

**CUTTERS
END**

PROLOGUE

He wasn't coming back. The finality of it hit and hot tears welled, the blindfold growing soggy once more. Her head thumped and now that the blood had dried, the side of her face felt pinched and hard. She couldn't feel her legs.

In the beginning she could kick away the ants that swarmed, but now she imagined them converging, all those creatures crawling over helpless limbs. From somewhere in the scrub, a bird gave a long, drawn-out cry. She knew at that moment she would die, and she waited for the bird to cry again. *If only it would cry*, she thought. Then she would not feel so lonely, it would not be so bad. *Please cry again, bird*, she whispered, aloud or in her head. It was hard to raise any moisture in her mouth and she couldn't have shouted if she'd tried. Her breathing slowed. The time for screams was over and the world became quiet and still.

She thought of her family and her home, so far away. With a deep sadness, she felt a yearning to tell the world

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that once she had existed. She wanted to write her name in the sky so that everyone could see it. She wanted someone to *read* her name. The urge to do so became overwhelming and the pounding in her head thumped with the words: *My name, my name.*

The splinter of wood she'd concealed for hours in a vague thought of attacking him took on a new and final purpose. Gripping it between the base of her two thumbs, she summoned all her remaining energy to carve her first initial into the tree. Her arms, wrapped around the trunk behind her, felt almost numb. It was hard to balance the piece of wood; her pen. She traced the second letter, tried to push in hard when the bark would not yield. She took a short rest before raising her head and gritting her teeth. The third letter was more difficult and, after pressing the splinter in, she felt it break. A dry sob escaped her. But with one final reserve of energy, she used her ragged thumbnail to finish carving out the last letter of her name, barely feeling her skin tear and bleed as she did so.

It was done. Her head dropped.

In the deep darkness, she listened for the bird. But the bleak and desolate world was still.