

THREE

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Barbie propped the pink princess phone between her chin and shoulder. Sitting there at the white vanity table, she watched herself talking in the mirror. Her pointed feet were soaking in a small tub of bubble-gum-scented suds. Skipper stood behind her, carefully pulling Barbie's pink comb through her long blonde locks. Barbie watched herself talking, but she could see Skipper there behind her in her red jumper and white blouse, little chestbumps just barely poking out through the cloth.

Skipper in turn watched Barbie as she talked on the phone. Barbie was pretending to be something she wasn't, which Skipper knew was part of the job. If Barbie and Ken didn't pretend, Skipper wouldn't have this fabulous life, with the pool and the palm trees and the vistas. Skipper never had to pretend anything.

"Yes, I have the directions," said Barbie. "Yes, we'll be there at ten tonight. Yes, I have the password. Yes, we know to bring cash for the tires. Yes, it will just be the two of us."

After she hung up, Skipper said, "Tires?"

Barbie looked up at Skipper's face in the mirror. "A code word."

"For what?" asked Skipper.

"Juvenile property. Trade."

"Slaves?" said Skipper. She spritzed some hairspray on Barbie's mane.

"Yup," said Barbie. She yawned. "Have you seen Ken? I feel like having sex."

"Oh, he's out on the deck, doing his exercises."

Barbie removed her feet from their bath and went over to the dressing-room window. Below, she could see Ken in the middle of his daily calisthenics. With his right arm, he removed his left arm and placed it next to him on a mat. Then he removed his left leg, followed by his right one. He liked to focus on his core muscles first. Barbie rubbed her hand between her legs as she watched him do his one-armed crunches. Skipper sat down at the vanity table and tried on some of Barbie's pink lipstick. Barbie began to moan, rubbing harder and faster. When Barbie saw Ken beginning to reinsert his limbs, she ran out of the dressing room.

Skipper admired her bright-pink-painted lips in the mirror. She fluffed her hair and jutted out her chest. She tried rubbing between her legs like Barbie, but nothing happened. So she wandered over to the window and looked down at the deck.

Barbie was smoking a cigarette, reclining on one of the lounge chairs with her negligee pushed up past her navel. Ken, whose left arm still lay on the mat, was pulling one of Barbie's legs off. Then he picked up his free arm and slowly moved it, hand first, into Barbie's empty leg joint. Skipper saw Barbie arch her back and drag deeply on the cigarette. Kneeling before her on his bendable legs, Ken moved the arm in and out of Barbie's pelvic cavity. Skipper closed the curtain and went back downstairs to the deluxe kitchen. It seemed like a good time to make a tray of cupcakes.

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When Father Sunshine and Boy came back in from their patrols, Margo walked right over to Father and knelt at his feet. Something cold and determined had settled into her heart. She was alone in this ugly game.

"Father," she said.

He looked surprised. "Yes, Vessel Omega?"

"I have been thinking about the prophecies."

"You have?"

"Yes. I have been meditating on the Dodecahedron."

"This is great news, Vessel Omega."

Margo nodded her head, bowing a little and doing her best to convey absolute deference.

"I just wanted to let you know that I look forward to learning more about the hieratic ordinations."

She glanced around the cramped van. Did the Sunshine children exchange looks, or was it her imagination?

Susie appeared and knelt down next to Margo. "I look forward to it, too," she said. Margo tried to decode her tone of voice, but it was unreadable.

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The old judge and his aide had shown H. Mouse around the offices of the Justice Building. The office that would soon be his overlooked a small park with a fountain, a bronze statue of the Founder of the Courts, and some cherry trees which were of course now bare and spindly. Next to an impressive collection of diplomas and certificates, the old judge had pictures on his wall, posed portraits of his family: his matronly wife, who had wrinkly ears and a long nose; his five offspring and their many progeny, all dressed up for some formal occasion. H. Mouse had waddled over to the desk and touched the green blotter paper.

"Go ahead," the old judge had said in his creaky voice, eyes twinkling. "Try it out." He gestured at the desk chair with his cane.

H. Mouse had sat down at the desk then, and he felt completely split in two. Half of him was absorbing the enormity of responsibility that he had not just voluntarily accepted but actively pursued. Had he been crazy, he wondered. The other half of him was reeling and spinning, dizzy with terror and guilt. His poor little daughters. Would he ever be able to have their portraits taken and hang them on the sober gray wallpaper?

The old judge patted H.'s shoulder. "I know, son. I know. The gravity of sitting at that desk for the first time."

H. nodded. "It's powerful," he said, choking back a sob.

"You're ready," the old one had said. He'd moved around the desk and sat across from H. He'd leaned in toward his replacement. "You know, I probably wouldn't have chosen to retire this year if I hadn't gotten wind of your plans to run. I knew you were the only one besides me who could beat the other guy. And I knew you had the integrity and perspective to carry out the duties of this job."

Now H. Mouse was standing outside Harrigan's Pub, waiting for the journalist. A taxi pulled up, and out hopped Liz Fox. He recognized her from the picture next to her byline in the *Eagle*. She was more lively in real life, he thought. And younger than he expected. She was wearing a form-fitting black coat. Her black eyes flashed when she greeted him. And she was certainly not shy. In an almost masculine gesture, she pushed open the door of Harrigan's and held it open.

H. Mouse had been to the pub once or twice before. Really it wasn't a pub but a pubbish expensive restaurant frequented by lawyers and politicians. Tiffany lamps with dim bulbs hung low over the intimate tables, which were placed far enough apart that eavesdropping was difficult. The floor was carpeted and the chairs densely cushioned. Harrigan's was famous for its blue-cheese steak and stiff drinks. H. reminded himself to be careful.

"Such a pleasure to meet you," said Liz to H., after the maître had taken her coat and pulled a chair out for her.

â€œIâ€™ve been following your career for a while.â€

â€œYes,â€ he said. â€œI know. Thank you for the attention you helped us get for the school lunch case last year.â€

â€œOh, you know,â€ she said, â€œIâ€™m not advocating for anyone or anything. Iâ€™m an unbiased member of the press.â€ She laughed. Her black eyes seemed to slant up when she smiled. A waiter came to take their drink orders.

â€œDirty martini,â€ said Liz.

H. was about to order what he really wanted, which was a scotch, double, on the rocks. But then he stopped himself. Drinking, and the inhibitions it loosened, had gotten him into trouble in the past. He pushed the image of Barbie and Ken, that midnight drive a couple years ago, and the briefcase full of cash, out of his head. â€œClub soda with a slice of lime.â€

When they were alone again, Liz Fox pulled a tape recorder out of a bulging black bag. As she fiddled with a microphone and some batteries, she said, â€œI didnâ€™t know that H. Mouse, State Judgeâ€elect, was a teetotaler.â€

â€œOh, Iâ€™m not,â€ said H. quickly. â€œItâ€™s just that Iâ€™m on antibiotics for a, um, an eye thing, conjunctivitis, that is. Canâ€™t drink. Certainly not if Iâ€™m to drive home.â€ He patted his tummy, having no idea why he did so.

â€œGotcha,â€ said Liz Fox. â€œSo, is it cool with you if I turn this on now?â€

He nodded.

She asked the usual puff questions heâ€™d expected: would he still have time for the community work with his neighbors, was he going to redecorate the office, and how did his daughters feel about his win? (He had practiced an answer for this one in front of the mirror, but still he winced when he gave it.) About half an hour into the interview, their salads came, Liz Fox ordered a second martini, and H. Mouse asked for a ginger ale. Sipping her fresh drink, Liz pushed the microphone a little closer to him and said, â€œSo, Mr. Mouse. Thereâ€™s a reason youâ€™re so well liked. Your messages of equality, integrity, and parity have really resonated across many districts and demographics. Your grassroots campaigning appealed to both young folks and the older ones who remembered a time when politics was simpler and more meaningful and politicians really accomplished things. But thereâ€™s one issue that Iâ€™and many others, even many of your supportersâ€™am confused about your position onâ€ She gestured with a swizzle stick upon which three olives were impaled. â€œAnd thatâ€™s this whole repeal-the-statute-of-limitations thing for manslaughter cases.â€

H. Mouse shuddered. â€œAh, yes,â€ he said. He took a breath, let it out. Heâ€™d learned in his days as a lawyer and then attorney that it was sometimes good to just let people keep talking rather than jump in too soon.

After a moment, Liz Fox continued: â€œWell, in general youâ€™re seen as so fair. Pretty liberal without being radical.â€

â€œUh huh.â€ H.â€™s heart was racing.

â€œWell, I just donâ€™t understand. I mean, even if someone did cause someoneâ€™s death two decades agoâ€say, in a hit-and-run when they were a teenager, or out hunting and accidentally hitting the wrong target, or because they were all hopped up on caffeine at the time and didnâ€™t know what they were doingâ€but like I said, itâ€™s been two decades, why dig up the old wounds? Why go after them if theyâ€™ve never killed again? If theyâ€™ve matured and had full lives? Donâ€™t you think that if theyâ€™re basically good and mean wellâ€and isnâ€™t that what you believe? That we are all basically good?â€why punish them if so much time has passed?â€

â€œHmm,â€ said H. He took a sip of ginger ale, and was grateful that he hadnâ€™t ordered scotch.

Liz slid an olive off the swizzle stick with her sharp little teeth. Her nose twitched. â€œSome citizens thought that maybe you took that stance to get the backing of certain groups, crime-victim groups that normally wouldnâ€™t support a candidate as liberal as yourself.â€

â€œAh,â€ said H., nodding.

Liz flipped a page of her memo pad. â€œFor instance, Offspring of the Mugged, Association for the Return of Separated Limbs and Digits, United Organization of Poaching Sufferersâ€ She gnawed another olive and gazed across the table at H.

He took a bite of salad and chewed it slowly. Then he spoke: â€œWell, Liz. I appreciate the question and Iâ€™m grateful for the chance to articulate my position to your readers. Yes, I do believe weâ€™re all good. Not one of us is born bad, and thereâ€™s no such thing as evil. If a citizen has killed someone, no matter how long ago, and they havenâ€™t paid penance of some sort, they are still living with their guiltâ€most likely secretly. I imagine itâ€™s a very lonely place to be, a very sad and dark place. And I imagine that, given that thereâ€™s goodness at everyoneâ€™s core, they wish to say theyâ€™re sorry but they donâ€™t know how.â€

Liz Fox nodded. H. went on: â€œNow, itâ€™s natural to be scared of punishment. Most folks donâ€™t have the unbelievable courage it takes to come forward and say, â€œIâ€™ve done something bad.â€ A repeal of that statute of limitations would simply give those whoâ€™ve done something terrible in the past a chance to do the right thing. To pay the proper price and then move forward with their lives, never to live in shame and darkness again.â€

He still had it. Even under stress he could still do it. He hadnâ€™t wept, hadnâ€™t pounded the table. Hadnâ€™t sounded defensive. Liz was smiling at him.

â€œThanks so much for the clarification,â€ she said. She reached over and cupped his cheek, which H. found startling but not unpleasant. â€œI think thatâ€™s enough for this interview.â€

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â€œThus the Power enters my vessel body, and thus the Power gives me strength. As the Dodecahedron was in the First Days, so is it now. The Dodecahedron is constant, the pulp of the vessel is weak. So why does the Power grant its Spirit Carriers these vessel bodies?â€

â€œTo fulfill the prophecies and distribute the Ordinations?â€

â€œYes, Vessel Omega.â€

Girl Sunshine swiveled her head. Margo could feel Girlâ€™s cold, dull gaze, sweeping up and down Margoâ€™s body.

â€œVessel Omega, in what form will the Power signal that the momentum has begun?â€

â€œThirty hours of darkness, Father.â€

â€œAnd then, Vessel Omegaâ€?â€

Margo opened her mouth to speak again, but Susie blurted, breathless: â€œThe prophecies!â€

â€œVessel Alpha, I was querying Vessel Omega.â€ Father hinged an arm up and pointed at the corner of the van. â€œThe Power commands you to Rest.â€

â€œYes, Father,â€ said Susie.

Margo kept her head locked squarely in place, but in her peripheral vision she saw her sister, quivering a little, move toward their blanket.

â€œVessel Omega, what sound will we vessels hear when the Darkness lifts and the Fulfillment commences?â€

â€œHissing. The hissing of serpents.â€

Father Sunshine hovered his hand over Margoâ€™s head. â€œYes, Vessel Omega. Girl, you may take Vessel Omega to the spigot now.â€

Condensation clouded the vanâ€™s windows. It was dusk. Outside the tin cans rattled on the line.

Margo heard the scratchy sound of Girlâ€™s hip hinges as Girl stood up. Margo stood and followed her out of the van. It was drizzling. This was her third or fourth time going to the spigot with Girl. Standing there in the mist as the icy water rushed into the bucket and splashed on her legs, Margo thought about shaking Girl. She wanted to punish her, interrogate her, show her something real. She imagined stomping on one of Girlâ€™s hands and commanding her to admit that she felt pain.

But Margo knew better. Margo cranked the spigot shut. Girl reached for the handle of the bucket. Their eyes met. They stood like that for a while, and it felt to Margo like a dare. She broke away first. Girl picked up the bucket.

It had stopped raining. H. Mouse was driving home, driving on the right side of the road, driving on the right side of the road, driving on the right side of the road. He imagined they were all returning to happy, safe offspring and comforting spouses. He felt the sweat begin to bead behind his ears. But then, couldn't he take a little credit if they were going home to security and prosperity? In his district, anyway? He'd been a good village councillor. And now he had won this election, fair and square. One week from today, he would be H. Mouse, State Judge. And in his new post, all of these citizens would be a part of his greater family. He had a responsibility to them.

Again, he commended himself for not ordering that scotch he'd wanted. He went over the moment in his head: when Liz Fox had asked him about the statute of limitations, he had waited. He hadn't jumped to the defensive. He'd let her explain her question. She hadn't been probing into his association with Mr. Glet at all, as it turned out. Not that he had done anything illegal there. But it just seemed best not to broadcast.

When Mr. Glet invited him over to smoke cigars and drink port; when Mr. Glet told H. the story of what had happened twenty years ago, how Mrs. Glet was tripped on the real electric escalator that really went up and down at Lucky's; when Mr. Glet explained how a witness had finally come forward just three months after the statute of limitations had expired—a witness who had seen the long umbrella dangling from the killer's gloved fist; when Mr. Glet's eyes welled up as he explained that this witness was not allowed to submit testimony; when Mr. Glet announced with a tremor in his voice that he knew H. was the only one who had the integrity to set things straight with this manslaughter problem; when Mr. Glet suggested H. set up a consultancy firm and advise Mr. Glet on civic matters; when the checks started coming in, far above the limit on campaign contributions, made out to HM, LLC and signed P. I. Glet: the law had not actually been broken. Still, it had seemed counterproductive to bring the public's attention to the arrangement. H. and Mr. Glet had agreed on this point.

H. had practiced what he would say if a reporter or opponent had stumbled upon it, and he'd even felt satisfied that it wasn't technically not the truth: over the course of the past year, he had become friendly with one of his constituents and learned his tragic story; they had gotten to know each other while H. Mouse was doing some consulting work for him; through casual conversations, H. had had his mind changed about manslaughter and so, yes, while there was an indirect connection between his friendship with P. I. Glet and his pressing for a change to the law, nothing untoward had happened. But, thank goodness, he still hadn't needed to give that speech.

H. signaled and turned onto the curved exit ramp. For a moment, he had forgotten everything, and he felt the usual swell in his heart that came when he'd been away from his daughters for a few hours and was returning home to them. But by the time he got to the end of the ramp, he remembered. And the agony set in once again.

23

Barbie knew that others had the kinds of jobs where they woke up at the same time every day, arrived at the office at 8:59 a.m., talked about lunch with their coworkers, packed up their briefcases at 5:30 p.m., and forgot about work until the next morning at 8:59 a.m. Barbie didn't pay taxes; she had five driver's licenses all bearing different names and three passports; she woke up at a different time every day, and sometimes she didn't sleep at all. She liked it this way. What was it to be part of the system, arriving and leaving as predictably as the second hand on a clock? Why, to be one of those drones was to be practically dead. Barbie chose to feel alive. Yes, her life included danger. A lot of it. But being in danger made her appreciate the moment, made her appreciate life's simple pleasures like sunny days, pretty clothes, good food, and having her orifices penetrated.

Barbie and Ken stood outside of the low warehouse building on the edge of the canal. They'd been buzzed in at the front gate and patted down by a couple of thugs in a decrepit trailer. Now they were waiting for the head of the whole operation.

He came out wearing camo and a beret, Purple Heart pinned on his chest.

He shook their hands. Didn't even glance at Barbie's chestbumps, which surprised her. He stood rigidly straight. Barbie could practically see his six-pack through his tight shirt.

"Corporal Joe," said Barbie.

"Ben, Karly," he said. "You can just call me G.I. Only ones who call me Corporal are my bodyguards and the product."

"Where is the product?" asked Ken.

"I'd like to talk in my office first. There are some business matters I like to go over with new clients before we get started. Standard stuff."

They followed him across the dirt yard and into the warehouse. First they passed through a dark foyer; then a heavy sliding door opened before them, revealing a fluorescent-lit room with a big gray desk, filing cabinets, a black phone with a blinking light, and a few chairs. It looked like any warehouse office, Barbie thought.

"Have a seat," said G.I. They sat. "Coffee?"

"No, thanks," said Barbie.

G.I. picked up the black receiver and pushed a button on the phone. "Pam, may we have the standard registration materials?"

A minute later, Pam arrived. She was short and chubby, wearing an ochre pantsuit. Her hair was badly permed, Barbie thought, and her makeup was all wrong. She had on orthopedic shoes that laced up the sides. She handed G.I. Joe a manila folder and shuffled out of the room.

G.I. opened the folder and took a ballpoint pen out of his breast pocket. "So," he said. "I know my assistants screened you ahead of time, but for my records here, who did you say referred you?"

"Paddy Skuldug," said Ken.

"Good guy," said G.I. "And how much product did you have in mind, Karly?"

"Two, maybe three," said Barbie.

"Great. Now, do looks matter?"

"What do you mean?" asked Barbie.

"Well, you know, depending on your intended use, the appearance may or may not be important."

"Oh, I see. No, looks don't matter," said Barbie. For a second she thought it would be nice to give a sexy little slave to Ken for Valentine's Day. But then she reminded herself that they weren't doing this for fun. They were here on H. Mouse's dime.

G.I. checked a box.

"Age? Preferred range, that is?"

"Young," said Ken.

"The choices we offer are: A, juvenile; B, pubescent or young adolescent; C, late adolescent; or D, fully grown."

"A," said Barbie. "Juvenile."

"Alrighty," said G.I. Joe. "I like to develop good relations with my customers. Most return to do business again. So, are there any questions that you have for me? Obviously I can't answer everything, but I can talk about our procedures here. Oh, also, I should let you know, too, that this," he pointed to a mirror affixed to the wall behind him, "is a camera, that the room is miked, and that five of my biggest guys are standing outside right now."

"Is it okay if I smoke?" asked Barbie, reaching into her patent-leather purse.

"No," said Joe.

"I have a question," said Ken. "I'm really just curious on my part, but how did you get into this business?"

"Well, Ben, I'm glad you asked, because the answer may surprise you. When I was down in the jungle fighting the war, you wouldn't believe the suffering I saw. In the villages, in the swamplands, and in the nomadic encampments, everywhere these pretty little things were caught in the violence, starving and desperate. The insurgents used their bodies like meat, and some of the Democratic Liberation officers weren't much better, I'm sorry to say. I figured, there's got to be a way to help them. When my tour was done I tried to set

up an aid foundation, but in spite of my Purple Heart, no one would give me the time of day. So I had to give a clandestine business, bringing these victims here and placing them in new homes.â€

As Joe gave his little speech, Barbie noticed that his knee was jiggling under his desk and he kept licking his lips. What a pile of bull dung, thought Barbie. Did anyone believe this crap about the noble soldier? She didnâ€™t care about the origin of his wares, but she hated a bad liar. Her little crush on him had completely dissolved.

â€That is a wonderful story,â€ said Barbie. â€May we see your selection now?â€

â€Yes, Karly, but as you know, I need to keep a deposit, whether or not you wind up actually purchasing something today. Itâ€™s for security reasons.â€

Ken opened the briefcase and placed a pile of bills on Joeâ€™s desk.

A minute later they were walking across the foyer again. They boarded a freight elevator, and when the rear doors opened there were two huge guards waiting there. They flanked Joe as he led Barbie and Ken to a catwalk.

â€Here we are,â€ said Joe. â€These twelve suites are our juveniles.â€

The suites were wire cages, each with a few mattresses on the floor. Their occupants sure didnâ€™t look like they came from the jungle. And most of them looked miserable, even catatonic. Probably drugged. In the first, Barbie saw one of them pushing a small red ball back and forth. Next to her, another chewed on her own toe. Neither looked up. In the second cage, one of the captives ran up to them, slamming against the metal, smiling desperately, batting her eyes and wiggling her rear end. In yet another cage, three were piled in a heap, asleep or passed out.

â€Theyâ€™re all healthy,â€ said Joe. â€Theyâ€™ve had their vaccinations, and theyâ€™ve been checked for diseases. Theyâ€™re a good product.â€

Barbie liked H. Mouse. Liked him more than most of their clients. Even though she had been hoping this would be a quick job, in and out, she was relieved that she wouldnâ€™t have to tell H. that his daughters had been in this horrible place. She was pretty sure that Joeâ€™s wards never recovered.

The plan had been to walk away if Margo and Susie werenâ€™t here. But back in Joeâ€™s office, Barbie decided to take a huge chance. If it got her and Ken in trouble, well, life was full of trouble if you lived it right.

â€Joeâ€™,â€ Barbie said. She really wanted a cigarette.

â€Iâ€™m getting the feeling that none of the juveniles suited you. Are you sure youâ€™re not looking for the next age-level up? The pubescents tend to be more lively.â€

â€I have to level with you, G.I.,â€ said Barbie. Ken looked over at her. â€Weâ€™re not looking to purchase random juveniles. Weâ€™re looking for two specific ones who disappeared last week.â€ She turned her gaze to the mirror on the wall and addressed the camera. G.I. reached for something under his desk. Barbie leaned forward and touched his arm. â€Weâ€™re not cops. Far from it. We operate in the same shadow world as you do, friend. Right now, in fact, weâ€™re working for someone who has hired us specifically to avoid the scrutiny of the law. And his daughters were taken from him. Since theyâ€™re not here, I thought maybe you could give us some leads for where else to look. And then we can all pretend we never met.â€

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Margo and her father had always had a special connection. She knew him, she knew him so well. People said she was like him, that she resembled him. Even though they were close, it wasnâ€™t actually the case that Margo was so much like him. Sometimes he seemed like the young one to her, and she felt old, as if she were the grown-up. Sheâ€™d never known her mother, and she sensed that in some roundabout way sheâ€™d become her own motherâ€™ and by extension, her fatherâ€™s helpmate. Sometimes she thought H. was naâ€™ve and needed protection. Her poor dad, how he took everything to heart. He himself had no idea, really, how fragile he wasâ€™ and sometimes, when she looked at her father across the room at a library fund-raiser or teatime meet and greet for his constituents, she half expected him to crumple into a helpless and rumpled pile of cloth, like a pillowcase thatâ€™s been left in the dryer. Nobody else seemed to notice, though. Her father seemed to have the magic touch with the citizens. Margo thought that maybe what she saw as helpless and vulnerable in her father translated into sincere and real for the voters. Thatâ€™s what they always said about her dad in articles and editorials: heâ€™s *real*.

Margo knew, she *knew*, that her father was in agony right now. She knew the kind of angst and guilt and fear he was experiencing. She knew he wouldnâ€™t be able to function for very long without her and Susie at his side. She figured heâ€™d probably won the election, and it broke her heart to imagine him unable to celebrate. Her father was proud. He also had a certain shyness, which he pretended was determination and ambition. And he was vigilant about maintaining his public image. Margo figured he hadnâ€™t told the police about the fact that she and Susie were missing. Not even Bub Flytrap.

But how would he find them without the police? She didnâ€™t want to think about it. Once, when she came home from school a little early, sheâ€™d heard her father whispering inside the coat closet. Another time, he said he was going to be at the office all day until late, working on the plastics recycling expansion proposalâ€™ but when she called him to tell him sheâ€™d gotten an A+ on the earth science quiz, the receptionist said heâ€™d only dropped by for a few minutes that morning to pick up his mail and messages. Margo was aware that, while she knew her father very, very well, she didnâ€™t know everything about him. And she was glad she didnâ€™t.

These were Margoâ€™s thoughts as she recited the twelve Elemental Ordinations.

â€Thus the Power commands: that the serpent swallows its own venom and grows stronger; that the scorpion stings its vessel; that the stags lock antler to antler.â€ Father Sunshine intoned the Third Ordination. He was wearing his black poncho and white hood.

â€Serpent, venom; scorpion, stings; stag, antler,â€ answered Susie, Margo, and Boy and Girl Sunshine. They all knelt on a mat at his feet.

Father Sunshine inhaled. â€Thus the Power commands: that the avalanche buries the rot; that the snowdrift smothers the poison; that the flood swallows the putrescence of flesh.â€

â€Avalanche, rot; snowdrift, poison; flood, flesh,â€ they answered.

Margo looked sideways at Susie. Susieâ€™s eyes were closed, and she was wearing an alien smile, a version of the ones the Sunshine Family wore on their shiny beige faces. Margo felt that bitter twist. Her sister really was this weak. Where was Susieâ€™s conscience, her consciousness? Sometimes, here in the van, Margo thought maybe she didnâ€™t love Susie anymore. She saw Susie differently now. If they ever got out of this, Susie would be the kind that gives herself to the first suitor to tell her sheâ€™s pretty. Sheâ€™d be the kind that orders products off the television. Sheâ€™d be the kind that would join an angry mob.

Were they already up to the Eighth Ordination? Margoâ€™s mouth kept moving.

She glanced up and out, through the circular window. It was always dark here on the mountain, deep in the trees. Their branches and dense foliage made a constant twilight, and the icy wind shuddered across the clearing, riling little twisters of dust and pine needles.

â€Thus the Power commands,â€ chanted Father Sunshine. He kept his voice perfectly flat. Margo had heard Susie practicing, trying to hit the same kind of flatness. â€â€™that the sun shall go dark for twelve moons; that the sands absorb the air; that the hieroglyphics are restored to the vesselsâ€™ pyramidal tracts.â€

It was the final ordination. Margo recited the response along with the others. She squeezed her eyes shut to look extra devout. She sat up straight and bobbed her head and pretended she was experiencing blissful transcendence.

Afterward, Father Sunshine commended her chanting: â€I could see the Power vibrations pulsating in your vessel body, Vessel Omega,â€ he said. â€You are getting closer and closer to the next level of purity.â€

â€Thank you, Father,â€ she said, lowering her eyes.

How easy it was to pretend. How easy it was to separate her inside and outside, to make her limbs and voice and face behave one way, while her mind and heart were somewhere else completely.

25

Skipper flipped the pages of a magazine as she ate her bowl of fruit cocktail. She always picked out the maraschino cherries first, and often didn't even touch the grapefruit. It was sunny and hot out on the deck. The parrots chattered in the palm trees. She looked at the pictures in the magazine and imagined she was also in a picture in a magazine. She could see the picture: Skipper on the deck, in her plaid dress and bare feet, eating fruit salad, flipping the pages of a magazine, and imagining herself in a picture.

26

The young clerk, Benjy Weevil, was clearly nervous around the newly elected State Judge. H. Mouse knew that Benjy had been an intern until a couple of months before, and that working under H. would be his first job with real responsibilities. Benjy Weevil didn't smell very good. H. hoped it was just due to anxiety, and that the odor would go away once the clerk relaxed into his job.

H. had noticed that his own body wasn't behaving right. He didn't smell the way he should, either. He was running to the bathroom often; he'd found a private one in the basement of the Justice Building. He couldn't eat very much at a sitting, and he was losing weight. The other judges and the State Attorney joked about his nerves—they'd all been through it, they said: the adrenaline, the insomnia. They called it "the swearing-in diet." "To take off all the weight you gained at those county fairs and banquets during the campaign," said Justice Lynx, whose policies H. Mouse despised, but whom he couldn't help but like for her slinky walk and insouciant sense of humor.

He hadn't officially started the job yet, thank goodness. No, he was just having some boxes and files moved in while the old judge and his aides packed up. The court was on a break, the State Legislature was on a recess. There were some briefing meetings to attend, some lessons to learn on navigating the culture of the Justice Building. He walked through all of this as if he were being programmed by some unseen remote control. Somehow he was able to function, even as the picture of his daughters throbbed inside his skull like a headache.

Sometimes he went down to the private bathroom in the basement even when he didn't need to use it. He'd lower the toilet cover and sit on it, just trying to breathe and make reason of things. He thought of Margo most often. It was she whom he stood to betray, to disappoint. He couldn't bear the idea of falling down in front of her. If something happened to Margo, if he didn't find her in time to prevent some irreversible damage, she would never forgive him, and then, well, then he would just have to die. With Susie it was different: it's not that he loved his elder daughter any less, it was simply that they spoke a different language. He knew that Susie's mind worked in a different way from his and Margo's. Susie would be fine, even if she wasn't. And Margo might not be fine, even if she was.

Two days earlier, Barbie had called his private line, the one his daughters didn't know about, the one in the coat closet. She had spoken in vague terms, but he was pretty sure about what she'd meant: that there was progress. On the one hand, he hated the thought that his daughters' lives might be dependent on Barbie and Ken. On the other hand, Barbie and Ken had never let him down. He trusted them. He paid for that trust, paid handsomely, but still it was trust.

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Barbie handed Olga Schevschenko the cheap vinyl travel bag. The alley smelled like rotting orange rinds and pig offal. Barbie was wearing a black wig and a trench coat. She looked hot, like a hot spy. Sounds from the restaurant—dishes clattering, water running, cooks and waiters shouting and joking—buried Olga and Barbie's brief conversation. Barbie knew that Olga Schevschenko was not her real name, no more than Barbie's name was Angela Goldentwig. Barbie knew Olga's accent was probably just as fake as Barbie's. It didn't matter, so long as her information was real, as real as the money in the cheap vinyl travel bag.

Olga passed Barbie a worn manila envelope. "The details are in here," she said, in that ridiculous accent. "I'm not doing this for the money," she added.

Barbie took out a cigarette and placed it in her long, lacquered cigarette holder, which she thought was a really nice touch. She French-inhaled. As the smoke curled away from her, she said, "Of course not."

"There are scattered settlements across the country, especially on the far coast. They tend to encamp in the mountains, and they'll watch a community for a long time before deciding who to take."

Barbie nodded. "How do they decide?"

"It's all in the papers. I've given you some of their original mimeographs. Their decisions are based on messages they think they're getting from the Power."

Barbie snorted. "The *Power*?"

Olga didn't smile. Grimly she asked, "Have you ever dealt with true believers before?"

Barbie couldn't even imagine what that meant. She shook her head.

"They are the most dangerous of all. Be wary if you find them. They will not think twice about giving their own lives, or taking anyone else's, if they're convinced it's what their scriptures tell them to do."

Barbie nodded, trying to take it in. The lowlife scum she was used to confronting might care about nothing but themselves; however, they did care about themselves.

"True believers, Angela, are like a virus. Be forewarned." And then Olga turned and walked up the alley, over the cobblestones, through the oily steam spewing from the kitchen vents, and to the iron gate, which she slipped through as quietly as she had arrived.