

To celebrate her seventeenth birthday, Jade Cameron twisted the cap of a gas can, sloshed the contents on the shed at the back of her stepfather's house, and ignited a mascara-stained tissue she flicked toward the building. The flames attacked the walls. Satisfied, she picked up her frayed backpack and walked.

All she had left was a few clothes, a cell phone, a hundred dollars pilfered from her mother's purse, and change, along with tinted lip balm. She tromped across caliche lawns proudly displaying Kokopelli yard art and cactus. Jade crossed deserted lots to reach the I-40 corridor that would take her from Albuquerque. She sucked in the desert air, tears smearing makeup across her cheeks. A plume of smoke rose behind her like a dark curtain. The snug shorts and halter top attracted honks and catcalls from passing vehicles. She would never be trapped; locked away. Jade touched her bruised eye and grimaced. She wouldn't be back.

She trekked along the access road, the afternoon sun baking her olive skin. Two guys drove past, slowed, and braked. She hurried after the Impala brake lights as a beer can flew out the shotgun side window.

"Where you headed?" The rider leaned out of the window and cracked a new beer while the driver lit a cigarette and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel to a beat on the radio.

"Away," Jade said.

"Away where, Missy?"

"Away from here."

The one guy looked at the other and grinned. He leaned over the bench seat of the Chevy and opened the back door. A crucifix and a miniature Mexican flag dangled from the rearview mirror.

“That’s a destination we’re familiar with, Missy.”

Jade climbed in the back of the Chevy and tossed her backpack on the floorboard as the trio sped down the interstate. Behind them, a Torino ate their dust.

“We are going to Roswell.” He looked sideways at the driver who shrugged. “We can take you that far and let you off. Unless you want to get off sooner? If you like to get off sooner.”

The men laughed at this, a joke Jade did not understand.

“Never been to Roswell. Isn’t that where the aliens landed?”

The guys chuckled without looking at each other.

“You have no idea.”

They exited I-40 and traveled south. Jade entertained her new chums with high school anecdotes. They laughed. Popped open more beers and handed her a cold one. At the edge of nowhere sat the *Easy Does It*. A drooping sign pointed to the door. A cloud of dust from the parking lot masked the dim bulb suspended by the front door. Scrub brush thrived on each side of the building. Many vehicles were parked under the mesquites, hidden from wives, girlfriends, and the law. Jade’s companions told her they knew it well.

Jade won the first game of pool. The alcohol blurred her vision. The smell of dust clung to the walls. She slow danced to a favorite song with someone others called Chuy but moved to a

creaky, uneven bar stool after his hand slithered down her backside clutching her butt. Jade, safe from unwanted hands, lined empty glasses along the counter. Hours sunk with the sun. “We’re heading outta here. You’re welcome to crash at our place for the night,” Her driving companion said.

“Thanks for the ride but I’d like to hang here for a while.”

“Suit yourself, Missy. Thanks for buying drinks.”

“By the way, it’s Jade.”

They waved goodbye, chuckling as the door creaked and closed. The loosely attached screen door reverberated several times before coming to a standstill.

Jade’s wavering form smiled at the bartender placing a napkin in front of her. Her last bill left her fingers and floated across the bar top, then landed. The bartender shrugged, picked it up, and set the drink on the mesquite-carved counter.

Country music rotated on a 45 inside the juke box. The crash of billiard balls and an occasional argument filled the bar. From an dark corner of the bar a tall, lean cowboy in a crisp white shirt and tight jeans moved into Jade’s personal space. He leaned forward and brushed her bare shoulder. Peering in her eyes, he extracted the cherry from her drink. The musky smell of his cologne enveloped her, not mixing well with the alcohol sitting in the floor of her stomach.

“Looks like you need a fresh drink and a cherry. A megawatt smile revealed a perfect row of veneers. “It’ll ease the pain of that bruise on your cheek.”

He opened his mouth and handed her the cherry stem tied in a bow. She offered an impressed grin.

“I’m Derek.” The cowboy pitched his hat on the roughed-out counter revealing cappuccino eyes, weighty lashes, and a slight facial scar as he called out to the bartender.

“Give us two of what she’s drinking.”

The bartender hesitated.

“I’ll make sure she gets home safe.”

“Ok. Last one for her.”

Her eyes burned and watered as she struggled to pry them open. Jade perused the rusted metal above her head. A miniature amount of light from a hole in the trunk floor provided a view of her predicament. The motor rumbled beneath her body. Jade surmised they were on the move. She fought to breathe through her nose, the only path to air.

She tasted the duct tape covering her mouth. Her hands were bound behind her back. Her feet held together at her ankles. Sweat seeped from her body and salted her eyes. Her head pounded to the roar of the car engine.

Morning or afternoon? Not the Saturday she pictured when, Derek, if that was his name, slid the last salty dog in front of her.

Jade wrestled against the restraints as the car slowed. She twisted and scrunched her body to move her eye into position over the hole at the bottom of the trunk. The motor idled. They halted on the highway.

A truck jerked behind them and Jade could hear the downshift of the transport.

Ambulances and police cars whizzed. Sirens bellowed.

Parched, Jade was reminded of the time she inhaled eighteen cayenne peppers during a slumber party dare to beat out the birthday girl. The result landed Jade extended time in the bathroom and her mother in a lengthy conversation with the host mother.

“Well, hell.” Derek muttered under his breath. The cowboy lowered the window and viewed the road. He switched off the ignition and cracked the door. His alligators met the pavement and he sauntered to a group on the rise of the hill. Traffic stopped in both directions.

An officer directed traffic and signaled a group of motorcyclists to the abandoned gas station across the street from The Silver Dollar, home to supposed ghosts and a Chicago mob boss’ relocated bar. A light rain drizzled on their leather riding clothes. Returning from a rally in the mountains, the riders used the time to wipe their faces. The tail gunner pulled in, slipped a dry shirt from the saddlebag and bummed a smoke as he observed the chaos on the highway.

“What’s going on?” Derek asked.

“Head-on collision over the hill.”

“Heard they are waiting for the medevac copter from El Paso.”

“We came on an accident like this once. We were there for hours.”

“I don’t have hours,” Derek said.

The group groaned and nodded.

“Hey, you driving that Torino?”

“Yep. That’s mine,” Derek smiled, remembering the day he bought it.

“My uncle used to drive one of those. What year is that?”

“It’s a ’69 fastback. Looks rough but runs great. Have an appointment to get the rust repaired next week.” Derek looked back at the Torino. It was next to last in line of the traffic forced to come to a standstill.

“I remember my uncle’s having a big ass motor and a trunk to match. Mind if I take a look?”

“Not much to look at and the trunk is jammed. Been meaning to fix that,” Derek said.

“Great memories in that old Torino. It was a copper ’73 and had a 400 under the hood. I don’t think the air conditioner ever worked.”

Derek chuckled. “My air conditioner isn’t working either. Glad it’s mild today.”

The helicopter drowned voices as it levitated above the crowd. A dragonfly darted for safety and loose dirt blocked their view. The crowd shut their eyes, using hands, arms, and hats for protection.

Jade heard the copter. Sweat continued to drip and blinded her eyes. She was the only thing in the trunk. A taped-up girl with a hole for light.

Jade rolled to her back and evaluated the roof of the trunk.

She had survived lockups in the shed, hits in the face, and beatings with a belt. This would not be the end. She needed out. Freed. She required someone’s attention.

How?

Yubitsume. Japanese finger shortening. It could work.

Jade's last steady boyfriend was obsessed with Japanese history. Half-joking, he had suggested she try it on her stepfather. She could cut the tip of her finger on the hole. It wouldn't be the first time she was injured, bleeding. Pain was second nature. Maybe, just maybe, she could lose enough blood for someone to notice.

Just like other resolutions in her life, the decision was swift, determined, and irrevocable.

Jade maneuvered her back to the floor and placed her bound hand over the hole wiggling her finger in it. The trunk grew dark. She closed her eyes, clenching her teeth beneath the tape. Placed her index finger in the hole, she moved it around, and gauged the space. Jade required momentum. She extracted the digit from the hole. She needed blood. A lot of it.

"Don't think. Just do," she thought.

In laser precision, Jade moved her finger to the hole and with a swift swipe, caught the first joint of the index finger against the sharp edge of the rusting steel and pushed. Squeezing against immeasurable pain. It snapped and dropped to the pavement.

A blood-curdling scream followed from Jade and ripped the sweat-covered binding off one side of her mouth. She took a long overdue breath to fill her lungs.

The helicopter drowned the sound.

Jade slowed her exhalation and gained composure. Yelling was futile and tears approached like the opening of floodgates. She placed the raw, exposed end of her finger in the hole allowing the flow of blood.

Distress signal achieved.

Feeling queasy she closed her eyes, forcing her mind to a climb made to the top of the Sangre de Cristos. It didn't help. The inside of the trunk began to spin. Jade was hot, dizzy.

Fearing a loss of conscience, she moved side to side and focused on the trunk imperfections. Gave herself a pep talk. Checked the pavement through the hole. She saw red. Turned away. She rolled on her stomach, ripping her halter.

“Damn.”

If she escaped, the ripped top would expose the fresh tattoo--the latest infraction that forced her into the locked shed.

She rolled in a ball and compressed her body. She ignored the blood, and planted her eyeball over the hole. The crimson trail inched toward the truck.

In the truck, Chester Drinnan dug in his teeth with a broken toothpick and extracted what was left of a ham and cheese sandwich. In the other hand was a cell phone. He nodded.

“I understand but what am I supposed to do. The road is completely shut down.

I'll pick up something down the road. She'll forget I wasn't there as soon as she opens it. I've never missed her birthday before. I'll be late, but I will be there.

Lay off, will you? I'm sorry.

There's a helicopter landing. Won't be much longer,” Chester said.

A thick crimson pool in front of the truck seized his attention and Chester Drinnan squinted his eyes. He caught his image in the rearview mirror and frowned. Embedded lines and droopy eyes looked back at him. The stress of the job plastered his face.

“Hey. I’ll call you as soon as I’m moving.”

Chester snapped the flip phone and tossed it on the seat. He leaned forward and gazed at the pavement.

An ambulance exited the scene and sped along the mountain road to Ruidoso. Minutes later, the second ambulance raced to the hospital.

The onlookers couldn’t view the action but the sound of the blades from the copter were undeniable. The last victim was lifted in the air.

Chester climbed from his truck and glanced around for the owner of the Torino. The crowd was gathered in the distance. He decided to investigate. The red spot meandered from the vehicle. The design reminded him of the card a shrink held in front of his face years ago. Chester bent down swiping his finger through the puddle and sniffed the liquid, then wiped it on his jeans. He lay on his back against the cool, damp pavement, sucked in his belly to avoid scraped flesh on the bumper, and crawled under the Torino’s back end. The back of his head soaked the coagulated stain.

A bright blue eye glared at him through the hole.

Startled, he bumped his head on the undercarriage.

“Help me.”

“You alright?” Chester rubbed his wincing skull.

“Obviously not. This maniac has hogtied and kidnapped me.”

“Hang on. I’ll get something to pry the trunk open.”

Chester clamored to the truck. He returned to the Torino with a crowbar.

“Move back. I’m going to break the lock open.”

Jade inched to the other side. After several hits on the lock, the trunk popped ajar.

Chester opened the trunk to find a bloodshot, bruised girl peering at him. He slipped his knife from the front pocket of his pants and cut the tape from her feet and hands.

Jade clamored from the car and threw up on Chester’s shoe.

“Don’t worry about that. Let’s get you out of here.”

Wiping her mouth with her drooping shirt, Jade wrapped her arms around Chester’s protruding stomach.

“You saved me! What now?”

“Come with me.”

Chester shut the trunk and used the cut tape to secure it. He retrieved the finger underneath the car, slid it in his pocket, along with his knife. He grabbed the crowbar and Jade’s uninjured hand. They scurried to the truck.

As a clean-up crew cleared the roadway, a wrecker transported a black SUV with Texas plates toward the village. A crumpled minivan followed atop the second tow truck.

The bystanders waved goodbyes and trekked to their vehicles.

The three hour wait was over. Officers signaled the onlookers to move.

Derek's phone rang. He slid across the exposed foam of the car seat and caught the torn cloth on his jean pocket. He tossed the sweat-ringed hat in the seat.

"Good news Mrs. Cameron. I found your daughter. She's safe and I'll have her there in a few hours," Derek said.

"Let me talk to her," Mrs. Cameron said.

"She's tied up. You can talk to her soon. I've put a scare in her. This should teach her a lesson. Cure her from running away."

"Good. She needed to learn her lesson. How can I thank you?"

"The best way to thank me is to have the cash ready when I drop her off. We'll be there in a few."

Derek cranked the Torino, pumping the gas pedal. After a couple of tries, the motor turned over shooting a puff of smoke from the tailpipe. Derek fingered the volume on the radio to share a favorite song with Jade. Good music for the ride to Albuquerque and collect an easy five hundred.

Jade resisted Chester's grasp.

"Shouldn't we go to the police? I see their flashing lights.

Hey, over here!" Jade waved her arms.

Chester pushed her arms down.

“That was a pretty serious accident. They are busy doing the investigation. Wouldn’t give you the attention you need. We’ll stop in Ruidoso to alert the authorities. You want their full attention. I have the kidnappers make, model and license number. And what if the kidnapper sees us? Let’s contact someone higher up. These fuzz only know about writing traffic tickets.”

“Ok. I guess you are right. Thanks.”

“No need to thank me. Just doing what should be done.”

Jade opened the door to the truck cab.

“Hey, what are you doing,” said Chester.

“I thought...,”

“You don’t want him to see you.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s only a few miles. You should ride in the back out of sight. Just be for a few minutes. You’ll be safer. Let’s get to the back of the truck.”

“Okaaay.” Jade was woozy and latched on to Chester’s arm. “Wish my stepfather could be more like you.” Chester pulled an oil cloth from his back pocket.

“Is there someone you need to call?” Chester said.

“No.”

“No one?”

“I won’t be missed.”

“Well, that’s too bad. Cell phone?”

“Not sure what happened to it.”

Chester held out the cloth. “Here. Wrap that up. You’ve lost a lot of blood.

“Thank you so much. You saved my life.”

“Stop it. I’m blushing.”

Jade took a final look at the green mountains surrounding the accident site.

Chester rolled the back door up a few inches.

“Upsy-daisy.”

Giving Jade a boost, he pushed her through the opening.

The afternoon glare spotlighted the interior. Jade’s eyes landed on a band of women, girls: rawboned, filthy, and chained to the floor. Jade turned to escape but the door shut and the interior went black.

Chester answered his ringing cell.

“It’s our lucky day, sugar. The road is clear. I’ll be home as soon as I drop the cargo. I have some extra dinero coming this trip. Baby girl will get a real nice birthday present.”