A few weeks after we returned from Port-au-Prince, Michael and I went to brunch with Mona and Carlito. We sat on a sunny patio of a popular restaurant at one in the afternoon, slightly hungover from drinking and dancing the night before. We all drink a little more in the after, just enough to dull the constant reminders of how our fairy tales have been rewritten. The restaurant was crowded, loud. The day was sunny and warm, a perfect Miami moment. I wore sunglasses. I always wear sunglasses when I am not at home. I am always hiding in plain sight. I do it out of respect for the living. I wore a long summer dress, bared my arms, finally felt comfortable enough to do something other than shroud my body in layers of dark, heavy clothing. The bruises have long faded but scars remain. In certain outfits, people stare but I pretend they cannot see me or these truths, so written on my body.

Mona looked at me over her menu, offered a reassuring smile. She does that a lot, checking in with me in small, intimate ways, letting me know I belong to people who love me, letting me know I am safe, trying to hold and keep me in the world.

At first, I did not recognize the busboy. He wore black khaki pants and a short-sleeved, white button-down shirt over a T-shirt. There were sweat stains under his armpits. He was quick with his work, clearing tables, carefully setting plates covered in runny eggs and syrup and fluffs of leftover butter and fresh salmon in a gray plastic tub. He came to our table to refill our water glasses and when I looked up, I saw the scar beneath his left eye, still pulsing like it was trying to move across his face. I thought, “This is not possible,” and then I thought about my work and how many people build all their hopes on the promise of living in this country. I thought, “Of course.” I grabbed Michael’s hand, squeezed so tightly he winced, said, “Babe, what’s wrong?” He studied me carefully, worry in his eyes.

My throat locked. I wanted to shield his body with mine or shield mine with his. I moved my chair closer to his. I could not speak. The leash around my neck tightened. It had been some time since I last felt that leash. Michael patted my hand, returned to his conversation. He and Carlito were engaged in a heated debate about a mayoral candidate. The busboy paused, looked at me. I stared at him. He could not see me behind my sunglasses but he knew me. He quickly finished pouring our waters. His hands shook and he spilled some water on Michael’s slacks. I could not release my grip on Michael’s hand.

The world is the smallest of all places. You are never safe. When he leaned over my shoulder, I smelled him. His smell is always with me. There is no escape from it. None. Mona stared
at me too. She could not see my eyes, so she could not see my fear. She could not see how we were in danger but she knows me. She tried to make sense of what was wrong.

The busboy left and I looked around, tried to find him again. I needed, very much, to understand his exact location in relation to mine. I looked at my sister and her husband and my husband. They were not safe. I needed them to be safe because they were my whole world. I stood, slowly, my legs rubbery.

Mona stood with me. “What’s up, kid?”

I didn’t say anything. I walked away from her. She tried to follow me but I waved her off. I walked through the noisy restaurant and into the kitchen. At first no one noticed me. It was hot and loud, cramped and crowded. The air was even more humid, steamier than outside. A waiter finally noticed me, said I couldn’t be back there. I focused on what I needed to say. “I’m looking for the man with the scar.” The waiter nodded, pointed me toward the back of the kitchen. I walked past the line cooks shouting rapid Spanish to each other back and forth across the line. I saw the back door to an alley, cracked open. I walked through it and found the Commander standing, leaning against a concrete wall, smoking a cigarette. He was waiting for me. He was no longer a boss, no longer the king of his world, sitting on his red satin sheets watching American sitcoms. He was no longer a blade digging into me, his fresh wound.

I did not know what to say. I did not know what I was doing, alone, in an alley with him. I raised my sunglasses, resting them on the top of my head. I did not need to hide from him. He was the architect of my fear. I wanted him to see the woman he made, the steel of my body he helped forge. I wondered how long it would take Michael and Mona to realize something was wrong. I hoped. I dared to hope they wouldn’t take long. I lifted my chin, exposed my throat. He had the chance to put me in the ground.

I called him by his given name. I said, “You should have killed me after you killed me.”

He said nothing. His face betrayed no emotion but his eyes were calmer than they once were, older. I thought about tearing that thick scar from his face. I thought about what I might find beneath the dead braid of tissue. I stared at the scar and it hissed. I was calm and then I was not. I was crazy. I was all the crazy held in my bones for five years. I pounded his chest with my fists and he didn’t resist. He didn’t try to defend himself. He stood still, his arms hanging loosely at his side while his cigarette burned. He let me bruise his body and break the blood beneath his skin. The din of the kitchen grew quieter. My arms were tired so tired but I was wild with rage and nothing would stop me. I would break his skin and break his bones beneath the hot Miami sun. I would leave his carcass on the pavement. I would.

I made an ugly, wheezing sound, a desperate sound. A strong pair of arms pulled me off him, lifted me into the air. I still tried to hit the Commander with my arms, my feet, with anything. I clawed at him, tearing his skin apart. I looked up and saw Michael, Michael who finally came for me. Mona appeared, her eyes narrow, flashing. “What’s going on?” she said, practically shouting. I pointed at the Commander, and made a new, sharper sound but I could not find words. I could only make that horrible sound. I was a wounded animal. Michael tightened his grip as he tried to make sense of the situation. It did not take long. “You should have killed me,” I shouted. “You should have
killed me." My voice grew hoarse. "Let go of me," I shouted. "Let me go."

Michael refused, said, "Miri, Miri, sweetheart, calm down."

"You calm down," I said, squirming. I was strong. I worked very hard five years into the after to be strong, to fight even harder.

Michael loosened his grip and spoke softly into my hair. "I am going to let you go but I want you to stand still."

I nodded and he let go of me. I lunged for the Commander again, dug my fingernails into his face, tried to pull off his hideous scar, left a deep red fissure of broken skin bleeding beneath it. I stilled. The wail of the car horn filled the alley and the air around us.

The Commander looked at me and his lips curled into a little smile and I remembered everything he did to me. The memories filled my body at once, threatened to spread through me like a malignancy, destroying everything I had done to become closer to alive again.

Shaking, I reached for Michael's hand. My husband stood in front of me. His muscles tensed and he stared at the Commander real hard. "What did you do to her?" he asked.

Some of the kitchen staff began hovering in the doorway. I was a spectacle. I was garish. The Commander looked at my husband, my husband who is strong and big and who keeps me safe. Michael let go of me, turned me around, studied my face, and looked at the Commander. Michael reached for the man who so wholly changed the course of our lives, his hands trembling, his body finally understanding. The Commander ran. He ran like a coward. He ran because he was no longer the man with a gun keeping a woman in his cage. He did not have his knife or his
The last time the Commander forced himself on me, after my ransom had been paid and I was not released as had been agreed upon, he told me his real name—Laurent Charles. He told me his was a good name, a strong name, one he wanted to give his son. I lay on his bed, handcuffed, my arms stretched above my head. My body settled easily into this human bondage. The body adapts more willingly than the mind. I knew it would be the last time I had to endure his body on top of me and inside me, his sweat, his tongue, his spit, his skin. I had that to hold on to, the knowledge that there would be a last time between us. I would not belong to him. I would be free of him even if I could not be free of him. It was the last time but I wanted mercy. I needed mercy. The body adapts but the mind has limits. I was shattered.

The Commander lay next to me, his body stretched along mine, his skin sticky against mine, as he drew his knife between my breasts over and over. You do not feel the pain as your skin comes apart. There is an uncomfortable sensation strangely absent of discomfort when the blade first pierces the skin. The pain comes when the knife cuts deeper, through the fat, what little there may be, when your body is open and bloody. That pain is breathtaking. Blood trickled along the undersides of my breasts and down my sides. I spoke his name, firmly, clearly. I said, “Laurent, please grant me mercy.” I said, “Forgive me for my father’s sins.”

He stopped, set the knife on the bed next to my ear. The blade was so sharp it hummed eagerly. “You want mercy?” His voice was drowsy with desire. I never hated him more.

“Yes, Laurent, I do. Please grant me mercy.”

He thought for a moment, rubbing his hand across my stomach. “I will grant you mercy if you do not fight.”

I bit my tongue. This was the real sacrifice, my life for my life. I gave him one kind of pain to avoid another. I killed myself to save myself. I would not have survived otherwise.

I told him to uncuff me; he did. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders. I kissed his forehead. I died. I kissed his cheekbones, sharp. I died. I told him he was the son of L’Ouverture as I gently grazed his neck with my teeth. I died. I pushed him onto his back and lay on top of him. I bled onto his body, dead but still dying. I pulled his arms around my waist. This was mercy. I pressed my lips to his chest, slid down his body, tracing along his center with my tongue, tasted my blood on his skin. I died. I traced the deeply carved muscles of his trembling
thighs with my lips, my fingers, my tongue. I said, “You shall know kindness even though you have shown me none.” I died. When he said, “I want you now,” I lay on my back. I did not fight. I died. When he said, “Look into my eyes,” I did. I died. I did not fight. This was mercy. This was my sacrifice. He said, “Say you love me,” but that I could not do. Anger coursed through him. It was a bitter thing for him, understanding I would never belong to him. He fucked me harder and harder. I did not resist. I relaxed my whole body around him. I made him believe I wanted him, that there could be an us because I understood what he wanted. There was nothing breakable left inside me. I let him take me. I let him kill me. He said, “Say you love me.” Again, I refused. He punched my face. The ringing in my ears grew so loud, rattled my skull. I took his hand, his raw knuckles, raw from the abuse he had inflicted on me and I kissed each one. I died. He said, “Come for me, let me pleasure you.” I refused this delusion too. I could not have even if I tried. Only one of us misunderstood what was happening. He punched me again. I smiled up at him, held him gently, touched him gently. He grabbed me by my shoulders and shook me violently, made me think what little held my body together would finally be ripped apart. I said, “Hush.” I said, “You shall know kindness even though you have shown me none.” I showed him kindness. When he was done, I went to the bathroom and prepared a wet cloth. I returned to his side and washed him clean as he lay in the middle of his bed, his limbs heavy. I wiped his face and his chest and between his thighs. I knelt at the foot of the bed and cleaned his feet, massaged them gently. I rubbed his entire body with lotion and lay next to him. I died. I threaded my fingers between his and lay my head against his chest. It was not long before he wanted me again. There was so much fight swelling just beneath the surface of my skin. I ignored it but it was there. He tried to kiss my lips and I turned my head. I let him have me again. It did not matter. I was already dead. He said I would see my family again soon. I showed him kindness. He remained an animal. That is how I died even though Laurent Charles, who called himself the Commander, did not possess the kindness to kill me.

In Greek mythology, Hades fell in love with Persephone. In one version of the story, Hades wanted Persephone and had to have her so he abducted her and forced himself on her and kept her with him until Zeus ordered him to release her because her mother, Demeter, forbade the earth to bear fruit until she found her daughter and the people were hungry. Hades was so desperately in love with Persephone that he deceived her, plied her into eating pomegranate seeds while she was in the underworld because he knew that if one eats while in the underworld, they are doomed to spend eternity there. Hades released Persephone to her mother as he had been ordered but she was forced to return to the underworld for a time each year. She was free but she was not free. Persephone paid a steep ransom for eating six pomegranate seeds.

When he was finally done with me, I could not allow myself to believe I was being released. I had no idea where my shoes were. That’s what I focused on as they walked me out of my cage. My feet were bare. The Commander and three other men put me in an SUV. I sat in the backseat between the Commander and another man. The Commander held my thigh possessively, like we shared a certain bond. When I tried to shove his hand
away, he squeezed harder. I leaned back and closed my eyes, tried to sit so still he might forget me altogether. I did not want to incite his desire.

We drove from one neighborhood I did not recognize to another neighborhood I did not recognize. Eventually, we stopped on a deserted street, far less dense than the alleys of Bel Air. He ordered the other men out of the car. They stood, huddled a few feet away, smoking cigarettes, laughing loudly as they joked.

I wanted the Commander to hold his gun to my head and pull the trigger. I wanted him to put me in the ground.

He sighed. “It did not have to be this way. Normally, I am a man of my word. I am a businessman. I do not harm women during the course of these negotiations.” He brushed a strand of loose hair from my face, tucked it behind my ear. “The only person to blame here is your arrogant father.”

I did not move. I did not believe I could be free.

The Commander opened his door but paused. “Perhaps next time you are driving through the city in your expensive car, you will look at the city around you instead of looking through the city around you.”

I stared at my bare feet. “I could say the same thing to you and the way you ride around in your expensive cars.”

The Commander chuckled. “You do amuse me. You know how to fight. You have a mouth on you. You should stay, be the boss’s woman. You’re no good to anyone else now.” He shrugged, rubbed his chin. “I ruined you for any man but me.”

I shook my head like I was having a seizure and slowly slid toward the door because if I made it past the door, I might find my way to the woman I had once been. He was probably playing a game and I did not want to give him the satisfaction of fooling me. And still, I wanted to be free. The Commander tried to help me out of the car but I slapped his hand away. I stood next to him and he tried to hold my arm.

I stepped away. “I would have never belonged to you.”

He nodded, sneered at me in the moonlight. The Commander grabbed me, digging his fingers into my arms. He pressed his lips to mine, his tongue thick and wet in my mouth. I tried to bite him but he did not pull away until he was satisfied. The man was, in all things, merciless.

“Run,” he said. “Run until you cannot run any farther. If we see each other again, I hope you will say hello. We are friends now. We have shared so much.”

The Commander kept talking but I did not listen. I did not want to hear his voice. I took a step away from the Commander and his men. I took another step. Every nerve in my body was raw, exposed. I took another step. I started walking quickly.

“I will not forget you,” the Commander shouted. “And you will not forget me.”

I wanted to tell him, “Yes, I will,” but I did not need to have the last word.

Instead, I ignored the pain, how it made my body feel open and completely worn-out. I ran and I ignored the Commander still shouting, his voice rising in pitch. I ignored how he sounded almost sad and lonely. I ignored how maybe we were both broken in similar ways. I did not look back. I listened for his footsteps behind me but there was only the sound of my terrified breathing and my bare feet on the ground. I ran faster. I finally dared to hope.