

SKINNY and the ALIEN

"Is that you, Skinny?"

Kaila recognized the woman from their neighborhood. Nilda's bulk filled the space in the open door, her body muffling the rolling squeak of gurneys down the hall, the swish of curtains on metal hooks, exaggerated voices assuring others that everything would be okay. Nilda wasn't big enough to hide the intermittent shrieks from other labor rooms, but she zoomed comfort into Kaila with hot-chocolate eyes.

"It's me," Kaila groaned. "Haven't seen you for a long time. Forgot you were a nurse."

"Why you in here, baby girl?" When Nilda waddled from the door, the noise came back inside the room with her. A gurney rushed past the door in a race to the delivery room.

The stupid question made Kaila smile. "I'm having a baby. Why else would I be laying in a place like this?"

"Just yesterday you were singing in the junior choir," Nilda said, putting on her signature sacred expression. She'd worn the same look when she'd sat in the third row of the sanctuary when their chorus of street punks sang. "Voice like an angel. Kae was so proud of you."

Until that second, a cord of intimacy had connected them. But at the mention of her mother, Kaila turned her face to the window. Getting dark now, grey and dense. Cold. She shuddered.

"Let me get you another blanket."

"I'm okay. I just wanna to get it over with." She felt Nilda's hand wrap around her ankle.

"Still skin and bones. How'd you ever make a baby?"

"That's what I was wondering. Girls like me can't get pregnant, right? I mean, we don't have enough meat. Not like Sasha or Michelle. They pop out kids every year, but they've got the hips for it. And the asses." She giggled. "Definitely the asses. Men love staring at them. They know. Those girls are fertile."

"Right about that," Nilda said. Her laugh rose, a soft rumble from her belly. "Guess it don't take much meat to make a baby. Takes a man, though." She tilted her head and waited.

"I think I know that. I'm not a kid anymore."

"I never heard you got hitched," Nilda stepped up and took her wrist. "Here, let me get your pulse. Stay quiet for a second, little Kae."

"Kaila," she snapped. "Don't call me Kae."

"Sorry, Skinny. I know it still hurts."

In their neighborhood, everybody had a tag. A tag defined you, but more than that, it made you a member. You belonged. Nilda was Church Ma. Malik was The

Singer. He graduated to The Singer who worked for God, and after that, The Singer who left God for the devil. He didn't mind – working for the devil worked for him. Worked for Kaila, too. The devil made Malik the hottest guy she'd ever met.

Her mother, Kae, was Chef Ma. Clueless about cuisine, her gift was akin to Jesus dividing the loaves and fishes. She made more food out of less than any woman in the neighborhood. Somebody had to eat it, so they came in droves. They sat at Kae's chrome and glass table with Kaila's brothers. Others took their food to the parlor still furnished with Nana's brocade sofa and armchairs. The TV was always on. Overflow guests went outside and sat on the stoop.

They shoveled down Kae's arroz con pollo, baked ziti, fried plantains, and flan the color of crap. The food disgusted Kaila. Her brothers' mouths and guts disgusted her. But she adored Kae, even when the smell of her food made her puke.

Kaila's tag, Skinny, was no compliment in a neighborhood where feasting was favored over fucking. But she accepted being Skinny until her life morphed. She became Skinny with a dead mother. Then, Skinny who never ate.

The neighborhood morphed, too. The natives were under siege by aliens who stole entire blocks. They filled high-rise condos, and dirtied the streets with poodles and other fuzzy shit-makers. Sushi Bars followed them in. Neighborhood shops turned into boutiques. Liquor stores shelved fine wines and it became impossible to find a cheap red. The natives struggled to adapt. Some switched to vodka and let the aliens keep their Chateau-whatevers.

"It'll take a few years, but we'll turn this dump around," cackled one of them. Fate had a native bum stationed in the alien's path. Crazy Nick wobbled into the alien and spilled Stoli on the guy's purse.

"Tell your wife I'm sorry," muttered Nick. "Her bag stinks now."

"It's a man-bag," said the alien. "You should get to a shelter where you'll be safe. Or rehab. I could make some calls for you."

"Worry about yourself," Nick said.

"Is that a threat?" The alien backed up to the curb. "We're trying to live at peace with you people. You don't make it easy."

Crazy Nick swigged his Stoli and walked away cursing.

Nilda looked at the chart at the foot of the bed. "Induced. They broke your water."

"Yeah. That was fun."

"Overdue, then?"

"Two weeks. I was supposed to have it February 17. It was gonna be a sign."

"What kind of sign, sweetie?"

"Kae's birthday," she said. "But it didn't happen. I don't think it wants to be born. Can't say I blame it."

Nilda whispered what Kaila knew was a prayer. "We all miss her. Not the same at church without her. But your baby wants her own birthday. Or is he a boy?"

"I never asked. I think of it as *it*." Kaila paused, annoyed by the early burn of a pain coming on. "Wanna know the truth? I tagged it Alien. You know, it snuck into my gut and made a home there. Like the aliens who are taking our neighborhood."

Nilda chuckled. "Not much of a house for the little thing. Glad to see you grew a bit, though. You'll get a five-pounder. Still tiny, but she'll be strong."

"I had no choice. I'm full," she said, thinking about the food she started eating when she knew she was pregnant. Rich, heavy gook, like Kae's. And she understood—nothing else could have gotten her to eat. Only this. Contemplating it, she had what felt like one of those in-the-Spirit sensations at church.

"She wants to be born tonight. By morning you'll be a mother."

When she didn't reply, Nilda patted her hair. "Want me to sit with you for awhile? You shouldn't go through this alone."

Kaila had planned to go it alone, but when a cramp hit hard, she squeezed Nilda's hand. She stiffened, bit her lip. Held her breath.

"Just go with it, Skinny. Don't fight it. Don't fight God."

"God damn!" she yelled. She cursed until the agony subsided.

Nilda pulled a pea-soup colored chair next to the bed and plopped down. "Let's see how long you go between contractions." She checked her watch. "Now tell me about your husband."

"He's not," she said. "I didn't get married. But you know him. The Singer."

"Malik?" Nilda chuckled, then frowned. "Still singing for the devil, is he? I loved that boy. Had the anointing. We all knew the hand of God was on him, and I still pray for his soul. I remember how he glowed when he was under the power."

Kaila closed her eyes. She remembered, too

She and Malik quit church at the same time. Malik's anger drove him, but she never understood what made him so mad. People at church worshipped him. When God's hand was on you, it was almost as good as being God. He could have had any girl there—any color, any size. They would have done anything to have him bless their spirit-filled bodies.

They sat on her stoop while Malik ate Kae's ziti. The block hummed with night heat. The sound of a basketball bouncing in the playground provided the beat. "I'm backslidden," he said. "I can't fake it anymore. I gotta get out."

"I'm getting out, too. Can't get the blessing. I tried," Kaila said.

"You talkin' about tongues?"

A lame thing to be humiliated about, but she nodded. "Everybody else can do it. God won't bless me. Marlon said it's the way I dress."

Malik's laughter tickled her neck. "There's no blessing. Easy enough to figure out. You make up words. Then, if you cry a little, it sounds real. And don't forget the

pitch. It's gotta be high. Like this." He put his plate on the step and leapt up, letting out a wolfish howl.

Skinny didn't laugh much, but she laughed that night. "You mean they all fake it? Even your Ma?"

When he sat back down, he put his arm around her. She looked down at her t-shirt and saw the rising points of her tits. He pressed his leg against her. "It gets them excited. They think they feel the Lord. But don't believe it. All a game. The whole business is a game to keep people out of sin. Like the cops, I guess."

By sixteen, she'd gotten saved and unsaved more times than she could count. Not sure if she was a believer or not, Kaila knew one thing that night. She wanted to sin with Malik in the worst way.

"You should eat," Malik said. "Here." He raised a forkful of gooey cheese. "Your mother's a great cook."

She crinkled her nose. "I never eat that stuff. I keep my body pure. I mean...you know...not that kind of pure." Between her legs, she felt wet.

He beamed love into her. "You're perfect, Skinny. I'm not into fat girls." Then Kaila knew Malik would be into her. Soon. And he was.

When Malik left God for good, he started a band. They played the local dives yet unsanitized by the aliens. After closing, he knew where to find her. Kaila waited for him on their stoop below Kae's bedroom. Through the open window, she heard her mother snoring. Kae always left a plate of cookies in the entry in case Malik stopped by. He usually had a cookie or two before having Kaila, and finished them later as she smoked.

One night, Kaila wasn't waiting for Malik on the stoop. No cookies in the entry. Kae was dead—just gone without a good-bye. She stood in the kitchen and stared. Crusty dishes sat in the sink. A sated roach staggered across the counter to a pot of rice that had dried into glue. Fruit flies hovered over a black banana. While her brothers sobbed, lights popped on in the neighborhood and the phone kept ringing. On that night, she made the decision to stop eating. Her plan was the only thing on earth that made sense to her.

"Twenty minutes apart" said Nilda when Kaila's pain hit again. "You've got a way to go. Try to work with your body."

The ache began in her back, then fanned out and over the mound that housed Alien. Then it squeezed, harder, harder. "It's killing me. Fuck," she whispered. "He should be going through this, too."

"Yes he should. Where's that boy? Let me go call him."

"That's not what I mean." She tried to breathe like they'd taught her. "I mean, he should feel my pain. The Alien came from him. It's only fair."

"It's God's plan," said Nilda. "You know the story. Women pay the price till Jesus comes. But that don't let Malik off the hook."

Another hit on top of the first. "It must be coming out now." She panted.

"Not yet. You've got plenty of time."

"Time for what?"

"Aren't you waiting for Malik?"

"He's got a gig. I didn't tell him I came. Tonight's all mine."

When the contraction subsided, Nilda left the room and returned with another nurse. This one stuck her hand deep inside. "Dilated to three fingers," she stated. "Hang in there."

"I need drugs. And a cigarette."

Nilda huffed and returned to the chair. The nurse left without promising to bring drugs. "Is everything all right between you and Malik? I hope your babe will grow up with a daddy."

"We're good," she said. Fatigue lay heavy on her, like a drunk. "I just don't know why I'm doing this."

There were good reasons to give birth. She imagined what they must be. Somebody to love more than yourself. Somebody to carry on your family. A gift to your lover—a piece of him, a piece of you. A baby would absorb all the magic of the two of you, but none of the crap. Babies—the God-given reason to fuck, the only good reason to live. But she didn't feel any of that, didn't mean to get pregnant. The girl with the dead mother got a surprise, and ten months after her death, Kae would get a grandchild.

"I don't think you're ready for this," her friend Jo said when Kaila told her. "I don't know, you're...you know..."

"What?" Kaila snapped. She had a headache that wouldn't go away. She'd already been warned about pills, even aspirin. Had to bear the pain. No cigarettes. No booze. Plenty of food. Milk. Meat.

Jo shrugged. "Messed up. Not that I blame you."

"Doesn't matter. Ready or not."

"I hope it's not retarded. You're too skinny. You should've put on some pounds first."

Horrid. Alien was making her insides split, mocking her now every ten minutes. Nilda left and returned with a notepad. "Let's make a list," she purred.

"Drugs!" Kaila yelled.

"Tucks," Nilda licked the tip of the stubby pencil. "I'll bring you some in the morning."

"What the hell are tucks?"

"Little pads. They'll cool your stitches. It'll feel good, honey."

"Why do I need stitches?" She moaned. "I know. Alien's clawing my guts out."

Nilda chuckled. She breathed deeply for the girl. "When the doctor cuts you. It helps the baby come out. It's really to keep you tight for lovin' after the baby. You don't wanna be all stretched out. A woman's gotta stay able."

"I hate Malik," she seethed. "He gets off, and I get...this."

Every three minutes, Alien pummeled her. Nilda ordered her not to push. Not yet. Not until they got to the delivery room.

"Why can't we go now?" she cried.

"Doctor's not here yet. He had a dinner party tonight. On his way, I hope."

After an age, another visit from three-fingers nurse. She came bearing a gift – a syringe. Kaila held out her arm.

"Not that kind of drug," said Nilda. "The needle goes straight to ground zero."

"As long as it knocks me out," she said. "I've had enough."

"You don't wanna sleep. Don't you wanna remember the moment your daughter's born?"

"No!" she screamed. "I wanna wake up and find out it's all over." The needle went in and she screamed again. "Leave me alone! I gotta be alone."

Sleet pelted the windowpane. Nilda stood at the window and whispered another of her prayers. "You're not alone, baby. I feel her. If you give her a chance, you'll feel her, too."

"Get me outta here," cried Kaila. "I can't do this."

"Fully dilated," stated finger nurse. "We'll take her in now."

Blur. Cold. No toes, in fact – no legs. Dark. It was over. Kaila wondered why her legs were gone. She wondered if Nilda had called Malik. She wondered why she was alone. Were they supposed to leave a dying person all alone?

"You're not alone," said Kae.

"You left me."

"No."

Kaila squinted. She'd gone mad, she thought. Kae wasn't there. But her pinky toe felt warm. She touched the deflated mound Alien had left behind. Empty. Void. Hungry again. She wanted a cig.

"Your girl's here," Nilda cooed. She wheeled in the bassinet with Alien wrapped up tight, only her black hair visible. "And daddy's on his way. Malik's gonna give you a talkin' to for not calling him. Wanna hold your baby?"

Her feet tingled. She nodded. Tap tap tap on the window. Sleet. Or fingers. Then wind, breath.

"She's beautiful, Skinny. Almost six pounds. You done good, girl. I'm proud of you," whispered Nilda. "Your mama's proud." Tears wet her wide face. "You'll feel better now. Just watch." Nilda laid Alien on Kaila's chest. The tiny thing's eyes fluttered open for just a second, then closed. "Look at that. Not even crying. You gotta give her a proper name. But Alien can be her tag," chuckled Nilda.

Kaila sighed. Glad she'd come alone. Glad it was over. "Kae," she whispered.

Nilda glowed as though she was under the power. "Yes."