

Regions of Passion  
Tag Cavello  
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Smashwords Edition

Regions of Passion  
by  
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*For Rose*

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## *Part One: Departure*

## I. Man

*"In a realm of chaos there is no striving but towards order. We are born, we destroy ourselves, and then we are born again."*

This is a quote from one of the region's most beloved philosophers, a man by the name of Gielgood Goldenbough, dead these many centuries through the misfortune of being struck by a falling tree during a lightning storm. According to accounts that were sketchy at best, he had been dashing home through the rainy streets from one of his own lectures, this one concerning the spiritual benefits of growing and tending fruit orchards. But whatever the circumstances of his demise, all who respected his doctrines and dogmas agreed that a great man had been taken from them. His teachings, his writings, would be forever considered cornerstones of the region's political architecture.

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Woodward Cambridge was no student of Goldenbough's. The philosopher's works, in his opinion, had always seemed too tame, too trite, to wield any real influence. But there was one belief he shared with the dead thinker: Where there was order, there was prosperity. No region, large or small, could hope to achieve balance and functionality amongst its people without a proper guidance system in place. No kingdom, mighty or meek, could hope to stand the test of time without the existence of a healthy political machine in its castle.

Cambridge's ruling over his own castle was testament. The servants who worked in it, though small in number, followed a tight regime as they went about their tasks. They were forbidden to take actions outside of their jurisdictions. The laundry ladies were not allowed to polish the furniture. The furniture polisher was not allowed to do any cooking. The cook was not allowed to sweep the steps. And so on and so forth. And while it was true that such tasks would indeed be fixed to the appropriate individuals, in any castle, Cambridge felt that by tethering them to their specific duties he eliminated any chance that one of them might lay blame for an interruption in the order of things upon another. Indeed, each servant was required to place his or her name onto a service parchment before performing any duty. If a stain should ever show up on one of his tunics in the morning, Cambridge would be able to discover exactly who had washed that tunic the night before. Should a mound of dust ever be found beneath any of the castle's many curving, stone steps, Cambridge would have no trouble finding out who had swept those steps so sloppily. And should any of his meals ever be inadequate--the potatoes undercooked, the coffee too strong, the sweet-cake too dry--it would be a simple matter of looking at the service parchment to find out who had done what, and at which time.

Order--yes, order. The castle almost rang with it. Servants came and went, obsequious, fastidious. They knew what was expected of them--indeed, what was demanded of them. They worked with faces devoid of expression, and when they spoke

to their master, they did so in low, even tones, displaying fear and respect in equal measure. Only two had been removed over the past year: one for dropping an antique teacup in the kitchen, another for coughing outside the door to get his attention. The latter had been concerned about bats nesting in one of the castle towers, but he had interrupted Cambridge from a particularly pleasant memory about the taste of a young girl's blood. The cough had been annoying--almost impatient. That servant's bones were today drying in a dungeon beneath the castle.

Outside, beyond the moat, things were different. From his bedchamber high in the east wing, Cambridge had a fine view of one of the region's more lush forests. To the right of that forest was a body of water known as Coldfrock Lake. To the left, a road led into a landscape of rolling hills. A full midnight moon shined upon this scene. A light wind whispered. Bracts from a nearby dogwood tumbled through the air. Peace and tranquility seemed to hold court in every shadow, in every splash of moonlight. Yet Cambridge was not fooled. He sipped his tea, gazing at the region with a face that wore no expression, but with eyes reflecting a calm cynicism for the secrets so poorly hidden behind the pretty dalliance of the night. Two hundred years of living in this place had stripped away the masquetry.

A sudden knock at the door broke his chain of thought. "Come in," he called moodily.

The door opened. In it stood a tall, lean man in a pressed gray suit. He did not cross the threshold, instead choosing to speak his purpose for the intrusion from the candlelit hallway.

"My apologies, sir," he began, "but there's a disturbance at the southern area of the castle. A large wolf is running loose in the pasture. The animals there are in a panic. There's danger of a stampede."

Cambridge's eyes grew wide. "A *wolf*?" he asked. The chair gave a squeak as he rose. "How certain are you of this?"

"Near to positive, sir."

"Come in, O'Connor. It's all right; you needn't speak from outside the door."

The man entered, his gait and expression maintaining a balanced dignity that Cambridge had come to appreciate over the many years he had spent under the castle's employ. He had started out as a prophet, reading tarot cards for the amusement of Cambridge's court. But it soon became apparent he possessed skills in other areas, particularly when it came to leadership. The lord of Coldfrock Castle had eventually promoted him to chief advisor, and from there to the position he held today.

"One of the parapet strollers spotted the beast skulking in the orchard. Its eyes, he said, seemed to be following our stock, as if on the hunt."

"I see. And how long ago was this?"

"Approximately thirty minutes ago, sir. I didn't wish to disturb you with any news that would later prove to be false. I ordered the stroller, along with four of his colleagues, to form a perimeter around the pasture"

Cambridge nodded. "And they are armed with kickshellacs I hope."

"Indeed, sir. With a bit of luck the beast will be trapped and disposed of with very little unpleasantness."

"We'll go down and join the strollers."

"Sir?"

O'Connor's eyes were gleaming in the moonlight, as were the features of his wrinkled, ruddy face. Cambridge did not expect to see fear there, nor did he. The pale beams picked out only two things: concern and, dare Cambridge even consider it, surprise. The latter was unusual, as O'Connor was not a man who wore his emotions publicly. But then again...

"Suppose you were attacked, sir?" he went on. "Injured or even..."

His words trailed off, but Cambridge caught the gist well enough. He smiled at his servant as he threw a light coat over his shoulders. "Attacked and injured. Or even something worse, eh?" He shook his head while walking towards the door. "No, no, O'Connor, I think not. In fact I rather feel the region is trying to prove a point to me tonight, and it needs me alive for that."

"What point, sir?"

Cambridge was still smiling as they stepped into the hall and headed for the stairs. "That there is, in fact, no striving towards order--that there will always be chaos."

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"I think it's time, O'Connor," he said, once they were at the pasture gate. "We have armies in hiding outside two of the region's major cities, correct? Thorncut and Dalandaniss?"

"That is correct, sir. And according to their reports, neither city is at all fitted for self-defense. In fact their inhabitants seem barely attentive to such things."

"That will change once we're in charge."

His eyes scanned the pasture and rested on a copse of trees some two hundred yards distant. According to one of the strollers, the wolf was cowering inside this copse. No doubt it knew full well it was surrounded--its nose had told it as much.

Thorncut and Dalandaniss were in a similar situation. The first was a port city, medium-sized, on the coast of the Yeetahtan Sea. The second was used as a stop for traders. They were neither safe nor especially clean, these cities. What they lacked in order, however, they more than made up for in arrogance and self-satisfaction. They offended Cambridge's love of arrangement, his passion for foundation. Did they now, like the wolf in the copse, sense, at least in some vague way, the coming demise of their wantonness?

Cambridge doubted it. It had been too long since they had known change; they were too far mired in their own improvisational lifestyle. But oh, how things were going to rumble, and soon. Years of planning had gone into the siege that was about to take place. It was time now to set a match to its fuse and watch the old, cavalier ways of the region be sent to oblivion. It would be ugly business. For awhile, at least, there would be even more chaos for the land. But when the dust settled--when all the fires and the flooding and the corpses of the dissidents had been swept away--there would be plenty of room to rebuild. There would be a church--*his* church. There would be an altar--*his* altar. And at last, there would be a bible. A bible of the new order.

"How about the ogres, O'Connor?" he asked, still studying the copse.

"I don't know, sir."

Cambridge looked at the man, unwilling to believe what he'd just heard. "I'm sorry? Could you repeat that, please?"

"I don't know, sir," O'Connor obliged, allowing a trace of penitence to cross his typically featureless expression.

It was this penitence that enabled Cambridge to maintain his temper. "Explain yourself," he demanded.

Just then a shout came from the other side of the pasture. The wolf was making a break for it. At the sight of it, dashing towards the fence on the far side, Cambridge had to gasp in a breath. The beast was heavy and black—a misshapen shadow cast on a wall. A low, angry growl emitted from its throat, as cries of *shoot! shoot!* came from the strollers on Cambridge's side of the pasture.

The wolf stopped and crouched, as if in hope the high grass would shelter it from danger. It then turned, abandoning this hope, and started running full speed directly at Cambridge.

"Sir!" O'Connor exclaimed.

Cambridge was backing away from the fence, with O'Connor following. The shadow closed in. Two red eyes, furious, desperate, gleamed in the moonlight. A mouth full of white fangs gaped. O'Connor stepped in front of his master, prepared to shield him to the death. One of the strollers fired a shot from his kickshellac and missed. Another cried out that his weapon was jammed. A second shot was fired--again, a miss. The wolf let out a long, triumphant roar, and Cambridge wondered for a moment whether or not the beast might be a giant gorilla running on all fours. But no--he got time to see that it *was* a dog of some sort, as it leaped into the air to tear him and O'Connor apart. There was a muzzle, dripping with saliva. There was fur, twisted and tangled. There were paws and toenails.

There was also a bullet, fired from one of the kickshellacs, that found its way into the flank of the creature, shattering its ribs, tearing through its lungs. Its roar of triumph turned to agony as it writhed and then crashed into the fence where Cambridge stood.

The sound of hissing, labored breathing followed. Cambridge stepped from behind O'Connor, peering at the dark shape lying in the grass. Distantly, he could hear the strollers approaching. Orders were being shouted, questions asked. Was everyone all right? Was the wolf dead?

"We're fine!" Cambridge yelled, not taking his eyes off the creature. He moved closer, wanting to get a better look.

"Sir you'll be bitten," O'Connor warned.

Cambridge stopped. He was close enough to see as much of the wolf as he wanted to. It was panting hard beneath a crooked fence-post, staring at the moon with draining red eyes.

"You see, O'Connor?" he said with a small, forced smile. "This is chaos." His hand gestured the beast. "This is disorganization. This is destruction. Mindless, whirlwind destruction. And it will not be stopped without an agent. A champion."

"No, sir."

"Tomorrow evening the armies attack. Thorncut and Dalandaniss will burn."

"Yes, sir."

Cambridge's voice lowered; he was still staring at wolf as it released its final breath and lay still. "We'll wait til they've had dinner. Their bellies will be full. They'll be slow. Sluggish."

"Yes, sir."

"Then we'll put out the fires. Clean things up. A new leader will emerge from the rubble." He turned to look at O'Connor. "They'll be better people for it in the end."

"Yes, sir."

By now the strollers who'd fired upon the beast had arrived, along with several others from the castle parapet. This latter party had no business whatsoever with tonight's events; Cambridge would get their names and see that they were punished. For now, however, there was still the wolf--or rather, the wolf's corpse. Cambridge was tempted to have it moved to the dungeon, gutted, and then stuffed as a trophy. But that would never work. The stroller who had shot it would no doubt pause to look at it every day. Pride would swell in his chest over time. He would tell stories to his friends and colleagues--yes, he would do this anyway, but it still irked Cambridge to know he'd have something physical to point at as well.

He asked who it was that shot the wolf. When the man stepped forward, Cambridge congratulated him soberly. He then sent them all back to their duties on the parapet.

"Have it burned in a pyre," he said to O'Connor, when they were alone. "I never want to see it again."

"Very good, sir."

He paused for a moment. "And then you will come inside, to my study, and tell me about the ogres." His eyebrow went up. "Understood?"

"Yes, sir," O'Connor replied, his voice not wavering so much as a jot.

Cambridge looked at the wolf one last time. Tomorrow night the end would begin. With Goldenbough's edict--in a realm of chaos there is no striving but towards order--serving as foundation for the entire movement, Cambridge would take control of the region, city by city, and show it a way of existence it had hitherto never known.

It would be ungrateful at first. There would be uprisings, rebellions. But Cambridge was a patient man. He'd been living in this world for a long time. The rebellions would be squelched, as much by his ability to interpret how the insurgents would feel and do things as by force. In a way, he even looked forward to this part of the game. Because afterward, of course, these very same insurgents (along with the rest of the region) would heap adoration and praise upon his head--or at least the ones left alive would.

Would, would, would. That word flashed in Cambridge's mind, over and over, as he walked back to the castle. The future was coming. A new region. The idea made his thoughts leap from one vision of glory to the next, and his belly churn with anticipation. The future was coming. It would be here soon.

It would, it would, it would.

## ***II. Girl***

*Ingrid Semeska* sat quietly inside the office of her high school guidance counselor, looking every bit like one of that counselor's prim and perfect students. Her small hands were folded in her lap. Her legs were crossed beneath the hem of a short but clean and pressed denim skirt. A light blue blouse, also clean and pressed, decorated her narrow chest. Her long brown hair shined in the sunlight coming through the window, lending its delicate curls an almost gilded appearance. To look at her, one would most certainly think: Now there is a girl with a future.

"Ingrid?" the guidance counselor, whose name was Martin Prewski, said. "Will you look at me, please?"

Ingrid turned from the window, where her eyes had been studying a cloud that looked like a castle. It looked pretty, yet Ingrid wasn't fooled. A storm was coming.

"Ingrid," the counselor said again, his voice more stern.

It irritated her. She was looking right at Prewski now--why was he still trying to get her attention? "Yes?" she replied, shrugging her shoulders.

He was a little bald man with glasses who liked to wear a beret in the halls when he could get away with it. It always made him look like an Italian jazz player from the nineteen-sixties. Except Prewski was more (oh so very much more) a man of today--of this day in late May of 1990. Unlike the guidance counselors Ingrid often saw on television, he never tried to talk to the students at their level, using their language. The beret no doubt was fakery enough for him. He was instead chilly and officious with any pupil who set foot inside his office. For him, you were either in or out. Only he never said it that way. Those that were *in* received warm smiles and friendly words of encouragement about what lay in wait beyond the doors of Norwalk High School in lovely little Norwalk, Ohio. Those that were *out* saw a man with a straight face, a tight lip, and an even tighter spiel about finding work in what he called "the general labor bracket".

Ingrid didn't even reach this high on his credibility scale.

"You're going to fail school this year," he said, his eyes bulbous and even a bit ichthyic behind the lenses of his glasses. "You're going to have to repeat the junior level next year. Unless of course you attend a summer school. But even that..." He trailed off with an exasperated sigh, shaking his head.

"You don't have to tell me this," Ingrid informed with dry weariness.

The fishy-eyes widened for a moment. "But I do, Ingrid. It's my job."

"And that's what's important?"

"Yes," he nodded. "My job is important to me. Responsibility is important, Ingrid. I've never been able to make you realize as much. That's my failure. *Your* failure"--he raised a copy of her transcript--"is here. In these grades. Your attendance record reveals quite a bit as well. To be frank I'm surprised the school hasn't sent a truancy officer to your doorstep yet."

"The school isn't taking me seriously anymore."

"I'm taking you seriously."

"No you're not."

He looked hurt. "But I am. It breaks my heart to see kids spiral down the drain like this." The transcript was raised again as he spoke. "Your freshman year was fine--Bs and Cs. A few As. Mrs. Hammersmith down in Arts and Theater was particularly enamored with you. Last year came a noticeable drop-off--Cs and Ds. An F. And this year--"

"You don't have to tell me this!" Ingrid said again, her voice raised. She was scowling at her hands.

"I *am* telling you. And watch your tone when you speak to me, young lady."

Her head came up. "Or else what?"

Prewski's cheeks went red; his lip tightened. "I should have you expelled," he almost hissed. "You haven't even been trying this year. But I'm not going to."

"Very noble, Mr. Prewski. Only you're not going to because you can't, not because you care. Girls like me and Trudy Bench and Danielle Brewner, we make being a guidance counselor difficult, except you don't like trying very much, either."

"What on Earth are you talking about?"

Ingrid uncrossed her legs. She was getting ready to leave, whether this man wanted her to or not. "General labor--isn't that what you tell anyone you can't figure out, or are too lazy to figure out?"

"Shut up!" Prewski snarled.

"That's okay," Ingrid said, picking up her bag. "I'll get a job at the grocery store, or typing letters. And your straight A students will go to Caltech or one of the Ivy League schools or wherever. That's the easy way, Mr. Prewski. It makes you look compassionate and helpful. All of that stuff." She stood up. "Anyway--"

"Sit down, Ingrid. You're not going anywhere."

"Oh I'm going all right."

"*I said sit down!*"

Ingrid looked at him. While she'd been talking, her eyes had begun to hurt. There was no enigma in what that signified: Tears. She was going to cry, and she wanted to be away from this man before it happened. But now he was standing up, too, and while he was not a tall man by any means, he was still taller than she. Also, he looked very angry indeed.

*Don't cry, she told herself, not in front of this slimy mud cat, girl, please.*

Prewski bared his teeth. "What did you just call me?" he whispered, eyes narrowing in disbelief.

Ingrid realized that she had actually said "slimy mud cat" out loud, though she hadn't meant to. She shook her head as the counselor took a step forward. "Just leave me alone!" she sobbed.

"Ingrid, you are going to sit down, or I am going to sit you down."

This was not the truth, and Ingrid knew it. If Prewski were to so much as brush her elbow with his pinky, he would lose his job; she was not worth that kind of trouble, to him or to herself. And yet she had begun to cry with helpless abandon anyway. Tears

fell to the floor; her hair hung in her face. When Prewski told her for a fourth time to sit down, she did.

"I'm going to call your parents," he said. "And then all four of us are going to come here and talk--for a long time, no doubt. You are one..." he trailed off as his mind groped for the appropriate adjectives "...disrespectful little juvenile."

Ingrid still couldn't raise her eyes. "May I go now, please?"

"Go. Get out of here. Get back to class."

She rose from the chair on shaking legs. Her bag dropped. She picked it up. As she opened the door, Prewski had one last thing to say.

"Don't think we're finished here, Ingrid. We're not, I can assure you."

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The girls' bathroom was quiet. Ingrid splashed her face with cold water. Little by little, her composure returned. The water washed away what was left of her makeup. The skin underneath looked red and raw, clean to the point of being brutal. That was good. It would make forgetting what happened in Prewski's office easier.

She was applying a sheen of fresh makeup when the toilet behind her flushed. There was the sound of rising water, and then--

"Oh shit!" a girl started shouting. "Oh shit! Oh *shit!*" Splashing sounds now--water on the tiles. A puddle of it ran under the stall door. "Goddammit!"

Ingrid finished with her makeup. The girl in the mirror who'd been crying just minutes before had actually begun to smile. She thought out a thank you to the other girl, who was still swearing and stamping around in the stall.

Seconds later the end-of-period bell rang. Students gushed into the hall, a deluge of chatter and foot-traffic. Ingrid weaved her way through them, getting herself downstairs to her locker. Here, she picked up her jacket. Other lockers opened and slammed shut. There were a couple of faces she knew standing next to them, but none of them said hello or even smiled. After making her way to the end of the hall, Ingrid went down a short flight of steps, and then outside.

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*Go back to class*, Prewski had told her.

But where was the point in that? Ingrid was failing all of her classes save one--Arts and Theater. There was no time left in the school year to turn things around, not that it would matter either way. Ingrid had spent the entire first semester of this year trying to care about her grades, but by the end of the second semester a full out academic brushfire was burning on her report card.

Her teachers had been baffled. She was not a stupid girl and they all knew it. Prewski had also been baffled. In their earlier meetings he'd kept asking her: *Why? Why, why, why?*

She'd been asking herself that very same question. The answer resisted words. She had always been a sullen girl. Part of this had to do with her past, or seeming lack thereof. She lived with a foster family on West Main Street, having been adopted by them from an orphanage in 1975. Her real parents were nothing more than names taken from her birth certificate. On it, over the space marked Mother, was the name Luanna Quinn. Over the space marked Father there was but the surname, typed in

faded ink: Quinn. That name had not seemed to be connected to any of the families living in Norwalk at the time. Attempts to track them down over the years proved futile. Questions at the orphanage resulted in a lot of heads shaking, and even more shoulders shrugging. As for the foster family itself, the Semeskas...

Ingrid didn't want to think about them right now. There would be plenty thinking about them--indeed, plenty interaction with them--later on. God knew what horror stories Prewski was putting together at the moment. Still, what he finally did tell them would not be fresh news. That was a satisfaction Ingrid was not at all willing to grant. The news that she was quitting school would come from her lips first. There was little possibility they would commiserate. Randy in particular, the foster brother, would be furious, even if he didn't in truth care; there was the chance of a beating from him, should her timing be bad enough. He'd attacked her before for lesser deeds. She might even be thrown out of the house at the end of it all. This was a threat the Semeskas had made time and again in the past, for crimes such as coming home too late, or burning the morning eggs, or failing to scrub the bathroom tiles properly. Could it be they would make good on it at last?

She didn't want to risk the chance. She took the long way into the downtown district, crossing over Linwood Bridge to Summit Street, and then walking down Benedict Avenue into the flats. There was a pay phone here, outside a bar that had a dangerous reputation on weekend nights. The number of her ex-employer at Cedar Point came fast enough to her fingertips after she dropped a coin into the slot. After three rings it was picked up on the other end.

"Frontier Town," a gruff voice spoke, "Tom Rolling here."

"Mister Rolling? This is Ingrid Semeska."

Rolling did not reply immediately. Ingrid's first stint at Cedar Point amusement park last summer had not gone well. She'd treated her job as a caricature artist in much the same fashion as she'd treated her schoolwork this year--which was to say, carelessly and without inspiration. In August she'd left the park, without giving notice of any kind. It was no wonder hearing her voice again gave him pause.

"And what do you want?" he asked flatly.

Ingrid saw no reason to beat about the bush. "I want to come back to Frontier Town and work for you, Mister Rolling," she said. "I realize that must sound a little strange after what I did last year, but--"

"A *little* strange?" He paused again, then huffed into the receiver. "Girly, you must think you're part of a pretty rare breed, to be calling me like this. I've got artists knocking on my door every day of the week looking for a job. Artists who will show up on days that they're scheduled to work. Artists who will stay with my team for a full season."

"I understand that, Mister Rolling, truly I do. I was...having some difficulties last summer. I'm past them now."

"Bullshit. You sound just the same as you did during our first interview, Ingrid. A little out of focus, a little left of center, whatever you want to call it. I didn't mind it then, because that's pretty much the way all artists are. On top of that you were damned good."

"I'm still good."

But Ingrid's brow was furled with confusion. Were her apathy and lack of spirit so obvious that Rolling could with pinpoint accuracy detect the sweep of their numb erosion just by hearing her voice on the phone? It seemed so. And if that was the case, she was much farther gone than she'd feared.

"If you'll accept my apology, Mister Rolling, I would be happy to come back and prove it to you," she pressed on. "I know you can always use an extra girl to work in front of the upside-down house. People come off of that ride with the funniest pictures in their heads, am I right?"

"You're right. You're also right about my needing an extra girl. But goddammit, Ingrid, you are not the one I have in mind. We've got thirty-thousand people trolling through this park every day, forking thirty bucks a ticket for some thrills and chills--and yes, the occasional talented caricaturist. I don't want to have to go to my boss's office on fucking July the 4th or Labor Day or whatever and tell him at least some of those people are walking away from Frontier Town with their hands free of souvenirs because one of my artists is too busy pouting over how shitty the universe has been treating her."

*You're laying it on awful thick, fella,* Ingrid thought. *I draw pictures for crying out loud. I'm a side-show.*

"You will *not* be telling him that," she said out loud.

Rolling said nothing for a few moments. His breath puffed into the receiver. "All right," he at last conceded. "One more chance, Ingrid."

"Thank you very much, Mister Rolling. Sincerely."

"But don't fuck with me. When I call you, you're on. Where I put you, you're at. If I tell you to paint pictures of Donald Duck on top of the Gemini at twelve midnight, then that's what you'll do. If I tell you to jump into the pool at the bottom of the Log Jam and sketch the Loch Ness Monster, then that's what I mean. I speak, you do. Understand?"

"I understand. When can I start?"

The operator cut in after this question, asking Ingrid to please deposit another twenty-five cents. She dropped a quarter into the slot.

"Mister Rolling?"

"I'm here."

"When can I start?"

There was more breathing into the phone as he chewed this over. "Be here tomorrow at 1PM," he decided. "You'll start at your old spot by the funhouse."

"Will do. One more thing, Mister Rolling."

"You're not negotiating already?"

"No, no. I was just wondering if you know whether or not a woman named Lisa Felton is still working there?"

"Lisa Felton?" His voice trailed off in thought, then came back with sudden punctuation. "Oh yes! I believe she still runs the Ship-to-Shore diner near Soak City. End of the Oceana Midway."

Ingrid allowed herself to smile for the first time since leaving the school. "Thank you again, Mister Rolling. I'll see you tomorrow."

"I hope you mean that."

"I do."

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The walk home from the flats was slow and pleasant. Part of this had to do with the approaching storm--as Ingrid passed by a cafe-restaurant a cool breeze swept the awnings, ruffling their scallops. Flower petals from a park swirled around benches; a little boy laughed, chasing his cap.

Another reason was the memory of Lisa. Ingrid hadn't been thinking about her at all when she'd first dialed up Rolling. The woman's name popped into her head right as the call was coming to a close, perhaps because spending time at the Ship-to-Shore diner had been her favorite thing about Cedar Point. Ingrid had gotten to know Lisa Felton after eating there a few times. She made for easy company, which was a rare commodity among Ingrid's circle. It was Lisa, in fact, who had invited Ingrid to her diner for the first time, after getting a portrait done. Her opinion of this portrait had been very high, to the point where Ingrid's cheeks had turned red (praise was another thing she wasn't used to). From here, their friendship had blossomed. Ingrid went back to the Ship-to-Shore almost every night during the months of June and July. She went there in certain parts of August as well, even as it was becoming clear her job with Tom Rolling's team was not going to provide the fulfillment she was so desperately searching for. And of course, in the midst of these final few visits, Lisa had sensed something wrong. She'd tried to get Ingrid to talk, to tell her something, anything, that would help her bring the issue into focus. Ingrid had failed to do this, evening after evening, until finally the sadness and frustration got the better of her. On a sunny day near the end of the month, she had walked out of the park gate with tears on her cheeks.

God yes, there had been tears! She had cried all the way home that day, thinking of Lisa. Now, she felt like crying again, only this time not for loss, but for a coming happy reunion.

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The driveway was empty when she arrived home--another thing to feel good about. Randy worked as a taxi driver in Sandusky and was still on shift. Ingrid opened the side door. Her foster mother was in the living room watching television; she looked up instantly.

"You're home early." There was no music to these words, or empathy--her tone instead was that of a woman wondering what was wrong this time.

Ingrid came right out and told her. "I quit school."

"You *what?*"

"I quit school."

The television was snapped off. "You can't quit school. You're sixteen years old."

Ingrid shrugged and walked into the kitchen. It was two o'clock. That left four hours until the family sat down for dinner--time for a nice head start. She peeked into the refrigerator to see what was there to cook up.

"Is Dad still at work?" she asked, sensing her mother, whose name was Nancy, had followed.

"Yes. Ingrid--"

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