



ANGELA

Mal McCullough

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*This is the keyword-rich,
attention-grabbing subtitle*

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For information contact :

(Address, website)

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Mal McCullough

INSIDE BOOK COVER

When Angela's mother and father pass away, her childhood turns to trauma and chaos and Angela is left to navigate the storm of grief, confusion and the ever-growing chaos that envelops her. As her world unravels she becomes a pawn in the hands the Universe. Angela is confused, frightened and alone. She is unaware that her life's journey through addiction and abuse is being guided by the Universe.

The Universe, however, has a plan for her—a journey of pain and redemption that will ultimately lead to her awakening, becoming a testament to the power of self-discovery and the possibility of redemption even in the darkest corners of existence.

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Prologue

IN A WORLD SHADOWED BY ONGOING STRUGGLES, Angela navigates the turbulent waters of recovery, often unaware of the hidden currents that have steered her course, the haunting echoes of childhood trauma, an insidious specter that lingers in the recesses of her memory, its presence often unrecognized yet deeply influential.

The aftermath of psychological and physical abuse, a malevolent force, invisible and silent, that erodes her cognitive awareness, leaving her with fragmented memories of her past pain. Meandering through life with a diminished capacity to connect deeply with others, her relationships are often superficial and unfulfilling, plagued by an undercurrent of distrust and fear.

The biological scars of her trauma manifest in a heightened responses of fight or flight, a legacy of a time when danger was omnipresent. Interpreting the world through a lens of heightened suspicion and anxiety, a constant state of vigilance. These are the remnants of biological dysfunction, a twisted inheritance from her days of innocence lost to trauma. In her struggle for sobriety, she faces not only the demons of her addictions but also the ghosts of her past.

Her mind, ever resourceful, strives to fill the voids left by what her senses cannot perceive. In an attempt to create a sense of equilibrium she weaves narratives and constructs realities, often far removed from the truth. Her quest for stasis, however, is a double-edged sword as it brings comfort but also delusion, a false sense of understanding.

Trust, once broken, becomes a rare commodity for Angela as her ability to forge genuine, positive connections with others is compromised, leaving her isolated in her internal fortresses.

The illusion of understanding pervades her interactions, creating a facade of comprehension that is more varied and colorful than reality.

In this complex dance of perception and reality, Angela strives to redefine herself. She seeks to break free from the chains of her constructed selves, to uncover the truth beneath the layers of illusion. Her journey is not just about battling addiction but about rediscovering her authentic self, that she lost in the maelstrom of childhood trauma.

As she navigates this challenging path, she comes to realize a profound truth – she understands less than we think. Her grasp of reality is but a sliver of the vast tapestry of existence. In acknowledging this, she begins to see the world with new eyes, eyes that are more accepting of the unknown and more forgiving of the imperfections within herself and others.

Hers is a story of reflection, of the resilience of the human spirit, a testament to the power of self-discovery and healing. It is a reminder that even in the depths of despair, there is hope, and in the journey towards recovery, there is the potential for transformation and redemption.

First Night

The journey toward redemption and healing is a journey you cannot avoid.

ANGELA HAD ALWAYS DREAMED OF ESCAPING THE SHADOWS that clung to her existence in the city. The dimly lit room with its creaky wire bed and unforgiving mattress served as a constant reminder of the life she desperately wanted to leave behind. Her days were spent navigating the cold, concrete streets, seeking refuge in the only world she knew – a world where her body became a commodity, traded for survival.

Lying in the early morning hours, a sense of restlessness consumed her as she tried to alleviate the pain in her hips. The oppressive heat of tropical Far North Queensland hung in the air, and the squeaky ceiling fan above struggled in vain to cool the room. The old 1970s timepiece atop the three draw wooden cabinet seemed to mock her, its rhythmic 'clack' echoing in the stillness of the night as she felt the walls slowly squeezing in upon her.

With each passing minute, she counted down, attempting to will herself into sleep. The walls seemed to close in around her, and the mosquitoes, persistent in their buzzing, added to her discomfort. The geckos, their clucking sounds like distant echoes, chased the pests across the ceiling. Despite her physical discomfort, she couldn't shake off the mental unease caused by the unfamiliar symphony.

Sweat dribbled down her neck as she lay on her back, staring at the ceiling. The shrill cries of the native curlew outside her room, reminiscent of a screaming human baby, sent shivers down her spine. '*God, just my fuckin' luck,*' she muttered to herself. The thought of disease-carrying mosquitoes and the eerie cries of the curlew didn't make her new surroundings any more inviting.

As the night wore on, her mind became a battleground of discomfort and frustration. She grappled with the strange sounds and sensations of her environment, yearning for relief. In her silent screams, she cursed the lack of baits to ward off the creatures that seemed to make her room their nocturnal playground. Little did she know, the challenges of her first night were merely an introduction to the eclectic cast of characters that inhabited her new world. In the days that followed, she encountered not only the persistent mosquitoes and geckos but also the enigmatic people of Far North Queensland. The nocturnal cacophony became threads in the tapestry of her own story, a narrative of self-discovery in a world that was both strange and fascinating and an entree into her coming to terms of being enclosed with many strange and bewildering beings. She was to find herself entangled in a tapestry of unfamiliar faces and the unyielding secrets they held.

In the small room, bathed in the eerie glow of the full moon, she lay awake on her bed, the yellow and blue colored glass window allowing moonlight to spill across the faded and torn purple tulip motif wallpaper. Shadows danced on the walls, cast by the swaying branches of the mammoth mango tree just outside the window. The moonlight revealed the decay within the room—the peeling pink lead paint on the ceiling, the encroaching mold stain above the three-panel wooden door.

Transfixed by the moving shadows, she found her mind racing through memories she had long tried to suppress. Unwanted flashes of the past haunted her, causing her heart to race with a mix of fear and confusion.

Unable to bear the torment of her own thoughts, she leapt from her bed, rushing toward the window in a desperate attempt to thwart the shadows that seemed to mock her. Her trembling hands fumbled with the blackened mould-stained drawstrings of the wooden blind, hoping to block out the moonlight that served as a spotlight for her unsettling memories.

As the room plunged into darkness, she took a moment to catch her breath. The shadows, once ominous, now lay dormant, hidden from her consciousness. The silence of the night surrounded her, broken only by the rustling leaves of the colossal mango tree.

Peering from the blind to the outside, she noticed that her room, perched on the second story, overlooked the grandeur of the massive tree. Its branches reached up alongside the building, obscuring any view of the ground below, it had a width that matched its height, exuded a sense of majesty that dwarfed her small existence. She found an unexpected comfort in the embrace of the tree. Its sturdy limbs seemed to cradle her in a protective cocoon, offering a sanctuary from the tumultuous memories that had threatened to consume her. In the quiet moments that followed, she couldn't help but marvel at the resilience of the tree. Its roots, hidden beneath the ground, mirrored the buried memories that she sought to escape.

As the night unfolded, she found solace in the silent companionship of the majestic tree. The moon, now obscured by the thick foliage, whispered secrets of growth, resilience, and the inevitability of embracing both light and shadow. Yet, like the tree, she realized the strength of the power that came from confronting the shadows of the past.

As she slowly turned away from the window, the semi-darkness of the room revealed itself to her strained vision. Puzzled and disorientated for a moment, she couldn't remember walking up any stairs to be on a second story, for that matter she couldn't remember coming into the room.

She felt a surge of disorientation. Her heart raced, breaths came in short, fast gasps, and her legs shook beneath her, threatening to give way. The room seemed to spin, and a wave of nausea gripped her stomach, akin to the unsettling feeling of seasickness. Attempting to make sense of her surroundings, her mind was a turbulent sea of confusion. A fleeting memory flickered—a vague recollection of being told she was expected to surrender her life to others in this place. The thought sent shivers down her spine, and the question hung in the air: *Where the hell am I?*

The room itself seemed like a blur, a disorienting landscape that triggered memories of a time when agency of her own destiny was not a thing. She was unable to find her bearings in this disconcerting present, she felt the weight of a past she had fought to overcome. Memories of a time when she had no say in where she lived or whom she answered to, flooded her mind. It was a time when saying no or escaping pain were luxuries she couldn't afford.

As she reached out with her left arm to steady herself, the slimy texture of the mouldy wall greeted her touch. Turning to face the wall, she pressed her right arm against it, bending over with her head between her arms. The room spun faster, and a surge of nausea rose within her. In a sudden, violent eruption, projectile vomit expelled from her, coating the mouldy wall and rebounding over her legs.

"Fuck!" she yelled, the exclamation punctuating the disarray of her thoughts and the visceral reality of her surroundings.

Drenched in sweat and vomit she struggled to catch her breath. The room seemed to close in on her, a suffocating reminder of a past she had hoped to leave behind.

As the echoes of her yell faded, she took a moment to gather herself. The pungent odour of vomit hung in the air, mingling with the dampness of the mouldy walls. It was in this unsettling moment that she realized she needed

to confront not only the physical discomfort of her surroundings but also the haunting memories that threatened to pull her back into a life she had fought so hard to escape.

The journey to reclaim control over her own narrative had just begun, and knew she had to navigate the darkness within to find the light she sought.

In the dimly lit room, the aftermath of Angela's struggle left a nauseating stench hanging in the air. Another round of the warm, stinging liquid erupted from her mouth, splashing onto her feet. The sickly sound reverberated, echoing the turmoil within her. Out of breath and clinging desperately to the wall, she gasped for air as if each inhalation were a lifeline.

"Jesus - stop!" she urged between breaths, her voice a strained plea against the relentless assault on her senses.

The greenish-yellow ooze slid down the wall, pooling at her feet, and the putrid smell filled the room, reminiscent of a compost heap baking in the hot sun, yet laced with a sickly sweet edge.

Summoning all her strength, she released her grip on the wall, gingerly sliding her feet away from the mess. With a grimace, she wiped her feet on the carpet, the coarse fibres offering little comfort. Grabbing a towel, she half-heartedly cleaned the wall before spreading the towel on the floor. Bent over, she scrubbed the top of her feet, the dry retches from her stomach continuing their relentless assault on her already weakened state.

Sweat dripped from her armpits, soaked her hair, and rolled down her forehead. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she then smeared it on her black singlet top, leaving a streak of defeat across the fabric. Her head throbbed with each heartbeat, and the room began to spin as dizziness overtook her senses.

Realizing that she needed to escape the overwhelming smell and

surrender to the pain and exhaustion and gathering the last ounce of her strength, she staggered toward the squeaky, lumpy bed. With a desperate lurch, she threw herself onto the wire and steel frame, shuddering and vibrating in response to the force. As her body sank into the worn mattress, her mind teetered on the edge of consciousness. The room swirled in a hazy dance, and the pungent smell lingered like a malevolent spectre. With each breath, she sought refuge in the darkness of her closed eyes, clinging to the fragile hope that in the dim silence of the room, sleep might bring temporary relief from the relentless assault on her senses.

She surrendered to the throbbing pain, her consciousness slipping away into a twilight realm where dreams and nightmares coalesced in the fractured landscape of her troubled mind.

In the quiet aftermath of her bodily turmoil, she lay still, the room slowly settling into a stagnant calm. It took a relentless 15 minutes before the thumping in her head began to subside, evolving into a constant ache, like a constrictive band pulled tight across her temples. The stomach cramps faded, and the dry retching subsided, leaving behind a lingering chill from the sweat that clung to her body.

Yanking the thin, pink, open-weave cover over her head, she sought refuge not only from the persistent shivers but also from the ever-present mosquitoes. Beneath the cover, a long, deep sniff filled her senses. The familiar scent of the cover, a hint of lavender and mothballs, wafted through the air, evoking memories of a distant past. It was a scent that eerily offered her a sense of comfort and safety, a stark contrast to her present reality. The smell transported her to her childhood, a time when all she had to shield herself from the harshness of the world was an old, thin, and smelly blanket. It was a meagre source of warmth and security, a makeshift shield against the heat and cold that were mere reflections of the emotional climate she endured. The memories of those times lingered, painting a vivid picture of a past she had

long sought to escape.

As she relaxed beneath the cover, attempting to ward off the shivers and mosquitoes, her mind waged its own battle. Thoughts surfaced like ghosts from her past, each one a haunting reminder of the reality she had desperately tried to forget. She grappled with the images and emotions that crowded her mind, the echoes of a childhood marked by hardship and struggle.

Closing her eyes, she attempted to block out the memories, to retreat from the painful recollections that threatened to resurface. Yet, as she sank into the cocoon of the thin, pink cover, the walls between her past and present blurred, exposing the vulnerability that lay beneath the surface. In the stillness of the night, with the smell of lavender and mothballs lingering in the air, she confronted not only the physical discomfort of her current situation but also the emotional wounds that time had failed to heal. The night unfolded with a fragile peace, but the shadows of the past lingered, waiting to be acknowledged and, perhaps, ultimately overcome.

Attempting to find solace in the rhythmic 'clacking' of the clock. She desperately sought a meditative escape from the shrill cries of the curlews, the geckos' incessant clucking, and the relentless buzzing of mosquitoes feasting on her type O blood. The more she tried to block out the cacophony of the animal world, the more it intensified, invading her attempts at tranquility. As the dissonant symphony persisted, she found herself succumbing to the pressure. In her struggle for serenity, she began to replay the events that had brought her to this moment. Memories flooded her mind, each one a snapshot of a life marked by turbulence and the relentless pursuit of escape.

Amidst the myriad recollections, the moments with her friends and family emerged, particularly the years spent with her son, Gabrielle, who was now 20. His image flickered in her mind, a poignant reminder of the one constant presence that had pleaded with her to change her ways. Gabrielle,

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with eyes filled with concern and compassion, had been a steadfast advocate for her well-being. For years, he had pleaded with her to cease or, at the very least, reduce her drinking and drug use. His unwavering love and desire for her to break free from the shackles of addiction echoed through the corridors of her memories.

As the clock continued its rhythmic 'clacking,' Angela faced the profound impact of her choices on those who cared for her. Gabrielle's words, spoken with a son's love and a painful truth, reverberated in her mind. She grappled with the weight of her past and the toll it had taken on her relationships.

As she lay on the bed, the room seemed to close in around her. The animal chorus outside persisted, but within the confines of her mind, a different kind of turmoil unfolded. Angela knew that she stood at a crossroads, and the decisions she made in this moment could shape the trajectory of her future. She found herself grappling not only with external forces but also with the internal echoes of her own choices.

Gabrielle

The ghosts of your dreams whisper of possibilities yet to be explored.

IN THE DIMLY LIT ROOM, ANGELA'S MIND WANDERED through the corridors of her memory, retracing the all-too-familiar path of heartache and regret. She dwelled on the fleeting embraces, the tears that marked both love and separation, and the wide, lost eyes of her son, a confused and vulnerable child who bore the weight of his mother's struggles.

The echoes of his childhood resounded in Angela's consciousness—the short hugs, the tears of love and separation, and the haunting image of a young boy, blaming himself for his mother's repeated departures to yet another stranger's house. Gabrielle had spent years shuttling through a dysfunctional state foster care service, a consequence of Angela being deemed an unfit mother when he was just six years old.

For the longest time, their interactions were limited to Children Services visitations, a brief connection in a sea of uncertainty. As Gabrielle grew older and eventually left the State care system, his resentment festered, transforming childhood guilt into adult anger and abandonment.

Regular contact with Angela became a distant memory, marred by the spectre of her destructive addictive behaviours. The years of missed opportunities and the emotional pain she had inflicted upon her son loomed

large in Angela's reflections. Recounting the choices that had led her down a destructive path, the grief and loss resurfaced, etched into the narrative of her life. Deep beneath the surface of her sorrow, an ongoing anguish festered, a guilt that mirrored the torment she herself had endured. Tears spilled down her cheeks as the weight of her actions became too much to bare. In the quiet solitude of the room, she confronted the painful truth that her choices had not only shaped her own life but had cast a long shadow over Gabrielle's as well. The room seemed to close in around her as the realization crystallized, leaving her grappling with the tangled emotions of regret, sorrow, and an overwhelming sense of powerlessness.

"Fuck it, Angela. God. You can't go on; it's got to stop!" Her words escaping in a burst of frustration and desperation.

The stark truth echoed in the empty room, resonating with the heaviness of a reckoning that had long been overdue. In that moment, she confronted the imperative to break free from the destructive patterns that had defined her life and, in turn, impacted the life of her son. The journey ahead loomed uncertain, but she had reached a crossroads, and the choice before her held the power to shape the redemption she so desperately sought.

She stared into the abyss of her recent choices as she grappled with the urgent need to redeem herself in the eyes of Gabrielle, who, again, had responded to her latest cry for help, a lifeline she desperately clung to. The memory of his face loomed large in her mind, his eyes reflecting a mixture of disgust and sadness, a painful testament to her latest descent into the depths of her addiction.

It had only been two weeks since she stood behind cold, unforgiving bars in the police lockup.

The memories of her son, a source of both joy and pain, flooded her consciousness. She revisited the moments they had shared, the laughter, and

the innocence that had once defined their relationship. But the warmth of those memories was overshadowed by the harsh reality of her own choices, the abuse she endured to feed her addiction. Each painful recollection etched deeper lines of despair on the canvas of her existence.

Her heart was heavy, burdened by the memory of that haunting look in her son's eyes - a look that bore the weight of disappointment and a silent understanding of her failures. It was a look that seemed to pierce through her, etching a deep, indelible mark on her soul. Each time she closed her eyes, it was there, a vivid reminder of the pain she had caused.

As she sat alone, enveloped in the stillness of the night, her mind relentlessly replayed the events of that evening. She could see her son's face, so much like her own, yet lined with a maturity far beyond his years, a maturity forged in the fire of her own shortcomings. The knowledge that she had, once again, let him down was a bitter pill to swallow, and it left a sour taste of regret that lingered on her tongue. Her son, her precious boy, had been a silent spectator to the rollercoaster of her life – a life marred by too many wrong turns and not enough right ones. He deserved more, so much more than the broken promises and weak justifications she had offered in the past. He deserved a mother who could be his rock, rather than another storm he had to weather. The guilt that gnawed at her was like a relentless tide, threatening to engulf her in its dark, unforgiving waters.

In the dimly lit room of the rehabilitation center, her cries resonated, a haunting echo that filled the stifling, heavy air. The burden of unresolved grief was a palpable force, pressing down on her with an almost physical intensity. She buried her face into the pillow, her tears soaking into the grey-stained fabric. They had become a silent witness to her darkest nights. Nights when the engulfing darkness seemed too vast to overcome, and her only refuge lay in the cathartic release of weeping. The room itself was a stark, unyielding reminder of her battles, a microcosm of her inner turmoil. Its walls, bare and

unadorned, seemed to close in around her, embodying the confinement of her own struggles. The dampness that hung in the air clung to her skin, a chilling embrace that mirrored the wet trails of tears on her cheeks. In this secluded, solitary space, she was forced to confront the harsh, unvarnished reality of the path her life had taken. Her sobs, a raw and audible manifestation of her inner chaos, continued unabated. It felt as though the weight of her past, a tapestry of mistakes and regrets, was a tangible force, bearing down on her, threatening to engulf her very essence. As the night stretched on, the shadows cast by the meager light seemed to dance upon the walls. They moved in a macabre tandem with the ghosts of her dreams that haunted her restless sleep, creating a surreal landscape in her small, confined world.

Even as the intensity of her crying gradually diminished, transforming into exhausted whimpers, the emotional tempest that had raged within her left a profound exhaustion in its wake. She felt drained, not just in body but in spirit, as if every tear shed had taken a piece of her anguish with it. Eventually, succumbing to the sheer weight of her sorrow, she drifted into a fitful sleep. The lingering tears on her cheeks glistened faintly in the dim light.

The Room

It's the defining moments that shape our journey's narrative.

THE PRE-DAWN MORNING UNFOLDED in hues of yellow and blue, casting a surreal glow upon the small, shoebox-sized room. The multi-colored window, adorned with a motley assortment of hues, filtered the early light through slats in the wooden blinds. The aftermath of the previous night's rain left a humid legacy, turning the room into a steamy cocoon. This close, stifling humidity would persist throughout most of the day until the predictable evening rains arrived, a rhythmic cycle that mirrored the patterns of Angela's life.

She stirred, dragging herself from the thin-weave blanket that clung uncomfortably to her body. As she threw it off, her gaze lingered on the peeling ceiling, a visual representation of the decay that surrounded her. The room, though modest in size, felt oppressive in its confines, magnifying the weight of her own internal struggles.

The humidity, unforgiving and relentless, had begun to breathe life into the congealing vomit on the carpet. Its putrid stench permeated the air, a sickening reminder of the degradation that had become a constant companion. Though familiar with such squalor, she couldn't escape the overpowering scent that now seemed to possess a life of its own.

As she surveyed the room, the relentless tug of war within her intensified. Her internal landscape echoed with the ceaseless conflict between her negative emotional self and her rational self, the latter desperately grasping at the fraying edges of hope. The room became a battleground, and she found herself ensnared in the suffocating embrace of her own thoughts.

The temptation to succumb to the darkness clawed at the edges of her consciousness. Her internal dialogue, poisoned by negativity, toyed with the idea of ending this arduous journey prematurely, whatever it entailed. The weight of her existence bore down on her, and the room seemed to pulsate with the rhythm of her internal turmoil.

In this claustrophobic space, she grappled with the conflicting forces that defined her reality, the external decay mirrored by the room, and the internal decay mirrored by her own fractured psyche. The pre-dawn light cast a deceptive tranquility, belying the storm that raged within. As the day unfolded, she stood at the precipice of a choice, whether to surrender to the darkness that loomed or to summon the strength to face the uncertain path ahead. The journey, whatever it was, demanded a reckoning, as she teetered on the brink.

The idea of escaping this place took root in her mind like a stubborn weed pushing through cracked pavement. The impulse to make a swift exit surged through her. It was a desperate bid to break free from the oppressive confines of the room, to evade the tendrils of decay that seemed to snake around her every thought. *If I'm quick enough, I can bolt from here and be gone. Macca will take me in for a night or two, not a problem.'*

The front door, wherever it was, beckoned as a portal to potential freedom. The possibility of trading the stifling room for the open air, even if just temporarily, ignited a spark of hope. As she swung around to search for her black fake leather travel bag, the bed emitted a loud screech, a piercing protestation against the clandestine escape plan still forming in her mind. The

sound, a reminder of her confinement, seemed to echo beyond the four walls, broadcasting her intentions to anyone who might be lurking in the shadows. But then an unexpected voice resonated within her, *First thought wrong,* the words echoed a lifeline from a distant past. A psychologist's strategy, urging her to pause, reflect, and reconsider before making impulsive choices, reverberated in her mind. In that moment, the unexpected intrusion of that psychological wisdom interrupted her flight of desperation.

Why the voice surfaced at this precise moment, she couldn't fathom, but it felt like a lifeline, a timely reminder to resist the impulsive urges that had often led her astray. Caught in the pause, she sat in the room's dim light, her black travel bag forgotten for the moment. The echoes of her tumultuous thoughts lingered, but in this interlude, a small seed of contemplation took root. The room, though still oppressive, seemed to offer a moment of reprieve, a crossroads where she grappled with the choice between impulsive escape and remain ensnared in the cycle of self-destruction or to seize the fragile opportunity for the possibility of a more deliberate, thoughtful, purposeful path.

She felt her heart racing, as if she had just climbed a set of stairs, breath quickening, and sweat returning to her forehead. The metal bed screeched and groaned in protest as she gingerly placed her feet onto the grey-blue, threadbare carpet. Catching a whiff of its dank, musty smell, her nose crinkled. *Looks and smells like it's seen more than its fair share of shit from a lot of troubled souls before me. I bet it hasn't seen a steam cleaner since the day it was laid.*

As she scanned the room for her leather sandals, her gaze fell to the vomit on the floor, a visual reminder of the chaos she had wrought only a few hours ago. Earlier in the day, in a fit of anger and frustration at her predicament, she had hurled her meager possessions to the far reaches of the room. One sandal lay near the door, a lone sentinel on the battlefield of her emotions, while the other perched atop the multi-colored wardrobe that

seemed to be plucked from a side show alley. Discarded on the floor at the end of the bed she found for her fashionably faded denim jeans, Yanking off the black AC/DC singlet, stained with vomit from the tumultuous night, she retrieved another of the same from her bag. It was a size too small for her, emblazoned on the front was a bold design, a bottle of Victoria Beer sitting atop a large, ornately designed skull, from which protruded two syringes. Pulling on the snug singlet, her reflection stared back at her from the large, cracked mirror, on the sideboard opposite the end of the bed. The image held a complex mix of defiance and vulnerability. Her fingers fumbled with the straps of her leather sandals, securing them onto her feet.

The room, though a testament to neglect, with its stained carpet and mismatched furnishings, bore the scars of countless struggles. She too, bore her own scars, visible and invisible, etched into the tapestry of her life. With determination flickering in her eyes, she stood, ready to face the uncertain journey that lay ahead. offered a starting point for a new chapter—one where resilience might triumph over despair, and where the echoes of a troubled past could be drowned out by the footsteps of progress.

Attempting to stand, she moved ever so slowly, seeking balance and navigating each step with caution. The room seemed to sway around her, a disorienting dance that mirrored the turmoil within. She shuffled toward the end of the bed, only to stumble over the hastily packed bag that bore witness to her sudden decision a week before, a decision triggered by the unexpected visit from her probation officer. Stumbling, she pressed on, her unsteady movements taking her to the warped wardrobe. Stretching upward to retrieve her sandal, she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the cracked mirror. Time seemed to freeze as she halted in her tracks. Leaning forward, she studied the figure that stared back at her, a distorted image of a woman with tired eyes and a spirit yearning for more. The room's dim light cast shadows on the lines etched into her face, each telling a story of hardship and resilience.

In the stillness of the room, standing before the mirror, a mere reflection of the vibrant woman she used to be stared back at her. She found herself locked in a silent exchange with the stranger in the mirror, a stranger who had become all too familiar. Her hollow eyes, burdened by fatigue, told a story of sleepless nights and relentless battles. With her nose touching its cold surface and creating a mist before her, she flashed back to a time when she stood, as a frightened child, with her nose against the glass of her mother's hospital room, creating a mist, refusing to accept the inevitability of life.

She traced the dark rings under her eyes, an intricate map of weariness that was etched into her face. The circles seemed to accentuate the once lively brown pupils that now gazed back at her, bloodshot, half-closed eye, a haunting reminder of nights disrupted by shadows and turmoil. Her cheeks, once filled with life, had succumbed to the relentless toll of illness. They now bore the marks of sunken hollowness, and her skin, once kissed by vitality, now wore a sickly pale yellow hue. It whispered of an internal struggle, an ailing liver desperately fighting against the invasion of Hepatitis C. Her fingers, stained and worn, gingerly tugged at her limp, greasy hair. The strands, now neglected for half a year, retained the echoes of a time when they cascaded with health and vitality. The mirror's reflection revealed the grime and neglect that clung to her once-lustrous locks, serving as a tangible symbol of her descent.

Her gaze shifted to her teeth, each one bearing the scars of a tumultuous past. With her forefinger, she attempted to scrape away the yellow buildup that coated her enamel. Many teeth were missing, and those that remained were stained with hues of yellow and black, a visible testament to the toll exacted by years of injecting substances into her veins.

Her reflection portrayed a woman caught in the grips of despair, a mere shell of the vibrant soul she once embodied. The mirror, like a merciless storyteller, narrated the chapters of her life, a journey marked by hardships,

addiction, and the arduous pursuit of survival.

For the first time in a long time, she truly looked at herself, beyond the physical flaws and the scars that marked her journey. The tired eyes reflected a history of battles fought, and the weary spirit held dreams that had weathered storms. In that moment of introspection, she confronted the stranger within, acknowledging the pain, and the strength, that lingered beneath the surface. A spark ignited within her, fueled by a desire for change that had long been dormant. It was a flicker of hope, a glimmer of recognition that the path she had tread, could be altered.

In the dim light of the room, the mirror served as an unforgiving witness to the toll of her tumultuous journey, of a life lived on the fringes, a life marked by self-destruction and the ravages of addiction. As she lingered, the weight of her reflection sunk in. It was a confrontation with the physical manifestation of her struggles, a confrontation that stirred conflicting emotions within her, a blend of regret, self-loathing, and a flicker of determination. The woman reflecting back at her in the mirror was battered and worn. A raw expression of frustration and despair reverberated through the room.

"Fuck me, what have you done, you stupid bitch!"

As her eyes continued the survey the reflection, she couldn't ignore the small, encrusted sores on the corner of her mouth. Cracked and bleeding they triggered a vivid memory of the last time she had engaged in oral sex with the City Mayor. A bitter chuckle escaped her lips, a dark humour that momentarily lightened the heavy atmosphere of the room. The juxtaposition of laughter and the reality of her circumstances created a disconcerting harmony. The internal struggle between acceptance and denial played out in this silent battle against her own image, as the cracks in the mirror reflected the fractures within her psyche.

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Unable to contain the tumult within, she slowly lowered her head, closed her eyes, and clenched her teeth. She unleashed her pent-up frustration on the warped wardrobe, thumping it with both clenched hands, it banged against the wall and twisted sideways. Holding tightly to the sideboard, she violently shook her head from side to side. With each motion, she sucked in her breath, filling her lungs, only to exhale forcefully in an anguished release of frustration. The room seemed to echo with the sounds of her turmoil, a symphony of desperation and denial, her voice oscillating between self-pity and defiance.

Leaving the room

"Fuck me, how did it come to this?"

The cramped room, with its warped wardrobe and cracked mirror, fractured like Angela's resolve, stood as silent spectators to a soul grappling with conflicting forces. It bore witness to her internal struggle and blame found a target in Macca, her probation officer. He was the personification of toughness and unyielding resolve to tough love Angela on the path to recovery.

"That cunt Macca, if he hadn't been so fuckin' tough, I wouldn't be here. He could've given me a break. For fuck's sake, I told him I was giving it away. I just needed some time."

In these moments, the room transformed into more than just a physical space; it became a vivid stage where the unfolding drama of her existence played out in stark relief.

Around her, the walls seemed to pulsate with the weight of her choices, each one a step that had led her to this critical juncture. The air was thick with the tension of her conflicting desires: the oppressive grip of her current life and the desperate, aching yearning, for another, as the harsh reality that enveloped her life cast long shadows across her heart.

Each breath she took was heavy with the gravity of her situation. In this arena of her life, each choice held the power to redefine her, each moment was an opportunity to either succumb to the inertia of despair or to muster the courage to stride towards a new destiny.

It was here, in this crucible of self-reflection, that the true struggle for her soul was being waged.

Settling from her fit of frustration and anger, she composed herself enough to finish dressing, which included spraying deodorant under her arms while her shirt was still on.

Angela's internal battle waged on as she stood at the precipice of her desire for a cigarette warring against the rules of the rehab'. The scent of rebellion hung in the air as she wrestled with the urge to satisfy her smoking addiction that clung to her like a persistent shadow. *'Fuck, I could do with a fag.'*

Her gaze fixated on the large DO NOT SMOKE IN THE ROOMS signs, a stark reminder of the boundaries imposed upon her. The fluorescent pink fire alarms on the ceiling stared down, almost taunting her with the consequence of disobedience. Yet, the allure of a simple act of defiance tugged at her, beckoning her to challenge the rules that constrained her.

Though the window, with its open weave flywire barrier, presented a potential loophole, she faced the door feeling the increasing urgency of her craving, as the call of the cigarette echoed louder with each passing moment. The internal debate raged on—risking the disapproval of authority versus succumbing to the familiar comfort of nicotine. The ceiling fan, her potential accomplice, loomed as a mediator in this clandestine affair.

Summoning a deep breath, she mustered the courage to place her sweaty hand on the old round brass knob and gently turn it. As the solid

wooden door gradually opened, it came halfway and stuck.

"Fuck it, God, nothing fuckin' works!"

The room echoed with her exasperation, the stubborn door becoming a symbolic barrier between her and the fleeting solace she sought beyond.

Managing to force the door wide open, the rusty hinges protested, screeching in protest. As she stepped into the door space, the corridor bathed in the harsh glow of fluorescent lights., she found herself exposed to the wider world of rehab, a place she never thought she would end up.

The corridor stretched both ways, the walls were a stark hospital white with lighting from two uncovered flickering florescent tubes fixed to the roof, illuminating identical doors leading to rooms like the one she had just escaped. The same blue-grey carpet that had covered the floor of her confinement now extended down the hallway. *'Must have been a job lot from an ugly carpet sale when they got this lot in,'* she shook her head in disbelief, as if trying to dispel the surreal feeling that had settled over her since she arrived at the rehab.

Tentatively moving from the safety of her doorway, into the corridor, she observed an open door leading into a large kitchen. Smelling burning pancakes wafting from the kitchen, she realized that the pains in her stomach were a mixture of continued withdrawal and hunger, and that a pancake and a cup of earl grey tea wouldn't go astray.

The smell of the pancakes and the tea immediately transported her to just after her fifth birthday, when it was just her and her father living in their old house in Shadow Creek.

Daddy

Angela and her father, Joesph, would spend as many early Sunday mornings together, as his driving job would allow, sitting on the back large wooden verandah watching the sun come up. Quietly opening her bedroom door, he would lean over her bed, bend down, and gently stroke her blonde hair that has been transformed into a bird's nest over night.

“Come on sweetie, its nearly time to see a new day, let say hello to mummy,”

Awakening from her slumber, she couldn't help but smile upon seeing him standing tall above her. With a playful gesture, she threw off the cozy, thick doona and stretched out her arms wide. In a swift, loving motion, he scooped her up, twirling her around in a whirlwind of laughter until a pleasant dizziness enveloped them both. As the spinning world around them gradually slowed, he carefully set her down on the soft sheepskin rug and tenderly wrapped her in her pink fluffy dressing gown.

As dawn painted the sky in hues of pink and gold, Angela stepped onto the verandah of her childhood home. Clad in her purple long pants pajamas and white fluffy slippers peeking out from her gown, she sat on the

first step The crisp morning air embraced her, carrying with it the promise of another Sunday morning ritual.

Nervous anticipation fluttered in her stomach as she heard the familiar sounds of her father in the kitchen, preparing the breakfast that had become a comforting tradition. A small smile played on her lips as the door creaked open, he carried a tray adorned with two large cups of hot Earl Grey tea and a plate piled high with pancakes, generously slathered with butter and honey. As he handed her the tray, their eyes met, and a silent understanding passed between them. This ritual, born out of loss and shared grief, had become a lifeline for both father and daughter. He settled down beside her, enjoying the warmth of the morning sun as the aromas of breakfast filled the air.

The two sat in comfortable silence, sipping tea and savoring the pancakes. Each bite held a memory, a remembrance of the woman they had lost less than a year ago, due to an aggressive brain tumor.

The large eucalyptus tree, standing tall and majestic in the backyard, served as a silent witness to their Sunday mornings and the emotions that unfolded beneath its branches. Angela's father, a pillar of strength despite his own grief, had taken on the role of both parents. In the quiet moments shared on the verandah, he offered comfort and love through the simple act of preparing breakfast. Angela, in turn, clung to these moments, finding solace in the routine that connected her to the past.

As they sat together, the sun rose higher, casting a warm glow over the verandah. The eucalyptus leaves rustled in the gentle breeze, carrying with them a scent that seemed to envelop the father and daughter in a cocoon of memories. The tree, a symbol of endurance and resilience, stood as a testament to the passage of time and the cycles of life.

In the midst of their shared silence, Angela and her father found a

quiet strength. The Sunday morning ritual became more than just a meal; it became a bridge between the past and the present, a way to honor the memory of a beloved wife and mother.

As they finished their breakfast, Angela and her father exchanged a glance that spoke volumes, acknowledging the unspoken bond that had grown stronger through their shared grief and the simple Sunday morning rituals on the verandah.

Cuddling up next to him she watched the sun rise and smelt the scent of fresh eucalyptus. With the innocence of a child, and as a comfort to her, she asked of her father the same question every Sunday morning.

“Daddy. Why did mummy have to die?”

“You know she was very sick sweetie. Now she’s with the angels, they’re looking after her.”

“Do you think one day I could be an angel and look after mummy too?”

“Absolutely my darling. You can be anything you want to be. Always remember sweetie. You’re already an angel.”

In the quiet solitude, bathed in the warm glow of the morning sun, Angela embraced her father, feeling the weight of his sorrow in the tightness of his hold. Tears streamed down his weathered cheeks, leaving a trail of grief that seemed insurmountable. The loss they shared had forged an unspoken bond, a connection that transcended words.

As she rested her head against her father's chest, she could feel the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, a comforting pulse that offered a semblance of solace in the midst of their shared pain. With a tender touch, she raised her arm and wiped away his tears with the back of her hand, a gesture of comfort born out of an instinct to ease his suffering. His dampened cheeks bore

witness to the depth of his grief.

Angela's fingers, now moist with the traces of her father's sorrow, moved to her gown. With a gentle stroke, she wiped her hand, taking with it the physical remnants of his anguish.

Closing her eyes, she inhaled deeply, her senses overwhelmed by the familiar scent of his 'Old Spice' aftershave. The fragrance, a subtle blend of warmth and familiarity, enveloped her, offering a sense of comfort and safety that transcended the pain of their shared loss. In that moment, the scent became a lifeline, connecting her to the memories of her mother's scent of frangipani and patchouli, a poignant reminder of the woman they both loved and the enduring bond that would carry them through the challenges of healing and moving forward.

"I really miss her too, Daddy."

Her father, still holding her close, nodded in acknowledgment. No words were needed; their shared grief forged a silent understanding that bound them together in the face of life's most profound challenge. As they lingered in that embrace, time seemed to stand still. In the midst of their collective sorrow, they found strength in their connection, a shared journey through the labyrinth of loss. In the quiet space they created, Angela and her father clung to each other.

Meet the Residents

ANGELA'S MIND GENTLY DRIFTED BACK FROM THE DEPTHS of her daydreams, where echoes of the past played like old films in the theatre of her memory. In these fleeting moments of escape, she had revisited the happier times, the laughter-filled days that now seemed like fragments of another life. But as the veil of reminiscence lifted, the stark reality of her present situation settled around her once more .

Wiping the tears from her eyes and releasing a deep, defeating sigh, Angela redirected her thoughts to the kitchen of the rehab facility. The remnants of her emotional outburst lingered, but practical matters demanded attention. She observed the pile of used dishes submerged in cold, grey water in the sink. On the grey-blue countertop, matching the hallway carpet, lay a scattered heap of toasted breadcrumbs beside a tub of slowly melting butter.

The scene unfolded before her: an open milk bottle, abandoned and forgotten, left to warm on the countertop; a jar of peanut butter with its lid placed upside down, trapping two flies in its sticky confines, slowly succumbing to the growing humidity.

"What a fuckin' mess!" she muttered, her exasperation extending beyond the boundaries of her emotional turmoil.

Through the door leading outside to the wooden landing overlooking

a small courtyard, the first light of dawn began to paint the sky above the palm trees. The promise of a new day contrasted sharply with the disorder within. Angela took a moment to absorb the scene, the chaos in the kitchen standing as a metaphor for the turbulence within herself.

Summoning a renewed sense of purpose, Angela approached the kitchen sink. She turned on the tap, letting the cold water flow over her hands. With deliberate movements, she began to tackle the pile of dirty dishes, the rhythmic sound of water and scrubbing creating a semblance of order within the disorder. As she worked, the rising sun cast its warm glow across the wooden landing, offering a fleeting sense of tranquillity amidst the chaos of rehab life.

The kitchen, now devoid of the haphazard remnants, began to transform into a space of relative order. Though still wrestling with her internal struggles, she found a small victory in bringing a semblance of cleanliness to her immediate surroundings. The sun continued its ascent, casting a warm light on the courtyard below, a reminder that each day brought the possibility of renewal, even in the face of the messiness that defined her journey.

Venturing down the shaky, wobbling staircase, each step gingerly tested for stability, Angela descended to what could only be described as a small shed with sheets of rusted tin forming its walls and wooden slats serving as a roof. The rear yard, enclosed by two towering cement walls over six meters high, featured bright, vibrant paintings illustrating various locations and motifs of and around Australia. Each mural was a testament to creativity amid adversity.

A two-meter wooden fence backed onto a residential high-set house, creating a stark juxtaposition between worlds. In one corner of the yard, a small swimming pool was set into the ground, surrounded by palm trees that

swayed gently in the breeze. On the other side, a small grass lawn bordered a boxed-in vegetable patch, a humble attempt at self-sustainability in this unlikely setting. Two large double-story wooden Queenslanders stood sentinel on either side of the vast inner-city block, connected by a walkway running from back to front.

As Angela made her way into the yard, the acrid scent of cheap smoking tobacco greeted her. She inhaled deeply, sucking the second-hand smoke into her lungs. The atmosphere was thick with the pungent fragrance, a familiar presence in the lives of those who sought solace in shared struggles. Scanning the faces of the individuals seated on flimsy plastic outdoor chairs, she recognized the etchings of time and hardship etched into their expressions. The ages on those faces betrayed the real, shorter length of time they had spent on this earth. The lines and wear spoke of lives marred by the ravages of long-term alcohol and drug abuse, a shared history etched into the faces of kindred souls.

The makeshift outdoor gathering space, surrounded by the eclectic artwork and guarded by the towering cement walls, became a haven for those navigating the tumultuous journey of recovery. In the presence of shared pain and resilience, Angela felt a strange camaraderie and as the sun began to cast its warm glow over the unconventional courtyard, the motley group embraced the solace that the space provided—a refuge within the chaos, a place where the echoes of shared struggles spoke louder than words.

The souls seated before Angela formed a diverse assembly, spanning an age range she estimated from 25 to 60. As she gazed into their eyes, she recognized a familiar reflection—the pain and mayhem of her own life, a tumultuous journey that had unfolded since the tender age of six. In an attempt to mentally distance herself from the group, she dismissed the string of her own previous court convictions for minor public nuisances, drunkenness, and minor drug and prostitution offenses. 'I'm no fuckin' crim'

like most of these pricks,' she thought, a brief moment of defiance in her internal dialogue. However, even this proclamation didn't deter her from scanning the gathered faces, an unspoken search for a kindred spirit or, perhaps more urgently, someone who could supply her with a cigarette.

Shuffling into a corner under the stairs, she instinctively backed herself against the cool concrete wall. Having her back to a wall had become a self-preservation trait, a defensive posture ingrained in her from an early age. This secluded spot beneath the stairs, hidden from the direct gaze of others, was to become a refuge—a place where she sought solace in her own misery, away from the collective scrutiny of the group.

As she leaned against the concrete, Angela's eyes swept across the motley assembly. Each face carried the weight of lived experiences, scars etched into the fabric of their beings. The courtyard, with its artwork and makeshift seating, became a microcosm of shared struggles. Unbeknownst to Angela, she was both an observer and a participant in a silent exchange of empathy—a silent acknowledgment that each individual seated under the watchful eyes of towering cement walls carried their own burdens, and in that shared recognition, a fragile sense of unity emerged in the midst of the rehab facility's unconventional gathering space.

"Hey mate, you got a smoke? I can't find mine in all the mess I've got upstairs. Who knows where they are. I can pay you back later, no worries," Angela appealed to a young man in his 20s.

"Sure, love. Here, go for it. Not a problem. What comes around goes around, hey. The names Aaron." he offered with a friendly smile.

Aaron, at 20 years old, possessed a youthful countenance that belied the weight of experiences etched into the lines of his demeanor. As he lingered in contemplation, the lines on his forehead and through the thoughtful gaze, he cast a quiet understanding in his eyes, revealing a

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recognition born from shared struggles and the challenges of navigating life's unpredictable hardships.

Aaron, approached Angela, extending his arm with a packet of roll-your-own tobacco in his hand. Angela flinched, stepped sideways, and ducked down, her eyes transfixed on his, her muscles tensed, ready for fight or flight.

"Hey, chill chick. I'm not gonna hurt ya. Geez, you're jumpy," he reassured her.

Aaron put the tobacco, rolling paper, and a lighter on the ground and stepped back.

"Here you go. Sorry if I scared you. Didn't mean to. " he said.

She stood hunched over for a minute, then slowly rose, sliding her back up against the wall. Her eyes didn't move from his.

"Thanks, mate. Cheers," she said.

Bending over, she picked up the tobacco, paper, and lighter, displaying a practiced efficiency. With precision and skill, she began to roll her cigarette.

"Geez, girl, you've done that a few times, hey?" Aaron remarked.

"Yeah, a couple, I suppose. Too dear to buy the packet, tailor-made stuff," she replied, lighting the cigarette.

The warm glow of the flame momentarily illuminated her face, revealing a mixture of weariness and defiance—a silent testimony to a life marked by resilience and struggle.

Aaron lingered for a moment, recognizing in Angela's actions and demeanor a shared experience of navigating life's hardships. As the first wisp of smoke curled into the air, a tacit understanding passed between them—an unspoken acknowledgment of the survival skills honed in the face of adversity. In the courtyard of shared pain, a fleeting connection formed, a bond forged

Mal McCullough

in the simple exchange of a cigarette and a momentary pause in the relentless march of time.

As a result of the first drag of her first smoke of the day, Angela was overtaken by a bout of gut-wrenching coughing fits that seemed to stretch into eternity. She nearly passed out from the exertion, spitting a gray-blue blob from her mouth into the overflowing ashtray on the cement floor.

"For fuck's sake, girl, give it a rest. Don't want you pegging out on us; you just got here," Aaron chided.

"The first for the day... always has bones in it... Angela. My name's Angela," she replied between coughs.

Although the coughing and retching weren't a deterrent, as soon as the first smoke had been flicked into the garden, Aaron offered her more tobacco and papers, and she rolled another.

As the full morning sun began to filter through the slats that made up the smoking area roof, she sat on the cool concrete floor. Closing her eyes, she began to feel the warmth of the sun on her skin. Slowing her breathing, she initiated a meditation to calm her racing mind.

"Hey, you okay? You're zoning out on us. Hey, you okay?" shouted one of the other residents.

"Yeah, yeah, sure, sure. Just thinking, that's all," Angela replied.

"Well, for fuck's sake, don't do that too often. You went pale as. I thought you were gonna keel over!" the resident said.

"Nah, it's alright, mate. I'm fine. Anyway, if things get too rough, I've got someone who always looks after me," Angela replied.

"What? You got no fuckin' friends in here that I've seen," the resident replied, a mixture of curiosity and skepticism in his voice.

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Slowly standing up, Angela leaned forward towards him, catching a whiff of cheap aftershave mixed with foul breath.

"Mate, you don't have to see; you just feel," she whispered to him.

"If you believe hard enough that there is something better, that there are Angels, they will be with you when you really need them. I'm not talking about day-to-day shit, but when you 'really' need them, they will be there. You, my friend, just have to... believe."

A shiver raced down his spine, and his skin crawled with goosebumps. His eyes widened, and his face displayed a stunned expression.

"For fuck's sake, girl. You a witch or something? Don't do that to me again. Fuck," he stuttered.

"No. Not a witch. Just someone who believes," Angela replied with a wide grin.

Her eyes reflecting a mixture of wisdom and a subtle defiance against the odds that life had thrown at her. As the morning sun continued to warm the courtyard, Angela's words lingered in the air, leaving an indelible mark on the collective consciousness of those who had momentarily gathered under the slatted roof of the smoking area.

In that fleeting moment of interaction, a kernel of hope was sown, and the potential for embracing something beyond the stark realism of their current situation began to grow.

Mick

Recovery, an ongoing journey, a long way off.

GRADUALLY PACING DOWN THE WALKWAY between the two buildings, Angela passed four small bedrooms on the right and a double sliding door on the left, opening to a large common room. The walkway garden was filled with tropical plants that overhung and crept on the reddish stone pavers. The staff office was located at the front on the ground floor. She peered into the office through the front set of glass sliding doors, observing one of the rehab workers assisting another resident with their morning medication of anti-psychotic and cravings-diminishing drugs.

Observing the two in the office, her anxiety rose, as did her self-doubt. A thought flashed through her head. 'All I have to do is turn around and make a quick rush for the main gate.' Locked from the outside, the gate could be opened from the inside. 'I can ring up later and get my stuff from the room.' At least she knew that lifestyle—the players, how the games were played, and the stakes involved. 'I'll give Macca a call and crash out at his place for the night until I can find somewhere more permanent. He'll have me for at least a week.' A week longer than the permanency she had known for the past year. 'This here, right now is fucking scary, not for me.' The idea of stepping into the unknown, away from the familiar chaos of her previous life, struck her with a mixture of fear and uncertainty.

However, before she could act on her impulse to flee, another soul from the smoking area came up beside her.

"Hey. I'm Steve. You Angela, yeah? Hang in there – it gets easier, take your time, chill into it," he said.

Steve, a stalwart presence within the rehab community, exuded a quiet strength that complemented his role as a seasoned guide for newcomers. His weathered countenance, etched with lines that spoke of both hardship and resilience, bore witness to a life intricately entwined with the ebb and flow of addiction and recovery. The deep-set eyes, though tinged with the shadows of past struggles, radiated a compassionate understanding, a testament to the empathy he had cultivated through his own battles.

Dressed in attire that hinted at a desire for simplicity and practicality, Steve's demeanor carried an aura of approachability. His shoulders, though burdened with the weight of personal experiences, stood squared with a quiet confidence, as if he had weathered storms and emerged stronger on the other side. The subtle calluses on his hands spoke of a practical, hands-on approach to life, while his calm yet expressive voice held the resonance of someone who had learned to navigate the tumultuous waters of recovery.

As a seasoned mentor, Steve's words of comfort were not just platitudes but a genuine reflection of the empathy he felt for those undertaking the challenging journey of rehabilitation. The authenticity in his gaze and the warmth in his voice made him a beacon of hope for newcomers, offering a glimmer of reassurance in the often turbulent seas of recovery.

The glass sliding doors were the defining difference between living the life as a resident and the sanctuary for staff against the incessant demands of those in early recovery. Before she had a chance to enact her escape plan to freedom, another resident, Wayne, who had suddenly appeared from inside, slung open the doors. He met her with the enthusiasm of someone who had

been made to be up at 6am against his will.

"You're up," he mumbled.

Wayne, a soul weathered by the relentless storms of life, bore the physical and emotional scars of a journey marked by hardship and despair. His gaunt, black skinny frame spoke volumes about the arduous path he had trodden, often seeking refuge under sleeping swags in the harsh realities of parks and night shelters. Angela could see in his eyes the echoes of countless sunrises, each representing another day survived in the relentless struggle for existence. The lines etched on Wayne's face told a tale of struggle, mapping the years of exposure to the elements and the weight of a life spent in survival mode. His dark eyes, once perhaps filled with dreams, now reflected a profound weariness, the spark of hope dimmed but not entirely extinguished. Despite the evident toll of time, there lingered a quiet strength in his bearing, a testament to the survival instincts honed through years of adversity.

Dressed in clothing that bore the marks of wear and tear, Wayne's attire mirrored the rugged nature of his existence. The layers of dirt and grime on his weather-beaten hands hinted at the challenges he faced daily, while his movements carried the subtle stiffness of someone accustomed to navigating the shadows of society.

For Wayne, every day was a battle against the harsh realities of life on the streets, a struggle that had forged him into a symbol of endurance. Angela sensed the palpable loss of hope in his demeanor, a poignant reminder of the profound impact that a life marked by homelessness and survival could have on the human spirit.

As Angela stood fixed in front of the sliding doors, in a freeze state, she waited for the worker, Mick, who was trying to find her tray of medication. Mick, a seasoned figure in the realm of rehabilitation, was just finishing his last 10-hour night shift of four nights straight, bore the unmistakable weariness

etched onto his features as he wrapped up his final ten-hour night shift after enduring a four-night marathon. His eyes, clouded with a blend of exhaustion and unwavering determination, hinted at the countless challenges he had faced during his prolonged stint. The lines on his forehead and the faint shadows beneath his eyes spoke of both experience and a quiet resilience, earned through years spent assisting individuals on their arduous journey to recovery. Dressed in the worn uniform of a dedicated worker, Mick carried an air of quiet authority, his movements purposeful yet tempered by the weariness that came from nights spent tending to the needs of those seeking solace in the dim hours before dawn.

She had become adept at pushing her personal traumas to a place where they lay beneath her day-to-day consciousness. She could function, within limits, in what was considered 'normal,' but the dampening of her feelings of the past also took a toll on her ability to deal with the present. In her anxiety state, every second Mick could not find her medication felt like an eternity. Ignoring the advice offered to her earlier:

"What the fuck are you doing, dipshit?" she barked.

Frightening even herself with the outburst, it was a learned defensive stance that she had found useful during her years of bingeing on up to five bottles of cheap red wine a day. This type of outburst assisted in establishing the upper hand for her safety in the many dangerous situations she had encountered outside the walls of the rehab'. It was especially useful when she had no idea where and with whom she had woken up next to, and no orientation of place or time, where the only scenery was outside the window of the wardrobe-sized motel room in the centre of the city was a brick wall of the block of units next door.

Mick, a weary guardian of the night, stood amidst the shadows of the early morning, his eyes reflecting a depth of despair earned through years of

toiling with the drugged, drunk, and destitute. The lines etched on his face told stories of countless nights filled with residents' trivial yet emotionally draining issues that tested the limits of his patience and compassion. Stolen cigarettes, disruptive snorers, and the incessant chorus of nightly complaints were the mundane challenges that haunted Mick's nightly routine. Observing the weariness etched into Mick's features, Angela sensed the silent exchange of glances that spoke volumes about the nightly battles he faced. It was a symphony of small grievances that orchestrated the background noise of Mick's professional existence. Yet, beyond the trivial complaints, a more sinister undertone lurked in the shadows – the threat of physical danger from residents pushed to the brink.

In the dim light of the office, Mick conveyed the weight of his late-night confrontation, with a desperate soul armed with a six-inch blade, demanding release from the confines of the rehab'. The irony was not lost on Mick – of the ease with which one could simply walk to the front gate, unlock the mechanism, and embrace freedom. Yet, he marveled at the paradoxical nature of human behaviour, where an ingrained sense of escape could override the rational simplicity of walking out the front door.

As Mick recounted the tales of residents navigating the darkness, he shook his head in bemusement. The internal fence of the facility, purposefully adorned with cacti, became an obstacle course for those who preferred the clandestine thrill of scaling barriers. Mick couldn't help but wonder if, in their desperate flight, they imagined a pursuit by himself in a plea for them to return. The reality, as he knew too well, was a stark contrast – no one would chase after them, and the night would carry on in the same rhythm, indifferent to their escape attempts.

In the tense atmosphere of the early morning office, Angela and Mick engaged in a verbal duel, their gazes locked in a clash of wills. Mick, caught off guard by Angela's aggression and deprived of his usual nightly respite,

responded with a sleep-deprived weariness. The effects of his night shift hangover dulled the edge of his professional demeanor, leaving room for a raw and unfiltered retort.

“Well, Angela, perhaps you might want to take double the meds to get double your buck, and then day shift won't have to deal with your shit the rest of the day. Well, the reality is, it's not gunna happen, girly. Otherwise, while it's just you and me, Fuck Off!” Mick snapped, his patience worn thin.

Angela, standing indignant, unleashed a heated response, "No, prick. YOU fuck off!"

Yet, the moment those words escaped her lips, she sensed the need for a quick course correction. Drawing upon her wealth of life experiences, she assessed that escalating the situation would serve no one. Recognising the need to diffuse the tension, Angela approached Mick, her eyes locking onto his, conveying a silent plea for understanding. Despite the considerable height difference of Mick's imposing frame, Angela aimed to extend an olive branch, hoping he would see her next move as a gesture of peace.

“So, where's the music so we can dance our way out of this?” she offered, injecting a note of humor into the situation.

Mick, well-versed in navigating the complexities of interpersonal conflicts, saw the opportunity to de-escalate and flicked the switch to the office radio. A grin broke through on his craggy face, signaling a truce in the making. As the strains of the Blue Danube filled the air, Mick playfully raised his arms, inviting Angela to join him in an imaginary dance. Smiles broke across their faces, signaling a shift in the atmosphere. The tension of their earlier exchange began to dissipate as Angela took a step back toward the glass doors.

"Ok, good morning Mick. How's things this bright and cheery day?" she greeted him, extending an olive branch.

"A big morning to you, Angela. Up nice and early for day one, I see. Hey, sorry about snapping at you; it's been a big night," Mick continued, revealing the strains of the challenges he faced during his night shift.

"Some bastard tried to play heroes early this morning, suppose I'm still a bit on edge." He said.

"Nah mate, she's right. It's me who should be saying sorry. I haven't had a wink of sleep. Can't seem to settle my mind from racing round and round," Angela offered, her distinctive Far North Queensland Australian accent carrying a hint of vulnerability.

Seating himself on the office desk, Mick adopted a kind and gentle tone, sharing words of wisdom he had dispensed to countless others before Angela.

"Don't expect too much of yourself; you just need to take it easy, slow, move into things. This is the beginning of your journey. Yeah, sure, I'm not going to bullshit you; it's going to be hard, probably the hardest thing you've done. But if you don't go with the flow and accept that you are here and acknowledge why you are here, then you're not going to last beyond two weeks, at best. At your age, you had better think hard about your future. Whatever you've been doing in the past doesn't seem to be working, so perhaps it's time to start doing something different. It's time to re-wire your thinking." Mick advised, his words carrying the weight of experience and a genuine desire to guide Angela toward a positive transformation.

Angela's mind whirled with a cacophony of emotions and realizations as Mick's words reverberated through her. His candid advice cut through the layers of denial she had built around herself. She felt a sudden impact, as if the reality of her situation had struck her with the force of a rock. Her gaze shifted around the office, absorbing the details of her surroundings—the tropical gardens, the windows revealing a world beyond. In an instant of

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profound clarity, Angela understood the gravity of her circumstances. She recognized the echoes of the concerns voiced by her family and friends over the years. A familiar voice, one that surfaced during her moments of desperation and rare episodes of sobriety, whispered in her mind. ‘Girl, you’ve got a problem, and you’d better do something about it. You know you’re sick and tired of being sick and tired. This is real now. You’ve messed it up for years. Best give this the best you’ve got; this is your last chance to show those bastards that you can get your shit together. Screw them!’

As Angela grappled with the weight of her newfound understanding, a rush of guilt and shame flooded her thoughts. She confronted the wreckage of her past—lies, cheating, and a litany of broken promises inflicted upon Gabrielle and her friends. With a deep sigh, Angela sat on the blue grey material couch, her eyes fixed on Mick’s, seeming to pierce through him, fixated on a point in the distance she began a thousand mile stare.

It had been at least five minutes before Mick could get Angela’s attention, out of what was a unresponsive state.

"Angela, Angela, can you hear me?" Mick implored, recognizing the turmoil playing out in her mind.

“Angela, it’s okay. You’re here because you want to make a change, right? It’s not about blaming yourself. It’s about taking the opportunity to move forward. You’re not alone in this. We’re here to support you.” He implored again.

She was seated on the couch with her legs crossed up on the cushions, her head and shoulders rocking rhythmically. Mick pulled up a chair, sitting across from her, maintaining a calm and empathetic demeanor. He placed his hand on her shoulder, breaking the spell she was caught up in. She startled and moved back against the office wall, with a look of despair on her face, tears welled in her eyes, her nose dribbling, she wiped with the

back of her hand and then onto her T shirt. She gradually composed herself and nodded to Mick with a mix of determination and vulnerability in her eyes.

"I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. I've fucked things haven't I?" she continually repeated between sobs.

"Stick with us, believe in yourself and you can rebuild." Mick said.

"Oh fuck Mick, what have I done, what have I done, what have I done." She repeated.

As quick as she had moved into her despair, she stopped still for a moment. In a fit of instant rage, her face turned red and contorted, and she moved away from the wall.

"No. Fuck that. I refuse to still be a fuckin' victim, No. No. It's not what I've done, it's them, they've done this, they did it." She screamed. She began hitting her forehead with her open hands again and again, the slaps with each blow getting increasingly louder, her forehead getting redder with each blow.

Mick, recognizing the urgency of the situation, acted swiftly. He firmly but gently grasped Angela's wrists, preventing her from inflicting further harm upon herself.

As quickly as the grief and anger arose it began to dissipate. As she began to settle, Mick began to feel a sense of guilt of the way he had spoken to her earlier. He should have been more professional, more empathetic to her current situation, knowing what he did from reading her admission notes in her file, of her childhood and recent past.

As Angela settled deeper into the comforting embrace of the couch, her mind continued to wander through the memories of her rural upbringing. This mental journey, though a brief respite from the relentless challenges she faced in her current life, also brought a poignant realization: the tranquil scenes

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of her past were, in reality, not so different from the struggles she faced now.

The small rural town of her childhood, nestled in southern Australia's picturesque landscape, had been a place of both beauty and hardship. The simplicity of life in a farming community, once a source of peace, had also been a backdrop to its own set of challenges. Struggling to find its identity post-mining, it grappled with the realities of economic hardship and the often harsh demands of agricultural life. Angela recalled the close-knit community where everyone knew each other's business, for better or worse. Though her childhood, was intermittently brightened by brief instances of joy and wonder, it was largely eclipsed by dark, oppressive forces, where opportunities withered, and expectations were rigid and unyielding that cast a foreboding shadow.

As she reflected, Angela realized that the challenges she faced in her rural upbringing had, been a precursor to the struggles of her current life. This bittersweet nostalgia for her past served as a reminder of her resilience. She had faced difficulties before and had survived.

Shadow Creek

ANGELA'S MEDITATION DEEPENED, drawing her further into a poignant nostalgia that retraced the contours of her life's journey. She found herself reliving the past, specifically those long, sweltering summers in Shadow Creek, where the relentless sun scorched everything in its path. In her mind's eye, she recalled how the intense summer heat seemed to amplify the unspoken tensions within the small community. The sun, a relentless orb in the sky, bore down mercilessly on Shadow Creek. Its rays didn't just warm but scorched, turning the tar on the roads into sticky, melting pools that shimmered in the heat haze. The once-green sheep paddocks transformed under the sun's unforgiving glare, becoming barren expanses where nothing but dust and the occasional hardy weed could survive. The oppressive heat, often soaring to a stifling 40 degrees Celsius, felt unyielding and inescapable. It was as if the entire landscape, along with the people within it, was being baked in an open oven. The air itself seemed to simmer with the heat, heavy and thick, making every breath a laborious task.

This extreme weather mirrored the hidden struggles and simmering conflicts within the community. The stifling heat seemed to bring these issues to the surface, much like the way it brought the tar to a boil on the roads. The way the community navigated these sweltering summers became a metaphor for how they handled their internal challenges – with a resignation to the

unyielding conditions of their environment.

In this meditative state, Angela realized how these searing summers had shaped her, that would become crucial in facing the trials of her later life. The heat of Shadow Creek was not just a physical phenomenon; it was a crucible in which the character of its inhabitants, including herself, was forged.

The community eagerly embraced the cool respite of early mornings, a brief escape from the relentless heat that enveloped them throughout the day. This welcome coolness dissipated around 8am, giving way to the visible rise of heat haze and mirages in the distance. For Angela, these mirages became a poignant metaphor, reflecting the stark disparity between the outward portrayal of her life to the wider community and the harsh reality she faced daily.

During her childhood Angela enjoyed the freedom of carefree existence, much like the other kids in the community. This freedom was accessible as long as they adhered to the unwritten moral codes and rules deeply ingrained in their conservative farming rural surroundings. The rules, though unspoken, were well understood by all. Children had the liberty to roam the oak tree-lined dirt roads on their own time, especially outside of school, church, sports, and family chores. They could vanish for hours, exploring the paddocks, engaging in the timeless pursuit of "yabbing" for small freshwater crayfish in the muddy dams, or climbing the bush-covered hills to construct fortresses from the branches of towering gum trees. This idyllic environment provided Angela and her peers with the space to cultivate their imaginations and forge lasting childhood memories.

A weekly gathering unfolded around the operator-assisted public phone housed in the big red box at the top of the street. Given the scarcity of phones in individual houses, the phone box served as a vital connection to the outside world. Every Sunday evening, a neighborhood social event ensued, creating a street party atmosphere. As adults patiently lined up to take turns

using the coin operated phone, a lively scene unfolded. Older children engaged in spirited football matches on the street, while the younger ones frolicked in the dusty front yards, playing a games of "chasey." This communal event became a platform for strengthening the bonds within the neighborhood. Residents shared stories, reviewed the past week, and looked ahead to the one to come, fostering a sense of unity and connection in this close-knit community.

Angela cherished the idyllic lifestyle she enjoyed during her childhood in this tight-knit rural community. The town, nestled on the edge of the river, provided her with endless opportunities for adventure. Most of her days were spent swimming in the meandering river or passionately participating in netball matches for the local junior team. However, amidst the freedom and joy, there was a significant caveat—the ever-present "knowing" within the community.

Here, in the remote outback town, it seemed that every move the children made was subject to the scrutiny of an invisible bush telegraph. Somehow, news of their escapades reached their parents even before they had returned home from their bush adventures. Angela quickly learned that this all-knowing network had its eyes and ears everywhere.

One of the key contributors to this pervasive knowledge was Mrs. Anderson, a keen observer who spent her days seated in her kitchen. With her curtains half-drawn, she maintained a watchful eye on the comings and goings of the town. Positioned at the only road intersection, her vantage point allowed her to see who arrived, who departed, and who was seen with whom. Mrs. Anderson had earned a reputation as the community's unofficial "person spotter."

Despite the surveillance, Angela and her peers relished their freedom, cherishing each day's adventures and relishing the small-town caSarahderie that came with it. Yet, as Angela would soon discover, the rural tranquility

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concealed a darker reality that would test the resilience of her community and alter the course of her own life forever.

In this close-knit community, Angela's sense of belonging ran deep, every neighboring family felt like an extension of her own. She enjoyed a unique connectedness to this community, one where she could freely wander in and out of her neighbors' houses with a quick knock on the door and a cheerful "Yoohoo" to announce her arrival.

One of her cherished community memories was a simple yet heartwarming tradition. On balmy Sunday evenings, Angela's neighbor, Mr. Frazer, became the local hero when he wheeled his prized possession—a Black and White Television—around to face the front yard. The entire neighborhood, especially the kids, would gather, each armed with their blankets to sit on the bare ground, to watch the Sunday night comedy show. Under the starry skies, laughter and camaraderie filled the air as the townsfolk shared jokes and stories. Mr. Frazer's television served as a magical portal, transporting them to a world of laughter and entertainment, if only for a few hours. These moments of togetherness were treasured by all, a reminder that even in the hidden pallor of darkness, there was boundless joy to be found.

As Angela sat on that front yard, surrounded by the familiar faces of her neighbors, she felt a profound sense of belonging and gratitude. In those moments, those shared experiences, in seeing true essence of her community emerge, if only for a short time. she reflected on what a true community could be.

Knowing

THE SUMMER OF ANGELA'S TENTH BIRTHDAY marked the commencement of her transformative journey within Shadow Creek. This year was one of innocence lost, where Angela was quickly developing her awareness that in reality, the mirage offered by the community in which she dwelled was merely a window dressing on lives lived in a collective delusion. It was one that hid a greater, darker, sinister meaning, that should not, could not, be interfered with.

As Angela ventured through the sunlit streets of this seemingly tranquil town, the illusion of neighbourly interactions concealed a deeper, more ominous reality. Behind the vibrant façade of smiles and greetings, a sinister force gripped the soul of the community. In this pivotal year, Angela began to realise that the 'knowing' within her small rural enclave extended beyond mere awareness of each other's whereabouts. It was a knowing tainted by shadows that cast a chilling pall over unsuspecting lives. It was a creature of darkness, subtle and pervasive, full of monsters and void of happiness, an evil enemy of righteous souls which embodied a greater, darker and sinister meaning of a private yet communal truth. It had spun its web of despair, ensnaring the hearts and minds of those who had once known only happiness. The 'knowing' was a real, private, yet communal truth that was more than just a note written in the dusty ground, to be blown away in tomorrow's wind, it

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was embedded in the fabric of their being.

As Angela roamed the streets, she overheard fragments of conversation carried by the wind, a clandestine symphony of murmurs hinting at a deeply rooted darkness. It was a silent storm that had gripped the town for years, waiting to unleash its fury upon those who dared to uncover its secrets. The townspeople, caught in the grip of this communal truth, lived with a profound shame hidden behind closed doors. The battle between light and darkness unfolded in the hearts of residents, their struggles echoing through the very fabric of Shadow Creek. Amidst the arid winds and dry leaves, Angela felt an urgency to unravel the mysteries that clung to her hometown. The secrets whispered to her, beckoning her to confront the shadows that tainted the core of Shadow Creek. Her life, once vibrant with color and promise, began to fade into monochrome as the clutches of reality tightened around her and as a way to cope, an insidious creature had taken root, feeding on her joy and replacing it with a deep despair. Shadows danced in her peripheral vision, and the once familiar faces of friends and family became distorted masks of judgment and disappointment.

Outwardly Shadow Creek was a haven of joy, internally it was a pressure cooker simmering with concealed truths. Angela, a curious soul on the brink of understanding, sensed the profound complexities woven into the tapestry of her seemingly idyllic hometown. Little did she know that this odyssey would shape her destiny, propelling her toward a confrontation with life long demons. Though in the recesses of her mind she also kept an insatiable hunger for something more, something better.

Daddy

THE RITUAL OF SHARING TEA WAS A SMALL but significant moment of bonding, for Angela and her father, a time for quiet reflection and gentle conversation as the day wound down each day.

As they finished their tea, Angela changed into her favorite nighttime attire - soft purple pajama pants paired with a cozy pink top. The familiar fabric of her pajamas brought an immediate sense of comfort and ease. Her father, ever thoughtful, had prepared her bed, warming it with a rubber water bottle, a gesture that spoke volumes of his care and affection. She snuggled into her bed, now invitingly warm thanks to her father's preparation. Her room was enveloped in a peaceful quietude, the kind of serene stillness that only the countryside night could offer. It felt like a blanket of tranquility had been gently laid over the world outside.

As she lay in her bed, her gaze wandered across the ceiling, following the intricate patterns that danced in the dim light. The steady, rhythmic breathing of her father, who sat at the edge of her bed, provided a comforting soundtrack to her thoughts. His presence was reassuring, a solid, loving anchor in her world of change and uncertainty. In these quiet moments, the bond between father and daughter was palpable. It was in these instances of simple, unspoken togetherness that Angela felt most at home, most secure. As she lay there, the worries and noise of the day faded away, leaving her in a peaceful

state of relaxation, ready to drift into a restful sleep under the watchful, loving gaze of her father.

Max, her loyal dog, a black and white Australian Shepard, sprawled contentedly on the bed, his presence a comforting weight in the room. Her father, a transport truck driver, was preparing for his nightly journey. His voice was gentle, laced with the unspoken promise of return.

"I have to go to work, Angela," he said, his hand ruffling Max's fur.

"I'll be gone all night, but I'll be back in the morning. We'll have tea and pancakes, just like we always do." His words were a soothing balm, a ritual that anchored their small world.

Max, sensing the moment, wriggled under the bed covers, curling up against Angela's feet. His warm, furry body was a reassurance, a silent vow of protection. Her father stood up, a tall silhouette against the dim light of the room, and turned to leave. He turned the bedroom light to dim, to cast a soft glow across the room, and gently closed the door behind him.

Alone, yet not entirely, Angela lay back, her eyes finding the moonlight streaming through the window. The light danced shadows across the walls, creating a mesmerizing display that lulled her into a peaceful sleep.

Morning arrived with the sun's rays brightening the room. Angela awakened, surprised to find the clock showing 8 am. She had slept in, a rare occurrence in the routine of her life. Her tranquility was abruptly shattered by a knock on her bedroom door.

It was Sarah, her mother's friend, a familiar face in their life. Sarah's presence had become a fixture in Angela's life following the tragic loss of her mother as it was Sarah's seductive charms and manipulative prowess that had ensnared Angela's father after he was left a widower. But today, Sarah's eyes held a deep sadness, her expression etched with grief. Angela's heart skipped a

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beat as Sarah sat down beside her on the bed, the weight of her sorrow palpable in the air.

"Angela," Sarah's voice trembling, tears brimming in her eyes.

"There was an accident on the highway in the early hours of this morning. Your father's truck... it crashed into three other cars." The words fell like stones in the quiet room.

"Your father," Sarah continued, her voice breaking, "he... he died at the scene."

The news struck Angela like a physical blow, a tidal wave of disbelief and despair crashing over her. The room, once a haven of moonlit shadows and peaceful dreams, now felt hollow, the air thick with the weight of her loss. Max, sensing the shift, emerged from under the covers and nuzzled Angela gently, his presence a silent comfort in the crushing reality of the moment. The promise of tea and pancakes, of her father's return, now lingered in the air like a ghost, a reminder of a future that would never be.

In the stark light of the morning, Angela sat, a young girl facing a world forever changed, her heart grappling with the sudden absence of a father's love, and the unyielding presence of grief.

Sarah

WHAT WAS AN ETERNITY TO ANGELA was in reality only one week since her father was buried, and six months since her mother succumbed to cancer. A period marked by a gradual unraveling of the world as Angela knew it.

Sarah, had stepped into the void left by the death of Angela's Mother, and now with the passing of her father was offering Angela a place in her home. This arrangement, though born out of necessity, was not without its complications.

Child Services, tasked with ensuring Angela's welfare, had reluctantly approved Sarah's guardianship. They were not entirely convinced that Sarah's home was the ideal environment for a grieving child. Their decision was based on a principle of 'good enough', a benchmark that met the minimum standards but did little to inspire confidence in a nurturing, supportive future for Angela. Though Sarah wasn't adverse to receiving the generous Child Services support funding that came with having Angela under her roof. Angela's Aunt Miriam had been considered as a potential guardian, she was family, after all, and had expressed a willingness to take Angela in. However, at 82 years old and battling her own health issues, Miriam's capacity to care for a young, grieving girl was questionable. Reluctantly, Child Services had concluded that Sarah's home was the more practical option, though rumour around the town also suggested that

Sarah had offered the young male Child Services worker some 'personal favours' as inducement for her to be the chosen carer.

In Sarah's house, Angela found a shelter, but not a home. Sarah struggled to fill the roles of parent and confidante. The house, once a place of occasional visits and casual familiarity, now felt alien and constricting. Angela's room, devoid of personal touches, was a reminder of her loss and displacement.

Sarah was a woman of stark contrasts, her presence leaving an indelible mark on those around her. A cloud of anger seemed to hang over her perpetually, an anger directed at the world and everyone in it. Standing at a diminutive height, she barely reached five feet tall, and her short-cropped hair, dyed in wild shades of purple and green, added a rebellious flair to her appearance. Her frame was alarmingly skinny, her bony shoulders often exposed by the vintage-style clothes she favored, relics from an era long past. She was rarely seen without a cigarette dangling from her thin, nicotine-stained fingers. Years of smoking had etched a raspy quality into her voice, giving her words a harsh edge that matched her demeanor. She was known to light up even in the most inappropriate of places, her defiance of societal norms evident in every defiant exhale. Her life was marked by a history of drug use, a turbulent path that had left her with an unpredictable temperament. Her abusive tendencies, both physical and emotional, cast a dark shadow over the household.

In the midst of her chaotic existence, Sarah was a volatile force, leaving scars on those unfortunate enough to cross her path. Her tumultuous relationship with Angela was a constant source of tension, an unending battle of wills that played out within the walls of their troubled home.

As the days turned into weeks, and weeks into months and years, Angela navigated her new reality with a resilience born of necessity. School

became a refuge, a place where she could lose herself in the normalcy of classes and the company of peers, however fleeting. But each day would inevitably end, and she would return to Sarah's house, and the emptiness, gentle understanding and shared grief, were conspicuously absent. An echo of her own internal void. Sarah's house stood as a fading relic of the past, a testament to neglect of the old weatherboard house that had seen better days. The floorboards, once polished and inviting, now lay bare, riddled with holes that allowed the unforgiving cold of winter to permeate the entire house. The backyard, surrounded by a ramshackle wooden fence, held its own collection of relics from more prosperous times—rusting car bodies and remnants of long-forgotten mill machinery. The once-thriving mining industry that had supported the town had withered away, leaving behind a graveyard of discarded dreams.

Angela learned to tread softly, to keep her true feelings hidden behind a mask of compliance. The lively, spirited girl who once roamed the countryside with a sense of adventure was retreating, her light dimming under the shadow of her losses. Amidst this backdrop of sorrow and adjustment, Angela clung to the memories of her parents, their love a beacon in her heart. She would often find solace in old photographs and keepsakes, each item a thread connecting her to a past that felt both distant and deeply ingrained in her soul.

As she navigated this uncertain terrain, Angela held onto the hope that, in time, she would find her way back to a place of peace and happiness, a place where the shadows of loss would give way to the light of new beginnings. But for now, she was a young girl in a world turned upside down, searching for a path through the storm.

Sitting in her room, a space that felt neither fully hers nor entirely foreign, Angela looked around. The walls were adorned with simple decorations, impersonal and uninviting, they lacked the warmth and personal

touch that her own home, now a realm of memories, had offered. Her belongings, few as they were, lay scattered across the bare floor.

The window was slightly ajar, letting in a soft breeze that carried the sounds of the neighborhood – distant laughter, the occasional bark of Max, her beloved dog who Sarah allowed to come with Angela, however more for the purposes of guard dog than companionship for Angela. Angela felt disconnected an observer in a world that marched on relentlessly, indifferent to her pain.

Her gaze fell upon a photograph on her bedside table, a picture of her parents smiling, their eyes sparkling with the joy of a captured moment. Angela's heart ached with longing. She missed their embrace, their guidance, their understanding. In them, she had found her champions, her protectors, her source of unconditional love. Now, in their absence, she grappled with a loneliness that seemed to grow deeper with each passing day. She felt a chasm between herself and Sarah, as their conversations were perfunctory, often limited to mundane topics, they were void of emotional connections, shared experiences, the essence of a familial bond were conspicuously missing. In the solitude of her room, she would often write in her journal, pouring her thoughts and feelings onto the pages. It was a small act of rebellion against the silence that enveloped her life, a way to voice the turmoil that churned within. Her words were raw, a mixture of sorrow, anger, confusion, and a flickering flame of hope that refused to be extinguished.

Her days were punctuated by the routines of school and household chores, a rhythm that brought structure but little comfort. As there was only one primary school in the town, she attended with all the other town children. School, once a haven, had become another arena where she felt out of step with her peers. The laughter and chatter around her were reminders of what she had lost, of the carefree innocence that tragedy had snatched away. To her it was only a place of continuance, where the community life mingled with

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school life, with no real separation. She saw school as just another place to hang out for its social gatherings with the very few friends that she had, than the formal learning. She was a below average rated student whom performed poorly formal in all aspects of learning in all subjects. She often missed large periods of school attendance as she was often bullied and made a scapegoat for the poor state of her school uniform and her personal hygiene. She became adept at regurgitating the excuses to her teachers, drilled into her by her Sarah, for the state of her appearance and lack of attendance.

As her resilience was tested time and again. She clung to the memories of her parents, using them as a beacon to guide her through the fog of grief. Even at her young age she instinctively knew, deep down, that the journey ahead was hers alone to navigate, a path she must carve out of the wilderness of loss. In her quieter moments, she would gaze at the sky, the stars a glittering tapestry above her. They seemed to hold the promise of something more, a vastness that spoke of possibilities and new beginnings. And in those moments,

Angela allowed herself to dream, to imagine a future where the pain of the past was a companion, not a captor, where the echoes of laughter could be heard once more in the hallways of her life.

Charlies

Within the center of Shadow Creek there was the local 'licensed grocer'. This was a small convenience store that sold everything from groceries to beer and cigarettes and everything in between. It was also where the elder members of the community would congregate every day to swap their stories on the day before and their predictions of that which were coming. This catchall of commodities was locally known as 'Charlies Top Shop' though the reality of was there was no 'bottom shop', as it had long closed 50 years before.

Having been sent on an errand by Sarah, to 'Charlies' for cigarettes and soft drink Angela was in company of the her friend Jimmy whom lived next door. Jimmy was Angela's childhood friend, a familiar presence in the small rural town of Ellis Town. Standing slightly taller than Angela, he had a boyish charm that endeared him to everyone who knew him. His distinctive features included dark cropped red hair that seemed to catch fire under the bright Australian sun, freckles that danced across his pale skin like constellations, and a high-pitched voice that belied his youthful innocence. However it was Jimmy's piercing blue eyes that often left a lasting impression on those who met him. Like twin sapphires, they held a depth of curiosity and wonder, reflecting the endless possibilities of youth. His eyes were windows to a soul unburdened by the complexities of adulthood, a soul that found joy in

simple pleasures and cherished the bonds of friendship.

Jimmy's presence brought a sense of adventure to Angela's life. Together, they explored the sun-soaked streets of Ellis Town, often venturing into the paddocks, where they would catch glimpses of native wildlife or go "yabbing" for small freshwater crayfish in the muddy dams. His infectious enthusiasm and boundless energy made every day an adventure, and his blue eyes sparkled with laughter and mischief.

As Angela's closest friend, Jimmy was a source of support and comfort in a world that sometimes felt challenging. His loyalty knew no bounds, and he stood by her side through thick and thin. Angela knew she could always count on Jimmy, the boy with the fiery red hair and the sparkling blue eyes that held the promise of endless summers.

As they made their way back up the long dirt street, an argument over lollies escalated, as friends' disagreements tend to do. Dust billowed around them, stirred up their heated exchange.

"C'mon, Jimmy, you're such a selfish bugger. How 'bout sharing a few more with me? I always share mine with you," Angela persisted.

Jimmy was having none of it.

"No way," he shot back.

"Jimmy, I give you stuff all the time, you know I do. You're just being unfair," Angela raising her voice.

Jimmy, feeling the frustration mounting, responded,

"It's because I do give you stuff all the time and get nothin' back! That's it, Ang, no more."

Undeterred, Angela increased her efforts. She knew that with a few strategic words and a louder voice, she could often wear others down to her

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point of view.

"I give you stuff all the time, Jimmy. I let you borrow my things constantly. You're just being a bugger," her voice raised even higher.

Growing angrier with each exchange, Jimmy stood his ground.

"No way, I've had enough of you. You try to get everyone to do stuff for you. I tell you, Angela, one day, it'll be you begging to get stuff off me, and I'm gonna make you pay for it."

Their argument reached a boiling point as Angela couldn't contain her frustration any longer.

"Fuck off, Jimmy!"

The two friends continued to walk up the dusty street, still engaged in their disagreement. It was a familiar scene in their friendship, filled with ups and downs, but deep down, they knew that their bond was strong enough to weather even the stormiest of arguments.

Unbeknownst to Angela, in her heated argument with Jimmy, they had passed by Mrs. Anderson's front window. The sharp-eyed old lady had witnessed Angela's harsh words and aggressive demeanor toward her childhood friend. Without hesitation, Mrs. Anderson rushed to telegraph this incident to Angela's stepmother, Sarah, using the well-worn route of communication, the rear fence that adjoined their two properties.

As Angela and Jimmy turned the corner, they approached the low wire front fence of her home. Little did Angela know that a storm was brewing on the other side, and her stepmother, Sarah, had worked herself into a furious rage. With a face flushed red, bulging eyes, and spittle flying from the corners of her mouth, when angry Sarah was a formidable sight to behold. She had always been quick to anger, and this latest news from Mrs. Anderson had set her off like a powder keg. She had no tolerance for Angela's misbehavior,

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especially when it involved a public display like the one witnessed by their nosy neighbor.

As soon as Angela and Jimmy came within earshot, Sarah unleashed her wrath.

"Angela, you ungrateful little brat! How dare you treat Jimmy like that! You should be ashamed of yourself!" Her voice was a piercing screech, and her words carried the weight of her fury.

Angela's heart sank as she realized the gravity of the situation. She had known that her actions would likely earn her a scolding, but she hadn't anticipated the sheer rage that Sarah was displaying. Jimmy, too, stood there, a mixture of shock and concern on his freckled face.

Sarah, fueled with alcohol, reddened face, bulging eyes and spittle firing from the side of her mouth, continued her tirade, berating Angela for her behavior, her tone growing louder and more accusatory with each passing moment. The whole neighborhood seemed to hold its collective breath, knowing that when Sarah was on a rampage, there was no reasoning with her.

"What have you been up to now you little bitch? For god sake how often have I told you to leave people alone, the world doesn't fuckin' revolve around you Angela. Get the fuck inside before I belt the bejesus out of you." Sarah screamed in a rage.

Angela knew from recent history that this kind of attack by her Sarah meant it was best to keep a low target profile, agree with her and apologise with your head down low and back to the wall.

"Sorry Sarah, Jimmy just wouldn't share, I give stuff to him all the time!" She said.

It was with this statement that she felt the shear pain that came from the first strike on her lower calves. It came without warning, Angela had

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not expected it for what she considered a misdemeanor, though she had felt this pain many times before.

Sarah screamed with an uncontrolled yell.

“I’ve fuckin’ told you to call be mum, I’m your fuckin mum so bloody call me that.”

Sarah had insisted all the children call her ‘mum’. Every time the children failed to adhere to this rule they were punished swiftly and severely. However with it being a couple of months now between the last strikes, it stung this time as though it was the very first. A pain that shuddered through her legs and made Angela scream at a high pitched volume that any one within town must have heard it, like the screaming howl of a wounded animal. She realized that she was on the end of her Sarah’s favourite item of abuse. A skinny branch off the apple tree that grew directly out to the side of the rear steps of the house. Sarah had stripped a small branch from the grown tree, she called it a ‘switch’. Angela had not only felt this before but had seen such being wielded to great effect upon her step siblings as well. Many a day she had nursed her step brother and sister from the results of the ‘switch’.

She screamed and pleaded with her step-mother to cease the attack.

“Mum, no, no, please, please, I’m sorry, mummy, mummy, no!”

Each blow became more misdirected and landed not only the back of her legs but struck it searing pain on her arms, back and head.

“Mummy, please, please, I’m sorry.” Angela pleaded.

Placing great emphasis on the word ‘Mummy’ Angela hoped that this would bring the assault to a halt. She instinctively turned her back on her assailant. Covering her face she headed towards the couch. She climbed

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on top of the back of the couch, curling into a crouching ball. Each blow, in quick succession, was getting harder and harder as Sarah, who had now lost all control, began to pant and gasp for breath. Sarah maintained her verbal abuse at Angela between each strike.

"I...have...fuckin'...told...you...to...fuckin'...stop...annoying...people...you.....just...dont...know...when... to...stop. I'll teach you a lesson you wont forget, I'll fuckin' kill you."

"Please, Mummy, no, no, I'm sorry, please," Angela's voice trembling with fear and pain.

Her pleas and cries for mercy fell on deaf ears as Sarah continued her relentless assault. Each blow landed with searing pain, as the room echoed with Angela's desperate pleas, Sarah's rage showed no signs of abating.

As the merciless beating continued, Angela's physical pain merged with the growing darkness within her mind. It was a place she had discovered long ago, a sanctuary she retreated to when reality became too unbearable to endure. Her eyes rolled back as she delved into this internal world, a realm where pain ceased to exist.

Within the depths of her own consciousness, Angela found herself in a world that was untouched by the brutality of Sarah. This was her haven, her refuge, a place where she could escape the torment of her mortal body. It was here that she summoned Keira, a protector and a guardian who had emerged time and time again to shield her from the harshness of her life. Keira, in Angela's mind, was a symbol of hope, a radiant light that shone as brilliantly as the sun streaming through the stained-glass windows of the grand cathedral she had visited during a school trip to Melbourne. Keira bore the burden of Angela's suffering, absorbing each brutal strike of the switch and enduring the torment that Sarah inflicted.

In this inner realm, Keira became Angela's protector, a guardian who

shielded her from the pain and anguish of the outside world. She played a dangerous game of torture with Sarah, bearing the brunt of the violence so that Angela didn't have to. Keira's presence offered Angela a glimmer of solace amidst the darkness that threatened to consume her.

As Angela's consciousness retreated deeper into this inner sanctuary, Keira maintained control of her fragile body. She would remain vigilant, waiting until it was safe for Angela to return to the harsh reality she had been trying to escape.

Though Keira could not alleviate the physical pain inflicted upon Angela, she offered a psychological refuge from the relentless cruelty. She was the whisper in the wind, the comforting darkness of the night sky, offering solace and strength. In times of need Keira was Angela's inner warrior, a figure of empowerment that rose in times of adversity. She was the embodiment of the dark-haired protector, a symbol of the untapped strength that lay within Angela. In her darkest hours, when the world seemed overwhelming, it was Keira who stood as a bulwark against Angela's tides of despair, a constant reminder of the enduring power and mystery that darkness could hold. Keira was more than just a figment of imagination for in every step, in every breath, Keira was there, a silent companion in Angela's journey, a testament to the strength that comes from embracing one's inner darkness and transforming it into a source of power.

It was Keira whom took the brunt of the beatings, the one that experienced the severe strikes each time the 'switch' would ravage Angela's body.

Just as Keira enveloped Angela in a protective cocoon, shielding her from the relentless pain inflicted by Sarah's fury, Angela's consciousness was pierced by another voice, one she recognized all too well. It was Judy, a neighbor who lived across the road. Angela's foggy perception slowly began to

clear, and the chaotic scene in her living room came into focus.

Judy, tall and slender, Her shoulder-length brown hair gleamed with a healthy shine, framing her face with a touch of elegance. She was a smoker, and the faint scent of cigarettes often clung to her, a cloud of cigarette smoke trailing behind her, had raced across the road in response to the desperate cries of her son, Jimmy. It was Jimmy who had come home in a frantic state, shouting for his mother to help Angela, claiming that Sarah was in the process of murdering her. Panic etched across Judy's face as she witnessed the horrifying scene unfolding.

Angela, still curled up on the couch, felt a surge of hope and relief upon seeing Judy's arrival. She knew that Judy, despite her own complex life, was a neighbor who genuinely cared about her and the other children in the tight-knit community. Judy had been a source of comfort and support for Angela on numerous occasions.

Judy's presence in the room seemed to momentarily freeze Sarah in her tracks. The atmosphere grew tense as the two women locked eyes. Sarah, breathing heavily and with her hand still raised, held the switch menacingly. Judy, despite her slender frame, possessed a presence that commanded attention and respect.

"Stop it, Sarah, you're going to kill her, stop it, she's had enough," Judy pleaded desperately, her voice laced with fear and urgency.

Judy, her slender frame struggling against the chaotic turmoil in the room, reached for the blood-soaked switch that had been used to inflict so much pain on Angela. Her fingers wrapped around it, and with a mixture of determination and horror, she pried it from Sarah's grip. The switch, now a sinister instrument of torture, seemed to throb with malevolence in her trembling hand. As she held the bloodstained switch, Judy turned her gaze to Sarah, who was still caught in a frenzy of anger and frustration. Sarah's face

was twisted in a mix of rage and despair, her breaths coming in ragged gasps. Judy knew that this moment was critical. She had to defuse the situation and protect Angela, who was now cowering and whimpering on top of the couch, her body battered and her spirit broken.

Her voice quivering with concern as she stepped closer to the traumatized girl, this wasn't the first time she had intervened in Angela's turbulent life.

With remarkable calm, Judy attempted to reason with Sarah, her voice softening into a soothing, encouraging tone.

"She's had enough now. She's had enough. It's ok to stop. Come on in the kitchen. We can have a drink and Angela can go to her bedroom." Judy instructed.

Judy gently guided Sarah by the arm, leading her away from Angela and the living room, the scene of horror, knowing that removing Sarah from the immediate vicinity was essential to ensure Angela's safety.

Turning back to Angela with a sympathetic yet helpless look, Judy motioned with a subtle tilt of her head toward her bedroom. She leaned closer to Angela and whispered,

"Angela, honey, are you alright? Ange, it's best to go to bed now." Judy said softly.

Angela, her body trembling and her spirit shattered, the tears continued to roll from her eyes from the pain searing through her body. She could only manage a weak nod in response to Judy's question, clinging to the lifeline of support that had arrived just in time, with her body in trauma from the relentless assault, her spirit was shattered.

With Keira's protective presence still hovering over Angela, she could only manage a faint nod in acceptance of Judy's intervention. Her tears

continued to flow, streaking down her dirt-streaked cheeks, mixing with the blood and grime from the ordeal that had just unfolded. The agonizing pain coursing through her body seemed to intensify with each passing second, and the shrill screams that had once filled the room had now dwindled into soft, heavy sobs.

As Judy skillfully distracted Sarah, Angela, battered and bruised, tenderly climbed down from the couch. With each movement, she winced, the pain a constant reminder of the brutal assault she had endured. Keeping her back against the walls for support, she inched her way out of the living room, leaving a faint trail of smudged blood against the once-white wall. Her legs bore the oozing welts, painful souvenirs of her Sarah's fury. She moved slowly and deliberately, her small frame burdened by the weight of her injuries. The hallway felt like a narrow tunnel, leading her toward the one place that offered some semblance of solace—her bedroom. As she reached the door, she gently closed it behind her, shutting out the chaotic world that existed on the other side.

Collapsing onto her bed, Angela's small body trembled with a mixture of physical pain and emotional turmoil. She buried her face in her grey, lumpy plastic pillow, muffling the sounds of her sobs. The thin, open-weave blanket, which carried the comforting scent of lavender and mothballs from her grandmother's gift, enveloped her. It was her only source of comfort in this moment of agony.

Lying there, in the dimly lit room, Angela retreated further into her safe haven within her mind. It was a place she had learned to escape to during the darkest moments of her young life. Here, she could momentarily find respite from the overwhelming pain and trauma that still wracked her child's body. As she drifted deeper into her inner sanctuary, she clung to the hope that someday, somehow, she would break free from this cycle of abuse and find a way to heal the wounds that marred her both inside and out.

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Angela, and Keira, drifted off to sleep with her fathers voice echoing in her mind as she saw him standing on the step of their home calling her for butter and honey pancakes and an Earl Grey tea. 'Come on sweetie, its nearly time to see a new day, let say hello to mummy.'

Escape

They are those whom are evil, and enemies of righteous souls

UPON WAKING FROM HER DREAMS, a fleeting refuge from reality, Angela found herself back in the stark truth of her world. Despite regaining full control of her senses, an overwhelming urge surged within her – a desperate need to flee from the unrelenting pain that still wracked her small, fragile body. Her instincts kicked in, driving her towards the small window adorned with blue and yellow glass, a portal from her room to the outside world, to freedom.

As she began her careful ascent through the window, the muffled voices of Sarah and Judy filtered through from the kitchen. Their conversation, marred by slurred words and raucous laughter, betrayed the influence of too many drinks. Intermittent, lengthy coughs, the legacy of years of cigarette smoking, punctuated their dialogue, a harsh soundtrack to Angela's escape.

With determined resolve, she navigated through the window, her actions fueled by a burning need to escape the continual hell that each moment in that house represented. She moved with a stealth born of necessity, knowing that silence was her ally in this clandestine departure. Her plan was clear: to make her way quietly through the house, past the familiar landmarks of her backyard, and beyond the confines of her current life. The backyard, with its

four old car bodies, had been a constant in her life since Sarah was deemed fit to be her guardian by Child Services. These rusting relics, now home to at least four deadly black snakes she had seen herself, and countless red-back spiders, were landmarks of danger and decay. Yet, in her desperate bid for freedom, these hazards seemed minor compared to the emotional turmoil she was fleeing from. However, Angela hadn't anticipated one crucial factor – her best friend, Max the dog, suddenly appeared, his barks of joy piercing the stillness of the night. His enthusiasm, though a testament to his affection for Angela, became an unintended alarm. The sound of his barking shattered the quiet of the night, alerting Sarah to the unfolding escape.

Sarah, roused from her inebriated state, stormed out of the house into the backyard, just as Angela was scrambling through a gap in the rotting wooden fence that marked the boundary of her small world. The sight of Angela, poised on the edge of freedom, sparked a tumult of emotions in Sarah, a chaotic blend of concern, frustration, and the dawning realization of the depth of Angela's desperation. In this moment, as Angela navigated her way through the narrow escape, the backyard transformed from a familiar space into a tableau of her bid for liberation. The twilight cast eerie shadows over the scene, highlighting the stark contrast between the young girl's desperate courage and the encroaching presence of an out of control Sarah. This was not just a physical escape for Angela but a poignant symbol of her fight for autonomy, a struggle to break free from the confines of a life that had become too much to bear.

“Angela, come back you little bitch!” Sarah screamed,

Angela pushed the two rotting palings of the fence apart and squeezed through head first. Wriggling frantically to fit through she hit her head on the ground, temporarily stunning and disorienting her. As she came to her senses, she felt the weak grip of Sarah's hands on her left ankle.

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“What the fuck are you doing you little bitch, where do you think you’re going, get back here”. Sarah screamed.

Judy yelled at Sarah, trying to get Sarah to let go of the grip she had on Angela’s leg.

“Sarah leave her, let her go, let her go, let her settle she’ll be back” Judy begged.

Now fully under the influence of Gin and Marijuana, Sarah shouted,

“Bullshit. If this little tart pisses off, we’ll have the fucking Child Services on us, those toe-rags.”

“Sarah, Sarah, look at me, your going to really hurt her and then you wont be able to explain it away.” Judy pleaded.

Sarah's attention momentarily shifted towards Judy, her focus wavering. Seizing this brief opportunity, Angela managed to free her ankle from Sarah's grasp. With a surge of adrenaline, she rolled across the verge of the road, desperately seeking distance from the grasp of her troubled life. As she staggered to clear the area, a figure materialized seemingly out of nowhere. It was Jimmy.

“Oh Jimmy, Jimmy, please help me!” Angela pleaded, her voice quivering with urgency and fear.

“Quick, Ange, come with me, let's go, now, run come on, run!” Jimmy's voice was sharp, his directive clear.

Angela, driven by a mix of fear and relief, found the strength to run alongside Jimmy, she was running, trying to leave, without success, the hurt in her wake. Despite the throbbing pain from her head striking the ground and the disorienting effect of seeing double, she pushed forward. Each step was a fight against the physical hurt and the emotional turmoil that haunted her. 'Just make it go away, please, please,' she thought, her mind a whirlwind of

desperation.

They reached the edge of the town. Angela was breathing heavily and disoriented, She looked at Jimmy, her eyes filled with questions and pain, her voice a mix of confusion and hope.

"Where are we going, Jimmy? Can you make this pain go away? Where do I go now?" she asked,

"Your Aunty Mimmie's, that's who. She'll look after you," Jimmy responded, his tone urgent yet reassuring.

"Listen, Ange. Look at me. As soon as Sarah started on you, I ran to get Judy. If she hadn't been home, I don't know what Sarah would've ended up doing. Fuck, she gave you a hiding, geez mate, you look like a bus has just hit you. It was lucky Judy was home, I mean, for fuck's sake!" He rambled.

"Jimmy, Jimmy, shush, I'm okay, really. Just a bit sore. Good idea, let's go to Mimmie's place," Angela replied, trying to muster a semblance of calm amidst the chaos.

"I'd love to go, Ange," Jimmy said, his voice laced with regret,

"But if I'm away from home for much longer, I'll get in trouble too. You go now, if Sarah comes by I'll throw her off your scent and send her the other way. Go on, shoot through." He said.

With these words, Jimmy became more than just a friend, in that critical moment, he was her ally. Angela nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. She turned towards the direction of Mimmie's house, her steps uncertain yet determined, embarking on a journey towards a hopeful sanctuary, away from the turmoil that had ensnared her life.

Miriam, the sister of Angela's father had always offered refuge to Angela when she needed time out from the tirades of her Sarah. She was the elder of the family whom had seen her own times of family trauma

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through the loss of her own son, husband, and brothers to the ravages of them fighting in foreign wars. She offered a sense of calm and stability which comforted Angela in the knowing that her Aunty Mimmie would be there for her 'no matter what'. That her 'Mimmie' had an instinctive knowing that she should protect this young soul and provide the love and nurturing that was required. Angela knew that this, right now, was one of those 'no matter what's', she was going around to Aunty Mimmie's.

Mimmie's

Mimmie's quaint residence was a charming, small weatherboard cottage with two bedrooms, a testament to architectural styles predating the Second World War. Tucked away at the very edge of the town, it quietly marked the conclusion of the neighborhood, right where the large town water tank stood as a prominent landmark. The cottage, enveloped by the natural beauty of surrounding bushland, held a special place in the family's history. It had been their abode for two generations, ever since Mimmie's grandparents had journeyed from the historical lands of Palestine, joining the post-First World War wave of immigrants seeking a new beginning.

Inside, the cottage exuded warmth and a sense of welcoming. Mimmie's door was perpetually open, a gesture of her deep-rooted hospitality. The heart of the home was the kitchen, where a large, blackened kettle sat perennially on the wood fire stove, its steam a signal of readiness for brewing a fresh cup of Earl Grey tea. Accompanying the tea were Mimmie's famous homemade ginger biscuits, crafted with loving care from ginger she cultivated in her own backyard garden. These biscuits were not just treats; they were fragments of her heritage and love. However Mimmie's garden held secrets beyond the eye-catching ginger plants. In a discreet corner, she nurtured a variety of other medicinal plants. These plants were her personal remedy for

various aches and pains. Mimmie maintained a veil of secrecy over these special ingredients. In the changing times, the plants she grew and relied on for their therapeutic properties were now considered illegal. Despite this, she continued to cultivate them with care, a silent rebellion against increasingly restrictive societal norms, preserving a piece of ancestral wisdom and natural healing.

As Mimmie settled into her early evening ritual in her cozy, oversized high-back lounge chair, the comforting aroma of Earl Grey tea mingled with the sweet scent of her special ginger biscuits, a combination that never failed to bring a sense of tranquility to her cottage. The sun was gently waning outside, casting a soft, golden hue through the windows. However this serene moment was unexpectedly interrupted by a faint, rhythmic tapping on her back door. At first, Mimmie thought the sensory delight from her biscuits might be playing tricks on her aging senses. However, the sound persisted, growing into a slow, unmistakable squeak of the door's hinges, followed by a weak, trembling voice calling from the doorway.

“Mimmie, Aunty Mimmie,” A note of desperation lacing the words,

“Mimmie, Aunty Mimmie, please, please help me.”

The voice belonged to Angela, a small figure whose presence was as delicate as it was heartbreaking. After she left Jimmy, Angela had dragged her small, battered body for over two kilometers, propelled by a desperate quest for respite from the unrelenting pain that seared through her. As Mimmie appeared in the doorway, Angela's pent-up emotions burst forth, unleashing a torrent of tears, her body shaking with waves of despair, hurt engulfing her both physically and emotionally.

“I don't want to go back there Mimmie. I can't. She is mean, she beats me, and... and... we are scared of her. Oh, I wish mummy and daddy were alive. I miss them so much. Please, Mimmie, help me, help... help.” Angela

pleaded.

Mimmie's heart clenched at the sight of Angela. With maternal instinct, she reached out to embrace Angela, attempting to provide a haven in her aged, yet sturdy arms. However as she cuddled the small, fragile frame, she realized that even this gentle embrace was amplifying the Angela's physical pain. Quickly adjusting, Mimmie released her grip and knelt down to Angela's level, placing her hands tenderly on the child's trembling shoulders.

"Darling, you can stay here. You're safe now," Mimmie assured her softly, her voice a soothing balm.

"Things will settle down. I'll talk to Sarah, and I'm sure we can sort things out." Mimmie whispered.

Deep down, Mimmie was only too well aware that these words were mere cold comfort. She knew that soon Sarah would come searching for her 'errant child', eager to whisk her away from prying eyes, to conceal the grim reality of her psychotic torment. The thought of sending Angela back to such a dreadful environment filled Mimmie with a profound sense of dread and helplessness, yet she was determined to protect this vulnerable soul as much as she could, for as long as she could.

"Come on sweetie, let's go and have a cuppa. I've just made some of my special ginger biscuits, they'll do you the world of good". Mimmie said.

Knowing that the cannabis in the biscuits would help sooth both the physical and emotional pain that Angela was going through, Mimmie prepared a tray of tea and biscuits.

"Thank you Mimmie, I love your tea, it reminds me of Daddy. I especially love your biscuits,"

With her heart heavy yet hands steady, Mimmie prepared a lukewarm bath for Angela, infusing the water with oils extracted her special medicinal

plants, a blend of nature's healing essences, were Mimmie's secret remedy for soothing physical and emotional trauma. As the bath filled, Mimmie selected a vinyl record from her collection, placing it gently on the turntable of her old stereogram. The soft, melodious strains of classical music and the comforting scent of the healing oils soon filled the room, creating an ambiance of tranquility and comfort, a stark contrast to the turmoil Angela had endured. Angela spent a good hour soaking in the nurturing embrace of Mimmie's bath. The healing properties of the bath were enhanced by the lingering effects of ginger biscuits, which seemed to offer their own kind of comfort. Gradually, Angela's tense muscles relaxed with the soothing soaking of the water and the smell of the oils, the emotional weight she carried began to ease, if only slightly.

After emerging from the bath, she found herself at the bathroom door, where Mimmie was waiting with a large, hand-woven blanket. The blanket, imbued with the calming scent of lavender mixed with the nostalgic hint of mothballs, enveloped Angela in a cocoon of warmth and safety. She wrapped herself in it, taking a deep breath. The unique scent was one that would forever be etched in her memory, a reminder of solace in the midst of chaos.

In the spare bedroom, a long cotton dressing gown awaited her. Angela draped it around herself, the hood covering her head, feeling a sense of security in its soft embrace. She then made her way to the living room, where she settled into the big lounge chair opposite Mimmie. A freshly brewed cup of tea was waiting for her, the steam rising in comforting swirls. Angela took a few tentative sips, feeling the warmth spread through her. Looking up at Mimmie a fresh wave of emotion overcame Angela, and she began to cry again. Mimmie, wise in the ways of the heart and its pains, let Angela's tears flow uninterrupted. She understood the necessity of allowing grief and pain to be expressed, to be worked out from within. In her years, Mimmie had learned

that sometimes the greatest comfort one can offer is a safe space for sorrow, a quiet presence that speaks volumes of understanding and acceptance. In this peaceful haven, with the gentle crackle of the record player and the soothing aroma of tea, lavender, and therapeutic oils, Angela savoured the rare gift of being allowed to just be, to heal in her own time, under the watchful, caring eyes of Mimmie.

As Angela's gaze wandered around the room, it was drawn to the myriad of old photographs adorning the walls. These images captured three generations of soldiers, each holding a significant place in Mimmie's life and history. The photographs, varying in hues from black and white to sepia, seemed to be portals to bygone eras, each telling a story of courage, sacrifice, and a connection to a past that was both proud and painful.

"Mimmie, tell me again who those people are," Angela asked,

Her eyes fixed on the faces frozen in time. Her request not new. She had heard these stories many times before, but they never ceased to captivate her. For Angela, these tales were more than just history; they provided a sense of belonging, a link to a lineage that her current life sorely lacked.

Mimmie, sensing Angela's deep interest, began to narrate the stories behind the photographs. She pointed to a sepia-toned picture in an oval carved wooden frame.

"That's your Grandfather Charles, my father," she said softly.

"He was in the Second World War, dressed in his uniform there. He chose to fight in the Middle East. His decision was influenced by his own father, Yosef, who came from Palestine. Charles felt a strong need to defend the land of his forefathers." Mimmie said.

Mimmie's voice held a tinge of melancholy as she continued.

"Charles was a lovely man. I was about your age when we lost him.

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The memories of the war, the horrific things he witnessed and endured, they haunted him. He found solace in drinking, which eventually took him from us. He had ginger hair, much like the color of the sunset, and he always smoked roll-your-own cigarettes.” Mimmie recounted.

She then gestured towards lounge room window, with the back garden visible through the window.

“The special plants in the backyard, the ones I use for the oils and remedies, they originated from seeds he brought from Palestine. He was always connected to the earth, to the healing power of plants.” Mimmie smiled.

Mimmie's eyes lingered on the photograph a moment longer before she turned back to Angela.

“After the war, your grandfather bought this house with the money he earned as a farm laborer. He was determined and hardworking, saving every penny to support his family. This house, it's where both your father and I were born. It's more than just a building; it's a cradle of our family's history, holding stories of love, loss, and endurance.” Mimmie said.

As Mimmie shared these stories, the room seemed to fill with the echoes of the past, each photograph a testament to the resilience and sacrifices of those who came before. For Angela, these stories were not just narratives; they were threads that wove her into the fabric of a family history that was rich, complex, and deeply rooted in the trials and triumphs of generations.

"Who's the man in the helicopter, Mimmie?" Angela asked.

Her eyes fixed on a black and white photograph that seemed to hold a thousand stories.

"That's my beautiful husband, darling. That's your Uncle Tobais," Mimmie replied.

Her voice tinged with a mix of pride and sorrow.

"In that picture, he's an Army Sergeant, leading his men, heading off to a battle in Vietnam. He was a real warrior, darling. Brave and resolute. He served three tours in Vietnam, each one taking a piece of him. Like your grandfather, the war left deep scars on him, scars that never really healed. Those experiences... they followed him, haunted him for the rest of his life." Mimmie said.

Mimmie paused, her gaze lingering on the photograph as if seeing beyond it, to the past it represented.

"He turned to smoking and drinking, trying to escape his demons, but they never left him. Watching him struggle, slowly losing himself to those inner battles, was heart-wrenching, darling. It was hard, so very hard. God finally took him, but the truth is, we lost him to his demons long before that."

"And the really good-looking one, in the center of the mantelpiece, Mimmie?" Angela's curiosity moved to another photograph.

"That's my darling boy, your Uncle Jude. He had such a gentle heart, a soft soul. He was called up for National Service, when young men were conscripted into the Army and sent to Vietnam. War... it wasn't in his nature, darling. He wasn't cut out for the horrors of battle. When he returned, the things he had seen and endured... they changed him. He tried to find his footing back in the world he left, but the memories, the nightmares of war, they were too much for him. His drinking, it was his way of coping, but it consumed him in the end. It's a sad pattern in our family, one I hoped would end with them." Mimmie said, a sad softness entering her voice.

Mimmie took several deep breaths, steadying herself. She reached for another ginger biscuit, her hands slightly trembling. Each bite seemed to give her a moment of respite, a brief escape from the painful memories evoked by the photographs. Angela watched her, sensing the depth of loss and love intertwined in Mimmie's stories, a tapestry of family history marked by

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bravery, tragedy, and enduring affection.

They both fell silent for what seemed an eternity to Angela, as she relaxed in the presence of Mimmie as the reflections of the past and the thoughts of the present occupied their minds. The warmth of the bath and the sedation of the biscuits and tea had her drifting off to a safe place, without the aid of Keira.

A long loud banging of fists and kicking on the front door awoke both Angela and Mimmie from their relaxed dreamlike state. Sarah had come to reclaim Angela as her own. Sarah's screams echoed with a ferocity that rattled the front door, her voice a tempest of desperation and fury.

"Mimmie, you witch, let her out! She doesn't belong with you. If you've drugged her with your dope, I swear I'll have the police tear this place apart. Get her out, NOW!" Sarah screamed.

Angela's her body wracked with a pain that seemed to penetrate her very soul. She leaned heavily towards Mimmie. Her voice, a fragile whisper, it barely rose above a trembling whisper.

"Mimmie, I can't bear it anymore. It's overwhelming. I feel safe here, like I can breathe. Please, I'm begging you, let me stay. Please Mimmie, Please!" Angela pleaded.

Mimmie's eyes, a reservoir of wisdom and sorrow, met Angela's with a gentle, yet pained understanding.

"Oh, my dear, my sweet girl," she murmured, her voice a soothing balm.

"I'll do everything within my power, but Sarah, she's relentless, unyielding. And I... I'm not as strong as I once was. Quickly now, change your clothes and escape through the back. Run to the school and hide in the kitchen. You know the sliding door on the side? Stay there then return here in

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the morning. We'll figure this out, but you must hurry." Mimmie urged.

"I'm coming Sarah, I'm coming, don't have to break down the door." Mimmie yelled back at Sarah.

Mimmie urgently waved at Angela to go out the back as she slowly made her way the front door. Slowly prizing the front door open Mimmie put her face through the slight opening.

"Sarah what are you making all this fuss about, I was in the middle of a nap?" Mimmie whispered, pretending to be half asleep.

"Where's that little bitch Mimmie, I know she's in here, get her out now." Sarah yelled. Sarah tried to push past Mimmie by violently pushing the door, only to be stopped by the security chain.

"Open this fucking door Mimmie, I haven't finished with that little bitch."

"Sarah, settle down, I haven't seen Angela, she hasn't been around here, I told you I was having a nap, which you've just ruined. Settle down, please and I will let you in."

"If you've been giving her your dope biscuits, I'll get you locked up."

"Sarah, please settle down, I can see your upset but really I don't know where Angela is, you know I'll tell you if I could. Now settle down and come inside."

"Fuck off Mimmie, I know you. This was the first place she'd come to. But she'd have fucked off by now, now that you've stalled me. Fuck you Mimmie. I'll go and find her myself. Don't worry old battle-axe Anderson will know where she is."

Sarah turned away from the door and banged her fist hard against the entrance wall and then headed off down the wooden stairs. As she reached the

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small wire front fence she began screaming at the empty streets.

“Angela, you’d better come home before I find you, or else I’ll send you to that girls home in the city. Angela, you hear me, you hear me, come here now!”

Stan

ANGELA'S HEART POUNDED IN HER CHEST, a drumbeat of fear and hope, as she followed Mimmie's instructions. The night air, cool and sharp, felt like a splash of reality as she slipped out the back door. She made her way around to the side of the house and stopped as she heard Sarah yelling. Putting her back up against the wooden planks of the wall of the house, she broke out into a cold sweat and shook from head to foot. She heard Sarah's booming threats, she froze, and had a passing thought of letting Sarah know where she was, to protect Mimmie from any further verbal assault. However she clung to Mimmie's instructions like a lifeline in turbulent waters. She remembered Mimmie's instructions, 'run over to the school.' Gathering her courage again she made a dash for small wire front fence and jumped over it in one go and continued to run towards the school. 'through the sliding door at the side.' She continued to run until she rounded the corner and saw the small country school house. The school loomed in the distance, a sanctuary in the shadows, silhouette against the star-pierced sky, appeared both foreboding and comforting. It stood as a bastion in the darkness, its familiar walls promising a temporary haven from the maelstrom of her life. The shadows it cast seemed to dance in the moonlight, beckoning her closer with the whispered allure of refuge. Sitting on a large block surrounded by pine trees the building had a meeting hall attached to one side. The night air, crisp and invigorating, swept across her face, its coolness a stark contrast to the feverish panic that engulfed

her. As she stealthily slipped through the back door, the world outside seemed to hold its breath, the only sound her own hurried footsteps. Her mind raced with the possibilities of the night and the uncertain promise of safety. She moved swiftly, yet cautiously, her mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and fears. Each scenario played out like a cinematic reel, fraught with the perils of being discovered and the chance of evading Sarah's wrath. The idea of safety, so close yet so fraught with uncertainty, was a beacon in the night, urging her on. With each step, the reality of her situation sank in deeper. She was a fugitive in her own life, chased by the very real specter of Sarah's anger. Her breath came in short, sharp gasps, not just from the physical exertion but from the overwhelming surge of emotions that threatened to engulf her. Her hands trembled as she navigated towards the sliding door at the side. The cool metal of the handle of the door felt alien under her sweat-slicked palm, a chilling reminder of the perilous tightrope she walked. With a gentle push, the door yielded, and she slipped inside, the darkness of the kitchen enveloping her like a cloak. In that moment, hidden from the world's prying eyes, Angela allowed herself a moment to breathe, to gather her scattered thoughts and steel herself for what may lay ahead.

The kitchen in the hall, shrouded in darkness, felt unfamiliar and intimidating to Angela. She hesitated momentarily before flicking on the light switch. The fluorescent lights above flickered reluctantly before fully illuminating the room, revealing the stainless steel surfaces that reflected a ghostly sheen. The kitchen, typically bustling with the preparation of quick meals for students, was now silent, its air tinged with the residual aroma of deep-fried chips and dim sims. Her stomach growled, reminding her of the hunger pangs she felt, exacerbated by the few biscuits she had eaten at Mimmie's. Opening the large double-door refrigerator, she found two trays of neatly cut sandwiches covered in plastic wrap, meticulously prepared and labeled with a note stating 'For Teacher Conference Only'. Beside the

sandwiches, there were two containers of orange juice and two cartons of skim milk. Checking the date on the notice, Angela realized that the school had a teachers' conference scheduled in the hall the next day.

With a pragmatic resolve, Angela thought to herself, 'I'll be okay. I'll stay here tonight and leave early in the morning before they arrive.' She carefully selected two rounds of sandwiches, eating them with a sense of gratitude. The sandwiches, along with two small containers of orange juice that she gulped down in succession, helped quell the hunger that had grown since her modest meal of Mimmie's biscuits. After her makeshift meal, she rummaged through the storeroom cupboard and found some blankets and pillows. With these, she fashioned a temporary bed beneath the main bench in the kitchen. It was a crude arrangement, but it offered some semblance of safety and comfort in a strange environment.

Turning off the light, Angela crawled into her makeshift bed, the darkness enveloping her once again. In the quiet of the kitchen, she felt a wave of longing for Max, her loyal companion. She missed not only his warmth but also the unconditional love he provided, a constant source of comfort in her life of turmoil. As she lay there, poised between fear and the hope of a new beginning, she found solace in the thought of returning to Mimmie's in the morning, before the conference attendees arrived. This brief respite in the kitchen allowed her to rest drifting into a restless sleep, offering a momentary escape from the relentless challenges she faced.

Return to School

STARTLED BY THE SUDDEN RATTLE ON THE MAIN DOOR to the hall. Angela's heart skipped a beat. In a swift, almost reflexive motion, she pulled the curtain hanging from the bench towards her, concealing her makeshift bed in the shadows. She nestled deeper behind the curtain, her breath held in suspense, her body tensed in anticipation of discovery.

Stan Fox, the former Principal of the school, had arrived earlier than usual to prepare the hall for the upcoming conference. With a key in hand, he unlocked the main hall door and stepped inside. The hall, once a familiar territory where he had held sway as the principal, now felt like a distant memory, a relic of his past life. At 60 years old, now retired, he carried an air about him that was both intriguing and slightly unsettling. Short in stature, he had a way of moving quietly, almost stealthily, that could surprise those not aware of his presence. His appearance was marked by a distinctive contrast: while the front of his head was balding, the hair at the back grew longer, falling to his shoulders in an outdated style that seemed incongruous with his age. His facial features were dominated by a thin, black pencil mustache, meticulously groomed but giving him a somewhat sinister appearance, especially when he fixed someone with his steady, piercing gaze of his dark eyes. His choice of attire did little to soften his demeanor. He favored conservative clothes, often wearing a tartan jacket complete with elbow

patches, which seemed to hark back to an older, bygone era. His black shoes were pointed and shiny, overly polished to the point where they seemed to gleam unnaturally in the light. The tartan socks that peeked out from under his trouser cuffs matched his jacket, an attempt at coordination that instead lent an odd, almost eerie quality to his overall look. With deliberate movements, he had a habit of lingering just a bit too long in conversations or in shared spaces, his presence often casting a shadow that was both intriguing and slightly discomfiting. His voice, when he spoke, was soft yet carried a certain weight, leaving an impression long after he had left the room. Overall, Stan's appearance and demeanor combined to create an aura that was peculiar and slightly disconcerting.

Yawning, Stan moved with deliberate, slow steps, his eyes sweeping over the hall. Each corner, each crevice of the place resonated with echoes of his former days, a poignant reminder of a time gone by. His gaze fell upon the green 'kitchen' sign. Below it, a small, hand-written notice read 'Staff Only'. A sigh escaped his lips as he mused, 'I was staff, once.'

Gently, he pressed against the swinging door of the kitchen, expecting it to yield as it always had. However, the door resisted, its frame warped over time, demanding a firmer push to open. Gathering a bit more strength, he nudged the door again. This time, it gave way with a faint creak, allowing him entry into the kitchen. He paused for a moment, absorbing the stillness of the space. Unaware of Angela's presence, hidden just beneath the bench, he began his preparations for the day.

As the early morning light gently seeped through the windows of the school hall kitchen, Stan stood amidst the quiet, his figure casting a solitary shadow on the stainless steel surfaces of the benches that glimmered softly around him, now aglow with the morning light. The benches served as unwitting mirrors, reflecting not just his physical form but the introspection of a man coming to terms with his past. He paused, his mind drifting into a sea

of reflection that was as deep as it was complex. He thought back on the years he had dedicated to teaching, to guiding and inspiring young minds. Each student he had encountered was a world unto themselves, a unique blend of potential and aspiration. He had been a part of their journeys, a guiding force at a crucial juncture of their lives. Yet, as he stood there, it wasn't just the successes that occupied his thoughts; it was the opportunities he had missed, the moments he could have done more, been more. His tenure as an educator was marked by achievements, but also shadowed by a series of ethical transgressions that now weighed heavily on his conscience. With the clarity of hindsight, These were not just professional missteps; they were personal failings that had impacted lives, young lives that had been entrusted to his care, and to which he failed, as he was drawn into the sucking void of the 'knowing.'

Still concealed beneath the curtain, Angela listened to the sounds of Stan moving about the kitchen. Her mind raced with thoughts of what to do next. Should she reveal herself or wait for an opportunity to slip away unnoticed? The risk of being discovered weighed heavily on her, yet the need to escape undetected was paramount.

In the quiet, still morning of the kitchen, two stories intersected – Stan's journey through a space filled with memories and Angela's desperate bid for a safe haven, the kitchen became a stage for silent narratives, each unbeknownst to the other, yet intimately connected by the threads of fate and circumstance.

The refrigerator large and industrial in its design, stood imposingly against the kitchen wall, a silent guardian. As Stan reached for the handle, his fingers wrapped around the cool metal, feeling the familiar resistance before exerting a firmer grip. With a decisive motion, he swung open the refrigerator door. It refrigerator released with a faint whoosh as door swung wide, revealing the neatly organized contents inside. Rows of shelves, bathed in the soft, white glow of the fridge light, were laden with various items meticulously arranged

for easy access. The cool air that escaped from the refrigerator brought with it a mix of scents – the freshness of dairy products, the tang of citrus from the juice containers, and a faint hint of the sandwiches' fillings. It was a familiar smell, one that brought back to Stan memories of countless school events and meetings, where food played a central role in bringing people together. However, he quickly noticed something amiss – some of the sandwiches, particularly the white bread ones, had been tampered with. The wrapping was pulled back, and a few sandwiches were missing. Beside the tray, two small orange juice container lids lay abandoned, a silent testament to an unexpected intrusion. As he stood there, contemplating the minor mystery, something in the corner of his right eye caught his attention, a movement, subtle yet distinct. Quickly turning his head, Stan saw the cloth curtain hanging beneath the stainless steel bench still swaying slightly. A small foot, dirty and unmistakable. It was protruding from under the curtain, heel down on the floor, toes pointing upwards.

“Oi! What are you doing there?” Stan called out.

His voice reverberating in the empty kitchen with the authority of a principal accustomed to command. The small foot quickly retracted under the bench, as if trying to erase its presence.

“Yes, you. Come on out of there,”

His tone firmed as he leaned down towards the curtain.

“Who let you in here?”

With a swift motion, he snapped the curtain back and stooped to peer under the bench, eager to identify the owner of the small, dirty foot. The shadows under the bench offered little in the way of clarity, but Stan's eyes began to adjust, searching for the intruder who had sought refuge in this unlikely hiding place. As he waited for the person beneath the bench to emerge, his mind raced with possibilities. Was it a student, a runaway, or

someone in need? His initial irritation gave way to a growing concern and curiosity about who he might find and what story they might have to tell. The unexpected discovery in the quiet of the morning had turned an ordinary day into something entirely different, a situation that demanded not just his authority but his empathy and understanding.

Curled up in a ball, Angela was backed against the cold pipes under the bench, her small frame shaking uncontrollably as she tried to hide from the world. In her hands, two sandwiches she had leftover from the previous raid on the fridge when she first arrived, had been unintentionally squashed into a disfigured mass, and the juice bottles she had been holding lay upended on the floor, their remaining contents slowly spilling out. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she pleaded through her sobs.

“Leave me alone, please, don’t tell anyone!” she implored, her voice quivering with fear and desperation.

“I’ve done nothing to you, please let me go.” She begged.

Stan, responded with a calm, soothing voice,

“I’m not going to hurt you, sweetheart, it’s okay. Hey, you’re little Angela, aren’t you?”

As he squatted down to be less intimidating, he extended his hand towards her gently.

“C’mon, sweetie, I’m not going to hurt you. You want some more sandwiches, hey? Come on up, and I’ll get you some more.”

His eyes caught sight of multiple red welts on the front and back of her legs, across both her arms, and striped across both cheeks and forehead, His observations made his brow crease deeply, etched with a growing sense of alarm. Angela, stared back at Stan with a distrustful gaze. She tried to shuffle further back as he reached out to her. Her fear was palpable, and her hesitation

was evident in her guarded body language.

“Really, sweetie, I want to help you. Angela, you look like you could use a friend right now. You know me, don’t you? Mr. Fox. I was the Principal of the school here when you first started in Kindergarten,” Stan continued, trying to build a bridge of trust.

“C’mon, there’ll be a lot of people coming in here soon, and you don’t want them to see you under there, do you?”

Angela realized that if she didn’t place her trust in this man now, she would soon be discovered by many more adults pouring into the kitchen. They would ask too many questions, wanting to know why she was there, judging her for running away from Sarah, causing problems in the community, blaming her for a ripple in the ‘knowing’.

“Oh, ok, ok” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

“Great, now take my hand, and I’ll help you up, here you go, sweetie.” Stan’s voice was warm and reassuring.

He reached out his hand again, this time with a little more confidence that she might accept his help. Angela, taking a deep breath, hesitantly extended her hand towards Stan. With her hand clutching the squashed sandwiches, she tentatively placed her tiny, trembling hand in his, allowing him to gently help her out from her cramped hiding spot beneath the bench. Her movement was delicate, almost fragile, reflecting her physical pain and apprehensive emotional state. Stan gently took her hand, carefully assisting her as she emerged from under the bench to stand upright.

“There you go, sweetie, now take your time and steady first. You ok?” Stan inquired with a tone of concern.

As she slowly stood up from her refuge, Angela gave a slight nod in response and instinctively moved back against the wall opposite the bench,

seeking a semblance of safety and space. She began to put the squashed sandwiches into her mouth, driven by hunger and desperation. Noticing this, Stan moved forward.

“No, don’t eat those ones,” he said softly, a note of care in his voice.

However, his sudden movement startled Angela. She instinctively recoiled from him, quickly crouching down on the floor. Her eyes, brimming with fear, looked up at him warily. Years of difficult experiences had conditioned her to view such approaches as a potential threat, and she tensely braced herself for a strike.

“Sorry, sweetie, I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m not going to hurt you,” Stan quickly reassured her, his voice gentle and soothing.

“Here, I’ll get you some fresh sandwiches to eat and another bottle of juice.” He said.

Angela, still squatting and visibly shaken, hesitantly dropped the mess of food clenched in her fist onto the floor. She then cautiously accepted the fresh food that Stan had collected from the refrigerator. Once again, she hastily forced the sandwiches into her mouth, her actions reflecting a deep-seated hunger and an urgent need for sustenance. She gulped at the juice, her small body trembling as she consumed the food. Stan watched her, outwardly displaying a mixture of concern and empathy. He realized that Angela’s behavior was not only a result of physical hunger but also a manifestation of deeper emotional and psychological needs. For Stan, this unexpected encounter in the early morning had evolved into something much more profound, and that he knew he must act upon.

The distant sound of people in the main hall was a clear signal to Stan that the meeting attendees were arriving. Realizing the urgency of the situation, he bent down towards Angela, his voice low and reassuring as he whispered in her ear.

“Look, sweetie, the others will be coming into the kitchen soon. I think it’s best if you sit just outside, on the ramp. I’ll stay here and make sure no one goes out that way. As soon as it’s clear, I’ll give you a signal to come back in, and we can talk about what you want to do next. Ok?” Stan offered.

Angela responded with a small, almost imperceptible nod. With a cautious grace, she slowly stood up, her movements tentative as she edged herself along the wall towards the sliding door. She slipped out the door, her gaze fixed on Stan, a mix of trust and apprehension in her eyes, and took a seat on the concrete ramp outside. After finishing the last of the food and juice, Angela lay down on the ramp, her body still feeling the comforting effects of Mimmie’s cookies. Bathed in the gentle embrace of the sun’s rays, Angela felt a comforting warmth that contrasted sharply with the cold uncertainty of her recent days. The sun, with its soothing touch, seemed to wrap her in a cocoon of tranquility, a rare comfort in her turbulent world. This serene environment gradually coaxed her into a state of drowsy calm. It was as if the very atmosphere was conspiring to offer her a much-needed respite, a chance to let her guard down, if only for a short while. The chaos and upheaval that had marked her recent experiences seemed to fade into the background, replaced by a fleeting sense of serenity.

Outside, with the kitchen door slightly ajar, Angela’s world narrowed to the concrete beneath her and the open sky above. She drifted off to sleep, a small figure curled up in the safety of the ramp, and aware that inside, Stan was keeping a vigilant watch, his presence a silent promise of protection and understanding. In this unexpected sanctuary, Angela found a momentary escape, a chance to rest before facing the uncertainties that lay ahead.

It felt to Angela as though she had barely closed her eyes, surrendering to a fleeting moment of rest, when she felt a gentle but insistent tugging at her shoulder. Stan’s voice, soft yet urgent, broke through her drowsy haze.

“C’mon, sweetie, time to go. Angela, come on, Sarah’s here, sweetie. She’s been looking for you everywhere,” he whispered.

The mention of Sarah's name sent a jolt of fear through Angela. Freezing her in place. She kept her eyes tightly shut. A part of her refusing to accept the reality of the situation. 'It can't be, he said he would look after me,' she thought in disbelief.

“C’mon Angela, time to get up off that cold concrete, my love,” Sarah’s voice chimed in, a tone of feigned concern lacing her words.

“You hear that, sweetie? Sarah’s come to take care of you now,” Stan added.

Slowly, Angela opened her eyes. Her body remaining still. Her gaze squinted in the hope that what she was hearing was part of a dream. 'That's it, I'm still asleep,' she silently hoped, clinging to the idea of being in the midst of a nightmare rather than facing a harsh reality.

“Thanks, Stan, I’ve been worried sick about her. She came home with those welts on her body and won’t talk to me about it. Then she went up to Mimmie's, and I think Mimmie's given her some of that weed she grows, and that’s why she won’t say anything. I want to get her up to see Dr. Richards in town tomorrow,” Sarah said, her voice laced with feigned concern.

“Yes, I saw those welts too. I also noticed she was a bit vague, and thought you’d be worried about her, that’s why I rang you,” Stan replied.

Angela lay still, frozen in time, her mind racing as she processed the conversation happening around her. The reality of Sarah's presence and her mention of the doctor sent waves of anxiety through her. Stan's voice, once a source of comfort, now seemed distant as she grappled with the thought of returning to a life she desperately wanted to escape from. Lying motionless on the cold concrete ramp, Angela peered through squinted eyes, witnessing a

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disturbingly intimate exchange between Stan and Sarah. With a familiarity, Stan moved closer to Sarah and casually placed his hand on her behind, giving it a suggestive squeeze while simultaneously softly kissing her neck.

“Oh yes, I certainly appreciate you being in touch. I’m sure that I can repay you for all your trouble,” Sarah responded.

With a hint of playful flirtation in her voice returning Stan's kiss with equal familiarity.

“Hmm, that takes me back, Sarah. We had some fun in this hall, didn’t we?” Stan remarked.

His voice tinged with nostalgia as he reminisced about their past, his smile conveying a shared history of untold stories. Turning his attention back to Angela, Stan’s tone shifted,

“C’mon, sweetie, up you get now.” Stan said.

He bent down to assist her from the ramp. In this moment, Angela recognized the gravity of her situation. She knew that defiance against the adults could lead to severe repercussions once back at Sarah's home, at least more than she was going to get for running away. With a sense of resigned acceptance, she slowly stood up, straightening her dress. Her posture was one of submission - head bowed, eyes fixed on the ground, voice soft, hands clasped behind her back, heels together. This stance was her shield, her best strategy to protect herself from potential reprisals.

“Thank you, Mr. Fox. Thank you for helping me and letting Mum know where I was. Thank you, Mum, for coming to get me. I know I should have told you where I was going. I’m so very sorry,” Angela’s words laced with a feigned sincerity.

“That’s okay, love, we found you, and now we can take care of you. And yes, thank you Stan. I’m sure that I can repay you for all your kindness,”

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Sarah's voice carrying an undertone that suggested more than gratitude.

"That's all good, Sarah. To the future then. You take care young lady, and no more disappearing. You know Sarah really has your best interest at heart since your lovely mother and father passed," Stan replied.

"Yes, Mr. Fox, you're right. I'm sorry," Keira responded.

Carefully stepping past the two adults, Keira had appeared the moment Angela had seen Sarah standing at the bottom of the ramp. Angela had been sent into a near catatonic state to avoiding any interaction between her and Sarah. Keira kept her head down, avoiding any eye contact as a protective measure. She began to walk slowly towards the road, her steps hesitant, her heart heavy. She didn't dare to look back or to break into a run, despite the overwhelming urge to escape the unsettling environment and the complex emotions it stirred within Angela. Each step away from the hall was a reluctant journey back into a world of uncertainty.

Jake

TWO EXCRUCIATING WEEKS HAD ELAPSED SINCE Angela's brutal beating at Sarah's hands, every day was stark reminder of the nightmarish reality she was trapped in. Her fleeting escape attempt was cruelly cut short by the unspoken, oppressive 'knowing' that governed life in Shadow Creek. Since attempted escape, Sarah had confined her to her dank bedroom, a grim, isolated cell where she was fed leftovers of the family meals on a tin plate, a punishment meant to instill fear not only in Angela but also in her younger step siblings.

During this bleak fortnight, Aunty Mimmi had made several attempts to visit. However, each time she tried, Sarah callously denied her entry. Sarah had erected an impenetrable barrier, ensuring Angela remained cut off from any semblance of kindness or support from the outside world.

In her dimly lit room, Angela lay on a thin mattress, the now partially boarded up window was the only link to outside world. In revealing the first light of dawn it outlined the rusted car bodies in the yard. The sight, rather than offering solace, seemed to underscore the desolation of her circumstances. Her thoughts were abruptly interrupted by the sound of a man's enraged screams and the cacophony of objects being violently hurled against the kitchen walls. The man she heard screaming was Jake, Sarah's latest live in lover, of a long line of live in lovers.

Jake was an imposing figure, standing at 6 feet tall, with an appearance that was as striking as it was intimidating. At around 40 years old, his body was gaunt and unhealthy skinny, a physical manifestation of years of drug abuse that had taken a toll on his health. His skin was a tapestry of thick black tattoos that covered most of his visible body, extending up to his hairline and ears, creating an almost mask-like effect on his face.

One of the most chilling aspects of his appearance were the two tear-drop tattoos inked on his right cheek. These were stark symbols, each signifying a life he had brutally taken, acts of violence that had led to his 25 year imprisonment. He had been released on parole after 15 years four weeks prior to moving in with Sarah, his presence now a looming shadow in the household. His demeanor was consistently angry and aggressive, traits exacerbated by his addiction to drugs. His hair was buzzed short, in a style reminiscent of an American Marine, which added to his menacing appearance. A heavy smoker, he was seldom seen without a cigarette in his hand, the smoke adding to the aura of danger that surrounded him. His attire consisted of a black singlet, which did little to conceal the myriad of tattoos on his arms and chest, and long black track pants that contrasted sharply with his latest, expensive white sparking runners. The choice of footwear was a peculiar contrast to the rest of his appearance, hinting at a complex personality beneath the hardened exterior.

Jake's presence in any room was commanding and unnerving, his every movement and gesture reflecting the unpredictability and volatility of his character. He was a man marked by his past, and his appearance – from his striking tattoos to his constant scowl – served as a constant, unspoken reminder of the life he had led and the danger he posed.

Jake manipulated his way into Sarah's the week Angela had been dragged back to her house of horrors, he had added a new layer of fear and unpredictability to her life. It was not only his methamphetamine-fueled anger

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that regularly unleashed a terrifying display of violence, he also undertook a daily ritual of opening Angela's door to menacingly stare silently at her, his behaviour had become a terrifying and constant reminder of her helplessness.

With a heart weighed down by fear and uncertainty, Angela cautiously edged off her bed. Moving with a silence honed by weeks of living under the threat of sudden violence, she tiptoed to her bedroom door that opened into the kitchen. Her hand trembled as she slowly pushed the door ajar, steeling herself to witness the source of the turmoil that had shattered the oppressive silence of the house.

The tension in the kitchen escalated to a fever pitch as Jake's anger boiled over.

"Fuck the kids, what about me, you bitch?" he screamed a raw mix of fury and desperation.

In a fit of rage, he grabbed the stainless steel kettle and hurled it with full force at Sarah, who was cowering against the kitchen wall. The kettle crashed into the wall with a thunderous bang, rebounded off the fridge door, and clattered under the table, its metallic rattle echoing through the tense air.

"Where the fuck has all the money gone, Sarah? Tell me where the fuck it is before I break your fucking neck," Jake bellowed, his face contorted.

Sarah, overwhelmed with fear, slid down the wall into a crouching position. She shielded her face with her hands. Her voice trembling as she replied,

"I've told you, Jake, I spent it on food for the kids. They were hungry. I bought two-minute noodles and sugar frosty cereal for them."

"And I fucking told you, fuck the kids, ungrateful bastards. Where the fuck am I going to get my fix tonight?"

Jake's rage was uncontainable as he grabbed a large breakfast bowl and

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threw it viciously at Sarah's head. The bowl shattered on impact, sending shards flying across the kitchen.

"For fuck's sake, Jake, stop! You'll fucking kill me! Please, please stop. I can get some money for you, just stop," Sarah pleaded,

Blood began streaming down Sarah's face from a large gash on her forehead, that still had a shard from the shattered bowl protruding from it.

As Jake leaned over the kitchen table, reaching for another bowl, he caught sight of Angela peeking through her door. His wrathful gaze locked onto her.

"What are you looking at, you little fucker? Get back in that stink hole of yours before you get some of what I'm giving this bitch," he snarled.

With a swift, menacing movement, he flung the bowl in Angela's direction. Reacting quickly, Angela slammed the door shut just in time, the bowl smashing against it with a loud crash.

Retreating to the relative safety of her room, Angela sat cross-legged on her mattress, her heart pounding in her chest. The sounds of the continuing violence in the kitchen were a harrowing reminder of the volatile and dangerous environment she was trapped in, a place where fear and violence were ever-present.

In her small, dimly lit room, Keira hugged her knees close, trying to find Angela a sliver of peace in the midst of chaos. A faint, wry smile flickered across Keira's face amidst the chaos, an unexpected reaction sparked by a memory of Mimmie's words. Despite the turmoil surrounding her, Keira found a momentary solace in recalling Mimmi's sage advice. 'Don't worry about getting revenge on anyone, Ange', because Karma will get the bastards in the end.' The wisdom in those words resonated within her, a small beacon of hope in her dark world.

As she sat there, hugging her knees on the mattress, The scene unfolding outside her door – Sarah's distress at the hands of Jake – seemed like a manifestation of those very words. 'Mimmie was right again, Sarah was definitely experiencing her Karma,'

This realization brought with it a mix of emotions. While part of her felt vindicated, seeing Sarah face consequences that seemed like cosmic retribution, there was also a profound sadness. The cycle of violence and suffering she was witnessing was a stark reminder of the pain and hurt that permeated her environment, affecting not just her but everyone around her. In that moment, both Keira and Angela understood that true justice was more complex than the simple retribution they had once envisioned. Mimmie's words were not just about waiting for others to receive their comeuppance; they were about recognizing the intricate web of actions and consequences that life weaves, and the understanding that one's negative actions eventually circle back.

As the cacophony of violence persisted in the kitchen, echoing through the thin walls of her room, Keira instinctively took over. She gently closed Angela's eyes, a protective gesture to shield her from the harsh reality that played out just beyond her door. Settling into a rhythmic rocking back and forth, she whispered to herself in a soothing, repetitive chant,

"Someone will come, soon someone will come, soon someone will come, soon someone will come. Please, please."

This mantra became a lifeline, a rhythmic incantation that helped drown out the distressing sounds of the conflict. Each repetition was a hope, a plea for intervention, a call to the world outside for rescue. The rocking motion, steady and consistent, was almost therapeutic, a self-soothing act that brought a semblance of comfort in the midst of chaos.

In this moment, Keira was not just a part of Angela; she was a

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guardian, a caretaker guiding Angela away from the immediate pain and fear. She helped Angela retreat into a mental sanctuary, a 'safe pain-free place' that existed within the recesses of her mind. It was a place where the screams, the threats, and the sound of shattering dishes were replaced by silence and peace, a haven where Angela could find temporary respite from her harrowing reality. This inner sanctum, conjured by Keira's protective instincts, was more than just an escape; it was a testament to Angela's resilience, her ability to find pockets of peace even in the most dire of circumstances. Here, cocooned in her mental refuge, Angela could detach from the physical space she occupied, allowing her mind and spirit a much-needed reprieve until the turmoil subsided or help arrived.

Dolly

It's a universal law that the past always catches up with the future.

THE DIM LIGHT OF THE NEXT MORNING found Angela seated on her threadbare mattress, a small space on the floor that had become her world. In her hands, she gently cradled a small doll - a toy that had seen better days, yet held immeasurable value in her eyes. This doll, 'Dolly', had a mismatched charm: one brown button for a left eye and a blue one for the right. Its clothes were raggedy, and half of its golden hair had fallen out, giving it a well-worn, loved appearance. To Angela, Dolly was more than a toy; it was a symbol of unconditional love and care, a constant in her turbulent life.

Dolly was a precious gift from her father, given to her after her mother had passed away, to keep her safe during the lonely dark nights. It symbolized one of the few connections to happier times, a link to the love and care she once knew. In the stark reality of her current life, Dolly was her sole companion and comfort, the only possession she was allowed to have in her room.

As Angela gently stroked Dolly's thinning hair, she was abruptly pulled from her trance by raised voices coming from outside the front of the house. Sarah's voice, shrill and panicked, pierced the morning air.

"Fuck off, you bastards! There is no way you are going to take my

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kids,” Sarah screamed.

The response came from a male voice, unfamiliar to Angela, firm and authoritative.

“We’ve given you enough chances, Sarah. You have shown that you can’t take care of these kids by yourself. There have been too many complaints, and the one from yesterday, when Jake gave you a hiding, that the whole town could hear, was the last straw. We’re here to give them a home that you obviously can’t provide.” The male voice warned.

Angela’s heart raced at the exchange. The words hinted at a drastic change, a possible turning point in her bleak existence. The prospect of being taken away from this house of horrors, though frightening in its uncertainty, also sparked a glimmer of hope in her. She clutched Dolly tighter, a silent plea for comfort and strength as she braced herself for what was to come, her future hanging in the balance of this tense confrontation.

“Her fuckin’ Aunty Mimmi, she’s behind this, isn’t she? Why the fuck don’t you go and arrest her? That fucking drug addict bitch! Run, kids, Angela, Johnny, Samantha, run! They are trying to take you away, quick now, run! Run! Run!” Sarah’s voice was a frenzy of accusation and desperation.

In her room, Angela huddled on her bed, paralyzed with fear. She instinctively scooted back into the darkest corner of the room, seeking refuge under her blanket. The fabric, imbued with the scent of lavender, intended to mask the pervasive odors of neglect and decay that lingered in the house, was a gift from Mimmi, smuggled to Angela by her stepsister Samatha, after Mimmie had bribed her with some medicinal tea. The familiar, comforting smell was a small reminder of Mimmie’s care, a stark contrast to the chaos unfolding outside her door.

Rocking gently back and forth, Keira sought to soothe Angela, her inner protector, shielding her from the terrifying reality. The sounds of

violence intensified - the thumping against walls, the heavy thud of furniture being thrown, the cacophony of chaos reverberating through the thin walls.

As hard as she tried, Keira couldn't stop Angela's body shivering uncontrollably from the terror of what might come next. Memories of previous encounters with drunk and drugged adults invaded her thoughts, each recollection sending a fresh wave of fear through her. The thought of them barging into Angela's room again was near unbearable.

"Keira, thank you?" Angela whispered.

Muffled by the fabric of her blanket, Angela's voice was a faint whisper, a soft murmur of fear and desperation. Underneath this thin veil of security Keira was her inner strength, the courageous persona that emerged in moments of dread and danger, a beacon of resilience in her darkest hours, the part of herself that had always been able to confront the terrifying realities of her life. Huddled in her small, darkened sanctuary, the room felt like a prison. The dim light filtering through the boarded up window accentuated the gloom of her surroundings.

Despite the overwhelming fear, a flicker of hope stubbornly lingered in Angela's heart. It was this sliver of hope that she clung to, the belief that somehow, she would find the strength to endure the turmoil that churned just beyond the thin walls of her room. The sounds of the confrontation outside, Sarah's frantic screams, the commotion of her siblings being urged to flee – all of it melded into a cacophony terrified her.

Keira wrapped the blanket tighter around Angela, a symbolic armor against the chaos outside. Her breaths, though shallow and quick, were her silent mantras of courage. In the small, dim room, Keira prepared herself for whatever was to come, holding onto the hope that this storm too would pass, and that in its wake, they would both emerge stronger.

As the door to Angela's bedroom creaked open. Clutching her blanket

she peered over the cover. Though strangely the opening of the door felt like an intrusion, a breach into her small, cloistered existence. On the other side of the room stood a policewoman, momentarily pausing as her eyes adapted to the pervasive darkness of the room. Sergeant Sally Stephens, a seasoned policewoman with 20 years of experience, presented a unique and memorable figure in the force. Despite her small stature, she had a heavy build, a testament to the many hours spent in a police car patrolling the streets, where convenience often led to a diet of junk food. Her sandy hair was cropped short, a practical style that suited her active line of work. Adding a touch of personal flair to her appearance, she often wore teardrop earrings that gently swayed as she moved. Her complexion was pale, perhaps not seeing as much sunlight due to the long hours spent in the vehicle or the station. Her eyes were notably caring - a window to her compassionate nature, which seemed at odds with the tough exterior often required in law enforcement. Her touch was soft and gentle, conveying empathy and understanding, qualities that made her well-respected and appreciated, especially in delicate situations. Unconventionally, instead of the standard policewoman's dress, she opted for men's police pants. This choice spoke of her no-nonsense approach to her job. Her fingers were adorned with silver nail polish, a subtle hint of her individuality. One of the most distinctive features of Sergeant Sally was a small black ink tattoo of Buddha on her right forearm. This tattoo was not just a mere decoration; it suggested a deeper connection or interest in spirituality, mindfulness, or peace – principles often associated with Buddha. This tattoo hinted at a depth of character, suggesting a thoughtful and perhaps philosophical approach to life and her work in law enforcement.

Sergeant Stephens had seen similar scenes like the one that she was now confronted with in her line of duty, rooms that spoke of neglect and despair, but the extent of filth and the overpowering stench in Angela's room

assaulted her senses like never before. It took all her professional composure not to be physically sick, although a few strangled choking sounds inadvertently escaped her throat. She silently gagged, the taste of bile rising in her mouth, a visceral reaction to the overwhelming odor.

The room was a stark testament to years of neglect. A small pile of rancid clothes and unwashed linen was heaped on the floor, covering the bare wooden boards. In a corner lay an open metal bucket, a makeshift toilet that added to the room's appalling conditions. The bed was nothing more than an old wire spring mattress laid on the floor, so stained and filthy that not a single clean spot remained. It lacked a bottom sheet, covered only by a threadbare blue-grey blanket that hadn't seen a wash in years. The thin plastic pillow, devoid of a casing, was stained a grimy gray-black.

Amidst this squalor, one thing stood out incongruously – a school uniform neatly hanging from the picture rail that ran around the room. It was a feeble attempt by Sarah to maintain some semblance of normalcy, a superficial effort to appear as though she cared for her children's outward appearance.

On the small, dilapidated mattress, the Sergeant Stephens noticed the small, huddled figure of Angela, curled up in the corner of the bed, tightly clutching what appeared to be her most cherished possession – a small, blackened doll no more than five inches tall, dressed in barely a shred of clothing. Angela held the Dolly close to her chest with both arms, rocking silently back and forth. Her lips moved continuously, mouthing words that were not yet audible to the policewoman.

The scene was a heartbreaking tableau of neglect and despair, a stark contrast to the innocent world a child should inhabit. The Sergeant Stephens, despite her experience and training, felt a wave of emotion at the sight of this young soul clinging to the only source of comfort she had in a world of hurt that inhabited her soul. As she cautiously approached Angela, she spoke in a

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tone that was gentle and reassuring, a stark contrast to the harsh voices that Angela was accustomed to.

"Hey darling, I'm here to help you. Darling, can you hear me? I won't hurt you. I want the hurt to stop for you. Can you hear me, Angela? That's your name, yeah, Angela? Darling, my name is Sally, I'm here to help you, can you hear me?" Sergeant Stephens said in hushed tones.

Angela continued her rhythmic rocking, her eyes darting upward without lifting her head. She was trying to discern if the soothing voice she heard was real or just another manifestation of Keira's efforts to help her escape the pain. For a moment, she remained still, then slowly, she sat bolt upright. This reaction wasn't born out of disbelief or a reflexive response to Sarah's demands, but from a sense of something different, something hopeful. Sergeant Stephens soothing voice penetrated the walls Angela had built around herself, igniting a spark of hope that maybe, just maybe, the universe had finally answered her prayers. Clutching her beloved Dolly for comfort, Angela's rocking and chanting took on a new tone.

"Finally, someone has come, finally someone has come, thank you, thank you, finally someone has come. Thank you. Thank you, Keira." She whispered to herself.

In this fragile moment, as the Sergeant Stephens gently reached out to her, Angela felt a shift within herself. In a mix of relief and gratitude, there was a recognition of the potential end of her suffering. The presence of this kind stranger, an officer of the law, symbolized a lifeline, a chance for a new beginning. The small room, a place of confinement and despair, suddenly transformed into a space where salvation seemed within reach.

Angela, still holding tightly to Dolly, allowed herself to believe in the possibility of being saved, her heart tentatively opening to the idea of being rescued from the nightmare she had been living. For the first time in what

seemed like an eternity, Angela felt a glimmer of hope, a possibility of rescue from her life of misery.

As the brightness from the open door cast a revealing light into her dim room, Angela's senses sharpened, and a profound realization dawned upon her. The figure standing over her, clad in a blue uniform, was undeniably real. The commotion she had heard just outside her room was not the familiar, dreadful sound of yet another altercation, not the usual scenario of a drug-fueled male unleashing violence upon Sarah. Just one more time. It was something different, something that signified change. The words of comfort spoken by Sergeant Stephens her tone seemingly imbued with genuine concern, penetrated Angela's consciousness. This was a voice that did not carry the threat of ensuing violence, a voice that did not signal the onset of pain and terror. This was no figment of her imagination, no Keira induced dream state from which she would painfully awaken. The authoritative yet caring presence of the policewoman was a stark departure from the nightmarish figures that usually populated her world.

For once, the person leaning over her did not have the intention to cause harm or to add to her litany of beatings and sexual abuse that she had endured. Instead, there was an air of protection, a sense of safety that Angela had long forgotten could exist. Sergeant Stephens presence, coupled with her gentle words, offered a stark contrast to the brutal reality Angela had been conditioned to accept as 'normal.' That within this community, every child, into their teenage years, went through what Angela had endured, as a rite of passage, 'the knowing.' And like her, no-one at school dared communicate about it. Yet still, she had dared to imagine, many times during the years, that perhaps was she what she was experiencing was not all there was. 'Surely there is something more.' For years she dared dream that the images constantly before her was not all that there is, of a male wanting to inflict unbearable pain upon her, through continual abuse of her young female

body, the nightmares of her step-mother torturing her with the 'switch', the rules of behaviour constantly changing, being refused food as punishment for things that she did not understand. She dared dream of a place where all things would one day all come to an end.

As Sergeant Stephens gently reached out to touch Angela's hand, Keira instinctively recoiled. Despite the apparent sincerity in the officer's gesture, Keira's distrust of what she was witnessing remained. Years of conditioning had taught her to perceive touch as something bewildering and often dangerous.

In Angela's experience, physical contact had always been a precursor to confusion and pain. She had become wary of the initial softness of a caress, knowing it could quickly escalate into excruciating agony, prompting Keira to whisk Angela away to her mental sanctuary as a means of survival. Alternatively, pain could arrive abruptly and without warning, with her abusers cruelly blaming Angela for their actions. The promise of future pain was always contingent on her behavior, yet the rules were never clear, leaving her in a perpetual state of uncertainty and fear.

Angela had come to understand a harsh reality: her abusers exploited the inherent qualities of a child's love – its intensity, acceptance, loyalty, and forgiveness. They knew that with the right amount of fear instilled in an innocent soul, the child would use these loving traits in a misguided effort to shield the very person who caused them harm. This manipulation twisted the purity of a child's affection into a tool for control and abuse.

As Sergeant Stephens hand made contact with Angela's, Keira wrestled with these conflicting emotions and memories. The touch, devoid of malice or ulterior motive, was foreign to her. For Angela, this moment was a critical juncture, a test of whether she could allow herself to trust this gesture of

kindness from a stranger. Since she was placed in care with Sarah, it represented a challenge to her recent understanding of love and touch,— could she dare to believe that this time, the hand reaching out to her was one of rescue and not of harm? As Angela felt the gentle pressure of the policewoman's hand on hers, a battle raged within her. Keira and Angela, two sides of the same coin, were confronted with the possibility of a different reality — one where touch did not lead to pain, where care was genuine, and where safety was more than just a fleeting dream.

“Come on, darling, it’s okay, you’re safe now! Angela, remember my name is Sally, I’m from the Police. Darling, I’m here to take you to a safe place. Angela, you’re safe now, darling. Come on, let’s get you some food and a nice bath.” Sergeant Stephens whispered.

The words 'safe place' uttered by Sally, resonated deeply within Angela. Keira, who had always been her guardian in the darkest times, felt a profound sense of relief upon hearing these words from someone else for the first time. It was a validation of the safety they had longed for but never truly believed could come from the outside world. Angela took several huge, deep breaths, the kind that were laden with years of pent-up emotion. Her breathing was ragged and desperate, reminiscent of a child with Whooping Cough. Each breath she drew arched her back, a physical manifestation of the emotional release that was surging through her. Then, suddenly, she lurched forward into Sally's chest, unleashing a torrent of uncontrolled sobbing. Her cries were raw and primal. A cathartic outpouring that seemed to echo throughout the neighborhood.

In her desperate need for comfort and assurance, Angela clutched Sergeant Stephens with an intensity that was overwhelming. Her arms and legs wrapped tightly around Sally’s neck and hips. Her grip so firm it seemed as though she might never let go. It was as if Angela was trying to absorb the safety and warmth that Sally represented, her small body clinging to Sergeant

Stephens as if she were a lifeline.

Between her sobs, Angela tried to express her gratitude, her words intermingled with tears.

“Thank... Thank... Thank... You... Thank... Thank... You. Oh... I’ve... been... been... wait... waiting... for... so... long... for... you. Thank... you.” Each word was laden with the profound relief and gratitude she felt, a struggle to articulate.

For Angela, Sally’s arrival was not just a rescue; it was the end of a long, harrowing wait for salvation. It was the arrival of hope, the promise of a new beginning, and the realization that her prayers had finally been answered. As Angela clung tightly to Sally, seeking solace in her protective embrace, Constable Adrian Fletcher stepped into the bedroom. He paused at the threshold, momentarily overwhelmed by the harrowing scene before him. The dismal state of the room, the palpable air of neglect and suffering, struck a chord in him, stirring a mix of professional resolve and personal shock.

Constable Fletcher was a fresh-faced addition to the police force, his youth and recent graduation from the Academy apparent in his demeanor and approach. Standing at an average height with a lean build, he carried himself with the eager energy of someone new to the job, keen to make a difference but still finding his footing. His appearance was that of a typical city dweller turned rural law enforcer. His hair was neatly trimmed, his uniform crisp and meticulously maintained, reflecting the discipline and order instilled in him during his training. His eyes, a clear shade of blue, often held a look of keen observation, betraying his drive to understand and adapt to his new environment. Growing up in the city, Adrian had been cocooned from the more rugged and raw aspects of life, something that was now a daily reality in his role as a Constable in rural farming communities. This shift from urban to rural policing had been a significant adjustment for him. He found himself

navigating a community with different norms and expectations, where the close-knit nature of rural life presented both a challenge and an opportunity in his policing duties. His approach to his work was methodical and thoughtful, yet he sometimes displayed a hint of naivety, a reminder of his inexperience.

Sally, her voice laced with a mix of frustration and disbelief, turned to her colleague. "Adrian, how the fuck has this been able to happen?" Her question reflecting the incomprehensibility of the situation.

Adrian, known as Constable Fletcher to his colleagues, responded with a grimace.

"Fucked if I know, Sally, but I can assure you that there are a few more in this community than Miriam Shifra holding onto 'the knowing' in this fuck hole of a place." He snapped.

His response was a harsh indictment of the silent acceptance and concealment of abuse within the community, 'the knowing', a widely understood yet unspoken practice of turning a blind eye to the suffering and injustices occurring within their midst.

The conversation between Sergeant Stephens and Constable Fletcher, amidst the backdrop of Angela's rescue, highlighted the broader issue of societal neglect and the failure to protect the most vulnerable. For Angela, the intervention of these officers represented a lifeline, a chance to escape the cycle of abuse and start anew. For Constable Fletcher, it was a stark reminder of the responsibilities that came with the badge, he felt a renewed sense of duty to combat the hidden evils that lurked in the shadows of seemingly ordinary communities.

As the gravity of the situation weighed heavily upon Constable Fletcher, he fought to maintain his composure. He briefly closed his eyes, struggling to hold back tears that threatened to betray the emotional impact of the scene before him. Taking a deep, steadying breath, he centered himself,

recognizing the need to remain focused and professional in this critical moment of rescue. With a sense of purpose, he retrieved a fresh, clean police blanket and handed it to Sally. The blanket, dark blue and emblazoned with the bold letters spelling 'POLICE', was a symbol of safety and protection. He then gestured with his hand, signaling for Sally to bring Angela out to the waiting police car parked outside.

Sally, understanding the urgency, wrapped Angela tenderly in the blanket, ensuring her head was covered to shield her from the traumatic scene they were about to pass through. Placing Angela's face into the nape of her neck, Sally cradled Angela's head with her hand, providing both physical support and a sense of comfort.

As they quickly moved from the bedroom towards the kitchen, the reality of what was unfolding became even more apparent. They passed by Sarah, who was being restrained on the ground by two uniformed male police officers. Sarah was facedown, her cheek pressed against the feces-stained bare board floor, a stark contrast to the care and gentleness being shown to Angela. The handcuffs around Sarah's wrists, locked behind her back, signified the end of her reign of terror over Angela and her step siblings.

"Leave me alone you bastards, get off me, you got no right you ain't." Sarah screamed.

As Sally navigated through the kitchen, with Angela securely wrapped around her, they entered the lounge. This room bore silent witness to the harrowing events of just two weeks prior - a setting of unspeakable torture and fear that Angela had endured. The air still seemed to hold a residual heaviness, a palpable echo of the terror that had transpired.

Disheveled and bearing the marks of neglect, the room was a stark reminder of the ordeal Angela had faced. Furniture was askew, and the walls, once perhaps a source of comfort and familial warmth, now stood as mute

spectators to her suffering. The very atmosphere of the room felt tainted with the residue of pain and helplessness that Angela had experienced.

For Sally, guiding Angela through this space was a delicate task. She moved with a careful, protective urgency, conscious of the trauma that Angela was reliving with each step they took. Sally's grip on Angela tightened ever so slightly, a silent reassurance that she was there to shield her from the past horrors that the room evoked. Angela, for her part, remained tightly clung to Sally, her sanctuary in this moment of vulnerability. The lounge, a place that should have been a haven of safety and comfort, had instead been transformed into a scene of her torment. As they passed through, the memories of what had happened here flooded back to her - the fear, the pain, the desperate cries for help that had gone unanswered.

Sally wound her way through empty boxes in the hallway, plates on the floor with scraps of food still in them and excrement from the many animals that had made the house their home. Carefully choosing her path down the steps of wooden entrance way, Angela could hear Sarah's continued loud protest of having the children taken away.

"Give them back you pricks, let me go, let me go, your all just bastards." Sarah continued her tirade.

Angela was not only being led away from the squalor and abuse but also towards a new chapter of her life. As they stepped outside, the fresh air and the sight of the police car waiting to transport her to safety marked the beginning of Angela's journey towards healing.

Return to Mimmie's

ANGELA SAT IN THE BACK SEAT OF THE POLICE CAR, still wrapped in the dark blue police blanket, her grip on Dolly unyielding. The car's interior was pristine, and the distinct new car smell filled the space, a sharp contrast to the squalor she had just left. Beside her, Sally offered a small pack of ginger honey biscuits, a gesture of comfort that seemed to momentarily brighten the somber atmosphere. Constable Fletcher, sitting in the driver's seat, navigated the car through the streets with a focused calmness. His eyes occasionally met Angela's in the rearview mirror, offering silent reassurances as they journeyed towards a hopeful destination – Mimmie's house.

Arriving at Mimmie's in the broad daylight, the house presented a welcoming sight. It was a quaint, well-kept cottage surrounded by a lush garden, the flowers and plants basking in the sun's warm embrace. The house, with its battered weatherboard yet charming exterior, seemed to whisper stories of love and care, a stark departure from the place Angela had known as home.

Through the kitchen window Mimmie saw the Police pull up out the front of her home, She hurried outside, her expression a mix of relief and worry. Mimmie hurried towards the police car, her heart heavy with worry and regret. Pressing her face against the window, she peered in to catch a glimpse of Angela. Her voice, thick with emotion, was barely audible through the glass.

"I love you, my darling girl. I'm so sorry I couldn't protect you, so, so sorry."

Constable Fletcher, observing the scene from the driver's seat, felt a mix of emotions. He opened his door and stepped out, casting a look of disdain towards Mimmi. Despite her heartfelt words, Constable Fletcher couldn't help but feel a sense of disgust for what he perceived as her failure to intervene sooner. He walked around to the other side of the car, opening the door for Sally and Angela with a respectful nod. As the door opened, Angela, momentarily hesitant, caught sight of Mimmie. In an instant, her apprehension gave way to a desperate need for comfort. She rushed around the car, flinging herself into Mimmie's open arms. The reunion was bittersweet, filled with relief and a shared sorrow for the time lost and the pain endured. Sally, witnessing the emotional exchange, glanced towards the gathering neighbors, noting Mrs. Anderson, who was conspicuously the first on the scene, her curiosity piqued by the unfolding drama.

"Let's go inside, away from the prying eyes." Sally suggested.

Mimmi, holding Angela close, nodded in agreement.

"Yes, let's go inside," she murmured.

Mimmie's voice still laced with regret and love. She gently led Angela towards the house, her protectiveness evident in every step.

As they walked away from the car, Angela clung to Mimmie, finding solace in her embrace. Sergeant Stephens and Constable Fletcher followed. Inside Mimmie's home, they would find a haven of privacy and comfort, away from the judgmental stares and whispers of the community, whose eyes were fixed on the small procession.

Inside, they gathered in the cozy living room, where the sun streamed through lace curtains, casting gentle patterns on the floor. Mimmie's home was

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a stark contrast to Angela's previous living conditions – it was warm, clean, and filled with a sense of peace.

Angela, still clutching Dolly, explored the room with her eyes, absorbing the warmth and safety it exuded. She seemed to be slowly uncoiling from the tight shell of defense she had wrapped around herself. Her drifted back to the time following the brutal attack, a period marked by pain and vulnerability, but also by the refuge and solace provided by Mimmie. Despite the horrors she had endured, Angela found a haven in Mimmi's care, a gentle contrast to the harshness of her recent experiences. She remembered how Mimmie's arms had enveloped her in warm embraces, each hug a wordless promise of safety and care. In those moments, held close to Mimmie's heart, Angela had felt a glimmer of hope, a sense that maybe the world wasn't entirely devoid of kindness and love. The warmth of her embraces, the healing power of the hot baths, and the comforting taste of ginger biscuits had all woven together to create a tapestry of recovery and love. In Mimmie's care, Angela had found not just a refuge from her pain, but a nurturing environment where she could begin to mend her broken spirit.

Constable Fletcher, holding his police hat in one hand, began to undertake a difficult conversation that reflected a complex mix of empathy, legal obligations, and a collective desire to protect Angela and give her the stable and loving environment she so desperately needed.

He addressed Mimmie with a tone of concern mixed with professional duty.

"Mimmi, we understand the difficult position you've been in. But we need to discuss a couple of important matters. Firstly, about the plants in your backyard..."

Mimmie, her face a mix of worry and understanding, nodded slowly.

"Yes, I know. The plants... I've used them for years for medicinal

purposes. I never meant any harm." Mimmie replied hesitantly.

"We believe you, Mimmie." Sally assured, her tone gentle and empathetic.

"But you understand they are illegal. And we also know about the biscuits you've been giving Angela." Constable Fletcher replied.

"The biscuits... I just wanted to help her, to ease her pain." Mimmi's eyes lowered, a hint of regret in her voice.

"We're going to have to ask you to destroy those plants, Mimmi. And no more biscuits for Angela. I'm willing to overlook this due to the circumstances, but it cannot continue." Sally insisted with a note of authority.

Mimmi nodded in agreement, a silent promise to comply.

"Now Mimmie, a delicate matter. There's also the issue of Angela staying with you. Child Services had reservations given your age, but we've insisted this is the best place for her right now." Constable Fletcher offered.

Mimmi's expression softened, gratitude shining in her eyes.

"Thank you. Thank you so much. I'll do everything I can for her. She's safe with me." Mimmie responded.

Constable Fletcher cleared his throat, shifting the topic.

"And about Sarah... Why didn't you report her earlier?" Constable Fletcher inquired.

"I was scared. Over the past number of years, Sarah became someone I didn't recognize. And those men, they had killed people... I feared what they might do. But I do regret not stepping in sooner." Mimmie replied with a heavy weight in her voice.

Mimmie's admission was a painful acknowledgment of her feelings of helplessness against Sarah's tyranny. Sally placed a reassuring hand on

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Mimmie's shoulder.

"We understand, Mimmie. What matters now is that Angela is safe. We'll need to work together to ensure her well-being." Sally reassured her.

Mimmi nodded, a determined look crossing her face.

"Anything, she's been through so much. She deserves a chance at a better life." Mimmie reflected.

Eventually, Mimmi led Angela to a room that would be hers. It was a small, but lovingly furnished space with a window overlooking the garden. The bed was adorned with a colorful quilt, and a small desk was placed near the window, a perfect spot for daydreaming or drawing. Angela placed Dolly on the pillow, a symbolic gesture of her finally finding a safe haven.

That night, as Angela lay in her new bed, the horrors of her past seemed like a distant nightmare. For the first time in a long while, she felt a sense of security and love. The room at Mimmie's was more than just a physical space; it was a sanctuary, a place where she could start healing and where she believed that the painful chapters of her life could slowly be closed.

Mummy

THE FIRST NIGHT OF ANGELA'S STAY at Mimmie's was enveloped in a sense of warmth and nostalgia. They were in the living room, a cozy space filled with memorabilia and tokens from Mimmie's life. Angela, fresh from a relaxing bath, lay curled up on the couch. She was wrapped in her long, fluffy dressing gown, her feet snug in pink slippers, the very picture of comfort and security. Mimmie, seated in her favorite lounge chair that was adorned with bright tapestry, was savoring one of her special ginger biscuits. The room was quiet except for the occasional crackle from the fireplace, adding to the room's homely ambiance. Angela, observing Mimmi eating the biscuit, couldn't help but feel curious.

"Mimmie, can I have a biscuit?" Angela asked innocently.

Mimmie paused for a moment, then tentatively offered.

"Well, you know I promised that nice policeman that I wouldn't give any more of these special biscuits. But, seeing as tonight is your first night here, I think we can start that promise tomorrow. Just this once."

Angela's face lit up with a small, grateful smile as Mimmi handed her a biscuit. She took a small bite, the familiar taste bringing a sense of calm and comfort.

As the effects of the biscuit began to take hold, Angela found herself

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drifting into a state of reminiscence about her mother. The room, with its gentle warmth and the soft flickering of firelight, became a backdrop for Angela's memories. She recalled moments of laughter and love shared with her mother, each memory more vivid than the last. The special biscuit, while a source of controversy, tonight served as a catalyst for Angela to connect with her happier memories, a bridge to the joyful times that seemed so distant now.

Mimmi watched over Angela, a mix of affection and concern in her eyes. She knew the journey ahead would be challenging for Angela, but she was determined to provide all the love and support the young girl needed. As the evening wore on, the living room became a sanctuary for both of them, a place where past and present intertwined, offering a glimpse of hope and healing for the future.

"Mimmie, do you know I can remember when Mummy went to heaven?" Angela said.

"Do you, sweetheart? What can you remember?" Mimmi asked, her voice gentle, encouraging Angela to share her memories.

"I remember I was five years old. Every Saturday morning, I'd scramble out of bed, quickly put on my pink fluffy dressing gown—it was too long for me—and my fluffy slippers, and I'd rush to the kitchen. Mummy would be there, cracking eggs into this large creamy bowl," Angela recounted, her eyes distant as she visualized the scene.

"You know, sweetheart, that bowl was your grandmother's. She used it all the time and gave it to your mum when she married your daddy," Mimmi softly adding a layer of family history to the memory.

"I remember mummy tossing flour across the bench, and it'd always end up in my hair. I was so clumsy with the milk, always spilling it. She let me squeeze the pancake mix, and when it became too hard, she'd hold my little hands and help me. She'd let me lick the mixture off my fingers and slowly

spoon it into the pan." Angela recounted.

As Angela spoke, she found herself transported back five years, to a time when life felt so much simpler and happier.

Angela's mother was a woman of captivating beauty, a figure who seemed to carry the warmth of the Mediterranean sun in her very presence. Her hair, a cascade of lustrous blonde locks, fell gracefully to the middle of her back, shimmering like spun gold in the sunlight. Her skin, kissed by her Southern Italian heritage, held the glow of a perpetual tan, giving her an aura of radiant health and vitality.

Her eyes were like two sapphires that could light up with joy in a moment, captivating all who met her gaze. Her smile, featuring brilliant white teeth, was infectious. She carried with her the scent of an exotic perfume, a unique blend of frangipani and patchouli that exuded a rich, earthy, yet musky and exotic scent, that was both enchanting and mysterious. It was a fragrance that lingered in a room long after she had left, a sensory reminder of her presence.

Even in her home attire, Angela's mother exuded a sense of high fashion. Her clothing choices, always tasteful and fashionable, reflected her confident personality and her appreciation for the finer things in life.

Her meeting with Angela's father was like a scene from a romantic novel. They met in a bustling market while she was traveling through Turkey, a chance encounter that blossomed into a love story. Their connection sparked instantly, a profound meeting of souls amidst the bustling energy and vibrant chaos of the market, surrounded by the rich fragrances of incense and spices. Their love story was one of adventure, passion, crossing borders and blending cultures, a testament to the power of love to unite and transcend differences.

Angela's mother was not just a figure of beauty but also a source of love, warmth, and inspiration. Her memory was a treasure trove of happy

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moments, laughter, and love, a legacy that continued to live on in Angela's heart.

"Mummy, I love making cakes with you," Angela said, her young voice filled with joy.

"I love it too, my angel. I really love it too," her mother responded.

Wrapping her arms around Angela in a loving hug and planting a kiss on the top of her head. The flour on her hands would rub off on Angela's dressing gown, neither of them minded.

"Mummy, I miss daddy when he's not home. Do you miss him too?" Angela asked innocently.

"You and he are my world, darling. I miss him every single day," her mother replied, her voice laced with longing.

"Do you think one day he will stop driving his big trucks and stay home to look after us all the time?" Angela's questioned, longing for a family reunited.

As tears began to well in her mother's eyes, she squeezed Angela tightly, her embrace full of love and unspoken promises.

"Yes, my angel, I'm sure he will. Very soon, I am sure. He will look after us and love us, both so very, very much."

In this conversation, Angela's mother navigated the delicate balance between maintaining her child's innocence and offering honest explanations. It was a tender exchange, filled with love and care, as Angela's mother sought to reassure her daughter while preserving the magical world of childhood just a little longer.

Angela felt a surge of love and loss. The memory of her mother's love and reassurance was a bittersweet reminder of the happy, carefree days that

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seemed so far away now.

In Mimmie's comforting presence, Angela felt the closest connection to her mother, a link that brought both joy and a deep sense of longing for what had been lost.

Being in this moment, Angela was transported to the time when she was five, standing in the kitchen of her home, baking pancakes with her mother, waiting for her father to arrive home from driving his large transport truck for four days.

She inhaled deeply through her nose, savoring the sweet aroma of cakes baking in the oven. It was an experience that would become a lifelong memory trigger, instantly transporting her back to this moment - a time when she was cherished and allowed to embrace her childhood. This period was a reprieve from the 'knowing' that loomed ominously around her, a world she was still too innocent to fully understand but was gradually being drawn into.

"Mummy, you know those special smokes that Aunty Mimmi gives you?" Angela asked, her voice tinged with the curiosity of a child.

"Yes, darling," her mother replied, gently encouraging her questions.

"You know when you smoke them out on the verandah?" Angela continued, her gaze inquisitive.

"Yes, sweetie," her mother affirmed, with a nod.

"I can smell them when I'm in my room, when I'm in bed or watching TV. They don't smell like your ordinary smokes," Angela observed, her senses keenly aware of the difference.

"That's because they're not ordinary, darling. They're special smokes that Aunty Mimmie makes from the plants she grows in her garden," her mother explained, maintaining a tone of openness.

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"Is that from the big herb tree she's got in the very back corner of her place?" Angela inquired, recalling her observations.

"Have you seen that tree?" her mother asked, a hint of surprise in her voice.

"Yes, Aunty Mimmi showed me one day when we were gardening. She said it's her special herb tree," Angela shared, her memory vivid.

"Yes, sweetie, that's what it is, a special herb tree," her mother confirmed softly.

"So why do you want to smoke her special herb tree? It smells really funny," Angela questioned, her innocence framing her understanding.

"That's because it helps mummy with my headaches and makes me feel better, so I don't feel sick," her mother gently explained.

"But, mummy, you said you are okay now and that you won't need to go into the hospital anymore for your headaches," Angela remembered, concern evident in her voice.

"Yes, sweetheart, that's right. Mummy won't need to go into the hospital all the time now and be plugged into that special machine. Remember Doctor Jenny, the nice lady doctor, Dr. Jenny?" her mother prompted.

"Yeah, she is a nice person who gives me lollies all the time if I sit still when they put that needle in your arm to get better," Angela recalled fondly.

"That's right. Well, she said that I can stay home now," her mother said, a note of relief in her tone.

Her mother's emotions suddenly overflowed, tears streaming down her cheeks in a torrent of sorrow and relief, her nose running as she gave in to the moment's intensity. Overwhelmed, she enveloped Angela in her arms, holding her so tightly that a small groan escaped from Angela, signaling the

fierceness of her embrace. Realizing her strength, she gently eased her grip and laid her head on Angela's small shoulder, her tears continuing to flow. As she cried, her hand softly traced comforting circles on Angela's back, a tender gesture amidst her own vulnerability.

"I'm not going back to the hospital, darling. I will be here with you, all the time," she whispered, her voice quivering with emotion.

"Do you promise me, Mummy?" Angela asked, her voice filled with a mix of hope and apprehension.

"Of course, darling, of course," her mother replied, trying to regain her composure. She gently lifted her head and wiped away her tears, offering Angela a small, reassuring smile.

"Now, let's set the table so we can enjoy those little pancakes for breakfast. They smell great, don't they?"

"Yes, they smell lovely. But not as lovely as you do. I will always remember the frangipani and patchouli oil that you wear. I love it," Angela said.

Her words laced with adoration and a sense of comfort drawn from her mother's familiar scent. Her mother's face brightened at Angela's words, a moment of joy piercing through the sadness. It was a sweet reminder of the small yet significant things that formed the bonds of their relationship – the scent of frangipani and patchouli oil being one of those cherished connections. They moved together to set the table, the act of preparing for breakfast becoming an opportunity to rebuild and savor the simple moments of togetherness.

Hospital

THREE MONTHS HAD PASSED since that cherished Saturday morning with her mother, a memory now deeply etched in Angela's heart. In stark contrast to those warm, joyous moments, Angela now found herself in the sterile, echoing corridor of a hospital, standing on her tiptoes to peer into her mother's room.

"No, no, no. I don't want to say goodbye to Mummy," she cried out, her voice choked with tears.

"She promised me, she promised me! She said she'd be with me all the time. Why did she say that, why? She said she wouldn't go back to the hospital and that she would always be with me. She promised, Daddy! She promised! If you hadn't been away so much, she would be better now. You should have stayed home. I'm not going in, I'm not!" Her words racked with grief.

Her father had gently tried to persuade Angela to enter the room, to be with her mother in these final moments. But Angela, overwhelmed by fear and sorrow, had wrenched her small hand from his grasp. As he went to sit beside his wife, Angela stood in the hallway, sobbing uncontrollably, her young mind grappling with the reality before her. Her small nose was pressed firmly against the cool glass, her breath leaving a frosty haze on the surface. Through the window, she could see her father sitting beside her mother's bed, his posture one of utter desolation. He was bent forward, his forehead resting

against her mother's temple, his tears silently falling onto the hospital bedspread, each drop a testament to his grief.

Angela's world had been shattered upon hearing the truth of her mother's diagnosis of brain cancer. The illness had been aggressive and unforgiving, taking her mother away in a devastatingly rapid decline. Her father, an interstate truck driver, had been away often, as the only income earner for the family, leaving Angela to wrestle with her mother's illness and the looming sense of abandonment. The promise her mother had made - to always be there for Angela - now echoed in her ears as a painful reminder of what was being lost.

In those moments, standing in the hospital corridor, Angela's pain was not just about losing her mother; it was also about the broken promises, the fear of being alone, and the deep longing for things to be as they once were. Her reluctance to enter the room was more than a child's fear; it was a desperate attempt to hold onto the last vestiges of her once happy and secure life.

Lost in her grief against the cold glass of the hospital ward window, Angela felt a sudden, unexpected sensation, a soft, gentle touch on her left shoulder, accompanied by the warmth of someone's breath. Startled, she turned her head and was met with the kind, compassionate gaze of Rebecca, a compassionate cancer care nurse. Rebecca possessed a presence that was both comforting and commanding. With 20 years of experience in palliative care, she had developed an exceptional ability to provide comfort and support to those at the most vulnerable stages of their lives. Her career choice was not just a profession; it was a calling, a dedication to easing the journey of those facing life's final chapter.

Standing tall at 6 feet, Rebecca's physical stature a product of a strict training regime, was notable, yet it was her gentle demeanor that truly defined

her. Her jet-black hair, meticulously tied into a long, neat plait, added to her composed and professional appearance. But it was her eyes, warm and empathetic, that spoke volumes of her experience and the depth of her compassion.

Rebecca exuded a sense of calm that was almost tangible, a quality that brought immediate relief to anxious families and patients alike. Her aura was one of love and profound empathy, attributes that made her an invaluable presence in the emotionally charged environment of palliative care. She navigated the complexities of palliative care with grace and sensitivity, offering words of comfort, a listening ear, and a reassuring touch. Rebecca's unwavering commitment to her patients and their families made her much more than a nurse; she was a guide, a confidante, and a source of unwavering support during some of life's most challenging moments.

"Hello, beautiful girl," Rebecca greeted her with a soothing tone.

As Rebecca crouched down to Angela's height her hand remained reassuringly on Angela's shoulder, offering a touch of comfort.

"I can see you're upset. Have you come to see your mummy?" she asked gently.

Rebecca's presence was like a ray of light in the darkness for Angela. For a moment,

Angela gazed at Rebecca, her eyes a mix of confusion and hope. She nodded in response to the nurse's question, managing only a small, breathy gasp,

"Yep, but if I stay here, she won't leave me. She said she wouldn't. She told me I was her angel, so if I keep looking, she won't leave."

Rebecca, with a tender smile, reassured her,

"You do look like a loving angel, Angela. Do you know what angels

do?" She gently asked,

"No, not really." Angela responded with a quiet sob.

Rebecca explained softly,

"Angels are loving guides who help people on their journey to heaven. They stay beside you, offering comfort and guidance. "Do you think you could be a guide for your mummy on her journey to heaven?" Rebecca queried.

Angela nodded, a sense of purpose lighting up her tear-streaked face.

Rebecca stood up and, taking Angela's hand, led her silently into her mother's room. They approached the bed from the opposite side to where Angela's father sat, his presence marked by a heavy, grieving silence. With a gentle nod and a subtle tilt of her head, Rebecca silently gave Angela permission to climb onto the bed.

As Angela carefully made her way onto the bed, her father raised his head, his tear filled grieving eyes meeting hers in a moment of shared sorrow and understanding. Angela lay down next to her mother, resting her head on her mother's chest, feeling the faint, very slow but comforting rhythm of her heartbeat. As Angela nestled beside her mother, her father extended his arm, enveloping both his wife and daughter in a loving embrace. His eyes, filled with a mix of love and sorrow. In that quiet, sacred moment, the bond between them was palpable.

"I love Mummy too," Angela whispered.

Her voice barely audible, a testament to the depth of her affection and the pain of impending loss.

"I love you both so much, my Angel," her father replied.

His voice breaking with emotion. His words were a tender affirmation of the love that held their family together, even in the face of heartbreak. Just

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then, as Angela leaned in to kiss her mother's face, two small tears escaped from her mother's eyes, trailing down onto Angela's cheek. It was as though her mother, even in her weakened state, was communicating her love and farewell. The machines, which had been a constant in the background, maintaining their rhythmic tone, suddenly fell silent, marking a profound and final transition.

"Don't be scared, Mummy. Your little Angel will help you find your way to heaven." Angela softly whispered,

In that hospital room, time seemed to stand still. The world outside faded away, leaving only the family united in their love and grief. Angela's father held them both as they faced this heartbreaking goodbye together.

Mimmie passes

5 years pass – Mimmie dies in her sleep, Angela discovers her

v Bathroom Scene

Puppies in bath

Step mother knocking on door

Angela entranced with puppies swimming in the bath – struggling

Angela links in her mind the puppies struggle to her own survival

S/mother enters kicking Angela hard on the behind

Angela hits her head on the pipe underneath the sink

Next thing Angela is coming to – in bed blood on the pillow

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Angela's First Drink

Location?

Drink?

10 years old

Sick

Vomitting

Wakes up in strange bedroom

Vomit in her mouth

Sore between legs

Blood on the sheets

Sex for \$ and food

Police Custody

Police take custody of Angela at 15 – and Sally, Fletcher has been posted to the city.

before the court, (15) years old.

Childrens Home

THE POLICE CAR NAVIGATED THE TREE-LINED DRIVEWAY, through the early misty drizzling rain of the morning, Angela's gaze was fixed on the looming red brick building that came into view. It was a double-story structure, dotted with numerous small windows and flanked by two large bluestone entrance ways at its base. What struck her most were the bars on the windows. Her childlike innocence couldn't comprehend the need for such security. 'Who would want to break into a children's home?' she wondered silently.

"Sally, why are there bars on the windows?" Angela asked Sergeant Stephens, her voice tinged with confusion and apprehension.

Sergeant Stephens paused thoughtfully before responding, choosing her words carefully to avoid alarming Angela.

"They're there to keep you safe, darling. It's okay, you'll be fine. It's only for a little while until we find a nice home for you," she reassured her gently.

The car's slow progress over the crunching gravel driveway heightened Angela's sense of foreboding. As they approached the 'Safe Haven Home For Girls,' her eyes widened, trying to absorb every detail. A shiver of fear ran through her body, and her instincts, along with her inner voice Keira, warned

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her that something was amiss about this place; it seemed to emanate a dark, unsettling aura.

As the car came to a stop and Sergeant Stephens turned off the engine, she looked back at Angela in the rear seat, meeting her wide, fearful eyes.

"It'll be alright, darling. I promise it won't be long," she said, trying to offer comfort.

Upon her opening the driver's door, a rush of cold air invaded the car, causing Angela to shiver even more. She wrapped herself tightly in the police blanket, seeking a small measure of security. Constable Coates, who had been sitting beside her, opened the rear door and stepped out, offering his hand to help Angela.

"C'mon, love, out you get," he encouraged her.

Angela hesitated before responding to his gesture, eventually shuffling across the seat. As her feet touched the gravel through her thin slippers, it felt as if she was stepping on boulders. Sergeant Stephens closed the car doors and led the way to the large bluestone entrance, which exuded a daunting presence.

"Okay, let's go, Rob. Let's do this thing," Sergeant Stephens sighed with a sense of resignation.

Sergeant Stephens pressed the illuminated doorbell, and the sound of chimes echoed inside, signaling their arrival. They waited in the brisk morning air, the slight breeze adding to the chilling atmosphere. After what seemed like an eternity, the large, dark-stained wooden door creaked open. Before them stood an imposing figure, casting a large silhouette against the dimly lit backdrop of the entrance. The man was notably tall, standing at 6 feet, with an obese frame that filled the doorway. His presence was accentuated by a full, unkempt beard that cascaded down to his chest, giving him a somewhat

disheveled appearance. His eyes were dark and penetrating, adding to the foreboding aura that surrounded him, which added to the mix of curiosity. There was a hint of something unreadable, making Angela and the officers momentarily uneasy under his gaze. He was dressed in a stark contrast of attire that seemed at odds with his overall appearance. His white shirt, though plain, strained against his large frame, tucked into a pair of black trousers that were standard yet worn. The outfit was unexpectedly completed with a pair of brown runners, a choice of footwear that seemed out of place with the rest of his attire.

The overall impression was one of an unconventional caretaker, whose physical appearance and choice of clothing added an air of peculiarity to the already tense atmosphere. The man's presence, with his towering height and penetrating gaze, left Angela and the officers with a lingering sense of discomfort as they prepared to enter the 'Safe Haven Home For Girls.'

"Welcome, Officers, and to you, my little one, to Safe Haven. Please, come inside out of the morning chill. It gets this way in the mornings, but it will warm up soon enough, that's for sure. I'm David, I'm the gopher. Go for this, go for that. Come in, Come in. I'll take you to the Matrons office." the man rambled on as her gave a mighty belly laugh at his own attempt at humour.

Sergeant Stephens and Constable Coates exchanged disbelieving glances at caretakers attempt at humor. Sensing the unsettling atmosphere, Angela clung tightly to Sergeant Stephens' arm, squeezing it hard.

"Can we go home now, please, Sally? I don't want to be here. Keira and I don't like it," Angela pleaded, her voice filled with a mixture of fear and desperation, hoping against hope for a different outcome.

The group trailed behind the Caretaker, moving through the heart of the children's home. The corridor they navigated was long and imposing, lined

with polished wood panels that reflected the dim light, creating an atmosphere both grand and somber. Underfoot, a tapestry-style hall runner stretched the length of the corridor, its intricate patterns worn by the passage of countless feet over the years. Periodically there stood large, old vases, each a testament to the home's history. These vases, relics of a bygone era, were filled with artificial flowers, their colors faded yet adding a touch of life to the otherwise austere surroundings. Above them, the very high ceilings gave a sense of spaciousness to the earlier time. These lights cast a soft, muted glow, contributing to the corridor's timeless ambiance.

Their journey culminated at a large wooden door at the corridor's end. The door was substantial, its wood polished to a sheen that spoke of meticulous care. Emblazoned in gold lettering on the door was the word 'Matron,' indicating the authority and importance of the person who resided behind it. Next to the door, an illuminated door chime/intercom button was mounted on the wall. The Caretaker stepped and pressed the button, filling the silence with a distinct chime that played behind the door. They waited in anticipation, the air heavy with a mix of apprehension and formality.

As they stood before the door, a brief moment of silence enveloped the group, the kind that often precedes significant events. It was as if time itself had paused, creating a tangible sense of anticipation mixed with uncertainty.

Finally, the intercom crackled to life, breaking the silence.

"Yes, David. Are they here?" inquired an anonymous voice, its tone indicating authority.

"Yes, Juliet, they just arrived," The Caretaker, responded promptly.

"Okay, bring them in. The Matron is expecting them," the voice instructed.

The audible buzz of the door being unlocked followed. Stepping aside, the Caretaker gestured for the visitors to enter first.

"You all go first, special guests before beauty," he quipped, his attempt at humor doing little to lighten the mood.

Sergeant Stephens took the lead, her expression serious and professional. Constable Coates followed, keeping a protective hand on Angela's shoulder as they crossed the threshold together. The room they entered was dominated by a large wooden desk, its surface covered in green vinyl, which seemed to absorb the room's sparse light. Behind the desk sat a middle-aged woman, her greying hair neatly styled, but her appearance was somewhat marred by her overdone makeup. Her bright red lipstick contrasted starkly with her flushed cheeks, hinting at too much alcohol consumption. Her long, red fingernails were meticulously manicured, but it was her eyes that captured their attention. Icy grey and lifeless, they surveyed the newcomers with a detached, almost clinical gaze.

"I'm Juliet Blaise, I'm the Matron's Personal Assistant, and the Home's Administrator, I will see if the Matron is able to see you know." Juliet stated as a matter of fact.

Juliet's presence commanded the room, yet there was an underlying sense of weariness about her. It was as though the years of overseeing the home had taken a toll, leaving her with a facade of authority that barely concealed the fatigue beneath. As they stood before her, each member of the group felt aware that they were in the presence of someone who held significant power.

Juliet, with a sense of formality and respect, rose from her high-backed, leather-clad office chair. She approached the Matron's office, her steps measured and deliberate. The door before her bore a large brass sign, elegantly engraved in cursive script: 'Ms. Elisheva Hawthorne, Matron.' Juliet gently

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tapped on the door, three times, with one knuckle.

“Yes, Juliet, show them in, please, thank you” Replied the soft, unassuming voice from within.

Juliet carefully turned the large brass handle. The door opened smoothly, revealing the Matron's office to the waiting guests.

“May I present Sergeant Stephens, Constable Coates, and Angela Shifra, Matron,” Juliet announced in a hushed, respectful tone. The trio stepped into the office, their movements quiet and cautious.

The sight that greeted them was unexpected. The figure rising from behind the desk defied two Police Officers preconceived notions of a Matron. In place of the stern, older figure they had imagined, stood a young woman, likely in her late twenties. Her tall, athletic build was accentuated by her poised stance. Her striking blonde hair, shoulder-length and lustrous, cascaded elegantly over her right shoulder. Her skin, naturally tanned, spoke of a love for the outdoors. It was her eyes, however, that were most captivating – a striking shade of blue that seemed to reflect a depth of understanding and empathy. Her attire was equally impressive, a sophisticated royal blue dress that hugged her figure gracefully, complemented by a wide white waist belt. The ensemble was completed with striking white high-heeled shoes. Her long white fingernails added a touch of elegance to her overall appearance. Yet, despite her youth and beauty, there was a strong hint of refined authority in her soft-spoken voice, commanding respect and attention.

Angela, however, seemed to recoil at the sight of the Matron. Clinging to Sergeant Fletcher, her body shook with an unspoken fear. In a whisper barely audible, she confided in the Sergeant,

“We need to go, Sally. Keira really doesn't like her; she's mean.” Angela said.

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Despite the Matron's seemingly approachable demeanor, Angela's instincts screamed a warning. The disparity between the Matron's appearance and the fear she invoked in Angela added a layer of complexity to the situation, leaving Sergeant Stephens and Constable Coates momentarily unsure how to proceed in the presence of Ms. Elisheva Hawthorne, the young and enigmatic Matron of Safe Haven Home For Girls.

Settling In to the Home

Her first introduction to the childrens home, whilst and Angela was beaten, abused and just treated really badly by the staff.

Angela played up one day, she cried and so they made her stand in the corner, She wasn't allowed to speak or go to the toilet. She had an accident in my pants. The person who was in charge at the time dragged her outside by the hair, hitting and kicking her all the way, she then stripped Angela of all her clothes, it was winter, and hosed her down with the fire hose. It hurt when the water hit Angela's body.

She was the made to stand in the same corner with no clothes on until this other lady, who she remembers as being loving toward children came on duty. She took Angela, to a hot shower and was given some clean clothes. Angela told her what had happened and she told Angela she would sort it out. Angela never saw that lady again. Angela doest remember her name but to a young child, she was around 50-55 years old.

Things got worse after that, leared at by male workers in the shower, washed and felt up by female workers

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Bent over for internal search – workers linger longer than is necessary

Then they moved Angela to another Girls Home. It started all over again. This was the home Angela ran away from and was brought back by two policemen Angela didn't know. She told them why she ran away and they told her to stop telling stories.

Escaping from Juvenile Prison

Trick worker

Jump huge brick wall

With three others

Running up suburban street

Sleeping in park

Beaten up by 'Parkies'

Shopping Trolley

Bags in trolley

Not showered for 4 days

Stealing food from convenience store

Pick up by Police in Van

Driven to Police Station in back of Van – rough ride

Couple of slaps around by Policewoman

Confuses her given her relationship with Sally (police)

Anna was sitting in the parked car with two friends when a charcoal

gray van pulled up and flashlight beams momentarily blinded her.

There were two of them, both plainclothes detectives over 6 feet tall and powerfully built, flashing their badges and asking questions. There was weed in the front cupholder, and soon the detectives ordered the three occupants out of the car. As Anna later recalled, the detectives handcuffed her and told her friends, both young men, they were free to go. Then, she said they led her — a slender woman just over 5 feet tall — into the back of the unmarked police van with tinted windows.

Inside, Anna said the detectives took turns raping her in the backseat as the van cruised the dark streets and as she sat handcuffed, crying and repeatedly telling them “No.” Between assaults, she said, the van pulled over so the cops could switch drivers. Less than an hour later, a few minutes’ drive from where it all began, the detectives dropped Anna off on the side of the road, a quarter-mile from a police station, surveillance footage shows. She stood on the sidewalk, her arms wrapped around her chest, looking up and down the dimly lit street and pacing slowly before borrowing a cell phone from a passerby to call a friend.

Becoming a mother at 15

Not knowing

Realising

Who’s the father

Baby put in care

Court Battle for son

Child protection system- workers

Survival

ANGELA'S LIFE HAD BEEN A TUMULTUOUS JOURNEY of one crisis following another. At 35 years old, the latest chapter found her in the backseat of a luxurious, black Mercedes with a plush leather interior. She lay back, feeling the numbing high of the drugs she had just injected coursing through her veins, a temporary escape from her reality. Across from her, her client, a man exuding a sense of entitlement, reclined with a self-satisfied smirk. He casually wiped his manhood clean of her saliva and his own fluids with a freshly laundered handkerchief, embroidered with a logo, indifferent to the chaos he was part of in Angela's life. As he zipped up his trousers, their momentary bubble of seclusion was shattered. A beam of light pierced through the rear window, followed by a loud thud against the side door of the car. Angela, her senses dulled and mind floating in a drug-induced haze, barely registered the intrusion.

Suddenly, the rear passenger door flung open. Before she could react, Angela was yanked from the comfort of the leather seats. She tumbled onto the crushed rock of the car park, her dress flipping over her head, her dignity stripped away as her panties tangled around her knees. A police officer's torch shone directly into her eyes, the harsh light an unwelcome return to reality. The officer then turned the beam towards the car's interior, illuminating her client's figure. The Sergeant of Police, holding the torch, inhaled sharply through his

nose as the light revealed the man's appearance. The client, an elderly male, had an air of dated opulence about him, reminiscent of a character from a poorly made 1970s gangster movie. His Rolex watch glinted in the torchlight, as did his manicured nails and a shiny gold front tooth. His face was adorned with a trimmed grey moustache styled in a Mexican fashion, adding a touch of sinister intent to his demeanor. The light also caught his shiny bald head, emphasizing the strands of brown-dyed hair combed over in a feeble attempt to conceal his baldness. In that moment, Angela's world, already hanging by a thread, seemed to crumble even further. The harsh light of the police torch not only exposed her and her client but also illuminated the stark reality of her life's descent into despair and desperation. The contrast between her current state and the opulent surroundings of the Mercedes was a poignant reminder of the path her life had taken.

The City Mayor stepped from the back seat of the Mercedes, further adjusting his trousers and shirt and strolled slowly around the rear of the car to where the Sergeant stood. The Sergeant was a man who carried the weight of his years visibly, both physically and emotionally. In his mid-fifties he stood at 6' in the old measure. His frame was broad and heavy, with a noticeably large stomach that protruded under the fabric of his police uniform. His overall appearance was that of a man whose best years were behind him, his uniform hanging on him awkwardly, reminiscent of a bag of potatoes. His face bore the marks of a life led in harshness and excess. His cheeks were round and bulging, and his nose bore the telltale reddening of chronic alcohol abuse, a physical testament to the personal battles he waged silently. His demeanor was that of a man who had seen much and grown weary of the world he patrolled. With a career spanning over 35 years, he had watched as opportunities for advancement slipped through his fingers, marred by the persistent rumors and whispers of corruption that seemed to follow him. Time and again, he had been passed over for promotions, his aspirations thwarted by a reputation he

could neither shake off nor fully escape. The result was a deep-seated bitterness that had taken root in his psyche. He had witnessed younger men, once his juniors, ascend the ranks to become his superiors. This reality was a constant source of frustration and anger, feelings he often projected onto the community he was sworn to serve. His enforcement of law and order was frequently tinged with an unnecessary harshness, a reflection of the resentment and disillusionment that had come to define his view of his profession. His presence was imposing not just because of his physical appearance, but also due to the air of jaded authority he exuded. He was a man shaped by the disappointments and compromises of his career, a career that was now in its twilight, leaving behind a legacy that was as complex as the man himself.

As the Mayor stood beside the Sergeant, his attention was drawn to a young officer he hadn't noticed before. The officer, a tall figure, loomed over Angela, who was still sprawled on the ground. The officer directed his torchlight onto her. Blinded by the harsh brightness she tried to shield her eyes with her arms as she struggled awkwardly to pull her dress down and her panties up, but her efforts were futile.

The Sergeant turned to face the Mayor, his expression one of disbelief and disdain. With eyes narrowed in a squint, he conveyed a look of vehement disgust toward the Mayor. Disgusted by what he'd witnessed, he cleared his nose and spat disdainfully at the Mayor's feet. The spittle shot from his mouth, landing squarely on the Mayor's shiny crocodile leather shoes.

"I've been watching you for five minutes, Marius," The Sergeant said with a tone of contempt.

"I thought I'd let you finish the job before I got the young fella here to bang on the door. Why the hell would you want this one to give you head, look at her?"

The Mayor, unfazed by the Sergeant's evident repulsion, casually pulled out the monogrammed City Council handkerchief he had just used to clean himself. He bent down and wiped the spit off his shoe with an air of indifference.

"It's cheap," the Mayor replied nonchalantly.

"Why pay some unknown slut? Besides, I've known her since she was 12. Since she first came from that hole of a country town. What's it called again?" he paused, then barked at Angela,

"Hey, Angela, what's the name of that fucking shithole you came from?"

The scene was a stark display of the power dynamics at play, the Mayor's sense of entitlement and disregard for human dignity, contrasted with the Sergeant jaded, yet still present, sense of moral outrage.

As Angela attempted to turn over, the coarse gravel of the car park pressed into her skin like needles, each sharp rock embedding a pang of pain into her back and hips. Her mind, clouded and disoriented from the events of the evening, struggled to grasp the reality of her situation. Lying in the darkness, she tried her best to respond to the Mayor's question, her voice barely more than a faint, hushed whimper.

"Shadow Creek," she managed to say, hoping it was the answer he sought, even though the question itself barely registered in her confused state.

The Sergeant, observing the scene with a mix of disgust and resignation, took a series of long, deep breaths. He began to pace around Angela, his heavy boots purposefully crunching the stones beneath him. Angela, still disoriented, writhed on the ground, clumsily attempting to rearrange her disheveled clothes. The Sergeant paused, looking down at her. Their eyes met, and in that brief moment of eye contact, there was an

unspoken acknowledgment of their shared, tumultuous history. With his hands planted firmly on his hips, the Sergeant arched his back and closed his eyes, letting out a heavy, audible sigh.

“Well fuck me, Shadow Creek! I remember it well; it was my first posting nearly 30 years ago. Even back then, it was a shithole, and I doubt it's changed much over the years,” Sergeant Fletcher remarked with a tone of contempt, reflecting on his past experiences.

“It was a haven for weirdos and criminals. Sure, on the surface, it looked like any other small town, but beneath that facade, it was a cesspool of secrets, child abuse, and corruption. It wasn't until me and my Sergeant, Sally Stephens, got our hands on it and took it by the scruff of the neck that we started making a dent. We tried to clean it up, make it safe for the kids there.”

His words carried a mix of resentment and pride. Resentment for the town that had been his first foray into the harsh realities of law enforcement, and pride for the efforts he and Sergeant Stephens had made to combat the darkness, ‘the knowing’ that lurked beneath its seemingly tranquil exterior. Sergeant Fletcher's eyes hardened as he recalled the challenges they faced trying to root out the deeply ingrained problems of Shadow Creek.

“Sally and I, go bless her soul, worked our asses off, trying to turn that place around. But towns like that... they have a way of holding onto their darkness. You peel back one layer, and there's another one just as rotten underneath.”

His gaze distant, was suddenly transported back to his early days on the force, recalling a particularly harrowing case from his first month in Shadow Creek.

“I remember this one time, not long after I started,” he began, his voice tinged with a mixture of sorrow and resignation.

“We got called to this godforsaken place, a real cesspit of a home. The abuse... it was like nothing I’d seen before. A young girl, trapped in that nightmare. The only thing she had with her when we rescued her was a rag tag doll, she just wouldn’t let go of that thing.”

He paused, trying to recall the girl's name, but the years of alcohol abuse had taken their toll on his memory.

“Her name... it escapes me now,” he muttered, frustration evident in his tone.

“But she was just a kid, and the things she had to endure...” His voice trailed off, the weight of the memory too heavy to bear.

Sergeant Fletcher shook his head, a look of defeat crossing his face.

“Last I heard, she’d left town, vanished without a trace. People said she wouldn’t last long out there on her own. Poor thing, she had an aunty, used to dope her up. The kid never stood a chance in a place like that.”

His reflection painted a bleak picture of the young girl’s prospects, a life marred by abuse and neglect, with little hope for a better future.

“That town, it swallows up the innocent. Places like Shadow Creek, they don’t let go easily. Breaking free from it... it’s near impossible for some.”

As Sergeant Fletcher continued speaking, his words became a distant murmur to Angela, her mind clouded by the influence of drugs. She lay there, disoriented and dazed, struggling to piece together the fragments of conversation that penetrated her drug-induced haze. Fleeting mentions of Shadow Creek floated to her ears, stirring a vague sense of familiarity deep within her foggy consciousness.

In her altered state, Angela was only dimly aware of the significance of the moment. She was unwittingly in the presence of the very person who had played a pivotal role in her past, her childhood savior, the one who had

rescued her from a situation that could have led to her death. Yet, in her current condition, she was unable to fully grasp or respond to this connection. Bits and pieces of Sergeant Fletcher's recollections about a young girl from Shadow Creek resonated with Angela, but they were like echoes in a dream, intangible and elusive. She lay there, caught in a limbo between the present reality and the distant memories of her past, missing the chance to reconnect with a figure who had once been her lifeline. This missed opportunity was a poignant reminder of how drastically Angela's life had diverged from the path she might have taken had circumstances been different. It underscored the tragic consequences of her childhood and her life choices that followed, the circumstances that led her to this moment, lying on the cold ground, unable to recognize or reach out to the person who had once rescued her from despair.

Bringing himself back to the present, Sergeant Fletcher, reverted to his angry, resentful self.

"Oh well, lets move on. Marius, seems to me she's had her day. Jesus, fuck me, mate, it's time to move on and get some new flesh," he said, his voice laced with a bitter cynicism.

Although his words were harsh, unfeeling, and spoken with a toughened demeanor, they were accompanied by a more sinister, hearty laughter.

"Mate, she'll only bring you grief one day. Who knows what she's carrying. How would your lovely new bride take that, eh, you may as well go and live in Shadow Creek?"

There was also a hint of warning in Sargent Fletcher's his tone, a suggestion that the Mayor's actions were not only potentially dangerous to his own standing but to his personal relationships as well. His comment about Shadow Creek carried a disdain for the small town and its people, indicative of the divide between those in power and those who struggled at the margins of

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society like Angela.

Payoff

EXTENDING HIS ARM DIRECTLY TOWARDS THE MAYOR, Sergeant Fletcher turned his palm upward in a silent, expectant gesture. The Mayor, understanding the unspoken agreement, firmly shook the Sergeant's hand, discreetly passing him four crisp, brand-new \$50 notes in the process. This covert exchange ensured that the Mayor would escape any legal repercussions for soliciting sex in the carpark.

After the transaction, Sergeant Fletcher turned his attention toward Angela. He walked towards her with deliberate, heavy steps, each footfall pressing into the ground with a menacing crunch. He towered over her just as she was struggling to her knees. In a sudden and brutal act, Sergeant Fletcher unleashed a full-force kick with his leather-booted heel into Angela's lower back. The impact sent her hurtling face-first into the sharp, crushed rocks of the car park. The stones embedded into her skin, marking her face with their cruel imprint. The force of the blow expelled the air from her lungs. She lay there, gasping audibly for breath. A victim of the Sergeant Fletcher's ruthless display of power and aggression.

This violent act was a stark display of the corruption and abuse of authority that the Sergeant Fletcher had come to embody.

"Hey rookie, help her up. With the drugs in her system, she won't feel the pain until morning. And for God's sake, pull her knickers up. Put her in the

back of the van, take her to the station, and let her sleep it off. We'll release her in the morning. Find someone to bail her out. Just get her out of here as soon as possible," barked the Sergeant with a tone of indifference.

The young officer, recognizing the harsh reality of the situation, gave a slight nod in acknowledgment. The Sergeant Fletcher, his orders given, turned and walked back to the Mayor's luxury car with a sense of satisfaction. As he slid into the front passenger seat of the Mayor's car, a thought crossed his mind: 'I never get tired of this.' He took a moment to savor the upscale environment he found himself in, inhaling the rich scent of new leather that came with such high-end vehicles. His eyes admired the elegant walnut finish that adorned the dashboard and steering wheel, and he ran his fingers over the soft, pale kid leather of the dashboard. Opening the glove compartment, he found a bottle of Chivas Regal Scotch Whiskey and a large Cuban cigar. Holding the bottle for a moment, he relished the anticipation of the drink. Unscrewing the cap, he took a long deep sniff, savoring the strong warm and inviting aroma before indulging in a long, satisfying swig, allowing the flavors and vapors to overwhelm his senses. His eyes rolled back slightly in pleasure. He then prepared the cigar, breaking off its end and lighting it with a gold lighter found in the leather console. He inhaled deeply, savoring the rich, intense flavors of the smoke, holding it in for a moment before exhaling loudly. The luxury of the moment was not lost on him, a stark contrast to the world outside the car - a world he had just left in turmoil. In this bubble of affluence and privilege, he found a temporary escape, reveling in the sensory pleasures that momentarily distracted him from the darker aspects of his duties.

Gazing at the silver crucifix dangling from the rearview mirror, Sergeant Fletcher couldn't help but scoff.

"You fucking hypocrite, Marius," he muttered under his breath, shaking his head in disdain.

As he closed his eyes, the rich flavors of the whiskey mingling with the bold aroma of the cigar evoked a flood of memories from his days as a young police officer. Back then, he recalled, life was different, he had made sure to get only the finest perks from the gangs he covertly worked with. ‘Young coppers these days have no idea what they’re missing, he thought nostalgically, a smirk playing on his lips. Taking another large swig from the bottle, he felt the liquid burn its way down, causing him to inhale sharply through clenched teeth. ‘This’ll help me through the night shift,’ he reasoned to himself, trying to justify the indulgence. Slumping back into the plush seat of the Mercedes, he reveled in the momentary pleasures, allowing himself a brief respite before springing into action.

After a pause, he leaned across to the driver’s side, flung the door open, and called out to the Mayor, to grab his attention.

“Hey, Marius! Get your arse over here.” He yelled.

As the Mayor slid into the driver’s seat, Sergeant Fletcher’s demeanor shifted dramatically. The jovial, indulgent air was replaced by an urgent, serious tone. In a swift, decisive motion, he grabbed the Mayor, his large hand encircling the man’s throat and neck. The suddenness of the action was startling, marking a stark transition from the lax, almost leisurely attitude he had just a moment ago. This change highlighted the unpredictable and volatile nature of the Sergeant, a man capable of swiftly alternating between indulgence and aggression.

Grasping the Mayor’s face with one hand, Sergeant Fletcher pulled him closer, their cheeks nearly touching as he whispered directly into the Mayor’s ear. A broad, self-satisfied smirk spread across his face, embodying the sense of power and control he wielded in the situation. His voice, low and menacing, carried a chilling undertone as he laid out his terms.

“Next time, Marius, it’s going to cost you \$400. And when that rookie

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gets rid of the girl and leaves in the van, you'll drive me to the station. By the way, you could really invest in better quality Scotch. What you've got here is camel's piss," he hissed.

"But first, it's time to pay the rest of what you owe. Pay the piper, Marius."

In a fluid, calculated movement, Sergeant Fletcher unzipped his trousers to expose himself with his left hand while simultaneously grabbing the Mayor's head with his right. He forcefully guided the Mayor's face down into his lap, exerting his dominance in a display of power. Reclining in the seat, he reveled the authority he held over the Mayor, a twisted pleasure evident in his demeanor. This moment highlighted the Sergeant Fletcher's corruption and abuse of power, not just an exchange of money but a sinister demonstration of the perverse dynamics at play.

Rescued again

RESIGNED TO HER FATE, ANGELA LAY MOTIONLESS, her body splayed face down on the unforgiving rocks of the car park. She had ceased her attempts to fix her disheveled clothing, succumbing to a sense of defeat. 'What the fuck,' she thought bitterly, 'If I move, that bastard will just hit me again.'

Startled, she felt a sudden touch on her shoulder. The young officer was bending down beside her. His presence initially frightened her, the unexpected contact jarring her out of her resigned stupor. 'That's not a cop. They don't care about people like me,' she thought full of skepticism.

"Hey, are you okay? You still with us, Angela, your name is Angela, yeah?" The officer's voice carried a note of genuine concern.

The gentleness in his touch and the soothing quality of his voice, so unlike the harsh tones she was accustomed to hearing from law enforcement, seemed surreal to Angela. It was almost dreamlike.

"Angela. Listen. I've got to get you out of here before he gets too drunk and really decides to hurt you. Come on, help me get you up," the officer whispered softly, his voice barely audible.

Right then she had a flashback to another time when a young rookie policeman had been kind to her, he had saved her from a nightmare. It

seemed as though she was experiencing a DeJa'Vu. This moment marked a turning point for Angela – a choice to trust a stranger's kindness over the certainty of further abuse. It was a leap of faith, fueled by a desperate hope for escape from the night's traumatic events. As she began to move, the sharp rocks bit into her cheeks, shoulders, hips, and knees, each movement a reminder of her harsh reality. Despite her distrust, the voice offering help was a beacon in her current darkness. With a deep, internal struggle between skepticism and the desperate need for a way out, Angela decided to take a chance on the voice before her. She began to wriggle, trying to right herself and roll over, her movements clumsy and weak. It was a vain, yet determined attempt to respond to the officer's call for action.

The young officer acted with a kindness that seemed out of place in the harsh reality of the car park. Gently, he maneuvered Angela onto her back, positioning himself at the back of her head. He then bent down, sliding his arms under her armpits. As he stood up, he carefully lifted her, helping her rise to a standing position alongside him.

"It's alright, love. Let me help you. You'll just go arse over again if you try on your own," he said, his voice a blend of care and practical concern.

Angela, still disoriented, turned her head in an attempt to get a better look at her unexpected rescuer. In the dim light of the car park, Angela could discern the figure of a young man aiding her, most likely in his mid-20s. Constable Charles Suter, he was notably tall, standing over 6 feet, with a presence that was both commanding and reassuring. His physical build was robust, suggesting a person who was fit and accustomed to physical activity, perhaps as a requirement of his profession. The most striking feature of his face was his chiseled chin, which lent him an air of determination and resolve. It was the kind of feature that instantly conveyed a sense of reliability and strength, traits that Angela found oddly comforting in her current state. His eyes, a striking ice-blue, caught the light from the torch, shimmering like twin

beacons in the darkness. These eyes radiated a sense of calm and steadiness, a stark contrast to the chaos and panic of the situation. They were the kind of eyes that seemed to look right through the turmoil, offering a moment of peace.

As he helped Angela to her feet, she could feel the strength in his hands and arms. His grasp was firm yet gentle, indicative of someone who was accustomed to handling delicate situations with care. His chest, pressed against her back as he supported her, felt solid and unwavering, a testament to his physical fitness and strength. She could also sense the quick yet strong rhythm of his breathing, a sign of his exertion yet controlled demeanor. It was a steady, reassuring pattern that spoke of his focus and concern in that moment.

Overall, Constable Suter appeared to be not just a figure of authority but also one of compassion and strength, qualities both needed and appreciated by Angela in her vulnerable state. His physical attributes and calm demeanor provided a sense of security and hope, something Angela desperately needed at that moment.

She caught a whiff of Old Spice aftershave emanating from him, a scent that evoked a sudden and vivid memory of her father. Angela remembered sitting on the edge of the bathtub as a child, watching her father shave, and how he would playfully dab a few drops of his aftershave on her face. The nostalgia brought by this familiar scent was a brief but welcome escape from her predicament.

“Take it easy love, get your bearings a second. You’re going to have to pull you nickers up sweetheart. They’re around your knees, here I’ll give you a hand. Constable Suter offered.

“Just stay like this for a ‘sec, you’ll be dizzy. Now I’m gunna put the cuffs on you. Sorry darl’, if Fletch’ doesn’t see me doing this we’ll both get it.”

It took a moment for Angela to fully comprehend the Constable

Suters' words, his soft and calming voice cutting through the fog of her dazed state. She found the strength to offer a feeble nod of her head in agreement. Bringing her arms behind her back the Constable Suter used the least amount of pressure he could he locking the cuffs. She listened as he continued to speak gently, his tone soothing and reassuring. This unexpected display of humanity from a police officer, especially in her current vulnerable situation, was a stark contrast to her earlier experiences that night.

He held her hand and guided it down to her knees enabling her to adjust her panties with what little dignity she had left at the treatment of Sergeant Fletcher.

As Constable Suter assisted Angela, his gaze momentarily drifted across the dimly lit car park to where the Mayor's car was parked. The vehicle's tinted windows obscured his view, leaving him to wonder about Sergeant Fletcher's prolonged interaction with the Mayor. In his mind, the Mayor was nothing more than a low-life criminal who had managed to buy his way into the city's top job, a fact that made Sergeant Fletcher's delay all the more suspicious and unsettling.

Turning his attention back to Angela, he spoke softly,

"We're going to head over to the Police van now. Can you see it over there? I need your help with this, Angela. Watch out for the step. Can you see it? You'll need to step up and push yourself in," he instructed gently.

Despite her unsteady state and the tremors that shook her body, Angela managed a faint nod. She shuffled towards the Police van, each step a test of her will and strength. The officer, maintaining a gentle but firm grip, assisted her as she approached the van.

As Angela attempted to step up into the rear of the van, she overbalanced. Losing her footing, she fell forward onto the cold steel floor, the impact forcing an agonized groan from her lips as the sharp rocks embedded

in her skin were pushed in deeper. The pain was acute, a cruel reminder of her earlier ordeal. Rolling onto her right side, she sought refuge in the numbing embrace of the drugs still coursing through her veins. The pain gradually receded into the background as the narcotics dulled her senses. She curled up into a fetal position against the metal seat, her body seeking whatever comfort it could find in the harsh environment of the van. Within moments, Keira slipped Angela into a comatose state, her consciousness retreating from the cruel reality of her situation. Constable Suter watched with a mix of pity and helplessness. He knew his duty was to bring Angela to the station, but the human part of him ached at the sight of her suffering. As he held the door of the van open, he looked inside and he couldn't help but feel a profound sense of sadness for the state she was in, a stark contrast to the Sergeant Fletcher's callousness and the Mayor's corruption. He stood behind the van, his eyes fixed on Angela for a moment longer than necessary. He carefully observed the rise and fall of her chest, silently offering a prayer under his breath.

"Please, God, don't let her die on my watch. Just don't let her die," he implored, the weight of the responsibility heavy on his shoulders.

With a gentle, almost reverent motion, he closed the van's rear door, ensuring Angela's safety inside. He methodically slid the external bolt across, securing it firmly. Moving with a sense of purpose yet weighed down by his thoughts, he walked around to the driver's side of the van. Opening the door, he slid into the worn drivers side vinyl seat, feeling the contrast of the cool material against his uniform. Sitting there, he stretched his arms out to the steering wheel, his body language offering a need for a moment of pause. His mind raced as he reflected on the events he had just witnessed and his role in them. The situation was a stark deviation from what he believed was morally right, and it clashed violently with his personal values.

Being raised in a small rural farming community, Constable Fletcher found himself feeling an unexpected kinship with Angela. His background had

instilled in him a strong sense of morality and empathy for those in difficult situations. Grappling with his conscience, he tried to reconcile his duties as an officer with his innate sense of right and wrong.

Reaching for the radio handset, he held it to his mouth but paused, collecting his thoughts and steadying his nerves. After a brief moment, he called into the Police Station Watch House, reporting their imminent arrival with a prisoner. For the next five minutes, he sat motionless, lost in a trance of contemplation. He was at a crossroads, both professionally and personally, as he pondered the path forward. The night's events had exposed him to the harsh realities of his job and the moral dilemmas that sometimes came with it. In the quiet of the van, he contemplated his next steps, knowing that the choices he made now could define the course of his career and his integrity as a law enforcement officer.

As he reached for his seatbelt, preparing to drive away, Sergeant Fletcher appeared from the shadows behind the van. He leaned in through the driver's window, his face uncomfortably close to the Constable Suters right ear. The overpowering scent of Scotch whiskey mixed with the stale odor of cigar smoke filled the enclosed space, a pungent reminder of the Sergeant's earlier indulgences. In a calculated move, Sergeant Fletcher slipped two of the \$50 notes, initially given to him by the Mayor, into the top pocket of the Constable Suters uniform. His voice, a menacing whisper, carried a chilling message.

"There are things in this job, son, that if you look after, will pay you better than the pittance the Force offers. Now, take this skank back to the cells and process her. And remember, if I catch you playing Mr. Nice Guy again with her or anyone like her, you'll be answering to me. They only respect one thing, and that's a rough hand." Sergeant Fletcher said menacingly.

With these ominous words, Sergeant Fletcher straightened up and strutted back towards the Mayor's car, his demeanor one of triumph. He let

out a loud, mocking belly laugh, punctuated by a snort. As he puffed on his cigar, the red glow of its burning end flickered through the darkness, a sinister beacon in the night.

Constable Suters stayed in the driver's seat, feeling a deepening sense of conflict and disgust. The money in his pocket felt like a weight, a symbol of the moral compromise he was being coerced into. Sergeant Fletcher's words echoed in his mind, a stark reminder of the corruption and brutality that sometimes lay beneath the surface of law enforcement. As he started the van and began to drive towards the station, he grappled with the reality of his situation and the choices he would soon have to make.

Angela, lying curled up in the back of the police van, represented a poignant and tragic figure, emblematic of the many lives caught in the undercurrents of a broken system. Her journey to this moment, face down in a police van, her dignity stripped away, was a stark testament to the series of misfortunes and systemic failures that had shaped her life. Once a child with potential and dreams, Angela had been reduced to a mere pawn in the games of the powerful and corrupt.

The interaction that night, under the cold, uncaring gaze of the streetlights, was not just a confrontation between individuals but a chilling representation of the deeper malaise afflicting the City. It laid bare the personal failings of those in positions of authority – the Mayor's brazen corruption, the Sergeant's brutal exercise of power, and the young officer's struggle between duty and morality. Each character in this grim tableau played a role in perpetuating the cycle of abuse and corruption that had come to define the City's underbelly. The very institutions meant to safeguard the community, wielded power with impunity, at the expense of the vulnerable.

Survival belongs to those who dare to survive.

ANGELA

One More Time

Just 'one more time'.

HER BODY SPRAWLED ACROSS THE COLD METAL BENCH of the police station cell, Angela awoke with a start. As she slowly became aware of her surroundings, she noticed the dampness of her clothes clinging to her skin. At first, she reasoned it was sweat, but the chilling discomfort suggested otherwise. Gritting her teeth against the pain from the embedded stones in her skin, she managed to swing her legs over the side of the bench, wincing as the cuts and bruises across her body protested the movement. The sharp ache in her back was particularly unbearable, a cruel reminder of the kick she had endured. Sitting on the edge of the bench, she took slow, deep breaths, trying to steady herself. Her vision was blurry, but she could make out the sparse features of the cell: another metal bench on the opposite side, a stainless steel toilet without a seat, and the dull sheen of the polished concrete floor. Wool blankets lay crumpled at the end of the bench, offering little comfort or warmth. The cell was filled with an unexpected scent of lavender disinfectant, which struck her as odd. Normally, police cells were dominated by the raw, unpleasant smells of humanity, vomit, blood, sweat, and excrement. But here, the air was tinged with this incongruous, almost soothing fragrance. Her gaze drifted to the fire hose coiled on a hydrant in the corridor outside her cell. A vague memory flashed through her mind, being doused with high-pressure

water after she had vomited on the floor upon her arrival. She recalled the sting of disinfectant as it was sprayed over her, an attempt to cleanse the cell but only adding to her humiliation and discomfort. ‘There’s only one animal on duty at the moment. Does that cunt ever stop!’ as she reasoned that Sergeant Fletcher was still tormenting her.

In that cold, sterile cell, Angela sat alone with her thoughts and pain. The stark contrast between the lavender scent and her grim reality only added to the surreal and disorienting nature of her experience. She was left to grapple with the physical and emotional aftermath of the night's events, a night that had left her not just physically battered but also stripped of her dignity and humanity. Alone in the concrete and iron cell, the isolation was palpable, yet she didn't feel cold; the heater was blasting warm air through a vent in the ceiling, providing some physical comfort in the stark environment. With great effort, she gradually pulled herself to a standing position, pausing momentarily as a wave of dizziness washed over her. She waited, gripping the edge of the metal bench, until the room stopped spinning. Carefully, she shuffled towards the cell door, her movements tentative as she sought to orient herself. She looked down at the floor, a blur of grey concrete, before pressing her face against the cold, hard bars of the cell door. The pressure left temporary indents on her cheeks, a physical reminder of her confinement. Her tongue moved over her dry, cracked lips, trying to moisten them. Drops of dribble from her nose mingled with her saliva, creating an uncomfortable sensation on her chin.

Gripping the steel bars tightly for support, she slowly raised her head, her vision gradually focusing as the dizziness abated. Through the dim yellow light of the corridor, she could make out a figure leaning against the wall opposite her cell. A mix of emotions washed over her – relief at not being alone, yet a deep sense of shame for the situation she was in.

As her eyes adjusted to the light, the blurry figure began to take shape,

and a sudden realization hit her. It was her son, standing there in the corridor, coming to her rescue once again. Following Sergeant Fletcher's orders, Constable Suters had called him to collect his mother, a routine that had become all too familiar.

Hanging on the gaol bars with a vice like grip to prevent her legs from collapsing underneath her, the desperation lingered in her voice as she attempted to explain herself to Gabrielle. Stumbling through words that could never adequately justify her actions. The truth spilled out, a desperate exchange of her body for a hit of heroin, she gave the local politician oral sex in the poorly lit back car park of the local hotel. The shame of that moment weighed heavily on her, casting a pall over any attempt to salvage her dignity. Gabrielle, standing there, his gaze piercing through the cell bars, spoke volumes without uttering a single word.

Standing at an imposing 183 centimeters, his presence exuded a mix of vulnerability and resilience, a testament to the challenges he had weathered in the shadows of his mother's struggles. His long, curly black locks tumbled with a sort of wild elegance, creating a stark contrast against his olive complexion, framing his face and occasionally falling over his forehead, lending him a look of a brooding artist or a thoughtful poet. His smooth skin complemented his Palestinian heritage and his eyes were like deep pools of dark chocolate, disarming yet inviting. When he focused on someone, it was as if he was peering directly into their soul, his gaze penetrating yet not intrusive. His clothes, well-fitted, seemed tailored to accentuate his tall, lean frame.

He stood on the other side of the goal bars, a silent observer to the turbulent scene unfolding before him. In the past, his eyes sparkled with hope, reflecting a youthful belief that his mother could conquer the demons that haunted her. However, as the years wore on, disappointment etched its mark on his gaze. The weight of witnessing his mother's recurrent battles with inner demons cast a somber shadow over his once-optimistic spirit. Despite the

weight on his shoulders, Gabrielle retained an innate kindness that endeared him to those around him. He exuded compassion, a quality that had matured alongside him in the crucible of life's challenges. As he stood there, his unspoken words reverberated with an unyielding love for his mother, a love that persevered despite the storm raging within their lives.

Seeing her son in this context, Angela was flooded with feelings of gratitude for his unwavering support, yet also a profound sadness for the burden she had become. The sight of him, standing patiently yet wearily in the corridor, was a poignant reminder of the impact her choices had on those she loved most. It was a moment of painful self-awareness, as she confronted the reality of her situation and the toll it had taken on her family.

Gabrielle's silhouette was barely discernible as he stood, his back against the wall, in the dimly lit corridor outside the cell. Angela, struggling to clear the dribble from her nose and chin, smeared it onto her black AC/DC singlet and floral skirt, which was already stained with the remnants of her turbulent night. She tried to speak, but her words were slurred and broken, her mind still clouded by the lingering effects of the drugs. Her world was a maelstrom of confusion and desperation.

She looked at her son, her eyes pleading, her voice a mix of despair and determination.

"This time... I will, darling.. Mummy will... I'm giving it all up... doing it for you... I promise... I love you, sweetheart... you know I do."

Gabrielle felt a profound sense of pity and loss wash over him as he observed the figure that was once his mother. He noticed her pale, yellowing skin, marred with scratches and cuts. Her face was worn, with big, dark bags under her eyes and beads of sweat trickling down her forehead. Her nose and mouth corners were stained with dribble, and her teeth had yellowed from years of smoking, drug use, and neglect. Her once lustrous black hair, now

dull, strands of grey, and disheveled as if it had been a nest for mice.

Even from a distance, Gabrielle could smell the mix of body odor, vomit, and the oddly contrasting lavender disinfectant. The odors hit him with a wave of nausea, making him wince as they reached his nose. He knew the woman in front of him was his mother, yet part of him wished it were not so.

This scene was painfully familiar to Gabrielle. He had witnessed his mother's promises and pleas countless times before, each ending in the same heartbreaking cycle. She would beg for help, vow to change, and he would pay her bail, clinging to a hope that perhaps this time would be different. Yet, inevitably, she would return to her dealer, succumbing to her addictions 'one more time.'. He stood there, torn between love for his mother and the disgust at the woman before him. Looking into his mother's eyes with a mixture of hope and resignation, he spoke with a heavy heart, his voice trembling with emotion

"It's not for me, Mum. You've promised too many times. Please, you have to do this for yourself. I've paid your bail again... 'one more time'. But this is it, Mum. You're on your own now. Please, don't call me again until you're clean. I mean it this time."

Turning away, he began the solitary ascent up the stairs from the holding cells, each step heavy with the weight of his decision. As he exited through the front entrance of the police station, he paused for a moment at the top of the steps. His gaze drifted to the cityscape transitioning into the soft glow of early dawn. The tropical botanical park across the street was beginning to stir with the morning's activity, its lush greenery a stark contrast to the grey confines of the station he had just left. A cool, early morning breeze wafted through, carrying with it the rich, intoxicating scent of tropical frangipanis in full bloom. He inhaled deeply, letting the sweet fragrance fill his senses, a natural balm cleansing the oppressive smells of the cell block from his

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memory. He took two more deep breaths, savoring the moment of peace and clarity.

As he began descending the steps to the street, his tears flowing freely, a silent testament to the pain of letting go. Walking away, he sniffled, trying to hold back the overwhelming emotions. It was a heart-wrenching farewell, a moment of painful acceptance that things might never change. This time, he vowed, would be the last. But deep down, he knew it was a promise he had made before, a cycle of hope and despair that had become all too familiar.

Leaving Lock Up

One man can teach you, that they're not all the same.

THREE HOURS AFTER HER SON HAD DEPARTED, leaving her in the bleak confines of the cell, Constable Suters reappeared with clipboard laden with bail papers. He opened the cell door and gestured for Angela to follow him.

“Come on, Angela, off you go now. Time's up. You can head home. Just sign here, and you're free to go. You won't need to show up for court, it's just a formality. You know the way out, up those stairs you go.” He said.

At the top of the stairs she pushed open the large glass doors of the police station, she was greeted by the first rays of dawn light piercing through the rare tropical winter fog. The chill of the morning air was a stark contrast to the heated interior of the cell she had just left. Standing at the top of the sandstone stairs, she instinctively began to rub her bare arms and breathe into her cupped hands, seeking warmth in the crisp morning air. Dressed only in her singlet top and short floral dress, she felt the cold more acutely. She cursed under her breath, frustrated that the police had released her so early in the morning. "They could have waited until it warmed up a bit," she thought resentfully. The local population, accustomed to the tropical heat, were donned in light cardigans and scarves, with a few even wearing woolen beanies to ward off the morning chill. In contrast, the tourists were easily identifiable

in their board shorts, sandals, and loud, tropical short-sleeved shirts.

From her elevated vantage point on the stairs, her gaze drifted across the road to the park opposite the station. It was a sprawling expanse, comparable in size to a Rugby football field, framed by palm trees, frangipani, and vibrant bougainvillea creepers. During the day, the park's open grassy areas and ornately decorated sections attracted tourists, but at night, it became a haven for the city's itinerants and other homeless groups seeking refuge in its relative safety. With amenities designed for the comfort of tourists, equipped with shower and toilet facilities and electric barbecue areas, these conveniences, had become essential resources for those without a home, who had established their makeshift camps, preferring the relative freedom here to the restrictions of alcohol-free 'dry communities.'

Angela, though not sharing the heritage of many who frequented the park, felt a deep connection to its culture. It had become a familiar refuge for her, a place where she had spent countless nights and weeks among its regular inhabitants. Over time, she had become well-acquainted with the lifestyle of those known colloquially as 'parkies,' understanding their unspoken rules and social mores. The existence of such communities in a country as affluent as hers was a paradox that often left her puzzled. She couldn't fathom why the police would routinely disrupt these gatherings, chasing away the parkies who had nowhere else to go.

As her gaze drifted over the park scene, she recognized several familiar faces. They were up early, partaking in what was known as a 'heart starter' – a ritual morning alcoholic drink to shake off the chill of dawn. Around a campfire, which emitted more smoke than flames, they gathered, each with a glass of Old Tawny Port from a cardboard cask and a hand-rolled cigarette made from black market tobacco, often followed by harsh coughs and the guttural spitting globules of blue green phlegm into the fire, a stark reminder of the harsh realities of their lives.

These early morning scenes, with their blend of camaraderie and struggle, were a microcosm of the park's ecosystem. It was a world she knew well, one that offered both a sense of community and a reminder of the societal edges on which so many lived. As she stood there, a sense of familiarity mixed with despair washed over her, a reminder of the thin line between finding a place to belong and being utterly lost.

The sudden opening of the police station's large glass doors jolted Angela from her contemplations. She swiftly turned around, her heart skipping a beat, only to see the young Constable Suters, who had treated her with kindness and gentleness throughout the night. He was ending his night shift and stood at the entrance for a moment, at 25yrs, his 6-foot-3-inch frame and well-built physique commanding attention. His dark blue uniform, tailored to perfection, accentuated his athletic build. Angela couldn't help but take a moment to admire the young man before her. A fleeting thought crossed her mind, 'If only I was ten years younger, I'd give you a run for your money.'

"Angela, it's time you got it together," Constable Suters said, his voice laced with genuine concern.

"Really, love, you're too old to be turning tricks in a car park. You're so much better than that. Do you have any cash for a cab?" he asked, offering assistance.

Angela knew all too well that Sergeant Fletcher would have accepted a bribe from the Mayor but he had also confiscated the \$100 she had dropped in the back seat of the Mercedes as he dragged her from the car in her. Feeling a mix of shame and helplessness, she shook her head and dropped her gaze, avoiding the Constable Suters kind eyes. Without hesitation, the officer reached into his top pocket and retrieved the \$100 that Sergeant Fletcher had earlier during his shift slipped into it. With a gentle and respectful gesture, he placed the money into Angela's palm.

“Here, take this. It’s better off with you than with me. It’s really yours anyway, the cash my boss took from you.”

In this small act of restitution and kindness, it was a rare moment of compassion in Angela’s turbulent life, a reminder that not all encounters with law enforcement were devoid of empathy and understanding.

As Angela lifted her gaze to meet the Constable Suters eyes, she was overcome with a sense of shame. His act of kindness contrasted sharply with her current situation.

“Thank you, You’re not like the others. What are you doing in that job?” Her voice a mix of gratitude and bewilderment.

Constable Suters paused, reflecting on her question.

“I often ask myself the same thing. But then, every so often, I meet someone like you, and I remember why I’m here.” He said.

With a gentle touch to her face, a gesture so tender and devoid of malice, he turned and began to stride away. Angela stood frozen for a moment, struck by the rarity of such a kind touch. She froze for a moment, for it had been a very long time that a man had touched her face in such a way, without pain to follow. She watched as he moved with a graceful ease down the steps, crossing the street to a small soft-top four-wheel drive. Shaking her head to clear the whirlwind of emotions, she called out to him,

“Hey, what’s your first name?” she yelled.

He paused, turning back with a gentle wave.

“Charles, my friends call be Charlie” he responded with a broad smile.

“I’ll remember you, young fella. Your kindness, I’ll remember you, Charlie” she called out, her voice tinged with gratitude.

“It’s not about kindness to me, Ange!. You need to show some to

yourself first,” Charlie replied.

As he drove in front of the station, he offered Angela one more small wave, a final gesture of acknowledgment and farewell. Angela watched him go, the interaction leaving a profound impact. In a world that had often been harsh and unforgiving, Charlie’s kindness stood out, a beacon of humanity that reminded her that there was still goodness in the world. It was a moment that Angela knew she would hold onto, a reminder to perhaps start showing some of that kindness to herself.

Startled again by the sudden, violent opening of the large doors behind her, Angela instinctively ducked and pressed her back against the handrails. Her heart pounded in her chest as Sergeant Fletcher emerged, his towering presence looming over her.

"Fuck off out of the way, you stupid slut. Get out of here!" he bellowed aggressively, his voice laden with contempt.

Angela's mind raced back to the survival tactics she had learned as a child living with the abuse from Sarah. She knew that bowing her head and offering profuse apologies often diffused the situation, reducing the likelihood of a physical assault. She quickly adopted a posture of submission, hoping to placate Sergeant Fletcher with the words she knew he wanted to hear.

"Sorry, Sergeant, yes, Sergeant, I'm moving on, Sir, yes, Sir," she repeated, her voice a mix of fear and urgency.

But her pleas fell on deaf ears. Sergeant Fletcher continued his march down the sandstone steps toward a waiting car, one that Angela recognized with a sinking heart. A storm of rage brewed within her as she silently vowed, 'I'll fucking remember you, you bastard. And you know I will.'

She watched as Sergeant Fletcher swung open the front passenger door of the familiar Mercedes and slumped onto the seat with a heavy thud.

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The force of the door slamming shut made the car sway momentarily. He reached into the glove box and pulled out a bottle of whiskey, taking a long swig of what was left from the previous night, directly from the bottle.

“For fuck sake Marius, you’re late you bastard.” she heard him yell even with the windows of the Mercedes up.

The Mayor gave a loud laugh and they drove off at high speed. Angela stood at the top of the stairs, a mix of anger and helplessness washing over her. The sight of Sergeant Fletcher drinking in the open in front of the Police Station so brazenly, coupled with his cruel dismissal of her, was a harsh reminder of the injustice and corruption that still thrived in her world.

As she took in the scene, a sense of desolation washed over her. The park, with its beauty and tranquility, stood in stark contrast to the turmoil of her own life. She contemplated her next move, knowing that she had to seriously contemplate how to navigate the complexities of her existence, ‘one more time.’

Parkies

Eternal vigilance, is fighting against the crabs in bucket dragging you back.

ANGELA DESCENDED THE SANDSTONE STAIRS of the Police Station, her movements slow and deliberate. As she approached the road leading to the park, she paused mid-footpath, determined yet uncertain, her mind clouded with indecision. The two \$50 notes in her hand felt like a lifeline, yet she was unsure of her next steps. Almost mechanically, she found herself crossing the road, her actions more instinctual than conscious.

Arriving at the park, she approached a campfire under a towering palm tree. The smoke from the fire stung her eyes, and the acrid smell of burning plastic assaulted her nostrils. Clutching the money in her hand, she pointed towards a full unopened bottle of red wine, held by an older bearded parkie. He exchanged a glance with his much younger, long-haired companion, who gave a nod of approval. Sitting down beside them on one of the parks low backless benches, Angela handed one of the \$50 notes to the older man, and in exchange, she received a bottle of the cheap wine. In her mind, this seemed a fair trade, especially with the nearest bottle shop hours away from opening where she could procure one for six dollars. Her hands trembled as she clutched the bottle, holding it as if it were her last possession. Raising the bottle to her lips with a double handed grip, she tilted her head back and began to guzzle the wine greedily.

“Slow down, girl. You’ve got to taste it, savor the flavors,” said the younger man, his words tinged with a mix of humor and concern.

What began as full throated belly laugh, quickly turned to a fit of rasping coughing.

“Fuck me,” he gasped between coughs,

“You’ll kill a man.”

The older man's gruff voice cut through the early morning air.

“Tell him to take a flying fuck, Ange’. You drink it how you want. You paid for it. Stop coughing, you dickhead, or I’ll stick this burnt twig in your eye,” he barked at the young man with a gruff laugh.

The younger man attempted to stand, his movements uncoordinated. He lost his balance and tumbled over the log he was perched on, landing flat on his back. His head hit a plate of beans left out from the night before, spreading the beans around the back of his head in the formation of halo. Both the older man and Angela erupted into loud, boisterous laughter.

“Oh fuck me, that’s gold,” Angela yelled, her laughter reaching a high-pitched crescendo.

“You silly young cunt,” the older man chortled, shaking his head in amusement.

From under a blanket on the other side of the palm tree, a male voice growled,

“Shut up, you bastards! What the fuck do you think you’re doing so early? Shut up, or I’ll wring all your necks, dickheads. And tell that fucking sheila to shut the fuck up and fuck off.” He grumbled, filled with irritation and sleepiness.

Angela doubled over on the low bench she was sitting on, her laughter

was now uncontrollable. She tried to stifle it with her hand, which only made her nose dribble. Snorting the dribble back up, she wiped the back of her hand across her nose and wipe her hand on her black singlet, her face turned red from the effort of holding back her laughs. It had been ages since she had laughed so freely, and it felt surprisingly good, a brief respite from her usual struggles.

After finishing the last of the wine, she took three deep breaths, steadying herself for an attempt to stand. Her first effort was unsuccessful, and she tumbled back onto the bench with a thud. The young man's harsh words cut through the morning air,

“You can’t fucking laugh, bitch!” he yelled in a mix of jest and annoyance.

Despite the fall, her spirits were momentarily lifted by the rare moment of genuine amusement and camaraderie. For a fleeting instant, she was reminded of the simple joys of life, a stark contrast to the often grim reality of her existence. Unfazed she casually tossed the empty wine bottle into the fire. It shattered against a smoldering burnt log, the sound echoing through the early morning stillness. With renewed determination, she tried once more to stand up, using the sturdy palm tree as support. Leaning against it, she took a moment to collect herself, feeling the warmth and buzz from the wine starting to kick in. However, as her mind cleared, so too did the realization of her growing cravings. Her addiction, ever-present and demanding, began to gnaw at her, reminding her of the emptiness and desperation that came with not having drugs coursing through her veins.

“Hey, you, girly, you want your 50 bucks back?” the younger man called out.

Breaking her train of thought she turned to face him and was met with a sight that once disturbed her but now only brought amusement. The

man was lying on the ground, his trousers open, crudely pleasuring himself.

“Come on, you can have another bottle,” he pleaded as his movements becoming more frantic.

Shaking her head and rolling back her eyes, Angela snapped back,

“Fuck off, you young cunt. Put it away before some bird flies by looking for a worm.”

Pushing herself away from the tree, she made a hasty, unsteady retreat back to the footpath. She hurried away from the park without a particular direction in mind, putting distance between herself and the park. Experience had taught her that lingering there never boded well. She had been down that road before and knew all too well the consequences of staying. It was a scene that spoke volumes of the life she had come to know, a life where the numbing comfort of alcohol often overshadowed the harsh realities of existence. As she walked away, her mind was a whirlwind of mixed emotions, one was the resolve to escape the immediate squalor, ‘one more time’, the other, that in the company of these park inhabitants, she found a sense of belonging, however fleeting and troubled it might be.

The Deal

There is always a reckoning for the way you wrote your history.

LADEN WITH AN INEXPLICABLE SENSE OF FOREBODING, she navigated her way towards the city, a feeling of unease settled over her, as if the very fabric of the universe had shifted in a subtle but unsettling way. She couldn't shake off the feeling that something ominous loomed on the horizon.

The events at the park that morning, though not entirely unfamiliar to her, had left a distinctly strange and disconcerting imprint on her psyche. Over the years, she had developed a keen sensitivity to the subtle ebbs and flows of the universe, an almost sixth sense that alerted her to pay heed to its hidden messages. Today, more than ever, she felt that intuition stirring within her, an internal radar signaling that something significant was amiss.

This heightened awareness made her more cautious as she approached the main shopping center. It was then that her internal antennae went into overdrive. Across the street, at the bus stop bench, sat her dealer – a man of her age, yet oddly out of place with his attire that spoke of a much older era. The sight of him struck her like a bolt, freezing her in her tracks.

For a moment, she stood there, locked in indecision. Her mind raced as she weighed her options. Should she continue forward, crossing the path of the man who represented so much of what she was trying to leave behind? Or should she retreat, taking a step back into the relative safety of where she had

just come from?

Her heart pounded in her chest as she contemplated her next move. The familiar pull of temptation clashed with the newfound resolve stirring within her. It was a crossroads moment, one that could define the course of her immediate future. With her intuition on high alert, She knew that the decision she was about to make could be a turning point, for better or worse. The sense of foreboding that had accompanied her since the park seemed to crescendo at this moment, urging her to choose her path wisely.

The dealer's shout broke through the morning air, reaching Angela with an unsettling familiarity.

"Hey, Angela!"

His voice carrying a casualness that belied the complexity of their relationship.

'Shit, he's seen me. Fuck it,' Feeling the walls of her resolve beginning to crumble, her mind raced with panic, she glanced to the footpath.

"Hey Angela, Oi, over here. Haven't seen you for a while. Come on over, I've got some specials just for you,"

His tone a mix of friendliness and sly business.

"Hi... yeah, though it's bit early for this bird! Isn't it?"

"Not really, darl. You're just up earlier than usual. Did you shit the bed or what?"

"Ha, Ha, you're hilarious. Can't a girl take an early morning walk without being hassled? By the likes of you/"

"Ange' stop yelling across the street. Come here, I've got something to tell you,"

"Yeah, sure, mate. I don't need anything," she lied.

Mal McCullough

Her mind screaming in contradiction. 'If I don't get a hit soon, I'm going to lose it.'

"Ange', it's me. Come on. Have a freebie, on the house,"

She stood at the corner of the intersection, feeling the sun's intense heat and the growing cacophony of city life around her. Taking a deep breath, she began to cross the road towards the dealer, her steps reluctant but seemingly inevitable.

'How do I get out of this? That young cop was right. I'm too old for this shit,' she thought, with a mixture of desperation and clarity clouding her mind. Standing uncomfortably close to her dealer, her eyes darting around the busy street. The constant fear of the law dictated that one wrong move and everything could come crashing down. She could sense her dealer's unease too as he scanned the area for undercover police. Seizing the moment, she leaned in, her arm casually draped around him, and whispered with a hint of mockery.

"Geez, mate, You never know when those fuckin' narc's are gunna fuck you over., especially with you looking more and more like a 50's gangster with that get-up. Seriously?"

"What the fuckin' hell would you know about fashion, Ange'? Style is style, and you ain't got a fuckin' clue,"

Ignoring his jab, she got straight to the point.

"How much?"

"For you, my sweet, just a low 50," he said.

"Do you have it on you right now?"

He shook his head slightly.

"I'm all out here, but I've got plenty back at my place. Just give me a few minutes, and we can head up together,"

“Really? For fuck's sake, what kind of operation are you running here? This is shit. You know better. You're fuckin' with me. Up front bastard or I tell ya I'm walkin'.”

“Bullshit, Ange', you know I have to keep the good gear at home. Fuck you think I'm gunna give it to some low life who wouldn't know shit from clay? Get you arse into gear and come with me, for fuck sake.”

Angela felt trapped in this conversation, a dance she had done too many times before. Part of her wanted to walk away, to take the advice of the young officer and start anew. Yet, the gnawing need inside her made her hesitate. She stood ensnared in the shadows of a conversation too dark and familiar, a haunting dance she had been drawn into countless times before. The deep-rooted, insidious craving clawed at her resolve. The choice was filled with uncertainty and fear. She doubted whether she had the strength to step away from the abyss and choose the road less travelled.

“C'mon then, hurry up, stop fuckin' around let's go.” She said.

As they both neared the imposing three-story red brick apartment block adjacent to the 24-hour petrol station, she inhaled deeply. The urge for the drug was a powerful force, propelling her forward despite her reservations. She was acutely aware of the internal battle raging within her, the desire to escape her current reality clashing with the insistent pull of addiction.

Angela paused, her gaze drifting upward along the daunting stretch of stairs before them. For a fleeting moment, she contemplated turning back, stepping away from the familiar path that led to her own destruction. Yet, the silence between them was heavy with unspoken expectation.

As they stood together, motionless, as seconds stretched into what felt like an eternity. In reality, it was merely half a minute, and they both understood the unchanging script that was about to unfold.

"I don't know, I think I should take a few days off the gear, especially after spending the night in the cells, one more time. I'm thinking I should fuckin' clean up a bit before I can't get up at all," she said

"Really? Earth to Angela. You've been hanging around those parkies too long, girl. You're starting to sound like one of them. Remember where you come from." He said.

"Yeah, I know, but it's something that a young cop said to me this morning. He has started me thinking. Perhaps. Maybe. I'm getting too old to be playin' around and maybe I should start some serious shit at getting it together. Y'now Gabrielle bailed me out, just one more time, this morning. Really, he shouldn't have to continually do that." She said.

"And Jesus walked on water. You can believe in fuckin' miracles if you want. But the reality is Ange' that you are a child of the streets and only the streets can look after, we both know that. All the other fuckers, like that young cop you mention, have only one goal. He wants to fuck you over. He wants to fuck you as much Shadow Creek did. If it's not getting in your pants, its screwing you for your hard earned, and if it's not for that, it's to give them a hard on that their wives can't do anymore. Fuck them Ange', as far as they are concerned, you and I are dead last on their 'care factor meter.'"

His words cut through her like a cold blade, laying bare the painful gap between the life she yearned for and the harsh reality she was living. She stood frozen, her feet rooted at the base of the stairway that stretched upwards before her. It felt symbolic, a representation of her life's journey – fraught with choices and critical junctures, each step a testament to her struggles, each landing a moment to pause and reflect.

With a heavy heart, she began the ascent. At each landing, she paused, not just to catch her breath, but also to grapple with the internal conflict that was tearing at her.

As they walked along the outside corridor toward the dealer's unit, the intimate display of the other tenants' personal laundry hung on the railing felt oddly intrusive. Each item of clothing seemed to tell a story, giving a glimpse into the lives of those who lived behind each door they passed. It was a stark reminder that everyone had their own battles, their own hidden stories.

Reaching the dealer's unit, he opened the door with an air of familiarity and stood aside, gesturing for Angela to enter.

'In you go Ange', age before beauty.'

'Fuck off, we're the same age and you know it, you redheaded fuck.'

She hesitated for a moment at the doorway, taking in the dimly lit interior of the unit. It was a space that promised temporary relief but also represented the chains of her addiction. This moment, standing at the door, was yet another turning point. With each step inside, she would be reaffirming a life she was both bound to and repelled by. It was a choice that came with a heavy price, one that Angela knew all too well, yet in her current state, felt almost powerless to resist.

"You know your way around. There's some beers in the fridge if you want."

"Thanks. I think I'll just have an earl grey tea, please."

"You still like that stuff. Smells like fuckin' flowers for me."

"I suppose it does, suit your personality down pat, ya pansy!"

"Fuck you Ange'. You know where the kettle is."

Angela's footsteps echoed hollowly as she moved towards the stove in the dealer's dingy apartment. The grimy walls and the musty smell of the room closed in on her, heightening the sense of dread that had been her constant companion since she entered. It was a familiar scene, one she had lived

through too many times, yet each occurrence left her feeling more hollow than the last.

As she neared the stove, the dealer's looming presence behind her sent a shiver down her spine. His voice, devoid of any pretense of civility, cut through the silence.

“You know the drill, Ange’. Nothing for fuckin’ nothing. Bend over, bitch,”

He pushed her roughly over the stove, tearing at her clothing with a brutish force. He forced her to bend over the stove, ripped at her panties and forced his way into her body. Her head knocked painfully against the stove's splashback with each of his forceful thrusts. She gripped the door handles of the overhead cupboards, not resisting but resigned to the grim routine. Her thoughts were a mix of resignation and bitter sarcasm, 'Oh, for fuck's sake, could've at least let me have a tea first. Hurry up, you bastard.'

Once he was done, he nonchalantly sat back on one of the stainless steel chairs, casually wiping and adjusting himself. He tossed a small clear plastic bag containing crystals towards Angela. His gesture was dismissive, callous.

“Here, bitch. It's yours. Fuck off,”

Angela, could only muster a weary retort as she gathered her shattered self. She shot back, her voice a mix of anger and deep-seated hurt.

“You’ve always been a cunt, Jimmy. Even when we were kids. Even that day Sarah beat the shit out of me, was your fuckin’ fault, if you’d just shared those lollies, everything would’ve been fine.”

“Fuck off Ange’. I’ve always told you it wasn’t my fault you got a beating by Sarah that day. You were whining about the lollies and wouldn’t give up. What happened was your business not mine. I told you then that one day

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it'll be you begging to get stuff off me and I'm gunna really make you pay for it. And, here we are!"

"Get fucked Jimmy, you were always a bugger, a cunt, you'll take advantage of anyone to get what you want, that day you didn't appear until I made a run for it, thanks for fuck all."

"Ungrateful bitch, you were always off you're fuckin' face with that Aunty of yours, and her home grown weed, you're no fuckin' Angel. Fuck off out of here. See you next week."

Angela's reaction was swift and visceral. With a surge of pent-up anger and desperation, she snatched the bag of drugs from Jimmy's grasp. As she shoved past him, her fist connected with his chest in a punch fueled by years of resentment and pain. Leaning in close, her breath hot against his ear, she hissed a sinister promise,

"That's the last time, Jimmy. You're fuckin' dead to me. Stay the hell out of my life."

She was just about to grasp the door handle and make her escape when the door was violently thrust open from the other side. It swung inward with such force that it sent her stumbling backward, pressing her against the wall, hidden behind the door.

A thunderous male voice shattered the tense silence.

"Hey, you little cunt! Your time's up, we've given you enough chances."

Jimmy, caught off guard, stammered in response,

"Christ, Marius! I thought I had another week. There's some mistake!"

Peering cautiously around the door's edge, Angela's heart pounded as she recognized the large, bald-headed man with a long black beard that brushed his massive Harley-Davidson belt buckle. The terror escalated when

she realized who was with him – the local Mayor, the same man she had turned a trick with in the car park the previous night. In the bearded man's outstretched arm was a huge handgun grip its monstrous barrel trained mercilessly on Jimmy. Before Angela could process the horror of the situation fully, the gun exploded with a deafening roar. The bullet tore through Jimmy's forehead, sending him reeling backward onto the stove. A gruesome spray of blood and brain matter painted the stove, the splash back, and wall in a macabre display, even spraying back towards Angela. Frozen with terror, she tried to make herself as small and silent as possible, praying they wouldn't notice her, less they realize her presence, and spend another bullet on her. 'Just stay still. Don't even breathe 'Fuck. Jesus what! Fuck no, God it's not happening,' she thought frantically, her body trembling uncontrollably. Warm droplets of Jimmy's blood trickled down her forehead, a chilling reminder of the brutality she had just witnessed. Gently she put her back against the wall, ensuring she didn't touch the door. 'Don't move. Stay still.' Keira appeared and calmed her down taking slow inaudible breaths.

Marius chuckled darkly, his laughter echoing with a sinister edge as he and his accomplice, Geoff, turned to leave.

"C'mon Geoff, he's fucked and wont be screwing me around again, the little smart arse cunt."

Keira kept Angela motionless, waiting in the shadows until the sound of the two assassins footsteps faded on the distant landing. She couldn't afford to make a move too soon. As she turned her gaze back to the horrific scene before her, she fought to suppress the gag reflex that threatened to overwhelm her. The taste of bile rose in her throat, a nauseating reminder of the brutality she had just witnessed.

She knew she had to act quickly. Time was of the essence, and lingering in the apartment was a risk she couldn't afford, as the Police would

no doubt be on their way. She spotted the bag of drugs and a stack of cash lying abandoned on the kitchen sideboard. A twisted sense of irony washed over her. 'In the end, Jimmy, it wasn't me who paid the ultimate price. It was always going to be you,' she thought, a grim satisfaction settling over her. Gazing at Jimmy's lifeless body, still bleeding out onto the floor, a cold smile crept across Keira's face. The universe had indeed shifted in a way she hadn't anticipated. Bending down leaning in close towards Jimmy, she whispered to his corpse.

"You won't be missed, Jimmy. The foreboding Angela felt, wasn't for me, it was for you Jimmy. I was meant to be here when you received your final payment, for all the crap you have put her through all her life. You may not have thought of Angela as an Angel, but right here right now. I am very much your Angel. I am your Angel of Death."

Standing over Jimmy, Keira lifted her leg and smashed the heel of her foot into his right cheek. Her voice was steady, a mix of resolve and detachment.

"Cunt."

With that, she quickly scooped up the drugs and cash, stashing them securely in her pockets. Straightening up, Keira took one last look around the grim apartment, the universe had presented her with a gruesome yet clear path, and it was time for Angela – and Keira – to take the first steps towards a new, albeit uncertain, destiny.

Turning and walking from the unit, she waved to the neighbours as they peered from behind the curtains of their windows, she had the knowing that she was safe from Police questioning, as none of them would not have heard or seen anything. For Angela was one of their own.

Geoff

Friends are like stars, you don't always see them but you know they're there.

LIVING ON CHEAP CASK WINE AND TWO MINUTE NOODLES, Angela had slept, in-between day time television, on the couch for nearly two days. Not wanting to return to her unit fearing that the Police or worse, Marius, would be on the hunt for her. It had been three days since she banged on the unit door of one of her mates, looking for a shower to scrub her skin raw to rid herself of Jimmy's remains and for a place to finally rest her tired strung out mind and body.

After squeezing the last contents of the cask's silver bladder into her mouth, she threw it to the back of the couch and sluggishly stood up, checking her pockets and socks for some more cash to replenish her stock. With none to be found she began a systematic check of the unit of all the places where she would stash money if she didn't want anyone to find it. In her third location attempt she found a \$20 note taped to the underside of the Soda Machine maker. 'Fuck Louise, that was too easy'. Leaving a note for her mate Louise that she owed her \$20, she made tentative steps outside the unit. Her radar was doing overtime as she gradually made her way down the outside walkway and down the back stairs. The liquor store was normally only 5 minutes away, however her cautious approach took her journey 15minutes at best as she continually scanned her surroundings. She rushed the last ten

minutes to the automatic glass doors of the store and immediately went to the back against the pallets of carton beer. Slowing her breathing down getting her composure so she could utter at least one sentence, she made her way to the front counter, moving her gaze from the security cameras, the back door, the front door and back again.

Leaving the store with a five litre cardboard cask of cheap red wine weighing heavy in her hand, she stood under the verandah of the store, back to the glass shop front. Not so much as to stay in the shade, but for bit longer to scope the streets for anyone that may be looking to connect her with the topping of Jimmy.

Leaving the shade of the verandah her small black top provided no protection to the hot Queensland sun as it began scorching her arms. While standing at the pedestrian crossing waiting for the many cars crossing to stop and let her across, a large car that she immediately recognized pulled up in the middle of the crossing and the back door swung open. ‘God fuck me not you.’

“C’mon Ange get in quick before some cunt books me for parking here. C’mon haven’t all day, hurry the fuck up, you can bring that Goon Bag with you.’ Marius.yelled

‘I could bolt and try my chances, but he’d fuckin’ catch me later some time, keep the cask, I could bang it over his head if needed.’

“Alright, no need to get your knickers in a knot, I’m coming.” She yelled back.

Slowly moving across to the parked car she cautiously slid into the back seat, placing her cask on the floor between her feet. The door shut and automatically locked her in.

“So, Marius, what do you want, I was just on my way home so haven’t got much time” she said.

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“Just a chat, that’s all. Thought we might have something in common you and I.” he said.

“Really, the only thing we have in common is me giving you head.” She said.

“I understand that there may be more than that Ange, much more, we need to talk a bit. But hey plenty of time for that, I need to go do a couple jobs and meet a few people first, once we do that you and I, my dear, can have a nice little heart to heart.” As he smirked.

Her heart skipped a beat and her hands began to shake. ‘Fuck he’s on to me, one of those pricks at the units, he must have paid them a pretty penny, fuckin’ turn coats.’

“Yeah, sure Marius, whatever you want, I’m happy to go for a ride in this nice transport of yours, I’ll just pretend your my chauffeur, off we go James, off we go.” She said.

Hiding her shakes Kiera took her off into a safe place, rested her head back on the rear head rest and stretched out, soaking up the heat that was radiating through the tinted windows. Opening up the cask of wine she drank three large mouthfuls, wincing and gagging at each gulp such was the quality, it helped her calm down and drift off into a much needed sleep, in which she became oblivious to the time or distance that Marius had driven.

Being awoken with a start at the slamming of the drivers door, the rear door opened with Marius standing over her.

“Stay the fuck here and leave the windows up” Marius barked as he slammed the car door.

Not being able to see much through the dark tint on the windows, Angela could just make out a large white limousine parked out the front of a large rotting wooden sliding door of a warehouse. She opened the rear window

only so slightly to gain a better view of where she was. Immediately assaulting her senses was the salt of the ocean, the stench of rotting fish and the oil from the large tankers tied up to the wharf. Though strangely she could also recognise the aromatic smell of the spices that were packed in large hessian bags inside the warehouse.

Squinting her eyes she could just make out and recognise two of the men standing just inside the doorway, in the cavernous space. One she knew immediately as Sargent Fletcher, she groaned at the site of him. The other, a tall skinny man with a small grey moustache, in a very well tailored suit and tie. It took her a little while, then it came to her in a flash. Fuck, I've seen him on the news on tele', what's his name, who the fuck is he?

Before she realized what she was doing, she quietly opened the rear door of the Mercedes, slid out of the leather seat and stood towards the rear of the car. Slowly and gently closing the door so it wouldn't click. Deliberately walking on the sides of her shoes, she crept slowly and quietly to the edge of the large sliding door, making sure she didn't lean against it to alert those inside to her presence. Don't move, don't move, if they see you your fucked, don't move, just like at Jimmy's place, be still.

Peering between the gap between the door and wall of the building she could see the three men standing facing each other. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the large space her focus became sharper as she witnessed Marius handing over large amounts of cash, all \$100 notes to the tall skinny man.

"Firstly Marius, let me congratulate you on your re-election to this great city shithole, I expect our relationship to blossom further now we've helped you keep the dizzy height of power", Said the skinny man.

"Thank you, I am sure that there are many more beneficial projects that both yourself and I can be working on for the benefit of the citizens of

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this great City,” Marius replied.

“However, Marius, don’t be under any delusion that there isn’t a price to be paid for going outside our rules. It’s going to personally cost you a great deal more to make this one disappear. You blowing away that little no body scumbag is by far the stupidest thing I’ve heard of this year, hey Fletch?” He said.

“Yep, I’m sure my friend here will keep us entertained, and we’ll be talking about it for a long time to come.” Sargent Fletcher said.

“Now, Fletch here tells me his got this under control and that the Criminal Investigation boys are organizing a fix for your little misdemeanor. Now the boss is not wanting to know anything about this, she needs to be at arms length with plausible deny ability.” Said the skinny man.

“You tell the Premier.” Marius began

The skinny man leaned into Marius’ face and began yelling and spraying spittle,

“I’ve fuckin’ told you, you stupid cunt Marius, never to use anyone’s title, it’s a sure fire way in getting your fuckin’ head blown off. You’re not learning, are you? Got it Dickhead! Sometimes I wonder why I wasted so much hard cash on getting you re-elected” The skinny man yelled.

Moving back from Marius the skinny man outstretched his right hand and softly placed it on Marius’ left shoulder.

“Now listen here my friend, Fletch and I go back a long way, hey Fletch?” said the skinny man.

“Sure do Johnno’, sure do. See Marius, back in the day, Johnno and I went through the Academy together, Geez, that’s been near 40 years. Now, just because he’s the Chief Commissioner, doesn’t mean that he and I aren’t still joined at the hip. You get my drift Marius? You need to remember your

place in the food chain, my friend, and you need to be sure you follow the rules. And your little stunt getting Geoff to top Jimmy, for fuck sake just after the election, has certainly got the wrong people looking in the right direction. Got it, my friend?" he said.

Angela froze, sweat running down her temples and the nape of her neck, she started to shake, uncontrollably fearing they would hear her shaking against the outside wall. Fuck, now I remember who he is, he's the fuckin' Police Commissioner, Johnson, and Fletcher's up to his eyeballs with him. Fuck Ange, thought Kiera, you've gone and got yourself well and truly over your head now girl. Get back in the car, slowly, now, go on now, for fuck sake Ange get back in the car. As Kiera slowed down the panic and took control, she stepped side ways slowly back against the outside of the building 'till she was opposite the Mercedes, she inched across to the car, open the rear door and slid into the seat, closing the door silently and putting up the window. The moment the window closed, all three men appeared out of the building, shaking hands and nodding heads. The Police Commissioner playfully slapped both sides of Marius' face, leant forward and gave Marius a kiss on the forehead. As he was leaning forward to Marius, Angela notice a slight but perceptible nod of the head and closing of his eyes to someone who was still in the warehouse. Sargent Fletcher opened the drivers side door of the Limousine and took up his position behind the steering wheel, and the Chief Commissioner strode confidently around and hopped into the passenger side. They drove off slowly around the front of the warehouse and disappeared. As Marius approached his Mercedes, Angela again started to sweat and shake, she lay down across the back seat and curled in the fetal position, hands over her head and eyes closed. 'Now fuckin' stay here Ange, he'll think you have been here all along, keep your head down, eyes shut. Marius violently swung opened the drivers door and slumped on the seat so hard it shook the car. He sat there silent but with very deep breaths as if trying to calm himself, for

what for Angela seemed an eternity, saying nothing, not moving, both hands on the steering wheel. She could just see him squeezing the top of the steering wheel off and on so hard it squeaked each time he squeezed. Erupting into a fit of rage, he began banging the steering wheel with his fists over and over.

“Fuck you cunts, Fuck you cunts. This isn’t the last you’ve heard from me. How fuckin’ dare you threaten me you pricks. It’s a two way street cockheads, you are much bigger fish than the Crime Commission will love, don’t you forget that you dirty rotten fucks.” He screamed.

The rear window of the Mercedes exploded into shards of glass that sprayed throughout the cabin of the vehicle, covering Angela from head to toe. The shotgun blast immediately deafened her. Loud ringing began in her ears. She shook uncontrollably and lost control of her bladder. The smell of the spent shotgun cartridges searing into her nose. The rear passenger door next to her head slowly opened. She felt someone grab the back of her shirt.

“No, No, I didn’t see anything, I’ve been here all the time. I’ve been here all the time. Please, Please, No.” She pleaded.

“C’mon girly out you get, you don’t want to be lying in that for too long do you?” A soft spoken male voice said.

Sobbing loudly, her nose ran like a tap, gasping for breath with a loud wheez, she remained in the fetal position with her arms covering her head.

“No. No. I promise, I’ve been here all the time.”

“C’mon now, you need to get out of there, we need to make a move, you’ll be fine.” the voice said with a sense of urgency.

“What do you mean ‘we’, make a ‘move’, where?, be fine be fucked. No, No, your just fuckin’ with me.” She pleaded.

She felt a strong tug as the male’s grip on the back of her top tightened and started dragging her out of the car. Realising resisting would

only make things a lot worse, she allowed him to slowly slide her along the back seat. Moving her hands from her face she began to look around, wishing she hadn't. Through the two front bucket seats she could see what was Marius, was slumping forward onto the steering wheel, with what remained of his head spread across the front dashboard instrument panel and inside windscreen. She began to gag and dry reach then projectile vomited her red wine stomach contents to mix with some of the remains of Marius' head dripping from the top of the front seat.

She fell face first onto the hard, sun beaten sticky hot tarmac of the wharf which started burning her face and arms. Flipping her over on her back, a tall large bald male towered over her. The large brass 'Harley' belt buckle reflecting the sun's rays into her eyes that half blinded her, though she could still recognize the long black beard and tattooed bald head. 'Shit, he's the prick that blew Jimmy away, Geoff'.

She was immediately taken back to when she was hiding behind the door at Jimmys, the noise, the gore, how petrified she was that she would be found. 'I fuckin' knew they'd find me, shit.'

"Fuck you're a mess girl, c'mon I said, we have to make a move, get up now, c'mon, c'mon" He said.

Pulling her up by the grip that he had on her top and now grabbing the belt of her jeans, he stood her up, dragged her around to the rear and leaning her against the back of the Mercedes. Gaining some sense of orientation to where she was, the ringing still in her ears, she felt multiple pieces of glass in her hair, large tracks of blood and gore over her right side, her crotch and top of her thighs wet from her urinating from fright, red wine stains over the front of her top from her vomiting. She shook her head, and closed her eyes in disbelief that again she been front and centre of a gangland shooting. She turned to face the rear windscreen as she smelt acrid smell of

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petrol, she could easily see into the vehicle through the large hole that had been blown out by both barrels of a shotgun. Geoff was throwing fuel from a metal can all through the vehicle and over what was left of Marius. He threw the can onto the front seat and then made his way back to Angela, grabbing her by the back of the jeans pulling her with him. When they were about 10 metres away, they turned, he lit a large old style metal cigarette lighter and threw at the Mercedes, it hit the boot lid and bounced inside the blast hole of the rear windscreen. The Mercedes erupted into fire, the blast pushed both Angela and Geoff back another metre to escape the heat and flame.

“Now it’s really time to go. Quick now, around the back of the building” Geoff implored her.

(continue this with discussion between both and more Geoff background and why he is helping her)

Macca

It's your plan to commit, that will commit you to the plan.

STANDING TALL WITH AN IMPOSING STATURE, Macca, Angela's Probation Officer, carried the weight of his years with an air of authority.

His physique, though slightly overweight, exuded a sense of strength and resilience. The remnants of greying hair clung to his scalp, a testament to the battles fought and the wisdom gained. His most striking feature was his piercing blue eyes, windows to a soul that had weathered life's storms. Behind the soft-spoken demeanor lay a depth of experience and a quiet strength that demanded respect. His voice carried the weight of authority, an embodiment of the tough decisions and unwavering resolve that defined his character. As a figure of consequence in Angela's life, Macca's character unfolded beyond the physical attributes, embodying a wisdom that came with navigating the rough terrain of existence, a testimony to a life lived in the raw authenticity of the world.

A week after breaching her bail conditions of having to report to the Police, her probation officer tracked her down to the small one bedroom unit where she had been keeping low and out of the way.

“Why in the fuck have you been avoiding me Ange?”.

“Oh for fuck sake Macca, if you'd been livin' in my skin for the past

week you'd be hiding too. How in the fuck did you find me?"

"Thank fuck those parkies didn't take too much of the folding gear to give you up, a quick \$50 to one and you were done girl. And, thank fuck I don't know what goes on inside that skull of yours. It looks messy enough on the outside let alone who knows what goes on between your ears. It's been fuckin' crazy this week, especially with Jimmy meeting his maker and that corrupt cunt Mayor Marius Kakourgos getting his fuckin' head blown off down at the wharf. Everyone's gone to ground, its quiet as hell. Best rest I've had for a while."

"What you talkin' about Macca? You do nothin' but rest, I'd do your job standing on one leg. Anyway what about Jimmy? What's up with that little shit now, and what are you talking about with the Mayor?"

"C'mon Ange, surely you of all people know that Jimmy copped it sweet in his digs the other day. They say it was as if someone had spread spaghetti bol' around his unit, and the Mayor gets his brains spread across his dashboard and barbequed for good measure. Seems a bit of a coincidence that Jimmy and the Mayor get whacked the same time you disappear off the radar. Where in the fuck have you been girl, what have you been up to? You can't go more than a day without scoring and with Jimmy laid out in the morgue, who you been getting' the gear off?"

"Bullshit Macca, for fuck sake lay off the hundred questions. I just seen him a couple of days ago and he didn't seem as though he had pissed anyone off, just the annoying little asshole he always was, and all I can remember of Kakourgos is giving him head in the back of his Merc' not so long ago, from what I hear he was well overdue to be taken out."

"Well, Ange it seems that Jimmy has pissed off the wrong people. Looks like it was a proper hit, nice and clean between the eyes. Though a mate in the Coppers tells me that whoever did it gave him a good smack in the face

for good measure, cause he's cheek was smashed in too."

"That doesn't surprise me, given the prick he was."

"I heard that you and he knew each other since you were kids, is that right?"

"Yeah, the little prick used to give me the shits all the time and when I was taken away from my Step Mother and put in an institution, we lost touch, thank fuck for that. Up until we banged into each other a couple of years ago down at City Station. I was sitting at the entrance trying to get a bit of coin together hustling, when he rocks up, the rest is history."

"They tell me you and him were close of recent times and that you met him down the near the city central before he met his maker."

"What the fuck Macca, you a Copper or something? That little prick was only good for one fuckin' thing. That's to get me my gear each week. What the fuck he got up to beyond that. And cause I let Kokourgos slide his sausage down my throat now and again, don't mean I know why some cunt would want to separate his head from his body, and barbeque him. None of my business."

"Hey hold on. I'm on your side Ange, I'm just giving you the heads up that the Coppers are all over this and with you being linked to Jimmy and the Mayor, is gunna keep you in their spotlight. Whether you like it or not. Keep your head down girl, is all I'm saying."

"What the fuck do you think I'm doing being here, but someone, like you, keeps wanting to let the world know where I am."

"Well, I've got a good option for you. Either you agree to the assessment I've organized at the hospital to do the detox then off to the Rehab, or, I'll have you off to be with your favourite licker in B Block before you can fuckin' blink, now get your fuckin' arse into gear and outa this shit

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hole. Once you finish the detox, I don't give a fuck what you tell the rehab, those dumb cunts will believe anything, just get in there, get admitted next week or go up the fuckin' hill."

"You've always had a way with words Macca. Listen, I was just saying to Jimmy, before he copped it, maybe it is about time I started to seriously get it together. Mate, I really am too fuckin' tired for this shit. Seriously, I am really sick and tired of being sick and tired."

"Hint of the day Ange. Don't mention again that you recently met with Jimmy. Your prints are on the unit on the cupboard which places you there at the time he met his maker."

Angela froze, her thoughts rushing through her mind one after another. 'Fuck. They are too. Geez. All's good. Could have been there any time. Fuck, how long do prints last? That's it, I was there the night before. He raped me. Well he fuckin' did. I was hanging on to the cupboards. Yeah, that's it. Shit did I touch anything else? No worry same deal. There the night before. Oh fuck! Fuckin' Fletcher will find out. He'll let the Police Commissioner know I was there. Fuck.'

"All right Macca I'm off. Though, no chance of staying at your place tonight?"

"I fuckin' told you last time Ange, that was the last time. You know I'd lose my job if they found out you were staying over and who would look after you then?"

"C'mon Macca, for old times sake. You know I can keep a secret, just you an' me hey?"

"Ange, you just said you've had enough. Just listen to yourself, this isn't someone who really wants to give up."

"Macca, I really do, its Angela that doesn't." said Kiera.

ANGELA

Detox

ANGELA HAD BEEN LIVING ON PRESCRIBED DRUGS, to ensure her addictions to both drugs and alcohol didn't cause her body to crash and put her life in danger. Moving into her second day of admission at the Hospital Detox Unit, when she began to gain some clarity of time and place. Though during those two days she was aware that all was not right in her treatment by the staff at the 'detox unit'.

In Bed drugged up, in semi conscious state in a single room, night shift

Angela asleep

"hmm you smell so good"

Feeling presence of someone

Goes to safe place

Freezing – scared

Feels touching

Smells stale smoke

Smells stale alcohol

Forces himself inside her

As the fog lifted from the drug induced state she became more aware, feeling the stickiness between her legs she began to remember perverted way with her drug induced unconscious body had been abuse by one or more male orderlies. The abuse was always in the privacy of the one to one so there were no witnesses to this criminal bastardry.

Not only was she becoming fully aware of the abuse perpetrated on her but also the very real physical effects of her detox', the headaches, the shakes, the diarrhea, she was gaining clarity of being subjected to the demeaning nature of detox' staff, with their snide judgments verbally and physically abusing her. 'Junkie shithead'. They would whisper to her.

"Morning bitch." said the male nurse upon entering her room.

"Mornin' she replied.

"So how's my favourite slut this morning?"

"Hmm. What? How's who? Sorry its these drugs, they fuck me up.

As the Nurse leant forward to whisper his usual vile in her ear she grabbed him by the back of the neck and crashed her forehead into his nose, pushing him back with all her force. Leaping from her bed she pushed him against the wall. With her left hand squeezing his crotch. Her right hand grabbed his pen from his shirt pocket and pressed it up against his carotid artery.

"Don't you bitch me, cunt. Don't move or yell out or your fucked. Feel that against you neck? You move and its going straight into your artery. You'll bleed out before anyone can get to you. Understand?" she whispered in his ear.

The Nurse nodded his head in agreement and stood still against the wall.

“We’re not going to report you, you bastard, you’re not worth wasting our oxygen. Don’t you ever touch Angela again. You sanctimonious fucking prick, with your holier than thou fuckin’ attitude. Turning up to work with hangovers, off your face. Lecturing her on the values of abstinence. We’ll have our day. You’ll get yours. Cunt. Now, understand this. You will receive what’s coming, that we promise. You won’t know when or where, but you’ll know when it’s happenin’. Got it?” she warned.

He nodded his head again. Confused with her use of the third person when speaking about herself. Sweat streaming from his forehead, his body beginning to shake.

“You fuckin’ tell anyone what’s happening right now, I promise you. We’ll make sure that when you do get fucked up, it will be slow, very slow. You’ve heard of our mates, the Scorpions? Do you know why they’re called Scorpions? Because Scorpions kill spiders. And you, dickhead, are one big hairy rock spider. One word from us and you’re fucked. Get it?” she warned again.

He nodded agreement. Wondering who the person was in front of him that had him bailed up against the wall. It was certainly Angela in front of him but it wasn’t her that was speaking. She let go of his crotch and slowly, deliberately put the pen back in his pocket.

“Now go and be a good boy and arrange for Angela’s discharge.” She demanded.

Slapping him across the face, she turned and lay back on her bed, turned on her side and went to sleep.

(More of being in detox- leaving detox calling Rehab – using again meets Young Policeman on Street – he takes her to Rehab)

Pay The Rent

'Don't let them take rent if your head.'

'DON'T LET THEM TAKE RENT IN YOUR HEAD.' Angela repeated over and over as she sat on the chocolate material covered lounge of the community room. The morning rehab' community meeting had just begun.

After three weeks of struggling with her demons she had reached the stage of feeling good, her physical health was improving as witnessed by the return of a healthy glow about her skin. She had begun to sleep much better, now she was getting 4 hours straight before waking up and her appetite had returned to some degree.

"Ok Aaron, do you want to share this morning?" asked Rob who was taking the morning group.

"Sure Rob, as I've said before, I no longer want to glorify my drug use, my gambling addiction and the lifestyle I had. I would lie and cheat, beg or borrow and take from my family and friends, just to feed by selfish habits. I was a con man, with the reasons for needed money-support getting bigger and bigger. I could sell sand to the middle east. I now realise that I was the selfish bastard and did heartless disgusting things. Now I am clean for two months I look back and am ashamed of myself and what I did to others. I lost my family, my job and my friends. All the time I used

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to blame them for things going wrong in my life, I took no responsibility. I thought my wife was a bitch for leaving me and taking the kids. I realise now I lost not only her love but the kids as well. I treated them like shit and preferred to be on the chase instead of being with them. I have made a clear and utter consistent pledge that today I take responsibility for what I have done and am committed to make my life from here on dedicated to my family.”

“Ange, you with us. Ange it’s your turn.” said Rob.

“What, oh yes, sorry, I was just thinking” She said.

“What you thinkin’ bout girl?” said Rob.

“It’s probably about time enough for me. I’ve gotten the rest I needed. I reckon I’m strong enough now to tell those energy suckers out there to go take a flying fuck, if they think I’m gunna get back on the gear.” Said Angela.

“So you think you are strong enough to say ‘no’ and that after 30 years of struggling with your demons that three weeks is all it takes?”

“Well, they reckon I couldn’t do it, well fuck them, their not gunna take rent in my head, I’m not gunna worry what those dickheads say, I can’t control them.” She replied.

“So, Ange, who is, they?”

“All those pricks that reckon I was too weak to give this a go and get clean,”

“So, and all those pricks are, who?”

“Well, you fuckin’ know all those dickheads who try to take rent in your head and start you disbelieving in yourself, that’s who, too many to name them.”

“So all these, others, are the crabs in the bucket trying to pull you back

ANGELA

in.”

“Fuck yeah.”

“So, if all these, others, are taking rent in your head and pulling you back in the bucket and you believe their all wrong, then what do you think they will say when you leave here after only three weeks?”

“I don’t give a fuck what they think.”

“Great, so what do you think then?”

“Think about what?”

“You wanting to leave after only three weeks. Are you sure you’re not the crab pulling yourself back in the bucket?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because it’s not you that’s doing the thinking, it the addiction speaking to you. Remember what action we take when we start thinking we are ok and have this thing beaten?”

“Yeah, I know. ‘First Thought Wrong’.

“And, if you say that to yourself, where do you end up?”

“Time to move to some-one else now Rob.”

“OK, sure perhaps we can have a chat later over a cuppa.”

“Yeah, perhaps.”

“Ok, everyone, lets be back here at 1030” said Rob

The morning meeting broke up with all the residents heading off to clean rooms, have breakfast and undertaking their community chore of the morning. Angela just sat on the lounge, taking deep breaths, calming herself down and resisting the urge to get up and pack her bags. ‘If only they knew why I was really here. If it wasn’t for Macca giving me the heads up the

Mal McCullough

Coppers would have well and truly pinged me by now and given me over to the Chief Commissioner. It's not the dickheads out there taking the rent, it's the pictures of Jimmy and Marius being wasted, I can't get their poor old mush for brains out of my head. I'm not going fuckin' anywhere. The last thing I need is Fletcher and Geoff knockin' on my door.'

"You comin' Ange, I'm fuckin starving." Yelled Steve

"Yep sure mate, won't be long, just gettin' my thoughts together, be with you in a bit." she replied.

Breakfast was always best at the large wooden table outside that sat under the huge mango tree that Angela first seen from her second story window. Four of the residents made sure that every morning they would gather at the table and have breakfast of cereal, eggs and bacon. A routine that was missing in their life on the outside.

"Tell you what Steve, I really love this time of year, mornings are great." Angela offered.

"You wouldn't have said that three weeks ago Ange." said Steve.

"100 per cent." She replied

"I tell you Ange, you looked sick as, when you first got here. Geez girl I thought you were gunna peg out on us that first time you came down those stairs." said Brian

"To be honest Brian, I felt like death warmed up. If you had given me any reason, what so ever, I would have shot through from here in the blink of an eye." she said.

"Fuck girl I could tell that. But, hey you've got through the first set of three," Simone offered.

"The what?"

“The set of three.”

“And what the fuck is the set of three? Hand over the sauce mate will ya?”

“You don’t know the set of three?”

“If I knew do you think I’d be askin’ ya?”

“It’s the times that most people will fuck off from rehab. The first three hours, the first three days, the first three weeks and the first three months. If you get through each of those your chance of coming out the other side increases at each step.”

“We’ll I’ll be fucked. So that’s what been at me this week, it’s my first three weeks.” ‘Bullshit, I’m not goin’ anywhere, as long as Fletcher doesn’t know where I am.’

“Yep, no doubt that’s it girl. You just hang in there. Remember we are all in this together, so anytime you just call out and we’ll help you through the ‘first thought wrong’. I think we can all help you beat this thing.” Aaron said.

“Well Aaron, tell you what, your thoughts are an uncommunicable product of your mind and does you no good at all, best not to do it, they’ll only cause you extreme perplexity and strain.” Angela said. ‘I’m not giving you the time of day in letting you into my life you old drunk cunt.’

“You know Ange’, I really think that you will make a real go of this and be one of our success stories.” said Simone.

“You know, ‘mone, I think your right, I reckon I will be.” ‘In more ways than you can think of. I’ve survived this long without you wankers, there is no doubt I can get through the rest of this shithole life without you being the Angel on my shoulder.’

“I reckon I might miss the rest of today, got a headache, gunna go lay

Mal McCullough

down in my room for the rest of the day, bit stressed from this morning's session with Rob. Can you let him know. Sorry guys, must be part of the three week thingy. Catch you later, hey." Angela said.

"Yeah sure, and his gunna believe that then is he?" said Simone.

"I really don't care what that poofter says, if I'm sick, I'm sick and get him to prove otherwise." Replied Angela as she turned a began walking away.

"I really don't think he's a poofter Ange, and you really need to be careful about dealing with him cause he can have you thrown out of here in a heartbeat." Cautioned Aaron.

Kiera stopped Angela in her tracks and very so slowly turned to Aaron, squinted her eyes and creased her forehead. Leaning close to him her nose only centimeters from his she spoke in a hushed raspy voice.

"To be honest Aaron, I don't care if he fucks goats, he is a very little cog in the very big world that I'm part of and he will play to my tune. What you guys don't understand is that we create our own reality, and that we also create how we wish others to perceive us, therefore, if you're not getting the right answer, you're asking the wrong question. You all think you have any understanding of what is going on around you, the fact is you only have an illusion of understanding, which I can tell you my friend, that this illusion you carry, is far more rich and varied than actual reality, you my friend, have an understanding of much less than you think. Your mind fills the gaps in what your senses miss in an attempt to make sense of your reality, and you, my friend, don't know what you don't know. You see a world that you think you understand very well, in reality, you don't. You, all live, in a collective delusion of which I will not be drawn into. I experienced that once and I refuse to live it again. We are born to be exactly who we were born to be. To be us. We are the total sum of all of our experiences and choices and, no matter where you go, there you are, until you are no more. As your preordained existence falls

ANGELA

away it leaves an exposed raw nerve of reality, the realisation that the missing piece you had been searching for was right in front of you all along, your own mortality.”

We understand much less than we think.

Sex in the Hab

Grooming In The Hab

Sex in the hab with worker

Working grooming over time

Secrets

Workers contracting other workers for silence

Party At Workers Home

Other workers present

Grog

Drugs

Sex

Angela in attendance

2 other residents in attendance

Morning group

Out of sorts

Feelings and meditation

ANGELA

Feeling cards

Monkey Mind

Ruminating thoughts

Boundaries-

-Relationships with staff-

Group – meetings –

Sex in the The Hab –Confessions

Back Cover

Addiction is a creature of darkness, full of monsters and void of happiness. An evil enemy of righteous souls which embodies a greater, darker and sinister meaning of a private yet communal truth. The small rural Australian town in which Angela lives, though seemingly idyllic on the surface, harbors secrets that fester beneath the veneer of community life that is enmeshed within a collective delusion that becomes a suffocating force, trapping Angela in a web of distorted realities. Unaware of the cosmic forces at play, Angela descends into a tumultuous existence, beneath a carefully constructed façade, seeking solace in the numbing embrace of substances and the fleeting comfort of destructive relationships.