

A small brass bell jangled as the door opened. Dave called a casual hello without lifting his eyes from the book. He set his coffee on the counter, read to the bottom of the page, finally looked up, and was surprised to find a woman glaring at him.

“Oh. Hi. Hey,” he fumbled. “We’re not open until two. Um, can I help you?” Demons, dragons, and drunken cuties watched him approach the woman, awkward and stumbling.

“No, you can’t help,” she turned to leave. “Not if this place isn’t open. You shoulda locked tha door or something.” He reached the door before she escaped and gently pushed it shut.

“I’m expecting a delivery this morning,” he explained, reaching up to silence the bell. “This damn thing drives me nuts. You’re here. Let me get your name. Write you in the appointment book. Stephen’s the first one working today, but not until two. That’s in, let’s see – that’s not for – um, six more hours. Maybe I could help you find what you need.”

From across the room she had been all bleached hair, old bruises, and second-hand clothes; he hadn’t realized how petite she was until he was up close. He also hadn’t realized how tightly wound she was. He saw sparks flash in her hazel eyes, ready to call down lightning bolts. He felt the charge she generated. Angry sexual electricity like a lioness in heat. He recognized himself as prey.

“Ah don wanna to tell you my name. Ah don wanna to make no appointment. Ah tain’t trying to look around at flash.” In her anger, she had forgotten to corral her Georgia accent. She still spat out each word like gristle. Each syllable became some wild swamp creature she hunted, gnashed it with sharp small teeth.

With a deep breath, she got the drawl under control. “I know what I need. *Thank you*. If I can’t get it *here, now*, then I’ll go somewhere *else*. Get your hand off the door.”

Dave's instinct was to attack her ferocity, but curiosity overrode impulse. He took his hand off the door, but shifted his weight to block her access. "Fuck, girlie. Calm down. The shop is now ... open," he flipped the sign over with a flourish. "If you promise to retract your venomous fangs, then we're open for business. You're going to have to settle down enough to tell me what you want," he tried to gentle her. "And stop rolling your eyeballs up like that. You'd be sorry if they got stuck that way."

She didn't trust him. Or anyone. She suspected him. Of everything. Mercy warily met his eyes, and couldn't help but laugh. She took no comfort in what she saw: his well-muscled shoulders tense, his arms crossed defensively, his brow creased. He looked like a fortress, prepared for a long battle.

Another deep breath. She steeled her resolve and bent life to her will. A piece of notebook paper appeared from her pocket.

"I need this," she said in a controlled voice, unfolding the paper. "Above my heart. I'll pay two hundred. I want it done as soon as you can set up. I don't want any sort of paperwork."

Dave's fingers brushed her hand as he took the paper she offered. Suddenly he was in too deep to explain that he was only an apprentice. He wasn't even allowed to practice on his own skin yet, much less hers. After a year of watching Stephen and the others work on customers, Dave was still only allowed to tattoo oranges.

He'd lose her forever if he couldn't deliver exactly what she wanted. He was fucked. He stepped over the line without looking back. He held the paper gingerly with exaggerated caution and shammed courtesy.

"A heart and banner. Mercy, huh," he cocked an eyebrow, waited for an explanation that never came. "We've got flash like it, but with a dagger, for one fifty. There should be a coupon –

free dagger with every heart,” he chuckled at his own joke. “I need to call you something, even if I don’t write it down. So give me a name.”

Never having experienced mercy herself, she hated her name. Loathed it, cringed at the sound of it. She wasn’t about to share this hated betrayal of a name with this stranger.

“Pick a name outta that book you’re reading,” she challenged. “It must have a woman in it somewhere. What was she called?”

“Well, Lady Smart Ass, the book does happen to have a female character, a tough cookie – just like you’re trying to be,” he winked. “Her name is Mary America. What do you think of that?”

“Mary America?!” She turned the name over in her mouth. “You can’t get more generic than that. Add that free dagger. I like the *death to mercy* theme. This is my first tattoo. Don’t screw it up.”

Flinching at the irony, he went to set out the tools of his new trade: gauze, a sterilized needled wrapped in a paper pouch, inks in small plastic caps, a disposable razor, and a fresh cup of coffee to steady his nerves.

Dave led her to a chair. “I can’t take you to the more private rooms,” he apologized. “Still waiting on that package.”

Mary sat down eager and expectant. She scratched at her chipped pink nail polish. She cleared her throat. “So on a scale of one to eight million, how bad is this going to hurt?”

“Well, let’s see,” Dave stalled. “The top of the design - the skin’s pretty thin there. Not much between the needle and the bone. It’ll be better the lower we go. How bad did it hurt to scab your knee up like that?”

“Pretty bad.” She licked her lips like an accountant ciphering hard numbers. “It was bleeding. I didn’t cry. I swore a blue streak. But other stuff was going on too, so I’d say ... it was about six million seven hundred forty-eight thousand and two.”

“Well, figure the top of the dagger around seven million then,” counseled Dave. “Nothing a roaring tiger like you can’t handle.”

He pulled a needle from the pack and nestled it into the gun. He had watched Stephen do this routine everyday and hoped that his stumbling fingers wouldn’t give him away. He tightened the bolt, checked the movement, and stalled for time.

“Um, I need to prep the stencil,” he said self-consciously. “Take off your shirt and bra while I’m doing that. Here’s a sheet to cover your right side.”

“You’re blushing,” she cackled. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You think that covering one titty is going to make me feel better with the other one hanging out? I never would have figured you would be blushing at the sight of a breast! At least not professionally.”

“I’m soooooo glad that I keep you amused,” he retorted. “Maybe you’ll laugh through the pain I’m about to inflict on you, smart ass.”

Dave tried to focus as the copier worked its magic on merging the word “mercy” with a daggered heart. He knew he should tell her the truth, that this was the first tattoo for both of them. He wanted to tell her, but couldn’t figure out how. Maybe he could somehow call Stephen and ask to be rescued without Mary hearing him?

“There’s a stack of CDs there,” he gestured blindly. “Pick out something to help take your mind off the sound of the drilling.” How was he going to fake a tattoo? He didn’t want her to leave. For some reason, he needed her.

Mary pressed play and a deep, rich voice quivered out of the speakers. Mary read along with the liner notes and added her own voice on the chorus. *And the mercy seat is waiting. And I think my head is burning. And in a way I'm yearning.* Dave knew he was in love.

“Okay. I’ve got the sten-” He sputtered. “Stencil. I’ve got the stencil. Wow. Um. Yeah. Let’s get started.” Dave remembered how to breathe. He sat, unsteady, tried to avoid staring at her bare breasts. He desperately pulled his eyes to her face.

He clutched the antiseptic soaked cotton, sanitizing her skin from collarbone to nipple. His hand shook, just a little, as he covered the area with a thick layer of Vaseline. He cursed himself to Hell and back. He felt the heat of her skin through his gloves.

He dipped the needle into ink, ran the gun, and exhaled his tension like a Buddhist monk. Leaning in close, he got a whiff of strawberry shampoo. The needle purred like a dentist’s drill and punctured her skin. An hour later, he sat back swallowing fear and cold coffee. Dave smiled. “Not bad for my first tattoo,” he mused. “I mean *your* first tattoo,” he recovered quickly. Mary hadn’t noticed the slip. She was buzzed from the endorphins that her body released in response to the pain.

Dave knew that rush from getting his own tattoos, what he hadn’t realized was what a rush it was to *give* a tattoo. His pleasure was almost sadistic. She’d never forget him now. He had marked her as his own. There was a peculiar exhilaration mixed with relief. Dave was addicted to this process of creating beauty out of blood. Mary was hooked on the magic of transforming pain into a visible badge of courage.

He released Mary from the chair with a nod. She looked at herself in the mirror. She couldn’t believe the sense of power, of transformation. “Mercy’s dead. Long live Mercy,” Mary murmured with satisfaction.

“Mercy’s got a dagger through her heart,” Dave agreed as he came up behind her to admire his living canvas.

“Ready for the gauze,” he asked, reaching one hand reaching for her bare shoulder. “It’s a shame to cover up such pretty work, but it’ll heal better with a bandage.”

The door jangled. Dave let his hand fall to his side as both turned to face a shocked deliveryman. “Oh hell,” the man muttered. “Sorry if I’m interrupting. I got a few boxes for you though.”

“We were just taping up her first tattoo,” Dave clarified. He handed Mary the tape and a square of gauze, nodding toward the bathroom. Mary grabbed her backpack and shuffled for the privacy offered. She stuffed her bra into her backpack and pulled out a can of play dough in an old sock. She shook her head, refusing to remember the night she found the can under the bed. She pulled two bills from the can and put the rest back in place. She opened the bathroom door, checked to make sure the FedEx guy was gone, and handed the money to Dave.

“Keep the change,” she grinned. “You did a great job.” She fought the urge to kiss his cheek. “I’m ready for lunch. Can you leave now that the delivery is here.”

“Is there a reason why your money smells like play dough?”

Mary ignored him. “Where do you want to go to lunch? Is there a pancake place?”

“Did you just move here,” Dave fished for clues about her.

“Nope,” she answered, falling back into her previous pseudo-thug stance. “I didn’t just *moooooove* here. I’m moving, somewhere else. Just passing through. Do they or do the *not* have pancake in this town?”

“Grab your stuff. I’ll lock up and take you to the Pancake Queen’s House of Hot Cakes, the finest food in Dixie,” Dave crowed. “Maybe the food will convince you to stay around awhile.”

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James let the letter fall to the floor. He had read all he needed to know – Mercy did have a tattoo of a heart over her own heart. A tattoo that matched the one Dave had tattooed on his girlfriend, Mary, all those years ago. It seemed that Dave and James shared more than a prison cell. They were in love with the same woman, and now they both hated her. Mercy was the Mary who landed Dave in prison.

James had been curious about Mary’s story long before he knew Dave was referring to the woman he loved. But it’s never a good idea to ask too many questions. People talk when they are ready.

Dave’s story had come out one night when the cops tossed their cell. The night shifts were worse when headed by Correction Officer Brittany Coates. Female COs are always more vindictive and vicious than male guards. Preservation of the species in hostile conditions, maybe. Or maybe they only hired cross-eyed man-hating bitches.

That night Coates was in a particularly foul mood. From the smell of her frequent farts, James guessed she had burritos for dinner. “That Mexican food is tearing up your stomach,” James faked concern in acid tones.

Coates responded by running her greasy fingers across the small desk. Books and papers went flying. A stack of photos and letters fell to the floor. In the flurry, Dave eyes were drawn to one falling photograph. His stomach clenched. He heard the picture hit the cement floor. It

sounded like shattered glass, as if it had been in a frame. Maybe it was closer to the sound your face makes as it hits the windshield in a fatal crash.

The cell foreshortened. Dave's vision tunneled in on the photograph's eyes. Those eyes – he saw them every night in his best dreams and worst nightmares. Locking eyes with Mary once again knocked the breath out of him. No one noticed his shock until he drew in a sharp, gasping breath. Coates turned on him, and animal excited by the scent of fear. She followed his staring eyes to the picture on the floor. Her malicious boot moved toward Mary's smile. Dave tackled Coates into the wall. The picture was safe in his pocket before the pepper spray hit him full in the face.

James saw it all, but didn't understand it. He kept his mouth shut. With hands behind his head, he waited for the shit to hit the fan.

Once he returned, Dave looked haggard from the days in solitary. He hadn't slept more than 10 hours total during his 10-day bid in the hole. The memory of Mary burned brighter than the constant light shining in his eyes. Sleep had not been an option.

His questions ate at his stomach, ulcer questions burning his thoughts. Dave slowly unpacked his laundry bag – arranged the soap, comb, vitamins – everything he owned. His hand lingered on the bottle of strawberry shampoo. Prayed for the strength to hear the truth of how James came to own a photograph of Mary as a brunette.

James wordlessly handed him a cup of instant coffee with a Milky Way candy bar melted into it. Dave nodded his thanks, handed over the now-crumpled photo.

“I don't know when she changed her hair color, but she has a tattooed heart over her heart. The banner reads Mercy,” Dave blurted out. He didn't flinch when James plucked the picture from his fingertips. “It was a joke, death to mercy.”



“You *know* that,” James questioned with repressed violence. “I’ve been waiting to hear this, but before you start I think you should know that I had planned on asking Mercy to marry me.” He pulled a small velvet box from his pocket. “I had to hustle a while to get this for her. The warden’s already given permission to marry her – if she says yes. If I still ask her. I guess I’d better hear your story though.”

Dave took a breath. He drained the last of the coffee in the cup, shook his head to clear his thoughts. “Never occurred to me that Mercy was her real name,” he confessed. “I called her Mary for so long that I forgot that it wasn’t really her name. I wonder if this is her natural hair color.”

James poured more hot water in the cup and handed the jar of coffee crystals over, waiting to hear Dave’s impossible story.

“I was in Nashville. She walked in all brassy blonde white trash – pissed off and foul-mouthed in her Lynard Skynard t-shirt. Didn’t get a chance to explain that I hadn’t even worked on a real person before. That heart was the first thing I ever drilled into someone’s skin. Have you seen it,” his eyes pleaded in a way that his voice never would. “Never mind. Don’t tell me. Doesn’t matter. I’ll skip to the day I got lugged here.” On calloused hands, he ticked off the points of his incarceration –

He woke up early. Still dark outside. She wasn’t in bed. He heard the radio playing in the kitchen. Recognized Tom Waits and knew she was in a bad mood from the song. Went back to sleep. Alarm clock. Shit. Shower. Shave. Kitchen was empty. An unfinished note on the table read “Gone to” in her handwriting. The car keys gone. He felt uneasy at that, and a little pissed.

There was an appointment with his probation office that afternoon. Wondered where she went and why she left so early.

His own note explained that he took the city bus to see his PO; she'd have to pick him up afterward. Suggested a need to talk.

From the bus stop up the street, he saw cop cars speed towards the apartment. He ran back, thought the appointment might have been earlier – maybe he had the times mixed up. He tried to explain.

Arrested. Armed robbery, assault, felon in possession, parole violations he didn't even know existed. Money from a Dairy Mart hold up earlier that morning was found in his car. His car - parked at an abortion clinic on the other side of town. The cops assumed he was the masked man with Mary.

He still doesn't know that the hell was going on that day, not even after six years of re-living it in every cold sweat nightmare. Best he could figure was Mary had some other fool. She got pregnant. She helped the guy rob the convenience store for money to pay for an abortion. They ditched Dave's car after the robbery and picked up another car at the clinic. It didn't really make sense. Nothing made sense.

It depressed him to think of all the daily things that he knew about her, but he hadn't known that she was pregnant and cheating on him. "Oh, fuck," he sighed. Dave didn't have to finish the story. James knew how it ended. In this cell.

Dave closed his eyes. To himself he said, "After three months I knew that she liked her coffee black, but took her tea with milk. After six months I knew that she'd buy any strawberry-scented shampoo that was on sale, but only bought Crest toothpaste. After nine months I knew she liked calypso music for romance, but sang along with Nick Cave while doing the dishes. She learned all the words to *Mercy Seat* that first day when I was inking the heart on her perfect skin." He slipped into the memory, started humming to himself, hearing Mary's voice. *It began*

*when they come took me from my home. And put me in Dead Row, of which I am nearly wholly innocent, you know.* The irony was not lost on him. How the hell could he not know she was going to fuck him over?

James couldn't believe or deny what he had just heard. He met Mercy through a pen pal service and destiny. He only saw her in the visiting room at the prison. Maybe Dave had the wrong woman? There were too many similarities for him to really believe that.

"I don't know about a tattoo or not. I'm hoping, for all of us, that you've got the wrong woman," James sighed. "There's a lot my *Mercy* has in common with your *Mary* though.

"For one thing, Mercy has an abortion a long time ago. She told me that she couldn't stand the thought of herself being reborn, a small version of herself repeating the same mistakes. That's what she said. She didn't say anything about the baby's father, so I don't know.

"I know her hair smells like strawberries. I know she hums that Mercy song. Maybe it's just a coincidence because it's got her name in it. I've never seen her with blonde hair, but all of it is circumstantial, except the tattoo. So I'll have to ask her," James concluded with another sigh. He climbed into his bunk, the photo still clutched in his hand.

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Mercy let the letter fall from her fingers, watched pages drift to the floor. Why now? She would never answer his prying questions. She couldn't bring herself to write them down knowing the prison guards would read her worst fears and deepest secrets. She'd tell James to his face, or not at all.

Self-preservation told her to run and hide. She couldn't be held accountable if she couldn't be found. Silent tears ran down her cheeks. In full-survival mode, this little girl knew

that in order to live you had to be quiet. Mercy groped through the closet. Where was that damn backpack?!

She tugged everything off the shelf over her head. An avalanche of self-help books and letters fell on her head. The letters spilled their contents like gut-wounded soldiers. They shocked Mercy back to reality. She was *not* a child. She would *not* hide under the bed. He was *not* coming to get her. James was *not* her father.

In the sunny bedroom, Mercy screamed out loud. She screamed at the father who killed her childhood. She screamed at her ineffectual mother who had lived inside a bottle until she died at the kitchen table. She screamed at her own child self. Mercy couldn't keep quiet any longer. It was time to tell.

She needed to tell James what had happened in Nashville. What her school years had been like before that. She had to tell him. She didn't know if she could. She trembled to think what his reaction would be.

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Mercy stood in the visiting room, controlled her breathing. It was time to get a grip. Her auburn hair was sprayed into perfection. Her makeup came out of a Clinique ad. Her posture was straight. Her Chanel suit was defined by starched-sharp creases. She opened her eyes, narrowed her focus, kept her thudding heart at bay, and refused to pass out. She sang under her breath to herself. *All things either good or ungood. And the mercy seat is waiting. And I think my head is burning. And in a way I'm yearning. To be done with all this measuring of truth. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. And anyway, I told the truth.* She sang to soothe herself, never considering the lyrics in the context of a prison waiting room, in the context of her life.

A guard led James into the room. The sight of him nearly broke her resolve. He rubbed his wrist where the cuffs had bit into his skin. He walked to her haltingly and sat rigid as if caught in crosshairs. Mercy flinched in response to his obvious hostility. She touched her hair, picked at her manicured cuticles, squared her shoulders, leaned in to kiss his cheek. “Hah, Sugah,” she choked out. Even after years of living up North, she still slipped into a drawl when she was nervous. Her anxiety grew with the sounds of those missing R’s.

“Hello, Mercy.”

“I asked for a longer visitation,” she offered.

“We might not need the extra time,” he replied quietly.

Mercy tugged at her shirt, revealed the top of a tattoo. “I can’t show you the whole thing, it goes down too far. When I’m done I want to know how you knew about it. I need to tell you how I left Georgia. You already know how I found my momma dead and that my father got even meaner after that,” Mercy started. She sat on the plastic chair bolted to the floor. This room always reminded her of a tacky airport. She forced herself to look into his eyes before she continued.

“I spent most nights hiding from my father. My mother drank to get away from him. He’d beat her unconscious, if momma wasn’t drunk enough to tolerate his touch. He terrorized her, throwing his folding knife at her feet while she was cooking, beating her for *wasting* money on food if the booze ran out. He’d finish with her, then come a-howling after me. One night, when I was 10 or so, momma had a bowl of strawberries sitting on the kitchen table. That’s what set him off that night. He was allergic to strawberries. She knew that and brought them home anyhow. It was a bad night. I hid under the bed listening to her screams. Under the bed, I found a play dough can full of hundred dollar bills. It was my mother’s money, earned on that lumpy mattress,

hidden from my father, and then forgotten about in a drug haze.” Mercy tugged on the silver locket she wore at her throat.

James absorbed the story, not judging or interpreting. He listened without moving. He didn’t speak. He listened to what Mercy said and what she left unsaid.

Mercy had to remember to breathe. Breathe in. Breathe out.

“I had to get away. I hid that money until I was brave enough to buy myself a bus ticket to New York,” Mercy toyed with her silver hoop earrings as she spoke. Her voice seemed loud in her own head, but it was hard to hear as the visiting room buzzed with 20 other conversations. James leaned in, rested his elbows on his knees.

“I was on that bus forever. From Vidalia to New York takes thirty-eight hours, and thirty-two minutes,” Mercy straightened her cuffs. Her hand brushed the person sitting behind her as she adjusted her hair. The movement sent a drift of strawberry-scented air. James bit his tongue and kept his eyes from going wide. Mercy adjusted the strap of her Manolo shoes.

“I took one look outside the Broadway & Exchange station in New York and got right back on the bus. Twenty-five hours later I got to Nashville. God bless Greyhound.

“I spent that long ride looking up words in my dictionary. It was my prized possession. I looked up the word ‘mercy’ on that bus to Nashville. I don’t know why I hadn’t thought to look it up earlier,” Mercy tugged the locket again in apprehension. “You know, a lot of people use mercy when they really mean *pity* or *tolerance* or something.”

In a proper classroom voice, Mercy quoted from memory, “Mercy – refraining from inflicting punishment or pain on an offender or enemy who is in one’s power.”

“Who had ever shown mercy *to me*? Not the parents who gave me this stupid name, that’s for sure. I threw the dictionary in the trash at our next stop.” The silver chain snapped.

“Nashville was a new start for me.” She never noticed the locket as it dropped to the floor. James reached for the charm, but stopped short. Visitors are not allowed to pass anything to prisoners. He put his hand up in a gesture of surrender, telling the guards that things were cool. Mercy took his gesture as a sign of disbelief.

“I sketched out a heart, protected by thorns, and a banner in the middle with mercy written on it – not for my name, but as a plea for mercy from the universe.” She nervously jiggled her foot, kicking the locket under her chair.

“I got this tattoo the minute I got off the bus. It was 8 o’clock or some ridiculous hour. I walked into the first shop I found. A heart tattooed over my own heart – I was going for irony. When the guy asked me what my name was, I knew I couldn’t tell him Mercy. It simply wasn’t my name anymore. It no longer applied to me. That’s how Dave started calling me Mary America – after a character in a book. I tried to find him later, after I left Nashville.

“Wait. I’m getting ahead of the story. Wait. Let me get this part straight, it’s important,” she shuttered. “Things were good. Ah shoulda known something would ruin it.

“Ah was living with Dave, the tattoo artist. Ah turned up pregnant. You know I didn’t have the baby. I was scared that I couldn’t give that child a better life than the hellhole I had.

“I didn’t tell Dave that I was pregnant. It was his baby and I should have said something. But instead I made an appointment. Too bad things never go as planned,” she confided.

“I woke up early. I thought I could get myself back home before Dave woke up. It was still dark outside, the middle of the night really. I went for a drive, too scared to tell the truth, and too scared to look back.”

Mercy looked up to see if James understood what she meant. He was staring - afraid she’d disappear if he looked away. She started scratching a fingernail along the seam of her linen

pants. She hadn't known linen from polyester when she was in Nashville. So many things changed since her days of pancake mountains and tattoos.

“As I drove around town, I saw a hitchhiker. I felt bad for the guy on such a cold morning. He got in, made polite conversation. I was relieved to talk until he pulled a gun out of his coat pocket. He put a second gun in my lap as I drove. His gun had bullets and mine didn't. I didn't have a choice,” Mercy pleaded. James wished the room would go silent. Dave needed to hear this.

“I didn't want to go into the store. The people didn't know that my gun wasn't loaded. I didn't want to go inside. He told me either I went along with the plan or I was dead, either way worked for him. No one seemed to notice how scared I was. It went so fast. He grabbed the money and we were back outside before I knew what was happening. I dropped my gun in the parking lot, trying to get the car door open. He drove us down the road a ways before pulling over. He took the money outta the bag and threw my keys in the ditch,” she paused for a breath, trying to control her voice. Her nails broke the thread of her seam.

“He was so calm. That's what scared me the worst. He left gas money for me if I could find the keys and then go home.

“Then he got out and walked away. I found the keys once the sun came up. I drove myself to the clinic. I didn't know what else to do,” Mercy whispered pitifully. James watched her hands unconsciously travel from the busted seam, to where the necklace had been, up to her hair. She was falling apart before his eyes. He was helpless to stop her disintegration. He nodded for her to continue. There was no turning back now. Where could they go except forward into the darkness of unpleasant, undeniable truth?



“It was late afternoon before they released me, later than I had planned. I ate at a Waffle House and decided I couldn’t go home. I had left the bag with the money in Dave’s car. Maybe he thought it was payment for ruining his life.” Mercy rested her sweating palms against the cold plastic seat. He tried to speak, to swallow, to breathe. She took silence as permission to continue.

“I used the last of my play dough money to move here and get my realtor license. I swore I was done running away. This time I was going to do it right: a good job, some decent clothes, a little self-respect. It was time to grow up.”

James wanted to comfort her. He almost tried to hush her and wipe the tears away. Instead, he sat there mute, arms folded across his chest. He wondered what Dave thought of this polished Mercy, unraveled and crying her heart out for the memory of him

“Ah was a-fixin’ to call Dave, but what would I say? Sorry wasn’t enough - he wouldn’t have agreed to the abortion. I couldn’t explain why I ran away. By the time I tried to reach him, I couldn’t find him. He’s probably got a family now, kids of his own playing in a big backyard,” tears rolled down her cheek. She wiped at them, smudging her eyeliner.

James lost the argument against himself, no longer able to play the hard ass. He reached for her hand. He needed to feel her skin, her heat. Her.

The inmate behind Mercy stood up abruptly. Guards immediately pulled weapons and took combat stances. The troublemaker was face down on the floor in seconds. James stood up to shield Mercy. She couldn’t see anything except batons thrashing someone in prison greens.

A guard ushered visitors to an opposite door, into a hallway, outside to the cold sunlight between the prison and the visitor check in. Another guard moved James toward a door. He turned back, shook his head good-bye. “What now,” Mercy said to herself. “What will I do now?”

“What now,” James thought to himself.

“What will I do now,” Dave echoed. He had heard Mary’s story – Mercy’s story. She had brushed her hand against him while she fidgeted. She had unconsciously passed her locket to him under the seat. He had picked it up in the confusion, held it under his tongue until they returned to the cell. She hadn’t recognized him. He almost hadn’t recognized her.

He believed every word she told James. He wouldn’t have believed a bit of her outrageous story if she had told it to his face. With her halting, pain-filled voice, talking to the man she now loved, Dave believed her. She didn’t defend herself or excuse her actions. He believed her. Where did that leave him now?

He thought there was only one way to make the pieces fit, only one possible version of the story. He hadn’t considered that he wasn’t seeing all the pieces. She hadn’t seen all the pieces either. Of course she hadn’t been able to find him; he was in here, surrounded by cinderblocks and murderous graffiti. She was under the anesthetic when the news broke about the robbery. She was on a bus when the evening news featured his arrest.

She grieved for the fatherhood she had denied him. She hadn’t cheated on him. She hadn’t robbed that convenience store willingly, hadn’t sent him to prison intentionally. He fingered the silver locket. Dave didn’t know if wanted to kill her or kiss her as he sat on the one chair in the cell. She hadn’t cheated on him. That thought just spun through his mind.

This new Mercy, all fancy clothes and cultured voice – she loved James. His version of Mary snapped her gum, talked with food in her mouth, and wore a Jolly Green Giant T-shirt for three days straight. Mercy dressed like a Republican. That woman in the visiting room sold million dollar houses. He doubted her hands still smelled like Misty cigarettes or that her kisses still tasted like peaches and blood.

What happens to the goddess when the priests lose faith? What was he going to do? Dave held out the locket to James.

“What am I going to do with this,” James asked disinterested. He turned toward the window, the only view that didn’t include the toilet or Dave. “You shouldn’t be here. She needs a lawyer. You’ll be out before me, now.”

Dave stared at his hands. It wasn’t that easy. They couldn’t just ask Mercy to turn herself in for the robbery and exonerate him from the crime. James didn’t have all the pieces to the puzzle either. “Open the locket,” he said. James slid a fingernail along the crease until the locket popped open. No photo, only an inscription that read, “Mercy & Grace.”

“She’s not going to see me,” Dave said while he added more sugar to the cooling coffee. “She’s not the woman I knew in Nashville. She doesn’t look the same or sound the same. She’s your fiancée now. A judge would order a new trial, not dismiss my charges. She’d stand trial for the hold up. A jury won’t believe that story and won’t look kindly on all these years before she came forward.”

“Bullshit,” James said. He closed the locket.

“Think it out,” Dave scolded. “She goes to court. The jury convicts her of armed robbery and fleeing. She gets 15? Maybe 20. You’re getting out in a few months. Are you going to wait 20 years with that ring in your pocket? She’ll be an animal by the time they let her out. She’s not coming out of a bid like that still smelling like strawberry shampoo, dancing in the kitchen while the bread bakes. She won’t let you wait – not when she finds out that I sat behind her while she told you the story. She’ll quit you in a heartbeat when she finds out you set it up. No matter what a jury says, she won’t forgive you that,” Dave argued between bites of honey bun smeared with peanut butter. Sugar helped him think.

“I know what comes next,” Dave admitted. “Don’t ever tell her that I’m in here. She thinks I ran off to some storybook ending with a wife and two kids on a swing set. She didn’t cheat on me. I knew her heart after all,” Dave drained the last of the coffee sludge.

“I’m short here. I’ll do this time and put it behind me. Your plans fall apart if you tell her,” Dave reasoned.

“You don’t get it,” James said with unreasonable decorum. “Do you think I can just call her up tomorrow morning and pretend it’s golden? I can’t sit here, looking at you, knowing she can get you back out on the streets. I’m supposed to ‘unknow’ this shit?” James kept his voice monotone, but his eyes were blazing.

“Her face when she was talking – I’m a fucking consolation prize. He’s just pretending. She might look different, sound different, but she’s still in love with you. I’m second best to her memories of you. I can’t marry someone who still loves a ghost. I won’t,” James resolved. “She needs to know you’re here. She deserves that. You can’t decide this for her, or for me. I don’t care if you write, or call, or meet with her – but damn it, you’re showing yourself.”

“Remember Mar- Mercy telling how she threw her dictionary away,” Dave probed. “How she wasn’t going to be called Mercy anymore? When I tattooed that banner across her chest, I didn’t know it was her fucking *name*. I thought she was, like, claiming to have mercy. Like an ideal she was hoping for,” he said. “She was looking for mercy, waiting for the world to live up to her name.”

“You might marry her,” he conceded. “I’m not going to allow her ending up here. This is the ‘mercy’ she needs,” Dave growled. “I’ve got the chance here and now,” he proclaimed. “She’s still my Mary America. I am her mercy now.”