

THE SUICIDE TABLE

A Dissertation

presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

ANNELISE HATJAKES

Dr. Phong Nguyen, Dissertation Supervisor

MAY 2024

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

THE SUICIDE TABLE

presented by AnnElise Hatjakes,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy,

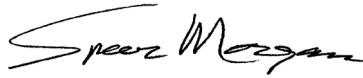
and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.



Professor Phong Nguyen



Professor Trudy Lewis



Professor Speer Morgan



Professor Rebecca Scott

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my mom, who saved every story I ever wrote and inspired me to find humor in the absurd and joy in the act of observing. I miss you every day.

I would like to thank my family (Dad, Mark, Chris, Amanda, Zac, Alison, Jonathan, and Matthew) and husband, Orlin, whose unceasing support was felt across the thousands of miles that separated us at many times throughout this program. I would also like to thank Lauren, Phoebe, and Caylin for friendships that buoy me and make me feel brave no matter how rough the water.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would not have been able to complete this project without the support of my committee members. I am especially thankful for the feedback offered by my chair, Professor Phong Nguyen. His guidance as an instructor, mentor, and fellow writer informed and inspired many of the decisions I made in this novel. Professor Trudy Lewis' illuminating workshop centered around the movement of time in narrative prompted my exploration of history in this project. I also learned from Professor Speer Morgan's sharp editorial eye and Professor Rebecca Scott's theoretical insights. Thanks also to the members of my workshop group, Satoshi, Anna, and Emily, who helped me cultivate this novel from an errant seed.

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THE SUICIDE TABLE

AnnElise Hatjakes

Dr. Phong Nguyen, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

The Suicide Table is a formally experimental novel composed of narrative, primary source material, and fictionalized historical accounts. It opens in present-day Reno, Nevada, and follows Nellie, a historian by training. It's not just her work that is rooted in the past. She avoids as many aspects of modernity as she can, dressing in vintage clothing and carrying around a flip phone that she rarely charges. In hopes of getting a grant from a historical preservation society, she pitches a project about women who lived through the 19th-century mining bonanza in Virginia City, Nevada. Soon, her focus narrows on Julia Bulette, a beloved historical figure and local legend, whose fictionalized diary entries appear early in the novel to form a narrative thread of their own. The novel concludes with Nellie's discovery of the diary, which had been secreted away in the famed Delta Saloon Suicide Table that her grandfather acquired at his pawn shop after the saloon-turned-casino went out of business. In conversation with the Western novel tradition that influenced its creation, the novel explores points of intersection between historical records, folklore, and fictional stories.

Critical Introduction

The Taller the Tale, the Greater the Truth: Culture, Myth, and History in the Western

The Western¹ exists somewhere between myth and reality, ‘high’ and ‘low’ art, academic and popular discourse. I’ve chosen to position my dissertation within these liminal spaces by finding points of intersection between historical records, cultural myths, and fictional stories. It is a formally experimental novel composed of narrative, primary source material, and fictionalized historical accounts.

Fiction as a “False Document”

My novel opens in present-day Reno, Nevada, and follows Nellie, a historian by training. It’s not just her work that is rooted in the past. She avoids as many aspects of modernity as she can, dressing in vintage clothing and carrying around a flip phone that she rarely charges. In hopes of getting a grant from a historical preservation society, she pitches a project about women who lived through the 19th-century mining bonanza in Virginia City, Nevada. Soon, her focus narrows on Julia Bulette, a beloved historical figure and local legend, whose fictionalized diary entries appear early in the novel to form a narrative thread of their own. The novel concludes with Nellie’s discovery of the diary, which had been secreted away in the famed Delta Saloon Suicide Table that her grandfather acquired at his pawn shop after the saloon-turned-casino went out of business. Interwoven into Nellie’s sections are excerpts from her research, which are composed of primary sources. Some sources are altered and some aren’t, exploring the blurred line between fiction and nonfiction, as well as the ethically fraught business of writing revisionist historical fiction.

¹ I capitalize the words “West” and “Western” throughout this essay to refer to the geographic area in the western United States and the literary tradition, respectively.

Told in a close third-person perspective, the novel's primary narrative voice is highly influenced by Nellie's research background with footnotes that provide historical asides that complement, contextualize, or resist the present narrative. I am interested in the ways that a story's form influences the way that story is received, especially in terms of the expectations of historical fiction. Writing in this genre poses a number of issues: What is the writer's responsibility to accurately representing the past? How does one even determine what *accurate* representation looks like? How does a writer navigate these questions when they are based on actual historical events and people? Prolific historical novelist, E.L. Doctorow posited a theory about these complicated questions in the form of a seemingly simple answer: there is no distinction between historical fact and historical fiction. His argument was informed by a postmodern distrust of realism and the genre's ties to the ruling class. Although the majority of my novel would best be described as realism, my inclusion of Western genre conventions allows me to put the two genres in conversation with each other and hold up a mirror to prompt reflections of both.

In Doctorow's view, realism attempts to approximate nonfiction, and in so doing, serves as a way to perpetuate dominant ideologies. In his 1977 essay titled "False Documents," he writes, "I am thus led to the proposition that there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative" (163). Doctorow argues that writers of both fiction and nonfiction often rely on the same narrative tools, so it is more useful to evaluate them through the functional consequences of their language. He divides the power of language into two categories: "power of the regime" and "power of freedom." The former is based on an analysis of a *New York Times* headline about Navy jobs being cut, and the latter is described using an excerpt from Vladimir Nabokov's novel, *The Gift*. The (nonfictional) regime language "derives its strength from what we are supposed to be" while the (fictional) freedom language empowers writers to show "what we

threaten to become” (153). History is not captured through an artifact like a “spent shell,” “bombed out building,” or “a pile of shoes,” but instead through the storyteller’s mediation of the events and people’s experiences those artifacts evidenced.

We see this process of written artifacts creating a reality of their own, as well as the thematic importance of documents and record-keeping in Doctorow’s own Western novel, *Welcome to Hard Time* (1960). In it, a drifter referred to as “the Man from Bodie” comes to the small titular settlement in the Dakota Territory and wreaks havoc through a murderous rampage before setting fire to the town. The novel’s protagonist, Blue, is the de facto mayor² of the town, so everyone is looking to him for guidance when the Bad Man arrives. Rather than staging a shootout with him, though, Blue offers up one of the prostitutes as a distraction so that he can retrieve the town records. The narrator says, “He [the Bad Man] was at the doors now, sending shots into the dirt at my heels, into the porch alongside me, and what I thought then was that I wanted to go across to my room and get those ledgers to safekeeping” (19). Blue prioritizes the safety of the documents over the safety of the townspeople as if the documents can establish the reality of their existence more effectively than their actual existence. By the novel’s conclusion, the few remaining townspeople have begun to rebuild Hard Times, and some new settlers have arrived. The entire story serves as Blue’s own false document, and it ends with his reflection on his misguided efforts to keep those records. He says,

I scorn myself for a fool for all the bookkeeping I’ve done; as if notations in a ledger can fix life, as if some marks in a book can control things. There is only one record to keep and that’s the one I’m writing now, across the red lines, over the old marks. It won’t help me nor anyone I know. ‘This is who’s dead,’ it says. It does nothing but it can add to the memory. The only hope I have now is that it will be read—and isn’t that a final curse on me, that I still have hope? (185)

² When asked by a fellow townspeople, Ezra, whether or not he’s the mayor, Blue responds by saying, “Only to those who voted for me” before explaining, “I had not been elected mayor, I had taken it upon myself to keep records in case the town ever got large enough to be listed, or in case statehood ever came about. I kept the books and they called me mayor” (12).

The events described in the novel did not take place; there was not a town called Hard Times; the people described in it never existed. However, Doctorow would likely argue that those facts do not make the story any less real.

James Donahue builds on this argument that fiction can paradoxically capture reality in a way that nonfiction alone cannot. He argues that fiction and nonfiction can work together to create a more comprehensive view of history by offering “as wide a lens as possible on the historical moment, where both [fiction and historical accounts] mediate the world in very different ways, giving meaning to the multiple (but not competing) accounts” (35). I included primary documents and footnotes as an immediately visually recognizable way to collapse the division between fiction and nonfiction. Doing so hopefully adds the wider lens to history that Donahue describes, while also advancing other aspects of the story. Michael Hinken argues that while false documents like the ones I have included are “sometimes criticized as affectations, or mere ornamentation,” they actually “can serve as an effective craft element.” For my project, the paratextual elements and the blending of historical accounts and fictional narrative invites the reader into the story so that they can engage with the different materials alongside the characters.

History Versus Historicity

My dissertation is also informed by the work of New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt, who argues that literature, history, and culture should be viewed in conversation with one another. I am especially interested in his conception of the circulation of social energy and cultural poetics. According to Greenblatt, we cannot understand fiction without understanding the cultural contexts that surround that fiction. Though Greenblatt is a Shakespeare scholar, and his analyses pertain mostly to the power dynamics between artists and institutions during the Elizabethan period in England, his ideas are still applicable to my study of the Western in terms of the methodology,

which enables me to explore how cultural beliefs serve as both the sources and products of literature.

One way to examine the interplay between literature, history, and culture is through Western folklore. In his book, *Monumental Lies* (2023), Ronald James argues that folklore provides a way for scholars to study narrative by privileging what those stories say about the people and culture that produced them over whether or not the stories align with historical records. He writes, “Although western folklore has many dimensions, the art of deception has always been key, a first cornerstone of the region’s traditions: many westerners found liberation in their careless attitude toward facts” (3). Such an attitude contributed to the success of early journalists in 19th-century Nevada, Mark Twain chief among them. Twain came to work for the *Territorial Enterprise* in Virginia City in September of 1862. At the time, the newspaper was regarded as being a serious newspaper that could be relied upon for recounting truthful events. However, it wasn’t long before Twain began exaggerating the truth for humorous, dramatic, or satirical effect (James 2023). His justification for this was that his stories were not outright lies; they were hoaxes. James explains, “While a hoax in the West was false, it had to walk a narrow path separating the believable from the unlikely. Anything that was incorrect but entirely plausible was merely a lie, and there was no fun in that. Craftsmanship was in the execution, delivering the joke with a careful balance between the possible and the inconceivable” (74). In Twain’s news article titled “A Bloody Massacre Near Carson,” he was accused of not including a “tell” so that readers could identify the story as a hoax. According to his story, an investor had been cheated by a California developer, which had prompted a murderous revenge spree. Twain said it should have been clear that it was a hoax because the setting of the killings was described as a forest near Empire, and there are no trees in that area. If that wasn’t clear enough, he said he had also included a detail that the murderer rode into town after slashing his own

throat, which was in no way plausible (James 70). For one of Mark Twain's contemporaries, Dan De Quille³, the writer's duty was to transcribe stories as they were told to him. He was a folklorist before such a vocation existed. One complicating factor, though, is that De Quille did not simply retell the stories he had heard or read; he collected them into books that were classified as nonfiction (*History of the Big Bonanza* remains an important source of early Nevada folklore). At one point, he relinquished responsibility for proving whether or not the stories he was recounting about the Pyramid Lake War were true by saying, "I tell it as 'twas told to me, not vouching for its truth in any particular" (James 55).

It is this storytelling impulse to manipulate facts for better fiction and stretch the truth into more interesting shapes that led to the booming popularity of early Westerns. Many of the dime novels of the mid-19th century through the early 20th century were inspired by the stories of real people; however, the authors' adherence to factual historical details was often tenuous. For example, over 500 dime novels were written about William Frederick Cody—better known as Buffalo Bill—and the details chronicling his exploits in the American West seemed to grow more and more outlandish with each retelling. Buffalo Bill was a showman, hunter, and soldier. These facts that characterize the broad strokes of his life are uncontested, but when it comes to the specifics of his experiences, biographical entries for him lack such definitive declarations, replaced instead by qualifying language and the passive voice ("it is believed," "he is rumored," "according to some"). Biographer Gerald Kreyche explores how Cody's stories straddle the line between fact and fiction by connecting them to his status in America's cultural imagination: "The life of this hero and showman embodies the desire for history to become myth and myth to become history" (52).

³ Just as Samuel Clemens wrote under the pen name Mark Twain, William Wright wrote under the pen name Dan De Quille. The fact that these writers did not write under their *real* names adds another layer to the discussion of fact versus fiction.

We even see the tension between nonfiction and fiction in the historical record itself, like the letters between this folk hero and President Theodore Roosevelt. In one, President Roosevelt thanked Cody after receiving an autographed copy of Cody's autobiography, *True Tales of the Plains*⁴. "I value the volume and look forward with much pleasure to reading it," he wrote above a closing that read "with regards, believe me." A would-be cowboy himself⁵, Roosevelt admired Cody, who he saw as American exceptionalism, embodied. Cody's relationship with then President Roosevelt highlights the strong connection between Western myth-making and America's national myths. In an analysis of Western films, critic Jim Kitses goes as far as to say that "the Western *is* American history" (174).

To add another layer to this discussion of art versus reality, Cody's life was chronicled in newspaper accounts written by journalists who documented the buffalo hunts he guided for wealthy men who'd traveled from the East Coast and Europe. Reality became fiction once those newspaper articles were used by writers as authors' imaginative kindling for dime novels and stage plays, and then fiction later became reality when Cody enlisted in the U.S. Army to fight in the Plains Wars, "announcing from the stage of one of his shows that he was leaving 'play acting' in search of the 'real thing'" (Olou). This kind of inversion represents one possible consequence of dime novels being a "heteroglot collection of texts." Daniel Worden explains, "[M]any [dime novels] are

⁴While the stories in Cody's autobiography may be loosely based on true events, many of the details were exaggerated, and many events were altered to recast Cody as a hero. According to Cody, his name, for example, is attributed to the fact that he was a skilled hunter. What is omitted from this personal history is that Cody was hired to kill buffalo under the indirect orders of Ulysses S. Grant appointed to solve the "Indian Problem" according to Olou by slaughtering as many buffalo as possible (Olou).

⁵ According to Roosevelt biographer, Edmund Morris, Republican Senator Mark Hanna exclaimed, "Now Look! That damned cowboy is president of the United States!" upon hearing that Roosevelt had been elected.

expanded versions of sensational crime reports, many reference actual historical events and figures, and many were reprinted in different series, under different author's names, different titles, and even by different publishers, multiple times" (37). It may have been the dime novel that transformed Westerns from individual stories to collective myths, owned not by a single author, but by an entire culture.

The permeable barrier between historical reality and cultural myth is not limited to dime novels; it is apparent in contemporary Westerns as well. In his chapter "The Function of Frontier Narratives," Tom Sullivan argues that this may be because these stories have always served a practical function: "Narratives explain," he writes. "People use stories to explain their behavior," especially when those behaviors feel inexplicable (1). The frontier narratives that Sullivan examines were largely shaped by Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 essay titled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."⁶ In that essay, Turner presents a story about westward expansion that explains behaviors as being motivated by romantic ideals like freedom and fierce individualism. Turner's story is crafted to depict a 'natural' progression from unsettled to settled land that takes place in the "meeting point between savagery and civilization" (23). According to Turner's interpretation, westward expansion "begins with the Indian and the hunter," moves to "the pastoral stage in ranch life," then to farmers' "exploitation of the soil by the raising of unrotated crops," which leads to the "intensive culture of the denser farm settlement" and finally to "the manufacturing organization with city and factory system[s]" (Turner 23). The initial response to his essay was unenthusiastic (his academic peers took issue with the underlying premise and his poetic writing style), but, undeterred by these critiques, Turner continued to promote his ideas. Through

⁶According to Richard Slotkin, Theodore Roosevelt was one of the first historians to endorse Frederick Jackson Turner's essay, which mirrored some of the ideas in his multivolume series, *The Winning of the West*.

years of work assigning the essay to mentees who would go on to promote what came to be known as the Frontier Thesis, giving public talks both inside and outside of the academy, and writing for a popular audience, the essay eventually broke out of academic circles to become a “major social force” that “served as a source of American character” (Walsh 2). Turner’s thesis was eventually challenged by the new Western historians, who argued for the inclusion of race, gender, and class in discussions of the frontier. While the ideas underlying the Frontier Thesis have since been modified greatly by contemporary historians, the legacy of Turner’s conception of the frontier lives on in the genre of the Western, which is “defined not only by a time period and place but also by several overarching themes: freedom, opportunity, and strength of character” (Johnson 235).

As researchers like the new Western historians came to determine, the frontier process was not a straightforward, linear series of events as was characterized by Turner. This period of American history cannot be captured so tidily by any one story, so why is it that so many, if not most, of the novels set in that period feature the same characters, themes, and plots? This may be because the American frontier is not a specific spatially- and temporally-bound place; it is instead a “myth itself” (Stevens 1). Henry Nash Smith highlights the mythic significance of the American West in his seminal work titled *Virgin Land*. In the 1950 book, which is credited with igniting scholarly interest in the literary West, Smith argues that the word “myth” should not be taken to mean “erroneous belief,” but rather the relationship between “imaginative constructions” and the history of the West (Rollins and O’Connor 3). According to Smith’s analysis, the Western myths can best be understood abstractly, but the already difficult task of abstraction becomes more difficult when authorial/storytelling agency enters the discussion.

For example, one reason that it is so challenging to parse these myths is that the original writings about the frontier from James Fennimore Cooper were not written by anyone living in the

West. Christine Bold explains how these novels were largely written by a group she refers to as the “frontier club.” She writes, “At the turn of the twentieth century, this network of patrician easterners [the frontier club] created the western as we now most commonly know it, yoking the genre to their interests in hunting and conservation, open-range ranching, mass publishing, Jim Crow segregation, immigration restriction, and American Indian assimilation” (xvii). Much like Theodore Roosevelt’s symbolic use of Buffalo Bill’s stories, the frontier club employed the Western storytelling tradition to pursue political and ideological goals.

These tensions between culture and literature, as well as fact and fiction, are what have inspired me to blend contemporary realism and historical fiction in my own work. Lucy Ives’ review in *The New Yorker* to Daniel Dutton’s historical novel, *Margaret the First*, is salient here.

She writes:

But a handful of recent works of fiction have taken up history on radically different terms. Rather than presenting a single, definitive story—an ostensibly objective chronicle of events—these books offer a past of competing perspectives, of multiple voices. They are not so much historical as archival: instead of giving us the imagined experience of an event, they offer the ambiguous traces that such events leave behind. These fictions do not focus on fact but on fact’s record, the media by which we have any historical knowledge at all. In so doing, such books call the reader’s attention to both the problems and the pleasures of history’s linguistic remains. (2016)

In addition to helping us explore “history’s linguistic remains,” historical fiction also helps us interrogate “why we are the way we are and how we got here” (O’Grady 2019). New Historicists’ analyses of fiction aim to compound the subjective nature of literature by layering the subjective nature of history on top of it.

In my novel, the setting rather than the characters produces the majority of narrative energy. In Western literature, the setting—environmental, ecological, political, geological—is central to the work, but the same can be said of any writing that engages with place in meaningful ways. What makes the West any different? In his essay, “A Sense of Place,” Wallace Stegner argues that places

and the stories set in them are intrinsically linked, a linkage that is especially evident in the West, a region so often romanticized and mythologized: “No place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments. Fictions serve as well as facts” (2). Stegner alludes to an interesting cycle here. Places are constructed by the art that represents them, and that art in turn constructs the perceived realities of those places. Thus, the idea of the West becomes just as important to this literary genre as the West itself. The tension between fact and fiction is exacerbated by conventions of the Western that favor hyperbolic retellings over matter-of-fact recounting. As Louis Rubin points out in his essay, “Thoughts on Fictional Places,” readers hunger for “authenticity of detail” that extends “beyond an effort to ensure a continued suspension of disbelief.” He argues that “the novelist is engaged in doing an audacious thing: creating fictional life out of language, inventing entire characters, endowing them with consciousness—and doing this in a very precisely lineated setting, against which the authenticity of the fictional characters can be readily measured” (Sullivan 19).

While specific details may provide for an immersive sense of place, their ability to depict reality are limited, given the role of colonization and empire in defining place. Theorist Edward Said speaks to this relationship in his article, “Invention, Memory, and Place.” He writes, “People now look to this refashioned memory, especially in its collective forms, to give themselves a coherent identity, a national narrative, a place in the world...” (179). Myths are created in service of empirical exploitations that can then be “refashioned” into new myths. One example of this negotiation between myth and empire is Helen Hunt Jackson’s novel, *Ramona*. Jackson published the novel three years after she published *A Century of Dishonor*, under the pen name “H.H.” She sent the *A Century of Dishonor*—a nonfiction account of the federal government’s mistreatment of seven Native American Tribes that was initially inspired by a lecture she heard by Chief Standing Bear of the Ponca Tribe—

to every Member of Congress along with a note that read, “Look upon your hands: they are stained with the blood of your relations” (“A Century”). Despite *Ramona* being a fictional novel, its aims at shaping policy were similar, with characters articulating the arguments in *A Century of Dishonor* in the form of dialogue.

Reimagining through Revisionist Westerns

Hundreds of Western novels, television shows, and movies have been created, and there is no sign that the genre will die out anytime soon. David Evans attributes the “fertility of the genre” and its enduring appeal to the West’s mythos. The stories set there are based on a mythologized history of the West, exponentially multiplying opportunities for new narratives. Despite those ample narrative possibilities, though, the nature of the publishing market in the mid-19th century incentivized replication over innovation such that most of the novels presented some version of the same story. It was not until the mid-20th century that Western authors like Cormac McCarthy⁷ applied a more critical lens to the more troubling consequences of westward expansion. While McCarthy’s interpretations of life in the Old West may have approached a closer mimetic representation, his characters still embody a moving power sourced by their own myths. Invoking Roland Barthes’ discussion of myths’ function in literature, Sara Spurgeon explains in *Exploding the Western* (2005) that Westerns like McCarthy’s fulfil the “double function of myth”: “They point out and notify; they make us understand while forcibly imposing that understanding upon us; they make us see our myths *as* myths, without lessening their mythic power” (145). McCarthy has been credited with transforming the genre from being composed of literary products that were uncritical

⁷ Though Cormac McCarthy is often thought of as a Western writer, his early works, including *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), and *Suttree* (1979) were not Westerns. It was not until he received a MacArthur Fellowship that allowed him to conduct research in the Southwest, which he used for his successful Western, *Blood Meridian* (1985).

replications to critical examinations. His novels contain many of the same conventions as the dime novels did, but they are often amplified: the villains more dastardly, the victims more helpless, the conflicts more brutal. That amplification, combined with genre hybridity seen in his use of the Southern grotesque, led to his work being characterized by some as anti-Western (also referred to as revisionist Western). As a genre designation, this term poses issues since the writers who are subverting conventions of the Western often do so by engaging with those same conventions, making it difficult to see where the pointed critique ends and the positive alignment begins. For that reason, Susan Kollin suggests viewing the genres of the classic Western and the anti-Western as existing on a continuum. She writes:

On the one end [of the continuum] may be found the classic Western, which upholds—with varying degrees of success—the codes and conventions of the form, its Anglo male protagonist, and the national project, but which contains resistant elements that undermine its cultural logic and status as a discrete, coherent entity. On the other end may be found the anti-Western, itself an unstable and shifting form that engages in a critical dialogue with the genre but that is also shaped by a certain desire for and attraction to the classic features of the Western. (560)

I position my work closer to the anti-Western on that continuum, engaging with many of the tropes and conventions of the Western while inviting critical analysis characteristic of the revisionist Western.

McCarthy's contemporary writer, Larry McMurty, whose *Lonesome Dove* series occupies an important place in the Western canon, argued that revisionist Westerns “portray America’s western expansion as ‘an irresponsible white male’s adventure, hugely destructive of the land itself, of the native peoples, and even of the white male’s own women and children,’” which led to these writers undercutting the “...quality of imagination that constitutes part of the truth” (Jeffrey).

I agree that writing revisionist Westerns carries many of the same risks as writing Westerns, which is eliminating nuance, substituting one didactic narrative about American history for another

(e.g. ‘westward expansion was a stain on America’s past’ instead of ‘westward expansion was responsible for America’s thriving present’). However, I resist McMurty’s contention that revisionist Westerns turn “brutal, masculine confidence” into “new, open, feminine American self-doubt” (Jeffrey). I believe revisionist Westerns allow for diverse storytelling, especially in terms of gender⁸.

The Western is a male-dominated genre in terms of its authorship, its content, and its literary criticism. Fictionalizing Bulette’s diary gives her much more dimension than the women of Westerns written during the peak of the genre, from which women were almost entirely absent⁹. In my dissertation, Bulette is given space on the page in a way that isn’t granted to characters like Lurline Monti Verdi from Pete Dexter’s *Deadwood* (1986) whose only real descriptor is as a “singer and a blackjack dealer” who’d “fucked more highwaymen than there was bullets to shoot them” (21). Women and non-white characters are almost always relegated to the role of side characters who contribute to the complexities of the hero’s narrative by either thwarting or aiding him on his journey.

In my project, I use personal artifacts to develop the rich inner lives of both main characters so that as Nellie performs her archival research of Bulette, the reader simultaneously gains access to the characters’ *emotional* archives. This formal choice aligns with Caleb Seeling’s contention that

⁸ Many revisionist Westerns have also centered non-white perspectives. Though that is not the subject of my study, recent examples, including Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, Stacey Lee’s *Under a Painted Sky*, Tom Lin’s *The Thousand Crimes of Ming Tsu*, and Hernan Diaz’s *In the Distance*, and C Pam Zhang’s *How Much of These Hills Is Gold* warrant mention as examples of how literature can provide what Greenblatt refers to as a “plurality of meaning.”

⁹ Women seldom appeared in Westerns of the mid-20th century. When they did, they were often either set pieces or narrative tools to propel the actions of the male protagonists. Off the page, researcher Victoria Lamont offers a competing perspective about women’s role in the Western genre in a project she describes as a “feminist literary recovery”: “Indeed, the first known cowboy novel outside of the dime novel tradition was written by a woman, the Colorado suffragist Emma Ghent Curtis, and published in 1889, thirteen years before the popular western was supposed to have been reinvented by Owen Wister, who published his novel *The Virginian* in 1902” (1).

“there is no one type of Western woman. They are cowgirls and office staff, rock climbers and birdwatchers, First Nations members and migrant workers” (Seeling 1).

In her contribution to The Western Literature Association’s anthology, *Updating the Literary West*, Krista Comer notes the “boom in western women’s writing” since the mid-1970s, but puzzles as to why the literary criticism about this literature is lacking. She argues that this ‘may be caused by broader issues within Western criticism: “Western criticism is saddled with male-centered, white-centered and pre-contemporary aesthetic ideals which disable it on questions of gender and race and on the post-1960s period in which these issues predominate” (20). My use of formal experimentation relates to Comer’s contention that feminist approaches to the Western often seek to destabilize traditional narrative structures by engaging in “postmodernist formal strategies” (31).

Women Rewriting the Western

My novel is in conversation with the work of female Western novelists Andromeda Romano-Lax and Claudia Cravens, who engage in these subversive strategies in different ways. My novel bears resemblance to Romano-Lax's 2021 novel, *Annie and the Wolves* in both its structure and some of its thematic explorations. The novel follows two main characters: a present-day historian in Minnesota named Ruth McClintock and the historical figure, Annie Oakley. Similar to the protagonist in my novel’s present-day timeline, Ruth’s interest in her research subject borders on obsessive. She discovers Annie’s journals, which detail her correspondence with a psychoanalyst in Vienna. The threads of the two women’s lives become entangled as Ruth works to identify the “wolves”¹⁰ who abused Annie as a child, which prompts Ruth’s own psychological revelations.

¹⁰According to Annie Oakley’s 1925 autobiography, she was essentially enslaved by the “wolves” at the age of ten. She recounted one particularly disturbing experience of abuse that occurred while she was darning socks. She wrote, “Suddenly the "She-Wolf" struck me across the ears, pinched my arms and threw me out of doors into the deep snow and locked the door. I had no shoes on and in a few minutes my feet grew numb. I was slowly freezing to death. So I got down on my little knees,

When the journal is first sent to Ruth, she is skeptical of its authenticity. She says, ““People aren’t honest when they’re speaking or writing to others only when they’re writing for themselves...Finding or decoding an authentic diary—something the public was never meant to see—is what a historian dreams about. This isn’t that”” (33). As with my own novel, the present-day protagonist is attempting to solve a mystery that has been buried under the heavy weight of myth. Given that there is little evidence to work with, Ruth finds herself writing her own “false documents” to piece together one possible reality: “Ruth felt she was gently renovating a house with historically sourced materials. It was more a form of carpentry than construction. And it was certainly not demolition” (69). By the novel’s conclusion, the wolves remain unnamed, but according to the fictionalized journal entries, Annie has found a way to feel at peace with her traumatic past through being of service to other women in her present. A letter from a fellow patient of the psychoanalyst advises her to take action because “bedrest and talking for talking’s sake” will not heal her” (391). Such an idea appeals to Annie, who was “...never a talker or a writer to begin with” (392). Annie’s words work their way through a narrative chain first to the present-day protagonist and then to the author, ultimately linking the reader to a one possible version of history.

Claudia Cravens’ primary subversive strategy in her novel, *Lucky Red* (2023), is objective reversal; the protagonist, Bridget, and her fellow prostitutes at the Buffalo Queen brothel drive the story forward while their “tricks” look on from the story’s peripheries. In one particularly telling scene, Bridget describes her job and how that job has influenced the way she views the men around her:

Whoring is like any profession in that there’s a knack to it, and it turned out I had the knack. To me, men were like horses, mostly alike but for some notable distinctions, and I cultivated expertise with an eye to increasing my profits. I approached each night’s barroom herd like a

looked towards God's clear sky and tried to pray. But my lips were frozen stiff and there was no sound."

horse trader appraising new stock: this one looked skittish but could be tamed down with gentle words, this one would balk at a tight rein but run easy under a little slack, this one was likely to kick and not to be ridden at any price. (34)

Despite this callous comparison between the men and livestock, Bridget does care for some of the men who visit her and ultimately develops a friendship and alliance with one of the lawmen who frequents the brothel. The subversion here does not come from the fact that the men are flattened and objectified, but that they are in a distant background to the action-heavy plot that is unfolding on center stage. Bridget is similar to the hero of the classic Western, who is “typically unmarried and earns respect in the eyes of other would-be heroes through his self-sufficiency and his expertise with the weapons of his trade...” (Meldrum 86). Unlike those heroes, though, who act alone, her power comes from her care for the community at the Buffalo Queen. The “weapons of [her] trade” are based in loving rather than violent impulses.

In an interview with Cravens, she described how she views the subversive elements of her novel, along with the way she sees her book working within the broader Western tradition. She explained:

The Western is a trope-rich genre, but it’s also very tightly contained, which is part of what makes it so much fun to play with. Flipping even one trope on its head upsets everything, because the genre itself is so tight. In this case, I decided to ask a stock background character—the working girl with the heart of gold, whose job it usually is to help a man have his own adventure—to tell her own story in her own words. The only other change I made at the outset was to have the mysterious stranger that she falls for be a woman instead of a man. Just these two small changes set so many things in motion, it was really exciting!

The Westerns that inspired me the most are the ones that center an unexpected protagonist and/or that have a wide cast of characters. I love a story with an ensemble cast, where you can tell that even minor characters have their own lives and stories going on. The works I drew on the most were *Lonesome Dove*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, *Deadwood*, *The Sisters Brothers*, and *True Grit* (the novel). I love all of these so much, but what ties them together in my mind is that they all have rich, intense worlds, and that they all center characters who defy the ‘lone ranger’ stereotype.

For Cravens, working within a such a well-established genre was not limiting; instead, it compounded creative opportunities. She subverts recognizable tropes in ways that are sometimes direct (having the love interest be a woman instead of a man) and sometimes less direct (having the side characters of the fellow prostitutes develop their stories alongside the protagonist's). Her novel contributes to the literary tapestry of the Western by following the pre-established patterns in some places while adding her own divergent threads and designs elsewhere.

It is through this feminist, postmodernist, New Historicist framing that I reintroduce readers to the story of Julia Bulette. Like many miners, trappers, and land-seeking explorers, she traveled west in the early 1860s in pursuit of a better life. But by most accounts, the life she found wasn't much better than the one she'd had in New Orleans. She continued to work as a prostitute—now in a small house on the northeast corner of D and Union Streets in Virginia City, then a booming mining town, now a tourist attraction that purports to capture the spirit of the Old West. When Bulette was living in Virginia City, her clients would have largely been laborers doing the dangerous, sometimes hellish work of silver mining, where the heat could be so intense that men “could work for only a few minutes at a time” and where the threat of death underground was constantly looming in the form of “cave-ins, fires, floods of scalding water, bad air, falling timbers, and misfired explosives” (James). Work in the mines was heinous and monotonous. Women like Julia and the other prostitutes on D Street offered comfort in companionship, nightly escapes from the reality of their days.

Despite the fact that by all accounts, Bulette's life was “average in most respects,” she was catapulted into posthumous fame soon after she was murdered (James 36). Her grisly death immediately became fodder for sensational news stories that transformed her ordinary life into an extraordinary myth. James argues that the nature of the crime and the resulting execution of a man

(which was graphically but thoughtfully described in a news article written by Mark Twain) made Bulette “a perfect candidate to rise in local legend as the ‘whore with a golden heart’” (75). Few primary sources remain that tell us about Bulette’s life; it is still unclear where she was born or where she was buried. Nearly one hundred years after her death, the owners of the Bucket of Blood Saloon¹¹ on the main street of Virginia City capitalized on her myth by erecting “a white-painted fence around an imaginary interment, clearly visible from the large window they had cut into the back of their establishment” (James 121). Julia Bulette remains a presence in Virginia City. In the now closed Julia Bulette Red Light Museum, there was a sign that read “Julia is remembered for her golden heart and remains Nevada’s most celebrated courtesan as people remember the request that ‘her faults be buried with her and her virtues live.’” This quote highlights the deep tension between reality and myth that may be characteristic of all fiction, but as I have argued, is especially evident in the Western.

In her introduction to the book, *West of 98: Living and Writing the New American West*, Lynn Stegner compares analyzing and defining the Western to “dissecting a creature still alive, still moving: parts of it dying or already dead, while others are developing compensatory muscles, adapting, and one hopes, surviving” (xi). My humble hope is that by critically and intentionally invoking aspects of the Western’s rich literary tradition, my dissertation contributes in some small way to this extraordinary creature’s survival.

¹¹ One biographer notes that Julia Bulette may not have moved from New Orleans to the West and could have instead come from Mississippi. It is generally agreed that she was born in England (either in London or in Liverpool). There is only one verified photo of her, but a photo of another woman labeled with Bulette’s name currently hangs in the Bucket of Blood Saloon. According to Ronald Genini, Bulette’s origins were altered in order to make her seem more exotic: “...Robert Laxalt calls her a ‘sultry Creole’ and Zeke Daniels writes that she ‘helped to buy freedom for some of her Black friends in New Orleans...Actually, Julia was, as her true photograph from the Nevada Historical Society reveals, a very plain Englishwoman, quite white’” (28).

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Chapter 1

Nellie picked up two steak and egg specials from the Club Cal Neva and walked the few blocks to her grandfather's shop, Silver Pawn, passing one wedding chapel, two liquor stores, and three casinos on the way. Inside, she saw the usual customers, whose motivations for selling landed on different points of the desperation spectrum. The desperate ones pawned family heirlooms to make rent; the less desperate ones pawned old electronics for extra spending money.

The shop's a mile away from the Nevada Historical Society where Nellie had recently begun spending many of her days working on a research project. So much changes in that one-mile stretch: university research labs to boarded up weeklies, manicured hedges to milkweed-strewn lots awaiting a developer's excavator, new buildings stamped with their donors' names to motels with sun-bleached signs that once lit up in neon.

Her grandfather kissed her on the top of her head when she arrived, and she situated herself behind the glass cases near the back.

"Hi, Gramp," Nellie said, balancing on top of a teetering stool.

"Thanks for bringing this, Nellie," Gramp said. "I could eat a horse, hooves and all." A man about Gramp's age walked up to the counter and asked how much he could get for a silver necklace with an opal stone. Nellie knew right away it was a fake. She ate her eggs in silence.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not buying jewelry like that right now," Gramp said. He wiped steak sauce from the corner of his mouth and kept wiping long after it was gone.

"What do you mean, you're not buying jewelry? This place is full of it, but nothing quite like this rare opal." The man took off his hat to fan his face, pausing the sweat beads journeying down his face. His white hair, pink cheeks, and round stomach made him look like the kind of mall Santa

Claus that gave mother pause before they handed over their children for a picture. His posture and stance, hunched and wide-legged, reminded her of one of the fellow regulars at the research library, Alfie Wingfield. He was a descendant of George Wingfield¹² and often requested materials about his ancestor from the stacks and then argued with their contents. “Always an agenda,” he’d say.

“Sorry. Like I said, it’s not something I’ll take right now.” Gramp turned his back on the man and urged Nellie to eat her lunch while it was still hot. It’d been cold since she picked it up. The man pulled up his sagging pants and left, mumbling an insult about the shithole that was Gramp’s livelihood. The man attempted to slam the door, but its dampening device made it close as slowly as ever. Gramp changed the radio station from the news to the KBUL-FM country station. He and Nellie hummed along to “Friends in Low Places.”

“Here you go,” Nellie said, handing Gramp his AARP card. He insisted that she use it to get senior discounts—the least he could do if she was buying.

“Good as gold,” he said. “Better even cause it doesn’t lose its value. Leanna refused to take advantage of the discount. She always looked so much younger than she was that nobody would even believe her if she told them her actual age. I wish we’d kept her age off of the headstone. She would’ve hated knowing that anyone strolling through the cemetery could see how old she was when she passed.” Nellie was guilty of doing just that. She couldn’t help but do the arithmetic implied by those dates on any headstones, not just when she visited Leanna’s (who she still thought of more as Gramp’s wife than her own grandmother) or her mother’s. Nellie’s mother wouldn’t have wanted that either. She’d hate people shaking their head, whispering *so young*.

¹² George Wingfield, for whom the nearby Wingfield Park was named, is credited with single handedly brought illegal gambling to Reno. He went from being a Faro dealer to the richest man in Nevada in less than five years

“It wasn’t your fault,” Nellie said. “They told you it was required.” Nellie dipped a corner of her toast into the egg yolk, as she’d seen Gramp do every morning when she was little.

A pretty woman wearing oversized sunglasses came in and wandered around the shop’s perimeter before approaching them at the counter. She perched her sunglasses on top of her head, swooping back the stray hairs that’d been framing her face. Her eyes were red-rimmed and raw. She twisted her wedding ring, working it from side to side until she slipped it off, which left a belt of indented flesh in its absence. The pear-cut diamond looked like the one Nellie’s boyfriend, Jack, had promised her when he got down on one knee and proposed in the kitchen of her apartment.

“Close your eyes and describe the perfect ring,” he’d said. She’d described a pear-cut diamond on a gold band, something that looked like it was from the late 19th, early 20th century. The description was so detailed—gold filagree and two side stones, and an engraving—that it started to collect power, and she believed that when she opened her eyes, she’d see it. Instead, there was an empty box, a small ivory pillow-covered in synthetic silk.

“I need a loan, please,” the woman said. “I’m not selling this forever, just for the short-term. Consignment, is it called?” Another customer walked in, and the woman jerked her head around to the door. A sharp inhale. Quickened breathing.

“Let’s take a look,” Gramp said in the calming voice this kind of customer needed to hear. The other pawn shop owners called him a pushover. The Bordens who owned Mega Pawn referred angry customers to Silver Pawn as part of a long-running, one-sided joke. “Harold will treat you right,” they’d say. After he made it clear that he would never sell Silver Pawn, they were constantly making ridiculous offers. At one point, they said they’d toss in an extra fifty grand if Nellie was included in the deal.

The woman's eyes shot from Gramp to the front door and back. She rubbed her hands together, which pinked the papery skin. Two people in the back of the shop tested out a stereo, turning it up too loudly. Nellie walked down one of the only aisles to confront them, but by the time she got there, they'd turned the music back down.

Nellie took her time returning to the front, picking up some of the items under a sign that read "Nevada Knickknacks." These were some of the few items that weren't stored away behind glass. She picked up a ceramic tiki glass in the shape of a woman, a keepsake from one of The Nugget's bars, and put it down. She picked up a taxidermy rattler mounted to a wood plaque, its fangs on display. A pair of cufflinks shaped like two dice was priced too low. She'd told Gramp as much, but he argued that just because something was old didn't mean it was valuable. He had specific tastes and little business sense. His father had owned one of the first profitable pawn shops in Reno, built an empire out of belongings from people with little luck and less hope.

Thousands of years before there were reality TV shows about the innerworkings of a shop, pawnbrokers in ancient China were offering short-term loans to peasants. When the Roman empire spread, the job of pawnbrokers spread with it¹³. Nellie's mind often wandered into these different time periods. Her years spent studying history granted her the superpower of mental time travel.

People often described Nellie as being an "old soul," not because she acted older than she was, but because it seemed as if someone from the past occupied a present body that drove a Volvo and owned a flip phone.

¹³ A lesser-known aspect of pawnshops' history revolves around charitable giving. In 1450, a Franciscan friar named Barnaba Manassei began the Monte di Pietà movement in Perugia, Italy, which provided financial assistance in the form of interest-free loans secured with pawned items. Instead of interest, they urged borrowers to make donations to the Church.

At the counter nearest the cash register, Gramp wrote the woman a pawn ticket and counted out ten twenty-dollar bills, which she folded in half and slid into her red wallet, then buried the wallet at the bottom of her slouchy purse. She was crying tears of sadness or relief or both.

“She’ll come back for it,” Gramp said. He had good hunches when it came to whether people would pay to retrieve their item or would let it live in one of the glass cases until someone else bought it. “How’s John doing? Still living at your place for free?”

“His name’s Jack. You know that. And he’s doing better, getting a lot of promising leads on jobs.” Jack hadn’t gotten any promising leads. He spent most of his days recording a podcast about the dark web, and then deleting the recordings for fear they’d be discovered by the State. His real passion was photography, but he didn’t want to become a sellout as a portrait or wedding photographer. Nellie let him live with her because it felt good taking care of someone, especially someone who appreciated her vintage clothes, her refusal to participate in social media, her vast collection of antiques that occupied nearly every inch of her 600-square-foot apartment. He also didn’t have anywhere else to go. She’d never seen his apartment, but his story about how his landlord not only didn’t address the bedbug problem, but blamed him for it, kept both of them away.

“You could do better than him,” Gramp said. Nellie threw away his empty takeout container and put her almost untouched meal in the small fridge tucked into the corner of the back office. She hugged him and left the store. Two men leaning against the storefront were taking deep pulls on their cigarettes. Even with the smokey cloud she was walking through, it was easier to breathe as soon as she left the store.

#

As she walked through the doorway to her apartment, she noticed that Jack had cleaned up. No, that wasn't right. Jack had cleaned her out. Furniture was gone, the laptop she'd bought him wasn't on the midcentury tiled coffee table—also gone—where it usually lived. The two issues, her missing items and missing boyfriend, were obviously unrelated. She must have left her front door unlocked. That happened sometimes. She called him five times, but he didn't answer.

She cried as she stood in the space where there was once a gramophone sitting atop a Jacobean-style credenza. She imagined what the person who stole from her looked like, and a blurry image of a man hunched over, smile full of teeth stained from cigarettes, long hair parted down the middle, sharpened in her mind. She realized the image she conjured was of her father, who she only knew from photos protected by plastic sheets in Gramp's albums.

Everything Nellie owned had a story behind it, stored in the wood grains of a desk or the fibers of a silk slip. Before she bought the gramophone from a thrift shop in Carson City, she imagined it was owned by a woman in nearby Dayton who played her husband's favorite record, Vivaldi's *Orlando Furioso*, after he died. This woman had never really loved him when he was alive (he'd proposed before the unplanned pregnancy started showing, and she'd said yes because that was the only possible answer), but playing the record helped her revise the memories into happier ones rosily glossed by nostalgia.

What stories were behind the furniture with its pieces packed into boxes or the fast fashion floral blouse at the mall or the new dinnerware sets awaiting purchase on a wedding registry? None that she'd be interested in reading. Nellie poured a glass of whisky in one of her crystal tumblers. She called Gramp, who didn't answer, then tried Jack again, who also didn't answer. After one more glass, her warm buzz intensified. She compiled a list of everything that was missing.

- Victor Victrola Gramophone with Internal Horn and Tapered Tone Arm - 1906
- Bowers Brothers Co. Jacobean style credenza in cherry wood with gold filigree - 1921

- Rolleiflex Automat Camera with Schneider Kreuznach Xenar taking lens - 1938
- Colt Army Model 1860 Revolver believed to be used by general-in-chief Henry Halleck – 1864
- Midcentury Roger Capron tiled coffee table – 1961

The more time she spent cataloging, the more she realized how many possessions she had. Even with furniture missing, it was difficult to walk from room to room. Jack had complained about that many times. Maybe he had sold some of these items to buy her the ring she wanted. After all, she'd gifted him the gun and the camera. He'd need a truck to sell the furniture, though, and he didn't have a car. When they'd first met at the National Automobile Museum, he'd said that he was trying to get an idea of the kind of car that he could see himself driving. "Cars these days all look the same," he'd said. "Not like this." He'd gently knocked on the door of a 1965 Ford Mustang, causing reproach from the security guard.

Gramp had given Nellie a 1986 Volvo coupe, which she drove with some amount of pride. When she gave friends rides, she relished telling them they'd have to roll down the windows manually. "It's time that you joined us in the 21st century," Gramp had said after taking her to print out her master's thesis instead of editing it on a computer. "Just dip a toe in. The water's warmer than you might think."

She poured herself a third drink and sat on one of the Heywood-Wakefield chairs, its rigid back pressing into her own. She pulled out her genealogy notebook, a relic of her Mormon past, and traced her fingers along the pictures of her relatives. She had photos of her mother and father, but no concrete memories of the latter. In her 35 years, she hadn't tried to learn much about her father. He left before she was born, and her mother died before she turned 10. When she tells people these details, they nod knowingly. She knows what they're thinking: *that explains a lot.*

She cut out a photo of one of her second cousins using an x-acto knife and pasted it into the book. The photo's edges were crooked. She cut another sliver to straighten it. The woman, Diana

Ensley, died of cardiac arrest at the young of 46. Different illnesses haunted the two sides of Nellie's family: heart disease on one and cancer on the other, depression and addiction on both.

She sat outside on her small porch that overlooked the pool. Three teenagers were skinny-dipping. The moonlight bounced off of their bodies in a way that made them seem like deep-sea creatures. Nellie shivered. The desert heat had been overtaken by the high desert cool. Nellie retreated inside and turned on the stove to heat her copper teakettle. When it screamed, she made herself a cup of chamomile tea. She called Jack two more times. No answer. This time, she listened to his voicemail message more closely, though like before, she didn't leave a message. At the beginning of it, he pretended to pick up the phone. For the first several seconds, he said "Hello?" as if he couldn't hear the caller. Then, he'd finally say, "Jack here, but not really here. Leave a voicemail if you want, but no guarantees on a call back." His voice sounded sweet.

She put on Sinatra's¹⁴ *In the Wee Small Hours* album on her record player and again mourned the loss of her gramophone. As Sinatra sang, Nellie danced. She wet a rag to clean up the line of dust that marked where the credenza had stood and wiped away the remaining evidence of its absence. She could feel the reality of what'd happened sneaking up on her, and she sat in its shadow as she slipped into sleep. She hoped that everything might look different in the daylight.

¹⁴ Sinatra once owned a partial share of the Cal-Neva where he and his romantic interest, Ava Gardner, lived in order for both of them to process their divorces. Divorce tourism in Reno began in the mid-twentieth century when entertainment venues and lodging were developed steps away from the courthouse where divorces were finalized.

Chapter 2

Nellie arrived late for her appointment at the Historical Society's research library. Lydia, the volunteer stationed at the front desk, wordlessly handed her a parking permit. Any day she didn't get a 6 a.m. call notifying her of an available substitute teaching job—or even sometimes when she did—she would head to a library to work on her project. When she got back inside, Emory, the recent special projects hire, brought her a cup of tea. He was four years younger than her and still had the optimism of a recent college graduate despite having graduated a half-decade prior. He wore the same clothes every day, a too-big polo shirt tucked into pleated khakis held up by a belt that looked like a ratchet strap.

“You're usually right on time for your appointments,” Emory said, somehow gulping his steaming cup of coffee. “Up late last night? You've got a little something here.” He touched the tag hanging out of her polyester blouse (1962), big-petaled orange and red flowers chasing each other against a backdrop of swirly green stems.

“I had an issue I had to deal with.”

“How's your project coming along? If I have to read through any more of these birth records, I may go blind.” He took off his glasses, cleaned them using the hem of his polo, and then put them back on. They looked more smudged than before. Emory had been hired to digitize primary documents that did not have copies, a herculean effort that Meredith predicted would take at least a year. The work was boring, too boring even for the undergrads majoring in history who'd earn work study credits that'd waive their required Nevada History class. Emory said he enjoyed the work, though, said it made him feel like he could step into and out of hundreds of different people's lives over the course of a work week. “It's good to remember how hard life was,” he'd once told an

intern. The student had taken her break halfway through her first four-hour shift and never returned.

“I keep getting sidetracked. There’s so much to research, and the stacks are a mess.” In her grant applications, she’d pitched the project, titled “The Feminine Frontier: Women of the West,” as one excavating the histories of women whose stories were often omitted from larger narratives about the Silver Rush in Nevada. Though Nellie’s project had begun as a survey of the women of the west, the focus had narrowed to one place and one woman: Virginia City and Julia Bulette.

“It’ll start coming together,” Emory said. He seemed almost as unsure of that fact as Nellie did. “The research will guide you on where to go.”

Nellie asked Lydia to use the phone since she’d forgotten hers at home, which wasn’t unusual. Even when she remembered to bring it with her, it often wasn’t charged. The people who mattered knew how to get a hold of her.

No answer. She started worrying about Jack. He could be impulsive, and she worried he might have gotten himself into trouble. He also played a lot of pool with unsavory crowds, often sandbagging and betting on games against tourists who couldn’t play, who re-chalked their cues every few minutes to look like they knew what they were doing. Nellie didn’t know who else to call to find him. Jack had told her that he was a very private person, and when she asked questions about his family and friends, he’d snap and spit that she was nosy like his ex, who was constantly checking his phone and monitoring his social media profiles.

As Nellie got to the bottom of her green tea, bits of sediment settled into the mug’s base, she felt her jaw tighten. The worry dissipated and left anger in its place. How difficult was it to answer a call? As she normally did when she was angry, she channeled her energy into research.

Meredith, the lead archivist, retrieved some of the books, ledgers, and microfilm reels she'd been working with during her last appointment.

Nellie spent a lot of time in the research library mostly because of the access to resources, but also because she hoped she could snatch up a position like Emory's. All her life, she'd wanted to work as a researcher, but thanks to her undergraduate adviser who she met with only once, she'd ended up pursuing a master's degree in history instead of library science and didn't meet the requirements for most positions in the field. During her daydreams about having a job like Meredith's or Emory's, her days were spent in the distant past, years before she'd taken out tens of thousands of dollars in student loans.

"Preserving the past doesn't pay much in terms of money, but it's important work," Nellie had heard Meredith say. Some people might pity Meredith's life with its presence of frozen meals and absence of a spouse or children, but Nellie saw the freedom in that kind of life.

"Any other materials for today?" Meredith asked.

"These will do, thanks." Although the focus of Nellie's research project had narrowed, she still found herself stuck in the exploratory phase. An article about a Comstock mining accident led to an article on early embalming methods led to letters written between Dr. Thomas Holmes and his start pupil.

Today's research began like it did on other days. Start with the place, and then move onto the people in the place. She read through the revised mining claims in 1861, trying to track who'd owned what when. She moved onto a description of Virginia City's early days, as described by an early folklorist. According to the story, the city was named for James "Old Virginny" Finney.

Though few records of him survived, Nellie imagined that he wore suspenders to keep up the trousers that hung on his narrow frame. He is credited as the first person to discover gold in what

became known as Gold Hill¹⁵. According to one diary entry, when he was out drinking one night, he stumbled and fell, shattering the bottle of whiskey he'd been drinking from. He used the remnants of the liquor to baptize the ground, naming the area for himself. When Nellie read about him, she could smell the whiskey on his breath, could hear the gentle snores as he slept on a hay mattress in a three-room inn on C Street.

Nellie put on her gloves and pulled out the box of microfilm she'd been working with, labeled with a piece of masking tape that read "Territorial Enterprise Jan 1-March 1, 1867." It wasn't necessary to wear gloves when handling microfilm, but she chose to anyway. She loaded the microfilm onto the glass and opened the software program used to spin it. She carefully navigated to the right page; advancing through the film too quickly made the software program glitch and close out.

When Julia arrived in Virginia City from England (by way of New Orleans or perhaps somewhere in Mississippi, the records aren't consistent), she was among the only women there. Few miners could afford to bring their wives. Soon after her arrival in 1863, there were 30 woman and 2,206 men. Despite being posthumously made into a folk hero, during her life, she was likely average in most respects. It was the averageness that drew Nellie to Julia. She wanted to understand the myth by understanding the real person behind the myth. Julia's entire life with its heartbreaks and triumphs and loves and losses had been reduced to an Old West trope—the whore with the heart of gold.

¹⁵ Gold Hill, Nevada, was one of the first settlements in the Comstock mining district after the discovery of a rich deposit of free gold above Gold Canyon in January 1859. Silver soon supplanted gold throughout the Comstock, and Virginia City quickly overshadowed Gold Hill in size and development. The population of Gold Hill reached 8,000 at its peak and was primarily inhabited by working-class residents, including many Cornish miners.

In researching Julia, Nellie began at the end of her life and then worked backwards. In one newspaper article eulogizing Bulette, the author wrote, “She brought airs and graces where comparative barbarism had reigned, and the miners accorded her an homage that elsewhere would have been the prerogative of a great lady.” Nellie copied the phrase “prerogative of a great lady” onto her legal pad and marked the obituary location. In the accompanying photo, the only one that’s been verified, Julia poses with a fireman’s helmet from station 1, of which she was an honorary member. Despite the black and white coloring, Nellie could see the pink of Julia’s cheeks and the amber of her irises.

FUNERAL.—The funeral of Miss Julia Bulette took place from One’s Engine House, yesterday afternoon. She was buried by the Company. Rev. Mr. Martin delivered the funeral sermon, which was listened to with profound attention. The discourse was a most excellent production, and doubtless was sown on grounds where the gospel seed is seldom permitted to be sown. The extreme inclemency of the weather prevented many from attending the funeral although there was quite a large number who notwithstanding the rain and snow followed her to the grave. Let her faults be buried with her and her virtues live. Mortals are but frail barks, liable to be wrecked in an unguarded

Gold Hill Daily News, January 22, 1867

Back at her usual spot in the research library, Nellie organized her notes and materials. She paid Meredith to make a few copies. Impossibly, hours had passed, and the library was closing.

“When do you hear back about the proposal?” Meredith asked as she handed Nellie the copies.

“It’s still a few months out, I think.” She knew the exact date—December 10th—but saying it out loud made it feel too real. This was likely her only opportunity to fund the rest of her research to get the book in publishable shape. She allowed herself the fantasy of her author photo inside a glossy book jacket. “And I’m just going to keep working on it one word at a time.”

“I’m rooting for you.”

As Nellie walked out to her car, she thought of what to say to Jack when she got home, then remembered that he wasn't there. Her memory of what'd happened just hours before kept getting pushed out of her thoughts, then suddenly reappearing like an unimpressive, unwanted magic trick.

She didn't feel ready to go home yet and confront its possibilities. Whether it was empty or if Jack had returned, both options represented a disruption to her routines that she didn't want to adapt to. Instead, she stored her research materials in her attaché case (1925) and drove down the street to Circus Circus¹⁶.

By the time she parked in the garage, sweat had soaked through her shirt, still inside out. The blast of cold air from the casino's industrial air conditioners welcomed her inside. Sometimes at the end of a long day, she treated herself to some table games and a free circus performance. Every thirty minutes, against the flashing lights, laughter, and arcade game soundtracks, performers on an oval stage would balance spinning plates on wooden dowels, contort their bodies in flexibility feats that made Nellie wince.

Some of the arcade games mimicked the games of the casino floor below. In old school games like the milk bottle toss, players bet on themselves; in other games, they bet against each other. Nellie liked playing a few hands of blackjack before getting herself a soft serve ice cream cone and walking toward the arcade. As she ascended the escalator, she thought of herself as aging in reverse.

Nellie navigated through throngs of children running from game to game and secured a viewing spot right near the stage. A man positioned himself next to her, a yard-long drink strapped

¹⁶ When Circus Circus was built, the owner, Jay Sarno, wanted to create the largest circus in the world. The building, shaped like a pink and white big top tent, was erected in Las Vegas in 1966, its Reno companion in 1978. To address concerns about kids wandering around the casino floor, Sarno built a circular midway with carnival games and a performance stage.

around his neck. He looked like a lot of the tourists who visited from the Bay Area. His sunglasses sat on the back of his bald head, as if eying the group of teenagers playing Dance Dance Revolution behind him. Unlike a lot of those tourists, though, he was alone. Normally, they traveled in packs wearing different versions of the same shorts, button-down, and flip flop uniform, sometimes an added fleece vest in the winter.

The lights dimmed, and a deep voice announced that the show was about to begin. A few people in the arcade—mostly adults—approached the stage. The stage was elevated so that Nellie was at eye level with a performer’s calves clad in flesh-colored tights adorned with rhinestones. The woman sashayed across the stage until she and a man wearing a complementary costume met in the middle. They contorted around each other’s bodies until the man was balancing the woman’s body in the palm of his hand. As his straight arm worked to keep her up in the air, the veins bulged and the muscles quivered.

“I can do that too,” the sunglasses man joked. “Are you that flexible?” He gestured to the performer, who’d dismounted from her partner’s hold and had now folded her body into a C, her chest on the ground. Her partner placed a bow and arrow in between her feet. She nocked the arrow and set it sailing across the stage to a bullseye. Nellie didn’t respond to the man, and he mumbled something. She continued licking her melting ice cream cone. She pulled an embroidered handkerchief from her purse to wipe away the trail of liquid winding down her hand. The lights came up, and the performers bowed.

“Stunning,” Nellie said as she clapped. The female performer blew the sunglasses man a kiss as he whistled. What would his great grandfather think if he saw his descendant strapped to a novelty drink, which he spilled as he fumbled for the phone in his pocket to take a picture? Thinking

of the brothels and Old Virginny christening the ground using his broken bottle of whiskey, Nellie imagined that this man's ancestors might be proud.

Chapter 3

On Saturday morning, Nellie got ready for the day by picking out what to wear and laying it flat on her made bed. It looked as if she'd evaporated out of existence while lying down for a nap. She chose a peasant top with billowy sleeves (1972), a Chanel tweed skirt (1964), and black patent Hollywood Oxfords (1922). A former coworker had once called her style of dress "clownish." Gramp said she was a trendsetter. She didn't really think about her style as saying anything about her. Instead, she thought of herself as a curator of various pieces, many of which she could describe in great detail. After she'd acquired all of the furniture that'd fit in her apartment, she'd moved onto her clothing, the only remaining real estate to showcase her collection being her own body.

Credit cards were one of the few modern innovations she actually enjoyed utilizing. She could swipe the card whenever she wanted to buy something. The bills, mounting by the day, were stored in a roll top secretary desk. She had no real intention of paying them (what was the purpose of having good credit in a city where you can't afford to buy a house?), but she kept them in case someone in the future wanted to piece her life together using the bills as source documents about her life.

The heat outside made Nellie regret the tweed skirt, which was trapping sweat in between her thighs. On her way to Silver Pawn, she was re-routed around downtown because of a chicken wing festival. Her car didn't have air conditioning, which she appreciated because it made her experience the city in a more meaningful way. The South Virginia Street corridor smelled like barbecue sauce, grill smoke, and cigarette smoke. She parallel parked while a small audience

watched. She walked under the arch that spanned South Virginia Street, advertising Reno as the biggest little city in the world¹⁷.

Tourists posed under the arch as people streamed down the street, hopping from kiosk to kiosk in pursuit of chicken wings, beer, and the occasional handicraft. A group of men pressured each other into ordering wings that were so spicy, whoever purchased them had to sign a waiver. They eagerly handed around the clipboard, signing their names to waive the right to sue the distributors of Death by Sauce.

By the time she made it to the other end of the street, the crowd had thinned out. The only kiosk that far north was selling anklets, toe rings, and fake turquoise bolo ties. Inside the front of Gramp's store was emptier than usual. In a few hours when tourists and locals were drunk enough, they would retreat into the casinos and shops that lined the street. Usually, a handful would come into the store and pose in front of the Nevada Knickknacks section and then leave without buying anything. Gramp didn't seem to mind. Getting around wasn't as easy as it once was, so most of his time on the job was spent talking to the few regulars who came in as he sat on a stool behind the counter and researching the history behind his merchandise. He and Nellie once talked about the signed photograph of Marilyn Monroe from her visit to Reno in 1960 for over an hour. It was one of the few items in the store he refused to sell. It was displayed on the wall behind the cash register, and Gramp had said that the placement ensured that Marilyn was always looking over him and his customers like the angel that she was.

"Looks like a good turnout," Gramp said as he looked through the shop's barred windows.

¹⁷ The slogan "Reno: The Biggest Little City in the World" was conceived of by G.A. Burns, a resident of the nearby city of Sacramento, California. He won \$100 for his winning entry in 1929.

“It’s busy, but not as busy as it was last year,” she said. She walked behind the counter and rearranged some of the items in the jewelry display case. Gramp nodded his approval.

“You should be out there having fun with everyone else. Didn’t you say your boyfriend is a good cook? He might appreciate something like this.”

“We’re not together anymore,” she said. Gramp smiled, then frowned, then smiled again so that Nellie could see him processing the development in real time.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He opened up the ledger where he tracked his revenue and expenses. As far as she could tell, the ledger was something he maintained more to keep his late wife’s memory alive, her perfect cursive on many of the pages before the last few, than to actually keep up the books. Gramp accepted credit cards, and she guessed he also had some kind of digital records. Part of her wished she could be the kind of granddaughter who brought her technological acumen to her relationship with the man who’d raised her. But a bigger part of her enjoyed their shared resistance to every newfangled device that was intended to replace the device that’d been created just a few years before. “I’ve got to tell you something I didn’t say before.” He closed the ledger with a thud that made the glass beneath it rattle in its metal surround. “I never cared for that John. He didn’t treat you like you should be treated.”

Gramp had said this many times before, but Nellie didn’t argue. The more worked up he got, the more she wanted to share Jack’s flaws.

“I know. He stole from me.” Saying the words aloud made her eyes mist. How had she let him dupe her for so long? He’d been living in her apartment rent-free, and rather than accusing him of freeloading, she’d allowed herself to hope that he’d propose. “A few nights ago, I came home and he was gone. He’d taken his things and some of mine as well.” Nellie fidgeted with the puckered hem of her peasant top. She could feel Gramp’s anger radiate off him.

“What a dog shit coward.” His insults were frequently composed of these kinds of unpredictable phrase pairings. Nellie smiled. Jack was a dog shit coward.

A group of three men walked into the store, but unlike those who wandered in to entertain themselves, these ones had a clear purpose. Their footfalls were loud and fast. They echoed off the concrete floors covered by a thin layer of carpet.

They all looked related with their barrel chests, green eyes, narrow limbs, and thinning hair, as if they’d all decided to do some shopping after a family cookout. Usually, when a customer walked in, Gramp greeted them after the bell dangling from the door’s handle chimed, even if he was working in the back. This time, he didn’t say anything. When they approached the counter, Nellie was the one to ask if she could help them find something.

“I don’t need anything from you, but you’re going to want something from us.” Nellie almost admired the approach. She wondered if he had rehearsed the line. Nellie thought of the mobsters who found shelter in Reno when the FBI was coming for them. The man leading the group looked like George Wingfield with his close-set eyes and down-turned mouth.

Nellie knew that Gramp didn’t want to talk to the men. When people made this kind of offer, they had something completely unsellable or illegal hidden in the trunk of a car. Nellie pulled him aside and said that they should check it out. If nothing else, this would be an interesting story for him to tell the group of men he played poker with on Sundays. He rubbed his stubble, which he’d recently let grow longer in between shaves, then agreed.

In the alley out back, Nellie’s prediction of the car this group was driving and what they were actually driving didn’t match. She’d imagined an SUV from the 90s with tinted windows, the kind of car a cop might profile. Instead, it was a VW bus in banana yellow. The leader of the

group slid the door open to reveal a felt top table. Anyone could see it was an antique poker table, but only Nellie knew it might be something more.

“We’ll take it,” she said. Gramp shot a sharp look.

“She means we might consider it,” he said. The Wingfield lookalike described the table’s features in a way that showed he didn’t actually know anything about it. The description ended with him asserting that it was “very old” and that he’d inherited it from a distant relative who used to own the Delta Saloon in Virginia City. His great uncle had put it in storage because it was bad luck to keep a card table that wasn’t in use on display. If money wasn’t passing over the table, he’d heard, the unused table would feed off of the bad luck of the gamblers who were playing nearby.

“Quite a story,” Gramp said. He looked to Nellie, and she gave a serious nod. “Are you looking to pawn or sell outright?”

“I want \$1,000 for it.” The two men standing behind modern Wingfield crossed their arms in unison.

“I can give you \$500. Antiques like this don’t sell too well in the store. You may have better luck taking it to one of the antique malls further down south.”

“We’ll take it,” Nellie repeated. She squeezed Gramp’s hand. This table could turn everything around. Gramp freed his hand from Nellie’s and used it to close the deal with a handshake. The two backup men unloaded the table in the back of the shop as Gramp peeled crisp 100-dollar bills from a stack he kept in the bottom of the register.

As soon as they left, Gramp put his hands deep into the pockets of his Wranglers. At first, Nellie thought he was angry, but as she rushed to get a magnifying glass, she could tell that he

was more curious than anything else. Nellie studied the wood grain, the areas where the felt had been completely worn away, the screws that'd likely once secured a plexiglass cover on the top.

This was it, the Suicide Table.

“Jackpot,” Nellie said. “You’re now the proud owner of a wonderful piece of Nevada history.”

“Is that so?”

“As the name describes, the table was believed to be cursed since three of the owners from the mid-19th century onward died by suicide after losing thousands of dollars. For decades, the table was kept in storage since no one would play it. Eventually, it became part of a tourist attraction that disappointed most of the people who paid to see it.”

“How about that,” Gramp said, bending over Nellie’s shoulder as she continued inspecting it.

“And now, it’s yours.”

Nellie waited for him to tell her what a good job she’d done, how thankful he was that she was there to facilitate the acquisition of this piece. Instead, he stared at her, his expression hardening, eyebrows furrowing in slow motion.

“This is dead last on the list of things I need right now,” he said. He stomped to the back and brought out his ledger, opened to the first blank page and included the table under his expenses. “I’m sorry, sweets. Didn’t mean to bite your head off.” He flipped back through the ledger to a page that, unlike the others, was all in red.

“Was that the slump you were talking about last winter?” The figures were in the thousands, one looked to be in the hundreds of thousands. Certainly, he didn’t still owe that much. Why even keep a record of it at that point?

He pointed to the red figures. He always dug into the paper deeper when he was cataloging expenses, as if etching his failures into a permanent record. There was a tenderness to the way he ran his hands over the page. It reminded Nellie of the way he would smooth down the cowlicked hairs that stuck up in the back of her head when he'd attempted to style it.

"No." He closed the book. "It's a different kind of debt. Those poker games I go to, they're not just for fun." Color had begun to return to his face. Maybe saying it aloud gave him some relief. But then, tears started collecting in his eyes. Nellie looked away so that he could believe that she didn't see him cry.

Two customers wearing Mardi Gras beads came into the store, wobbly as they pointed to the store's merchandise. They posed next to a cardboard cutout of Elvis, alternating their slurred impressions. Thank you, thank you very much, they said from curled lips.

Gramp went to the back office and closed the door, taking the ledger with him. Nellie had to work the counter, which was more standing than anything else. The noise outside had quieted down. The musicians playing on the stage set up in the middle of the street had long since left. Nellie rested a hand on the table's ledge and thought of all of the forearms that had rested on that same surface. By the time Wingfield was her age, he and his business partner were worth \$30 million, thanks to their take Goldfield Consolidated Mining Company public. But he lost his fortune during the Great Depression. Even the players who win the biggest pots have to lose at some point.

Chapter 4

Nellie's book was coming along thanks to her self-funded research trips. As she drove through northern Nevada, she was struck by how alive the desert felt. Driving a couple of hours in any direction, the landscape might change from scrub brush to alpine forests, rolling hills to steep mountainsides. She spent weekends driving across the state to check out books from interlibrary loan rather than waiting days for them to arrive at the university. The trips couldn't happen for long, though. She could hear the car's death rattle—an actual rattle that amplified the jingling of loose change in the cupholders.

She'd filed a police report for Jack's theft, even for the items she'd bought him. She knew nothing would come of it, but she welcomed the warm feeling of this small vengeance as she handed over the report. The officer had asked her to file it online, but she'd insisted on the hard copy.

On a Saturday morning, she stopped at the public library downtown to check out a few books and then went to play \$2 blackjack at the Bonanza¹⁸, one of the few casinos that offered anything under \$5 hands.

Nearly all of the Bonanza dealers knew Nellie, and she'd earned plenty of food comps from playing there in the decade since she turned 21. The bigger casinos with the newer slots, bright animations of buffalo and Monopoly men and bejeweled cats, put Nellie on edge. Most of them didn't even have a lever to pull on the side anymore. The sound of coins spilling into the metal tray had been replaced by a poor digital substitute.

¹⁸ Most people know that a bonanza refers to a rich deposit of ore, but few know the term's opposite; when a mine goes dry, it's called a borrasca. Bonanzas have brought prosperity to the region in more ways than mining opportunities. A theme park inspired the television show, *Bonanza*, once operated near the shore of nearby Lake Tahoe. The park, now closed, included a replica of Virginia City, which itself replicates the way the city looked in the 19th century.

There were three open seats at Harvey's blackjack¹⁹ table, and she took the one in the middle. Being in the seat to the dealer's right is too much pressure; hitting when you should stay could mean losses across the table. She regretted not packing a sweater. They always cranked up the AC too high in the summer. A cocktail waitress named Kat—her nametag read Katherine—took her order, a whiskey neat, and knew to make it a double. Nellie changed her 40 dollars for chips and alternated between betting and hanging back to prolong the lifeline of her chip stack.

Harvey dealt the cards, and the woman two seats over hit on seventeen, then busted. Rookie move. Someone kindly explained the strategy of assuming that the card the dealer isn't showing is a ten. She nodded like a diligent student. Then, she lit a cigarillo and blew the smoke directly in front of her. Harvey positioned the portable fan he kept at the table's edge so that the smoke blew back toward her, but she didn't seem to notice.

Kat brought another round of drinks, and Nellie tipped with a dramatic flourish of her wrist. Sometimes, new players needed to have a role model at the table. Despite her lack of skill, the smoking woman continued to add to her stack of chips. She celebrated each win by standing up from her stool and clapping.

A man wearing a buckskin jacket with fringe dangling from the arms and a low cattleman hat watched two hands before taking a seat next to Nellie. He smelled like campfire smoke and honey, an earthy aftershave. Nellie tried not to show that she was studying him, but she couldn't stop looking at his jacket, trying to place it. Soon, she realized he was studying her too.

"That's a nice vest," he said.

¹⁹ The first known reference to blackjack is in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Cervantes was a gambler and may have modeled one of the cheaters in "Rinconete y Cortadillo" after himself. The game's origins are unknown, but the term "blackjack" was popularized during the Klondike Gold Rush of the late 19th century.

“Thank you,” Harvey and Nellie said in unison. Nellie thought he was referring to her leather waistcoat (~1970), but realized he was referring to the top half of Harvey’s casino uniform: a satin vest in a gold a silver paisley pattern, a white button-up shirt, and a bowtie.

Nellie drank down her whiskey, plunging the embarrassment deeper into her gut with each gulp. Not paying attention, she hit on fourteen even though Harvey was showing a four. She lost and was down to her last five dollars. As she rested a forearm on the table, she tried to see if she could feel its energy. Nellie was not the superstitious type, but in graduate school, she’d developed her own theory of *historical energy*.

The history of a place can only live as long as its memory is preserved the material things, the theory went. She’d described the idea in a conference paper proposal as a way to reimagine historical materialism²⁰. Though her proposal had been accepted, the actual presentation had gone terribly, the sparse attendants at her panel questioning whether she had even read any Marx or Engels, or if she’d only used their ideas as fodder for a compelling paper title. Even so, she thought the theory held true. The memory stored in objects is more reliable than the memories stored in minds where they bend and morph to suit whatever that person requires in the moment. Nellie had witnessed her memories of both parents change every year so that she had tidy narratives of who they were as parents, as people. But the polaroids in Gramp’s photo albums never changed.

Whenever new buildings are constructed, an archaeologist is technically required to be on site. But when Nellie was doing field work near Pyramid Lake, the one archaeologist who’d been appointed to the project (a recent college graduate who she could tell had already become

²⁰ The principles of historical materialism were laid out in Engels’s 1878 book, *Herrn Eugen Dührings Ummwälzung der Wissenschaft*. The book was written under Marx’s supervision and approved by him. While Marx may have agreed with the contents, he did not lay out his own theory of history at that time.

disillusioned) spent most of the days wandering around, taking samples, and as he explained, “Staying out of the lead contractor’s way.” On that site, Nellie could feel the energy in the artifacts and remains that were buried in the ground. She’d closed her eyes to imagine what that place looked like during the Pyramid Lake War²¹.

On the casino floor, history was stored in the ashtrays that lined the tables, the vents that recirculated air, the stools that looked sturdy, but that wobbled on uneven legs. On Nellie’s last hand, she was dealt a king and ace—21. The man next to her wrapped his thick-knuckled hand around her shoulder and congratulated her. She tipped Harvey and stood up, determined to keep what little remained of her original stack. She felt unstable on her feet, as if her joints had been loosened while she was playing, and the man next to her stood up too to help steady her.

“Can I walk you out?” he asked. Was he trying to escort her out to save herself the embarrassment of stumbling out alone? Was he setting the groundwork to ask her out on a date? She nodded, open to either.

She complimented his jacket, and he complimented her Oxfords. He had a short, well-manicured beard. Jack’s beard always came in patchy, which made him look like he was recovering from an illness. He blamed the heavy metals in tap water.

“My name’s Bill,” he said. She guessed he was in his late thirties by looking at the backs of his hands.

²¹ Also known as the Paiute War, the armed conflict began in July 1859 after the discovery of silver in the Washoe Hills of Nevada brought with it a rush of white settlers who immediately began depleting the area of other natural resources without regard for the Paiute and Shoshone tribes whose lives were sustained by those resources. The recovered primary documents about the war are nearly uniformly unreliable, all accounts written by the occupying miners and ranchers who were attempting to overtake the land. In those accounts, some wrote that they tried to offer food to the people whose land they were taking. There was no proof to substantiate the fact. The tribal alliance was defeated when the United States military intervened.

“Eleanor,” she said. She rarely told people her full name, not even in professional correspondence. Saying all three syllables gave her name weight and made her straighten her posture.

“A drink?” he asked. They went into the bar tucked away near the entrance. There was a new bartender she didn’t recognize. She ordered for both of them. He smiled, the first smile she’d seen on him. Nellie wasn’t much for the strong silent type. It made her think of the titular character from *Shane* coming into town and settling into Starrett’s farm. “Shane was dangerous. But he was good.” In Bill’s case, though, she appreciated the silence. Jack was always talking over her, correcting her historical tidbits about local buildings, her opinions about the food she ordered when she took him out.

The bartender placed their drinks on cocktail napkins and walked to the other side of the bar and posted up in front of a TV screen playing a football game.

“Where’d you get that hat?” she asked.

“It was my grandfather’s. He was a rancher out in Washoe Valley, and in every memory I have of him, he was wearing this hat.”

“You’re from here?”

“Fifth generation.”

“Me too.” Nellie drank too fast and coughed. “Was the jacket your father’s as well?”

Somehow, the more she drank, the less drunk she felt.

“No. Got this out at the big antique mall on Virginia.” He moved his glass so that it marked a new ring of condensation into the napkin, etching a Venn diagram into its surface. “Or my ex-wife got it for me.” When Nellie didn’t respond, he added, “You’re a good card player.”

“A well-trained primate can win at blackjack. You should see me play poker,” she said. She could hear a new lilt in her voice. She thought of Gramp and all of that red on the page, the bills filed in her roll top, the collectors’ calls she never returned, and the wooziness came back.

“I would like to see that.” He edged his hand on the bar closer to hers so that their pinkies nearly touched.

“Is the ranch still operational?” she asked. He nodded. Someone nearby won big, and the several seconds of digital clanging turned heads, including theirs.

“Is that where you work?” Nellie imagined him mending fences as the sun crisped his bare shoulders, him riding on a horse in the foothills.

He shook his head but didn’t say where he did work. Instead, he asked what she did for a living, and when she told him, his eyes widened with interest. For an hour, uninterrupted, she described the Suicide Table, the history of the Comstock Lode, the daily life of a miner, the items that came through Silver Pawn. She kept waiting for him to tell her he had somewhere else to be and politely excuse himself from the conversation, but he never did. He ordered another two rounds. Nellie felt heat blooming at the base of her neck, partially from the whiskey sloshing in her empty stomach and partially from the image of Bill riding a mustang.

“You think that table is worth a lot of money?” he asked. “Sounds like a one-of-a-kind piece.” Nellie wasn’t ready to tell him about her plans for it, which she hadn’t completely figured out herself. Somehow, she was going to use it to help get herself and Gramp out of their position, but the idea of how exactly that would work hadn’t taken any solid shape yet.

“We got it for a thousand and could probably sell it for five. But we’re not comfortable selling it to a private collector. You can’t ensure that they’ll take care of it.” That estimate wasn’t

based on any research, but it seemed like a plausible figure. Bill's hand crept toward Nellie's until their fingers were interlaced.

"You have the prettiest hands," he said. "I noticed them while you were tossing your cards to the dealer at the table. Could I take you out some time?"

"No, thank you." She waited for him to frown before adding, "But I could take *you* out on my next research trip. Heading to Gold Hill." She attempted a wink. He closed out their tab, and she didn't offer to split the bill. He didn't seem like the type who'd want her to. Some water, some nickel slot play, and some more flirting later, Nellie was ready to drive home. Bill walked her out to her car. He wanted to kiss her, she could tell, but didn't.

"Can I get your number?" he asked.

"You can, but as a warning, I don't always answer. Don't take it personally." She offered her old cell phone and its dead battery as proof.

"I'll tell you what. I'm going to give you my business card so that you can reach me anytime, anyplace. Can't wait to see Gold Hill. Haven't been since I was a kid." He pulled the glossy card from his wallet, and Nellie's face fell as she read, "Service Technician, Sierra Broadband." She didn't know what she was expecting, but it wasn't that. What did a job like that even entail? She imagined Bill fussing with wires and buttons. When she got into her car, he closed her door and waved, then tipped his hat, the fringe of his jacket swaying in the desert breeze that'd picked up.

As soon as he was out of sight, she clicked on the overhead light to inspect the card further. He wasn't the rancher she'd hoped for, but she chose to blend the earlier fantasy with the reality before her. She'd hardly been single and already had a new dating prospect.

She stored Bill's card in her center console. By the time she got home, it felt like someone had recently been there; her genealogy project was slightly out of place, the throw pillows formerly

on the chaise moved to her Ib Kofod-Larsen sofa (1958). She grabbed the closest thing to a weapon she could find, an umbrella hanging on the coat rack, and held it like a baseball bat.

As she surveyed the living room, she saw that nothing was missing this time. Instead, there was only a note on the middle of the kitchen counter.

I'm really sorry for taking those items. I was in a jam that I can't talk about here. I'm sorry too that it didn't work out between us. I know you'll find someone just as unique as you, and you'll be happy.

-Jack

Nellie's first impulse was to crumple up the note and throw it away, but she decided to keep it with her other records in the roll top desk. In the morning, she'd need to ask the landlord to change out the locks. She wondered where Jack was then and who'd taken her place as his caregiver. The throw pillows smelled like him, and she imagined him sitting on the sofa brainstorming what to write in the note. He thought himself a poet, even had her attend an open mic night he performed in. She cringed at the memory of him pausing too long at the line breaks and flirting with the English undergrads who'd complimented his vivid imagery afterward.

She put on the kettle and boiled some water for pasta. It was after 1 a.m., and she needed a bed of carbohydrates for the whiskey to settle into before she herself went to bed. She steeped the tea for too long, making it too strong, and the noodles were too bland. They actually balanced each other out. Gramp would be proud. Her mother had been a great cook, but she hadn't inherited any of those skills. She remembered seeing her mother cook a couple of times, and it looked like magic when she took a pinch of spices and tossed them into a skillet filled with vegetables that she didn't recognize and refused to eat.

After dinner, she moved around the furniture, a bimonthly ritual. She tried reading for a while, but thoughts of Jack and Bill and Gramp and Emory swirled in her mind until it seemed like all of the letters of their names were trading places. The dog in the unit next door barked and

whined, probably begging to be let back inside from the balcony. She walked out to her own balcony, forging a path through the antique yard art she stored there, and took a biscuit shaped like a bone from the Bartlett Collins cookie jar (1954) she stored outside for this purpose. She tossed the biscuit over, and the dog sniff around in the dark until he finally found it.

Chapter 5

September 18, 1863

I arrived in Virginia City this evening after an hours long journey that left me weary. Soreness crept through each and every one of my bones, and I yearned for a hot bath like Mother used to draw on Sundays. I did not have anything in the way of lodging but was told by a woman I met at Fort Humboldt (she was the wife of a prospector who was also leaving the California Territory to find better opportunities since gold was no longer being found by pickax or pan) that I should write to someone named Mister Buck Bennington at the Gold Hill Hotel. I wrote him and hoped that my letter would make it to the new city before I did.

As soon as I walked into the main street, lit by elaborate brass lamps on both sides, I was struck by a veritable cacophony of sounds. Something like grinding gears and metal clanging and men calling out to one another. All this despite the late hour. That same woman informed me that the sounds I was hearing were the sounds of the silver mines, which ran from sunup to sundown and even the hours in between. I smiled at the prospect, for it was my plan in traveling here to strike it rich. We had read in the papers that silver could be plucked from the hillside by anyone with an eye for it. Even an ass was said to have snorted at a pile of rubble that turned out to be ore. They can sniff out ore as well as any prospector, seems like.

Before I could even collect my trunk, I heard the bang of a gunshot and a menacing laugh. I ran across the planks on the side of the road, which were not easy to see, and stumbled over the uneven ground. My boot wedged in between two slats, throwing my balance off kilter. A man caught me in his arms and laughed. I was thankful for the assistance, but I had to hold my breath

due to his stench—grease, muck, and woodsmoke. When he spoke, that all mixed with whiskey to make the surrounding air nearly unbreathable.

“What’s a pretty little doe like you doing here?” he asked. He helped me stand upright and retrieved my trunk.

“I have just arrived,” I said. “Was somebody shot?”

“Just having some fun. But yes, may have been shot. We’ll be able to tell come morning.”

My initial impression of the man as brutish was incorrect; he was rather kind and respectable. Before setting out West, I researched what it would be like as best as I could. Based on the accounts I had read, there were two different groups out here: the respectable people and the people of ill-repute, and I aimed to be a part of the former but did not take issue with the latter. The people with ill reputations have the better stories.

Options would be limited given my particular set of skills, but I remained hopeful that I could make a wage as a dressmaker. My dream that I have not voiced to anyone else is that I hope I may too find my own claim. The treasure is out there, and it does not take a treasure map to find it—just hard work, time, and maybe a thimbleful of luck.

The man, who told me he was called Chicken Liver (an odd name, to be sure), led me to the Gold Hill Hotel. It was not too far, but my feet ached as we trudged up and down steep hills. I had never seen mountain ranges like these before, and I could hardly wait until the morning light to see how the sun shone upon them. Traveling from California, I knew we traveled through some smaller ranges, but I had trained myself to be lulled to sleep by the coach’s bumps and sways. That, I had been told, is the only way to keep one’s head. The driver let me drink from a tincture that helped me sleep. He said that people traveling without it can go “crazy enough to eat the devil with horns on.”

Chicken Liver tipped his hat and left me at the entrance, promising that he would see me around town soon. I entered the hotel, and I had never seen anything quite so grand in my life. Glass chandeliers hung from the ceiling, and gold filigree wallpaper adorned the walls. I thought such buildings only existed in Europe. It was more beautiful than anything I could have imagined, and certainly a refined contrast to the wild happenings on the main street.

An attendant wearing a double-breasted suit jacket greeted me and asked if I had arranged a stay at the hotel. I explained that I had not, but that I had spoken to someone who had referred me to Mister Buck Bennington, and he had agreed to employ me there. The man, who wore an untrimmed mustache and had eyelids that drooped like a sweet old dog's, described in quite gruesome terms that Mister Bennington had been hung from the gallows two days prior.

"He shot the overseer at the mine, and he was hanged for it." I held up my hand to indicate that this was enough of a description, but he continued on. "A sorry sight, really. His neck didn't break seeing as how slight he was, so he was hanging there for five or six minutes, I reckon. The crowd left after the first few minutes because they did not want to watch his body turn about on that rope any longer." The man was like a half-polished stone, some shine on the outside, but not enough to conceal the roughness underneath.

"I am very sorry to hear about Mr. Bennington, but he was the only person who I was told might be looking to hire, and I must find some form of employ and a place to rest my head." I would have laid down there on the ground if I thought he would permit it.

"I'll tell you what, little miss. You can have lodging here for the night so long as you help with breakfast in the morning."

I agreed, as this seemed like the best possible arrangement I was going to come to in the middle of the night in a new city. Just then, a man stumbled inside holding out his revolver. He wore a handkerchief over his face so that all I could see were his green eyes outlined in soot.

“Put them up!” he yelled. I gasped and sought refuge in the corner. The mustached man laughed.

“That’s just Lucky Jax,” he said. “He puts on this kind of performance every once in a while. If you looked inside that pepperbox, you wouldn’t find a bullet in it.” Lucky Jax pulled a flask from his hip and tipped it up so that it pointed to the glass chandelier, then walked back outside without saying another word. I was beginning to see how lawless this land really was and hoped that everything felt a little more ordered in the morning.

I slept that night on a bedroll that was so soft, I nearly cried. As I fell asleep, I felt like my dreams would be lined with silver.

September 19, 1863

I was abruptly awoken this morning by a man who instructed me to help him clean the room. He shook his head, saying how lucky I was. I had thought that I made a reasonable arrangement with the innkeeper, but I learned that these accommodations were typically reserved for the wealthiest of guests, the wives of the most successful stock speculators. The man helping me was called Lee, and he was from the Far East. He was very deft with the cleaning and said he would show me how to make a proper biscuit. The kitchen bustled with people. I had never seen so many people working at once. Back at home, I had only cooked at the hearth and knew how to make a very limited number of dishes, including a cabbage stew that Mother taught me to make. I missed her then as I tried to stay out of everyone’s way. All of the new faces and manners of speaking

excited me, but I also knew that I had much to learn. At thirty years of age, I know that I am perhaps beyond marrying age, and I must therefore find a way to take care of myself and secure my own future.

I endeavored to send a letter home and planned to tell them I was on track to find employment at the most lavish hotel I had ever seen. I gave the innkeeper and Lee my thanks for allowing me to stay there, packed my trunk, and walked outside, careful to lift my skirts so that I did not dirty them before meeting with possible employers. The clanging and the yelling I had heard the night before still echoed through the hills, but as I had hoped, it was much more serene. The blue mountains in the distance were crested with white. I knew this was snow, as I had read about it and had seen it once I traveled to the California Territory, but I had never seen so much of it in one place. I could see for at least a mile into the deep valleys lined with brush. I felt like my breath came easier here, and the future looked as bright as the sun that burst through the only cloud in the sky.

Since the Gold Hill Hotel was not hiring at the moment, I decided to try my luck in the city proper. To my surprise, people lined the main street as they had the night before. Some men were slumped over, drink tilting them this way and that in the early a.m. Soon, I realized why the man from the night before had been so curious about my being there. As it was, I had not yet found another unaccompanied woman. Even the married women were few and far between. They wore lovely dresses and did not participate in the debauchery happening in the street.

I thought I could keep accounts or keep house for someone, given that I did have training in the domestic arts and could read and write. On a piece of stationery I borrowed from the hotel's clerk, I wrote down each of the boarding houses I could find. At each place, I asked if they were looking to hire someone, and at each place they said they were not. The only woman who seemed interested was called Mary Lions, and she said she would tell me if something came available.

“Jobs like these aren’t easy to come by,” she said. “And once unmarried women like us get one, we don’t tend to let them go. We work twice as hard as the men with half of the complaining. Still, though, without being able to work the mines, we have to find ways to work for the men who work the mines. Just how it goes.”

“I hope that someday, it goes a different way,” I said, and thanked her.

By mid-day, I was tired and was growing despondent, for I had few options remaining. Rather than drag my trunk from place to place, I asked a kind-eyed man if I could store it next to his horse stables. He agreed and kissed my hand.

My stomach complained of hunger, so I found a restaurant and tried to order something that would fill me up for as long as possible. The sausage and beans were over-salted, but I enjoyed the victuals anyhow. I had saved little money and guessed that I could keep myself fed and sheltered for another day or two before I would need to consider other options.

A man seated next to me spit into a spittoon and then smiled, his teeth still coated with chewing tobacco. I returned his smile, though, because I was aiming to make a good first impression in this new town. I would be cordial and kind, no matter who I was with. A man approached me and complimented my dress.

“Very becoming,” he said. I curved my back and bowed my head in a seated curtsy. He was handsome and was dressed nicer than any of the other folk in the place. “Your dress, I mean. Real becoming,” he said, reaching out his hand. I did not know if I was to shake it or what else, so I placed my fingers in his and did not pull away when he planted a kiss on my knuckles. From behind his left shoulder, I saw a feather waving from left to right. Soon, I saw the feather was fastened to a hat and that hat was fastened to a woman’s head.

“Lord almighty!” she screeched. “I leave you alone for less than a quarter hour, and you’ve already gone looking for a sporting woman to entertain you.” Her features were sharp and bird-like. The feather suited her more than I bet she knew.

I wanted to tell her that was not true, but I came to see the scene as she had and cast my eyes down in shame and anger. I had hardly been there for a day, and someone already thought she knew who I was. An awful feeling it is when people make a story for you before you have a chance to write a story for yourself. My stomach turned, and I wished I had not eaten so much so quickly. The two left as quick as anything.

“Don’t worry about that old wet hen,” the cook called out from behind one of the two stoves. He brought over a biscuit layered with what looked like strawberry preserves, then licked the fingers that looked sticky with red. “Her name’s Mrs. Crawford. No one even knows her first name, proud as she is of her married surname. Thought she caught a big trout on her line when she married John. Turned out his only likeness to a big catch like that is his beady eyes and slimy belly. He’s cheated just about everyone in town out of their money, telling them their claims were worth more than they were to inflate the price, taking shares out, and then selling them all. Not long before he squanders his daddy’s fortune on bad dealings and ladies of the night, and she can’t help but take it out on pretty gals like yourself.”

“I meant no offense.”

“Don’t make no difference to people who find offense easier than a fly finds shit.” He nodded at the biscuit. “Didn’t mean to spoil your appetite. Eat up. Tasting something sweet will wash the sour out of your mouth.”

I thanked him and ate the rest. I even rolled my finger across the plate until there was no crumb left.

I felt in higher spirits then, but as soon as I walked outside, a man grabbed at my shirtwaist, asking how much it would cost to cure him of his loneliness. I was appalled, but as he kept pulling, I began to feel sorry for him. He looked desperate as a hungry newborn clawing at its mother's breast. His plump cheeks were pink, and cowlicks swirled his hair in all different directions. He was likely about eight years my junior.

"I do not know exactly what you are requesting, but I will tell you that I am no woman of ill-repute. If you require a companion, I can help you, but in exchange, I will need you to fetch my trunk, which I have stored over by the stables."

He nodded and left in the direction of the stable, walking with a limp that broke my heart in three. I could tell that this mining was dangerous work. The men who I'd dismissed as drunks were actually very ill. One man who was splayed out on the plank walkway only had one hand, and the other appendage was a poorly bandaged stump. Another man sitting outside of the Royal Saloon had burns that twisted his expression into something so monstrous, I could hardly look at him. The price of getting rich seemed high indeed.

The boy came back without my trunk.

"Sorry, ma'am, but there ain't nothing there. Just the horses and their dung heaps that need shoveling."

"Of course it is there. Someone agreed to watch over it as I sought out employment in the city."

He cast his eyes down and grabbed at my shirtwaist once again, but I slapped his hand away. I hitched my skirts and ran to the stable, and he was right. Someone had absconded with my trunk! Everything I owned was now gone, save the clothes I was wearing, the food in my belly, and the few bills in my reticule.

I hurried off to the nearby shops to see if anyone had witnessed the crime, but I was met only with shrugs of disinterest and one more question about me healing a man's loneliness. I found my way to the sheriff, who was not easy to find. The buildings there were all put up so hastily in that part of town, it was difficult to tell the difference between a mail outpost, a bank, and a bar.

Before I entered, I could hear a terrible growling sound and wondered if a criminal was being punished or interrogated inside. Instead, I saw only one man who was sitting with his head tilted back and arms folded across his chest. There was a single cell behind him that was unoccupied. For all of the shooting I had heard the night before, I was surprised that no one had been put away or reproached.

I heard the growling again and realized that the sheriff was asleep. I had never heard a snore so loud. Mother always joked about Father's snoring sounding like a timber mill, but it was not nearly as bad as this man's. I knocked lightly on the desk where his boot spurs were resting. He startled awake.

"My apologies, ma'am. You caught me during my siesta hour," he said. He dressed to match the part of a sheriff with his wide-brimmed white hat and a suede duster jacket. His clothing was immaculate, though, and I did not imagine that he was the type of lawman who wrestled thieves to the ground or rode out to catch someone skipping bail no matter the weather. He looked well-groomed and well-taken care of. I wondered if his wife lived in one of the nice homes lining E Street. His paunch was not large enough to indicate sloth; instead, it made it seem as if he had always eaten well in preparation for any emergency.

"I am the victim of theft, and I would like to file a report."

"And what's been stolen?" He rubbed his eyes and pulled a bound journal from his desk drawer.

“My trunk, which has everything I own inside of it, every item of clothing, all of my housewares. I am simply lost without it.”

“Where was it taken from? Your lodging?”

“No. I stayed at the Gold Hill Hotel last evening, but that is not where the thief took it from. I asked a nice man to watch over it as I sought employment this morning and afternoon. He was an attendant of the horse stable near Main Street. I do not recall his name.” I felt myself flustering, as I realized while I spoke that it was not a smart plan to keep all of my belongings under a stranger’s watch.

“This attendant. Did he have long gray hair pulled back into a plait?”

“Yes. A striking look for a man, I believe.”

“And was he tall as a beanstalk and ugly as homemade sin?”

I tried to recall exactly what the man looked like, but it was difficult to see in the bright sunlight since his face was cast under the shadow of his hat.

“Yes, he was tall, but I cannot recall exactly what his face looked like.”

The sheriff took an apple from a rucksack and began skinning it with a knife.

“Sorry to say your trunk is long gone by now. That man you asked to watch over your things is Davey Blues, so called because he is always down on his luck at the Faro tables. He’s a liar and a cheat, but a real smooth talker. Could charm you better than a witch’s brew. By now, he’s sold everything inside and spent the money on liquor, women, and cards.”

I felt tears begin to collect in my eyes, which I suspect the sheriff noticed.

“But don’t you fret. This is a small enough town. We’ll be able to collect your things piece by piece as we see women wearing your dresses or using your housewares.” He closed his notebook and began to eat the peel he’d cut from his apple.

“And what punishment will this Davey Blues be given as a result of his crime?”

“Honey, his whole life is punishment enough. He’s nearly blind from an accident at the mine, and his wife divorced him soon as they got here, citing impotence. Word got around about that, so there’s no way that any other woman is going to marry him, especially considering the state of his visage with those beady eyes, hook nose, and rotted teeth.”

I am ashamed to say that I began to cry then, in part because of poor Davey’s circumstance, but largely due to my own. I had little money and no job prospects. It got cold during the night, much too cold for me to be sleeping outside.

“Thank you for your help, sir. Before I depart, though, I must ask for your assistance in one other area. I am in need of work, preferably in a dressmaking shop, keeping house, or keeping the books. I can read and write.”

“I don’t know of anything available right now, but the person who would know is at the Sagebrush Place, which is located in Little Tipperary, the Irish part of town. His name is Patrick McLaughlin. He’s got his fingers in all sorts of different pies. I’d take you there myself, but I have a hanging to attend at half past the hour.”

I imagined what Mr. Bennington’s body looked like as it jerked and then swayed under an audience’s stare. Did he have a proper burial afterward? Would anyone even remember his name after this next hanging?

The sheriff gave me clear directions to Little Tipperary before we parted ways. The air outside was beginning to chill as I walked the streets. I still could not find any other women who were at a similar station in life as I was, so I excused the men who yelled profane comments to me from casino stoops and doggerly windows.

As soon as I walked through the doors of the Sagebrush Place, which was lit by a bright blue light, I found all of the women I had been looking for before. Men were playing Faro at tables and personal games of whist on the sofas nearest the door. This was no ordinary hotel. There was gambling and drinks and women, a handful of them with their skirts hiked up above their knees, showing their calves, completely bare. No one stopped their fun on my account, save one man who hollered that I looked lost. It did not take long to find Mr. McLaughlin. He was strikingly handsome with his strong jaw and thick hair parted on the left. He had a mustache and a trimmed goatee like the men in Europe wore. He was playing cards and was winning I gathered based on the number of bills in front of him. I tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned around so quickly that his drink spilled.

“I was referred here by the sheriff,” I said. I had to repeat myself several times to be heard over the din of the place. A woman nearby laughed as a man walked his fingers up her unbuttoned shirtwaist as if they were a pair of legs taking a stroll on silk.

“If that lily liver wants something from me, he can come fetch me himself,” he said as he placed another bet on the table. “Of course he’d send a woman to do his bidding.”

“No, he did not send me. He said that I should come find you in order to secure employment. I have just arrived here yesterday.”

Mr. McLaughlin stood up. The man seated next to him had to readjust the woman on his lap so that Mr. McLaughlin had enough room to face me.

“I do have some opportunities here, but I’m not sure they are suited to a woman like yourself.” I smoothed my skirt front as he examined me. “Let us go somewhere quieter to discuss the possibilities.”

He led me down a hallway, and I could hear the animal sounds of lovemaking. I grew worried that the only job for me would be sporting, a job that had already been offered to me two times over. My growing hunger reminded me that I would need to work for my supper, and I decided that some prospect was better than no prospect.

Soon, though, he led me to a quiet room that felt safe despite its proximity to the business transpiring in the surrounding rooms.

“How are your letters?”

“I can read, write, and keep books, if that is what you mean.” I spoke quickly as I tried to sell my positive attributes. “And I can cook, clean, mend, make patterns, really anything you need.”

“Anything?” he asked. I scanned his face for any signs of menace, and detecting none, I said, “Anything.”

Chapter 6

Gramp invited Nellie over for a mid-week dinner, which was unusual. She usually picked up takeout and brought it to the store since he tried not to spend too much time in the apartment he'd moved into after Leanna died. Her battle with Alzheimer's had been a devastatingly short one. Gramp would be paying off the remaining bills from her stay in an assisted living facility for at least three times the duration she'd been there. He'd sold the house they'd lived in for the 15 years they'd been married for almost enough to pay off the two mortgages he'd taken out on it.

Nellie hadn't visited his new place since she'd helped him move in anything that was small enough to be boxed. After they'd sorted the boxes and stacked them along the walls of their respective rooms, Gramp had opened one labeled keepsakes and pawed through yellowing photos and newspaper clippings. His eyes threatened tears, and Nellie had hugged him and left before the threat was made real. She imagined her own grief as being contained in one of those boxes. As long as it stayed stored away, it became an artifact that could be buried under the weight of her everyday tasks. Who had time to grieve when appointments had to be made, projects had to be completed, and paychecks had to be earned?

When Nellie walked in, she saw that it was nearly as spare as it was when they'd lined the walls with boxes. He had all of the essentials: a couch, a table, and a bed, but no pictures hung on the wall. One picture of Nellie at her college graduation, positioned in between Gramp and Leanna, lived on the refrigerator. The living room didn't have an overhead light, and no lamps had been plugged in, so the room was dark, save for the light bleeding in from the adjoining kitchen. She could smell the carbon of burning food and wished she'd thought to eat beforehand.

"Knock knock," she said, making her way through the living room.

“Sorry, didn’t hear you come in. The chef is busy at work.” He was wearing a Kiss the Cook apron that still had the tags on it, likely something someone had brought into his store.

“Is something burning?” They both sniffed as he lifted the lid off of the slow cooker, unleashing a plume of steam. He stirred the ingredients.

“No, it’s just the first time I’ve put some of the kitchen appliances to use, and that’s their way of complaining about it.”

“Need any help?”

“You take a seat and relax. This dinner is my treat. Get yourself a beer out of the fridge. It will pair nicely with tonight’s main course.” In contrast to the rest of the apartment, the fridge was surprisingly well-stocked. He usually drank domestic beers, so she was surprised to see the six pack of craft beers marked by artsy labels depicting a unicorn reared up on its hind legs against a desert landscape. She opened the mostly empty kitchen drawers to find a bottle opener and sat on the couch. “That’s local. The brewmaster told me all about it—hops, IBU, pale ale versus India pal ale. There’s a lot more to it than I thought.”

“It’s really good,” she lied. She picked at the corners of the label, then used the condensation to reseal them to the bottle. “Did you know that India pale ales were created when the British empire needed to find a way to preserve their beer when they sent it to India and other places they’d colonized? It’s brewed more like a wine than a traditional ale.”

“See, that’s why I keep you around. Who else has all of these facts tucked under their sleeves? I like the sweater, speaking of.”

“Thanks. Before these bell sleeves were popularized by hippies, they were worn by clergymen during the Medieval period.” She waved her arms to show off the capacious sleeves. Then Gramp rolled up his.

“Do they get in the way?” He opened a beer for himself.

“Not in my line of work. Have I told you about the project I’m working on?” She knew she had, but she wanted him to have an out if he didn’t want to hear about it again.

“The ads for that garage door place?”

“No, not that. My real project.” That was actually a good reminder. Writing copy for Truckee Garage was going to help her make rent, and the deadline was fast approaching.

“Oh yes, you have. I can’t wait to read the book. Those women back then, they had grit, just like you and your mom.”

“They really did. You wouldn’t believe some of the things they went through. I just found a work log for a woman named Mary Lions, who worked at Crawford’s Boardinghouse. She meticulously accounted for every minute of her working day and was up from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. tending to the guests’ needs.”

“Lions seems like a fitting name for her.” He portioned the chili from the crockpot into two of the four bowls he owned and asked her to join him at the table.

“I couldn’t imagine having to work that hard every single day just to survive. All that while the mine owners kicked up their un-muddied boots and waited for their claims to pay off. I hope The Preservation Society is impressed by my proposal. That’s the only chance I’ll have at researching and writing full time.”

“You didn’t tell me that it was a proposal. I thought it was a sure thing. Do they pay you for the work you’re doing now?” Gramp furrowed his brow. He still looked younger than his nearly 80 years. He hardly had any wrinkles on his face despite spending the bulk of his younger years working outside as a land surveyor before taking over the pawn shop.

“Once the manuscript is accepted, that’s when it will pay off.” She regretted revealing the details of the process. There was nothing he could do about it, and he was the type of man whose sense of purpose was derived from the number of problems he fixed, or at least the amount of advice he gave about how to fix them. “Well, what you need to do” was a common phrase that preceded that advice. “This is just how the process goes,” she added when he looked unconvinced.

“I’m glad to hear you’re getting it all sorted. Between that and getting rid of Jack, you’re making a good path for yourself. Now eat up. This is a family recipe from your great grandpa Willis, my dad.” She took the first bite with some reservations. It wasn’t the most appealing dish to look at, the beans swimming in a thick brown liquid that hid the other ingredients. But it was delicious. She could hear the clink of her spoon against the bowl’s wall before she’d noticed how much she’d eaten. “See, I can cook. Well, just this one thing, but I sure can cook it. The secret ingredient,” he leaned in, voice dropped to a whisper, “is nutmeg.”

“This really is excellent, Gramp.”

“Don’t sound so surprised. I can take better care of myself than it might seem.”

“Can I help you put up some of your decorations while I’m here? I can hang things without the aid of a tape measure or a level. It’s a secret power.”

“Not much use in it, but thanks, sweets.” Nellie’s seat back felt more rigid than it had before.

“Why not? I know you have plenty of nice things in those boxes. Why keep them stored away?”

He pulled another two beers from the fridge and handed one to her. The upstairs tenants started stomping around the apartment. They both looked up, tracking the footsteps with their eyes. Gramp took both of their bowls and ran the tap until water overflowed them. The water kept

running as he looked at the wall behind Nellie. Its beige color was depressing, but inoffensive. She imagined it was called something like *Elegant Sand*. The walls were empty scrolls onto which new histories would not need to be written.

“I’m going to be selling the lot of it soon, try to get myself back into the black at the shop.” Gramp drained the rest of his first beer, popped the cap off of the second. “I don’t have much, but some of the antiques can fetch me enough to stay afloat.”

“And then you can finally retire.”

“No retiring for me. I’d go nuts sitting on my rear watching TV all day.”

“I know. No retiring for you.” If the numbers Nellie had seen in the ledger were correct, there was no way that selling a few paintings and porcelain figurines would be enough to get him out of the hole. This was a story that he needed to believe, one that was more survivable than the reality: he was a widower two times over who didn’t want to confront his loss through reminders of the past he’d shared with either woman. Nellie could feel her box of grief straining at the seal. She missed her grandmother and even Leanna. She missed Leanna’s banter with Gramp, the way she challenged him, teased him about not having her same experiential wisdom since she was six years older. She was warm and generous, but Nellie never thought of her as a grandmother figure despite the fact that she’d been around for a good chunk of Nellie’s adult life. She seemed more like a close family friend. She was the one who snuck Nellie her first sip of wine and advised her that she could still go “window shopping” even after she’d started dating someone.

“I hope you don’t get rid of anything you want to keep. If it’s money, I can help you.” They avoided eye contact. Their family didn’t like talking about money. Families with histories of gambling addiction rarely do. Nellie pictured the *When the Fun Stops* pamphlets for people who wanted to quit gambling. They were often hidden in the shadows cast by slot machines.

“It’s not just the money. I’m going for a new look here. Minimalism, they call it. I only want to keep the things that are necessary to get by day-to-day.” He threw the bottlecap in the trash, but it bounced off the corner. He groaned as he bent down to pick it up, knees creaking. “So, you liked the chili?”

“It was great. Thanks, Gramp.”

“I’m going to turn in for the night, but I’m glad I was able to make you a home-cooked meal. I’ve been meaning to do that for a long time.” According to the digital clock on the oven, it was 7:42 p.m.

“I’m beat too,” Nellie said.

“You know how much I love you, and I’ve always tried to do right by you,” he said.

They hugged despite not being the hugging types, and Nellie abandoned the remainder of her beer. As she left, she glanced back to apartment 10, but she couldn’t see anything. He’d drawn the blinds. Something was off. He wasn’t going to bed before it was even dark out. She decided to do a stakeout²², though she didn’t know exactly what she was looking for. It reminded her of a class she took in graduate school. She wrote one of her capstone papers on organized crime in Reno, and despite reading all of the transcripts from trials, she still couldn’t believe the nonchalance with which these men took a life.

²² During one of the longest stakeouts in Reno’s history, the police were trying to catch casino owner Louis Strauss, better known as “Russian Louis” for conspiring to murder Harry Sherwood, who was his partner in the casino. After two weeks, they couldn’t find anything, and the hot case went cold--flames to ash, evidence to tall tales swirling around the Washoe Valley. But Strauss didn’t get away with it. In 1953, he tried to extort money from Las Vegas mob associate Benny Binion. He put a hit out on him, and the man who did the hit, Jimmy Fratianno, said, “I told Louis; hey Louis come on we’ll go have a cup of coffee. So as he went in, one guy put his arms around him, Frank Bmp and I put the rope on him and we killed him and that was it, we choked him.”

Nellie watched a couple fighting while the man fumbled for his keys. A woman struggled to carry all of her grocery bags to her apartment in one trip. A teenager ran up the stairs two at a time to beat his mother to the front door. After nearly an hour, Nellie had almost given up on her stakeout. Just when she put the key into the ignition, she saw Gramp leave his apartment, scanning from right to left and right again as he locked the door. She reclined her seat so that she wouldn't be seen, even though he'd certainly recognize her car. Peering through the window, she saw that she was undetected. Still reclined, she buckled her seatbelt, then slowly un-reclined. She was going to follow him.

#

Nellie hung back as she trailed Gramp. Once he parked, she parked about a block away. It was an enormous house in the Old Southwest neighborhood. The houses there were spaced far apart, separated by mature trees that could fool someone into thinking they were meant to grow there. Freshly cut and perfectly edged lawns bordered each house. In the house Gramp entered, two big luxury SUVs were parked in the driveway like sentries. Gramp's Pontiac and Nellie's Volvo looked so out of place in the neighborhood that if they left them there for a couple of nights, they'd surely get a note on their windshields requesting to move them at their nearest convenience. Gramp entered the front double doors after waiting outside for a few minutes.

It occurred to Nellie that this might be the house of one of his poker buddies. But she knew who he played with. None of them lived in this kind of neighborhood. Ted was out in the trailer park on Second, Dave lived on a plot of land with chickens and goats in Lemmon Valley, and Emmett lived in an apartment near the university. The front of the house looked normal enough with its potted plants lining the small porch and the decorative chalkboard sign that read *Home*. Nellie could tell that something sinister was happening on the other side of that door. She imagined

a group of men circled around Gramp, intimidating him as he eyed the gleaming tray full of dental tools-turned-torture devices. He'd keep making smart aleck comments until they threatened to come after Nellie, and he'd break.

She quieted her impulse to swing the front door open by taking several deep breaths. She had to be careful. She had no idea what was going on in there, and making wild hypotheses rarely helped anyone. Maybe Gramp was dating someone new that he didn't want her to know about, some well-off retired anesthesiologist who hired a crew to maintain her lawn and tend to the hot tub out back. Or perhaps someone else had joined their poker game, and he hadn't introduced her to them yet. He was always hesitant to bring her around his poker buddies since they were "rough around the edges," as he said. Over the few occasions she met them, Emmett said she shouldn't look so gloomy, Dave told her she looked more like a woman than a little girl, and Ted asked her to make him a whiskey sour. She was twelve.

Nellie snuck up to the bay window, but she couldn't see anything beyond the floral curtains hung up inside. She walked around to the east side of the house, which had a picture window. As she walked on the sun-bleached cedar bark, she only allowed the balls of her feet to make contact with the ground. She slowly raised up her head at the window, and thankfully, this one didn't have a curtain obstructing her view. However, there was a piece of furniture pushed against it, and the window was too high off of the ground for her to see over it. She searched for something to stand on and eventually found a hose wound up inside a sturdy plastic container. She positioned it under the window, stepped on it, and once again peered above the window's ledge, a Jack-in-the-box²³ opening in slow motion.

²³ There's a theory that the "Jack" in that toy's name refers to the devil, which an ecclesiastic in the Middle Ages claimed to have caught in his boot.

Finally, after minutes of rising up a millimeter at a time, she could see into the living room. Her hopes for the new girlfriend or new addition to the poker game crew were dashed when she saw a group of five or six men huddled around a kitchen table, Gramp nowhere in sight. They were clearly arguing but she couldn't make out what they were saying. She tried to observe patterns to figure out who these people were; her research training had prepared her for that. She started with their style of dress. One of the men was wearing a tailored suit, one had on a plaid button-down shirt and jeans, and the others were wearing what could be called business casual attire. Across the room, she saw a cherry wood buffet with family pictures showcased on top. Given the mix in dress and the fact that this did seem to be someone's actual home rather than some hideout for someone on the lam, she allowed herself to revisit her earlier hopes.

But then Gramp appeared, bleeding from the side of his head, one eye nearly swollen shut. She gasped and brought her hands to her mouth. Her bell sleeve got stuck on the thorny bush to her right, and while trying to free it, she lost her balance. Though she'd only fallen from about a foot and a half, it felt as if she'd plummeted from the second story. Her right hip and elbow had taken the brunt of the fall, and both ached in painful waves. Thank God for the energy efficient, likely soundproof windows. The tall bushes she'd just been flanked by betrayed her fall. She stood up slowly, trying to ignore the pain that was beginning to radiate to other body parts in dominoes of discomfort.

Before she could assess the likelihood that she'd been seen, someone grabbed both of her arms. Panicked, she apologized and then screamed out for Gramp. Surely, this was the kind of neighborhood where neighbors kept an eye on their surveillance camera notifications.

All that could be heard were her own voice muffled by the man's hand, a cat hissing at something nearby, and the distant sounds of the city, muted by a mile of quiet roads that snaked

outward from downtown. She thrashed around until a hit to the back of her skull made the dark night even darker.

Chapter 7

When Nellie came to, she was inside the house she'd just been looking into. Her head throbbed in time with her slowed heartrate. Gramp was sitting in a recliner, holding an icepack against his eye. She wasn't restrained, and the fact that she'd awoken seemed of little interest to the men sitting at the dining room table. There were only four now, and the one wearing a suit approached her as the other continued talking in hushed tones.

"Eleanor, right?" he said. He crouched down on his left knee, and she could smell his shampoo or hair gel, which was surprisingly fruity, the chemical approximation of strawberries. "I'm really sorry that you got hit. We don't hit women, and the person who did that was asked to leave." A lot of passive voice.

"Can we go? I won't say anything. I really can't miss work tomorrow. I have deadlines coming up." The man laughed a single *ha*, and Nellie realized how ridiculous her words were. She turned to Gramp. "Are you okay?" His one good eye was cast downward.

"Oh, he's fine. That little booboo was of his own making. We gave him a loan in good faith, and he still hasn't made any effort to pay it. Not only that, but he had the audacity to come here tonight to ask for more. Then, he insulted one of our wives. He said she looked like a pug and snorted like one too." That was not the kind of thing Gramp would say. At the store, Nellie had watched customers scream at him, run through all of the insults they could conjure, and their words would ricochet off of him like the children's rhyme about sticks and stones. Now, he shook his head slowly, not in denial of what he'd done, but instead in shameful acceptance. "He was trying to get hit so he could go to the cops and get some leverage—that's my guess. How close am I?"

Gramp didn't respond. Who were these people? As Nellie surveyed the living room, she saw how average everything looked. The decor not the work of a professional interior designer. A standard love seat and sofa sold as a set to provided enough seating for a standard gathering, and the rectangular table would be the place where standard sustenance was served: a starch, a vegetable, and a protein served on white dinner plates. These weren't mobsters in a crime syndicate who were ordering hits and making people do their bidding under the threat of those hits. They looked more like a group of men who played golf together sometimes, took an annual trip to a budget resort in Mexico with their families, wore floral-print shirts when they got there.

"Nellie, I'm so sorry I brought you into all of this." Gramp started to cry, and the suited man didn't insult him as she expected he would; instead, he softened, his rigid posture and lines between his brows softening. She rubbed Gramp's shoulder and told him it was okay, though she could feel anger hardening inside her. It was a strange feeling. The last time she'd been mad at him had been when he didn't allow her to go on the senior graduation trip to L.A., and even then, she'd understood where he was coming from. This was different, something closer to disappointment. She held his hand to steady its tremble and rubbed her thumb over the sunspots. "I just need the money. I need it."

A laugh in the distance, but not in response to what Gramp had said. One of them appeared to be attempting a celebrity impression.

"Here's what's going to happen," the suited man said. "Your grandpa has told us a lot about you. He says you're very smart and that you're good at researching things."

"Yes, I have a master's degree in history and a bachelor's in English." She sat back down in her seat as if she were now being interviewed.

“My niece is a librarian over at Sparks High,” one of the men added before returning to his conversation with the others.

“We don’t have a lot of resources ourselves. The money we loaned your grandfather was a favor we did because my mother was close friends Leanna, and I knew that’s what my mother would want me to do. But now, we’re all in a tough spot. Have you heard of Matthew Berkshire?”

Of course she’d heard of him. He was running for mayor; his signs lined every vacant lot and adorned lawns all around Reno. His slogan was “Renovate Reno,” and in his campaign speeches, he promised to get rid of the city’s blight, replacing the weeklies downtown with condominiums.

“I know he’s running.” Nellie used her fingers to check the back of her head for blood, but there wasn’t any. The pain in her hip and elbow sang out in alternating waves like choir soloists.

“We need him to lose. If he wins, his interests will be diametrically opposed to our own. We don’t have the money or the political wherewithal to make him lose in the *correct* way, whatever that is, so we need your help. And as you’ve probably gleaned from this whole situation, your grandfather owes us one.”

“Or several,” another man added.

“I can do that,” The sureness with which Nellie said this surprised the man as much as it surprised her.

“We need it to be a silver bullet. It’s not enough to find out that he had an affair or said something racist. It needs to ruin him, not just for this election, but for any future election.”

The word “ruin” echoed in her ears. She wasn’t planning to vote for him, but she wasn’t planning to destroy his life either. The weight of the task started to settle in. Her posture got a little better, her shoulders a little farther back, her head a little taller. This wouldn’t be a manuscript printed by a university press, distributed to a handful of libraries, and then stored away for months

until a student used it as part of their checklist of required sources. This would be a concrete effort, the result visible and knowable come election day.

“I can do it. But I need to know that my work will make up for any of the dealings you had with my grandpa.” Gramp had removed the icepack from his eye. The swelling was already going down. The blood she’d seen before had been cleaned up, and he looked less frail than he had when she’d first come to. Even so, he looked tired. He was a man who’d been bested by his desperation, and there is no force that ages the body and mind as quickly as desperation.

#

Nellie hardly slept after getting home and rushed to the Historical Society the next morning without brushing her teeth. As he sometimes did, Emory let her into the back area that was off limits to the public. He and Meredith were in negotiations to split one of two remaining donuts.

“Happy Friday. What a week,” Nellie said.

“How’s the manuscript coming?” Emory asked.

She couldn’t stop thinking about Gramp’s ledger covered in so much red, it looked like it was bleeding. And now, getting the research done for her own project was impossible with this new task looming. The end of the month was also approaching, and unless she finished her copywriting work, she wouldn’t have enough to cover the next month’s expenses.

“It’s coming right along. You know how thorough I am.” She smiled and realized how horrible her breath was, prompting her to fill up the electric kettle to pour a cup of peppermint tea. “I’m thinking of doing a separate chapter on women’s labor in the Comstock. There was this woman named Mary Lions, who was referred to by her boarders as a woman with the build of an ox and the stamina of a workhorse. I doubt she got Friday donuts.”

Emory forced a laugh, and she poured her tea before settling in at her usual spot in the research library. Unlike her other research where she had set dates and areas to work within, her research into Berkshire would require resources she was not as comfortable utilizing. She pulled out the years-old laptop from the canvas messenger bag she'd gotten from the Army surplus store (1974) and began the long process of booting it up. She finished her tea in the back and stored her bag behind the counter per the library's policy.

Only about a half hour after getting started, she had to leave since they didn't have Wi-Fi. She asked to take a donut with her. The budget line item of groceries would soon be cut. She drove to the downtown library and sat at one of the work stations.

After settling in, she began her research into Berkshire on his campaign page. There, like in his speeches, he promised to clean up the streets of Reno, a common promise among mayoral candidates. To clean meant to conceal, removing unsheltered people from where they lived to the outer peripheries of the city or locking them away in jail cells. Berkshire's second promise was to serve Reno families, and this platform item was accompanied by a picture of him and his wife and three kids—all in matching denim and bright smiles. Even the toddler looked like he'd had his teeth whitened. A man sat at the PC station next to her and narrated his searches. He was looking up how to get an elementary school variance.

Even if she weren't under pressure from the man Gramp owed money to, this was the kind of research black hole that Nellie would get sucked into on her own. After getting a good sense of what Berkshire stood for (the usual conservative word salad: *family* and *prosperity*, saturated with *community* dressing), Nellie browsed through the FEC database to figure out who his biggest donors

were²⁴. She saw the typical mayoral race donors, like casino owners who donated their maximum of \$2,000, but then found an aberration in the numbers. Several of the donations were tied to a group called Battleborn²⁵ Justice, which she guessed was a political action committee. She found their website, which looked like it hadn't been updated since it was created in the 90s—neon yellow font on a black background.

Just as she began reading their mission statement about protecting small business owners, the man sitting next to her leaned over and began reading her screen.

“Sorry, sir, I’m very busy at the moment.”

“I didn’t mean to bother you. I was just curious. I like seeing what everyone’s looking for. Everyone’s looking for something.” He trailed off and continued with his narration.

Nellie smiled and returned to her research. Over and over, she saw Battleborn Justice come up on the donor lists, not just for the most recent election, but for elections all over the county dating back 20 years. Nellie sent an email to the contact listed on the website requesting to talk to the head of the organization. She then opened up her personal email account, which she hadn’t checked in months. Over 2,000 emails promised her everything from sexy Christian locals to deeply discounted skincare products. One of them stood out in the sea of promotions and solicitations. The subject simply read, “Hello.” When she clicked on it, there was an attachment that read “For

²⁴ Although the FEC wasn’t officially established until the passage of the Federal Election Campaign Act in 1971, leaders had long been concerned about the role of money in politics. In the early 20th century, Theodore Roosevelt said, “All contributions by corporations to any political committee or for any political purpose should be forbidden by law.” But in 2010, the Supreme Court ruled that political spending is a form of protected speech under the First Amendment, paving the way for corporations to stake out sizeable influence over elections through campaign finance efforts.

²⁵ The term “Battle Born” was coined in 1864 at Nevada’s second constitutional convention to mark the state’s entrance into the Civil War the same year it was admitted into the union. Nevada’s primary contribution to the Union effort did not come in the form of soldiers, but instead money; at least \$400 million in silver ore from the Comstock Lode was used to finance the federal war effort.

Eleanor.” She knew better than to download it. She’d completed a mandatory training at her last freelance editing job about the dangers of phishing scams.

But the button was too tantalizing.

The attachment was blank, and it caused the computer screen to freeze. She slammed the laptop shut before packing up and leaving.

“Didn’t find what you were looking for, I suppose,” the man next to her said.

“Not yet.”

Outside, the sun was warm on her shoulders, but not too warm. Maybe she could balance it all. Soon, she’d be able to get Gramp out of his jam, she’d make some headway on the manuscript, and she’d have Bill at her side as she did so. She planned to call him that night to formally extend the invitation to join her, and the thought of him with his strong hands and superhero dimpled chin sent a jolt through her that made her molars buzz.

She drove to the pawn shop to see if Gramp had returned to work. No use trying to troubleshoot whatever was going on with her laptop, and she was too scared to confirm her fear that she’d broken it. The closed sign dangled from the inside of the front door, but the lights were on. She unlocked the front door and called out hello? as she canvassed the store. Someone was in the office.

“Gramp? I was worried you’d go right back to work. Let’s get some takeout and head home.” When she opened the door to the office, it wasn’t Gramp inside. She recognized the man’s cowlick and freckled neck, but still reached for a weapon as if protecting herself from a stranger.

“What the hell are you doing here, Jack?”

“I was hoping I could find you here,” he whispered into his collar bone.

“I doubt that’s true.”

“No, really. This is the third time I’ve been by. Did you get my note?”

“That doesn’t explain why you’re here.” Gramp hadn’t said anything about him coming by. He didn’t know what Jack looked like, and Jack was likely too much of a dog shit coward to introduce himself.

Someone walked through the front door, jangling the bells.

“We’re closed,” Nellie said.

“Don’t look closed,” the man said. He walked toward the office, then spun around as if he’d just remembered an important appointment, and left.

“I did get your note. It was missing one key piece of information, though. When do you plan to bring all of my things back? I could take you to small claims if I wanted to. I already filed a report.”

“And you think the cops are going to follow up on it? I would take everything back right now if I could. Problem is I don’t have it anymore.” His eyes looked pink and watery, but in a way that signified allergies instead of emotion. His lips were chapped. His blond eyelashes made him look reptilian. Nellie smiled at her efficient cataloging of his flaws.

“Doesn’t surprise me. How did you even get in here?”

He nodded toward the back door, which she’d regrettably shown him how to open by wedging a credit card into the narrow gap where it latched.

“I have a proposition for you, and that’s why I’ve been trying to find you. It’ll help us both.” He licked the corners of his mouth, then bit at a piece of skin that’d begun to unfurl from his bottom lip. “I’ll show you. Come over here.”

He maneuvered around her so that he could leave the small office without his body touching hers. She felt a strong impulse to touch him, though she couldn't tell if it'd be a hug or a punch. She clasped her hands together as she followed behind him. He led her to the table.

“How much do you think you could get for this?” he asked.

“We're not selling it.” She said it so quickly and so loudly that she hoped that might be true.

“I thought you might say that, but everything's for sale at the right price. Remember that documentary podcast I had you listen to about the lady who sold first her kidney then her kid on the black market?”

She'd listened to ten minutes of the first episode before applying the CRAAP²⁶ credibility test to it, which spurred Jack to accuse her of being brainwashed by the academic elite.

“I don't think she really did that.”

“She did. I'll send you some more articles on it. It was really horrible what she did. The kid even came out later and wrote about the whole experience. She was sold off to work at a labor camp in Eastern Europe. Really messed up stuff. She's grown up now. They're making a miniseries about it. Anyway, that's not really what I'm talking about. What we're talking about is money, and how much of it you can get for that old hunk of wood.” He spoke more quickly with each word so that there were no distinctions between word endings and beginnings. Whenever Jack started talking like this, whether it was about politicians harvesting stem cells or an eighties pop artist's better, lesser-known songs, she imagined him as a little kid biking down a hill, pedaling to gather more speed even

²⁶ The CRAAP test was originally created by Sarah Blakeslee, in coordination with the University of California at Chico's Meriam Library. It has been integrated into many curricular materials as a way to improve students' information literacy. For secondary teachers, the method's greatest success is directly tied to the acronym permitting young students to say *crap* in class.

when the handlebars began to wobble. Soon, he'd crash into an angry conclusion about people's willful ignorance.

"Even if we were to sell it, what makes you think that you'd benefit from its sale? You *stole* from me," Nellie said.

"I'm the only one who can connect you with a buyer. The right buyer, I mean. One who's willing to shell out a lot more than you probably think."

Nellie couldn't help but let different figures bubble up in her mind. \$1,000, \$2,000, \$15,000?

He turned his phone screen toward her to reveal an email. Her eyes skipped over the letters to land on the numbers: \$28,650. Her mind transformed the sum into an eraser that rid the red from Gramp's ledgers. It could replace everything she'd lost and then a lot more. It'd give her enough to survive as she awaited publication of her manuscript. The mental money was all spent in the short space between Jack showing it to her and her responding.

"I'll think on it, but we're not selling it for now."

"Tell me when you're ready for me to take this off your hands and fill those hands with cash instead. I'll give you this in the meantime." He pulled a crumpled receipt from his back pocket, grabbed a pen from next to the register, and wrote out a note. She smoothed it between her fingers as she read: this piece of paper is worth \$25k. The still wet ink smeared over the letters and stained her thumb tip black.

"What about the other \$3,650?" she asked.

"That's my cut. What were you going to sell it for? A few hundred? You've never been much of a business woman, Nellie. That's where I come in." He pulled a small container of Vaseline from his pocket and smeared it on his lips before leaving.

Nellie sat on the curb next to where she'd parked and allowed herself a few minutes of unexpected wealth reveries: original paintings of the Sierras by Hans Meyer-Kassel, a two-month long writing retreat in a cabin at the foot of the Ruby Mountains, a letter of resignation for each of the freelance content writing jobs that made her feel emptier by the day. A couple walked past and argued over where to go for dinner. The man sneezed into the crook of his elbow.

“Bless you,” Nellie said.

“Thanks,” the man said, surprised.

“Nice day out.” Nellie said. The woman pulled at the man's hand. Nellie returned to her daydreams. She quieted her fears about what'd happen to this piece of history if she were no longer its steward by dreaming even bigger. Soon, it was hard to see those fears, deep as they were in the shadows of priceless antiques and beautiful art and elaborate research trips. She tilted her face up so that the sun warmed her cheeks. Nevada skies are bright blue by day and electric pink by night. Looking up in their expanse makes it feel like anything is possible.

Chapter 8

September 19, 1863

Dear Josephine,

Thank you for your letter. I received it shortly before I left for Virginia City, where I am currently writing you from. I have received help from one Mr. McLaughlin in finding employ in this new city. Even having only been here for a short while, I can tell that there are not rules as there were at home. I imagine any laws have been scratched out and rewritten, that is if they were ever written at all. I spent the morning writing a long letter to mother, thankful that I had some good news to share with regard to my potential employment.

I tried to describe the mountains by picture knowing that words could not do the scenery justice. Enclosed, you will find my feeble attempt. This must be what Edmund Burke meant when he described the sublime. He wrote, "The passion caused by the great and the sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully is astonishment," and I will tell you now that I have been astonished as I look up at those mountaintops and then back to the points of my shoes. How small I feel!

The sleeping accommodations at the Sagebrush Place where I stayed when I first arrived were comfortable enough, but I had to make a bed on the floor in the far corner of the room using nothing more than my heavy wool blanket. I tried to escape the sounds of the other two boarders and the guests in the next room over, who I guessed were the women I had met downstairs with various gentleman callers who stayed only briefly. I felt unclean listening to them, not because of the acts I knew they were committing (I am not naive and had been a waiting girl in Storyville where men could visit ladies of the night), but because I had not yet washed since my long journey and had

been wearing the same underclothes for several days over. Hearing them growl, howl, and holler made me realize that I was also little more than an animal that needed tending. It reminded me that I had done the same work, had actually traveled west because I knew I could be paid for it more there, but I wanted a change. I wanted to be able to walk down the street with my head high, my back straight, knowing that I was perceived as a respectable woman.

When I descended the stairs, what had been a raucous scene the night before now looked calm. Even one of the men who had been playing Faro the night before—yelling when fortune did not smile upon him and grabbing at the women who walked by—looked at peace as he sat slouched over in the corner like a sack of wheat. I made my way to the kitchen to help prepare breakfast and found that Mr. McLaughlin was heating up water in a kettle. He asked if I wanted some coffee before even turning around to see that it was I who had entered.

“Yes please,” I said as I fingered the letter that I needed to send to Mother. The cook’s face was bright red and sweat dripped down his brow despite the fact that the sun had hardly crested the mountains. “Can I help prepare breakfast?”

“Arvin’s got it well-handled, don’t you Arvin?”

Arvin nodded, though I could tell that he would have appreciated my help. He began coughing. As soon as he saw that I saw he was coughing, he did so over his shoulder so as not to spittle on the pork belly he was cooking. My stomach growled as the fat sizzled on the skillet. Cough or no cough, I would have eaten the meal he was preparing and asked for a second helping. Since I had arrived, I had noticed changes to my constitution that made me crave meat, heaps of it. Perhaps being high up in the mountains made my body feel as though it needed to store away something extra in case I ended up stranded somewhere and needed to scale a mountainside to get back home.

Mr. McLaughlin poured me a cup of coffee, which I had never tried before, predisposed as my family was to tea. The taste was bitter, but I concealed my surprise at the bitterness, as I was embarrassed that I had not tasted something everyone else drank on the regular.

“Don’t like it?” he asked. Apparently, my efforts at concealment were unsuccessful.

“I am not used to drinking coffee. That is all,” I said and smiled. He smiled in return, and I noticed that he had all of his teeth, a beautiful smile shining beneath the chew.

“So, this job prospect I’ve got for you, it’s not easy work.”

“I’m not afraid of difficult work.” I suddenly worried that he could smell my stench from across the table we were both sitting at. I wanted to make an impression of being a hard worker, unafraid of any prospect he offered, but I did not want him to think me manly and overeager.

“The establishment is on D street.”

“Yes, I believe I have walked down that street.”

“So you know what goes on there?”

“It seemed quite lively the first night I arrived.”

“It’s a jolly time,” he said. He smiled but seemed embarrassed by his statement. I had seen the blue lights outside of some of the hastily built structures. Back home, they used red lights (have you ever seen them?), but they indicated the same thing. The work he proffered was at a melodeon singing and entertaining men or as a courtesan.

Like the miners who toiled in the heat to find a vein of silver, I would have to take whatever opportunity was given even if the work was undesirable. People who must survive do not have the luxury of turning their nose up at opportunities that smell of sin. I was surprised by how quickly I resigned myself to this work. Perhaps I already knew that this was the life waiting for me here, at least until I was able to find my fortune a different way.

“I will accept. Please provide me the details so that I may get started this morning.” (Please do not tell my mother of the particularities of this development, as it will make her worry needlessly.)

Arvin set down two plates in front of us, and I nearly began eating with my bare hands, hungry as I was. I had not expected such hospitality when I first arrived and saw the men fighting and the sheriff turning his head the other way. It seemed like such a coarse place with rough men, but I was beginning to see its soft underbelly with people who were willing to help without expecting much in return. Thankfully, Mr. McLaughlin began eating, which meant that I could eat too. I thanked Arvin profusely for the meal, and he nodded at me as he continued cooking for the other guests who likely were beginning to collect in the main hall.

As we ate, Mr. McLaughlin described the job, careful not to speak as he was chewing.

“We need more ladies at The Palace, and you can make a good cut with your handsome looks. American?”

“Yes. England originally.” He cut me off with a wave of his hand.

“Same difference. Don’t go tellin’ people about England, though. They like French and American, and that’s about it, aside from in Chinatown. Some Mexican, but not on D Street.” I was not sure why he was explaining this to me, but I listened carefully because I knew that with my gumption, I would not be a courtesan for long. I would become a madame of my own house as soon as I had the ability to do so. I looked at the letter I’d written Mother, and felt shame for a moment, but it dissipated along with my hunger as I ate. Josephine, I must tell you that thinking of your life, how you have been able to make a wage after Andrew passed, has helped give me the strength, or perhaps foolhardiness, to believe that I can do it too.

“I understand,” I said. “Will you make introductions for me? I assure you I do not always look like this, and I do not want to make a bad impression on my employer.”

Mr. McLaughlin laughed. His laugh always faded to a raspy finish. “Well, that’s not possible cause I am your employer. I’m in the mining world, and in that world, discovering treasures takes digging in the dirt.”

I could feel heat in my cheeks.

“I can tell what kind of work you do by your strong hands.” We both glanced at his hand balled into a fist around his fork. He adjusted his grip to a more gentlemanly one.

“I’m more on the business side of things now, but I can push a wheelbarrow full of ore and operate the pump machinery in the tunnels as good as anyone.”

“I believe you can.” Even though this was not what I had daydreamed of in the days spent traveling west, I took comfort in discovering how skilled I was with conversation. And what more is sporting than a conversation between bodies? Questions and compliments and answers. Men will choose to believe what women say when their words are flattering. “Speaking of those very capable hands, could you possibly take this letter to the post? I can pay you once I begin working.” He took the letter from my hands and nodded before slipping it into a pocket inside his vest. I imagined my mother’s expression as she read from it. Supposing that you both receive my letters around the same time, can you check in on her to see what she thinks of my decision to come out here? She will never tell me straight.

D Street looked as quiet as the surrounding streets, but there was a different feeling here. Some men leaned up against the saloons and barrooms, either drunk from the night before or from the morning after they had worked their shifts. This was not an uncommon sight, and Mr.

McLaughlin explained that it was sometimes easier to catch some shut-eye sitting upright than it was in a shared boarding room.

The Palace did not carry a sign that indicated the location. It was a small cottage that looked more like a personal residence than an establishment that offered everything Mr. McLaughlin said it did. The woman who greeted us at the door fanned herself using a beautiful fan of brilliant peacock feathers. The sun had gotten to work like everyone else in town. Its rays shot through the cool fall air as fall held onto the coattails of summer's end. She wore a black silk dress that seemed a continuation of her shiny black hair. Her rouge had been applied in two large circles, which drew my eye to the high cheekbones underneath.

"You brought this fine young woman for me?"

"I did indeed. This is Ms. Eloise Granger, but she's known around town as Madame Raven," Mr. McLaughlin said. I waited for him to introduce me as well, but when I saw him screw up his face, I realized that he had either forgotten my name or had failed to ask for it.

"My name is Julia Bulette. Pleased to make your acquaintance, madame," I said as I knelt into a deep curtsy.

"Come on in, Ms. Bulette. I'll show you around and get you settled in."

The inside of the cottage was as plain as the outside. Madame Raven's style of dress made me think that the windows would be adorned by velvet drapes and manservants would be darning Persian rugs and dusting grand fireplace mantels. Instead, I saw what looked like a normal home, save for the bar, which was made of a fine dark wood. One woman who was dressed only in a dressing gown and an overcoat greeted us.

"Welcome!" she said, cheery as a morning with bluebird skies. "I'm Annabel. Happy to see a new face here." Madame glared at her, and I worried that there was bad blood between them. But as

I looked around, I realized that she was commenting on how they did not have many girls working for them, which is likely why Mr. McLaughlin went out of his way to provide me with this opportunity. Annabel wore her white blonde hair in ringlets pinned up on her head. Though it was still rather early in the morning, her face was already painted, her lipstick a shade of light plum, which suited her.

“My name is Julia,” I said and curtsied again.

“Very proper, this one,” Madame said as she continued to fan herself. Annabel laughed from behind her delicate hand. It was not a menacing laugh, and I rather liked hearing it.

“As you can see, this is the main area where you will be cavorting around the suitors. Unlike the other similar establishments on this street, we do not open our doors to them until late at night. Otherwise, they’ll stay here all the live long day, helping themselves to drinks behind the bar and sleeping on the sofas. If you follow me, you can see the kitchen.”

I was pleased to see that there was a separate kitchen instead of them cooking at the hearth. This was the second one I had seen in just two days. Some day, I hope you can travel here and see how the riches from the ground are making their way out of the earth and into the town. It is an impressive sight indeed!

“Your board will cover access to all of this, but you will need to either prepare your own meals or pay for our cook, Boone, to prepare them for you. Down the hallway here, you’ll find our private rooms. The other two girls are still sleeping, so we will not bother them.” Madame turned around then and eyed me very sternly. “Have you done this kind of work before?”

“Yes, I have but only for a short period of time to save money before coming out here.” This was a lie, as you know. But I could not risk losing out on my only prospect, and I could learn easy enough.

She laughed. People here laugh easily. “It’s of course nothing to be ashamed of, my dear. One of the only professions that will never dry up. The silver in those hills will disappear before the men mining it do. They’ll keep coming here long after there isn’t anything else here for them. As you know from experience, there isn’t much to it, but one thing I’ll say is that they come for the jollies, but they also come for company. Make sure you collect the coin first. Otherwise, they’ll talk both ears clean off while they hold your earnings hostage.” Madame adjusted the brooch on her dress, a beautiful fleur-de-lis in black crystal. There was something ethereal about Madame. As she walked, I imagined that were I to pull up her skirts, I would see that she was floating above the floor.

“Are the prices set?” I asked. Despite the fact that this land seemed to be generally ruled by lawlessness, I did see that no one spoke directly about the profession, and though I took some comfort in the sideways talk around it, I also worried that I did not have enough information to satisfy the customers and meet Madame’s expectations.

“You can set whichever price you please, but do not start too high, as that can be perceived as insult and sometimes send our patrons galumphing out to one of the other establishments.” She studied me then, and I felt like every one of my physical imperfections was burning. “Did you leave your things with Mr. McLaughlin?”

“I am sad to say that my trunk containing all of my belongings was stolen my first day by a man called Davey Blues, and the sheriff did not take up my cause when I asked him to retrieve it.” Ridiculously, I felt tears collect in my eyes. Again, Madame laughed.

“Davey used to come in here. Stopped coming when he couldn’t pay and I had Mr. McLaughlin kick him out. He doesn’t mean any harm. Just a man who ran out of luck years ago and hasn’t chosen to accept that fact. It’s a finite resource for some men. We’ll lend you dresses to wear until you are able to have your own made by Deliliah, the dressmaker on C.”

We returned to the main room near the front door, and Annabel was now dressed in a lovely lace chemisette.

“You will be boarding with Annabel in her room,” Madame said, and I delighted in this news, for I could tell that Annabel was an agreeable person and knew that she would answer the questions I had without judgment of me being new to town and somewhat new to the profession. I believe you and Annabel would get along famously. “I’ll leave you two to get to know each other. Annabel is a chattering box and will surely tell you what you need to know.” Madame then retired to her quarters at the end of the hallways.

By that time, I guessed it was midday, though it was difficult to tell given the only lighting was from a small porthole window near the front door.

“You may borrow one of my gowns for today. We have about the same proportions, though your waist looks narrower than mine.” She winked her right eye.

“Nonsense! You are thin as an arrow.” I was happy to be in the company of another young woman. I felt at ease with her and her broad smile. We went to her room, which had not been included in my short tour of the building. The decorations were spare, save the bed, which had a nice brass frame and was draped with furs and a blanket cover that looked more like a rich tapestry—a bed fit for royalty.

Though the bed was beautiful, I had a dark feeling when I thought of what transpired there, what may transpire with me there. I let the brightness of the money my new prospect would bring me outshine that darkness. Josephine, enclosed too, you will find a bank draft that Madame Raven has given me in advance of receiving my first earnings. Please exchange it for coin and leave it at my mother’s home.

Annabel held a deep maroon dress with a full skirt of flounces against my body.

“This is magnificent,” I said, and she gestured for me to take the gown from her. Feeling the soft materials, a combination of silk and cotton, on my fingertips nearly brought me to tears. “May I?”

“That’s the idea! I bet it’ll look right stunning on you.” As I began to undress, I could smell my scent.

“Before I do, is there a place I could bathe?”

Annabel laughed her singsong laugh, and that diminished my embarrassment a bit.

“You are in luck, Julia. We have a tub inside, and we have plenty of water from the well to boil. I even have a sprig of lavender that I put in the bath with me.” Annabel prepared my bath, and I washed my underclothes out behind the building as she did so. That night, I planned to make as much money as I could to purchase more undergarments in town and repay Annabel for her generosity. I did not want to make the impression of being an idler or a leech that was here only to glut off of others’ generous acts. After a restorative bath, I dressed in Annabel’s gown and really did feel like a woman anew.

At dusk, Madame opened The Palace’s doors to customers. The door was never locked, but the clients seemed to know that they should not arrive until well after the sun went down. She was tending bar, and Annabel set herself up on the small stage. She began singing, and as I predicted, her voice was that of an angel. The three men who had already entered clapped and stomped their feet. One of them tipped his hat to me, and I did a shallow bow, which he seemed to enjoy. Of the three, he looked the cleanest, though it was clear they were all in need of a bath. Annabel had given me a few drops of her La Rose perfume, which she suggested I put on both wrists, my neck, and right under my nostrils. When the smell from those men traveled toward me, I realized why she recommended the lattermost application. I waited until it was clear that he was about to approach

me to turn away and retrieve a drink from the bar. I asked Madame for a drink, not specifying what kind, and she poured a dark liquid into a crystal glass that looked like it may break if I held it too tightly. It was the exact prop I needed containing the liquid courage I also needed.

The first sip burned my lips, which had chapped since I'd been out west. The following sips did not burn, as my body quickly adjusted to the liquor's fiery bite. I could feel that the man still had his eye on me, and when I turned away from the bar, he was indeed within inches of where I stood. His beard was streaked with gray, and though it was long, it seemed that he had trimmed the scraggly bits at the end. He had bright green eyes with a wide expanse between them, which gave him a reptilian look but I did not mind it. I focused my eyes at the bridge of his nose. When he opened his mouth to speak, I tried not to let my expression show my alarm at the scent of his breath, which had the distinct odor of rot. I imagined vegetables and raw meat stewing in his stomach, their vapors escaping through his mouth whenever he opened it.

I turned to face Madame, and she already had the bottle poised to refill my glass. After two more deep drinks, I hardly noticed the scent at all. He was a man of few words, and he mumbled under his breath that I was handsome. That is the word they use for me here. He smiled to reveal a crowd of teeth, then pulled out a paper from inside the waist of his pants. He unfolded it and asked me to read it.

"You've your letters, I expect," he said. I must have looked puzzled, which I was, because he added, "You can read?"

"Of course I can!" I regretted my enthusiasm immediately since he was made sheepish by my declaration. I had taken the fact that I could read and write for granted. Of all of the visitors and women working at The Palace, I realized that I may have been in the small minority of people who

had their letters, as the man had put it. “Some. I can read some,” I said as I touched his hand and gestured for Madame to give him a drink.

Inked onto the paper was an image of someone who looked a little like the man standing before me. It read, “The Deputy Sheriff hereby declares that Earle ‘Froggy’ McGee is a fugitive, having stolen \$4,229 in gold coin while traveling on the Virginia & Truckee Railroad. He is also suspected in the slaying of a man named Virgil Wendover.”

“So?” He stared at me, then looked at the paper, then looked back at me.

“It appears that someone, this man pictured here, stole from a train,” I said. He did not seem ruffled by these words, so I continued, “And that he may have killed a man.”

“There a reward?”

“Yes.”

“Say how much?”

“No,” I said as I reread the description to make sure. He laughed, and his laugh sounded more like a whimper, like the final sounds of a wounded animal.

“No reward means no bounty. No bounty means no problem. I’ll cheers to that!” He slammed his glass against mine, and to my surprise, it did not break. “I’ve got some money to spend if you’re looking to make some.” He nodded his head toward the bedrooms down the hallway.

“I suppose I am.” I attempted a wink, as I’d seen Annabel do. It came rather naturally. As I lead him down the hallway by the hand, the liquor swirled in my stomach in a cyclone that helped me feel strong.

My dearest Josephine, I think this marks the beginning of the greatest adventure of my life.

All my love,

Julia

Chapter 9

Bill offered to drive to Gold Hill even though Nellie had invited him. He picked her up in a late model sedan, a stark contrast to the vintage duster he was wearing. Is that what she looked like when she was driving or researching on her laptop or browsing through online antique shops? She felt like an anachronism, embodied. She'd chosen to wear a Victorian-style crinoline dress with a corset that she'd removed the boning from (made in 1992, pattern from 1876). This was her usual uniform when she was conducting field research. People often assumed she was one of the actors who walked the unevenly planked sidewalks, which gave her free rein of the town. When Nellie got into Bill's car, he looked pleasantly surprised, like he'd discovered a forgotten five-dollar bill in his pocket.

"That's a nice dress," he said.

"Thanks. It's more comfortable than it looks." She had to rearrange the full skirt, twisting it in on itself, so that she could shut the door. As they drove up the windy road to Gold Hill, several packs of motorcyclists passed them since Bill was driving five miles under the speed limit. Virginia City was a popular haunt for motorcycle clubs. Nellie enjoyed seeing the packs of men in their leather vests and serious expressions pull up to the candy shop.

"You might want to speed it up. It's dangerous for them to pass on these curves."

"You might want to stop being a backseat driver."

Air conditioning was blasting through the vents, but sweat dripped down Bill's temples. He pushed the sweat beads back into his hairline. She could see in his incessant minor adjustments that he was a nervous driver. She imagined a giant hand plucking him from a different time and place—the 19th century, a horse—and dropping him in this driver's seat without further instruction.

“Sorry. You’re doing great.” She’d attempted and failed to remove any notes of sarcasm in her tone.

After minutes of silence, Bill said, “I was in a car accident that killed my brother and almost killed me.”

“I’m so sorry,” she said too loudly, as if she’d been the one responsible for the accident and this was a prelude to her asking for forgiveness. He shrugged, then turned up the sound on the radio. Only static played. Neither of them said anything for the remainder of the 45-minute drive. He parallel parked in front of an audience on the main drag and did better than she thought he might. He was very cautious, though, and took so long that a group of teenagers applauded him when they exited the car.

Bill had never been up to Virginia City, and she wanted to give him the full tour before walking the mile and a half to Gold Hill. They stopped in for some old-fashioned candy, and he apologized in between licks of a lollipop for being short with her during the car ride.

“I wanted to make a good impression on our first real date,” he said. A loud crack as he bit through the lollipop’s crystallized sugar.

“You’re already making a good impression by coming up here. Are you ready for the whole tour?”

He nodded eagerly. He seemed more like himself now.

“This is Mackay Mansion, which is one of the oldest buildings here. It was John Mackay’s²⁷ home, and he was one of the Bonanza kings. He’s the one the university’s School of Mining is

²⁷ John Mackay arrived on the Comstock along with other fortune-seekers in 1859. Unlike his penny-pinching business partner, James Fair, Mackay was well-liked and generous. In his book *An Editor on the Comstock Lode*, journalist Wells Drury explained that the phrase “It’s a John Mackay” signified “the idea of high quality and good luck.”

named after. And up that hill is Piper's Opera House²⁸, where they still do live performances. It's an event venue too. I went to a wedding reception there once. The pre-mixed cocktails were served out of jugs marked XXX. Back when this city was booming, most of the performances were put on by the prostitutes who performed in the melodeons.”

“Can we see inside?”

“It's usually closed unless there are performances, but we can always come back.” Nellie was a good tour guide because she knew exactly how much information to give before people started to lose interest. Once their eyes showed signs of glazing over, she'd pepper her recipe for delivering informative history with spices like sex and violence. Nellie reached for his hand and held it until their palms were sealed with sweat. A red-cheeked woman on the brink of exhaustion ran after her toddler. After scooping up her son, she approached Nellie and told the boy who was now crying after his capture that she was from the “olden days.” Nellie curtsied and said, “Pleased to make your acquaintance, young man.” He continued to wail before finally going limp in his mother's arms.

“He still hasn't had his nap,” she said, as if she owed them an explanation.

They continued down the street until they came up on the Bucket of Blood Saloon, navigating around a man outside of a store that sold tourist-centered merchandise: t-shirts emblazoned with John Wayne's face, turquoise jewelry²⁹, motorcycle leathers, parking signs that read

²⁸ Many folktales attest to Mackay's generosity, including one where he paid for poor children to attend shows at Piper's Opera House.

²⁹ As with many renderings of Indigenous peoples in the American West, the culturally rich histories of the Northern Paiute Indians have been dramatically flattened. Gift shops sell miniature teepees, bronze statues made to look like Native chiefs, and dream catchers: the literal and physical products of a violent history of assimilation and displacement. Now a museum, the Stewart Indian School was originally created as a means of Indigenous cultural erasure. The State forcibly sent children from the Washoe, Paiute, and Western Shoshone tribes there from the late 19th century through much of the 20th century.

“Irish parking only.” He offered them root beer-flavored hard candies and urged them to come inside and get their Christmas shopping done early.

“This bar has been here since 1876, one year after the Great Fire. Just think of how many people passed through here. I love to think about what these walls have seen. Fistfights, dances, celebrations, grieving. People drinking because they got good news about the mines or drinking because they got bad news about the mines.” They heard the music before they entered. Knowing that the sound of a fiddle and player piano would fill in any of the awkward silences in their conversation was a comfort.

The man tending the bar looked to be on the other side of a few decades of hard drinking. Broken blood vessels spanned his nose and his cheeks, but it made him look jovial rather than sickly. Nellie imagined a younger version of him in sepia tones, his angular jaw highlighted against a dark background.

He took their order by way of putting both hands on the bar across from them and nodding. It'd normally feel wrong to drink whiskey before noon, but not in this bar. She also ordered their signature sarsaparilla, which came in a thick-glassed, frosted mug.

“That’s Julia Bulette, the person who’s stolen the focus of my manuscript.” Nellie pointed to a portrait hung behind the bar, situated among the shelves of liquor.

“Pretty.”

“It’s not actually her³⁰,” Nellie said in a whisper. “That’s a whole other story, though. Anyway, there used to be a place called the Boston Saloon downstairs,” she said. “And some of these walls predate 1876. They were able to salvage a portion of the structure.”

³⁰ One biographer notes that Julia Bulette may not have moved from New Orleans to the West as many of the popular sources about her say and could have instead come from Mississippi before soon traveling to the West Coast. It is generally agreed that she was born in England (either in

“This is a great spot, and I can see with the exposed stone there that that’s one of the older walls you were talking about. I’ve been meaning to visit for a long time.” They clanked their glasses together.



The only verified portrait of Julia Bulette



The portrait that hangs in the Bucket of Blood Saloon

“To new experiences in old places,” Bill said. Nellie bought the bartender a shot before they took some free popcorn to go, and Bill tipped the fiddler. They walked past a plaque on D Street and stopped. Nellie never left a plaque unread. Jack had grown tired of this habit quickly when they’d visited the ghost town of Bodie and he got a sunburn severe enough to send him to urgent care, having refused to apply the sunblock she’d brought. He’d said it was full of perfume and chemicals.

London or in Liverpool). There is only one verified photo of her, but a photo of another woman labeled with Bulette’s name currently hangs in the Bucket of Blood Saloon. According to Ronald Genini, Bulette’s origins were altered in order to make her seem more exotic: “...Robert Laxalt calls her a ‘sultry Creole’ and Zeke Daniels writes that she ‘helped to buy freedom for some of her Black friends in New Orleans...Actually, Julia was, as her true photograph from the Nevada Historical Society reveals, a very plain Englishwoman, quite white.’”

This building was once home to The Palace, a brothel run by Eloise Granger (known by locals as Madame Raven) and later by Julia Bulette after Burkdale was murdered. Julia Bulette, a beloved resident of the city during the Comstock Boom met a similarly grisly fate in 1867.

“They never discovered who actually killed her,” Nellie said. “They pinned it on the most convenient man they could find, and now she’s been elevated to mythic stature. I’m examining that in the manuscript too.” Julia’s story made Nellie grieve for the lost women on the Comstock, who struggled in life and were not celebrated until their death.

“I can’t wait to get your first signed copy and tell people that I’m dating an author.” Bill was either blushing or the sun was getting to him.

“If I’m even able to finish it,” she said. Bill shot her a reproachful look. “Things are stressful now with the book and my grandpa’s shop.” The dam broke then. “And I think I broke my laptop. I don’t have the money to get it fixed, and tech stuff is kind of beyond me. I need it for the freelance work I do.”

“I can help with that.”

The profession that had turned Nellie off when they’d first met was now the most attractive thing about him.

“I hadn’t even considered that,” she said, and it was the truth. She didn’t avoid technology because it felt impersonal or that it discouraged “real” connection. She avoided it because being raised by Gramp, she hadn’t had the chance to keep up with it when she was younger (through dial-up and the chat rooms and the first social media sites), and now she felt too old to do so. “Thank you so much for the offer. Can I bring it by sometime this week?”

“Sure thing. It’s probably just malware or something like that.”

Nellie pulled the slip of paper where she'd transcribed the address of a collector in Gold Hill. She double checked the numbers against the ones painted next to the powder blue house's front door before knocking. There was no answer and no doorbell, so she knocked louder. The collector had said that he had newspapers that had not yet been chronicled by the Historical Society, and he was looking to get rid of them. She checked her Waltham pocket watch (1918) to confirm that they were right on time. A woman wearing a bathrobe emerged from her house next door, a more dilapidated version of the one they stood in front of.

"Leonard's not home and won't be for the rest of the day," she said before retreating inside. Nellie couldn't tell if this was just a strategy to get them off of her neighbor's front porch, so they continued to wait in front for a half hour before giving up on the effort. Like many of the houses in the area, the owner had a Gadsden flag³¹ flying alongside the Nevada state flag.

Nellie wanted to have something to show for their trip beyond her buzz from The Bucket of Blood, so they made their way back to Virginia City to survey the Silver Terrace Cemetery. Part of her research centered around the burial processes for "disreputable" women³². Bill hesitated as they walked through the iron gates, but Nellie continued on, nodding at the security guard.

"Does this feel wrong, going to a cemetery when we don't know any of the people buried here?"

³¹ The Gadsden flag features a coiled rattlesnake ready to strike and the phrase "don't tread on me." It was originally designed during the Revolutionary War as a way to unite the thirteen colonies against England's rule. In the last century, it has been coopted by a number of different (and sometimes oppositional) groups, including Libertarians, the Far Right, the Tea Party, and briefly a queer self-defense group in San Francisco.

³² During the 1950s, the founders of The Bucket of Blood, the McBride capitalized on the legends that surrounded Julia Bulette. According to one historian, they may have scavenged materials from a nearby grave to create an imaginary interment they said was the burial site of Bulette. They built a white fence around the site, which is clearly visible from the large window they had cut into the back of their establishment. Viewers can get a closer look using a coin-operated telescope.

“I feel like I know a lot of these people, or at least some of their ancestors. Remembering is a form of respect.” This argument worked, and he came with her, delicately stepping around where he imagined the bodies were buried beneath. Some of the headstones were beautiful, a stark contrast to the waxy plastic flowers that had collected dust on their petals. Nellie used the inside of her skirt to clean a marble headstone marking the grave of a child who’d died in 1986. *Our little angel has returned to Heaven*, it read.

A group of ghost hunters hauling all of their gear arrived at the cemetery. The leader asked when they’d be done, and Nellie glanced up at the sun before asking, “Do the ghosts come out during the day?” She wasn’t trying to insult them, but based on their expressions, she’d done just that. The security guard watched them as they spoke before returning to his phone.

“We’ll wait,” the leader said, planting some kind of recording device near the gate. “Keep an eye on this, will you?” he asked the security guard, who shrugged in response.

In the corner, Nellie found what she was looking for: a series of graves marked only by wooden crosses of various sizes. She took note of their placement relative to the other graves and planned to connect with one of the archaeologists she’d done coursework with to dig deeper into what the crosses might mean. One of them would likely be willing to help. They liked doing work that felt more meaningful than being the bureaucratic body on call before front-end loaders dug up sacred sites to build the foundations for something more profitable.

“Each person here has a story. Do you ever think about that?” Bill asked.

“That’s one of the only things I think about,” she said, dusting off her skirt. She wondered how she and Bill would get along if they’d been alive two hundred years before. He might have tagged along with his more adventurous brother who’d fallen for the promise of fortune in the west.

They'd have several children by now with their only effective birth control³³ being his reluctant acceptance of her rejections quietly delivered in the marital bed in their one-room cottage.

Nellie shuddered at the thought. She couldn't imagine having to care for a child in addition to herself. Despite being in her early thirties, she wasn't ready for the philosophical questions underpinning the creation of another human being's story without their consent.

They began walking back toward Bill's car. She heard the distinct bang of a cap gun, which meant that there was a staged shootout happening on the main drag. They walked toward the street where the reenactment was taking place, and Bill's face lit up as he saw the actor blow on the tip of his gun's barrel.

"At the height of the Comstock boom, this is where they hung men, which was part early justice system, part public entertainment. No such thing as Due Process. People were strung up, and the only sheriff watched as the executioners did as he ordered."

"I don't think I would have made it long back then."

"With your ability to wear a jacket like that in this heat, I wouldn't be so sure."

The actor who'd been slower to draw fell to his knees, clutched at his chest, and shouted, "And here is where I die by the hands of one Gerald Porter, that rat bastard!" before falling to the ground. Nellie appreciated his commitment to the role as he lay face-down on the asphalt road. A child called his brother a "rat bastard" as he aimed his thumb up and his pointer finger toward his brother in the shape of a gun.

³³ Early condoms, which were made of linen, sheep gut, or fish bladder, were expensive and often unavailable until those materials were replaced by rubber. In early 19th century America, condoms were linked to the *sporting life* (a reference to prostitutes, who were sometimes called "sporting women") to prevent venereal disease rather than family planning.

After another minute, the actor resurrected himself and posed for pictures. He directed adults to the nearby saloons and handed out coupons to the Old Timey Photo Shop--two 5-by-7 photos and ten wallet-sized photos for only \$49.99. Nellie asked if Bill would want to take advantage of the photo session, and he reluctantly agreed. They crossed the street as the group of bikers that'd passed them earlier pulled on their throttles so that their bikes roared. Bill quickened his pace.

Inside the photo shop, distressed wooden planks ran vertically up the walls, but some of the new drywall peeked through in two of the corners where it looked like they'd measured incorrectly. They weren't the only ones who'd been enticed by the coupon. Two families and another couple stood in front of them as a group of six college students posed for their picture, empty bottles of Jack Daniels in their hands and pistols held at odd angles. One of the parents tried to shield her preteen son from the young woman wearing a satin bustier and a feather boa, but he positioned himself so that he could get a good view. The group laughed as the photographer shot a series of pictures and had them rearrange themselves in different configurations, which caused some tension. The redhead seemed to have a crush on the tallest guy, but he was flirting with the brunette who was tickling his face using her feather headband.

After finishing their session, they changed back into their normal clothes, which weren't much different from the costumes they'd just been wearing. The brunette slid on a pink sash that read, Buy me a shot. I'm 21! They all took uncertain steps toward the exit. The sash appeared to have worked; the birthday girl required a support person on either side of her to walk to their next destination.

"We probably don't even need to borrow their costumes," Nellie said to Bill, suddenly more aware of the width of her hoop skirt, which was bumping into the customers in front of and behind her.

“Yes, we do. I want to be an outlaw. I’ve never been arrested in my life, never even gotten a speeding ticket. This is going to be the closest I’ll ever come to looking like I could be on a wanted poster.”

“In that case, I’ll go for the woman of ill-repute look.” His face brightened at this prospect, but she couldn’t help but add, “Prostitutes actually would have been fairly covered up since the nights here can get really cold, and it was expensive to heat the brothels.”

“I don’t mind using my imagination,” Bill said as he winked and put his hand on the small of her back. She could feel her cheeks flushing as she made her way to the dressing room with an armful of costume pieces. When she got embarrassed, her face would get so red that strangers often asked her if she was alright. She laced up the bustier over her bra and tucked in the straps, then put on a muddy brown skirt that didn’t match the top. Once the photos were printed in sepia, it wouldn’t matter. A box in the dressing room was filled with giant plastic clips meant to efficiently tailor the one size fits all garments. She chose a headband with peacock feathers extended up from the left side, a purple boa, and lace gloves.

When Bill emerged from his dressing room, he was wearing a leather waistcoat, a linen shirt, and pants that hung loose on his waist. This was the clearest look she’d gotten at his body, wide shoulders and a narrow waist, and she could feel her cheeks, neck, and chest reddening again. She’d only ever slept with Jack and one guy from her anatomy class as an undergrad. In high school, she was known for being a prude, and she didn’t mind the label. It meant that hormone-riddled boys only took an interest in her when they needed help studying for their AP exams or memorizing the steps to their marching band numbers.

She grabbed one of the clips and pinched in the waistband of his pants.

“Do I look like I’m ready to rob a bank?” he asked, twirling the fake revolver around his finger. She tied a bandanna at the base of his neck.

“Now you do.” The photographer instructed her to stand in front of Bill and for him to put his hand around her waist.

“This is a good look for you,” Bill said, and she could feel his eyes on her bare shoulders, which were rarely exposed. They did a few different poses, even utilizing the claw foot bathtub that sat near the back of their set. She wasn’t sure what the concept was supposed to be, but they sat in it regardless, and she dangled one of her legs out of the tub. It was cold against her flesh covered only by a fishnet stocking.

They changed back into their normal clothes, and they waited for their pictures to print. The coupon turned out to be a scam. Neither of them had read the fine print that for the deal to apply, they also needed to buy a framed 8 by 10, but neither of them cared. After their pictures were developed and she saw their stern faces looking back at them from another era, it seemed a small price to pay.

Chapter 10

September 24, 1863

I have not been feeling well, and Annabel is concerned that I have caught something from the men who visit The Palace. I have pains in my stomach and have visited the outhouse at least a two dozen times in the last two days. Annabel says this might be typhoid, which can easily pass from person to person, so Madame has instructed me not to visit with the men or the other women—anyone at all—until it clears. I have woken up damp with my own perspiration soaking through my nightclothes and have had odd dreams where I see visions of my mother, but rather than caring for me or tending to the garden, which is how I usually envision her, there are no whites to her eyes. She is menacing and scratches at me with claw-like fingernails. The nightmares paralyze me and make me wish my mother would travel here so that I may see her as the beautiful light she actually is.

In one vision, I saw the first man I laid with at The Palace. He was handsomer than I remembered, but both of his arms had been removed at the shoulder, and he asked me to give him a bath. As I wiped the sponge across his back, he wept. The actual man who visited me also wept after he “shot his gun” as I have heard people refer to the climactic event. He then took out his actual gun and pressed it against my bosom, warning me that if I told anyone about his tears, he would kill me. It was an empty threat, I could tell, but it made me stare at the door to our room wide-eyed in the dark until the sun finally rose up past the hills.

Today, I feel better than yesterday, but I fear that I will not be able to pay for my board if I am out of work much longer. I was able to have two dresses made by the seamstress on credit. I have been thinking about my father, who once said that life is more peaceful in death than in debt,

and though I thought such an idea was absurd, the more debt I accrue, the more imprisoned I feel by it, a dark cloud ready to rain misery down on me with little notice.

This morning, Madame Raven gave me a tincture that makes me feel as though my mind is swimming in a pond filled with muck. It is like the one my driver gave me, but stronger. Everything is hazy, and the walls of my bedroom, and even my script I am writing in, look askew to my eye. It is difficult to write in a straight line, and I continue to refocus my eyes to straighten out the walls before me. I can hear the bustle of the girls preparing for their work tonight, and though I am worried about my finances, I cannot say I wish I were out there with them. Even now, I can feel that man's single-shot pistol pressed into my bare flesh.

September 26, 1863

I do not think myself a pious woman, but I thank God for helping me recover from my ailment. The only doctor in town was unable to see me, which was just as well considering that he does not have any formal training and likely would have provided me with the same treatment that Madame Raven gave me.

To add to my bountiful luck, no one else caught my affliction, which makes me wonder if it was a case of a very nervous stomach due to my new occupation. When Annabel tightened my corset in preparation for last night's work, I felt that same nervousness in my stomach, the same heat in my face that made droplets of sweat loosen my pinned curls.

Annabel has said that I will get used to laying with men I do not know, and I hope that is soon true. I thought fortune awaited me here and that my present circumstances were temporary. I imagined my life as a play where I had gotten to intermission and was waiting for the best part of the show to dazzle everyone in the audience. I still hold onto a hefty scrap of hope that I will find new

opportunities just like the men toiling in the mines; no matter the amount of darkness we must bear, it is worth it for the promise of bright fortune. Annabel has been a wonderful help to me, teaching me how to apply female wash and a substance she calls “mother’s friend”—both promise to preclude pregnancy. I do not know what I would do if I were with child in this place, no help from Mother or anyone else. There are few children here, and they are kept out of the town proper from what I can tell.

As we readied ourselves for the night, Annabel gave me advice on which men should be solicited first, as well as the kinds who should be avoided.

“You’d think that you wouldn’t want to choose men who have a bounty on their head, but in truth, these are some of the best men to choose since you know that they likely can pay you. The ones you need to look out for are the ones who are wearing nice suit jackets and hair coated in pomade. These men are either evaluators or mine owners, and they are some of the few who bring their wives with them. They ask that you do what their wives won’t, and sometimes it can be painful.”

I winced as she tightened my corset once more.

“If the men do hurt you, I suppose the sheriff will not do much about it. He did not lift a finger when I reported my chest stolen.”

“We have another kind of justice. The men can’t stand when you make their privates public, and they know we hold all of the secrets about their undercarriages. A man who people now call Crooked Boris wasn’t called that before he hit sweet Lyla across the face, if you see my meaning.” She laughed, then squeezed my hand and kissed it. Minutes after, I thought I could still feel the warmth of her lips on my hand, though I had rubbed away her lipstick that had marked me.

In the main room, I stood by the bar. I could not stomach whiskey, so Madame recommended that I have the last few droplets of the tincture.

“It’ll help you feel like you’re someplace else,” she said. And indeed, whereas when I was ill and the medicine made it difficult to think straight, I now relished the haze it cast over my body and mind. I was hovering somewhere above the ground, above my whole being, observing the entire scene around me. I smiled at the men, careful to spot any who were dressed too nicely. Annabel traced her fingers along a man’s breast pocket. Madame Raven told the fiddler to start up playing again. I spotted Lyla, the poor gal Annabel had told me about. I was happy to see that no bruises marked her.

The two other girls who I still had not spoken to much stood on either side of a man who had angry red scars along his fingers and forearms. I had already seen many men with similar marks from the hot water that ran the length of the mines when they broke through rock, though I could not confirm if that was what had happened to this particular man.

I set my sights on a man about my same height. He was wearing a clean linen shirt, which was unusual. No dirt marked the collar or the sleeves, and I admired that. Thanks to teachings from my mother, I associated cleanliness with kindness. She said only ruffians let themselves appear soiled like an animal in the presence of a lady.

As I was steeling myself to approach him, he thankfully approached me first. He was handsome by comparison of the other six or seven men in the main room, and he took my hand for a kiss in a gentlemanly fashion. Perhaps my mother was right. His boots were coated in a layer of mud, but such was to be expected. I was unable to remove the clay-like mud from my own shoes since I arrived. The mud here is packed hard into the ground, layers of parched dirt that are rarely loosed by water.

“I was admiring you from clear across the room,” he said. I smiled, but suddenly words were a jumble in my mind, and I did not feel I could say them in the correct order. So, I kissed his hand as he had kissed mine. It was an odd gesture, but he seemed to enjoy it. “Not from around here, I take it.”

“That is how we do it,” I said, wondering if the words had come out in the order that I intended them to come out.

“Europe?” he asked.

“England,” I said, and he laughed. I worried that I had pronounced it in an odd way.

“I’m looking for company tonight, and I’m hoping you are too.”

“Yes.” I waved at Annabel and waited for her to acknowledge me. She nodded, meaning that I could use our room. I led the man by his surprisingly soft hand down the hallway. Our physical exchange was short but not rough, and he specifically requested that neither of us fully disrobe. As he was buttoning his pants, I realized I had not asked for payment, and thankfully I did not have to, as he had already set two silver coins and a bill of credit on the vanity. He kissed my hand once more before exiting, staring right through me to the wall I stood in front of, and I mined the dregs of my tincture, one final droplet to get me through the rest of the evening.

September 29, 1863

Annabel and I were tasked with the wash for the week, and I did not mind the responsibility, as I was still eager to contribute to The Palace beyond simply paying Madame for my stay. Had she not taken me in, I would not have survived one week out west. When Annabel pushed up her sleeves, I saw that her skin was mottled, purple and green wrapping around her otherwise fair wrists.

“What happened there?” I asked as I plunged one of the girl’s slips into the metal basin using the washing bat.

“Oh, this is nothing. The ones who come off of a ten or twelve-hour stint in the mine can be rough. They need time to adjust to being around women. This one didn’t mean any harm, but some of them do. They can be an angry bunch.”

“What was he called?”

“Jeremiah, I believe, but I can’t be sure.” I found it difficult to believe that she would not remember the name of a man who had hurt her like that, but then realized that I could not recall the first man who pressed his pistol against me, though I would never forget the look in his wide-set eyes.

“Tell me about his undercarriage then,” I said, feeling impish then.

“No bigger than a grubworm and about as appealing as one too!” We laughed.

“After the wash, what do you say we have some fun today?” I asked. “Neither of us has taken a break for well over a week, and you’ve hardly seen what this town has to offer.”

“I would love to,” I said. Annabel was right. Aside from my initial tour and my trip to the dressmaker, I had not seen much beyond The Palace’s walls.

We attended a play at Piper’s Opera House. The tall ceilings dwarfed me, and elaborate designs papered the walls. I recognized one of the women who I had seen at the Sagebrush Place. Annabel whispered in my ear that her name was Mary, but I already knew that. The play was about a king who had taken a mistress, but then rebuffed her as soon as his queen bore him a son. The mistress, played by Mary, tried to sabotage the marriage by publicly discussing the affair, but was unsuccessful. At the end, she died by her own hand, ingesting poison to put an end to her misery.

Annabel offered her kerchief when my eyes misted at the end, and she held my hand in hers.

“You can audition for one of these plays if you’d like,” Annabel said. “Most of the women actors work on D Street or in the boardinghouses.”

“I could never.” The thought of standing in front of at least fifty people made my nervous stomach twist, but I did think it would be a thrill pretending to be someone else.

“Oh sure you could. I’ve done it. Not much to it, and you get to keep the costume as payment, even the jewels.” I imagined myself in Mary’s costume, the wide skirt keeping anyone from coming within a yard of her.

We funneled out with the rest of the audience into the dark street, and I heard the crack of a gunshot. I had grown accustomed to such a sound, but this one was so close, I thought we may be able to find the source. Indeed, we saw a man slumped over in front of one of the gambling houses.

Annabel and I rushed toward the man, I presume because she wanted to see if she could save him. But when we kneeled beside him and saw where the bullet had exited, taking a large portion of his skull with it, we knew that he was not alive. I had to run to the nearby scrub brush as nausea overtook me, and I tried not to get any of my sickness on my dress.

Two other men approached, hands on hips, to survey the scene. One of them smoked from a corncob pipe like the one Father smoked. Homesickness added to my other sicknesses.

One of them absently kicked at the man on the ground. The dizziness came back. Just moments before, he had been alive.

“Looks like he’s the latest victim,” the smoker said.

“Of what? Or whom, might I ask?”

“He just lost his year’s pay on the faro table and looks like he chose a hole in his head over a forever hole in his pocket.”

“Someone will tend to him in the daylight,” the other man explained. They both took off their hats, and one whispered what sounded like a prayer. I wondered how many times bodies had laid lifeless on the dirt, countless more in the mine tunnels beneath it. Annabel told me that the ghosts of dead miners still wander the mines; so too do fairies who warn them of imminent dangers.

It seemed wrong, leaving him there for all to see. I asked if Annabel would help me to bury him or at least try to take him out of the road, and she grimaced at the request.

“Like he said, they’ll take care of him in the morning, give him a proper burial then.”

I trusted that she was telling the truth, but I could not bring myself to leave him. As I moved closer, I recognized the clean collar I had seen just hours before at The Palace. I focused my eyes on the collar to avoid looking at the gruesome scene above it, and with some effort, I pulled the dead man to the side of the road. He stared through me once more, but this time, he was looking into whatever world his spirit was traveling toward. Annabel held onto my shoulder as we returned to The Palace.

“You can’t get to know them, or it’ll hurt your heart when they don’t make it,” Annabel said, kissing the same hand that had been kissed by a man whose blood now ran cold.

Chapter 11

Nellie had been dreading meeting up with Gramp after their night out in the suburbs, but she needed to discuss Jack's offer. And mostly, she needed to see that he was okay. She was able to find alley parking near the store after driving around the block a couple of times. It was so hot that her platform heels (1976) felt a little more unsure on the asphalt than they had when she put them on that morning. A woman wearing denim shorts with the top button undone, the waistband folded down so that it looked like her shorts had lapels next to the zipper, nodded at her. She was probably working the street³⁴.

As an undergrad, Nellie's human sexuality class had taken a field trip to the Bunny Ranch outside of Carson City, and three of the women working there broke them into small groups and gave them a tour. She remembered seeing the panic button above the cherry wood bedframe in one of the rooms. The woman leading them, a blond wearing a bikini and a kimono, said that the button made her feel safe, as did the fact that all clients who tested for STIs.

"I'm not from here. I just fly down one weekend a month and make way more than I do as a marriage and family therapist," she'd said. "I'd argue my work is a more radical form of therapy."

The two guys in the group had been avoiding ogling her by looking at every other part of the room.

³⁴ In the late 1930s, city officials in Reno attempted to shut down brothels within city limits, deeming them public nuisances. At first, they were unsuccessful, but during World War II, when the Reno Army Air Base was established just north of town in what is now Stead, the federal government warned that the entire city of Reno would be declared off-limits to all servicemen unless its brothels were shut down immediately. Within months, the most prominent red light district, The Stockade, and all other brothels in the city shuttered their doors. Brothels outside of city limits were in murky territory until Joe Conforte, who owned the Mustang Ranch, was able to convince county officials to pass an ordinance that would allow for brothels and prostitutes to be licensed. In 1977, the much less appealingly named Chicken Ranch followed suit.

Nellie imagined the woman near Gramp's store working as a therapist, her legs delicately crossed at the ankles as she helped Nellie explore the issues of abandonment she dragged behind her like a field cultivator churning up the soil of her carefully stored memories.

Inside the store smelled like sage, and Gramp explained that he'd decided to cleanse the place.

"I'm not into this kind of thing usually, but I feel like the energy here has been a little funky, don't you think?"

"You think it has to do with—" she cleared her throat, "those men who knocked you out?"

He pursed his lips and relit the end of the sage stick.

"Nellie, I told you that I didn't want to get you involved in all that." The only customer in the store came up and asked if the price on the plasma TV mounted on the north wall was negotiable. Gramp entertained a negotiation even though the guy low-balled him with a hundred dollar offer.

"These aren't even popular anymore," he said before leaving the store, bouncing on the balls of his feet rather than walking heel-toe out.

Gramp's eyes looked glassy, and Nellie regretted bringing it up.

"I was getting worried about you," Gramp said.

"Sorry. I came by the other night, but you weren't here. With this new project and this new guy I've been seeing, I haven't had much time for anything."

Nellie adjusted her feet in her platforms. They'd started to sweat. A dull ache was gathering in her toes that'd slid forward to crowd the narrow toe box.

"A new guy, huh? I hope he's better than that rattlesnake Jack. Men will treat you as bad as they think you'll let them."

“I won’t make the same mistake again.” Nellie’s earlier intention to tell him about the deal Jack proposed dissolved. It was probably just another one of his tricks. And she’d rather be poor with convictions than rich and unprincipled.

“I’m not saying it’s your fault, what he did. But fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, I’m the fool.”

Nellie inspected the TV, its network of wires snaking into the wall. Nothing had really changed in the years Gramp had owned the store. When he sold a stereo, he took another stereo on consignment. The same cardboard cutout of John Wayne was now so sunfaded that it looked like his ghost haunted the front display window. Card playing aside, it was no wonder that he was in the red. There was no way that he was making money off of the few items he sold. He never did any marketing and never seemed interested in bringing more people in. Deep down, Nellie knew that it wouldn’t be long before the entire block would be knocked down and replaced by big mixed-use buildings. Already, these had begun to sprout up in between weeklies and the dirt lots where other weeklies had been razed to the ground.

“Can I get a water?” Nellie asked.

“Sure, and grab me a soda, if you could.”

Gramp kept the fridge well-stocked by going to Horseshoe Convenience Store two doors down. She retrieved the drinks and turned up the AC. The Suicide Table sat near the office in the back, along with the other items he hadn’t yet sorted or priced out.

“You can’t sell that. It might be worth a lot,” she said. She was testing him.

He smiled. “Of course I can, but I won’t.”

“I’m glad. It’s a wonderful piece and belongs in a museum.” In between gulps of water, she peeked under the sheet to look at it. She pressed her hand to its underside and imagined the men

nervously tapping their feet as they waited to see the cards flip over, revealing if they'd won or lost. She felt a raised section as she felt underneath and knelt down to examine it further. It looked to be a trap door. With a squeak of the hinge, the door released, and a coin fell to the floor.

“See that. It’s paying off already.” She proffered the coin, and Gramp turned it over in his hand³⁵.

She scanned the store to make sure that the customer who’d left was the last one inside before bringing up the research project she’d been tasked with.

“I’m still in the early stages, but I think I’ll be able to help those guys with what they asked.”

Gramp rubbed the back of his neck and then his face in slow circles.

“I just don’t know if I want you to get involved.”

“I don’t have much of a choice now.”

He took a drink of the soda, and the carbonation made his eyes water. A violent coughing fit overtook him.

“You okay?” she asked as she firmly patted him on the back. He waved his hand.

“Fine, fine,” he croaked.

“I think the guy I’m dating is going to be able to help me on the technology side of things. I’ve already gotten a good start figuring out some suspicious campaign donations, but it’s still only a start.”

³⁵ The practice of storing coins or other signifiers of good luck is a folkloric tradition. In 19th century Virginia City, people of diverse backgrounds, including Chinese, Mexican, and Cornish immigrants, left objects within walls or beneath buildings. Born out of multiple different cultural traditions, this practice emphasized the idea that good luck could transfer from the object to the establishment that housed it. During an excavation in 2000, archeologists discovered two altered coins beneath the floorboards of the Boston Saloon, which was owned by William A. G. Brown, a freeborn Black man from Massachusetts. The alteration and storing of the coins are traditions that may be traced back to West Africa. A similar practice was later seen with casino’s retired poker chips that were mixed in with concrete foundation.

“Tell me about this guy.”

“It’s new, nothing to get too excited about.”

“And where’d you meet him?”

“Playing blackjack after work.” She could hear her voice quieting. Even though he’d been taking her to casinos since she was a little girl, he sometimes pretended that he protected her from the many temptations they offered.

“You should get into poker again,” he said as he pressed the cold soda can against his forehead. “Although I wouldn’t want you running around with any of those guys.” The men who played hold ‘em into a few distinct categories, and none of them were very appealing. There were the guys in their thirties who’d read every strategy book about poker and watched the World Series of Poker. They knew the stats of many of the players, who they aspired to be. Reflective sunglasses concealed whatever their eyes might reveal. They knew how to shuffle the chips by dividing them into two piles and then deftly merging them into one in a fluid motion. Then, there were the guys who didn’t have money, but they played like they did. They were usually in management jobs, had hairlines in the process of ebbing back toward the crowns of their heads. They never tipped out the dealer or the cocktail waitresses even when they managed to win a few big hands. Finally, there were the high rollers who drove in from the Bay Area. They traveled in packs and dropped their inch-high stacks of hundred-dollar bills on the felt table to get their chips, hardly smiled when the dealer counted out the piles of chips before sliding them across. They often played badly, which made them the most dangerous. No way to predict what they’d do. After re-buying in several times, they’d grow bored of the game and go find other places in the casinos like the nightclubs to show people how much money they had.

Gramp didn't fit into any of these categories. Few long-term local players did. He was skilled, but humble and had a good read on the people he played. The problem, though, was that he had a hard time not playing every hand. He'd play a two seven off-suit even if calling the big blind would wipe out the last of his chips. It wasn't that he was greedy. Gramp just needed to remind himself that he was always in the game, even if he wasn't going to win.

Two customers came in holding their novelty drinks, crushed ice and something neon in cups shaped like footballs.

"Excuse me, gentlemen. If you could set your drinks there, I'd appreciate it." Gramp gestured to the small table by the entrance that served this sole purpose. Tourists often assumed that there were no open container laws like Vegas' strip. When Nellie was younger, the first time she traveled to another state for a marching band competition, a girl from Iowa had asked how often she went to Vegas and if they all lived in the hotels that lined South Virginia. She explained that Vegas was an eight-hour drive and that they lived in houses and apartments outside of downtown. The girl didn't believe her, and neither did the majority of people she met afterward. Most of their perceptions of the city were shaped by a show about a group of quirky cops, and she'd given up explaining that even the B-roll footage for the show was from Sacramento. Reno doesn't have palm trees.

One of the customers asked if they carried any rose gold jewelry.

"Fucked up real bad with the old lady," he explained as his friend nodded in agreement. Both of them were wearing tanktops. One was short and thin, the other wide and tall. They looked like a Looney Tune pairing.

"I can help you out with that," Gramp said. He pulled a few pieces from the display case, and the tall man pointed his hairy knuckled finger at the necklace featuring a crystal heart.

“Wouldn’t she like that, Devon?” he asked. Devon shrugged. “She’s *your* sister.”

“She’s *your* wife.”

“It’s a nice necklace, and I’m sure she’ll like it.” Gramp’s assertion put an end to their bickering.

“I didn’t mean to make her mad,” the buyer said as he pulled his thick wallet from his back pocket. “We were out late having a good time.” He shifted his gaze from Gramp to Nellie. “Why is it that when women say it’s fine, it means it’s the opposite of fine?” Nellie could tell that he didn’t want an answer to this question, but she provided one anyway.

“Because we want to believe that you can interpret how we feel even if we don’t say it outright.”

“I think it’s so that you can get us in trouble all the time so that we have to apologize and make it up to you,” he said.

Gramp disagreed. She could tell by the tensing of his shoulders. But he didn’t say anything. He ran the card, told the guys to have a nice day, and reminded them to pick up their drinks on the way out. He took a sip of his own drink and started coughing again.

“Guess I’m going soft. I can’t handle the bubbles,” he said after he’d stopped sputtering. Maybe I should stick to water.

The store was set to close in fifteen minutes, and Nellie asked if Gramp wanted to take a walk. Even when it hit 95 degrees during the day, it’d always cool down at night, sometimes even cool enough to require a sweater. She loved these dramatic swings in temperature because it felt like nature couldn’t decide what she wanted.

After Gramp locked up, they ducked into Shooters to drink a beer while they waited for coolness to settle into the valley.

The bartender remembered her from the last time she'd brought Jack there. She'd told him that if you challenged the bartender to a hula hooping contest on the bar and won, you'd get a free drink. He didn't believe her, and she didn't feel like making him believe her, but after several drinks, she found herself swinging her hips to keep the hoop off the ground. She'd lost, but the bartender, who introduced herself to Nellie as Cherry, had told her she was impressed with the performance.

Tonight, Cherry wore her hair in a tight bun above the nape of her neck, gel pressing her black hair to her head so that she looked like she was wearing a swimming cap. Everything about her, from the hairstyle to the mauve lipstick to the sharp collar bones, was severe. But when she opened her mouth, she spoke in a high-pitched squeak. This didn't make any of her regulars respect her less. She kept them all in order and could make anyone leave just by whisper-squeaking that she'd called them a cab.

They each had a shot of Maker's and a Pabst, which felt like lighting a fire in her stomach and then only partially dousing it. The neon lights in the otherwise dark bar made Gramp look sickly, a tinge of green flickered on his cheeks.

"You ever take Leanna here?" she asked. "Or grandma?"

"They were both your grandmas, sweets. And absolutely not. I wouldn't have taken you here while they were alive." Nellie searched her memory for one where they were at a dive bar together, but couldn't find one. They'd spent so much more time together, especially since Leanna passed, that she'd begun to insert him into her memories with other people.

A woman next to them, who had been talking to herself, asked if Nellie had a lighter. She apologized as she explained that she didn't have one, and the woman continued talking. Soon, she saw that the woman's lips synced up with the song she'd requested on the new digital jukebox.

"Do you think those guys will hurt you?"

Gramp looked around, assessing the other few people huddled over the bar.

“I don’t see why they would.”

“No, I mean the ones at the house in the southwest, especially the one who hit you.”

“Oh them.” He looked as if he’d already forgotten about the event that had thrown a sharp left turn into their lives. “No, but if you could help them, I think it’d be for the best. Not just for me, but for the city. If Berkshire wins, this entire block will be leveled before his term’s up.” That was probably true. In Midtown, luxury apartments overtook the affordable complexes that preceded them. Nellie’s own complex was now flanked by modern buildings. The university and other institutions of learning and what Gramp called “culture” insidiously crept into the spaces once reserved for back-alley dice games and streetwalkers’ negotiations.

“Do you really think the locals would let that happen?”

“You don’t?” he asked before getting the bartender’s attention. He ordered a round of tall cans for the bar, and once they were delivered, gave a toast to their city.

Cherry tended to all of their needs with such aplomb that it seemed she’d been doing the same job for decades. She could predict what they needed when they needed it, and Nellie wondered if this was always what she saw herself doing. She imagined that her mother was a nurse and her father was a high school teacher. A short rebellious spell in high school made her drop out, but she eventually earned her GED and attended the community college. Maybe she’d planned to go into nursing too until the golden handcuffs slapped on her wrists during her first particularly good tip night at Shooters locked her to the service industry.

“Not many locals around anymore,” Cherry said, inserting herself into their conversation, but not making eye contact as she did so. “Who here’s from here?”

Only the woman who’d been singing along to the jukebox raised her hand.

“Fourth generation,” she said, smoothing the hair that’d escaped from her ponytail.

“You’re sitting next to a fifth generation Nevadan right there, if you want an autograph,” Gramp joked. He used to say that they’d become part of the landscape, their line had been here so long. His cat once coughed up a hairball he swore looked like sagebrush.

“I can’t say that it hasn’t been six or even seven generations here for my family,” the woman responded. “Hard to find records of the Paiutes they killed or forced out to the Pyramid Reservation.”

“I had no idea,” Gramp said, which Nellie knew was intended as an apology, but didn’t work as one.

“Can I get you another drink?” Nellie asked.

The woman shrugged, took one sip of the beer in front of her, and left it there mostly untouched.

Nellie and Gramp decided to walk up north toward the university. The air got even cooler there, thanks to all of the trees that would never survive in our desert without the advent of automatic irrigation. But now, those trees’ roots dug down deep into the Earth, some of them even extending out to the sidewalks where they made the concrete buckle and crack.

“Sometimes, I wonder what Mom would think of this area if she saw it now. She might like all of the shiny new buildings.”

“She might,” Gramp said. Nellie usually avoided talking about her mother and grandmother, stirring up the wonderful ghosts of their memory. After she’d have a few drinks, though, they were the only people she could think about. “But she’d also be proud of what you’re doing.”

“Avoiding getting a real job so that I can spend my time reading old newspapers? I’m not so sure.” In the few memories Nellie had of her mother, she looked put together, the radiance of her

skin highlighted by carefully applied makeup. She used to watch her apply lipstick in the mirror and mimicked doing the same, but the only makeup she had any need for—even at that young age—was concealer, which she dabbed onto the dark circles under her eyes. She used to tell Nellie that she carried the whole weight of the world on her shoulders, said she was a serious child.

“You know what I mean. You’re doing something important, something that will matter well after we’re all gone.” He pulled his handkerchief from his pocket, and when he removed his hand, she saw that his tremor had worsened. He balled it up and blotted at his eyes and nose.

“Thanks, Gramp.” She stared at the handkerchief as he shoved it back into his pocket. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything is ace-high. We’ll figure it all out.”

A man talking into his phone’s accompanying earpiece threw a half-full bottle of water into the trashcan near them and didn’t pick it up when it bounced off the lip.

“Excuse you,” Gramp said. He picked up the bottle and made a show of throwing it in the can, but by then, the man was several steps away, waving either in thanks or in dismissal. “Some people,” Gramp said, shaking his head. As they approached the overpass that spanned the I-80 highway, they felt the familiar movement of the bridge and heard the cars screaming past. But then she saw something that was unfamiliar. A figure wearing all black had climbed the fence that curled over the walkway to prevent people from doing just what this person was doing. Gramp saw it too. He picked up to a sprint and was twice as fast as Nellie was.

“Stop!” he yelled with such urgency and assurance that it seemed like this was a practiced habit. “Don’t do it!”

The figure, who Nellie could now see was a man about her age, clung to the chain-link fence. By the time they got to him, two other people who’d been eating at Roberto’s on the other side of

the highway had also joined. She didn't know what to say, so she didn't say anything at all. Nellie heard the sound of a siren in the distance and hoped that it wasn't the police heading their way. If there was one thing she knew about growing up drinking in back alleys, wandering casino floors years before she could gamble, and watching officers harass a homeless man named George who hung out by the store, nothing good ever came of getting the police involved.

COMMUNITY

Bystanders Stop Suicide Attempt

Barry Hernandez
August 22, 2015

At approximately 8:46 p.m., police were dispatched to the I-80 overpass on North Virginia Street after receiving a call that a man had climbed the fence. With the aid of two bystanders, he was persuaded to climb back to safety. The man asked not to be named, but he said that he would like to publicly thank the people who intervened. "When you are in that much pain and feel that alone, it can take someone you don't know to show that they care," he said.

"By the time we arrived, the situation had already been resolved," Officer Wallace said.

Rates of suicide have been steadily rising in the region in the last five years.

"This is a very troubling trend in our community, especially among young people," Erica Baldwin with Evergreen Center, a support service for youth in crisis, said.

If you or someone you know are experiencing thoughts of suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

"It's going to be okay," one of the men who'd come from Roberto's said. This statement seemed to loosen the man's grip on the fence. They all looked to each other as the man only a few stories above his potential death cried aloud.

"I can't do it anymore. I just can't do it." He was not looking for anyone to talk him out of his decision, that much was clear. His fingers were loosening. Panicked, Nellie ran up to him and wrapped her own fingers around his. The cars kept rushing by, east and west-bound to places she'd likely never visit.

"It seems like that right now," Gramp yelled.

"I'm not arguing with you. But I can tell you now that you can. What you're thinking of doing right now can't be undone. This will forever be the way you leave the world."

She worried about this approach. She'd learned at a conference in grad school that the last thing you were supposed to do when a student is in mental distress is make them feel guilty for their feelings. His hands felt soft, and for a fleeting moment, she imagined interlacing my fingers through his without the barrier of the woven metal.

"I don't know you, but I want to know you," she said. His grip on the fence and on her fingers tightened. "I'm going to help you get to the side of the fence. We're going to go step-by-step until we reach that utility box over there, okay." She was surprised that he was able to hold on as long as he had already, but she could feel his muscles straining as his fingers curled and flexed.

"You don't know anything about me," he yelled over the cars' noise.

"And I won't know anything aside from what's printed about you unless you let me help you." He allowed her to help him climb to the side of the highway. The police had shown up at that point, as had the news crew for Channel 8. They were probably already nearby covering a pile-up on 80. All of them sat around the man who'd seemed so hopeless minutes before, but who now looked full of hope, even as he stared blankly into the stoplight that hung above them.

Chapter 12

In the last complete memory of Nellie's mother, she was wearing a summer dress patterned with daisies. They were touring Colonial Williamsburg for Nellie's eighth birthday. They'd driven across the country for the visit, and they'd made it from the West to the East in three-and-a-half days. Bathroom stops were timed and requests to stop at roadside attractions were ignored. Her mother leaned forward in the driver's seat, cranked up whatever radio station came in the most clearly, and clenched her jaw as she drove at least fifteen miles over the speed limit. Their Buick could hardly handle the speed, and somewhere around Colorado, it overheated. They had to pull off on the side of the road and walk to the nearest gas station about two miles back. Her mother convinced the attendant to drive them to their car and inspect what'd happened. After what felt like an interminably long time—her sense of time warped by the heat like a mirage—he was able to fix whatever was the source of the smoke, but Nellie was hesitant to get back in. The sun glinted off of the man's ultra bright white teeth as he wished them luck on their journey, and her mother blew him a kiss. He looked confused by the air kiss when he waved at them, a grime-covered towel extending from his hand. Nellie buckled her seatbelt and sunk low into the passenger seat until they were miles out of view.

Nellie didn't remember much of what she saw through the car windows, but she remembered the rest stops and fast food drive-throughs. During bathroom breaks, her mother would look down at the tiny gold watch face she wore on her left wrist. She'd say she was going to time her and see if she could beat her previous time. Somehow, each stop was exactly five seconds shorter than the one that preceded it.

They slept in motels with scratchy comforters that Nellie could hear her mother's cracked heels catching on as she put herself to sleep by rubbing one leg across the other like a grasshopper. Scratchy comforters aside, the accommodations seemed upscale to Nellie as she unwrapped the soap and used the washcloths that were shaped into fans pocketed inside larger towels.

By the time they arrived in Williamsburg, it seemed like her mother had forgotten about her altogether. She bought her three different kinds of hard rock candy and asked if Nellie could join a group of middle school students for a tour. Nellie clutched onto her bouquet of treats tightly as she was ushered into the group.

"Mom has to find someone, so it's really important that you stay with this group. We'll meet back here at the end of the tour and then we'll go for ice cream for your birthday." She whispered something into the tour guide's ear before weaving around another group that was watching a demonstration on butter churning.

Heat radiated up from the grass, and the humidity sprung Nellie's normally wavy hair into curls. The guide was maybe in her twenties. She wore a white bonnet and a full dress, her hands buried deep in the pockets of her apron. The dress shape suited her much better than the cutoff denim shorts and spaghetti strap tank tops suited the girls in the group. The boys mostly wore basketball shorts and T-shirts with antagonistic phrases on them. Hemp necklaces wound around a few of their necks, teardrop glass beads hanging from the front.

Their first stop was a hut that housed a shockingly large dairy cow. The guide explained that milking cows and collecting chickens' egg would be the kind of work that would be done by young children.

“By the time kids were your age,” she said as she pointed to Nellie, “they were helping on the farm. No video games or TV for them. Not even any books aside from the Bible, and even those would be reserved for wealthier families.”

“That’d suck,” one of the teenage boys said. The others nodded. One girl took out her cell phone, which was clearly the envy of the group. It was half the width of a deck of cards, and the sun shone off of its hot pink exterior.

“How much longer is this?” she asked. She flipped the top of the phone down with a satisfying click and slid it into her back pocket.

“We just started,” the guide explained. “Who wants to be the lucky one that gets to milk Miss Clover here?”

“Jackson wants to.”

“No, I don’t!” The boy who’d been volunteered cringed as he crouched to inspect the cow’s udder. “I milked your mom last night.”

A chorus of ohhhhh’s came from the rest of the boys. Could women be milked like a cow? Nellie made a note of it and planned to ask her mother when she returned from her mission.

“I’ll do it,” Nellie said. The tour guide brightened at this. She explained that she’d need to sit on the stool and be both gentle and firm as she squeezed.

“Start with your pointer finger and then squeeze with your middle finger, ring fingers, then pinkies. Don’t just yank on her. That would hurt,” she explained.

The cow turned its big head toward Nellie, as if to emphasize the words of caution. Flies landed on her back and then flew away when she swung her tail. Nellie wondered if she could feel these tiny insects land on her. She’d never seen a cow up close before, and when she sat down on what the guide called the milking stool, she thought that if this wall of an animal fell over, she’d be

crushed to death. She looked around for a place to stash the rock candies, and seeing none, decided to grip onto the wooden sticks of them between her thighs. The roof of her mouth was already raw from sucking on the jagged sweets.

She positioned her hands around the teats and gently but firmly rolled her fingers down the length of them as she'd been instructed. Nothing came out at first, and she looked to the guide for further instruction, but she didn't say anything. Nellie worried that her failure was being observed, but when she looked over her shoulder, none of them were watching her aside from the girl with the flip phone.

Finally, she heard the tinny sound of milk hitting the metal bucket beneath the udder and got into the rhythm of milking her.

"You're a natural!" the guide said. "You'd do just fine in the 1700s." Aside from learning to read before most of the other kids in her class, this was the first time that she felt proud of being able to do something that the people around her could not do. The cow let out a guttural sound that didn't even resemble the word moo. She took this as a sign that she should leave her be and stood up to join the rest of the group. The boys started a slow round of applause, which she took in earnest, but which she could tell by the girls' subsequent laughter was intended as a joke.

They then made their way to the bindery, which the guide explained was where they'd see how books were put together.

"Does anyone know which part of a book the binding is?" the guide asked. Still riding the high of successfully milking a cow, Nellie was eager to respond, but she didn't know the correct answer.

“It’s the main part that faces out when the book’s on a shelf,” a girl who stood apart from the rest of them said. Her arms were folded across her chest, which likely had just grown to a cup size she wasn’t ready for.

“That’s exactly right.” The guide led them through a doorway that was so short, some of the boys had to duck their heads to fit underneath it. Inside the bindery, a man and woman stood behind a table where loose pages, covers, and strings were laid out. Sweat showed through the woman’s bonnet and the top of the man’s shirt, which laced up at the top. Nellie felt desperate for air conditioning. What was taking her mother so long? Maybe she’d forgotten to get Nellie a gift and was finding something at one of the gift shops nearby. Or maybe she was getting tickets for them to go to the water park she’d been promising her. Nellie had seen a brochure for it in the motel lobby in the last town they’d stayed in. She’d collected several of the brochures, enjoying their glossy feel with the understanding that they would likely be the closest things to souvenirs she’d be able to keep.

The girls in the group were instructed to sew the book pages together, while the boys were taught how the rudimentary printing press worked, which seemed like much more fun. Nellie threaded the needle through the pages, careful to make the stitches even. The other girls were careful too. By the end, they proudly held up their blank books, and the guide told them they could purchase them for ten dollars. Two of the girls pulled crisp ten dollar bills from their velcro wallets and proudly flipped through their books’ blank pages. The rest of them left theirs on the table.

A few of the boys showed off the pages modeled after newspapers that they’d rolled through the letterpress.

“They had newspapers back then?” Nellie asked.

The tour guide paused before answering that the first printing press arrived in 1683.

“1638,” the man attending the letterpress corrected. The guide glared at him, but then smiled widely. These people were supposed to be the experts, so it seemed odd that they didn’t have their facts straight. Nellie planned to ask her teacher about it when she returned to school in the fall.

“Now, we’re going to head to the final stop on our tour,” the guide explained. All of them were sweating, and Nellie walked quickly in the hopes of creating her own breeze. “This is the Great Hopes Plantation, where most people would have been spending their days.” Tidy rows of plants extended for hundreds of feet, and kids Nellie’s age, women her mother’s age, and men her grandfather’s age all took turns plucking parts from plants and dragging farm equipment through the dirt that separated those rows. They all smiled as they worked, some of them even whistling and singing songs. Sweat made one of the men’s white shirts translucent so she could see the thick black hair that grew on his chest.

“I thought slaves were the ones who worked at the plantations,” one of the boys said. His friend jabbed him in the ribs using his elbow.

“Yes, some of the people in Williamsburg were enslaved, but they were still part of the community. Agriculture was an important part of everyday life for most people in the community. The people you see here are volunteers, unlike those who would have actually been working in this heat.”

“That’d seriously blow,” the boy said. The rest of the group nodded. “I mean, we already learned about all of this in Mr. Danes’ class, but I guess I didn’t realize how hot it’d be.”

“And they worked from sunup to sundown and had much poorer housing conditions. Many of them only had a wool blanket separating them from the dirt ground,” the guide explained. At first, the group seemed interested in these distressing descriptions, but eventually, a digital wind chime sounded, and everyone turned to the girl with the flip phone. She whispered to one of the

girls near her, and the two laughed. The white kids' shoulders were turning pink, and Nellie could feel that her face was getting sunburned.

As they returned to their starting point, Nellie began to panic. Her mother always established a meeting place if they got separated, but that wasn't the case this time. She dug in her memory to see if she could remember what her mother had said before rushing off past the butter churners. Just as she was beginning to spiral, trying to think of whether she could recall her grandparents' phone number, the tour guide knelt down and put her hands on her shoulders.

"Don't worry, sweetie. Your mom will meet you right there at the gift shop. It's much cooler in there." She left Nellie standing in front of the shop as another group of teenagers was handed off by their teacher.

Inside, Nellie browsed scrolls that included replicated letters written by people who once lived in the colony, candles, and t-shirts that featured pairings of the sights and punny sayings like "Williamsburg is butter than the rest" beneath a picture of someone manning the butter churner. She made a mental list of what she'd buy if she had the money. If her mother returned and told her she could pick one item, she wanted to be prepared with something in mind for each price range.

An hour passed before someone at the cash register pulled her reading glasses down the bridge of her nose and asked if she was with a group.

"Just waiting for my mom to pick me up," she said. The woman pushed the reading glasses back up to her eyes and returned to reading her book.

Right when she thought that she should maybe start looking for her mother on the grounds, she heard her voice. So did everyone else in the shop. She was screaming at someone whose responses were too quiet to make out. The words "deadbeat," "daughter," and "drunk" stood out from the rest. It felt like a soil sifter allowed most of the other words to pass through, leaving only

the stones. Nellie repeated the words to herself as she looked outside of the door and saw the person who was on the receiving end of her mother's words. A slight man who was slowly blinking his glassy eyes stood in front of her. He looked like the other volunteers dressed in colonial garb, but he was wearing white sneakers.

He threw a few stones of his own: "ugly," "never," "cheater." When Nellie came into full view outside, her mother saw her first before the man.

"She doesn't look a thing like me," he said. He bent over to tie his shoe, then took off his hat to fan himself. With his narrow upturned nose, black hair, and green eyes, he didn't look like Nellie at all. Her mother pulled Nellie toward herself and attempted to cover her ears, but missed the mark. Her hands held pressed up against the hair behind her ears, so she heard her clearly when she said, "The only time you ever hear from me will be through a lawyer. You were the biggest mistake I ever made."

Nellie did not get a gift from the shop and didn't go to the water park. But her mother did let her buy twenty dollars' worth of candy from the convenience store before they began their journey back west. Leisurely bathroom breaks punctuated the long stretches driven slightly under the speed limit. Whatever force had been making her step on the accelerator and weave around semis on two-lane highways was gone after the fight, so Nellie decided whatever happened was a good thing. Her mother was lighter now, and when Nellie recounted her experience on the tour, her mother turned down the radio so that she could hear every word she said.

Chapter 13

October 2, 1863

I have fallen ill again, and I worry that this illness is different. Madame gave me more of the medicine she gave to me the last time I was infirmed, and it has only worsened my condition. I cannot hold down any victuals, not even the delicious pork belly stew that Annabel has prepared for me. It is her mother's recipe and has flavors that I had never experienced before making the journey here. I have not been able to work, and though Madame has been patient with me, she has told me that I cannot continue boarding at The Palace if I am not able to pay this month's dues soon. Annabel has offered to help me, but she has already helped so much that I do not want to take advantage of her kind heart. Additionally, she will not be able to work for the next three to four days because she just got her blood. Upon hearing this, I counted back to my last curse, which was well over five weeks ago.

I thought of when my mother was pregnant with my brother, and I saw her outside propped on all fours like a farm animal as she expelled the already empty contents of her stomach onto the ground. She told me that she was sick every single day, not just at the beginning like some other, more fortunate women.

While I entertained the idea that I could be with child, it seemed unlikely at first. I always used Mother's Friend as Annabel instructed. As the remedy Madame provided did not work, I began to accept that the evidence was in favor of the possibility that I was pregnant.

I sobbed for an entire day, unable to move under the full weight of my predicament.

"What will I do? What ever will I do?" I cried to Annabel. She hugged me close and said there were ways to fix this problem, but that she would not even entertain the possibility.

"It is very dangerous, and I don't think you should get rid of this gift God has given you."

“A gift? This will be my undoing. What work will I be able to find? How will I be able to care for a child when I can hardly care for myself? Will we sleep with the baby in between us at night?” My words were sharper than I intended, and I could see in Annabel’s quivering lip that I had hurt her feelings.

“You will find a way,” she said as she stroked the back of my hand. “We will find a way.” While I usually appreciated Annabel’s positive spirit and cheerful outlook, in this instance, it made me angry. She spoke to me in reassuring words as if I myself were a child.

“I will see the doctor today,” I said. “Surely he will know of a way to resolve this issue and restore me to my previous state.” I reached for the bedpan, which we had already both made use of that morning. The smell of it increased the intensity of my sickness and therefore the urgency of my need to heave. It made the liquids splash, and I apologized to Annabel for the mess I had made.

“You should not be ashamed. This is the most natural and beautiful act a woman’s body can do.” She beamed, which again angered me.

“Nothing about this is beautiful. I was foolish and did not take all of the necessary precautions. This is no world for a baby.” I took the bedpan outside and emptied it in the outhouse. I walked straight to the doctor, though I did not have very much confidence in his abilities. Already, he had failed me, and I was not sure of his training. Even so, I had no other choices.

“You’re outside. That’s a good sign.” A voice came from the front porch of The Palace. Madame was wearing black silk gloves and a black gown, as was frequently her uniform. She held a pipe in between her gloved fingers. “This isn’t a place to bring up a child.”

“How did you know?” I asked. In the sunlight, I saw that I had gotten my sickness on my skirt, and I tried to conceal it using my hands.

“I’ve been doing this a long time. I was in your same position when I was about your age. More than once.” A plume of smoke left her mouth. “You’ll take an herbal remedy. It’ll taste like the muck you scrape out of a horse’s hoof, but it’ll work.”

I felt my sickness returning, but I did my very best to quell it as Madame described the procedure.

“The doctor’s the only one in town who’s got it, but don’t let his moralizing get to you. He’ll stand on the pulpit and say that you do not have the right to end a new life, but he won’t say that those herbal remedies are the only medicines he’s given out that always do what they’re intended to do. He’s tried to mix herbs and botanicals like the Chinese doctor on the outer edge of town, and they say that’s what killed One Shot Jack.”

As I walked to the end of the street, the nausea had been replaced by pain. I felt as if whatever was inside of me raged against the decision I had come to. I still did not feel as though this were a person, though. I had always planned to have a family, but only in summary, a few lines in my letters home. I did not think of this in practice with a husband and children expecting me to tend to them every minute of every hour of every day.

I timed my steps with the familiar clanging of the mines, and Madame’s words rattled in my head.

“Ms. Bulette?” a voice behind me called.

I turned to see Mr. McLaughlin holding his hat over his heart. “Are you alright? I saw you walking down the street and you’re crisscrossing all over the place. Looked like you were corned as I’ve ever seen. Didn’t take you for much of a drinker.”

“It’s just a passing sickness, a cold perhaps.”

“Where are you heading?”

“The doctor.”

“I’ll walk with you there. Let’s take C Street instead. There’s a hanging today.”

I thought my stomach would turn at this mention, as it had the night of the play when I saw that poor lifeless man on the ground. But it did not. I worried that I was growing accustomed to the violent ways of the men around me.

“Have you ever killed someone?”

“Well, sure, but that was in the early days before we’d come to figure out all of the rules.”

Mr. McLaughlin adjusted his hat and offered for me to hold onto him to steady myself. I had begun to sweat and wished I had brought a handkerchief with me. “Might be something you ate wasn’t cooked right.”

“Perhaps.” I held onto him as we walked. A breeze swooped in, which made the dirt swirl around our feet. I heard the cheers of the crowd that had gathered to witness the execution.

“Don’t worry about that. They’re all bad men, the ones they’re hanging. They’d steal the shawl from their own grandmothers’ shoulders if you let ‘em.” I doubted this was true, seeing as the enforcement of the law seemed inconsistent. I had seen men shoot each other in the middle of the day when the sun was shining down on the scene, and no one was held to account for the offense.

“Mr. McLaughlin, I do not wish to sound ungrateful for the opportunity you have provided me with at The Palace, but I am afraid I can no longer serve in my position there. Could you keep me in your mind if you discover another opportunity in a different line of work?”

“It ain’t what you ate, is it?”

“It is not.”

“Well, here we are. I can wait for you if you’d like. I have to make a run to Gold Hill later, but I don’t have anywhere to be before then.”

We stood in front of the entrance to the doctor's cottage, which looked nicer than the surrounding ones on account of the fact that it had been painted white. I could not bear a stern talking-to from this man as Madame had warned.

"That is a very generous offer, Mr. McLaughlin. Maybe you could accompany me for my visit?" I nearly fell to my knees as pain shot through my middle. He shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Bulette. This is no affair for a man to be tangled up in. The doctor would make me leave anyhow." He held onto my hands and squeezed. "It'll be alright. You're sick, and his job is to make you well again. I'll be here."

When I walked through the door, a bell rang. I heard the abrupt end of someone snoring. Half the men in this town spent their days sleeping while the rest of them did the hard work, seemed like. When the doctor met me near the door, his white hair was flat against his skull on one side and sticking straight out on the other. Lines from his pillow marked an X into his cheek, which was so pink it looked as if he had applied rouge.

"Apologies. I was taking a rest before my afternoon constitutional. What can I help you with?"

"I am unwell."

"I assumed as much," he said and laughed. I had thought of what I would say, but now that I was in front of him, I did not know exactly how to characterize my predicament.

"There is something in me, and I need it to not be." I sat down in the chair near the doctor, though I had not been invited to do so.

"Did you drink the water before boiling it? There are these bugs in there so small you can't see them, and they'll stay in your stomach as long as they can. Make you sicker than a wild hog. Animals living in animals, that's how they've figured it in Italy."

“No. It is something else that needs getting rid of.”

He screwed up his face, furrowed his eyebrows so that they nearly met in the middle.

“No need for embarrassment here. Some prunes will do the trick, get everything moving through you right quick.” When I did not respond, he added, “It’ll make the train leave the station, if you get my meaning.”

“I am employed on D Street.”

“I see.” He maneuvered quickly around the room, searching for something. He dug through his medical bag, throwing items clear over his shoulder, which seemed careless to me. Metal instruments covered the floor. I had to move from the chair for fear that one of them, especially a sharp one, would hit me. He pulled a small pouch from a box atop the shelf on his wall. “Here it is.”

He threw the pouch at me, which I was not prepared to catch. I picked it up from the floor and dusted it off.

“I also am having pain,” I said, clutching the small pouch against my stomach.

“Then, some of your work might already be done for you. Put about half of those herbs in some boiling water. You should be rid of the child by tomorrow. If you do not bleed by then, use the other half.” He looked angry enough to spit. He reached his hand out for payment, and I pressed the coins into his palm.

“It was a mistake. I did not intend for it to happen,” I said.

“They always say that. I’m in the business of fixing people up, so the next time you come to me, it’d better not be to harm an innocent child.”

“I am a woman of faith,” I lied. He laughed the same loud laugh as before and shooed me out the door. I cried big tears as I ran from the house. I scanned the street and could not see Mr. McLaughlin. Instead, I saw a few men sitting outside of the saloon across the road and felt like they

could see the pouch in my hand, and further, could tell what its contents were intended to do. I hid the pouch in a small satchel that could be concealed within my skirt.

I quickened my pace, though the stabs of pain in my stomach made it difficult to walk in my usual fashion. I cursed Mr. McLaughlin for saying he would wait and then going back on his word. I longed to see Annabel. I wished I could transport myself back home where Mother would let me eat the buttercream she had churned. Thinking of her made my tears come faster. Her heart would break down the middle to know that I may be with a child and without a husband.

Then, I saw the white hat I knew to belong to Mr. McLaughlin. He turned toward me and was holding a bouquet of wildflowers. He must have walked all the way to the meadow past the hillside to retrieve them. The sight of him holding flowers dried my tears but did not relieve the pain I was still carrying with me.

October 4, 1863

Dear Josephine,

I have fallen ill and regret to say that I may be out of work for some time. Please send any money that you can spare. And please do not tell my mother of this request. She need not worry. Please also forgive the curtness of this missive. I have little time to write. Today is dark, but tomorrow will be brighter. The sun always keeps its promise to shine.

All my love,

Julia

Chapter 14

Nellie chose not to respond to the reporter's interview requests from about what happened on the overpass, partly because she didn't listen to the voicemails until three days after the fact and mostly because she had not yet processed what had happened. She didn't even get the man's name before he was enveloped by the growing crowd of first responders. Gramp said he was worried that she was shaken up, but she knew that the real reason he made them leave in a hurry was because he didn't want his name or picture in the newspaper.

On Monday, Nellie didn't start work on her project until the late morning. She'd stayed up late talking to Bill on the phone. They talked until her cell phone was hot to the touch, burning her earlobe as she balanced it on the side of her face while lying on the couch. He talked about the ranch and how his father made him butcher his first steer when he was young and weak, not even strong enough to cut through the gristle. She told him about the memory of her mother in Williamsburg continually reappearing behind her eyes like a tension headache. As they learned each other's histories, she made note of the ways they intersected, imagined them at some point becoming a shared story. She kept her phone charged and promised herself that she'd pick up a few substitute jobs the next week. Though she didn't keep close track of her credit card spending, with some rough estimating, she knew she was close to them being maxed out. And she couldn't pay her rent on a credit card anyhow.

Today, though, she wanted to dig into her research project. She'd continue her exploration of the relationship between women and work in the Comstock. She posted up at one of the public computers at the library and did some neck stretches before reading through the digital archives. As often happened, though she started with a clear research task, what she was actually looking for

became murky as her curiosity took her in different directions. Soon, maybe because of her worry about the Berkshire research, she found herself researching the longstanding relationship between politicians and mining interests³⁶. Maybe the role of women specifically as mediators in that relationship could be one of the final chapters in the book. There were too many gaps in the digital newspaper archives, and she needed to find more primary materials anyway, so she packed up and drove to the Historical Society. Emory intercepted her as soon as she walked through the front door.

“I am so screwed,” he said. He smoothed the front of his polo, which had wrinkles that spanned the entire front side in crisscrossing evidence of the fact he’d likely pulled it directly from his laundry bin. “They’re cutting me down to part-time.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. You still have loans too, right?”

“Yeah, and I just leased a new car. I got a Tesla after they opened up their battery factory in Stead.”

“Aren’t the cheapest ones like fifty grand?”

“I think thirty-eight out the door, but since I’m leasing, I only know what my monthly payment is.”

“That’s one way to go about it,” she said.

“The only way. Only worrying about what’s due each month is a good way to practice mindfulness. If you think about it, I’m kind of following Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path.”

³⁶ Around 1880, the Comstock bonanza had turned into a borrasca, which sank the economy of the entire state of Nevada. The population dwindled from 62,000 in 1880 to 42,000 in 1900. The decrease in population and wealth had political implications, as voters chose a new entity over the two political parties. In 1892, the Silver Party, which focused on using unlimited silver coin production to restore prosperity, was born.

She laughed. Emory was easy to talk to; he struck a nice balance between self-awareness, self-deprecation, and half-earned confidence. He pushed his thick, dark curls out of his eyes. They stayed where he'd pushed them.

“Any other job prospects?”

“Not a paying one. Or at least not one that pays in money. I've been writing western fanfics.”

“What's a fanfic?”

“Man, Nellie, you really need to enter this century at some point. It's where you take the characters from books and rewrite their stories. Usually, it's with YA books, so what I'm doing is really new. Honestly, I think you might see what I'm writing in Oprah's Book Club at some point.”

“I'll get a signed copy for free, right?”

“You'll get the link for free and then will buy the hard copy after some big-time agent discovers it and begs to represent my brilliant work.”

“Dream big, Emory.”

Nellie sat at her usual work area in the research library and rearranged her supplies. Another research library regular sat at one of the nearby tables where Meredith had already laid out some of the materials he'd requested. A cursory look revealed he was researching the same time period she was. Obviously, they were not in competition, but she felt a kind of ownership over her research interests. These were her discoveries to make. The slight sense of competition motivated her to put a list together to get her research and life back on track.

- 1) *Redraft manuscript outline*
- 2) *Flesh out first chapter outline, focusing on the cemetery*
- 3) *Brainstorm journals to publish ch. 1 in*
- 4) *Try to increase credit card limits*

After some work on the outline, she grabbed her leather messenger bag (1972) from the locker, pulled out her address book and called Mel, a fellow student from graduate school who'd gone on to become an archaeologist. One of the other library researchers called over Meredith to help him load the microfilm. His hand tremored too much for him to do it himself.

Nellie asked to speak with Mel, and the man who'd answered asked if he could put her on hold. She could tell that he was just holding his hand over the receiver as he shouted out that a lady was asking for Mel. There was some back and forth before she finally heard Mel on the line.

"Melinda speaking."

"Hi Mel. It's Nellie." No response. "From grad school. We took a seminar together on Nevada history with Professor Briar." No response. "You borrowed one of my Victorian gowns the Halloween you dressed up as Marie Curie."

"Nellie! Oh my god, I haven't heard from you in forever!"

"I know. I've been so busy with work that I've hardly kept up with anyone from school. Is your firm still taking on contract work? I know you all have worked with other people at Western Cultural Management, but I'd love to have you on a personal project if possible."

"I'd have to talk to my supervisor about it. Depending on the scope, I might be able to. Our budget got slashed, so we're hardly doing any fieldwork now. I can try to make a case for it, though." Her voice sounded just as chipper as it had the morning after she'd returned Nellie's dress, which she'd gotten dry cleaned after spilling red wine all over its front.

"Sounds great!" Nellie tried to match her tone. Mel was one of those people who uses phrases like "the silver lining is" and "on the bright side" even in the direst circumstances without an ounce of irony. When she nearly dropped out of school because she was sexually assaulted by a man in their program (one of the many who specialized in World War II history) and then lost her

father to cancer in the same semester, she told Nellie that in the face of those tragedies, writing a paper about colonialism and antiquities trafficking seemed completely doable by comparison.

When Nellie got home after work, she charged her cell phone battery enough to call Bill and invite him over. After he agreed, she did some furniture rearranging. She tried the Dutchesse Brisée chaise lounge (1899) in the corner of the living room and then swapped it with her Milo Baughman midcentury sofa (1971). It didn't look quite right, so she put the sofa back where it was and swapped the chaise lounge with the credenza. By the end, she was dripping sweat and saw that the furniture's feet had drawn indentations into the fake hardwood floors.

As Mel would say, on the bright side of Jack stealing from her, she finally had enough room to bring the bar cart she'd bought at an estate sale into the living room. She placed two crystal tumblers on the cart and retrieved the few bottles of liquor she normally stored on top of the refrigerator. The living room looked perfect: eclectic but not too busy, interesting but functional.

She walked to the collection of mailboxes near the covered parking lot to squeeze in one final task before Bill arrived.

"Going to a party tonight?" a neighbor she didn't recognize asked as she unlocked her mailbox's small metal door.

"No, I'm in for the night," she explained.

"I just thought because of—" He moved his hand in a broad circle. They both looked down at what she was wearing, an elaborately embroidered tunic (1960s), corduroy pants (date unknown), and T-strap kitten heels (1926). "Looked like an outfit for a costume party is all."

"It's vintage," she said. He was wearing a t-shirt that was too tight around his middle, an image of a motorcycle stretched so that the tires were ovals. When he turned around, she saw that the back read, "If you're reading this, the bitch fell off."

She collected her mail, scanned through all of the red letters screaming in bold font. FINAL NOTICE, OPEN UPON RECEIPT, URGENT. Inside her apartment, she placed them alongside all of the others from credit card companies in her Edwardian oak rolltop desk (1910).

One letter wasn't like the rest. She didn't recognize the handwriting in the address portion; each line skewed to an upward angle. The envelope was mustard yellow, and she could tell by the thickness that there was a card inside. The only person who used to send her letters was her grandmother. Her throat tightened as she placed the envelope on her kitchen counter. She'd open it after he left.

Bill knocked too loudly on her door before jiggling the handle. She rushed to let him in, and as soon as she did, he walked past her. He had both of his hands laced behind his head and didn't say hello. Instead, he paced around in her living room.

"Everything okay?"

"No." He continued pacing, then sat on the chaise and bounced his heels. She poured him two fingers of bourbon and sat next to him. "Sorry. I just got some news that I wasn't ready for."

She scanned through the worst possible scenarios. He'd lost his job. Someone in his family had died. There'd been another accident. She handed him the drink, and he shook his head in refusal, but then drank from it anyway. He wasn't wearing his usual jacket. Instead, he wore a plain white T-shirt and jeans that didn't fit right. The shoelaces on his right tennis shoe were untied. She filled up a glass of water and put it on the coffee table in front of them. Bill swirled his drink around so that the bourbon chased itself in the thick glass' base. "I'm not getting my monthly allowance anymore."

"Allowance?" Her eyes widened. She pictured a chore chart that hung up on a refrigerator, gold stars marking whether he'd picked up his room and cleaned up after the dog.

“My uncle is cutting us off. The campaign is more expensive than he thought, and he can’t afford to keep paying his nieces and nephews their monthly allowance³⁷. We all counted on that to get by.”

“He gave all of you an allowance?” The last word echoed in Nellie’s mind. He looked like an embarrassed teenager who’d just returned from gym class and hadn’t had a chance to fully change back into his street clothes.

“Yeah.” He downed the rest of the bourbon and looked at Nellie as if she’d asked him a question that had an obvious answer. “He’s made a ton of money in real estate, and he wants us to eventually help take over his business instead of working at the ranch.”

“So, he’s trying to incentivize you to work for him instead of working out in Washoe?”

“He’s a really smart businessman.” Bill stood up to pour himself another drink. “I don’t know how I’ll make rent or even get groceries for the month. That was a big part of my budget.” She recognized his expression as the one that Jack would make right before he criticized her spending habits and then asked her for money.

“My financial situation has been precarious lately too.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. It might be time to get an actual job. Put those degrees to work,” Bill said, looking past her left shoulder. It seemed like he was reading off of cue cards set up in the corner of the living room. “I’m only working part-time right now. And it’s only on commission, so I’ll have to hustle to close more deals. What’s going on with us, by the way?” Anger edged his voice.

“What do you mean?”

³⁷ Sidonie Gruenberg, a parenting expert, popularized the concept of an allowance in 1912. She criticized American parents for arbitrarily enforcing Puritan ideals and in an address on behalf of the department store Macy’s, she argued in favor of parents buying toys for their kids instead.

“We haven’t slept together yet, and it’s been weeks. Like are we dating or what?”

“Or what,” she snapped before considering the response’s implications. He swallowed his bourbon and slammed the glass on the drink cart. When the door shut behind him on his way out, she felt a complicated emptiness somewhere between freedom and loneliness.

Chapter 15

Nellie gathered everything that Bill had left at her apartment, artifacts of their short-lived relationship, and put them in the corner of her closet. He'd left a leather jacket, a lighter engraved with the silhouette of a bighorn sheep, and a hopeful stack of business cards. She'd wait until he contacted her to retrieve them. She folded the photos from Virginia city in half before throwing them in the trash. After a moment, she retrieved one of the wallet-sized photos from the bin and stored it in the rolltop desk.

It began to rain--always a welcome sight, sound, and smell in the desert. She brewed a cup of tea and sat at the desk that she'd bought with the loose plan of sitting there to write her family's history as a gift to Gramp. There really wasn't anything stopping her from writing that history. It was not for lack of time that the desk and project stored within it had begun to collect dust. Her social life was as spare as the desk's contents. Only two drawers were in use, the ones that housed all of the past-due bills. She'd grown especially fond of the desk for helping her secret those away. She opened and shut the drawer before really examining how many warnings had stacked up with a mortician's detachment. That is where the dead bodies lay, the debts she hoped would haunt corporate profit/loss statements.

She imagined someone with the property management company discovering her body after whoever had just moved into the apartment next door complained about a smell. After her remains were taken care of, the other remains of her—letters and photos and curated collections—would be taken care of too. She would become a task and then a story as the man described what he'd gathered about her life's plot arc to his family that night. She took a moment to think about whether this would be a sad ending (the rain often steeped her in moody contemplation) and ultimately

decided that it would be sad, but not tragic. The sadness of someone using a buy one, get one free entree coupon for herself to avoid cooking or someone receiving their own love letter with a red stamp that instructs RETURN TO SENDER. A small sadness.

Wind rolling off of the nearby mountainside rattled the single pane kitchen window in time with the tea kettle's scream. Her apartment felt alive in its resistance to the elements pelting it with water and wind. As she plunged the tea bag into the water and let it bob up and down, she watched a group of kids playing soccer on the shared yard outside. This was probably one of the first times they'd gotten to break in their shiny raincoats that'd been bought for them when they were smaller. Their sleeves didn't cover the length of their forearm to their wrists. The girl, maybe five, laughed as the boy, maybe eight, kicked the ball past her. He was demonstrating his dribbling skills for a small audience as he called out for someone behind the nearby window to "watch this!" Nellie could see that his parents were not watching, so she served as his new audience, applauding after an especially impressive kick sent the soccer ball through the rain.

The yellow envelope on her kitchen counter had been calling to her all morning, but she'd intentionally placed it under her lucite napkin holder (1958) so that she might be surprised by it later. She knew it probably wasn't anything special, maybe a promotion from an insurance company in the fashion of a birthday card, printed cursive meant to look like it was written by an invested employee's hand. Or perhaps it was a thank you card from Gramp, who might think that putting his wishes for her not to worry about him in words may have the power that his verbal wishes lacked.

Using the thin blade of her letter opener (1987), she sliced the top of the envelope and when she pulled the card from inside, newspaper clippings fell out onto the counter. The card featured a portrait of Marilyn Monroe she hadn't seen before, an intimate one in black and white where she peered at her reflection in the vanity mirror. The inside was blank, save for the note that read, *I'm*

sorry. At first, she couldn't tell what connected all of the clippings until she realized they all had something to do with her: community page articles about her work with the nonprofit Reno Restored, which brought old buildings back to the life they once had, a list of the area's high school



Mapes Hotel: Special Collections, University of Nevada, Reno

valedictorians, a feature about local reactions to developers' plans to put a high-rise condo on the Truckee's edge where the Mapes Hotel once stood. At first, she thought it was from Bill, which didn't make sense; his face was just the first that materialized in her recent recollections.

She heard the boy outside crying. It was clear that his cries were an intensified effort to get his parents' attention after sliding and falling onto the wet grass.

Of course it wasn't from Bill. It was from Jack, who, despite realizing that she wouldn't sell the table, had finally decided to apologize and make things right. He was also very dramatic, and this was an attempt to keep up an air of mystery. He'd seen the cutout of Marilyn Monroe in Gramp's pawn shop and had joked that the cutout would make the perfect girlfriend.

She couldn't decide if the gesture was endearing or creepy, and after imagining him digging through decades of newspapers to piece together her personal history, she landed on creepy. He'd once cut a lock³⁸ of her hair while she was sleeping and presented it to her in a velvet box normally reserved for fine jewelry.

³⁸ Keeping hair locks as mementos of a loved one became especially popular during the Victorian era. Saving hair wasn't always a romantic gesture, though. A lock of Beethoven's hair that was cut during this period (1827) was auctioned off in 1994. An analysis of the hair determined that his lifelong illness was caused by lead poisoning.

She often analyzed what went wrong in her relationship with Jack using data: pie charts and bar graphs measuring and assessing their failures as a couple. None of that data ever fully explained why he left. The equations of how much he took and how much she gave were always balanced. The more she gave, the more he took. What was his plan with this card? What kind of future did he see for them? She tried to imagine a future with him, but each imagined scenario was out of focus and hard to see, like a dream where you're trying to read something but can't quite make out the letters.

#

Her car pattered all the way up Geiger Grade, and when she finally parked in Virginia City, one plume of black smoke escaped from her tailpipe in what looked like a comic book strip illustration. She'd have to put the car in neutral for most of the drive back to ease the poor machine's workload. Mel pulled up in a Prius that looked like it'd just been washed by hand. She was wearing hiking boots and well-fitting jeans, a cotton T-shirt French tucked in above the button in her waistband. Nellie looked over at her car, then down at her bell bottom jeans and felt like a version of Mel that'd stepped into a time machine and was disappointed with what she saw when she stepped out.

"Absolutely love it!" she said as she grabbed two canvas bags of equipment from the hatchback. "You always had the best outfits."

"Can I help with that?" Nellie reached for one of the bags, showcasing the arm cuff fashioned into a silver snake she'd recently gotten at Gramp's shop. She nodded, and they walked to the cemetery, winding around the tourists clustered together to pose for pictures on the wooden plank sidewalks.

"I'm excited to be back up here. I haven't been since our group came up for that visual surveying exercise at Gold Hill. That's about all we can do here today as well. I have the radar

equipment, but we can't go poking around burial sites or anything. I'm not here in any official capacity.”

Nellie's heart sagged. She didn't know what she'd expected in the two days since she'd called to ask for help. Navigating through the endless bureaucratic hoops at Western Cultural Management would have taken months. But curiosity did strange things to her. Once a project like this one took hold of her attention, there was no way to let it go. She had once read about a researcher working in the Gadchiroli Forest who'd heard a scratching sound in his head. He thought he was going insane at his isolated outpost, but the sound turned out to be from a botfly that'd hatched in his scalp wound. Nellie's research obsessions gave her a similar sensory experience. Like an earworm, the fastest way to get rid of them was to indulge them.

She told herself that she could use this research in the book project, but really she wanted to dig into this one corner of history to unearth the kinds of answers that are only revealed after someone's death. The materials gathered during someone's life only told part of their story. She led Mel to the area with the wooden crosses. It was hidden behind a jagged line of sagebrush.

“Isn't it strange?” Nellie asked, as they both crouched down to examine the area. Billowy clouds cast stretched shadows that snaked across the valley's floor with surprising speed.

“It is strange,” she said, pausing between each word. She stepped closer to the grave sites. This cemetery had long ago transformed from a place for people to mourn and pay their respects to a tourist attraction most popular around Halloween. Teenagers with little else to entertain them in the small city drank malt liquor behind the cemetery, the evidence of which in the bottles and cans cast down the hillside. Nearby, a couple looked at a glossy brochure and pointed to where Nellie and Mel stood. This was likely one of the optional stops on the recurring bar crawl. The woman, decked out in a floppy suede hat and knee-high boots in the same shade posed as if she were drinking from

the capped bottle of sarsaparilla in her hand³⁹. Maybe they weren't part of the bar crawl. Maybe they were scouting out wedding venues. Couples can get married at the Silver Terrace cemeteries for \$275, and the fee is tax deductible. Mel scowled at them.

“Don't they look like genuine markings?” Nellie asked. Mel nodded and took out her radar equipment to see if she could chart out what lay beneath the shrubs and dirt. They both looked over their shoulders before she flipped on the ground penetrating radar even though they wouldn't get in trouble for what they were doing. It was wrong; they needed permits or at least permission from someone from the Comstock Cemetery Foundation⁴⁰, but no one was policing this one. Many of the remains had been moved to nearby cemeteries, but the tourist commission had claimed this one for its own. The markers now marked historical figures that never actually existed, their names plucked from westerns. As Nellie stood looking at a nearby wooden cross, tilted at an angle so that it only hovered above the ground, she wondered at the word “remains.” What remains of the people buried in pine boxes in that city had long since deteriorated, become part of the landscape beneath the sagebrush's shallow roots. The other remains—records and photos and journal entries—lived on well after people's physical bodies were absorbed by the Earth.

“There's something here,” Mel said. Nellie could see a familiar look on her face. It was the reason she'd called her in the first place. A little bit of curiosity took her a long way, and she could work for hours uninterrupted when something captured her interest. While studying for their

³⁹ Popular in the 19th century, “Sarsaparilla” comes from the Spanish word for “brambly vine.” The Spanish learned of the plant's medicinal benefits (it was used to treat issues of the blood and skin) from Indigenous people and brought sarsaparilla to Europe. Now, one of the microbreweries with a wild west aesthetic on the outskirts of Reno—aged barrels for cocktail tables and bales of hay for beer garden seating—serves it on tap.

⁴⁰ The Comstock Cemetery Foundation's stated mission is to “restore the gardens of the past by preserving the historic cemeteries located on the Comstock within the Virginia City National Landmark.” For every bottle sold of Virginia City's official spirit, Cemetery Gin, \$1 is donated to the foundation.

antiquities final, she told Nellie about an hours-long detour to explore the Hellenic religion of Dionysian Mysteries, which included rituals with mind-altering substances to remove inhibitions and return followers to their natural states. “Two things, actually.” She moved the GPR machine with such care that it looked to be floating.

“What do they look like?”

“Can’t tell that much from this. I can only see if something is there, not the shape or anything. But it seems to be quite shallow.”

“That’s the end of it then, right?”

Even if it was shallow, there was no way they could move forward without getting approval from the foundation. The line between satisfying one’s archaeological curiosity and being a grave robber is a thin one.

“We’ll just come back after sunset,” she said, lips curved in an impish smile.

“You could get in serious trouble for this.” Nellie crossed her arms in maternal reproach even though she was relieved that Mel wasn’t ready to give up on the project yet.

“They don’t have any more of a right to this place than we do. And by trying to dig up the truth, we’re paying our respects in a way that people walking around the graves doing photo shoots aren’t.” Her anger brought a faint flush to her cheeks, and as she spoke, they were both convinced by her.

#

They watched the sun set from the Bucket of Blood’s valley-facing window. Electric streaks of pink and purple advertised the area’s alien beauty. Nellie’s stomach felt uneasy, but they finished their beers served in frosted mugs in industrious fashion.

A mother nearby gave her two teenage sons an option in their keepsakes from the giftshop, which took the form of a few items hung up behind the bar—mostly T-shirts. They fought until they made their decisions, one choosing a long-sleeved black shirt that featured a skeleton smoking a cigarette at the bar and the other sulkily deciding on nothing after the bartender said the swords crossed in an X were not for sale.

“I’m surprised they’re giving him the royal treatment,” Mel said. Nellie looked past the disappointed teenager to see a man who looked vaguely familiar. The bartender, a woman wearing a low cut ribbed tanktop and denim cutoff shorts, climbed a ladder to get a bottle expensive enough to warrant its placement on the top shelf.

“I thought those were just for show,” Nellie said. The woman got up on her tiptoes so that her calf muscle, now defined, hardened into a mound beneath the back of her knee, a sight that was not lost on the vaguely familiar man. The guy standing next to him raised his eyebrows at him as the woman nearly toppled off the ladder.

She retrieved the crystal bottle and measured out two shots. This was not the kind of whiskey one measured by eyeballing it.

“So how about it?” the sidekick asked. “You give us these for free and then you tell your kids—or grandkids—that you served the future mayor.” The woman smiled the kind of powerful smile that only a weathered bartender can give, the kind that makes men shrink into themselves and women suddenly become self-conscious of their makeup. The dig about her age clearly had rolled off her like the condensation on their once frosty mugs.

“How about this. You pay me the sixty bucks for those shots and then I don’t tell everyone what an asshole you are.”

That's why he'd looked familiar, his face plastered all over neon blue campaign signs, his name boxed in amidst white stars. Surprisingly, he was better looking in person. Nellie's stomach lurched as she thought about Gram that night he was supposed to be at his poker game. She thought of how his black eye eventually turned a sickly green and how she'd successfully suppressed that memory and the task she'd been assigned until then. The election was a month away, which meant the window for her to dig up dirt was narrowing by the day. She knew that she needed to act soon, but it'd all been buried by more pressing needs—finding a way to get more hours somewhere or picking up more sub jobs to quiet the final notices yelling from their envelope windows. But really, she didn't take the men seriously. She guessed this was just one of many plans they had in the works to take Berkshire down. Or maybe they weren't trying to take him down at all and just wanted to scare her and Gram. Besides, how much could a local politician do to shape Reno's landscape?

“I mean, I could also tell people what an asshole he is,” Mel whispered.

“Really?” Nellie asked, trying and failing to conceal the eagerness in her voice.

“Before he died, my dad did some work with him. My dad was working on a housing assistance program at the time, and he found out that Berkshire was the one who concocted the plan to bus unsheltered people out of downtown by promising support, but then loading them onto charter buses, paying their one-way fare to the Bay Area. He funded the project himself and called it Renew Reno.”

Berkshire looked in their direction, and Nellie worried he'd heard them even though there was no way he could over the band that'd begun warming up on the stage.

“That's awful,” Nellie said. “I hadn't heard anything about that, but he seems like the type who'd see human beings' existence as a mess to be cleaned up.”

“We know all about him at work from how well he could find loopholes to avoid having us interfere in his development project in Midtown. My supervisor suspects that the new wax salon and smoothie place were built right on top of the foundation of a 19th century trading post we were supposed to survey.”

Nellie could see Mel’s resolve to return to the cemetery that night in her pink cheeks.

“Some people have no interest in the history that’s right beneath their feet,” Nellie said as she brought their empty mugs back to the bar, halfway hoping that he’d heard her. He and the man he was with were scrolling through pictures of a sharp-featured woman wearing a crop top on his phone, laughing as they described her with varying levels of hyperbole. The hottest woman they’d ever seen. The finest piece of ass on the planet.

Nellie shuffled through her stack of credit cards before selecting the one she thought had the most room on it and asked to close out their tab.

“Didn’t go through, hon,” The bartender said. She patiently tried another three. More and more eyes landed on her as the transaction continued on. Mel rescued her by setting a twenty-dollar bill on the bar top. Nellie apologized and stuffed her cards back into her wallet as embarrassment pricked at her chest. She could feel the red splotches bloom on her skin.

“Sorry again. I wanted it to be my treat.”

“No need to apologize. Probably just an issue with the card reader.”

Mel glared at the men before plunging a five into the band’s tip jar and leading the way back to the cemetery.

Chapter 16

October 21, 1863

A fortnight has passed, and yet my mind continues to return to the first time Mr. McLaughlin held me around the waist. It took me a moment to realize that he was not making an advance but was instead serving as the only reason I was standing upright. I had gone faint, it seemed. The cold air threatened winter, but the chill awakened me, brought me to stand firm on my feet.

“I apologize,” I said. He steadied me as one might prop up a doll in her stand.

“No need for apologies. You looked like a ghost coming out of there. Thought you might need some help. Is it your belly?”

How did he know? I looked down to survey whether or not my middle had begun to curve outward and was relieved when I saw that it did not.

“Oh yes, it is the bugs too small to see, the doctor said. Animals inside of animals.” I imagined a worm writhing around in my insides, and it was a surprising relief. Imagining an animal instead of a human child acted as a salve on my irritated conscience, though I suppose we are all animals in the end. The flowers Mr. McLaughlin had been holding were strewn about on the ground, brilliant pinks and yellows already muted by a layer of dust. I bent over to pick them up, but the pain once again shot through me. Mr. McLaughlin collected them for me, blew on the petals to return their brilliance, and brought them up to my nose. They were not very fragrant, but I said they smelled lovely and tightly wrapped both hands around the stems as if I were a bride, the walkway my aisle.

Though part of me wanted Mr. McLaughlin to stay by my side, I knew that I needed to perform this medicinal treatment on my own. Those days, my body had begun to regularly betray me. He walked me to Madame Raven's. A forceful breeze swept through and awoke a man laying against the building's front. He cursed at the wind in a queer way that made Mr. McLaughlin and me laugh. Once he rolled over and opened his eyes, which protruded from his skull in ghastly fashion, I recognized him as Froggy McGee, the first man who had paid me for my services at Madame Raven's. The recognition intensified my pain. When I was working, I did as Annabel instructed and pretended that I was somewhere else. Here, with Froggy laying on the ground with a dark spot marking where he may have urinated, I could not pretend to be somewhere or someone else.

"Can I come inside?" Mr. McLaughlin asked. Froggy stared at us, but soon mostly closed his eyelids so that only slivers of his eyes were visible.

"I think it best that we have a proper visit on another day when I am in better spirits, Mr. McLaughlin."

"Please call me Pat, as my friends do. I'd like to believe that we're friendly, wouldn't you?"

The pain in my stomach was replaced by fluttering nervousness, but it was fleeting.

"Of course, Pat." I smiled and curtsied deeply before walking inside to see the audience of women who had been watching our goodbye from the other side of the porthole window.

"You be careful," Madame Raven said. He's a slick one, and sometimes the slick ones will get you to forget that they're the ones paying, and you're the one getting paid. He may look modest, but he and his friend were one of the first ones to strike silver."

"He is just a friend." I would not have described him as "slick," and I had always been a good judge of character. "He was simply accompanying me from the doctor." Annabel emerged from one of the back bedrooms, spinning one of her perfect curls in her finger to maintain its shape.

“Ooh la la,” she said, nodding her head at the wildflowers I had forgotten I was carrying.

“I just picked them.” I do not know what compelled me to lie when everyone had just seen and likely heard my exchange with Mr. McLaughlin. Annabel plucked one of them from my hand and placed it behind my ear.

“It suits you,” she said. I resisted a smile and then was overtaken by a sneeze.

“Perhaps not,” I said, gently pulling the flower from behind my ear. “Can I speak with you privately?” I asked Annabel. The herbs I had gotten from the doctor were secured in the satchel hidden in the thick ruffles of my skirt. Back in our room, I revealed the contents and wept, the pain suddenly overtaking my entire being.

“He said to put half of them in boiling water and drink it as a tea. If that does not work, I am to take the remaining half.”

“I must warn you that the taste is much worse than the smell.” Annabel spoke with the confidence of someone with a great deal of experience. It hardly seemed possible as I inhaled the herbs. They smelled rotten, like the animals my father had sometimes left out too long before butchering. Madame brought boiling water to our door. I expected Annabel to try to persuade me out of my decision again, but she did not.

“Don’t worry about that doctor. He’s awfully high on his horse considering he’s the reason one of our girls had to get those very herbs last spring.”

The thought cheered me, but only a little as the smell now climbing from the open pouch was making me queasy. The queasiness and pain twirled together in a terrible dance. I sought refuge by lying on the bed. Annabel prepared the medicine, and I drank eagerly, having convinced myself that this drink would bring me some relief. The taste was not as bad as the smell, which provided its own small relief. I imagined the piping hot liquid working its way through my body to soon turn me

back into who I was before all of this. Annabel touched my tear-stained cheek. In that moment, as in most moments, she looked like an angel, and I was thankful for an angel's touch.

I could feel the liquid working after several minutes and went to the outhouse to check for blood. Nothing was there, which made tears fall down the same paths already trailed down my cheeks. How could I have made such a mistake? What would my family back home think if they knew the line of work I had gotten myself into? All of that book learning for what?

The next morning, after a fitful night, I checked the bedsheets eagerly but disappointment once again sank me. Not a blemish on them. In the common area, Madame was already frying eggs. A dark-skinned man sat at the table, and I wondered if his skin was made dark by sun or by birth. Not many people in that area fit the latter. Indians stay to the outskirts, and Chinamen stay in Chinatown. They all came out looking the same color after working in the mines, and I wondered if this thought had ever occurred to them.

"Madame, may I have your ear for a moment?" I asked. The man at the table smiled at me. He was handsome, thick hair pulled back to the base of his skull, stony features that could have been cut from a boulder.

"You need more tea, dear?" There was a wink in her voice as she reached for the kettle. Soon, the tea was brewed, and I returned to our bedroom to drink it. I hoped that it would work and hoped more fervently that I would be forgiven if it did work. There was a shot outside that interrupted the constant groan of the mining equipment. I started, and my movement awoke Annabel.

"It's early," she said. Sleepiness slitted her eyes.

"Yes, it is." I pulled the quilt over both of us, though I was fully dressed. I could not bring myself to leave the room and face what awaited me in the world outside of our bed.

November 15, 1863

I can no longer tighten my corset over my ever-expanding middle to the degree that I used to. Madame Raven has given me other work since even the most depraved men now refuse to spend the night with a woman who is expecting. She asked that I study under Mr. McLaughlin to learn how to turn the front of our establishment into a gambling hall. My new position has been a blessing, though I worry that Annabel sees it as special treatment.

Tonight, she gifted me a beautiful porcelain pot filled with earth. She told me that there is something planted inside that will bloom the same month the child is born. I had forgotten that it was nearly Christmastime and did not have a gift to give Annabel. I had planned to create a beautiful beaded headband similar to one I had seen worn by one of the prospector's wives, but such an undertaking would take weeks. I looked at Annabel, empty handed, as I thanked her for her gift.

"Yours will be ready soon," I promised.

"Don't you worry. I don't need a thing! I was too excited to wait until Christmas." Though her voice was bright, something like sadness clouded her eyes.

"It will be worth the wait." I hugged her tight, the boning of our corsets pressed together.

Mr. McLaughlin arrived and escorted me to three different establishments to observe how they were run. There was a heaviness in the air along C Street as we followed the paths carved into the snow by other people's boots. The last saloon we entered was dark. Only half of the oil lamps were lit. Despite the darkness, there was a tremendous energy in the place.

"You come to play?" one man asked. I could not tell if he was a dealer or a player, but I guessed the former. His left arm hung in a sling of yellowed linen fabric.

“I always come to play.” He took a banknote from his pocket, impressing the dealer. “What exactly are we playing?” he asked, but I could tell from his tone that he knew exactly what they were playing.

“Bucking the tiger,” the dealer said. He smiled in an apparent test.

“Faro’s a favorite of mine.” The other men at the table watched the exchange in silence, some even spitting their chew quietly so that it oozed from their mouths rather than flying from their lips. The sight made my belly turn, and I held my forearms across it both for comfort and concealment.

“Ladies sit over there,” the dealer instructed. He pointed with his good hand to a corner even more dimly lit than the rest of the room. I squinted to see a woman wave me toward her.

“How long before that baby comes?” one woman asked. “Looks like you ain’t too far along.” Her teeth crowded one another so that her lips had to work to cover them. But when in repose, this actually made her more beautiful, giving her a permanent pout.

“I am not with child,” I snapped. “I always round out in the winter months.”

“I’d heard about it, that’s all. I’m Eliza, the lucky soon-to-be bride of that strapping gentleman.” She waved at a man who must have been the oldest there. His white hair curled inward at the ends, and his thick mustache tilted at different angles as he considered his cards.

“When is the wedding?” I asked.

“No date set. We’re playing it by ear, or by year depending on how much longer he makes me wait.” She adjusted the plunging neckline of her gown so that it plunged just a bit deeper. He looked to be a miner, and I thought it unlikely that he was going to wed a sporting woman like Eliza. Many men felt compelled to promise that after they found their favorite woman to bed. They wanted to feel like upstanding men, but more importantly, they wanted to make sure they could lay

claim to their preferred woman much like the prospectors who found the land that promised rich deposits of ore.

“He your fellow?” she asked, nodding in the direction of Mr. McLaughlin, though I couldn’t quite make out where he was.

“He is a professional acquaintance,” I said, “and friend.”

“You look mighty friendly to me.”

“And whose arm do you two belong to?” I asked the two other women across from us. They looked at each other and then at me. They didn’t respond and instead fanned themselves despite the chill in the air. I suppose they liked to be able to do something with their hands. I enjoyed the same comfort as I had recently begun to unconsciously lace my fingers over my stomach. It was nice to have a resting place even though the more comfortable that resting place got, the less comfortable the rest of my body became.

A loud sound cracked through the air, a sound I had heard so many times, one would think I would be used to it by now. But I was not used to it. “Cheat!” someone accused. “Scoundrel!” someone else responded. The dealer stood and held his good arm in the air. Four or five men grappled on the ground. Eliza removed her long satin gloves and held my hand in her own.

“We need to get you out of here.” Her voice was firm, but calm. My heart beat fast, and for a moment, I considered that there was another heartbeat inside of me that might also be quickening with the sound of the shot. I wondered if the beats were in sync or syncopated, and the thought unsteadied me. As soon as the heap of fighting men had moved to the corner farther from us, Eliza spotted our opening and guided me to the front door. I scanned the room for Mr. McLaughlin, whose white hat stood out amongst the black-hatted miners and gamblers. He was securing another man’s arms behind his back.

“It’s okay, Julia. Just a disagreement,” he said. Queerly, he seemed to be on the cusp of laughter. Eliza took me to D Street and invited me to her room, which was also on D Street.

“I need to—”

“Wait for your friend,” she finished.

I nodded and she bid me adieu. Soon, Mr. McLaughlin met me outside, moonlight spotlighting his hat. He patted dust from the front of his pants.

“Animals, the lot of them,” he said. “Without the tender hand of a woman, these men go feral, you know that? Our establishment will be different with rules and expectations. None of this roughhousing every time someone loses a hand they think they should’ve won.”

We walked to the end of D Street and seeing Madame Raven’s place dimly lit made my lower lip quiver. This was no place for a baby. I imagined a diapered infant crawling across the wooden planks, slivers blemishing her unblemished skin. I imagined picking that baby up when men brawled, when gunshots rang out, when smoke plumed out of a mine fire.

“I think I should go back home where I would have help,” I said. Mr. McLaughlin reached for my hand, squeezed it tight. “How can I expect to raise a child here?”

“No,” he said. I pulled my hand from his and stopped walking so that he was a couple of paces ahead of me. The night outlined his slim figure. He turned to face me and then pulled his hat from his head to place it over his chest. “I will raise that child with you. Always wanted one of my own, and I think you’re a very special woman, Ms. Bulette. I think we can make something wonderful here.”

My tears ran freely. I knew we fancied each other, but I did not know the intensity of Mr. McLaughlin’s feelings. Between him and Annabel, perhaps I had the small community I needed to help raise the baby. The wind snuck under my skirt. My breath had turned into small clouds that

floated in front of my face. Cold in the west was different from the cold I knew growing up. Here, it does not chill you to the bone. It makes itself known but does not linger for long. By the morning, the sun will emerge and go to work melting the snow. Then, there will be mud until it dries out. Soon, it will be spring. The smell of sagebrush will fill the air. Clouds will part to make way for the sun's rays, and the wildflowers will turn to face those rays, their bright buds preparing to unfurl when the time is right.

“Do you promise?” I asked.

“I promise. And I believe that a man is only as good as the promises he keeps.”

“Why me? Why choose me when you are desired after by so many women in this town?”

“When you got off that wagon in a place you hardly knew a thing about aside from the hope that you'd have a better path here, you met me and were ready to get started on that path right away. You didn't want to survive, you wanted to thrive. I knew it then, and I know it now.” He wrapped his arms around the small of my back. “What I'm saying, Ms. Bulette, is that you got grit, and I love a woman with grit.”

Rather than walking me back to Madame Raven's as he normally did, he took me back to his house, which was not shared with any other boarders. The house was modest, but it was his alone. If he really was as wealthy as people had told me he was, he was not keen on people knowing it. I sat in the groove carved into a wooden bench with a thick wool blanket folded into quarters on top. He built a fire and delicately unfastened my boots. After he removed them, he positioned my feet near the fire, and we both let ourselves be warmed and mesmerized by the glowing flames.

Chapter 17

It was after midnight when Nellie and Mel returned to the cemetery⁴¹, and the moon was bright. Most of the bars had officially closed, but that didn't stop patrons from ordering drinks and bartenders from serving them. A parade of cars drove by blaring music. They heard the same few pop songs on loop as teenagers drove the main drag. The cemetery was set lower on the hillside, quite a ways from the main streets. Still, it was a risk.

"Is this a good idea?" Nellie asked.

"Probably not," Mel said, "but I don't think that should stop us. I want answers, and doing it the right way will take too long. Better to ask forgiveness than permission, right?" Mel was convincing. Her eyes shone in the moonlight. It was now too cold for either of their outfits to suit the occasion. Nellie should have worn the army fatigues (1956) she liked to wear when doing fieldwork instead of the bell bottoms she had on. She was a pacifist as all people with a background in history scholarship should be, but doing work while wearing those fatigues made her feel like she was giving them a new life and her a new purpose.

"You've got a point there. I also didn't see a security guard posted up like there usually is. It feels like a sign." Mel hadn't packed the right equipment for a dig, which was a relief to Nellie. It felt like their actions were less premeditated. They went to her car, both trying to keep an even pace and steady step as they jaywalked. She dug through her trunk and lifted a hand trowel to her chest, victorious.

⁴¹ Often times, the cemeteries in Western American mining towns were haphazardly constructed, if constructed at all. At the beginning of the Comstock boom in 1859, the dead were often buried in a convenient hole that was sometimes created by exploratory mining.

“Yes, I knew I’d have something in here! My boyfriend always makes fun of my messy car, but it comes in handy. I left this in here after volunteering at the River School. There might be a sweater or jacket on the floor too.” Sure enough, there was a denim jacket rolled into a ball in the footwell. Nellie held it up to her, but she waved it away. “You take it. I run hot.”

Goosebumps covered her arms, while Mel’s remained smooth, so Nellie took her up on her offer.

“This might work too,” she said, rotating a crowbar in her hand.

“Jesus, put that down, Mel. You look like you’re preparing to murder someone. It was Mel. With the crowbar. In the cemetery.” In a thrilling inverse relationship, as Mel’s excitement rose, her precautions decreased. Nellie realized how much she’d missed spending time among people with similar interests aside from Gramp. By this point, Bill was already starting to feel like a distant memory.

Without ever having met him, Nellie decided that Mel’s boyfriend wasn’t good enough for her. She wrapped the crowbar in a towel, along with the small shovel and motioned for them to cross the street. Mel looked more suspicious than she would have had she just carried them both openly, but Nellie didn’t say anything.

Back at the cemetery, they hopped the now locked gates and then took turns digging by the moonlight. One of them stood guard while the other delicately moved earth. Even with Mel’s equipment, they couldn’t tell exactly how far down the artifact was, and they didn’t want to risk damaging whatever had been buried. Nellie set her expectations low. Artifacts were often just another time period’s junk that historians and archaeologists fawned over. For one class in college, they’d been allowed to observe a dig site of a California mission. Someone found something, and the rest of the crew gathered around until the lead, a paunchy man in his sixties, laughed and explained

that what'd been found was a bedpan from the early 1900s. The young man who'd found it did not laugh. He'd thought it was a sculpture used in religious ceremonies.

As Mel dug, Nellie kept watch. Sound carried easily down the hill, and she could still hear the distant sounds of someone's car speakers.

"I've got something," Mel said in a decrescendo. She waved for Nellie to come over. She brushed dirt from what looked to be a pine box, but it was hard to tell with all of the hard soil that'd been packed over top of it. Given its small size and the fact that it was only buried about three feet below the surface, Nellie doubted that this was a grave site. At that point, they were both hoping for an experience closer to the bedpan discovery than actually finding a body. "Should we take it out?" They both looked to the nearest street, which was empty. A distant streetlamp flickered until the bulb eventually gave up.

"You should be able to open the box with that crowbar, right?" Nellie asked.

"Well, I probably could open it, but *should* we?"

"Why shouldn't we? Whatever story is contained in that box will stay buried if we don't examine what's inside. Don't you think we owe it to whoever belongs to that story to finish what we've started?" Nellie had halfway started to believe what she was saying, but she wasn't quite convinced yet. Excitement and fear swirled together to dizzying effect. A breeze kicked up, which pushed the surrounding loose soil back on top of the box as if the box had summoned the coverage. "What do you think?"

"Well, it goes against just about everything we've learned about the ethical way to do this kind of work, and beyond any moral questions, this is probably all kinds of illegal."

"Let's open it," Nellie interrupted.

"We'll both open it. You hold the bottom of the box steady, and I'll try to pry the top off."

Nellie inspected the box to make sure the gap between her expectations and reality was as narrow as possible. The wood looked aged, but it wasn't rotted, which indicated that it likely wasn't from before the 20th century. However, the nails looked to be square-edged, and those were only used through the late 19th century. As Nellie placed her hands on the side of the box, her heart felt like it was beating in her throat.

Mel pried one side of the box open with a loud crack.

"What do you think you're doing?" someone yelled from nearby. They swore in unison, and Mel placed the box back in its hole as carefully and quickly as she could. They hid behind the nearest, tallest stone monument. The man didn't look like someone working in any official capacity. He wore what looked like a cattleman hat and a long duster, maybe or maybe not a costume. He kicked at something on the concrete walk on the other side of the gate. "She's my kid too."

Mel and Nellie looked at each other, relieved to see that there was a flip phone (2007) much like the model Nellie owned in his right hand. His figure was lit by the streetlamp, which shone so brightly, he looked like he was the one being interrogated instead of whoever was on the other side of the call. He'd maybe walked from the RV park nearby seeking privacy in the near-empty desert hillside.

"And I know Judge Ensley personally. His clerk already told me that I'm favored in the custody⁴² case." The man paced in a small circle following the outer limits of where the light shone.

⁴² In Nevada, *Peavey v. Peavey* (1969) authorized courts to use the "tender years" doctrine in custody cases, which stipulated that the child should be placed with the mother unless she was deemed unfit since there was no substitute for a mother's love. The Nevada Supreme Court overruled Peavey's tender years doctrine in *Arnold v. Arnold*, noting that the doctrine was "nothing more than an expression of a culturally enforced bias favoring rigidly and unrealistically defined societal sex roles."

This seemed to be a familiar ritual for him. Soon, he snapped his phone shut and trudged up the steep hill in front of him.

“So many of those family court judges are good old boys,” Mel said, shaking her head. Nellie nodded, vaguely remembering a former coworker who’d battled her ex for custody and ended up with a joint arrangement despite the fact that her ex had left a number of voicemails threatening to kill her and their son. The judge had explained that we all say hateful things when we’re angry, but it’s important for a son to have his father in his life. He’d then asked if the ex watched football to ensure that the custody commitments didn’t interfere with his Thursday, Sunday, or Monday night entertainment.

“It’s a shame,” Nellie said. She reached for the box again. It was as light as a shoe box with one of the shoes missing.

“I don’t know if we should open it,” Mel said. “What do you think?”

“If we don’t, how long will it go undiscovered? This has long since been abandoned as a place of archaeological interest, right?”

“It hasn’t been on our radar since the excavation in the seventies after those lawsuits over Indigenous land⁴³, at least according to the records I had access to.”

Nellie positioned it on the ground next to the hole, and Mel slid the crowbar in the opening she’d already created. They both shivered as she worked at the box. With one final creak of nail being pulled from wood, the box was open.

Inside was a layer of fabric that looked like a wedding veil.

“I feel like we should be wearing gloves,” Nellie said.

⁴³ In 1968, the court case *United States v. Northern Paiute Nation* held that miners working on Indian lands received rights to the land as of the date of entry because the government later retroactively validated their title to that date.

“We should be.” Mel pulled the fabric back to reveal something that made Nellie wretch. The small form looked like a skeleton stretched over with rawhide. Few efforts had been made to preserve the body, but its contours were still clearly identifiable. Enough flesh was still on the bones to tell limb from torso from skull. Nellie smelled rot and wretched again, but she knew this was my mind playing tricks on her. Too much time had passed for there to be much of a smell from feet away. Her mind spun as she thought about who this child had belonged to, whose grave had been trampled over by tourists and ghost hunters. Whoever this child was, it was no longer resting in peace.

“Jesus,” Mel said. “We really shouldn’t have disturbed this site.” They both knew there was a very real possibility that they’d find a body in that box, but their curiosity masquerading as a sense of duty to honor the past had gotten the best of them. Without saying so out loud, they decided to secure the lid and bury it deeper than it’d been buried before.

After several minutes of effort, something other than soil obstructed their downward path. It was another box. They worked to pull it from the ground. This time, they paused before opening it.

“Should we check inside this one?” Nellie asked. Mel gave a solemn nod. This one was smaller and hardly required any effort to open. Inside were several crocheted caps and booties. Mel started to cry as she held one of the bonnets in her hands.

“I miscarried last year. It was early on, but still,” she said. Nellie hugged her as she put the bonnet back in the box.

“Should we rebury this one too?”

“Maybe keep that one out,” Mel said. She pulled her shirt sleeves over her fists and used them to dry her eyes.

“We should get out of here,” Nellie said after they’d patted down the soil on top of the grave. The drive back was mostly silent, save for the staticky voice of a radio host. In the moment his voice cut through the static, he delivered a sermon about the importance of resilience. He quoted from Job 1:21-22. “I left my mother’s womb naked, and I will return to God naked. The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken. May the name of the Lord be blessed.”

“Job really did get a raw deal,” Nellie said. Mel leaned forward to focus on the road. She drifted over the dashed white line, and Nellie worried that Mel’s night vision was as bad as her own.

“Yeah,” she said, her mind clearly elsewhere. They curved around the mountain dotted with pines and sagebrush, down Geiger Grade until they were greeted by the highway and familiar neon lights.

Mel dropped Nellie off at her apartment and gestured for her to take the box from her trunk.

“I’d lose my job,” she said. She turned on the dome light, casting dark circles under her eyes. “I hope you can figure out the stories behind this. Once you do, call me and maybe we can figure out next steps, like how we can return it without anyone finding out.”

“How can I tell their story without anyone finding out?” It was clear by the look on Mel’s face that she was not in the mental space to consider this issue. As with most actions born out of impulse, the choice to unearth a coffin and other artifacts in the middle of the night had not included much consideration of what’d happen afterward.

“Thanks for everything. We should get together another time and do something less illegal.”

Inside, she placed the box next to the card she’d received from Jack and then moved it to the drawer in her desk beneath the ones housing her bills. This also didn’t feel right, so she stored it

under her four Berkey and Gay poster bed (1952). Before allowing herself to fall asleep, she charged her cell phone enough so that the rectangular digital window lit up. She had four voicemails and eight missed calls—all from Gramp except for one call. She started with the most recent one first.

“Hello. This message is for Eleanor. You are listed as the emergency contact for Gregory Robinson. He is currently in our care at Renown Hospital after taking a fall in his apartment.”

As she sat on her bed, the objects in front of her started to blur, as did the words in the voicemail. Thankfully, when she listened to the ones from Gramp, he sounded like his usual self.

“Hi, sweets. I took a nasty spill at my apartment and couldn’t get up, so I had to call an ambulance. Embarrassing stuff, really. Don’t worry, and don’t come down here! They’re going to get me fixed up, and I’ll probably be back home by the time you get this.”

She thought of the night he’d lied about the poker game and left with a black eye. He was old, but not unable to get up from a fall old. She worried that this fall wasn’t from a bout of clumsiness. What if someone had come after him again? What if this was her fault for not getting the information those men had asked for? She called his landline hoping that he was right in his prediction that he would be fixed up by then, but any comfort from hearing his voice was cut by the fact that she’d gotten a machine recording rather than him on the line.

“Friends, leave it at the beep. Enemies, beep off.” She left a message saying she’d come see him and got into her car. The sun was on the cusp of rising, the surrounding mountains brightening from a deep navy to purple. Sleep deprivation weighted her eyelids, but the adrenaline from hearing about Gramp kept her eyes wide enough to see. After some complaint from the ignition, it turned over, and the car started.

The streets were empty aside from the other few drivers coming home from the night shift. Gramp had sometimes worked the night shift the few years when he was a card dealer. When Nellie

was in elementary school, she looked forward to him coming home from those shifts because he'd greet her with a donut or scone from Rosie's Cafe that would otherwise be tossed out.

She parked across the street from the hospital and fished for a dollar to give to the man laying on a grooved metal bench, his extended hand holding onto a paper cup stained with coffee. He lay curled around the piece of metal designed to deter people from resting there⁴⁴. Isn't it punishment enough to try to keep warm out on the streets, vulnerable to human and natural dangers alike?

"God bless," he said as he tried to rearrange himself on the bench. The whites of his eyes were bright, and the circles underneath were dark, which made for a striking contrast—two snowballs in piles of ashes.

Inside, she rushed to the reception area and asked where Gramp's room was.

"Take a deep breath," the woman behind the front desk instructed in a measured voice. Nellie did as she said, not realizing until she spoke that she'd been holding her breath as she walked and was now on the brink of hyperventilating.

"Please. It's important that I see him."

The nurse stood up to show how to get to room 229. Her curved figure competed with the boxy lines of her scrubs. She gave several different directions, lefts and rights at this door and that elevator. Nellie couldn't follow along. Seeing this, the woman walked around the counter and positioned a map between them, then slowly drew a path with her finger. Her blush had been

⁴⁴ The term "hostile architecture" is relatively new, but the practice of designing public spaces in accordance with social engineering ends is not new. It is based on a design philosophy called Crime Prevention through Environmental Design, which was popularized by the beliefs about "defensible space" in the 1970s. There is no evidence that this decreases crime rates.

applied in perfect cherubic circles. Her Crocs were adorned with pins in the shapes of different dog breeds.

“It’ll be okay.” Nellie chose to believe her.

The word “Robinson” was written in black dry erase marker on the board to the right of the room’s doorway. She knocked quietly and, not hearing a response, gently pushed the door open. Gramp was tethered to a number of different machines monitoring and medicating him. His eyes were open enough to show her that he was trying to conceal that she’d woken him up.

“You should be cozy in your bed right now.” His voice was hoarse.

“I was happy to catch a sunrise for once.” Her eyes scanned his thin frame covered by a pale blue sheet, a folded blanket near the foot of the hospital bed. “What happened?”

“Your grandpa is a fool is what happened. You know those boxes I had piled up that you said I should put away. Well, you were right. There was a towel that’d fallen out of one of them when I shifted them around. You know the towel. It’s got a seashell on it. Anyway, I slipped on that. They said it’s a hip fracture. Not much they can do about it aside from giving me whatever magic is in that bag.” He pointed an arthritic finger to the IV.

He was probably lying; providing too many details was his tell.

“You should get some rest while they get you fixed up, Gramp.”

A nurse came in and explained with gentle insistence that he take some Morphine.

“He’s already had some,” Nellie said. The nurse flipped through his chart, which was already several pages long.

“Not yet. He’s a tough guy, this one.”

Gramp and Nellie looked at each other, both knowing that they’d have to talk about why he was hurting. But for now, he could rest.

Chapter 18

Nellie knew that it was time for Gramp to move in with her. It'd been one of the cruel years where the weather skipped right from summer to winter with temperatures plunging and cloudy skies promising winter storms while Halloween decorations still adorned porches. During the winter months, the snow that sheeted the valley floor would be melted by the sun enough to then freeze at night. The ice would be dangerous. His lease term was almost up anyway, and he could hardly afford the rent.

"You're overreacting, sweets," he said once he awoke from his painkiller-induced slumber. His slight slur blurred the distinction between words. A blade of light came in through the window and cut his body in two. Nellie must have slept through shift change because she didn't recognize any of the new nurses who came in.

"Love the pants. Reminds me of what we used to wear when I was a kid," one of the nurses said. The nurse replaced a bag of clear liquid with another bag of clear liquid. She wrote her name, Clara, on the whiteboard in a box marked off by electrical tape which was labeled "attending nurse."

"These are originals, J.C. Penney's signature brand. James Cash Penney who started the store first opened the Golden Rule dry goods store in 1902," Nellie said, trailing off near the end. The nurse was turned away from her, and Gramp was nodding off, the narcotics pulling at his consciousness. The nurse took note of Gramp's vitals and then drew a smiley face next to her name in green marker.

"That's neat," she said. "Or should I say groovy?" She held up her pointer and middle fingers in Vs next to her face. "We still feeling alright, sir?"

Gramp nodded. His smile looked crooked.

“We’ll have him discharged in a few hours. If he’d landed any different, that hip would be much worse off.” She talked over his body as if he were not inhabiting it. He was composed of parts to be prodded, measured, and observed. The room suddenly smelled like disinfectant.

“Don’t you worry about me, sweets. This old bag of bones got rattled around. I’m already feeling better. Nothing’s broken, but the bruises will keep me from modeling panty hose, I imagine.” He smiled, this time straight. Nellie watched the screen that showed his heart rate and thought about when her mother died and she’d overheard him tell his grandmother that his chest hurt so badly, he thought his heart had actually broken down the middle. “Don’t cry, girlie! You know my body will keep on trucking just to spite me.”

Nellie wiped her cheek.

“Would you consider moving in with me? It’s nothing fancy, but you could consider yourself a boarder at my inn.”

“That’d suit me just fine. Now, tell me something interesting from work. Any new discoveries that’ll get you on the bestseller list?”

“I made a discovery, but it wasn’t at work.”

Chapter 19

November 26, 1863

I no longer fit into my dresses and have made do by unfastening the corseted backs and overlaying the area of exposed underthings with cotton. The patterns and fabrics clash, but I do not mind. It has been two months since I began living with Mr. McLaughlin, who insists I call him Pat. He has not even given me a look that would indicate he has designs on me. Though his actions seem honorable, I remain wary of his intentions. Aside from keeping house and preparing the few meals for him I know how to, I have not done anything to pay for my own way. He has provided just about everything for me, save my two day dresses, and soon, even the clothes I wear will be provided by him. He has promised me a heavy wool cloak and thick stockings to keep me warm this winter. Since he struck silver, he told me the least he can do is share luck with me. Just the other week, he said giving me gifts was his way of giving thanks, part of a tradition his family celebrated when he was younger. They would go to church and then eat heaps of potatoes mashed until they were near smooth. And they would eat slow cooked salt pork and cabbage rolls. I tried frying up corn and mashing the potatoes but did not have the right ingredients. We also did not attend church, as my rounding belly known to contain a baby with an unknown father, made the churchgoers uneasy. So, we made the best of it with our dry potatoes and corn patties. I got a good cut of pork from Mr. Geoffries, who kept pigs outside of town past Gold Hill. I near cried watching poor Pat try to swallow the potatoes, which formed a lump in his throat like a rattler that'd swallowed a groundhog.

“Don’t you worry, miss. Thanksgiving is about being thankful for what you have. And I have you,” he said. He pulled out a parcel wrapped in nice, thick paper. I could tell it was from the dress boutique on B Street by the pretty ivory ribbon that quartered the package. I tried to untie the

ribbon, but the knot was too tight. “No need to be precious about it,” he said, pulling a small knife from his belt and cutting the ribbon. Inside were all of the items he had promised me.

“This is all too much. I simply do not know how I can ever repay you for your generosity.” The cloak was made of a lovely black wool. Its beautiful silver buttons like coins shone in the firelight. I stroked the button as if shining it, but it certainly did not require any shining, new as it was.

“When we get our business going, we can work that out. For now, though, you need to stay nice and warm and keep that babe in there comfortable.”

Confused, I looked down. I have been forgetting that I am with child despite my belly growing bigger by the day. I have found that recently, I somehow think about it all of the time and none of the time. It is as if I have worried all of the possible worries for this child, and having run out of those, my mind has chosen to forget about the child altogether. It does not help that the child does not move much and there are no looking glasses in John’s home. I should ask Annabel if this is normal, but I fear seeing her, as I think she will be cross with me for not staying at Madame Raven’s with her.

Pat wrapped the cloak around my shoulders.

“That’s a perfect fit, I’d say,” Pat said. He stood back and surveyed me, which prompted me to do a twirl. He laughed, and I felt ridiculous. Why had I decided to act like a little girl? He lifted my chin up using his pointer finger, and I could feel the roughness of his knuckle. I had been looking down at my buckles like a sullen child. “You’ll be happy one minute and sad the next. That’s what happens when a baby’s on the way, feelings up and down like those peaks and valleys out there.”

I did not understand how he knew so much, but I did not ask questions because that explanation made a lot of sense to me. One minute, I would feel so mad at the man who did this to

me, I could spit. The next minute, I would miss Annabel and my family so much, I would feel my eyes water. And the next minute after that, I would think about this baby, imagine rocking it in my arms, and I would feel excitement, if only faintly.

Pat hugged me. I could smell the fried corn cakes on his breath, a little whiskey mixed in there too. And just like that, I was back to feeling like everything would be alright. I would help Pat with this business idea of his, and he would help me with this baby of mine. We could be a family. I had started to get lost in a daydream when there was a knock—or really more of a banging—on the door.

“You expecting somebody?” Pat asked. I shook my head, suddenly feeling like I was in trouble. He pulled the knife from its leather sheath. It looked longer and wider than it had before. There were no windows except the east-facing wall, so we could not see who had knocked. Pat held up a finger to his lips, pointed with his other hand to the corner where his straw bed was. I crouched down, which did cause me some discomfort, and I could hear the usual hollering outside. Someone shot a gun, and in the distance, the mining equipment sang its usual song. Those noises that I thought I would never become accustomed to had begun to soothe my nerves. So much so that when it went silent and I could hear my own heartbeat, I was fit to be tied.

Pat swung the door open, and from where I crouched, I could see only a white hat in front of Pat’s left shoulder. The knife was soon sheathed once again, and the two men were embracing just as Pat had been embracing me.

“Ma’am,” the gentleman said. He removed his hat and bent at the hip to greet me as I still sat crouched in the corner. Pat’s home was a one-roomer—unlike Madame Raven’s place that was sectioned off into different areas—so no matter where you stood in the house, you could see every corner.

There was something sinister to the man's smile; his teeth were hardly darkened by chew, which struck me as queer. "I see that you've taken up with the finest fellow that Ireland has to offer." I had not until that moment noticed the nature of Mr. McLaughlin's accent. I had heard him accused of not being from around here, but dismissed such accusations, as no one really was from around here except the jack rabbits and sagebrush, and of course the Indians I saw every once in a while since they'd been moved somewhere beyond the bustle of the town.

I stood up and curtsied, feeling a bit silly that I was wearing my cloak inside.

"Pleased to meet you," I said, curtsying once more.

"I wrote you about Ms. Bulette. She's going to do great things in this here city. We're going to create a place for the all-around enjoyment of the men here: brothel on one side that she'll run, gambling hall on the other, a kitchen to get grub and a bar to get drink in the middle." This was the first time I had heard of the plans in their full form. I felt a fool for not seeing sooner what role I played in this imagined new establishment. I remembered him mentioning the tender hand of a woman, and I crossed my arms, hiding those tender hands behind the opposite elbows.

"It's a real smart idea, and I'm ready to stake my claim in it. The prospecting wasn't for me like it is for you. They told me, Alfred, you couldn't find silver if it was in a jewelry maker's shop. But I still got the vision. That's what they don't have. They have their tools, but I have that intuition."

"I know you do. And together, we have the resources to see it through." Pat pulled two glasses from the mantle above the fireplace where the cooking things were stored. The two glasses clinked together as he carried them in one hand and the bottle in the other. "Take a seat."

The two sat in the only chairs available, so I sat on the bench. I tried to chime in that I had concerns about the business, that serving liquor was likely to cause the very roughhousing he'd said

he wanted to avoid. And I only had a few months until the baby came. Certainly that would not be the place for a child to live. At Madame Raven's place, everyone worked where they lived, lived where they worked. Was I to raise my baby alongside men grabbing at women's bodices, drinking themselves silly and arguing over the Faro play that got them knocked out of the game? I felt cold, and a violent shiver overtook me. I put another log onto the fire. It was close to being only embers now. I fanned it with bellows until it grew to the size it had been before. I looked to Pat, half expecting a thank you for tending to the fire.

"I'll keep this place too. Don't you worry yourself about that."

It seemed an eternity ago that he was talking about Thanksgiving and feeling joy just for having me. That joy was not from me, but the possibility for riches that I would help bring him with a surer thing for once the mines dried up. But why me? Why not any of the other women on D Street? My fingers laced over my belly without me instructing them to.

A sad and sinister realization struck me; he had chosen me because I did not have any other prospects. He chose me because he knew I would say yes. The other women could make their own way, but not me. I felt faint, thought about all of the men who I had lain with, their faces morphing so that they all looked like the same man. These men who paid me all looked at least a little like the man standing next to me, and I nearly laughed at the thought. Not a joyous laugh, though.

I longed to be home with my mother and father, but I could not return there either, not with this baby they would call a bastard. Pat and Alfred were laughing and then talking quietly as if swapping secrets, and then laughing again. They carried on like two close friends whose shared past made it easy to fill any silences. I wondered how they had come to know each other. By then, I felt near invisible.

“I must go outside,” I announced. Neither of them acknowledged me as I walked out of the front door. The cold air mixed with my tears as the wind whipped at my face. More tears came. I found my way to Madame Raven’s once again, and when I arrived, I realized that this may be the only place for me. The usual couple of men slept on the front porch, having been kicked out by Madame. Soon, she would come out and click her tongue as she chased them off with her broom. It was all done in jest, so they never became angry when she chased them off as she might a dingy cat that has come around looking for scraps.

November 27, 1863

I spent the night in Annabel’s room after the men had stopped visiting with her. The bed still had their smell on it, but Annabel had spritzed her lovely lavender perfume on the pillows, and I slept just as well as I ever had. I did not even have to ask if I could stay with her. She clutched me in her arms as soon as I walked through the door. It is a small city here, smaller than where I was in California at least, but once people move away from D Street, they rarely come back. It is possible to never cross paths with someone who only lives a few hundred yards away.

I woke up refreshed, though confused at first, having forgotten where I had stayed the night before. “Are you thinking it’s a boy or a girl?” she asked, as she put her hand on my belly. I had not truly considered the possibility until then and tried not to let my prediction turn into hope one way or the other. “I’d say a girl with the way you’re carrying.”

Once Annabel said those words, it felt as if they were true.

“I did feel quite sick at the beginning. That is a sign of a girl as well?”

Annabel nodded, but screwed up her face, and I could tell she knew about as little as I did.

“We must think of names for this little one,” she said, “for a boy or a girl.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “But I am hoping for a girl, one we can dress in knit bonnets. All of the girls here will fawn over her. Perhaps we can pick nice girl names and not so nice boy names to help encourage our outcomes.”

I was not sure what she meant until she suggested, “Rose if it is a girl, and Thorn if it is a boy.” She laughed, and I joined in, though I felt sad to think of a boy with such an awful name.

“Daisy if it is a girl, and Chickweed if it is a boy.” Soon we were doubled over laughing ourselves silly. It was cold in Annabel’s room, so we huddled under the heavy quilt made by her mother’s hand. She did not lay the quilt on her bed until after the men left. I followed the stitches’ paths with my fingers.

“Do you know how to stitch a quilt like this one?”

“Oh sure. I can teach you if you like. This is a tough pattern, but we can start on an easier one, maybe a triangle quilt. And I can show you how to sew bonnets too. I made many a bootie and bonnet in my time. She got out of the bed and put on a robe over her nightshirt. Then, she opened up the heavy trunk at the foot of her bed and pulled out these threaded fruits of her labor. There were too many to count.

“It was a hobby of mine,” she said. “My mama always said it’s best to be prepared, and when I find the right man and settle down, get a little place to call our own, I don’t want to be rushed with my needle and thread, so I’ve stored everything in my hope chest.”

“Who did you make these for?”

“No one.” Her eyes narrowed. “Just a hobby, like I said.” I knew then that Annabel had probably lost at least one baby. I knew too that the life she was dreaming of might not happen for her. I took a moment to mourn whatever dreams I had carried with me all the way across the Great

Plains, the dreams my parents had had when they loaded me up onto a ship from England to the new country.

I held one of the bonnets in my hand.

“That’s my favorite,” Annabel said. “Rose will look cute as a button in it.”

Someone outside was singing in a way that sounded more like hollering, likely someone still drunk from the night before given the early hour. “My lady, she left me, my horse, he kicked me,” he wailed. He shuffled his feet so loudly that I thought he was right outside of the cottage. Soon, his voice faded, replaced by a knock. Madame Raven, looking glamorous as always, peacock feathers adorning her hair, held a letter in her hand. I knew the wax seal straight away. It was from my mother and father.

“Looks like this came for you a while back, Missy. They didn’t even bother to put an address, but one of those Indian boys from out yonder is driving the stagecoach now, brings us letters from all over the place. He asked around until he found you. I didn’t know to tell him otherwise after you left a few weeks back.” Madame Raven fanned herself. It was cold out, so I supposed she was not trying to cool herself so much as move the air so that her peacock feathers moved with it. I snatched the letter from her gloved hands.

“Thank you,” I whispered. Both women positioned themselves behind me, the devil and angel on my shoulders, and tried to peer over to see what had been written. It was difficult to read since the ink looked to have faded some, but I could tell that it was written by someone who normally had good penmanship, but who didn’t under the circumstances. I had accidentally left the bonnet on Annabel’s bed and remembered that this was a terrible omen, leaving a hat on one’s bed like that. It meant that someone was like to die.

All of the words that I needed to know jumped out like a scared cat. Paul, ill, buried, Ophir mine, Virginia City. Madame Raven fanned me as I sat. The wind howled outside, along with the man from earlier. But the singing this time was quieter, beautiful almost. I wanted to hear about his lady and his horse, even if the story was a sad one.

Chapter 20

Gramp looked like the early model La-Z-Boy (1931) that usually housed Nellie's laundry was made for him. He was still weak from his fall two weeks before, and he winced when he pulled back the lever to kick up his feet and recline. His hip and his ego were only bruised, not broken.

"You still haven't told me what you found. Did you strike gold?"

"I'm not sure yet. Maybe seems like gold to somebody." Nellie retrieved the box and began to pry it open.

"This level of excitement is a little too much for this ticker of mine. We might need a drink."

"What about the pain medication? It doesn't seem like a good idea to mix them."

"Most of the things worth doing are bad ideas to some," he said. He adjusted the recliner once again.

He had a point there. Nellie thought of some of her early archival research on George Wingfield. She studied him because Gramp thought he was an inspirational figure. She thought otherwise, but tried her best to paint a flattering, but accurate, picture of his life—like one of the Flemish Master's oil paintings. Wingfield took a gamble with his move to Reno, Nevada after his family restlessly bounced around the East and West Coasts. At the age of 20, he was working as a cattle driver who would drive herds from California and Oregon to Winnemucca, Nevada⁴⁵. Now, Winnemucca, which bills itself as "The City of Paved Streets," functions mostly as a pull off for

⁴⁵ In Wingfield's time, Winnemucca was known for its brothels, saloons, and gambling houses. Wingfield went from buckaroo to saloon owner under the mentorship of US Senator George S. Nixon. He sold the saloon in 1901 and used the profits to move to Tonopah, a town in southern Nevada that was booming due to a discovery of silver ore. There, he played poker and dealt cards at the Tonopah Club. Rumor has it that he won ownership of the club in a poker game and made \$200,000 when he eventually sold it. Wingfield was so lucky that there was a term named for him—Wingfield luck.

truck drivers' long hauls through a state where you can drive for hours without finding another car on the road. One billboard promises Girls! Girls! Girls! Their silhouetted figures don cowboy hats and boots. One of Gramp's and Nellie's favorite restaurants is a Basque place right off the highway on Potato Road.

Nellie poured drinks for Gramp and herself, filling his glass lower than her own, which didn't escape his notice. He tilted his head to the side like a dog who knows you're hiding the treat behind your back. She filled them up equally.

With some careful work, she was able to pry the box open without damaging it too much, though part of the wood on one side splintered. She slid her hands into a pair of cotton inspection gloves she'd been gifted when she'd interned at the university's special collections.

She laid out the knit baby booties and lace bonnets in a wide array of styles and sizes on her coffee table. Though some dirt had gotten into the box and there was yellowing from the fabric being oxidized, the pieces were in great shape overall. She knew there was something underneath them, had known it since the night she and Mel unearthed it, but she'd waited because she wanted Gramp to be with her when she looked. Beneath the knit goods were a Colt six-shooter and two pieces of paper—a newspaper clipping and a dedication to a baby, stillborn by the look of the dates, named Annabel Rose and a letter written by Mark Twain to the *Chicago Republican* about the execution of Bulette's accused murderer, a French wanderer named John Millian⁴⁶. It was a replication that someone had diligently copied over by hand. But Nellie could not see who this assassin was since the name had been inked out. Had this been an original, all of their money

⁴⁶ Also spelled "Milean" and perhaps most intriguingly, "Villain" in the lawyer's transcript of his confession.

troubles might have vanished. Thinking about these artifacts in terms of how much they were worth in dollars made her feel sick, but that's what money—or the lack of it—does.

As Nellie read aloud, Gramp sat and listened, his mouth wide open.

“What do you suppose he did? Do you think that's his gun there? Did he do something to that poor little Annabel or whoever else wore those bonnets?”

“It's really hard to say without doing proper research.” Nellie placed all of the contents back inside the box, but left out the letter from Twain. This unsatisfying answer was a disappointment to Gramp in the way that an unfinished novel is. But to Nellie, it was painful. Her own impulses had gotten in the way of an amazing discovery. What was she supposed to do now with a stolen piece of the past?

“And that's Mark Twain as in *the* Mark Twain?” Gramp shook his glass a little, signifying that it was time for a top off.

“A copy, but yes, I'd say so.” Nellie tried to smile and not reveal her own hangups with Twain, of which there were many. One of the most prominent writers of the time period, he carried the responsibility of telling the world about any place he lived, whether it was in a newspaper article,

Mark Twain proposed to an audience to illustrate the cannibal propensities of the ancient islanders by devouring a child in the presence of the audience, if some lady would furnish him one for the occasion.

Detroit Free Press, January 12, 1867

short story, or novel, and he'd turned real people into characters and the rich textures of their lives into

one-liners⁴⁷. She had to admit, though, he was one hell of a storyteller.

⁴⁷ Mark Twain has been the subject of study by historians, literary scholars, and folklorists alike for his artful manipulation of the truth. His tall tales, or “stretchers” as they were sometimes called, made discerning fact from fiction difficult, especially in his semi-autobiographical novel, *Roughing It*. In 1862, he took his first full-time position as a writer was at the *Territorial Enterprise* in Virginia City.

“That’s an exciting discovery, sweets! Your publisher is going to be thrilled with what you’ve found.” She didn’t correct him about the book proposal, grant application, and publication process.

Nellie nodded and pulled her gloves off, leaving them inside out on the coffee table. She was on the verge of tears and was thankful that the electricity went off.

Until she realized it’d gone off because she’d gotten so far behind on her bills.

She forced an optimistic outlook. This was an opportunity to use her handled oil lamp (1882), still in the broom closet that doubled as the storage room for her 19th century antiques. She had to open the door slowly; otherwise, the porcelain doll collection and other primitives she’d collected after the Midtown Antique Mall went under would tumble out.

“Do you think the city’s doing work out on the utility lines again?”

“That’s my best guess,” Nellie said. “The electricity has been going on and off ever since they started to do that foundation work.” She struck a match and tried to light the lamp several times before giving up. Unlike the lamps at Gramp’s pawn shop, the one she’d bought didn’t come with a piece of masking tape labeled “works.”

“How about we make our way to the shop? We can get things in order and grab some flashlights while we’re at it.”

Nellie thought of the men from the poker game. She could only reassure herself by asking, “What’s the worst they could do,” and then not answering the question. Like a lot of medium-sized city heavyweights, they talked a bigger game than they actually played. How different would this be a half century earlier when people would go missing after their debts outpaced their ability to pay

In that role, he popularized hoaxes, which often blended the real and the absurd to humorous effect. Such is the case in his stories about a “petrified man” and a “bloody massacre near Carson.”

them back? She thought again of George Wingfield, what it was like when he first brought gambling to Reno⁴⁸.

Redemption was easier back then. Horrible men would be celebrated for their horribleness if that horribleness resulted in more money in more people's pockets. Meanwhile, people like Nellie who studied men like him had to leave their apartments after the utilities were cut. If only her research helped her figure out how to turn a profit, how to find her own goldmine.

They had to drive up and down Virginia Street for almost a half hour before they could find parking that was close enough for Gramp to get to. He didn't let her drop him off out front. She'd packed the walker the hospital had provided despite Gramp's vehement protests. He said he didn't need it when she grabbed it from the trunk, but after the first few steps, he gestured for her to hand it to him. It was 9:25 p.m., after the posted closing time, but Gramp switched the sign from Closed to Open anyway.

"Now is the time of year that people start to come in to get a head start on their Christmas shopping," Gramp said. He parked the walker at the front of the shop. He was walking slowly as he turned on the display case lights that made cubic zirconium sparkle as much as diamonds. She attempted to smile through the image that popped in her head of someone pawning a family heirloom to buy a used, outdated stereo system for their kid who didn't want it.

⁴⁸ By the time he was in his early thirties, Wingfield had amassed a fortune by taking the Goldfield Consolidated Mining Company public. Fearing that the mining workers would organize to get better wages and protection, he closed the mines, and the Nevada Governor, John Sparks, had to bring in the National Guard to quell the uprising. Wingfield lost most of his fortune during the Great Depression, but he built it back through various enterprises. Despite accusations of embezzling and working with the mafia, he still died with honor to his name, which marked developments all over Reno. Now, locals and tourists alike flock to Wingfield Park during the month-long Artown festival to watch everything from jazz musicians to interpretive dancers.

“Let me do the running around, Gramp. Maybe you can sort through the books and check messages, see if we have any new inventory coming in.” He didn’t respond but heeded her suggestion. After dusting off the glass cases and turning on the electronics, Nellie sat down at the Suicide Table, imagining that she was playing a high stakes game of Faro. In the middle, she imagined stacks of bills bound by white paper ribbons. What does \$25,000 dollars look like? Tomorrow, she would call Jack to see if he’d still connect her with the buyer.

The front door’s bells jingled.

“I’m looking for Nellie,” a low voice said. She knew who it was but couldn’t bring herself to look up at him right away. “I’ve been trying to find her for a long time.”

“And you are?” Gramp stood up from the padded stool she’d set up near the counter.

“I’m Bill, sir.” He removed his hat and his fringe jacket, already making himself comfortable. He continued looking at Gramp even though Nellie was at the table only a few yards away. Gramp’s look was asking whether or not he should kick this guy out.

“It’s okay. I know him, Gramp. We went on a few dates.”

Gramp looked as if he might tease her, but he didn’t seem to have it in him. Instead, he sat back down. He joked about the men she dated, but the truth was that it made him nervous. Ever since her grandmother died, he’d tried to take on a maternal role, offering dating advice that was quotable, but hardly useful. By his third tumbler of whiskey, he’d recite crude spins on old sayings: “Why buy the buck when you can ride for free?” still haunted her. He wanted her to be okay on her own, but he also wanted her to be taken care of. She wondered if he gave her mother the same kind of advice when she was her age. By then, though, she’d already had a daughter who she was raising on her own.

Bill and Nellie walked to the quietest corner of the shop where he sat in a videogaming chair, low to the ground, and she sat in a recliner, doilies strategically placed to cover the cigarette burns on the arms.

“I wanted to say that I’m sorry,” he said. She thought back to the Marilyn Monroe card. It was from him after all.

“I know. I’m sorry too. I should’ve been clearer about what I was looking for.”

“I haven’t been straight with you from the start I’m not good with all this money stuff, and I was in a pinch.” He twisted a piece of fringe between two fingers. “Still am in a pinch.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I am too.”

“Even with all of the business here?”

It was hard to believe he wasn’t joking as they both looked around at the merchandise that hardly kept the lease paid.

Another jingle at the door saved her.

“I have customers I have to help. I’m sorry to hear that you’re going through a tough time. I hope both of us can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps.”

“I knew you wouldn’t help,” he sneered. Gramp was within earshot, and he moved quicker than someone nursing a hip injury should be able to.

“Unless you’re a paying customer, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. The only help we can offer you is help finding the door.”

Bill struggled to get out of the gaming chair and left, knocking over the Elvis cardboard cutout on his way out.

“What a joker,” Gramp said. She wanted to join in on the heckling, but ridiculously, Bill’s status as a joker felt like a referendum on her.

They went to get breakfast for dinner at the CalNeva. Outside, it was cold enough to keep tourists in their rooms above the El Dorado, Silver Legacy, or Circus Circus gaming floors. Traffic's flow on Virginia Street was disrupted by a couple taking a photo under the Reno Arch. Someone in a Cadillac nearly took them out when they sped around the car that'd stopped for the couple's photo opportunity only to have to stop at a red light a few hundred feet later. Music from the speakers outside of Harrah's competed with the street performer who'd set up an amp for his steel guitar, and the street performer was winning. The amp had a tinny sound that complemented the guitar solos. His metal finger picks plucked at the strings as the smooth slide bar climbed the instrument's neck. A small crowd gathered, and Gramp put a \$10 bill in the open guitar case. A woman tried to take a selfie, and when she didn't tip, the rest of the crowd policed her, pointing to the open guitar case until she dropped in a bill. They stayed for a honky-tonk rendition of a Springsteen song before heading into the Cal Neva where the music was replaced by a cacophony of unskilled, but enthusiastic karaoke singers and slot machine sound effects. They hustled up the escalator to grab dinner. It was quieter up there, the few pockets of slot machines spaced out throughout the entire floor, but it was smokier too. Though she didn't smoke herself, she sometimes enjoyed how the secondhand smoke clung to her clothes and reminded her where the night before had taken her. Gramp got a short stack of pancakes, which was unlike him. He'd once told her that pancakes were for kids.

But he ate them just as aggressively as ever, sawing through them so that pancake fluff was strewn all over the plate.

"Nellie, sweets, we need to talk about the shop. It's going under. We both know that. The question is what we're going to do after that. I got an offer that I didn't want to tell you about because I already knew what your answer would be. A fellow came by and said he'd take the place

off my hands, and he'll pay me a good amount of money to buy me out of the lease. Before you say no, think about the amount of red in that ledger. There's no way I'm coming out of this on my own; it's going to take someone like him pulling me out."

"What do you think Leanna would say? Or what Grandma would have said." Nellie knew this was a low blow as she was saying it. Disappointment pulled at the corners of his eyes and mouth.

"They'd both say not to leave you with a mountain of debt when I kick the bucket." He folded his final pancake into a butter and syrup-filled taco and ate it in three bites. Nellie had hardly touched her food. The over medium yolks had begun to congeal.

The waiter came by and topped off their coffee so that they were both seeing each other through plumes of steam. "How's everything tasting?"

They nodded their answers, and he left. In the distance, she heard the ring of a winning slot machine. The graphic on the TV above Gramp's head showed winning Keno numbers—nearly the entire row of 20s.

"Isn't that what you normally play?" Nellie asked.

He craned his neck to look at the numbers, then pulled a ticket and marked his numbers for the next round.

"That's right. The roaring twenties."

"What do you think the chances are that those same numbers will come up twice in a row?"

"The chances are always the same. The only difference is whether or not you play them. And that's why I've lost so far. Never quite figured out when to play and when to fold."

"Take the deal," Nellie said. A woman came by and chirped, "Keno?" before taking Gramp's stamped ticket. "The electricity turning off wasn't from a storm or utility work or anything.

I can't pay the bills. I've just been collecting all of those red envelopes in my desk. And I already know what Grandma would say about that. She'd say to save the whining for the grapes." The tears started coming down fast then. Gramp rested his head in his hands so that all he could see was the keno ticket in between his elbows.

"You know what Grandma would say?" He lifted his head. "She'd say that she was so proud of what you're doing in your work, and she'd compliment that getup of yours." They looked at Nellie's dolman sleeve sweater (1960s). "She'd say that I should be ashamed of how I got you involved with those men and all their plans. And then she'd say that it's time to fold, that I was always chasing a four of a kind like I'd already been dealt a pocket pair."

The numbers for the keno round Gramp played came up on the screen. He got two of the numbers—enough to get his dollar back.

Chapter 21

Nellie didn't like leaving Gramp at home, but she was able to get up early enough to get a half-day sub job out in Sparks and couldn't say no to a paycheck. The Volvo now required an elaborate procedure—part mechanical, part superstitious—to start. She turned off the radio, opened the hood and shifted the battery in its harness, pressed on the accelerator. She had a quarter-tank of gas and had to weigh if it was worth it to drive almost out to Stead.

When she subbed at middle schools, she was careful to wear clothes that gave the students as little ammunition as possible. Today, she chose a navy blue blazer with the shoulder pads removed (1988) and pleated men's trousers (1994). She checked into the front office, and they gave her a nametag. Today's she'd be covering for an algebra teacher.

The building looked clinically new. It had the chemical smell of quick fabrication. A painting of the school mascot, a blue warthog, charged down the hallways. A few students walked in the hallways holding objects that'd been repurposed as hall passes. One held a ruler. Another held a comic book.

The teacher who she was covering for had left out a binder with a lesson plan and classroom procedures. She thankfully had time to set up during the prep period before the morning classes.

Nellie read through the instructions several times to ensure she understood them.

Thank you so much for covering! One of my kiddos had to get into the dentist, and this was the soonest they could get him in. Today, all three of the afternoon periods will be doing the same lesson. They're doing lesson 3.2 in their textbooks. After the first thirty minutes, if they work on their own quietly, they can work in pairs for the last twenty minutes. The seating charts are included in this binder. They will tell you that they don't need to follow them when there's a sub. I assure you they do. Thanks again! :)

Nellie began studying the seating chart, but hardly had a chance to review it before the bell rang. It took about a minute for the first student to arrive. He wore a hoodie with a beanie under it. She'd

seen on a sign posted about the dress code that hats weren't allowed, but she had no intentions of enforcing that. Twenty-seven other students packed into the room by the time the second bell rang. She straightened her posture and stood at the front of the class, binder perched on a lectern in front of her.

"My name is Ms. Robinson, and I'm your substitute for today." She started taking roll and realized that the students saying "here" were not matching up with the seating chart. "Please make sure you're in your assigned seat, or else I'll have to mark you as absent." The students all exchanged looks, but she couldn't figure out what they were communicating. She continued calling roll. When she said "Mark," a blond girl raised her hand. When she called "Marisol," a hulking white pre-teen boy who was taller than her raised his hand. Laughter rippled through the classroom.

"Okay, you've made your choice. There are 28 of you here, and 32 on the roster, so I'll just close my eyes and see when my finger lands and mark those kids absent." This tactic earned their respect. Many students got up and shuffled around until they were in their correct seats. By the time that was sorted, 20 percent of the class had passed. While they quietly worked on their lesson, she turned on the teacher's computer. Maybe she could get a little research done while they were working. She started by trying to find antiques similar to the table on Sotheby's to see what they were going for at auction. The closest she could find was a French gilt-silver and etched glass liquor service tray for \$18,500, and that was definitely not one of a kind. A student asked for a hall pass, and she handed him a ruler from the desk drawer.

She'd have to talk to the buyer. There really wasn't anything to compare this artifact to. She announced that the students could begin working in pairs, which she then regretted as they began talking loudly. While she had the resources, at least she could print out some of the articles about John Millian, who'd been executed for Julia Bulette's murder. Soon, she had an enviable stack of

A MURDERER.—We have it on pretty good authority that the murderer of Julia Bulette has been arrested. Articles belonging to the murdered woman and taken the night of the murder have been found in the possession of the man who has been arrested.

papers. She'd only read the headlines of most and couldn't wait to read the rest. A student asked for a hall pass, and seeing no other ones, she handed her a folder. She began to annotate the first article. "We have it on pretty good authority," she read and scoffed. A student asked for a hall pass, and when she looked up to make sure the other students had returned, she realized that at least a third of the class was missing.

No sooner did she realize this than a man with thickly gelled hair was standing in front of her, trailed by several of the student who had left.

"I know you're not familiar with our policies, but for the students' safety, it's important that they're all accounted for during class," he said. A few of the students laughed. Nellie clicked out of the articles, and they both looked at the stack of papers on the top of the printer. Heat overtook her body. The polyester of her jacket was suffocating her skin. "And the expectation when you're teaching is that you are delivering the lessons as the lesson plans say."

"Or course, yes. I'm so sorry. It won't happen again."

"I know," he said. She would never be asked back.

Today's research topic had its hooks in her, so she decided to drive straight to the Historical Society. Emory would either help her fix her laptop or find someone else to help her. She layered up since her car's heater no longer provided enough heat until she got to her destination. Her car started on the fourth try.

"What do you have to work on today?" she asked Emory when she arrived. He was inspecting the newest arrivals for the exhibit in the hallway: Hollywood in Nevada.

“I’m just digitizing away, trying to coordinate the volunteers’ contributions to the Doten Project⁴⁹. It might be helpful for you, actually.” He handed Nellie a cup of coffee. “It’s probably cold by now. I saw that you had an appointment in the research library and wanted to have something warm waiting for you.”

“You’re always looking out for me, thank you. Speaking of digitizing, could you possibly help me with my laptop? I think it has a virus.”

“Good Lord. This dinosaur could be in an exhibit. And no problem. I have one I could lend you in the meantime.” Relief loosened her muscles, slumped her posture, took her to the brink of tears. It was difficult for her to ask for help even from people who wanted to help her.

As she handed him the device, she almost laughed at her failed blackmail efforts. Even the most horrifying, morally repugnant revelations weren’t enough to dissuade people from voting for a politician that promised jobs and economic prosperity. She was naive to think that she’d be a part of the vigilante group that was trying to take down Berkshire. And if studying history had taught her anything, being naive was functionally the same as being ignorant. One word was just more palatable than the other. Even in the age when you could type in a search phrase and retrieve more information than you could ever read, it was easier to be swayed by the mud-slinging ads or vote for the person whose name looked the most familiar.

⁴⁹ Alfred “Alf” Doten (1849-1903) was a prolific writer. His handwriting filled 79 books of diary entries (the last of which written hours before his death), and his published work included 210 newspaper articles. Topics ranging from what he ate to who was murdered were described with the same matter-of-fact prose. In one entry about when Ben Ballou was shot in a Virginia City saloon, he wrote, “His boots were pulled off at once like Tom Peasley’s, that he might not die in them.” The Doten Project invites volunteers to digitally transcribe his handwritten journals to make them more widely accessible.

In a presidential history class she took, the professor, a man in his late seventies who despite being long since tenured was still very passionate about the handful of subjects he taught, showed a



The Judge Magazine, 1884

a series of political cartoons from the 19th century. They laughed at how problematic the caricatures were. They found the cartoon from 1884 depicting a supposed bastard baby calling out “Pa” to his father, Grover Cleveland, especially funny. Nellie and Mel took the class together, and there was a time that they attended the seminar a little buzzed, Nellie drew a cartoon of the name slung at the Democratic presidential candidate in 1848: pot-bellied mutton-headed cucumber. She passed the note to Mel, and the two had to spend the mid-seminar break composing themselves in the bathroom.

The next week, the professor showed a series of attack ads similar to the miscegenation accusations against Andrew Jackson. Then, modern-day ads that said candidates weren’t born in America and think pieces about a female politician’s power suits and cankles. Political cartoons with a Black man made to look like a monkey, a Jewish man’s face elongated to look like a rat. The lesson, they all understood, was that the nation hadn’t come very far.

Emory came from the back with the loaner laptop, and Nellie got situated in the library. As it booted up in a fraction of the time that hers did, she realized that it may be time to sort out her relationship with technology. Part of her knew that she sabotaged the technology in her life, letting the one smart phone she’d ever owned dangle precariously from her satchel’s open pocket or letting Wi-Fi payment reminders come and go until the service was cut. There was some pride in it. She was still choosing to resist the modern age even though resistance wasn’t just futile—it was potentially harmful. No one took her seriously. Attributing this to her loud clothing, she’d once tried swapping

out some of her vintage wearable art for fast fashion button-ups and synthetic fabric pants, but there was no point. Her ideas about breaking the historical cycle by giving into history's centripetal force more willingly were dismissed as the musings of someone who couldn't get a boyfriend ever since most dating opportunities had moved online.

She took out her legal pad and started working through some of her notes. She was determined to find some information on the cemetery discovery and then tying that discovery to some broader idea. Certainly, there was something to be said about mothers in the new frontier. Her research pursuits were taking her farther away from the original proposal, but that was okay. Academics found ways to make these kinds of arguments, and she'd have a better shot at publishing with a bigger press if she made a more controversial claim than she was inclined to. Maybe she hadn't aimed high enough with the Western History Preservation Society. What she was working on was more important than an amalgamation of other people's ideas; it was art. She thought of her research as adding careful brush strokes to the portraits of these women's lives—there an eye glinting from a love affair, there a smile flattened by a series of premature births.

She walked over to the university's library to see if her reels had come in, and the college kid standing at the circulation desk said they were. That position was once filled by her friend who had a master's degree in library science.



Territorial Enterprise, January 22, 1867

“We sent text and email notifications that they'd come in,” he said, tapping on his phone. “I'm glad you came in, though, because we were about to send these back to SoCal.” He

put his phone down and then flipped it over so that the screen lay against the desk's surface. Nellie

turned around to see his supervisor walking up behind her. She envied the young people growing up in the digital age for one thing only: their ability to sense when they were being surveilled even when they were completely immersed in their device.

“I don’t check my phone or computer much.”

“Cool.” He eyed the gold bangles rounding half of her right forearm. “I’m not on social media.” They let themselves enjoy this moment of overlap before he handed her the reels.

She flipped on the microfilm machine and carefully threaded the film of the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise* newspaper through the handles and laid it flat under the glass panel. There it was—the article that she’d been trying to track down for the last two months, the one that was missing from the Historical Society’s extensive collection.

Nellie pulled her face away from the viewer. Newspapers then sensationalized violence, and she knew she’d need to brace herself before committing to the entire description. She’d known that Julia had been killed, but knew little about her life beyond the few pieces of information she’d scrapped together from the archives.

The most cruel, outrageous and revolting murder ever committed in this city was that of Julia Bulette on Sunday morning. She lived in a little house by herself, near the corner of D and Union streets, in a thickly settled neighborhood, and within a stone's throw of the station house. The murder was probably committed about 5 A.M. but it was not discovered until nearly noon, when the body was nearly cold and stiff with death. At eleven o'clock a Chinaman who was employed to make fire, sweep, bring in the wood, etc. came into the house as usual, kindled a fire and left thinking she was asleep, as he could see her covered up in bed.

About half an hour afterward, a woman who lives next door came to call her to breakfast, and discovered her to be murdered. She was found lying on her left side, with a pillow over her head and face, the bedclothes beneath her head being saturated with blood. Her throat was lacerated with the marks of finger nails, and the blood-suffused and distorted countenance, together with the writhing position of the body, showed conclusive evidence of strangulation. There were two small wounds on her forehead and the back of her left hand was somewhat lacerated in her struggle to free herself from the grasp of the fiend who had her in his power. The murderer took a set of furs worth \$400, two gold watches and chains, and several pieces of valuable jewelry, even taking the earrings from her ears.

It certainly is to be hoped that murdering villain may be captured and eventually adorn the end of a rope. His victim was known as Jule Bulette, and was a native of London, England, whence she emigrated, when quite

young, to New Orleans, and thence to California, in 1852 or 1853, where she lived in various cities and towns until September, 1863, when she came to Virginia City. She is said to have married a man by the name of Smith—from whom she afterward separated and has an uncle and a brother still living in the State of Louisiana.

The phrase “nearly cold and stiff with death” rattled in her ears as she strained to read the bold typeface that’d begun to blur together with time. The letters seeped into one another, but certain words still jumped out—death, blood-suffused, murdering villain. Her heart broke for Julia and her contorted face and for the man who had come to build her fire and left with an image certain to haunt him for the rest of his life, much like the ghosts who wandered around the Silver Queen Hotel and the condemned mines.

The stories she’d heard about Julia had never sat right with her. The article describing her death made her seem like a saint, accompanied by the one known photograph of her where she posed with a fireman’s helmet. She was said to nurse sick miners back to health, to volunteer with the fire department so regularly that she was honored in one of their parades.

“How’s it coming?” the college kid from the circulation desk asked. He was bored, and she knew that even the most exciting description of what she’d discovered wouldn’t make him less bored.

“Great. I’m finding just what I was looking for.” Saying this out loud turned her stomach a little, tugged at the part of my conscience that whispered *grave robber* whenever she’d successfully repressed the memory. “Can I Xerox these?”

He raised one eyebrow.

“Or print them? However you do it here.”

“Oh sure. Just print it to a PDF, and I can save all of the slides to a flash drive so that you don’t have to pay for the ink.”

Nellie knew what he was talking about, but the jargon still felt like an attack.

“I like to hold the paper in my hands. I’m a tactile learner,” Nellie said.

“You got it.” As soon as the first page printed, Nellie examined it again. This time, she was struck by the words that were missing—prostitute, brothel, madame—the ones that appeared in everything else written about her⁵⁰. Big pieces were missing from her story, and it was up to her to fill in those gaps. The shape of her project about Nevadan woman was morphing as she realized that the seeds of an obsession had been sewn. Rather than a garden being planted, though, it felt parasitic. From then on, all thoughts began and ended with Julia, and she couldn’t wait to tell Gramp all about her. He would be proud. Nellie put the small stack of papers in her suede professor bag (1984) and walked out to the car.

When she turned the key in the ignition, the engine choked like it normally did. She gave the dashboard a few encouraging pats.

“Come on, you old steed,” Nellie said, but the car didn’t respond. The temperatures had dipped to colder than she’d ever remembered during this time of year. She worried for the people living on the banks of Truckee River. The city’s cruel cleanup sweeps didn’t provide any place for them to go. Last she heard, Johnson Commercial Development⁵¹ was going to build a mixed-use structure masquerading as a source of affordable housing. In reality, nobody would be able to afford

⁵⁰ The Julia Bulette Red Light Museum was built in the basement of the Julia C. Bulette Café and Saloon in Virginia City. The museum exhibits included antique sex toys, modes of contraception, and an elephant penis walking stick, as well as a life-sized diorama of a premature birth. The collections were assembled by Gordon Churchward. A framed notice included this quote: “The Red Light Museum took me over 10 years to put together. I spent over \$35,000 on showcases, mannequins, and lighting.” The museum has been closed, and a Chinese restaurant called Mandarin Garden stands where the saloon once did.

⁵¹ Like many tourist towns, Reno has a fraught history with developers. Large commercial developers have leveled many weekly hotels (also known as ‘naturally occurring affordable housing’) without building anything in its stead; the land is worth more than the structures built on top of it. Recently, the Home Means Nevada initiative was created to provide more housing in the state, which currently ranks last in the nation in available affordable housing proportional to the population.

the apartments in the tower, and even when the ones who could afford it moved in, the people in the surrounding area would whisper, “there goes the neighborhood” over craft coffee and croissants at the coffee shop across the river.

November 10, 2015

Reno Daily News

Issue #10

Brenna Mets

Locals Take Issue with Development Deal

“They care more about money than they do about people.” -Alicia Sanchez, Reno resident

Tensions ran high at a recent City Council meeting where residents concerned about the rising cost of living dominated the open comment period. Speaking in opposition to the new sweetheart deal struck with Johnson Commercial Developing, locals got together to voice their concerns. “We raised our two children here and paid for both of them to attend the university. We’ve invested so much into this city with our own business and with our kids. Now, they’re looking elsewhere to settle down because they can never afford a house,” commenter Bryce Boyd said.

The recent deal offered tax incentives to the Bay Area development company, which got its start developing east Oakland in 2010. This is the largest public-private partnership in the city since the Commercial Row project in 2000.

“You all sit up there making these decisions based on numbers. But they affect real people,” commenter Alicia Sanchez said. “You give these tax breaks to huge companies that don’t need the money. Meanwhile, you shut down my restaurant for failing an inspection without explaining what was wrong.” Sanchez,

whose family has owned Sanchez Taqueria since 1998, complained that the City seems as ready to shut down small businesses as it does to support corporations moving in from California.

David Sorens, a representative from Johnson, released this statement in response: “Our projects will bring in over 560 new jobs to the area. We are invested in Reno and are committed to responsibly developing the area while ensuring that Reno stays Reno.”

One more turn of the key, and her car thankfully started up. Her fingers had already stiffened with cold. Back at her apartment, Gramp was bundled up in blankets, reading by candlelight. How had she forgotten about the power going out? Even in the dark living room, she could see his breath.

“I’m so sorry, Gramp! What time is it? I can pay the bill right now.”

“It’s close to 6,” he said, squinting at the watch on his wrist.

“They’re closed now, but maybe I can call an afterhours service.”

“Don’t bother with it. And don’t be sorry. I’m the one camping out here without paying you a dime. You know I would if I could.”

“I know you would. And putting you up is the least I can do. Why don’t we go to the shop again? Even if you’ve already started to close it down, we’ll at least have a warm spot for the night.”

“Remember when your grandma and I used to help you set up that canvas tent in the living room so that you could feel like a pioneer woman?”

“I do remember.” She smiled at the thought, remembering the oil lantern he let her light despite the fire risk, how her grandmother replaced it with a flashlight and some twigs from the backyard. He’d told her that was good thinking, and the moment her grandmother fell asleep, he brought that lantern back out. They balanced each other out that way—the risk-taker and the risk-maker. She wondered where she fell on that spectrum. Where her parents fell.

“Let’s get to camping out, then. I’ve got enough stuff in the sporting goods section to get us a nice setup for the night. And maybe we can pick up some pho? Not something a Nevada pioneer woman would have been lucky enough to eat, but that’s one of the perks of living now, isn’t it?”

They both peered into the shop, hands curved around their eyes before Gramp unlocked the door with such a practiced hand that he did not need to look where the key was inserting into the lock. He turned on the light, but he kept the cardboard sign flipped to Closed. They ordered pho from the Vietnamese restaurant a mile away, and Nellie said she’d walk to pick it up. Her car had started up on the first try to take them to the shop, and she didn’t want to risk Gramp seeing that it was really on its last cylinder.

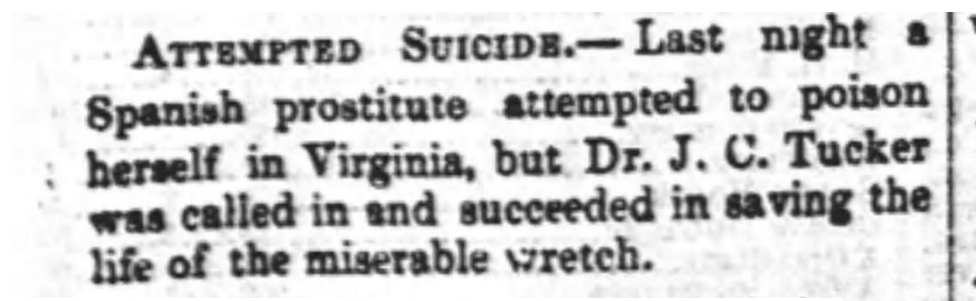
They set up an enormous canvas tent in the back of the shop next to the Suicide Table. She picked up their dinner, and they played heads-up poker. Gramp was a better player than Nellie was, even when she could see his cards. He was so persuasive that she couldn’t call his bluff with his hand in full view. After he’d won all of her imaginary money, she pulled out her stack of documents about Julia and John.

“Looks like you’ve been busy,” he said. He slurped the final remains of his pho broth.

“I sure have been. I’m on the brink of something big, I think. This could be huge.”

“I knew it. I can always tell when you’ve got a new project that you’re excited about, a treasure that only you know the location of. This have anything to do with that wooden box you found?”

“I’m not sure yet,” she said. One was the product of an impulsive act; the other represented something she was allowed to do, something that she was potentially going to be paid to do. “I always knew that there were parts of Julia Bulette’s story that were missing. She’d been made out to be this Virginia City martyr, the prostitute with a heart of gold. That couldn’t have been the whole story. There have been a couple of biographies written about her, but I still don’t think they capture the whole story. One of them has the portrait of someone else on the cover. I think that while she



Gold Hill Daily News, May 19, 1865

was alive, she was treated like most prostitutes were in that time—and now.” She checked

Gramp’s expression to make sure she wasn’t saying anything too outrageous. He was nodding along.

“And you found the information about how she was mistreated?”

“Not exactly.” She realized then that she hadn’t found much at all. When she got into that obsessive state, her research skills would decline, her ability to prioritize the research over her imagination dissipating as the obsession annexed more territory in her brain. “But I’m starting to learn more about her murder and how everything happened.” She flipped through the pages of research so quickly that she was hardly reading the words contained within it.

“I can’t wait to learn what you find. You’re my historical detective, you know that?”

“I do.”

“I’ll miss this place. This is where I try to solve mysteries myself—what has happened to people, where the things they bring in come from, how much they’re worth.”

“I’ll miss it too.”

That night, they slept in their tent, the sounds of downtown only slightly dampened by the building’s facade. As she lay awake, she thought she heard the jingle of a slot machine telling the gambler in front of it that she’d won.

Chapter 22

December 15, 1863

The snow is falling again, and though it was magical at first seeing those delicate flakes fall from the sky like a whisper, I was growing weary of the cold sneaking into the toes of my boots. The coldness has been worsened by own feelings, given the news about Paul. He was the only person I felt wanted to protect me, and as of this moment, I cannot accept that he is no longer in my life. I had made plans to see him once the baby was born, though I had not yet made plans to make that a reality.

When we were younger, we used to make believe that we were wild animals, and we would ask that Father let us eat our dinner outside. We would tear into the roast and howl at the moon, sprinting away into the wooded hills until his mother called us back. “Come on home, little doggies,” she would say, and we would run in and sleep well in our straw beds knowing that the next day, we could once again be wolves.

I read about Paul’s accident in the morning, and the grief unsettled my stomach. Throughout the day, my stomach had a tough time holding onto the food Annabel had prepared for me. Pat came by that night, and I was right thankful because I did not want to be there when the men began to visit. I was a welcome distraction for Annabel, but I knew that she needed to work if she was to make enough money for board.

“I don’t know what I did wrong, but I’d like it if you came and stayed with me again. It feels empty there without you,” Pat said. He looked nice that night in a fresh shirt that I guessed he had gotten laundered by the Chinamen on the outskirts of C Street. I frowned at the thought of him in that part of town. The women who worked there did not seem to be staying of their own wishes,

and the men who visited were too gruff to be seen by the women on D. They would get kicked out of each place until they finally made their way to Chinatown.

“Yes, I will come with you. But I need you to know that I will soon have a place of my own once I am able to work more on the day-to-day. I did not travel across the country and near break my back on the back end of a cart hitched to an ass to be saved by anyone.”

He laughed, but I was dead serious.

“I know, Miss Julia. I said it before—you got grit.” He took off his hat and fastened the top button of his collar. A man stumbled past, his face dirty with under-earth from the mine. He pushed past us into Madame Raven’s, and I hoped that he wasn’t going to visit Annabel. Pat laced his arm through mine, and we walked back to his cottage. Annabel rushed out as we were leaving.

“Don’t you dare forget these!” she said, proffering an armful of the bonnets that she had knit.

“Oh, I could never take those. You should save them for your own.”

“Please take them.” Her pleading eyes looked glassy like the deep pools off of the Yuba that I had heard so much about. I had seen her drink from a small vial earlier, and I worried that she was taking missy like some of the other girls. Maybe it was not just the visiting men who were dulling her brightness.

I reached for the bonnets, but one of them fell to the ground, and I had to pick it up and dust it off. A horse without bit or carriage walked down the street, turning his head from this way to that as if he was deciding which gambling hall he might want to place a bet. A man wearing only long johns came chasing after him, a carrot in each fist, and that had the opposite of the desired effect. The horse took off running, and the man ran after him with the flap of his long johns

whipping in the winter wind. Me and Pat laughed, but Annabel remained silent with her eyebrows knitted tighter than the beautiful stitches in her bonnets.

“Where do you suppose he’s going?” she asked, twirling a curl in between her fingers. She did not seem to expect an answer as she kissed my cheek and walked silently back inside, her head hung low.

“I have something for you,” Pat said. He was smiling wide, and I suddenly felt the urge to kiss him square on his mouth. I did, and he was as surprised as I was. Someone inside whistled at us, though they likely were not looking at us since no one inside could really see through the one small, cloudy window. “Looks like you had something for me too.” We started walking, and the points of my heeled boots dug into the snow with each step. Noticing how slow my pace was, he picked me up and carried me like a man carrying his bride across the threshold. I started crying then, thinking about Paul under a pile of rocks at Ophir. I wished I was there to save him. I wished I could have taken him with me and protected him from the hard, hard work he had to do out there. If Pat saw me crying, he did not whisper a word about it. Instead, we returned to his cottage, and he silently built a fire to warm me. He unlaced my boots and rubbed my feet, wiggling each toe back and forth until the dull numbness in them wore away. He put a kettle on and made me a cup of tea. Pat is the kind of man who shows how he is feeling by doing, and in that moment, he was feeling tenderness towards me.

We drank tea, and he showed me the gift he’d been talking about—a fur coat, mink by the feel of it.

“My goodness, Pat. I cannot accept all of these luxurious gifts. You are starting to make me wonder what you actually want from me, and you know I cannot give you any gifts in return.”

“It gets colder here than anything you’re used to, and I don’t want you to ice over. You and the little one deserve to be comfortable.”

The little one. I had not even thought about the baby all day, not even as I accepted the gifts from Annabel, and yet, when I looked down, my fingers were laced over my belly as always. I felt a kick then, and without saying a word, I brought Pat’s hand to the highest point on my stomach, rounder by the day. He had to wait there for a few moments before another kick came, and when it did, his hand flew from me.

“This baby is a strong one, I think. She is like to kick her way out of here like a buck turned loose.”

“Just like her mama,” Pat said. His eyes wet at that. I still did not understand why he wanted to take care of me like he was, but in that moment and in the night that followed, we lay on his bed and fell asleep holding onto each other so tight that the devil himself could not have tore us apart.

December 26, 1863

Dear Josephine,

I am writing to say that I no longer need the funds I asked for. I have recovered from my illness and have found new employ. In this ink, I write my promise not to be an imposition on anyone any longer. The next letter I write to you will include with it money for your children.

All my love,

Julia

December 26, 1863

We celebrated Christmas with a whole feast at the firehouse. Annabel and I both wanted to go to the church service, but we were not allowed in; none of the sporting women were. Mrs. Crawford saw to that. We did not mind, though. We had a church service of our own where we blessed our food and prayed that when we met our maker, he would deem us worthy of salvation and overlook our sullied pasts. I gave my own sermon that I wrote about the power of the Lord's love and how it could extinguish any hellfire. I did not believe everything I said, but in light of Paul's passing, I felt that I needed to have a more positive outlook for the ne'er-do-wells like us who were doing our best to make it in a world that did not seem to want us in it. The firemen loved my sermon, and they invited me back to speak, which I will do. They have taken kindly to me ever since I cared for their fire captain when he took sick.

After the service and the dinner, we were dead tired. We crawled into our bed, and as soon as my eyes felt like they had sealed shut for the night, they flew open with a pain I have never known. I am not one to squeal when I am in pain, but rather keep it inside. This time, though, I could not stop wailing. Pat was afraid. He did not know what to do and kept asking what was wrong. I could not tell him, though, because I did not myself know. I only knew that it was the baby, who I could no longer feel moving. I threw off the quilt and told Pat to leave as I examined the source of the pain as best as I could. Blood streamed down my legs, soaking clear through the bedding. When he heard me scream once again, Pat did not heed my wish for him to look away. His face was a ghost as we both looked at the blood.

"I'm calling on the doctor right now!" He paced in one wide circle before darting out the door to get help. I dreaded the doctor coming to tell me everything I had done wrong and how I deserved to be hurt by this child conceived out of wedlock. I cried then, long and hard such that I could hardly see. By the time Pat returned with the doctor, the pain had somehow gotten worse,

which at that moment, I did not think was possible. It was not until I rubbed my eyes to clear the tears that I realized that Pat had not returned with the doctor at all. Instead, I had begun to see double. I felt like my mind was running away from me, and there was no way I could run to catch up with it. What had I done to this child?

“We’ll have to take care of it ourselves,” Pat said. “I yelled out to the doctor at his house until he gave me some instructions and threw me his bag of tools.” I had little faith that Pat knew what he was supposed to do with those tools. But by then, the pain was so severe that I was ready for my body to leave this world and I to leave with it. As soon as Pat pulled a metal tool out of the bag, I lost touch with my physical self. Pat gave me a teal tincture to drink from. And when I did, I could feel myself begin to drift away. The pain was still there, but I was too tired to notice it so much.

I woke up groggy, surrounded by people from Madame Raven’s and the firehouse. They leaned in over me. Annabel tended to a cold rag on my forehead. I had a fever hotter than anything. My mouth felt dry.

“Thank God!” Madame Raven called out. Pat looked like he had been crying. “I thought that sleep might be your last.” Annabel jabbed her in the ribs.

“Well, I didn’t!” Annabel said. People rearranged themselves in the circle until only Annabel and Pat were by my sides.

“Did the baby make it?” I asked. I already knew the answer to this question, but I had to ask it anyway. It felt like any air in the room had been fed to the fire that was blazing so high, it looked like it might jump out past the hearth.

The three men in the room removed their hats.

“There wasn’t a thing I could do. I don’t know what words I can say to make this right. I’m sorry one hundred times over. If I could’ve switched my own life with that little one’s, I would have, swear to God Almighty,” Pat said.

“Can I see the baby?” I asked, and deep down, I hoped that they would tell me I could not. I was relieved when that turned out to be the case.

“We did a proper burial, and I’ll show you where when you’re feeling up for it. But I didn’t think it’d be good for you to see her in that state.”

“Her?”

“That’s right,” Pat said. He looked like someone who had shared a secret he’d promised to keep. “I bet she’s with Paul in Heaven now, and Paul is having a right good time bouncing her on his knee.”

I smiled, but all I could think about was that first sight of blood soaking through the mattress. I could not think about a girl bouncing on Paul’s lap because even when he was grown, I still thought of Paul as the same little boy who would howl at the moon with me. It may have been the medicine they had given me, but I still felt like before where my body was not my own. Annabel retrieved a handful of snow from outside and wrapped the rag around it. I was so thankful for her then in more ways than she would ever know. Pat left my side to keep on loving by doing—tending to the fire, retrieving another blanket from his cedar chest, and putting on a kettle for tea.

“Do you need some of this?” Annabel asked. It looked like the bottle Pat had given me to ease my pain before, and though I worried it was missy, I knew that the pain between my legs and throughout my middle would not be going away anytime soon. So, I said yes. I wanted only to continue sleeping and disappear into a place where I did not know I had lost the baby or even better, a place where I had never had a baby at all. In that place, Paul could be alive, and I could be

set up with a job where I provided for everything on my own table instead of going from Madame Raven's to Pat's and back again.

I fell asleep and woke up feeling wetness. I am ashamed to say that I had soiled the bedding just in time for the doctor's arrival. He shook his head back and forth, and I braced myself for his judgment.

"Feeling a little better, are ya?" He lifted up the blanket, revealing my shame, and then frowned before putting it back down again. "Well, you're looking better anyhow. And this is no place for a bastard child anyhow."

"Well, you listen here. I paid you to come in and make sure her fever doesn't need treating and that I stitched everything up right. If we wanted some lesson, we'd go to the schoolhouse or the church," Pat said.

Annabel had left, and as soon as the doctor began inspecting the wounds that I still had not seen, I wished she was there with me. I also wished that her tincture was there. For a moment, I felt as if I was still in the dream I had been in just moments ago. How long had it been since all of this began?

The past felt elusive, but the future, that was something else entirely. New Year's Eve be here soon, and that may be my chance to start anew. Snow has fallen onto all of the buildings so that the city feels brand new under its white blanket. I asked Pat for more medicine, and the doctor said no, said that any pain I was feeling was my old damn fault.

I realized then that, in truth, all of this was probably the doctor's fault. Whatever he had given me months before had made the baby not grow right or had done something to my belly that made the baby want to leave it. I did have to admit to myself, though, that it was me who had

sought out the doctor in the first place, me who had asked for a way out of the predicament I had found myself in.

The pain came in waves, and those waves changed in shape and size. Sometimes, they were low and strong, the beginnings of a wave in the deep ocean. And other times, they felt like the crash on a shore, pulling me out to sea. Maybe it was time for me to leave this place and the sad memories attached to it. But what would Pat do without me? He had begun to grow very fond of me indeed, and it would not be fair to him to leave after everything he had done. Maybe I could take him and Annabel with me.

“We’re all done here. The infection isn’t anything to worry about too much. It will clear up quick, and she can be put back to work soon thereafter.” The doctor smiled a sinister smile before Pat about threw him outside. Pat tucked me back in, and looking up at him then, I realized that my fever had finally broken.

Chapter 23

Nellie and Gramp carried on like that, camping out in the shop and stocking up on food from the El Dorado buffet, until Nellie got two long-awaited paychecks for some copywriting and editing (and sometimes writing) college admissions essays. The paychecks came just in time too. A few days after they moved back into her apartment, the development company that had bought

CONFESSION.

His name as given to me, is Jean Marie A. Villain, a native of St. Malo, France. He emigrated to California in 1849, and remained until 1853, when he returned to France and was conscripted and served in the Marine service during the Crimean war, and served in the trenches there for a period of twenty-three months, being one of the storming party at the fall of the Malakoff fortress, which terminated that memorable siege by the fall of Sebastopol. Subsequently he returned to this coast and pursued various pursuits here and in California, such as working as a boat hand on the Stockton boats — serving as a sailor on coasters in the lumber trade up the coast — driving water-cart in San Francisco, and working on ranches as a laborer, near Oakland, Cal. — and in this State, having worked mainly as a laundryman in this city, and at Mr. Hall's laundry, on the Geiger Grade.

That at some time during his life he had formed the acquaintance of two men, one named Douglass and one named Dillon, two men whom he particularly described to me and others, but whose whereabouts he has never informed me, farther than as will hereafter be stated.

On the night of the murder of Julia Bulette, he, Millian, was passing at the corner of C and Union streets, at the International Hotel, when he saw Douglass and Dillon in private converse; that Douglass spoke to him and said: "How are you, Frenchman?" at which he halted and waited for them a moment while Douglass and Dillon continued their conversation unheard by him. Presently, he heard Dillon say: "Who will help us?" To which Douglass replied: "Frenchman will do." Dillon replied: "I would rather have Chris." Douglass replied: "No, Frenchman will do;" and turning to him, (Millian), said: "Frenchman, I want you to help us do a little job to-night: there is money in it. Will

Life and confession of John Millian: (properly, Jean Marie A. Villain) convicted as the murderer of Julia Bulette, as given by him to his attorney / [Charles E. DeLong], 1868

Gramp out laced a heavy chain through the front doors' handles and locked it up using a fist-sized padlock. Nellie was grateful that Gramp never saw the shop like that, his countless hours of work and memories boarded up in the soon-to-be forgotten relic of downtown Reno's past.

The following days blurred by as Nellie continued researching Julia. The research itself blurred too; Nellie called its historicity into question with each competing narrative in the newspaper headlines⁵². There were enormous gaps that spanned decades of Julia's life; the only consistent coverage didn't

⁵² Bulette became a folk hero after she was murdered in 1867. The accounts of her being a wealthy and charitable brothel madame, beloved by miners, firemen, and polite society alike, replaced the true nature of the end of her life, which was characterized by a long-term illness and insurmountable debt.

come until after she'd died, and even that was mostly focused on her murder suspects. Nellie had begun to have dreams about her. In them, she often sat quietly by a fireplace, smiling into the flames.

By the time winter fully settled in, the roads were slick with ice, and Nellie's car finally gave up her fight. If Nellie couldn't get somewhere by foot, she wasn't going. The size of her world shrank to the several blocks around her apartment, midtown to downtown.

On Monday, December 10, the day circled in red pen on her calendar, she took her borrowed laptop to the nearest coffee shop. This was the day she'd learn whether or not she'd received the grant from the Western History Preservation Society. She ordered a green tea and posted up at a table for two near the coffee bar.

The baristas strategized on the placement of new tattoos. A man who had the nervous energy of someone at either the beginning or end of a relationship asked to take the empty chair at Nellie's table. She nodded, and the chairs' metal legs screamed as they traveled across the concrete floor. She applied for a few more copywriting jobs and filled out some surveys (earning the cost of her tea took about an hour) before she couldn't bear another minute of not knowing whether her proposal had been accepted and she'd received the grant.

At first, she didn't see an email notification as the foundation had promised, which simultaneously alleviated and intensified her anxiety. She checked her spam folder, and there, wedged in between the digital sedimentary layers of promotions for shapewear and solicitations from sexy singles, she saw the notification. The message's preview offered its apologies before she even clicked on it. The laptop motor whirred in the delay between the click and the message opening.

Dear Eleanor,

We are sorry to inform you that your proposal was not accepted. We were struck by the strength of the submissions for this fiscal year, and we wish we were able to fund more projects than our budget allows. Please subscribe to our newsletter to keep up with the latest organizational and member updates. In the meantime, please also consider supporting WHPS by making a one-time or recurring donation.

*Warmly from the West,
Tara Andrews, Director*

Nellie moved the email to her ‘submissions’ folder, but then decided to delete it. She closed the



Gold Hill Daily News, 1878

laptop, drank the rest of her tea, and gestured to the man lingering by the counter that he could take her seat. She took unsteady steps outside and stood next to a patch of grass that had been frosted from the previous night’s threat of snow. She regretted wearing her Victorian-style kitten heels (1878), which had no tread on the bottom. She may as well have strapped into skis that morning. A familiar voice called out her name, and when she turned around, she

saw Emory.

“I thought I’d find you here.”

“I didn’t get it. The grant.”

“That’s why I wanted to find you. I subscribed to their newsletter when you said you applied and saw that your name wasn’t on the list of recipients.”

“List? The email made it sound like only one writer got it.” Nellie’s right foot started to slide away from her, so she took a step back to where the salt had done a better job melting the ice.

“Just a few people. If it’s any consolation, I got canned today. No money in the budget for my position.” Emory seemed unfazed as he looked back to make sure he’d locked his Tesla. He’d find something else, something in digital humanities maybe. But Nellie didn’t have that luxury of occupational versatility. Being an author was the only job she’d ever wanted, researching the only

skill she'd always been confident she could do well. How else could she make a living? Maybe she could become a desert nomad and wander from ghost town to ghost town. Or maybe she could give city tours for tips. Each alleyway and every gutted-out casino has a whole collection of stories to tell that can't be gleaned from the cigarette butts, peeling wallpaper, and crumbling exteriors.

Nellie could start with a tour of the Little Nugget. Word had it that it'd soon be replaced by a mid-scale restaurant for people staying at the new gambling-free casino a few doors down.

"I'm going to get a drink. You want one?" Emory asked.

"I wouldn't say that I want one, but I probably do need one." Nellie pulled the pocket sundial she'd recently found in the Reno Antique Mall, and Emory laughed.

"No second hand on that thing, huh."

They walked down the street toward a sports bar that stood in the long shadow cast by the Wild Orchid strip club. A digital sign in the parking lot showed a cartoon image of a bikini-clad snowman and the text, "The weather outside is frightful, but our happy hour specials are delightful." Then, confusingly, an image of an American flag waving in the wind. The bar smelled like peanut shells and beer. Nellie was thankful for the stickiness from other patrons' spilled drinks. At least that'd help her stay upright better than the boots she was wearing. Three different TVs aired baseball, basketball, and hockey. They ordered whiskeys and walked to the booth that sat near the middle of the bar. Though they were served in tumblers, the two drank them like shots and ordered another round. It was now just past 10 a.m. The bartender and waitress were too busy flirting with each other to judge them, or to notice that one of the TVs was now showing an extended infomercial for a new vaginal rejuvenation laser.

Emory explained that this was probably best for the both of them. He said that if he had to look at one more image and reorient it before digitizing it and filing it away in the right spot, he'd go

crazy. He was put on this Earth to be a maker, and long after he died, no one would remember his work at the Historical Society, but he would certainly live on in his fan art.

“Either way, you’re preserving the past,” she said. As it usually did, the whiskey was making her sentimental.

“I don’t know about that. My book doesn’t have much in the way of truth, and the books and movies it’s based on weren’t too interested with truth either. I can’t imagine that John Wayne knew much about the Comanches⁵³.”

“Probably not.”

The waitress squeezed the bartender’s bicep as he flexed. Emory ordered another round. Someone turned up one of the TVs. Nellie was soon drunk and perfectly at ease with her circumstances—all before noon.

“Where are you headed now?” Nellie asked.

“Like in life?”

She nodded in agreement, but also because her head felt too heavy to hold up.

“I’m going to keep renting from my parents,” he said. “Hopefully finish up this novel. And then who knows. Maybe join the Peace Corps or something.”

“Good idea. Very good idea.”

⁵³ In the film, *The Searchers*, John Wayne’s character, Ethan, is a Civil War confederate veteran who is searching for his abducted niece, Debbie. He finds her years later living as a member of the Comanche tribe. She is one of the wives of the tribe’s chief, Scar, who was played by a white actor named Henry Brandon. Ethan would rather see his niece dead than living as a member of the tribe, and he tries to kill her. The movie ends with Scar being murdered and scalped and Debbie being returned to a ranch. In 1989, *The Searchers* was deemed "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant" by the United States Library of Congress and selected for preservation in its National Film Registry; it was one of the first 25 films selected for the registry.

A few construction workers walked in and sat at a nearby booth. One of them blew his nose into a napkin, which spurred complaints from the others.

Nellie went to the bar to order a glass of water and then to the bathroom without announcing where she was going. When she got back to the table, Emory looked worried.

“You disappeared on me,” he said. It was difficult to figure out when people should announce what they’re doing and when they don’t have to. She shrugged, apologized. “What about you? What’s next for you?”

“I’m working on something big. It’s going to blow the lid off this whole thing.”

“Oh yeah? Off of what exactly?”

“You’ll have to wait and see.” Her shoes felt too tight. She struggled to take them off. She could feel the bartender’s eyes on her and saw Emory mouth, “Yeah, she’s fine.” Her toes were free. The relief bordered on ecstasy, and before she knew it, her feet were traveling up Emory’s pant leg. Whoever was sitting in that booth wasn’t the Nellie either of them knew, but she liked her. Maybe it was all of that research she’d been doing. She thought of Julia traveling thousands of miles by ship, wagon, and foot, arriving somewhere she’d only heard of, with little more than the stories she’d been told. One reporter had described her as having a "kind-hearted, liberal, benevolent and charitable disposition."

Nellie was feeling her charitable disposition then as Emory’s cheeks reddened. He was lonely. She could tell in the way he got lost in his book, the only company he had regular access to. And she was lonely too. She hadn’t felt desired by anyone since Bill, and even he treated her more like a novelty than a girlfriend.

“Do you want me to take you home?” Emory asked.

“Yessir.” With some effort, she got her shoes back on. She knew she should call Gramp to tell him she was having company over, but she didn’t have a charger. She couldn’t even remember the last time she’d used the phone.

Emory said he needed a little more time to sober up, and they sat in silence dividing their attention between the TV screens while that happened. Time felt like it was suspended above them, just like the faux antique toys and ranch equipment that hung from the ceiling. She looked at the beer posters on the wall featuring pinup girls. They sold these kinds of signs at the souvenir shops on South Virginia and up at Virginia City, often next to beer steins that read “#1 Dad.”

#

The apartment was dark and somehow colder than it was outside even though small snowflakes had begun to fall. She’d paid the power bill, so it felt like the company was punishing her for doing so late. She rushed inside to find Gramp, but he wasn’t there. Nellie resolved to do better. He was still recovering, and she wasn’t taking care of him like he deserved.

Emory’s teeth chattered, which was a little dramatic for her taste. He wouldn’t be able to last through a Northern Nevada winter for long without a furnace.

“I need to figure out where my grandpa is. He probably left a note.” Nellie turned on the gas lantern and as she anticipated, there was a scrap of paper on the counter: *Don’t eat dinner. I’ve got something special planned. And I have a surprise for you down at the store. Meet me there when you can!* “What time is it?”

“It’s a quarter after 3.”

“Wow, we were gone longer than I thought. Pretty early for dinner, though, right?”

“Depends on who’s asking. My dad and I have found some pretty killer early bird specials.”

It didn't make sense. Gramp didn't have any way of getting around. Maybe the payout for his lease had already come through. But they still had to clear out the shop that weekend. Wind rattled the window above the kitchen sink, and Emory chattered some more.

"I'm good here. Thanks so much for the ride."

"You don't want me to stay?" He pushed his hair back behind his ears.

"I'm sorry." She wasn't sure who the apology was directed toward or what it was for. He left, and Nellie instinctively walked to her car to go track Gramp down. It wasn't until she unlocked the door that she remembered it wouldn't start. It'd sit there in her designated parking spot until she could afford to get it fixed, and it was hard to say when that might be.

When Nellie had first signed the lease, she paid extra for a unit with a covered parking spot. Gramp had helped cover the security deposit. He'd also helped her stuff it full of her heavy furniture. The first night after the landlord handed over the keys, Nellie's excitement over the place, the first one of her own, morphed into worry as she explained that she'd fudged some of the numbers on the application. He suggested they take their minds off things by making s'mores. Everything would be fine in the end. They roasted the marshmallows over the gas range. Gramp was okay coexisting in the moment rather than thinking about the past or the future. He was an expert in mindfulness without knowing the term.

Back inside and sobered up, Nellie promised herself to get her life together. She was going to get a new job that paid better, a permanent, full-time one with benefits. She'd start chipping away at those bills, get her car fixed, and start planning for the future instead of being so impossibly immersed in the past. She fished out her cell phone charger stored in the big box of wires in her closet. The first big freeze of the winter wasn't far off, and if she didn't get things sorted with the

power company, the pipes could freeze⁵⁴. The utilities were in her name, and if something like that happened, the damage would be her responsibility. Nellie walked back to the coffee shop with charger and phone in hand and staked out the same seat she'd sat at earlier, bought another tea with extra honey.

She kept sipping the tea even when it burned her lips. Snow flurries spun up and then died down outside. It was going to be a cold walk home, which wasn't much warmer. Maybe she could put her small paychecks toward getting her and Gramp a hotel room for the night. It'd be good to be somewhere more comfortable than the apartment, somewhere with room service and hot water, when she delivered the news about the grant. Maybe then, the whole situation would seem darkly comical rather than downright bleak.

As soon as her phone got enough of a charge to turn on, she saw that she had fifteen voicemails. Nothing unusual there. It'd been off for a long time. The first several were from collectors, angry robots reminding her how much money she owed to different companies.

The voice in the last three was much kinder. It was the voice of someone delivering unbearable news. Gramp had sustained a massive heart attack. Someone had found him in the alleyway behind the pawn shop. He was trying to move a big antique table by himself.

Nellie listened to the messages over and over again until she felt sick. She had to put her head between her knees and could feel everyone else's eyes on her, so she went to the bathroom. She locked herself in there, blocked out the incessant knocking, until someone recruited a barista to tell her that there were several people waiting in line for the bathroom and could she please consider

⁵⁴ A city-wide pipe freeze was rumored to have happened in Virginia City on New Year's Eve in the early 20th century, which is why they now celebrate the holiday two months later to mark when the pipes were finally fixed.

their needs as well. When she didn't respond, the barista said that they'd fill up her tea with hot water for free. When she emerged, a business-suited man clapped.

"My grandpa is dead." She started crying to the point of heaving. "He's gone forever. I don't have anyone else." Saying the words out loud finally made them real. She slumped over, and the barista started to pat her back, then rubbed it in circles.

Nellie stood up straight and let the tears fall for another few minutes before wiping them all away. She walked to the hospital, which was near downtown, about two miles away. All the while, she was being transferred from hospital employee to employee, department to department. The tears came back, and the streaks they left behind felt even colder when the wind started blowing. The sun was about to set. The walk home would be too cold for her feet to withstand.

She finally arrived and was told that he could no longer be seen since he had been transferred, to the morgue, she assumed, as they awaited instructions from Nellie on which funeral home she planned to use.

"I haven't planned on any. I haven't planned for anything," she said. She tried to stop crying, but couldn't. And the effort that it'd take to didn't seem worth it. The nurse tried comforting her, but she could tell that he was rushed. He looked about seven years younger than Nellie.

Nellie chose the same funeral home that Gramp had used for her grandmother and for Leanne. She was going to make sure he had the nicest casket and most beautiful celebration of life party, no matter the cost.

Chapter 24

Grief has a way of distorting time and memory. Following the news of Gramp, days passed like hours, hours like days, some minutes like eternities. After her mother had died, Nellie made sense of the loss by retreating into stories, some real, most imagined. Gramp inserted Nellie's mother into bedtime stories. In these spin-offs, Nellie's mother was a side character in the *Princess and the Pea*. She hid in the jungle overlooking *Where the Wild Things Are*. She didn't ask *The Giving Tree* for anything. When her grandmother died, she found herself doing the same thing, often inserting her into memories of events she wasn't present for. Now, the three of them gone, Nellie imagined them the way she'd describe them in an analysis for a college class, their thoughts, feelings, and habits all written in the literary present. Her grandfather thinks and her grandmother says and her mother feels.

When she was young, Nellie had often been bored in school. She would finish the assignments quickly, which left her only the company of her own thoughts. In the months following her mother's passing, she'd feel a tightening in her stomach and a wooziness in her head as soon as her mind wasn't occupied by mad minutes and environmental science study guides. She'd raise her hand and try to explain how she felt, and her teacher, a frazzled man who wore loudly patterned ties, would cut her off mid-explanation by pointing in the direction of the school nurse's office. "Is it the sad bug or the stomach bug?" the nurse would ask. Regardless of what kind of bug it was, Gramp would come pick her up.

After Gramp rescued her from school, the adventures they went on after were their secret. No one but Nellie held onto these memories, and now that he was gone, she was their only keeper. What a terrible burden. She should have asked him more questions about his life. What it was like

when he met her grandmother. How he dealt with the loss of his only daughter. How he felt when he got a second chance at love. Why he dedicated his life to the operation of a pawn shop that hemorrhaged money.

People told her that time heals all wounds, but the sad bug that infested Nellie's every free thought like an untenanted room shifted into something even worse in middle school. Her two closest friends had successfully gotten a variance to the better middle school a few miles away. "Better" meant more white people⁵⁵—a fact she didn't realize until she started digging into zoning laws for an essay in college about the relationship between city planning and systemic inequity. At the time, though, she was excited to be among people whose cultures and histories differed from her own. On day one, she'd tried to make friends with anyone whose last name seemed interesting. "Where are you from?" she'd ask, and they'd answer "here." Disappointed, she'd press, "But like, where is your family from?" They'd frown, and though some humored her, none wanted the conversations to continue. She was well-meaning, like a lot of white children who'd learned most of what they knew about the world from TV or their parents.

During algebra, science, English, and P.E., dread about who she'd sit with at lunch weighed her down. She hunched over in her desk more and more as the day went on. And the dread turned out to be well-earned. At lunch, she traveled from table to table, and each time, she sent the people around her scattering. The first attempt was met with whispers about her outfit. She put her tray down next to a group of four girls, one of whom she recognized from her algebra class. She bit into her apple, thick with wax. The girls whispered to each other.

⁵⁵ After Nevada became a state in 1864, legislators passed a law stating that "Negroes, Mongolians and Indians shall not be admitted into the public schools, but the board of trustees may establish a separate school for their education, and use the public school funds for the support of the same." In 1873, this statute was repealed, likely a response to the high cost of running separate schools more than the constitutional infringements posed by the law.

“I’m Eleanor, but I go by Nellie. You’re in my algebra class.” She sat up as straight as she could in her too-tight collared shirt and overalls.

“Her outfit looks like something my little brother would wear, and he’s four,” one of the girls said. Her grandmother had chosen the outfit, which she thought looked better than the low-riding jeans and striped spaghetti strap tank top the girl was wearing. Her outfit had a story. It was the one mother had worn on her first day of middle school. Gramp had shown Nellie the picture.

“It was my mom’s,” she explained. The girl laughed, and then there was silence aside from the booming echoes of other kids talking in the cafeteria. Their eyes darted from one to the other until they all picked up their paper bag lunches and slid several feet down to the other side of the table.

The group that replaced the girls was more accepting, but still didn’t respond to anything Nellie said. After a few attempts to learn their names, she gave up. A boy whose black hair had been flat-ironed to cover the top right corner of his face asked her if she was going to finish her macaroni and cheese. Before she could answer, he took the container and peeled back the film that sealed the top. He ate a couple of bites using his friend’s fork and then gave his review. It tasted like shit. They left the remnants of their food on the table instead of throwing it away like all of the signs posted around the room instructed and walked out single-file.

In her final class, she was a teacher’s aide for the librarian, Mrs. Miller, and she found solace in the quiet. She filed away books, careful to remain within Mrs. Miller’s view so that she could witness her mastery of the Dewey Decimal system. The librarian was impressed, her eyes trained on Nellie’s deft maneuvering.

“All done. Anything else I can work on, Mrs. Miller?”

“I can hear your stomach growling from all of the over here. Are you hungry, sweetie?”

“Not really.” Nellie shook her head, started to cry.

“Your stomach is telling a different story.” She shuffled around the papers in one drawer until she unearthed a granola bar, which she presented to Nellie. A boy named Edwin was one of the two other students sitting in the library. She knew him and the kid he was sitting with from the after-school program in elementary school.

“You don’t get lunch either, huh?” he said. Mrs. Miller found one more granola bar and a package of fruit snacks. The boys gestured for her to throw them, and she did.

“I had hot lunch,” she mumbled. “Can I please go to the nurse?”

Mrs. Miller wrote her a pass and told her that she was excited to have Nellie on board in the library. She would be a good helper, Mrs. Miller could tell. The nurse asked what was wrong and offered an ice pack before Nellie finished explaining. The lies came fast. Her head hurt, her stomach ached, she had cramps (something she’d heard a girl in P.E. say when the teacher asked why she didn’t dress out), her ankle felt weird. She called Gramp and asked him to pick her up, which he did despite the fact that there was only one hour left in the school day. As he drove, he didn’t ask what was wrong. He said that middle school is the time when everyone wants to be like everyone else. That’s what made Nellie so special. She was her own person, and that was something to be proud of. At a red light, he pulled out the picture of her mother in the overalls and polo, said that he wasn’t the only one who was proud.

#

They picked up milkshakes before going to the Peppermill sportsbook. The cigarette smoke was thick, which Nellie liked. The smell was a comfort that she associated with late-night dessert at the 24-hour cafes and her childhood game of strategically stepping to avoid lava (the splotches of red in the elaborately patterned gaming floor carpet). The transaction with the man in front was

wordless except for the initial question about it being Gramp's usual bet. The usual changed based on the season, and this time, it meant a bet on the football game (whichever team wasn't favored to win) and the horse races (whichever horse had the worst odds). A cocktail waitress came over and said kids weren't allowed in that area, but then gave in after Gramp said it'd been a tough first day of sixth grade. She came back with a whiskey water for him and a Shirley Temple for Nellie. She drank it slowly, wondering if anyone was convinced by the confident way she held the glass that she was drinking something alcoholic. She unbuckled one of her overall straps to let the bib's corner hang loose. The cocktail waitress noticed when she came back and said that it looked good on her. She looked like a skateboarder she often saw skating outside of the Peppermill.

Gramp bet \$30 on a horse named Campfire S'mores. Even Nellie's untrained eye could see that the horse probably wasn't going to win. His movements looked labored even when he was slowly walking up to his starting stall. He ran faster than it seemed like he should be able to, clumps of mud flying from his hooves. For a fleeting moment, he was in second place. Gramp stood up out of his seat, and Nellie stood on top of her seat until the only other guy betting on the race told her that she was blocking the TV. Campfire S'mores didn't get any slower, but the other horses got faster as their jockeys whipped them. Gramp's horse got second-to-last place.

"Sorry he didn't win," she said.

"He's a beautiful horse, and he didn't get last. I like when my horse is second-to-last. It means he's got heart, but that he doesn't have the skill yet. You can train them to be faster. You can't train them to have heart. They've either got it or they don't."

There was an hour-long break before the football game started, so they walked across the gaming floor to eat Chinese food. While they waited for our food, Gramp played Keno. He let

Nellie pick all the numbers for him. After the digital screen alerted them that two of her numbers had been pulled, he said that they'd broken even.

“Some people think of breaking even as losing, but not me. We got to have fun and didn't have to pay for it. That's a win in my book.”

Chapter 25

Nellie didn't remember much about the funeral. At least four people told her that it was a nice service. She'd bought a new dress because it felt good to have a task. The dress was modeled after the one Queen Victoria wore after Prince Albert died in 1861⁵⁶.

She didn't recognize some of the people who chose to speak. One of the more tear-soaked eulogies was given by a man she recognized from the night Gramp had to come to terms with all of the debts he'd accrued. The man appeared to have a skilled tailor. "He was too young, too full of life to be gone." His shoulders shook. "I wish I had been a better friend. We used to play ball at Idlewild Park and have poker nights during the summer. He rarely won, which is why he called himself the unluckiest lucky man in the world." Nellie cried then, but it was a soft cry like the whimpers of an animal caught in a hunting snare.

Her own eulogy was a rambling mess. Instead of preparing something in advance, she had collected some of her favorite photos of Gramp and recounted the memories that those photos inspired. One time they went fishing on the Truckee River, and the only catch of the day was a picnic basket. Another time, he planned an elaborate scavenger hunt that ended at the Reno air races, and he sweet talked one of the pilots into letting her sit in one of the jets. Once, they went camping near Prosser and woke to an entire family of deer a foot from their tent. Gramp tried feeding them a hotdog buns, and they ran away.

Nobody could see the photos of him from that far away. The audience members looked confused as they leaned forward in their seats, strained to see them.

⁵⁶ Following Prince Albert's death, the queen wore black clothing until her own death in 1901.

“I already feel like my memories of him are slipping away. That’s why I’m holding onto these photos so tightly.” She wasn’t crying anymore. She felt angry with herself and with everyone in that room for not knowing that Gramp’s heart condition was much more severe than his description of his “tired out ticker.”

She found a safe corner during the wake to eat slices of deli meat and crackers. Only two people bothered her there: Emory and a man she didn’t recognize. Emory gave her a hug that she wished wouldn’t end. She folded herself into him, and he rocked her from side to side. Somehow, he knew exactly when to let go. He assured her that he’d come check on her soon.

The man looked vaguely familiar, and at first, she thought he was one of the servers from Cal Neva. He asked if they could go somewhere private to talk, and her stomach dropped, imagining that this was yet another debt collector who’d begun circling her like a scavenging bird. Everyone staring at her was making her paranoid.

“I don’t have anything,” she told him.

“I know. That’s why I’m here,” he said.

They found a private room that was probably off limits. He explained that he was her father, that when he left their family, it was because he had his own issues to attend to (that was over now; he’d just recently gotten his 20-year AA chip) and knew that he was in no state to raise a child. But he’d always kept up with her, had even clipped out newspaper snippets from when she’d participated in Young Chautauqua as Mark Twain, a white suit made for a ring bearer pulling tight over her recently developed hips. She should have wanted to ask him why he’d left and what he’d chosen over her mother and her, but she couldn’t muster any interest in him or his life decisions. Unlike with her research, this curiosity had clear limits.

“I’ve come into some money with my new position, and I think you should have it. I wanted to tell you about it in that card I sent with Marilyn Monroe, but I couldn’t. Your mom always reminded me of her. Not the looks, but I don’t know, in other ways. She was a mysterious woman, your mother. I was sad to see her pass away so young. I loved her, you know.”

“I don’t need it,” Nellie said. She couldn’t stop looking at his face, examining which of his features looked like the origins of her own. She felt tears roll down her right cheek, but it didn’t feel like she was crying. Her body was responding to the conversation in a way that her mind refused to. Through the wall, she could hear someone with a raspy voice giving a eulogy for her husband who’d died of cancer, which she referred to as “the big C” in her speech. The funeral home was packed full that day, a concentration of grief stored neatly into one unassuming stucco building on the edge of downtown.

“How are you paying for all of this? Are you still teaching? That can’t be much of an income.”

“It’s not your concern.” Her eyes focused on a pastel painting of a flower bouquet that looked to be sun-faded despite the fact that the room where they stood was windowless.

“Your grandpa never liked me much, even when your mother and I first started dating in college. He never cracked a smile in front of me, not once. The first time I met him, he stared at me while one of his friends asked me questions about my life. He nodded and took in all of the information. I could tell by those nods that I didn’t measure up to his standards for his daughter.”

“I guess you proved him right.”

His chin, the same dimpled one as hers, trembled.

“I came here to offer you help and pay my respects, and now that I’ve done both, I’ll be on my way.”

He loosened his tie so that it sat a couple of inches beneath the collar of his freshly pressed shirt and left the room without saying another word. Like Nellie, he was slightly bow-legged. He was taller than she expected. She said goodbye in the direction of her feet after he was far enough away not to hear her.

Back in the room dedicated to Gramp's service, Nellie collected the sympathy cards that people had left. She couldn't have been talking to that man long, but everyone was gone. It didn't matter. She was coming to the end of her allotted time in the room, and she was relieved that she couldn't listen to any more carefully curated anecdotes about Gramp.

The funeral home director, a broad-faced, oddly proportioned man, came in to tell her that she could take all of the leftovers. That was included in the overall cost. One of his nostrils whistled. She nodded, though she knew she had nowhere to store them. They'd all go bad in the fridge that was still turned off, and she wasn't in a place to navigate the power company's customer service line. Maybe she could store them outside on her small patio. She'd spent weeks without power and still hadn't cleaned out the fridge. It probably smelled terrible. The thought of food rotting in Styrofoam boxes made her feel sick.

She'd been waiting so long for things to turn around, and now that things were finally turning around, it was for the worse. She opened up the sympathy cards and searched for cash. Most of the cards only featured the pre-printed condolences, along with the mourner's signature, so she didn't feel bad when she stopped reading them. Three different people bought the same card that depicted a serene meadow landscape and said, "May you find peace in this trying time." When she opened an envelope lined with gold foil, she predicted there'd be money inside, and she was right. The card was from Johnson Commercial Development. A note inside of the otherwise blank card featuring a Picasso rendering of a woman on the front read, "Our hope is to carry on your legacy as

an integral part of our vibrant downtown.” Nellie pulled the two crisp hundred dollar bills from the card and before throwing the card in the trash, along with most of the others. Unlike those, she ripped this one in half first.

The director knocked gently on the frame of the doorway she hadn’t noticed he was standing in.

“Sorry to bother you, ma’am, but I’m afraid we need to clean up before our next service.” Nellie thought of the people who would come in after her. The funeral home was a turnstile, slowing the constant flow of grieving people by offering them a space to eat cheese and crackers together.

“Yes, of course,” she said, collecting the cards that were worth collecting.

“The food,” he said, and she shook her head. He seemed disappointed in her as he called over one of his employees to clear it away.

“Oh yes, the food. I’ll take it,” she revised. She left with a small stack of cards in her satchel and three large tins filled with commingling hors d’oeuvres. The meager charge she’d gotten on her phone had already run out. She had nowhere to go, so she figured that she’d walk around town like she’d done as a teenager with Gramp.

She couldn’t feel her feet anymore, but the numbness felt more mental than physical; she was no longer tethered to her body. It was the late afternoon, and people were already packed into the bars, drinking shoulder-to-shoulder to ward off cold and loneliness. She stopped into her favorite karaoke bar and was relieved when feeling returned to her feet, even if the feeling was in the form of a dull throbbing pain. She put the tins of leftovers in front of her as a barricade hoping that it was too strange an action for there to be a rule against it.

“Sorry, ma’am. No outside food in here,” the bartender said. He pointed to a sign that clearly outlined the rule. Enormous snakes in faded ink traveled up his forearms, clear coverups of even older text. A woman’s name maybe.

“Unless you want to share with the entire bar,” the female bartender said. Her face looked much older than her body, which was in better shape than Nellie’s though she was nearly half the woman’s age. She wore a leather bra and a leather brimmed captain’s hat. The outfit suited her. She looked like an original Burner who’d attended the event when it was just a small bonfire on the shore of Baker Beach.

“That’s exactly what I’d like to do,” Nellie said. The only other patrons were skeptical at first. But soon, the captain hatted bartender was handing out plastic cutlery and people were moaning their contentment. Nothing tastes better with an afternoon beer than unexpected, free food. “What time does karaoke start?” Nellie asked.

“Starts whenever you want to start singing,” the woman said. She pushed thick bleached blond bangs from her forehead. Her skin sparkled with body glitter, and Nellie almost asked her where she’d bought it.

“I need a little more time before I can do something like that. I’m a terrible singer,” Nellie said.

“That’s the whole point. Especially now before the people who can actually sing get here.”

Nellie started chasing her shots of tequila with spoonfuls of potato salad. It seemed like a good idea to get some starch into her stomach to quiet its growling, ease the persistent nausea.

“Snappy outfit,” a man next to her said. She looked out of place there like she did in most places. Nellie rolled her eyes out of habit, and he looked hurt. His body hunched even further over the bar than it had been before.

“Thank you. I just left my grandpa’s funeral,” she said. He and the two people next to him laughed nervously. The female bartender turned up the volume on the TV. Nellie let herself cry, but only briefly.

“I’m ready for the mic,” the man said. “This one’s for your grandpa.”

The man sang the worst rendition of “Missing You” by Diana Ross that Nellie had ever heard. It made her smile, but not for the reasons he probably hoped. They clapped louder for him than it seemed possible for a group of six people. It took two more shots before Nellie was drunk. She was a seasoned enough drinker⁵⁷ that she didn’t think this could happen so easily. But there she was, beyond unsteady on her feet, squealing for the mic as a baby might scream for its rattle. She sang “Ring of Fire,” and her pitch was better than she expected. She wasn’t lying when she said she couldn’t sing. But while standing with locked knees on that sticky floor, her mic-free hand waving in the air and watching everyone enjoy the leftovers she’d carried several blocks made her feel like she could belt out any tune she wanted to.

“Can I do another?” she asked too loudly.

Everyone at the bar nodded. One of the bartenders turned the sound off of the TV. The other one sprayed cleaner on the bar to wipe up the trail of leftovers that ran from the tins to each

⁵⁷ During Prohibition, the Anti-Saloon League argued for the link between alcohol use and social issues like domestic abuse. In 1908, the Reno chapter of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union installed a fountain on the corner of Virginia and Plaza Streets to “quench the thirst of all of God’s creatures,” including dogs and horses. Bars and saloons lined Reno’s streets, and they were frequented by many of the people who’d traveled to Reno seeking a quickie divorce. Noting the issues posed by prohibition on the local economy, then Mayor Ed Roberts delivered a speech at the Methodist church saying that prohibition was unenforceable and that he had long since instructed the city police to ignore liquor-related offenses. Now, Reno regularly ranks among the “drunkiest cities in the United States” with the amount of adults who report “excessive drinking” often exceeding 20%.

of the patrons' paper plates. Nellie sang "Fire and Rain," one of Gramp's favorites and a nice complement to the first song. Soon, she'd finished an entire set.

Back at her seat, the room felt like it was getting too hot. The neon beer lights cast a ghoulish hue over the other patrons. The man who'd complemented her dress before almost looked translucent.

The man next to her introduced himself as Benny. He held out his hand long enough that it was too embarrassing not to shake it.

"Do you want to leave?" he asked. The woman with him repeated the question. Her hair was teased so that it looked like a golden aura radiated outwards from her forehead.

It wasn't until they were playing carnival and arcade games at the Circus Circus that Nellie realized they were swingers who were looking for a third. She thanked them for the last drink they'd bought her and played several games where she pelted a ball at weighted milk bottles until she won a panda bear stuffed animal that had pink and green fur instead of black and white.

By the end of her walk home, she was dragging the stuffed animal. She'd spent every last nickel to her name on it and wasn't ready to get rid of it even though she was in no place to be carrying anything but herself.

The apartment was as dark and cold as she expected, but she kept herself warm thinking about how Gramp would smile if he saw her win that panda.

"You've always been so strong," he'd say.

Chapter 26

January 4, 1867

It has been a difficult many years since I lost the baby I had not even met and did not have a chance to bury. Now that I have found my way back to myself, Annabel suggested that I begin writing again, and I obliged. It does do my heart good to watch as my hand turns these inked shapes into meaning.

More people have been coming to the city by the day. I no longer know every person who walks through the streets as I once did. Annabel now has three children by a handsome man who she took care of following an accident deep in the belly of a mine. He says that he saved her from a life as a sporting woman, but all three of us know the truth. She has saved him like she saved me and just about every other man who walked through the doors of Madame Raven's place.

Last evening, I invited her and her family to our annual fundraiser. Her three boys are each less than one year apart. They all have their father's black curls and Annabel's bright eyes. I wonder still what a child of my own might look like. But I did not try for a baby after the last time. I cannot bear the pain, and I do not believe my body can bear the burden.

We made a New Year's feast that could feed everyone in town two times over. Even the little ones helped. Her boy, Tom, collected and cracked eggs into a big bowl and whisked them faster than I could have. All of her boys are going to be proper cooks if Annabel has anything to do with it.

The event was well attended even though the mines kept many of the men from joining. They did not get the evening off then, and with the new pit mine opening at the base of the hill, there was little chance of them getting a break anytime soon. I saw Mr. McLaughlin there. He was looking dapper and had a new lady on his arm. He and I fell out after I lost the baby, but neither of

us blamed each other for it. We were daily reminders of each other's pasts, and neither of us needed or wanted reminding. I tipped my bonnet at him, and he tipped his hat back. I knew he still felt tenderly toward me as I did him. But our paths had diverged and the new paths we had carved would be easier for us to travel separately than to forge ahead together.

We stood so close to one another at the feast that there was hardly room to walk without bumping into someone else. The two wood stoves in the east and west corners of the hall went out, and no one stoked the fires inside because our bodies and breath were making enough heat.

We played games all night. Of course there was a game of Faro going on, but nobody wagered money. It was all in good fun, and we were all in good spirits. A game of Big Windy broke out, and I knew that Froggy McGee would win. He had so many tales to choose from.

"I'll tell ya'll about the time I ended up on the back of an ass, runnin' for my life when I was chased by a group of gunslinging desperadoes east of the Mississippi River," he said, mimicking a gallop as if he was once again riding that donkey. As he spun his tale, we threw our coins at him, and he only picked up a few when we were done. The rest, he said, could go back to the folks who needed it most.

We stayed there well into the evening. The biting cold air outside—colder by the minute—slinked in anywhere it could. At midnight, the small group of firefighters—there were up to ten of them for the city then—put on their own play, even splashed the audience with water as they pretended that we were all on fire. We were soaked, and even though there was ice on the ground outside, we were not angry. We were glad to see that we could still have fun inside of that building, no matter how miserable our lives outside of that warm hall might be. I made a toast to that effect. Our community was like a knit sweater, I explained. The tighter the knit, the warmer the sweater. Before I could fully draw out the idea, two of the men hollered "Here here! To Julia!" There was no

need for me to carry on after that. I felt the warmth I had been discussing. It had taken four years, but I was finally part of the stitching that kept our town together.

The prospectors paid good money to attend. They will do anything to put a smile on their wives' faces, and the annual gala I held for the firehouse and the injured miners' fund I had begun was a place for them to feel important and beautiful in their gowns that had been shipped from thousands of miles away. Otherwise, they threatened to go back to San Francisco where they had much more comfortable lives before being dragged over the pass. It got mighty cold and snowy over that pass, and stories about the poor souls who had gotten stranded and had taken to eating the shoes on their feet, the roof over their heads, and even the flesh of their fellow travelers was enough to make everyone stay put. But they made the threats just the same.

A trio of the wives stood near one of the unlit wood stoves. They were talking about Annabel and me and all of the other former women they called soiled doves. This was the only time that we saw each other, for which I was grateful. Those women disdained us, feared that we would steal their men like a fox might steal your day's fishing catch. Really, though, those foxes did not steal anything that was not given to them. The fish would swim upstream if to get into the fox's paws. I once heard that the wives bake for the men in the jailhouse who have battered a working woman, but I choose not to believe that such cruelty could exist in any person.

The women laughed as they looked at us, clearly discussing what we had chosen to wear from the meager collection that was not even large enough to warrant a wardrobe to contain it. Perhaps they envied the simplicity that came with our lives—one dress for each occasion, and there were only two different kinds of occasions: church and work. Unlike me, they did attend the former and did not do the latter. So, the simplicity may not suit them after all.

Near the end of the long, joyous evening, Mrs. Crawford complimented my cooking, my speech, and my cape on my way outside. She smiled, but not far beneath that smile was a scowl that could hardly be concealed. The perfume she wore may have been expensive, but it smelled rotten to me, like apples that had browned and fallen from a tree before anyone had a chance to pick them.

“I may have some work for you,” she said. “These men, they really accept you despite your past, don’t they? You’re able to tame even the wildest stallions.”

“I left that life behind long ago, Mrs. Crawford. This is my life now,” I waved my hand toward the guests, many of whom were carrying out the chairs they had brought from their boarding houses.

“I mean no offense. This opportunity was practically made for you and yours. I would like you to perform in a play much like the one put on tonight. But it will be a grand affair, one that has a purpose in civilizing the men here.”

“I do think I could be a skilled player,” I said, thinking back to the days when I first arrived and would have done anything to be one of the women up on the stage instead of in Madame Raven’s quarters. “I do not think, though, that one play will make many of the men here change their ways. Their work is hard, and when they finish that hard work, they want to find anything that will take their minds off of the mines and the friends they have lost.”

“It would be a regular affair. I understand that these things take time.”

“Even if it does not change them, it might just help them,” I said.

“Well then, that settles it.” Her gloved hand shook my bare hand before we both walked out into the black night.

January 10, 1867

I must say that I am more excited about this play than I thought I would be. We have been rehearsing for hours each day, and I have been able to fit in some schooling for the other players. Many of the girls cannot read, and I was able to get the newsman to typeset and print the scripts. In the beautiful building that housed the newspaper, I saw a man dressed hat-to-boot in white—an odd choice in our muddy city. The suit matched his white hair and mustache, and when he tipped his hat to me, I will say that my heart skipped one or two beats.

Mrs. Crawford gave me the script. It was an adaptation of *The Odyssey*, which described the travels and adventures of a man named Odysseus, who would do anything to get back to his poor wife and son who were waiting patiently for him to return. That epic poem is thousands of lines long, Mrs. Crawford explained, which is why we could only focus on two portions of it. We were to play out the scenes where Odysseus was nearly killed by sirens and the scene where he was stuck on the island of a nymph named Calypso. I was to play both Calypso and the siren who tried to lure Odysseus and his crew to their death. I had the majority of the lines, so teaching the other women was not difficult. They only interjected a few times, mimicking a Greek chorus.

At one rehearsal, Liza, a young girl who had just recently arrived, said that she did not want to participate.

“It’s making us all out to be fools, and mean fools at that,” she said.

“Players have to take on the role they are given. And this is from an epic poem that was written hundreds of years ago. There is nothing foolish about it.”

“It says here that we’d all be dressed in bedding pinned around us to look like togas with our arms naked for anyone to see.”

“Is that so different from the work you normally do?” I asked. It was an unkind remark, but I was growing impatient with her. She threw her script to the floor, which was a darn shame. Each

one of those represented hours and hours of careful typesetting and printing. I hoped the man in all white never learned about what came of his careful work.

We only have eight more days until our performance, and I want it to be the best it can be—not for Mrs. Crawford, but for the men who need a distraction, especially as they dig through the frozen ground, their hands bloodied from the rough handles of their pickaxes.

Thank heavens for Annabel, who is the only person really keeping things together. She is sewing all of the costumes, which is a mighty feat given that there are now six of us in the performance. Her boys sit quietly while we all work. They are the best behaved children I have ever seen, and I can already tell that they will be pure of heart like their mother. The eldest reads from his pocket Bible while the two younger ones listen, paying close attention to the words that they are hearing.

I worried about Annabel for a long while after she had taken to the tincture of missy that she kept on her. But one morning when I was still staying with Mr. McLaughlin, she told me that she was done with it, done with all of it. She moved out of Madame Raven's and into a place of her own that very same day. I knew better than to ask what had happened, but her black eye nearly swollen shut told me just about everything I needed to know. She moved into a crowded boarding house on B Street and worked as a seamstress. She never looked back, and neither did I. We buried our time on D Street just as we had buried the little pine box filled with bonnets made for the baby that died before it could even take one breath of the mountain air. I never learned where that baby was buried, and it may be for the best. I would have visited that spot every chance I got to talk to my little one and tell him all about the world he had escaped. I still do not know if there is a Lord Almighty or not, but I do know that my little one is up with the angels now.

January 15, 1867

Tonight was our final rehearsal for the play. Some of the townsmen got to sneak a peek at our work, mostly those who were paying the bill for our production. Annabel did an amazing job with our costumes, though the plunging necklines plunged more than was comfortable in the cold hall. The men did everything they could not to look at us. Mrs. Crawford's husband, who I had first met at the restaurant years ago and had since seen at Madame Raven's many times, pulled a gleaming pocket watch from his suit jacket over and over, even before the minute hand had ticked forward. Mrs. Crawford watched him like a coyote stalking a chicken coop. She would swoop in to punish him when he was at his weakest. I found it unlikely that her plan of civilizing the men would work, but I do not think they need civilizing, at least not when it comes to us women. Two of them, Douglass and Dillon, do not hold any promise of being civilized. They are a wicked pair, and she is often whispering to them in a way that makes the players nervous.

What the men really need is to see us soiled doves as simply doves, peace-bringers who inspire them to keep the barrels of their pistols empty and their balled fists loose at their sides. That is not Mrs. Crawford's aim, but I hope that our message comes across that way, thanks in part to the revisions I have made to the script.

I have taken some liberties with my parts, but I will not reveal those until we perform. Mrs. Crawford would shut the entire production down were she to hear the beautiful speech I have written for Calypso, who, in my new version, will graciously release Odysseus from her capture and reveal that he has been free to leave the entire time. Everyone was pleased with our rehearsal, and I was pleased with all of the girls' performances. They all had talents for pretending they felt one way when they felt another. It was a necessary skill for their profession. How many times had I also

looked up at a man as if I loved him when the opposite was true, when I was imagining him disappearing from the Earth altogether rather than laying with me in my bed?

After our final rehearsal, I returned to my cottage alone as I always did. I am happier now in my life alone. After Paul passed, and I lost the baby, I realized that the more I loved people, the bigger my heart grew, and a big target is easy to pierce. It is only me in this cottage, save for the nice Chinaman who builds my fire each morning. Each morning, I tell him about my dreams as he stokes the fire. He does not respond as if he does not understand, but I know that he understands very well. Like many of the other people in Chinatown, he speaks two languages, but knows better than to share this with the rest of the men, who already resent them for doing better work for less wages. Like the girls on D Street, his safety depends on his ability to pretend he is not as smart as he is.

I heard a knock on the door so quiet that I thought it was just the wind knocking the window's outer shade against the frame. I covered my inkwell and lit another oil lamp to inspect the noise. When I opened the door, I was surprised to see Mr. Crawford standing before me, so far away that I had to reach my lamp in front of me, its soft light reflecting off of his sharp features.

It was quite late, at least a quarter past midnight. He said he had a bad feeling about the play, that it kept him from sleeping. His wife, he explained, was a jealous woman whose ugliness inside was as striking as her beauty outside. He did not know what she was planning, but whatever it was would not be good. I invited him inside, but he refused. The look on his face was one of pure terror, an animal with one foot in a trap listening for the creature that would make him into dinner. I met him outside even though I was only in my dressing gown, which the night air easily cut through. It was not just Mrs. Crawford I should worry about. This play was all one distraction. I told him that was the entire point. A play is meant to distract from reality, to imagine a world different from our own. But he continued shaking his head from side to side. He'd gone to the fortuneteller dressed

like a gypsy in her silk scarves. She had looked into her crystal ball and seen something so horrible that she could not describe it in words. I thanked him for warning me and sent him on his way, but I knew better than to believe that fortuneteller. She was the best actress of us all.

Chapter 27

Nellie no longer locked her front door. If someone wanted to steal the sad remains of her life, they were welcome to them. She couldn't sit in that place any longer. Her hip bones, once covered by a thin layer of flesh, now jutted out at sharp angles that frightened her. Her linen blouses from the sixties got even more billowy on her disappearing frame. She thought of the people incarcerated in Ely who'd gone on hunger strike⁵⁸ after new policies dictating what they could and couldn't buy from commissary blew away the few scraps of freedom they had left. But what was her cause? She walked down to Gramp's shop to see if she could remember.

It was a long walk that further irritated the raw skin on her feet. Though physically uncomfortable, the asceticism brought her some peace. She stopped at the Truckee River to watch the water roll over small boulders. Trash had collected along the bank, so she walked down near the overlook where one of the chapels held outdoor ceremonies and picked it up. She wobbled as she carried chip bags, water bottles, and beer cans back up the river's bank. She threw away the bags in an overflowing garbage can next to the movie theater. "Those melon-headed folks are going to put a movie theater right on the Truckee," Gramp had once told her. "They blew up the beautiful Mapes Hotel⁵⁹ so that they could put in a high-rise and a theater without any windows." If she had the

⁵⁸ Hunger strikes have long been used as a form of civil disobedience. Authorities are often motivated to quash these protests as soon as possible, which has led to controversial practices like force feeding. Starting in 1909, the British government used the practice on imprisoned suffragists who were on hunger strikes, which some argued led to the death of at least one woman imprisoned there.

⁵⁹ The Mapes Hotel was the tallest building in Nevada when it was constructed in 1947. For the more than three decades that it stood, The Mapes was considered one of the most elegant hotel casinos in Reno. Its history dovetailed with Reno's history as an entertainment hub; entertainers ranging from Liberace to the burlesque dancer, Lili St. Cyr, performed there, and the movie *The Misfits* was filmed there. After a City Council vote to demolish it took place in 1999, it was imploded the morning of Super Bowl Sunday, January 30, 2000.

money, though, she would have gone to see a movie. She wanted to immerse herself in a different reality. In some parallel universe, she was not in so much pain.

She walked past one of the boarded-up casinos. The few street performers who chose to bear the cold stood outside, and people tucked in sleeping bags who didn't have a choice but to bear the cold lined South Virginia. Soon, the city's community response team would push the people from their sleeping bags and tell them about resources that did not exist—not really. They would find another place to sleep until they were uprooted from there. Nellie was close to joining them, and she imagined how her life's story, now hundreds of pages long, would be reduced to one sentence if she lived on the street: a tourist who'd booked a room in one of the big hotels downtown saying, "This doesn't look like a very good part of town," before gripping her child's hand a bit tighter.

The air was cold, and without any humidity, she could feel her lips chapping. She imagined the cracked skin on her heels, a trait she'd likely inherited from her mother. Nellie should have asked her father for a cataloging of all of his traits so that she could figure out which ones he was responsible for. She hoped that she was a mix of her mother and Gramp, skipping over her father entirely.

She wondered if anyone believed Gregor Mendel when he discovered the basics of genetics⁶⁰. Nellie considered that the overlap between faith and science was bigger than people thought. Sometimes, you need to believe in something even if you can't see it.

⁶⁰ When Mendel presented his discoveries in 1865, they did not gain much traction. He tended to his yellow and green pea plants for years before he was able to commit to a theory of dominant and recessive genes. His work was not rediscovered until the turn of the 20th century, and he was deemed the Father of Genetics. During his life, he served as a monk, believing that the monastic life helped him avoid "the perpetual anxiety about a means of livelihood."

She continued walking in the shallow shoe tracks in the snow that hadn't melted under the awnings. As she approached Silver Pawn, she braced herself against the image she knew was coming: the entire shop gutted with a thick chain around the handles. She looked only at her feet and kept a measured pace. "The only way you can get somewhere is to put one foot in front of the other," Gramp had said. "You try taking two steps at once, and you'll topple over." Right foot, left foot, right track, left track. Nellie only knew that she was in front of the shop when she approached the electrical box outside of the El Dorado that'd been painted with peace signs and music notes. Pink and purple swirled and collided on the back panel, which she had never seen despite spending most of her grown years only a couple hundred feet away. She imagined the painter's brush moving swiftly across the metal, tourists stopping to watch them at work.

When she finally looked up to inspect whether she'd also missed an image on the top, she saw the shop in front of her. Or, more accurately, she saw the gaping hole where the shop once stood. Part of her expected this. The buildings in two of the surrounding lots had already been bulldozed to make room for additional university parking and a shuttle stop. But that expectation hardly tempered the pain of seeing the shop reduced to rubble. Sometimes, lots stood empty for months or years after a sale. Other times, it only took days. She hadn't prepared herself for this to be one of the latter times. A quickly constructed metal fence stood around the lot, a sign promising the completion of this *Reno-vation* by fall of 2016 from Johnson Commercial Development hung on the front. She slowly walked around the perimeter, stopping at times to push her face against the fence and look inside, until she made it to the backside that butted up against two buildings and an alleyway. She saw something in the alley that stood up among the black trash bags that surrounded it. It was one of Reno's rare cloudy days, and the alley was shadowed more than it usually was for this time of morning. But whatever was sitting in it was calling to her.

She heeded its call.

A few steps closer, she realized that it was the Suicide Table. She ran to it and draped her upper body over it as if to protect it from the elements that'd already soaked the felt top. She threw the trash bags farther than she thought she could, but then thought better of it. If she kept it as it was, surrounded by trash and other demolition detritus, people wouldn't see the value in it and would leave it alone. She ran to the Cal Neva where she knew one of the waitresses would let her borrow a cell phone, and she called Emory. He was in the alley by the time she got back.

"That was fast," she said.

"A guy that said he was your dad asked me to take it before they tore down the building. He said that there'd been a note on it and that he wanted to give it to you, but you didn't give him a chance."

"Of course he'd make it out to be my fault. And how did he know that it'd be here?"

Emory's voice dropped down to a whisper.

"You don't know?"

She shook her head.

"His company was the one that's building here. I mean, it's the one that tore it down."

Nellie dropped to her knees. Hopefully, all of her father's genes were recessive. Emory offered her his hands as she started to shiver, and she stood like a foal just born.

"How could he do that?" She wept, but her cries were silent. Emory didn't say anything. Nothing could be said. Instead, he handed her the note from Gramp.

My sweetest Nellie,

I am usually not so mysterious like this, but I thought you would appreciate a scavenger hunt like you used to do as a little girl. Consider this your first clue! Well, the note I left on the counter was the first clue, so I guess you can consider this your second. The shop will be gone soon, which I haven't had the heart to tell you. This

has been in the works for some time because I didn't want you to inherit my burdens. When it's gone and replaced by another movie theater or something, we'll have to take detours so that we never have to pass it.

The good news, though, is that you have two surprises coming your way. This should keep you busy for a couple of hours, and I've made dinner plans for us. But you're so sharp, you might be done within the hour. That's why I said you should have an empty stomach. Being hungry also makes you think more clearly. Your grandma told me that once, but she may have just said that so I'd stop tasting her cooking before it was ready and she could keep me out of her way by tossing a crossword puzzle in front of me.

I don't have a way to get a hold of you, so if you ended up getting stumped (you won't), just meet me at the Harrah's steakhouse at 6. Thank you for taking care of me the way you have been. Now it's my turn to take care of you.

Location 1: Roses are red, violets are blue. I love looking at Elvis' car and I know you do too.

XOXO

Gramp

Nellie asked Emory to drive her to the National Automobile Museum even though it was only a couple of blocks away. He didn't ask what was in the letter before agreeing to take her. He drove ten miles over the speed limit and rushed through a yellow light—neither of which he would ever do on his own. Emory paid their admission with their locals discount, and she led him back to the 1973 Stutz Blackhawk. Nelly stepped right over the velvet rope, past the sign that warned “DO NOT TOUCH,” and immediately tried to open the door. A security guard hustled over, shouting out “miss,” “ma'am,” “excuse me,” but none of the phrases stopped Nellie.

When he pulled her from the car, her body went limp.

“I'm really sorry. I just need to get the next clue.”

“I thought you'd be younger,” he said, releasing his tight grip. He was stronger than he looked, probably didn't weigh too much more than Nellie. “You're the one doing the scavenger hunt? I thought it was for a kid.”

“Do you know where the next clue is? It should be here.” Her eyes scanned over the car’s sleek lines, focusing in on the narrow grill Gramp had told her was unique to this model.

“They left it for you up front. A nice old man came here and was just about as bold as you trying to tape a letter to the car. I’ll be lucky if I don’t get fired for that. Twice in one week.” He licked at what appeared to be chocolate on the corner of his mouth.

At the front, Nellie apologized, begged the woman not to fire the security guard. The woman laughed, said that compared to the teenagers who go to prom there, this was nothing. She examined one of her bright red acrylic nails and searched through a few loose papers on the desk before holding up an envelope. She passed it to Nellie.

“I like your nails,” Nellie said. The woman’s face brightened, and she described in somewhat excruciating detail how she had just gotten them done and wasn’t sure about the shape. She’d asked for squoval and had gotten square, which made her fingers look squatty.

Nellie thanked both staff members and apologized again before walking toward the door. She delicately tore open the envelope.

Location 2: There once was a man named Marsh. He was known to be rather harsh. But then he made money and turned sweet as honey before settling down on his toosh.

“Lake Mansion?” Emory volunteered, smiling. They drove the few blocks west before parking outside of the white Italianate-style house. The house sat just off of mansion row where men like William Marsh bought property in the 19th century. Now, it was flanked by a bar where you could bring your own meat to barbecue and an assisted living facility.

Instead of barging in, Nellie tapped on the door. She and Emory stood out on the veranda, and Nellie stepped back to see the widow’s walk near the rooftop. An elderly woman with perfectly curled white hair answered and asked if they were there for the Artown fundraiser. Nellie said no and tried to explain why she actually was there. Hearing the explanation out loud made her blush,

but the woman didn't seem to mind. She wondered what she looked like standing in front of this woman. When was the last time she'd showered? Her shoes left muddy tracks on the oak hardwood floors. Being in a place with high ceilings, chandeliers, and wainscoting, and standing among Reno's wealthy artsy types sharpened the contrast between her and them. She was thankful Emory was standing next to her.

"Oh yes, he left something for you."

"It's in the incoming mail slot, Gail," a man called out. He was carrying an industrial size container of toilet paper up the stairs. The floor above them creaked as the fundraiser guests mingled with one another. One of the attendees came in the door and strategically moved past Nellie, and Gail pointed to the stairs behind her. People applauded, and someone's piercing whistle made Nellie jump. Gail handed Nellie the envelope, and she read the next clue as Emory looked over her shoulder.

Location 3: During the cold winter months, this place offers respite. But two million years ago, it'd have given you a fright. Dip in your toes and melt away your woes while the water brings you delight.

Nellie imagined herself plunging into one of the hot springs pools. She and Emory got into his car, and he started driving without instruction.

"Just keep going south, right?" he asked. He turned up the heat. The quietness of his car unsettled her.

"That's right." The twenty-minute drive to Steamboat Hot Springs was enough time to finally restore warmth to her extremities.

The woman at the front desk gave them a shallow bow as they walked in.

"Do you have an appointment?" She relit a stick of incense that was perched on the front desk. It was hard to imagine the sandalwood scent being any stronger than it already was.

“No, and this is going to sound strange, but I’m doing a scavenger hunt, and my grandfather should have left a clue for me here.”

“I don’t know anything about that, but I can call my coworker to see if she knows about it. The outside tub’s open if you want to get a 15-minute soak in the meantime. She looked to Emory to see what he thought, but he was busy surveying the tea and crystal collection on the opposite wall.

“Sure, we can do that.” She tried a few credit cards until Emory realized what was happening and intervened.

“It’s on me,” the woman said. She adjusted her septum piercing and smiled so that it nearly disappeared into her nostrils. “You have a really nice energy.”

Nellie and Emory undressed down to their underwear and got into the small pool. It’d begun to snow again. Nellie’s cotton underwear was not transparent, but Emory didn’t seem to care. And surprisingly, neither did she.

“Thank you again for helping me,” she said. “Gramp would’ve said you’re one of the good ones.”

“I try to be. I wish I’d gotten to know him.” He leaned back to wet his hair, and Nellie did the same.

“The Paiute people believed these hot springs had healing powers and recommended that miners soak in them to rejuvenate themselves when they traveled through during the Gold Rush. A British hydrotherapist built the first bath house.”

“They had the right idea. I can’t remember the last time I felt this relaxed.” Both of them sat next to the pipe that delivered water from the springs. It was hottest there. They sat quietly as snow collected in their hair.

The woman from the front desk came out and said their time was finished, so they toweled off and got dressed. Back inside, Nellie peered into one of the private rooms, bathed in purple light that looked more natural than it should have.

“Good soak?” she asked, and they nodded. “I found that envelope. My coworker had put it away.” She handed it to Nellie, and Emory paid for two cups of tea. In the car, Nellie read the clue as their tea steeped.

Location 4: This hotel has 4,000 rooms. It was built after one of our booms. Now lights still flash as people lose all their cash. But still have fun in costumes.

Unlike the first three, Nellie had to think this one over for a moment. It was definitely the El Dorado casino, but the last line threw her. Gramp wasn’t much of a poet. She wasn’t sure if the costume line was a reference to the cover bands that played near the gaming pit, costumed as the band they were mimicking or if it was about the men who played the dueling pianos at Rum Bullions wearing Hawaiian shirts to fit the bar’s theme, or if it was a reference to the showgirls who posed with tourists on Wednesday nights. This was a city where most people were in costume, even if they didn’t think they were.

She counted back the days to when Gramp set up the hunt, and when she realized it was on a Wednesday, she said it was definitely the showgirls. But they wouldn’t be out that day—a Saturday. Emory and Nellie parked in the structure, and Nellie speed walked to the main ballroom. A comedian she hadn’t heard of was performing. No showgirls stood outside, but she asked the ticket taker anyway. He said that he had no idea what she was talking about. Emory stepped in to say that he didn’t have to be rude about it, but Nellie seemed unaffected as the guy asked her to leave so that he could get the people behind her into the show. Nellie noticed that flakes of dandruff speckled the shoulders of his black suit.

“Gramp loved the cover bands, especially The Windows,” Nellie said.

Emory tilted his head.

“It’s a Doors cover band. I think he liked their terrible name best of all.” They walked across the gaming floor and sat down at one of the pub tables positioned in front of the band. Nellie looked underneath their own table and then the rest of them. Soon, a security guard asked if she needed any help. They kept a close eye on people jogging across the casino floor, she guessed. She explained the scavenger hunt, and like the ticket taker, the security guard said he didn’t know what she was talking to, but in a much gentler way.

“Nellie, look!” Emory pointed to the tip jar on top of the piano. The band wasn’t playing, so the jar was empty, save one pink envelope with her name on it. Gramp always tipped generously, so generously that she was often embarrassed. He tipped like he was a big spender even though he could hardly cover his monthly expenses.

Nellie rushed to the stage and plucked the envelope from the jar. She brought it back to the security guard, who said that he was glad she found what she was looking for. He was probably relieved that he didn’t have to kick out the strange woman who seemed on the brink of a breakdown. Nellie read the final clue to the digital sound of clanging coins and an ocean-inspired theme song for the Ultimate Catch game in the bank of slot machines to her right. A woman blew a plume of e-cig smoke into the air. It smelled like an apple pie that’d gone bad.

X marks the spot! I’m afraid I’m all out of rhymes, and there isn’t much mystery to this last clue. In the corner of the shop, you’ll see that there’s one item left. Lift up the felted top and you’ll see something I think you can use for your book. I protected it as best as I could, but go quickly. They’re going to be in to do demo this week!

Love,

Gramp

P.S. Sorry, but you’ll have to sneak in from the back door since they didn’t leave me with a key. You know how to jimmy it open.

Nellie and Emory walked across the street to the alleyway where they'd started. She pried open the top of the table as gently as she could, trying to suppress the guilt over letting this piece of history fall victim to the people peeing in the alley, using the top as an ashtray. The top popped off with surprising ease. This must have been where the dealer kept his bank so that players could not swipe chips or coins from the tabletop. Inside was a plastic bag, and inside of that plastic bag was another bag, and finally, in the middle was some bubble wrapping. She unraveled the bubble wrap until she found a stack of pages bound loosely together with twine. As she read the first page, her jaw fell open, her eyes widened, her nostrils flared as if her whole face was opening up to the possibilities contained within those pages.

My story

Julia Bulette

She started turning the pages as quickly and carefully as she could: journal entries, letters, and articles—maybe materials collated by a relative. A few pages in, her eyes settled on something familiar, an article from the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise* written by Mark Twain. In it, he described how he made up stories to keep the townspeople entertained.

To find a petrified man, or break a stranger's leg, or cave an imaginary mine, or discover some dead Indians in a Gold Hill tunnel, or massacre a family at Dutch Nick's, were feats and calamities that we never hesitated about devising when the public needed matters of thrilling interest for breakfast. The seemingly tranquil Enterprise office was a ghastly factory of slaughter, mutilation and general destruction in those days.

Nellie placed the article back where it'd been in the stack, the stack back into the bubble wrap, and the bubble wrap back into the bags. She hugged Emory, then the now protected pages.

“I can finally tell her story, the real story, just as she deserves.”

Chapter 28

January 19, 1867

I woke up with a stomach full of moths that did not go away until I was eventually standing on stage with the other players. There was so much still to do. Annabel did final fittings of the costumes, and Eliza had to finish learning her lines after she rejoined our group. There was a bustling energy all around town. Even the coyotes outside were howling. We had made posters and featuring a beautiful illustration in brilliant colors. The production was called *An Odyssey in the New Frontier*, which I would have changed if Mrs. Crawford allowed me. There was not much of what she called the new Frontier in our play, but I had learned which battles to take up with Mrs. Crawford, and they were only the battles that she did not know she had waged.

We arrived there three hours early. I had never seen our community hall as beautiful as it was then. Mrs. Crawford had decorated it with enormous swaths of white fabric so that it felt as if we were performing in the sky. Boards had been inlaid with gold foil, and an enormous chandelier hung from the ceiling. I could not tell how it had been lit, but the entire space was brighter than anything I had ever seen. I told her that it truly was exquisite, and she shrugged.

“Those who live a life in the Lord’s image live a life of beauty,” she said. I did not know what she was referring to, as many of the attendants that night had never stepped foot in a church. The closest thing they had to a church was the faro halls, and when they were ready to meet their maker, they accepted their fate by sitting at the cursed Suicide Table.

“Yes, of course,” I said. For hours, we set up the props, including the deck of a ship some of the men had made from the wood that was still too wet to be firewood. Sweat beaded our brows despite the cold. This performance would rival the elaborate ones in Europe.

Soon, it was time to perform. I squeezed each of the girl's shoulders and told them that they would do wonderfully. This was their time for others to see them for the shining stars they had always been. Our faces were fully painted so that we could be seen from the back of the hall.

Mrs. Crawford had let all people come, including those in Chinatown, the Mexican men working at the Maldonado mine, and the Indians nearby. I knew this was not an effort to bring the whole town together, but instead to try to extend the reach of Mrs. Crawford's civilizing arm. She herself was the savage, but she was skilled in concealing that savagery. But I could tell from the look in Mr. Crawford's eyes last night. He was married to a woman who wished most people harm, and it was the insidious kind of harm, an infection that finds any wound until the disease of her hatred has taken over their body. I am thankful that this was the first time that our paths had crossed. She was a figure much like those in the Brothers Grimms' fairy tales, which I read even though they were expressly prohibited in my childhood home. I wondered what made her this way, but I did not feel compelled enough to explore why she had become so callous and uncaring.

I hardly remember the performance, except for the speech I revised. I took original lines from the poem and then included my own. As long as I had the stage then in front of all of those people, I thought it my duty to spread a different kind of message than the one Mrs. Crawford had intended. I nearly yelled some of the lines: "You unrivaled lords of jealousy, scandalized when goddesses sleep with mortals. And yet you yourselves bed a mortal every night." Mrs. Crawford's face turned a deep red, but I continued on. "My every impulse bends to what is right. Not iron, trust me, the heart within my breast. I am all compassion. You have always had the choice to leave, dear Odysseus, but you have chosen to lay with me, just as the men who came before you and the men who will follow you."

By then, I doubted that anyone could hear me over the roar of people's cheers. Whiskey bottles were passed around liberally despite Mrs. Crawford's strict rule about there being no liquor allowed in the hall that evening. Mrs. Crawford ran up to the stage as quickly as she could, though her corseted gown slowed her pace some. She pushed me back in line with the other players, and I did not resist her.

"Don't you heathens understand?" she screamed. "They're whores. And whores can kill you. These temptresses are here to make you fall from grace. They have been sent here as a test from God Himself." She breathed so heavily that I wondered if she might faint. People in the audience booed her off and called for an encore. She left the building in a huff, and Mr. Crawford followed behind her after he allowed himself one deep sigh. We had no other material prepared, but Buck had his fiddle, and I invited him on stage so that he could play. We danced, and soon, the play hall turned into a dance hall. The white fabric was quickly sullied, but we did not care. Arm in arm, we all danced. The children, the prospectors, the miners, the women—all of us joyful that we had found our way here and we had found a way to get along. It was not all joy and dancing, though. Soon, fights broke out when some men took up dance partners that they should not have. Even if the peace was short-lived, it still did live at one point, and for that, I was thankful.

Froggy got up on the stage to tell a story, but none of us could hear him over the music and our own voices. The few children were taken home first, and we kept at it until we were all dead tired. I had to drag my feet when I finally left. Outside, I breathed in deep, listening to the distant howls that echoed off of the canyon walls. It was quieter than it normally was, seeing as most people were in the hall instead of strolling outside.

I turned my head when I heard Mrs. Crawford's shrill voice. She was talking to two roughnecks, men I had never seen before. I could tell by the looks on their faces that they were

studying me, and I felt more naked than I had on the stage with bare shoulders even though my shoulders were now covered by my thick fur. It is easy to tell the difference between someone who is rough and someone who is a roughneck. You simply look at their boots. If they're covered with muck, they're just rough men who work the mines, but if they have shiny boots with silver spurs on the back despite not riding a horse, then they're roughnecks. They will do just about anything for a few coins.

"I am sorry, Mrs. Crawford," I said. "I grew up reading adventure books, and I know what makes a good story. People like surprises, and even people who knew that story were likely surprised." The shadows cast strange shapes on Mrs. Crawford's face. She shooed the roughnecks away as if they were flies who had landed on her supper.

"I should've known better than to think that you could follow simple directions. I spent an absolute fortune on that event, and for what? This is a town of outlaws and crooks and soiled women and gamblers. What made me think I could do anything to stop it? How can anyone live in this godless place?" She cried then, and I reached out to comfort her.

"Don't touch me, you whore!"

"Now that's not necessary, is it?" Mr. McLaughlin said. As with all times I saw him, I was thankful for his presence.

"I don't need some drunk Irishman telling me how to act," she said. When Mr. Crawford walked up, Mrs. Crawford acted as if one of us had just struck her, but I could tell that he did not believe her performance. She howled and pointed her long, accusing finger at us. Mr. Crawford took her in his arms and walked in the direction of their three-bedroom house that dwarfed all of the ones around it. He turned around and made a face of apology. Mr. McLaughlin and I understood exactly what he was apologizing for. We nodded our acceptance of it.

“That was a great performance,” he said. “I think you have a future in acting. People here are hungry for entertainment.” The water wheel in his mind was turning, and he was working on another business opportunity.

“Perhaps,” I said and winked. I still engaged in some harmless flirting then. It had become part of my nature.

“You have a tear there,” he said. At first, I thought he was razzing me, but when I pulled off my fur, I realized that he was right. “My fiancé can do amazing things with a needle and thread. Why don’t you let me take that home and ask her to repair it. You can borrow my jacket for the night.”

I traded him my fur for his jacket. Its large size on my small frame made both of us laugh. I thought I would feel hurt when I learned of his engagement, but it did not affect me in that way. I would like him to be happy, just as he would like me to be happy. We embraced and walked our separate ways. As I listened to the whines and squeals of the mining equipment, I began to think of my next play.

Now, I feel like I cannot stop thinking of ideas, and though it seems a bit prideful, I believe I would like to tell my own story. This is a story of heartbreak and sorrow, but also of love and joy. In the first scene, a little girl will be taken across the Atlantic ocean to settle down near in a new land. She will love the music that her neighbors play, which she can hear from nearly a half-mile away, and she will love catching toads with her cousin. She will be thankful for her Uncle Jule for showing her that she had more choices than it seemed.

The audience will see this choice in the form of a riverboat tour with her uncle. She will see the exquisitely dressed women who get to travel and look beautiful while doing it. He will explain that these women who entertain the gentlemen are called “courtesans.” She will begin this work in her sixteenth year—earlier than me—and it will take her all the way out West. But then there is the

conflict. She does not want to do this kind of work and thought that moving out West would mean a new kind of life.

She decides to move to the gold fields in Sacramento and later to Virginia City where she has heard there's silver in the hills. Where there are riches, there are opportunities. She wants to give back to this place. That is where her story will depart from my own. This character will live the life of a philanthropist. She will be like the Rockefellers, and for every two pennies she makes, she will give away one. She will be happy on her own, married to the place she loves so dearly.

In this play, I will not include the baby or Pat or the gentlemen callers. I plan to make some embellishments. The character will find success sooner and differently from how I did. She will be the version of myself that I would have been if I had the privilege of fortune telling.

Tomorrow, I will write to my family back home to try to see who among us is left. I have spent so much of my time caring for the people here that I fear I have forgotten about them. And at the next ball, I will send posters all the way to San Francisco, inviting the wealthiest men to spend their money here. With enough work, this jewel of a city will sparkle. I will earn so much money that every orphaned child and widowed woman has enough money to never worry about keeping food in their bellies.

For now, though, I will dress out of this costume and put on my dressing gown. I will read through the articles in the paper and imagine what my name and picture might look like printed in it.

I was startled awake and have not been able to fall asleep again. It sounded like some creatures scurrying around out back, and I suspect possums. I did not think they lived here, but Annabel is convinced she saw one's beady little eyes staring at her a few weeks back. I decided to go outside and listen to the sounds of the night. The wind was loud as ever. It crescendoed and

diminuendoed as it passed from one side of the valley to the other. It did not take long for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, and soon, I could see the outline of mountaintops bathing in bright moonlight. I thought about how much these mountains have seen. I heard a gunshot in the distance, but I have come to discern the difference between a celebratory gunshot and a malicious one; thankfully, this one was the former. Moonlight bounced off of my dressing gown so that it looked like I was being lit by a bright lamp light. I let myself feel so cold that I could not feel anything at all. That is the power of this place. Within the span of a few hours, it can make you feel alive and then make you feel completely numb. Inside, I built my own fire, where I warmed my feet. My toes curled up and then flexed until feeling came back into them. I poured myself a small glass of moonshine that I had been gifted by one of my favorite firefighters, a man who went by Joking Jenkins. The moonshine burned going down, but soon it had its intended effect of making me drowsy-eyed.

I write now by lamplight in my bed, where it is warm against the cold. I can't help but smile as I remember that this bed is mine alone.

Chapter 29

Nellie and Emory went straight to Emory's apartment after discovering the materials, making one small detour to her apartment to get the pine box. These materials needed to be handled properly, and once she had at least digitally preserved the paper artifacts, she could turn over everything else to the Nevada Historical Society to be dealt with correctly.

Emory lived on campus with college students even though he was at least ten years older than them. He warned Nellie about the state of things: beer bottles and one stolen road sign as the sole decorations. He kept the apartment stocked with beer, and they let him stay in the smallest bedroom and pay less than half of what he'd be paying if he tried to rent his own place. Thankfully, when they arrived, only the quieter of his two roommates was home.

"Xander keeps to himself mostly," Emory explained. Just then, Xander swung his door open wearing nothing but boxer shorts. Nellie tried to look anywhere but at the young man in front of her.

"We need your share of the utilities," Xander said, unfazed by Nellie's presence.

"I'll get that to you tomorrow," Emory said. He scratched the back of his head. "This is someone I know from work. At my old job, I mean. This is my friend, Nellie."

"Cool. The bill's on the counter. I already did the math and wrote it on the board there." Xander retreated to his room, and Emory poured himself a glass of water, drank it down, and then refilled it. He asked Nellie if she wanted anything to drink, and she said that she too would take one-and-a-half glasses of water.

"This has been a day, hasn't it," she said. She still held onto the box and the bag.

"I'm sorry. Let me unlock my room so that you can put all of that down." He pulled a key ring with no fewer than 15 keychains on it, including one shotgun shell and several gas station

trinkets, from his pocket. Seeing them in his hand, she was surprised that he was even able to fit them in his pocket. “I have a lot of valuables, so I got a keyed lock for my room.”

“Smart,” Nellie said. She meant it, but she realized that her assessment of his locked door sounded patronizing. She couldn’t help but talk to him like a little brother if she’d ever had one, a tender condescension that she’d never learned to edit from her tone. This was why they could never be anything more than friends, and that was fine by her. She did better on her own anyway. The romantic interests in her life had done little but wrong her and then eventually apologize so that they could preserve the possibility of wronging her again.

“You doing okay?” he asked. He was looking at her hands, and she hadn’t realized they were shaking. “Have you had anything to eat today?”

Nellie thought back to her last real meal. It must have been a couple of days after Gramp’s service. She’d taken the dregs of food from the tin to her apartment and eaten them cold until they started to turn.

“Not today, no. That might help, if you’ve got anything.”

“I can find something. It’s a good idea to eat every day,” Emory said, jabbing her in the ribs like he might to an unseasoned teammate. Nellie let out a breath that stole the tension from her shoulders. They would not need to have any kind of talk, wouldn’t need to bring up the day at the sports bar when she got too close to flirting with him in earnest. They had an understanding. Emory turned on the radio app on his laptop and switched from classic rock to public radio. He shook something out of a bag in the freezer and microwaved it. While the microwave hummed, Nellie listened to a story about the mayoral candidate Berkshire. Someone had tipped off the authorities about suspicious campaign contributions. A recall petition had already gotten thousands of

signatures. Nellie smiled, and though she wanted to tell Emory about it, she decided to relish this piece of information for herself.

“Well, that’s good. He seemed like a real asshole,” Emory said, and Nellie agreed. She ate the mini calzones he’d microwaved, and then they went to his room. The walls were covered in stills from Westerns, but they featured side characters instead of the main ones—Marshal Curly Wilcox instead of Ringo Kid, Martin Pawley instead of Ethan Edwards.

Nellie read from Julia’s diary aloud as Emory lay on his bed, head perched on his hands. It took hours, but they agreed to get through all of the entries together before Emory digitized them and the archivists verified them and made them accessible to the public. After reading the final entry, Nellie knew what she needed to do. The journal could be recorded, but the box needed to be buried where she’d found it.

That night, they drove up to Virginia City, and Emory booked them a room at the Silver Queen Hotel. Nellie could not sleep. As soon as she’d begin to doze off, she would hear a pack of motorcyclists pulling on their throttles to speed down the main drag. The iron bed they shared creaked whenever she adjusted in it, and when Emory put his arm around her in between his snores, she didn’t move it. All of the sounds she heard that night were easily explainable—kids running around in the hall, water traveling through old pipes—but still, she could not shake the image of the woman named Rosie who was believed to have died by suicide in room 11, which was two rooms over. Like most ghost stories, Rosie’s focused only on how she died instead of how she lived. Ghost hunters who regularly toured and stayed in the hotel filled in their own stories, usually involving a plot about scorned women and jealous men.

The next morning, Nellie and Emory got up before the rest of the small city had and wordlessly walked to the cemetery where she had first discovered the box. Nellie found where she’d

taken the box from and marked it by kicking the heel of her boot into the hard ground. They looked around for the security guard who thankfully wasn't on duty yet and then dug using sticks, rocks, and the one garden shovel Emory had found in the back of his closet. In the middle of winter, the ground was difficult to get through.

When the hole was deep enough, Nellie placed the box back inside, and they covered it up. It was dawn, and the sun had just crested the mountains. Nellie looked off into the canyon and imagined what this place looked like to Julia when she first arrived. She was completely alone, and she had no choice but to get back up every time she was kicked to the ground. Nellie needed to find a way to get back up as Julia had so many times. She whispered her own prayer for Julia and tossed the rock she'd been using to dig. Her hands were covered in dirt and red raw from gripping the rock.

The two washed up at the hotel and then decided they would take a break from the history they'd uncovered by being tourists instead. Nellie had never allowed herself that kind of enjoyment. She was always busy imagining the actual history, quick to correct someone who'd gotten a date or a fact wrong like she had on her date with Bill, but today, she wanted to live in the present. She wanted to eat some of the "world famous fudge" and then go down two stores to the other shop that promised the "world's best fudge." She wanted to watch the performances of shootouts without worrying about the historical accuracy of their clothing and their weapons. Most importantly, she wanted to see where the past collided with the present, ATMs in the lobbies of 19th century hotels, big sound systems in bars that'd been standing for at least a hundred years before she was born.

She asked if Emory could drive them to the American Flat, the site of the United Comstock Merger Mill ruins. She'd never seen it after learning about the site from an industrial archaeologist because it felt like a perversion of history with the remaining building materials covered in graffiti⁶¹.

Emory and Nellie walked around the flats, spotting their favorite art. A cheetah sprawled out above a bright neon tag. The word "dream" cut through a big cloud. Nellie especially admired the places where the concrete had been painted over and over again, layers of creativity beneath newer layers that would someday be covered by someone else.

They walked through the maze of concrete hallways, and Emory took a picture of Nellie on his phone as she posed with her palm pressed against the cloud. He showed her the picture, and she realized this was one of the very few that existed of her as an adult. If Nellie were to die tomorrow, this would be a good picture to remember her by.

It was still before noon when they returned to the main drag, but the bars had opened already. They ordered beers at the Delta Saloon⁶². Nellie had never been inside, but she'd heard the myths about what happened there. One corner was cordoned off with caution tape. A plaque outlining the history of the Suicide Table had been covered up by a missing poster for the thief who'd stolen it.

"I didn't know they took it. I figured they were just looking to sell it to Gramp because they were doing renovations."

⁶¹ Back when it was constructed in 1920, decades after the initial booms, prospectors were looking for the next big bonanza, and they believed it was at the American Flat. So they built the biggest mill of its kind, going off of a little evidence and a lot of faith. It was going to put Virginia City back on the map, but of course that didn't happen. Only a few years after it was constructed, they declared bankruptcy and abandoned the mill and all of the hopes that came with it.

⁶² This saloon was the best known for its gambling hall where men who'd been treated well by the bonanza were known to lose thousands of dollars on a single hand during games of Rocky Mountain.

“I’m surprised they haven’t come looking for it yet.”

Nellie decided she’d return it just as she’d returned Julia’s box of bonnets for her child. The bartender was a woman in her 60s covered in colorful tattoos that blended into one another much like the art at the American Flat.

“If you don’t mind my asking, when did the table go missing?”

“Maybe a couple of months back,” the bartender said, wiping down the bar. “Some jackasses who were supposed to be replacing some of the broken slots stole that, along with a few machines. They tried to take the ATM too, but you can see how well that went.” Nellie turned around to see that the ATM had only been moved about a foot from its original location.

“Did you file a police report?” Nellie asked.

“Of course the owner did. We haven’t heard anything back, and I don’t expect to. They’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

Emory and Nellie finished their drinks and strolled up and down C Street, dipping into whichever shops caught their interest. Emory bought a t-shirt patterned with an eagle and an American flag. He bought a small pocketknife inlaid with turquoise for his mother’s upcoming birthday. They went to The Way Things Were Museum and posed with the paper mâché sculptures of miners. They got breakfast, and Nellie ordered her eggs over medium like Gramp would have. The eggs were cooked perfectly, their yolks velvet suns. They went to a place where they shot fake rifles at fake targets, loud pings bouncing off of the walls when the deer or outlaw cutout was shot.

On the windy drive back down the mountain, Nellie fell asleep. Emory gently nudged her awake when they were back at his apartment. There, she began writing and didn’t stop for hours. Within the week, her book about Julia Bulette would be complete.

Emory dropped her back off at her apartment and thanked her for taking him along for the adventure.

“You make a good sidekick,” she said.

“I take that as the deepest of compliments. I love a good sidekick.”

Nellie kept writing by lamplight well into the night. In the morning, she wrote again. The words poured from her, and she rarely needed to consult the journal entries and letters since she’d already internalized them completely. It had all become a part of her, and it was easy to recall parts of herself. She took breaks only to stretch her fingers and rub her sore hands. She eventually fell asleep, and her dreams were filled with the words she’d just written.

When she woke the next day, she took to cleaning out her apartment, beginning with the refrigerator. She pulled out all of the bills that’d been hiding in her desk and arranged them from oldest to newest. She made a plan to apply for jobs and write a proposal for her book to be published by the university press. Gramp would say that she had grit the way she was dusting herself off like this.

Nellie clipped the meaningful messages about Gramp in his condolence cards and made a collage. She arranged their words into a list that she’d frame when she was ready.

You’ll always be in my heart

I’ll miss giving you my money at poker

Reno’s got a Greg-sized hole in it now

Love you forever

She changed out of her dressing gown pajamas into Gramp’s denim jacket and walked outside. She saw symmetry in the tree’s bare limbs. A thin layer of snow had fallen overnight and was already melting under the sun. The snow that remained glinted, the tiny particles of ice reflecting

light in every direction. Someone's alarm clock went off. Another person rushed out of the door balancing a thermos of coffee and a messenger bag. A child wearing a backpack nearly as big as him held his mother's hand as they hustled to the bus stop.

The day was just beginning, brighter than it had any right to be.

THE END

VITA

AnnElise Hatjakes holds an MFA degree in fiction and a master's degree in writing from the University of Nevada, Reno. Her stories have been shortlisted for the Neil Shepard Prize in Fiction and the Curt Johnson Prize. Her work has also appeared in journals including *Juked*, *Bull*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, and *Typehouse*, among others. She is currently completing revisions on her novel and short story collection while working as a teaching assistant professor at the University of Nevada, Reno.