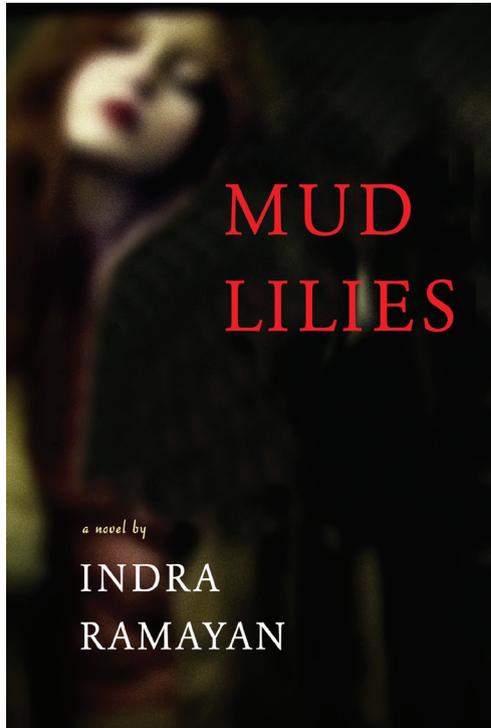


Excerpt from *Mud Lilies*
by Indra Ramayan



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CHAPTER ONE

Before my first rape, I thought I was pretty. I used to play with makeup and pretend to be a supermodel getting ready for a runway show. I'd cover the lamp with a pink pashmina, tune the radio to the Chill Channel, and imitate the starry-eyed, fish-lipped expressions of magazine models in the mirror. After the rape, I found my reflection revolting. I hated my face, my future, and my fate. I hated myself so much, I put my life up for sale.

I sold the only thing I had for money.

And then I got so tangled in the weeds of my trauma, I couldn't touch my life anymore.

So I gave the rest of it away.

I didn't even try to salvage the shreds of my being as they fell away and ripped open dangerous portals to the darkest of people. People disguised as friends, mothers, and lovers. People who fit my narrative that the world was evil, and I'd never be safe. That better was for everyone else, and mediocre was the best I could ever hope for. That I should never want for anything more than to survive for one more day — and often, I'd wish not to.

That's how Blue got in. He breezed in through one of those portals when I was broken wide open and bleeding my desperation into a world that didn't care. He pulled me so close, I couldn't see his darkness. All I felt was the frantic neediness of a ruined teenager clinging to the last pieces of herself. I had to hold onto something, so I held onto him, and it's taken me four years to start letting go.

I used to dream of Blue almost every night. It made me feel like a puppet dancing in random sideshows for the devil. In every dream, I was leaning against the countertop, and he was kissing

me. But in my dreams our brains weren't sick, and he wasn't dead yet. And every single time, I'd wake up to screams — his or mine, I still don't know.

The screams have begun to fade, but now I hear a faraway weeping, like a lost child crying in a ravine. My childhood ghost is restless beneath the surface of the shallow grave where I buried her. She wants out. And I want to dig her out, but I'm still too scared to see her.

I tell her that we're fine, that I've made real progress, and I have a future. I'm in my fourth year of my Bachelor of Arts degree and on my way to graduating with distinction. But I cannot silence that broken little girl. She says she's still in pain, and her cries have become constant. She's been crying for years, and she won't stop. She's demanding to be heard. I keep telling her that I'm not ready, that my wings are still broken, and that I am deeply flawed. But I know there is shelter, even beneath imperfect wings, where I have found much of my own healing. She is getting louder and more restless. She tells me that I can fly with broken wings. I just have to try harder.

This is my story.

I met Blue on a smoky summer night. British Columbia's forests were on fire, and record-setting temperatures held people hostage inside air-conditioned malls and bars. The smoke had travelled over the Rockies and cloaked the city of Edmonton. The smog hung heavy; the city sweated ashes. The air was thick and disorienting and made me feel as though I'd been dropped onto the set of a Quentin Tarantino movie. My eyes burned; my throat ached. I was pissed off about having to go to an outdoor art show with Brenda, former hooker turned cleaning lady after what she'd called an "economic meltdown" had sent her to a mental institution for a

few months. I guess that's where Jesus showed up, and she claimed to have joined hands with the Lord. It's also where Prozac, sobriety, and her new hippie Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor, Penelope, came along. I think Brenda used her cleaning job as an attempt to offer reparation to God for all the blow jobs she'd sold over the previous thirty years. I wondered if someday, Jesus would come and rescue me too.

I should have known Brenda was no good when she'd "rescued" me four years earlier. What kind of person finds a teenage girl crouched down outside a truck stop in the wee hours of a cold spring morning and thinks, *Opportunity!* But I was a kid — a scared kid. I remember squinting up at her through raw, salty eyes, and despite her denim shorts, stiletto heels, and hot pink bikini top with devil's pitchforks on each of her sagging breasts, she sounded like an angel when she leaned over me and said, "Honey, I'm gonna take care of ya."

I got up from the curb and followed her into a cab. A few days before, I'd been a regular teenager: anxious, angry, and reclusive. I'd gone from hiding in my bedroom to riding in the back of a Yellow Cab with a stoned hooker and a pervy driver who stared in his rearview mirror as though we were the prelude to a porn flick. Brenda smiled at the driver. He smiled back and said, "Call me Mo!" She winked at him and lit up a joint. Mo winked back and took the joint out of her hand. He sucked it long and hard while wagging his eyebrows at me. I shook my head no. When we pulled up in front of an abandoned auto body shop, Brenda said, "Head on up them side stairs. I gotta pay the driver."

Them side stairs looked like they belonged to abandoned buildings I'd seen pictures of during my grade six field trip to the archives. I half-expected police tape on the door. Instead, a faded sign that read *OFFICE* greeted me just above eye level. I turned

the loose doorknob, and the biting smell of *old* slapped my senses sharp. Old carpet, old furniture, dirty dishes, and cigarette butts. Pungent. Rank. My new life. Two armchairs from the seventies leaned against each other in front of a rickety coffee table littered with porn magazines, beer cans, fast-food bags, and overflowing ashtrays. A hot plate sat askew on top of an old beer fridge, like it had been tossed there in a hurry. I thought, *I should run! But where? Back to the truck stop?* Besides, running would take guts, and I'd left my guts on the basement floor with *him*.

I plopped onto a stinky armchair and squeezed my eyes closed. I knew I could never go home. There I was sitting in the middle of a trash pile, like a lone dog discarded at the dump, my future in the hands of the first taker. I'd run from one trash can to another. My childhood home, a 1950s red house shaped like a perfect box. Plain and practical. My dad had inherited it when my railroading granddaddy dropped dead on the basement floor with yellow eyes and a rock-hard liver. My grandma had died before I'd been born. My dad followed in his father's footsteps. First the railway, then the house. And then the bad energy and trauma that lingered inside the walls.

The house should have been a good thing for my dad. No mortgage and only steps away from the railyard. But he didn't like the proximity of the Dover Hotel, right down our back alley. The hotel had been built in 1912 and stood two storeys high. It proudly advertised weekly and monthly rates and off-track betting in giant red letters. On the east side of the hotel was the tavern entrance where the barflies smoked and where drunken fights were settled. The west side of the bar wasn't any better because it housed the Cold Beer Store, whose entrance was just as popular a hangout as the tavern doors. My dad had told me, "If I ever catch you anywhere near that hotel, it will be the first time I beat you."

My dad's words had worked. No matter how brutal the weather, I'd always detour a couple of blocks to stay off the bar's radar. But what I couldn't avoid were the bar buddies my mom brought home to "keep her company" while my dad was out of town working on the railway. And then there was Clayton, the bar buddy who never left. The one who'd moved in so quickly, he personally had to pack my dad's things to make room for his own.

My mom had felt different about the house. She didn't have to work, and she could walk to the bar, where she'd made plenty of pub friends to keep her company. So I grew up with the sounds of sirens, train whistles, and traffic. Most nights, I'd hear drunken garbles, yelling, and whoops from the late-night bar stragglers. I'd awaken to the occasional drunk sleeping off too many pitchers on our lawn, and one time, I came home to a black Ford Tempo with a smashed-out windshield at the foot of our front steps.

Brenda breezed through the door about ten minutes later, her face flushed and her bikini top crooked. She grabbed a sheet from a closet, threw it on the floor, handed me a bunched-up sweater, and said, "This should do ya!" And then she went down a narrow hallway and slammed a door. I curled up on the armchair and gently rocked myself to sleep. It seemed I'd only slept an hour when Brenda woke me and said, "Git up, girl! We's goin' to meet Milos!"

Milos looked like a cross between a hunter and a hit man. A hundred pounds lighter, clean hair, and a quick shave, and maybe he could have been handsome. He wore a white dress shirt, unbuttoned and untucked, and leaned against a black Lincoln as though he were taking a smoke break after winning a bar fight. True Religion jeans and scuffed cowboy boots with steel tips on the toes made me wonder if he'd ever been in theatre. Like he'd played the role of a gay cowboy and made off with the wardrobe. When we

walked toward him, he pushed himself upright, extended his giant hand toward me, and said, "Hello, buttercup."

I giggled, and my face went hot. His Serbian accent made my stomach jump, as though a mob boss had just asked me to dance. I was used to being around guys who wore ball caps, boring and ordinary. Guys who used words like *flange* and *spandrel*, often in between burps. Not some black-haired European who called me buttercup.

The clouds parted for a moment, and the sun shone on Milos's blue-black hair. He swept his hand toward the back door of the car, swung it open, and said, "We go buy pretty dress for pretty girl, no?" For a moment I felt special, like a prom queen getting into the back of a limo. But the fast-food bags on the floor and the stench of pine and vanilla air fresheners quickly pulled me back to ordinary.

Brenda hopped in the front seat. "We needs some coffee, Milos. I feel like I got boats 'n shit floatin' around in my head."

"Coffee for everyone!" Milos said and then jerked the car into drive.

The three of us spent the afternoon wandering around Northside Mall with extra-large coffees in our hands. Brenda led the way, stopping at a store crowded with a lot of neon clothing in the entry. Rap music blasted out of cheap speakers, and an even cheaper salesgirl sang along. The tops had built-in boobs, and the pants and skirts looked like shiny plastic. It reminded me of the crap my mom used to wear before she hooked up with my stepdad, Clayton.

"Whatta ya think of this little charmer?" Brenda said, holding up what looked like a neon-green tube.

"What is it?" I said.

"Whatta ya mean, 'what is it'? It's a dress, darlin!"

"Oh!" I rubbed the fabric between my fingers. "It's pretty."

“And it’s five bucks!”

“Get her other colour too,” Milos said, reaching for his wallet. “I buy green one!”

Brenda and Milos bought me three spandex minidresses: hot pink, lime green, and electric yellow. Because we’d blown most of our budget, Brenda said I’d have to settle for secondhand shoes. They decided we’d check out Goodwill. Milos said, “We eat! Then shoes.” He took us to Burger Baron and bought us poutine and cherry sundaes. We ate together at a picnic table tucked under a dead tree in the corner of the parking lot.

“Hey! Tell ya what, girl. I got a special pair of shoes I’ve kept hidden away in my closet for like — a hundred years. I made shit piles of cash wearing them. They’re like lucky charms,” Brenda said, licking fake whipped cream off her fingers.

I held a french fry like a cigarette and flicked my hand back. “What do they look like?”

Brenda widened her eyes and gave her head a hard shake. “They’re fuckin’ gorgeous, girl! They’re purple platforms, open on the toe, six-inch heel. Oh yeah, and they got a little strap around the top of your ankle, kind of like a dog collar.”

“Wow, Brenda! They sound beautiful.”

“They are, sunshine. I ain’t worn them in about ten years. Kept them in my closet for someone special.” She winked at me and shoved a handful of my fries in her mouth. “Ya know what, girl? I think yer pretty special, and I got a good feelin’ about our partnership. I’m gonna give ‘em to you.”

I shook my head. “I can’t take them. They sound like they have a lot of sentimental value.”

“That’s what I’m tryin’ to say. They got a lot of value, and I wan-na give ‘em to you. Show a little gratitude!”

“Okay.” I nodded and reached for the last french fry.

“And?” Brenda squinted and raised her hands up by her head.

“Um, thank you very much, Brenda.”

“That’s better, girl.” She laughed and swiped the last fry from my fingers.

Milos sang along to Jack Johnson all the way home. He kept smiling at me. I smiled back. I closed my eyes when we drove past the truck stop where Brenda had found me weeping on the curb the night before. When we got home, we spent the rest of the day watching *Saturday Night Live* reruns. After we finished eating pizza and chicken wings, Brenda said, “Why don’t ya model some of them sexy dresses for us? And them shoes I gave ya too?”

A few minutes later, I wobbled down the hall in stilettos with the neon-green dress shrink-wrapped to my body.

“Ya better learn to walk sexy in them shoes,” Brenda said.

“I’m trying.”

“Learn to strut that peachy little ass of yers.”

“I need a bra and panties,” I said, pulling the dress over my butt cheeks.

“Quit tuggin’ on it! You ain’t gettin’ no bra and panties. We needs to show off them little teenie treasures of yers. How do ya think yer ever gonna earn yer keep if ya don’t learn to market that ass?”

I didn’t respond. My *little teenie treasures* still hurt from the night before.

“You better remember, sweetheart, yer lucky ole Brenda found you beggin’ at the Flyin’ J instead of one of them dirty truckers. We’s gonna make you strong — be an entrepreneur and take charge of yer life. You won’t ever be nobody’s bitch but yer own. No more beggin’ and cryin’ outside truck stops. You be livin’ in a high-rise with a view of the downtown! Are ya pickin’ up what I’m puttin’ down, girl?”

“Okay, Brenda.”

“Not just okay! How ’bout a ‘Thank you, Brenda?’”

“Thank you, Brenda.”

“Now remember. You’s gonna owe me for helping yer little run-away ass build a good life for yerself. Do ya understand me? This ain’t no friendship shit. It’s kinda like a joint venture.”

I nodded and kept practising my walk in the six-inch stilettos.

For two days I staggered around Brenda’s apartment in those stupid shoes. My hips ached, and my feet blistered. Brenda sat on the couch with Milos, barking orders at me: “Swivel on yer toe. Push yer butt out more. Arch yer back, girl!” On the third night, Brenda disappeared for a while and came back with a bottle of Captain Morgan and cans of root beer. I guzzled the first drink quickly. Milos gave me another. My body warmed up. A lot! I started dancing around like a pop star. I’d never had alcohol before, but I already knew I wanted it again. It made everything seem so easy, like I’d been beamed up into an alternate universe where everything felt like the height of a teenage crush.

Brenda and Milos laughed and cheered me on. They said: “She’s a catch, what a face, dancer’s body, sell like hotcakes.” I felt *special*.

“We’s gonna call ya Jade,” Brenda said, “cuz of them crazy green eyes of yers.”

I didn’t bother to tell her my name was Chanie. Besides, she hadn’t asked my name or my age. She hadn’t asked me anything about where I came from or what I was doing at a truck stop at four o’clock in the morning. I didn’t care. As long as the rum kept coming and they didn’t make me go back to my mom and Clayton, they could call me anything they liked.

“You certainly got the looks, girl, but we’s gonna have to teach you some skills to go along with them. Did ya ever do a blow job before?” Brenda slurred as she wrapped her arms around my neck.

I blushed and said, “Not really.”

“Well, it’s gonna be the core of yer business, girly-girl! I tell ya what. Me and Milos are gonna teach ya.”

Milos belched and undid his belt buckle. I tucked my chin to my chest and shimmied closer to the wall. Brenda pointed at me and barked, “Hike up that dress, Jade! Get Milos ready for ya!”

I didn’t want to. Rum or no rum. For some reason, I’d believed that my new job would happen in a dark room underneath a blanket. I’d be naked only in front of strangers, not my new pseudo parents. Brenda glared at me; Milos grinned. Fear and alcohol brought my hand to the bottom of my dress, and I tugged it up — just a bit. The booze made it seem like everything would be okay.

I did everything they told me. When I gagged and started crying, Milos pulled my hair harder and said, “Streets not so easy. You are lucky girl to have nice man like me train you.” He yanked my head from his lap. “Go get on chair!” I scrunched my face and clenched my fists. It wasn’t the first time I’d seen that depraved look in a man’s eyes. I closed my eyes, rode it out, and prayed that it wouldn’t always hurt so much.

“Gotta toughen you up, Jade!” Brenda laughed. “Can’t be cryin’ like that when yer at work.”

Milos slapped my ass and said, “Don’t cry. I take care of you on street! If man is bad, I beat him.” He lowered his eyebrows, made an O shape with his mouth, and punched his fist hard into his palm. “I like to beat!”

I ran to the bathroom to wash my face, afraid of what I’d see if I looked in the mirror. But I had to make sure my mascara hadn’t smeared. “We’s use waterproof, girl. That way when ya cry, nobody can tell!” That’s what Brenda had said when she’d done my makeup earlier that night. Claimed she was “showin’ me the tricks of the trade.” I squeezed my eyes tight and heard my dad’s words: “Be brave, Chanie. Be brave.” Brenda pounded on the door. I looked in

the mirror. Be brave — *Jade*.

Under Brenda's tutelage, I blossomed into a high-value hooker, whatever that meant. Every john in the city smelled my youth, my desperation, and my self-destruction. I guess there's nothing more tempting than reckless fourteen-year-old sex for sale on the streets. I don't even know how much money I made. All I know is that my mouth hurt, and my insides burned like fire. I also know that I cried a lot, and then one day, I just stopped crying.

Four years later, on my eighteenth birthday, Brenda and I stood under the bright red service sign at the Don Wheaton Chevy dealership on Whyte Avenue eating red velvet cupcakes from Crave. The glow from the neon Chevy signage bounced off the showroom glass and spread over the sidewalk where I stood fixated on a black Camaro. I wondered how many tricks I'd have to turn to afford a car like that. Plus, where would I park it? Certainly not at my trash-can apartment building on 107 Avenue and 110 Street. I'd even had a john refuse to park there when I invited him in for a drink after we'd had an exceptionally long date at the Road Runner Motel on the south side. He looked right at me and said, "Holy fuck! Are you kidding? I'd never park my Vette here."

The fact that he'd been willing to park his *Vette* at the Road Runner Motel for three hours while being entertained by a hooker confirmed that my neighbourhood was tragically bad and probably a dangerous place to live. I got out of his car with a red face and resigned myself to a life sentence of staring wistfully out the tiny window of my second-floor bachelor suite. I smoked a joint and eased myself to sleep with the fantasy of someday living in a one-bedroom on the top floor with a balcony. That and a bus pass.

My stomach rumbled, and I snapped out of my Camaro fantasy. I wanted to go home. I looked over at Brenda, who was admiring

the same car as I was. Her face looked soft under the night lights of the street. She'd been clean for three months, and it was starting to show. Her skin didn't look so tight anymore, her jaw had relaxed, and her eyes were almost alert. But she still looked tired. And she looked worn out from a lifetime of booze and hooking. Maybe a few more months of self-care would lessen the telltale signs of a life gone awry. Or maybe not. Maybe those signs were her cross to bear and would someday be mine too.

"Brenda, let's go," I said, wanting to go find some food.

"Relax! I got a big birthday surprise for you at my new building," Brenda said.

"Oh my God, not Milos!"

"Jesus, girl. No, it ain't fuckin' Milos."

"Oh my God! Promise me it's not Milos."

"For fuck sakes, girl. He's gone back to Serbia."

We walked toward the top of the south riverbank off Saskatchewan Drive. The city lights distracted me from the chilly April evening. I focused on the traffic rolling through the downtown hills, the headlights like mini shooting stars darting around in the dark valley beneath the dense downtown lights. Before my world had become so dull, the city lights had charmed me into believing that tucked in between all the glass towers, something great awaited me. That had been when my innocence still had a voice. But that voice had faded away in the same way that long, dark winters can make you forget the hot summer sun.

I followed Brenda through a grey industrial door at the back of the high-rise where she lived and worked as a cleaning lady. The 1964 building was the freak of Saskatchewan Drive. It stood out amongst the wealthy towers like a misfit pigeon in a flock of tropical birds. According to Brenda, the owners were connected to the building as though it had been built from their own bones. It had

a forever home on top of the riverbank thanks to those owners, who'd continually defied greedy land developers. It was not, and would never be, for sale. For many, the weathered tower, with its old windows and faded brick façade, was an eyesore. But for those who could otherwise never afford high-rise living in the heart of Old Strathcona, it was a gem.

Inside the back entry, an orange notice that warned residents to not smoke in the common areas of the building had been stuck to the drywall with electrical tape. Right next to it, a neon-yellow note, written with a dark-green Sharpie, warned of letting unwanted visitors into the building, which at the moment was me.

We came out a side door into the main area. The lobby had an entire wall made of glass brick, and the opposite wall had two grey industrial doors that were both labelled "Mechanical Room." The elevator had a full-length mirror on the back wall, and the buttons looked like white peppermints with faded black numbers. Brenda pressed 9, which we identified by the location on the number pad because the floor number had probably worn out sometime in the eighties.

I walked behind Brenda and tried to ease my anxious belly as she struggled with the lock on the door. What kind of surprise awaited me behind the sticky lock of Suite 902? How many men would be waiting inside for me? What kind of gross experience was I about to embark upon in the interest of *earnings*? The new Brenda was still a work in progress, and I more than half-expected Milos to be behind the door.

"Here ya is, honey!" Brenda said, jerking her thumb toward the inside of the suite, like a wayward hitchhiker losing patience.

"It's empty," I said, walking into the centre of the living room, my eyes scanning every corner, bracing for her surprise to jump out of the dark.

“It’s yer new home,” she said and snapped the light on.

“Don’t play games, Brenda.” I made a beeline for the balcony door to see the city view I’d often dreamt of.

“This ain’t no game! I scored this little sweetheart for ya from my boss! And two months’ free rent.” She grabbed my hand and pressed the keys into my palm. “Didn’t I tell ya that someday you’d be yer own woman, livin’ large in a high-rise with a view of the downtown?”

I stepped onto the balcony and looked at the city’s core crammed with glass towers and industrious people, the trees in the valley, the North Saskatchewan River, the High Level and Walterdale bridges, and the hills and winding roads. I couldn’t wait to smell the summertime campfires that trailed up from the river valley parks and bask in the Telus Building’s winter-season Christmas trees that illuminated the entire side of the tower in red, green, and yellow. My favourite sites of the city, including the majestic Hotel Macdonald, were right there in my living room. Maybe all the blow jobs had finally paid off.

The new Brenda, under the wings of her sponsor, Penelope, had agreed to undertake healthy hobbies and activities as part of her recovery. I couldn’t connect Brenda 2.0 to my brain. I couldn’t exercise the hooker in her and allow her to morph into the hippie cleaning lady she attempted to be. The version of her who called me her dear friend, her rock, her sister. She even called me Chanie instead of Jade for a while. My instincts knew better. Alcohol was only one of the things that made her dangerous. Art shows, yoga classes, and meditation would do nothing to dispel her dark nature. The only program or sponsor capable of neutralizing Brenda was death.

Penelope was a big fan of local farmers’ markets and art shows.

Brenda, in her attempt to be a team player, agreed to go to the Whyte Avenue Art Walk, but insisted on dragging me along like an old security blanket. The sun was strong, and the smoke was making me miserable, but I trudged along for two hours feigning interest in paintings I wouldn't use as a floor mat. I was grateful when it was over, and even more grateful to get away from Penelope's insistence that all my troubles would fade away if only I'd let her balance my chakras.

We took a shortcut through End of Steel Park on our way home. While we walked down the back alley of our building, I debated about whether I should have a few drinks and go make some cash or blow off work altogether and have a Netflix marathon instead. I didn't notice Blue until he piped up and yelled out to Brenda.

"What's in the bag, Brenda?" He squinted at us, cigarette dangling from his lips, the smoke blowing into his icy eyes. His face had a bit of scruff, like he hadn't shaved in a couple of days. He reminded me of those forty-something skinny guys who ride around strip mall parking lots on BMX bikes: wiry, weathered, and always smoking. Blue looked at me, leaned over, and picked up a beat-up yellow dishwasher. Effortlessly, cigarette intact, he tossed it into the box of his ratty Chevy.

"I got a nice paintin' for my wall," she said, the hooker in her taking over. She swayed her body from side to side, chin down, eyes up, chest out.

"Who's your buddy, Brenda?" Blue nodded to me. "Is she your lover?"

"I only date men!" I snapped.

"Oh, whatever." Blue broke into a wheezy smoker's laugh.

"I bet your computer has a lot of viruses, pig!"

"You bet it does. It's so slow I gotta turn it on on Tuesday if I wanna beat off on Thursday." He tossed his head back and broke

into a coughing fit. “And if I can’t get it going, I call up one of you bitches to come and take care of it for me.” Blue grabbed his crotch and smacked me on the back of the shoulder.

“Don’t touch me!” I slapped his hand and walked away. Brenda laughed and followed me through the back door. “Who the eff is that guy?”

“That’s Blue.” Brenda smiled. “He’s an old buddy of mine. Just moved back from out East. He’s one of the maintenance contractors for the building.”

“He’s a dick, and he looks like a ferret.”

I went to my suite and made Kraft Dinner. I mixed Captain Morgan and root beer in a Big Gulp cup, stripped naked, and curled up under a blanket with my iPad. I passed out in the midst of a hair-pulling, vase-throwing fight between two big-breasted blondes on Ex-Wives of Rock.

When I woke up, I was still kind of drunk. The quiet made me nervous. I don’t like silence much because I have what I’m told is a contemplative mind. Anxious. Depressive. Addicted. That’s how a doctor at the Medicentre had defined me. He’d written the name of a shrink on his prescription pad. I said, “Don’t waste your ink,” and never went back.

I had been a little more tired than usual. The hours were hard, the men sometimes harder. Something dark had shifted in my mood, much darker than I’d ever known, like someone had stuffed my pockets with rocks and shoved me into a swamp. I couldn’t even get out of bed some days. I’d pull the covers over me and shut my cell phone off. It was easier to be invisible because it took too much energy to witness my life. Everything felt like I was watching it on TV, like it wasn’t really happening. My walls, clothes, books — even my text messages seemed surreal, like writing I’d read on a bathroom wall someplace a long time ago.

A few days later, completely out of food and money, I had to go to work. I hoped that some loser would pay me three bills for a “girlfriend experience.” Even though I’d have to let him kiss me, it beat having to hustle up three or four blow jobs for the same amount of cash. It would be a quick ticket to some lasagna, instant coffee, and a few more days of refuge under the covers.

I got out of bed. My body ached as though I’d driven across the country without sleep. I flicked on the bathroom light but snapped it off again when I saw my dead eyes looking back at me. My stomach grumbled, but my cupboards were empty. A quick trick and I could at least grab a bagel. I jammed some earbuds in and rode the bus downtown to my usual spot, a section of the street the girls called *Headquarters*. By the time a green Ford pickup pulled up to the curb, I thought I’d faint from hunger. I looked down for a moment, took a deep breath, and forced a smile.

“Hey, big guy! What’s your pleasure tonight?” I leaned in the window. He looked like the bull-riding type, mid-twenties maybe, cowboy hat shadowing his face.

“How much for all night?” he said, sounding like a drunk Dwight Yoakam.

“How’s five hundred bucks?”

“Four-fifty and you got a deal. I got us a motel room right up the road.” He spat a toothpick out the window.

“Cash up front!” I said and hopped in the truck.

I don’t remember much after that except waking up on the floor of the motel. My head throbbed, and I felt sticky between my legs. My body told me everything I needed to know. I’d never been so tired of myself and my sick little life. I remembered my school counsellor telling me to think of things that bring me hope to offset thoughts of suicide, but there really isn’t much hope. It’s all a farce — regurgitated quotes from self-help books. I used to think

of hot summer nights, but on that hot summer night, I lay on a motel floor freshly raped and robbed by some dirtbag farm kid.

I used the dresser to help pull myself up. When I saw myself, the blackened eye, the swollen lip, the whore in the mirror, I clenched my fists and swung as hard as I could. The glass exploded, even angrier than me, grateful to release years of degradation it had witnessed in that dump. I yanked a shard from the edge of the frame and dug it into my right wrist and then feebly attempted my left. I guess I must have screamed loud enough that someone called for help because sometime later, somewhere in my pain, rolling around on the floor bleeding dark pools of blood, a paramedic pinned me down.

I woke up at the hospital. Nobody called anybody for me because I didn't have anybody to call. They didn't do a rape kit because I was a whore. They held me for twelve hours and gave me some watered-down chicken noodle soup. I left the hospital with a bag of cookies and a whole lot of gauze on my wrists, wearing the same torn and bloody clothes I'd been admitted in.

I remember the moment I fell in love with him.

When I limped in from the hospital, Blue was sitting on the floor in the hallway digging through his toolbox. He glanced up at my bandaged wrists and calmly pointed at the drop sheet in front of him, as though he'd been expecting me. I dropped to my knees and let him pull me against him. We rested against the wall, and he held my head on his chest. "I'll keep you safe," he said. His words wove through me. My heart fluttered like a frantic bird battling a strong wind but slowed to the rhythm of his heartbeat, measured and strong, like a metronome. His inhaled and exhaled, like waves, easing me — falling away ...

The golden hue of the sky mesmerizes me. I want to stop and

stare, but something tells me to keep moving and push forward up the mountain.

Almost there. So tired ... Running to something. Something that matters.

Finally, the summit. The grass cools my skin; the air is crisp and moist. A monochrome forest lies beneath the ridge. Trees with pewter branches reach toward a sepia sky as though praying to the heavens; their metallic leaves, lavish and playful, sway back and forth. They wave to me; they wave to one another. They celebrate beneath a mandarin moon as though world peace is real. A flock of copper owls gather, their feathers luminescent, emerald eyes aglow, lighting the woods the way a vigil lights the hearts of the grieving. They tiptoe toward me and lift their wings; their wild souls infuse me — hypnotize me. I feel love. Peace. Beneath their feather dome, I rest.