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# **HEAVEN'S DOOR**

**a novel**



**the story of a Girl,  
her big Milwaukee-built motorcycle,  
and her brief adventures around  
Vermont and Quebec  
during an Outlaw Biker war**

**by J. Kilburn**

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# HEAVEN'S DOOR

a novel

by J. Kilburn

Copyright 2020 James K. Mossman III

Kindle Direct Publishing Paperback Edition

Copyright 2020 James K. Mossman III

Independently published by the Author at TOPDOGSNOVEL.COM

ISBN # 978-0-578-66792-8

Printed and Distributed by Amazon / KDP

U.S. Library of Congress Archive Edition:

ISBN # 978-0-578-67036-2

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HEAVEN'S DOOR, A NOVEL by J. KILBURN

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

I am indebted to Ardelia Huntress for drawing the illustrations in this book. Art is just one of her many talents. Making her acquaintance has been an unexpected wealth of good fortune.



**CONTENTS:**

**Chapter 1: The Fight**

**Chapter 2: A Scooter For Erin**

**Chapter 3: A Short Career As A Biker**

**Chapter 4: Escape**

**Chapter 5: Gloaming**

**Epilogue**

**The Prequel - BEFORE (coming soon)**

**About the Author**

**Interview with the Author**



## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **A SHORT CAREER AS A BIKER**

Erin looks past the grey steel rail of the ferry, at the surface of the water beyond.

Reflections of colors and green trees shimmer in a dance on the water, here where it is protected from the open length of the lake, and where it is not disturbed by the bow wake of the small ship.

Erin peers closely, her attention finally caught by something outside her strife. The trip across the water has given her some distance. Just splotches of color at first, they resolve themselves into... squares, reds, blues, greens.... Ah. Stone buildings, colored rooves, trees. Upside down. Like my life.

The loud rumble and rattle of the boat's engines, a commotion that can be felt in the feet as much as heard in the ears, slows and diminishes and then settles to a quiet rumble.

Time to get it together, again, Girl. A tiny little hamlet announces the arrival of the ferry to wherever this is. To shore. A road, at least. Erin feels better when she is busy. Driving her new motorcycle, yes, that is busy. Very busy.

The Demon, over at the other rail, still talks in hushed tones with Laurent. Sometimes pointing back at Vermont, sometimes gesturing at Erin. She wishes she could hear. She turns, putting her elbows up on the hard steel side of the ship, and leans back on it, displaying her wares and a saucy smile. A message: Everything is fine. You have nothing to worry about. I don't notice that someone is missing. I'm keeping it together.

Laurent has convinced himself that she will be okay, even at the border. It will NOT DO if the girl is freaked because then they would search for something, look them over, maybe see the blood or ask questions about the bike. Their Canadian friends will tolerate much, but murder is unseemly, and the murder of a police officer is a faux-pas that cannot be overlooked. They ALL must be composed, even the girl, for this to work.... But she seems alright, other than sea-sick. On a LAKE, a la calice de tabernak!! By Christ's holy cup!

The Demon isn't so sure. In heavy, angry, French-seasoned English: "She's flipping! Not good at zhe border. Ne pas demain, aussie." Nor tomorrow, either.

Laurent offers to fix the situation, after a fashion: "Put just a little something in her, fuck her up, so they think that's why she's freaked?"

The Demon spins around, bristles, and snaps in a heavily-accented reply, with all his w's and r's preceded by a guttural roll of an h: "Why zhe FUCK would we do zhat?!? Are jou a RETARD?!" In lower tones: "Get 'er arrested so she's safe and tidy with some cops? Fuck 'er up so she's not able to ride zhe bike? We're not letting 'er out of our sight! Got zhat?!?" He calms. "Anyways, zhat shit went overboard halfway across zhe lake."

The ferry is now fixed to the ramp with big ropes slung over tall pilings, and car engines are starting. The quiet little harbor is becoming a bustling, choreographed automotive dance for a few minutes.

The Demon whirls in the direction of the parked motorcycles. "Let us get zhe fuck out of here." He looks over towards Erin, points, then hooks his finger down to the seat of the cream and blue custom chopper. The message is clear: Get your ass over here on this, NOW.

Starting the bike is easier this time, and for some reason these men are content to let her drive the motorcycle up the slippery ramp by herself.

The exiting parade of cars and motorcycles drives past a line of waiting vehicles and past a toll booth, where Laurent and The Demon flip off the toll attendant as they go past, merely out of habitual disdain for Authority. The trio rumbles up a short street, the report of the engines

rattling back from the stone buildings in a feed-back cacaphony, to a T-intersection with a state route. Erin follows the men as they turn right, to the north. She might have enjoyed the quaint, shop-lined, touristy street, and even engaged in a little twenty-mile-per-hour sight-seeing, if she wasn't scared for her very life.

Once on the faster state road, Erin chances a look around. The New York side of the lake is like a different country: older and more severe, with steep hills that plunge right down to ledges on the left and occasional short, stony beaches that appear on the right. The narrow, winding pavement twists and turns past occasional houses fronting on the road, structures mostly of stone - old, hand-quarried stone - or of clapboards and broad beams, all painted in old, stately colours. Not at all like Quebec, or even the other state from which they have just come. Eventually, they take a left. Erin starts to get the chills again. More narrow paved road, more small brick villages, then a red and blue shield announcing a bit of the U.S. thruway system ahead. She leans the big motorcycle hard to the right, opens the throttle with a huge rattling roar to straighten out, shifts up, and she is once again wild and free on an expressway, behind two formidable men who might kill her once they are all home in Quebec. At the top of the entrance ramp, already going 120 kph, dread changes places with the feeling of freedom for a few minutes, in a back-and-forth. Then she remembers WHY she is driving this motorcycle, and the dread falls back on her with a thunderclap.

Erin's emotions will flip-flop in that fashion for the rest of the ride, all the way to Montreal.

They stay in the left lane, as much as possible, and almost everyone gets out of the way. Those that don't merge right to yield the faster lane quickly get passed on the right, with a flip of Laurent's finger to protest the insult. They make a spectacle: two men wearing those unique vests with brightly-colored patches splayed out boldly across the back, riding abreast, with Erin bringing up the rear close behind, the threesome passing every car and truck like they are parked.

The sight arouses feelings in the occupants of the vehicles they pass: fear, envy, resentment, awe... but very little curiosity. One look at the vests and the other motorists know that these men are Topdogs. Everyone knows who and what the Topdogs are.

The Demon is in a hurry now, apparently. Erin chances a look down at the speedometer and finds that it is shaking so much she cannot read the numbers, but she does see the needle somewhere in the triple digits - in mph! We must be going nearly two hundred Kay! KPH.



Kilometers-per-hour. Eyieyiyiyiyiyi! One car they pass on the right honks and starts to merge to the right before she is fully past; Erin guns the motorcycle minutely closer to the wildly embroidered backs in front of her and tosses a quick, high, palm-backwards wave of her left hand to the impudent prick who has gotten in her way. She is getting the hang of riding like a 'Dog.

It seems just a minute to her, and then traffic slows and the real bikers coast and the expressway becomes flanked by signs: "ARRET." Stop. Customs. Ah. Home. Almost there, Girl! Erin makes sure to tug her white spandex top down to minimum altitude. Make those men happy, make these men happy. Everyone is happy, I can go home to whiskey and try to forget about today.... They slowly pass a long queue, and suddenly there is a booth in front of them, a line of parked Canadian Customs police cars, and the bored scowls of her country's border agents.

The Demon and Laurent are not too very worried anymore. These Customs officers are unarmed, mainly administrative, and unlikely to bother the motorcyclists, for a number of reasons. The Topdogs have control over some of these reasons, and also some of these men. These Royal-Pains-In-The-Asses do have the support and professional courtesies of their kin on the southbound side of the line, however, and that leaves the bikers more guarded than they usually would be. Not to mention the fact that they have spent the afternoon casually fleeing a murder scene. The male riders turn off their engines to coast in, and once they reach the Inquisitors, The Demon reaches over to casually flip over the key on the big motorcycle that Erin is driving. Funny, how the sudden silence is what finally causes heads to turn. The Canadian Customs Supervising Agent is aware of how these outlaws have run up the shoulder to pass the long queue of cars, cars that will be searched and held while the occupants are interrogated. He frowns, sighs, and steps out of the booth to cross in front of the line of traffic. He motions with his fingers, as he walks, two fingers in an up-turned dance on the end of his hand: Come here.

The bikes are already turned off, and thus hard to move. The Demon summons with a toss of his head: No, here.

The Canadian official shrugs to himself and saunters over to them, clipboard in hand. "Bon apres-midi." Good afternoon. "Bienvenue au Canada." Welcome to Canada. He waits.

None of the three in front of him answer that. Laurent slumps and smirks. The Demon looks ahead towards Canada, inscrutable. Erin sits ramrod straight, chest and eyebrows high, eyes wide, her pout turned up at the corners of her mouth, not sure what to expect.

The Canadian Customs man tries again: "Good afternoon. Welcome to Canada."

Laurent prefers to converse in English whenever confronted with an official situation, out of mere contrariness, French recently being legislated the Official Language of Quebec. And he also tends towards taciturn, apparently: "Thanks."

The Customs Agent looks them up and down.

Laurent points forward with a lazy, upturned toss of his hand. "Home for all three of us." Barely-veiled impatience in his eyes: Hurry up.

"Very well. Licenses, registrations, passports please." The Customs Agent does not actually require a passport for entry of an ostensibly Canadian citizen returning home, but he is jaded by his job, repeats his required mantra ten thousand times a day, and frequently becomes too bored to vary it.

The three bikers dig for, and quickly produce, documents.

As his compatriot's license comes out and goes across to the Border Pig, Laurent once again wonders what The Demon's real name is. He's never seen the documents being handed across, not up close. Of course, the name that this Demon was born with and the name that he goes by are not necessarily one and the same. Been across the border seventy times with him, and I still only know his nick-name, eh? Amazing.

Erin's license comes from a tight front pocket; she has to scooch up high in the air to even get her hand into the crease where pocket meets her waistband. She gets to the little plastic laminate card with effort and a backward arch of her back and forward thrust of her hip that put her most intimate contours out into stark relief. The Customs man holds her bike up straight so that it will not tip over out from under her. Erin can feel the heat radiating from his blush.

The government man savors the mere fact of standing next to this pretty woman in the clinging clothing, so close as to be able to hold onto the handlebar she has just recently touched. He puts the three ID cards on his clipboard to examine them. Hmmm. He takes an unconsciously-furtive measure of the middle one again. I wouldn't like to encounter Demond D. Normande on a dark street. "Declarations? Bringing anything in?"

Laurent speaks sarcastically: "God save the Queen." Then, when the officer doesn't respond to his declaration, he shrugs. "Besides drugs, beer, and a whore?" Laurent gestures randomly into the air with an angry smirk. "You don't SEE anything, do you?"

The Customs man frowns. "May I look in your saddlebags." A demand, not a question. An order.

"No." Laurent says it politely, but emphatically.

The man can look without consent, here, normally, by nature and authority of his position on the border. He makes to reach towards a saddlebag with one hand, maybe to point, maybe as a prelude to bending down to un-fasten a buckle and open the contents to the world.

Laurent says nothing, his face remains stoic, but shakes his head slowly, emphatically, once to the left, once to the right, then back to center. No.

The man's tentative hand retreats. The Topdogs do not have the Rule Of Law on their side here, on the edge of this country, but they have something more important: Power. It is not healthy to cross them. Things happen, later.

The Customs officer shrugs. He makes some notes on his clipboard, below the ID cards that he has secured into place at the top with the wide steel spring-clip. "How long were you in the States?"

"Too long." Laurent smirks.

The Demon finally moves his glance sideways, to gaze inquiringly at Laurent. Enough, already?

Laurent gestures to the road ahead. "Can we go home now?"

"Where is home?"

"Quebec. Didn't you see the fuck'n patch?"

The Demon slaps Laurent on the back of the head with the tips of his fingers. Thwack!! He rolls his eyes for the benefit of the Customs man. Forgive my impudent protegee. "Children! They are like zhet, no? Jou 'ave some of your own, perhaps?" A smile - or a leer - crosses his face.

The border man shivers inwardly and writes on his checklist again.

It seems okay, more or less, and the Customs officer would just like to get rid of these Devil's playthings, so he is reaching for the driver's licenses on his clipboard, probably to give

them back.... But no, another functionary in a different uniform is now coming over from the government booth with a disapproving scowl on her face. The Customs man drops his hand.

This agent wears a black windbreaker emblazoned with three yellow letters front and back: CIC. The Canadian Immigration Authority. She points at the motorcycle under Erin. "THAT is not your motorcycle." She's been running license plates. She turns and rudely rummages on the clipboard that the Customs man is holding to ferret out the female's driver's license. She scowls at it briefly, holds it up for inspection with Erin's profile in the background, and points with all fingers bladed at the license held up in her other hand. "Jou, Madam?" Is this you?

Erin scowls down at the front tire for a beat. Then, eyes bright, that pout suddenly a wide smile that lights up in the new uniform's direction, she arches her shoulders back just a little bit and answers in her best faux-Franglais, "Moi, oui!" Yes, me. "Zhe motorcycle, mine? Of course not! It est moi boyfriends, non? 'E is such ah... ma-ma boy.... His momma, elle est mal... sick. 'E goes to see 'er, maybe 'e no come back to moi. But 'e come back to zhe bike. So I keep, 'e comes back!" And she smiles and cocks her head minutely like it is the most sensible thing in the world.

She's good, thinks The Demon. Real good. Maybe she'll keep her life.

The Immigration officer's head moves back skeptically. "Mademoiselle..." She advances on this woman with an incredulous smile. "'E just GAVE jou zhe bike?" The CIC officer snorts.

Erin shrugs. "But of course.... 'E gives moi les... babysitters." She looks left and right at Laurent and The Demon. "Aussi." Also.

"What is zhe name of his mother?" A smirk from the officer.

Think! Ah! Erin smiles and replies easily: "Ann-Marie LeRoya."

Her two companions look on, impassive. Stage faces, poker faces.

The Demon wonders, What the hell?

Laurent is impressed at the girl's lies. Dave picked well. No wonder he kept her. Then he remembers that 'Dave' may have been 'Bruce,' and a threat. Hmmmm. I wonder what she knows about our friend back there.... He decides to think on that later. He doesn't want the murder to make it to his face.

"And WHY is your boyfriend's sick mother in zhe United States? Zhat IS what jou implied, eh?" She stands with hands on hips, the license of the interrogatee still held between two fingers, a victorious smirk on her face.

A beat.

Your nametag is showing, you dolt! Her government co-worker thinks that this border functionary is very foolish. She may be dead in an unfortunate accident next week, if she keeps it up. These minions of Hell can probably find out more about HER than our computers can tell us about THEM. He shakes his head behind her back and does not care that the bikers see. Better they know I am not with her.

After an impossible interval, Erin brightens again. "Elle est ah, at Isle La Mott, of course! With Saint Anne's!"

St. Anne's shrine is a well-known small Catholic park and retreat on an island not too very far from the border on the U.S. side of the line, and has always been a frequent vacation and health destination for residents of Quebec and Ontario.

"Hmmpfh." The Canadian Immigration official has lingering questions, mostly about why any biker would let this girl out of his sight even with his supposed buddies playing guard dog, but the gist of it checks out, and... pok, pok, pok, tap, tap goes the keyboard.... Ouiess, a Mme. LeRoya went through at Cantic several times already this summer. Okay, eh?

But the Canadian Immigration officer is not done. "Jou 'ave no motorcycle permit. To operate." She scowls at the Erin's license. "Not endorsed for motorcycles." She is just giving this Erin Sweet woman a hard time; the officer has no authority over motor vehicle operation. The motorcycle is registered in New Jersey, and the Customs Agent next to her should be following up on that, but he is not. The Immigration official can do nothing except deny them entry, or let them pass. She scowls at the two men wearing Topdogs vests and then looks Erin in the eye. "Jou will meet a bad end, young lady, hanging around with zhe likes of them." She waves her hand at the Customs man: Let them be gone. She hands the driver's license back to her co-worker and stalks back to their little white hut.

The Canadian Customs Supervising Agent is glad to do just that. I wonder if she has a target on her back, now? He gives these bikers their three driver's licenses, a lifted brow, and a toss of the head in the direction of Quebec, all of ten yards away. They are home.

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They stop for gas and beer three miles up from the border, in downtown Cantic, thundering into a busy just-over-the-border 24-hour gas, beer, and money-exchange depot. It is spartan: a pump apron, a huge wall of coolers, two cash registers for the cash of two countries, a safe. It is also extremely busy. Even in their unique vests with the bold patches and veiled threats sewn on front and back, the two men and their waif blend and melt almost blandly into the throng of activity.

Laurent and The Demon become merry in their relief. Home. Comparative anonymity. Safety. They gas all three bikes one after the other at the same pump, pull cans out of the plastic hoops to throw them loosely into the saddle-bags, and leave a mess of empty ice-cube bags and six-pack rings on the ground.

Ever thirsty, those two. Erin thinks that's one of the things she liked about Dave. I picked the right motorcycle to climb on that night I left the strip club. He never drank quite as much as the rest of them... always keeping his wits about him, that one. She is just starting to tear up when a form looms over her. Oh no! Pull your shit together, Girl!

The Demon actually has some kind words for Erin. "Zhat was sweet, ma chien!" My bitch. "How in zhe 'ell did you DO zhat?"

"Ah, merci! It was simple, non? My auntie is Catholic! She went to spend duex weeks at the Shrine, some little inn there on the isle.... Many go pour the health, jou see!"

"Bon chance pour vous! Welcome to zhe fraternity!" This demon gives her a rare and winning grin that almost makes his eyes.

Erin smiles. What fraternity is that? Are you making me a Topdog? Not likely. The fraternity of liars? The fraternity of survivors? The fraternity of people with Aunts at the Shrine? No matter. I kept it together. I'll live. "Merci." A small, almost imperceptible and unconscious curtsy of deference plays across her body: a miniscule shrug, a slight bowing, a parting of waist-high hands, legs ever so-slightly bent at the knee and opened at the thigh. Erin does not even notice that she does it.

He does. A grin plays across The Demon's face. She has just proffered herself to her new Royalty. As it should be. "Bon. 'Ave fun with zhe moto." He turns to get on his motorcycle.

Erin sighs. She has hardly stopped shivering from the last part of the ride, along the lake. She climbs onto the seat of her new motorcycle to prepare for another seventy- to one-hundred-mile-per-hour assault on her increasingly cold and stiff body.

The Demon looks ahead, and suddenly he is off in a roar, Laurent close behind him. Erin steels herself, jumps down on the peg of the kick-start, and struggles to make it through all the shifts smoothly, quickly, so she can catch up. Off to Montreal. Off to a new life. Or the end of it?

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Montreal can be surprisingly quiet at night, in places. They roll up to a large metal warehouse bathed in bright industrial lights, and the men shut off engines. The roar and boom and rattle echoes back for a moment until Erin, late to take her cue, shuts off her engine, too. Sudden stillness arrives, a hollow thing where noise used to be, even though there remains movement: A man stretching. Erin shivering. The Demon peering around warily, regarding the nearby rooftops and cornices like enemies. There is a stillness like the very atmosphere has been sucked out of the place. The modern metal building sits perpendicular to a taller, sprawling brick once-factory that it was cobbled onto, ungracefully, years ago. The many and regular rows of unlit windows in the three stories of the older building are dark black voids, holes in an otherwise sodium-yellow wall of brick that is probably dirty red in the normal, daytime, sun-derived light of the known world. The orange alpenglow of city lights illuminates the thickening cloud-bottoms over Montreal and makes the whole scene alien, other-wordly, Martian. Laurent and The Demon kick down their stands and get off to light cigarettes.

Laurent looks at Erin, still astride Dave's motorcycle, and speaks sideways to The Demon. "In or out?"

The Demon chuckles. "In for a penny, in for a kilo, eh?" He crooks a finger at Erin, then flicks it back. All one careless, severe, quick-enough-to-be-missed gesture. "Allons." Come. "See nothing and maybe you will live."

Lovely. The hair stands up on Erin's neck, but she smiles playfully, sets up the heavy motorcycle on the kickstand, then hops off artfully. Tres interessant, eh? How interesting. They

threaten my life to my face now. She perks out her chest, flips her platinum-by-day hair, and winks. Bastards. You have no idea, the secrets I already keep....

So the three of them troop up a short set of stairs on a loading dock that joins the two buildings, their footsteps bell-like. They pause as Laurent opens a door, and then the building swallows them whole. Quiet returns to the night for just a second, and then the city sounds gradually intrude again: The din of tires on the nearby L'Autoroute. The hum from high-voltage wires plunging from somewhere overhead into a transformer yard adjacent to the old factory. A bell on a railroad locomotive. The roar of a speeding car in bad repair. Sirens, far away. The deep roar of jetliners not too far away. A thrumming harmonic burble that moves with a ship's radio mast, just visible over the top of the warehouse roof. The echoes of a thousand voices, autos, planes, boats, alarms, trains, ambulances, all amplified and blended and anonymized by the perpendicular and vertical cement surfaces of a sprawling and climbing international port city.

Inside, the bikers cross three dimly-lit, cement-floored truck bays, with Erin scurrying to keep up. Their footsteps echo off the cement walls around them: slap, slap, slap. Then, up a short set of metal steps, a different sound: thok, thok, thok. A pause, as Laurent knocks twice. They spill into an office of sorts, where the night crew is hard at work. Two men sit on opposite sides of a heavy metal desk: grumpy-looking, ageless older men with thin faces, tiny bourgeois French noses, long greying hair spilling over their shoulders, and hard expressions. They face each other over the surface in quiet concentration.

A bottle of Canadian whiskey open on the desktop between them draws Erin's immediate attention. Oh, how I wish....

An ash-tray beside the bottle overflows with used-up cigarette butts, a few tiny remnants of hand-rolled stubs, a cough-drop wrapper. Playing cards lay out on both sides of the desk, the reason for the concentration that suffuses the air around the table in a palpable mist. Or maybe it's just cigarette smoke long gone to a general haze.

Silence.

One of the "night watchmen," if that's what they are, takes a pull of the whiskey, right from the bottle. He does not even turn an eye towards the intrusion, as he continues to study his cards and his opponent, but instead takes his measure of import, fight, or flight from the changing expressions on the face of his compatriot: friends, they are, apparently, but with a twist.



The other man, the one who has bothered to turn his attention to this intrusion, lights another smoke and sits back to scowl at the three of them with his cheeks sucked in around his cigarette, eyes appraising and calculating, his head veiled by a dense and spreading plume of smoke already ascending towards a dull brown spot on the ceiling directly above his seat, the residue of this very act repeated a thousand times a thousand times in this very spot.

The first sets the bottle down and leans back jovially as he finally turns to take a measured inventory of the visitors, and especially of Erin.

Erin thinks they could be twins, so alike do they look. *Repetez, s'il vous plait!* Bikers, but swaddled in smooth, slick, shiny colorful chemises that suit bankers or lawyers instead of the flannel button-ups and cotton hoodies she is used to seeing on these men. *Alors!* The cost of those clothes! Before this, she's only seen silk at work, on women. I am having what they call Errant Thoughts. Concentrate, and I will live. She keeps her face stoic, impassive, her mouth pouty. Best not to smile before I know why we are here, and thus appear stupid. She smiles with her eyes, though. They like that, the pouty mouth and the smiley eyes. They always do. Everyone must like me now, or I will be taken to the woods. An instant of darkness and she sees Dave's fallen body, for just a flicker of a second, as swinging car headlights pass over and through the brush between his body and the road. His face is twisted, frozen, with vacant eyes and colorless lips.

She sees him exactly as he actually is now, though it is not possible for her to know that. A police car is using the turnout 100 miles to the south for a turn-around. A random, unconnected visit that will be brief and repeated a thousand times before The Body brings them in droves.

He is lying broken in the woods and so will I, too, if I fuck this up. She comes back to the bright room.

The man who was looking Erin up and down has turned his attention to Demond, as he is known to them. "So."

The other Watchman, The Smoker, as Erin is already calling him, scrutinizes the end of his cigarette as it burns. Staring, really. His attention is neither in this room nor somewhere else.

The Demon looks to Laurent and nods. You may answer for us.

Laurent clears his throat. "It's all out there, falling south. I wouldn't say it went 'FINE,' but there's no problem with the treasure." He isn't sure how to bring up the killing. Or if he even should. Does it matter?

The Demon knows it does. "Oui. Mais...." But.... He begins again: "We had a complication, as you can see."

The staring, silent Watchman suddenly comes to life. His blank stare swerves from the cigarette tip to look straight into Erin's eyes, as he says, "I can see that." His sudden, merry smile adds a twinkle to his own eyes as he says, "One of you grew some curves!"

The faces of these old ones are French, but this accent could be from anywhere English. They are not from here, not from Montreal.

The man's gentle merriment does not comfort Erin. She shivers, merely being looked at by this bedraggled, unkempt man who is draped in a wealth of exquisitely-cut and tailored fabric. She does not know why he makes her feel so cold-to-the-bone.

The other Watchman, The Drinker, clarifies: "Or, one of you didn't come back."

The Demon sighs his answer tiredly or resignedly. "Oui."

The two Watchmen look at each other and chime in unison:

"Well, which the fuck is it?!?"

"Well, which the fuck is it?!?"

Raucous laughter from the two of them.

Chuckles from the two bikers, also, but quickly subsiding.

A nervous cluck from Erin, a bit late. Another errant thought: If they switched the bottle and the smoke, we would not know which was who.

Laurent is thinking, they sure don't look like much, but The Demon seems to be respectful. Scared? I don't know which, and maybe HE doesn't, so these fuckers must have some juice about them. Strange way to finally meet these two, bringing news that we killed one of our own. One of theirs. He decides to be matter of fact. "We thought we'd better leave one in the States."

The Demon glares at Laurent for speaking out of turn, and then tells the tale: "Oui. We 'ave left one behind, apres." After. "David was recognized. By Grandmere, it would seem."

Eyebrows lift up as the Canadian whiskey bottle goes down to the table. The cigarette is forgotten for a moment. Serious, sharp looks from both Watchmen now, the drunkenness and casual manner instantly replaced by businesslike intensity. "And...."

"Not 'David's Grandmere." The demon known to only a few, including these two men, by his proper name - Demond - shifts his feet. His European origins make it seem like he keeps saying 'NUT' instead of 'NOT' as he continues in his heavy accent: "Not David, whoever 'e was. Or not JUST David. She calls 'im someone else." The name 'Bruce' sounds like 'bruise' in his heavy, glottal, rolling, continental accent: "'Bruce,' she spoke it." He looks up, makes eye contact. "And zhen 'e pissed his pantaloons, by way of reply."

"Shit."

"Oui." Demond grimaces. "Zhere is more..."

The office is silent, palpably pregnant with anticipation.

Erin tries to keep her eyes from going wide. Well? She doesn't understand any of it, of course. David had a Grandmother? Her mind has gone simple from sudden anxiety.

The Demon sighs. "I am czertain zhat 'e knew zhe woman." He gestures back and forth: you, me. "Nous connaissons... We know cette femme certainment. J'ai regarde cette maison celquefois." In his well-contained excitement and alarm, his only slip is that he keeps flipping between languages. We certainly know her. I have watched her house sometimes.

The old men understand all, and all, now.

The whiskey-drinking one leans forward with a startle. "The Wendell woman?"

Demond nods wearily. "Le meme." The same.

A merry audible and visible snort issues from the Smoking One, two merging streams of smoke shooting from his nose. "We have come full circle, then."

"Oui" The Demon - Demond - looks at his shoes. Embarrassed, perhaps. "Zhe two 'ave become one."

The Drinker slams down his glass. "So now we know."

THEY know, but Erin doesn't know: WHAT on EARTH is this Demon fellow is talking about? Erin fidgets in the silence, not aware that all this had occurred inside the quick-stop gas station while she was outside, waiting. As far as Erin knows, these men have coveted her, have fought over her, and she is now property of the winners, whether she likes it or not. She does NOT. She liked Dave. He was - well, had BEEN - polite, reserved, respectful of her, and very good looking. She had not thought she would become the property of these 'Dogs. Yes, sniffing around me like dogs, exactly! How quickly a rational descision becomes un-rational, irrational. Grandfather, I have screwed up! Do they see her eyes roll heavenward for just a flicker,

beseeking, as she converses with the long-dead? She misses the gist of the conversation happening right around her, so busy are her thoughts. Erin's eyes are open, present, seeing all. Her ears are hearing. Her mind is not with her. She does not catch the vital next thoughts from this demon in front of her.

Demon shrinks the whirl of his rapid thoughts and impressions to the concise: "I think our David was zhe gendarme." The cop. The center of any spinning circle is surrounded by movement on all sides, but is itself resolved into a motionless single molecule simultaneously going in the average of all directions - the mean leads to a single point. Demon is likewise resolved, now. "Zhe cop or zh'enformer. While unexpected, it would explain much about zhe young man." This demon deflates for a moment as the room assimilates his statement. The winded expression and sagging shoulders are an unusual affect for such a man.

From Drinking Watchman: "What the fuck'd he know, anyway?! He learned this warehouse deal on the way down. That's IT, right?!?"

Looks all around. Each man scrutinizing the others for clues. What did YOU tell him, eh? Each man mentally tallying what he'd told this 'Dave' brother, or not-so-brother, and what he'd heard told to the man by others.

Erin's flesh crawls. She has awoken to the fact that something weighty is being discussed here. Something much graver than her own future. Why am I here? I should not be here! Keep it together, Girl! She finds a convenient spot on the wall to focus her attention: Topdogs biker calendar, twelve-month spread, 1996. Suddenly a very bad year. Erin stares at the picture: a motorcycle, a dangerous-looking minion - like these men - astride it, with a token topless waif sitting demurely behind. Oh. That's me, now. How unreal. She manages not to jump by force of will when she hears a hard slap on the desk behind her.

A voice, one of the old men: "Listen! Everything he learned that only 'Dogs know, as far as business, he learned on this trip. You were with him the whole time?"

Erin, still with her back to them, now listening intently, tries to make sense of any of this, while remaining invisible. Silence behind her, which she tries to interpret, but cannot. She can't turn to study their faces. Hear nothing - or pretend I did not - and I may live.

The same voice, maybe. One of them, anyway: "Then we're fine. Good time to close the book on this kid." Pause. A long, noisy exhale. "As it were."

Ah! The Smoker.

The other voice: "Means nothing anyway. Might be a cop, might be an informant, might just be he knew someone. We all have reasons to leave our past. Nicknames, used to move on. No matter that. Probably the mistake of a boy."

Erin hears the Demon's voice close behind her.

"It makes moi nervous...."

Involuntarily, she turns towards him. His back is to her, he is facing the table, but he is close. Very, very close. Her skin crawls and the hair stands up on the back of her neck.

The Demon collects his thoughts and continues: "Zhe boy... zhat one 'as learned much about zhe Topdog along zhe way, non?"

A long exhale, smoke streaming from the man's nostrils, and then The Smoker dismisses that worry. "So they know a little bit more about our CLUB!" He waves the trouble away with his cigarette. "No different than when we sent that puppy up through the ranks at the Royal Canadian Mount-Each-Other. We know their rules, they know ours." He shrugs, takes a long draught off his smudge. "Feck 'em."

The drinking Watchman leans forward over the desk they are using as a table, his two eyes interrogating, his face bisected by the neck of the whiskey bottle. "SHE makes me nervous. Where did you find THIS one, eh?"

The Demon swivels on one heel, grabs Erin's arm, and then gently turns her.

Erin is surprised he can be so gentle; that hard angry man is touching her with just his fingertips, respectfully, actually, as he steers her around in a circle so she is in front of him, by the desk, looking down at a seated Watchman. Placing her there so delicately and precisely with the same hands that have just killed Dave.... She is sick and shocked and taking part in the unreal, obviously. Her stomach flips before she has even fully articulated the thought to herself: Now I face my end. I wonder if the ball of snakes will land on this desk, right here?

Demond answers, now that the exhibit is in place. "'DAVE,' or 'BRUCE,' or whichever 'e was, picked la fille" - the girl - "up on Saint Catherine's." A well-known street not very far away from where they are now. "Very easy, but appeared legitimate, non?" He is looking at Laurent for confirmation.

Laurent, relieved to have permission to speak to defend this poor beautiful bitch, is ready to give alibi: "Ya, wrong place at the wrong time... or right place at... aw, fuck, you know what I mean! Happenstance, anyway."

Laughter from the desk, then from The Demon, a beat late.

A Watchman slaps the table in merriment, and Erin DOES flinch this time, but the man says, "See how she confuses him! He cannot even SPEAK when he is looking at her!" More howls of laughter from both Watchmen.

Demond waits, and then adds, "Oui. But my poor, smitten compatriot is correct. We picked zhe bar, zhe route, everything.... Just a girl looking for a ride duex weeks ago, one zhat seems to 'ave stuck around. Or, 'e kept la fille pour le peux d'amusement." Or he kept the girl for a little amusement. "So? Maintenant?" Now? He spreads his hands, bobbing them up and down, weighing, but one hand is lower and one is higher.

It is olbvious, what he means. Erin stiffens, and squares her breasts out, a reflex. What, am I not here, or something? The snakes are roiling inside her rib cage, almost up in her neck, struggling to get out. She wishes she WASN'T here, wishes she was back in the club with men trying to lick her when the bouncer wasn't looking, wishes she was ANYWHERE. I was STUPID to leave that club! She forgets, in that moment, why she knew she had to. Lost in thought, she doesn't realize that now she looks angry.

"See!" Smoking Watchman gestures with his ever-present cigarette. "We talk about many things, and she has yet to bat an eyelash!" He sits back. "She saw it, though?"

No one has to say what "it" means. Nods. Close enough to seeing, anyway.

The Watchman speaks from behind the flare of his lighter as he fires yet another smoke. "She would not be with us," - a pause for a puff - "here if she hadn't seen it." He raises his eyebrows to make it a question, but his tone is final, flat, defining.

The other Watchman takes a drink from the tall bottle, then points at Erin with the neck of it. "A rock! A beautiful, curvy, sparkling rock, that one! Look at her now, here with you! We speak of her future, and she boldly displays herself, without blush or balk!" The Watchman turns, cocks his head, and inquires of the other warehouse man: "I think we give her a job, eh?" He does not wait for an answer. "Yes! That is what we do!"

With that, the smoking Watchman stubs out his used-up cigarette with one angry smash, grabs the bottle from the desk, and stands up. Erin turtles her neck ever so slightly, waiting for the blow. Instead, the man bends down beside the desk and stands back up holding up a large blue duffel. He tosses it on the desk in front of Erin and points. "Here, beauty! Count this mess!" He gestures towards his chair like a real gentleman.

Erin doesn't move.

The Demon bows his head and stretches out his hand. My lady: chair. Sit.

Erin hesitates still, then loosens her body to strut as alluringly as she can around the desk towards the chair and the bag. If they like me, I will live.

The smoker steps aside to politely make way for her, and then pats her ass cheek as she squeezes by.

Figures. She flashes the man a sweet smile as she turns to face him. "Jou would get along well with moi brother." Erin plops gracefully into the chair and settles herself demurely, even as her insides quiver with worry. What the Saints have I got myself into NOW?

"Why, thank you, Miss." Smoking Watchman stands over her and scrutinizes her clinically. Not a leer, and not something safe, either.

I wonder if he wants to kick my tires, too?

The whiskey Watchman waits for her to be settled and then unzips the bag under her nose. He rummages in the desk, shuts a drawer, and tosses a scrap of paper and a pencil in Erin's general direction. "You may need these."

She gives him a stoney smile, shrugs, and goes to work.

Her face is hidden behind her white-blond hair, but they can tell when she realizes it....

She reaches to spread the bag open and freezes. The WHOLE bag is stuffed FULL of MONEY. A whisper escapes her: "Holy fuckin' shi...." She has forgotten herself and reverted to un-accented English. So much money. Even in the club, after a busy night, she hadn't seen a hundredth or maybe even a thousandth of what is here in this duffel! She catches herself. Keep it together!

They were waiting for it, these Watchmen. They love a girl's reaction to money. With every one it is different, but they all react. They can see it in the bob of her hair and the sudden stiffening of her back. Smirks around the room.

Erin doesn't know where to start. There is probably \$500,000 U.S. in there, maybe more! Mixed denominations, nothing banded, a mess of wealth.

The man with the whiskey bottle knows exactly how much, of course.

Smoking Watchman opens a door to another room. The other one gives a toss of his head to their guests: Let's go. Then he and his buddy file out of the room, followed by the two Topdogs.

The smoking Watchman turns on the other side of the door, reaches down to a phone jack, and unplugs the cord. "Just in case, eh?" He stands back up.

The whiskey Watchman closes the door after Laurent and Demond pass through it, and then turns his attention to the two bikers. "THAT will keep her busy and occupied for a bit. Which is exactly what I want YOU two to be! Not out of your sight! Find out what her name - REAL name - is, where she is from, and then we will know what to do with her, eh?"

The smoking Watchman is already putting a cigarette to his lips. As he flourishes his worn steel and nickel lighter, he pauses long enough to issue another directive: "And find out who the Hell is this brother, too."

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A few hours later the Watchmen, or whatever they are, bustle about in the vacant office, picking up bottles and ashtrays. The Topdogs and their new muse are long gone.

The working people will be in soon; the sun will be up, and a different world will descend on the warehouse complex. Paper, actual, real paper - newsprint - will be bought and sold, received in 12-foot high spools that weigh seven thousand pounds. The spools will be un-rolled, cut to sheet size, palleted or boxed according to size of the finished sheet, and re-sold on the commodities market. Trimmings too small to sell - remnants, in other words - will be compressed, baled, and shipped south across the border to a recycler as feed-stock for a pulping operation at some paper mill. Once in a while, a bale of something else may happen to be in the middle of the load. This paper warehouse is both an excellent way to launder money and a convenient device for shipping certain prohibited items across the border. This particular company has been engaged in the dual-business model since the first Prohibition, the United States of America's Eighteenth Amendment of 1919. Back then bottles of Canadian whiskey were nestled into cutouts in tall stacks of newsprint in boxcars.

The smoking Watchman uses his shirt-sleeve - eight hundred dollars worth of worm-spun, loom-woven, wax-died fabric right there, used as a rag - to wipe fallen cigarette ash off the desk-top. He looks up with a grin. "How much did she take?"

"You want to know if she cleaned us out, eh?" The whiskey watchman grins ruefully, a stage-pout belied by his merry eyes. "Paupers, we are not." He straightens up from emptying



the waste-basket into a bag that they will carry away with them and pulls down his own silk shirt to straighten the front. "The little bitch only took thirty-six dollars."

"And how much was there before she played with it?"

"One hundred and seventeen thousand, seven hundred, and thirty-six."

"It must have looked like a million to her, the way she perked when she looked in the bag."

He grins, remembering the soft, taught feel of her backside in his hand. "So... you suppose thirty-six dollars is what she gets for a pat on the ass at Club Castor et Chat?" These men had already found out that much about little Erin.

"She must think so, eh?"

"She must know we'd check."

"She knew. That was a little thirty-six dollar fuck-you if I ever saw it."

Hearty laughs as they swing out the door, pause to squint into the dawn, and then lurch down the factory steps to a rare-model Bavarian sedan parked behind the loading dock in the still-shadows of the fast-disappearing night.

By that time, Erin, Laurent, and The Demon are passed-out in a hotel room on the opposite side of the city.

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The Watchmen had donated a couple of bottles of whiskey from their case towards a sleep aid, and these quickly went in the motorcycle saddle-bags with some ice from an all-hours petrol station. It is now three AM on this sultry late-summer evening, and all three riders are tired out, each stressed for entirely different reasons, united in silence.

Laurent rents them a room with a pair of double beds. He keys in, doesn't even wait for the other two to enter, but instead lurches into the room in exhaustion with an armload of beer cans and the two cold bottles. He falls back against a wall and slowly slides down to eye level with the dark screen of the institutional TV that is on a low table across the room. Quietly and tiredly, without emphasis: "Merde, chu fatigue."

It sounds like a third language (Spanish? Portugese? Coptic?) has entered the mix, but actually it has not. Quebecois is starting its tectonic, Darwinian drift away from continental French. Chu: a Quebecism for 'je suis.' In six more generations, it will take a whole group to

suss out the actual meaning of an everyday conversation on the streets of Canada's French-language province: someone from Scotland, a German, people from three different regions in France, someone from an Eskimo village, and also a long-time resident of Paris, a place with a language all of its own. For now, these people right here mostly speak a mix of French and English and 'American.' The combination is sufficient to be understood in the moment: Shit, I am tired.

Outside still, The Demon bows his head and extends his arm towards the entry. Well?

Erin takes a steeling breath of the outside air - My last? - and walks into their new lair.

Laurent rips the foiled cap of a whiskey bottle to the left and takes his first pull on the bottle. "Cette journee est fuckee." He has lapsed again into his native tongue in his exhaustion: What a screwed-up day.

The Demon shuts the cheap door, looks around at the furnishings, and falls sideways on a bed. He speaks a single word, a reply to Laurent, without looking over at him. "Oui."

A pause, as the two collect themselves and the third tries to understand what has happened.

Eventually, the Demon's head swivels in that snake-like manner of his, and he scowls in the general direction of their new blonde partner. "Partez en coulle pour certainment." Yup, it's gone to shit for sure. The scowl passes to puzzled, rueful merriment as he dismisses her from his thoughts.

Laurent passes up the bottle. The Demon drinks, then passes it back. That is how they stay for the next hour: Laurent, getting drunk, staring at a blank TV; The Demon reclined, pensive, untroubled, and occasionally sitting up momentarily to drink the cold whiskey like it's iced tea in a really BIG bottle. Back and forth goes the bottle. Erin, standing, ignored, and quite happy enough about that, leans against the bathroom doorway in her own world. She is scared, angry, confused, and doing her best not to let any of that show. She has one of the big, clear, cold glass bottles to herself, and is carefully sipping the amber from it, though hardly any is gone after an hour.

Laurent passes out sometime later, while he has the bottle.

The remaining wakeful outlaw ignores Erin for long enough that eventually she feels safe. She takes a couple of big swallows from the whiskey bottle, crosses to the unoccupied bed, rolls herself up in a bedcover, and flops onto her side. Maybe if I make myself hard to get at, these two won't try to screw my sleeping ass. She checks to make sure she is firmly rolled up in the

coverlet and then turns one more time. She faces the bathroom, away from the other two. After a time, tears slowly stream sideways down her face. Crying for Dave's life, her life, their future, her future, no future. Erin is suddenly very drunk, or very tired. She isn't sure, and doesn't care. She feels oblivion coming. She speaks without turning. "Why did jou kill that man?"

Silence in the room. Somewhere out front a car door thumps, an engine starts, a fan belt squeals.

The Demon thinks she is fairly smart, already distancing herself, not using the dead man's familiar name. He's seen that on the field of battle before. She might just make it. He answers, after considering for a few moments: "Le garçon, 'e was not who 'e said 'e was. Unknown. Zhat is dangerous, eh? As are jou, for now." He has said more than he intended to. A veritable speech, for him, and with a stranger. Perhaps he is drunk. No matter. She might be dead by next week. Or tomorrow.

The ball of snakes surges and tames and surges and tames and then goes away. Something between resolve and drunken lack of care replaces it. She unrolls and comes to rest at the edge of the bed, facing him. She holds the bed-cover up. "Know me."

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