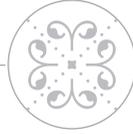


FROM

## *Blood Highway*

BY GINA WOHLSDORF



I put my backpack frontways and unzipped the smallest pocket. It took a dozen bobby pins to get my hey-look-at-me hair secured. My wig was shoulder-length and dark brown with thick bangs. The bangs annoyed my eyes; they also hid them. I stole the narrow black apron from Ty's house last time I stayed there—her sister was a waitress at Chili's. The finishing touch was a thick slather of maroon lipstick. My bearing had been northeast this whole time, and now downtown stretched in front of me, the glass-enclosed footbridges of the Skyway like tubes in a hamster's cage.

I got a free day pass at a gym and went to their locker room. I shrugged on a white button-down shirt I kept wrinkle-free in a freezer bag and stowed my backpack. The Skyway map was framed on a wall close by, but I didn't need one; the network's bends and loops and intersections were branded on my long-term memory. Aboveground mole holes connecting theaters, concert halls, museums, sports arenas, restaurants, six-figure apartments, luxury hotels, little stores, and massive multidepartment monstrosities. The tunnels themselves overlooked the streets, so the cars passed underneath you in a tide. Seeing those millions of streetlights and headlights and shop lights in straight lines, beckoning, still choked me up when I was hormonal.

The Skyway was unusually busy for a Thursday. I trailed a knot of women and girls who all had the same long brown hair. They talked in such quick succession I felt like I was in a *Gilmore Girls* episode. They peeled off and went to an escalator. I hit the door at Fourth Ave, hopped down the dull stairs, tied on my apron, and waited around the corner from City on Tap's hostess station, examining my nails.

A party of four came in, business-casual. They were trading polite laughter at a joke that had been delivered outside. They passed me, disappeared.

“Four please. Nonsmoking.”

The plunk of menus and a tinkly hostess voice: “Right this way.”

I went in.

The secret is posture. If you stand up straight, everybody thinks you belong there, wherever you are—as long as you look the part, and I did. A trifle young, maybe, but the tables at City on Tap were low and candlelit, putting a helpful distance between the diners and me.

Lots of awkward dates going on. My favorite. Women never cleaned their plates on dates, but a surprising number of dudes didn’t either. I found a Brooks Brother and a native of Banana Republic in a corner booth. She was talking with her hands while he nodded and sipped an inch of liquor. He’d left two sliders; she’d hardly touched her—what were those? Wontons?

“All finished?” I said.

“Yes,” the woman said, not looking at me. “It’s breathtaking,” she continued. “I’ve spent my whole life in ignorance of what an interior designer can bring to a room, and now I’m converted.”

I turned. It wasn’t just any turn; waitresses do a kind of ballet. As I curved around another booth, a hand rose out of it. “Miss?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We’d like our check. We’ve been waiting ten minutes.”

“Right away, sir. Just let me set these down and I’ll be right back with that.”

The busing station was adjacent to the kitchen but not in the kitchen, which was another reason this place ranked high in my marks. I took a paper sack from the ten or so folded in my apron, snapped it open, and tipped the leftovers in with a trio of fluid motions. They were tucked away when another busser approached with a brimming tub. We did a two-step around each other, and I cruised right for the front, untying the apron and tucking it under my shirt.

“Thanks,” I said to the hostess.

“Have a great night,” she said.

I mounted the stairs, banding the wig back into a ponytail. I unbuttoned

my blouse, rolled up the sleeves, wiped off as much lipstick as I could. I found a bench with a view of Marquette Street and opened the bag.

They were wontons. Fried, crab. Not bad. The sliders were greasy, juicy, bacon-y handheld heaven. After that, I wanted something sweet. And a beverage, other than water-fountain water. I didn't like pulling the waitress shtick more than once a night, so I backtracked to my backpack, carefully folded and ziplocked my button-down, left my apron, and coded the locker shut.

The Barnes & Noble café was crammed. I got some E. E. Cummings and claimed a seat. In less than an hour, I'd collected three two-thirds-eaten pieces of cheesecake, various flavors, which translated to one whole piece of cheesecake, or, as I preferred to think of it, a cheesecake sampler platter. All it involved was watchful observation and table-hopping. When I was done, the barista called out a hot chocolate that nobody claimed for a full two minutes. It was fate.

So, exiting onto the street at six thirty, backpack situated firmly on my shoulders, I felt almost uncomfortably full. It'd gotten chillier while I was inside. Not some wimpy five-degree dip, either—my sweater might as well have been made of mesh. The sky above me was clear, spookily so. No clouds, no stars. Flat black. People were still out in force. Minnesotans hold on to their warm days with a denial that's almost admirable.

I took the ponytail out, but I left the wig on. I had another hour before my house was feasible, and I liked to pad it, give her an extra twenty minutes for the pills to kick in.

Tomorrow was Friday. It'd be smart to get cash for the weekend. I didn't want to; I never wanted to. I tried to think of ways around it, but I failed.

Most of downtown was pretty open, not a lot of alleys. The exception was an area around Target headquarters, where the retail chain had elbowed its way into an already dense crop of luxe restaurants and bars with kitschy drink names—those places you gotta go when your life is nine hours in a box and two more each way in another box, eat, bed, get up and do it again.

A handful of corporate buyers were huddled at the bus stop, checking their watches. A guy in his early thirties—pudgy, geek glasses—was trying to crowd a few women farther under the overhang. He was catching runoff

from the stop's plexiglass roof. He could've avoided it by staying to the side, but clearly it was the principle of the thing.

"Excuse me," he said, and turned to see who'd bumped him.

"Sorry," I said, and raised both my hands. Empty. "I'm so sorry," I said, pouting my contrition. There's really no such thing as laying it on too thick.

He got an eyeful of me. This delightful moment of incredulous blinking, his long, tedious day a dissolved cloud. He took a wide step, holding an arm out to indicate where he'd been standing a second ago. "I insist," he said.

I went where he pointed. The women had witnessed all this and had formed an opinion of me that was as negative as his was positive. Two crossed their arms. A third's smile said, "If murder were legal, I'd stab you in the throat with my pen. Oh, yes I would."

"Long day?" the man said.

"Very," I said sweetly.

"At least the weather's holding."

"Yes, it's nice."

The third woman piped up. "It's supposed to snow a foot tonight."

The man said, "Maybe a miracle will happen and it'll pass us."

"Christmas miracle," I said, intent on the sidewalk.

Men love women who hate themselves. And most women do. We're taught to from the age of nine or ten: you bleed, you're weak, ick, ack, you're disgusting. A great many women fight their self-hate, though, by hating other women more. Particularly women they're jealous of. I had ample experience with this. I had, after all, lived through junior high.

But men? They're scared shitless of us. And not because of any complicated Freudian business where they think our wombs are going to open wide and swallow them, negating the existences we have the power to create—but because they want to fuck us, always, and these days they have to ask our permission unless they want to face about a 2 percent chance they'll get jail time.

I was a virgin, obviously.

"Finally," someone said, and I knew the 7 was close.

"Could I—" The man took out his phone, a Nokia so new it didn't have a flip feature. "I'd really like to call you sometime."

I mumbled nine digits. He asked me to repeat them, and I waited for the bus's loud rush of air. He'd think he typed it wrong. He'd think: Wasn't meant to be.

"Go ahead," he told me.

"I'm waiting for the nine."

"Oh." He waggled his phone.

"You should hurry," I said, grinning. A flattered damsel.

He climbed on, the doors closed, and the bus gusted away.

I stayed alone at the stop until it swung right, then I took an alley. I pulled his wallet out of my sweater cuff, pushing against remorse at his dorky driver's license photo. Ignored the name, counted the cash: eighty, all twenties. I stuffed it in my pocket. I took off the wig and unpinned my hair. When I emerged on Tenth, I tossed the wallet into a trash can and reluctantly aimed my legs toward the house.

BLOOD HIGHWAY

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