

DEMON



Kristin
Garth

an Avalon Hayes mystery

number
&
book

AVALON HAYES, 2012

Let me tell you about the liars – a new one making up for lost time. This week I'd lied to my maybe-father (Geoffrey), my mother, on multiple occasions, without a catch in my throat or blink of an eye.

I'd cooperated with Geoffrey's rules before I had a secret. After two days at college, I'd found one – an invitation to the woods by a mysterious older boy. Now, I was afraid to make my nightly call.

"How was the teacher? What was his name?"

I'd giggled, remembering what a fool Kurt made of him before I said, "Mr. Camp."

"What's funny?"

"He's kind of a character."

"What does that mean? Was he inappropriate?"

"No. I didn't mean that, geez."

"Well, what do you mean?"

I tried to change the subject to schoolwork.

"Doesn't seem to be a hard class. Essays I'm not great at, but" —

"Did Camp talk to you alone?"

Could Geoffrey know I'd stayed after class? Was it possible he'd followed me? It was during the school day – work day, for him.

"My dad's knocking on my door. Gotta run." Another lie. Didn't dare tell him about Kurt. Even before Thursday and what happened next.

AB –

English class, Thursday, was the first time I looked forward to school since the photo mess. Picked out a sundress, twirled before a mirror, imagining what this older, experienced boy would think.

Mr. Camp was more serious, less jokes. Read from an assigned story about a girl talking to a dangerous man through a screen door, *Where Are You Going?* Something like that. Camp made it exciting. It was easier to see why he was teacher than when he was roasting his students for attention.

Focused on Camp's reading, I knew Kurt was staring before I peeked over my shoulder.

Between the suspenseful story, attention from the dangerous cute boy and Camp releasing us ten minutes early (again), class flew by. Before I could gather all my things, Kurt was there.

“Coming to the pasture?”

I blushed. Afraid to go to the woods, I still wanted his attention.

“Come to my house.”

He smiled, “What would your daddy think?”

I shivered, not thinking of Neil but Geoffrey. He wouldn’t like it, but there was no reason he needed to know.

“You scared of my daddy?”

I was, but tried not to sound like it. Hoped he wanted to prove something the way he had with Camp.

“When?”

“Tonight, 8:00?”

“Get me an address, and I’m there.”

I’d written it down, also my phone number. Spent the rest of the day deciding what to wear, preparing Ada and Mom to be cool about my first college “friend” coming over. “Dad” had a work event. Kurt wouldn’t have to deal with my daddy at all.

There was only Geoffrey to deal with -- called earlier than usual, 7:00. Didn’t dare call him after Kurt left, sounding dreamy or horny – he’d know I was deceiving him. If Geoffrey Chase was my father, he was more controlling than the Mormon who’d raised me.

Did it matter who my father was – if the real one was a psycho? Maybe I was done being Avalon the investigator. Locking my bedroom door, I picked up the phone.

“Avalon, you’re early tonight.”

“So much reading. I just want to take a bath and sleep.”

“Please don’t stress. Bring anything over Saturday, and we’ll figure it out together.”

Saturday, the boat – it’d slipped my mind. Remembering made me anxious. Things had changed. The last thing I wanted was to be alone with Geoffrey.

“Is something wrong?”

“Just a headache.”

“English again today?”

“Yeah. Mr. Camp read a story about a man, behind a screen door, talking a girl into something.”

“Interesting choice.”

I may have been the girl on the other side of that screen door, but it wasn't Camp who was talking me into anything. It was Geoffrey.

“You are coming Saturday?”

“I said I would.” I wanted off this phone call more than anything, “I'll call tomorrow. I promise.”

“Fine. Goodnight, Avalon.”

I hung up without a word.

KURT KLINE, 2012

Before I could deal with Avalon's parents, I'd need to contend with mine. Reclined in her favorite chair in the library, eyes half closed, Mom was between two worlds, a familiar place. Most nights, I'd leave her there. Tonight I was forced to give her an assignment.

“Mom,” I nudged her arm, “look at me.” Eyes fluttered. Incarceration was at stake, and this was as alert as she was going to get. I leaned in close. “Have to go out. Remember the house arrest, what could happen?”

A delay, but she nodded, “Don't go, Kurt.”

“It'll be all right,” I put the phone on the arm of her chair. “Odds are he won't call. If he does, call me.”

“Be careful.”

“I will, Mom.”

Taking my chances, I'd left. Avalon was a game that required risks. The best games do. Should have been nervous, but I was too excited to be on a hunt in the night.

A+

Ringling the door of a majestic Victorian dollhouse, I waited to be vetted by a dad. Instead, the tiny blonde doll answered herself, in a white dress – an angel or a sacrifice?

The house was quiet. She led me up black lacquered stairs. Music played through a closed door – girly punk. Sister? Hmmm, I shivered at the thought. I followed Avalon into her room, and she shut the door.

Leading her, trembling, to the bed, I covered that fawnish skeleton with my demonic musculature, unsheathed claws straining not to pierce her flesh. Held her still, forced her little doll mouth open with an ancient tongue.

She didn't resist. Music, through thin walls, was loud enough to mute any protest if she did. I leaned back, doing a little due diligence before proceeding.

“Parents here?”

She smiled, relieved at the reprieve. Her skin goosebumped, pupils wide, she was enjoying it even if she looked like she might bolt. It was the way of the fawn. They were not to blame.

“Mom's in her room.”

“Ah,” I moved closer again. We were not alone, fair chase. Letting my fingers wander up her narrow thigh, teasing the damp place where it ended. She threw her head back, and I listened to animal little breaths, watching the door for interference I knew, in my hunter's gut, would come.

And then, almost on cue, it did. Quick knock, no pause, the door swung wide. I retracted my hand carefully as I could. My mouth mimicked a broad smile as I looked into the eyes of Blondie's red-headed MILF mom.

She looked stunned. Were my horns showing? Was my zipper down? What had I neglected? Something evil was exposed because this woman plainly saw the demon.

I walked towards her. Without breaking eye contact, she took a step back. Goddamn, this game, only starting. Was it coming to an end?

“Ms. Hayes? My name is Kurt – Kurt Kline.”

“Avalon, can I talk to you alone?”

The demon roared. Avalon left, more than angry, giving me hope, as she walked toward our mutual enemy.

This game always changes. The best games do. The dreams of hunters demons will pursue.

ASTER PRICE HAYES, 2012

I'd always been the cool parent. It's why Avalon asked, "Dad have anything tonight?"

"Yeah. Garden Center, design expo. Won't be home until around 10:00. Why?"

"I invited a friend over – boy. Please don't make a thing about it."

Elated my daughter was socializing again after the scandal -- then I remembered it would be a college boy, and I had a few motherly, uncool, concerns.

"A boy from one of your classes?"

She looked confused by this invasion of her privacy, "Yeah, duh. English Comp."

All of Avalon's classes were freshmen level, so he'd be older – maybe just a year. Let it go momentarily and got dressed for a run to the little brick house.

O-

Back home after a fruitful writing session, relaxed in my bedroom, I heard the doorbell -- knew better than to answer it. Didn't leave my room, though I was filled with curiosity.

"I'll wander downstairs later for a glass of water – scout out the situation."

As I thought it, I heard footsteps and hushed voices on the stair, a door shut. They were locked away on this floor; I hadn't laid eyes on this boy. Never felt this protective. Was I turning into my own mother?

Halfway through *Gone Girl*, I couldn't concentrate on the words. Decided I would finish a chapter then make an excuse to knock on my daughter's door -- see what a college boy looked like these days.

I gave myself over to Amy and her antics as long as I could – glossing over paragraphs, without processing, until I couldn't anymore. Giving in a page before the chapter ended, I knocked then opened Avalon's door. No one spoke, but I stared at a boy whose familiar features made me feel faint. Couldn't process how it could be, but on my daughter's bed sat a younger version of Jared Kline. Then he'd opened his mouth and confirmed it, offering the name of a boy I'd met as a toddler – Kurt Kline, Jared's son.

My mind moved fast – what could I say, having said nothing so long? Avalon could not be with this boy. Calling her out of the room, I shut the door.

"You cannot see him, Avalon."

My daughter looked shocked, working herself up to scream. Glancing at the closed door, not wanting to embarrass herself, she'd whispered venomously, "You don't even know him. Why do you suddenly care?"

Her words wounded me, but I was focused on getting this boy out of this house and out of her life. I knew how plain I could, and should, make it but feared her reaction, the boy inside that room's reaction to a truth held in so long. She would hate me. Panicking, I said the only other thing I knew about this boy's family that could explain my reaction. I whispered it, the way I'd heard it, when Daphne told me.

"The Klines are in the mafia."

Avalon made a face as if I were joking, but then she turned serious.

"How would you know that?"

"I've lived here all my life, Avalon. I know. Tell him you have to," I stumbled for words, what I feared was beginning in that room, "cut things short. You can't expect me to explain this with him sitting there."

Tears in her eyes, she hadn't moved.

"Do I need to ask him to leave?"

"No, Jesus. I'll handle it."

Avalon went into the room. Would I have to go in and wreck our relationship further? Fortunately, the door opened before I was forced to -- I scooted back as Kurt passed by in a huff. He carried his anger like his father, too.

DAPHNE PAUGH, 1992

Knew Friday was a lost cause as we pulled our cases around the corner of the dressing room. Sitting in my seat was a blonde in a thong and pink converse. Babyfat Skipper smiled like we were old friends -- big, white teeth encased in, I kid fucking not, braces.

"You're in our place."

"So sorry. Didn't know where to sit. I'm Ariel."

This girl was either an Academy Award winning actress or sweet and country as hell. Recent experiences with female duplicity left me inclined to believe the former. I turned to Aster, still holding her Little Mermaid pull case.

"Looks like somebody's stealing your act."

Aster didn't speak. I turned back to Usurper #2.

"She cannot be 18," I whispered to Aster.

The new girl hurried to move her things out of our way.

“No way,” Aster agreed.

This girl was a bad omen without a doubt. Once we hit the floor, the whole club felt sinister and wrong, a parallel naked universe where I’d become too old. We weren’t safe anywhere – not even in the VIP.

GEOFFREY CHASE, 1992

Left the house around 7:30 in a fedora, the one hat I possessed, and the plastic bag. In the car, I tore the bag apart. Inside, there was the license and a maroon baseball cap with Frank’s in bubble letters. Was this a new purchase or a souvenir of Jamison’s? Didn’t know, but it was genius – a hat that implied I’d been to this place before.

I pulled into Frank’s just past 8:00. Before I got out of the car, I put on the hat and checked my profile in the rearview mirror then made my way towards the oversized medieval style doors.

Pulling one open, the world went from darkness to neon, a loud bass track, cheesy DJ banter and a high pitched “schwung. I stepped to the register manned by a tall, plastic-seeming blonde.

“ID?”

She looked me over. I handed over Jamison’s extracted from my own wallet. She examined it long enough I worried then handed it back.

“Five dollars.”

Containing my desire to jump with joy, I handed her the cash. The song changed as I made my way into the darkness. Girls, half-dressed, walked past like it was nothing as the music became slower, a familiar snapping of fingers I couldn’t place. A waitress in fishnets, a tuxedo shirt and not much else stopped next to me, my eyes flitting in every direction looking for Aster.

“Can I get you a drink?”

Not at all a drinker, my immediate instinct was to send this distraction with a tray on her way, but I was undercover and underage. It was important to blend in.

“Budweiser,” I said, first beer that popped in my head.

“Sure. Be right back. Need a table?”

“No, just looking around.”

Instantly regretted my choice of words, but the waitress smiled like it was normal.

“That’s why we’re here. I’ll find you.”

She left. I got lost in a swirl of young uninhibited flesh bearing no semblance to Aster. Returning my attention to the song, its title revealed itself: Where Did Our Love Go? Where did it go, Aster? You tell me. My eyes hit upon a space shrouded in plastic plants with a sign, blinking pink neon letters: VIP. Even without my forsaken glasses, I pulled from my pocket now to blurry eyes, I noticed a swing of familiar long red-orange hair.

The waitress chose this moment to return with my \$6 beer. Pulling out a ten, I told her “keep the change,” not out of generosity just the efficiency of her exit.

“Well, thank you. Let me know if you need anything else.”

Eyes on the neon garden, glasses made things clearer and worse -- Aster twirling, half-dressed, for some old man, at least 40. Another girl, back bent, legs straddled around one of his, writhed on top of him. Despite this second siren’s efforts, all this elderly deviant’s attentions were fixed on Aster. Aster’s cheeks flushed a familiar shade of pink, the hue of her happiness. That shade tonight meant she had moved on.

Lightheaded, I reminded myself to breathe. If there had been a chair close, I would have collapsed into it, but I was in no man’s land. The weight of my untasted beer felt oppressively slick in my unsteady hands.

That’s when Aster, in the midst of a taunting twirl and seductive swing of hair, saw me. Time slowed as she stood silent and confused. Did I have a chance? Would those questioning lips turn into a smile? Would she run into my arms? Would I grab her by the hand and forget we ever knew of this place, these wicked weeks?

None of this happened. The confusion on her face became anger. She turned toward the geriatric lech. Relayed some message provoking him to spring from his seat and scream in my direction something I couldn’t hear. His brash movement had consequences. The first, unintended, was bumping the second, superfluous, stripper to her knees as he lunged in my direction.

Even from a distance, this unwanted girl, for whom I felt instant sympathy, was clearly hurt, humiliated. She wailed, pointing a finger at Aster and the old man.

All of this happened like a movie on fast forward. Then a second, more dire, consequence: a 300-pound bouncer running at a startling pace, for the weight he carried, into the VIP room. Knowing my seconds were numbered, I backed slow and steady to the exit, dropping the pointless prop of beer.

“Leaving already?”

It was the blonde at the door questioning me. I didn’t answer. Looked back. The bouncer, leaving the VIP chaos, was running to me. Pulling keys from my pocket, I ran to my car. Hands shaking, fumbling with the key then locking the doors.

Pulling out of the parking lot, I finally breathed, noticing nobody in pursuit. They got what they’d wanted; I was gone. Betrayed by the girl I’d come here to save.

DINA FARRELL, 2012

Away from the drama of the VIP, in the florescent calm of the office, Daphne fumed. Our underage stalker was probably back to mommy and daddy with soiled pants. The tale of the high school kid chased out by Mike, a former college defensive lineman, was being told and retold by Dale at the bar to easy laughter. Kiera, at the door, defiantly insisted it was a real ID.

"You need a BAND-AID, Jellybean? At least, it'll go with your outfit."

Daphne, in one of her many schoolgirl uniforms, didn't smile. Red, puffy eyes fixated on the admittedly ugly rug burn on her knee.

"Sugar, this kid's been bothering your friend for weeks. Kline didn't know what was about to happen. When she told him the boy was here, he just reacted. I can't kick out a well-paying customer for defending another dancer. You understand, right?"

"Whatever."

Logic was not going to work. I tried for a deeper truth.

"Miss Thing, we get each other, right? You know where I've been -- side of the road, duct tape around my hair, over my eyes -- the man who found me, ripping it off, took off half my eyelashes. And I know about you, a girl in her bed shaking, praying, pretending to be so small you may go unnoticed, untouched by your own daddy."

Tears ran down her face.

"Aster hasn't been there. She's has no fear. And why not? Never been bitten or beaten or punished. We all are who we are, Sweet Pea. So she's foolishly carrying on with this loser, we know she is -- tell her to move out but keep the peace here, please. She's done nothing I can fire her for yet. Maybe she won't. One way or another, she won't be here long. This place -- us, we're a curiosity."

Daphne nodded, "I know you're right."

"Of course, I'm right. Been here 20 years, seen this a thousand times. Take the night. Go home, pop popcorn. Watch a movie. I'm getting jealous thinking about it."

"Tonight's ruined anyway. You got your illegal labor out there in pink tennis shoes and braces."

"Don't even joke like that. You wanna see her entertainer license? You're worked up tonight; need a valium?"

"Not gonna say no."

Retrieved one from my purse and put it in her needy little palm.

"Better see you tomorrow night, number one on that sheet, driving these bitches crazy with jealousy, natural

order of things." I winked at her. "You hear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Wanted to bug her, but I could see her confidence returning. Last thing she wanted was pity. Girls like us, sometimes we need a minute, but then we remember how to survive.

ASTER PRICE, 1992

After the showdown in the VIP, Terence, the manager, attempted to smooth things over with Jared.

"Why don't we to start over with a complimentary bottle of champagne?"

He'd said "we" but looked at Jared.

"My head's killing me. I want to go home."

I looked at Terence for approval. He looked at Jared before taking away another of his toys.

"Pretty beat myself. I'll wait at the bar. Make sure this one makes it out of that dressing room alive."

Terence nodded, "Then I'm buying you a drink."

I trudged off to a completely unmonitored dressing room to face possible execution by stiletto or hair dryer. Reaching the door, I paused, working myself up to opening it. Instead, it opened itself—slamming against the wall as Daphne popped through its frame. Leaping from her path, in five-inch heels, I narrowly avoided being taken out by her enormous pull case. Then she was gone.

Who knew what half-dressed girl in this room Daphne may have incited to take me down? Threw clothes and shoes in my case with no concern for order, dressed quickly then ran to the end of the bar to find my man.

He wasn't alone. Standing beside him, showing lots of metal covered teeth was the assuredly illegal Ariel (the last thing Daphne and I would probably ever agree on in our young lives.)

"I'm ready," I said, announcing my presence.

"You okay?"

"Don't want to be here anymore."

He nodded at the interloper, looked into his wallet and extracted a \$20.

"Take this. Get the doorman to call you a cab and take you to -- your house," Jared said those last two words with emphasis.

O+

I had, after all, a secret house – a little brick house, his gift that second lunch, given like it was just another book. He'd walked me into the one-bedroom brick cottage less than a mile from Daphne's -- completely unfurnished minus a king-sized bed that filled the tiny bedroom. Priorities.

"How'd you find this place?" I'd asked, shocked.

"Supposed to be a rental property. Callista's project she's completely abandoned, like everything else."

How easy this was for him, collected the components of an affair long ago, just waiting for a needy young girl. Wasn't a flattering thought. Still I'd been slowing moving things in ever since that fateful lunch, so he must have chosen well.

A-

I wasn't going home in a cab.

"I'm done with Frank's. Done with Daphne/Dolly/Darlene. Done with this teenage hooker. I wanna leave with you." Two sets of eyes on me, and no one spoke. Ariel rolled hers and walked off to tattle about a girl going home with a customer having the audacity to call her a hooker. I could see the irony. The bridge to this place, for me, was cremated, and I was glad. I know when I'm done.

Jared covered my hand with his, "Let's go home."

AB-

"You should drive, if you don't mind."

He was right. Not liking alcohol, I hadn't tasted the champagne he'd purchased to get into the VIP. He and Daphne shared it, then he'd topped it off with the martini at the bar.

"Fine by me."

Driving was a rare treat. I'd driven Jared's car three times, and Daphne's twice. The rest of my jaunts to the store or the little brick house I'd made on foot or a pink bike with an oversized straw basket Jared bought me, too. Something about being behind the wheel of a car made me feel like an adult – which I guess I was but didn't really feel that way at all.

"So she was never Darlene? Lies on lies on lies with that one."

After we spotted Geoffrey, not even 18, much less 21 in the club, Jared reacted to save me, and Daphne was accidentally pushed. Screaming and accusing (with the bouncer deciding what to do), Daphne was clearly using the opportunity to punish Jared.

Jared saw it, too, "Darlene, you know it was an accident."

I couldn't take another second of this theater.

"Jesus Christ, her name's not even Darlene. It's Daphne."

Nobody spoke. Daphne looked like if she had a weapon, I might be dead. But thankfully, the house mother took her away. Now, Jared was blaming me.

"You kept this secret for weeks. I don't like that."

"I didn't like seeing you talking to that underage hustler with bad teeth, so I guess we're even."

"What? She came up to me -- is she really underage?"

"Stop talking about her."

"Stop changing the subject. We're discussing your deception."

"Keeping the peace, she was my roommate."

"You could have moved in the brick house the first day I brought you there. Most of your things are there."

It was true. As soon as I'd received the bike, I'd made a point of bringing things over day by day, the small owl bookcase, the books inside, my diaries, knickknacks and clothes. I had maybe a week's worth of clothes at Daphne's, which didn't mean a thing -- and the ballerina lamp, which I'd have to retrieve.

It occurred to me that needed to be tonight -- before Daphne changed the lock. I'd had that lamp since I was tiny, when I had a father. Doubt he'd picked it out but certainly turned it off with his own hands when he put me to sleep. It was worth a fight if it came to it.

"I'm stopping by Daphne's, something I need; this key's not gonna work tomorrow."

"Afraid you're right about that." He didn't look happy though.

As I pulled up, he offered, "You want me to come with you?"

Rolled my eyes. We both knew that was a terrible idea.

"If I'm not out in ten minutes, assume the worst."

Already shutting the door as I said it, I made my way, the last time, up the long flight of stairs. Turned the key and bolted inside, I scanned the kitchen and living room for signs of life. Seeing none, I headed straight to my room and grabbed the lamp I'd feared I'd find smashed in pieces. It remained intact, porcelain torso to tulle tutu.

Back in the living room, I heard the TV. It was always on, and everything else was quiet; I'd assumed Daphne was in the shower or her room. But as I reached the door and gave this place one last look, I saw two sets of pink painted toenails, peeking resting on the coffee table. She was slumped low on the couch I couldn't see her head. Asleep or ignoring me? Either way, best to leave things as they were, so I left.

AB+

Jared called Sundays "son days" which he spent with Kurt. This was the second I'd spent alone. I'd see him at work tomorrow. Once he'd been a regular at my work. Now I was a regular – or employee at his.

Even had a company car (a used sky blue VW bug) to make sure I could get to work and do errands. Lenore surprised me on a Friday while Jared was stuck in depos away from the office.

"You need transportation if you're going to be a runner."

The firm already had an office assistant, my first post, and probably didn't need another. But Jared insisted I go on payroll after leaving Frank's – "a way to get you some income I can deduct." I did anything Lenore told me to do, but there was a lot of sitting around.

Of course, I had GED practice tests, he insisted upon, too. Sometimes I just read novels, waited for Jared to call me to his office, ask me to shut the door.

What the firm needed was a runner. The duties were simple: pick up and deliver documents to other attorneys, the court and other miscellaneous supplies. You just needed to be quick on your feet -- and have a car.

Excited about the car, I'd lost something valuable, too: some of his carefully allocated time. Missed the pick ups and drop offs -- though the subterfuge of those drove me a little crazy. Drop off and pick up occurred at a coffee shop three discreet blocks away. The subterfuge made it feel like we were still at the club. They didn't seem to bother Jared at all.

JARED KLINE, 1992

"Lenore, is Aster here?"

"Affirmative. Send her back?"

"Yep."

I'd been dreading this all day. Knew she'd close the door, cheeks flushed, expecting pleasure just to receive bad news. I'd waited until past 4:00, when we didn't have much traffic in the office.

She practically bounced turning the lock with a naughty little look. The look combined with those legs in that tight gray dress tempted me to postpone the news but I wouldn't see her tonight. Callista and I had a wine and cheese at The Cavanaugh's, neighbors/clients, attendance compulsory. It was Tuesday afternoon. Thursday was D-Day. Had to be now.

Patted my lap. She came over and sat. "You know I've got Secret Stuff depos at the office, Thursday and Friday?"

"Yes, Lenore told me. Pantry's stocked. Something you needed me to pick up?"

"No, Lenore has it in hand."

"Okay."

"Mickey the Tooth is coming."

"Oh, wow. Haven't seen him in a bit. That'll be different."

"I can't let a client see I'm employing strippers he partied with weeks ago. It's not you. It's the situation. This is a business; it supports all of us. I can't jeopardize it to spare your feelings."

"You're firing me?"

"Are you kidding? Never. I want you to take Thursday and Friday off, paid. Consider it a bonus."

She pouted but then looked me in the eye, "I mean I guess I understand. I just miss you. Promise you'll come over Friday night."

"Well, that's another problem. Mickey expects to be taken to Frank's after depos. He calls it 'the Pensacola ballet.' These depos are mind-numbingly brutal. Silly things get us through. Keeping that man happy is a part of my job. Do you expect me to displease Mickey the Tooth?" Maybe the mafia lie could do me some good.

She sobbed against my shoulder.

"It's not something I'd do on my own, but I can't get out of a standing arrangement with this particular client. You're a smart girl. You should be able to understand."

She sniffled, "What about Saturday? Halloween, you have to come and bring me some candy. I picked out a special outfit."

Crap. Halloween, Kurt's first trick or treat. Wasn't as if my addled wife could be relied upon to take him. Had she even purchased a costume?

"Aster, you know I have a son ..."

"Unbelievable!"

She screamed. I lost my patience altogether. Cupping my hand across her mouth to muffle the sound, I lifted her on my desk, pulling off her black thong, I whispered in her ear, "Will you be quiet if I move my hand?" She nodded. "You'd better." I unbuckled my pants and let them fall, putting myself inside her, hard as I was angry. Couldn't stop myself from pulling her hair, but as she promised, not a sound escaped those pretty

bitten lips.

B+

Wednesday was prep with the Secret Stuff employees at their hotel, then a short depo at the court reporter's office in a trademark dispute case. Didn't make it back to the firm until 2:30. Hoped to read the rest of the day and prep with Lenore.

Heading to my office, the last thing I wanted was distraction. Then I heard Aster's laugh. Her work laugh. Not legal work. The laugh I'd heard waiting for some rotund, middle-aged man to slide his \$20 in her garter before I could whisk off to the privacy of the VIP. She'd laughed artificial and weird, not at all her actual laugh — like something she'd heard on Skinemax. I'd catalogued this sound as noise I never wanted in my vicinity again. Yet, on this important day, it was coming from my conference room.

The door was ajar, but I didn't dare look and let whoever was with her see my jealousy and rage. I walked over to the one person in this place -- maybe anywhere now -- I could rely upon.

"Who in the hell's in there with her?"

Lenore look terrified, like she was going to be blamed.

"It's Richard Englehoff."

"Dick? What's he doing here?"

Dick Englehoff, junior counsel from Warner & Levanowitz, counsel for Waylon Mullins, as in Mullins v. Secret Stuff Storage, Inc., my opposing counsel was in my conference room being seduced by my secret girlfriend.

"I don't know. He showed up with boxes for tomorrow."

"Just carried them in himself? Excellent use of a law degree. They don't have runners?"

"I don't know, boss. She was taking a practice test. He went in ten minutes ago -- clueless about the rest as you are."

"I'll be in my office. When Dick leaves, send her back."

"Will do. Want me to try to listen in?"

If I had been sure Lenore was serious, I would have said yes. Such was the state of my mental health. Instead, I brooded in my office.

If I'd had ten more minutes for the rage to subside, what would have happened? I don't know. Three minutes and 35 seconds later, Aster strolled in with a smug little grin. That was not sufficient for me to

process my emotions.

I flew from behind the desk. Without thought to repercussions or sounds in an active office, I slammed the door and pushed her against the wall, one hand on her shoulder and one on her throat.

"Who do you think you're dealing with? Some boy you have the mental capacity to manipulate? You're a fucking high school dropout."

Her face was scrunched up and her eyes were wide with fear. I heard a scratching, scuffing sound I couldn't place. Her feet, in ballerina pink flats, shuffled back and forth against the wall, trying to find the floor. Horrified, I let go of her, and she slid to her feet. Bent over, holding her hands on her knees, she was gasping and shaking.

I lead her, gently, to the beige couch where she pulled her knees to her chest and sobbed.

"I'm sorry, princess. I didn't mean to – it was the wrong day for this."

I was out of control and scaring myself. Looked at my watch, only 2:50. No one in this office could see Aster like this. Not even Lenore. I'd have to keep her with me until everyone was gone.

"Come here."

She didn't move. She looked like she might be sick.

"Are you all right? Please say you're all right."

She shook her head, "I'm achey and I feel like I could -- "

"Lie here and rest while I do some reading, okay? If you need anything, water, food, blanket – tell me, and I'll send Lenore to get it, okay?"

She didn't say anything.

"Do you want to lie down?"

"Okay."

Gently, I removed her shoes, leaned her back, found a pillow for her head. Pulled those lovely legs up with the rest of her on the couch, rubbed them until she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

She'd baited me, humiliated me – made me jealous, unprofessional. But I had really hurt her. I had become as bad as the man I'd pretended to be in that place I met her.

ASTER PRICE, 1992

"I should get you a more grownup watch."

"Maybe I'm not a grownup."

He unbuckled my Swatch, my clothes already on the bathroom floor, and deposited it carelessly on the edge of the sink. It fell in the bowl.

"Hey! Watch it!" I leaned across him, every muscle in my body aching, to retrieve the watch. "It may look like nothing to you, but it's everything to me."

Walking into the bedroom, I returned it to the safety of my piano jewelry box.

"Get in this bath, will you, before it's cold?"

Shivering and a little dizzy, I made my way to the bathroom.

"Give me your hand."

He held me steady while I made my way, one wobbly leg at a time, into the steamy, lavender bath.

"What in the world was he talking to you about?"

He was still not over it.

"Fine, keep your secrets. I guess that's where we are."

I broke into tears, battered and broken down on the inside as I looked on the outside.

"I'm a jealous man."

"It was nothing. He was talking about college. Maybe he likes me. I guess I was jealous, too, about Frank's."

"You will always get hurt in a struggle with me, Aster. Do you understand?"

Nodded. I'd come to the same conclusion.

"So stop struggling."

The scent of the bath, the steam and his stare felt so smothering. I thought I was suffocating then I felt worse.

"I think I'm going to be sick."

He helped me out of the tub. I leaned over the toilet, but the relief of the purge never came.

"I think you better lie down. I'm going to get you water and maybe some tea. Does that sound good?"

"There's mint in the cabinet above the sink."

I laid on the bed alone, my body warm and throbbing, so sure I was in love and so unsure I was going to survive it. He returned with the tea in one hand and a glass of ice water in the other, placed both on the bedside table. Rubbing my cheeks with his fingers, he kissed my forehead. Then his fingers wandered down the opening of my robe, touched me softly until my eyes closed.

"I doubt I can come the next couple of days, but Sunday, I promise, you can have me all day, if you want."

I conjured the best smile for him I could. Did I want him? Everything was different now. That was achingly clear. I was indeed keeping secrets. That's where we were.

AB-

Woke sometime after 10:00 the next morning, twelve hours of sleep. I'd drifted off early, halfway through The Westing Game, the comfort brain food on the sacred owl shelf. I was so in need of comfort. Throat and back hurt; stomach felt strange still, but I'd woken alone, in the little brick house, to the prospect of not seeing Jared for two, maybe three whole days. All I felt about that was relief.

Stayed in bed as long as I could stand it, contemplating how to spend the rest of what felt my first free day of my life maybe ever. No Mom, Geoffrey, Daphne or Jared with their agendas and plans. I'd decided on a trip to the bookstore.

Then the phone rang. In the fog of sleep last night, I'd heard a call and ignored it. It could only have been him. Nobody else had this number. If he was taking precious depo time to call, I was afraid what might happen if I dared not answer.

"Hello?"

"Aster. It's Lenore."

"Oh, I --"

"Jared, gave me the number. Know you're off, but we need you -- a few hours."

"Lenore, I can't. He knows I'm in no condition for the office."

"Won't be at the office. Jared says he left you money in the nightstand. He'll reimburse you, but he needs you to go to Target and buy some costumes for his son. Wants him to choose. Callista's on something -- doesn't want her driving. You understand, right?"

Oh, I understood. My boyfriend had his secretary sending his mistress over to his drug addicted wife's house to babysit her and his toddler son.

"Lenore, you know why I can't do this."

"It's messed up. I get it, but we have depos, so I can't go. If anything happens to Kurt" –

"All right. All right. What's the address?"

"38 Gardenia Court."

"Have no idea where that is."

"Off Scenic Highway, on the left -- you have a pen?"

"I'll get one."

Pulling a pen from the cup by the phone, I opened the nightstand drawer. The money Lenore mentioned, ten crisp hundreds, was beneath a pink Post-it note, "Have a great weekend. Sunday you're M-I-N-E." Taking this money, I was fixing a price for damages I knew would be paid again. Lenore brought me back to reality.

"Gotta pen?"

"I do." Stuffed money in the pocket of my robe and wrote the details.

"The neighbor girl's coming after school, 3:30. Callista is -- I'm sure you've heard stories, but she's kind, graceful, an intelligent woman -- a little desperate, emotional. Won't be as bad as you think.

Couldn't imagine anyone feeling more desperate emotional than I did right now.

CALLISTA KLINE, 1992

The doorbell interrupted the best dream. Back at Emory, Jared and I listening to Dr. Larissa Rinehart wax on about Nin and the Delta of Venus. He'd followed me back to my dorm after, held me down and taken me the first time. Each time we made love, it was more intense until it ended with a ring on my finger.

Wasn't even a dream -- a dream is an untruth, a fiction. This was a memory, a gift the cozy tingle of Percocet brought, if I laid still, gave myself over. Held onto this memory until the rings got closer and closer together and then stopped.

Only when they stopped did I realize it was my help, abandoning me. I raced out of bed, jumped into my slippers, almost knocking Kurt over, playing with blocks on the floor. Grabbed my Chanel robe from the chair, raced downstairs, working arms into sleeves as I opened the door.

A tiny strange redhead was retreating. To bleary eyes, adjusting to the light, she looked like a little fairy, sans wings -- back to me, hand on the door of her Volkswagen. I called out, my voice brash and desperate.

"Hey! Wait!"

She turned, several Halloween costumes folded over her arm.

"Thought nobody was home. Would have left these on the step, but it looks like rain, so -- was going to

bring them to Lenore.”

Her speech was brisk. Words sounded double speed. More than likely, it was me, stuck in permanent half speed. As she approached, I noticed her neck. Her white mock turtleneck only highlighted the angry red marks peeking out the top. She quickly put her hand to her throat, cheeks flushed. I felt gauche and ashamed for staring.

“I’m a terrible host. Come in. Can I make you a cup of tea?”

She followed through the foyer into the library where she stopped and gasped.

“It’s the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever seen.”

My husband and I, two English majors, shared an unabashed lust for books particular to people whose relationships began in pages and graduated to sheets. When we bought this house, Jared put more thought and money into the design of this room than any other. The exterior wall was entirely glass. The opposite wall, with built-ins to the ceiling, high, dark oak shelves with a railed rolling ladder, was every inch covered with books. Forgot how impressive a sight it was, to the right sort of person, which this girl, whose name I hadn’t bothered to ask, obviously was.

“I haven’t introduced myself. I’m an unforgivable mess -- Callista Kline.”

“I’m Aster Price.”

“How lovely. Surprised my husband hasn’t mentioned it. Always had an appreciation for a lovely name. We’re both logophiles, as you can see.”

Her eyes were everywhere, “I can indeed.

“Take a peek while I collect the little monster and make us some tea.”

I left my guest in the library. Not all stories are in books and dreams; sometimes they walk in the front door of your house. I’d forgotten those kind recently. This one intrigued me.

B-

A pot of chamomile tea and three costume changes later, Kurt chose – as much as a one-year-old chooses anything -- the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle suit. I’d managed to extract not a peep of personal info from my young guest. A vicious pain pulsed in my neck. Aster was in the kitchen making Kurt lunch. Deciding I lacked the requisite strength to follow through on this investigation, I was ready to retreat upstairs, take a pill for this neck, read and drift off to some place more accessible.

Then I heard the unmistakable sound of retching came from my kitchen. I hurried in to see what in the world was the matter.

Aster leaned over the sink, a half-open can of tuna fish deserted on the counter. She pulled herself upright, turned on the water.

"You look shakier than me."

I led her back in the library to the couch, covered her in a light blanket from its neatly folded place on the armrest.

"Maybe I shouldn't be in here. It's too lovely. I don't know what's wrong with me these days."

"Shhh. I'll get you a wet washcloth for your head. Just rest."

Returned with the cloth. Crossed my fingers she would hold it together. For all my brave talk, Jared would lose his mind if she desecrated his library. His anger could be frightening

"Lie your head back."

I placed the cloth on her forehead and took her tiny hand, "Permission to speak frankly?"

She waited a moment then said, "Go ahead."

"Is it remotely possible you are -- with child?"

I had my answer in the worry all over face.

"I had the same reaction with Kurt to all sorts of smells, meat and fish the worst, but perfumes, all kinds of things."

I reached out and touched her throat. She didn't pull away.

"Are you afraid of him?"

"Yes."

"You should be. You know it's not going to get better?"

She nodded her head.

"Well, then. First things first, information, confirmation. No use getting upset until we know. Follow me upstairs. Always pregnancy tests at this house. Won't be surprised again. Not sure I completely survived childbirth the first time."

I flipped on the light of my dark bedroom and caught a glimpse of those big gray eyes making a careful study as we traveled through it. In the bathroom, I retrieved the test and put it in her hand.

"Take your time. I'll be downstairs with Kurt, ready to listen if need to talk."

Left her to it. Made my way down the curl of stairs to see what damage I must undo from Kurt's unsupervised stint in the library.

ASTER PRICE, 1992

On the toilet of a kind stranger and the love of my life, I looked at a plus sign that meant a baby. A single thought in my head: make this very nice over-medicated woman believe she's wrong. If not, she'll certainly express concern for the abused and pregnant girl the office sent over. If I were to leave him – and I had to leave him, would he come after this child? I could not allow it.

Threw the used box in the trash, tucked the positive test into the only place I could -- the pocket of my denim miniskirt. Turning on the faucet, I splashed water on my face. Made my way down the stairs, back into the library of my dreams.

"You scared me to death, Callista."

"You're not pregnant?" She looked skeptical.

"Must be the flu. I probably should go."

If I stayed in her presence, I was sure I'd confess all my secrets.

AB+

Made it home on autopilot, my mind on the smallest thing buried deep inside, the biggest secret of my whole life. Toiling with that stubborn lock of the little brick house exhausted me. Surreal how tired I felt, like a girl in a fairytale who's unwittingly ingested some toxic fruit -- or, perhaps, a poisoned pot of tea? Even if I'd deserved every spiked sip, Callista was no assassin. She was someone I once wanted to be, and today decided I didn't.

I pulled, from my closet, something I'd never needed to wear more than now: a faded blue flannel shirt of my dad's. Safe in the shirt, lights flipped off, I, returned to the warmth and safety of my very own bed for an afternoon nap.

When I woke, it was to darkness and the feel of a pressed shirt crinkling against my soft flannel. Laying on my side, I felt Jared's arm pulling me close. Hadn't heard him come in the door. Did he know? Had Callista not bought my act?

His lips beside my ear tickled as he whispered, "Heard my baby was sick. Had to stop on my way home."

Even though I knew "my baby" meant me, it made me nervous.

"It was wrong to put you in that position. Kurt loves his costume. Thank you for helping my son.

I knew he wanted me to say everything was okay. I just couldn't. Words and soft kisses could not overwhelm the fear. My throat reminded me for all this softness, there was a hard price.

"Say something so I know you don't hate me."

"I don't hate you. I'm just tired."

"Close your eyes. I'll stay and hold you until you're fast asleep."

Because I knew it was over, I held my eyes open for as long as I could managing to savor every touch and whisper until I gave myself over, at last, to a sleep I no longer had the power to delay.

A+

Woke the next morning, early, the sun barely peeking in my window. My body shivered though it wasn't cold. I threw on my robe. Aching, I decided the only thing to do was to return to the comfort of The Westing Game and a hot cup of tea. I passed the morning until I turned the final page and a peek at my Swatch said lunchtime. My emptied stomach rumbled its agreement. I felt a powerful craving for a grilled cheese sandwich, a bowl of soup and some fresh air. A half-mile walk to Souper Bowls in the warm sun seemed the perfect solution.

"Cream of artichoke, grilled cheese and an iced coffee."

Found my table, relieved to have an appetite and a cooperative stomach. The short girl with the Betty Page haircut brought everything quick. Food worked its magic; my head began to clear and form steps of an actual, albeit, crazy plan.

The walk home I contemplated it, this one final test for Jared Kline, one I was sure he would fail. Seeing him fail it, holding you there inside me, my blind little witness, I knew would be enough to make me let him go for good.

Before the test, though, I wanted to make a stop to the bookstore to buy you something, your first book. Well, a book for both of us. I'd need all the help I could get.

AB+

There was only one outfit that would do for such a test: the black eyelet dress. It had seen me through the worst days of my life. Maybe it could get me through one more.

I concealed my secret in its sleek confidence. Wild, free, girlish hair seemed wrong somehow. I did something I hadn't since I quit ballet in the 6th grade: wear it up. In the mirror, my braided bun looked like a fiery crown. I felt like the queen of my own life.

I slipped into ballet flats, grabbed keys, my purse and left in the Volkswagen, first, to the mall bookstore. I was off to buy somebody a book, somebody I loved even though we hadn't even met.

GEOFFREY CHASE, 1992

Everything was astonishingly clear. Aquamarine triangles on a loud purple shirt of the obese woman in front of me were visual assault more than wardrobe choice. Every t-shirt caption screamed secrets of the universe -- maybe not the girl wearing "All That and A Bag of Chips." But the next, a tight black shirt with white letters, which said, "In Memory of When I Cared" gutted me.

How I longed for casual indifference I could celebrate with a t-shirt. Wasn't there. Would I ever be?

Each step away from the Society of the Spectacle(s) was, as Dr. Binani said it would be, "sharp and fresh without physical barriers between you and the world." Should have tried contacts years ago. Hadn't had an eye exam since freshman year, a fact I used to my advantage, rebuking my mother who'd fished her credit card from her wallet and said "See if they can get you in tomorrow."

Called Binani -- I'd wanted to since they opened in the mall, piquing my interest with their bookish name. After school, I headed straight to the philosopher optician.

With my new eyes and a brain teeming with competing philosophical ideologies, I sought further edification. Towards Waldenbooks, I made my first positively chipper trek since all that happened with Aster Price. Was it my new vision or a new confidence? I noticed, on more than one occasion, females noticing me. I must admit, even if I wanted nothing from them, the affirmation was bliss.

At the bookstore, I headed to my favored spot in the back, left far wall, where philosophy and self help collide. (Two shelves down from science fiction, which I now avoided; sci-fi caused too much agony this year.) The store had four seats, bench-style, constructed on the end caps of two shelves.

Sitting, I weeded through an armful of possible acquisitions. Hadn't found anything on the Situationists which Dr. Binani suggested. Placing the rest at my feet, I opened Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life. Felt it this afternoon, but peace, post-Aster, was a fleeting emotion.

A few pages in, the skinny goth bookstore employee carrying a tall stack of paperbacks almost tripped over my outstretched legs. Hastily, I turned sideways to clear a path. Distracted, my eyes wandered. On the carpet, opposite side of the aisle, two achingly familiar pale legs in ballerina shoe, extended in my direction summoned me to a face, nose buried in a book. My God, it was Aster Price.

Hands gripped the bench, holding me in place. Though my heart hadn't caught up, my body remembered how unwanted I was. She'd made it clear in that strip mall palace of nudity.

If she saw me, would she cause a scene? The threat of eviction from a bookstore was sobering. A place, I must add, I entered with nothing but intellectual and spiritual concerns. I moved the book from its place on my lap to cover my face, a ready-made disguise I hoped would suffice.

I peeked, carefully, over the top of the book. The dress she wore was the same as her last day of school, the one those pumped up philistines violated with their minds when she'd bent over in speech class. It was the dress I'd promise to remove only to be denied the pleasure by malicious forces I still didn't understand.

My heart beat so fast I felt it might hop out of my body and into her lap, a hopeless little lapdog. Something screamed inside me -- how can you continue to disregard these messages from the universe?

But as enlightened as I wanted to be, I was, alas, a mere mortal teenage boy. An eager panting puppy on the inside, on the outside, I sat stiff and still as a weathered old man.

Aster was reverent in her concentration. Her lips, every so often, made the slightest turn upwards, bemused at some turn of phrase or revelation. I never felt so jealous of a book. How I longed to be the object of that singular gaze? She cupped it close, hands obscuring key words of the cover and half the picture. I dared to cheat my angle of observation to chance a better view. All I could see was a somewhat portly lady, arms awkwardly posed, a couple of whole words unobscured by dainty, long fingers (WHAT TO) and then a fragment of another (TING).

It meant nothing – couldn't surmise a genre. Would have guessed, from the vernacular, self help, but that was impossible. She would have been sitting next to me. Imagine. No helpful signage visible from my vantage point, the rigid posture I was affecting hurt my neck.

Then she moved the critical hand and revealed a word, the key word that made me want to die right there in the fucking mall: EXPECTING.

I'd like to solve the puzzle, Pat, the worst puzzle of my entire life: What to Expect When You're Expecting. The love of my life, feet from me, was pregnant – and happy. Game over, asshole. You lose.

Gutted by this girl again, I sat too afraid to be noticed. Moved myself around the bench out of her view, waiting for her exit, so I could leave without a confrontation. Focused on my watch, the cruelest countdown I could imagine, I took a breath for courage and peeked discretely as I could. Nothing. No legs, no girl. She had gone. Should have felt relieved, but my heart mourned my choice. Scanned the front of the store, the register, to be prudent, but all I saw was the goth behind the counter.

"Nothing good today?" The goth called out as I passed his register.

After all I'd been through, I couldn't fathom a response. His words echoed inside my brain as I headed to the parking lot.

Nothing good today.

Nothing good today.

Nothing good for the rest of my goddamn long life.

AVALON HAYES, 2012

Kurt and I talked, on the phone that night more than we ever had this week.

"No idea what came over her. Swear she's never like this."

"The mafia? My dad was a corporate lawyer, probably died of boredom."

“Ever heard of a man named Mickey the Tooth?”

I sounded ridiculous asking.

He'd busted out laughing, and I was beyond relieved. I'd actually been scared to bring up the mafia question – on the small chance it was true. Of course, it wasn't.

AB+

After he'd left, Mom recounted some cray tale about a friend of hers from cheerleading who became a stripper and had some affair with Kurt's father, a lawyer for the mafia. He was also abusive. The girl became so scared she'd gone into hiding.

“She said he was tight with this gangster called Mickey the Tooth. I haven't seen her for years, Avalon. Who knows if she's even alive.”

Her dramatics, I'll admit, worried me, but then I remembered this woman was a liar and some kind of secret writer, in other words, a professional liar. The realization gave me strength.

“Even if this is true, you're talking about a dead man. Kurt said his father is dead.” That shut her up for a minute, but then she spoke with a look of determination I'd never seen.

“Avalon Hayes, you will not see this boy. If I find out you are, I'll go straight to your father and tell him everything I know. Do you understand?”

I was in complete shock. My mother never played my father against me. There was no reasoning with her. I dealt with her the way she deserved. I lied.

“I'm sorry, Mom. Okay. Fine. I won't see him. I promise.”

She looked like she was deciding if she could trust me, then she wrapped her arms around me and held me tight.

“Ice cream?” she said then, like that could fix anything like when I was five.

“Sure.” I said because I did still love it, but, mostly, so she'd believe me. I was a good liar -- one who learned from the best.

AB-

Then I'd gone upstairs and called Kurt.

“I'm so sorry about your father,” I continued. Kurt was dealing with so much, between his father's death and his mother's drug problem. It made me so angry that my mother had added to his troubles with these lies. The misunderstanding had seemed to correct our course. Earlier in my room, I'd felt like an object, just some hookup. Opening about his life

and his childhood, I felt like something more.

“Are you still going to see me?” he asked.

“Of course, Kurt.

“You on campus tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“When’s your last class?”

“Gets out at 11:55.”

“Perfect. Where?”

“Philosophy, Building F.”

“I’ll be there. We’ll go to the pasture.”

“Okay.”

Going to the woods with Kurt felt different now. We needed to talk where no liars could interrupt us. It seemed like the perfect place.

KURT KLINE, 2012

Woke Friday knowing today I would have her, my skipping fawn. Felt it in my blood. The shift in the air brushed against my skin raising the little hairs on my arms with its electricity like her small body soon would. I heard the syllables of her name in the calls of the birds as I’d hiked up that hill to the philosophy building, leaves crunching beneath my Danner Pronghorn boots, early, scouting my position. My father would be proud.

I breezed right past Camp on the sidewalk, laughing with two middling brunette pieces. Go for it, you decrepit geezer; get those rotting rocks off, please. Keep your noise and your patchouli far away from my kill plot, my Bambi; you and me got no quarrel.

I might have been wearing flannel, but I wasn't wearing poser patchouli. I'd doused myself in Comme des Garçons Wonderwood. While I waited for her class to end, I daydreamed of golden fawn hair and leading her, by the nose, to the pasture where we would play.

When she came out of the building, I felt like I was tripping. Her hair braided like a little crown on top of her head, began to glow like a halo, almost too bright to look. Squinting,

my head felt like it was struck, in every follicle, with lightning bolts. Still I couldn't turn away, no matter the pain and consequence. Then the halo exploded into confetti -- white petals, like the daisies on her long skirt I wanted to rip off her body, buttons in the air like petals.

Though she was waiting for me, I couldn't move. It had to be my father, giving me his blessing, his approval of my choice of prey. Speech finally became manageable.

"You dressed for me today; didn't you?"

"Maybe."

Her smile was full of lust and nerves. It was enchanting. I wanted to turn it to fear, but not yet. We hadn't made it to the woods.

"A lovely outfit for a walk in the pasture."

I took her hand; it was trembling. Her hair was changing back and forth from that little crown to a glittery halo emitting smoke. She was too done up, confined in these trappings. I knew who she was, and it wasn't this civilized little buttoned-up animal. Could not wait to undo that braid in the pasture and set her free.

Her cheeks glowed. It was the blood pulsing so hard under the skin I could almost smell it mixing with the vanilla she wore to entice me. And it had. It made me hungry. This game required patience; the best games do.

I saw it in her widening dark pupils, she blinked and turned, in that instant, into giant black hearts. She was love, you see, and I was death, and we were going to the pasture; all would be as it should.

Oddly in this moment, my mind turned to Camp – his pedestrian ramblings on a short story called "The Man on the Stairs" by Miranda July. Despite Camp's efforts, he did not ruin this story about a hunter who wanted to make the terror last as long as possible before he showed himself, couldn't help but think of it now

I took her pink backpack from her, threw it over my shoulder. She smiled at my chivalry. Sunny and cool, prime atmospheric conditions, looking down at my dainty quarry, the snug white turtleneck revealing an outline of lace beneath it across her chest, I couldn't not taste her one second longer. Grabbed her by the shoulders, pulling that little chest towards me and her face up to my greedy lips -- no resistance whatsoever. In seconds, I was inside that

mouth chasing that shy, small tongue, hearing the sound of owls and her beating, bleating heart.

When I pulled back, her eyes were closed; she looked like a dreaming little angel. I grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the pasture. Her gawky, unsteady gait shuffling along a little quicker beside me, lured and ready, a credit to my years of study and experience in the brush.

As we walked I thought of the story again, and just like Mr. Camp asked us after the story, I mimicked my best old stoner sleeze voice "Do you have a man on the stairs, Avalon?"

She nodded. In my strange state of mind, I actually started looking around, scanning for wolves in the bushes and trees.

"Not here. Doesn't go to school here. Older."

"Really? What's the codger's name? I'll hack that fucker into a thousand bite-sized pieces and feed his perverted heart to my dogs."

She laughed so loud it surprised me.

"Woah, Jesus. I think I better not say."

"Has he fucked you?"

She turned bright pink, "It's not like that."

"It's always like that."

We'd made our way to the English department offices, the pasture in sight. I saw Nolan by the trees doing a celebratory little dance when he spotted us.

"I didn't know he was coming, too."

"Nolan's good people. He has the magic elixir that'll make your creeper on the stairs go bye-bye a while. He's our friend. "

She didn't respond, but when I pulled her towards Nolan and the pasture she did not resist. Her body glowed, like a candle flamed inside it, light shining through each pore, warming its pale velvet for my touch. We stepped into the pasture, love and death and Nolan. A comforting familiar power grew inside me each step into these trees. I was here to play.

A-

Leaning against a tree, her body splayed across my chest, my sweet little fawn, eyes closed, bedded down, her virgin lungs partaking of herb so powerful even I felt subdued though horny as fuck. I could not begin to imagine how incapacitated she was behind those closed lids. Extracting glistening fingers from inside that skirt, I knew she felt good and tasted like apricots.

Nolan, leaning against his own tree, had nodded a little too but rallied watching me lick those fingers.

"What is this stuff, Nolan? Definitely not Sour Dream like before."

Nolan laughed.

"I'm talking about the weed, you freak I mean, look at this."

It was some killer sex strain, for sure, but my little fawn was in some kind of indica sex coma. She looked like some twisted, slutty little Sleeping Beauty, but I wanted those eyes open. I wanted responses. When I stuck in my blade, I wanted to see big Bambi doe eyes staring at me.

"CannaSutra. It's like smoking sex."

"Yeah, but I don't fuck corpses, dude. Not my thing."

Ran my fingers through her loose hair, freed as soon as we'd finished that first joint while Nolan rolled a second. She had been so paranoid about him being there. He'd planted himself ridiculously far away, leaning against his own tree, eyes closed, pretending to nap. I'd unwound that hair and pulled her by it on top of my lap. My fingers finding soaked panties, I'd made her cum so quickly, she forgot Nolan, her man on the stairs and every other thing in the whole wide world except me. Then between cumming again and the second joint, she'd collapsed against my chest and closed her eyes.

Now, here we were Sleeping Beauty laid out on top of me, perversely beautiful and a gift to the senses, for sure, but essentially useless.

"Man, get over here. I'm tired of yelling."

Nolan hopped up walked to our tree and collapsed, staring at my slumbering little fawn like the delicious little piece she was. Closeup, she was a trophy.

"She smells so good."

"I know, vanilla. I can't take this anymore. Hold on to her, dude. I'm gonna wake her up."

I'd pushed her gently off me, so I was free to move, and against Nolan who slipped an arm around her sleepy little shoulders to stabilize her. My fingers found their way back inside that skirt and my teeth found their way into her little neck.

Her eyes opened, and the cutest little bleat escaped those sweet lips that turned into a smile. Then waking enough to realize she was looking at me, realizing the chest she leaned against and the arm around her shoulders belonged to someone else, she turned to see Nolan.

"What's going on?"

"You fell asleep. I woke you up."

She looked back at Nolan and then to me. I could see she wanted to run. I pulled her over to me, against my chest, where I knew she would feel safer than over there with Nolan, even though she shouldn't. Nolan was just a horny human boy. I was a demon.

I held her against my chest, arms length now away from gentlemanly, if a little horny, Nolan, stroked her breasts through her shirt and whispered in her ear.

"Nothing to fear with Nolan. Much nicer than me actually. He shared with us today, and we should share with him. It's only polite."

She didn't say anything, and she was trembling, but I knew I had her in my demonic spell. I pulled up her turtleneck and exposed that lace bra, the hard nipples peeking through.

"Shit." I thought Nolan might fall over with joy.

"You can touch them, man. Go ahead."

Nolan didn't move. Avalon's tremble turned into just the smallest hint of a struggle but I wrapped my arm tighter around the top of her chest and whispered again.

"Be polite."

She stopped moving. Hesitantly, at first Nolan touched her breasts and then when she didn't act out, a little more enthusiastically, tweaking her little nipples. I licked and kissed her neck, keeping my sweet fawn in this delightful little game, though I know it wasn't one she'd have thought to play all on her own.

I could tell, even though she'd had never chosen it and never would admit it, she was starting to get off on all the attention now. Nolan looked about as happy and intense as I'd ever seen him. I decided to try to take things to the next level.

"Hey, man, you should really feel this pussy. You won't believe it."

Avalon pulled against me -- real resistance, but I was getting off on this, too. The demon was not ready to stop. A switch flipped inside me. I went into full battle mode now, ready to take my game down with any means necessary. My hand that had been wrapped above her chest, gently securing her there for Nolan moved up around her neck, ready to squeezing her into compliance.

It was Nolan who was the obstacle. His discomfort with the situation all over his face even as his tone of voice was collected and calm.

"Naw, man. Don't think she's into this.

She was sobbing in my arms, obviously truly terrified. To the demon inside me, it sounded like music. But to Nolan, it sounded like something else. Not wanting awkwardness with him, I released her. In an instant, she was up, pulling down her shirt, looking frantically for her backpack. Grabbing it, she ran.

I'm sure she expected a chase. Had I been alone, I would have obliged. Alas, it was not Nolan's cup of tea. He was a normal boy. I was a demon. We all are who we are.

After she was gone, several minutes passed before anyone spoke. I really hoped not to get a lecture on morals from a drug dealer. Finally, Nolan laughed.

"You are one crazy fucker."

"I can't help it, dude. I'm a demon."

We were both pretty baked, so I'm sure he'd blamed my improbable declaration on those

factors. He'd laughed again.

"No doubt. But, Jesus, you're paranoid about selling drugs and house arrest, but not worried about that -- did you see the way she ran out of here? Aren't you worried she's going to tell?"

"I would never pick a girl who would tell. It's a part of my gift, discernment."

"Okay, man. Think I'm going to jam. If we smoke anymore, you're going to end up in a straitjacket."

"You may be right.

GEOFFREY CHASE, 2012

Only 20 minutes left in the school day when my cell rang. On my office line with a parent, I'd pulled out my phone to see who I needed to call back. When I saw the name, everything changed.

"I'm sorry. The principal's here. I'll call you back."

Fumbled between phones knowing something must be wrong if Avalon was calling at this hour. She'd been hiding something. Whatever it was must have come to a head.

"Are you okay?"

I hadn't even bothered with the pleasantries. Her breathing alone told me she wasn't.

"I don't know what to do. I can't go home like this."

She was crying.

"Where are you?"

"Bayview Park."

"Are you safe?"

"Yes, I think so."

"On my way, 20 minutes."

The whole drive I'd fumed over Camp. I knew she had been deceiving me – pulling away from me almost as soon as she met him. The little giggles she didn't want to explain. How confident she was she would do well in the class. The signs had been there and I'd let myself be rebuffed and pushed aside while some man had been using this time to gain proximity to her. What had he done?

Arriving at Bayview Park I saw her pink Mini Cooper in the otherwise vacant parking lot. I pulled up next to it and ushered her into my own car. When she got out, her hair was wild – something entwined in it, dark – a leaf? Her eyes puffy and red, not only from crying – drugs? Jesus.

Getting in the car, I reached for to remove the foreign object from her hair.

“Bark?”

She sobbed.

“I'm so sorry, Geoffrey. I just – I met a boy. Not even a boy really” –

“I knew it, Camp. Jesus Christ. Did he give you drugs?”

“Camp? No. Gross. Why are you obsessed with Camp?” she sobbed.

She leaned over and looked into the rearview mirror to inspect her eyes.

“Just let me -- I can't go home like this. My mom and I got in a big fight. I wasn't supposed to see this boy. If she sees me like this” –

“Is anybody at your house right now?”

She looked at the time blinking on my car, 3:50

“My mom's probably running or whatever she says.”

“We'll drive by – in my car. Get whatever you need, leave a note saying you're staying with a friend. Do you have anyone you can use as an alibi?”

“Maybe Mary Nell would, for old time's sake.”

“Call her. Ask her. Tell her what happened with this boy -- a short version. You can tell me everything later. We don't have a lot of time.”

“Okay.”

She made a quick call and told an abbreviated version of a story that made me boil with anger. I wanted to find this college boy and take him apart bone by bone. But I had so

many more tasks to accomplish it turned out. I'd made a decision. Mary Nell agreed to the subterfuge while I drove us to Avalon's house.

I waited outside looking at a house I'd memorized so many nights – belonging to a girl I'd somehow played hide and seek with my whole life. That was over now. Another girl inside this house had stumbled into my life and I was not going to make any mistakes this time. I'd been preparing for this for decades in various spiritual and physical ways. Avalon scurried down the steps with a bag on her shoulder, wiping her bleary eyes.

“I'm ready.”

So was I.