The Chrysalis Center

When they arrive, I give them ginger chamomile tea.

The ginger is good for their stomachs—relaxes the tangled knot of intestines. The chamomile pours like honey over their exposed nerves, and holding a hot mug between two cold hands is better than any medicine.

When she came in, I started the tea like usual. The Chrysalis Center is tucked away from the main street, down a cobbled back road. The entrance is humble and windowless with an empty front desk and one waiting room chair. We've had people wander in before and just sit—people looking for solace and knowing instinctively that they've found it.

She came to us the way most do, with hands reaching, but I knew right away she wasn't one of those wandering people. She was here for a purpose. I peeked through the hidden eyehole and then opened the side door.

"Come on, dear," I said, and gestured her into the real parlor. I set down the tea and two teacups while she eyed the small table of finger foods. The girls never eat on their first trip here, but we always put out the snacks anyway. I've found that access to food is more comforting than the actual eating.

She was all dark features and strong, clean right angles. Her wavy black hair fell to the middle of her back and was lovely even in tangles. Her skin reminded me of whipped mousse, smooth and delicate. As she took off her coat, I wasn't surprised to see a waif underneath it. I was even less surprised to see the dark marks on her skin. They perched on top like the shadow of a fist.

"Come on, blossom," I said. I put my hand on her arm, lightly, the way a school teacher might to lead her tiny charges, and she coiled back like a snake. I saw the venom at the edges of her wide eyes, and she raised her open hand. It stayed there, crossing over mine so that both were hovering in the

space between us—one raised to comfort and the other to strike.

I took back my hand and tucked it into the front pocket of my old flower apron. After a moment, she lowered hers, too.

"Some women," I began, talking straight into the whites around her eyes, "react to violence with more violence. And it just rolls on and on, like the devil's cycle."

She looked away, shaking her wild hair out of her face.

"There is no violence here," I told her. "Not toward you, and not from you. That's one of the rules."

"I understand," she said, her hands sliding behind her back and knotting together. There was a beautiful lilt to her voice.

"What's your name?"

"Mari."

"I'm Susanna," I said, cupping my hand in the open air. "Now come."

We have people for the girls to talk to. Specialists, men and women, all vetted and approved by the director. A lot of them have framed degrees from the universities. I have no degree or formal training. What I have is a lifetime of mothering instinct with no one on Earth to mother.

Mari wouldn't talk to them. She settled into the routine of the house, keeping her room tidy and doing her laundry on Tuesdays and taking her share of the cooking. She was a great cook, but the kitchen was never stocked well enough for her. She deigned to cook with the ingredients we had, muttering all the while how they weren't good enough.

She never mingled with the other girls. Our guests group off one by one, drawn to each other for some reason or another, in couplets or small gaggles. But she stayed in her room most days, or out

on the patio by the atrium.

Her conversations with me weren't great those first few weeks. When I asked her how she was settling in, she remarked on the chilly weather and the imperfection of the knitted gloves we gave her.

Then one day, as I was scouring some particularly dirty dishes, she brought the rest of the plates to the sink. She set them there and I thanked her, expecting her to turn and go.

"How long have you been here?" she asked instead.

I waded backward through time, flicking through decades and girls. "20 years or so.

“Why?"

"Why did I come here, or why do I stay?"

"Both."

"Well, the answer is the same," I dried my hands on a dish towel and then turned toward her. "I love you. Every one of you. I see you here, and I love you."

She didn't say anything, but she stepped up to the sink and picked up the scrub brush. She'd been with us three weeks by that point, but I'd never seen her do a chore she wasn't assigned. Her shoulders sloped down, her hands rough over the dirty dishes.

"How long for you?" I asked.

She didn't look up. "Ten years."

My throat strained with the effort it took to control my voice. The girls never liked pity. "Is there a child?"

The scouring brush scraped so hard over the china, I worried she'd send glass careening into the sink. "There was."

I could feel it, the invisible wall you sometimes hit with these subjects. Two decades with girls like Mari and I knew when to stop asking questions. And I'd tempered my own curiosity by then, so it

didn't buzz incessantly in my ear. What they tell me is never about me.

"Help me finish up the dishes," I said. "Then I'll make you some tea."

The screeches echoed all the way down to the atrium.

The sound of women arguing is a lot like the canaries bickering up in the trees. Fights between the girls are usually small, focused on laundry or telephone use or how one roommate isn't keeping up her side of the housekeeping. But with so many different backgrounds under one roof, and with so many women used to having a front-seat to violence, it can get dangerous. A punch to the jaw can knock out teeth—a bout of hair-pulling can rip strands out by the root.

I hurried up the stairs, watering tin still in hand. Mari and another girl, Laurel, catcalled at each other across the short hallway between their rooms. A group of girls gathered around Laurel, patting her shoulders and bolstering her on. Mari stood alone.

"Girls!" I commanded. I don't like shouting, but I've learned how to get my voice to echo down these long halls.

The rest of the girls went quiet, but Mari just kept going—a long diatribe that buffeted up into Laurel like a bitter wind.

"Mari!" I said, louder this time. She stopped and turned. Her dark skin was damp, like she's been swimming, and her chest was heaving up and down like that too. She met my eyes, and I could see there was a power there—a darkness.

"What's going on?"

"She started it," Laurel defended, jabbing her finger at Mari. Mari turned and stared at Laurel, cool enough to freeze over the surface of a lake.

"Mari," I said, curling my finger toward her. "Come with me. Girls, I'm sure you all have things to

do."

Mari followed along after me, and I led her into my room. It wasn't unusual for me to have two or three girls in here, draped over my sofa or leaning up against my desk. The atmosphere was decidedly stiffer as Mari sat down on the wicker desk chair.

"What?" she asked, perching on the tip of the chair, straight-backed and proud.

"You tell me."

"I didn't start it."

"What happened?"

"*Dios mio*, some of these girls here are so *stupid*."

"How so?"

"They all just sit together and discuss their situations, as if this helps them. They bounce off each other, each trying to sound worse than the last. *Perras tontas*."

"I still don't understand why that makes them stupid."

She stayed silent for a moment. Then, "Some things should not be forgiven."

"You think they're stupid to forgive the men who hurt them?" She didn’t answer, and I continued. "Maybe you're thinking about it the wrong way."

"How should I think?"

"Forgiveness isn't for the soul of the man who hurt you," I said, leaning forward. Her eyes were wide again, showing off the whites like that first time in the waiting room. "It's for yours."

She didn't say anything, but her shoulders were tense and raised, her arms a harsh criss-cross over her middle.

"No more fighting with the other girls," I told her sternly.

She nodded, but her stance stayed tight and bundled. I didn't believe her.

They came running to get me, but I could already hear the cacophony from my room. They were scared, all of them—a man's voice echoed through the halls. The director was careful about raising his voice; the psychiatrists were strictly told not to. The girls chattered and bickered sometimes, but it was never like this. This sound went through the house like ice water through veins.

"Go back to your rooms. Now!"

They scurried off in pairs, huddling into each other's rooms instead of fleeing separately. That didn't matter—let them draw comfort where they could. I rushed down to the real waiting room and peered through the crack into the fake one.

He was tall, a gaping dark figure blotting out the faint sun from the open door behind him. His mouth was open, arms flailing—the voice boomed out, pulled up from some evil place in the center of him. Horrible words, the worst words—and a name punctuated them like a period. *Mariposa*.

I felt her presence unfurl behind me, but I didn't turn. I just kept watching the tall, screaming man. She walked to my side and stooped to peer out at him. Her face was pushed up against the wall, her nose flattened into the wood, and I was suddenly afraid he would see her.

All the time she'd been here, I'd been wondering what sort of man it took to break someone like her. Now I stared at him, and it was like staring at a special cranny in the corner of hell.

"Go," I said quietly.

"You go," she said. She straightened, and I could feel her gathering her forces, turning her soft parts to stone. I grabbed her arm, the only other time I'd touched her since she almost hit me. Her reaction was much different now—the stone bled out of her, and she was soft woman again.

"No," I said. "You go on upstairs, Mariposa. We'll take care of this."

She looked at me, and there was an ancient pain in her eyes. It was not her pain alone but ours—all of ours.

She went back up the stairs, just as the director came down them. He looked out at the man

now ripping through the false waiting room. The secret door loomed close to the monster's left.

The director was a small man, slight—with sandy blonde hair that was always a shade too long and big round glasses that magnified his eyes. We had limited security, which stemmed from a desire to keep unfamiliar men away from our girls. This place relied very much on secrecy as protection.

"He's come for her," the director said.

"Someone must have told him."

"He'll keep coming," the director answered, peering through the wall. I looked too, and for a moment the man stopped in his destruction to stare at exactly this wall. We met eyes, except he didn't know that. Then he started shouting again, this time a slew of words I didn't understand.

"Yes, he will," I answered. Nothing in this man was willing to quit or compromise.

I knew what the director would say, just like I knew he'd be right to say it. I waited for the words anyway.

"She can't stay."

"No," I said quietly. The man outside huffed and puffed now, his shaking limbs visible through a solid wall. He would tire soon, but not completely—never completely. "No, she can’t."

I worked for weeks on laying out the plan before saying anything to Mari. I wanted to have all the pieces gathered before I told her we were sending her away—I didn't want her to feel the sting of abandonment. I wasn't abandoning her. We'd done this for a few other girls when they were violently pursued; gotten them to another safe place out of the city. It wasn't abandonment—it was another form of protection.

I put the soup on simmer and covered it with a pot. It was chickpea, her favorite—but she called it something else. Mari taught me the recipe a few weeks ago, when the dreadful coldness bouncing off

the cobblestones called for something hot.

When I was sure the soup was done, I lowered the temperature and walked through the house calling for her. I looked in the atrium, but it was still chilly and the girls didn't spend much time out there this time of year. I checked the common area next.

The television was running, a newscast from one of the popular stations. The girls did this often—turned on the television and left it burning there unattended, the faces looking out with nothing looking back at them.

When I didn't find her there, I went by her room and knocked on the door. I checked the knob after a moment—unlocked, which was unusual. She was very private, very careful, and she didn't like the other girls.

The room was empty and made up nicely, the bed folded over in the way I kept reminding the girls to do but they always somehow forgot. The only sign that she even occupied the room was a collection of colored pencils on the desk and a few sheets of blank paper. She hadn’t gotten those from the center.

Pressure built in my chest, like my lungs were slowly filling up with steam. She wouldn't be in any of the girls' rooms, and I'd already been to the kitchen. Our guests were allowed to leave, but most of them didn't—most of them wanted to stay off the streets where they could be recognized.

I slid my shaking hands into my apron pocket, playing with the frayed edges of the papers I'd been carrying. They included a train ticket, an itinerary, and notes of recommendation from the director and me. It took a bit of convincing to get him to write it. There was another train ticket on my dresser—I planned to make the trip with her, maybe stay a few weeks to help her settle in. I don't abandon my girls. I never abandon my girls.

The steam rose up from my lungs to my head, and I felt faint. I sat on the windowsill, curling inward and resting my head against the foggy gray panel. After awhile, I stood up and headed back to

the kitchen

There stood Mariposa, shaking some seasonings into my soup.

"You forgot the *azafrán*," she said, businesslike, back still toward me. There was a brown paper bag next to her, and I recognized it from the supermarket down the street. "It's nothing without the *azafrán*."

"I'll remember that," I said, walking up to her. She nodded and dipped a wooden spoon into the mix, trying the new version of the soup.

"Better?" I asked.

"Much."

There were so many things I needed to tell her. She had no business leaving the center, not when he was out there, lurking in these streets and waiting for a chance to see her. She had to leave, and my plan would help her do it. She had to go. No matter how we cut this situation, she had to go.

I tasted the soup when she held it out to me—it really was better the way she made it.

I told her so. I didn't say anything else.

I walked into my room to find her holding the train ticket. In both of her hands, but gently, like it was a birth certificate. She sat on my dresser with her legs crossed at the ankles. My throat worked, pushed the sadness down my throat into my belly.

"Two of them," she said, but she only held one. The other sat on top of the dresser.

"I'm going with you," I said. There was no point in trying to make an excuse—she was too smart not to have come to the right conclusion. "Help you get settled."

"Settled," she said, and by the way she said it, I knew she'd never been settled.

"There are other places like this," I said. "For situations just like these. You're not the first girl

whose abuser is—" I stopped, unable to describe the monster of a man I saw in the lobby, clawing at the wallpaper and ripping up floorboards.

"I don't like places like this," she said, very quietly. She set the bus ticket down on my dresser. Then she slid down to her feet, like a dancer landing an arabesque.

"Then why have you stayed so long?"

She looked at me with that ancient wisdom in her eyes—the kind that comes from the common place in all of us. I knew why she'd stayed so long. I knew exactly why.

"Child," I said softly. "There are other mothers like me."

She leapt toward me with the wild look she wore the first time we met. Her hands flattened on my back, her arms wrapping around me like I was the only thing she'd ever really held onto in her whole life. She had a boxer's body—strong and thin.

Then she walked out of the room, leaving both tickets on the dresser behind her.

She arrived on a Tuesday, and she left on one. I felt the shift in the air before I got out of bed—the particles were less charged, like she took all the energy out with her. The two train ticket glared at me from my dresser.

I put on my robe, made the knot big and loopy with shaking fingers, and walked down the hallway. Her room was at the very end, past all the other girls' rooms and right next to the exit. It was like she planned it that way—like she'd been looking for an escape since the day she stepped inside. Maybe she had been. A loving cage was still a cage, even filled with pieces of ribbon and hot cups of soup.

Her bed was made just the way I liked it. The whole room had been scrubbed over—not a speck of dust, no wrinkles in the covers to indicate she ever slept underneath that white cotton comforter. All

the emotions rolled to the base of my throat like fallen apples. For a moment I hated her, though there was surely no point—she had always been like this. She had always been a handful of sand tossed up to the wind.

I ran my hands on the underside of her simple wooden desk, felt into the corners of her empty drawers, but there was no note. She'd left nothing of herself for me to find—no phone number, no trajectory of her flight pattern.

She did leave all of the clothes I'd given her over the course of these six months—the white cotton shirts with the peasant sleeves, the long floating skirts. She'd looked like a child of the Earth in them, her hair all loose around her face. But they were never her style, and that was why she left them. She was like that, lovely and bright but with an underside like a knife held to a stone sharpener.

I reached past her clothes into the corners of her closet. Nothing for one, two, three corners, until I got to the fourth—and there, tucked up behind a particularly long skirt she always tripped on but never let me hem, was a rolled-up paper. I pulled it out, slipping a finger into the long tube to test the paper's durability. It was strong and rigid, just the kind of paper she'd use.

I unfurled the tube slowly, and the image took shape: in fierce color, dominated at first by a set of wings that stretched over the whole of the paper, butting up against the corners like the canvas was too small to contain them. They held patterns inside—all of these complex, mirrored images. Then, as if she'd planned it that way, the drawing pulled me into the body of the creature, which was partway-sheathed in a cocoon so black Mari had nearly shaded through the paper.

The creature was half-emerged, half-caged in the black cocoon, prying with antennas at the dripping split. There was purpose in every line—the creature could succeed, would succeed, but had not succeeded yet.

It was glorious and fearsome.

The apples were back at the base of my throat, rolling up and choking me. I rolled up the

drawing and slid it into the pocket of my robe. Then I retreated from the tidy room and closed the door behind me, walking back down the hall. The slight weight of the drawing hit my hip, the paper rustling with each step.

Glorious and fearsome.

Mariposa.