs towards him, clutching a bag to her chest.

They climbed into his car, and Rae said, "I really appreciate this, Dax."

"Sure," he said.

It wasn't until they got back to his apartment that the gravity of the situation really hit him. Dax had invited a girl to spend the night at his apartment. A girl. To spend the night.

And never mind her being a girl. He realized with a sinking feeling that it would be unacceptably impolite for him to ask her to sleep on the couch while he slept in his bed. No. He would have to give her his bed, and he take the couch. He hated sleeping on the couch. Couches were for—well, they were for sitting. And watching television on. And reading a book. Not for sleeping. Besides, Dax liked his bed and it was where he slept best—and now, after this strange night, when all he wanted was a cup of chamomile tea and the comfort of his own bed, he was going to have to let Rae sleep there.

This was why Dax didn't date. There was too much doing what you don't want to do, and not doing what you do want to do. It got too complicated. It was easy to give the wrong impression, or to be misunderstood. It wasn't that he didn't value her comfort, it was just that he valued his own comfort more.

Not that he was dating Rae. One date didn't count as dating, right? He was just helping out a friend in need. And if they weren't dating, technically, maybe he wouldn't have to offer the bed.

Rae followed into the apartment, neither having said much to each other on the drive over. It had been too strange of a night, and neither of them seemed to have many words left. It was already after midnight.

Dax flicked the light switch.

"Wow," Rae said.

Dax turned around to look at her, to see what the "Wow" meant.

Rae clutched her bag. "It's so clean," she said.

"I like it clean."

Rae laughed. "It's so clean and—like, white. And grey. Where's the color?"

"You can have the bed," Dax said, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice but realizing he wasn't succeeding.

"I didn't mean it like that. It just feels so—sterile. So perfect. I guess I wasn't expecting that."

"What were you expecting?"

“Well, not *expecting*,” Rae said. “I wasn’t expect anything. You just don’t see this often with guys.”

“Here,” Dax said. “The bedroom’s this way. You can put your stuff in there, and I’ll show you—”

“Hey Dax?”

“Yeah?”

“Would you mind very much if I slept on the couch?”

“What?”

“I know you’re trying to be a good host, and I appreciate it, but I just prefer the—”

“Are you sure?”

“Sure what?”

“You don’t want the bed. Because you can have the bed.”

“I don’t want to hurt your feelings.”

“How would you do that?”

“I’m sure your bed is very nice.”

“It is.”

“It’s just,” Rae said. “I sleep better on couches when I’m in a new place. It feels more secure. In a new bed there’s always so much open space.”

“You’re sure?”

“I prefer it.”

“Okay,” Dax said. “But if you change your mind, you’ll tell me?”

“Of course.”

Dax showed Rae the bathroom, and she went inside to get ready for bed. He changed into shorts and a t-shirt while he waited for her, and listened absently to the sounds coming from the bathroom. Water turning on and off. The swishing, scrubbing sound of tooth brushing. Clinks on the counter. The flush of the toilet, which embarrassed Dax for hearing. Water turning on and off again.

A brief silence, then the bathroom door opened and Rae came out. She was looking at the floor and rubbing the edges of her face with a towel.

“Do you think it’s connected?” Rae said, finally looking up at him.

“What is?”

“The cards. The break in.”

“Oh,” Dax said. “I don’t know. Could be I guess.”

“I feel it must be,” Rae said. “But I can’t figure how.”

“Could be a weird coincidence.”

“Yeah,” Rae said. “Still. It just feels so uncanny. I feel like I’m missing something. I just can’t see where the connection is.”

“Could be an ex-boyfriend.”

Rae laughed, snorted almost. “Yeah, right,” she said. “Luckily I don’t have any crazy exes.”

“A pissed off friend?”

“None that I know of.”

Dax shrugged. “I’m out of ideas.”

“I have a thought, but it’s a little out there.”

“Shoot.”

“Well, I bought the cards on eBay,” Rae said.

“Yeah, you said.”

“I mean, I entered my address and everything, so they could be shipped to me.”

“Okay,” Dax said, understanding. “Why would the people who sold you the Tarot cards come to your house and tear your apartment apart but not steal anything?”

“Maybe they didn’t find what they were looking for.”

“You think they were looking for the cards?”

“I don’t know what I think, not really,” Rae said. “But you’ve seen what the cards do. Maybe they want them back, or they sold them by mistake? I don’t know.”

“I think you’re reaching.”

“I probably am.”

“Why didn’t you mention it to the police?”

Rae raised an eyebrow. “Do you want to be the cuckoo who brings up some cursed Tarot cards to the cops?”

Dax nodded. “True.”

“I wouldn’t want to say anything unless I was absolutely sure,” Rae said.

“How would you get sure?”

“I have no idea,” Rae said. “Anyway. I don’t want to think about it anymore tonight. You care if I go to bed?”

“I’m pretty tired too,” Dax said.

“Good night, Dax,” Rae said. She reached up to touch his shoulder, a gesture that meant more to him than he wanted it to. “Thanks for letting me stay.”

Rae went into the livingroom, and Dax went into his bedroom and shut the door. He climbed into bed, and turned off the light.

He lay his head on his pillow, and his body was grateful for the comfort of his own bed. In the hours that followed, he found some solace in that. Because Dax soon discovered that with Rae only feet away and under his same roof, it was impossible to sleep. And if he was going to be wide awake all night, at least he got to be comfortable.

2012

It was pitch black in the desert, and Joshua was sound asleep in his tent. Or he had been, until Don Marco woken him roughly.

“What is it?” Joshua mumbled.

“It is time for training,” Don Marco said.

Joshua waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, but it just wasn't happening. The two of them had been camping in the desert for several nights. There was a new moon tonight, and the blackness of the desert night was complete. “Now?”

“Get up!”

It was clear there would be no more sleeping tonight. Joshua pushed himself up from the warmth of his sleeping bag and felt around for his flashlight. Don Marco caught him by the wrist. How on earth Don Marco had such great accuracy with his grip in that darkness, Joshua couldn't tell.

“No light.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Come.”

And Joshua did. He followed Don Marco out into the night, stumbling behind him in the darkness. Don Marco didn't speak or provide any explanation, so Joshua struggled to follow him by sound alone. They walked in the darkness for a painfully long time, until finally Joshua ran into his teacher, who had stopped dead in his path.

“Sorry.”

“Run.”

“What?”

“Run.”

“What do you mean, ‘run?’”

“You want to be a *brujo* or no?”

“Yes, but I don’t see—”

“Run.”

“Run where?”

Don Marco made a guttural sound of intense frustration. “We can go back into town, and you can go back to the border.”

“That’s not necessary,” Joshua said, inserting what he hoped was a humble tone into his voice. “Just help me understand.”

“Nothing to understand,” said Don Marco. “Just: run.”

“In the dark?”

“If that’s how you see it.”

“I don’t *see* anything.” This whole scenario felt foolish to Joshua, and he couldn’t figure out what it had to do with sorcery, unless this was more of Don Marco’s energy sacrifice nonsense.

Still, he said, “Okay.”

And he took off running.

That is, he started to run, but he made it approximately three whole feet before he ran into a bush and fell on his face.

He heard Don Marco breathing next to him in the dark. “Get up. Again.”

“Again what?”

A yack of exasperation greeted him in the darkness.

So, Joshua started to run. And again he fell. And so on, for at least thirty minutes but possibly three hours. He ran into desert shrubs and, even worse, what he knew to be cacti based on the piercing pain that shrieked through his body on contact. Joshua felt a liquid creeping down the side of his face and he was certain that it wasn't sweat.

Just when Joshua was starting to think that this would go on all the way until dawn, he felt Don Marco's hand on his chest.

“Stop,” Don Marco said, his voice soft. “You cannot see.”

This infuriated Joshua. “No kidding?”

Don Marco continued. “You cannot see because you think you cannot see. Therefore, you cannot see.”

“It's dark.”

“Out here, yes,” Don Marco said. He tapped Joshua on the forehead. “In here, no.”

“Can we try again tomorrow?”

“Close your eyes.”

“What?”

“You don't need them.”

“This is—okay,” Joshua said. He closed his eyes and listened for Don Marco's voice.

“Now, you *see*.”

“See what?” Joshua said. “I’m sorry. I see nothing.”

“Perception,” Don Marco said, “is deceptive. You do not need your eyes to see. You just believe you do.”

“That’s what eyes do.”

“Breathe slowly.”

“I don’t see anything.” He took a deep breath, then another.

“You keep saying that, you make it true,” Don Marco said. “Find another truth.”

“Another—?”

“Believe.”

“Believe what?”

“That you can see.”

“But I can’t.”

“Because you believe you can’t.”

“So?”

“So believe. Have faith.”

*Have faith.* This triggered something in Joshua. *Go. It shall be done for you as you have believed.* Joshua tilted his head to one side, like it was an antenna looking for reception. He started to respond, then stopped, because somehow, with his eyes squeezed shut, he could see everything. “Oh. *Oh.*”

“Now,” Don Marco said, his voice deep with satisfaction. “Run.”

And Joshua ran.

*October 2014*

Luna liked to watch things. Like the light that played on the surface of the ocean, the way it shimmered and sparkled like glitter. It hurt her eyes to watch, but she did anyway. Luna watched the way her little brother threw himself at the waves with complete abandon. She spent most of her free time on the beach, slathered in SPF 100, under an umbrella, watching. She sunburned very easily and had to re-apply sunscreen every half hour to make sure she didn't burn.

Pale skin got a bad rap, in Luna's opinion. Many seemed to think that whiteness was an oddity in Southern California, where everyone was bronzed and golden. Luna didn't mind being different. She liked her whiteness, the way her skin looked like fresh cream. It made her feel old fashioned, like someone special, like she was a girl out of one of the Zhou Fang paintings her mother kept on the walls.

Luna didn't have a lot of friends, but that wasn't because she didn't like people. She did, a lot actually. She especially liked to watch them. She liked seeing all the funny things they did. All the different shapes and sizes and all the different ways they talked. The beach was the perfect place for people watching.

The pretty ones were not her favorite. Anyone could be beautiful, in Luna's opinion. And there were so many types of beautiful that, really, after a while, beautiful just got boring. Especially in California. Beautiful people were everywhere. Eventually they all started to blend in together, just a beautiful knot of weeds in a sea of people.

It was the weird ones, the bumpy ones, and the ugly ones that Luna loved best. It made her giddy to see all their lumps and ridges, their protrusions and angles. Like that

woman on the beach in the black bathing suit. Her whole body shaped like an odd lumpy potato. And the way her belly folded out of her body, like there was a big sack of jello inside her bathing suit. The whiskers that jutted from her chin. The warped, uneven sides of her face. The black hair. Luna liked it best when ugly people didn't care—they just sat there in their bathing suits, soaking up the sun, not giving a hoot what they looked like or who looked at them.

She didn't ever speak to them. She just watched them. Appreciated them. Loved them whether they knew it or not. Thought about how funny it was that humans cared so much about appearance when really, everyone was created in the image of God. And there were so many different expressions of Him! God was infinite, and the way Luna saw it, that must mean his image was infinite, too. Big, small, black, white, skinny, fat. It was all a reflection of God—a perfect, unique creation of His. And then people acted like it mattered if they had a tan or highlights or pink lip stick or chiseled abs. Luna didn't have anything against those things. It was just that, in her opinion, exteriors weren't important.

Still, sometimes pretty people caught her eye, but not usually for how they looked. It was because they seemed unusual or their situation stood out somehow. Like that couple over to her right, if they were even a couple.

Luna smeared more sunscreen onto her body and watched them with avid interest. The girl was blonde—like everyone in California, it seemed—and her hair reached all the way down to her hips. She wore a stylish bikini with an southwest print and big sunglasses. The funniest part about her was her oversized hat and the bangles all along

her arms. The way she used her arms to talk and really, it looked like she would just never stop talking.

The girl was pretty and bohemian, but the best part was the dark haired guy who was with her. He was good looking enough—he looked like he probably worked out a lot and like he got his hair cut once a week. Like he probably didn't know what he looked like with any other hair because he'd probably been getting his hair cut once a week for a billion years. But that was why Luna loved him. He was in the most laid back place a person could be—on the beach—with a chill bohemian babe, and he looked liked he may as well have been wearing a suit or something.

Luna wished she could teach him how to live.

He sat with his back straight upright, his hands neatly folded in his lap, and he watched the girl with a strange look on his face. It looked to Luna like a mixture of curiosity and bewilderment. Like he had no idea was she was talking about but he really wanted to. They didn't look like they belonged together at all.

And that is what Luna loved best about them.

*October 2014*

“Don’t look now,” Rae said. “But I think that girl over there is watching us.”

Since the break-in at Rae’s apartment, the two of them had started seeing each other a few times a week. The cops were never able to figure out who had broken in, and none of Rae’s neighbors had seen anything. So, until someone was able to offer more concrete information, the investigation was halted.

It made Dax nervous to think of Rae being in her apartment all alone after something like that. He knew he was not in any position to tell her what to do, but he often worried about her. He’d started finding little excuses to spend time with her, and in the process, was discovering that he truly enjoyed her company. It made him feel guilty, but that didn’t stop him from coming around.

Dax’s head whipped around in the direction that Rae had nonchalantly pointed.

Rae smacked his thigh. “I said *don’t look*.”

It had been a knee-jerk reaction. “What do you mean, watching us?”

“I didn’t mean it was a bad thing,” Rae said. “You know how you can just feel when someone is staring at you? It’s like a magnet. I just kept feeling this—*weirdness*—coming from her direction. I couldn’t help but notice.”

Dax completed what he hoped was a thorough and complete scan of the entire beach behind them. He wanted it to look like he was just checking out the beach. Or looking for someone could be joining them.

“Smooth,” Rae said with laughter in her voice.

“I don’t see anyone,” Dax said.

“That tiny Asian girl,” Rae said, looking out to the ocean casually. “Under the giant umbrella.”

Dax made another complete scan. “The teenager? With the black hair?”

“Well I don’t know how old she is,” Rae. “But yeah, probably. Stop *staring*.”

Dax turned around again.

“You’re so clueless,” Rae said. “Completely obvious. Now she probably knows we know.”

“We know what?”

“She knows we know she’s watching us,” Rae said.

“Why is she watching us?”

“How should I know?” Rae said. “It’s probably because you look so out of place.”

Dax shifted self-consciously. He looked down at his Quiksilver board shorts.

“What’s wrong with how I look?”

Rae slapped him playfully. “Nothing, silly. You just look a little like you don’t know how to relax.” She ran her fingers through his part, messing his hair. “I mean, did you put gel in your hair or what? Who showers before the beach?”

“You didn’t shower?”

“What for?” Rae rolled onto her back and stretched. “Just to get all sandy and salty?”

“I like to be clean,” Dax said.

“Sure,” Rae said. “So do I. Just not before I’m about to get dirty. I like to get clean all at once.”

“You think she thinks I look too clean.”

“Who?”

“The girl. The teenager.”

“Who knows why she’s staring at us,” Rae said. “It’s just a guess.”

And then Dax knew what Rae had meant, about feeling a *weirdness*. His whole backside prickled with a strange sensation, and suddenly he just knew that Rae was right. The girl was watching them. It made him feel uneasy. He played with his hands in his lap, and thought about what Rae had said. He tried to look more relaxed. He slumped his shoulders forward and allowed his spine to curve. In less than a minute, though, he straightened it out again. Bad posture made him feel uncomfortable. Like he’d get stuck that way.

Dax risked a peek over his shoulder, and sure enough, the strange pale girl was staring at him. He looked away. Rae was laying on her back still, and he could tell that her eyes were closed behind her big glasses. She’d thrown her big hat off to the side and the sunlight illuminated her skin. He watched the bronzed curve of her stomach lift and fall with the slow, lazy rhythm of her breath, and he looked away. If he didn’t, he was probably going to have to touch her. And he wasn’t sure how she would feel about that. He wasn’t sure how *he* would feel about that.

So he looked back over his shoulder again. And the pale teenage girl was still watching them. Watching him. She didn’t have sunglasses on, so there was nothing to hide her from the world. Dax almost looked away again, embarrassed at being seen, but then he didn’t. He didn’t look away because she didn’t look away. Most people, if they

are caught looking at someone, will look away quickly. Not this girl. She just went right on looking, right into his eyes.

It made Dax feel nervous, but also it made him feel strangely relaxed and safe. Something about her felt brave. And strong. It felt good to look a stranger in the eyes and not be afraid of it. To not be afraid of them seeing you or you seeing them. It felt terrifying, and yet really good at the same time.

“What are you doing?”

Dax jumped. He turned around to see Rae propped up on her elbows, staring at him. “I—nothing.”

Rae looked over at the girl, who was still staring, then back at Dax. “It’s kind of giving me the creeps. You aren’t supposed to look *back*.”

“Sorry,” Dax said. He was embarrassed, though he wasn’t sure why. He hadn’t shared a single word with the girl, yet somehow, he felt like they just understood each other.

“We should talk to her,” Rae said.

“Why?”

“Why not?” Rae said. She started waving at the girl, gesturing at her to join them.

“Hey, come here!”

Oddly enough, it was this act of recognition that seemed to throw the girl off kilter. Wordless communication, connections that were formed without speaking, with the simple act of looking so boldly into another person’s eyes, she seemed to be okay

with. As soon as she was physically and verbally acknowledged, her quiet, confident demeanor evaporated

She seemed to shrink into herself. Her skin went even more white, her sunscreen caked arms wrapped around her tiny waist. Her shoulders hunched forward and her neck lowered. She looked like a turtle trying to retreat into its shell.

Dax felt uncomfortable for her. He touched Rae's arm. "Come on," he said. "Leave her alone."

Rae shook him off and kept waving. "Hey!" she called to the girl. "Come join us."

The girl looked away from them, and it looked like she was scanning the waves. At this moment that Dax saw her expression change. Her face froze in a moment of recognition, like her eyes had caught a snag.

In a flash she was up from her towel and running towards the water.

Dax turned his head to see where she was going. He had a sick feeling in his gut. Something felt wrong, and he looked to see where the girl had gone. When he saw her again, she was dragging something with her. Not something; *someone*. With horror, Dax realized it was the body of a little boy.

"Help!" she screamed. "Does anyone know CPR?"

The people on the beach seemed to be edging away from her, forming a half-hearted circle around her. It was like they were too afraid to help but too curious to actually leave. Dax felt sickened by their lack of action, until he realized he was a part of it, and without thinking, he tore down to the shore.

The girl met his eyes in recognition, her frail arms and body shaking and her lips purple with fear. “I don’t know CPR.”

Carefully, yet firmly, trying to conceal his own fear, Dax took the boy from her arms and laid him on the sand. They had offered CPR certifications at work last year, and he’d taken the course because it was an automatic fifty-cent raise. He closed his eyes and breathed and tried to remember the steps.

“Hurry!”

The boy wasn’t breathing. Dax held the kid’s nose, breathed into his mouth, and began to pump his tiny chest. The boy’s ribs felt sickeningly fragile beneath his hands. *One, two, three, four, five...* count to thirty, he reminded himself. A steady beat, like a heart.

The boy coughed and salt water gushed from his nose and mouth and he took a long, gasping breath for air.

At that moment a pair of life guards pressed through the crowd. While they checked him, one of them said, “What happened?”

“I saw him go under,” said the girl. “I’m his sister. I was supposed to be watching him.”

The boy was breathing, but he still looked disoriented.

“You saved him.”

She was looking right at Dax, her dark eyes solemn.

The lifeguard looked at Dax. “Did you perform CPR?”

“I’m certified,” Dax said, fumbling for his wallet, but it wasn’t there, because he was wearing swim trunks.

The lifeguard held up his hand. “Not necessary. Hey, man, you saved this kid’s life. Just needed to know for the report.”

Another lifeguard instructed the crowd to clear space for the EMT’s who were coming down to take the boy to the hospital.

“He’s breathing,” said the Asian girl. “Where are you taking him?”

“Standard procedure,” said the lifeguard. “If he stops breathing, they’ve got to take him in. Figure out why he stopped in the first place. May have hit his head.”

The EMTs strapped the boy onto a stretcher, and the girl clapped a hand over her mouth. The little boy reached for her and whimpered. “It’s okay, buddy. I’m his sister,” she said again. “Can I ride with him?”

The EMTs gave the okay. Once they had finished strapping the boy into the stretcher, they started walking quickly toward the ambulance. The girl struggled after them in the sand, abandoning her umbrella. She turned momentarily to look at Dax. “I’m Luna,” she called to him. “Thank you.”

2012

Joshua was a dedicated student. Where Don Marco was unrelenting in the physical aspects of the training, Joshua was unwavering in his commitment. Very soon, the training, rigorous and physically demanding as it was, began to combine much more elements of sorcery. Joshua proved to Don Marco to be incredibly adept at learning the *brujo's* ways.

“You have a gift,” Don Marco admitted one evening, careful not to make his smile too generous.

Don Marco taught him about the laws of perception, and Joshua learned how to manipulate the laws of physics—how to change the forms of energy. It was simple, really, once you understood that the only reason you couldn't do it in the first place was because of an ingrained belief that you couldn't. Don Marco taught Joshua to see outside of perception, or rather, to adjust his perception so he could live outside of the rules.

Joshua kept his small Bible in his pocket always, and it was worn from reading and re-reading. In the beginning, he kept the book hidden from his teacher because he wasn't sure how the old sorcerer would feel about it.

However, once, he asked Don Marco about Jesus. As usual, his teacher's reply was evasive. He never could seem to get to the point, Joshua had learned.

Smiling, the old man had said, “Yes, Jesus. He was a teacher—a man who had mastery of himself and could see outside of perception. He was sent just like all the others. To Unify. To be an example of love.”

Of course, Joshua thought to himself bitterly, the old man wouldn't admit that Jesus was the one and only Savior of the world—such blasphemy! Joshua knew that the sorcerer felt himself to be too wise for that—oh, what arrogance. It sickened Joshua and filled him with a black hate that he would actually taste on his tongue. If the sorcerer was truly as skilled with perception and seeing energy as he claimed to be, how was it that he remained oblivious to Joshua's hate?

This only furthered Joshua's contempt for the old man and served as further proof that his teacher was a fraud—able to harness some kind of power, certainly. But what kind of power was it, if it did not come from the one true God? Because clearly, it did not. The Lord would no more use the old sorcerer than he would have used one of Pharaoh's magicians in Egypt.

And it was true that the sorcerer could do wondrous things. Yet, this was exactly why this power was very dangerous in the hands of a man like Don Marco. Don Marco did not give praise to the Lord, to whom praise was due. He practiced his "secret arts" and sacrificed energy to what he referred to as "the universe." It was a wonder the Lord had allowed him to continue on this path for so long without striking him down. The only reason He hadn't, Joshua concluded, was because he was a part of the Lord's plan to help Joshua ascend into power. Because this kind of power needed to be in the hands of a man of God. A man who would use these miracles and wonders to further the kingdom of heaven, rather than to spread blasphemies.

Because, the sorcery Joshua learned was nothing short of miraculous. Don Marco showed Joshua how to fly, and yes, even to walk on water. Joshua found himself elated

the day that he first walked on the smooth, shimmering surface of a pool (a rare commodity in the desert, but which Don Marco had located in a hotel several hours away.) Joshua marveled when he achieved it, and finally, deeply, understood what Jesus had meant when he'd told Peter, "You of little faith. Why did you doubt?"

And it's also what He meant when he said if you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could move mountain. It wasn't just any faith: It was having faith that the mountain would move. *Believing*—and also *knowing*—it would move.

Because that was exactly what Don Marco was teaching Joshua: it was doubt in the first place that made things impossible. The moment humans perceived something as impossible, it became so. Because humans believed walking on water to go against the laws of nature, it became so. Belief dictated reality. All a person had to do was change his beliefs.

It was that simple, and that difficult.

This understanding made Joshua feel connected to the Savior in an intimate way. As the training continued, and Joshua's skills increased, he became even more convinced of his own destiny. However strange that he was learning from such an unholy man, it was clear to Joshua that God had led him into the desert for a reason. Much like Jesus' own sojourn into the desert.

It was during this time that he became even more obsessed with the book of Revelation than he had even been in the past. He read it, and re-read it, in any spare moment he had during training. He was having vivid dreams at night, and was learning

from Don Marco how to work in dream space. And in what little free time that he had, he began to believe himself to more than just connected to the Messiah.

He believed himself to *be* the Messiah.

*October 2014*

The day that had started off so perfectly blazing hot for a beach day had chilled quickly with the sunset. Dax and Rae packed their towels into Rae's brightly colored beach bag and ambled off of the beach.

When they reached the sidewalk, they paused to shake the extra sand from their legs and feet before putting their sandals back on. Rae slid her sunglasses and hat into her bag, then pressed her palms up against her face. "My skin is so warm," she said. "I'm so sun stoned. And hungry."

Dax took one last look at the ocean and the hazy pink sky. The waves danced in the purplish light and crashed against the pillars of the pier. It had been a while since he'd actually spent time in Ocean Beach. "I hope that kid is okay."

"He's fine," Rae said. "The lifeguard took care of him. Where are we eating? I'm starving."

"That girl was so frightened."

"It was good that you helped him."

"I could have done more."

"You were great." Rae swatted him. "Food. I'm starving."

"Okay, okay," he said. "Where to?"

"I know a place."

"Nothing weird?"

"Meaning, you want something boring,"

"I just want food I can trust."

Rae started walking. “Don’t worry, this place is safe.”

Dax followed her lead, and thought about safety. A month ago, he’d been safe. His life had been neat, organized, and predictable, just the way that he liked it. The promotion had really rocked the boat, and Dax felt like the ground beneath him was unsteady. He hadn’t spent this much time with a girl since—well, since Theresa, which unearthed a whole lot of emotions Dax wasn’t particularly eager to sift through. He was embarrassed because he was so out of practice at dating. Worst of all, though, was the overwhelming guilt. It was ridiculous, he knew, because Theresa would have wanted him to embrace life without her. But he didn’t know how to let go, and if he was honest with himself, he was terrified.

Dax watched Rae now, prancing slightly in front of him, wrapped in a turquoise colored scarf, her hair waving wildly in the breeze. His eyes traveled to her ass, the way it moved underneath her white beach dress, and his face went hot. That was the other thing. They’d spent a lot of time together since the break in, including a couple more sleepovers for safety and security, but they hadn’t yet shared a bed. Not for any reason, either practical or—otherwise. His eyes traveled the length of her tanned legs, and to the place where legs met skirt, and to his embarrassment, he was hard. If he was reading their situation right, sex would at some point become inevitable, and the prospect filled him with a combination of anticipation and dread. Like oil and water, these two emotions didn’t mix well, and the result was a nervous sick feeling in the pit of his belly.

So absorbed was Dax with watching her that he nearly ran her over when she stopped. She turned around to look at him, her eyes shining, and he was mortified

worrying that his boner had betrayed him. He stepped back from her, probably too quickly, and looked up to see where they had stopped. Instead of seeing a restaurant, as he had expected, he was surprised to see they were standing in front of a church.

“Is this the restaurant?” He felt stupid for even asking, and slightly guilty to find himself standing in front of a church after his recent rush of impure thoughts. He hadn’t been to church in a long time, but all those years of Catholic conditioning were hard to shake.

Rae wore a confused expression, like she’d been awakened from a deep sleep. “This is the place.”

“This is where we’re eating?” Dax said. He looked at the church again.

“This is where we’re supposed to go.”

“I don’t understand,” Dax said. He followed her up the church steps anyway.

“I didn’t know you were religious,” he whispered when they were inside.

Rae placed her fingers on her temples and her forehead wrinkled. “I’m not,” she said. “I’m just—we’re supposed to be here.”

“Aren’t you hungry?” His own stomach was beginning to growl.

“I can’t even think about food,” Rae said. Her face had taken on a strange, distant quality, and she moved toward the altar at the front of the room.

There wasn’t a mass in progress, but there were several people in the worn red pews, heads bent in prayer, or lighting candles at the altar. Church was supposed to be a safe place, but he felt cold, hungry, and terribly uneasy.

Rae waited in line between three other people—two older women and a middle aged man—who were lighting a candle and saying a prayer.

“What are we doing in here?” Dax whispered.

“Hush,” Rae said. “Be respectful.”

Dax clasped his hands together in front of his body, looked down at the sand stuck between his sandal-clad feet, and felt enormously out of place.

Finally, it was Rae’s turn. Dax stood beside her while she picked up the candle and held the flame to the wick of another candle that wasn’t yet lit. She closed her eyes and Dax realized that he gripped his hands together so tightly that his fingers had gone numb. He didn’t know Rae very well yet, but he’d never suspected her to be religious. Eccentric, yes, but religious, no. His neck swelled, like his collar was too tight, only his shirt didn’t have a collar. Church was really not his thing, not anymore, and it definitely did not fit into his comfort zone.

About the time Dax expected Rae to be done with her prayer or whatever it was that she was doing, she opened her eyes. Dax heaved a sigh of relief, then stopped mid exhale when he got a good look at her face.

Rae was smiling. But this wasn’t her regular intoxicating smile. It was wicked; sinister. Dax felt his blood turn to ice in his veins.

Dax realized that her face was unusually bright for the darkness of the church. Much brighter than it would be in any normal candle light.

He looked away from her awful smile, let his eyes travel down the length of her arm towards her hand that was holding the candle. She was still holding the candle above

the other candle, only now, instead of a normal sized flame, there was a roaring flame where the wicks of the two candles met. A flame pushing four feet in length.

And Rae just stood there, watching the flame erupt, smiling, her face glowing from the heat.

“What are you doing?” Dax was so stunned he couldn’t move.

Rae didn’t answer him or even seem to register that he was there.

There was a commotion in the church behind them.

Dax’s entire body throbbed with humiliation. What were all these people thinking? He turned around, trying to come up with some sort of explanation.

All of his thoughts vanished the moment he turned around and saw what was happening behind them in the church.

It was mayhem.

People were throwing hymnals at each other’s faces. They grabbed anything in their vicinity and began to attack each other. One woman raked her fingernails without mercy across a man’s face while he clubbed her on the head with a Bible. An older man used his cane to puncture another man’s lungs. Very soon the people were more than just beating each other—they were murdering each other. They used their bare hands if they had to. It was terrible, and the church echoed with wet, ripping sounds and the sharp echoes popping of joints.

Meanwhile, Rae just stood there, the flame growing ever larger.

Dax scanned the room for a way out. It seemed everywhere he looked there was an obstacle, or a group of people likely to attack him if he tried to escape. He was trapped.

His eyes locked onto something. Another pair of eyes stared back at him from beside one of the pews in the side aisle. Sane eyes. There was something familiar about them. They were calm and steady, though at the moment, quite terrified. He squinted, his eyes trying to read them in the darkness of the church. Rae's flame burned brighter and Dax saw a flicker of black hair.

"Luna!" He tried to yell while whispering.

Dax felt his stomach turn. Of all the horrible things he had witnessed, this couldn't be one of them. This was where he drew the line. He couldn't let anything bad happen to that girl.

The girl's dark eyes widened and she hid herself behind the pew. Meanwhile, the people in the church continued to mangle each other.

He didn't want to talk too loudly because so far, the violent church people hadn't seemed to notice him. "It's okay," he said. "Come to the front. I'll keep you safe." He wasn't sure how, but he was determined.

He tried not to look at the mayhem and just kept looking to the spot where he'd last seen Luna's eyes. "You can trust me."

He jumped when he felt a cold hand touch his arm. He looked down and saw that it was Luna, looking up at him with wide, watchful eyes.

“What’s happening?” she whispered. She looked at Rae, who hadn’t moved, and then towards the pews, where the few remaining people were still attacking each other. The sickening sounds increased, and unholy aromas of flesh and copper filled the room.

Dax put his finger on Luna’s chin and turned her face away from it all. “Don’t look,” he said. “You don’t need to see.”

“Why are they doing this?” She asked Dax the question, but her eyes were fixed on Rae. Her face registered a deep shade of horror. “We have to stop her.”

Dax knew Luna was right. He was terrified to touch Rae, but knew that he had to try.

The minute he touched Rae’s arm, his hand snapped back reflexively. It was like touching a stove burner. He looked at Luna.

“What is it?” Luna was unable to hide the fear in her face.

“Her skin,” Dax said. He looked at his fingers. They were already pulsing angry red. “It’s on fire.”

Luna looked out into the church, where the last few people were still beating each other. “They’ve gone mad,” she said. “We have to get out of here.”

“I can’t leave her.”

“Then stop her.”

Dax inhaled sharply, then reached for Rae’s arm yet again. He managed not to scream, but just barely. He pulled on her arm, now using both hands, the edges of his vision white from the searing pain. Her arm wouldn’t budge, and the flame continued to grow brighter.

In that moment the last of the people in the church stumbled to the ground and fell over, dead. Dax howled as he gave one last effort to pull Rae's arm away from the candle. It finally came free, and she dropped the candle in her hand. It rolled on the floor away from the altar.

As soon as Rae dropped the candle, the large flame extinguished. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she collapsed.

Dax lifted her and noticed that Rae reeked of sulfur. He felt clumsy with the burden of her body. Luna rushed over to help him, and together they carried her out the back door of the church.

*October 2014*

When they had gotten as far away from the church as they could possibly manage while carrying Rae, who was still passed out, Dax and Luna found a discreet patch of grass next to a school to lay her in. They put Rae on her back. She was still unconscious, but a surge of relief flooded through Dax when he ascertained that she was still breathing. He reached into Rae's beach bag and pulled out a towel they'd used at the beach earlier.

Luna hadn't spoken since they'd left the church. She watched Dax quietly while he arranged Rae's hair and smoothed her forehead. Rae's arms were sprawled along her sides, her left wrist turned upwards.

"What's with her tattoo?" Luna said finally, her voice wavering slightly, like a match shivering in the darkness.

"I don't know." It was honest. He didn't.

"I went to the church to pray for my brother," Luna said. "He hit his head. He has a concussion." She paused, then looked up shyly at Dax. "A broken rib from the CPR."

"Jesus," Dax said.

"He's okay," Luna said. She smiled. "He was eating green jello when I left the hospital. Just, you know, it can't hurt to pray."

Dax didn't take his eyes off Rae. "Glad he's okay. Sorry about the rib."

"You saved his life," Luna said.

"There was a lifeguard."

"Not fast enough," Luna said. "So is she like, a witch?"

“She’s not a witch,” Dax said, feeling defensive. He touched Rae’s cheek and noticed that his hands were shaking. He felt like he should be doing something. Anything. Freaking out. Calling the police. Running away as fast and as far as he could.

“You like her.”

“I hardly know her.”

“What was with the fire?”

“All those people.”

“So many,” Luna said. She was looking back towards the church.

That was when the sirens started.

Dax jumped at the sound and looked around, reassessing their location.

“We’re too exposed,” Luna said.

“We didn’t do anything wrong,” Dax said, his voice too harsh.

Rae stirred and the two of them stopped talking. She opened her eyes, slowly. She looked, first at Dax, then at Luna. Then she burst into tears.

“What happened?” Rae choked out.

“Don’t you remember?” Dax said. He lifted Rae slightly and sat behind her, sliding his legs beside her torso. Her back rested up against his chest while she shook with sobs. Luna sat in the grass, in the shadows, and watched them.

“I felt a rush when I saw the church,” Rae said. “I couldn’t control it. I had to go in.”

“Was it like at the restaurant?” Dax said.

Rae's brow furrowed and she wiped snot from her nose with her bare fingers. "I don't—" she said. She looked pointedly at Luna.

"It's alright," Dax said. "She helped us."

"This time—" She stopped, a sob caught in her throat. She looked up at Dax, who was still nestled behind her, and real terror was in her eyes. "I needed to go in that church. It was awful. Like being possessed." She shuddered.

Luna, in her watchful way, was quiet in the dark where she sat on the grass. "How did you do it?" Her voice always had a way of being unexpected. It was likely because her entire appearance was wispy and waiflike, yet her voice was startlingly clear.

Rae looked at Luna. "From the beach. How...?"

"She was in the church," Dax explained. "I broke her brother's rib."

"It wasn't your fault," Luna said.

Rae looked perplexed, like she was trying to remember. "It's so far away. The beach, this day...the church."

"What did you do to those people?" Luna said.

"It's the cards," Rae said, pushing herself away from Dax's chest and sitting upright. "It's got to be."

"Are you like a Satanist or something?" Luna said.

"You have to believe in Satan to be a Satanist," Rae said sharply, holding her left wrist up so Luna could see her tattoo. Dax wasn't sure what it meant, but he knew that Luna had hit a nerve.

“I saw the fire,” Luna said, her voice even and clear. Her hand flew to the cross around her neck. “And that tattoo.”

Rae’s certainty waivered and she whirled around to look Dax in the face. “What fire?”

“Don’t you remember?” Dax said.

Rae put her face into her hands. It was several minutes before she replied. Luna seemed to watch her with calculated curiosity. “It’s blurry,” Rae said, finally looking up. “My memory. I remember—I saw the church, and then this *rush*—going inside and then—” She stopped. “It’s sickening. Like I feel repulsed and also—stimulated. Oh, I think I might be sick.” She rushed to her feet, ran to the nearest bush, and vomited violently.

The sirens from the direction of the church blared persistently. Dax looked at the sky and could see flashes of red from the lights.

Dax wasn’t sure of much, at this moment, but he did know one thing: they were too exposed out in the open like this.

“What did she mean about cards?” Luna’s voice, as always, startled him.

“It’s a long story,” Dax said. He was getting up.

“I’m a good listener,” Luna said.

The noise of the sirens was bothering Dax, making it hard for him to think. “We need to get out of here,” Dax said. He walked over to Rae, who had finished vomiting but was still hunched over. He put his hands on her shoulders.

Luna shuddered and hugged herself. She glanced back in the direction of the church again.

“They’ll be questioning anyone outside,” Dax said.

“We’re innocent,” Luna said.

“We are,” Dax said, his face shadowed. “But it’s better if we go.”

Rae wiped her mouth with her scarf. She stood up shakily next to Dax. “I’m not a Satanist.”

“Sorry I said that.”

“Where do you live?” Dax said.

“I’m just a couple blocks away from here,” Luna said.

“Okay. Should I walk you?” Dax said.

Luna shook her head. “No,” she said. “I’ll be fine. Get her home.”

Dax hesitated. “Luna?”

“I won’t say anything,” Luna said. “I trust you.”

Dax reached into the pocket of his board shorts and fished for his wallet. When he found it, he pulled out a card and handed it to her. “If you need anything, call me,” he said. “If anything weird happens. Call me first, please?”

Luna took the card and smoothed her fingers across it. “Yeah,” she said. “Sure.”

“And tell your brother I’m sorry.”

She smiled and only then did Dax notice how exhausted she looked. “Yeah, sure, sorry for saving his life,” she said. She touched the silver cross around her neck. “I’ll say a prayer for you guys.”

“Thanks,” he said. “We’ll get this figured out.”

The sirens blared, Dax helped Rae over to the sidewalk, and Luna disappeared into the night.

*October 2014*

When Luna got home, her mother was sitting in the living room, staring at the television and eating take out chow mein. She didn't look up when Luna walked past her.

Luna went into the bathroom and turned on the light. She stared at her reflection, taking in her round, pale face and long black hair. She felt tired and numb. She hadn't really paused to think since everything happened, and now that it was quiet, she could still hear the sound of rending flesh. She shivered and turned on the faucet.

She leaned down and splashed her face with the cool water. It didn't make her feel any less unnerved.

Luna straightened up, and realized she had to pee. She went over to the toilet, pulled down her pants, and sat on the toilet seat.

She looked down at her underwear and felt a jolt of shock. She blinked, then stared.

There was a brownish red blood stain in her underwear.

She realized that this was probably not unusual for most girls, but Luna was seventeen, and though she'd never told anyone this, she had never had a period. Sometimes, this had made her feel vaguely abnormal, a distinction between herself and other girls. It didn't bother her enough to see a doctor or tell anyone. She figured it would work itself out.

And now that it had, it was very anti-climactic. And Luna wasn't sure what she was supposed to do, or what kinds of supplies she needed. Such things had never been

discussed with her mother, who wasn't even aware that Luna had never menstruated. And even if she had, no one had prepared Luna for the next steps.

From what Luna had picked up in the restrooms at school, she knew that girls handled the subject of their periods differently. For some, the event was momentous, a threshold to cross over into womanhood. For other girls, it was a source of shame. Still others, a nuisance.

Luna just felt curious.

She pressed her finger into the bloody stain, then lifted her finger to her face, examining the red mark.

Her abdomen churned with heat.

It had been a very strange night.

2013

One evening, Don Marco informed Joshua that there was nothing left to teach, that Joshua was excelling and had achieved success as a sorcerer.

Don Marco's sharp eyes shined with love, wonder, and pride in his apprentice's accomplishments. "I have nothing left to teach you." He pulled Joshua close and kissed him on the forehead.

Joshua wept.

They shared a meal together that night, as they had many other nights. As a special treat, Joshua turned their water into wine.

"This is a celebration," Don Marco warned. He was in a good mood. "You must be careful with using sorcery for frivolous things and personal gain."

"It's a special occasion, Teacher," Joshua said. "Don't worry! I will make an offering."

They drank wine together, Don Marco having much more than he usually permitted himself, until the darkness settled over the adobe home like a warm, woolen blanket.

"Good night, my son," Don Marco said, his eyelids drooping. "I am an old man who is not used to much drink."

"Good night, Teacher," Joshua said.

Later that evening, Joshua slipped into the cool, stone walled room where Don Marco slept. Joshua walked in the dark over to his teacher's cot, stood over him, and cut a long, neat slit in his throat with a knife.

Don Marco's eyes popped open, bright and trusting, not registering what had happened to him. Joshua saw an expression of complete and utter bewilderment cross his mentor's face while blood sprayed and spurted from the gash on his throat. A gurgling sound erupted from Don Marco's lips when he tried to speak and realized he could not.

Joshua now knelt next to the cot, Don Marco's blood coating him until he was slick with it, and the dying man's eyes locked onto his own once they finally registered what was happening. He was dying. Joshua had done this to him. Joshua, the young man who had been his deepest confidant, his brightest student. The young man whom he had clothed and fed and given a roof to sleep under for over two years. His eyes formed the question that his mouth could not.

Joshua took Don Marco's hand gently and held it tenderly in both of his. "*Puede ver, maestro?*" he said, in Spanish. "For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive.' Matthew twenty-four, verse twenty-four. My responsibility is not to you, or to the world, but to the Lord God Almighty, the Heavenly Father. May He deal with you as He see fit."

And then the old sorcerer was dead.

Joshua leaned forward and kissed his teacher's hands. He knelt in Don Marco's blood and prayed.

*October 2014*

They hardly spoke on the way back to her apartment, and Rae was glad of it, because she wasn't sure what she would say. She felt stronger now and walked slightly ahead of Dax, moving deliberately. Rae didn't look behind her to make sure he was following, but she knew he was; she could feel him, in that weird electric way you can sense a person you're attracted to.

And how could she explain what had happened? How *would* she explain it? Surely he would want an explanation. Once they were safe inside her apartment, and the sirens were far behind them, and the dead bodies began to crystalize in their consciousness, that's when he would want to know, because they would realize, wouldn't they, that people had actually *died* back there?

But she wouldn't be able to explain it, because she didn't know. One minute, she'd been walking towards Ranchos for a black bean burrito and a Negra Modelo. The next minute, she'd felt this *pull*, this need, and she'd found herself heading for the church. Which, if Dax would have truly known anything about her, he would have found completely insane because Rae never went to church. She usually took alternate routes to avoid even walking by churches, because they just creeped her out. And made her angry. And brought up a lot of other emotions that she usually found unnecessary and so she just tried to avoid them all together. But to make a deliberate choice to go inside a church?

Rae didn't understand it. She wasn't sure how the switch had happened, but something had flipped inside her. She shivered now, not from the cool breeze, but as one who had seen a ghost. Because in some strange way, hadn't she?

The stairs to her apartment. The front door. Each of these she took with fierce, purposeful steps. Like she knew where she was going. Like she knew what would happen once they got inside.

She felt Dax standing behind her. He paused in the doorway, and she felt heat radiating from him. Or maybe she didn't, but she *felt* like she could. At first she didn't turn around. She just stood there, halfway into her apartment.

Finally, she whirled around. She marched back to where Dax was standing, her mouth drawn in a firm line. She grabbed hold of his shirt, pulled him into the room, pushed the door shut with his body. She was close to him now, her face to his face, her eyes piercing his.

“Rae,” Dax said, or started to say. But she didn't let him finish. She pressed her mouth to his, hard at first, probably too hard. And he kissed her back, no hesitation this time like that first, awkward kiss in the car. There was heat on his lips and he was pushing back just as fiercely. He pressed his body forward into hers and she pushed on his shoulders, shoving him back against the door, and she bit his ear. Hard.

She didn't know why she bit him—it wasn't something she usually did. But with Dax, she just had an urge to do it, like somehow lips against lips and tongue against tongue was not enough. She wanted to feel his flesh between her teeth, to take him into her mouth. If she could, she would bite a piece off and swallow it, making him a part of her forever.

“Ow,” Dax said.

Rae pulled back, gasping. “Sorry.”

Dax's face was flushed. "Easy," he said.

Rae was embarrassed. "I didn't mean—"

"It's okay," Dax pulled her face back to his, parted her lips with his tongue.

"Don't stop."

They moved over to the couch and fell onto it, and Dax stuck his hands up her shirt and kissed her neck. And Rae closed her eyes and felt the sweetness of it, and the nearness of him, and she felt bad for biting him, because there was something about the eager way he kissed her and touched her that reminded her of high school. It was not so much like being touched for the first time as it was feeling like it was his first time touching. That's what made her ashamed of her ferocity. Like maybe he would think she was too experienced or freaky and would change his mind—

Dax stopped suddenly. He pulled back and looked at her, then away.

"What is it?" Rae said.

"I need to use the bathroom," Dax blurted.

Rae didn't ask what was wrong, but clearly something had caused Dax to back off. It was the ear biting thing, she just knew it. After all this time of taking it slow, she had moved too fast. She didn't want him going to the bathroom and changing his mind. She wondered what she could say to make him stay, to come closer, to make her feel wanted.

"It's down the hall," she said.

Dax disappeared into the bathroom. Rae curled up into herself, the blood in her veins still fresh and pulsing. She waited there, curled up and waiting and wanting, and not knowing what she'd say when he came back.

When Dax returned, he looked sheepish. Rae burst out of her curled up position and tried her best to stretch out into a pose that would look sexy and desirable—but still innocent, because she didn't want to look like she was *trying* to be sexy and desirable. She couldn't seem too much like she knew what she was doing. She wished that they had just gone for it, without the interruption. Now there had been too much time for thinking and getting self-conscious. This was just stupid. What was wrong with him, standing there, shifting from one foot to the other like that?

“Is everything okay?”

“I really like you,” Dax said.

She patted the cushion next to her. “Come back on the couch, Dax.”

“Listen,” Dax said. “I have to tell you something.”

“Okay?”

“I wasn't prepared for—this—tonight,” Dax said.

“We don't have to,” Rae said. Maybe it was the wrong thing to say, but she felt rejected.

“I want to,” Dax said, quickly. Then he looked at the ground and mumbled something. “I donna of a fandom.”

“What?”

He glanced up from the ground then, gave her a pleading look. “I don’t have a condom, okay?”

Rae suppressed her giggles, and tried not to show too much relief. “Oh, is that all?” she said. She thought of the condoms in her drawer, and wondered if they would make her seem too prepared. *Screw it.* She leapt up from the couch and took his hand.

“Follow me,” she said, and she led him into the bedroom.

The sex wasn’t terrible. Their initial frenzy had been stilted with the awkward intermission, and they never did get back to quite the same energy. They bumped foreheads and mumbled awkward apologies. There was no arching of backs or curling of toes. And anyway, if there was anything Rae was learning during her Commitment Cleanse, it was this: first time sex was rarely good.

Still. It wasn’t terrible.

When they were finished, Dax collapsed on the bed next to her.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Don’t be,” she said.

He looked at her for a long moment and brushed her hair behind her ear. The motion was so sudden and so tender that it reminded Rae of being a child and tears came to her eyes.

“You’re beautiful,” he said.

They lay like that for a long time.

*October 2014*

After a while, the reality of the situation settled on Dax, and he turned away from Rae.

“Okay,” Dax said, sitting up. “I’ve got to find my car.”

“Don’t go,” Rae said, clutching his arm. “Stay a while. Have a drink.”

“I have work in the morning—”

“Please. Stay.”

Dax felt all of the excuses rising in him, all of his desire for routine. There was nothing he hated more than sleeping in a strange place. He thought of his own bed and his boxers and his clean white walls and his toothbrush. He thought of his morning regimen and his treadmill and his coffee maker. He wanted to get back to a place where he could sort out what had happened—both back at the church, and here in Rae’s bedroom. There were too many emotions happening and if there was one thing Dax wasn’t good at, it was emotions. He felt like he could cry—a thing he hated, because it made him feel so out of control and it didn’t do any good—and he didn’t want to be here if that happened. He wanted to be alone where he could sort himself out, but what could he tell Rae? He could say, “Sorry, but I haven’t had sex with anyone since the night my girlfriend died five years ago, and I’m not sure how I feel about it.” That would go over well.

Dax sighed.

“All right,” he said.

She smiled, and leapt up from the bed.

Dax pulled on his boxers, then followed Rae into the living room. Now that he was in a normal state of mind, he was able to take in the interior of her apartment. He saw, first, a large, worn bookshelf that was seriously testing the laws of physics with its book-to-shelf-space ratio. Nothing inside the place really matched—nothing was flashy, and there were crystals of many shapes, colors, and sizes placed randomly around the room. It was unbearably girly. There was nothing about this place that fit him, nothing about it that was anything like his own clean and simple apartment, his neat and organized life. Which was, Dax thought as he accepted the beer Rae had gotten for him, to be expected.

The beer can was brown and had a picture of a chocolate Labrador Retriever on it. It certainly wasn't the green Heineken bottle he was used to.

He must have made a face, because Rae said, "Oh, just try it." She sat down on her couch and moved the colorful throw pillows out of the way to clear a space for Dax.

"What's with all the pillows?" Dax said. He sat down.

"I like pillows," Rae said, sipping her own beer. She watched Dax intently while he prepared to sip out of his can.

"Don't do that," he said.

"It's just pillows," Rae said.

"No, I mean, don't watch me drink," Dax said. "It's making me nervous."

"I just want to see if you like it."

"Now there's too much pressure," he said.

Rae tossed a pillow at him and laughed. She picked up another one and hugged it close to her.

“What did you mean before?” Dax said.

“When?” Rae said.

“About the cards,” Dax said. “The Tarot cards?”

Rae stared at her beer can. “That night, at the restaurant.”

“Yeah?”

“I had a vision.”

“A vision?”

“Like a premonition.”

“So you did know.”

Rae shrugged.

“And what does this have to do with the cards?”

Rae reached into her bag, pulled the Tarot cards out, and set them on the coffee table. “It’s still happening.”

“What is?”

“Every time I pull a card, it’s the Death card.”

“So don’t pull any cards,” Dax said.

“You think I’m crazy,” Rae said.

Dax sipped the beer. “It’s different.”

“Different could be crazy.”

“No, the beer,” he said. “I like it.”

“I keep pulling cards because I want to pull a different card, just once,” Rae said.

“I wanted—what I wanted was, a new beginning. A fresh start. Not—this.”

“You think the—visions—and what happened at the church? It has something to do with the cards?”

“I know it sounds insane,” Rae said. “I mean, that stuff isn’t *real*.”

“So get rid of them.”

“If I get rid of them, they win.”

“Who wins?”

“The cards. The—forces, or whatever,” Rae said. “It’s like I’d be admitting they have some kind of power.”

Dax sipped the beer again, but wasn’t sure how he felt about the nutty flavor. He set it on the coffee table and looked over at Rae. He was thinking of what Theresa had told him that night, about Tarot cards always having different messages for different people. “Do a reading for me,” he said.

“What?”

“Have you done a reading for anyone besides yourself?”

“I thought you weren’t into that stuff.”

“Have you?”

“Well, no.”

“So, do a reading for me,” Dax said. He sipped his beer again. The taste was growing on him. It was smooth.

Rae shrugged. “Can’t hurt, I guess,” she said. She started to shuffle the cards.

Dax was trying hard to remember. “Make sure you’re thinking of me.”

“I read the booklet,” Rae snapped jokingly. She winked at him, then set the cards down on the coffee table. “Cut the deck.”

Dax cut it.

Rae put the cards back together, then flipped over the new top card.

They both stared. Neither of them said anything for a long moment. Then Dax looked at Rae.

“What made you think to do that?” Rae said, not taking her eyes off the card on the table.

“Just something I remembered.”

“What does it mean?”

He looked back at the table. The card that was flipped up was, in fact, not the Death card. It was a new card. It was The Magician.

“I thought you read the booklet,” Dax said, poking Rae in the ribs.

“I’m serious,” Rae said, pushing his hand away. She dug the booklet out of the Tarot card box, and flipped to the right page.

Rae read aloud: “Know, will, dare and keep silent. You possess and wield the tools of magical change. You are a visionary, but it is not necessary to express this to others. Trust the lessons of your own experience and insight. You embody force and power. You hold every key to create change and you have all the resources you need, but only if you operate through *focused action*, the second model of empowerment. Be ready to create your world in the image of your choosing.”

Neither of them spoke for a while after she finished reading.

Finally, Rae said again, “What does it mean?”

Dax didn’t respond, because he didn’t have an answer. None of that sounded anything like him. He was no magician or creator of change or whatever. He was not going to remake the world.

In a sudden movement, Rae scooped up the cards and started shuffling, a crease forming between her eye brows. She closed her eyes, cut the deck, then flipped the top card.

The Death card.

“You?” Dax said.

She nodded, paler than usual.

Dax put his hand on her arm. “Are you okay?”

Rae shook her head, the crease between her eyebrows deepening. “What does it *mean?*” she said, for the third time.