

# **GIRL OF DUST AND SMOKE**

**HALO SCOT**





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*A Dark Fiction Novella*

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thank you.*

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## Little Girls and Murder Babies

Now

“I like it when they burn.”

The strange new girl says strange new things. Her name is Isobel.

The residents think she’s a witch. “She knows magic,” they say, carving the air.

But Isobel doesn’t know magic; she knows people. Her whispers are weapons. Her smiles are swords. She knows your heart, and you think her thoughts. Her thoughts are thieves. Her bribes are spells. Her charms are snares. She lures fish into traps, then snaps her shark mind shut.

Isobel has behaved, though. She hasn’t hurt anyone since she arrived. She hurt many before she arrived, but so have all those here. They’re murder babies, parent killers. Happy Hearts is a homeless shelter for little girls and boys who never grew up. They’re runts. Anomalies. Odd, weird, and razor-sharp. “Put them in a corner, and don’t make eye contact,” society says.

Happy Hearts is that corner.

No, murder is not what makes Isobel special here. What makes Isobel special is her hands; they're clean. She doesn't kill; she makes others kill. She hisses in their ears, and they wield her words. She listens for dreams and sharpens desire. *See me.* She sees you. *Hear me.* She hears you. *Know me.* She knows you like a shadow.

"She's dangerous," the cook says.

"She's not like the others," the cleaner says.

"Give her time," the nurse says. "She's young, different. It might take longer, but she'll find her way."

"No," the cook says. "There's something wrong with Isobel."

The cook is right: There's something wrong with Isobel, indeed. In fact, there are many things wrong with Isobel. Things happen around her. Bad things. Scary things. She changes people. She reaches inside and molds their minds. But nobody notices. Nobody resists. Nobody knows she's knotting their strings.

"Daddy's ashes. Mommy's ashes. Sissy and Buddy both fell down," Isobel often says. She's a sickly girl. Skeletal and small, she inspires no intimidation, but intimidate she does. Freckles splatter her ashen skin, and she stands crooked, her spine a vine. Her back is beautiful, her sole beautiful trait. Straight blue-black hair sprouts from her family, but her large violet eyes are her own. The purple came from nowhere. Isobel wishes she came from nowhere, too. Nowhere is better than somewhere, in her experience. You can't hurt shadows. You can't scream in space.

"Where did your family go?" the nurse often asks.

"They flew away."

Those were her first words in this new place: "They flew



away.” Pity. Her family was famous. Legendary, even. Three kids, two parents, one sob story, zero leads. Ash on the wind, over the dusty plains. But Isobel’s hands are squeaky clean, though her soul is dirty as mud. If she speaks, turn around. If she waves, run away. *I want.* Here’s a coin. *I need.* Here’s a hug. *I love.* Here’s a kiss. *I bleed.* Here’s a knife. She uses silent wishes to steal free will, and they thank her for the leash.

“Play with me. I like games,” Isobel says.

So the residents play her games. She makes them jump. She makes them dance. She makes them laugh, and she makes them cry. They think they’re winning, but nobody wins Isobel’s games. It’s fun for her. They pretend it’s fun for them, too.

Yes, Isobel Walsh is a strange new girl in a strange new world saying strange new things. Though she’s more gun than girl, more weapon than woman, twenty-five years old in a world made of clay.

\* \* \*

Isobel is hungry. She’s often hungry. Her parents’ RV always had too much food, but Happy Hearts always has too little.

She calls the others with her flute-like voice. They melt from walls and harden at her feet, wax dolls ready to serve. All in their twenties and thirties, they act like children. They want to be children. Orphans earn pity; vagrants earn disgust.

There’s Rowan. Rowan is a gentle boy. Life is not gentle to gentle boys. Isobel is gentle. She takes his tiny man-baby hand and leads him through the white-washed house. Rowan likes Isobel. Everyone likes Isobel. No one knows why, but they know they do—very, very, *very* much. Isobel knows why, but she won’t tell you. Instead, she whispers in Kenzie’s ear, and

Kenzie surrenders her bread ration. Kenzie likes bread, but she likes Isobel more. Then Fitz, always the hero, yields his water ration, and in a place like Happy Hearts, water is gold. Last and not least, Ula proffers a can of stolen corn. If Housemother and Housefather discover the theft, even Isobel cannot protect Ula. They won't find out, though. They never find out. Isobel is too cunning for them and this world.

Here's Isobel's queendom: Rowan, Kenzie, Fitz, and Ula. Kenzie talks too much; Ula talks too little. Rowan is too naive; Fitz is too nihilistic. Together, they balance each other and Isobel. They play, eat, sleep, and wake, slaves to routine.

Six in the morning: eyes open, beds made. Isobel leads the dance. They scrub themselves with wipes and dress in white linen tunics with slippers. It's a washed-out world, and Isobel likes it this way. When they're all the same, differences stain bright, blood in the sand, stars in the night.

Next, breakfast: tea and bread. The tea is always weak, and the bread is always stale, but Bara does her best to coax life from dust. The cook is a mother to all searching for one. Isobel is not searching for a mother; she had too much time with her own. But many want mothering, and Bara wants to mother. Wayfarers find solace in her large brown frame, silver hair, and firecracker eyes. She's comforting, sweet. Her voice is honey, and her smile is sugar. Isobel doesn't want sugar; it's addictive, controlling. Isobel is the one in control.

Shoulder to shoulder at the farm table, the residents lick their plates clean, then start chores. It's seven o'clock: wipe dishes, sweep floors, vacuum all the dust. These are the cleaner's jobs, but Caelin is lazy. There's not much to say about him: hazel eyes, oily straw hair, flaky skin, an encyclopedia of complaints. He's dull, skinny, whiny, and useless. Useless is bad. *Useful* is

good, is *safe*. Isobel learned that from her wandering days. So Isobel makes herself useful, and the others follow.

They dig out doors and windows from overnight dust drifts as their faraway neighbors do the same. After, they help Bara stack food and water from their daily truckload. Their rusty van is unsuited for frequent travel, so they rely on these rations. It's not good to rely on anyone or anything. Isobel's parents taught her smart, if not well, but they aren't here now, so Isobel stocks the pantry. She piles cans into a tower and lines two water jugs along the wall—no running taps because of the drought. It's not enough. It's never enough. But they'll survive. Isobel always survives.

After, Fitz and Kenzie take out the trash. There isn't much trash. Waste is a luxury. Rowan and Ula beat the laundry on the line—without water, of course. Wet-washing and wet-baths occur once per month. More often, and the truckloads stop. The truckloads can't stop. They'd all die within days. Rules are important. Isobel's parents taught her that, too.

Chores are done. It's ten o'clock. The residents work on their studies. Online design and development cushion Happy Hearts, and everyone must pull their own weight. After two hours of screen-squinting, it's time for lunch at noon. Bara always serves the same one-pot meal midday: beans, corn, and rice. Isobel doesn't mind. It's food, consistent and steady. She likes consistent and steady. Her parents were neither. Their RV was a rocket through a supernova.

But Isobel doesn't think about them now. She tries not to think about them at all, but she must, because from one to four, residents meet with Nurse Riley for checkups and group therapy. Isobel likes checkups. She likes to feel noticed and pretends to feel wanted. But she doesn't like therapy. Riley is

kind and quiet, dark-skinned and doe-eyed. He listens well, and he asks the right questions. Isobel doesn't like questions. Questions lead to answers, and answers lead to truth. So Isobel lies. Riley knows Isobel lies, but he lets her lie. Everyone lets Isobel lie.

At four after group, they fix things. Something always needs fixing at Happy Hearts. Sew blankets, patch clothes, seal windows and doors. Too much is broken, and there's never enough thread.

Another one-pot meal at six. Dinner is lentils, pasta, and peas—always. Housemother and Housefather join the residents and staff only now. The rest of the day, Elsie and Jessie Croy bunker upstairs in their room. They're odd creatures, neurotic and strict, with beady eyes, salt-and-pepper hair, greasy skin, and bony bodies. When they talk, their voices croak, but they don't talk often. As a long-term homeless shelter, Happy Hearts earns government checks. That's why the Croys bought it, for money, nothing else. They don't care about the residents, and they ignore the staff. Isobel doesn't mind. She likes invisibility.

In the evening, from seven to ten, it's free time. Fitz reads on a tablet from the Croys' online library. He's tall, dark, and broad with a shaved head and warm brown eyes. His conscience is too big, his heart too fragile. He wants to save the world, but the world doesn't want saving.

Rowan peers over Fitz's shoulder, brows pinched in concentration. Rowan doesn't read well; he orphanage-hopped till he outgrew the system. He's tiny, a pebble, though he wishes he were a mountain. People walk all over him, and he thanks them for their steps. Auburn ringlets bounce in his wake, and his chestnut eyes are too wide and too bright. He's a twenty-two-year-old child in a world built for ghosts. His bronze skin

shines like a statue's, and he stands proud if not tall.

Fitz helps Rowan read. That's part of his problem: He helps too much. People take advantage of helpers, but Fitz Fletcher suffers both a superhero's name and complex. He wants to help. He *needs* to help.

Kenzie doesn't want or need to help. She's gorgeous, and she knows it. With green eyes, strawberry braids, and olive skin, she commands every room and attracts every eye. She has curves, sass, and legs for days, plus a criminal record just as long. Kenzie doesn't mind the record, but she does mind the scars. She covers her legs with a threadbare blanket as she stands on the dusty sectional and pantomimes with the TV. She's a performer, so she must perform. There are two channels, both of them news, so weather reports (always dust storms) and economic forecasts (always depressing) limit Kenzie's dramatic gusto. It suits her, though. She's a diva, squeezing heartache from humdrum and anguish from ordinary.

Opposite Kenzie, Ula curls in a corner, praying to disappear. She blends into the Kansas dust with beach-sand skin, sky-blue eyes, and wavy hair spun from sunshine. If she wanted to dance, she'd be a dancer, but she doesn't want to dance, not anymore. Quiet and confused, Ula is a feather, soft and sensitive and aching to fly. She can't fly, of course; her parents cut her wings. She cut theirs, too, but she didn't mean to, or so she says. Though she doesn't say much. She watches everything and everyone, especially Isobel.

Isobel plays solitaire. She doesn't like solitaire. She prefers games with opponents, with winning, with success. You cannot beat yourself. You are both winner and loser at once. Solitaire is stupid, Isobel decides, so she tosses the cards across the living room. Ula picks them up and puts them away. Isobel doesn't

even need to ask.

At ten, it's bedtime. Dry-brush teeth, then sleep. There are three bedrooms upstairs: one for residents, one for staff, one for directors. The cots are uncomfortable, and the sheets are chalky with dust. Still, Isobel sleeps well. She doesn't hear the stairs creak when her housemates use the downstairs bathroom in the night. She doesn't hear *squeak-squeak* from the compost toilet lid. She doesn't hear wind against shiplap, or groaning floorboards, or whimpering pendulum lights. No, Isobel hears nothing and dreams nothing here at Happy Hearts. That's how she likes it, dark and empty. Her wandering days were not empty. They were full, too full, and bursting at the seams.

## Chase Me

### Before

Isobel was born in a storm. Dust clogged her first wails, and smoke stung her unused eyes. She was an angry baby, strange from the start. Her siblings grew bored with her. Bridget and Brodie had better things to do at two. Isobel was a nuisance to her parents as well. The twins had been easy, docile, but Isobel was neither. She was all too aware of her infant state, unable to walk or talk or do anything interesting. Isobel liked interesting. She *needed* interesting. Life on the road was harsh, cruel, and Isobel's first word was "hate."

The Walsh family started with fortunes. The fortunes were bland—and fake, of course. "Magic doesn't exist, Bel," Pa often told his runt, "but people *want* magic to exist, so we pretend it does."

Isobel, now older and unfortunately also wiser, said, "So we're frauds."

Ma scowled. If there was one thing Blaire Walsh wouldn't

tolerate, it was being called a fraud. As it was, she wouldn't tolerate most things and held few friends. She preferred isolation, for herself and her family. Fewer influences. Fewer bad habits. Yes, she scammed people out of money, but times were tough. It was the customer's fault. People would pay any price for hope.

"We aren't frauds," Ma said.

"We're opportunists," Pa added.

"Blake, don't use big words. It's against our brand."

"Yes, ma'am."

And the Walsh family had an ironclad brand. By Isobel's seventh birthday, when the twins were nine, Walsh was a label, a patent. They came alliterated: parents Blaire and Blake, twins Bridget and Brodie, and Bel for Isobel, the tagalong afterthought. Isobel did not like being Bel. Bel was not her name. But her parents didn't listen. They were a package: scrawny and short with "B" names, pale skin, straight blue-black hair, and narrow gray eyes. Isobel's eyes were not gray. Ma and Pa gave her contacts to hide the violet, but Isobel suffered an allergic reaction and could not wear them. Nobody was sympathetic; she was ruining their image. They tried to hide her freckles, too, but dust scratched most makeup away.

That was okay, her parents decided. Isobel had two mutations, two dangers to the brand, but she was the smallest, so she could hide. Isobel liked hiding. Bridget and Brodie did not like hiding. Isobel shrank in the back while they sat front and center, club feet out and proud beside their good ones, beautiful in every way. Isobel's feet were fine, but her spine curved like a snake. Still, she could outrun the twins' taunts and her parents' complaints.

"Bel, come back," Ma and Pa called, their voices brassy and



blunt.

“Bel, there’s cake,” Bridget and Brodie lied, their voices reedy and sharp.

Isobel’s voice was quiet, a flute, and she whispered, “No, Sissy and Buddy. There’s never any cake.”

Soon, the Walshes ignored Isobel. Their four-person unit worked like a charm, like that fool’s magic Pa always rambled on about. When the twins reached twelve, they started vlogging on their phones, and their RV life became a sensation. They were in the thick of crisis, and people loved to rubberneck struggle. Comments exploded with questions about homeschooling, rations, rest stops, waste dumps, caravans, and dust markets. The twins glamorized nomadic life, and America devoured their lies.

Their most popular video, with over three million likes, was an RV tour plus fortune-telling session. Their RV was nothing special in their current caravan, but to coastal city dwellers and listless suburbanites, the RV was escape, was freedom. On the outside, white trim and chipped red paint welcomed visitors to their metallic home. Bridget giggled in the video, banging the door, always so rough with things, with life.

Behind the camera, Brodie narrated the interior as they stepped inside. There was a tiny kitchen across from a table with booths. Enamel mugs ringed with tea stains sat on the counters. Camping pots, pans, crockery, and cutlery dirtied the sink. Behind the kitchen, a couch and TV faced each other, and in the back were two bedrooms: one for parents, one for kids. Isobel didn’t like sharing a bed with the twins. She didn’t sleep much, and she didn’t sleep well, especially when Pa drove. His whistling carried from the front to the back, hacking Isobel’s dreams into nightmares.

After the video tour came the session. Ma and Pa sat in one booth, and their victim sat across the cramped table in the other. The twins filmed in the kitchen while Isobel watched from the couch. *Make them come to you*, Ma always taught. *Make them chase you*. And they did. Everyone chased the Walshes. This client was no different, a young nomad with little direction and less ambition. The Walsh brand could work with that.

"Yes," Pa said, holding one of the client's hands while Ma held the other. "Today is a turning point for you. Change is scary, but you must embrace it."

"Faith is key," Ma said. "Trust yourself. You will know the right road when you see it. Do not be afraid to choose the wild path."

"But be gentle with yourself. Be firm in your decision, but soft in your judgment. Other travelers wait for your guidance."

"You will meet someone radical and someone conservative. Your fate is to become a bridge."

The video continued for another twenty minutes of vague and noncommittal nonsense. Isobel left halfway through filming, but its popularity haunted her. "Choose the wild path" became a slogan—a borderline religion to some. Fellow wanderers recognized Isobel by her squid-ink hair and pearl-white skin, begging her for fortunes, for fate. That's what they all wanted: fate, destiny. *You mean something. You're special*. But they meant nothing, and nobody was special, so Isobel always murmured a weak, "Be wild," to deflect desperation with ambiguity.

Even at ten, Isobel understood too much. Walsh was a brand—an all-American, authentic, marketable brand. *Chase me*. People chased them. *Need me*. People needed them. Targets stalked the red and white RV, seeking redemption.

"Make them wait," Ma instructed.

"Absence increases value," Pa added.

"Blake, language."

"Sorry, Blaire. What I mean is, the less they see you, the more they want you. Better?"

"Better."

Vocabulary was a sin in the Walsh household. They were approachable, everyday people, just like you and yours. Isobel hated the costumes, the facade. She hated most things at this point in her short life.

"Bel, are you listening?" Pa asked.

"Yes," Isobel said, obedient—on the surface. She always listened. That was her job. She listened for whispers, then she weaponized secrets. Her family couldn't control her as they controlled the others, because they taught her all their tricks: their first mistake.

"Then what was the lesson?" Ma asked. She itched to exercise her infamous temper.

"Make targets chase us for their approval and attention."

Ma slapped the table. Isobel startled. The twins grinned. Pa mediated. He always kept his cool, even when he shouldn't.

"They're not targets," he said. "They're clients."

"And don't use 'approval' or 'attention,'" Ma snapped. "It's not on-brand. It's too...clinical."

"Yes, Ma," Isobel said.

"We only want what's best for you, Bel," Pa said.

"Call me Isobel."

"Go to your room."

Isobel didn't. She stormed out of the RV and shouted over her skeletal shoulder, "Chase me."

Her family didn't chase her. They wouldn't risk their image. But Isobel wasn't an image. Isobel was a blur.

## Pretty Pennies and Ugly Ducklings

Now

Isobel is not a pretty girl. That's a good thing, because the world has too many pretty girls, all fighting for the spotlight. No, Isobel is an ugly girl, fighting for the shadows.

Well, not ugly exactly, but not beautiful. Her eyes are nice, but her face is forgettable. She's too skinny, too small, too unsettling and strange. Isobel knows this. She wins no glances unless others recognize her (in)famous genes. *You're a Walsh*, they'd say, stuck between awe and fear. But nobody winks, catcalls, or courts Isobel. This suits her. Isobel craves control, and romance is a cataclysm.

"Isobel, tell me about your parents," Nurse Riley says in group. He crosses his legs, clasps his hands, and focuses on her. The other residents form a circle in the living room, cross-legged on the floor. Isobel is the only one on the couch, her musty throne.

"They flew away," Isobel says yet again. She hates questions, but she hates answers more.

"Before they flew away," Riley presses, "what were they like?"

"They called me Bel. I am not Bel."

Kenzie twirls a braid. Ula hugs her knees. Rowan fiddles with his tunic, and Fitz frowns at the dust-coated window. They didn't share much, either. Parent killers don't want to talk about parents. Though in their cases, murder was a mistake. Isobel doesn't make mistakes.

Riley sighs, uncrosses his legs. A dust bunny floats across the floor. "Isobel, I can't help you unless you let me help you."

"I don't need help," Isobel says. "I need food, water, and shelter. That's why I'm here."

"But what about the future? What are your plans?"

"I don't make plans."

"Then what about goals?"

"I live in the moment. You should, too."

Frustrated, Riley rubs his dark face. "If you could be anything, what would you be?"

"A bird," Isobel says.

"I mean in terms of career."

"Yes, a bird."

"I worry about you, Isobel."

"I worry about you, too, Riley."

Group is over. Again, no progress. Isobel prefers treading water. She's happy in her puddle. She doesn't want to join a lake.

The door and window seals need fixing, so Isobel encourages Kenzie and Fitz to shoulder the work. How? Kenzie wants new lipstick, so Isobel steals some from Bara. Fitz wants extra reading time, so Isobel smuggles him a tablet. They both owe

her, so they both pay their dues.

Rowan and Ula do not owe Isobel today, so Rowan patches a blanket while Ula mends Isobel's tunic. There's a tear near the bottom from when Isobel stacked cans this morning—that's the lie Isobel told Riley. The truth? Isobel sleepwalks. It's a dangerous pastime, one which annoys her. No control, no memory. Ula caught her once and kept her secret. Isobel has trusted Ula ever since, but not too much.

"Can you...um...never mind," Ula says. She blushes scarlet and hides behind her sunshine hair.

Isobel arches a blue-black eyebrow. She does not ask, "Can you what?" She does not reply, "It's okay, you can tell me." In fact, she does not say anything, nor does she need to. Silence sparks tongues.

"Sorry, it's...the hem," Ula says. "To make it even..."

Ula does not finish her sentence. Her voice is soft, her words clumsy. Isobel likes Ula's voice and words. They're warm, gooey. She can weave them into her web.

"I don't need it even," Isobel says.

"Right...of course." Ula eyes Isobel's crooked posture, then blushes deeper, red-hot regret. "Oh, no...I didn't mean... however you want—"

"It's fine." It's not fine. Isobel's spine is crooked. But that's not Ula's fault. Despite Isobel's quirks, she is not one to lash out. She blames the source and no one else. This is not mercy, but a different shade of control. Strength means forging flaws into armor. Isobel's spine is one of her many shields.

"How...?" Ula shakes her head, severing the question.

Isobel is disappointed. Ula is curious. Ula is not supposed to be curious.

"I've always been this way," Isobel says, her tone a scythe.

Ula shirks away, and Isobel leaves to plant more weeds.

\* \* \*

"I'm sorry."

At breakfast the next morning, Ula apologizes.

"No worries," Isobel says, though she does worry about Ula. The woman is a key, but Isobel likes her doors locked.

"I...like your spine," Ula says. She says strange things, too, but Ula is a pretty girl, so she can get away with saying strange things.

"I like silence," Isobel returns. She finishes her bland tea and dry bread, then stands to start chores—well, to bribe others to start chores. *Work smarter, not harder*. Pa loved to parrot that at dinners. Isobel loved to fantasize about his death.

"I'm bored," Kenzie complains. "Every day, it's the same damn song."

*Good*, Isobel thinks. She likes boredom. Boredom is predictable. Boredom is safe. She knows what excitement feels like, and it doesn't feel great.

"Everywhere is boring," Fitz says, sweeping the floor. "If you want to move, then move, but don't expect anything different."

"You're such a killjoy," Kenzie says. She wipes the dishes, leaving grimy streaks. "Indulge my wanderlust for once."

"Stability is more important than wanderlust."

"Ah, yes, because you're so *wise*."

"Stop it," Rowan says. He and Fitz have grown closer lately. Though Rowan is still a gentle boy, Fitz reveals his hidden edge. Isobel notices. She notices everything.

Kenzie laughs. "Calm down, Rowan. I'm teasing."

"Well...don't." Rowan's words are not frightening, but Kenzie

lets it go. She has never understood love in the human sense. Music is her love, her passion, and it makes more sense than people.

People don't make sense.

People make trouble.



## Want Me

Before

“Ma has a gun.”

Ma pulled Bridget close and covered Brodie’s eyes. He did not remember Isobel. She sat on the RV couch, young and confused.

“It’s okay, honey,” Pa told Bridget. “She’s practicing.”

Ma was not practicing. Isobel knew this. Pa knew this. Bridget and Brodie did not know this.

“I’m scared, Pa,” Brodie said. “What if Ma hurts us?”

“Ma won’t hurt you,” Pa said. “Ma loves you. She’s cleaning it, that’s all.”

Ma was not cleaning it. Isobel knew this, too. She knew too much, but Pa still forgot about her.

“Don’t do anything stupid, Blake,” Ma shouted outside the RV. She banged on the wall, and the tin box shivered. “If I hear a siren, this whole place’ll blow.”

Pa didn’t do anything stupid, though he should have done

something, and stupid was better than nothing. He could have called the police, or started the engine, or hid the kids in the back while he calmed his wife outside. But he did none of those things, because Ma was not bluffing. Isobel knew this as well. She knew her mother would raze the place. Isobel would, too, if given the chance.

"It's the middle of the night, Blaire," Pa shouted back. "Let's talk tomorrow."

"It's always tomorrow with you," Ma said. "I'm done with tomorrow. Let me see the kids." She slammed the gun into the RV, and the metal bawled.

By now, the caravan had awoken. They didn't interfere, though. These were the Walshes. They were famous, rehearsing. They knew what they were doing. If Isobel screamed, the caravan would think it was staged. If Isobel called for help, the cops would think it was a prank. She was trapped in a filthy RV with twins who ignored her and a father who forgot her. Helpless. Powerless. *Weak*—

No.

Isobel was never weak.

"Let me see my babies!" Ma shouted. She banged the RV again. The metal splintered Isobel's ears. She slid off the couch and crept toward the back.

"When you're calm, Blaire, of course," Pa said. He was always calm—always far too calm. Bridget sobbed. Brodie shook. Pa clenched his jaw and waited.

Isobel did not wait.

Force would not work. Fighting fire with fire led to a bigger fire. Neither would logic. Reason fueled Ma's moods. But praise was her off switch. It couldn't come from Isobel, though. No, Isobel's hands must remain clean.

At the back of the chipped red RV, a door squeaked open and closed. Isobel flew between the squeaks. Nobody heard. Nobody saw. Ma shrieked louder. Pa spoke softer. Bridget and Brodie cried like babies, even though they were fourteen. Isobel did not cry. She was never allowed to be a baby.

"Give them to me," Ma screeched.

"Blair, please," Pa said.

"They're *mine*."

"Yes, they are, but you need to calm down."

A bang. A gunshot. A runaway bullet. Twin teenage sobs. The Walsh brand faded into the background as Isobel wove through the caravan. She finger-combed her hair and smoothed her nightgown. Presentable. *Powerful*. People knew her. People wanted her. And she knew who wanted her most. Well, a version of her.

*Knock, knock, knock.*

A door creaked open. A fan's jaw dropped. His navy pajamas blended into his navy RV. Some people became their home. Isobel would never become hers.

"Bridget?" the boy asked. "Bridget Walsh?"

Isobel thanked fate for the dark. In the midnight lamplight of the rest stop, she could pass for her sister. Isobel was famous, too, but in a logistical way. She was an entry on a form, a scribble on a list, never her own separate title. Bridget was more than a title. Bridget was a symbol, a *sex* symbol—almost legal, already polished on a pedestal for her fleeting flash in the sun.

The boy was Bridget's age, also fourteen. Isobel knew this, because he wrote it in his every comment: "So it wouldn't be weird if we were together."

It would be weird, username xxxJoey14.

It would be weirder still if Bridget's stalker knew this was Isobel, only twelve.

xxxJoey14 didn't know, though. He didn't notice Isobel's violet eyes or freckles. He didn't spot her two good feet or crooked spine. All Joey saw was the hint of a figure teasing the cotton nightgown, and the suggestion of breasts was enough to melt his puberty-mauled brain.

"Sorry it's late," Isobel said, invoking Bridget's confidence. She had none of her own. "I couldn't get away before. Parents and all."

Joey didn't answer. It was possible he *couldn't* answer. Too much blood pooled between his legs for thoughts to form up top. He lived with his parents, too, but they were asleep. Isobel's parents were not. She remembered this with sharp urgency and let a strap slip down her arm. She was a child, but she had lived a thousand years.

"I read all your messages," Isobel said. "I wanted to reply, but nothing seemed good enough, so here I am."

"So here you are," Joey choked out.

Isobel let a tear fall. She wasn't crying—she didn't cry—but she could control her body the same as others' minds.

The tear animated Joey. "Bridget, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing," Isobel said, wiping her eyes that were not gray, that were not Bridget's. "It's...stupid."

"I'm sure it's not stupid. How can I help?" Joey was eager to please, and Isobel was eager to tease.

"No, it's fine. I don't want to put you out."

"You'd never put me out. What is it?"

Isobel paused and pretended she didn't let her strap slip further. "My mother...Ma. She's sad about the latest video. She thinks people didn't like it."

Joey's eyes ballooned in his skull. "Didn't like it? I *loved* it. All my friends did, too. The trail mix part was *genius*. Showed life on the road."

It was not genius, but Isobel was. She shifted her nightgown—oops, a thigh—and braided the rest of his strings.

"Would you mind...if it's not a bother...telling her that?" Isobel asked. "She could use a boost. I'll mention you in the next video."

She would not mention him, but Joey would not remember. His first glimpse of breast erased all the rest.

Isobel glanced down and summoned a blush. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry. So embarrassing." *Want me.*

Joey wanted her. "S'not embarrassing," he babbled, tongue-tied by a nipple. He wandered toward the Walsh trailer, a clown grin on his face.

He didn't see Ma's gun.

Or smell the diesel.

Or see the real Bridget inside.

Or watch Isobel sneak back into the RV.

He didn't see fear or danger or death in the night.

All he saw was Isobel's breast in his mind.

"Mrs. Walsh, your latest video was *epic*," Joey exclaimed. "*Super* brilliant."

Ma faded from fire to smoke. "Sorry?"

"The trail mix video. My buddies and I *loved* it."

And Ma's gun vanished. *Magic*. No such thing.

Joey vomited praise while Ma drank in fame. Pa, Bridget, and Brodie didn't know that Isobel had saved their lives. Isobel knew. Isobel knew too much. She fell asleep, knotted in a ball, molested by nightmares, forced to grow old. She was never a baby, rarely a child, always an object, forever a treat.

Joey left an hour later with autographs and a story to sell.

## Baby Dolls and Cheap Prizes

Now

**A**t twenty-five, Isobel is stunted. She is a doll, and sex is a prize. She has never been in love, because she can't afford to fall.

But she has been in hate.

Many times.

She hates to love, but she loves to hate. Love is a fall. Hate is a rise. So here, at Happy Hearts, she tries to hate.

Isobel hates Kenzie's theatrics, her stubborn hope after all she lost.

Isobel hates Fitz's morals, his tragic heroism bleeding into their castoff afterlife.

Isobel hates Rowan's optimism, his submission, the overeager way he yields to every dust mote in the house.

And Ula...Isobel hates Ula most. She's too quiet, too calm, too odd and familiar. Isobel doesn't like familiar. Familiar is dangerous, a viper inside Pandora's box. Isobel prefers foreign.

New shores, new lands, new skies and stars.

Unfortunately, Isobel's stuck on Earth, and Ula is, too.

"Isobel, help me with this soda bread," Bara calls from the doorway.

"It's free time," Isobel says. She stays on the couch, watches the news, ignores Kenzie's pantomime. Fitz and Rowan cuddle over a tablet, and Ula shrinks into the shadows.

"I know, but I could use you," Bara says. "Storm's comin' tomorrow, so we gotta prep."

A storm is always coming. Life is always dying.

"I'm busy," Isobel says.

"It'll be fun." Bara opens her large brown arms in an air hug. She should be Isobel's mother, but she is not, and Ma carved trauma deep.

"No," Isobel says.

"I'll help," Rowan chirps.

"Sorry, darling, I need Isobel for this one," Bara says.

"But I can make soda bread."

But it's not about soda bread. Isobel knows this, so she does not budge.

"Stop being such a bitch, Bel," Kenzie says.

"I am not Bel," Isobel says. Her chains loosen. Her demons wiggle free. She does not panic—she cannot afford panic—but she does free-fall, control clipped at the roots.

"Kenzie, relax," Fitz says. "Isobel, help Bara."

Like that, the dynamic flips. Kenzie dethrones Isobel, and Fitz replaces her. Isobel's second chance becomes a second cage.

"Please, honey," Bara begs. She does not budge, either.

Defeated, Isobel follows the cook into the kitchen. She lives in a glass palace under an avalanche. Any power is fragile and



short-lived.

"Isobel, can I talk to you about something?" Bara asks. She leans on the island opposite Isobel. There is no soda bread.

"Do I have a choice?" Isobel asks. She hates lies that are not her own, but she hates heart-to-hearts even more.

"It's important. Have you heard the news?"

"What news? There is a lot of it lately."

Bara chuckles. "Yes, there is." Her warm face sobers, and she scans Isobel with kind eyes. "Have you heard about the memorial? The statue?"

"No, and I do not want to," Isobel says. She refuses to melt, to become a hot mess. Instead, she is a cold scar, and she will not compromise her spartan emotional depth for memory's vicious knife.

"I think you should hear this. I think you should know."

Isobel remains silent. She curates her battles, and she recognizes a futile fight. Unsolicited conversation is a brutal weapon.

"Kansas has built a statue, a memorial to your family, to commemorate their lives and contribution to Midwest tourism." Bara slides her phone across the island. Isobel stares at the photo, unblinking. Statue versions of Ma, Pa, Bridget, and Brodie sit, presidential, atop a stone bench. A plaque at their feet reads: *The Walsh Family Memorial. For their selfless contribution to society during the hardest of times, and for their enduring legacy of adventure and freedom, we honor them with this humble tribute. May their souls live forever, and may their voices never fade.*

Isobel does not react. She does not swallow her bile. She does not seethe at the injustice, nor balk at the lies, nor rise to the sour fury in her gut.

"I'm sorry they forgot you," Bara says, pointing at the statued

quartet.

"They didn't forget me," Isobel says. *They didn't want me.* Her voice is crisp and clear, the ring of a blade. The memorial is unfair, but so is life. That does not surprise Isobel. What surprises Isobel is that, even in death, the sun shines down on her family but somehow misses their many shadows. At least the garden around their statue became dust. Everything fades to dust, even them.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Bara asks. "Group is great, but some things are better felt alone."

Isobel lifts her head and scowls at Bara's concern. "Then leave me alone."

Bara sighs, but she's not offended. "I'm sorry, honey. Whatever happened to you, I'm sorry, and I'm here."

Isobel leaves the kitchen and returns to the living room. She shuts her mind and locks her heart. Life loves some people, and her family were those people: monsters misremembered as martyrs, villains mislabeled as heroes. They didn't deserve it, but life loved them the same. Life does not love Isobel. Life hates Isobel. If she does the right thing, life calls her wrong. If she plays nice, life turns cruel. If she is good, life sends her all the bad. Cursed sounds self-pitying, but no other word holds Isobel's misfortune. *Make your own fate*, Ma had often screeched. But fate is a wriggly, slippery, troublesome thing, and Isobel could never speak its tongue.

"Is the soda bread done?" Rowan asks.

Fitz hushes him, because he understands. Ula understands, too, but she makes no sound. Kenzie might understand, but she doesn't care enough to listen. The news commands her muse. For once, Isobel focuses on Kenzie and blocks out the rest.

*"After years of hardship, Congress has declared the Midwest*

*drought a national emergency. This grants the US government additional legislative and executive powers to take the aggressive action we sorely require."*

Kenzie tosses her braids and worships the ceiling, olive curves slithering with fairy-light splashes. This declaration is not a surprise, even less of a surprise than the Walsh family's shit-shined memories. The dust has invaded most of Isobel's life. It's as familiar as lies.

*"It's a disaster," the news anchor continues. "A man-made and natural disaster, a tragedy. Some are calling it the Second Dust Bowl, alongside the Greater Depression. A century after their namesakes, and we're in an even worse position. Overfarmed land, row crops gone, frequent dust storms—America's heartland is dying...again."*

Kenzie interprets the heartland's demise with a pirouette. The news is all doom and gloom. The news is also right.

*"Some former farmers flee to the coasts, but coastal living is expensive. Others remain in the Midwest and live off welfare. There's been an increase in orphanages and homeless shelters, along with welfare fraud. Many of the owners cash government checks and neglect their residents. Massive economic upheaval is on the horizon, that's for certain. Stock up on water, canned goods, toiletries, and dust masks, if you can still find them."*

Kenzie jumps in a circle. Isobel decides to ignore Kenzie from here on out.

*"It's not good. Whatever comes next, I know it's not good. If you thought the recent stock market crash was rough, that was peanuts compared to what's next. How did this happen? The same way it happened before: unchecked consumerism, rampant debt, overproduction and decreased demand, bank closures and increased interest rates, declining international trade. There's a formula for disaster, and we've ticked every box."*

Fitz turns off the TV. "That's enough for tonight."

Kenzie scoffs. "Who elected you king?"

"You don't elect a king," Rowan says.

"No, I suppose you grovel at their feet, suck up to him every spare moment, and trail after him like a fucking groupie."

Everyone ignores Kenzie.

"What happens next?" a shadow asks. The shadow becomes Ula. Ula rarely talks, and when she does, it's seldom such a normal question. Times are tough, indeed.

Fitz pauses. He considers his next words with a frown. "Mass unemployment, unpaid consumer debt, poverty, homelessness, bankruptcies, evictions, wage cuts, deflation, depression, suicide, domestic violence, malnutrition, and starvation."

"So nothing new," the shadow called Ula whispers.

"Nothing new," King Fitz I echoes.

Isobel hates Fitz. She can't compete with ethics. All Ma and Pa left her was damage. Well, Ma and Pa didn't leave Isobel exactly, but if they had left her, they would have left her with nothing. As it was, Isobel left them...in a way. Semantics. Isobel hates semantics, too.

"Isobel...are you okay?" Ula asks. "I mean, because of Bara?"

"Yeah, where is the soda bread?" Rowan asks.

"There is no soda bread," Isobel snaps. She does not answer Ula. She hates Ula, too. She hates her so much it hurts.

"Bedtime," Fitz breathes into the tension.

Isobel glares at Fitz. She hates him so much she wishes he were Brodie, because if Fitz were family, she wouldn't be here. He should be her brother, but he's not. Her brother is a ghost.

"I'm twenty-five," Isobel says. "I don't have a bedtime." But she has since she arrived in this welfare dump. Isobel feels like acting out. She likes acting out, throwing tantrums, but she

never does, because she never can. Fitz brings out the kid in her, the little girl aching for friendship.

He's dangerous.

"And I'm thirty-two," Fitz says with a hard stare, "so it's bedtime."

"How traditional of you," Kenzie says, "pulling age."

"I think it's chivalrous," Rowan says.

"You also think he shits sugarplums."

"True."

They all listen to Fitz and climb the whiny stairs to their bedroom. The five lost souls sink into their cots and fall asleep. Despite her complaints, Isobel feels safe here. Well, she did before the questions and statues. The only memorial the Walsh family deserves is a landfill. They were trash, even Isobel.

But she never hides her stain.

## Fear Me

Before

“We need money,” Ma said. “Fortunes don’t make enough.”

“What about the channel?” Brodie asked.

“It’s good, baby, but we still need more,” Pa said.

“What about publicity?” Bridget asked. “Talk shows, that sort of thing?”

“Everything is virtual, and everything is free,” Ma said. “We can’t afford to go in person, and no one would pay for our tickets. We’re famous, but not that famous. Not yet.”

The Walshes sat at cramped booths in their RV. Once again, they excluded Isobel. Isobel preferred this. She liked when they excluded her. Then they couldn’t harass her.

“This dust is a curse,” Ma said.

“This dust is a *blessing*,” Pa said. “It’s given us opportunity. People love suffering. It’s the reason they buy our fortunes and watch our channel. Without the dust and drought, we’d fail.”

"I hate when you psychoanalyze."

"I hate when you hypocritically use big words."

"Fuck the brand."

"Blair, the children—"

"—should see life for what it is: impossible."

"Your mother doesn't mean that, kids." Pa smiled at Bridget and Brodie. He did not smile at Isobel. He did not include her in his definition of "kids." He did, however, include her in another way. Isobel was a dependent, a write-off, and Pa could cash her in.

"Bel," Pa said.

Isobel wished he paused here, hesitated here, thought about what he wanted to ask his sickly runt.

But Pa did not pause, hesitate, or view Isobel as more than a tax return entry. "You're a pretty girl."

Isobel was not a pretty girl, and Ma said so. "She's not, Blake. Bridget is pretty. Bel is smart. She homeschools herself." Which was a good thing, since Ma and Pa often forgot about Isobel. She wished they forgot about her now.

"Still," Pa continued, "she's a girl, almost sixteen—"

"I'm fourteen," Isobel said. Nobody listened.

"—so we could, you know..."

Isobel knew. Ma knew. Bridget and Brodie did not know, so they asked, "What could we do with her?"

Isobel was a doll, a plaything. She was not flesh and blood. Dread drowned her. She could not breathe, could not think. She could only wait for judgment, for reckoning.

"They want to whore me out," Isobel said. Rage bubbled within her, and she let fury simmer into her words. "I'm *fourteen*. I'm underage. I can't work as a fucking prostitute."

"Bel, language," Ma said. "And you wouldn't be a prostitute."

You'd be a courtesan. Since you are *our* daughter, we could sign a waiver to grant permission. We feed you, care for you, and keep a roof over your head. It wouldn't kill you to show some respect."

"You're pimps."

"We're entrepreneurs," Pa said, calm, too calm, always so goddamn calm. "You'll thank us for the experience later."

Isobel shook with wrath. She was trapped, and she was sick of her cage. "You can't be serious. You can't sell me for sex!" It sounded absurd to her ears, ridiculous and disgusting. But that was the thing with the Walsh family: Beneath their approachable, accessible, everyday veneer, ridiculous and disgusting powered their brand. Parents should protect their children, not exploit them. Then again, Ma and Pa were never parents. They were employers, and that was all.

"Relax," Pa said, more to Ma than Isobel. But Ma wasn't upset over Pa's suggestion, like Isobel. No, Ma was upset that Isobel wouldn't listen. "We aren't selling you for sex," Pa continued. "You'll still live here, in the RV. It's a job, not a sentence. You need to work, same as us. While we're telling fortunes or filming, you'll pull your weight, too."

"I *do* work," Isobel hissed through panic. "I work as hard as you all."

"Do you, Bel?" Bridget asked, dark brows raised. She'd turned into a bitch recently...or she'd embraced what she was from the start. "Brodie and I pull twenty-hour days while you're in our room doing God knows what."

Isobel was not in their room. Isobel was seducing fans, spreading secrets, cultivating rumors, and squashing suspicion, all to uphold the unholy Walsh brand. "God knows what" saved their asses more than once, but she couldn't tell Bridget. She



couldn't tell any of them. They'd use her seduction as proof she should sell her body, but seduction was one thing, and prostitution was another.

"I won't do it," Isobel said. That's all she said, all she could say, and Bridget huffed, bored. Ma was right: Bridget was a pretty girl, and pretty girl meant princess in this dusty hell. Royalty could choose their fate. Isobel could not.

"You must, Bel," Ma snapped. "Don't you care about this family?"

No. Isobel did not care about this family, and neither did Ma. All Ma cared about was business, was brand.

"It's this or the dust," Pa said. He wasn't bluffing. They'd throw Isobel out if she didn't obey. They were trash, and Isobel was the dumpster.

Isobel wanted to storm out of the RV—to slam its walls, cause a scene, kick the dead dirt till she felt better. But she didn't storm out. She didn't cause a scene. And she didn't feel any better. Because she was fourteen. On her own, she'd suffer the same brutal fate. Even ugly, her body was a body, and her hole was a hole.

"I have another idea," Isobel said.

"This isn't a negotiation," Pa said.

"Blake, language," Ma said.

"Sorry, this isn't up for debate."

"Eh..."

"This is final, Bel."

"There you go."

"I can make you more money in a different way," Isobel said. She wished this weren't her idea, that they forced her into this, that she had a normal family in a normal time. But she didn't, and this was her last escape. If not this, she'd become a ghost.

She was already empty. She couldn't disappear.

"If you would just—" Pa started.

"Give me today," Isobel interrupted. "If you hate my idea, I'll listen. I'll...obey."

"Okay," Ma said in an un-okay way. "You have till tonight. And clean yourself up. You look homeless."

Isobel *was* homeless. This RV was never a home.

\* \* \*

Isobel's idea was dangerous, but dangerous was better than stupid, and she'd rather be a killer than a hooker. Well, her idea technically didn't make her a killer, and technicality was her backup. She was a kid. A poor, little, foolish kid. Nobody'd ever suspect her fangs.

Their caravan had stopped near a dust market. Dust markets meant tourists. Tourists meant cash. Crowds gathered beneath pop-up tents. Their pastel flaps swallowed victims whole. These markets were temporary. Storms made it so. No stakes in the ground when the ground was dust. Markets roamed, like caravans, throughout the Midwest. Isobel spotted some familiar faces, fellow nomads on the road to nowhere. But most were tourists. Disaster was exciting when it wasn't your own, when you could leave hardship for home on a plane. Isobel had never been on a plane. She had never flown at all.

Her target was easy to spot. The woman wore jewels while the poor wore rags, and her clothes still shone despite the swirling dust. Isobel did not know her name, but the woman didn't need a name. She was different, and different was a scar. People always remembered scars.

Next, Isobel found her hammer. The man was square-jawed,

early twenties, principled, and gallant. Yes, he'd do fine. A scarf noosed his scruffy neck, and glasses rimmed his ping-pong eyes. He saw everything. Judged everything. And judges were easy to convince. True, they thought themselves difficult, headstrong, but Isobel had long ago learned to spin their gears her way. *Use their momentum as your moves. Use their opinions as your tools*, Pa taught. Pa taught too much. He should have kept his secrets from Isobel, because Isobel wielded them with far better aim.

"The good snacks are that way," Isobel said when the man spotted her.

"Pardon?" he asked, half annoyed and half intrigued. Isobel guessed this was his usual state.

"This place"—she gestured at the periwinkle tent—"is a tourist trap. Kettle corn and doughnuts. We don't eat that anymore, can't afford it. If you want authentic, Patsy's is best." Across the dust, a lavender tent fluttered, sparsely populated.

"You're a...traveler?" the man asked.

Isobel gave him a point for not using *hobo* like most did. "Yes."

He squinted at her. "You look familiar. Do I know you from somewhere?"

"*The Ring*," Isobel said.

He laughed. "You do have a Samara vibe."

"So I've been told." Isobel winked and turned. *Chase me.*

The man chased her. "Do you come here often?"

"Here' doesn't exist often. Dust markets wander."

"Then how do you know about Patsy's?"

"We ran into each other a few times on the road. Sorry, gotta run. Hope you find what you're looking for." *Need me.*

The man needed her. "Wait." He caught Isobel's wrist. She tensed, and he pulled away, embarrassed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. What should I order at Patsy's?"

An easy catch. Eager to serve. Afraid of abandonment. *Follow me.* He would. *Fear me.* He did. He feared the loss of her warmth. Isobel held a spark—a spark she faked, but a spark nonetheless. He'd jump through her hoops to chase it. She offered him attention in isolation, fire on a glacier. Once she lit the candle, he was always her shadow.

"Candied beans," Isobel said.

"Okay, is that what you want, too?" the man asked. "To order, I mean."

"I'm not hungry."

He didn't surrender. As planned. "It's on me. Let me pay. You saved me from that tourist trap, after all."

She pretended to fidget. "Don't worry about it. I don't go to Patsy's, anyway."

"Oh? Why not?"

"Nothing. It's nothing. See you around." *Hunt me.*

The man hunted her. "Why? What happened? Did somebody hurt you?" He puffed out his chest and balled his fists, itching to defend someone's—*anyone's*—honor.

Too bad he'd chosen a weapon to protect. Isobel never had honor, and she wouldn't start now. Still, she could sense his hero complex from a mile away and twisted it in her grip.

"It's fine." Isobel made her eyes water.

"It's not fine at all," the man said. "Tell me. I can help."

She let him stew for fifteen seconds. "That woman"—she pointed at the bejeweled target—"touched me...inside Patsy's. I can't go back. Too many memories. Sorry, I know it's dramatic—"

"It's not dramatic. She assaulted you." The man fumed, chest bulged and fists coiled. "Did you call the cops?"

"The cops didn't believe me. They think I asked for it." Isobel

motioned toward her sheer tunic.

“How fucking—”

“As I said, don’t worry.”

“Of course I worry. *She’s* a criminal, and *you’re* paying. I swear to God I’ll beat the shit—”

“No, no, that won’t change anything.”

“Let me do *something*,” the man begged. “*Anything*, please.”

Isobel paused, pretended to swoon. “I don’t even know your name, yet you’re willing to fight my battles.”

“Henry. And you are...?”

“Mary.” Isobel was not Mary, so Henry would take the fall. “Okay, Henry, if you insist...I have an idea.”

“I’m all yours.”

*Foolish boy.* “Swap her granola with laxative granola.”

Henry tried not to laugh. He failed. “Um...sorry...but how is that revenge?”

“She violated me, so this violates her. It’s strong granola. Super strong. Don’t try any, or you’ll suffer the same gastric fate.”

“You’re a better person than I am, Mary.”

Isobel was not a better person. Poison laced the granola, not laxative. Times were tough, but Isobel was tougher, and she had been making preparations in case. There was always an “in case” in the Walsh family. She refused to sell her body, but she had no issue selling her soul.

Henry swapped the bejeweled woman’s granola. Isobel swiped her wallet, keys, and found her RV. She thanked Henry with an air kiss and promised to (never) call. Then she raided her target’s RV for cash—and her target hoarded a *lot* of cash. Isobel could smell it on her. She had disposable income to burn, so Isobel collected the flames.

The woman died.

The cops came.

They arrested Henry.

That night, the Walsh family left the dust market many pounds richer.

"What if she finds you?" Ma asked, shuffling bills. Reluctant, she accepted Isobel's alternative line of work, but prostitution was always a threat if she failed.

"She won't," Isobel said. "She's dead."

"Good girl," Pa said.

"But what if they find out you killed her?" Brodie asked.

"They won't," Isobel said, "because I didn't kill her. I made someone else."

"How?" Bridget asked.

"He didn't know it was poison."

"But what if he tells the cops about you?"

"Won't matter. We're already gone. They'll think him mad."

"Brilliant," Pa said.

It was not brilliant, but it was not stupid, either. It *was* dangerous, but Isobel relished danger. She had agency. Control. But her hands were clean. They were always clean. And her body was her own, if not her soul.

## Blood Rain and Dust Storms

Now

**T**he storm is a monster.

Isobel is a monster, too.

She doesn't show her claws, though. No, Happy Hearts is her empty place, the bridge between hells. She behaves here. She likes being empty.

Outside, the storm roars. Isobel wants to roar back. She does not, because she is empty. Instead, Isobel sweeps dust into a kitchen corner. Bara watches. Isobel does not like when Bara watches. She sweeps faster. The other residents and staff attend different rooms, so Bara and Isobel are alone. No one owes Isobel today, or she'd already be done. But morning chores are almost over. Isobel can escape soon.

"It's always the birds," Bara says.

Isobel does not ask Bara to clarify, but she clarifies regardless.

"Before every storm, they fly away."

*They flew away.* Smoke. Flames. No, Isobel is empty.

"Some think it's the static," the cook continues. "Ever notice the shocks? When you touch someone's hand?"

Isobel has not noticed. She does not touch other people's hands.

"It can short out an engine. Shorted out the van's a few times, not that we use it. Can't drive through this shit." Bara waves a can toward the dust-darkened window, then resumes organizing the pantry. No truckload today because of the storm, but Bara likes to keep busy. She needs to feel useful. Isobel needs to feel useful, too.

Wind shakes the rickety house. Windows clatter in their sills, and doors strain on their hinges. The lights flicker, then survive.

"Might call this one a black blizzard," Bara says. "Same as before. Can't escape history. Always repeats."

Isobel wants Bara to stop talking. She doesn't want to think about history, or hurricane-force winds, or hundred-mile-wide storms. All Isobel wants to think about is dust—steady, stable, snowlike dust, eternal as damnation.

Bara wants to think about everything. "Mama would've loved this. She was a storm chaser, before the dust pneumonia got her. Family is everything."

*Family is a burden*, Isobel thinks.

"They always welcome you back, even after you've said and done stupid shit, without a moment's pause. They're home, that's what family is." Bara eyes Isobel, a statue in the dust. "God, I'm so sorry. That must be a tough topic for you." She misinterprets Isobel's silence for remorse. "It's okay to cry, honey. In fact, it's more than okay. It's *brave* to cry. That's what Mama used to say. Feelings are a gift."

Isobel wouldn't know. She feels nothing, and she likes feeling nothing. She also likes sweeping, so she sweeps harder and



faster.

"I'm here if you need me, Isobel," Bara says.

"I don't need you, Bara," Isobel says.

"Still, I'm here."

Isobel is itchy. It's the dust. It's Bara. Even when the cook leaves the kitchen, Isobel is still scratchy inside. She doesn't want to feel scratchy. She wants to feel empty. But she prickles like a scab—raw, pink, and weak.

*No.*

Isobel is never weak.

So she sweeps. And sweeps. And sweeps so hard she gets a splinter.

*Shit.*

*Language, Bel.*

*I am not Bel.*

Isobel ignores her ghosts. Her finger swells around the splinter. It's a tiny cut, but to Isobel, the splinter is a sword. She must remove it. But she can't. Not here. Not now. No one can see this dent in her shield, a hole in her armor that could flood her new life.

Isobel abandons the broom and climbs the stairs. The residents' bedroom is vacant. Morning chores are over, and studies start downstairs. Isobel does not start her studies. They will notice Isobel's absence, so she must work fast.

Isobel steals a washcloth from the corner laundry pile and sits against the wall, finger elevated. With a lip-chew and swear-hiss, she rips out the splinter, then tosses it in the dust, so much dust. Blood bubbles. Red beads. Then more blood. Scarlet globes. Isobel wraps the washcloth around her finger, and it's okay, everything's okay, as she escapes another leash.

*No.*

Isobel can never escape.

Red feathers the washcloth, soaking the fabric.

*Please stop, please stop, please stop, please stop*, Isobel prays in heartbeat. She doesn't believe in God, but she believes in the Devil, though she has little soul left to sell. She's been careful, so bloody careful, but the Walsh legacy looms large as the storm.

The Devil doesn't answer. He's done with her shit.

Isobel understands. She's done with her shit, too.

Still, she bleeds.

Then bleeds.

And bleeds, bleeds, *bleeds* some more.

The washcloth is Mars, and Isobel is the moon: pale, ashen, and lifeless. Dizziness washes over her, then panic, then dread. *No*. She did not come this far to die from a splinter. Then why *did* she come this far? Why is she here at all? *Stop*. Isobel survives by ignoring such questions. Yet still, she bleeds.

*Knock*.

The door.

It's locked.

No, it's not.

Isobel forgot.

She tries to stand. She cannot stand. The washcloth splatters the floor red. It's a sponge, and her finger is a faucet. She'll drain in minutes if she cannot stop it.

The door opens.

Isobel cannot run, cannot hide. Her facade fractures. Chiseled from fame and pain, it's become something lost and strange. This person will see her cracks, the fire within marble. They will see Isobel is not marble at all.

So Isobel waits.

She is used to waiting.

She is also used to crumbling.

So she crumbles.

The person enters. The person is Ula. Isobel hates Ula. Ula apparently hates Isobel, too, for her sky eyes widen, then she runs away. *Good*, Isobel thinks. Then she thinks, *Bad*. Ula will tell the others. Ula will bare Isobel's weakness. Ula will—

Ula will return with the first aid kit and lock the door behind her.

Isobel is confused. She cannot think, cannot move. "Go," she rasps, but Ula does not go. Instead, she lifts a towel from the laundry, then sits before Isobel, opening the kit.

"What are you doing?" Isobel asks. She tries to back away, but her back is against a wall. "Leave...now."

"Give me your hand," Ula says. She does not often say much, but she says much now. Her voice is soft as feathers, her face haloed by sunshine hair. Isobel hates her. She *must* hate her. Because she does not feel empty around Ula, and she must feel empty, so she uses hate to burn.

"No," Isobel snaps. She clutches the blood-soggy washcloth to her chest. All she sees is red.

"Isobel, please," Ula says, but she does not beg. She will not beg. She knows begging does not work. "You could die. I don't want you to die."

Isobel doesn't want to die, either. She did before, many times in her past. Now, she doesn't. She wants to live free.

"Me neither," Isobel says, then gives Ula her hand.

Ula holds Isobel's wrist and unwraps the washcloth. She is touching Isobel. Isobel does not want her touch, but she forgets why as blood streams from her finger. Ula reaches into the kit. She sanitizes Isobel's cut. It stings. Isobel hisses. Then Ula squeezes glue on Isobel's finger and covers the cut with a small

bandage. No more blood. All the pain. Too much bloody hate.

“Why?” Isobel asks.

Ula frowns. “Why what?”

“Why save me?”

“Why not?”

“I’m a killer,” Isobel says.

“So am I,” Ula says. “Everyone has something. Some people have lots of somethings. You and I have lots of somethings, so I’m here.” She shivers and adds, “Plus you’d make a scary ghost. I don’t want you to die then haunt me.” Ula says strange things, too, like Isobel.

Isobel lifts her bandaged finger and says, “If you tell anyone—”

“—you’ll kill me?” Ula shrugs. “If someone needs to kill me, I’d like that someone to be you.”

Isobel still cannot think. She wants to say something clever and deflect Ula’s words. But Isobel doesn’t deflect, so Ula’s words slip through. Isobel lets Ula attack her. She likes when Ula attacks her. But she hates Ula. She hates Ula so much it conquers everything else.

“Do you need help?” Ula asks. She points at Isobel’s bloody tunic and mess.

Yes. “No,” Isobel says. *I always need help.*

“Good, I’ll help,” Ula says, answering Isobel’s thoughts and not her words. She throws the bloody washcloth and towel in the trash. Isobel strips, wipes herself down—with baby wipes, not water—and changes into new clothes. Her old clothes join the rags. Nobody will know. Nobody but Ula, scrubbing the last bloodstain on the floor.

Isobel wants to thank Ula, but she will not thank Ula. Thanks is a doorway, and Isobel is locked shut.

Riley bursts into the bedroom, worried, but relaxes when he

spots Isobel and Ula. "Thank God. I thought...never mind what I thought. Why aren't you downstairs?"

Ula raises her rag with the last of the blood, and Riley understands.

"Right, lady stuff. Shit, sorry." He hurries back downstairs, and they follow.

On the stairs, Isobel taps Ula's shoulder, and Ula turns around. Isobel does not thank her, does not open that cursed door, but she does say, "You don't talk much."

Ula nods, quiet.

"You should talk more," Isobel says.

Ula freezes.

Isobel burns.

## Pity Me

### Before

**I**sobel killed many people. She wasn't supposed to like it, but she did. Murder was freedom. If she must be a slave, she'd be murder's, not desire's.

Her targets always drowned in wealth, and her weapons always flared with justice. But she was not a vigilante, and she did not want to be. Her weapons and targets were not bad people, only in bad places at the wrong time. But it bought Isobel freedom. Isobel needed freedom. So her body kept its wings.

"If you change your mind, I've got connections," Pa often said.

"No," Isobel always returned. *I'm not a whore*. But she was a killer, an indirect murderer. She pitted fires against each other, but she didn't start them. Not yet.

Isobel made the Walshes money this way. Their fortunes were gimmicks. Their channel was fickle. Life was feast or famine—most often famine. But Isobel was their beating heart.

Without her jagged whispers and fatal winks, the Walshes would have died far earlier.

“Dust does not forgive,” Ma said far too many times in far too many places. She refused to become another broken-down RV beside the road, another carcass caravan haunted with dried-up youth. Desiccated. Embalmed. No, Ma deserved better, because she said so.

So Isobel whispered.

So Isobel killed.

And it worked for a while.

After a year, her soul was a shabby, moth-eaten thing, worn with holes and fraying edges. Isobel didn’t care. She was in survival mode. One step forward, another notch cut, so Ma and Pa would leave her alone.

Nobody caught Isobel. She was never arrested. The Walshes traveled in endless loops, knitting their way through the Midwest one dust market at a time. They were famous, yet forgotten. Known everywhere, yet followed nowhere. Since the drought, the sun shone stronger, and shadows pooled darker. There were more—and better—places to hide.

This dust market was particularly dark, adults only—though they made an exception for the (in)famous Walshes. Isobel tried not to look, but fantasies slipped through: orgy, BDSM, knockout, and screaming tents. The screaming tents jarred her, and Isobel did not like being jarred. She caught a glimpse of wounds, a quilt of gashes, then steered clear of that area for the rest of their stay. As such, she hadn’t found a target, nor had she found a weapon, so she returned to the RV, reluctant.

Ma and Pa were out refilling water jugs and buying granola, dumping waste and stocking up on diesel. RV life was not glamorous. It often smelled like shit. Isobel never adapted to

the scent. She never fit this life, and this life never fit her, so they both strained at the stitches till the cut opened and bled.

Isobel slid into a booth at the table and pretended her enamel mug held water. It would soon, but for how long after? The drought was ambitious, but so was America. *No*. These were not questions for Isobel to answer. Ma punished curiosity. So Isobel peeled her mind from dust and planned her next plan, schemed her next scheme. *Empty*. She was always so empty. Inspiration didn't come in a void, but Isobel was the void, and she worried she'd never feel again.

*Time*. She needed time. And rest. But life allowed her neither. Between homeschool, work, and travel, there were few pockets to think, never mind thrive. *It doesn't matter*, Isobel told herself. She needed no dreams. Hope was for children. Only those with nothing to lose earned something more, and she had so much left to lose.

The RV shook. Maybe the wind. Or idiot passersby. Dust markets were crowded—the good ones, at least, and this was a great one. This market sold desire, and desire melted even the most iron of hearts.

Another shake. Not wind. Not passersby. The engine? No, Ma fixed it that morning. Something else? Isobel should check. The RV was not her home, but it was her shelter, and nights teemed with monsters.

A third shake, and Isobel rose. She walked toward the back and stalled outside her shared bedroom. Her serpentine spine ached with stillness, but fear caged Isobel. She didn't want to see this. Didn't want to hear this. But she couldn't turn away.

Straight blue-black hair. Unwashed and unraveled. Pale flesh, scrawny limbs. An octopus of passion. Gray eyes narrowed in pleasure. Chapped lips parted in moans. A forbidden dance. A



searing sin. The beginning of the end for them all.

“Bel!” Bridget shouted, then Brodie fell off his twin. They both covered themselves, but Isobel already saw everything and more.

“What...why...holy fuck,” Isobel hissed.

“What the hell are you doing?” Bridget demanded.

“This is my room, too,” Isobel said, and she wished she’d said it stronger. “What the hell are *you* doing?”

“Practicing,” Brodie said, calm, too calm, always so calm and steady like Pa.

“Not that it’s any of your fucking business,” Bridget snapped. She uncovered herself, because the damage was done, but she didn’t care. Bridget was beautiful, and she knew it. She was confident, and she owned it. So she stood from the siblings’ bed and limped toward the doorway. She rested against the frame, crossed her arms beneath her breasts, and leaned on her good foot, hip out. Womanhood blessed Bridget. She knew this, too. She was seventeen, and the world was waiting to worship her.

“What if Ma and Pa find out?” Isobel asked.

Bridget and Brodie laughed.

Isobel did not understand the joke.

“You can either leave now and keep your mouth shut,” Bridget said, “or you can join in. You are family, after all.”

They rarely called Isobel family, and they hardly acknowledged her as their own. Ownership felt...good. Belonging felt *good*. Being wanted and seen in an invisible world felt *very fucking good*.

No.

This was wrong.

“I’ll keep your secret,” Isobel said. She turned to leave, scarred and traumatized, but Bridget looped an arm around her neck

and stuck their bodies together.

"Have you ever lived, Bitty Bel?" Bridget whispered in Isobel's ear. Her breath stank and tickled her skin. Both their chests sharpened. "*Really* lived, I mean? Lived so hard you forgot someday you'll die?"

Isobel had not lived. She had never really lived at all. But she wanted to live. God, she wanted to live so, so bad. Her want dripped on the floor. But she could not want. She *would* not want. Not with Bridget. Not with Brodie. They were family, and family didn't do...*this*.

"No," Isobel rasped, but she did not move. She did not pry herself free.

Bridget kicked the door shut. She pressed herself against Isobel's back and snaked her other arm around Isobel's sunken, filthy stomach. "I know you want to. I *feel* your want." Her toes wriggled in Isobel's secret on the floor. "I can help you, Bel. Say the word."

"Not...not...not like this," Isobel said, though she did want it like this very, very much. "You're my sister."

"Exactly," Bridget murmured. "Nothing is more natural."

Brodie groaned in agreement, stiff on their bed.

"If Brodie scares you, we can send him away," Bridget said. "This is a sister thing, and we haven't bonded in a long time."

"N-no...God, n-n-no," Isobel stuttered. But a flame flashed inside her, moaning, *Yes, God, yes*, and fire was greedy. It scorched logic to ash and smoked through her core. "We...I can't...*this* can't happen."

"So traditional. So...*dead*. I can show you the stars, Bitty Bel. I can bring you the sky."

Isobel squirmed. She tried to remember why she shouldn't, why this was wrong, but her thoughts tangled in a drumbeat of

*I want, I need, I want, I need, I want to see the stars.*

"No," Isobel breathed.

"No?" Bridget asked. She slithered an arm beneath Isobel's clothes, then inside. Isobel gasped as Bridget played her strings. "I didn't hear you, Bitty Bel. Was that a 'no'? The door's locked. You can have anything you want."

Isobel couldn't answer. She was alive. And she would never die. She would stay fifteen forever.

"Shh, I've got you," Bridget said. She shimmied them backward, then laid Isobel on the bed. Brodie stripped Isobel and worked her above while Bridget worked her below.

Isobel was an ocean. A volcano. She writhed like an eel. Bucked like lava. Bridget stole everything, and Isobel let her. Inside and outside, around and around. Isobel fell apart so many times that time itself ignored her.

When Isobel surfaced, it was dark outside. Night or storm? Didn't matter. Her body was mud, mind was ash, heart was smoke, charred by the fire. Brodie lay on one side, Bridget on the other. Isobel should have seen their claws, but it was too dark, and she was too young.

The door burst open. Bridget said she locked it. She did not lock it. Her first lie that day, the first of many, and Isobel felt them all fall down.

"What the *fuck* are you doing?" Ma roared. She boiled in their bedroom doorway with Pa behind her. "Get your clothes on *now*."

The three Walsh siblings did what they were told. They always did what they were told, but they seldom thought about what they were told.

"Blaire, I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation," Pa said.

"Reasonable? They were fucking each other!" Ma shrieked.

"Sorry, Ma," Bridget whimpered. "It was Bel's idea. We didn't want to, but she forced us."

"She wouldn't stop asking," Brodie added. "She kept tugging on my...you know."

Betrayal. Hurt. Isobel froze. The twins had played her. Like a fiddle. And Isobel had let them.

*Pity me*, the twins prayed. So Ma and Pa pitied them. The twins were the victims, and Isobel was the villain. Martyrs and monsters. Deities and demons. Act weak to get what you want, but the twins weren't weak. They were never weak. Isobel was, though. Weak as butter, as flesh, as water. Bridget had wanted her—had *pretended* to want her—and Isobel was not used to want. She wanted to be wanted, to be beautiful, like Bridget. But Isobel was an ugly girl, and this was an ugly world.

Her parents did not ask, "Is this true, Bel?" Nor did they say, "Please explain." No, they trusted the twins. They believed the twins. They never trusted or believed Isobel.

Isobel turned to Bridget and mouthed, "Why?"

Bridget sneered and mouthed back, "You know why."

And Isobel did. Bridget framed Isobel to save the twins' secret. Even if their parents caught the twins together again, Ma and Pa would blame Isobel, even if Isobel was not there. The runt lost so much that day. She was desire's slave as well as murder's, for desire was everyone's true master.

"You'd whore yourself out to family but not clients?" Ma shook her head, livid and enraged. "You could make us so much money."

"I *do* make you so much money," Isobel said. "Please, I didn't... I won't...I promise it won't happen again." She wished she could beg for her innocence, but nobody listened, and nobody cared. Isobel was marked now, and words could not erase scars.

"You'll begin work in the morning," Pa said.

Isobel panicked. "No, I'm not a whore. I can't—"

"Stop," Ma said. Isobel stopped. "Bel is right. She's not a whore. She's a slut. And nobody wants a slut."

Bridget and Brodie closed their door.

Ma and Pa took Isobel outside.

\* \* \*

Isobel knew pain, but this was not pain. This was everything bad in the world rolled into a single moment, sharpened into communal suffering, and plunged into Isobel, again and again.

The runt leaned on the chipped red RV—shaking, sobbing—while Ma and Pa punished her as they'd never punished her before. They did not lay a hand on Isobel, but they did not need to touch her. Instead, they stabbed her with insults. Raped her with words. Bound her with humiliation, then gagged her with condescension.

"You are *nothing*," Pa hissed. Isobel had that hiss.

"We *never* wanted you," Ma whispered. Isobel had that whisper. "You were a terrible mistake."

"Worthless. Wasted."

"Unwanted. Unneeded."

"A true disappointment."

"An ugly little shit."

Those were the warning shots. Next, they cracked open Isobel's skull and carved deep into her soul.

"There's something wrong with you," Pa said.

"Something *extremely* wrong," Ma agreed. "And you'll never change. Nobody will want you. Nobody will love the monster you've become."

“You’re a hideous person. You won’t help your family, and you fuck everything up. Stop it. Stop crying. You have nothing to cry about.”

“Such a baby. So hopeless. So...*disgusting*. Look at me, Bel. LOOK AT ME!”

Isobel looked at Ma. Tears poured down her cheeks, but her face was smooth, her sobs silent. She didn’t cry. This wasn’t her. This was the monster Bridget made when she opened Isobel up and preyed on her insides. Isobel tried to stop, but she couldn’t stop. Instead, she leaked and wished she bled, but Ma and Pa held her captive with hate’s chains.

Ma glared at Isobel with knife-sharp eyes, gray swirling with storm. Isobel did not have those eyes—the Walsh eyes, the *brand* eyes—because she wasn’t a true Walsh. Her heart drummed to a different beat, and her thoughts swam in different seas. She blinked her violet eyes, her strange new eyes for a strange new girl, and faced Ma with fury if not fear.

“I hate you,” Ma said. “I have always hated you. Ever since I felt you growing inside me, I hated you. I knew you were different. Knew you were *wrong*. I should have listened to your father and killed you then and there, but I didn’t. Know why?”

When Ma didn’t continue, Isobel shook her head.

“Because you were another body, and we needed another body for money. Times were tough, so we let you live as a worker—nothing more. You are our employee, not our daughter, and if you *ever* repeat today, I will throw you in the dust and bury you alive. Understand?”

Isobel nodded. She understood, because she had to. There was no other choice. Cops wouldn’t believe her. Foster homes wouldn’t take her. She was a Walsh—in name only, but that name carried a blanket of lies, and no one dared look

underneath.

“Repeat after me,” Ma said. “I am a slut.”

Isobel stayed silent.

“SAY IT!”

Isobel squeaked, “I am a slut.”

“Nobody wants me.”

“Nobody wants me.”

“I am worth nothing,” Ma said.

“I am worth nothing,” Isobel repeated.

“I will shut my mouth and my legs.”

“I will shut my mouth and my legs.”

“And I will do as I’m told.”

“And I will do as I’m told.”

They forced Isobel to hack herself apart, so she listened, hacked, charred her soul to ash.

“Go,” Pa said. “Make some money. Get some work done. I don’t want to see you till tomorrow.”

“Fucking ugly cunt,” Ma said as she and Pa left.

Those words slit Isobel’s throat. She bled and bled, but nothing came out, so she conned angels into murder and demons onto thrones. Her family had played her—Bridget and Brodie, then Ma and Pa—and Isobel vowed she’d never be played again. She was no pawn. But she was also no queen. No, Isobel was the knight you never saw coming, loping crooked across the board till a jagged move out of nowhere checkmated the king.

## Shadow Spiders and Eggshell Webs

Now

Isobel draws in the dust. She likes drawing. She likes dust more. She writes her first name—her first name *only*. There is a lot of dust inside Happy Hearts, even after chores, so Isobel also draws a spider. She likes spiders, too. She wishes she were a spider. Then she could weave webs from iron instead of eggshells.

It's afternoon and time for group. Isobel is bored. She hasn't done much today. A stolen pen for Fitz relieved her from chores, and a pilfered notebook for Rowan freed her from studies. Fitz is teaching Rowan how to read better, so Isobel takes advantage. No, not advantage. She's helping them, and they're helping her. It's fair. Balanced. Not at all like the blood-red RV.

The residents gather in the living room for therapy. Isobel sits on the couch. Ula and Fitz sit beside her while Kenzie and Rowan sprawl on the floor. Nurse Riley stands by a window. He stands a lot lately—restless, relentless. His questions are sharper



since the news, barbed and caustic. It's the end of the world, like always, but Riley wants to fix them before it ends...again. The other residents side with him. *Why keep secrets at the end?* That's what they think. Isobel does not think that. She thinks the end is a great time for secrets to die. Ghosts can't speak, and Isobel's secrets don't deserve a voice.

"Who would like to share first?" Riley asks.

Kenzie would. She shares too much. Happy Hearts is her theater, the raggedy room her stage. Music is her love, so she sings her secrets, and Isobel cowers from the assault. The melody is beautiful, but the words are raw, hungry, a starving kitten scratching at hearts. Kenzie unleashes her story in painful whips, choking down sawtooth trauma in a flash of green tears and a wave of strawberry braids.

It starts with the punch, the punch they all share: Kenzie killed her parents. It's why she's here. It's why they're all here. This dagger hooks them. The blade spears their stomachs, guts them like fish. It rips through their squashy meat, shreds their bleeding hearts, then slices tongues, noses, faces in two till they are equal parts themselves and their mistakes.

But Isobel's secret wasn't a mistake.

So she traces her name in the couch's dust, quiet.

"It was an accident," Kenzie sings. "I never meant to...you know. A car crash. A stupid thing. Should've watched where I was going, but my parents were always my eyes—then they fell asleep, and I couldn't focus. That's why I have these." She lifts her white linen tunic. Burn scars rumple her legs, silver against her olive skin. "Paramedics pulled me out. I was the only one left. I killed them."

"You didn't kill them," Riley says, doe-eyed, placing a dark arm on her shoulder.

"Regardless," Kenzie says with a sniff, "I'm the reason they died. If not for me, they'd still be here."

"Maybe," the nurse says. "Maybe not. No one knows what would have been."

"But they would have been together, at least for a little while."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. They left this world happy and loved. That's a greater gift than many receive, a miracle by most accounts." Riley hugs Kenzie and turns toward Rowan. "How about you, Rowan? Would you like to share?"

Rowan fidgets, tugs at auburn curls, picks at bronze skin. "I guess I should." He gulps mouthfuls of air, tiny frame shuddering, and trains his chestnut eyes on the filthy floor. "I don't remember it, but I killed my mother. She died in childbirth, because I was a large baby. Hard to believe now." He tries to chuckle—nervous, neurotic—but coughs instead, then continues. "My father was never in the picture, so I hopped between orphanages and shelters till I landed here. Never fit in. Never cared."

"Do you fit in now?" Riley asks. "Now, do you care?"

Rowan shrugs. "I feel less guilt. Dunno if that counts."

"Of course it counts. And you shouldn't feel guilt. What happened to your mother wasn't your fault."

Isobel senses a pattern, and she doesn't match. She *should* feel guilt. It *was* her fault. Everything was always Isobel's fault. Ma and Pa told her that many, many times. And this last time, she does agree.

"Thank you for sharing, Kenzie and Rowan," Fitz says. "That was brave of you both."

Isobel stifles a snort. *Brave*. Mistakes aren't brave. Accidents take no courage. Crime, on the other hand...

"Would you like to go next, Fitz?" Riley asks.

Fitz sighs and straightens his dark, broad shoulders while Rowan watches, gaze glued. “Um...yeah. Yes. Sure. Okay.” He blinks tears from his brown eyes and nods his shaved head, committed. “My moms were saints. They were everything to me. We lived on the East Coast, down in Virginia, and there was a flood in our apartment building. It was fast, sudden, so we didn’t have time to evacuate. The water rose up to our floor, and we were about to escape through a window, and we were so close, and they could have made it, but there was this cry, and we stopped, and they—”

Fitz pauses, breathes deep, settles into a steady rhythm.

“There was a baby,” he whispers. “A baby and a single father two apartments down from us. I was the strongest swimmer, so my moms told me to save them first. I didn’t want to, but I always listened to them, so I told them I’d come back. I *promised* I’d return. But when I reached a lifeboat with the baby and their father, the building collapsed. My moms were still inside, and I couldn’t save them. I killed them, Riley. I killed my moms. I should have swum faster. I should have been stronger. I should have—”

“No,” Riley interrupts, gentle. “There was nothing you could have done, Fitz. It was a tragedy, and it was not your fault.”

There it is again, that ill-fitting phrase.

“I miss them,” Fitz says. “I miss them so goddamn much. The world’s a little emptier, and the sky’s a little fuller. That’s all we can hope for at the end—to be a memory in the night, to share a smile with a star.”

Isobel squirms. She does not like night or stars. Too much truth in the dark.

Riley comforts Fitz, telling him he’s a hero, how he granted his moms’ dying wishes. Isobel tunes out. Draws in the dust.

Warps her name into a cemetery.

"I'll share," Ula whispers.

Isobel tunes back in. She hates Ula. She wants Ula to burn.

Isobel wants to burn with Ula.

"It was a stupid way to die," Ula says. "Then again, I guess death is always stupid." She tucks her sunshine hair behind her sandy ear and folds into herself near Isobel on the couch. Isobel cannot see Ula's sky-blue eyes. This is for the best. She does not want to see the sky Bridget promised then shattered.

"It wasn't stupid," Riley says, soft as a broken vow.

"It was," Ula says, but she doesn't cry. She sits still as stone, her arms around legs that have forgotten how to dance. "I made them scallops. Mom and Dad were allergic. I didn't know. They went into anaphylactic shock. We lived too far from the hospital to save them. They died."

Isobel likes Ula's story. It's emotionless. Tearless. Painless.

Or hidden.

Riley does not like Ula's story. He frowns. "This was recent, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Ula says.

"I'm so sorry, Ula. That must have been awful."

"Well, they were awful, too."

Everyone turns toward Ula. She rarely talks, but this rings harsh as two dissonant church bells colliding.

"Would you like to talk about them?" Riley asks. He tiptoes on glass bubbles in case the world falls down...again.

"No," Ula says. "They hurt me. With words, not hands. But I hurt them, too, though I didn't mean to, so I guess I'm no better."

Riley frowns deeper. "You are *far* better. I didn't know they abused you. If you ever need to talk, I'm here. We all are."

"I don't need to talk," Ula says.

Isobel sees Ula now. Ula is a mirror. They both crumpled inside haunted houses till they themselves turned into ghosts. But Isobel hates Ula. Yes, she hates Ula more, because their shadows are twins. Isobel hates her shadow. She wants to rip it free. She wants to rip Ula more.

"What about you, Isobel?" Riley asks. "Would you like to share?"

Isobel would not like to share. Her secret was not a mistake. As much as she belongs here, she also does not. They would not understand. They would side with Ma. Or defend Pa. Or blame Isobel for Bridget and Brodie. Then call her wrong in every way. They wouldn't grasp her fire, its flames, the sister between her legs, or the parents within her skull. Unlike the others, she is no hero. She is a monster at best, a mutant at worst, and she can't unlock this horror...yet.

"No," Isobel says.

Riley presses her. "Whenever you're ready—"

"I'll never be ready."

"But if—"

"Stop."

"Okay."

Isobel has no magic, but she has control, and that is magic enough. She is a little murder girl in a little murder world, and nobody understands her weeping blood.

"By now, I assume you've all heard the announcement."

A new voice crawls into the living room. Heads snap toward the source and stall. Elsie and Jessie Croy stand on the room's edge, greasier than usual, rigid as always, two rusty wheelbarrows oiled with gunk. This is not the schedule. They stay upstairs except for dinner, but it is not dinner, and they

are not upstairs. Isobel does not like surprises. She's suffered enough to prefer the mundane.

"Housemother, Housefather," Riley greets, straightening. "How can we help?"

"You can't," Jessie croaks.

"It's done," Elsie rasps.

"Sorry," Riley says, "but could you please explain?"

"The news," Jessie says, then he leaves with his wife.

Hesitant, Riley flicks on the news, though this is group, not free time, and not routine. Isobel likes routine. She does not like disruption. Disruption means chaos, means pain.

The TV sizzles to life, cranky and tired. Isobel forgets about schedules and surprises as the news anchor rambles.

*"Stricter measures are necessary. Without added restrictions, our infrastructure will collapse. Starting tomorrow, food and water rations will be cut to seventy-five percent. Gasoline and diesel are limited to essential personnel; all other employees must work from home. Electricity usage will be monitored; overdrafts beyond the allocated quote will incur a fee. Federal income taxes will increase across all brackets to support drought resources, including the funding of additional medical staff, road crews, and delivery services. We urge all to remain inside when able, especially those in the Midwest. Air quality is hazardous, and residents are prone to dust pneumonia. Major cities will require an evening curfew after six, and towns are encouraged to follow similar precautions."*

The anchor continues to drone on about statistics and data projections, but they stop listening. Numbers don't solve art.

"We're trapped," Rowan says, though they already were.

"We're starving," Kenzie says, another preexisting condition.

"Don't worry," Riley says, worried. "We're together. We'll make it through. People survived this before, and we'll survive

it again.”

“The Second Dust Bowl is different,” Fitz says. “We’re more dependent on infrastructure than they were. And this Greater Depression...it doesn’t bode well. There are only so many times history can repeat itself till there is nothing left to repeat.”

“Then we’ll all die,” Ula says, but she is not nervous. She is also not scared. Death does not frighten her. *She thinks she deserves it*, Isobel realizes. *No, her parents made her think she deserves it.*

Rage rises in Isobel, hot and bitter, but she pretends it’s hate, because she must hate Ula. Ula is like Isobel, and Isobel hates herself, so Isobel must hate Ula, too.

“Don’t talk like that, Ula,” Rowan says. He is nervous and scared. Death does frighten him. He killed his mother before he had memories of her, of himself, of this entire bloody life. His violence bloomed in the womb, then withered in the world. He was a murderer before he breathed his first breath. An accidental murderer, sure, but that doesn’t change his grief.

“We’ll be fine,” someone says. That someone is Isobel. That someone does not sound like Isobel. They stare at her, confused. She stares at her hands, also confused, as if her fingers betray her instead of her tongue. “We’ll be fine.” There it is again, softer yet still from Isobel’s lips. Those are not Walsh words. Those are not part of the brand. Those are not included in the marketing material Ma shoved down her throat—

*No.* Ma doesn’t exist anymore. Pa, Bridget, and Brodie don’t, either. The RV is gone. The chipped red paint is gone. Dust markets and caravans and rest stops and floppy tents are gone, gone, *gone, gone, gone.*

Nothing is gone. Dust markets live on. Caravans travel far. Isobel erased herself from their story, but she can never erase

them from hers.

“Sorry,” she murmurs to no one, to everyone, to life, loss, and love, then leaves the room to whispers she didn’t plant, to weeds she didn’t sow.



## Worship Me

### Before

Isobel avoided the twins.

After the incident, they still shared a room, but Isobel entered after they fell asleep and left before they woke up. That bed was a prison, trauma's thick scar. Isobel couldn't forget what they did to her, couldn't forgive how much she wanted it again. Bridget and Brodie had fondled this tender, delicate thing, then ripped off its wings and pierced it with horns.

Isobel hated them, but she hated herself more. She knew the game, yet she let them play, let them seduce her with all she craved but could never admit. Her body admitted it, and her body craved it still. *Traitor*. She hated her body most. It showed her secrets even with her lips and legs shut. Whenever Bridget passed, Isobel grew warm. Whenever Brodie stretched, Isobel grew weak. This was *wrong*. She didn't want them, but she wanted the fire they started. Isobel was fifteen, and childhood

was no longer enough.

She wandered through dust markets, fleeing memory and starving for its ghost. She shouldn't, couldn't, wouldn't do it again with the twins, but the flames they set would not die. Yes, there were others with whom she could play. Though Isobel was an ugly girl, she was a girl, was a body, was a hole. *Disgusting*, Ma would say if she could hear Isobel's thoughts. As it was, she could not hear Isobel's thoughts, and she rarely heard her daughter's voice. Ma and Pa ignored their runt since that razor-sharp day, so Isobel ignored them right back.

The ugly girl made them money. She conned kindness into killing, caring into cruelty. She made up stories about rape and theft, then pit heroes against each other, snatching their gold. *Here's a gift*. You owe me. *Here's a present*. Repay me ten. *Worship me*. They worshiped her. *Anything, everything, whatever you want*.

Heroes were fools. Honor was naive. The world didn't award sacrifice; the world used sacrifice to steal dreams.

So Isobel stole their dreams. They listened to her while she seized money beneath their principled noses. With the worsening drought, people kept more cash on hand, so Isobel had more cash to steal. She tied up all her loose ends, and cops were too busy with mass hysteria to notice an ugly little girl whispering in ears and weaving lies into murder.

Murder and money didn't help Isobel, though. It helped her family, funded the brand, but Isobel was not her family or the brand. No, Isobel was empty. Bridget had filled her, then stripped her bare. Longing ate her insides where pleasure then pain had once lived. Isobel *ached*. Isobel *wanted*. Isobel *needed* to erase loneliness so she could focus, so she could be free.

But she was not free. She was distracted.

And distractions led to mistakes.

"Bel," Ma said one evening outside the RV. She looked at Isobel. She never looked at Isobel. Something was wrong. Something besides Isobel. No, something *worse* than Isobel.

"Yes?" Isobel asked. She was returning from an unsuccessful job. Her target was too smart, and her weapon was too stupid. She escaped before they remembered her, but it was too close, and Isobel was better than that. She had to be.

"It's Bridget and Brodie," Ma said.

Isobel tensed. The last they spoke of the twins, it had been that cursed night. Since then, Isobel was a ghost who haunted the family, nothing more.

"They're sick," Ma explained.

*Good*, Isobel thought.

"They have dust pneumonia. It should clear up in a few days, but they can't run the channel in their condition. And after the latest storm, sessions have been down. Too much cleanup."

*Too much bullshit.* Disaster had a way of eating dreams, and dreams fueled sessions. Isobel knew what Ma wanted, what Ma wouldn't ask but would instead demand.

"We need more money," Ma said, "and we need you to make it."

The RV shook with coughing, then feverish moans rose from the siblings' bedroom. *They deserve it*, Isobel thought. And they did deserve it, but Isobel was still the one who paid.

"Okay," Isobel said, because she had to obey, to sell her soul to save her mind. She was not yet strong enough to survive on her own. One day, she would be, but not today.

"Okay." Ma returned to the RV and shut the door behind her, even though Isobel was a tiny fifteen-year-old girl standing alone in the twilit dust. At least it was warm, but heat attracted

insects in the night.

Fury and frustration fumed within Isobel. Her family hated, needed, used, abused her, and she let them. She had no choice. Nobody did. Life caged and chained you from the start in a family, a situation, a blessing, a burden. Escape was lucky, and luck was extinct. Freedom was fortune, and fortune always died. They'd built a broken world on stilts and rafts, then wondered why it sank.

*Quick.* Isobel wanted this done. She pickpocketed a tourist, tossed the wallet, saved the ring. A wallet held a life, but a ring held a story, and a story was worth more than a life. Lives ended. Stories never died. They were more interesting, more valuable. Besides, she had no use for a clump of paper trash.

Isobel found the bar tent, then took a seat in the dark. She was too young to drink, but she was also too young to die, and the bartender thought she should get a chance to drink before she died, because they would all die soon, according to the news.

"What'll it be?" the bartender asked. He was a handsome man, and he knew it, so Isobel puppeted his charm.

"Something strong," Isobel said with a blush. She painted this blush. Emotions were her palette. They were hers to borrow, not own.

The bartender—Reese, if his nametag was accurate—smirked. He looked good when he smirked, and he knew this, too. "Aren't you a bit small for something strong?" Reese asked, a quirk to his lips, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Small things can be strong, too," Isobel said. She tossed her blue-black hair, then leaned into her crooked spine. For a candlelit moment, she could pass for pretty, if you looked at her violet eyes and not the rest of her face. She had a suggestion of beauty, of a statue squashed by a sculptor's mistakes from

goddess into beast.

Reese chuckled. "True, true." He poured Isobel a double vodka, then split a cherry on the glass's edge.

*Subtle*, Isobel thought. She ate the cherry first and swallowed half her drink. It didn't affect her, but she pretended it did, because she was a weak, scrawny, tiny girl, not the monster wearing her skin.

"Easy there," Reese said.

He pretended to cut her off, and she pretended to let him while they performed on a stage only she could see. Isobel liked drama. Drama she could control.

Isobel removed the stolen ring from her pocket and spun it on the pockmarked counter. A teardrop diamond sat in the white gold. Pretty. But pretty was dangerous. Pretty made the world spin.

"That yours?" Reese asked.

"Kind of," Isobel said. She hesitated for one, two, three seconds, then added, "I told him no."

"And he let you keep it?"

"He wants me to reconsider."

"He's bold."

"He's stupid."

Reese grinned. Isobel grinned back. Yes, he was a good weapon, cute and soft and harmless—unassuming. He didn't even know he was a sword.

"Sorry," Isobel said. "I shouldn't air out my dirty laundry here."

"Dirty laundry is what I'm here for. Alcohol, too."

Isobel bit her lip and faked a sob. Reese's face fell. He reached across the counter, *there-there-ing* her while she faked a recovery.

"What's wrong?" Reese asked, concerned. "Did he hurt you?"

Isobel scanned the tent, on edge—she didn't need to fake her nerves. "Hurt? No. Well...not...no, he didn't. I'll just tell him no again."

Reese raised an eyebrow. "Will he let you tell him no again?"

"It doesn't matter. We're moving on from this market soon, so..."

"So...?"

Isobel forced light into her face, allowed her long-planted idea to bloom. "Wait, I know! *You* keep the ring."

"Are you...proposing to me?"

Cute and soft and harmless...and dumb.

"No, as a gift," Isobel said. "You were nice to me, and the world needs more nice men. Then I'll tell him I lost it...or someone stole it...so he'll think I'm careless and not want to marry me." Isobel slid the ring across the counter to the bartender.

Reese frowned, fidgeted, rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know. It's an expensive ring. You could sell it for a lot."

"I don't want money." *I want much more.*

"What if he finds me?"

"He won't. His family is leaving for the coast in the morning. They want me to go with them, but this is my home." *If hell were a home.*

"I get that." Reese paused, troubled. "Still, I can't accept this for nothing. Let me repay you in some way."

To Reese's credit, he didn't glance at Isobel's chest or between her legs. He was a good guy, and good guys made the best weapons. They always aimed true.

"Not necessary," Isobel said. "I'm glad to get rid of it, to be honest, and you deserve it more than me."

"More than you?" Shock rippled Reese's face. "The guy was a

dick. You did nothing wrong.”

*I did everything wrong, and I'm about to do more.*

Isobel shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t know. Anyway, it’s yours, free of charge.”

“Nothing is free,” Reese said with another grin. This man was far too happy, and Isobel was far too cunning. Happy had too many holes.

But she’d deny him once more to pretend this wasn’t her plan from the start. “Take it.”

“That’s not how my mama raised me.”

*That’s exactly how my mama raised me.*

Reese slid the ring back toward Isobel.

“Please,” Isobel said, “I need you to take it. I need to look reckless.”

“Then throw it out.”

“As you said, it’s an expensive ring. It should go to someone who deserves it.”

“Then name your price. If I deserve it, as *you* said, then I deserve it because I won’t take it for free.”

Good men were always so predictable.

“Fine,” Isobel said with an eye-roll tease. *Name your price. Worship me.* “There’s this dick near my RV.”

“Another dick?”

“They’re a plague.” Isobel winked. She had perfected this wink. Reese wasn’t ready for it. He leaned closer and fell into her trap.

“So this second dick...how can I help?” he asked.

“A harmless prank,” Isobel said. “He empties his piss tank behind our RV every evening, and it fucking reeks.”

This dick, her target, did not empty near her and did not know her. His sole fault was responsibly withdrawing a large

amount of cash for the upcoming collapse. Well, they weren't calling it a collapse yet. They weren't calling it anything yet. Words were weapons, and the government held their bombs tight.

"A dickish thing to do, indeed," Reese said with yet another grin. His joy would have annoyed Isobel if it weren't a weapon, too.

"So...I thought I could return the favor by dumping mine in his window garden," Isobel said. "He knows my face, or I'd do it myself. Don't worry, it won't hurt him. It'll just make his roses smell like piss."

It *will* hurt him, because it wasn't piss, and his flowers were not roses. It was poison over food, and food was hard to find. Her target ate these flowers every night—an odd habit, but one Isobel could use—and they had minutes before he repeated his routine. Isobel did not panic, though. Good guys were obedient. They always followed her moves.

"Brilliant," Reese said. "I'll do it on my break in five."

"Perfect," Isobel said. "Thanks so much." She left and returned with a bottle of piss-like poison, and Reese pocketed the ring.

In five minutes, Reese took his break.

He "watered" the target's "roses."

Then returned to the bar tent.

The target ate the poisoned flowers.

Then died.

Isobel stole the target's cash.

No one saw Isobel.

No one saw Reese, either.

The cops questioned him, but Isobel framed a stranger.

Why?

Reese was a nice guy.



And nice guys should finish first.  
Sometimes.

## Ghost Songs and Midnight Pleas

Now

Rowan screams.  
He screams so loud he wakes everyone up. Kenzie is annoyed. Ula is scared. Fitz is worried. Isobel is bored.

It's the middle of the night, and a dust storm slams the ramshackle house. Happy Hearts is not happy anymore, but the staff still sleeps, oblivious, in dream.

Fitz crosses from his cot to Rowan's as wind howls outside while sand pelts the house.

"It's too loud," the tiny boy wails.

"I'm here, I'm here," his hero whispers.

"Shut up," Kenzie snaps. She tangles herself under her sheets.

Ula says nothing. Isobel says nothing, too.

"The shootings," Fitz says. Nobody understands. "His orphanages." Still, nobody understands. "The shootings at his orphanages."

Fitz is frustrated. He doesn't want to explain. He wants the others to get it like he gets it, but the others don't get it, aren't heroes, don't care. They want Rowan to calm down. Sleep, that's all that matters. It's their escape, and they worship it as their god.

Rowan does not calm down. The residents do not return to sleep. Isobel is annoyed. She does not feel sorry for Rowan. *Everyone has something, and they must deal with their somethings alone.* That's what Ma and Pa taught Isobel. *Stuff everything inside, bottle it up tight, and try not to explode.* It was not good advice, but it was sound advice, and it had worked for Isobel thus far.

Riley doesn't agree. He thinks emotions deserve wings. He wants them to talk till they all explode. Isobel doesn't want to explode. Ula doesn't, either. She agrees with Isobel; her something belongs in shadow.

"Make it stop," Rowan wails. "Fitz, you have to make it stop." He claws his curls and spasms on his cot. Fitz holds him, rocks him, soothes him with nonsense. Because it *is* nonsense. Nothing will cure him. Nobody can save him. Isobel knows this. Ula knows this, too. Fitz knows this as well, but he still tries to cure and save Rowan, because he's a hero, because he's doomed.

"For Chrissake, QUIET!" Kenzie shouts.

Rowan whimpers, obeys. Fitz stares at Kenzie. He wants to glare, but he can't glare properly. He's too warm to summon such ice. Isobel can glare, but she doesn't glare at Kenzie. She glares at Ula instead. Ula does not glare back. She cocks her head. Sunshine tumbles over her shoulders, and Isobel hates Ula so much she glares harder.

"You hate me," Ula whispers. Kenzie doesn't hear her. Rowan

and Fitz don't, either. Only Isobel hears her featherlight words, downy in the dust.

"Yes," Isobel whispers back. Nobody hears her, either. Nobody but Ula. But Isobel's words aren't feathers; they're flames. Flames no one sees, blue in their birth, but they dance hot and angry in her midnight pleas.

Ula and Isobel sit opposite each other on their cots. The room is calm again. Kenzie, Fitz, and Rowan fall asleep. Ula and Isobel do not fall asleep. They sit in stalemate. Neither wants to move first.

"Why do you hate me?" Ula finally asks. She's pocketed this question for many days, many nights, and tonight is the night she shows her hand.

"It's late," Isobel says. "We should sleep."

"We should."

Neither does.

"Why do you hate me?" Ula asks again. Since she's shown her hand, she won't rest till Isobel shows hers. Ula doesn't talk much, but when she does talk, her words are greedy. Isobel is greedy, too.

"Everyone needs someone to hate," Isobel says, "so I hate you."

Ula thinks and chews her cheek. "Makes sense, but why me?"

"You're pretty," Isobel says. "I hate pretty." She hates pretty. Hates Bridget. Hates how Bridget used her.

"You think I'm pretty?" Ula tilts her head.

Isobel would blush if she hadn't leashed emotions long ago. Her face warms, though no red shows. "The world thinks you're pretty."

"Hmm. I guess."

"I am not pretty," Isobel says. She does not know why she says it, but she needs to say it, needs Ula to hear it, needs to

push this ghost dancer away.

"True, you are not pretty," Ula says.

*Good*, Isobel thinks. Others would lie, would call Isobel pretty, but Ula doesn't lie, wouldn't lie to Isobel. She sees Isobel for what she is: ugly. But Ula doesn't stop staring. You don't stare at ugly. You let ugly die.

"I don't want you to be pretty," Ula adds. She wants Isobel to trust her, because she trusts Isobel, and this is why Isobel hates her, because Isobel trusts Ula, too.

Isobel is confused. She doesn't know what to say or how to escape, so panic churns in her crooked gut. "Sorry?"

"Pretty is perfect. Perfect is boring. You are not boring."

"But I am ugly."

"I like ugly."

"Nobody likes ugly," Isobel says.

"I do," Ula says. "It's interesting."

Ula doesn't want Isobel to be pretty. Most people are ugly on the inside, but Isobel is ugly on the outside, too, and this intrigues Ula. She doesn't want a doll; she wants a fighter, and Isobel is a warrior.

"Good night," Isobel says.

"Good night," Ula says.

"I hate you."

"I hate you, too."

"Sweet dreams."

\* \* \*

Isobel wakes to silence.

Something is not right.

It's never silent at Happy Hearts, never this type of silence.

This silence is heavy. An iron weight. A lead brick. The shared breath of a funeral before coffin greets grave.

Isobel opens her eyes. She is not alone. Ula watches her, but no one else is here. The beds are not made. The sheets are not tucked. They abandoned the schedule. They never abandon the schedule. Something is more than not right. Something is truly, horribly *wrong*.

"They forgot me," Isobel says.

"Yes," Ula says. Her honesty is corrosive, but Isobel is a stubborn blade.

"Why?"

"Something's wrong."

"I gathered that. What happened?"

"Come see."

Ula offers Isobel her birdlike hand. Isobel doesn't take it. Ula shrugs, and they walk downstairs, outside, through dust accumulated in last night's storm. Drifts creep up the siding and wrinkle into the sepia distance. The air is too hazy to see any neighbors. They're the last souls on Earth. *Alone*.

Sobs rise nearby, and storm dregs howl threats. Fear births monsters in even the toughest souls.

"Rowan's hurt."

That's not a monster. That's Fitz, their hero, in title if not deed. The tall man trudges through the snowlike dust, and the rest appear in his wake. Riley and Bara carry an unconscious Rowan in a makeshift stretcher. Caelin and Kenzie follow, annoyed. Caelin should be cleaning, but he rarely cleans, and Kenzie should be helping, but she rarely helps. Housemother and Housefather are not outside. Housemother and Housefather do not care.

"He fell out of a window," Fitz explains.

"He did not fall," Isobel says, but only Ula hears her, and only Ula agrees.

"We need to get him to a hospital."

"We can't," Riley says. "There's a stay-at-home order, and gasoline is for essential personnel. We're not essential."

"He could die," Fitz protests.

"He won't," the nurse says. "He has a few bruised ribs, a minor concussion, but otherwise, he's fine."

He'd be fine if he fell, but he did not fall. Isobel knows this. She should say something louder, but she doesn't know how to turn something into strength. Nobody listens to her, anyway. Well, nobody used to listen to her. Ma and Pa trained her to bow, to bend.

"The storm spooked him," Fitz says.

"He's a gentle boy," Bara says.

The cook eyes Rowan with sympathy. She likes gentle boys. She wishes she were a mother to a gentle boy, but she is not a mother. Though she tried and tried, fate cursed her with a maternal heart and a childless womb. Bara wants to adopt, but times are hard, and if children survive, their parents hold them tight if not right. Infant and child mortality rates are up. There are fewer kids around, and orphanages need kids for bills. Hardship spawns abusive families and government checks.

"Please," Fitz says. "He needs a hospital. I'll take him. I won't even mention Happy Hearts."

Riley shakes his head, sad but unyielding. "Sorry, Fitz, but this isn't an emergency, so he must stay home."

"Then what is an emergency?" Fitz snaps. "How many times must he fall down before you listen?"

"It's not me," Riley says. "It's the law. If I let you go, they'll arrest you and seize the van."

"So you're worried about the van, is that it?"

"No, I'm worried about *you*."

"But you need that van, and that's the real reason. The van's more important than Rowan, than me."

"This *home* is more important than any *one* of us," Riley says. There's an edge to his voice he seldom reveals. "This is not about Rowan, and this is not about you. If you leave with our sole transportation, you endanger the rest of us. What if Kenzie slips? What if Ula twists her ankle? What if Isobel cracks her head? You take the van, and we all suffer. Rowan is not dying. Not even close. He'll be fine. He needs rest, and you need to calm down. See the bigger picture, Fitz. We can't afford to panic."

"Maybe we *should* panic," Fitz says. "Everyone acts like this is okay, like we should swallow bullshit and pretend it's fucking cake, but it's *not* fucking cake, and it's *not* bloody okay, and it's *never ever been* bloody fucking okay."

"Then what do you suggest we do? Huh? Tell Mother Nature to go fuck herself? We are *nothing*, Fitz. We have no control. This is nobody's fault, and we're all doing the best we can. Know how you can help? *Sit* with Rowan. *Stay* with Rowan. He doesn't need a knight in goddamn shining armor. He needs a friend. Stop trying to save the world. The world doesn't need saving; it needs healing. So heal him."

Dust swirls, and wind whines its assent. Riley and Fitz stare at each other, chests heaving, jaws clenched. Rowan stirs on the stretcher, then sinks again between Riley and Bara. Caelin kicks the ground, bored, and Kenzie twirls a braid, annoyed. Ula wants to say something, but she doesn't know what to say. Isobel knows what to say, but she doesn't want to say something.

"If he gets worse," Fitz says, voice low, "I'm taking him."



"He won't get worse," Riley says. "He's not sick. He fell."

"He did not fall," Isobel says again, but still only Ula hears, and still only Ula agrees. Isobel clears her throat. "He did not fall." This time, they listen. "He jumped." They face her, confused. "So he is sick." There. She doesn't want to say that something, Rowan's something, but she needs to say it, needs them to hear it, and they do.

"He jumped," Riley echoes. "Did you see him?"

And there's the accusation. Blame follows Isobel. She is an easy target, ugly and unwanted, though she expects better from Riley.

"No," Isobel says.

"Then how do you know?" Fitz asks.

"The storm scared him. He wanted it to stop."

Everyone looks at Isobel. Their eyebrows raise in unison. They do not trust her. They do not believe her. Ula trusts and believes her, so she lies.

"Isobel's right," Ula says. "He jumped. I saw him."

They swivel toward Ula, and dust follows suit. "Then why didn't you say something, sweetheart?" Bara asks.

Ula shrugs. "The storm scared me, too."

"So if he jumped, he's sick," Isobel says. "And if he's sick, he could get worse. He might need a hospital. It might become an emergency."

Fitz understands now. Isobel is helping him. She is not used to helping people, so her help is clumsy, but it is help just the same.

"Okay," Riley says, slow and unsure. "Okay, we'll keep an eye on him."

"And if he gets worse?" Fitz asks.

"We'll talk."

Talk is good. Talk is a doorway. Isobel does not like talk or doorways, but Fitz does, so she opens this one for him. He squeezes her shoulder as they go inside, and Isobel flinches away. She does not like helping, but she's tired, scared, sick of running.

Ula is sick of running, too.

## Save Me

### Before

“I know who you are,” the weapon said.

“I have a familiar face,” Isobel said. Her target was primed, but her weapon was stubborn. *Listen*, she urged her, but the woman stood firm.

“No, you have a famous face,” the woman—the weapon—said, unconvinced.

This was not Isobel’s plan. Her weapon was supposed to believe her target’s falsified assault charges while Isobel slipped into his RV. The weapon would then kill the target even when the target begged innocence, because the weapon’s son was assaulted, and she wanted revenge. The weapon was difficult, though. She was a lawyer, and she didn’t buy Isobel’s bait.

“I get that a lot,” Isobel said. She shifted into a shadow and counted the tent’s exits. She counted exits a lot nowadays. Dust markets grew dangerous, and the drought grew severe. Still, Isobel worked. Ma and Pa made her.

"You're a Walsh, aren't you?" the lawyer asked.

"A what?" Isobel couldn't fake ignorance much longer, or she'd need to fake death very soon.

"Not one of the twins, though." *Not pretty* is what she meant.

"Sorry, but you have me mistaken for someone else." The words were chalky in Isobel's mouth, and she counted the exits again.

"I don't make mistakes, sweetheart."

The lawyer sipped her gin, slicing Isobel with steely eyes. Her blonde hair fell to her shoulders, clean and fierce, two things Isobel would never be. The woman leaned forward and crossed her arms, but her suit didn't wrinkle, didn't shift. She knew who she was, and she trusted what she thought. Isobel knew and trusted nothing. She was grasping at straws in a barrel full of weeds. *Save me.*

"Anyway," Isobel said, mouth dry, "thought you should know."

"About a stranger's criminal record?" the lawyer asked. "Assault charges, that's what you said. Oddly specific in relation to me, but you knew that already, didn't you, Miss Walsh?"

Isobel did not answer. Her skin was ice; her skull was glass. The woman could see straight through her.

"Do you think it's fair to use my son's trauma against me? Is it kind? Is it *legal*?"

Again, Isobel did not answer. She knew it was not fair, kind, or legal, but her family needed food, and food cost money.

The lawyer clenched her jaw into a dagger. "They told me the heartland had gone to shit, but I didn't want to believe them. I'm from here. Did you know that?"

For the third time, Isobel did not answer.

"I grew up before the dust, and it was a better place—a *nicer* place. Now, it's full of people like you, preying off heartache,

exploiting tragedy. I bet this stranger was rich. Why else pit me against him? You'd make me do your dirty work, then steal his money—easy. The game you're playing isn't new, darling, nor is it particularly smart."

Isobel used to be smart—before Bridget, before Brodie. Then the twins chopped up her mind and blended her brain into soggy, pulpy, bloody thoughts. She should have chosen a different weapon, a duller blade, because sharp knives tend to cut their owners and not others. But the lawyer beckoned Isobel with everything she was not, so Isobel's weapon backfired.

"I should go," Isobel said.

"Yes, you should," the lawyer agreed. "In fact, you should leave this market while I debate whether to report you. I'm leaning toward letting you go—if you go now—because you're young, and you don't look well." *You're ugly, Bitty Bel.* "But if I catch you pulling this shit again, I'll convict you myself. A word of advice? If you keep playing, either smarten up your game or dumb down your marks. People like me don't fall for tricks from people like you."

"People like me?" Isobel should have walked away, should have run, but she was sick of being a doormat. "What exactly do you mean by 'people like me'?"

"Petty criminals," the lawyer said, unfazed. "Kids who grew up wrong."

"Sounds like prejudice," Isobel said. "Discrimination, even. Don't think that would hold up in court."

Again, Isobel played the wrong hand.

The lawyer laughed. She laughed so hard that gin flew out of her nose. But not on her suit. No, her suit remained squeaky clean. "Honey, I dream about statutes and regulations. I know your rights better than you do, so at least do a little research

before you threaten me. Prejudice is an unproven opinion, but you prove my opinion with your every breath. Discrimination is the unfair treatment of a group of people, but I have been more than fair in giving you warning and access to a trial while *you* facilitate murder and theft. You should go now. You're young, but you're old enough to know better, and the longer I'm here, the more I'm leaning toward reporting you."

So Isobel ran. Through the market. Over dust. Feet crunching. Arms windmilling. *Save me.*

She reached the RV and yanked open the door. "We gotta go."

Ma and Pa stared from the kitchen. Bridget and Brodie smirked from the couch.

"Did Bitty Bel make a boo-boo?" Bridget teased.

"What happened?" Ma asked.

"Nothing," Isobel said, slamming the door behind her. "Just drive."

"What *happened*?" Ma asked again. She balled her hands into maces; her veins popped blue.

"I tried to use a lawyer, but she recognized me, then threatened me. She knows what we do."

"No, she knows what *you* do," Ma said. "We are not associated."

Pa eyed Isobel, disappointed. "We wanted a better life for you, Bel. You could have been safe. You could have been happy. But *you* chose this path."

"I am not a whore," Isobel snapped. "You gave me no other choice. You can't sell your daughter for sex."

"Take responsibility. You'd be selling yourself," Pa said, then waved his hands. "But that's in the past."

"How will this affect the brand?" Ma asked. "What if the lawyer slanders us? Our fans would never forgive us."

"We'd deny it," Pa said. "And if we must, we'd deny Bel, too."

Isobel tensed. They'd disown her in a heartbeat to save their skins. It did not surprise her, but it still hurt—like most things they did.

"I'll drive," Ma said.

She did not wait for Isobel to sit down or explain, because she did not care. None of them did. In their eyes, Isobel fucked up, though she supported them, fought for them, risked her life every day for them. She was a workhorse, nothing more. An asset to utilize then euthanize.

With dread-heavy steps, Isobel reached the couch and sank beside Bridget.

"You fucked up good, Bitty Bel," her sister said.

"Shut up, Bridget," Isobel said, though she shouldn't have. The lawyer shook her apart, and she hadn't put herself back together again.

Bridget giggled. "I like when you're naughty. We got time while Ma drives." She glanced toward their bedroom. "Wanna play?"

"Fuck off."

"Make me."

Bridget reached between Isobel's legs, but Isobel was sad, mad, scared, confused, and there was little room for so many emotions to fit inside her scrawny frame. She slapped Bridget away, and Bridget's hand flew to her face. Then she smiled. It was never good when Bridget smiled, and this was a dangerous smile, jagged and sharp.

"Ma, we got a problem," Bridget said.

"What is it, darling?" Ma asked the sole daughter she considered hers.

"We didn't empty the tank."

"Which one?"

"The urine one. We thought we'd have more time, but..." *But Bel fucked up.*

"If it overflows, it'll ruin the engine," Ma said.

"Don't worry, we'll handle it," Bridget said.

"Thanks, love," Pa said, but he didn't ask how. He trusted Bridget. He shouldn't trust Bridget. Even Brodie didn't trust Bridget, and he was her twin.

"Come on, Bitty Bel," Bridget whispered. "Time to play."

Limping, she grabbed Isobel's arm and dragged her to the back of the RV. Brodie did not follow. He did not want to know. Though he was no saint, he was also no bully. Bridget was a bully. She liked being a bully. Brodie liked pretending he didn't care.

"We're lucky it's diesel," Bridget said. "Couldn't fix a front engine in an escape. Then again, we wouldn't need to worry about piss with a front engine." She opened a panel in the back and slid out a large tank. After she unscrewed the top, she removed a straw from her pocket and handed it to Isobel. "Drink."

Isobel stiffened. "What?"

"Drink the piss, Bitty Bel. You're so stupid sometimes."

"No...I can't...I won't—"

"Urine's sterile."

"I don't think that's—"

"You'll be fine," Bridget snapped. "Drink, or we die. You got us into this mess. Now, get us out."

Flames crept up Isobel's throat, and terror knotted her gut. "I'll get a cup. We can throw it out the window."

"And lead the cops straight to us?" Bridget shook her head.

"No, ain't gonna happen. Doesn't need to be much, but we can't



overflow. You know how much it costs to fix an engine?"

Isobel didn't answer, couldn't answer.

"It costs a shitload, and the only way you could pay for that shitload is the only way you won't. So unless you want to spread your legs for every lonely traveler over the next six months, drink the fucking piss."

Isobel did not want to spread her legs. She did not want to pay with her body. She wouldn't survive that level of sacrifice.

"Just a little," Bridget said. Her gray eyes seethed with lust. "Come on, Bitty Bel, drink for me."

So Isobel drank. She opened her fear-dry mouth, licked her chapped lips, and sucked on the straw. Piss stung her gums, scorched her tongue, seared her throat. She gagged, lips still locked around the straw, and swallowed her first mouthful. It burned all the way down. Her stomach bubbled, and she gagged again. The urine was dehydrated. It tasted of drought, desire, and other vile things.

"Shh," Bridget said, rubbing Isobel's shoulder. "Can't throw it up, or we'd have the same problem. I know it hurts, but guess what helps with pain?"

Isobel gagged a third time, eyes watering from the stench.

"Pleasure," Bridget said, wrapping herself around Isobel's crooked back.

She reached again between Isobel's legs, and this time, Isobel didn't slap her away. Instead, she leaned into her sister, thankful for the distraction, guilty at its cost. *Save me.*

"Ah, yes, I knew you wanted this, Bitty Bel," Bridget said.

Isobel gulped down another mouthful of piss. It stung less this time, eclipsed by the storm between her thighs. *This is wrong. Everything about this is so fucking wrong. The piss, the passion, the disgust, the desire.* But Isobel didn't say stop. She'd thought

about Bridget nightly, ghosting her fingers inside herself then pulling away, mortified. Bridget was her sister. It was supposed to matter that Bridget was her sister. It was supposed to bother Isobel that it didn't matter that Bridget was her sister. She'd promised herself she'd never do this again, but there she was, dripping on her sister's toes while swallowing piss. Nobody saw or heard them. The rest of the family was busy in front, and the engine was loud enough to drown out their moans.

"You deny yourself so much," Bridget whispered. "You could have this every day if you want—every hour if you're hungry. I'm not the one pushing you away, Bel. You take yourself from me, time and time again."

Isobel gulped harder. She was thirsty, and she didn't taste the piss anymore. She craved Bridget's touch, Bridget's desire, to be seen as a gem instead of a rock. Yes, she knew Bridget was using her, abusing her, punishing her for losing cash, but when your heart's a desert and your body's a worm, any attention chars reason to ash.

"Come for me," Bridget murmured. "Come for me hard."

So Isobel did. She bucked and froze, mouth open in silent cry. Rapture racked her body. She rippled with bliss, then dropped with release. She had drunk a third of the piss.

"Good girl," her sister said. "Now, do me."

Isobel sunk to her knees and devoured Bridget whole.

## Vicious Whispers and Wicked Moans

Now

“I don’t want Rowan to jump again,” Ula says.

“Me neither,” Isobel says.

They sit together during free time in a corner of the living room. Kenzie worships the TV while Fitz and Rowan read together on the couch. Isobel sits on the floor. Isobel never sits on the floor, but Ula is on the floor, so Isobel sits on the floor. She hates Ula, and this is her punishment for all the vicious whispers and wicked moans.

“Do you ever think about what comes next?” Ula asks. “After Happy Hearts, I mean.”

“No,” Isobel says. The room is dim, so Ula can’t see her twitch. Isobel *does* think about what comes next, but she doesn’t want to think or talk about what comes next, especially not with Ula. Isobel hates Ula. She hates her so much that she wants to take her upstairs and show her the size of her hate.

*Stop.*

Isobel stops. Ula does not.

"I'm worried we're wasting our lives," Ula says. "Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful, I am, but I need something more. And I need someone, too."

Ula is not supposed to talk this much. Isobel is not supposed to like it.

"Something more?" Isobel asks. She ignores the "someone" part.

"You know, like a goal or a dream," Ula says. She does not blush. She's proud of her hope. It's rare as daisies in this dust-drowned wasteland.

"Goals and dreams are for children. We're not children."

"We are, Isobel. We never grew up."

Isobel shivers. She likes when Ula says her name. She hates that she likes when Ula says her name.

*That's enough, Bitty Bel.*

"Wanna go outside?" Ula asks. "It's clear tonight."

"No," Isobel says.

"We can see the stars."

Isobel likes stars. She cannot see them often, because of dust and storms, so this might be her last chance in a while. Still, she hesitates. Outside is dark. One big shadow. She's lost herself in shadows before.

"No," Isobel says again. Isobel is stubborn, but Ula likes stubborn, likes puzzles, likes problems to solve and trouble to burn.

"Okay," Ula says. "I'll go alone."

Ula will not go alone. Ula knows Isobel won't let her go alone. Isobel is a warrior, and Ula sees it first. Isobel will not abandon Ula to the dark.

"You can't go alone," Isobel says.

"Why?" Ula asks, though she knows why and wields why as her weapon.

"It's late. It's dark. The dark is dangerous."

"There's no one around. No neighbors for miles."

"It's not neighbors I'm worried about. People always pass through. You just don't see them." Isobel is someone passing through. She knows what it is to be a ghost, to be invisible, soundless and bodiless, a shadow in the night. The Walshes taught her well if not right.

"You're worried?" Ula asks.

Isobel should lie, but she doesn't. It's a small concession, but a strong one. "Yes."

"About me?"

"About the dark."

"Then you better make sure the dark behaves."

Ula rises from the floor and heads for the door. Isobel pauses. She wants to follow Ula, needs to follow, *aches* to follow, so she follows. She hates Ula even more for making her follow.

Fitz tracks them with his eyes. He keeps a mental inventory of where everyone is at all times since Rowan. "Have fun," he says, but he means, *Don't die*.

Isobel won't die. She won't let Ula die, either.

Ula skips ahead of Isobel, a dancer who does not dance, and lies down in the dust—no blanket beneath her, just powdery Earth. Her sunshine hair haloes her delicate face, limbs a starfish, moon in her eyes. Ula smiles. She does not smile often, but now, she smiles wide.

Isobel lies beside Ula, stiff as a corpse. She does not smile wide. The ground is uncomfortable, and Isobel prickles in the evening chill.

"Are you cold?" Ula asks. She does not turn her head. She

keeps her chin up toward the sky, drinking in the stars, but her butterfly arm reaches toward Isobel. Their hands brush. Isobel retreats. Her fingers snap shut. Body squirms sideways. Eyes close. Throat swallows.

Ula does not retreat. She shimmies closer, shoulder to shoulder. "You are cold," Ula decides. In a fluid sweep, she removes her tunic and drapes it over Isobel. Ula is naked. Isobel is aware that Ula is naked. Isobel forces herself not to look. If Isobel looks, Isobel will blaze hotter, and she is already an inferno inside a volcano. "No one can see," the sunshine girl says. *No one except you, Isobel.*

Happy Hearts glows amber behind them, but the shine does not reach the two women. They are alone under an indigo sky pierced with diamonds, a ribbon of Milky Way braided overhead.

"This is the closest we'll ever get to freedom," Ula says.

In her periphery, Isobel sees Ula arch her back and stretch her arms, but Isobel does not turn, does not look, does not see Ula's naked geometry. She wants to. Lord, she wants to drown in Ula's arms. But she won't turn, won't look, won't drown, won't burn. Because she can't. Bridget ruined this for her, and Ula doesn't deserve Isobel's baggage. Ula is a bird. Ula is light. Isobel wants to be a bird, to be light, but she chained her wings after she scorched the sky.

"There's no such thing as freedom," Isobel whispers. She grabs handfuls of Ula's empty tunic and pretends it's Ula.

"Of course not," Ula whispers back. "But we don't want freedom, do we, Isobel? What we want is peace."

Ula shifts closer, and their arms meet. This time, Isobel does not shirk away. Even if their skin sizzles. Even if they're melting together. It hurts. It stings. It summons Bridget and savage

things. But Bridget is dead. Ula is not dead. Ula is red-hot alive.

"When they called me weak, I'd watch the stars," Ula says. Her voice is soft, but Isobel hears her. Isobel always hears her. "When they called me dumb, I'd pray to the moon. When they called me ugly and unwanted, I'd sing to Venus and dance under Mars. I do not dance anymore."

"You are none of those things," Isobel says. It is not a powerful sentence, but strength does not always lie in power, and power does not always lie in strength.

Ula smiles again, but this smile is sad. "I am some of those things sometimes. And that is okay. But I am not all those things all the time."

"I have never seen you weak or dumb or ugly or unwanted." Isobel cringes. Another weak sentence. Another unassuming strength.

"But you're not seeing me, Isobel. You're not looking at all."

Isobel is scared. But Isobel is also brave. She turns toward Ula, and Ula turns toward her. Both creatures tremble in the dark.

"You are still cold," Ula says. Her body is a rose, thorny bones and blushing petals. Isobel stares. Isobel cannot stop staring. Isobel stares so hard she becomes Ula's stem.

"I am still cold," Isobel agrees.

"Let me help."

Ula removes Isobel's tunic and tosses it in a crumpled pile. They are both naked now, both raw and greedy. Warmth brews between them as they press together.

"You are pretty," Isobel says, a playground plea if Isobel had ever known a playground. "I am not pretty." She surveys her sickly skin and hungry flesh.

"I know," Ula says. "But you are still beautiful."

"I am not. I cannot be both ugly and beautiful."

"Most ugly things are beautiful inside, and most beautiful things are ugly outside."

"You are not ugly inside or outside," Isobel says.

"To you," Ula says.

"To everyone."

Ula pauses, thinks, considers. "Okay. I trust you, Isobel."

Isobel tenses, then cedes. "I trust you, too, Ula."

Trust is like love at the end of the world, in a time of monsters, in an age of defeat. Ula spins around and nestles her back against Isobel's chest. Their skin sticks together; their breathing aligns. Cautious, Isobel wraps an arm around Ula's stomach. Though she wants her fingers to rise or fall, to spin lust and fire, she stays stone still. Bridget never held her this way. She never ruined this.

"I've done a lot of stupid things," Isobel says.

"Good," Ula says. "I don't trust people who play it safe."

"But I played it stupid."

"Stupid is brave."

They quiet for a moment, knotted and bound.

"One day, I'll want more," Ula says. She wriggles lower and brushes Isobel's hand with the bottom of her breasts.

*Soft. Silk. Flames. Inferno. Volcanoes. Explode. Erupt.*

Isobel's mouth dries. She's too thirsty to swallow, too hungry to cry. Wind tickles her hair, a black flag in the breeze—no mercy, no quarter.

"I know," Isobel whispers. "For you, I'll try."



## Praise Me

### Before

**I**sobel told herself she'd stop.

She promised this was the last time a dozen last times.

This was wrong. She knew this was wrong. But she was also lonely, and loneliness was a wolf.

So years passed. Every night, Bridget ruined Isobel. Brodie joined often, but he did not join always. He did not hunger like Isobel, like Bridget. He was not a wolf, but Isobel was a pack.

*Come for me, Bitty Bel. Die in my arms.* Isobel did, again and again. So Bridget unraveled her, again and again. They were lonely. They were odd. They were strange new girls in a strange new world, and nobody understood them like they understood each other. Their sisterly bond eclipsed all others. They knew each other best, because they were each other, shared each other, lived each other's lives. Bridget preyed on Isobel's loneliness, and Isobel preyed on Bridget's hunger. They fed each other everything.

"You'd make a good whore," Bridget told Isobel one evening after Ma and Pa had gone out, after Brodie had fallen asleep.

"I'm not a whore," Isobel snapped.

Bridget snorted. "No, you're an incestuous freak." Isobel peeled her naked self off Bridget, but Bridget clutched her shoulder and yanked her back to bed. "Easy, Bitty Bel. That came out wrong. I mean you could get money for this from people who aren't me."

"I'm eighteen."

"Exactly, an adult. Think about it. You're a natural."

"I'm not a fucking slut."

"I didn't call you a fucking slut. I called you a whore. Ma and Pa were right about you. They asked the wrong way, but they see you, Bel. I know you want it. Be honest. It's nothing shameful. You love sex, and sex can make a killing."

Isobel wanted to make a killing by killing, not fucking. She would not yield. Murder was easy. It cost nothing. Sex was hard. It cost everything.

"Listen," Bridget said, "I'm sorry. You can of course make your own decision, but why not try it? I won't tell Ma or Pa. Do it for *you*. If you hate it, no harm. But if you love it, there's money."

Bridget was being nice to Isobel. Bridget was always nice to Isobel when she got her way. Isobel often let Bridget get her way.

"I don't want them to be right about me," Isobel said.

"Forget them," Bridget said. "This is about you. I know you better than anyone, Bel, and you want so much more than I can give. You want to burn. You want to drown. You want someone to spark all your nerves. I'm your first, and though you always remember your first, you also shouldn't stop at your

first. There's a whole world to explore."

Isobel was scared, because Bridget was her sister, and others wouldn't be her sister. This was wrong, but there was no pressure. Sisters could never break up, because they could never be together. There was no guesswork, because their bodies were mirrors. Yes, Bridget was pretty while Isobel was ugly, but the same spells summoned the same explicit moans. Isobel was fucking her sister, herself, and she feared a stranger's magic.

"You do know me best," Isobel whispered. "That's why I'm afraid. I don't want anyone else."

"You have no reason to be afraid," Bridget whispered back.

"I don't trust you."

"Good. You're smart, Bitty Bel. You were always the smart one."

"The first time you fucked me, you sold me out to Ma and Pa. How do I know you won't do the same with this?"

"We fucked many times after, but I've told Ma and Pa nothing since."

"Why?"

Bridget smirked. "Because I want this, too."

"I still don't trust you," Isobel said.

"And you still shouldn't." Bridget spread her sister's legs and slid her finger inside. "You're hungry, Bitty Bel. You deserve much more. Let yourself feel. Let yourself live." She spun in circles, and Isobel hissed. "That's it, hate me. Hate me *hard*."

Isobel hated and came harder than a mountain.

Bridget giggled at the mess they made, the stains of sins overdone.

Bridget found Isobel two clients, one man and one woman a few years older than Isobel.

"Thanks for the discount," the man said. His name was Camden, and he thought Isobel knew what she was doing. Isobel did not correct him.

"Yes, thank you so much," the woman said. Her name was Addie, and Isobel wanted her more. Addie's curves were foreign; they stirred Isobel to destruction.

Clothes came off. Both Camden and Addie were well endowed, well fed. They were not from around here.

Isobel stared. She was not supposed to stare, but she couldn't stop. She wanted, needed, blazed, broke. Bridget waited outside the tent and coughed when she heard silence. Isobel cleared her throat and continued her lie. She started with Addie.

Isobel's fingers were deft from years of theft. She played Addie like a piano, and Addie sang her every tune.

"You're beautiful," Isobel breathed between Addie's breasts.

*Praise me.*

And Addie did.

"You're an angel," Addie whined, roasting inside. She thrust her hips over Isobel's fingers, and Camden mounted Isobel from behind. He filled her full.

Isobel was not used to being full. She starved for everything, always hungry, always greedy. But not anymore. She was stuffed. Whole. Stretched. Crushed.

*Praise me.*

And Camden did.

He slammed her hips while Isobel arched her crooked spine. She pulled Addie down and unfurled between her legs. They moaned, groaned, both warm and wet, the storm before the rainbow burst.

They all tried to wait, but time waited for no one. Ashes, ashes, they all fell down. Isobel sparked first, then Camden, then Addie, and they all knocked bodies, consumed by the sun. Sweat misted Isobel's skin, then tears fogged her eyes. *No*. After the rocket, the rebound shook her. They were not Bridget, not Brodie. They did not know her like family, devour her like gods. But she could not cry. Not here. Not now.

"Again," Isobel said.

Addie beamed. Camden beamed. Isobel did not beam. She spread her legs and arms, then surrendered. Camden filled her every hole, but this time, Isobel was not full. She was empty. Addie licked her toes to chest, but Isobel remained a shadow. Addie did not notice. Camden did not care. Passion possessed them, and Isobel was thankful for the diversion. She came again, several agains, but not like with Bridget. After each, she cried, so she'd command, "Again," and they'd break her again. She didn't bother picking up the pieces. Strangers were not family. Strangers were not love. Strangers could not satisfy the starvation that gnawed at Isobel's soul.

Two hours later, they finished for the last time. Camden bucked between Isobel's legs, and Addie shuddered over Isobel's face. Isobel wobbled then wept. She allowed herself a moment, then dried her eyes on Addie's thigh.

"Shit," Camden said. "Best night of my life."

*Worst night of mine*, Isobel thought. She still wanted, still needed, still blazed, still broke. No, she was *broken*. She craved a sister over a stranger—a sister who used, abused, mistreated, and molested her, but she couldn't help it, couldn't stop, couldn't force herself away from Bridget's heat.

Camden and Addie paid Isobel. It was a lot of money. Isobel liked money. She tried to remember why.

Her clients left the tent. Isobel stayed. She was still naked, still raw. Her legs ached. Groin throbbed. Chest sharpened. Mouth yawned. Bridget entered the tent.

"Aw, Bitty Bel," her sister said. "Always causing trouble."

Behind her, Ma and Pa entered, too. "Give us the money," Ma snapped.

Isobel was not surprised. She gave them the money, then dressed. Bridget sold her out, and Isobel let her, because she was so lonely, hungry, damaged, weak.

Even then, even betrayed, she wanted Bridget to ruin her. *Again.*

"I thought you were against this," Pa said. He was disappointed. He was always disappointed in Isobel. Beside him, Bridget sneered.

"I am," Isobel whispered, "but I wanted to try it...on my own terms."

"And?" Ma asked, annoyed, tapping her foot. She was more than disappointed. She was livid. *Again.*

"And it's not for me," Isobel said.

"You're unfortunately right. Everyone heard you. Some people saw you. They called you disgusting, you know that? They said you were hideous, that your clients were desperate. You're a monster, Bel. A goddamn freak."

Isobel *was* a freak, a monster, hideous and disgusting. Bridget had let others listen, let others watch, because she knew Isobel was ugly, and she wanted Isobel to see how much.

*Nobody wants you,* Bridget's smile said. *You're alone, and I'll ruin you, again and again.*

Isobel smiled back. *Then I'll ruin you, too. Someday, when I'm strong enough. Someday, when I'm brave enough. But not today. Today, I need you.*

Today, Isobel was still hungry. So she let Ma and Pa scream, let them yell, let them hurt. Insults gouged Isobel while she stood. Words punched and kicked her, drained confidence and bred doubt.

Bridget still smiled. Bridget should not have smiled. After Ma and Pa finished, Isobel was still standing. Her parents left with yet another promise to disown her, but Isobel was still standing. They threatened her to make money *or else*, but Isobel was still standing. She had lived in *or else* for a very long time.

"You're mad," Bridget said. "I told you not to trust me."

"I'm not mad," Isobel said. "And I never trusted you."

"Then why did you listen to me?"

"Because I needed you."

Bridget frowned. "How?"

"The clients," Isobel said. "I needed clients."

"For sex?"

"For games."

Pale, Bridget stepped forward. Darkness crept inside the tent, and night whistled a killing tune. "Bel, what are you talking about?"

"I used you, too, Bridget," Isobel said. "People who pay for sex have loose tongues. I needed information."

"I still don't understand," Bridget said.

"You taught me well. I might be ugly, but I'm also good. Camden and Addie sang for me, Bridget. They told me everything I needed to know."

Kisses revealed Isobel's next target. Her tongue on Addie revealed the target's location. Her hips over Camden's leaked the target's weakness. Her fingers inside Addie slipped the target's schedule. Her mouth around Camden's shaft sealed their help. *It's easy*, Isobel vowed, filled with Camden, dripping

with Addie. *Quick in, out, then done.* Isobel turned everyone into weapons. They prayed to her, repaying compliments with devotion. *Praise me.* They did. *Serve me.* They had. *Remember me.* They would.

Since the lawyer, Isobel was cautious—was *clever*. She both upped her game and dumbed down her marks, thanks to the lawyer's free-of-charge advice. She hadn't fucked up since. Murder was a fever dream, and she never wanted to wake. But her hands were clean. No blood, no shame.

"Right now, someone is dying," Isobel hissed. "Someone with fame. Someone with money. Someone who will feed our family for a month. She's heiress to a hedge fund, and she brings tons of cash to dust markets. Camden knew her from elementary school. Addie works for her mother. After they left, they slit her throat and fucked her corpse, then stole her money. Why? They want to go to jail, and if they did this, I promised them a good jail, a safe prison, a haven with no bills, a sanctuary with food and books and community and shelter for the rest of their lives. The world is starving, and people are desperate—as Ma said. A little murder for a comfortable life? Camden and Addie said yes before I asked."

Outside the tent, a bag jingled on the ground. Footsteps ran. Dust whirled. Cops shouted. Camden and Addie confessed.

Isobel retrieved the bag. Cash overflowed its drawstring. Bridget eyed her as she zipped the tent shut, horrified and awestruck.

"Murder is not little," Bridget finally said.

"Neither am I," Isobel replied.

"I see that now. Always knew you were too smart."

"Always knew you were too sharp."

The sisters glowered, and hate rose to fire.



"I want you," Isobel said. Her flute-like voice darkened with desire.

"Still?" Bridget asked. She leaned on her good foot and crossed her skinny arms.

"I want to fuck you till you forget your name." Isobel would have blushed here if she could have blushed without a command. As it was, Isobel tailored her every emotion. All Bridget saw was blank, not Isobel's true and furious longing.

"I cannot give you everything," Bridget said.

"I do not need everything," Isobel said. "I just need something." And something was enough. Yes, her hunger flared wilder than ever, but strangers could not tame it. Only Bridget came close. One day, perhaps she'd find an ocean, but not today and not for a while. She was a bottomless pit, and she needed to feed it *now*. "On your knees."

Bridget knelt. She was scared, as she should have been. Isobel wanted to destroy her. The runt turned cruel, because cruelty was power when you had none.

"Touch me," Isobel commanded.

Bridget touched her. She slid her hands beneath Isobel's clothes, weaving her threads. Isobel did not moan. She did not whimper. She did not give Bridget an inch. Instead, she rolled her hips around Bridget's fingers and held off the wave till Bridget started to cry. Isobel liked when Bridget cried. She could not hold off the wave any longer. The tide rose and crashed as Isobel took Bridget with her. She flipped her sister to the ground, slammed open her legs, and preyed upon every moan.

Because Bridget *did* moan. She moaned hard. She moaned long. She moaned for Isobel to stop. She moaned for Isobel to never let go. She moaned till she forgot her name, then she

moaned till she forgot her home. Isobel did not stop, would not let go. She stole from Bridget, as Bridget had stolen from her, and night passed outside the tent.

They remained locked together till dawn.

## Hungry Hope and Broken Prayers

Now

Isobel has behaved. She has behaved at Happy Hearts for a long, long time. She has been a good girl. A quiet girl. A calm girl. A nice girl. She has not whispered. She has not winked. She has not planted any weeds.

Isobel is bored.

She flexes her old skills: a bribe here, a gift there. *Do my chores. Braid my hair.* They're small, though. Small and powerless, how Isobel used to be. Isobel is still small, but she is not powerless. Not anymore. Bridget gave her power. She did not mean to, but she did.

And Isobel craves more.

No. Isobel is a strange new girl. She cannot hunger for the past. Hope dies quicker than dreams, and prayers break with every storm. Isobel must write a new story now, a story clean of blood. Bridget is gone. Her family is gone. Isobel is gone, too, but she pretends to live on.

"You look wrong," Ula says in the kitchen.

Isobel sweeps dust into a corner. "I *am* wrong."

"Wanna talk?"

"No."

Talk is for group. Group is in the afternoon. It is still morning. Morning is for chores. This is the routine. Isobel praises the routine. Yes, the routine is boring, but boring is safe. Boring is steady. Isobel needs boring after all the interesting. But Isobel fears boring, too.

"Let's leave," Ula says. "Let's go somewhere new, you and me."

"I've wandered before," Isobel says. "I won't wander again."

"Not wandering, traveling."

"Same thing."

"Traveling has a destination."

"Wandering has many," Isobel says. "I've done that, Ula. Adventure isn't worth it."

"Adventure makes everything else worth it," Ula says.

"I disagree."

Isobel sweeps harder. The dust never ends. The mess always stays. Isobel likes dust. It's a problem without a solution, something greater than them all—a god of sorts, a titan. It reminds her that she's insignificant. She likes to remember that she is a grain of sand, not an ocean. Her mistakes mean nothing. Isobel means nothing. She is invisible, and she doesn't want to be seen.

Ula opens her chapped lips to retort, but a crash interrupts them, a crash from upstairs. Isobel's neck snaps toward the sound, then she hisses as her back cracks. She clutches her side, tries to straighten her spine, but she's always been crooked, and crooked she'll stay. Ignoring the pain, she rushes up the stairs and into their bedroom.

A woman glares at Isobel. She has Rowan by the throat. A knife kisses his bronze neck, and tears jewel his chestnut eyes. Kenzie leans against the wall, annoyed. Fitz stands nearby, dark hands raised in peace, but the woman doesn't want peace. She wants revenge.

Behind Isobel and Ula, the staff arrives. Housemother and Housefather stay in their room. They do not care. Isobel wishes she didn't care, too.

"We can help you," Riley says, "if you put the knife down."

The woman glares harder. "I don't want your help." Her voice is sandpaper. Her eyes are yellow scythes. She twists Rowan's curls in her hand and drops the knife to his heart.

"Take me instead," Fitz begs. "He's done nothing wrong."

"I don't want you," the woman says. "I want him."

"Why?" Bara asks, stepping forward. She shields us, pulling Riley and Fitz behind her.

The woman tilts her head at Rowan. "He killed my sister."

Bara narrows her firecracker eyes. "You're Kyla, his aunt."

The woman—Kyla—nods.

"It wasn't his fault," Bara says. "She died in childbirth."

"Because of *him*. He was such a fat baby, and look at him now. *Weak*, pathetic. Just like his father."

Rowan whimpers. He never knew his father, and it sounds like a blessing. Kenzie and Caelin are bored now, so the singer and the cleaner retreat downstairs. Fitz scowls at them, but they don't see. Isobel sees everything. She sees a web to weave.

"How'd you find us?" Riley asks. He distracts Rowan's aunt to buy time, but time is extinct, so he buys them nothing.

"Patience," Kyla says. "I've been looking for him since he was born. Checked every orphanage across the Midwest, then every shelter. But we're going now. I have no issue with you. Let us

pass, and I'll leave you alone."

"Never," Fitz snaps. He lunges toward Kyla, but Riley and Bara restrain him, one on each arm as Fitz thrashes and flails.

"Easy, honey," Bara says. "Let him go, or you'll risk us all."

"Then I'll risk us all. I won't let him go. I *can't*, Bara. You don't understand."

"I understand more than you know, and that's why you must let him go."

Fitz doesn't let Rowan go. Muscles clench under his tunic as he strains at Riley's and Bara's grips. But Riley and Bara are stronger than they look, and Fitz is weaker than he seems. Love is poison. Her family taught Isobel that.

Kyla shuffles by them, her knife again at Rowan's throat. Rowan cries. Fitz cries. Ula cries, too, but Isobel does not cry. She sees a key. No one else sees a key. No one else is brave or crazy enough to turn that key and open that door. Isobel is not brave, but she is crazy enough, so she turns.

"Duck," Isobel whispers to Ula.

Ula ducks.

Isobel leaps over Ula and grabs Kyla's hand, the one with the knife. Kyla does not see Isobel, so she does not block. Isobel yanks Kyla's hand down, breaking her thumb, and the knife falls to the ground. Kyla shrieks, but she still does not see Isobel. Isobel crouches, lifts the knife, then spins around Kyla, to her back. She wraps a skeletal arm around Kyla's neck and slits Kyla's throat. Still, Kyla does not see Isobel. Blood geysers onto Rowan's horrified face, but Kyla still does not see Isobel. Kyla sinks to her knees and smacks the floor, but she still does not see Isobel. She breathes her last ragged breath, then dies in a pool of her own scarlet blood, but she still does not see Isobel.

Isobel sees Kyla. She watches, curious and cruel. She does

not feel guilt. She does not feel shame. She feels intrigue—and flames. Isobel wants to slice open the rest of Kyla and molest her organs, shove bones between her legs. She wants to tear apart Kyla piece by piece and put all those pieces inside her. She wants to eat Kyla's eyes and suck on her tongue, grind against her rib cage and come on her bun.

Isobel does not do any of those things, but she thinks them, and she thinks them hard. So when Fitz calls her a hero, she laughs. They think she's humble, but Isobel is not humble. Isobel is broken with the first blood on her hands. She's no longer clean. No longer a shadow. Sure, she's assisted murder countless times, whispered and winked at many weapons to end many targets. But this is different. This is cold-blooded slaughter. Yes, she saved Rowan, but she didn't care about saving Rowan. She only cared about slitting Kyla's throat. Rowan was an excuse.

"Thank you," Fitz says. He holds a sobbing Rowan in his arms and says again, "Thank you, Isobel. We owe you."

*No, I owe you,* Isobel thinks. She does not say this, nor does she admit that she helped Rowan because she wanted to kill, not save. "It was nothing."

"Let's get this cleaned up," Riley says.

Bara calls Kenzie and Caelin to help move Kyla's body and scrub blood off the floor. They'll burn her, and nothing will remain. No organs for Isobel to fondle. No bones for Isobel to grope. Her toys will become ashes. Her desires will become dust. Murder opens a wound inside her, a gash ever-bleeding, ever-gaping for more.

And Isobel wants *so* much more.

Unsatisfied, she lets Riley lead her into the downstairs bathroom. She does not accept his help and wipes herself down

alone—no water today, as usual. Ula brings her fresh clothes, and Isobel is clean. She doesn't want to be clean.

Isobel misses the blood on her hands.

"You look better," Ula says once they're alone.

"I feel better," Isobel says.

"Fix the window seals," Bara tells them. She returns from outside, smoke in her wake. The fire's already started. Kyla's almost gone. "Check the locks on the doors. People are getting desperate."

"Will there be more break-ins?" Ula asks.

Bara shrugs. "Most fled the Midwest for the coasts. I don't think there are many left to cause trouble. But it doesn't hurt to prepare. Emergencies bring out the worst in people."

"Is this an emergency?"

"A state of emergency. Government declared it."

Ula is scared. Isobel is not scared. She likes emergencies. People focus on emergencies and not her.

"I'm hungry," Kenzie says. She and Caelin re-enter the house. Another waft of smoke. Another wave of Kyla.

"We're all hungry," Fitz says. He holds Rowan in a corner. They both shake.

"We're all *starving*," Kenzie snaps. "We need more."

Isobel agrees. She needs more, too, but she doesn't need food. This is her missing piece. The part Bridget could never give. The hole strangers could never fill. *Don't do it*, Isobel argues with herself, but she doesn't listen.

Isobel has behaved. Isobel has been a good girl. She has not whispered. She has not winked. She has not planted any weeds.

Isobel likes weeds.



## Please Me

### Before

**I**sobel was hungry. Hunger was dangerous. Hunger was destructive. Hunger made people do bad things for good reasons, and Isobel did so many bad things.

Every morning, she forced Bridget to her knees. Every afternoon, she found a new client. And every night, she whispered weapons into murder. Sex melted brains. As clients used her body, she used their minds. Between her legs, they let targets slip—the rich and the famous, the royal and the powerful. Her clients became blades, then she collected blood money. Isobel liked blood money. It lasted longer than clean money. Tasted better, too.

Ma and Pa ignored Isobel. She made most of their income, so they left her alone. Isobel liked this newfound freedom. She cracked her back and ached for wings. Yes, she became a whore after all, but she was a whore on her terms, self-employed and self-sustained. She would not join a brothel. She was her own

pimp, she worked hard, and she liked it.

Still, she was empty. Even in threesomes, even plugged shut, she still yearned for something more. Money tamed that something more as cash flowed in each evening, but it lingered, biding time, waiting for weakness.

For now, Isobel was happy. Happy was unfamiliar. Happy was uncomfortable. Happy made her itchy, and she squirmed inside joy. She couldn't function like this, with no tethers to anchor her. She was used to cages; without bars, she stumbled.

"They're not allowed here." Isobel's latest lie. She whispered this into her client's ear while they danced under the covers. *Please me.* Nessa, her client, moaned as she listened. "The cops are after them. They stole extra rations. If you turn them in, there's a reward."

Nessa assumed the reward was hers, because Nessa wanted the reward, and people assumed what they wanted. But the reward was not Nessa's. Isobel said there would be a reward, not who would receive it.

"Why don't *you* turn them in, then?" Nessa asked. "Get the reward for yourself."

Not as dumb as Isobel would have liked.

Isobel twisted inside Nessa, and Nessa forgot why she cared.

"What's the reward?" Nessa asked.

"Ten thousand dollars," Isobel said. Ten grand for *Isobel*, not Nessa.

"So I say where they are, and the cops give me cash?"

"Yes," Isobel lied.

"Okay," Nessa said.

Nessa didn't question why Isobel trusted her with this information. She didn't question why this group—polyas, a polyamorous sect—wasn't allowed at this dust market or what

they'd done wrong. She didn't question anything, because she felt everything, and after a life of nothing, she needed something to survive. Isobel needed something, too. Today, Nessa was her something.

Isobel wrapped Nessa around her finger—literally—and Nessa finished around Isobel several times. Then Isobel kissed Nessa goodbye, and Nessa told the cops.

From Isobel's perch behind a tent flap, she saw her web spin. Nessa told the cops about the polyas. The cops tensed and crossed their arms. Confused, Nessa said the polyas weren't allowed here and asked for the reward. Enraged, the cops handcuffed her. Sometimes, bad was good. Sometimes, wrong felt right.

Nessa pointed at Isobel, but Isobel was a shadow with a fake name, and the cops didn't care. All they cared about was Nessa targeting a marginalized group. "Slander" and "hate crime" floated on the wind. Nessa strained in handcuffs, but she was their scapegoat, and cops needed a scapegoat to show they did their jobs. The media had attacked them, had called them lenient with the poly discrimination crisis, so they were not lenient with Nessa. They did not listen to her "please" and "I didn't know." They did not care if someone framed her. They had a fall girl and needed someone to take all their blame.

And the ten thousand dollars? That would still come. Nessa was Isobel's weapon, and her target was a cop. This cop hated polyas. He was the reason behind the media's attack. Though no one knew him by name, except Isobel, they knew someone among the cops was a bigoted asshole, and Isobel liked using bigoted assholes against themselves.

His name was Greg. Everyone hated Greg. Greg hated everyone, too. After Nessa's arrest, he slipped away from the

other cops and headed toward the polya camp. Slurs fell from his mouth; the polyas did not react. Insults pelted them; still, the polyas did not react. Abuse rose to shoves and slaps; still, the polyas did not react.

Yes, the polyas did not react, but their sympathizers did. A neighboring camp rushed Greg from the side. Punches bloodied his face, and kicks ripped his uniform. Unseen, Isobel skipped through the carnage and robbed Greg's RV. He trusted no one and kept too much cash on hand. People were easy to read, and Isobel had pieced together his story over a lazy afternoon.

The fight continued in Isobel's wake. The cops broke it up and arrested Greg, too. Isobel was already in her RV. She handed the cash to Ma and Pa. They did not thank her. Instead, they counted the bills, then added them to the safe with a loose nod.

Isobel retreated to the tiny bedroom she shared with the twins. The twins weren't there. Isobel was alone. Isobel liked being alone. The world didn't like that Isobel liked being alone. She ate a granola bar and longed for fresh fruit, but the dust was ruthless, and her parents refused to move. They should go east or west or somewhere else, but Ma and Pa were stubborn. *This is our home*, they always said. *We belong here*. And they did. They had always belonged here. They were creatures of dust and smoke, but Isobel wanted flames.

Bridget entered the bedroom, then knelt on the floor, though it was not morning, though it was not routine. Isobel had broken Bridget like Bridget had broken her. An eye for an eye, a cunt for a cunt. This was wrong, but damn, it felt right.

"What do you want?" Isobel asked. She did not look at Bridget.

"You," Bridget said, and she meant it. Bridget was a bully,

and she needed a punching bag. But Isobel was not a punching bag anymore. Isobel was a prize, so she made Bridget earn her. *Please me.*

"I'm busy."

"You're not."

Isobel raised a dark eyebrow. "Oh? Who keeps this shitty roof over your head? Who makes sure you have food to eat and water to drink? Hmm? Because Ma and Pa sure as hell don't."

"Sorry, Bel, I didn't—"

"It's *Isobel*. I'm better than a nickname."

Bridget tried to stand, tripped on her club foot, tried again, succeeded. She was a pretty girl. Pretty was her power. She relied on pretty. She *needed* pretty. When Isobel didn't bend to pretty, Bridget snapped.

"You're a *freak*, you know that?" Bridget spat. "A disgusting, mutant *freak*. You think you're on top of the world now, but one day, the world will fall on top of you, and I won't be there to save you."

*You won't be there at all.* Isobel grinned. "Is that all you've got?"

Bridget paused. This was a new game. A strange game. A dangerous and desperate game. But Bridget and Isobel both needed *more*.

"Ugly slut," Bridget hissed.

"Goddamn maniac," Isobel hissed back.

"Bloody cunt."

Isobel slapped Bridget. "Fucked-up whore."

Bridget ripped off her clothes. "Stupid bitch."

Isobel stripped and threw Bridget beneath her. "Dumb fool."

Bridget squeezed Isobel's breasts till skin blanched between her fingers. "Idiot runt."

Isobel shoved her hand inside Bridget. "Beg for it."

Bridget begged. She begged till she sobbed, and Isobel fucked her till she bled. Brodie walked in toward the end and punished Isobel hard. The chain of siblings ruined the sheets, then ruined each other, too. They prayed for more. They prayed to stop. But they couldn't end this vicious cycle. It was a lonely world, and they were so alone, so strange. No one understood them, so they understood each other till they came.

"What the *hell*?"

Ma and Pa stood in the doorway. The siblings hadn't heard them. All three were naked, and all three were undone.

"Bel," Ma said, because it was always Isobel's fault.

"Blair," Isobel said, because she was sick of Ma's bullshit.

"Outside."

"No." Isobel was a bad girl, and she wanted bad things.

Ma seethed. Pa fumed. A kettle and a chimney, both useless in this storm. Monsters shone from their eyes. Isobel liked monsters. She greeted theirs with her own.

Still naked, Isobel walked toward them. "You want to touch, is that it?" she purred. This voice was new, yet it was hers all along. "Is that why you're cranky? Bridget and Brodie had all the fun, so you're jealous, right?"

The twins panicked and dressed. Isobel didn't like clothes. They were pretty, and she had no use for pretty things.

"Then touch me," Isobel growled in this voice she just found. "Devour me. Make me scream your names."

Terror struck Ma and Pa. They did want to touch. They were not supposed to want to touch. Isobel was a runt. She was supposed to stay a runt. But Isobel disagreed. She opened her arms and shimmied her chest. Power coursed through her as she cackled.

"I am a *prize*," Isobel snapped. "Earn me."

Ma and Pa did not earn her. Instead, they shook their heads. "Do you want to end up like us?" Ma asked. She pointed at Isobel's crooked spine, then at Bridget's club foot. "This madness made you. Don't repeat our life."

Isobel was not surprised. She had suspected all along. Ma and Pa were siblings. But Isobel liked her spine, and she liked madness, too. Manners were temporary. Madness was eternal.

"It's my legacy," Isobel said. "Aren't you proud?" She cocked her head, and Pa winced. Ma did not wince. She grabbed Isobel's shoulder and shoved her backward. Isobel tripped and fell on the bed. Years ago, Isobel would have cowered. She did not cower now.

With a razor-sharp smile, she spread her legs. The twins retreated. So did Pa. Ma did not. She stared at her daughter's raw, bruised flower with sin-soaked desire. Isobel smiled wider. Yes, this was power.

"Touch me," Isobel said.

Ma squeezed her eyes shut and swallowed. Her horror ignited Isobel. Fear was the greatest drug.

"You want me. You need me. And since my money supports us all, what I say goes, so touch me."

Ma did not touch her. She did not open her eyes. The twins and Pa whimpered in the corner; they wanted to touch, too.

Isobel was a snake. Her hand whipped out and plunged Ma's fingers into her core. Ma's eyes flew open, and she gasped. Isobel moaned. Then neither moved. Desire grew.

"Make me come," Isobel ordered.

Ma tried to wriggle free, but Isobel forced her hand to stay inside.

"Make me *come*, Mother. Teach me what you know."

Ma did not make Isobel come, and there was little she knew

that Isobel had not found out. But Isobel had underestimated Ma. She thought their monsters were the same, yet Ma's fangs were longer. She slapped Isobel with her free hand and scratched her nails inside Isobel's core. Blood poured out. Too much. Too fast. Another curse from love's poison, courtesy of Ma and Pa.

"Stop the bleeding," Isobel said, but it was a plea, not a command. Power fled her, same as blood, while crimson soaked the sheets.

"Remember *this*, Bel," Ma hissed. She dipped her fingers inside Isobel and scratched along her walls again. Her other hand pinched Isobel's nipple. "You are *mine*. I made you. I own you. And if this happens again, I will *destroy* you."

Ma was full of shit. She had threatened Isobel before, the first time she caught the siblings, but she did not throw Isobel in the dust, did not bury Isobel alive. She couldn't. She needed her daughter's money, if not her daughter's soul.

Though this did not calm Isobel. Blood loss drained her. She was dizzy, woozy. Ma shoved gauze inside her, filled her up with stuffing, a meaty teddy bear. After half an hour, the bleeding stopped. Her family left her naked and stained on the bed.

Isobel trembled. She was not a monster, after all. Nor was she the hero or the princess. She was only an ugly little girl in an ugly little world saying ugly little things.



## Rotten Skulls and Dangerous Dreams

Now

**I** sobel misses Kyla.

Riley thinks she's scared. Bara thinks she's hurt. Both the nurse and cook are wrong.

They are always wrong about Isobel.

In group, they discuss trauma. Kenzie sings her sorrow. Ula mimes her pain. Rowan sobs, and Fitz weeps, but Isobel stays silent. She likes silence. Dreams live in silence, and every night, she dreams of Kyla.

There are so many bones in a body. So many toys, so many delights. Isobel felt alive with Kyla. She wants to feel alive again. She does not often feel alive. Often, she feels dead. Her mind is a rotten, infected lump, but her heart beats strong with the pulse of dangerous dreams.

The TV is always on. It's a state of emergency, and things go missing in emergencies: a comb, a toothbrush, a fork, a knife. Isobel collects supplies, because she is ready to express herself.

The human body is a masterpiece; she wants to discover why.

Isobel is patient. She waits for another Kyla, but another Kyla does not come. The drought is too long, the storms too strong, so Happy Hearts is isolated. Isobel does not like isolation. She grew up in an RV, hopped between caravans and dust markets. Yes, she was lonely, but she was never alone.

So Isobel becomes impatient. If another Kyla will not come, Isobel will make another Kyla.

Housemother, Housefather.

Riley, Bara, Caelin.

Kenzie, Ula, Rowan, Fitz.

Isobel juggles names in her skull. She should behave. She should be a good girl. She should not plant weeds.

But weeds planted her.

So she chooses.

Caelin. Easy to blame. They will miss him least. Lazy and sloppy, unchanging and complaining, no one will mourn the unclean cleaner.

Isobel drools. It is not a pretty sight, but she is not a pretty girl, so the world lets her drool.

She searches for Caelin as dust clogs her nose. The seals weaken. She should fix them. She won't. Broken things don't always want fixing. Isobel knows this best. Besides, it's not time for chores; it's time for studies, so Isobel studies. While the others crowd into the living room to practice marketable skills for which there is no longer any market, Isobel follows grimy footprints upstairs. She brushes aside a neglected string of fairy lights, braces herself on the white shiplap wall, and opens the door to the residents' bedroom.

Caelin is supposed to be cleaning this room. He is not. Instead, he sits on one of the cots. *Her* cot. Rage rises, whip-

fast and true. A shred of old Isobel returns: the ugly girl who thought she could earn power. But power is not a thing to earn; it is a thing to conquer, and Isobel was never intimidating. Still, she pops a hip, thrusts her chest, and pretends she is cute. She is not cute, but Caelin is horny, and beauty is in the eye of the boner.

His dull hazel eyes scan her crooked self, and he runs a pasty hand through his oily hair. Skin flakes scatter as he itches his scalp, and a low snarl escapes him. *Good*, Isobel thinks. This is a game she has won many times before.

She kicks off her slippers and slides free of her tunic. It is not graceful or elegant, but the message is clear. Naked, she blinks her large violet eyes at the lazy cleaner, rubbing ashen hands over her skeletal frame.

“Are you cold?” Caelin asks. It is a stupid question. Between the drought and dust, the heat is stifling. The house is a furnace cooking all their minds.

But Isobel is used to stupid questions. She’s asked many herself; Ma told her so. “A bit. Thought I’d rest.”

Caelin doesn’t move. Isobel doesn’t ask him to. Instead, she closes the door, pads across the room, and nestles her small body against his musty stench. Her blue-black hair blankets his lap, a smear of the Walsh brand, stubborn and cruel.

The cleaner holds his breath. “Riley...Bara...do they know?” he squeaks.

Isobel weaves a lie. “Yes, they suggested I come upstairs.”

Caelin exhales. He believes Isobel. He shouldn’t believe Isobel. Hell, Isobel doesn’t even believe herself.

She wriggles on the cot, feigns discomfort. A prize hardens against her back. She spins toward Caelin, make-believes shock. Blushing, he adjusts and turns away. Isobel turns him back.

"May I?" She taps his groin, an innocent dove. There is nothing innocent about Isobel, but it's an easy disguise. Most underestimate her. She's little, weird, and ugly. No runt is the strongest in the flock.

But she doesn't want to be the strongest.

She wants to survive the longest.

And so, she survives.

Caelin mumbles, "We shouldn't." It's word vomit, what he's supposed to say when a broken bird asks to peck.

"We're all gonna die," Isobel says. The TV agrees. It barks downstairs about dust, storms, and emergencies.

"You're young."

"I'm twenty-five, and I've lived twice that long."

The cleaner doesn't argue further. He runs out of script, his willpower depleted. Isobel senses his surrender. She unzips his pants, rescues his meat. It's purple and throbbing, sprouting wiry hairs. Not appetizing, but Isobel is not picky. She fists the shaft and sucks.

Caelin grunts. It is not a pleasant grunt. Isobel sucks rougher, then stops. Caelin pushes her head, but she slaps him away. He grows harder.

Isobel sits and straddles Caelin. He grabs her hips and eases her down. Isobel traps him, squeezes him inside her. He is her hostage and collapses as she conquers.

*Yes, this is power*, she thinks, but she does not think for long.

Her hips gyrate over the defeated cleaner. A storm builds inside her. She smacks her ass against his thighs once, twice, three times, then howls as her body seizes.

Caelin already came. He was punctual, for once.

Tentative, the cleaner reaches up to tweak Isobel's breasts. They are not impressive breasts, but they are breasts nonethe-

less. Isobel pretends she likes his touch and lets him fondle while she slips out a knife.

Nudity is the best distraction. Isobel could have walked in with a bomb, but a flash of tit and cunt blinds all starving eyes.

Caelin leans up to taste Isobel's nipple. It does not taste good. She cannot clean often. This satisfies Caelin, because he does not like cleaning, but his satisfaction does not last. In an abrupt jerk, Isobel jams the knife up his nose, into his brain. The cleaner gawks then dies. His eyes are vacant. There is blood. Both unremarkable, like Caelin.

Nobody notices. The TV still roars downstairs. The same recycled conversations buzz below.

Isobel buzzes, too. She is excited. She is not often excited. This feeling is new and untamed, risky and dangerous. She cannot cut Caelin deep or precise, else the others suspect, but she can cut him in a wild slash across his knee. With her other tools, Isobel combs aside his skin, brushes blood and tissue away, then pries off his kneecap with the fork. It springs free. She reaches between her legs, stashes the kneecap inside, then shrieks.

Bara and Riley come running. They burst through the door to find a weird, ugly girl shaking and pointing at the greasy, dead man.

"He...he came at me," Isobel says. She kicks her tools to the ground. They are the story's tools now. "Then he...he..." She gulps and shakes her head.

Bara rushes to her side, but there is nothing she can do. Neighbors and help are miles away. It doesn't matter; Isobel is infertile. She cannot carry a murder baby. But Bara does not know this, so she sobs.

Riley sobs, too. He asks Isobel to talk. Isobel does not want to

talk. She wants to rest, so they let her rest. Sympathy is another rationed commodity in this drought.

They leave with Caelin. Minutes later, they burn him, like Kyla. Isobel likes fire. Smoke is her home: sneaky, invisible, toxic, weak.

Isobel births the kneecap. It is small. She does not want small. She wants big. She wants the world to stuff her full of pain and pleasure so she never remembers the RV again.

The world does not oblige.

The kneecap disappoints her.

The murder does not give her the same rush.

Isobel needs more.

Isobel wants to fly.

## Behold Me

Before

**I**sobel was a bomb.

She ticked everything off her list, and she was ready to explode.

Ma and Pa ignored her. Bridget and Brodie feared her. Isobel received neither respect nor release, and she deserved both. All that time on her knees and back should count for something, so Isobel counted it.

*Tick, tick, tick.*

She made them money. She sold her soul. But the twins would not touch Isobel again. She wanted their touch. She wanted their pain. She wanted them to hurt her so hard she'd know she was not alone, that there were other ugly little people in this ugly little world saying ugly little things.

And there were.

But not Bridget.

Or Brodie.

Or Ma.

Or Pa.

They weren't ugly and little like Isobel. They were ugly and little in their own corrupt way—in a way that no longer welcomed her.

Since Isobel could not grow bigger, she grew angrier instead.

*Tick, tick, tick.*

So Isobel played every game she knew.

*Behold me.*

These were not kind games. They did not belong to children. They belonged to Isobel, and she twisted their roots. She was not a girl anymore. No, she was dust, she was smoke, she was the will of the wind over the fog of the damned.

*Behold me.*

Isobel prepared the board.

Her pawns filled every space.

*Tick, tick, tick.*

Many owed her favors. She inflated these favors. They were costly reminders of the guilt she scrubbed from their groins. When Isobel called in a few of these filth-ridden favors, all her pawns obliged.

The RV had stopped at a pop-up dust market, the pastel tents hazy through the storm. But the RV was clear. Its chipped red paint bled through the dust, and Isobel ushered her pawns toward the wound. This was her first game, the favor game, a game to plant weeds of flame and watch them grow. Isobel's pawns planted many weeds. The tiny grenades waited beneath wheels, calm and obedient—as Isobel used to be.

But Isobel was not calm and obedient anymore.

She flirted with her pawns, mirroring their wishes, not hers. Candy love smothered them with attention, and trust brewed



from fake honesty. They bonded. Isobel liked bonding. Give a secret; gain a dozen. Lies disarmed all truths, and they wriggled free through the dust, worms puncturing Isobel's gut. She was a chameleon, a costume, which she preferred. If they blamed this mask, she was still herself, still safe, and Isobel needed safety after all these years of swords.

A wink, a sway, and they all obeyed. She played to others' fantasies, so her own dreams came true. Isobel learned this through sticky fingers and tongue. Her hands were clean of blood but nothing else as she weaponized desire, and desire was a powerful blade. Drained and euphoric, her pawns laced water rations with poison inside the RV.

Fury boiled inside Isobel. Yes, this was another game, a diversion, but this was something more, too.

This was a reckoning.

Isobel stepped into the RV. The sink overflowed with rusty crockery. The TV promised doom. Diesel stank from the engine, and piss reeked from the tank, overfull and leaking. The twins sat at the table. Ma and Pa stood across in the kitchen. Fake fortunes littered sticky notes on the counter, and Brodie's phone flashed with their vlog. Back to the beginning. A return to old scams. Frauds till the end.

And this was the end.

They did not want Isobel anymore, and Isobel did not want them. Her theft and whoredom frightened them. Their hatred and apathy annoyed her. They wanted her gone. Isobel wanted herself gone, too. She would miss their sins, but she had outgrown their cage.

The storm raged behind her. Isobel raged, too. She plucked an enamel mug from the overflowing sink and threw it at the twins' booth. Bridget ducked. Brodie did not duck. The mug

cracked his tooth, and he hollered like a beast. Bridget tended to him, then scowled at Isobel. But nobody fought back. Not even Ma or Pa.

They were the same. All five Walshes were pale, short, and scrawny with blue-black hair and parasites in their skulls. But Isobel's violet eyes set her apart: a brand, though not the type Ma liked. They all stared at her with a narrow gray gaze, Pa and Brodie stiff, Ma and Bridget fuming, ice and fire, stone and steel. Isobel hated them all, herself included, but she couldn't run from herself, so she ran from them instead.

Though not quite yet.

The Second Dust Bowl churned outside the windows. Dust looked like smoke, and Isobel liked both.

"Bel," Ma finally said in her reedy voice.

Isobel did not correct her. There wouldn't be much to correct soon. They were horrible parents, so they would die horrible deaths.

"Bitty Bel," Bridget said, a brass fanfare, an accidental dirge. She dragged her club foot forward and stretched. Brodie did the same with his, a reminder of their parents' sin. Incest: a vipers' nest, a legacy, their generational burden and pain. They were grotesque and fucked-up. Isobel liked being grotesque, though she liked being fucked-up more.

Isobel stretched her crooked spine. It was the most beautiful thing about her, a sinuous curve, a hopeful vine. Isobel didn't like hope. Hope was messy. Hurt was more reliable.

"Sissy," Isobel said. Then, turning to Brodie: "Buddy." They flinched from her childhood nicknames for them. Isobel wanted them to flinch from her.

So she turned their games against them: shame, threats, isolation, judgment. "You're nothing. I hate you. You'll stay

here forever. No one will find you.”

But they did not have the same effect. Insults bounced off her family’s undeserved self-esteem. They had each other, so they would never be alone.

Isobel was done with games.

*Behold me.*

*Tick, tick, tick.*

Once with a smile, she had promised herself she would someday ruin Bridget, too, when she was strong and brave. She was not strong and brave, but strength and bravery were traits stolen, not given, so she would steal them now to survive on her own.

Sometimes, you need to leave home to find home.

So Isobel left. She was eighteen and cruel. She would be fine. She had her body, if not her mind. This was not the agency she desired, but it was agency all the same.

“Goodbye,” she said, and that was that.

*Behold me.*

*Tick, tick.*

The door slammed behind her, and she walked through the storm. After a minute, she heard gags. Then gargled screams. Agony, dizziness, weakness, fever. Chills, headache, drooling, rash. Poison was a terrible way to die. So was burning alive.

*Behold me.*

*Tick.*

Her pawns sparked the bombs. No one heard over the thunder. No one saw over the dust. The RV exploded, then her family burst free.

They flew away.

*Behold me.*

## Beautiful Storms and Lovely Pain

Now

**T**here is a beautiful storm outside Happy Hearts.  
There is a beautiful storm inside Isobel, too. Hunger and anger fuel her tornado, and she spins out of control.

Rations ran out days ago, even without Caelin's mouth to feed. No food or water for forty-eight hours. Trucks can't make it through the storm, and neither can their van. It's dry, anyway. Gasoline ran out first, and they were never essential, nor are they an emergency when everywhere is an emergency. They can't call for help, because cell service is out. Electricity, too. They've festered in the dark since Monday, and Wednesday tempts them with rage and pain.

Ula is sick with dust pneumonia, because Housemother and Housefather forgot to buy dust masks. The directors remain upstairs, locked away. Government checks have not run out, and until they do, there they will stay.

Isobel will not stay. Happy Hearts is clogged with plaque, an embolism waiting to strike. But she cannot leave now. She blames the storm. It is not Ula. She hates Ula. She is glad Ula will die. Nobody else is glad Ula will die, but Isobel is not a nobody anymore.

Dust sifts through the windows, then piles on the floor as the storm charges on. Fitz and Rowan sweep, but there is too much. They slump on a dust mountain beside Kenzie. Kenzie does not sing anymore, but she does speak—too much and too harsh.

“What’s your story, Isobel?” she asks. “How’d you kill your dear old Ma and Pa? You know ours. Mine: car crash. Ula’s: anaphylactic shock. Rowan’s: childbirth. Fitz’s: flood. All tragic accidents. Was yours an accident, too?” Kenzie glares at Isobel. Her green eyes blister as wrath reddens her olive skin. She reminds Isobel of Bridget in that moment: a pretty girl with ugly power. Isobel does not want to remember Bridget.

“It’s rude to ask questions when you know the answer,” Isobel says.

Kenzie scoffs and tugs a strawberry braid. “You are so strange.”

Riley chastises Kenzie. “Leave Isobel alone. She’ll talk when she’s ready.” The slender nurse continues to monitor Ula on the couch. His dark hands check her vitals as she coughs. Isobel does not look at Ula. It is not safe.

“Isobel will never be ready to share, but she’s more than happy to steal our secrets without reciprocating.”

“Leave it, Kenzie.”

Kenzie does not leave it. It’s the end of the world: economic depression, national crises, black blizzards, infrastructure collapse. There’s no reason to behave.

So Kenzie does not behave. "I've read about you. The legendary Walsh family. Your parents told fortunes, and your siblings vlogged. Everyone loved them, but no one loved you."

Isobel does not answer.

Again, Riley tells Kenzie to stop.

Again, Kenzie does not stop. "Always left out. That must have hurt. There are rumors, of course: theft, prostitution. I heard from some caravans that you contributed in your own way. Is that right?"

Isobel tries not to answer, but she also tried not to kill, so she decides she is not good at trying and surrenders. "I survived."

"Oh, you did far more than that," Kenzie says.

"Enough," Bara snaps, her voice lemon instead of honey. Bara does not often snap. Isobel would be honored that Bara snapped for her if she did not want to snap Bara, too. "Kenzie," the cook continues, "shut up or get out. I'm too hungry for drama." Her firecracker eyes flare amber, and she crosses her large brown arms. Silver hair frizzes at her temples from dust.

Kenzie shuts up, but she does not get out. Nervous, Rowan nestles his tiny frame against Fitz's broad build. Their brown eyes seek each other in the shadows, and Fitz ruffles Rowan's auburn curls.

Bara turns toward Isobel. "We are all born into different worlds, and you survived your world the only way you could."

It is a nice sentence. A disarming sentence. Isobel feels a sword release her heart. Her secret bubbles to the surface with its liberation, and she blurts out, "Poison and bombs. They flew away."

Bara does not defend Isobel anymore. Neither does Riley. Kenzie wants a secret, but she does not want this one. Fitz and Rowan gape in terror at this strange girl who is now even

stranger.

"You killed them all," Kenzie croaks.

"Yes," Isobel says.

"By accident?" Rowan squeaks.

"No. They abused me for years. I was done."

They do not understand. Isobel knew they would not. She is angrier and hungrier now, so she leaves.

"Don't go," Riley says, but he does not chase her.

Isobel flees outside. She is a bird. Birds should not be caged. No one follows her. Dust lashes her flesh as she trudges, blind, to the rusty van. It is empty but unlocked. Isobel lies in the back, across the worn-leather bench. Freedom is sour, not sweet, and Isobel is stuck in the storm.

A knock jolts her nerves. Isobel shoots up and spots a slim figure through the dusty wind. Sky-blue eyes, beach-sand skin, sunshine hair...*Ula*.

Isobel lets her in. She should not let her in. She hates *Ula*. But Isobel is tired and bored, and both are dangerous things.

*Ula* arrives with a belch of dust. She closes the door and sits beside Isobel. Coughs rattle her bones. Isobel wants those bones.

"Are you ready?" *Ula* asks.

"For what?" Isobel replies.

"For more. You promised you'd try."

Isobel is ready for a type of more, but not *Ula's* more, though she could try *Ula's* more first. "Okay."

*Ula* twirls, straddling Isobel. She wraps her arms around Isobel's neck and whispers, "I want you."

*Ula* is unstable.

But Isobel is also unstable, so she whispers back, "I want you, too." She does not want *Ula*, not in this way. She hates *Ula*.

Ula hates Isobel, too. She slips off her tunic, then Isobel's. Naked and awkward, they stare at each other.

"You lied," Ula purrs. "This is not what you want." Her nipples peak against Isobel's, and Isobel forgets to think. It is unwise to forget to think when thoughts are the only reason she is alive.

"No, it is not," Isobel says. Her thumbs dig into Ula's waist, and the dancer who does not dance rocks her hips forward.

"You want something far worse."

Isobel pauses at Ula's words, then tenses from Ula's glare. She is not flirting anymore.

"I know what you are," Ula says around a cough. "I know what you did."

"So does everyone here." Isobel pushes Ula away, but Ula clings to Isobel's skeleton like an octopus. The storm hammers the van.

"You fucked Bridget and Brodie," she says, the swear bitter on her tongue.

Isobel frowns. Everyone knows the Walshes' names, but Ula wields them with intimacy. "You knew them."

"I knew your brother."

Ice spikes through Isobel's chest. "You loved him."

Ula nods. "You stole him from me."

"He *abused* me, Ula."

"And you abused him."

The staring continues.

"You want to kill me," Isobel says.

Again, Ula nods.

"Then why wait? You could have killed me many times before."

"I needed your confession. Unlike you, I don't kill innocent people."



"Brodie wasn't innocent."

"But Caelin was."

Isobel simmers. "So this was all a game."

"Should feel familiar," Ula hisses.

She slaps Isobel's cheek. Isobel wants more. Ula gives her more. Another slap, then a pinch. Isobel does not strike back. She lets Ula think herself powerful. It's how she handled Bridget, and Ula is Bridget's ghost.

"You want to hurt me, because your parents hurt you," Isobel whispers. "They made you weak."

Ula scowls. Her face purples, and she loops her fingers around Isobel's throat. "I want to hurt you, because you *killed* Brodie, you fucking cunt."

She squeezes. Isobel spits in her face. Ula blinks away phlegm.

"Your parents hated you," Isobel wheezes. Still, she does not fight back, not with fists. Isobel's words have always been her weapons. "And they were right to hate you."

Ula releases Isobel's throat and punches her temple. Isobel's ears ring, mind clouds. She likes this feeling. Cotton stuffs her skull. Stars paint her eyes. It's nice here. Peaceful, even.

Though it does not last.

Isobel squirms, but Ula does not budge. Her tentacles latch deep. With one hand, she squeezes Isobel's breast; with the other, she jams fingers between Isobel's legs. Isobel smiles. She has played this game before. Bridget taught her well.

"More," Isobel sneers.

Ula freezes, appalled. Then she schools her face into defiance and twists Isobel above and below. Isobel moans. Violence is her bitch.

"You want to violate me, so violate me," Isobel says. She grabs Ula's wrist and plunges her deeper inside. "Fuck me as hard as

you hate me.”

Ula writhes, trapped inside Isobel’s core, but Isobel will never let her free. “Please,” Ula whimpers.

“*You raped me*, so finish me off.” Isobel rolls her hips around Ula’s fingers.

“Not like this...you said you didn’t want this.”

“I always wanted this. Make hate to me, not love.”

Enraged, Ula punches Isobel again. The blow jerks Isobel’s head back, and her neck cracks. Isobel moans louder. She claims Ula’s mouth, and Ula submits, as Isobel knew she would. Isobel’s tongue carves out victory. She eases Ula down on the van’s bench, beneath her, as Ula coughs in time to the storm. Feverish, Ula swings at Isobel, bruises her ashen skin. Isobel does not swing back. Gentle, she caresses Ula’s legs, hips, waist, and chest, then cradles her chin with a sickening tenderness. Ula shivers. Her nipples harden, and warmth pools between her legs.

“You lied, too,” Isobel breathes. “This wasn’t all a game to you. You want me.”

“I want you *dead*,” Ula rasps, then succumbs to another cough. Her chest twitches with the struggle, growing harder.

“Then kill me. You know how.”

And Ula does. She knows Isobel’s secret. A tiny scratch is all it would take.

But Ula does not scratch Isobel. Not yet.

So Isobel waits.

And Ula watches.

And the storm growls outside.

“You’re afraid,” Isobel finally says. The windows fog with dust, and wind licks the van.

“Of course I’m afraid,” Ula says, trapped inside Isobel’s skeletal

cage.

“Then let’s do pleasure before pain.” Isobel strokes the side of Ula’s breast—considerate as Ula, Bridget, and Brodie were not.

Ula coughs. Then chokes. Then rekindles her feeble fire. “No. Pain before pleasure.”

It’s quick, like most mistakes. Ula swats Isobel, a kitten to a tiger.

But this tiger weeps.

Blood scalds Isobel’s cheeks. Red curtains close over her fate. She fondles the gashes beneath her eye with sorrowful lament. They’re too big for pressure, too deep to scab. Isobel did not think Ula would kill her, but Isobel was wrong, so she mourns. There was so much more she wanted to do, so much more she wanted to see, but this is right. Isobel is a monster. She knows this, owns this. And monsters are meant to die.

So Isobel will die.

But Ula will die, too.

The willowy woman coughs again, a bark swallowed by the storm. Blood is in that bark. It mingles with Isobel’s, a crimson spatter across Ula’s breasts.

At least Isobel will die living.

She kisses Ula. Ula kisses her back. Blood rains from Isobel’s torn skin. Dizziness follows, then Isobel fades fast. The storm fades, too. Lovely pain rocks her to sleep as she collapses over Ula. They die together. They fly away.

But everyone else dies and flies away, too.

Dust buries Happy Hearts, and its roof caves in.

No hearts are happy ever again.

## Remember Me

After

Cops thought the storm killed the women, but Isobel was the storm.  
They were always wrong about Isobel.

*Remember me.*

They razed Happy Hearts and its bodies, then the dust lifted, though Isobel never saw. She wouldn't have wanted to, anyway. Dust made her; she slept in its cocoon for the seven homeless years between the RV and Happy Hearts. Isobel liked being homeless. She was always a wanderer, a vagabond queen, and nomad life suited her. She was a bird; she wanted to fly free.

But she wouldn't fly free anymore.

Though I did.

*Remember me.*

The raw, healing heartland was better off without the strange new girl in a strange new world saying strange new things. Isobel was a beast, though she called me the same, and perhaps

I was, though I never meant to be. Isobel scared me. She was a demon, a monster, savage and cruel. I stayed away from her rotten mind—always watching, always listening, but too afraid to show my bomb-maimed face.

Now, she's gone. It's for the best. If she had lived, she would have wandered to a new home, set new fires, because she liked it when they burned.

I would know.

I am her brother, after all.

## Acknowledgments

Thank you for finishing my absolute weirdest and least marketable book. This story refused to stay tame, and Isobel refused to behave. I did not intend to write an incest novella, BUT HERE WE FUCKING ARE. Anyway, thank you. Truly. I hope you enjoyed the nausea-ridden mayhem, and you are a saint for finishing this disgusting book heathen.

To everyone who has retweeted, read, or reviewed my work: Thank you for your time and gag reflexes.

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To S and C: Love you both an aggressive amount. Never read my books, sweethearts.

Reviews are authors' superheroes.

They save us from the villainous Lord Algorithm to lend us credibility and visibility. If you would consider leaving a review on Amazon, Goodreads, and BookBub of even a few simple words (ex. "There's something wrong with Halo." or "Halo pulverized my mind and cackled while doing so."), I would be forever grateful and will award you an esteemed spot in my empire once I achieve galactic domination.

## About the Author

Halo Scot is a dark fiction author of [book monsters](#), many of which bite. Reviews and press are available on [HaloScot.com](#). Halo has been featured in *Publishers Weekly* and *BookLife*. Also, as a founding member of [QueerIndie.com](#), Scot has appeared at Brooklyn Book Festival and Pop Pride Week, an event hosted by ReedPop, BookCon, and New York Comic Con.

To summon this obscure and skittish writer, one must align the following items in a circle as an offering: three shots of whiskey, two bowls of jelly beans, something shiny or lit on fire, and a printed photo of Nicolas Cage as a duck.

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**NOTE: Please read the content warnings. My mind is a horrifying place. Only enter with poisonous weaponry and snacks.**