

November 21, 1979 (Early Morning)

It happened such a long time ago . . .

I woke in darkness. Not the smothering gloom of a typical evening in a London oh so familiar to me, its neighborhoods vanishing in a crepuscular combination of soot and fog till they resembled a dirty sheet flung over a dying lamp. This was a total and absolute darkness. I could see nothing, perceive nothing. All I could do was feel.

The space I occupied was short and narrow and close, the slightest movement of my arms bringing them into contact with the wooden sides of the box I lay in. My first instinct was to stretch, but I could not, not completely, for the cramped interior would not allow my body to extend to its full (albeit modest) length. Swallowing the salty panic rising in my throat, I squirmed and struggled till finally I could force my hands over my face and touch, mere inches away, the lid of my prison.

Where was I? How had I gotten here?

I slapped at the top of the crate with my hand, crying out as I did, then was struck silent. For I had expected to hear a far different sound, a hollow echo, such as one would hear when knocking on the closed door to an empty room.

Instead I heard a dull, and quite muffled, *thud*.

The realization of my predicament struck me like a blow, for I was not in a crate. I was in a coffin. A coffin now buried beneath the earth.

I cried out, pounding at the surface just above me:

Thud . . . Thud . . . Thud . . .

I took a deep breath of the frigid air, drawing it into my lungs with great effort. Then, terrified, I began striking and clawing at the wooden lid above me which, thin and brittle, finally began to splinter, and then to crack, under my relentless assault.

But slowly. So very slowly . . .

When, ultimately, the planks above me did break, I pulled at the shards, clawing at them with nails wet and slippery with blood flowing from the splinters now lodged beneath them. But before I could take a moment's joy from the reward of my efforts, a stream of rank earth plopped over my face, covering my nose, my mouth and my hair. Sputtering, I scraped the dirt away as it continued to pour in, threatening now to fill the rapidly shrinking space.

Screaming wordlessly, I redoubled my efforts, scooping the soil away as furiously as any dog digging into the ground.

But when the rain of earth did finally slow, my relief was short-lived. For in the space above me, almost out of arm's reach, my questing fingers found yet another wooden barrier, this one not nearly so fragile as the first.

Broken, I sobbed for a time. Until a fresh clump of dirt struck me in the face yet again.

Then I began clawing at that barrier as well.

At some point the flow of earth slowed to a trickle. With knuckles both bruised and torn, I continued my assault on the ceiling of my prison. Then, just as exhaustion had transformed my arms into lead, and I could feel despair creeping over me like the loss of hope, I heard a noise above. *Crack!*

Summoning the last of my fading strength, I struck at the now-broken board, each blow a singular and focused effort requiring a prolonged recovery before the next could be attempted.

Then, with a joy almost orgasmic in its intensity, I felt the planks above me shatter.

But when they did, something fell on top of me.

The stench was overwhelming. A sheaf of rank hair fell into my mouth. I shoved at the body sprawled atop mine, my hands sinking deep into the soft, rancid flesh. Squirring, I managed to scramble above the corpse, for while I could not see it, I could feel it, the small, soft breasts collapsing, like rotten fruit, in my hands.

I got to my knees and forced my way into the coffin above me, mind now almost gone, ears near deafened by my own screams.

I have no memory of those last few minutes spent clawing my way up, but when something resembling sanity did finally return, I found myself sitting, waist deep, in a graveyard, one of London's many.

If you are a student of history, you know that, during the cholera epidemic, so little space was there to be had in the city that the parishes were forced to pile coffins (along with the bodies they contained) in layers one atop the other, like jackstraws. By the time the epidemic had run its course, some of those cemeteries stood a tall man's height above normal ground level, so full were they of the newly dead.

Half crazed by this point, I looked about and saw the three of them, staring silently at me not six feet away. And while I did not recognize the two men, her I did.

She resembled a statue in Winter as she looked down on me, her porcelain face like marble, the snowfall of her hair tumbling to her waist as I endured the stress of her regard, her alabaster arms crossed beneath her barely discernible breasts, the tip of her finger resting on the point of her chin.

"She is a mistake," said the one on her left.

"Not at all," responded the one on the right, whom I would soon come to know as Jester. "A mistake implies some degree of intention, of misguided foresight. She is a mishap. An accident. A die unintentionally, and quite poorly, cast."

I stared first at the one, and then the other, before returning my attention to the lady, her pale skin and hair so white she seemed almost to glow in the darkness as she whispered in a voice like the hiss of sleet on cobblestones.

"Now, what are we to do with you?"

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You, my imaginary and theoretical reader, may roll your eyes at my penchant for melodramatic narrative as I pen these words, put to paper so long after the events which inspired them, but there is no sophisticated artistry involved. I simply find it easier to express myself within the confines of this journal as though carrying on a one-sided conversation in which you have been made the captive audience, unable to speak or respond to anything I might say or do.

Not, for me at least, an unfamiliar scenario.

I saw the headlights approaching me from behind long before the unexpected *Whoop!* of the siren caused me to jump. Claws and fangs involuntarily extended, I resisted spinning to rend whatever fool had so startled me. Instead I forced both nails and teeth to retract before turning to squint, my eyes shaded against the beams spotlighting me. Not truly necessary, since we Breed can control the aperture of our pupils whenever we wish, but my defensive instincts have always been to simulate vulnerability whenever possible in potentially dangerous situations. A figure, little more than a shadow, exited the vehicle as its red and blue lights flashed, the irritating klaxon now silent.

I had been walking for not quite an hour, according to the Omega on my wrist, casting nervous glances at the sky all the while, and though I had no idea yet where in the continental United States I was, the sky had continued to remain quite dark, suggesting that the coming sunrise might not yet be imminent. My shoeless feet burned from the countless minor scrapes and bruises they had received from the sand and gravel covering the asphalt, and already I felt the diminishing of the energies from my last feeding.

(You should understand that, under normal circumstances, my kind feeds perhaps once or twice a week, but only when few demands are being placed on us. The more resources our bodies demand, the more blood we require.)

"Are you all right, ma'am?" the figure, a man, drawled.

"I have found myself in more pleasant circumstances, to be sure," I replied, forcing a chipper note into my voice as I emphasized the southern accent I had been inculcating for the past half-dozen years. Previous experience had taught me it frequently had a salutary effect on the typical male of the species. "And who might you be, kind sir?"

The man stepped forward. He wore some sort of beige uniform with a star-shaped badge above one pocket, the image completed by a wide-brimmed hat perched atop his head. "My name's Clanghorn, ma'am. Deputy Clanghorn." He took me in, from head to toe. "We got a report about some kind of explosion or some such over this way." Then he looked me in the eye. "Know anything about that?"

My mind whirred. Was there anything incriminating in the now-sunken plane?

You mean other than the dead bodies? Like the one with its throat torn halfway out?

"I'm afraid I don't," I said.

"I see," the deputy mused. "Well, if that's the case, would you mind explaining to me just what you're doing walking down this highway in the middle of the night, soaking wet, and with no shoes on?"

I bobbed a bit, grateful for the foresight I had shown the previous morning in eschewing a bra. "It's not the most pleasant tale, officer," I simpered. "You see, I was in need of a ride, and this gentleman (or so I assumed him to be at the time) offered to shuttle me as far as the nearest town. Back that way," I said, pointing in the direction from which I had come. "After we had traveled no small distance, he told me he was getting sleepy and that he needed a short break. So he exited the highway down to a lake; no doubt you're familiar with it. But when we got there, he perked up considerably and began making what I can only describe as unwelcome advances. Disinclined to accommodate him, I left the vehicle and ultimately was forced to retreat to the water in order to stave him off. When I refused to come back to shore, he drove away, abandoning me to the Fates, after flinging my bag in after me as a fare thee well."

"I see," the deputy said. "And where did you say he picked you up at?"

"I didn't say," I replied, keeping my tone as friendly as I could manage. "And I'm afraid I can't answer your question, as I don't quite know where I am."

"You were hitchhiking?"

"Only after being set upon by three reprobates who robbed me of all my money, as well as my car and my purse, before abandoning me in the middle of nowhere," I said, as if fighting against tears. "I was driving along when nature demanded I stop, and during that time they came upon me. That last pretense of a gentleman found me not long afterwards, sobbing roadside, and offered me a ride, prior to his behaving like a complete cad. Now I am simply trying to find a town with a phone from which I can call my family."

"You mean no one knows where you are?" the deputy asked.

"Not a soul," I sniffled.

He grunted. "Well, Pixie's maybe another fifteen miles west of here, but that won't do you no good."

"And why is that?"

"Phones are down," he said. "Avalanche took them out just this afternoon. Probably be a couple of days before they get 'em working again. Leastways, that's how long it took last time. But you're in luck, Midge's place is just up the road, and her phone is working. At least, it was when I stopped by a few hours ago for a pit stop of my own. She rents rooms, mostly to locals, but I'd be willing to have a word or two with her on your behalf if you'd like. You could contact your people from there, and if she has a room available then mebbe you could stay while you get things sorted out. I'll even give you a ride. Have to be in the rear seat, though. Department policy, you understand."

"Of course," I gushed. "You cannot possibly imagine how relieved I am to be able to place myself in the hands of a trustworthy peace officer."

He gave me an appraising look, one I have experienced many times, before clearing his throat. "Not a problem, ma'am," he replied. "Here, I'll catch that door for you."

I gave the deputy my sunniest smile as I brushed past him and got in. He closed the door firmly, then circled around to his still-open one and got on his radio. "Car number five to dispatch. Donna, you painting your toenails or can you pick up? Over."

The high-pitched voice of a girl who sounded as if she were only weeks from her first menstrual cycle came over the speaker a moment later. "Car number five, I read you. Over."

"Donna, would you do me a favor and give Midge Gallaspi a call, tell her I'm swinging by with a lost lamb and to have the porch light on?"

"I suppose I could trouble myself that much. What's your twenty?"

"I'm about fifteen minutes east of her place on Highway Sixteen."

"Ten-four. I'll let her know."

"Much obliged," he said. "Over and out."

I watched the deputy as he clambered in, maneuvering his broad-shouldered bulk with surprising grace, and with a spitting of gravel and spinning of tires we were quickly underway.

As we drove in silence, I stared out my window while utilizing my peripheral vision to monitor the good deputy. His eyes flicked occasionally from the road to his rear view mirror as he snuck surreptitious glances into the backseat. Feigning unawareness, I crossed my legs, allow my hemline to rise. The beast in my belly was stirring, much to my surprise, a reaction I attributed to having spent so much time of late daywalking despite my current reversion to my normal self. The officer was, it had to be acknowledged, not at all displeasing to the eye, and looked to be quite virile, as opposed to that little girl of a flight attendant whose fragility had placed severe limits on our recreational activities.

This one, however, looked as though he could endure no small amount of rough play and still perform, particularly were I to allow him to make judicious use of those handcuffs hanging from his belt. With their assistance, and a firm anchor from which to secure them, the chains might restrain me for a sufficient time so as to allow the satisfaction of the itch now threatening to make me squirm in place until they would, inevitably, fail. Then, at that point, I could treat myself to dessert, crushing him to my breast until his rib cage gave way with a sound like the crackling of cellophane while listening to him struggle uselessly for breath as I sucked his tongue into my mouth before nipping off the tip and draining him as a child might a fountain soda.

Nice little scene. And hey, it's not like anyone's going to notice the sudden disappearance of a deputy sheriff if he isn't found. Or his murder if he is.

Dammit.

"Not meaning to pry, ma'am," he said, "but whereabouts are you headed?"

Distracted from my imaginings, I refocused on my situation. Where were we? I wondered again while rubbing my raw feet. The midwest? I could not be sure, which meant it would be best were I to divert the conversation so as to minimize questions. I grew up in London, you see, during the early part of the nineteenth century when the city had entered into the first stage of its massive population explosion. During those times it had been a crime to be found on the streets without funds of any kind, and I had no desire to risk the possible complications of appearing to be a vagrant of some sort, the elegance of my sole remaining piece of luggage notwithstanding. Not to mention the thick wads of hidden cash it contained, a contradiction to my earlier tale of having been robbed.

"There has been a death in my family," I said somberly, "and my presence is required."

"Sorry to hear that, Miss," he said. "Mother? Father?"

"Cousin," I replied.

"Ah. Well, you two must have been close, for you to be going to so much trouble," the deputy said.

"My sole surviving relative," I said, more or less truthfully.

"That so? Then I'm doubly sorry. My brother Lincoln is all I got left, so I know how you must feel. How'd your cousin pass, if you don't mind my asking?"

Bound with silver wire with his house torched around him after having been forced to watch the members of his hashna slain before him, one by one, execution-style. "Medical misadventure," I said.

"That so? Can't be too careful with doctors. Reminds me of the story about the surgeon who told the family that the operation had been a success, but that the patient had died. Ever hear that one?"

"Not recently," I admitted, it having been decades since I'd last heard that old chestnut.

"Well, you know what they say, nothing new under the sun. You planning on taking your cousin's doctor to court?"

"I fully intend to see the responsible party, or parties, raked over the coals." Literally, I added in my head.

"Hope you do, if for no other reason than to help keep the rest of 'em honest. Okay now, the turn-off is just to the right up here. I'm telling you ahead of time so's you don't get nervous; Midge's is off the highway a little piece. Like I said, it ain't a hotel, she lets by the week, though some folks who've been with her for a while pay by the month."

I wasn't concerned, though it would hardly have been in character (given my story) to have said so. During my life I have had varying experiences with law enforcement of one kind or another, and one comfort I took in my new life was that I no longer had need to be concerned about being either abused and/or exploited by them.

We drove down a narrow dirt road, its center line a thick running hump of grass, eventually emerging from the trees into a large space where a huge three story house sat.

The windows were dark, but as promised, there was a porch light on, along with lights burning behind the front windows. A bare patch of ground served as a parking lot, its sole occupant a weary pick-up truck. We pulled into an empty space.

"You need any help with that bag of yours, ma'am?" Deputy Clanghorn offered as he opened my door. Clutching it to me, I shook my head and smiled. He shrugged, then walked ahead of me, up the stairs to the door, then knocked. "Midge? You up?" he called.

The door opened, and a small gray head peeked out through the crack. "Well, don't just stand there, the two of you, come on in. Keep it down, though. *Some* folks are sleeping."

We entered the front room, a modest foyer where all of the antique chintz wallpaper from the previous century had went to die. Small porcelain knick-knacks and figurines filled the majority of the free space on the various tabletops and shelving. A heavy rolltop desk sat next to a black cast iron stove. I could feel the heat radiating from it.

"Sorry about the late call, Midge," the deputy said in a low voice, "but it was either this or take the young lady back to the station. Probably would have had to put her up in one of the jail cells, since (as you well know) Pixie don't have so much as a no-tell motel."

"I see," Midge said with a sniff as she gave me a thorough examination. "And who might you be, dear?"

I gave the middle-aged gnome one of my megawatt smiles. "My name is Penelope. I am *so* sorry for putting you out like this, and I *do* appreciate your taking me in on such short notice."

She gave me, and then Deputy Clanghorn, a glance. "Lost lamb, eh?"

"Lady's on her way to bury the last of her family," the officer reassured. "Poor thing's been robbed, and almost assaulted. Had a rough time, to hear her tell it."

"That a fact?" the landlady said.

"I'm afraid so," I confirmed.

"If you'd like, Miss, I could stop by in the morning and take you in to look at some pictures," the deputy said. "Maybe identify those no-accounts who robbed you?"

"I would deeply appreciate that," I replied. "I'm quite exhausted, however, and might need a day or so to recuperate. By the way, when does it get light here?"

"Sunrise is another three hours or so away," Midge said. "You got someplace you have to be?"

"Now don't be so hard on the young lady, Midge. Remember, she's had a bad night," Clanghorn said,

The woman frowned, then shrugged. "Well, since the deputy here is willing to vouch for you, I suppose I can scrounge up a bed, so long as you don't mind basements. No windows down there, so if that's a problem, nothing to be done for it."

"That's *perfectly* fine," I assured the woman. "We redheads are very sensitive to the light anyway. I'm quite the night owl, you see."

"Me too, ever since my Willard died," she said, digging out a set of keys and a flashlight. "Bulb blew on me earlier, and I'm out of spares, so just stay behind me. Stairs are over this way."

I followed the woman after giving the deputy a final smile and a nod. The woman and I made our way down a narrow hallway to a door at the end.

"The steps are small, so be cautious going down," Midge said.

I followed the woman. Maneuvering the narrow staircase while simultaneously manhandling my bag took some effort, but I managed to do so without tripping. Once we reached the bottom Midge fumbled with the keys, searching until she found the right one.

"Bed's already made, so just go on in," she said after stepping to the side. I squeezed past her and looked around as she continued speaking. "There's no switch, just a thread for turning the light on hanging down from the bulb in the middle of the room, Just head straight in, you feel it."

Easing forward (after all, I wasn't supposed to be able to see in such darkness) I found the cord she had spoken of and tugged on it.

The sudden glow revealed a room that was almost bare. The faint light from the weak bulb illuminated four stone walls. A single cot, its metal frame bolted to the floor, occupied the far corner next to what looked like a chamber pot.

Momentarily confused, I turned, just in time to see the heavy door, metal on this side, slam shut a moment before its locks engaged.

"If it makes you feel any better, feel free to scream and carry on as much as you like," I heard Midge say, her whiskey voice barely audible through the door.

"Room's soundproof, so it's not like you'll be disturbing anyone."

As I heard her make her way back up the creaky stairway, I studied my surroundings, the small space in which I had now been confined, and could think of only one thing to say.

"Well, shit."