

## **The Waxed Pavement**

By Ashlee Winters

Something shifted when my mother left today. The winds were stronger, and the sun never filled the sky. I should've known to stay in the abandoned tunnels we called home, but something drew me to the line I promised my mother I'd never cross.

It wasn't to watch the sun fall while I waited for her return— a habit I gained when I missed the heat on my skin. It wasn't to collect water in rusted buckets while it rained. Although, it was my mind's excuse today. It was the sound of laughter as it left a woman's throat.

It should've scared me like the rare sounds of humans, and inhuman things did when it echoed down stone walls. But today, the sound was followed by a light mother told me stories of; stories in which the world terrified me but made me curious for a glimpse. A quick step past the line, and I'd be satisfied, I thought.

I was wrong, and I didn't have to cross the line. The glowing glass mother warned me of, "that could seduce and make someone go blind," lit more than one story. The violence she spoke of danced before me in strong thrusts of hands and pleas.

Outside the tunnel's entrance was a man laid helpless on the dirt and rock ground, dark liquid weeping down his face. Another stood above him. The man on the ground pleaded when the other raised a metal bar, "I'm only trying to find my daughter."

The bar came down. "And I'm looking for cash."

The woman laughed again.

I closed my eyes, and a crack rang in my ears. I gasped and covered them, dropping the bucket in my hands. I should've ignored the world and weather and stayed in bed. I wanted my mother to come and save me from the scene, to shake me out of my frozen state and erase what I saw.

I uncovered my ears when the muffled laughing ended, and I opened my eyes. My hand dropped to clutch at a broken half of an empty locket around my neck. The man and woman were gone, but the man on the ground laid still and groaned. His graveled voice made me flinch. "Help me, please."

My eyes darted around him, looking for another person and hoping it was mother. I've never talked to anyone but her. I could hear her howl now if I ever tried, "Bonne Baker! What have I told you about people from outside?"

"I can see you in the tunnel," he said. "Step out and get the police."

I thought of the books mother brought me. The one with pictures and a girl speaking to others. She called them *Mam* and *Sir*, never *police*.

"I can't help you, mam," I stuttered.

He chuckled, and I turned around, dirt crunching under my bare feet. Mother will know what to do when she's back.

"Wait, I just need a hand so I can continue my search." The man wobbled up on an elbow.

"I only want to bring my daughter home."

I paused, fiddled with my broken locket. I will not disobey Mother further. "I'm sorry.

You can move, so leave."

"I don't think I'll get far," he said. "Some bones are broken."

*Broken?* I gazed over my shoulder, my attention-catching on the glass box. I looked away.

"The light, what is it?" I asked.

"The lantern?" he asked.

"It's to help you see. Haven't you seen them?"

"Mother said they're dangerous and can harm you."

"Nonsense. Come see for yourself; it's not that scary," he said.

I hesitated, a shorter pause than it should've been, and turned around. I wiggled my toe forward in the dirt.

*Don't you dare, Bonne*

"No, thank you." I heard a gasp as I answered. A familiar short woman with knotty hair came around the tunnel's entrance. Mother!

I ran to her but tripped to a stop when she shouted, "Don't you dare!"

I scrambled back when I landed too close to the man and knocked into my mother's knees. He studied my face intently. Mother glared at him and grabbed me by the forearm, heaving me to my feet.

"Ava." The man cried and struggled to stand.

I glanced back confused when my mother started to drag me into the tunnel. Her face was set in a deep scowl.

"I wasn't going to leave," I promised.

He called the name again and stretched his arm out to grab at her feet. "Let her go!"

His shouts shrank the deeper we went. When we got to our little cove of stained blankets and mismatched furniture, she tossed me to the cushions that made our bed.

"Haven't I warned you enough?" she asked. Her tone was calm. I kept my head down. She walked to me and pinched my chin in her fingers, tilting it up. "What did the man want?"

"Help, so he can find his daughter," I whispered. My chin jerked as she released me. She walked to the table.

"Men lie, Bonne. People lie. They will do anything to get closer."

I flinched at the slight rise in her tone, "But he—"

Mother sighed and slid into a chair. "That man doesn't have a daughter, Bonne. Everyone in town thinks he's crazy because he's searching for something that was never his."

My stomach coiled. Something in the man's voice told me he wasn't dangerous, and the light. It had no effect on us like mother's stories. She doesn't believe me, but that wouldn't make her lie, would it, "I didn't know."

"Of course, you didn't," She patted the seat beside her. "Because I keep you safe here, at home. Remember Bonne, stay a coward, it'll keep you safe."

I sat, and she pushed a hand into my tangled hair. "I'm sorry, Mother."

"You've never made a mistake before. Are you feeling alright?" Mother asked, pushing a hand to my forehead.

I moved back, as if her hand could grab my thoughts. "Must be the weather. The winds are harsh today."

She studied my hand when I thumbed my locket. "I'll find us more blankets. I feel a storm coming."

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The wind howled through the tunnel tonight, keeping me from sleep. Mother was soundless beside me. I laid on my side and watched our single-lit candle drip wax on the floor. When the wax got toward the bottom, it passed a carving. It read, *Ava*.

I moved the blankets and sat up. I grabbed the candle, tilted it, and traced my finger over the name. My gut swiveled when I thought of the man. I stopped hearing him when mother left to get us more blankets after our conversation. I didn't mention him in fear I'd upset her again.

I looked to her next to me, then lifted my gaze behind her to the darkened path leading to the tunnel's entrance. One glance back at mother and I stood.

I kept telling myself as I walked that he would be gone, and so would my curiosity. I wanted to know more about the light and Ava— what it was, who she was, and if mother lied.

He was still there with his back against the wall and his eyes shut. A new bruise on the sides of his neck. I crouched in front of him. "Excuse me."

I nudged him when he didn't answer, and he slumped to his side. My eyes followed a chain falling out of his shirt pocket; I caught it before it fell. It held an oval locket with a small design circling its sides. I moved to flip it, but a booming male voice made me drop it and stand. "You there, stop what you're doing!"

A man in a black suit and a dome hat stood at the end of the valley. He took immediate steps toward me, and I ran back into the tunnel. I didn't get far when his arms wrapped around me and pulled me back outside.

I yelped at the unfamiliar contact. "Mother!"

The man pulled me closer to the valley, and I moved frantically in his grip.

"It's your father, Fitz. He's dead," he said to a young man jogging to us. Fitz tried to pass and go to the man, but the one holding me shoved me into him. I retched my head away.

"You're off the case. Take her to the station," he said.

I tried my escape when his fingers left my arms, but new ones halted me.

"Off the case? He's my—" Fitz started.

"I can't let your emotions interfere," he said, pointing at me. "The station."

His grip tightened, and he pulled me further from home, my movements leading to no avail. We turned a few corners, and suddenly people were everywhere. Animals pulled wooden things on wheels, and a metal machine followed, letting out a loud rumble. It was a chaotic symphony, and I didn't fit the mix. I saw oversized lanterns on thick metal bars lining the path. Fitz took me down. I cowered into him to hide.

He took me into a brick building with a paper sign reading, Police Station. Tables were scattered through the room. They looked different from the ones at home, and people surrounded them. He walked me past the groups of men and down a long room. There were two doors on the left and metal bars running from the floor to the ceiling on the right. He put me behind them and left.

I immediately curled myself into the corner and cried into my knees.

"Are you alright, Fitz?" A gruff voice asked.

I guess I wasn't the only one crying.

"My father was found by the abandoned train tunnels. The girl was next to him," Fitz sniffed.

"Is she here for questioning?" I flinched at the voice beside me and looked up. The man kneeled on the other side of the bars, and I crawled back as much as I could. He was huge!

He frowned, stood up, and left. Rushed steps enter the building. "No one was in the tunnels. It was just the girl."

I shot my head up. Does this mean mother was coming for me? What if she couldn't find me because I was stuck here?

"Officer Fitz, you may want to look at this." The huge man said.

I stood and walked quietly to the bars. They were likely built to keep people inside, but it looked like I was small enough to fit through.

I peeked my head down the long room. A man stood at the end with his back to me, blocking the view to the others.

"Fitz, I think this is her," the gruff voice said.

"The girl in this picture is three," another joined in. "That girl back there looks eleven."

I silently slipped through the bars and pushed at the closest door. It opened.

"The girl in the picture was three, eight years ago," Fitz said. A scuffle followed.

"Contact my mother, Avery!"

The door shut, and I was met with doors lined on the side of the wall and bowls attached to the other. There was also a small window; I climbed through it.

When I steadied myself on bare feet, I ran in the direction I remember coming from. However, the weather was different outside, and rain pelted my vision. I turned a corner and heard Fitz shout at me. They noticed my absences too soon.

I turned another sharp corner and slipped on the gravel, wincing as I hit the ground. My foot stung as I picked up speed, and it left a trail of dark liquid. Fitz's shouting was muffled by a whip of wind down the alley. He was close, but if I got to the tunnel before him, mother could help me.

I skidded to a stop when I took my last turn. I was met with the wet stone of a building I didn't know. I went the wrong way. I slammed my palms onto the stone ignoring the soggy paper stuck to it. "No. No. No." A paper slipped down the wall when I turned to face Fitz. "Take me home," I cried.

He walked to me, catching his breath. His eyes were swollen, and his face was spotted with red. I hobbled to the corner. "Please," I said.

"Ava," Fitz cooed. "I know this may be confusing, but that tunnel isn't your home." He got closer, and I shook my head. "I'm—"

Fitz suddenly slumped when a smack rang out. My mother stood behind him with a brick in her hand, eyes aflame. I rush into her, and she drops the brick. Apologies spilled from my mouth, and her grip tightened.

"Do you get it now, what people are like?" she asked. I took a step back. Her voice raised. "You disregarded all my warnings and left."

"You're scaring me," I said, backing away. My foot bumps into an unconscious Fitz.

"I was protecting you, but look what you made me do," she shouted.

I looked down at Fitz. Next to him was the fallen paper, a *missing* paper.



A little girl with soft features and short hair was on it with the name *Ava McAdams*. I studied her. A locket around her neck looked like mine and the one the man had in his pocket.

"Who is this?"

"She's no one," mother said.

"You said only bad people lie," I said. I held up the paper toward my mother. "Who's Ava?"

"When have I ever lied to you? Ava doesn't exist—" mother started.

"The lanterns, you said they hurt people, but everyone out here is fine. That man in front of the tunnel was hurt, and he was looking for this girl," I said.

Mother's scowl deepened. "When the lights were first made, everyone was so distracted. They didn't care that a little girl was walking away from the crowd. She walked to me."

"You're not my mother, are you?" I asked. I wanted her to say sorry for the lies and tell me that I was always hers. That keeping me in the tunnels was really only to keep me safe.

"They never cared about you the way I did. You became Bonne when you chose me." She tore the paper out of my hand and grabbed my forearm, yanking me towards her. "You will come home with me, and you are going to stay there."

"That man was my father!" I shouted, pulling back.

She tightened her grip, and her brown teeth shone through her lips. "You are mine."

Fitz stirred and groaned behind us. He called the man father too. "When the man wakes up in front of the tunnel, he will not stop looking." I said.

I fought to get out of her hand as she pulled me out of the ally. "I killed him," she sheaths. "He was trying to take you away from me. He dragged you out here. This was his fault!"

I was suddenly scared of the tunnels. It didn't show me warmth or the mother I thought knew. She was a scary woman in front of me.

"I don't want to go," I cried.

"You think you can live out here? You need me because you're a coward, Bonne," she said.

I grabbed onto the brick of the build when she tried to make a turn.

"Let her go," Fitz said, standing with a hand to the back of his head and the other on the wall.

I stuttered, "I'm not a coward."

Mother laughed. It was like gravel in a tin bucket. "Is he why you're acting like this?"

Fitz got closer to us.

Mother didn't like it, "You stay there, boy."

"You are under arrest for the kidnapping of Ava McAdams and killing of John McAdams. Remove your hands from the girl." Fitz said, standing fully. He grabbed two circles dangling off each other from his side.

Mother let go of me and smiled toward Fitz, "Are you sure you have the strength?" She picked up a new brick by my feet, "This is what happens when you don't listen."

She ran toward Fitz and raised the brick to hit him. She knocked them to the ground, and I screamed, "Stop it!"

I ran to her ignoring the pain that shot through my foot and grabbed her wrist. I lurched forward when she tried to move. "Don't hurt him."

This allowed Fitz to put the circles on her and stand. "You'll get what you deserve."

More men came into the alley and grabbed her. She fought in their grip as she was dragged away and out of view. Fitz touched my shoulder, and I jumped.

"You're very brave, Ava," he said.

"What's going to happen to her?" I asked.

"She'll be punished for her crimes and taken somewhere to live out the sentence," Fitz said.

I nodded, half understanding. Tears fell on my cheeks. "What do I do now?"

"I'll take you home as dad wanted," he said.

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It was a silent walk, and my foot still stung. The gravel didn't help. Finally, Fitz took us to a long building with multiple doors. When he opened one, a crying woman sprung into the rain. She clutched me and stiffened.

"Ava, my baby," she cried.

"Mother, give her some room," Fitz said, giving us a nudge inside.

The woman let me go and shut the door. The building was warm and smelled of food. The walls were covered in paper with people on them and colors that weren't in my books. My books, would I be able to get them?

"Come sit," Fitz said. He was at a table and pulled a chair for me. "I'll treat your wound."

I sat, and he grabbed my leg. The chairs were uncomfortable. He touched the dried liquid on my foot.

The woman sat across from us, "Tell me everything."

After a long story of life in the tunnels and many tears, she led me to a room and left. It was quiet and filled with soft animals and a mat on wood with lots of blankets. I took them off and put them in the corner of the room and laid down.

I cried with the thoughts of who I thought was my mother and slept.