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Trick turned the corner and watched a guy get shot; it was her fourth dead body two weeks past her seventeenth birthday.

The first was a bit of a freebie. Back when she was five and still went by Trixie, she was dragged along to her great-grandfather's open casket funeral, and remembered feeling relieved that the pained, smelly old man she had met only once had now learned to relax. Trick knew that it was all a show, that he was really sleeping, but she played along and didn't reveal his secret to anyone so he could nap uninterrupted.

The second, like this fourth one, was against the sidewalk. Trick had been walking herself home when she came across the site of an accident, and some poor lady who didn't put her seatbelt on lied in a pile in front of her, like dirty laundry on a bedroom floor, pointing in several directions at once. It was gross, sure, but what really bothered her was the lady's apathetic expression, like this was more of an inconvenience than anything.

She didn't talk about the third one.

Trick thought about running. She thought *really hard* about running, but it took her feet a little while to agree. In a place like Vegas, where guns and booze and the odds of getting fucked over are bountiful, shootings aren't hard to come by. But a white guy in a suit getting shot by a bunch of other white guys in suits? Trouble. It got darker, and Trick realized she had ducked into an alley, sidestepping the trash cans and skipping over shards of glass from beer bottles long abandoned.

Trick trusted her feet to guide her to somewhere safe. What choice did she have? She couldn't go to the police, 'cause she was still seventeen for a few more months, which meant they'd take her back to that damn house she so successfully avoided for the better part of two years, and also fuck the police. No, she'd just have to run, and pretend she didn't see anything, which was admittedly a pretty futile task. The permanent terror stretched across the man in the suit's face made Trick wish for the complacency of the lady in the car crash, and the expression of the man holding the gun. The face of a man who had just taken a life.

Where was she? Trick squinted at the street signs and ran the mental map in her head. She was somewhere between Las Vegas, where people lived, and Vegas, where people went to say they've been. She looked around for any sign of the guys she saw amongst the herd of locals trudging to and from work.

"You look like a chicken with your head bobbin' around like that," croaked a voice behind her, a voice like steel wool drenched in phlegm. Crazy. Trick turned around to find him close enough to see the fog in his eyes. "Don't you know them chickens outnumber humans twenty-five to one?"

"Crazy, listen. There might be guys in suits after me."

"Course there are, when ain't there?" Trick knew not to push him any further. Crazy was somewhat of a homeless celebrity, the kind that was most likely to have been abducted by aliens, or secretly be John F. Kennedy.

"You didn't see me, you don't know me. Okay?"

"Tell me something I don't know," said Crazy, with a garbage disposal cackle. Good enough. Trick started to power-walk her way towards the *Santa Maria*.

The sun eased itself behind the copper-tinged mountains that surrounded Vegas like police tape. Trick made her way through the neon air as she approached the outer reaches of the Strip, towards Paradise. Before the gaudy luxury of all the resorts trying to look and sound European, stuffed with bachelor parties and baby boomer rock concerts, a carcass of a casino loomed dim and quiet: The Santa Maria Resort & Casino.

Trick waited for a cop car to turn the corner before throwing her backpack—pink, to get more pity—over the chainlink fence in front of the casino, and crawled under the well-traveled gap. The Santa Maria was built nearly a decade ago by an ambitious business tycoon who wanted to bring a “Caribbean flavor” to Vegas; in reality, he was a majority shareholder in a tiki torch company and wanted a venue where he could really drown the place in tiki shit. But a couple embezzlement schemes and a cliché secretary affair later meant he had to sell the place just two weeks after he built. The owners of the casino next door took over, and wanted to demolish the Santa Maria to build a new parking garage. The demolition crew forgot one explosive pack, so the building didn’t fall, and now it’s too dangerous and too expensive to do much about it, a concrete house of cards that stands crippled behind the technicolor glamour of the Strip, waiting for a strong enough breeze to topple it over.

Trick didn’t know how much of that was true. Stories tend to grow in minds empty of other obligations, and being homeless can actually be really boring at times. What was true was that this abandoned casino still stood, and more importantly, its gift shop still stood, the titular *Santa Maria*. She was a model galleon, proudly anchored in front of the building, complete with a busty, winking mermaid as a figurehead and fiberglass sails rippling in a frozen gust.

Kalani let her in. She was a couple years younger and a couple feet taller than Trick. Trick hugged her on sight, and quickly closed the door behind her.

While the exterior of the *Santa Maria* was faded yet presentable, the interior was more of a fixer-upper. About twenty feet bow to stern, the walls were lined with verses of poetry, abandoned tic-tac-toe games, emergency contact numbers, graffiti, murals, sketches; no one was a particularly good artist. Sleeping bags of various sizes, shapes, and smells were strewn about—one of these was filled by someone Trick couldn't identify from the tuft of hair poking out. A few battery-powered fans were arranged haphazardly across the floor in a futile attempt to fight the Mojave sun that leaked through the porthole, the only window and light source in the whole ship. Trick remembered feeling guilty about the mess at first, but after realizing that in a business where the main rivals were Native Americans, the owners of this place named it "Santa Maria", Trick didn't really mind lowering the property value.

"I didn't see you at the mission, dear," squeaked a voice behind Trick, belonging to someone once named Martin but now known affectionately as Mom, who despite her bird's nest beard and inch-long arm hair still applied her shoplifted mascara with a knowing hand. It always looked great.

"Yeah Trick, where were you? You missed the birthday feast." said Kalani. Trick realized, in waves, that they were talking about the Rescue Mission which provided food every day from five to six sharp; a doomed glance at her Mickey Mouse watch revealed 6:28.

"Shit, guys," managed Trick, as if that would explain everything. "I got caught up. Something distracted me." The face of the man with the gun flashed in her memory again, blurry except for the eyes.

“Hon, you’re shaking.” Mom’s hand clasped Trick’s. She was right. The *Santa Maria* was her sanctuary, and she still didn’t feel safe. Something was off, something was wrong, it was like something that looked red but tasted blue.

Kalani took Trick’s other hand, which made her shake in a different way, and gently sat her down. Trick focused on her breathing, blowing an imaginary balloon like she had learned in kindergarten. When she was done, Kalani rummaged in her backpack and produced a bag of weed.

“Since you missed the feast,” said Kalani, carefully cutting her rolling papers, “you can enjoy the afterparty.” At this, the figure in the sleeping bag turned around.

“We about to smoke?” He had pronounced cheekbones—a sign of either good bone structure or malnourishment—and snowboarder hair. He wriggled out of his sleeping bag and already had his lighter out. Trick stared at Kalani until she cleared her throat.

“Trick, this is Amos. He helped with the weed.” They exchanged nods as Amos lit the joint.

Trick sat across from the porthole, in line with the setting sun. She held the joint so it looked like the sun was lighting it for her, that the rays had traveled millions of miles through the cold vacuum of space just to spark one up. It was good weed, or maybe the occasion had become so rare that her standards lowered. Either way, her breathing was back to normal, and the thoughts of what she saw earlier were now eclipsed by her growing hunger. It wasn’t that big of a deal; it was late, and red-eyed convenience store workers would happily ignore her pocketing a cellophane-wrapped sandwich and small bag of chips if it meant less work. She adjusted her

back, trying to find the comfiest position against the curved hell of the *Santa Maria*, half-listening to Kalani's birthday recap, and pondered sleep. Someone said her name.

"Huh?" Alert. Tense. She didn't like how her voice sounded, and how suddenly and profoundly uncomfy the wall had become. Kalani couldn't help but smile.

"What distracted you, Trick? I was gonna sneak into that new Sandra Bullock bullshit, but I wanted to go with you." They bonded over trash talking rom-coms in the blessedly air-conditioned cinemas.

"Not distracted. More like, grossed out. Vegas stuff, y'know? Makes you lose your appetite." Trick wondered who she was lying for. She took another drag, and handed it off to Amos.

"Vegas stuff," he repeated through gritted teeth, clutching the joint in place as his calloused thumb worked the lighter. He sucked on the joint for a few seconds and tried to blow a smoke ring. "This shithole's always been like this. This is the place they dropped nukes for fun. This is where your grandma came to try to fuck Tom Jones. This is where a fool and his money are parted. If you can't handle filth, you're in the wrong town sweetheart." Trick shot another gaze at Kalani, this one coated with menace. Kalani shrugged with an apologetic smile, and took the joint. Trick opened her mouth to say something she knew she'd regret.

*Thump thump thump*. Someone banged on the door, and all inside knew how cops knock on things. Kalani put out the joint with a stomp and squish from her battered Converse, and Trick generously spritzed the air from their emergency air freshener. *Thump thump thump*.

"I saw you through the window, guys, open up. You're trespassing so I have my right to barge in here. I just wanna talk." Amos got back in his sleeping bag and immediately pretended

to be asleep; Mom, who didn't smoke, had genuinely been asleep for half an hour. Trick and Kalani locked eyes again, and Trick saw her fear: young, pretty Hawaiian girls gave some cops certain impulses, and she wasn't ignorant to the weight of her word against his. *Thump thump thump.*

Trick opened the door. The most cop-ass looking cop she'd ever seen towered in front of her. Pale, burly hands hovering a little too close to his belt, the practiced scowl of a man who didn't laugh at poop jokes as a kid, who recites the Pledge of Allegiance outside of school, glaring down at her. He was even wearing a fucking cowboy hat: all that was missing was a sheriff's star and a mustachioed ne'er-do-well hogtied behind him. He nudged his head toward the interior of the *Santa Maria*.

"Is there a Trixie there?"

"No one called Trixie here."

"That's what they said you'd say. I'm Officer Calhoun." He said it like it would be followed by a handshake but didn't. "I'm afraid you're our key witness."