

Reset

Aaron wanted to get up on Victor's shoulders.

"Shush!" Maria scolded.

Victor thought it might have been okay. Crystal would have approved. But they were in the house of God, after all, and he didn't want to upset the Doers, or Pastor Droettboom, or the scrubbed congregation of the Church of Christ the Redeemer. So he squeezed Aaron's shoulder to signal mutual subjugation, and steeled himself for the difficult ceremony ahead.

The process of exhuming his mother's remains, conducting a forensic examination, then working through the funeral arrangements with Grandma and Grandpa Doer had been difficult – to put it mildly. Poor Albert had been shaken most by the ordeal. Should he love Victor or hate him? Hug him or spurn him?

Albert's ambivalence put Barbara in a difficult spot. She had warmed to Victor, especially since he'd assured her that his passion for erotic art might be heading in a new, 'less flamboyant' direction. But her allegiance must always remain with her husband, and more than ever Albert needed her.

Given time – *a long time* – they might work things out.

Then there was Maria. He and she would marry. Of that there could be no doubt. Aaron would perhaps have a brother or sister one day. Victor smiled, thinking about it. Larry and Cathy seemed to be headed in that direction, too. Already controversy was brewing over the notion of a joint holiday, which Maria seemed keen on, Victor less so.

He glanced at his partner. She sensed his attention and glanced back, offering a quick, supportive smile.

My God! he allowed. *How can anyone be so beautiful?*

Some mornings he would get up early and walk the seawall to First Beach. On those days even TooBee seemed to acquire a sense of decorum, as if he understood in his canine way the need for moments of awe. Standing there on the edge of the ocean,

watching the sun rise, knowing that the water at your feet connected you with all the world's continents – that's how it felt sometimes, being next to Maria.

Detective Inspector Tom Cochrane had shown up for the memorial. After thirty years, he could finally put Victor's case to bed. The Boy's origins had been discovered and two criminal investigations wrapped up in one.

If the police had arrived at Umbach's place five minutes earlier, things might have turned out differently. They might have been able to persuade Frank not to kill himself. Then again, he might have reacted badly and killed Victor instead. Others would have to grieve for Umbach; Victor couldn't.

The police investigation turned up a lengthy note from Crystal, which she had concealed behind a wardrobe in the bunker.

Umbach had kidnapped her that August morning in 1972 by pretending to have something that needed delivering from the church to her parents' house. She recognized him. He said he'd expected Albert and Barbara to still be at home, then asked if she could help him get the item out of his van. The plan had been that simple.

She had been abducted in broad daylight and transported to Umbach's cinderblock hell while her parents and his wife were singing hymns and praying for a world redeemed. He'd raped her then and there. Not once after that did she describe Umbach's repeated assaults. She wrote about the between times instead - about Victor especially, after he was born.

"My boy is beautiful. I suppose a part of me should hate him because of his father and the way he was conceived, but Emanon is my only reason for living. I love him. I know that one day he will escape this hellhole and then I will be free too. He's all that's left of me."

Near the end Umbach started forcing Crystal to cook and clean in the main house. He said she was 'in training' for the day when she and The Boy would become 'members of the family', Rachel reported to the police. Victor was left behind in the bunker and Umbach threatened to kill him if Crystal ever bolted or tried anything. So she didn't dare.

He wants Emanon naked, she wrote, because he says that keeps slaves from running away, and until Emanon is properly christened an Umbach, he will remain a slave.

When she was about her chores, Crystal fantasized: *“I want to stab Umbach, but I’m afraid I’ll fail and then Emanon will pay,”* she wrote. *“Frank watches me like a hawk and he’s got that gun to hand always. I can’t risk anything.”*

But she did get to know the lay of the land outside the bunker during those work excursions. She described the old maple in Umbach’s yard, the farm beyond, the side door they went into the house by. Umbach’s routines and ramblings.

“Frank is insane. He says he and Rachel are going to adopt Emanon, and have me stay on as their servant during the ‘End Times’. But Rachel can’t stand me being there and she’ll never be able to love my son. If it wasn’t for Emanon, I’d kill Frank and her too, or die trying. He’s evil. I don’t believe he intends to let me live. He needs me for now to take care of Emanon and satisfy his lust.”

She laid out in detail her plan for getting Victor out: how she started leaving a pile of clothes next to the door, so Umbach would get used to it; how she trained Emanon, going over and over the timing and route of his escape.

Victor marveled at her courage.

When Pastor Droettboom asked the crowd to bow their heads in prayer, Victor focused on the spirit of Crystal Doer. She seemed more a big sister to him than a mother. She’d never been given a chance to grow into motherhood, but she had risen to the occasion when heroism was required.

You did it Mom. You saved me.

Only in that moment did he fully know it.

All these people had gathered to honor her refurbished memory. Victor studied her portrait, propped on a table in front of the pulpit – that happy, somewhat defiant smile. *You deserve a hero’s honors Mom,* he thought. And at last sorrow broke, a wave that had come from far, far away and must now expend itself on his shore. A wave that would return again and again throughout his life, always bringing with it something beautiful, something sad from the places that could have been.

The End