

The Painted Slate

Her blond hair and sunken face were so pale that she might have been mistaken for a ghost. She looked dead, but her chest rose and fell with shallow, hopeful breaths. Dr. Tripur listened to the slow and determined heartbeat echoing through his stethoscope.

“She’s dehydrated and she’s lost a lot of blood,” the doctor announced to the young medical student standing behind him. The student, Rajeesh, scratched the observations down on a clipboard. A female nurse prepared a unit of O-negative blood for transfusion. Rajeesh felt compelled to add an observation of his own, to impress the veteran doctor. “She’s very thin,” he said hesitantly, and waited for a nod from his mentor before adding this to his notes.

“What do we know about her?” Dr. Tripur asked.

Rajeesh scanned the file on his clipboard. “The man who brought her to the hospital works at a hotel just south of Dharavi. He said he found the patient unconscious in her room, lying on the bathroom floor. He thinks she might have been like that for a few days. We don’t know her name; she had no identification. She’s an American, the man knew that much.”

“But he didn’t know her name?”

“He thinks she registered with an alias.”

“Make note of it, it’s all we have.” Dr. Tripur leaned over the woman, examining her bandaged

wrist, which was fractured in two places. “What were her other injuries?”

Rajeesh read the woman’s chart aloud as the doctor continued his examination. Her hands were soft and smooth, her skin as fine as silk. Her face, despite its morbid pallor, was quite beautiful. He couldn’t imagine what such a woman was doing alone in India, let alone in a hotel room on the border of Mumbai’s poorest slums, where guests gave false names and were left to lie unconscious on the floor for days on end.

Suddenly, the woman’s face twitched. Dr. Tripur gently pulled back her eyelid and flashed a light across her eye. The pupil did not contract against the light and he tried the other eye. “Hello?” he said in English, but the woman did not respond. “Good morning, can you hear me?” The woman’s face twitched again and her body jerked, but Dr. Tripur knew that her movements were not a reaction to his query.

“Please,” she moaned softly, speaking to something within her mind.

“Please.”

She was so cold. It was snowing in the darkness. The flakes were sharp and icy, and made a whispering sound as they landed on her shoulders and in her hair. She was standing outside a window, looking at a man inside. He was crying; his whole body shaking with heavy sobs. His handsome face was red and wet with tears. She wanted to go to him, to comfort him. She reached out to him as he turned away.

“Please.”

“There are high levels of Phenobarbital in her blood,” Rajeesh continued, pausing only to turn the page. “They pumped her stomach in the emergency room but the barbiturate has already been absorbed by her system.”

Dr. Tripur nodded. “It has suppressed her central nervous system. She could be in a coma for

several days, but her vital signs are acceptable so we don't need to schedule hemodialysis to clean her blood. She should improve significantly after the transfusion.”

She was in a car.

She turned the steering wheel left and right, and stomped on the break, but the car did not respond. Instead, it slid sideways across an unlit road, the beam of its headlights slicing through an inky black forest. An eerie calm fell over her as she watched the trees sweep by the windshield. She waited for grief or fear to take hold of her, but all she felt was relief. She reached down and unfastened the clasp on her seatbelt.

“If he's gone,” she prayed, “take me, too.”

“It was probably a suicide attempt.”

The doctor considered his young colleague's idea, but shook his head in disagreement. “She overdosed, certainly, but if she had meant to kill herself she easily could have with Phenobarbital. More likely, she was taking it to relieve the pain of her injuries.”

“Wouldn't she be more inclined to seek treatment for her injuries than self-medicate with a fist full of downers?”

“A good point,” Dr. Tripur granted to the young man. “I don't think we can assume anything about this woman's inclinations or her circumstances.”

Bolstered by this concession, Rajeesh proposed a second theory. “The Phenobarbital could have been prescribed as a sedative following one of her surgeries.”

Dr. Tripur looked up. “Surgeries?”

Rajeesh found the x-rays in the patient's file and handed them to the doctor. “A few cosmetic procedures. I would guess they were all performed within the last two or three years.”

The doctor held the x-rays up to the window to see what Rajeesh was talking about. “A few!”

he exclaimed. “She’s had at least five procedures on her face alone. Porex implants, silicone and fat injections, bone reductions... I don’t see any signs of disfiguration, but what she’s had is tantamount to reconstructive surgery!”

The two men looked at the woman, watching her eyes dart back and forth as she slept. Rajesh could barely imagine the months and pain and frustration it must have taken her to recover from so many surgeries. “Why would someone do that to themselves?”

She stood in front of a mirror, staring at a face she didn’t recognize. She tried to remember the person she expected to see. A memory of two men came to her instead. She shook her head to clear it, and tried again. She saw a man above her, making love with pleasure on his face and something cold in his eyes. She saw a house and a river. She saw a naked woman arching her back against the floor. She couldn’t think straight. There was music, growing louder and louder. She looked around, trying to see where it was coming from.

Suddenly, there were people everywhere, sitting at tables and milling around in a smoky room. She tried to concentrate. She tried to understand how it all had started, but something deep down told her she would be happier in the dark.

Part One: Actions and Consequences

Chapter One

“Pervert.”

Sarah hissed it under her breath. She was getting goose bumps. It felt like his eyes had hands - the kind of hands that can touch you everywhere at the same time, with wet palms and cold fingers.

He didn't hear her above the music. “Sorry little girl, what did you say?” Even his voice was dripping sweat. He sounded like a bee had stung him in the mouth; like his tongue was too thick to fit behind his teeth. At least he'd managed to drag his eyes up to her face, and their bright blueness was startling, contrasted as it was against his swollen and pasty face. His eyes were the first thing that Sarah recognized about Lewis Fallon.

“Whatcha drinking?” she repeated, and this time her voice wavered nervously. He didn't seem to realize who she was. She hid her face behind the blonde wig that covered her short, dark hair.

“Whisky.” Lewis Fallon let his head fall forwards onto his chest, exhausted after the exertion of placing the order.

Sarah turned to the man beside him. “What about...”

“Beer.” His friend flicked cigarette ash to make her get out of the way. “Move it, honey, or take off your shirt.”

She tried to force her grimace into a smile. “The show will start any minute now. I'll fetch your drinks.”

Turning on the balls of her feet, Sarah's shoes skated an inch on the slick bar room floor, the leather straps cutting into her ankles and across the tops of her feet. It was suddenly claustrophobic in the club, the music for the eleven o'clock show getting louder and louder as she elbowed her way toward the bar.

She would put in the order and have another girl deliver it to the table. There were several other blondes working in the club that night and Lewis would never know the difference. She would slip backstage, out of sight, before he got the first taste of his whisky.

She should have left at ten o'clock when her shift ended, but everywhere she'd turned there was another man waving a twenty in her face, asking for a drink, hoping for attention. *One more order*, Sarah had told herself over and over, *this is the last one*.

Suddenly, Sarah was grabbed from behind, a strong hand pushing down on her shoulder. Her eyes instinctively flickered to the bouncer in the corner of the room. He was looking the other way, watching one of the Chicago regulars get a lap dance from Leona, a pale-skinned redhead with impossibly long legs.

"Where are the hookers?" a voice shouted close to her ear. Sarah turned to look at the man who was holding on to her, as much to steady himself as to get her attention. She shook him loose, but felt herself relax. He was young and harmless; a happy drunk enjoying his bachelor party. He was wearing a silly grin, and what looked like a red, sequined g-string on the top of his head. His friends, sitting at the table behind him, were all wearing the same suspicious, slightly fearful expression that young men have when their friend is about to tie the knot. It was a look that came from simultaneously worrying that they might be next, and that it may never be their turn.

"Pardon?" Sarah leaned closer to hear him. She knew that she needed to keep moving, but the party had already tipped her sixty dollars and she could see a wad of unspent bills still lying on the table.

"Dude, they're not hookers, they're strippers," one of his buddies added helpfully.

“Yeah, where are the naked girls?”

“The show’s about to start,” Sarah told him, turning back to his table to clear the empty bottles. As she collected them onto her tray she felt fingers, cold and wet from being wrapped around a bottle, push a few bills into the waistband of her short skirt. “Need another round?” she asked, trying to muster a grateful smile.

“Hell, yeah.”

“Coming right up.” It would only take a minute. It would be the last order of the night.

There was an explosion of applause and cat calls around her as the first dancer stepped onto the stage.

“Brian, I need a Bud, and a Jack on ice!” Sarah shouted to the bartender, a tall brick-shaped Irishman who was as wide across as two normal men. “And those kids need another round of Heinekens.”

She added the orders to her tickets as Brian fetched the bottles from under the bar. He proceeded to open them by twisting the lids hard against the once-soft skin inside his forearm. “What are you doing here, Sarah?” he asked. “Don’t you turn into a pumpkin if you’re not home by eleven?” He grunted with effort as he opened another bottle and slapped it down on the bar.

“Something like that.” Sarah checked her watch. “I have a few more minutes.” She looked back at the table of young men. They couldn’t even see the stage from where they were sitting but they were all whooping and hollering for the fun of making a racket. They were typical Iowan boys, clean cut in a way that boys just weren’t in other parts of the country. Every night some would venture across the Mississippi River into Illinois, where Sarah worked serving drinks four nights a week in a “Gentlemen’s” club called Club Corina.

The club was one of a handful in East Dubuque, all lining the same street that was amusingly named Sinsinawa Avenue. The whispered promises of *Sin-Sin*, or *the Sin Strip*, as some of the locals called it, lured young men from across the River like a siren song. On the Sin Strip they could buy a

brand of illicit fun they would regret the next morning, but no longer than that.

“I’m just going to deliver this round, and then I’m done,” Sarah told Brian. “I have an eight o’clock class in the morning.” She’d begun loading her tray when another hand closed down over her shoulder. She shook it off again, growing annoyed. “I’m bringing your drinks right now. You’re not about to die of thirst.”

“I want southern whisky,” a voice growled behind her. “Don’t bring me any of that Canadian crap.”

Sarah froze, but managed to nod. “No Problem, I’ll bring it right over.”

She could feel Lewis standing behind her, looking at her. “Do I know you?” he finally asked, putting his hand on her shoulder again, turning her around.

Sarah looked up at him, the blonde wig hanging all over her face. It was beginning to burn and itch. She scratched at it anxiously.

“I don’t know any of my boys as well as I’d like,” she answered, dumbly reciting one of the phrases that the girls at Club Corina were required to say to customers. It made Sarah feel foolish as well as afraid. Lewis was looking at her like he could only half-focus his eyes, but there was seriousness there that unnerved her. “Excuse me, sir.”

Sarah edged past him, taking whatever beers she already had on her tray. She rushed them to the party of young men and practically threw the bottles down on the table. One tipped over and Sarah apologized in a panic, but she didn’t try to clean up the mess. She left her tray on the table as well, her unpaid tickets arranged around the edges, and pushed her way towards the nearest door.

As she turned the handle, Sarah chanced a look back over her shoulder. Lewis was watching her leave, a dangerous smile turning up the corners of his slack mouth.