

A woman in a black dress is walking away from the camera down a narrow, dark, and dilapidated hallway. The walls are peeling and cracked, and the floor is uneven. A bright light source at the end of the hallway creates a strong silhouette effect on the woman. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and unsettling.

UNKNOWN KADATH ESTATES

ZACHARY RAWLINS

VOLUME 1: Paranoid Magical Thinking

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Paranoid Magical Thinking

Zachary Rawlins

Illustrations by Xi Lu

The Unknown Kadath Estates Books

The Night Market
Paranoid Magical Thinking
The Mysteries of Holly Diem (2013)
The Floating Bridge (2014)

Other Books by the Same Author

The Central Series:
The Academy
The Anathema
The Far Shores (2013)

For Mr. Sleep, my partner in crime.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- [1. No Fixed Position. 6](#)
- [2. Rain Fade. 25](#)
- [3. Lotus Effect. 47](#)
- [4. The Tenant. 59](#)
- [5. Tropospheric Scatter. 79](#)
- [6. The Girl Who Never Came Home. 98](#)
- [7. Ghosting. 111](#)
- [8. Anti-Life Equation. 132](#)
- [9. Bad Houses. 147](#)
- [10. Some Girls Wander by Mistake. 162](#)
- [11. Displacement of a Fixed Volume. 177](#)
- [12. A Fully Functional Model of the Human Heart. 184](#)
- [13. Neurasthenia. 195](#)
- [Epilogue. 207](#)

1. No Fixed Position

All relationships are inherently unstable. My relationship with the truth is no exception. Something to consider.

The strange thing about the city – or, rather, the first strange thing – I have no memory of the highways that brought us there.

That may not sound unusual, but for me, it is quite abnormal. I have always had an almost perfect map of my surroundings in my head. I can remember every turn we took in the proceeding fugitive weeks; running when we had to, hiding where we could, always moving. We travelled on back roads and forgotten highways; a long crawl across miles of desolate land, a parade of decaying motor courts and half-dim neon signs. I remember crossing granite mountains, traces of dirty grey snow on the sides of the road, then a vast desert, gravel and scrub brush withering under unbridled sun. It reminded me of the surface of the moon, or the desolation of the ocean floor. I do not, however, remember the drive into the city.

I knew I had arranged an apartment, because I had a letter with a key and a map from the landlord, though I had no idea how I had obtained them. I did not let that worry me. There was no advantage in worrying.

What I do remember is the first time I saw the city, because I never forget my dreams. Asleep, I had walked patchwork streets of concrete and cobblestone, damp with early morning rain. Hydrocarbon rainbows stretched across the puddles. The towers of downtown met the sky jagged like broken teeth, fractured on bitter grey clouds that hung over the city like vultures waiting for a death that was always imminent. The oldest buildings were carved from a grey-green stone that I had never seen before, smooth as glass to the touch, but with an internal coldness that burned the tips of my fingers.

It bothers me that I cannot remember waking from this dream.

When we first arrived, the city gave me an awful sense of *déjà-vu*, like waking from a dream, losing teeth to find my mouth empty. The city brooded at the end of a gelded river, dammed upstream to provide drinking water for the uncounted millions who lived there. The oldest neighborhood brushed against the rocky coast and the placid, dark waters of the ocean, wooden skeletons exposed to the vicissitudes of time and tide. The freeway ran through the western side of the city, beside a small enclave of modern conveniences and contemporary high-rises. The buildings everywhere else were ornate and crumbling, often built from the strange green stone, as covered with cornices and gargoyles as they were with satellite dishes and outflow vents for climate control systems. The remains of the river, now confined to a garbage-choked concrete canal, bisected the city neatly. From my seat in the van, I could not see anything on the near side of the river that appeared less than a century old. Along the rocky coastline beyond the river, things were even more ancient and rundown.

The city was grotesque and magnificent, ornate and forgotten architectural styles cheek-and-jowl with scenes of tremendous decay. One building we passed was crawling with strange statues, fish-men and octopus-faced things, every window broken, not a single light inside. Another was wrapped in suffocating layers of vines with bizarre, garish purple blooms. The faces I saw behind the dirty glass windows were blank and uncaring. An ancient colonial house slowly merged with the earth, wood turned the non-color of time and exposure, swallowed by the shadow of the squat brick foundry across

the street.

~~The map I had been given was detailed, but not particularly helpful. The layout of the city was bewildering, ancient streets meandering around forgotten landmarks and tiny stone alleys spiraling out in all directions. I followed the map as closely as possible, but one-way streets and a shortage of signs made it hard for me to be sure that I knew where we were going.~~

We found our apartment building in the heart of the emptiest neighborhood I had ever seen in my life, blocks of vacant, decaying buildings surrounding roads that were crumbling from neglect.

Of course, once we finally found the place, we had to drive back to the nearest public transit following the elevated train tracks until we came to a nearby station – to be certain we were followed. We left the van on a side street two blocks from the station. April fell soundly asleep with her head resting on my shoulder, soothed by the labors of the train as it lumbered back to our new home, the Kadath Estates on Leng Street, in a district by the same name.

We could see Leng Street from the parking lot of the train station, running straight through the heart of a desolate residential area, the neighborhood built in a depression, on what had probably been marshland at some distant point in the past. A staircase was cut in the trash-strewn slope that descended down into our new neighborhood, hundreds of steps hewn from slippery black stone. The path was cool in the shadow of fragrant and towering pines, remnants of a forest that had crowded the hillside long before the city had swollen to fill all but the steepest places.

Our neighborhood had been abandoned sometime before, whether in response to a disaster or anticipation of renovations that never arrived, I could not be certain. Leng Street was a large commercial boulevard, desolate except for the leaves and plastics bags creeping down the expanse of worn asphalt, moving along with a breeze that brought the scent of the polluted ocean. April stayed closer than usual and I was glad for it.

The Kadath Estates hardly seemed to merit the grandeur of its name, though it was inarguably old. The building was roughly square in shape and wedged between crumbling tenements. The dirty brown river crawled through a concrete embankment immediately behind it. Dusty green ivy burdened with fragrant purple flowers blanketed the walls of the lower story. The second and third floors groaned under the weight of stone flourishes fashioned into fantastic and horrible creatures, buttresses and clusters of statues that reminded me vaguely of hounds. If I am any judge, the Kadath Estates were a hundred years older than any other building on the street, though in slightly better repair. Like the oldest parts of the city, the Estates were composed mainly of blocks of slick, green-speckled stone. The door was heavy and reinforced with wrought iron, the kind of door intended to keep out people who were serious about getting in.

I was glad the manager had sent a key, because I did not see a callbox or a manager's office. The lock was almost as old as the building itself; the key was a heavy, ornate thing that looked like, but could not possibly have been tarnished silver.

The gate swung closed behind us with a squeal that spoke of years of accumulated rust and neglect. I caught the reflection of a cat's flat eyes in the shadows of the foyer before it disappeared into up into the darkness of the stairwell. The hall was cold and drafty, the stone steps of the stairs partially overgrown with a faint blue moss. Bundles of telecommunication and power cables were attached to the walls with metal staples, branching chaotically and punching haphazardly through the stone. External lights were placed sporadically throughout the stairwell, providing flickering, minimal illumination. Water dripped from every surface and the smell of mildew was pervasive.

I walked up the stairs slowly so April would not lose hold of the back of my jacket. Normally I would have held her hand, but I was worried about what we might find waiting for us at the top, and

wanted my hands ready. There was nothing waiting for us on the second floor hallway besides the resentful black cat, though, so we went to the unit marked 2A and used the reassuringly mundane door key that the manager had sent.

The door took some persuading to open, warped by the damp. The living room was empty, with a new roll carpet and bundles of cable jutting from a rough breach in the wall. It smelled mostly of fresh paint and cleaning solution, and just a little like the wet stone hidden behind an inch of drywall. It was actually jarring how normal the inside of the room was, in comparison to its bizarre exterior. We made a quick circuit of the apartment – one bedroom, furnished with a bed and a bureau, as agreed. One bathroom with a bathtub, a shower curtain, a medicine cabinet behind the mirror. One kitchen with an electric stove, as required. A noisy refrigerator with nothing inside but a lingering smell of garlic.

Catching April's eye, I nodded toward the bedroom, pulling a screwdriver from one of the pockets in my jacket. She took a smaller tool from her backpack and we set about disassembling the bed frame, the bureau, the medicine cabinet – anything that could be pried apart. The blinds were shaken out and inspected, the mattress turned over and then thoroughly jumped on by April. I stuck my head underneath the sink in the bathroom and the kitchen, using a flashlight to scope out the recessed areas behind the pipes. I inspected the toilet, the tank and the mounting. We took the covers off every vent and power outlet in the apartment, the grill from the refrigerator, and knocked on the walls. I am not sure why we knocked on the walls, but we always did. Then we pulled the carpet up in every room to inspect the floorboards.

“Looks okay.”

We sat in the middle of the living room. I felt bad for April – she looked spent, her brown hair damp with sweat, and we weren't even half done. She still had to make the place safe for herself.

“Do you want chicken for dinner?”

April thought about it for a little while, then nodded reluctantly.

“Then you'd better get started,” I urged. “Because the restaurant is back by the station, and you don't want to walk with me.”

April dithered a moment longer, her thin fingers digging unconsciously into the fabric of the carpet, but hunger won out over exhaustion. She returned to the bedroom and started unpacking her gear. I followed and lay on the floor to watch April do her thing. I had seen it many times before, but that didn't make it less fascinating.

She started by putting brand-new sheets on the bed, along with new pillows, both taken from her enormous backpack. She aligned the pillows carefully, followed by her own possessions, lining them up as neat as a row of ducklings behind the bulk of her backpack, right down the middle of the comforter. April likes stuffed animals, the bigger the better. She doesn't seem to mind if they are ugly, so she doted on each piece of her collection, arranging them with thoughtful precision.

April walked the perimeter of the bedroom three times on her wobbly legs, fingers trailing along the wall for balance, her other arm extended as if she were on a tight rope. Her fingertips lingered over every flaw and facet of the wall. April returned to her bag and got a hammer, nails, and the sheets of paper that she had fabricated during the drive.

If there is a pattern, a method to the way April builds her barricades, then I have never been able to see it. Of course, April sees any number of things that I never will. The symbols were painstakingly drawn on coarse white sketching paper in heavy-handed charcoal pencil. Or, perhaps draw is the wrong word.

The pages were neatly inscribed with symbols, letters from a language that April invented, which

only she understood. She has tried to explain the concept behind it, but most of what she says beyond me. As best as I can understand, April's language eliminated the concept of representation. Instead, she uses a separate word for each specific thing, with mutable elements that describe place, time and relationship with the observer. There were no 'cars', or 'red cars', or even 'red cars with ridiculous spoilers'. Rather, a single word meant 'that specific red car with a ridiculous spoiler that drove by us a moment ago'. A unique word that was used once and then never again.

The letters she drew looked like cuneiform, pictographs, hieroglyphs, Japanese wood-block print. Together they spelled out protection, security and anonymity; a wall that kept the world and April apart. I could not have told you what each individual piece meant, but you would have been blind not to see meaning in the whole.

Her alphabet was beautiful and unsettling, reoccurring in my dreams as enigmatic as ciphers. I was grateful, somehow, that I couldn't read them. Even a basic understanding of April's private language had disquieting implications.

The creation of spontaneous savants is not unprecedented. Twins develop private languages as infants, forgetting them later in life. A man beaten until his brain swelled in his head saw nothing but fractals when he recovered, the only person in history capable of drawing the impossibly intricate figures by hand. Another man had no appetite for number until he suffered repeated lightning strikes and became something of a human calculator.

The brain responds to damage in surprising ways.

Of course, all of those were accidents of nature or circumstance. April's remarkable and deviant genius was the result of deliberate tampering with her mind and development.

April stumbled back to the center of the room almost an hour later, folding up neatly on the floor beside me, face creased with exhaustion. I held her briefly and patted her head, then set her down carefully on the bed, where she curled up with her bizarre plush menagerie.

"Are we going to be able to stay here for a while, Preston?"

April yawned dramatically, stretching out to accommodate the gesture, her tangled bangs damp with sweat against her forehead.

"You tell me. Did you make it safe?"

April's nod was grave. She knew as well as I did that safe was both relative and temporary. And she wasn't done. Not unless April planned to spend the rest of her life in the bedroom.

"Then we are safe," I shrugged. "Finish the bathroom and then stop for the night, okay? The rest can wait."

She yawned again, her movements exaggerated and played for sympathy. Our last landlady had confused April with some long-dead grandchild and dressed her like a doll, all bows and ribbons and velveteen dresses. She would stand out until I could get her some normal clothes.

"You're still hungry, right?"

It was not an idle question. April's eating habits were unpredictable at best. Sometimes she lost interest in food. Sometimes for days. Other times, when I wasn't paying attention, she would make herself sick on breakfast cereal or canned fruit.

"Yeah. A soda, too. Alright?"

"Okay," I said, dragging out my cell to check and see if caffeine was allowable. "But you have to promise to sleep tonight. We have a bunch of stuff to do tomorrow."

"I promise," April said, nodding her head solemnly. "But you promise, too, Preston. No arguing about sleeping on the floor tonight. That bed is big enough for both of us."

"We'll see," I lied. "You want mashed potatoes?"

“You know I do,” April huffed, pulling her charcoal pencils from her oversized backpack.

~~That was my cue, and I was hungry myself, so I headed out the front door. I was so busy searching~~ the many pockets of my jacket for headphones that I almost walked over the shorthaired lady with glasses who stood in the hallway.

“Ahem.”

“Oh, hello!”

I took a couple careful steps back because the lady seemed nervous. She was plump and middle-aged, with a severe face set in a grim expression and dowdy clothing. She must have had major vision problems, because her glasses were some serious hardware. I know. Take April’s contacts out and she can hardly see at all.

“Hi. You must be the new tenant, right? Unit 2A?”

“That’s me.”

Her voice was cooler and more confident than her mousy appearance suggested. She fixed me with an evaluating stare and it was my turn to feel nervous. It was as if I had asked to take her daughter on a date or something.

“Sorry... my name is Preston. Preston Tauschen.”

“I’m Kim Ai, the apartment manager. Are you going somewhere? Do you mind stopping by the office to sign a few papers later?”

“No, not at all. I’m just going down the street to grab some dinner for April and I, then...”

I headed for the stairs and she fell in alongside me, watching me the way someone watches a wild animal that has gotten too close. I wondered if maybe I had done something wrong already.

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot. April is your girlfriend, or wife, or...”

“No,” I said flatly. “We aren’t like that. I am more like a caretaker. April’s got health issues, Miss Ai...”

“Kim.”

“April’s got health issues, Kim. She needs pretty much round-the-clock monitoring. That is when I come in. I look after her.”

I heard her pause briefly on the stairs above me. I could already tell this one would be trouble. Seems there is one in every apartment complex.

“It’s nothing serious, or contagious, I hope...”

I sighed and shoved my hands in my front pockets so she would not see my fists clench. It wasn’t her fault, I had just had my fill of this conversation already, enough to last a lifetime. My patience was at its end. My voice seethed with bitterness.

“She is not contagious. The condition is not life-threatening. April won’t harm or bother you or other tenants in any way, Miss Ai.”

“Kim is fine. Still,” she nagged, “you should have notified us in advance.”

“April has a rare neurological disorder. It causes certain eccentricities in her behavior, but she’s completely harmless. Just give her a chance. When you meet her I guarantee that you will like her. She is actually quite bright, much more so than I am. Anyway, one of her quirks is that she does not leave the apartment unless I accompany her. So you don’t need to worry; she won’t be bothering anyone.”

I reached for the latch on the front gate. Kim stopped behind me.

“This is all quite suspicious,” she said frankly, sounding ever more like the voice of the local Parent-Teacher Association. “She never leaves her room without you? Did you kidnap her or something?”

I couldn't say whether she was remarkably perceptive or a prying bitch. It could have been my own exceptionally bad luck. Whatever. I had only just arrived at the Kadath Estates and Kim Ai was already getting on my nerves. I got the feeling she was the kind of middle-aged lady who, for lack of ability or opportunity, never has children, then spends the rest of her life bossing everyone else around to make up for it.

“Look, we are both starving. Let me go get some food, then when I come to sign those papers after dinner, I will bring April along. You can confirm for yourself that she isn't dangerous, or in danger from me, or whatever you are imagining. Okay? Please?”

I glanced back at her, and she hesitated, as if she might decide not to let me go. I was frankly shocked. There is nosey, but this...

Kim nodded, grudgingly. I released the latch and hit the street, letting the door slam behind me with a sound like a misshapen bell ringing. A childish gesture, but I was hungry. Moreover, the kidnapping thing... even if it wasn't what she thought it was, her allegation made me feel exposed and vulnerable. The whole way down to the fried chicken place, I wondered if maybe we shouldn't stay there, at those strange, intricate apartments after all. We had been running for so long, though. We were out of money and exhausted. We had to stop somewhere. The Kadath Estates was as good as any other place for us to lay low.

It started to rain as I made my way down the street. I was so tired and miserable that I let it fall on my head, trying to imagine what it would be like to be truly and actually free.

Kim's apartment was almost as spartan as ours; spare and functional in its minimalist furnishing. Of course, she had a couch, a television, and similar niceties, but her apartment still managed to look as if she had only recently moved in and had not gotten around to unpacking. I noticed Kim inspecting April for bruises as I led her gently into the room, holding the elbow of my jacket until the door closed behind her. April then relaxed as if the room had pressurized.

April doesn't look all that odd. I could see Kim start in on a fresh set of doubts about my story. April's condition is only vaguely visible in her general frailty and her idiosyncrasies. What Kim saw was a normal girl about the age for college, skinny and sickly-pale, with brown hair almost to her waist, and cute, slight features that are modestly hidden by her tangle of hair.

“Hello, April,” Kim said, with a kindness that surprised me. “I'm Kim, the apartment manager.”

“Hi, Kim. Ooh, your hair is pretty.”

Kim blushed and made dismissive noises. April gives compliments like a child – they come from such a place of utter honesty that it is difficult not to be moved.

April is that way with criticism as well, but most people never have an opportunity to see it.

April reached for Kim's arm with her thin, nervous fingers, and I could practically see Kim melt. In fact, I didn't really need to watch. I had seen April do this any number of times since we had run away. I did not listen much to the things April said, because the words were irrelevant. If April decides that she is going to be close with someone, then that is the end of the story. And she knew that having Kim on our side was critical.

In five minutes, April had her utterly charmed.

“What a sweet girl,” Kim chuckled, patting April affectionately on the head. “What in the world do you see in him?”

Kim pointed at me as if I had a scarlet letter on my forehead. I didn't take it personally.

“You had some papers for me to sign, right?”

~~“Yes, of course,” Kim snapped, glaring at me for no apparent reason. “I have it all over here.”~~

I followed her over to the kitchen sidebar where there was a variety of documents waiting. A fake name presents all sorts of unanticipated challenges, none more difficult than producing a credible signature. Ask any married woman who changed her name. A signature is far more practiced than I had realized until I needed to fake one. I muddled through the rest of the forms, fabricating birthdate and hoping Kim was not the type to try to confirm documents.

“Hey, Kim, what is this picture of?”

Kim gave me one more suspicious look, as if to warn me that she had counted the spice bottles on the nearby rack, in case I got any ideas, before she joined April at the other side of the room.

“That is Vietnam. It is a little village that my family left when I was only baby, you never would have heard of it. I went back years ago and took some pictures.”

“Wow,” April said, looking at her with wide eyes. “You went to Vietnam? Cool... what was it like?”

“Very different,” Kim said thoughtfully. “But also very beautiful. It was hard, because I don’t speak Vietnamese, so people kept assuming that I spoke the language. The food was amazing, though, and the people were quite nice.”

“Which was more like going home?” April asked innocently. “Going there or coming back here after?”

Kim looked astonished, the way people always do when they have started to lull themselves into thinking that April is shy or indifferent.

“Well, I was born there,” Kim said carefully. “I’ve lived here as long as I can remember, though so Kadath feels more like home.”

“That must be nice. I’ve never been anywhere I’d want to go back to.”

“Wait. What?”

“Kim, have you read *Cities of the Red Night*? The spine on your copy looks brand new. Can I borrow it when you’re done?”

Kim looked back at the three crowded bookshelves behind her, every shelf packed with a densely and rigidly organized collection of paperback novels and older, leather-bound books with faded titles and scrollwork. Her jaw dropped in astonishment.

“How did you?”

“She has a great memory,” I said hurriedly. “For the things she sees, at least. April really likes books. She could probably recite every title she saw in your collection. She is good at remembering stuff like that. Not so much for the things I ask her to do.”

“That is totally unfair. It’s just that he asks me to do all the wrong things,” she explained to Kim with air of exasperation. Suddenly there were two sides to the room and I had one all to myself. I guess I should have been happy that they were friends, but it still felt a little cold.

I let them chatter while I finished the forms as best as I could. Kim must have been a woman who only liked other women – the warmth she showed April was unexpected, given my previous experience. Then again, what do I know? Kim must have had her reasons.

Don’t we all?

“When did you last cut your hair, April?”

“Well, never, I guess. Yeah. Never.”

Kim’s glare was accusatory. I felt compelled to defend myself.

“Well, we’ve had to move around a lot these last few months. There wasn’t any time for things

like that. As soon as we get settled here..."

"I don't like that," Kim said, taking something from a drawer in the kitchen. She returned with a comb, a brush, and a determined look. I was nervous about how April would react to her ministrations, but April didn't so much as blink an eye when Kim started fussing with her hair. "Why have you two been moving around so much? Are you in some kind of trouble, April? Has Preston gotten you in trouble?"

"Because it isn't safe. Yes. No."

"What?"

Kim froze with a tangled mass of April's hair held distastefully in one hand.

"Look, I'll let April answer your questions, but you have to remember that English isn't her first language. There are going to be some oddities."

Kim looked from one of us to the other, puzzled.

"Not her first language? Then what is?"

"Ask her. I have no idea what it's called," I said, shrugging. No need for a lie when you don't know how to answer.

"April, is Kim safe? Are you safe here?"

April looked around the room slowly, warily, while Kim watched in disbelief.

"She's okay," April said brightly. "We're cool for now."

"You have your phone?"

She rummaged in her pockets and came up with a sticker-covered Motorola.

"Okay, I'm going to go do some stuff. You call me when you are done and I will come and get you. And while I'm gone, please try to convince Kim that I'm not a threat or holding you hostage or anything."

I nodded civilly at Kim, patted April on the head, and went to the front door.

"He's an awful sex offender," April confided as the door shut behind me. "He makes me do some perverted things every night."

I gritted my teeth and made my way out to the hallway, then down the stairs to the street, feeling no great desire to sit in the apartment alone. April would convince her, I knew. April would become Kim's best friend.

For an agoraphobic, April is great with people.

There were things that needed doing, so I got to work.

First, the van.

I drove around until I found a deserted industrial side street, miles of decaying warehouses moldering in the sun, surrounded by brown grass and ancient stumps of what must have been huge trees. I followed it until the city started to peter out, only the occasional ancient house dotting the side of the road, slowly collapsing into the soil. It did not take long to find a spot where I could push the car off the road and into a shallow ditch. I got out, leaving the van in neutral without the brake, and went to the trunk for a plastic container of gasoline I had filled on the way to the city. My eyes watered as I soaked the interior of the car. The gas caught with the second lit match I tossed in. I had to hurry to push it over the ledge before the fire got too intense, almost rolling over my foot in the process. I was worried that the fall would put out the fire, but nothing of the sort happened. In fact, the flames threatened to ignite the nearby brush at the side of the deserted road. I hurried off, trying to appear uninvolved in case anyone bumped into me in the middle of nowhere.

No one did.

The nearest bus stop was less than a mile away according to my phone's GPS, which started

functioning as soon as I left the heart of the city. I made it in ten minutes, hustling. My phone rang just as I got on the bus and I cursed. I had hoped to have time to change into clothes that, if they were not clean, at least did not reek of gasoline before I had to face our landlady.

“Hey.”

“Hey, um, you,” April said hesitantly. I was secretly pleased. It had been a trial to teach her not to use names, even fake ones, while talking on a phone. “The manager lady doesn’t think you are a criminal or a molester now.”

“That’s good. Thanks.”

“No problem. We get along. She wants to talk to you. Do you want to?”

It was not an idle question. If I said no, April would make sure that Kim never got on the line. Compared to April, I’m a pushover.

“Fine by me. Put her on.”

There was a clattering as the phone was passed. The guy next to me glared over his newspaper, apparently bothered by the conversation. My glare was worse. He returned his attention hurriedly to the business page while I wondered what kind of relevant news could possibly be in an eight-hour-old newspaper.

“She says I’m not allowed to use names,” Kim said dryly. “I can’t tell you how uncomfortable that makes me.”

“I can explain some other time. Is your mind at ease, otherwise?”

I heard Kim close a door to shut out the noise of a television.

“I suppose. She says that you are her friend. I suppose that will have to be good enough for now. She claims to be twenty, but half of the time... how can she possibly be twenty years old?”

“She has a neurological disorder with any number of physiological manifestations. Believe me, she is every bit as old as she says. Don’t underestimate her.”

“I’ll try not to read into that much,” Kim grouched. “Her hair is filthy. And I can’t cut it until it’s clean. When was the last time she took a shower?”

“Every morning that I could find time to make her, but, well...”

Thankfully, Kim caught my drift. I couldn’t march into the bathroom every morning to force April to bathe, unless I wanted to invite more confusion into a relationship that was already over and ambiguous.

“Okay. Well, I am going to wash it. Then I am going to finishing cutting her hair. You can pick her up in two hours.”

It was not a question. Kim did not say goodbye. I just heard the phone rustle and then it was April again.

“Do I have to?”

“I’d like to stay here for a while. You know that we need to. This means we both have to do things that we don’t want to. I wish it wasn’t like that, but it is. Your hair really is gross, you know, and you do need a haircut. Suffer through it.”

“Fine. But you better bring me something.”

The line clicked and I put the phone away. Two more hours made nine in the evening and I was only a few minutes from downtown. I had enough time to do some shopping. Besides, the detour would require a transfer to a different line and give me an opportunity to suss out any potential tails. It would also help break up any patterns developing in my movements; it was important that I never take the same route anywhere twice in a row.

I spent the next several blocks watching a tired brunette discretely apply makeup to her pa-

cheeks, using her reflection in the bus window as a mirror. She looked tired and I caught myself feeling a little sorry for her.

But the thing about faces? After a while, it seems like I have seen all of them somewhere before.

“You look tired.”

“I am.”

“That’s a lot of bags.”

“We do not have a lot of things. This is a poor attempt to rectifying that situation. Now, I do not mean to be rude, but...”

“That’s fine,” Kim said, smoothly positioning a freshly scrubbed and gleaming April in front of her in the doorway. “I wasn’t planning on inviting you in.”

“Right. Sure. You ready, April?”

She spun to show off her hair.

“It looks nice,” I allowed. “Now can we go home please?”

It did look nice. She had needed a haircut for some time. Kim had managed to get April to part with half the length. The remainder of her hair was loosely braided, and now I could see most of her witchy face. Whenever our eyes met, April would blush, and then we both had to look away.

The apartment was as depressingly barren as before. My purchases mitigated that a little, but not much. Some food – fruit, cereal, bread and frozen stuff, the staples. A change of clothes for both of us, just the basics, plus a shirt and a pair of slacks that I hoped would be good enough for job interview. Soap, shampoo and toothbrushes. However, it was my final purchase that caught April’s attention.

“You got a TV!”

April literally jumped in celebration, clutching the box to her chest.

It was true, though it wasn’t much of a television. Thirteen inches and light enough to hang on the wall, I had bought it in a suspect Chinese grey market electronics place downtown. It was an expense we could hardly afford. April, however, needs TV the way other people need food.

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t get attached. It will probably fall apart before we move.”

April ignored me, totally consumed by the process of opening the box. One of April’s quirks was that containers were to be opened systematically, in the manner by which they were sealed. When she was finished, the box would be flattened and neatly folded, the interior foam and plastic laid out in parallel lines. April often used packing tape to draw things that looked like her private language on the carpet. I shrugged and left her to it, heading for the shower.

I let the hot water run over the back of my neck for a couple minutes. Then I took a good look at my side, a souvenir of our abrupt exit from the last hotel where they had caught up with us. The knife had cut in above my belt on the right side, and I had probably been lucky that nothing important was punctured. The wound was half-open, an ugly red mouth on my side seeping blood and puss. The bruising around it had a couple days to develop, and was now in full bloom, a mottled and unpleasant purple and yellow blotch that stretched to the top of my hip. It hurt to the touch, but it didn’t seem to be getting worse, so I soaped up, washed my hair, and got out to check on April.

She was watching a sitcom, sitting far too close to the television.

“April, reasonable distance, okay?”

She grumbled and scooted back a grudging five feet. I went to the kitchen and put on water for tea, which had just finished steeping when there was a knock at the door. April never even looked up.

sighed and went to answer it.

I wasn't surprised to see Kim.

"Are you serious about needing work? April says that you are broke."

If April was not completely oblivious to the glare I shot her, then she did a remarkable impression of it.

"Not broke exactly," I said, mindful that I was talking to the person charged with the collection of the rent. "I am going to start looking for work tomorrow, though."

"You're not a slacker or a thief, right?"

I shook my head, puzzled.

"Okay, then. Have you met Holly upstairs? No? Okay, well, she is in 3C. She has a few days worth of work for you, at least. Go up and see her tomorrow. If you get along, then great."

"Thanks," I said carefully. "Can I ask what kind of job it is?"

"Can I ask who is looking for that girl?" Kim said, nodding in April's direction, who was still staring raptly at the television.

I took her point.

"What time should I be there?"

"No earlier than noon. No; let's say one, to be safe."

I meant to thank her again, but she turned abruptly on her heel and disappeared down the hall.

"What do you think, April?" I asked, shutting the door behind me. "Do we have some time before they find us?"

She looked up from the television, her eyes misty. I have never understood why, but April cries almost constantly while watching television. Not sobs, just a sort of gentle welling of tears, even though she prefers comedies and reality shows.

"I think so," April said, biting her lower lip while she concentrated. "This place is... obscure. And you said yourself that we can't keep running forever. We have to stop somewhere, at least for a while."

"Okay," I said, sitting down on the blanket she had spread on the floor in front of the television. "Are you going to be alright if I go and see about this job tomorrow?"

She crossed her arms and huffed.

"Are you going to try and sleep on the floor tonight?"

"No," I lied. "We can start having that fight when I have a couch to sleep on."

"Then you don't have anything to worry about."

That made both of us liars.

2. Rain Fade

We were never hidden. The code spelled out by a portion of her DNA became the telemetry used by suborbital broadcast satellite to invade our dreams.

The floor was both colder and harder than it looked, even with a blanket spread over it. Fortunately, I woke up early enough that April was still asleep, so I could shower and clean up hopefully before she realized that I had not come to bed last night. I'd put her down once she started yawning, then spent the night in the living room, the door cracked so I could hear her toss and thrash in her sleep.

I found periodically waking to her audible nightmares reassuring – at the very least, it meant that she was still here, that they hadn't taken her back; they hadn't caught up with us. Yet.

I woke early, not even nine, so I had time to head to the convenience store for eggs, orange juice, and a can of instant coffee. If the job that Kim had promised me came to naught, we were going to be in financial trouble sooner rather than later, but no point in worrying about that. Better to get back before April woke, better to keep moving and not think too much.

I scrambled two eggs with water, remembering too late that I forgot to buy butter. They came out okay, but the pan was going to be a bitch to clean. April didn't wake up, but that wasn't too unusual. Sometimes, she slept for the better part of a day, left to her own devices. Other times, she would not sleep for what seemed like days on end. I had been trying to get her on some sort of schedule since we hit the road, but given how exhausted she had been yesterday, I decided to let her wake up on her own.

After eating an unsatisfactory breakfast and forcing down a cup of the acrid instant coffee, I went about the process of removing the tags from the clothes I had bought the day before. I combined them with the handful of items that I had brought with me, trying to figure out what to wear that day. Kim hadn't actually mentioned what kind of work it was that this Holly person wanted done, so I wasn't sure what would be appropriate. I decided that it was probably physical labor and passed on the new slacks and shirt, not wanting to ruin them clearing out some old lady's storage unit or cleaning rain gutters, and stuck with jeans and a sweatshirt.

There was still time to kill, so I decided on a long overdue shave, then brushed my teeth and clipped my fingernails for good measure. I paused to inspect myself in the mirror and decided that even if I looked presentable, I did not much care for anything I saw. I was in the kitchen making myself another cup of terrible instant coffee when April emerged, rubbing both of her eyes so hard they looked painful.

“Do you want eggs?”

She shook her head and marched grimly into the bathroom. Progress had been made in the last few weeks. If April was not fully convinced to begin bathing daily, she at least was willing to wash her face and brush her teeth in the mornings. She came stumbling out a few minutes later; face scrubbed pink, presenting herself for inspection. She had passed on the plain clothes that I had picked her up yesterday in favor of a light shift bordered with lace and a pair of sandals. I tied her hair back with a rubber band left over from the television packaging and then started the daily ritual of putting in her contacts.

“Your side of the bed was cold this morning.”

“I got up early,” I lied, pouring solution into clear plastic vial.

“I waited up. I don’t remember you coming in.”

“You were asleep. I didn’t come to bed till late.”

The lenses lifted carefully from their packaging, moist and vaguely organic. April blinked her pale eyes, as blind as a mole in sunlight.

“You shouldn’t lie so much,” April scolded. “It’s a bad habit.”

“As if I don’t know that. You sure you don’t want breakfast? I’m supposed to work today, and I don’t know when I’ll be done.”

She shook her head when I tried to get near her, the contacts on my fingers.

“Kim said she would come get me for lunch. She thinks you’re a creep, you know,” she confided happily.

“I did get that impression. You didn’t tell her anything, right?”

April stuck her tongue out at me.

“Don’t be stupid. I convinced her not to call the cops on you.”

“I appreciate that, April. I don’t mean to be paranoid. I have just been feeling... exposed, since we got here. I don’t know why. Nerves, I guess. They got too close to us. That last one rattled me.”

April wrapped me in an enthusiastic and unexpected bear hug, her arms tight around my bruised ribs, her face pressed against my sternum. I held my arm up in the air to save the contacts and did my best not to whimper in response to the agony in my side.

“We can’t run forever, Preston.” April’s voice was muffled by my chest. “This place isn’t safe because there isn’t any safe place. Nevertheless, we can hide here for a while. And we can trust Kim.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right.”

Eventually, we got the contacts in. It was always an ordeal, since April flinches when I get near her eyes. Then we settled down in front of the television for late morning nonsense. It is not good for anyone to watch as much television as April does, but given the situation, that seemed like the least of our worries. At a quarter to one, I gathered up my things.

“All right, I’m heading upstairs to see about this job. I don’t know when I will be back, but I will text you later and let you know. You have your phone with you?”

April held it up, not looking away from a documentary show about crab fishing.

“Okay, I’ll be back as soon as I can. Call me if anything happens.”

“Bye.”

I shut the door firmly behind me then waited until I heard April obediently bolt and chain the door behind me. It wouldn’t make much difference if they caught up with us, but living on the run successfully involves the cultivation of a manageable degree of paranoia, an innate security routine. April had only lived this way for a few weeks, but she was learning.

It took me five years to figure it all out, but she has always been smarter than I have. It was weird how little she had changed since I left – a little bit older, a little bit thinner, but still the same wide-eyed and deceptive enthusiasm. April had not seemed surprised when I came back for her.

The steps leading to the third story were more decayed than those on the second story, the exposed concrete loosened and crumbling under the beating of God-knows how many years of rain and cold. The third floor was laid out exactly as the first two – three apartments arranged in a square around a fenced-off opening that descended to the empty courtyard below, the shaft of sunlight smothered by afternoon shadows before it hit the ground. The ivy dominated the interior stone of the breezeway, and the air was heady with the perfume of the purple flowers. Units A and B appeared identical to our 3C, where Holly lived, was a double, like the unit Kim occupied, and I envied the space.

There was something up on the frame next to her door, like one of those Jewish things, a mezuzah.

but I had never seen one like this. It was made from a single piece of clear quartz, and the writing on the suspended parchment inside was in a language that I was certain was not Hebrew. I tried the doorbell, but nothing happened, so eventually I knocked. The doorbell must have been broken, because the door opened almost immediately in response to my knocking.

“Oh, hello, dear,” the woman holding the door open said sweetly. “You must be Preston. Kim said you might be interested in helping me out. Please, come in.”

“Um, sure, Mrs...”

She laughed, and her laughter was surprising rambunctious.

“It’s Holly, okay? And even if you were going to call me by my last name, it would be Miss Diem,” she scolded gently, leading me into a living room that was as cluttered as my own was barren. “I know I’m older than you, Preston, but that doesn’t mean I’m ancient.”

“Right, no, of course not. I didn’t mean anything like that.”

Smooth, right? Well, I was nervous.

“Come on inside.”

“Uh, sure.”

For one thing, Holly was beautiful. She was in her mid-forties probably, but she had aged gracefully. Her hair was almost as long as April’s, and light blond to the point that it was almost silver. She was tall, with a generous and inviting figure that her black-and-white polka-dot dress served off to her advantage, taut calves emphasized by her impractical heels.

“Don’t mind the cat,” Holly said from the other room, while the aforementioned black feline looked lazily over at me from his perch on an overstuffed chair. “That’s Lovecraft. He won’t bother you. He pretty much has the run of the whole building.”

“No problem. I like cats,” I lied, shifting from one foot to the other, while Lovecraft stared at me knowingly.

There was so much *stuff* in the room, I could not help but worry that bumping into or sitting on something was almost inevitable. And such strange things – I could not begin to describe them all. Heaped on every available surface, with the exception of a couch and an easy chair near the middle of the room, there was an assortment of books, candles, rose quartz and jade figurines, scraps of paper and framed photographs of places I did not recognize. Looking closer, I realized that none of the pictures had people in them; just shots of decaying buildings and lonely wilderness scenes, many featuring ancient standing stones.

The cat decided he had better places to be, after giving me a look that warned that the contents of the room were carefully inventoried, should I get any funny ideas in his absence.

Then there was the statue. It was set back in a glass case, shadowed by a thing in black onyx that looked something like an elephant combined with a flower, so I could not get a good look, but I recognized it from the outline. The girl with her tragic, vacant face, a tentacle about to snap tight around her neck, pull her down somewhere that the sculpture had mercifully omitted. I had seen similar figures here and there, around the city. The face on this statue, however, was hauntingly familiar. I leaned forward for a closer look, and was startled by Holly bustling past me.

“Sit down, sit down,” she said, motioning toward the couch. “Would you like coffee? Tea?”

“Yes,” I said by reflex, quickly moving my gaze from her ample bust to what appeared to be a stuffed eagle mounted on top of one of the overflowing bookcases. He looked about as out of place as I felt. “Coffee, please.”

Holly disappeared into the kitchen, while I tried not to look too hard at my surroundings and hope against hope that she did not need help cleaning the place up. After a while, Lovecraft reemerged from one of the bedrooms and gave me a cursory examination, but he didn't seem to be all that thrilled with what he found and moved on to greener pastures. I wasn't hurt. It is a common reaction.

"Here we are," Holly said brightly, clutching two steaming mugs. She set one down in front of me and the other on her side of the table, and then sat down. I sipped the coffee, grateful that it was real, and not poisonously acidic like the instant stuff. "I'm glad that you were available to help me, Preston. I am in something of a jam, you see."

"Ah, right. About that. Kim wasn't actually too specific about what you wanted me to do..."

"Does it matter?" Holly asked, appearing genuinely curious. "Are there things you wouldn't do?"

"Of course! Well... it all depends."

"Good to know."

Holly sipped her coffee and smiled at me. I was nervous and sweating despite myself. It was downright embarrassing.

"Not to be pushy, but what is it that you want me to do for you?"

"I pay well. You will certainly earn more working for me in a day than you would anywhere else around here."

"That's good to know, but, well, it's not actually an answer."

Holly looked impressed and I couldn't help but wonder exactly how stupid she thought I was.

"True," she admitted. "So there are things you won't do for me, or for money. Tell me, then, Preston – is there anything you wouldn't do for April?"

My reaction was born of instinct, not thought. I am not normally in the habit of overturning tables or of hurling mugs of hot coffee aimed at a lady's head. Holly ducked it so casually I could have sworn she anticipated it, however and then laughed as it hit the wall, leaving a giant brown mark on the eggshell paint.

"Calm down, Preston." Holly giggled as if I had committed a minor faux pas. "I don't know what you are running from but I'm not them. You are safe here."

"Then how did you know..."

"Kim told me, silly. Besides, everybody who lives in the Estates has their reasons for being here. At least now I can tell you what you will be doing first – get a towel from the closet and mop this up, then get yourself another cup of coffee so we can talk like civilized people."

Chagrined and puzzled, I went to go look for the towel, wondering exactly what I had gotten myself into.

Holly changed before we went out, probably because I had splattered coffee on her dress. The patterned skirt and trim blouse she'd chosen to replace it were both dark, in contrast to golden leggings that emerged beneath her hemline. She had me bring along an umbrella despite the weather, the warmth, the lack of anything other than wispy clouds in the sky.

Traffic on Leng Street was light, mostly trucks and commercial vehicles. There was a scattered assortment of people on the sidewalk, most of whom could not stop staring at Holly. The heels she wore seemed like a poor choice for a long walk, and she took my arm for support after only a few blocks.

"Holly..."

“Preston?”

“Sorry about the coffee.”

“Are you still worrying about that? It’s fine. Kim warned me that you were a little edgy.”

I shoved my hands into my pockets, driving them down so that she couldn’t see my fists clench.

“I was afraid of this,” I admitted. “I am the paranoid bastard I always worried I would become.”

Holly laughed brightly.

“I’m curious about what kind of life experiences would lead you to throwing hot coffee at a woman you’ve only just met. Never mind. You wouldn’t tell me the truth in any case, would you? No, that I mind a man lying to me, you understand. But those aren’t the particular kind of lies that I like to hear.”

That shut me up pretty good. We were quiet for another block, as the town grew gradually more run down and the buildings were incrementally shorter. The faces in the crowd were predominantly wizened and unfriendly.

“Holly,” I begin carefully. “You never told me what it is that you want me to do.”

“If I asked where you came from or where you got that pretty little girl you live with, what would you say to me? Would you make up a story?”

I thought about it for a long time before I answered her. It is not in my nature to be honest about these things, but the best lies have a kernel of truth at their core. Oh, I could tell her whatever I liked with a straight face – I know that much about myself. My body will not betray me. My nerves are rock solid and my mannerisms are rehearsed. I could lie to the face of a god, assuming he has one, and make it sound natural. Nevertheless, Holly would see right through me, no matter how plausible the story I told her.

“Probably.”

She smiled and patted my arm.

“You have to be careful, Preston. Telling the truth can become a habit. A bad one, at that. Especially for a man in your position.”

There it was again. That look that implied all sorts of things, mainly that I would never understand anything going on behind that elegant face.

“Of course, there’s no harm in telling you. We are going to do a number of small things today, Preston. None of them will be difficult or dangerous. Not today. All of them, I assure you, no matter how trivial they seem, are of the utmost necessity. Our first destination is a park not too far from here.”

“That doesn’t really clear anything up for me...”

“You got an answer.” Holly looked at me slyly. “Are you angling for more?”

I shut up. I always did that when I wasn’t certain what I would get if opened my mouth. My hand strayed by reflex to my phone, but it was still too early. I had another thirty minutes, easy, before our first checkin.

The park was desolate and ugly. There was more concrete than grass, and the grass that was there was mostly dead. With an oddly shaped triangular lot and too much slope to make development feasible, it was a typical urban afterthought – better a park than a vacant lot. The trees were spindly pines that leaked sap and left black stains on the sidewalk. The play area was made of battered molded plastic, the colors dulled by rain and sun and neglect. The swings hung, forlorn and seatless, chains swinging gently in a breeze that I could not feel. Holly tutted distastefully and released my arm, digging through the enormous bag slung beneath her arm that she probably would have called a purse.

“Here,” Holly explained, thrusting a small wrapped present in my direction, paisley paper with

corresponding crimson bow, a small, densely hand-written note poking out of the ribbon. "Put it inside there, please."

She pointed, indicating the inside of an ancient, vaguely turtle-shaped cast-iron climbing structure that sat, rusting, at the edge of the sand play area.

"Excuse me?"

"Put this," she said, pointing to the box in my hand, "inside there," she continued, pointing at the innards of the climbing structure. "There should be some graffiti near the back. Look for the word 'GOAST' scratched in the metal, put it underneath that."

"'Ghost'?"

"It will be misspelled."

My mouth opened and then closed again, all without making any sound. I gathered my wits and made a second attempt.

"Okay, but how did you... never mind. You're just going to leave it there, for anyone to find?"

"Not at all," Holly assured me. "The person it's intended for will find it, trust me. I only give people the things they need."

I shrugged and climbed inside. I am sort of a big guy, so it took a little negotiating, but I managed to get enough of myself in there eventually. I squinted in the half-dark until I could see the back of the tight and decaying enclosure. Sure enough, 'GOAST' was scratched into the layer of rust coating the metal, probably with a set of keys. I felt weird leaving the present sitting there, but a job is a job. It was too dark to read the note, but it was definitely addressed to someone and quite long, written in compact and neat cursive. My back was sore by the time I had carefully wormed my way back out.

"Thanks. That would have taken me all afternoon," Holly said inexplicably. "Well, come on. We've tons more to do."

Indeed we did. We left a variety of brilliantly wrapped packages at various locations throughout the neighborhood, walking miles along winding streets. We left one inside the brass mail drop of an abandoned building, another behind a pile of discarded traffic signs underneath a freeway overpass. One was carefully hidden behind staged books in a department store's home furnishings section, while a brilliant yellow package was left casually, in plain view on a park bench outside of an elementary school. There were a dozen more before I lost count.

We stopped in front of a small coffee shop somewhere a bit after noon, near a quiet corner a few blocks from downtown. I expected to be handed a present, until I realized that Holly was waiting for me to open the door for her. I did so, and we went inside, into the smells of fresh bread and roasting coffee. Holly picked out a table near the window and I obediently tagged along.

"So, we are...?"

"Eating. It is lunchtime, Preston. Go ahead and get whatever you want," Holly said, nodding at the counter. "It's on me. Don't worry. They won't ask for money and they already know my order."

I was nervous with the arrangement, but the counter girl welcomed me cheerfully enough, then asked what I would have. I ordered a turkey sandwich and an iced tea, because that was the first thing on the menu I saw.

"You're working for Holly?"

The girl glanced over at me, freckled, teenage and curious, as she filled a glass with ice cubes. She tossed her brunette hair as if she wanted me to notice it.

"Yeah, at least for today. Does she come in here a lot?"

The girl laughed at me and handed me my iced tea, her interest evaporating. Belatedly, I realized she had assumed that I was someone important, someone in the know, simply because I was working

for Holly. Until I opened my big, curious mouth.

~~“Sorry, big guy. You have questions, you ask Holly. It should mean something to you that I know her order without needing to ask.”~~

I just nodded. How exactly do you react to having your stupidity pointed out? Well, if you are like me, you get quiet. I did not say anything until I had ferried my sandwich along with Holly’s Greek salad and some kind of floral-scented tea, to the table.

“You’re doing fine, Preston,” Holly said reassuringly, like a particularly compassionate school teacher, spooning dressing on her salad. “You don’t have to worry. April is fine. Kim is a good person.”

The screen of my cell phone said the same thing in April’s shorthand.

‘Fine. Lunch now. Downstairs. Bring present.’

A normal text from April. She sent them every two hours, without fail. She usually asked for presents, too. Just, she said, to be on the safe side. Almost anything would do as long as she hadn’t seen it before. I made a habit out of trying to find something, every day. With the exception of television, April hadn’t seen much of anything, so novelty was easy to come by.

“Yeah, I guess so. Wish she was a little less hard on me, though.”

Holly gave me a serious look as she munched on her lettuce.

“Kim thinks you are bad news. Dangerous. That you lied to her, and you are lying to April. Would you call any of that incorrect?”

Ack. I put my sandwich down on the plate in front of me carefully so she could not see my hand shake. It seemed extremely important, for some reason, that Holly didn’t realize how badly she had rattled.

“Not exactly wrong, no, but...”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Holly said, smiling as if she had won something. “You’re a good guy, Preston, no matter what Kim thinks, no matter what you think of yourself. You will do the right thing eventually – once you run out of other options.”

And there it was. In praise, condemnation. Bittersweet as the expression on her face.

“How do you know these things?”

Holly shook her lovely head.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. Call it magic if you like. Eat up. We still have things to do today.”

Holly paused to have a cheerful chat with the freckled counter girl on our way out. No one asked her to pay for anything. That, if you ask me, is a very good trick.

The second half of the day was as much a blur of activity as the first. I could not understand how Holly could walk so far in those shoes. We visited a Chinese grocery store where Holly had an animated conversation in what I thought was Mandarin. Eventually, Holly accepted a paper-wrapped bundle without examining it, taking the proffered bag and handing it to me to carry. It wasn’t heavy.

Four blocks later we stopped at a Persian teahouse where there was not another woman in sight and two soccer games played mutely on different televisions. The muttered conversations in English and Farsi were as thick as the smoke in the room. Holly had a brief discussion with a jumpy fat man, who I guessed was the owner. After a whispered conference and some nervous looks at his clientele, he motioned for her to come into a back room. At her nod, I followed.

Behind the teahouse was a dirty white hallway, stairs climbing up to a second story, and a small room at the end of the hall. A man sat, hidden by his newspaper, at the single table there. Holly greeted him cheerfully as she walked by, ascending the stairs with the rotund owner, motioning for me

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