

# The Untethered

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Part 1:  
Jet Black Eyes



# Chapter 1

“The density times the material derivative is equal to...” Roble Santos mouthed as he read the book slumped across his lap.

A newspaper across the aisle stole his attention and he glanced up.

Two large hands held the paper amid a row of US Airmen. Half the uniformed men and women looked asleep; the other half dazed from the constant droning inside the windowless aircraft.

*What is that?* Roble leaned forward, pushing against his shoulder restraints, peering at the photo of a jet on the newspaper. *Its shape is so...* He frowned. *It's probably just concept art from a movie or something.*

He sat back, dropping his eyes to his coverless textbook, feeling the airplane vibrate his calloused hands. He tried to concentrate on the Navier-Stokes equation, but it was impossible with that jet's image prostituting itself across the aisle.

Closing the book and wedging it between his seat and his neighbor's, he unhooked his restraints and dropped to his knees. At eye level with the paper, he pushed back his hair and studied the image.

The jet's gloss-black fuselage splayed across the page in front of him. Its slender nosecone began a gracious line that followed under a long neck. The line continued back until it met two sensually curved air intakes that stretched into lengthy engine encasements. The jet's tail arched subtly upward then thrust vertically into a soaring fin with horizontal winglets. Its swept-back wings flared thick and muscled at their bases but tapered out into dainty tips. Along its top, a sleek, clear canopy extended almost from nose to tailfin, revealing just a hint of the cockpit inside.

Roble's chest expanded. *That's the sexiest jet I've ever seen.*

The image sank toward the aircraft's floor. He followed it down.

"Can I help you, Airman?" a hard voice said in his ear.

Roble looked up, surprised to be kneeling on the floor and even more so to be staring at the sergeant holding the paper. Several airmen seated nearby laughed.

The sergeant shook his head, frowning.

"May I read your paper when you're finished?" Roble asked.

He dropped it on Roble. "Put your damn restraints back on."

Paper in hand, Roble sat back in his seat, fastened his restraints, and read the headline below the picture: *Supersonic, but at what cost?* His eyes returned to the image.

"That Alexa Patra, she's hot." A young airman sitting next to Roble jabbed his finger into the side of the newspaper, his chapped lips cracking a smile.

Roble ignored the comment, focusing on the photo of the jet.

"Did you catch her wearing that swimsuit in *Sportsman Quarterly's* charity edition?" the airman asked. "Now *that's* how you raise money for a good cause. I even read the article, at least the highlighted parts."

*Why haven't I seen this jet before?* Roble began to read the editorial.

His talkative neighbor slapped his shoulder. "Can you believe she's in charge of saving Nevada's homeless kids? Plus, she's like the commander of her own charity. And get this—they want her to run for governor. Look at her," he said, gawking at the newspaper. "That's the complete package—uh, what's your name?"

"Roble."

"That's the complete package, Ronald. I don't care if she's thirty-five; I'm looking her up when we land."

Roble folded down the top of the paper and gazed at Ms. Patra's picture. *Alexandria Patra Taking Nevada's Public/Private Partnership National* splashed across the page above her. He stared at her smiling lips and frowning eyes. *She was unusual. And what a day that had been. How long ago was that?* He rubbed his chin.

*Almost six years ago...*

State truancy officers had captured him a few days after running away from the Sands family. Taken to Ms. Patra's state office building, Roble sat in a chair leaning against her secretary's

desk, passing the time by watching a truancy officer munch potato chips and sip a soda the size of his head. The building smelled like the last middle school he'd been forced to attend—the scent of fresh vomit covered with janitorial cat litter. Luckily, they'd expelled him.

“She’s ready for you,” the secretary said. The truancy officer gestured at Ms. Patra’s door with his soda. Roble rose, took one final glance at the potato chip shrapnel littering the floor, and entered the office.

Alexa Patra stood behind her desk, poised like an Egyptian queen. She wore a crisp white blouse and long black skirt, a silver wrist cuff her only adornment. Her toughness looked honest, and he liked the thought of trusting an adult for the first time.

Yet the longer he stared, the gentler and more accepting her pose became. At first, he thought her hair appeared straight but he was mistaken—it coiled into supple black curls. Her eyes looked like impenetrable black onyx, but they softened as he approached. Her kind veneer forced him to raise his guard, knowing from experience it must hold an unknown danger. Even so, her appearance intrigued him.

Ms. Patra sat down and motioned for Roble to follow her example.

He obeyed, before bolting back up, frowning at his response to her command.

She watched him without speaking.

Roble paced the room, its single window unable to offset the harsh fluorescent lighting. Awards from politicians, CEOs, and private foundations covered three walls, along with dozens of photos that displayed Ms. Patra standing among groups of smiling children.

Two framed posters hung on the wall opposite the desk. Roble stopped before them.

One pictured a group of people, their arms interlocked at the elbows, staring down into the center of a circle. Their smiling faces appeared convinced and complacent. The word *Unity* was written at the center. The other poster displayed a barren mountain peak with the word *Sacrifice* printed below.

Roble gazed back and forth between the two posters, then at Ms. Patra. *Uh-huh.*

“Hey.” The chapped-lipped airman snapped his fingers, laughing.

Roble looked up from Ms. Patra’s picture in the paper.

“Don’t stare too long or you’ll go blind. Plus, I already called dibs.”

Roble felt the aircraft climbing, the engines vibrating his hands.

“Ever been to Vegas?” the airman grinned.

“Born...and raised,” Roble said, glancing back at Ms. Patra’s grainy picture.

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Alexa Patra, balancing on high heels, took a step down the boarding ramp in line with the prospective passengers. “Hello, Preton,” she said, the phone to her ear.

“Where are you?” Preton Moore asked, his voice exuberant.

“Still in Vegas, at McCarran.”

“Well congratulations, my dear. I’m sorry I was out of town, but you pulled off quite a launch.”

“Thank you, but it’s not my victory.” She switched the phone to her other ear. “It’s the children’s.”

“Simply remarkable. Have you looked online? The president and six governors have already endorsed your partnership.”

Alexa exhaled. “Please don’t try to flatter me. When—” Alexa lowered the phone and held it against her tailored suit as a young girl with red hair whirled by. She turned cartwheels down the ramp, her untied shoelaces whipping like tassels in front of embarking passengers. Alexa glimpsed a smile as she spun away.

A bony-shouldered woman with thick blue eyeliner ran after and caught the young acrobat by the arm. She dragged the girl back up the pathway, offering apologetic looks to everyone she passed. Beneath the captured girl’s freckled scowl shined an unmistakable spark of satisfaction.

Alexa turned away from the girl’s gaze, feeling an unwanted sense of loss which tightened her empty stomach. She waited a moment before peeking up the ramp. The bobbing red hair disappeared into the crowd.

Hearing the distant squawking of Nevada’s lieutenant

governor, Alexa raised the phone to her ear. “Preton, my flight is leaving. I’ll call you from DC.”

Jet fumes and cheery-faced attendants greeted Alexa as she queued into the hissing aluminum tube. Slipping between passengers, she plopped into her seat by the window. She felt relieved and a bit guilty to be tucked away out of the limelight.

A flight attendant reached out, lowered Alexa’s food tray, and set down a newspaper and a plastic flute with champagne. “Congratulations, Ms. Patra,” she said.

Alexa pressed her lips into a smile. *Is this what success feels like?* The numerous congratulations she’d heard today blared like car horns in her mind. *It must be.* She yanked the newspaper from the tray, hiding it in her lap. *I’m doing all the right things.*

Lifting the champagne to her lips, she sank the liquid in one smooth swallow, then closed her eyes, trying to feel some semblance of happiness. The cartwheeling girl’s smiling face spun across her mind, and she cringed.

*“We are sorry for the inconvenience,”* the loudspeaker said, *“but this flight is delayed due to inclement weather at our destination. We hope to have an update within half an hour.”*

Alexa moaned, rubbing her forehead. *I don’t have time for this.* She thought about all the traveling she would be doing. *There has to be a more efficient way to travel.*

Two hours later, she peered out the oval window at the distant vein of a passing canyon.

The newspaper crunched under her elbow, reminding her she hadn’t read the article—her article. She picked it up and studied the smiling image below her name, bemused to see herself looking happy. The thought of others seeing her appear happy gave an odd sense of peace, reaching so deep, she shivered. She pulled the blanket higher over her lap.

*As long as I’m in charge, no child shall lose her dream.*

Her eyes zeroed in on her own quotation sandwiched somewhere within the article, but looked away. She didn’t know why she’d misspoken; she’d never said that phrase before. “No child will be lost from the arms of society,” had been her quick correction to the reporter, but he obviously hadn’t used it.

Of course children *were* lost from her state foster care—becoming runaways, locked up in juvenile detention, or worse. That’s why she cofounded the nationally acclaimed charity

Children for Universal Hope, known as the CUH. It promoted group activities that encouraged children to feel comfortable belonging to something greater than themselves, thereby discouraging dangerous antisocial behavior.

With the guidance of Preton Moore, she'd designed the new public/private partnership between Nevada state foster care and the CUH to address finally and fully all the accepted risk factors causing children to fall through the cracks of both programs. She had announced the partnership's launch to great fanfare this morning in downtown Las Vegas.

Alexa sighed, knowing that even if the public/private partnership became highly successful, some good kids would still be lost without explanation. She hated that reality. At least the children labeled as *high risk* could be explained.

Running a finger around the rim of her champagne flute, she tried to relax, but she knew not every kid could be easily cataloged by the state's accepted risk categories, even though nobody she knew would admit it. She didn't like to admit it herself, but she had the proof. Those painful, unexplained losses sat stuffed inside the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet in her state office.

That drawer haunted her.

She'd heard people retroactively try to diagnose those lost kids with sophisticated-sounding names, but she'd met most of them, and those labels hadn't explained anything. According to the state child-welfare manuals, *that* type of uncharacterized kid shouldn't even exist.

At the rear of that drawer, one dense file, pale blue with red *Delinquency* stamps emblazoned on it in the shape of a launching rocket, troubled her the most. She thought about it often. *How long has it been?* Reading the date on the newspaper, she realized almost six years had passed.

Roble Santos had entered her office wearing a grease-stained jacket plastered with motorcycle and skateboard patches. His straight black hair hung over his ears and forehead, drawing attention to his scarred, ruddy-tanned chin. His body looked thin and wiry, like that of a starving street kid, except his steps held a controlled energy that reminded her of a long-shot racehorse walking to a starting gate.

"Roble," she began with a smile, after he sat down on his second attempt, "it's nice to meet you."

Maintaining eye contact, Roble slid down in his seat, leaning his head against the back of the chair.

“If you would tell me what is going on, I can help.”

Roble watched her without blinking. She stared back.

After a moment, he jerked his thumb at the door. “That hungry dude and another guy, who doesn’t use deodorant, dragged me from my home.”

“You were living in a pirate ship in front of a casino.” She lifted her palms.

“No, I wasn’t.”

“No?”

He sat up. “I was living in the *HMS Dauntless*. The pirate ship sits too close to the tourists and its captain’s quarters are actually a pump house.”

She locked her fingers together. “What about before you ran away? Would you like to tell me what happened?”

Roble shook his head.

Opening his file, Alexa glanced at the first page. “You’ve been through a lot of foster families for a twelve-year-old.”

He shrugged.

“My office had hoped the Sands family would click with you. Donald is a well-respected, faith-based youth counselor and he’s known as a supportive, athletic-type of father. They have a boy, Danny, your age...and even motorcycles, I hear.” She looked at Roble’s jacket. “They’ve hosted many foster children without any issues.” Tapping the file, she asked, “So why did you run away?”

Roble lowered his face, bangs shielding his eyes. “You *really* want to know?”

Alexa’s eyes narrowed. She’d heard coworkers describing Roble as an inexplicably hopeless case ever since he was five. She glanced at the bottom filing cabinet drawer. “Roble, I *really* would like to know.”

“I don’t like what happened to me today.” He brushed the hair from his eyes. “So I might sound mean. Everyone always says I’m mean.” He rubbed his nose. “And this building stinks.”

She caressed the worn cardstock of his file. “Go on. I’m listening.”

“The Sands weren’t the usual family taking me for the state’s money. With that kind, all you gotta do is cost less than they get and they’re happy. I figured out how to give all of *them* a big loss

so they'd kick me out. I'll pay you back someday, if that's what you want."

Alexa opened her mouth to speak, but Roble continued without pause. "The Sands also weren't the kind who talked all nice and stuff, trying to bribe me into doing things. With that kind, all you gotta do is what they say and they're happy. I never did, so *those* all kicked me out."

She leaned forward, surprised at the contrast between his gentle voice and his rebellious words.

"But Donald Sands? He was a real true-believing, hands-on type of guy." Roble touched his scarred chin. "He taught me the same lessons as all the blabbers, only he was better at it. I took it for a while, but it got boring." He dropped his hand to his lap. "He wouldn't kick me out like everyone else—so I left."

*Oh no.* Alexa stared at his scar and stiffened. *This might explain his behavior.* "Roble, are you saying you were abused?" She opened a drawer and pulled out a multi-layered form. Clicking the back of a pen, she looked up.

He said nothing.

"Roble, I would like for you to explain what happened. Or would you prefer to speak to a counselor?"

"You want names?"

She pressed the pen to the form. "You don't need to be afraid; you will be protected."

"Okay. Write down the Bensons, the Everetts, the Cruisers, the Wards, the Marxes, the Lees, the Villafanas—"

Her thumb released the pen's button. "What are you doing?"

"I'm listing all the parents who should stop teaching kids anything. And don't forget the Costens. You can start with those, but I have more."

"You inferred Donald Sands abused you."

"I said Donald was better at teaching the same lessons than all the others." Roble pressed his feet against the top edge of the desk, tilting his chair back.

Alexa shot to her feet, crossing her arms.

The sudden movement startled Roble, sending his chair flipping backward, his arms flailing in the air for balance. His shoulders hit the floor as his feet followed over the top.

Lying on his stomach, he pressed himself off the floor with his palms, lifting his head to stare at Ms. Patra. A black arrowhead

attached to a shoelace around his neck had fallen out from under his shirt.

Alexa's arms fell to her sides. "Are you all right?"

Roble stood, wobbling on his feet. He tucked the arrowhead under his shirt and glanced behind him at the two large posters, then back at her. He seemed both troubled and impressed.

"If you are uninjured, please take a seat, Mr. Santos." She sat and returned the unused form to the drawer.

He lifted the chair back to its feet and sat down.

"You will *not* bring accusations against my families if you can't provide evidence." She closed the drawer with a gentle push. "And you will *not* lean back in my chair again."

His shoulders straightened.

"Now, let's start again, shall we?" She smoothed out the pages of his open file. "I am well aware that not every family and child is a match, but what they teach you is for *your* benefit."

She flipped a few pages into the public school section of Roble's file. He had never been disciplined for drug use, violence, or stealing, but he'd been expelled from every school he'd ever attended for disobedience and refusal to cooperate with other children. No apparent reason accounted for his behavior beyond plain, purposeful insubordination. *And why had Roble made the effort to get perfect grades in some classes while not lifting a finger in others before being expelled?*

Alexa looked up, her brows bent. "Roble, you could excel in school if you wanted to. Why not just follow instructions?"

"What for?"

"It's for your—" she stopped. He was sitting up straight, seemingly obedient. "Look, Roble," she said, hand waving at the pictures on the walls, "don't you at least see the benefit in getting along with other boys your age?"

He looked at the pictures and shrugged. "I do stuff with kids I like. I listen to adults when they make sense. Everyone tells me I'm a problem, but I don't see how."

"Roble..." She paused and flipped back to the summary page of his file. "You've burned through eleven families and six schools. You might not like what I'm going to say, but when everyone else—and I mean *everyone*, without exception—says *you* are the problem, you might want to consider the possibility."

"Why should I care what they think?"

She blinked at the question, feeling a flash of pain somewhere deep inside.

“Ms. Patra,” he said, gripping the armrests, “I want to be let go.”

Alexa stared at him, the tendons in her neck tensing to stop herself from glancing at the bottom filing cabinet drawer. “You are a child. You can’t be let go.”

“That’s what I want.”

She tapped a finger against the desk. “Roble, I’m here to help you.”

He dropped his head and let it hang limp.

“Look, I get it. You’re young and confused—”

“Half right.” He rubbed a motorcycle patch on his arm.

She spread her palms on the desk, trying to remember how she’d been taught to understand as a child, but froze mid-thought, not liking the memory. She flipped distractedly through his file. Leaning over a page, she followed a lengthy description with a finger. He’d been sent to juvenile detention many times for this, but it might be a way to convince him.

“Your host families say you spent a lot of time inventing contraptions, rockets in particular.” Alexa didn’t mention his arrests for using dangerous fuels and explosive materials to construct them. “Don’t you want to go to college someday and learn to build real rockets?”

Roble lifted his head, eyes widening a bit.

“With the proper guidance, you could accomplish great things for mankind, but in order to learn you’ll need to adapt to the right environments. The first step is to follow the rules at home and at school.”

Roble’s arm fell off the side of the chair and dangled.

Sweat formed on the nape of Alexa’s neck. “You can’t legally work, you have no money for rent or food, by law you must go to school, and you need a loving support group. I can think of a thousand things worse than letting others help you.”

“Like what?”

She closed the file and massaged her forehead. *No, I will not lose this one.* She rose to her feet, lifting his file and glanced at all the *Delinquency* stamps. With a flick of her wrist, the file dropped, thumping against the desk.

His arm returned to the armrest.

“I run the CUH.” She shot him a cold glance. “Don’t look at me that way. I’m not suggesting you enter a group program.”

He sat attentive.

“For the last three years, Nancy Tatum, my CUH program director, has hosted a foster son, a physics genius. He reminds me of you in some ways. Nobody thought he could get along with anyone. Well, he just graduated from high school with honors and moved to South America to help homeless children full time.”

She leaned over the desk, resting on her fists. “Now, Nancy is looking to host another gifted child. Beyond encouraging her children to excel in their respective fields of interest, she assigns them life goals and instills in them a sense of purpose by having them serve the community.”

Alexa sat down. “Roble, I think this opportunity could save your life.” In a lowered voice, she added, “I was fortunate to have parents who raised me in a similar way...” She stared out the window, thinking back.

Regaining her focus, she concluded, “Please consider it carefully. Most kids with your track record would never get a chance to be a part of a family like this.”

Roble stared at the blaze of red ink on his file.

“Ms. Patra,” he said, their eyes meeting above the file. “I don’t want to sound mean, but I don’t want anyone to assign me goals or tell me what to do.”

Alexa’s shoulders sank.

Lifting her arms, she said, “All right, Roble, I can place you in a monitored boys’ home or detention. If you were in my shoes, what would you do?”

“I’d quit.”

Her eyes shot to the posters of the mountain and the group standing together in a circle, searching for support. She drew in a breath and exhaled slowly. “Roble, I’m not doing this job for my sake.”

“I know.” His tone somehow sounded both accusatory and grateful.

She wrung her hands, not liking the sensation of being attacked or understanding why he seemed appreciative. “I don’t want this outcome, and you know it.”

Roble stood up, pointing a finger at his file. “You could throw

me out like all the schools, churches, and most of the families did.”

“You need help,” she snapped.

Roble lowered his arms and gazed out the window.

Alexa saw her hands trembling and hid them in her lap. “I’m sorry, Roble. I didn’t mean to raise my voice. It’s just that...I really do care.”

He fell back onto his chair. “If that were true, you would’ve asked me what *I* needed, and would’ve returned what *you’ve* stolen.” His voice rang soft, but clear.

She counted her shallow breaths. “Roble, what...what is it you need?”

He pulled his arrowhead out from his shirt and rubbed it. “I don’t need to hear how scary the world is and how I shouldn’t try anything. I don’t need to know how much suffering there is out there,” he pointed out the window, “or how bad I should feel about it. What *I need*...” he looked up, his grey eyes pleading, “... is to see someone who is still happy after growing up.”

Lowering his head, he added, “I need to see *living*, Ms. Patra, because I actually want to live.”

Alexa tried to breathe. She searched the pictures on the walls, focusing on her own frozen smiles, but she couldn’t feel them.

“You said...” She smoothed out her long sleeves. “Roble, what is it you think I took from you?”

“No matter how many fancy words you say, you stole my freedom. I want it back.”

She nodded unconsciously, feeling strangely guilty. Swiveling in her chair, she stared at the bottom filing cabinet drawer. *What if everyone refused my help like Roble?* Her fingers ran along the coarse fabric of her skirt. *To what end will I have lived?* She turned back to him and stared, forgetting she should speak.

Roble squirmed under her gaze, looking uncomfortable for the first time.

Reaching up, Alexa pulled her hair in front of one shoulder, wrapped it with both hands and stretched it out until straight.

“Ms. Patra,” he said, “you’re different from the other adults. I almost want to like you.”

She released the hair, and it expanded back into curls.

“Not because I think you’re trying to help me,” Roble continued. “Maybe you’re not allowed to admit it, but I think

you understand me. It's in your eyes." His voice lowered. "So please—just let me go."

Without breaking eye contact, Alexa slipped off her wrist cuff and held it in her hand. She watched as the shields before Roble's eyes slid away, making him look vulnerable for the first time. She could now see he was not angry, or even rebellious—but hurting.

An internal storm churned within her, a vortex blurring her thoughts with spinning memories. She tried desperately not to look too closely, not to remember, fearing that to linger would put her life's sacrifice at risk.

She closed her eyes to avoid the images, but instead of relief, she envisioned a young girl springing from her own chair and leaping over the desk with energetic gaiety, one leg kicked out straight, the other bent beneath her body. The girl landed on her toes and grabbed Roble by the arm, yanking him to his feet. With his hand in hers, she ran from the office, her hair streaming behind, whipping against Roble's chest. Alexa heard the girl laughing as they ran along a sandy lagoon toward a sailing ship anchored in a harbor.

The sound of her own laughter snapped Alexa from the vision. She glanced away from Roble's stare and slipped her wrist cuff back on. She stood and focused on the posters hanging above Roble's head—*Unity and Sacrifice*. A sense of uneasy relief washed over her.

Then she caught Roble's gentle gaze and trembled on her feet, feeling a wave of regret, but knowing somehow it didn't involve him. Her face flushed. Then, as if a circuit cut off in her mind, her chin dropped, followed by her eyes, and her hand pointed at the door. "This meeting is over."

Roble rose slowly.

"The truancy officer will take you to the boys' home," she said, unable to look him in the eyes.

As he walked through the doorway, she glanced at him, and wondered why *she* was the one who felt betrayed.

A few days later, with the file still on her desk, she learned Roble had run away again and hadn't been recovered. Swiftly and painfully, she had buried it in the bottom file drawer.

A flight attendant placed another champagne flute on the tray table, waking Alexa from her memory. She turned and peered

out the lofty porthole at the fields rolling away beneath her along the Missouri River, wondering what it might have been like to grow up in a different place or in a different time.

She picked up the champagne, leaned back, and poured it between her lips. The newspaper slid off her lap to the floor. Her smiling picture landed face down.

## Chapter 2

A low rumble stirred the air, vibrating the gravel on top of Lou's Gas & Lube. Tattered fronds on a nearby palm tree rustled. The rumble increased into a driving whine like a field of windmills, enveloping the gas station and rippling its flat gravel roof into a blurry brown sea.

Several customers filling their cars looked up.

A shadow preceded a military transport with massive wings, its four engines hauling a long, green fuselage. Its tailfin looked like it would clip Lou's roof as it descended toward the western runway of Nellis Air Force Base.

Directly below the roof of Lou's Gas & Lube sat an empty attic—Roble's former home. Starting at age fifteen, he had lived there alone for three years, working in Lou's garage in exchange for rent and the store's expired food.

Its roof used to serve as a bed when the attic grew too hot, and as an observatory—not for stars, but for jets. Caressing the gravel at his sides, Roble had studied every detail of each passing aircraft. And a few times he stood tall, reaching up, grasping for their landing gear, wishing to be taken away.

Sketches plastered his attic's unpainted walls. An open laptop always sat upon art pads piled atop plastic bins. Model aircraft and rockets hung from strings stapled to the ceiling. Aviation magazines and books lay scattered across the uneven floorboards while paper and pencils buried his sleeping bag.

On those curling papers and dim computer screens, Roble drew every aircraft he'd ever seen, but never as they actually were—only as he thought they should've been.

The military transport dropped near the runway, three hundred meters from the abandoned attic.

Inside the aircraft, Roble's eyes narrowed when he felt the tires bark against the tarmac. The heads of all the airmen nodded from the jolt. He imagined puffs of smoke coming off the

landing gear—a sight at Nellis he'd only seen from the other side of the fence.

Gazing across the faces around him, he noted their indifference to this particular landing, this milestone. *He* had finally flown over Lou's.

With his nosy, chapped-lipped neighbor distracted by listening to music with ear buds, Roble lifted the newspaper and finally read the editorial about the mystery jet.

*This week, Libby Industries of Las Vegas unveiled their latest private jet, the Libby III, nicknamed the Succubus. Ms. Elizabeth (Libby) Dodge claims it will reach Mach 2, twice the speed of sound, which is a daring increase over the Libby II, Wyvern. It incorporates thrust-vectoring maneuverability and advanced avionics rivaling many fighter jets, but as it only carries four passengers and a list price of \$60 million (the equivalent of a hundred-seat passenger jet), this Succubus' desire to draw blood seems more than just fantasy.*

*In a bulletin issued yesterday, the FAA reiterated that supersonic speed in private aircraft is not allowed over the continental US, and over international waters only by special permit.*

*Frederick Compros, the CEO of Defense Contractors United (DCU), explained: "It's dangerous to allow private citizens to own such a fast plane. The risk our supersonic military jets take is for the good of all, not just the indulgence of a privileged few. And while DCU must make some profits, we prioritize our values by giving back to nonprofit organizations. [Ms. Dodge] happily slings all her profits at developing toys for the rich when she's not too busy blasting her new luxury home into the side of an environmentally sensitive cliff. If it were up to me, I'd outlaw her jets."*

*When asked why she chose to expend resources on such an exclusive, highly engineered piece of eye candy, Ms. Dodge said, "Because I could."*

*It can be assumed that posters of the aptly named Succubus will be pinned to walls in teen boys' bedrooms, like pictures of all impractical supercars and supermodels, but in this day and age, perhaps society should prioritize its resources to accomplish the greatest good for the greatest many. The Succubus may be fast, but who is going to be left with the cost?*

*That jet is real!* Roble wanted to yell and run down the aisle

high-fiving everyone. He looked around, but they all seemed oblivious to his discovery. He caressed the pictured jet. *A woman named Libby Dodge actually built that.*

Opening his backpack, he pulled out a pencil and sketchpad. A line flared across the page. His hand danced, leaving controlled dots, dashes, and arcs on the sheet, forming a tightly interconnected pattern. Dabbing the graphite with his thumb, he held the paper out in front of him. His eyes widened when he glanced back to the newspaper photo. His drawing possessed the fewest artistic modifications to a jet he had ever made.

He pulled a crumpled paper from his pants pocket, smoothed it on his knee, and made a single mark on it. Slipping it back into his pocket, he inadvertently knocked the newspaper to the floor with his elbow. The picture of Alexa Patra landed face up.

When the transport stopped, Roble pulled on a jacket riddled with jet and rocket patches and stuffed his belongings into a backpack. Against the line of starched blue uniforms and buzzed scalps, Roble's short hair and unruly jacket stuck out; he hardly noticed.

Reaching the rear exit ramp, he gazed beyond the runway and through the distant barbed wire fence at the white rectangle of Lou's Gas & Lube. The exiting servicemen pushed him forward, complaining at the delay.

He descended the ramp, feeling the crumpled paper inside his pocket. Of all the hundreds of drawings from his former attic, this was one of only *two* he'd kept. The others he'd memorized and tossed in a dumpster when he entered the Air Force. But *this* one in his pocket was different because it wasn't finished. It was only an idea; no, an *idea* of an idea—a puzzle needing to be unraveled. He knew he would unravel it someday.

Eagerly sucking in jet fumes, Roble jogged down the ramp until the tarmac seared against his boots. He walked toward a row of khaki-colored buildings, in step with the mass of eager young men and women, many of them graduating mechanics who would soon disperse around the world.

A fighter jet roared by overhead, its circular exhaust palpitating bright amber flames. Roble forced his lips not to smile, but his eyes sparkled in defiance.

He veered away from the others and skirted the terminal

building alone. Squeezing through a loose gate in a chain-link fence, he entered a parking garage full of military vehicles.

Tucked in a corner near a stack of large tires, a dusty tarp lay over a ridged object. Roble peeled back the canvas, revealing a café racer motorcycle he'd built from scratch. From its thin seat, to its aerodynamic tank, to its low handlebars, the motorcycle sat flush to the ground as if begging to slice the road like a razor blade.

Roble ripped off his jacket and airman's shirt, leaving his obsidian necklace exposed on a fitted grey tee. He tossed the clothes under the bike's seat and jumped on, but before he could turn the ignition, his phone buzzed with a message: *Are you back yet? Meet at RR at noon. Danny.*

He stared at the message. *Danny Sands.*

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Danny Sands sat on a German-built motorcycle, a backpack fastened over his shoulders. His football player body pressed into the seat, his athletic sneakers planted on the curb of the Road Runner Motorcycle Shop.

Peering out from his helmet visor, he gazed along a line of dried weeds above a gutter littered with syringes, dirty gauze, and crushed glass bong.

Tilting his head, he envisioned drawing this place as a backdrop in a comic strip. *The contrast between the shade and the sun's direct angle really brings this disgusting stuff to life.* He looked away when he noticed huddled bodies sitting in cinderblock shadows on either side of the shop.

He'd never liked this place, but Roble often hung out here, bartering work with tattooed mechanics for spare parts. Danny didn't want to see him today—but he *needed* to. He'd needed to see him several weeks ago, almost as much as he needed to breathe.

Exhaling, he relaxed, knowing Roble would always meet him here.

Roble's café-racer motorcycle rumbled to a stop next to him.

Removing his helmet, Danny smoothed out his blond hair. His droopy eyes fell on Roble's face, which was reminiscent of a Native American warrior in a western movie or a hard rock drummer. "Already tossed the Army duds?"

“Hey, Danny.”

“You never mentioned you were joining grunts when we camped last fall. Afraid to admit you were joining something respectable?”

“That was a good trip.”

“Good? You hardly said a word.” Danny reached out and patted Roble’s back. “When did you enroll, a few weeks ago?”

“Four months ago.”

Danny stared. “Are you serious? Why not join a social networking site or something so people can track you? You’re like a freaking ghost.”

“And it’s the Air Force.”

“The... Oh, right, that’s what I meant, the Air Force—your airplane sketches.” Danny squinted at Roble’s short but longer-than-expected hair. “You lasted longer than I would have guessed.”

“How’d you know I was back?”

Danny frowned. “I worry about all my friends. I don’t just ignore people. The Army’s website—I mean the *Air Force’s* website—said you were shipping back to Vegas today.”

Roble raised an eyebrow.

Danny covered his mouth to hide his annoyance. “Don’t take everything so literal. I got some phone numbers from their website and made a few calls to Nellis and Lackland. And considering what I learned, I thought maybe you’d need someone to talk to.”

Leaning back in his seat, Danny bit his dry lips waiting for Roble to spill the details of his discharge. *If Roble would just admit what it felt like to fail, just once, to be shot off his dreamy perch—it would make it much easier to say what I need to say.*

After an awkward silence, Roble asked, “So, what’s going on, Danny?”

“What do you mean?” Danny wiped the sweat from his brow. “Things are going well. Really well.” He gulped and coughed to clear his throat. “I guess you wouldn’t know, but the California Military Institute accepted me.”

“Congratulations.”

Danny straightened up, nodding his head. “They train the best. It’s the fast track to a Marine officer commission. I’m taking on real responsibilities.”

“Okay, Danny.”

Danny glanced down, frowning. *Why can't he at least act impressed?* He tapped the gas tank, feeling sick to his stomach. “You think I'm doing it because of my father, don't you?” He swallowed and looked back at Roble.

“I never said that.” Roble rubbed his nose. “It's just I remember you wanting to go to art school is all.”

“Art school?” Danny scoffed. “Being a Marine officer is more important than doodling. Everyone knows that. A Marine officer impacts real lives by serving and leading others,” he said, his gut tightening.

“Is Jenny going with you?”

*Oh God, Roble already knows.* Danny's shoulders slumped as he thought of Jenny, her disheveled blonde hair and unrestrained boyish laugh, the way she'd always been since that first year in middle school.

He'd watched her in their introduction to art class, thinking he would never dare speak to her. Then Roble arrived at his parents' home as a foster child. He and Roble made so many childish bets against each other. Danny lost a big one over something he couldn't even remember now, for more money than he could've earned in a year, and Roble settled for forcing him to ask Jenny on a date to the Princess Fun Zone.

He would've killed Roble if he could've gotten away with it to avoid asking her out, especially to a place as unbearably uncool as that. But he'd been almost inseparable from Jenny ever since.

Roble turned off his engine.

“Did you call her?” Danny winced. “Is that how you know?”

“Know what?”

Danny's face reddened, always fearing Roble might try to steal her away. *And why wouldn't he try? Girls love bad boys.* But Jenny never left him, not even for the most popular guys in high school. She could have been popular, but instead of going out for cheerleading like all his football teammates' girlfriends, she worked at a casino food court at night and modeled for catalogs on weekends. She used the money to buy necessities for her little sister and alcoholic mother, keeping the rest hidden in a hole in the drywall behind a concert poster. “So when did you last talk to her?”

“Not since I saw you both on Fremont Street over a year ago. What’s going on?”

Danny moaned as if slugged in the gut.

Roble lifted his palms.

“I was *accepted* into the CMI.” Danny’s fist pressed against his leg. “My parents announced it to everyone. I’d never seen my dad so proud of me before. Do you have any idea how that felt?”

“I haven’t a clue,” Roble said, his voice low and cautious.

Danny gripped his handlebars, rubbing them. “I’ve been planning to go ever since...well...I’ve always known I had to go. Everyone expects it. My *dad*...” his voice trailed off.

Roble looked down.

Sucking in a breath, Danny said, “But Jenny is pregnant.” His words dropped to the ground like lead bricks.

Roble glanced up, eyes wide.

Danny turned away, shoulders heaving from labored breaths. His parents had never approved of Jenny because of her divorced parents, wrong religion, wrong neighborhood, immodest clothing—the list seemed endless. They forced him to break up with her many times, but the breakups never lasted. His mother often repeated, with great concern, “I just have a bad feeling about her, Danny.”

His father threatened to kick him out of the house if he didn’t break up with Jenny last year. Danny tried his best to avoid her, tried like hell, but it was their senior year and it had been impossible. He snuck out of the house at night to see her and met her at school without his parents’ knowledge.

Danny and Jenny celebrated their graduation with a bottle of her mother’s gin. He’d never physically gone all the way with Jenny before that night because he knew his father would literally kill him if he ever found out, and more than that, he couldn’t risk Jenny getting pregnant because the CMI wouldn’t admit anyone legally supporting a child and his father wouldn’t pay the tuition to anywhere besides his alma mater.

Jenny asked Danny about wearing protection that night, but in his intoxicated state and feeling newly liberated from school, he didn’t want to care what his father or everyone else expected of him. He had to be with Jenny without any restrictions. And she hadn’t insisted otherwise.

They lay on a blanket on a moonlit lawn in a closed public

park. Jenny's wispy hair caressed her smiling lips as she nestled against his shoulder. He told her "I love you" for the first time and meant it. Their heated act felt like the best moment of his life.

The next morning Danny cried, teeth gritted together, consumed with guilt, remembering his parents' wishes and that he'd put the CMI at risk. He felt resentment toward Jenny for not stopping him and woke her, pleading she do whatever necessary not to be pregnant. He couldn't believe the betrayal when she revealed her pregnancy a few weeks ago.

"I'm happy for both of you," Roble said, his voice lowered.

Danny picked at the rubber grips, face contorted. "My parents don't know about it. Once everyone finds out, the CMI is gone. Everything I've worked for—gone. My life is ruined, Roble." He slumped over the handlebars, damp hair falling in a curtain of resignation.

Looking to the sky, Roble started his engine and revved it. It crackled, explosively alive.

Danny peeked through his hair as if the motorcycle's vibrations could wash away everyone else in the world.

Roble gripped the low handlebars and turned to Danny. "I'm riding to the Calico Basin." He pressed his body down and his eyes into slits. The racer ripped away as though catapulted from an aircraft carrier.

Danny blinked, donned his helmet, kicked his bike into gear, and tore after him.

West of the city, on the turnoff to the Calico Basin, a group of protestors with placards stood partially blocking the road. Danny watched as Roble stayed centered in his lane, head low, on track to barely miss the signs.

Seeing the approaching rider's apparent indifference to their cause, the demonstrators stuck their signboards in Roble's path. Danny swung into the oncoming lane to avoid the conflict. Roble lifted his boot and kicked two of the placards out of his way. His front wheel mowed down a third sign as he cut through.

Danny slowed down and read the flattened posters as he passed. *SAVE THE CLIFFS! RETURN THE LAND TO THE NATIVES! STOP LIBBY DODGE!* Voices shrieked at him. He accelerated.

Near the base of a plateau on the western edge of the Calico Basin, along a rocky road, they pulled their motorcycles to a juddering stop.

“What the hell, Roble? You could have swerved around them,” Danny said, watching Roble dismount and head off through crusty sand spiked with Joshua trees.

Danny ran after him. “Didn’t you read those signs you blew through?”

“I can’t read things stuffed in my face,” Roble said as he continued through the desert.

“Some of them are fighting to give this land back to the Native Americans.” Danny lifted his hands. “You’re half Indian, right?”

“What’s your point?”

*Roble hasn’t changed a bit.* Danny shook his head, glad to have something to think about besides his father.

It felt like old times as they continued toward the plateau without speaking. After close to a mile they wound through a cluster of massive red boulders, some split down their center as though sliced by a giant sword. They scrambled up an incline, seeking traction along exposed sandstone. Above a series of jagged ledges, they reached the summit.

The hazy, crisscrossing veins of Vegas spread out in the distance. A line of casinos like a concave spinal column marked the valley’s center.

Roble gazed north at a tall crane about half a mile away placing a red-hued window in front of a cavity in the cliff face. He pointed it out to Danny.

“No kidding,” Danny said. “That’s who’s upsetting everyone.”

Roble stared at the glass sparkling against the rock.

Danny frowned and opened his backpack, extracting beer cans, handing one to Roble. “I wish life were like this.” He cracked one open.

“Like what?”

“*This*. Open. Free. You know—wide open.” He gestured out with his can.

“Isn’t it?”

Danny took a swig and shook his head.

Roble gazed at the distant slashes of the Nellis runways across the valley and sat down on the cliff’s gritty edge.

Emptying his can, Danny sat next to him. “By the way, how did you get into the Air Force? You never even went to high school.”

“That’s what the recruiter said when I listed Glenn Curtiss, William Boeing, Howard Hughes, and a couple others on the application as my educators.”

Roble pressed the cool can to his forehead. “So I had to waste a day passing both the GED and the Air Force entrance exam.”

Danny picked up another beer. “You’re just lucky your juvie stints didn’t go on your permanent record.”

“Am I?” Roble asked, watching a plume of ice crystals expanding behind an airliner.

“What do you mean—‘Am I?’ You worked for a drug lord. You’re lucky to have escaped with your life.”

“I didn’t escape. And Stock’s not a criminal, not if that word has any meaning.” Roble looked at Danny. “Let’s just leave it at that.”

“What are you talking about? Just because Stock’s gotten away with bribing every politician in town doesn’t change the fact he’s the greediest criminal in Las Vegas.”

Roble handed back the unopened beer and rose to leave.

“Whoa. Hey,” Danny said. “Everyone says it, not just my dad.”

Roble began walking away.

“I take it back, all right? Don’t leave.”

Roble stopped.

“I’m sorry. It’s all rumors anyway, right?” Danny held out the beer.

Roble turned and studied him for a moment. Danny lifted the beer higher. Taking the can, Roble sat down.

Danny touched Roble’s shoulder with his beer. “Listen, I meant to say earlier, it’s too bad what happened to you.”

“What?”

“You know...” Danny gestured at Roble’s non-military length hair.

Roble furrowed his brows.

“All right, I’ll *say* it then. When I called Lackland Air Force Base, a guy mentioned you hadn’t completed your mechanic’s training. There, now it’s out there. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, that.” Roble pushed back his hair. “Yeah, Lackland got

rid of me early. My instructor, Sergeant Peterson, said I broke just about every maintenance procedure. I guess it's possible, since I made up my own after learning everything they could teach me. And I don't think he liked me making my own parts and modifying the aircraft."

"Jesus. Well, it serves you right. There are some rules that just need to be followed."

"So I've been told."

"It sucks growing up, right? Now look at us. We're both screwed." Danny laughed, too loudly, and for too long.

Roble looked away.

Danny tossed up a hand. "Now what? Moving back to that attic?"

"I wasn't kicked out of the Air Force."

Danny dropped his beer. It rolled, spraying foamy blotches along the rock until it fell off the edge.

Roble set down his own beer and lowered himself over the ledge. Out of view, he said, "Last week, Peterson took me into his office, smacking shit off his desk with my rolled-up test scores." The can flew back onto the rock next to Danny. "I'd aced all their final exams halfway through training." His head popped back up over the rim. "I guess that took away Peterson's easy way to get rid of me. He cursed about the pain-in-the-ass procedures required for my involuntary discharge. He actually ordered me to quit to save him the trouble." He pulled himself back up onto the summit.

"And?" Danny prompted, his eyes wide.

"I told him you shouldn't expect others to give you what you want."

Danny's jaw dropped. "What'd he do?"

Roble tossed his unopened beer in the air, spinning it. "Maybe he actually liked my work, or just hated paperwork." He caught it. "Who knows, but he gave me my certificate early and transferred me as far away as possible."

"No way! Nobody else could get away with that shit." Danny turned and rummaged through his pack. Finding another beer, he popped it open, releasing fizz over his hand. He chugged it. "Why am I never lucky?" He leaned back on his elbows.

"Lucky like your father?"

Danny sat up, back stiff. "My dad never failed at anything."

He lined up the empty cans along the rock. “Not as a Marine, not as a counselor, not with his reputation, not with disciplining his other foster kids—nothing.” He lifted his legs and smashed the cans with his shoes. “But he failed to tame you, and he took that out on my hide. That was the only year he ever laid a hand on me.”

“He shouldn’t have.” Roble winced. “But at least we learned something from it.”

“From having the livin’ hell beat out of us?”

“It left no illusions about what he was after. When he stops swinging fists and starts talking about love and sacrificing for others, that’s when you should pucker up for the real punch, because you can’t avoid your own fist if you’ve been convinced you deserve it.”

“Huh?”

“When the message is demanding you give up the only things you care about, what’s more offensive? A punch to the face or the kindest sounding words in the dictionary?”

Danny lay back onto the rock, staring at the sky. “I think I prefer more kind words and less hitting.”

Roble rose to his feet. “Maybe that’s why you feel unlucky.”

Danny watched, thinking Roble might leap off the edge and soar away like a fighter jet. Roble always knew what he wanted. He wondered why *he’d* never really known.

He squinted, blurring his vision, and imagined Roble’s outline transforming into himself. He liked visualizing standing like that, so bold, not caring about anyone—as cold as a killer. He envisioned himself kicking high into the air like a perfectly drawn cartoon ninja. *In another life I would have become an anime artist, but Father hated “foreign art,” as he called it.*

“Why can’t you at least draw something respectable, like Robin Hood?” his father, Donald, asked once before adding that, “All cartoons are childish.” Donald used a Robin Hood logo for his youth counseling business. But Danny never drew anything his father mentioned, keeping his art as his only uncompromised activity.

His mother threw away his drawings, anime videos, and manga books, saying, “You have to grow up and get serious about life.” His father told him to focus on playing football because it

taught teamwork and would allow him to represent the whole community, not just himself.

Danny had represented Green Valley High as a wide receiver. He practiced harder than anyone on the team, his father driving him on. But whenever Danny ran for the long catches in the big games, he never saw the football, only his dad's face—the face Danny wanted to see beaming with pride at his success. When he caught the ball, he never felt a sliver of joy, only relief. And when he dropped it, he never felt a twinge of disappointment, only guilt.

Roble cracked open his first beer, tipping it toward the sky before sipping off the foam.

Danny rubbed his face, sat up, and peered over the edge. *One yard out, and it drops the distance of a football field. Touchdown.* He exhaled. "Sometimes, I wish I'd run away with you."

Roble set down his beer.

Danny lobbed a rock off the edge and watched it shatter below. "Remember that day my dad stood on the roof fixing shingles and you launched your rocket next to the house?" He coughed and wiped his eye. "He screamed like a girl in full view of Mr. Zindal. I'd never, *ever* seen my dad embarrassed before. I honestly thought you were a dead man."

"He should've just taken it out on me."

"I'm glad you did it—all of it. I'm pretty sure that was the best year of my life." Danny's shoulders relaxed as though a weight momentarily lifted.

Roble pulled his knees to his chest. "I'm flying out to Okinawa, Japan, next week."

Danny's shoulders tightened. "Transferred out of the country?"

"I'm going to work on fighter jets." He rested a hand on his pants pocket. "I might not be back for a while."

Danny looked away, the lump in his throat pinching off air. He didn't know it would hurt so much to hear that. After a moment, he said, "I'm glad you weren't scared of my father. You were the only one."

"I'm pretty sure there were *two* 'little shits' as your mother called us."

Danny nodded, almost smiling, then frowned. "But my dad

was wrong about one thing—I got myself into more trouble without you.”

“You’ll figure it out.”

Danny shook his head. “It’s not just up to me.”

Roble exhaled and pushed against the stone to rise. “I need to go find a place to stay until I ship out.”

“Roble...” Danny looked over the edge, heart thumping in his ears, remembering he’d needed to see Roble weeks ago when he found out about Jenny. “I don’t know how to make it all work—how to reconcile what everyone wants of me. Sometimes,” he sighed, releasing a heavy breath that hung like smoke, “sometimes I can’t see a way forward, can’t see how to meet everyone’s expectations of me. And I wonder if...” he stared at the ground far below, “...if there is a painless way out.”

Danny held still, focusing on the boulders below, boulders that had fallen off this cliff and cracked. *Pebbles, a meaningless pile of pebbles.*

Glancing at Roble’s boots, he thought how ironic it was that Roble brought him to this fatal ledge. He didn’t know what he wanted Roble to do—beg him to stop so he could face his father, or walk away and let him jump. Somehow both choices seemed as indistinguishable as those pebbles.

Roble lowered himself to the rock and gripped the arrowhead hanging from his neck. Danny slumped forward. A warm breeze ran across their bodies, through the backs of their hair.

“You can end your world any time you choose,” Roble said. “Nobody can stop you.”

Danny sat up and opened his mouth to protest, then closed it and looked off the cliff again. He slid back a bit.

“It’s a choice.”

Danny blinked, unconvinced.

“I don’t pretend to know how the world looks from your eyes,” Roble said. “But whatever it is that’s inside you, whatever was inside you back then...” he released the arrowhead, “...it belongs only to you.”

Danny listened, hoping Roble would continue.

“If *you* decide your world is worth living in,” Roble said in a voice as resolute as his grey eyes, “don’t let it go.”

Danny’s palm gripped into a fist.

They faced the distant city as it dissolved beneath the

deepening mountain shadow. When the sun eclipsed the jagged bands behind them, Las Vegas ignited into a golden sea of fire.

## Chapter 3

Libby Dodge gazed down on a parched, honeycombed desert stretching between desolate mountain ranges. Brushing the control stick with her palm, she rolled the gloss-black *Succubus* wings vertical to the horizon. She pushed it further and the aircraft inverted. Her neck-length, russet hair hung toward the glass canopy.

Closing her eyes, she relaxed and released the stick. The *Succubus* fell in an uncontrolled arc, spiraling toward a barren plateau. Her hair swayed with the movement.

“*Auto recovery engaged,*” a mechanical voice said from a cockpit speaker. The jet rotated upright, lifting into the sky, pressing Libby against her seat.

She gripped the stick, thrust it forward, and held it there.

“*Auto recovery disengaged,*” the speaker said. The *Succubus* nosedived toward the ground.

Libby nudged open the throttles, accelerating the jet’s speed, its engine exhausts pulsing bloodred.

“*Danger! Altitude warning! Control override. Auto recovery engaged,*” the speaker said.

Even as Libby pressed against the stick, the jet’s nose pulled up. The throttle controls retracted against her hand, slowing the *Succubus*’ speed. It entered a wide circular pattern.

“*Auto distress signal will initiate in three seconds unless disengaged. Three...two...*”

Libby disengaged the signal, placed an elbow against the canopy and rested her chin on her fist. *Nice work, Sigg.*

“*Ms. Dodge?*” a woman said from the cockpit speaker. “*Your 2:30 appointment is here.*”

“Hey Amanda. Who is it?”

“*The Commissioner.*”

“The what?”

“*Mr. Wright.*”

“Oh, him. Reschedule.”

“*This is the third reschedule. You told me not to let you push him off again.*”

“I did? What time is it?”

“2:28.”

“On my way.”

Libby slammed the control stick to the right. Her left foot lifted while her right foot hammered down. The jet spun on its belly, flipping directions. She opened the throttles wide. The air behind the *Succubus* combusted into flame, launching the sleek projectile across the sky.

By the time it ripped past Mach 2, the Las Vegas skyline broke into view. She cut the throttles, slowing below the sound barrier.

Gliding over a sea of tract homes, she opened a radio channel. “Hey Mackie, this is *Succubus-zero-zero*...oh never mind, it’s me, Libby. I’m going to land on runway two from the north. Is that a problem?”

“*Affirmative, that is a problem, Ms. Dodge. We have a Cessna one minute from final approach.*”

The *Succubus* roared over Libby Industries’ expansive single-level structure adjacent to the North Las Vegas municipal airport. “I’ll be in the hangar before the Cessna touches down. Libby out.”

“*That’s another violation. I’ll have to report it this time, Ms. Dodge. Do you copy?*”

Zooming past the airport tower, the *Succubus* lined up with runway two, touched down, and sprinted along the tarmac.

The canopy opened as the jet rolled into the private hangar. A woman in beige overalls directed Libby with batons into an open slot. When the wheels stopped, Libby climbed from the cockpit and dropped to the ground. She sprinted to the bridge leading to her manufacturing building.

“Where is he?” Libby ran past Amanda at her desk.

“He’s...” Amanda pointed at a chair in the reception area.

Libby stopped and turned.

Chris Wright jumped from his seat and took Libby’s hand into his sweaty palms. “I’m so glad we could meet today, Ms. Dodge.” His jowls drooped below his smile. “I think you’ll like what we at the Federal Aviation Administration have for you.”

Libby slipped her hand free, wiped it on her flight shirt,

and led him into her office. “All right, Commissioner. What’s happenin’?” She motioned for him to sit and sat at her desk.

“As you know,” Mr. Wright licked his lips, “there are some who disagreed with the certification of the *Succu...*the Libby III, but I was always in favor of approval, which is why it was certified.” He bobbed his head. “Mach speed is a marvelous feat for a private jet, from a purely scientific point of view of course. However, there are many other important things to consider.” He bobbed his head again, eyes searching for agreement.

Libby scratched her forehead.

Mr. Wright rubbed his arms. “Selling your jets to Asian billionaires is one thing, but the *Succu...*the Libby III is... How many have you sold now? Five?”

“Eight. Four in the US.”

“Well you only sold five Libby II *Wyverns* and the Libby III just launched. There could be dozens in the sky soon. You know the rules about Mach speed over land. Most on the commission never thought it would actually sell when they voted for approval. But now, seeing the evidence, I fear they might be tempted to reconsider.”

Libby drummed her fingers against the desk. “What evidence?”

“With so many Libby IIIs in the air, how do you expect us to monitor and cite them for speeding?”

Libby laughed hard, wiping a tear from an eye. “Good one.”

Mr. Wright frowned. “Let’s keep this civil, shall we?”

“Oh, you were serious.”

“Look, Ms. Dodge, one must adapt to the concerns of safety and order. Aerospace manufacturing can be a very difficult business for those who don’t cooperate, especially for small nontraditional outfits. Lord knows many have failed.”

“If you’re proposing to stop regulating me so I don’t become another casualty, I accept.” Libby stood. “I’m glad you stopped by. If you have a moment, come with me. I want to show you something really astounding.”

Mr. Wright held up a palm. “You miss my point, Ms. Dodge. But you are right, *I am* on your side, and there are practical solutions to every problem. Here’s where the good news comes in.”

He leaned forward, bristling eyebrows leading the way.

“Frederick Compros has been looking to expand into the small civilian jet market for a while now. Defense Contractors United, as you know, is well organized to follow necessary rules and regulations. Model corporate citizens, DCU.” He smiled, nodding his head. “Mr. Compros has ‘unofficially,’ just as a friendly courtesy, offered to buy Libby Industries.”

Whipping a paper from a shirt pocket, he slid it across the desk. “It’s a *very* generous offer.”

Libby stared at Mr. Wright’s bobbing head.

He dabbed his forehead with his tie. After a moment, he stood up. “Take your time. Of course this is a big decision, but one which I think is best for everyone.” He turned and walked to the door.

Libby crumpled the unread paper and flicked it. It rolled after Mr. Wright’s feet as he slipped from the office.

Shrugging, Libby pulled a report from a desk basket and studied it. Reaching the third bullet point, she dashed from the office.

“Ms. Dodge, your next appointment...” Amanda said as Libby flew by.

At the end of a hallway, Libby jogged around Mr. Wright and entered a wide doorway.

Shrieks of metal bending, lathing, and fusing echoed through the manufacturing floor. Libby grinned at the smell of grease and solid rocket engines as she veered around stainless steel tables surrounded with workers assembling toy rockets and jets. Passing a slow moving assembly line of aerodynamic jet-bikes, she saluted a woman ratcheting a black carbon wheel to a frame’s front forks.

Near the far end of the building, she crossed behind a row of red manufacturing robots with *Bekken* written across them. She slowed to watch the robotic arms twisting and rotating along a *Succubus* wing like competing lovers kissing up the arm of a mistress.

Arriving behind a curtain, Libby stared wide-eyed at a partially assembled grey-blue aircraft surrounded by engineers.

She approached a tall man in a white overcoat. “Siggy.” Libby gripped his shoulder. “You did it. I knew you could solve the electrical system issues.”

Sigmund Evert nodded.

“But,” Libby said, studying the fuselage, “what about the metallurgical complications, the dual mode ramjet’s computational fluid dynamic issues, and the bugs in the primary quantum computational avionics system? Have we cleaned those up yet?”

The sedate-looking head engineer held up three fingers, one at a time. “Your job—sort of—and mostly.”

“Keep up the good work.” Libby leaped toward the cockpit.

Sigmund reached out and held her back with his lanky arm. “We’re in the middle of some tests, and I *know* you don’t want to slow us down.”

Libby rolled her eyes. “Fine, I’ll check out the engines.”

Sigmund strode toward the engine testing area. She smiled and caught up.

“How did the new emergency back-up software perform in the *Succubus*?” Sigmund asked, his voice flat, scientific.

“That?” She shrugged. “Well, if our customers want to be bored to death—it works great.”

They stopped before a massive metallic cylinder teeming with pipes and valves. Sigmund’s brows lifted. “I heard you were scheduled to meet with the FAA today.”

“Yes. It went fine.” Libby poked and prodded the side of the turbine.

“The last time you said that the FAA made us rerun all our flight tests for the *Wyvern*. We need the Commissioner on our side if we want to have any chance of getting the Libby IV flight-certified.”

“Stop worrying, Siggy. Once they see what we’re making, they’ll be blown away. I’m sure of it.”

Sigmund turned, looking behind him. “Ahem.” When Libby didn’t respond, he tapped her shoulder.

“What?” Libby turned around.

Amanda stood, tapping her toe and pointing at her watch.

“Another meeting?” Libby asked.

“Mr. Victor Lafayette in the Calico Basin in one hour,” Amanda said, frowning, and then winked at Sigmund.

“Victor? Why didn’t you tell me?” Libby smiled. “That’s today?” She tore away, yelling, “Call Halvern Black. Have him meet me at the stable.”

Hooves hammered rhythmically against loose soil as Libby Dodge and Halvern Black rode horses around barrel cacti and creosote bushes. Dirt spit into the air when they flanked a flat-faced boulder below a cliff. Reining to a stop, both of their cowboy hats tipped upward.

Libby squinted against sunlight bouncing off sheer glass near the top of the plateau. The cliff house looked like an Anasazi dwelling, fused within the top of an art-deco skyscraper, perched atop a wall of sheer rock. An orchestra of uniquely spaced windows played reflective notes, some ringing dull from sunken crevices, others sniping bright bursts from exposed corners, and a few thundering bass salutes from wide red panes.

Cut-stone walkways connected glass to dark rectangular openings. A crane hoisted a girder up past the three completed lower levels to workers swarming through cavernous holes filled with rock pillars and steel beams below a natural rock roof.

“I love it,” Libby said, rubbing her purebred Arabian’s mane. Halvern’s white hat remained steady, angled up.

“Are we on schedule?” Libby asked with the excitement of a young girl awaiting ice cream.

He focused on the crane’s cargo, then glanced at a mobile device in his hand. He moved three-dimensional renderings around with his thick fingers and grunted, almost mimicking his mustang.

“It’s turning out better than I imagined,” she said, patting her horse. “Just look at it, girl.”

Slipping the device into his shirt pocket, Halvern faced her, revealing a gruff, black face, his frown wedged below grey-haired temples. “I’m building into a goddamn fractured cliff,” his voice boomed from a barreled chest. “I anticipated obstacles, but, god almighty. The down shafts needed bracing through unstable formations. Natural springs are coursing through everything I want to keep dry. Our battery supplier can’t figure out how to run the cabling, and they underestimated our solar window electricity generation by a factor of six.”

“And?”

He wiped his chin and glared at the construction. “I need to get up there and sort things out. I’ll meet your friend another time.”

“So is it on schedule?”

“Goddammit, Libby. The EPA has sued for a temporary injunction to halt construction while they conduct environmental tests. The County Building Inspector wants to retract his approvals after taking heat from reporters. The protestors are harassing my workers and suppliers. Nonprofit groups are cluttering my desk with ‘letters of ecological concern.’ Lieutenant Governor Moore even called me, screaming that this land should’ve been appropriated into a state park. He’d probably send in the National Guard to shut this down if I wasn’t designing a project on the Strip he wants to highlight in his gubernatorial bid.”

Libby tilted her head. “So it *won’t* be done on time.”

“You’re like a child who thinks life is supposed to be a fun day in the sandbox.”

Libby furrowed her brows.

Leaning back in his squeaky saddle, Halvern’s scowl transformed into a low chuckle. “And *that’s* why I bought your *Wyvern*, relocated my business here from Hong Kong, and why I’m building you this house. Because I enjoy seeing a grown woman having so much goddamn fun. No, your house won’t be done on time. It’ll be done two weeks early.”

Libby beamed at the house, stroking her Arabian’s neck.

Halvern scanned the desert behind them. “When is your French aristocrat supposed to arrive? I don’t have time to babysit you.” He stared a moment too long, causing Libby to look back as well. A trail of dust blazed away from Libby’s stable a half mile to the east.

“Victor’s taking the long way,” Libby said. “He must’ve misunderstood Guardo’s instructions.”

Halvern pulled out binoculars. “What the hell? Is he wearing some kind of medieval armor?” He glanced over the binoculars before looking through the lenses again. “Goddamn French.”

Libby smirked as she watched Halvern.

“Oh, great,” Halvern said, wincing and shifting in the saddle. “He’s riding right into your trespassers.”

Victor Lafayette, wearing a full suit of curvaceous matte-white armor, sat atop a prancing black Percheron. He seemed drawn to the protestors like metal to lodestone.

Pulling to a stop at the mob’s edge, he flipped open his visor, revealing narrow indigo-blue eyes and a few strands of platinum hair stuck to his face. He read the signs, pausing on one that

said, *Take back our lands!* In a thick French accent, he said, “Good morning, my American compatriots.”

The twenty or so protestors stared, confused. A few backed away. One freckle-faced man wearing a t-shirt depicting a dragon yelled, “All right.”

Victor raised a gauntleted fist in the air as though rallying troops into battle, exposing gunmetal chainmail at his joints. A cheer erupted from the crowd. Victor’s thin lips pursed. “*Viva la liberté!*”

He repeated the cheer. Many protestors joined in.

“Son of a brass buttress,” Halvern whispered. He handed the binoculars to Libby.

Libby peered through the lenses, her gut shaking with laughter.

Victor fed the group’s growing energy with French slogans. They followed along.

The apparent leader of the protest, a bearded man in a tweed jacket, yelled, “This is what I’ve been talking about.”

Removing his helm, Victor exposed neck-length hair and an angelic bone structure. Several young women and a middle-aged man jostled forward trying to get in a better position to see the Frenchman.

A doe-eyed brunette pushed past the competitors, placing her hands on Victor’s armored leg. He reached down and pulled her onto the front of his saddle, seating her sideways. She stared into his eyes only long enough for Victor to press his lips against hers. The crowd roared in communal romantic triumph.

“Please tell me, beautiful,” Victor whispered in her ear, “where may I find my friend, *Madame Dodge*?”

She shook her head. “I...ah...I... You’re Libby Dodge’s friend?”

“You’re looking for Libby Dodge?” the bearded man asked.

Tension rippled through the crowd.

“Naturally. *Madame Dodge* invited me here. Were you not invited to be on her land as well?”

“What?” several people yelled in unison.

The brunette passenger fidgeted.

“I’m here to engage in a morning ride with the *Madame*. I hear she is crafting a *château* in these parts. By chance have you seen it?”

Several picketers looked north at the clearly visible cliff house. “He’s a traitor,” shouted a plum-faced woman.

Victor lowered the young woman from his steed. “You have chosen a lovely day to celebrate. Carry on.” His fingers flicked in the air.

The protestors shrieked and bounced signs. One threw a rock. It deflected off Victor’s chest plate. Donning his helm, Victor tweaked the reins, spurring the Percheron toward the Libby House. A placard flew after him.

Libby lowered the binoculars as the white knight on a black horse pranced up to them.

“Ahh, found you.” Victor removed his helm in one motion and set it on the saddle horn.

Halvern spit on the ground. Victor squinted up at the Libby House, his face glowing in the sunlight.

“Ahem.” Libby pointed at Victor. “Halvern, this is Victor Lafayette, the brain behind Bekken Advanced Robotics in Germany, among other things.” She motioned toward Halvern. “Victor, this is my architect, Halvern Black.”

Victor bowed low from his steed, extending a gauntleted hand to Halvern.

Halvern scowled, turning to Libby.

“My architectural compliments, *Monsieur* Black,” Victor said, looking back at the house.

“I suppose he jousts too?” Halvern asked.

“I brought Victor here because of his many talents.”

“Is kissing your dissenters one of them?”

“There was a real beauty over there,” Victor said, looking back.

“Victor missed his time slot to be born during the Renaissance,” Libby said, smiling. “But he’s an expert in robotics, plasma tools, and solid state lasers.”

“A jack of all trades and a knight? Pardon my French but—”

“His plasma tools can melt high volumes of sandstone into tempered glass,” Libby said, not wanting to discover the breadth of Halvern’s French vocabulary.

“Can you cut out ten thousand square meters of manufacturing space from under our feet and have the roof be self-supporting?” Halvern asked, spitting again.

“Of course,” Victor grinned, “*Monsieur* Black.”

“He excavated many caverns in Africa while in the Legion’s Mountain Commando Group. Let him see the blueprints.”

“Does he plan to hire those screaming protestors to help him dig it?” Halvern pulled the blueprints from a saddlebag and tossed them at Victor’s face.

Victor snatched them from the air, flicking them open.

Leaning forward, Halvern gripped his side and winced. He straightened up, snapped the reins, and spurred his mustang toward the construction crane.

“Thanks, Halvern,” Libby yelled.

Victor studied the plans and then scanned across the desert. He pointed north. “Who owns the land over there?”

“Believe it or not, Halvern bought it six months ago, even before he learned to ride a horse.”

“May I send an underground passage across a corner of his land? It would be more efficient.”

“You can ask him when we get back. Just ignore his grumpiness.”

“Grumpiness? Didn’t notice.” Victor smiled at the complex diagrams in his hand.

“By the way,” Libby glanced back at the picketers, “that was some show you put on out there. Do they teach protesting in French grade schools or something?”

Victor laid the blueprints against the horse’s neck, removed a gauntlet, pulled a smartphone from his saddle, and typed calculations. “Don’t worry about protestors, my friend. If I dig the cavern, nobody will know it. My plasma gougers don’t produce roll-off waste.”

“Can you complete the cavern during that month you Europeans call a holiday?”

“Certainly. I was going to use that time to upgrade your manufacturing robots, but that can wait.” He nudged his horse around to see the desert from a different angle and looked back at his calculations.

“Now hold on there,” she said, moving her Arabian next to Victor. “I need my robots upgraded as soon as possible. I can’t wait until next year.”

“That is what you Americans call ‘wanting to eat your cake and keep it too.’ No?”

“No, it’s called figuring out a way to make lots of cool stuff super-fast.”

Victor raised an eyebrow.

“Look, just quit Bekken and work for me full time. I need you to dig the cave *and* upgrade my robots.”

Victor tapped his smartphone screen and lifted it to his ear.

“What are you doing?” Libby scratched up under her hat.

“Der Udo Bekken?” Victor said. “Please excuse the late hour, but I respectfully resign my position.” His expression revealed nothing as sharp German grunts reached all the way to Libby’s surprised face. “I appreciate the offer, but I must respectfully decline. And once again, please excuse the improper hour.” He hung up the phone, sniffed, and looked at Libby.

“Uhhh... You always quit like that?”

“No.” Victor pushed the phone into the saddle pocket.

“I haven’t hired you yet.”

“No.” He folded the blueprints and wedged them under the saddle.

She stared, searching for even a trace of fear on Victor’s face. Seeing none, she said, “All right then, in addition to upgrading my robots, I want new ones installed in the cavern once you’re finished excavating. That sound like a good job description?”

“No.” Victor pulled on his gauntlet.

“Money? Fine, I’ll give you twice what Bekken was paying.”

He yawned.

Libby winced. “Two and a half times?”

“Start a fourth manufacturing line at your facility.”

“Start a...” She scrunched her brows. “That’s your condition to working for me? What in the blazes do you want to manufacture?”

“Body armor.” Victor lifted his helm with both hands. “Your aerospace grade alloys combined with nanotube fibers and ceramic plates should allow for impenetrability and deflectability against almost any hardened round, perhaps even against depleted uranium.” He gazed across the desert as if surveying a new world. “My friend, the day of the knights in shining armor may come again.”

Libby followed his gaze. “You just got me kinda excited.” She slapped Victor’s plated shoulder. “Make whatever you want; just get everything else done first.”

Victor slid the helm back over his head. “And I’ll take three times my Bekken salary.” He spurred the Percheron away.  
Libby shook her head, grinning.

## Chapter 4

Sun-drops sifted through pine branches, sprinkling blond diamonds on Stock Brant's spiky hair. He stood erect, clad in black, drawing back a sword.

A young pinyon tree reached to the sky in front of him. He thrust the blade into its bark, twisted, and withdrew it.

Stock held out the concaved, alloy blade, its serrated edges sharper than a razor. Inhaling the scent of the tree's core, his shoulders relaxed and his eyes narrowed.

He scraped the sample into a testing device, pegged the sword into the ground, and leaned against the pinyon. When the device chirped, he studied the results, and slid his hand off the bark.

Reaching up to an enormous pinecone, he plucked out a truffle-sized pine nut. He carried it between two fingers, his boots crunching across the mulch. He removed his leather jacket and tossed it like a blanket over a fallen bristlecone trunk. Lying down, he gazed up at his creations—a pinyon variety existing nowhere else on earth.

He dropped the nut into his mouth. Spitting out the shell, the remaining flesh melted like edible gold. Pleasure coursed through his body.

His eyelids drew closed. *This is how the world should have been.*

Hours later, as the shadow of Mt. Charleston fell across his trees, Stock veered his dust-covered motorcycle onto the Las Vegas Strip forty miles away. Tourists meandering along sidewalks turned toward the whirling rumble. A cone of fire pulsed from a center exhaust behind his matte-black jet-bike, as sleek and daring as a hound from hell.

Wind rustled Stock's hair. Sunglasses, like dark voids, clasped his hard cheeks and stubby nose. His jacket and jeans looked fitted over living granite. His military-style boots were scuffed yet tailored and sat on the jet-bike's platinum foot pegs.

Stock didn't appear forty; he made one forget about age because he looked indestructible.

*The Sin's* black stone façade rose in the distance like a gothic cathedral turned skyscraper, replete with gargoyles and medieval saints, but also adorned with modern concrete balconies and glass railings.

It wasn't the largest hotel and casino in the city, but certainly the most expensive. Some local authorities suspected Stock Brant owned it, yet it couldn't be proven. Corporate entities encased within special interest vehicles wrapped within other corporate entities legally controlled it. Not even its cash flows could be traced to its ultimate owner since the flows were negative and nobody knew how it made up the losses.

Some rumors asserted that *The Sin's* penthouse replicated the interior of the Chartres Cathedral, but no verified accounts from hotel guests existed. A few former employees claimed Stock lived there, but their stories contradicted one another, which only increased the seductiveness of the rumors.

Ted Hollings, the manager of *The Sin*, never answered questions about Stock Brant, and it was said he'd fired every employee who had.

*The Sin's* marquee, a poised silhouette of a naked woman, stood three stories high. Stock gazed at her as he rode near. He'd had it designed after a woman he first saw in the news. Four years ago, before *The Sin's* construction was complete, he made an exception to attend a public function, *her* function. And that single view of her body had convinced him to make her the undisclosed model of the marquee.

People complained that the marquee looked vulgar—and they were right, Stock thought—not because it stood naked, but because it shone too beautifully for his own depraved eyes to behold.

The public also accused the marquee of being unrealistic—and they were right, Stock thought—not because the body displayed flawless proportions, but because he'd hidden its eyes in shadow. He had seen her real eyes, and they apologized for, and thus imprisoned her body, just as he knew society's laws apologized for, and thus prohibited his unapproved genetic creations.

Therefore, *The Sin's* marquee represented the impossible, the unrealistic, the mere silhouette of a world Stock knew could

never exist: a world allowing him to create without being evil and allowing him to look upon her body without hating her eyes.

But the model of the marquee *did* exist, and both her body and eyes were real, as was the world. And that reality brought Stock to this intolerable state between pain and desire, this state he'd endured so unbearably long. And as he'd risked the price of touching the soul of forbidden genetics, so now he would risk the price of touching her forbidden body.

*The Sin's* shadow wafted across Stock as it spread out over the Strip and the corner of McCarran International Airport. He thought of his phone call one week ago to Lieutenant Governor Moore, relaying an offer to his living marquee in exchange for a benign request. Stock shivered, knowing it wasn't benign, but an insufferable snare for his siren.

Stock received no answer from her at first, the silence screeching more cruelly than any response. After waiting a day, he walked into one of her charity events unannounced, but she was not there—her first absence in an immaculate career.

After that night, he attended every one of her scheduled public functions. He forced himself to attend, to mingle, and to be photographed the way a man forces himself to saw off an arm when pinned under a boulder.

At the end of each event, as the manicured guests faded away, Stock drank himself into the solace of knowing he'd caused her absence, but still wished in those moments for just one more untouchable glance.

Lifting his head, he spotted the penthouse atop *The Sin* and pictured the note Ted Hollings delivered early this morning. *I'll be there at 7 tonight.* Stock recalled the bold lettering, softened to look grateful, just as he once studied her bold body with eyes tempered to look obedient.

An airliner flew out of McCarran International over Stock's head. His Hell Hound accelerated, roaring against the whining jet turbines above. He touched the pocket containing the note, and for just one moment wished he hadn't made that call or that she hadn't accepted, for he understood that with sirens—as with death—there could be no half measures.

He stared at his marquee. *I will see her eyes tonight.*

The jet-bike growled past *The Sin's* main entrance, swinging into a narrow alleyway. Beyond a lone dumpster, a rusty gate

rolled out of Stock's way, allowing entrance in to an abandoned parking structure. He parked in a dark alcove.

Loose concrete crunched underfoot as he walked through the windowless garage. A locked metal door marked the entrance to a former motel, known now by its clandestine inhabitants as *The Hole*. Instead of being razed to the ground, *The Hole* had been secretly swallowed up, cocooned by the many levels of *The Sin's* new parking structure during construction.

Stock wound through *The Hole's* stale, cigarette-reeking halls, home to many of his unofficial employees. Several clusters of scruffy-looking men cleared the path as he progressed. A couple of tattooed men walked by. Nobody looked directly at Stock.

He glanced behind him and thought his employees looked older, somehow different from what he remembered. *There are so many now.*

Shaking his head, he entered a stairwell, the metal treads clanging under his heavy footfalls. Beyond a reinforced door, concrete steps led beneath the Strip. He passed doors, tunnels, and more employees along the way, ignoring them all.

At the bottom, a row of lit bulbs dangled from wires, casting shadows down a shrinking passage. The walls absorbed his scuffing steps, soaking up the evidence of his life.

Reaching an oversized wooden door, he stopped and gazed further down the hallway—to a white door near its end. It led to his pharmaceutical lab, a place where he had developed his last three genetically engineered biologics; none submitted for government approval, but each a cure to a terminal disease thought to have no hope for a cure.

He looked away and opened the wooden door before him, releasing a wave of humid light. A domed cavern dripping with lamps spread out the distance like a Midwestern farm and its bright sky had sunk down to the center of the earth. His nostrils flared wide, drawing in the aroma of soil and vegetation—the smell of home.

At the far end of the cavern, Kat Lister glanced over oat stalks, revealing pale eyes beneath sandy hair. She was twenty years old and Stock's only remaining genetic research assistant. She joined him when she was just fourteen, at a time when Stock still employed a dozen runaway youths to perform his biologic research procedures with a meticulous eye.

Kat was also his special delivery girl. Every few months, she used craft and ingenuity to anonymously distribute packets of raw diamonds to many local politicians and appointed government leaders. The packets contained nothing else—no requests, no demands, no hint of their origin.

Since many recipients turned the diamonds over to the state or donated them to charity, news stations across Nevada publicized the mysterious payments. But because Stock left out no political party or interest group, and revealed no purpose for the loot, nobody understood who should be upset, though everyone claimed to be. Committees formed and investigations were launched, but nothing was discovered except the mistrust of every politician against every other, and the mistrust between politicians and investigators.

Some rumors claimed the diamonds came from Stock, but people discounted these like all rumors about him—except for those people who secretly kept Stock's diamonds, and *they* publicly claimed to be the most doubtful of all.

Stock walked along a row of wheat, noting each nuance of the spikelets, sheaths, and leaf blades. He stopped and tore off a floret, fondling it.

A slim, black-haired young man with a friendly face slipped into the cavern like a summer shadow, leaving the entrance door ajar. He stopped a few steps behind Stock.

"Shut the door, Jesus," Stock said without turning, and bit down on a wheat kernel, separating out its germ.

Jesus "Jessy" Gorronda walked back and closed the door, standing for a moment to appraise Stock's crops.

Stock moved the germ against his teeth, detecting traces of magnesium and zinc, but a disappointing lack of leucine.

"Our monthly report is ready," Jessy said as he returned.

"Give me the genetic sales numbers."

"Yes, of course, but before we get to genetics," Jessy said, his voice smooth, "we should discuss our latest distribution success."

Stock breathed in, mixing the air's nitrogen with the wheat's phytic acid. *It could use more water.* "Which is what?"

"Desomorphine." He opened his arms wide. "It has flooded the valley with such ease we should...celebrate."

Stock spit out the germ, staring at the wheat in his hand. "A

synthetic street chemical? You wish to celebrate our customers' deaths?"

"Not their *deaths*, Stock..." he lowered his arms, "...their *desire* to free themselves from society and its corrupt laws."

"The laws are *not* corrupt." Stock lowered his head and crushed the wheat in his hand. "I'm headed to hell and our customers will meet me there."

A grin spread across Jessy's lips.

"The next time you feel the need to free someone from something," Stock continued, "just liberate yourself and leave me."

Jessy bowed. "We are only here to serve and protect you."

Stock sifted the pulverized wheat through his fingers, his boot burying the chaff with a swipe of soil. "How much of this month's filthy lucre came from my genetics?"

"Stock," he placed a hand to his chest, "the more *elevated* principles of our endeavors shouldn't be measured with mere profits."

"Don't try to explain elevated principles, Jesus." He spun on his heel. "I only understand dirt and drugs." Marching away, he pressed through rows of crops, stopping to inspect a line of barley.

Jessy followed behind. "We sold fifteen metric tons of genetically modified seed, which is down only about ten percent. And biologic Ds and Ks are selling...fine. But," he lowered his voice, "as you already know, almost all profits now come from street drugs."

Stock exhaled and ripped golden flower heads off a stem. "If that's all you have to report, you may go." Biting off a floret, he measured its resistance to pressure while tasting its earthy, nutty flavor. *A hint of unusual bitterness. What is off?*

Jessy paced behind him like an attorney preparing an argument. "However, we do have a slight distribution issue. The price of powder is declining due to an unfortunate oversupply. As a purely defensive measure, perhaps it is time to...consolidate competitors in the Spring Valley."

Stock gnashed the floret with his molars, his arms stiffening.

Jessy stopped in his tracks. "Stock, if we consider the good of the entire valley's drug industry, it becomes clear it needs organizing, and that should be done by us. Even you've said our

competitors are unprincipled and violent, so why not use a little proactive muscle against them?”

Stock winced, having no answer for why he wouldn't allow it. “The powder you've been selling is compost, and almost as bad as the synthetics. The customers were right to pay less.”

Jessy frowned.

Stock touched his jaw. *Maybe it's not a macro that is off. The acid balance?* He moved his tongue, tasting the barley mesh. Looking at the flower heads in his hand, he noticed Jessy's shadow below him and spit out the mesh. “If you're going to sell street drugs, then at least sell *good* street drugs. The Columbians' coca methods became lax after the rebels surrendered to their new government. Everyone in Vegas is importing their refuse. Change to Bolivian sources, the ones willing to grow *Erythroxylum* at high elevations and not harvest until after twenty months. Then raise the price.”

Jessy shrugged in defeat, but smiled in acceptance of Stock's expertise. “We will make the changes right away.” He turned to leave.

Stock picked up a dirt clump, crushing it in his palm. He moved the granules around with his other hand.

“Oh,” Jessy turned back to him, “there is one more unpleasant detail to report. L523s...”

Dirt rained from Stock's hands. “How many did we sell?”

“Two doses.” Jessy narrowed his eyes at more than just the low number.

Stock lifted his head, the ceiling lamps brightening his face as he recalled how he'd discovered a way to make biologic L523 using a technique nobody else in the world had dared to contemplate.

“We sold one to a late-stage pancreatic cancer victim...”

Stock brushed his hands clean. “Who else would buy it?”

“It ended up,” Jessy cleared his throat, “he worked undercover for both the FDA and the DEA. We tested him for the correct cancer before we sold it, so we thought we were safe. Two of our men were lost in the sting.”

Stock's neck tensed. “Why did you wait to tell me this?” He squinted against the brightness. “And what happened to the customer?”

“The feds confiscated the dose as evidence, so he will die, as society’s justice demands,” Jessy said, averting his gaze.

Stock closed his eyes, unwilling to grimace for relief.

“We will be more careful next time,” Jessy said.

“I want customers screened properly. The feds will never get another dose. *Ever*. And triple the price of L523. If a customer wants to be cured, he’ll have to pay for the sin of using my biologic.”

“That is wise,” Jessy said, “to reduce demand for genetics. The feds have been diverting resources to stop unapproved biologics and GMOs. It’s that news story: the father robbed and stabbed to death downtown while seeking to buy one of your doses for his daughter. Without it, the girl died in her hospital bed on live TV while onlookers prayed for her health and politicians demanded an end to illegal drugs. The public blames the existence of the biologic for both deaths.”

“The public is right,” Stock said, his voice heavy, face sinking into shade.

Jessy stared with satisfaction in his eyes. “The feds’ new drive against genetics is reducing the risk of selling street chemicals and drugs, but it’s also making it easier for our competitors, which is why we might—”

Stock’s shoulders tightened.

“Why we might wish to consider other options,” Jessy finished, his shadow slicing across Stock’s back. “If physical consolidation is out of the question, perhaps we could direct a portion of your diamonds in, shall we say, a more politically friendly manner? We have men to make the deliveries.”

Stock gripped his hands into fists. “My bribes are not to entice others to help us. I give them as recompense for my crimes.” Exhaling, he whispered, “I am begging.”

Jessy took a step back, his boot catching a young barley stock, breaking its fibrous backbone. “Someday society might forgive you for your sins against them.”

“You are an optimist, Jesus,” Stock said, his voice tired, “but it is wasted.”

“Serving you is an honor.”

From across the cavern Kat’s eyes lifted and glared at Jessy. Her pupils seemed to expand and contract with each measured breath.

“Have you hired more runaways?” Stock asked, his voice deflated as he again walked away. He knew they were becoming less useful as the empire expanded toward street drugs. But in the early days, those kids were sharp and eager to help produce his genetic creations and sell them like hungry Victorian street peddlers. His favorites had all been runaways, and three had been brighter than all the rest. Two were in this cavern. He stopped at the edge of an apple orchard near a cavern wall, his boots digging into loose soil.

Jessy caught up, stopping several paces behind. “Those types of ex-foster kids don’t come around like they used to.”

Stock smoothed over his boot craters, his face pulled tight, contradicting his easy movement.

“We had another kid deserter last month: Jack Noonan.” Jessy’s voice hung tentative as though seeking and fearing a reaction.

*Where are the best kids going, and why?* Stock exhaled, his shoulders falling limp.

Jessy nodded at the lack of response. “We’ve ramped up the recruiting of more mature and tractable candidates. Don’t worry about foster whiz kids—we don’t need them anymore.”

Stock whirled around, his stare twin beams of blue flame searing Jessy’s face until he turned away.

“You’re an ex-foster kid.” Stock’s voice became hoarse. “Roble was an...” He turned and clasped his hands against an apple tree.

“Ah yes...Roble.” Jessy blinked with pleasure. “If only treachery did not cut so deep. We’ll keep looking for replacements, as always.”

Stock ripped a massive, green-speckled apple from the tree. Roble had been his most favored runaway. Yet unlike the others, he didn’t work on genetic production or distribution. Instead, he spent his time souping up Stock’s motorcycles in *The Hole’s* garage or tinkering with Stock’s private jet in the hangar. He reminded Stock of a fledgling monk, describing all things mechanical with a religious reverence.

In the rare daytime hours when grease didn’t cover Roble or he didn’t hold a socket wrench, he stood at Stock’s side in the labs asking questions with childlike wonder about the creation

process and about which principles could be applied to other fields.

At night, they sometimes talked for hours in the hangar, or in the air in Stock's jet, about what was yet possible for mankind. It was like they spoke a language nobody else understood or cared about.

Stock's sunglasses fell back over his eyes.

Just days before Roble left, Stock offered Jessy the position of second-in-command of his empire, but Jessy refused, insisting Roble be given the position in his place. Jessy told Stock that Roble confided in him that he was leaving to seek fortune on his own, and suggested that giving Roble a position of power and riches was the only way to make him stay. Stock didn't understand Jessy's selfless rejection or why Roble would want to leave him, but he couldn't bear the thought of losing him.

So even though Roble was only fifteen at the time, seven years Jessy's junior, Stock announced his surprise promotion in front of everyone. To his immediate relief, Roble didn't refuse—he didn't say a word.

Stock pressed the apple to his heart, trying to replace something ripped out. *Why did you still abandon me?* He shook his head.

It seemed impossible to comprehend, but only in retrospect did he realize he hadn't felt like a criminal for the three years Roble worked for him. *How did you make me feel that way?* He lowered the apple to his side.

Gritting his teeth, a swell of betrayal and anger washed over him. He threw the apple. It arced across the cavern below the lights like a sparkling sunstone. *Roble, I don't understand.* The apple smashed against a cavern wall with a sickening pop.

Jessy strolled out of the growing chamber.

Stock plodded through the crops, his head lowered. He stopped and peered over Kat Lister's shoulder at her mobile computer screen.

Kat glanced at his face and winced. "Did the new sword work this morning?" she forced out, trying to sound hopeful.

"Just give me the results."

Kat studied her device, her short hair creating two sharp points before her face, her nimble fingers scrolling through graphs. "The J87 oats are using eighty-one percent less water,

have double the soluble fiber, and so far I'm finding them sweeter than J86s."

Stock noticed the time on Kat's display: 6:12 PM.

"Want to see if we can increase the omega 3s?" Kat raised her head.

Stock walked away without answering, his boots thumping against the dirt, in sync with his heart.

*It is time to see her eyes.*

## Chapter 5

Alexa Patra entered the only open lobby elevator at *The Sin*, glancing at the thin-mustached operator in a black buttoned-up suit with a gothic hood resting on his back. “Penthouse,” she said.

The man studied her, then opened a mahogany panel, inserted a key, and pressed a sequence on a pad. His wristwatch flashed 6:59 PM.

As the cab rose, Alexa almost gagged at the thought of the hotel patrons frolicking in the lobby’s pompous display. The décor, a mix of royal furnishings replicated from eras ranging from Charlemagne’s court to the later European Renaissance palaces, was smeared together with a heavy spill of purple velvet, shellacked with gold leaf, and left guarded by marble gargoyles. Everything appeared fabricated with ancient forms of hand craftsmanship using the costliest imported materials—which was particularly offensive considering the talk at her state office that *The Sin* somehow dodged paying taxes. Alexa attended social functions in every hotel in the city but by her own will, *never* this hotel.

She watched the Roman numerals lighting up as they ascended. *We’re passing the tenth floor already?* She wasn’t ready to see Stock Brant again so soon, even though it had been four years since their only encounter.

That long-ago night she hadn’t known what he looked like; she hadn’t wanted to know. She’d just assumed anyone with such an unlawful reputation would be monstrous, an image involving a single strand of greasy hair, two sweaty chins, and three gold necklaces.

From across the vaulted ballroom, she’d observed a man enter. His short, unkempt hair wisped like flame atop charcoaled roots. A tailored black suit emphasized his impeccable frame, which ended in mud-caked biker boots. His hard face insulted

the dignified guests seemingly without their notice as he passed them.

He stopped and stood alone, receiving two fingers of whiskey from a waiter in lieu of the champagne flutes everyone else held. As the manicured herd forced conversation upon him, it was his uninterested expression, not his boots, which seemed to kick mud across their freshly dry-cleaned outfits. One by one, each peeled away with an indignant frown, only to be replaced by eager new guests.

Alexa's eyes remained riveted on him, the most rugged yet poised man she'd ever seen. She stared so long a group of donors she was entertaining walked off, offended by her inattentiveness.

When he returned her gaze without even the decency of discretion, she blushed. His piercing blue eyes held an obscene intelligence and a scorn that seemed both personal and ferocious. His lips pressed together as though holding back even the pretense of conversation—or hunger. She turned away.

Standing alone, she knew his gaze must be on her neck, her shoulders, her legs. Her mind buzzed, feeling aware of the gown stretched against her body. Her breathing quickened, becoming shallow, and she felt guilty for liking the sensation.

Lieutenant Governor Preton Moore caught her by the arm and she jumped. His brilliant white grin apologized as he said, "Don't look now, but Stock Brant crashed our event. I'm not sure if it's a compliment or an affront."

She swung her head around, searching the ballroom entrance, shocked she hadn't seen that slimy criminal enter. Then Preton pointed in the direction she hadn't dared look again. She had clenched her fists for she'd stared like one of Stock's rumored concubines. Downing her drink, she had fanned her cheeks with a cocktail napkin before walking away to find her lost donor guests.

*Twentieth floor of The Sin; halfway there. The floors are counting by too quickly.* Alexa raised a finger, contemplating pressing the elevator's emergency stop button. But the finger recoiled as she remembered walking into Preton's state office a week ago.

He often called her in to plan events and to give advice, but this get-together was something unprecedented. He suggested she meet privately with Stock Brant to accept an 'anonymous'

donation. The subtle lines of Preton's face implied the unthinkable purpose for Stock's request.

She'd stood without answering, remembering Stock's ballroom glance four years earlier. When she imagined meeting alone with Stock, she felt heat flash down her body.

Staring at Preton's calm face, she felt her redness become fueled by anger. Crossing her arms, she told Preton that Stock should be locked up in jail, not indulged by law-abiding citizens trying to help others.

Oddly, Preton hadn't insisted. He simply revealed the size of the donation awaiting the CUH. He enunciated an amount so large her last eight years of squeezing money from vodka-and-chive-breathed donors seemed laughable.

Alexa knew no matter how much money Stock offered, it was dirty and its acquisition must have hurt innocent people. But she swallowed her anger when she remembered she had no personal line of comfort that couldn't be crossed if done in the service of those in need. How could she enforce society's sense of justice on Stock by refusing him, when it would come at the expense of helping hundreds of underprivileged children?

Without reply, she left Preton's office, and went home for the day, the first time she'd ever left work early in her life. When she didn't return to her office or go to her charity fundraiser the next day, she told herself she felt physically ill, or needed to attend to personal issues, or just needed her first vacation—the justifications morphed by the hour.

She filled the time working on the phone and computer—working harder than if she'd gone to the office. But she wouldn't leave and risk an encounter with Stock, as seemingly impossible as it sounded, for fear some inappropriate, selfish desire within her would make her forget her reasons for wanting to avoid the proposed meeting.

When she heard from her assistant that Stock was attending her scheduled public functions that week, Alexa glanced out the window, knowing a decision must be made. She walked toward the phone to call Preton, but veered away and sat atop her bed, just to rest for a moment. She didn't wake up until the next morning.

As the days passed, not even the actual sickness in her stomach made her isolation feel justified. At night she turned

the air conditioner as cold as it could go, but sleep still fled as she twisted under sweaty sheets, trying not to envision what Stock wanted when he stared at her from across that ballroom, while her mind repeated he was an insensitive, society-loathing criminal.

After a week of seclusion, an embarrassingly obvious solution came to her. She felt relieved that it would fulfill her duty to the children without giving Stock what he did not deserve. His offer demanded nothing but her presence and that is all he would get. Everything could be gained and nothing lost. The plan sounded so solid, especially late at night when she'd concocted it.

"As I've often said, when it comes to the greater good," Preton had told her when she called yesterday to surrender, "the end always justifies the means, or else what are we sacrificing for?" She had set the phone down, her fingers releasing one at a time, and walked away.

*Thirty-fifth floor; almost there.* Pressing her back against the elevator wall, Alexa searched along the ridged panels for an escape hatch, yet she felt secret relief there wasn't one. "This is an official meeting on the future of Nevada's children," she whispered. *This certainly isn't a date.* She checked her hair as the elevator doors opened directly into the penthouse.

Stock stood before her, his bloodshot eyes meeting her widening stare. His hair was spiked wet as though he'd just stepped from a shower. Wearing a white tee, cargo pants, and sandals, he should have looked sloppy, yet the simple clothing seemed becoming on his solid frame.

Her intent had been to understate her dress as a reproach to *The Sin's* gaudiness, but looking at Stock, she realized she'd failed miserably.

His gaze left her eyes, and dipped to her platinum choker, making her feel as if it burned like ice across her neck. When he followed her glistening curls down to her white dress, which clung to her curves, she snapped her chin up, averting her gaze, not daring to see his reaction.

She took a breath and stepped from the elevator, wishing he would step back. He didn't. His body smelled of freshly tanned leather splashed with desert rain.

"Thank you for coming, Ms. Patra." His voice rang low and raspy.

“Of course, Mr. Brant,” she said, feeling too exposed and forcing a smile. “You’ve offered to become a valuable patron of the CUH charity. As such, I’m here to discuss the needs of the children.”

“Mm,” he narrowed his eyes.

Alexa glanced beyond his shoulders at the penthouse. It didn’t seem possible it was in the same building as the lobby. It looked open and minimalist, slashed with clean edges of black and silver across white surfaces. Floor-to-ceiling windows absorbed the colorful city lights, accenting the penthouse’s single integrated style more convincing than any material decoration. It felt like they floated above the earth as if it were mankind’s natural state to live in the sky. She’d never beheld a more beautiful home.

He took her hand so easily she didn’t believe it had actually happened, and he led her to the balcony. Loving the feel of his rough skin on her palm, she followed. But in a flash of disgust, she ripped her hand free, or at least she thought she did. She looked down—his fingers still held hers. She commanded her hand to pull away, but before she could, he released her and leaned against the glass rail.

Alexa turned away, feeling both indignant and disappointed, gazing instead at the rambling gothic roof far below. She exhaled, silently cursing Preton for expecting her to be here. Her eyes panned back to his chiseled profile. “Why name this place *The Sin*?”

“Don’t think it fits?” His eyes held the city.

“Too well, I think.”

“Not well enough. It’s much worse.”

“What’s worse than *sin*?”

His gaze shifted to her darkened state office building in the distance. “You should approve of *The Sin*. It has the state’s consent to operate.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but stopped and thought for a moment. “I think you made it despicable on purpose to blame society for your own faults.”

His jaw tensed.

She smiled, liking his show of discomfort. Then she frowned, knowing it was improper to revel in it. Remembering this was a philanthropic meeting, she decided to wait politely for him to

“speak again, but instead said, “I’ve heard it’s the only casino in the world that somehow loses money on gaming.”

“What of it?”

“If you’re running at a loss purposely to avoid taxes, the city would be better off if *The Sin* were sent back to hell.”

“That is true,” he whispered.

Her brows furrowed.

“Nobody will ever profit by *The Sin*,” Stock said. “Not even I.”

“But that’s a complete waste of...everything.” She motioned a hand across his penthouse. “So instead, you purposely make *all* your money through crime?”

“Not all of us have dreams that are good.”

She pressed against the railing, glimpsing a memory of her dream, feeling sick. Her gaze caught the shadow of *The Sin’s* marquee, and her disgust made her forget. Straightening up, she said, “That doesn’t make sense. You actually *want* to be a criminal?”

“Want? We don’t get to choose what is called right and wrong.”

*But...* Alexa glanced from his chest to his eyes. She swallowed, which pressed her beating neck against her choker.

“Mr. Brant,” her voice came out husky, “there must be some good in you. You’re offering to make a contribution to the CUH so large...I’m...” She stopped, looking away to avoid seeing the sudden scorn in his eyes attached to the thought of his generous donation, and not wanting to consider whether she found it repulsive or irresistible. “The Lieutenant Governor appreciates your donation. He told me so, which is why—”

“Which is why you prostituted yourself here.”

She whirled around, slapping him across the jaw. The blow echoed off the glass walls and hung in the air. Her own violence stunned her, stealing away the anger, and left her feeling guilty for hurting him—and even guiltier for having enjoyed it. She pressed her stinging hand against her hip.

“Did Preton send that as well?” He felt the welt on his chin.

Her eyes glared, but her mind reeled.

“I didn’t think so. He wouldn’t risk my donation. But I’m sure you already knew that.”

His eyes moved down the length of her body like hands.

Alexa pressed her thighs together. A flash of unwanted heat

rushed through her, melting her wall of denial that had masked her naïve scheme to come here. She knew he wouldn't give his donation unless she slept with him—she'd always known it. And her own desire to do so now slapped her in the face with guilt. *No*. She winced. *What I want is irrelevant.*

Then her gut tightened as she remembered her duty to the children. “You think this is a game?” She curled her throbbing hand into a fist. “You think I enjoy coming here to watch your immature act?”

He watched her, his lips hard.

Her fingernails dug into the palm of her fist. “We had an agreement. If you had any honor, you would keep it. I've already done my part by coming here. Now you do yours by paying.” Her heart raced, wishing her words could dissolve this impossible conflict before her.

Stock's gaze mirrored that in the ballroom four years ago, only more so.

Her breath escaped her. *I can't make this choice!* Curling her other hand into a fist, she stepped back, lowering her forehead as though readying for battle. A tingling of eagerness and fear shot through her.

“My payment will be made as promised,” he said. “You may leave.”

She felt her body falling as from the balcony, but her feet hadn't moved. She stared at his hands. *That much money for just... this? Why does my relief feel like my worst defeat?* Her fists unraveled. Stepping forward, she searched his eyes for an explanation, but they escaped her scrutiny.

He pointed at the elevator. She rubbed her still stinging palm against her thigh.

“That is all, Ms. Patra. You've done your duty.”

“God damn you, Mr. Brant.”

Stock turned away. “He already has.”

“But—”

“Don't forget to smile in the photograph with my check.”

Her chest rose and fell with barely controlled breaths. “I guess we are done here.” Alexa strode toward the elevator, feeling lightheaded.

“Wait.”

He said it so softly she wasn't certain if it had been his voice

or just her own thought. She stopped midway across the floor. *Don't...* She glanced at her feet.

He walked passed her. Stopping next to a liquor cabinet, he pulled out a bottle with a hand-drawn label: two crossed six-shooters with *Wayne Smoke* written across them.

She flushed. *No, I can't. He is what he is. I have no further purpose here.* “Save it for one of your sluts.” Her heels clicked along the floor to the elevator.

“You are right to leave,” he said, not turning around.

She reached for the elevator call button, but instead of pressing it, glanced over her shoulder at his back moving beneath the white cotton as he filled two glasses.

“I’ve never invited anyone here before,” he said.

Before she could turn away, her eyes absorbed the motion of his approach. A tanned forearm held out the smoky liquid.

He’d already returned to the balcony before she realized she held the drink. It smelled of hickory-charred corn, earthy and clean. *Why did I take it?*

Stock leaned against the rail, holding his glass.

Without taking a sip, Alexa walked to the liquor cabinet, her hair sweeping behind her dress. The bourbon splashed over the rim as she stamped the glass on the counter. Holding still for a moment, she rubbed her bourbon-drenched hand across her lips, tasting its unusual bittersweet flavor. She wanted desperately to drink it.

*No.* Brushing the tumbler away from her, she faced him across the room. “You hate society but donate large sums to it. You insult everything I stand for, but invite me for a drink in your penthouse?” She lifted her palms and then forced them back to her sides, demanding an explanation.

He set the Wayne Smoke down on the railing. “Why are you still here?”

Alexa’s brows angled into Egyptian daggers. With elongated steps, she went to him. “I’m trying to do what is right. But with you, everything is an act of rebellion—even this meeting. You’re cynical to the point that nothing virtuous matters.” She waved toward *The Sin’s* marquee below. “But I guess you have it all figured out. You must be really happy with the results.”

“No,” he whispered, “I’m not happy.” His eyes held hers without defense.

She glanced behind her at his penthouse, then back at his face. She trembled. *Who could be so honest and evil, so beautiful and ugly, all at the same time?* It broke her heart he wasn't happy, but somehow it also gave her hidden comfort. She wanted to be happy, but she'd concluded long ago that the loss of happiness was the price for being good—but for Stock, how could his loss also be the price for being evil? Were they both guided by something similar yet unseen? Gripping her elbows, she tried to refocus her thoughts. *That can't be. Everyone agrees I'm doing the right things—not Stock. Be strong.*

She extended her arm. "You don't have to be this way."

"You're wrong." His tone rang dense, as if many layers of pain had long ago compacted together.

Alexa rubbed her lips together as she studied his face, his indestructible veneer, but she saw torture in his eyes, like he'd been the victim of some long-past cruelty. Her years of working with troubled children rushed through her mind. She grasped the railing. *Someone abused him.* She hoped to be wrong, but she knew what she saw.

"Let me help you," she said. "I know it may be hard to talk about. But the effects of...some experiences...can be reversed. They don't need to determine your course."

He downed his drink, eyes aflame.

Alexa waited, hoping and fearing he would speak.

He turned away. "This was a mistake."

She reached for him but pulled back and studied her fingers.

"Stock...I'm still here because I want to be," she whispered.

He didn't move for a long time. "It's funny I guess." He shook his head and looked off in the distance. "Growing up on a farm, I received nothing but what you would consider love. You wouldn't have recognized me. I obeyed my parents, my church leaders, my community leaders—everyone. You should have seen how proud they all were. My first grade teacher once declared in front of the entire class," he gestured at his casino, "Stock Brant, why can't everyone be just like you?"

*How could that be?* Alexa cringed at the anguish in his voice.

"But that was before I developed a flaw..."

She gripped tighter to the rail.

"...a reality affliction. I couldn't see the same world everyone claimed existed. And it made me ask—*why?*"

She furrowed her brows, wondering what he had questioned. Her heart beat faster, thinking of the answer.

“I finally needed to know the reason for every command, for every burden and prohibition demanded of me. I was giving up my life to obey them, and all I needed to understand was, *Why?*”

Alexa sensed something dark bubbling up, but not inside Stock. Her eyes darted to the elevator, but immediately returned to him.

“Do you know what answer I received? Every single time and from everyone I asked?”

She shook her head, not wanting to hear it.

“*Because—I—said—so.*”

Her body tensed to flee at his words, but she held still.

“The priest, the university, the politician, the FDA panel, *the majority—said so.*”

Her throat felt so dry she couldn’t swallow.

“Are they driven by love? Concern for others? Righteousness? Higher ideals?” He faced her, their eyes meeting. “Yes.”

He lowered his head. “It must be all of those things. Therefore, they are morally right.”

Alexa recoiled, shocked his words hadn’t filled her with a sense of vindication or at least relief. She felt nauseous.

“I know why seeds grow. I understand the genetic code—it is knowable and unchanging.” Stock’s chin continued to lower until it nearly touched his chest. “But with morality, there are no rational answers. I cannot understand it.”

A warm breeze blew across Alexa’s body, sending wisps of hair over her lashes.

“I finally could not be good any longer, because I could not obey what I could not comprehend. Their beliefs made me evil. I hate them. I rebel against them. But I must accept them, just as I must accept the genetic code. I do not control truth.”

Alexa stepped forward, his words drawing her closer—so tragic, yet so familiar.

“Why is the world this way?” he asked.

Reaching out, she touched his hand to feel his warmth, his desire to understand. At her touch, he closed his eyes.

“Can you tell me why it had to be so?” he whispered. “Alexandria, I don’t know the answer.”

Why did Stock have the courage to admit his uncertainty when

she dared not? And how could they both be at the mercy of the same mystery which had stolen their ability to be happy? She could think of no answers, but his honesty and his question shot an unwanted spark of mutiny through her. It ignited and burned a small hole through a vault she'd created to conceal all she'd feared to ever see again: her childhood questions, her abandoned dream. She could feel them spreading through her like an intangible dark threat and knew they were evil because they would neither help nor obey anyone. She'd always had the strength to suppress them, to hold them back. Her strength faded now, even as she knew she must keep the darkness inside. It churned within her, neither suppressed nor released. The sensation tingled dangerous and enticing—like sin.