



It's still early when I find myself standing outside his house, across the street, under the shade of a big tree. He comes out eventually and starts walking, a messenger bag slung over his shoulder, not unlike my duffel bag and me. The sight of him hits me like being doused with ice water. He looks just like our father. Tall and lanky with broad shoulders and dark, thick, almost unruly hair. He has a strong handsome jaw line and skin much more olive than mine which is pale and pinkish. I want to run up to him, embrace him, escape with him, and never have to talk about what has happened to us. But I resist. I'm not so confident he's forgiven me for being the sole survivor of the accident. I've long ago forgiven him for not coming to rescue me, but my sin seems much greater to me than his; it always has.

I tail him from a safe distance, my exceptional sight making me particularly good at it. We walk for nearly fifteen blocks, until he finally comes upon a big elementary school with a small, mostly asphalt yard. Kids are hustling into the building as a long, loud bell rings out into the yard and as Jasper draws closer he breaks into a jog. I cross the yard filled with swings, a jungle gym, and basketball hoops, heading for a bank of windows on the ground floor. The second to last window has an overflowing rowdy bunch of kids – maybe second graders – and Jasper bursts through the door smiling and out of breath. Some of the kids shout his name and I can't help but smile at the sound of it. He has a hell of a time calming them down and getting them all in their chairs, but it all seems in good fun. I watch as they take turns coming up to the front of the class and talking about the most important person in their lives. Some of them have drawn pictures or brought props like photos and toys to represent their person. It's mostly a hilarious parade of pets and parents with a couple of best friends and uncles thrown in until a kid named Noah, serious, but with a mischievous glint in his eye comes to the front of the class. I

can tell from Jasper's expression that Noah is one of his favorites. He's smiling even before Noah starts.

"My favorite person is my new baby sister, cause she's going to be my best friend an' slave till I get a baby brother, which will be much better," Noah says with pride, holding up a pair of pink baby booties. Jasper starts to laugh and then covers his mouth and coughs, while several of the Noah's male classmates nod solemnly in agreement.

"Does your sister have a name Noah?"

"Yeah, it's Emma, but I call her E-dawg."

"I'm sure your mom loves that," Jasper says with a smile. Noah nods confidently.

"Ya, she likes it," Noah pauses, arms crossed, "You got any brothers or sisters Mr. J?"

Jasper corrects Noah's language, "You mean do I *have* any brothers or sisters."

"Ya, ya," Noah says waving his hand dismissively, "Do ya?" I'm holding my breath in anticipation of Jasper's answer.

"No," Jasper says simply and with a smile, "No brothers or sisters for Mr. J," he says ushering Noah back to his seat, pink booties in hand.

This information hits me like a bullet. Like a million bullets. It's not even like there is sadness in his face. He said it as simply as if I had long ago been wiped away, or worse, never existed. I pull back from the window stumbling over my own feet and fall into a swing far too small for me and drag my sneakers clumsily across the black tar, tears falling onto my jeans in desperate little plops.

Clearly he hasn't forgiven me.

I'm not sure how long I wallow, but a small clear voice rouses me from it. "Your hair is pretty," it says, and I look up to find a tiny girl in a quilted orange jacket far too warm for early June staring at me. I wipe my eyes, embarrassed.

“Thanks,” I say, smiling a little.

“Are you sad?” she asks, pulling herself up into the swing next to me, her little pointed toes barely grazing the ground. “Did someone kill your turtle? Cause my brother killed my turtle and even though he sayed it was an accident I still cried lots.”

I try not to smile. “I’m sorry about your turtle. What was his name?”

“His name was Gregory,” she says, deadly serious. I try not to smile again.

“That’s a very good name for a turtle.”

“Ya,” she nods in agreement.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Nu-uh, you gotta tell me yours first, or else you’re a stranger and I shouldn’t talk to you,” she says.

“I’m Bonnie.”

“I never heard that name before,” she says thinking hard. “I’m Celia,” she adds, putting out her tiny hand for a proper handshake. I take it gingerly and we have a little silent shake together.

“What are you doing out here Celia?” I ask, looking around, wondering about her parents.

“I’ve got to go to the dentist,” she says, sticking out her tongue in disgust.

“Where’s your mom?”

“Inside. She tol’ me to sit still on the steps.”

“Well, this isn’t the steps,” I say tentatively.

“Jeez! They’re right there,” she says, gesturing at the steps thirty feet away.

“Okay, okay,” I say, raising my hands in defeat.

“What are YOU doing out here?” she asks with a challenge.

“Just saying goodbye to someone,” I say.

“Who?”

“My brother,” I say, and Celia turns up her nose at the word.

“Hmmm. Just be glad you don’t have no turtle,” she says under her breath. This time I can’t help smiling and have to stifle a laugh. Just then Celia’s mother emerges from the building.

“Celia!” she yells a little too loudly and Celia pops off the swing.

“See ya Bonnie,” she says running toward the front steps.

“See ya Celia,” I echo back. Halfway to her mother, she turns around, not unlike a pumpkin in her puffy orange coat. “I still like your hair a real lot!” she shouts. I smile and shout back.

“I like yours too.”

Long after Celia and her mother have left I pick up my duffel and leave the yard. There’s nothing for me here. He’s obviously moved on. I don’t want to hurt him any more than I already have.

It’s back to the train yard for me.

I wait all afternoon for something headed west and take the first one that moves. I’m going to start over somewhere else. Maybe even *be* someone new.



I wake up in my crappy Phoenix motel room, the gross comforter on the pretty much gross floor, the white sheets in knots around me and candy wrappers strewn across the bed like opened presents. Judging by the light in the room I’ve slept a long time, maybe even into the late afternoon. I’d shed my blood caked clothing like a second skin the night before and I stare at them now wondering what I should do with them. I suppose a dumpster somewhere will do. I

hop across the dark carpet and into the bathroom, hoping a hot shower will loosen up my muscles after the long bike ride. I don't really hurt but my body feels more stiff than normal. The shower is glorious.

Later, my hair in a fluffy white towel I dig through my bag looking for new jeans and a t-shirt and cuss at the bag when I remember that I never managed to get my cat suit back from whoever had it, whoever stripped it off me in the desert. I kick at the bed in frustration. Before fully committing to my t-shirt and jeans I go digging through the bag of loot from Melvin's safe. Inside his bag there's a separate smaller plastic bag, which has a bunch of the stuff he stole from my room including my first stolen necklace and miraculously, at the bottom, my cat suit, folded nicely. I pull it out and try to shake it free of wrinkles. It's a mess - caked with blood and there's a huge tear where my abdomen is supposed to go. There's also a tear in the calf, a bunch along the shoulder and neck, and tons on the back, I guess from where the dogs attacked me. I don't know what the hell Melvin could have wanted with a cheap nylon cat suit covered in blood and tears but the potential creepiness gives me a slight chill and makes me gladder than ever that I put a bullet in him.

I fold the suit back up, happy to have it, regardless of its condition and pull on jeans and a black t-shirt. The cat suit would be better, but this will do. It never occurred to me until I saw the flyer with those words "world's strongest woman" that there might be others like me, but now that I've thought about it, I can't get it out of my mind.

The show is smaller than I expected. It truly is just a sideshow of freaks, and not really a circus or carnival or fair or whatever they call them. I pay at a window up front and walk in among aimless crowds that all head like sheep toward a main stage. I try to follow the posters in the opposite direction. A wiry punk looking kid not much older than me stops me and kind of

silently ushers me in the other direction. I point towards the other posters and the smaller stage I'm heading to.

"Miss, the main stage is behind you. The show will be starting in a few minutes."

"I'm not interested in the tattooed dude. I came to see the strongwoman."

"Sorry then doll, but she's not on tonight."

"Why not?"

"She only does the weekend show...the bigger show that includes all the acts. This is Monday, only the big names go on tonight...she's not on until Friday."

"You've gotta be kidding me," I pull out the flyer from my back pocket. "It doesn't say that on here," I complain, thrusting it at him.

"Yeah, it does. See here at the bottom. *'Not all acts available at all shows'*"

"But it doesn't say which damn acts," I say. He shrugs his shoulders like it is the least of many problems in his life - a 'sorry' that he doesn't mean at all. I think about punching him in the face. But I take a couple deep breaths and decide not to - he's not what I'm here for. I start to walk away and then turn back to him. "What's her name?"

"Whose name?"

I roll my eyes. "The strongwoman."

"Lena. Her name's Lena."

"Thanks," I walk away and think about heading out, still having no interest in pierced and tattooed freaks that at best have a high tolerance for pain, until I see a woman in a white corset top and pristine white leather pants leaning up against a wall talking to a guy with a giant head. She's extremely fit, with the biggest arms I've ever seen on a woman in real life. I look at the flyer. Same short dark hair with a single curl on her pale forehead, same broad shoulders and well-defined arms. Same thin lipped smile and dark eyes. I take a seat in the back, near where she's

leaning with her bigheaded friend. When the lights go down and the music starts pounding, the bass echoing up through my metal seat and colored lights dancing across the stage I hear her speak to her friend.

“Ugh. I can’t watch this show another time this week. I’m going to go out for a smoke.” Her friend nods and I watch her duck out a side exit. I wait a few moments and follow her out. She’s walking through the parking lot to a field, cigarette already lit. Once she gets to the field it’s dark enough that the burn from her cigarette is the brightest thing around. When I’m close enough that I know I’ll startle her I call out.

“Hey Lena,” I say. I’m surprised she doesn’t jump. She just turns around coolly.

“Yeah?” But her eyes narrow when she doesn’t recognize me in the dark. “Who’s that?” she asks, squinting a little bit.

“I’m Lola.”

“I know you?”

“No.”

“Then what are you doing out here? Audience and fans aren’t supposed to be out here...this area is private...restricted.”

“Sorry. I just wanted to talk to you.”

“Yeah? What about?”

“Well, I guess I just wanted to know how you got into this...how’d you become a ‘strong woman’?” I ask, trying to sound young and naïve. She snorts a laugh.

“College drop out. Broke up with my boyfriend. Lifted weights. Got lost. Needed to pay the bills. It’s a real skyrocket of a career. Don’t tell me you’re interested.”

“Sorta,” I say. She squints at me again, eyeing the slender bones in my wrists.

“Gotta say kid, it doesn’t really look like you’ve got it in you. Maybe pick something a little more up your alley. You ever even lifted weights?”

“No. But I’m pretty strong.”

“Sure. I’m sure you are.” She flicks the cigarette into the dirt, stamping it out with her white boot. I don’t know why she’s wearing all white, it seems weird.

“How strong are you?” I ask, innocently as I can.

“I don’t know...I mean, how do I even answer that question? Faster than a speeding bullet? More powerful than a locomotive?” she laughs again. “Hard question to answer.”

“Ballpark it,” I say, too sharply, regretting it almost immediately as I can see her eyes narrow.

“Nah. I’ve gotta get back in. Can’t have you giving away all my secrets anyway,” she starts to walk back to the auditorium and I grab her arm hard as she passes me.

“Ballpark it,” I say again even harder.

“What the hell. Get your hands off me,” she says, smacking my hand off her hard and sending my arm flying out into the dark.

“Nice,” I say, nodding.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she asks, sneering and rubbing her arm where I’d grabbed her.

“Let’s arm wrestle,” I say, smiling in the dark, revealing all my shining though slightly crooked teeth.

“Why the hell would I do that? Get away from me before I call the cops.”

“Why does the “*strongest woman alive*” need the cops?”

“Don’t be a moron. Get out of here, now.”

“No. Let’s arm wrestle.”

“I’m not arm wrestling you kid. Now get the hell out of here, NOW,” she turns to walk away and I draw back my fist and punch her in her lower back, hard. Not hard enough to cripple her, even if she isn’t some kind of “super strong”, but hard enough that she’ll take me seriously. She falls to the ground on her knees, her skintight leather pants instantly covered in mud and dead grass. Her hand goes to her back.

“Jeezus. What’s wrong with you?”

“I said, let’s arm wrestle.”

“And I said no.”

“Let me put it another way,” I breathe, leaning down near her ear. “We arm wrestle and you win, and I’ll let you live.”

“And if I don’t arm wrestle you?” she asks, sounding unsure for the first time.

“Then I don’t,” I hold out my hand to her, offering to help her up. She looks at me like I’m insane, which is fair I suppose. For a second I think she’s not going to take my hand, but then I see something click in her eyes and she reaches out to take it. When she does, she pulls as hard as she can, trying to pull me down onto the ground with her, but I see it coming and anchor myself. I don’t move when she pulls and the effort yanks her shoulder out of joint. She cries out in pain.

“Gonna be harder to arm wrestle now,” I say, clucking my tongue against the roof of my mouth with disappointment. She kicks at my legs, trying to sweep them out from under me. I think briefly about dodging them, but at the last second decide to take the kick, see what she’s got. I steel myself for the impact and I feel her shin break against mine. She screams again. I worry for a moment that someone’s going to hear her, but I can still feel the pumping bass through the ground and even oohs and ahhs above the music as the performance continues. Lena

lies on the ground, pathetic and bleeding. I kneel down next to her in the mud; glad I'm just in jeans and not my precious cat suit.

"I just wanted to see how strong you were. See if you were anything real, anything I should be worried about," I survey her broken parts. "Clearly, I didn't need to be concerned." Underneath the pain, there's some relief in her eyes; something I've said makes her think I'm not going to kill her. I almost feel bad for leading her astray and I frown a bit. "I do have to kill you though, can't have people like you walking around knowing there's someone like me. Besides," I add almost casually, "I find the idea of you kind of gross. Revolting even. Almost like you're a total affront to my existence. Yeah, you shouldn't be pretending to be something you're not...not without expecting the real thing to come and challenge you least ways." I lean on my knee. She closes her eyes, probably feeling sorry for herself and I can taste the fear rippling off her body. It's like a salty metallic wave that fills my senses. It's delicious. And I want to swallow it whole. "I would like to know though, just out of curiosity, if you don't mind, how much *can* you bench press?" I ask. Lena's eyes stay closed.

"360 is my best."

"Hmm. Is it just me, or is that not much?"

"It's good. It's very good. It's more than most men can..." she trails off.

"But, it's not even like a record is it?"

"No."

"So what I want to know," I pull out the flyer from my pocket and hold it in front of her face. "Is where do you get off calling yourself the '*strongest woman alive*'?"

"I...I don't know," she stammers. "What is it you want?"

I stand up, put my hands on my hips, and look around the field. "Hmmm. Y'know Lena, that's a hell of a question. I mean, in the broader scope of things I'm thinking world domination of

some kind, but tonight, tonight what I was looking for was someone with power. And I really didn't find it, did I?"

"Just let me go, okay? I'm not going to tell anyone about you." She props herself up a little.

"Sure, sure, no problem." I lean down and put my hands on the side of her face, as if to tell her a precious secret and then I twist her neck sharply to the right. She lies there, filthy in her pristine white clothing, staring up blankly at where the stars should be. I feel disgusted and scammed. I walk back toward the auditorium muttering to myself, "360 pounds." Although the truth is, I have no idea how much I can bench-press. It's certainly more than 360 though. It's gotta be. Maybe one day I'll have to find out.

On my way back to the auditorium I see some trailers for the traveling show and have an idea. There are six trailers, one with 'Manager' written on the door. I head over to that one and break in. The lock is cheap and snaps off in my hand. Once inside I ransack the place looking for a schedule of performances. In one drawer I find exactly what I'm hoping for. It's a calendar list of other shows throughout the country, where they'll be and when, I guess so they can avoid being in the same areas at the same time. It even has a map. It's all I need to find any other women pretending to be "strong women" that might be wandering around. It's worth checking out. They might not all be as fake as Lena. In fact, there's a show east of here a few hundred miles with a strongwoman. Yeah, maybe "*Joan – The World's Strongest Woman*" will actually have something legit to offer.