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# Whisper

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Whisper

by

Christina Struyk-Bonn

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing

Thesis Committee:  
Anthony Wolk, Chair  
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Portland State University  
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## Abstract

Whisper was a reject, living in a world so polluted and damaged that many humans and animals alike were born with defects. She'd grown up in an outcast camp far from any village, and those who lived in the camp were like her: disfigured.

But on her sixteenth birthday, Whisper's father came to take her back to the village where she was to fill her mother's vacated spot and perform duties for the family. Her job was to cook, clean, wash the clothes, and maintain the family property. At night she was chained to the doghouse.

Her uncle decided that Whisper could make far more money for the family by other means. He escorted her to the city where he brought her to the Purgatory Palace which was full of people like her, people with disfigurements who had been abandoned by their families and lived in the city for one reason only –to beg for money. Whisper refused to beg, and instead used the violin she'd received from her mother, and played songs for the money she earned.

This became tolerable for a time. But Whisper missed her forest home with an ache as cold as the city and she missed the other rejects from the camp in the woods. When she was accused of attacking a store attendant, she found herself in jail.

She was rescued by Solomon, a man who had heard her songs on the street corners and said that she played as only a genius could. He offered her a place at The Conservatory of Music, where she would study the violin with him. Whisper accepted

this offer but even though she was warm, safe, and played music every day, she did not fit in at The University and knew that she never would.

This is a young adult novel about Whisper, trying to find a place in a world that doesn't accept her. It is a story of rejection, pollution and social status. Whisper discovers that through perseverance, friends and determination, anyone can find a way to fit.

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## Whisper

I remember the very first day of my existence, when hands pushed me into the cold water and held me down, waiting for me to drown but already then I was quiet and knew how to hold my breath.

### 1

It was my job to catch the crayfish for dinner. I didn't mind. I tried not to let Jeremia and Eva know that I actually liked it. They saw it as punishment, standing in the cold water waiting and watching for the pinchers to appear from beneath the slippery rocks. Jeremia thought that he should catch them as a man would – pounce, leap high, grab anything he could get hold of. He emerged from the stream wetter than the crayfish, frustrated with work that produced so little and took so long.

Little Eva lost interest. She gazed up into the branches of the trees and then hummed to herself, distracted by zooming dragonflies or the fractured light through the trees, forgetting all about the crayfish. She would swim with the fish, paddle with the ducks, and become part of nature rather than trying to capture it. We would starve if we had to depend on her ability to gather food.

I was quiet, still, like the leaf floating in the stream. The crayfish became accustomed to my clammy feet occupying space beside their favorite rock and they

started to trust. I could almost hear them, even beneath the water as they clicked their way across the bottom of the creek. Everything else became background noise; the screech of the crickets, the gurgle of the creek, the rustle of rubbing leaves. Then I eased my hand through the water and grabbed them just behind the pinchers, swift and sure.

But that day, just as I was about to grab a crayfish with only one pincher, the warning call interrupted and I missed.

I dropped, crouching, twisting my head in a frantic search for a hiding place that would protect not me from them, but them from me. The warning call meant a visitor. My breath came in short bursts and the pounding of my heart drowned out all other sounds. I'd dropped too low and the seat of my shorts soaked up the water, clinging to my skin. The silence of the woods felt unnerving, like the heavy air before a storm.

We only received two visitors at our outcast camp in the backwoods of Mexico, our secret forest hideaway where the leaves of the oaks, strangler fig and sky-reaching pines shaded us from sight. The nearest village was a day's walk through the trees of the mountain and those villagers didn't like to come upon our camp of disfigured children by surprise. The messenger came once a month and we prepared for his appearance by hiding. The other visitor was my mother, but my birthday was still four weeks away.

I hid low in the bushes and inched forward, pushing aside branches, crushing the forest debris, silent as a whisper. The sudden buzz of the cicada vibrated the air around me. I approached the back of my log and mud hut and crept around until I huddled between Jeremia's dwelling and mine. Our camp, so tiny and cloistered, consisted of four huts: mine, Jeremia and Eva's, Nathanael's, and the storage hut. They squatted in a rough

circle with our firepit and sitting logs creating the hub. Trees darkened the sky around our camp, leaving only a small round opening above us where we could see the stars at night, the sun during the heat of the day, and the silver flash of an airplane as it drew lines across the sky. We knew about airplanes, refrigerators, trucks and toilets but having learned about such things and actually touching them were two different types of knowledge.

Jeremia crouched in the shadow of his hut, five-year-old Eva beside him; both staring at me with big, wide eyes. Jeremia had his good arm around Eva, stilling her motions and calming them both. They had less than I did – they didn't even have mothers who visited them.

I flattened myself against the rough log wall of my hut and looked around the side. Nathanael stood by the firepit in the middle of our camp. The sun behind the trees cast dappled shadows over his face. He waited, and while he waited he seemed to shrink. All of his clothes flopped loose and baggy about his body when they used to fit him. Even his shoes looked long and awkward. Our fear – we didn't know what would happen to us when Nathanael aged past his sixty-nine years – where would we go, what would we do?

“Who are you?” Nathanael said, his voice wavering with age and perhaps fear.  
“What do you want?”

The messenger trampled the leaves and sticks of the woods, pushed through the hanging branches that shielded our village from view, and stepped out from the shadows. He wore the bill of his hat sideways, his pants so yellow they glowed, his shirt so red it

flashed like a cardinal through the trees. His colors shone to all the creatures of the woods, including ourselves. I didn't understand why he had come; he carried, along with his food pack, one item rather than the usual heavy load of our supplies. I didn't understand until I heard the peep.

It was like a kitten – a high mewl that made my hands flutter. I put my palm against my chest, afraid that my heart would respond to the cry and reveal my hiding spot. The messenger sat on the log and opened his shirt. Nathanael stood in front of him, bent and then sat beside him. The messenger unwrapped a tiny package, a miniature parcel wrapped in cloth with an opening at the top and laid it on his knees. Both Nathanael and the messenger looked down at the item. I stopped breathing. Nathanael grunted.

“They come so often now, one every three years. Before it was one every twenty,” Nathanael said.

I glanced to the graveyard. I couldn't see it. Low hanging limbs, vines, shrubs obscured the space between me and the four graves, but I knew they were there. One died after I came, before Eva arrived, before I understood that some babies lived.

“How old?” Nathanael asked.

“Three days.”

“Eaten anything?”

The messenger shook his head and then said, “Clemente and Maximo's fourth. They don't want it.”

Nathanael nodded. He reached down and picked up the tiny bundle. He placed it on his own knee, his broad brown hands longer than the package, his fingertips stretching beyond the cloth.

“I’m too old for this,” he said. “Someday I may need to consider finding a replacement.” He didn’t look at the messenger.

The messenger’s laugh was a burst, a bark of the coyote. “No one wants this job,” he said. “Can’t one of the rejects do it?” His hand waved outward, indicating us. I crouched in the shadow of the hut, ten feet away from where they sat – I could see sweat trickle down the messenger’s face.

“They don’t want the job either,” Nathanael said. One of his hands released the bundle and I saw a brown tip through the blanket’s opening.

“You want me to... you know...,” the messenger leaned in toward Nathanael and spoke lower, “get rid of it?”

My body betrayed me then, became noisy, shaky. My hands clutched at each other, gripping and wringing. Earlier I hadn’t been breathing at all, now my breath came fast, hard, and shallow. I felt light-headed and before I thought about revealing myself and the possible consequences, I pushed off from the wall, heard my feet hitting the packed earth of the camp’s meeting place, and listened to the wind whistle past my ears. I grabbed the bundle off of Nathanael’s knees and leaped into the forest behind them. I was jaguar, I was puma, I was hidden behind the nearest tree before they could react.

I peeked around the tree trunk. The messenger faced the forest, his eyes focused on the woods but not seeing me. He crouched low, next to the log where Nathanael still

sat, and spread his hands out, warding off evil. The sun beamed down on him, creating a shadow from his nose that stretched across his mouth, down his chin and onto his neck. The cheery center of our village, the firepit surrounded by sitting logs and then the four pointed mud-caked huts circled him like acorns around a strawberry.

The black, oblong object on the messenger's back, attached with a strap across his chest, banged against him a couple of times. He waited for an attack and I smiled. His head turned back and forth. I hid only ten feet away from where he stood but he didn't see me, he couldn't hear my heart hammering, he couldn't hear my breath sucked in through my nose. He had seen too much already.

"What was that?" he asked. His eyes were wide, the white showing all around his dark irises.

Nathanael turned his head and glanced into the woods, not caring to see me even though he could have if he'd wanted to.

"That was Whisper. She doesn't want you to get rid of it."

"That was Belen's child? Belen and Teresa's? She's an animal – and her face is..." His hands touched his own face, his unsplit lips and unbroken nose. "Is she dangerous?" The messenger backed away from the woods and stood near the firepit. I snuggled the bundle against my chest and rocked my body back and forth. No movement came from it, nothing but a touch of breath. I gently flipped up the edge of the blanket and examined the rounded face. How anyone could think her ugly was astonishing to me, but I'd seen my own face in the creek on a clear day, and someday she would look

exactly like me. I touched the tip of her nose against mine and breathed in her smell of freshness and untainted breath.

“She’s usually the most civilized. The most quiet. Dangerous?” Nathanael brushed a fly away from his ear. “What do you have on your back?”

A black strap secured the item to the messenger’s back and he pulled this strap over his head. His eyes continued to look into the trees trying to find me. I moved through the underbrush a few steps so I could see better.

Nathanael unhooked some locks on the carrying case with loud clicks and removed a wooden item with strings stretched from the narrow end to the rounded end.

“It’s from Whisper’s mother. She can’t make her birthday.”

The wind howled around my head and I sat down hard on the forest floor. I didn’t care that twigs snapped beneath me and leaves rustled. When I slumped to the ground, the smell of moss, earth and crushed Phacelia wafted into the air, making my head light, insubstantial. I didn’t care that the messenger could have seen me, could have come through the trees and looked at me crouched there, the baby in my arms.

My mother wasn’t coming.

She was abandoning me too. I had known it would happen. I had known that eventually she’d leave me, avoid the inconvenient trek to our home like the parents of the others in our camp, but every year she had come. For fifteen years she had walked the three days to the camp, loved me, sang to me, talked to me like a normal human being, called me Lydia, then name I’d been born with, and then walked the three days back. And because she had come for so many years, I’d grown weak, hopeful, accepting that this

was the pattern of my life and believing that maybe she still loved me, and maybe someday she would take me home.

I clutched the bundle close to my chest and felt the rhythm of the baby's breathing against my own heart. I leaned against the rough bark of a pine tree and tilted my head back. I gazed up, taking in the branches that arched over my head, obscuring the blue of the sky. The branches of the tree stretched away from me, up rather than down, and the comfort of loving arms was gone. My own arms would have to do now.

Lose a mother, gain a sister.

## 2

"They won't attack me when I'm in the woods, will they?" asked the messenger as he slung his food pack over his shoulder and adjusted the brim of his cap so it covered his ear. He looked around as if the woods were full of rejects, huffing and grunting, waiting to consume him. Nathanael said nothing.

Nathanael went to his hut and returned with one of Jeremia's sculptures, about the size of Eva, wrapped in palm leaves. He held it up while the messenger turned, bent his back, held out his hands behind his back and Nathanael leaned the object into his hands. The messenger grunted and began his plodding retreat from our forest home. His eyes shifted from side to side, waiting for us, the rejects, to ambush him. This was how we paid our expenses. The messenger sold Jeremia's sculptures in the village or in the city, and bought our supplies with the profits. Nathanael believed the messenger was



pocketing the extra money but we had no idea how much Jeremia's sculptures sold for and he carved more than enough to sustain our modest lifestyle.

When the messenger was gone, Nathanael sat on one of the logs by the firepit and waited. I crept out from behind the trunk, Jeremia and Eva tiptoed out from beside their hut. We stole forward on silent feet to where Nathanael was. I gently lowered the bundle to Nathanael's knees and then sat with my wet shorts on the very edge of the log. Jeremia and Eva crouched at Nathanael's feet and touched the baby's head.

Nathanael told Eva to get a bowl of water and she ran nimbly to our creek, returning with the cup sloshing liquid over the edge. Nathanael dipped his pinky into the water. He slipped droplets onto the baby's mouth until the lips parted and a squeak erupted from her. Nathanael placed more water into her throat where it was sure to go down. If the water touched the bubbled lips, the slices in the skin between her nose and mouth, nothing would go down her throat and into her stomach. The baby swallowed again and again and then opened her eyes.

We looked at each other. She was beautiful with her brown eyes and fresh smell. I didn't understand why her parents didn't want her, why Jeremia's didn't want him, why Eva's didn't want her, why my father had tried to kill me.

Nathanael held the baby with one hand and slid my birthday present on my legs with the other. The case was cold, hard, unfeeling and full of distance, so different from a mother's touch. I unlatched the clasps and opened the case.

“A violin,” Nathanael said. He was the only one in our camp who had grown up in the village, traveled to the city, and then chosen to come to our camp – on purpose, not because he had to. “What use is that to us? We can start the fire with it.”

The instrument was warm to the touch, chestnut brown with streaks of golden sun radiating through it. I plucked each string with my first finger and listened to the sound. Twangy. High-pitched. Nasal. Like my voice.

“Here,” Nathanael said. He pulled the violin out of my hand and slid the baby onto my legs. He set the cup of water by my foot and I began dipping my finger into it and dropping the water into her mouth. She swallowed, blinked, swallowed again. Jeremia slid his finger into her pink tight-fisted palm and her tiny hand hugged his narrow pointer finger. Eva laughed.

Nathanael shuffled to his hut and threw aside the deer skin door. After a minute I heard the voices from the radio, one of two channels we could hear clearly. Usually, to save the batteries, we only listened to the news station and tried to understand what was happening in a world we’d never seen - would never be accepted into, but Nathanael adjusted the knobs and I heard static, more static, and then music emerged. Nathanael turned up the volume and shuffled back out of his hut.

The music fit with the sounds around us, the wind, the birds, the crickets. Jeremia put his chin on my knee. He was in an affectionate mood but his moods changed with the wind and I’d learned to be cautious.

I’d never heard music like this before. It was the sound of the blue-black Grosbeak only sweeter and more painful. It was the sound of my loneliness, clear and

nerve tingling. As I listened to the music, my heart squeezed small, flattened into a straight line and compressed into nothingness: a tick, a flea, the point of a pencil.

“That’s the sound a violin can make,” Nathanael said.

I looked down at the instrument in Nathanael’s hand. He lifted it up, fit it beneath his chin and drew the long stick with hairs across the strings. His fingers pushed against the string in various places and different pitches emerged. His hands stretched long, the muscles taught and when I looked at his face, I saw a rounded splash of water slip, a snail’s trail down his cheek. He abruptly dropped the violin into the case and walked to his hut.

I understood why my mother had given it to me. The violin was me, nasal and foreign, but somewhere within its depths something beautiful resided. I looked at Jeremia. He looked at me. And on my lap, the new reject, the beautiful baby, closed her eyes, smiled, and passed gas.

“You two must be related,” Jeremia said, squeezing my calf muscle.

### 3

In the morning, Jeremia was gone. His time had been approaching. He disappeared rhythmically, like the moon, and then reappeared. In two years, when he would turn nineteen, I knew that he wouldn’t come back. He would vanish like the four rejects before him; not one of them returning to our little camp in the woods. They went to the city, maybe, to civilized places where the trees grew crooked in their search for sun and where the crickets couldn’t be heard. They journeyed through the forest, traversed the

creeks, and joined hundreds, thousands of people gathered in places with no trees.

Nathanael had been there – he said the city is a concrete slab full of square rocks that never forgive, and full of so much noise, it is hard to hear yourself. He said the air was toxic and that a smell, dark and evil, caused sickness like the tendrils of ivy, touching and choking everything.

I didn't understand what, in that cold world of square buildings, unnatural light, and illness, was so wonderful and so precious that the other rejects would abandon the only home they'd ever known. I couldn't imagine that I would ever make that choice. It wasn't bad, living in our camp, just solitary.

That morning Nathanael and Eva sat together on the sitting log when I stumbled from my hut, the sun already above my head. The baby, strapped to my chest, had woken me every time I fell asleep and during the night, when I had looked at the moon through my window, it seemed like it wasn't moving at all. Old cloth diapers, yellowed and worn with age - saved from when I first came to the camp, from when Jeremiah first came to the camp and even those before Jeremiah - were tossed haphazardly in front of my hut and needed to be washed. The baby needed something more substantial than water. She slept and woke, slept and woke.

Eva hiccupped and sniffled through tears. At first I thought it was because Jeremiah was gone, but then I saw her hand. Porcupine barbs were thrust deep into her palm. Nathanael shakily twisted them out with his thumb and first finger. When he saw me, he stood, moved over, and I sat across from Eva. She was trying so hard to be brave, her chubby cheeks red and mottled from tears and held breath. She bit down on her lower

lip and looked at me through watery eyes. Her webbed hands that could propel her like a fish through our creek, were red and swollen.

I twisted each barb and then removed it with a quick yank. She jerked every time I pulled one out but she didn't run away nor did she hide her hand.

"Jeremia left because of me," she said.

"No."

"Yes. He told me only stupid people touch porcupines and I'm the stupidest person he's ever met." Her cheeks were so red, bumps had appeared along the rounded curves. Eva was a creature of the forest; she sang with the birds, jumped with the grasshoppers, fed squirrels from her hands. It made sense that she would try to love and touch a porcupine. Nathanael sat behind Eva and put his arm around her shoulders.

I pulled the last barb from her hand and then poured water over the wounds. The blood and water mingled, dripping from the webbing between her fingers in dark red rivulets.

"Jeremia is like a cat, Eva," Nathanael said. "He is moody and angry. He needs to be alone for a while."

"Why is he so angry?" Eva asked.

"Jeremia is the only boy to ever be rejected. Even disfigured boys aren't rejected, but his parents already had four sons, and when he was born with only one arm and couldn't do the same amount of farm work as his brothers, they decided they didn't need him." Nathanael grunted.

“My parents didn’t want me either,” Eva said, her sore hand held in her good one. “And Whisper’s dad tried to drown her. We’re all the same...aren’t we?”

“Yes,” Nathanael said, “and no. You two are girls. All of the other rejects were girls. Jeremia is the only boy. He feels it more – this abandonment. Boys are precious and respected – to be rejected means...”

“...that the boy is like a girl,” Eva said, smearing the water around on her face, leaving smudges of mud. “I don’t see what’s so special about being a boy. They smell worse than girls. They fart and burp.”

Nathanael looked to the sky and laughed. It was a good sound, but he woke the baby who wailed that nasal, throaty cry that made my throat tighten. Later I would try to mix goat’s milk with the water and give her something more substantial to drink. Maybe she would sleep.

I fed the baby a bit of water, strapped her to my chest with a cloth wrap and walked around the firepit with her. Her eyes drooped, her mouth opened, her breath slowed. Nathanael took the baby from me, held her against his chest, and showed me how to press against the strings of the violin to make different notes.

“Your fingers are one through four,” he said. “You walk through the note steps by using a different finger.” His fingers pushed against my own.

The baby’s breathing was rhythmic and low. I eased the bow across the strings with my right hand and changed the positioning of my left hand fingers. I could do this. It was tricky, but I could do it.

My fingers fluttered over the strings, pushed here, pushed there, and the more I played Nathanael's simple tune, the more the song changed. At first the nasal twang screeched from the instrument, but if I pulled the bow so and held it down, a sweetness rolled from the strings and I could feel the music as it was supposed to be. When I'd successfully played the song, I smiled at Nathanael.

"Yes," he said, and looked at me with eyes narrowed, weighing and assessing. I put down the violin.

#### 4

The goat's milk didn't work. When I first gave it to her, she gulped it greedily, swallowed and demanded more but when it settled into her stomach, she started to cry and cried for hours. I burped her against my shoulder, walked her back and forth, felt my own tears joining hers, and then remembered Mom's lullaby.

Nathanael was asleep in our only camping chair. His head rested against the flimsy back of the chair, his mouth wide open and he emitted a loud rumbling snore every few seconds. Mornings in our camp were for lessons. Nathanael, who had lived in the village until he was twenty, taught us how to read, how to do math, what the plants around us meant. He had lived in the city for three years. When we asked him why, he told us he had been "searching."

I circled the firepit with the crying infant. I bobbed her up and down, up and down as I walked back to my hut. Inside the small enclosed space, I set the baby on the bed made up of layered blankets, propped her up like a warm sack of flour so she could still

burp if she needed to and then I opened the case to the violin. Her crying came in hiccups and shivers, her face a deep bruising red. I fit the instrument against my shoulder and under my chin as Nathanael had shown me. I held the bow in my right hand and eased it over the strings. I listened for the notes as Nathanael had taught me. The sound was so harsh and creaky, the baby hiccupped her crying to a stop and opened her eyes. I tried again.

The sound the violin made was no better than my own voice but I had heard the song on the radio, I knew what it was capable of. I slowed down, took a deep breath, tried not to let the baby's renewed cries make me so shaky. I whispered the lyrics in my mind and fumbled my way through the tune, pressing my left fingers to the strings and drawing the bow with my right. After a few minutes of fumbling, the song became recognizable.

*Mrs. Santana  
Why is the baby crying?  
For an apple  
That he has lost*

*Don't cry baby  
I have here two  
One for the Virgin  
And the other for you.*

I listened to the notes and pictured my mother holding me, rocking me, caressing my head with her hand. She would tuck my black hair behind my ears and smooth the strands over my head. I remembered the feel of her hands, rough and calloused but beautiful and loving. I remembered the sound of her voice, so deep, full and true like mahogany. The violin began to take on those tones as I played the simple tune over and over. When I felt the warm notes winging around the hut, I opened my eyes.



The baby was asleep. So was Eva. She had crept in while I was playing and now lay in front of the door, her left hand under her cheek, her right swollen hand wrapped in a white cloth and clutched against her chest.

I played the lullaby again.

## 5

I woke up four times in the night, the baby's sharp desperate cries startling me awake, my hands shaky and trembling from lack of sleep. I dripped more water into her mouth, I held her against my shoulder and patted the gas from her stomach. This child would not be another mound in the graveyard, not if I could find something to fill her, something that could replace mother's milk.

The third time she woke me up, when the moon had already crossed the opening between the trees above our huts, I heard a keening so sad and mournful, I wanted to cry along with the baby. I wrapped her tightly against my chest and walked silently through the woods, down the path to the creek, the sad song pushing against my nose, making it drip.

He didn't hear me when I padded behind him. The baby was quiet now, satisfied with the sound of my heart, and I squatted on my heels where I could see him, a shadow on the branch over the swimming hole. Nathanael was like a grasshopper, his arms bent at the elbows, his knees angled out, his feet hooked around each other under the log.

He played a song lonely and sad like the owl at night. My throat tightened, closed and I sat in the mud of the path. This was the song of a broken heart and I suddenly

understood Nathanael a little better. I'd always thought that he hated the village, had hated the city and chose to live with us because it was his best option but Nathanael had had other options and they must have vanished.

When he pulled the bow over the string one last time, the lingering notes floating across the water like the dragonflies, I opened my eyes, stood, and slipped back down the path. I knew, now, that Nathanael had known love and it had disappeared like dew on the grass. Nathanael told us so little about himself that I'd always thought of him as our father, single, satisfied.

I heard him creep into my hut, replace the violin into the case, and drop the deer-skin door back into place. I slept after that, for a few hours anyway until the baby's piercing cries woke me again, but I slept with an ache now, an ache that food could not fill.

## 6

In the morning, Eva climbed up the great pine by our camp. There was a nest in the open cavity halfway up the trunk, a large nest for the macaw, the green blue-tipped one with the red eye, and Eva believed there were babies in that opening. Jeremia refused to let her climb the tree because he remembered me at seven when I'd climbed up for no reason other than that I could and then I'd become stuck. I'd stayed up in that tree all day long, Rosa, my mentor at the time, stood below the pine, her arms across her chest, refusing to let anyone help me down.

“You got up there, you get down. You won’t always have someone to rescue you, you know.”

She’d gone to bed at dark and Jeremia climbed the tree, showing me the best places to put my feet on the way down and how to slide down the trunk when branches were scarce.

But Eva was not me. She was loud, courageous, willing to touch porcupines with her bare hands. She could do while I preferred to listen. When I woke up in the morning, tired from a broken night of shuttering cries, Eva already held tight to the trunk of the tree, her webbed feet clutched against either side, a towel in one of her hands. The opening with the nest was inches above her head.

Nathanael had explained to Eva that baby birds weren’t born in late summer, they’re born in the spring and should be out of the nest, flying on their own by this time, but Eva, hands clenched tight into stubborn fists, didn’t believe.

“What about the fox?” she said. “Look at her puppies.”

We didn’t know what to say to that. We didn’t understand why the puppies were still running about, half the size of their mother, and why they followed her, not daring to hunt on their own.

“There is a baby bird in that nest that can’t get out. I’m going to rescue it.”

I stood below the tree, my thoughts muddled from lack of sleep, the baby quiet against my chest, smudges of black beneath her eyes where healthy brown skin should have been.

Eva was cautious and careful. She never let go of the trunk with her feet but inched her way up with the ease and confidence of a sloth. She reached her hand into the hole, the towel draped over her shoulder. When she began to remove her hand from the opening, peeps and squawks filtered down from the nest and I saw the mother macaw hovering above Eva, shrieking and nervously flapping her wings.

Eva began to sing, a sweet light call. She crept forward again, the mother bird squawking and fluttering near her head. Eva ignored the mother, ignored the wings that flapped with the sound of panicked winds and pulled a green splash of color from the nest, wrapping it quickly in the towel. She tucked the towel into her shirt and began her retreat. The mother macaw, green and red against the sky, a flower in motion, screamed and cried. Her shrill call reminded me of the baby's, so desperate and scared. Mothers should protect their babies, threaten those who will take them away, and cry in desperation. Why had all of our mothers surrendered us, given us away to this forest home instead of flapping their wings and calling for help?

The sun shone high in the sky by the time Eva reached the ground. Her short black hair clung in sweaty clumps to the back of her neck and her limbs trembled. She set the towel down on the ground and shook out her arms, shook out her legs, wiped the sweat from her eyes. Huddled in the blue cloth was a macaw, hardly a baby anymore, but green and pink with a red tuft above its beak. The bird looked perfect, its beak thick, gray and pointed, its eyes pink and wary.

Eva placed both hands around the bird so it could not flutter or peck. The macaw cried, squawked and the mother answered in shrill fear from a branch near our heads.

“Look,” Eva said. She held the bird with only one hand and slid a finger under the bird’s wing. The feathers opened, puffed, ready for flight but the wing was miniature, a tiny perfect replica that had never grown to match the growth of the bird. Eva lifted the wing on the other side, also miniature.

“I’m keeping her.”

Eva carried the baby against her chest and walked with jutted chin to her hut, closed the deer skin door, and shut the mother out. The terrified mother perched on the roof of Eva’s hut and called to her baby all day. I watched that mother and wondered what she would have done when her new babies came the next year. Would she have kept the older baby or pushed her out of the nest to make room for the perfectly formed new ones?

## 7

Jeremia returned after a few days. He went to the city sometimes, to crouch in alleyways, to understand what people did who lived outside of our little camp and were an accepted part of the world. Sometimes he watched the people in our old village: saw his father, observed his family. He loved and hated them with a fierceness that scared me. He never spoke to them or revealed himself, but he referred to them by name.

He ran into my hut, shimmied over the dirt floor, leapt across the blankets that made up my bed, and danced in front of the stack of books on my rock and wood shelf, all the while wagging his butt and waving his one hand in the air while I played the violin. He opened his mouth and pretended to sing. He grabbed me around the waist and

twirled me around. Then he was out the door. No one asked him where he went or why, no one accused him of abandoning us and shirking his chores. Abandonment was nothing new and we all knew that it was better for Jeremia to understand himself – understand his needs than for him to stay and torment the rest of us with his moodiness.

Nathanael cooked rice for supper. He mashed some of the rice until it was ground as fine as dust and then he added water. He stirred the milky substance and when I looked at it, I could almost believe it was milk. I sat on a log by the fire and dripped bits of rice milk into the baby's throat. She gulped eagerly.

I waited for the gas to start, her stomach to clench, her crying to begin. Already I was prepared for a sleepless night of shrieks, shuttering, and fussiness. Even though we'd fed her goat's milk for days, she's never become accustomed to it.

Instead, she watched me, her eyes round and dark, her face solemn, serious, as if examining my distorted features were the key to understanding herself. She was content and calm, not squirming and crying so I unwrapped her from her cotton clothing and cleaned her with warm water.

Jeremia and Eva laughed. They laughed until tears dripped muddy streaks down their cheeks because the baby's tummy was so full and round, her limbs so thin and small, she looked like a frog, rana, and that is how she got her name. Rayanna. I liked it. It fit her.

We gathered on the logs around the fire, the baby calm and still, Eva's head resting on Jeremiah's knee, Jeremiah's eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep, his face smudged with dirt from the trip. He was always so happy when he returned that I wondered why he did it, why he tortured himself by watching a bruised world he couldn't heal.

There were others from our camp who had never returned. Rosa, my roommate, camp sister and mentor, left when she was fourteen and never came back. Jeremiah's mentor, Telise, never returned either. Every time Jeremiah disappeared, Eva fidgeted, worried, slept in the hut with Rayanna and me. She was sure Jeremiah wouldn't come back this time.

"It's worse now," Jeremiah said. "Many, many of us."

Rayanna's eyelids began to close. Her tiny hands relaxed, loosened their tight fists and she breathed softly through her opened mouth. I lifted her from my legs and held her beneath my nose, breathing her in, sweet and fresh.

"Tell us," Nathanael said. He leaned back in the camping chair, his knobby hands on his knees. He looked into the fire.

"It was the same as before. I came through the oaks, through the stunted bushes, over the reeking creek, to the place with roads. I followed the road back to the mountains, to the city, until I came to the hill of rocks and slept there, watching travelers on the road, coming and going."

We'd heard this part of the story before. Jeremiah often slept between the boulders, found a cave or rock overhang for shelter, and watched from his safe perch. Other people

lived in these rocks, many others like us, he said, and they sometimes lived together in camps like ours where they shared a fire, shared food, shared company. But he also said they sometimes didn't share but stole from each other, rolled among the rocks kicking and hitting, or attacked the weakest.

This time he slept near a camp with four boys in it. Two of the boys looked a bit like me, he said, with openings in their faces that shouldn't have been there, but the other two boys were different. One had no arms or legs but had to be carried from place to place. The other had no nose or ears, only openings where the cartilage should have been. I tried to imagine this, having a face with no nose, and even though my own face is bubbled, opened in odd places, I have cartilage. I wondered if he could smell – what life would be like if you couldn't smell the honeysuckle in the spring.

"They were a tribe," Jeremia said. "They'd built a platform on wheels for the boy, a rolling platform with a strap which held him in place. In the morning, they rolled to the city, and then came back at dusk. They would have food, money, bottles of drink. They sat around their fire and talked to each other, their voices growing louder and louder as the moon moved across the sky, until one boy became very sick and the other three fell asleep. They did not hear the other tribe coming."

I held Rayanna tightly against my chest and listened to her breathing. Jeremia had stopped, had curled his hand into a fist. A tick had appeared in his left cheek, as though his jaw was clamped so tight, it begged for release.

"The other tribe was normal. They looked like Nathanael."



We all looked at Nathanael as though we had forgotten his face. He had little hair now, a few strands that grew thin against the sides of his head and his face had grooves in it like the walnut shell, but he did not have extra openings in his face where water sometimes bubbled out, he did not have webbed feet like the ducks, and he was not missing an arm.

“While the first tribe slept, the other tribe took everything. They took the food, the money, the drinks in bottles; they took the rolling platform for the boy with no legs, they took the plastic covering that sheltered the first tribe from the rain. And then they woke up the first tribe.”

Eva covered her eyes with her hands. Jeremiah watched Nathanael now, the muscles in his arm tensed. Jeremiah looked like an adult with his black eyes, the fire dancing shadows across his face. He was almost eighteen, much older than the other rejects had been when they left, but he still returned. I hoped it was because of me.

“Why are they like that, Nathanael?”

I thought Nathanael had not heard. He did not move or blink. He stared into the fire and listened to the sound of the wolf on the hill, the sound of the crickets in the grasses, the sound of the bats in the sky. Slowly he turned his head. His eyes were old, creased below, above, to the sides.

“People are cruel,” Nathanael said. “Here we are unnoticed, isolated, maybe even a bit lonely, but it is better to be unnoticed than to be in civilization where cruelty will find you.”

Jeremiah nodded as though he understood Nathanael’s comments.

“It found that first tribe, cruelty. Those other boys used boards, they used rocks. I heard the first tribe screaming, running, trying to get away to hide in the hills or between the rocks. I’d never heard screams like that, so terrifying, such animals in pain. I thought of the rabbit with its head caught beneath the root, the screaming rabbit who woke us in the night. These boys screamed like that, like death would be welcome.”

I remembered the scream of the rabbit. I’d been about eight, still lived in the hut with Rosa, and the scream cut through our dreams and woke us. She’d held me, that time, held me close, covering my ears, adding her own screams to that of the rabbit until Nathanael had freed the creature and it had run, unhurt, into the trees. We’d slept together after that, her arm around me, her body warm and protecting. The night of the screaming rabbit is my best memory of Rosa.

“They got away, the two who looked like Whisper and the one without ears. The fourth rolled on the ground, twisted below their legs while they laughed and hit him with the board. He begged once, prayed that they would stop, and after they laughed and spit on him, he said nothing more. He waited for the board to come down again. I couldn’t watch anymore but stood from my place between the rocks and ran at the cruel boy whose back was to me. I knocked him to the ground, grabbed the board from his hand and stood over the armless boy on the ground. There were three surrounding us, three whose bodies appeared unblemished, but they backed away when their friend, whom I’d knocked to the ground, did not rise. I snarled, the wolf howled on the hill, and they walked away.”

I wasn't breathing. I held Rayanna tight against my chest and thought of violent boys chasing me through the night. I thought of how my heart would have pounded, how I would have run like the puma, fear chasing me. I would never go to the city and see this place where people hated each other so much, they would kill each other for being different.

"I dragged the boy into the space between the rocks and went down the hill for water. I filled a bottle with the water from the creek, the water with a film over the top of it like the skin of dead leaves after winter, and he drank from the water. He drank for two days but he could not speak, he never told me his name, and the wound on his head would not stop bleeding even when I pressed a cloth against it. On the third day, he died. I covered the opening with rocks and walked through the forest, the wolf howling on the hill. I never saw his tribe again; they never returned to look for him.

"And then I went to see my family." Jeremiah was silent, his hand skillfully flipping a knife between his fingers. He had been working on a sculpture, the large piece of maple at his feet, and in it I could see leaves from the trees, falling, falling, never touching the ground. We were Jeremiah's family. He should have come back to us.

"I watched my brother, my oldest one, Calen. He hunted the wolf."

Jeremiah's wolf followed him everywhere, but always at a distance. Jeremiah had never smoothed the coarse fur of the wolf's mane and the wolf had never brushed his rough tongue along Jeremiah's hand and yet they watched each other, predicted each other's moods, followed in the other's footsteps.

“He couldn’t catch him, of course. He followed the wolf up into the hills, tracked the footprints in the soft mud of the creek bank, and was so loud and clumsy in his movements, the animals stayed away for miles.

“My brother returned to the village with nothing and Jun, my father, hit him on the side of the head with the gun Calen carried. My mother came outside of their square house, pressed a cloth against Calen’s head, but Calen pushed her away so roughly she fell to the ground.”

Four boys, his mother had raised, four rough boys who beat each other blue and purple for saying the wrong word, breathing too loudly, or giving the wrong look. Only one lived at home anymore, Calen, the oldest. Jeremiah wasn’t sure why his brother chose not to get married and create his own family. He was like Jeremiah, though, taking aimless walks through the woods that were not intended for berry, meat or herb gathering. It produced thoughts, claimed Jeremiah, and understanding.

In our village, parents had abandoned us, older sisters left for the city and we never heard from them again. Would I do the same when I got older? Would I leave Eva someday, Rayanna and old Nathanael? I swore I would not do this. I would not abandon the people in this life who had become my tribe.

All night I held Rayanna against my chest. I heard the creek trickling its song through the night, I heard the coyotes snuffling by the fire, I heard the soft barks of the fox puppies, and I heard Eva’s macaw, Emerald, chirping in her hut but I did not hear boys with boards running through the woods even though I listened until the sun reached its fingers into the hut.

Since returning, Jeremia had changed. His actions were desperate now, more frantic and intense. While I warmed water on the fire, preparing to wash Rayanna, he came behind me silent as a moth. I felt his nervousness, his fluttering hand and when I looked at him, I saw his mouth moving, his lips whispering to himself. If I remained calm, gave him his space, maybe he would relax, stop fidgeting. Instead, he picked Rayanna up from where I had laid her on the grasses, and held her against his cheek. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He brought Rayanna to Nathanael who sat in the camping chair in front of the fire, and rested her on the old man's knees. Nathanael picked up the baby, rocked back and forth, hummed.

Jeremia grabbed me around the upper arm with his long, muscled fingers, pulled me away from the heating water and toward the creek. He let go and began to walk the path up the mountain. He didn't turn to watch me, he didn't check to make sure my steps followed his, but he must have known I would come. We'd walked this path many times, day and night, sun and wind, but usually little Eva was with us, running ahead, shrieking, and hopping over the branches in our path. Usually Nathanael came along with his fishing pole, wishing to catch the trout in the water hole.

It was early in the day to swim, but the water was always warm this time of year. The trees above the hole stretched their branches to the sun, leaving an opening above the water that sucked in heat. Jeremia sat on the branch of the pine that reached out over the water, took off his shirt and swung his feet. His body reminded me of the willow tree,

limber and thin, his muscles moving beneath the skin and his ribs gently raised bumps. Where his second arm should have been was a shorter appendage, a rounded limb that reached to where his elbow would have been. I was so accustomed to seeing his arm without fingers, that it didn't seem strange to me.

I sat beside him and waited.

Our feet were almost the same color, bronzed and darkened by the sun, but his toes were long and bumpy while mine were short and curled. I tilted my head back, felt the warmth of the sun and looked up into the sky. A vulture, alone with its bald head and shaggy wings flapped across the opening between the trees and I saw the smoky trail of an airplane as it cruised through the sky in its carefully plotted path. I heard the hum of the mosquitoes just awakening, I saw the stirring of the water bugs skimming the surface of the pool, I saw a leaf lazily drifting to the opening where the stream trickled from the pool.

Jeremia's hand touched mine. I looked down at our hands, his fingers over top of mine, warm and dry against my skin. That small touch, so light and delicate, sent tingles through my wrist and up my arm. I had been touched by Jeremia many times, but lately it had changed and seemed to mean more. When we were young, we'd wrestled like kittens. We'd tumbled over each other, fought with each other, scratched, pinched, hit, but now every contact meant something else. I wanted him to touch me all the time.

I looked at him. His eyes were pinched around the edges as though he couldn't see me clearly without squinting. Something needed to be said, but I didn't know what. None of us talked much – except for Eva who chattered like the squirrels – but Nathanael

was quiet, Rosa had been moody and spoke almost always in caustic bites, Jeremia and I had never needed to speak; we understood each other. But sitting beside him wasn't enough right now because I didn't know what he saw when he visited the city and I didn't have the words to speak to him about it.

A groan came from his lips. Then he dropped from the branch, his body straight, and slid like an otter into the water. I could see his legs frog kick and move him just beneath the surface. His black hair spread behind him, straight and streaming. When his head surfaced, the sun glistened off the water on his skin and turned him beautiful. He pulled his arm back and dragged it along the surface of the water, sending a plume into the air that hit my legs. I pushed off from the branch and dropped to the water, my legs straight. This was a language I understood, a physical dialogue that I could speak. I dropped down, down, until my feet hit the muck of the bottom, and then I pushed up right below Jeremia. I found his ankle and pulled down hard.

He came down too easily, too readily, and put his hand on my shoulder, pushing me back down into the muck. I flipped my body around and dug my fingers into the mud of the bottom. I grasped a handful and rose to the surface. I waited for his head to come back up. The dappled shadow of his form moved away from me, toward the bank where the otter's slide muddied the hill.

The ooze in my hand began to slip through my fingers, trickle down my arm. When Jeremia's head came to the surface, I threw but his hand came up, stopping the muddy assault. He smiled at me, a grin that darkened his eyes. He took a handful of muck from the otter slide and pelted me with it. I ducked below the surface, laughing as I went

and choking on the water that flowed through the slit in my face, into my nose. He would come for me now, so I turned and swam to the opposite side of the hole, the side where the wild rose hung over the water in rows of yellow suns. I surfaced beneath the branches, hoping they were thick enough to cover me, and waited.

I couldn't see him from here, didn't know where his changing water shape would emerge. I held my breath. His head pushed the water up, a rising bubble, and he looked at me from only inches away. I could see the gold flecks in his brown eyes. Water dripped from his perfect nose and mouth. My feet dug into the ooze of the hole.

"This is the best life we'll ever have," he said, "here, with just us."

I looked at the banks of the pool, trying to understand what he meant. This pool was good. We ate well, except for during the late winter when supplies ran low, but my mother was not returning and I now had a baby to care for. Life could be better.

"Out there, no one cares. We have to stay together."

His hand gripped my arm, squeezed and tightened. His mouth was pulled straight and his eyes did not shift. Where had this Jeremiah come from? What had happened to the dancing Jeremiah who swung me about, danced against the light of the fire and carved such beautiful sculptures I wanted to crawl inside of them, their cascading waterfalls forever sliding over my body? This Jeremiah gripping my arm knew about a world I'd never seen and didn't care to understand. My heart pounded beneath his fingers where his hand squeezed my arm.

"Only us, Whisper."



He pulled me against him, his chest against mine. I could feel his heart beating, speaking to my own, and his mouth against mine was like the first bite of a fresh mango. My lips parted, the slit opening and spreading against the solid skin of his own lips. He didn't seem to mind. My hands slid across the skin of his back and tightened, pressing him against me so the length of his body met my own. He lifted my feet out of the mud and his arm held me close, so close, but not close enough.

And then he let go. I sank back into the mud and we looked at each other. He brought his finger up to his lip and tasted the tip of his finger. I held my hand against my chest, tried to still my heart, tried to cover its almost visible pounding.

Jeremia dove into the water, swam to the bank where the pine tree hung over the pool, and pulled himself out. He reached for his shirt, glanced at me one last time, and then walked back down the path.

I wanted him back. I wanted his body pressed against mine again. We weren't children anymore, couldn't roll in the grasses, wrestle in the mud, rest our backs against each other for warmth in the night when the chill seeped through our blankets. Something had changed and even though I was almost sixteen, my birthday only days away, I was not a woman. I had not yet grown breasts, I had not yet grown tall, and I had not yet had my period. I knew I was late. Rosa had gotten her period when she was fourteen, but I did know that my feelings were true and my blood bubbled when Jeremia touched me. I wanted that feeling again; his body pressed against mine as snug as bones.

Our job was to dry blueberries, wild raspberries and black berries for the winter months. We picked them in great quantities and laid them on the plastic sheet near the fire. Eva's job was to scoot away the bugs that liked them as much as we did. Eva forgot always, chased after a dragonfly, or played her pretend games which didn't have room for the drying of berries and the shooing of bugs. I went through them again later in the day and removed what I could.

It was hard to imagine how little we'd have in the winter when fruit grew all around us in the summer and brought living creatures, like the bats and tiny flies. The air was thick with the smell of sweet berries and oncoming fall. I used to love this time of year because it meant my mother was coming. The air itself breathed her presence, a delicious promise.

Rosa, my mentor who left five years ago, had hated my mother. I used to dance in anticipation of her coming and Rosa would swat at my legs, smack me on the side of the head and huff.

"Your mother doesn't deserve your love. She abandoned you. She deserves hate."

I had thought about that. I considered hating my mother but she had saved me as best she could. When I had been born and my father had seen my disfigured face, he'd said, "Devil, witch, stealer of lives," and had run with me to the stream. He'd held me below the surface of the water but my mother had chased after him. She'd pulled me from him, held me tight against her chest, and refused to let my father touch me. I was their first child. Then she gave me to Nathanael.

“I see my mother one day a year,” I had whispered to Rosa, “why would I spend that day hating her?” Every time my mother came for a visit, I asked her, begged her, pleaded with her to take me with – to take me back to the village. She’d tucked my hair behind my ears, smiled a half smile, called me Lydia and shook her head. For many years, it was all I dreamed about, all I wanted – going home with my mother, but Rosa told me that such dreams were stupid.

When my mother came, Rosa stayed long enough to glare at her, snarl a few times, and stomp around. Then she’d leave and only return when my mother was gone.

Rosa was still young when she’d left our camp. Only fourteen. I thought about her sometimes and wondered what had happened to her. She had struck out at life and I often got in the way. But then other times she’d comb my hair until it glowed black and glossy – she’d braid it for me, tenderly and carefully, and she’d chew on a strand of her own hair in such a way that I would forget that she’d slapped me the hour before. When she left I was lonely but also secretly happy.

I promised to be a better sister to Rayanna than Rosa had been to me. I would never hit. I would never torment or ridicule. Rosa had made fun of my whispering all the time. She’d said it was stupid, “You have a voice, use it,” she’d shriek at me in her shrill, nasal scream. I hadn’t wanted to sound like her. Ever. And my own voice was nasal, airy and distorted.

My mother never made fun of me. I had her for one day, one short day between the rising and setting of the sun, and I spent every moment touching her hair, holding her

hand, resting the skin of my arm against hers. Did she miss me when she left? Did she miss me as much as I missed her?

“Your father is a very important man in the village,” she’d told me, while combing my hair, preparing it for a braid. “He sits on the tribal council with many other important men like Jeremiah’s father, Jun. They make the decisions for our village.”

Her hands, so gentle in my hair, so different from Rosa’s pushy movements and bossy ways, almost lulled me to sleep. My head rocked in motion with her fingers.

“Someday you will meet a man, Whisper. A man you can love because only you know how to reach him. Your father is such a man.”

How could anyone love a man who tried to drown her first child? My mother’s hands soothed, combed and brushed my tangled hair, made it shine as though it had bright bits of glass that reflected the sun. But I knew now what she meant. Jeremiah with his dancing anger that whirled and burned was such a man. I understood him. Better than anyone else.

“He needs me and sometimes need and love become tangled.”

I didn’t know what she’d meant but I remembered every word. I remembered about my brothers, Mateo and David, who looked like my father but were as different from each other as the vulture is from the hummingbird. I remembered about life in the village where the council decided everything – what work each person did, what rules the town would follow, what foods the town would eat. My father was on this council; my father who had decided that I could not live with them in the village.

I couldn't hate my mother who visited every year and whose gentle hands reminded me that someone cared about me, but I could hate my father.

## 11

Three days before my birthday, as I sat by the fire and coaxed songs out of the violin, while Rayanna bubbled breath against my chest, Jeremia's wolf visited us.

Jeremia sat beside me, carving a long twisted branch of maple in which I could see the faces of raccoons, otters, me with my broken lips, Eva with her webbed feet and Jeremia with his half arm. Jeremia heard the soft snuffling, the coughing bark and put his knife down on the log beside me. Our legs had been touching, just at the knee, but he pulled away and walked beyond the circle of firelight.

The breathy bark came again and Jeremia followed the wolf into the woods. Their padding feet left no marks and no sounds. Nathanael sat up in the chair. I put down the violin, and Eva, with Emerald on her shoulder, walked to where Jeremia had disappeared into the trees. None of us spoke, the pop of the fire so startling, we jumped every time. We waited. I fed Rayanna more rice milk which she pushed about with her tongue, half of the mixture coming out again through her nose. Eating the food was enough to tire her and she soon slept.

I rocked back and forth on the log and listened so hard, every noise became the wolf. Eva shuffled her feet in the dirt by the trees. Nathanael stood suddenly, walked into his hut, and returned with the radio. When he turned it on, the loud static cackle surprised Rayanna, her eyelids fluttering, but she soon went back to sleep. Nathanael adjusted the

dial, turned it back and forth, an eerie shriek coming from the machine, and then he found the usual station with the news.

A woman spoke of people, names that I knew nothing about. Hearing another voice, though, a clean, clear voice without the nasal quality that I was so used to in my own voice, was enough to make me listen. I tried to remember the names but they meant nothing to me and moved through me like air. And then Nathanael turned it up.

“...growing concern about the crime brought by the disfigured masses, the numbers of which are escalating. At last count, more than 300 had migrated from villages and towns to the larger metropolitan area. Scientists are concerned at the rise in number and wonder about environmental contaminants that may be causing so many...”

Nathanael flicked the switch and the voice stopped. Instead we heard panting, loud breaths and the trudging of feet as though someone with a heavy load were lumbering through the trees. I stood up from the log and held Rayanna against me. I tensed my muscles, readied myself to run, but when Jeremia emerged from the trees, I relaxed again.

The wolf padded along behind Jeremia. I had never seen it so close and marveled at the beauty of its silver fur. Eva backed away from it and stood by the fire next to Nathanael and me, the macaw on her shoulder wisely silent, only its head snapping and watching. The wolf's long tongue hung from its mouth and its yellow eyes glinted in the fire.

Jeremia carried another wolf slung over his shoulder and laid it down on the piece of plastic where we dried our fruits. It was a much older wolf with tufted black fur that

had become tinged with grey and a smell rose from the wolf, a smell so strong that I pushed my hand against my nose, trying to stop the odor from drifting into my mouth. The wolf's muzzle was white, completely white except where sores had formed around its mouth. Always be wary around hurt animals, I had been told, but this creature's eyes rolled about in its head and it panted loud foamy breaths flecked with blood. I couldn't imagine it harming anyone.

I took a bowl to the creek and filled it with water. I placed the bowl by the hurt wolf's head. Jeremia's wolf looked at me, licked its lips once and then panted, its tongue again hanging from its mouth. Jeremia picked up my bowl of water and sniffed it.

Nathanael knelt beside the hurt wolf and spoke in a low voice. He hummed, murmured and laid a wrinkled hand on the wolf's abdomen. The creature whimpered and panted, more froth spilling from its sore-infested mouth.

"Something it ate or drank," Nathanael said. He breathed to the side, away from the stench of the wolf.

He held the bowl up to the wolf's mouth, poured a bit of the water onto the sore lips. The wolf lapped at it eagerly, its tongue searching for more but its eyes rolled again and the whimper was so painful to hear, I held Rayanna tighter. Eva pushed her hands against her eyes and cried, her voice one continuous wail. Emerald fluttered to the ground on her stunted wings and ran on quick legs to Eva and Jeremia's hut where she slid behind the door flap.

Now even the healthy creatures in our woods were becoming sick and maimed like us. How were we to escape whatever it was that caused all of this disease?

Nathanael hummed to the sick wolf and stroked its head and back. The animal's side heaved up and down with each breath, the panting beginning to slow, to lose its panicked movements. As Nathanael moved his hand over the wolf's back, clumps of hair slid from the wolf's body and fell in patches. I put my arm around Eva's shoulders and pressed her against my hip even though I wanted to wail with her and cry tears through my fingers. Instead the water dripped from my nose and pooled in the slits above my lip.

When the wolf's breathing stopped, I felt like mine started. I sucked air in deeply, listening to the shuddering of Eva's breath as she tried to calm herself. I sat down on the log again and looked at the sick wolf which had once been a large animal, the fur so dark and swirled with black, it could have been a panther. Jeremia's wolf, its coat silver and tan next to the other wolf's black pelt, lay down next to the dead wolf and put its muzzle on its paws.

We went to our huts, then. I curled around Rayanna, her light breath a promise of life after the death we had seen within the camp circle. And even though Rayanna slept that night, her stomach full, her body warm against mine, I listened to the low bark of the living wolf by the fire as she said goodbye to her friend.

In the morning Jeremia's wolf was gone and the dead wolf was stiff. Jeremia dug a hole in our graveyard, where the babies had been buried, and the two of us wrapped the body in the sheet of plastic and hefted the wolf up, bringing it to the grave. In the daylight we could see the damage to the black wolf and marveled that it had lived as long as it had. Great red sores covered its body, not only its mouth, and it smelled of rot as though it had been dying for a very long time. It was best dead, even Eva understood that.



The night before my birthday I sat by the firepit and played the violin. I could play about five songs, none of them screechy and high-keeened. Nathanael pulled on my fingers sometimes, correcting my movements. He wouldn't tell me how he had learned the violin, he wouldn't tell me why he refused to play anymore and why he watched me now with eyes so narrow and dark I wondered what I was doing wrong. I had lived with Nathanael all of my life but I knew more about the village he came from, the one I'd never seen, than I knew about him.

Jeremia sat beside me carving a piece of wood, his hand never still, his short arm holding the wood in place. I slid further down the log, closer and closer so I could smell his nearness, breathe in the darkness of his scent. He reminded me of a humming bird, fluttering here, hovering there, and then gone. We balanced each other – solid, dependable, quiet me and fast, whirling, dancing Jeremia. Sometimes he would leap about the fire, crazed, intense and full of monkey antics. I watched him then, quietly and carefully, because his beauty – his supple, lithe beauty burned with the intensity of a firefly: so wonderful to watch but dangerous to arrest. If I could have, I would have captured him, held him close but that would have killed him.

The new object Jeremia carved while sitting by the fire was for my birthday although he didn't say so. It was a miniature violin, one you would tie to the Christmas tree. As I watched him shape the ornament, I knew what I would do with it; I'd wear it

around my neck, close to my voice box where it would represent the promise of what my voice could be: musical, sonorous.

Jeremia put down his tools and looked up into the night. It was too dark to carve – the bats had come out and flitted against the sky. I played my mother’s lullaby once more and felt the sting in my nose, and the glassing over of my eyes. Jeremia grunted.

I put down the violin, set it in my lap and brushed the sleeve of my shirt against my eyes. Rayanna snored softly, tied like a heartbeat to my chest. Jeremia looked down into the fire. His shoulders hunched and I felt his arm tense as it brushed against mine.

“You had fifteen years, fifteen times that she came to visit you.” His voice was low, gravely. “My parents haven’t visited me once.”

He turned his head to look at me. His face, shadowed and blurred, carried a glint from the fire. “You shouldn’t cry.”

He stood up, brushed against my knees with his legs, and picked up Eva who had fallen asleep on a mat in front of the fire. I placed my hand on Rayanna and felt her warm breath seeping into my shirt. I rocked her back and forth.

He was right. I knew he was right, but I still missed her. Is it better to never have known your parents like Rosa or Eva, or better to have had one brief day a year in which to place all of your hopes?

I woke up and looked out the window. Clouds in billowing pillow shapes rolled across the sky. Rayanna slept on my chest, her favorite spot. Since we had discovered the rice milk, she woke only occasionally during the night.

It was my birthday. I wasn't sure I'd get out of bed.

And then I heard the alarm; three short whistles and a long one. Before I thought that it couldn't possibly be true, I reacted to the pounding of my heart, the shaking of my hands, the rush of my blood. I jumped up, held Rayanna to me, and ran out the door of my hut. I was so happy, even my fingertips tingled.

It was not my mother who stood in the center of our camp. It was a man and two boys. When I emerged from my hut, the man stepped back, narrowed his eyes, and put his left hand on his belt where a knife glinted.

My heart began to slow and my shoulders started to droop. Now I felt twitchy, like lightning was about to flicker from the sky and set my hair on end.

Both of the boys took steps back and the smaller one crouched, arms out. All three of them made the sign of the cross over their chests. They should have babies strapped to their chests; they're much more substantial than airy symbols.

Nathanael stood in front of the man. His arms were crossed and his chin jutted forward. He was standing tall, and his clothes seemed to fit him better at this moment, more filled out. He had strength that his sixty-nine years shouldn't have supported. I waited at the door of my hut and tried not to let my fluttering heart and hands wake Rayanna.

“That her?” the man asked.

Nathanael’s chin jutted forward and he crossed his arms over his chest.

“You Whisper?” the man shouted. “Lydia?”

I looked at Nathanael.

“We came for you. We came to get you,” the man said. He had a prominent forehead and heavy eyebrows that made him look angry. “It was your mother’s dying wish.”

I had to take that in for a minute, weigh what his comment meant. My mother’s dying wish. She was dead.

I felt the air rush out of my mouth and nose. My stomach clenched. I took a step back and leaned against the doorframe of my hut. I closed my eyes and tried not to breathe so hard and fast. I’d thought I’d given up all hope, but it had still been there all along and now it popped, shooting shards of glass through my chest to my limbs. I slid down the wall of my hut and sat hard on the ground.

When I opened my eyes, the scene in front of me had not changed. I felt old, trodden, worn, and yet no time had passed.

“Does she understand what I’m saying?” The man spoke to Nathanael but looked at me.

“Yes. But I’m not sure I do.” Nathanael crossed his arms over his chest. “What do you want with her?”

“She’ll come home with us, help in the house, take her mother’s place.” The man peered at me, the corners of his mouth turned up in a slight smile. I thought he was

cunning although he spoke to me as if I were stupid. I sat on the ground in front of my hut and bit my bottom lip.

“You have shown no interest in her for sixteen years and now suddenly when it suits you, you want her back. She’s not going,” Nathanael’s mouth was pulled straight, tight, and his eyes squinted. The man heard Nathanael’s words and turned to look at him.

“I have every right to claim her, which you do not. I want her now, that’s what matters and she’ll come home with us.”

The two boys stepped forward and flanked their father. The three of them had the same hair – thin and limp. They had hunched shoulders and rounded limbs. I thought all men were like Nathanael, Jeremia, and the messenger with muscles rippling beneath the skin and with flat bellies. These three looked weak in body but there was a strength to them that resided somewhere other than in their muscles.

I didn’t want to go.

“Come, girl. Get your things,” the man said.

Panic started to rise in me and forced me to my feet. My breath came fast and the beat of my heart matched Rayanna’s. My father walked toward me. His head was lowered and his upper lip twitched into a snarl. He reminded me of the coyote who snooped around our camp, always wanting, always hungry. I held Rayanna tight against my chest.

“You will come with me,” he said. He was two feet in front of me. He looked up and down my body. “Even though I don’t want to claim you as blood, you are mine and

you've had sixteen years of freedom, living wild like the animals. Now you will come with me and do your duty."

Rayanna stirred. The man's nose wrinkled.

"That your child?" His mouth turned up in a sneer. "You're sixteen and already carrying a child. I can see what living here in the wild has done for you. Who's the father? The old man?"

Nathanael coughed and then he spoke low and slow as if he were speaking to Eva when she was having a temper tantrum.

"That is Clemente and Maximo's child, abandoned just like yours."

The man blinked his eyes four times and then he reached out, grabbed my arm, and I wondered why I ever thought him weak. His grip cut into my upper arm until I felt my heart beating under his hand. I pulled back, tried to yank my arm from his grasp, but he had become a rock, unyielding and impenetrable.

"I said get your things. I don't want this other child, this destroyer of lives. You come alone. Now."

I heard rustlings at the side of my hut. Not now, I thought, not now. I felt Jeremiah's anger like low-lying fog slithering along the ground and wrapping itself around us. Jeremiah had not yet felt the power of this man and the encounter between the two wouldn't end well. I closed my eyes and prepared for the impact. The man was taken by surprise when Jeremiah flew through the air and landed with his foot against the man's chest. Jeremiah was on top of him, pinning him to the ground, snarling into his face, and the man shrieked.

When the man screamed, we heard twigs snapping, leaves rustling, and another man emerged from the woods; he held a knife and crouched low. He ran to Jeremiah, grabbed him by the back of his hair and yanked his head up while holding a knife to his throat. He pulled Jeremiah's arm behind his back and forced him to his feet. Jeremiah's eyes were red, wild. He growled deep in his throat.

The man Jeremiah had knocked down, my father, Belen, sat up, steadied himself with his hand against the ground and stood. His face was red and swollen. He panted. The two young boys didn't know what to do; they ran to their father, then back to the woods, then they crept forward again.

"Kill him," Belen said, his voice rough and jumpy. He nodded to the man with the knife against Jeremiah's throat. Pounding fear pumped through my chest. The very air itself seemed to throb.

I saw the man with the knife to Jeremiah's neck look at Belen, I saw him tighten his grip on the knife, I saw the knife press against the skin of Jeremiah's throat.

Nathanael slid behind the man holding the knife. He gripped the man's arm. Muscles, tendons, bones stretched against the skin of Nathanael's hand as he pulled the man's wrist and knife away from Jeremiah's exposed neck. As the man tried to resist Nathanael's grip, his teeth clenched and his arm muscle shook. Jeremiah pulled away and whirled around, facing the man with the knife.

Jeremiah had no weapon and only one arm. That would not stop him. When Nathanael released the man's arm and jumped back to avoid the downward slash from the knife, I saw Jeremiah tense his muscles and prepare to leap.

I screamed. I hadn't used my voice in so long, it sounded as though it came from the trees, from the sky, squeezed from the sun. Everyone looked at me.

"I'll go with them," I whispered.

Jeremia rocked back and forth, his eyes black, the tendons in his neck standing out like the strings on the violin. When he heard my words, he shook his head.

"You can't leave."

"Please," I said, "take care of Eva, Nathanael and Rayanna for me."

In Jeremia's eyes I saw something I had not seen before. It was dark, twisting and filled with yellow swirls. Fear.

"Don't," he said.

"No one will be hurt because of me."

Nathanael and the man with the knife swayed opposite each other, their arms out, their legs wide. The man with the knife swung it forward, sliced at Nathanael. Nathanael backed up against one of the sitting logs. I saw what would happen, how this would all end, with old Nathanael cut open over our chair, the father of the camp hurt beyond repair. With icy hands, I touched Belen's arm and he jerked away from me, rubbing at the spot on his arm as though I'd burned him.

"Stop," I said.

Belen pointed a finger at me and muttered. "Don't you ever touch me, girl." He glared and then yelled. "Celso, Enough."

Celso heard because he twitched his head, but his eyes never left Nathanael and with a powerful lunge, he lurched toward Nathanael, pushing him hard with both hands



and slicing the top of his arm with the knife. Nathanael sat heavily on the log and held his hand over the cut. Blood seeped between his fingers and I ran to him, pulling his hand away, examining the wound. It would heal. He would have a scar, but it would not fester and weep like deep cuts sometimes do. Jeremia stood beside me, his hand out to the side, his jaw set with an anger that went deep into his neck. We were not used to such blatant cheating, not from adults.

Nathanael accepted Rayanna in his bloody hands when I handed her to him. My fingers, as they laid Rayanna in his lap, gave me away. They shook and fluttered. Nathanael gripped my wrist, pulled me down, spoke into my ear.

“Come back, Whisper. As soon as you can. You, of all the rejects, were never meant for the life out there.” While he spoke into my ear, he slipped something around my neck. I looked down and saw the violin that Jeremia had carved for me – the miniature instrument with a string fitted through a tiny hole at the end of the long handle – a little piece of warmth and wood with smears of Nathanael’s blood on the edge. I slipped it into my shirt where it soothed my skin.

I stood, held my head high once more and bit down on my tongue. I would not cry in front of these men. I would not let them have that power over me. I reached into myself and pulled on a small thread of anger. I held onto it, squeezed it, felt how delicate it was.

My belongings were quickly collected; I had very little. Everything my mother gave me fit into a handkerchief she had worn on her head. I held the handkerchief up to my nose and breathed deeply. It still smelled of baking bread and molasses. I wrapped

my cloth doll, a silver spoon and three ribbons for my hair inside the handkerchief. The violin fit against my back and then I looked around my hut. I left the blankets, pillows, the life-sized wood carving by Jeremia that reminded me of waterfalls, and books – the three Encyclopedia volumes I'd read from cover to cover, learning about the world. I pulled on my sweater, flipped aside the deer skin door and walked out of the hut. I wished I could pack Jeremia, Eva, Rayanna and Nathanael into the violin case.

When I emerged, Jeremia stood by the firepit holding Eva. The two of them watched with big, glassy eyes. I wanted to run to them, feel Eva's arms around my neck, feel the tingling that started when Jeremia's body was pressed against mine. Instead, I jerked my head away and tried to find my thread of anger.

Celso and Belen stood by the path into the woods, and my brothers both peered out at me from behind Belen's body. I turned to look at our camp, the log huts, the firepit, the sitting logs surrounded by huge trees that stretched and strained to the sun and I thought of how small my world had been for sixteen years: how small and yet huge, filled with the trees, the stream, the owls, the crayfish and the songs of the crickets. I wondered, where I'm going, will anyone hear my song?

When we walked into the woods, I did not look back, but as we moved away, I heard nothing from the world behind me as the two men and two boys in my company lumbered through the trees, drowning out any sign of beauty that might have been there.

My mother was dead. And with that thought, my thread of anger disappeared and I felt my lower lip begin to shake. I held it between my teeth and bit down until I couldn't tell if the tears in my eyes were from my mother's death or the pain in my lip.

The two boys looked at me as we walked. The farther we got from the camp, the braver they became as if distance gave them strength. The younger one who looked to be about eight years old and had sturdy legs and a protruding stomach waited for me to pass and then walked behind me. I walked beside the tromping men, my feet so silent it was as though I weren't there. We trod beneath the oak trees with their majestic branches and I listened to every move the boy behind me made. The other brother walked in front of me but glanced back often, looking at my face, examining my features. Belen led the way along the narrow path through the woods - tree branches and bushes almost covering the slim trail we followed - and the other man, Celso, walked behind me. Not one of these people smiled at me, attempted to talk to me, softened their gaze when they looked at me. I had no friends among these smooth-faced men with their unblemished faces. There was no one to trust here.

About three hours into our march, I felt the first seed hit the back of my neck. If Jeremia had taken out his slingshot and pelted me, I would have slipped away, run on silent feet through the woods, snuck up behind him and thrown a handful of nuts at him, pelting him in multiples for his individual missiles. I glanced at the man behind my brother and understood that if I slipped away he would come and find me – perhaps return to the camp and take out his anger on Jeremia or old Nathanael.

As I continued to walk I felt heat from my chest creep up my neck and into my face. The anger and fear of helplessness burned my nose. I would not give in to this feeling.

Zing, another seed flew by the side of my face.

Zing, another hit me on the back of my head.

The littlest brother giggled and the man behind me started to laugh. The brother in front of me looked around, tried to understand what was so funny.

I slowed down just a bit. Littlest brother snuck closer, became braver, and hit me on the cheek. It stung but I said nothing. Try it again, little brother, try it again.

Zing, another hit the back of my neck.

He was very close and as we crept along, prey and aggressor, I remembered his name, Mateo. Mom had told me about the boys and described them as loving, but mischievous. This little boy was about as sweet as an unripe lemon.

Celso's laughter encouraged him and he became braver. He stepped up right behind me and I felt how close he was by the sharp sting on my shoulder blade. When the seed hit the violin case, Mateo laughed at the hollow sound it made and then forgot to watch where he was going.

I stopped, whirled around and snatched the slingshot out of his hand before he noticed how close we were.

"Hey," he shouted, "give that back."

"Stop hitting me or I snap this in half." I held the slingshot over his head.

“Dad will make you give it back. You can’t feel those hits - look at you. You’re not really human.”

I weighed that comment, considered taking offense, and then I laughed. I was still laughing when his face contorted, his eyes stretched wide and he screamed. He screamed again and again, backing away from me, his hands in front of him. Belen ran back, pushed past me through the thick leaves of the trees and held Mateo against him.

“What did she do to you, son?” He kneeled at Mateo’s side, his arm around him. “Did she hurt you?”

I no longer laughed. I clutched the slingshot over my head but lowered it. I held it at my side.

“She made a face at me. She snarled at me. S...S...She was going to hurt me.”

And then I remembered Nathanael’s warning. Never smile, he had said. Never laugh or grin at someone who isn’t used to your face. When you smile your teeth are bared, your face splits open and you become a canine, an animal with teeth and gums exposed. I was careful not to smile as my father looked at me. His face became a burnt red color, the underneath of a cardinal’s wing and he spoke low, his lips tight.

“If you ever threaten this boy again, I will finish the job I began when you were born.”

I clenched my jaw. When I felt a tug, I looked down and saw the other brother, David, pulling the slingshot out of my hand. Even though he looked like the other two, his eyes were gentler, more searching, more willing to crinkle and laugh. He held the slingshot up for his father to see.

“Mateo was hitting her with seeds from the slingshot.”

Belen yanked the slingshot out of David’s hand and gave it back to Mateo.

“He may do what he likes to her. She’s not like us.”

David narrowed his eyes, as he tried to understand if I truly was an animal. Mateo gloated and fit another acorn into his slingshot but rather than walking behind me, he joined his father and the two marched on, leading the way.

David walked between me and his father as we continued our passage through the woods. I pushed fern leaves aside, felt the scratch of thorny branches against my legs, tugged my feet through vines. As we walked, I hardened myself, wrapped a shield around me and prepared for my new life.

## 15

The first day we met no other people and I marveled that my mother had walked this distance all by herself for fifteen years. I understood the dedication she’d shown, the sacrifice she’d made. She truly had loved me. We slept in the vines and bushes, under the arching trees. My stomach rumbled with hunger. I tried to silence the sound by sleeping on my side, but the noise of emptiness reverberated against the ground. Because we had left the camp in such a hurry, I’d packed no food and they offered me none during our travels. As the noise from my hunger continued to groan against the ground, I felt something pressed into my hand. My fingers closed around the object and I brought it up to my nose. It was a soft, folded tortilla; I ate it in three bites.

The second day we passed a small village. About ten huts were grouped together in a rough circle and children, barking dogs, smiling inhabitants appeared and disappeared between the huts. I hoped, when we came up to the village, that this was ours because I could feel the acceptance.

Children ran out of the woods to greet us. They looked at my face curiously but were not afraid of me. They took our hands and pulled us into the center where a firepit surrounded by sitting logs circled the open space. We were given bowls of rice, cooked vegetables, bits of meat and I ate it while turned to the side so they could not see me placing the food at the back of my throat, away from my mouth, away from the openings that make the food spill out again.

When I looked around the village, I saw another woman like me with slits in her face, with openings between her nose and mouth and with one eye that looked down always. She smiled at me and raised her hand. I raised my hand in response but Belen stood in front of me, blocking my view. While I ate my dinner, I saw two boys playing together by the firepit, one of the boys had only one arm, the other one had a sore at the back of his head.

I wanted to stay in this little village where the disfigured children were not sent to the forest, to huts in the woods where no one could see them, but played in the center of the village where the other children could play with them and where the parents could watch them, but after we ate the meal in the early evening, we continued on our way.

The path we followed started to widen and I noticed, now, the difference in the trees. Bushy leaves did not reach out to snatch at our hands, cuts from the thorns and

brambles no longer stung my legs, and spaces appeared over our heads. More and more people passed us on the way. I saw strange sights; people with markings, symbols on their arms and faces. People with their hair cut into strips on their heads or braided in long lines down their backs. They looked at me with the same curiosity with which I looked at them. Sometimes Belen and Celso stopped to converse with these people, sometimes we passed them without a word.

Again the second day we stopped in a village and were given a meal but I did not want to stay in this village. The children hid behind the huts or trees when they saw my face and one little boy stood in front of me, pointed and screamed.

I was offered rice, here, but there were no vegetables, there was no meat, although I could smell something roasted coming from Belen's bowl. I did not sit on the log beside my little brothers, but sat on the ground at their feet and dipped my fingers into the rice, eating as fast as I could in case they decided to take away what little food I had. Here I felt like an animal, squatting, skulking, shoveling, while they watched me as though I might eat their children.

That last night, before we reached our village, Belen and Celso built a fire in a small clearing. They sat by the fire with the two boys while I sat behind them, just beyond the reach of the fire's warmth, trying to see clues to my mother in the shapes of their heads. They said little, but I did hear my name and saw Belen glance back at me.

Celso stood from his place by the fire and walked to me. I kept my chin on my knees, my arms wrapped around my legs.



“Your place is with us, now,” he said. I looked at his brown boots, thick and durable, perfect for the walk through the woods. “You’ll not go back.”

I barely felt the edge of the fire’s warmth. My place might have been with them but it was not equal to them.

“And if you run, I’ll hunt you down. You’re father may have weakness, but I don’t.”

I looked up. The sky was dark, the trees shadowed and black around the outside of the fire, and I could see nothing of his face. He knelt in front of me and wrapped something around my feet – a bit of twine, a scratchy piece of rope. The strands itched and he tied the rope so tight, it cut into the sides of my legs.

When he finished tying the knot, he returned to the campfire and sat down beside Belen. They said nothing, the boys glancing back at me, I turned on my side, lay down on the ground, and rested my cheek on my hands. Hot tears dampened the fingers under my cheek but the tears made no more sound than snowflakes might. This was my life now.

The others slept beside the warmth of the fire, a circle of inclusion while I lay behind them trying to pretend that I did not want to stretch out my legs.

## 16

We reached my family’s village in the afternoon of the third day. As we progressed through the forest, the pine trees thinned and disappeared, replaced by stunted magnolias that were more spread out, less dense - and by a thick, rotten smell. My head hurt from

the reek and my hand moved to my nose, covering it. Death. Decay. A world filled with rot. My eyes stung. I was hungry but this smell made me queasy.

I heard the village long before we came to it. I heard dogs barking, children yelling, an occasional shout and absolute silence from the insects and birds. I had never heard that before – that silence. It was peculiar and indescribable. The emptiness made my heart feel hollow, lonely, even though there were people everywhere.

We walked along a road now and as we neared the first houses of the village, I noticed many smells. Some were good smells, like the cooking of soups, but behind those good smells always lay the heavy reek of filth, latrines, and unwashed bodies. I could feel my nostrils flare. How could people live under this haze of stench? My hands felt unsteady and continually flew to my throat or clutched at my clothes. I tried to control them.

We walked along a wide dirt road lined with houses constructed of flat pieces of wood that fit together snugly. They were also covered with some sort of metal roof that repelled the rain. For a minute I felt some excitement – maybe I would be warm, dry and protected. Our huts in the woods, made of sticks, logs and mud, always developed cracks in the winter that let the cold air from the mountain creep into our blankets and bones.

People stopped and stared as we walked by. I'd never seen so many people before and couldn't believe how the dirt street with houses seemed to stretch on like darkness. Children took breaks from playing with balls to stare at me – women paused as they carried heavy loads of water, wood or clothing and watched as I walked by. I stared also.

Everyone was beautiful with smooth faces, sealed mouths, and un-split noses. No wonder they thought me a monster. I wanted to cover my face, hide it behind my hand but instead I looked ahead and met their eyes.

When a beautiful man glanced at me and then looked hard with narrow eyes, I felt a moment of panic. I'd seen him before but knew that wasn't possible. He had curly hair that hung to his shoulders in graying black waves, his eyes were rimmed with dark lashes, his muscles twisted just beneath his skin. It was Jeremiah – Jeremiah without a missing arm. Jeremiah older. When I walked past him, he hissed and I saw sparks, something smoldering. Jeremiah released his anger by disappearing for days at a time. I didn't want to know how this man released his anger.

My father's house was near the end of the long street. As we walked, we gathered an audience. I trailed behind Belen, Mateo and David but felt wary, my shoulders tense, my hands sweaty around the sack which held my mother's gifts. I followed them to the house but stopped outside the door.

This was where I had been born. This was where my mother had lived. This was where she had baked the bread, cared for the children, loved, lived, died. The outside of the house was brown. Two steps led up to the yellow door– faded yellow, the color of fall leaves on the ground. Two windows with glass covering them gave the dwelling a face but I saw no friendliness in its expression. No flowers grew around the house, only straggly clumps of grass that stretched brown and crinkled from the ground and a few withered plants which might have contained blooms at one time but were so ragged now that I didn't recognize them.

Mateo prodded me in the back with his slingshot. When I turned to look at him, I saw a pack of children his age gathered behind.

“Snarl,” he said. “Make that face again. Show them that face.”

My head was so filled with the stink in the town that I couldn’t concentrate. I shook my head to clear it and then wrinkled my nose. I felt my mouth pull up, split open from the nose to the lips, and the children gasped. Mateo pointed a shaky finger at me and shrieked.

“See, I told you. I told you.”

Belen stood with his arms crossed while Celso pushed me to the side.

“You don’t go in the house,” Celso said. He continued to push me and I submitted to his hands. He was forceful, firm and as I saw the other men gathered around, I understood why. The house faced the dirt-packed road and a line of people stood along the edge of the street watching. There were no trees to hide me. My shield had dissolved and tears tickled my nose.

“This is where you will stay,” Celso pointed to a structure next to the house.

I didn’t understand what it was. This miniature house was low to the ground with a large opening. A black hard flap fit over the hole in the front. How was I to fit in there? If I curled into a ball, perhaps I could squeeze myself between the walls. I heard laughter ripple like heat through the crowd.

“Dog house,” they said.

Dog house. Warmth crept across my chest, up my neck and into my cheeks.

I crossed my arms and planted my feet. Never in my life had I felt this hungry, this insubstantial. I looked at Celso, glanced at Belen standing behind him. I shook my head. My tears would fall any minute, but I would not crawl into a house constructed for animals.

“You’ll do as I say, girl,” he said. His hand flit through the air and slapped against my cheek. My head snapped back. I felt a burning in my face but I swallowed the need to crouch low, hold my face, cry, and ram my head into Celso’s stomach. I had learned that Belen would not stand up for me so I stood on my own, holding my arms closer to my chest, letting my eyes fill.

“Get in the doghouse,” Celso said through teeth tight as roots.

I glanced at the line of people watching. The faces had smirks, mouths drawn up into petty smiles. I saw no kindness, no mercy, no forgiveness. I guess when you don’t carry deformities, you can abuse those who do.

Celso was wearing a plaid shirt with shiny snaps in the front and at the cuffs of the sleeves. He opened up the snaps on the cuffs, rolled his shirt up to his elbows and waited. Maybe I should have gotten into the doghouse. I knew that if I submitted, though, that would be my accommodation forever. I’d had better shelter in the woods.

The blow hit me so hard, I gasped. The world spun around me and tipped; I clutched at my stomach. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t see straight. A kick from his boot landed against my side. Flashes of light twirled around my head.

As the world spun and I hit the ground, I wondered what had happened to the dog – why its home was waiting.

When I awoke, it was dark. The line of people had disappeared. Artificial lights shone from the windows of the houses and I heard the welcome sounds of the forest. Birds screeched, crickets chirped rhythmically and bats flitted against the sky. I breathed in as deeply as I could without choking on the smell. This, at least, was a world I knew.

As I sat up and inched my fingers across my chest and stomach, feeling for wounds, my legs rebelled. I tried to straighten them, tried to pull my feet forward where I could see them, but they were stuck, fastened to the ground. I rolled onto my hands and knees and crept backwards. I groped down the sides of my legs and yanked my hands back when I touched the cold, hard, un-forgiveness of metal.

Nathanael, Jeremia, Eva and I used to joke about being trapped in the camp, locked away in our forest jail, but Nathanael had told us as we sat around the fire and played games or listened to stories of the civilized world, that he would choose this forest jail over the town we'd been banned from over and over again. Why, we'd asked him. Why choose this seclusion?

"People can be cruel," he'd said. Perhaps Belen allowed Celso to chain me to the ground because it was expected, because he was on the town council and had to set an example – even an example with his own daughter.

I lifted the flap covering the opening to the doghouse and felt inside. A worn, fur-infested blanket that smelled of urine and worms lay crusted and stiff on the ground. The blanket was beginning to disintegrate, becoming one with the dirt, but I pulled it out and

shook it. As I wrapped it around my body, I remembered the violin leashed to my back. I pulled the strap over my head and held the case in my hands, weighing it, considering. There was nothing to do, no one to talk to, no baby to care for, no little sister or big brother to tease. I wondered – do I feel sorry for myself? Do I crawl into the doghouse, curl around myself and weep?

I opened the case to the violin, fit it against my shoulder and began to play. Light and clean, the notes lifted into the air and spoke of me staked to the ground. I didn't play my mother's lullaby or any of the other tunes I'd pieced together. I played a song all my own and it came to me on the soft wings of bats.

The door to the house opened and a rectangle of light stretched into the street. It illuminated the rough, bumpy ground where a few straggles of weeds and grass grew stunted and brown. David stepped out of the house and sat in the doorway, his shadow long and lean. My music mingled with the darkness and brought a bit of beauty back into my life. I don't know when I finished playing, but David was gone from the doorstep by the time I put down the violin and the moon was hidden behind the houses to the west.

## 18

“Get up,” said the voice as a boot nudged my side.

I lay on the ground in front of the doghouse, the disintegrating blanket twisted tight around me. I turned my head and looked up, squinting into the sky. The sun shone behind the man's head.

“Get up.”

My body felt cold and stiff. I'd slept on the ground all my life but it had been layered with blankets. We'd collected them, used them as mattresses and sometimes coats. Here, on this ground, tentacles of cold had crept into my skin and I was stiff. My chest and stomach hurt where I had been hit. I stood, knees bent, my legs staked to the ground.

"You will make us breakfast, do the laundry, clean the house, and bake bread to have ready for sale. You understand me?" He spoke loudly, as though my distorted features might somehow affect my hearing. I held tight to the blanket around my shoulders. A rumbling, which rose in pitch and shook the ground, started in the distance and seemed to come straight for me. I saw a large rectangular machine turn onto the street where Belen and I stood, and make its way toward us, un-pausing in its approach, as though coming to squash us flat. I stepped back toward the house and as far as the chain on my legs would allow me to go. I waited for the roaring machine to come and held my breath as it came closer, but it rumbled by and drove down the street, past many more houses, until it turned left and then rattled its roar to a stop. A white automobile, I realized, my first sighting of a truck, SWINC in black letters on the side. I had no idea they could be so big. Belen continued as though nothing had happened.

"And if you run, the neighbor will shoot you."

Belen nodded to the house next door where a woman with a puckered mouth rocked back and forth and wore a polka-dot top with a flared skirt. A long gun rested on her legs, a threat that lay dormant and cold. When I looked at her, she smiled at me; she had no teeth.



Belen leaned down to my feet and unlocked the chain around my ankles. The metal fell away, leaving red indentations in my skin. I fought the urge to bend and rub them. Next to our house, to the north, was the woman with the gun who sat on her porch and to the south was another house but I saw no movements there. I had become a central attraction in this washed out world.

When I tried to walk, I wobbled and felt my ankles giving out, but somehow I made it to the front steps, using the railing to pull myself up and then I limped through the front door. Belen walked behind me.

The smell in the house pulled on my memories and made me sway. It was my mother, everywhere. Yogurt, dough, molasses, a bit of cinnamon and nutmeg. I thought for a minute that I might throw up. I held my stomach, breathed deeply, and stumbled into the house when I was pushed.

Mateo and David sat at the kitchen table. They both had plates in front of them – empty plates and empty glasses. A third place was set at the table but I knew better than to think it might be for me. I tried to remember the last time I'd eaten. The smell in the house was thick enough to consume.

“Eggs in the fridge, bacon in the fridge, we're out of bread.”

David sucked in his breath when Belen said this. Bread meant a mother; a mother lost and gone. They'd lost a mother too, a mother they'd known much better than I had and even though I knew nothing of Belen that endeared me to him, my mother had stayed with him, maybe even loved him, and had loved her two boys. When I heard both boys

sniff and watched them wipe with their hands under their noses, I knew they'd loved her, too.

I dropped the blanket onto the ground and kicked it to the door. I grasped the metal handle and opened the refrigerator, which I had read about but never seen. The gush of cold air against my arms, face, and neck woke me, made me think of fresh morning breezes by the creek where rancid smells didn't clog the senses.

Eggs, bacon, milk. I removed these items from the refrigerator after searching for their unfamiliar packaging and turned to the stove. If I was able to cook these things over an open flame back at my home, I could certainly cook these things over this luxurious device that was said to cook food so evenly, you didn't have to continuously move the pot to the best spot over the fire.

Belen stood beside me and pointed to the matches. He turned a knob on the stove, and held a match to the holes beneath a metal ring. A flame shot up and formed a circle. On the back of the white stove, in black script was the word *Swinc*. It was on the refrigerator too, dark letters against a white background, just like the lettering on the rumbling truck.

"Don't think you're staying in the house just because you're cooking and cleaning in it. You'll go back to the doghouse tonight."

I looked down at the pan on the stove. The eggs bubbled gently, the bacon sizzled, and I felt stirring in my chest, a stirring like ants, or like fleas that had crept into my clothing and started to bite. The nibbles fluttered beneath my collarbone, twitched in my

cheeks. My face became hot, burning, and my breath came fast. I flipped the eggs, turned the bacon, opened the cap on the milk. My hands were shaking.

I refused to return to the doghouse – to be chained and kept. That would not happen. I was so angry, I could not even cry.

I flipped the food onto their plates and watched them shovel great spoonfuls into their mouths. I could feel my lips tighten over my teeth – I glowered at them, hungry, angry, imprisoned, trying to control the water that threatened to drip from the corners of my mouth.

“Stop staring at us,” Belen said. He put his fork down. “I can’t eat with you staring at us and with that face...”

He stood up, pushed his chair back from the table and marched into another room. I looked at David. He had stopped eating and watched me. Mateo didn’t bother to look up. Belen walked back into the room, the floorboards shaking with his weight, and tossed something over my head. It was black, transparent, filmy, like the creek on a sunny day.

“You’ll wear that from now on.” Belen sat back at the table and focused his eyes on his plate.

The material was soft, with a loose weave. It smelled of nutmeg and cumin. It must have been my mother’s, a scarf to wear around her neck and warm her throat rather than hide and disguise her face. I should have been enraged, angry that my face had to be covered, that I was so hideous, they couldn’t eat while my face was visible, but I was not angry. Instead, all that rage leaked out like smoke from beneath the black veil and I allowed myself to smile. This was my mother’s. And now when people stared at me, I

could curl my lips into a snarl, I could cry, I could laugh, I could wrinkle my nose and glare. They couldn't see me.

When David and Mateo left for school and Belen left to sit on the town council where he was a member, I ate the remainders of the breakfast. I didn't even remove the veil. It made me feel hazy, vaporous, as if maybe I didn't really exist and all of this was someone else's life. With my face covered, the world became less substantial and the life in my head, as I wished life to be, became almost real.

## 19

My life might have been despicable right then, but I also walked the path my mother had walked before me: I cleaned the dishes and put them away, I picked up clothes from the floor in the main room, found a cloth, and ran it over the furniture: a couch, a round table in the middle of the room, some puzzles and a few books on the table. I looked at the books: *Holy Bread. The Art of Bread Baking*. I understood how I would learn to make the bread – my mother told me that she loved smoothing and kneading the bread until it became a stretchy soft dough that would expand into a perfect loaf. She had begun to add nuts, bits of fruit, seeds and wild grains, making the recipes her own and selling the special breads at the grocery store. They'd become dependent on the income from that bread, as it supplemented the limited amount of money Belen received from sitting on the town council. I silently thanked Nathanael for teaching me to read, to do math, to study life.

I cleaned in David and Mateo's room first – made a stack of the dirty clothes, pulled the dirty bedding off of their beds, picked up their toys and tossed them onto the shelves made of boards and bricks. When I opened a thin door that covered a miniature room – a closet - I sighed and began to pull out the piles of clothes. Why did they need so many clothes? So many shirts, pants, socks – in our camp in the woods, we had received our supplies once a month and had received new clothes twice a year. I owned one set of clothing: a pair of brown pants, a white t-shirt with a faded picture of a large-eared mouse, a black sweater with a hole at the right elbow, and a pair of brown shoes. These children had ten pairs of pants, fifteen shirts, short pants, sweaters and coats. They only had one body, why did they need so many pieces of clothing?

A mouse had been nibbling on something in the corner, a wad of chewed paper that crumbled like snow when I picked it up. I began to realize the extent of the mess and started to wonder how long my mother had been gone. Maybe she had died the day she sent the violin. That was weeks ago. And then my father had waited until my birthday to come and get me?

With no looming father, no staring brothers, I could explore as I wished. I found a washbasin behind the house. I looked around me, trying to determine how people washed clothes in this village, and saw a woman walking through the brush of the neighboring backyards to some taller grasses. The forest began just past those taller grasses. A creek perhaps. I placed the clothes in the washbasin and balanced it against my hip as I'd done for years in our camp. I walked parallel to the woman, down a narrow path lined with browning weeds and found myself at the creek where a string of women and children

lined the banks. The water was dark, brown and murky. I couldn't see the bottom of the creek. This may have been the same creek that ran through our camp in the woods but somewhere along the way it had become filthy and rotten, the crayfish so camouflaged by the grey waters that I couldn't see them skittering along the creek bed.

The children and mothers quieted for a minute when they saw me approach, but it didn't take long for the little ones to go back to their play and for the mothers to resume their talking. I hesitated before lowering my basket to the filthy water, but the other women scrubbed their clothes in the stream, the children splashed and played in the creek, so I settled myself and began the work.

I liked the chatter around me. It reminded me of Eva and Jeremia – of having friends. My throat felt tight, pinched and raw. I should have let myself cry, why not. But I didn't cry. Not then, anyway.

When the first pile of clothes was washed, I returned to the house, hung the clothes to dry on the outside line that ran between my father's house and the neighbor's where the woman with the gun waved at me and grinned her toothless grin, and then I took the next stack to the creek. Many of the other women were gone when I returned. There was one family, a mother with two wee ones, and she also left after a few minutes. I didn't know if she left because I was there, or if she left because her toddler had grown sleepy and cranky.

The sun was high in the sky. It beamed its rays onto my head, onto the dark veil that covered me. Usually I welcomed the sun – I didn't even mind the heat, the enclosing warmth of humidity, but because my hair had fallen over my shoulders, the veil stuck to

the back of my neck. It became itchy, scratchy and annoying. I glanced up and down the creek, saw that I was the only one there, and took off the veil.

I folded it carefully and placed it behind me. I closed my eyes, tilted my face to the sun, and felt the touch of a breeze against my sweaty neck. My shoulders were beginning to ache, my hands raw and sore, my upper back stiff from bending. I turned to my work and pulled out a cream-colored skirt; cream like the color of a perfect egg. I stopped for a minute with the material in my hand. The thumping of my heart told me what I had, what treasure I had found, and I stood shakily, clutching the skirt to my chest, afraid that it might not be real – that it might disappear.

When the material stayed in my hands, continued to warm and caress with its softness, I pulled it away from my body and shook it loose in front of me. It was long, with pleats that narrowed at the waist and expanded around the tops of the thighs, but the smell was wrong. It should have smelled of yeast, cinnamon, nutmeg but from the depths of the cloth I smelled something dark and decayed. I turned the skirt around and in the back, right in the center, was a circle of black – an almost perfect sphere of brown maroon. Blood.

No.

I pushed the material down into the water, swirled it back and forth, back and forth again. I rubbed the material between my hands and scrubbed at the spot between my knuckles. I didn't even look to see if the spot was gone. I ground and rubbed, twisted and scrubbed until my arms ached and my shoulders burned. Then I stood and shook out the skirt.

I could still see discoloration, a darker patch on the lightness of the skirt, but now at least I could look at it. I knew what the stain meant – I would always know what was there, but I could pretend it was something else like a water mark from the brown waters or the smudgings from a log she had once sat on.

The sound of swishing grass whistled on the wind. I stuffed the skirt under the other clothes in the wash tub and pulled out a different garment. Guilt tickled my nose, bit my lip, but I tried to reassure myself that I'd done nothing wrong.

When Belen stepped out of the grasses and stood beside me, I scrubbed the garment in my hands with shaky fingers and with sweat dripping off the end of my nose.

“You didn’t bake the bread,” he said.

The article of clothing between my hands softened, lost its stiffness of dirt but I didn’t exchange it for another article of clothing.

Belen placed his foot against my back. I crouched on the dirt bank over the water and when he pushed, I stretched out my hand to catch myself. My hand and face felt the cool shock of water – the rest of my body followed. The water was not deep, I stood easily, dripping and sodden, but now fear took the place of guilt, making me shake even more.

The sun shone over Belen’s shoulder turning him into a blackened shape with no discernable face. The clothes had taken me all day to clean.

“Why didn’t you bake the bread?” His voice was so low and gravely it sounded like the cough Jeremia’s wolf had made in our camp. I put my hand over my eyes to



shield them from the sun. When a slight breeze danced over me, the cool creek water tingled on my skin.

“Answer me,” he said.

“I don’t know how,” I whispered.

Belen picked up the black veil and threw it at me.

“Put it on. The clothes don’t matter,” he said. My stack of clean clothes sat on a large rock. Belen bent low, shoved with both hands and toppled it into the creek. “The bread pays for the stove, for the refrigerator, for the electricity in our home. We could lose these things without the money, do you understand? I want a washing machine next, which the bread should pay for. You will bake the bread,” he said, spit from his lips flying past the edge of the creek and landing on the front of my mother’s black veil, “or you will not eat.”

Then he turned and swished back through the grasses along the creek.

I gathered the clothes that he had thrown into the water. I wrung them out once again, wrapped the cream skirt around my waist, knotted wet and cool against my skin. In my camp in the woods, we’d never needed money. I’d never even seen it although I knew the concept. Nathanael had paid for the supplies we needed from the village by selling Jeremia’s sculptures and we had never considered the option of buying more than the absolute necessities.

I didn’t understand why Belen couldn’t bake the bread himself. Maybe he didn’t know how. I still stood in the creek, the clothes in my hands, when a thought nudged me.

I tried to push it back, tried to submerge it with my mother's blood, but it popped up again.

Power. If I was to bake the bread and help support the family, I had power. As I gathered the clothes and balanced the wash basin against my hip, I thought about that power. It was Jeremia refusing to split the wood until I brought fresh water for him from the creek; it was Nathanael refusing to tell us stories of the city until we had cleaned the evening dishes. It was Whisper trying to find a place for herself in a different world. Was it such a terrible thing to want a little bit of power?

## 20

When I returned to the house and hung up the wet clothes to dry, I noticed a door that I hadn't seen before. A lean-to tilted against the back of the house like an ungainly rectangle, a wooden box held together with a short wood door. I undid the latch, pulled the door open and peered inside. It was empty except for slivers of wood, mouse droppings and cobwebs. The boards around the small room didn't fit together as well as the boards around the house but it still offered more shelter than our huts made of logs and sticks back in the woods. I knew, as I examined the rough shack, how I would use my power.

When I walked between the houses to the front, I saw David and Mateo playing in the street with other children. They kicked a can and then ran to hide. Belen stood by the clothesline between the two houses, his fists curled into his jean pockets and talked to my jailor next door. When she saw me standing by the front steps, she held up the gun and

pointed it at me. I walked up the steps, feeling that gun aimed at my back, opened the door and went inside.

My stomach felt knotted and tight when I heard footsteps following me into the house. If my notion was incorrect, if the thought that I had power was untrue, then this would not work and I would again be chained to the dog house. Sweat began to gather in the pits of my arms.

“Make dinner,” Belen said.

I leaned my hip against the stove in the kitchen and crossed my arms over my chest. He couldn’t see my eyes behind the veil, but he glared as though he could.

“I said make dinner.” His voice was low again, dangerous and his eyes almost disappeared beneath his heavy brows.

I didn’t move. I bit down on my tongue to control my shaking. He could hurt me. I knew that – and he probably would. I still didn’t move.

Faster than I would have thought possible, Belen crossed the floor between us and slapped me hard across the face. My head whipped to the side and my crossed arms uncrossed, my hands grabbing the edge of the stove behind me. I closed my eyes for a minute to still the stars that flashed in my head. I adjusted the veil so it was balanced over my head and draped like a shroud to my shoulders. Belen breathed heavily through his nose and the vein in his neck bulged. He lifted his hand to slap me again but stopped when I whispered.

“Is this how you treated my mother?”

“What? Are you comparing yourself to her?” He dropped his arm and a barking laugh erupted from him. “Your mother was a saint. You look like the devil. I told you to make dinner.”

“No,” I said. It was a small word, low, strong, quick; I surprised myself when I heard it come from me.

A flush started in Belen’s neck and flowed up into his cheeks. The vein in his neck throbbed and he clutched his hands tightly into fists. His anger leaked up into his eyes and made the whites red. Suddenly he roared.

“You will do as I say, girl.”

My voice was so quiet, I wondered if I’d actually spoken out loud. Everything about me was shaking, even the veil rustled from my tremblings.

“I want to stay in the lean-to. If I am chained, I will not bake bread. If I am hit, I will not cook the meals. You may break as many bones as you like, but you will not get anything from me.”

Again Belen’s speed surprised me. He grabbed my arm, yanked me to the front door, opened the door and threw me down the front steps. I fell with my hands out, my wrists taking most of the impact but I rolled quickly so I could watch him, see his next move. Belen stood panting and sweating on the top step, looking down at me on the ground.

The children in the street stopped, clustered together in a protective circle, stared at Belen, stared at me. I could hear the lady next door creak out of her chair and take a

few steps across her porch. I imagined the gun pointed at me – at me, like I was the wild animal about to rip and tear. Belen slammed the door to the house and retreated inside.

My veil had slipped from my head and lay a few feet away, like someone's discarded shadow. David walked to it, picked it up and handed it to me. I stood up shakily and accepted the veil. Then I hunched down on the front step, my chin on my knees, and waited. The children waited with me, shuffling their feet in the dust of the street, looking at me sideways. The woman next door waited as well, her polka dot shirt like spots at the corner of my eye. I looked down at the ground seeing nothing, and listened to my heart beating alone, no Rayanna tied to my chest to regulate the beats. I had now been in this town for about twenty-four hours and an ache the size of Jeremia, Eva, Nathanael and Rayanna had made its way into my core. I wanted friends, a world I understood; I wanted peace.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and looked up. David stood beside me holding my violin. My body ached, too hollowed out to play any music, but I understood his gesture – his proffered token of friendship. I fit the violin under my chin and began to play.

## 21

Darkness pushed against me. The sounds of the forest crept back into the town to swallow my loneliness, and the song of the cicada joined my own song when I finally stopped playing. David and Mateo had sneaked behind me into the house long ago and I smelled potatoes baking. When I put the violin down on the step beside me and rested my chin on my bent knees, the door opened a crack. The strands of a straw broom

appeared through the crack and David's voice whispered, like he was trying to squeeze his voice into a bubble and not out into the night. I looked up to see the tip of his nose and chin lit by the stars.

“Here is a blanket and potato.”

I accepted the broom, blanket and potato, and carried them around the side of the house. The moon was low, only a sliver, and I could see nothing inside the shack, but I swept anyway, tipped the debris out the door, and lay the blanket on the ground. It would do for now. When the cooler night temperatures of winter came, I would need more but maybe David would truly be my friend by then and would help me survive, help me stave off the inevitable earaches and sore throats that the colder weather brought. I made one more trip to the front of the house, collected the violin, my few belongings that had been shoved into the doghouse and the gifts from my mother. I returned to the lean-to, consumed the potato which at least filled the hole in my stomach and flattened my mother's skirt underneath the blanket. It cushioned me from the hard ground, softened the impact of the earth, and reminded me of yeast, cinnamon, and blood.

When I lay down on the blanket, I smiled. There would be more battles to come but for now I was sheltered and not put on display. As I lay in my tiny house, a sliver of fear worked its way beneath my breastbone; a slippery tickle that made me wonder if perhaps there was more of my father in me than I cared to admit. I felt the violin on the string around my neck. I ran my hands along its edges, felt the smoothness of the back. With the touch of the wood, I floated to my life in the woods and when I thought about that life, my throat tightened and my eyes hurt. I missed who I had been in that place.

I rose before the sun the next day, minutes before the rumbling began and the huge white truck grumbled down our street. I had seen no other cars in this town, but this one came steadily and stopped around the corner. My urge to follow the truck and understand its business would have to be fulfilled another time, when Belen didn't watch every movement I made and when trust had been established.

Breakfast was ready when David, Mateo and Belen got up. While they ate, I collected their dirty clothes. Then I stood at the stove and began perusing the book entitled *The Art of Breadmaking*.

Today I would finish the laundry on time, return home, and bake my first batch of bread. Belen would find nothing to complain about.

## 22

The creek was busy in the morning. I joined the other women and we scrubbed the clothes clean, or at least as clean as possible in the filthy water that smelled of chemicals and latrines. I didn't mind washing the clothes, scrubbing them rhythmically with my hands while the sun shone on my back and the soft shush of grasses hummed beside me. There was beauty here, if I could forget the smell of the water.

The same woman as last time, the woman with the two wee ones, worked closest to me. I listened to the chatter of her oldest child, a toddler who busily ran about the bank of the creek, and suddenly I missed Eva with a pain as big as the sun. Eva had been like my little sister, just a baby when she came and full of talk and energy like this child. She

had brought so much life to our little camp; Rosa had recently left. Jeremiah and I were eleven and ten and sometimes I would hide from him, just because I could, and sometimes he would throw acorns at me because there was no one else. Eva's entrance offered us a distraction – we were responsible for her and Jeremiah, as the oldest, was especially in charge of her care.

And then Rayanna. She had been my responsibility. And I'd abandoned her. I'd abandoned them all.

I ground the shirt between my hands, scrubbing and twisting, burning the energy that would otherwise become tears. This was my life now, my new life and these people needed me. Somehow I had to reconcile myself to where I lived and how my days would pass.

I'd done enough laundry the day before that I had little left to do. The woman beside me slowly progressed through her stack of diapers, the toddler constantly distracting her. He waddled too deep into the creek and she pulled him back. He wandered too far into the grasses and she retrieved him. He put his hand on a thistle and she comforted him.

I stepped into the grasses by the side of the creek and tugged out a clump. Using single strands of dried grass to tie the clump together in bunches – a round bunch for the head, individual bunches for arms, and individual bunches for legs, I fashioned a roughly hewn person. I had made these grass dolls for Eva – they never lasted long but they were diverting at least for a while.



I stepped over clumps of weeds toward the woman with the baby strapped to her chest. She glanced up at me and I immediately stopped. She looked fearful, her eyes big and mouth pulled straight. I held out the doll to her, gestured to the toddler and said in a whisper,

“May I give this to him?”

She looked at the doll in my hands and the expression on her face changed. She raised her eyebrows and let the corners of her mouth lift into a small smile. She nodded.

I gave the doll to the toddler and he laughed. He hugged it, held it out to look at again, and then marched the doll on its feet through the grasses. He sang a song as he squeezed the doll to him, hugging until the grasses squeaked.

“Thank you,” she said around wisps of hair that fluttered like dandelion seeds against her face.

I gathered the wash basin with its dripping contents and balanced it against my hip. When I glanced at the woman, she still watched me, her head turned to the side. She wasn’t much older than me, perhaps two or three years, and she had a softness to her that I liked. Her cheeks were round with a bright rosiness and her arms were plump and healthy. She was the type of person who would feel good to hug – not all angles and sinew like Nathanael or Jeremiah. Her babies, with their round faces and pudgy cheeks, were obviously hers. I could like her, I could tell, if only she could like me.

As I read through the instructions for baking the bread, I felt doubt: there was so much waiting – for me to knead the dough just right, for the fermented yogurt to begin its work, for the dough to rise again. I came to a specific recipe that looked the most basic, few ingredients, and beside this first recipe I found notes scribbled in the margin. When I saw them, my heart fluttered and my hand slipped under the veil and touched my cheek.

*Honest hands are the key to perfect bread.*

I had never seen my mother's handwriting before. I could barely make out the scratching but seeing her words in print and scribbled on the paper felt like a small gift, like a glimpse into her secret thoughts. I continued to read.

*Make the yogurt culture a day ahead.*

I felt sweat on my back. The yogurt culture was necessary for making the bread rise and I had failed to prepare the ingredients in time. The bread would not be made that day which meant Belen would once again be dissatisfied with my work. Quickly, my hands shaking and heart pounding, I made the yogurt culture and warmed it on the back of the stove. Then I scrubbed the indoor bathroom from floor to ceiling.

I cleaned around the base of the toilet – an indoor latrine was a luxury I had heard of but never seen – and then scrubbed again. With the first washing, the water added to the scent of urine, releasing it into the air and making me gag. The floor had to be scrubbed twice as well; it was a shiny plastic material that I had never seen, but after I cleaned it once, a sticky residue covered it. Then I turned to the sink. The mirror stopped me.

It was oval in shape, a flat glassy material that lay against the wall, thin, silver, revealing. When I cleaned the sink below the mirror, I lifted my eyes and saw myself. My hair, black and glossy, had a sheen to it, a bright glister that looked like raven feathers. My eyes, a deep brown, were lined with black lashes and stared out at me solemn, large. I lifted my chin and observed my nose, mouth, lips.

I had seen myself before. The creek on a still day reflected honestly and I had studied my features on its surface. But the depth of water offered a darkness, an obscurity that softened the effect, but here in the bathroom, with the lights glowing against my skin, nothing was softened. Where lips should stretch in a gentle curve across my face, I had instead an X, a crossed opening which exposed lip, gum, and teeth. I lifted the veil from around my neck, covered my nose and mouth so only my eyes and hair were reflected back at me and saw how normal I could have been. As I lowered the veil and looked at my mouth, nose, lips, I wondered why some people reacted to me the way they did. If everyone had been born with nose and lips like mine, then I would be normal and those with smooth faces would look odd, too simple and erased. I jumped, these irreverent thoughts feeling shameful and dangerous, when I heard the door to the house open. Silently I slid the veil over my head and took two deep breaths, stilling my heart and preparing to face my family, breadless yet again.

“She escape?” said a voice.

“No. Djala would have shot her.”

“Djala can’t see three feet away.”

“She’s not to be trusted, you know, not with two young boys in the house.” This last voice was abrupt, quick, like the squirrel chatter in the trees.

“Lydia. Whisper,” Belen said. The curttness in his voice was obvious and I didn’t dare hide from him. I opened the door to the bathroom and walked down the short hallway until I stood in the front room behind the couch.

Three men stood in the doorway. One was very old, older than Nathanael with curved shoulders and an enormous nose that did not fit his face, having continued to grow while his face did not. The other man beside Belen was very tall and younger than the others. He twitched his hands as he stood in the doorway, unable to still his restless body.

“Take off the veil,” Belen said.

I slid the veil off of my head and looked again at the men without the blurring blackness of the veil. In return, they examined me, the older man looking at me with one eye as though his vision were blocked by his nose and the younger one looking once, then quickly looking away again. The pause lasted as long as it takes for a turtle to cross the log over our pond.

“You’ve been on the council for many years, Belen, and you would not lose your position but having a reject in the house does not improve your reputation among the villagers.”

“Shuh. I’d keep her hidden if I were you.” The younger man spoke so quickly, biting off the words, that I had to think about what he’d said after he’d finished.

“She’s cleaned the house,” Belen swept his arm through the air, indicating all I’d picked up and polished, “and if she’s able to make the bread for the store then she

provides us with income. Both of these are useful to me right now. If she works elsewhere, who will cook for us, wash the clothing, keep the house in order? This is why I need her.”

“If she works in the city, she’ll make more money which you could use to pay for a housecleaner. Think of Camilla, the spinster.”

The older man took a step toward me, peering through his hooded eyes, hovering in front of me like a vulture waiting to consume the carcass. His bony hand reached out as though he would grab my arm but instead he pointed at my face and then made the sign of a cross in the air.

“She can’t stay, Belen, it doesn’t look good. As a leader in this town, you must set the example and contaminating your home and your reputation with this girl will hurt your standing. You were right to get rid of her. Speak with Celso when he returns. Send her away. Have her earn money in other ways, where she isn’t visible as a presence in your house.”

Belen said nothing but looked at me as though he’d never observed my features before. I felt heat rising to my cheeks. I stood in front of them, a human being with feelings, intelligence and ideas yet they treated me as though I weren’t even there. Belen was no better, speaking to them instead of to me. Would he have acted differently had my mother been around?

The two men left the house, Belen grunting when they touched his arm. He watched me after they’d left, then went into the kitchen where he sniffed the yogurt culture on the back of the stove. He didn’t ask about the bread; he didn’t become angry

that I'd been unable to make it; he didn't speak to me and ask for my feelings on their discussion. He simply walked out the front door and stood in front of the neighbor's house, talking with the woman holding the rifle.

I didn't know where Celso had gone or when he would return, but I knew that when he came back, my life could change again.

## 24

That night I worked on my mother's skirt. I made a slit, right up through the middle on both sides, slicing the brown patch in half. I sewed the loose pieces together into pant legs using a needle and thread that I'd found in the house. I slipped the skirt/pants on and then pulled my brown pants overtop. From now on, my mother's skirt would fit against my body, an extra layer against the oncoming cold of winter.

As I lay in my lean-to, trying to find a soft piece of ground, feeling my mother's clothing against my skin, I heard rustlings outside. I sat up, held my breath, listened with the pores of my body.

"She's in there," a voice said.

"Just open the door and throw it in. She won't hurt you."

"I heard she's a witch. What if she turns me into a crow?"

I crawled on my hands and knees to the door and peered through cracks between the slats of wood. Four little boys armed with slingshots and a dead animal impaled to the end of a stick, stood outside my door, silhouetted by the light of the moon. I didn't see David.

A surprise attack was needed. My hands fluttered to the latch on the door. The tension made my shoulders hunch, my neck tighten and my mouth stretch up into a smile. Jeremia, the prince of pranks, had once pretended to be a crocodile, slashing and snapping through the overhanging bushes by the side of the creek. Eva and I had stood in the water, her arms wrapped around my leg as tight as a spider monkey baby, and we had shook in fear until Jeremia lifted his head and howled. Eva and I got him back. We caught ten grass snakes and tucked them into his bed blankets.

Never sneak up on someone with a deformed face in the black of night when the moon is out. Should I show them my face? Yes, decidedly so.

I flipped up the catch on the door. The boy with the skunk stuck to the stick in his right hand reached for the door with his left. As his fingers touched the door, and as he leaned forward to pull it open, I pushed it hard. He jumped back, tripped and sprawled on the ground. The dead skunk flew behind him and hit another child in the chest. The three standing boys started to scream. They screamed, bumped into each other like frightened chickens, and screamed again.

I laughed, the first time in days. The boy on the ground scrambled to get away from me and join his terrified friends but those friends did not wait. Already they were turning the corner around the house and disappearing from sight. I chased after them, snarled lightly, and turned the corner where a light, projected into my face, blinded me.

I stood still, leaned from one foot to the other, and stared at the dark blankness behind the light. I felt the corners of my mouth turn down and I sucked in the smile.

David lowered the lantern. The hand holding the lantern shook – the light bobbling like a firefly. We turned away from each other at the same time. The light he carried drifted to the front of the house while I blinked away the spots of lights still suspended in the air and returned to the lean-to. How delicate was our web of friendship; had I just lost him because he saw me smile? I tried not to think of the fragile friendship I may have just sacrificed.

## 25

In the morning I checked the yogurt culture on the stove. It needed to stay warm, to grow bacteria which would cause the bread to rise. I lifted the lid from the pan and then turned my head away, the reek from the yogurt stinging my nose. I had burned the milk onto the bottom of the pan and a thick layer of blackened scum rose to the top of the culture when I stirred it. Biting my lower lip to keep it from trembling, I poured the ingredients into the sink, scrubbed the pan, and dried it. I would try to make the culture again when I returned from the creek.

I washed the few dirty clothes we had collected. The woman and her children were already there, a stack of dirty diapers beside them. When the toddler saw me, he waddled on chubby legs to me and held out his doll which had disintegrated, cracked apart, and lost its suppleness. I stepped into the weeds at the side of the creek and pulled up a new handful. I shaped the head, wrapped a stem around the neck, maneuvered the arms, coordinated the legs and handed the new doll to the toddler. He clutched the new doll to his chest with pudgy hands but didn't let go of the old one. He didn't stare at my



veil, wondering what was underneath; he accepted me as I was and touched my fingers, unafraid.

The mother nodded at me, smiled, tilted her head. I stepped to my tub of washing and tried to ignore them, tried to pretend that I was there alone. She didn't have to be nice to me; she didn't have to talk to me because I had made a weed doll for her child. When she spoke, I startled, my hands losing their grip on the pants I was washing.

"I knew your mother," she said.

I retrieved Mateo's pants and scrubbed them between my knuckles, rubbed and ground them against themselves, but I felt as though my hands were separate from the rest of me. My ears burned from strain, my neck ached from control, my head twitched from want – my desire to turn and stare at this woman hurt.

"I liked her very much," she said. Her voice reminded me of Rosa's, deep and rich with a bit of hoarseness. I tried to open my ears even more.

"She was quiet, like you," she said, "but she listened always and laughed easily. She laughed at Benny all the time." The woman meant the toddler who was trying to construct a hut for his dolls out of sticks balanced against each other.

Other women around us chatted, laughed, rolled their eyes but they didn't listen in to the conversation between a girl beneath a veil and a young mother with two distracting little ones. More, I thought to myself, give me more.

I realized that I had been rubbing the same spot on Mateo's pants again and again. If I wasn't careful, I'd rub a hole right through the material.

“She talked about you sometimes,” the woman said. Her voice was softer, gentler. I could tell that she wasn’t looking at me; she was examining whatever she scrubbed between her hands. “She said giving you up, her firstborn, was the worst experience of her life. She said it hurt worse than childbirth ever could.”

I stopped scrubbing the pants and gave in to my need to look at her, absorb as much as possible about my mother. She felt my eyes on her and looked up. We stared at each other across the few clumps of grass and straggly weeds, our hands wrapped in dripping articles of clothing, the stench of the water lifting hazily around us. I wondered what I looked like through her eyes: A witch? A ghost? A vast emptiness?

“It’s because of the council that they had to give you up. You know that, right? Your father couldn’t be elected to the council with a deformed girl child, with deformed children – who would vote for him? When he saw you, he thought you’d ruined his life.”

She shrugged. Her cheeks reddened and she looked down.

“I’ve said too much,” she whispered.

“No,” I whispered back. I jumped slightly and put out my hand to steady myself on the straggly grasses when I heard my own voice. “Thank you, for telling me.”

“He’s been on the council for sixteen years and will be there for life. He doesn’t fear losing the people’s vote now as much as he did before.” Her arms wrapped around the baby strapped to her chest and she held her face up to the sun. I would never be able to do that, opening lift my face to the sun, not in this village, not within a public setting with people around.

He thought I would ruin his life. So instead he ruined mine.

The next day, as I scrubbed the front steps leading to the house, pulled the weeds that grew against the boards and swept the debris into a stack, I watched those passing by in the street. I saw women with children, elders with canes, and young people my age who looked carefully away down the emptiness of the road, as though that were far more interesting and worthy of their time than I was. But then I saw something that made me stop, and made me drop my handful of weeds onto the cement steps.

A boy, a few years younger than myself walked by. His eyes were dark, his hair black, and two slits appeared between his nose and his mouth. The lady with the rifle across her knees snored loudly from the porch next door, her head to the side and her toothless mouth wide open.

I followed the boy. He didn't seem to notice my quiet feet plodding along behind his, but walked down the road with one hand in the pocket of his pants. I adjusted the veil over my face, hiding my blemishes, while he carelessly showed his to the public. He turned left, followed a narrow path that had been worn hard by constant walking and then continued between two houses, walking in the opposite direction of the creek.

He wound his way through long grasses, which spread behind the houses for almost half a mile. In these grasses a solitary building made of grey stones stood square and brusque against the blue sky. Wide open windows permitted the sounds of children to filter out into the air. A large sign on the front said, "Swinc Elementary School." As I walked past, I snuck a quick glance through the window and saw a man, barely older than

myself, standing at the front of the room, writing words on the board and asking the students to recite the words in unison. I did not see David and Mateo, but I assumed they chanted along with the other students, learning to read and write.

The grasses swished and sang their rustling song as I followed the boy into the field. A grass snake slithered by my feet, its bright green color a surprise beside the browns of the grasses, like an emerald macaw wrapped in a blue towel.

The grasses tickled the undersides of my arms and as I walked, grasshoppers jumped around me, landing on my shirt. The boy ahead of me walked out of the grasses and under a canopy of trees. To keep up with him, I swished more quickly, cutting the underbelly of my arms and rattling the grasshoppers into sporadic jumping like drips into a puddle. He went to the biggest tree, a gnarled oak that grew old and crooked. The trees surrounding the oak on all sides were stunted and dwarfed, while the bushes sprouted a few grey and brown leaves when they should have been covered by fresh green ones.

The boy pulled himself up the tree, stepping onto boards that had been nailed to the trunk, and disappeared through a hole in a wooden platform that had been constructed on the lowest branches. I stood under these branches and looked up. I wanted to follow him, mount those steps and knock on the door to his tree house but I feared that I would be rejected here as well.

I circled the bottom of the tree, walking around and around, sliding my fingers against the rough bark of its trunk. I considered what I should do - return to Belen's house where the woman with the rifle snored on the porch next door and attempt to bake

the bread, or climb the steps and knock on the wood, willing myself to speak to this boy who lived in the village, not rejected.

“Well, what are you waiting for?”

I sucked in my breath so fast, stepped backwards so quickly, that I stumbled over a root and went down, the veil slipping off of my head. I looked up at the platform surrounding the tree and saw a face in the opening. It was like looking into a mirror.

Brushing myself off and tying the veil around my neck, I took hold of the boards nailed to the tree and pulled myself up. When I stuck my head through the opening, my eyes took a minute to adjust to the darkness of the tree house. Four boys sat haphazardly around the small room. Two of them played chess on a board balanced over a bucket, one of them read a book, and the other boy crouched in front of me, a wooden recorder in his hands. All of them had deformities. The boy that held the musical instrument looked like me, the two playing chess looked like reflections of each other with large purple splotches covering half of their faces and the last boy had crutches that leaned against the wall beside him.

I stepped onto the platform, bent my neck so my head wouldn't hit the roof of the tiny house, and brushed my sweaty palms on my pants. The boys playing chess glanced at me and then went back to their game, the boy reading the book never even looked up, and the boy with the recorder sat down against the wall of the house and grinned so hugely, so unabashedly, even though his face turned into a snarl, that I smiled back.

“Don't get many girls up here,” he said.

He stretched his legs out in front of him and crossed them at the ankles. I sat next to him. He fit the recorder into his mouth, his teeth gripping the top of it, and played a breathy tune. His lips did not close over the top of the instrument so the sound that came out was not clean and clear but airy and gasping.

“Wish you’d shut up with that thing,” the boy with the book said. “You can’t play it.”

“*Can’t* is a matter of interpretation,” the boy with the recorder said. “Besides, wouldn’t want our visiting musician to think she was the only one with any musical talent.”

One of the boys playing chess played his knight, took his opponent’s bishop, and then went back to his former position – legs crossed, elbows on knees, chin in hand.

“Welcome to the hideout of the hideous,” said the boy beside me. “My name is Jafet. The grouch reading the book is Fabio, Nacio and Adan are playing chess. We are the fabulous foursome and spend more time here than anywhere else.”

He stuck the recorder back into his mouth and sprayed a splattery tune. The boys playing chess, Nacio and Adan, both covered their ears and one of them moved a pawn. Fabio slammed his book down on the ground and sighed.

“You can’t play that thing. Would you put it away and stop tormenting us? She doesn’t want to hear it either.”

I liked them immediately. It was like being home with Eva, Jeremia and Nathanael.

“Hey, we don’t want her to see all our faults on the first visit, do we? Where are your manners?”

Fabio picked up his book and tucked it under his arm. He adjusted his crutches and hobbled his way to the opening in the platform. He dropped his crutches through the opening and then climbed down the tree while holding onto the wooden steps.

“See you tomorrow, Fabio, don’t get ambushed,” Jafet yelled through a square window cut into the side of the house. He looked back at me. “He’s just jealous because I found you first and you look like me.”

Jafet resumed his seated position and put the recorder to his lips. I looked through the window and watched as Fabio moved surprisingly fast through the weeds that grew past his waist. He left a path in the field, one of many, that joined in a pattern, as though someone had combed the field, leaving a row of parallel paths from one side to the next. The boys playing chess continued to be engrossed in their game and Jafet played a tune I didn’t recognize and could never repeat.

“Why are you guys here?” I whispered.

“Cause they don’t like us out there,” Jafet said, waving his recorder toward the window and the field beyond.

“I mean, why are you allowed to stay?”

“I don’t mean to be insulting,” Jafet said while studying the mouse on my t-shirt, “but you’re a girl. If you hadn’t gone to the camp in the woods, you’d probably be dead. I happen to be an only child - like they were going to kill me.”

The two boys playing chess looked up. The dark patches of maroon pigment made their faces blotchy, diseased.

“We’re twins.”

“Not many twins around.” Their mouths opened and closed at almost the same time.

“But girls, now they’re not so valuable. They can’t sit on the council, they don’t have jobs that pay much, all they’re good for is reproduction and right now too many babies are born looking messed up. If the girls come out disfigured, might as well get rid of them.” Jafet tapped his fingers against the floor and hummed a quick tune. He didn’t seem to sit still much but twitched, hummed, tapped constantly.

I had a hard time reading him. I thought he was joking, being sarcastic, but I didn’t know him well enough to know for sure. He didn’t look me in the eyes but I didn’t know if it was because of his sarcasm, my female-ness or just because he didn’t look people in the eyes. Low chimes, spaced and eerie like the call of the loon, filtered through the window. Jafet stood and so did the twins.

“Council’s adjourned. Time to go.”

My hands became sweaty and a flush crept up my neck into my cheeks. Belen would be home and all I’d accomplished was the washing of a few clothes and the scrubbing of the top step. The yogurt culture warmed on the back of the stove, solitary and unused.

Without waiting for an invitation to go first, I climbed down the steps of the tree and began to run through the field. The dried grasses brushed against my skin and I knew



I would be itchy later, but I had to get back to Belen's house and hope that my lean-to hadn't been destroyed and the chain re-attached to the doghouse. I didn't bother to silence my movement through the field but ran until my breath came from my mouth in rhythmic exhalations and my side began to ache. When I emerged from the grasses, behind the house with the sunflowers, I gasped and held my chest when someone spoke.

"Not so fast, miss. Thought you could slip away while I was taking a snooze, did you. We'll see what Belen has to say about this."

Her chin jutted forward. Her polka-dot shirt looked so bright and merry next to the browns of the grasses and against her bronzed craggy skin that she appeared to be an illusion, a butterfly against a dead field. She stepped closer to me and examined my face.

"Well, you're as ugly as they say. I could barely see you from my place on the porch but now that you're right up next to me, I can see why they kept you hid. Your mom, you know, said you were beautiful. I knew that weren't true or Belen would've kept you around. Your mom liked everyone, sainted creature that she was, even me."

Her face was so close to mine now that I could see the color of her eyes. They were green, a faded green with bits of white. I thought about this woman, holding her rifle across her legs while sitting on her porch, watching my movements and considering when to point her weapon in my direction, and I realized that she was probably a bit like the macaw. That mother macaw had screamed and screeched, mourned the loss of her baby like it was her left wing, but she hadn't hurt Eva and never did do more than bluster. Perhaps this woman also made loud noises but little else.

"You ain't gonna cry, are you?"

I shook my head.

“Don’t talk much, huh. That’s probably smart. Talking always seems to get me into trouble. My husband doesn’t even hear me anymore. Don’t get yourself a husband, girl, if you don’t need one. They’re nothing but trouble. If I’d been able to sit on that council myself, I never would’ve married him, but women can’t do much around here but hold rifles and boss their husbands. Let’s get going or Belen is gonna have my hide. Give me your arm.”

The woman grabbed my arm and hobbled along beside me. She used the rifle for a walking stick on the other side. Her flared skirt brushed against my leg as we walked and sounded like the dry grasses in the field.

We crossed the road and I walked her to the front porch of her house. She let go of my arm and grabbed the railing. Stepping slowly onto each step and still using her rifle as a cane, she made her way up the porch and sat heavily in her rocking chair. She waved her gun in the air and called loudly.

“Over here, Belen. I caught her trying to escape.”

My heart pounded somewhere in my neck when I heard Belen’s footsteps on the hard dirt of the yard. He stood near me, next to me, but not close.

“Where you been, girl,” he said.

I untied the veil from around my neck and draped it over my head. The shield fell over my sight, softening my view of Djala’s porch, causing the spots on her shirt to blur, and sending me to that place in my head where everything was hazy.

“She visited them deformed boys over at the tree house. She sneaked by me on the way down, but I caught her on the way back.”

Belen grabbed me by the hair and pulled, dragging me with him as I stumbled over the bumpy grass to the back of the house where he threw me into the lean-to with such force I tripped and went down hard. I sprawled over the blanket and held my hands over my ears, waiting for the next blow but instead the light narrowed and disappeared as Belen slammed the door shut.

I stayed on the floor for many minutes, willing myself not to cry, and disappearing in my head to a place beside our creek where I liked to sit when I needed to be alone. In that place, the sun shone on my shoulders, the frogs grumped in the reeds by my feet, the dragonflies hovered over the pond, and my balance was restored. As I lay in the lean-to, I willed myself to find that balance, to return to a place that was warm and safe, but it took me many minutes to build that calm and when I finally felt as though I wouldn't cry, scream or bang my fists against the wood slats of my shelter, the sun had disappeared and I had failed to bake any bread or to please Belen.

## 27

The next day Djala again held my arm with one hand and the rifle as a cane with the other. We hobbled down the street, following the roaring truck, to the store where I was to purchase more milk for the yogurt culture and more eggs for breakfast. I didn't have the money, Djala did, and even if they had given it to me, I wouldn't have known how to

use it. Size didn't seem to matter with the coins since the smaller one was worth more, according to David.

We joined students on their way to school, mothers on their way to various chores, and men on their way to work. Everyone passed us and many said hello to Djala, but they ignored me as though I were nothing more than a crutch. I had been nervous around Belen in the morning after he'd tossed me into the lean-to, but he looked over my left shoulder and told me about the items I needed to purchase at the store.

"The bread," he said. "Today."

I had never been in a store before. We entered through a door that had thick metal bars running from the top down to the ground. Inside, a woman stood behind a counter with a large adding machine on it and she watched us as we walked beside shelves full of foods in boxes, foods in packages, foods in cans. I had never heard of half of these foods. What was chili? Stewed tomatoes? Fruit roll-up? We shuffled to an enormous refrigerator where jugs of milk, eggs and cheese lined the shelves, such plenty and choice in one place. There was a shelf with packaged loaves of bread which Djala pointed out to me, but she said in a low voice,

"Don't eat that crap, nothing to it. Your mother's bread had taste and texture. Bake something with substance, not this tasteless air."

At the counter, we placed our items next to the adding machine and the woman typed in numbers which gave us our total. Djala handed over the money while I looked at the sign hung on the wall.

**Swinc Market.**

Djala took my arm, I took the sack, and we hobbled home again. I did not go to the creek but stayed home, determined to bake this bread, even if mine tasted like insubstantial air.

I fumbled with the ingredients, first adding more water which made the dough too sticky, and then adding more flour which made the dough too crumbly. It was after an hour of kneading and fiddling, that I deciphered the note in the margin. *Add a touch of oil* and when I did this, the dough became smooth like baby skin beneath my hands.

I set the dough in a patch of sun on the front porch. I scrubbed the refrigerator, pulling out rotted potatoes, molded sour cream, limp lettuce, and four packages of bacon that were slick with age. *Swinc*, it said on the refrigerator door. *Swinc* it said on the front of the stove. I wondered what this word meant and why it seemed to be the emblem of this town.

The dough was supposed to rise for about an hour and a half. Between removing molded food from the refrigerator and wiping the insides of the cupboards in the kitchen, I checked on the dough. It wasn't rising. I didn't understand what I had done wrong. I reread the directions again and again. I had done everything they asked me to do - everything. I warmed the water, added the yogurt culture, and allowed it to foam with a bit of sugar, but the dough sat heavy and solid in the bowl.

After reading the book yet again, I found a small passage, an insignificant detail in miniature print under the picture of a perfect loaf of bread. "Make sure the dough is allowed to rise in an area without a breeze."

I stood on the front stoop, glanced at Djala on her porch next door where she sat with her head thrown back, her snores a rhythmic hum, and removed my veil. Wind cooled the sweat on my forehead and lifted the hair from around my face. I brought the bowl of dough into the house and put it in the oven even though I knew it would bake hard and dense.

The house did smell like bread when Belen walked in later that afternoon, but when I pulled the loaf from the oven and set it on top of the stove, I felt my cheeks turn red beneath the veil. With hands covered by towels, I tipped the pan upside down and felt the hard impact of the loaf of bread hitting the stove top with a thunk. I sliced through the dense mass and laid the strips out on the stove. They were as solid, impenetrable and hard as one of Jeremia's wood sculptures. Belen walked back outside.

That night I sat on the ground outside of the lean-to, the patchy straggles of grass poking through my mother's skirt to press into my legs. I adjusted the violin to my shoulder, tucked it under my chin, and began to play. I let the new song trickle from me in low, slow notes. The song sang of my missed life, of my failed bread, of my loneliness. I became so engrossed in the song that I failed to hear the sound of footsteps and I didn't notice the heat emanating from the body until the man stood right in front of me and nudged my knee with his boot. The shock of the touch ended my song the finishing note nasal and harsh. I held my breath.

It was Jeremia. He stood in front of me and with the veil over my face, I could believe for just a moment that this truly was Jeremia, tall, confident, beautiful and seething.

“Is he alive?” asked the man.

He spit the words at me with lips that were stretched taught and pulled down in the corners. His eyes, so black and narrow, glinted at me with flashes of the sun that hung low in the sky. He thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his pants and his knuckles bulged under the material in crocodile ridges. He had two whole arms.

“Is he alive,” he said again, lower, slower.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Then you tell him this.” His eyes were so narrow they became slits as thin as butterfly wings. “When he dies, our shame is gone.”

The man walked through the weeds toward the creek. As he walked, his shoulders rolled with unreleased anger, his mouth tight with no laughter lines. I hoped he never saw Jeremiah again.

## 28

As Jeremiah’s father walked away, I stood. Sometimes Jeremiah would watch this village. He would come from our mountain and observe his family. What if he were here now?

My breath came in quick gasps and I laid my violin in its case, quickly snapping the latches and leaving it in the lean-to. On feet as silent as winter, I slipped through the grasses, waded across the creek and walked into the stunted trees. Jun tromped through the woods on heavy feet that left cracked sticks, bruised bushes and crushed leaves behind. He was easy to follow and I did so carefully, keeping trees and undergrowth between us.

He walked north, through this patch of trees, until I heard a sound of chattering, squeaking and chirping. We came to a clearing. In the clearing stood a house like the others, with flat boards and an angled roof of metal but the expanse around the house was large with long patches of green grass broken by sheds. From these sheds came the chattering of birds, hundreds and hundreds of birds. I had heard a similar din before, from the flock of crows nesting in the top of an oak or from the group of starlings pecking at seeds in the spring. The smell around these sheds reminded me of the heavy air in the village, the oppressive reek that hung on me now and saturated my clothes.

Jeremia had never told me of the bird sheds. Jun walked around the house to the back. I saw no one else so I slunk across the grassy expanse to the first shed and unlatched the door. The sound inside was like a thousand macaw babies clucking and chirping in an enclosed space. Rows and rows of metal cages stretched from one end of the shed to the other and were stacked on top of each other from the dirt floor to just beneath the roof. The smell, when I opened the door, made me turn my head away and press my hand to my nose. Even my eyes hurt.

The chickens were kept in small cages where they could barely move, and some of them needed their bedding changed so badly, it clung to their feathers in clumps. I held my hand to my nose, breathed through my fingers and wished I was wearing my veil. I couldn't imagine anyone doing this to a living creature, to a fellow dweller on this earth and I thought of Eva's strutting macaw with its proud head, quick beak and insistent cry – these were proud birds but there was nothing to be proud of here.



A woman and a man worked in the back of the shed, walking from cage to cage, opening the cages and removing the eggs. When I saw the workers, I ducked down where they couldn't see me. I looked into the cage nearest me, right into the pebbly eye of a chicken. She made a low, squawking sound deep in her throat and she stood to back away from me but one of her legs was short, stunted, like the wings of the macaw, so the chicken leaned unsteadily to the side and continued her unbroken screech.

"I won't hurt you," I whispered. "Don't be afraid."

The bird watched me with one eye, her head cocked to the side but the squawk was gone. Someday I would return, free these creatures, and let them be animals to peck and run in the weeds, pulling worms from the ground and reestablishing the natural order of things.

I left the shed. My eyes were blurring from the smell and the sight and I crept around the house to where I had seen Jun disappear. I saw no one now, but as the din from the chickens died, another sound drifted from the forest. I didn't understand this noise anymore than I had understood the music of a thousand chickens clucking, but this sound made me tense my shoulders and curl my hands into fists.

I crouched in back of the woodpile behind their house, ran quickly over the packed dirt where someone had been chopping the wood and where the smell of the maple reminded me of Jeremia, to the edge of the trees. The sound continued, an in-out whimpering howl. It came from trees past the woodpile and I crept between the trees hoping that the harmed animal wouldn't leap at me in fear. A square box, nestled like a

squatting trap beneath the trees, housed the animal. The sound, I realized, was not a whimper but a pant, or panicked breath. My own breath matched that of the creature's.

I crept closer and peered between the slats of the box. When it saw my face, it screamed, snarled and hurled itself at the side of the box. I jumped back.

"Shh," I said and began to hum.

It was a badger and either a hurt one or a starved one. After breathing deeply for a minute, I stood and examined the latch on top of the cage. If I flipped the latch up, allowing the creature to escape, it would leap at me with its claws and teeth but if it didn't see me, perhaps it would run into the woods. I'd seen badger attacks on animals before and it was a rare fight when the badger lost. But I couldn't leave it trapped.

With a long stick, I pushed at the latch, knocked it through the hook and then wondered how I would open the door without being seen. The door opened up, like a hinged roof, and if I stood behind the hinges, perhaps I could flip up the door and hide behind it.

After three attempts, the stick became wedged under the hook and I pulled, lifting the door first an inch and then a bit more. Before I was able to pull the door all the way up the creature inside hurled itself at the opening door and came hurtling out of the cage to stand on top of the door, and look me in the eyes. Its mouth foamed, its eyes were crusty and red, its sides heaved with breath and the fur hung off it as though made for a much larger creature. We looked at each other, that animal and I, and then a sound like a pop from a burning fire sent me to the ground and the creature to the woods. I held my hands over my ears and squeezed my eyes shut. I didn't open them again until a boot

nudged me in the side. When I looked up, I looked at a wider, thicker Jeremia with two whole arms except now he had straight hair that hung in his eyes and over his ears.

He said something and I took my hands away from my ears.

“Two years, is how long?” The man had pulled up the pant leg on his right leg and was showing me a round wound that had healed flat and red, the muscle and tissue gone. “Been starving it good and mean so we could turn it loose on a dog and watch it fight. You just lost me a whole lot of...you that girl from the camp in the woods?”

I sat up, then stood, brushing the dirt from my clothes. He’d already seen my face so I left my veil around my neck and looked at him as hard as he looked at me. I’d never heard of badgers and dogs fighting but I’d seen a badger scare off a wolf before. Eva and I had watched from the top of a rock and had to wait half an hour after the fight had ended to come down because both of us shook until our teeth chattered. Those creatures had snarled, barked, torn chunks of fur and skin from each other, and Eva and I didn’t even know what the fight had been about.

“You live with Jeremia. I’m his big brother Calen.”

He looked me up and down. I didn’t know if I liked this man or not, torturing that animal the way he had, but his eyes weren’t as flat and mean as Jun’s, his father’s, and he had a way of wiping his hand under his nose that reminded me of Eva.

“Sometimes I think he watches me.” We both glanced into the woods. “He follows me into the woods. He don’t talk to me, though, and I just walk. I like the company.” He shifted his weight back and forth from foot to foot. His face was different from Jeremia’s with a softness to his jaw and a curving to his shoulders. I was surprised

that he wasn't angrier about the badger. When he looked at me, he glanced away often to the trees, the ground, the sky.

"You tell him when you see him that I might not be the smartest, but I know when something's not right. Sending him away wasn't right." He squinted at me when he said this.

"Locking up a badger isn't right," I said.

"That badger bit me."

"It's an animal. It shouldn't be punished for behaving like one."

Calen looked up, as though the darkening sky might help him respond. When I looked at him from the side, I saw that he was heavier than Jeremiah, heavier than Jun and had rounded shoulders that he hunched under. We stood quietly for a long time until he looked at me and crossed his arms over his chest.

"But a badger ain't human. This is my gun."

He smiled then, shyly, like a five year old as he held the rifle out in front of him. That was when I understood who Calen was, why he still lived with his father even though he had been a man for years. He wasn't married, didn't have kids, and probably wouldn't. Maybe his father and mother, when they'd seen Jeremiah's missing limb at birth, had thought that he would be like Calen, simple, or maybe it was acceptable in this town to have deformities as long as they were inside where people couldn't see them. Maybe they hadn't understood their child's simplicity until they'd become attached to him and then hadn't been willing to let him go.

Calen wiped his hand under his nose again and began to mumble. His lower lip pushed forward and he put a hand on his hip. I put my hands on my hips and he copied me, leaning his rifle against his body. What had Jeremiah said about this brother? He had tried to track the wolf, followed it for miles, but was too loud and clumsy through the trees to ever sneak up on anything.

“Calen.” A call came from the house. I bent my knees and put my hands against the ground. Calen dropped beside me in a similar stance and bit his bottom lip. I smiled at him, held a finger to my lips, and then I slipped into the trees the way I had seen the badger go. When I looked back, Calen still crouched by the badger cage, looking into the trees where I had disappeared. I ran quietly, hunched over, skirting the edge of Jun’s property and came again to the back of the chicken shed. As I turned the corner to head back to the woods, back where I’d come from, a hand grabbed my shoulder and I gasped.

I spun around, ready to lunge at whoever had grabbed me but instead a whimper came from my mouth and I threw my arms around my attacker’s neck. Jeremiah had come for me.

He held me tight, his arm wrapped around my back and I pushed my face against his neck. I shook against him, but he held me still and held me close until my hot tears stopped dripping and my whimper finally stilled.

“Have they hurt you?” he asked, his voice whispered into my ear.

Of course they had: kicked me, pushed me, slapped me, humiliated me. How could I tell Jeremiah that and watch him pulled apart in this town? I shook my head.

“Come home with me.”

The heat from his body seeped into mine. He lowered his arm, down my back so his hand pressed into the small of my back and our bodies together. I breathed in his deep scent of earth and wood that stilled the smells from the shed behind us. His lips kissed the side of my head and I turned my face so our mouths could meet. He pushed his mouth against my lips, his tongue searching for mine. Everything tingled, my lips, my hands, my insides, but suddenly the image of Jun came into my head, his eyes narrow and his fists tight. He could not find Jeremiah here. I pushed away.

“You have to leave,” I said.

Jeremiah held my hand and I tried to look away from the confusion on his face.

“He wants you dead.”

“Who?”

“Your father.” I knew I should run, force Jeremiah to leave, but instead I threw my arms around his neck one more time, breathed his scent in deep so it would cling to me, my clothing, the inside of my mouth, and then I turned to leave. “You mustn’t come back, Jeremiah. They will hurt you.” And then I ran into the woods without looking back.

By the time I returned to the house, it was dark and Belen stood in front of my lean-to, his arms across his chest, his face a red so dark, it looked blackened.

He opened the door when he saw me. I untied the veil and slipped it over my head. When I walked past, into the lean-to, he took a step back and I thought he might shove me inside but instead he slammed the door shut after I entered. Then I heard a lock clicking into place and I was once again a prisoner.

But this time I had Jeremiah's scent on my hands and even though I felt alone in this place, I wasn't. My family would always be with me, watching me through the secret passageways between the leaves.

## 29

The next day, I heard the lock unclick on the outside of the door, and a fist pounded on the wood.

"Breakfast," he said.

I made breakfast, washed any dirty clothes, and returned to the house for my next attempt at baking the bread. The batch of yogurt culture I'd made after my failed attempt and after buying fresh milk, warmed at the back of the stove. I checked and double checked the ingredients, kneaded the dough with my hands until it stretched and bounced, placed the bowl in a sheltered, sunny area, and waited.

I scrubbed the plastic kitchen floors on my hands and knees, weeks of grime dirtying my bowl of water, the floors almost as filthy as the packed dirt floors of our hut. I checked on the bread. I wiped down the walls in the kitchen where greasy splatters and drips of milk obscured the color – they were dark blue, I discovered, not grey. I checked on the bread. After moving from the kitchen to the living room and again scrubbing the floors, the bread had risen until a rounded mound pushed at the cloth towel draped over the top of the bowl. A stirring began in my chest, a tingling sensation that pulled the corners of my lips up and made me bubble with excitement.

I punched the rounded mound of dough so it sank back into the bowl and then I divided it into four, placing the handfuls of dough into greased bread pans and setting them back in the sun to rise. It was then that I dared breathe to myself that it was working. I finished the floors in the living room while the dough rose in the pans, pushing a soft mound against the towel much more quickly this time as though it had learned how to rise and now perfected the art. I warmed the oven and put the pans inside. The dough matched the description in the book and I bit at my finger, a squeak escaping my mouth.

While it baked in the oven, I moved to the boys' bedroom and scrubbed until a warm wood glow rose from the floors, giving the room the aura of health and naturalness. I checked the door, looked out the front window, determining that no one was watching, and then I lay down on the bed, my head on a pillow. These boys had probably never experienced an ear ache in their lives.

I could hear the laughter of children, the sound of Eva dancing in the sun, and slid off the bed, adjusting the veil over my face. I looked out into the street from the doorway. The bread was baking, the children were laughing, my smile reached my eyes until I saw what the children were laughing about.

A group of kids gathered in a tight circle and I assumed they would kick the can and run as they had earlier, but this time their excitement was focused on something other than a tin object that could not be hurt.

One of the boys I'd met at the tree house stood in the center of the circle; the boy with crutches, who sped away in the grasses as though he'd been chased often. Fabio. I could see his face just above the children's' heads, his lips were pulled tight and his eyes



were wary. A red gash bloodied the right side of his forehead and blood dripped down into his eye and yet none of the children helped him; instead they laughed, encircled, and jostled him. It was me the first day in this town when I'd been chained to the doghouse with a row of onlookers who observed but didn't help.

I glanced to my right, at Djala's chair. She sat watching, rocking, the gun across her knees. She cackled and rocked, cackled and rocked. I crept down the few front steps and walked carefully, quietly, a silent wolf observing the enemy, making my way to the back of the circle. On the other side of the street stood David. We looked at each other but he did not come to stand beside me and I did not ask him to.

Mateo stood in front of Fabio and held the boy's crutches in his hand. He held them close to Fabio's outstretched hand and then quickly pulled them away when Fabio reached for them. He laughed the sound of a hyena, a cackle of ill will, a carrion eater waiting for the prey to show weakness and run.

I pushed my way between a girl and a boy, both of whom stood on tiptoe, trying to see into the center of the circle. Sliding between those in the next row, I found myself with only one child between me and Mateo. I stopped, considered a moment, and evaluated whether or not I would become the next targeted victim if I disrupted their game. What did it matter? I'd already been the target.

Fabio saw me, looked at the veil over my face, but his expression did not change. When I looked at him now, in the daylight rather than the dark shadows of the tree house, I saw a very different person. Here in the sun he looked thin, pale, with hair so black it made his skin almost translucent. His surliness was gone but a determination remained

which I could see in the set of his jaw. The wound on his head was beginning to form a hard crust and on the other side of his forehead I saw a thin line, a raised scar, from injuries past. Maybe life was better for those rejected and sent to the camp in the woods than for those who remained.

I evaluated the distance between me and Mateo and pushed aside the child in front of me. I reached out, grabbed Mateo under the arms, hoisted him into the air, turned him, and slung him over my shoulder. Many times I had done this with Eva: Mateo was heavier, a bit, but not unbearably so and he wasn't as muscled as Eva but felt soft, malleable and puffy around the waist as though he were made of rising dough. He did not kick as I walked with him back to the house, but grunted when his stomach pushed into my shoulder. He dropped the crutches.

The children's laughter changed. Now, instead of laughing at Fabio and his futile efforts to regain his crutches, they laughed at Mateo. When he heard their laughter, Mateo became furious and then began to kick, pounding his fist into my back, and pulling at the veil over my head. I held his feet together and endured the fists that pummeled my back like seeds shot from a slingshot.

The veil was off now, but I kept my steady pace. I walked across the lumpy ground of our front yard, glanced at Djala on her front porch who raised the rifle at me and offered a gummy smile, and climbed the steps to the house, pushing open the door. The smell in the air had changed from the nutty aroma of baking bread, to the slightly smoking smell of bread that had been baking too long.

I was angry as I had never been before.

Mateo continued to pound me with his fists and now I increased my pace and kicked open the door to his room. I walked to his bed and threw him down on it. He landed on his back, grunting, and looked up at me with startled and fearful eyes. His hands were tight and closed into fists, his face was red and puffy, his breath fast and hard.

“I’m telling dad,” he screamed.

The heat of anger crept up my neck and into my cheeks. I bit my teeth together hard and swallowed.

“He’ll chain you up to the doghouse again and pound you until you bleed.”

“Those kids play with you only because they fear you,” I said.

“I have lots of friends and you don’t have any. I hate you and wish you’d died.”

I walked out of his room, slammed the door behind me and went into the kitchen. I opened the door to the oven and with towels over my hands, pulled out the loaves of bread. They had baked too long and were more dense and hard than need be. I sat down on the floor right there and put my face against my knees. Tears softened the material of my brown pants and I could feel the wet fabric against my cheek, rubbing, but I couldn’t stop. Someone came in the house, propped open the door, opened the window in the kitchen, and opened the window in the living room. He closed the door to the oven and draped the veil over my head and knees.

Mateo screamed from his bedroom.

“David, don’t you be nice to her. You saw what she did to me.”

David opened and closed the door to the bedroom. I could hear murmuring in there, a soft conversation which became momentarily loud.

“I won’t do it,” came Mateo’s voice, high now and in a whine. “I hate you. Why do you side with her?” Something hard and solid hit the wall and David emerged from the bedroom. He closed the door behind him and sat in the living room where he picked up one of the books on baking bread and began to turn its pages.

I lifted my head and wiped my face with the veil. I stood up and washed my hands at the sink. I peeled potatoes, cut up vegetables, prepared a pot of water on the stove and began to add ingredients. Nathanael’s favorite stew would be our dinner tonight which would be accompanied by bread that was a bit hard and had baked too long.

As the stew began to cook and I added salt, strips of ginger root, chunks of turnip, I also warmed a pan of milk at the back of the stove and began to gently cook the yogurt culture for my next attempt.

### 30

As soon as Belen arrived home, Mateo yelled from his room and began a loud sobbing that made me wonder for just a minute if perhaps I’d hurt him more than I thought. David followed his father into the bedroom and closed the door behind them. The loud sobs quieted, stilled and then I heard only murmuring. When Belen came out of the bedroom, I stiffened my shoulders and waited. He spoke to my back.

“You will not discipline these children. That is my job, not yours.”

The veil rustled slightly from the breeze through the open windows. I stirred the warm milk in the pan, and I thought about my life in this village so far. Even though I had cooked, cleaned, washed the clothing and made their lives easier, we hadn’t had a

single day where conflict didn't occur. My shoulders were tight and sore from the constant tension and I'd become unsure and hesitant in my actions. Around Belen, I felt like the wolf – not wanting to be touched, wary of his presence, and as cautious of his movements as I was of fire.

“You will look at me when I speak to you,” he said and grabbed my shoulder, his fingers digging in. I stared at the floor because I could, because he did not know where I was looking and couldn't control that, at least.

“Don't touch him again, hear me? Ever.” His voice was low, deep and his hands twitched at his sides, wanting to swing and slap at me. “Tomorrow Celso returns and we will discuss the next step you will take. You've been troublesome and meddlesome. You are more work than your cleaning is worth.”

He pushed me aside and sniffed the stew on the stove. He dipped the spoon into the pot, lifted it to his mouth and tasted. He dipped again, tasted once more, then dropped the spoon onto the stove beside the over-baked loaves of bread and strode out the door. David sat down on the couch in the living room and continued to read the book, or pretended to read the book, but Mateo never did come out of his room, even when we sat down to dinner and ate Nathanael's favorite stew. I sat in Mateo's place, ate at the table with my brother and father, and almost felt like I was part of the family. When the bread was dipped into the soup, it tasted quite good and softened nicely. Both David and Belen ate great chunks of it but neither looked at me and not a word was said.

In the morning I made breakfast and then returned to the lean-to. I wanted to sweep in the daytime, dust the edges of the room before starting this day's bread making. When I returned to the house, David stood in the kitchen, his hands kneading and turning the contents of a large bowl. His hands were coated in flour, his face had a slight dusting of white, and his shoulders rotated in rhythm with his hands. I dropped the basket inside the door and stood beside him in the kitchen. As I watched his hands turning and kneading, the muscles in his arms tensing and releasing, I understood that this was not new to him.

"You almost had it," he said. "The last batch would have worked if you'd ignored Mateo."

"You don't need me to bake the bread."

"Yeah we do. Dad doesn't want anyone to know I'm doing woman's work."

I continued to watch his hands and could see the confidence and enjoyment he found in doing this. It soothed, to watch him work, and I leaned against the stove.

"But they'll send you away if you don't do the bread right and if you don't stop making dad mad." David's dough was soft and stretchy, matching the photos by the recipe.

"Where will they send me?"

"The city. And I like what you did to Mateo yesterday. He deserved it. He needs it. Mom used to keep him in line but there's no one to do that now. I want you to stay here."

Tense, release. Tense, release. The dough was smooth and malleable, not sticky or flaky. His movements were mesmerizing and confident. When a shadow stretched across the square of sunlight from the door, I looked up, blinking, waking from the calming movement of David's kneading. A dark shape stood in the doorway – I couldn't see the person's face with the light from behind, but David stopped his movements, pulled away from the bowl and stood trembling against the refrigerator door. I stood in front of David, and waited.

The man took a step into the room, out of the sunlight, and now I could see the heavy brow, thinning hair, deep set eyes of Celso, Belen's brother. The man who'd chained me to the doghouse. David breathed hard behind me.

"David, David, David," Celso said, his voice a singsong, light and teasing. His eyes didn't match the tone, though, and I moved closer to David. "I've told you before, kid, you're not cut out to be anyone's protector, not even your reject sister's. Making the bread for her, were you?"

A squeak entered David's breathing, a high-pitched wheeze that sounded almost like the buzzing of the cicada. The rhythmic squeak began to increase in speed until there was barely a pause between the squeaks. David held my arm and then he slid to the floor, his other hand against his throat, his body convulsing, his breath coming in gasps. Celso pushed me out of the way and stood over David.

"And look at you now. Can't even breathe. How are you ever going to help her? Your mother never should have taught you how to bake the bread."

I turned the cold water on at the sink and ran a cloth under the tap. I knelt next to David on the floor and wiped at his face, around his eyes, around his mouth. He stared up at Celso, his eyes huge, his breath ragged. The cool water on the cloth didn't seem to help, but I kept wiping at his face while Celso watched, a half smile on his face.

"Like brother like sister. You two are both impaired, he with asthma, you with ugliness."

I stood then, and pushed with everything I had. I pushed Celso in the chest so hard I grunted and he fell backwards, landing on his back in the doorway to the house. I bent down again and wiped at David's face. He could no longer see Celso but looked at me and as he watched me, his breath began to slow, began to lose its squeak and the skin around his lips became pink again instead of blue.

But when a shadow stretched through the room, sent its darkness like a blackened cloud over us, I leapt to the side as David raised a hand to shield his eyes. Where I had been the moment before, the flash of a blade came down, Celso sweeping his knife through the air above David. I crouched now, hands out and he charged at me, but I leapt aside and in an instant ran through the kitchen, and out the front door.

I could hear him breathing hard, almost a growl but as soon as my feet touched the grass, I knew I could outrun this man. I could run back to the camp in the woods and never see this village again. But then he would use my running away as an excuse to torment my camp family and he had probably been tormenting David for years. I slowed my feet, turned and faced the man with the knife.



He charged at me with the momentum of a rolling rock. He was lumpy and slow with his body but quick and sneaky with his hands. When he ran at me, the knife pointed to my chest, I stepped to the side and he barreled past, but his hand reached for me, grasped my arm, pulled me with him, down to the earth where my shoulder hit hard against the ground. His hold loosened and I stood quickly.

He rolled, lumbered to his feet and switched the knife to the other hand. His chest heaved, like the dying wolf's in our campsite. I bent my knees, held my hands out from my sides and waited. David appeared on the small porch, his hand steadying himself in the doorway, his other hand on his chest.

While I looked at David, Celso barreled at me, his hand quick and flashing. His knife cut a groove in the palm of my hand. I gasped, pulled back and stumbled over the lumps in the grass, falling hard. He came at me fast now, his face angry and mottled, his knife pointed at me and glinting in the light of the sun. I should have run, escaped to the woods when I'd had the chance.

I curled into a ball, held my hands over my head and waited. When the gun was fired, Celso stopped. Djala stood at the end of her porch, pointing her rifle between me and Celso.

"My eye sight ain't too good, Celso, wouldn't want to hit the wrong person."

The tendons in Celso's arms stood out, tense and rigid. He watched Djala and I stood, tensing my legs for another run or assault or fall.

"Go back to sleep, Djala," Celso said.

“Think I’ve slept enough today.” She didn’t look at me but I was pretty sure she was speaking to me. “Don’t know that Belen would appreciate what you got in mind to do to his little project here.”

“She should be chained to the doghouse.”

“Well, she ain’t.”

They stared at each other, both with jaws set and eyes hard. I didn’t know if Djala was being nice to me, or if she was merely protecting Belen’s interests.

I backed up until I felt the steps to the house behind my heels. I looked up at David. His breathing was normal now, his face no longer pinched and blue. Together we backed into the house and shut the door. We watched Djala and Celso from the window over the sink in the kitchen. David held out a towel to me which I wrapped around my right hand. I had been holding my hand up and the blood dripped from the cut, disappearing into the sleeve of my black sweater and reminding me of a mother’s skirt wrapped around my legs.

We didn’t hear what they said but Celso walked away, down the street and then disappeared between two houses. David wrapped the towel tightly around my hand and I held it in place with my other hand. He returned to the kitchen where he put the bread dough in bowls, placed them on the stove in the sunny spot from the kitchen window, and covered them lightly with another towel.

He stood in front of me for a minute and we looked at each other.

“They mustn’t burn this time,” he said. Then he left the house and I watched from the doorway as he dragged his feet in a slow, plodding path through the dust of the road.

When I pulled the loaves from the oven, the top of the bread was a crisp, golden brown and the smell in the house breathed of possible success.

Belen walked in the door, Celso almost tripping over the backs of Belen's shoes. When I saw the two men together, standing in the doorway to the house, I wondered if they were twins – same heavy brow, same square body shape, same hooded dark brows, but Belen's eyes looked away while Celso's tried to bore holes in my veil. I bit my lower lip while they examined the bread. What had Celso told Belen about the bread? What had Celso told Belen about me, about Djala, about David?

Celso broke one of the loaves of bread open, sniffed the fluffy interior and took a bite. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Not bad. Not as good as Teresa's, but not bad."

He sat at the table and consumed a quarter of the loaf of bread. I saw Belen tuck the other loaves into a bag which he placed in the refrigerator. Mateo came running into the house, David trailing behind, his hands deep in his pockets and his eyes wary.

"We smelled it all the way down the road," Mateo said. "I want some."

Belen cut a thick slice, spread it with melting butter and handed the first piece to David. He cut another slice and handed this to Mateo. Then he cut one for himself. David did not breathe deeply and consume the smell of the bread, but ate with great bites while watching Celso. Mateo hummed to himself, a tune my mother used to sing to me which spoke of happiness and goodness and maybe some innocence somewhere.

Belen sat at the table across from his brother. He ate his slice of bread carefully. His eyes jiggled, never holding still. He appeared to be talking to his bread when he spoke.

“You said she’d make how much again?”

“In one week she could make as much as Teresa made in a month baking the bread and selling it at the market.” Celso watched me then, his lips pulled up at the corners. “Tell her to take off her veil. I want to see her face again.”

Belen nodded at me.

I stood against the stove in the kitchen. The room felt hot, sticky, the yeasty smell of the bread causing my stomach to groan. His reasons for wanting me to take off the veil didn’t make sense. He’d seen me without the veil when Djala had shot between us.

“Take off the veil,” Belen said.

When I still hesitated, he stood, placing both hands on the table top. I slipped the veil off of my head, trying to still its fluttering by using both hands. The quick movement reopened the wound on my hand and blood began to drip.

Celso raised his eyelids enough to look at me. He examined me up and down, from the tip of my head to my toes. I wanted to look where he was looking, I wanted to understand the knowing look on his face, examine myself from outside of my body. What did people see when they looked at me? Why did it feel so different to look out of my own eyes, feel who I am, know who I am, when almost everyone else looked on me with shock and revulsion?

“If she doesn’t make the money sitting on the corner, she can make the money in other ways. Her body is fine. Men pay a lot for young flesh like that.”

Belen jerked his head away from me. Both David and Mateo sat silently, watching this exchange with serious faces, with mouths full of bread.

“We never agreed to that,” Belen said. “I’ll not have her used in that way.” He glanced at me, at the two boys, back at Celso who was watching him. “Begging, yes.”

Celso said nothing. Something bubbled in me, something dark and deep. The way he looked at my body, the smell of unwashed skin and smoke that emanated from him, how he spoke through Belen as though I weren’t worthy of his attention – all of this made me see him as the coyote, skirting and devious.

He hadn’t told Belen about attacking me with a knife and he hadn’t told him about David making the bread. Should I say something? That might make things worse.

“We may not need to go that far. Her face alone should earn you plenty of money,” said Celso. He looked at me now with his mouth pulled down at the corners and his eyebrows down tight over his eyes, as though I were something filthy, something slippery and rotten. He stood, pushed back his chair and wiped the crumbs from the table onto the floor.

“If you decide to send her, I’ll be here before dawn. Dress her in rags, add some dirt to her face, make her bring that violin she is said to play.”

I forgot for a minute that the veil was in my hand; my lips quivered and I blinked my eyes. I’d been here for how long, a week? And already they were sending me away. I

was too much trouble, too hideous, too incompetent. When I opened my mouth, my voice wouldn't cooperate. I couldn't even summon a whisper.

Belen tapped one hand against the top of his thigh. His eyes focused somewhere on my knees and I stood very still, hardly daring to breathe, hoping that he'd allow me to stay.

"Next month," he said, "this bread will do for now. We can sell it at the store."

Celso slammed his fist down on the table, the bread popping up and dropping back down again. Belen looked at his brother. A froth of white outlined the right side of Celso's mouth and his nostrils flared like a wild boar's.

"She did not bake the bread."

David sucked in his breath. Would the squeaking begin again, the thrashing about on the floor, and the blue lips? We waited, the moment thick and oppressive like the moment before I grabbed the crayfish when I knew it might erupt, snap at me, hide beneath the rock. Belen looked at David, disappointment in his face.

"Your mother taught you well, David. Then we don't need the girl."

David pushed back from the table and held his hands in his lap. Mateo's head rotated back and forth, a wary owl, his mouth open slightly. I held the veil in my hand, felt its absence and tipped it back onto my head. They wouldn't see my tears – none of them would see my tears.

"She will make money for us in other ways. We will try these other ways for a while and if they do not work, she'll return home, take care of the house and you will teach her how to make the bread. For now, it will be your job, David, but only for us.

You will not sell the bread at the market, that is not a man's work. When her money comes in from the city, we will hire someone to tidy the house. For now, this will do." Belen's arm swept out, indicating the cleaned house and all the work I'd done. I should have worked more slowly, made them think they needed me forever. David opened his mouth but did not speak.

Celso crossed his arms above his puffed stomach and tried to smile but the unused muscles resisted, stretching the corners of his mouth long. "And you, girl, will stay with me when we travel to the city, you'll not run, you'll not attempt anything or your handsome little friend from the woods will find his throat slit in the middle of the night." When he said the word *handsome* his eyelids fluttered.

Celso reached around me, his unwashed smell pushing against the smell of fresh bread. He grasped the remaining chunk of bread in his meaty hand, and brushed his arm against my chest. The floor shook with a heavy beat as he exited the house.

Tomorrow he would be my new caregiver. Just as I'd begun to get my feet underneath me, to make friends and find support, I would again disappear like I had from the camp in the woods where dragonflies flew and crickets sang. How many more moves were left for me? Probably more than I cared to know.

### 33

The night passed slowly. I listened to the call of the Caracara; I heard the squeak of bats as they swooped by the open door; I waited for a dead skunk – for little boys who run shrieking – terrified but thrilled – into the night. No clouds crossed in front of the stars.

Nights were cooler, the air tingly and smelling of falling leaves. I looked forward to the change in seasons – I loved fall with its cool air that awakens; I especially loved the smell of earth, leaves, and rain.

Nathanael, Jeremia, Eva and little Rayanna would be collecting wood for fires on the colder winter nights. They were drying the fruits, collecting the berries, trapping rabbits and hunting deer to make into salted winter meat. They were sitting around the campfire, Nathanael telling stories of the river witch who swam through the creeks to villages along it and crept into children's huts in the night time, taking away their voices so they could no longer speak. I knew that we lived primitively in our camp in the woods but I also knew that I'd had a good life, free of cruelty. Nathanael had been to the city; he had seen the cars, the huge buildings, the swarms of people and he had hated it. He had said that only the desperate went to the city: the desperate, the frantic and the rejected.

So he'd stayed with us in the woods and told us of traveling bands of people who packed up their tents, carried them on their backs, moved to a new place and set up their tents once again.

That was me. A nomad. Only I didn't have a tent to carry with me. I had nothing but the clothes on my back, the few items my mother gave me, a cream skirt with a brown wound, and the violin that could be my voice. Maybe this was my life – maybe I would never know a permanent home again. I thought of running away, gathering my belongings and slinking through the grasses to follow the creek back to our camp in the woods but I didn't: I would not let them hurt Jeremia. I would not allow Jeremia's father to forget his shame.



Before the sun rose, the shape of a man appeared in the door of the lean-to, the stars obliterated by his presence. His protruding stomach filled the opening and his smell permeated the little room with ash and sweat.

I was ready for him. I had dressed in all of my clothing: my pants, my mother's skirt made into short pants, my mouse t-shirt, and the black sweater. I slipped my feet into my brown shoes and left the lean-to. Swinging the violin case over my shoulder and carrying my small sack, I draped the veil over my head and followed him out the door. The lean-to was not my home, I would miss only David, but the farther I moved away from our camp in the woods, the more lonely and full of holes I felt.

Celso climbed onto a tethered mule at the edge of our village. The mule began a steady trot down the road and I followed, my heart rubbing against the bones in my chest making my eyes steam. As we approached the last houses and prepared to step away from this village and forward to the big city, I heard the pattering of footsteps behind me and I felt my hands shake with the possibility that maybe Belen had changed his mind.

When I turned around, David stopped and bent over, his hands on his knees. His breath made the high squeak when he breathed in. As his breathing calmed, the squeak lessened and soon disappeared.

"Here," he said. He thrust his hand toward me, a lumpy handkerchief tied in a knot hanging heavy in his fist.

"May it go well with you."

And that's when the water dripped from my eyes, down the sides of my nose. The veil covered my face, the night revealed nothing, and David pushed his shoulders back, breathing deep and clean once more.

"And may it go well with you," I said as he walked away.

Celso took the bundle from my hands. With blunt, fat fingers he untied the corners of the cloth and opened the square piece of blue material. Inside were three items: a corner from one of the other loaves of bread, a small square of cheese, and a slingshot.

Celso took the bread from the cloth sack, broke off a chunk, and gave me the remaining portion. He handed the items back to me and resumed his steady trot while eating.

I rolled up a small piece of the bread, made a sticky dough ball and rolled it around on my tongue. I chewed it slowly as I walked. Fresh and soft, moist and grainy, I hoped as I savored the nutty texture, that I would discover ways to be more like my mother and less like my father.

### 34

The walk through the woods was peaceful and quiet but the trees were brown, short and stunted. I missed the tall trunks and feathery leaves from my home and the thick vines full of flowers in the underbrush. Celso didn't speak to me so I listened to a small owl hooting in the trees, I listened to the creek from the village laughing and giggling, I listened to the call of a wolf and I wondered how I could play these songs on my violin.

We walked from before the sun rose until after it set.

I was grateful for the bread and cheese. Celso had his own lunch and I smelled the sausage and fried egg he shoved into his mouth with fat fingers, but I didn't want anything from this man. He watched me with searching looks that made me want to pull inside of my sweater. When the road became so dark our shadows disappeared, we crunched through the debris on the forest floor and Celso built a small fire beneath the stunted trees along the path. Then he tied my hands together with a piece of rope and looped the rope around a tree. The mule he tethered to the same tree and then Celso wrapped his coat around himself and lay in front of the fire, falling asleep in seconds. I whispered to the mule and it pushed its nose against me. The animal was warm, soft and smelled of grass. I tried to sleep against the tree, my knees bent, my head against the rough bark, my shoulder pushed into the tree until it ached with a dull throb. When my body, so tired from walking all day, finally relaxed and I slept, whisperings, the soft mumbling of words, startled my sleep and woke the mule. It whinnied and backed away from the tree as far as the rope would allow it to go, and then it pulled, its back legs digging into the ground. I whispered to it but it had had enough of whisperings.

"Cut it, then."

"Sh, you'll wake him."

"Hurry up. We'll not have time at this rate."

The outline of a head appeared around the side of the tree, light from the stars the only light available; Celso's fire had died out long ago. I saw nothing but the flash of stars on bright eyes and the glint of light on teeth. The head drew back behind the tree and a tugging began. The ropes were being unknotted and my hands tingled as the

circulation returned. When the ropes fell away, I stood, my creaking knees stiff and threatening to collapse, my sore shoulder aching.

“Come,” the voice said and a person appeared around the side of the tree. I could make out a shape, loose clothing, and bare feet that knew where to walk on the ground so its movements were silent.

I glanced back at Celso, a rounded lump on the ground and I touched the nose of the mule. Now that the strangers no longer stood by its tree, the mule ceased its pulling and stood calm, its head hanging low. On feet as silent as theirs, I followed these people into the woods.

The brush became a bit thicker as we moved away from the path and the sounds of the woods intensified. I could hear tree frogs gulping, snakes creeping, and the owl calling. An orange glow flickered against the sickly trees and I followed my rescuers to the spot of light in the woods.

Two girls looked back at me when we reached the small clearing. Both were smaller than me and dirtier with matted hair that might have been brown and with faces smeared with dirt so their bodies blended into the brown of the trees. They motioned for me to come and sit down by the fire. On the other side of the fire sat two others, another girl, and a boy with large teeth that stuck out over his bottom lip. The two girls I had followed looked normal, appeared to have no blemishes, but the third was tiny with hands and feet so small, they looked like a doll's. I leaned down onto my knees and slid the veil off of my face.

“See? See? Didn't I say?” said one of the girls who had untied me.

“Like Kada,” said the other, nodding at me and looking at the tiny girl.

When the tiny girl spoke, her voice was deep, seeming to come from the boy beside her. I looked again and saw shadows under her eyes and lines around her mouth as though perhaps she hadn’t eaten enough or was older than I’d thought.

“Why were you captive?” she said.

I sat on my heels and held the filmy veil in my hands. All of them looked at me, their eyes big, their faces turned to me without fear or disgust. There was no danger here that I could see.

“I must go to the city.”

“And work for him?” The tiny girl dug with a tiny hand into the soft ground of the forest and threw bits of leaves, sticks and bark onto the fire. The pieces popped and cackled when they hit the flames.

“To send money for my family.”

The two girls I had followed both laughed. One nudged the other with her shoulder and then covered her mouth with her hand. The other didn’t even bother to cover her mouth.

“That’s no father that will tie his daughter to a tree,” said Kada.

Nor is it a father who will chain his daughter to a doghouse or kick her in the side or slap her across the head. I knew this. I wasn’t traveling to the city for them.

“You may stay with us, with me and my sisters, and with our friend Tollie.”

When Tollie heard his name, he smiled so big, his cheeks squeezed up and his eyes closed. “We are our own family now.”

“There are others I must protect,” I said not looking at the two sisters who giggled behind their hands.

“Your responsibility is to yourself,” Kada said and looked at me so hard, with such narrow eyes that I wanted to drape the veil over my head and hide behind its film. What did she know of my life?

“Then why are your sisters with you?”

“They chose to come. They’re not rejected but they wouldn’t tolerate my ill treatment, my caging as though I were an animal.” The tiny girl trembled as she spoke, a compact ball of defiance, her cheeks pink with heat, her mouth tight with hate. “We take care of each other now but if something were to happen to me, they would save themselves.”

The two girls had stopped their giggling. One of them sat with her head cocked to the side, watching me with one eye like a macaw, the other looked into the fire, still with a smile that she never hid. They were about David’s age, 10 I would guess and Kada was older.

I stood up and slipped the veil over my head again.

“I will need help with the knots.”

The girl tossed her hair which grew long and brown, reaching the ground. She looked into the fire and seemed to speak into the flames.

“We help you escape and your choice is to return. You will never go far in this world if you don’t know how to rescue yourself.”

I paused, waiting, but the group at the fire ignored me now, watching the flames as though they held more sway and power than I ever could. I must rescue myself already, it seemed.

The darkness was beginning to ebb as I tried to follow my path back through the woods. I could see the outlines of the trees more clearly now and the sounds of waking birds made my hands slick with nervousness. My feet seemed to find every stick, every leaf, and crunch through these straggly trees with as much noise as my father and brothers made tromping through the woods.

When I finally found our camp, the light from the east glowed white in the sky and outlined the trees with the brightness of day. Celso sat by the fire, the thick smell of bacon rising from a black iron pan he gently shook over the flames. When I sat across from him he did not look up. When he ate his bacon, he offered nothing to me and continued to pretend that I had not returned or perhaps that I had never left.

As he packed his belongings into the bag slung over the mule's back, he said only this to me, "So many children disappear, these days, and never are found again."

He climbed onto the mule when the sun had risen above the trees and I followed behind him, my feet dragging in the dust of the path, my violin bumping a rhythm against my back, my thoughts somewhere back in the camp where my family prepared for winter and became accustomed to my absence.

Throughout the morning, the sounds around me changed. No longer did I hear the song of birds or the chirping of crickets, but I heard voices, the shuffling of feet, the creaking of wheels and the hum of machines that I could not name. Now and then the roaring of a truck could be heard and I imagined the words SWINC written on the side of it like a message lacking subtlety.

We moved from the path we followed onto a much broader road which was busy with people. We all trudged along, most of us staring at our feet, ignoring each other, while I wondered about the other people – what their stories were – where they were going – what their songs might be. I felt as though only part of me marched along this road, the part full of muscle, bone and blood; the rest of me lived with Nathanael, Jeremia, Eva and Rayanna, and a tiny piece of me, unsure and battered, baked bread with David.

Celso and I reached a farm just as night fell. I was so tired, my feet barely lifted from the ground and my head felt thick. The smell from my father's village, ten times as strong now, grew, swelled, burst from the air around me. The smell was so bad, I feared that it was actually part of me, my fear and dread dripping like sweat.

The road we marched on passed huge buildings, great rectangles which could have fit fifty houses like Belen's. They grew up into the air, flat, abnormal dwellings which blocked the setting sun and threw a shadow over the road that cooled and suffocated with darkness. We still followed the creek, the stream that ran through my camp, through Belen's village, all the way to the city, but the water was covered in a



greasy film here, a sluggish swamp that had grown to three times its width and barely moved. I shivered as we trudged along under this shadow.

When the darkness of these buildings became a second night, a night without stars, we looked past the structures and saw people in a field, stirring a broad lagoon with sticks. Above the lagoon a haze hovered, a fog of thick stench that pushed the oxygen out of the air. This was where the smell was most concentrated and it was so strong, I felt dizzy and swayed from side to side behind the mule. A churning noise groaned from these buildings – the sound of animal crowds in close, enclosed spaces.

Once we left the buildings behind and were beyond the immediate smell and sound, I lifted my head and felt my face pushing through the odor to the cleaner air above. I tried to understand this smell, discern what it was, what it reminded me of but all I could think of was the dead possum, the rotted corpse by the creek that had sat under a bush too long and become rancid.

We reached the outskirts of the village and stopped at the first house, a small wood house with a wide inviting front porch. Celso placed his hand against my back and I climbed the steps to the front door. The door was opened by a woman with eye wrinkles that reached out into her cheeks. Her face was as old as Nathanael's but something about the way she held herself, her shoulders back, her arms thick with muscle, her legs sturdy, made me think she was younger than her face appeared. Her eyes were foggy, clouded, but around her mouth were smile creases and her cheeks had a rosy glow. She peered at my veil with curiosity, but not with fear.

“We are traveling to the city,” Celso said. “We wondered if you would know of a place where we could stay for the night.”

The woman crossed her arms over her chest and looked at Celso. She didn’t smile, didn’t speak, but appraised. She examined him for a long time, it seemed, and then looked at me. Her face softened, her mouth turned up at the corners into a smile, and the creases around her eyes reached almost to her hair.

“The child needs a place to stay,” said the woman and opened the door wide.

Celso placed his hand under my elbow and guided me into the house. It appeared that I would not be left outside with the mule, this evening, but must act the role of a person.

The room was small, warm, with wood floors, wood walls, a wood ceiling. A wood table with benches on either side occupied the middle of the room and rugs made from strips of cloth gave the room bright bits of red and yellow. Two pairs of dirt-covered boots and two sets of worn work gloves rested beside the door. I added my brown shoes to the line. On the left side of the room a fire blazed on the hearth and a weathered man, knobby ankles emerging red and chapped from beneath his canvas pants, sat in a rocking chair smoking a pipe. He waved us in but didn’t get out of the chair.

“We’ll be off before dawn,” Celso said. He didn’t remove his shoes. I saw him glance over to the table where leftovers from their dinner still emitted delicious smells of butter and pepper that seemed to push the dark odor to the fringes of the room. The woman saw Celso’s look and ushered us to the table. She gave us each a fork and instructed us to eat the leftovers from the bowls.

Before I was able to understand where we were and why, I sat at the table with a fork in my hand. My muscles, so tired from marching behind the mule for two days, didn't want to lift the fork. I could have laid my head on the table and slept right there.

"Ines and Hugo. Don't get many visitors," she said. She slid onto the bench. I could feel her face turned toward me, her watchful eyes examining my veil.

"We're going to the city. Her husband waits for us there." He stuffed bits of stew and potato into his mouth quickly.

The woman watched me with faintly furrowed eyebrows and those eyes that could see but probably shouldn't.

"Just a child," she murmured, her breath touching the side of my veil. "So young."

The food was simple, warm, and filling but as it cooled, the smell from the food dissipated and was replaced by the horrid smell surrounding this town. When Celso had eaten his fill, we sat with Hugo and Ines by the fire. I squatted on the floor and Ines knelt next to me, leaving the other chair for Celso. Hugo sat in the chair, rocked back and forth and watched the cackling flames. Ines was like the wind, always touching me, petting my knee, brushing her fingers against the back of my hand. They had lived in this village all of their lives and had worked on the farm that was the main employer for Gloriosa, since the farm had come, almost twenty years ago now.

My village didn't have a name. Or if it did, I didn't know what it was. The reject place, maybe, or the place of disfiguration. The Hidden Camp.

“Aren’t very many children in this town,” Ines said, again touching me, her knee against mine. I had not been touched in a gentle manner since leaving my camp in the woods but something about her attention made me feel exposed.

“Can you play us a song?” Hugo asked. His rocking chair issued a steady creak into the room. He was worn, weathered, with creases around his eyes, mouth, and through his cheeks, but he was like Nathanael, strong with knotted muscles twisting just beneath his skin. “I haven’t heard a violin for years.”

My arms were too tired, my head too filled with decay to liven this room, refresh it from the thick smell that weighed it down, but Celso glowered at me, his face dark and drawn. I pulled the violin over my shoulder, unlatched the case and fit the instrument beneath my chin. I eased the bow against the strings and began to play.

I chose to play songs my mother had sung to me, but as I ran out of those tunes, I searched through my own songs, ones I had composed myself, that came to my fingers like treasures and the more I played, the more I wanted to keep playing. Music and smell throbbed for domination of the room.

Hugo smiled in his chair, his lips curved around the mouthpiece of his pipe. I could see the fire reflecting sparks in his eyes. Ines sat next to me by the fire, her head thrown back and her eyes closed. Whenever I stopped playing a song they asked for another.

To escape this strange room, I closed my eyes and let my hands hum their language. What would these lonely and empty people who had wanted children in their lives have said if I pulled the veil off of my face and showed them my distorted features?

They would have been grateful and glad that they'd had no children as hideous as me. There was no place in this world for me, nowhere but with others who looked like I did. I closed my eyes and felt the music.

I awoke when the clatter of my bow hitting the floor shot a new sound through the room. Ines took the violin from me, laid it in the case and then took a hand-stitched pillow from the other chair and laid it on the ground.

I slept on the floor in front of the fire. Before leaving the room, Celso leaned down, whispered into my ear and said, "You run and I'll hunt you down. You leave and your friends in the camp will suffer because of it."

Then he was taken to a different room, somewhere beyond the light of the fire. Ines asked me if I wanted a bed as well, in the same room as my uncle, but how could I leave the glow of the fire to sleep in the same room as him? Ines brought me a blanket and another touch as she patted my shoulder.

"Eight," she whispered to me, the glow from the fire painting hollows in her cheeks and setting her eyes back into her face. "Eight babies. All of them imperfect but so beautiful. I would have loved them, even just one of them, if only they'd lived. Some children live, in this town, but not many."

She smiled when she said this. Her eyes shone, glowed, glinted. She saw all. She saw beyond the veil, beyond our secrecy, beyond Celso's lies. I wanted to pull away from her, back away but there was nowhere to go and she'd been nothing but kind to me.

If she had been my mother, she would have kept me. She would have made me an accepted one and maybe I could have helped her stay in this world rather than disappear

to the one she saw beyond those cloudy eyes where babies lived, even babies wrinkled and deformed.

Before dawn, Celso came to get me. We did not say goodbye to Ines and Hugo but Celso placed one small silver coin in the middle of the table.

### 36

Later in the morning, we no longer felt the cool shade of trees, stunted or tall. We merged from our packed dirt road onto a street coated in a hard black substance from which the heat rose through the soles of my shoes. The plants along the side of the road twisted crooked and thin beneath the sun. I felt exposed here, conspicuous, lost in the wide spaces like an ant without a hill. As the sun grew hotter, people merged from similar dirt roads and walked with us on this busy one. Horses pulled carts, people hunched forward with fruits and vegetables on their backs, cars hummed and buzzed, emitting an odor of burning butter; the white, growling trucks with the word *Swinc* on them roared past. Too much noise and smell thumped in my head and I felt confused.

A different machine, a quiet one with no smell rolled by often. One or two people sat on this vehicle and pushed with their feet. It moved quickly down the road and I wished I had a contraption that could propel me through space like the one these people rode, then I could return to a place with less noise, fewer people, better smells. My feet hurt, my heels were blistered, my right shoe had come loose from its sole and flapped as I walked. Now was the time to run back to the woods – a world that felt comfortable and

understandable – but under Celso’s skin seethed an anger dark and menacing and he would not hesitate to hurt my family.

I stared as we walked and many of the people stared back. No one else appeared disfigured here or walked beneath the filmy cloud of a veil, but I was not the only one with troubles.

All of the travelers were dirty, all were from villages and moved forward in unison, but I watched carefully from beneath the veil and saw our differences. A man walking on the other side of the road pulled a cart with wheels. A strap stretched from the front of the cart to around his shoulders and chest. He leaned against the band, willing the rattling and banging cart to follow him down the road. A woman wearing a long brown skirt shuffled her feet in the dust of the road. Two children walked beside her, the girl also shuffling her feet but the boy marched by his mother and sister with his head held high, his eyes flashing, his mouth angry.

Hills pushed from the ground on either side of the road and were dotted with rocks. Where was Jeremia’s hill, the one where he’d tucked a broken boy into a hollow and then turned that hollow into a grave? The odor from Gloriosa, the stench from the farm was lower here, beneath our feet, saturating the ground. Between the hills, as we neared the city, the road grew a border of houses, but these were houses as I’d never seen before, not even in my books. They were made from boxes – cardboard boxes or sometimes wooden slats balanced against each other. The smells from these houses rose pitifully – urine, I thought, and sickness. The children we walked past who lived in these

flimsy houses stared at my veil. I stared at the dirt covering their bodies and at the sores open on their arms.

This couldn't be the city. I found that my hand moved to the carved violin around my neck more and more often with each step that brought us closer to our destination, and I tried to still the twitching of my hands.

We did not stop when darkness shrank the lights to small bubbles, but we continued on the road, the houses changing from dilapidated cardboard houses to houses stacked on top of each other like rocks under a waterfall. The voices of people spilled from the open windows like the din from a flock of starlings. Lines of clothing stretched from the buildings, criss-crossing each other in disorganized spider webs. A few trees, here and there, jutted in front of the buildings through squares cut into grey hard rock, but they looked so forlorn, so lonely and separated that I wanted to hug one and stay there, our loneliness united. So many people lived here: hoards of people shuffling, pushing, calling to each other, singing from the windows that I was just one more.

Celso no longer rode the mule but walked ahead, the rope to the mule in his hand. The mule was as tired as I was, its hooves sliding across the hard rock ground, its head hanging low, searching for something to eat but there was no grass. I kept a hand on its back and leaned slightly, gaining support from its warmth and swaying movements.

Large groups of women wearing paint on their faces, vivid colors that blurred their features, stood in clusters where streets came together. Their bodies revealed skin that the color on their faces concealed: breasts bulged from shirts, thighs plunged from short skirts. They moved with big gestures, their strides long, their shoulders rotating.



These women strode into the streets and leaned into the open windows of cars, where the men smiled with square teeth and passed coins from the windows to the hands of the women. My stomach lurched in this place, my skin tingled like the moments before a thunderstorm, but no one even glanced at me. It was Celso who didn't fit – a man with a mule who could show himself for what he was.

This, then was why the rejects from my camp came to the city and stayed. We fit in here, our strange features no more bizarre than those of the undamaged people who milled around. I could easily blend in and disappear into the crowd.

Celso stopped. We stood in front of a building painted a flat grey like the color of the sky before a torrential rain. The building tilted to the left, almost leaning against the next wall and it glowed with swirls, lines, dots that might have been words and were painted on its front in brazen patterns. Bars for cages lined the windows set up high in the walls. No faces appeared at the windows, no singing voices could be heard; this building was cold and lifeless in comparison to the other buildings on the street.

No one answered the door. Celso pounded again and continued to pound until a light went on in the windows beside the wooden door. The door opened a crack and a woman's face appeared behind the bars.

"What," she said. I took a step back. She looked rotten, overdone. She was maybe ten years older than my mother, her hair black with a clump of grey right in the front. Her eyes had dark bags beneath them – purple and black bags and her nose, streaked with red lines, was swollen like her body. Her breath gushed between the bars in front of the door and smelled of sweet fruits that had sat too long.

“I have brought another worker,” Celso said. Another worker. Celso had intended for me to come here from the moment he came to our camp and pushed me into this new world. He had done this before. This was how he earned his living, as a bully and a thief.

The woman unlocked the cage door with a cluster of keys. She opened the door wide and stood in the opening, one hand holding the door, the other leaning on her hip. Her body, clothed in a tight nightgown, bulged oddly, like it had been squeezed tight in the middle and pushed out at the chest and hips.

“Take off the veil,” she said. I slid the veil off of my head.

“She’ll do. She’s young enough to look like a child still. We’ll have her sit on the corner until she looks too old for that. Then she can work in the brothel with the others.” Her eyes watched me but she spoke to Celso. “Same as always: Fifty a week for room and board. She keeps whatever else she makes. I take it you want the rest?”

“I will return in a month when I will be paid.” He held out a white folded piece of paper. Her left hand tightened around it, crinkling it. Celso grasped the back of my neck with his hand and squeezed. I hunched up my shoulders and stiffened.

“I want a hundred from you at the end of the month. Anything less, and we send you to the brothel.”

What did a hundred look like? I knew I didn’t want to go to a brothel, a place for girls who were too old for sitting on the corners. When Celso let go of my neck, my shoulders slumped and my bottom lip trembled. Nothing felt like home here; the darkness didn’t soothe and calm like at home but jarred with shrieks and the hum of cars. I would have welcomed the sound of the wolf howling.

Celso turned the mule around and walked back into the street. He didn't look at me and I didn't say goodbye. He looked strange, like the wrong page in a book as he pulled the mule behind him through the milling women in their painted colors and strange clothes. The mule was silent and calm, shuffling its way beneath the music, shouts and screams of this city. I would not miss Celso: I didn't want to run after him, but at that moment, he was all I knew. I felt sweaty, hot and cold at the same time, and the lid above my left eye twitched.

"Well come on then, girl," the woman said. "Someone will show you how things work in the morning."

I stepped into the light of the hallway and heard the cage door shut and lock behind me. Light came from a huge shining lamp hung in the middle of the ceiling. It glowed and glittered, casting shards of light into the hallway like sun reflecting off the spray from a waterfall. Cobwebs stretched from shiny shards of the lamp and shot to all corners of the room. A cockroach skittered across a patch of oil on the ground that swirled with iridescent purples and greens. The walls were streaked with dirt and patches of rust that I didn't want to know the origin of. I followed the woman down the hallway and saw a scurrying rat, its nails clicking on the cement floor, leading us down the hallway. It disappeared into a hole in the wall, a natural ending to the crack that started as a thread on the ceiling and became a fissure by the time it reached the floor. My hand moved to Jeremiah's carved violin resting against my chest. I squeezed it until my palm throbbed.

Brown doors with gouges hacked out of them like ax wounds on a tree lined the hallway. They were all closed and had only one distinguishing feature – a clear number painted on them in black.

“I’m Ofelia,” the woman said. “Your room will be 13 – unlucky and always vacant. You get the room at 2:00am; before that, it’s off limits. I lock the doors at night, whether you’re in or not.”

When she stopped, I bumped into her soft body which dented and then popped back into shape. She turned, put her hand out and shoved me against the wall.

“Let’s get something straight, girl.” Her teeth were brown, broken and crooked with big gaps between them. Deep grooves that might have been dimples once, lined her sunken cheeks. “You don’t touch me, ever. It’s bad enough I have to live with you freaks: I won’t be touched by you. You pay for your room and board, and you’ll have a place to stay. As soon as you miss a week of rent, you’re on the streets. Understand?”

She unlocked the door to room #13, pushed it open and shoved me inside. She slammed the door, and the lock clicked. I tried to blink away the darkness.

My eyes burned, my nose tingled, my feet ached. I wanted Nathanael, I wanted Jeremia, I wanted Eva, I wanted Rayanna’s heart beating against mine. I’d never whine about my mother leaving me, I’d never complain about anything ever again if I could just go back home. I didn’t need a mother, I didn’t need a father – I had a family who loved me. I wiped the sleeve of my sweater under my nose.

A slice of moonlight shone onto the floor of the room from a window set high in the wall, and once my eyes adjusted, I could make out two mattresses on the floor that

occupied opposite sides of the room. A small table with three legs and stacked bricks for the other leg stood under the window. The cracks in the walls revealed the bones of this building.

Closing my hand around the violin at my neck, I brought it out of my shirt and pressed it against my cheek. The coolness of the wood soothed my hot face. I removed the real violin from around my shoulders and laid it on the ground, and then I slipped my shoes off. The small sack from my mother sat lonely and small on the crooked table.

What else was I to do?

A patter of footsteps, a child's tiptoe clattered rhythmically down the hall and stopped. I heard a soft shuffle and something slid through the slit beneath the door. Then the footsteps retreated and a door softly closed. I picked up the piece of paper and held it up to the white light of the moon. It was a hand drawn picture of the building, its size exaggerated and swollen between anemic buildings on either side. On the bottom of the picture were two words.

"Welcome home."

I slid the picture under a mattress and then lay down, trying to calm my heart and find a way to be quiet, relaxed. I closed my eyes against the sight of the battered room, trying to find a place that soothed, but I heard rodents nibbling at something in the corner, I heard the whoosh of cars passing on the road, and I heard my heart tapping out the pattern of my life against my chest. Was this it? Was this what my life would consist of? I closed my eyes, searched for home inside my head and slowly the nibbling became the crackle of a warm fire, the whoosh became a soft wind through the trees, and the tapping

inside of me became the rhythmic calm of night crickets. If I could live in my head, I would survive this place.

But, this would never be my home.

### 37

I woke to a pounding on the door.

“Get up,” a voice said.

My head felt heavy from lack of sleep and my body ached from walking for three days but I jerked awake because my clothes writhed against my skin. I pulled down my mother’s skirt, yanked up my sweater and t-shirt and looked under my clothes. My stomach was speckled with little brown flat bugs that pinched. I slapped and scratched at them, and when the door opened, my pants were around my ankles and heat rose to my face in a rush.

Ofelia stood in the doorway, her hands on her hips. She looked at me, then uttered a bark of a laugh.

“Bed bugs, girl. Ain’t you ever had bed bugs before? Pull your pants up before one of the boys sees you.”

I eased my t-shirt and sweater down and my pants up while willing myself not to cry even though the tears threatened to fall any minute. I tried to breathe deeply, catching the breath that stuck in my throat, but I couldn’t find a calm place. I slid the veil over my head, concealing my burning cheeks, and followed Ofelia out the door. The bugs

continued to bite and I couldn't think of a time I'd felt more uncomfortable – maybe chained to the ground in front of a dog house.

None of the people in the hallway looked like me with my bubbled lips and open face, nor did they look like Nathanael with his smooth, sealed features. They chattered, laughed, and grumbled at each other. I wandered behind Ofelia, scratched my stomach and tried to hide beneath my veil.

“Show us what you got, girl,” said a tiny person beside me. Her head reached to my chest but she was not a child. Her head was disproportionately big in comparison to her body and she had breasts and hips. She crossed her arms over her chest and waited. She was the only clean person in the hallway.

I slid the veil off and kept my eyes down, focused on the filmy material in my hands, trying to keep them from fluttering and twitching.

“Another one of you. I've seen your type pass through this place. I give you one month.”

“I'll take six weeks,” said a voice from near my feet. I looked down and saw a boy pulling himself along on his hands. He dragged his body down the filthy hallway, the dirt gathered in drifts and patches across his skin, his pant legs empty and flat where his legs should have been. “I'm an optimist,” he said.

“Don't listen to them, dearie,” said someone from the doorway of room #8. The person was probably a woman but it was difficult to tell since her skin, bubbled and scarred, stretched tight from the top of her head all the way down her neck. She was covered in burns, like the patch on Jeremiah's arm where he'd bumped into the heated

soup caldron. “I’ll bet you surprise us all and only last a night.” She merged with the rest of the residents in the hallway.

Where did people who never grew, people with shortened arms with miniature fingers, people so filthy with grime that it was part of their skin, come from? Maybe they were from Astatla, my parents’ village – I had seen a few other children there with deformities. Maybe they were destroyed. Maybe they were sent here.

I didn’t need my veil.

We climbed the stairs at the end of the hallway and entered an enormous common room, the floor almost as grimy as the hallway on the first floor. This room had a kitchen at one end which consisted of a huge stove, refrigerator, and shelves lined with cans, boxes of foods, and light bulbs that shone bare and naked over our heads. Two long wooden tables stretched from one end to the other and at the head of one of the tables, an elderly man with no hair and wrinkled skin served breakfast. When I got closer and heard the person talk, I realized that he was young in an old body. I stood in line beside the boy who pulled himself along on the floor with his hands and picked up a bowl for me and one for him. Oatmeal was ladled into the bowls and the old young boy crossed his eyes, stuck out his tongue and hissed when he saw me looking at his wrinkled hands.

The boy from the hallway pulled himself up to the table and sat beside me. He was about my age – maybe a year or two older. He grinned, big dimples appearing in his cheeks. In the last week, I had met more people than I’d met in my first sixteen years of life and yet I knew none of these people, but would sit with them, sleep near them, share food with them and pretend to be a friend.



“Don’t take the betting personally,” the boy said. “We always bet on the new people. I’ve never seen someone like you stay, though, and I’ve been here almost my entire life. I’m Oscar.” He stuck his hand out for me to shake. His lower left lip pulled down when he talked, but the rest of his mouth stayed straight.

“So, you sign up to help with breakfast, lunch, and supper once a week. My specialty is pizza. They love it when I cook. We have curfew and wake up call, but otherwise the rest of the day is yours. We can’t go back to our rooms until after 2:00 am because the night shift works until then but we can come here, to the common room. If you make more money than you need for Ofelia or to send home to your family, you get to keep that money. You should visit my room sometime and see all the stuff I’ve bought.”

I understood the words he said, but nothing made sense to me: the night shift, making money for Ofelia, visiting rooms. I opened my mouth, intending to ask about the night shift, but the tiny woman who’d told me to take off my veil sat across the table from us. She looked like a child, her arms plump and short but her face had high cheekbones beneath black, narrow eyes. Her jaw pushed forward.

“There’s one rule here,” she said, “and you’ve got to respect that rule. You never, never work someone else’s territory. You got me? You find yourself a street corner somewhere, camp out, and make sure no one else has claimed that spot.”

The oatmeal would not go down my throat even though I’d shoved it to the back so it wouldn’t bubble out my nose. I swallowed, choked, and felt tears come to my eyes.

A street corner, making money, staying clear of other people's territory. I still didn't understand what I was supposed to do.

"I'm Candela," the woman said and stuck out her hand.

"Whisper," I said while shaking her hand. Both Candela and Oscar looked at me.

"You don't talk?" asked Candela.

"I do."

"You can't just sit there and whisper, people will ignore you." And that's when my stomach came up into my mouth and I choked even though I'd eaten very little. I couldn't do this. All my life I'd tried to do the opposite, be quiet, try not to be noticed, blend in with blackberry bushes and oak trees and now they wanted me to draw attention to myself. If Candela saw my tears, she pretended not to or didn't care.

"How can you make noise?"

I didn't know how to answer that. What was required of me; that I shout like everyone else?

"I play the violin," I whispered. Both Oscar and Candela lowered their shoulders and relaxed their tight mouths.

"You didn't tell us you had a talent." Tears stung my nose but I held them in.

I swallowed a few bites of the oatmeal and then stood, following Candela, Oscar and the others. At the stairs, Oscar put his hand against the wall and lowered himself from side to side down each step. He pointed to the bathroom, the first door at the bottom of the stairs, and I followed Candela inside: four stalls, none of them with doors, all of them with toilets that flushed, and three sinks. Candela and I sat in the stalls and did what

we needed to. I tried to pretend that this was all normal, that I wasn't embarrassed, that I didn't mind when people glanced at me as they walked past, that I didn't care how sticky the toilet seat was. I felt more exposed here than I ever had in the woods, where we had relieved ourselves under the bushes, burying our waste.

At the third sink stood two girls whose shoulders stretched long together and between their bodies emerged one arm.

"Hi Maria, hi Selene," Candela said to the attached girls while I kept my head down, watching the paths of grime on the floor rather than staring at people who were inseparable. I followed Candela, tried not to collide with anyone in the hallway, and tried not to breathe too quickly or gasp. Oscar met us in front of room #13.

"Bring your violin," Oscar said.

I stepped into the room, slung the violin over my shoulder and took a deep breath. My hands shook against my violin case and felt slick with sweat when I lowered the strap over my shoulder. Just go along, just do what they do and everything will work out. I followed the others into the street. The door to the building closed behind us, the bars clanging like the tolling of bells.

Oscar pulled himself along the street to the right. Candela crossed the street and turned a corner. All of the other people from the building wandered off in twos or by themselves. I stood on a patch of grey cement in front of my new place of residence and bit down on my lower lip. My eyes hurt. My stomach itched. I pressed the knuckle of my right hand into my eye and clutched the carved violin with my other hand.

I would not cry. I would not flutter my hands and panic even though my understanding of the world was winging away from me. Pulling my arms in tight, pushing my elbows against my ribs I squeezed my eyes closed and tried to imagine the world when it had made sense, when the creek gurgled at night, when the coyotes howled in the hills, when I played Rummy with Eva and let her pick out the good cards from the discard stack.

After a few minutes, when I could remember the smell of trees and the sound of larks, I relaxed my arms and opened my eyes. Jeremia's violin was around my neck and my mother's skirt warmed my legs. For now, that would have to be enough.

### 38

I stepped to the left, then the right, not sure how to get away from the slanted building that in the daylight looked like a dwelling for animals rather than one that housed people, yet I would have welcomed it rather than face these unknown streets. The city shuffled around me, more noise and bustling than I'd ever felt before. I could hear babies crying through the open windows, mothers and fathers talking to each other, and older children yelling.

I trailed behind Oscar, keeping enough distance behind his dragging legs so he wouldn't see me, but following closely enough so I didn't lose him. I wanted Nathanael back, I wanted something natural - the stream with the crayfish and the trees with the mangoes. I wanted bats flicking across the moon and Jeremia's predictable unpredictability. It was cold here; there were no trees, no flowers, nothing green.

Everything was too frantic and fast paced. The buildings felt tenuous, as though they might fall down as soon as the families in them left.

After crossing three streets, Oscar stopped. We'd reached a cobblestone town square with a large fountain in the center. Benches, chairs and tables were grouped sociably here and there; I could see a row of chess tables set up beside a short wall, against which Oscar seated himself. He didn't rest on a blanket, he didn't give himself any sort of comfort, but leaned against the short stone wall that surrounded the square. He slumped to the side, leaned precariously, and changed his face. The grin was gone, the dimples disappeared, and his shoulders drooped.

Aside from us, few people were in the square. Those who did appear, walked quickly across the stones, using it as a short cut from here to there. No cars roared across the bricks. I wanted to look at the fountain, reach my hand into its cold depths, feel the texture of moving water on my skin to remind me of the pond at home, but the water sprayed in bursts, poured from the hands of angels and I could not bring myself to walk through the square, amble through the open space where people would stare or, worse yet, pretend I didn't exist, and allow myself to touch that beauty.

Four stunted trees in pots occupied the south side of the square. Oscar sat to the west, to my right. I crouched between the four trees, rested my back against one of the pots, and watched. It was shaded here, filled with the slight rustling of leaves and if I closed my eyes, I could pretend I was in the woods. Oscar sat, waiting for someone to notice him. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine Jeremia here – Jeremia filling his time with nothing. He would never have rested against a wall, sat passively and hoped for

money. He would have angrily pushed past anyone offering him sympathy, run back to the woods and lived with the foxes. He would have carved his way through the blandness of the stone around him, creating living sculptures of water and wind from dead rock. My hand moved to the violin around my neck and I held it in my hand.

A girl my age lurched to the opposite side of the square. Her body curved in a strange manner – her back twisted sideways. When she walked, she used wooden crutches and rocked from side to side. She sat against the wall on the east side of the square and placed a cup on the ground in front of her.

The light grew, became day, but seemed to be filtered as though pushed through a cloud of dust. People crossed the square in a steady flow now. Most were dressed in pants, skirts, dark straight coats that were not dirty or full of holes. Some of them passed by Oscar or the girl and threw coins into the receptacles on the ground. Oscar spoke to the people who walked by, his hands reaching out, imploring, but from where I crouched, I couldn't hear what he said.

I understood what I needed to do and judging from what Oscar and the other girl did, it wouldn't be difficult – if you were able to speak and didn't care that what you said turned you into a carrion eater, a scavenger. I would not make fifty dollars crouched between the pots of four unhealthy trees.

My legs shook as I stood and stepped out from between the pots, joining the walking crowds. I thought that the people would avoid me, glare at me, turn up their noses, but they didn't seem to care that I had joined them. I exited the square and stood on a street corner where six roads intersected. The streets angled away from the square,

curved around it, bustled with cars and pedestrians or people rolling along on the foot-powered vehicles. The warmth of the sun began to seep through my black sweater.

No one occupied a corner of one of the streets so I eased my way between the people and sat against a closed grey door. I kept my head down, not wanting to admit to anyone or myself that I was about to ask for money. The violin felt good in my hands, heavy, something to occupy my time and attention. The case, black outer shell with a crimson lining, covered the gray space in front of me, a throbbing heart against the grey stones. The violin was an answer in my hands – the key to something – I fit it beneath my chin and eased the bow over the strings.

The first few attempts to play a song came out scratchy and shaky as my fingers warmed up, but soon the tune smoothed and I heard the sound of larks singing at dusk. I was able to make my way back to the trees. I played the song of Whisper and closed my eyes to the chaos and confusion around me.

### 39

The sun shone high and bright, having consumed half the day when I lowered the violin and straightened my shoulders. My neck cracked when I tilted it back, and as I opened my eyes, the canopy of trees from my home in the woods, the song of the crickets and the aroma of the Hibiscus faded like a rainbow.

Coins of various shapes lay silver and copper on the crimson cloth. I lifted one of these coins between my fingers. It was a thin metal disk with the head of a man on the front and a sheaf of grain on the back. I didn't know what to do with it, what it meant.

Was this enough money to pay for the rent? Did I have more than the rent – something for Celso?

I collected the coins and slid them into one of the pockets of my sweater where they weighed down the material and felt satisfying. I slid my violin into its case, nestling it against the warming cloth and stood. When I raised my head, I looked into the eyes of a man.

He was young, dark, with a smile broken by pointed eye-teeth. His face was rough with hair that grew in uneven bursts. I thought of a skunk with its pointed face and secret weapon.

“Hey, ugly,” he said. “We’ve been watching you.” He jerked with his head. I looked across the street and saw two more men standing on the corner. Their waxy skin matched the washed-out grey of the stones that made up the buildings, the streets, the walkways – they looked like they’d stepped from the very walls themselves. Black cars skittered like roaring cockroaches in the street but I could see the hunched shoulders and thick necks of the men from where I stood.

“And because you’re new to the city and don’t know the rules around here, we’ll take it easy on you this time.”

I covered my sweater pocket with my hand.

“You want to use our street corner, you have to pay for it. If you decide not to pay, we take all of your money and a little something else.”

He looked at my body. His eye teeth settled on his bottom lip and the whites of his eyes looked bloodied and bruised. The palm of my hand became sweaty against the



coins and my heart thumped rhythmically in my neck. The people who walked by avoided my eyes - they were all busy.

I didn't know how much money weighed down my pocket but the coins were mine – he would get none of them. I shook my head.

He raised his eyebrows and then whistled a quick, high note. The two men moved away from the grey walls and stepped into the street, walking across without pausing. One was tall with hunched shoulders and hair that floated in stringy wisps and curls about his head, the other was shorter with thick arms that he held away from his body. They didn't look to their right or left to avoid the cars, but marched across, their strides long and confident, the cars swerving around them and blasting honks like geese.

My hand, against my sweater, began to feel sticky. My back turned hot and cold at the same time. I thought about Belen's hand slapping me across the face and his boot kicking me in the side. I thought of Celso tying me to a tree with a donkey.

Just before the men reached us, a man with a long heavy coat brushed against me. He said, "Excuse me," stepped into the street to get around the eye-tooth man, and then stepped back onto the walkway. I reached for his wrist and whispered.

"Please."

He looked at me, started when he saw my face, and then glanced at the three men grouping around me. He backed away, yanking his arm from my grasp, and then he ran.

"People know us," said the first man. His smile evaporated, his face more narrow and skunk-like than before. "No one will help you. Now we need all the money and if

you give it to us without argument, we won't make you pay in other ways." The two men stepped closer, their smell caustic and biting like the skunk cabbage.

"I need this," I whispered.

"I don't give a shit," he whispered back and then laughed. The two men behind him laughed rhythmically, a sound like hacking coyotes.

"Let's give this a try," said the man with the thick arms. He stepped around the leader. I held my hand over my pocket and tried to back away but before I could step beyond his reach, a fist landed in my stomach knocking the air out of me and I curled up, gasping.

The first man reached into my pocket and pulled out the coins. I looked at his shoes, black, pointed, the material patterned in diamonds like snakeskin. Water leaked from the corners of my eyes and darkened the grey cement in splotches.

"I'll let you keep one as a reminder of what you'll lose if you refuse to pay us." And then they were gone, back across the street, stopping the flow of cars.

I sat down on the gray cement and tried to catch my breath. Each of my lives seemed to grow shorter and sink lower. How low could lives go? Lower than the earth, lower than the worms, lower than death. When I was able to stand erect and breathe, I didn't feel like crying anymore. I was done crying. Now I would merely exist.

We couldn't return to our rooms until 2:00 am. I didn't know why I couldn't return until then, I didn't know how to figure out if it was 2:00 am, and I didn't dare go to the common room in case I was the only one there, so I wandered.

The people in the city all seemed to know someone, talking to those around them, yelling across the street, talking into tiny telephones that they held to their ears. People in the cars yelled out the windows and honked horns, their anger palpable even where I walked. The buildings were all crooked, ragged and cracked with laundry strung across them and around them like tangled ropes. I kept my head down, and felt more lonely here than I had when chained to the doghouse. *Sometimes it is worse to be noticed.* Nathanael might have been right in some circumstances but here I felt like vapor, like smoke, like a shadow that might as well not exist. People brushed against me, bumped into my shoulder, stepped on the heel of my shoe but no one looked at me or said sorry. The only proof of my existence was the muffled sound of my shoes scuffing against the hard ground.

Everywhere I turned, someone with crooked limbs, distorted features or missing body parts sat with a hat, a jar or can in front of them. So many of us. What was wrong with this world that so many human beings were distorted in some way? I stood in the middle of a bridge that rose above the river like a rainbow arch and on that bridge, I saw three beggars, all seated on the cold ground calling out for money. I returned the way I'd come.

I walked until fewer and fewer people passed me, until the buildings shrank in size, more and more houses appeared and every now and then I passed a square of grass, vibrant and alive. The buildings felt substantial here, square, individual houses that were painted solid colors and didn't lean to the side. They weren't built on top of each other precariously but stood alone, well-cared for.

I stopped at a patch of green that stretched like a surprise meadow in front of me. The open space bustled with shrieking children, benches lined the walkways and a pond with lily pads rippled with the slight wind. It was as though all the green growth in the city had fled to this one spot, an oasis in the desert of manmade structures. A sign in the middle of the grass said Toulouse Park.

I walked to the pond as quietly as I could, glancing beside me now and then to see if anyone followed or rushed at me, shouting that I needed to leave. It was the first time since arriving in the city that I smelled green leaves, earth, and worms – it was the first time I could picture my camp in the woods without having to close my eyes and squeeze out a memory. This is where I would collect myself and get rid of the panicked feeling I'd had since arriving in the city.

An elderly woman holding a cane occupied one of the benches next to the pond. Her eyes were closed and her head leaned back, the hazy sun warming her face. I sat two benches away. My feet ached from all the walking I'd done to get to the city and my back groaned with relief when I sat. While orange and white fish flashed through the water in the pond as blips of blurred color, I pressed my hand where the man had forced the air out of me.

As I closed my eyes, ready to dream myself back home, I heard music, real music played with fingers and strings – not music squeezed through a radio, interwoven with static. I stood, looked around and hobbled on sore feet to a small grove of trees. Willow trees, the branches long and feathery, guarded the sides of the creek like hunched osprey, the branches dangling over a stream that trickled through the park. Underneath the branches I saw four musicians. One played a violin, one played a larger violin, one played a much larger instrument that he leaned against the ground and held between his legs, and the last played a violin so huge, she had to stand up to play it.

The music pulled me back to my camp, to running through the grasses, to a warm fire and laughter. I untied my veil from around my neck and adjusted it over my head. I crept to the other side of the tree, and sat on the roots, my back rubbing against the rough bark. I breathed in the beauty of the music: the lightness of the high notes, the sureness of the middle notes, the groans of the lowest notes. There was a wholeness to the music that I never heard when I played by myself.

I dreamed of dark nights by the fire, coyotes creeping just outside our camp circle of warmth, wolves howling up on the hills. Even the smell of this green area seemed right – woods, water, earth. If I had music to warm me, it would be enough.

When the music stopped, I opened my eyes. A man a few years older than myself, with orange-red hair and eyes the color of Christmas trees stared back. His eyes looked fully into mine, and without thinking, I reached up and touched the veil to make sure it was still in place.

“Would you play something for me?” He pointed to the violin beside me.

I stood, bumped my head on the branch above me, stumbled over the roots of the tree, pulled the strap of the violin over my shoulders and backed away, the willow branches snagging on my sweater. He stood too, his neck angled awkwardly beneath the branches of the tree, his head tilted down and to the side. I did not take my eyes off him as I moved away, but watched his half smile disappear as I wobbled, stumbled, and then walked across the grass and down to the street. I felt heat creeping into my neck. I didn't belong, not here, in this place where rejects sat on corners and begged for money.

When I'd listened to the music, I had felt like a part of something – a creation of beauty that included even me, but I was again nothing and if I disappeared, only Celso would care because he wouldn't get his money.

As I walked, I saw three others like me, one walking with crutches, one limping, and one looking down at her feet. All of their shoulders hunched, trying to conceal the disfiguration that tainted them. I followed them back to the neighborhood where the building with the caged bars leaned in a lackluster way toward the dilapidated building next to it. It wasn't dark yet. I wasn't supposed to return to my room, but I didn't know where else to go and my hands felt stiff and useless as I tucked them under my armpits.

But the doors were open and I walked inside. I felt a bit of warmth and shook off the cold that had followed me down the street. I walked to room #13, opened the door, closed it softly behind me and then shut my eyes. In the middle of the room, I lifted up my arms, raised them so they stretched straight from my body on either side, and I tilted my head back. In my head I heard the instruments with their individual melody lines and I let them ring.

If I could sit in Toulouse Park, rest beneath the willow trees and listen to the beauty of that song and transport myself back to the creek, I would be able to stand this life. I would be able to think of cool creeks with crayfish, of soft nights floating with bats, of friends who laughed and teased with the ease of family.

## 41

As I stood in my room, my body open to the music, I began to see fireflies against the lids of my eyes. My head rang with the music from the park, the notes winging through the air and as I emptied myself of the last few days, I began to see the music. The notes were as tangible to me as my own hand. They flitted through the air like hummingbirds and I watched the patterns they made. I saw birds flying in formation, the notes fitting together. The music in the park had been real, palpable, something I could see and touch.

But it began to dissolve when the door to room #13 slammed shut. Candela looked up at me as I stood in the middle of the room with my arms spread wide. She reminded me of Eva with her watchful eyes that took in everything, but Eva was quick to laugh, quick to be silly and I didn't think Candela had been silly for a very long time.

"How much did you make?"

The music bubbling in my head popped and all that beauty rushed out of me. I was left with the reality of my life - sitting on a street corner, losing the money I'd earned, and living in a house full of rejects. I reached into my pocket and felt the cold metal edge of the one coin.

"Why'd you have your eyes closed when I came in?"

I looked around the room, trying to find a way to explain the music I had seen in my head. I didn't know how to explain that music made me feel real and whole - it would take too many words to describe. But maybe I could show her.

"May I play my violin beside you tomorrow?"

"I don't work with other rejects."

"Just one day?" I asked. "Just one day."

"I thought you were different from Rosa, but you're not, are you?"

I blinked and felt a jolt. Rosa. The idea of Rosa made me feel small again, exposed. I had always been the dumb, unrelated sister, the one who wet her bed and cried out for her mother. Rosa had wanted to be beautiful more than any of us; she'd hated her face, hated herself, and I remembered once that we'd looked into the creek together, watching our broken faces appear on the surface of the water, and she'd held a handkerchief over her nose and mouth, hiding the deformities. She'd winked at the image of herself and said, "Buried beauty, but beauty all the same."

"You know Rosa?"

Candela looked at me with her lips drawn into a tight line. Her hands were still on her hips and she looked like a cat, wary and aloof but ready to flee or pounce.

"Why should I be nice to you? You'll end up selling sex just like she does. My friends never stay."

The words floated in the air between us, hovered and then dropped. When I understood what she'd said, my chest began to squeeze tight. Rosa sold sex. Rosa had been the one who'd told me about sex, about male body parts, about how babies were



made. When she had gotten her period, she had declared herself a woman, that now she could find a husband, someone who didn't care about her distorted features, and she would create her own family, one that would never reject her and would see her buried beauty for what it was.

So many times I'd woken up in our hut with her hand pushing against my lips, blocking my breath, and her words against my ear, "Stop blubbing, cry baby." But she'd taken care of me, she'd changed my diapers when I was little, she'd taught me my first word, *wind*, when I'd been a child. She'd combed and braided my hair when her mood had been right. I looked down at the mattress, envisioning Rosa there, Rosa's limbs entwined with someone else's – someone like Celso with his unused muscles and sweaty hands.

"One day," Candela said, "that's it, you understand? One day and then you find your own spot."

I looked at the map of water stains on the walls, at the flaking ceiling, at the exposed boards in the north corner of the room where I'd heard a rat the night before. How could Rosa stay in this room? No one stayed in this room. Maybe my destiny would match Rosa's; I now knew what a brothel was. I should have known all along.

## 42

While the sun still shone, Candela helped me drag my mattress out the front door of the building. She hit it with a flat paddle while I held it up and watched bugs jump into the cracks of the sidewalk. Candela told me that this wasn't enough, we'd have to spray the

mattress with an insecticide or the eggs already in the mattress would hatch, grow teeth and bite.

After sending the bedbugs to a new home, it was time to leave our rooms.

Candela showed me a clock on the wall in the common room, one like Nathanael had used back at the camp, and when it read 5:00 pm, it was time for us to leave our rooms to the use of others. The front door of the building opened and closed, opened and closed, allowing women with short skirts, long boots and revealing shirts to enter the building and take their places in the rooms. I walked with my head down and avoided eye contact with any of these ladies just in case one of them was Rosa. I couldn't face her, not just then.

Candela and I ate dinner, a warm stew thick with vegetables and meat. I was so hungry, I ate two full bowls. A boy maybe ten years old was the cook. He had two faces which startled me. He appeared blurred, repeated, like *déjà vu*; both faces smiled at me when I complemented him on his delicious stew. I wasn't sure which face to focus on, both sets of eyes looked down when I whispered to him, but I watched him slip extra chunks of meat and large wedges of potato into my bowl. When he handed the bowl back to me and smiled, I felt a little piece of beauty returning to my life. Two smiles on the same boy, there was nothing ugly about that.

The common room hummed with people. Some slept on the benches, some played games in the corners, some drew pictures or stared at the ceiling. Oscar played cards with the burned woman, a boy with only one arm, and another boy about the same age as Oscar but with blunted hands and feet. They had coins in the middle of the table and

shouted, laughed, yelled occasionally. I sat in the corner, my violin at my feet, and watched the members who lived here. This house wasn't so different from my camp in the woods – here, too, the people didn't fit with the outside world; here, too, we became our own family due to necessity rather than choice, but I didn't feel included and didn't know that I ever would.

Too tired to think or attempt socializing, I leaned my head against the wall and after a while, drifted into a hazy sleep of boys with two faces and girls sharing an arm.

### 43

The next day Candela allowed me to follow her out of the shelter.

“It's called The Half-Way House, or Purgatory Palace.” She waved her arm backwards, indicating the building we exited. “We'll take the sidewalk this way.”

I'd followed Oscar to the north yesterday, to the city center, but Candela walked in a different direction, west. She towed a suitcase on wheels behind her and when she arrived at a huge hill that slanted away from the morning sun, I helped her pull the maroon suitcase up the hill. Sidewalk, she called it.

“Don't think you're ingratiating yourself to me by pulling my suitcase up the hill. We work one day together and that's it. Got it?”

“I understand,” I said, but I didn't. In this city, working together seemed safe.

Before we reached the top of the hill, the buildings began to change. The new structures were made of white stone, a hard substance with patterned bumps. The houses here didn't have words scrawled on them, they didn't have pictures painted on their

fronts, but were clean and pristine, like the houses I'd seen around Tolouse Park the day before. Grass appeared in patches, the faded green of winter a welcome relief from the otherwise washed-out colors of the city, and big palm fronds added shade to the fronts of houses. We passed larger buildings filled with windows, layers and layers of windows that lay flat and opaque beneath statues of leering animals with horns and fangs. These buildings did not slant to the side or look as though a strong wind could blow them away, but they planted their walls firmly into the ground and held the upper levels confidently.

Candela paused, caught her breath for a minute, and then turned to the right. I looked into the windows of shops we passed and saw lamps, furniture carved from marbled wood, toys painted red and yellow, and even a store filled only with angels. Candela tugged at my sleeve when I lingered in front of the stores for too long. At a shop where the warming smell of coffee and bread overcame any other street smells, we paused. From her suitcase she pulled a folded stool and an easel which she set up in the middle of the sidewalk. She placed a pad of paper on the easel and put a flat box filled with thin black rectangles on her knees. She hung a sign from the easel which read,

“CARICATURES. \$5.00 each.” Over her left ear she angled a slanted red hat.

“I have an arrangement. I recommend their coffee and pastries, and they let me draw caricatures in front of their store.” She leaned in close and whispered quietly to me, “I’ve done all of their caricatures for free. Look through the window.”

When I peered through the window, I didn’t see anything beyond the glare of the sun so I shielded my face with my hands and pressed my nose against the cold glass. There were no customers inside the shop yet, only empty tables, an empty counter area,

and maybe fifty pictures lining the walls. The people in the drawings had disproportionately large heads with tiny bodies underneath. One, I realized, was Oscar, his dimples prominent, his mouth wide and warm, his missing legs irrelevant beneath the square jaw and warm grin.

When I looked back at Candela, she took out a black pencil-like rectangle and drew on the pad of paper with it. Her hands were fast, sure and beneath the different shades of gray and black, I began to emerge. She made my eyes dark with thick black eyelashes. The eyebrows became prominent, the nose straight, the openings between my nose and mouth mere slits, barely perceivable smudges. The bubbled lips, the widened nostrils were smooth, softened. I was beautiful.

She gave the picture to me when she was done. I reached into my pocket and tried to give her the coin. She pushed my hand away.

“Play your violin,” she said. “Even if you don’t make money, you’re not getting any of mine.” I squatted next to Candela, placing the violin case in front of me and fitting the instrument beneath my chin. I eased the bow over the strings and thought of the music I’d heard in the park the day before. The notes piled up in my mind like the birds flying in formation; I felt the music in my chest, in my head, down my arms and out my fingers. Tucking my chin in close to the instrument, I played the song I’d heard from the four musicians. Then I played it again.

When I finished, I looked at Candela. My head felt a bit woozy. It felt good to play the song, but it didn’t have the wholeness, the filled in melodies that the music in the park had. I felt dissatisfaction now as though I were trying to make do with a fountain

when all my life I'd had waterfalls to splash in, but Candela's eyes were wide, her eyebrows furrowed.

"Where did you learn that song?"

"Toulouse Park."

"You heard it in the park. Yesterday. And now you're playing it."

I looked down at the sidewalk and felt uncertain – it wasn't okay. I'd stolen the song and then made it worse.

"Play again," she said, "and make everyone want to hold their arms out and lift their faces to the sun."

I looked up at her. There was an intensity to the way she looked at me that I'd misjudged. Candela wasn't angry or frustrated, she was surprised. Maybe this was how she talked to people – without smiles or winks but through intensity. It was okay, I hadn't done anything wrong. I closed my eyes and all around me was the music. I forgot the rest, the bugs in the bed, a lost sister named Rosa, the shocked stares of people around me, the men who'd stolen my money. When I played the violin, I was transported to a different world: a world of sweet smells, tolerance and blue dragonflies in golden fields.

A tap on my shoulder pulled me out of the music. Candela stood in front of me with a mug of hot cocoa in her hands. The steam rose up around her face and made her look unearthly, like a dark-haired angel.

"Time for a break," she said and squatted down on the sidewalk next to me. Coins littered the red lining of my violin case. "Yeah, honey, you're working with me every

day. Usually I do three or four caricatures on a good day. Today I've done twice that and it's not even the afternoon yet. You're good for business."

A girl with a very red nose and watery eyes stood in front of us with two plates. She sniffed and avoided looking at my face.

"That was so beautiful," the girl said. "Here, these are from him."

She nodded toward a table behind me where a customer sat. I looked over, not daring to look up, and saw brown loafers beneath brown slacks. Candela stood, said thank you, but a hand waved at her from above the table and a voice said, "I would pay far more to hear music like that." The server set the plates on the ground. On them were sandwiches – sandwiches with meat, cheese, lettuce, tomatoes; everything good, crunchy and fresh. Candela took one of the sandwiches and talked to me around a mouthful.

"I don't know, girl. I haven't heard anyone play the violin like that. The guy's right, people would pay good money for this kind of music. How'd you learn to play that thing?"

I thought about the music flying around, waiting to be caught. How do you explain to someone that the music was a part of me, something I'd always known? All I'd needed was the instrument and Nathanael's help with the fingering. It was like Rayanna. No one had taught me to love her, I'd just done it. I felt warmth as I sat there on the cement in front of this café, warmth that refreshed my spirit and helped me feel like maybe there was a place for me in this dilapidated world, even if that place happened to be where others put their feet.

On the way home, Candela and I stepped into a small store with bars across the door and windows. A greasy man behind the counter wore his black hair swiped in sticky strands from the right side of his head over the top to the left. His nose had a large red wart on the bridge. Candela walked to the counter with a can of bedbug repellent and pushed some coins at the man. His gnarled hands took our money, pushed the can at us.

“You filthy people, covered in lice, infested with germs, itching with fleas, scabies, ticks, crawling with worms...”

“Yeah, yeah,” Candela said, turning her back on the man. “Ever looked at your own nose?”

I was ready to run, ready to protect my body, ready for a boot to kick me or a fist to land in my stomach but nothing happened and the man didn’t follow us out of his shop. I didn’t understand this city. When I didn’t expect anger and cruelty, it rose like thorns from the ground and when I expected it, nothing happened.

We sprayed bug repellent over the two mattresses in room #13 and then went to the only space available to us, the common room. Already many of the other residents sat at the tables playing games, talking, dozing. Maybe Rosa would use my room tonight; maybe the smell of the spray would help her forget what it was she did for a living.

#### 44

I worked with Candela every day. I played the violin until my fingers ached and my neck felt like it might never straighten again but I could feel my songs taking shape, coming



alive. I started new songs. I didn't know if the people around me cared that I played a few songs they might recognize, the rest coming from places inside me where the woods still grew and the breeze rustled branches. I liked composing my own songs; they felt like something to hold onto in this chaotic place where noises were so piercing and sharp that they buried the undertones of nature.

I began to notice patterns –the same people came to the bakery where Candela and I sat and even though I didn't dare look these customers in the eye, I recognized them from their shoes. A pair of brown loafers tapped the beat to my music and every day those loafers resided under the outside tables, the ones closest to me and they stayed there for a long time, even though the mornings were cold and few others chose to sit outside.

I continued to collect coins and Candela taught me how to count them. The big one with the head of the man and the sheaf of grain on the back was worth \$5.00. The smaller, silver one with the pig on the front and #1 on the back was worth \$1.00. Those were the ones you wanted, the ones that added up to something substantial. The smaller ones were good too, but took many more to accumulate. After a week, I had enough to pay for two weeks of rent and a bit left over for Celso. Candela said I needed to talk to Ofelia about my documentation. I knew what she meant, the crumpled piece of paper that had been passed from Celso's hands to Ofelia's. It wasn't mine. I didn't really want it. We stood outside Ofelia's door and I tried to stand up straight, look her in the eye, but I'd become used to staring at feet.

“She needs her birth certificate,” Candela said to Ofelia slowly, carefully.

“What she need that for,” Ofelia said. Some liquid sloshed out of the glass in her hand and landed at our feet. She lived in the first room, #1, and I looked past her, through the doorway.

I’d never seen a room like this. Tapestries covered the walls like the canopy of leaves had covered parts of my forest home. Beautiful quilts, stitched bead work, handmade artwork turned her oblong room that had the same dirty floors and lack of windows that my room had into a haven, a place that anyone could have been comfortable in. Red and yellow rugs covered the floor like a field of poppies. Even the cover on her bed was handmade, patched together in squares of dark purple and green. Living in a room like this would keep life gorgeous all the time. Ofelia jabbed her fingers into my chest.

“What’chou staring at,” she said. “I want my rent.”

I opened my hand and offered her \$50.00 in coins. She snatched the money, her fingers forceful, jamming into my palm.

“Been making some good money, huh,” she said. “Maybe your ugly face won’t have to work the night shift after all, though I wouldn’t count on it.”

I told myself not to take a step back, not to worry about the splash of liquid on top of my shoe, not to flinch when her breath made my eyes water.

“The birth certificate,” Candela said.

Ofelia retreated into her room, shuffled through some papers, and returned with a single sheet of crumpled paper.

“Lydia Gane, daughter of Belen and Teresa Gane,” Ofelia looked up, her red eyes unfocused. “It should say rejected daughter of Belen and Teresa Gane, born October 13<sup>th</sup>,

1994. Here's your reminder of the parents who abandoned you." she flipped the paper at me. I tried to catch it but it fluttered out of reach and drifted to the floor. I bent down and picked it up carefully, between my thumb and first finger. Ofelia stepped back into her room and slammed the door.

This piece of paper was proof of my existence and meant more to the bank where I hoped to deposit my money than did my physical presence. Ofelia was right – all this paper proved was that I had a name. It said nothing of my life, who cared about me or what I might become in the future. This paper claimed that I had parents but that was as true as the cry of the mockingbird.

#### 45

I liked Candela and her gruff ways. She wasn't hurtful, like Rosa, but she also told me things straight, honest, with no hidden messages and meanings. I felt comfortable with this but she didn't tell me everything, at least not right away. There were times when she hinted at something, when she started to talk about who she was, why she was here, and then she'd stop. It took weeks of working together daily, making money, and hanging out in the common room before I heard her story and then I wondered why I'd wanted to know.

It was late afternoon and we had about an hour before we needed to vacate – make space for the night shift. We sat in Candela's room, which was more comfortable than mine even though the room was the same shape, a small rectangle with one high window. It contained the same mattress – a flat foam cushion that rested on the floor, and

it had the same placement of the door – right in the middle of the wall as though escape or exit were more important than staying. Her drawings adorned the walls. I loved looking at them. I saw Oscar in many of the pictures and I found myself in two. Ofelia was in a lot of them but the pictures made her look less drunk, more humane. All of the pictures flattered.

Oscar was with us for a while in Candela's room and we played cards, Rummy, a game I had played with Jeremiah and Nathanael. Homesickness burned my nose.

"Oscar, are you cheating?" Candela asked as he laid down a set of three aces.

"I don't cheat," he said.

"Right."

I smiled. Jeremiah used to stack the deck – put the aces every third card and deal himself an unbeatable hand but we had all known he was doing it. He would bite the knuckle of his first finger and stop talking. His right knee would bob up and down, up and down, controlled by invisible strings.

Oscar was quiet now. I heard him flipping the cards in his hand. I could almost touch the lines of tension that stretched between the two of them, excluding me.

"Why do you hate me?" Oscar said to Candela in a whisper.

The anger was gone. This was the real Oscar, without the bravado and the dimples, without the dejection and begging. I wanted to look at him but I didn't.

"You know why," she whispered.

"We can't be together, Candela," he said. "You know that. Two freaks is one too many. Both of us need someone normal."

“What the hell is normal? If half the people in this city are normal, then I’m glad to be a freak. They’re more deformed than we will ever be. At least our problems are right out where people can see them instead of hidden away.”

I held my breath. She was talking about Belen, Celso, Ofelia, Jeremia’s father. Why hadn’t I ever noticed that before – everyone had deformities, not just those of us who wore them as appendages, as part of our skin. Oscar shuffled the cards in his hands.

“You broke my heart, Oscar, breaking up with me.” I could hear a squeak in Candela’s voice, a waver that felt close to tears. “That’s why I hurt you back.”

Candela and Oscar sat on opposite ends of the mattress. I sat on the floor, the third point in the triangle. When I looked up, they didn’t notice. I eased my breath out slowly.

I saw something I hadn’t noticed before as I observed the two of them. Candela was sure of herself, solid and talented. Oscar was unsure, angry, resentful and yet full of charisma. If they were together, Candela would keep Oscar grounded, keep him in the realm of the good while he could show the world her talent, using his charm. I’d never seen people complement each other like that. Had my mother and father looked like this when they were together? I’d always wondered what my mother had seen in my father, why she’d stood by him when he’d abandoned me and why she chose him over me. There must be something redeemable in Belen and when I looked at Oscar, I began to see it.

Oscar, too, could be biting and cruel and yet when he loved and cared about someone, he did so with such defiance and bravery, you couldn’t help but like him. And yet, I didn’t trust him. Never would. His dimples and grins hid an insecurity that could

easily become backstabbing. I would never trust Belen either, not if he could abandon his first born and stand by watching when his brother chained me to a doghouse.

“You know why we can’t be together. I will not be exploited all my life, living in this place, begging. I will be someone.”

“You are someone, Oscar. You don’t need someone without blemishes to make you whole.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not going to make me whole either. Two halves do not make a whole when it comes to people.” Oscar slid off the bed and out the door.

“Yes, they do,” Candela screamed after him. “Two halves always make a whole. Even with people.”

I felt like my hair was standing on end. I stood up.

“Oh no you don’t,” she said to me.

I sat back down on the floor and collected the cards. I shuffled them and waited, the tendons in my hands straining as I held the cards too tight.

Candela took shuddering breaths and then un-balled her fists. She squeezed the pillow to her chest and rested her chin on it. Her nose was red, glistening, and her hands shook. She wiped her eyes with the pillowcase, wiped under her nose.

“I’ve known love. Oscar hasn’t. I should try to understand his side but sometimes it’s so hard. Why does he want to be with someone normal so badly? He’ll never grow legs.” She pushed the pillowcase against her eyes. She spoke to me through the pillow, her words distant and muffled.

“You know how you grew up? In the woods with friends and people who cared? That’s how I grew up. I had a family who loved me. They thought I was so cute, so tiny and adorable. My older sister carried me with her wherever she went and treated me like a doll.” Candela pulled her face out of the pillow and rested her chin on top of it. She wiped under her nose with the sleeve of her shirt. “Oscar was left here when he was three days old. The owners of the place, the people before Ofelia, gave him a name and wrote up some papers. He doesn’t even know what his parents originally named him.”

I’d been abandoned at that age. Why hadn’t Belen brought me here, to start a life of begging before I could even walk?

“But I do know what it’s like to have family turn on you.”

When I glanced up, she was looking at me. I nodded.

“When I turned twelve I started to grow breasts, like most girls do at that age, but my sister didn’t think I was quite so cute when I no longer looked like a miniature child. That’s when she became nervous around me and started listening to what other people said about me – I was malformed, a dwarf, and because there was no dwarfism in my family otherwise, I must have done something terrible to deserve this punishment.

“One night, her boyfriend came to our house. He and my sister were going to the dance in town and she was upstairs getting ready. I thought he was so gorgeous with his black eyes and black hair. I offered him refreshments while he waited for her and we sat together on the couch drinking lemonade. I think he was fascinated with me. I didn’t look like the other girls and this was disturbing and intriguing to lots of boys. He stared at my body and then he reached out to touch my breasts.”

Candela's hands clutched the pillow in her arms, they wrung and twisted the white corners into knots, wrinkled knobs with pointed tips like albino teardrops.

"I'd never been touched like that before. I'd always been treated like a child, like a doll but he noticed that I was actually growing up."

She looked at me then, the anger gone.

"I kissed him, Whisper," she said. "I leaned right in and kissed him on the mouth. He pulled me against him and I could feel his warmth through my clothes. My sister came down the stairs and saw us. She never forgave me. She told everyone at school that I was a slut, that I stole boyfriends, that I couldn't get enough sex and would do it with anyone."

Candela smoothed her thick bangs out of her eyes. She threw the pillow behind her and crossed her legs.

"That's when the guys at school started following me around, calling me names, treating me like a freak. My sister never defended me. She wanted me gone. So I left. And here I am. Eighteen and in love with Oscar. I'm such a moron."

"No," I whispered.

Her hands reached for mine and squeezed hard until my knuckles cracked beneath the pressure.

"You're not like Rosa," she said to me. "You're not like anyone I know. You are the only person I've ever met who makes me feel good about myself and I don't even know how you do it."



We sat together in silence for a while but it felt okay. I could hear the building groan around us. I could hear the mice. I could hear the other Purgatory Palace residents stirring and gathering and heading to the common room, I could hear the honking of car horns and the yelling of pedestrians on the street.

“I want to see Rosa,” I whispered to Candela.

She let go of my hand, sat up straight and looked past me. “Okay.”

## 46

A week later, instead of moving to the common room for the evening with Candela and the others, I exited the building with my violin strapped to my back. I turned the corner and stepped into a doorway, the wooden door behind me solid and sure with bars stretching across the front to ward off possible thieves. After I’d stood still long enough to feel the chill seeping through my torn sweater into my bones, and when the blurring effects of night had settled around me, I saw two women arrive together. They were laughing, their eyes lined with black, their lips abnormally red, their eyebrows narrowed into thin arches and their coats alive with the fur of dead animals.

Neither of these women were Rosa. I didn’t want to meet Rosa inside Purgatory Palace, in one of the rooms where a man might knock on the door and money change hands. I wanted to meet her here, in the street, in an untainted place, in front of a door that seemed impenetrable.

A bit later, Rosa arrived by herself. I waited in the shadow until I knew for sure that it was she. Her cheeks were no longer puffy and full, her hair had been cropped short

in spikes and prickles, and her eyes – lined with black – didn't look anywhere but down. It was the raised red birthmark that reached from her forehead, down her right cheek, to the edge of her jaw that convinced me. She didn't see me even when I stepped out from the doorway. She had almost passed me when I spoke.

“Hello, Rosa,” I whispered.

Her head jerked up and she looked at me in such a way that I wanted to step back into the shadows and hide. It wasn't hate, in her eyes, but something very close to it. And then the look disappeared and Rosa's regular surliness asserted itself, twisting the edges of her eyes down and the corners of her mouth up.

“Well, look who's here.” She put one hand on her hip but the other hand stayed where it was, against her stomach which bulged beneath her coat. “You're a little young to be here already, aren't you? What are you now, sixteen?”

I shifted from foot to foot and held my hand against my chest where Jeremia's violin rested.

“How'd you end up here? And don't tell me you still aren't talking. If you're going to live here, in the city, with all the other hard-luck cases, you had better make some noise.”

I opened my mouth but nothing came out. She looked at me like she used to – like I was pathetic and small, unwise and unhardened. She used to make me feel so useless and now I felt that same sensation again. I was that little girl, afraid of the dark, sniffing in the night afraid to make any sound.

And then I heard a squeak, a kitten peep that tittered from Rosa's coat. I looked at the front of her white puffy coat and saw something squirm. Rosa removed her hand from her hip and placed it under the bulge. She jostled the bump up and down, up and down but when the peeps continued, she unzipped the top of her coat and a tiny head emerged. The eyes met mine and the peeps stopped.

The baby was beautiful. Her lips weren't deformed, her mouth and nose weren't divided by a slit, a birthmark didn't cover half her face in an angry welt. She looked at me with bright eyes that seemed to understand everything at once.

"She's beautiful." My hand reached toward her, to a perfect little Rayanna. If she had flaws, they were hidden from view.

Rosa's mouth relaxed and her hands reached up to adjust the knitted cap on the baby's head. "She is beautiful," she said.

A tiny hand emerged from the coat and stretched out to me, the hand healthy with rolls and dimples. The chubby fingers grasped my thumb and held on with a grip that felt real, as if something substantial and good did exist in this world. Then Rosa took a step back and the tiny hand was pulled away from me.

"What are you doing here? You're not meant to ever leave that camp. They'll eat you alive here; you'll never survive. Go back to the camp, go live in the woods, hide with the others. Stay good, stay pure." Her voice was so low and biting it chafed like the brittle snow that cuts in the winter.

"Who is the father?" I asked.

She turned away from me, her feet already pointed in the opposite direction, her black-lined eyes watching the trodden sidewalk.

“Just wait. You’ll do the same thing I did. They’ll start following you, telling you how beautiful your body is, how sexy you look and you’ll believe them even when you know it isn’t true. Then you’ll go with them and feel loved like other people are loved. And once you feel that love, there’s no turning back. It’ll happen to you, too.”

She walked away, taking the perfect child with her. My right hand was raised. It was level with my shoulder, stretched to Rosa. I lowered my hand and watched her turn the corner where she would enter Purgatory Palace and continue to squelch the defiance that had once kept her eyes leveled with anyone’s, not trained on the ground.

#### 47

Night was thick now, colder and heavy. The painted women began to pace on the sidewalks, their pointed heels like woodpecker beats against the hard ground. I couldn’t follow Rosa into the building – I didn’t want to see her standing in the doorway of a room, waiting for her customers, earning a living while her baby squeaked and gurgled in the corner.

Instead I trudged west, through the square where Oscar begged, over a bridge where the stream from our village swelled into a black river that smelled of chemicals and latrines, to the blocks of big stores that sold everything from clothes to pots to fishing poles. I had never been here before. These stores occupied entire blocks and stretched above me three or four stories, their shadows silent, solid and sharp unlike the shadows of

trees that rustle, shift and sway. The windows shone yellow, orange and warm. My hands were numb with the cold. After watching people push their way into the store or emerge with bags dangling from their hands, I held my shoulders straight and walked into the first store, standing just in the entryway, watching the people who swarmed like flies around counters and racks of clothing. They glanced at my exposed face and then looked quickly away.

I didn't belong here. This city welcomed rejects only on grey street corners where dirt and scuff marks marred the cement. This shiny, posh store belonged to those with money to spend and bellies already full. I stepped back, away from the warmth and unfriendly stares, but stopped when I saw the coat. It was dark green like the forest, thick like the canopy of my home, and soft like the feathery arms of the willow. Big wooden clasps the color of cedar held the front of the coat closed. I touched the dark green material with my fingertips. It would warm me while I stayed on the streets during the day and would remind me of my forest home.

The tag dangled beneath a sleeve. \$110.00: the price of two week's stay at Purgatory Palace or a month of pay for Celso. I touched the sleeve of the coat again and then lifted it to my face, the smell of newness surprising and strange.

While I stretched the fabric across my cheek, a firm grip dug into my shoulder and yanked me back. Almost losing my footing, I flung my arms out, trying to catch myself, and jabbed my fingers into the cheek of a store clerk. He screamed. When I recovered my balance and opened my mouth to apologize, he held his hand to his face and shrieked again.

“She attacked me,” he said, pointing his finger at me then stumbling away, gasping in great gulps as he ran.

I glanced to the sides. The people who had ignored me before, who had watched their feet when I stood near them, now stared at me openly, their mouths straight, their eyes narrow. I untied the veil from around my neck and backed to the door. I should have left when I’d had the chance, when I’d recognized the exclusion of this place. Before I could make an exit, the man who had grabbed my shoulder came back down the aisle followed by a short, rolling man wearing spectacles. I turned and ran.

My heart pounded so hard, I thought it might escape through my mouth. I pushed my way through the doors of the store, the violin strapped to my back banging against me, matching the rhythm of my heart. I turned corners as I rushed past others on the street: right, left, right again, then left, over the bridge, beyond the river. I didn’t look behind me, I didn’t slow down, I couldn’t stop. The veil still covered the gaps between my fingers rather than those between my mouth and nose and I knew that anyone who saw me would recognize me now and again later.

When my chest burned from the cold air and my sides heaved, I slowed down. I knew where I was. I was in the park where I’d heard the four musicians playing under the willow tree. It was the smell of this place that pulled me back each time. I looked around but no one chased after me into the park, no one grabbed my shoulder, no one screamed for me to stop. My breath was so loud, moved through me with such intensity that I bent over, gasped and placed my hands on my knees.

It was dark, the park empty except for a couple strolling hand in hand. They wore warm coats, gloves, and scarves. I shivered in my black sweater with the holes at the elbows. I crept under the willow tree, hiding and panting until my breathing slowed and the panic subsided. Then I sat with my back to the tree and closed my eyes. With my eyes closed, with my breath calming, the sounds outside of my body became discernable. No pounding feet chased me into the park, and the honking sounds of the city were quiet here, muted. Up close, I could hear the trickling of the creek, the pip of a bat and the rustle of leaves as the dry branches of the willow rubbed against each other.

Under all of this other noise, I heard music. It came from the base of the tree in waves and patterns. The melody floated around me, brushing against my arms and cheeks, but when I opened my eyes, I saw nothing. I closed my eyes again and listened. The song of this jostling city welled up inside of me, the sound of my panic stirred beneath the ground. I pulled the violin from around my shoulders, opened the case, fit the instrument under my chin, breathed deeply – my panic finally abating - and began to play. I played along with the song that fled in panic through the willow branches.

Until deep into the night, I sat by the tree and felt music, the music of stars, strays and isolation. The violin fit against my shoulder and became the coat I didn't have, the warmth I didn't feel.

## 48

**By** the time I located Purgatory Palace, my hands ached. I curled my fingers into my armpits and tried to warm some of the ache out of my fingertips. When I arrived at the

building, I stopped across the street and waited in the shadow of a neighboring building while music without meaning thumped above me and reverberated through the walls, obliterating any noise or clues from the police officers across the street.

Two men in green uniforms stood outside, illuminated by the light from the door, and Ofelia, glass in hand, talked to them. She pointed down the street, shook her head and kept the bars of the door between her and the men. A tightness filled my chest, a squeezing that had nothing to do with my arms wrapped around my body. The face of the store clerk appeared in my mind, the face stretched long, mouth open in fear.

The police officers returned to their car which sent two piercing beams of light into the street like glowing wolf eyes. Three women with black-lined eyes, short skirts and pointed shoes swayed past the officers.

“Hey, baby,” said one of the women. “You looking for me?”

“Not tonight,” one replied.

I waited in the dark of the doorway until the police car mingled with the other vehicles in the street, creating a living, changing flow of noise and smog. I crossed the street in spurts, stopping and starting as the traffic roared around me. I squeezed into the small space between our building and the one next to it, ignoring the women on the sidewalk as they ignored me. I hadn’t looked at how high the windows in our rooms were, but now that I was between the buildings, I saw that I wouldn’t be able to reach Candela’s window without a stool. Debris littered the ground –newspapers, plastic bags, an old sink. I kicked over a washtub and stood on its upturned bottom. With my



fingertips, I reached through the bars to the glass of Candela's window. I tapped a hollow ping.

My nerves were strung tight like the strings of my violin, and I watched the narrow passage between the buildings, waiting for the officers to return, capture me and lock me away in a world even stranger than this one. I tried to calm myself, convince my sweating palms that they hadn't been here for me – they'd come for someone else – but the fear making my limbs tremble convinced me otherwise. I'd probably lose my room, lose the one friend I had, lose the warmth of Purgatory Palace. Strange how awful places seem not so awful when a more terrible alternative presents itself. My camp in the woods had been a haven, Belen's house had been bearable, Purgatory Palace was almost tolerable now that I had a friend and a means to make money; being tossed out into the street felt incomprehensible.

"Whisper." Candela stood in the narrow corridor between the buildings.

"I'm here." I slid between the walls back to the opening.

"Come now, fast, Ofelia's in her room."

Candela turned and ran the short space to the front door. Oscar sat in the entryway, keeping the door open and watching for Ofelia. When I got to the door, Candela took my hand and pulled me into her room. Oscar followed and softly closed the door behind us. Candela rubbed my hands and arms. I was shaking.

"What did you do?"

My knees began to tremble and I lowered myself to Candela's mattress. "I went into a store on the other side of the river," I said. "Randall and something. I looked at a

coat. A clerk grabbed me by the shoulder, pulled me back and when I tried to catch myself, I scratched him in the face. They chased me out of the store and I ran.”

Candela shook her head. Oscar raised one eyebrow.

“Randall and Burns. Why, of all stores, did you choose that one to go into?”

Oscar started to smile. “Course, when I get my legs, I’m going in there. I’m going to chew gum and tuck wads of it into the pockets of all their expensive coats. I’m going to try on their fancy suits after not bathing for half a year. I’m going to cross that line between them and us and I’m going to spread rot when I do.”

“We’ll hide you,” Candela said. “You think stuff like this hasn’t happened before? A year ago I had to hide Oscar for two weeks when he got into a fight with a cop.”

Candela looked at Oscar. Oscar looked at the ground.

“If you lay low for a couple of weeks, Ofelia forgets about it and unlocks your room.” Candela pointed to the mattress on the other side of her room. “You can stay there.”

“Why did you go into Randall and Burns anyway?” Oscar asked.

My hands in my lap were red and raw. I wondered how much longer I could play the violin in the streets. If it kept getting colder, I wouldn’t be able to hold onto the bow, I wouldn’t be able to squeeze out the songs, I wouldn’t be able to pay Celso and protect my family.

“I need a coat,” I whispered.

“Well, that’s not where you get one. I’ll take you to the thrift store sometime this week. The coats there might not be the prettiest, but they look fine on us – it’s good enough for us – beggars.”

I was safe but my mother’s gifts were in room #13. I had the violin – the most important gift, but I wanted the handkerchief that smelled of bread, I wanted the rag doll, the silver spoon, the rock with pores. I touched the top of my leg, pushed my mother’s skirt against my skin and felt its comforting warmth. I wanted to keep what little I had.

Candela told me I’d get my things back, later, when Ofelia forgot and when the police weren’t looking for me. I didn’t know how long that would be – Ofelia might have a short memory, but I wasn’t so sure about anyone else. If the police were like me, then they remembered everything.

## 49

Candela was an easy roommate. She didn’t snore, she didn’t boss or intrude. We spent so little time in the rooms anyway, it hardly seemed to matter that I was in a different space. Home had become something intangible, foggy and unknown.

In the morning Candela got breakfast while I washed in the basin of water after she did. I used her dirty water; I ate half of her meal. We trudged up the hill to the coffee shop.

The city was colder than the forest had been. I didn’t know why this would be since the forest grew on the side of a mountain, but here there was nothing to hold the

warmth close and hug it in tight – no trees, no bushes, no hills. The cement, stone and brick of the buildings held as much warmth as icicles.

Candela did five caricatures. I played the violin. The mornings were cold but the afternoon warmed up as the sun tried to beat its way through the haze of the city. I had enough rent money for another month but I couldn't pay Celso on top of that and I would not resort to begging.

While I crouched on the ground and played my third set of songs, Candela nudged me with her foot. Two police officers had parked their car across the street and were walking toward us.

My hands became sweaty and even though I tried to keep playing, my fingers slipped on the bow and the violin slipped from beneath my chin.

“Run,” Candela whispered to me.

My heart began to beat in my left temple.

“Run!”

I didn't bother with the violin case, but stood, tucked the instrument under my arm, and ran.

“Hey,” someone shouted behind me.

My feet slapped against the cement and warmth crept into me, starting in my legs and working up into my chest. My heart began to pound and I heard a strange whistling in my ears. This was the time of year when the earaches started and I could feel one nesting against my head like the pinchers of a crayfish. I turned left, then right, then left until I was disoriented.

The footsteps that had chased me down the street seemed to have quieted although my ears rang so loudly I wasn't sure. If I had been in the woods, I could have slipped between the trees, crouched in the bushes, and camouflaged myself in the vines. I could have disappeared in seconds but it felt like hours and I was still pounding my way in thumps and beats away from those two police officers.

When I finally slowed down, I was outside of the park with the willow tree. I ran to it and crawled underneath its sweeping arms. I placed my back against the tree, pulled my legs up to my chest, balanced my violin on the tops of my knees and tried to slow my breathing. They could find me here, they would, and then what would I do?

The deep breaths started to work and my gasping slowed. That's when I heard the crashing footsteps that had followed me all the way to this place.

I tried to become part of the tree. I hugged my knees tighter, placed my chin on top of the violin and stopped breathing. Whoever had been chasing me breathed like Celso's mule, ragged fish gasps through his mouth and nose. I didn't dare peak around the tree to see who was there.

The tree shuddered when the pursuer leaned heavily against it. I closed my eyes and tensed my body, ready to leap and begin the chase all over again.

"Woah...girl..." panted a voice from behind the tree, "you... are... going... to... kill... this... old... man."

I couldn't remember if the police officers had looked old or not. Had one been an old man?

“Ha...” said the voice. I heard the man slide down the tree to sit heavily on the ground. It was time to run; this was my chance, but I didn’t know where to go from here. They would find me no matter where I ran. I sat, my muscles taught, and I waited.

“Ahhh.” His breathing was not quite as fast, not quite as labored. “Whew.”

My breath eased out of me slowly, evenly. I was quiet as a bat, still as a butterfly, stealthy as a fox.

“Okay,” said the voice. “Maybe I won’t have a heart attack. If I’d have known you were coming here, I wouldn’t have run so hard. There are about ten different ways I could have come to this park, all of them shorter.”

Slow as a silent snake in dried leaves, I peaked around the side of the tree as far as my neck would allow. All I saw were feet and ankles. The ankles were clothed in black tight socks and on the feet were brown loafers. Brown shoes. And that’s when Rosa’s words came back to me.

*Just wait. You’ll do the same thing I did. They’ll start following you around...and then there’s no turning back.*

I knew what this man wanted and I would not give it to him. I leaned forward, put my weight on my feet and tucked the violin under my arm. I was about to leap, about to run crazed through the streets again when he spoke.

“When you listened to us, that day under this very same willow tree, I had no idea how well you could play. But when I heard you repeat Bruch Concerto #1 in G minor while you sat in front of the coffee shop, I knew that you were more gifted than all of my university students combined.”

He panted for a moment and took a few deep breaths. I was squeezing the violin so tightly, the fret dug into the underbelly of my arm.

“I believe that you heard the song once. Once! And then repeated it perfectly. Is this true?”

A face appeared around the side of the tree. The face was friendly enough with a fuzzy gray mustache and heavy gray eyebrows, but I knew what he wanted from me and I doubted that it had anything to do with my musical abilities. I stood up and backed away from him.

“Is it true?” he repeated.

I shook my head. I took another step backwards while watching him. He didn’t get up to follow.

“So you had heard the piece before?” He raised his eyebrows and waited. “Please don’t make me run again.”

“I don’t understand,” I whispered.

“Well,” he said, “Who does? I don’t understand where musical gifts like that come from and yet here you are. Did you write the other songs yourself?”

I peered through the hanging arms of the tree and nodded. He clapped his hands together. Great creases appeared in his cheeks, creases that had graduated from dimples into caverns and rifts.

“Stupendous,” he said. “Marvelous. We must talk more. Come with me to a café and have a bite to eat somewhere. I’m tired from the run and I’m too old to sit on this hard ground.”

I took three quick steps away from him. My breath came hard and fast again. He would grab my arm tight as teeth and drag me away. I could not go anywhere with this man. The branches of the willow tree fell around my shoulders like welcome camouflage.

“Right,” he said. “Shouldn’t talk to strangers, eh?”

My eyes were beginning to hurt but I was too scared to blink. The throbbing of my right ear reminded me that I needed oil, warm oil to relieve the ache.

“Okay, then, let’s head back to the café where your friend is. She can be our chaperone, eh?” His laugh was deep, melodic. It made me think of waterfalls and swimming holes.

He groaned and pushed himself off the ground. His hands, in fur-lined black gloves brushed the debris from his pants and coat. When he stood, he was tall, much taller than me, much taller than Nathanael or Jeremia, but he leaned away from me with his body and had such a welcoming smile that I didn’t step back.

“Now then,” he said holding out his gloved hand, “I am Solomon.”

He didn’t lower his hand even though I waited many minutes. I stepped from the branches of the willow tree and touched his fingers with the tips of mine.

“Whisper,” I said.

“Wonderful to speak with you at last. I told the police officers that you are my student and that I would speak with you so I followed you here. They have agreed not to harass you at the café. I can’t guarantee that they won’t harass you at your place of residence, since they believe you assaulted someone, but the café is safe for now. I’ll lead the way. A much shorter way.”



With a sweeping arm, Solomon pushed aside the branches from the willow tree and turned his brown loafers back to the café.

I didn't know what to do. If I followed him and he really did want more than to talk about music then I could become like Rosa. And yet, he had seen my face time and again at the coffee shop and he hadn't said anything about being interested in my body. Besides, he had known about me listening to the music under the willow tree.

Creeping slowly out from beneath the weeping branches, I watched him until he was halfway across the park. Then I followed, stealthily, silently as a wolf hunts its prey. I placed a hand over my aching ear.

Never once did he look back.

## 50

I followed Solomon all the way to the café. What had seemed like miles when I had run to the park, was merely blocks. Candela watched me return, her eyebrows lowered, her mouth a tight, thin line.

Solomon walked into the café, sat at a table near the front window and ordered from the woman who approached his table. I stood with my hand on the door, one push away from entering. Never had the workers or owners asked me to come inside – my place was on the cement, sitting where people walked. I had no right to go in. I had no right to go into Randall and Burns. I was no longer allowed in Room #13 at Purgatory Palace. Who was I to think that I could walk into this café?

Two steaming mugs were placed in front of Solomon. Two bowls of piping hot soup twisted their heat into the air above the table. Solomon saw me standing in the doorway, saw me through the window and motioned for me to enter. Would I owe him for the lunch and if so, what payment would he want?

I thought of Rosa and her beautiful baby. I thought of the money I owed Ofelia, Celso, now possibly Solomon. How would I satisfy all of these debts?

I stepped into the café.

Keeping my head lowered and my eyes on the floor, I shuffled my way to where Solomon sat. He stood up when I neared the table and pulled my chair back so I could slide in. Somewhere between the police officers arriving and my sitting at this cafeteria table I had become human.

“No coat, no gloves, you’ll ruin your hands. Hold them over the soup.”

I held my hands, palm down, over the soup and looked at my fingers, red and rough as though I had been scrubbing laundry in a filthy river. I turned my hands over and looked at my palms. The steam from the soup warmed even the insides of my fingers and the smell triggered memories of Nathanael, Jeremia, Eva and me heating up stew over the open fire pit, filling the pot with chunks of potatoes, beets, carrots, and throwing in the meat from a rabbit or maybe something bigger if the hunting had been successful.

The worker placed a basket of bread on the table in front of us. Solomon unfolded the towel draped over the bread and tore off a piece. The smell of warm dough rose and I breathed it in remembering my mother, her gifts of bread, and times when I had felt loved.

I took a sip of the soup. The flavor was even better than the smell. I broke off a piece of the bread and dipped it into the soup. Curling my shoulders, arching my back over the table, I tried to relax but at any moment this bowl of soup would be taken away from me, the steaming cup of cocoa would be tossed out and I would be asked to leave, or thrown out the door. I hoped he was not watching me eat, watching my careful placement of the food well into my mouth.

When I reached the bottom of the bowl, Solomon slid his bowl in front of me. His generosity increased my hunger - if he would be exacting a price from me, I had better eat as much as I could.

I held my spoon over the bowl, waiting, watching Solomon.

“You said you were hungry,” I said.

“I changed my mind.”

When I finished the second bowl and felt the weight of warmth and comfort in my stomach, I looked out the window to Candela. She was gone. It was too early for her to be done working. I knew what this meant – she believed that I had joined Rosa and that now I would be working the night shift. She believed that I wouldn’t need her help anymore. My legs twitched beneath me. I’d had my soup, I was warmed, now I should leave, save myself, apologize to Candela. But that would be stealing.

I sipped the cup of rich cocoa. My hands wrapped around the cup and I breathed in the aroma. I could have sat there all day.

“Now,” said Solomon and I jumped in my chair, choking on the sip of cocoa. The drink bubbled out the slits between my nose and mouth and erupted from the holes that

were an extension of my nostrils. The towel from the now empty bread basket was close at hand; I dabbed at my face. My cheeks burned, my chest felt hot, my neck throbbed.

“I’m sorry,” he said to me. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

I looked down into the cocoa. Solomon’s voice was low, soft and careful as if he were talking to a rabbit, trying to coax it out from beneath a bush.

“I’ve been listening to your music for weeks. You are astonishing. I don’t know where you live, how you live or how you have lived until this point, but I want to offer you a proposition.”

My hands started to shake.

“I would like you to be my student. In return, I will find you a room at the university, I will find you a scholarship, and your tuition and housing will be paid for. All I ask is that you allow me to teach you.”

I wanted to stare down into my cup of cocoa but my eyes betrayed me, showed my vulnerability and I looked at him. He was watching me, his heavy brows pulled low over his eyes.

“I have gotten ahead of myself. I am Solomon Till. I am a professor of stringed instruments at The Conservatory and I would be honored if you would agree to be my pupil.”

I looked closely at his face, searching for the truth in this inconceivable offer. Did he really think I would believe this?

“That’s not a proposition,” I said, “that’s a gift.”

“The university offers tuition remission to budding musicians. You are such a pupil.”

His smile was so broad that I stared at his teeth. They were straight, white, big; no brown roots, yellow stains, gaping holes. This man had never lived in the forest with other rejects. He didn’t know what my life was like. He couldn’t possibly be offering me something that only those with unblemished faces, those who were not rejected, received.

“Would I have to...” I paused, licked my lips, and glanced around the cafe. Still no one had come to take away my cup of cocoa. Solomon’s brows were no longer down, but jumped up like fuzzy woolly bears, giving him an intense look of listening.

“Would I have to...” I swallowed. “...work the night shift?”

“What does that mean, dear? What does one do when she works the night shift?”

“Give you sex,” I said so low that he leaned forward in his chair to hear me. I impulsively leaned back in mine.

“Come again?” he said.

“Would I have to give you sex?”

He shook his head and then leaned away, his eyes hooded and dark. With one finger, he touched the back of my hand which still held the mug of cocoa. I pulled my hand away and put it under the table.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t know what your life is like, nor do I know what you have been through, but you will never, ever have to work the night shift at The Conservatory. You will be given your own room with a lock on the door. You may come and go as you wish. No police officers will chase you down or force you to run away. I

am offering you a legitimate proposal and will write it up as such. You owe me nothing but some time as my student.”

Could this possibly be true? If it was, what would Belen think if I disappeared? What would Celso do when the money he wanted was not there? What would Candela believe? Would Rosa think I’d become like her?

And then I didn’t care. I wanted to play the violin – I wanted to live the life he was offering.

“What about this?” I waved my hand in front of my face. Solomon’s eyelids fluttered as he glanced at my face and he quickly looked away.

“I don’t care about that, but others might. The first day in the park, you wore something over your head, something light, mysterious.” He leaned forward again. This time I didn’t back away. “Wear that again. Disguise yourself. Let them guess at the mystery that is Whisper. You are wonderful, a fabulous musician, a great talent. Wow them with your skills so they fall in love with you. Then who cares.”

His chair creaked and groaned beneath his movements.

“So what do you say?” he asked.

I considered my options: hiding in Candela’s room, going to jail, living on the streets. I didn’t have to think long.

“I would like that,” I whispered.

“So would I,” he said.

And then I allowed myself a small smile – a twitch of the corners of my mouth and rather than screaming in terror, and running away from me, he smiled in return.

The next day I was to meet Solomon at the café and together we would go to the school where he would show me my new transient home, introduce me to my classmates, and elevate me to a new status – one I didn't deserve. I listened to his plans, nodded, inclined my head, but they were words, words, words and I couldn't bring pictures of this new life to my mind. That, in itself, should have been a warning.

When I returned to Purgatory Palace, I squeezed into the alleyway, stood on the overturned bucket and tapped on Candela's window. A few minutes later the front door to the building opened and Candela stood in front of me, her eyes watery, her nose red. I followed her into the building, past Ofelia's closed door. Candela didn't look at me but climbed onto her bed and lay down with her face to the wall. I stood by the door and slowly closed it. My violin case rested in the corner of the room and when I opened it, the coins I had earned that day still lay on the bottom. I placed my violin on top of the coins and closed the case.

"So, are you going to live with him?" she said. Her voice was low and hoarse.

"He's a professor of music and wants to teach me."

Candela sat up straight on the bed. I hadn't seen this Candela before. Her face was scrunched around the nose, her mouth pursed tight, her eyes narrowed, her cheeks sucked in. If I could have taken a step backwards I would have but I already stood against the door.

“And you believe him. I thought you were smarter than Rosa. I thought you had talent and goodness, I thought you would be the one friend who stayed but you’re just as moronic as she is and I hope this life you’ve chosen makes you miserable. I never want to see you again!” She screamed the words at me. Her fists were tight balls and her face was the color of blood stained into a mother’s skirt. She threw the money she’d been keeping for me, the coins rolling around the room.

Panic like fleas flittered in my chest.

“It’s not like that,” I said. “He’s writing a contract...”

“Whisper. No one offers opportunities and hope to people like us. No one. We have to make opportunities for ourselves. But you don’t have to believe me, find out for yourself. Just don’t expect me to be here, waiting to put you back together again when you realize what this guy wants from you.” She turned her head away, toward the wall, and wouldn’t answer me even when I said her name three times.

I picked up the few coins that had landed by my feet and tucked them into my shoe. I took the picture off of the wall that Candela had made for me and slipped it into my violin case along with my birth certificate, the only validation that I existed in this world. Now I had no home, no friends and a promise that might be empty.

I thought of what I could say to her, what I could murmur softly that would fix this but words were hard for me and I couldn’t think of anything. My throat felt closed and tight. I opened the door and shut it behind me.

Ofelia, in a lumpy purple robe and grey slippers, stood at the front door of the building, her back to me. She turned her head when I closed the door to Candela’s room.



“Well, speak of the devil.” She said with a thin, watery smile.

In my violin case I held a certificate that claimed I’d been born and a picture that made me beautiful, against my chest I held a small sack that smelled of baking bread. When Ofelia stepped aside, I could see the two police officers standing outside the door.

“That’s her,” said one of them. “She matches the description of the face and clothes.” This officer was skinny with pointed cheekbones, a pointed chin and a pointed nose, even his eyes looked sharp.

“She’s the one,” said the younger officer. He had rosy cheeks and his nose tip was red. Both men wore green and white uniforms that reminded me of lizards and grass snakes.

“Now I’ve got to fill that damn room again,” Ofelia said.

“You’re under arrest,” the older man said.

The police officers stepped aside, a narrow passageway opening between them. I stared at my feet, my brown shoes that would carry me to the next place. My options had disappeared like mushrooms, sucked back into the ground where they had come from, as if they’d never been there at all.

I walked down the hall, walked away from Purgatory Palace, each police officer firmly holding one of my elbows. They led me to the car. The younger man opened the door and waited for me to climb in.

My breath came fast, shallow and loud. The smell from the car of dirty bodies, overripe fruit, fermentation and a musky odor that reminded me of Astatla upset my stomach. I turned to the side, ready to run. The older police officer shoved me in the

back. My head hit the frame of the car right above the door, and my neck snapped back. He pushed me again and I found myself lying on the back seat, my violin beneath me, my belongings scattered on the floor. The two men slid into the front seat so quickly, so fluidly, that the car was rumbling and jerking before I understood that we were moving.

Blood dripped from a gash on my forehead. I wiped it away with the sleeve of my sweater. My insides were knotted up, twisted into a tight fist but no tears came to my eyes, no cry came from my throat. I thought about Jeremia's wolf sitting by his dying friend, how silent and forlorn he had seemed and for the first time, I understood that feeling. Nothing was sure in this world. The memorabilia on the floor of the car meant no more than Solomon's offer, a bubble of possibility that had popped and evaporated.

I had cried in embarrassment when the hot cocoa had bubbled out my nose and I felt the sting of tears now as the loss of anything I'd ever had overwhelmed me. But we drove away and my tears didn't change anything.

## 52

We drove past the town square where the fountain with angels was lit by lights from below. We arrived at the police station in minutes, the street it was on no different from Purgatory street with apartments stacked one atop each other, clothing lines crisscrossing the space between buildings, and sheets like flags waving in the night. The police station itself looked like the twin sister of Purgatory Palace. It was a low, squat stone building covered in scrawled words of all colors. The older police officer grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the back of the car as if I were about to resist, as if I'd be able to run

away and save myself, as if I had anywhere to go. Two women in short skirts and big hair were shouting horrid words back through the entryway. An unwashed man in a sloppy grey coat that hung past his knees chanted a song under his breath, a tuneless rhythm about a dog bite. These were the people I fit with. These were my new companions.

I blinked at the brightness inside the police station. The front room contained a few desks, a few people behind these desks, and milling people, all rife with odors that made me hold my breath. The walls were white, an empty impersonal white: anyone could disappear into walls like that.

“Assault,” the older police officer said as he pushed me toward a hard wooden chair by the first desk. The woman behind the desk didn’t look up. She watched a lit-up box with words, numbers, strange forms projected on the flat side of it. These images disappeared, reappeared, changed, returned like flashes of lightning. She clicked at a row of letters under her fingertips.

This was a computer. It hummed, rumbled, and emitted beeps and clicking chirps, a living entity with no softness. It glowed and flipped images while the woman asked me questions: name, age, date of birth, occupation. I swallowed my whisper and spoke over the noises in the room. When I said, “musician” for occupation, she coughed a dry laugh and then her fingers tapped and the word appeared on the screen. When she asked about my address, my home, and I couldn’t answer, she looked at me.

“Your mom’s been here for a while, a regular attendee. You guys can have a family reunion.” When she laughed loudly, her chin disappeared into her neck. Her

maroon hair was the color of the berry from the dogwood tree and her skin looked flaky and old under a coating of white powder. My mother was not here.

I was being charged with attacking the man in the store who had put his hand on my shoulder and pulled me away from the beautiful coat. My imprisonment would be for a month unless I was able to come up with bail. They told me that someone had to pay \$200.00 to get me out of jail, the cost of a month's stay at Purgatory Palace, the cost of two months pay that I owed Celso, the cost of two beautiful green coats that reminded me of forests.

They pressed all of my fingers against a black pad that stained them and then recorded the print my fingertips made on a piece of paper where all of my information had been printed in neat, perfect type. They took my picture against a white background then told me to turn to the side. I had never had my picture taken before – my deformities would now be visible for those who had never even met me.

"I'll take her to her cell," said the younger police officer. I was glad that it would be him – his rounded cheeks were gentler than the angles of the older one.

He pointed to a door at the back of the room and I moved toward it. An old woman with no teeth was being asked questions at another desk. When I walked by she reached out and scratched the back of my hand. I looked at the line of red that appeared on the top of my hand but I avoided meeting the eyes of this woman I'd done nothing to. The police officer reached around me, opened the door, and I looked down a long flight of stairs. The stairs were made of stone, like the outside of the jail, and twisted and turned

downward, the smell of dirt, earth and urine wafting up over the steps. The coldness crept up through the stones into my legs.

I put my right hand against the wall to steady myself. I wasn't shaking but I felt tired, very, very tired.

"I'm Officer Nicholas," he said. His footsteps fell heavily on the stairs behind me, spurring me on into the darkness below. Small lights jutted out of the wall – lights that gave off a white glow with no warmth. I'd always thought of the earth as a warm refuge from the chill of the night, but the air in this place grew crisp as we descended.

When we got to the bottom, I stood in front of a row of cages locked shut with metal bars that reached from the ceiling to the floor. No windows broke the darkness with rays of warm yellow light. I heard a moaning that made the hair on my arms stand up.

The first two cages housed silent, staring men who watched our progress, their clothing so worn and old it fell in strips over their bodies. The crooning came from the next cell – a low moan from a heap of clothing in the far corner.

"Lizzy, shut-up already. You want to scare your new roommate?"

The pile of rags rocked back and forth but the noise didn't stop. Only grey hair, curled and matted like discolored yarn, was visible of the woman inside the heap. Officer Nicholas opened the cell door and waited for me to enter. I took a couple of tentative steps into the cage.

"Oh," he said, "I need that instrument and that sack of stuff."

My hands tightened around the mouth of my small sack. And then my breath increased, my heart began to thump, my shoulders hunched. Through all of the questions,

the printing of my fingerprints, the taking of pictures, I had not felt the tears burn but now when he would take the last few items of my life that defined who I was and where I'd been, I choked and coughed on my swelling throat and flooding tears.

"I need this," I whispered.

"Sorry. Can't have it. No belongings in the jail cells."

"But there's nothing in here, nothing I could hurt someone with or hurt myself with. The violin was a gift." I could hear the pitch of my voice begin to rise. I felt ashamed, frantic and embarrassed.

Without asking again, Officer Nicholas took the sack away from me and pulled on the violin strap. When he pulled the strap off of my shoulder, the violin began to slide down my back. I clung to the strap with my right hand, envisioning the instrument hitting the floor and snapping in half, my life torn in two.

"Got it," Nicholas said. His hands were on the violin case and he lowered it to the floor. I stepped out of the strap and into the cell. When I turned around, Officer Nicholas locked the cell door and walked away with my only possessions. My violin and small sack of belongings would sit on a desk at the bottom of a stone hole. Now all that remained of me was a deformed face, a carved violin around my neck, and a stained skirt that warmed my legs. The stones seeped cold through my sweater and rough cotton pants while the floor below me offered nothing but hardness. There were two benches in the room and a bucket.

A month.

I sat down on the bench nearest to me. It was pushed up against the metal bars of the next cell, a cell with a woman in it. This woman had red circles painted on her cheeks and blue arches over her eyes. I turned my back to her, pulled my knees up to my chest, and curled around myself, wishing I had a blanket to wrap around me. This was it – all I was, all I had left. I was a husk now, an empty nest and even though I was broken and deformed, no one would rescue me or fit their body against mine. I knew this.

### 53

I woke when I felt hands in my hair. Lizzy stood in front of me, layers of tattered clothing hanging from her like vulture feathers.

“Black rain,” she said.

I looked into her face, into her toothless mouth and my hands became slick with sweat. I slid along the bench and when I got to the end, I stepped off and stumbled to the door of the cage. She watched me. She didn’t try to grab me, she didn’t run after me with clawing fingers, scratching and tearing. Her crooning was gone, but the white lights from the stairway threw shadows under her eyes and made her sunken cheeks almost skeletal.

“Don’t like what you see?” She put her hands on her hips and offered me a smile of missing teeth and blackened gums. The bars pressed against my back, locking me in as I tried to wedge myself into the corner away from her.

“What you so scared of, Lovey? Old Lizzy won’t hurt you.”

She took plodding, careful steps toward me. I balled my hands into fists. When she was a step away, she smiled and cackled a low, creaking laugh.

“Lizzy knows you and you know Lizzy.”

I shook my head. My breath came fast and shallow. I needed Rosa, someone hard and worn – someone who knew how to protect herself, lash out and slash. Candela wouldn’t have put up with anything from this woman and here I was cowering in the corner.

“Lizzy and you are the same.”

I shouted so loudly, the echo from my voice, from that one word, bounced back at me, nasal and harsh. The word itself seemed to mock me.

“NO.”

She cackled loudly, her mouth wide open, an irregular circle. I covered my ears with my hands and squeezed my eyes shut. I screamed over top of her laugh, I screamed until my voice became hoarse. I squeezed my eyes shut tighter and slid down the bars to sit on the floor, crouching there until my arms ached from being held to my ears and until my back developed indentations from the bars behind me. When I couldn’t stand to keep my arms wrapped around my head, I dared to open my eyes.

Lizzy was asleep on the bench where I had originally sat, her snores rhythmic and calm. She was not me. That woman was not me. I would never croon myself into the corner of a jail cell, reek of urine, lose sanity – she was not me even though her face looked exactly like mine.



I didn't sleep that night. My earache had come in full force, the throbs and sharp pinches reminders of Rayanna, the earaches we both suffered. If I didn't put oil in my ear soon, the eardrum could swell and rupture. I watched Lizzy until I heard footsteps on the stairs above us and until I heard the men begin to mutter and stir.

"Porridge, my favorite," one of the men said.

"Good thing we're not having bacon and eggs again, I'm so sick of bacon and eggs," shouted another amidst low mirthless chuckles.

"Yeah, yeah," the officer said. "Come up with something new, would yuh."

I needed to go to the bathroom so badly, I was scared to stand up. I wobbled as I rose to my feet, my knees buckling and my back aching. I shakily stood erect and watched Lizzy, wondering when she would rise like a future ghost of myself and remind me again of what could become of me. Even though her eyes were closed, she muttered and twisted her hands into her hair.

A different officer from the night before opened the door to our cell and pushed a tray with two bowls and two spoons inside the door.

When he left to go back up the stairs, I looked at the bucket. I knew what it is for, I recognized the smell of a homemade latrine, and I was desperate enough to use it, but everyone would see me, they could watch, and unlike the bathroom at Purgatory Palace where the stalls were open and exposed, I felt no camaraderie in this experience.

I crept my way over to the bucket. I imagined Lizzy's claw-like hands reaching out for me, grabbing me as I slid past. I reached the bucket and scooted it against the

stone wall. Lowering my pants, lowering my mother's skirt, but keeping my sweater pulled low, I looked away from Lizzy to the cells where the men were, but they were too busy eating their porridge to notice me.

There was nothing to wipe with. I could feel heat in my cheeks. I sat over the bucket, airing dry for a few minutes and while I did so, Lizzy rose from her bed and took a bowlful of porridge. I pulled up my pants and hugged my body with my arms. She did not look up from her intense eating. Her hair fell into and around the bowl while she gobbled and she did not care that some of the food bubbled from the slits in her face.

My hands were filthy from the edges of the bucket, but there was nowhere to wash. Every inch of this place felt unclean, from the hard-packed dirt floors to the benches covered with a sticky residue, to the bars that looked slick with sweat. I stood in the middle of the cell, wondering how to avoid touching anything. A month, I would be here, thirty days and I could not stand in the middle of the cell for that length of time without touching anything.

I took a bowl of porridge and sat on the bench. The porridge smelled of burnt pots and sour milk – I could not bring myself to eat it, but placed it beside me.

Lizzy shuffled across the room, her back bent, and sat on the bench next to me, picking up my bowl of porridge and quickly shoveling its contents into her mouth. I held my breath and then turned my head away, trying to avoid the smell of body odor, urine and unwashed clothes that contaminated the air around her. My arms were wrapped around my knees, held tight against my chest but Lizzy's insistent fingers pulled at my

arm, gripped and tugged until I relaxed and allowed her to hold my hand. What did she want from me? I still held my head away, trying to breathe in untainted air.

She began to rock, to move the bench back and forth and after first trying to resist and hold stiff, I relaxed and moved with her. While she rocked, Lizzy hummed a low song, deep in her throat while my eyes slowly closed, a song remembered from when I was a child and my mother used to visit me.

Little bird that sings by the wandering stream  
Don't wake up my baby in the small cradle.  
Cookaroo!  
Cookaroo!  
Sleep my little morning star  
My little morning star.

With one hand, she held mine while her other hand brushed over the top of my fingers gently, lightly, like the touch of dry grasses. My head, so tired from not sleeping, felt clouded and full and while I rocked, I could believe that this was my mother, singing to me, holding my hand, keeping me safe. Lizzy turned my hand over so my palm was up and across it she rolled an object back and forth. The object felt cool and smooth as though it had been rolled across a hand many times. My fingers reached perfectly around the object as though it had been designed for my hand alone. I opened my eyes and stopped rocking.

"Where did you get this," I said.

Lizzy hummed her tune again but the vision of the creek by our house, the grasses in the meadow and the rustle of wind through the trees disappeared and became a mud-

packed earth floor, the rancid odor of unburied fecal matter and the sound of discontented men bickering with each other. I held her hands still in mine and shook her arms.

“Tell me.”

She looked at me then, her clouded eyes focusing on something beyond me, over my shoulder. I shook her arm again and held the object in my hand so tightly, I could feel its grooves begin to dig into my skin.

“He doesn’t know,” she said and then giggled as though she were five years old.

“I know where they come from but he doesn’t know that I watch him sometimes.”

“Who?” I wanted to shout at her and shake her, but instead I gripped the object tighter.

“I took this one without him knowing and I hold it, remembering.”

She reached for the wooden piece in my hand but I stood up from the bench, stepped back and held it behind me. With my other hand, I pulled the carved violin from around my neck and showed it to Lizzy, waving it in front of her.

“Give it,” she said, not seeing the violin.

I stepped back when she reached for me. I held the violin up to her face. She waved it away with her hand and gripped my arm so tightly, her fingernails punctured my skin.

“Give it.”

“Look,” I said, and pushed the violin against her cheek. She shook her head, swatting my hand, and finally she saw the small carved figure. She stopped then, letting go of my arm to hold the carving, her body so close to mine I could feel her heat.

She turned the carved violin over in her hands, looked at all sides, and then smiled a warm, understanding smile.

“We are the same,” she said, “you and I. You grew up in the camp in the woods. You know Nathanael.”

I brought my hand out from behind my hand and opened my fist. The cylindrical carving of leaves cascading down from a tree was Jeremia’s and Lizzy had been holding it for so long, the wood was worn smooth as a polished stone and some of the grooves in the wood had lost their depth. We looked at it together, this woman and I. She knew Nathanael. She had watched our camp in the woods, she had stolen a carving made by Jeremia. She took her carving back, rolled it in her hand and sat back on the bench where she rocked back and forth and hummed lullabies. I watched her sitting there, a woman with a split face, no home, and probably no family and I wondered – would I end up like her someday?

## 55

Lizzy slept the rest of the day on the stone bench. I watched her, trying to piece together her story which was somehow tied to Nathanael, and connected to Jeremia.

Aside from Rosa, Lizzy was the closest tie I had to my home.

The absence of the violin began to weigh on me, pull me down into the depression that crept along the floors and leached into the skin through the bleakness of this place. The woman in the cell beside me picked her nose, the men in the cell on the other side

bickered with each other, stared at me and then offered worn remarks to the police officer who brought us our lunch.

“Yes, porridge – my favorite,” said one of the men.

“Thank Jehosophat we’re not having thick slices of meat and cheese on fresh bread. I am tired of thick slices of meat and cheese on fresh bread.” They laughed but it was a laugh without substance, a laugh done by rote.

My violin sat on a desk in front of our cells. When I paced to the front of the cell, I could see it, I could sense it, I could feel the tingling in my arms, the need to play. I stood at the bars, not daring to touch their cold hardness and looked at my case, at that present from my mother that might have cost her a year’s worth of baking and I thought about the music I could play with it. Since I had received that violin, I had played it every day, until today.

After our dinner of a stew which had the look and feel of the morning porridge but with bigger lumps, I lay down on the bench, and I waited for the forgetfulness of sleep. I held Jeremia’s carved violin in my hand, felt its curves, the points and angles of its shape, and watched Lizzy do the same to the sculpture in her hand. I closed my eyes and willed my mind to go blank, my thoughts to disappear down my throat, to bubble in my stomach along with the dense porridge, but the ache in my ear had become constant, a festering sliver and I couldn’t forget.

I heard footsteps on the stairs. A number of footsteps – more than one person, but I felt too cold and too tired to care. The police officer’s stick rattled against the bars of the cell and I slowly opened my eyelids, so heavy after not having slept the night before.

I rushed to the front of the cage. I held the bars in my hands and when he saw me, he stopped fidgeting and his warm, large hands eased through the bars and encompassed mine.

“Whisper,” he said.

This was what it had felt like when my mother showed up on my birthday.

“Whisper, dear,” he said, wiping his nose with a handkerchief he pulled from his coat pocket, “I have had such a time finding you. Are you well? Have you been hurt?”

The mint and coffee smell of him rose up and drifted into the cell, making me want to cry or shout. Rosa’s words came back to me for a minute but I pushed them down, away, under my haze of relief and hoped that he had come to let me out of the cell because he wanted to teach me music and not because he wanted me to work the night shift.

“She’s the one, then.” The round officer, his neck almost nonexistent, jangled a cluster of keys in his hand, and fit one of them into the lock. Lizzy lay folded into her clothing on the hard bench. She didn’t move when the door opened to let me out, but she hummed her lullaby and rolled Jeremia’s statue around in her hand. I stood beside her for a minute, watched the carving with the falling leaves and tangled vines, and touched the top of Lizzy’s hand with my own. We were not the same, me and Lizzy, and I would not end up like her. I would control the shape of my future somehow.

“Lizzy,” I said. “I’ll come back sometime.”

She looked up at me, her eyes focused for just a second.

“No,” she said. “Don’t come back. Be the morning star that becomes the evening sun. Be strong.”

Her hand flipped over and our fingers touched. I could feel energy move into my hand and I felt it surge within me. Yes. I would be strong. I would be more than this place wanted me to be.

After strapping the violin to my back, and tucking the small sack of belongings under my arm, I followed Solomon and the police officer up the stairs while the men in their cells watched me with eyes that reflected the flat yellow of the stairway lights.

## 56

Upstairs, Solomon and the police officer chatted amiably, laughing and shaking hands while Solomon placed a heavy hand on my shoulder and handed me a piece of paper rolled tight with a red string around it. I untied the string and read the scroll while Solomon signed papers and handed his identification to the woman behind the desk.

*I, Solomon Woodson, in agreement with the Music Department at The National Conservatory of Music, hereby appoint The Watts Scholarship to Whisper \_\_\_\_\_ for the duration of her studies at The Conservatory. She will be given room and board at The University during her education and will also receive a stipend of \$75.00 a month.*

*Terms of agreement for the continuation of her scholarship:*

- 1. Whisper will attend classes and fulfill her obligations as a student.*
- 2. Whisper will attend private lessons with Solomon Woodson while she studies at The Conservatory.*



*3. Whisper will maintain a reasonable GPA and will comport herself in an honorable fashion (in other words, she will absolutely not be allowed to “work the night shift” and if anyone asks her to work this shift, that person will be reported to The Conservatory staff and punished accordingly).*

*4. Solomon Woodson will be responsible for Whisper’s progress and for aiding her in her acclimation.*

*Signed, Solomon Woodson Ph.D.*

*I, \_\_\_\_\_, being of sound body and mind, agree to the above terms on this day, the \_\_\_\_\_.*

I read through the contract again. I understood the language, none of the terms were foreign or obscure, but the meaning of the words fluttered above my head, unfathomable, like a dream that seemed plausible while being dreamed but, come morning, would feel inexplicable and ridiculous.

Solomon handed money to the woman behind the desk, signed a piece of paper, and shook the stocky police officer’s hand again. Something would be required of me – something more than I could currently see. Perhaps I would climb this tree, cling to the branches, with no one to show me the way down.

Solomon raised a farewell hand to the police officers and then dipped his arm low and gestured for me to proceed. I walked out the door of the police station, the contract he had given me still in my hand, still held between sweating fingers that might smudge the fairytale words. Solomon unlocked the door to a small black car that sat against the curb. He held the door open for me and then got in on the other side.

My emotions felt ready to bubble out my nose, to overflow from the slit in my face and pour out of me. This wasn’t happiness, it was something else, something like the

touch of ice cold water against your feet on a hot summer day. My legs eased into the car and I found myself seated in the vehicle. It didn't smell like urine, vomit, and deceit like the rear seat of the police car – it smelled of coffee, cigar smoke, and peppermint, just like Solomon's jacket. I held my violin in my lap and headed to I didn't know where, pretending to be someone I wasn't.

And that's when I knew how this would all end. I would go to The Conservatory, play my petty and unpolished pieces beside those who played like heavenly beings, and they would see that my musical abilities were nothing, a farce, and they'd take back this undeserved scholarship. My shoulders sank into the seat of the car, and I stopped feeling the pressure of expectations, the weight of undeserved grace. I would fail, and that put me at ease.

We crossed the river, drove past 210 Independence Place and I saw Purgatory Palace. I searched for Rosa, Candela, Oscar, even Ofelia, but I saw only the night life beginning to mill, the women with the colored faces, the men with their devouring looks.

"I'd never been in there before, didn't even know it existed," Solomon said when we drove past Purgatory Palace. "So many people with hard lives. I never knew."

"We make our own family," I said. "We fit together because we don't fit anywhere else."

"But that is not the right place for you."

"What is?"

"The Conservatory. That is where you should be."

"I won't fit there either."

We drove the route that Candela and I walked every day. We cruised up the big hill, approached the grey stone buildings filled with turrets, domes and rows of glass windows, and turned into a street where these buildings lined both sides. This was The National Conservatory of Music. I had passed by this street every day, and had never known that the huge buildings with the skulking creatures along the roof were part of the university. But it made sense – our coffee shop was just around the corner which explained why Solomon was always there.

Solomon drove confidently, with one hand on the wheel and the other hand waving at people walking on the sidewalk. He turned right and stopped beside one of the beautiful buildings. It must be a church, I thought, although I had never been in a church. It was tall, made of square cut stones, with brightly lit windows and balconies around the upper level. Solomon turned off the car and smiled at me. I began to shake. New places were never good, that had been the rule of my life so far. I had been a prisoner in Belen's house, a beggar at Purgatory Palace, a criminal at the jail – what would I be here? A freak? An object to be displayed and stared at? A bizarre exhibit?

He opened the car door and grunted as he extricated his large frame from the car. I considered staying in the car, refusing to move, but I pulled the handle on the door, and followed his example. The door popped open and I stepped out.

For a moment, the world spun around me. Lights lined the streets and walkways like organized stars and students moved beneath these, coming and going from the buildings. A professor climbed the stairs to the building carrying a small leather case in her hand, and amidst all of this I saw myself, small, disfigured, a reject. I grasped at the

veil around my neck, untied it and slipped it over my head. In the city, near Purgatory Palace, rejects occupied every street corner like featherless birds but here at The Conservatory I saw no blemishes.

Solomon climbed the front steps to the music building and I followed, still holding my belongings, my violin and the piece of paper he had given me.

I tried to take in everything at once but it was impossible. We walked through a doorway as tall as Purgatory Palace and twice as wide. Inside, the hallways were cavernous and the floors were made from a hard substance that was cold as ice, hard as rock, but beautiful as gold leaves. Our footsteps rang through the hallway and I shuffled along, as quiet as I could but this was not the forest floor and my steps echoed across the hall, announcing my presence. Students, people all older than myself, and dressed in expensive looking clothing milled about in the doorways to other rooms, laughed with each other, and then quieted and watched when they saw me under the veil. I knew they couldn't see my eyes or meet my look but I wanted to look away anyway, down at the floor, watching my shoes shuffle along.

Solomon's office was on the second floor, just past the curving staircase with a stone railing that was as beautiful, curved and polished as Jeremia's statues. We entered a large room with maroon decorations where a tiny man who had been seated behind a desk, stood and introduced himself to us. He was the office manager for the music department, he said, and shook my hand vigorously. He came up to my shoulder, twittered and fluttered like a cricket and buzzed around the office in such a frenzy, I was reminded of Eva jumping with the grasshoppers.

“Dorm Room #113, Clarence Hall,” he said. “A room all to yourself, honey. Here is your meal card. Call me Quincy.” He handed me a hard piece of plastic with a blank for my signature.

“We’ll need a photo sometime,” he said but when Solomon furrowed his eyebrows and shook his head, he added, “or not.”

His eyes behind his rectangular spectacles looked me up and down. I glanced where he looked, noted the tattered sweater, the threadbare canvas pants, and the flat-soled brown shoes that I had been wearing far too long. I signed my name to the contract and watched as Solomon folded it, slid it into an envelope, and handed it to Quincy. That was it then, a new direction to my life – I would be a student here at the university but before I could fit, I needed new clothes and oil for my ear. The only items that I would keep from my past life were the tiny violin hung from my neck, the white skirt wrapped around my legs and the brown shoes that had carried me so far.

“I will take her to the dorm myself,” Solomon said.

“You have class tonight.” Quincy looked at Solomon over the tops of his glasses.

“Cancel it. I’ll show her the dorm room and the cafeteria. Tomorrow we get clothes from Randall and Burks.”

When Solomon said this he gave me a big wink and a wiggle of his mustache. We would return to the store of my accuser. So many new emotions jumbled together like fireflies that I didn’t know what to feel. Why not go to Randall and Burks? I’d spent a night in jail and it hadn’t killed me; how much worse could a posh store be?

Solomon handed me the key to the room which was on the first floor of a massive building and was the first room after the stairs. He opened the door, turned on all the lights as though having control over locks and illumination were common and natural. He turned on the tap to the bathroom sink, looked in the closet, and declared the room acceptable. It was noisy, located under the stairs where the tramping of feet could be heard when students went up and down like tumbling rocks, but it was acceptable. Before he left, Solomon squeezed my hand, smiled, and then quietly closed the door behind him.

Having my own place was odd, lonely, quiet, peaceful, and incomprehensible. The bathroom had a shower, something I'd never experienced before. This couldn't be my place to stay, with my own bathroom, a real bed, and a closet to hang my clothes. The closet was empty and waiting for submissions, the desk against the wall had a small lamp that went on with a click of the button, the brown patterned curtains covered a window that looked out over an expanse of green and a walkway that led to the cafeteria. All of this was mine to use.

The mattress was a hands-width thick, and it rested on wire springs that groaned when I lay down. Blankets, pillows covered the bed and after a shower, I crawled beneath the blankets with the key to the door still in my hand. I'd never owned a key, the power to keep out whomever I chose. Such power needed to be with me at all times and I held that key tight through the dark night – a night without the sounds of the street, the hum of traffic, or the friendship of Candela.

I woke when light shone between the curtains on the window. I listened. I had thought the camp in the woods had been isolated but there I'd had friends, a make-shift family and here I had only myself.

When I entered the bathroom and saw myself in the mirror, I knew that clean clothes and shampooed hair would not help me fit in. I didn't know what a home was anymore. I had thought it was a place, a place of my own but it was more than four walls and a roof. Home was belonging.

## 57

Only a few lights at the back of Randall and Burks were lit when we arrived. The clerks were refolding sweaters. The manager, the round rolling fellow who had come after me the last time I was in the store, walked toward us with a large ring of keys in his hand. Solomon, standing outside the door with me behind him, tapped on the glass door with assurance, as if he had every right to do so. I adjusted the veil over my head and wished it would stop fluttering and shaking.

"Not open yet," the manager said to Solomon, unlocking the door to speak through the crack. Solomon pushed his way into the store, crossed his arms over his chest, cleared his throat and placed himself in front of the manager.

"Whisper will be purchasing a new set of clothes, and some other much needed items. Could you tell me, perchance, if a young man named Swanny is working this morning? I would like to have a few words with him." Solomon's feet stood solid like tree stumps and his arms remained tightly crossed.

“She can wait until the store opens, along with our other customers.”

“No, she can’t,” said Solomon. “This child was sent to jail, was housed over night in a cell where ruffians and villains are kept, and she lost twenty-four hours of her life to undeserved and unwarranted incarceration. You owe her not only time, but reparation.”

The manager looked at me. He pulled at his bottom lip and then he spoke into the device he held in his hand.

“Swanny, come to the front of the store please.”

“Go on,” Solomon said to me.

My breath came in quick puffs. I walked past the green coats and let my hand slide across the material. I reached for a long brown skirt that reminded me of my mother and I chose a black sweater with a high neck, long sleeves, wide pockets and no holes at the elbows. I saw a package of underwear and tucked those under my arm as well as black leggings – warm black tights. As I clutched these items, the prices rolled around in my head like gnats, confusing. I knew that I didn’t have enough money but I didn’t know how to say this to Solomon. I didn’t know how much reparation he had planned for me. Beneath the veil I felt my cheeks burning, the flush creeping down my face into my neck.

Solomon waved to me and I stood next to him, the clothing in my sweating hands. A clerk stood with one foot on top of the other, an unbalanced stork, and chewed on the fingernail of his first finger. When he saw me approaching, his eyes widened and he held his hands out in front of his face as though warding off the devil.

“Is this the fellow?” Solomon asked.



According to the police report, I had attacked this man with my claws and nails, had used my powers when he was most vulnerable. Even though I examined his cheek, I detected no bruises. He was at least six inches taller than me and even though he was thin, I was sure he weighed more than I did.

“Stay away,” shrieked the man in a voice so high, it sounded like the cry of a crow.

“Come on, man.” Solomon’s hands twitched as though he wanted to wrap them around Swanny’s neck. “This girl wouldn’t attack you. Tell us the truth, now. What really happened?”

“She attacked me,” Swanny said while taking a step away from me. “She threw her arms at me. She was going to kill me, if not with her hands, with her spells and horrid, horrid face.”

“What did you do to her?” Solomon let out a long, huffing sigh.

“I touched her shoulder.”

I don’t know what came over me, how I’d become so brave, but rather than remain mute, I spoke. It was as though the words were pressed out of me by a squeezing hand.

“He grabbed my shoulder from behind.”

“You grabbed her, did you,” Solomon said to Swanny. “Well you probably scared her half to death.”

Swanny had taken two more steps back and his hands still fluttered around his mouth but the manager stood behind him.

Swan. Beautiful bird – long necked, elegant, stylish.

“I wasn’t sneaking. I wouldn’t have surprised her.”

“And where did she bruise you? Where did she attack your face and leave you partially maimed?”

Swanny’s right hand moved up past his mouth and touched his cheek with four unsteady fingers. Solomon took two large steps toward Swanny. He peered at Swanny’s face, took his chin in his left hand and twisted Swanny’s head back and forth, trying to locate the bruises, scratches, tell-tale marks.

“I don’t see a thing,” he said.

Swanny glanced back at the manager but the little man shook his head and rolled his eyes. His voice was as low as Swanny’s was high. “Swanny, she’s only a child.”

“She attacked me, I tell you, she flew at me with her sharp talons and tried to scratch out my eyes.”

While he said this, I shifted the clothing to my right arm and raised my left hand, examining my fingers. Talons. My nails were chipped, broken but clean. My hands were red and raw but unremarkable. I was a beggar. I had spent a night in jail. I looked like a witch. I almost believed Swanny myself. Without intending to, I lifted my hand and touched my mouth through the veil. This face, this horrid, horrid face. I might play the violin like a chorus of fifty angels, but this face would always be how people judged me – what they saw first.

“Didn’t you say she was interested in the coat?”

The manager waddled over to the rack of coats, flipped through them to find a size that looked appropriate, and glanced back at the now shuddering Swanny. The manager held out the coat for me.

My heart thumped against my tattered black sweater and my hand stretched out tentatively to the coat. It would be withdrawn at any moment, I understood that, so I wrapped my left arm around it and then dug through my pockets with my right hand, located the coins Candela had thrown at me, and held them out to the manager. I knew it wasn't enough; how could it possibly be, but I wanted that coat as much as I wanted home. The manager waved the money away, took two steps from me and glanced quickly at Solomon who still stood as though it would take an earthquake to move him. His eyebrows were low and his mustache quivered.

“Keep your money. Swanny gets a discount.”

Swanny sobbed but kept his hands over his face. I held the coat against my cheek, under my nose all the way back to The Conservatory and to my room, my very own room with a bed that sat on a frame, with a desk that contained two drawers, with a closet that held my old clothing. I tried on the new coat and knew that whenever I wore it I would think of mangoes, starlit nights, the company of friends, and huts in the woods that had been my home.

## 58

The impromptu recital, organized to introduce me to Solomon's students, was scheduled for 11:00 a.m. in the performance room. A clock with red glowing numbers sat on my

desk, announcing the time both day and night. At 10:45 I walked to the building where Solomon taught and looked for the auditorium. I thought that the muted colors I had chosen would help me blend in, become part of my surroundings as it would have in the forest, but here, in the ornate building decorated in white and gold, I stood out like a blemish.

Solomon sat on a stage in the enormous room where rows and rows of seats stretched forward like the cells of a wasp nest. In the rows facing him were about thirty students, scattered haphazardly in the seats. Lights hanging from the ceiling by long narrow cords illuminated the first ten rows of seats and I slowed my pace, stopping where it was still dark. I tugged at the veil, wishing it would stretch and cover my entire body.

“Whisper,” Solomon said and motioned for me to come closer. I slipped one hand into the pocket of my green coat and held the other at my neck where it held Jeremia’s violin. My heart pounded in my chest, ready to burst from its cage.

Solomon leapt off the stage and took huge steps up the aisle to where I stood. He put his arm around my shoulders and guided me down the aisle, into the beams of light. All of the heads turned and thirty pairs of eyes watched me: eyes that were curious, wondering, questioning, while others were narrow, suspicious and appraising.

“This is Whisper,” Solomon said. He guided me to a seat about three rows up and right on the edge. The girl in the next seat pulled her arm off the shared armrest and turned her head away from me. “She is the recipient of the Watts Scholarship and will be under my tutelage next term.”

I concentrated on Solomon, willing everything else to fade away.

“Christmas vacation is in three days but our recital is only a month away. When we return from the holidays, we have one week. Stay with the regimen!

Now, I want Tomas, Max, Sara and Rita on stage, front and center. Let’s show Whisper what we’re all about.”

Solomon climbed the far steps to the stage and tapped his foot while four musicians followed, carrying their instruments. They jostled each other, joked, smiled and stood in a rough circle. Solomon placed his feet shoulder-width apart and whispered a beat under his breath while waving his hand in a syncopated pattern. The four musicians readied their instruments, tapped toes to the beat, and when Solomon raised his hands, they lifted their bows.

The music moved through me like water: first slow and luring, gaining speed with rapids, then sounding like the animals on the shore, the fish in the water, the birds in the air. The low strumming beat spoke of rocks, sand, planted trees. I felt so homesick that a shaky breath whistled from me and puffed the veil.

I wanted this to go on forever.

The musicians drew their bows across the strings one last time and I woke from my dream. If only I could wrap that music up, squeeze it inside of me and carry it around, filling that hole of loneliness that wouldn’t go away. Why had I only heard the beauty of this music now, sixteen years into my life, when I could have been consuming it all along?

I clasped my hands around the violin case in my lap while Solomon brought all of the other students up on stage and had them play. He was showing me something, I

understood that, and I could feel that some of these musicians were better than others. When the music stopped, I watched the students whisper and ignore me. The girl beside me spoke only to the person on her other side as though my veil were a solid barrier between us. The boy in front of me turned around with a big smile that felt false. He looked at the black plastic case that lay in my lap.

“What make of violin do you have?”

Are violins made differently? Maybe I had the wrong version. I shrugged.

“I’ve got a Doreli,” he said, holding up his violin. It was beautiful with cherry and orange coloring, and a sheen that reflected the light from the stage.

I opened the case and looked at my violin. In comparison to his, it looked tattered and worn. The girl beside me glanced into my case and then laughed. The boy looked as well, then gave me a big grin.

“Not a Stradivarius then, is it? Someone make that for you?”

The two girls to my left laughed out right, then put their hands to their mouths. I closed the case and looked away. I wished I could ignore them – not care about their whispers, their stares, their appraising glances but every mutter felt like it was about me and every laugh was at my expense.

My night in the jail came back to me, the night when I had vowed that I would never end up like Lizzy, that I would be proud even when others made me feel like the dirt pushed through an earthworm, but that moment of strength was hard to recapture in this place. I didn’t fit in here; I would never belong.

Every day I spent two hours with Solomon. He repositioned my fingers on the violin. He showed me sheets with music on them, sheets that I was supposed to read but didn't understand.

"You will learn how to read the music. Don't become so frustrated," he'd say when I threw the sheets of music on the floor and put my face in my hands.

"I'm too far behind. I'll never catch up."

"You are not behind and I will not listen to nonsense. With your talent and natural skill, you sound like a seasoned musician who has played for half a century. Now, let's try again."

He'd pick up the book and I'd look at the bubbled notes again, trying to make them fit with sound. Solomon gave me a small round machine, a CD player that I slid metallic circles into. The music that emerged from the machine was clear and perfect compared to the radio back at the camp and even though I had been lonely with no one to talk to besides Solomon, the music from the machine filled the empty space. After listening to the songs on my CD player, I would play them on the violin. Most of my days were spent in practice room #303, and there, I recreated the sounds as best I could.

The cafeteria, where food was distributed, hummed with noise and movement, the students like a pack of coyotes, cackling, jostling, gorging themselves and screeching across the room to their friends. The very first day I went to the cafeteria, I stood at the back of the line which extended out the door of the squatting stone building. I waited in the cold, my hands deep in my pockets and my veil draped over my face. Two students

from the music program, Rita and Max stood a few people in front of me. They whispered to the other students in their group and all faces turned to look at me. No one waved or invited me to join the group, no one said hello even though they were obviously staring at me. It felt like being chained to a doghouse in a lonely village with family for enemies. After that first day in the line, I waited until the cafeteria was almost closed and then I darted in, sneaking and scavenging, grabbing whatever leftovers were available, and running out again.

I curled onto my bed, out of the wind and cold, listening to the music of heaven. Gradually my hands lost their coating of red, rough skin. I hadn't had an earache since my first night at The Conservatory, when I'd bought oil at the store on campus. Even though I was physically comfortable and could spend all of my time listening to and playing music, it wasn't enough. I cried more than I'd ever cried before. And a fear that never went away rested against my chest.

I had not paid Celso. A month had passed and I was sure he'd come for his payment. He would take it out on me, find me and force me to the brothel, or he would punish Nathanael. Jeremia. I didn't want to think of Jeremia, but sometimes I lay in bed at night, pulled my coat around me, and remembered the way his hands made my skin tingle.

## 60

Christmas morning I walked the five blocks from The Conservatory to Solomon's house. He lived in a neighborhood with trees: gigantic trees with wide empty arms and thick



sturdy trunks. I wanted to see them in the summer, fresh with green leaves and arching branches that would shade the street and offer an umbrella of color. Now it was so cold outside, my breath froze in misty clouds when it puffed from my nose. As I walked along the sidewalk here, where the houses were three stories tall with huge windows and supporting columns, I saw a family emerge from a car and rush to a house where the door was thrown open wide and the people inside the house hugged and kissed the visitors. The inside of the house glowed with a yellow warmth. The windows of Solomon's house were the same, bright and yellow like framed campfire lights. When I knocked on the door to his house, a tall, thin woman with wide round glasses opened the door. She wore a white apron speckled with textured spots.

"You must be Whisper," she said and stepped aside. "I'm Katherine, Solomon's housekeeper. Shall I take your sack?"

I shook my head, hugging the brown paper bag to my chest. My violin thumped against my back. Shoes lined up by the door and I added my scuffed brown shoes to the row. I hung my green forest coat in the hall closet. The veil covered my face, a constant disguise.

Katherine led me down a hallway, past a dining room with a long, wide table set with plates, glasses, silverware, and candles; a carefully placed arrangement that would soon be cluttered by family – Solomon's son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren whom, he'd told me, were coming for the holidays.

We went to the kitchen where Solomon sat on a stool at the counter drinking a cup of coffee and reading a newspaper. He looked relaxed here, at ease with the large, chunky chairs sturdy enough to support his large frame.

“My virtuoso,” Solomon said, “I’m honored.”

He pushed a chair back from the counter with one of his feet but I didn’t sit. I placed my bag on the counter top. Katherine was quiet, tense in the neck, stirring the contents in a big pot.

“What do you have in the bag?”

I edged it toward him. Solomon stood, peered into my bag and then looked at me, his eyebrows up. Katherine touched the spoon from the pot to her lips.

“Could I...” I whispered and glanced at Katherine, “use your oven? I have some bread ready to bake...”

“I think we can figure out the timing. Katherine is a culinary genius.”

She opened the oven door and slid the turkey to the side, making room for my loaf pans.

I felt like a toad in Solomon’s house, short and stumpy in earth-toned clothes that didn’t match the peach and purple tiles of the countertops and walls. Solomon had invited me to Christmas dinner three times, but I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t sit at a table full of beautiful strangers and try to eat. How would I keep the veil on my face while slipping food into my mouth, how would I keep the children from staring, how would I feel comfortable – as though it were truly Christmas? I was here for only one reason: to make the bread and give it as my gift to those I fit with best. I remembered my mother’s recipe

word for word, even the lines about the yogurt culture needing to cook for a day, but when I had purchased the recipe items at the store, I had come across something my mother had not known – yeast, a miracle ingredient that could be added to the bread immediately, making it rise like a Morning Glory.

While the dough rose, I played chess with Solomon, a reminder of Jeremiah. Jeremiah had never been a good chess player. He would furtively make his move and then bite his first knuckle. While playing the game with Solomon, my nose began to drip, my eyes filled up with tears and my head ached. Would I see them again, hold Rayanna, play hide-n-seek with Eva, soothe Jeremiah's energy or watch the stars with Nathanael? Their absence hurt more every day, a spreading infection like gangrene. Would Celso punish them for my absence?

"Christmas," Solomon said. "I always miss Anna most at Christmas."

I looked up, surprised, although I shouldn't have been. He had children, grandchildren, a housekeeper but no wife. Maybe that was why he'd invited me to dinner – Solomon knew the loneliness of holidays.

"How long has she been gone?" I asked.

"Six years and three months," he said, looked down at the chess board. After contemplating for a minute, he took my knight with his bishop.

"Do you miss her less or more after six years?"

He looked at me and pinched his bottom lip between his teeth. "I don't miss her more or less or the same. I miss her differently each year. This year I miss that I can't talk to her about you. She would know better than I do how to support your inclusion."

I looked away then, down at the chessboard and moved my rook out of his knight's reach. Maybe I didn't want to be included.

The dough rose perfectly. Between chess games, I punched it down, shaped it into loaves, and let it rise once more. Katherine seemed to understand that I didn't talk much so she said very little, showing me where to find the materials I needed for the bread but not demanding that I explain who I was and why I knew how to do this. She was comfortable to be around, quiet and careful like me, not wanting to intrude but also not leaving me alone.

The bread was soft and golden when I took it from the oven. It had risen perfectly, it had not burned and it smelled like my mother. Solomon stood at the counter, picked up a loaf of bread, closed his eyes and breathed in deeply.

"Why is the smell of bread so comforting?" he asked.

I picked up another loaf of bread and smelled until my lungs were full of the rich, nutty smell.

"It means warmth, comfort, and home."

He nodded without opening his eyes and smiled. "Yes," he said. "Home."

I left one loaf with Solomon and wrapped the other loaves of bread in towels as gifts, but as I was preparing to leave, again refusing Solomon's request that I stay for dinner, a chime rang through the house. Solomon glanced at Katherine, moved down the hallway, and then returned, almost tiptoeing, with a woman following behind.

She was a short woman with plump hands, a plump neck, and a soft, lined face. When she saw me, she beamed, stood with her chubby hands wrapped around the handle

of her handbag, and rocked back and forth on her feet. Even her hair was plump, framing her face in soft white curls. The woman looked like she had been shaped out of a lump of dough and then left to rise.

“Meet Dr. Ruiz, Whisper,” Solomon said. He placed a hand on my shoulder, directed me to the high counter and eased me into a chair.

Dr. Ruiz sat in the chair beside me and placed her handbag in her lap. She looked at my veil and that, at least, I liked because she didn’t glance about the room, looking everywhere but at my face. She met me eye to eye, but she sat too close, the powdery sheen on her face like a dusting of snow. Solomon slipped out of the room as though I wouldn’t notice.

“Very nice to meet you, Whisper. I am Dr. Ruiz.” She spoke with a slight lisp, a sibilant hushing sound that made me think of snakes sticking out their tongues.

“Solomon has told me about your skills with music and a bit about your unconventional life, but really I am here to see your face, to see if perhaps surgery could be of help to you. May I see your face?”

Surgery. What did I need surgery for?

She pointed to her upper lip. A white line, thin as the vein on a leaf, ran from below her nose to her lip. “I was born with a cleft palate, or an opening at the roof of my mouth, just like you.”

I almost laughed. As if her face had ever looked like mine. Her lips were solid, well defined, unsplit while mine were gaping and bubbled.

“Do you know what a cleft palate is?”

“No,” I said.

She opened her mouth and pointed to the roof with her first finger.

“A cleft palate is when the two shelves at the top of your mouth don’t grow together before birth, but stay open. It can cause all sorts of problems like ear aches, food and drink up the nose, rattling breath. I would have had all of those problems too, but my family had money, and I had three surgeries before I was one year old. And now I’ve performed operations on many patients with cleft palates, all of which have been successful.”

I watched her talk. Her mouth was perfect, whole and unsplit. Was it possible that she had looked like me at one time; that seemed absurd, ridiculous, dishonest.

“In your case, if you do have a cleft palate, there is a drawback. You are no longer a baby. Most of the surgeries I have performed were done on children under the age of two. In your circumstance, the surgery might be a bit trickier. But, until I can really take a look at your face, I won’t know for sure.” Dr. Ruiz smiled and all the puffiness in her face pushed up. Her cheeks became big and round, her eyes were almost lost in her cheeks, and even her ears moved back.

“I’ve had this all my life,” I said, “I’ve learned to adapt.”

“Of course you have,” she said, “but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t consider how your life could improve were the surgery to be done.”

How my life would improve. Could the surgery bring my family to me? Could it make my mother live again? Would it change the fact that I’d been ostracized most of my life? Would I be accepted?

“I don’t have any money.” I slid off the stool and held my paper bag with the wrapped loaves of bread in it against my chest.

Dr. Ruiz hopped down from her stool and stood in front of me.

“My health clinic would pay for the surgery,” she said. “It would be no cost to you.”

“No.”

Dr. Ruiz’s smile narrowed and then she suddenly grinned, as though I’d told a joke she hadn’t understood at first.

“Why don’t I give you my card, dear, and you can think about it.”

I made no move to take the card she placed on the countertop. The silence between us became huge, big as the wind through the trees.

“Good-bye, Whisper. I can see that I have made you uncomfortable. That had not been my intent.” As she brushed past me, I smelled a red flowering Camellia.

I waited where I was, perched on the edge of my chair until I heard whispering in the hallway and then the front door opening and closing. My shoulders were tight, my teeth clamped together but almost of its own accord, my hand reached out, snatched Dr. Ruiz’s card off of the counter and slipped it into my sweater pocket. When I looked back at the granite, at the deep purple counter where the card had been, it was surprisingly bare. When Solomon came into the kitchen and placed his hand on my shoulder, I dipped so his hand slipped off.

“Won’t you at least listen to her?” Solomon said.

“I would listen if I thought it were true.”

“It is true,” Solomon said. “A cleft palate can be fixed.”

“Not for people like me.”

Katherine and Solomon watched as I placed the remaining three loaves of bread in the sack, pulled on my coat, put on my shoes, and opened the door. I didn’t wave as I walked down the street. They stood in the doorway, their mouths tense and their eyebrows lowered. I wanted to walk away, but I turned and made myself speak.

“Thank you for the use of your oven,” I said. “I will think about Dr. Ruiz.”

My feet moved me through space, my coat wrapped warm and comforting around me. Surgery. Corrective surgery for my face. I could look like everyone else. Had Nathanael known? Had Belen known? Had my mother known? The card in my pocket crinkled and rubbed. According to her story, if my parents had given me surgery when I was a baby, I could have had a barely discernable scar like Dr. Ruiz. All of us could have been normal. All of us: Rayanna, Lizzy, and Whisper.

## 61

Few people had passed me on the sidewalk and even though the houses grew on top of each other, the windows to these houses were closed, making the stillness of this city as unnatural as the green calm before a thunderstorm. I removed my hood, adjusted the veil over my face and stood in front of the jail door counting to thirty before I dared enter the building. The woman who had asked me the questions was not behind the first desk. Two



officers leaned in chairs at the back of the room, their hands behind their heads, their heels on the desk tops.

“Merry rotten Christmas,” the older one said, his face red like a cardinal wing. The air in the room smelled like fermented mangoes. The older officer was lean, thin and wiry with eyes close together. I unwrapped a loaf of bread. The officer closed his eyes and breathed in deeply.

“That is what it smells like in heaven.” His arms dropped from behind his head to his lap and he slid his feet off the desk. “Who’s it for?”

“Lizzy,” I whispered.

“She your mom?” His eyes narrowed and he examined me intently.

“No. She’s a friend.”

I felt a little knot form in my stomach. She could have lived a normal life with Nathanael if she had known about the surgery, if she had been given the operation. The other police officer moved to stand behind the one at the desk. The two of them watched me, their faces difficult to read, their eyes glassy and unfocused.

“You missed Lizzy by about forty minutes,” the standing officer said. His face was kinder, less hardened, still chubby in the cheeks.

“Where did she go?” I asked.

The younger officer shrugged.

“Heaven,” he said. “Hell. Wherever people like that go when they die.”

I felt a fluttering in my head, a beating of my heart somewhere in my ears. People like that.

“It was the weirdest thing. I’d brought their lunch down, I gave her the food. She was standing, looking right at me, her eyes as clear and focused as I’ve ever seen them. I had to stop and look at her for a minute – she was kind of creepy, you know? With those eyes, messed-up face. She raised her arms to the side and then one of the lights, the one right behind me popped, shot out red, yellow, and orange sparks. Made me jump out of my skin. I went upstairs to get another light bulb, and when I came down again, she was gone. Dead. Lying on the floor of her cell, her mouth pulled into a snarl.” The young man’s hand reached up to his own face, touched his lips.

“She was a witch, you know, making that light bulb pop like that. She had powers, that woman.”

My hands were damp against the paper bag. I hadn’t known Lizzy well, I hadn’t known what her life had been like but I did know that she could have lived a life outside of a jail cell.

“Merry Christmas,” I said.

I left the loaf of bread on the desk in front of the men and walked out the door.

Maybe departing this world could be considered a gift in some cases.

## 62

I walked through the cold streets, the colorless lanes and passed four people even though I looked around every corner – if Celso came, where would he show up? One man lay on the ground, cardboard under him, cardboard over him. I didn’t know if he was still alive. Everyone else must have been gathered around warm fires, singing songs, stuffing

themselves full of goose. Even the ladies with the high heels, exposed skin and made up faces were gone, taking the day off to celebrate in whatever way suited them best.

Nathanael, Jeremia, Rayanna and Eva would be stringing necklaces of holly for the tree and gathering pecans for the rice dressing. I could have been at Solomon's, feeling warmth and kindness, if not inclusion.

When I knocked on the door of Purgatory Palace, it was flung open by a tall man with a lopsided nose and a very black, swollen eye. I held my breath for a minute, wondering if Celso had come, taken over the entire building while I was gone, but the man laughed when he saw me. I had prepared myself for Ofelia, for her sneer, condescension, rancid breath, but her door was closed.

“Well if it isn't Whisper,” he said. “Merry Christmas!”

“Oscar...”

I remembered the veil and slipped it off of my head and into the sack. Here I was not different, here I could uncover my face. Oscar wore tan shorts over thin metal legs ending on split wooden ovals that clumped in a stuttering beat against the floor.

He steadied himself with his hands and lurched from side to side as he led me down the hall. Residents of Purgatory Palace stood in the hallway, each with a paint roller in hand and a bucket of paint by their feet. Oscar weaved unsteadily past them, wobbling and waving his arms in big swings, but he was so giddy with laughter, that those in the hallway giggled too.

“I'm almost six feet tall,” he said. “Woah.”

His legs leaned to the right while his body moved in the opposite direction, but Oscar didn't fall. Instead, he placed both hands on the left wall and pushed himself back toward the legs. Tears leaked from the corners of his eyes.

Candela stood by the doorway to her room and watched Oscar lurch down the hallway toward her. She held a paint roller in one hand, a big splotch of white paint smeared across her black bangs.

"Of course he fails to mention that he got a little help from a friend." When Oscar reached Candela, he bent down from the waist, picked her up and held her against his chest. The roller waved wildly as Candela shrieked and a line of white smeared across the unpainted door. When Oscar put her down, Candela smiled shyly and touched the arm of my coat.

"Glad you came," she said. We both looked down at the freshly scrubbed floor. The weight of unresolved issues hung like a fog between us.

"We're getting married," she said. "He decided that we are meant for each other, even if we're not whole." I looked at her, daring just a glance. Her eyes didn't narrow, her mouth didn't pull down at the corners, she didn't sigh or roll her eyes. This was a Candela I could trust and love.

"Congratulations," I said but felt such sadness, such overwhelming loneliness that I coughed, choked on the word. She spoke slowly and carefully so no one else in the hallway would overhear.

"That man who came to get you. Do you live with him?" Her words were abrupt.

"He's teaching me music," I said. "At the school. I live in the dorms."

I picked up a paintbrush from her tray and eased it over the chipped doorway, erasing the streaks and flaws. I didn't know if she would believe me, but I wanted Candela back. I painted, back and forth. She spoke after a long pause.

"Do you like it?"

"Yes," I said, "and no." I choked, tried to swallow but made a strange sound like the panting of a dying wolf. "I hate it there but I want to learn music."

Candela dropped her paintbrush and wrapped her arms around me. I held her against me, tight, like I would have with Eva. I leaned down, placing my cheek against the top of her head.

"Sometimes we have to do what we hate to get what we want," Candela said.

"Yeah," I said and then smeared paint in my hair from the brush when I wiped the tears away.

Surgery wouldn't change Candela. Surgery wouldn't help Oscar. If I had surgery, would they still want me around? With my free hand, I removed a loaf of bread from the sack and handed it to her. She held it against her nose and breathed in.

"You're staying, you know. Aren't you on holidays from school or something? Christmas is big around here – it's not like we have to be anywhere else. And it just so happens that you could stay for a few days in Room #13."

If she hadn't invited me, I would have gone back outside and curled up on the street beside the man in the cardboard box.

As we stood together in the hallway with paint brushes in hand, we talked. I told her about The Conservatory, the students who watched and whispered, the music that

filled my days with a beauty that I'd never known before and she talked about Oscar and how he'd told A that he didn't want to work for him. She told me about Oscar tripping A, knocking him to the ground where they could at least look each other in the eye. She said Oscar had been beaten so badly, he didn't get out of bed for three days. Ofelia, she said, was getting worse - she stumbled and slurred, grabbed them by the hair and screamed into their faces when she came out of her room. Ofelia cried every night, the sound muffled but heart wrenching and she'd told them they didn't have to pay rent the week of Christmas if they'd use their money to fix the place up. She was selling it. They didn't know if they'd be allowed to stay when the building was sold, or if they'd be out on the streets, living in the hills with all the other beggars.

How could I complain about my life: a room to myself, three meals a day, the luxury of education when they didn't even know where they would live after the sale? I pretended that my life was acceptable by not saying that it wasn't. When Candela and I finished our spot in the hallway, we went to see the decorations in the common room.

"Oh, incredible," I said. The common room had been transformed into a holly tree, green with red dressings. A Christmas tree spread its branches through the middle of the room, the tin star on top brushing the ceiling, the branches loaded with red bows and lit candles.

"Where did you find such an enormous tree?" I asked.

"The dump," she said. "We find a lot of good stuff there." Candela showed me the branches, perfectly formed, bizarrely symmetrical, a plastic tree with hints of dust between the needles. It was almost as beautiful as Christmas in the woods where nature

adorned the real holly trees with blood berries and where the song of the owl joined our carols. As I began to feel comfortable, warm and relaxed, someone tapped me on the shoulder. The woman with the burns spoke through lips that were pulled tight into bloodless lines.

“Little miss princess. The Purgatory Palace is for people who understand hell – you’ve graduated, honey, you no longer meet the resident requirements.” Her wrinkled, pinched fingers pulled at my coat, pulled at one of the wooden buttons so hard, I thought she’d yank it off.

“How long do you have to live in hell to know what it’s like?”

“All your life, princess, not just the first bit.”

“And what would heaven look like in your world?”

“A soft bed, no begging, and maybe a man to tuck me in,” she said. She might have been sneering but her face was so bubbled and scarred that all of her expressions were the same.

“Then I don’t have it either.”

Sonja let go of the button so quickly, I fell back against the table, the edge pushing into my side. I glared after her, but she was right. I didn’t belong here, at The Conservatory, or at Belen’s house. I didn’t fit. I didn’t fit anywhere.

But I was learning music, how to hold my violin correctly, what arco and pizzicato meant, how to vibrato, and how to make a sound so keening and plaintive, wolves on the hill would howl their replies. Maybe I didn’t have heaven, but I was closer than anyone here.

The next day, Candela grumbled and muttered as she brought me to Rosa.

“Forget about her, Whisper. She has her own life now, the baby, her career.” The words must have tasted of fire the way she spit them out. I showed Candela my last loaf of bread and she shook her head, put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes.

Rosa lived by the river, next to a huge building with smoke stacks that spewed thick smog into the air and that had a fence with barbed wire all around the building. White trucks were parked behind the wire fence, trucks with the word SWINC in black letters on the sides,

I hadn’t been down her street before and I vowed, as I walked down the street, that I would never come here alone. The people seemed vacant, absent, as though they lived within themselves rather than outside with the rest of us. Candela held onto the sleeve of my coat and pulled me along as I watched two women in an alleyway crouch together, slipping something pointed and sharp into their arms. I hugged the loaf of bread to me with one hand and held Jeremia’s violin with the other.

Parts of the building were falling apart – metal poles showed through the walls like ribs, crumbling bits of stone exposed more metal, and shards of glass poked from frames where windows should have been – it was as though the insides of the building had been turned to the outside.



The smell of urine, unwashed skin, and rotted food made my eyes water. I pushed a hand against my nose as we stepped around garbage, toys, and sleeping people lying on the walkway outside of the rooms.

Rosa lived on the third floor. Candela and I paused at the door and glanced at each other. I held my breath when Candela knocked. A man opened the door. He was stooped, his shoulders rounded as though they had once been strong but now pulled his body toward the ground. The inside of the room had a couch, chairs, a refrigerator, and seemed much more livable than the outside of the building suggested.

“What.” His hand reached up under his shirt and scratched at an enormous stomach thick with hair.

“Where’s Rosa,” Candela asked.

“Gone.” He crossed his massive arms over his chest. He was built like the cars I saw rumbling through the streets outside. “She doesn’t want to see you freaks anyway.”

“Like I want to see her.” Candela pointed her thumb at me and I tried to loosen my arms from where they pressed the bread to my chest. I thrust the loaf of bread toward the man. Even though the loaf of bread was a day old, when I held it toward the man, the aroma of yeast and flour wafted between us like a message.

“She went for a walk. The baby was fussy.”

Our hands both held onto the same loaf of bread for just a minute and he looked at me fully, seeing me.

“You from that camp in the woods?”

“Yes,” I said.

“She said she saw you. She cried for hours after she saw you.”

“I’ll watch the baby if she ever needs help.”

“She’d like that,” he said, then took the bread, stepped back into the room and slammed the door.

Candela looked at me, one eyebrow lowered, creases between her eyes. She put one hand on her hip.

“Geez girl, he just said something nice to you. He’s never said anything nice to me.”

“Is that the baby’s father?” I asked.

“Who knows. He’s a leech. She works and he lives off her. I don’t like you being nice to him.”

“Everyone could use kindness. “

“Yeah, or a couple nights in jail.”

“No one needs jail.”

“That’s bull,” Candela said. She turned and stomped back the way we’d come, around the sleeping people, over the garbage, through smells so dense and horrid they made my eyes water. Maybe when Rosa returned from wherever she was, she would at least smell the bread-tainted air and think of me.

When we reached the street, I looked at the factory next door. A haze surrounded the building, as though fog had settled around it and didn’t mean to leave anytime soon. Candela pointed to the trucks behind the fence.

“I think their main factory is in Gloriosa.”

All I could remember of Gloriosa was the farm where most of the people in the town worked – the huge buildings that blocked the light and created the head-crushing smell.

“What is SWINC?” I asked.

“Meat-packing plant. If you don’t want to beg, if you don’t want to work at the brothel, the next best job for us would be there,” Candela said.

It looked like the type of building that if you went in, you might never come out.

When we returned to Purgatory Palace, Candela and I joined the others in the common room. I unstrapped my violin from around my shoulder, opened the case, fit the instrument under my chin and steadied my hands. It was nice here, warm, inviting but I couldn’t shake a sadness that made my fingers feel heavy, or a tension that spoke of surprise visits from men on mules. I played the violin for many hours a day, trying to add my tainted emotions to the remnants of satisfaction found here. If those around me could find happiness, why couldn’t I?

I stayed for eight days – the days between Christmas and new years, and even though I played games, talked to Candela, laughed with Oscar, felt comfortable and warm, a hollow feeling had lodged itself in my chest and I knew that the only way to get rid of it was to see Jeremia again, hold Rayanna, play with Eva. I wanted to tell them about the surgery, ask for their advice, but I was on my own here and had to live with the decisions I’d make.

After midnight on New Year's Eve, I left Purgatory Palace. I hugged Candela, wrapped my arms around the tall Oscar, avoided Sonja's eyes as I had all week, and wished them a happy new year. I rubbed my finger tips across Ofelia's newly painted door and thought about the snuffling I'd heard in the night, thought about the sadness that even normal people could feel.

It was the middle of the night, but the darkness of the streets had been pushed back by revelers. Shouts, singing, bursts of fireworks shot pinpricks of celebration into the blackness and people ran by me, giddy with happiness and camaraderie.

The Conservatory buildings were dark, with most students having gone home for the holidays, but a few dorm windows winked with light, a few students unable to go home, celebrating in their rooms. I approached Clarence Hall, the tall stone building with four layered rows of dorm windows, and slid my card into the lock. I kept my head down as I walked along the hallway, the hood shadowing my face, but I still sensed someone in the hall before I got to my room.

Shuffling, whispering, stifled giggles filtered out from the darkened stairwell beside my room. My heart quickened and my hands became sweaty, the key slipping in my fingers as I approached the door to my room. He'd found me here and now my easy life would be over.

"Look who's finally here." From beneath the stairwell emerged three figures. They were silhouetted, dark, but I knew who they were before they stepped into the light

of the hallway, Tomas, Carla, and Ben, students of Solomon. I stood still, the dorm door two strides in front of me, but as far away as my camp in the woods. At least it wasn't Celso.

"Hello Whisper. You go home? Spend Christmas with your family of freaks?"

Ben giggled. Carla crossed her arms over her chest. I looked down at the floor.

"And what is up with that stupid veil?" Tomas said. He drank from a bottle in his hand and stood crooked, his limbs dangling and disjointed. The three of them smelled like Ofelia: fermented and poisoned. I stepped back.

"Where you going?" Tomas said, closing the distance between us, his black hair a shadow across his face, his eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot. Carla stood beside Tomas. Ben loomed behind them, tall, gangly, red-haired and smirking.

"We want to know what you're hiding, what you've got under there. Solomon thinks you're some kind of miracle. We think you're creepy." I took another step back, my breath coming in short bursts.

The wall was against my back. Tomas stepped closer, Carla and Ben flanked him. My hand reached up to my neck, clasped the violin made by Jeremia, squeezed until the edges poked into my palm.

"Show us what you got." Tomas reached up, pushed back the cowl of my hood, his hand clumsy and hot, and yanked my veil off of my head, dropping it on the floor. I squinted from the sudden light in my eyes.

All three of them stepped back.

"Woah," Tomas said.

I looked at them, not avoiding their gaze, and set my jaw as I'd seen Candela do. My hands no longer shook and my breath began to slow. Tomas gaped, his nose pulled up in disgust; Carla's hand impulsively moved to her face where she touched her lips, her nose, her perfect features; Ben stumbled backwards, turned and strode down the hallway.

I stepped forward. I felt the power that this face could wield in a dimly lit hallway with no one around. My breath deepened, my jaw tightened, my shoulders tensed and then I ran, my feet moving as though with a will of their own, and I pulled my mouth into a half smile as I watched Tomas and Carla back step away from me. I made a final rush at them, my fingers reaching for them, but still clamped tight around Jeremia's carved violin. Too late, I felt the string stretch taught, snap and then I let go. The hand-carved violin dropped through my coat to the carpet of the hallway and I stepped on it, snapping the carving in two. Tomas and Carla ran, following Ben, and I stumbled, crying out. I knelt and rocked back and forth. Ofelia's shuddering breaths, heard through the thin walls of Purgatory Palace, now became mine and I sobbed, unable to find a place for myself in this world that was pulling me apart.

## 65

I stopped wearing the veil. I remembered the night in jail with Lizzy, swearing to myself that I would never end up as she had, but I didn't know where that strength had come from. It was not strength that allowed me to get rid of the veil, it was the knowledge that those three students had already told everyone what my face looked like and if I didn't reveal my true face, soon the rumors would have me looking like such a hideous monster

that I would lose any credibility I might have had. So I showed my face, but I was not proud to do so.

So far in my life the veil had been chosen for me – Belen made me wear it, Celso made me wear it, playing my violin in the streets forced me to take it off, this school required that I wear it again, the students chose to remove it. When would the decision be mine to make? The only place where I could be who I was without hiding was Purgatory Palace, but even there I felt like an outsider. I had a scholarship; I went to The Conservatory. What did the other residents have? Soon, they wouldn't even be able to call themselves residents.

At my first music lesson after the holidays, Solomon watched me with eyes that weighed and assessed. I sat in the metal chair and picked at the violin strings with the first finger of my left hand.

“Why did you remove the veil?” he asked.

I didn't think that he wanted to hear the answer.

“Well, no matter. Now I can see your beautiful eyes.” He placed his fingertips together, his elbows on the arms of his chair, and tapped his first fingers against his lip. “Dr. Ruiz would like to see you again. Have you given that any thought?” The card from Dr. Ruiz was in my pocket always, a constant reminder that a decision should be made. How could I not think about this? How can the lone wolf not always think about protecting itself?

“She told me that you probably suffer from a great number of ear aches.”

“I’m used to them,” I said. “And haven’t had one since I’ve been at The Conservatory.” I didn’t tell him that I would gladly accept them back again if it meant returning to my home in the woods.

“The surgery would alleviate eating difficulties.”

“True.” Nothing he mentioned was a new thought. But you don’t just change the most defining physical characteristic about yourself without repercussions. Oscar’s new legs didn’t change who he was; he was still a reject and his friends understood that, but he could take those legs off whenever he wanted and fit in with others who were less than whole. If I had surgery, it couldn’t be undone. If my deformities disappeared, Whisper would be gone – Whisper of the forest, the creek, the camp in the woods. I didn’t know if I could be Whisper of the greater world.

Solomon clapped his hands together.

“For now we play. Let’s hear your recital piece.”

I sat up in the chair, lifted the violin to my shoulder, lowered my chin, closed my eyes and played the song of Whisper when she had known who she was and where she belonged.

## 66

The auditorium where our final performance would be held was large enough to hold three thousand people – enough for the entire school to attend along with their families - more people in one place than I had ever seen. I walked through the side door, found myself on the stage, and held my breath. It was bigger than the meadow with the deer and



so dim from lack of sunshine that I shivered. The second level also contained seats and boxes where people could sit, hold binoculars to their eyes and watch the performers on the stage through special lenses where defects would be magnified. I felt mouse-like standing on that stage and wanted to crawl back to my dorm room, curl under the covers and clutch the broken violin in my hands.

We would perform that night. Before the performance we tested the sound in this large open space. I wondered how anyone would hear me with so much air to dissolve my song but Solomon said that the music would wing its way to the far corners of the room and fill hearts with beauty.

Perhaps hearts with beauty, but certainly not eyes.

The other students were giddy with nervousness. They tried to appear solemn and serious while they tuned their instruments, but they laughed shrilly and then glanced about, listening to their laughter bounce around the room. Tonight all of the school, and more of the world than I cared to acknowledge, could fill this space and watch me. My only hope was that I was so tiny on the stage, so miniscule in the great open space and oppressive air that they wouldn't even be able to see my distorted features, that I would be as insignificant as a hummingbird chirping its staccato tune.

We played bits of our pieces, listened for the acoustics, made adjustments and then again played for the people who operated the sound booth. They adjusted this and that and then asked us to play our songs again. My violin felt weak and small. I had always felt its power before but here in this great space, its power was a thin trickle of smoke dispersed through the air.

Tomas and Carla, along with Max, Sarah and Rita, grouped around Solomon after the rehearsal. They gestured with their hands and glanced in my direction. I knelt in the corner of the stage, folded my violin into the case, strapped the case to my back and stood. Solomon walked to me, his heavy footsteps echoing through the room. He pulled at his chin with his left hand.

“Whisper,” he said.

A tingling started in my nose. I would not cry here, in front of these students who wanted me to be embarrassed and humiliated. Why did they hate me so? I didn’t understand what I had done. I tried to summon the strength I had felt in the jail, the desire to change my life, to be different from Lizzy, to shape for myself a different fate and to choose when I would wear the veil and when I would remove it.

“I’ll wear the veil,” I whispered.

Solomon placed a finger under my chin and lifted my face so I looked up into his.

“The choice is yours,” he said, “The beauty of your music surpasses any of theirs. I would listen to you play your violin over them playing their instruments any day.”

Me or them. Them or me. Always separated and alone. I would play my song. I would lose myself in my own music, but the audience would not see me. They would see a veil, a mystery, a disguise. In some ways I felt relief but I was embarrassed to admit this even to myself.

My shoulders tensed, my heart thudded against my chest, my hands began to sweat when I walked down the dorm hallway and heard shuffling from beneath the stairs. A small whimper worked its way out of my mouth. Either it was Celso, or the other students had come to torment me, today, the day of the recital. I couldn't endure the tormenting today.

I heard rustling, whispering. I hurried the last few feet, running past the darkness beneath the stairs, inserted the key, turned it in the lock, opened the door and slammed it shut behind me. The bolt clicked beneath my hand and I stepped back, watching the door as though it might open on its own, even a lock not enough to protect me from tormentors. I heard no sound but my own panicked breathing.

I inhaled through my mouth, into my chest and felt my breath begin to calm. Then I heard a knock on the door. Maybe if I made no sound, whoever was out there would leave, would think I was asleep, would think I had slipped out the window, leapt into the sky and been blown away by the wind.

The knock came again, a timid knock, a gentle knock, a knock that was low, half-way up the door, and not pounding or demanding. I stepped to the door, peaked through the miniature hole and saw nothing. Whoever was knocking on the door must have been short, must have been below my eye level, must have been Candela. The possibility that it might be someone I wanted to see, felt startling and stilled my hands.

I unlocked the bolt on the door, felt how slick with sweat my hands had become, and pulled the door open.

For a minute I stared at the figure in the hallway, trying to understand what I was seeing. Then I kneeled, wrapped my arms around her and squeezed so tight, I thought maybe she could become part of me.

“Eva.”

“We found you,” she said. Her round warm cheek pushed against mine.

I heard more shuffling behind the stairs, looked into the darkness and saw a shape emerge, a large shape with a bulky chest. I stood, lifting Eva into my arms even though she was getting big, almost seven years old.

He had changed. He was lanky and lean, his frame inches taller than I remembered it even though I had only been gone for three months. His face was different too – longer, less baby-ish, more angular with a scrubbing of straggly prickles pointing from his chin in sparse patches. His eyes were wary, darting, like those of a trapped animal and he held Rayanna tight against his chest, wrapped in a piece of cloth. The deep, bruising circles under his eyes were also new.

We looked hard at each other. Jeremia stepped from foot to foot, tiptoeing, tense, ready to run back to his shelter or wherever he had come from.

“I missed you,” I said.

“We’ve needed you,” he replied. He touched my cheek with the tip of his finger and then jerked away when the front door to Clarence Hall clicked open. A group of students, talking and laughing, entered the building. Jeremia shifted his weight to the left, to the right. I pushed the door to my dorm room open and hoped that he would rush inside rather than out into the shadows, an elusive deer that I would once again lose. He

looked once at the people in the hallway and then slipped into the dorm room. I stepped in after him still holding Eva against me and shut the door behind us, cocooning us together once again.

I realized that I had not felt arms around my neck, the warmth of a body against mine for a very long time. I sat on my bed and held Eva against me, breathing in the dusky, tree sap smell of her hair. She held me tight, sniffled her nose against my green coat, smeared the tears around on her face with the back of her hand, the webbing between her fingers catching bits of water and reflecting it in the light. I loved everything about her, the webs of skin between her fingers, the unlaced shoes that needed to be stretched wide to comfortably encase her feet, and even the little crunchy sleep pieces in the corners of her eyes. Jeremia stood at the desk – the built-in desk that emerged from the wall like an opened mouth.

“You get to live in this enormous house?” Eva asked, her eyes wide as she looked around the room.

“I borrow this room,” I said, “while I am a student here.”

“But everything is so clean and new. The bed is so soft.” She bounced up and down on the bed. “And look at this.” She opened each drawer at the desk, shut them and opened them again.

Rayanna muttered against Jeremia’s chest. He jostled her up and down, up and down and then pulled her from the strip of cloth. He held her high from the wrappings with his one arm, letting the cloth fall from her, and then he set her in his lap. She gazed out, her eyes large and black and then suddenly she smiled. The smile stretched from ear

to ear and was such a surprise, such a startling flash of light across her face that I laughed. Jeremiah jerked his head, looked at me with furrowed eyebrows. His eyes lost their intensity and for a minute I thought he might actually sit down, but instead he leaned against the desk, his body bowed, supple like a new sapling. I didn't know where he planned to go, but he certainly didn't want to stay.

Eva's face was smeared with grime, the kind of dirt that took time to accumulate. Shadows like half moons circled under her eyes, her mouth trembled and twisted, and I could see her cheekbones where I should have seen rounded cheeks. I set her down on the bed and went to the cupboard for food reserves – bread, crackers, small bottles of water. I gave the bread to Jeremiah, the crackers to Eva and a bottle of water to each.

Before feeding himself, Jeremiah pulled off a soft piece of bread and placed it in Rayanna's mouth. Her eyes became intense, dark, her mouth pulled tight and she sucked on the ball of bread. Her hands came out, she grabbed at Jeremiah's fingers and he gave her another soft piece. She was five months old. I'd missed almost four of those months. Eva shoved crackers into her mouth without chewing them.

"Slow," I said. She crammed another cracker into her mouth and then smiled, bits of cracker falling from between her lips. I shook my head.

"We thought you were dead," Jeremiah said. He leaned against the desk, eating great bites of the bread. "Celso said you didn't pay him."

"What happened?" I asked.

Eva's eyes became big, her cheeks squeezed up and large drops spilled onto the crackers in her hands. She sobbed once. I slid next to her, put my arm around her and looked at Jeremiah.

"They came on Christmas. The middle of the day. Three men this time, although your father only watched. The boys weren't there." Rayanna's hands stretched before her again and she opened and closed her fist. Jeremiah gave her a small piece of bread. Her fingers squeezed it, smashing the soft bits into pulp and then she shoved it toward her mouth, opening like a baby bird.

Jeremiah didn't look at me. He looked somewhere over my shoulder, his eyes examining the wall behind my bed. I watched the twitch at the top of his left cheek.

"They told us where you were, that you'd gone to the city and were working for them. They told us that you had disappeared, you hadn't held up your side of the deal and now they were coming to fulfill their promise."

Eva watched Jeremiah so hard, creases formed between her eyes.

"They poured gasoline on our huts, on our supplies, on our sitting logs and when I tried to stop them, Nathanael told me to go, to run to the city and find you. The third man wasn't there to destroy the camp, he was there to get rid of the past. My father wanted me dead."

Jeremiah focused on my face now. The scared look was gone, the haunted look had disappeared, and what I saw now were liquid-filled eyes so brown and disturbed, I felt my own eyes filling with tears in response. He lifted his chin where a gash just under his jaw snaked red and inflamed against the brown skin of his neck.

“So I left with the little ones,” he whispered. “I left Nathanael. He’s dead.”

His voice cracked when he said this. I slipped off the bed, took three steps and enclosed both him and Rayanna in my arms. He lowered his head to my shoulder and with my hands on his back, I felt the gasping of his breath.

“But you saved the little ones, Jeremiah. Look how far you’ve come,” I said.

As I held Jeremiah, I was not sure what to feel. Nathanael was dead, died in a fire, died at the hands of Jeremiah’s father. I felt the horror of it, but I also felt heat, the heat of anger seeping from my chest to all parts of my body, the determination I had felt in the jail cell. My biological family had done this – my uncle. This was my fault. If I had paid them the money I owed them mid-December, none of this would have happened. They would come for me.

Jeremiah’s breathing calmed and he sat down on the chair by the desk. I crouched on the floor beside him, my right arm around Eva, my left hand on Jeremiah’s arm, his muscles tight with tension.

“We’ve been looking for you for a long time,” Eva said. “We walked through the forest, we walked through the smell, we freed the animals, we came to the city, we were told to go to that hotel and we asked there about you. This lady who was my size,” Eva stood when she said this, held her hand up to her head and showed me how big she was, “told us you were up here at The Conservatory. We came here to look for you.”

Jeremiah leaned his head back. The twitch was gone from his cheek. His arm drooped and I took Rayanna from him. She cooed and talked. I touched her nose against mine.



“Sleep,” I said to Jeremia. He didn’t resist.

He was seventeen and the father of the family. He lay down on the bed, rolled toward the wall and within seconds was asleep. Eva curled up against his back and smiled at me as her eyes drooped. Rayanna’s thumb made its way into her mouth and then she too began to close her eyes.

The camp was gone. I could never return there. I felt no surprise about this, nor did I feel fear. I’d already lost that camp, but now that my family was here, I didn’t care where I lived or how; somehow, together, we would make it work.

## 68

I woke up and glanced around the room, feeling lost, and disoriented. The winter evening held no light and only a small crack under the door allowed a yellow beam into the room. Eva snored slowly on the bed, Rayanna breathed sweet baby breath into the room; I couldn’t hear Jeremia’s breathing at all. A tickle, a feeling of unrest told me I needed to be somewhere.

Standing quickly, I moved to the bathroom with Rayanna still in my arms. I gathered three towels, shaped them into a nest, placed them on the floor near the bed where Jeremia and Eva would see her when they woke, and tucked Rayanna into the cozy nest. Then I shut myself in the bathroom.

The recital was now. The reflection of my face in the mirror didn't calm the twitching nerves in my stomach. I considered waking Jeremia, Eva and Rayanna, taking them with me, but I knew that walking them into the huge auditorium would only terrify them. They didn't walk between societies. They didn't wear the veil. This was a moment I must face on my own. I considered not showing up, disappearing like the sound of a whisper, but I couldn't do that to Solomon after all he'd done for me.

I dried my cheeks, brushed through my hair, straightened my sweater and felt something crinkle beneath my hand. I removed the slip of paper from my pocket. I placed the card on the counter next to the sink and looked at it. It was a plain card, white with blue ink, Dr. Susan Ruiz's name small and unassuming, but the possibilities behind the card were as weighty as oak.

I opened the door a crack, collected my violin, strapped it to my back, and tucked the broken pieces of Jeremia's violin into my sweater pocket. I clipped a note on the mirror and was about to leave when I glanced again at my reflection. My finger moved up to my mouth, pushed at the slit and bubbles in my lip and watched as my gums and teeth showed through the gap, revealed these inner workings of the body that were supposed to remain concealed. This was who I was and what I looked like and what I'd always been, but that could change with surgery. And it could change for Rayanna.

I loosened the black veil from around my neck and with it in hand, I walked out the door of the dormitory

The other musicians already stood backstage in crisp white shirts, elegant black dresses and polished shoes. The first group to play, Ben, Tomas, Carla and Michelle,

were on stage. When Solomon saw me, he strode toward me and placed an arm around my shoulders.

“Thank God,” he said. “You came.”

I pushed my face into his tweed coat. He smelled of mint. Solomon held me away, leaned down so our faces were level, and looked into my eyes.

“You will be magnificent.”

“I won’t,” I said against his coat. “I can’t do this.”

“Of course you can. If you can do this on a street corner with raw, stiff hands, you can do this here, where everyone came to hear you.”

“They didn’t come to hear me, they came to hear them.” I glanced at Tomas and Carla on stage.

“But you are the one worth listening to.”

I slipped the veil over my head. Solomon patted my shoulder but he didn’t smile. His great cheeks sagged, became jowly and heavy.

As the other students played, I listened, the notes like butterflies flitting around the room. I heard the nervousness in Ben’s bow – the cello voice fluttering with his hands; I heard the tension in Tomas’s violin – the emotion flat; I heard the anxiety in Carla’s viola – the notes rushed, ahead of the beat. I breathed deeply and thought of Eva’s arm wrapped around my neck. I thought of the way it felt to hold Rayanna against my chest, and the way Jeremiah’s body felt when his breathing rasped in him. There was beauty in my life and that part mattered more than standing on this stage ever would.

When it was my turn, Solomon placed his arm around my shoulders. Together we walked out to the stage and I felt for a moment as though I had a father. We walked past the grand piano, we walked around the quartet of set-up chairs, we stood at the front of the stage, only a microphone on a metal pole in front of us. I watched my feet as Solomon adjusted the microphone to the level of my violin. The shuffling of the people, the soft whispers, the brushing of feet against the floor echoed sporadically through the space like cricket chirps in the night. Solomon spoke into the microphone.

“Whisper Gane is the newest member of our stringed section here at The Conservatory. She is also our youngest member. She says very little, but allows the music she has composed to speak for her. Please welcome her with me.”

Solomon stepped away from me. I heard him walk across the stage toward the piano. He stopped there, stood in the crook of the grand piano and crossed his arms over his chest.

I stared down at my feet, at my brown shoes that were worn at the toes. I looked at the brown skirt that reminded me of a lost mother and trees in the forest. I listened to the sound of my breath.

I raised my head, raised my eyes and I looked out into the auditorium. The lights, brilliant orbs too white for sunlight, were blinding but the gauzy black veil dampened the effect. I raised my violin to my shoulder, rested my chin against it, fitted my bow to the strings and closed my eyes.

No longer was I standing in front of hundreds of people wondering why I wore a disguise. I was in the woods, under the leaves of the trees, by the creek and with my

family, but the huts were no longer there, the smell of smoke burned through the air, the birds so silent the emptiness hurt. This was my song. The music carried me away once again and I lived in my head even while I stood on the stage.

The song ended, my eyes opened and I lowered the violin and bow to the sides, my arms trembling. Solomon's arm settled around my shoulder and my knees shook beneath that weight. Now was when I would faint. Now, when my song was done. Solomon whispered against my head, spoke into my ear,

“Beautiful. Perfect.”

But he was all I heard. No longer did I hear shuffling, no longer did I hear echoing coughs. We stood alone.

And then I heard a number of people shifting their weight, adjusting their bodies, and a sound echoed about the room, bounced off the walls. Applause. It was scattered and sparse but allowed me to relax my shoulders and control my dizziness. There were not nearly as many people as I had imagined; only a smattering of students here and others there, adults whom I assumed were parents, relatives, friends of the other students, and a few professors from the school sat in clumps throughout the auditorium.

Solomon held me tight, my shoulder wedged into his chest, and we stood still until the clapping slowed and the people sat. Then we walked off the stage together and when I stood with the other musicians I almost felt like one of them. They smiled slightly, inclining their heads. There was an excitement in the air, a giddiness and I fluttered on the periphery in my disguise. I hung there for just a minute, and then I

remembered what waited for me back at the dorm. I slipped my violin into its case, squeezed Solomon's hand, and walked out the side door.

Before going home, I stopped at the little shop on campus and bought bread, cheese, milk, apples, carrots and cloth diapers. Beside the diapers were plastic pants, little pull up pants that went over the diaper. I'd never seen these before. I bought two and laughed when they crinkled in my hand like dried leaves.

At the dorm room, I gathered a bucket of ice from the machine in the hallway, dumped it into the bathroom sink, and cooled the milk and cheese there. I threw my veil on the floor by the door. I snuggled Rayanna against my chest, positioned the towels under my head and lay on the floor. They couldn't stay here, in this dorm room, even though I wanted them to. Jeremiah, with his need for space, would twitch into the corner, become furtive like an animal. Rayanna needed care; how would I take her with me to my classes, to my lessons with Solomon? And Eva. Eva was six now. She could do many things on her own but needed education, someone to teach her and Nathanael was no longer an option.

I wasn't sure what to do but tonight I had played my song in front of many people and I had survived.

## 69

Just as my breathing and heartbeat began to slow and calm, a knocking on the door startled me awake. My first thought was Celso – he'd found us, would jab his sharp knife into Jeremiah's throat and sell the rest of us. But I reasoned with myself that it couldn't be

him – not now, not in this place. He'd look for us at Purgatory Palace. It must be Tomas, I thought, or Carla, Max. I couldn't decide if I should open the door and stop the pounding so it wouldn't wake Jeremia, Eva and Rayanna, or if I should ignore it and hope whoever it was went away.

“Whisper, it's me, Solomon. I've got to talk to you.”

I tiptoed to the door, Rayanna still snoring softly against my chest. I shifted the bolt and opened the door just a crack. Solomon stood in the muted light of the hallway. His face was split in a wide grin, a grin that stretched his mustache toward his ears.

“Come, come,” he said gesturing to me.

I opened the door wider and stepped out into the hall. Solomon placed a hand on my shoulder and peered into my face.

“Guess who was at the concert,” he said.

Rayanna shifted her weight against my chest.

“Ruy Climaco of the city philharmonic orchestra, and guess who he wants to play with the symphony?” His breath smelled of garlic, ginger, and oregano. “Whisper Gane. You, my dear. He requested that you play the song you played tonight and the symphony would accompany you. Isn't that fabulous?”

Solomon jumped back and did a dance step in the middle of the hallway. His large stomach stretched and bounced the fabric of his tweed coat.

He wanted me to play my song with an entire orchestra to accompany me, me at the center, just me, with the other instruments to fill in and make my song full. I bit down on the tip of my tongue. My heart began to thud. And even though Rayanna slept

through all of the noise Solomon made, all of his dance steps and garlicky breath, she woke when she heard the speeding beat of my heart. She lifted her head, opened her eyes and looked at Solomon. Solomon's eyes widened.

"Who is this?" He stepped closer.

"Rayanna," I said.

"A sister, I assume."

I looked down at the floor. I'd expected more from him, more than a focus on the physical deformities. Of course she looked like me.

"You must both look like your mother with the almond eyes, pointed nose, even the widow's peak of your hairline."

Twisting Rayanna around in my arms, I examined her features. He was right. The resemblance was much more than the bubbled lips, the slits, the abnormal openings. She did look like me, like my mother, like a daughter of Belen.

That was when I remembered the skirt of my mother, the stitched pants I wore beneath my skirt, and thought of the dark stain that had never completely gone away. Lose a mother, gain a sister. Of course. Rayanna was the destroyer of families. My mother had died when she was born.

"I've just found her again." I wanted to squeeze her closer, hug her until she fit inside of me because now I had biological family that wouldn't deny the relationship. Solomon's face was serious now, his mouth straight, his mustache quivering.

"Your life is becoming quite full," he said. "Monday we practice with the symphony."



“Do you think I can do it?” I asked.

“You?” he said. “You can do anything.”

## 70

I awoke in the morning with the weight of eyes on me and when I opened mine, I saw Jeremia watching me, while Eva still curled against his chest, her cheek on her hand. I wondered if he saw changes in me like the ones I saw in him.

Rayanna’s washcloth diaper had leaked, a warm rush then a sticky residue, and my black sweater stuck to my skin. I repositioned Rayanna on the towels, lifted her gently, not wanting to let go, and stood. After weeks of sleeping in a bed, the floor left stiffness in my limbs that reminded me of the jail.

Jeremia watched as I opened the closet door, pulled out the old discarded t-shirt with the big mouse, and slipped into the bathroom. His eyes were more curious and watchful than I remembered.

The shirt was clean, laundered and dry but I had not worn it since before Christmas when I’d purchased my new clothes. Now, when I pulled it down over my chest, it stretched tight and I tugged at it so it would cover my stomach. I didn’t remember it feeling so snug and form-fitting.

I peered at myself in the bathroom mirror. My hair, long and black, hung straight down my back. I pulled it away from my face, pretended to tie it with a holder, securing

it away from my cheeks. The bubbled lip and split skin of the cleft palate became more pronounced so I dropped my hair back around my face and over my shoulders.

He stepped into the bathroom behind me. I could feel the heat radiating from his body and I breathed in the richness of his smell. When his hands slipped around my waist and his chin settled on the top of my head I closed my eyes and leaned against him. He placed his lips against my neck with the lightest of touches, the lift of a dragonfly and yet my heart pounded in response. His hands tightened around my waist and I felt his chest muscles move against my back. Closer, I thought, I want you closer. And then I felt Eva's hand against my leg and Jeremia pulled away.

I showed Eva the shower. She experimented with the hot and cold taps, shrieking in surprise when water spurted over her extended hand, a shockingly warm rain, and then quickly took off her clothes and stepped inside. I handed Eva the soap and a washcloth. She scrubbed her body, dirt streaking in rivulets down her arms, then I washed her hair.

Behind me I felt Jeremia's presence, the smell that made me think of the forest and cool places beneath the trees. He had found the card I'd left on the bathroom sink.

"What is this?" He tried to hand the card back to me.

I shut the door to the shower and turned to look in the mirror. Our eyes met but he never once looked at my bubbled lips or the slits in my face. Maybe he didn't see them anymore, but saw only me

"It is called a cleft palate," I said. "This doctor says she can fix them. Rayanna's for sure because she's still a baby."

Jeremia's eyebrows drew together, pinched down over his eyes. "Nathanael would have told us," he said.

"Nathanael didn't know everything."

I tensed my shoulders, wondering if Jeremia would react, turn angry and dark. I thought of his arms around my waist, his chest against my back and I thought of whirling, happy Jeremia at the fire. That Jeremia was not here now.

"Why would this doctor help her?" Jeremia dropped the card onto the bathroom sink. "Because someone fixed hers."

"Can she give me a new arm?" he said.

"No, but I think you might be able to buy a mechanical one."

His eyes widened, his shoulders pulled back. I thought for a minute that he might smile, he might laugh. Instead, I heard Eva begin to sing, to add her sweet voice to the rain falling over her head and even though Jeremia didn't smile, I did.

They slept the whole day, ate a tray of cafeteria food as if they'd never had such a wonderful meal, and then slept more. While they slept, I studied in the library and practiced in the practice rooms. I was learning music from the masters now and even though I didn't read the notes well yet, I could hear the song once and repeat it almost perfectly. I practiced songs by Cavali, Albeniz, Sanz and began to learn different approaches, different ways to express the voice inside. I loved my hours of practice and continued them even though my family was now with me.

They slept fifteen hours a day, took showers and looked out my window with its view of the campus: the walking paths between stone buildings, and the carefully placed

trees that had been pruned and trimmed to look like perfect representations of themselves rather than natural forms. When they began to get restless and impatient, I knew it was time. I would take them to see the doctor on a Saturday. I didn't know if she would be there and part of me hoped that she wouldn't be.

## 71

Dr. Ruiz's office was not far from the school. Eva skipped and sang, dancing like a firefly on the sidewalk in her orange coat, her wrists sticking out of the sleeves like chicken legs. She touched the fences we passed, gaped at the large warm houses, and pointed, shrieking, when she saw a woman walking a dog. Jeremia shuffled beside me, his eyes down, his hand dug deeply into his pants pocket. He stepped around the people we passed on the sidewalk, not glancing around. It had taken a week of cajoling to convince him that a meeting with Dr. Ruiz wasn't a commitment.

I wondered what we looked like to those who passed us. The woman with the dog smiled at Eva when she saw her skipping, and then held a hand to her mouth when Eva twirled on the sidewalk, her hands splayed above her head, the webbing between the fingers pink and thin. Now that I walked with my family, I had no need for the veil but kept my head up and looked into the faces of those we passed.

Dr. Ruiz's office was not what I had imagined. I had thought that it would be a bustling place with formidable glass doors like Randall and Burks, but it was just a

house, two stories with wide steps leading to the porch and a door painted deep green. I straightened my shoulders and marched up the steps, pretending that my heart and Rayanna's were not beating in a quick, staccato unison. I had to show my family that I was not afraid, that I knew what I was doing, but my hands shook and my mouth felt dry when we stood in front of the door.

Eva pushed the button by the door. Then she stood, arm raised, finger pointed, eager to push the button again. Jeremy waited on the sidewalk below. We listened to footsteps moving inside the house. Both Eva and I took a step back when the door opened.

Dr. Ruiz looked different than the last time I'd seen her. She wore a lime green shirt and pants that encased her doughy body like a cocoon and when she saw us, she clapped her hands together and laughed. Her cheeks pushed up into soft bulges and Eva clapped her hands in response, giggling at this caterpillar of a woman.

"Wonderful that you're here," she said. "Come in, come in."

She stepped aside and Eva followed without hesitating, her head turning as she consumed the art work on the walls, the wood floors, the sculptures placed in the corners of the first room. The rugs and curtains of the house were a deep burgundy with bright bits of yellow as though they had been made from the petals of black-eyed Susans.

Jeremia, still standing on the sidewalk, watched Eva enter the house. His fist bulged in the pocket of his grimy jeans and his shoulders hunched. He looked down the street, tensed and I wondered if he would run, if this would be the last I would see of him.

I watched, ready to chase after him if need be. Instead, a shiver ran through him, and then he stepped forward onto the stairs and entered the house before me.

“Bilateral cleft palates. Two of you. And the little one with syndactyly and the older with a missing appendage. Simply remarkable. Unheard of.”

We followed Dr. Ruiz down a short hallway with two closed doors leading to the right and large open rooms on our left. I wanted to stand still, touch with my eyes all of the beauty in that room but Jeremia marched forward, looking neither to the left or right, following the woman down the hallway as though headed to his execution and I followed closely. It was so different now. Before, I’d just worried about my own reception, and had kept my face covered, but now that we were all here together, I needed to know how Jeremia was feeling, how Eva took in the people around her. I had no time for my own emotions.

Jeremia stopped abruptly at the end of the hall. I looked into the corner between the hallway and the kitchen where he stood. There was a statue, long and thin, with smooth, separated pieces running from the top to the bottom. It was a sculpture of water, of shadow, of sunshine beams stretching through tree branches.

Dr. Ruiz looked at us from the kitchen, wondering why we’d stopped, and saw us studying the statue in the hallway.

“Oh, I love that piece but I’m afraid it fell after I bought it at the market place.”

She leaned forward, turned the piece around and showed us the back. The sculpture was dented and gouged.

“If I keep it in the corner, no one can tell it’s damaged.” Dr. Ruiz said and giggled.

Jeremia dug into the pocket of his jeans. He pulled out a miniature sculpture very similar to the one in the corner. Dr. Ruiz gasped.

“Did you do this?” She flipped the miniature sculpture around in her hand. “This is exquisite.” She looked up, her chubby cheeks sagging. “You are a talented young man. How did you learn to do this?”

“We had a lot of spare time. You can get pretty good with practice.”

“But look at the way the wood moves like water. I’ve always felt that somehow the water was frozen into the wood.”

Jeremia ran his finger down one of the flowing pieces. “I’ve gotten better. This is crude.”

“Crude? I think this is a beautiful sculpture. Is your work that much better now?” She looked again at the piece in her hand. She examined it from all sides, almost smelling it. “Yes, this one is better. You’re right. This one is alive.” She looked up at Jeremia, her face serious. “Would you make me a new sculpture? One just like this? I’ll find the wood.”

I held my breath as I watched Jeremia. He ran his hand over the large sculpture in the corner, his long narrow fingers flowing with the movement of the wood.

“Yes, I’ll make you a new one.”

“Like this one,” said Dr. Ruiz giving the sculpture back to Jeremia.

“Somewhat similar,” he said.

She clapped her hands again, grinned and giggled. “Marvelous. Simply marvelous.” She skipped into the kitchen.

Dr. Ruiz bustled about, pulling mugs from the cupboard and filling them with cocoa and milk. She set the mugs in a microwave. All the while she chatted about her plants in the window, about the mess on the table, about how thrilled she was that we’d come.

She ushered us into chairs around the circular kitchen table. When a fat orange cat strolled into the room, Eva wrapped her arms around the animal and the two curled up on the kitchen floor, the feline purring a deep rumbling murmur and Eva cooing softly to it and stroking its head. Dr. Ruiz clapped her hands and laughed again. Her lime green clothing lit up the green of her eyes but made her pale skin look ashen.

“May I?” she asked.

I carefully extracted Rayanna from the cloth wrapped around my chest. She opened her mouth in a wide yawn, blinked and looked at me. Then she smiled. I felt the sting of tears in my nose and impulsively held her close, smelling her sweet baby breath. The doctor’s soft hands wrapped around Rayanna’s middle and she took my sister, holding her out to look at her.

“Look at you, precious.” The doctor rubbed her nose against Rayanna’s. “We can fix you right up.” She leaned Rayanna against her shoulder and patted her back a couple of times. She didn’t hold Rayanna with two hands as though she were delicate and about to break, but gently bobbed her against her shoulder and snuggled her close. I realized



that my hands were in the air, twitching to receive Rayanna back again. I put them under the table, on my lap, where they could twitch without being seen.

“These are pictures of children and adults with the bilateral cleft palate.” Dr. Ruiz pushed a large square book with a dark blue cover into the middle of the table. She flipped open the cover and pointed to a picture encased in a plastic sleeve. It was a picture of me. Of Rayanna. When I flipped the page and looked at the next one, the woman from the first page no longer had the splits from her nose to her mouth, nor did she have the holes beneath her nose. In this second picture, red bumpy seams had taken the place of the holes. On the next page the seams were not as prominent and by the last page, the seams were still noticeable scars running from her nose to her mouth but they weren’t swollen and both her nose and mouth looked almost normal. I leaned over the book, examined the picture as closely as I could, wanting to know how this could happen. I wanted to push the book away, shove it across the table at this puffball of a woman who giggled and chattered like a squirrel but at the same time, I wanted to see more.

The next picture was of a baby. Rayanna. Again, the splits in the face were prominent, noticeable, bubbled and irregular. By the last page, the baby’s scars were nothing more than a fuller upper lip and a thin white line. By the last page, the child was maybe four years old and had a huge smile on her face: a perfect smile showing no gums, only clean, even teeth.

Jeremia sat beside me, breathing against my shoulder. I heard an intake of air, the speeding up of his breath as we flipped through the pages. This could be Rayanna. This

could be me. Eva abandoned the cat and stood between our chairs watching the transformation as we flipped through the pages.

“Does it hurt?” she asked, looking at Jeremiah. “I don’t want it done to Rayanna.”

“Yes,” Dr. Ruiz said in her soft voice, the final “s” pulled long, “there will be some discomfort. But, the baby will no longer have difficulties eating, she will no longer have the chronic earaches, she will no longer have the nasal voice. The surgery will be easiest for the baby, and most difficult for Whisper.”

I wanted to hold Jeremiah’s hand but his hand held tight to the edge of the table and his knuckles were white. I leaned toward him, wanting to ease my arm through his, but he sat stiff as though turned into one of his own sculptures. He studied Dr. Ruiz’s face, examined the thin line between her nose and lip, searched her eyes to see if she were someone he could trust.

“Why did it happen?” Jeremiah’s mouth barely moved when he spoke.

“We’re not sure. It seems that something occurs in gestation, some developmental step is skipped and the child is born with a hole in the roof of her mouth. It is nothing anyone did or could have prevented.”

Jeremiah watched her as she spoke, his lips drawn tight.

“But,” she continued, “there have been too many deformities lately – in the past fifteen years – and we don’t know why. There are four of you here, four from the same village – all with various developmental traumas. Something is causing these deformities, some environmental contaminant but we have not figured out what it is. Pollution?

Chemicals? Contaminants in the food?" Dr. Ruiz shrugged her shoulders and patted Rayanna's back.

Jeremia sat at the table, holding the mug of cocoa in his hands while Dr. Ruiz explained the procedure to us. I took quick, careful sips from the mug. My lips didn't fit against the cup and I didn't know what might bubble out my nose. The cat curled up against Eva on the seat of the chair. She stroked the cat, extracted rumbling purrs from the animal and listened, her eyebrows drawn low.

"We need to go. We need to think about this," Jeremia said, suddenly standing.

"Of course, of course. But don't think too long. The longer you wait, the harder it will be. Syndactyly can also be fixed with surgery." Eva knew that doctor was talking about her because she held up her fingers and tried to stretch them wide.

When Dr. Ruiz handed Rayanna to Jeremia, his shoulders straightened and his arm held tight to the cooing baby. We pulled on our coats, walked slowly to the door, saying nothing.

"We've got maybe two months before we really need to start the process," Dr. Ruiz said as she followed us down the hallway. "For the baby do it as soon as possible."

We walked down the street slowly. Even Eva was quiet, her fingers cold and curled in mine.

"It's so much bigger than earaches, or the holes in mouths," Jeremia said. "Why would it matter if your face changed? It won't change you or that you were ostracized by your family."

"But it might help Rayanna belong. And Eva," I said.

“I don’t want to have the surgery,” Eva said. “Then I can’t swim like a fish. And Rayanna doesn’t want it either, I can tell.”

“This isn’t about want,” I said. “It’s about need and should. Do you need the surgery? Should you have the surgery?”

“I don’t need anything but you. I shouldn’t have anything I don’t need,” Eva said, beginning to skip again.

Jeremia looked at me over Eva’s head and for a minute as quiet and fast as a heartbeat, I thought he was going to smile.

## 72

We made cheese sandwiches in the dorm room, a calming activity, mundane. Rayanna lay on her nest of towels and played with her toes. Eva found my notebook, my pencils, and drew pictures of animals stacked on top of each other all with large heads, stick legs, and spotted bodies. Jeremia and I sat cross-legged on the floor and looked everywhere but at each other. I took the broken pieces of the violin he had carved for me from one of the desk drawers and slipped them into his hand, trying not to touch my fingertips to the palm of his hand, where sparks seemed to jump up whenever I made contact. He curled his fingers around the pieces.

We were so close to each other, I could smell him, a scent that kept me leaning forward, wanting more. It was a heavy muskiness, a man-ness that seemed new to me

even though I had smelled it in the past. If I could just sit beside him like this, feel his heat, smell his scent, I could be happy forever.

“We stayed in a barn on the way here.” Jeremia pointed to the picture Eva drew. “She’s had nightmares ever since.”

“What are they?” I asked.

“Pigs. Thousands of pigs.”

It had been their fourth night away from the camp. It hadn’t been safe to follow the path out of the burned camp in the woods, the path that led to the village where we were from, so they followed the creek.

They slept beneath the trees, they ate roots and shriveled apples. By the fourth day, they were so hungry, so cold, so tired of sleeping restlessly beneath the trees, so nauseated by the smell that rose from the creek, that when they saw the huge barns, they sneaked inside the closest building where rows and rows of cages housed pigs - hundreds and hundreds, teeming, shrieking.

The pigs were rotten. The meat was tainted, grown from animals that were kept in tiny closures so small, the pigs couldn’t turn around; the pigs so obese, their legs couldn’t hold their weight.

Eva began to gasp as Jeremia told me the story. I looked at her picture, at the animals stacked on top of each other, at the bent legs she had drawn, and the obscenely rotund bodies. Eva pulled at her shortly cropped black hair, covered her eyes, let out huge sobs. Jeremia pulled her to him, held her tight against his chest.

“When we crept to the third barn, keeping to the shadows and avoiding the workers, we found the young ones. The piglets had been taken from their mothers and were fed from a machine. They squealed in a frenzy for the food.”

Eva clawed at Jeremiah’s arm, trying to bury her face even deeper into his chest. Jeremiah rocked her back and forth, while she shook and uttered shuttering gasps.

“She ran through the barn, pulling open the gates, screaming at the pigs to run, to hide in the forest, to save themselves. They didn’t want to leave the food at first, the round metal machine with nozzles, but Eva ran into the pens, and chased them through the open gates.

“Hundreds of piglets ran out into the night. The workers ran after them, to get them back. Only two workers followed us. I had to carry Eva over my shoulder and back into the forest because she wanted to free all of the pigs and she didn’t see the danger we were in. At the trees they caught up with us and shone their lights on us.” Jeremiah smiled now, a grimace that didn’t reach his eyes but pulled his mouth straight. “When they saw Rayanna’s face, Eva’s webbed hands, and my missing arm they stopped, then ran away, scared of us - the demon spirits enraging the pigs.”

Eva breathed heavily, relaxing against Jeremiah’s chest now that the story was over. She turned her face to the side, pressing her cheek against his shirt. Her face was streaked, lined with water and her cheeks were mottled pink and red.

“The stream was rotten there, so full of pig shit and whatever chemicals they used to get rid of the waste, that we couldn’t drink from it, not until we were past the town, above the barn and its rot.”

Eva stood, shivered from head to toe, and returned to her picture. She started a new illustration, drawing piglets running through a field, running into the trees of the forest and in this new picture, the sun shone brightly and the pigs had smiles on their faces. She wiped the water from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

“The stream,” I said, “could that be the reason for the crayfish with only one claw?”

Jeremia shrugged and at the same time, we looked at his shirt sleeve which fell loose and empty.

### 73

Eva, Jeremia and Rayanna slept most of that afternoon, as they had done since arriving at The Conservatory. Before resting, they handed me their dirty clothes through the barely opened door of the room. I told them to bolt the door until I returned, until after I had washed the clothes in the basement.

I sat on the washing machine, my chin in my hands, and tried to understand what I was supposed to do. I must bring them to Purgatory Palace, I knew that; I couldn't keep them with me any longer without jeopardizing my standing at the school, but what would they do there? How would they pay for rent? Jeremia wouldn't beg, I wouldn't have Eva begging, and Rayanna would not be used in such a way. Somehow, we needed to make money. My stipend from the school was not enough. What would happen when Celso

showed up again? I had no doubt that he would and every time I went outside, I found myself searching for him.

After placing the wet clothes in the dryer and putting the coins into the slot, I walked across the cement floor to the basement bathroom, one hand against my stomach, one hand against my head. I didn't like using the bathroom down here because it was cold, as cold as going to the bathroom behind a log on a winter day, but it was a hard cold that crawled up your legs and into your bones. I locked the door, lifted my brown skirt and then pulled down my mother's skirt. My hands shook when I saw the stain. The bright blood, red as holly berries, had returned to remind me again of a mother, lost and dead. She was haunting me, telling me through the reminder of her blood, that I had a responsibility to these people as she'd had to me.

I didn't know what to do. I sat on the toilet, my head in my hands. My eyes stung and I wanted to press my hands into my eyes and cry. Truthfully, now that I had seen the bigger world, I didn't know if I could return to the woods and forget about this bruised world where rejects lived together in a palace between heaven and hell and where animals were so abused, they couldn't stand on their once-functioning legs. I used the toilet, prepared to wipe and saw an astonishing sight.

The blood was mine, not my mother's. Rosa's words came back to me, her belief that when she got her period, she was a woman, would go to the city and find a man who would love her. And here I was, in the city, my blood mingling with my mother's and my body becoming a woman's. I put my face in my hands again and let the water drip between my fingers. So much loss.



It was during my lesson with Solomon the next day that I remembered why I was attending the school, why I had abandoned my family once again, sending them to Purgatory Palace where they wouldn't be trapped in a tiny room, and why I had to keep coming back to play music. This was my voice and my story. Without it, I had little to say and no way to say it.

When I had arrived for my lesson, my hands raw, my eyes watering not only from the cold but from lack of sleep and abandoned loved ones, I found a man in the practice room speaking with Solomon, the two of them filling the tiny space with their loud voices and wide frames. The man speaking with Solomon was younger, less grey, less rotund and two inches shorter but his voice boomed and his wavy graying hair swished and bounced with every turn of his head. Solomon grinned hugely when he saw me and took two large steps toward me.

"Whisper." He put his arm around my shoulders and pulled me into the room. "This is Ruy Climaco, director of the philharmonic orchestra."

Ruy Climaco hesitated, his smile thin, controlled. He stood in front of the metal chair nearest to the door. I wondered if he would walk out after seeing me without the veil. He tried not to stare at my mouth, but his eyes glanced, looked away, were drawn to my face again. He shook my hand with the tips of his fingers.

“You are a marvelous violinist, and a talented composer.” He studied my face. I looked down, then straightened my shoulders and looked him in the eyes. This man may have viewed me as mysterious and exotic the night of our performance when I’d hidden beneath the veil, but this was me and I would not be ashamed.

His eyes faltered before mine did.

“Recording device,” Solomon said, picking up a metal box and showing it to me. “Ruy wants to record your song. Then he and the orchestra will piece together the accompaniment. You will be the youngest musician ever to compose for the philharmonic.” I looked at Ruy Climaco who still watched me surreptitiously, glancing away quickly when our eyes met.

“Can’t anything be done about that?” he asked, pointing to his own lips and mouth. He wrinkled his nose and pulled his lips tight. Solomon paused and narrowed his eyes and then boomed his answer.

“Yes, but it should typically be done when the child is still an infant. We are not yet sure what Whisper’s decision will be concerning surgery for her cleft palate.”

Ruy Climaco and I watched each other. Solomon looked back and forth between us.

“Well, shall we begin?” Solomon said.

I was not sure I wanted to give anything to this man whose mouth twitched when he looked at me and whose pride radiated from him as sharp as the needles on a pine tree. Solomon placed a hand on my back – I would do this for him, because of his kindness, but I did not and would not like this man who could not control the obvious disgust he

felt for me. I sat in one of the chairs, unsnapped my violin case, fit the violin under my chin and began to tune the strings. The three of us formed a rough triangle and I leaned toward Solomon. Solomon prepared the recording device, setting it on his knee.

This man would not get the song of Whisper, the song of my home, the creek, Nathanael and crayfish. No, he would get a different song because in his presence, I felt none of the happiness my camp in the woods deserved. Instead, I played the song of Purgatory Palace, with its discordant notes that spoke of Ofelia, its jerking low to high notes that told the story of the inhabitants, and its unresolved ending that hinted at our unfulfilled lives. My eyes closed, my heart slowed, and the confusion of not belonging entered the room.

When I finished and opened my eyes, both men were watching, Solomon with a smile, Ruy with a frown. Solomon pushed a button on the recording device and the soft shush ended.

“That’s not the same song,” said Ruy Climaco.

I lowered the violin to my lap.

“I expected the song you played at the recital.” One of Ruy’s legs rested over the knee of the other. The foot of the upper leg rocked with a twitch of the toe.

“I had heard that you were a very nice little girl, a very agreeable and compliant young woman who would be honored and flattered to play with the symphony. What I see here is a stubborn and sullen girl who does not recognize an honor and gift when it is handed to her. Do you even know what I am offering you, child? What it means to play with the philharmonic orchestra? Musicians pray for this chance and most will never

achieve it and yet you flaunt it in my face as though you, a freakish and defective child, were too good for this opportunity.” Solomon reached over and touched Ruy on the shoulder. Ruy flinched.

“What does it matter which song she plays? They’re all astonishing.”

Ruy crossed his arms over his chest. His eyes were narrowed, his lips pursed together until little creases appeared like the grooves in a walnut shell around his un-defective mouth.

“That may be so, but I need consistency if my orchestra is to accompany her. I haven’t seen consistency here. I also need someone I can work with, not some demented diva.” He waved his arm around in the air. His foot twitched.

“Play it again, Whisper,” Solomon said. “Just like before.”

I raised the violin to my shoulder, rested my chin on it, and considered playing a completely different song but I couldn’t do that to Solomon, not after all he’d done for me. I played the song of Purgatory Palace once again.

When I finished, Ruy picked up the recording device, stood, swished his hair away from his shoulders, and looked down his nose at me. While he appraised me. I met his look and did not turn away.

“You are hardly the child I imagined under that veil.”

“And you are not the man I would have envisioned at the head of a great and honorable symphony.”

Solomon clapped his hands together loudly and both Ruy and I jerked away from each other to look at him.

“Then you shall continue to surprise each other as you work together.”

“We will see if I can do anything with this disjointed piece,” Ruy said. He opened the door to the practice room and Solomon followed Ruy out. I clutched the violin and bow in my hands. In a way, he was right. I didn’t care about standing on a stage in front of an audience of thousands; it meant little to me except that it allowed me to play my songs and might ease my hard life. His vision of the music did not match my own and I would not give away my songs carelessly. The music was my voice, my life. It was mine to share with whom I chose.

Ruy and Solomon whispered outside the door, but their words crept along the floor and into the room. “She can’t stand on the stage in front of thousands of upper class, money-paying patrons without modesty. She will have to cover that face.”

“She will do so, Ruy.”

“She covers that face or she does not play. Understand?”

My back was tense, rigid, my hands still squeezing the violin, trying to wring blood from my mother’s present when Solomon murmured a slow yes and then returned to the practice room. He entered the room, straightened his shoulders, and placed his hand on my shoulder.

“Marvelous playing, Whisper, simply marvelous. Ruy found it astonishing.”

I placed the bow across my knees and reached up to touch the violin around my neck. It was gone, broken, and instead I touched my mother’s scarf which warmed my neck but spoke of secrets and masks. I liked Solomon. I trusted him. He had accepted me as I was, but he was taking Ruy’s side in this which made me feel wary and alone.

I withdrew everything I had from the bank, gave it to Candela to pay for rent, and then wondered what I would do to pay for their stay after that. Seven days they could stay, seven days and then they would be homeless again. I might have to return to the coffee shop with Candela, sit on the corner, and keep every penny that came to me.

In the mornings, Ofelia was rarely around, so Jeremia, Eva and Rayanna could wander the building at will, play games in the common room, eat the shared food, meet the other inhabitants, but in the afternoons they walked the 20 blocks to The Conservatory and came to visit me. I waited, impatient and nervous, until I saw Eva's light step and Jeremia's wary tread. I brought them to my room, fed them food from the cafeteria, and kept them safe while I attended my afternoon and evening classes. In this way, they saw a bit of the city, weren't completely trapped in the tiny rooms, and avoided Ofelia while also avoiding campus monitors who sometimes patrolled The Conservatory greens at night.

These were not good options and didn't provide solutions to Jeremia's pacing, Eva's twirling or Rayanna's crying. I didn't know how long we could manage this arrangement. We were being watched by some of the other students in the dorm. By Friday, when Dr. Ruiz bumped loudly against the room door, we were sniping at each other, our muscles twitching beneath the skin. Jeremia hadn't slid his arms around my waist since that first day.

“Oh my,” she said and dropped a large log to the ground in the hallway. She leaned her hand against the frame to the door and breathed in gulps, her doughy cheeks pink and mottled. “I’ve got three more in the car.” She leaned on Eva’s shoulder and dragged herself into the room, sitting heavily on the bed.

Jeremia and I walked to her car and carried the pieces of wood into the dorm room where Jeremia examined them carefully, scrutinizing their durability and quality. Dr. Ruiz sat on the edge of my bed, her breath shallow and uneven. She tried to smile at us but her cheeks sagged and her chin trembled.

Eva stood on the flat end of one of the maple logs, then raised one leg. “Look at me,” she said.

“One of these is for me. The other three I thought you might be able to use.” Jeremia extracted a jackknife from his pocket, leaned down to one of the logs and whittled into the side. A long sliver fell off the edge, the wood underneath smooth, deep brown with lighter streaks that pointed like lightning bolts through the grain.

“And what have you decided?” Dr. Ruiz folded her hands together in her lap and squeezed her legs close together, reminding me of an owl, perched, collected, observant, her panting almost gone.

Jeremia and I looked at each other. His head lowered once, a quick nod, and I returned the gesture. We hadn’t talked about it but we hadn’t needed to. There was no question, even though I felt guilt at knowing the answer. Jeremia and I would always walk the line between accepted and not, but that didn’t have to be the case for the little ones.

“Rayanna,” I said.

Dr. Ruiz clasped her hands together and beamed.

“Wonderful. I will secure the funds and she will stay at the clinic, at my house.

You are welcome to stay with her, of course. How old is she?”

“Almost five months,” Jeremia said.

“Then we’ll start in two months. That gives me time to prepare.”

Dr. Ruiz stood abruptly and marched to the door. She threw it open, startling the two students standing there, Tomas and Carla. They looked over their shoulders at us, both with smirks on their faces, and then turned and ran.

“Huh.” Dr. Ruiz placed her hands on her hips. She observed the other students in the hallway who looked our way but didn’t speak, or stepped to the other side of the hallway when passing the room.

“Or you may stay with me now, if need be. Please let me know.” She clasped her handbag between both hands and took short, quick steps down the hallway, saying “shoo” to anyone who looked at her or us. I watched her all the way down the hallway and smiled as I shut the door.

“Rayanna will have the surgery?” Eva still stood on the top of the log. With the added height, she was taller than me. “Rayanna won’t have openings between her nose and mouth? But it will hurt her.” Her eyes filled up with water. I felt my own eyes doing the same even though I’d been smiling the moment before. What if this was the wrong decision to make and instead of improving Rayanna’s life, we ruined it? Again, I felt the



doubt of our decision. Who was I to make this decision for another person? Nathanael with his wisdom would have known what to do.

“Remember the porcupine?” I asked, taking Eva’s hands in mine and squeezing, watching the extra skin between her fingers wrinkle and fold. “Remember how painful it was to pull out the quills? But afterwards your hand became better, right?” I turned her hand over and looked at her palm. The scars were mere pin pricks of red, almost forgotten flea bites. “The surgery will hurt at first but Rayanna will be very brave, and afterwards she won’t wake us with her cries.”

Eva looked at me with her eyes narrowed. She was not ready to believe, but she was considering.

## 76

There was a tension in the air, a waiting for something to happen and I had a pretty good idea what it would be. Any minute now Celso would leap out from between buildings and slice at us with his knife.

When we knocked on the door to Purgatory Palace, it took a long time for anyone to answer. Jeremia stood with his back to the door, resting his foot on the log, while he watched the passersby on the sidewalk. I was about to give up, about to squeeze into the alleyway and knock on Candela’s window, when the door opened a crack and Candela peeked out at us.

“Ssh,” she said, glancing behind her into the hallway.

Candela pulled the door open and we rushed down the hall to room #13, but we were not quick enough. Ofelia appeared at the top of the stairs, and she saw me pushing Eva through the doorway into the room.

“You,” she screamed and rushed down the last few steps. I closed the door behind Eva and stood in front of it. Jeremia was in, Eva was in, Rayanna was quiet.

“You are a thief,” she said, her face inches from mine. Red blotches stood out from the skin on her face, deep raspberries of color. “How many people are in there? How many? And what are you paying?”

Red and grey wisps of hair flew around her face, as scattered and crazed as circling gnats. I could see the pink of her scalp through the strands of hair. She pushed her face so close to mine that the thin red veins running up and down her nose became ribbons of color. She smelled of sickness. I protected Rayanna with my arms, wrapping them around her as she snuggled against me in the cloth wrap.

Candela stood next to me and when Ofelia balled her hands into fists, Candela bumped against me, sliding me out of the way to take the brunt of Ofelia’s verbal lashings.

“You are all robbing me. I let you live here, all of you, for nothing. For less than you would be charged anywhere else and what do you do to me? You act like you care about me and then abandon me.”

She shrieked the last two words and they screamed through the hallway, unleashed demons. I flattened my back against the door to room #13, wrapped my arms more tightly around Rayanna and turned my face to the side.

Ofelia placed her hands in front of her face and cried loud, shrieking gusts. Candela put her hand on Ofelia's back and pushed her, guided her to room #1. Candela followed her into the room, shutting the door behind both of them. For a while I heard ranting, then murmuring voices, and then nothing. My heart calmed in proportion to the noise and when Candela finally emerged, my eyes had grown droopy and my head had started to nod.

Candela's face was puffy, her eyes red. She leaned beside me and then slumped to the floor. I slid down the door and sat beside her.

"How the hell am I supposed to fix everything around here?" She had a wet patch on her shoulder as though someone had been crying there and had left a stain of tears. "Her son finally told her that he doesn't want her staying with them. She's been asking to live with them for years. She's been sending him money since she first bought this place. Now he won't take her in."

I rubbed small repeated circles against Rayanna's back through the fabric of my coat. She stirred and gurgled. I thought about that, a family abandoning an adult, someone without a blemish, though I knew that Ofelia was one of those people with blemishes on the inside.

"What will she do?"

“What we all do when we’re abandoned by our families. Make new ones. Endure.”

Rayanna began to squirm and her muffled cries could be heard from between the buttons of my coat. I opened my coat and she peaked to the side, her face happy, curious. Candela held her hand out to Rayanna and Rayanna grabbed her first finger. She tugged at it, squeezed it tight.

“You’re the luckiest of us all, you know,” Candela said.

Rayanna blew bubbles and gave soft squeals against my chest.

## 77

Candela started an IOU for Jeremia, Eva and Rayanna’s stay. She said that when Jeremia sold his sculptures, he could pay the bill. I didn’t like to owe, but we couldn’t pay and for some reason, I didn’t feel right about taking Dr. Ruiz up on her offer of a place to stay. I hardly knew her, and Jeremia would feel just as caged there as anywhere else.

Every day I had to be at Solomon’s office by 4:00 in the afternoon when he would drive me downtown to the grand auditorium. On the outside, the building sat low and round like a fossilized hat, hunkering between rectangular buildings that jutted into the sky, but the inside of the auditorium was rich with reds and golds, and was layered with ornate seating areas that leaned out over the stage where, on the day of the performance, people would peer down at me. I stood to the right of the orchestra and played the song of Purgatory Palace again and again and again.

The violinists of the symphony wouldn't look at me. The woman in the first chair sighed loudly when I got ahead of the beat, and snorted when I forgot that they were keeping pace with me, trying to match my uneven song. Playing with them was much more difficult than I had imagined it would be. I had to hold each note the same amount of beats each time, as though I were a programmed cricket. I couldn't slow down or speed up to change my interpretation, but must consistently play the song at the same tempo, the timing perfect, like catching crayfish in the stream.

"God," the second violin player said to the first, "I can't believe they let people who look like that just walk around."

I stood on the stage, set apart from the others in a way that was meant to honor and emphasize, but instead separated me even more than usual, my misshapen features highlighted and further exposed.

"You lead us, Whisper," Ruy Climaco said, "but it is not a stampede. Again." I lifted the violin to my chin and began at the place in my song that spoke of creeping between pots in the town square, but it was difficult to begin there since the music was my story and how can someone begin halfway through a story, so I paused, stopped, and lost the beat. Ruy threw down his baton and raised his hands into the air as though offering up a prayer.

"This is a disaster. She cannot lead us when she forgets the song herself. Why did I think this would work?" He leaped off the stage and stomped down one of the aisles, his hair bouncing. I looked at the orchestra wondering if they would leave as well but they remained, some lowering their instruments to the stage.

We waited so long, I sat down as well, crossed my legs and closed my eyes. When I opened them again, Ruy Climaco was walking back down the aisle, climbing onto the stage, and picking up the conductor's stick.

“Again.”

He did this almost every day, stormed out, while we took a break. Then he would rush back in with new instructions and make us do it all over again. In this way, the music took shape and soon his theatrics mellowed, came less and less often and every now and then, he even smiled.

Sometimes the music sounded beautiful – so complete, like the music of my life, but I was so exhausted by the end of each practice session, that I returned to my room unable to complete the homework for my other classes and unable to do anything with my family but sit, hold Rayanna, and watch Jeremia as he whittled the wood. Sometimes they walked back to Purgatory Palace without me. I had never been so tired in my life, not even plodding behind a donkey on my way to this city.

And I dreamt of the music all night, seeing the notes of my life piled up like layers in a wasp's nest. The days seemed to begin before the one before had ended and I slept, woke, waited, practiced and then did it all over again. I was ready for the concert to end, for Rayanna's surgery to be done, for answers to come so I knew where my family would be, how we would survive, and how we would stay together. It felt as though we were waiting for something but I didn't know what that something was and the more we waited, the more unsure I felt.

It was a Thursday, a week before my concert when I woke up with my heart pounding and my body slick with sweat. I had practice that afternoon, a practice I couldn't miss, but I dressed and ran the twenty blocks to Purgatory Palace, my heart pounding somewhere in my throat. The sky was gray and cold, still closing the city in winter, and fewer people were on the streets these days. Windows were closed, warmth was kept inside, and the women who walked the streets had gone to bed. Only the cars roared, adding their blue smoke to the grey of the sky and making me cough as I ran.

Jeremia, Eva and Rayanna were eating breakfast in the common room and looked up, surprised, when I sat next to them. I picked up Rayanna, flipped her around, smelled her sweet smell and nodded at her smile. I turned Eva's face to the side, back and forth, examining her for sickness, but nothing seemed out of place and when I saw the raised eyebrow on Jeremia's face, I began to feel foolish at my impulsive action.

"What's wrong with you?" he said.

"I don't know." Trying to ignore the unrest I felt in my chest, the little prickles that were raised on my arm, the nervous energy that indicated a storm was coming, I glanced around the room and saw nothing out of the ordinary. Winston served the oatmeal, Candela and Oscar leaned close together whispering and holding hands, Sonja glared, stuck out her tongue and wagged it at me. Nothing seemed wrong but I had this uneasy feeling, like any moment the sky would open up and swallow us whole.

We walked back to The Conservatory early because I wanted them with me even though I couldn't explain why. They settled into my dorm room, Jeremia whittling on a

log, bits of wood flipping through the air like sparks, Eva taking a long hot shower, her favorite thing to do and Rayanna rolling across the floor gurgling and shrieking. I couldn't shake my unease but paced the room, determined not to leave even when the time came for practice, but Solomon showed up at the door and convinced me to go to the auditorium.

I practiced with the orchestra, but through the rehearsal my stomach twisted inside of me, and every shadow on the stage felt like a waiting threat. My chest ached as though I'd swallowed something too large and my hands sweated. I didn't understand. We had a month before Rayanna's surgery, I had a week before the concert, my family was healthy and well, what was wrong with me?

It was as we walked back to Purgatory Palace that evening, as I became more and more wary and my stomach felt as though it might heave the sandwich I'd had for lunch, that my premonition became reality. When we arrived at the building where a crowd of people stood outside and crashes and shrieks came from inside, I knew that what we'd dreaded for weeks had finally come to be. A donkey stood tethered to a shriveled stump of a tree. The donkey's head stretched to the ground as he ignored the milling people around him and searched for bits of grass.

I waited for a minute with those on the street, Rayanna strapped to my chest, Eva holding Jeremia's hand but I knew this was about me and I would have to face whatever tornado whirled through Purgatory Palace. A crowd had formed, people from neighboring windows leaned over the sills and watched the action on the street; even the women who stood on the street corners gathered in front of the building. I looked through



the people around me and saw the boy with two faces, the burned woman, the twins who shared an arm, but I didn't see Candela, Oscar or Ofelia.

I pushed my way through the crowd in front of the door and ran up the two steps to enter the building, Jeremia just a step behind me. We passed Ofelia's room where the door, torn off its hinges, lay like a broken arm in front of the doorway. Her room was in disarray – tapestries hung tattered and ripped on the walls, lamps lay scattered in shards on the floor, her bed was off its frame, overturned. Bottles of alcohol lay scattered everywhere, the glass glittering in ruins like a trail of icicles shattered by violent winds.

Doors to the other rooms had been completely removed and leaned across the hallway. Whenever we glanced into the rooms, we saw destruction – dismantled beds, broken dressers, tossed clothing. In Candela's room, her pictures, her beautiful caricatures lay in fragments like broken mirrors, our torn and damaged faces peering up at us.

The common room, so huge and wide, so able to house all of us when it needed to, felt closed-in even though there were only five people in the room.

Celso walked to each table and threw it over. Jeremia's father followed behind pouring Ofelia's alcohol over the wood, splattering it against the walls and floor. Ofelia followed them, pulling at Jeremia's father's arm which he yanked away when she touched him. Candela followed Ofelia. A body lay in the corner of the room, the legs twisted at such odd angles, I knew they must be broken, that he must be dead, but it was Oscar and his legs had come loose from his body.

"You've ruined my life," screamed Ofelia. "You destroy everyone's life."

“Whose fault is that? You should have paid me when I was owed.”

“I told you, I don’t have the money and that tramp was hauled off to jail. Like I’m responsible for that.”

Celso turned abruptly and grabbed Ofelia by the neck. He squeezed and she clutched at his hands.

“I’m sick of your whining, you old bat. Look what you’ve done to yourself. I can’t stand the sight of you.”

She clutched at his hand, gasping, her eyes bulging and scared.

“You think I’m afraid of you just because you live in the city and work in this big building? That’s nothing to me. I hate this stinking place.”

Candela began to beat against his side with her fists.

“Let her go,” she said, “you’re killing her. Let her go.”

Jun watched from beside Celso and laughed.

And then Celso saw us. We grouped together in the doorway, Jeremia beside me, Rayanna strapped to me, and Eva holding onto my coat with one hand. When he saw us, the room became so still, I could feel Rayanna’s breath against my chest. Celso let go of Ofelia’s neck and with a great grunt, he lifted another table and threw it to the side. Jun poured alcohol from Ofelia’s bottle over the wood.

“You’re too late,” he shouted at me. “You should have given me the money when I’d come weeks ago. Because of you, the old man burned.”

I sucked in my breath. It was true. I’d killed him. My breath came in short, quick gasps. Jeremia squeezed my arm.

“No, Nathanael burned because of you, Celso,” said Jeremia. “It’s not our fault you’re a murderer.”

“Rosa still pays me. You know that? She’s been paying me every month since she came here. She’s such a hardworking little whore.”

I was going to be sick. All the wanderings from my forest home to The Conservatory boiled down to this one moment when I had to face the truth. My mentor sister slept with men for money, I had killed Nathanael, and I didn’t know how to care for my family. I felt the tears, the sting of guilt, but Jeremia shook my arm hard and I felt the fury in his grip. He woke me from that moment of self-pity.

Fleet and agile as a deer, Jeremia was leaping over tables, maneuvering his way around the destruction as though none of it existed. I had seen him like this before – climbing the trees, rising above limb and leaf as though they were irrelevant obstacles, as though missing an arm meant nothing. I wanted to look away, to not observe the anger that would be unleashed, but at the same time, his beauty was most magnificent when he moved with such timing and grace.

Celso crouched, ready, the knife at his side but Jeremia came with such force, Celso was up against the wall of the common room with Jeremia’s forearm against his neck before he had time to slice. Jeremia’s father dropped the bottle in his hand and rushed at Jeremia, his hands outstretched. Jeremia’s foot landed in his stomach and with a grunt, Jun landed against the wall.

Before I could understand what I was doing, before I remembered that I had a baby strapped to my chest and had a child following behind, I leaped over the tables,

stepped over the chairs, jumped over broken bowls, and was back in the forest once again, my footing sure.

With my shoulder down, with my arms protecting Rayanna, I threw myself at this man who had risen, seething with anger, ready to rid himself of a forsaken son who was less than perfect. His hand was aimed at Jeremiah, about to thrust a knife into Jeremiah's side, when I threw my shoulder into him, right under his arm. His hand rose into the air and he fell backwards with a scream.

I stumbled over a bench at my feet and tried to regain my footing, landing heavily on my side. I remembered the baby at that moment and tore open my coat. Rayanna saw me, looked at me, and then scrunched her face, crying loud shrill shrieks. I jostled her up and down, and moved my hands over her body. She seemed okay – I felt nothing sticky, no blood, no limbs twisted into awkward positions. Jeremiah still pinned Celso to the wall. Celso pushed at Jeremiah's face, tried to dislodge Jeremiah's arm from his neck, but his pushes were weakening, his face a dark red and his eyes bloodshot, bursting. The knife lay at Jeremiah's feet.

I pulled myself off the ground and stepped around an overturned table, wondering why Jeremiah was shrieking so loudly. I stepped over glass, around chairs until I reached the two men and put my hand on Jeremiah's arm. He didn't feel me, didn't see me. When I looked at his face, I saw his mouth twisted, his eyes blackened, the tendons in his neck drawn and taught, but he was not screaming. I touched his cheek. He jerked and then saw me.

“Okay,” I said.

His eyes focused on Celso who now feebly pulled at his arm with both hands. Jeremia stepped back and Celso fell to the floor, gasping and clutching his neck.

“Did you know?” Jeremia’s voice was hoarse, low, as though scraped over rocks. “Did you know that surgery could correct a cleft palate?”

Celso’s face slowly lost its purple color and became blotchy. His eyes no longer swelled from his face, his cheeks sank back into their place. He chuckled a dry cough of a laugh.

“Of course,” he whispered and then put his finger to his lips. “But what good was she to us if she couldn’t make money on the street corners?”

And then we looked at Jeremia’s father. The knife, with his hand on the handle, was embedded in his right eye. His screams pulsed with each breath. I held my hands over my ears. Rayanna cried against my chest, Jeremia’s father screamed on the ground, Ofelia moaned and twisted her hands in her hair and I saw Eva curled into a tight ball by the doorway to the common room. I sank slowly to the floor.

I rocked back and forth, my hands over my ears, and I gasped, breathed, whispered to myself. I had done this to Jeremia’s father, I had shoved the knife up and into his eye. These men had come to do harm, to cause violence, and even though I had been defending my family, I was no better than them. I’d sunk to their level. The goodness I’d once had, the innocence I’d brought with me was gone. I no longer knew who I was, where I belonged, and what my song should be.

For three days I slept. I lay in Room #13 and kept my face to the wall staring so hard I saw all the way back to the forest. Candela sat with me sometimes, rubbed my back, brushed my hair away from my face. Eva lay on top of me, pushed her soft cheek against mine, told me how much she loved me. Rayanna had become Jeremia's responsibility once again. People whispered when they were around me as if my form of speaking had become contagious.

I heard what they said, I understood the situation, but I was so tired. I didn't know how to get rid of the ache in my limbs, the weight that pushed on my shoulders, shoved me into the ground. I wanted to become part of the earth, melt into the soil and feel the roots of trees holding me together. There I could feel whole again and remember the song that had once been my voice.

Jeremia told me that his father, Jun, would recover. Ofelia had called a doctor. The doctor came but couldn't save Jun's eye. He would wear a patch now, a covering to protect the world from his disfigurement.

Celso was fine. He had a bruise across his neck, but bruises heal, at least the ones you can see. The residents of Purgatory Palace had cleaned up the spilled alcohol, the tossed furniture, the broken doors. The building was salvageable because the men hadn't set fire to it. Oscar, it seemed, had not been killed but had a concussion. He whispered to me that a concussion a day kept insanity away.

Ofelia was moving out. She had placed Oscar and Candela in charge of the building – to use as they deemed fit – as long as they paid her monthly rent. Candela and

Oscar were so excited, had so many plans to turn this Purgatory Palace into a haven that they argued about it constantly. They couldn't agree on anything, not even the new name. Heavenly Haven. The Final Stop. The Last Resort. Home.

"We'll have a restaurant upstairs and Winston will make all the food. We'll divide the common room into an area of shops and we'll sell all kinds of artistic things – we'll sell Jeremia's sculptures, my art work, your music. We'll tell the night workers that they have to go somewhere else. We'll make so much money with our art that we'll never have to beg again!"

I listened but I didn't turn my face away from the wall. Moving my head was too much work. Who would come to a restaurant run by rejects and who would eat food cooked by a boy with two faces? And where did I fit in all this? Would I live here again or keep going to school? If I stopped going to school my lessons would stop, my work with the orchestra would cease, I would lose the wholeness of the music that I'd grown to love.

Solomon came to visit. He had visited Ofelia before, but had never seen the rest of the building or the inhabitants. He was subdued, speaking to me softly, finally understanding just a bit of my life. Solomon probably thought that the symphony would spur me into action, would convince me to rise from this bed and feel well again, but I was just too tired to get up. I felt like my song was gone and I'd been left with nothing to say.

Jeremia sat in the corner of the room and whittled. His sculptures were different here in Purgatory Palace. In our camp, the forms had spoken of water, twisting branches,

beams of sunlight; here they resembled flames, shards of glass, the points of knives. Dr. Ruiz bought the first sculpture from him, paid him enough money to pay for a month's stay at Purgatory Palace. He saw that he could make his living in the city, whether he liked it or not.

When Dr. Ruiz came to buy the sculpture, she clapped her hands and laughed out loud. She refused to whisper.

“There is so much work to be done here. And you have such a wonderful family. But where did all these people come from? Why are they all gathered here?” She sat in my room and listened to the stories of Purgatory Palace.

Winston, the boy with two faces, had been born in a village south of the city. When he had been born, the people of his village had thought he was a marvel, thought he was blessed and could predict the future, thought their village would prosper. But in the years after he was born, the village's water supply completely dried up, the wells became stagnant, the crops failed. Their belief in the miracle of the boy with two faces changed, turned around, and they blamed him for the destruction of their village. They left him on the doorstep of Purgatory Palace.

The connected sisters, Conjoined Twins said Dr. Ruiz, were from Gloriosa. Their parents worked on the farm. Their parents already had three children before the farm came, before pigs became the main source of income, and then they had the twins. They didn't need more kids – kids who had to do everything together, couldn't be separated, so they brought them here.



She brought bandages with her, skin-colored bits of tape and she applied them to Rayanna's lip.

"See?" she said. "This is what she'll look like after the surgery."

I turned my face away from the wall and opened my eyes. I looked at Rayanna who appeared blurred, misshapen. I lifted my head from the bed and stared at her face. She had no blemish. The tape covered the irregular openings and turned her perfect. This is why I was here, to make a better life for my little sister.

The room swirled around me, brightened and I felt something in my chest – a small bud that was growing, blooming, spreading to my limbs. Jeremia stopped whittling, the Siamese twins stopped speaking, Eva stopped hopping on one foot, Dr. Ruiz's cheeks puffed into a smile when I got off the bed. My legs felt shaky, my arms weak as I stood. I brushed off my clothes, opened the case of my violin and fit the instrument to my shoulder, under my chin and it all came back, everything I had said through my songs. I played the song of Purgatory Palace. It was my first practice in three days; I closed my eyes and felt the music. I pulled the veil from around my neck and draped it over my head. Candela, Dr. Ruiz, Jeremia, Eva and Rayanna all watched as I pulled my coat on and fitted the violin back into its case.

"I need to talk to Solomon," I said and walked out the door.

I heard shuffling behind me, the sound of people scurrying, hurrying. I didn't look back but swung the strap to the case over my shoulder.

Solomon was in his office at the Conservatory. He sat behind a desk littered with newspapers, disposable coffee cups, wrappers. His usually smooth chin was stubbled with growth and his peppermint scent was muddled by coffee, bad breath and body odor. When I pushed open the door to his office, he held his hands out to me and spoke in a shaky voice.

“Whisper, can we ever make it work?” His voice was as hoarse as mine. “Have I lost you and the beauty of your song?”

I understood now why I walked between two worlds and why this had become my place. I was the bridge, I was the translator between those who come into this world whole and those who didn’t. Rayanna would join me as a member of both worlds.

“I’m ready to play.”

He rubbed his eyes with both hands, stood and walked around the desk, lumbering in heavy strides. He looked at me through eyes so bloodshot, I wondered if perhaps he shouldn’t lie down on his bed and not move for three days.

“Are you sure?”

I wasn’t sure. How could I be? I was about to tell my story to a roomful of people in a huge auditorium, and who knew if my message would come through? But this was the way I spoke and this was my story and these were my friends who needed my help and this was my little sister whose cleft palate would be fixed and whose earaches would disappear.

“I’m sure.”

The auditorium was vacant, hollow, and dark. We were early. As Solomon and I parked in our usual spot, a car pulled into the space next to ours, and out of it stepped Dr. Ruiz, Jeremia with Rayanna and Eva, Candela and Oscar. Oscar raised his leg in the air and waved it at me as he climbed out of the car with Candela's help.

I couldn't stop the sudden tears. I sniffled, rubbed my nose on the sleeve of my sweater and tried to smile but my mouth wobbled and my lower lip drooped. Candela put her arm around my waist on one side and Eva did the same on the other. Jeremia stood in front of me, his eyes dark, his mouth straight. He reached out and touched my cheek with the tip of his finger. Then he slipped his arm around my waist and held me against his chest. I pressed my cheek against his neck and listened to the pounding heart that spoke to me.

Dr. Ruiz walked beside Solomon and we all made our way to the dark stairs that led from the parking garage to the auditorium. We walked down the aisle, Eva gasping and pointing as we went, touching the ornate gold decorations on the sides of the seats. I'd never been here when the orchestra was absent and most of the lights were turned off. The building felt very hollow, emptied out, and I clutched Eva's hand, glad to have her warmth beside me. Solomon and I sat on the stage and waited.

Ruy Climaco rushed in, flipping his hair from his shoulders and leading his body with his chin. His eyes and mouth were narrow slits in his face and his arms pumped back and forth, the baton gripped like a sword in his right hand.

“Well, Miss,” he said, calling to me before he was halfway down the aisle. “Think you’re a bit high and mighty, don’t you. Think you can come and go as you like – well, young lady, I’m here to tell you that playing with the philharmonic city orchestra is an honor, an honor, mind you, and you, child, should understand that. You don’t miss practices for the philharmonic orchestra even on your death bed – and you, you especially should be grateful for the opportunity....”

As he talked a baby gurgled behind him and then someone coughed. Rayanna shrieked, coo-ed, blew bubbles. Ruy Climaco slowed his speech and turned around. When he saw the group of people seated in the front row, his hand moved to his face, fluttered and covered his mouth.

“Good God.”

The people in the front row smiled, except for Jeremia, and Oscar waved a leg at Ruy. Ruy turned around abruptly, his jaw clenched tight.

“Let’s begin, then, shall we?” Solomon said.

We practiced for two hours. I tried to remember all the advice given to me by Ruy Climaco and by Solomon. Ruy hummed the accompaniment, I kept the beat steady, I counted in my head and played the song of Purgatory Palace.

I was only a small part of the performance and my piece came in the middle. For the first half of the evening, I sat in the front row with my family. Jeremiah and I took turns holding Rayanna, bouncing her on our shoulders, feeding her bits of a roll. She gurgled along with the music but the sound she made was lost in the song of the symphony. For a time, she listened, mostly she slept.

At intermission, Solomon stood up and motioned for me to follow. When I rose from my seat, Jeremiah pulled on the sleeve of my sweater. He held his hand out to me, the back of the hand up, the fingers curved around something in his fist. I opened my hand beneath his. His fingers touched my palm and when they did, energy burst into me, tingled through me, and I was awake as I hadn't been for a long time. Something dropped into my hand. It was my carved violin, complete and whole once again. Jeremiah said nothing, but for the first time since he had returned to me, he smiled. I leaned down and pressed my lips against his. He kissed me back, strong, sure, unembarrassed. My heart fluttered in response.

I stood beside Solomon at the back of the stage and he whispered to me.

"You, Whisper, are the strongest person I know."

I had just curled into myself for three days, I had been sad, lonely, lost, and abandoned. I slipped the string around my neck, and felt the weight of Jeremiah's violin against my chest.

"No," I said. "I'm not strong. I'm human like everyone else."

Pulling my shoulders up, pulling my stomach in, I stood straight and finished tuning my instrument. My veil had slipped to the side and I adjusted it over my face. It was time.

The orchestra members took their seats, tuned their instruments, readied themselves. Ruy Climaco climbed the steps to the stage, turned, and bowed to the audience. The audience clapped, a few yelled. I waited in the wings, Solomon beside me – still with his hands thrust deep into his pockets.

“We are honored to have a guest violinist today. Whisper Gane, a sixteen year old virtuoso, will be playing a piece that she composed herself. Please give a warm welcome to Whisper Gane.”

Ruy’s arm swept toward me and his face turned in my direction. He beamed as though he had never been angry. I took a deep breath and tucked my bow under my arm. With my left hand I reached out to Solomon and squeezed his arm.

“Your song is a miracle, Whisper, and your story needs to be heard.”

“Thanks for being the first to listen,” I said. I walked onto the stage. I stood in front of the microphone, bowed to the audience and smiled when the front row of listeners screamed, yelled, and whistled.

“Break a leg, Whisper,” yelled Oscar, his voice booming through the auditorium, one of his legs held up over his head. Some audience members laughed, others gasped.

Looking out into the audience, the lights from the ceiling blinding me to anything but those in the first few rows, I listened to my heart – the slow steady beat of calm. I fitted my violin to my shoulder, rested my chin on it and at Ruy’s signal, began to play.

My hands didn't flutter, my heart didn't race, my knees didn't become slick with sweat. I was transported to Purgatory Palace, to a place where love existed at the edges of torment and loneliness. My song found wings and flew through the auditorium. I kept the beat, I listened to the orchestra, we played in harmony.

As I drew my bow over the strings of the violin for the final notes, I opened my eyes and saw that the first row, all of my family and friends were on their feet clapping, screaming, yelling my name. Their enthusiasm leaked from the front row to the back and soon the entire audience had risen to its feet, clapping, whistling, cheering for me, a reject, a lost member of this world.

When the clapping died down, I continued to stand in the same spot. Silence filled the room after people shuffled down into their seats. Ruy held his hand out toward me and instructed me to take a bow. Instead, I tucked my bow under my arm, reached up with my left hand, and felt the veil whisper against my face as I lifted it from my head.

Gasps rose up like moths from the depths of the audience. Ruy stood in front of the orchestra, his face frozen, his hands stiffly held in front of him.

I stepped out from behind the microphone and looked over the audience. Tonight, almost every seat was full. My friends and family in the front row screamed once again and yelled my name. It was then, as Whisper Gane without the veil, that I took my bow.