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They say a man lives north of Babylon beyond the
peaks of the Seven Hills with the secret to immortality.

This is not his story.

This is the epic of Glenda Mesh, and the story
of why she went looking for him.

PROLOGUE

What had been a relatively boisterous afternoon at the track and field tryouts suddenly became quiet when race time approached. Enkidu went to the starting line and stretched. Four other girls took their positions alongside her. She sized them up and felt pretty confident, felt that surge of *you got this* energy.

Then everyone—the competitors, the scouts, the captains, the coach, the *world*—stopped and watched as the infamous Glenda Mesh came walking across the field toward the starting line.

One of the other girls said quietly, "Guess we're only racing for second place," and another said, "She's just here to see her competition," and the first girl said, "Competition? We're running for the same team," and the other girl said, "Glenda Mesh is on her own team."

Glenda was gorgeous, fiercely engaged like a torpedo, angelic in her zenlike intensity. Enkidu felt the atmosphere shift when she arrived. She carried the weight of her infamy like jewelry, ignorant but also reveling in the attention, focused on the race and the power she held over her audience. Enkidu couldn't stop staring. Her heart was racing, maybe in anticipation of the race, or maybe because looking at Glenda was like looking at a work of art, breathtaking and bewildering.

Anzu was standing nearby. He gave a thumbs up.

Enkidu almost forgot where she was or what she was doing.

The starting gun fired.

One girl got off to a bad start, a little stumble, and Enkidu already knew that girl would not regain what she had lost. Then there was the blonde girl, who was keeping the same exact pace as Enkidu, but Blondie was slapping the track too hard with her steps, which would wear her out sooner. The short-haired girl ahead of her was probably set to run a five-thirty mile. A worthy contender. Then there was Glenda, who burst into the lead at an inhuman, impossible pace, cheetah speeds compared to the others.

Enkidu ran her best. She put all she had into those four laps.

Her brain hurt trying to understand how Glenda was able to run a mile in four-ten as if she were out for a light jog on the beach. She lapped one girl. Enkidu gradually increased her pace after every lap, but she'd started too slow to ever have a real chance. She crossed the line at five-twenty, a personal best, but a full seventy seconds slower than Glenda. It was baffling. She never would've thought it was possible to run like that, less like a human and more like a machine. Her pace didn't falter at all as if she were on cruise control.

After the race, Enkidu gulped down a bottle of water and meandered the field with her hands atop her head, trying to regain her breath. She'd gotten second place, but it felt more like a loss than second place had ever felt before, seeing now the gap between where she was and where she'd need to be.

She overheard a lot of different snippets of conversation as she meandered, and all of it was hush-hush about Glenda. *She stole my boyfriend. She stole my girlfriend. She cheats on every test. She sleeps with every teacher. She litters. She lies. She's evil.*

The way Glenda walked around the field, it was like the big bad wolf waltzing around scaring all the little piggies into their huts. She didn't talk to anyone but the coach, with whom it appeared she got along swimmingly with. Enkidu couldn't help but watch her, the way a film crew might watch a rare wild animal in its natural element, drawn to the feminine sway of her hips, the purpose put into every move and gesture.

Enkidu quickly disliked her.

Sure it was from hearing all the negative rumors about her, and probably it had to do with how much better of a runner she was, but simply watching Glenda be Glenda was enough to irritate Enkidu. Glenda buzzed around

like a wasp. People flinched when she was near. She would go to a group of friends and take over their conversation and leave them all looking glum. She would come to a happy hand-holding couple and squeeze between them, whisper into the boyfriend's ear, and then waltz away with the boy like he was a plaything to be borrowed, leaving the girlfriend speechless and alone. She and Anzu crossed paths at one point and she stuck out her foot and tripped him. So immature. So callous. Enkidu watched her with clenched fists, anger rising within like boiling oil.

She went and helped Anzu up.

"Beat her," he said, with startling intensity. "If anyone can do it, it's you."

"Why is she even here?"

"She's stroking her own ego. Making sure these new runners know who's the best on the team." Anzu noticed his track shorts had mud on them and groaned.

Enkidu said, "She really is a monster, isn't she?"

"If you can't beat her, at least make her nervous."

Enkidu nodded. It was time for the last race. She got into position for the eight-hundred-meter dash: two laps around the track, nearly at full sprint. One of the hardest races to be good at, but Enkidu knew what she was up against, knew what her body had to do. She stretched and listened for the starting gun.

Glenda was in the lane next to her.

Ready. Set. Go.

TABLET I

About a month earlier in September, when summer was still shedding its sunburnt skin, a police cruiser was dispatched to the Sargon Family Foster Center to assist with a traumatic incident. It was midnight. A wispy mist hung low to the ground like the fuzz of a peach, fine and soft. The sea rested peacefully beneath a moonless starry sky. The whole city seemed to be asleep, totally unaware that life in Babylon would be changed forever by a red-headed girl hiding in a tree.

Officer Shamash and his partner, Officer Mari, pulled into the Foster Center visitor parking lot and Shamash killed the engine. Shamash was young and new to the force, had the pep and energy of a puppy, with the look of a surfer wearing a police officer costume. Mari was older, seasoned, and entering the third trimester for baby number three, with the look of an exhausted mother who could still tackle a suspect if need be.

"Sad this is the best Babylon can do for its foster kids," said Shamash, taking one last sip of black coffee as he stared up at the gloomy structure.

Officer Mari said, "Must be bad if they're getting us involved."

The officers got out of the cruiser and approached the entrance.

The Foster Center was designed and run like a low-security prison, with high fences around the yard and door locks and ankle bracelets for the troubled kids and burly, brutish staff members who forgot how to smile, forgot they were dealing with children. It was infamously dour.

Ms. Sargon, the director, came bounding down the cement porch steps to greet them. She was all flustered and sweaty and there were fresh scratch marks on her arms, some still bleeding.

"She ran off that way," Ms. Sargon said, pointing west.

"Who did?" asked Officer Mari.

"Her name is Enkidu. She's new. She refused medication, then fought off two of my attendants and got Tom's keycard. I was in my office. All I heard was screaming. Peggy nearly had her eye scratched out, and when I got there, Enkidu was swinging a chair at the staff in the entryway. She's wild. *Quite* wild. I got close enough to grab the chair but then..." She held out her arms. The scratches were deep, the plump flesh swollen, pink. "She's been growing out her fingernails just for this, I think, sharpening them at night. Like claws. After she scratched me, she opened the door and she was gone."

"What kind of medication?" asked Officer Shamash.

Ms. Sargon said, "Anxiety medication. It's the only thing that calms her down."

"Where'd she come from?"

"I'd say raised by wolves, but her forms say out east. She came in last week. Took apart every lock on her bedroom door; we replaced it five times already."

Shamash said, "You lock them in? Isn't that kinda—"

Mari elbowed him in the side. "Is everyone else okay inside?" she asked. "Any serious injuries?"

"We'll be fine."

"Any idea where she went?" Shamash asked, rubbing his bruised ribs.

Ms. Sargon's lip quivered and her eyes watered, and biting her lip to hold back the tears, she shook her head. "I didn't know what to do. My daughter is out looking for her, too. She needs to know she's being taken care of. She's scared. She's from back east, never saw the ocean. She's fascinated by it. Maybe she went to the beach?"

"We will find her," said Mari, taking the director's hand and giving it a warm squeeze.

"She's a wildflower in the wrong garden," said Ms. Sargon solemnly.

"Do you have a photo of her? What does she look like?" Shamash asked.

"She's got hair like a sunrise," the director said. She took out her cellphone to show a photo of Enkidu. What stood out first was her fiery red plume of hair, like a star gone supernova. She had the intense beauty of an owl, both captivating and not to be underestimated, with a round face and big eyes, small nose, thin lips. Shamash guessed she was five-six, one-ten. The director sighed. "That's Enkidu. Careful. She bites."

II

They followed the director's directions to the end of the road, flashing their vehicle's spotlight into every nook and cranny. They passed through a suburban neighborhood, with their fenced-in yards shoulder-to-shoulder with their neighbors. There were trash cans out on the curb. Hedges, trees, dog houses, cars parked in driveways. The girl could be hiding anywhere, if she didn't make it all the way to the coast by now. They kept driving until the neighborhood ended and the road curved through a large swath of undeveloped forest.

"Needle in a haystack," said Officer Mari in the passenger seat. With a belly bloated with baby, she preferred not to drive. Barely fit behind the wheel, anyway. Said driving stressed her out. "What are we gonna do? Go traipsing through the forest to find her?" she said.

"Traipsing," said Shamash. "What does that even mean?"

She sighed. "I don't know, Shamash. It means traipsing. It means getting lost in a goddamn forest. Just keep driving, I guess."

"Graveyard's up ahead. We could check it out."

"I'd rather not."

"We'll never find her just driving around."

"Well let's go to the beach and turn back, at least."

They drove slowly past the cemetery, somber and quiet. Neither had any family buried there, but second to the courthouse, it was the oldest establishment in Babylon, which earned it a hallowed atmosphere. Some of those crumbly tombstones were dated in the 1800s. Officer Shamash panned the searchlight beam across the hilly lawn, finding nothing alive among the flower vases and grave markers.

"It's a whole lot of nothing after this," said Officer Mari, "'til the beach."

"Wait a second," said Shamash, pointing up ahead, to the left.

"What is that?"

"There's a bike in those bushes. See? Like someone ditched it."

He parked the cruiser across from the bike. Here, atop a hill, he could see down to the starlit stretch of beach below and the docile waves lazily slapping the sand like a cow tonguing a salt lick. He caught a strong whiff of the sea as he jogged across the street. He tugged the blue bike out of the bush and propped it upright on its kickstand, then surveyed the shrubbery around the area with a sweep of his flashlight.

"Enkidu?" he called out gently.

While he stood there, he heard a rustling above in the branches of a large oak.

"There's our wildflower," he whispered. Her red hair was a giveaway.

The girl had been watching him with her owl eyes, waiting for him to notice her, *daring* him to notice her, and when they locked eyes, Shamash nearly stumbled backward from the intensity. He'd never seen anyone like her before.

"I'm not going back there again," said the girl in the sweatpants from a branch about fifteen feet up. "I'm not coming down."

He waved at her. "My name is Shamash."

"Okay."

"And you're Enkidu, right?"

Officer Mari was out of the car now, too curious to watch from the seat.

The girl looked at her, then back at Shamash. She said, "All they do is drug me up. I didn't ask for that. You want me to go back to that?"

"I'm sure they've got their reasons."

“It’s child abuse. Again. I’m sick of all these places treating me like an object.”

Shamash didn’t know what to say.

“I’d rather be out here on my own. I’m better on my own.”

Shamash said, “Sleeping in a tree?”

Enkidu replied, “Beats jail.”

After waddling across the street, Mari stepped up beside her partner. She squinted up at the girl in the branches. “Oh honey,” she said, “come down from there.”

“I’m not going back.”

“It’s not safe up there,” said Mari, holding her belly.

Enkidu snapped, “You think it was safe where I ran from?”

She was thin, almost dangerously so, with skin the color of peanut butter, smooth and tan. Her eyes were large and fierce. Features foreign, not from these parts. The girl was comfortable up there, like a fairy, some wild thing.

“Sleeping in a tree isn’t the answer,” said Mari.

Enkidu stopped talking to them.

“I’ll call the director and let her know we found her, at least,” said Shamash.

III

About thirty minutes later, a battered blue car parked behind the officers' cruiser, and out stepped the Foster Center's daughter, Aruru. She looked like she'd just woken up, hair all frizzled, slouching under the weight of an oversized Uruk High hoodie. Eighteen going on twenty-five, she gave the aura of a young woman already weary of the world, exhausted by the effort required to merely exist. With a slender, serious face and a plump, full figure, she could be sweet and intimidating at the same time, like a sword sheathed in silk. Black hair. Black eyes. The kind of charming pessimist you were drawn to, pulled into her gravity like a black hole.

She crossed the street and greeted the officers with a nod.

"My mom sent me," she said, yawning, looking up. "She's up there?"

"Our little Rapunzel," said Mari.

"Great. Maybe the branch will just break and she'll fall and die and save us all a bunch of headache," said Aruru, taking off her sweater. She handed it to Shamash, who took it and awkwardly laid it atop the nearest bush. She said, "I'm kidding," as she looked for a good place to start climbing.

"You're going up after her?" asked Officer Mari with motherly concern.

"Well you two couldn't talk her down. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em." She pointed at Shamash and said, "Give me a boost."

Shamash obliged. Aruru's muddy sneakers left him looking for a towel once she'd been hoisted to the lowest branch. He wiped the mud on the tree trunk.

"Careful, honey," said Mari.

Up above, Enkidu called down, "Who's there?"

"Aruru!" Aruru shouted.

Enkidu didn't say anything.

She was up on the first branch now, scoping out the next. The officers below backed away and watched from the sidewalk. That was when Officer Mari took a call and walked toward the cruiser. Shamash seemed torn between following her and monitoring the girl in the tree situation.

Then Officer Mari said, "We gotta go, Shamash. There's been an incident at the library."

Aruru caught Shamash looking at her. "You can go. I'll take care of this."

He nodded and jogged across the road. "What's going on?" he asked, plopping down into the driver's seat.

"Someone set a dog on fire," she said, shutting her door. It was a phrase so unusually cruel, the mind rejected it, at first, then like an ugly, terrible gift, the mind didn't know where to put it.

Shamash flicked on the lights and sped away, hurrying toward the library.

When their car turned the bend and was out of sight, Aruru stopped climbing. She settled against the tree trunk and looked out, through the leaves, at the view over the graveyard. Enkidu was only ten feet above her, but the truth was Aruru wasn't the nimble athlete she used to be. Those cheerleading days were long behind her. Out of breath and exhausted, this was about as far as she planned on climbing. She yawned and let it out in a long sigh, seeing from here the gravestones across the road. A little breeze whispered by.

Enkidu was watching her. She knew Aruru from the Foster Center, of course, because she was often there helping her mom in the office. Sometimes she'd come out during meals to assist in the kitchen. The first time they met, Aruru was there to carry Enkidu's boxes to her new room and give her a tour of the compound. She was blunt and brutally honest, which, after years of flowery bullshit from therapists and social workers, was a welcome change. At the end of the tour, she'd said, "This place is a nightmare for kids like you. You're too smart and pretty for this place. If I were you, I'd run away."

That was a week ago.

Aruru, below, took out a cigarette from her pocket and started laughing as she lit it. "You passed the test," she said, exhaling smoke through her nose. It drifted up to Enkidu. Sweet and earthy, like pencil shavings.

Enkidu responded, "What test?"

"I tell all the new orphans to run away. No one ever makes it out the front door. But you," she said, looking up at Enkidu with a grin, "you're the badass orphan I've been waiting for."

Enkidu looked away, frowning. "You said it was a nightmare there. It's worse. All they do is drug us up and put us in front of a TV. I'm not a mental patient."

Aruru said, "It wasn't always like that. My mom had to tighten the reins after this one guy, a few years ago, broke a vase and tried to kill the cook because he didn't like hotdogs in his macaroni and cheese. So that's why there's no glass or breakable things anymore. And they started using heavier drugs."

Enkidu replied, "I'd rather live on the street than be in a coma."

"That was your plan then? Camp like a hobo in the woods? Beg for money from tourists on the beach like a bum?"

"Live with the animals, howl at the moon," Enkidu added.

Aruru laughed. "Hey at least now you're getting three meals a day and they'll be sending you to Uruk High once the paperwork's all cleared." She took a long drag. "Not that Uruk High is all that great. At least you'll be around normal people. Well, normal enough."

Enkidu was quiet a minute. Then she felt the lump in her throat burst and she started to cry. She was tired. So tired. So tired of running and not knowing what she was running toward.

"Look," said Aruru, "I can work out something with my mom. You don't fit in at the Foster Center, and it'll probably only get worse before it gets better, so I'll ask her if you can stay with us at our house."

Enkidu's head was against her knees. She was sobbing softly. Embarrassed. Her last therapist said the death of her parents left her an unmade piece of clay waiting for someone or something to mold her into shape. Was that someone Aruru? She cried at the mere thought of getting her hopes up.

"I mean it," Aruru said. "Now and then we take in a stray like you. No offense. My mom already said that's probably what'll happen for you. Some wildflowers just need the right garden. Her words, not mine."

Aruru finished her funny-smelling cigarette and tossed the filter into the night air. It flickered like a firefly until it landed with a hiss in a puddle below.

"My mom is a nice person. I swear. She's the nicest person I know," Aruru said. "You'll see. She won't even hold it against you that you scratched the hell out of her arms."

Enkidu shifted. She'd been up there almost an hour. Her body needed to stretch.

Aruru continued, "No more drugs. No more strict rules. No more fences. You stay with us, prove to her that you're a well-behaved human being, and maybe by the time you start school my mom can push you to the front of the adoption line, get you in a real home with good parents sooner." Aruru looked up at her to make sure she was listening, and she was. "But you'll have to be presentable. That gives me a month to domesticate you."

"I'm not a dog."

"No, but you're an orphan who's been through eight foster families in the last five years, so there must be *something* wrong with you."

Enkidu said, "There's nothing wrong with me."

"I get it." Aruru smiled. "Your parents died so you're probably always going to feel like the world is unfair and everyone's just pretending to care."

Enkidu couldn't deny that.

"I'll find you a good family. I'll shape you up nicely. I promise," she said. "It's kind of my specialty."

"Why do you care?" Enkidu asked.

"You passed the test, remember?" She had a really great smile. "You earned it."

So Enkidu and Aruru climbed down.

"Here," said Aruru, while Enkidu hopped down to earth and turned to face her. Aruru had a handful of wet mud in one hand. "Shake on it."

"What's with the mud?"

"Some people swear on a bible. Or spit in their hands. Or blood, whatever. I swear with mud. Made of earth, swear on earth." She shrugged and extended her hand. "Promise you'll clip your nails and give my mom and civilization a second chance."

"Promise," she said. Enkidu gave a firm, squishy handshake. She laughed at the smear of mud on her hand. Childish, but honest and real, like a pinky-swear or a cross-my-heart.

"Consider yourself made anew," said Aruru.

IV

After moving into the spacious spare bedroom of Ms. Sargon's house, a lot of changes happened rapidly. A whirlwind of unexpected positivity, a maelstrom of kindness. It started when Enkidu was at the store with Ms. Sargon trying on new clothes for a brand new wardrobe, and when Enkidu started crying in the changing room, Ms. Sargon came in there with her, held her tenderly, and said, "Accept generosity, it is the greatest gift we can give each other." Soon Enkidu was meeting with her school counselor, putting a combination lock on her locker, and sitting in a crowded classroom on her first day of school while the teacher droned on about the quadratic formula. Some nights, Enkidu was unable to sleep, wide awake at midnight in the bedroom across the hall from Aruru, watching from her window as Aruru snuck out with a boy with a mohawk and a motorcycle. Most days, Enkidu and Aruru were hanging out about town, spending time at the beach either in a big group around a bonfire or just the two of them, helping out at the Foster Center on the weekends. On a drizzly evening in the overgrown backyard, Aruru listened to Enkidu's sad life story, gave her a hug, and said, "Even if you don't get adopted, you're part of our family now." The very next morning, Enkidu got her ears pierced with Aruru at a tattoo parlor downtown where the mohawk guy worked and she bought Cedar Sticks from him, and that night Enkidu got high on Cedar for the first time, and oh how they laughed and laughed. Once, after school, Enkidu returned with Aruru to the tree where they shook hands with mud, and they sat on a branch smoking one of those Cedar Sticks that Aruru got from her mohawk guy friend, then they carved their names into the bark, and held hands as they walked home. Enkidu was doing pretty well at school, building friendships with her classmates, becoming herself, feeling emboldened, feeling like she was truly home.

Three weeks passed since she climbed down from that tree with Aruru. She had a pretty good read on the vibe of Uruk High and the city of Babylon, but still had much to learn.

One day Enkidu asked Aruru about the girl in her history class that seemed to carry her bad reputation like a badge of honor, and though rarely in class, like a malicious spirit she haunted every conversation. "Who is she?"

"You're talking about Glenda Mesh," said Aruru. She was driving them home from school. The car was filled with Cedar smoke.

"Is she like the school bully or something?"

Aruru laughed.

"She's the Queen of Babylon," she replied, smiling sardonically. "Haven't you heard?"

Glenda Mesh woke at five to take her sunrise run along the coast, finding solace in the slap of her shoes against the sandy pavement. Totally zen. This was Glenda when she wasn't a monster. She was far too focused on her form to wreak any havoc, yet. Her tyranny would wait until after breakfast, her cruelty until after coffee.

It was a familiar sight for the early birds of Babylon to see Glenda cruising the sidewalks downtown, or sprinting alongside the waves. They all knew her. She was a local treasure. A star athlete, considered by some a demigod on the track, probably out training for her next big race.

Running her morning route, she never stopped or slowed. She greeted no one. People wisely got out of her way, then whispered about her once she'd gone past. She always heard the whispering. They were jealous. They were *afraid*. That's how she liked it.

Glenda returned home, took a lengthy shower, brushed her long black hair with care, dressed tightly, and smiled at her reflection before grabbing her Uruk High track and field bag from beneath her bed.

She heard her parents downstairs having breakfast. It was one of the few things they still did together. Her father enjoyed preparing elaborate meals, and her mother loved being doted on like royalty. He always made a plate for Glenda, though she often skipped family time, and her gourmet meal would go cold. Today the smell of hollandaise sauce and fried ham drew her downstairs to the dining table like a flute charming a snake from a basket.

She heard her mother say from the dining room, "Don't forget she's young. I think a nice boy could help settle her down."

"I don't think encouraging our seventeen-year-old to go out dating is the appropriate remedy," said her father.

"Maybe she'd find a nice boy like Shamash. He's an officer now. You liked him."

"Sure I did. He was fine. But she was too young to date at fifteen and she's still too young to date now."

"Shamash still sends me birthday cards, you know. I think he still has feelings for our little Glenda Mesh." There was glee in her mother's voice. She lived vicariously through Glenda and a rekindling romance was just the sort of plotline she'd love to see develop.

Glenda smiled. She remained hidden around the corner, curious about their conversation.

"I don't know," said her father. "All I know is that people come to confession not for their own sins, but the sins of my daughter. It's not been easy preaching one thing while my daughter gallivants around town doing the opposite."

"It's a phase," said her mother.

"We need to be on the same page," her father pleaded. "We need her out of this phase now. I've seen where this behavior leads and I will not let that happen to Glenda."

When she entered the room, they looked at her like the bottom row of an optometrist's vision test chart: blurry, vaguely familiar, and impossible to read.

This was a peculiar trio.

Glenda: an aggressively beautiful warrior whose fierce blue eyes should be classified as weapons of mass destruction; a young woman with long shadowy hair bundled hastily in a bun and tanned skin smooth as stainless steel.

Mrs. Ninsun: a stunning middle-aged harlot of the silver screen reduced to a has-been small town beauty queen who viewed the world like a television show.

Lugalbanda: LB for short, a proudly average man in almost every way, like the human version of mild salsa, palatable, harmless, and kind to the senses, with just enough bite to keep you interested.

Her parents exchanged looks. They weren't used to a third party at the table. LB cleared his throat with a cough.

"Hello Stranger, my name is Dad."

"That joke is so lame," Glenda replied, slicing into the perfectly poached egg.

"She's a busy girl."

"Too busy to say grace?"

Glenda's mouth was full. "Amen?"

Mrs. Ninsun laughed. Her diamond earrings jingled.

"It's unwise to be ungrateful," said LB, softly stern. "It's a sign of greed."

"She's grateful," said Mrs. Ninsun. "Aren't you, sweetie?"

"Oh yeah. Thanks for the eggs benedict, God."

LB sighed. "I'm detecting sarcasm."

"Well," said Glenda, "God invented sarcasm, so I'm sure *He's* alright with it."

"Is there track practice today?" Mrs. Ninsun asked.

Glenda nodded. "I'll be home late. There's a party after."

"A party?"

She shrugged. "A party."

"How fun." To her husband she asked, "When's the last time we went to a party?"

"We went to dinner with the Rileys last week."

She waved her hand to swat the comment away. "Not a party."

LB chewed his food slowly, then said, "I want you home by eleven."

Glenda laughed.

"I'm serious. With that psycho out there setting dogs on fire, it doesn't feel safe."

"Nice to meet you, Serious," she said. "I'm Glenda Mesh."

"Oh let her stay out," said Mrs. Ninsun. "It's Friday."

"It's Thursday, and I say eleven."

"I get the days all mixed up."

Glenda said, snidely, "It's five o'clock somewhere. Right, Mom?"

She ignored or didn't catch the comment.

"You're not the center of the universe," said LB, folding his arms across his chest. "I know it seems that way now, but something will come along and prove to you otherwise."

"And I'll see the light, Dad?" said Glenda with a bite, "like you did?"

"Better sooner than later," he said.

"If this is you trying to get me to go to your stupid church, it's not working."

Mrs. Ninsun choked on her mimosa. "That's enough. That's enough," she said cheerfully.

LB shook his head. "So much for being on the same page," he said to his wife, and he promptly wiped his hands with his towel and stood. Dressed in his holy garb, he nodded politely and made his way toward the garage, whispering a prayer beneath his breath.

"Have fun," said Mrs. Ninsun, reaching across the table to put a hand on Glenda's. "You're only young and beautiful once."

"That's depressing," said Glenda. She took her hand away.

Mrs. Ninsun poured herself a third mimosa from the carafe, picked at her food, and hummed the theme song of a television show she once starred in. "I'm only saying," she said, "that I like to see you having fun. I had so much fun at your age. I miss it."

"Fun," said Glenda, as if the word were a chewy piece of fat that she couldn't swallow. "I guess I'm having fun."

She left on that note.

Glenda Mesh lived in a palace. The tall ceilings and large windows and cavernous rooms were decorated like the wings of a museum, with thick rugs over marble floors, too many bathrooms to count, and a grand staircase at the entrance with heavenly sky and clouds painted overhead. It was Mrs. Ninsun's career as an actress that afforded them this luxury, the pool, the acreage of vineyards, the tennis court, the in-house sauna, the cleaners and the gardeners. It was all that Glenda knew. Raised by blank checks.

As her father drove off to the Church of Kullab where he preached, Glenda went into the garage and found her bicycle. Then she saw her mother's red convertible and changed her mind.

Glenda didn't have her license, but that didn't stop her from speeding down the hill toward the city center, passing her father on the way and honking, teasingly, waving to him and catching sight of his flabbergasted face in the rearview mirror.

She laughed and turned up the radio, barreling down into Babylon like a meteor, roaring and tearing through the atmosphere without a care.