

CHOOSE POISON, CHOOSE LIFE

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The town was called Villa Gardenia. It was nestled into the foot of a mountain whose arms enclosed a bay. It had once been a sleepy town. Resorts now lined the beach. Violet had booked a room in a place she had stayed years before. Its paint was peeling, and its rooms were austere. She didn't plan on being there long.

Her flight got in late, but she rose early. She showered, brushed her hair, then dressed and went outside. A man was setting up a souvenir stand on the street. Briefly, she considered buying herself a parting gift. Instead, she followed a path around the hotel through a stand of palms to the beach, which at that hour was nearly deserted.

She crossed the sand, slipped out of her sandals, and waded into the water, stopping where it licked her ankles. Its surface was crimson, pink, and ruby red with predawn light, as though smeared by carnations. She hadn't slept at all the night before. Or the one before that. She was jittery, exhausted, and overwhelmed.

She waded further, halting when the water reached the hem of her shorts. Several miles offshore sat two small islands, lush with vegetation. Local legend spoke of twin deities, sisters who had raised the islands from the ocean floor, destroyed them in a fit of rage, created them anew, and now slept deep beneath them.

Violet envied them their sleep. She was here to sleep.

She took a few more steps, each one more difficult than the last. She was in a dark, dark place, but life did not give up easily. She was thirty-four years old, and for thirty-four years it never had. It cried out to her now.

Was there anything she hadn't tried? Anything she hadn't done? Anything left? *Anyone* left? Anyone unknown to her who might stem the tide of self-destruction? Anyone hidden? Anyone anywhere—anything—to justify living?

As if in response, the goddesses seemed to stir from their watery beds. They knew a thing or two about destruction, and also about creation. They'd created the islands, after all, which were filled with living things. They themselves seemed alive, and to Violet's wonderment, they now spoke to her, not in words, which she wouldn't have understood, but in images. They painted portraits in her mind, and teased other portraits from her, portraits favoring creation and life, all on the theme of survival and resilience. Portraits of people she might be, portraits of survivors, as if to say, consider these.

There were myriad possibilities, myriad lives, but she didn't have time for myriads, not with her life hanging by a thread. What she had was what she permitted herself, which was time for two.

* * *

DAISY

It looked like a crack in the rock from below. Daisy was surprised not to have noticed it earlier. She'd been using the trail ever since she'd discovered it. It was the most direct path across the island, and it ran past the fresh water lagoon where she and Richard swam and bathed. At first they thought the trail was man-made. The way it followed the contours of the jungle floor, wrapping around a clump of trees here, switchbacking up a slope there, was clearly the product of intelligence. Something with a practical, topological mind. Their hopes of being rescued had soared. But in the ensuing weeks they'd found no human beings, nor any trace of humans. They had, on the other hand, caught glimpses of a shy, retiring, fox-sized creature, along with scat, tufts of matted hair, and once, a crown-shaped tooth. It was an animal path, though less of one, naturally, once they began using it. They were not getting off the island anytime soon.

The crack was almost vertical, splitting the rock like a sideways grin. The rock itself was huge and shaped like the head of a lion. It jutted above the jungle canopy as if in the process of declaring its prowess. She had admired it on more than one occasion, though typically in passing, which may have explained why she'd failed to see the crack. She doubted it was new. True, the island was volcanic: witness the ubiquitous rusty red rock, spotted black with lichen in places, like leopard skin. But there'd been no signs of activity, no belching of gas, no spitting of flame, no tremors, and by the undisturbed profusion of vegetation, she guessed it had been hundreds, if not thousands, of years since the earth here had shaken. She was glad of this, having no way to escape if the volcano chose to wake from its slumber, although a different part of her would have loved to be present for the spectacle.

She and Richard had discussed the pros and cons of trying to get off the island and back to the world that, through no choice of their own, was lost to them. The pros boiled down to they might make it; the cons, they might not. In the early days the pros outnumbered the cons by a wide margin, as neither of them, relative strangers to one another, took pleasure in being marooned. But as the weeks wore on, their willingness to risk their lives without knowing where they were—and more importantly, how far they were from civilization—took a back seat to the unspoken but shared decision to make the most of the lives they had. There was food on the island. Daisy knew something about plants, and this something, together with what they could catch from the sea, was enough to keep them from starving.

There was water, too. Richard had woven a leaky basket out of reeds that allowed them to portage the water a short distance. Daisy had improved on his design by adding a milky white pitch she'd seen on an injured tree. Sticky when wet, rubbery when dry, this sealed the basket completely. Now they had water wherever and whenever they liked. For shelter, they'd built simple lean-tos. But with time on their hands, and hands that liked to stay busy, they'd hatched a new plan. Daisy drew it up in the sand, and Richard, after suggesting a modification or two, was eager to get started.

His openness to her ideas was astonishing to her. It had not been her experience with men. She'd had her share of failed relationships, and as usual, she found herself both hoping and doubting this one would succeed. Not that she couldn't live alone. Or be alone. In many ways she preferred it. Yet here she was—here *they* were, the two of them—succeeding.

Before the week was out, to take but one example, they had a hut, and not just any hut, but, amazingly, a sturdy, roomy pentagon. Complete with thatched walls and roof, situated perfectly to catch, but not over-catch, the afternoon breeze. Big enough for a small family of humans, certainly big enough for a pair. It seemed there was nothing the two of them couldn't do when they put their minds to it.

She eyed the crack. Something about it drew her attention, as if it might be more than what it seemed.

She had some water and left the trail, weaving through the jungle to the base of the promontory. The volcanic rock was abrasive and sharp enough to slice a finger, or worse, but it made for excellent footing, and she was sure-footed to begin with. She found an easy pitch and monkeyed up, careful where she placed her hands. She loved working the rock. The shifting of weight, from side to side and up and down, and the sense of losing then regaining her center of balance, all in a split second, was like playing with gravity.

She made short work of the ascent, hoisting herself onto a narrow ledge, invisible from below. The crack was at the back of it; what would have been the lion's neck, except that up close it no longer resembled a lion. Just as the crack no longer resembled a crack. It was an opening, twice her height and wide enough to squeeze her body through.

She took a step inside and stopped. Light spilled in, revealing a smooth curved ceiling, a level floor, and a surprisingly large space. Large enough that she couldn't see the end of it, which was swallowed in darkness.

She took another step, then a half-step to the side to keep from blocking the light. She saw, indeed, that it was a cave, or at least the beginning of one. Created, perhaps, in the aftermath of an eruption, when the lava had cooled, trapping air into chamber-sized bubbles. Though it wasn't completely trapped: she felt a breath of it in her face. Amazing, she thought. There was a flow. This chamber must connect to the outside by way of a second opening. There must be another chamber, maybe a string of them, maybe a warren. Who knew what mysteries lay ahead? Already she loved this place.

One more step. The darkness deepened. The whisper of air rose, then fell. Riding on it was a moist and pleasantly earthy scent. It reminded her of the lagoon, where a certain kind of tree grew, a tree of delicious but unfortunately high-hanging fruit. When it happened to drop the fruit, a rare event, they happened to be able to eat it. She complained of this once, light-heartedly, that a tree would be so stingy of its gift. Immediately Richard leapt up.

The trunk of the tree was like a palm in that it was a long way before a branch. It was unlike a palm in that it had branches, and also its bark was smooth, making it nearly unclimbable. They both had tried without success. But Richard had a look in his eye, and the next thing she knew he'd sprinted off, returning a short time later with a leafy vine, which he'd stripped, then looped around the tree and then himself. After knotting the ends, he began to climb.

Initially, he did more slipping than climbing, as if the tree were laughing at his puny efforts to scale its towering self. After a while, he got the knack, and then he was up in the branches, plucking as many of the gold-striped fruits as his pockets would allow. He descended the tree like a fireman racing down his pole. He spread the fruit on the ground, then picked the most luscious-looking. He broke it in half, scooped out the fat black seeds, then fed her the sweet crimson flesh, the juice dripping down her chin. After that, she fed him, and after that, because the fruit was so incredibly juicy, and the juice was making such an incredible mess of their clothes, they took off their clothes. Or rather he took hers off, and she took his.

She'd been with men, and she'd been with women. She knew how it felt to be vulnerable and exposed. She'd learned how to get beyond this, so that now she felt

comfortable in her nakedness. She liked having sex. She loved getting off, though there'd never been a time that she'd been without a tiny resistance deep inside, like a pellet of unmeltable ice. Never until Richard. It was there, then it wasn't, as if her life had suddenly, miraculously, rewritten itself.

One more careful step. The floor took on a gently downward slope. At the same time it went from rough to smooth, even a little slippery, as if the lava had cooled fast and turned to glass. She glanced back at the opening, which was doubly a mistake. First, her pupils instantly shuttered down to pinholes, so that when she looked back, the darkness was impenetrably thick. Second, the turning threw her subtly off balance, which she instinctively compensated for by transferring her weight. In this case, to her forward foot, which slid further forward, allowing her a brief moment of panic before it slipped out from under her completely. Suddenly she couldn't feel the floor at all. Both her legs were dangling in air. She felt a draft from below and frantically grabbed for some sort of handhold, without success.

Fleeting, she thought of Richard. Other highlights of her life flashed by. The thing about falling into darkness, the scariest thing, was that you never knew how long you had. Or what was at the bottom. Death could come in an instant, or not at all. You could suffer only minor injuries, or be crippled for life.

She was not crippled, not yet, neither in body nor in spirit, though she had every reason to be. Her life had been no bed of roses, but she had never given up. She had fought and clawed through the darkest of times. She fought and clawed now, trying to stop her fall. As hopeless as this was, as sealed as her fate appeared, she refused—and would always refuse—to timidly, docilely, surrender to it.

* * *

ROSE

The other island raised by the goddesses was separated from its twin by a wide strait. A deep channel bisected this strait, giving rise to a powerful surface current as well as a steady upswelling current rich in nutrients and both tiny and not so tiny forms of life. The area teemed with fish. Fish drew fish and other hunters, and sharks patrolled the waters in hopes of finding a hungry, daring (and foolish) mammal, preferably a young and succulent seal or porpoise. Foolish humans were easier prey but stringier meat, and in any event, there were only two on the island, a man and a woman, neither of whom had yet been foolish enough to venture into the open water.

The man had considered it. He and the woman were marooned, with scant hope of rescue, and the companion island might on an off chance contain something of use to them. A dash across the strait seemed worth a try. The woman, named Rose, having observed the treacherous current and circling sharks on a succession, first of days, then weeks, was opposed to the idea. The other island promised nothing. Moreover, the chance of reaching it was slim to nil. The chance of being swept out to sea, on the other hand, and being attacked by sharks, or, god forbid, *eaten* by sharks, was high.

Did the man, whose name was Marl, know these things? Of course he knew. He had to know. Although maybe not. In any case, she encouraged him, by all means, to try.

She did more than encourage. She searched the island for materials to build a boat. She helped him fell a tree, split the tree, and painstakingly scoop out the trunk with mussel shells until her hands were blistered and raw. With these same hands she made him a rough paddle out of driftwood. She went so far as to part with one of their two precious glass water jugs, which she lashed to the boat with a vine she had personally torn from a tree and stripped clean.

The day arrived when all was ready, and they carried the rather heavy vessel to

the edge of the water, then past the waist-high break. He steadied the hollowed out craft for her, assuming she would join him, motioning for her to get in.

She was surprised.

“Oh no,” she said. “Not me. You’re the man with the plan. You’re the brave one. I’ll cheer you on from shore.”

He frowned, then shrugged and climbed in. She retreated to the beachhead, then scrambled up a little knob of rock to watch his progress. The current, she noted, was especially strong that day. He was already having to fight it. Whitecaps tipped the waves, which were sloshing over the sides of the glorified log. She spied the sleek gray blade of a nearby shark, gliding through the water. Then a second shark. Her stomach clenched. She covered her eyes.

A heartbeat later, she cracked her fingers and forced herself to look. The tipsy, makeshift canoe was steadily taking on water. It was getting harder and harder to maneuver. The sharks were closing in.

Marl threw her a glance. He didn’t look particularly worried. He never looked worried. He was always sure of himself, and she realized she wouldn’t know how he’d look if he weren’t swaggering and self-possessed.

So maybe he was worried. Maybe the worry was there, but in hiding. This in turn worried her, because he needed to stay on course. He mustn’t turn back. Perhaps what he needed was help, her help, and accordingly, she sat up tall, lifted her chin, patted a look of confidence on her face, and raised her thumb in encouragement.

The chop got worse. The ocean churned. The sharks approached. Suddenly, a monster wave broadsided the boat, swamping it and flinging the man into the water.

His head went under. She counted the seconds.

Sputtering, he surfaced.

She stood, her heart in her throat.

Did he know the danger he was in? Apparently so, for the next moment he was swimming like a maniac back to shore.

Somehow he made it, inches ahead of the gray-nosed, razor-toothed predators. He crawled onto the sand, chest heaving. On his hands and knees, with his tangled gnarl of dripping hair, he looked like a half-drowned dog. After catching his breath, he got to his feet and gave her a dark, angry look.

She was rattled by his narrow escape. She was shaken. What was wrong with these sharks? And this ocean? What was its story? Almighty Nature was supposed to be almighty. If Rose couldn’t rely on Her, then who could she?

The answer came moments later, when Marl strode up the beach, lifted their remaining water jug, and shattered it against a rock. This had the shattering effect of clearing her head. She was not an unintelligent person. She had talents and skills. She knew plants, for example, and the island was full of plants. Edible plants, inedible plants, and, she suspected, if she looked, poisonous plants, plants, that is, that straddled the line between the two.

Finding the right one would be a project, and she liked projects. Poisoning him, besides being a just reward for the way he’d repeatedly poisoned her, would give her something to do. Being stranded on an island with the person you most despised was a recipe for disaster if you didn’t find a way to structure your life. Things were always better, and time flew, when you had purpose.

* * *

VIOLET

A man’s voice interrupted her reverie. It seemed to come from a distance. Her first instinct was to trust it. Her second, to stiffen.

"Can I help in any way?" it asked.

She erected a wall.

"Please don't tune me out."

She fortified the wall, and was rewarded with silence.

But the silence didn't last. "My name is Levy."

"Go away."

"Joe Levy. Levi, back in the day. People call me Shep."

"Leave me alone."

"I will. You have my word."

But he didn't. What he did do was keep his distance. He had a calm voice and a gentle manner.

This set off alarms, and she wheeled on him, ready to unleash the fury of her tongue. What she saw gave her pause: a fat and balding man in an undersized straw hat and a ridiculous-looking tropical shirt of cartoon parrots and toucans.

"Don't you understand English?" she snapped.

"Forgive me for interrupting."

"Stay away from me."

"You were having a conversation."

Irritation turned to suspicion. "What if I was?"

"Do you mind my asking what it was about?"

"None of your business."

He didn't respond. Didn't look at her either, as if to spare her any further reason to feel preyed upon.

"You drove them away," she said at length.

"Drove who?"

A mist had appeared, blurring the islands. The sun was up, and already a furnace. The tide was rising.

If she ignored this man, sooner or later he would leave. If she concentrated hard, she might make him disappear altogether.

Time passed.

"You're very good at that," he said at length. "But here I am. What next?"

"Go away."

"I'm not here to hurt you. I'm here to help."

"You're fucking with me."

The corners of his eyes crinkled, and his mouth curled up. "I am. I'm fucking with your head."

"Why?"

"It's a head I want to know more about."

"Why?"

"Because it's a good head."

"You're wrong."

"May I ask you a question?"

"No."

"Are you here alone, Violet?"

She froze. "How do you know my name? Who *are* you? Are you following me?" She threw a glance at the beach to see if others were watching, and edged away from him.

"No. I'm not. I was out for a morning stroll. I found myself wondering why a young woman was thinking of killing herself. No one else seemed to notice. As for your name, I guessed."

"You're lying."

He gestured. "You've tattooed it on your arm."

Curling around her bicep was a circle of violets. Spiraling around her other arm, a leafy vine with small dark berries.

"I took a gamble it wasn't deadly nightshade. That's the other one, if I'm not mistaken. Though now that I think of it, I suspect it was your name at some point. Am I right?"

"Are you kidding me?"

"Now you seem more like a Violet."

"Fuck off."

"More a Violet than a Nightshade. I'm curious, what were you thinking of when you got the violets done?"

"I don't remember."

"Which came first?"

"You tell me. You seem to know everything."

"I'd say the violets. They're very pretty."

"They'd be prettier if I'd asked for them."

His eyes flickered. All of a sudden she felt the full weight of his attention.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said.

She remembered being led into the room and an ornate cup being put in her hand. It was her first taste of wine. They said it would help, but the needle still hurt. But then it was over, and the next part of the initiation began.

"The nightshade was me," she said.

"How old were you?"

"How old do you have to be to be forced into something?"

His face darkened. "Have you tried to kill yourself before?"

She shrugged.

"It's your right."

"I don't need you to tell me that."

"Your life. Your right. Though if you'll excuse my saying, it seems another version of being coerced."

"No one's coercing me into anything."

"I've struck a nerve."

"Go fuck yourself."

"So tell me why you decided to keep the violets. You could easily have had them removed."

"Violet's my name."

He nodded, as if this were the answer he was hoping for. "May I show you something?" Without waiting for a reply, he pushed up the sleeve of his shirt. Tattooed on his deltoid was an angel with delicately feathered wings and a golden halo.

"My better half," he said, then pushed up the other sleeve to reveal a particularly wicked looking devil.

"I got Lucifer first. He made the decisions for a long time. I got myself into some scary situations. Taking risks was what life was about. That, and being alone. Me against the world."

"I am alone," she said. "What's Shep stand for?"

"My father called me that. It's short for Shepherd. A family name. Who named you?"

She didn't answer.

"You don't know?"

"My father," she said at length.

By his silence he invited her to say more. By hers, she declined the invitation.

"I'd like to put a thought in your head," he said. "You may find it insulting. It's not meant to be."

"I know what you're going to say."

"Really?"

"Life is precious. Death is final. Consider an alternative plan."

"Not bad," he said. "You've been told this before, I take it."

"I'm a straight A student."

"It bears repeating."

"I tell it to myself every day."

"And?"

"It's tiring. And not helpful. I'm done listening."

"Hold on a minute." He made a T with his hands, as if to call time out. Then he removed his hat, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, replaced the hat, then knit his brow, as if faced with a difficult, but solvable, dilemma. "How about this? Tell it to yourself for another day. One more day. Just one. After that . . ."

"Give it a rest," she said.

"I'm serious."

"Why?"

"Why? Because it's a good message."

"No. Why do you care?"

They were interrupted by two guys in a kayak. They were passing a bottle of rum back and forth and being loud and obnoxious. Violet armed herself as they approached. But their barbs were aimed at Shep.

"Hey, fatso. Get out of the water."

"You're scaring people."

"They think you're a whale."

"Someone's gonna harpoon your ass."

Raucous laughter. Violet was incensed, but Shep merely chuckled, and tipped his hat. When they'd gone, he turned to her.

"I make some people nervous."

Was he kidding? He was making *her* nervous.

"Don't let it bother you," he said.

"Don't lecture me, okay?" Her choices seemed to be dwindling. Either that, or mushrooming into some unseeable, uncomfortable, possibly infinite, amount.

"One day? That's it?"

He raised a finger.

"I'm making a mistake, she told herself. "Then you'll leave me alone?"

"I'll do whatever you say."

* * *

ROSE

Poison came in many forms. Powder, liquid, leaf, needle, shell, bark, flake. It could be baked, brewed, stewed, distilled, and extracted. It existed in every culture. It existed in every land. If you cared enough and had the right eyes, you could find it in virtually any corner of the globe.

Rose had excellent eyes. She also had an encyclopedic memory. She had studied plants and ecology for two semesters at a JC before dropping out. Between semesters she'd wangled her way onto a field trip to peninsular India. For two weeks she studied the decline of various local populations and the spread of non-native weeds. For another two weeks she concentrated on a single species, *nannari kummulu*, a native shrub being threatened with extinction by the usual culprits. It was during this time that she had a conversion experience. The young son of the family she was staying with had fallen ill. One day he was feverish; the next, barely able to lift his head.

His parents did what they could with what they had. They gave him sips of water. They crushed and fed him aspirin. They cooled him with wet rags.

His condition steadily worsened. It seemed he would die. Then early in the morning of the fifth day an Aryurvedic practitioner appeared at the door. With the parents hovering anxiously over their semi-comatose son, the woman forced a reddish liquid down the boy's throat. She left a vial with instructions to continue the remedy. Two days later, he opened his eyes, and by the end of the week he was playing with friends.

Rose was deeply affected by this. After returning to school, she changed her career path, from the study and cataloguing of plants to the use of plants and anything else that could help people in need. She took a class in herbal medicine. She thought of becoming a nurse, or a pharmacist.

Then one day she got a call. Marl wanted to see her again. She couldn't believe her ears. He swore things would be different. She said, "Good. Be different with somebody else." But he kept at her, until eventually he wore her down and got what he was after.

She dropped out of school, because Marl had a thing about school. He found her an apartment, which he visited as often as he said he could. It was a cheap apartment, ruled by cockroaches and mildew. She cleaned it up as much as possible. With money from him she bought curtains and a second-hand bed. Neither of them was happy to find bedbugs in the mattress. She wasn't surprised when he tore it off the bed in a fit of rage, shoved it out the window, doused it with gasoline, and set it on fire. He was a man of action.

He liked to put roaches in a stovetop friendly jar and watch as they suffocated and burst into flame. He taught her the answer to the riddle of how a match could burn twice. But mostly he was nice.

Things started to unravel when she got a job. He was all for it at first. Someone needed to pay the bills. But he didn't like it when he came by and she wasn't around. He didn't like having to wait for her. Didn't like how she dressed sometimes for work.

One night he locked her in the bathroom and wouldn't let her out until she'd shaved all her pubic hair. He gave her a used and wrinkled camisole meant for someone two-thirds her size. She might as well have been a twelve-year-old again. When she protested, he washed her mouth out with a bar of soap. When that didn't stop her, he flicked on his torch lighter and asked how she liked her tongue, braised, baked, or fried?

She started staying late at work, avoiding him. When he got wind of this, he took her phone and locked her in the apartment. He let her out after two days, hungry, demoralized, and without a job.

Things spiraled down. She started drinking. The sex, which was never fun, got rougher. She had learned how to distance herself from the act early on, and now, day and night, with or without him, she was estranged from her body, anesthetized, a mere shell of herself.

The day he hit her, she was brought abruptly back to her senses. She was too stunned to speak, but not too stunned to think. It was like waking from a coma. She waited until he was gone, gathered her things in a daypack, and left.

He came looking for her, but she managed to stay one step ahead of him, until he stopped. After that, her life was no bed of roses. But it didn't include Marl, at least not in the flesh. So how in fuck did she end up marooned on an island with him? It was too ironic.

Yet here she was, with a chance to make things right, trying her damndest, and not getting any help, thank you very much. The current hadn't swept him away. The sharks had merely driven him back to shore. It was as if Mother Nature had better things to do than deal with such a scumbag. Would She mind a helping hand to lighten Her load? An eager acolyte to handle this particular piece of dirty business? Rose thought not.

She was excited to get underway. Also a little nervous, which she often felt when facing a challenge. Nervousness seemed necessary for her to rise to the occasion, and for this reason she welcomed it, for it was a sure sign that rise she would.

She already had a step up, knowing plants as she did. She loved their beauty, their diversity, their role in replenishing the atmosphere, their use as food and also as medicine. She had studied their medicinal uses, not extensively, but enough to know something about toxicity. The line between helpful and harmful was often blurry. What made a plant poisonous was a matter of degree. It depended on dose, mode of delivery, timing of delivery, and, of course, plant composition. A poisoning could occur in many different ways. Some of these were slow, some quick, some painless, some excruciating. If there'd been a hospital nearby, or even a local pharmacy, Rose could have had her pick of methods. Instead, what she had was an island paradise, lush with vegetation. A Garden of Eden really, with Marl in the peculiar role of Eve, and she as . . . who? Not serpent: she didn't slink or speak with forked tongue, like he did. Not temptress: the thought made her sick. Devil? No, not that; she was not an evil person. Not that she was some kind of saint. She had her faults, heaven knew. What she was was a facilitator, a helper, a restorer of balance, like the healer who had cured the young boy. She cared for people, felt for them deeply, which made her, in any universe, a force for good.

* * *

DAISY

She fell. Face up, limbs flailing, through cool air and thickening darkness. The longer she tumbled, the less she could deny the outcome. She was going to die; there seemed no point in pretending otherwise. Right before she hit bottom, with a sickening thud and a terrible bone-crunching crack, she had a vision of Death. He was standing beside her, looking surprised, as though not expecting her arrival. Being a gallows humor kind of gal, she grinned.

Then it was over. She hit the ground hard, and life flew out of her.

A short time later, miraculously, it flew back in. For the following two days she lay in a heap, unconscious.

When she came to, she was cold and stiff. There was a sharp pain in her left shoulder. Her mouth felt like cotton. She couldn't see her hand in front of her face.

She remembered hiking up a hill, finding a cave, and taking a step inside, but nothing after that. Now, it appeared, she was in another cave, or a deeper part of the same cave. She was hungry, she was thirsty, every bone in her body hurt, and the shoulder, something was seriously wrong, and the back of her head was the size of a grapefruit and matted with blood. The list went on; that was the bad news. The good: she was alive.

She tried to sit up. A pain unlike any she'd ever experienced slapped her down. She located its source and tried again, this time keeping her left arm pressed against her side, moving it as little as possible. This was better, and she waited for the lightness in her head to pass, then tried standing up. She staggered and reflexively reached out to steady herself, which only made her stagger more, as there was nothing to grab but thin air. And her arm wasn't happy with this jolting motion. Not happy at all.

She cursed. The words echoed back to her, then died, like a door closing on life. But the echo stirred the memory of the hole in the floor of the cave, and also the memory of having fallen. There was some kind of passage—a tube or a tunnel or a shaft—that had swallowed her, and since it wasn't likely to spit her back up, she would have to climb out.

With her good arm in front of her she took a step forward, sliding rather than lifting her foot, careful to keep it in contact with the floor. Then she raised the same arm above her head, feeling for a roof or a ceiling. There was nothing but air above her, and eventually she came to a wall, which curved sharply. She traced its circumference, which led to the discovery of another tunnel, or maybe the continuation of the one she'd fallen down. Also the discovery of just how wide the chamber she was in was, so that by the time she finished her circumnavigation, she'd given up any hope of being able to wedge herself into the shaft above it, soles against one wall, back against the other, pressing her body outward like a spring and shimmying up. If she wanted out, she'd have to use her hands and feet and climb.

She was fully prepared to do this. Overcoming adversity was, in a manner of speaking, her life's work. The problem was the rock. It was too smooth to get a good grip on. And the walls weren't perpendicular: top to bottom they angled out, putting her at the wrong end of a funnel. Then there was her shoulder, which had its own opinion about her suitability as a climber, and was announcing it nonstop.

She tried anyway. The first two times she slipped and fell and landed on her feet; the third time, on her feet and one good hand. The brief stab of pain she felt in that wrist was nothing compared to the one in her bad shoulder, but it led to a light bulb moment: she couldn't afford to lose the use of the other arm. A cheap lesson, quickly learned. The third try was her last.

She was panting a little now, from the pain and from the effort. Her heart threw itself against her chest. The adrenaline rush from trying to escape was quickly wearing off, leaving her feeling jittery, depleted, even a little confused, the telltale signs of bottoming out.

She could easily have panicked. All the cards were lined up. But she wasn't a panicker. She was a thinker, a doer, and a bouncer back. She asked herself what she hadn't tried. What options were left to a woman of resource and intelligence, a woman who took care of business, who prided herself on not needing others, who liked others well enough, but didn't need them, didn't want to need them.

Cupping her hands, she shouted for help.

Her throat felt like sandpaper. Her voice was weak because she was weak from lack of food and water, and it cracked like a twig underfoot. The rebounding echo sounded tentative and unconvincing. Briefly, she thought of Richard, who would doubtlessly be looking for her. The odds of his hearing her were vanishingly small, but those were the odds: in an up and down life, she'd both survived and triumphed over worse. Summoning every ounce of energy left, marshaling it into her lungs and throat, she shouted again. And again. She yelled until exhaustion took her voice.

She knew what desperation was, how it felt and what it led to. She had taught herself to guard against despair. She was out of options at this point, but that could change. She didn't know how, only that what she needed now was rest. Shivering with fatigue, she eased herself down to the floor, gingerly turned on her side, curled into a ball, and slept.

* * *

She dreamed of imprisonment, of being crushed beneath a weight, robbed of freedom, and she dreamed of escape. When she woke, she knew if she didn't find water, she would die of thirst. Struggling to her feet, she located the opening in the wall. It was round and low-ceilinged. She imagined a mouth, which, like the hole, would swallow her. It certainly swallowed her voice, which died as soon as it left her lips. The ensuing silence gave her the creeps—she had no idea what lay ahead—but all things considered, moving forward was better than staying where she was, stranded with nothing but a useless echo of herself.

Stooping, she entered the tunnel, edging carefully ahead. The floor had a gradual

downward slope, and she sensed the tunnel gently curving, though without sight it was impossible to be sure. But nature favored curves. In certain situations it also favored curvy ways of thinking, with logic mingling freely with hope and intuition, which could lead to great leaps forward but also illusions and dead ends.

Daisy was no stranger to the power of illusion. Fantasy was a fact of life for which she had no use. She took great care to avoid it, which meant she took care of her feelings, not endangering herself by getting carried away. This explained why she didn't get overly excited when, after hours of creeping slowly ahead, first on foot, then on her knees and one good arm, the other never ceasing to complain, she felt a breath of air in her face. Or when the smell in the tunnel subtly changed from dusty and dry to earthy and damp. She'd been dreaming of nothing but water—glasses of water, tubs of it, springs, ponds, streams, lakes—so no wonder she smelled it. If it weren't so utterly dark, and she not so utterly opposed to self-deception, she might have treated herself to a mirage and seen it as well. A nice, palm-lined oasis, shimmering in the sunlight. With the freshest water she had ever tasted. And a tree growing beside it, covered with fruit. And a lover in the tree, tossing the fruit down to her. This kind of thinking did no good, so in that sense it was a plus she couldn't see.

But then she could. Or she thought she could. The darkness lifted ever so slightly, the way it did at the very first hint of dawn, when you were never quite sure, except that you knew eventually night would end. She did not know that her night would, and she didn't immediately trust her senses, until this became an exercise in pointless self-denial, as the light in the tunnel steadily grew. All at once she could see its walls, which were smooth and dark as obsidian. The wet smell grew. She crawled faster, heedless of her aching arm and scraped up knees, beetling then barreling ahead. The tunnel took a sharp left, then a sudden downward turn, sending her head over heels before spilling her out onto a patch of sand. She groaned, rolled, stood, and grinned. Her lips, in protest, cracked and bled, and how little this mattered. There was water, a perfect little pool of it, and she fell to her knees, forced herself to taste it first, found the taste to her liking (more to the point, it didn't make her gag), and immersed her face.

* * *

VIOLET

She stood at the window of her room. The sky was enormous. The ocean was immense. The islands seemed lost in it, and she was lost in their goings-on. She didn't hear the knocking at first. When she did, she was annoyed at the interruption. Then she remembered who it was, and went to the door. But paused before opening it.

What are you doing? she asked herself. Stop. Don't let him in.

"Who is it?"

"It's Shep. We have a date. Am I too early?"

Too late, she said to herself.

"I can come back."

"No." The word jumped out of her. She unlocked the door.

He was wearing another tropical shirt, grinning dolphins this time. Long pants and woven sandals. He loomed in the doorway, like a huge and benevolent bear.

"Hello," he said. "I'm glad to see you. I'm happy you're here."

"Where else would I be?"

"I thought maybe you'd back out," he confessed.

"You should have more faith."

"I should."

"Tell me again why we're doing this? Why you want to hang out with a suicidal freak?"

"I like the freak's company."

"You're weird."

"Decidedly."

"Just so we're clear. This is a one-time deal. That's the agreement. One night. It ends when I say it ends. After that, we go our separate ways."

"Wherever they may take us. That's the agreement."

She fetched her jacket, the only one she owned that wasn't leather, stepped outside, closed the door, and led him down the stairs. The sun was sinking, the sky deepening in color, the light that was always in it beginning to lengthen and fan out like a peacock's tail. The street vendors were packing up their wares for the day. He asked if she was hungry.

"Not so much."

They strolled to the water's edge. His walked with his hands loose at his sides. He wore no rings. Without a hat, his head picked up the colors of the sky, shining like a dull crystal ball. His eyebrows were thick as nests, perched at the bottom of an arrestingly tall forehead.

He asked how she was feeling.

"You mean, am I going to run in and drown myself? I doubt you'd let that happen."

"On a scale of one to ten."

She shuddered. "I hate that."

"Numbers?"

"They use it against you."

"Who does?"

"Where I come from. You'll do anything to come in first. To get a star by your name." She dug her toes into the wet sand, then kicked upward, sending a spray of sand and water flying. "That's what I think of one to ten."

"I won't ask again."

"Gray," she said.

"Gray?"

"Yeah. I was black this morning."

The admission of progress made her uneasy. What the hell was she doing with this man? Going out with him. Trusting him. She'd worked so hard on this, learning, or relearning, not to trust people but to center her trust inward, solely on herself.

"This is not a good idea," she said.

"How so?"

"I've been down this road before."

"We're pilgrims," he said. "Every road is different, even the same one. It's different each time we set foot on it. We're different each time we step out the door. Pay attention to the details, Violet. Big changes rarely happen all at once. Small ones, constantly."

"Some things never change."

"That's not true." He stopped and picked up something in the sand. He showed it to her.

"Coral," she said.

"Dead or alive?"

"Probably dead."

He tossed it into the ocean. "Just in case. Tell me something. Do you have family?"

"Not here."

"But somewhere."

"That's debatable."

She tried not to think of them. It wasn't often she had happy thoughts of her family, or could separate the happiness from the rest. The playroom she and the other kids played in was an example. Her memory of it was bittersweet. It was where they were free to be kids, which meant free to run around, free to shriek and build forts, free to paint pictures and play endless games of tag, free to have fun. The playroom was where she met Richie when they were ten.

"I have more brothers and sisters than I know what to do with. Aunts and uncles, too. I've lost track of how many."

"Really? That sounds like quite a family. Do any of them know you're here?"

"They're done with me."

"How do you mean?"

She gave her standard recitation. "I grew up in a special place. I left. They don't like people to leave. When you do, that's it. As far as they're concerned, you don't exist. They erase you from their minds."

"That's quite a trick."

"You don't think they can? Think again."

She and Richie were inseparable. They played together, hid together, shared secrets, held hands. When they were older, they kissed, and slowly started to explore each other in other ways. Then they were caught, and after that she never saw him again.

"When did you leave?" Shep asked.

"Not soon enough."

"And your parents?"

"We didn't have parents. Only aunts and uncles. I knew my father a little, but I couldn't tell you my mother's name. I doubt she could tell you mine. She wouldn't, if she could."

"Because you don't exist to her?"

"I don't exist to any of them. And you know what? They don't exist to me."

"Yet you do exist. I mean here you are, existing."

"Not by choice."

"*Only* by choice. You could have drowned yourself."

"I plan to."

"I hope to dissuade you."

Other couples strolled by, along with families, singles, and loose packs of friends. People did not come to Villa Gardenia to be inside at sunset. The sky was putting on a show. It looked like melted gold, with ribbons and threads of red and amber. As the sun reached the horizon, it turned liquid, then slipped out of view like a penny in a slot. At the very last instant, when the final pinpoint blink of light was snuffed out, a green oval appeared in its place, suddenly, incredibly, as if by magic. It looked like an eye stood on end, a cat's eye. Its edges quivered and spread like ripples in a pond, until the whole sky was shimmering with emerald light. Then, with a wink that felt like a bomb, it was gone.

Violet was dumbstruck. "I've never seen that before."

Shep clasped his hands, bowed his head, and said a prayer.

They continued walking, until they came to the end of the beach, which was marked by a spit of sharp rocks. Shep was lost in thought, and didn't notice that Violet had fallen behind. When he did, he hurried back and apologized.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"I've worn you out."

"You haven't."

"How long since you've eaten? Or slept?"

She shrugged.

“You must be exhausted. And starving.” He glanced back in the direction they’d come. “I’ve dragged you way too far. I wasn’t thinking.”

You were too busy being nice, she thought. Or pretending to be nice. “It’s okay.”

He held out his arms. “I’ll carry you.”

“I’ll pass on that.”

He turned around. “Climb on.”

“No way.”

“I insist.”

She’d been with plenty of guys who weren’t what they seemed at first. The difference now: she felt sorry for this one.

“I’m not going to ride you,” she said. “So stop.”

He frowned, as if there’d been a failure of communication. “Will you eat something then?”

He pulled a palm-sized packet from his pocket. It was wrapped in leaves, which he unpeeled to reveal a moist dark bar. He broke off a piece and handed it to her.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Manna.”

“For real.”

“I don’t remember the name. It’s a local treat. I have a supply.”

“You first,” she said.

He bit off a chunk, chewed and swallowed it. She waited, and when he didn’t gag, turn blue, or double over, she took a bite. Then a second one, before returning it.

“I’m hungry,” she said. “Let’s get something to eat. Please don’t act crazy.”

* * *

They found a quiet restaurant. It was open air, which allowed them to hear the susurrance of the surf, and to smell the gardenias that were planted outside. Violet ordered something light: all her appetites had shrunk. Shep had the catch of the day. He asked if she wanted something to drink.

“I gave up drinking,” she said. “Feel free.”

“I don’t like to drink alone.” He inhaled. “I love that smell.”

“Gardenias.”

“Yes. And salt air.”

“I could never grow gardenias. Wrong climate, wrong soil.”

“You have a garden?”

“You could say that.”

She told him a little about herself. She had a small, private garden and oversaw a much larger public one for her job. She worried about the plants. She never liked to leave them for long. The hardy plants would be fine, but the more fragile ones would suffer in her absence. Some would not survive.

“You feel responsible.”

She did. It weighed on her.

“These are plants you planted yourself?” he asked.

“I’ve nurtured some of them from birth.”

She remembered every single one. Her own garden would suffer most of all. Unlike the public one, there was nobody to care for it, certainly nobody remotely in her league when it came to a practiced and loving hand.

“Tell me about it,” he said. “Your garden. Describe it to me.”

It wasn’t big, she said. No more than twenty feet square. It was out the back door of her ground floor apartment. She’d started it when she first moved in. She wasn’t seeing anyone at the time, and in fact had stopped trying. Days could go by without her speaking to another person outside of work. Initially, she’d felt isolated, as

though something vital were missing from her life. The feeling never completely went away, but it gradually subsided.

Weeding the ivy and weed-infested, previously untended, plot was a dependable pleasure. The act of pulling up a clump of something unwanted, plucking it right from the ground, was a visceral pleasure, the way that anything purely physical was, like digging a hole, lifting a stone, brushing her hair. Bringing order to chaos was also a pleasure, of a different kind. It was settling to her mind, like solving a puzzle, or cleaning up a mess. Never mind that the mess might be of her own making. It was equally, if not more, satisfying to clean it up.

An added satisfaction: Mother Nature actually seemed to welcome this.

Preparing, then planting, the beds, poking the seedlings and tiny plant homunculi into the enriched, waiting soil, then giving them their first drink, was icing on the cake.

"Sounds wonderful," he said.

"I got lucky."

"How do you mean?"

The garden faced south, she explained, which, in a city where densely packed buildings cast long shadows on open space, was a stroke of good fortune. What it lacked in size it made up for in sunshine. She grew roses, irises, culinary herbs, assorted wildflowers, and one tall, gorgeous, lip-pink sage. In the sunniest corner, beside a trellis fragrant with jasmine, she had a small table and chair. On weekend mornings, over coffee, she would sit in this chair, and on the good days, the best days, be content.

She would ask herself how to maintain this contentment in a world where people were out for themselves and not to be trusted, and where her natural tendency was to trust and to please. She'd been taught to please others. She was quick, on the whole, to compromise, and quick to give in if it meant making peace. Saying yes was no weakness in her universe, yet somehow she kept ending up with the short end of the stick.

In her garden, given the right care, everything said yes. The leaves were leafy, the stems and trunks were thick, the flowers were astounding. When she stepped outside, she was met by a chorus.

"Of beauty," Shep said knowingly. "How wonderful."

"Of voices," she replied.

His face lit. "Saying what?"

She had never told anyone before. "Look at us. Can you believe your eyes? All things are possible."

"Amazing. I've heard that same chorus."

"It's not true."

"No? It's tempting to think so."

"Where have you heard it?"

"Most recently? Death Valley. It's where I live."

"It's a desert."

"Yes. A wild place. And far, far from mute. It has more life, more songs, than you can imagine. I'm there for half the year. The rest of the time I travel."

"Looking for train wrecks?"

"Not at all. But not shunning them."

"You're a do-gooder."

"I confess. It's perverse."

She liked this man. He shared her sense of humor. She felt a bond.

"How long will you be in Gardenia?" she asked.

"Unknown."

"Days? Weeks?"

"Days, for sure."

"Then what?"

"Then I'll go."

Suddenly, she wasn't hungry. She craved a drink instead.

When dinner came, he tucked his paper napkin into the vee of his shirt. It seemed the size of a postage stamp on his massive frame.

"That looks ridiculous," she said, hoping to hurt him.

He smiled congenially. "I'm sure it does. But I'm a messy eater. And it's a new shirt."

"Your fish looks toxic."

"Really? It's the catch of the day."

He refused to be baited.

She hated him.

"I don't want you to leave," she said.

After dinner he walked her home. They made a date to meet the following morning. Violet made him promise that he wouldn't stand her up. That, he said, was an easy promise to make. Short of a natural disaster, he'd be there.

She opened her door, then hesitated.

"What?" he asked.

She didn't trust herself to speak, and shook her head.

"Please. I'd like to know."

"Why are you doing this?"

"You're precious. Life is precious. Death is precious too, but in its time. Not now."

"But why you?"

"Why not me? Why not you?"

"You have a gift," she said.

"You have one, too."

She felt like a leaf in the wind. "Let's not get carried away."

He grinned.

"Tomorrow then. For real. You'll be here?"

"Bright and early."

"At nine?"

"On the dot."

She entered her room. "A gift, huh?"

"You have no idea. We'll talk more in the morning."

"I'll see you then. Good night, Shep."

"Good night, Violet."

* * *

DAISY

Once she'd had her fill of water, she sat back and took stock. She was in a steeple-shaped cavern, fifteen or twenty feet wide at the bottom and as tall as a skyscraper. There was an opening at the top where the sun shone through, illuminating the cavern's upper wall with a narrow cone of light. The rock in that area and for most of the way down was broken into columns and ledges. It looked climbable. If her shoulder allowed it. If, after days without so much as a morsel of food, she had the strength.

The pool owed itself to a trickle of water that originated high on the wall and ribbed down before hitting an overhang, from which point it dripped. A moss grew on this overhang, darker than any moss she'd ever seen. Above the overhang, because of the sun, it was lighter in color. There was a large clump of it, chartreuse green and

vibrant as only moss could be, and to the side of it, from what looked like a fissure in the rock, grew a shrubby plant with flowers and berries. It looked familiar. The berries reminded her of blueberries, and she had no trouble imagining a bowlful of them. With cream. And bananas. And other berries. And toast.

Her stomach was so very empty. Her whole body ached at the thought of food.

She had more water, then slept. When she woke, the cavern was brighter. The sun had moved. It shone lower on the wall, highlighting the fissures, cracks, ledges and shelves. She could see what she thought was a route. It would take her past the shrub, whose small dark berries begged to be eaten. But where would she find the cream, she thought wistfully, returning her attention to the wall and her paramount task, to get out.

The more she studied the route, the better it looked. She had an urge to get started, right then and there, but she cautioned herself to be patient. Going off half cocked had gotten her into this mess to begin with, and here was a chance to correct that mistake. She was not opposed to self-improvement. On the contrary. If it helped in some material way, she was all for it.

So she took her time, observing, weighing, considering her line of attack. She took enough time that she received an expected gift: a small cloud floated by the opening high overhead, beautiful in itself, but more importantly, a sign of the beautiful world outside. The one she would soon enter. The sight of the cloud had a ripple effect. Suddenly, she saw the world she was currently in with new eyes—the breathtaking up-sweep of its walls, nearly vertical; its soaring, chimney-shaped vault; the hugeness of the whole space, its majesty and grandeur, as if nature were polishing the apple of itself. And then there was the light and shadow show, more gorgeous than it had any right to be, and the thickening of the air as the sun angled through it. And the pool, and the little patch of sand. A very special place, this cavern. Once she got out, she'd have to figure out a way to get back in, something less jarring to the system, and bring Richard.

After a lengthy internal debate, she decided to put off the ascent. There was adequate light, but she had no idea how long it would last. It would be catastrophic to be stuck on the wall as darkness descended. Best to spend the night and start at first light the next day. Better still, get some food in her belly first. Dinner, for example. Breakfast. She was weak from hunger, and the climb, as it was, would test her strength. Add to that the unusable arm. Could a test be any sterner?

She discovered that she was worried, which was an unfamiliar state. Doubt, then fear, the two great soul-killers, reared their heads. She might not make it. She might hit a snag. She could fall. She could die, or hurt herself in some terrible new way. Any sensible person would have quailed.

Daisy had sense, but she was hard-nosed. She didn't run with the pack. Her hackles rose to hear a thing called impossible. She bristled at the word no.

She was tough, and she was stubborn: these were her armor against an unpredictable world. Beneath the armor she was flesh and blood, like anyone. She was tough there too, but also vulnerable. She believed in the goodness of things. She was susceptible to romance. She could—and had—put her heart up for grabs.

She could be playful. She could be girlish. Sunshine had been known to flow through her veins. It flowed now: she had a free afternoon, and how about that? Things could be a whole lot worse: she could be chained to a hospital bed, or a desk, or a wall. Though probably not a wall. Judging by the width of the incoming sunlight, which shone in a narrowing band on the uppermost cliff, it was late afternoon. Plenty of time left to take care of some pressing business.

Accordingly, she peeled off her clothes (her shirt with an effort) and took an inventory of the merchandise. She sported a variety of scrapes and bruises. Both her knees

were torn up from the long crawl. The lump on her head was smaller, which was good. The pain in her arm was not as sharp, also good, but it was deeper. It throbbed like a rotten tooth. And the arm looked different than the other one. She could see the ball of it, and the whole thing was forward and down. She couldn't move it without the pain becoming unbearable. Parts of it hurt to touch, though not as much as she expected. So maybe it wasn't broken. Maybe only out of position. It was against her nature not to be hopeful about this, but the truth was, it didn't matter. It was useless in any case.

On the plus side, it didn't prevent her from bathing, as long as she kept it still. Without soap or shampoo there was only so much she could do, and with only one arm what she could do was a chore. But afterward, her skin tingled, and she felt as fresh as, well, herself.

Night finally fell. The cave turned gray, then black. The one or two stars she could see had no effect on the darkness that enveloped her, which, like before, was total. As was the silence, save for the sound of dripping water, her own little waterfall. This was the music to which she nodded off.

She woke two or three times during the night from hunger. She was grateful when daylight came, and after filling herself with water, she got under way.

Routes always changed when you were face to face with the rock. But hers turned out to be a good one, and the changes—and more significantly, the challenges—were minor. Two hands, naturally, would have been better. An energy bar or five, better still. It was weakness as much as anything that slowed her down. When she stopped, which was frequently, it was not just to plan out her next few moves. It was also to gather strength.

She passed the shrub, pausing to appreciate its pretty, bell-shaped flowers, its clusters of shiny black berries, and the amazingness of its being in the cave at all. She imagined a plant suddenly deciding to sprout from the dark recesses of her mouth: it was as improbable as that. She knew enough not to eat the berries, at least not a bellyful of them. That said, they looked harmless enough. The safest thing would be to test one. Not a whole one, but a part of one. A very small part.

Hunger demanded it, but she resisted the temptation. The safest thing, actually, would be to leave the plant alone. Tighten her belt, suck it up, and get the hell out. She proceeded to do this, finding seams in the rock, handholds and footholds as if they were placed with her in mind. As if nature, in its grand design, were smiling down on her sorry plight. Not that it was easy. She had to work for every inch, pushing, pulling, clinging, balancing, stretching beyond the point of what seemed possible, all the while taking care not to move her gimpy arm, or to move at all when her head was light, which was often. It took every bit of strength, discipline, and courage she possessed to climb that wall.

And then she had. Or almost: she stopped one last time within shouting distance of the top to catch her breath.

The opening, of course, was much wider up close than it had appeared from afar. It wouldn't be a squeeze in the slightest. She could see a fair amount of sky, blue blue blue, and the light streaming in was glorious. Her heart pounded from the climb, which was nothing compared to her mind, which raced with excitement.

One last push should do it, and she searched for the best route. A broad and implacable overhang stymied her from above. To her right was empty air, and a fall best not to contemplate. To her left, solid rock and a handhold, which, if she could reach, would be a hauling point. There was a foothold beyond it, and after that, what appeared to be a smooth ascent. There were only two problems: one, she couldn't reach the handhold; and two, the arm that would have to was useless.

It was a setback, but in no way a defeat. Backtracking, she tried a different route,

which was no better. Then another, which was worse. She approached the first one again, eyeing the handhold like a horse its carrot, willing her arm to move by an inch. It screamed. Then a second inch. More screaming, and that was it. The pain was indescribable. Unless the handhold miraculously floated closer, and she had no reason to think the rock would cooperate in this, her climb was finished.

Always harder to get down, slower, more tedious. Worse when combined with hunger, fatigue and frustration. She stopped at the shrub, defiantly broke off a clump of berries, stuffed them in her pocket, and completed the descent.

She rested on the sand, battling various dark thoughts. If she couldn't get out, she'd die. And she wasn't getting out, not unless some angel came and lifted her.

It was the first time she'd cried in many years. She sobbed herself to sleep, dreamed of food, and when she woke, pulled out the berries. She could waste away slowly, or waste away a little less slowly. Life was precious, and you only got one shot. If they made her sick, so be it. If not, and they bought another hour, another day if she was lucky, then why the hell not?

She had a nibble. The taste wasn't bad. Not bitter, which would have warned her off. Slightly sweet, though nothing like a ripe blueberry. But not offensive. She waited to see what would happen, and when nothing did, she finished the berry and had another.

* * *

ROSE

There was a fruit on the island that grew on trees surrounding the fresh water lagoon. It was a succulent, delicious fruit, and decidedly nontoxic. The two of them had scarfed it down without ill effect. The only danger was eating too much, which was the danger of anything so good. The seeds, however, were another story, or they could be. Some of the sweetest fruit, like apricots, cherries, and plums (all of which, she noted with a certain amount of pride, were members of the rose family), contained some of the most toxic seeds. She considered daring Marl to eat them, which was just the kind of bait he would rise to. Having survived his ill-fated voyage, he felt more invincible than ever. His embarrassment at her having seen him flailing around only fed his need to prove himself by dominating all things. He would not be afraid of the small black seeds. Unfortunately, neither were the bushy-tailed, fox-sized rodents, who ate them with impunity. Humans weren't rodents, it was true, but biologically, if not temperamentally, they were similar. The seeds might give him a bellyache, but it was unlikely they'd kill him.

She was not that disappointed, as she hadn't expected to find something instantly or easily. She actually looked forward to widening her search. The problem was getting free of him. He liked to keep an eye on her and didn't like the idea of her traipsing around without him. The most casual onlooker would have found this nonsensical, if not bizarre, as her presence gave him little pleasure, other than the pleasure of being surly, ill tempered, and abusive. But Rose understood.

She tried to sneak away one night by the full of the moon, when he was sleeping. This was when she discovered that he never slept, not when it came to her. Eyes closed or open, pointed away from her or focused narrowly at some task at hand, he was always watching.

He did allow her to get water, which they drew from a shallow pool in the jungle fringe above the beach where they camped. It was good water at first, but at a certain point its taste changed, as if something had been added to it. There was a nearby orchid, lovely to look at, foul to smell. Depending on the time of day, its odor

ranged from rotten to repulsive to shit. The water tasted similar, perhaps from petals of the flower having fallen into it, perhaps more insidiously from chemicals in its bulb and roots leaching in. Marl, naturally, blamed her. She swore her innocence with the straightest of faces. In any case, it was no longer drinkable.

The nearest alternative source was the lagoon, and Rose offered to take on the chore of making the hour-long trek. And it was a chore, carrying the unwieldy, woven baskets they'd had to make to replace the glass jugs he'd destroyed, and she made sure he knew it. It was easier once she started using the bamboo pole across her shoulders, and she nearly made the mistake of mentioning this, and of compounding the mistake by hurrying back, just so he could admire her speed and ingenuity. But she heard a voice, sharp as a thunderclap, that said, "Don't be an idiot." And she listened to it.

So she had a little extra time, a little leeway, which she could stretch by various means. The first few trips all she did was sit by the lagoon, or swim in it without his watching, or treat herself to a piece of fruit, whose flavor, given his absence and her now undivided attention, she appreciated even more. It reminded her that the Earth was not to be denied, that its creativity was rich beyond measure. Some of its riches were sweet, some juicy, some bitter, all interesting. There were pleasures under every bush and in every clearing. Life was truly a feast.

She rediscovered the delight of exploration. One of her best days came when she stumbled upon a cave inside an outcrop of lava that rose above the jungle and looked like the head of a sheep dyed red and splashed with splotches of ink. What made the discovery so good was not the cave so much, which she had no use for and knew enough to avoid without a source of light, but a plant growing nearby. By its leaves and flowers she recognized it immediately as a Solanaceae. It clearly wasn't a tomato or potato or eggplant. It wasn't tobacco or jimson weed. By its size, shape, and shiny black berries, she thought the chances were fair to good it was a nightshade. Not precisely deadly nightshade—the flowers were the wrong color—but a relative.

There was a fair-sized clump. It seemed to enjoy the porous, gritty soil surrounding the cave. Her delight in discovering it was enhanced by the interesting question of what to do next. She needed to test the various parts of the plant to find out their effect. Nightshade berries were commonly—and erroneously—believed to be the most toxic part, simply because they were responsible for most poisonings and deaths. But this was because they were showy and tempting to eat, and, temptation being what it was, many people, especially children, couldn't resist filling their hands with the fruit and gorging themselves. Gram for gram, the leaves and roots were often more toxic. But every species was different, and you never knew unless you were told, and since there was no one around to impart that wisdom, she was left with having to experiment.

Using a bird as a subject was a possibility, except that a bird's reaction said little about a human's. And she didn't relish catching and caging one, not to mention trying to feed it against its will. She felt the same, or worse, about using one of the bushy-tails, which had done her no harm. The fact that they were mammals, and therefore more similar to humans, merely added to her reluctance to poison them. (Although the thought did cross her mind one day, after watching a big one first bare its teeth, then proceed, unnecessarily she felt, to take a king-size chunk off a smaller one's ear.)

Once she had sifted through her thoughts and eliminated what she couldn't do, she was left with what she could. There was only one animal on the island that was not exempt from experimentation. This simplified things enormously. And it couldn't have come at a better time, because hauling water, gathering food, and staying out of Marl's way had become so tedious she was ready to scream. Now she had something different to look forward to, something new, and she had to hand it to herself. As he himself had once said—and she remembered the day vividly because saying it had

come close to killing him—she was not only intelligent but resourceful, not only resourceful but resilient. She could spin gold out of straw, pluck diamonds from dross, see silver on the cloudiest day. She really was an amazing person.

* * *

VIOLET

She slept better than she had, which wasn't saying a lot. Nervousness and excitement woke her several times during the night, until morning came and she woke for good. She showered, then dressed and put on a little makeup, humming to herself, thinking of Shep. She checked the time, then went outside to walk off the butterflies.

The souvenir guy was at his stand, ready for customers. He smiled as she approached. She didn't intend to stop, but before she knew it, was walking away with an extra-large, short-sleeved, tropical shirt. She passed a liquor store, thought twice, then entered. She'd robbed him of a drink the night before, and wanted to make it up to him. Feeling carefree and immune to risk or temptation, she bought a pint of expensive rum, then changed her mind and made it a full bottle.

She checked the time and returned to her room. She picked up her clothes. She made her bed. She checked the time. It was ten to nine. Then it was five to nine. Then it was nine on the dot.

She went to the balcony outside her room. She looked down the street. It was empty.

She waited and eventually returned to her room. She sat on her bed, periodically checking her watch. In a lifetime of mistakes this had to count as the worst. She wanted to die. Put an end to the relentless suffering and sadness. No one could change who she was. No one could save her. It was time to stop kidding herself.

At half past nine she left the room, one and only one thought in her mind: to do what she came to do. Now. She was done waiting.

* * *

At half past nine Shep was fast asleep. Hours before, when he should have been asleep, he was wide awake, puking his guts out. He suspected the fish, which was ironic, considering he'd once been a fisherman and had lived for a time solely on denizens of the deep. Not the healthiest diet, but several steps up from starvation, which he'd also tried. And everything in between, in an effort to find a steady, reliable source of nourishment. Food was a stand-in, but hardly superfluous. Besides, he loved to eat.

He rarely thought of his stomach as a line of defense, but he was pleased it was doing its job, getting rid of the poison. Not so pleased at its violence. For hours, in cycles, it had been cramping, knotting and exploding, hurling its contents, even when there were no more contents, into the toilet bowl. When that activity ran its course, the cramping moved south, and his bowels opened up like a faucet. He'd seen his share of sickness and malady, but this, this gushing, this deluge . . . he'd never witnessed such a thing. He was in the bathroom all night. Finally, as the sky was growing light, he staggered back to bed and slept.

He woke with the sun in his eyes. The room was an oven. He was dying of thirst, and stumbled to the mini-fridge for a bottle of water. Then he realized the time.

Shep Levy was not a man to curse. He asked himself if his oversleeping was by unconscious design and for the best. If Violet would rise to the occasion. The answer: he was many things, but unconscious he was not. Violet was in grave danger.

He cursed, threw on some clothes, and raced to her hotel. The door to her room was open. A bottle of rum, half consumed, sat on her dresser. Tipped over next to it lay an empty bottle of pills. He rushed outside and to the beach, scanning the ocean, not finding her. He saw a knot of people on the sand and hurried over.

Violet was on her back. Her hair was wet and streaked with sand. Her eyes were closed. Someone was barking into a cell phone.

Shep knelt beside her. He felt her pulse. He watched her chest. It rose and fell ever so slightly. She was breathing, which meant she wasn't dead.

But then she stopped. A sound erupted from her mouth, a kind of croak, and her body went stiff. Her eyes opened, then rolled back in her head. Her jaw clamped shut. Then she started to shudder and shake, as if possessed.

* * *

DAISY

She lay face up on the sand. The sun was nearly overhead, and it poured into the cave through what looked like a mouth. Where it struck the wall, it seemed to shatter into particles, which dripped on her like drops of rain. She wished it were rain. She was dying of thirst. Her tongue was swollen. Her throat felt like burnt toast. The water that she ladled with a cupped and shaking hand from the pool for some reason didn't help . . . when she was able to drink it. She seemed to be losing her ability to swallow. Her hunger, unfortunately, remained painfully intact. It gnawed at her like a worm, from the inside out. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had real food in her mouth.

The berries were gone. The branch where they'd been was denuded of fruit. Its once green leaves were sickly and limp. Though not always. Sometimes they came alive. They shivered sometimes. They pulsed, and they crawled. They were beetles sometimes, or gunmetal green colored creatures with wings made of thread. Or tiny jade wafers.

She was having visions, and she had one now. Food was falling from the sky. Loaves of bread and baskets of vegetables and fruits. Fat green beans, cucumbers, and carrots. Candy too, coconuts, and cakes. They were drifting slowly downward in a multitude of colors, sizes, and shapes. Like hot air balloons. Like manna from heaven. But nothing was reaching her. All of it stopped and hovered in the air just beyond her grasp. It hung there, suspended, begging to be eaten.

Well, that was easy enough. All she had to do was stand up and grab it.

She nearly fainted when she tried. Would have cracked her head on a rock if she hadn't kept her wits and fallen forward, not back. Tasted sand instead of cake. Spat it out, wiped her mouth, then got to her knees, holding that position until the light-headedness passed, then staggered to her feet.

The food was gone. Other things she couldn't name floated in its place, ribbons and streamers and snaky shapes, as if the air had thickened, congealed, and given birth. The columns of rock were melting. The little waterfall dribbled and oozed like a wound. The smell in the cavern made her nauseous, as though she were breathing stink.

She wasn't herself. The details were hazy, but she knew she was sick.

Stumbling forward, she plunged her face into the pool. Its iciness revived her a little. She eyed the dancing wall of rock. She had failed to scale it. There were reasons for this. Possibly it couldn't be scaled, not ever, but something inside her would not admit defeat.

She stood, teetered, then lost control of her legs and collapsed. She lay on the sand in misery, until mercy smiled on her, and, fitfully, she slept.

* * *

VIOLET

She opened her eyes. Winced at the bright square of light in the wall. Saw a man in a chair.

"Where am I?"

"In a hospital," he said.

"Am I dead?"

"No. You're alive."

Her mouth felt like glue. Her head, a disaster. "I'm supposed to be dead."

"You were saved. You saved yourself."

She tried to get out of bed, but something held her against the mattress. "Who? Who interfered?"

"Two guys in a kayak. They pulled you out of the water."

"Why?"

"You were weaving around, they said. Trying to get back to shore. Then you stumbled and went under."

"Who told them to pull me out?"

"They didn't need to be told."

"They had no right." She fought to free herself. "I can't move."

"You're restrained. For your safety."

"My safety? I wish I was dead."

"You had a seizure. From all the pills you took. They pumped your stomach and gave you medicine."

"Without asking. Leaving me feeling like crap."

"Are you thirsty? Can I get you some water?"

"How about a knife to cut my throat?"

He brought her a cup with a straw. She took a few sips, then realized who this man was.

"You," she said.

"Me."

She snatched the cup from his hand. "Go away."

"I was sick, Violet. That's why I didn't come when I said. I couldn't. I came late."

"Save it."

"I was up all night. I had food poisoning. I didn't fall asleep till dawn."

"You slept in?" She was incredulous.

"It wasn't my intention."

"Fuck your intention."

"I'm sorry. Truly I am."

"Tell it to someone who cares. Can I get some help in here?" she shouted, fumbling for her call button. "Thanks for nothing, asshole."

* * *

ROSE

She decided to use the root. It was colorless and easy to remove from the decoction she made by soaking it for several days in a small quantity of water. Its bitter taste all but disappeared when this water was diluted in the lagoon water she continued to faithfully fetch.

She was careful to keep the poisoned water separate from the good supply. Careful also to drink from it, or appear to. When he wasn't looking, she'd pour some out of their makeshift jug, so the level dropped, as it should. He'd notice if it didn't. As a result he got less of it than she would have liked, but less was better than none. The key thing was not to rush. Not to do anything to arouse his suspicion. She had to be patient.

She waited a day. Then another. She knew how to watch, wait, and observe, for having paid the price when she didn't. She was happy to bide her time, though after a week, when he'd drunk more than his share of tainted product without apparent

effect, she began to feel uneasy, as if, perhaps, she'd misjudged, either the plant or the man.

It wasn't until the second week that the poison began to work its magic. He complained of thirst. Then of blurry vision. He lost his appetite, and this, in combination with the poison itself, made him weaker by the day. He had trouble raising his arms and lifting his legs. He managed to drag himself around, but he stumbled frequently, and one time fell. For his safety she insisted he lie down, until whatever he had went away. He didn't argue. He seemed to understand that on his back was where he belonged. He spoke less and less, and eventually fell into what on the surface appeared to be a fitful slumber.

He stayed this way for days, waking on occasion, always in a confused state. She continued to dribble poison into his mouth, but not only poison. She gave him sips of plain water, too. It wasn't in her heart to sit idly by while he died of thirst.

She wasn't happy at having him harassed by animals either. Not the bushy-tails, which, if she wasn't around, came out from hiding. She caught one of them nibbling his big toe. And not the black-feathered, sharp-beaked birds that had taken to perching nearby and were eyeing him with interest. Or the colony of red and black ants, whose scouts were on the prowl.

None of these intruders was to her liking. Her sense of fair play did not extend to having him eaten alive. The thought was barbaric. Even he deserved better.

But he would be eaten—or pecked, or nipped, or gnawed—if she left for any length of time. She was forced, therefore, to stay with him, sitting vigil while shooping off flies, brushing away beetles, and flicking off ants, which had now formed a line.

It was monotonous work. It was also unsustainable. She couldn't watch him every minute of the day. She had to relieve herself from time to time. She had to get water and food. She had to sleep. Although to give her credit, she tried not to. When night fell, and her eyelids drifted closed, as they did, repeatedly, she repeatedly snapped them open. She stood and stamped her feet and slapped her face to stay awake. This only delayed the inevitable. In due course she sank onto the sand, her head drooped, and like butterflies, her eyelids fluttered, then like a trap, they shut for good.

She was jolted awake by a noise. Two of the oily black birds had landed on his belly. They were making a commotion, croaking and squawking at each other like irate consumers, as if to establish who got first dibs. She shouted and sprang to her feet, waving her arms, which was unnecessary, as the birds had already leapt up in alarm, spread their wings and fled. It was nearly dawn, and she knelt beside him, checking his body for signs of injury. His shirt and shorts were filthy but unpecked. His arms and legs—hairy, tanned, and flaccidly defenseless—were unharmed. His face was untouched, and for this she said a silent prayer of thanks.

His beard, she noted, was getting bushier every day. It softened the hardness of his eyes and mouth. Unconsciousness softened him, too.

Marl the Almighty, getting cut down to size by the likes of her. It should have felt better than it did. Her conscience was bothering her. He was the one supposed to be suffering. Not that she was suffering excessively, except possibly from a lack of sleep, but even a small amount seemed unnecessary.

She needed to come up with a better plan. She splashed water on her face and turned to the horizon, where the sun was getting ready to rise. Everyone agreed on the power of sunrises and sunsets to invigorate and inspire.

She had to get him off the ground. Leaving him at the mercy of nature's divine mandate of eat or be eaten was not an option.

She could put him in a tree and wedge him in the branches. Better yet, truss him up in a basket of vines and hang him from a sturdy limb, like a bundle of fruit. She knew of two or three trees that were both climbable and stout enough. But getting

him into the tree, and, more importantly, securing him so he didn't inadvertently fall, seemed beyond a single person's strength. Besides, so many of the jungle's creatures could climb trees, or fly.

She couldn't very well bury him. True, it would protect him, but burying was not for the living. It was more than barbaric, and not to be tolerated.

A raft was a possibility, built of bamboo woven tightly together with grass and reeds. She could pull or roll him onto it, then float him into the lagoon. Tether the raft to shore, so she could reel him in when necessary. He'd be safe from crawling and slithering creatures, as well as most creatures with legs, but not from birds. And if he happened to stir in his sleep, he might easily capsize and drown.

She had other ideas, all of them unacceptable in various ways. It was no no no down the line. She was frustrated, as if something were actively opposing her perfectly good intelligence, and she wheeled around, stalked up the beach, and put it to him. He was a smart guy. There was never a time when he had not known more about everything than her and everyone else. Never a time when he had not, in one way or another, informed her of his supremacy. What would he do?

She recalled one particular night, not long after she dropped out of college to be with him. He'd shown up unexpectedly at her apartment with an invitation for a romantic midnight walk in a nearby forest. She was thrilled. Yes, she said. How wonderful. Thank you. Yes.

He led deep her into the forest's heart. They carried flashlights, turning them off from time to time to concentrate on the symphony surrounding them. Nighttime creatures were calling and signaling to one another, searching for mates. The air was heavy and warm. Her own mate was beside her. She felt his presence; she smelled his familiar scent. The whole thing was too much. She felt alive as she'd never been, intoxicated, in love.

Suddenly, without warning, he snatched the flashlight from her hand and vanished, leaving her alone in the pitch black darkness. To see how she'd handle it, what she'd do, what her threshold for discomfort was, how she'd react. He explained all this a half hour later, when he reappeared and congratulated her for not freaking out. He called it a lesson in survival.

She called it a lesson in allowing the wool to be pulled over her eyes. It was a lesson that had taken her longer than it should have to learn. A more together person would have left him immediately. A less together one would have crumbled.

Following that incident, her life took on a progressively unreal quality. For much of the time she was in a daze. She made herself sick, to the point of forgetting how it felt to be well. That's how his poison worked.

The sickness didn't stop when she left him. Sometimes it was worse, sometimes better, but it was always there. She vowed his would be different. Her poisoning of him would be swift, final, and therefore more humane.

Standing over him, their roles reversed, she wondered how he felt, if he felt anything at all, being at her mercy. Scorn and condescension were embedded in him. He wouldn't believe for a minute she'd go through with her plan. Though maybe he would. Maybe the poison was already doing its job. Maybe the sickness it caused would teach him the meaning of surrender.

The sun chose that moment to show its face. It cast a long shadow of her otherwise short body on his inert frame, as though she were sharing that dark and shadowy part of herself with him. It was like sharing a friend. Darkness was home to her. It was familiar. In its way it was safe.

She remembered the cave.

It would solve a number of problems. Though getting him there would be a chore. But she had legs, and a compact, muscular core, and shoulders and arms strengthened

by all the water carrying. She was confident she could do it, and her mind didn't change when she got him up and onto her back. He was bigger and heavier than she was—she was never not aware of his size. But slinging him across her shoulders, which was the way to go, then straightening her legs and taking a few preliminary steps wasn't that hard. The burden of carrying him paled, she found, in comparison to the ones she'd already borne, so in that respect he was light.

Still, it took her the better part of the day. Her legs were shaking and her neck was one vast knot by the time she got to the mouth of the cave. The ascent of the sheep's head rock was particularly harrowing. She almost lost him, and catastrophe was in her mind all the way to the final step, where she was able, at long last, to slide him off her back and rest.

She left him briefly to get water. The lagoon wasn't far, and he wasn't going anywhere. When she returned, she dribbled some into his mouth, then filled the cup of her hand and washed his face. He moaned and mumbled something unintelligible. His skin was hot, and she tore off a strip of her shirt, wet it down, folded it, and pressed it to his forehead.

For a second he seemed to come around. His eyes opened, roved in their sockets like a pair of rogue billiard balls, then fixed on her face. They were all pupil, making them appear both strange and of great depth and penetration. There was no accusation in them. Instead, he looked puzzled, as though he didn't understand but would like to, would love to, as though he were eager to hear her side of things and to right any wrongs. He was such a snake.

She would have preferred an out-and-out accusation. She had answers for anything and everything he might lob her way. Did the answers justify what she was doing? Would they stand up in a court of peers? More importantly, did they stand up to her own conscience?

A good question, under constant review. For now, it was enough to know that the sentence had been meted out. For both their sakes it was best not to waver. She knew how to harden herself, and she did that now, meeting his quizzical, mildly demented look with authority and resolve. She added a measure of compassion, not a huge amount, but genuine. He seemed to draw strength from this. His breathing became easier, and his eyes rolled back and closed.

She rewet the rag and mopped his brow. Asleep, he seemed so docile. Childlike almost, and she was startled by a thought: could the poison possibly change him for the better? If she stopped delivering it and he survived, might he wake up a new man? Some people did after a brush with death. They saw the light and turned things around. It wasn't impossible.

It was unlikely, however. And if she did back off and he recovered, and he was the same monstrous man, then where would she be? At the thought of the evil he would rain down on her, she shivered. The man was wily. He was working his poison on her even now, and she snatched the rag off his forehead, wrung it out, and used it on herself. Then she hoisted him on her back and carried him into the cave.

She didn't go far, stopping where there was still enough light to see. Carefully, she lowered him onto his back, cradling his head in her palm so it didn't bang against the stony floor. She was relieved to have this part of the journey over. She was exhausted, and longed to stretch out and close her eyes, but the opening through which she'd entered made her uneasy. It seemed an invitation to anything that cared to walk, crawl, or stumble inside. They were the only humans on the island, but humans were far from the only ones who used caves.

There were loose rocks outside, and she collected a pile of them, which she then began to stack into a wall. Big rocks on the bottom, rotated to find their balancing point, small rocks to plug up the chinks and provide stability. She worked from the

outside, until the wall was a bit more than knee high, then transferred the pile inside and worked from there. When the wall reached her waist, she paused. The opening was not wide, but it rose a good distance above her head. Just how much of it did she need to plug?

If she went very much higher, she'd have trouble getting out. This was assuming she stayed inside with him, which, she realized, she intended to do. On a number of levels it would be easier the other way: stay outside, seal him in, wash her hands and be done with it. But this seemed as barbaric and cruel as burying him, and in fact no different. She would not rest, knowing he was entombed but alive.

She decided to make the wall chest high, which would permit her to climb out when she had to. Before doing this, she left to get more water, returning as quickly as her tired legs would allow.

A few more rows of rock, and she was done. Finally, she could rest. Leaning against the wall, she slid down until she was seated, then stretched out her legs.

She glanced at him. He was little more than an arm's distance away. His chest, it appeared, wasn't moving. So soon? Alarmed, she touched him with a trembling hand.

His skin was doughy and cool. She jostled him and called his name, but he didn't respond.

She stiffened. The man was an asshole, a true asshole, despicable in an infinite number of ways, but did that mean he was pure, unadulterated, a hundred and one percent evil? He had a thimbleful of admirable traits. He was tough, for one: tough to like, but also tough to dislike. You'd hate him before disliking him. With Marl there was no middle ground.

As it turned out, he was also tough to kill. She didn't believe her eyes at first, the sign of life was so slight. It occurred in his beard. Periodically, the snarled hairs shivered, like blades of grass in a whisper of wind. That was all the life force he had left. But she wasn't going to quibble. He was breathing.

She wasn't, but now she did.

She felt a wave of relief, then its opposite, frustration and anguish. She knew it was wrong to kill. She wasn't a moron. Life was precious. You only got one. It was wrong to throw the door open and invite death into the house.

It was also wrong to let a killer go and spew his poison elsewhere. She had another look at him, spewer of poison and killer of souls. His body was limp and all but inert. It gave off an unhealthy smell. Save for his soundless, shallow, scarcely visible breaths, he could have been death itself.

She rose. She hadn't slept in nearly two days, but couldn't sleep now. She had to decide this thing once and for all. She went outside, clawing her way over the wall until she stood in sunshine and fresh air.

She found a rock and sat on it, watching the long day come to an end. At length the sun dipped below the horizon. She felt a burst of resolve. Then progressive calm, as night came on.

When the first star appeared, she climbed back down. She felt her way inside the cave, found his face, his lips, and dribbled the last of the poison into his mouth. Then she sat beside him, bearing witness, until sleep took her in its arms.

* * *

VIOLET

She woke. Her headache was gone. Shep was seated, eyes at half-mast, earbuds in, nodding his head.

"Who invited you back?"

He looked up, pulled the buds out. "Charlie Tuna. I love it. You're awake."

"You fucked up."

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"Did I really turn back?"

"You did."

"That complicates things."

Her body restraint, she noted, was gone. In a limited sense she was free. She sat up.

"Have you ever killed a man?" she asked.

"I've killed animals. Never a man."

"Have you ever come face to face with evil? True evil?"

"I thought I did once, and I had him by the throat, but mercy stayed my hand."

"I'd do it again," she said.

He didn't ask what or why. "Mercy takes practice."

"Poisoning takes resolve. I learned the subtleties of poisoning at the hands of a master. I owe him a debt of gratitude, although I doubt he'd see it that way."

"He sounds monstrous. Even so, I'm afraid you'll suffer for what you've done, or imagined."

"Not much."

"Your conscience will suffer."

"Whose doesn't?"

"You have a point. Still, forgive me if I worry. What's to stop you from using poison again?"

"My conscience."

"Your conscience needs work."

She remembered entering the water. Splinters of sunlight hurting her eyes, then the pain receding before a gathering darkness. A feeling of relief, then panic, as she sank beneath the waves and struggled in vain to surface.

"I couldn't pull the plug," she said.

"You chose not to."

"Maybe suicide takes practice, too."

He leaned forward and took her hand. "Let's practice something else for today. What do you say?"

"I'm so tired."

"Why not sleep a little more?"

"Will you be here when I wake up? Never mind." She waved the question off. "Forget I asked."

* * *

DAISY

She heard a voice. She heard it again, opened her eyes, and sat up.

There was a man in the air nearby. She couldn't remember his name, but she remembered his dark, curly hair. And his beautiful, androgynous face. He looked like an angel without the wings. She pinched herself and slapped her cheek.

He drifted closer, and she raised her hand, expecting to be lifted. He gave her a heartfelt but no-can-do look, and kept his distance. At first she didn't understand. Then it occurred to her that one hand might not be enough. He was afraid of hurting her, or of her slipping from his grasp. She was open to being picked up and carried, either in his arms, which would have been sweetness itself, or slung across his back, which would have been fine, but he wasn't offering. She guessed he didn't want to risk dropping her.

It was annoying but understandable. She was left with having to rely on herself. In other words, back to square one, with a notable difference: he was there to encourage her and give her moral support.

She stood, steadied herself, and started to climb. After half a dozen steps fatigue and dizziness forced her to stop. Her angel hovered just out of reach. He was staring at her useless, broken wing. There was doubt in his eyes. He was worried.

She appreciated this. She was touched by his concern, though wouldn't it have been nice to get some real, hands-on assistance?

She considered her next move. It required a big step onto a small ledge. It was moderately difficult, partly because she'd be rounding a corner and therefore exposed. Nothing but air below her. The good news: she wasn't that far off the ground. A fall would hurt, but unless she happened to hit a rock—and there was only one of any consequence below her—it wouldn't be fatal.

She took the step, one foot then the next, balancing on the narrow shelf. With her good arm she steadied herself against the wall, waiting for the light-headedness to pass. When it didn't, she looked to her angel for help. He was still there, and finally he responded to her. With a troubled expression, as if to apologize for some future offense, he offered his hand.

Without thinking, she reached for it.

Her fall did not last long. Nothing like the fall that had dislocated her shoulder. She did, however, hit the rock that rose from the sand like the dorsal fin of a shark. Not with her head, which was a blessing. She clipped its hard edge with her gimpy excuse of an arm, and she screamed in agony.

Then a strange thing happened. The agony subsided, and the pain that remained was not only bearable, but a relief. She felt a shift in her body, a settling, as if she'd been sleeping on the point of a sword and had finally found a way to dislodge it. With her good arm she pushed herself to her knees, which was when she noticed her other arm. It was back in place. The fall had somehow restored it to its proper position.

She tried it out. Forward, backward, to the side, cautiously, carefully, holding her breath. It hurt, but not excruciatingly. Little by little she increased the range of movement, which increased the pain, but not so much that it held a candle to the joy of having the use of it back.

There was nothing to stop her now. In a way her angel was to thank, but her angel was gone. She thanked him anyway.

Moments later, she was on the wall, arms and legs splayed like a spider. She visualized the obstacles ahead. She mustered her strength. She took the first step up. Success was no sure thing, but it was no longer impossible.

* * *

VIOLET

She opened her eyes. Shep was at the window, his back turned. She sat up, dangling her legs over the side of the bed, waiting for the dizziness to pass, then stood. The floor felt good, the way it pressed against her soles, and the way her soles and calves and thighs reflexively pressed back. Terra firma, the push-pull of life, the proof of life, as opposed to the weightless disembodiment of death. She went to the bathroom, splashed water on her face, then came out.

"See something?" she asked.

"It's so thick."

She peeked past him, at a wall of mist. The world beyond it was hidden.

"We could be anywhere," he said.

He was wearing an all white suit. And a plain blue shirt, which she saw when he turned. His hat was in his hand.

“You’re leaving?”

“I am.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.”

“It’s time.”

“What if you’re wrong?”

“I’m not.”

She felt a stinging in her eyes, wiped them with the back of her hand.

“I’ll call you,” he said.

“What if I want to call you?”

“I won’t be reachable. Not for a few days.”

“Where are you going?”

“Halfway around the world. The cradle of civilization. I have the ticket right here.”

He checked his inner coat pocket, then patted himself down, with rising consternation. “I seem to have lost it.”

“The man who can do no wrong.”

“Who said that? Here it is.” He flourished the paper.

“I’ll miss you.”

“You honor me.”

“May I hug you?”

He held out his arms.

He was twice her size. She felt awkward at first, as though everything about her was the wrong proportion. But this didn’t last, and soon she was sinking into his embrace, and then, miraculously, he seemed to disappear, and she was sinking into herself. She was large too, in heart and in spirit. Large in courage, and in resilience. She could handle whatever came her way.

The question in her mind: how long would the feeling of largeness last, and would it last? The answer: there was no guarantee, but longer than it would if she kept being hateful.

* * *

She felt good the rest of the day. Shep’s presence seemed to linger. The next day, not so good. She was a fuckup. One mistake after another. No end to the ways she could fail.

She rallied that evening. She had no idea why. She’d been told she had a chemical imbalance that caused excessive mood swings and depression. It was an easy answer to a complex problem, insultingly simplistic in her humble view. She didn’t remember being moody or depressed as a child. Angry sometimes. Wary. But mostly happy.

She was very happy, though naturally nervous and a little afraid, the day she was chosen. She was only twelve years old. Her body was changing. All the girls her age were self-conscious.

But he made her feel like a princess. He flattered her. He admired her spirit and intelligence. And the women in the house, who lived together in a separate wing, made such a fuss. She was proud to become one of them.

She didn’t get depressed until later. In the early years after making her escape, she was wild and reckless, and had no idea that these were signs. She took risks. She stood on the lips of tall buildings. She developed a hard, brittle edge. She wasn’t often happy, but she knew how to have fun.

The depression began in her twenties. She didn’t know to call it that until somebody told her. She thought it was normal for a certain kind of person, for anyone really, to want to die.

She still thought it was normal, just not to the exclusion of wanting to live. She

doubted a drug would get rid of the feeling, and wouldn't have taken it if it did. Being morbid was home to her. It tickled her funny bone. It was like dancing with Death without dying, partying with Death without going home with Him.

Save for nursing checks, she slept that night without interruption for the first time since being admitted. She woke to the smell of flowers. Violets and daisies spilled from a vase on the table at the foot of her bed. Half-hidden in the forest of blooms, like an insider's joke, sat the tight bud of a rose. No card, no bow. Just the flowers, and their widening—for all she knew, ever-widening—chorus.