





up a Lavender. Imelda shifted her weight, but didn't move from her spot under the tent.

The trailer door squeaked open and slammed shut. Imelda heard Boss Ron's feet on the woodchips, but she moved quickly out into the field—ducking first behind the racks of hanging fuchsias—before he could scream at her. *Customer service, customer service, goddamn customer service*; she'd heard it before.

Imelda approached the old woman near the daylilies. Bees buzzed in and out of the petals and whizzed by her ears.

"Need help," Imelda said flatly.

"What was that?" The old woman twisted her neck to look up at Imelda, up to the sun. She squinted her eyes and pulled her lips apart, revealing the red lipstick on her teeth.

Imelda turned her eyes to the road—the divided highway, just a few yards away, with passing cars and car radios and car air conditioning. She imagined herself being sucked into traffic and the words slipped out dreamily: "Your voice is like murder on my ears."

"What was that?" the old woman's voice grated.

Imelda's eyes snapped back in recovery. "I said, do you need help?" she asked again, louder.

"Where's Josh? Is Josh here?"

"No, it's his day off."

"Well, I don't know if you can help me."

"You don't think I can help you *carry* some damn plants?"

"What was that?"

Imelda held her breath long enough for the words to slip back into her lungs. She lifted two perennials from the woman's arms and said: "I'll take these to the counter."

The old woman followed Imelda across the woodchips, babbling on.

"The girls that work here are so lazy!" she grated. "All they do is point! I've always favored the boys. It's a good thing I had sons! Did I tell you about my son, Richard? He's a successful producer in Hollywood! Guess who his boss is!"

Imelda reached the counter and was trapped; the woman, now just inches away and smelling of harsh eau de toilette, once again craned her neck to look up at Imelda, lipsticked teeth and all. Imelda looked away—cringing and laughing and cursing inside. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Boss Ron, lurking around the rack of hanging pots. *Now sandwiched between fucking nutcases and being watched*. She turned to the woman and offered an uninterested stare.

"BARRY GORDY!" the woman said, as if she would burst. "His boss is BARRY GORDY! I called my son one afternoon, right, and he was taking a nap on his lunch break! Do you ever do that? I bet you do!"

"That's fascinating," Imelda said. She punched the prices into the cash register. "Your total is thirty-one, seventy-seven."

"What! I've only got three plants!" *Grate, grate*.

"And they're each nine ninety-nine. Didn't you see the sign?"

"What! They're selling them down the road—THE SAME PLANTS—for seven dollars!"

"Lady, you drive a *Lexus* for chrissake; just give me the money."

Boss Ron tottered over on his lopsided legs—one thin, one not. He stood a couple of inches below Imelda, and this, she thought, always enraged him even more.

"Eye-melda," he fumed—always Eye-melda, always, even after all the times she corrected him—"I want you to go home."





