

# People Mover

a novella

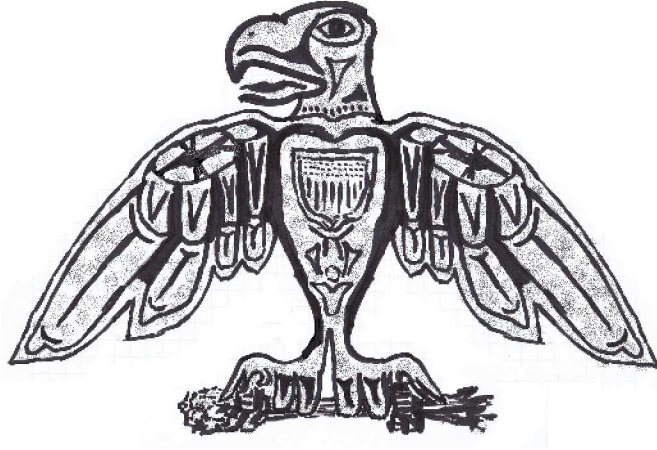


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The warm, early morning air blew past the truck at high speed, hugging it, sliding across its shape, fleetingly visible as it rolled over the rig's scorching metal chassis. The distinctive sound of the whistling wind amplified the inherent eeriness of the situation. A little girl sat, squirming, in the passengers' side seat of the cab, despite no good – or legal – reason on Earth for her being there. Inside the truck she was constantly planning her next move. The girl's backpack still lay at her feet and her left hand rested close to its open side, her thumb and forefinger anxiously tugging at the zipper. She knew the man driving beside her was surely as nervous as herself, even with the grimly stern face that he had put on. Things were getting edgy, but the odds leaned more in her favour with every passing minute.

"I have to use the restroom." The girl said, uncomfortably, but not untruthfully.

"We just left the inn half an hour ago. Besides, closest break we can get is *at least* another hour away."

She deferred down to the crumpled map she'd been lucky enough to find on the truck cab floor that down lay somewhat-uncreased on her lap. "This says there's one in two miles."

"I've done this road a million times *girl*, I know it better than the people who laid it in the first place"

"I would hate to mess up your truck. The smell isn't something you'd want to get used to. Believe me"

A surprisingly blunt remark for a girl her age, the driver thought. He made another futile attempt to establish authority. "You should know

I'm in charge of this vehicle, and its occupants. And my boss wants me to make a *speedy* delivery.”

“I am in charge of my own bladder. But it doesn't listen to me when I need it most.”

“How old are you again?”

The girl continued fidgeting around in her seat. “Twelve. Again.”

“I'm starting to think this was a mistake. Your snide comments aren't so welcome with me.”

“Starting? It was your wish I started talking when you took me personally, you could have just ignored me all the way.”

He wished he had. “I thought I could use the company.” he sneered. How bad could a twelve-year-old be?

“I'm sorry for not living up to your expectations. I may be *mature for my age*, but my body still works like any other twelve-year-old's. Look, that blue board says there's a stop after the next exit. If you refuse, I may have to resort to *other means*.”

He recoiled in his seat at her tone and choice of words. His choices seemed admittedly limited, forced even. “Guess it wouldn't hurt to make one more quick stop”

The driver detoured into the rest area and parked his truck behind another big rig. His companion, the twelve-year-old girl, wasn't ideal by any means. Whenever he had a travelling partner he usually hoped for someone that could keep him awake with stimulating conversation, with stories they could swap and advice they could share. Ideally, someone trustworthy and preferably his own age. But this girl was unlike anyone he had met in all his past endeavors. She was needy, impractical, petulant. Initially – all too briefly – he had

thought of calling Child Protective Services when he saw her following him on his way back to the truck. Her story had a dubious taste in his mouth – left alone by her parents in the early morning light at a trucker’s inn after she wouldn't stop crying in the car? Sounded ridiculous. It didn't add up and he didn't *need* to take on the responsibility of handling her. But he felt concerned, and a sense of guilt was making ever-larger strides in his conscience. He kept questioning himself, making up theories about what a girl of only twelve years could be doing hitchhiking so far away from home? Eventually, he surrendered to his curiosity and with perhaps too-much empathy creeping upon him, he decided against calling the authorities, at least immediately. First mistake?

He knew the risk was high – the police probably wouldn't believe him given his own dubious history with both the law and CPS. He trawled through the consequences, weighing them, but nothing got past it. The lack of integrity with the authorities *had* been the decisive cause for his actions. But the tears streaming down the girl's face adding to the voice of despair had helped his case. She had, after all, just asked for a ride to the next town: Saint Mary, Montana. He wished the tears hadn't helped her case. He wished he had reconsidered his decision to call CPS even. Most of all, he wished he'd never met her. The situation had changed considerably.

Because very shortly into their journey together, he realized he had definitely made a mistake. The girl he had perceived to perhaps be a somewhat bratty nuisance had now taken a turn for the worse. Halfway through, he knew he have to go further than Saint Mary.

Because halfway through, this twelve-year-old girl had pointed a gun to his face.

## 2

The driver thought about it while she used the wretched truckstop restroom she'd insisted they stop at. He could always run to his truck and pull out onto the highway before she was finished. An act of self-defense, a path to ignorance. He noticed a line of trucks making their way into the parking area. A clean exit was on the cards if she took her time. "Girls always did, or maybe... *women* always did?" His thoughts bore little sense even in the context of the scenario.

Regardless, his mind was racing with ideas. He thought the girl was dangerous, an imbecilic loose cannon and he knew he could not afford to entertain her anymore. He had to act on impulse. If he succeeded, he was sure to rid himself of this devilish conundrum. A twelve-year-old with a fickle mind could be harmful to society. But he couldn't care less about society – frankly, he just wanted to survive.

Eventually, he decided to take the risk. Freedom was undervalued.

Running to his truck, he checked behind him if the girl had in fact left the restroom yet. Nothing. Upon setting one foot on the truck's cab-door steps, he did a retake. A huge freight transporter was making its way to the parking spot right behind his truck. If he were to get out of this soon, he had to make sure of his intentions. He waved hone

sweaty hand profusely, signaling the truck driver to stop. Once he realized the freight driver had taken notice of his intention to back up, he made a double-check in the direction of the restroom area. The girl was still nowhere to be found.

He got into his own truck's cab and cleanly reversed out as fast he could – something straight out of years of driving experience. He pulled onto the highway and took one last look at the side mirror.

A smirk found its way onto his relieved face.

### 3

He was a perfect target.

From her vantage point, Helen had found the companion for the next phase of her journey. Another trucker. Tattooed hands, thick blond handlebar mustache, a slightly-too-tight Marlboro T-shirt, and most egregiously, plastic truckstop sports sunglasses, all came together in perfect harmony to project their own type of Middle American masculinity – it all ticked, it all fit. From Saint Mary to the next town, or farther depending on how happy she could keep her new travelling companion. She could've been there by now, had it not been for the conniving driver who she had left the restroom just in time to see pulling out onto the main road. How selfish, yet smart. *Pragmatic.*

She had admittedly thought about running up to him and threatening him with the gun. She could've made it in time, but she had already found her next target in Mr. Sunglasses. Hidden from his view, she fiddled around in her bright pink backpack and checked on her most prized possession. The weapon was still tucked away under a few items of spare clothing. It had been helpful, the gun, to install fear and doubt. She could accomplish much more with it than any girl of her years should normally be able to, just by making it conspicuous. Fear instigates a recklessness in humans, and this reckless panic enables exploitation.

“So how did a girl of your age get to this rest area without any supervision anyway?”

“My parents left me here an hour ago as punishment. They do that sometimes, whenever I become a burden to them.”

“That’s no reason to leave a child alone. Are you sure they aren’t going to come back?”

“If all the past times are to be repeated, I’ll be stuck here for at least until the sun sets.”

“Maybe I should call the cops and let them handle it. Or one of those children-helping institutions... *what were they called?*”

“Please sir, I only need to get to the next town.”

“I’m really sorry girl but I’m doing a job and won’t be stopping for the next eight hours once I get going again.”

Perfect, Helen thought. If he was driving that long, he was most likely crossing the border, or getting close to it. It was the ideal route she had wanted to be on, the quickest possible way she could get to her destination. And for her to succeed here, she had to utilise her cloak of emotion, drama, and self-pity. Something she absolutely hated doing but something that absolutely worked on her targets.

“You’re my only way to get back home, I am really scared and nobody wants to deal with me.”

“That’s because nobody wants to get into any *trouble.*”

She realized he was going to be a tough rock to crack. Now, the dramatic part had to begin. She put her head down and slumped into the fetal position, snorting and making liberal use of her ability to cry

almost on-demand: a classic move for deception. It worked, almost embarrassingly easily. Helen knew the empathetic kind were gullible.

“Look, kid, I think the best way to help you is to call the police, but I doubt you'll necessarily stay out of trouble till the time they get here. So, I'll drop you off at the next accessible spot so you're not waiting around in a parking lot for a truck. Then you are on your own from there.”

“Thank you so much, I really appreciate it.”

Easy. A little drama and they always fold.

## 4

“Your parents always treat you like that?”

“No.”

He waited for her to continue. Once he realized she wasn't going to talk, he tried to interest her in some food. “Have you eaten anything? Would you like a cookie?”

“What kind?”

“I dunno. It's got the cream stuff inside.”

“Ok.”

Helen had always tried to be prudent when it came to accepting food from strangers, she'd heard all the PSAs, but wasn't above taking a free snack. Especially whenever she didn't know for sure when or what her next meal might be either. She had studied the man to a considerable extent, but it was hard to find any real fault with him as yet. She had to be careful – an honest façade engulfed every person in the world, like herself. Everyone has something hidden, some dark place they wish they could never visit. Besides, her driver was already one-handedly taking the cookies out of their store-bought pre-wrapped sleeve tray. Safe, and very welcome, she concluded.

“You're not much of a talker now are you?” asked the driver, quickly munching down one of the cream-filled cookies he must have kept in his cab for longhaul trips.

“I know I tend to get on people's nerves when I talk.”

“I've got nerves of *steel!*” Helen's latest driver spat out

enthusiastically. He realised a split second later he might have used that term wrong. “Tell me about your folks. I have never heard of such careless behavior in my years of parenting”

“Are you a father?” Helen asked. She tweaked her tone ever so slightly to sound like she was actually interested.

“Yeah, I’ve got a son. Just turned eighteen. Hard to cope with at this age, but I guess you have to let him be. Adolescence can be tough.”

Helen knew what he meant. She had a brother who whiled away his time smoking and drinking with his *creative friends*. Much like their parents. “Their attitude isn't worth paying too much attention to” she flatly said back.

“How'd you get to sound so smart? What do you know at your parenting at your age anyway?”

“I understand he's work *now*. He'll change for good once he gets out of the house and misses his family” said Helen. She was starting to feel uneasy about making this almost-earnest small talk.

“I guess. So what do your parents do?”

She realized he wouldn't stop the conversation until he got satisfactory answers. The type of infuriating characters she had had to deal with on this journey – they all needed satisfaction. Perhaps it was just a universal thing, part of *the human condition*. She had decidedly refrained from telling any of her travelling companions thusfar the complete truth about her parents: their demeanor, their lethargy, their lack of faith in her. And worst, all the crystal meth.

That drug that had ruined her life. For eight years of her life she was treated well, as well as the life of any school going girl, born in the closest thing the Northern flyover states had to a typically Middle Class family, innocently going about her life one cherishable day at a time.

But that eighth year of her life was when it all took a turn. It felt like a once-fluffy cloud that had given way to a dark and heavy object falling from the sky with ever-increasing speed, waiting for disastrous contact. Contact that could dissolve the suffering. But, as Helen found, the object had *evaded* the ground. It only kept falling. Plunging into a abyss with no visible landing. No contact. No end to misery.

Just as she was starting third grade, her grandfather, the one person Helen had always valued over anybody in the world, left her side. She still valued her grandfather more than anything else. She just wished she could hear him speak, hold his hand, or do any of the other simple things grandfathers did so comfortingly even one more time. Her grandfather truly had been the one sane person in the household, always keeping things in check, making her parents – his son and daughter-in-law – behave like normal, civilised adult caretakers. As a retired O-6 logistics officer of the US Army, his principles and morals had mostly kept the more ethically-slack impulses of the adults of the house at bay.

He was Helen's mentor, supporting and compassionate, a light that held off the darkness. His stories and occasional impromptu lectures had crafted her strong and mature mentality. He had explained to her the *malignity* of the world around her, the unfair nature of it. He taught her that all human beings are their own worst enemies and it is within one's own best interests to always do their utmost to avoid harm. All the negativity and plain evil in the world was not what mattered in a magical oasis of clear headedness and practical thinking. With his training, Helen had created a mental barrier of strength, a shield protecting herself from utter madness. He often prepared her for the possible *worst*, and a desirable *best* in the same breath.

The house Helen grew up in was now a wrecked mess and reeked of sickly fumes. Her parents had no *friends*, and Helen was certainly not going to invite any of hers over either, if they even thought of coming. The sizeable inheritance from her late grandfather had helped her parents survive without getting off the lounge for a real job, all they needed now was an occasional food-run from the local supermarket were and their homestyle hardcore chemical stimulants to keep themselves excited. Her only other remaining family, her brother Anthony, was more-or-less following suit.

News of her parents' descent into the throws of junkiedom had quickly reached the ears of the wily and judgmental school children. Never much one to be subjected to any special attention at school before her grandfather's passing, Helen now became latest target of the schools' rumour-mill. She held the distinction of being the *loner*

*kid from a bad family* in the eyes of her primary school peers until her final day of attendance, which just so happened to also be the first day of fourth grade. Helen never went to school again after she realised *it* would never forget, and her parents didn't care.

## 5

“My dad works at a loading dock for a company.” Helen said.

Perfectly mundane, perfectly believable. Completely false.

“Not bad. If he works, he must be able to put food on the table.” the driver said, munching on the last bits of his second cookie.

“I guess.” Helen found herself yawning for a good two seconds. “I have to go to sleep.”

“Alright, I'll wake you shortly when we're at your stop.”

Helen dreamt of Mount Fairweather. The *peaks*, the *hike*, the *view to be had from the base of the mountain, let alone the top*. She had dreamt about it before: a magnificent stretch of land, in all its beauty, setting itself apart from everything else within Glacier Bay National Park, Yakutat Alaska with its sheer height and magnificence.

*Rough-hewn triangles probing the slate-grey sky.*

*The genteel contrasting colours of snow, rock, and ice floe underneath.*

*It was a spectacle to behold.*

*'Tsalxhaan' she knew locals called it.*

It was a similar dream which had first instilled the confidence in Helen to embark on this journey. She had devised a carefully laid out strategy with contingency plans for every possible scenario. Among other things, her plan involved stealing – a malicious activity, something she once never would've thought of doing, *ever*. It had gone against her grandfather's principles. But she knew that at her age she wasn't going to be hired for work, nor was she going to be lent much money by her parents. And she was determined to do this *now*, at this age. But mostly, it was a way out of the dreadful environment she was confined to. She found solace in the fact that stealing a bundle of loose cash from a stash of her parent's drug money could be redefined as a *loan*. She could try to give it back once this was all over, once she returned as a wiser person.

The drug-money guilt was easily overridden anyway: it was all grandpa's money after all, and he must've left some for his favourite person. And then, there was *the gun*. Her most faithful companion. A sordid apparatus of death, destruction, and intimidation. Helen knew where the gun had been hidden. She had tracked her burnt-out father's movements for days to gather his habits. He tucked it under the bed – out of sight, but in her mind. She quickly found a window of opportunity to steal it from beneath the inattentive, eyes of her parents who were presently arguing about something or other out in the living room. She slunk away with it, completely unnoticed, and

hid it in her backpack the day she was about to embark on her grand quest. A fitting object to start her perilous *adventure*.

Helen woke up to the smell of smoke and a gently tapping hand on her shoulder. For a moment she thought she was back in her dreaded room. Perhaps her family had given enough of a damn to actually come looking for her. Once she cleared her head and vision, she realized it was the driver, puffing on a cigarette and patting her with both his eyes still firmly on the road. She was awake and back in the truck once again, happily miles away from her home.

## 6

She didn't *necessarily* want to resort to the gun again. Helen the gunslinger? No – she had learned to hold it in her hands together without nervous muscle tremor but that epithet would never sit right with her.

Helen had set out with the idea of being nice to the world, to the drivers she would encounter on the journey. If she found she must resort to acting coercive, it was to be with her words; her knack to somehow convince people through considered speech alone. It wasn't downright evil to find accomplices to join her on this adventure, in hindsight it was just a small roadtrip from one relatively small town to another. But it hadn't been easy. Nothing about this was easy. From the outset, she felt ambitious and knew of the risks she would face, but it was getting harder. The gun was to be her *very* last recourse. Her *ultimate* weapon, a creation of the worst minds of men, sicker than The Bomb. A skilled show of handling and threatening choice of words could make any sensible person paint vivid mental pictures they never thought they could. And she had already made use of it once.

“Ok. Your safe stop's just coming up next” the driver croaked, mouth dry from the day's heat and his smoke. He also seemed as if he was trying hard to stay awake after an already considerable long shift

driving his rig.

“Great. Back to Hell as I know it.”

“Hey, if you were a grown-up, I would've tried to make sense of this life to you, but you're too young to see it now. Just know that no matter how bad things seem right now, it'll always pass eventually”

“Right” ... “Where are you headed next?”

“I'm headed across the border, North to Cardston then on to Calgary after that.”

Helen had memorised the major towns and cities she would most-likely encounter over the course of her roadtrip – starting out from her parents' quaint antique family-style cottage turned dingy meth shack just a little ways outside Kiowa. It was then in Browning where she had found her first target: a younger driver whose Good Ol' Country Boy pure helpful intentions, and perhaps a slight deficiency of critical sense, had gotten her surprisingly easily to a major highway. At first, her plan seemed foolproof. She would sneak out of the house at night, part of the plan that was too easy with the help of her uncaring parents. The next bit was to arrange for a ride to take her to the trucker's inn she knew sat waiting once you reached the turn-off for Route 89.

Ralph had helped Helen with this. Ralph was a boy about her own age she knew from school with a weak heart and a heavy crush. She knew he could be played, exploited to her own benefit. He was blinded by harmless affection and she was very much aware of it. Ralph managed to take her to right up the inn from the main road turn-off she had found herself at on his two-seater bike. He had

wondered at the time why she had such an obviously over-stuffed backpack on her, but with fear that Helen would make him cancel the ride, he refrained from ever questioning her about it. He was happy to be around her, especially on such a pleasant afternoon and with no other pesky boys around to spoil the mood. He felt like a man of strength, protecting *his dear woman*. He dropped her off and headed back home as Helen had then brusquely told him to. She felt bad for using him as transportation, but *promised* him she would meet again and they could have a *good* talk.

At the trucker's inn, after her stunt with Ralph, Helen made herself comfortable at the root of an isolated tree with a good view of all the parked big rigs. The decorative bushes in front of her had made for an excellent good hiding spot and also not the worst possible place to sleep through the night in several layers of Winter clothing as she had discovered, much to her delight. She awoke at the break of dawn to a scarce yellow, slowly painting a new sky over the starry dark of the Montana night. It wasn't long until she found her target man, a clean-shaven driver emerging from the doors of the inn, taking in the fresh breath of the morning air. He had looked friendly enough, and Helen had hoped she still did too.

She started wondering if any of the other towns she was sure to pass through would provide views as beautiful as this morning's sky too. Here she was, on the journey to partially find out she supposed. Defying logic, defying sense, and the best of all, defying danger.

But in her current truck, her new associate was friendly – unlike the smoke from his cigarette, and very much unlike her first aide-de-camp, the freshly-shaven man who had found the courage to leave her at a rest stop not that much further down the road had ultimately turned out to be. *Calgary was perfect* she thought, *too good to resist*. She knew her instinct to choose a new driver was ripe. This was going well, but she was *keenly* aware it could've gone otherwise. *It could still, in fact*.

Helen suddenly felt a sense of regret fill her head. Since she had knowledge of his final destination, she could've been thinking of ways to convince him to take her with him. Instead, she was snoozing around comfortably. *Stupid move. Very lazy*. If she was to do this, she had to be much more observant, careful, and ultimately, *shrewd*. But now it was almost too late. Her driver was spearheading his truck past the lay of the countryside. More and more of the beautiful countryside was passing with every second. Helen was making progress towards her goal, true. But she still faced a fast-ticking clock that was steadily turning her current situation into one that could only be remedied by *the gun*.

She made one final attempt at human connection. “What hour is it?” The driver stole the briefest of glances at his wristwatch. “About quarter-past seven”.

“It's still early. The stop you leave me at could still be *scary* this early out.”

“Don't you worry. I called the town sheriff while you were taking your precious nap. They'll be picking you up at the next stop very soon.”

The driver assured Helen with a smug look imprinted on his face. Helen was rattled. She had not planned for this. She could hear the sound of her heart beating in her head.

“That's mighty kind of you.” ... “Does your son ever come home around this time?”

“I'd hope not. I saw him sneaking out past his bedtime once when he was slightly older than what you are now. But my punishment set him straight.”

“I doubt it.”

“What?”

“I said – I doubt he never sneaked out again without you being aware of it. I think he just got better at it.”

“I don't know what your parents do for you, but in my house I retain a strict climate to keep my kid under control.”

“My parents don't care. I snuck out of the house yesterday.”

“Wait. What?”

Helen explained her story from the start, *carefully* avoiding the part that involved the gun.

“I don't believe this. I'm travelling with a twelve-year-old, taking her to a place she's never even been?”

“Yes, I'm glad you see through it. And I would really appreciate it if you could please take me all the way to Calgary.”

“No way girl. I don't want nothing to do with you anymore. I am surrendering you to the sheriff”

“Look sir. That could land you into a lot of trouble” said Helen, realising it was no use trying persuading a lost cause.

“Yeah, right.” her driver remarked sarcastically.

“There may already have been a missing child alert issued by my family. If you take me directly to the police and I frame my story in such a way that makes you look like you have been *using* me from the start ... I don't think it would be well received. And you don't have much time to think about it”

“I don't think you'd do that. Besides, I haven't done anything wrong”

“Except pick up a stranded young girl randomly at a truckstop and try to leave her at the next one? How do *you* think the cops will read between the lines?”

The driver's face contorted into what could only be described as a contemplative grimace. He could see how this easily seemed to the ear of an outsider. Suddenly, he was faced with a decision that could dictate his future. One verbal mistake with the police and it could be years behind bars. He felt a slight rage form inside him, a rage that could perhaps make irrational decisions for him. He thought about stopping his truck and forcefully throwing the girl out. He chided himself inwardly. “Look, this isn't a game I want to play. I have dealt enough with your rubbish”

“I assure you, I won't be a pest. I simply want to be dropped off at your destination.”

“We'd have to cross the border. No way in Hell am I dealing with that.”

“I'll deal with that. Just do as I say.”

“I am not dealing with the border police. That's a whole other thing. This has got nothing to do with me. I helped you and I don't want to be the one facing the fall for all the good I've ...”

He stopped short of finishing his sentence. He felt his right cheek contort to the touch of a tube-like object pressed hard against the skin of his face. For a second, his mind failed to comprehend the moment. But that was it, it all fell into place immediately. Point-blank range with disaster. Heart pounding, for an unprecedented sense of danger was taking over him. It was a gun's cold barrel that was presently pushed into his face by a twelve-year-old girl.

*Crime*, much like *sports*, is a player of emotions. Two parties with vastly different ideas and reactions. Feelings of sympathy for the underdog or an envious dislike for the dominantly-skilled usually boil up within the spectators. The latter, for most part, triumph because they have the *tools*, the *machines*, the *will*, the *players* to make it happen.

The truck driver thought of all the disgusting child-related true crime stories he had heard about over the years; *trafficking*, *abuse*, *abandonment*. How the dominant breed got away with most of it. By all rights, he should be the dominant one here: the more physically powerful, richer, adult person in this scenario. But he was made the neutered underdog by the presence of one simple tool in the hands of a schoolgirl.

Now it seemed like he was in the midst of a conundrum, on the receiving end of a gunbarrel, cowed in true fear and trapped in the cab of his own sixty-tonne Mack like a mouse in a cage. A calm and ordered grasp of the situation might have deduced that there was to be no easy way out of this situation.

However, hope springs eternal.

## 7

The *Glock 19* is a semiautomatic, recoil-operated handgun with a four inch barrel, capable for firing its standard capacity magazine of fifteen 9mm rounds at muzzle speeds of well over one-thousand feet-per-second at an operational lethality range of up to fifty metres. It is one of America's most widely used sidearms. It is a coercing device, built made to be lightweight, compact, competitively priced, and wielded easily (primarily, but not exclusively) by military and law

enforcement officials. “*Such a weapon in the hands of a little girl would be bad enough*” Helen thought. But she didn’t have a mere Glock, she had the *Dezzy*.

But none of its sleekness, affordability, or civilian availability matched up to the smooth, precision-engineered, *Desert Eagle* .50 Cal pistol. ‘The Dezzy’, as it is otherwise so proudly known as by many, including Helen’s hated parents, is a slick device used widely by gangsters, gangster-wannabes, props departments, and the Israeli weapons industry to announce style and swagger in a boastful manner otherwise unachievable with a more modest handcannon. A heavy container for a metallic missile that’s made to travel fast, elude gravity, pierce the air, and only ever stop once it makes contact with another entity along its path. Usually, a human target. Truthfully, very little good was ever envisaged by anyone behind a *Dezzy*, and curiously it also happened to be what Helen felt connected herself to her late grandfather the most. But, The Dezzy, that very encumbrance, was currently being held in the sweaty, immature, palms of Helen, who had lined it up at the visibly bewildered face of her travelling companion, a truck driver she hadn’t even bothered to learn the name of.

*So close to its target, the bullet inside would never see daylight.*

“Pull over. Now” Helen said with the utmost sternness in her voice. The driver crackled his dry mouth. “What are you doing? Put that down, you’ll hurt yourself.”

"I don't think it's me you should be worried about."

"I... I don't understand why you are doing this. Put it down and we can talk."

"We can talk either way."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I simply want you to listen to what I'm saying. And don't do anything *stupid*. I have fired this before and I will not hesitate to do it again."

"We're in a moving truck. If you shoot me, we're both going to end up off the road"

"I am *aware* of the situation. Stop the vehicle on the shoulder and turn off the engine and raise your hands to your head."

The driver obliged. He looked for a wide shoulder on the right side of the road with enough room for a freight transporter. *A lane that should only be used in an emergency.* "Did this count as one? *Surely.*" he thought. After a mile, he switched on the hazard lights when he found the road widening. There was a protocol to be followed in this situation, he actually *had* been trained for it, but his hitchhiker friend had made him forget all about it. His mind was racing with adrenaline, a million thoughts, and very few decisions to make. And he did exactly what Helen had asked of him.

"I want you to take me across the border and do as I say. Simply remain calm with the border police and silently take me with you to Calgary."

"*Please* put the gun down."

"I will. The sooner you realize this is your only way to see your adolescent, the better."

"I can't just sneak a random kid into Canada! I need documentation

to convince them. And there are no weapons allowed.”

“You let me worry about that” she paused “Just answer this – have you sent your paperwork for this truck to the border?”

“My boss takes care of that through the freight company.”

“Will you be heading into the primary lane directly?”

“Yes, that's what I have always done. How do you know all this?”

“Perfect.” Helen said under her breath. She ignored his question.

“Let's get moving, I'll fill you in on the way. How long till we reach the border?”

“Maybe another hour.”

“Good. Keep driving. And don't pull any tricks. And give me your phone.”

The driver handed over his well-worn mobile. She made sure it was completely off then tucked it deep into her backpack for the time being.

A silence prevailed in the truck. It was windy and starting to chill outside. Back at home, Helen had practiced her threatening speeches in front of a mirror continuously till she felt her voice gain an air of confidence. Threats can only be validated with an aura of authority. The best and most vicious leaders had the intelligence and audacity to intimidate their enemies into submission; Genghis Attila, Vlad – they all resorted to ruthless methods. Guile and malice were the chilling methods of how demands were met, a medium to enlighten the observers of who was in charge. Challenge it trivially, and one ensures their own annihilation. Helen and her driver had both read enough history at school to know that lesson.

Helen had actually never held a weapon in all her life prior to the day she stole The Dezy from her parents. She didn't need to of course. The life of most any average school girl ideally never did. Never one to be a headliner, she was happy with her incremental school gossip and trivial ambitions. Regardless of how unfortunate her home life was, she never entwined in any narrow minded quarrels and possessed the characteristics to always come out of any unfriendly disposition. *A mature head, unbeknownst to any harm.* There was no desire to peek around the corner of the wall protecting her from the wickedness of the world, no curiosity to see what lurked behind.

But this was *necessary* evil. A complex state of affairs she had planned on since the thought of the expedition had first crossed her mind and quickly solidified in it. She had to instill fever inside the brain of her accomplice, her to-be breaker of international border law. There was still compassion somewhere within her, but a boldness outside now too. The grotesque device in her hands and the drive overcome her mentor – *her grandfather's* – pragmatic wisdom. Because for now, within the confines of the truck, she was playing God.

The party of two were still traveling North in the uncomfortable hush of the truck's interior, inconspicuous to the outside world. The small clock on the truck's dashboard blinked: 8:30 AM. They were getting closer to the Canadian border and Helen was still mulling over what exact words she would need to convince the border officials. But the thoughts of the two riders varied wildly. For the driver, illegal immigration, bribes, crime, blackmail, emotions: a thoroughly mixed bag, far from what he had projected this job to be. Suffice to say, this was not how a smooth freight delivery was supposed to go down. Tranquility, a peaceful state of mind was all he desired now and dying was not the way to earn it. The deviously controlling mind of the girl was proving to be harder to comprehend with every passing second and mile closer to the border.

It was hard not to feel utterly helpless with every second he contemplated the dreaded object in her hand. *Was the gun loaded?* His mind was battling, examining and calculating every next move. But the way he saw it, this was not the time for rash actions or action movie heroics. He wanted to snuff the fire out at the first *safe, smart*, opportunity he saw. He felt, and fought, the reckless urge to snatch the gun from the feeble hands of the girl. The driver knew such a hasty move could very quickly result in a death, or two.

“What's your name, Sir?” Helen asked, breaking the stream of muffled noise from the moving truck's engine.

“Lewis Gnessi” the driver answered flatly. Almost grateful to have any conversation at all to distract him from his ongoing internal stream-of-consciousness panic.

“Do you mind if I call you by your name from now.”

“Are you giving me a choice?”

“I'm sorry things have gotten crazy for you. I had to plan a way for somebody to take me across the border.”

“And this is the way to do it?”

“I had no choice. I don't have the money and materials to pull this off otherwise.”

“Doesn't look that way *to me*.” the driver – *Lewis* – said, eyeing the gun still resolutely pointed at him. Helen had pulled it away from his face, but repositioned it an angle that was still damaging, mentally and physically.

“This is my only way to convince you to do this for me. I really don't want to hurt you and I hope you don't lead me into making the choice. We're only a little bit out from the Alberta border now”

“And how do you suppose we handle the border?”

*A very good question.* To paint a picture of the Canadian border entry lanes for motor vehicles, one would do well to imagine an imperfect resemblance to a standard American tollgate. Drivers are required to choose the appropriate lane for the nature of their entry – commercial, residential re-entry, holidaymaking, those sorts of normal *everyday* reasons – and then hand over documents pertaining to their arrival and business in the country. A very

standard procedure of give and take, only made difficult by hesitant and jittery answers. But like any area crawling with *men and women in Blue uniforms* – or perhaps even RCMP Mountie Red – there are restrictions and formalities to follow.

For licensed and bonded truckers, like Lewis, the paperwork to cross the border can be sent beforehand and with the help of a customs broker. A process which allowed for a smooth crossing and minimal interruption. The *bill of lading*, a customs invoice that dictated the value of the load in both US and Canadian dollars, and electronic manifest obtained by the agent broker for freight were among the border crossing documents which together generally made for effortless international road-travel. For the sake of convenience and the operation of an efficient business, Lewis' manager back at the freight agency had of course seen to it that everything necessary had been filed as-required beforehand. And usually, these documents ensured an easy entry into, and swift departure through a primary commercial lane.

The presence of the *unexplained little girl* in the truck's cab however, would draw the eye of an inquisitive customs officer that the pair was to encounter, much to Helen's imminent chagrin, within the next half-hour.

## 9

Relatively barren land greeted travelers on either immediate side of the border. As if the innate *life* of the countryside itself had been cleared away to make room for this customs checkpoint. A few houses, all of which looked abandoned sat a stone's throw away from the main road. Houses with hanging clapboards, rusted metallic roofs, brown chimneys, and peeling timber walls that bore no signs of life on the exterior.

The weather became more and more pessimistic with every minute of the morning that passed. The bright dawn had given way to a gloomy, fog-filled, mid-morning that made anything fifty feet away little more than another indiscernible blur in the chilly haze. Two glimmering dots of yellow light and the silhouette of the customs and immigration checkpoint slowly emerged into view just ahead of Lewis and Helen. A few seconds later, they were welcomed to a long line of trucks hindering the smooth pace of their own.

They eventually got to the front of the line. The time had arrived. Time for Helen to showcase the malicious being within her again.

The dictators of the world, the ones we look at as *history that can't be repeated*, are the people who have the dire ability to take control

where most fail. They call the shots in their life, through their actions, guided by their principles. The world may seem an unfair place for all, within our own minds or physicality if not obstructing our own greed. Power attracts covetous stares from those less-off. Powerful individuals tend to avoid sympathy. There is no place for treacle sentiment in a war with the world. Because sentiment is only powerful if you let it be. You may have the physical strength to overcome your nemesis, steal their possessions, torture them till they deform, but you may concurrently find that you're only obeying orders from a greater mind. A good leader's mind is a mind that knows no sympathy, a characteristic hard to manipulate by powerless individuals. A higher authority that orders and a soldier that obeys. A leader, only given the authority owing to their own deceitful mind.

In Lewis's mind, the ingenious leader was just like Helen and he, to his disbelief, was the pawn.

The border-crossing process involves a fairly uncomplicated procedure of document presentation accompanied by a series of questions the visitors are expected to answer. The less documentation one had and more apprehensive one was, the further they were bound to be restrained by the authorities. But this one on the Montana-Alberta – the one our protagonist and their travelling companion were about to enter –, was certainly not used as much as the border services between, say, New York and Québec, or even Minneapolis and Ontario. Crossing here would hopefully be much more *lax* than attempting to do so at most inspection stops along the

US-Canada border. Helen had thoroughly researched experiences, rules, criminal stories and arrests of people passing through before making her journey. The rules for minors entering into the True North with adults were simple: they must remain with a parent or legal guardian, present their passport and birth certificate, *behave*, and mustn't be over the stolen-and-unregistered-firearms-per-child limit. Expectations which didn't admittedly didn't all fit Helen's current situation.

"Passports?" the border police officer said after shooting a firm glance at the two passengers of the truck. He started typing on his computer.

"I see you have most of your documents sent in. Do you have the custom invoice there on you?"

Lewis obliged. He was visibly nervous, but he had done this before without any disputes. The only difference now was his hitchhiker: a girl of twelve with a gun directed at him. A gun very palpable to himself, but presently obscured from the border agent's line of sight. A scary mixture of two threats with alternatives he wished he didn't have need to choose between. But the safest way to go about now was to follow the girl's instructions. Because perhaps unaware to Helen, he was about to be presented with a window of opportunity – a fortunate chance to explain his situation to the law.

"Looks like everything is in order Mr. Gnessi. May I speak to the passenger please?"

"... Yes, officer?" Helen said. Her heart pounding.

"What is the purpose of your visit?"

"I'm visiting my aunt. This is my uncle right here"

“Ah, I see.” He was typing very quickly into the computer that sat in front of him. His expression showed no signs of change and he proceeded to not say anything for the next fifteen seconds. Then he cleared his throat and resumed addressing Helen: “As you are a minor, you are required to have a guardian to enter this country. Assuming this is your guardian, I will not be able to allow you into this country without proper documentation and authorisation from your parents.”

“Yes officer. What documentation do you need?”

“I will need the letter of proof that your parents are expected to provide for your travel. I will also need your birth certificate.”

“Sure. Give me one moment.”

Helen bent down and rummaged through the belongings in her backpack. This was the first step into fooling the border police – a toothless ask by them that she was prepared for. At home, her preparations had made her think of every possible obstacle and pressing scenario. This was by far the highest wall she needed to jump over, but she was ready. All she needed was a forged signature on a printed template of words, easily found with one internet search: *‘border access entry letter for minors’*.

In her effort to find the pieces of paper she had thrown into a pouch hidden under her clothes, Helen almost forgot about the gun she had had constantly pointed at her driver. *The foolish work of a multitasking head*. Her trembling fingers felt faux-leather, the fake outside of a pouch containing all her documents. A few seconds later, while she was pulling the documents out of the bag, she suddenly became fully aware once again of *the gun* and her

*hostage*. She shifted her gaze, but it was too late. Lewis was clearly moving his eyes and brows profusely at the officer, shaking his head with obvious intent, gesticulating that something was wrong. *His fortunate window of opportunity*. She felt her heart pounding now with unprecedented rapidity. A speed that dictated a change. A faint voice inside her head almost seemed to whisper: "*the tables have turned.*"

## 10

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. Damn that stupid kid. Where'd she go?"

"Beats the Hell outta me. We don't lose her money till she's eighteen. She's probably stuck at some friend's party. Where did you put the next batch?"

"Same place as always."

"Let's get one done before we tell the cops about her."

"Yeah and what if they jail us instead?"

"Their priority will be Helen. If they knew we were dealing, they would've arrested us by now, right?"

"*But they can't come in here!* And now they will. Because the kid's missing."

"We'll be careful. If they want us locked up, they need probable cause to enter. Because we ain't letting them close our business. Now stop being paranoid."

"Yeah, the Hell we aren't. I'll go get *the crystal.*"

Bose and Anna Baronhurst. They complimented each other in a relationship filled with actions only they could comprehend the reasons behind. They were at war with sanity, with only a future of unrestrained base instinct and self-destruction waiting to happen. But they didn't care much and neither did their progeny. Helen was currently far from the reach of these cretins, but right in the midst of a self-manufactured problem of her own.

"Uncle Lewis," Helen said.

Lewis immediately shot a glance at her. He knew he had been discovered. Worse still, his beguiling plan to get the attention of the officer might have been in vain, he thought. A risk that hadn't paid off. His mind ran the full gamut of human emotion, from the glee that he'd *perhaps* passed his message on, to thrill, to regret, to danger, and now, a strange guilt. He looked into her eyes with dilated pupils, ready for the inevitable. But Helen had other thoughts. She slowly shifted her gaze to the border police officer and stretched her hand out to pass the papers. The *Dezzy* was back in a position of concealed fatality. Only now, unbeknownst to the border agent, it was pointed at him. Still obscured from his sight and hidden behind the opaqueness of the truck door. Lewis looked at it with obvious horror. Death was only one wrong move away.

The agent ran the details through his computer. He asked Helen a few questions about her parents. He then turned to Lewis to ask about his return. After assessing their answers and discovering nothing of suspicion, he handed their documents back. The documents *looked* valid, and their answers were fair. But hidden

behind the bored mask of any professional document checker was a person who was trained to recognize the slightest guilt in an individual's face. The border agent *had* noticed Lewis' skittish behavior. And he decided on his next move: to check the contents of the truck. A move not particularly welcomed by Helen. A move, much to his delight, Lewis had cordially received.

They made their way into a parking area. Helen had to resort to *Plan B*.

"Do as I say."

"I already am."

"Shut up. Don't play me. I saw you signaling the officer. You're lucky I haven't shot you." Helen said, trying to keep her words down as best she could.

"If you wanted me dead, I would have been dead. How can you point *that* at a police officer?"

"I don't want anybody dead. All I asked for is a little favour. But *now* you've gone and left me with no choice."

"You have to understand your time is up. They're going to interrogate us separately and they are going to find the gun. I can prove my innocence but you can't. Your time is up."

"No. Listen. You're going to do *exactly* as I say."

"I ain't doing anything."

"*Alright then.*" Helen said curtly. She decided to hide the gun in one of her spare skirts she had brought along. She wrapped the gun inside the cloth, which made it resemble a thick, deformed rectangular wash cloth. She continued on to hide the piece of cloth inside an old large empty soda which sat stickily in the truck cab's

passenger-side door cupholder from some long-forgotten previous roadtrip of Lewis', closing it tightly with the plastic lid. She bit the straw in half and inserted it into the top hole of the lid. Somehow, a perfect size and fit.

They were now parked in their assigned parking slot. She quickly placed back in the slot on her door, giving the impression of a heavy and unconsumed cup of Coca-Cola. The risk was great. But the *best* hiding places were always in plain sight.

She turned to Lewis. There was no way she could get out of this without making one final threat. With no gun, – without the *Dezzy* – she had to bring her malign back words into play. She had thought of it at the moment, it came naturally to her, and she was thankful. A mental fortune, an idea that was almost certain to coerce him. She had chosen him to be her driver for he had fit the profile, checked her boxes, and she *knew* she could sway him.

“If you tell the cops anything other than what I'm about to tell you, you are going to find yourself in a lot of trouble. Because you'd be wise to know, my parents are addicts, and I've hidden a bag of crystal meth in this truck. And I am sure I will be easily able to convince the police it's yours.”

## 11

An official at the border directed Lewis to open his truck's doors. A second officer asked Helen to pick up her belongings and follow him. He guided her into a spacious off-white room with several other border police and clerks dressed in clean Blue uniforms. The whole place was filled with small office-style cubical booths with glass mounted walls and an atmosphere of professional apathy.

Helen felt queasy. She began to nervously fidget with the strap of her backpack. Only two other *civilians* were present in the room. *Making her the third-in-line?* she hoped. As her inspecting officer continued to walk her along a corridor with a white tiled wall, she saw one particular policeman with an ugly, *brutally* strict face glaring right at

her. She unintentionally made eye contact with him and immediately looked away, slowing her stride so to hide behind the moving legs of the officer who was leading her. Not even another minute later, Helen's officer asked her to wait inside a room occupied by nothing else but a few steel folding-chairs. *Forlorn furniture for forlorn people*. But as innocent as she might otherwise appear, her hopes for entry depended entirely on the bluff she had told Lewis.

After ten minutes of being subjected to the stark silence of the empty room, she saw the shadows in light leaking in from under the bottom of the door grow darker and larger by the second. A large figure entered the room. It was the officer with the *nasty* gaze. Helen managed to continue successfully pulling off her *innocent schoolgirl* character for the unpleasant looking but surprisingly affable man. He asked her a few *basic* questions about her family, her nature of relationship with 'Uncle' Lewis, her intention to go with him. But nothing untoward had resulted out of it. The conversation had lasted no longer than maybe ten minutes, and she felt surprisingly comforted by his conversation. *If only he knew*. He was quite apprehensive, giving off the impression that perhaps he'd never interrogated a twelve-year-old girl before. This made it all the easier for Helen, who in the past forty-eight hours had flourished on the unease of her company.

After the barrage of easily answerable questions, Officer Seemed-Nasty left the room and asked her to stay put till they cleared her uncle. *If the same questions were put forward to Lewis, he'd have to do well to lie with confidence*. Her forged documentation was not

going to be a problem, nor was the gun. It was evidently too hidden in normalcy to be detectable. Her hopes rested on the threat, *on Lewis' mentality*, now and until the next phase of her journey. In a matter of minutes, her first officer strode back into the room again with only three vaguely-intoned words coming from his mouth: "*Come with me.*"

## 12

5:00 PM. Nature's artist had once again started painting a beautiful pink-orange tableau in the heavens. Dark, far-off, silhouettes of houses and trees appeared at the base of a sky filled all the colours of a Winter Albertan afternoon. The orange slowly faded into the faintest dash of cerulean blue along a layer in the sky where the sun made an effort to shine its last light of the day. Minutes later, a similar – albeit, far less magical – orange shade from the streetlights illuminated the ground and road. The sky was about to turn into a pitch black opaque blanket almost frighteningly quickly. To be filled

with who-knows-how-many shiny stars and a bright moon not even partially obscured from their view by the clouds to complement the occasion. The arrival of the night, *a night of decision*.

Helen and Lewis were still travelling up North. They were now only two hours away from Calgary, Lewis' final stop. But he wasn't sure about it anymore. In his travel with the girl, he had managed to experience a routine delivery of goods turn into more than a lifetime's worth of peril. A thrill, that after the border incident, he had *almost* looked back on and welcomed. They had talked quite a lot after the border. Helen told him a great deal about her family, her grandfather's death, her school, her social life, Ralph the lovestruck boy she'd used for transportation, and the hobbies she once loved. She explained her wealth of knowledge by crediting it to her innate curiosity – a characteristic where she could ignore her parents' misery and continue to learn through books and, occasionally, the internet. She had even told him about the first driver, her threats, and his escape, which left Lewis admittedly a little concerned. All the same, he had returned the smooth conversation, kept it flowing with no breaks and he was starting to feel a little bit happier about accompanying her after she had mentioned her motives.

*It was quite unusual*, Lewis noted. He had *hated* her, *wished spite upon her* not so long ago. After all the threats and bullying energy, in his relieved state of mind, he had found her to be *interesting*. The tranquility that he had sought before had molded into existence, in its own strange way. He realized that she was possibly actually harmless inside, at her very core, but demonstrated remarkable

strength. Her disturbing methods were the only means to send a message across. Back at the border, he had decided against the risk of not siding with her and her 'uncle' story. He had managed to answer all his officials' questions, which, thankfully, weren't *too* grim. And now he was gaining a few insights into parenting his own son, by another kid, who was most unlike any others her age.

After they ended up being let through by immigration security, and after an early lunch and two coffees each at a small family diner in Cardston just over the border earlier that day, the pair had started making proper headway deeper into the province of Alberta, closing in on their destination. How very quickly their mid-morning brush with customs had given way to the evening. Helen found no need to threaten him anymore and Lewis was content to let her come with. His biggest fear had been being snagged by the border police, but that had passed now. Canada was a much calmer country to be in and any news about a missing girl in Montana would hopefully not make too many waves across the border. Besides, Helen had convinced him that her parents were never going to deal with the police. In this unfair world, the reality of missing children alludes to an unpleasant fact: after the first day, the fate of abducted children is generally assumed to be sealed. Hundreds of children disappeared everyday across the globe, another sad truth many people still seemed almost willfully ignorant to.

Admittedly, Lewis wasn't *entirely* unworried about his fate in all this. He had been given a letter by Helen stating that he was in no way responsible for her disappearance in any way nor for the activities he had partaken in with her. Perhaps a futile piece of evidence but

*calming* to Lewis all the same. It put him at ease till he had to go back across the border and face the authorities again. He was sure the girl was capable of taking care of herself. From illegal entry, forgery, intimidation to whatever lay beyond, she had managed to play her audience. *Convincingly*.

He felt an unusual mix of emotions. He was not happy to have met her initially. But that had partly changed in time, having learnt more about her, having successfully helped her get closer to where she needed to go.

A strange sense of fear was progressing in his conscience, he was afraid. Afraid for his family, his own self and for the girl. He felt a premonition, a forewarning to a disastrous event waiting to happen, but he wasn't sure what it was. He wasn't sure who it was for, or why. *A most queer feeling*. He looked over to her seat in the cab of his truck at her and saw her happily mouthing along to the tunes of the unfamiliar pop music gently emanating from the radio. *A potential scourge hidden underneath an exterior teemed with innocence*. A new friend that was a letter away from a fiend. He had not forgotten about the hidden crystal meth in his truck. But for now, that didn't worry him.

In the back of his mind, he could shake the smallest feeling Helen would find trouble and come out of it. *Preferably alive, possibly dead*. And he would be heavily responsible.

A distance marker on the highway read 'Calgary 15'. A few kilometres ahead, a second traffic sign indicated a winding road.

## 13

Mankind's impulse to create and invent is a built-in *essential*. There exists an innate desire to surpass complacency. Throughout history there have been artificial creations and spectacular showcases of craftsmanship, often then recognised by all their creator's peers as pinnacles of ingenious invention. Some of us help this cause by

making *machines*. A *machine* is invented in the hope of making life 'easier', *lazier* even. From the invention of the wheel right through to the next generation of cars that might theoretically drive themselves: all inventions are created in the hope of satisfying the same desire – comfort. Either driven by inspiration for creativity or desperate necessity, material inventions have made progress through the ages as we know them possible, each era of history constantly improving an already existing concept.

In a particularly unnatural state of affairs created by the mind and actions of a twelve-year-old girl, two machines have played a significant role. A gun, The Dezzzy, with its threatening nature that had served one purpose and the truck Helen had spent the best day of her life in served another. Lewis' faithful Mack that she had repurposed to serve her own needs. A truck she was about to step out of and never see again.

A battle of wits won with the help of some precise timing, a war of words, a show of strength and an exercise in declarative authority had made had made the experience all the more memorable for Helen. Her journey had lasted around two days total from the very outset, but she had grown exponentially bolder within that brief period, unafraid and possessing a natural inclination for danger. Everything she had pictured up to this point had gone more-or-less gone down according to her blueprint too. There *were* a few unknowns, nothing her mettle couldn't endure. Her research had sketched out the rough plan of her journey and the eventual reality of it hadn't turned out to be *that* much different. Her brash actions had gotten her to Calgary now, across one border, and halfway to the

next. She had grown rather fond of Lewis, who had proven to be a respectful choice. She felt sad at the thought of not seeing *him* again, not just of letting go of a healthy asset. He had done enough, any further persuasion would most likely only enrage him, Helen figured. And she *couldn't* use the gun again, not after what she had asked of him, not after he had delivered. She had to look for new means of transportation on this wild quest.

“Can you please drop me off at the busiest street in Calgary. That's where I should be able to find more travelers.”

“I can't take this truck on a busy, narrow street. Especially not at this hour. Besides, if they're travelers, I wouldn't think they would waste any time on the streets.”

“But it's getting dark already. And not many travel too far in the night. Everybody has to sleep somewhere. And what better place than in a nice city hotel?”

“I can't win with you. Look, I have to park the trailer at the loading dock for the company. They're going to move in the morning. I can stay with you till the night passes or you can sleep in here.”

“That's a good option but I don't have much time to waste. Now I need to find a companion straight through British Columbia and to Alaska.”

“That might be a tough find.”

“You don't know how generous drunk travelers can be.”

“Ah, I should've guessed. I'll drop you off somewhere up near 26<sup>th</sup> Street then. You can make use of the buses from there.”

“Sounds like a plan. But are you sure you don't want to come with me? This could be an exciting journey for the both of us.”

“I risk losing my job and my family if I do that. Gotta say *no* to that.”

They made their way closer to 26<sup>th</sup>. Lewis stopped the truck on an almost-empty street.

“Alright, this is goodbye then. Don't get into *too* much trouble. Call the number I gave you if you're in desperate need of assistance. And good luck”

“Thanks, but I'll be fine. And good luck to you.”

“Alright, kid. Now get on with it.”

Helen took the phone she had confiscated off Lewis earlier in their journey together out of her backpack and silently handed it back over to him. She got off the truck and firmly closed the door behind her. She checked her belongings and waved goodbye to Lewis. As he restarted the truck, she remembered and shouted over to him: “I never really hid anything in the truck. You won't have a going back into America”

“Good to know,” replied Lewis, his suspicions about her earlier claim confirmed. He calmly pumped on the accelerator and disappeared out of sight into the Calgary night.

Helen changed her American bills to a few Canadian dollars at the local foreign exchange. This whole place was lined with tall, very brightly lit-up buildings, each competing against the next for the attention of the denizens of the nighttime streets. She got onto a modest red-, white-, and silver-coloured public bus and rode until her eyes found a street filled with bars. After taking a moment to study her crowd and the number of vehicles parked at the side of the road, Helen decided get off the bus and strolled along to the end of the

street until she arrived at the entrance of an old and busy looking establishment where the many puddles of water lining the footpath outside reflected from below the streetlights' glow that shone down from on high. The air around her was filled with different bar music coming from every direction invaded by constant the chattering an occasional laughter of a nightlife distinct in full swing. A setting so youthful; yet Helen was still, by rights, too young for any of it. She stopped just short of entering her chosen speakeasy and read its name off the majestic oak board on the front. in front of an establishment with a glimmering board that read '*The Hackney Carriage* ~ Authentic Olde English Pub'

Helen thought there was an air of smarmy pomp to it, herself. But the name and the decor didn't matter. This bar ought to serve her next travelling needs perfectly.

## 14

A distinct forceful *whooshing* sound was audible in the small pocket of city Helen now found herself in. The frigid Winter wind blew with a shifting intent that night. It was early November now, midway between the clear skies of Autumn and the inevitable heavy snowdrifts that hit this part of the World by mid-December. Chilly weather and the season of thankfulness and giving: Winter was the perfect time for Helen's journey.

'The Hackney Carriage' was certainly a *quaint* affair. A surreptitious peek through a window gave away its nature. Inside table service coexisting with an outdoor drinking area. The open-air patio had a bar, occupied by a large group of *civilians* – some drinking away their sorrows but most reveling happily. Those are very standard bar furnishings. What stood out though was that the indoor section of the pub proper came resplendent with all manner of pseudo-British memorabilia: upright red postbox placeholders, bonechina teacups patterned with dour bulldogs, to a row of painted portraits hanging above the service area featuring everyone from Shakespeare to Churchill to even a few podgy regal-looking types Helen's own interest in history still didn't help her name. The whole, expat-pandering, overpriced gastropub might as well have actually been a cheap props storeroom for period dramas set anywhere between 1066 and The Blitz that also happened to stock gin and tikka masala

for how haphazardly the décor had been thrown around the room. But since Helen wasn't exactly here as *The Calgary Herald's* latest nightlife critic, it didn't really matter to her.

A long-rusted wrought iron fence separated the patio from the sidewalk. The whole outdoor section was occupied by tables and chairs for anybody who wanted to take in their warm English beer in the frosty Canadian air with a stiff upper lip and a firm grip on their pint-glasses. Helen found a spot beside the fence, it provided her with a space for possible conversation without stepping foot inside.

It was time. Time to study her potential targets, *understand* their weakness and exploit the good-bad-natured minds of the drunk, common folk. She stood there, an unaccompanied twelve-year-old from out of town, but constantly held the aura of a person looking for no special attention. Despite the garish overdone interior décor, from the outside, with the sole exception of the thick oak sign bearing the pub's name, the place had looked not particularly dissimilar to most of the other bars on the street. The outdoor patio was primarily being used by smokers, some standing, some sitting and whiling away their time. Perhaps waiting on friends to join them or just wanting a break for the heady sights and sounds of the pub's interior for a few minutes. It was known, at least to Helen, that travelers frequented all sorts of strange bars during their first time in a new town, usually to meet the locals and find interesting people, hear stories, that sort of banal thing. She wasn't sure if she would find a worthwhile companion that was headed the same way she was. A long shot,

but, she had to say – based on her journey so far, anything was possible.

“Hi there, are you lost?” a voice broke the chatter coming out of the bar. She had a thick, almost stereotypically syrupy, Canadian accent and looked... perhaps thirty-years-old? Labeling the voice was easy but Helen had never been good at discerning ages. First impression: her manner revealed that she was an half of a married couple, with her husband standing next to her, reflecting a wide smile. She spoke from the on-property side of the wrought iron fence directly to the solitary little girl she had dutifully spotted standing alone in the cold night air.

“No, I'm waiting for my uncle. He's around somewhere” Helen said.

“Ok. Is he going to be around soon?”

“I think so.”

“Do you want to wait inside till he gets here? It's pretty cold out in the night and you look like you're shivering.”

“Am I allowed inside?”

“I know the bartender here. Come on in through the front door and out by this side.”

Helen entered the bar and took the visuals all in. The interiors were mahogany with furniture mostly of the same color. Restaurant tables sat in the main area with nattering customers in them. Tall legged bar stools stood in front of the massive wooden *bacchanalian* alter behind which was a spread, a vast array of spirit- and serving glasses. The bartenders were flaring, pouring shots and attending to the inebriated *herd* desperately baying for attention. Quite a few

bored faces turned at the sight of Helen, a short and *possibly* underage girl walking in with a bright pink backpack was not something they expected to see in this setting. She walked across the tables, avoiding contact with the many people blocking her way and pleasantly being left to her own devices by barstaff either themselves understanding of the situation or maybe just too busy to remove her or formally ask a twelve-year-old for her ID.

The happy married couple guiding her motioned for Helen to step outside onto the porch area. There was no empty table fit for the three of them to sit down properly at. And the move even defeated the purpose of letting her inside to avoid the chilly air. But Helen didn't care, she was all too happy to already have another helpful face or two to begin getting to help with her cause.

With a few basic introductions and general smalltalk out of the way, the amiable maybe-thirty-something couple that let her in, started bombarding Helen with the sort of questions she was prepared to answer with absolute *aplomb*. They were the loquacious kind, the kind Helen often hated to deal with. *Needless* talk simply bored her, always had. The Hackney Carriage wasn't meaningfully different from pretty much any other theme-pub you could find dozens of in any major North American city, but all the same, the interior of a bar was actually brand new to Helen. She noted the smell – not great, and most likely coming from the manky carpet. She heard occasional shouts coming from other men and women around the room, and a few louder exclamations that were followed the occasional heavy laugh.

After a fair bit of mindless chit-chat, Helen had somehow managed to convince them that her fictional uncle might have lost sight of her, and that it wasn't uncommon. She used her best faux-innocent *don't-worry-about-little-ol'-me* tone to assure them that she'd be okay, and that she had been in this situation before, successfully making it back home alone. She dropped the name of a budget hotel she'd seen on the bus ride over, *Wayland Inn*, as the place she was supposedly staying at.

The cordial nature of the couple was welcome, but their efforts weren't. They tried hard to make Helen happy: the man had the annoying need to impress her with treats in the form of bar food, the woman with her mothering tone and gentle conversation. A common behavior among certain adults when precocious little kids were around that made little sense to Helen. For she had, in her considered opinion, a mind that was beyond the childishness or triviality of needing adult care. But Helen was pragmatic enough to see it wasn't a tall ask to make them happy by accepting their snacks and polite chatter. She strove on situations like these, with guile, with artful deception. Later on, the couple promised her they'd drop her off at the Wayland.

## 15

Helen woke up in an uncomfortable, unfamiliar, bed in a room with very little light. It took her a while to even make sense of her surroundings: a small apartment with closed tinted-glass windows that barely let any sunlight in, a run-down kitchen with tarnished utensils, a hole in the dingy bedroom's wall that lead to an ersatz en suite bathroom and a main door that didn't open and was presumably locked from the outside. There was no one in sight, but Helen wasn't so sure there was no one around. She silently took in the roughness of the room.

*Her backpack.*

Helen started looking for it frantically, but quickly knew it was gone.

She tried the doors again. Still firmly shut. She tried to put last night's events into place – the drinking crowd, the casual conversation, the couple, the snacks she had politely accepted. After she was 'interviewed' by a variety of bar attendees with multifarious lives, she hadn't found a single traveler that was making the journey to the same place she hoped to go next – *Glacier Bay, Alaska by way of British Columbia in order to finally reach Mount Fairweather.*

. Eventually, she had settled on making use of the maybe-thirty-something couple's offer to ride with them to The Wayland. She had intended to find other travelers there. Her memory served her request to a point. A point that returned *plenty* more questions and *no* answers.

She remembered... leaving the bar with the *couple*... into a... *tan Corolla*? Driving away from the street with the row of nightlife venues. The Wayland? No – it hadn't turned out that way. This did look like a cheap motel, *a very cheap motel*. Why and how was she here?

Because she had consumed a drink before heading for the exit? Helen had accepted one glass of cola. *She should have known better.*

She tried the blackout curtains that were blocking the morning light. The glass behind them felt awfully thick. A quick scan of what she could make out through the heavy windows outside revealed that she wasn't *too* far off the ground, but a twelve-year-old landing hard and awkward from even one storey up would certainly still not be

pleasant. For all the situational analysis Helen was attempting to do, she still hadn't fully actualized the fact she had appeared to have been *literally drugged and abducted*. That grim reality not leaving much of an emotional mark on her as if she had simply partitioned that fact off from the rest of her mind. Helen utterly refused to engage with it emotionally, sleekly merely an immediate solution and *perhaps* she'd mull over the personal implications later.

Perhaps her kidnapers had underestimated her because she was just a little girl. One who had admittedly slipped up in taking their drink, to boot. *Perhaps it was their first time pulling off a feat like this.*

It was stupid of her to trust such an over-friendly couple. Like her, they wore a deceptive veil that provided for a decoy. Their motivation? As confusing as it was for her to fathom the need to kidnap a twelve-year-old they didn't, she assumed it might be child trafficking, *perhaps*. Was it that the couple had simply brought her to this wretched place because she was asleep in their car? It didn't all add up, the possibility of spiked drink made her think sinisterly. She might very well have been merely projecting her own deceptive nature on top of a simple misunderstanding – after all, *a thief assumes everyone steals*. But *for better or for worse*, that possibility never crossed Helen's mind.

*All the same*. She had to get out.

The fall, she assumed, wouldn't be the problem. She could make it with only a few minor injuries if she could land well. No part of this was to be easy. She found no heavy object to break the window's glass with, no gun to shoot the panes down. She searched again, every square inch of the room for any trace of her backpack.

If she was to do this, she had better do it sooner rather than later. There was no way she would be able to overpower the two adults – or even more – when they returned. It was a foolish move from her captors to leave her alone in a room, but whatever motive they had was about to be fouled. With no obvious tool to break free and no conceivable way of finding her backpack or its contents Helen felt a rage inside her like never before, but she thought hard. With few other options on the table she ran towards the bathroom and pulled up the lid of the toilet's flush-tank. *This was the best she had.*

It went through the room's antique half-inch thick frosted glass window without resistance, shards of ceramic and bouncing across the worn carpeted floor of the room, and down onto the pavement outside. She now easily saw dozens of cars parked on the other side of the road inside a three-tier parking garage structure. It had made a deafening noise, the window crashing, and the landing of the ceramic lid, thereafter. There was no one walking around outdoors, at least as far as Helen's eyes could see.

Carefully, she climbed out of the window, doing her best to ignore the few jagged pieces that still remained around the edges of the room's new escape-hole. This decrepit building had no fire escape, so she

stood on the windowledge, probing her surroundings for a sign of a flag pole, a pipe, a garbage bin, anything at all that could be used to make the fall shorter and less painful. No luck. She took a deep breath. *One. Two, Three.*

When she hit the ground, she bent her knees as she vaguely recalled once having been advised to do in the event of needing to fall any great distance. Her right ankle twisted from the impact of the landing all the same. There was no pain for now, she couldn't feel it yet. She got up immediately and ran across into the parking area. It was a somber place, dull and functional, with three equal floors – each open and filled with an array of cars. At the entrance, an automatic yellow-painted barrier shot up every time it sensed a moving vehicle come through. She snuck in as if this wasn't a public facility with no pedestrian traffic observing her all the same. Helen frantically ran on her twisted ankle up the ramps of the multistorey parking lot to the top layer and settled behind the last car in a row that hugged the sturdy concrete wall.

The worst was over. A weak feeling started to overcome her. Helen's body collapsed onto the asphalt floor. She sat there and let out a wild scream. Slowly, she checked her skin for minute shards of broken glass, and rubbed her ankle in the hopes of alleviating the swelling pain. A few minutes later, she felt comfortable enough to stand up. She peeped over parked cars in front of her, waiting like a hawk. *Waiting for her wannabe-captors.*

It wasn't that long. She heard the blare, then the pulsating lights of the two colours floating on top of the car, alternating red and blue. Two police cars zoomed past the other vehicles on the street, stopping just short of the entrance to the building Helen had just gone to great lengths to defenestrate herself from. Helen had a clear view of the scene from the top floor of her parking lot. She noticed three officers barking commands at one another, organising themselves into position, methodically making their way inside the accursed apartment. The insides of the cars surrounding Helen were clear as daylight entered through from above. From her vantage point, pinching her eyelids together, she sat looking for any sight of the couple that had brought her here. A few minutes passed before a familiar tan-coloured car pulled over behind the police vehicles. Two individuals stepped out, one of which she recognized as last night's '*motherly*' figure. She needed no second invitation once she saw it. Helen ran down to the ground level of the parking lot, across the stream of cars parked dead on each floor. Despite her ankle, she practically vaulted one concrete safety barrier on her way over to the tan Corolla, and immediately recognised what she was looking for inside through a window. The hot pink was easily distinguishable from the black interiors of the car. It was her backpack, and within it, her money, her clothes, her documents, The Dezzzy, *everything she held dear*.

She snuck around to the back behind the vehicle. The woman who had abducted and presumably brought her here was too busy looking at the work of the police to notice Helen. With no sight of her

'husband' or the other person who had gotten out of the car with her moments ago. Helen waited until she was sure the coast was *absolutely* clear. She thankfully found that the back door of the car was unlocked, and opened it *ever-so-gently*.

She took back her bag and opened it to see if it was all there. Carefully, silently. She dug through the belongings and immediately groped around at the bottom of the bag until she felt the all-important and still cool-to-the-touch object hidden at the very bottom. Unsure why her captors, or the police, hadn't seized it yet. She felt fortuitous, and closed the door. But in her enthusiasm, the door had found a mind of its own, and it creaked weightily and snapped into the fully-closed position with a distinctive *clunkthud* that all-to-easily heard by the woman standing not ten feet from her. She turned back and looked in shock. Helen immediately pulled out the gun, silently pointed it at her, and motioned her to keep her quiet, finger to her lips. The woman stood still, mouth still wide open, but unspeaking and clearly shaken. Helen slowly starting backing herself into an adjacent alley that led to the other side of the avenue, all with no change in the direction of the gun. A few seconds later, she turned around and started sprinting as hard as her body let her. She heard the woman start screaming and chasing after her but continued running the full length of the alleyway.

She had just reached the end of the passageway when, perhaps with no better reason than adrenalin-filled intuition she turned back around. And in that moment – in that flurry and fear and excited

nerves – with the crosshair of The Dezzy cleanly pointed at the woman, Helen pulled the trigger.

*There was no shot.*

## 16

Endless fields, separated by a line of trees lay adjacent to the road. The cool breeze wafted around the pleasant smell of rainy earth. The thousands of trees here had shed their leaves onto the ground in the Autumn just gone – some *scarlet*, some *crimson*, others just plain red. They played dead now, and would for the few months, waiting for the radiant Spring that followed the slow beauty of the Canadian

Winter. A euphony of chirping birds resonated through the chilly air. The caravan steadily trudged alongside the other vehicles on this three-lane road headed up North. It was a different journey, in a different mode of transport, far from the horrid experience Helen had encountered before. In it, she was riding along with a holidaymaking family of three: a husband, wife and their boy.

It was certainly an unusual time of the journey, calm with no twists. Helen had been in this caravan over ten hours and she felt good. *Remarkably good in fact* because there had been no preparation for this, no piece of the puzzle that fit into the right square. It was a boring necessity, one that she needed, one that kept her *sane*. In the last few hours, things had gone haywire. She was on the verge of probable kidnapping, possibly minutes away from malicious exploit, arrest, or death even. Her journey thusfar had been an eventful few days. But it was that moment of madness in the alleyway that had stood out the most. She had deceived her true being and turned herself into a killer when she had clicked the trigger. The fact *the gun* had failed to fire was immaterial. Helen's intent in the moment had been clear.

It was a romance with *the gun* and the choice of vernacular that had played its part into bringing her here. But the former was not a side of her that made *sense* anymore. She vowed to not listen to the dark, *bad* side of herself. Helen wished she could just get rid of The Dezzzy, but she knew better than to try. It was a simple choice of yes or no, one that could dictate the next phase of her events. But it was

lethargy, evil, death, and spite combined into a device – a dark cup of sweetened poison.

A voice resonated inside her head. *You still need it*

Helen sat on that one thought for hours.

She had been in the caravan for almost a day now, subject to no further unexpected surprises or unpleasant complications. It felt almost like a beautiful family vacation that might have been possible with her real relations if Grandpa was alive. Back at the dreaded motel she had *escaped* from, Helen had somehow managed to beat the odds of arrest and possible murder by sheer luck. Since then, everything had fallen into place for her. She had managed to snag a taxi, immediately after the gun had failed her and she'd been forced to continue her mad dash away from the *not-actually-motherly* woman. She rode for a just a mile and exited at a busy corner. With serendipity at its best, she ran into a shopping centre, past the sea of *civilians* that were carelessly strolling around the place. It provided for cover, shading her from the watchful eyes of the police who she imagined were sure to have started grasping the situation by now. She went inside a kids' clothing outlet store and bought the attire she had envisioned in her state of panic. A cap, a hoodie, a different colored top and a new bag – all so generic they could have belonged to any kid around her age. She took a good long look at herself in the full-length mirror of the store's dressing room, slowly comprehending her situation. She ditched her old clothes and

backpack inside after transferring all that she needed carefully into her new bag. After exiting from the back of the shopping centre, she waved profusely at a taxi and in a couple of moments she was in. It was time for a new driver to take her to a place far from trouble.

Getting in the taxi marked the inception of her momentary tranquility. Her mind needed it, *the journey demanded it*. The taxi driver was surprised to see a little girl take a cab by herself. What she said next stunned him further. She had offered him a bundle of cash to keep *completely* quiet throughout the journey and take her to a place where she could find caravans. He was reluctant, like most of Helen's previous travelling companions, but the sight of the bundle of notes waved in front of him made him think of all the days he could feed his family. *How nice*. It was half of the amount of cash Helen had brought along, which still accounted for quite a lot. And she had finally found use for it: as a covetous object of manipulation, *much like the gun, much like everything that felicitated greed*. The driver had agreed to drop her off at the first sight of a vehicle that resembled a caravan. She agreed to it, decidedly rescinding from her practice of pulling out the gun, and then they'd taken, the turning tires skidding over the frigid road.

In the calm of the taxi ride, Helen rested her eyes in deep thought. There were many unanswered questions: from the motive of her captors, her parents, the desolate room, and the spiked drink. But she put her thoughts aside for now. There was no point brooding over the consequences. Helen thought to herself about the ways of life, her grandfather's *teachings*. His ways were unorthodox – he

wrote about life, usually in an almost lyrical manner, his words seeming *equal parts poetic and prose*. But Helen had no problem in understanding his meaning.

He had told her about the complications of achievement. About what interested a person in life: its twists, its hope for that day of *triumph*. Something, forever a whisker away, escaped by sheer luck or for good. And in the deep heart of it, filled with tragedy and marred happiness, the mindset you put into actions, the convolution of the journey, and the eventual destiny that never came into existence are all pieces of a game, a puzzle. It's a puzzle, life, and it is not uncomplicated. To some, it may feel otherwise, but they pass on before they realize differently, or with the help of the guardian society that has never let them believe for a second that they were in trouble. It is desire that dictates actions, and the fortuitous or dreaded luck that will fabricate you into who, or what, you want to be. And anybody who has ever come close to defining luck should tell you, it is all about coincidence. Luck combines with courage. It is hard to build courage, but work with it, and one day, when you find happiness, at that moment, in that glee, you will wish life could never end.

Helen woke up to the voice of the taxi's driver. She saw him frantically pointing towards a line of campervans that were resting at the edge of a body of water. He had managed to somehow *accomplish* his end of the deal. She was far thankfully *far* away from Calgary. The place was lined with forty-foot-tall tall cottonwood trees that shaded the parking spots beneath them. The driver had brought

her to an incredibly large lake, a beautiful and serene stretch of land with cool water gently lapping at the broad banks of the solid ground. An endless plain of water, a blissful setting that resonated a characteristic unlike anything Helen had faced all through her journey out of her home in backwater Montana and through Canada. The campervans each stood at the edge of the sand, overlooking the repeating form of the waves and the setting sun, now turning into a slight shade of orange again, slowly hiding beneath the horizon.

Again it was time for Helen to put on her veil of deception. She decided to restrain her use of the gun. The device had no bullets, her brief moment of lunacy in the alley had made that clear. But it could work as a scare mechanism and that had *partly* stopped her from getting rid of it. She slowly surveyed her surroundings, studying the undoubting minds of the lakeshore inhabitants.

Helen found her stride slowly rising in pace, along with the beating of her heart as she approached the first campervan. Right up until *the drugging incident*, everything she planned for had fallen into place like line of dominoes. Now, there was a strange sense of fear creeping upon her. Even in the tranquil environment she found herself in, she was scared, the silence was vicious. But she shook it off on the pretext that her previous incident had occurred due to a lack of awareness, and rattled her nerves. She gained momentum, her feet crushing the odd dry twig fallen from cottonwood trees as she marched in. This was about survival, mixed with a mean amount of trickery. She had *studied* for this, out of interest and to an extent, *out of preparation*.

Helen knew that throughout history there have been conartists that have made a significant mark on people, hustled and deceived the common folk to great success. From the relatively harmless acts of Pamela Des Barres, a rock groupie who travelled the world using only the words "*I'm with the band*", to the legendary exploits of Frank Abegnale: these case-studies each provided a stepping stone for Helen, a means to achieve her manipulation and sway people to her will. But not everyone was so oblivious as to see not through the twelve-year-old's lie as it turns out, something she had found out quickly after she'd approached the first campervan.

The first van rejected her. And then the next. And the next. And then two more. And it repeated. After brief encounters with half of the standing campers, all of the caravans had rejected Helen's plea to travel with them. They cited excuses, refused the money she had offered, some even threatened her, some asking her to leave before they might even call the cops. The thought of the police cars scared her. She was quickly running out of ideas, out of vans and families to approach and failing miserably at her choice of words. She turned her head around in every direction to see if the taxicab driver was still around, but he had already left, just like the first trucker Helen had met.

She decided to approach the last few caravans slowly, with stealth, with cunning, like a wolf approaching a flock of unaware sheep. This time, she waited, and waited, till she saw a twist in life unfold in front

of her own eyes. *A little boy stepped out of the second-last campervan in the row.*

Helen had been riding in the comfort of the caravan for close to a day now, close to her next hurdle, the second US border crossing – over the line separating Canada from the state of Alaska. But she was sure she wouldn't have a harrowing experience now, not in her own country. *And because she was in the company of a combination of people that would raise the least amount of suspicion to the officials.* This caravan was comfortable, much more than the cab of Lewis' truck, and infinitely better than the tan Corolla.

It had worked well, not with the use of her gun or even a sparse and cunning display of words, but with a sly use of her physical characteristics: her pretty face that had shed its affection onto the weak heart of the other twelve-year-old, a boy that was on a similar expedition with his family. She didn't need to say much to convince him because he was already melting inside, shying away every time Helen's eyes found his. Helen knew he was smitten, *and she could make good use of that.* The boy's family was driving to Alaska, making occasional stops at landmarks and places of natural beauty like The Glenbow Museum and Ghost Lake. It was smooth sailing therefore, for a part of the journey that Helen had no well-thought-out plan for. A surprise in life, like she had stumbled across a golden lantern, and the genie that emerged had granted her a wish that she hadn't even needed to ask for, or even think of.

In its own dear way, life had provided her with marvel in reality. And she could not believe the magic that lived in her grandfather's words: there was one thing that had now come true. She had taken relief in the simple meaning of the word '*coincidence*'.

She had seen him after three days. Just three days of wild events and mishaps that felt like a *decade*. The boy she had seen stepping out of his family's campervan by the lake was Ralph, her schoolmate who had transported her on his bicycle and taken Helen to the trucker's inn on the first day of her journey.

Bose and Anna were still *visibly* high on the meth when they were taken in by the police. It was a time of the day that breathed no happiness. A certain kind of atmosphere where the air was thin and the inevitable was due. They ran out of mental strength, nothing they could say under the best of circumstances would provide them with a strong defense, and the copious amounts of street-grade amphetamine still in their systems were only making it harder. In a closed interrogation chamber where words bore no meaning and their reasoning seemed absurd, it was time for Bose and Anna to plead their guilt. There was no conceivable argument that was going to save them. No lawyer could make a case for their exit from the interrogation room because they weren't going to ask for one, they simply couldn't win here. And eventually, when the high wore off, the noticeable difference in their faces, minutes after reality had hit them made the police laugh. *Montana's Finest* had made an important arrest, possibly leading to the capture of a whole drug supplychain.

Now, Bose and Anna found themselves in painfully bland room behind a table with three police officers grilling them for whereabouts. They sat in uncomfortable cheap plastic chairs, silently. They knew nothing about what they had said to the police

during their period of brief escape from existence. It was a woozy instance of unclear reality. Their minds wandered, not to their fates, not to their children, but right now, with the thought of how they could score more drugs in prison.

For the police, the job was basically done, made all the easier by an anonymous tip they had received over the phone. The call they'd gotten was just a simple report of some sketchy-looking activity in the neighbourhood. Honestly, it had sounded exactly like a prank call – the dispatch officer said the fabricated tone and dry wheeze of a lie made up on the spot by one or another of the county's slack-jawed highschool dropkicks who knew had little else to do but waste cops' time and smoke in the backwoods all day. Police dispatch officers were indeed the sorts of people able to deduce such details from barely twenty seconds of a telephone conversation alone, but department policy was generally to follow-up any tips at where feasible, and today, like most days, was pretty slow down at the Glacier County PD offices.

An officer was called in to investigate the surroundings of the Baronhurst home. When he saw the door of the house spread wide open, the officer knocked to be let in. With no one in sight, he *might* have proceeded to exit the area, but when he started to recognise muffled screams coming from inside the run-down old building. With no warrant, but enough *probable cause*, a term the inhabitants of the house thoroughly dreaded, he let himself in without permission. With stealth and a shooting stance achieved through years of rigorous

training, he walked in cautiously, announcing himself loudly and clearly across the trash strewn on the floor and as he neared his point of interest: a battered door, only slightly open, shielding the wicked scene inside.

The screams were growing louder, and he heard a repeating *thud*. Years of working through grim cases with often bizarre and *gristly* endings out here in the Montanan boonies had prepared him to not expect anything less from behind the door. When he entered, he discovered a young man, beating two middle-aged adults lying on the floor – a husband and wife – with the stock end of a rifle. Once more, the officer shouted, making his presence known again, and immediately motioned for the young man to drop his weapon. With a startled hollow expression on his face, Helen's brother slowly obliged, transferring the improvised club to the ground. But they were too much alike in many ways – Helen and her brother Anthony – and just like her, he was willing to risk a dangerous move that threatened life; this time that of the officer. The young man shifted the direction of the rifle, and aimed its barrel-end squarely at the officer. He would have pulled the trigger too, but that could happen, a professional sleight-of-hand by the officer saw his service pistol drawn all too quickly. The young man fell to the ground, three 9mm rounds had perfectly pierced him. His clumsy rifle had failed him, his mind too.

The police had gotten a confession out of Helen's parents, albeit an intoxicated, almost involuntary one. According to them, the situation

had progressed as follows: Bose and Anna were being subjected to a violent display of rage by their only son, who had reacted in the aftermath of his parent's constant abuse and lethargic demeanor with an explosive outburst. Bose had found out that his son was dealing drugs, he had followed their example, and the situation at home had escalated from a foul verbal exchange into a wild quarrel. Anna had intervened, and within moments had found herself in the midst of the brutality from both sides. Their son had reached for the rifle, but instead of using it for its primary cause, he used it as an object of dominance, not outright lethality. Striking his parents dozens of times at different tender areas of their bodies. It was a tumult of emotions that had instilled a dark authority inside the man, something no one in the household had ever witnessed before.

There had been plenty of drugs hidden inside the house too, of course. The police had spent all night discovering it and carrying it away for documentation. And their son was now in the hospital, critical condition. And their other child still missing.

Finding the girl was the priority now. The local police obviously needed the help of a stronger law enforcement agency to find this missing child. This was an interstate affair, potentially international even.

Six-hundred miles away, The FBI field office in West Amelia Earhart Drive, Salt Lake City – responsible for protecting all 5,319,000 residents in all 315,000 square miles of Utah, Idaho, and Montana – had just received word from the Alaska-British Columbia border that

a girl named Helen Baronhurst had passed through, not too long ago but long enough to make it all the harder to narrow her location.

## 18

Helen was with Ralph, who was thoroughly elated at the actuality of successfully spending a day in the company of his crush. Helen was happy too, but for reasons and motives Ralph knew nothing of. She *liked* him, his helpful family, and the care they'd given her. The way she had used their help was unconventional, but relatively harmless, she supposed. Helen knew her encounter with this admirable set of people was only temporary and she couldn't have asked for more. Ralph's family had started their travel on the day after Helen had

embarked on her trip. They were on their way to a funeral, Ralph's great aunt in Alaska, who had taken her terminal breath, days after her last wish had been fulfilled. Ralph had yearned to tell Helen about this story on the night she had asked for his help, but his shy nature and the overwhelming nervousness of being with her had stopped him. Things could have been much easier for Helen.

The time Helen had traveled in and around the awful motel had paralleled the amount of time the family had journeyed, which just so happened to lead both parties to this exciting moment here.

When she first saw him at the lake, after she had gotten over the shock of seeing him, it didn't take too long for her to make use of her charm and wit. Ralph tried to convince his family, parents who were rightly skeptical of Helen's reasons. It was a very valid skepticism – for she had gone on to string lies, each connecting the other like a weak chain. Helen said she accompanied her uncle to Canada, who supposedly lived only a few miles away from Ghost Lake, Alberta. She continued to fabricate bluffs, stating that she was to travel to Gustavus Airport, Alaska, that very day for her trip back to Montana, but her uncle had cancelled, something that made Ralph snort with inaudible laughter. She passionately faked a phone call in front of them, cleverly disguising her conversation to suit positive replies. Read: “Uh huh, yes I'll be safe, of course, yeah, they are traveling straight to Alaska, I have most of my stuff with me, ok, ok, ok, thank you so much. Miss you, love you, bye” After she hung up, the adults couldn't find themselves a reason good enough to turn down Helen's request to tag-along, especially with Ralph's tenacious nagging. And like *good* attached parents, they loved their child so much, they knew better than to refuse his wishes.

Thankfully too, minors were allowed to fly on US airlines unaccompanied by an adult. Finally, they agreed to drop her off at the Alaskan airport once they consulted amongst themselves. Fluky fortune, suppose it did favour the brave afterall. They quickly overcame their doubts about her company and influence, Helen had relayed her charm well.

The campervan laboured along the road, gradually leaving the tarmac and the dead trees behind. Helen was losing time, she should have been looking at the jagged mountain peaks of Fairweather by now. The Martino family was in no hurry as the funeral wasn't to start anytime that day. They had known that the end was coming for Ralph's aunt, and had made arrangements in advance, down to her last wish. They were on course, going steadily along the route they had planned out.

Helen was constantly checking phones to see if anybody had filed her missing yet. Nothing. *Typical* of her parents. She had her own phone firmly off and even perhaps even over-enthusiastically shrouded in aluminum foil in fear of a trace from the police. It was a risk she didn't could take until the border, if she could at all help it. The caravan stopped at multiple landmarks across the route and even though it made her late, she was sure she would *cherish* these stops later, reminiscing the good.

Canada, she took it all in, the warmth from the sun and the cold from the snow combined together. The mountains that felt so close in sight, yet far from touch. And she knew she'd experience something very similar, *amplified*, at Fairweather – and perhaps beyond. There were almost no signs of modern human civilisation around them. Very few made their way across this border by road.

## 19

The man sat, parked very comfortably in the same ratty chair in the cab of his Mack he occupied every day, slowly and thoughtfully smoking a Marlboro from one pack he'd picked up once he had completed his most recent job. It was a morning of complete peace, all the more welcome after a heady few days. Only ever interrupted by an occasional whining of engines, those of the other trucks in the depot yard. The uniform long white truck trailers hitched to a full spectrum of cabs reminded him of the difference in the lives of the people that rode in them, sometimes daring to escape the ordinary, but other times, happy in the complacency of the delivery, *the job*.

He had finally decided to phone in the tip after what he had read in the local times. A small section in an online headline he had managed to find the time to glance over sealed it in his mind.

CALGARY, ALBERTA: An American girl, believed to be of age 10 - 12, has been reported missing from a local motel chain in the outskirts of the City of Calgary, police say. The girl, whose identity remains unknown, was last seen wearing a black parka and carrying a pink backpack. She was last accompanied by two individuals, a woman, Ms. Jane Jones, 33, and her husband, Mr. Ryan Faber, 34. The pair had picked her up at a local bar establishment after the girl had allegedly agreed to ride with them to a hotel. *"She wouldn't wake up in the car when we reached the hotel. We had to look into her belongings to know where she wanted to go."* said Ms. Jones. After checking her belongings, the duo claims to have discovered a handgun, among other valuables. They then proceeded to take her to a local motel and locked her inside in hopes that she would wake up in the morning. When asked why they hadn't reported the incident to the police, the duo replied *"We thought she was violent and unstable. Our best bet was to lock her up in some place till the police station opened up."* An official investigation by the Calgary PD has begun. It is believed that both the accused were intoxicated at the time of the incident and that they failed to recite the events in order. Police have reportedly said that the couple's story could not be validated entirely. Upon further questioning, the pair allegedly answered by stating that they were "frightened to inform the police" and in their inebriated state of mind and had decided to follow up the

next morning. Today, police officials rushed to the motel and saw that the glass windows on the first floor of the hotel had been shattered. There was no sight of the girl. Ms. Jones and Mr. Faber both remain in police custody. Further details on the whereabouts of the alleged missing girl remain unknown.

Lewis needed no second invitation. He stubbed his cigarette out in the cab's ashtray and closed the phone's browser. He was right. *His gut was right.* Helen was in danger, and it seemed she had somehow escaped it like a champ, too. *She was the clever sheep that got lost, hunted by animals she knew nothing of.*

He wanted Helen to win, to reach the one place she had wanted to go, with much grit and determination. But he didn't know how he could help the cause, what his next move was to be. He quickly started searching around online to find anything at all that could let him help. *A full name? Any social media accounts?* Just then, he remembered the letter he had gotten from Helen, she might even have mentioned her phone number. *Perhaps her address was on it?* He searched through the small collection of clutter around his cab and found it. He picked up the phone and dialed her number. He waited ten seconds on the dialtone, unconsciously reaching for another cigarette to pass the time. Failure to connect. He hung up and dialed the number for the Glacier County, Montana police station instead. Waiting, waiting, *another drag on his Marlboro*, waiting. The line connected.

Lewis quickly spat out that he'd seen "a couple of guys who looked like drug dealers" enter a house as he quoted off the address on listed on Helen's 'proof'-letter. He added in afterthought "there's about to be a shootout. I can hear a few screams from inside." too for the sake of making it seem urgent. *It was enough.*

The border experience for the civilian entry on the Alaska Highway was nothing like what she had been through earlier. All the travelers in her caravan were US citizens entering US territory, and there was little doubt that a family's entry would be considered suspicious. Helen was aware of that, and she felt confident enough no perfectionist border guard would insist interrogating her properly. She *did* feel nervous about the gun, something she worried would land *everybody* in hot water if the police were to check the vanity of the caravan's bathroom. It was the only place she could tape it out of sight and she found a window of opportunity to hide it without Ralph, or anyone else, noticing. Her pulse quickened every with yard closer to the border.

She needn't have worried, really. The officers were *perfectly happy* with the answers Mr. and Mrs. Martino had given them. There was a frivolous check of two suitcases, something that would provide the officials the satisfaction of following standard procedure. When her documents cleared with no complications, Helen knew that her parents had apparently still failed to report to the police. *Perhaps for the better.* She heaved a sigh of relief once the camper lumbered clear of the border and back onto the open highway. Her bones re-solidified and a smile reached her face. *The universe had made it all*

*right*. The worst part was over, she was in Alaska, only a few hours away from the airport. And blissfully unaware of the ghastly state of affairs back home.

“We're only an hour away, dear. I hope you've got all your belongings together and ready.”

“Yes, I have, Ms. Martino. And I wanted like to thank you for this, it has been a lot of fun.”

“Of course dear. We've loved having you with us. Ralph definitely seems to like your company lots too.”

“Ralph's one of my closest friends.” Helen lied “It was always going to be fun with him around.”

This interaction was a boring necessity. She was truly thankful for them, but she knew the need to conjure false praise on demand. She was trying her best to keep herself sane as she got ever so closer to fulfilling her journey. About ten minutes later, she finally checked the phone for any flashing news. She Googled herself, expecting her parents to be too self-involved to care about her – especially given her luck in getting through the border completely without issues – perhaps so much so that when she returned to Montana, they might just act like nothing had happened at all.

But that idea died quickly. A picture of herself, under the blunt headline: *Twelve year old girl goes missing from home. Parents arrested with brother in critical condition*. She found herself reading the report over and over and over again when the words didn't make

any sense to her. It was an incomplete report, the police had saved the goriest details for themselves. She considered calling her parents, or surrendering herself even. It was unfathomable. *Her brother? And why?* She felt little true *concern*, it was more... *curiosity*. But all the same now Helen wanted more than nothing to get off the damn caravan.

## 20

The end was near. *It was almost over*. The overwhelming rush to the finish line, Helen was about to witness the fruits of her journey's labour. It was enough to make her forget about the proceedings back at home for the time being. Helen wanted to finish the job first, her presence was not going to alter the strange events in Montana. It was true, her expedition had *somehow* landed her family in a state of

disarray. But if somebody was to amend the status quo, and if it meant a complete overhaul anyway, *so be it*.

She found herself with no *feeling*. No sorrow or anguish whatsoever. Finding the moral suasion that held all the reasons to her journey to was crucial now. *This was a necessary ugliness*, and this was not the time or place to turn back. She was within striking distance of her intended destination.

The caravan trotted up the Gustavus Airport off-ramp and wheeled over close to the taxi ranks. Signboards denoted directions to the departure sections. Her second stint with Ralph was about to end. He had been her pathway to a means of transportation at the most vexing points of her journey, she knew that the gate number she had given Ralph's parents was fast approaching and she had a plan ready. Time to get off the caravan. She hugged Ralph, longer than he could have ever hoped for. She looked straight into his eyes, and pursed her lips. A second later, she let out the words amidst the flow of his exhausted breath, "Thank you." She turned around and waved goodbye to the other occupants.

She approached the only taxicab presently there. It was going to be the last use of the money she had brought: one ride to the station and the train ticket. It was as if the options were presenting themselves for her, *as if the universe wanted her to make it just as much as she did*.

If the police were on the lookout for her... *if she was stopped by them before she had the chance to reach Mount Fairweather...* it was a thought she couldn't take.

All that she'd been through would have been for naught. She gently took out her cell phone once more. It didn't matter if the police could trace her now, she needed to know what was happening in Montana. She climbed into the taxi and swiftly directed the driver to take her to the train station.

When she got onto the train, she failed to process the passing scenery. Truthfully, she scarcely bothered looking out the windows whatsoever now. Her brother was fighting for his life, and if he had made it, he would most likely be jailed instantly.\

Her parents were already in cells of their own, she knew that had only been a matter of time anyway. Even a few details surrounding the couple who had supposedly kidnapped her had come to light. The thoughts failed to leave her. *It was a different sort of chaos everywhere she went.* But there was no time to dwell on the bad, she could only do so much now. Perhaps they had even deserved it, for the physical abuse, the more-than-a-few-times a switch met her skin, for the childhood she had not had. There were questions about her future that firmly *remained* questions.

The train zoomed past the snowcapped lands towards Glacier Bay National Park and Reserve. Compared to the drive in the campervan, this felt much longer. Outside the train, nature's

elements had formed an interaction with each other to produce a vista to behold. Not that Helen looked. When she got off the train, right at the entrance to the Reserve, she hugged her bag tightly. There were a few groups of people in front of her lugging around their equipment. She followed them, making sure they knew nothing of her existence. Her feet slowed down after a brisk walk across a small path. *At last.*

It was right there, and it was just like what she had dreamed. Clearer in the daylight, no murk, no fog, just white in the clear blue. She stood silent, the great mountain perfectly mirrored in a small lake that lay in front of her. The mountain looked tremendous – *both of it*, Helen smirked

It was a magnificent peak, over fifteen-thousand thousand feet up in the air, like a king sitting on the throne amongst his loyal subjects. *Resplendent.* The whole range of summits stood beside one another, like a white, pointed crown for the body that lay beneath. There was a broad, lush stretch of heath in front of her, so full of color, like a fresco. So beautiful, for a moment she had forgotten to breathe the Winter oxygen in.

She didn't need a camera or her phone to save this image. It set in, and like a perfect mental picture she clicked the shutter of her mind and saved this feeling of amazement, forever.

She had made it, defying her age, in spite of all the odds stacked against her, against all common sense even, all on the strength of

her determination, a promise made to herself, and her grandfather's wisdom. *She had really made it.*

With no small amount of involuntary or coerced help perhaps, but still, Helen knew to credit herself.

*She made it.*

She *made* it.

She made *it*.

It was a *strange* thing to see in many ways, the peak of Fairweather. Having wanted it so much for so long, it felt different now. Obviously, she could never go back to *not having seen it*, therefore she could never see it for the first time ever again.

Helen still harboured an insatiable hunger to want *more* from it. *An unknown stirring of the mind.*

Abruptly, the feeling within her – a sense of achievement – returned to the normal state of placid despondency. She turned and made her way into the break of the treeline that lay to her immediate East, avoiding the bramble and the larger rocks. *Far away from the people bustling around her as they disembarked the same train she had taken.*

Further inside the loneliness of the woods – the beige-brown birch stumps and a carpet of shed leaves, the sound of frail twigs and an occasional sun-dried deer bone cracking underfoot, no path to guide her. Helen stopped once she could hear no other voice.

She emptied out the black bag she had been carrying all her meaningful possessions in ever since her time at the shopping centre onto the damp ground. Four important things inside finally saw the daylight again after their long rest.

The Dezy, a blank sheet of A4 foolscap paper, a black ballpoint pen, and a very cool-to-the-touch glass jar. She sat down to rest her tired body, trembling slightly in the chilly air. She clicked the top of her pen, ready to write. Helen slowly put it to the paper.

She remembered the words that had made her start this venture, a combination of the poetic and prose, words that were the motive for all the courage she had gathered to embrace what she had gone through. Helen knew what she wanted to write.

And underneath this mountain; '*Fairweather*', '*Tsalxhaan*, "The great big snowy one", she wrote these words with pride in her heart, crying gently, teardrops plummeting to burst on the paper, slowly spreading the ink around. *That didn't matter.*

It's a thing I do not know, sweetheart.

I don't want to define it,

Point to the happier things,

The metaphors and memories,

Those that you may look back ahead  
And you may think to yourself,  
“He lied”  
But know this my dear,  
That in the future  
When you have lost something valuable,  
That large fish in a small pond,  
A thing that blurs everything around,  
Just remember, don't forget  
That when it began, when it all started  
You were born with emptiness  
And when you are born with nothing,  
You start to collect along the way  
Some valuables, some cherishes  
Some that you keep,  
Some that you rid.  
And with time  
What you keep the longest,  
What you have grown this affection for,  
The older it gets, the wiser you get,  
You will eventually find it missing.  
By choice, by chance, or by misfortune.  
In that moment of hollow,  
You will feel something.  
This is rust, and flying dust and the mysterious  
Chemical is its appearance  
You will know what a mess it was,

And it is not perfect,  
That it is with no direction, and no purpose.  
That this is how it will be without that thing  
The thing you've held on to for long.  
So tread lightly until you wake  
Wake to the euphoria  
Of finding a golden map  
To the deed you've wanted all along  
The one that replaces memories  
And take it in  
And I hope you will find peace in it,  
Take solace in the complication of it all, because my love,  
You have dug a jewel,  
A cloudy treasure amid a storm  
But a disguise of magic  
For your best chance to find meaning in life  
May have finally arrived.

Helen folded the piece of paper, still crying, making no effort to wipe away her tears. She made a small hole on the ground with her bare hands, pushing away the loose mud that uncoupled the roots of the massive trees. She picked up the glass jar and kissed it, little drops of her tears cleaning the dirt off the exterior. She placed it inside the small hole she had dug, along with the paper and the gun. The gun that had only failed to fire because of a jostled-loose firing pin, and not because it wasn't loaded. But she didn't know that, *she didn't need to either.*

Helen took one last look at the ground, her grandfather's ashes, placed gently beside the object that had killed him.

One night he simply hadn't come back in following his regular evening walk. Instead, his pained face that had lain on the pavement overnight, chest oozing blood down onto the cracked concrete all the while. A probable mugging-gone-bad in a deadend country town with too-few hopes and at least one-too-many handguns. *So mundane in today's world, and so disastrous to the lives of the affected.*

Ret. Col. Joseph Baronhurst's killer had most likely panicked too, left the scene, dropped the gun. Hadn't even ended up taking the old man's wallet after all that effort. *No witnesses, case still open, no leads as of yet, one year later.*

His long-passed body had been discovered not even one-hundred yards from their house by Helen's mother the next morning. Neither of her parents may have picked up a fully formed meth habit yet, but she had evidently already been of a loose enough ethical persuasion to pocket the dropped *Dezzy* from the scene before relaying her discovery to her husband, either child, or calling the police. She had clearly seen no reason not to take it. Maybe in the moment it just looked *cool* or *valuable* to her. It had ended up joining the other family gun – the Ruger 10/22 rifle as an ostensible *home defence tool* and occasional toy for Bo' and 'Tony to take out for plinking target practice in the woods.

Helen couldn't imagine her family's tampering with the scene helped the police solve the mystery either. Although, being honest with herself, she doubted it would have made any real difference either way – certainly wouldn't bring Grandpa Joe back. And it's not like she'd gone running to the police herself to report what her mother had done once she realised where her brother and dad's new gun had come from either. *A moral lapse of her very own perhaps. Runs in the family.*

All the same, the poetry, the jar, the Desert Eagle were all never to see the light of day again. She blanketed them over with the same dirt she had released from the Earth to make the hole in the first place. When the dirt back in place, shading the belongings underneath the ground forever, Helen stood up and laid her eyes on the mountain again.

Helen turned away from the grave and walked away in no particular direction.