

PROLOGUE

AS OF TODAY, I'M not a threat to re-offend. A stone-faced officer of the parole board reads the decision to me. Despite the importance of this meeting, I'm distracted by the dandruff on his suit jacket. There's enough white stuff to build a snow fort, not that I remember how.

"What will you do with your freedom, Epke?" the only other female in the room asks. From the way she leans forward, I believe she really needs to know. Her silver nail polish is nibbled off at the tips. The criminals she releases must worry her.

"The usual things," I say. "Eat good food. Hug good people. Sleep at night."

Save the earth. I don't say that last goal out loud. If I did, they'd never let me out.

I sift through the clothes I arrived at Kokwanakway's Woman Prison wearing. The black jeans, Ban Vivisection T-shirt and Docker boots send me back in time.

"What happens if I don't sign for these?" I ask the clerk. Her shrug says she doesn't care and it can't possibly matter. I run a finger along one of the many decals on the black leather jacket I bought when I was eighteen and innocent.

So much life has happened since. I've shown mercy and vengeance. I've been both

courageous and cowardly. I've inspired love and have instigated murder. When I walk out the doors to freedom, it's without the reminders I don't need. Some things are too wonderful, and too terrible, to forget.

SARRACENIA TITAN

I'M AN EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD farm girl standing outside a second-hand store, mesmerized by a jacket worn by a mannequin. The jacket has to become mine because the worn and cracked black leather matches my angry and depressed mood. There are holes up the front where someone has pried out the snaps. There are also decals. Save The Horse Fly: Give Blood. Do Something! Even if it's Wrong. Your Mother is Monster Fodder.

I open the door, letting out the stink of unwashed clothing. The only customer, a bent old man, scurries behind the lingerie rack. A moose head with glass eyes ignores me. I politely request the jacket from the moon-faced salesclerk.

"Can't sell the items in the window until next Wednesday," she says.

I know as much from a sign in the window, but I can't come back in four days. I don't drive, and even if I did my grandmother wouldn't lend me the truck. "It won't kill you to break one little rule," I say.

The clerk sniffs. "No, but it'll get me in trouble with my boss."

"Fuck you," I say. I walk behind the counter to slide open the panel that divides the window display from the rest of the shop. While the stunned clerk watches, I wrestle the jacket off the mannequin. I toss a ten-dollar bill on the counter to cover the six-ninety-five price. "Keep the change," I say. It's the first crime I've committed.

When I leave the store, Mr. Prior is waiting for me in his truck. When our dairy-farming neighbor went to town, my grandmother arranged for me to tag along. I'm supposed to buy

clothes to get me through the spring and summer. His purchases--a footbath and a copy of Architectural Digest--are piled on the bench seat between us.

"Where to next?" he asks.

"Home. If you're done."

He has a teen of his own, so he gives my single purchase a quizzical glance. I hadn't really looked him in the face during our drive in. Now I notice that his black eyebrows have turned gray over winter. It makes me sad; Mr. Prior is a kind man.

"Mind if I ask you a question?" he asks as we maneuver into traffic.

"You just did," I say.

He pauses a moment to reset the conversation. "How are things between you and the old lady?"

I look at my legs to avoid the pity I can't stand to see in his eyes. My life is hard on clothes and both knees are blown out of my best pair of jeans. I pat the eighty dollars still in my pocket and wonder if my grandmother will be angry enough at my impulsive purchase to demand I return the unspent money to punish my failure, or if she'll let me order from Sears.

"Peachy," I say. "Anna's the best."

Mr. Prior jockeys for position in the inside lane with the aggressive driver of a red Fiat.

"If you ever need a shoulder to cry on, me and the wife..."

"How's Marvin these days?" I say to make him stop. It's mean of me because his son uses drugs. Even worse for his hard-working farming parents, he's a lazy slacker.

Whatever faults people can find in me, laziness isn't one of them. I do nothing but work. My grandmother is old and useless and the rest of my family is dead. This leaves me with a

forty-acre organic orchard to maintain.

My grandmother, who I call Anna because she hates the disrespect, always rings me up Sundays at noon. At a quarter to eleven, I settle onto a chair beside the telephone. Spring is only a few weeks away, but it's cold outside. I live in a caretaker's cottage with a fireplace that only keeps me warm if I'm not too busy to keep the fire fed. Today I'm swamped with work, so I'm wearing my new jacket over a ratty pink sweater that once belonged to my mother. I'll see Anna later in the day, so I've applied bright blue shadow to my eyelids, and thick black mascara. My silver hoop earrings are so large they stretch out the holes in my earlobes.

My grandmother thinks I look like a whore dressed this way--De hoer spleen in Dutch. She says, "Like mother, like daughter" which tells you how my mother made her living.

To pass the time, I pick up one of my grandfather's illustrated books on the subject of carnivorous plants, The Barbarous Plot. Reading about the bloodthirsty pitcher plant Sarracenia Titan inspires me. I draw a parody of my grandmother over a photograph of the plant.

When the call comes, I pick up on the final ring, although I often make Anna call twice. "And how are you wasting the day, Epke?" she demands. My name is a Dutch in-joke. Used for males in Holland Epke means "bright as a sword" and is Egbert when translated into English. I cherish a few happy memories of my mom. In one she calls me her little Eggy.

I hold the receiver between my head and neck to free my hands as I snip my face from a photograph. Using a finger, I smear glue on the back of my photo-paper face. I stick it over the head of an insect struggling to escape the flesh-eating Anna-flower.

"The orchard's full of rotting fruit, ja?" Anna says. "We'll have pests this spring instead

of apples."

"If you poked your nose outside, you'd notice it's too freaking cold for work."

After an explosive snort that must send snot flying, she finally gets around to her reason for calling. "I cooked hutspot and boterkoek. You'll come tonight?"

"Ja, Oma." Despite my rebellious attitude, I'm her dependent. When I chose to stay after graduation, Anna made it clear she could not afford wages. Our weekly dinner dates, the time when I slump the thirty yards from my caretaker's cottage to the main house in order to beg for groceries and toiletries, are necessary for my survival.

I remove my boots in Anna's crowded foyer where she's hung her collection of Van Toorne and Knutson portraits. My beloved grandfather, Piet Van Toorne, has an amused expression on his face. There's also a stiff childhood portrait of my mother, Katja. In a photograph I keep inside my bedside table drawer, she's an adult with piercings and a haunted look.

Anna's busy in the kitchen where dinner steams in an old copper-bottomed pot on the stove. A tea tray holds her best delftware, a sugar bowl and a pot of cream. For our dessert she has buttered some crackers and sprinkled on blue and white muisjes, Dutch candy my mother might have used to announce the births of my brother and me. I hold firm to my belief in the boy's existence despite Anna's vehement denial.

When Anna sees me, she pretends not to read the decals on the leather jacket or notice my garish makeup. The symbolic dessert and her refusal to react to the jacket turn me reckless. I bring up Anna's most taboo subject, my dead grandfather. "Grandpa would have celebrated his eighty-fourth year today," I say. "Do you wish he was here?"

"Ben je gek geworden?" Anna's slip into Dutch betrays her impatience. The phrase means she considers me acutely stupid.

"Does that mean you do miss him or you don't?" I persist.

She raises one dismissive shoulder. "He was my husband."

"Why did he leave Holland for North America?" The brass bells of her Zaandam clock strike the half hour as she pushes a few exasperated breaths through her nose. "No one else can tell me, Anna," I say.

"He came to grow fruit and his boots were size eleven. How is that for big news?"

I rub a slogan on my jacket's waistband for courage: Except for ending slavery, fascism, Nazism, and communism, war has never solved anything. "I want to build a memorial garden in Opa's honor," I say. "One nice enough to draw in paying tourists."

Anna sets down her spoon. "Too bad we will not be here to enjoy this wonder. I have telephoned a real estate agent. They come tomorrow."

For ten years, Anna has threatened to sell the farm. Ten years ago my mother and grandfather died. And, ten years ago, the baby brother I'd only glimpsed once disappeared. But Anna has never contacted a real estate agent before. I believe she is serious this time.

"No," I say. "Please." I'm in shock as Anna describes a horrible future with us together, living in a city. My voice sounds shrill, even to my ears. "Grandpa promised the orchard would always stay in the Van Toorne family. Heiko must have instructions not to let you sell."

The executor of my grandfather's will is the son of my grandfather's best friend from the old country. Once a year in June, Mr. Willemsen, as I'm forced to call Heiko, arrives at the orchard to ruffle my hair, eat sweet cakes, and leave satisfied of our well-being. He's the closest

thing I have to a protector. He's also barely forty, ridiculously gorgeous and the man I'm saving my virginity for.

"Heiko has no say. Knutson money bought these acres, ja? Not Van Toorne."

"Lying bitch."

Anna raises a hand to hit me. When I laugh instead of cower, she turns off the stove with a snap of her wrist. Then she strides from the room.

I stay in the kitchen, eating crackers and drinking enough of the tea to strain my bladder. In my off-key voice, I sing the few lines I recall of the Dutch national anthem. The song is a gift to my grandfather, but it's not enough. I sketch his memorial garden and populate it with my missing family members. My aboriginal father and brother wear feathers, beads and war paint. I make my mother beautiful, not ravaged by drug addiction and prostitution. I'm there, too, dancing as we all hold hands.

I leave Anna out. It serves her right.

Two days later, a listing appears in the local paper that describes the twin chimneys, wrap-around porch and sash windows of the Dutch Colonial main house and praises our virgin land, which has never known a drop of pesticide or chemical fertilizer. When a single For Sale sign appears on the property line, I rip it out of the ground and dump it in the river at the back of our property.