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The Cutman

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The Cutman

by

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Abstract

In this novel, professional wrestler Domingo Contreras coaches his sister, Pilar, on the eve of her tryout with Mid-Coast Championship Wrestling, a small federation based in Charlotte, North Carolina. While facing dilemmas concerning his identity inside and outside the ring, Domingo comes to realize that the business which is gradually destroying him will consume his sister at an even more terrifying rate.

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Chapter One: The Sumter County Freedom Fest

Man is meat. One of the dozen broken wrestlers who told Dom their way to bump and run the ropes in low-ceilinged gyms across the Carolina low country had said so. Dom didn't remember who. As a kid in a business that eats its young, Dom was a magnet for shit advice. It all blended together, except that one line. Man is meat.

There were nights, especially after Dom and Pilar decided to leave their mother, where he tried to parse out why it stuck with him—why he spit it through his teeth at the gym, toasted no one with it before downing a shot, mouthed it while he lay on the floor and watched his sister flop herself to sleep on their trash-day futon. He wanted to make it smart, to make it deeper than where it came from, but that lead nowhere. Its blunt, dumb simplicity is what plugged into his brain. Man is meat. He can be cut. He can be cooked. He can be chewed and swallowed.

On the independent wrestling circuit, a loose network of federations busting chops for peanuts and pocket change up and down the east coast, Dom was an itinerant heel. In that way his job wasn't so different from how they ran things back in the day, when the territories were king and monster villains stomped from Philly to Memphis to Georgia to challenge the local hero. A few promoters actually had the gall to pitch it to him like this, as if Dom were so green or thick or pan-fried that he couldn't see a firing for what it was. Dom wanted to hurt these men. Wrestling was one of the few businesses where burning a bridge could shore up three others if you were up to date on your politics—the enemy of an enemy is a friend and all that. But Dom didn't do business that way. He took enough

risks in the ring so that any theatrics backstage would be pressing his luck. As much as Dom cringed at all the carnie shit that had been ingrained in wrestling since someone had the bright idea to work it over all those generations ago, he couldn't avoid the superstitions. Tempting fate was a daily thing. Even in a perfect match, spines could snap out of pure chance. A pound of pressure applied just so could collapse a windpipe. It had happened to better wrestlers. It happened to guys with necks as thick as tree trunks. If Dom could limit the number of dice rolls necessary outside the ring, he was all for that.

Dom had been working through the summer with Mid-Coast Championship Wrestling, an indie outside Charlotte with a respectable draw, usually a couple hundred per show. Main stage was in a hangar on an old airstrip outside the 485 beltway. Bleacher seating. Decent lights and sound. Some money coming in from iPPVs thrown together every few months. When Dom wrestled the Hangar, he was usually the only early-on who'd loiter until curtain to scrounge up what leftovers he could from the barbeque trailers parked outside. Pilar was sick of pulled pork and all but off red meat as she ramped up her own training. Any money he saved with free meals meant she could get a little more creative at the grocery that week. Dom knew his chances to jump into a national promotion were slim, but Pilar was just out of high school, and she had a sharper look and a clearer shot at the top than Dom ever had. He'd made sure of that.

MCW ran satellite shows in partnership with smaller promotions across the Carolinas. No cameras, smaller draws, school gymnasiums, but necessary for Dom, both for whatever pittance they offered and to stay in ring shape if a real opportunity did come rambling down the I-95 corridor. In August, Dom was booked to tag-team the Sumter Freedom Festival as Hack Barlow, the crazed lumberjack gimmick that had earned him a

couple of big paydayes in the Ohio valley before fizzling out and forcing a move southeast. Though he'd dropped close to forty pounds and was distancing himself from the burly Barlow in favor of something sleeker and more maintenance-friendly for his middle-age as a wrestler, most of the MCW cross-promotions were driven by spectacle. The Barlow gimmick was an even better fit for these kinds of events than it used to be. Dom would muss his hair and thick beard into something horrifying and throw on his old jeans and flannel, which would hang off him like a kid trying on his dad's clothes. He looked totally deranged, and best of all, he looked as if he'd decided to try out this wrasslin' thing that morning. This is what these casual crowds were after. To sniff out one of the MCW main shows took some effort, so most of the draw at the Hangar was made up of folks that actively sought wrestling. They had a very different feel than audiences who stumbled into the one-offs expecting a freak show. They were hoping that some drunk redneck had decided to throw himself into the ring and get himself killed. Any paying audience was a good audience for Dom, but every time he staggered out as Hack Barlow, it felt like a step back.

Pilar rode shotgun to most of Dom's summer gigs—a new development, one Dom had quickly warmed to. One thing the gym couldn't prepare you for, even with a trainer as focused as Dom, was the lifestyle. Especially with the national promotions, the show always went on, no breaks, no offseason. To make a real living, to be able to afford the basics and to build a nest egg for the inevitable injury or burnout, a wrestler had to be on the road three hundred days a year. This meant long nights down dark roads with the pain of thrice weekly matches weighing on your back and joints. At least Pilar could fit into Dom's Civic, still going strong after two hundred thousand miles and a slew of

modifications that turned into the world's smallest and poorest equipped RV. Dom was far from the biggest guy in MCW, but he still had to fold himself in behind the wheel. With the seat lowered and pulled back, his head still wore a bald patch in the driver's side canopy. Every pothole was a serious threat.

From the entry gates, the Freedom Festival looked typical. Flags fluttered from the top of every structure, some permanent concrete and brick fixtures at the Sumter County Fairgrounds, but most trailer shaped pop-ups fringed with neon selling all things sugar and grease. Whiffs of fry oil further thickened the saturated air and reminded Dom how fucking hungry he was. The place was so aggressively pastel, some festival-goers had parked themselves under cover and were staring at the darkest part of the shadow just to give their eyes a break. Even the ground, the once turfed lot flattened to hay on dust, reflected the sun with a vengeance.

Though these events always marketed themselves with some food or diversion—bluegrass, crawfish, okra, hog racing, and so on—the real point of distinction was wet or dry. Though there were strange exceptions like the Strawberry Shortcake Slam near Spartanburg in 2012, alcohol determined the type of crowd and match Dom planned for. For children, Hack was a boogeyman. He'd walk to the ring in a daze, eyes wide, find a kid on the rail that was trying too hard to be tough and strike out. He'd get heat early and dominate the face until the comeback. After the job, sometimes kids would throw stuff at him. Dom loved this, especially when he got hit with stuffed animals the kids had picked up on the midway. If one hit his face or groin he'd reward the little sniper with an oversell, then stomp the toy into the ground. Didn't matter how small or dead the crowd, that bit was always good for a round of boos, which meant he'd hit and done his job. A

lot of guys lived and died by the rule that a heel's art was to make the face look good no matter what, but with the shit talent Dom would so often meet in these one-offs, he could sleepwalk through it and still steal the show.

For boozed gigs, Dom always read the crowd, but usually, it was a question of how unhinged he'd work that night. He'd tweak little things like how sloppily he'd throw his punches, how much and how directly he'd scream at his opponent, the audience, the sky, etc. In one bit he'd go to every now and then, he'd call for a shot to the head, take it hard and fall into a trance, then steal an empty chair from the first row and start chopping at the ringpost. If the draw was quick and into it, someone might yell out "Timber!" and Dom would stiffen and topple over as if the blow had finally registered. Those were good gigs, but not all of them were.

But the Freedom Festival was different, a little off. "Freedom" of course was code for "firearms," though that was par for the course. He'd seen enough of these part fairs, part trade shows, part Second Amendment circlejerks. They didn't faze him. There were some characters inside the gates, but one reliable perk of the wrestling biz was he looked big enough in street clothes so that he rarely got fucked with. The times Dom actually had to worry about problems of the physical sort were after shows, after people knew he was a wrestler. As meatheaded as most of these guys came off, Dom understood where they were coming from. There were a lot of people out there who thought they had something to prove and had arrived at that feeling through no fault of their own. Dom couldn't bring himself to resent someone who would snarl a pathetically obvious dig about wrestling's fakeness. He pitied these people. They were just now getting a joke thirty years after the punch line. They also didn't seem to understand that even if pro

wrestling was a work, that didn't mean Dom went home and hung his muscles in the closet and forgot everything he had to know about what the human body could and could not take.

These kinds of people were everywhere, but the Freedom Fest had a strange vibe. August in the middle of South Carolina was a prototypical mad dogs and Englishmen scenario. Hot as balls and twice as sticky. Yet, aside from a few permanent show buildings and restrooms, the Sumter County Fairgrounds were wide open to the blazing midlands sky. Despite that, the place was packed. Braised skin pulled like power lines. Tattoos of every shape in every possible place with no offense neglected. Dom didn't take ten steps into the party before seeing people in all stages of consciousness—some comatose under direct sun, others grinding together in the rare patches of shade to the bass thumping in from an unseen music stage in a far-flung corner of the grounds.

There were guns, of course, but the freedom Sumter was celebrating this weekend was extended more liberally than Dom had initially thought. The first sign was the leather, any trace of it much too much on that kind of day. First an armband here, a spiked collar there, but soon chaps, leashes, hoods, corsets, and, unbelievably, full body suits. Men and women, young and old, touching, drinking, walking. Fried vowels rising above the clatter, carrying notes of admiration and pleasure. All this amidst tall-boy toting, stars-and-bars types browsing cases of assault weapons. And there was not a trace of high school dance separation. Dom followed his line of sight from a middle aged woman feeling out the grip of an Airsoft replica glock to a fuzzy-lipped ectomorph crinkling his roll of specialty condoms into a star shape. This wasn't the place you'd ever

use a word like “harmony,” but there was an unsettling, almost beautiful peace about it. Dom paused at the sight of it and tightened his grip on his duffel.

“I’m gonna get a sno cone,” Pilar said.

“Why?” Dom asked.

“Because I’m melting and sno cones are delicious.”

Dom turned to give her a look, but she was punching at her phone. “So much for rare and appropriate cheats,” he said.

Her thumbs tapped and punctuated something with a calligrapher’s flourish, then she dropped her arms and looked up. “This is rare. Can you even imagine a ball of ice on a day like this? Miracle of science.”

“You can’t out-train a bad diet.”

“What crawled up your ass? You bugging out? Look, you’re sweating buckets.”

“Well no shit,” Dom said, wiping his brow. In the walk from the car, his armpits were stained, his shins had droplets collecting, and even his beard was getting wet.

“Just saying you look nervous. You’re worried about getting all these freaks riled up. Better watch out, they might start unloading on you.”

“I’m actually kind of loving this,” Dom said, looking around. At a nearby booth, a man in a golf shirt and salmon-colored shorts squeezed a dab of clear liquid onto his index finger, thoughtfully rubbed it with his thumb, and wafted it toward his nose.

“Just when you think you’ve seen it all,” Dom said.

Pilar wedged her phone into a front pocket of her jean shorts. Half of the screen stuck out over her waist and the hem of her bright green tank top. She bit a strand of her

hair and wagged a finger at her brother. “So we’ve found your kink. *El fetiche de Domingo*. Wait. It is *fetiche*, right? *Fetiz? Fetrices?*”

“I have no idea,” Dom said.

Pilar scrunched her face, pried out her phone, and started tapping. “Service is so bad here,” she said. “When you booked?”

“Five.”

“Oh wow. Ditch the flannel early.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I’m serious. You’re going to pass out. In fact, I’m gonna find something new for you here. What do you think? Spandex or leather?”

“I’ll save you a seat.”

The ring was situated among the food tents, live bear show, and music stages toward the back of the festival, so Dom had to walk through the game barkers and vendor stands selling guns and sex toys and gun-shaped sex toys and dozens of tables handing out pamphlets and trinkets for kook political causes. Three sets of bleachers, the tallest two stories high, surrounded the ring. Stage right was left open for a basic entrance and entryway with black privacy curtains separating front and back of house. Nothing was under cover, but that was probably best. A tent would stall the air and cook it, and any sort of audience would make it unbearable.

Two amateur-looking boxers were going at it with about sixty people scattered around fanning themselves and spitting into plastic beer bottles. It wasn’t unheard of, even with events cosponsored by MCW, to discover the local booker was either stupid or

greedy enough to try to cram boxing, wrestling, and MMA all into the same ring that wasn't meant for any of them. They looked similar, but a boxing ring could kill a wrestler, or at least cut most of what Dom could safely do.

The boxers danced around each other, their knees wobbling. The ring had considerable give and there were three ropes instead of boxing's typical four, which meant it was likely a wrestling ring. Far from the best or even a good squared circle, but it would do. The floor was some kind of plastic Dom rarely saw. The boxers' boots left shallow imprints which the thin layer of foam underneath would slowly fill in. Most good rings were canvas, but they weren't designed for the elements. The ropes looked especially chintzy, their nonstop quiver the telltale sign of bungee wrapped in rubber. They'd be much harder to climb than padded steel cable or actual rope.

Dom found the opening to the backstage area. An older guy in a triple XL event staff shirt was sitting guard behind a barricade rail and didn't raise an eyebrow when Dom strode past. Back of house was barren, even by festival standards. Dom wrestled a lot of one-offs in high school gyms, and all those had locker rooms, some unexpectedly posh. Theaters, ballrooms, even the army vet halls could be trusted to have a dressing room set aside. The Freedom Fest had nothing. No signs pointing to a green room. No catering table with expired deli platters from the local discount grocery. Dom stepped over a line anchoring the adjacent tent which smelled like it was used for animal auctions. He rapped his business knock on what might have been the booker's trailer. When no one answered, he turned to the noise coming from the ring.

He passed electrical cords snaking through the matted grass and open roadie boxes. Beer cans and plastic water bottles littered the ground. He kept moving toward the

sound, pushing his way through curtains. He didn't call out. He figured he'd run into someone or he'd pop onto the stage and they'd have to swerve the boxing match into a triple threat.

Finally, a man appeared like a troll from under a folding table topped with electronics and a basic sound and light board. A battery pack hooked on his belt powered a ridiculously showy headset, like the kind Dom would've jizzed over as a teenager. "SUCK IT," was printed in bold across his black, sweat-soaked T-shirt.

"Who the fuck are you?" the troll asked.

"Hack Barlow," Dom said. "Where's the locker room?"

"You're late," the troll said, wiping his nose.

"I'm definitely not," Dom said. "If anything I'm obnoxiously early."

"You being smart with me, asshole?" The man straightened his back and puffed out his neck. Huge veins instantly engorged and pulsed.

Dom sighed. "Where's the locker room?"

"There is no locker room. And even if there was, no way in fuck I'd tell a faggot like you where it is."

"Oh, okay then."

Dom set his duffel on the table then hopped up to sit beside it. The table sagged under his weight.

"What in the blue fuck are you doing?" the troll said.

"What's it look like?" Dom said. He tossed off his shoes and tugged down his pants. Dom's pubic hair was shaved into an H. He'd lost a gym bet in Greensboro years before and decided to keep it going.

The troll tore off his headset. “Get the hell off of there or I’ll—”

“Or you’ll what?” Dom said without a trace of anger in his voice. His face was relaxed and matter of fact when he reached into his duffel and removed a bottle of baby powder.

The troll stuttered and coughed. “There’s an Airstream,” he said. “Just walk that way and you’ll see it. Door’s open. It’s a piece of shit and there’s no AC but that’s all we got for talent.”

Dom dumped a half the bottle on his crotch and slapped it around to form a billowing cloud. The troll cringed and scooted backward to avoid breathing it. A light dusting settled onto the table’s electronics.

“I’m sorry. Could you repeat that?” Dom asked.

“Holy shit! If it ain’t that son-of-a-bitch torino, Domingo Contreras. Dommy, it looks like you got a blowjob from a snowman!”

Dom hadn’t bothered to put his pants back on when he found the Airstream, right where the troll said it was. Primal Trotsky, a vet on the indie circuit who Dom had known since Dom was Pilar’s age and doing backyard shows, was waiting for him. Primal creaked out of a chair, one of several that seemed like they’d once been inside the trailer, and put up his dukes to shadowbox.

“We’re working tag tonight, Dommy. Been a while, huh?”

“No kidding,” Dom said. “Good to see you, man. You look like you got caught in a Mack truck’s wheel well.”

Primal smiled and took a pull from two liter bottle with the label scratched off. The brown liquid inside sloshed. There were lumps floating in it. “Good!” Primal said. “Adds to the character.”

Primal was squat but built like a boulder. Coarse hair peppered with gray covered his shoulders like a charred forest and his beard rode up to his cheekbones. He was half into his red and gold singlet, the straps bunched at his hips. Primal has been working the same eastern European monster angle since the 80s. Dom never asked, but he figured Primal in his late forties, old for any wrestler but ancient for an indie scrub who worked match to match. They’d mostly tagged and shared a few battle royals. Primal was slow, but safe, and a lot of guys liked him because he never made a fuss. Dom thought he called too loud in the ring and talked too much afterwards, but he didn’t mind Primal and actually thought Hack Barlow paired surprisingly well with him. Primal looked like he’d been taken captive in the Caucasus and shipped to America as a sideshow. Selling the team of the crazed lumberjack and Marxist mountain man was a short order.

“Who we putting over tonight?” Dom asked, pulling up a chair and dusting the extra powder into the grass.

“Oh, some local greenhorns,” Primal said. “Couple of little tykes. No one I’ve heard of. Saw one of him back here for a hot minute with a couple of girls, ripe on the vine the both of them, but they took one look at me and buzzed straight outta here.”

Dom checked his wrestling trousers, a pair of jeans he’d weathered with sandpaper, wine, and chocolate, for holes that might have gotten too big. He debated staying bottomless until just before his match, but he’d have to put on sunscreen and that would cake the powder.

“You were always good with kids,” Dom said.

“Like a fuzzy teddy bear,” Primal said, scratching his belly. “Say, how’s your sister been? I hope you’ve smartened up and told her to run away before you turn her into one of us.”

“She’s getting there. She wants into a ring as soon as she can.”

“I remember when she was yea high and had that lisp.”

“Yeah, well she’ll be eighteen in a few months.”

“Eighteen? No shit. We’re getting old, Dommy. But I’ll tell you what. If she needs a sparring partner, you know, someone to break her in before you throw her to the wolves, you call me. I can teach her a few things.”

Primal’s laugh sounded like a plucked bass. They threw jabs back and forth while the boxing wrapped up. Dom not so politely refused a pull of Primal’s chunky beverage. He stretched his boots and laced them paratrooper style, a long-standing routine he focused on to get just right. He liked the way the laces looked like a series of folded arms, a ladder of limbs climbing to his knees. Under a water spigot not hooked to one of the trailers, he let his hair out of its knot and doused it. By match time, it’d be partially dry and perfectly ugly, damp strands hanging past his shoulders, fly-aways riding the subtle updrafts fueled by his body heat. He pumped with resistance bands—biceps, triceps, chest, neck, quads. The jeans and flannel would obscure his muscles, but he needed them red and ready.

“Not bad,” Primal said. “Trim a little, and I’d mistake you for the Brawny Man.”

“He’s shaved now,” Dom said.

“Horseshit.”

“Look it up.”

Primal curled his lip and took out his phone, which barely had a thumbprint on it. “Goddamnit,” he said. “They gotta fuck with everything, don’t they? Perfectly good paper towel gimmick, and they turn him babyface. For what?”

“Gotta stay fresh,” Dom said. “Especially when you’re in the cleaning business.”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s all the same. You give people what they want. And no one outside some slick marketing firm is going to want to makeover the Brawny Man. That moustache? Famous.”

Dom rolled his neck, which cracked like popcorn. “Nobody knows what they want. You have to dictate. You’ve gotta sell.”

“Oh yeah? What are you selling?”

“Depends,” Dom said. He stretched an arm behind his head, taking his elbow past twelve o’ clock. His fingers brushed a zit starting to form on his shoulder blade. He set his jaw and squeezed it to the surface until it ruptured. Pus flowed and he took off his shirt to let the sun at it, practically hot enough to cauterize. “Today, I’m selling whatever these tykes throw at me.”

“Garbage then. You’re selling hot garbage.”

“Best salesman can sell water to a drowning man.”

One knee at a time, Primal got himself into the pushup position. The transition was slow and creaky, but once he started, his triceps bulged, and his body smoothed into the exercise like an old pickup slipping into high gear.

“Could never bring myself to think that way,” Primal sad. “Everyone knows we’re hustling. A lot of guys could run the hustle, but the best always looked at it, you

know, more like an art. I'm not one of those guys, but I've been working long enough. I've seen it. It's a dance. We dance. We dance with the tykes. Then if we're good and the mood is right, we ask the crowd to step in."

Primal slowed his push until he was just barely moving, his arms train pistons steaming to a stop. With his final rep, he blew air out his teeth and locked his elbows. Dom offered a hand to help him up.

"You okay?" Dom asked. "They say guys can guess when their time is up, so they unload all their bullshit before it's too late."

"Better than okay, but you're still going to listen, you goddamned torino. The most important advice you'll ever hear. Never work sober."

Primal held onto Dom's helping hand and pushed his bottle into the other.

"Something's curdled in this," Dom said.

"Keeps hair on your chest," Primal said.

"So I've seen," Dom said, his fingers curling around the bottle. "What should I toast to?"

"Jesus fuck. No toasts. Bad luck before a match."

"Ok," Dom said, raising the bottle. "No toasts." Primal smiled as Dom tilted the two liter to his lips. He pretended to drink, but he plugged the bottle with his tongue to prevent the sour-tasting liquid from entering his mouth.

The tag-team Dom and Primal were working with called themselves the Federal Titty Inspectors, FTI for short. Primal asked why they didn't go with "booby," and the two stared back like they didn't understand the question. Their names were Maxwell and Cee-

Saw, and they had that pudgy-muscle look Dom had recently and with great difficulty cut from. Nobody in the indie circuit had the time or money to eat well.

The Inspectors were green, but chill enough. They shook hands and deferred to the heels to plan out the match. Orchestration traditionally went that way, but young bucks with big heads sometimes stepped on toes during talkthroughs, which would always lead to something much worse than crushed toes during the match. Their only request was a hero spot with their managers, two unsurprisingly chesty ladies named Mackenzie and Bria. Primal would give chase outside the ring and only to get his bell rung by the ring bell, an overhead blindside from Mackenzie. Primal was more than happy to oblige. Planning with them was a treat for Dom after the headset asshole. There were plenty of good, sensible people in his corner of the wrestling biz, but by design Dom had gotten to know most of them. Any friendship had the potential to build a bridge to somewhere greater, if not for him, then for Pilar. The Inspectors were silly, and their ring gear included poorly dyed FTI T-shirts with the letters set among a sketched pair of hands raised either to cup something or to praise the Lord. Cee-Saw was the huskier of the two, and on his shirt, the hands were placed as if they were reaching to caress his own flabby pectorals.

A dark cloud blocking the sun gave everyone's eyes a breather but did little to relieve the heat. Primal's insistence to pick through the details of the bell spot with the ladies quickly became tedious. Dom dawdled through his warm-up and then, feeling sluggish, restarted. He was hungry, and he could identify each fresh minted fried Oreos and London broil and funnel cake when its odor wafted backstage. Users on his fitness board had crowed that after starting a diet, once they began to notice results, they didn't

even think about the foods they could no longer eat. These were bullshit lies. There was rarely a moment when Dom's cravings didn't threaten to burst into consciousness. The posturing was so obvious. The fetid machismo. Dom disgusted himself by visiting the forum, but he couldn't stop. Even before the match, he felt the urge to pull it up on his phone. He couldn't believe all those gym rats, each of them addictive personalities pretty much by definition, never thought about cheating. None of them were at the Freedom Festival. That was certain. The fair made him salivate. More than the smell, the consumptive attitude of the place was like a warm sea feeding a hurricane. Dom wanted to smash a yard-long corn dog dipped in drawn butter. He wanted to seduce a woman in leather lingerie and fuck her on a bed of elephant ears.

When it was finally show time, the wrestlers got into position behind the black curtain that opened to the stage. Headset guy appeared and yelled instructions, but he swallowed his bark after Dom fired him a wink. Rain started to fall, but there was never a question—the show would go on until lightning struck a ring post or someone holding the purse strings forced them to stop. Dom caught headset guy sneaking glances at the sky and knew they were in the same boat. Empathy was easy to find in the business. Friends, assholes, newbies or bosses, didn't matter. Everyone was tight. Dom had seen check signatures disintegrate the lifelong friendships and lava-hot rivalries in a day. He imagined getting a beer with headset guy and trading war stories—venues that had fucked them, drunk talent showing up with shaved eyebrows, botches worthy of a snuff film. Maybe the MCW sound tech would get his ears boxed in a bar fight and Dom could tell Bonnie Blue that he knew a guy. Maybe headset knew a guy who could pull a string to get Dom an extra spot in a show when the majors rolled through. But then again,

maybe headset guy had already slipped one of his grips twenty bucks and a joint to find Dom's car in the Freedom Fest's Sahara Desert sized parking lot and slash his tires.

The minutes before open curtain were the most ritualized part of Dom's pre-match routine. First, he downed a small squeeze bottle of Yucca Mountain Sludge, his close to undrinkable concentrated espresso brewed from the trash grounds of the bombed out coffee place close to where he and Pilar lived in Charlotte. Though Dom always drank it at ambient temperature, its burned-tire taste shocked his body to high alert. When Dom's body started to crumble at the end of a match, the caffeine would kick on the afterburners and let him overclock his muscles for a strong finish. Dom was otherwise monk-like in his coffee abstention, so the jolt would hit him like an atom bomb with fallout strong enough to build a craving that never faded, even if Dom went a week between matches.

Sludge consumed, Dom then cracked every knuckle on his hands one-by-one and followed with five consecutive big toe pops, which reminded him of those gunpowder spitwads that snapped when thrown to the ground. Under his breath, he said the date and his sister's full name, Pilar Contreras Moreno. Early on an Ave Maria had followed, but he'd quit with that. He shook out his arms and traced three scars—the concentric arcs on his left hand, the line of staples under his hair, and the Predator-esque triple dots above his right elbow. Then ten high knees, ten cross-body punches, and a strong exhale.

“Something I've been thinking,” Primal said. He'd just finished his own sequence of crosses, grunts, and points to the sky. “You want it now or later?”

“Whatever,” Dom said, slipping his squeeze bottle behind a box of replacement ring rigging where no one would disturb it.

“When you get a free day, you and Pilar should stop on by my place. Let me treat you. It’s not much, but I can do up some fried chicken and we could tell some tall tales.”

“I’d kill a man for a drumstick,” Dom said. “But the ricochet would kill my cut.”

Primal laughed. “Then rabbit food, whatever you want. Hell you can swing by and we could all puke into the same bucket.”

“That sounds wonderful. It’s a date.” Dom paused and made a show of looking off into the distance and shivering. “Somewhere out there, Pilar just felt a cold shiver down her spine.”

“She loves me,” Primal said. “Unlike you, I never tap out of a good time.”

“You’re lucky. She’s developed this bad phobia of bare shoulder and back skin. So your hairy ass is right up her alley.”

“Magic carpet ride, torino. Want a turn? Wait in line.”

Dom didn’t want to think farther than that. He tightened his wrist tape and ran his fingers up the front of his flannel to ensure it was buttoned in the askew way he liked.

“One more question, Dommy,” Primal said.

“Listening.”

“You’re not going to clear cut your beard, are you? You’re an ugly sumbitch without it.”

Behind the entry curtain they could hear an MC hyping the draw. The cheers were louder than Dom had anticipated. Once the music would hit, they’d walk in, scowl, antagonize, wait for the tykes and their women, then go. Dom’s entry song when he worked solo was Jimi Hendrix’s “Voodoo Child,” which he’d chosen on the spot when he debuted Hack

Barlow. He botched through that first match after hearing how on-the-nose the chopping mountains line sounded out loud. But he loved the guitar riffs. They revved like a rusty buzz saws and sounded just plain mean. Later Dom burned an edit without lyrics that could loop if needed and ran with that.

Since they were entering the match together, they decided to go with Primal's music, which Dom had always been fond of. The speakers squealed and caught purchase. Angry horns boomed a Soviet march. The song promised that something terrible was coming to the ring—be it a tank or an ICBM or two big motherfuckers keen to break kneecaps. Dom and Primal bumped heads and went out. They cursed at the marks, stomped the ground, beat their chests.

About three hundred people hugged the seats at ring level and the first handful of bleacher rows. Tucked away backstage between the trailers, tents, and curtains, the tone of the Freedom Fest had slipped Dom's mind, but before he'd climbed the ring steps, its strange brew came back into focus. Who were these people? This wasn't a wrestling crowd. At least a quarter were openly carrying, rain sprinkled pistol butts glossy in hip holsters. In Dom's periphery he caught someone holding a sign over the rail. When he lumbered over to rip it in half, two figures in gas masks gaped into him with rat skull eyes. He snatched the sign, but he was too quick and it fluttered out of his grasp.

The rain picked up pace, bringing relief and ratcheting up the excitement. The sky was dryer lint gray and darkening. The volatile, swampy air churned and thickened the clouds. Tough to tell if they'd have a pop-up shower or something more serious. A brief deluge, at least, seemed immanent. No one had their phones out. Dom could see every face. Some smiled. Some were dripping with lust. Not for him, Dom thought, for the

beating he'd give and take. Though the glut of wide eyes, cat calls, and writhing tongues made him think again. Everyone leaned forward, as if trying to hear a whisper.

Incredible, given the speakers' ear-crunching volume, Primal's goggling eyes, Dom's dreading beard. The wrestlers had tailored themselves to be as loathsome as possible.

Two ugly, insane outcasts brimming with rage.

Primal screamed canned Russian at a shirtless man with an M-16 tattoo across his chest. Then, the hulking bear adjusted his singlet straps, reached underneath the ring apron, and pulled out a Soviet flag. He climbed to the center of the ring and waved the red and gold with fervent pride. Dom scaled a turnbuckle to the second rope and gestured to the banner, damning all the American scum in attendance.

Boos and jeers rang out, but they weren't the usual. They welcomed the wrestlers. Held them close and dear. The roar was like whitewater surging through a canyon. Ions sizzled and popped. Any rumbles of thunder were absorbed by feet pounding on bleachers. Though the ring, the seats, and the rigging were all meant to be folded up and shipped down the highway in a night, even though Dom felt the cheap rubber ropes beneath him drooping under his weight, the place radiated permanence. Dom stood at the pulpit of a great stone cathedral. Incense burning. Choir chanting. The congregation on their knees, eating from his hands. He couldn't believe it.

Dom scanned the first row for Pilar. She could always, with Dom's help or not, find her way to the front. He found her hanging on the rail next to the timekeeper's table. Her phone was still in her jean shorts pocket, but it was wrapped in a plastic baggie. Her eyes met Dom's and she laughed and shook her head. This was no high school gymnasium with a handful of jaded die hards. This wasn't Ballroom C at the airport

HoJo. This wasn't even a MidCoast pay-per-view. Each of the couple hundred in attendance had the moxie of ten regular marks. Dom knew what it was like to pull heat, but nothing as tangible, as alive, as this.

When their music ended, Dom and Primal stood in their corner and waited. Police chatter splintered through the amplifiers, the Inspectors came out, and they sky opened.

The house went berserk.

Pouring rain. EDM blazed at max volume and shook everything. Bria and Mackenzie had changed into white T-shirts knotted at the back and v-cut with scissors. In seconds the shirts soaked and clung, snugly transparent. Maxwell flipped a magnifying glass from his trunks and Cee-Saw produced brass opera specs. True to their name, they examined and evaluated. Grade: thumbs up, fist pump, tongues out, and after a synchronized crotch chop from the ladies, the Inspectors were blown off their feet. With unexpected dexterity, they tucked into backward rolls and sprang out, bounding to the ring, tugging the ropes, raising their arms to the feral crowd.

Sheets of water. Thumping bass and screeching highs. Shaking, flexing, gyrating. Lured by the spectacle, festival goers out on the midway crammed the openings between the bleachers. A few hopped over the guardrail and, with no one to stop them, the levee broke and a flood rushed in.

The music cut and the referee stepped between the ropes and sloshed into one of several puddles forming in the ring. His combover had slipped over the wrong side. A cross of black duct tape obscured the World Wrestling Entertainment logo on his zebra stripes' breast pocket, which meant he had actually bothered to hide the fact he'd bought the shirt himself from WWE's online store.

“This is fucked,” he said, kicking water. He bent over the ropes and yelled at the men sitting with the timekeepers, trying to wave one over. A group of women in tactical gear caught wind of his attitude and seeded a chant demanding they ring the bell. This flared like dry tinder and exploded across the seats.

The ref flicked his hair back and threw up his hands. He splashed over to Dom, who was in the ring, the first to fight. Primal stood behind on the apron, stretching the ropes and growling. The referee grabbed Dom’s wrists and pretended to check for illegal items.

“I’ll count for y’all, but anything else you’re on your own,” the ref said. “Make it quick.”

Dom shifted from one foot to the other. His boots weren’t Velcro on the plastic mat, but they didn’t slide. Old gym shoes on a wood floor. Watch the knees. Watch ankles. Keep feet underneath.

“We’re in no hurry,” Primal said. He punched the padding on the turnbuckle and laughed.

The ref blew water off his lip and skulked to the opposite corner. Dom turned and embraced Primal like a good comrade. “Don’t catch a cold standing around back here,” Dom said.

“Don’t tire yourself out,” Primal said. “You’ve got a pin to eat.”

Primal snarled and clapped Dom’s head between his palms. Dom broke free and paced his corner like a caged animal. He glanced to Pilar once more and she grinned and flipped him off. Dom flashed the victory sign. He wasn’t sure if that was an insult in the part of Eurasia Primal was billed from, but it was close enough.

The ref spun away from the inspector's corner and called for the bell. Three quick strikes, and the crowd erupted.

...

i was like 10 so pilar was 3 or 4. during summer wed be outside. it was so fuckin hot in the house and ma never let us open the windows. you could barely see out of them. i thought for the longest time we had frosted glass. didnt know it was called that but id see block windows people had for their basements and in some of the shops in town and in my head i was like yeah we have that. when we found out it was dirt we started drawing shit with our fingers and when ma came in she flipped out. i guess its easy to ignore dirty windows when theyre all the same dirty...we did that thing where you draw swastikas and then turn them into windows. so ma came home and saw this window covered with tiny windows.

we were always outside unless it was raining. we didnt have toys but we made do with stuff around the house. we built forts and played restaurant and rolled around. id carry pilar and flip her around. she loved it. pop her up on my shoulders and she could reach the high shelves. one day we climb through the mess downstairs and find this plastic bin. its full of papers so we toss that out and carry it upstairs. we jump in and out of it like cats. youd think i was too old to be playing with fuckin boxes but thats all we had. werent any kids around. i guess i coulda got outta there and found someone but then what? pilar sits around all day? sticks a fork in a power socket?

so we bring this bin upstairs and pilar is so tiny she fits right in. i realize i can pick her up in the bin and carry her around. i do little ten year old dead lifts with her then i get this idea and put some pillows in the bin for cushioning and shut the lid and then and i roll her. long ways short ways all over the living room carpet. and pilar is fearless. always was. shes in this bin laughing

like its a fuckin carnival ride. im flipping the bin like strongmen lift tires. this goes until the lid pops and she falls out. but she gets right back in and we keep going.

then ma gets back. sees us. starts yelling. broken neck and all that. she sends pilar to the closet and she takes me by the wrist to the kitchen. she tells me how terrible a brother i am. how im failing to protect pilar. how i cant be trusted. i don't say anything because theres no point. doesnt matter that we were having fun or that pilar liked it. doesnt matter if i apologize. shes yelling so hard my hairs blowing back. i stand there and take it. she doesnt like this. she turns on the stove and slams my hand onto the burner. the noise is really bad. it sounds like cooking.

...

Cee-Saw was a heap on the mat. Dom writhed next to him, his tailbone selling itself. One tap of a fingernail on his kneecap would've shattered his leg. He'd been stung plenty of times—on his freshman football team, botching a piledriver, taking a chairshot square in the crown—but never in his legs, in his pelvis. The needlelike tingle traveled up his spine and balled in throat. He sprawled out, gasping for breath. The rain pelted his eyes and flooded his mouth. His flannel was a long-sleeved flak jacket. He had to wrench onto his side.

The ref was counting. Two...three...four...very slowly and barely audible beyond the deluge of water, the heavy rain falling and droplets splashing from the mat. What was the crowd saying? How bad had it been? He couldn't hear, and with the glare from the lights and the billowing drapes of water, he couldn't see.

The mat, however, was vibrating. Beneath the plastic was a layer of padding less than an inch thick, then plywood, then springs mounted to a steel frame. Dom felt the referee take a step, leaning forward and announcing the count of five above the prostrate

wrestlers. A slight dip in the coils, followed by a stiffening ripple meant he was counting with two hands, throwing each into the air as if unfurling a blanket. Dom waited for the quick smack of Cee-Saw slapping the mat in pain or the soft bass of a roll or a rise to a knee, but there was nothing.

Cee-Saw was motionless. Forehead kissing the mat. Left arm chicken winged under his body. His right leg curled against his chest. The other fully extended and rigid. Dom pedaled his legs, ache-sick and prickly, pushed toward him, and masked a grab to Cee-Saw's free hand. He didn't squeeze back.

Dom had called for vertical suplex. Cee-Saw was supposed to fly through it, land on his feet, and reverse into a neckbreaker. Executed perfectly, it could be operatic. The suplex—yoked physics rooted in the bedrock of wrestling. The attacker a lever sacrificing his body to the gods of angular momentum, potential energy, and gravity. The target weakened but not yet beaten. At the move's apex, one man holding the other vertically inverted above him, a yin and yang of victor and victim, the two bodies would stretch more than ten feet high. They might've held here, maybe for a few seconds, longer if then men were well-balanced. Blood would rush to the target's head, and the draw's adoration at the feat of strength would accrue in his boots, ensuring more damage when the target finally came crashing back to earth.

But the story was always meant to turn. When the great tree of man leaned and fell, the target would spring to life, bending from the throw, landing on his feet. For a moment, it would seem as if some two-headed creature had taken its first step in an end-over-end tumble out of the ring. But then, the target's deception would unfurl. The maneuver was never a prelude to an endgame but a bridge to a comeback, the supposed

target tricking the attacker, exploiting his hubris, risking a back-breaking fall to trap him in one of the most vulnerable positions in wrestling. Finally bent backward, held by the neck, the attacker would become prey, his vertebrae the pivot point cracked on the sharp fulcrum of his opponent's shoulder.

The maneuver, like most, required the strength and timing of both men. Dom was to be the base on which Cee-Saw would perform an assisted handstand. He had to guide the landing, sell the subterfuge, and absorb the neckbreaker. Dom and Cee-Saw agreed before the match it would mark babyface Cee-Saw's final comeback, an exciting and valiant feat of will after Dom snuck in a low-blow while Primal was distracting the referee. But three-quarters to vertical, Cee-Saw turned to stone. He'd sandbagged, Dom thought. He hadn't put enough into the jump—a sure sign of hesitation, of fear. Had Cee-Saw been less bloated, Dom might have been able to take him up the rest of the way, but his legs buckled and slipped, and Cee-Saw came down headfirst.

“He's hurt,” Dom said through his hand to the referee. The count hit six and was braking.

“Stop the match,” Dom said.

The referee faked interest in the kerfuffle outside the ring. He knew Cee-Saw was booked to go over. Maxwell held Primal, still selling the hit from the ring bell, in a standing triangle choke as Bria went ham with chops across his chest. They looked confused at the ref, not having seen Cee-Saw's spine-cracking fall. Mackenzie, who'd just shaken herself off the ground beyond the opposite corner, slammed her fists on the apron. She screamed at Dom for dropping Cee-Saw and tried to coax the slumped

wrestler to his feet. Dom couldn't tell if she was serious or playing off the situation. Her cries so quickly modulated from baby talk to trembling rage.

“Hey, he needs help!” Dom said, not bothering to hide it this time. The ref turned and looked right through him. The cogs in his mind seemed to ratchet to a full stop. He meekly threw up a seven count.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Dom said. He pulled to his knees and crossed his wrists above his head. Almost never did a wrestler have to give the trouble sign, but Cee-Saw still hadn't moved and the ref was useless. Dom swiveled his head, searching for the onsite medics that should've come running in, but he didn't see anyone beyond the rail. Rain continued to pour.

Dom felt constriction around his ankle, as if someone had tugged his boot laces. It was so soft it almost hadn't registered. It was a hand. Cee-Saw's.

“What're you doing?” the fallen Inspector said. He'd rotated to Dom so he could see part of the F in FTI and one of the hands, positioned now so that it seemed Cee-Saw had crushed someone who was desperately reaching from underneath.

Dom quickly dropped to straddle Cee-Saw and put him in the noodle-loose headlock.

“You okay?” Dom said. “Neck?”

“I'm good,” Cee-Saw said. “Cinch up.”

Dom flexed around Cee-Saw's face but didn't tighten. “You got KO'd.”

Cee-Saw didn't hear. Dom had to get right on him and spoke to the bones behind his ear.

“No. I’m good,” Cee-Saw said. “Elbow, whip, hip toss.” Cee-Saw labored a knee from under him, forcing Dom to take his chin tighter.

“Cool it,” Dom said. “We need to finish.”

“Bullshit,” Cee-Saw said, beginning to rise to his feet. Dom appeared to struggle mightily against him. The draw’s cheers finally registered. It was likely they’d never stopped, only blended into the storm’s roar. Cee-Saw ripped at Dom’s bicep and flailed behind him. “Never out. Selling.”

“I checked you,” Dom said. On a sunny day, marks in the bleachers would’ve heard it.

“Scary, yeah?” Cee-Saw said. “Don’t drop me next time.”

Cee-Saw wedged a shoulder between Dom and the hold and broke it with three elbows to the gut. After an uppercut, Cee-Saw whipped Dom into the ropes and flung him over his hip on the rebound. Cee-Saw’s technique was steady and timing acceptable. Clear eyes and set jaw.

Dom stewed the entire sequence until his toes started to curl and cramp. He’d danced with guys who’d worked stiff and fought dirty, two-timers in MCW who’d paid his tab, spilled their guts, then told Bonnie Blue to cut him loose. No one had ever pulled this level shit-brickery.

Cee-Saw brought another elbow down and wrapped Dom into a sleeper hold. The pressure on Dom’s throat was like a tight collar, just as it should be. More than ten minutes of wrestling in car wash conditions, he could still smell whatever crap high school locker room body spray Cee-Saw had bathed in—his swamp-rot odor only partly masked by a blend of incense and Lysol. Dom hadn’t dropped this sandbagging

motherfucker. The miracle of the day was that he got as high as he did with that pussyfoot assist, or that his trunks didn't tear off his fat ass when Dom tried to save it.

“What's the call?” Cee-Saw asked. Dom wanted to tap and get the fuck out of there. It would've been the smart thing to do. Get in the car with Pilar and head back to Charlotte with the Inspectors in the rearview. Stop by Yucca Mountain for some sleepy tea and snooze off the match. But Cee-Saw had broken him in front of this draw, this magnificent draw. They didn't deserve Cee-Saw. They didn't deserve this fiddling referee or this piss poor operation. With these skid marks, goddamned Bruno Sammartino couldn't have given a proper show.

Cee-Saw jerked Dom's neck. “What's the call, asshole?”

Dom slid his lips down Cee-Saw's forearm into the crook behind his elbow and bit down.

Cee-Saw shouted and threw Dom out of the hold. He was staring at the bloody teeth marks in disbelief when Dom swung his boot heel to Cee-Saw's jaw. The wrestler didn't topple stiffly as he would with a sell, but crumpled, leg muscles slacking like snapped rubber bands.

Reflex brought his hands to his face, so Dom heaved himself onto the middle rope and springboarded above Cee-Saw, leg dropping the same heel into his solar plexus. Cee-Saw deflated and choked, paddling his arms in search of air. Dom pivoted to his left and seized Cee-Saw's wrist, anchored his legs around the Inspector's face and chest, and yanked the arm sharply over his hip.

Chapter Two: The Civic

Though the Civic had four doors, it was no longer a sedan. Parked at an interstate rest stop or in a Wal-Mart's shadow or on the shoulder of a quiet, pale highway, the Civic looked no different than its thousands of clones across the country. Stars and stripes blue, scratched and dented. Fogged headlights. Tires sagging, even after a fresh fill. To notice anything strange, a passerby would almost have to cup her eyes and stare through the back window.

Dom needed a home away from home on the road. Fuel, maintenance, and size ruled out an RV, even a clunker. For so many venues Dom worked, street parking or an empty alley was the only option. A lot of wrestlers that traveled together would split motels, cramming five or six into one room. Dom could sleep anywhere, but his brethren usually didn't sleep. They passed out. Though he worked most of the MCW gigs, close to half of Dom's income came from satellite events or from gigs in completely unrelated federations. MCW had a list of feds Dom couldn't compete with, but as long as he changed up his gimmick, no one cared where he went on his own time. Dom appreciated Bonnie Blue, MCW's head promoter, for that. Most wrestlers, even the big boys in the majors, were independent contractors, but often in name only. Feds owned their characters and their likenesses. Dom knew rising stars who'd moved up to a mid-major in Chicago or Philly and had to work under a stage name for the first time in their lives because they'd signed away everything to their previous fed. If Bonnie's boys wanted to

make a living wrestling, her modest company couldn't cover it. She understood that. So she let them wander.

Dom wandered in his Civic. With duct tape and superglue, he'd retrofitted the rear seatbacks into a cushioned bed extending into the trunk, anchored in the spare tire well. There was a clear dip in the threshold between the cab and trunk and Dom didn't have much wiggle room around his waist, but the bed was flatter than simply reclining the front seats, and most importantly, darker and more private. Dom had rigged a series of curtains on PVC rods that obscured the back windows and separated his sleeping compartment from the front seats. Surprisingly little light shined through. His climate control options were opening windows or crawling inside his sleeping bag. If he was sleeping alone, on all but the worst nights he bunkered in the Civic. He'd drift away quickly, fatigue overtaking the ripening pain from the evening's match, the chronic ache in his back and knees. His last, groggy thoughts before dreamless sleep shifted between pride for his ingenuity and self-pity kindled after realizing he'd yet again reached out to spoon the spare tire.

When Pilar began riding with Dom to his summer events, the siblings doubled the Civic's maximum nightly occupancy. In a pinch, Pilar could recline the passenger seat while Dom slid into his trunk bed, but mostly, they drove, taking turns if needed while the rider dozed against the window.

They packed light. Rarely could Dom string together enough gigs to justify touring up the coast or across the Mississippi. A typical run might've been a Friday night show in South Carolina, then maybe a daytime gig in metro Atlanta, and finally they'd double-back to Charlotte for a Sunday night MCW pay-per-view. They both brought

gear. Boots, trunks, Dom's ring wear, pads, stuff for cuts and blisters, stretch bands, braces, hair stuff and makeup for both, a cooler of snacks and powders, and loads of extra sport tape. Dom was friendly with a dozen wrestling school owners throughout the southeast who'd let him steal a few minutes of ring time, or even set Pilar up with a sparing partner. Mostly, it was the two of them.

After Dom made Cee-Saw tap, forcing the referee to stop the match and award the heels, Hack and Primal, the victory, Dom and Pilar booked it from the Freedom Festival and hit the road back to Charlotte, just a few hours away. Since first small run they took together to a one-off near Norfolk earlier that summer, Pilar drove after the matches. Giving up the wheel felt like ceding the independence Dom had fought to earn since they lived with their mother, but less than fifteen minutes out they hit a stop-and-go stretch of Highway 58. Dom was so delighted at how much easier it was to take the traffic from shotgun that it actually pissed him off. Seeing this, Pilar made special care to remain chipper despite the suicidal Virginian motorists and to brake extra softly. It was the most relaxing backup of Dom's life and he cursed himself for not pairing up sooner.

The two-lane back from Sumter angled them through the sandy outskirts and then dove between long stretches of pines. They were mature but maddeningly thin, teasing a view of the rolling midland hills. Every highway in the northwest half of South Carolina was like this, even the interstates. Dom hated it. He knew a vacationer versus someone who lived life on the road by what states they bitched about. Dom would take Ohio, Kansas, or eastern Colorado over South Carolina, east Texas, and the Atlantic coastal plains every time. The heartland's sea of dirt and scrub was the underappreciated wonder of the continent. Only in a place so open could one entertain the idea of a planet

underfoot. So much could be seen in those supposedly empty flats, and the straight, somber roads offered plenty of time to look.

They crossed a causeway slicing through a finger of Lake Wateree. At bridge's end was a gas station that served autos and watercraft. The road was so low to the water, Dom was tempted to reach for it. Docks with pontoons and jet skis lined the fingertip's edge, but Dom couldn't believe there was space for them to motor under the bridge. He cranked the window, thinking he might lean out and see a subtle rise in the bridge, making way for a boat channel, but a blast of honey-thick, scorching air slammed him back into his seat.

"The fuck are you doing?" Pilar said.

"Definitely not that," Dom said, shutting the window tighter than he needed to. "What did you want to say?"

"Tell her, 'No. You'll smell like Big Macs and generic lemon cleaner.'"

Dom typed on Pilar's phone and pressed send. The window in the messaging app was labeled "B." Since May, Dom had texted Bill, Cayla, Courtney, and Amanda, but also AC, &, Z, and the aforementioned B. Pilar hadn't told him why certain contacts were encoded like this, and Dom didn't pry further. Pilar had agreed not to text while driving if Dom promised to secretary with discretion. He'd floated the proposal as a joke, but when Pilar took it seriously he decided so should he. They mirrored the deal for him driving before events and pledged not to snoop around outside text and email. Her phone was far more active, but Dom didn't mind. Traveling partners trusted each other. Most wrestlers Dom knew could get moving violations on foot, but the safe ones, wherever they were, surely had a similar pact.

Pilar's phone buzzed back. "B says, 'But I really need the money,' frowny face."

"You'll never be able to eat there again," Pilar said. Dom typed and wondered why that would be such a loss.

"You wanna stop at Sol's?" Pilar asked, dialing her voice to Dom. "It's like twenty minutes out of our way."

"I need to dry out before I even think about the gym. But if you want to, I won't stop you."

"Let's do it. You think he'll still be there?"

"You kidding? Sol's like a mouse in there. I think he's got a nest in the storage room."

"Pilar licked the corner of her mouth and drummed the wheel.

A buzz. "'I'd die before I'd give up McNuggets,'" Dom read. "'They're like crack,' and then there's a diamond emoji, which I guess is supposed to be a crack rock."

"Tell her she's worth more seven twenty five an hour."

Dom sent it and they were silent for a while. He flicked her messaging window away and stared at Pilar's wallpaper—a photorealistic drawing of some alien-looking flower with neon green leaves and rose-pink pedals.

"Is this thing real?" Dom said, holding up the phone.

"I dunno," Pilar said.

Dom scrolled right so most of the app buttons were hidden. "It's got little thorns in the center, like lamprey teeth. Where'd you find it?"

"Someplace on the Internet," Pilar said.

"Well, no shit. I mean where? This from one of those Japanimation shows?"

“Japanimation?”

“Yeah, like Pokémon or whatever, only more artsy.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“What?”

“You’re so freaking lame. And I don’t know where it’s from. Someone drew it, and I thought it looked cool.”

“All right, fuck. It was just a question.”

They’d left the lake and were back in the tunnel of pines. The sun hovered just above them. Dom took out his phone, an old model smart phone with beat up edges. The screen was, incredibly, still intact. He punched in his unlock code. No new texts. He scrolled through the junk in his email.

“How’s your back?” Pilar asked, her voice a lot softer than before.

“Okay,” Dom said, reaching for his tailbone. “That botch at the end compressed it pretty good.”

“Did you two slip or—”

“He sandbagged,” Dom said, the two words blurring into one. “I thought I’d get under him, but you saw. Or maybe he slipped, I don’t know.”

He flicked to Tinder and checked his messages. Five new women in Sumter had matched and sent him notes. Two “Hi’s,” an “Hola guapo,” a “You have great forearms,” and one asking if he’d like to be *Dominated*. A year prior, when he downloaded the app, he was lucky to get five matches in a month, and it didn’t matter how charming or assertive or complimentary he was. They all left him hanging. One of the first lessons Dom learned in the business was that being a wrestler, especially an indie nobody that

looked like a husky goat, didn't mean shit to most women. The epic stories of the legends fucking around the country were true enough, but these men were famous, and their playground the 1980s. The scene wasn't like that anymore. Ring rats, save for the biggest promotions, were a dying breed. Plenty of guys Dom knew turned a lot of tail by dint of their bodies or charisma or stamina at the bar. Some played the numbers, asking hundreds of bottomed-out barflies if they wanted a go. Dom's shameless counterparts rarely stumbled home alone, but even the sleaziest, most desperate among them never led with wrestling.

Tinder seemed like a force for change, way to make the road a little less lonely. Dom uploaded Hack Barlow pictures and pecked out a wall of text affirming and reaffirming wrestling as his life's mission, the cradle of his soul. He didn't think at all about how a potential hookup would read that. Dom Contreras, 25, north of three hundred pounds, Queen City, but good luck finding him there. Here he is at the gym with gut roll sweat stains. Here he is looking like a homeless logger. Here he is leaping off the top rope with murder in his eyes. Just imagine that hairy, greasy body flying into your bed. Dom Contreras, his signature move is the piledriver. Ladies, would you swipe right?

During his last contract signing with MCW, Bonnie Blue asked Dom why he was dropping the weight. Dom said Hack Barlow had run his course and he'd taken him as far as he would go. Domingo Contreras had his sights set higher. He cited health and longevity, all those wrestlers with exploding hearts. He said everything he should have said, but after an eight month cut, he was still in MCW, still wrestling as the lumberjack, but he had made long strides in his Tinder game.

With a phone in each hand, Dom was confused for a moment when Pilar's phone buzzed with another message from B. The tremor seemed to occur in the air between the devices, or maybe somewhere in his chest before echoing down to the nerves in his palms. He panicked for an instant before his brain reminded him that handling both phones would not link them together. B would never see the explicit messages from Caroline in Orangeburg, or the dick pic he'd taken for Kiki in Macon but had never sent.

“Yeah? How much are you gonna pay me then?” Dom read. “Tongue-sticking-out face.”

“Ugh, this girl,” Pilar said. She scratched underneath the hem of her shorts. The movement caught Dom's eye, but once he saw where it was going, he blinked back to his phone. “Send her back the same face.”

In the spring, Dom had expunged every mention of wrestling from his Tinder profile. The only hint was the appearance of the word “rambler” in his bio. His updated his pictures: shirtless next to the Catawba River, the first and only time he'd been there, laughing in Pilar's brown beanie, a selfie at an empty Hornets game, looking over his shoulder with his sleeves rolled up. He kept his description simple and let the photos talk for him. A month before Pilar's semester ended, he was 250 pounds and falling fast. He had more than fifty active conversations with women in a dozen cities. Spinning them all was a full-time job. More than once he'd drop a line, forgetting he used it with the same person earlier.

He didn't sleep with them. He'd tried at first, getting a few in Charlotte and a couple on the road to take him home. He fucked a college student in Tuscaloosa in the back of the Civic. The metal seat frame pinned them across the threshold between the cab

and the trunk. He kept apologizing until she maneuvered into a workable position. As local used car ads played on the radio, they fogged the windows and writhed awkwardly, the spare tire looking on in disapproval.

Soon after that, he stopped pursuing sex with his matches or even giving out his number. Pilar graduated and joined him on his weekend tours, but Dom didn't think one change had affected the other. He just couldn't do it. He wanted to. It wasn't a matter of desire. He'd never had women worship him like this. He'd stutter. They found it cute. He'd lose his train of thought, and they'd get lost in his eyes. And he liked them. Most were a hell of a lot of fun and led lives so different than his. On paper, there was no downside. He didn't need to get bombed or string himself out or stay up to four in the morning before trolling out his net. He was politely up front with what he wanted and so were they. He found his matches to be not so different than how he imagined himself—unmoored but put together, driven and passionate, a little lonely. But it didn't work. A meetup would proceed without a hitch in a way he knew would make most men sick with envy, but when Dom returned home the hangover would hit him like a stiff clothesline. Physically there was nothing wrong, but his mind felt like it had been doused with bleach—an alkaline burn that seeped through the folds of his cortex into the pit of himself. It wasn't guilt. He knew he'd done nothing wrong. He knew he was attracted to these women. In the wrestling world he had plenty of opportunities to explore alternatives, and none had sparked interest. The fallout from a date was like waking up after bad night's sleep with no idea why. He felt like his mind was betraying him after his body had busted ass to shape up.

But he kept messaging.

“So what happens now, after a finish like that?” Pilar asked, air tumbling out of her.

“Like what?” Dom said.

“A shoot.”

“Who said it was a shoot?”

Pilar stuck her jaw forward and stared through a clearing cut for high tension wires. Fifty yards from the road, at the base a tall, insectile tower, a small memorial wilted in the sun. “I know what an arm bar looks like,” she said. “Much more and you would’ve broke his elbow inside out.”

A text from B said, *i heard what ur doing this summer. u could use an apprentice ;)* Dom didn’t read it. He blocked “Hola guapo,” from his message list and started on the others—two “hey’s,” one “Thanks! They’re still not quite where I want them,” and one “You think you can *Domesticate* me?”

“What I’m asking is, are they gonna pay you?”

Dom looked up from the phones. “I worked, didn’t I? Fifteen minutes.”

“And you think the promoter will let it go?”

“What does the fucking carny care? He got his match. And now he knows not to book those cocksuckers ever again. You don’t work an injury without telling your partner. Kid’s lucky I didn’t end him.”

Pilar popped a tin of breath mints sitting in an alcove under the radio and crunched on one. She looked to pass a slow moving timber hauler in front of them, but a line of cars were fast approaching in the opposite lane. “From where I was sitting, it looked like a good sell.”

“What?”

“Cee-Saw. He fell hard, but he wasn’t hurt bad. At least that’s what I could see.

Ref seemed to think the same way.”

Pilar’s phone buzzed, but Dom let it drop between his legs. “From what you could see? Way out behind the rail? Did you *see* me check him?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you *see* him squeeze back?”

“Well, no but—”

“But what? You were too far? It was too subtle? You had rain in your eyes? What else did you *see*, Pilar?”

“Okay, whatever, fuck off.” She blinked hard and gripped the wheel. After a minute she asked for her phone back, checked the home screen, and tossed it into her door-side compartment next to an empty fast food cup.

Dom waited for responses, but service started to crawl and cut out. He leaned his forehead on the window and stared at all those trees, all that green—first a blur, and when his eyes decided to follow a single trunk, briefly sharpening into an image, as if he were on an old Hollywood set with the backdrop conveying past and looping back, over and over. Angling his neck just so must have tripped the lock holding back his pain because suddenly, everything hurt. His body marinated in the dull ache that had become routine after years in the ring. Sharper pain hit his lower back. His wrist bones crackled as if bone dust from abusive wear had fallen into the joints. He popped into his glove compartment pharmacy and removed some over-the-counter painkillers, washing them

down with a warm diet drink. It tasted like a microwaved fudge popsicle drizzled with vegetable oil. At least it wasn't chunky, Dom thought.

"We need that money," Pilar said. She was pitched forward in her seat, her head craning to see around the truck. "I don't need to say it, but I need to say it." She inched out across the dotted yellow, but pulled back as a white SUV came barreling by, a dust cloud tailing it.

"I know," Dom said

Pilar saw her chance and floored it. The Civic coasted, as if it were waiting for Pilar to change her mind, and then begrudgingly revved and accelerated. They passed the trailer wheels, more than half the height of the Civic's doors. The driver looked down and flashed a peace sign, or maybe a victory sign, Dom wasn't sure. They pulled ahead with plenty of space before the next car whizzed through, and Pilar slowly let off the gas and held her hand above the center console and waved. Dom glanced back at the truck driver, but he was already too far to make out.

"You going to show your friend the ropes sometime?" Dom asked.

"What was that?" Pilar said.

"B. It said something about getting into wrestling, being your apprentice. I think you'd be a good teacher. You've picked up the art of it so fast."

"B doesn't give a shit about wrestling," Pilar said. "None of my friends do." She stared straight ahead, and the tunnel of trees continued, breaking occasionally for a trailer home or a dirt road, but nothing else.

Solomon's was a few minutes off the highway in a Rock Hill industrial park. The long steel building housing the gym was tucked behind a silica processing plant and a gothic soap factory which stood in a state between half-hearted restoration and disrepair. It had always reminded Dom of a shrine—the brick factory towers like a pair of steeples looming over a crumbling cathedral, the skeletal gravel machines the remains of prehistoric beast. But a quarter mile down the cracked asphalt drive, the view changed completely. Row after row of squat, two-story rectangles, each subdivided into a dozen units, many of them vacant. Solomon's was wedged between a hitting academy and a shop that cut tubes for Daimler and BMW. Like every other unit, he had an entry door and a corrugated garage door just large enough for a docked semi-trailer. Solomon's garage door was wide open. The fluorescent light from inside shoved through the outdoor twilight, and every bug in the south took notice. A dented but recently painted aluminum sign, probably fashioned for Solomon years ago by one of his neighbors, hung next to the entry door. It read, "Solomon Lung's Athletic Training."

The two rows of equipment stretched the length of the unit. Benches, Smith Machines, squat racks, and bicep racks—black and gunmetal with visible welds and sharp angles. They were old, but in good shape, with hunter green vinyl covers free of wear and oil marks. The free weights were cast iron. Two giant fans encased in steel cages buzzed out hot air and kept most of the moths fluttering in the front of the gym. Giant mirrors hung on each wall, one panel after another, stretching fifty feet toward the back. Dom liked Solomon's because it was empty. No one ever stepped foot on its Mars dust colored floor without knowing exactly where it was and exactly what he was doing.

Pilar had barely thrown the Civic in park at the garage door's threshold when she zipped inside, heading straight for the business office in a walled-off corner. Like an old noir film, an opaque window with Solomon's name on it was inlaid in the door. Dom lugged himself out and heaved their duffels from the trunk. He heard Pilar and Solomon's shouts of surprise and greeting.

He let them have a moment and walked to the very back of the unit where jutting out from the wall was a raised platform of stretched canvas the same green as the bench covers. A layman, or even someone who knew wrestling might've thought it was a trampoline or powerlifting stage or a cot for a twenty foot tall ogre, but Dom knew differently. He'd taken hundreds, maybe thousands of bumps on Solomon's hand-crafted training mat. Though it was rectangular and ropeless and flush with the wall, its bump was the truest of all mats Dom had wrestled. He couldn't practice an actual match at Solomon's, but when it came to the fundamentals—learning to fall, stringing a chain, toe-kicking, hip-tossing—it was perfect.

Dom stepped up. Even soft footfalls made noise on the tightly strung canvas. When he stomped, the mat echoed like an acoustic guitar. The thump of a finely tuned ring never got old. He'd seen the instinct in non-wrestlers. On stage, at football games, crossing a wooden bridge in boots, people craved it. They wanted to stomp, to make noise, to prove they were here and alive and powerful.

The office door had an inlaid, opaque window with Solomon's name on it like an old noir film. The walls were papered with yellowing posters from the NWA, CWG, and AWA barking undercard matches featuring "King Solomon." One card, framed and dusty, hanging behind Solomon's desk so that it would be first to catch the eye of a

visitor, was a GCW poster from the 1970s promoting their Christmas special. At the very bottom, in almost fine print, the poster read GRUDGE MATCH – KING SOLOMON VS. RANDY POFFO. At the time, Poffo was an unknown minor league baseball player in his offseason. In years following he'd climb the ladder to the WWF and hit megastardom as the Macho Man Randy Savage.

Solomon leaned on his desk, and with Pilar hanging on his every word, pointed out the features of what appeared to be model, judging by the sandpaper squares and tiny jars of enamel cluttering his desk. It was silver and boomerang-shaped, with dark highlights and a shock of deep red.

“Domingo, my baby, how the hay are ya?” Solomon floated over and hugged Dom with one long arm and held out the wet model with the other. He was tall and lithe looked like he could squeeze in a casual marathon that evening. In his wrestling prime, King Solomon topped out at four hundred twenty pounds, but he'd regularly beat men half his weight in sprints. Dom had heard the stories first and second hand. For nearly fifteen years in the 70s and 80s, Solomon never bought himself a drink. He was either buying rounds for the bar or downing his winnings from various bets and feats of strength—arm wrestling, one handed pushups, balancing eggs, naming all forty U.S. Presidents.

Dom winced at the embrace. The constriction wasn't nearly as painful as the pull on his lower back required to straighten and receive Solomon. The old vet sensed it immediately and stepped away.

“Little coccyx trauma, huh? Bad leg drop?”

“Botched suplex,” Pilar said. Dom spit a glance at her.

Dom steadied himself on the back of a folding chair facing Solomon's desk and said he was fine. Solomon smiled and flew his model back to his desk making whooshing noises. His arms were dark and veined. Aside from eyebrows, there wasn't a hair on his head. Physically, Solomon was the archetype of what a wrestler should become after wrestling. After retirement, he dropped the weight gradually, took up yoga before most westerners had heard of it, and hardest of all, he learned to moderate his lifestyle. Transitioning from the carnie world of wrestling had killed a lot of tough motherfuckers. Tougher than Dom. Smarter than Dom.

Solomon stalled the model in front of Pilar and angled his body so both she and Dom could see it. "As I was saying, the Cylon Raider is my favorite starfighter, probably the most interesting weapon in all of science fiction. Have you seen *Battlestar Galactica*, Domingo?"

"I don't see a lot of movies," Dom said.

Solomon chuckled through his nose. "Best television series of the 21st century. Remind me to give you my streaming passwords before you leave. You need to study up on this. Anyway, you know *The Terminator*, right? Everyone knows *The Terminator*. Schwarzenegger kicking ass. Killer metal android covered in living tissue. A Cylon Raider's the opposite of that. Metal armor protects living tissue underneath. The Raider looks like a ship, but it's actually a living organism. The Cylons' attack fleet isn't piloted or remote controlled. It's unleashed like a pack of trained wolves."

"Have you seen this show?" Dom asked Pilar.

"A few episodes," Pilar said. "Starbuck is a total badass."

"Starbucks?" Dom said.

“Kara Thrace,” Solomon said. “Pilot for the Colonial Fleet, callsign Starbuck, one of the main characters. She actually figures out a way inside a downed Raider and pilots it back to the Galactica to use on a later mission.”

“I thought you said they were flying dogs.”

“Yes, sort of, but their systems are partially cybernetic and can be hacked.”

Pilar widened her eyes at Dom as if it was his fault for not following.

“Now, the Cylons have developed technology so that when they are killed, their consciousnesses are automatically uploaded into new models. This also goes for the Raiders, provided a Resurrection Ship is within range. Dying hurts and depletes resources, but in its demise and rebirth, the Raider has gained valuable experience a human pilot can never have.”

Dom interrupted to say he was hitting the john. Solomon took a beat to tell him not to fall in, then continued with Pilar.

The men’s locker room was tiny, basic, and spotless. Twelve high school lockers lined one wall, a wooden bench kneeling before them. Manila tile. Nickel drains. The shower stall was sunk an inch below grade. In the middle of the square room stood a shower tree, spanning floor-to-ceiling with four nozzles. When Dom first walked into Solomon’s, he was surprised by the solid construction of the toilet stalls. Nothing squeaked or wobbled. Some rust had collected around the hinges and handle, but Dom hadn’t noticed any advance in his ten years of training stops.

Dom latched the door, dropped his shorts. The seat was cool, flat, and had some height to it, which Dom preferred. 21st century shitters were over-engineered, the product of yuppie eggheads outthinking themselves. Too many times had Dom patronized an

airport or convention center commode built for all the five foot, three hundred pound chodes in the world who preferred near-continuous splash back from the hair-trigger automatic flush to a simple, reliable handle. Maybe five people had an ass that could noticeably benefit from those seats' ergonomic contours. Meanwhile, millions were inconvenienced by all the surplus piss now collecting like glacial melt in the seats' many couloirs. Some asshole who'd tripped over his own smug euphoria to design a multi-flow water saving flush system covered with antimicrobial green hadn't thought a second about the lowest-bidder TP stocked in ninety-nine percent of the country's public stalls. Paper so thin and useless it made tidying up after even the mildest case of mud-butt akin to fighting an Alaskan oil spill with paper towel. After a match of repeated blows to the gut, Dom needed a redwood's worth.

Solomon's throne was straightforward and simple. Dom loved the solitude and constriction of the bottomless stall. Rarely did he enjoy this kind of privacy in his apartment, a studio dive with one-ply walls. There was a hole in the bathroom door where a knob should've been, a single window, broken blinds. Still, it was home, or at least half of one if you counted the Civic. Dom paid rent on time and cooked meals and blasted his window AC after workouts. It took something Spartan and functional like Solomon's locker room to remind Dom of the basic comforts he didn't have. So rarely was he truly alone.

Dom tapped to his phone's camera and pulled off his shirt. The hook on the door would've required getting up or a toss, so he slung the shirt over his shoulder. In the screen he inspected his battle wounds. There was a sizeable, Florida-shaped bruise that started near his hip and curled up his ribs under his pectoral. The handprint on his

sternum from Maxwell's chops was a brilliant sunset violet, but it would fade long before the bruise. The gash on his abdominals from a misjudged fall on the ring steps a few weeks prior was healing nicely. No scab remained, only a swollen, flaky ridge eroding into the surrounding skin.

He looked good. Even at Hack Barlow's peak, the muscles were there, wrapped in a coat of leathery blubber. In a crowded gym, other lifters had stayed away from Dom because he'd looked like he could rip a tree from the ground. The cut had sloughed off almost all of the excess, but his hard, powerful core remained. Dropping so much weight took a tremendous amount of work, but Dom was used to that. What nearly derailed him was the will it took to change his habits, the procedures and methods and even the ways of going about a regular day that had brought him everything he had so far. Each cent he'd earned since he quit his landscape job junior year of high school had come through Hack Barlow. Accepting the character's plateau and reaching higher brought the distinct chance of tumbling off the mountain, and there was nothing to catch his fall. Every contact he had was in wrestling. He'd passed high school on a plea bargain. His mother, if her skull hadn't yet caught the edge of a curb, was dead broke and permanently drunk in any one of a hundred Cincinnati flophouses. And after witnessing all the uncertainty, transience, and hollow hurt in his life, his sister wanted to follow him into what all measures said was a dying industry. If he failed, her chances of being seen as anything other than Hack Barlow's hack sister were slim.

Every day, he thought about putting the weight back on, but he looked so damn good.

Dom flicked away his camera app and opened mobile Omegle. In seconds he was live streaming video and sound to some dude with a brown-orange beard and dark circles under his eyes. Dom angled his camera to show just his torso. He lifted his chin, but he couldn't keep the point of his beard out of frame, nor could he ensure the tile locker room wall didn't peak around him. Dom straightened his shoulders until sparks of pain showered from his lower back. The guy on the other end scrunched his face and disconnected, and the app lined up the next chat partner, choosing from a sea of men, women, and children lying about their age. Dom didn't know who would be next. The chat's gimmick was its randomized, anonymous pairings. Anyone in the world who hit its big blue *Start a Chat* button had no more or less of a chance than whoever else to see Dom's bruised six pack. They were different people from different worlds, but all had decided to turn away from whatever the world outside their device had offered, choosing instead to step into the gaze of a stranger, to see and be seen from bedrooms, subways, office desks and gym locker rooms.

The next partner was someone in a horse mask. The figure turned in profile and shook its head like it was laughing. Noisy, garbled house music drowned any chuckle or whinny. The figure then snapped its snout back to center and promptly disconnected.

The next partner was a man in a dark room. He nodded like he was expecting Dom, then disconnected.

The next partner was a young man with an English accent and a flat-brimmed ball cap riding fifteen degrees from vertical. He asked Dom if he was having a wank, then he disconnected.

The next partner wasn't a partner at all, but an animated gif of an attractive woman in a bikini. Bright blue text below her urged Dom to visit her private chat room at a non .com web address. This time Dom disconnected.

The next partner was a shirtless man, much less muscular than Dom, covering Jason Mraz's "I'm Yours" on acoustic guitar. Dom listened to the entire song, which was in tune but played too fast. He congratulated the man for sticking it out and singing well. The man asked Dom if his voice turned him on. Dom said not particularly. The man asked if Dom was hard. Dom told him no. The man peered into the screen for a while, not saying anything, until Dom finally asked how the man learned to play. The man opened his mouth as if to answer and then disconnected.

The next four partners were men of various ages in dark rooms. Upon seeing Dom, they all disconnected.

The next partner was a woman masturbating. Judging from the angle and the movement of the camera, it seemed she was lying flat on a bed and holding her phone between her feet. The only sounds came from the jostling device and her fingers as they did their work. Dom waited to see where it would go or if she would look up to glimpse who was watching her, but before long, her fingers stuttered and froze and she disconnected. Dom had to laugh. It was probably a connection problem, but he liked the idea that someone else was there with her and had decided to move to the next viewer, or even better, if the woman had such practice and toe dexterity that she could hit the skip button without using her hands.

The next six partners were men of various ages in dark rooms. Upon seeing Dom, they all disconnected.

The next partner was a young woman with her hair in a ponytail. She was sitting cross-legged in a bed with several large pillows fluffed around her. Her glasses were thick and had big black rims but they didn't obscure the tiredness behind them. She wore a baggy hooded sweatshirt that said Warrior Football across the front.

For a second her eyes widened and then she smirked and started typing. The clacking keys were loud even in his tinny speakers.

“best bod ive seen tonite...” appeared in Dom's text window.

“Thanks,” Dom said.

The girl leaned forward and after a second typed, “hard to hear u. buzzing noise.”

“Sorry,” Dom said. “I'd type, but I don't have a keyboard.”

“or ur hands are too busy :P ,” the girl wrote.

Dom smiled and told her to wait a second. He froze his video with his chest and abs still filling the frame and tapped open the text window, which filled the right half of the screen. The feed of the girl shrank and settled in the left. “There we go,” he wrote, his spellcheck correcting his punctuation. “I need two thumbs on my phone.”

“Didn't know there was an app,” the girl said.

“It's new and buggy but it works.”

The girl pulled out a thin strand of hair from her ponytail and twirled it. Dom waited for her to respond. From the rare occasions when he'd actually engaged someone in conversation, he knew they were about to enter a critical turn. Since neither was actively masturbating or pulling a rib, and both seemed at least mildly interested in continuing, they had to figure out together what the first move would be in a dance with no predetermined steps or beat. It was like working a match blind, having no idea who or

what the night's opponent might be. Dom could adjust on the fly, but it was always tough to compose a believable response for everything. For instance, he didn't know what to make of the girl taking the trouble to write to him when her microphone was working fine.

“where are u thats so loud?” the girl typed.

“Gym,” Dom returned.

“explains the washboard. gettin swole?”

Dom told her he was training. She asked for details, and he said he was a wrestler.

“wrestlings fake u kno.”

“Wait? Really?” Dom typed. “Fuck. And here I've been beating people to death my entire career. No wonder I'm still working county fairs.”

The girl uncrossed her legs and split them out wide, her sweatpants riding up her ankles. She leaned forward, stopping when her face was inches from the camera. The blue glow of her laptop screen brought out freckles and a cluster of pimples on her forehead.

“if ur in a gym where are the weights?”

“Outside. I'm in the locker room.”

“thats creepy”

“Creepy is par for the course in this place.”

“honestly i think ur just waiting to show ur cock.”

“Nah. Doesn't do it for me.”

“No?”

“lol no.”

“then what does?”

Dom didn't have a quick answer. He knew what had once turned him on, but all the old standbys were stale and dry. He could have told the girl about the time at a high school party where he'd retreated to the bathroom and someone crammed a pair of panties under the door. They were lacy and sea green and when he called out there was no response, not even a laugh. For a while they lay on the tile like a beached jellyfish. Dom was afraid to touch, but he couldn't help prodding. With the tip of his shoe he caught the waistband and coaxed them over. He wanted to stand on a chair, hold them high like a beacon, and snatch whoever fluttered in. Instead he left them at the foot of the toilet and spent the rest of the night downing noxious mixes of bottom shelf liquor and falling in love with every girl who met his eye. For years after, every woman appearing in his fantasies wore the sea green panties. He never found out whose they were.

He could have told the girl about the redhead at The Landing Strip outside Pittsburgh International. Dom had just joined a new promotion, and the boys rallied him after he unceremoniously jobbed to an established up-and-comer for barely enough cash to buy a round. Many wrestlers were instinctually drawn to strippers and Dom was no exception. He felt an immediate kinship with these women, their bodies on display, navigating a kayfabe all their own. The redhead danced on the T-shaped stage and afterwards strolled down the bar, her confidence turning palms of both frat boys and regulars clammy. She stopped in front of Dom and put her foot, her bare foot, on top of his shoe. Dom was not a foot person and airport strip club seemed like the worst place to bare your sole, but the gesture felt so terribly intimate, so absolutely real. She'd read him instantly, plunged into him at a depth he'd never had the ambition to explore. The joint's

murky light covered it, but Dom could feel his a splotchy purple rash seep from fingers to knuckles to wrist, the same reaction he experienced upon entering a cold gym without a warm-up.

Maybe he actually was a foot guy. She made him believe it. She made him want to lick mayonnaise off her toes. It was all a work of course, but Dom understood that truly great performances had almost nothing to do with acting. He'd seen it from the legends of wrestling, who could work an audience member at ringside or in the nosebleeds or thousands of miles away, who could ignite frenzy with a flex of a bicep, an arch of an eyebrow, a live microphone and thirty seconds in the squared circle. Anyone could throw a punch. Anyone could fall in love. But it took a performer of incredible skill with a supernatural grip on the strings that tug people through life to create such feeling. The task was so intricate and beautiful. Dom preferred it to whatever its "real" counterpart would be, and of course, the woman knew this.

There were other turn-ons he could have shared with the Omegle girl, who'd leaned back and re-crossed her legs and looked as if she were seconds away from hitting the button that would permanently sever their connection. Dom had accrued a rich and varied bank of experiences, people, and sensations, memories which had once been more than enough to get him going. They were no less vivid in his mind, but none of it struck him anymore.

"I just like talking to people," Dom typed. His thumb stalled over the send button, but he whispered the sentence, frowned, and let it drop.

The girl smiled. "then why arent u out there...talking to people?"

"You're a person."

“i might be.”

“You’d be the best bot I’d ever seen if you weren’t. Like, at that point, you just fucking hire someone to play your scam.”

“are u a bot?”

“Ha. There aren’t any male bots.”

“there sure are. and honestly as much as i love these frozen abs on my screen, im getting kinda suspicious.”

Dom had forgotten that he’d turned off his camera, and even though he was watching the girl tap her chin with her index finger in real time, a still image of his torso was all she could see.

“How can I convince you?” he asked.

“Show me your cock,” she said.

“lol. No.”

“holy shit this must be a first in omegle history. someone call guinness.”

“I’m not like other boys,” Dom wrote. After the sentence, Dom typed in a winky-face but was immediately grossed out. He deleted it, hit send, and watched her read.

“fine. show me your face.”

“Can’t do that either, sorry.”

“why not?”

“I just don’t do it.”

She rocked back and then leaned forward, the closest to the camera she’d been.

“im not letting it go. are u ugly? deformed? i dont care.”

“No.”

“are u famous? are u hulk hogan? its ok. ive seen way more than ur face, hulk.”

“I’m not Hogan. He’s like sixty.”

“then show me ur fucking face. what is the problem?”

“Can we talk about something else?”

“NO. cant u see how fucked this is? why should i have to show my face but you dont?”

Though her words came quickly and her keystrokes were loud, the sound lagging slightly behind her fingertips’ jabs, her shoulders were bouncing and head bobbing like she’d just heard incredible news. She didn’t scrunch her face to hide its excitement.

“You can turn off your video if you want,” Dom typed.

“thats not how this is going to work. show me ur face.”

“I’m not going to.”

“show me ur face and ill flash my tits. cmon we can do it at the same time. itll be fun.”

“No.”

“what u afraid of u fucking pussy? do it.”

The girl raised her eyes from her screen and mouthed do it directly into her webcam. Dom heard her tongue click on the inside of her teeth. One of incisors was angled inward in such a way to make her look very young, like a teenager who’d yet to get braces. Dom wanted to reach through to her and yank it into place. It would only hurt for a second.

He moved his finger across screen where her face was. In the fluorescent light he could see his fingerprint streaking. He kept it going to the disconnect button and with a single tap, cast himself back into anonymity.

Her feed vanished, and in a few seconds, a new partner appeared on screen.

Though the garage door was open and the huge boxed fans still hummed, all the lights had been turned off in the front half of the gym. Only the training platform was illuminated. For such a low rent facsimile, with no ropes or apron, the stage glow was surprisingly good. Solomon had rigged a few spots and fourth-hand Fresnel lights in the support beams above. With the gym's back wall abutting the mat, multi-armed shadows bloomed on the whitewash.

Pilar and Solomon were circling each other, the mat clapping under their feet. They both wore ring gear, Solomon in black trunks and black boots, Pilar in blue trunks and a black, sleeveless rash guard. The shadows added definition to Solomon's arms and Pilar's legs. Sweat droplets on the crown of Solomon's closely shaven head grew heavy and streamed down the cables of his neck. The skinny, raven-haired teenager and the giant, oaken veteran would never have fought in most promotions, but their pairing churned electric in Dom's gut.

He'd tried to stifle it. He knew chance didn't favor him rising to the big leagues and headlining, but the prospect burned in him and had yet to be snuffed out. The envelope of plausible wrestling bookings had been stretched to oblivion in so many directions by untold hundreds of promoters, but somehow there were stories yet to be told about competitors like the ones in front of Dom. Mixed matches between men and

women were nothing new, but almost no one had taken them seriously. Dom was sure the time was coming when a draw would buy hard for someone like Pilar working someone like Solomon without gimmick, without a male manager pulling her strings or coming to her rescue. Male-female competition was the last great untapped market in sports. If it was possible anywhere, it was in a wrestling ring, where disparities in physical ability and stature could be and had always been compensated for. Pilar had trained with men her whole life. She had the speed. She'd soon learn the technique. Dom saw Pilar's abilities surpassing his in within a year or two. With proper guidance and guts, she could do it. She could change wrestling.

Pilar charged at Solomon and leaped. Solomon grasped her hips and boosted her launch skyward. Seven feet above the mat, Pilar split her legs and rotated backward. She hooked her legs onto Solomon's shoulders as she returned to earth and whipped her head between his legs. With his hands back on her hips, Solomon sprang forward, completing a somersault in mid-air. He landed on his back with Pilar on top of him. His legs rebounded off the mat from the force of the impact, and Pilar hooked them for the pin.

"Textbook," Solomon said.

"You think?" Pilar said, breathing hard.

"Eight out of ten," Dom said. "You gotta snap a little more. Looks like Sol's doing all the work."

Pilar let Solomon's legs drop and rolled out of the pin. On the raised mat she and Dom stood eye to eye. "I'm like a foot shorter than him," she said. "He's gotta jump to clear."

Dom shook his head. "Should be easier with a smaller partner. More headroom."

“Bullshit. It’s a fucking Huricanrana. I’m tucking to same place regardless.”

“You gotta sell the snap. No one’s gonna buy the way you just did it.”

“Jesus Christ. Sol, can you tell my brother he doesn’t know how to wrestle?”

Solomon kipped-up like he had a spring under him and cracked his neck.

“Domingo,” he said. “You don’t know how to wrestle.”

Solomon hopped off the mat and shook his face into a towel hanging on a pull-down machine nearby. Pilar found a suitable spot on the map and started on her sets—pushups, handstands, and back handsprings. She muttered something Dom didn’t catch.

“She’s good,” Solomon said. “Damn near ready if you ask me.”

“That’s where she wanted to be,” Dom said. “Bonnie’s been itching to book her debut.”

“You’re gonna feed her to MCW?” Solomon said, snapping his towel back onto the machine.

“It’s as good a place to start as any. My first match was on four king-size mattresses in a vacant lot.”

“You two should head to Mexico. They’d love you.”

The back of Dom’s neck, just below his skull, tightened. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Solomon paused, as if computing what kind of answer Dom wanted to hear.

“Well, Pilar’s been training lucha, and your newly tight ass better be planning to fly. Plus, you’ve both got the look. Seems like a natural fit.”

“We’re not Mexican.”

“That’s right. You’re not. You’re two lost pups. A couple of Cuckold Spaniards. What’s your point?”

Pilar cartwheeled into a handstand and dipped into pushups. She inched low and pushed her tightly woven hair bun against the mat.

“You went to Mexico, right?” Dom asked.

“Dos años,” Solomon said. “Naulcapan y Ciudad de Mèxico.”

“They like you down there?”

“Nah, but that’s a heel’s life. You work for the jeers. In Japan they might hate you but you can still earn their respect. South of the border, you wear spit like a medal. One night someone’s abuelita jumped the rail and took a swing at me with a half-empty bottle of Jalisco’s finest. I swiped it and took a pull while they muscled her out of the arena. Nuclear heat.”

“Can’t play too close to the sun,” Dom said. “Lots of sun in Mexico City.”

Solomon threw on a T-shirt with a sketch of Chewbacca under a banner that read *Wookie of the Year*. His arms filled the sleeves without stretching them, and the hem drew a crisp line across his waist. Dom’s impulse was to rib the shit out of him, but the wind needed to huff it out got caught in the drooping cotton folds of his quad-X tee purchased years prior.

“Good work in Mexico,” Solomon said. “Anyone who knows the business knows that.”

Solomon left for the locker room, and so ended the sell Dom had heard many times. Japan, Canada, England, Detroit—Solomon had a pitch and a story for every market. For as much as he seemed to enjoy Dom’s visits, especially once Pilar had joined

him, Solomon never forgot to remind Dom to get the fuck out. The advice may well have been wise. All serious wrestlers, at least to start, were eager to abandon the idea of a permanent home. Dom had never considered his cave of an apartment in Charlotte anything more than a base camp—a place to resupply and refuel before the next run at the top. But for Dom, Mexico was the moon. Japan was Jupiter. Alien and inhospitable worlds. The states were tough enough to navigate. He'd had a hard time getting his order right in drive-thrus. How was he supposed to negotiate a contract with a promoter in Tokyo who knew how to fuck him over in five languages? How was he supposed to focus on performing when every part of his routine would have to change, right down to what kind of plug he'd have to use to power his blow dryer?

Every Joe who'd told Dom about his lovely trip to Paris or his transformative years working some bullshit teaching gig in Sweatstain, Chile or Cathole, China didn't know what it was like to really travel, to work ten shows in eight cities in a week, to fall asleep behind the wheel near the Texas-Louisiana border and nearly get kneecapped by a curly tailed porker of a cop who'd mistake someone who didn't know one word of fucking Spanish for a fresh wetback. Plenty of wrestlers had worked internationally, but most did so in wrestling's heyday, or when long-haired, juiced-up white boys were still a novelty. Most were paid peanuts. So many were forced into such depths of cocaine and alcohol abuse in order to cope with the culture shock and the homesickness and brutally stiff matches that they didn't live to see fifty.

And there was Pilar. No one who'd told Dom to pick up and try his luck outside the states had considered her. They'd seen her of course. They'd ogled her. They thought how she'd look split over a bedpost with a dick in her mouth, but they hadn't given a

second's thought about what a move abroad might mean for her career. None of them could name a female American wrestler who'd got her foot in the door outside the U.S. before making it big. Too many couldn't name a woman wrestler, period.

With Solomon in the back, Dom wanted to hop up to the platform and correct Pilar's Hurricanrana, but the post-match ache in his knees and ankles slowed each step as if his joints were gripped by rotten brake pads. Pilar's leaps and rolls on the mat were completely opposite—smooth, precise, and well-oiled. How quickly she'd advanced from the stuttering clunk of her mid-teens. How easily she hid the difficulty and strain of her contortions. Her body flowed like a river that had never run dry. Dom looked on with pride as her trainer, love as her brother, and a deep appreciation of her will to exceed the limits imposed on her. She'd never be the strongest. She'd never have the best teachers. She'd be lucky if she ever got the benefit of the doubt. Despite it all, she could be great.

But the wealth of possibility, particularly as Pilar's advancement left Dom with less and less to teach her, opened Dom to floods of dread. It rusted his joints even further, and made it all the more difficult to shake himself free of it for his next match. Pilar couldn't know this kind of pain. She could train and spar until she killed herself in the ring, but there was no way for her to understand the decade of grinding Dom had been through, the feeling of destroying yourself for so very little. Her youth would be an advantage until it wasn't. This moment came all too early for everyone in wrestling, but especially soon for women. Even for the best, those filling gaps left by 28 year old retirees cast aside for the next younger, prettier thing, the window was paper-thin. For someone looking to rise beyond that, she might as well have tried slipping through a brick wall.

“You’re staring and it’s creepy,” Pilar said. Balanced mid-thigh, she arched back, reaching her toes to her head. The bend would’ve snapped the spine of every man that had set foot in a ring.

“Marks aren’t going to give a fuck what offends you,” Dom said.

“Yeah, but I didn’t think you’d be one of them.” She uncoiled and rolled in the opposite direction, folding her forehead between her knees.

“Finish up. We’re hitting the road,” Dom said.

“Que te den, guiri,” she spat from the corner of her mouth.

Dom dropped a foot on the mat that cracked across the empty gym. He didn’t step up, but instead left his foot there, echoing. “Come again?” he said.

Though the strike practically rippled through the canvas, Pilar remained locked in her stretch and took her time turning her head to Dom. “Nothing important,” she said.

“Go tell Sol we’re done here.”

Chapter Three: Bonnie Francy Blue

The principal cruelty Bruce and Helen Blue would commit against their only child would come on the day of her birth, when the pink placard reading *Blue, Girl* affixed to the cold, birthing ward bassinet was replaced at their request with another which read *Bonnie Francy Blue*.

In Connecticut high society in the late 1960s, with the grumblings of southern pride half of a country beneath them, the Blues hadn't considered how it would come to affect their daughter. If they'd heard about the nickname for the Confederacy's first adopted flag in history class or had remembered Rhett Butler's poor, blue-eyed girl and her ragdoll flight from horseback, it had been long forgotten in the whirlwind of wine-soaked, country club politics and the manic corporate evolution unfolding as BluCon Industries rode the crest of the post-war manufacturing wave. In thirty years, the company Bruce came to inherit from his father grew from regional candle maker to a major player in the national plastics scene. By the early 1980s, BluCon was one of the world's top toy producers, hitting line-drive after line-drive with the fad-crazy American public while finding great success with their home video game console, a rip off of the Atari 2600.

Though proclaiming this kind of thing with certainty is always subject to the millions of *what ifs* that nudge a human life in one direction or another, most who would become professionally or intimately close to Bonnie over the years would cite her name

as the helmsman and harbinger of her character, the essence of which her parents, even if they'd remembered 11th grade U.S. history, wouldn't have anticipated.

The signs came early. Bonnie was a millionaire's dream child, quietly taking advantage of every privilege offered her. She burned through tutors like, well, candle flame through plastic during an experiment she conducted at five years old to determine the melting point of her parents' *Pong* clone. She was conversational in French and Spanish, and making modest but impressive strides with her German and Japanese. Her giraffe-like sleep schedule included a lone block of extended R.E.M. that hit around three in the morning. Her remaining need for shuteye was satisfied with a dozen micro-naps dispersed throughout the day—during the ride to school, in between courses at dinner, while standing straight and long-necked for her Easter dress fitting.

But even those who were woken by Bonnie's late night recitations of Herman Hesse in his native German were hard pressed to classify her as something non-normal. Bonnie had friends. She could kick a ball. Her speech fit whatever the occasion deemed appropriate. Bruce and Helen's friends loved her, this child with all the novelty of a wunderkind and none of the pretense. She told good jokes. She knew the starting lineup for the Hartford Whalers. Conversing with her, one got a distinct sense she was fully aware of her superiority over other children but didn't really give a shit about it. Tantrums were nonexistent—though Bonnie would get red in the face and mutter things to herself if a sneeze managed to slip out. Before most children could ride a bike, she'd learned to suppress a cough into what could easily be mistaken for a modest chuckle. Bonnie never hiccupped—not ever.

She got so good at making blueberry muffins, her favorite food, that Bonnie's father had one of the top pastry chefs in the northeast shadow her in the kitchen and record her technique. After an intense bidding war, the recipe was sold for five figures, and the profits funneled into a trust with which Bruce gave Bonnie free reign to play. With investments in Nerf, a Vermont candy company, and a small professional wrestling federation out of New York City, Bonnie's portfolio had the texture of a spoiled child's trip to the mall, yet her stratospheric ROI made her father's blue chips and utilities look like penny stocks.

One might expect a gifted child sharing a name with the banner of a secessionist state to be something of a rebel. There are, of course, many shades and degrees of rebellion, but by measure of the number of cheek kisses exchanged between Bonnie and her parents, and by the income streaming into BluCon directly tied to the part-time consulting work Bonnie dabbled in during her duller moments of college, Bonnie was a loyalist through and through. Had she been born in a different time, the best word to describe Bonnie would've been *honorable*. Her early awareness of the world outside the lines connecting the Blues' Bridgeport property to her private school to BluCon headquarters to the beach, where Bonnie liked to fly a kite every now and then, brought her to establish a set of principles by which she lived her life. She had only recently learned to flip her N's and R's to their correct orientation when she wrote these principles down in the back of her French Fun Book. In the course of her childhood, she'd polish the list and transfer it to blank pages in more advanced texts, but the root content persisted.

These principles included some classics—repay debts, don't steal or lie, etc—but many of them were forged in Bonnie's experience as an authentic Connecticut blue-blood. For instance, she'd been playing Sleeping Bag Snail at her friend Bridget's house when Bridget's terrier, Sammy-Boy, interrupted. Bridget shed her puffy shell and turned all attention to Sammy-Boy, his tongue lapping Bridget's coos right out of the air. Bridget's little brother, Nathan, who was having a grand old time spelling out three and four letter scatological words on the floor with his imaginary slime trail, burst into tears. Bridget was too busy puppeteering Sammy-Boy's paws into a disco dance to care.

Bonnie could tell this wasn't the first time Sammy-Boy had stolen Nathan's sister away. He writhed and wailed in his down cocoon as if he'd been pelted with salt. At any moment, the dog might waddle into wherever he and Bridget were playing and erase him from the face of the earth. It was really screwing with the kid. Bonnie helped pull the bag over his head, and Nathan's eyes, red and tearing in rage, snapped to the pup.

The day's events knocked around in her head for a long while and eventually helped pour the foundation for one of Bonnie's principles, number five on the list in French Fun Book—*People are always more important than non-people.*

Due to number five, Bonnie never asked for a pet. She never braked for squirrels unless she was the only car on the road. At the zoo, she gazed in wonder at the geodesic beauty of the glass and steel dome of the butterfly house. When two brilliant Swallowtails landed on her arm, she brushed them away like flies.

Bonnie was loyal, and she loved her parents fiercely, but when the time came to choose between fidelity to Helen and Bruce and adherence to her principles, there was no

debate. Her parents, in their belief they'd raised the perfect child, failed to predict where that perfection would inevitably lead.

Again, the signs were there. There were no secrets with Bonnie. If her mother criticized a family friend's choice in a second wife, Bonnie would not filter those barbs from conversation if, say, the friend stopped by to talk biz and share cigars with Bruce. Bonnie's glass-edge memory meant she could preserve every detail, every clumsy portmanteau her mother patched together to describe her revulsion with the new wife. This friend had to dig beneath the well of his lifelong training in proper New England gentility to restrain his cocked hand from slapping the shit out of Helen Blue after Bonnie told him that Helen had called his new wife a Red-Nosed, Ladder-Rat Cum-Sipper.

Punishing their daughter for instances like these was nearly impossible. Grounding Bonnie would only clear her schedule for catch-up on her reading. She'd do such a good job cleaning the kitchen or polishing the silver, Bruce would have to manage the fallout from nervy housekeepers anxious about their job security. In their last effort, her parents locked Bonnie in an empty, dark closet. Thirty minutes later, they opened the door and found Bonnie sitting cross-legged, close-eyed, and completely blissed out. They left her like that, and Bonnie spent an additional, non-mandated half hour in peaceful meditation.

For most kids under a certain age, it's very dangerous to learn that one's primary authority figures have very little power to enforce rules. Bonnie was no less susceptible to this danger. She was fully aware how easily she could frustrate her parents and became an early expert. She took pride in it, a pride that grew as rapidly as she did. Her parents sensed this, but they couldn't bring themselves to anger. Whatever they'd done—

genetically, environmentally, subliminally—had produced this child. Bonnie would one day inherit their business and, with her potential, probably take over the world. They should have understood that even prodigies, especially prodigies, need directing. But with the world wide open to her, Bonnie's view of the world solidified. With no one to offer a challenge, her confidence grew.

In the early 90s, after several crashes in the video game market and the rise of competitors that soon seized the industry by the neck from the old giants, both Atari and BluCon were struggling to tread water. Atari's flailing hit the Blues' company hard in the form of a lawsuit—\$500 million for a grocery list of patent infringements on the 2600 entertainment console. BluCon had no choice but to take it to court in hopes that a protracted battle would sink Atari and give them time to mortgage enough assets to survive.

It was national news the day Bonnie Blue, by then the youngest senior manager in the company's history, testified against BluCon, bringing a mountain of evidence stretching back a decade which implicated virtually every engineer, lawyer, and manager in the blatant and willful theft of the 2600's design. For a week, Bonnie held the stand. Her words were efficient, her demeanor calm, like a surgeon delivering bad news. She spoke on her father for two days, and the knife twisted so hard Bruce had to be escorted from the court after he broke down in tears and wailing.

The media devoured Bonnie's story. For fifteen minutes, she was a household name. She granted no interviews. She took no book deals. Most knew her from a famous snap by a young staff photographer from the *Hartford Courant*. Bonnie was shouldering through a mob of reporters, police, and gawkers outside the simple granite portico of the

Norwalk Superior Court. Her lawyer, a severe woman with a helmet of ink-black hair, scowled at a photog beyond the frame's left edge, her left arm carving a path through the crowd. Just behind her was Bonnie. A gust of wind flared her raincoat open, revealing her tall, gaunt frame. She might've still passed as a teenager, but her eyes were two lunar craters on her face, darkened and creased and burnt to ash from a month of bankrupting her family and a lifetime of sleepless nights. She stared straight ahead, ignoring the microphones brushing her cheeks.

Near the glass courthouse doors, at the end of the trench Bonnie, her lawyer, and other members of her entourage cut through the swarm, stood her parents—their bodies folding into each other, grabbing, bending, curling with grief and rage. Minutes earlier, there'd been a scuffle in the court. Bruce had tried to force his way to Bonnie through two legal teams and several Norwalk court officers. He demanded to speak with his little girl. He called out to her over and over, her name gurgling in his chest.

She didn't acknowledge him. Bonnie knew giving him anything would make his pain worse. She'd known since the company lost hope in finding a settlement that her parents were gone. They'd deserved to fall. Her father had tripped over himself opening every door, pulling up every rug and mattress, showing her what it took to manage a global company. He'd assembled the bomb that would destroy them all right in front of her, betting on the chance that she wouldn't detonate it. When, after witnessing her defiance and self-assuredness and monochrome morality, he offered her a job that would immediately expose her to the company's secrets, Bonnie could only think that he'd lost his mind or that he wanted her to tear it all down. She could have done a million things

with her life, but he'd cleared the path to a future with a single outcome. She had no choice.

Bonnie marched from the courtroom and Bruce pressed after her. Helen pleaded him to stop, to let her go. When the *Courant* photographer raised his camera, Bruce's tie was loose, his shirt torn. He stretched toward Bonnie with both arms, and it was difficult to tell if it was his last, desperate reach for her, or if he'd thrown his hands up to block his view, to protect himself from seeing his only child turn her back on him, even though he wanted so badly to watch her until she'd gone. In the frame he was small and broken.

The lawsuit vaporized the Blue family fortune and turned BluCon under the dirt. Bonnie's name flashed in the papers once more when she dumped most of her personal assets—four years' salary from BluCon, her Manhattan apartment, the investments she'd tended since she'd sold her blueberry muffin recipe—on more than one hundred local and national charities. With her financial connections to BluCon and the family crumbled and scattered, she cut all contact, bought a secondhand 4x4 from a dealership without a showroom in rural Connecticut, and left.

Most people who didn't know Bonnie at Mid-Coast Championship Wrestling thought "Bonnie Blue" was a stage name, but no one questioned her about it. She liked that about the business. Even in the 21st century, the blurred lines between story and reality still extended far beyond the ring. Everyone had their own way of dealing with names. Some guys preferred a clearly cut divide between their character and their true selves. Others got their names legally changed. Plenty didn't give a shit, and a few would throw a tantrum if a newbie failed to remember the right name at the right time.

When a wrestler introduced himself, the boys called him what he wanted. During all ribs, pranks, and bullying, names were off-limits. Strange, Bonnie thought, for a group that loved whisky and strippers and had a thousand words for breasts.

Bonnie's self-imposed exile ended in 2005, when the same ancient 4x4 she bought more than a decade earlier sputtered through the gates at the defunct Wilbur Wright Airstrip outside of Charlotte. Newly founded Mid-Coast Championship Wrestling was holding its debut pay-per-view, a hastily organized affair promoted as "Air Raid" that promised a no-name card and a tiny draw.

Bonnie was there to see Karl "Clout" Crawczak, owner of MCW and former partner in the Big Apple Wrestling, the small, NYC-based fed she'd invested in as a child. Before the Atari suit, and before Vince McMahon's sprawling WWF empire absorbed BAW and most of its regional competitors, Bonnie maintained correspondence with Clout. They exchanged letters through Bonnie's teens and, after Clout lost his stake in the company and got busted with a pile of heroin, wrote each other sporadically during his stint on Rikers Island.

When he read Bonnie's first letters, personally addressed to Mr. Karl C. Crawczak, Clout smelled a sucker. He was legendary for sniffing his way into wallets. In the 1960s, at the peak of his wrestling career, he'd jobbed to legends like Killer Kowalski and Bruno Sammartino. Clout wasn't the biggest, and he was far from the best, but unlike so many of his midcentury wrestling brethren, he was butter on the microphone. Back then, when someone stepped through the ropes into the squared circle, everyone knew they were in for a fight. Professional wrestling was worlds away from the soap opera reality television

variety show it became in the 21st century. Clout was one of the game changers who brought the power of the spoken word to a performance that relied exclusively on the storytelling of the body. When he marched off to the timekeeper's area, spooled out a garden hose of cable, then dragged most of it behind him into the ring, he was hated for it, he was loved for it. Everyone had an opinion. Everyone listened.

Clout could dress down any opponent, from the freshest greenhorn to the international mega-star. The gift of gab followed him into the locker room, where he schemed, betrayed, and double-talked his way to the top of many cards. But like all good politicians, Clout couldn't resist a proper scandal. Women were his kryptonite. He never met one he didn't fall in love with at first sight, and the boys would routinely test him on that during slow nights in the unprettiest parts of the country. Didn't matter how good Clout could bark, the Paleolithic rage triggered by sleeping with the wrong man's wife didn't typically lead to careful listening, and there were a helluva lot of wrong men.

Fancying himself a man of letters, Clout had eagerly returned Bonnie's correspondence, hoping for a quick check that would help him pay down a few of his more perilous debts. But soon, it became clear that Bonnie was no mark and her money was something that even he could take seriously. They met, quite serendipitously, at a playground in the north Bronx. Bonnie had her father's financial advisor at her side. Clout rolled with his old tag partner, The Übermensch, posing as his lawyer. They shook hands and discussed their future on the swing set, which sagged under the wrestlers' weight. Clout liked Bonnie immediately.

They made a deal, and in the years that followed, Clout became, narrowly, a rich man. The influx of cash helped BAW claw into a protected hollow with the fight-crazed

degenerates of the five boroughs. New York was a mean town in Clout's time, and Big Apple Wrestling was known for its stiff, pug-nosed workers. Bonnie learned the business through letter after letter of Clout's concussed scrawl. Clout, too, received an education. With Bonnie's help, he burned off a dozen leeches gorging on BAW's profits. He negotiated a new union deal, breaking down the barrier preventing the federation from promoting larger, riskier events in regulation-heavy NYC. And though he never admitted it, the girl compelled him to slow his chemical suicide. Plenty of people had told him to straighten his life, but Bonnie seemed to implicitly demand it through her own example. The girl wasn't made of the same meat as men like him. Clout was careful to manage BAW as close to the letter of the law as such a business allowed. He held his past and present indiscretions close to his chest, but it was clear she could see straight through him. Later, he wasn't surprised when he got word in prison of how coolly she'd buried her feet in concrete to drag down her family. He'd been terrified of her doing the same to him. She had half the compromise of a four-hundred pound man. He didn't understand her, and that ensured she'd remain a woman above all other women—someone he couldn't imagine boring him.

Throughout Air Raid, three hours of schlock one indie scene blogger in attendance would call "more a junior high dance than professional wrestling," Clout spotted Bonnie sitting behind the rail. She was one of the few women among the scattered attendants. Dressed in business attire, she was the only woman not wearing a tank top or oversized T-shirt. She had short, graying hair, but her face recognizably belonged to the child he'd met when he was still a powerful man.

Clout had so much riding on the debut MCW show. He'd spent all the money he'd squirreled away from his drug habit and his lawyers before his decay in Rikers. The wrong men he'd lassoed into loaning him the extra capital needed to take a shot at running a pro wrestling federation were eager to find out if he really had injected all that cash he'd earned in Big Apple Wrestling's prime. Clout had planned and sweat and negotiated until he was hoarse, but his stress lifted when Bonnie entered the Hangar. She leaned forward in her seat as the one of the bloated undercarders pitched himself over the top rope like a bridge jumper experiencing a tardy change-of-heart. The sight of her refreshed a long-forgotten memory—Clout's mother, her face kind in the dim candlelight, pulling a coarse blanket his chin and telling him the same thing she said every night. He was loved. He was beautiful. He made her proud every day.

"Your last letter," Clout said. "The fold was double-creased. Wasn't like you."

"Wrote it the morning I left," Bonnie said. "I was in a hurry."

A tattered windsock caught the shifting breeze and squeaked on its axis. Clout and Bonnie had commandeered two folding chairs from the kids cleaning up inside the Hangar and found a quiet spot on the old tarmac. They'd lined a football field's worth of it for parking, but the cars for Air Raid had only filled the first row.

"And then not one more. Six more years on that stinking island. Nothing from you or anyone. Then I get out. My name is everywhere. But still, no letter. Heck, not even an email or text. Do you text?"

Bonnie smiled and shook her head. Clout reached into his trouser pocket and removed his phone.

“This is brand new. They call it the Razor, and it’s the most beautiful piece of machinery ever made.” Clout unfolded the phone, and its interior screen lit with a picture of the Statue of Liberty. The keypad numbers glowed so vibrantly they might have detached themselves and flown like digital fireflies into the night. “If you had a phone, I could call you right now, and my voice would fracture into bits and shoot line-of-sight to the nearest tower, through the good ole land lines to a routing station, then back through the pipe, probably to the same tower, where all those bits would explode across our little corner of the Tar Heel State. Every phone in that swath, maybe thousands of them, reads the signal. Most would stay silent, but yours would ring, and we’d be connected over a path that might be a hundred miles long. I’d say something, and there’d be a delay before my voice came through your phone.”

Bonnie took the phone from him and pressed buttons until she was scrolling through the menu. Photos. Email. Alarm. Music. Preferences.

“And text. I don’t know what I did without it. Say you want to tell me something. Maybe you want to tell me, ‘Hi, Clout. I’m alive. Glad you’re out of prison,’ but you don’t want to commit to a conversation, or you want to give me the option to respond when I want. Well, just type it in, dial in my number, and hit the green button. Now I know you haven’t been killed by your father’s assassins, and I can invite you to my coming out party.”

“How was it?” Bonnie asked.

“How was what?”

“The party.”

“You kidding?” Clout said, laughing. “There was no party. You were my only friend in the world.”

“Oh, c’mon. You weren’t that broke.”

“No, but you can’t take it with you. I don’t want to tell you how many of the boys are in the ground. I had lots of time to read the obits.”

“But you had visitors. What else do you meatheads have to do before you croak? They probably loved you in there. Captive audience.”

Bonnie handed Clout the phone. Pale green light broke across the pitted, pillowy bags under his eyes. He clicked back to his home screen and snapped the phone shut.

“No one came,” he said. “Thirteen years on my own. Finally I paid a guy to get his brother to talk to me just so I could see the room. You know, the little booths and glass and shit? It was the only place in Rikers I’d never been.” Clout put the phone away and took out an inhaler. He shook it and huffed his lungs empty, mucous crackling like fried bacon. He puffed and heaved in. “It’s terrifying. Knowing that you’ve lived half a century and no one gives a damn.”

Clout squeezed his arms to his chest as if he’d caught a chill. No longer did his biceps’ bulge strain the threads of his jacket. His chest had sunk, and he stooped, even while sitting in the chair. Veins popped through the translucent skin of his hands. They were calloused and mottled, but still thick, his fingers knobbed like tree limbs.

The side access door to the Hangar flew open and two wrestlers in street clothes stormed out. The more mountainous of the two led the charge, leaning forward as if fighting a stiff wind. Following was another man, smaller but more tightly coiled. His

long, wet hair hung like tentacles and seemed so alive it made the first man's squared regulation cut look fake, the coiffure of a Ken doll.

"We've got a problem here, Clout," the bigger man said, each step registering on the Richter Scale.

"No," the other said. "Cross's got a problem. His brain's smaller than his balls."

The bigger man spun to him. "I'll whoop your ass, you piece of shit."

"Go ahead, fuck face. You might throw a convincing strike for once."

The two pressed their noses into each other and fought back the tears welling from the pressure. Clout muttered a string of obscenities and took another puff from his inhaler. "This is the bright future of my federation," he said to Bonnie. "Sixty marks through the gate, half of them paying nothing, and these two fucking Eskimos. I hired them and learned a hundred words for dumbass."

That night, Cross Gruden, the bigger man, had pinned the long-haired heel Brody Ruckus in the first of a series of matches to determine the number one contender for the first MCW World Heavyweight Champion. The newly acquainted wrestlers working in the freshly minted company put on a passable show. Clout had designs for both men to become MCW's primary draw, at least until the company found its legs and was able to hire real talent. Cross pinned Ruckus with his finisher, a top rope Flying Crucifix, but Ruckus, not wanting to appear weak in his debut with MCW, kicked out right after the three-count.

"It's a fucking insult," Cross said. "To me, and your booking, Clout."

"Seriously, brother. You've got the smarts of a goldfish," Ruckus said. "I'm impressed you can speak in sentences."

“Day one, and this guy is already going into business for himself,” Cross said. “What’s going to happen a month or year from now? Asshole’s going to be no-selling chair-shots to the face.”

“We’ll be on the streets a year from now unless we can book a proper angle.”

“There are thirty fucking people in the seats and you’re bitching about angles?”

“Oh, that’s right. So sorry you and all your hillbilly cousins that came tonight are too stupid to follow a basic story.”

“Say that to my face, shitstain.”

“I’ll fucking rip out your shoulder blades, mate.”

Clout yelled at the men to knock it off, but they pressed their noses together once more. Cross grunted like a bull and Ruckus’s neck stretched into a pumpkin stem.

Clout leaned close to Bonnie. “How did your poppa tell you to deal with belligerent employees?”

“Report them to HR,” Bonnie said.

Clout laughed. “You sure you weren’t adopted? That would explain a lot.”

Bonnie opened her eyes wide and nodded, then peered over to the wrestlers. Their anger was like two pit dogs straining at the leash, their mouths watering at the chance to eat the other’s throat.

“So what would you do, Bonnie Blue?” Clout asked.

“Let them fight,” Bonnie replied, loud enough for the wrestlers to hear.

Cross turned at Bonnie’s voice, his lips puckering and biceps spontaneously flexing. This woman was speaking his language. Ruckus saw his chance and threw a punch to the back of Cross’s head. The giant wrestler staggered forward, but kept his feet.

Before he'd fully gathered himself, Cross balled his fist and launched it back like a shot put. Ruckus, too quick follow his punch, took the swing on the jaw.

The dazed wrestlers squared off, orbiting a point between them. Instinctually, it seemed, they knew the rules. They'd agreed to the stakes. Bonnie smirked at this display of efficiency, brainlessly male, full of posturing, but free from the typical in-ring showmanship. This is what people would pay for if it could somehow be reliably reproduced, she thought. A fight without pretense. The great lie of sports like boxing and mixed martial arts was that they were real, as if real fights happened under bright arena lights, within octagon-shaped enclosures. Pro wrestling had earned Bonnie's respect, especially as the business entered the late 20th century, for winking hard and carrying on after kayfabe died, for using its audience's knowledge of its predetermined structure to prick at the reptilian brain and reach emotions difficult to excite outside an honest-to-god street fight. Wrestling wasn't staged so much as it exploited the stage. In its fictional world, true feeling difficult to perceive in the muted routine of daily life was laid bare. In a good promotion, the match was only the tip of the iceberg supported by weeks, months, even years of conflict. A good booker knew the perfect time to apply pressure and tip the entire iceberg over.

Ruckus, with his early advantage, connected with a solid right that crumpled Cross to a knee. Ruckus grinned, held his chin, and counted teeth with his tongue.

“What do you think, Sugartits? You want a go? I promise I'd put you down faster than I did this thick-skulled horse's ass.”

Clout cleared his throat. “She's too much woman for you to handle, boy.”

“Then she can tell me herself,” Ruckus said, squeezing a rope of bloody mucous from the side of his mouth. He approached Bonnie, who stood her ground. Even in the dark, he was close enough for her to see the tiny cut on his bottom lip. He caught her looking and lapped at it, then audibly sucked in the juices.

“What d’ya say, love? I promise I’ll keep that suit of yours nice and clean.” He blew on his fingers and brushed the corner of her lapel.

“He had his back to you when you hit him,” she said, gesturing to Cross, still on a knee.

“A proper lesson,” Ruckus said.

“A punch like that is memorable,” Bonnie said.

“Not to him,” Ruckus said, spitting his words at his opponent.

“I’ll remember it,” she said. “What about you, Clout?”

Clout nodded eagerly. “You bet. I might look like shit, but the rats are still running upstairs.”

Bonnie fingered a tentacle of Ruckus’s long, wet hair and twirled it around her knuckle. “This business has a long memory. Your cerebrum will be leaking out your nose, and you’ll still remember your enemies.”

Ruckus popped his tongue over his cut and curled it across his teeth. “And what about all the cunts I’ve fucked? Will I still remember them?”

Bonnie smiled like one might when humoring a toddler and let Ruckus’s hair unravel and fall. “This one’s a talker,” she said to Clout. “Reminds me of you.”

“You mean I’m that bad?” Clout asked.

“When you want to be,” Bonnie said, taking her seat.

Ruckus took a deep breath and snorted. He blew out air a little too forcefully and the snort cracked into a high pitched yelp. “This your new toy?” he asked. “Bit high-end for you, isn’t she?”

Clout started to answer, but Bonnie interrupted. “No no! You were doing fine!”

“What?” Ruckus blurted.

“You lost it with that last one,” Bonnie said.

“The fuck are you talking about?” Ruckus said.

“Measured jabs upon entry. Escalation. Redirection. Blind side cold-cock— classic heel move, really great stuff. Good form in the fight. Solid finisher. Excellent crowing afterwards. Stayed cool under some heat. But then right when there was the tiniest hint you might be losing the center of attention, you start flailing. Can’t let the crowd play you like that.”

Clout swallowed, then caught himself midway and narrowed his eyes. “What crowd? Who the fuck are you, lady?”

“Name’s Bonnie Blue, and that’s what you can call me. I’m no one right now, but if I play my cards right with your boss here I just might make him my boss too. But don’t get the wrong idea. We both might have to answer to this man, but you’d be answering to me, the underboss, a regular Sonny Corleone. You understand?”

“That’s the way it is now is it?” Ruckus said. “You sashay up in here and act all tough and cunty and expect me to bend a knee? Well I’ll put a knee through your pretty face.”

“Blah. Enough jaw for one night,” Clout said. He braced himself on the side of the chair and rocked himself to his feet. “Here’s what we’re doing. You and Cross have a

rematch in the main event next weekend. You call it. You go over. We'll see how you do. Good?"

Ruckus's scowl melted. "Peachy," he said.

"Good. Now shake his hand and get the poor bastard to his feet."

Cross was wheezing and holding his side. He'd dropped to knees and elbows and seemed to be oozing through the tarmac. Ruckus hooked the crook of his arm and pulled him up.

"My ribs!" Cross squealed. "Oh god, I think my lung is punctured!"

"Let's hope you heal up quick," Ruckus said. He seized Cross's hand and tried to crush it.

"Oh please no!" Cross yelped. "Uncle! Uncle!"

Ruckus tossed his hand away like rotten meat and turned to leave, but not before wagging his tongue at Bonnie.

"A rematch?" Cross said as Ruckus climbed into his pickup. Smoke belched from the tailpipe, and he tore off.

Cross continued yelping. "Clout you couldn't! Please!"

"Oh, cut the act already," Clout said. "You could've at least tried to be convincing."

"Why waste the effort on that idiot?" Cross said, all traces of distress gone. He straightened up and cracked his neck. Clout dug out his billfold and handed him a wad.

"Next week's a shoot," Clout said. "Play along until it gets boring, then do whatever it takes to pin that late-kicking son of a bitch."

“Gladly,” Cross said, shaking Clout’s hand. “Catch you later. Nice to meet you, Ms. Blue. I hope we’ll be working together.”

Bonnie nodded and extended her hand. “Nice to meet you, Cross.”

Cross took her hand and bowed slightly, then left them. Only a few cars remained on runway. The wind had died, and the air was quiet. The vast concrete desert kept the bugs and frogs far away, outside the airport fence.

“When did you know we were working Ruckus?” Clout said.

“Had an inkling pretty early,” Bonnie said.

“I hate sore losers. Huge waste of money.”

“But now you can squeeze another match out of him.”

“With one hell of a finish,” Clout said. “Dumbass thinks he’s hot shit. When he finds out differently, well, there’s just no substitute for that kind of drama.”

The fire in the old man’s eyes could’ve landed a DC-10. Every cell in his body was united to keep him kicking, to keep him in the game a little longer. Bonnie loved such clarity of purpose.

“I’m in,” she said, “and I don’t care about compensation.”

Clout sucked his paper lips and smiled. “You don’t care about money,” he said. “I didn’t expect you to. But I’ve never known anyone in this business that worked for free.”

“Then you know what I want,” Bonnie said.

Clout coughed up a chunky glob on phlegm and spat it aside. “I can certainly guess.”

Chapter Four: The Flytrap

The three sodium lights extending from rotting phone poles above the sandlot near Pilar and Dom's apartment building attracted biblical swarms of insects unlike any Pilar had seen. In the mornings, the rusty Tauruses and pickups and ancient imports held together with duct tape and bubblegum were covered with gunk. On the worst days, the city birds would eat their fill and still be unable to keep up with the massive die-offs. Twitching bodies jammed the creases between windshields and hoods, doors and roofs.

Pilar hated the bugs, especially when one would buzz her ear or, even while fanning herself nonstop on the walk from the Civic to the building's back entrance, complete a kamikaze dive into the white of her eyes. When the cicadas emerged in late summer, their heavy wings struck the plastic covers around the lights, and the noise was intimidating enough to be mistaken for automatic gunfire. To make matters worse, almost every time Pilar ran the six-legged gauntlet, it came at the end of several hours of driving in which Dom had either fallen asleep or driven her out of her skin. Add onto that the mounting soreness from whatever training they'd managed to squeeze in, and her limping, sunken-eyed, trudge from the Civic to their crusty efficiency would come close to breaking her. More than once Pilar had dreamed of wrapping herself in Tyvek and dual-wielding a pair of Raid tall-boys, raining death so horrific upon the plague that the entire block would be purged clean.

But the swarm was so bad, it was hard not to feel some pride about it. Pilar's drab corner of greater Charlotte was Times Square for insects. It was Vegas on fight night. She

was at the center of something—a spectacle reserved for her, her brother, and a few dozen Mexican and Vietnamese neighbors. Though the swarm was likely explained by the semicircle of vacant lots and perpetual standing water surrounding the apartment building, by the blocks of dark streetlights gutted long ago for their copper, Pilar liked to think the lights’ song drew them in. The tones emanating from the three sisters braided together in eerie harmony. Pilar imagined the sound slipping through the city. Though it quickly dropped through the threshold of the human ear, it was a sirens’ song for anything with an exoskeleton. The airborne insects had of course appeared first, but soon, perhaps by the end of summer, the ground-dwellers would arrive—billions of ants, beetles, and slugs, marching, churning, sliming their way to the sandlot. There they would stretch their tiny bodies toward the beauty and comforts of the lights. They’d slither up the poles and cover the bulbs in a squirming cocoon. Those blocked out would search desperately for alternatives, scrambling for headlights, snuffing out every illuminated doorbell. Eventually, they’d come for the hard fluorescents and the pale blue phone light in Pilar’s apartment. Their weight would crack the windows, and they’d spill in like a mudslide. They’d envelop Pilar, pushing themselves into her wherever they could, and finally, with maggots and leeches worming against her, inside and out, she’d find calm. No pain from a hard bump. No fly wings crackling her eardrum. No fears about what has passed or what’s to come. Just pure, even sensation. Amniotic bliss.

Pilar slung her pack over her shoulder and kicked her way to the door of the apartment building. She left Dom in the Civic, which wasn’t unusual. His fatigue and pills often kept him glued to his seat. Other times he just needed the space, and so did she.

Their room was on the fifth floor. The elevator was working that night, but Pilar wasn't tired enough to trust it. The stairwell lights were mostly dead save for a few on the upper floors. As depressing as it was to come home to the swarm and the sandlot dust and the fermenting grime of the first-floor tile, Pilar's climb brightened as she ascended. It always gave her the feeling that she was making progress out of the muck, that one day she'd reach the top floors then the roof where she could fly or jump or be plucked away.

She slipped her key just so into the lock to catch the deadbolt and shouldered her way inside. She tossed her bag next to the door, kicked her way through the dirty clothes, and dropped onto the futon, which had been her bed from day one in the apartment, before a brother she barely knew saved her from their mother. It was a night Pilar hardly remembered, but she did know that it was the last of those kinds of nights. She'd quit her mother's habits cold and never looked back. Not a drop of the hard stuff. Not a single pill, not even the ones Dom had begged her to take when a woman twice her size tore Pilar's meniscus in her first week of live sparring.

The interior of the fridge looked like it had been used to store road slush from Charlotte's last winter storm. An uncovered bowl of what might've been some kind of kale salad was fuzzy and blue and drowned in dripping condensation. Pilar opened the freezer, found half a pack of spinach, set it to boil on the two-burner stove. With nothing else in the edible in the cabinets, she twisted off the lid of the bucket-sized tub of powdered protein drink. Beneath the stove hood's dim incandescent, she peered inside and sifted, looking for worms.

The blender pitcher had a crack spanning halfway from lip to base, so she rinsed out a tall, plastic glass in the sink, added water, and stirred in the powder with a spoon

that was too short to reach the bottom without dipping in her fingers. She glugged down the chalky, chunky mixture and immediately stuck her mouth under the faucet. The water felt slick in her mouth—like it had been flavored with vegetable oil.

She drained the spinach and ate standing up while flicking through her phone. A series of lengthy texts from B said she'd gone in for an interview at McDonald's and the manager was expectedly greasy but surprisingly fuckable. He was saving up to start his own line of designer phone cases and seemed to have his shit together. He said B would only have to work a month or so without any major demerits and he could bump her up to assistant manager. She'd made a verbal agreement to take the job but it wasn't like she'd signed anything yet, so, whatever.

B wanted to get together with Pilar a.s.a.p. to debrief and plan her next move. Pilar texted back and said she was dead tonight and had to train most of the next day. She added a frowny face but deleted it before she hit send.

She tapped through her Snaps, most of them photos of animals in mildly cute poses from people she hadn't spoken to since graduation. She hit the button for her forward-facing camera and her face filled the screen. There was a raw spot on her left cheekbone where it'd scraped across Solomon's mat. What was hopefully a pimple and not an ingrown hair in her nostril was making its presence known on the outside with a faint, pink splotch. Her crooked incisor seemed to be jutting out a bit more than it had the last time she'd given it a close look. It was still a little early, but she knew she was getting to the point where her wisdom teeth would be a problem. She'd distracted herself from the anxiety of not having dental insurance by hoping that whatever lucky doc got the inevitable job of yanking out the remains of one or two of her pearly whites cracked

in half in the ring by a stiff elbow would go ahead and throw in a wisdom tooth extraction for free. There was also the unlikely but biologically elegant scenario in which whatever promotion she ended up wrestling for would tolerate an eighteen-year-old with black gaps in her mouth until her wisdom teeth grew in and filled out her smile. They could strap a fin to her back and call her Shark Girl—only a moderately insane gimmick for an indie wrestler. Stranger ideas had worked, and Pilar had no doubt it would satisfy the secret fetish of more than a few marks out there.

The spinach was gritty and tasted like the pot she'd boiled it in. The apartment was damp and hot, and the geriatric window unit sputtered out far more noise than cold air. From only seconds in the swarm, three mosquito bites had swelled on her ankle. They always itched like mad down there. Bending over to scratch pissed the discs between her vertebrae right the fuck off, and using her toenails was like trying to masturbate with her off-hand.

She was tired but not tired. The chances of Dom peeling himself out of the Civic before dawn weren't great. She couldn't imagine how he could sleep in that thing. Even at night, it turned into a swamp after five minutes without air. Though she knew sleeping wasn't quite the best word for what Dom was doing down there. Sleep to most people involved going to bed, implying that one might've chosen where and when to sleep, whether or not to stay up and watch old WWF matches on YouTube. Dom made a choice years before to not have much of a choice when it came to where and when his body would quit on him. But still—how much more effort could it have taken to drag his ass inside?

Pilar scrolled through her phone again and found nothing new. She was bored and antsy, and she debated texting AC to check if he was sober enough zip by and scoop her somewhere interesting. He'd been tougher to lure out of the underbrush since she'd hit him in the stomach that winter. Their dynamic was always kind of like warring siblings in that they didn't much like each other outside of the fun they could have at the other's expense. AC even looked a little like Dom, which really fucked with Pilar's head when their ear-flicks and stepping on heels escalated to more intimate aggressions. AC was hot in the way that generally athletic high schoolers could be, but he toted around this transparent arrogance a puberty-stricken eighth grader could knock out of his hands. One night in his parents' kitchen, AC and Pilar were messing around, and he yanked Pilar's arm into a sloppy hammerlock. She'd mostly kept her training to herself, but she'd learned the difference between a stiff move and a mean one. AC had wrenched her wrist up her spine and was pulling her elbow into his chest so she could feel the stress on her collarbone. It was amateur, but it hurt. The difference then after spending hours tangled in the ring with dozens of people of varied and wandering motivations was that her mind instantly understood everything about what was happening to her. She could picture the angle of their bodies as clearly as if she were watching from across the room. She knew exactly what was hurting her and why. She could guess with confidence that AC had suffered the hold from an older brother who in turn had endured it from an uncle or cousin or some other family figure who took real pleasure from it—though not quite sexual pleasure and not quite the pleasure men get when they demonstrate their physical dominance over those destined to overpower them, but that fleeting joy physical touch can provide someone experiencing desperate, bone-rotting loneliness.

Pilar also knew exactly how to escape the move and reverse it with double the force.

Someone without Pilar's growing expertise might describe what happened after that as wrestling. The altercation wavered right on the line between deadly serious and profoundly intimate until AC asked Pilar to hit him. He flexed and braced himself against the countertop and dared her.

Up until then Pilar had never hit anyone on purpose. She'd struck opponents in training—blows designed to safely achieve the desired visual and audible drama. Her sets with heavy bags and punch mitts were hard and fast, but she wasn't swinging for the fences. AC's jackass smirk told Pilar he had no idea what she could do to him, and really, she wasn't all that sure herself.

When she hit him, she thought she'd killed him. He dropped like his skull had eaten a slaughterhouse piston. For a moment, he was a heap of meat and bone on the ground, and it took a frightening amount of time for the air to explode back into his lungs.

Pilar slurped down her remaining spinach and balanced the bowl atop the mound of dirty dishes in the sink. She took her phone with her into the bathroom, idly tested the loose knob to see if it had somehow fixed itself since she'd left, and flicked on the lights. The exhaust fan in the ceiling labored through the cobwebs and rust between its blades and started spinning. It whined and tinked and then started to rasp, getting louder and louder until it drowned out the swarm and threatened to rattle cracks in the ceiling.

Pilar glanced into the mirror but didn't let her eyes linger. She pulled down her sweats and kicked them beneath the door so a fold or two might delay a hasty entry. She sat on the toilet and clicked open the in-private web browser on her phone.

She had a routine. She needed one with how little time she had to herself. First were pictures she'd curated from social media and hidden away in an obscure hosting site. Not usually friends, but friends of friends who looked through her screen like they knew what she was doing. Some were dressed for dances. A few older siblings wore tight jeans and club shirts. The wrestlers in the collection weren't wearing much at all—singlets, jean shorts, trunks. Candid shots from the gym, in a practice ring, sweaty from an evening run.

About forty photos in, there was a picture of B. She was on the beach, the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse blurry in the background. She was standing back-to-back with her ex-boyfriend, each with their hands folded into pistol-shapes and pointing skyward. The boyfriend was raising an eyebrow to the camera, and B was trying but failing to do the same. Her forehead looked like it was being pulled with wire, and beneath her goofy, embarrassed smile, Pilar saw the strain betraying B's sincere effort to correctly arrange her face.

The boyfriend was wearing board shorts and a backward baseball cap. B's green and blue bikini fit perfectly. Drying seawater curled her hair. Loose strands caught the wind, frizzed out, and disappeared into the blue behind her. Pilar never understood why so many girls imitated that stupid Charlie's Angels pose until she first saw the photo. B was what every brace-face, slump-shouldered girl was going for. What every hot mess thought she was. It was like someone had measured the curves of her biceps, chest, and

thighs to compliment perfectly. The picture was taken the previous summer. B had put on a little weight since then. It wasn't a lot, but Pilar knew B would never again look like she did in the photo. She was beautiful in the way she could have only been at that exact moment. That B was gone, and would soon be farther gone, pushed deeper into the past by vats of fryer grease and employee-discount chicken nuggets.

The photo reminded Pilar of how absolutely not like B she would've appeared to someone who could see her. Phone in her left hand. The right between her legs. Her elbow resting on the sink countertop for support. Her head and back sharply bent so the screen would fill her vision. One leg braced against the wall. The other searching for purchase on the bathtub's outer rim. Pants down. Ratty T-shirt wrinkled and damp. She imagined herself a rock climber wedged into an impossible spot—sweaty, straining, losing her grip.

Pilar closed her cache and moved to videos. She had a few go-to's she'd stream from a free site. She routinely thought about ripping these videos, even if Dom routinely handled her phone. It'd been really fucking hard to find porn with attractive people that showed the guy's face once in a while, with actors that appeared to care about how their partner's genitals would feel after the shoot was over.

When she was close, she kept the sounds going quietly in the background and punched in the address to a site specializing in amateur art. She clicked through the browsing tree, through communities dedicated to movie posters, superheroes, and comics. The link to the portion of the website labeled *NSFW* appeared midway down the page. A three-digit exponent indicated the number of subcategories, more than any community on

the site. A pixelated emoticon next to the link depicted a smiley face peering through a pair of white gloves.

No matter how many times she'd done it, Pilar felt a twinge of perversion whenever she clicked the link. In the moment, it always felt kind of dangerous, like she was scaling a fence meant to keep people like her out. There were women all over the site. Artists. Commenters. Lurkers. Girls that, like her, had stumbled into the site one day and lied about their age to follow their curiosity where it willed them. Despite the abundant evidence to the contrary, Pilar was drawn to imagine the space as one built for men, by men—a place where she could glimpse into minds so ravenous for pleasure they'd been compelled to create something entirely new and often times wildly exotic to satisfy their lust. Yet, afterwards, when Pilar's vision widened beyond the search for her preferred niche, the thrill of trespass faded into an awareness of her surroundings, of how deep she'd dug, and how easy it would be to keep going.

But she kept coming back. The drawings hastened and intensified what her imagination, photos, or video could do. Viewing them suddenly made sense of so many fascinations Pilar barely knew she'd had—strange, unshared obsessions stretching back into childhood. Her clamshell bath toys chomping her boats and plastic fish. The afternoon feeding ants to the creatures buried under the tiny, conical sand pits beneath the evergreen tree at the end of her block. Hours spent kneeling in front of her mother's square television, adjusting the rabbit ears to get a clearer picture of a nature show. The animals: always somewhere else, always looking for food.

She found a sequence posted just a few hours before. In the first panel was a monstrous Venus flytrap, its neon green and violet leaves blending with its alien jungle

surroundings. In the next was a human couple, beautiful and naked, with immense insect wings sprouting from their backs. Lost in each other, they didn't notice their proximity to the trap's gaping leaves and sharp teeth. The panels depicted their unwitting approach. Closer, closer, closer.

Pilar heard the apartment door fly open. Before it crunched a delivery box preventing the knob from punching a hole in the drywall, she'd closed her browser. Labored footsteps shuffled to the sink, where a light and the water turned on.

Pilar let the momentum of her rolling eyes pull her head back as far as her neck would allow. She thrust her lower jaw forward and the guitar-string tension near her collarbone offered some release. She dressed and flushed nothing and ran the sink water. Salmon-colored mildew ringed the drain and the faucets.

Outside she saw Dom. Paying no mind to the noise, he was shoving dishes and pans aside and splashing water on his face. He was shirtless, bruised, and crooked.

"You still up?" he said.

"I think you just woke half the building," Pilar said.

"No one sleeps in places like this."

"Cause of neighbors like you." Pilar reached back into the darkened bathroom and tossed her brother one of the tattered, matted hand towels hanging on the loosened rack. Dom held it up a little in thanks, then buried his face in it.

"Barlow's Mobile Motel not happening tonight, huh?" Pilar said.

"Bug got in. Kept buzzing my ear."

"Ugh. Hate that."

Dom hung the towel on a cabinet knob. It gripped for a second and then fell on the floor.

“You take some of this?” Dom asked, popping the lid from the tub of protein powder.

“Didn’t have much of a choice.”

Dom grabbed an old cottage cheese container off the stack, gave it a quick rinse, then scooped a bunch of powder in. “Good. You need to get used to this shit.”

The futon needed a bulldozer to clear everything off, so Pilar scouted for the sharpest and hardest items and tossed them aside. “So, what was your problem at Solomon’s?”

Dom mixed his drink and shrugged.

She tugged on the end of a weight belt that felt like it had burrowed into the cushion. Dom’s weight belt. It seemed like most of the crap on her bed was his.

“I’m serious. You get into these fucking moods. Then you ignore it, and I have to wait until it happens again.”

Dom slurped and chuckled. “You think I’m bad. Just wait.”

“Fucking can it with that. For all your wise-elder bullshit, you’re the one who’s consistently the biggest pain in my ass.”

“I’m the only one that treats you like a wrestler. You don’t want to know what you are to everyone else.”

Just fucking shut up, Pilar thought. She uncovered a bag of toy axes and threw them on Dom’s bed. Her brother had no idea the kind of shit any girl dealt with walking

down the street every day, let alone what she had to face in wrestling gyms six days a week.

“You do realize that as good as you look, no one could give a shit, right? Pilar said. Drop you into a crowd and you’re just some muscled dudebro who could go the whole day without a single person noticing you.”

“Oh, I know,” Dom said, licking the protein-stache accumulating above his upper lip.

Pilar crumpled a stack of junk mail into a box of loose paper and pushed it toward Dom’s bed, revealing an outlet. She plugged her phone in and untangled her power cord so that it could reach the futon.

“Keep the noise down,” she said, squeezing into bed, “or you’ll be driving all day tomorrow.”

“That reminds me. You’ve got a tryout with Bonnie at four.”

She sat straight up. “What?”

“Three hours before curtain. She wants to see what you can do with someone from the roster.”

Pilar got up, knocking her phone to the floor, and stomped over. “You tell me this the day before?”

“That’s right. Aren’t you ready?”

“And I get nothing about when or where or even who I’m working with?”

“So should I tell her you’re hurt?”

“Drop this shit!” Pilar yelled as she shoved Dom’s chest. A glop of protein drink splattered on the countertop. “Fucking christ, just talk to me like you’re actually my brother for thirty fucking seconds.”

Three solid thwacks boomed through the kitchen wall, rattling the dishes. Muffled Spanish followed. The sounds tensed Dom for a moment before he took a breath and spoke, almost in a whisper.

“Look, this was the best I could do. Just got the official word after we drove up. I know it’s shitty, but this is how Bonnie works. You’ve got to be ready to go at a moment’s notice.” Dom was gritting his teeth, like it took him massive effort to peek through the façade.

“You could’ve came up and told me,” Pilar said.

“I didn’t want to wake you up.”

“For something like this, you fucking wake me up. Okay?”

Dom swallowed a counterargument and nodded. They went over a few logistics for the next day and parted ways—Dom to the bathroom, Pilar back to bed. She stared at the light under the door and her mind tussled between every word for *thank you* and *fuck you* she knew. What she’d heard about Bonnie Blue peppered the spectrum between genius and bat-shit crazy. With Dom’s tenure in the company paving a path for her, MCW was the only promotion she had more than a lottery’s chance with, but still, ceding this much control over her official debut felt like the worst move she could make. Riding in atop the coattails of her middling, journeyman brother didn’t scream badassery or mint dollars, but the business was the business, and as weak and fake as it felt, she had to remind herself that a mega-star was almost never plucked from obscurity. Most women

wrestlers retired before 30. She had half the time to climb the same ladder that Dom or any man had to ascend. She fucking hated it, but she had to take any leg up she could get.

Dom emerged from the bathroom and fell into bed. After a second, he grunted and rolled out, wobbling to the kitchen to turn off the light. Wall to wall, the walk wasn't much more than half the distance between the ring ropes.

He muttered goodnight. Pilar had a dozen different replies, but nothing came out.

In minutes, Dom was asleep. Pilar checked the time on her phone, the blue glow from the flower on her lock screen seemed to flicker, slowing the light's travel across the ceiling. Dom's snores were instantaneous and about as loud as the clatter he'd made earlier. Pilar's eyelids were racked out of reach.

She tapped open her browser and reloaded the comic. In one of the middle panels, the flytrap had closed over the man's torso. His body had slipped between the teeth, but his wings were bent and punctured. Terrified, he grasped his partner, who tried desperately to free him. But the flytrap didn't let go. In subsequent panels, it drew him deeper into the pod. The man gasped for air while the woman tore and slashed the trap without noticing the green tendril slowly wrapping around her ankle.

Without viewing the final panels, Pilar turned off the phone and listened to the fridge kick on, the footsteps of their upstairs neighbor, and the drone of the swarm outside, so strong and unvarying it seemed it would never end.

Chapter Five: The Yucca Mountain Coffee Shop

Dom was an early riser, and he didn't need an alarm. In his wrestling youth, when the money he was pulling from the Ohio Valley shaded his eyes from the future's uncertainty, he'd sometimes pin an hour of shuteye before tossing awake, his joints complaining, his skull heavy like stale iron.

Now, though Dom had never looked healthier, his shrunken waistline and newly defined muscles did not wind back a decade of abuse. He was barely old enough to rent a car, but in wrestling years, he was well into middle age. For his entire career, he'd been redlining his body. It was only a matter of time before the naivety of youth sloughed away and exposed his mind to the reality of what was happening to him. These days, unless he'd hit something hard, he slept in a dozen thirty minute naps each night. Since Pilar moved in, he'd prohibited himself from getting out of bed more than twice before morning.

Sleep always came, but it never stayed for long. At home, in the car, on the concrete in a hidden corner of a venue, fatigue could drag him under. Dom's final waking thoughts would escalate and seep into his dream space so that he often jolted himself into consciousness convinced that the Civic's saggy tire had turned molten, eating through the vehicle's rims, or that the touch of bursitis in his elbow had swelled and ruptured with a thousand spaghetti-sized worms.

If Dom committed, he could gather enough sleep so that he could make it through a day, but often, the cycle wore him down. Around four, he'd quit sleep and venture

out—sometimes to run, sometimes to a twenty-four hour gym franchise he'd been given free access to by a misaligned owner who once saw Dom's face on an MCW promo card. On mornings like the morning after the Sumter Freedom Fest, when Dom's back ached like he'd been shouldering a pallet of bricks all night, when stepping outside felt like breathing over a boiling pot, Dom folded himself into his gray sweats, limped out the door, and gradually increased his pace until his muscles loosened their grip and he could sprint down the dark, deserted streets.

After a mile, the sweat from Dom's pits and chest had merged into a single blotch creeping down his hoodie. The damp fabric hung from him, and he thought how strange it was to feel so much heavier than when he'd started running, but still a completely different kind of heavy than he'd been a year ago. He knew taking off the cumbersome sweats would feel like shedding five pounds, although it would be mostly water weight, a lie. There wasn't anything healthy about running like a high school kid trying to drop a weight class, but it felt good, if only in comparison to the train wreck of rolling out of bed and the shock of pain in his lower back.

With each footfall, the length of Dom's sciatic nerve pulsed in stark relief from the muscle in his right leg. He felt like it was trying to find a way out of him, to snag itself on a tree root or the protruding barbs of a chain link fence and rip through his skin. The jolts were comforting in that they made sense. The botched suplex had bruised his tailbone, compressed his spine, irritated discs which had already been pushed far beyond their recommended mileage. He'd felt this kind of thing before. He had an alchemist's recipe of stretches, icing, and salves to treat it, or at least to focus his mind elsewhere. It hurt, but he wasn't injured. He could increase his pace. He could run faster.

In Charlotte, early Sunday morning was the city at its quietest. Too early for church. Too late for most of the drunks. Corporate-types were high up in their towers tangled in unnaturally white sheets or else flung far past the beltway in labyrinthine neighborhoods connected by leafy divided highways. In Dom's part of town, over the red eyes landing at Douglas and the air conditioners struggling in bedroom windows, you could hear the click of changing traffic lights. Pounding pavement, Dom could easily imagine himself at the center of it all, even though the downtown lights were far in the distance. How many of the city's best had he beaten awake? How many worked harder than him, hurt more than him? The marathoners, the gym rats, hell, even the pro football players, how many could he put down at their own game? For Dom, the city's silence was far louder than the roar of a capacity crowd. He had more excuses than anyone to stay in bed, to take it easy. Yet here he was, endorphins flooding out the pain, his second mile over more quickly than his first.

"On your left, buddy," said a voice so close, Dom thought he felt a tongue on his earlobe. Startled, Dom shot right, caught his toe on the curb and stumbled, narrowly avoiding a headless parking meter that seemed bent and sharpened specifically to impale.

"Oh, my bad!" the voice said, now in front of Dom. He was a kid. High school or a painfully babyfaced college runt. He turned his head only long enough to make sure Dom hadn't become one with the sidewalk then continued forward at a gazelle's pace. He was shirtless, skeletal and stringy. If his balls had dropped, his fluorescent green shorts wouldn't have been long enough to keep the kid decent.

Dom's toe burned like he'd super-kicked the leg of his futon. Once he swallowed a howl and overrode his instinct to crumple into the gutter, he stoked his boilers and

cranked his engines full ahead. The whole of him shuddered and, after a handful of ugly strides, he fell into gear. His target was already fifty yards ahead, bounding efficiently over potholes and street trash, but Dom locked on and gave chase.

The kid was built like a radio mast. Dom couldn't believe he could stand unsupported. His calves could be circled by a middle finger and thumb, and Dom was certain he could break his femur with one hand. The kid's number two buzz atop shaved sides was brutally honest about the shape of his head. Dom wanted to sit him down, feed him an almond butter milkshake, and ask him what the fuck he was doing with those meager biceps and that squirrely haircut in this part of town. He wanted to tell the kid, whose name would probably be Mason as in Mason Jar, a nickname pinned to him by his track friends one night after huffing cheap solvents because they were too afraid to nick their stepdads' beer, that running only got a man so far, that eventually, when his knees bowed and his heels burst through his paper-thin skin, the kid would wish he'd had the guts to turn and fight. He wanted to run this bony motherfucker down, give him a scalpel, and guide his hand across Dom's elbows and hips so the boy could see how much scar tissue looked like cancer. And without washing the blood from his hands, Dom would take out his wallet to prove that there would come a time in the not-so-distant future where they'd be practically the same age.

But first, Dom had to catch him.

The kid floated above the pavement, his rhythm easy and quick. Dom's initial burst of energy closed the gap, but he tired quickly, and the kid kept going. Dom sucked in heavy air and reached deep in his well. A frenzy of desperate strides earned him ground, but he gave it right back when he couldn't sustain the speed. When the kid took a

corner generously wide, Dom seethed. The kid surely heard the wrestler's feet slapping the road, but he never turned. The back of his head said all the kid needed to say.

Still Dom chased. He ran until his lungs filled with phlegm. He ran until he could barely see the jarhead over a line of parked cars. He ran until the kid disappeared past the cloud of dust he'd left for Dom, and then, as if his oil tank had sprung a leak, Dom's muscles seized and he ground to a halt.

A regular cup of joe at Yucca Mountain Coffee tasted like spicy Band-Aids. The help was lousy and turned over constantly. The building had once been a pop-up church for a group of Catholic charismatics no one could remember appearing or vanishing. A couple of the surviving pews were tacked together into creaky booths around particleboard tables. Under the grime fit for a gas station bathroom, the floor tile formed a mosaic of a figure in a nun's habit holding a rose and kneeling in a sunbeam. The tile above the nun's shoulders had been smashed and crudely filled with epoxy, but a graffiti-scratched metal plaque hammered into the wall indentified the woman as Rita of Cascia, the patron saint of impossible causes.

As often as Dom heard the term "caffeine junkie" thrown around by people wearing branded workout clothes, in his experience Yucca Mountain was the rare coffee joint in which the clientele earned the title. There were no smiles among men and women who'd filed in with the dim sunrise and taken their silently agreed-upon seats. Even the vacancies radiated focus, the fallout turning away most casual clientele who happened to stumble in. Unlike the slugs slipping from their barstools at closing time after a wrestling show, Yucca Mountain's crowd was more difficult to pin down. After many visits, Dom

was still trying to read what the details were telling him. The time of day. The average distance between nose and screen. The ubiquity of fishbowl-sized cups, mugs, and thermoses with no trace of a Yucca Mountain logo. The trim, tasteful outfits. The fact that no one inside the shop was older than fifty.

Most, like Dom, came for the Yucca Mountain Sludge, which was off-menu and never discussed. Dom had discovered the drink right before Pilar moved in. Repairs on the Civic and a dry spell in MCW had sucked away the last of Dom's Ohio Valley savings. His cupboards were so spare, he was counting calories to determine precisely how far he could stretch his remaining food. He happened upon the shop in a neighborhood close to his apartment. It was on a corner he'd passed many times and had always assumed was vacant. After Dom wedged his girth into a booth and stewed for a spell, pretending his glass of water was something of substance, he nearly cracked a tooth when a man sitting next to him shot to his feet. The man had been playing his tiny laptop like a concert pianist when he flipped his computer closed and stormed out of the shop with the device cocked behind his head like he wanted to throw it into orbit. Later on when Dom had mustered the will to walk back into the world, he picked up the cup the man had left behind to return it to the counter, and he caught a whiff. The brew smelled like scorched earth and was thicker than oil. The man had been sipping it like warm milk.

Dom had to taste it, and once he got over the feeling he'd been poisoned, he thrust the cup under the patchy beard of the guy behind the counter and demanded to know what it was.

"I don't know, man. I'm sorry. I just started here."

"But, you made it, right?"

“Does anyone make anything anymore, man?”

Dom narrowed his eyes, and the barista’s smile fell down his throat. The kid was a foot shorter than him and about half as wide as Dom.

“Listen, hoss, I swear I don’t know. There’s a tub of it in back, and I just ladle it out to whoever asks. I’m not even supposed to tell you that.”

“What’s it cost?”

“Seventy five dollars.”

“No, I mean for a cup.”

“That’s what I meant. Seventy five dollars.”

“Yeah, nice rib. Seriously, buddy. I’m not in the mood.”

“What’s wrong with my ribs?” the barista asked, poking around his chest as if he’d sprung a leak.

“Fuck, nothing,” Dom said, squeezing the corners of his mouth together. “Just tell me what’s in the goddamned coffee.”

“Jesus, man. I’m sorry. I swear, literally just put on an apron, and already it’s like I have to decide whether I’m going to piss you off or start blabbing about proprietary business secrets and shit, man. Jesus Haitch.”

Dom glanced around. Their conversation had likely exceeded the weekly average number of words uttered in the shop, but no one had bothered to turn their way. The guy behind the counter clicked his tongue and emitted a low, uncertain wolf-whistle. When he saw that Dom noticed it, he sucked in his lips and set his jaw. He strained to keep his lips closed, but like a tic, another whistle escaped. *Woot-woo.*

Before the barista could stumble through an explanation, he'd whistled again and looked ready to melt through the floor drain. There was no doubt some instance, perhaps in his childhood, where the tic had ticked at the wrong time for someone too unkind to take it as anything but a come-on, and the barista had paid for it. Dom, sensing the opportunity, stretched his neck toward him with veins bulging and cocked his head. Terrified, the barista whistled again and shut his eyes, but opened them when Dom echoed his call.

Woot-woo. Dom whistled.

Woot-woo? the barista uttered, unsure of what he'd just heard.

Woot-woo, Dom returned.

The barista's next whistle hiccupped out of him, eyes wide with surprise. Dom changed up his next whistle into a dove call. The tone was way off, but the cadence was more or less on point. Dom smiled, and a new wave of panic swept over the barista but quickly faded. He clutched the counter and swallowed hard, his face contorting as if he'd eaten something spicy. He took a long breath and held it.

Woot-woot-woo, the barista whistled.

Dom didn't know any more bird calls, so he whistled the first few bars of the song Hulk Hogan always used as his entrance music. The barista thought for a second and picked up the next few notes. Soon, the barista was whistling the lyrics and Dom the lead guitar, and when they joined together on the chorus, Dom was pumping his fist and the barista was drumming on the countertop and stamping his foot for the bass. Red-faced and huffing, they belted out the last few notes. When it was over, a woman near the door

clapped vigorously for a few seconds, then snapped back to her phone screen like it had never happened.

“Holy shit, bro,” the barista wheezed. That was the best thing that’s ever happened to me!”

“I’m surprised you’re a fan of the Hulkster.”

“You have no idea how many people freak the fuck out when I do that. Kind and reasonable people. Men, women, children. You can’t whistle like that at kids, man. I’ve had the cops called on me. And here a man of your size and obviously higher-than-average testosterone levels—I was flashing back, man. Trauma. One day I walked around in public with twenty clothespins on my lips. Cut off all the blood flow. How did you know to do that, man? You’re a freaking saint. A god-damned seer.”

“Sometimes I get lucky reading people.”

“I’m really good at anticipating a beating, and I was already planning tonight’s icing regimen. You should go into practice.”

“You haven’t seen when I’m not so lucky,” Dom said, popping his thumb. “Now about that—”

“I hear you, man. The coffee. I know what I can do. Wait right here. Don’t move. No sudden movements now. You big lug you. Wow. Shit-on-a-stick.”

The barista disappeared into the back of the shop and quickly returned with a black garbage bag which appeared at first to be empty, but the barista discretely opened it and wafted out the smell—strong enough to wilt nerve endings.

“Some guy came by yesterday and hauled away like fifty pounds of this stuff,” the barista whispered. “I think it’s the spent grounds they make the drink from. I took a

little off the top. Impossible to notice. I bet if you throw a little of that into ole Mr. Coffee at home, you might not be drinking what they're all drinking, but you'll be feeling good, man. Really good."

The barista slipped the bag under the counter, tied it off, and slid it across to Dom, who balled up the bag until it could fit in his fist. There must've been less than a cup of grounds inside.

"Level with me, brother," Dom said. "What kinda secret sauce you brewing here?"

"Bro. On my life. That could be unicorn shit. I wouldn't have a clue."

MCW had only tested Dom once, right before his interview with Bonnie Blue. They'd ushered him into her office directly from the pisser. He'd never heard his results. Tests were a formality for a promoter like Bonnie, who knew on sight what was and wasn't helping Dom. But there was always the chance, however slim, that someone up Northeast would give him a call, someone who had to worry about public relations and stockholders and federals seeking a scandal to redirect the public eye.

Dom thanked the barista, who stuck out his hand. His thumb stretched for the top of Dom's knuckles like a climber losing his grip.

"You big guys are all right," the barista said. "Some of these skeletal motherfuckers act like the world has it out for them."

Dom felt his lip twitch. He flared his nostrils and used the proximity of the coffee grounds as an excuse to tense up and grip the shit out of the barista's hand. A squeak slid out of the kid, and Dom let go. Still, no one seated in the shop seemed to notice Dom, even when he opened the door to leave and disturbed a cluster of jingle bells hanging

from the stopper, even when Dom waved through the front window and the barista emitted a loud *woot-woo*.

Several months later and forty pounds lighter, Dom was a regular at Yucca Mountain, though he hadn't spent a cent there nor joined the entranced figures in the pews. At home, he'd tossed the grounds in a dusty moka pot salvaged from his mother's place. The resulting sludge rushed straight to his brain stem, his spine igniting like it was clamped between jumper cables. Though Dom was a few credits shy of the pharmacy degrees earned by many of his older colleagues, he'd experienced the highs of most mainstream stimulants and knew the sludge was something else entirely. He wasn't made jittery or stronger, but he cared a lot less about anything past or future. After a few casual slurps leading to an afternoon of Sunday driving the Civic until it ran out of gas, and another instance in which he fell into a YouTube hole watching a guy from New Zealand taste-test military rations, Dom realized the sludge demanded a more experimental approach. Drinking before a workout rendered him acutely interested in a single exercise. He found himself losing track of time and executing set after set of skull crushers, reducing the weight until he could barely lift the naked bar. He tried drinking just after he woke up, and within minutes he was completing the word puzzles and simple mazes on the box of his store brand Apple Jacks. Though he never felt chemically motivated, he did experience a sense of accomplishment and appreciation for the team of artists who at that very moment in some corporate tower were being paid to design and draw the next set of breakfast-box diversions. Thoughts of this strange occupation satisfied him until

lunchtime, when the sludge's effects slackened so that he was able to resist a detour to the grocery store cereal aisle and drive himself straight to the gym.

Dom determined the best time to drink was just before a match. The jolt through his nervous system created a physical threshold between performance and the real world, and the enhanced satisfaction with the present helped him shrug off botches and prevented him from over-thinking dangerous spots. The big moves still hurt, and Dom was glad for that. In the long term, something that dulled or blocked the pain was always bad news. But with a small squeeze bottle of sludge down his gullet, Dom could sense an added dimension to the pain, like he was witnessing the bass-kick of a back bump or the sharp sting of a chop across his chest with the fans outside the rail. Each strike he absorbed fit neatly into long history of scrapes, blows, stretches—a lifetime of injuries minor and life-threatening scarred into his tendons, etched into his bones. It was remarkable he had endured and could continue to take such punishment.

The prospect of dealing with the whistling barista again had almost convinced Dom to forget Yucca Mountain loosen his belt for a pound of extra-strong, grocery store espresso, but his early tests with the sludge demanded refinement. Though Dom returned to the shop exactly one week after his first visit, there was a new and visibly green college-aged woman behind the counter. Dom wasn't looking forward to a second runaround, but when he asked about the grounds, the new barista disappeared through an *Employee's Only* door and emerged with a small sour cream container in hand. Dom opened it and, sure enough, reeled back like a claw had yanked out his nose hairs all at once. He asked the barista how much, and she said it was on the house.

The ease of obtaining his second batch unnerved Dom. He considered trashing it, but instead tossed it into the back of his fridge. Within a day, the smell had permeated his lunchmeat and homemade tortillas. He tried entombing the container in Ziploc and doming it in the butter compartment with a bunch of baking soda, but the smell soaked him each time he needed something cold.

Eventually, he broke down, brewed a cup, boiled the shit out of it, and let a few drips of the liquid sit on his tongue for a while. Reasonably convinced the drink wouldn't liquefy his insides, he downed it through clenched teeth. Soon after, the sludge's familiar effects rolled in.

Every few weeks, Dom's trip up the Mountain was punctuated by a new worker behind the counter. All of them followed the same procedure. Spent grounds. No charge. Dom asked a few point blank what was up, and they all became avoidant or nervous or just as unhinged as the first guy. When he tried working them, the most he could extract was that they'd been told explicitly and as a condition of their employment to provide Dom with his ration of grounds, no questions asked. Their instructions involving Dom seemed to be just one set in a long, long list that might have, Dom imagined, covered every Yucca Mountain regular. Early on, he felt like a fugitive—skulking into the shop, taking the handoff, then disappearing into the morning haze—but after a few weeks, picking up his grounds became just another errand among many needed to keep himself in wrestling shape. A decade in the ring meant maintenance costs were climbing. Being able to write off a small slice of that as a glitch in his favor more than paid for the fear that he'd stumbled upon something he'd one day regret. Taking now and facing consequences later was instinct. Even though Dom's profession, founded on its

audiences' naivety, attracted a higher rate of liars, cheats, and pure sociopaths than most industries, what felt like conspiracy would typically be exposed as coincidence or incompetence. The likelihood that the sludge was something more than uniquely strong, abhorrently expensive coffee was slim. The manager, whoever that was, might have thought Dom homeless, and so in ordering his employees to dispense to him what was bound for the dumpster, saved them all the indignity of a curiously husky transient diving for his fix, making all kinds of untrendy racket. Anyone charging seventy-five dollars for a cup of anything would have to find a way to sleep at night, and Dom, with his swamp cult beard and ratty workout clothes, certainly looked the part.

And so, Yucca Mountain became habit. Dom ran, sweat, walked in, nodded his head at poor, pixilated Rita lying headless on the floor, picked up his grounds, and left. Nothing gave him pause until the morning after the Sumter County Freedom Festival, after he'd been burned by the human stick insect. He saw the Omegle girl.

She was facing the door, her pew booth to the right of Rita's rose. Her hair was down, frizzy but not wild, and she was wearing the same Warrior Football hoodie she wore the previous evening. It was gray like Dom's sweats, both outfits so idiosyncratic in the shop that one might have thought they were together. Her legs were stretched across her pew like she was reclining on a loveseat, and she was staring directly at Dom.

Had she not immediately lowered her gaze back to her laptop screen, Dom might have frozen in the doorway. Recognizing anyone from the Internet in three-dimensional space, even some of his old Tinder matches after a meeting had been planned, was difficult. Running into a chat partner chosen at random from thousands of users in a place

he frequented every week was frightening. A person he'd written out of his life was sitting right in front of him. It was like seeing a ghost.

Her averted eyes gave Dom permission to enter the shop. He took a few halting steps and remembered this was the first time she'd seen his face. She'd been so insistent in the chat that it almost felt like Dom had given in, but he hadn't. She knew him only by the still image of his torso and his dogged insistence on proper capitalization.

Behind the counter this month was guy around Dom's age who was so maddeningly crisp, Dom imagined breaking him in two just to hear the snap.

"Good morning, sir," he said. "The usual?"

Dom grunted in assent, and while the barista took the well-worn trip to the back, Dom steadied himself against the countertop. The Omegle girl was typing. Every few words she'd toss a hand in the air to let gravity slide the cuff of her shirt up her arm. From his angle he couldn't see what was on her screen.

"Here you are, sir," the returning barista said with a slight, reverent rise in his brow. It was like the asshole was practicing to be the world's most pretentious butler. "Will you be enjoying anything else this morning?"

Dom shook his head no and burrowed the container, an old Greek yogurt cup this time, into his hoodie pouch, ripping the opening so a little more fabric hung frayed and dog-eared. His next move, usually, was to leave, walk home, or if he was busy later, head to the gym. If he could breeze right past her, and that would be it—unless she was back the next time, Yucca Mountain claiming yet another worshipper. But simply leaving her felt wrong. This was an opportunity, though for what Dom wasn't sure. He had nothing to say to her. Her puffy, frazzled veneer didn't prompt fantasies of what might be found

underneath. She still looked young, very young, and that rattled in Dom's mind because he'd never seen a teenager in Yucca Mountain. He thought she might've been one of those high-voiced women who skipped straight from puppy dog eyes to crow's feet, but then he remembered she hadn't spoke in the chat. This uncertainty sparked doubt—what if he was mistaken? What if it was some other girl? Maybe they both had boyfriends on the same football team. The low quality of her webcam could have easily hidden major differences in appearance. He couldn't recall specifics of eye or hair color. Height was a complete unknown. The girl in front of him wasn't wearing glasses.

“Sir. Sir? Could you please step aside so I may serve the guest behind you?”

Dom shuffled out of the way for a Yucca Mountain regular who was scratching her temple with a credit card. As soon as Dom had cleared her path, she sprang forward and slammed her card on the counter.

Dom couldn't remember who the Omegle girl had replaced in her booth. Might it have been the same girl the whole time? There was only one way to know for sure, but Dom's throat was dry, his tongue a loaf of cold bologna. His legs refused to move him into her line of sight.

“Order for Caitlin,” the barista called. Dom stumbled over himself when the Omegle girl popped up and approached the counter. She was bent over her phone and only raised her eyes so she could navigate around a pew's sharp corner.

“Enjoy,” the barista said, handing her a tall, clear beer mug of brown liquid with a melting whipped cream cap.

She made a noise which might have meant *thanks* and took her drink to the accoutrements table, an arm's reach away from Dom, who felt every square inch of his

massive frame. She picked through the glass shakers in the spice rack and looked surprised by the unusual offerings—pulverized eggshells, powdered peanut butter, cayenne pepper, cardamom, pink salt from parts unknown. Dom thought a regular would know exactly what to grab. When the Omegle girl inspected a thermos cryptically labeled *RAW*, Dom saw her wrists were wrapped with a number of rubber bands and hair ties on the outside of her shirt cuffs.

“Do you know what this is?” she said. Her voice was deep, maybe a little hoarse. Much less sardonic than Pilar’s.

Dom didn’t say anything at first, but then she looked up at him and a *no* somehow bubbled out.

“This place is kind of fucky. Especially for this neighborhood.” she said. She poured a spot of *RAW* into her hand, stuck her nose in it, and immediately turned away. “Woof. Do not try that.” She took a whiff of peanut butter next and, after a more positive reaction, shook some on top of her drink’s cone of whipped cream. “You come here a lot?”

“Kinda,” Dom said. “But I never hang around.”

The girl unwrapped a straw and sank it into her drink. “Then whatcha doin’ back here?”

Dom had nothing for that. He scrunched his shoulders into something like a shrug and completely lost control of his face.

The girl, *Caitlin* if the dry-erase calligraphy on her mug was accurate, offered a suspicious nod and returned to her pew. Dom, rocked by his inability to bullshit his way through a simple conversation, slinked into an empty booth near the rear of the shop,

under what might have once been a font for holy water. Caitlin edged back into her pew, fired off a text, mixed the cream and peanut powder into her drink, and sipped.

Dom scratched a trench into the table's soft wood with his thumbnail. He couldn't look at Caitlin, even the back of her head, without his cheeks feeling hot. Why? He thought. What the fuck was it about this girl, this little girl, that made him feel green as turtle shit? Though Dom had nothing to do with her appearance in the shop, the encounter was his to own. He knew her face, and he knew what she'd wanted to see. She'd been curious about him, his body. Desirous. Insistent.

Dom's hand slid to his hip, across his sweats' elastic waistband and down his thigh. He wanted his phone. It was instinct to reach for it in situations in which there was no right place to look, but he'd been running. His pockets were empty.

He cursed himself for not buying one of those arm-band phone pouches. He cursed himself for obliterating his last phone during a run-in with a possum, that fucking devil-spawn. He scratched the table and watched his thumbnail pale and redden with the pressure. He peered under his brow across the shop and determined he was the only one without a device. Even the barista was tapping away at a tablet docked on the ordering counter.

She wasn't the first to ask Dom to show more. Her persistence, her youth, her openness—he'd seen it all before. Yet, as he cowered in the booth, he felt exposed, as if this person he'd never met, who wasn't even looking at him, could see every single fucked up thing he'd done.

He wanted to leave, but he was compelled to watch, and so he saw her down half her drink then grow tired of it. He saw her bob her head like she was laughing at

something on her laptop, likely the same machine she'd used to chat with him. He saw her turn away from her screen and remain still for a spell. Maybe she was lost in thought, or maybe her body was trying to decide if the caffeine or the early morning cobwebs were going to win out. He noticed a few regulars in the shop, men and women both, had levered their eyes away from their devices to join him in looking at her, as if they'd all read the Omegle chat log and knew exactly who she was. And finally Dom saw one of them, a skinny-fat guy with a pressed shirt and designed bed head, stroll up to her from his entrenchments next to one of the shop's large windows. They chatted for a minute, and midway through the conversation he flexed his bicep, jokingly pushing it up with his index finger. The girl laughed and with a tip of her mug gestured him to sit down.

Chapter Six: The Queen City Skyport

“This business is like a desert,” Clout told Bonnie the day of her contract signing for a managerial position at Mid-Coast Championship Wrestling. “You’d think only madmen would try their luck with it.” Clout licked the point of his pen and handed it to Bonnie. She twirled it between her fingers, turned the contract’s pages, and scored her name like a figure skater on fresh ice.

Clout watched her flourish and smiled. “And you know what? You’d be right. We’ve all got something reckless inside us. When you bake under those lights long enough, when you’ve shivered yourself to sleep in all those cheap motels, instinct takes over. You realize that you have to move, and you have to keep moving. The moment you become comfortable with where you are, that’s when this business will eat you. It sweeps you up in a dust storm and buries you alive. If you’re smart, you don’t tie yourself down. You discover pockets of life, tiny oases that have withstood the droughts and provide just enough to keep you going. And you keep going, because you know that one day, maybe years from now, the rain will come. When it does, and you’re one of the few that had the strength to survive, the desert will bloom. All that dry sand will explode in color, and you will be there, a honeybee in paradise, ready to drink your fill.”

2005 was a dry year in the industry, a difficult time to launch a new wrestling promotion. The business was regressing from its zenith in the late 90s, when the clash of Vince McMahon and Ted Turner’s titanic companies elevated a handful of wrestlers into multimedia megastars. Territories which had once been perennial hotbeds for wrestling

fans were supersaturated with product. The glut of it—a dozen TV shows, a million crossovers and marketing angles and failed attempts to wrestle-ify music, Hollywood, and pro football—quickly gave consumers more than they could ever want. When the fad ended and the rains receded, many of those reliable havens for the business were no longer interested. The people had changed. Wrestling had changed. McMahon’s company survived by corporatizing, gobbling up its competition, making ad deals with other corporate giants, transforming its product from pseudo-sport to variety show. The fans that remained begrudgingly followed.

MCW couldn’t compete with an industry reoriented to entertain at any cost. They stuck with what had worked—the squared circle, the competitors, the conflict, matches worked the old way. MCW never filled a venue. It didn’t make headlines. The promotion earned just enough to keep floating, finding new ways to rake in a few dollars against all the dips and recessions and infinitely expanding options an average person had to burn free time. Satellite shows exploited wrestling-friendly gatherings at festivals, fairs, concerts, and races. MCW was one of the first to stream their major shows online, cutting out the cable-providers which had been a blood-leeching but nonetheless necessary staple of pro wrestling business models for a quarter century. MCW lost a lot of their best talent to the big leagues, but maintained a serviceable stable of men and women, and among them, a few minor stars that either hadn’t cared or thought enough of themselves to try their luck on a larger stage.

Within a few years, Clout had ceded most creative and managerial control to Bonnie. As Clout grew older, the distance between MCW’s talent and the creaky ex-con widened. Clout’s strength had always been his mouth, but bridging the gap of years and

experience wore on him. Before one of MCW's pay-per-views, a marquee show under high pressure to draw a full house and big online numbers, the owner had to be restrained from ear-boxing one of his mid-carders who refused to take a bite from Clout's steak and cheese hoagie. The wrestler was vegan, a word Clout understood conceptually, but he couldn't wrap his mind around the notion that one of the boys could have such an affinity for it that he'd flat out refuse an offer that anyone who had a dozen working brain cells could tell wasn't an end in itself but a first step in a direction which could lead to the kid finally getting the break, the money, and the recognition he'd been training for his entire life. It was exactly that kind of mulishness, Clout thought, which proved the kid's gray matter was lacking vital nourishment. In Clout's day, when he was young and hungry, there could've been baby puke in the bun. He still would've taken a bite.

Any wrestlers skeptical of a woman at MCW's helm were quieted when they talked with their buddies in other promotions. The chorus shouted from backyards and whispered in the locker rooms of eighty-thousand seat stadiums was the same. Wrestlers were misused. Storylines, if they even existed, read like they'd been written by a troupe of sleep-deprived fourth graders. Management, from the bookers to the bosses to the j-brones who stocked crafty with cold Taco Bell, had its head up its ass. Bonnie's ship, in comparison, sailed tight. Schedules were made and kept. Checks arrived on time. There were clear procedures for proposing ideas and airing grievances. It was still a wrestling promotion—boiling-over with aggression and lust, real and faked emotions muddling every conversation, abuse and injuries and always a million ways to piss away a nest egg—but MCW employees felt lucky their promotion was a lot less clusterfucky than others.

And even though many of the wrestlers were too young to remember, they'd heard the stories. Bonnie was next-tier no bullshit. She'd taken the stand and single-handedly erased her family's millions. Her father had begged her to save him. He'd wept on camera. Bonnie no-sold it, stone-faced, stiff-lipped. Before long, the wrestlers had legends of their own to tell—seven foot monsters hulking into Bonnie's office, bragging how they'd crack a coffee pot over the cunt's forehead if she gave any yankee sass, and later emerging with tails between legs and not a single negative word as they shouldered their gear and walked out the door, never to step foot in a ring again.

It was Bonnie, of course, who ensured MCW's Internet presence, slick website, humorous and unobtrusive social media. Competing promotions snickered when their shows, advertised through canvassing and fliers, outdrew MCW's iPPVs, but they changed their tune when, years later, a few of MCW's best and most ridiculously spot-heavy matches released online for free garnered seven-figure view counts. When WWE transitioned their pay-per-views from cable to their subscription-based online network in 2014, they used MCW's system, already running for years, as a proof of concept. MCW built an audience of die-hards who were invested in the success of the promotion. Rather than crutching on advertisers, MCW appealed to their audience and became the first wrestling company to work seriously with crowd-funding. Per-capita spending among MCW's fans was through the roof, and the live attendance at many local shows shot up with the Internet buzz. Even some of the satellite shows, given a perfect storm of venue, date, and wrestlers, could be raucous affairs populated by long-time MCW nuts who considered themselves just as much a part of the entertainment as the wrestlers.

Closing on a decade after MCW's founding, in one of the first years of true profitability, Clout got sick. Throat cancer. It took his voice first, ripping away his famous baritone and leaving a gravelly husk. The doctors were initially optimistic, but as soon as Clout understood he'd be finishing his run speaking in whispers in wheezes, his defenses laid down arms and the cancer spread. When word got around that Clout was getting the go-home cue, a few MCW wrestlers who'd been with the promotion since the beginning visited their boss in the hospital. Among them was Cross Gruden, now in his early forties. Though his face bore the scars of a life in the ring, he was still built like a mountain.

Cross had been MCW's top babyface since he'd humiliated Brody Ruckus in a shoot match during an early MCW pay-per-view. Ruckus had run out cocky and put his weight behind a slap that would've knocked the jaw off a normal person. Cross had flinched a little, then smiled, and the rest of the match wasn't a contest. Cross legit manhandled Ruckus even though the heel was trying for real to resist. He was so fast Ruckus had no time to slide from the ring and run backstage. After the three-count, Cross grabbed a microphone, stepped his opponent's chest, and announced his weightlifting statistics. A few were world records, and all were corroborated with video and eyewitness testimony in the months following the match. The crowd loved it.

In the hospital, Cross sat next to Clout's bed and held his hand. The strength in Clout's grip was surprising. His skin was like birch bark and his stringy hair was matted as if he'd been caught in the rain. Clout's eyes were closed, and he was wheezing. His mouth slacked to the side, and it was hard to tell if he was grunting in communication or

pain. His grip reminded Cross of his first day with Mid-Coast, Clout's promise that Cross would be his number one guy, the handshake that sealed their mutual respect.

Rarely had Cross been in a quiet room with this many wrestlers. Bullshit was always flying—ribs, stories, fish tales. Clout had never missed the opportunity to take this piss out of him, and Cross had gotten good at spitting it back. From the way the wrestlers were sucking their teeth and shuffling around, Clout could tell they wanted to break the silence, but the hospital sounds, the hunting show on the TV in the corner, and Clout's grunts were too much to talk over.

Clout was old, Cross thought, but he wasn't this old.

Cross was no stranger to funerals. It was easy to see them in a celebratory light. Food, booze, old friends and enemies. Reunions. Everyone was together. Toasts clinked long into the morning. Crying was okay and even encouraged because wet wakes quenched burning bridges. The number of stories told and retold made the guy in the box, whatever his age, seem like he'd lived a hundred years. No one ever said it, but it was easy to agree—heart attack at fifty, overdose at forty-three, liver failure at forty-eight—they'd all lived hard and fast and beautifully. Were they to do it over with the option of trading it all for a nine-to-five, they all knew, to the last man, the answer would be no. Hell no.

Cross couldn't feel any of that listening to his boss breathe as if he was trying to suck air through a straw in an almost-empty soda cup. When wrestlers died, they went fast, or, like dogs, they found an out of the way place to give up the ghost. Clout had no family, nobody left from the time before his time on the inside. When Bonnie had called Cross and told him he should gather some of the old guard and see the boss off, Cross

expected they'd whoop it up one last time, maybe sneak in some of the good stuff. He'd wanted to tell Clout how grateful he was, how well he'd be remembered. All of that seemed fucking stupid now. Clout's grip felt so pained, so desperate. Cross wanted to squeeze back until the end. At the same time, he wanted to pry Clout loose and get the fuck out.

"Well, boss, I think you've seen better days," Cross said. He swallowed and craned his neck to the ceiling. The other wrestlers nodded, thankful someone had finally broken the silence.

"To be honest," Cross said, "you look like snot on a sick mule."

Clout grunted, but nothing in his face indicated he was listening. His mouth belonged to a tragedy mask, twisted in such perfect imitation it was almost funny.

"Hold this," Bonnie said, tossing Cross a length of hemp rope. It was about ten feet long and wrapped in MCW red tape. Nothing, not even spent ropes from old shows, went unused at MCW. Bonnie and Cross were about a quarter mile from the Hangar down the old runway. Sharp-leafed weeds and scraggly elm shoots poked through cracks in the tarmac. It wouldn't be long, Cross thought, before nature reclaimed the entire mile—a softly undulating strip of urban prairie.

Bonnie backed away from Cross until the rope was taut, then popped the lid on a can of white spray paint and shook. She was wearing the same thing she always wore—an MCW red golf shirt, khakis, black sneakers. With her hair in a tight ponytail, Cross thought she looked like any one of a hundred mid-range hourlies paid to look cute and

wash towels in gyms across the South. Except Bonnie was a few years older, had far less body fat, and her hair was defiantly stone gray.

“Clout asked about you,” Cross said. There was something about Bonnie’s pull on the rope that made his wrists ache. If she just tugged a little harder, Cross thought, maybe she could pop the pain out of them.

“I’m glad you went.” Bonnie said. “It was good that you saw him.”

“When did you see him?” Cross asked.

A puff of white escaped the can’s nozzle and the breeze took it away. Bonnie slid her left hand to the very end of the rope, crouched down, and began to spray an arc with Cross at the center.

“He asked me when you were coming,” Cross said. “Do you know how fucked that is? If you could catch that bastard in an honest moment, I’d bet he would’ve said you were the only friend he had.”

Bonnie paused for a moment, checked her work, then continued without looking at Cross. “You know Clout did time in Rikers?”

“No,” Cross said. “Thought they shuttered that place in the 60s.”

“That’s Alcatraz,” Bonnie responded. “Rikers is in the East River, New York City. Clout was there for twelve years. Not once did he have a visitor.”

Cross shuffled to his right, such tiny steps, keeping the rope straight between him and his boss. Somehow, the spray bursts left her black shoes untouched.

“How many friends do you have, Cross?” Bonnie asked.

Cross shook his head. “Everyone knows you have the company now. No one even bothered to ask me who he left it to. And you know what? I think you’re going to do a

great job with it. Clout knew the business, but he was an old dog who taught old dogs. You have to figure—you're a woman who knows business, period. You've got a good nose on you. Wind's gonna change, and you can sense that. So, you'd figure, someone like you would understand that no matter how different things get, there's no making up for lost respect. You lose that, it falls apart. None of us have any real fucking money, so that respect is all we have. It's how bills get paid around here."

Bonnie finished her circumnavigation, leaving Cross at the center of a white circle twenty feet in diameter.

"And what's the first thing you do as big boss? Your first chance to prove yourself as owner-operator, as CEO. What do you do? You disrespect a dying man who gave you everything, who brought you out of wherever the fuck you were hiding and sheltered you under his wing. He may not have been Vince McMahon, but Clout saw a lot of guys through hard times, and he loved you and you should have been there for him. You owed him at least one lousy afternoon."

Bonnie popped the cap on the paint can and placed it just outside the circle. "Thanks for your help. This is perfect."

Cross peered at the white line encircling him. "That's it? What is this?"

"It's exactly what it looks like," Bonnie said.

"Looks like a waste of my fucking time."

Cross took a step in what was to be a long, loud stomp back to the hangar when he realized he was exactly the same distance from the curved line of paint as he would be from the ropes in the center of a wrestling ring.

“There you go,” Bonnie said. “I thought about dohyō dimensions, but I bet you’d lose that instinct. Under twenty feet, I’d trust you dogs, both the old and the new, more than a tape measure.

“Ring gimmicks? Clout’s still above ground, but as soon as he hits that grave, he’s gonna start spinning. You debut a circle ring and we’ll be belly up in two months.”

“No gimmicks. A new promotion. One that you want to hear about.”

Look at this bitch, Cross thought. Assumptions and bullshit. He figured something like this would happen. With Clout gone, common sense no longer had any pull with this woman. Her innovations had worked, but without Clout, even as out of touch as he was becoming, nothing would stop her from thinking them all out of a job. It was clear where he was fitting into this. He knew her game. Bring him out here, one-on-one. Spin some shit. Sell him on this grand new idea, an exciting new role for him. Sure, more like a trick to get him to step aside quietly. She thought he’d fall for it. She believed a guy who’d been at the top of the company since the beginning would lie down and lap up what she fed him. Clout might have been losing it, but he had enough respect for the boys to tell them when they were being bumped down the card. A job was a job, and Clout never tried to sell one pretty. Bonnie could mint a buck or two, but she had no idea what wrestling was really about.

“Look,” Cross said, “You better make sure whatever you say next, you say straight up, because if this is some runaround, I can’t guarantee I’ll still be an employee of Mid-Coast Championship Wrestling by the time we’re done talking.

Bonnie folded her arms and rubbed her chin, eyeing the wrestler from head to toe and back. “You want it straight?”

“Damn straight I want it straight. I’m your goddamned champion. You’ll show me respect, or I swear I will walk.” The force of Cross’s words pushed him back on his heels, onto an old spur. A blast of pain shot through him, all the way to the base of his skull, where his brain sponged it up.

Bonnie chewed her upper lip and let out a sigh. She stepped into the circle and stopped just in front of Cross. Bonnie never slouched, but even at her full height, the crown of her head barely reached Cross’s chest. The wrestler put his hands on his hips and leaned over her, casting his wide shadow.

“You sure?” Bonnie said.

Clout grimaced. “Who the fuck you take me for?”

“You’re a smart guy,” Bonnie said. “Smarter than most, actually. And believe it or not, I read you a tick or two less bright than you’re being right now, which means I’ve gotta call an audible. That, regrettably, will not be to your advantage. Though if you want, you could have a sit in this mystery circle, and it would only take me a minute or so to think of a way you could leave tonight feeling good about yourself.”

“Listen you patronizing cunt, you’ve got a fucking second or so before I—”

“You’re terminated from MCW,” Bonnie said. “And you’re not alone. I’m bringing in a lot of new blood. Your style doesn’t fit the direction we’re heading—the direction I’m heading, to be more precise. Truthfully, we could’ve dealt with that, but you’re almost certain to suffer a career-threatening injury within the next six months. The odds don’t lie, and I’m not one to bet against them. Though I’m incredibly skilled at getting people to do what I want, even I would have a difficult enough time convincing

you to rebrand *and* scale back. After all, you are one smart cookie. Your heart tells you that you've got a lot left in the tank."

No one would see, Cross thought. Fifteen hundred feet down the runway, no one would see him clock Bonnie out of her cross-trainers. She had to know this. It had to be the reason she brought him way out here. She wanted him to hit her, Cross determined. She needed the ammo.

"I know. I know," Bonnie said. She patted Cross's elbow and scrunched her nose. "Now you're upset. I am sorry. This is going to be tough, but you need to remember how you feel right now and try to savor it. At least now all that anger is making you feel powerful. It's helping you forget how frighteningly reliant you are on this promotion."

"I see what you're trying to do," Cross said. "It's not going to work."

"Oh, you do?" Bonnie said. "How much money am I about to offer you?"

Clout wound back to throw a response at Bonnie, but then he processed the content of the question and was forced to ask Bonnie to repeat herself.

"What kind of bullshitery is this? You just sacked me," Cross said.

"From MCW," Bonnie said. "As I mentioned, quite clearly, there's a new promotion in the works. We're going to write you off the main roster, and you'll debut in the inaugural match. You'll do the job, one night only, and you'll be compensated.

"How much?"

"Five times what you make in a year with MCW. Six if you do well. All of it up front. And you know what? I think you're going to do a great job with it."

"Fuck off. You could buyout half the boys with that."

“You need to think of it as your retirement. Your knees are completely shot. Your spine has suffered incredible damage over the course of your career. If you continue as you are with some other promotion, you will fall to injury, and you’ll bankrupt yourself trying to claw your way back in.”

“You think you can wave a bunch of Monopoly money in my face and expect me to roll over?” Cross asked. “You think I’m in this goddamned business for the cash? When did you start giving two shits about what happens to me?”

“There’s of course one unusual stipulation to this offer,” Bonnie said. “It’s nothing that would be contrary to your best interests, but I won’t bore you. You know exactly what I’m trying to do.”

Cross raised his right fist, but caught himself immediately and masked it by pointing a finger at Bonnie. He didn’t want to give her a claim to victimhood, so he held the finger against his forehead and kept it there. His elbow twitched as Bonnie no-sold the threat, and Cross realized the gesture, with his finger pointed diagonally to the sky, was more of a salute than anything.

“No deal,” Cross said, side stepping Bonnie and finally willing his legs to carry him to edge of the circle. Rich bitch hadn’t the slightest idea, he thought. Sliver fucking spoon sticking out of her ass. He was still MCW’s biggest draw. He sold tickets. He sold the fucking T-shirts. Fat man-children bursting with Red Bull were dropping fists on their keyboards about the state of his booking. They were doing it right now. How many times had he turned down deals from bookers who actually had a hair of respect, who were veterans of the ring, who understood that it took more than the promise of a thicker wallet

for men to commit to destroying themselves for show? How fast would've MCW sank if he'd stopped keeping it afloat?

Cross kicked through a clump of grass growing through the tarmac on his straight line back to the Hangar. He thought about what he needed from his locker, and what he didn't give a shit about leaving behind. He pulled out his phone with the sudden desire to talk with someone whose voice would curb his need to punch the windows out of his car, but the stream of names scrolling past said nothing to him.

"You're right about visiting Clout," Bonnie called out from behind. "Any decent person would have done that."

Bonnie's commute to her flat, which was, like Mid-Coast's home arena, once an aircraft hangar, was precisely thirteen minutes on foot. Just after World War II, a dice-rolling real estate magnate flattened an old rail yard and steel mill fifteen miles outside downtown Charlotte and built an airport ready-made to become the hub for the city's commercial carriers. With two runways, a luxuriously appointed passenger terminal, and state-of-the-art luggage conveyor system, the airport was a monument to the if-you-build-it-they-will-come mentality of numerous post-war entrepreneurs who saw the country's triumph over foreign powers and domestic depression as evidence that anything with enough American grit could succeed. The Queen City Skyport opened with fanfare and circus elephants wearing cardboard airplane wings. The event was jolly and wholesome until one member of the herd bounded free and trounced through a patch of curing concrete near the outskirts of the complex. The elephant, chased by its handlers, hoofing it at full speed with a thirty-five foot wingspan strapped across its back, became a minor sensation when

a photo of the pursuit appeared on the front page of the *Charlotte Observer* the next day. The photo became a Pulitzer finalist, but lost to a snap of a fifteen-year-old boy holding another teen hostage during a standoff with the Boston police.

Most of the Queen City Skyport's newly constructed service and storage buildings were never occupied. Its cavernous terminal often contained more squatters than waiting passengers. Most of the airport was sold off just a few years after opening to various industrial concerns. Some of the infrastructure was repurposed, but many buildings were razed or simply left vacant. After losing all its commercial business to what would become Douglas International, Queen City limped along until the early 90s as a public-use airport—mostly recreational props and flying instruction—but it shuttered for good as Charlotte's sprawl crept outward, and the city's general aviation crowd moved their planes to suburban airstrips in nearby Concord, Monroe, and Rock Hill.

Bonnie found the logic of the old airport grounds comforting. On her walk home, there was a clear story in view—evidence from close to a century of history and strong hints of what was to come. The big sky and level roads reminded her that the earth, acres upon acres, had been scraped flat. Ornamental palms grew outside a processing facility for an asphalt contractor. The green blazed like neon against the sliver and tar-black silos. Just across the street, a garden center. Hedges, grasses, pruned bushes, clay pot water fountains. Beyond that, a produce co-op that never had more than one car parked next to its polyethylene greenhouses. The rusting porticos of a machine shop loading dock. A self-storage facility unlabeled save for a hand-painted sign hanging loosely from a barbed-wire fence. And then, Bonnie's apartment, a small aircraft hangar block subdivided into high-ceilinged lofts.

The apartments were a sign of what was to become of the grounds. Charlotte's population had doubled in the last twenty years, as it did the previous twenty. Kids who'd grown up behind high fences in cookie cutter suburbs longed for hardwood floors, exposed brick and air ducts. As a viable indie wrestling venue, the Hangar had ten years at most before development would choke it out. Even to Bonnie, the reality of it was uncanny, especially when standing in the middle of the old runway. For a time, thought she might head off the builders, reinvest future MCW profits into the surrounding real estate and build her own neighborhood of townhomes and trendy flats. Not for the money of course, but so she could preserve nature's slow reclamation of the airstrip. If the airport grounds were a story, that runway was its final chapter—a sneak peak of the inevitable and beautiful erasure that awaited everything. She liked to imagine a child a half a century in the future exploring the peculiar, flat forest behind her parent's apartment, stumbling upon the skeletal remains of the Hangar, and wondering what in the world went on in a building with forty foot tall sliding doors and hundreds of metal folding chairs.

The idea had its utility, but when it came down to choosing a future for MCW, now entirely hers, she had something far more beautiful in mind.

When she pressed the unlock code for her front door, she didn't hear the steps behind her. This should have meant there were never any steps to hear, but as soon she'd cracked the door, a dog ran past her and slipped inside.

Bonnie had seen stray dogs on the grounds before, so she wasn't surprised. A few would come begging at the Hangar near show time, enticed by the smells from the vendors. It did, however, startle her. The noise that escaped her lips was reminiscent of a

sneeze, and even though nobody was around, especially because nobody was around, she felt embarrassed.

There weren't many places to hide in her flat. Most of her rooms were simply furnished—a chair and a lamp, a dining room table, her computer desk. The exceptions to her neatness were the stacks of books in her study that clawed at the bare wall like a hand. One finger, wrestling biographies. Another, state fighting laws. The pinkie, thick tomes on general medicine, case studies on various traumas, journal articles on the latest techniques in orthopedic surgery. Bonnie braced herself for the crash of the animal toppling the towers, but when she stepped inside, the dog was sitting in the vestibule, staring right back at her.

“Get out,” Bonnie said. Naturally, the dog did not respond, and Bonnie decided to forgive herself for saying it, the line being more an exclamation than a command. She opened the door as wide as possible and attempted to flank the animal. It was a mutt, medium-sized, its coat a shade of brown that may or may not have been tinged red with clay dust. It had no collar but was sitting as if fully trained. When Bonnie reached for its scruff to lead it out, it casually turned away and walked into the kitchen.

Rather than give chase, Bonnie closed her bedroom door, then shut herself into her office with her computer and books. The dog had done enough to disrupt her evening plans, and aside from soiling her floor, there wasn't much damage it could do. Once it realized there was nothing to eat, nothing of interest to explore, it would see itself out.

She fell into her computer chair, forgetting the bag on her arm. There was no ideal spot for it in the study, so she dropped it next to her, noting its precise location as to not trip on it later. She considered the scent of hand sanitizer and lip balm inside the bag, the

attractive effect it could have on the animal, particularly behind a closed door. She knew from her wrestlers that the most enticing smells—be it food, money, or women—came from withheld sources.

In the interest of objectivity, she'd delayed the completion of her first task that evening for several weeks. All the loose ends from the Clout Crawczak chapter of her life had been tied—everything save his letters, which were neatly fanned across her computer desk and a temporary folding table in the center of the room. They numbered one, typed under Big Apple Wrestling letterhead, to seven hundred forty-four, a barely legible, mostly incoherent scrawl on a single leaf of hospital notepad paper. The clearest part of it, which had little context given Clout's general preference of substance over style, read, "Looking like crap is disrespectful to the fallen." It made Bonnie smile.

She'd brought a banker's box from the office and had plastic dividers labeled by year. Another option was her shredder, which could within minutes devour all the letters with a single button press. Though it was wise to not make a decision so soon after Clout's passing, the prudence in her hesitation was waning fast, and the fact that she was no closer to knowing what was the right course of action concerned her. She'd long absorbed all practical and emotional information from the letters to the extent of knowing about a hundred of them by heart. Storing them indefinitely was something a rodent would do.

Bonnie thought she'd heard the scrape of toenail on tile from somewhere in her apartment when an email came in, over-flagged and carrying a subject line with obscenities written in all capital letters.

The sender was Gerard Clothier Sawyer, nickname of Beef, owner-operator of a travelling firearms expo that hosted a few MCW satellite shows every year when they looped through the Carolinas. The note, loaded with typographical errors, relayed the dire condition of Beef's son, Christian, ring name Cee-Saw, who'd suffered a broken arm at the Sumter Freedom Festival at the hands of Hack Barlow, an MCW mid-carder, and bulleted a list of outrageous and contradictory demands. Beef hadn't done much to impress Bonnie, but as a communicator he typically had far more tact, which meant Christian had likely sent the note under his father's account. Bonnie noticed the light which indicated Beef's availability for video chat was illuminated. Though she was already annoyed with what promised to be a protracted exchange, she knew she could settle the matter with a face-to-face that evening and ensure Beef's continued support of the promotion.

The first attempt to hail the Sawyers failed, but a few seconds into the next, a connection was made. Though her screen remained dark, Beef's voice croaked through Bonnie's speakers.

"Chrissy! The fuck is happening to my screen? Get your ass over here and help Daddy!"

"Good evening, Beef. Bonnie Blue here."

There was a yelp and a series of crashes and shouts. When Beef responded, his voice was distorted and cracking as if he were pressing his mouth against his microphone.

"Bonnie Blue? Where you coming from?"

"What is it, Daddy?" a quieter voice said.

“Can you figure this fucking thing out? I think Bonnie Blue’s on the line.”

“She call you?” the voice said, louder now.

“My screen got all discombobulated, and now I hear her voice literally coming through it.”

“Then she’s probably got you on the video. Hello, Ms. Blue.”

“It’s Bonnie, Christian. How’s the arm?”

“Not very good at all, Ms. Blue. Your wetback son-of-a-bitch snapped it in two.”

“Jesus Christ, Chrissy. What my son is trying to explain is that he has endured a grave injury perpetrated by one of your wrestlers—the lumberjack looking fellow. Three of Chrissy’s ligaments are completely ripped to pieces.”

“Doc says I might never regain my motion, Ms. Blue. This is my right arm we’re talking. I need my motion. Daddy, you know you got your camera taped over?”

“There’s always this damned light shining in my eyes. All those California eggheads think everything they make now needs to blink at you. Remember phones, Bonnie? You dial a number, you get a fucking person. No funny business.”

The black video chat window suddenly burst into color. Beef, in a choking tie and button-down set to pop, leaned toward the camera. His son, wearing an FTI T-shirt, hovered over his shoulder and rolled a piece of electrician’s tape into a ball.

“I apologize to you and your son, Beef. We will of course cover Christian’s medical expenses. What Domingo did was unconscionable, but we need to discuss the requests you forwarded me.”

She heard the scraping noise again, louder now. If it was the dog on her bedroom door, the door would already be scratched to hell. Years of feedback had trained the dog

to understand that a human would do something if it clawed hard enough. It couldn't have known that hard enough for the only person in earshot meant digging straight through and nothing less. About the only way an animal could earn Bonnie's respect was through such a display of will. It made little and therefore complete sense to her that most people fell over themselves to congratulate a dog for sitting down while ignoring an ant surviving a crushing force five thousand times its body weight or a mouse gnawing off a leg to free itself from a trap.

“What do you mean requests?” Beef asked.

“We want that beamer exported, Ms. Blue,” Christian said. “We're willing to take this all the way to the IMF.”

“Oh, Chrissy, not again,” Beef said.

“And my damages go far beyond medical,” Christian said. “What about pain and suffering? What about lost earnings? There is no Inspectors without Cee-Saw. We've got a warehouse of merch and three months of gigs to cancel. Freedom Fest was our biggest show yet, Ms Blue. I've been cut down in my prime. My motion might never return.”

Beef's cheeks puffed out and he held a finger to the camera and asked for a minute. Bonnie assented and Beef peeled off a sticky note and put it over the camera. Bonnie's screen went black, but the argument between father and son came through clear as day. After a minute, Beef was able to convince Christian to leave under the belief he was fetching some critical legal documents. When Beef reappeared, he was wiping his brow with a handful of fast food napkins.

“You want to know the mystery of parenthood?” Beef said. “Despite it all, I love that boy to death. I’d take a bullet for him. Hell, I’d intervene on his behalf with Bonnie Blue.”

It was unmistakable now—nails on wood, scratching the door handle’s brushed steel, no attention paid to the wide open front door. There was nothing in her bedroom the dog could possibly want. Her sheets, freshly washed, scentless detergent. No leftover food. No candles.

“Beef, I’m extremely busy tonight, and I don’t appreciate receiving Christian’s insolent and poorly worded emails under your name.”

“I apologize for that, Bonnie. Chrissy ain’t no wordsmith, but I think we both can see that he has a legitimate grievance with your boy, not to mention a tidy brand to maintain.”

“You do realize Domingo Contreras is an American citizen. The best you could do is press an assault charge, and there’s no money in that.”

“We could sue MCW.”

Bonnie made a show of covering a smile. “Beef. C’mon.”

“What?” Beef said, grinning back. “Is something the matter? You’re usually more sporting than this.”

“It would be extremely difficult to prove intent or even negligence in the context of a wrestling match. What we’re offering now is more than you’d make in a settlement after lawyer fees.”

“You are on edge. Did your shoe come untied today? Maybe some mustard on your shirt during lunch?”

“Beef.”

“Or maybe, maybe there’s finally a beau who’s caught your eye. Is that it? Only the desires of the heart could shake someone as rock solid as the great Bonnie Blue. Is it one of your boys? I’d bet huge that half of them are scheming plots to nab you, now that you’re the boss. Those poor louts. I have yet to meet a wrestler without a secret infatuation with authority.”

“Full medical reimbursement and a year of rehabilitation,” Bonnie said. “What else?”

“Okay. Okay. All-business Bonnie. That money is fine with me, but something needs to happen with your boy, just so I can shut Chrissy up and stop him from bitching to the entire Carolina Bar.”

“Fine. Contreras is gone.”

“Gone?”

“Terminated from MCW. Effective immediately.”

“Damn, woman. I would’ve thought you’d at least step up to the plate for one of your boys. Talk me down to accepting a suspension. Or at least booking rematch where Christian can even the score, dress this kid down a little.”

“He’s expendable,” Bonnie said. “No one comes to one of your shows to see a single rifle. We work the same way.”

“Point granted,” Beef said, chuckling with his arms around his bulging abdomen. “You know your business, and you could probably come in here and run shop better than any of us.”

“I could,” Bonnie said, her cursor hovering over the button that would end the call.

Christian’s muffled shouts floated in, something about being unable to find the right documents.

“What we do for love,” Beef said, inflating his cheeks like a bullfrog. “I used to wonder what a woman like you was doing in a mid-tier wrestling program of all places, but I’m beginning to put the puzzle together. You can’t help doting over what you bring into this world. All respect to Clout, rest his soul, but MCW would’ve gone belly-up years ago if it weren’t for you. It’s your baby, ugly as it might be.”

“Interesting assessment,” Bonnie said. “Only a few hours ago my supposed number one guy was seeing me quite differently.”

“I know you better than any of your grapplers, Bonnie Blue.”

Bonnie emerged from the study expecting her bedroom door to look like an old park bench, but it was free from marks. She’d been so sure of the source of the noise, the sight of the untouched door and the continuing scratching disoriented her. She followed the sound to the vestibule. The dog was there, and it was sprinting. It flew around and around in a tight circle as if it were dead set on catching itself. Its tongue flopped loosely out the side of its jaw. Its manic gait was cartoonishly inefficient on the slick tile, granting the animal one stride forward for every three it kicked out. A few leaves that had strayed in through the open front door swirled underfoot.

When the dog noticed Bonnie, it slid to a stop and sat at attention.

“What was that?” Bonnie asked.

The dog, panting hard, flung its wide tongue up to lick its nose, but it did not break eye contact.

“Why were you running?” Bonnie demanded. “This is an empty room. There’s nothing here to chase.”

The animal’s body rocked in time with its rhythmic breathing.

“Is there something under the floor? A mouse? A termite colony? Are the pipes making noise? Are you rabid? Is your little mutt brain melting in your skull, all your wires rerouting in service of spreading the disease? Do you want to bite me?”

Bonnie knew she needed to throttle down, but the dog’s attentive gaze easily facilitated the illusion that it was listening. An open set of ears inside her flat, even if furry and floppy, was a rare sight.

“Or maybe you’re just exercising. Thought you’d take a spin on the indoor track today. Working on that split time. You might look like a Hanna-Barbera character, but all those extra strides might help you finally break your plateau.”

The dog cocked its head like an idiot.

“Speak,” Bonnie demanded. She took a heavy step forward and pointed down its nose. “Speak!”

Nothing.

“I knew a dog like you once. Had to be the center of attention. You’re all like that, and you’re exceedingly skilled at it. Right now there are a dozen people that need my direct attention, and yet here I am. You proud of that?”

Somebody had trained this animal. It sat so still, so confident. There was nothing exceptional about a trained beast, but this dog was so clearly on its own that its origins

were a tempting story to ponder. Training, of course, was an exercise in dominance and submission, reward and punishment, alpha and beta, but the most successful relationships of the sort always pushed beyond that basic divide. An expertly trained dog might begin to teach its master on a channel only those with the keenest understanding of the animal have access to. Bonnie wasn't convinced those lessons were worth the time.

The smartest animals would become aware of the illusory binds of its capture and simply choose to leave. The exceptional always set themselves apart, pack animals included. Perhaps this dog was one of them. Or, if it was only on the high side of average, maybe its master had suddenly died. Instead of lying, confused and useless, aside the corpse, waiting for a human to come by and glop praise on it for such a moving display of loyalty and unconditional love, the animal had set off on its own, disoriented by the swerve, but nonetheless driven and focused to find another—another master, or an apprentice to call its own.

“I warn you,” Bonnie said. “Most say I'm not easy company.”

Finally catching its breath, the dog stood and walked past Bonnie, who followed it into her study. It stepped carefully around her stacks of books and lay prone in the glow of her computer. Bonnie turned into the chair and pulled up a roster with head-on shots of every wrestler in MCW.

“This is Cross Gruden,” Bonnie said, clicking on the wrestler's face. “He's going to sign a deal to lie down in the first match of the new promotion. Big payday. Gets him out of the business with a chance he won't kill himself. The heat we'll spark will be worth it. What's going to happen—we can't limp into it. Needs to draw.”

Bonnie closed Cross's window and pulled Dom's photo, which had been taken a few years prior when his face resembled a round and hairy potato.

“This is Hack Barlow, birth name Domingo Contreras. He's a good fifty pounds lighter now. Between gimmicks. Little direction. Broke a kid's arm this week in-ring at a gun show in South Carolina. Did it on purpose. I've had my eye on him, but this seals it. We pluck him from MCW, sprinkle some salt in his wounds, then slap on a mask and let him loose in The Circle. He wants to use the armbar? Good. He wants to get even nastier? Better. We establish the stakes and move from there. If Domingo can't cut it then we move down the list. You following?”

With its paws parallel in front, the dog was decidedly sphinx-like.

“It's all about mystery. We keep MCW rolling. We write Cross like he quit on us. We act like Domingo was never here, and the weight loss will help. He's difficult to recognize as his old character. We vehemently deny any connection to The Circle. We act like its barbarism is a threat. Its barbarism is a threat. It's the future of this business.”

Bonnie scrolled through the roster, tiered by draw strength. Below the full and part time jobbers was a group of prospects, their candid photos snapped at wrestling events or copied from social media.

“Now, I've just cut our top guy and a proven, if volatile, workhorse from the main roster. We need to fill that vacancy. Who would you elevate? The hungry high-flyer from Spartanburg? This kid from Durham with hot dog skin? Maybe this one—Miss Teen Virginia runner-up. There's a video of her squatting 275. Or—”

Bonnie's cursor paused over a photo of a young woman stretching on a practice mat. Blue trunks, sleeveless black top. Squid ink hair. She was thin, but her core was

coiled tight like a dancer's, and her legs had just the right mileage. The label on the photo: Pilar Contreras, 17, Charlotte.

"I've always found beauty in symmetry," Bonnie said, plugging the number listed for the woman into her phone. She'd have a few minutes for this girl the next day before MCW's seven o'clock show. She swiveled to face the dog and raised her eyebrows. "You hungry?"

The animal followed her into the kitchen, which was white, bright, and unadorned. Bonnie tugged loose the lid of a container the size of a painter's bucket sitting in the cabinet under her sink and scooped a cup of chalky powder into a Gatorade squirt bottle. She filled it to three quarters with tap water and shook. The dog, wagging its tail, sat on one of the dark squares of the kitchen's checkerboard tile. Not a toenail or hair broke into the surrounding white.

"I've never fed a dog before," Bonnie said. "Though I've read enough in passing over the years so that I get the picture. I hear we're slowly weakening your entire species with corn-based kibble. Fortunately for you, I will never purchase such garbage."

She squeezed a swallow of drink into her mouth, and the dog perked up. "No," she said. "I paid too much for this, and you'll likely find it unsatisfying. But I believe I have something."

Bonnie opened her freezer. A veil of condensation poured out. She pushed aside a few containers cold-sealed with freezer burn and found a half-eaten pack of hot dogs, borrowed months prior from the expired stock of a food cart at an MCW event.

“Meat,” Bonnie said, displaying the package. “Though of indeterminate origin, and I wouldn’t be surprised if there happened to be a lot of corn in this. But, best I’ve got.”

Bonnie set the package on the counter and found a saucepan to boil the hot dogs. “I know you couldn’t care less about my feelings, especially now with these meat tubes on your nose, but I have to remark how feeding hot dogs to a dog is jogging loose the some of the same feelings I experienced when I was served ladyfingers and gingerbread men as a child.”

When both her hands were occupied filling the pot under the faucet, the dog sprang up, leapt at the countertop and, with his claws scratching the hell out of the faux-granite, gathered enough momentum to snag the frozen meat in his jaws. In a flash, the dog zipped out of the kitchen, through the vestibule, and out the front door, which Bonnie had never closed.

Bonnie traced the dog’s escape path, admiring its efficiency. She remembered the water running when the saucepan began to overflow. She shut it off, dried the pot, and after taking a sip of her drink, walked out of the kitchen to close the front door. There was no sign of the dog. The sun was dipping behind the silos of the asphalt facility, and though it was nearly a half mile away, its industrial hum filtered through the glaze of evening light. Bonnie appreciated the way the blanket of sound, droning continuously, softened her apartment, warming it in a way photographs, silk plants, and pointless trinkets never could.

She closed her door, hammered the bolt, and returned to her work.

Chapter Seven: Solomon Lung's Athletic Training

When Pilar rolled out of bed, her brother was gone. She had no idea how he functioned on so little sleep. She wanted to squeeze in a gym session before her tryout. She had one shot to catch a bus that, after two transfers and a hop across the state line, would drop her off close enough to reach Solomon's on foot.

Some mentor, she thought. Some brother. She considered taking the car and letting him fucking deal with it, but the route tracker said she had time to catch her bus if she hustled. She threw a bag together and headed out, passing on a protein shake with hopes that she could scavenge a breakfast at Sol's.

The driver was one of the less sociable ones, so she sat up front, knowing her proximity to him might dissuade someone else to talk at her. Even the pair of conspicuous over-ear headphones she'd taped together from an electronics junk bin at Goodwill weren't enough sometimes. She felt guilty for shutting herself off like this. There were a few notable exceptions, but most people on the bus were friendly, maybe curious about where she was going, or just looking for ways to pass the time. She imagined how she looked to one of the regulars she'd begun to recognize—that girl always buried in her phone, dead to the world. She wished she could signal she meant business without communicating the nature of the business. Men had a tough time getting people to take a professional wrestling career seriously, and Pilar would never have the instant credibility twenty-inch biceps could earn. Though the landscape was changing, and more and more high-profile women in the fighting world got press for their ability

instead of their novelty or looks, when Pilar confessed what she was training for, eyes would often drop to her body, looking for signs of what they expected—Trish Stratus’s tits, Sable’s ass. It wasn’t that Pilar had a problem with being desired. She’d dealt with that for years and knew how to handle how men and women treated her because of it. She hated that the job she was training for caused people to focus largely on what she was, rather than what she could do.

Also, in almost every way, she was an artist, a storyteller. All of her favorite storytellers, inside the ring and out, understood people. A wrestler didn’t learn how to get a crowd eating from her hands by cocooning herself against small talk. How could she ever be comfortable with a microphone in front of thousands if she couldn’t deal with a couple of insistent fuckheads on a city bus?

Everyone said the business had come naturally to her, but it never felt that way. The disparity was reason enough to keep training. She’d seen plenty of rooks and more than a few vets wrestle like they’d just learned to walk. A lot of them were cocky, and a lot of them had never worked a venue without basketball hoops bolted to the walls. Though Sol and Dom had always put a lid on their praise, as if mouthing her success would jinx her, she knew she had a shot. Modest success would sell enough T-shirts to pay for a better place with something more than cold spinach in the fridge. If she didn’t hit, the exposure alone would open some options.

Under her breath, she practiced talking. She cut promos on the bus driver, the dented Acura cutting them off, a bench with a realtor’s face on it. *You’re pathetic*, she whispered to the twenty foot tall pizza chain spokesperson grinning from a billboard. *Your pizza tastes like cardboard, and you’ve been making pizza your whole life. I’m*

having my first real match today, and I'm already the best wrestler in this company. You won't be smiling after I've kicked your teeth in.

She caught the bus driver peering at her through his mirror, and his eyes snapped back to the road. She probably looked pretty nuts mumbling to herself, making angry faces and snorting, but if that kept people from disturbing her as she steadied herself for the day, they could go ahead and keep thinking that. *Go ahead. Underestimate me. Think I'm just some crazy bitch. It'll be the last mistake you make.*

The hour was too early for Solomon so Pilar let herself in with a key hidden behind the cap of a dry fire hydrant around the back of the building. The gym was still tropical, so she flipped on the fans but kept the dock closed. After changing, she hopped onto the training platform and tested its bounce. Stopping her body from springing into its routine unsettled her. With her tryout looming, she had to take it slow, just a warm up, a few bumps to loosen her back. But she wasn't sure how easy was too easy. It was a good problem, one that meant she was taking a step into unfamiliar territory. If she impressed Bonnie and started working, Pilar would quickly master pre-match prep, but advancements in her training had so far meant greater intensity, higher difficulty, more impressive feats of strength and coordination. Throttling down felt like the opposite of what she needed to do, but there was no cramming for this test. She had to be fresh. She had to trust her work.

She stretched—legs first, then the rest. Each move weaved in moments of balance, tension. Her neck was stiff, so she kept her head swiveling to identify the culprit muscles. Her limbs were most comfortable in motion. Her transitions between exercises

were flamboyant and sharp, practice for the ring, where she'd be expected to fill the space, to command attention whether she or her opponent had the upper hand.

She didn't know who Bonnie would pit her against. Though MCW's men outnumbered the women almost three to one, the promotion paid about eight full-time girls and had a dozen semi-regulars that came in for special events or extra eye-candy. Pilar had sparred with a woman named Orchid who'd shared cards with Dom early in his career and had been friends with Sol for years. She'd danced a little with Blair Jackson, former MCW Women's Champion, but she'd never shared the ring with any of MCW's active wrestlers.

Pilar was younger than most when she discovered that professional wrestling wasn't quite as it seemed. Dom smartened her up when he first got into the business, when Pilar was around eight years old. They weren't close then, but Dom didn't want word to get back that he fought people for a living. He'd told her that it was just a game, that no one got hurt. She knew that was a lie when he, with black eyes and gashes on his forehead, would storm into their mother's after she'd screamed at him through the phone. During one of those nights watching VHS tapes of old matches on a strange couch, Pilar forced Dom to explain why and how those injuries happened, how they appeared nasty but were somehow not bad enough to get him to quit. Dom demonstrated how to pull a punch while slapping skin and stomping a foot to mask it in sound. He coiled a headlock around Pilar's chin. Even though he was very large and she very small, he could squeeze and squeeze without hurting her.

The next morning, before taking her back to their mother's, Dom introduced Pilar to the squared circle. Its layers of canvas, padding, and plywood. Its suspension. He leapt

high into the air from the ring post, dropping an elbow on a folded gymnast's mat in the ring's center. The crash of his landing boomed through the gym like a gunshot, but Dom got to his feet. It did hurt, Dom explained. Though the ring had some give, its padding had to be thin and hard so as to sound real and not depress underfoot. He'd learned how to take the fall, but he'd also trained his body to absorb and ignore the impact. He let Pilar pound the mat with her fists and take a run at the ropes. Her hands throbbed. A dark bruise bloomed on her shoulder as if she'd tried to tackle a doorframe.

Pilar grew up hating the F-word along with most other wrestlers, but she hadn't yet found a term that agreed with her. "Entertainment" had been corporatized by the WWE. "Predetermined" better described a fixed boxing match than a pro wrestling bout. She'd tried "kayfabe," but she hated how everyone pronounced it with two syllables instead of three.

Some of MCW's women were like her. There were successful wrestling families and middling ones, and others that seemed cursed to suffer tragedy—heart attacks, overdoses, accidents. Pilar was surprised at first that the family pedigree didn't always make for better performers. A few of MCW's women had never seen a match before Bonnie persuaded them to put their other careers on hold. Johnnie May was once a ballet dancer. Tanya Flex, MCW's Women's Champion was a former fitness model who'd appeared in the background of a few high-profile workout videos. The only bump she'd taken before signing with MCW was from a spoon tip, and within three years there was talk of her jumping to a national promotion. Tanya could make anyone look good, and Pilar dreamed of facing her. If Bonnie wanted a squash, the heel champion gaining credibility through the merciless destruction of her challenger, Pilar would sell her heart

out, show both Tanya and Bonnie that she could work stiff, not only eating a pin but devouring it. If they wanted more of a match, Pilar could fight clean or dirty, winning over the draw or turning it against her. She'd wow them any way they wanted. Even if they threw her in with a nobody, even if they asked her to call the match, she was ready.

Pilar pushed out a set of fifty burpees and sprang to the corner of the mat for shoulder rolls. Her core was tight and powerful. The contact with the mat kindled her skin, the coursing of blood palpable from chest to fingertips. She slapped her bare biceps and soaked in the endorphin rush. She felt like she could spear the arm of the bench press and break it in two.

She took a back bump, kicking her legs out from the imaginary strike, landing with her shoulders square to the mat, extending her arms to maximize surface area. Her first bump, taken at a twiggy 15, had kicked the air out of her, left her positive her organs had burst. This one energized her, reminded her how strong she'd become. She took another, whipping her neck as if receiving a stiff lariat, and another, flipping backward and careening chest first to the mat. There was pain, a lot of it, but she didn't care. Her training allowed her to transform it into adrenaline, focus, the drive to spring to her feet and take one more.

There were no ropes on Sol's practice mat. As it was tucked into the back corner of the gym, the sides opposite and left of what would have been camera in an MCW ring were only twenty inches of padded carpet away from the gym's cinderblock walls. Pilar sprinted to the left side wall, aiming to leap the carpeted gap and hit the wall feet first, flipping off it. She loved to screw around with the move during practice, testing how high she could run up the wall before gravity compelled her to kick away, flipping toward the

mat. It was a totally badass kung-fu thing most men who trained with Sol were far too bulky to do. The finishing move she'd been working on was a variant of the Shooting Star, a back flip from the top rope which came careening down across her opponent's torso. Though her wall kick required a completely different set of steps, she'd justified it as practice for her finisher, as helping her body become familiar with the forces involved.

She was jacked from her bumps and moving at the perfect speed, but right when she left her feet, she knew she'd flubbed it. She was pushing too hard, too fast. She flailed, trying to correct her mistake, but the trigger had been pulled.

The angle was too steep. Her legs found the wall in time to keep her from smashing into it. They coiled and misfired, shooting Pilar on the diagonal across the mat's corner. Her arms flailed to slow the hit, but she'd rotated too far, and she couldn't tuck her head closer to her chest. She struck the seam between the mat and the carpet with her neck and the top of her shoulders. Her head snapped back and the momentum rolled her knees up and over, into the back wall.

Again, there was pain. No more or less real than the pain from before. It didn't overwhelm her. Though her body was locked by it, though she wasn't sure if she'd be badly bruised or paralyzed, she could think beyond it, and those thoughts in a matter of seconds caved into a sharp, dense point of shame. How stupid. How careless. How fucking clueless. The pain was nothing against the thought that she'd just acted with the self-awareness of a child. And what pierced her as her lower half slid down the wall was a shadow of the possibility that some part of her was aware and wanted it to happen.

About a minute passed, but she was able to catch her breath away from all that and refocus on her body. Her kneecaps were screaming as if they'd cracked, but she

could set her jaw and bend her legs. Despite everything there was a small wave of relief with this. Her knees would be fine, and most important, her spine had escaped damage.

Her neck, however, was bad. She tried to sit up, but the weight of her head was too much to support. Electric sting shocked her muscles. If a vertebra had cracked, such a jerk could jostle loose a bone shard and that would be it. The safest option was to remain still and wait for help, to lie helpless on her back, staring at the ceiling, her neck swelling, the gym fans whirring.

“C’mon,” she said.

She tried again to sit up, grabbing her knees and wrenching herself vertical. Agony, but she made it. Once her head found stability on her shoulders, the downward pressure eased the sting. Carefully, she tested it. Only a half-turn to the right, nothing to the left. Tilt in any direction forced her neck to hold weight, and that wasn’t happening.

She slid to the edge of the mat, and, as if balancing a stack of books on her head, rose to her feet. She shuffled to a cabinet near Sol’s office and cracked a couple of ice packs. Raising her arms brought more pain as her traps contracted, but she rested her elbows on the arm of a dip bar and held a pack against each side of her neck.

She was standing like that, attempting to stretch, thinking about how she could fashion a hot compress, when the dock door activated, spilling the hard line of sunlight waiting beneath it into the gym.

“*Hijo de perra,*” Sol said, seeing Pilar after ducking under the rising door. “You broke your neck.”

“It’s not broken,” Pilar said.

“Oh! You mean I’ve had an x-ray machine in here this whole time?”

“Shut up. I’m fine.”

“If you were fine, you would’ve removed yourself from this silly-ass stance before I waltzed in here. Lemme see.”

Sol clasped Pilar’s wrists, set them down on the bar, and put the cold packs aside. Then, he placed a pair of fingertips behind each of Pilar’s ears and slowly felt his way down.

“What happened?” Sol asked.

“Took a bad fall,” Pilar said.

“Back bump?”

“Something like that.”

Sol frowned and tested Pilar’s range of motion. Some left rotation had returned and she could nod a little, but when he tilted her head back she had to swallow a yelp.

“You know,” Sol said. “Every wrestler has a punch card, and all the bumps she’ll ever take are on that card. For some, there’s a million teensy little circles. For others, there’s a single big one right smack in the center. You punch all your holes, you’re done. Body breaks down. Career’s over. You’re young, really young. You got a lot of punches left. But even so, why the hell are you wasting them on a Saturday morning by yourself in this run-down old place?”

Pilar sniffed in a wad of mucus and looked up at Sol. “Sometimes, I don’t know why I do things.”

“No one does,” he said after a pause. “Especially the ones that say they know.”

Sol contorted his face as if he didn’t trust how serious his advice sounded. Pilar recognized it and brightened a little. “Am I going to make it, doc?”

“Probably just some bruising. Maybe a strain. Three weeks rest would do you some good anyway.”

Sol smiled and offered Pilar the cold packs. She didn't take them.

“Bonnie's trying me out today,” Pilar said.

Pilar could only hold Sol's eyes for a moment. They were so heavy, and her confession seemed to remind Sol of every pitiable thing he'd seen.

“Today,” he declared.

“Later,” Pilar said. “Before the house show at the Hangar. I wanted to warm up for it.”

Sol, washed in the light streaming through the dock, stared down at her, offered her the cold packs again. Pilar reached for them. Too far for her neck.

“Fuck,” she said, wincing.

Sol stepped to her, covered her with his shadow, and held the cold packs to Pilar's neck until she mustered enough strength to raise her arms to rest again on the dip bar.

“Bonnie Blue,” Sol said. He dried his hands on a towel hanging on a rack nearby and folded it neatly back into place. “When I met her, she'd just joined Mid-Coast, but I remember her face from that photo, the famous one. Hard to forget. Buried her whole family then disappeared. Sounded like a story someone in our biz would dream up.”

Sol dug a flake of dry skin from the corner of his mouth and shook his head.

“How long were you standing like that?”

“Too long,” Pilar said.

“You want to sit? You can rest your arms on the preacher bench.”

She said yes, and Sol helped her cross the gym floor. Once she was situated, he unzipped the thin long sleeve synthetic he was wearing and sat on an incline bench nearby. Underneath the jacket was a sleeveless compression shirt struck with white and black like Stormtrooper armor. Any other man his age, even those with similar physiques, would've looked ridiculous in it, but Sol, in his sixties, could've modeled the shirt for a commercial.

“One time Old Clout Crawczak brought me in to work muscle for one of his protégés. Easy gig. Just had to look good for the cameras every couple of weeks. Take a few bumps. Sell at ringside. Snarl at the rugrats. No sweat stuff. But one day, the guy I'm valet for misses a taping. Clout gets a call. This guy's wife is in the hospital. She was attacked by bees. A goddamned swarm of enraged bees. She's not even allergic, but she got stung so many times that her heart wasn't ticking right. Too much venom in her system.”

“Jesus,” Pilar said. “Was she on safari or something?”

“Nope. She was walking outside their place. A rental in Morningside. We all thought it was bullshit, but I knew this guy, and he had doctor's bills, pictures, police report, everything. This was a legitimate freak bee incident. Straight out of a horror movie. Pretty damn good excuse for missing work. Only when he shows up next week, we get word from Clout himself that there's been a change of plans. Me and this guy are going to tease a breakup, and at the next pay-per-view, I'm going over. His goddamned 55-year-old, has-been, no-name valet is going to beat his ass.

“Now I've never had a problem cashing a paycheck, but c'mon. This guy is young. He's drawing. I'm entourage, you know? I look good and throw a right every now

and then. It's clear they're burying him out of spite, for attending to his family in a bizarre emergency, and it's clear that this isn't Clout. Clout's a sonofabitch, but he's not some moustache twirler."

"It was Bonnie," Pilar said.

"Of course it was. Bonnie Blue had her tongue wrapped around Clout's ear from day one. So I go to her. I go to her and I say, look. I'm not doing this. I'm not going over this guy. Find someone else to pull your heartless shit. I'm not in business for this. And wouldn't you know, as sure as we're sitting here, Bonnie sits me down, and tells me, yes. Yes I am. Then, like it was another day at the office, she pulls this file. It's got everything on me. My whole history. Every gold star I'd won in every pea-puddle promotion I worked. She's got all these projections and surveys and outlines, pages and pages of storylines. My chase for the title. Feuds with everybody. My reign as champion. Didn't matter I was posting highway speeds. Bonnie was certain. I was the guy."

"But something happened," Pilar said. "You never won the title."

"Blew out my knee before the next taping," Sol said, swinging his left leg. "And MCW blew right past me. Never wrestled for them again."

Pilar balanced one of her cold packs on the peak of the preacher bench, tried to squeeze the blood back into her wet, pale hand, then stuck it under her armpit. "She didn't wait for you to heal? All that work she did to convince you to take the top spot—she threw it away?"

"A lot of work to us, maybe," Sol said. "But not for her."

"Did she still bury the guy you were muscling for?"

"Eventually. But my knee bought him a few extra paychecks."

Pilar brought the other cold pack down. The exposed skin burned in the industrial fans' breeze. "So you're saying I'm fucked."

"You very well might be."

"Might be. Well thanks, coach. Nice pep talk."

Pilar clutched the sides of the bench and pulled herself up. She needed to get out of the gym, back to the bus stop. Back home she could soak in the bath and maybe scald the hurt away. Or, she could stay on the bus, riding until they forced her off. She'd sit in the back, leave herself open to anybody, and let every bump and pothole flop her head whichever way it wanted to go.

"Sit down," Sol commanded, his voice like a body blow driving Pilar off her feet. He strode to her and squatted. His torso was so long that she still had to look up at him.

"I know you want this," Sol said. "I've watched you grow. I've watched you fight. No wrestler I've trained has had a clearer path to the top. I can do something that might help you, but I need to hear you say that you want it. You want to ace this tryout more than anything, and you're willing to do whatever you must."

His face was like a sandstone cliff, and his breath was sour.

"Sol, I—"

"You want it, or not?"

"Yes," she said. "It's all I've ever wanted."

The hard edge of Sol's cheeks and chin softened. The whole of him seemed to shrink a little. He nodded like a waiter who'd just been reamed for poor service, and Pilar was worried that she'd said the wrong thing. But he told her to stay put and left for his

office. When he returned, he offered her a plastic Ziploc with pills inside. Two types—both round, one chalky and green, the other white and glossy. Eight pills in total.

“Don’t ask what they are. Don’t look them up. Take two of each now and then again about an hour before your tryout. Do not let anyone see you take them. Do not try to get more.”

“I’ve taken shit before,” Pilar said.

“Yep,” Sol said. He handed her a small squeeze bottle. “Wash it down with this. Half now. Half later.”

“What is it?” Pilar asked, unscrewing the lid.

Sol shook his head.

The liquid inside looked like motor oil, though Pilar couldn’t tell if its color was indeed black or if it only looked that way inside the dark walls of the bottle. She stuck her nose through its mouth and regretted it instantly.

“The fuck, Sol? You trying to poison me?”

“Tastes even worse,” Sol said.

“C’mon. What is this?”

“Drink it or give it back.”

Sol stretched out his hand, then waved his fingers just to make a show of it. Pilar waited for him to say more, but he didn’t.

Trying not to bend her neck, she fished out four pills, popped them in, held her nose, and drank.

Sol closed up the gym and drove Pilar back to greater Charlotte. They didn't say much—Sol asking for directions when he needed them, Pilar replying. His car was newish, a sedan, unmodified. Like Dom, Sol drove with the seat ratcheted back as far as possible. The crown of his bald head brushed the canopy. The radio blared with the nasal voices of two guys arguing about spaceships, but it didn't annoy Pilar as much as it should have.

She wondered if the drugs were responsible for that. For much of the ride, she tried to discern what, if anything, was changing. Would she feel it creeping up on her, like after a drink or two, or would it be fast, undetectable, like anesthesia? Her neck was feeling better, though her range of motion was still limited. She suspected a muscle relaxer, maybe a pain killer. It was hard not to take offense from the way Sol had given them to her. She'd heard what pills could do to a wrestler. Half the MCW roster was a walking cautionary tale. She knew herself and wasn't so green as to deny her vulnerability. A small blessing from the wreck of her childhood was that Pilar could never deny the monster which claimed her mother also lurked inside of her. Her youth and inexperience didn't blur that truth. She understood the decision to help her was no small weight on Sol's shoulders, but she imagined the exchange going much differently had she been one of his male students, or even if she'd looked more like a ball-buster than a ballerina.

Her phone buzzed with a text from B. Just one word—*mcnuggets?*

Now there's a fucking addiction, Pilar thought. She checked the time and saw she had some. She hadn't planned on leaving the gym so soon and certainly wasn't counting on a door-to-door commute. The prospect of counting down the minutes alone in the

apartment, drinking lumpy protein, freaking out after her neck's every complaint did not entice her.

She typed back. *fine. ur buying...and picking me up. 20 mins?*

None of her frequently used emojis felt right for the occasion, so she scrolled right and was stuck by how many tiny drawings flew past and how many of them seemed purposefully useless. Three kinds of paperclips, black and white squares, a bunch of clocks with the hands jutting in random directions. Somebody had a rationale for this, and she made a note to look it up later. Emoji chooser. In the meantime, she punctuated her text with French fries and hit send.

When they rolled up to her apartment building, Sol gripped the wheel and turned to her. "Come back down tomorrow. Take a cab if you want. I'll pay for it."

"I'll be fine," Pilar said.

"I know," Sol said. "You'll impress, but in any case, we're probably not going to see each other so much after tonight."

Pilar considered this. She'd been so focused on what a huge step forward that evening could be, she hadn't thought about what she'd have to step away from, and the other side of Sol's statement was even more unsettling. If Bonnie wasn't enamored with her, what were Pilar's chances at finding another promotion? How long could she keep training before she had to find a way to support herself?

A note from B buzzed in—*that u in that car?*—and it was enough to pull Pilar out of her head. Sol was wearing a strained but real smile and was blinking more than usual. She realized he was waiting. Not on purpose, not for something specific, but it was clear he wasn't ready to drive away. In that moment, Pilar felt the tilt of their entire

relationship. What had she ever given this man, who opened his gym to her like a home? Who sweat with her, bled with her, and never asked for anything in return? How many people had never asked for anything in return?

She tried to smile. “What if I need a valet someday?”

“Find someone younger,” Sol said. “And cheaper.”

Pilar couldn't just say goodbye. Her training had demanded collision after collision, but the most entangled maneuvers between them were nowhere near as intimate as leaning over for a hug would be, or kissing him on the cheek. Pilar shrugged and held up a fist, but rather than bumping, Sol wrapped it within his giant hand and held on.

B's ancient Geo Tracker was waiting curbside across the street. On her way over, Pilar peeked into the apartment lot and saw the Civic, which didn't necessarily mean Dom was home, but she thought about jetting upstairs to check and tell him her plans. B jumped on this pause and laid on the horn.

Pilar turned, raised two middle fingers, and kept them up until she opened the passenger door.

“Let's gooo, P,” B said, chugging her arms and bouncing in her seat.

“Okay, okay,” Pilar said.

B punched the canopy. “Nugs! Nugs! Nugs! Nugs!”

“You know what's in those? I bet you've got pink slime in your veins.”

“Ugh, my name is Pilar Contreras,” B screeched. “Can I have, uh, some apple slices, a parfait just the granola, and, um, a side salad, dressing on the side of course.”

“More like a bottle of water and something to jam up my nose.”

B unbuckled and nearly jumped on Pilar to embrace her. “Where have you been all my life?”

Pilar patted B’s back and through her tank top and cami felt the muscle definition around her shoulder blades. “I’m carny trash now,” Pilar said. “I go from one dank pit to another.”

B cranked the air conditioning and chunked the Tracker into gear. She was noticeably more toned than the last time Pilar saw her, and she couldn’t remember quite when that was. School? The party after graduation? Her face and shoulders were bronze and her arms weren’t far behind. Pilar’s skin loved the sun and she could tan in minutes, but B was several shades darker.

“So was that guy your groupie?” B asked. “Y’all were in that car too long for just conversation.”

“My trainer,” Pilar said. “I’ve got my first real match tonight.”

“No shit! Congrats, girl! I’m totally coming to watch you.”

“I don’t think it’s really a public thing.”

“Well it’s good I’m not the public then,” B said, her eyebrows leaping.

The McDonald’s wasn’t far, an exit down the freeway between a rusty Ford dealership and a dollar store. It had yet to get the facelift a lot of the other joints in town had gotten. It had that squat look a lot of old fast food restaurants had, and its red roof was chipped and fading. Inside, Pilar ordered a cheeseburger and a water to go with B’s bucket of chicken nuggets, and they took a booth adorned with a dusty, fake plant. Three tables over, two guys wearing far too many layers for the weather were staring at Pilar in the way men only stared when they were in pairs. The one who would be facing away,

chinstrap goatee and acne craters dotting his ruddy face, had made a point in turning as far as he could without straddling the chair back.

“Is this where you interviewed?” Pilar asked, trying to ignore them.

B, oblivious to the men, had five different dipping sauces neatly opened and aligned in front of her. She dunked a nugget with one hand and poked at her phone with the other. “Huh?” she said.

“You said you talked to a guy, and he was gonna bump you to assistant manager.”

“Oh,” B said without looking up. “No, he’s closer to my side of town. You couldn’t pay me to work in this dump.”

Pilar looked at her and then down to her burger, which was smashed and had half a pickle slice sticking out like road kill tongue. She took a bite, and as her teeth sank through the bun and meat, Pilar thought she heard the burger let out a tiny squeak.

B tapped her phone with an exaggerated flourish, raised her head with a confident smile, and then stuffed that smile with another McNugget.

“So who’s that?” Pilar asked with her mouth full.

“Oh, you know,” B said. “Another live one. He stocks beer, so he’s got these shoulders. And he’s got a screenplay.”

“A screenplay?”

“Yeah! They film a lot of stuff in North Carolina, you know. Like that Dome show? Where the whole town is trapped under it? Anyway, he said he might have a part for me once it gets produced.”

Pilar barely had to chew her burger. Slicked with grease, the bite pretty much slid down on its own. The slimy texture tensed her throat, and she felt the bolus squeeze

through each rung of muscle. Chinstrap, who was still staring, seemed to enjoy this. He raised his brow and took a long, tight sip of his soda.

“You gonna eat all that?” B said, pointing to the five-sixths of a burger remaining on Pilar’s tray.

Pilar’s eyes slid back to B, whose cheeks were packed with nugget meat. “We just got here.”

B snorted. “I know. I’m joking. I just figured with your tryout and everything you’d be packing it in. You know, for energy.”

“Oh,” Pilar said. Her skin suddenly felt hot, like she was blushing, though she hadn’t felt at all embarrassed.

“So you’re actually fighting someone tonight,” B said. “Are you nervous?”

“Not really,” Pilar said. Only nervous enough to jack up her neck and take mystery pills.

“Are they gonna let you fuck a bitch up? You should go ham with a folding chair. Those have to be fake, right? Like foam or something.”

“No. They’re usually just cheap metal chairs. And no, we’ll probably keep to chain wrestling, maybe some low spots.”

“English please.”

“Just, like, basic stuff. Nothing too fancy.” Pilar labored through another bite of burger.

“You gonna wear facepaint? I can totally help you with that.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

“Then what’s your character gonna be?”

Pilar's stomach gurgled, and she swallowed a burp, terrified by how the burger and motor oil mixture might taste. "It's just, me," she said. "I'm trying out. They just want to see what I can do in the ring."

"Oh," B bit off half a nugget and then dug the rest into a sauce container to extract the last drops of honey mustard. "But you want to perform too, yeah? Isn't that the whole point of wrestling? Like, oh no! The insano postal worker just clobbered the guy who thinks he's a werewolf."

"It's not so cartoony anymore. Usually wrestlers are just themselves only turned up, more intense."

"But isn't your brother a lumberjack? Wait, was he like a forest ranger or something before he started wrestling?"

"No, but—look, can we not talk about this? I'm freaked out enough about this tryout."

"This is going to help you. It's like acting right? All the best actors step into their characters. Some even stay in character when they aren't filming. It's called the method. When you get out there, you can't be nervous little P anymore. You gotta be, well, somebody else."

There was a painful tightening in Pilar's midsection, and a wave of fatigue rolled over her. It was getting hard to listen. B sounded like Sol was feeding her lines. For a second Pilar's brain considered that a real possibility, and she had to take a deep breath and not look at B's ears for some kind of piece, not look between her breasts for a microphone slipping out. That effort brought her back to Chinstrap. Though he was across the restaurant, Pilar swore she saw him lick his lips and wink. She thought she'd

imagined it. It was so over the top, even for a creep in a McDonald's, but then he snickered to his friend and slapped his hand in congratulations.

"I've got it," B said. "We do you up all pale and shit, straighten your hair in front of your face, get a grandma nightgown from Goodwill. You could be one of those scary Japanese girls."

"I'm not Japanese," Pilar said.

"Yeah but you got that whole ethnic thing going for you, so it would work. Imagine all the lights go out, and then you appear in the center of the stage. Freaky!"

"But that's not wrestling," Pilar said. Her eyes fluttered, and she had to rub them and blink a few times to clear her vision.

"Wrestling isn't wrestling," B said. "It's theater. It's like a goddamned soap opera for teenage boys. And they're gonna strut you out there like a piece of meat and they're all gonna jerk it to ya. You're better than that, P."

Chinstrap knocked his friend on his shoulder and gestured to the women. The friend gobbled a handful of fries and stood, and the two headed over, sliding across the tile as if they were floating. Pilar's gut churned. Her hot skin flashed to cold, and she could almost draw blood with her sharp gooseflesh. "A little Japanese girl couldn't suplex anybody."

"What?" B said.

"Suplex."

B scrunched her nose and leaned an ear over the table. Pilar felt the room tilt. Her mouth filled with saliva. Chinstrap opened with a knock on the top of their booth. "You know," he said, "if you two ladies were vegetables—"

“I’m gonna be sick,” Pilar said. She shot to her feet, knocking Chinstrap back into his friend, and hurried to the restroom.

The soul-withering discomfort which usually accompanied the vomit wasn’t there, not a hint of it. In its absence, Pilar hovered over the bowl and considered what was in it. Since the food had been so new in her stomach, she could identify every component of her swallowed burger, including the bun. She also realized her neck was bearing the full weight of her head with no pain whatsoever. Her range of motion was limited only by a mild stiffness. Sol’s cocktail was working. Really well. Frighteningly, fascinatingly well.

“P, honey, are you okay?” B said from behind her in the stall. She raised her hands to Pilar’s head, presumably to hold her hair back, but they melted off when she found the ponytail Pilar had been wearing the whole time.

A quick knock on the bathroom door. “You okay in there?” a voice said, definitely one of the men, but too squeaky and hesitant to confidently pin on Chinstrap.

B turned to respond, but Pilar cut her off. “Yup, just puking my guts out.”

Pilar looked back at B and smiled. Not one complaint from her neck. B’s face shrank into itself as if she was sucking a lemon. A rare sight, Pilar thought. B’s self-assurance had always impressed her. Back in high school, a few nights they’d found themselves in sketchy corners, and even though it was Pilar who knew fifteen weaponless ways to incapacitate an assailant, B had always seemed the one in charge, the one who would get them out of a jam. It was neat to finally see her, if only for a second, completely bewildered.

Pilar made gulping noise the men would be sure to hear. “Oh, god,” she said. “Round two!” She tore a stretch of toilet paper to wipe her mouth, and then without turning back to the bowl, feigned a tremendous wretch, punctuated with coughs and sputtering. Had the stall door been closed, B’s leap backward would’ve broken it open.

Muffled obscenities filtered in from outside followed by another knock. “Hey, should we call someone?”

“No, no, she’s fine,” B yelled, as Pilar heaved over and over.

“My intestines!” Pilar screamed. She hammered the stall and stifled laughter.

“The fuck are you doing?” B whispered.

Pilar mouthed for B to join in, and unleashed another wretch which was mostly shriek. Though it had started with something real, like a wrestling bump, the discomfort was only temporary, and really, it hadn’t been much discomfort at all. It was a release, and now, in the wake of it, Pilar could show her friend the fun part—the reaction, the sell—which didn’t feel so much like a performance to Pilar as it did a celebration.

“Hnggggg,” Pilar bellowed, clutching her stomach, grinning like child. B’s face began to turn, her confusion drowning in the deluge of absurdity. She let out an exaggerated choke.

“B! Help me!”

“There’s just—ugh—so much of it!” B said through hiccups. “I can’t.—I can’t—”

“The manager’s coming over,” said the voice outside the bathroom. The women could barely hear it through their heaving.

B slammed herself against the trash can. “Oh god, it’s the nuggets!”

“Fuck, it’s moving, B!” Pilar screamed. “Your puke is moving!”

Back in B's Geo, they couldn't stop laughing. They got the horn from an F-150 behind them when B failed to see the light change. They took the wrong on-ramp to the highway and had to loop around. Pilar knew her timetable, but part of her wondered how bad it would be if they cranked the music, rolled down the windows, and kept on driving.

"Did you see their faces?" B asked, bouncing in her seat.

"Fuckers were ready to stick their fists down their throats," Pilar said. "You should've seen the looks they were giving us, like we were slabs of meat."

"Holy shit, P!" B nearly ripped her hands from the wheel. "Did you hear what line he was going to use on us?"

"Oh my god. What was it?"

"If you girls were vegetables...you'd be cute-cumbers."

Pilar stamped the footwell carpet and struggled to breathe. "At least we're vegan!"

"I'm going to eat you," B said in a deep voice. "I'm going to dip you in my milky ranch, little cute-cumber."

"Excuse me, ladies?" Pilar followed. "I'd give anything to pickle you."

"I'm going to peel your skin off and chop you into my salad, baby."

"WE. ARE. DELICIOUS!" Pilar yelled out the window. She turned back to B. Her hair was flying everywhere, catching the sun, shining a brilliant gold. "Seriously," Pilar said. "Look at us. I would fucking eat us. We're a goddamned delicacy. You inhale fried chicken, and you're still skinny as fuck."

B stuck her tongue out of grin a mile wide. “Well you rally puke like fucking Rocky. Half your guts are in the toilet and you’re like, time to clown these motherfuckers! I mean, what the fuck decided to kick in there?”

Pilar bit her lower lip. “Oh, you wanna know?”

B weaved through the post-lunch traffic, cut off a merging semi and ignored its horn. Pilar wasn’t even sure what highway they were on, but she didn’t much care as she reached in the back seat for her duffel.

Chapter Eight: The Timber Terror

For such a big man, coiled in muscle, Dom was patient, but the world didn't often expect it. Mechanics spoke to him plainly. Doctors didn't strand him in empty exam rooms. Children got quiet in his presence.

Years prior, when Pilar was in grade school, he'd waited outside his mothers' house. It was winter and freakishly cold, the southern air refusing to dry despite plunging temperatures. He couldn't afford to waste gas running his car, so he shivered. Every quarter hour, he had to crack a window to clear the fog gathering on the windshield.

When his mother finally arrived, he took video with his cell phone, caught her struggling to parallel park her vehicle, staggering toward her apartment. Pilar was in tow, her gait sleepy. It was three in the morning.

Dom kept the video rolling until the pair was out of sight. He made notes in the back of a creased Mead he used to track his workouts. Date, time, how long he'd waited, details of his mother's condition. He knew it wasn't easy to strip a child from her mother, and he knew a judge would sooner run from the courtroom than sign him custody rights, but he kept the journal and saved the evidence. If anything, he thought the videos and pages of notes would someday will him to action. The record would force him to see what his mother was doing, and it would be too much to bear.

Before he left on that frigid night, Dom left his car and walked around the building to the window of Pilar's bedroom. The light was on, and she, still in her street clothes, was passed out on her bed—no sheets, no pillows, no blankets. He watched her.

She tugged her legs to her chest, and the movement jostled the loose knit cap from her head. Her hair was greasy, knotted.

Dom was patient, but he wasn't a saint. He'd trained for quickness in the ring, where everything moved faster. His persona, Hack Barlow, was a lumbering monster, but to achieve that effect, he only needed to move a step behind his opponents. Most casual fans didn't appreciate the speed at which the wrestlers worked. They didn't realize that Dom, when his patience finally wore thin, was quick to the strike.

Dom couldn't leave the café—not while she was still there. He chewed on her name—Caitlin. It wasn't working in his head. They hadn't been introduced. He'd stolen her name just like he'd taken her face. He'd gotten everything he'd wanted, but given her nothing in return, and he was still taking.

He tried to work through ways to explain it. As far as he knew, the chat service paired users randomly, but what if there'd been some option he'd inadvertently clicked, one that privileged partners who were close to each other? What if his memory was failing him and it wasn't her? What if she'd hacked the system, found out his info? What if she was after him?

Those thoughts disturbed him in their paranoia, and sickened him in their hypocrisy. He was the one who hadn't stopped staring at her since she entered the café. He has the one lurking in the back pews, refusing to leave as she talked over her laptop screen with the skinny-fat regular. The man, hand under his chin, leaned toward her intently. They were speaking quietly, but Dom caught a word here and there. She was

writing something. She couldn't believe she'd never been to the café before. Her drink was delicious.

Dom reached in his pocket for his phone, and remembered again he didn't have it. Instead, he felt the yogurt container holding his grounds. He opened it, took too deep a whiff, and was overpowered but nonetheless enticed. There was no way to brew it, and he sure as hell wasn't approaching the counter again, so he pinched off a little and packed it like a dip between his lip and gums. Nothing happened at first. He felt stupid, and to his surprise, worried about the regulars seeing him do it. He'd never thought himself a part of them before—their still shoulders and frantic fingers, their eyes burning blue, starched collars and three-figure haircuts. But now, he was curled over a pint of Hellenic fruit-on-the-bottom with a plug of nuclear waste in his lip, and his taste buds finally sensed it and sounded the alarm. His mouth flushed with saliva, glands cramping painfully, shrinking to the size of raisins. The moisture activated the grounds, and Dom imagined the tight bolus burning through his incisors. Bitter so bitter it tasted sweet and then bitter again.

“Hey, you're Hack Barlow!” The shout seemed to come from the wrong side of Dom's eardrums. A hand flew in from his periphery with such force, he had to dodge it.

“Oh jeeze. Sorry to scare you! I'm a huge fan.” The hand was attached to a man wearing pressed khakis and a shirt with a wild-eyed lion on it. He was gangly and breathing much too hard, but his hair was cut in a bob so inexplicably stylish, Dom made and held eye contact, which was enough of an invitation for the man to seat himself across the table.

“I can't believe this. Hack Barlow, *The Timber Terror*. You're a legend, man. Your workrate has been off the charts lately. Can I ask you a few questions?”

“Cup,” Dom said.

“Excuse me, Mr. Barlow?”

“I need a cup,” Dom said, inky spittle dripping down his beard.

“Oh, of course. What an honor!”

The first time Dom dipped, the kid who’d showed him the ropes and packed the tin of wintergreen for him had said to expect a burn because the companies mixed in tiny shards of fiberglass with the tobacco. It would cut your lip so your body could rapidly absorb the nicotine. Compared to the pinch of grounds, the wintergreen had tasted like pulverized Tic Tacs.

“Here you go, Mr. Barlow,” the man said. “I got you some napkins, too.”

Dom spit a rope into the cup and was about to dig the lump out, but his salivary glands had started to relax as his body remembered how the substance made it feel. Dom touched the bulge in his lip and noticed how much liquid his facial hair had absorbed.

“This is a nice place, huh?” the man said. “Everyone is so well dressed.”

Dom wrung out his beard in the napkins and nodded.

“So, my friends and I have a bet. Last year, at Slaughterfest, you and Doctor Graveyard worked a thirty minute Broadway. You got some serious color in that match, like point nine-oh Mutas, and they say you gigged after Doc walloped you with that seven iron, but I say you went hardway with it. I mean, crimson like that had to be legit, right?”

Dom blinked as if his eyelids were pulling weight. “What?”

“Or what about 2011, at Forsaken IV, you ate the pin for The Carolinian Dragon Bruce Knuckles. Strong showing there, five stars for sure. One of the best Enziguris ever.

And that Shooting Star Press? From a competitor of your stature? I was marking out. Couldn't believe it. Anyway, I'm sure you know that ole Brucey is making waves over in New Japan as B.K. Brown. I'm just wondering how it feels to drop a match to someone who might be champion of a major international promotion. You and Dragon still correspond?"

"Look, brother," Dom was able to mumble. His tongue was swelling. Sick ache radiated from his bones, but his muscles demanded action. He didn't want to be an asshole, but he had no idea what this guy was talking about. He scratched the edge of the table, filled his lungs and let the air out slowly. When he opened his eyes, he first saw the man, smiling expectantly, and then he saw the Omegle Girl's table. It was empty.

Dom nearly tipped his table launching to his feet. The tilt spilled his spit cup. The man in the lion shirt recoiled, but only a dribble of black muck oozed out. The barista shouted something as Dom sprinted from the café onto the street.

"Slow down, Speedy!" a man yelled from shotgun in a pickup driving past. Dom scanned the cars on the road and those parked nearby. He looked for the Omegle Girl's long hair, her hooded sweatshirt. A figure caught the corner of his eye, and he cut hard to change course. The force slung the yogurt container from his pouch. It hit the pavement and burst open.

Dom collapsed, scraping his knees. He drooled on the grounds as he tried to scrape them back in. His head swiveled wildly up the street and down, back to the grounds, to the coffee shop. She wasn't there. She was nowhere.

The container was no more than half full when he took off. He ran south, where a few cars were stopped at a light. Maybe one of them was her. He could memorize the plates, look up her address, her last name.

Though no trees grew roadside, many sidewalk slabs had pitched or rolled at unique angles as if roots had buckled them. Every stride of Dom's frenzied sprint was a major hazard. His hamstrings torqued near failure, but he didn't care. His focus was singular. Find her. Find her. Find her.

He reached the stopped vehicles just as the light turned green. He saw the faces of two of the waiting drivers, their frowns turning to him when he flailed into their peripheral vision. The first car straddled the stop strip and accelerated immediately upon green. All Dom saw was the back of the driver's head—possibly female, possibly hers. He gasped and pumped his legs as hard as they could take. The car easily outpaced him. He scanned for a license plate, but the rectangular indent where it would've hung was empty. In the back window, at an indecipherable angle, was a temporary plate.

Dom slowed, letting the terrible friction in his hips and knees grind him to a stop. As the car grew smaller and smaller, and the two others he'd passed overtook him, each driving in the wrong lane to make the buffer zone as wide as possible between them and this crazy, hooded monster, he nearly cracked a smile. What would he have done if it was her in the car? If he'd caught her? On two occasions now, he'd chosen to keep his distance, to sever conversation, yet losing sight of her felt like he'd torn up a winning lottery ticket he'd been too afraid to cash in.

He kicked a parking meter hard and square with his middle toes. The pain registered solidly, so he did it again. It was good, he thought. He deserved it. How many

kicks would it take to purge him, to let him start over, to stop thinking of her as a lightning bug in a jar?

“What’s wrong, Speedy?” a voice called. “Cheese too fast for you?”

The pickup had pulled next to Dom, its engine at idle louder than a train. The man leaned on his hand on an arm as he barked through the passenger window.

“I’ve never seen a spic run like that unless he’s stole something,” the driver said.

Dom, his toes throbbing, looked at the men. The truck was elevated, and its tire treads were deep enough to claw up a mudslide.

“Saw you disturbing those motorists,” the passenger said. “How about you finish what you were starting with us?”

Dom still had the plug of grounds in his lip, and the slurry building in his mouth was thick enough to choke. He leaned back, curled his tongue behind the fluid, and spat a tar-black wad of it inches below the right-side window.

The passenger grunted, then inspected the spit oozing down the door panel. Noises escaped his mouth, and after a short conversation, both men exited the car. Clenched fists. Bared teeth. They approached like wolves thirsty for marrow, one reaching at his belt, for what Dom didn’t much care. The wrestler stood his ground, waiting to see which man would be brave enough to take the lead.

...

i knew it was over when i hit her. it was just as fucked as youd think but what killed me was how good it felt. i can sit here and tell you that it was the last straw that anybody in my shoes woulda done the same but the fact is i did it. and it felt good because i knew right then id never be able to look at her without remembering the sound she made. and thats what i needed because no matter what she did i was too weak to stop it the right way.

you'd think after everything it woulda been some big thing but it wasn't. i come in one night when the doors unlocked again and ma and pilar are both passed out in the living room. this is the fifth time. the fifth time since ive been writing all this down. do you see what im saying. who waits until the fifth fuckin time. i check to see if i need to call again and mas got this cigarette in her hand. still right there between her fingers. below on the arm of the couch theres a burn. and not just a scorch mark but like a spot where the couch burned for a second. and pilars head is hanging off the side of the recliner. her face is like right there. inches.

pilar's what like 15 at this point so its been a while since ive taken her. shed get so pissed at me. ive woken up in enough strange places to know how bad it can be. and ive never taken her when ma was asleep like this but i saw that cig and i was really really scared. like its a shitty couch but even then i know they dont design these things to just light up. and fuck me this is far from the worst spot ive seen them in. like i can see breathing and theyre home and theres not some tweaker in the corner. but that fire. it got me.

so i sling pilar over a shoulder and take her to the civic. buckle her in and then mas there. i think she like tugged on my shirt. like i got headphones on and im blocking her way down the sidewalk. just like excuse me sir. excuse me. so i turn and shes there and doesnt say nothing. shes not even really giving me a look. shes just there. standing. waiting. and then i hit her.

i mean it couldve been revenge. i never wrote down how often shed got me but it was too much. the belt. the hairbrush. the pan. fuckin plunger. guy once asked me how i could take a tube light across the back and i was like brother give me a warehouse of light tubes before one solid strike with a good wooden spoon. and i know mas doing the same to pilar. for years. her whole life. but its not revenge. its not hate. i think what it was is that i finally made a choice. it wasn't a good one

but at least it was something. right after shes falling this sound comes out and its like a sigh. like shes just found out i cheated on a math test and shes disappointed. ill never forget that.

took me a while to stop pilar from going back. and honestly it was mostly her. some kids do grow up you know. i showed her the notebooks. didnt want to because when does something like that start saying heres what your brother knew but did nothing about. we never heard from ma. almost three years now. i know how lucky i got with that. you wanna know who i really am. im a lucky sonofabitch. things could have been so much worse.

...

Though the cut had barely penetrated the calluses on Dom's knuckles, he still hit it with a double dose of peroxide and ointment, then found a pre-snipped bandage designed to curl around joints and flex with his stretching skin. By far the most well-organized and lavishly appointed nook of his apartment was his medicine cabinet, which would've looked right at home behind pharmacy glass. Dom knew what to buy and where to get the most he could for his money, but more than once he'd retrieved something from the cabinet then moved to the refrigerator, finding it barren and frostbitten, and wondered if that was really the type of wrestler he wanted to be. If you could ignore the gimmicks, it was simple and surprisingly cheap to eat a diet that would make everything easier, that would eliminate the need for about a third of the products gleaming inside his medicine cabinet. But, it had been tough enough to keep the fridge stocked when he had fifty additional pounds to maintain, and not even Pilar's arrival had been enough to change that.

When showering, Dom had two choices. The bathtub fixture was a curved pipe sticking out of the wall, and the only flow control came from adjusting the amount of hot

and cold coming through it. Whatever voodoo was working on the building's pipes dictated that a stream usable for a normal shower emerged tepid. If Dom wanted hot, he had to crank the left-hand faucet so that water spurted so hard from the pipe it formed a cone-shaped mist. Of course, the bathroom's exhaust fan had never worked, so any humidity hung there, breeding pink mildew and dark mold. Whatever type of shower stream Dom chose, the water hit about midway down his back. Most days, his neck was sore, so he had to kneel to rinse his hair.

This day definitely called for hot. Dom got it as scalding as he could take and stood in the fog. After a few minutes, he soaped his hands and realized the bandage he'd just put on was soaked and curling away from the cut on his knuckles.

The men hadn't really been serious—those types never were. The weapon the driver had pulled was a butterfly knife he'd likely never learned to twirl, let alone hurt someone with. Their body language made it clear they'd cower once they knew Dom's figure wasn't for show. They didn't deserve to see what Dom could really do, so he'd holstered the far more devastating palm and elbow strikes for an inefficient, showy, closed-fist punch, which caught the passenger's jaw.

Shit hurt, and it could have easily broken his hand. He wondered if he would've been so forward without the sludge in his lip.

The shower loosened everything a little, so it wasn't too much of a struggle to dress and stretch out in bed. He shot a quick text to Pilar to check her status. Still a few hours before the tryout. He wanted to call her, ask how she'd been preparing, find out if she'd gotten a good breakfast somewhere, but after the previous night's words, he held off. Had he been thinking ahead about her career, he would have tried his luck at teaching

the ropes to a rookie or two or years ago, gotten himself some experience. He knew he needed to push Pilar, but every time she blew up at him, Dom seconded guessed himself. The hardest part of it was that he really had no idea who she was to him. Pilar took the roles of sister, student, and travelling partner. Not long ago Dom had seen her at her most vulnerable—ninety pounds, strung out, and she was just a kid. Now, if someone went Hollywood on her teeth, she'd be right at home on the cover of a fitness mag.

The day he'd taken her, Dom took responsibility for her. Even at the time, he knew she was old enough that he only could do so much, and that was less than what he should've done, how he'd wanted to help. He never thought she'd take a shine to the business. It'd been his escape, a way to flee his catastrophe of a childhood. He'd assumed Pilar would find her own way out, hopefully down a path less destructive than her previous one. What teenage girl could stomach being around her meathead brother for so long? But she hadn't fled. She'd gotten closer to him.

There'd been a few late nights out with the boys during which Dom had speculated if there was something in a wrestler's DNA that drew him to the squared circle. Genetics would help explain why the business ran so often in families, and why the urge to compete seemed to appear like a mutation in people on farms, in ghettos, in law school, and everywhere in between. But he knew the truth. Without him, Pilar would never have heard of professional wrestling. She'd seen his life and followed. He'd wanted to convince her otherwise. Even if she got a shot, in all likelihood the business would use her, exploit her, wreck her body. But he was good enough of a brother to know that no matter the probable outcome, he loved Pilar. She had a right to his support. Dom was no star, but he had honed a skill. He would never keep that from her.

He put on a T-shirt and a pair of loose-fitting track pants, tying the drawstring so they'd stay up. Though leftover damp from the shower was drawing sweat from his chest and back, the reunion with his phone brought Dom comfort. He opened the web browser and realized where his fingers wanted to take him. He flicked the browser closed and brought up his Tinder profile. One of the Sumter "Hi's" hadn't responded. The other had spammed him with a dick pill ad. The woman interested in his forearms said he looked familiar. "Have I ever seen you at The Athlete's House? I'm usually there three times a week." His last Sumter match said there was a surprise waiting for him on her Instagram account. Dom pulled her profile up and saw its latest post—a shot of her from the neck down. She was wearing a white tank top with a black bra underneath. A domino peeked out from under the top of a cup.

"Jesus," Dom said, exiting the program without following her.

He had two new matches from the greater Charlotte area, a 29-year-old from Midtown with a Cam Newton jersey and Panther blue streaks in her hair, and a 24-year-old from Lockwood wearing a pirate hat and holding a toddler in a parrot onesie. He sent hellos back to them and saw that one of his long-term conversations had replied—a woman from North Charleston he'd started talking to almost four months earlier. Dom could scroll up their chat window for a good minute without reaching the beginning. They'd hit on just about every topic. Dom never went into much detail concerning himself, but he was more than willing to listen to her story and give his honest opinion on movies, eateries, the best Carolina beaches, sex positions. She was Dom's age and she was good. Whenever the conversation grew too suggestive and leading, she would sense Dom's reticence and pull back. After a few weeks of this, Dom wondered what she'd

thought about his unwillingness to escalate, so he abruptly asked. Her reply essentially said she was willing to play the long game and enjoy his company in the meantime. Dom didn't see anything about this woman that would prevent her from befriending an attractive, well-adjusted partner in real life with a quarter of the effort she'd spent on him. The image of her hunched over her phone, wondering if this would be the day Dom would consent to meet, made him consider unmatching out of mercy, but he didn't. He was sure that a similar thought must have crossed the woman's mind about this celibate bodybuilder she was chatting with. Maybe this was the kind of relationship they were both looking for. Maybe this was the only way they could connect.

She'd asked if he'd ever been up in the Appalachians to camp. Dom replied that he'd been up and over, but there'd never been enough people to keep him in the mountains. He didn't return a question.

Dom opened Omegle, but closed it after his first pairing with an empty chair and an energy drink can. The lighting in his apartment was terrible anyway.

Unsure of where to go next, he stared at his lock screen. His background image was an MCW promo shot of Hack Barlow at his heaviest, three hundred plus. His beard was knotted and wild, and he was gripping an ax the photographer had spurted with ketchup. The image was hideous and that's why Dom kept it there. It was the first and last thing he saw every day.

Dom knew he was going to do it eventually, so he decided to quit pretending like he wasn't. He pulled up his browser and started searching for Charlotte-area high schools with sport teams named the "Warriors."

He found two—a Christian academy that had just opened, and Weddington High, a public school in Union County south of the beltway. The Irish green on their “W” emblem was the same color as the “Warrior Football” on the Omegle Girl’s sweatshirt.

The website loaded slowly, but it didn’t take much clicking around for Dom to realize this wouldn’t be as easy as finding some kind of photo directory or online yearbook. He clicked on a page for the school’s Parent-Teacher organization and paused on a photo of the officers. Their faces were kind, but sober. Dom had to chuckle at how well he fit the stereotype for an online predator. These parents probably had his face in mind when they set the rules concerning what information about their children would be permitted on Weddington’s website. The Omegle Girl had looked young, less so in person, but Dom had never quite processed that she could’ve been someone who needed protection from him.

He tossed his phone on the bed and got up to stare at the dishes, stacked so high in the sink he had to remove a few from the pile to fit a glass under the faucet. The water sloshed in his stomach, empty since the previous night. He mixed a double-thick protein shake and washed down a handful of supplements in one, chalky gulp. The aftertaste was like soft-serve that had sat in the machine too long.

He wasn’t pursuing the Omegle Girl for sex. He’d enjoyed talking with her. He’d been fine with showing her what she’d seen and nothing more. If anything, she’d pushed him for more. She’d demanded it.

On the edge of the bed, he retrieved his phone and pulled up Facebook, found the page for Weddington High School, liked it, flicked through its photos. The page had more than 1500 followers. Dom scrolled through the list. Middle aged men, likely fathers

of students. Women in college and graduate school. Winter scarves. Bikinis. A man engulfed in cigar smoke. A man with an American flag overlaying his profile picture. Couples posing in formal wear. Lots of Panther blue.

Suddenly, there were voices in the hallway outside the apartment, then a key turning in the lock. Dom flicked the list away before the door opened.

“Wait, is your brother home?” a woman’s voice said.

“Hey, Dom!” Pilar said, leading with her hip through the doorway. She looked behind her with a flat smile as the second woman entered. She was around Pilar’s age. Clearly not a wrestler but fit enough. Dom’s ribcage threatened to implode when he noticed she looked a little like the Omegle Girl. It wasn’t her, but she caught the shock in his eyes.

“Goddmanit, P.” The woman turned to the door then spun back around. “You should have let me change.”

“Take a look.” Pilar swept her arms around, held them at the sink, stuck out her tongue in disgust. “We clearly don’t give a shit.”

“It’s fine. I basically live in a trash can.” B dropped her bag on the floor. The strap caught on her hair, so she fluffed it back into place and stuck her hand out to Dom.

“Hi. I’m B. Sorry your sister picked today to finally introduce us. I swear it’s barbeque sauce.”

Dom took her hand and saw a dark red stain, almost like dried blood, streaking down her white sleeveless shirt from the side of her breast to the bottom hem.

“Nice to meet you,” Dom said, trying to relax the death grip on his phone.

“I’m a really messy eater,” B said. Pilar, who was rummaging through a pile of crap of the floor, let out a long laugh, and B struggled to keep one in.

“Wait,” Dom said. “Your name is actually B? Like the letter?”

Pilar snapped her jaw shut and shot him a look. Dom remembered he only knew that because he’d read so many of B’s texts while Pilar was behind the wheel.

“Oh my god. What has this whore told you about me?” B said.

Dom stood. B might have been a little taller than Pilar, but from his height, they were the same. It had been strange to meet a woman without her having to crane her neck to see him, but now she assumed that familiar angle—hair, forehead and nose taking precedence over mouth and chin.

“Not a lot, actually,” Dom said, peeking over to Pilar. “She’s been weirdly secretive about you. I thought ‘B’ was an alias or something.”

B laughed. “Your sis just wants me all to herself, doesn’t she? Nah. B is short for the horrowshow of a name my parents gave me, and no, I’m not going to tell you.”

Pilar dropped shaker bottle, and it bounced noisily on the floor. “Shiiit. Where are they?” Pilar said.

“So what do I call you?” B said as Dom opened his mouth.

“Oh, fuck. Sorry. I’m Dom. Though Pilar’s had to have told you that by now.”

Dom reached out to shake her hand again.

“Just wanted to hear it from the source,” B said.

“Domingo hates his name,” Pilar said. “He hates *all* his names.”

Now it was Dom’s turn to fire off a look.

“Domingo!” B said. “C’mon. That’s pretty. It means Sunday, right? *No es un mal nombre, hermano. Es el mejor día de la semana.*”

Dom nodded and squeezed out a smile. Brushing past B, he moved to his sister, now half under the bed. Items slid out beside her—a mildewed gym bag, a worn pair of cross-trainers, wrinkled copies of *Muscle & Fitness*.

“What the hell are you doing?” Dom asked.

“It’s a surprise, chill out,” Pilar said, her words mattress-muffled.

B licked the corner of her mouth. “*¿Qué quiere decir, nombres? ¿Eh, Domingo? ¿Cuántos nombres tienes?*”

“*Dejalo ya, que le vas a cabrear,*” Pilar said.

“*¿Qué?*” B said, turning to Dom. “What did she say? I only got to Spanish III.”

Dom bit his tongue. He could feel the exact point at which it would begin to bleed if he bit hard enough. “I don’t know Spanish,” he said.

B stared at him as if she’d missed the punch line to a joke. Dom didn’t elaborate, and before B could ask a follow up, Pilar had pulled herself from under the bed. She smacked the ground and kicked the bed’s spindly metal frame.

“Four hundred fucking square feet, and I can’t find a goddamned—OH SHIT, YES!”

On top of the bed, under laundry and a crumpled sheet covering a corner, was a plastic bag. Pilar tugged it out, ripped it open, and a dozen plush axes sprang out.

Pilar cheered, snatched up one of the axes, and seized B by her neck. “Dom, look at this!” she shouted, hacking at the stain on B’s shirt. “This is exactly what you need!”

Pilar continued maniacally chopping. B sold the whacks, trembling and contorting her face, and they both fell onto the bed, struggling to breathe between fits of laughter.

Dom's gut told him that Pilar had taken something, though he didn't entirely trust it. Since Pilar had moved in, Dom hadn't seen her under the influence of anything. Her turn away from all that had been complete, even miraculous given Dom's minimal guidance and imperfect example. He'd wished he could ret-con an explanation for why he hadn't emptied out or at least secured the treasure trove of self-insistent helpers in the bathroom pharmacy or its satellite dispensary in the Civic's glove box, but the thought simply hadn't come to him until well after Pilar had demonstrated she could leave it all alone. Topsy Pilar was a sister he'd never met. That fact on top of his own lingering buzz from the sludge plug left him unsure, reluctant to accuse.

"This is how you get out of your gimmick," Pilar said. She pointed at Dom with the ax and kept an arm around B. "She's like your prisoner, yeah? Like Kong and Fay Wray. You come out with her, say like you caught her and have been doing all sorts of culty things with her back at your cabin or whatever. Then the faces are all honorable and shit and try to free her. But you beat'em up, beat'em up, until you've torn through the whole roster. Then, once there's no one to stop you, you set up an altar in the middle of the ring for a sacrifice—like you're going to eat her heart and absorb her youth."

"That's so good!" B said. "You know if you find like an old-school butcher I'd bet he'd be so desperate for your business that he'd give you a pig heart or something for free."

"No, bitch, he doesn't get your heart!" Pilar said, sliding her hand up to B's mouth and letting her friend toss it away. "What happens is you profess your love. You

get down on your knees and say you want to serve him, that you love him. Like, you've been his prisoner for so long, you've got Stockholm syndrome. He's your world now, or at least that's what he thinks."

Dom tugged on his beard until it hurt. The tryout had sent her over. He'd almost forgotten about it, but Bonnie would be waiting for them. Just a few hours. He shouldn't have sprung it on her so suddenly. He shouldn't have left her that morning. Wrestlers, hell, most people rarely had such an all-or-nothing moment. He should have recognized she would need help, and not some tough love bullshit but the help of a fucking brother who knew what she'd been through. Dom hated even thinking of the word, but Pilar was an addict, as unreal as that sounded. As strong as she'd been, he was an idiot to forget how easily she could fall back into it.

Pilar stood, orchestrating the scene with the ax, pointing to Dom, then to B. "You're about to cleave her, right? When suddenly you're overcome with emotion. Think Savage-Elizabeth, Wrestlemania VII, but like with a demon lumberjack. You've been a monster to her, but this expression of true, undying love worms into your cold heart. You begin to let your guard down. You start to rethink your murderous ways. You wonder what life would be like not as predator and prey, but as, like, friends, partners."

"Lovers," B said, raising her eyes to Dom.

"Or that," Pilar said, letting the ax droop for a second. "But the point is when all this is going through your head, as the crowd sees you start to soften, just at the perfect moment—"

"Ax through the neck!" B shouted.

“Yes!” Pilar cried. She jumped on the bed, clasped both of her friend’s hands and shook. “Dom, seriously. She has an eye for this kind of shit.”

Pilar leapt up and swung the ax at Dom’s neck. He stopped it and caught her gaze.

“Hey, are you okay?” he asked.

Pilar ripped the ax into her chest. “Fuck yeah, I’m okay. Hear me out on this. Rubber ax connects to your throat. You’re rigged with like dozen blood packs. Tubing under your flannel. The whole deal. You hit the deck, writhing in a fountain of blood, and she stands over you. Beauty killed the beast. Instant classic.”

“Badass,” B said.

“You kill your character in ring, and that like, forces a separation,” Pilar said. “Gives you closure, a clean break. Then you cut the Spanish moss off your face and re-debut as whoever you want. Then B becomes my manager, and I get the rub from her sweet-ass lumberjack slaughter.”

“That’s some plan,” Dom said. He couldn’t ask her what she’d taken. Pilar needed to stay upbeat, confident. “But how about we concentrate on step one. You remember? Tonight?”

“Shitballs!” Pilar said. “The tryout! Did you get my eye stuff?”

“You didn’t ask me to get anything,” Dom said, unsure if that was true.

“I’ve got you covered,” B said. She scampered to her bag and removed a smaller bag with clear sides that was jammed with makeup.

“Score!” Pilar said. “Already earning your keep, best manager ever.”

The girls scrambled into the bathroom and shut the door, which immediately opened a crack when the broken handle refused to catch. Their talk faded into the exhaust fan's belabored whirring.

The column of light emanating from the bathroom, much more than if the door had been closed tight, prevented Dom from knocking. There was plenty to review with Pilar—her moveset, the chain order she'd call, what holds would cover a botch if her opponent threw something unexpected. There was a headspace she needed to enter, a sense of focus and calm. She was all giddy with her friend behind that door, and that was the last thing she wanted to be in the ring. No one took giddiness seriously, especially not from an 18-year-old girl.

But what did he know? This was new territory for Pilar, and though Dom had learned much from honing his own ritual, every wrestler was different. They had time, he told himself. Pilar wasn't him. What if she felt more settled with a close friend in the wings? Maybe she needed to get a little fucked up before something like this. Maybe she could control it.

Dom could feel himself getting upset at the justifications in his head. The spiral cranking up at the base of his skull wasn't going to help anyone. He looked at his phone, which was still in his hand, and opened his browser, which returned him to the Weddington High School page.

In a dropdown menu he found a link to the staff directory, and there, a list of every teacher in the school, many of them with headshots taken in front of a splotchy, picture day backdrop. He was surprised by how many teachers looked his age. When he was in high school, there was one attractive physics teacher, straight out of her masters,

and a pimply dude that taught drafting or coding or one of those classes Dom never took. The rest were old, or at least looked it.

Dom leaned against the edge of the sink. A pot handle poked his lower back, and he turned to move it, almost toppling the tower of dishes. Once sure it was steady, he clicked on a gray-hair French instructor. The profile provided an email address, a biography that seemed much too long for a high school teacher, and a window to various websites used by the school's French classes. Many of them had just a few posts detailing assignments or other announcements from years ago. There was also a link to the French Club website, which was also a ghost town. Only a few links peppered its homepage, decorated with clipart of the French flag, a gondolier holding a bag of baguettes, and a giant cartoon Frenchman in a blue beret stooping over the Eiffel Tower and kissing it, the tower bent like it was trying its best to run the fuck away.

Scrolling down, there was a photo of a podium on the stage of a school gymnasium, the award ceremony for some French-themed competition. There was a caption below which read, "*Félicitations Matty Farnsworth. Le meilleur soufflé.*"

B emerged from the bathroom. After spending too long trying to close the door all the way, she shrugged her shoulders at Dom and went rifling through her bag.

"Anything good in there?" she asked, raising her chin.

"Potentially," Dom said. He backed out of the French site and summoned a fresh browser window.

"What model is it?"

"My phone? I don't know." Dom flipped it and saw only the back of his chintzy, black case. "Not a good one."

B continued reaching her bag. She had to have touched every item within at least twice. “Can I see it?”

Dom felt the screw in his head tighten again, but the pressure quickly dispelled. “Dangerous business going through a man’s phone,” he said.

She quit her search and came up to him, looked up to him. “No creepin’,” she said, smiling. “Just curious.”

Dom handed the phone to her, saw that her thumb was about as thick as his pinky finger. She twirled the phone around, popped it out of its case, closed an eye and inspected the power jack.

“Wow,” she said. “You weren’t kidding. I have no idea what brand this is.”

“Do you have any idea what drugs my sister is on?” Dom said without skipping a beat. The words hit B with some mustard, surprising Dom with how easily they’d come. He hadn’t sounded angry, and B didn’t look worried. She gave him the phone, and after lazily glancing to the bathroom, let her eyes fade up.

“Why?” she asked. “You want some?”

Dom saw two clear options for answering her. Chill, interested, flirty. Angry, protective, intimidating. Either would likely get him a response, but he couldn’t commit to one. He delayed his reply and watched B’s face. She gave him nothing.

“I want...to know,” Dom said, keeping his mouth open on the “o” then sucking it closed.

B let his words grow stale, then, spoke as a matter of fact. “We didn’t take anything. Pilar knows better than that. Though if you wanted something particular I might know a guy.”

Dom knew about eighty guys—practically every wrestler in MCW, their relatives, friends, dealers, trainers, girlfriends. One of his former tag partners got human growth hormone from his mail carrier.

“Was there anything you wanted?” B asked. She closed the space between them, leaned in. She reached around Dom and braced herself against the rim of the sink with her right hand, and with her left, she slipped a finger under his track pants elastic and snapped it against his waist. “In particular?” she added.

It was a smooth, practiced move. Dom imagined she’d executed it successfully many times. It did nothing for him, but she was rolling, and he knew it was usually best to harness a challenger’s momentum.

“C’mon,” Dom said. “Tell me.”

B stretched her neck and flexed her elbows toward each other. “Honest,” she said. “Straight as an arrow. Clean as a whistle. Go through my bag. Go through her bag. You’ll see.”

She was very close, and Dom remembered how he’d felt when women like B, despite his gut and beard and the stretch marks under his armpits, had shown they’d wanted him. It was fascinating, once he’d started paying attention, how promiscuous most people were, and not just the niche audience who liked to watch wrestling in an airplane hangar, but most everyone who had enough confidence or gave few enough shits to speak with him. There was no way he’d fit the standard of attractiveness for the majority of the women he’d been with, but they’d all been willing to ignore that. They’d wanted to be close to him, and he them, and it went on like that for a long time.

He still felt the core of that desire. It was most noticeable at a distance, when the ring ropes or a barricade or a thousand miles separated him. His mind had no trouble fantasizing, lusting after all kinds of women, but at some point, when the barriers were removed and the distance closed, the sense of a body next to his began to unsettle him.

He'd wondered if this was the natural consequence of experience, if his transforming body was shedding his less refined tastes along with his excess fat, if he was simply getting bored, but his cravings hadn't changed. He still trusted the promises of physical contact, from the most animalistic, masturbatory sex to something as innocent as holding hands and talking. The idea of all of it seemed completely palatable, but when the women got close, he was repulsed.

B reached for Dom again, placed a hand above his hip. He scratched his chin and tried not to cringe. Three or four skin flakes fluttered out of his beard into the draw of his breath. If he kept scratching, more flakes would fall, and if he tore at his chin with all ten of his fingernails, he could make it snow. Tiny pieces of himself would collect on his shirt, in B's hair, on the floor between them. He had never scratched for long enough to exhaust his supply. As far as he knew, he had enough flakes to fill the room and bury the both of them.

"Well, you got it or not?" Pilar asked, opening the bathroom door and bending her neck around it. B turned to her too quickly.

"Can't find it, but we can use mascara instead. Little fakeup trick I know."

Before she closed the door behind B, Pilar gazed blankly at Dom with her tongue pressed hard into her cheek. She'd evened her face, though her skin wasn't prone to breakouts or blotches so she hadn't needed much. She looked like she might say

something to Dom, or maybe at him, but turned her lips into an almost-smile and went back to work.

Dom watched the sliver of light escaping the bathroom for a minute. The girls were laughing, occasionally shouting. Every so often one of them would shift and cast a shadow across the doorframe, breaking the thin beam. Pilar's bag was on the floor next to the bed. Dom went to it, and, not very careful about what he was disturbing or what noise he was making, rifled through. Wrestling gear. Water bottle. Pads. Gloves. Strips of fabric torn from old spandex pants. Wrestling Boots. A battered copy of Chris Jericho's first book. Tape. Piece of cardboard filled with illegible scribbles. Shower stuff.

He opened a one of the soap bottles and smelled. Laboratory lavender. He shook the water bottle. Empty save a drop or two. He opened it. Lemon, as if it had been recently cleaned. On the periphery of the aroma, something subtly acerbic. Not unpleasant. It could've easily been a part of whatever detergent she'd used, but it lacked the assembled, cloying body that cheap soaps always had. Dom was drawn to it almost like the times when, out of nowhere, an odor he felt nostalgic for would dawn on him, as if he were remembering the smell of baby formula, or a place he'd been just once, long ago.

Unsure where to place it, he closed Pilar's bag and got back on his phone.

They took the Civic, all three of them. Pilar drove. At first, Dom was splayed across the backseat, but when he couldn't find a position in which a body part wasn't folded under itself, he stretched prone into the trunk, lying on the bed where he'd spent so many nights. It wasn't comfortable, and Dom wasn't sure if Pilar's nerves were prompting her

heavy foot and sharp turns or if she was doing it on purpose, but the Hangar wasn't far, about twenty-five minutes if traffic was clear. There was enough of a gap behind the front seats and the frame between the cab and the trunk so that Dom, if he leaned just so, could kind of see Pilar's right side, including her firm grip on the steering wheel.

"So how does it work?" B asked.

"How does what work?" Pilar replied.

"Wrestling. Like, you're not really hurting each other, and you know who needs to win, but how do you know what to do? Do you memorize all the moves beforehand?"

Pilar hadn't said much since they'd started driving. She rolled her head to her shoulder and popped her thumb on the wheel.

"No. They're not pre-planned like that. It's kind of hard to explain."

Dom was poking around the faculty pages of the Weddington High School web site. Geometry teachers. Western Civ. English. Some teachers had next to nothing in their profiles—no image, no information, only a silhouette where a photo would be and a Weddington email address. Near the end of the alphabet, he found a Computer Science teacher, a woman who, according to her attached résumé, got her undergrad degree about the same time Dom would have graduated college had he not gone straight into wrestling. She'd posted links to various instructional websites, a page for her intro coding class, and a page for the Weddington Warrior Pep Band. Dom read on the band staff menu that the teacher was the head of the color guard, which had its own page—schedules, routines, history, and a ton of photos. Girls waved giant, green flags in unison. There were close-ups, posed photos, candid, shots taken from high atop football field bleachers.

"C'mon," B said. "If your brother can do it, it can't be rocket science."

Pilar braked at a yellow light when she should've blown it. Dom felt his stomach lift and braced against the roof of the trunk when he began to slide.

“Sorry!” Pilar said to Dom. “You okay?”

Dom's back hurt, but that was nothing new. He grunted a yes.

“Are there canned matches?” B asked. “Like, if you meet the girl you're wrestling backstage, you ask her if she wants to do Match C, ending number four or whatever, and you'd both know what that was?”

“No, I mean, maybe a little of that, but, look, you know jazz music, right?”

B frowned. “Do *you* know jazz music?”

The color guard page had a section of formal group photos, one for each school year. Fifteen to twenty girls were sitting in three rows on what seemed to be the front steps of the school. The teacher sat to the left in each photo, and another, older woman was on the right. The girls wore uniforms of high-quality, brightly colored Lycra, better than the ring wear of most MCW wrestlers. In one photo, labeled a few years prior, they had airy, green dresses with sequined accents. It was in that picture, top row, second from the right, where she was waiting. Dom tried to blow up the image but he couldn't, so he took a screenshot and zoomed into that. It was blurry and peppered with artifacts from a sloppy resize, but it was sharp enough to tell. She was younger, thinner in the face, but it was the Omegle Girl.

There was no caption below the photo. None of the girls were named. Dom tried to reverse-search the image. No results other than the site where he'd found it. He did, he realized, know the teacher's name. He plugged that into Facebook, looked through the

results, matched the name to the correct woman, then entered her friends list. 1,122 people. He started scrolling.

“Look, some of it we discuss before the match,” Pilar said, her words shunting together, “especially if there’s a specific spot we need to hit. We also call stuff in the ring. If you watch a match you can see wrestlers talking a bunch. But really, most of it we just sort of know on the fly. There’s rhythm to the match, and you let your body carry you through it.”

“So you can read your opponents mind?” B said.

“No,” Pilar said. “You don’t even have to think about it. It’s like instinct, like putting one foot in front of the other.”

Many friends of the teacher had private profiles. All Dom saw of those were names. Again, he thought, each person who’d restricted their information had probably imagined just this scenario. Well, they’d probably pictured Dom lurking in a dark, unkempt room rather than the trunk of a sedan, but here he was, lurking nonetheless. Dom squinted at the tiny photos. Some featured multiple people, and he had to click on these to study each smiling figure.

At the rate he was going, it would take him hours to consider each friend. There seemed to be a hundred A-names. The list kept going and going. But then he remembered the name the Yucca Mountain barista had marked on The Omegle Girl’s coffee mug—*Caitlin*. He flew down to the C’s and saw one Caitlin and two Caties. Caitlin was an older woman in her 50s. One Catie had her profile hidden. Dom opened the third profile and saw an effigy, some thirty feet high, of a cartoonish man with a black moustache. He was wearing a tan poncho with a colorful sash and a sombrero the size of a hot tub atop his

head. Dom knew the statue well. In his time on the road, he'd driven by its idiotic smile and leering, sidelong eyes and at least fifty times. It was one of mascots for South of the Border, a tourist trap off I-95 on the state line between North and South Carolina. Below the man, miniscule in comparison, was a woman wearing sunglasses. Her arms were extended, gesturing to the carnival rides and Mexican-themed buildings as if she couldn't believe she was finally there. The photo was the only one available in the profile. Dom zoomed in as far as possible, but he couldn't tell for sure if it was her.

“How do you know all this?” B said. “I thought this was your first match.”

“I've sparred a lot,” Pilar said. “With Dom, my coach, a dozen others.”

“But that was practice,” B said.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Then how do you know this won't be different?”

Pilar started to respond, but the words caught in her throat. She glanced back at Dom, then quickly returned her eyes to the road.

Chapter Nine: The Tryout

Bonnie Blue stood in the ring. Beyond the glare of the lights were a thousand empty chairs, some on the floor, some stacked on risers of various heights and tiers. From its center, the Hangar looked like the remains of an ancient bowl—cracked, jagged, and incomplete.

Bonnie appreciated the ring for how forthcoming it was with its lies. The mat bounced with every step. Underneath, a set of microphones amplified the wrestlers as they played the ring like a giant bass drum. Their slaps, stomps, and flat-back bumps boomed through the speakers suspended above and rattled the Hangar's old steel. The ring steps, diamond-plate aluminum, were hollow, and Bonnie could lift two at a time.

The one secret the ring concealed was its simplicity. Steel. Plywood. Canvas. Twine. Hemp rope. Vinyl. An inch of high-density foam. No springs. No gadgets. No magic. Bonnie knew every bolt and every knot. With enough time, she could assemble it by herself from memory. A skilled crew could pack it away in fifteen minutes. It was a fine stage, though far from perfect. A ring could stand on an airstrip, on a carnival midway, in a hobbyist's backyard, in the center of Madison Square Garden, but it had limitations. As an icon of a business with a long, winding history, it carried the weight of a million brilliant and atrocious performances, and from that weight it would never be unburdened. Not even Bonnie could change what people saw in a wrestling ring, but she could give them something different.

The MCW machine was revving up for the evening's production. Techs were

stringing wires to the announce table. A few vendors had arrived and were setting up their booths on the periphery. One of Bonnie's production managers approached with questions about the card order and a spot they were setting up for the main event. Cross Gruden was getting tossed through a barricade into the audience, and they needed to choose which low-level roster members would pose as fans and break Cross's fall. Bonnie named victims who she knew would be fine taking the bump and not too upset about sitting in the crowd for the whole show, then left the ring and headed backstage.

The Hangar had very few native facilities—a small office and two-head restroom had been framed into a box hugging the arching wall near the middle of the building. Clout, ever the showman, had constructed a stage after purchasing the property. The wrestlers entered through a square proscenium rigged with smoke and lights which opened to a raised, rectangular platform about forty feet long. Salvaged scrap from demolished structures of the Queen City Skyport had been welded into decorative accents. Brushed aluminum and box steel tubes twisted out with organic, fungal curves from the stage's floor and walls. When stagehands were bored, Bonnie let them strip material from the airport's remaining structures and add to it.

The Hangar's original office had been incorporated into the foundation of the stage. It was still usable, though Bonnie had Clout's desk and couch and mountains of detritus removed and remodeled it as a private dressing room for VIPs or, more often, MCW wrestlers she was negotiating with for one thing or another. The older guys christened it Clout's Corner, and it offered all the comfort and warmth of a deluxe room at a below-par Motel 6. Compared to the rest of the Hangar's backstage, however, it was palatial. There'd been nothing but concrete in the cavernous Hangar, and for a few years,

Clout had the wrestlers dress outside under a party tent stayed uneasily with cheap rope and cinderblocks. He'd finally spent some cash and moved the wrestlers inside after the remnants of a tropical storm rolled through and blew the tent halfway to Asheville. What he'd built looked something like the decaying, ransacked showroom of a furniture store. A maze of thin walls anchored into the Hangar's massive floor slabs partitioned off men's and women's locker rooms, a meeting area, a kitchen with bare bones appliances and clogged sink, and a makeshift studio space for recording promos.

There were basic, immovable principles Bonnie set forward when dealing with any of her wrestlers, but her individual relationships were tailored to fit the needs of the parties involved. Some wrestlers needed a strong authority figure, a boss they could respect and revere. Others needed a parent, and within that group, preferences differed among those who preferred unconditional support or tough love or pep talks or oedipal affection. Bonnie also needed wrestlers to fit specific roles in order for the promotion to work. Not everyone could be a star. Only so many wrestlers could be cool until they all became uncool. She needed heroes, villains, underdogs, sexpots, monsters, comedians, warm bodies that would thud nicely when hurled over the top rope.

Bonnie also needed someone to square off against her new recruit. Contreras was due within the hour for her in-ring demonstration, and Bonnie had arranged for five-year MCW veteran Johnnie May to be her opponent. Of MCW's women wrestlers, Johnnie was third in merchandise sales, barely enough to claim a reliable rack space at the t-shirt booth, but she was by most measures the most technically proficient in-ring. Her finishing move, the Johnnie Driver, was her original creation, and likely one of the top five most dangerous maneuvers consistently used in any wrestler's repertoire.

Wrestlers who stayed with MCW more than a few months eventually laid claim to an area in the Hangar they could make their own. Johnnie's staked out a nook under the risers opposite the Hangar's hard camera with a hammock strung between two support columns, a few milk crates with weights, books, a station for hot gluing little trinkets she sold online. A six-foot long Rhode Island state flag provided privacy, and a tarp, stained and sticky from protecting the area from spilled nachos and beer, was bungeed taut above. Bonnie announced her approach and Johnnie May, already in makeup and her coral green ring gear, toed a crate to her boss's feet and invited her to sit.

"How was Myrtle?" Bonnie asked, neither accepting nor refusing the offer.

"Too cold for this time of year," Johnnie May said. She kicked her leg up to a column and stretched until knee kissed collar bone.

Bonnie frowned and noted a bowl of what might have once been canned spaghetti molding under the hammock. "I have a favor to ask you," she said.

"Lotta favors recently," Johnnie May replied.

"That girl tonight? I need you to make sure you don't scare her off."

Johnnie May snorted. On one foot, she worked her way back from the column and stood unsupported, her toes pointed one degree from vertical.

"She's promising," Bonnie said. "Enough so that if she has to be eased in, we're going to do that."

Like a crane lowering its boom, Johnnie May brought her leg down, shook it out, and turned to Bonnie.

"Soft," she said.

“No,” Bonnie said, her voice prickling. “You work her like you would anyone here, and nothing more. Understand?”

The wrestler sent up her other leg and as she put weight into the stretch, Bonnie could hear her hip crackling. “Need pressure to make a diamond,” Johnnie May said.

“I don’t need a fucking diamond,” Bonnie said, her face reddening. She swung herself behind Johnnie May’s beam and thrust her nose in front of the wrestler’s forehead. The padding under Johnnie’s boot gave her extra inches, but she was still shorter than Bonnie.

“I’ve been exceedingly lenient with the manner in which you’ve treated practically every new hire, and I know more about the pathetic motivations that inspire such behavior than your goddamned shrink would if you had the humility to visit one. You will take every caution in ensuring Ms. Contreras has an experience that will permit her to showcase her abilities, and you will do everything in your power to protect her from bodily harm. Do I need to repeat myself?”

Unflinching, Johnnie May coiled her toes and extended them, pushing herself away from the beam so smoothly that it didn’t seem possible.

“She’ll be fine,” she said with a trace of a smirk.

Bonnie told Johnnie May once again to be sure of it, then tore away from the bleachers back to the locker room area. Once out of earshot, she relaxed her pace and cracked each pinky finger three ways.

Primal Trotsky was taping his ankles on a trainer’s bench that stood in the center of what was more or less the hub of the backstage area.

“Bonnie Blue!” he growled, eyes lighting up and smiling a mile. “The sight of you could cure glaucoma.” He held out a fist, as big as a bear paw.

“Trotsky, my heart gives you top Marx!” Bonnie said, bumping her fist into his. She refrained from sneering at the T-shirt he was wearing—a World Wildlife Foundation Panda about to get blindsided by another panda wielding a folding chair—and continued on.

“Say what?” Primal said, but Bonnie didn’t turn around.

Pilar had driven through the chain link gate, over the pothole laden drive to the Hangar’s tarmac parking lot many times, but always as a spectator or cheerleader or student, never a competitor. Before, it had been easy to ignore the strangeness of the property, but this time, she fixated on it. Of all the places to root an indie wrestling federation, someone decided to build it here, in the middle of a concrete desert. There had to have been better options—old theaters, warehouses closer to downtown, spaces better connected to the city’s infrastructure that were designed to hold crowds, not aircraft.

Pilar didn’t know much of MCW’s history before Bonnie Blue, but as she pulled into the parking space Dom always told her to take before his matches, she wished she could meet the mind that envisioned such a bizarre future for this rusting plot and ask him what the fuck he was thinking.

“This is great,” B said, popping out of the Civic. “It’s like straight out of *Mad Max*.”

B stuck her arms out like airplane wings and jogged a few paces down the runway. The sky was huge, and the evening sun leaked through short-lived holes in the overcast.

“Holy shit, wait,” B said, dipping her wings and circling Pilar. “Please tell me y’all have midgets.”

Dom wriggled his way out the trunk and looked at Pilar. “You got everything from back here?” he asked. Pilar grabbed her duffel from behind the driver’s seat and nodded.

B yelled, “Midgets!” with her voice mimicking the drone of a passing airplane. She crashed into Pilar, wrapped her arms around her, and made an exploding noise.

“You’re gonna knock ’em dead, P!” she said, lifting Pilar and swinging her. When she returned to her feet, Pilar held on, thinking how comfortable it felt, how she didn’t need to sell or keep time or think of her next move.

“Hey,” B said. “You got this. Nice and loose, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Pilar said, finally letting go.

“Now that’s management,” B said, turning to Dom. “So, seriously, do you guys have—”

“No,” Dom said. “Just—no.”

Even with the threat of rain, the Hangar’s giant doors were open to keep it at a bearable temperature. The three walked through, Dom leading the way, nodding to the yellow-shirted security guy manning the entry gate.

It was settling in for Pilar. She saw the ring glowing under the venue lights as if the clouds and the Hangar’s roof had let the sun through. Men in black jeans and short-

sleeved shirts were fiddling with a control board, and a few wrestlers were mulling about, stretching, chatting, having a smoke a foot beyond the grooves in the floor on which the Hangar's doors tracked in and out. A couple of them glanced at her. One of the grips running cord drank her in obviously enough for anyone to notice. Dom kept striding ahead, face forward, and Pilar followed.

Backstage, they ran into Primal Trotsky, Dom's tag-team partner the previous day at the Sumter Freedom Fest. He stood next to a trainer's table and was rocking back on his heels, testing the tape job on his ankles.

"Dommy!" Primal said, and then, after a pause, "Ladies!"

"Where's the boss?" Dom asked. He leaned forward as if to keep walking, but then stopped when Primal elbowed past him.

"Hello, my beautiful devotchkas. My name is Primal. Please, please tell me you're not biting the heels of this goddamned, arm-breaking torino." After a little bow, Primal flipped a lewd salute to Dom and puffed out his chest. The women took his hand as if they were reaching to pet a suspiciously friendly wild animal. Pilar noted that despite his theatrics, Primal's grip was straightforward, firm, and welcoming. He grinned and, after following her arm up to her eyes, pointed at her.

"Hang on. You're the sister, aren't you? Pilar Contreras, toast of the Iberian! Future MCW Women's Champion. About time your brother pried his head out his ass long enough to bring you by. You were in the seats yesterday, yeah?"

On her best day Pilar wasn't sure if she could've matched the wrestler's pep. It was unnerving how quick and bubbly he was given his size. Part of her wanted to pass on

by, to focus on her match, but she also appreciated his interest, how avuncular it felt, and how he hadn't looked at B since they'd first approached.

"I was," Pilar said. "I loved your sell on that ring bell. The sound really made it."

"My forehead makes that noise if you thump it hard enough," Primal said.

"Simple elbow block. I bet you've got a better way."

"She probably does," Dom said. "Have you seen Bonnie?"

Pilar noticed B wince at the name, but a booming laugh from Primal centered her attention. The wrestler knocked his skull with his knuckles and pointed a sausage-sized thumb at Dom. "Check out Speedy over here. Yesterday you hit the road faster than two-wheeled tricycle, and today you—"

Dom seized a face full of panda on Primal's shirt and pushed him back a step. He stood between Primal and Pilar, who stumbled back with a shout. Dom bared his teeth in a false smile.

"Bonnie?" Dom asked, rocks in his voice.

Primal narrowed his eyes up to Dom, then shot a confused look at Pilar. "Yeah, sure," he said. "She was headed to Clout's last time I saw her."

"Good," Dom said, releasing him and motioning for the ladies to follow his march toward the office.

B was quick to comply, but Pilar stood her ground. One day, she thought, he would quit training, and she would keep going, and Dom would finally know what it was like to get pushed around by somebody smaller.

"Sorry about him," she told Primal. "It was great to see you again."

She shook his hand, weaker this time, and he gave her a thin smile.

When Pilar caught up to Dom and B, Dom was rapping on a door of a room that looked like the projection booth in her high school gymnasium, only instead of being on top of the bleachers, this room was buried underneath its web of steel latticing.

“That dude was a total Creepy McCreeperson,” B whispered.

“Primal?” Pilar said. “He’s a good guy.”

“Ugh, ladies,” B said in a bad accent. “In old country, women love shoulder hair, haha!”

“Shut up. He doesn’t talk like that,” Pilar said.

“Ugh, communism not so bad. Duct tape and Rohypnol subsidized, haha.”

Pilar smiled, but only to get her friend to stop. B was about to say more, but a woman opened the door to the booth. She was taller than Pilar, with gray hair pulled tight in a ponytail. She looked like a soccer mom who did really intense yoga.

“The Contreras Family,” she said. “Great to see you. Come on in.”

“Good to see you, Bonnie Blue,” Dom replied. Even though Pilar knew the woman had to be Bonnie, hearing her name was startling. This woman, wearing trim khaki pants, held the reins of Pilar’s future.

Bonnie stood behind the door as Dom entered, then Pilar. When B tried to follow, Bonnie stepped out on a solid left leg and stopped her.

“Who are you?” Bonnie asked.

“Pilar’s friend,” B said.

“What’s your name?” Bonnie said, visibly frustrated at having to reword her question.

“Same as yours,” B responded. “Only you’ve got that alliteration going on. Honestly that makes me hate it a little less.”

Bonnie paused. Dom looked as if he’d smelled smoke and was scanning for exits. Pilar was confused. B had never told anyone her real name. Even at their graduation, she’d somehow gotten the dean reading the seniors’ full names to shorten it. And Bonnie wasn’t a bad name at all. Pilar had assumed it was something like Bertha or Brunhilda.

“If this is like a super-secret wrestling meeting, I can wait outside,” B said.

“No,” Bonnie said, blinking away her silence. “Please, join us. It’s so nice you’re here to support your friend.”

Bonnie slid out of B’s path and gently ushered her inside with a hand on B’s lower back. B widened her eyes at Pilar and went to stand next to her. Bonnie shut the door and offered the group a beverage from the room’s mini-fridge. The girls waved her away, but Dom asked for water.

“Everyone here is fucking psycho,” B whispered to Pilar. Pilar flattened her mouth and shrugged a shoulder. Though she’d never seen Bonnie Blue, she’d had a clear picture of her in mind. It was almost a rule that showmen ran wrestling federations. Big or small, they usually couldn’t help but put themselves on stage—usually as charismatic, money-hungry bosses-from-hell. As long as Pilar had been paying attention, Bonnie had never appeared in any MCW pay-per-views or house shows. She was bigger than the spotlight. She was a powerful, unseen force. All within her sphere of influence had no choice but to abide her. Everything Pilar had heard about Bonnie solidified her image as an icon, a person who’d fold right in with the executives meeting on the top floor of one

of Uptown Charlotte's giant banking towers. But this Bonnie, in sneakers and a polo instead of heels and a business suit, looked disarmed, frazzled.

"Thank you for coming tonight on such short notice," Bonnie said, taking a seat and waiting for everyone to follow her lead. "I hope you understand that the pace of our industry sometimes necessitates a degree of improvisation. Two days ago I would have told you our problem was an overloaded roster, and now we have a vacancy we're eager to fill with someone of your caliber."

Pilar noticed Bonnie was mostly looking at Dom as she said this, and sure enough, her brother piped right in.

"Pilar is thrilled for this opportunity," he said.

"Absolutely," B said. "So thrilled she can barely say it herself."

There was a lull as they waited for Bonnie to respond, and the length of it stretched Pilar's nerves. She had too many advocates in her corner, and the great Bonnie Blue had no command of the room. It seemed so improbable that a meeting like this would feel so profoundly awkward that Pilar began to question if the cocktail of pills she'd taken was dulling her to some joke or test she had to pass.

"I've paired you with Johnnie May for your demonstration," Bonnie finally said. "We'll introduce you shortly so you can prepare. I'm sure you're familiar with her work. Top-notch competitor. Student of the business. Tough, smart, one of our best."

Dom nodded, seemingly pleased with the choice.

"Have you given any thought to the character you'd like to portray once you start touring?" Bonnie asked.

B gave Pilar an I-told-you-so nod, but Dom spoke before Pilar could respond.

“Well, she’s young and she’s got a ton of power in a tight package. I think you push her as underdog babyface all the way. She could be someone with pep, a lot of moxie, a girl who keeps fighting no matter the odds.”

“So, like that football player?” B asked. “He’s like a little guy. I forgot the movie.”

“Not exactly like that, but—”

“That’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard,” B interrupted. She stuck out her tongue out and gagged.

“Oh? And who the hell are you again?” Dom asked.

“I don’t know,” B said, throwing her arms up. “Someone with a pulse and tastes from this century?”

“Pilar,” Bonnie said with a pull to her voice that wasn’t there before. “Have *you* given any thought to your character?”

Bonnie’s face was kind, and Pilar saw a flash of the talk that had preceded her. Pilar had little reason to trust this woman, but the way Bonnie had cut in and opened the floor to her seemed to promise so much. It was like Bonnie had flicked a switch, timing her intervention to let Pilar feel like they were the only two in the room. The paranoia building in the base of Pilar’s skull disappeared

“I have,” Pilar said. “The character you want is me, and everything I can bring to this company. No acts, no gimmicks. You let me be myself out there. You give me the freedom to say what I want, to wrestle how I want. The quicker you do that, the quicker I make both of us a hell of a lot of money.”

B struggled to hide an enormous grin. Dom looked as if he'd aged five years in an instant. Bonnie nodded and crossed her arms. There, Pilar thought. There she was. Perhaps Bonnie had tried too hard to be welcoming and it had thrown her off her game. Once she saw Pilar was serious, that she was ready to stand tall and be her own biggest advocate, the boss's hunger whetted. Her focus sharpened.

"You know," Bonnie said, smiling. "It's been a while since I've heard that kind of rhetoric."

Pilar didn't miss a step. "You haven't met anyone like me."

"Well," Bonnie said. "Then let's see what you can do."

"You don't know who you're fucking talking to," Dom said. Bonnie had left the room to fetch Pilar's opponent, Johnnie May. Dom cracked a second water bottle and was gulping in between shouts. His beard was getting stringy from the sweat dripping down his face.

"You think all that macho bullshit means anything to Bonnie Blue?" Dom said. "She's going to eat you alive."

"Man, Domingo. Sounds like P and my girl Double-B are on the same page," B said.

Dom paced and wiped his brow. "She's always going to be five steps ahead of you, and the second you forget that, you're going to lose her respect."

"Is he talking about the same chick?" B asked. "She kill your dog or something?"

Dom waved his arms dismissively, flinging water from his bottle across the floor, couch, and wall.

"Oh, great," Dom said. He fell to his knees and dabbed at the water with his shirt.

“Seriously though,” B said. “She seems pretty normal.”

“She ain’t normal,” Dom said.

“It’s just water,” Pilar said. “You don’t need to do that.”

“Then what has she done to you, personally?” B insisted. “Like I’m sure everyone says she’s a bitch, but I’d bet there are more than a few knuckle-draggers around here that feel their balls shrinking whenever she signs their paychecks.”

Dom grunted and continued sopping, though sweat was now dripping from his nose at such a rate, he wasn’t doing much drying. Pilar got up from the couch and lugged him up, held him by the shoulders. His biceps were like basketballs in her hands. She didn’t come close to wrapping her fingers around them.

“I had to talk to her like that, because that’s how I’m going to do this,” Pilar said. “I can’t be like you. I can’t play someone else.”

Dom wiped his face in his shirt, which was now wet at the collar and the hem. “How do you know that’s you?” he asked. “What if that’s just what you think she wants you to be?”

Pilar moved her hands down Dom’s arms and squeezed his thick wrists. “I don’t know,” she said. She felt stiff in her neck and tried to crack it away. A tingle crept into her spine and discharged to her hips, legs. A couple of quick kicks seemed to shed it, and she looked up to Dom. His nose whistled a little as he sucked in air.

“I’m not scared of this, and you don’t have to be,” Pilar said. “I’m ready.”

Bonnie opened the door to the lounge and said Johnnie May wanted to talk alone with Pilar. B embraced her friend, told her to kick ass. B’s back was tacky with sweat, and Pilar wondered if it had really been that hot in the lounge. She hugged her brother,

wrapping her arms around his waist. Dom's height prevented him from doing the same without bending in half, so he placed his hands on her shoulders.

"Keep your chin tucked," he told her.

Pilar raised her eyes, but not her head. "Don't forget to breathe."

"You certainly have the look," Bonnie Blue said as she led Pilar through the backstage area. "But I'll be frank with you. Plenty of women do. Most promoters would take one glance and hand you a contract. That's not what we do here. I don't disrespect my employees in such ways."

When Bonnie walked, Pilar noticed it wasn't only to move from one place to another. Each stride was purposeful, elegant, almost like a lunge. It was tough to read her. She seemed confused in the lounge, then warm. As they ducked under the bleachers, Pilar watched Bonnie's calculated movements, perfectly ergonomic and efficient, as if every step were part of an aerobic routine. But it didn't feel like a show. That intimidated Pilar. She moved the way she moved. Pilar could stylize her motions in the ring, but she had to concentrate, plan for it. As she picked her way through the structure, Pilar had a hard enough time keeping herself from tipping or clanging her head off a support beam.

On first sight, Johnnie May's area reminded Pilar of a tree house. The hammock was especially serendipitous. Pilar silently cursed her lack of ingenuity that had sentenced her to all those uncomfortable nights on Dom's shitty futon. She could've drilled into the ceiling and hung a hammock anywhere. When she wasn't sleeping, she could've folded it up and used the space for something else. She couldn't have afforded much, but even a cheap model would've been an improvement.

Johnnie May was doing pull-ups on one of the bleachers' horizontal bars. She clutched the beam's sharp angles without gloves or chalk. The tendons and veins in her forearms bulged as if something inside was trying to push its way out. Bonnie said her name, then waited for Johnnie to finish her set. Pilar lost the rep count in the twenties, and her attention wandered to a molding bowl of SpaghettiOs and a jug of the same budget brand protein powder Dom had at their apartment. She realized there was far more about the space that reminded her of home than any home she'd wished she'd had. Clothes were strewn about. The floor was gummy. The air smelled the kind of sour that would never freshen until they razed the whole building.

Johnnie May finally dropped down and approached the women. She had a few inches on Pilar and was thicker all around, though her trunks fit her hips like cling wrap on a marble statue. Her green top plunged to reveal the gap between her breasts, and two black straps crossed her sternum like a challenge—hit me here, if you can.

“Pilar Contreras,” Bonnie announced.

Johnnie took Pilar in, starting with her feet. “That Spanish?” she asked.

“Yep,” Pilar said.

“I've got family in Seville.”

“I don't.”

Bonnie excused herself, reminding the wrestlers they were due in the ring in thirty minutes. She glided away, and Pilar couldn't decide if she was still impressed or if her movements were starting to look silly.

Johnnie May offered Pilar a drink and a seat. With the fuzzy SpaghettiOs in her periphery, Pilar said she wasn't thirsty but took the milk crate Johnnie had cleared of opened envelopes and spools of wire.

"I like your makeup," Johnnie May said.

"Thanks," Pilar said. "My friend did most of it."

Johnnie snagged a juice box from a wholesale pallet she had stashed next to a pile of sweets and junk food. In a move so practiced it seemed like magic, she detached the tiny straw, stripped its plastic, and penetrated the foil at the top of the box.

"It's going to smudge," Johnnie said. "You'll need to buy the stage stuff. Holds better."

"I kind of like it this way. Makes it look like I've been through a fight," Pilar said.

Pilar expected Johnnie May to down her juice so fast that the vacuum would crumple the box through the straw, but the wrestler took her time, sipping through the corner of her mouth.

"What's your finisher?" Johnnie May asked.

"Shooting star leg drop or a Barely Legal."

Johnnie made a face. "Little cute don't you think?"

"Good name's a good name," Pilar said.

"That shooting star's gonna kill you five ways. I bet you've already got the hips of a forty-year old."

"You might be right. Got any chondroitin hiding in that stack over there, or do you stick to Flinstones vitamins and gummy bears?"

Johnnie May pursed her lips and sucked juice, slurping air after it as if tasting an expensive wine. She kicked over the jug of protein powder, stood it on end, and sat next to Pilar.

“What do you think of Bonnie Blue?” Johnnie asked.

Pilar paused. She could smell the sickly sweet grape on Johnnie May’s breath. “Truthfully, I have no idea. I feel like she’s been four different people since I walked in.”

Johnnie May nodded. “You’re less green than you look, you know. You need to work on that. Everybody around here thinks Bonnie’s a mastermind. If you’re smart, you’ll learn she’s a gigantic mark for herself. You can work her just like any of them, even when she thinks she’s working you.”

Pilar kept her poker face and remembered the last time Johnnie May wrestled for the title at an MCW pay-per-view. She’d tapped in less than five minutes to Blair Jackson, the retaining champion.

“Here’s as straight as I can be with you,” Johnnie said. “Bonnie wants me to find out if you’ll take a shine. That’s one way to dance. But if you ask me, she might be the boss, but that doesn’t mean her opinion is the only one that matters. If we go out there and put on a real match, people will talk. You’ll turn some heads. That’s what you want, and that’s what the boss really wants.”

For a second, Pilar felt the pressure to figure it all out—how Bonnie wanted her to work versus what she expected, what Johnnie May had been told against her personal motivations, what Dom or Sol or even B might have advised given all this information. But none of that mattered. There were only two real options in front of her, wrestle or go

home. And she'd made that choice before, time and time again. The answer was always the same.

“My shooting star comes off the top rope,” Pilar said. “Looks best if you don't tuck your knees.”

Johnnie May smiled and sipped her juice to the last drop.

Back at the Civic, Dom searched the trunk for an extra shirt. The sun, nearly smothered by the building overcast, teased the horizon. The air was a little cooler, and that felt good, but his shirt was cotton and would take all night to dry in the humidity.

He found a pair of high socks he'd been looking for, but no second shirt, so he took his off and spread it best he could over the car's hood, pinning it down with the wiper blades.

His chest had yet to fully tighten from his lost weight, and his midsection sagged as well—not much, but enough. He thought he felt a raindrop, but after spreading his arms, he didn't detect another.

He was proud of Pilar, he decided, or at least he tried to think so. She needed to find her own way. In the moment, he couldn't help but reach over to steer her, and she'd refused to relinquish control. That's what she should've done, he thought, even if she was whacking a hornet's nest.

Caitlin's profile was waiting under his phone's unlock screen. He'd taken plenty of leaps into uncertain landings, so he attempted another. He opened a message window and started typing. His fingers mashed multiple buttons at a time, so he had to proceed more slowly than he'd wanted. A few sentences in, he'd written an introduction

describing his run-ins with Caitlin and how he'd eventually found her. He imagined the message immediately copy-pasted into a frantic email to a greater-Charlotte police precinct. Reading it back, he sounded like a serial killer. *i watched you in the coffee shop. your picture on your high schools website...*

B emerged through the hangar doors and briskly turned toward the car. Cross Gruden, wearing nothing but his wrestling trunks and a terrycloth robe, moseyed across the door tracks, mumbled something, and was headed back when he caught sight of Dom.

“Hey-o, HB!” he called. “This polite young lady was looking for you!”

Dom squinted at Cross and held up a hand.

“Until next time, miss!” Cross said, snickering as he vanished into the bay.

B shook her head and pretended to look for something in the back of the Civic.

“He gone?” she asked after a minute.

“Seems so,” Dom said.

B shut the door and leaned against window. “She probably knew we were just fooling, but make sure Pilar understands I have officially renounced my position as her future manager.”

“Noted,” Dom said.

“Everyone in there is a goddamned cartoon character.”

“That’s what Bret Hart said.”

“Who the fuck is Bret Hart?”

“Famous wrestler. Wrote a book.”

“Was he as insane as the rest of you people?”

“Never met him.” Dom held backspace until the cursor ate every letter of his message.

B gathered her hair and twisted it into a loose bun. She took a breath, raised an eye to the darkening sky, and quickly got bored of it.

“You look completely ridiculous right now,” she said.

“Your mind changes quick,” he said.

“Oh, I’m done with all of you. As soon as Pilar’s finished, I’m Ubering my ass outta here.”

Dom didn’t respond. His shirt was no drier. He wondered if he could catch Johnnie May for a second backstage and get a sneak peek at the angle she’d be running with Pilar. He’d worked a mixed tag with her a few years prior. She was quiet, confident in the ring, always chewing something sweet.

“So who is it?” B asked.

Dom let his phone drop to his side, his immense frame between B and its screen. “Who’s who?”

“Whoever you’re blowing up right now.”

“Nobody important,” Dom said. He pocketed his phone and shook his shirt free from the wipers. Though there was a mile of empty air before him, the breeze kicking down the runway wasn’t enough to catch inside the shirt.

“Then why the secrecy?” B said. She waited until Dom had tugged himself back into the damp shirt and gave him a bob that said she wasn’t going to let it go.

Telling her everything would probably get that ride here real quick, Dom thought. The fact B hadn’t dipped out already scored her a point or two. He couldn’t ignore the

similarities between B and Caitlin—age, build, they even sounded alike. And he had to face at some point that he was probably best off messaging Caitlin a series of hieroglyphics and then deleting his profile forever just so he could say he tried something.

Dom bit the inside of his cheek and gnawed on the fleck of mouth skin that snapped loose. “So there’s this girl,” he said.

“Always is,” B said, pulling on the flesh above her collarbone as she listened.

Dom drew a breath and let his lips flap on the exhale. “I had a chance to talk with her, a few chances, actually, and I didn’t. I should forget her, but that’s not happening. I think because I have this one last nuclear option that would fail so hard, but since it’s there—”

“Take it,” B said. “All warheads fire.”

“Can’t,” Dom said.

“Press the button, Dom.”

“Jesus. How would you respond if someone like me, out of the blue, suddenly popped into your life?”

“Pepper spray,” B said.

Dom nodded. “Me too. C’mon, Pilar’s gonna be on soon.”

He locked the Civic, pinched the front of his shirt and attempted to circulate some air under it. B checked the time on her phone and stayed at Dom’s side as they crossed the parking lot to the Hangar’s entrance.

“What if you tried being someone else?” B asked.

The question hung in front of Dom and burned in the stage lights shining upon the ring.

There was no ideal spot to observe the action, Bonnie determined. The bleachers were too far. The ropes interrupted the view from the front row on the floor. On the mats between the ring and the barricade, nothing prevented Domingo, who was no stranger to the space, from roaming about and potentially missing the match's critical moments. Despite the possibility of interference, Bonnie decided to set the example and stand on the ring apron near one of the turnbuckles, in the same spot Johnnie May's partner would have stood if the match were a tag-team contest. As expected, the brother Contreras positioned himself in the opposite corner, and the girl who reminded Bonnie how fortunate she had been at age 18 to have found a niche in her father's company that facilitated the flexing of her intellect and work ethic toward clear, capitalistic goals stood below, behind Domingo and out of the way.

The women stretched and tested the ropes. Bonnie was pleased to confirm they looked beautiful. Two highly-tuned bodies. Though the girl was secondary to her performance's effect on her brother, Bonnie perceived her desire to root for the young woman, not to win of course, but to endure the match and to still have the will in her to one day take a spot on the MCW roster. Bonnie had been honest when she'd told the girl she had the look of a star. Many would pay to watch her. The Hangar would erupt when she hoisted the Women's Title. There was money to earn, and as artless as the hustle could be, money was always necessary.

Johnnie May and Pilar Contreras met in the center of the ring. The referee, not Bonnie's first choice but nonetheless competent, gestured for the women to shake hands. They did so and returned to their corners. Since the timekeeper's area was unoccupied, the referee looked to Bonnie who, after savoring the fleeting energy special to those moments just before the start of a match, pointed back to him. "Go ahead," she said.

They decided the open would have no calls. To warm Pilar up, give her time to gather her feet and get her mind ahead of her nerves, they chain wrestled. Johnnie May, the heel, led the dance, and the two moved in tandem. Wrist lock, reversal, takedown, kip up, chin lock, reversal, armbreaker. They both sensed the next step before they thought it. Their bodies in time. Smooth. Quick. Snappy sells. Their shouts echoed through the Hangar. Without the need to be heard over a noisy crowd, they sounded real.

Pilar whipped Johnnie to the ropes, leaped her spear, then took her down on the rebound with a drop toehold, which she bent into a half-crab. She tugged Johnnie's leg back, put her weight into it. *More*, Johnnie whispered, and Pilar pulled harder. *More*, she said again, and Pilar, aiming to shut her up, put real force behind it until Johnnie's heel touched the crown of her head.

Damn, Pilar muttered as her opponent struggled for the ropes, screaming her lungs out and flashing the faintest hint of a smile.

Johnnie May got a pinkie on the bottom rope and the referee broke the hold. Hand overhand, Johnnie climbed to her feet and staggered back to center where Pilar was circling.

There were no cheers, no coaching from Dom's corner, no praise from Bonnie's. It was no different than Pilar's practice, and she wondered if it felt strange for Johnnie. The veteran would've always had noise, even in the smallest venues. Yelps, jeers, managers hamming on the floor, chairs scraping as people got up to take a piss.

"Can't break me, Spaniard," Johnnie shouted. Pilar stutter-stepped before she remembered Johnnie was acting the heel and was expected to antagonize.

"Just stretching you out," Pilar returned. "You can skip pilates this week."

Johnnie straightened and shook out the kinks, keeping a half-hour ahead of the girl as they orbited the center of the ring. Johnnie slowed her rotation and raised an arm, fingers wiggling, above her head. Pilar mirrored her, and the two locked fingers, thrust themselves shoulder to shoulder with Pilar gradually gaining the advantage, bending Johnnie back. Then, to feign a burst of strength from Johnnie, Pilar pulled her up, flipping their positions. She arched with Johnnie applying pressure from above. Lower. Lower. She wasn't as flexible as the veteran, but her bridge was solid, and she kept going until her head hit the canvas.

There was an audible click, maybe loud enough to hear beyond the ropes. It came from Pilar's neck, and searing pain followed. She broke her bridge. Johnnie May reacted immediately, avoided falling on her, and locked Pilar's arm into a loose vice.

"You okay?" Johnnie whispered.

Pilar felt everything, and that was part of the problem. The pain rippled down her limbs, her arms and legs blistered on the inside, as if needles were circulating through her veins. She remembered then the second dose of pills, how she'd split them with B, taken

them much earlier than Sol had said. Bonnie didn't give second chances. Pilar had been given one, and she'd squandered it.

Pilar crunched her molars together, squeezed Johnnie May's hand, and tried to sell the vice. The pain was too much to properly show it. Bonnie was watching her, steadying herself with an arm on the turnbuckle. Her face betrayed nothing. Dom, on the other hand, was leaning over the ropes. He didn't call to her, but his face was red, strained. She wanted to tell him she was okay, that he needed to stay where he was.

She shuddered and flexed to keep a shoulder up so the ref wouldn't count her. The rest of her back was flush against the canvas, and so she felt a vibration long before she heard anything. A low bass, it could have been a truck on the tarmac or a stage hand rolling something heavy, but it grew stronger and started to roar. Thunder, Pilar thought. No. Too close, too extended. Maybe an earthquake, but no. The sound got too loud. Everyone was looking up.

The Hangar shook. Lights started to swing. A chunk of meal rattled free from the entrance stage. The match all but halted, and on the drum skin of the ring, Pilar felt like she was at the center of it—the sound from above, the rumble from below. It was a plane. Jet engines revving, whining. The noise was terribly loud and Pilar waited for the rafters to come crashing down on them. She wondered if she'd feel the heat of the fire, or if it would all be over before then.

When the blast hit a crescendo, and its pitch changed, Dom knew it was an aircraft. Pilar, prone in the ring, looked to him, her arm bent into a triangle above her head.

“Everyone out,” Bonnie ordered.

The stage hands hustled to the bay doors, into the light mist falling outside. Dom ducked between the ropes and rushed to Pilar. He tried to pick her up, but she shrugged him off and took his arm instead. She bared her teeth and panted, pulling herself off the mat. She leaned on Dom and he held the ropes open for her as she stepped out.

When they got outside, they couldn't see the shape of it in the darkness, but they could see the plane's tail and wing lights. They blinked into the distance, gradually rising, and then were swallowed into the low-hanging overcast.

"What's hurt?" Dom asked.

"Neck," Pilar said.

Some wrestlers crowded with the stage hands into cars to get out of the rain. Dom glanced around for Bonnie but didn't see her. Pilar stood under her own power. Her head was tilted slightly as she probed the base of her skull with her fingertips. The noise had dissipated, and other than some detritus scattered on the tarmac, likely blown off the unused structures nearby, there was no sign of damage.

"She might postpone the rest," Dom said. A few stage hands were gathered at the threshold of the Hangar doors, waiting for the all clear.

Pilar cradled her jaw and rotated her head opposite its tilt. Dom didn't stop her.

There were numerous logical explanations for what had occurred—radar problems, computer glitches, pilot error. Once, a private, single-engine prop confused the Hangar's airstrip for one of the nearby municipals and aborted its landing after it was close enough to see the runway's state of disrepair.

But there had never been a plane that large and powerful. It had been so close. So very close.

Bonnie had sent a stage hand to look over the structural integrity of the trusses spanning the Hangar's roof. She knew he'd have nothing to report but felt that paying a nod to some type of inspection would give everyone enough peace of mind to return to work as quickly as possible. She was on her phone with him when Johnnie May, a damp towel draped over her shoulders, approached her.

"We can't continue the match," Johnnie said.

"The structure should be unaffected, and I'm about to confirm," Bonnie said.

"No, the girl is injured. Popped her neck just before that thing buzzed us."

Bonnie told the stage hand she'd call him back. "I didn't notice anything."

"That's because she's good. Good enough for this place. You need to call it."

"Since when did you start caring about the well being of your opponents?"

Bonnie said, jostling past the wrestler and striding into the parking lot. The rain was picking up, and Bonnie hated how her clothes were clinging to her, getting heavier. She found Contreras, and though the plane had likely distracted Bonnie from noticing any injury in the ring, it was clear from the girl's shy stance and delayed look that she was in pain.

"Johnnie May had just informed me that you may be unable to continue the demonstration," Bonnie said, too hastily she knew. She needed to take a breath.

"No!" Pilar said, and then, after she seemed to catch herself, "Why would she say that?"

Bonnie reached out and put pressure on the spot where the girl's trapezius muscle started its upward swing. She folded under the pressure and cried out. Dom slapped Bonnie's hand out of the way, and she could barely hide her smile.

Pilar begged. She ignored Dom's protests and B's pleas to get her back to the apartment to rest and she begged Bonnie for the match to continue. She railed Johnnie May for underestimating her. Against incredible pain, she demonstrated her neck's full range of motion. She demanded to be heard. Somehow, in the midst of her tirade, she knew Bonnie would side with her. It was like she'd expected her to push through like this. Like she was proud of her.

The match restarted. Dom clenched a fist and bit into his knuckle, drawing blood. He was big enough that he could have carried his sister out of the building. She could've hit him with all her might. It wouldn't have mattered. He could see Johnnie May want to ease back into the fight, but Pilar attacked her with a flurry of stiff strikes. Incensed, Johnnie May whipped Pilar into the ropes, and when she came back, caught the crook of her arm and hurled her over her hip. It was the hardest bump of the match.

Pilar's neck would be fine, Dom knew. He'd worked through far worse injuries. But one day, she wouldn't be fine. In the future, there would be a match in which her choice to fight would put her life in serious danger, and when that time came, she'd look back on this moment and remember how tough she was, how she could push through the pain. She would have faith that it was in her nature to overcome the limitations of her body, to push to the brink, to disregard the weaker parts of her person in favor of the

strong, and to show everyone how beautiful it could be to risk everything. And then she would destroy herself.

What kind of brother would allow that to happen?

Bonnie couldn't admit she'd anticipated the course of the evening perfectly, but she permitted herself to enjoy a moment of pleasure in light of how hard this young woman was working to please her, and how often her brother was burying his face in his hands, so wanting but so unable to throw in the towel.

But then the girl staggered to her feet. She wobbled and lunged for her opponent, but Johnnie May caught her across the chest, a devastating clothesline. The blow knocked the girl off her feet, and she hit the mat first with her elbow, then her shoulder, then her ear. Johnnie covered and the ref counted. The girl kicked out.

Contreras was injured, badly, but she kept fighting. She endured one maneuver after another, many of them required the wrestlers to contribute equally to their successful execution. Pain soaked the girl's face. Her cries when she struck the mat were real. Her head careened off the turnbuckle. There was true drama. The wrestling was astounding for someone so inexperienced. Had there been a crowd, they would've been on their feet.

But it was getting difficult for Bonnie to watch.

May heaved the girl like a log across her shoulders and tried to snap her. The move was designed to weaken her opponents for her finisher, the Johnnie Driver. May's right hand pressed in the same place Bonnie's had, just at the root of the girl's neck. Contreras screamed, and the referee tried to get her to quit. She wouldn't.

Contreras didn't know she wasn't the reason for any of this. She didn't know Bonnie only had half an eye on her, that whether she quit or wrestled until the customers began streaming in for the real show, her position in Bonnie's plan would remain the same. But the girl demanded attention. Her performance had been brilliant, but what stirred Bonnie's stomach, what made the color drain from her hands, was that Pilar's suffering, her foolhardy, incredible endurance, was not a show.

All along, it had been Bonnie's purpose to save these people, to offer them a knife with which they could cut themselves from the gallows rope, the nooses they'd tied for themselves.

"I've seen enough," Bonnie said, stepping down from the ring apron. She heard Johnnie May's yelp of protest and a gasp escape Pilar's lips when May let her fall from her shoulders. Bonnie steadied herself. She could feel the Contreras brother watching her as she marched backstage.

Chapter Ten: The Restroom

A few weeks later, Dom poured the drink he'd ordered into a toilet bowl in the men's bathroom at *Bar Pavón*, a popular hole-in-the-wall in Eastway. He unzipped his duffel bag and removed a large sport bottle, unscrewed the cap, and drained it. The stall walls were scrawled with Spanish. Most of it Dom didn't know, but he recognized a word here and there, the majority of them expletives. Music crackled through the disk speaker hanging loosely from the ceiling. A man and a woman sang to each other and played guitar. They sounded hopeful, in love.

Outside, Cross Gruden was sitting on a barstool. He'd ordered Dom his drink and asked if he'd ever hurt a man for no good reason. Dom had lied to him, then left for the restroom.

Inside his duffel was a mask similar to the kind a *lucha libre* wrestler would typically wear. One of Dom's early promotions, a backyard fed run out of a trailer that would put on matches in vacant lots, had forced him to wear one. When he botched, and he always botched with the mask restricting his breathing and vision, the onlookers laughed at him, called him useless, told him to get his ass back over the border. With a draw so tiny, he could make out every individual's voice.

This mask was black, with red rimming the eyes, silver streaking the nose and mouth. Laces threaded the opening in the back. His old mask had been Velcro—most of the cheap ones were. Dom pulled the laces from the mask's eyelets and re-strung them

paratrooper style, like his wrestling boots, though he wasn't wearing those. He had on jeans and sneakers, a simple, white T-shirt. Despite his size, he looked like any other patron of the bar that evening. It was crowded, and he blended in even when sitting next to Cross. That was part of the design. Bonnie had planned everything.

He tightened the laces to give his head just enough room to slip inside. Once in position, he squinted through the eye slits and reached back. He tightened the mask from the top of his head to his neck, and then tied a knot that would hold.

Dom wasn't worried about the fight, or about taking it convincingly outside where a 20-foot circle had been painted on a brightly-lit area of the bar's parking lot, or even about getting caught. He was worried about the half minute or so it would take to leave the bathroom and walk over to Cross. People would see the large man who'd spent an inordinate amount of time in the shitter emerge wearing a wrestling mask. They'd think all sorts of things about Dom. He'd have to bear the weight of their looks. He'd feel like a fake until, as they'd practiced, he ripped Cross off his stool and started it.

His stomach was full and warm, and the focus was settling in. He took a piss, washed his hands, let them drip under the rickety blower. His mind wanted to go to his sister, but he tried to distract himself from her.

The bathroom door opened, and the clamor from the bar washed in beneath the music. A man followed, and when he saw Dom he jerked back in surprise.

“¡Coño!” the man said.

“How you doing, boss?” Dom said. He thumped the man on his chest and edged past him into the bar.

...

i beat a man the other day. broke his arm in the parking lot of a bar. part of this new gig im in with. people really get hurt. like they sign up for it. it sounds brutal and disgusting i know. but when you really think about it how different is it than what ive always been doing. getting hurt is part of the job. only difference now is that you know when its coming. kind of easier that way.

first we rough each other up in the bar. kick ourselves outside. i keep an eye on the people watching. theyre scared at first. dont want to get in the way. dont want to get hurt. but then a few get into it and then a few more and soon everyone knows theyre in for a show. instinct. they need to see what will happen.

both of our shirts get torn off and were hurting but people are circling around us and the energy is good. then the guys got this piece of broken glass and takes a swing. cuts me clear across the chest. not too deep naturally but just enough to get a nice line going. really good piece of work. thats the sign to wrap so i get the glass away from him and lock his elbow.

the people loved it. they ate it up. i put the guy down and raise an arm and honestly im just looking for a way out of there but they all start chanting. bunch of latin guys at this place so its in spanish. theyre chanting cortador cortador cortador. and you know what i sort of like the sound of it. cort-a-dor. i think it works.

...

A driver took Dom to a small office behind a boutique gym a few miles from the bar where a medic examined him, put a few stitches in his chest, and sent him on his way. He arrived at the apartment late, but Pilar was still awake.

She saw the bruises and blood and his broken gait and said very little before she left. She was angry, Dom knew, but she'd come back.

He stretched in his bed and took out his phone. Pulled up a direct message window on Caitlin's profile and started typing. He wrote a whole intro describing their run in at Yucca Mountain a few weeks earlier, how he'd wanted to talk to her but missed his chance, how he was there all the time and would like to have a cup with her if she wasn't too weirded out. He stared at the message a while and then hit backspace, erasing it all until only the first word remained. *hey*.

And then he hit send.