

CHAPTER I

THE UGLY SECRET

Faith's one good eye snapped open.

The rhythmic beep of a truck's backup alarm filtered in through the open window.

The engine revved. The gears groaned then engaged. Beeping again.

Must be Retro's day to drive. Faith sat up slowly, rickety, like an eighty year old on a frosty morning. She glanced around at the broken antiques that she had made into a bedroom.

A young man's voice filtered up. "Morning Mr. H."

Oh my god, Cadel is here! Faith slipped out of bed and shuffled in front of the grandfather clock. The lead crystal face reflected an obscured ghostly visage with crooked features. Faith leaned closer until her chin came into focus. She brushed her long dark hair forward until the only bits of skin showing was the tip of her nose and her lips. Faith meticulously dabbed on lip-gloss.

Maybe today, Cadel will talk to me. After all, it is my eighteenth birthday. He practically fell over himself flirting with me all last summer, but I guess no one wants to be with an Edwina Scissorhands. Boys are so stupid, easily distracted by a flash of skin or an overstuffed bra. No wonder I'm invisible to him but an easy girl will get his attention. Maybe I'll give into him if he plays his cards right. Maybe.

Faith frowned at her bare arms. Her skin looked like the patchwork quilts her mother used to make.

Mom. The thought of her mother sent a pang of guilt through Faith's body. She could feel the acid in her stomach react. She gulped hard to keep the reflux down. Faith slipped on a hoodie and a pair of loose fitting jeans. She pulled on a pair of plain black oxfords. One had a three quarter inch orthopedic platform added to the sole. The other shoe was normal. As Faith stepped out of her room, her limp was ever so slight.

Faith shuffled out of the small apartment her Grumpaw had built over his antique furniture business more than twenty years ago. She stood at the top of the second floor landing that overlooked a vast warehouse. A strange aroma of orange oil and varnish

wafted up and wrinkled her nose. Antique furniture was sprawled everywhere turning the warehouse into a maze of armoires, desks and curio cabinets. Every few yards a mirror of a different size and style marked a change in décor. She chuckled at her Grumpaw's idea of cross marketing.

Faith ducked down as two boys in their late teens carried a piece of furniture to the center of the room. She peeked out from between the railing keeping her face hidden. Faith recognized the wide denim bell-bottoms, tie died shirt and long hair belonging to Retro, but it was the Abercrombie and Fitch body in the overly tight t-shirt that she was searching for.

Cadel lowered a heavy wood chair and Faith's eyes widened as his glorious biceps rippled under his golden tanned skin. He had a small tattoo just below his right ear that looked like single drop of blood dripping down his neck. He had gang ties and a history with drugs but for a girl who had never been kissed his questionable past seemed a minor obstacle to her plans today.

The two boys strutted out for another load.

Faith shuffled down the stairs as quickly as she could manage.

This is my chance. I'll ask him to dinner. No. A movie. At least it will be dark in there. If we left an hour after work, no one would see us. The Cineplex is only three blocks away. Who would we run into? Today is my birthday. How could he refuse?

Cadel and Retro carried a large desk inside and set it next to the previous piece.

Retro leaned against the desk and wiped the sweat from his brow.

“Retro, hurry up,” Cadel half whispered.

“What’s you rush, dude?”

“I want to be gone before Frankenstein’s monster wakes.”

“That’s just wrong, man. Not her fault she got in an accident,” Retro said as he plunged a finger up his nostril.

“You got a soft spot for the corpse bride?”

“No, but show some respect man, she did lose her mom and all.”

“I respect her sloppy snatch but she’s like Victoria’s Ugly secret.”

“Not cool man, seriously,” Retro said screwing his finger deeper.

“Hey, if I tapped her from behind, I wouldn’t have to see her face,” Cadel smirked.

“You are such an ass.”

“I’m just saying what you’re thinking.”

Retro hesitated, “That’s true. So, like, what? You read minds now?”

Retro finished his harvest and wiped his slimy finger on the bottom of his sneakers.

The boys shared a chuckle then swaggered away.

Behind the furniture, Faith slumped to the floor looking very much like a dog's discarded chew toy. The accident had left the bridge of her nose crooked and her cheeks scarred. Her face sagged Dahli-esque but with the pain of Cadel's words, her horrific features drooped even more.

She pressed the back of her hand to her lips and with a quick jerk wiped off the lipstick that she had so carefully applied earlier. Faith started to stand when she felt it - that sharp taste in the back of her throat. Like biting into a raw onion, the tears welled up and she slumped back to the floor.

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"Okay Mr. H that's the last of it." Cadel said as he nudged Retro towards the door.

Grumpaw peered at Cadel through his spectacles with a hint of annoyance. "The name is Helsing. It's only two syllables. That too much to ask?"

"No, but Mr. H makes you sound cooler," Cadel said with a wink.

"Eighty is old, not cool," Grumpaw harrumphed. "So, what did you bring me?"

"Some really great stuff from the Zabriskie estate."

"I thought that sale ended last month?" Grumpaw scratched his head.

"It did, but Jonas found some stuff in the attic that no one knew was there."

"Can I pay you after I've had a chance to look the batch over?"

"Fair enough," Cadel shrugged.

"Hold on one second boys. I'm sure Faith would like to say hello." Grumpaw hollered up the stairs, "Faith?"

"Got another pick up to make, Mr. H," Cadel said quickly. "Maybe tomorrow." The boys scurried out. Cadel pushed Retro all the way to the truck.

"Kids." Grumpaw harrumphed as he shuffled over to their latest delivery. His shaky fingers hindered his effort to untie the ropes. He moved around the blanket-covered item to get a better angle at the ropes and almost stepped on Faith.

"Oh. There you are. Cadel just left. Maybe I can catch him."

"No. Grumpaw, don't." Faith said softly.

"But I know you wanted to talk to him."

"Before the accident, I would never have even considered hanging out with Cadel. Now, look at me." Faith covered her face with scarred hands. "Oh my god. I'm stalking him." Her body shook as the sorrow played out into sobs.

Grumpaw stepped toward her with opened arms to give her a comforting hug but backed away when she roared into a heavy fit of sobs and shudders. He pulled out his handkerchief but after a quick check of its freshness, he shoved it back into his pocket. Finally, in frustration Grumpaw grumbled, "Just stop it. You don't cry over boys. Especially that one."

“I know you’re right. But you don’t understand.”

“Wish your mother was still here. She’d know what to say.”

“She’d have kicked my ass,” Faith groaned.

“If I thought I could get away with that, I would do the same.”

Faith chuckled at the thought of the old man trying to kick her in the butt. Her sobs stopped and the water works slowed.

“Come on help me get these ropes off,” Grumpaw urged.

Faith choked back her tears with a crooked smile. She got to her feet and yanked on the knots and the ropes fell away. She pulled the moving blankets away and revealed a very old red lacquer Chinese cabinet. It stood about seven feet tall and five feet wide. It had faded gold leaf accents and chipped inlaid pearl carvings that showed a royal courtyard setting. It was battered and had strange scratch marks as if a large bird had clawed it. Its four unfinished legs looked as though they had been rebuilt many times before. Two twin doors were kept shut by a simple brass pin in the shape of a winged dragon.

“What a piece of crap,” Faith exclaimed.

“And yet I think it is rare. If you clean it up this could bring a lot at the auction.”

“You’re kidding right?”

"Not at all. Being very old is exactly why it is valuable," Grumpaw said thoughtfully.

"We still talking about the cabinet?"

Grumpaw frowned causing his bushy eyebrows to knit together into a big fuzzy caterpillar.

"Okay," Faith shrugged. "I'll get to cleaning this up right away."

"That's my girl. Guess I'll reserve the ass kicking for another time."

"Yeah. Thanks for that," Faith chuckled.

"You know, some things take time to heal. That young doctor at the hospital thought you might be ready for plastic surgery soon," Grumpaw said trying to remain positive.

"Without medical insurance? How will we pay for it?" As soon as the words passed her lips, Faith regretted ever opening her mouth. The pain that filled her grandfather's eyes was the look of a man questioning his ability to properly provide for his granddaughter. Faith forced her pout into a weak smile. "Sorry Grumpaw. I don't mean to burden you with girl stuff."

"Nothing about you is a burden. I just wish your mother were still alive." His voice trailed off.

Faith could see it in his eyes. The thought of her mother's death stabbed at his heart. Now her silly emo outburst seemed selfish and stupid. Faith missed her mother terribly. She wanted to tell Grumpaw how sorry she was. How it was all her fault. That she had been looking at herself in the mirror rather than paying attention to the road. She tried to work up the appropriate words but "I'm so sorry," was all Faith could manage to say.

"Helsing?" The rough voice snapped Grumpaw around. A short stocky man about fifty stepped in through the open door. Faith recognized the rough voice as Sal Getz.

"Mr. Getz. What a surprise." Grumpaw said nervously as he shuffled away leaving Faith behind the furniture.

"Shouldn't be. You're late on the rent again. That makes three months now." Getz snapped.

"As you can see, we are preparing for an auction this weekend." Grumpaw replied calmly.

Getz jerked his head back and forth like a lizard hunting flies. His beady eyes darted around the auction house taking in a mental inventory.

Faith knew that Grumpaw did not like this little dirty man, but apparently, anything would be better than trying to figure out a brokenhearted teenager right now.

"So you'll have my money on Monday?"

"Well, I cannot guarantee..."

"You asked me to fix the fire sprinklers and I did it. Now, I'm telling you Monday or I start taking stuff at wholesale." Getz warned.

That's enough. No one threatens my Grumpaw, no matter how late he is on the rent.

Faith stepped out from behind the furniture with a dark frown on her disfigured face.

"You can't do that," Faith scowled.

Getz took a step back at the sight of her. "Who's that?"

"My granddaughter," Grumpaw said without apology.

"Didn't know you had a granddaughter." Getz glanced at Faith's burn scars and uneven legs, then he looked at the ground, the cabinet, then back at Grumpaw.

Faith winced at the veiled insult. The short man's discomfort with her appearance was obvious and stung more than words. She glared imagined death rays at Getz until he met her gaze. He quickly turned away. As the short man waddled out of the warehouse, he hollered over his shoulder. "Monday."

This had turned out to be some birthday, Faith thought to herself.

CHAPTER II

THE INSPECTION

"Hey. So tell me what's up with delivery boy?" A thin voice filtered out from a laptop on the table behind Faith. On the computer screen was a video window from where a sassy Chinese punker peered out. Her name was Mina Lee.

"Cadel? Nothing I guess," Faith replied with an indifferent tone as she rolled her chair away from the computer and closer to the red Chinese cabinet.

"Why nothing? Didn't you ask him out on your birthday?" Mina asked with growing curiosity.

Faith pretended not to hear and didn't respond.

"You did ask him out right?" Mina continued to press.

Faith thought about telling Mina the entire horrid mess that happened earlier that day but she fought against it and deflected. "So, what's happening in New Orleans?"

"Going to a concert. The Sound Pimps are playing at the Snake Pit." Mina replied offhandedly knowing that Faith was attempting to change the subject. "Now, what about Cadel?"

"The Sound Pimps?"

"They're cool if you like a dreamy hypnotic sound track." Mina paused. "You wanna come?"

"I would if it wasn't a three hour drive." Faith continued. "Who you going with?"

"Rocker dude. But enough about me, let's talk about you."

Holy crap Mina has "good tone" and her radar is locked. Faith groaned to herself. Maybe it wouldn't hurt so much to relive the morning's humiliation. Maybe sharing will strengthen our sisterhood. Faith finally caved in.

"Cadel called me Frankenstein's monster." Faith moaned.

"That flaming ass hole! What did you say?"

"Nothing. What could I say? I shouldn't have been listening."

"Nothing? You said nothing?" Mina was astonished. "Oh my god. Get up off the floor."

"But I'm not on the floor." Faith replied innocently.

"You should be. You're acting like a doormat."

"No. I'm not...am I?"

"You're letting him walk all over you and by saying nothing you're enabling him."

Mina continued.

"I'm enabling him?"

"Yes you. By remaining silent you enable him to continue trash talking about not only you but all women." Mina said sternly. "It's up to those of us with good souls to speak the truth and shame the devil."

"Where do you get this stuff? Dr. Phil?" Faith tried to lighten the conversation with some humor, but Mina wasn't easing up.

"You know I'm right." Mina folded her arms exposing an elaborate butterfly tattoo on her upper arm.

"Cadel is not the devil."

"Maybe not, but obviously the angelic face and washboard abs does not guarantee a kind heart." Mina retorted.

"It should be glue by now." Faith said as she slumped in defeat.

"What's glue?"

"That dead horse you're beating."

"I'm just saying you can't let people push you around. Stand up. Be strong. Grow some gnads." Mina insisted.

"Yeah, but you have to admit I am kind of a wreck."

"Faith, the accident only disfigured your outside. Your heart and soul are still as beautiful as ever," Mina said emphatically.

Faith spun around. She looked straight up to stop the tears from coming. Mina's the only person who doesn't seem to see my scars, but with her Oprah outlook, she only sees possibilities. Faith scanned the front of the cabinet holding a large magnifying glass in front of her face. She scrutinized a faded gold design at the top corner of the cabinet.

"See this figure?" Faith pointed to the gold design of a winged figure that took the form of part dragon and part man. "The style of that figure is from the Qin Dynasty."

"If that cabinet is authentic, it could be worth a ton of moolah,"

Faith pulled the brass dragon pin out and yanked the cabinet doors open revealing a large mirror that covered the entire back of the cabinet. The frame was an ornate silver dragon that twisted and crawled around the edge of the mirror ending with its tail between its teeth. Faith fanned the air. The cabinet smelled of mothballs and decay.

"Wow. Look at this."

"Kewl," Mina crooned. "Hey what are those? On the doors."

There were four panels each with odd carvings on the inside of the doors. Faith grabbed the webcam and panned it across each panel.

The first panel displayed carvings of a Warrior outside a tall wall. Two tall mirrors were standing on either side of him. He stepped into one of the mirrors as if it were a doorway.

“Is that the Great Wall of China?” Mina asked.

Faith swept the web cam over the second panel. The carvings showed the Warrior emerging from a cabinet mirror inside a palace boudoir. A Chinese Princess held a hand mirror in front of the cabinet mirror.

Faith pointed at the third panel where a dragon with yellow viper eyes glared out from the cabinet mirror behind the Warrior.

“What the fuck were these guys on?” Mina chuckled. “Hey wait, go back.”

Faith moved the web cam over the fourth panel which had rows of strange writing. Most of this panel had a sticky reddish brown substance obscuring it.

“That’s Chinese, at least I think so,” Mina said.

"Can you read this character? It's all over the place."

"Hold the web cam steady for a second." Mina stared out from the laptop screen. "It looks like the number thirteen. But the context doesn't make sense to me." Mina replied.

Faith ran her hands over the characters. The sticky reddish brown substance stuck to her fingers. "Yuck. What is this stuff?" Faith dipped a cloth into a bucket of soapy water and wiped the cabinet. As she wrung out the cloth, the water ran blood red.

"Hey. Gotta go. It's dinner time." Mina muttered.

Faith was relieved to duck Mina's scrutiny and yet Faith didn't want to end the conversation with her only friend in the world. "I'll send you close ups of these after I clean this goo off."

"Kewl. Maybe my grandma can decipher it." Mina said in her upbeat hipster way. Mina flashed a peace sign as she signed off.

Faith waved weakly at Mina as the video window on the laptop screen went black.

"How could I let myself become such a doormat?" Faith grumbled to herself. Faith was still hurt and angered by Cadell's words but she was now angrier with herself. Deep down inside I know Mina is right, but Mina is, well, Mina. Being "uber" cute, sassy and hip gives her the power to say whatever she wants to whomever she wants. There will always be another boy fighting to get to the top of her waiting list. She doesn't understand what it's like trapped inside a straight jacket made from titanium pins, stitches and patchwork skin.

Faith lifted a digital camera to her face and focused a tight shot of the Chinese characters. She pressed the shutter button. Faith stepped to the side to get a better angle of the fourth panel. When she did this, she exposed the five-foot tall mirror behind her. Unobstructed the two mirrors bounced reflections back and forth producing windows nested inside progressively smaller windows. They created endless reflections. An unnatural breeze tossed her hair. Faith looked around the warehouse but all the doors and windows were closed.

Faith put her camera to her eye and snapped a close up of the Chinese writing on the fourth panel.

“Welcome,” a thin distant voice called out.

Faith snapped around. “Hello?” Faith scratched her head. “Mina?”

Faith shuffled to her computer. She opened the webcam window but Mina was not there. Faith shrugged her shoulders. She attached her camera to her laptop. The photos uploaded into nested windows. “That’s odd,” Faith said as she enlarged a photo of the mirror.

Two yellow points of light appeared to float deep inside the mirror. Each had a black diamond at its center. “They look like snake eyes.” Faith shrugged. “Must be from the flash.” She clicked on the upload button. A few clicks later, the email went off to Mina full of attached pics.

Faith glanced at the cabinet. Better get back to cleaning. As she wiped the mirror with the towel, her knuckle grazed the mirrored surface and the endless reflections. She dipped the cloth into the bucket again and did not notice the ripple sweep across the dragon mirror. Faith reached out to wipe the mirror again and her hand dipped into the mirror's reflective surface as if it were made of Jell-O.

Faith gasped and instinctively yanked her hand out. Faith stumbled backward and bumped the large mirror knocking it sideways. The altered angle stopped the endless reflections in the dragon mirror.

Faith stared at her hand in dismay. A translucent silvery slime oozed all over her hand and the cloth she held.

"What the hell?" Faith sniffed the slime. "Eewww," Faith said in disgust. It smelled like something between a burnt match and vomit. She plunged her hand into the bucket of soapy water and swirled it around until she was sure her hand was slime free. She pulled her hand out and dried it with a new towel but when she inspected it, something was wrong or in this case, something was right.

Faith studied her hand with great curiosity. The skin on her hand was now smooth, supple and soft, almost as if someone had airbrushed all of her scars away. "What the fu...?" Before this wondrous development could completely register in Faith's mind, a crash from upstairs yanked her right out of her train of thought.

"Grumpaw?" Faith gasped.

Faith hobbled up the stairs that led to the apartment above the warehouse.

She stopped in the tiny kitchen. Dirty pots were in the sink; the plates from dinner were still on the counter and the take out containers were still on the table. Everything was in a messy state as usual. Faith shuffled quickly along the hallway and stopped at the first bedroom. She held her breath not sure what she would find inside Grumpaw's room. She gently pushed the door open. Faith sighed in relief. The old brass bed was empty. That was a good sign, Faith thought when a low groan turned her around.

"Grumpaw?" Faith called out but there was no reply.

Faith moved past her bedroom towards the bathroom they shared.

Grumpaw was slumped on the floor. He was half sitting half kneeling. A thin line of blood crossed his cheek where his straight razor had slipped. His shaving bowl laid at his feet shattered in several pieces.

"Grumpaw!" Faith hobbled forward as quickly as she could. She grabbed his head and turned his face towards hers. His eyes were glossy. His expression was blank.

Faith checked Grumpaw's pulse as he groaned softly. She wrapped both her arms around his chest and pulled him to his feet. She dragged him more than carried him to his bedroom. Not that he was heavy it was more that her uneven legs made it difficult for her to get the proper leverage.

"We should get you to the hospital."

"No. I am fine. I slipped, that's all," Grumpaw grumbled as he shook himself alert.

Faith snatched a pill bottle off the nightstand. It felt way too light. She snapped the cap off and as she suspected, found the bottle empty.

"When did you run out of pills?" Faith demanded.

"They make me dizzy."

"That's the fun of it."

"And they're too expensive." Grumpaw shrugged.

"Oh Grumpaw. You have to take your medication."

"You are beginning to sound just like your mother."

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Faith shuffled down the street. Although the darkness sheltered her in obscurity, she still shied away from anyone she passed. *Maybe the all night pharmacy will have the prescription filled already and I won't have to wait too long.*

Much to Faith's disappointment, the interior light in the pharmacy was blinding. The aroma of caramel corn and antiseptic assaulted her nose. While the orchestrated Hip Hop that blared over the public address speakers assaulted her ears. Three boys were giggling over a display of condoms. A scruffy man was searching for a certain bottle of

cheap whiskey. Faith shook her head in disgust. *How do you spell relief? Lots of cures for all sorts of ailments here.*

The pharmacist behind the counter peeked over his glasses at Faith.

"Pick up for Helsing?" Faith said as she looked at her feet to keep her hair in front of her face.

The pharmacist lifted a small pill bottle and read the label to himself then he stared at Faith for what seemed an eternity. "This is for a heart condition." He finally said. It wasn't actually a question but his tone implied he was expecting an explanation.

"It's for my Grump... my grandfather." Their eyes met for a split second then she quickly pulled her hair around her face again.

The pharmacist leaned forward and motioned for Faith to come closer. She reluctantly took a couple of steps and tapped her fingers nervously on the wood counter.

"You know I'm obligated to ask," The pharmacist said in a hushed tone.

"About the medicine, of course."

"No, about you."

"About me? What about me?"

“Are you okay?” the pharmacist asked with concern. “I know of a battered woman's shelter. They can keep you safe. Help you get back on your feet.”

Faith glanced at her reflection in the little mirror attached to the reading glasses display. Her disfigured face had Grumpaw's blood smeared across it. Together with her scars, she looked like she had just been in a knockdown, drag out fight.

"This is just how I look! Okay?" Faith snapped.

This guy is only trying to be nice, Faith thought to herself. But embarrassment mixed with the knowledge that the man was acting with sincere compassion caused Faith to burst into tears. She snatched the pill bottle out of his hands and rushed out the door.

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Faith rushed into the safety of the night. Three teen girls turned the corner just as Faith's uneven legs failed her. Her shoe with the platform caught the curb and Faith did a full on face plant into the gutter. She was totally yard sale as one shoe went skittering across the street, her purse spilled its contents on the sidewalk and the pill bottle rolled into the gutter. Faith watched in horror as the pill bottle spun a path directly towards the storm drain.

“NO!” Faith yelled as she crawled after it. She grabbed at the little plastic bottle but she was too slow. The small ripple of gutter water had just enough of a current to push the bottle forward. It was going down. Then a slim hand reached down and snatched the pill bottle from becoming certain sewage.

“Oh my gaawwwdddd.” A girl’s voice said with contempt.

Faith rolled over and looked up at Chastity standing on the sidewalk between two other girls she didn’t recognise. *Oh crap, shit, fuck*, Faith thought. *Why did it have to be Chastity?* “Well if it isn’t the high holy priestess of the populars herself?”

“You’ve really got to try to kick this habit.”

“They’re not for me. Those are for my Grump... My grandfather.” Faith said as she held out her hand.

“I’m sure the pain of being you is unbearable but I don’t think giving you meds is a good idea.”

“You wouldn’t know a good idea if one bit you on your saline implants.” Faith shook her opened hand twice. Chastity flushed red. “Chastity, give me those fucking pills or I swear I’ll infect you with my ugly germs.”

That did it. Chastity slapped the bottle in Faith’s palm but made sure not to touch any part of Faith’s hand.

“Jesus, I was just trying to help.” Chastity said with a self-righteous tone.

“And I was just trying to exist.” Faith spun on her one good leg and hopped across the street to retrieve her shoe.

“Did you see her face? Who was that?” The other girls asked.

"Faith Helsing but I like to call her Patches." Chastity replied with a smirk.

The nickname of "Patches" made Faith tremble with rage. But instead of turning around and possibly face more humiliation she just slid into the obscurity of the night.

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"Safe at last," Faith said as she slipped inside between the double front doors. She stopped in front of the twin seven-foot tall mirrors on either side of the entrance and wiped the tears and blood from her cheeks.

"You're disgusting," Faith muttered as she pulled her hair forward again. She wasn't concerned if Grumpaw saw her scars and she was pretty sure they would not have any visitors this time of night. Faith just hated looking at herself and the wicked scars that were a constant reminder that she was alone in the world. She stared at her reflection through the haze of her bangs. "I wish you were dead."

#

Faith opened the door quietly and poked her head inside. Grumpaw was awake but not terribly alert. She could tell he was uncomfortable.

She popped open the little bottle and pushed a pill past his crumpled lips.

"Drink," Faith commanded as she handed Grumpaw the glass of water from his nightstand.

Grumpaw gulped the pill down. His eyes wrinkled an unspoken “thank you.”

Faith made sure not to return the look. She did not feel like exploring any more of her feelings tonight.

“You okay Faith?” He asked softly.

“Just dandy, Grumps.”

“Then would you get something from my desk, please?” Grumpaw whispered.

Faith complied without question. She stood over the old secretary desk. Like all of the furniture they used for themselves, it was old, well used and broken. The desk had a deep scratch across the top, missing handles and sun bleached spots throughout its finish.

“Above. In the return,” Grumpaw nodded.

Faith slid the wood door over. The aroma of pine and metal greeted her nose. Inside there were the usual fine jeweler’s tools and polish cloths that Grumpaw used every day, but just behind them sat a small blue velvet box tied with a gold ribbon.

“You didn’t think I forgot your birthday did you?”

Faith glanced back at the old man. She shrugged her shoulders in jest but her beaming eyes gave her joy away. “You didn’t need to buy me anything.”

“Good, because I didn’t.”

Faith frowned.

“But that’s only because I could never afford such a thing.”

Faith’s frown shifted to extreme curiosity.

Grumpaw opened his mouth to tell her to open it, but Faith snatched the box up and pulled the ribbon off before he could utter another word. She slowly opened the little velvet box and gasped. Inside sat a long bronze key or so Faith thought at first. The tip was sharp and pointed like a dagger. Midway along its length, it expanded into a small heart. A larger heart dominated the very top. In the center of each heart, a yellow diamond sparkled.

“It’s a hairpin. It was designed by your great grandmother,” Grumpaw explained.

“It’s heavy. Is it made of gold?”

“Solid brass.”

“Oh,” Faith said politely yet with a hint of disappointment in her voice.

“It was handed down to your grandmother on her eighteenth birthday and to your mother on hers.”

“Really? So, this is a tradition?”

“Four generations old,” Grumpaw said softly.

“Wait, then it’s like what? One hundred years old?”

“One hundred and seven to be exact,” Grumpaw’s words faded into a long yawn.

Faith shuffled over to the bed. “Thanks Grumpaw,” Faith said as she bent over and kissed him on the forehead.

The medication was already taking effect. Grumpaw’s eyelids fluttered as he tried to fight off the drug-induced sleep. “Oh, did I mention, those diamonds are real.”

Faith’s jaw dropped wide open. She stared at the hairpin in her hand with renewed awe. She ran her fingers along its length and wondered if her mother had experienced the same reaction when she had received the hairpin on her eighteenth birthday.

“Grumpaw? Do you remember mom’s eighteenth birthday?” The old man’s steady breathing was his only reply.

Faith clipped the pin into her long hair then plopped into a chair and flipped open the accounting ledger. She poured over the receipts for the past month, then added up their debt for the past three months. Faith finally pushed back from her desk and stretched her arms. “Not enough,” Faith shook her head as she circled the fifteen thousand dollar figure in red. “This better be the best auction ever.”

Faith flipped over the newspaper and scanned the obituary section. Every now and then, she would circle a name that might yield some juicy items for the weekend’s auction. When she heard Grumpaw’s soft snoring rise from the bed, Faith left the chair and leaned over him. The smell of orange oil and varnish oozed from his pores from years of restoring furniture. It was a strange aroma but she liked it. It was a part of him.

He was like a walking piece of furniture. Convinced he was finally sleeping peacefully; Faith left the room and closed the door behind her. She should have been exhausted but there was something gnawing at her mind. *What was it?* She had almost forgotten with all the commotion. Faith looked at her hand on the doorknob. The skin on her hand was smooth and flawless. Now she remembered.

#

Faith yanked the brass dragon pin out and opened the red cabinet doors. She leaned in and studied the carvings of the first panel. Faith ran her fingers over the Warrior standing between the mirrors in front of the Great Wall of China.

"Two mirrors. That has to have something to do with it," Faith said to her reflection in the dragon mirror inside the cabinet. She set a small mirror on a chair so that it was at the same level as the dragon mirror. She stepped aside to check the alignment. With her body out of the way, the two mirrors were unobstructed and the endless reflections immediately flowed. An unnatural breeze kicked up, tossing Faith's hair.

Faith took a deep breath and held it then she pushed her hand towards the small mirror. She closed her eyes hoping her hand would dip into the silver surface again but her fingers bounced off the hard glass. The small mirror teetered then fell smashing into several pieces as it hit the concrete floor. The unnatural breeze stopped abruptly.

"Oh great. Seven years bad luck." Faith said to herself as she stared at the broken mirror at her feet. "But bad luck or not, I'm committed now."

Faith pulled a larger mirror across the floor and faced it directly in front of the red Chinese cabinet. She poked her hand at the endless reflections in the dragon mirror but the surface remained solid.

“ I wonder if ...” Faith rubbed her chin. “Could it have been the water?”

She dipped her hand in the bucket and sprinkled soapy water on the Dragon mirror. Faith waited and watched but there was no obvious change in the mirror. She gingerly poked at the mirror with her finger but again the surface remained solid.

“Maybe it was all a dream. No. My hand had been scarred.” Faith remembered the accident like it was yesterday.