

TRES CROW



THE
SISTERS

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**TRES
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Constant
READERS

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

*This book is dedicated to my sister and my mother for
a lifetime of understanding, compassion, and
patience.*

*And to my incredible wife, Olivia, for being my guiding
light and constant support.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am not a woman. I have never been sexually assaulted. While I'm not sure that it's necessary for an author to have experienced the things he writes about in his books, I feel it's necessary to address the obvious elephant in the room.

I am not a woman. I have never been sexually assaulted.

Nevertheless, I started *The Sisters* four years ago, at a time in my life when I could hardly be said to be *woke* with regard to women's issues. Sure, I voted blue, I believed in a woman's right to choose, I agreed with smashing the glass ceiling, and any number of feel-good feminism-lite cultural memes. I was a "good" liberal man.

Clearly that was not, and is not, enough. As #MeToo swept across the cultural landscape, I watched shocked

and embarrassed as nearly every woman in my life stood up and told story after story of abuse, harassment, embarrassment, and pain. I went through all the stages of white male grief. I was surprised, then I was defensive, then I was angry, then sad, and then finally I realized I should just shut up and listen. So I did.

And what I learned was that I really had no idea what was going on around me. I had spent a lifetime around amazing, brilliant women, whom I loved, cherished, and respected, yet I knew almost nothing of their actual lived experience. Ultimately, I was ashamed that I'd lived for so long in a comfortable, privileged bubble. I vowed to do better, and to never stop listening.

About 6 months ago, I found the manuscript for *The Sisters*, long abandoned in the proverbial drawer when I couldn't find a suitable ending to the story. As I reread it, and made some light edits, I suddenly knew exactly how to end it, and I felt an urgency to get the thing done and out of me. But once I had the finished product in front of me, I became afraid that it wasn't my story to tell. How could I, a white, cis-het male who's never experienced a tenth of the pain these characters feel, tell this story?

It's a good question, and the sort of question artists should be asking far more than we do these days. With so many great women authors and so many stories to tell, it's long past time to make room at the table for writers of every background. I suspect a better writer, one with more direct experience, could have done more with these characters, and with this story, but for whatever reason I'm the one who dreamed it up. I'm the one who gave it shape and brought it into this world, and I'm the one who's putting it to print and giving it over to you, dear reader, to judge and criticize, and hopefully find in it some kind of joy.

I hope I've done these characters justice, and that I've honored the spirit of #MeToo and #TimesUp. To the millions of brave women who've stood up to tell their stories, be counted, and who are working toward a just, and more honorable society, I want you to know that I see you, and I believe you.

The future is female. Women rule the world. And in the immortal words of Ariana Grande, “You’ll believe God is a woman.”

If that’s true, then we’re in good hands.

Tres Crow
Atlanta, GA
November 2, 2018

The
SISTERS

COLUMBIA STREET

{42°20'15.6"N, 83°03'11.9"W}

When the screaming started, the little ones huddled close to Wendy, their grubby faces pressing against her thin chest. She held out her hands and hugged them as best she could, but there were ten of them. There was only so much of her to go around.

“Pay no attention, ladies,” she whispered over and over. She knew what they felt like. She’d once been tiny and scared too.

In the next room over she could hear the sounds of the older girls playing cards and board games, smoking cigarettes, laughing, the types of sounds you’d expect from 40 or so girls staying up late with no adult supervision. For a moment Wendy wished she could be in the big room with them, but she pushed the thought away. Someone had to take care of the little ones. Someone had to teach them not to be afraid.

The John upstairs howled for a long time, until eventually he let out a long and loud squeal, his voice rising until it was almost inaudible, a dog whistle of pain. Then everything was silent. Wendy waited a moment to make sure the Sisters were done, gave the little ones a quick, hard squeeze, and then let them go. She stood.

“See?” she said, looking in each of their faces. “Nothing to be afraid of. The Sisters love and protect us. Now go to sleep. You need to get some rest. Tomorrow is your planting.”

She blew out the candles on the windowsill, then went to the door and turned out the light, pausing in the doorway.

“Miss Wendy? Have you ever seen the Sisters?” asked a small voice from the gloom.

“No one’s ever seen them...except the Johns,” replied Wendy, though that wasn’t entirely correct. “It’s better that way. If you need anything, I’ll be in the big room. Go to sleep.”

* *

The big room was aptly named. It was a big room that occupied nearly the entire 9th floor of the abandoned hotel the sisterhood had made their home. Wendy stepped carefully among the tight rows of cots and mattresses and potted plants that littered the floor. The air was thick with cigarette and pot smoke, diffusing the candle flames so that the very air seemed alive with an orange beating heart.

“The little ones asleep?” asked Daisy sullenly from a few rows over, a cigarette dangling from her thin lips.

“Not yet,” replied Wendy.

Wendy leaped over a mattress and flopped onto her bed, where Aurora leaned with her back against a radiator, playing solitaire and twirling her hair. Aurora looked up briefly and then frowned back down at her game. Her hair was long and blond and would have been beautiful if she didn’t twirl and twist it all the time until it was frayed at the ends. It was a habit she’d had as long as Wendy had known her, something Aurora had picked up during her long journey from California. Aurora didn’t talk much about those 3 months, only that it wasn’t much fun.

“The Sisters took a long time tonight,” said Aurora without looking up. “It’s been so long between Johns; they

probably wanted to savor things.” She moved a pile, then paused, moved it back. She frowned and considered for a moment. “Or maybe I’m just losing the thread.”

Wendy shrugged, and leaned forward, pointed out a move for Aurora. “Yeah, it seems like they’re taking longer lately.”

Aurora didn’t answer, but asked instead, “You going out tonight?”

“No.”

“You can’t stay in here forever. Snow White’s been asking about you.” Aurora waited to see if Wendy would respond, and when she didn’t, she added, “You’re so good with the little ones, Wendy, but there’s other work to be done. Planting time is here.”

Wendy looked over at her own plant, a curved white orchid that was white with purple stripes.

“Planting time...”

“It’s been three months, and we have 10 little ones already.”

“If I could do it again, I’d pick something prettier...like a hydrangea or something,” said Aurora, looking over at her stubby cactus plant.

Wendy smiled, “But the cactus is so easy to take care of.”

“Yeah,” said Aurora absently, dealing herself a King of Hearts. “I suppose.”

* *

Daisy snuffed out her cigarette and stood up on her mattresses, wobbling a little as the blood rushed from her head into her feet. She pulled down her patent leather skirt and straightened her push up bra. Her twiggy legs poked out of her skirt like the two sticks of a Popsicle. She slid on her high-heels and snapped her fingers at a few of the girls sitting around her.

“Who’s going out tonight?” she shouted. “Snow White? How many we need?”

Snow White was lying in her bed in the far corner, with her back turned to the room, reading a book about insects

she'd found in a dumpster three days ago. She didn't look up from her book. She didn't respond. Her long hair fanned out over her shoulders and hid her face.

"Snow!" shouted Daisy. "Sleeping beauty! How many we need tonight!?"

Snow White waited a beat and then held up four fingers, flipped a page in the book. Daisy pointed at the girl nearest her.

"Alice, get up! Nala! You're coming too! Wendy!" shouted Daisy over the noise of the room. "Wendy, time for you to get off your ass and get out there. The Sisters are watching."

Wendy froze, and stared intently at Aurora's game of solitaire.

"She's got the little ones tomorrow for the planting," said Aurora. "Pick someone else."

"No way. Miss Neverland ain't left the big room in a week," said Daisy. "She's coming tonight."

"She's needed tomorrow..." started Aurora, but Snow White had sat up and pushed her dark hair back over her ears. She looked over at Wendy and then at Aurora, her eyes so dark they looked black in the candlelight. Her lips were pressed together, purpling the scar stitched across her face. Wendy's cheeks got red and she stared harder at Aurora's cards.

"Daisy, watch how you use the Sisters," said Snow White, never taking her eyes off Wendy. "They *are* watching, and not just Sister Wendy. They're watching all of us."

Snow White went back to her book, and her hair fell back into place, creating a screen around her face and the book. Wendy stood up and shifted her short skirt, trying to make the thin bit of clothing into enough to cover her legs. She covered her bare stomach with a thin arm and pushed her hair over her ears.

Aurora grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze, "I'm sorry."

"Fuck it," shouted Daisy. "Let's go."

The four girls headed to the elevator, Wendy trailing a few feet behind the others. When the doors opened,

Wendy hung behind until Daisy grabbed her wrist and pulled her in the car. Before the doors shut, Aurora could see Wendy's face in the mirrored walls. Her lips were pursed, her eyes closed as though she was praying.

It was November in Detroit. It was bitterly cold, though no snow had fallen yet that year. The girls clacked down the empty sidewalk, Daisy in the lead, her hips moving from side to side, pulling her skirt higher and higher until her red underwear shone beneath. Alice tried to fix it from behind, but Daisy slapped her hand away.

"Leave it alone! I wanna get this over with," said Daisy. "It's cold as fuck out here."

They walked for several blocks away from downtown, until the buildings started to grow smaller and sparser. There were fewer windows, more boards, more broken glass on the sidewalks. None of the streetlights worked, but the moon was full and the sky clear, bathing the black top and sidewalks with a blue pale glow, turning the broken glass into a second sky.

Daisy stopped when she got to a corner that had three empty lots adjacent to one decrepit warehouse. There was only one door to the building that hadn't been bricked over and it was faded, peeling blue wood. Chains and a padlock kept the doors shut.

"Alright, this is far enough," said Daisy. "I'll be here. Alice, you go over to that corner. Nala, you go one block down that way. And Wendy, go sit in that field and fuck a pop bottle for all I care."

The girls split up. Wendy headed over to the field, but instead of sitting, she loitered on its edges. She didn't have to do what Daisy said. The sisterhood had no bosses, no authority structure. Wendy didn't know the word for what they were, but no one was above anyone else, save the Sisters...and Snow White, but that was because Snow White had been around longer than any of the other girls. She was almost 18, almost an adult.

Wendy looked over her shoulder at Daisy smoking a cigarette on the corner and leaning against the building wall, a halo of security light sizzling around her. On the wall behind her someone had tagged the word *duckface*,

which Wendy found funny. Wendy meandered down the street, hugging herself, shivering, wishing she'd brought cigarettes of her own, or a book, or anything to pass the time. The other girls thought she was afraid to go out at night—which she was, kind of—but she also couldn't stand the boredom of standing by herself, freezing her ass off, waiting for someone to come along. She was bait and she felt like it, and she hated the feeling. She'd been bait all her life, and though she knew it was for a higher cause, in the end it didn't feel any different. She was still waiting on a street corner. She was still bait.

Headlights flashed behind her and she turned to look, but the car rolled passed them all without slowing down. Wendy was embarrassed by the disappointment she felt.

* *

Wendy was born Natasha Allison Hornbrook, and she was 14 when she came to the sisterhood. Sister Aurora had found her in a dumpster with a broken cheekbone and two of her front teeth knocked out. She'd been unconscious for days and when she'd woken, she couldn't move, and her entire body ached so badly all she could do was mewl into her sprawling arms for hours and hours. She didn't remember much, only the moments before when she'd gone around to the passenger side of the car and she'd heard the driver's door open and the man had charged at her, grabbed her by the back of her neck and slammed her face onto the hood of the car. He'd had very bright teeth, very white. She remembered that. And he'd smelled like sweat. It had been the middle of the day on the street. She remembered that. Everything else was darkness.

Aurora had followed Wendy's crying, thinking it was a cat she could bring back to the sisterhood, but she'd found Wendy instead. She'd pulled her out of the trash and carried her over her shoulders all the way to the hotel. She laid her down on a mattress and she'd made her smoke some pot and gave her aspirin. Wendy slept for three days straight and when she woke, she was sore, but

felt settled in a way she hadn't in years. She ate soup and smoked a lot of pot and she never smiled because of her missing teeth.

Aurora was the one who'd suggested the name Wendy and the Sisters had affirmed it at Wendy's planting. Aurora had meant it as a compliment, a nod to Wendy's naturally curly hair and her open heart, but over time the name became heavier, a pick the meaner girls could use to tap at her, carve her into something they wanted.

Three months into Wendy's stay with the sisterhood, she'd gone out at night, and she'd been on a corner by herself when a car swerved to a stop in front of her. It was dark but she could see the man's teeth shining in the gloom. She couldn't breathe. She leaned back against the chain link fence behind her as his lips moved, as he said something to her. She couldn't understand. She was pinned to the spot, her brain turning over like a dead engine.

Aurora moved in front of her and leaned in the passenger side window.

"You want a two-fer? Pay for one of us, get the other for free?" she said.

The man didn't answer, just unzipped his pants and pulled out his dick. He was already hard.

"Hold yer horses," said Aurora. "Not here. We have a place just down the street. There's even more girls there. Come on. We'll take you."

Aurora turned to look at Wendy and only then did she see how terrified the younger girl looked. Aurora turned to look at the man again and she saw the teeth and she knew. She ducked back in the passenger window.

"You want us or not?"

The man answered by putting his dick back in his pants and nodding. Aurora opened the door and motioned for Wendy to get in the back. She grabbed the younger girl's hand as they got in the car and squeezed.

"You can just park here," said Aurora, motioning to a spot in the empty street in front of the hotel.

The man looked suspiciously at the boarded windows and the faded, tattered awning.

“Here?” he asked.

“It’s private,” said Aurora. “Trust me. There’s lots of girls upstairs. *Young* ones.”

“She coming too?” asked the man, nodding at Wendy in the rear-view mirror.

“Of course, she is.”

The three of them made their way into the lobby and onto one of the elevators. Wendy stood on the other side of Aurora, pressed against the elevator wall. She could smell the stink of him. He leered at her, but he didn’t seem to recognize her. There was a vacancy in his eyes. Aurora touched his thigh and stroked his finger to distract him. She smiled at him, all the while putting her body between him and Wendy.

There was a ding and the door opened onto the 9th floor. They could see the big room across the lobby, where 20 girls mingled on their cots and mattresses. The man peeked in and started to get out, but Aurora pressed a hand to his chest, and reached down and grabbed his crotch in her other. She shook her head.

“Not here,” she whispered to him. “The bedrooms are upstairs. We’ll meet you up there with two more girls. No extra charge.”

The edge of the man’s mouth curled, and Aurora rubbed against him through his pants. He nodded, and she turned, pressed the button for the 11th floor. She motioned for Wendy to get out of the elevator, and she hurried out, putting as much distance between herself and the man as she could. Aurora stepped out of the elevator and turned, smiling at the man as the doors closed. He’d pulled his dick out again and was stroking it. Aurora blew him a kiss.

The girls went to the big room and the two of them sat down on Aurora’s bed. She put her arms around Wendy, and she buried her face into Aurora’s tube top.

When the man started to shriek from the floor above, Wendy sobbed and shook and made uncontrollable noises. She emptied herself onto Aurora’s chest, all the while the older girl just stroked her hair and whispered it was going to be alright.

“You don’t have to worry anymore, Wendy,” she said. “The Sisters will protect you.”

* *

A car pulled up to the curb in front of Daisy, and Wendy watched as she leaned into the passenger window. There were two men in the car, and they smiled at Daisy. Wendy couldn’t hear what she was saying but she could hear the intonation of her voice and even that irritated her. She leaned against the chain-link fence and shivered. At least if Daisy got someone then they could all go home.

Daisy stood up and waved over at Wendy.

“Hey! Heifer,” she shouted. “Get over here!”

Wendy straightened and walked slowly across the street and over to the car. She stood behind Daisy and leaned down so she could see the two men. They were cute in a rough-trodden way. She curled her hair behind her ear and tried to smile.

“Hi.”

“I dunno why but these two wanna get with you,” said Daisy walking back to her wall and lighting up another cigarette.

“You like to party?” asked the driver, leaning over his friend in the passenger seat. “With both of us?”

Wendy shivered and nodded, trying to smile without showing her missing front teeth. She looked back at Daisy. It figured she’d catch some Johns her first night out in weeks. There’d been so few Johns lately, but here she was catching a pair of them.

“How much?” asked the passenger.

“\$10,” said Wendy. “For each of you.” She looked back at Daisy, who was grinning. She turned back to the car. “But I’ll do you both for \$10 if you take me somewhere warm. I know a place.”

“Get in.”

Wendy opened the door and got in the back seat, crossing her legs and covering her bare stomach.

“What’s yer name?” asked the driver, looking at

Wendy in the rear-view mirror.

For a moment Wendy wasn't sure what to tell him. Her mind was blank.

"Wendy," she said. "You can pull over here."

They got out of the car, and the two men followed her into the hotel. On her way in she could see Daisy, Alice, and Nala several blocks away, walking back. The four of them had gotten what they'd come for.

Wendy led the men into the elevator and pressed the 9th floor button. The elevator was mirrored glass in all directions, and she could see their eyes on her. She reached back and grabbed their hands. She led their fingers to her upper thigh and then dropped them the moment the bell rung. They started to follow her out of the elevator, but she stopped them.

"Upstairs," she said. "I'll be there in a moment. I promise."

The driver looked like he wanted to object, but his friend pushed him back in the elevator. Wendy pressed the 11th floor button and waved to them as the doors closed.

She went back to her bed, where she found Aurora asleep, her deck of cards still in her hand. She took her high heels off and sat down next to her, covered her friend up with a nearby blanket. She took the deck from her hand and continued playing her game of solitaire.

The Johns started to shriek a few minutes later. A few minutes after that Daisy and the rest of the girls came puffing back to the big room.

* *

Wendy dreamed she was standing at the top of the hotel, looking down over the city, at the empty blackness at its heart and the radiant horizon, where the suburbs that still had electricity shimmered. She stepped to the edge and grit fell to the street below. The wind howled in her ears but didn't ruffle her clothes or prickle her skin. She held out her arms and listened to the wind and the howl became the screams of all the Johns she'd lured to the hotel with promises of sex and pleasure and release. It

must have been hundreds of voices screaming at her, howling in pain and anguish and frustration. She stepped over the edge and the screams carried her over the tops of the buildings and she winged one way and then the other, dipping between the concrete and steel mountains, looking at the empty windows and boards and cracked ledges, rusted railings. She flew over the remains of the Renaissance Center, where the central tower had crumbled across both lanes of Jefferson Avenue, out over the river. She turned north and followed the coast over Belle Isle, where hobos clustered around campfires and took dumps in the fountains. She came to the very edge of the City Centre, where the great half-moon of the Suburban Wall rose majestic and imposing. The screams diminished the further she got from the City Centre until she couldn't hear anything but the air rushing passed her. It was her nightly journey to the Northern Gate, to the black forest and the cabin. She smiled and it felt good to smile. She was at the very edge of the city. She was safe.

* *

Wendy woke up to the light touch of a little one. She lifted her head and saw Aurora slumped against the radiator, clutching the cold metal like it was a teddy bear.

“What is it, sweetie?” asked Wendy, sitting up.

“I can't sleep,” said the little one. She didn't have a name yet, but Wendy thought she reminded her of a little kitten, curious but quiet and sincere. She thought she'd suggest they name her Bluebonnet after the cat in *Alice in Wonderland*. That seemed right.

Wendy reached out her arms and the girl snuggled against her. She was warm, almost feverish. Wendy stroked her hair and leaned in close to her, breathing in her warmth. It felt good to touch and be touched.

“It's been a rough night, huh?” said Wendy. “We don't usually get so many for the Sisters.”

“I'm scared,” said Bluebonnet. “Of the planting.”

“There's nothing to be afraid of.”

“But the Sisters...” and Bluebonnet trailed off, clearly worried about what she was allowed to say about them.

“You don’t need to worry about them. They’re here for you. For me. For *all* of us. They’re our protection. You *never* have to be scared of them.”

“What will they do to me tomorrow?” asked Bluebonnet.

“They’ll give you a name...if you’re lucky.”

“What will they name me?”

“Who knows?”

They laid in silence for several minutes until Wendy thought Bluebonnet was asleep, and Wendy started thinking about her own planting, about the knot in her stomach as she’d ridden the elevator to the 11th floor. She’d wanted to scream when the doors had opened, and she’d pressed herself against the back wall of the car, clutching her orchid to her chest.

When she heard the Sisters singing, though, their voices mingling so sweetly, all her fear, all her doubt, pain, and worry melted away and she stood tall and she walked out of the elevator, holding her flower high. She was named Wendy, and she was reborn, a sister too in the sisterhood of the troubled and abandoned.

“What are the Sisters like?” asked Bluebonnet.

Wendy thought a moment and then said, “They’re like being home.”

* *

Snow White wandered the halls on the 4th floor. She liked it because no one ever came down here. It was very quiet, so she could hear the Sisters more clearly. They whispered to her, all around her, coming from the vents and walls and the very air itself. And though she couldn’t understand the words, she knew the feeling. She understood enough. The Sisters were getting louder these days, and Snow White didn’t want to miss anything.

She came down here almost every day now, while the others slept upstairs. No one had bothered to cardboard over the windows, so the sunlight shone bright and

glistening through the windows. She had tremendous views of the city around her, of the vacant lots, and the forests growing back, returning after their centuries-old banishment. Sometimes, she would stand at a window and watch the wind rustling the leaves, watching the occasional passerby on the street below, at the reflection of the sun and clouds in the other empty skyscrapers around her. And she would let the rustling babble of the Sisters wash over her, bathing in the warmth of it.

Her time was coming. That much was clear. Snow White hadn't been the first and she wouldn't be the last. They'd told her that at her planting. This wasn't new to her; it was something for which she'd been preparing for 8 years. She was too old to be here anymore and even before the Sisters had resumed their whispering, she'd felt it in her bones, in the regularity of her period, in the looks the other girls gave her when they thought she wasn't looking. She was a woman now. She had a woman's body, a woman's scent. This wasn't a place for her anymore.

Eventually they all had to leave.

She paused in front of one of the large plate glass windows, covered in dust and grime. The morning sun peeked out from the building across the street, sending streamers of red and orange on the faded carpet. The Sisters babbled. Snow White closed her eyes and stuffed her hands in the pockets of her hoodie. They'd chosen the next one, it seemed. It was done. The Sisters' decisions were final.

Snow White asked, "What will happen?"

The Sisters didn't answer exactly, but Snow White saw in her mind the 11th floor, and remembered her planting 8 years before. She remembered the screaming of the John, the way her orchid had risen taut and lonely. She saw all this, and it was answer enough.

"Who will it be?" she asked, placing her forehead on the glass and looking down at the cracked, empty streets below.

The Sisters didn't answer. Their babbling stopped. Snow White touched the glass with her right hand and sighed.

Wendy was flying to the edge of the city again. She'd fallen asleep, with Bluebonnet in her arms, listening to her breath and feeling her heartbeat thumping counterpoint to her own. The sound and feeling of the two of them together had changed to the sound of the wind in her ears. She whooped and shouted, and her voice was carried away behind her as she streamed through the darkness of the night. The City Centre gave way to the glittering diamonds of the Suburban Wall in the distance, and then she was in the long, rolling forest that stretched out from the base of the Wall like a mossy beard. She could see animals in the trees and prairies, prowling and howling. There were trees in every direction, except to the East where Lake Saint Claire extended to the horizon. The moon smiled on everything, so bright that Wendy felt almost as though she could feel its warmth on her skin.

She started to fall from the sky, slowly, drifting down toward the earth, slowing as she went. The trees came up to meet her feet and the leaves kissed at her legs, her belly, her cheeks as she settled through the canopy and came in for a landing on the soft underbrush of the forest floor. She stood and watched the white and black birch and beech and pine trunks around her.

Something moved ahead of her, a black shape, a shadow within the shadows. Then two pale eyes opened, and she heard a deep, growling voice.

"Come," it said.

She followed the black shape as it took her deeper into the forest. She could hear the creature's paws crunching on the thick film of dead leaves.

Ahead of them the forest opened to a clearing and the moonlight shone down like a spotlight on a dilapidated cabin, with a mossy shingled roof and windows so covered in grime that they looked like closed eye lids. The creature stood on its hind legs, rising to its full height. It pointed with one paw at the cabin and then fell back down to all fours and Wendy actually felt the ground shake. The

creature disappeared into the woods, leaving Wendy alone with the crumbling cabin.

She drifted forward toward the door, which hung loose on its hinges and as she came closer the door creaked open and she could see something moving in the blackness within.

An ancient voice spoke to her, "Natasha. We've been waiting for you."

She stepped through the door.

* *

Wendy woke up to Daisy tapping roughly at her head.

"Get up, heifer," said Daisy, toeing Wendy's head one last time, hard.

"I'm up. Cut it out. Jesus," Wendy said. Bluebonnet wasn't in her arms anymore. She'd gone back to sleep with the other little ones.

Wendy sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"Planting day," said Daisy, and walked away.

Wendy stood up and looked over for Snow White, but she wasn't in her bed. The room was busy, with all the older girls getting dressed and putting on make-up and chatting loudly. Afternoon sunlight streamed through the cracks in the wooden planks on the windows, turning the room into a yellow and black zebra.

Wendy stretched and looked down at herself, straightened her outfit. She'd slept too late and there wasn't time to bathe, so she ran a brush through her hair and pulled it back in a ponytail. She walked over to the bedroom where the little ones were being dressed and primped by some of the older girls.

"You slept late," said Aurora.

"I had weird dreams," said Wendy, grabbing a hair pick and looking for a little one to help.

Bluebonnet was sitting by the window, looking through a crack in the boards, her bony knees pulled tight to her chest. Wendy sat down next to her and started to pick out her hair.

Bluebonnet looked back at her, “You talked in your sleep.”

“What did I say?” asked Wendy.

“I couldn’t tell.”

“My dreams...” said Wendy, and then said after a pause, “I dreamed I was flying, and then I met a creature in the woods up near the Northern Gate that showed me to a cabin. I went in the cabin...then...”

“What?”

“I dunno,” said Wendy. “I don’t remember.”

“I dreamed of an orchid last night...just an orchid in a black room,” said Bluebonnet, and tiny goose bumps rose on Wendy’s thin arms.

“What color?” asked Wendy.

“All colors,” replied the little one.

The two of them sat in silence, and Wendy picked the girl’s hair until all the tangles were out, then Wendy turned the girl around and she applied thick, red lipstick and put blush on her cheeks, eye shadow over her eyes, darkened her eyebrows. Wendy held the girl by her shoulders and looked at her. She smiled.

“You look beautiful,” she said. “You’re gonna do great today.”

Bluebonnet said nothing, but she hugged Wendy and they held each other for a moment. Wendy closed her eyes and she saw the creature and the cabin in the woods, and the door ajar, something black moving in the dark.

Snow White appeared in the doorway and leaned in.

“It’s time.”

The little ones stood slowly, and Wendy and the other older girls formed them into a line.

Snow White said, “Stick together. Stay in line, and don’t talk to anyone until we get to the market.”

* *

Planting day was the only time the Sisters allowed the whole sisterhood out at once during the day. All other days they were mostly nocturnal, so for the older girls the change from nighttime living to the bright sunlight of day

was a harsh transition. They blinked and squinted as though they'd never seen the sun before. Some were experienced enough to wear sunglasses. For the little ones, who'd been among the sisterhood for less than 3 months, it felt like a homecoming of sorts.

The entire sisterhood walked down the empty streets toward the Eastern market, a mile journey that took them through the valley of decrepit skyscrapers, passed the decaying remains of the Peoplemover, to the edge of the ruins that marked the end of the Old City and the beginning of the urban prairie.

As the girls walked, in a long line stretching out over two blocks, Snow White explained the protocol for when they arrived at the market, and some of the older girls relayed the messages back through the sisterhood. This was Snow White's 8th planting day, and by now she had her speech memorized. So did many of the older girls.

"When we get to the market, each team captain get your little ones and take them to your appointed section. Under no circumstances are the little ones to speak to anyone. Team captains, remember, *you* do all the negotiating. But let the little ones decide their plant for themselves. Make suggestions but don't be too pushy..."

Wendy walked near the front of the line, next to her little ones. Bluebonnet had grabbed her hand a few blocks back and they walked together, the rest of the way. Occasionally Wendy squeezed her hand to let her know it was going to be alright, but in her gut Wendy felt strange. She kept thinking about the creature and the cabin, about the shape in the darkness. She squeezed Bluebonnet's hand tighter.

* *

Eastern Market was nearly empty, save for a few remaining vendors in their drab stalls. Once a bustling urban farmers market before the turn, large portions of the market now sat empty or in ruins. No produce or goods came legally into the Old City, so everything for sale was either locally grown or smuggled in. Most of the

produce had the grayscale coloring of the Rot, so it was barely edible. You had to eat all you could until you got to the gray, and then throw it away.

There were four plant and flower vendors, spread at opposite corners of the market so as not to compete directly for the few people that still came.

The sisterhood walked under the market's frayed and peeled signage and into the gloom of the first of four pavilions, spread like a Greek Cross on the weed-choked market grounds. Snow White gathered them in a tight circle, 43 young women, aged 8-17, tight chests, breath held. A few people turned and looked at them, but most of the small crowd barely registered their presence.

"Alright, sisters," said Snow White, her voice low but audible. "We're here. Team captains. You know what to do."

Daisy, Wendy, Ariel, and Alice raised their hands and gestured for their contingent of little ones to follow them. Wendy lead her group to the northernmost pavilion, toward the vendor where she'd found her own flower 3 years ago. Her little ones trailed behind her, quiet, their eyes wide and wild.

The flower stand was small, dirty, but with an unassuming charm. In a more civilized age, it might have been called rustic. Flowers protruded out of nearly every corner, from pots and plastic cups, bins, and a few wooden barrels with rusted hoops. There was also a smattering of potted plants on bowed wooden shelves behind where the vendor sat slumped on her stool, her ancient back as bowed as the shelves. She appeared to be sleeping.

"Ok," Wendy said quietly, turning to her group of little ones. "It's time to pick. Everyone spread out. Don't push each other...there's no need for that."

"What do we do?" asked a little one from the far side of the stand.

"Simple," said Wendy. "You just take a moment to look at all of the flowers and plants, and whichever one jumps out at you the most, that's the one you choose. There's nothing more to it than that. Follow your heart

but take the time to see all of the flowers...to really *see* them.”

The little ones started moving around the edges of the stand, gazing slowly, cautiously, determinedly at the batches of flowers, moving at the edges, gently feeling their petals, smelling them. Wendy stood back and watched their movement, so much like butterflies, flitting in and out of traffic, tasting the flowers and then gently scuttling to the next one. Their movement became more excited as they started to feel the momentum of the ceremony. There was magic in this. There was an elemental power in making such a simple choice, to be able for once in their short lives have agency over their future. These were girls from all across the country, who'd been abused, raped, beaten, left for dead in trash bins, in fire station bays, in empty fields. Yet, here they were, loved and cared for, treated with kindness by older girls they could look up to, and given a chance to *choose* something for once in their lives. What flower were you? How would you bloom over the years of your life? And what would you call yourself?

Wendy drifted over to Bluebonnet, who'd been circling around a small, flared orange orchid. Bluebonnet leaned in close and sniffed the orchid. She had a small, quizzical smile at the edges of her lips. A soft rose colored her cheeks. She reached out for the orchid and a little tendril of electricity danced between her reaching fingers and the petals of the flower. She grabbed the pot, and the electricity flickered one last time, and snaked up her arm. It disappeared with a pop of the ears, like they'd ridden up the elevator too fast. Bluebonnet lifted the flower up to Wendy and smiled.

“This one,” she said. “I choose this one.”

An orchid, thought Wendy sadly. She smiled at Bluebonnet and hugged her close.

“Congratulations, sweetie. It's beautiful. You chose real good.”

The ceremony took less than 25 minutes, Wendy's group less than that. As they made their way home, snaking through the stacks of abandoned buildings, cracked sidewalks, and weeded lots, clouds darkened the sun and filled the sky. Wendy looked up as a drop of rain struck her cheek and dripped to the sidewalk. She smiled down at Bluebonnet, who clutched the orchid in both her tiny hands, and touched her cheek. The raindrop made it look like Wendy was crying.

* *

As they waited for nightfall and the second half of the ceremony, the little ones chattered excitedly in their room, combing their hair and splashing cold water on their faces. Some of them had borrowed makeup from the older girls and were applying it badly to their eyes and cheeks and lips. They grinned at each other, lipstick on their teeth, laughing.

Bluebonnet sat near a window, watching her orchid silhouetted against the darkening sky. The rain had come and passed, and the night was crisp but clear. Bright stars poked through the gloom, and the moon shone brightly on the wreckage of the streets below. She touched one of her orchid's petals, tenderly. She was afraid to touch it too hard. It was so gentle and small and beautiful. But she wanted to feel that electricity again. It was like nothing she'd ever felt before and she wanted it back, if only for another brief moment.

Nothing happened though. The petal just shifted and then she brought her hand back to her cheek and kept watch.

* *

"Ok, little ones!" cried Daisy, barging into the room. "It's time."

The little ones let out a collective cry and they all got to their feet. Some of them were dancing they were so excited. They couldn't help it. They were young, and coursing with energy.

“Calm down, calm down,” said Daisy, waving her hands for the little ones to quiet. “We’re going to break into seven groups so that we can try to get as many of you named tonight as possible.”

The older girls counted off the little ones into seven groups. Wendy edged herself over to make sure that Bluebonnet was one of her group of three little ones. The other two were small and excited. Their color was high in their cheeks. One of them had tried to apply mascara, and there was a small streak of black that trailed from the edge of her left eye. Wendy licked her finger and rubbed it off the best she could.

“You look beautiful,” Wendy said to them, her eyes lingering the longest on Bluebonnet.

They made their way slowly down the stairs to the dusty lobby of the hotel, the little ones chattering the entire way down, their voices skittering off the cement walls of the stairwell. Snow White led the way with a flashlight, the beam of light bouncing around the gloom. Out on the street, they spread into their seven groups, and Wendy looked around to make sure she still had her little ones.

“I’ll be taking her tonight,” said Snow White from behind Wendy. Wendy turned. Snow White was pointing at Bluebonnet, who suddenly looked worried. She drifted behind Wendy, like a child trying to hide behind her mother.

“You don’t need to do that,” said Wendy. “I can handle it.”

“I know you can, Wendy. The Sisters told me,” said Snow White, and Wendy knew it was hopeless. She lowered her eyes sadly, and scooped Bluebonnet out from behind herself. She stood for a moment, with her hands protectively on Bluebonnet’s shoulders.

“Take care of her,” said Wendy.

Snow White held out her hand to Bluebonnet, who reluctantly took it.

“I will,” said Snow White, and the two of them left to find their John.

“Do you know what sex is?” asked Snow White as she and Bluebonnet walked in the middle of the empty street

Bluebonnet waited a long time before answering, “That’s when a boy puts his...*thing* inside of your...”

“Yes,” said Snow White quickly. She walked for several steps in silence. The air was heavy and potent, musty like a wet blanket left in the snow. Then she said, “Have you ever?”

“No,” said Bluebonnet quietly. Snow White wondered if she was lying, but when she looked at the girl’s face, she knew she wasn’t. Bluebonnet looked up and she looked terrified. “Do I have to...?”

Snow White stopped and smiled, touched the girl’s cheek as tenderly as she could.

“Of course not. You’ll never have to. The Sisters will protect you.”

Bluebonnet was clearly relieved. She grinned and looked back at the ground. “Then what do I do tonight?”

“You finish your planting,” said Snow White.

Wendy watched Snow White and Bluebonnet walk away for a long time before gathering her two remaining little ones and heading in the opposite direction. The orchid troubled her. It was such a rare flower, nearly impossible to find in the Old City. Only two others had found an orchid, and now the Sisters were splitting Bluebonnet off from the others to go with Snow White. A hard press had grown in her chest since the Eastside Market. Something was wrong with all of this, but she couldn’t place it.

“What happens now?” asked the little one with the mascara.

Wendy smiled at her, “Have you ever gone fishing?” The little one nodded. “Well, tonight is something like that. But *you’re* the bait.”

“*Me!?*” Asked the little one, terrified.

“You have nothing to worry about, honey. I’m here for you. And the Sisters will protect us all.”

* *

The moon was high in the sky when Wendy decided to call it quits. It was freezing, and her little ones were shivering, their tiny teeth chattering behind their blue lips. Completing the planting ceremony rarely happened in a day. Sometimes it took months for a little one to get her name.

“Can we stay for just a few more minutes?” asked the little one with the mascara.

“No,” said Wendy. “We need to get inside or you two’ll get the flu.”

The two girls looked crestfallen.

“There’s nothing to feel bad about. Your time will come.”

“How long did it take you to get your name?” asked the other little one as they headed back.

“I was strange,” said Wendy. “I was named in my first night...but no one else was. It was just me.”

“Were you scared?”

“Yes, of course I was.”

They walked in silence the rest of the way. The wind had picked up and blew their hair gently off their cheeks and foreheads, making them shiver. They pulled their arms close around their tiny chests.

Back at the hotel, they found that most of the girls had returned already, and even more were coming in right behind them. From the look of everyone’s faces, it had been a disappointing first night.

“Did anyone get a John tonight?” asked Wendy to Ariel as they started up the stairs. Ariel shook her head no.

Back on the 9th floor, the little ones went to their beds, equal parts dejected and exhausted. The big girls spread out in the big room, some falling asleep quickly, and others lighting flashlights or candles, reading, playing cards. It had been a long day. The room quickly filled with the sounds of sleep and night quiet.

Wendy checked the little one's room for Bluebonnet, but she wasn't there. She was still out with Snow White. Wendy went to her pile of blankets and laid on her back, staring out the window at the stars, and the twist in her chest tightened.

* *

Bluebonnet shivered and wrapped her arms around her chest so Snow White wouldn't see she was cold. They leaned against a chain link fence, near a vacant lot strewn with broken glass, tires, and small, emerging firs. Snow White took off the fur coat she wore and guided it over Bluebonnet's shoulders.

"Here," she said. "It's so cold tonight."

"Thanks," said Bluebonnet through chattering teeth.

They hadn't seen a single car all night, and it was getting very late. Bluebonnet wondered if they would wait all night, and she dreaded the thought. Snow White and her had sat in near silence for almost the entire night. Snow White was quiet and brooding, a presence that was felt more than heard.

After a while, Bluebonnet braved a question that had been burning inside her since they'd first peeled off together.

"Have you?" she asked.

"What's that, honey?" said Snow White, looking far off down the street.

"Um...you know...had sex?"

Snow White looked at her and she looked so sad that Bluebonnet immediately regretted asking the question. She stammered and tried to take it back, but she was so cold that nothing came out.

"Yes," said Snow White looking away again and taking a deep breath. When she breathed out, the heat of her breath spread around her like a cloud. "Many times."

"Did...did you like it?"

Snow White paused again and then said, "Sometimes."

Headlights glinted at the horizon, around seven blocks ahead, and Snow White straightened, and gripped Bluebonnet's arm, pulling her gently off of the fence. As the car moved closer, Snow White took the fur coat off of Bluebonnet's shoulder and fixed her hair with flicks of her hands.

"*What do I do?*" asked Bluebonnet terrified.

"Just ask him if he sees something he likes."

"I can't say that..."

"You have to," said Snow White, bluntly.

The car sidled to the curb, and the man rolled the passenger side window down. He was old, with a creased forehead, and large yellow teeth. The smell from his car was horrible. Snow White nudged Bluebonnet toward the car, and Bluebonnet stumbled a little. She leaned toward that awful smell and placed her hands gingerly on the door.

"Do...do you see something you like?" she asked, and the man grinned wide, his black eyes glinting a little in the moon light.

He nodded and unlocked the car door, padded the passenger seat.

"Come in," he said.

Bluebonnet opened the door and sat down next to him. Somehow, he smelled even worse inside the car, a mixture of stale sweat, bad breath, and something rotten. He looked at her chest, where breasts would grow in a few years, at her thin legs and short skirt. He grinned wide, and he gripped her knee with a dry hand, tight. Bluebonnet tried to smile, but her face felt like a mask. Snow White closed the door behind her and moved back toward the fence. Bluebonnet looked out at her, fear like a tiny bird battering the inside of her chest.

"Are you coming?" she asked.

Snow White shook her head no and said, "Sorry. This you have to do alone."

Bluebonnet wanted to scream as the man pulled away from the curb. He gripped her knee tighter, his hand moving up to the hem of her skirt. She bit back the scream

and looked out the window. She let his hand creep under her skirt, holding her breathe against the stink.

“Do you...do you wanna have...sex with me?” she asked without looking at him. The man didn’t say a thing, but his fingers answered for him. “Then keep driving this way. I know a place.”

His fingers scraped at her, and her body recoiled away from him. He couldn’t touch her. There was something rotten about him, something wrong. She couldn’t let him touch her. She grabbed his hand and gently placed it on his own thigh, and then she leaned closer to him, trying not to gag from the smell of him. She grabbed the place where his legs met, where she knew his *thing* was. He smiled and licked at his lips.

* *

Snow White watched the car drive away, and then took off her heels and ran as hard as she could after Bluebonnet. The moon dove behind a skein of clouds.

* *

Wendy drifted through the sky, winging far away from the Old City, over the forests and rivers and lakes until she arrived at the forests of the Northern Wall. She landed gently on a soft cushion of grass, and she lay back for a moment, staring up at the stars, breathing the crisp, piney air. She heard the great creature at the edge of the clearing, snuffling and stamping its feet to get her attention.

“Ok, ok,” she said to the creature as she got up and followed into the woods. The air among the trees was light and quiet, still. She breathed deep and smelled centuries of dead leaves and dead creatures, bones, new life, new beginnings. She saw the cabin ahead, sheathed in moonlight. Its windows were lit from the inside, some dancing light like a candle or a fireplace.

The creature turned back to look at her as they walked.

“We’ve waited a long time, Natasha,” said the creature. “We all have.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” she asked.

The creature didn’t answer. They entered the clearing and the creature stepped aside, gestured toward the cabin. The door was open, and that dancing light spilled in a little sliver onto the rough stone hearth.

“*We* are there,” said the creature, and nodded at the cabin.

Wendy walked forward slowly toward the open door. Shadows began to move in the silhouette of the door. She wasn’t scared. She walked toward the door.

“Natasha,” said the voices. “You’re finally here.”

* *

“Wake up!” hissed Snow White, out of breath. “Wake up, Wendy. She found one.”

Wendy rolled over on her blankets. The cabin dissipated around her.

“What? Who?” she asked, but then she knew.

She got to her feet, and her and Snow White rushed to the elevator, where they could hear the car just a few floors below, coming up to them. Wendy looked at Snow White, who was still breathing hard. There was something odd in the older girl’s face, a bizarre mixture of pride, fear, and resignation as though she glimpsed something profound that she couldn’t put into words.

“Does she know to stop here and get her flower?” asked Wendy. Snow White didn’t answer.

The elevator car stopped at the 9th floor and the doors opened. The stench of the man wafted out with the opening doors. They stood there toward the back of the car, the man taller and lankier than he looked in his car, Bluebonnet so small in comparison. Her face was blank and inscrutable. She started out of the elevator and when the man began to follow her, Wendy and Snow White leaned forward to him, both of them smiling wide, touching his chest and gently pushing him back in the elevator.

Bluebonnet turned and said, "I just...I need to get something." Then she disappeared into the gloom of the big room.

Wendy and Snow White leaned into the man and rubbed his chest. Wendy held her breath.

"Where'd she go?" he asked.

"To get a toy," said Snow White. "But don't worry,

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The Sisters

we'll come join you too...free of charge."

The man smiled wide and laughed once, bright and clear. A perpetual loser who'd just won the lottery.

Bluebonnet came back, carrying her orchid and entered the elevator with them.

"What kind of toy is that?" the man asked, but Snow White moved her hand down to his crotch and smiled at him.

The elevator car started its ascent.

* *

The elevator doors opened on the 11th floor to a small lobby, bathed in gloom, bare cement floors, ceiling tiles bloated and rotten on the floor or hanging by a thin streamer of plastic or metal. There were water marks on the walls, where moss grew. Moss peppered the floor, the ceiling. At the end of the lobby was an opening. Beyond it, there was darkness.

"What do I do?" asked Bluebonnet, staring into the blackness.

"What do you mean, what do you do?" asked the man, turning toward her. "Are you a *virgin!*?"

"Take him over there," said Snow White, pointing to the opening at the end of the hall.

"I'm scared," said Bluebonnet, tears standing in her eyes.

"What's she scared of? What's going on her? Aren't you two coming?" asked the man.

“Just take him over there, honey,” said Wendy. “We’ll be right behind you.”

“What is this?” asked the man, twisting from one girl to the next, growing agitated. “I ain’t going over there.”

Bluebonnet was crying now, but she smiled somehow through the tears, and grabbed the John by the hand and she said, “Come on. It’s just around the corner.”

They walked toward the opening, and the John looked back at Wendy and Snow White, as though asking for their help. He looked frightened, like a little boy who’s been caught in a lie. They entered the gloom and the sound of the Sisters filled the room as they shrieked, and a black, roiling shadow grabbed the John with tendrils that were both smoke and shape. The Sisters leaned in and he looked at them full on, in their awful wildness, and he started to scream too. They kissed him and their lips ended his screams.

“Come! Quick!” shouted Snow White, holding her hands out to Bluebonnet.

The voices of the Sisters rose as something tore inside the John and blood spattered the crumbling cement walls. Blood hit Bluebonnet’s face and her hair, her clothes, the soil of the orchid she still held in her hand. Bluebonnet ran toward Snow White and Wendy and collapsed in their arms, sobbing and clutching her orchid. The Sisters howled their millennial rage, the end of time, the end of the world. They screamed the anger and pain and resentment of every girl borne into her womanhood by the acts of men. They howled and howled, and in their screams Bluebonnet heard her name, her *true* name, and she saw her orchid glow in the dark and wind and terror, and she knew who she was. All her fears went away. They melted like snow in piss. She smiled.

The Sisters spent the John, and his blood, gristle, and bone fragments dripped from the walls and joined the pool on the floor. The Sisters started to cry. Wendy felt their horror and shame. She felt their anger, and their ancient terror, and their worry, the ceaseless worry. Wendy felt her own bones crack, and her face bruise and split. She felt every punch and kick, every dick that had

ever broken her. She felt all of that. Years of trauma, stacked on itself, compressing, becoming one big trauma which felt so twisted up inside of her that she couldn't tell who she was outside of it. It was her, and she it. The violence, the violence, the violence. Her eyes bled from it. Her heart burst for it.

And she knew what the Sisters were. She knew what they wanted, and she was terrified.

* *

The elevator emptied onto the lobby of the 9th floor, and the three girls walked slowly into the big room. They were covered in blood, and they stank. They were exhausted. Snow White turned and gave Bluebonnet a hug, short, and then turned and walked quietly to her mattress in the far corner.

"We'll get you a mattress in the morning," said Wendy, "But you can sleep with me tonight. You're named now. You belong out here with us."

The two of them tip-toed over their fellow sisters and fell down to Wendy's pile of blankets. They wrapped themselves in each other's arms. Bluebonnet fell asleep almost immediately, and though Wendy tried to stay awake, after a while she too drifted off.

* *

Wendy woke up suddenly an hour later and felt her arm asleep under Bluebonnet. It was still dark, and the sounds of sleep whispered around them. She shook Bluebonnet.

"Hey, wake up!" she said. "We have to go! Something terrible is going happen!"

Bluebonnet opened her bleary eyes, and Wendy grabbed her under her arms and lifted her to her feet. They'd both fallen asleep with their clothes on. Wendy grabbed a few coats for them, and half-carried Bluebonnet through the great room to the elevator lobby.

“What’s happening? My orchid...” mumbled Bluebonnet, looking back at her plant on the windowsill. “Where’re we going?”

“I don’t know...just...we can’t stay here,” said Wendy, smashing the elevator’s down button.

The elevator came to life, and Wendy looked up to see it was coming up to them. The digital read showed the 5th floor, the 6th floor, the 7th, 8th, 9th, and then it kept going until it stopped at the 11th floor. She heard something heavy get in the elevator above them.

“Come on,” Wendy said. “They’re coming.”

She grabbed Bluebonnet’s arm and pulled her to the stairwell, grabbing the door and gently closing it so it wouldn’t slam and wake up the rest of the girls.

“We need to hurry!”

Wendy scuttled down the stairs, with Bluebonnet behind her, whispering questions the entire way. They hurried across the main lobby of the hotel and burst into the freezing night air. As the front door closed behind them, Wendy heard the elevator ding. She grabbed Bluebonnet’s hand and they raced across the street, down the block, and around the corner until the hotel was out of view.

* *

“What’s going on?” asked Bluebonnet after 20 minutes of walk-running through the broken sidewalks of the Old City. Wendy kept looking around them.

“Something terrible is going to happen if we stay there,” said Wendy. “To you.”

Bluebonnet stopped and leaned against a brick wall, her breath coming in jagged bursts.

“I have to stop,” she said. “I can’t keep running like this.”

“We have to keep moving. We have to get north. There’s...there’s a place where we’ll be safe.”

“*Why!?*” shouted Bluebonnet. “Why do we have to leave? I’m exhausted...”

“Because the Sisters are going to hurt you,” said Wendy. “I saw...I saw it when they...during your planting ceremony. I saw something I don’t think I was supposed to see.”

Wendy put her arm around Bluebonnet, and the littler girl pressed her face into Wendy’s chest. She wasn’t crying, but the shock of the last several hours was catching up to her. She was eleven years old.

“It’s the orchid, and you finding a John on your first night,” said Wendy. “That’s only happened twice before...with you, Snow White, and with me. I don’t know what it means, but I think...I think the Sisters are going to take us, like they take the Johns. I think they *have* to...it’s some old thing they have to do to stay alive.”

Bluebonnet looked up at Wendy, and now tears were trickling from the corners of her eyes. Wendy pressed her head back to her chest and looked back the direction they’d come. She hated lying to the girl, but she couldn’t tell her the truth. She was too young to understand.

“But I liked it there,” whispered Bluebonnet into Wendy’s chest.

Wendy held her tight for a long moment.

“I did too. Come on,” she said. “We have to keep going.”

* *

Two hours later they were farther from the City Centre than Wendy had ever been. The tall skyscrapers of the City Centre had become small houses and then vacant lots punctuated by ancient structures overrun with shrub trees and brush. Behind them they could see the tall buildings of the City Centre rising from the vast prairie. Ahead, a few miles away still, was the beginning of a large forest, which rose abruptly from the prairie like a dark green wall. The road they were on went straight into a small gap in the forest.

Wendy pointed, “That’s where we’re going. That’s where we’ll be safe.”

“I don’t like it,” said Bluebonnet. “It looks scary.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Wendy responded, but she didn’t slow and neither did Bluebonnet.

To the east the sky was lightening as the sun waited just below the horizon. A light mist hung over the tops of the trees, and in the distance the Suburban Wall rose like a mountainous mirage. It was gray and desolate and imposing.

The two girls walked toward the forest, holding hands. The walking and lack of sleep had wrung the tears from Bluebonnet, so she was dry and numb. She hummed a tune lightly, mostly to keep the sound of the wind through the tall grass out of her ears. It was a song she’d heard once on the street, tumbling out of a bar like dirty silk. She didn’t know the name, or even the words, but the tune had stuck with her immediately.

“You have a beautiful voice,” said Wendy, smiling at the younger girl.

Bluebonnet flushed and stopped singing.

“You didn’t have to do that,” said Wendy. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you. My mama used to sing to me when I was little. She had a beautiful voice too.”

“My mama died having me,” said Bluebonnet. “That’s what my daddy said, but...I dunno. He lied a lot.”

“Sing something else,” said Wendy. “I won’t laugh or anything. I just wanna listen.”

Bluebonnet started to hum again, tunelessly at first, and then she found something else she remembered from before she was on the streets, from when she was 5 or 6.

“The itsy-bitsy spider went up the waterspout...”

“I know that one!” shouted Wendy and started to sing too in a surprisingly deep and supple alto.

The two girls walked like that for another hour, singing together, holding hands, feeling the winter heat of the sun rising from the east.

* *

As they neared the edge of the forest, the cement road dissipated to a roughly hewn dirt path, straddled on both sides by tall grass. Pieces of metal, an ancient chassis, and

lonesome, ivy-covered brick walls plagued the prairie. Ahead of them, a time-worn, rusted gate hung loosely on its hinges, crossing the path. On either side of the gate were rusted iron statues of bears on their hind legs. The bears could have been roaring or laughing. It was impossible to tell in their decrepit state.

“Do you think there are real bears in there?” asked Bluebonnet, gazing warily past the gate into the gloom of the forest.

“Yes,” said Wendy. “I do.”

Wendy grabbed the top of the gate and lifted as hard as she could, slowly shuffling the gate to the side. It screeched, and it echoed in the forest. A large crow lifted from a branch and took off into the sky with a screech of its own. Wendy let the gate fall to the ground where it squealed from its hinges and landed flat in the grass.

“Do you know where we’re going?” asked Bluebonnet.

“Come on,” said Wendy, grabbing Bluebonnet’s hand and leading her into the forest.

The path narrowed even more, and on either side of them trees rose high above their heads in a riot of browned leaves, pine needles, and limbs. The canopy, even devoid of foliage, managed to block out all but disorienting lines and splotches of sunlight, but after a few minutes their eyes acclimated so that they could see the white gravel of the path ahead of them. Bluebonnet clutched to Wendy’s hand and held close, her eyes darting all around them for some sign of a bear or some other monstrous creature. Eventually, as they walked deeper, even the splotches of sunlight were blocked out, and all they could see were the wisps of dust particles and spider webs in the distance.

There was a loud snap ahead of them, and something large and heavy moved suddenly. Bluebonnet screamed and grabbed onto Wendy so hard she almost choked her. Wendy held her tight.

“Shh,” she said, holding her finger to her lips.

The thing moved again, and they could see a black shape shuffling in the shadows, rustling the branches as it walked. It was huge and moved slowly. They heard

snuffling and a low-level rumble, almost a growl. The creature walked out into the path about 50 yards ahead of them, and its bulk blocked the entire path and rose nearly to the lowest limbs. Two pale lights shown in the darkness, and the snuffling and rumble rose. Bluebonnet whined in the back of throat and buried her face into Wendy's neck.

"Come," said the creature from the blackness, and then it turned and started to walk away from them down the path. When the girls didn't move, it turned around and shouted loudly, "Now!"

They started to follow.

* *

The darkness played tricks on them so that they couldn't tell how long they walked, or how many forks in the path they took. Hours seemed to pass, and their legs ached, and their shoulders sagged. The creature didn't speak to them. It just walked and snuffled, occasionally stopping to sniff at the air, and then continuing. They kept their distance, following warily. Wendy could feel Bluebonnet's pounding heart through her fingers, and Wendy herself could tell her own heartrate was increasing as they got closer to the end of the path. She knew where they were going. She remembered her dreams, remembered the cabin and the open door and moving shadows.

Come, we've been waiting for you.

She shuddered and masked it by clutching Bluebonnet's fingers tighter in her own.

The creature stopped and looked back at them. Its eyes glowed brightly in the gloom, but Wendy could just make out the edges of its face, its fur, its long snout. Behind the creature she could see the path open slightly, and sunlight poured through the opening in the canopy.

"We're almost there," said the creature, and it pointed toward the end of the path with its snout. "Follow the path. You know where to go."

"What's in there?" asked Wendy.

“Follow the path,” said the creature.

It snuffled and then turned to its right and back into the forest. The two girls watched it go, waited for a long moment, and then started forward on the path. The opening grew larger as they walked, and the sunlight made their eyes water after so long in the gloom.

The path ended in a sun-blasted clearing, and in the middle of the clearing was the cabin from Wendy’s dreams. It was smaller than she imagined it would be, with a mossy shingled roof, two small, dirty glazed windows, and a heavy wooden door that stood slightly ajar on its hinges. In the shadow of the overhang, the light from a fire danced along the flagstones of the threshold.

The two girls walked toward the door. Tall shadows danced in the light of the flames, and they could hear a slowly gathering cacophony of whispers, as though thousands of voices were carrying hushed conversations at the same time.

Bluebonnet stopped and pulled her hand from Wendy’s.

“I can’t go in there,” she said, almost pleading. “Why are we here. I don’t like this place.”

“We have to go in,” said Wendy.

“Why!?! What’s in there?”

“I don’t know,” said Wendy looking back at the door. The voices whispered for her to come to them, to come in the cabin. “I saw it in my dreams.”

Come! Come!

Wendy reached her hand back to Bluebonnet.

“Please come with me,” she said. “We have to do to this together. *Please.*”

Bluebonnet reluctantly grabbed Wendy’s hand, and the two girls walked toward the dancing shadows and the flames. Wendy pushed the door open and they stepped into the cabin and...

* *

...Wendy was in her childhood bedroom. The covers were tight to her chest. Her daddy had just left, and she

ached so badly. She could feel wetness in her underwear. She could feel where she'd bruised. The inside of her legs. The inside of her. She could hear him stomping around the house. She could hear him getting another can of beer. She could hear the TV running in the background. Eventually she heard him snoring in the bedroom next to hers. She looked at the door, the sliver of light that crept underneath onto her bedroom floor, the doorknob. She expected it to turn again any moment. Expected him to come back for more, and she whimpered. No tears came, but they welled up inside of her and she thought she would rupture something deep inside of her. She twisted the bedsheets in her sweating palms, and she held on tight until a fitful sleep eventually took her away to where...

...she was in the street playing with a ragged doll. She was four. She was playing with a little boy from down the street, a few years older than her. His older brother was 15 and he was on the steps across the yard, smoking a cigarette and drinking a double-deuce of beer. He was smiling. His hair was greasy, and his smile was greasy too but...

...she was under the stairs. She was 12 giving a 35-year-old man a blowjob. He smelled like fast food and sweat. She whimpered and tried to pull away again, but he had her hair and he was making a noise like a trapped animal. He was smiling so big that...

...someone on the street said something to her. She couldn't hear it, but it was loud, and his friends laughed and then...

...she was crying in a stinking bathroom of an hourly motel room. He was in the bedroom, half asleep. She washed her face with cold water and sat down on the toilet until she...

...was alone in the dumpster, crying out as loudly as she could, which was just a sad mewling, like a dying cat. Her face was bruised and battered, her lips swollen, her teeth and neck aching. She was going to die. She looked up at the cloud-sprung square of sky above her and she sobbed

for all the shitty things that had led her here. She wanted to die. She wanted...

...her mama to sing another song, but it was too late, and it was time to go to bed. Her mama kissed her forehead and gave her a small squeeze, and she could smell the scent of her mama like pine and cotton. She was so happy she could cry. Her mama turned and smiled and then turned out the light, and...

...the driver didn't even stop. He just kept going, and her mama was there, alone, in the street and...

...night came and Wendy couldn't speak anymore. Her voice was crackled and broken from screaming and crying. The stink of the dumpster around her filled her nostrils and she thought it was right that she would die among the trash, among her kinfolk. She closed her eyes with what was left of her eyelids and she slept and then when she...

...woke she was in the big room and there were girls all around her and they looked worried and they looked happy, and she had no idea where she was. Snow White stood over her and washed her face with a wet cloth and for a moment Wendy thought it was her...

...mama paused a moment in the door, her body silhouetted in the hall light. "I love you," she said. "I'll always love you," and then she closed the door and Wendy...

* *

...was back on the 11th floor of the hotel, in the elevator lobby, shivering and wet. Bluebonnet was at her side and the two of them were still holding hands. Ahead of them the Sisters stood mirroring them, also holding hands. Their dark black hair hung limply around their faces, pale and translucent, black lips, black eyes, dresses that were worn and ancient and dirty. Black wisps of smoke and vapor swirled around them like crowns and like capes fluttering in some unfelt wind.

They didn't move their lips, but they said in unison, *You've come along way.*

Wendy tried to move, to pull away, but the Sisters held her in place somehow. She clutched tighter at Bluebonnet's hand, and the younger girl squeezed back.

"I'm so scared," said Wendy.

There's nothing to be afraid of, sister. You are safe. You are home.

"Why'd you let me leave? Why'd you lead me to that place?"

Because you needed to go. The world is big. It's a dangerous place, and it has no use for girls like us. Like you and her and us. You knew that once. You needed to be reminded.

Wendy started to cry in hitching sobs, and the Sisters' black eyes were inscrutable, but Wendy could feel them reaching out to her and touching her, and a warmth spread through her and her tears came stronger and they tore at her as they came out, like poisonous trails.

"Please," she said. "Don't hurt her..."

The Sisters moved closer to them, floating as though propelled by the phantom wind that swirled their vaporous black smoke everywhere. They reached out their hands to the girls, and Wendy tried to pull away. She could feel Bluebonnet struggling as well, but they couldn't move. They could only cling more tightly to each other's hands.

We will never hurt any of you. You are our sisters. We are your protectors. We are the protectors of all girls who are thrown away and forgotten and used. For all those crying daughters of men, who have known only torment and pain. We are here for them, because of them, with them. We are all of them at once. We are the first drop of monthly blood, and the last dying breath. We have always been here and we will always be here, but we bloom like the orchid and then we go away, to be replaced by a new planting, like every generation of women stretching back to Eden, who taught her daughters to navigate their treacherous way through the labyrinth, through this world built by men, for men. Every woman, every breath, every tear. We are. But we are nearly done. Our orchid has bloomed, and it is time for a new planting.

The Sisters reached their pale hands out to Bluebonnet, and they wrapped her tiny face in their hands, and the fear and pain and exhaustion fell from the girl's face, and she seemed suddenly rested and blissful. Wendy burst out in sobs again seeing the little girl look so untroubled. Bluebonnet closed her eyes, and her hand went limp in Wendy's.

She will never hurt again. She will be one of us, beyond pain, beyond sadness, beyond fear and hatred. She is pure and lovely. Can't you see?

And Wendy *could* see, and her chest welled with something she couldn't place, but it burned in her and made her feel bigger than she'd ever felt before. She finally understood and the tears burned and burned in her eyes and on her cheeks. She closed her eyes and waited for the Sisters to touch her and to join Bluebonnet in the new Sisterhood, but after a moment she felt nothing, and she opened her eyes. The Sisters were gone, and Bluebonnet was gone. Wendy was alone in the elevator lobby. A pale light shone from a far-off window.

* *

Wendy took the elevator to the 9th floor. Snow White was there when the doors opened, as though waiting for her in the lobby.

"Is it done?" asked Snow White.

Wendy nodded, and her face crumpled, "They took her, but...but they didn't take me."

Snow White grabbed Wendy in her arms and stroked her hair.

"Why didn't they take me?" asked Wendy.

"Because you're needed here, honey," said Snow White, patting Wendy's back. "You're needed *here*, with the rest of your sisters. It's not your time yet."

Wendy looked up at Snow White, "When will it be my time?"

"You'll know when," said Snow White, letting Wendy go and grabbing her chin. Looking her in the eyes. "You'll know like you knew about the cabin."

Snow White hugged Wendy one last time and then stepped into the open elevator.

“Where are you going?” asked Wendy.

“To join my sister,” said Snow White, pressing the 11th floor button. She had a faint smile on her face. “I’m the slut. There’s always two, the virgin and the whore. Like sisters. I’m the whore. You’ll find your virgin, Wendy.”

The elevator doors closed, and Wendy heard the car ride up two floors and the door open again. She heard footsteps, and then she heard the faint voice of the Sisters.

Then there was silence, and the Sisters ended their long watch.

* *

“Wake up, ladies! It’s planting day!” shouted Wendy, stepping among the rows of sleeping little ones. They slowly lifted their heads and immediately the excitement crackled through the room. Wendy walked over to the little one she’d started calling Clarabelle. She was a small, waifish thing, with a puff of curly hair, a broad, infectious smile, and gigantic eyes.

“Are you ready?” Wendy asked, as Clarabelle sat up and yawned. Her yawn morphed into a smile.

“Of course!” she said, and she got to her feet. She grabbed her poof of hair and grabbed it up into a bunch on the top of her head with a rubber band. “I’m so excited!”

Wendy smiled at her and rubbed her arm softly.

“What kind of flower do you think I’ll find?” Clarabelle asked, pulling on a pair of white tights.

Wendy smiled more, and said, “Whatever it is, I’m sure it’ll be beautiful.”

Wendy hugged the younger girl, and they walked into the big room, Wendy shouting at the little ones to hurry up the whole way. She thought back to her own planting, and her own excitement to be part of something bigger than herself, to be part of a sisterhood that loved and cared for one another. She thought about her mama, and

she was sad that she couldn't be here to see this. She thought about Bluebonnet and Snow White. She thought about the Sisters.

She held Clarabelle's small hands in hers, and she smelled orchids.

If you or someone you know has been sexually assaulted, you are not alone. There are those ready to help.

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