

BETTER LIVING THROUGH ALCHEMY
by EVAN J. PETERSON

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Alchemy

Evan J. Peterson

DANCING AT THE END OF DAYS

Tuesday, December 31

EVEN AS SHE DANCED, TRYING TO LOSE HERSELF IN THE PIT, TONYA COULDN'T ignore the feeling that her left arm had somehow returned. On stage, Electric Pentacle thrashed on their guitars and fondled their synthesizers, building the energy of the crowd as midnight crept close. The light-wave conductor played her oscillator, its white and red pulses building in frequency, ultimately mimicking the contractions of orgasm. On the threshold of the new decade, the fans pumped their limbs and swayed in the atomized sweat of the nightclub.

Tonya had never experienced a phantom pain—or phantom anything, really—since losing the arm in the crash years ago. Even in her dreams, she rarely noticed its presence or absence. She looked at the place where it would've been, imagining what it would look like to see both of her own brown hands swooping through the air, jiggling her tank top to get some air on her skin. She *could* feel it though, the air against it, its weight descending from her shoulder. For a moment, Tonya thought she could even feel sweat running down it.

Whatever was in this new shit, it was damn good.

The guy who sold it to her would only give her one, though she tried to buy more. "It's strong. Really strong. One is all you need." He looked like every other pale young guy in the music scene. He collected her cash and wished her

a Happy New Year. She popped the bardo into her mouth and swallowed. It had the faint glue-like taste of any other gel tab.

Tonya didn't know what to make of a dealer who didn't want her money. She didn't meet a lot of guys in general who discouraged her from getting wasted. She'd never tried bardo before, but it was New Year's Eve.

The boy dancing behind her sidled up and put his hands on her hips. She glanced over her shoulder to make sure it was the same guy from before, the adorable one in the Silver Ash Cure tee. It was. Tonya leaned back into him, and he wrapped his wet arms around her waist. She could feel his cock against her, hard already in his jeans. *You better get hard when I put it on you*, Tonya thought.

The Pentacles continued their pulsing rhythm while the singer stopped to make an announcement. "All right, my psychonauts! We're thirty seconds from midnight. Are you ready?"

The crowd cheered as one organism, troubling the line between orgy and hivemind. A girl approached and embraced Tonya from the front. White skin, blonde hair, pink peasant blouse—a crunchy hippie vibe. Exactly Tonya's type. The girl took a drag from her vapor wand, and Tonya opened her mouth, tongue wagging and beckoning. The blonde closed her mouth over Tonya's, exhaling the cloud into her lungs as their tongues met.

"Ten! Nine! Eight!"

The crowd chanted along with the Pentacles.

"Seven! Six!"

Her skin glistening in the throbbing light, Tonya felt like she was about to break apart into a thousand hummingbirds, each with nectar running through its tiny veins. The drug was kicking in much faster than she'd expected.

"Five! Four!"

The boy pressed against her from behind. The girl pressed against her from the front. Tonya closed her eyes as the vapor high mixed with the bardo high, and there it was: the moment everyone was chasing, the moment when the entire ego crumbles to glitter and there is only pleasure, right down into the soul.

"Three! Two!"

She was everywhere and nowhere. She was everyone and everything, only a vague memory of being separate. It was peace and ecstasy in one, rapture and satori.

“One! Happy New Year!”

She opened her eyes, and just for a couple of seconds, she saw it—her left arm, whole and dark and perfect. Through the haze of it all, she didn’t question it. It made sense. Most dreams make sense while you’re in them.

That’s the moment Tonya’s joints came apart, the invisible seams of her body opening, and she fell in pieces to the floor. The boy behind her was left holding her disembodied head. They didn’t even know each other’s names. The look on his face was the last thing Tonya registered before her brain shut down.

Wednesday, January 1

As expected, Critter was already in the office when Kelly arrived at 10:35. The pins and needles in her left leg sparkled extra this morning, and she had to rely on her wooden cane. The city smelled strange today, stranger than usual. Under the rain and the traffic and the waters of the Puget Sound, something new fermented. Kelly wondered when it would bubble to the surface.

“Morning! You’re later than usual today,” Critter said without looking up from his laptop.

“I’m the boss. That’s why I have an employee,” Kelly clapped back. She picked up the mug of cold black coffee Critter had prepared for her a half hour earlier. She slurped the sour liquid and read the black graphic on the clover-green mug out loud. “‘Keep Calm and Worship Cthulhu.’ That’s cute. What happened to my ‘Seattle is Wet’ mug?”

“Dropped it. Sorry.” Critter sipped from his iced latte in the disposable cup. “Thought I should buy you a new one. Aren’t you going to microwave that?”

“That’s rich coming from you—the iced-coffee queen. Did I miss anything?”

Critter severed his gaze from the screen and looked at her. “Actually, quite a bit. We had a walk-in. On New Year’s of all days. Rich by the look of her. I told her to come back at 11. Figured you had to be here by then. You better land this client. Also, have you seen the news?”

Kelly frowned and stared into her new mug. “You know I haven’t. What fresh apocalypse is it now?”

“Hey. Look at me,” Critter said. “Are you okay?”

She looked into his hazel eyes, gilded with forest green eyeliner. “Yes. I’m okay. Rough night. And my neuropathy is killing me today.”

Critter furrowed his brow. “Please tell me you didn’t drink alone.”

Kelly gave the kind of pursed smile most people would give a panhandler.

“I swear I didn’t. That’s part of the problem. I was alone on New Year’s Eve. It brought back some bad memories.”

Critter got up from his desk and gave her a hug. “I’m sorry, Kel. You could’ve come out with me and my crew.”

She slumped. “That might be even worse. The tagalong older chick out with the boys, trying to have a good time.”

Pulling back from the hug, he cooed. “Oh, come on. You’re thirty-two. What happened to that whole, ‘Old enough to know better, young enough not to give a rat’s ass,’ thing you were doing?” Then with a distinctly different tone, “Tell me again why we’re working today?”

“We’re getting caught up. And this isn’t a real holiday, Critter.” Kelly poured the rest of her coffee into a potted plant on top of the microwave.

“Hey!” Critter said. “What’d you do that for?”

“I’ll make fresh!” she said, grabbing a coffee pod.

“No, dingus! You just killed my bromeliad!” Critter walked over and grabbed a handful of paper towels, attempting to soak up the excess coffee.

Kelly gritted her teeth. “I thought coffee grounds were good for them?”

“Should I come back again in another hour? Or not at all?” A woman lingered in the hallway. Kelly didn’t like the smell of her. A little too much sandalwood and way too much entitlement.

She was tall, about six foot to Kelly’s five seven and dressed in an expensive-looking camel peacoat. Her inky black hair and olive skin shone with what little gray sunlight came in through the office windows. “Sophia Martinetti,” she said, strolling in without offering her hand to shake.

Kelly shot a look at Critter who clutched the flowerpot and returned with it to his desk. “Kelly Mun. Welcome to Non-Linear Investigations. Or . . . welcome back.”



Sitting in Kelly’s office behind a closed door, Martinetti got down to business. Almost. “Did you know that *nonlinear* isn’t hyphenated? Do any of your clients bring that up?”

Kelly played cool. A rich client was a rich client, and most of them tested her the way they would test a carnival palm reader. “I learned that after I got

my business license. It works though. Easier for the clients to sound out. Not everyone who hires me is a native speaker.”

Martinetti smiled almost as though flirting. “Neither is every private investigator. But you are. Korean dad, white American mom, born right here in Seattle.”

Kelly stayed even. “Very good. You’ve done your research.”

Martinetti gave a subtle shrug and looked around at the little office. “I like to know what I’m buying.”

This lady was pushing it. The roadside finds and assemble-it-yourself furniture in Kelly’s office embarrassed her, but she would not tolerate a client looking down on her. She gave a little attitude back.

“Miss Martinetti—I assume it’s *miss* since I don’t see a ring—if you’re this good at finding out about people, why do you need me?”

Martinetti leaned in. There was something predatory in her body language, like a viper coiling up to strike. “I thought that would be obvious. My people are awfully literal. I need someone more oblique. Esoteric. That’s what you do, right?”

Kelly nodded. The woman wasn’t just rich enough to look great; she was also compulsively fastidious. Her skin was flawless. Her hair was perfect. Her eyebrows were perfect. *She* was perfect. Kelly felt an uneasy mix of attraction and resentment.

Martinetti continued. “I don’t like getting my hands dirty. You do. And you’re very good at it from what I’ve seen.”

Martinetti smelled like blood now. Blood and money—how cliché. Without meaning to, Kelly broke her composure for a moment and grimaced.

“And how much of my work have you seen?”

Martinetti continued to smirk flirtatiously. “Enough to earn me as a client. You should charge more.”

Kelly laughed and tapped an unpainted fingernail against her desk. “You can tip if you like.”

Sophia Martinetti finally stopped pussyfooting around her real interest. “And though I can’t be sure, I’d wager that you’re psychic. You cloak it well, but you’re a little too good. Maybe not advanced enough for national or corporate security, but you’re no showbiz charlatan. My guess is . . . psychometry?”

“Ha!” Kelly said. “I wish I was a toucher. Nope. Clairolfaction.”

Martinetti's eyes lit up as she sounded out the sensuality of the word. "Clair-ol-faction!" She moistened her dark-red lips with her pale tongue. "That's a rare one. You should've gone into luxury brands. I know a perfumer in New York who could use a woman like you. May I pass your name along?"

"Do whatever you want. So now that you know I can smell bullshit, you can drop this executive dominatrix act. Talk to me, one professional to another. What can I do for you?"

Sophia Martinetti raised an eyebrow. She straightened her posture but didn't act quite as haughty. "Miss Mun, are you familiar with something called bardo?"

"Hmm. *Bardo* is a Buddhist term. The in-between place. The mists between one life and the next incarnation."

"Correct, and it's also the street name for a new recreational drug. Extremely new."

Kelly turned to her computer and typed in search terms: "bardo" and "drug." No leads.

"Not a lot out there on it."

Sophia stood and walked to the single window. "There won't be. It's only been on the street for about a month as far as I can tell. The cops haven't even picked up on it yet. But my people have. It looks like someone's testing it here in Seattle—figuring out the market, getting people interested. Maybe other places too, but I haven't been able to find anything beyond the city. Nothing in Portland or San Francisco or the usual smuggling ports. Nothing beyond the continent."

Kelly stared at Sophia. The woman certainly enjoyed playing up the drama. "Is it habit-forming? Any fentanyl connection?"

"We don't know that yet either."

Kelly took a deep breath. The conversation smelled like damp caves and decaying wood and hidden things. It smelled like a mystery but not a lie. "The name makes me assume it has something to do with disassociation. Is it like ketamine? Or Ambien with a psychedelic kick?"

"Could be. Someone overdosed on it last night at the Deep."

Kelly's stomach sank. She prided herself on staying on top of the news. Anything could be a lead in her business, and the strangest things often were.

"Ugh. I should've known that before you got here . . ." The two women went quiet while Kelly typed and scrolled. "Huh. The death at the Deep has no drug

connection in the news. And that doesn't sound like any kind of OD I've ever heard of. What makes you think that this woman was on bardo when she died?"

Martinetti stared out the window. "I have my ways."

"I'm sure. So what do you need me to find out?"

"At this point?" The client turned and walked back to her seat. "Everything. Assume I don't know anything about bardo. I haven't been able to get a hold of it or figure out who's manufacturing it. I need you to find out everything you can. What's in it, what it does, who makes it, who's selling, who's buying."

Martinetti's phone buzzed in her pocket, and she checked it and rolled her eyes. She tucked it back into her pocket.

Kelly asked, "And what about your other agents? The 'awfully literal' ones as you call them?"

Martinetti smiled. "I'm sure they won't get in your way. Or vice versa."

Kelly smelled the ozone scent of omission now. Not the acidic scent of a lie but getting there. Something was cloaked, either with magic or some other subterfuge.

"How much danger will I be in?"

Martinetti leaned into her chair, falling back into that initial flirty tone and body language. "That depends how deeply you go. The deeper into the abyss, the more likely you'll find monsters."

Kelly smiled and relaxed a bit herself. "Is that a pun? On the Deep?"

Martinetti rolled her eyes again. "I wish. You know how these things work better than I do. Glaring coincidences that lead nowhere. Tangents that seem barely connected but prove to make all the difference. But I'm not joking. Literally or metaphorically, I expect you're going to find some monstrous things."

Kelly stared Martinetti in the eye for an uncomfortable moment. Like an abyss herself, Martinetti stared right back.

Kelly grew impatient and broke the silence. "I happen to know someone who's quite fond of monsters. And the monsters are quite fond of him."

Martinetti smiled back. "Yes, your lobby boy. He's a darling one, isn't he? Have you ever made a pass at him?" She looked past Kelly at the pressboard bookcase behind her. Another sidetrack, most likely intentional to test Kelly's focus.

"If you really did your homework, you'd know he's my cousin. Mom's side obviously. I love him." She watched as Martinetti's eyes darted around slightly,

probably reading the book titles on the shelves behind Kelly or coming up with her next quip. “But I don’t want to fuck him. Or you, Sophia.”

The businesswoman’s attention locked back onto Kelly, reassessing her. Then she said, “That’s too bad. You’re very pretty. But back to the point. I doubt either of you will want to arm wrestle with these monsters. I will, of course, compensate you accordingly.”

“I won’t break anyone’s kneecaps, Sophia. And I don’t deal with mafia.”

“I won’t ask you to, Kelly. And I’m not mafia. I’m a businesswoman.”

“You realize that is exactly what someone in the mafia would say, right?”

The mysterious client sighed with impatience. “I need a detective, not a thug. I need to know the true impact of bardo on my business.”

“Which is?”

Martinetti’s face went soft and blank. “Research and investment.”

Kelly shrugged. “The more I know, the better I can help you. What do you think bardo is?”

“It’s magic, of course. A literal magic pill. You saw what happened to that girl in the photos. I suspect it’s a product of alchemy, but my other investigators have come up short. Even the psychics—but I suspect they’re too cozy in their assumptions. They’re missing something that I want you to catch.”

Kelly started to fidget. “I don’t know if I wanna step in a shit pile as deep as this one.”

“You can drop the assignment at any point, provided you communicate everything you find out. And no need for heroics. I need you to stay crisp and alive to report back to me. Go deep, come back in one piece, and for gods’ sake, do not sample the bardo if you find some.”

It was a tempting offer. Martinetti would know business was slow. She was good enough at this game that she didn’t even need to taunt Kelly about it.

“I’m still not totally convinced, Sophia—and that’s not hardball. It’s self-preservation. What happens if and when I find out too much? Will you and your people try to wipe me out? I told you I don’t do mafia assignments.”

Martinetti took a moment to stare at Kelly and then look around her meager office again. “We’ll wipe out your debts maybe. Paying people off is much easier than making them disappear, I find. If you learn too much, my first recourse is to reward you for good, effective services and offer to hire you full time. Just don’t go catching a guilty conscience. I hear those are highly contagious, especially if you don’t wash your hands.”

Kelly almost sneered but swallowed her pride. “You drive a hard bargain, Miss Martinetti. Fuck it. I’ll take it. That’ll be a thousand as retainer to start. I bill sixty an hour. I’ll let you know when we’re getting close to fulfilling the first thousand. You can pay Critter—Christopher—on the way out. For your privacy, we have a cloaked account.”

Martinetti laughed and got up to leave. Kelly couldn’t tell whether it was the laughter of mockery or genuine appreciation. With her back to Kelly, the businesswoman said, “I’m sure you’ve cloaked a lot of things. Your lease here for one. I expect you’re not paying what this space is worth. I applaud that. You’re a natural witch, whether you know it or not.”

Kelly got up to show her out, and Martinetti half-turned and gave some side-eye. “You’re discreet, and you know enough hoodoo to be slippery. I need a woman like you working for me right now. Look further into what happened at the Deep last night. Then you’ll start to grasp what we’re dealing with.”

When she’d gone, Critter whistled. “You really charmed her, didn’t you? She paid triple the retainer and told me to bill double the hourly rate you quoted.”

Kelly didn’t speak. It was easy to smell a devil’s bargain, but she still couldn’t detect which circle of hell the sulfur came from.



“Jee-zus fuck. What am I looking at here?” Critter scrolled through an image search as Kelly watched over his shoulder. Pics of the dead woman leaked immediately, long before the police got to the club. Her body had been divided into six pieces—head, torso, and four limbs—like some perverse hexagram from a desecrated *I Ching*.

“Gimme a sec.” Critter opened some links to various social accounts. They didn’t even need to go deep or check the hexweb. Kelly didn’t hold off.

“It looks like someone cut her to bits in front of hundreds of people at the Electric Pentacle show. But our client is sure this was a drug overdose.”

Critter leaned in, squinting at the details of a photo, and then he leaned back and used zoom. “Comments are saying that she fell apart. Just fell apart . . . hmm . . . her name was Tonya Williams . . . from Portland . . . she followed the Electric Pentacle here on their tour. There’s a good lead. Know anything about Electric Pentacle or Silver Ash Cure? That was their opening act.”

Kelly sniffed for anything she could detect. Digital data rarely yielded much

psychic information. “Well, they’re bands, obvi. Synth metal, I think. Not my thing. Which band was on when she . . . disintegrated?”

Critter scrolled. “Looks like Electric Pentacle. That’s a Hodgson reference. Hodgson’s Carnacki stories had an electric pentacle—a protection charm that Carnacki would make out of electric lights arranged into a traditional pentagram sign. Pretty good at keeping out malevolent spirits. Not foolproof though.”

“Hodgson was, what, Victorian era?”

“Just missed it. Edwardian. British, pre-World War I. The Carnacki stories anyway.”

“Hmm . . . anything else stick out about the music?”

Critter typed and scrolled. “‘Silver Ash Cure’ is a reference to H.H. Holmes, the World’s Fair serial killer. Gross. Both bands are on the Redchapel record label.”

Kelly sniffed. She didn’t get any psychic impression from the information. The web had its own spirit, different even than that of most physical electronics. An urban animist once told her that the internet was exactly that: a net or web of threadlike ley lines with its own rules and its own spiritual vibration, a wholly human-made new thing. That guy claimed he could talk to the web itself, but he was also a squatter living in a yurt in someone else’s backyard. Kelly didn’t take him too seriously, but she had seen enough to believe that there were some web adepts capable of pulling those virtual “ley threads” just as a traditional animist might pull medicine from the ground or rain down from the sky.

Kelly Mun, to her great frustration, was not one of these adepts. To her, the web—and any information she got from it—had no smell. She had to do the leg work of investigating in the old-fashioned way to get a psychic impression. There was, however, a cloaked occult web to help dig past all the digital noise.

“The girl. Tonya. She follows a band up from Portland, goes to their show, takes an overdose of bardo . . . and then people see her body literally fall apart. Let’s rule out good old-fashioned murder before we assume that a street drug made this woman break into pieces. Whoa”—Kelly pointed at the screen—“zoom in on the gore.”

Critter enlarged the latest pic. A close look at the wounds, at least what the camera revealed, showed Kelly more of the strangeness Martinetti only hinted at.

“Look how clean those cuts are. They should be ragged. I doubt very much

anyone could've had the time, strength, and swinging clearance to cut this woman apart that cleanly in a roomful of sweaty kids. And there's blood, but there should be more. A whole lot more."

Critter chewed his lower lip. "Well, I've never seen anything like this. Barring something unheard of, like time-stopping serial killers or invisible blades, I guess we're looking at witchcraft."

"Not quite. Alchemy. Let's assume it *is* the result of a drug overdose. If a street drug caused that, then we're looking at a fusion of magic and chemistry. Not our usual forte, but nothing about this case is usual. Martinetti said this shit has been on the streets for about a month. Why hasn't bardo done this to anyone else yet?"

"Maybe it has." They shared a moment of silence as they contemplated the implications. Then Critter sighed and took a pull from his iced latte. The straw sucked mostly air. "Okay, here's the weirdest part—"

"Weirder than a twenty-one-year-old breaking into pieces at the stroke of midnight in a packed room?"

"Touché. But here, someone swears this girl had only one arm when she walked in. There are two arms in the remains, a right and a left, and they look like they match. I don't like it, Kel. This just gets weirder and weirder. I'm not sure you should take this job."

Kelly grabbed her high-end, secondhand coat from the rack by the office door. "If you want your back pay, I absolutely should. Find everything you can on the hexweb while I'm gone." And with that, she was out the door, the soft tap of her cane fading down the hall.



The Deep was lousy with cops and onlookers. They swarmed like ants on carrion—though ants provide an essential function in an ecosystem. The journalists had already come and gone. Twelve hours after Tonya Williams's spontaneous disintegration, no one was sure whether to label this an act of terrorism, murder, or an occult incident. The press, predictable as ever, leaned toward the most sensational option.

The rain drifted more like a mist as Kelly scanned and sniffed the crowd for a perpetrator, returning to the scene. She leaned on her sturdy cane and closed her eyes. The city smelled like it always did, gray and powdery, like crumbling

newspapers and smoke and dust. Today, under the usual urban notes that mixed with the more pleasant ones of Pike Place Market, Kelly smelled evil. Real evil—premeditated, calculated, and cruel.

Most people who did nasty things smelled like violence and fear but not outright evil. True evil smelled like something so deeply embedded that it would take months to purge it, like tumors growing in the marrow of bones. Today, the street in front of the Deep smelled like that, and of sadism. Like tears and bruises, like adrenalin and the bite of a whip.

Kelly suspected that Tonya's killer was still here. If she could get ahold of some bardo, she might be able to track a scent. Would anyone be stupid enough to linger at a crime scene while carrying drugs?

Of course, they would. This was Seattle.

Before the street sounds drowned it out, an overheard police radio confirmed that the bomb-and-drug-sniffing dogs had already been through. That was usually a dead giveaway. Most dogs didn't like the smell of magic; it disoriented them. Dogs usually backed off or ran outright from a site of witchcraft. Occasionally, they ran toward it like it was a peanut butter and bacon sandwich, tripping on their own dizzy paws.

Humans weren't much better. Most people couldn't reconcile the occult with their need to control and predict their own reality. Some people, mostly the atheists, were adamant that there was no such thing as magic. Those with a superstitious nature believed in it deep down, but it scared them, so they avoided talking or even thinking about it. In general, people just ignored the occult or explained it away. A few misfits—the psychics, the queers, the neuroatypical, and the natural-born witches—couldn't ignore it, so they often embraced it. Kelly and Critter were such misfits. So was Martinetti, it seemed.

In the paid parking lot on First and Pike, next to the Deep, Kelly found exactly the misfit she was looking for. Just to her right, a blonde woman said, "Am I free to go?"

An officer answered. "For now, yes. But stay available. We may need to call you in for more questioning."

The woman, more of a girl, shivered in the misty rain and pulled out her phone. Kelly came around behind her and saw she was ordering a ride.

"Miss, I'm so sorry to hold you up."

The girl turned but didn't take her eyes off her phone. "Yeah?"

Kelly said, “I’m here to make sure the police are treating everyone with respect and not adding to the trauma. May I buy you a cup of coffee?”

The girl looked at her for a long moment before bursting into sobs. She tucked her phone into her pocket and let Kelly touch her on the shoulder.

“Hey, you’re gonna be okay. If coffee isn’t enough, I can take you someplace else you can dry off and get warm. I know what this must look like. I’m here to help people like you. Survivors.” Kelly hoped this girl didn’t have a strong bullshit detector.

When the girl relented, Kelly brought her to the nearest coffee house and escorted her to the bathroom. The girl happened to know the key code by heart.

“It’s just the zip code. Nine-eight-one-oh-one.”

Inside, they cleaned her up. Kelly maintained her own cover story while also prompting the girl for as much information as she could get.

“I’ve been in your shoes.” That wasn’t a lie. “If you want to tell me what happened in there before the police detained you, feel free. Sometimes talking about it makes it easier—but not when they’re interrogating you. I’m not interrogating you.” That, on the other hand, was certainly a lie.

The girl continued crying. Through quick breaths, she choked out a horrifying story: “I-I was just there—to celebrate—New Years—and I was dancing, and I saw this beautiful girl—and I went up to her—”

Racking sobs interrupted her. Kelly gave the girl another handful of paper towels and consoled her. She calmed down enough to continue.

“And there was this guy behind her, and the girl looked at me, and I went over. And I kissed her, and then it was midnight, and while I was kissing her—s-s-she—”

The girl broke down again, and she leaned in for comfort. “Her fucking head just came off!”

No scent of deception or omission. Nothing to suggest she was anything other than a traumatized bystander. Kelly didn’t pick up much of a clairfactory impression from this girl—smelled like sweat and weed and an inoffensive armpit odor, but that was it.

The girl snuffled back mucus and swallowed. “Who did you say you work for again?”

Kelly felt a sharp pang about lying, like neuropathy of the soul. “Survivor Advocates. We’re new. We do oversight of public services and make sure that

victims and survivors in the system get treated with the same fairness as criminals. Oh, and my name is Casey Moon.”

Kelly always had the ability to lie effortlessly and with charisma. She wondered if she were born with the skill, but it didn't really matter. And she only got better at it when she became a full-blown opiate addict, as addicts tended to be. Her aptitude for deception didn't decline at all once she got sober and started feeling her conscience again, but these days, she tried to use it to make the world a slightly less atrocious place.

“I'm Fern,” the girl introduced herself. “Fern Callahan. That's my real name. People think I made it up to sound like a flower. But it's my name. Do ferns make flowers?”

Kelly said she didn't know. Fern dried her eyes once again and leaned away.

“So am I considered a victim in this situation? I'm not, like, a suspect, am I?”

Kelly dialed up the empathy but tried not to be maudlin. “The police consider you a witness. I consider you a survivor.”

Fern relaxed a bit more. “Can we go get a table? I'd love a chai.”

In the café, Kelly watched as Fern stress-ate a bag of chocolate croissants and ordered a second chai. In no time, the sugar and the caffeine hit her bloodstream, and Fern told Kelly everything.

“And I use vapor all the time. I didn't tell that part to the cops, but you know. It's harmless, right? Who ever died from vapor?”

Of all the popular street drugs, vapor was kid stuff. It was mostly just nitrous oxide with a little THC. Whippits and weed. It wouldn't even cause most people to blackout, let alone spontaneously dismember.

Kelly sipped an overpriced Americano. “I've never heard of anyone dying from it, Fern. Please know that you didn't do anything to hurt Tonya. Whatever happened was not your fault.”

“Was that her name? The police wouldn't even tell me. Tonya . . .” She stared into her chai. “Thank you, Casey. That means a lot.”

Fern stuffed her face again. Kelly watched the crumbs collect on the girl's breasts.

The trust was there. Kelly, playing the concerned and sisterly Casey Moon, could ask pretty much anything at this point.

“What about her arms?”

“Herv armvs?” Fern said around a mouthful.

“Yes, there was some confusion about Tonya's arms. It probably sounds rude

to ask. I'm sorry. Truly. But I need to ask these things to make sure you're going to be okay."

Fern gulped down her tea and said, "She only had one arm. People saw what they saw, but I was right up against her. But people see weird things, you know? My uncle is a psychologist, and he told me that eyewitnesses are often wrong about what or who they saw. That's scary, isn't it? To think how many people have been sent to jail or worse. Oh my god. What if someone thinks they saw something incriminating? I swear to god I didn't do anything but kiss her and share my vapor cloud."

Fern looked like she might start crying again.

"I'm sure you're fine, honey." Kelly was almost positive that no one would try to hang any responsibility on Fern. There was nothing to hang, but that wouldn't stop some people from making pitiful attempts to punish her, trying to give themselves some kind of resolution. No, Fern wasn't the kind of girl you'd sue for wrongful death. She had great teeth and nice hands. Whatever vapor-and-free-love kick she was on, she still looked like a "nice" girl from a "nice" family.

She was nosey, though. "Did you survive something bad too, Casey? Is that why you use a cane?"

Kelly felt her leg tingling. "I've survived a thing or two. But no, I have neuropathy in my leg." The cane was handmade from cottonwood with a large burl at the top that served as a handle.

"Oh. What causes that?"

Without a beat, Kelly said, "Snake bite." She'd practiced this half-truth for the ones that like to pry.

"Huh. That sounds terrible." Fern gave Kelly a sympathetic nod and furrowed her eyebrows.

Kelly pressed her a bit harder. "So you're 100 percent sure Tonya only had one arm?"

"Yeah. Is this some kind of test? Like my memory is affected?"

Kelly felt the girl clamming up. "No, no, nothing like that. It's more of an exercise in healing."

That seemed to satisfy Fern. Kelly always found it remarkable how trusting people could be of her when she was pumping them for information. It was time to leave Fern alone before she caught on.