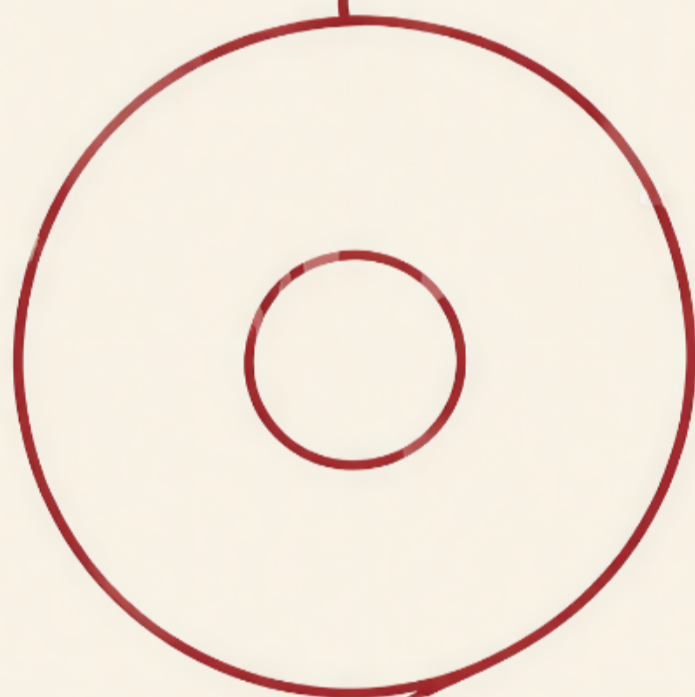


Cooper's



Emory Ahlberg



Cooper's Part 2

7

The first time I got hit for being like this, I was nine. Recess. Behind the annex where the teachers couldn't see. There were four boys. Two I knew from Sunday school, the others just faces, blurry and mean in the sun. They knocked me down and my knees hit the dirt. One of them held my arm behind my back and the other grabbed a fistful of hair. I didn't have long hair yet but they grabbed anyway, fingers digging into my scalp, and the pain was bright, then white, then red. They took turns, and they were polite to each other. They waited in line. That time, they didn't say *sissy*. They said something worse, something I've sanded down until it's just grass and blood in my mouth. I went home with a split lip, a bloody nose, a black eye. My father sat me at the kitchen table and told me to fight back. To stop walking like that. To stop talking like that. To be a man, Vernon, for God's sake, just be a man. Mama stood in the doorway with a rag and a bowl of ice water and



said nothing. Not because she agreed, because she didn't know what to say. Mama knew what I was. She didn't have a word for it any more than I did, but she knew, and when my father left the room she came over and pressed the rag to my mouth and said, *I'm sorry, baby*. That was all. Not for what happened, I don't think, but maybe for what the world was going to do to me, over and over, and how she couldn't stop it.

I left Louisiana seven years later, and I've been leaving Louisiana every day since. But the boys behind the annex are still there. They just wear different faces, different uniforms, different words. The fists are the same.

Tom takes another step.

Carmen's hand is still on my ankle. Her grip is slick. Her wig is on the floor three feet away and her mouth is a red mess and she's not making a sound. Carmen, who hasn't shut up since the night I met her.

Tom says, "Come on." He takes my arm, but he's not pulling. He's being gentle, like he's guiding me, like I'm lost.

The cop with the nightstick is standing over Carmen. His mouth is moving, but I can't hear because my ears are ringing. She lets go of my ankle as Tom pulls me away, and I see her hand reaching for something that isn't there anymore.

I say, "But she didn't do anything."

Tom moves me to the back of the hallway. There's a door there I've never noticed, the green paint peeling like old scabs. "Listen," he says. "You need to go. Right now."

"I can't—"

"Go out the back." His voice is urgent but soft. "Walk three blocks south, cut over to Broadway. Don't run. Just walk."

"Tom, please listen, my friend didn't do anything. That cop hit her for no reason."

"Probably took a swing when you weren't looking."

"No—"

"Los Angeles Municipal Code. Three articles of clothing." Tom talks like he's reading from a manual. "He's wearing—" There's a glance back toward Carmen. "He's not in compliance."

I know the law, every girl like me does. You have to wear three pieces of clothing that match the sex on your ID. You count them before you leave the house. Underwear, one. Socks, two. What else? What else can you hide under the dress that counts, that might save you if they check. Carmen doesn't bother. She says they'll find a reason to get you if they want.

God, she asked me to leave, tried to get me out of the booth. I said no. I wanted five more minutes being a real girl, talking with a real boy. Now she's on the floor because I begged her to keep the dress on, the wig, and be Carmen instead of Ernesto. I said *please* and she did it for me. Now her mouth is bleeding, the lipstick and the blood running together, red on red.

Tom is tapping his foot. Behind us, the cops are working the room. I hear George talking, a stool scraping, Dee saying *let go of me* in a voice I've never heard from her before, high and thin and young. I keep waiting for the cursing, for the Spanish, for Carmen. She doesn't make a sound.

"I know this young lady," Tom says over his shoulder to nightstick cop. "She was getting coffee, she don't belong here."

The cop doesn't look up. He's got Carmen by the arm, pulling her to her feet. Her knees buckle, he pulls harder.

Tom pushes the bar on the back door. The alley opens up, dark, hot, the smell of garbage and piss. "Go," he says. "Go home."

"I can't leave her."

"You can't help him." I see the sweat on Tom's upper lip and the place where he cut himself shaving. "Look, I—" He rubs the back of his neck. "I'm sorry, I have to take names. It's paperwork, it's nothing, but I have to do it or my sergeant—" He looks at the ground. "You were just getting coffee, I'll write it up that way. But I need to see your ID, just for the report. Okay?"

I could lie, say I left it at home, walk through the green door and disappear. He'd believe me. He believes everything about me. I reach into my purse. My fingers find the lipstick first—Woolworth's in New



Roads, worn to a nub. Then the compact. Then the folded bills I keep for emergencies. Last, the card.

I look at Tom's soft face, his neat hair, his badge catching the light. Maybe if he finds out now, while I'm being honest, it won't be so bad. Maybe he'll look at the "M," then at my face, and see the card is wrong, not me.

I hand it over. He looks down, and I watch his face the way you watch a thunderstorm moving in across the cane fields. Flat gray, bruised purple, then a streak of yellow-white before the crack splits the sky. His lips move. V-E-R-N-O-N. Born March 3rd, 1939. Male.

Tom's gentle hand drops from my arm. His jaw sets, and I've seen this look before. It was on my cousin's face when he opened the bathroom door to find lipstick smeared across my mouth, my music teacher's face when I sang the girl's part, my father's face in the porch light, his hand on my shoulder, twisting, hurting, the same night Mama put the bus ticket under my pillow. It's always the same. Muscles around the mouth go rigid, eyes go flat and wet, like a pond right before it freezes. The look men get when they realize the thing in front of them is a thing.

"Get out." The boy is gone. The cop is here now.

“Tom—”

“I said get out.”

“Hey.” It’s the cop who walked in with Tom. He’s smiling. How can anyone smile in a room like this, with Carmen’s blood on the wall, Dee yelling, and the smell of burnt coffee because George isn’t at his station? “This the girl you were talking about? You’re right, she’s a looker.”

Tom stares at me, I stare back. We both know what happens if he says yes. He was fooled; flirted with a boy in a dress, laughed at his jokes, asked if he comes here every Thursday. His partner will know. The precinct will know.

Tom puts his hand on my shoulder and shoves me through the door.

I stumble into the alley, my heel catching on concrete. I drop to one knee, the dress riding up, palms flat on the wet ground. Behind me, the door slams shut, the latch catching with a hard click.

“No!” I try the handle. Locked. Emergency exit, one way out, no way back in.

The alley is narrow and dark and the dumpster to my left is overflowing and a cat or something runs across the far end. I’m on my knees in garbage water and the maroon dress is ripped and the door is locked and Carmen is inside and I can’t get to her.

I bang on the cold metal door. The sound is flat, dead, swallowed by the brick walls. “Carmen!” My voice is wrong, too loud, too high. “Carmen!”

Nobody opens the door. Nobody is coming.

The alley stretches forty, maybe fifty feet. One end opens to neon and headlights, the other is blocked by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. I could go to Main Street, walk three blocks south like Tom said, cut across, disappear into the traffic on Broadway, let the city eat me the way it eats everything. I could. That’s what Tom wants. That’s what they all want. Sweep the alley, sweep the street, sweep me out of sight.

I stand. My knee is wet and my palms sting and one of my heels is broken, snapped clean, so I kick off both shoes and run barefoot to the end of the alley. The concrete is warm and gritty. Every crack bites my soles, every pebble digs in. But all I feel is Carmen on the floor, and all I hear is the sound of her not making a sound. Main Street opens up at the end, neon and dark and the distant sound of a siren that might be coming here or might be going anywhere.

I run to Harold’s.

Manny is in the doorway, same as before, arms crossed, same black shirt. He sees me coming and he’s already shaking his head before I get to him.

“Cooper’s,” I say. “They’re raiding Cooper’s. They have Carmen, they hit her, they—”

“I know.” He says it quiet. “I heard.”

“You have to help. You have to—there’s people in there, Dee is in



there—”

“I can’t.” He holds up his hands. “I’m sorry about Ernie. I am. But I can’t. We get enough heat as it is. If I send guys down there, we’re next.”

“Please.”

Manny shakes his head, his face set in a shape that doesn’t change, not for me. “Can’t do it,” he says. “Forget it. Go home.”

I duck under him into the bar. He yells, but I’m already inside, pushing through bodies and smoke. The music is loud, something with a horn, and the air is thick with sweat and Aqua Velva. The men in good shirts stand at the bar with their drinks. They know. It’s in their faces. They heard the sirens, the noise, and they’re standing with their gin and tonics because Harold’s has a door that closes and Cooper’s doesn’t. That’s the whole difference.

“Please,” I say. “They have my friends. They’re hurting people. Please.”

A man at the bar looks at me, looks at his drink, looks away. Another man puts his hand on his date’s arm and steers him toward the back. The bartender pretends not to see. He’s got a glass in each hand and he’s polishing them, but they’re already clean.

Manny’s hand clamps on my arm. Hard. Not the way he’d grab a

woman. The way you grab a stupid boy who's about to break a window. "Let's go," he says, flat and bored, a bouncer handling a problem. He walks me out through the door and lets go on the sidewalk. "Go home, kid. Sleep it off."

I stand there in bare feet. The concrete is hot. Harold's door closes. The horn goes on playing.

8

Running back to Cooper's, my feet slap the sidewalk, and the neon from the pawnshops stripes my arms pink and green. I'm in a torn dress with no shoes, blood trickling down my shin, but hardly anyone glances at me. There's nothing strange about a girl running barefoot down the Row at this hour.

The front of Cooper's is lit up with a spotlight from the squad car. Two cars, actually, parked at angles like they almost crashed into each other. On the sidewalk, a small crowd has gathered—ten, maybe fifteen people. Regulars, drifters, two queens I've seen at the counter but don't know by name. A man in a yellow bathrobe is watching from the flophouse across the street. George leans against the doorframe, arms folded, eyes half-closed. His crossword is gone.

The back door of one of the squad cars is open, and there's five or six people crammed inside, knees on knees. A cop argues with another about fitting one more. The wagon hasn't arrived yet.

"Hey, there's no room," says a man's voice from inside the car. "You can't put anyone else in here. There's no room."

Carmen is in the back seat. I almost don't see her. No wig. Mascara smeared down her cheek. Her mouth is swollen, blood dried brown at the corners. She's looking at her lap, mouthing something—maybe Spanish, maybe nothing—and I stop, because in the back of that car, knees together and shoulders caved, she looks like someone's kid. Not Carmen, not Ernesto. Someone before both of them, sitting in the dark, trying to remember how to pray. And she's crying.

I've seen Carmen angry, drunk, and laughing until she couldn't breathe; I've seen her do a hundred things with a hundred faces. But I have never, not once, in two years of sharing a mirror, a bathroom, and a four-hundred-square-foot box, seen her cry. Carmen is six-three in heels, she takes up the whole sidewalk, and nobody bothers her because she's too much of a problem. She is the wall who stands in front of the charge.

But she's crying, soft, and that's what I can't stand. She's not performing like usual, nobody's watching, or she thinks nobody is, and this is who's underneath, who's been underneath this whole time. I never thought of Carmen as someone who could be hurt. I've leaned on her for two years like she was concrete, like she could hold the weight of both of us and not crack, and I never once asked what holding me cost her. She paid for the dress I'm wearing. She took it in at the waist. She



put up my mirror. She walked me to Cooper's tonight on hamburger feet because I said *please* in that voice I know works. And now she's crying in the back of a squad car and I'm standing in the street barefoot, finally seeing her, too late.

The lights from the squad car press against my face, blue-white, buzzing, and the crowd is a knot of eyes. The cops are laughing. One leans into the squad car, says something, and Carmen flinches, shoulders up, eyes closed. The cop smiles wider. He likes that. I want to run to the car and pull her out, but my knees lock. My hands hang at my sides, big and stupid and useless. I stand there in the spotlight with my torn dress and my bloody shin, watching her shoulders shake behind the glass. Her face is pale. She doesn't see me. She's alone in there, and I remember being nine years old, wishing so hard that someone would come save me. Knowing nobody would.

There's a donut on the sidewalk still in its wax paper. It must've rolled out when the cops came through, and now it's just lying there, a fly already on it. I pick it up.

Tom is standing by the hood of the police car, writing in a notebook. Badge, belt, holster. He's doing paperwork. Carmen is bleeding five feet from him but he's not looking at her. He's too busy



with the form, the pen, the line where he writes the names.

The donut is still warm. Sticky. I close my fingers around it.

Carmen lifts her head and sees me. Her swollen mouth makes a shape. *Don't.*

I do. I throw the donut, hard. It hits Tom in the cheek. A dull thud, leaving a sticky smear of glaze and street dirt across his jaw and down the collar of his uniform. The notebook drops. His hand goes to his face, then he sees me, the thing he swept out the back door. "You."

The other cop turns. "The hell was that?"

They start toward me, the other cop walking fast, nightstick ready. The crowd shifts, rippling. I grab another donut and throw. It catches nightstick cop square in the chest. Jelly on his badge. He stops, looks down at his uniform like he's been shot. "You little—"

Someone in the crowd laughs. It isn't loud, but it lands like a match in a puddle of gas. It catches. It spreads. A man near the end of the line cackles, and then a woman in curlers howls.

The cop's grip on the nightstick goes tight. "You think this is funny?" But the laughter doesn't stop.

I bend, searching. My hand closes on a fork from God knows where. Stupid. I throw it anyway. It bounces off Tom's chest and clatters.

Behind me, a man kicks over a trash can and the sidewalk fills with jars, cans, newspapers—Main Street's garbage rolling toward the gutter. Hands reach down. A bottle breaks against the squad car. Then another. A man in a good shirt pushes through, sleeves rolled, jaw set. He doesn't look at me. He bends, grabs a loose brick from the curb like he's been waiting his whole life to find one.

Tom shouts. The other cop swings his nightstick at the noise, the bodies, the blur of faces, skirts, and sweat. But the crowd doesn't scatter, they pull closer. A whole plate of donuts someone grabbed on the way out hits the windshield. Powdered sugar, chocolate, shattered glass. Now the cops are yelling. I don't hear words, just their ugly, loud shape. The kind men use when they're scared. And I'm scared too. My hands tingle, my knee is bloody, I'm nineteen and I've never won a fight in my life. The fear tastes like the grass behind the annex, like my father's voice at the kitchen table, like the word *Vernon* on Tom's lips, and it feels like every schoolyard, alley, bus station, bathroom, church pew, and mirror stretched end to end into one long corridor I've been running through since childhood.

The nightstick comes at my face—

A dark hand catches it, wrenches it sideways. The cop stumbles.

The fear goes quiet. My feet stop hurting. The crowd is roaring now, a sound I've never made or heard, and it's coming from my throat too. Tom's hand is on his holster. A trash can lid sails over my head and hits the cruiser with a noise like a cymbal. The metal buckles. Dee is kicking the car door from inside. The crowd surges, and for one impossible second, the cops are the ones backing up, and now we are the wall, and we are holding.

The cops look at each other. They look at the car full of people they can't transport and the street full of people they can't control, and they back up, one step, then another, boots scraping against the curb. There are more of us than them. I see it. Tom sees it. The crowd is thirty now, forty, queens and runaways and hustlers. Sirens far off, but not close enough yet. A bottle arcs over my head and shatters at Tom's feet. Tom looks at his partner, his partner looks at the radio, the other one just stands there. They are three boys in a uniform and we are everyone else, and for the first time in my life, the number is wrong in their direction.

They run. The one with jelly on his badge first, then his partner. Tom stands there a second longer, looking at me, and then he turns and goes too. They leave the cruiser. They leave Carmen. They leave the notebook on the hood with the names half-written and the pen rolling into the gutter. The crowd howls and the howl is mine too. Dee's foot hits the back door one more time and it swings wide. She tumbles out first, then a sailor, then Carmen, who almost falls but doesn't, because hands catch her—my hands, finally, for once, doing what hands are for. Her blood is on my cheek. She doesn't smile. The look says: *you stupid, stupid girl*. The look says: *you came back*.

My feet are bare on the concrete and my dress is torn at the hem



and I walk with her and we sit down on the curb. “Vivian.” She says my name the way my mother said it once, pinning a hem.

Main Street is filling up around us with the loudest, strangest, most beautiful noise I’ve ever heard, and Carmen and I are sitting on a curb in front of a donut shop, not talking, the way we sit in the apartment after a fight, before we crack jokes. The cruiser sits abandoned, its door open like a mouth. Donuts everywhere. Glass. A shoe. The notebook on the hood, white pages fluttering in the warm wind, the names half-written. Carmen leans her head against my shoulder, slow, careful, like she’s testing whether the shoulder will hold. It does. Somewhere down the block, a queen is singing.

“Your dress is ruined,” she says.

“I know.”

“I liked that dress.”

“Me too.”

She looks at the street. The neon is turning everything pink and green and the crowd is getting bigger and the sirens are getting closer and the night isn’t over. She wipes her eyes with the back of her wrist, smearing the mascara into a wider bruise. “Forty-five minutes,” she says. “I said forty-five minutes.”

I laugh, wet, ugly, loud, on the verge of sobbing. Carmen looks at me, and the corner of her mouth moves up, just a flicker, before the split in her lip stops her. She winces, touches it, looks at her finger. “They’re coming back, you know.”

“I know.”

“With more.”

“Yeah.”

She nods, slow. Then she takes my hand. Big and clumsy in hers, the knuckles I hate, and she holds it anyway, like it’s the right hand, like it’s mine. Down the block, glass breaks. A whoop. Somebody beats a trash can lid like a drum, and somebody else has dragged the jukebox to the doorway. I don’t know how. It’s plugged inside Cooper’s and the cord stretches taut across the threshold, and Ritchie Valens is playing again, louder now, fighting with the sirens that haven’t come yet but will. A queen is dancing on the hood of the cruiser in stockinged feet, one hand on her hip, the other holding a coffee mug like a microphone. The sailor who was scared an hour ago is laughing with his arm around a man in a torn shirt. Dee is up, leaning against the lamppost, lighting a cigarette off another queen’s cigarette, both of them shaking so hard the tips keep missing.

A bottle of something brown gets passed down the curb. It reaches us. Carmen takes it without looking, drinks, hands it to me. It burns the whole way down and I cough and she laughs and then winces and touches her lip.

“Shit, stop being funny,” she says.

“I’m not trying.”

“That’s the problem.”

We sit there. A girl is singing along to Ritchie Valens, badly. Carmen’s head stays on my shoulder. The blood at the corner of her mouth has gone tacky and her breath is shallow and even, and I can feel where her ribs go in and out against my arm.

“We have to go,” I say.

“I know.”

Neither of us moves. The party is the kind of thing you want to stay in, the way you want to stay in a warm bath even when the water goes cold, because you know what’s waiting on the other side. Fluorescents from Cooper’s spill onto the sidewalk and the queen on the hood turns slowly with her arms out. Somebody whistles, somebody else claps.

Carmen sits up slow, like an old woman. Her hand goes to her side and stays there. “Okay,” she says. “Okay, *mija*. Let’s go.”

I stand first and pull her up. It takes both hands to get her upright. She leans against me, ribs stiff, weight awkward, like she’s not sure her legs will work. Dee sees us and pushes off the lamppost.

“You leaving?”

“She needs ice,” I say. “And a doctor maybe.”

“No doctor,” Carmen says.

“Ice, then.”

Dee nods. She looks at Carmen's mouth, at the swelling under her eye, then takes off her denim jacket and puts it around her shoulders. "Go," she says. "Go the back way. Cut up to 5th and around. Don't take Main."

"Dee, come with us—" Carmen starts.

Dee's hand is on Carmen's cheek, just for a second, the back of her fingers against the unbruised side. "They're looking for you two now—especially our little instigator. You go, hear me? I'll see you tomorrow. I'll bring soup. Don't argue, you'll eat it."

Carmen wants to say more. I feel the breath she pulls like she's going to talk. But the sound isn't there. She nods. We go. Past the cruiser, past the queen on the hood who blows me a kiss without breaking her turn, past the broken glass, crushed donuts, and the notebook still on the hood with its half-finished list of names. I think about taking it, but I don't. Let them have their paper. Let them write whatever they want. They didn't get us tonight.

Carmen leans on me and I take her weight. We make it to the corner before she has to stop and breathe. I look back once. The party is still going. Somebody has climbed onto Cooper's awning. The jukebox is on its third song.

"Don't look," Carmen says. "You'll want to stay."

We reach 5th. Carmen stops, hand on a parking meter, breathing hard. Her denim jacket slides off one shoulder. I pull it back up.

"Saturday," she says.

"What?"

"Harold's. Saturday. You're still coming."

"Carmen—"

"You promised."

"You can't even stand up."

"I'll stand up by Saturday." She spits something dark onto the sidewalk and watches it shine. "But wear what you want, Viv."

I look at her. The eye is closing now, the lid puffing up like bread in the oven. "What?"

"Whatever you want. The maroon. I'll fix it. Or another one, I don't care."

"Manny won't let us in."

"Manny can eat shit." She pushes off the meter, takes my arm again. "We'll find a door."

We walk up 5th. The neighborhood quiets as we go, the noise of Main falling behind us block by block, until there's only our footsteps, Carmen's breathing, and the far-off sirens that finally, finally, are coming. The concrete is warm, rough. My feet feel every crack. Carmen's blood is on my neck, her arm around my shoulders, and she is, somehow, humming. Not a song, just a note. A sound that means *I'm still here, I'm still here, I'm still here*.

I hum it too. We walk home like that, the two of us, the wrong way up a one-way street, humming the same note in the dark.



9

Three weeks later, I'm hiking to the Orpheum in a dress Carmen made me.

Remade, actually. She took one of hers, a navy blue with a neckline I always liked, and took it apart at the kitchen table with the sewing kit, a Lucky Strike, and more Spanish curses than I've heard from her in two years. She measured my waist and hips and wrote the numbers on the back of a gas bill. She cut, pinned, and stitched, and when I tried it on and the zipper went up without catching, she looked at me in the mirror and didn't say anything for a while, and then: "It's not bad. You need to stand up straighter."

The Orpheum is on Broadway, and we walk there from Main in the afternoon heat. Carmen walks on the outside, nearest the curb, the way men do in movies. I don't know if she learned that somewhere or if it's just in her, like my walk is in me. She's wearing her good suit, dark, the one she wears to Harold's when she wants men to buy her drinks. She keeps her hands in her pockets, I keep mine in my gloves, and we don't talk much. There's too much to say, so we don't say anything.

I see the marquee first. THE JEWEL BOX REVUE. TWO NIGHTS

ONLY. Carmen stops on the sidewalk and lights a cigarette. My stomach is knotted, my mouth dry. I'm not usually out in the daylight but today I am. I stand on the sidewalk in gloves and a dress with my hair up and my lips done in the right shade, and the sun is on my shoulders, hot and too white, and I feel like a mannequin in a window, painted, pinned, and put on display, waiting for the glass to be tapped. A woman pushing a stroller looks at me, then doesn't.

Carmen exhales smoke sideways, away from me, and reaches over and tugs the strap of my dress flat where it's curled. Her fingers are quick, businesslike. They don't linger. "There." She doesn't look at my face, she looks at the marquee. "You're going to be fine, *mija*." She says it like a fact, not a wish.

"You don't know that."

"I know that." She looks at me then, and it's the strangest thing, because the face is Ernesto's—the jaw, the stubble—but the eyes are Carmen's. Soft and scared and proud all at once. "I've watched you work. You don't even know how good you are. That's the thing about you, Viv. You think it's the dress or the makeup or the walk, but it's not. It's just you."

She takes a long drag and watches the smoke go. A bus passes, and the wind from it lifts the hem of my dress and lets it fall. Neither of us moves.

"You used to scare me," she says. "When you first came. I thought, this one's going to break in my hands."

"And now?"

"Now I think you're going to leave me." She's looking at the sky. "Not today, but soon. And that's a good thing, so don't get a face about it."

I don't have a face for it. I don't have anything. I take her hand, the one without the cigarette, and hold on. She lets me. Carmen doesn't squeeze back, but she lets me.

Carmen. I've been calling her Carmen in my head the whole walk here, the way I always do, and she's in a suit and a tie and her real hair and there's no wig and no lashes and no padding.

Because he's Ernesto. He's been Ernesto since we left the apartment. And I've been calling him the wrong name in my head for two years because I needed him to be like me. Because if Carmen was the real one and Ernesto was the costume, then we were the same kind of broken, and I wasn't alone. But he's not like me. He never was. He's Ernesto in the suit and Carmen in the dress and both of them all the way through, and the only person who couldn't see it was the girl who lived with him.

He drops the cigarette and steps on it. "What are you staring at?"

"Nothing." Then: "Ernesto."

His head turns. He hasn't heard me say it before, not like that. He nods, small, and smiles. "Okay, *mija*." He squares my shoulders with both hands like he's hanging a picture. "Now, let's go get you the job."

The stage door is around the side, down a narrow alley that smells like damp concrete. Nobody is there. No line. No sign. No table with a clipboard. Just a metal door with a buzzer and a piece of tape over the buzzer that reads OUT OF ORDER.

“Maybe Dee was wrong,” I say. “Maybe they already finished. Maybe they don’t do auditions at all and she made it up.”

“Dee didn’t make it up.”

“There’s nobody here, there’s no sign, the buzzer is broken.”

“So knock.”

“I can’t just knock.”

“Why not?”

“Because what if they open it and look at me and—”

“Vivian.” He says it flat, the way he does when I’m spinning, listing all the reasons not to do what I need to. “I spent three nights making that dress for you. My fingers still hurt. If you don’t knock on that door, I’ll be very upset.”

“What if they say no?”

“Then they say no, we go get pie and I eat yours.” He puts his hands in his pockets. “But they won’t. One look at you and they’ll hold an audition whether they planned one or not.”

I look at the door. The tape over the buzzer is peeling, the metal is scratched and dented. I think it’s the ugliest door I’ve ever seen, and my whole life might be on the other side, or nothing at all.

“Go,” Ernesto says. “I’ll be here.” He steps back to the mouth of the alley, leans against the wall, and lights another cigarette.

I walk to the door. I knock. The sound is small against the metal. I wait, count to five in my head, and I’m about to knock again when I hear footsteps, a lock turning. The door opens six inches, and a man’s face appears in the gap, annoyed, chewing a sandwich.

“Yeah?”

“I’m here for the audition.”

He looks me over—the dress, the hair, the lipstick, the shoes. His eyes drop to my hands. I almost hide them, then I don’t.

“Wait here.” He closes the door.

I stand in the alley. Somewhere inside, a piano starts and stops, starts and stops. Same four bars. I press my thumb against the seam of my glove. I want to turn and look at Ernesto, but I don’t. Because if I look back and he’s gone—and he will be gone, they always go, Mama at the screen door not waving just crying, my father turning his face to the wall—I won’t knock again. I’ll sit down in this alley in the dress he made me and I won’t get up. So I keep my eyes on the scratched metal and breathe through my nose and count the dents. Don’t look. Don’t look. I look.

Ernesto is leaning against the brick, watching me. He nods. Then he does something I’ve never seen him do—he takes the cigarette out of his mouth and touches two fingers to his lips and points them at me, quick, like he’s flicking something over. A kiss without the kiss.

Ernesto's version. He'd never do it as Carmen. Carmen would have blown it loud and made a show. Ernesto just sends it across the alley like it's nothing, like it's everything.

The door opens behind me. The man with the sandwich says, "Okay, come on in."

I turn around. I walk through the door.

















