

There was a moment as Veronica awoke, when she was conscious but had not yet opened her eyes, that she felt as though everything had returned to normal. That she was in her apartment in New York, and Dhan was beside her, turned toward the wall. His broad shoulders sloping down to a narrow waist that she would wrap herself around. His soft black curls she could stuff her nose into. It was so real, for a moment, that Vero felt a bewildered relief at the quiet, because it meant that Dhan's anti-snoring nasal strips had worked for once. Any minute now he'd stir. Any minute now, Fiesta would jump onto the bed, her tongue rough against Vero's cheek, and demand a walk.

"Hey." A voice, male, not Dhan's, growled Vero's eyes open. The rest of the van was empty; slashes of late afternoon sun lit motes of dust on the upholstered seats. Her heart sank into reality. "You coming in or what?" the smuggler asked.

"Yeah." Vero drew her body up from a slump, her neck and spine cracking as she straightened. She checked her phone: still no service. Everything must be jammed. She gathered her backpack by the straps and, as she slid toward the open door, checked to make sure she still wore her emerald engagement ring, and ran a finger under her denim waistline to confirm her money belt was in place. The blood on her tank top had dried into a stiff black Rorschach. She stepped out of the van and shook out her leg, which had fallen asleep. "Flush it with blood," her mother used to say. It stung back to life as Vero limped toward the smuggler, Robbie, who was standing a few feet away and wondering how his kids were doing. They and their mother were the first ones he'd taken across, depositing them on the other side of the Buffalo border with a map and a bottle of water and a sack of granola bars. Every few trips, now, he got to see them. He had been looking forward to finishing this run, taking them to a diner. Pancakes and sausage, maple syrup sticky on his chin. But it looked as though it wouldn't be so easy this time.