

Lessons in Hunger

Chapter One

“Eat.”

Ronin’s command cut through the stillness of the kitchen. Ann jerked her head out of a daydream and back to the present. She didn’t turn to meet Ronin’s large shape now looming in the doorway, but instead wrapped her delicate fingers around her spoon. She sat poised, the unused utensil gripped fiercely in her hand, and stared at the dull metal bowl full of dashi.

Ann thought back to the contorted old man who had whispered to her through bars at the slave holding. He had told her the first days would be difficult. He said she would probably be beaten, possibly worse, that her masters would try to break her spirit, that everything good in her life was now over. All of this and more she had expected, but the man who crept in and out of the dim light beyond her cell that night had never mentioned fish.

Ann slid her spoon carefully into the murky yellow liquid, not wanting to stir up the slimy contents that had thankfully settled to the bottom. She knew the soup wasn’t hot, but still hesitated with the spoon inches from her lips, as if waiting for it to cool. The floorboards creaked as Ronin shifted his weight behind her. Holding her breath, Ann thrust the spoon into her mouth and quickly swallowed the lukewarm fish broth the Japanese called niboshi dashi.

She hesitated again, hoping this would be enough to send Ronin on his way. Her wish was met only by silence. Ann repeated the process, skimming the surface of the soup and bringing the yellow liquid up to meet her lips. Ronin’s footsteps dropped like lead weights as he approached the table. Bending over Ann’s tiny frame he caught her wrist mid-motion and forced the spoon into the depths of the bowl.

“You’re missing the best part,” he said, and Ann could sense his sardonic grin without

lifting her eyes from her bowl. To her horror a small head bobbed to the surface, its black eye a tiny bead in a silver frame. The fish's mouth gaped open, and Ann waited to see if it would press open and shut.

Years ago at the hatchery in Rock River, she had watched as a thrashing trout flung itself free from one of the long cement tanks housed in the enclosed tin structure. The slippery escapee had kept up its breathless struggle on the concrete floor for what seemed an eternity. With every desperate twist and arc its infantile mouth sucked hopelessly at the air. As the fish slowly succumbed to its end, Ann had pushed herself farther and farther away from the scene of death until her back met the wall.

Mother had laughed at Ann's fearful reaction, then pulled her wide-eyed child to her breast and pressed comforting words into her neatly brushed hair. "Don't be afraid, Ann. This is how we eat. In order for us to live these fish must die."

Ann had been too young to explain her fear, her tender age held no words for the reality that gripped her. The fish's pathetic struggle taught a convincing lesson: we are all moments away from unceremonious doom. One throw, one twist of fate and suddenly you find the world devoid of necessary air—a gas oven.

A dozen years had passed and fish had never again crossed her lips. But now, in this small kitchen a lifetime away from the hatchery of her childhood, Ann was again certain the air had turned to poison.

"Oh, God," she breathed out.

Ronin seemed pleased by this. "That's right. Now open wide."

The small head sat perched at the end of the spoon staring its way to its final destination. Ronin's hand moved to the back of Ann's head, his rough fingers curling into her fine blonde hair.

“Open. Up.”

Ann pressed her eyes tightly shut while Ronin shoveled the coin-sized head into her mouth. The fish head ricocheted off the back of her throat and the potent broth sloshed against her tongue. Her gag reflex triggered and she pushed herself forcibly away from the table and out of Ronin’s grip. She was barely able to turn her head away from the table before the meager contents of her stomach erupted in a small stream of vomit.

Her mind reeling with repercussions, Ann flung herself clumsily under the table, tipping over her chair and causing the whole table to shake violently as she fell against the table legs opposite her seat. The bowl full of broth and fish parts dumped haphazardly across the table and floor.

“Baka kimpatsu!” Ronin roared as he side-stepped the spreading mess.

A second slave named Mary had sat quietly across the table through the whole encounter. Bracing her own bowl against Ann’s commotion, but keeping her eyes trained on Ronin, her cagey mind seized on this phrase. “What does that mean, Mr. Ronin?”

Ronin, still trying to process the sequence of events, twisted his massive torso toward her.

“Baka kimpatsu,” Mary prodded eagerly, “What does that mean?”

Mary stared dumbly as Ronin’s black eyes narrowed on her. He was a hulk of a man, over six feet in height, his shoulders and jaw cutting a cruelly angular silhouette in the dim kitchen light, a menace of both form and intent. But his deadly stare was no deterrent for Mary’s own unwavering ambition, and she peered hopefully up at him as he moved into action.

Slapping his hands down on the table in front of the old woman, Ronin leaned in until his face was inches from hers. Mary finally recognized she was an unwelcome supporter and cast her gaze to her bowl.

“It means stupid white girl, baka kimpatsu.”

Mary missed the implication in this and looked up, a childlike smile pressed into her wrinkled features. “Baka kimpatsu,” she repeated with a nod of pleasure.

Ronin let out a heavy sigh, then with a flick of his muscled arm knocked the nearly empty bowl out of Mary’s paper white hands. The bowl clattered on the wooden floor and eventually fell silent. Ronin kicked the flimsy table leg with the side of his foot. “Clean this mess up,” he ordered to the unseen figure still cowering beneath the table. Then as quickly as he had appeared, Ronin was gone.

Stillness settled back over the room, but Ann remained pressed into Mary’s scrawny legs. The old woman kicked the girl away from her, and Ann reappeared reluctantly on the other side of the table. Mary gave her a sickening smile. “Baka kimpatsu,” she said with a slight nod in Ann’s direction.

Ann wrinkled her forehead in confusion and anger at the old woman. “You’re white too, Mary.”

“Baka kimpatsu!” Mary cried with glee, clasping her hands in front of her chest.

Ann sighed and went about her business of cleaning the floor.

“Niboshi dashi,” Mary called out as Ann scooped the scattered fish heads back into a bowl.

“Yes, Mary, that’s soup.”

“Baka kimpatsu, niboshi dashi,” the old woman continued, trying out her new language skills. Ann cast a sideways glance at Mary who was tracking her with both her eyes and voice. “Baka kimpatsu, niboshi dashi, baka-kimpatsu, niboshi-dashi. Baka! Kimpatsu! Niboshi! Dashi!” Mary carried on with her jovial chant while Ann mopped the floor with long efficient strokes. Finally, with the laminate floors smelling strongly of lemon cleanser and the day’s dishes washed and stored away, Ann settled back in her chair to confront Mary.

She had relinquished her verbal assault and sat, eyes closed, rocking back and forth in her chair. Ann studied her features silently. Mary's limp hair was dark, but not black, her skin pale, almost translucent, but not definitively Asian or Caucasian. Mary's eyes, however, were perfect almond shapes despite the years captured in her sagging skin. *Mary could pass for Japanese*, Ann decided. Only her lingering history held her back.

"Mary is a half-breed," Yuri had declared several days before when Ann arrived at the estate. "Her mother was a white slave and she is a white slave just the same as you, so don't let her bully you." Yuri looked over her shoulder to make sure Ann was listening. Ann nodded in agreement with Ronin's slender young sister, then cast her eyes back to Mary who walked with them from the driveway to the house carrying the containers of food and supplies Yuri had purchased at market along with Ann. Mary showed no sign of acknowledgment and Ann refocused her attention on her new master.

"Mary's father was a slave owner, Japanese, but that doesn't make her one of us. The only thing that makes her is the daughter of a whore. Do you understand?" Yuri's words were direct, violent. There could be no misunderstanding.

During her first days as a slave Ann learned her trade from Mary. Together they worked in silence cleaning the main house as well as the adjacent slave quarters, doing laundry, cooking, sewing and performing a host of other domestic duties for their sibling masters. But their work was not confined to the two small dwellings; it spread in an ellipse to encompass the backing acres of sprawling Kansas plains.

Ronin and Yuri Sasaki owned nearly 20 acres of dry Kansas dirt and grass, a half-acre of which was painstakingly cultivated by Ronin into a minimally productive vegetable garden. The bulk of the land lay unworked, portioned off by a series of fences and gates forming small units used for the grazing and running of the dozen horses the Sasaki's bred and raised. Their

squat modular home was situated at the south end of the property, with a large barn and horse stable hovering to the west.

Mary and Ann filled their days shoveling out the horse stalls, mending fences on the south end of the property, which bordered the seldom traveled dirt road, tending the vegetable patch on the east side of the house, and a vast array of other duties that seemed without end.

During their days, Mary never spoke to Ann, not even to answer her questions. She addressed her only with grunts of disapproval or the occasional head nod to direct her attention. Ann had assumed Mary's stunted behavior was the result of years of abuse, though her situation remained a mystery. Yuri had said Mary was born to a slave mother, but Mary's age would mean her mother's enslavement would stretch back to before the Japanese land invasion of the thirties. Ann knew that Mary's age would lead back to the beginning of the war, a time so distant even Ann's mother had no memory of it.

Ann's family had managed to escape slavery by conforming to the food codes. Anyone providing food for the Japanese was allowed to live in relative freedom under the stern thumb of local governors and the ever-present nationalist agents. A small field of potatoes and sunflowers in Eastern Colorado had been the only grant of independence that had kept Ann and her mother from the slave market. But for Mary fate had not been so kind, and for a much longer time than Ann could imagine.

The outburst tonight had been the only real vocalization Ann had heard from this strange creature. She had observed Mary on several occasions lingering outside the window of the small home office Yuri often occupied. Mary listened intently as Yuri gave verbal commands to her computer and spoke on the phone in Japanese. During these times Mary seemed distressed, agitated. She would take small steps back and forth, bring her fingers to her mouth or tug at little pieces of her hair. She would find a word and form its shape and sound over and over again.

These actions were as comical as they were sad, for while she could hold on to the sounds, the meanings always eluded her.

The Japanese guarded their language, using it sparingly with their slaves. It was sacred to them, and they would no more share it with a slave than share their wife or dinner table. Ann had managed to pick up a little Japanese from books and from hearing it spoken in cities, but the first day she answered a question from Ronin with “hai,” or “yes,” he had come at her, lifting her like a rag doll and throwing her to the ground. Ann’s surprise was obvious, and Ronin had stared her down as she lay gawking up from the dirt outside the horse stable.

“Don’t ever speak to me that way again,” he commanded before leaving her with her lesson.

Ann sat pondering all this as Mary continued her hypnotic rocking. Ann wondered what Mary’s mother would have been like. She had to have been one of the first American slaves, probably captured in a failed invasion attempt. What would it have been like for her, a servant to Japanese masters still wrestling with a fledgling war and their own motives for killing millions of former allies? As the racism and nationalism necessary to carry out such a war grew, how would she have suffered?

Had this unknown woman come to resent Mary, an unwelcome daughter with foreign features? Ann had always been treasured by her own mother as the surprise result of a brief encounter with another slave. In the wake of the misery that had befallen her now, Ann could not imagine life without a mother’s love. *But Mother willingly accepted my father into her bed,* Ann thought, *Mary’s mother would have had a different experience entirely.*

Ann thought again of her own mother. She would be only a few years younger than Mary. Mary seemed to be a very old woman, but upon closer inspection Ann had come to realize she was most likely in her forties, only terribly aged. Looking at Mary now, trance-like, rocking

herself with the same comforting motion usually imprinted in infancy, Ann wondered if Mary's mother had ever rocked her.

Ann could remember her own mother rocking her even after she was too big to fit comfortably in her lap. Ann's mother had always rocked her babies, even the tiny sister whose lungs could not meet the demands of her premature system. Mother had rocked that baby long after the breath had stopped.

Even with just one arm Mother had rocked her. The other limb was a stunted nub of flesh and bone, a sad wing clipped by the lingering effects of radiation present in Grandmother's reproductive cells. A matching clubfoot had limited Mother only as much as her imagination, she excelled at anything she put her mind to. Ann smiled to herself thinking of Mother knotting the unruly bean plants to poles in their private garden using only her teeth and good arm. Life had been difficult for her, but Mother was strong.

Ann looked again at Mary who was now asleep in her chair. Several strands of limp hair had fallen from her bun and dangled in her bowed face. *Some of us are not so strong*, she thought. Just then Yuri appeared in the doorway.

"You both should be in bed by now." Mary instantly stirred to her feet. Yuri watched as the old woman shuffled out of the room with Ann close on her heels.

"Wait a moment, Ann," Yuri called after her. Ann paused and held her breath before turning to meet her. This was a moment she had hoped to avoid.

"Ronin tells me you're not eating." Yuri spoke with what seemed to be earnest concern.

Yuri was young herself, no more than 30, with a pretty face and keen eyes that might be capable of sympathy for the slip of a girl standing awkwardly in front of her. But the expression on her face remained neutral and Ann was unable to get a fix on her motives.

"I wasn't hungry tonight," Ann replied simply.

“You weren’t hungry last night either.”

“No,” Ann answered, knowing this was not a question.

“You don’t like fish, is that the problem?” Yuri’s bright eyes peered at Ann, eager to resolve this issue.

“No mistress, I don’t like fish.”

“And you’ve always avoided eating fish?”

Ann paused, suspicion budding in her mind. She slowly nodded her head yes.

“And you didn’t eat any other meat?”

“There was no other meat.” Ann watched curiously as Yuri nodded her head, her black hair trained neatly in place by two chopsticks. Yuri stood for a moment contemplating, her index finger tapping the wooden frame of the doorway.

“You can eat rice balls from now on,” Yuri finally concluded.

“Thank you mistress.” Ann’s suspicion lingered even after Yuri disappeared from the doorway. Thoughts raced through her head.

Why so much concern for my diet? Why not simply force me to eat the disgusting fish-head stew Mary gulps down gratefully each night. Ronin seems a willing enforcer, and rice is an expensive commodity. Something is wrong.

Ann walked quickly as she left the main house and followed the worn dirt strip that led to the single room building serving as slave quarters. The rusted hinges attaching the flimsy laminate door let out a strained whine as Ann slipped inside the musty room. She knew what she needed to do, but had to be careful how she proceeded. She switched off the methane lantern hanging from a nail on one side of the door and paused a moment as her eyes adjusted to the relative darkness of the windowless room. Faint strands of moonlight slipped through small slits in the roof, the same slits she knew would bring snow and moisture as fall hastened on.

Ann stepped out of her stained work clothes, leaving on her yellowed undershirt to crawl beneath the coarse woolen blanket covering her wooden cot. Mary lay a few feet away on a similar bed. She was motionless in the dim light, but Ann hoped she was not yet asleep.

“Mary,” Ann whispered without looking over. A long pause followed. “Mary,” Ann said more forcibly.

“Aye.” The old woman groaned and turned on her side away from Ann.

“Mary,” Ann continued, sure she held a captive, if not treacherous audience. “Why would Yuri not want me to eat fish?”

“Go to sleep, baka kimpatsu,” Mary said quietly, as if half asleep, but Ann was not going to give up without a fight.

“It’s important, Mary. Why wouldn’t she want me to eat fish? You eat fish, Ronin wanted me to eat fish, so why would Yuri not want me to eat it?”

“Aye, shut your mouth. You talk too much. Ask too many questions.” Mary was far from sleep now and rolled over to face the girl. “Who knows why Yuri does anything. All day, every day in that small room with her smart computer, smarter than she is. Then she decides to buy another slave. Four times she goes to the market. Four times she travels across the plains and three times returns with nothing, then on the fourth trip she brings back you. Scrawny white girl with big eyes and blonde hair. Too small to lift hay bales, too small to plow fields. If you ask me, Yuri would have been smarter buying another computer.”

Mary began to trail off but Ann was already lost in thought. The slave auction in Omaha had dozens of slaves available every day, and Ann had been on the block for two weeks before anyone purchased her. *Why her, why then?* Panic crept into Ann’s brain. Her heart beat fast against her ribs.

Ann thought of those awful moments on the auction platform, stripped naked, hands tied

in front of her, exposed to a sea of faces and peering eyes. She had to be forcibly held up after her legs went out. But each excruciating moment had passed and turned into days filled with more of the same agony. She had initially thought it was her own savage conduct that held off her purchase. She had actually believed those dealing in human chattel could be disgusted by a young girl pissing herself or vomiting nervous bile down her own naked breasts.

A week after she arrived at the slave holding, Ann retreated into a deep hole of self-pity and self-loathing. It was only after another slave charged with cleaning out the damp cement stalls had sprayed her with foul smelling water that she had forced herself to climb out of the recesses of her mind. She was ragged with too many of the horrors found away from the bright lights of the auction hall. The cries of pain and terror filling unseen rooms left her desperate to see the sun again and she had begged the short, middle-aged slave with the hose to tell her why she had not been purchased after what seemed a lifetime on the block.

“You don’t bleed.”

“What?” Ann managed through tears.

“You don’t bleed,” he repeated. “That’s a bad investment. You won’t produce other slaves to carry on the workload or sell back to the market for profit.”

Her mind reeled that this stranger could know such an intimate detail about her. She stared open-mouthed at the man before shaking her head in disbelief.

“You’re certainly old enough,” he continued. “The bulletin lists you as 17 and you’re fully developed.” He gestured vaguely to her small breasts and pubic area covered with a light, downy hair. “Says here,” he said looking above her stall at the small plastic tag clipped to the door, “that you’re from Colorado. That area was hit pretty hard with the water table and military bases. It’s probably a genetic defect.”

The man moved on without another word, immune to every brand of suffering the place

had to offer, leaving Ann frozen, numb.

Her awful secret. It had been a heavy burden for so many years, and she had tried to hide it, even from Mother. From the time she was twelve her mother had asked and asked again about her period. Mother always acted with a heart of kindness and it was out of character for her to make her daughter uncomfortable over such a thing. Ann didn't fully understand, but knew it was the one and only barrier in their otherwise loving relationship.

She would lie, bringing Mother scraps of cloth covered in fish blood, but when Mother became ill she could bring herself to tell no more lies.

"You shouldn't be alone," Mother confided finally when Ann broke down in a tearful confession. "If only your sister had lived."

In those last hours, when the need of the cancer overtook Ann's need to keep her Mother, there had been more regrets and sorrow than either had previously acknowledged. And for those last unhappy moments, the burden Ann carried had been both of theirs to share.

But only four months after Mother was laid in the ground, Ann sat in a solitary hell brought on by the unseen infirmity that plotted against her. The final injustice of the janitor reciting it back to her in monotone was enough to render her comatose for the next week. It was only when a hand went up in the crowd and the auctioneer called out in his strange Asian tongue that Ann had managed to raise her eyes. The eyes she met had been Yuri's.

All of this swirled in Ann's mind as she listened to Mary's noisy breathing. There would be no answers tonight, and no sleep either, but plenty of work tomorrow on an empty stomach. Things would definitely get worse before they got better.

Chapter Two

The next morning after breakfast was served to the masters, Ann managed to sneak a

small handful of dried beans for herself before starting on the day's chores. Ann worked with Mary in the small vegetable patch beside the house. The work left her dirty, but not entirely exhausted. Most of her time was spent unearthing small, stringy carrots for canning that afternoon. Once a carrot was wiggled like a loose tooth from the pale, dry earth, the dirt had to be pushed back into the hole to prevent the soil from sweeping away in the East Kansas wind.

Ann worked at this task while Mary carried a metal pail full of absorbent pellets back and forth between a small shed and the rugged garden. Mary carefully placed a heap of the small crystals around the base of each plant.

Ann finished with her harvesting and headed toward the house with a basket full of limp, orange carrots. Mary met her halfway.

"Uhh," Mary grunted at Ann, thrusting the heavy pail at her then wrenching the basket from her hands.

So we're back to this, Ann thought, turning her attention back to the garden. Ann continued the work Mary had begun, moving through the rows placing pellets around each plant. To keep her mind off her lingering hunger she quietly sang a song she had often heard from Mother.

"Catch the wind, see us spin, sail away, leave today, way up high in the sky.

But the wind won't blow, you really shouldn't go, it only goes to show

That you will be mine, by takin' our..."

Ann's voice came to a jerky stop when out of the corner of her eye she spotted Ronin. He moved at a quick pace away from the back of the house and entered the metal shed that sat just east of the slave quarters across a faded access road. Ann knew she would need to enter the shed to refill her bucket, so she watched carefully, waiting for Ronin to reappear. After a few moments Ronin strode through the tiny door carrying a large axe. Ann paused mid-bend to keep

her eyes focused squarely on his hulking figure as he made his way across the grounds. Finally assured that his direction led him away from her and her duties, she resumed her song.

“So if you wake up with the sunrise, and all your dreams are still as new,
And happiness is what you need so bad, girl, the answer lies with you.”

Ann made several trips to the shed to retrieve the angular white pellets from a large bin, but when she finished with all the plants in the garden, her bucket was still half full. She looked around to scout out any plants she might have missed.

Her eyes fell on several small bushes lining the house. She wasn't sure if she should treat these as well, and Mary wouldn't answer her if she asked, so she decided to unload her cargo. Working quickly to empty her bucket, Ann realized she could hear Yuri's voice trailing through the open office window. The Japanese words of her conversation were unintelligible, and Ann continued her work uninterrupted.

With her bucket empty, Ann stepped away from the window but stopped suddenly as she heard “Ann” float through the gaping window frame. She listened intently, unsure if she had heard her name or just some syllable of a larger word. The phrase “baka kimpatsu” followed closely and she knew there could be no mistake. Setting down her bucket, she pressed herself against the vinyl siding of the house and took a careful moment to scan the grounds for Ronin.

Listening closely, she was unable to distinguish all but a few yes's and no's in Yuri's quick speech. Then her wording slowed a bit and she was able to pick out a piece of her conversation.

“...sugoku eikyoryoku ga aru no kuni wo okita,” Yuri spoke merrily, followed by a small burst of laughter.

Ann sighed and pressed her head against the side of the house. *Eikyoryoku ga aru*. She had heard this phrase spoken a few times at the village closest to Grandmother's rural house. The

Japanese soldiers who traveled through on their way to Santa Fe had been fond of the joke that went along with it, and it always seemed to come up whenever any Caucasian was seen in less than fortunate circumstances.

Ann had asked Mother to explain it to her when she saw how the soldiers laughed about Mother's tiny arm.

"It means sleeping giant," Mother explained. "They find it amusing that our country had once thought itself so powerful, but fell asleep to the world a second time. And the second time, Ann, the Japanese were ready."

Ann had not understood this comment. Mother had taught her the basics of reading, writing and math, but everything else she learned was of a domestic order. Born into a world ruled by the Japanese, she found it strange to think the world could ever have belonged to her race to be taken away.

Mother took her home that day and sat a ragged book in front of her. The cover was missing and many of the pages were wrinkled and torn. The title on the copyright page read *The People's History of the United States*. Ann wrinkled her nose at this. She would much prefer to be outside in the warm sun tending the garden.

"This is your history, Ann. Your people. The Japanese read this and they learned while we forgot. I wouldn't want us to make that same mistake again." Mother's tone was serious and she met her daughter's eyes dead on. "For what is done, not to be done again."

Ann knew there would be no more objections, so she spent a summer indoors in her spare time, coursing through the channels of American history. Mother would read along with her to make sure she understood the lengthy passages. One of the first chapters that caught her attention involved the once used British tactic of distributing blankets contaminated with small pox to groups of Indians along the East Coast.

“But why would the Indians accept such a gift from their enemy?” Ann asked in amazement.

“You take a lot of things you need and don’t ask why. Your grandmother told me that when she was young nearly everything she owned was made in Asia. That’s why it was so easy for them to begin to contaminate us with deadly flues and other diseases. No one bothered to ask questions because we had accepted their trade for such a long time.”

“And why would the Japanese want to poison us?”

“For the same reason the British poisoned Indians and the same reason Germans poisoned Jews and Poles. Here let me show you.” Mother took another book off the shelf and flipped to pages with the title “World War II.” Her eyes scanned down a page detailing Hitler’s Nazi goals.

“See that?”

Ann strained to read the awkward German word. “Le-bens-raum.”

“Yes,” Mother nodded. “The Japanese call this seikatsukuukan.”

“And what do we call it?”

“Living space.”

A gust of dust-filled wind brought Ann back to the present. Looking around her at the flat, bleak earth it was hard to believe that separate races in separate times would fight for such a place. *But then again this is Kansas, the rest of the country isn’t so bad.* Ann smiled at her own joke then picked up the bucket she had set on the ground next to her. As she turned to move away from the house a tiny corner of the bucket pinged against the metal siding. A flicker of the noise carried through the window and Yuri’s head quickly popped out into the open air.

Ann tried to sink back into the wall but was promptly spotted.

“Ann, what are you doing out there?” Yuri’s head tilted in a cat-like motion.

Ann fumbled to find words, any words, but only managed to clumsily point at the empty metal bucket and then the ground.

“Ah, the water pellets,” Yuri said with a slight head nod. Ann let out a sigh of relief. “Why don’t you come in here for a moment. I need to talk to you.”

Ann stared in disbelief as Yuri disappeared back into the house. Had she heard her right? Had Yuri really invited her into her office? Ann set the bucket back on the ground and slowly made her way into the house, her mind ablaze with questions. She had been the brunt of that joke. Yuri had called her stupid and unprepared. What would she be walking into?

As she made her way through the kitchen, Mary met her with an impatient stare that quickly turned to anger as Ann brushed by her on her way to the dining room. Mary followed close on her heels but had more than grunting to convey this time.

“And where do you think you’re going? Those carrots won’t can themselves.”

Before Ann could answer, Yuri stepped through the connecting office door. Mary’s eyes darted curiously from Ann to Yuri and back again.

“Go back to the kitchen, Mary.” Yuri opened her office door wide for Ann to enter.

Mary’s eyes widened in disbelief, but she stood unmoving.

“Back to the kitchen.” Yuri spat her words across the room. This time they registered and Mary turned, eyes burning in her head, and stalked back to the kitchen.

As Ann slid past Yuri, she noticed a small puckered indentation on her left arm exposed by the sleeveless silken shirt she wore. She had been told the Japanese still inoculated themselves against the diseases they unleashed upon the world, but she had never before seen the evidence. Yuri noticed the direction of Ann’s eyes and gave her a coy smile.

“So, how are you settling in?”

“Fine, mistress.”

“You’re not finding the work too difficult?”

“No, mistress.” Ann held herself ready, waiting for the bomb to drop.

“And you don’t miss your family too much?” Yuri’s eyes held steady on Ann who slowly raised hers to meet Yuri’s intense gaze. For a moment as they locked glances, Yuri seemed to recognize the determination in Ann’s face. Yuri’s sly smile told Ann the game was afoot.

“My family is dead,” Ann replied, her eyes unwavering.

“All of them? Really?” Yuri contemplated this as she stepped to the other side of her sleek gray desk. “And your father, was he a soldier?”

Ann hated this woman, hated her slender face and prodding eyes. She hated the innocuous tone she used to taunt her into some unknown trap. “I never knew my father.”

“Oh?”

It was useless to lie to her. Yuri would have received all her paperwork from the Department of Acquired National Interests when she purchased her.

“Only his name,” Ann said through clenched teeth.

“But you know that he is dead, is that right?” Yuri was clearly comfortable with her upper hand.

“No, I said I never knew him.”

“So he could still be alive somewhere. Ummm. This is very different, Ann. A father is important. Our father died only a few years ago, did you know that?”

“No,” Ann replied blandly, though she had noticed a grave marker east of the house next to a group of withered oak trees.

“He was a great man. Very great. He fought in the first battle at San Diego in 2034. He was one of the few survivors.”

Ann wondered if she was expected to feign interest. She would much prefer he had

suffered the same fate as the other failed invaders.

“Ronin admired him very much. He has always aspired to be like our father, which is why he stays here. It is the memory of Father and his dying wish to keep this land that holds Ronin here. Do you understand?”

Ann nodded slowly, feeling the meaning of this encounter lay somewhere in these words.

“So now let us look to your father.”

Ann wrinkled her forehead in confusion.

“Konpyuuta, English.” Yuri spoke to the small liquid looking interface perched in the center of the desk. The console rippled to life and a small, childlike voice purred, “Ready, Yuri.” Ann’s curiosity prompted her to step to the side of the desk where she could see the full screen of this compact device.

“What was his name, Ann?” Yuri asked without taking her eyes off the console.

Ann stared dumbly at Yuri.

“His name.” Venom was growing in her voice.

Ann looked closely at Yuri’s dark eyes. “Stephen Cramer,” she said without releasing her gaze.

“Computer, find American National Stephen William Cramer, born 2018, Sheridan, Wyoming.”

Ann knew this was the beginning of the trap. Yuri already knew all her information, and obviously knew it well. Despite her best instincts she could not help but watch intensely as the blue background of the computer swirled for a moment before solidifying into a small picture of the man she knew to be her father alongside a detailed profile.

“Read to the end,” Yuri said, pivoting the console slightly so it faced Ann.

Forgetting her unsure surroundings, Ann delved into this document, scanning the lines

quickly: *Born to parents Robert and Stephanie Cramer, 2018, Sheridan, Wyoming; graduated Sheridan High School, 2036; Drafted into the Army, 2036.* Following were lines and lines listing him at military bases all along the West Coast and western interior: *San Francisco 2037, Sacramento 2038, Portland 2040, Boise 2042, Denver 2043.* The slow advance. The centers of population ripped open by the onslaught of Japanese troops who had waited patiently while the American people and their livestock dwindled with rampant disease and radiation sickness. So many years spent in a horrific war doomed to failure.

Ann's eyes clouded over. Gathering her strength, she forced her eyes to scan to the bottom of the report *Military status: Deserter, 2044. Acquired National Asset: 2045. Sold: Denver, 2045. Sold: North Platte, 2048. Sold: Cheyenne, 2050. Sold: Fort Collins, 2054. Sold: Grand Junction, 2060. Deceased: Grand Junction, 2062.*

Yuri reached across the table and turned the console back to its original position.
“Computer, off.”

Ann let her eyes drop to the floor. She knew whatever opportunity she had to match wits with Yuri was now gone.

“So what have we learned, Ann?” Yuri asked, prim as a schoolmarm.

Ann didn't dare bring her tear-filled eyes to meet the eyes she knew would be cold and dominating.

“Well?”

“Nothing I didn't already know,” Ann lied.

“Good, then we both know where we stand.”

“Yes.” On the contrary, Ann had no idea what this meant to her or what it could possibly mean to Yuri, but she would sooner swallow her tongue than give this hateful bitch any more of her pride on this day.

Yuri was too smart to be fooled though, and gently lifted Ann's head with her fingertip so the girl would be forced to meet her own ravenous eyes. "Your father was a coward. A very small man." Yuri whispered intently into Ann's contorted face.

Ann could only release her hatred in a strangled breath.

"If there's one thing I've learned in my lifetime, Ann, it's that a child is destined to become like his father."

Ann could barely breathe, her rage an unthinkable weight upon her chest.

"You can leave now," Yuri said calmly.

Flinging the door open, Ann burst from the room. She stumbled over her own feet, struggling to free herself of the house, to free herself of Yuri who lurked inside smugly celebrating her victory. Rushing out the kitchen door Ann wanted just as much to be free of Mary who watched dumbfounded as she tore across the room. But most of all, Ann ran to be free from the hatred that burned within her. It was a hatred not for the house, or Mary, or even Yuri, but a growing hatred of herself.

Chapter Three

That evening as the sun began its slow decent toward the endless horizon Ann crept quietly through the door of the kitchen. Yuri and Ronin stood by the stove filling their dinner bowls. Mary, who had finished the days work and prepared the evening meal alone, watched attentively from a corner of the room as both masters raised their heads to confront their long-absent slave.

Ann froze midway through the door as Ronin looked her over. Despite the seemingly willful act of removing herself from a day's work, she appeared now as a frail, dirty girl, no longer capable of meeting his presence without trembling. Ronin took a commanding step

toward her, but was halted by Yuri's slender hand placed carefully on his massive arm. Ronin turned to meet his sister and found in her torpid brown eyes a sort of appeasement. The two exchanged glances for moment before Ronin changed directions, moving out of the kitchen and into the dining room.

Yuri motioned for Ann to come in, but Ann's gaze registered only the floorboards beneath her. Yuri took one of the metal bowls from the counter next to her and moved toward Ann, pressing the bowl against her small hand still clinging to the exterior door. Ann grasped the bowl reflexively and took a timid step inside the house, allowing the door to swing shut behind her.

Yuri moved back to the counter and lifted the metal lid from a pot of steamed rice. As she set the lid to the side, she looked again to see if Ann was watching, then impatiently cleared her throat to gain the girl's attention. Yuri thrust a large metal spoon into the steaming brown rice and left it suspended, jutting out of the pot. With quick, even motions she opened one of the drawers under the counter to produce a pair of smooth plastic chopsticks. Yuri placed these on the counter beside the pot, then picked up her bowl and quietly exited the kitchen.

With Ronin and Yuri gone, Ann was now able to force herself into the mechanical motions necessary to fill her bowl with rice and seat herself at the table, chopsticks in hand. Her eyes never lifted from her hands and the mission of her anxious stomach or she might have noticed Mary's furious gaze trained on her. Mary was unable to motivate her own limbs into motion and stood consumed with rage, watching as Ann neatly delivered portions of rice from the bowl to her waiting lips.

As a slave, Mary had always eaten soup for her evening meal. She had never held a pair of chopsticks with the intention of eating with them, though she would sometimes enviously watch through a crack in the door as her masters wielded these delicate devices. Ann, still

preoccupied with her own thoughts, took no notice of Mary's malevolent stare.

The two women ate in silence, even Mary's noisy slurping was quieted for the evening, and afterward they fell into their usual routine. Mary gathered the master's bowls from the dining room and she and Ann quickly washed and stored the dishes and put away the remaining food. With their chores done for the day, the pair exited the main house and moved toward the slave quarters.

A few steps from their quarters, Mary abruptly turned and began heading for the shed. Confused, Ann stopped, her gaze trailing after the old woman. Mary pivoted back from her path to retrieve Ann, grasping her by the wrist and wrenching her in the direction of the shed. Ann stumbled to catch pace with Mary, her wrist caught in Mary's determined grip. Mary deftly opened the shed door and pulled Ann inside, then paused for a moment, scanning the contents of the metal enclosure.

As they stood at the entrance Ann turned toward Mary, her eyes searching her face for the purpose of this erratic detour. The old woman's eyes darted haphazardly across the small structure, her expression forced and frantic. Mary's grasp on Ann's wrist loosened slightly, and Ann was able to slide her hand to tenderly grip the old woman's hand in her own. Mary shook her hand free in disgust and forcibly pushed the young girl away from her. Ann reeled back, but caught her balance and looked helplessly at Mary who quickly moved toward a row of methane canisters stacked against the front wall of the shed.

Mary struggled to lift one of the 60 lb. canisters by the rigid handle and move it away from the wall. The skinny old woman stumbled a bit as she tried to walk with the heavy weight balanced in front of her. Ann stepped in to steady her, but Mary quickly dropped her cargo only to seize Ann again, this time grabbing her by both arms and forcing her hands toward the canister. Ann submitted to Mary, allowing her hands to be curled around the metal handle by

Mary's bony fingers. Ann looked over her shoulder at the old woman who was grunting and shoving her body in a downward motion toward the canister, her twisted hands pressing into Ann's back.

"Aye, aye, aye." Mary barked, as Ann remained hunched over the canister bewildered. Finally Mary relented her frenzied movements to stand erect and gaze again around the shed. She finally pointed a long thin finger to a small opening along the back wall. No more than four feet across, the space Mary indicated lay between a wooden work bench occupying the corner of the shed and several large bins containing fertilizers and the water pellets they had used in the garden that morning.

Ann shook her head, not understanding. There was enough room for maybe two canisters stacked side by side, but this location was certainly not big enough to hold the dozen canisters that lined the front wall.

"Aye, aye, aye." Mary shrieked again and began pushing Ann in the direction she had pointed out. Ann ducked her shoulder to escape the old woman's thrusting, then paused a moment, confused by her instructions, but too tired by the day's events to put up any further resistance.

Ann squatted against the canister then brought the weight up with her as she stood. Teetering side to side she managed to walk the length of the shed and deposit the canister in the gap Mary had designated. She looked back at Mary who stood waiting by the next canister.

"Aye." Mary pointed insistently to the canister by her feet. Ann let out a weighted sigh then moved to the front of the shed for the next backbreaking load.

When Mary was satisfied that Ann had been properly put to work, she then occupied herself moving small tools and garden equipment. Mary would stop her own busywork to grunt in Ann's direction whenever she paused too long after depositing a canister or was forced by

fatigue to set her load down in the middle of the shed.

Despite the demand on her body, Ann didn't mind the work. She hoped if her hands were busy it might hold at bay the thoughts stirring in her restless mind. But once she settled into the routine of her chore, her thoughts again began to wander. Her mind trailed back to her earlier encounter with Yuri and the handsome army picture of the father she had never known. Would never know.

There was no one left in the world for her. It was a fact she needed to accept. Tears began to well up in her eyes. Ann shook her head. *No. No more of this*, she thought and sought to direct her attention elsewhere.

She turned her thoughts instead to memories of Mother. The shuffling sound of her curled foot sliding across the wooden floors of their home. The happy sounds of her singing as she swept the floor each morning while the sun came up. Ann thought again of the rocking, that final rocking when it was she who held her mother. The last, breathless staccato of words that passed from her lips.

“Ann. Look for love... Wherever you can. If not love... affection. Kindness. Find it. Don't let go.”

Ann paused as she deposited her sixth canister in front of two others forming a narrow column against the back wall. As she took a few steps toward the middle of the shed, she turned her head slightly to watch Mary in her comical routine.

Mary hummed a broken, breathy melody to herself while arranging and rearranging the rows of nuts and bolts on the adjacent side of the L-shaped workbench. The small metal pieces made scraping noises as she pushed them about. Ann stopped and closed her eyes for a moment. She imagined it was Mother and not Mary who sang under her breath, that the metal bolts sliding across the table were Mother's shuffling steps.

Before she could stop herself, a sound spilled over her lips.

“Do you like me?”

Ann’s small voice was barely a whisper in the growing dusk.

Mary’s humming immediately stopped. Ann clapped her hands over her mouth and watched with growing concern as the old woman turned to face her.

“Hmmp,” scoffed Mary. “What a stupid question, girl.” Her voice rose steadily in pitch and volume. “Don’t you know anything about anything?”

Suddenly a dark figure cut into the late-day light pouring through the open door.

“What is going on here?”

Ronin. Ann caught her breath and dropped her eyes to the dirt floor. His elongated shadow was inches from her feet. She curled her toes to put more distance between her and his darkness.

“This white brat is no good for working, Mr. Ronin. Her mind is filled with questions, not work. Her hands are too small to lift even a hay bale from the truck and she sings to herself when she should be...”

Mary’s indictment was silenced by the sharp raising of Ronin’s hand.

“And is this why you scolded her now? Because of hay bales?”

His question left Mary fumbling. There were no bales in the shed to be lifted.

“No, not now. Now she asked the most stupid question I have yet to hear from her gaping mouth.”

Ronin turned his attention to Ann. One step forward left her engulfed in his shadow. She fought back tears as the inevitable darkness swallowed her.

“I have told you before, Ann. You will bring all your questions to me.”

“It’s not like that, Mr. Ronin,” Mary interrupted. “Now the baka kimpatsu asks me if I

like her.”

The crackle of Mary’s laughter broke the deadly silence spreading through her heart, and Ann raised her eyes to confront her betrayer.

“Enough!” Ronin raised his hand violently to end the old woman’s outpour. “If you ever use my words again I will cut your throat while you sleep. Get out!”

Mary recoiled at his words. Her mouth opened and shut in silence, then head bowed, she exited the shed.

Ann’s breathing was strained and the dull thudding of her heart left her ears thick with blood. She could not bring herself to meet his eyes, could not rid herself of this moment she had set in motion.

“Aa-ann,” came Ronin’s sing-song call.

Fear left her paralyzed, but Ronin would not be ignored. With the speed of a demon he was on her, snatching her chin in his hand to force her face up. Ann kept her eyes closed, but she could feel the intensity of his stare along with his hot breath on her face.

“Listen to me, you stupid girl. You bring all of your questions to me. Understand?”

Still muted, Ann nodded her head within Ronin’s monstrous grip. He released her and she took half a step back to catch her bearings.

“So then, stupid girl, ask your question of me.”

Ann jerked her head up to meet his stony gaze.

“Go on,” Ronin chided, “ask me.”

Ann shook her head slightly, not understanding his command.

“Your question. You asked Mary and received her response. Now ask me.”

Ann’s legs went weak as the wave of comprehension broke against her. She could not meet his demand, but knew the consequences of disobedience. She shook her head slowly, her

movements paced as if confronting a rabid dog.

Ronin's hands balled into tight fists. Ann's eyes widened in horror.

"Ask me."

Ann held her breath and shut her eyes against the coming storm, and then Ronin's hand was at her throat, lifting her off her feet and spinning to slam her into the shed wall. The metal rang out like thunder.

"Ask me!" he shouted into her terror stricken face, showering small beads of spit on her cheeks and lips.

Ann fought to release her breath from its bad prison. Her throat burned under his grip and her eyes watered.

"Do you," she managed.

"Yes?"

"Do you like me?" She cried out, her voice strained with pain.

The corners of Ronin's lips curled over his teeth into a vicious smile. His free hand moved to slide slowly down the length of her torso, carelessly brushing the small mound of her breast.

"You don't want me to like you."

Ronin's hand came away from her throat and crossed his body to deliver a back-handed blow to the right side of Ann's face. He stepped away as she collapsed to the ground.

Crouching beside her, Ronin brought his lips close to her ear. "Soon," he whispered.

The world was spinning as Ann tracked Ronin's feet across the shed until they finally disappeared outside the door.

The last rays of light retreated as she stared across the ground. A small pool of crimson formed beneath her gaze. Her eyes slowly refocused as she watched this puddle inch out across

the dirt. Finally her mind seized on this outcome. Blood.

She forced herself into a sitting position, leaning her head carefully against the cool metal side of the shed. Wiping her swelling face, she stared at the brilliant hue covering her hand. How could such a color come from her own pale face?

It had been years since she had seen her own blood. She was proficient enough in the kitchen that accidents were always avoided. The last time she had seen her blood was when she scraped her knee running back from the market with an apron full of apples brought in from the coast. Excitement had overwhelmed her and she had stumbled over a protruding rock in her careless haste. But even then the damage had been minimal, barely a scrape through her ankle length skirt. But now, this rush, this steady flow of red.

Tears welled up in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks.

How many times had she wished for blood? How many times had she begged whatever gods remained to begin the flow between her legs? To give her hope that she could one day have a child to call her own?

Why taunt her now with this meaningless river, still a promise that she would always be alone?

Ann moved quickly to raise her dress and slip out of her underpants. Then, leaning forward, she cupped her hands over her bleeding nose and mouth to capture as much of thick fluid as she could. Carefully as the blood seeped between her fingers she brought her hands to the fleshy mound between her legs. She slowly released the treasure and watched as it flowed down that most vulnerable part of her.

Please, she thought to herself, please let this teach my insides how to function. Then if Ronin fulfills his dark promise, at least it won't be in vain. I can survive here in this wasteland, but I can't do it alone.

Chapter Four

Ann woke before dawn to the sounds of breaking wood and frenzied neighing. She poked her head out of her quarters and caught a glimpse of Ronin tugging on his tunic as he moved quickly toward the barn. He must have noticed the open door of the slave quarter, because he shouted angrily in her direction before moving on.

Ann ducked back inside the small room and returned to her cot, unsure what would come next. Long minutes passed, followed by the sound of Yuri and Ronin exchanging muffled words somewhere in the distance. Then the sound of Ronin's hoverped buzzing to life, and then nothing. Ann lay awake for almost an hour until she heard the horse trolley rumble to life. Shortly after Mary was up and moving in her regular routine, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Breakfast was prepared for the masters, but sat on the stove until it was cold. Ann watched as Mary greedily gulped down the uneaten congealed porridge, then set about her chores as usual. Ann followed Mary's lead and went to the mud pens to slop the pigs. She was moving on to the horse stable and the bin of oats she would dispense to the waiting horses, when Ronin rounded the corner and stood hulking in her path.

Ann recoiled, quickly noticing that his hands were covered in blood. Ronin's tan tunic was also spotted with the deep red color.

"Go to the northwest corner of the property and repair the fence." He spoke with an urgency that was not his typical demeanor.

Ann stood motionless and wide-eyed as he thrust a pair of leather gloves at her. Ronin held these out only for a brief moment, before grabbing Ann roughly by the shoulder and

slapping the gloves against her chest.

“Go to the northwest corner of the estate and fix the goddamn fence.” With that he shoved her in the general direction of his command. “Mary, get her the tool from the garage.”

Mary moved immediately upon instruction, and quickly retrieved the pair of lightweight wire stretchers. Mary handed off the tool with a twisted smile spread across her face. Ann grabbed the strange metal object, annoyed and confused, and slipped it into her apron pocket before proceeding in the direction she was ordered.

The walk took her nearly an hour to complete, crossing the rugged 10 acres on foot as opposed to the fast and sleek hoverped Ronin used to patrol the estate. It was a welcome departure from her usual chores, and she quickly came to appreciate the solitude it afforded her. Her mind slipped away from thoughts of Ronin’s bloody hands and Mary’s distorted smile, and wandered back in time to her own farm, to the smell of the dirt in the garden after a rain, and the painted hues of the sky as the sun slipped behind the snow-capped wall of the Rocky Mountains.

She waded through the knee-high grass of the back field, her body bent forward so her right hand dangled so just the tips of her fingers brushed the ticklish tops of each seeded blade. Her left hand, loosely clutching the pair of thick leather gloves, dipped and rose against the sea of rustling stems. The dry gold stalks whispered in rhythm with the motion of her legs.

The angular morning light was more forgiving than the approaching noon hour would be, so Ann brought herself upright and quickened her pace toward the boundary fence. As she walked her foot emerged into a tire track that left the flaxen stalks bent and pressed to the earth. Ann peered up and down the dual linear paths, searching for any indication of movement or color in the wide open field stretching along the west side of the estate from the main road to the neighboring property on the north. There was no sign of a vehicle. No sign of Ronin.

Ann followed the tracks toward the barbed wire fence still nearly invisible in the distance except for the evenly spaced stone columns serving as fence posts. A few hundred yards more would bring her up to a sagging portion of the wire fence and the northwest corner of the Sasaki estate. The estate shared a corner with the property to the west, but the bordering property on the north ran unfenced as far as the eye could see in all directions.

The grass on the west side of the fence was cropped close to the ground, exposing the tender roots of the native grass, leaving the ground vulnerable to erosion. The pack of dull white sheep that wandered skittishly through this field was not in sight today, and the open acres yawned on forever, as barren as most of the land Ann had seen in this place.

Across the north fence a rickety metal windmill stood sentry on four anorexic legs, as if surveying the boundary between its southern neighbors. There was no breeze that morning, much less the sort of wind it would take to engage the rusty metal blades, so the lonely goliath stood motionless and quiet. The whole contraption seemed uncertain to the point of collapse. Ann felt that the next strong wind would surely send this heap of metal crashing through the fence. Ronin would no doubt send her out to wrestle the barbed wire again when that day came.

The land spreading out behind the metal windmill was consumed by a vast field of towering sunflowers. Ann had never been out far enough to notice this sizable crop, a vivid reminder of the home she had been forced to leave, but today she hardly took notice of the familiar yellow heads craning toward the east. Today she was preoccupied by the scene before her.

Now within a few feet of the drooping fence, Ann's eyes focused on flecks of red dotting the dry yellow grass. Examining the fence, she noticed small bits of fleshy brown hair clinging to the pointed tips of several malicious looking barbs. Ann bit her lip. The brown mare.

The dark-eyed animal waited eagerly each morning for the bucket of oats Ann brought from a bin in the corner of the stable. The horse would press her ample frame eagerly against the slats of her pen and whinny insistently if Ann dallied too long with the bucket.

She was beautiful, a model of strength and speed. During her first few days on the estate, Ann had watched with awe as she raced up and down the pasture fence, her young colt by her side. For those few days Ann had been able to place her hand gently on the bridge of the mare's nose while she dug her eager muzzle into her food trough.

The brown mare was a lively animal, never still for any period of time, but her energy had a sort of control to it. This energy was channeled effectively into her role as mother. She was attentive to her colt at all times, a constant teacher and companion as they moved through the open pasture and among the other horses. The colt was nearly a year of age, and he was learning to find his own way without his mother's guidance.

A week after Ann arrived on the estate, Ronin had loaded the graceful young colt into a large horse trailer headed for the Kansas City market. Ann had snuck away from her work in the garden when she heard Ronin's large trolley maneuvering by the stables, but only had a brief moment to watch before Mary had angrily retrieved her. Those few moments were burned into her memory—the brown mare pressed nervously against the pasture fence, her eyes frantic, riddled with the sort of look normally reserved for storm weather.

Since that day the brown mare had been restless, out of control. She would toss her head violently if Ann approached her stall, even with food. Ann had been forced to deliver her oats at arms length, and even then the mare did not eat. When Ronin sent her out to pasture with the other horses, the brown mare would linger by the loading gate or speed sporadically up and down the pasture fence as if testing to see if the barrier could still hold her.

And now, looking at the spattering of blood and tissue which belonged to the only friend she could claim at her new home, Ann knew the barriers Ronin created were sound.

Ann bent down to pluck a piece of dried flesh from the blood-matted grass. Suddenly a disruption in the rows of nearby sunflowers caught her attention. Shifting her focus, Ann watched anxiously as the flower heads swayed in a pattern that was moving closer to the fence, closer to her. Ann scanned the base of these plants, waiting to see if a dog would emerge or perhaps a scavenging crow fly free. All movement stopped suddenly, and the thick stalks relented their drunken sway.

Ann's heart was racing. Her eyes darted back and forth along the rows of six-foot flowers. Finally she managed to convince herself it had been some small animal looking for a free meal, nothing more. This had often been a problem with the crop of sunflowers she raised with Mother, and they had found themselves fending off birds, squirrels, even raccoons and the occasional coyote.

"This world has lots of mouths to feed," Mother would say as they walked the rows looking for scavengers.

Calmed a bit by her thoughts of Mother, Ann returned her eyes once again to the fence. But the very moment she looked away, a rustling stirred again in the lofty stalks. Ann was on her feet.

"Who's out there," she yelled over the fence into the field of flowers. Her eyes scanned again, looking desperately to find the source of the noise and relieve the nagging fear taking root in her mind.

The wall of stalks was still once again, but Ann's eyes searched higher this time, looking for the outline of a torso hidden among the vibrant yellow rings with their bulging black centers.

She found what she was looking for and simultaneously discovered the reason she had missed it before. Positioned among the dark seeded heads was an equally dark face. A black circle of human softness dotted with two dark eyes. As she focused in on this camouflaged face, the darkness of it was quickly parted by a valley of shining white teeth.

Startled, Ann took a shaky step back and prepared to turn and run. The body belonging to the face stepped forward onto the path running between the fence and the row of sunflowers. Ann looked the man up and down as she continued to back away. He was tall, as tall as the flowers themselves, certainly taller than herself and possibly even taller than Ronin. He was built like Ronin as well, his chest swollen and filling out his shirt with a ripple of muscles visible under the light cotton fabric. His legs were equally stocky and his thick calves jutted out of a pair of loose brown cut offs. He was barefoot and Ann noticed almost distractedly that his toes were curling into the rough dirt beneath his feet.

Ann had seen enough. Pivoting on her left foot she spun her body, gathering momentum for her panicky flight.

“Wait,” cried the voice behind her. “Wait, please,” came a voice as smooth and deep as his eyes had been.

Ann ran for almost a hundred yards before she gained enough composure to look back over her shoulder. The man had not moved, but stood with his hands wrapped around a stone column staring after her. Ann stopped in the grassy field, certain she had enough headway to outrun this stranger should he decide to pursue her. Staring back at the black figure she bent over to place a hand on each knee and focused on bringing her breath back to a sensible rhythm. As she watched, the distant figure raised his hand up to wave to her then quickly cupped both hands around his mouth.

“My name is Evander,” he shouted across the space between them.

The air fell silent again with no response from Ann.

“I don’t mean you any harm. I was coming out to check our fence, that’s when I spotted you.” He paused and she knew he was waiting for her to say something.

She thought for a moment before standing upright and cupping her hands over her mouth. “Who are you?” she shouted back across the field.

A brief pause followed. “I’m Evander,” he said again then quickly added, “I’m your neighbor.”

Ann hesitated. Could this be a trick? Clearly he was not Japanese, but he spoke of ‘our fence’ and called himself ‘neighbor.’

“Do you own that field?” Ann shouted and then watched as his body jerked with a soundless chuckle.

“Pretty much.” Even from afar Ann could see the vibrant white of his broad smile.

Ann cocked her head, still confused. “But you’re not Japanese.”

Evander’s frame once again rose and fell, but this time the deep tones of his laughter reached her.

“You noticed,” he called out then let the air fall silent again. Ann finally began to understand she was being teased. It was jolting to discover how far removed she had become from even a simple joke.

“Akaji Maro owns the land,” Evander finally relented. “I’ve just been working it so long it feels like mine.”

So he was a slave. Ann decided it was safe for her to move closer. After all, it wasn’t like she could go home with the fence unmended. She crossed the grassy field as the young man

watched her, and stopped a few yards away from where he stood. She waited for him to speak again.

“I planted all these sunflowers.” Evander jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “I worked out the seeds myself. Part giant, part dorado.” He seemed pleased with himself and then paused, as if waiting to see if Ann would be pleased too.

Ann nodded timidly. She still couldn’t bring herself to look him in the eyes.

“I’m sorry I startled you.” He paused a moment to take in her bruised face and frowned. “I shoulda come through the rows singing Amazing Grace or calling out the pledge of allegiance or something.” His wide grin was effortless and disarming.

Ann wrinkled her brow in thought, unfamiliar with both references. Evander raised an eyebrow.

“You don’t know Amazing Grace?”

Ann shook her head slowly, her eyes still avoiding his.

“Not even the pledge of allegiance?”

Ann shook her head with smaller motions this time, slowly becoming ashamed without knowing why.

“Shucks, girl. Amazing Grace been around since near the dawn of time, and the pledge of allegiance, well that’s been said in schools ever since there’s been schools. You gonna stand there and tell me you don’t know neither?”

Ann’s gaze quickly dropped to her feet. Evander must have taken notice, because his next words were in a softer tone.

“That’s alright. It don’t mean much of nothing now anyway.” He paused then nodded with his schoolboy grin. “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the united states of nothingness, and

to the republic, which can't no longer stand, one nation, under japs, incomprehensible, with slavery and injustice for all."

Ann finally brought her eyes up to meet Evander's. His dark brown eyes were bright and inquiring, punctuated around their edges with wrinkles from his deep smile. More importantly, they were entirely devoid of any of the contempt Ann had become accustomed to.

"So you're a slave too?" Ann whispered across the fence.

Evander chuckled. "Shit, according to my mama we ain't never stopped being slaves. Had ourselves about 100 years vacation, but even that wasn't exactly the high life." He paused to nod to himself. "So, yeah, you could say I'm a slave."

With that he ducked between the parallel lines of his barbed wire fence and moved into the field directly across from where Ann stood. She caught her breath. The sensors had not gone off.

Evander took notice of her wide-eyed expression and slowed his movements as he approached her.

"You're out here to fix this fence right?"

Ann nodded decisively.

"You have a tool with you?"

She quickly pulled the ratcheted tool from her front pocket and stepped forward, holding it out gingerly for him to take. Evander took a step toward her and grasped the length of outstretched metal through the barbed wire.

"You should learn how to use this." He gently pushed the tool back toward her. "Chances are you might be out here again."

Ann pulled the tool back and nodded in agreement.

“Ronin sent me.” She paused. “This morning.” Another pause. “Because of the horse.” Ann’s voice sped up to the pace of her thoughts. “But I’ve never fixed a fence like this before. Back home we used wooden fences, and I’ve built plenty of those, but out here I guess they don’t have enough wood for fences. I was told that even the wood for the houses was brought in from the east. It’s so brittle they don’t even nail it together anymore. They use some sort of strong epoxy to hold it together, and it smells awful when it gets wet. In the morning when the dew is out I can smell this horrible glue smell coming out of the walls. Sometimes it makes me sick and my head starts to swim. Nobody else seems to notice though, but then again, I’ve never really said anything. And it’s not like they’d say anything to me if they noticed either.”

Ann was painfully aware that she was rambling, but couldn’t stop herself as her nervous energy was released.

Evander held up his hand. “It’s okay. We’ll get you all fixed up.”

With that he pulled a wire stretcher from his hip pocket and crouched beside the sagging fence. Ann knelt along her side of the fence, slipping into the leather work gloves she carried while Evander put on a similar pair.

Starting with the drooping wire closest to the ground, Evander placed the prickly metal line into a fitted groove on his tool then pulled the wire taut around the stone post. Ann watched closely as he secured the wire around itself by releasing a small clip on the stretcher.

“Okay you try it.”

Ann nodded then reached over the bottom line of newly stretched wire to grab the next sagging segment. As her hand moved past the stone column a small burning sensation began in the base of her wrist. The pain quickly intensified to shooting pain traveling up the length of her arm. Ann jerked her hand back to her side of the fence. She snatched off the oversized glove

engulfing her hand to reveal a red glowing disc buried just beneath the surface of her skin.

“Ah, shit.” Evander reached through the fence to grasp Ann’s tiny wrist in his large palm. Ann wrenched her wrist out of his light grip and held it with her own hand as she sat back in the tall blades of grass.

“It should be okay in a minute,” he said. Ann’s gaze flitted up to the lithium sensor embedded in the fence post glowing the same frantic red as her wrist. Ann whipped her head around to look behind her in the direction of the house.

“Ronin done sent you out here to fix this fence. He ought to know you’d have to reach across that sensor to stretch the wire.” Evander’s hands moved rapidly to repair the remaining lines of drooping wire. “You think he’d have the sense to turn off the perimeter before you got out her. Damn, fool barbarian.”

Ann was surprised by Evander’s strong words. She shrunk away from them as if they would somehow rub off on her for Ronin to see.

“Did you know that would happen?” Evander was finishing the last line of wire, which was nearly four feet off the ground.

Ann nodded slowly. She thought back to her first encounter with Ronin. He had lead her from the house toward the west fence, then forced her hand across the perimeter. He had held her outstretched arm that way for nearly a minute, and a hateful burning had engulfed her body as the dull toxin spread through her bloodstream from the implanted chip. The pain had been enough to drop her to her knees.

Evander sighed heavily and looked consolingly at Ann. “You’ll be alright.” He nodded as if trying to convince himself. “You just got to find something good to keep for yourself. Don’t matter if it’s a song, or a memory, or some pretty flower you find out in the field. You keep it for

yourself, and don't never let that bastard at it. You hold tight to whatever you got that's yours and you'll do alright."

Ann looked up from her wrist to meet his deep brown eyes. The pain had drained out of her arm to a dull ache, but a new pain sprung up in her chest, a sort of insistent pressure under her ribs as if her heart was straining for release. Ann nodded slowly and swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat.

"You better be getting back now." A smile broke across his face. "Come back out this way again when you get a chance. I'll leave something for you along the fence."

With that he slipped back through the barbed wire onto his own estate. Ann pushed herself to her feet and watched as he stood for a moment, framed against the sunflowers in the mid-morning light. He looked back at her, a smile pressed into his round face, and then disappeared into the thick green stems.

Ann pocketed the stretcher and began the long walk back to the house. As her feet swished along in the grass and the sun warmed her limbs she slowly became aware she was smiling. She brought her hand to her face to touch the extended corners of her mouth. *How long has it been? A month? Two months? Six?* Ann couldn't remember the last time someone had made her smile. She looked back over her shoulder toward the north property. The horizon held only a faint hue of yellow as she moved away from the sunflower field.

Ann continued to think of Evander's words as she neared the house. Her hands pressed firmly against her flat abdomen and she wondered if her body would ever swell with the beginnings of new life. That would be something. Something she could hold onto and never let go.

As Ann approached the house from the west, the horse stable loomed before her. The red

painted wood looked dull and angry in the hot morning light. Ann jumped as a shot suddenly rang out across the field. The single blasting tone had emitted from the stable, undeniably a gunshot from within. Ann froze in her tracks. She knew instantly that the brown mare was gone.

Chapter Five

A heavy mist hung in the air carrying a chill that whispered of the coming fall. Ann gathered up the edges of her coarse blanket to tuck them beneath her small form in hopes of keeping the oncoming day at bay for a few minutes more. The sun was just breaching the horizon, and the first early rays began poking their way through cracks in the flimsy wooden roof.

Mary shifted slightly in her bed and let out a heavy moan. Ann rolled onto her side to peer across the small room to the dim outline on the other cot. It couldn't be more than 6 a.m. If they could sleep until 6:30, the sun might burn through some of the stagnant cold. Ann closed her eyes and allowed her mind to slide back into dreams.

The floorboards let out a small creak and Ann opened her eyes. Mary was on her feet but moving slowly. The rays of light coming in through the cracks were bright and glowing now. Maybe they had overslept. Ann pushed herself up on her cot and swung her feet over the edge. Her toes recoiled as they met the damp floor below.

She leaned over to pull her boots from beneath her bed. They also held the chill of morning and Ann found herself roughly sucking in air as she slid a naked foot inside the cool leather. As her hands worked the thin laces systematically through the metal prongs, she looked across the room to Mary, who sat pulling on her own shoes.

Mary's hands were sluggish, her bony fingers struggling to grasp the laces and twist in

the necessary motions to work them through the metal clasps. Ann paused to watch, wondering if Mary was still drowsy. Mary seemed to pick up on Ann's momentary pause, and she raised her eyes to meet Ann's curious stare.

“Mind your own business, Baka Kimpatsu!”

Ann lowered her eyes, and kept them lowered for the remainder of the morning.

When the breakfast chores were completed and all the livestock fed, the work of the morning became rebuilding a small stone wall on the east side of the vegetable garden. The wall was more ornate than practical, and seemed only to serve as a makeshift boundary between the tamed grounds surrounding the house, and the native fields of parched gold leading out to a small growth of withered elms along the eastern fence.

Mary and Ann set about reforming the rough shape of the wall by replacing fallen stones and resetting loose ones. The size and shape of each rock varied, but most were flattened and wide, with dull angular edges. The white-gray composition sprinkled with green lichen made each stone seem blandly uniform. These were of the same sort of pale limestone that composed the blunted fence posts surrounding the fields of the estate.

The porous surfaces ground roughly against Ann's small hands. Mary wore a pair of work gloves she produced from her apron pocket, but Ann had forgotten her pair in the musty chest back in the slave quarters. Mary smiled distinctly when Ann fumbled one of the stones she was maneuvering and pinched her skin between two rocks. Ann sucked at the emerging purple welt, and quietly cursed Mary's spitefulness and her own failure to prepare for the day.

Ever since the night of Ann's confrontation with Ronin in the shed, Mary's attitude toward her had never been less than contemptuous. Mary had greeted Ann's swollen face with a satisfied smirk the morning after the attack, and she had kept up her vengeful posturing in the

following days. But as difficult as she was to tolerate, the old woman had become a useful buffer against further run-ins with Ronin.

Ann stood shaking her smarting hand and digesting her anger when the faint hum of Yuri's electric car sounded from the opposite side of the house. Ann turned to watch for a moment as the rounded silver sedan slid out of the garage and maneuvered onto the dirt road. The small tri-wheeled vehicle accelerated rapidly down the two lane rural route to become a silver blur sparkling in the distance.

"Aye," Mary barked at Ann as she struggled to manage a large rock in her gnarled grip. Ann refocused on her work, taking the large stone from Mary's awkward hands and sliding it on top of the waist high wall.

The two women worked on in silence, tediously rearranging the rocks like life-size building blocks. Mary was struggling to match Ann's pace, and soon enough she was merely directing Ann's movements, pointing out gaps to fill and the rocks appropriate for those spaces.

Ann was so engrossed by Mary's insistent grunting, that she failed to notice Ronin approaching from the house.

"That's coming along."

His voice seemed out of place, casual and undirected. Ann jumped as he made his presence known.

"Mary, you don't seem to be helping much. Get a container from the house and go pick the rest of the grapes in the vineyard."

Mary, relieved to be freed of the heavy labor, shuffled off toward the house.

Ann hesitated as Ronin stood unmoving, staring at her progress on the wall. It seemed he had no new orders for her, so Ann proceeded warily, unwilling to turn her back as he lingered

behind her. Working in an awkward sideways stance, Ann continued to remove stones and stack them into more form-fitting rows.

Ronin silently watched, his arms crossed over his sprawling chest. Long minutes went by, and Ann's nervous hands began to fumble the rocks as she stacked them. Ronin had never taken such an interest in any of her chores before.

Ronin glanced over his shoulder at Mary, who was disappearing into the distance with a large bucket in hand.

"I fixed the roof of your quarters."

Ronin's voice was quiet, and Ann jerked her head up, her limp blonde locks falling into her face as she registered surprise at both Ronin's words and his leisurely tone.

"Would you like to see?"

Ann caught her breath. Ronin was watching her intently and she had no answer she wanted to give him. She stared at him dumbly, with wide, frozen eyes, a large stone still balanced in her grip as she hunkered over a pile of fallen rubble.

Ronin turned and began to walk toward the slave quarters. Ann fought fear as she placed the heavy oblong stone into place along the wall. She brushed the dirt from her hands and apron absently, distracting herself from the steps she knew she was required to take in Ronin's direction.

"Ann."

Ronin's call was neither a command nor a threat. His voice was painfully casual, and he stood a few yards away looking back toward Ann with what seemed only vague interest.

Ann's voice caught in her throat. She struggled to find words to answer her master.

"Yes," she said. It was the only appropriate reply.

Dizzying thoughts raced through her mind as she willed her limbs into motion. She knew this moment had been coming. Her hand trailed up to brush the faded bruise on her right cheek.

Ann marched across the property, her eyes trained on the choppy grass beneath her feet, her heart beating out a rhythm in her ears. She wanted to think of Mother. And of her father who had been only a passing stranger looking for a moment's company. The casual union, the brief exchange of need and relief. An exchange repeated with a worker from the city, producing the tiny, temporary sister her mother had never stopped grieving.

All of this Ann had come to terms with in her mind. From the dawn of her adolescence, she had assumed her future would hold something of the same accidental pairing.

When Mother became ill, drought had spread along with her cancer, and the life in the fields of their Colorado farm had dwindled with each passing sunrise. When the Nationalist Agents plucked her from her childhood home, she had expected her innocence would be taken soon after.

But it was not this foreseeable outcome that preoccupied her thoughts now. Nor was it some offhand notion of man coupling with woman as necessary and even desirable to produce children. Instead Ann's thoughts seized on a vivid image from her childhood.

Once, on a rare trip to Denver to procure supplies, Ann had chanced to glimpse a pair of half-starved dogs wandering loose in a desolate back alley. Mother's directed pace would have sped them quickly past the unfolding scene, but Ann had paused long enough to soak in the dogs' lecherous condition. The larger male had mounted himself over the haunches of his female counterpart, and his bared teeth sunk viciously into the nape of her neck. As he carried out his instinctual copulation, his eyes held steady in an unfocused direction while his teeth maintained absolute control over his unwilling mate.

The sparse grass of the courtyard finally gave way to the dull dirt of an all too familiar path. Ann looked up from her feet to find Ronin standing in the doorway of her quarters. His motives were absent from his gaze, and his blank, even stare tied knots in Ann's stomach.

"Come inside."

Ann's muffled cry caught as a whimper in her throat. Tears were suddenly in her eyes. Ronin reached out to grab her wrist, his touch cool against her sun-warmed skin. She allowed him to pull her through the open doorway, her limbs numb and slow moving. Ronin stepped inside behind her, closing the door after them.

The room, which had been rosy with faint strands of sunlight that morning, was now utterly dim as the roof withheld all light. Only the dusty beams slipping around the doorframe allowed Ann to find the outlines of the two small beds and the heavy wooden chest that held her and Mary's clothes.

"Do you like it?"

Ronin had released his grip on her wrist, and stood behind Ann in the new darkness of the small room. He did not touch her, but he was close enough for her to feel his breath flutter the back of her hair. Ann's rasping breath transformed into a pitifully small moan. She shook her head back and forth.

"No," she whispered.

Ronin's hand slipped around her waist and pulled her solidly against him.

"No." This time her cry held more purpose. She tried to pull herself free of his grip, but Ronin deftly caught the back of her hair with his free hand, jerking her firmly against his large frame.

Ann struggled uselessly, her tiny muscles no match for an opponent nearly twice her size.

As her hands fought to purchase some injury, Ronin readjusted his hold to pin her arms neatly against her body.

Ronin was alarmingly calm, allowing Ann to flail within his secure hold, but making no further advances. Several long minutes passed, and Ann tired, relenting her desperate drive for escape. A sickening stillness settled back over the room. Ann's strained gasps were the only disturbance in the dank space.

Ronin slowly uncurled his fingers from Ann's hair and moved his hand down to grasp her head securely under her chin. Ann's panicky struggle resumed without success, but her faint cries were suddenly met by Ronin's quiet voice.

"Kokoroate ni orabaya oran." His voice was low and guttural. His lips brushed against Ann's face, forcing his words into her ear. Her body went rigid. Somehow this was a terror she was unprepared for.

"Hatsushimo," he whispered, but Ann's sharp scream flooded the room. Ronin readjusted his grip to cover her gaping mouth with his wide palm. He wrenched Ann's head back into his chest, tightening his grip around her torso to crush the breathe out of her. Ronin waited for her final muffled cried to dissipate before he continued.

"Hatsushimo no oki madowaseru, shiragiku no hana."

Violently he released her, shoving her forward onto the waiting cot. Ann threw her hands forward to catch herself, falling awkwardly across the wooden frame. She struggled to push herself up and twist to face her attacker. Before she could manage either, Ronin's hand was at her neck.

Bearing down on the base of her neck, Ronin pushed her face into the blankets covering the small bed. Ann's hands fought to push herself upright. Her face was smashed into the coarse

wool with enough force to make it difficult to breath.

Her panicky mind held treasonous thoughts even while her frantic limbs fought to free her. *Please, God, let him kill me.*

Ronin's other hand slipped under the collar of her loose fitting dress and caught a fist full of the thin fabric. The worn cotton split easily along a side seam as he pulled his fist back toward his chest. Ann was able to lift her head slightly as her body raised with the pull of her clothing. Her tattered dress tore away to reveal the tender flesh of her naked back. Ann's desperate shrieks filled the room. Her voice was sharp and piercing, contrasting the thoughts that thudded like a dull heartbeat. *I don't want this. I don't want this. Don't let this happen.*

Her right hand managed to find Ronin's arm, his hand still gripping her firmly at the base of her neck. Ann's ragged nails tore deep into the flesh of his wrist. Her hand was quickly knocked away, and then Ronin's whole weight was bearing down on her. With one knee crushing into Ann's lower back, he manipulated his small victim to tuck her thrashing limbs beneath her body.

Ronin kept his knee squarely on her back, creating an unbearable pressure point. Ann's head was forced back into the rough wool by the downward thrust, but her howling scream found its way through the matted material. She was incapable of movement and could only endure Ronin's massive weight as he balanced on top of her.

Ronin moved roughly, maneuvering in some way that was unclear to Ann. Soon the whispering sound of leather sliding across cotton filled her ears. This held a vague familiarity, and her mind finally identified it as the sound of a belt being pulled free from a pair of pants. Ann's anguished scream rose with pitched intensity, and her trapped arms struggled under the enormous weight crushing down on her.

“If it were my wish,” Ronin said, his voice strained. Despite his low tone, his voice was explosive and violent in the small space. The sound of air hissing was followed by the brutal blow of the belt across Ann’s exposed back.

“To pick the white chrysanthemum.” Ann’s shrieks were still muffled in the blankets of her cot, and Ronin’s voice dominated the room as he continued lashing her with quick, decisive blows.

“Puzzled by the frost of an early autumn.” Untold rage hung from Ronin’s every word, ripping through the stillness as Ann’s flesh tore away under the impact of the belt.

Ann’s voice was only a gurgle as sobs of pain choked her cries. Her fingers curled helplessly against her body with every cutting blow. Ronin paused before the tenth stroke, his furious tone dropping off.

“I by chance might pick the flower.” Ronin’s final sentence was breathy, with each word heaved out upon an exhalation. He seemed distinctly tired. Ann squinted her eyes shut in anticipation of what would come next. A final ripping blow exploded across her back spreading hot pain through her torso.

Suddenly Ronin pushed himself off her to stand erect. He took a couple of unsteady steps back, and paused breathless in the middle of the room for a moment. Regaining his composure, he pivoted toward the door. He pushed his way through the thin wooden door, flinging it shut behind him.

Ann jumped as the wood cracked behind her, but remained face down on the cot, paralyzed by both fear and pain. Choked sobs wracked her body, finally emerging into a full volume scream. The cuts on her back seared with a vibrant intensity unlike anything she had ever known. Her howl was shrill and piercing, but finally abbreviated by her need for breath.

Ann sucked in air and forced her atrophied limbs to push her off of the small cot. She stumbled to her feet, teetering with dizziness in the blackened world. She struggled to pull her ripped dress back around her form, crying out as the light fabric brushed her ruined back. She needed to get out. *Run*, she thought. *Run, you stupid fool. Run like you should have run the moment you heard Ronin's voice.*

Ann burst from the wooden hut, glancing around feverishly as she bolted into the blinding light of the open yard. Ronin was nowhere to be seen, and Ann launched herself desperately into the north field. She careened haphazardly through the sprawling field, flinging herself over the pasture fence as she came to it. She ran at breakneck speed, sometimes stumbling, but catching herself mid-stride as the ground flew up to meet her.

Finally, her foot caught on an unknown protrusion and she crashed into the hard earth. The sudden impact jarred her enough that her knotted stomach vomited its contents. Orange fluid ran down her chin as she pushed herself back to her feet. She wiped her face clumsily on her dress sleeve and tried to pull the sagging garment back around her thin shoulders.

Forcing her legs back into motion, she picked up speed and ran until the back fence appeared on the horizon. Her pace fell off as she stumbled up to the wire barrier. She pivoted her body, turning west to barrel down the length of the fence. She ran until she once again found her flight blocked by barbed wire.

Ann stopped against the western fence. She shut her eyes tightly and tried to regain her breath. She thought of the brown mare, of the horse's own desperate flight. *There is no escape*, she thought. *Only a bullet in the brain waiting for me back in the barn.* Ann's eyes honed in on the clear plastic casing of the lithium sensor embedded in the rock post. As she reached her hand out toward the detector, the small red light blinked to life under the milky plastic.

Ann jerked her hand back and teetered for a moment on tired legs, her gaze looking desperately to the sky. *No escape*, her mind repeated. She crumpled into a defeated heap across the yellow grass. Several blades brushed the open wounds on her back and she jerked herself forward, away from the probing fingers.

She sat, hunched forward on the hard ground and let her thoughts sink into despair. Her tears began anew. She wept for what seemed hours, unloading all the agonies of her soul. Suddenly, through her watery vision, a hint of color caught her eye. A few yards away, lying along the north fence was a small red plastic box. Ann had not noticed it as she raced to the corner of the property, but it sat waiting, bright and obvious in the strong afternoon light.

Ann stood up on uncertain legs and approached this small box. Her tears were drying into salty tracks down her face, and she used her sleeve to wipe at her eyes and nose. She crouched down beside the curious object, distinctly man-made and out of place nestled among the native grass. There was small clasp on one side, and when Ann released this, the box opened to reveal a book inside.

A small cut of paper was perched on top of the book, and Ann pulled this out, revealing carefully printed words on the other side.

Ann,

If you can read, here is the present I promised you. If you cannot read, may God bless you enough to know this was meant for you.

Evander

Ann lifted the tattered book from the box and ran her fingers across the careworn cover. The edges were curled and the print on the cover faded.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

by Maya Angelou.

Ann stared at these words, her breath still ragged and uneven from her panting sobs. She carefully flipped the book open. A long rectangular strip of paper was nestled inside the front cover, hand-written lettering covering its length. Her eyes absorbed the words carefully printed on the yellowed bookmark, her lips giving voice to the last refrain of the poem.

“The caged bird sings with a fearful trill
of things unknown but longed for still
and his tune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom.”

A cool breeze stirred from the north, and the rushing air flapped Ann’s tattered dress around her body. Ann lifted her eyes to scan the field on the other side of the fence. The lofty sunflowers swayed restlessly in the breeze, but there was no sign of another person. The quiet rustle of the whispering grass came to Ann from all sides as she crouched among the golden stalks. The dry plains spread open and empty in every direction, but with the gifted book held tightly in her hands, suddenly Ann did not feel alone.