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Emaline searches the sky for storm clouds from the doorway of the Victoria Inn. The man snoring at her feet grunts, rolls over, and curls himself around an upturned bottle of whisky. She picks up her skirt, steps over him on to the porch. Can't predict the weather this time of year. Fools even the wild flowers. Mistake three days of sunshine for the start of May when one hard freeze will snap the petals right off and kill the early batch of mosquitoes already swarming.

Across the road, the chapel's canvas roof sags like wet clothes on a line. It won't take another snow like the last. Klein promised to fix the damn thing, but he's probably knee-deep in the creek with the rest of them. It's no wonder nobody in these parts has struck pay dirt yet, what with their canvas tents and frame cabins so easy to desert. Why would the earth give up its gold just to be abandoned on rumour of another strike? The soil is a shrewd old whore and has learned better than to give her gold for free.

A person should have a solid foundation, Emaline always says, some sort of permanence in her life, a place for luck to grow. That's why she's insisting on having the chapel finished. Nothing establishes a place like inviting God to stay. She

imagines a tidy steeple with a sensible wooden cross, a simple oak pulpit and rows of sober pews. No stained glass. No gaudy ornamentation. Save that for the Baptists who mistake the sound of their own voices for the word of God. Behind the chapel she pictures a cemetery with graves surrounded by white picket fences to keep souls from drifting. Emaline is tired of drifting. That's how she thinks of it; not pioneering, certainly not running, but drifting. True, Motherlode isn't much to look at. Not yet. But she has a feeling about the place; call it intuition.

The ravine walls stand at attention on either side of her valley and the cedars that brush the rim are a feathered fringe in the glare of the afternoon sun. A movement up the road catches her eye. She squints to see better.

'Preacher,' she says. The man at her feet grunts but doesn't move. Emaline nudges him with her toe. 'John.' She kicks him harder. Another grunt. 'Goddamnit, John! Wake your sorry ass up and look down the road.'

She reaches under him with her toe, lifts with all her might, and John rolls sideways down the steps to land in a stupor at the bottom. A stocky black man steps out of the building behind her and stares in the direction of Emaline's gaze.

'T'ain't no one but Randall, missus. And his mule.'

'I can see who it is, Jed.' But her shoulders slump and she lets out a breath, slowly, hoping Jed won't notice. 'And don't be calling me no missus.'

Jed crosses his arms in front of him and places his hand to his chin, a common posture for him. It's hard to tell whether he's deep in thought or simply hiding a smile. Emaline sits down, knees apart on the steps above Preacher John and glares back at Jed.

'Whatever you say, Miss Emaline,' he says, retreating into the building just as another, smaller figure appears around the mass of manzanita marking the edge of Motherlode.

* * *

‘Randall, I tell you,’ says Emaline, ‘if God ordered wine on Sunday you’d bring it a week later Monday.’

‘Now, Emaline,’ says the muleteer. His beard hangs to his waist and the tobacco stain blooming about his lips is the only way she can locate exactly where the whiskers end and his mouth begins. ‘You know I can’t make the wagon come. Sacramento ain’t no closer now than it were a year ago – ’less you want me to come without the molasses and the mail.’

Preacher John moans at her feet. She nudges him with her toe for no other reason than to remind him she’s here. Sober on Sundays, he’d said. At least he’s that, sober on Sundays. She shakes her head and is happy to let Randall believe this gesture is meant for him. She heaves herself from the steps and Randall stumbles back, regains himself. The mule behind haws its pleasure, or displeasure – hard to tell with mules – and the sound ricochets off the ravine walls and falls below the squawk of the scrub jays.

‘Dangerous work I’m doing,’ says Randall. He rubs his toe in the dirt. He spits. The mule brays again, louder this time. ‘Man’s – A man’s gotta be careful, take his time.’

‘Careful? How much time you lose playing five-card between Sac’ town and Grass Valley?’ She’s yelling now above the mule and she can see its ears rotating, its neck straining to look behind.

‘Ah hell, Emaline.’

‘Ah hell, nothin’ . . .’ Her voice trails off. She pinches her eyes to slits, thrusts her neck forward to see what the mule sees.

‘Who are you?’ Emaline says. The mule goes quiet.

The stranger shifts under his load, pulls his duster hat low as if he could hide there beneath it, as if my piss-poor eyes can see anything but his shape anyway, she thinks. She can see that he’s small. Narrow shoulders, his pack just about as wide as his whole back, his trousers and flannel draping over

him like they have only bone to cling to. She's known too many men to judge this one's threat by his size.

'Randall?' she asks.

'Hell if I know.' He shrugs, but seems content that he is no longer her focus.

The mule's ears rotate as if it too is waiting for a response, and the stranger seems to shrink down inside of himself in a way that raises the hairs on the back of Emaline's neck. The mule shifts its weight foot to foot, shakes its halter.

'I'm talking to you! Who are you?' Emaline charges forward and the mule rears its ornery self, eyes wild as if she'd struck the damn thing. Packages jar from the animal's back and slap the ground. Some burst open and precious flour thickens the air and powders the red mud of the road. Randall's beard trails behind him as he hustles after the frenzied animal, tripping in a wake of pinto beans and hollering, 'Goddamn you, Contrary Julie!' Red-speckled hens poke their heads round the side of the inn, pick up their skirts and run towards the mess of oats and beans. Scrub jays descend in blue streaks to scold and scratch. Emaline bustles about the muddy road, shooing chickens, flailing at jays, salvaging what she can: a sack of potatoes, a side of salt pork. By the time she charges back to the stranger she's sweated clean through her dress. At least, she thinks, catching her breath, at least he's seen fit to pick up a sack of flour. He holds it there like a shield between them.

'I suppose you can pay for these goods?' No response. Up the road, beyond the grove of manzanita, the echoes of a braying mule and a swearing man do battle. 'I don't take credit nor scrip, and – Look at me.' Small black eyes peek out beneath the duster hat. 'And I ain't here to nursemaid no runaway mamma's boy. Your name, if you got one?'

But his mouth pops closed. Flour sifts from his shoulders as he rummages in a small pouch at his waist.

‘Alex?’ he says, but it sounds like a question, a question she forgets when he holds out what looks to be a gold coin, San Francisco mint – double eagle, no less. The potatoes thump to the ground. She snatches the coin. Such a pleasing weight, twenty dollars. She gives it a bite, finds herself softening.

‘Well, Alex,’ she says, placing the coin in her dress pocket, patting it twice, ‘you got the voice of a choirboy.’

‘Haven’t got a sign up yet,’ says the woman, closing the door firmly behind her. Her voice fills every inch of space her body leaves open and she moves with an agility surprising and a little frightening in such a large woman. ‘But that’s what I call her – the Victoria Inn.’

She thumps the pork and potatoes on a plank table, or rather a series of tables held as one by a grubby cloth. Alex follows suit with the sack of flour and a puff of white escapes.

‘Victoria, like the Queen,’ the woman says. She dusts her hands on her apron and motions with her head to the water-stained portrait of a crowned woman on the opposite wall. Two windows of distorting mason glass offer the only light in the room and the painting’s features are indistinct. The face of a youthful older woman, Alex thinks, or an aged young woman, with round cheeks to match her chin.

A ramshackle bar traverses one corner and three-legged stools are scattered about. It smells of alcohol, yeast and strong burnt coffee, and Alex’s stomach grumbles with hunger, clearly not the response the woman is waiting for.

Emaline puffs a curl from her eyes. It catches in the frizzy halo framing her angular face. She turns on her heel and charges up the stairwell into a shaft of hallway light without pausing to see if Alex follows. She stops by one of eight doors in the narrow corridor, her hand on the latch, and squints in

the same probing manner she used on the muleteer, the scowl on her face made deeper by crease lines like poorly healed scars.

Alex pulls the duster hat low, makes an effort to look aloof, would have spit as the muleteer had done if they hadn't been inside.

No one, yet, has taken her for a girl. No one, yet, has looked this closely.

'You're from where, you say?'

Alex hadn't said, and is so relieved by the question she fails to answer.

'That's a question,' says the woman.

'Pennsylvania.'

'Don't talk much, do you?'

Alone in the room, the darkness is complete and endless, even as Alex feels the closeness of the walls, the low ceiling. Little by little her eyes adjust and the corners of the room take shape. The bed smells sharply of cedar. The only other furniture is a three-legged stool resting at a slant on the uneven floorboards. There is no window, no need for curtains; a single candle burnt nearly to the nub sits on the floor by the bed. The woman's heavy steps descend the stairs. Victoria, like the Queen, Alex thinks, and sees again the whitewash peeling down the inn's face, the unpainted balusters, the ornamental balcony propped precariously over the porch. She eases down to draw a line in the dust with her finger. A few days is all she needs, to rest, to think.

How far had she come since stepping off the steamer into the frenzied chaos of the Marysville docks? Was it only three days ago that she'd stood there on the river bank amidst that sea of canvas sacks, barrels and boxes? Delicate chairs, end tables and bookshelves looked out of place perched alongside kegs of black powder, stacks of picks and shovels, piles of hydraulic tubing coiled like earthworms. Alex pulled her

duster hat low, avoiding the eyes of the men scurrying back and forth, hauling skeins of fabric and barrels of whisky. She wanted to be back on the boat, surrounded by the hissing blast of steam and the clank of pistons, away from cursing muleteers and braying donkeys and important-looking men dressed in black. But after Marysville the river split in two, the Feather shooting north, the Yuba branching east, both too rough for riverboats.

Alex followed the Yuba because it sounded foreign and far away from San Francisco, because those men she had seen on the boat – lawmen, perhaps, with their trimmed moustaches, their pressed black trousers – were heading north. She'd joined the line of wagons rolling east, kept her head low, spoken to no one, and stopped briefly at a shanty store on the edge of town. It was here she'd learned of her need for boots.

'Best there is,' the merchant claimed, stroking the blackened leather with an arm that ended in a rounded stump of flesh. As he spoke, he gestured with the arm, as if forgetting his fingers were gone. 'Made special for a colonel. Small man – they all are. Killed by Comanche, 'fending women and children. For you, forty dollars. Boy don't deserve boots like this. A man's boots. War hero's . . .'

Gaps in the wall behind him let in streamers of light and the roof shuddered with every gust of wind.

'The hell kinda shoes are those? You steal 'em off your mama's feet? Won't last the week. Not half a week,' said the merchant. His cackle turned to a cough. Alex stepped back.

'Wait now, thirty dollars then,' said the man. 'Can't believe I'm saying it – three kids and a wife back home . . .'

He bowed his head, rubbed his salt-and-pepper beard with his good hand. 'Should just save 'em for my son, but with his one leg, won't do much good, see.'

Alex said nothing, fearing the high pitch of her voice. She shook her head no, turned to leave.

‘Goddamn! Goddamn, twenty dollars,’ said the merchant, dangling the boots from his stump by the laces.

She had rested in thickets, when she rested at all, and followed the twisted path of the Yuba to Rough and Ready, a town whose citizens had looked both rough and ready for all manner of mischief, staring openly at any passers-by as if assessing their worth. Here she bought a loaf of bread and a gold pan from what could have been the same grizzled merchant, apart from the missing arm. She put the bread in her pack and the pan under her arm as if it strengthened her disguise, as if gold had been the reason she’d come to California, as if, when she turned off on to a narrow road to the north-east, she was confident of a destination.

The land became steeper, the earth darkened to an iron red. Lonely scrub oaks in tall grass had long since given way to ferns and evergreens; the towering pines pinched off the sky and on the crest of every hill she found the gleaming teeth of the Sierra Nevadas growing larger, more menacing. By the time the trail split again – one tail coiling its way towards those mountains, the other dipping down into a valley – her legs were quivering protest with every step, her feet throbbed, her shoulders ached. All of her bread was eaten, her canteen empty, and the coil of smoke snaking its way from the valley floor called to her above the distant murmur of running water and the coughing protest of a donkey.

The gold pan in her pack clangs against the floor as she sits. She frees herself from the straps, rolls her shoulders front to back. Her leg muscles have already begun to tighten, but her body feels numb, distant – as foreign as the river she’d followed. She pulls her shirtsleeves to her elbows, straightens her arms in front of her to find the bruises there mere

smudges in the dim light. As if a bit of soap and water could wash them clean, she thinks, but she doesn't touch them. She doesn't touch the knots on her lower back or just below her collarbone. She can feel her heartbeat pounding in the blisters on her feet. She loosens her bootlaces, peels away the woollen sock. The skin of her heel is pregnant with white fluid, but disappointingly intact. She wants blood, proof of pain.

Below, a door opens and closes, and male voices seep through the floorboards.

'Alex,' she says to herself. The voice of a choirboy. She pulls her chin into her neck, scrunching her vocal cords. 'Alex,' she says again, and is still practising when a black man sticks his head through the door.

'You don't come now, it'll be gone. They ain't fixin' to wait for you.'

Downstairs, she finds herself trapped by the eyes of eight men hunched around the plank table, their expressions masked by facial hair and layers of dirt. The black man sits down opposite the head, but no one seems the least surprised by his boldness. The only sound is heavy breathing and the silence pricks the hairs on her arms. She tries to sit and finds a muddy boot planted on the only unoccupied stool. The owner's beard is yellow and a twisted smirk reveals teeth of the same colour.

A giant oak of a man to Muddy Boots's right lets out a long curving whistle that rises upward to the low-beam ceiling and spills in a puddle on the floor. The kitchen door bangs open and the woman bustles through with a large iron pot.

'Look out,' she says, brushing Alex aside, and slams the pot on the table. Muddy Boots moves his feet.

'You need an invitation?' she asks. Alex sits, feels her cheeks flush hot.

‘All right, Preacher,’ says the woman.

‘Dearly Beloved,’ says a dark-haired man with just a hint of whisky in his voice. He stands, as if it just occurred to him to do so, and runs his hands up and down his flannel. His eyeballs search for words beneath his lids and his hands clasp so tightly his knuckles show white. ‘We are gathered here today, Lord, to thank you for your wondrous bounty.’

‘Cept when it comes to gold,’ says a baritone to Alex’s right; the whistler, she thinks. A low chuckle catches, then dies. She bows her head, but lets her eyes dart to the pot mid-table. A large round loaf of bread sweats under a cloth and she begs her stomach silent.

‘And lead us not into temptation, Lord. No, lead us far from temptation, our Father who art in heaven. We hallow thy name, giving glory, Lord. Thanks for health, we ask for wealth. Hallelujah, let’s eat.’

Preacher’s plate is half empty before Alex is allowed to scrape the bottom of the iron pot for the last chunks of rabbit stew. What bread there was has already been snatched.

‘Don’t get used to it, boys,’ says Emaline. Her tone is thick with disappointment, and men pause mid-chew to listen. ‘Be cinching our belts by the end of the week, thanks to our new friend here.’

The serving spoon and nine faces point in Alex’s direction. Alex looks down at her plate. Alex chews. She has to tell herself to do these things.

‘But damned if he ain’t offered to buy drinks all round to make up for it!’

‘Attaboy, son,’ says the baritone and slaps her on the back, propelling the chunk of rabbit meat across the table and into the bowl of a beardless man with expressionless grey eyes. A drooping auburn moustache curtains his thin lips and frames his cleft chin.

‘No forgiveness like whisky. Ain’t that right, Preacher?’

The baritone stands, nearly brushing his head on the cross-beam. A grin fills his face. Alex flinches, afraid there's another slap coming, good-natured though the first one seemed. The moustache man fishes with both fingers for Alex's meat in his stew. His eyes flit to Alex and away.

'Don't think we've been properly introduced,' the baritone says. 'Mighty hard to be polite on an empty stomach, you know. No excuse, mind you, but the truth. I 'spect you met Preacher John yonder, but don't ask him to remember it. The one-eyed fella next to you is Micah Daniels, also a resident here at the Victoria. Owns a sore excuse for a general store and assay office just down the walk. Claims he can figure fine, but you watch him careful when he's weighing your gold. Been known to lighten the load some, yah know what I mean, and grows his fingernails long enough to get two dollars in one pinch of gold dust.'

'Harry Reynolds there lives in the first cabin as you come into town, along with good Mr Fred Henderson, self-proclaimed expert on rocks, animals, plants and all things natural. Next to him is our German friend Klein, master builder and jack-of-all-trades – when he feels like doing 'em. Got no other name, so don't go asking him. Just Klein. You met Jed –' he nods to the black man – 'and Emaline; Miss Emaline, if you know what's good for you.'

'My name is Samson Limpkin, but most call me Limpy on account of, well, let's say a crooked limb. And the man you so graciously shared your stew with –' he nods to the moustache man – 'is my cousin, David Trellona, fresh out of Cornwall and thinkin' he knows more about mining than those Empire folks over in Grass Valley. Why work like a dog for some other man? Aye, Dave. Why indeed?'

Limpky takes a swig from his cup, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, and with the same hand points at Muddy Boots, still bent over his bowl as if intent on ignoring him.

‘And that there is John Thomas. Not much on manners, but . . . well, not much on anything.’

‘Damn you, Limpy,’ says Muddy Boots, his mouth full of food.

Alex can feel the big man’s breath down her neck. He pulls a gold pouch from his pocket, holds it like an egg in the palm of his hand.

‘And you are . . .?’ Limpy asks.

The curve of Emaline’s brow, the curl of her lips, tells Alex these men know very well the name she gave.

‘A simple question, son,’ says Limpy. ‘Name?’

Men lean forward, listening, and names and faces swim as mismatched pairs through Alex’s mind. She pulls her head into her neck, says as deeply as she can manage:

‘Alex.’

‘Hah!’ says Limpy, his paw slamming down again, this time square on her back, forcing all the air from her chest. ‘Eighteen, my ass. Who said eighteen? John Thomas, trying to hide? Alex what?’

‘Shee-it,’ says Micah, thumping a small pouch of gold on the table and giving Alex a close look at the concave indentation of skin where his left eye should be.

‘Why thank you, Micah. Alex what?’ Limpy asks again. Outside, a scrub jay screams the sun down.

‘Ford?’ Alex says, hearing the doubt in her own voice. Emaline’s arms cross before her and her eyes narrow to slits, but Limpy doesn’t seem to notice.

‘Alex Ford,’ he says. ‘Solid name. No more than sixteen, if that. Pay up.’ Leather pouches thump on the table. ‘Pay up, John Thomas,’ says Limpy.

‘Now just hold on a goddamn minute,’ John Thomas says, his fair skin turning the red of Micah’s empty eye socket. ‘I’ll pay you later.’

‘My ass.’

‘Hell yes, your ass – you calling me a liar?’

‘Both of you better sit yourselves right back down,’ says Emaline, barely raising her voice. ‘Y’all know I don’t permit no gambling at the dinner table. And you, Alex –’ the serving spoon again jabs her direction – ‘finish up so I can get to getting done with dinner.’

With the plank tables separated, the room feels smaller, cluttered. The ramshackle bar at the far end of the room now dominates, the counter lined with tin cups and a few glass canning jars, and now the elbows of Limpy and the one-eyed Micah. Bloated whisky jugs on shelves behind the bar are blurred in the orange lamplight and look, to Alex, like a row of rotund women. Several card games are already in progress when Alex eases her way up the stairs.

‘Hey,’ says Emaline, pushing through the kitchen door. She thumps a stool down next to her own. ‘Stick a while.’

And something, the weight of her filling that doorway, or the calm authority in her voice, triggers an old habit of obedience. Alex sits, but remains above on the stairwell with her chin tucked into her knees. She hadn’t liked the suspicious glances the woman had been casting through dinner. She prays the woman’s eyes are as poor as they seem.

‘Whatever suits you,’ says Emaline, dismissing her with a wave of the hand.

‘Scuse me, gents, Emaline . . .’ Limpy’s voice and body rise as one from the bar and the saloon goes silent. ‘A toast. To Alex and his gentle way with mules. May his way with women be less costly, but just as exciting!’

He tips his glass, leads a collective swallow, motions to Jed to fill his cup again. ‘Now don’t you dare smile there, Alex, don’t.’ Alex does not feel like smiling, makes no attempt to smile. Six coins left, she thinks. She’d felt so rich with twelve.

‘And speaking of costly,’ says Limpy, downing the next glass, ‘how ’bout it Emaline? Nearly hit it today. Sho’ ’nough pay dirt. Pay you double price. I say I’ll pay you double, tomorrow –’

‘Now hold on there, Limp. You know the woman doesn’t take credit, and I’m a hell of a lot prettier than you anyway – and richer,’ says Micah, winking his one eye.

‘The hell –’

‘And I can hold my liquor.’

Alex is only vaguely aware of what they’re saying. The rest of their banter is lost beneath the groan of the accordion in the corner – a tune that just might be ‘The Old Oaken Bucket’ or ‘Clementine’, or a wobbly combination of the two – and as if called by this racket, miners begin to trickle into the saloon. No less than thirty, if she had a head to count, and she doubts whether some of those mud-stained canvas pants and holey flannels had ever been, or would ever be washed. It would certainly ease the competing stench of rotting canvas, stale tobacco, whisky. The men lean on the bar and against the walls and against each other. They swear and laugh with their mouths wide open, chew plugs of tobacco, smoke cob pipes, and soon the air is thick and yellow. Their hands stroke leather pouches of gold dust, arrange and rearrange dog-eared playing cards, fiddle with the worn visors of discoloured hats and punctuate speech with herky-jerky movements in the air. To Alex they are a collection of parts, of hands, feet and hats, interchangeable with a few exceptions: John Thomas; the big man, Limpy; the black man, Jed; one-eyed Micah; the moustache man, David, whose broad-angled shoulders give him a stocky compact appearance next to Limpy, even as he tops Micah by inches.

And there, sitting apart from the rest by the kitchen door, is Emaline. In her lap, a pair of trousers, needle, thread. Her fingers are busy, but she glances down only so often at her work.

Her weight is not so much the round softness of other women Alex has known, or the wire sinew of her gran. Emaline is solid, with wide, square shoulders and thick vein-tracked forearms. A fringe of dark hair feathers her upper lip. Her only softness appears to be her generous bosom that strains the front of her dress like mounds of rising sourdough. Emaline's hands work the cloth. Deft, confident movements, and Alex finds her fingers moving of their own accord, with life and memory of their own.

She forces her hands to fists, stuffs them in her pockets. Gran, too, could sew by feel alone, her fingers unconscious of themselves and of the bent-wire body to which they were attached. Gran was never so patient with Alex as she was with cloth. 'After three boys,' she liked to say, 'three foolish, foolish boys, God at least could have given me a proper granddaughter.'

Proper, Alex thinks. What would Gran think of her now, after all she's seen? After what she's done? She rises unnoticed, climbs the stairs. Thigh muscles catch and pull with every step. She slips across the hallway and closes the door of the dark little room behind her.

Mountain lion, Emaline thinks, and close by. She curses and grabs the shotgun by the bed. It won't be the first time she's been roused in the middle of the night to protect those damn chickens. Bothersome old biddies, scratching through the leaves all day, dining on leftovers. Women should be valued so much and paid so well for their monthly cycles. A dozen eggs brought her five dollars on Tuesday, more than that big-mouthed Limpy and his cousin David made together digging in the mud all day.

She hears the scream again – high-pitched, like a woman – and hurries out of her bedroom door. The hall is morning dark, but Emaline has memorized the irregularities in the floorboards like the lines of her mother's

face. She knows the sound of Micah's high nasal snoring escaping from the second room on her right. She'd thrown him out at midnight and listened while he clumped down the hall in unlaced boots. They never spent the night, her boys. She refuses to do business after midnight. They all know it by now and don't even grumble when she lights the lantern and hands them their boots. Grumbling costs extra.

She offers a product in limited supply in these parts, which is one of the reasons she moved to this little mud-hole town in the first place. Too much competition in the cities. Younger women, girls really, with exotic slanting eyes, or skin of rich amber – girls with pliant rubber bodies, born with their legs wide open. They monopolize the market. They work cheap, happy to sell themselves on street corners. Or they work for someone else, leasing their bodies for a fancy costume, a place to stay and a tiny fraction of the price paid. Emaline is not cheap. She is experienced. She has the touch and can tell what a man needs by the length of his stride, the angle of his grin, the shape of the erection through his trousers. Her callused, muscled hands transform from tough and insistent to feather-soft, almost tender, and she knows that in the dark she is more beautiful than any of those city ladies.

She's halfway down the stairs when she hears the scream again, above her this time. Her arm hairs stand straight. The snoring stops, sputters, then begins again, softer. She grips the gun with white knuckles. She eases up the stairs. The hall is empty. She creeps on. Her ears twitch. A soft, high murmur from the first room. She opens the door. It whines.

Young Alex is lying tangled in his quilts. His head is thrashing back and forth, and pellets of sweat roll down his forehead. Emaline eases the gun to the floor, folds her arms in front of her and watches.

In the hallway, a floorboard creaks. Arms encircle Emaline's waist. A fuzzy head rests on her shoulder.

'Should we wake him?' Jed whispers in her ear.

'No,' she says. 'Better to deal with demons in sleep.'

She closes the door and follows Jed back to her room.

2

Alex wakes to an empty cocoon of darkness, oblivious to all but the steady thump of her heart, the coarse wool blanket twining around her legs, hot breath against the skin of her arm. Last night she'd smelled bourbon, woke herself screaming. But for a moment she lingers in the pleasant fog of half sleep. For a moment there is no morning, no dreaming, no smell but the musk of her own sweat. There is only her pulse pounding at her temple, only the sheet beneath her head, and now unmistakably, unforgivably, the need to pee. She stands too fast, steadies herself against the wall. Her hair sticks out at all angles, perpendicular to her head, and she smashes the duster hat over the mess, stumbles to where she remembers the door to be and flings it open to the shock of sunlight.

Emaline's voice meets her at the stairwell.

'You heard me, John. You want, I'll yell in your good ear and pull your left right off your head, I will, preacher or no.'

Her wide frame is bent at the waist over Preacher, spread-eagled in the middle of the doorway. She holds a whisky jug by its eyelet and Preacher's red eyes follow its bobbing movement. He mumbles a response and she raises the jug high above her head.

‘I don’t care what the Lord tells you to do,’ says Emaline. ‘You get drunk on my whisky, you pay for it.’

Every bone, every muscle of Alex’s body is stiff. She tiptoes down the stairs, bent like an old woman, clutching her pack to her chest to quiet the metallic jangle of the gold pan against the canteen. She pulls her hat low over her eyes, but this does nothing to prevent the last step from moaning beneath her.

‘Well,’ says Emaline, ‘if it ain’t our newest prospector.’

With her hands on her hips, Emaline is as wide as the doorway.

‘You missed breakfast,’ she says, and moves aside. Alex squeezes past her, steps over Preacher and out the door.

The outhouse squats forty yards beyond the inn. Alex crouches over the wooden hole, careful not to wiggle and get splinters. She holds her breath against the smell. Flies knock themselves against the walls. A wasp makes circles near the ceiling as though anchored with a string and Alex watches, glorying in that blessed release when a branch snaps. Her bladder freezes. A shadow blocks the slices of sunlight piercing the open spaces in the plank walls. Something slides beneath the door. A newspaper? No, a magazine: *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, the same Gran read, sometimes aloud in her high north-eastern rasp, pointing out details of different fashions and pooh-poohing the poems. ‘All trying to be clever. Just say what needs said,’ she’d say. Or, if she really liked a poem, ‘Bunch of foolish fancy, that one.’

All but two of the newsprint pages have been torn out. On the cover a woman with hollow eyes smiles primly. She wears a dark gown embroidered with grey flowers. The sleeves are long, ballooning slightly at the wrists, and the corseted waist tapers to a triangle, cutting the woman into two halves. The skirt billows like a napkin doily, the layers of petticoats beneath forming a womb-like vase of fabric, accentuating the very region they profess to protect.

‘Hogwash,’ Gran would say. ‘One for her hips, one for her husband and one for the Holy Ghost. If a woman can’t keep her peace with three petticoats, she won’t do with ten.’

She looked at Alex when she said this, as though imparting some great knowledge. Alex could only nod, never quite sure what ‘keeping the peace’ entailed; she suspected it had something to do with walking slowly and with ‘proper reservation’. Gran wasn’t one to be questioned or contradicted, especially on her topic of expertise: women. She spoke in a removed manner of confident authority, as though age had absolved her of the vices of womanhood, leaving her only with the burden of virtue to pass on to her granddaughter, who, even as a young girl, especially as a young girl, found sitting still and walking slowly the most difficult virtues to master.

From Gran, Alex had learned the true nature of women – deceitful, manipulative, full of the sin of Eve – and she’d wondered more than once what kind of woman her mother had been, wondered if she too had been stricken with a wandering soul. Gran spoke little of Alex’s mother, obviously did not think her worthy of her youngest son, Charles. Alex knew her only as the gold-etched daguerreotype by her bed.

Her mother’s lips, thin and straight. Her mother’s eyes, looking out but seeing nothing. Her body, a thin, flat frame.

Instead, Gran related her own family history as a moral tale. She told of her husband Nicolas, who insisted on fighting and, by Gran’s telling, insisted on dying, in the Battle of New Orleans. Nicolas left her with three sons and no income, apart from her father’s dairy farm, and the boys grew fast and foreign to her, each one following their father’s reckless lead into military life, and eventually military death. Charles left behind baby Alex and a consumptive wife fated to live but

three months longer than her husband. Alex had always understood that her existence was in itself a ‘burden endured’ – had heard it put just this way by Minister Bosworth who, on occasion, was called upon to confirm Gran’s low estimate of female virtue.

‘A girl, from the time she is born, is at battle with her natural inclinations,’ the minister confirmed one day at tea while Peter, his son, made faces at Alex through the living-room window.

Alex had fidgeted in her chair, scowling at Peter and staring past him into the fall day. The leaves were just turning rose-brown. The apples were ripe.

‘She must, growing and through adulthood, quell the evil spirit within her and, by her submissiveness, gain eternal redemption.’

Gran’s head was bowed when the minister said this, and did not see Alex stick out her tongue at Peter.

Alex looks up from the picture, suddenly aware that the shadow is still there. Gran fades into the nitric fumes of the outhouse.

‘It’s not for reading,’ Emaline barks, ‘and you’re welcome.’ Then the shadow is gone.

Alex wads the front cover of the magazine, scrunching the dress, smashing the woman into a mass of crinkled paper. She wipes with the soft inside pages and drops them down the hole. But even as she makes her way along the road to the creek, the model’s hollow eyes take the form of the rough-cut windows of canvas shacks, giving her the disconcerting sensation that the town itself is somehow following her, closer and closer towards the sputtering edge of the creek until the town too is swallowed by the sound of rushing water. She turns to face the silence behind her.

The windows of the frame and canvas cabins are not eyes. The splintered grey walls are not inching closer. The clouds gathering on the lip of the ravine look as if they are brushing

the feathered heads of cedars, but the ravine walls are not collapsing around her. The brown-buttled chickens, worrying their way up the road, scratching for worms and other treasures, ignore her completely. It's only the Victoria Inn, with its ornamental balcony, splintered balusters and peeling whitewash, that reminds her of an old woman's crumbling face.

At the creek the tops of men's heads bob from holes in the ground. They gather beside long wooden sluices, washing soil down hollow slat-lined boxes. Most work silently, adjusting to each other's tempo, and the few that stop to watch as she passes make no effort to speak. Better to keep her feet ahead of her thoughts. Better to fill her senses with California, once a word light with hope. She keeps step with the thump of an axe, pulls her hat to the very bridge of her nose, tries to ignore the blisters pinching the skin of her heel. Biting air fills her lungs. Her aching legs begin to warm and loosen.

Further upstream, the path narrows. Her eyes begin to wander. The overcast sky allows the ravine above the thinnest of shadows, while brambles and thickets form dark impenetrable outgrowths of branches and leaves. Fallen limbs, black with mould, litter the trail. Mushrooms grow from the fermenting dead leaves, and the crevices of lichen-covered rocks. The clank of metal on rock becomes distant. Men's voices are all but swallowed by the rush of water, the squawk of scrub jays. She pauses for breath at a flat outcropping.

She likes the way the valley opens here, offering a shelf of gravel and sand that gives way to a carpet of grass and clover running to the ravine wall. The clearing is buttressed on either side by a twisted thicket of red brush bursting with pale, coin-sized leaves. Black-skinned scrub oaks reach arthritically outward, and above, on the ridge, fir trees stand rigid.

At the creek, a row of rounded boulders protects a calm

enclave of frigid water. She skims her hands across the slippery green skin growing on a rock. She rummages in her pack for the gold pan, past the tin cup, the canteen, the money pouch. How heavy these few belongings had felt, how light she feels now, alone here by the creek. She scoops up a brimming pan of sand and water, remembering the old prospector on the outskirts of Rough and Ready.

FROM \$10 TO RICHES, his sign had read, and beneath it a stack of gold pans rose one on top of the other like tortoise shells. She'd choked down a bite of the old man's barley bread. 'The first fortune is always the hardest, wettest, coldest, meanest son-a-bitch you ever chase,' he said. His voice was a gravel rasp, high-pitched, and in this way reassuring to Alex. Already her shaking hands had stilled some. 'They don't tell you that in those shipping fliers, do they? They don't need to. Gold! That's all they need, save the ink and paper. A man's not bound to read between the lines with a word like that to tempt him.'

He emptied his pipe on the stump next to him and pointed up at her with a finger more bone than skin.

'I see myself in you, is what I'm saying, and I'm telling you it's not as easy as they make it sound, finding gold, getting rich. Nothing is, is it? A man can lose himself in the search – forget anything else ever mattered to him but gold, forget who he was and what he valued 'fore he came. It's a danger, like scurvy – sneak up and take your teeth 'fore you know it.'

He bared a set of blackened incisors, yellow at their roots, but Alex's eyes lingered on the gold pans, and the word *gold* rested there on her shoulder as if it meant to follow her wherever she was going. She found herself reaching for her money pouch, giving the man a coin from her precious stash, though she knew better by now than to put faith in words, even those as shiny as gold. A crooked grin tugged his whiskers as he tucked the coin into his boot.

‘What you do is, you find a likely spot, one that smells rich, like a rusted wheel axle. Hunch down, like this –’ He eased off his stool and bent down to demonstrate, his knees jutting on either side of his shoulders. He mimicked scooping up a pan of soil and water. ‘Then you just rotate it round in a little circle. All in the wrist, see –’ His hands were small and slender with brown sunspots dotting the backs like islands. The crease lines in his hands were mirrored in his face, and a thin white beard was the only trace of hair on his head. He moved the pan in circles. ‘The lighter stuff, sand and such – worthless. That’ll slough off first, so what’s left at the bottom, see, is the black sand, the heavy stuff. And the gold.’ When he stood, the man’s back remained curved like the keel of a boat, and he had to crane his neck to look directly at Alex. ‘Course, most nowadays is using the rocker and long tom, if they don’t want to go down a hole, but thens require at least three to work right. Not long ago, miner by hisself only needed his pan. I know, I was here in ’47 taking gold ’fore anyone know’d the name Cal-i-for-ni-a.’

She takes a deep breath. The smell is organic, cedar bark, fermenting mud and mushrooms. No rust. She rotates her wrists clockwise. Small flecks of white, black, gold and grey swirl in suspension, spilling over the edge of the pan, staining her crotch and the front of her flannel. She sucks in her breath at the chill, dusts off the sand and silt, and bends down again, allowing her knees to jut on either side of her as the old man had done. She scoops less sand this time, less water.

She sets the pan like a boat on the water and watches it float downstream, catches it before it’s swept away. She gives the pan a spin, it twirls like a top, throwing flashes of sunlight into her eyes. She scoops another bit of water and sand, this time angling the pan away. She works slowly, biting the end of her tongue, losing herself in the water and silt. Her fore-

arms burn and she uses the pain to keep her mind from wandering back into memory. The manzanita rustles behind her.

She turns to face the teardrop ears of a doe frozen mid-step. Its tail twitches; its ears rotate, listening. Its pregnant belly is stretched taut. Liquid eyes fix beyond Alex, beyond the end of the clearing. Alex turns to look and the deer, even with her big belly, springs forward in two arching leaps before again halting, motionless.

Alex's ears twitch. Her heart begins to thud. She follows the direction of the doe's gaze to find herself in line with the muzzle of a rifle.

All she can see now is the gun, the tip round and glinting silver, and she thinks, how quickly, how effortlessly they found me, before I even knew where I was going. She rises to her feet and the doe braces to run, every muscle and ligament tense. The gunshot shatters the stillness; the metal whizzes like a breath past her ear. She hears metal strike flesh and flesh thump to the ground, and only now does Alex begin to shake, the instinct to run so strong she is paralysed.

John Thomas leaps from the manzanita grove. 'I got 'em, Jed,' he yells, eyeballing Alex.

'You get 'em?' says Jed, crashing through the brush behind John Thomas.

'I said I got 'em.'

The two men crouch over the body as it slides into death. Its eyes stare, too pained for fright, and Alex can't help but look down where the bullet has pierced the belly. The taut skin has split around the wound and a small, hoofed leg twitches through the hole.

'Cut the throat,' says Jed.

'Be dead in a minute.'

'Cut her now, goddamn it,' says Jed. He grabs his own knife and slashes the doe's throat. Blood surges crimson from its jugular. He stabs the belly and the fawn's leg stills. He

pauses a moment, letting the blood drain, then guts the animal, leaving the rope-like entrails steaming on the grass, and thrusts the small body of the fawn behind him, out of his line of sight, directly in front of Alex.

There are memories here, gathering like flies on the vein-tracked birth-sac.

‘Alex?’ says Jed.

The smell of blood, thick enough to choke her . . .

‘You all right? Alex?’ She opens her eyes. The doe’s legs drape about Jed’s shoulders like a shawl.

‘Nearly cost us the kill,’ says John Thomas.

‘Well now . . .’ says Jed, and then, grunting under the weight, he heads down the trail to town.

‘Don’t know what the hell you’re doing up here anyway. Hey – you deaf?’ says John Thomas, waving his hand in front of her face.

He’s only just taller than her, but far bigger through the shoulders. The pupils of his eyes are no bigger than pinheads. The curl of his lip disgusts her and for a moment it is this man dead on the grass before her, his belly ripped throat to gullet.

‘I hear you,’ she says.

John Thomas steps closer, as if hearing the challenge in her tone, and she’s not so sure he won’t shoot if she runs. She’s not sure if she cares, but finds herself backing away, splashing into the creek. Cold water tugs at the hem of her trousers, soaks through the toes of her boots. John Thomas grins.

‘Claim jumping’s a hanging crime. You ever see a man hanged? No? Dangles there, like a dead fish. Broken neck, if you’re lucky. Quick that way. Don’t cry, though, don’t piss your pants,’ he says, and he aims the rifle at her water-stained crotch. ‘I’d shoot yah if you was to live through the drop. First in the balls. One POP, then the other – POP, POP. And then in the kneecaps –’

‘Then the toes, then the elbows, then the stomach. Seems to me I heard this before sometime, Johnny. Seems to me David, here, has too,’ Limpy hollers. He emerges from the upstream trail and David follows, his shoulders alive with compact energy.

‘Limpy, this ain’t no goddamned business of yours,’ says John Thomas, but the gun falls to his side and Alex steps away.

‘Yours neither, if I remember right,’ Limpy replies.

‘I made this claim four months ago.’

‘And ain’t been back for two. Ten days, Johnny. It’s the law. Right, David?’

David’s large hands strain white around the pick. His nostrils flare. Beneath the upturned brim of his Panama hat, his eyes pierce John Thomas.

‘And don’t try and tell me you was here workin’ this claim all the time, ’cause me and David been by every day and never seen you. You ain’t even staked it.’

Limpy winks at Alex, and John Thomas’s face turns red to the roots of his eyebrows.

‘Ain’t no gold here, no how,’ John Thomas says. As he stomps away, he kicks the fawn with the toe of his boot, and Alex’s stomach seizes. She wants them all to go, but her thoughts, her desires, go no deeper than this. She’s wading shallow on the surface of her mind, afraid to slip deeper into the current of her memories.

Limpy ambles up as though a friendly hello was his only reason for being there.

‘You ain’t planning on getting rich with that, are yah?’ he says, and she finds she is clutching the gold pan to her chest.

‘Ah hell,’ says Limpy, ‘never mind. Just stay out of the way of that fella. Them little ones is always the meanest, yourself excluded, ’course.’ He chuckles a bit, raising his hands as if in surrender. ‘Come on, Dave,’ he says, and lumbers up the path.

‘You listen to Limpy, yeah? Stay out of the way of John Thomas,’ David says, his voice tipping in a funny foreign lilt. He lingers for a response. He shifts his weight in the silence, transfers his pick to the other shoulder, and turns to follow Limpy, leaving Alex alone with the steaming carcass of the fawn.

Stay out of his way? She drops the gold pan to the grass and steps towards the fawn. Her eyes sting, but stay dry. Impossible, she thinks. Flies scatter as she bends down. Everywhere is in the way.

The little body is much heavier than it looks, the flesh warm to the touch, the blood and placental fluid slick like the green ooze of the rocks. She holds the fawn away from her, sits back on her haunches, squatting above the branching stream of blood. She imagines that it’s her blood, thinks it should be her blood. The damp mercuric smell fills her head and the insects swarm about her, taunting, whispering, mimicking Gran’s hissing breath. ‘Natural inclinations,’ Gran says, shaking her head and rocking, rocking by the side of the bed.

Alex doesn’t bleed as she should, not any more, not since the night her blood filled that bed, soaking through the mattress to the wood beneath. She lay there as her insides shredded themselves, and she bled and bled until there was no blood left, and Peter never came, and Gran just sat and rocked like Alex rocks, holding the fawn away from her as the flies surround them both. In California she’s learned that there are many ways to bleed. The smell of bourbon . . . Don’t think. She moves to the side of the creek, holds the fawn underwater, lets the current tug and take it away.

She washes her hands.

‘Got a brother about that age,’ David says when he catches up to Limpy. ‘At least, he was when I left. Must be near a man now, working underground with the rest of them.’

‘We all got someone, somewhere,’ Limpy replies, and David says nothing more.

They settle down to work a half-mile upstream from Alex at a claim that has yielded modest yet steady returns of an ounce a day for the nine months they’d been there. But David is not satisfied. There is gold in this creek, more than an ounce a day. He can feel it like some men feel storms coming. He can smell it in the iron-rich soil, taste it when he puts the soft igneous mud to his tongue. So different from Cornwall, this country. Soil the colour of dried blood. Trees rising like the giants of Cornish legend. Clandestine peaks and valleys breaking the horizon into pieces. He misses the sound of the ocean, the pebble beaches and flat expanses of crab grass interrupted by white seven-lobed flowers, feathery, yellow dandelions and sun-sensitive bluebells in spring. He misses the salt smell of the air, and watching storms appear and then recede into the Atlantic. He misses the insistence of the wind, at times soft like a fluttering kiss, and at others brutal with an angry intensity, refusing to be ignored or even merely appreciated. Demanding respect and fear, like God.

‘Without the wind,’ his father told him, ‘a man might forget just how small he is.’

Over time, his father had shrunk, and not just in relation to his second son’s growing body. Only forty years old and already the tin mines had blackened his consumptive lungs and bent his back like a man many years older. His hands were hard-cut stones and his arms wire sinew blanched pale in the pitch darkness of the mine. Soon he would be restricted to the crushing grounds, sorting the pulverized ore in the wind and rain with the women, girls and young boys, while one by one his sons descended underground.

David imagines them waking before dawn, choking down a thin gruel, trekking three miles down the Penzance coast in a ragged line with father in the lead and mother in tow. Six boys, five now with David gone, and a baby girl, a three-

year-old who runs screaming with the other children, kicking clods of ore like other kids kick cans. Two miles off, the ore stamps move the ground in a steady rumble the family hardly feels. Then they part. The four oldest boys and father climb an hour down into the belly of the earth, with its damp, black walls. Climb down with only a candle for light, a pick for work, and a pasty for lunch to:

*earn enough money
to buy enough bread
to get enough strength
to dig in a hole*

Unending. Such a future makes any man feel small, wind or no. David wanted more. But his father was a stubborn man.

‘Follow in the paths of greed and find sorrow in the next life as well as this.’

‘It’s not greed. It’s a new life, a chance to work for yourself.’

‘It’s a metal, like any other.’ He grabbed the flier from his son’s hand and tore it down the middle, separating the *Cali* from the *fornia* and the *G* from the *old*.

‘You planning on working today?’ Limpy asks. David shakes himself into the present, bends and sets his pick on the ground by a wooden contraption. A rocker, they call it, or a cradle, like an infant’s bed made from an old whisky barrel cut in half and fitted with a row of wooden slats. It is not an elegant machine. The sides of the barrel are splintering and a pungent black fungus has begun to eat away the bottom. More a coffin than a cradle, David thinks. He picks up the hopper with its perforated metal bottom and places it back atop the cradle. Limpy dips two buckets in the creek as David shovels a load of earth into the hopper. While David rocks the cradle,

Limpy pours water over the agitated soil, making several trips to the creek until the dirt has washed through the hopper. The lighter, worthless minerals wash away, leaving the gold trapped in riffle slats at the bottom. Same idea as the gold pan really, only more efficient; if efficient is a word rightly used to describe alluvial mining. Returns have been too low. David didn't come all the way from Cornwall to dig in the mud, freezing his knackers off in the winter, frying them in the summer, all for one or two ounces of gold a day. He came for the lucky strike, the rich vein, the motherlode. Be damned if he'll ever again climb down a hole to make some other man rich.

After a while, they switch; David totes the water and Limpy shovels and rocks. Their faces are pink. Little beads of sweat gather at their temples, mix with the mud and streak rust-brown tracks down their cheeks. Downstream, the steady clank of picks and shovels mixes with the noisy murmur of the creek. The sun is directly overhead, and most of the birds have muted their songs till evening time. On flat, worn rocks, winter-stiff lizards rouse themselves to bask.

'Wouldn't hurt to have some help. Someone to shake the cradle,' Limpy says, as David pours a bucket into the hopper. The water splashes, speckling his trousers. 'Been thinking 'bout a long tom or a sluice box. Need more men to work one of those.' He rocks the cradle until David returns with another bucket of water. 'Said yourself he reminded you of your brother.'

'My brothers are in Cornwall.' David dumps the water. 'That boy's too scrawny to hold a shovel. He probably wouldn't know gold from pyrite.'

'I don't know. Got me a feeling about that boy.' Limpy stares off down the creek.

'You got a feeling about anyone you made money off,' says David.

Limpy only acknowledges this remark with a gesture.

'Sides,' he says, 'bound to fill out working claims, ain't he?
What with Emaline feeding 'im.'

'I'd like to know how he's paying for that.'

'City boy with a face for theatre,' Limpy says.

David glances at him, looks away. 'Not that pretty.'