

MAMA

Sherry wiped at her nose with her sleeve, straightened out her rumpled shirt, smoothed her hair back and tried to look as together as she possibly could. She knocked on the apartment door.

“Who is it?” The hopeful but anxious voice of a teenager answered.

“It’s me. Sherry.”

A few awkward moments later, Denise opened the door about six inches or so and gave Sherry the good old ‘up down’. You could never tell with Sherry. What kind of mood she was in, how hard she happened to be tweaking, or how desperate she might be to score. To the pretty, blonde sixteen year old answering the door, she looked to be okay. For now. Denise looked her in the eye and spoke.

“Hey, Sherry. I thought it might be Alex. He’s on his way over now.”

This was a little white lie. Alex was Denise’s boyfriend, and could usually be counted on to be there when she babysat. But not today. No, not today...when *Sherry* comes by, she thought. The high school football team was already in summer two-a-days, and Alex was probably catching passes and playing grab you know what with his teammates right about now. It just helped if Sherry didn’t know that Denise was alone with Aja. Cut out the BS and kept Sherry on her best behavior.

Sherry snuffled back her runny nose, rubbed her bloodshot eyes and nervously brushed back her straw-brittle, dirty brown hair.

“That’s cool’, Sherry answered. ‘Sorry to barge in like this. I was in the neighborhood, and just wanted to see Aja for a minute. Is that okay?’”

It wasn’t easy for a teenage girl to be put in this position. But Denise was up to it. On the smaller side, about five foot even. With

a steel inside that belied her stature. Like they say, it's not the size of the dog in the fight...and she could definitely be tough when she needed to be. Especially when it came to kids. Someday she hoped to have children of her own. The young girl hoped someone would be there to protect them when they needed it. Even if, God forbid, it was protection from herself.

“It's cool, Sherry. I just have to stay close, that's all.”

Jeff was Sherry's ex, and Denise's employer right now. He had given her explicit instructions about this exact situation, and it had happened a time or two already. ‘Stay in the same room that she's in. Watch her like a hawk. Don't let her steal anything, or do anything crazy like try to snatch Aja.’

Denise stepped out of the doorway and let Sherry into the apartment's living room. Sitting on the floor, having a Capri Sun juice and watching TV was Sherry's seven year old daughter Aja.

The rail thin woman approached her child, kneeling down and stretching her arms out, speaking as she did.

“Hey, darlin.”

Aja's head turned at the sound of Sherry's voice, but she made no move toward her. Her little face didn't darken or brighten.

“Hi”, the little girl replied shyly

Aja might as well have been greeting the mailman, or the lady that manned the counter at the corner store. She turned back toward the cartoons and another sip of juice.

It had been three years since Oxy and her sick need of it had forced Jeff to change the locks, divorce her and get a restraining order. She was fond of telling people that he used to pick up her prescriptions for it after she got in the car wreck that left her with chronic pain. Not so fond about telling others how her need for it grew out of control, to an addiction that ruled her and ruined her life. There was nothing she wouldn't do for it. She used her body to get it

until no one wanted it anymore. Nothing she wouldn't steal, no one she wouldn't betray. In her right mind, Sherry knew that Jeff had to remove her from their lives, if for nothing else than Aja's safety and well being. But Sherry's right mind was less and less present. She was starting to fade in Aja's young memory, morphing from a loving mother into a drugged out stranger, someone to be pitied, or worse, feared. For almost half of her baby's young life, Sherry had been gone. Either on the streets, in the flophouses or the jails of Providence, Rhode Island. Begging, stealing, or selling herself to get what she needed.

She was so tired. The harsh New England winter would be here soon. The buzzing inside her head...in her mind. It just wouldn't stop now. Lately her nerves had started firing off by themselves. and it felt like bugs were crawling on her arms and legs. Even when they weren't.

Sherry gave her head a little shake. Forcing herself to focus. On anything but herself. On Aja. Her *daughter*. Now.

"Babe?"

It was her nickname for Aja. She was the only one who ever called her that since the little girl was born. This little girl who was the only good thing Sherry had ever done. Aja's pretty face turned toward her, and Sherry put a bony hand on her shoulder.

"Babe, you know your mama loves you, right?"

A little flicker in Aja's eyes. It was enough for Sherry.

"Yeah. I know."

"Ok, babe", Sherry answered. She rubbed Aja's back. Denise remained vigilant, just a few feet away, and felt bad for both mother and daughter. Sherry straightened up and looked at the teenager.

"Thanks, hon. I appreciate it."

She walked toward the door, and Denise opened it for her. Sherry passed through it like a wraith, offering a “You take care now” as she went.

Sherry struck out on foot, heading south on Chestnut Street. Walking with a purpose. Ten minutes later, she made a left on Point Street, her arms folded against her breasts in a self embrace as she walked.

In short order, she was passing the Rhode Island Hospital on her left. Two stints there in detox, one getting her heart started again after an overdose. What a joke detox was, she thought. Quickly approaching the Providence River now, and the Point Street bridge crossing it. Little stumpy shrubs in a row, fake antique lampposts and now the pedestrian walkway. Steel guardrail toward the traffic and cyclone fence toward the river’s side. The girders of the bridge rose like spider’s legs interlocking in a towering grid, the river a good two hundred and fifty feet or so below.

The cyclone fence gave way to a double metal rail about four and a half feet high. A few people here midday, walking from one side of the river to the other. Mostly looking at her and hoping she didn’t speak, or bother them for a handout. No worries today. The Rhode Island sun was bright, and the smell of the dark water below was strong.

At the bridge’s midpoint, without breaking stride Sherry eased one leg over the guardrail, and then the other. She carefully found footing on the bridge’s outer concrete edge, bent her knees a little and pushed off like an Olympic diver, headfirst.

Hundreds of feet below, the river’s glossy black water rushed toward her. Sherry’s face was contorted, lips and cheeks peeled back by the howling wind. She felt the air swirl past her lungs, through her hair and outstretched fingers as she hurtled toward the water. Heard the buzzing in her brain for the last time. Just before her frail body crashed into the river’s surface, she thought.

What a *relief*.