

Flammable

Corey kept the doors in the house closed so that she could hear if one opened. Geoffrey had told her to do this when he was gone and she had listened to him, The house was a flat, steel and glass oblong box low-slung like a foxhole dug into the Redwoods.

Out back, if one jumped the over the slate roof that cast shade in an extended awning, was a brook that indeed, babbled. It babbled so much, Corey wished it and the owls and mating rabbits and hunting foxes would just lay down and shut the fuck up on some nights.

Sometimes, she heard a tree or large branch fall which she made jokes about. If a tree fell in the middle of the woods and you're the only one who...and so on. When she did talk to someone, it was her sister who was the only person she trusted.

She didn't tell her sister, Barb, exactly where she was but said she was in the Redwoods not too far from the Nevada state line. In fact it was close enough to sneak away to plunk quarters into slot machines and smell the brassy odor of oiled railings and old smoke and Ben Gay and bury herself in the frantic, steady bleating insistent chatter of losing.

Casinos had cameras and so she never went to the same one twice. She suspected no one cared about her. No one noticed that her once-green and blue hair was now its natural chestnut color and fishnet tights and pleather mini were now jeans and innocuous blouses and sweatshirts. Her old self was buried back in the anonymity of the Bay. People came and went, washed out with high rent and long commutes. She had been working two jobs at once when she met Geoffrey who had tipped her obscene amounts on his bar tabs. This had insulted her to a degree until the tips grew to three or four times the bill. He wasn't pushy but simply left his number in red ink around the margins of the bill. He came in alone typically, pecking away at his laptop like most everyone else. She had moved from Phoenix and didn't know anyone but her

coworkers who seemed more fixed on trading pills and fucking each other than anything else. Not her, she wanted something else.

The television was going, playing *Cheers* off of one of the streaming sites. It reminded her of being young, snickering at jokes curled into a beanbag chair when Barb babysitted her, off doing teenage things with older boys in the basement while Corey had reign of the television watching whatever adults watched. The show itself didn't matter as much as the presence that it offered. The actors voices were as native to her as family.

Her sister would appear with a boy and they might share a beer or smoke something out off the deck, a scrunchy unscrunchd, a smear of makeup curled off her lip. "Please don't tell," she would say which was the best part. Being entrusted with a secret. Being invested in, conspired with was more delicious than the two bags of buttered popcorn she'd filled a Twizzlers bucket with. These bonds were forged in something tougher than rings, tokens or vows. Secrets were something far more valuable.

"It's just the weather," Barbara told her. "The wind, something."

Possibly. Weather could snap twigs, down a weighted branch. Lightning could even strike. These things happened. "Oliver told us that when he got us the house," Corey said. "Lucky fucker got five percent on a lot no one cares about."

"He knows things out there better than anyone else from the city." The cymballic chime of a wineglass hitting granite counters. "After two years, you'd figure you would too."

"Twenty miles to the next decent margarita and taco. He oversold us. I know we wanted to move quickly but he got the sugared end of the stick here." Corey pulled a bottle of wine from the cupboard but stopped herself. It didn't make anything better.

"You really think you hear something out there? Couldn't it just be, Geoffrey?"

Corey went to the wall that was two eight-by-ten flanks of steel-framed glass. The glass was reinforced but not sound-proofed. The leaves stirred again and she saw something out

there, a shadow and then a flicker of light. "I saw something," she told Barbara. "Two lights. Or eyes. I don't know."

"Aren't there all sorts of things with eyes out there? A deer. A bear?" Someone else was in Barbara's kitchen. The sound of a sleeve shooing someone away, of wordless hand motions.

The floodlights lit the foreground but, beyond a lip of light, an orbit of deep space, of nothing but shadow-striped black. And there, the light again, on and off. "A flashlight, I think." She whispered. "I think it's a flashlight but it's dim, like it's shaky, a phone flashlight."

"Is that normal? That can't be normal? Are you watching *Cheers*?"

"You know I keep the television on for company. I can't listen to music anymore. It reminds me of... Shit, I can see someone." Outside, the outline of something, a person ducked between two trees.

"Get the hell out of there," Barbara said. "Why the hell are you still there?"

"Two miles to the main road," Corey reminded herself and her sister. "And into town where she couldn't talk to anyone. Not really. After two years she didn't know anyone. They were anonymous out here. Oliver staved off the barbarians.

"Go to one of those gambling places you like. Get out of there. You're tripping, losing your shit just a little." Barbara might have been bored with the whole situation. Or frustrated. But, this was the third call since Geoffrey had disappeared yesterday.

"This place is a goddamned fortress. Nothing gets in that doesn't come out."

"I think you've gone *Shining* on me. Just go to the garage, get in that car and leave."

There was simply no way. Corey couldn't feel her fingers. They were bent, clawed frozen in some Nosferatu-like hand-cringe that couldn't come undone. Geoffrey called it her action grip but this was induced from panic. She froze as she did since she was a child. "Nothing can come in that didn't go out." Corey repeated. She held herself still so that she might hear something. Only wind that fluted down the chimney and through the trees. Only wind.

"Corey, I'm going to hang up. I need to go right now but call me if you see anything else."

Corey wanted her to stay on the phone but wouldn't ask. Her bones rubbed together and her pores ached. Sweat dampened every crease she could connect with. It was like she just slid wet elastic over herself. She practiced breathing and steadied herself.

What would Geoffrey do? He had taught her how to shoot. The gun safe combination was her birthday of all things so she might remember in case something like this happened.

There, there it was again. A flicker of light, closer. And another, further out. Surely, something was out there. Kids, it could be kids. They camped down by the brook that, further toward town widened into what was casually called The River but seemed more like a creek. It had dried up over the years of drought. Sometimes, she found beer boxes that seemed sad, like they were vessels of actual time that had been emptied.

Kids, it must be kids. Kids did things like that. These were country kids, born with dirt in their bones, *Tom Sawyers* in toy trucks, she told herself.

There, there it was off to the left, swollen fireflies of light. This wasn't fear or anything else. She knew where the gun cabinet was, where the garage, and car keys were. She saw herself doig those things, shrapnel of her own self in impossible to-be-continued's, cinematically blowing by whoever out there only to have them pop one off in her rear axle sending her off the road and into the woods, where who knows what might happen.

Her phone buzzed. Barb was calling back. The lights fell further out beyond the driveway and stopped like they were in conference. She rubbed a thumb over the phone and imagined hitchiking, and how that seemed to be a century away from her. "I can see lights out there. Somethin's going on."

"Are you okay? So he's just going to leave and let this happen? Go to the police."

"I can't," Corey said. "You and Oliver are the only people who know where we are."

"Fuck Olliver. You paid him all this money to live in *Deliverance*?"

"We're in California, Barbara."

"And you think that keeps you safe?"

“Oliver has built homes for people with more of a profile than Geoffrey. He’s fucking known for doing it.” Corey stopped to watch a scene from *Cheers* in which the lead character was trying to seduce a woman by offering her a ride in his Corvette.

“And those walls, they can’t get through those walls, right?”

“As long as I keep the doors closed,” Corey said. “No one gets in who doesn’t go out.” The light was off further now. It dashed in different directions. There was only one that staggered a bit and slowed. The wind came again in a rippled sort of way that calmed her. “It’s further now.”

“Call the police. Fuck what Geoffrey said. Where is he anyway? Thinks he’s fucking John Dillinger because of a stupid website.”

“We’d lose it all. Fucking everything Barbara. All of it, the past five years for absolutely, fucking nothing.” Silence on the other end. “Say something.”

“It’s not worth it. Keys to the kingdom don’t need to be poisoned.”

“I didn’t have anything when we met. And I never would again. I couldn’t even pay rent before him.” Corey heard what she was saying. She wanted to, needed to believe it. Even though, what Geoffrey had built was little more than an online menagerie of lowest common denominators that kept battling to outdo one another. What was it exactly? Fraud on one hand. But, he had called it bare-knuckle capitalism that would eventually cannibalize itself. In reality it was an internet site in which (consenting) patrons brandishing waivers and releases paid or got paid to do things to themselves or (also consenting) others. She only went on the site once and never did again. Geoffrey often did.. He’d brandish it as an evolving experiment exposing the ills of society. It was studied by universities and the military. Even those who denied seeing it, at one point were challenged or challenged themselves to see it. It was in plain sight for two whole years concurrent with the evolution of their relationship. It was also being dissected by the FBI.

The light finally steadied in the trees. It blinked and slowly raised. In the light of the motion-activated LED lights that lined the driveway, she saw human shadows.

Corey turned the light off so she could see better. She had Barb quieted on the phone. “He’s coming here. If this is the last you hear from me...” Words kept coming even while Corey’s mind began to recognize the form as the man who had left her the night before. He was clutching his wrist. He had a parka on with the hood pulled over his head. He waved a hand. He must have known somehow that she was watching.

“It’s him,” Corey said into the phone, vaguely feeling more secure. Her muscles loosened. “It’s him. It’s Geoffrey.”

“Have you kept all the doors closed?” He threw off the parka onto the back of an Italian leather Chaises Lounge that he had mentioned cost more than a new Kia Seoul.

“Yeah, like you told me. Nothing comes in that didn’t go out.”

His bare arm was streaked with smears of blood. “Barbarians at the fucking gate.” He rushed to the kitchen and further, into the sitting room, surveying to make sure all the blinds were drawn. He made a shrugging motion like he was trying to shed off his skin and took a breath before going to the refrigerator and pulling out an aluminum bottle of Michelob Ultra, twisted the lid and drank like a wounded soldier might from a canteen.

“What, who? Who’s out there?”

“I fought one of them off.” He made a practiced smile, the same one he made on the cover of *Wired* just a few years ago. “Fucking bastard.”

“Who?” It was only when Corey approached him that she could smell the booze, old booze, rye and oak and pink bathroom soap.

“How the fuck should I know? Anyone? No one? I ruffled some feathers.”

“More than a few.”

“Gotta crack some eggs and so on.” He smiled again, oblivious to the arm before he saw her staring at it. “I used the Jiu Jitsu that Oliver taught me. Damn, if I wanted to have to use that shit, I would’ve just gone down the Tenderloin and savaged some junkie.”

“Geoffrey.” Here, she asserted herself. She would inject urgency into whatever was happening. “How many are there? Are they gone?”

“I’m pretty sure I scared them off. They wouldn’t be able to get in anyway.”

“We still need to be sure.”

“We’re not going out there.”

Where’s the car?” Corey said. “What happened?”

He shrugged. “I went into the city. Ran into some people. Had a few. They made me leave my car and bought me an Uber. Fucking driver made enough off me to take his sweetie to the Red Robin every night for a week.” He walked toward her like he might kiss her but she stopped him.

“What happened to careful?”

“What fun is careful? Tomorrow there’ll be sightings of me. It’ll be like D.B Cooper. But they know what I look like.”

“And that’s a good thing?”

He flinched so violently Corey thought he might yell. He must have heard something because he peeled himself away and drifted toward the kitchen. “You know what?” He began opening and shutting the cupboard doors, cursing as he slammed them yet the soft-close hinging allowed for a less dramatic yawning shut instead of the more injurious clap he might have hoped for.

Finally, he came to one, paused, shouted something, pulled one of the bullet-blenders out, unscrewed the cylinder top and dug around inside.

“Are you going to make a fucking smoothie?”

He whipped around at the absurdity of the question and held forth a stamp-sized jewelry bag bespecked with golden laptops. “Columbian, cure-all.” He began to dump some out on an imperfect ceramic plate bought from some online catalog and began to cut out lines the size of

fingers. "Watching *Cheers* again? You know, Sam always gets the girl. You know why, because someone has to. The world is Norm and Carla but think they're Sam. That's who we are."

"Are you serious? There are people outside trying to kill us."

"Die happy, then," He extended an aluminum straw to her. Along the tube the name of some startup trying to rid the planet of plastic straws,

She took the straw and held it like she had when it had been given to them, their mouths pressed into smiles like they'd just scored their first acting gig in a commercial for herpes cream, excited to be inside the building, "I'm not doing any. And you shouldn't either."

He already had another straw up his nose, his pinky raised like he was tasting wine. He inhaled the line, flinched and began to laugh. "They can't get in. They'll never get in. We could snort this whole ball and they'd still be lurking out there in the woods. By then, Oliver could help us. I'm sure he would."

"Who do you think you are, Tony Montana?" Corey shouted. "You're not an outlaw."

"What else am I?" He stopped, held up his hand and began to follow the noise outside. "Being an outlaw now looks different. Takes on a whole new meaning."

Corey's phone rang. She stepped away, into the foyer which felt cool as the heat-grid under the tile was set to match the weather outside. She held the phone close to her ear.

"What's going on little sis?"

"Geoffrey is here," Corey said with some measure. "But he's...gone. He's doing the thing he does when he's under pressure. It's like he thinks the whole thing is streaming."

As if he heard her, Geoffrey threw the blinds closed but not before getting caught in them and doing a sort of pirhoette to free himself. He then fled the room, ran by her to the stairs and nearly spilled over.

"I think he's going for a gun," Corey said.

"Are you okay? Who does he think he is?"

Returning to the windows, Corey could see the lights outside had become a small swarm of baseball-sized bulbs. Behind them were shadows that seemed to convene around a certain point. "They're still out there."

"So you're just going to wait it out? What if they have guns?"

"We have guns too. And our windows are some sort of acrylic hybrid that most bullets can't break. The doors are reinforced too."

"That's right," Geoffrey appeared in the room loading a magazine into a rifle. "We got better security than El Chapo."

"Didn't El Chapo just go off to prison?" Barbara said over the phone.

"I think he did go to prison," Corey said to Geoffrey.

"We need to scare them away," Geoffrey said.

"They know our address now, so they'll be back anyway," Corey said. "And then what? Our address is probably online by now."

"That's a problem for tomorrow." Geoffrey licked his lips and pulled his phone from his pocket. "It'd be a good time to send out a Tweet. Get in front of this whole thing. Optics and all."

"Fuck the optics," Barbara's voice called out from the phone in Corey's palm.

Corey hung up on her sister. "Take a breath." She approached Geoffrey and could smell the Bond No 9 cologne that masked the veneer of light beer and scotch. Sweat glistened on his skin and face where she could see he was older, greying slightly.

"Marc and Jack never had to deal with this. Fucking Travis took on a billion dollar industry illegally and got a fucking *Ted Talk*. And here I am, prisoner in my own home that I've been hiding in."

She went to him, took him by the elbow and side-stepped away from the windows. "We call the police and face the music. That's the only choice."

“We’d lose it all and then some,” Geoffrey said. “There’s all those lawsuits. They’ll offer me up as a sacrifice for the doing the same thing that’s made them all richer than god.” He took the gun in both hands. “Why should I?”

“If they can’t get in, why would you should them?”

Geoffrey stormed across the room to the window again. They were close, the bulbs of light had turned into a single streak. She could see shoulders and heads and hear voices. “I’m not going to shoot them. I’m going to scare them is all. Get them out of here. Make it clear that we’re not pushovers.”

“Who are they?” Corey didn’t want to know. Not really. To be tracked down, hunted in their own house, security shattered. It didn’t matter. They hadn’t done anything violent that she knew of, not yet anyway.

“They must have followed me back. Something like that. They hate for any reason. Mostly, they’re just jealous.” He rubbed his face on his sleeve. “There was a time when you weren’t found of it either. Listening to all those Clash and Public Enemy records thinking you had it figured out.”

It hadn’t been long ago to a time when Corey was confident in many things that had since evaporated. Nothing, it seemed, mattered anymore. In this moment, she just wanted to stay alive which was how she remembered the last few years of her life. All she wanted was...stability. Her phone itched at her side. She did her best to ignore it, knowing that there really wasn’t else she could say.

“I thought to myself, if I can get this girl to love me, then anything might be possible.” Geoffrey had approached her from behind and wrapped his arm around her torso. “You have no idea the strength that you’ve given me.”

He peeled himself away and returned to the gun. “Aren’t you glad I learned how to shoot this thing? I know you don’t like guns but when in Rome, huh?” He carried the gun into the

kitchen, set it on the counter and knelt toward the ceramic plate again. “Goddamn set of plates almost cost as much as the candy.”

Outside the crowd gathered and fanned out again. In the dark, she couldn’t see individual faces but silhouettes instead and wondered who they were.

“You’re not going to shoot them, right?”

“Know what the irony is? If I did, they could have streamed it on my site. Could have made them good money. People just don’t know what’s best for them.” He checked himself in the reflection of the stainless steel refrigerator/freezer. “Getting the blast-freeze was one of the best decisions we ever made. Never had a thing spoil.” He fixed his collar before walking over to Corey. “How do I look?”

“Are you going out there?”

“No,” he said. “I’m going onto the roof.” It was when he leaned in closer toward her, that she realized how strange he was to her.

“He’s going out on the roof. Please stay on the phone with me. If something goes wrong, if something goes wrong...I don’t know what to do.” She watched the surly bar waitress on television serve drinks. From upstairs, she heard Geoffrey turn on music which she didn’t recognize at first but, as the volume lifted she recognized as one of Geoffrey’s favorites, that Foo-Fighters song about a hero that she remembered him telling her was part of his ‘collegiate soundtrack,’ anthems to adderall and code-writing.

“He’s making a show.” Barbara was alone now. Corey could tell because her tone had leveled into something less coy and more declarative. “Just don’t do anything. Don’t go outside. I’m going to call the police.”

“No,” Corey shouted into the phone. “If you do, this will all be for nothing. They wouldn’t even be here for an hour anyway.”

The roof sloped down off a guest bedroom that they only used when they couldn't sleep in the same bed. Sometimes, Corey sat out there, read a paperback and smoked a Parliament. She'd given it up but, she didn't live with absolutes. "I almost started a fire up there once. Flicking my cigarette. I forget about the droughts. How dry everything is."

"What's he going to do out there? He's got a gun?"

"He wants to scare them away. He's just going to fire a warning shot."

"And he doesn't think that will attract attention?"

"We're miles from anything. Also people hunt and shoot here all the time." Corey could hear the window slide open. A slight vacuumous sound like the lid of a container had been pulled away. She could sense his body crawl onto the sill and then one foot clomp and the other out onto the slate tile and shimmy out to the eaves where he sat.

"What if something happens to him?"

Corey didn't say anything at first. Surely, it would make news. Maybe even the sort of news Facebook and Twitter and Uber made on any given day. Maybe it would be international. And maybe the website would be reanimated and rise to be what Geoffrey had envisioned it being. Or, maybe no one would care. "Whoever is out there is breaking the law. They'll leave."

"Corey, they'll be filming it."

"No they won't," Corey said. "They want the reward money."

Geoffrey had bragged about there being a reward for him. Of course, they both knew the money was put forward by investors who believed they'd been hoodwinked. After all, Geoffrey had plenty of lawyers. But, he had a dream to disappear. One day, when the heat had died, he had told her, he would come back into the spotlight, sell his story, maybe be shuffled off to some country club prison. So many people would want a piece of him that he'd never do any real suffering. Surely, people like him never did.

On the roof, she could hear him positioning himself. Depending on how much he'd had to drink, he could slip off. That's the worse that could happen. Would they hurt him though? No, he was worth too much to anyone.

"Fifty thousand dollars means a lot to most people," Corey said. "Most people can actually survive on money like that. We spent more money on sushi the year we met than that." Barb was silent on the other end. "Fifty thousand on sushi?"

"We took a private jet to Puerto Rico, once. Worst part is, it was right after that storm. He wanted to check out property there. He handed out twenties to the people like they were travel brochures."

"Fuck," Babba said. "Maybe you should let these people kill him."

She heard shouting outside. Someone had spotted him. The lights swelled and moved toward the sky. Corey could see them better now, scattered across the lawn like a mid-game chessboard. There was strategy with them, but now, they could see what they had come for and one man shouted Geoffrey's name. "Give it up," the man shouted.

"Give what up?" Corey could hear Geoffrey shout back. "I don't know you. I don't know any of you."

Cell-phone lights glowed and flashes sparked. Voices collided with and against one another and, above it all, Geoffrey lorded. "Go home," he shouted. "You all have lives to go home to, yeah? Go home to them then. Who are you to follow me here, to come to where I live."

"They're must a dozen people out there," Corey told her sister. She could see two of the shadows come close to one another and split. She realized they must have been fighting one another. The shouting continued and, finally, was punctuated by a thud, like a half-dollar dropping in slot-machine. It hit a window and made another sound like the machine had stopped.

And everything outside was quiet for a moment. A shot like a steel door shutting rung out. She could see it spark against a tree.

“Dear god, is someone shooting at you?” Babba said.

“It’s Geoffrey. He’s shooting.” The shots, she would say later, were fired at the trees, at the ground around the house. She could see the spark of the bullets hitting the dry trunks and leaves. The people scattered. Headlights flicked on in the depths of trees. She never saw what turned out to be a woman fall where Corey had planned to plant azaleas.

A finger-flame of light out in the brush. Sure, it could have been from the bullets. but someone could have also thrown a lit book of matches over their shoulder. She would say that she didn’t know. But she had. It was a bullet. He had fired a dozen or so times. One of them hit somewhere dry and dead enough to catch. That finger curled toward the earth and raised forward a moment later as an arm.

“Don’t put it out,” Her sister pleaded with Corey to leave it alone. “Don’t go out there.” She couldn’t see the body as the arm unveiled there was more. As if, the fire had sprung from a leak in the earth, it blossomed and bloomed until the trees swayed and pulsed with flame.

“If you’re not going to, I will,” her sister said. I’m calling nine-one-one.” Corey decided to end it there, to convince her sister it was okay, that emergency wouldn’t be here anyway but, instead, she froze and watched as something, a sudden push of wind, the earth tilting at just the right axis, caused the fire to lower, rise and then tumble toward her. It might have been accelerated but it could have just been the old growth, the dead leaves on top of dry soil.

In all this, more shots rang out that she might have imagined sparking, small golden jolts. He might have been firing into it, knowing this was something, one thing that might be difficult to control, to pay a fine and move on to conflate and twist and...One shot and another into the earth firecrackers popping off as the flames began to climb, and leap over branches while they snapped and fell.

A minute could have been ten or twenty. The laugh-track on the television fluttered with laughter as someone told a joke at someone else’s expense. She couldn’t remember this episode. Upstairs, finally, she heard Geoffrey’s unlaced Timberlands clop down the marble stairs

with the rug that Geoffrey had smuggled in from Iran, supposedly from the Khamanei's cousin but she just imagined now it was a street peddler trying to get by and so he'd created a story that anyone would believe because it had no consequence. Geoffrey had bought it because he needed something of consequence to talk about online to people who might have cared.

And here he was, glazed in soot-sweat and holding a gun that he might have forgotten about. He was smiling before he stepped forward to hug her and kiss her on the cheek. "Haven't liked it here either," he told her. "Way I figure it, tomorrow we can go home."

"What?" She stepped away. Outside, the fire was going in patches but something was blotting it out, erasing what she'd just seen."

"If I told you, I couldn't have gotten a natural reaction. Something had to give. It's going to be the most streamed content of the week, probably the month. By then, everyone will have forgotten anyway." He walked away to the sink where he ran water and splashed it over his arms. "You probably need a drink. And if you're feeling bad, nothing, animal nor human was injured. Everyone made enough money to buy whatever everyone buys and I made myself the victim. I'm thinking we can call them eco-terrorists. Remember the ELF? Lets tie it to them. They don't do anything anymore do they?" He paused, lost in his thoughts and then, as if prompted by something, maybe the man cleaning up in the yard or the programming on television. "*Unbelievable!*" He shouted. "Remember that song? That group was called ELF I think. Remember ELO? Totally different band. Both from England though."

"That wasn't the name of that band." Corey let her weight fall into a chair. "It was EMF, not ELF. And ELO was stadium rock."

He came to her, took her by the waist and mock-waltzed her out from the window, into the foyer. "A sympathetic judge will say I've suffered enough. Nothing more, nothing less." As if in rhythm to whatever dance Geoffrey was twirling Corey into, the door opened and there, in a sand and leaf colored outfit from Cabelas or Banana Republic, stood Oliver. A hat with a string underneath it, cocked to one side and Corey half-expected some sort of accent attached

that he'd dreamed up watching *Lethal Weapon* movies. "It's already out there," Oliver said. "You'll go in tomorrow. I got a guy meeting you, best in the Bay and he will guide you through the whole charade. Nothing you can't handle." He then set his arm on the back of the couch and ran his hand over the material. "You went with the Italian leather? Costs more than any of those fools have in the bank. You're keeping diversified right? I got a great crypto guy."

Geoffrey eyed the plate of cocaine. "Do you think we'll get the website back?"

"You still have legal right to domain." He parted from the couch and walked to the kitchen where he took the plate from Geoffrey, tasted the cocaine with his pinky and snorted some. "Sort of sells itself after this, doesn't it?"

"I don't want prison," Geoffrey said.

"Who does?" Oliver slipped the hat off his head and stared at the television long enough to ingest a joke about a barfly's wife and laugh about it. "Holds up doesn't it?"

"I'm serious. I don't want prison."

"Letting off live rounds up there, huh? Might not have a choice."

"Did I hit someone?" Geoffrey said.

"Grazed I think. If it was bad, I'd of saw them out there." He slapped Geoffrey on the arm. "Fucking, hell. Didn't think you had it in you."

"What if someone says something?" Corey said.

"I paid them more than they make in a week," Oliver said. "And we have more on them than they'll know. What nasty porn they like, what affairs they've had, what money they've stolen. They all got an anonymous file in their email. Low-rent actors from the community colleges. Fuck, a couple of them might have even been homeless."

"The reward money?" Corey felt like she might vomit. Outside, she could see the flames, small little curls and whispers of fire peeling up from the scorched ground. The trees were still veined with it. Her phone was ringing in her pocket while Oliver took Geoffrey by the arm and led him away from her. They had ignored her, assumed that she would be agreeable.

Before her sister said anything, Corey had already decided what she was going to do.

“It’s fine,” she told her sister. “The problem is gone. It’s all under control.”

“Just like that, they upped and left?”

“We won’t be here very much longer.” Corey felt Geoffrey’s hand on her shoulder.

“Hey Babs,” he said. “False alarm out here. Barbarians have been thwarted. Your sister’s a hero for being steadfast.”

Barbara sighed into the phone. “What the fuck happened out there, Corey?”

Corey stepped away from his grip and toward the door. “You’ll hear about it in the news but let me tell you about it first, once I get to Nevada.”