

12-15-2007

To Whom Much Is Given

Rachel Trujillo
University of New Orleans

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

Recommended Citation

Trujillo, Rachel, "To Whom Much Is Given" (2007). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 634.

<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/634>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

To Whom Much Is Given

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing Workshop

by

Rachel Trujillo

B.A. University of the Pacific, 2000
M.A. New Mexico Highlands University, 2004

December 2007

Acknowledgements

Not one thing—my degree, my presence here in New Orleans, my life—would be possible without the love of God and my parents, who have held me up and believed in my ability to do what I set my sights on achieving. My brothers, their wives and children, and all of my extended family have never questioned me or made me doubt myself by asking, “So, what’s that good for?” when I told them about my plans to pursue an M.F.A. in Fiction. Without those pillars of support, I have nothing. Thank you so, so much.

There are many friends, professors, and colleagues who have been great encouragers as well. Most recently, Joanna Leake, Joseph Boyden, and Dr. John Cooke sat on my thesis defense committee and brought me through unscathed. I am in your debt for the time and consideration you have given me in these past weeks and months, and I could not have finished this thing without you.

Before I get carried away with New Orleans, because it does sweep me off my feet, let me pay homage to my first house of creation: to the Dreemerz and what we were at the ages of twelve and thirteen. You helped me open my creative spirit, and for (and so much more) I will love you forever. To my first publisher, Foothill High School’s Literary Magazine, whose editors, contributors and readers gave me a broader outlet than two-person readings in my bedroom, thank you. I still have all my copies. To Amy from the UOP days, thank you for that night of shared poetry, the beer and the pizza, and for always telling me that I had a creative heart. It has given me confidence.

I must also make a stop in the Southwest. My two years of pain in Las Vegas at New Mexico Highlands University were pivotal, and I would not have found my way to New Orleans or to the heart of my writing without it, at least not at this particular point in time. Thanks go to the memory of Dr. Michael Carroll, who was intelligent, sassy, and incredible as a teaching mentor. He was my first teacher in the art of examining the familiar and making it strange, the better to understand it and show it to the rest of the world. I’m still learning, Dr. Mike. Dominika, Susan, Ann, Maggie, Dorrie, Lou, Rose, Janise, Marisa, Todd, Joe, Dave, Kris, Bud: you gave me joy in a hundred unexpected ways. Thanks also to Dr. Eduardo Tafoya and Dr. David Higginbotham, my first creative writing teachers. You ran workshops that made it easy for me to envision a new future for myself, and you gave me my first tools with which to build it. Most of all, I owe a lot to Wylee Rogers, who has filled my head with stories of his hometown, New Orleans, and told me about the artist in me. He was a refuge from the storm, both as I defended my thesis in New Mexico and again when Hurricane Katrina blew through a year later. Wylee, you have been a challenge and an inspiration, and I have learned more about how to express my thoughts and ideas by being your friend than anywhere else.

Now for New Orleans. Thanks to everyone in the CWW during my three and a half years here, both the ones I met and the ones that I didn’t. Each and every person in this program has contributed in some way to what it was, what it has become, and what it will be in the coming years. Thank you for being a part of my world.

I heartily appreciate the comments I’ve gotten in each of the nine workshops I’ve taken. Thanks to the committee that decided we have to take workshops in other genres. I have learned so much from exploring screenwriting techniques; and, according to the flavor of critiques in non-fiction, the less I know about a subject from personal experience, the better! To all of those people I have had the distinct pleasure of working with, I will not attempt to name everyone in those workshops for absolute fear that I will leave someone out, but please know that I have

appreciated not only your comments but also your work. Thanks for your good faith and the sincerity of your words, which have not fallen on deaf ears.

Thank you:

Jen Violi and Arin Black, for impromptu writing sessions, morning coffee, jugs of margaritas that I will never again approach with such abandon, SIN, and the days before and after the storm. Leeandra Nolting, for sharing a desk with the newbie, for talks in the courtyard, and for amazing poems that made me laugh and cringe, both in a very good way. Chrys K. M. Darkwater, for shots of Jameson, AAA, \$10+ bills at Taco Bell, shared characters, summertime (or anytime) bets, and true friendship from the heart. Casey Lefante and Trisha Rezende, where would I be without you, little sisters? You've lifted my spirits with big earrings, Guitar Hero co-op sessions, scalp massages, baking of all kinds, zombie princess action, initiation ceremonies, and all the encouragement, love, and raw talent any girl could every hope to surround herself with. You are bright jewels in my crown of friendship. And then there's Barb Johnson, my oldest work shopping buddy, thank you for being there with me from day one, lunch at the UC. Thank you for summer meetings, ad hoc workshops, lunches at Fellini's, pinky swears, and one Tennessee Williams Festival class with an accompanying moment of epiphany at Pirate's Alley over a cheese plate and beers. Those, and so much more.

Personally, to the members of the Pirate Ship of Gentilly, past and present: Jeremy Armstrong, you have exposed me to more storylines than I've ever heard from one person. Thank you for sharing your past, present, and cinematic excellence with me. Adam Aman, you're a brick, and an unexpected smile at just the right moments. David Parker, the man of stature and charm; you, my AAA friend, are so much more than your smile. Lish McBride, you have provided me with a touch stone, both artistically and personally, and I admire what you do as a mother, as a writer, and as a friend. Jennifer Stewart, you hold me quietly accountable, and forgive like no one I've ever met; not too many people like you exist, my friend.

And Ben. I don't know how you put up with me over the past year, but somehow it's worked, and you still want to hang out with me. Thank you for your patience, for pushing me to do my work when I got lazy or scared, for telling me that it was possible, and for holding my hand. It's all meant more to me than I will ever be able to say, but I also think that it's something you already know.

Thank you.

Table of Contents

Much is Expected.....	1
Not All Who Wander Are Lost.....	14
Chairs and Other Dangerous Projectiles.....	26
My Brother's Keeper	41
A Prayer for Wisdom.....	55
Kindling	72
Fret	84
Don't Leave	101
Self-Portrait in G-Minor	111
Travel Plans	121
Vita.....	139

Much Is Expected

Alicia cringed as her finger slipped against the neck of the guitar and the chord twanged instead of thrummed, the dissonance seeping from the guitar's body into hers. She felt embarrassment bloom in her cheeks, and she could not help but peek to see if anyone in the congregation of fifty or so people gathered into the classroom-size room before her had noticed. No one looked the slightest bit put off or amused, but that only transformed her embarrassment to annoyance. No one noticed, she thought, because no one was listening. She glanced at her father on the platform next to her, but he had on his intent look, dark eyes down and to the side, not seeming to look at anything in particular as his fingers roved across the neck of his guitar and held every combination of strings in a precise sequence.

Of course little kids will fidget and fuss, she knew he would say, but what bugged Alicia was that they weren't the only ones ready to bolt. One of the men sitting in the front row was losing his battle with sleep, head dipping suddenly before he could jerk it back up. People like that should sit in the back row at least, so their nodding off would be less distracting to everyone else. But how could she blame him when Gina, her own best friend, had clearly let her attention wander, given the fixed stare at some point just above and behind Alicia's head. That was to be expected, Alicia supposed, since Gina had the attention span of a gnat these days and was always mooning over this guy or that. Then Alicia's gaze fell on Peter, her own boy next door, who had to come back from the land of glazed eyes to smile when he noticed she was looking at him. Alicia knew he came to church just to hear her play. She wondered in annoyance, if she was so boring, why did he come at all? Why did any of them come? Even Alicia's mom was preoccupied, though her eyes flicked dutifully between Alicia and her father. She was probably debating with herself about how many more tortillas she would make for dinner. Every week she worried she wouldn't make enough food, every week she decided on the same amount as the

week before, and every week there were leftovers. Normally, Alicia thought that was funny, but today it disappointed her.

As the last notes of the hymn faded away, Alicia allowed her hand to slide down the neck of the guitar, placing the other arm across the instrument's generous curve. She slouched against it while the pastor led the church in the closing prayer, which droned in Alicia's ears as if it were a rote exercise. Where was the passion?, she wondered. The predictable cadence of the pastor's voice made her restless, and she could not keep her eyes shut, so from beneath her lashes she surveyed the crowd of bowed heads. After a minute, she vowed to adopt an artfully jagged hair part like Gina so that when her head was bent it wouldn't look like an animal's butt. She stopped her smile just short of a giggle and then immediately felt guilty. Not kind thoughts about people who were so kind and supportive.

Alicia knew pretty much everyone in the room, and every one of them had been nothing but complimentary about anything she decided to do. The Sunday School teacher said she was a great helper, "a real natural," and all the aunties had hung at least one of Alicia's watercolors on their kitchen walls. Some even went so far as to claim that all the pictures needed were frames to be indistinguishable from the art in the museums. Ever since they had heard her dad was teaching her to play guitar last year, it seemed that not a service went by without two or three people asking when she would play for Sunday worship. Mr. Arnold, who distributed the church bulletin, took to withdrawing hers and asking with a sly smile, "Will it be today?" before handing the little white half sheet to her.

When she finally debuted on the church stage with a much simplified version of "Amazing Grace," they all clapped, and Mr. Arnold gave a shrill whistle from the door. It had been exciting at first, playing a song or two with her dad. Her repertoire grew, and she got better at the old songs. The day she joined all three of the regular worship team onstage, her father, Joe and Aaron, everyone insisted that she was a wonderful addition. She became a Sunday morning

fixture, and for a few weeks she felt like she was doing something important. But then the applause died away more quickly, and she'd begun to notice the wandering eyes and vacant expressions just when she thought the music was really good. She wanted to do something significant, make people react to the songs with her talent, shake them up and inspire them to give it all to the Lord.

Problem was, no one really ever got fired up. She hadn't realized when she was the one looking up at the stage that anyone was looking back. The audience had no idea that performers knew the minds of the people before them. Everyone's attention wandered.

Out of the corner of her eye, Alicia could see her father looking at her, so she bowed her head and closed her eyes, focusing on the last of the pastor's prayer: "...and may we have the patience and perseverance to hear God's voice when he calls us to the tasks he has set for us. Not in our time, but in yours, Lord." And the congregation uttered a low, rumbling amen.

Her father set his guitar against the back wall and hopped off stage, catching up to a couple of kids who looked a few years older than Alicia. One was wearing sweatshirt with the Highlands University logo on it, so they were probably college students trying out churches in the area. Her father shook their hands and had them laughing within moments. He had such a way of getting people to light up.

Alicia saw Peter pushing his way up the aisle against the stream of people filing out on their way to Sunday brunch somewhere. "You need any help with that?" he asked, gesturing to the guitar in Alicia's hands. His smile was wide and bright.

"Nah," Alicia said coolly, the same answer she gave every Sunday, but she tried to make it sound even more detached. She looked down, careful not to maintain eye contact. Such small things as these had been misread in the past. Turning her back, she fumbled with her guitar case. Peter had had a crush on her since they were little, and she told him last week that he should try to like someone else because she didn't like him back. He had taken the blow well; he didn't

deny that he liked her or try to humiliate her or, worse, leave her standing there feeling like an idiot, and she was sure he understood what she meant because he'd been quiet for a long time. She wanted to be sure she didn't lead him on now that she'd said something because, even though Peter hadn't made a scene or anything, his face had gone pale, then red, and then something like green. Without his usual smile, he seemed to shrink, and she felt something cold and empty sucking at the pit her stomach as she realized for the first time just how much he liked her. She had wondered if her words had made a permanent hole in the space between them. It was not a reaction, or a feeling, she wanted to be responsible for, not ever again.

Gina came and sat on the edge of the platform while Alicia put her guitar in its case. "Hey, rockstar," she said. "You got to be anywhere after church?"

Alicia pushed a blond curl out of her eyes. "Well," she said, "Joe and Aaron are coming over—"

"Yeah, yeah, besides that?" Gina demanded, picking at her fingernails.

Alicia tucked her strap in carefully, avoiding Gina's eyes. "I'm going to practice with them," she said.

"Oh, come on," Gina said. "You play every day, all the time! Come to the park with us." She poked Peter in the side and dodged his return jab.

"Yeah, but we only practice like this once a week," Alicia protested, shutting the case and flipping the catches. She met Gina's eyes and saw a little bit of hurt, a little bit of anger. Peter just looked hurt. "You guys, we hang out all the time." School, after school, weekends, she thought.

"No," Gina said, brown eyes darkening, "we don't."

Alicia drew her brows together, glancing from Gina to Peter and back.

Peter scratched his ear. He did that when he had to say something that made him uncomfortable. "You always rush off to practice," he said.

“But I see you every day,” she protested.

Gina shook her head. “We never get to talk to you,” she said. “Don’t you want to spend time with us?” she asked, and the wince she gave after she said it made Alicia’s heart heavy.

That was the look Gina had whenever she realized she’d said or done something stupid.

Alicia searched for the right thing to say. “You could come over and sing with us if you want to,” Alicia offered, stifling her own wince. Gina couldn’t stand sitting around and listening when she could be out doing something.

Gina shook her head. “You know I’d hate that,” she said, an accusing emphasis on the first words.

Peter shifted from one foot to the other and mumbled something about the bathroom. Before he walked away, he shot Alicia one last look. She felt like she’d just whipped a puppy.

“We used to have fun on Sundays,” Gina said, watching Peter drift down the aisle. He walked right past the bathroom and out the door. He never could stand to stick around when she and Gina started in like this.

Alicia sighed. I don’t want to talk about hair and nails, she thought. I don’t want to talk about the same boys over and over, and I don’t want the same boy following me around anymore. Instead, she said, “We’ve seen the movies in both theaters.” One screen at each one, always grainy, always bad sound. Always disappointing, even when the owners shelled out the money for the really good movies and kept the theater open every day and for two shows on Saturdays.

“We can go to the bookstore then,” Gina offered.

“We’ve read every book in that store,” Alicia said.

“Maybe you’ve read them all, smarty pants,” Gina grumbled.

Alicia ignored her. “I get bored,” she said, even though she did love thinking of the narrow shop with its shelves of yellowed pages and plastic covers. Just not today, she thought.

“OK,” Gina said, shrugging, “then the park it is.”

Alicia groaned. She didn’t want to go to the park. She wanted to play.

Gina shook her head. “You know, ever since you started with that guitar, you’ve gotten all high and mighty on us,” she said. “I mean, do you actually think you’re too good to mingle with the common folk now?”

The questions came like a blow to the stomach. “That’s so not fair!” Alicia said. “I just don’t want to hang out with the people who go to the park now.”

Gina made a face. “What’s the difference between what you said and what I said?”

But Alicia didn’t answer. “You remember when it was just us?” she asked. Remember the lying in the grass, she thought. Remember cloud games and picnics, and talking about real stuff like hopes for the future or real lofty stuff like what it meant to be good, not just in actions but in spirit. “Now it’s all different.” She sat down next to Gina, squeezing in between her guitar case and her friend’s body, wanting to feel closer to her. “All we do is try to talk to the boys you like—”

“We talk to guys you like too,” Gina protested.

“—and when we’re not talking to boys, we’re talking about boys,” Alicia continued. “I just—” She broke off, trying to find the right words. “I just need a little something else, I guess.”

Gina’s face was red. “Right,” she said, her voice low. It was the tone she took when she was done. “So that’s your final word, huh?” Her eyes weren’t the narrowed slits of flash-pan anger Alicia had seen before. Alicia didn’t quite know what that look was.

“Gina—”

“Look,” Gina said, standing and looking down at Alicia, “you need some space, right? And I need someone to hang out with.” Alicia felt her stomach drop. “I’ve got to go. See you at school.”

Alicia watched Gina walk down the aisle and out the door. The guitar case crowded her on one side, making her feel off balance. She had to push it aside to get up.

The light of the afternoon sun made its way across the kitchen floor and into the living room where Alicia's dad sat practicing with Aaron and Joe. The three of them headed out to La Ultima Vez every Sunday evening to play music at the Bible study her dad ran, and the guys always came over to practice and eat an early dinner before taking off for the troubled youth camp. She used to think they were a strange mix, a college kid and two guys in their forties, but they kept each other laughing, and when it was time to play, the three of them could really settle in and focus.

She loved to play sets with them, but her fingers got so tired after the first half hour that she was no good for playing the same sections over and over again to get them perfect, and her mistakes just got embarrassing after awhile. Even so, she enjoyed singing the songs with them, and she could have watched them play for several hours. She hadn't learned to improvise like her dad yet, still hesitating and making obvious mistakes. He could always put his fingers on the right strings and frets, no fumbling. It seemed like he and Aaron communicated somehow, and Aaron could lie back or come forward at just the right moment. Sometimes she thought that what they were doing seemed like magic.

This afternoon, they knocked off earlier than usual. Probably the smell of *chile adobo* and hot tortillas had something to do with that, she thought, smiling as her dad and Aaron packed up their guitars. Joe hefted his bongos out the door and down the front walkway, and the guys loaded up the van while she and her mother set the table. Five of everything, placed the way her mother had shown her. Sharing her mother's enjoyment of symmetry, she rushed to get each setting just right before everyone gathered around the table. Alicia watched her mother's grin widen as Alicia's dad, Joe, and Aaron ooh-ed and ahh-ed over the steaming pots of beans and

chili, the generous bowls of lettuce and shredded cheese, the dish of sour cream. They did this every week, but it never got old. Sunday traditions were good.

Aaron was different that afternoon, taking one tortilla instead of two and passing the pot of chili after serving only two dippers full. When he spilled the spoonful of beans he was attempting to put in his bowl, he apologized up and down, blushing. Alicia's mother laughed and handed him a napkin, and her father raised his eyebrow. "Got something on your mind?" he asked.

Aaron swallowed. "You know I graduate this year," he said, fiddling with his napkin.

Who didn't know that, Alicia thought. For the last four years, he'd been going on and on about college and how he was going to be an engineer. The whole church had already started planning a graduation celebration for him, even though it was still several months away. She would have rolled her eyes, but she noticed that her father had cocked his head to the side. The corners of his lips had turned upward expectantly. "And?" he prodded.

Joe looked from Aaron to Alicia's father and back again. Then his eyes widened. "You got the thing at White Sands?" he asked. Aaron nodded, and Joe let out a whoop.

Above the tumult of congratulations, Alicia shouted, "What's in White Sands?"

"NASA," her dad reminded her.

The enormity of it settled on her. A real, important job. And he had to move. Get a new place to live. Make new friends. Each of these dropped like a stone into the still pool of her mind.

"Well," Aaron amended, "I'll work my way up to that, eventually."

Alicia's mind clicked. "White Sands is hours away," she said slowly. "How are you going to make it on Sundays?" As soon as she said it, she knew.

So did everyone else. Alicia's dad answered for everyone: "He's not." He reached out a long arm and patted Aaron's shoulder. "We're losing you, aren't we?"

The look Aaron gave him was at the same time mournful and full of joy. “Yeah.”

No Aaron means no harmony, Alicia thought. Unless. “So,” she said, trying not to draw the word out too far, “you’re going to need another guitar player, aren’t you?”

Joe laughed and winked at her dad. “Zero to infinity in half a second,” he said.

Her father’s eyebrow raised again. “I think we’ll do all right,” he said.

“Oh, come on,” Alicia said. “You need someone, and I know all the songs.”

Aaron glanced at her father and then at her. “She is getting good,” he said, and then shrugged.

Alicia’s father shook his head. “Baby, you don’t take it seriously,” he said gently, “or you wouldn’t have flubbed today.” Alicia’s face grew hot. “The kids at La Ultima Vez aren’t like the church crowd.” He looked at his watch and pushed back from the table. “And we’re late,” he said, even though they were half an hour earlier than usual. But it officially ended the conversation.

She stood by the front window as the men walked down to the van, feeling frustration spread out in a nauseating tingle from the crown of her head. “She plays really well,” she heard Joe say. Her heart lifted until her father shook his head.

“You know it’s not really about that,” he replied.

“You know, if she weren’t so cute—” Aaron said, but her dad put a playful headlock on him and cut in.

“That’s my daughter, there, son,” he said, roughing up Aaron’s hair before letting him go.

“I know, I know,” Aaron laughed, hands up in surrender. “I was just saying.”

There’s no reason I can’t go, she thought. No reason but his word. Why is he holding me back? She could learn so much if he would just let her be a part of his ministry, just for a little while. Then she could go out and find her own. Sometimes she wondered, just for a moment, if maybe he was afraid of how well she’d do.

* * *

Alicia's father was half an hour late getting home that night. In that time, Alicia had rallied her arguments. She was ready when he walked in, slump shouldered from the drive.

"How was Bible study tonight?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Fine." Alicia's mother whisked in and took his guitar from him, cupping his face in her hand for a moment before waving him into a chair. He thanked her and watched her set the guitar inside their room, all the time avoiding Alicia's eyes.

Right, fine, OK. "So," she persisted, but tried to keep her voice sweet, "what happened?"

Her father grunted. "Some listened, and some didn't," he said. "Had a couple of new kids. You know." He scratched his chin. "The usual."

No, she realized, she actually didn't. He always said the same things. "So absolutely nothing happened?" she asked.

He met her eyes and sighed. "Not nothing," he amended. "One of our kids wasn't there tonight." His voice had gone low. Sounded serious.

Now we're getting somewhere. "Why?" she asked. "Is he OK?" She wondered briefly if the scenarios she'd seen on TV about prisons applied to private teen camps in the boonies.

"Not exactly," he said. "Getting kicked out isn't the best way to go."

"What did he do?" Alicia asked, awed. The kids at the camp were troubled teens, so they had already done some serious stuff to get in there. What on earth did they have to do to get kicked out? He could have hurt someone, maybe a counselor.

Her dad shook his head. "It shouldn't have happened," he said. Alicia was about to ask what he meant, but he went on, quietly, almost as if he were talking to himself. "Kid should have had more of a chance."

"Well," Alicia said, matching his tone, "they can't just kick people out. He must have done something."

As soon as she said it, she knew it was the wrong thing to say. Her father's eyes blazed for a moment. He took a breath to calm himself before he spoke. "Sometimes," he said, "it's not so easy to figure out whose fault it is."

They sat in silence for a minute. Alicia's mind worked, trying to figure out what he meant so she could find the right words to go on, but everything she thought of sounded wheedling and fake. She wanted to sound grown up, capable. Nothing came to mind.

"I want to go with you next week," she blurted.

Her father looked up.

Have to say it, all out, now. "You need me," she said, keeping her voice even though she felt like her insides were going to explode. "We can harmonize," she reasoned, "like at church."

His eyes closed in a long blink, which she knew meant he was trying to say something mean sound nice. When he opened his eyes, he dropped the ax. "You're still growing," he said, holding up his hand as she made to protest. "There's still a lot for you to learn, sweetheart. Honestly," and then it came: "you're not quite ready for this."

Alicia felt something hard form in her throat. She spoke around it. "Why not?" she asked, her voice sounding high and tight in her ears. "I'm getting better every day. What if I practice more?"

Alicia's stomach clenched as the denial on his face softened to pity. She hated that look. It made her feel completely powerless and small. "It's not really about the playing, though," he said. His words hammered into her, big and hard to handle. "There are more responsibilities than that."

More responsibilities? Her ears perked up. "Like what?" she asked.

He frowned. "Bible study," he said slowly. "Small groups."

Small groups. Alicia felt fear slide like ice cubes down her spine. She hated feeling like she was being quizzed. But it would be easier than regular Bible study with the kids at church.

She could do that, she thought, answer questions, lead discussion. The kids at La Ultima Vez probably wouldn't ask questions she didn't know the answers to. "I can do that," she said.

His frown turned into a head shake. "This isn't like regular Bible study, baby," he said. "These kids have different frames of reference."

Frustration burned fear away and made Alicia's body tingle. "The Word is the Word," she argued. "I'll learn. I know the Bible really well. You know that."

"It's just not that easy," her father insisted. He put his hands on the arms of his chair, getting ready to leave the room and the conversation.

Alicia's throat constricted. "You aren't ever going to let me go, are you?" she whispered, then swallowed hard. "Whatever I do, it won't be enough."

"Oh, come on now," he said, tipping his head to the side, the way he did when he was trying to figure something out. "You're just not ready."

The tension and heat and cold and upset rose up through her throat like an eruption, and suddenly she couldn't do anything but yell, "Stop saying that." And then the sobs came, wracking her body. She rode them, barely feeling her father's arms around her. "You're never going to let me do this," she said. "Please, please just give me a chance. I promise I won't embarrass you."

Alicia cried until she could barely see, and her voice was hoarse. In the quiet of the room, she heard her father say, "You could never embarrass me."

She felt soothed for a moment, but his answer only raised another. "Then why won't you let me help you?" she asked.

"Because, baby," he started, but she cut him off.

"Don't call me that anymore," she pleaded.

He was quiet for a moment, arms around her. She felt him deflate a little. "Alicia," he began again, "You aren't ready for this. Some things about these kids you won't understand."

She tried to push away from him, but he held her tight. Pushing hard enough that at least her voice would not be muffled, she said, “There’s things you probably don’t understand about them too.” She felt his arms stiffen. She stopped struggling. “You can’t know everything,” she whispered.

After a minute, she felt his chin bob a little against the top of her head. “You’re right,” he said. With her head rested against his neck, she felt his words as well as heard them.

“How am I ever going to learn anything if I never get to try?” she asked, trying to pull away gently.

He didn’t answer her questions, and he didn’t let her go. Her arms were tired from fighting and hanging on, and tears leaked fresh tracks down her cheeks. Her drive to learn wasn’t getting her anywhere, and she felt stifled. Nothing she could say would be enough.

She was just about to try escaping his arms again when she heard a quiet, “OK.”

It sounded strange in her ears. “OK?” she croaked, just to make sure.

“OK,” he repeated.

Her heart rose. “When?”

He fell quiet again. Just when she thought he was going to take it back, he said, “Sixteen. When Aaron leaves, you’ll be sixteen. I’ll need you then.”

Alicia loosed one arm and wrapped it around him. “Thank you, Daddy,” she said. But when she felt like they had made it up a minute later, he held on to her.

Not All Who Wander Are Lost

Penny stabbed her stepfather in the hand with a salad fork. If she ever told anyone she didn't mean to do it, she would be lying, and that was one thing Penny didn't do. She also wouldn't deny that she'd stabbed him not once but four times, so she let the story grow up around her once she got to the troubled youth camp way out in the New Mexico desert. Most of the kids at La Ultima Vez were in for drugs or stealing, some for general rambunctious behavior that had cost their folks and their school-city-state too much money. A few got stuck here if they kept up with "self-destructive behavior," stuff like cutting or attempted suicide. And then there were a handful who, like Penny, had distinguished themselves as the anger management kids, which meant that they were a danger to others: short-fused, violent, malicious.

Penny had felt stripped when the judge had made choose between dying her hair black so she could go to a private youth camp or going to juvenile hall. For some reason, orange was offensive to everyone in the system, not just her stepfather. But she did it, bowed her head and submitted to hands that covered up the brightest thing about her. More than anything, Penny wanted to make her stepfather pay as much as possible now that he'd started this mess, and she knew that once she removed the obstacle of her hair he would be too concerned about his public image to insist on sending her to the state facility.

Once she got to camp, Penny refused to wash her hair until the sweat and dirt and oil not only made it smelly but also helped her spike it again. Not the same as gel, but it was enough. One of the first guys she'd met here, Juvie—real name: Javier—had told her, "If you feel like you don't fit into the place, keep your head down and your eyes moving," so she did. She could walk from the bunk cabin to the dining commons and back, chin tilted down, looking from side to side under that helmet of one-inch spikes. Only once had the counselors refused to let her out

of the showers until she washed her hair, but by then she already had a reputation, and for four naked days it was as if she still wore that armor. Everyone was sullen here in their gray T-shirts and khaki shorts, but she could see in their eyes that they thought she belonged in black and leather, preferably with a dog collar around her neck, attached to a chain, attached to a tree. A big one. That made her smile, but she saved that for the dark, the only time she was alone.

Although she loved the steel studded leather wristband her boy Jason had given her for Christmas a couple of months ago, Penny hadn't ever worn a dog collar. She laughed at the idiots who did. Stupid little girls playing the betty for their punk rock boyfriends. Most of them had only convinced themselves that they were mad as hell, but very few of them knew what they were angry about. Some, a very few, had real bones to pick, but usually they didn't even realize they were angry yet. But Penny knew what was up. She was mad at her stepfather.

"Sweet," her bunkmate had said, peeking over the edge of the top bunk where Penny lay reading at the end of her second day at the camp.

Penny rolled her head to the side to look at the eyes gleaming up at her. "What?" she asked.

"Just heard you stabbed your dad." The girl had pulled the front hem of her T-shirt up through the neck hole and pulled it down, exposing her belly and a good deal of cleavage.

Compensation for lack of dog collar.

Penny gave her attention back to the book she held over her head. "Stepdad," she said.

"Bet he didn't see it coming."

"Probably wouldn't have stood still if he did." She had fifteen minutes between study time and lights out, and this girl had just wasted one of them. Penny ignored her, and brassy blonde Betty went away.

Not stepdad. *Stepfather*. Her real dad had loved her. This jerk probably saw her in all black just like everyone else did, even though she hadn't worn black since surrendering the velvet dress she wore to her dad's funeral a year and a half ago.

For three weeks after she watched the casket sink into the earth, she wouldn't take that dress off. No showers, no laundry, nothing. She woke every morning, wondered in a sleepy haze why her chest felt heavy, and then she remembered. The weight grew, lead blooming inside her, pressing down on her throat, her lungs, her stomach. She could feel the change creeping out from that hard, heavy core. Every morning was the same: the forgetting, the waking, and then the pain. Then one morning she woke knowing why the ache was there. It welled up inside of her, but this time it didn't steal her breath away.

She took the dress off and dropped it in the garbage. Showered, ate, cut her hair. But she found she couldn't wear the tie-dye or batik she used to drape herself in. She needed that thing the dress had provided, the heavy darkness that weighed her down and kept her from flying apart. There was very little of that in her closet, so she and her mom went to Salvation Army. She went back there over and over, haunting the place until her closet was a dark bruise. It didn't really matter how the clothes fit, just as long as she could look in the mirror without squinting and see her own face. Jason told her she looked good in gray and helped her find music that didn't drill her ears with wailing, and remember music that had made her father laugh and say, "Zep and Morrison, that's my girl."

While she was getting a new wardrobe, her mom was getting a new husband. Except for going to the same church, he was nothing like her father. Penny guessed he was her mom's version of dark clothes, and maybe it didn't matter how he fit, either. She stayed out of the way, going next door to Jason's or going with him to his friends' houses. In those long afternoons, his

friend Nick teased her about the sullen stare she had adopted, bugging her until she learned to exchange it for one of disinterest and mild hostility. “If you look like you’re angry at everyone all the time,” he had said, “then the people you’re really angry at won’t feel it.” When her mom let Jack ground her whenever he said she had stayed out too late, she brought back that stare, put on her earphones, and tuned in to MxPx, turned up the Pistols, shut him out with Ministry.

It was a pleasure to thwart the new man in her life. Jack, *Jack-o*, got up in arms about everything. He would have hated her tie-dye—“dirty hippies”—and he couldn’t stand her dark colors, so she bought another black hoodie. She didn’t have friends, just “a legion of demons.” So what if she hung out with guys? Not like she could bring what few girl friends she did have to that leering sliminess anyway. Besides, she could fend off a horde of horny teenagers without considering it a challenge. Not that he would ever believe that she would. Sometimes, she made Jason pretend he was her boyfriend so she could hang on him in front of Jack, just to piss him off. Oh, and her Kool Aid-stained hair had been a riot.

“You look like trash,” Jack-o had said when Penny came down the stairs with orange hair. He saved his charm for when her mom was around.

She grabbed the front door handle. “If it looks like a duck,” she snapped back, swinging the door open.

“Can’t even tell you’re a girl anymore,” he called as she walked through the doorway, and she was pretty sure she heard him say, “Are you?” before she slammed the door shut behind her. Jackass.

He hated her clothes and always said Penny should wear something that fit. She’d watched him talk her mom into one pair of butt-hugging jeans after another, though, and Penny never wanted him to look at her like that. She wondered if her mother realized that he looked at

other women. Waitresses at the freaking Red Robin, for cripes sake. Sure he was a man of the church. Right.

So when Betty suggested she go to Bible study on Sunday night, during the only block of time—three whole hours—she had to herself all week, Penny laughed at her. “What for?”

Betty shrugged. “The group leader’s hot, and he brings free soda.”

Penny snorted. “I’ll pass,” she said. She’d met with hot church guys before. Jerk offs, all of them.

Her bunkmate’s smile turned into a smirk. “You think you’re really going to get that ‘free time’?”

Penny didn’t answer, but she found it difficult to keep the question she wanted to ask from ruining her disinterested pose.

Betty smiled and said, “You’ll see.”

Sunday afternoon, a counselor came around with the chore list to hand out assignments, and Penny got dining commons clean up. She had the pleasure of wiping down chairs and tables, moving chairs and tables aside, mopping floors, moving chairs and tables back, and then wiping counters and filling salt and pepper shakers and ketchup bottles and napkin dispensers. Halfway through, two of the other kids left. “Bible study,” she heard them say to the counselor at the door. “Hang on,” the counselor said and waved in another ponytailed blackshirt to replace her while she walked them out the door.

Penny had heard stories over the past week about two of her fellow workers. One girl had gotten expelled from three schools for fighting, and the last time she had beaten another girl so hard that her victim had ended up in the hospital. The other one, a guy, had gotten busted for beating his own mother. When he caught Penny looking at him for the third time, he said, “All

this for a little punch in the neck.” The words could have been a type of repentance, but the self-satisfied smile warping the line of his lips made it a boast. He held her gaze, and though Penny kept her expression flat, she looked away first.

After the kitchen staff had locked away all the utensils and movable cookware, the counselors led the clean up crew into the kitchen and watched as she and the other workers scrubbed trays, grills, fryers, sinks, floors. By the time Penny made it back to her cabin an hour before lights-out, her hands-arms-shoulders burned. She couldn’t lie on her back and hold the book over her head, and propping herself up while lying on her stomach definitely wasn’t going to work either. Conceding defeat, she took a shower and went to bed. As she lay there, Betty’s head popped up beside her.

“Think you’ll come next week?” she asked.

Penny let her head loll sideways toward Betty. “Are you kidding me?” she asked.

Betty smiled.

But Penny didn’t mean she’d go. She just nodded when John came around the following Sunday with the chore list, and she stayed in the dining commons after dinner. As she passed by, Betty hissed, “You get out of it if you go to the church meeting.” Penny shrugged. Betty didn’t mention church that night, but when the third Sunday came and she passed Penny, she shook her head and murmured, “They’re not going to let you off.”

Maybe it was the fact that Betty still bothered to say anything, maybe it was the three weeks of endless classes and group meetings and hiking, or maybe it was the way “Bible study” fairly dripped off the lips of those two deserters, but the work was even worse that night. The tables were heavier, the fryers were gummier, and guy-who-beat-up-his-mama was creepier. Later, as she stood under a stream of cool shower water, she thought root beer would be nice.

She didn't have to listen, she figured. It was only an hour, according to Betty, and then Penny would have an hour and a half to read.

When Counselor John came around on Sunday with the chore list, she said, "I heard there's Bible study on Sunday nights. I want to go."

He grinned, perfect white teeth standing out against a tan face. She wanted to punch him. "Only two spots per duty shift, and they're already requested. I'll put you in the rotation." He scribbled something on his clipboard. "You'll go next week," he said, moving off.

A week later, when she saw one of the regular deserters drop his rag into the scrub bucket, she walked over and dropped hers in too. As she did, she passed the other regular, the girl whose place she had taken. "Have a damn good time," the girl said, wiping streaks of dirty blonde hair out of her eyes. This girl hadn't sent anyone to the hospital, but Penny thought she'd better be ready to watch her back now that she was in the church rotation. She saved her smile for later.

She and Lanky Boy were the last to arrive at the multi-purpose room, led by their photocopy counselor-escort. At one end of the room, a circle of chairs was set up and mostly occupied, about ten others in all. Penny was handed off to another counselor, who walked her over and pointed her to a seat. She saw the guy she'd walked over with nod to a couple of the others, and Betty winked at her from across the circle, but no one talked.

Just as the minute-feels-like-an-hour silence grew heavy, two guys walked through the door. One looked like a lumberjack, all broad shouldered and blonde, and he carried, of all things, a set of bongo drums. He was either a lumberjack or a hippie, Penny thought, snickering. The handholding was about to begin. The other guy carried a guitar case and a flat of sodas balanced on his free hand, and he wasn't so easy to dismiss. He was tall with dark hair, and he

seemed to glow. Penny wasn't sure if it was that he was so tan or that his faced seemed chiseled from some kind of living stone or that his every movement was full of energy and purpose.

Betty caught her eye then and raised one eyebrow, as much as to say, "I told you so," but Penny didn't find him hot. Instead, she felt her stomach clench, and she determined to say nothing and do nothing to draw any attention from him.

The dark-haired man set the flat by the door—guess we're not getting those till later, she thought—and the two moved across the room to the two chairs set a little apart from the circle. Figures. Church guys are too good to be a real part of this group.

Penny studied the wall while the men pulled out their guitars, and the dark-haired one—she heard someone call him Dan—made small talk with some of the kids. He made some of them laugh the way her youth group leader used to try to do. Penny glanced over and looked him up and down. No one could abuse trust like a church man. This one couldn't get the girls alone here, though, she thought. Then he caught her looking at him and greeted her with a smile and a head bob, ducking his head forward but maintaining eye contact. Her heart jumped, and then it seemed a long time before it started again. She hadn't been greeted like that since her father died. Thankfully, the man looked away, and she fixed her eyes to the floor.

He's not Dad, she told herself. He's not anyone you know or care about. Don't say anything. Don't engage. But the familiarity was already working on her, loosening some of the knots in her gut.

When the music started, she resettled herself in her seat. She didn't open her mouth, but she hummed the familiar tunes under her breath. Her father would have made faces at some of the renditions, which sounded over-practiced and flat. Most of the kids were eating it up, though, and even Betty was mouthing the words while she eyed the dark-haired one, not even

trying to veil that hungry look. So so, Penny thought of him, and rested in the knowledge that he was run-of-the-mill at best.

She almost laughed when the dark-haired one – Dan, she reminded herself – introduced the passage up for discussion. It was the one from the book of John, one that was mostly used by hypocrites to condemn other hypocrites: “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.” Here we go, she thought. He’ll go on for an hour about compassion and then judge us for not having any.

Dan summarized the story of the woman brought to Jesus by a self-righteous mob and the answer that he gave them. “What do you think he meant the people to understand when he said, ‘Let he who is without sin cast the first stone?’” he asked the group. Penny waited through the silence. “Remember what we talked about last week,” he prodded the quiet room. “We all fall short of the glory of God.”

Lanky kid cleared his throat and said, “Well, if we all fall short, then no one’s not guilty.”

“Yeah,” Dan said, and she could hear the tone that accompanies the approving nod. “So what does that do to the crowd?”

“They all have to leave,” Betty said.

“Right,” he returned. “Then what happens to the woman?”

Oh, my lord, quit the spoon feeding, Penny thought. Despite herself, she felt her temper heat up while the guy next to her said, “She goes free.” Right, like an angry mob is going to let go of its scapegoat. What a freaking crock. Just give this guy and his partner half a chance, and they’ll find someone with a lip ring and a tattoo and consider themselves saints in comparison. Penny rolled her eyes. “Bogus,” she murmured and scooped herself further down in her chair.

“We have a dissenter,” Dan said, and Penny’s eyes flicked up to meet the man’s questioning look. “What were you saying?”

I wasn't going to say anything, she thought, but all eyes were trained on her. She focused on the floor. "I said it's bogus," she replied. She waited for him to say, no it's not, but he didn't. The quiet dragged on. Before she could stop herself, she peeked. He had that same half-smile on his face, so much like the one her father used to wear. When he nodded for her to go on, she felt a pull from her heart to answer. She fought against it, darting a look around the circle, praying someone else would talk before she had to, but aside from questioning looks and smirks, there was nothing. No one was going to help her out of this. "It's hypocritical," she said, and then stalled. They waited. "This thing you're telling us about would never happen."

Dan's eyebrows raised. "OK," he said "why not?"

Duh. Penny ducked her head, exasperation seeping in past her fear. This is such bullshit. "Those guys would never have admitted they weren't 'without sin,'" she said, cutting quote marks in the air with her fingers. "They brought that woman out because she was different from them. It's easy. It's obvious." She shook her head. It's why I hate church people. "Everyone lies. Mostly in front of others. And mostly to themselves." She stopped and waited for him to refocus on the story. The bogus story.

"Good point," he said, to her surprise. What, was he going to say the Bible was wrong? What kind of a church guy was he? He looked around the room. "Anybody here ever felt like people decided who you are and what you are about just by looking at you?" A few heads nodded. She looked back at the black streaks marking the floor, wondering whose shoes had made them. She felt eyes on her but didn't look up. Penny didn't want to be seen just now. "Or how about condemning you for looking like a certain type of person, a type they think they've figured out?"

Yadda yadda. She tried to tune him out, but he kept talking.

“How many of you went to church before coming here?” he asked.

Oh, come on, she thought as she watched heads nod. Penny squeezed the emotion out of her face and forced her mouth to stay shut. He’s going to ambush us all, tell us to get “out of the world” and into God’s house. Come on, kids, come to where the judgy-est of the judgers hang out.

But then he said, “I’d be willing to bet some of those people weren’t so great.” Penny’s thoughts stilled. She looked up at Dan and met his eyes. “You have first-hand experience,” he said, and shifted his look to the guy next to her and on around the circle. “Don’t you feel like church people ought to be more kind?” he asked. Dan’s partner let loose an amused snort, surprising a grin from Dan, and a few people laughed, including Penny. “But you know, they’re not perfect either. Do you think we have a right to expect them to be?”

Oh, sure, defend the judgers, Penny thought, but she shook her head in response anyway. “Shouldn’t they try to be better, though?” she asked.

Dan smiled. “You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” he answered. “Why do you think they don’t? Do you always keep clear of doing the things you know you shouldn’t?”

Oh, wow. Ask that from a group at a pre-juvie youth camp. Low blow.

After several moments of silence, the girl next to Penny said, “Maybe they’re working on other things, stuff that’s more important or something?” She stalled out, then started again. “I mean, maybe they have big problems that make them crabby.”

A few of the others laughed, but Dan said, “No, think about it.” He leaned forward and spoke quietly, asked questions he didn’t wait for answers to. “Do you have just one thing you need to work on? Wanting something that’s not yours? Hurting people who make you mad? Do you ever slip up, feel like a jerk, wish you could take something back?” He went on, never

challenging anyone specifically or accusing anyone of anything, just calling out a hundred little sins. Penny tried not to listen, but the words wormed their way in. When they bowed their heads for closing prayer, her mind was clicking away.

After prayer, Dan's partner went to get the flat of sodas from the door, and Dan moved among the kids. She took her soda and popped it open, putting it to her lips as she turned around, and there he was. Dan grinned, and she wanted to not be there, but there she was. She kept the can at her lips, even though it was that nasty lemon-lime stuff, and took a few swallows. He chuckled as she came up coughing.

"Hot soda isn't the best, but it's what we can do," he said, sipping at his own can.

"I was hoping for root beer," she said, feeling lame.

He shrugged. "Oh, well, we try to bring something different every time," he said. He cocked his head to the side. "Thank you for your comments tonight." Penny sipped her drink and shrugged. "Think you'll come back next week?" he asked.

"Maybe," she answered, running her finger around the lip of the can.

He nodded. "I hope so," he said, and then moved off. She threw out the still-full can and waited to be led back to her cabin. As he made his rounds of the group, she saw that head bob again. So much like her dad. She hoped he had more than one lesson to teach, and she wondered if he'd remember that some people prefer root beer.

Chairs and Other Dangerous Projectiles

The thud of the van door echoed through Dan's body. He marveled, as he did every Sunday night, at the way his buddy Joe took the porch stairs two at a time, hefting his bongos with one hand and never losing his balance. A jangle of keys at the lock, a porch lit salute from the blonde giant, and then Dan sat alone in the New Mexico night. He shut the radio off, glad to have only the steady rumble of the engine. Everything – music, jokes, simple conversation – had been grating on his ears for the entire hour of the trip home from La Ultima Vez, the camp for at-risk kids. All that chatter seemed much too light for the darkness he'd felt stirring tonight.

He felt a prickle pass over his scalp, and he felt the tension rise in him again, a heat that flushed his face, so he concentrated on looking out for the cat that always dashed out from under Joe's red Honda as he was driving past. His foot lingered near the brake as he rolled by, but nothing moved. Not tonight. Dan was a little disappointed. He'd anticipated a satisfying stomp and jolt, salvation from impending disaster, all a part of his Sunday night routine: tension, action, relief, satisfaction. Looked like he would only get to step one tonight.

He turned right at the corner and began to turn in at his driveway, a house with gray siding and white decorative scroll work. At times like this, he felt as if this couldn't be his house. He had grown up in a house with peeling wallpaper and crumbling bricks, a house his grandfather built and Dan's father neglected. But his life changed when he met Dorrie, and her father showed him how to fix things and even do fine work with a jigsaw. Her love and her father's faith had made him a man, but some nights Dan remembered too well what it was like be a part of a different kind of world with no time for peace. He slowed the van's approach to a crawl and peered up through the windshield.

Light burned in the gabled window over the kitchen. An image of his fifteen – no, almost sixteen – year-old daughter bloomed in his mind. She'd be dressed in paint-spattered overalls with her hair pulled back in that messy bun she loved, hunched on a stool in front of an easel and a primed canvas. Just like her mom. He smiled in the darkness, but then he realized that she would be practicing her guitar again, trying to be like him. He leaned back in his seat, pressed his foot against the brake a little harder and stared at the steering wheel.

The next part of this routine was the inquisition. On a night like tonight, Dan didn't think he could handle it. He definitely didn't want to talk about it. Joe had probably noticed he was upset. Dan wasn't usually mute on the ride home from L.U.V, but his friend hadn't said anything, and Dan knew he wouldn't. His daughter, though...she wouldn't let that silence last. Alicia would have questions. "Were there any new kids?" "Were there any good debates?" "Did anyone get upset?" "What happened?" He knew he needed to prepare her, and he had been more honest with her lately, but it wasn't enough.

She was about to be a part of these Sunday night trips deep into the cracked and deserted nothing part of northeastern New Mexico. Of course, she should know why they had to go all the way out there just to be with these kids. Dan couldn't do what he usually did, joking about cheeky kids with off-the-wall comments and colorful vocabularies. He needed to find a way to get out of that pattern with Alicia, to find a way to quit answering her questions on the surface level and begin telling her about the arrival of unexpected weapons and the need to be careful, diplomatic even.

Dan shook his head. Most nights were pretty safe, but some nights were scary. And he had to lead it all and make it all work. He hadn't been able to tell his daughter about a lot of things: the way a can of soda could be used as a weapon if it was full and thrown at the back of a

head by a smiling attacker, no warning. Or the way people could move faster than the mind could react, and how you had to be ready all the time to defend yourself because sometimes pain came from unexpected directions. Alicia hadn't learned caution yet, mostly because in her life she didn't really need it, at least not to survive. But, if he tried to teach her that tonight, while he was still frustrated and shaken, he might scare her. Fear was dangerous, and at L.U.V. it wasn't an option, especially for her.

Then there was Dorrie. She was perfect. His wife always knew when he needed to be quiet, not forcing him to talk or explain himself before he knew what he was about. In those times, she moved around him, touching him from time to time and looking to see if he needed anything, never hovering or staring or making him feel weak. When they were alone, though, her dark eyes often drew him out and made him say things he didn't feel he was ready to say. Most of the time, he needed that ability she had to draw poison from the wound, but tonight was different. He didn't want to spill this roiling mass of frustration and fear at her feet because it could make him slow and lazy. He needed to remember some things tonight, to memorize the hot spots and think about the kid who had set off warning bells in his head. Maybe he even needed to get a little mad about it. Tonight, that kid and his chair had reminded Dan that every encounter was a battle. He needed to calm the mess inside so he could use the energy that came from taming it.

The turn into the driveway changed to a slow swerve that took him back onto the road.

Dorrie heard the rumble of the van's engine as it approached. When it failed to cut off and instead receded into the distance, she allowed her head to bow and her eyes to close briefly before wiping down the rest of the kitchen counter. Dan must have had a hard night. He hadn't

needed to visit the mountains after youth group for a long time now. She'd know how bad it was soon enough. He was usually only gone about an hour. He used to do that a lot when he first started running Bible study for the kids out at La Ultima Vez, when he was first trying to earn their trust. He'd be gone just long enough to get some downtime and get perspective before having to deal with Alicia's questions. She always wanted to know everything, all the names and stories. He painted broad pictures for her, but Dorrie knew he kept back a lot. He had respect for the trust those kids gave him, was both true and an excuse to keep him from having to tell Alicia some ugly truths.

Alicia had always been surrounded by people who loved her, and she hadn't often been exposed to real-life violence. Dan hadn't quite been able to tell Alicia about the time one of the youth camp boys had to be rushed to the hospital. Another kid had thrown a full can of soda at him, a treat that Dan had given out during the meeting. Dan had been gone all night that time. Dorrie drove around in the wee morning hours and finally found him at the picnic table by the bridge, the same place he'd taken her when they first started dating. His eyes were red-rimmed but dry. He told her he hadn't seen the possibility of a can as a weapon, but he kept saying, "I should have. I should have known." She had settled next to him on the table and curled her body around his chilled torso until the sun rose and warmed them both into tears.

Dorrie rinsed out the sponge and propped it against the faucet. The first strains of "Amazing Grace" drifted down the stairway, and she sighed, thankful. Alicia had been playing worship songs for the last three hours, picking through the complicated parts over and over until Dorrie thought it might not be so extreme to take the guitar away for a little while. But this hymn was the one Alicia always began and ended with, and it really was beautiful. She'd begun to add soft flourishes of her own, and Dorrie was pretty sure Alicia was the only one who knew

anymore what notes, flubbed or not, she had truly intended to play. Dorrie was positive that, musically at least, Alicia was ready.

Over the past few months, since Dan had promised Alicia that she could go with him to L.U.V. once she turned sixteen, Alicia had serenaded them for at least a half hour every night, and she practiced every second Dan was gone on Sundays. She was excited to get out of the church, which she said was “safe,” and begin the ministering her father had been doing for years. Alicia preferred the term “troubled” instead of at-risk, and there’d been a time when Dorrie had been afraid her daughter would use the word “distress” and fancy herself a knight in shining armor. Instead of a lance or a sword, she’d lull the fire-breathing dragon into submission with her guitar.

Dorrie smiled at the image of her stout-hearted daughter, and then she shook her head. Alicia had grown out of the fairytale, but she held on to the root idealism that makes children believers. She’d grown up among the aunties at the church, and only now was she facing the world outside of it. She was already losing patience with Gina’s imperfections, even though Alicia’s best friend suffered from nothing more detrimental than a blooming awareness of her body and the boys around her. Alicia called her friend boy crazy. Dorrie tried her best to soften Alicia’s tendency to judge harshly the pressures she didn’t feel herself.

Therein lay the problem. Alicia had gradually taken herself out of the world, spending less time with her friends and relying more and more on this guitar-playing and the dream of using it to save souls. Alicia had been playing guitar for years, and for the past couple she had even been up on stage at their small church helping to lead worship service. She had a beautiful voice that was deepening into a soulful alto, and other mothers were constantly complimenting Dorrie on her daughter’s talent. They said soon she’d be able to croon anyone into faith. Dorrie

was afraid Alicia believed them. Music opened a door, yes, but Alicia had to be prepared to meet the person on the other side, not judge him.

Dorrie had been in Alicia's shoes when she was a teenager, intent on reaching into lives she didn't understand and trying to make a difference. It just wasn't as easy as handing someone a Bible with a smile. Dorrie had had those same Bibles ripped to shreds in front of her, knocked out of her hands, thrown in her face. Those had been hard days, and the feeling of personal rejection seeped through Dorrie like a virus. The sacred text that had been a source of peace, joy, and wisdom began to look tattered, tired, old-fashioned. A lot of people didn't want what Alicia was going to offer. More than likely, she had a crisis of faith ahead.

She would have a hard time understanding that not everyone wanted to be rescued, mostly because most people didn't believe they needed saving. Dan's father certainly didn't, she thought, shaking her head. The day she offered him Jesus was the day he threatened to hit her. Dan had stepped between them, and she'd never been able to approach his father again before he died. Dan explained to her later that his grandfather used to beat Dan's father and uncles if he caught them playing on Sundays, so serious did he take the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. Up until then, Dorrie had thought of fanaticism as cult suicides or dim historical events like the Spanish Inquisition. Dorrie was willing to be that Alicia just as little idea of how much harm had been done by wolves dressed in sheeps' clothing.

Alicia didn't see that she might not be recognized as a rescuer, or that in some cases she might be considered an out and out enemy. Nor were all those she wanted to save in need of saving. Some people needed to take a different path, not a fact-finding mission but a faith-developing journey borne of experience and difficult decisions. Alicia was so steeped in the theory of religion from the Sunday school classes and the aunties and the missions trips that she

couldn't see the people she wanted to serve. Dorrie told her again and again, there is no black and white, my love. But if Alicia was anything like Dorrie, she needed to struggle to understand.

Dan passed the town square, its border of trees strung year-round with Christmas lights that glowed over park benches and the town's small library. He veered left instead of right at the fork and headed for Hot Springs Road. In his own backyard, he could gaze up into the milky trails of stars that seemed closer to the highlands than to anywhere else in the world. He went to that quiet brilliance to dream his prayers with a calm spirit. Now, when his soul vibrated with the dissonant chord of tonight's meeting, he needed the water.

There wasn't ever much water to be had in the highlands, which claimed lakes no bigger than one boat could move around in, but once he got north of the springs he'd have the tumbling chatter of a stream. Dan guided the van up the narrow way, past the cars parked on the side of the road near steaming pockets of sulfur water that the locals visited. Someone had told him when he was a kid that the water had lithium in it that was supposed to cool you out. He knew from experience that a lot of that cooling out had to do with the dope everyone smoked while soaking in the funky-smelling pools lined with algae-covered stones. He tried to drop in once a week anyway. A lot of folks needed a lot of things – money, working vehicles, homes – and he sometimes brought food for those in immediate need, but he knew his real gift was ministry. He offered a listening ear and different solutions than they came up with on their own. It warmed him to leave someone more peaceful than he found them. But tonight, the heat of summer lingered and he had no peace to offer.

Continuing up the road past two bridges and most of the driveways, Dan came to a shallow turnout just before the next bridge. He backed into the space beside a rickety wood

picnic table, then got out and went around to open the van's back doors. He climbed up onto the little couch he'd created for Alicia. When she was younger, she'd curled up back there with stacks of books during long road trips. There were a couple of pillows and a blanket that smelled faintly of the Hello Kitty perfume he'd gotten for her when she was seven or eight. He leaned back against them and drank in the disorganized chuckle of water as it flowed under the bridge. The sharp pine scent of the trees outside mingled with the baby powder smell of the pillows.

Dan rubbed his face with both hands and sighed. Life was so easy when kids were younger. Feed them, love them, point them in the right direction. But there were danger signs to look for with them as they got older. He shouldn't have lost control so easily tonight.

They'd been discussing Proverbs 22:3, "A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it." These kids, these fighters, had been resistant to the idea of what they thought of as running away. He knew what it was like, had been pushed by his so-called brothers, really just guys in the street acting tough. He had several nasty scars to show for those years. Some of them, the thin cuts and busted knuckles, had faded, but he showed his kids the one from the closest of his boys, which still stung if he thought about it long and hard. Two smooth white circles on his forearm: one entrance, one exit.

"Shoulda moved faster," the new guy Darrell said, crossing his arms over his barrel chest.

"You're more right than you know," Dan said, meeting Darrell's challenging gaze. He wondered how many other times this kid had avoided getting sent to juvie. Darrell's eyes were dark, almost black. There was no telling what was behind them. From the beginning of the meeting, the other kids had given him plenty of space. Dan knew he had to be under eighteen to be at this camp, but with a five o'clock shadow that wasn't exactly patchy he didn't look like he could possibly be much younger than that. Dan resisted the temptation to stare him down. As the

leader of youth group, Dan had the power of acknowledged leadership, age, experience, and the trust of these kids. Darrell hadn't had a chance to gather a following. Dan reminded himself that he wasn't there to fight for any titles.

Dan let the quiet go on, scanning faces, hoping someone would speak up. He was glad to see Joe was doing the same instead of focusing on Darrell. The more attention they gave him, the more power he had. But they were both very aware of his presence, and Dan was glad to have a partner in the room.

"So," another kid, Alex, said and then stopped. The silence was hard to break. He hunched his shoulders and then pressed his lips together, screwing them up and to the side. "So," he began again, "it's like, when you know bullets are gonna fly, it don't make sense to just stand there and get shot, no? You gotta get behind something."

"Yeah," Dan nodded, thinking, this from the kid who came here because there was no fight too small to start. "That's a big part of it. Is that enough, though?"

"Gotta get a gun," someone grumbled.

There were murmurs of agreement. These were his kids all right. "Sometimes the Bible does talk about being armed for battle, that's true," Dan said, "though not with guns." A few kids chuckled. "But that's not this verse," he continued. "This one's trying to teach you something different." Their silence drew him, making him want to lean forward and engage, but he continued to lean back in his seat as part of the circle. It would be easy to lecture. They wanted him to tell them what they already knew. But if he did, he knew they would ignore the truth of the point by ignoring him.

Though a couple of the kids were zoning, most of them had turned their attention to Alex's poof of short black hair and narrowed eyes. Coming from him, the words had weight.

“Well,” he said, “if you can’t fight back, then maybe it’s saying that, like, maybe we shouldn’t even go to the fight in the first place.”

Dan tried to keep from smiling, because he knew how much that last bit had cost Alex.

“Sure *he* understands,” Darrell said, crushing the moment. He leaned forward so that his forearms rested on his knees, and his dark eyes glinted. “He’ll show you what he knows about ‘taking refuge.’” And then faster than Dan’s mind could register the warning bells sounding in his head, Darrell threw his chair across the circle. In the space between, Dan had a flash of Alex’s face, bloodied, ashen, immobile. But Alex was able to get his arms up in time. Blood squirted from his nose as one of the legs made it past his defenses, and his yell was a welcome sound because it was full of not just hurt but also anger. He was going to be OK.

Most of the kids scattered, but two of Alex’s friends made as if to take Darrell on. They moved in, shoulders hunched. He was ready for them, though, arms spread wide, a fierce grin stretched across his lips. They hesitated long enough for Dan and Joe to step in front of them. Dan put his hands out wide and low, giving the kids behind him an excuse to back down, and Joe scanned the rest of the room for trouble. The three counselors on duty (why hadn’t he noticed there were three this time instead of two?) called in two more black-shirts, but once they approached Darrell he dropped his arms, shrugged his shoulders, and even offered up his wrists. They escorted him out in handcuffs. As he sauntered past Dan, he said, “Think I put the fear of God in him, no?” and he smirked.

In that moment, looking into the opaque black eyes of a kid so steeped in resentment and pain that it was pouring out of him and onto everyone around him, Dan realized that he had consented to bring his daughter to a place where she would, not could, experience real unrest. Even more so, she would be a target. She hadn’t polished her armor to a shine or learned how to

hide the weak spots. He was afraid that nervousness would make her bluster, and if she forced a confrontation they would tear her to pieces.

Darrell wouldn't be back. Dan was sure of that. He and the camp counselors were careful to make the Bible study meetings as safe a haven as existed in that place. Darrell wouldn't have a chance to build a following. But Dan also knew that someday soon there would be someone else like him. There was always one aggressive rooster in the house, like his dad used to say. As a once-a-week presence, Dan could never quite control that position, which was fine because he knew how to fight both with his mind and with his body. He'd spent most of his life doing that, first out of arrogance like that kid, and now in defense of what he loved.

Lord, how can I bring my daughter there? The core of him felt tight and heavy, and the smell of baby powder suddenly overwhelmed him. I was born to this, he thought, but she has no stripes. They'll see it. They'll hate her for it. He bowed his head and prayed.

Dorrie could hear the rumble of her daughter's footsteps coming down the stairs from her attic room. "Dad's not home yet?" Alicia asked, hopping down the last two steps into the kitchen.

Dorrie looked up from the book one hand held open on the table in front of her. Alicia's bare feet looked cold and pale against the butter-colored linoleum. She met her daughter's expectant gaze and shook her head. Alicia's shoulders heaved and fell with her sigh. Ever the dramatic one. Dorrie felt her lips draw up into a smile.

"I bet they had an amazing session tonight," Alicia said, a wistful light in her eyes.

"Maybe," Dorrie murmured. But amazing how? An image of Dan when he was Alicia's age popped into her head, and she remembered how his face used to change when he was challenged. He had a heart for the kids at that camp because he remembered what it was like to

be one of them, but she remembered how dangerous it had been for her to work without a shield, how hard she'd had to search to find a way behind that wall. "I think your dad's going to be tired when he comes in," she said, "so how about leaving the Q and A for tomorrow?"

Alicia nodded. "Yeah, OK, I got a test tomorrow morning anyway." Then her face brightened. "Will you make buñuelos for dessert tomorrow?"

Dorrie smiled. "You know how to keep your father talking, don't you?" Alicia shrugged her shoulders and looked heavenward, feigning innocence. Some moments in this house were eerily like a sitcom. Make light of it now, Dorrie thought. We'll see what comes home with him tonight.

It was past midnight when he came into the darkened bedroom. He didn't take off his clothes but lowered himself slowly onto the bed. "You don't have to be quiet," Dorrie said softly. He lay down and curled up behind her. She waited until his breath came regularly across her neck before asking, "How was it?"

"Bad." He sounded tired. "There was some blood. And one of the new kids won't be coming back." He fell silent, but she could feel it in the way that his knees stayed tucked tightly up under her thighs that there was more, so she waited. "How can I take her out there?"

Oh, the temptation to tell him not to. She closed her eyes and said, "Not all of the meetings are like this one was." She thought of Alicia's smile, the way she became so animated, all elbows and hands as she asked questions about L.U.V.'s Bible study. "You've told us so many good things—"

"Yeah," he broke in, "but the bad stuff comes too."

She felt his forehead rest against her neck and said, "That comes no matter what."

Her words met still air. She wondered what he was thinking. His fingertips traced slow circles on her hip.

His voice came very low, so low that she might not have heard it if he hadn't been speaking almost directly into her ear. "I didn't see it coming," he said.

She listened, following the tickle on her hip. The silence drew out. He'd stalled. "See what coming?" she asked finally.

"The chair," he said. The gust of a sigh blew against her neck and startled her almost as much as his response. She caught the hand on her hip and laced her fingers through his. "That kid picked up his chair and threw it at another kid," he said. She drew his arm around her, pulling him closer to her. Into her hair, he said, "I don't know if I can take her there."

Then don't! She squeezed her eyes shut. "I'm not sure I want you to, either," she said. Then she felt her heart stir. "But Dan," she said slowly, "she wants this bad." As she spoke, she felt conviction spread through her like a vine. "She's seeking it out, just like I did. You know she'll have to face ugliness at some point. I'd rather you be there with her when she finds it."

Silence surrounded them again. Just when she thought he had fallen asleep, he shifted and said, "You weren't ready for me, were you?"

She wondered for a moment at the change and then chuckled. "Nope. Not you, with your cool, slicked back hair and that trailing bandana of yours." She felt the soft puff of his amusement against her neck. "And you weren't ready for me, either."

He grew still again. More contemplation. "You brought me hope," he said, and she resisted the urge to cringe at the despair she heard behind it. "I took yours away."

"Dear God," she said, louder than she'd intended, "let that be the last time this man ever says that." She leaned back into him and turned her head so she could see his face. "Maybe not

everything happened the way I, no, *we* wanted it to, but look at us!” It took both of them to get pregnant, but he always made it his fault in these moments. No matter that his enchantment with Alicia had begun to smolder as soon as Dorrie had started to show, bursting into full flame the moment he saw his daughter’s face five months later. He always saw the progression as a disaster before he remembered the joy. “Look at Alicia,” she commanded. “She’s amazing and perfect and beautiful. Now look at us.” She tipped her head towards his, and he met her halfway.

“I love you,” he murmured against her lips.

She cupped his face with her hand. “Yes, my love, we started young. And yes, it’s been hard. But we are a family,” she said. “You made that possible.”

He sighed. “Yeah, I guess,” he said, but she felt his shoulders loosen, and he drew her closer still. “But that was a miracle.”

“Baby,” she said, “that’s how God works.”

Lord, I am not in control. That is one thing I am sure of. I don’t want to take my baby into the lion’s den, but she seems determined to go. Maybe you’re leading her heart. Please help me not to stand in the way of that. And please, please, keep her safe.

Alicia cleared away the dinner dishes from the kitchen table, sweeping up her father’s plate as the last bit of tortilla was on its way to his mouth. He grunted in surprise. Alicia acted like she didn’t hear him. “Guess what we’re having for dessert,” Alicia commanded instead.

Dan let a slow smile spread across his lips. “I know what that lump of dough by the skillet means.” Dorrie winked at him from the stove.

Alicia giggled. “I talked her into it last night, before you got home,” she said. When he got up to help her clear the rest of the table, she waved him back to his chair. “Here,” she said, taking the butter dish out of his hand, “sit, sit. I’ll get you some coffee so you can relax a little while Mom and I finish up.”

Oh, how grown up she’s trying to be, he thought, resisting the urge to grin. She brought him his favorite mug filled to the brim with coffee and cream, and he stirred it absently while he watched his daughter’s blonde curls swish across her shoulders. As she worked, she bantered with her mother, and every now and then they would toss some comment his way so he’d feel a part of their conversation. Mostly, he just liked to watch them. They were so full of light.

When Alicia set in front of him a smoking plate of sweet fried dough sprinkled with powdered sugar, the topmost pieces still sizzling faintly, he leaned forward and took one, biting into it with relish. “Delicious,” he pronounced with a satisfied groan. This was part of the tradition. After the first one was gone, he sat back in his chair. “OK, my love, I know what you want. Ask away.”

My Brother's Keeper

Jay resisted the urge to pick at the hangnail on his left thumb. He knew it made him look nervous, and Max, squinting against the afternoon sun, was looking for something to criticize.

Max shifted his weight and leaned against the brick wall of the All-Sup's. "You sure Cochise won't follow you?" he asked.

Jay's dad, the guy who acted like the big bad Indian chief one minute and disappeared on a business trip the next, had been a nuisance lately. First, he'd pulled Jay out of a party by the collar of his shirt, and then a couple of days later he blazed into Max's house like a Hispanic Chuck Norris when they lost track of time playing video games. Jay had been one fricking K.O. from winning his fifth dime bag off of Max, who thought owning a game meant he *owned* it. "He's out of town," Jay said. "Where we meeting?"

Max scratched his stomach through his red T-shirt, his eyes focused on something behind Jay, who turned and copied Max's pose. They watched as a police car turned into the parking lot and rolled by their corner of the building. The cop eyed them, and Jay felt his neck prickle in the several moments it took for the car to pass on. "Isaac's," Max said, "tonight. Can you get to the west side by yourself?"

"Sure, my limo'll pick me up at nine," Jay said. Dumbass. "What time you pick me up?"

"Can't get out till ten. Get to your house, say...ten-thirty."

Jay turned his head to look at Max, who was still staring where the cop car had rounded the corner. "You live two minutes away," he said.

Max looked at Jay out of the corner of his eye. "Fine, walk your ass to my house. You can help Todd push the car down the street."

Still sneaking out, for real. “Pussy,” Jay said and smirked.

“My mom already called the police once.” Max shrugged. “Rather be a few blocks ahead this time.”

“Be faster if I ride my bike,” Jay grumbled.

“Your choice,” Max said, pushing himself off the wall. “Boat leaves at ten-thirty. If you’re not there, better love the wheels you got.”

Jay lifted his already-lifted chin, a cocky nod, hooded eyes gazing down his nose at the form that stood two years and four inches taller than him. Asshole. He watched the black jacket move across the parking lot and drop into a puke green Chrysler. Max thought he was the man in that rusted out P.O.S. he painted himself. Got him A to B, that was it. Maybe Jay’d just pedal. Better than dealing with this crap.

But Max was the in to Isaac. Jay was tired of standing down the street from Isaac’s house, he and Todd ducking behind a bush with tallboys in their sweatshirts when any cars drove past. Todd was OK, but his idea of a great night was going into a new liquor store, one where his mustache still bought him a couple of minutes of respect, and lifting a forty or two. He was slow, and he didn’t know anyone. But Max did. He had a little gray cell phone that rang every few hours, followed by a smile and a disappearing act. Jay guessed Max could afford to be a dick since he had people to see and money to collect, but that was still no excuse for driving that green slug.

Because Max had money. Him, not his family. There was no way his mom could have bought him that leather jacket or sneaks like the ones he got. All anyone had to do to know that was to look at the peeling paint on his house and hear the wind make that rusted out porch swing creak like crazy. His mom was a bear, though. Max always stuffed that jacket into the trunk of

his car before going in the house. His mom had complete control over every detail. Nothing got into that place that she didn't approve, at least not that she knew about. That included Jay. She had never liked him, and after Jay's father barged in and rowdied up her house, she adopted outright hatred. She'd looked him up and down that day, as if searching out the five finger discounts, and made him wait at the door. "*Sin verguenza. Desgraciado,*" she said. They must teach that in Mom Class, along with the icy, narrowed eyes and pinched lips. How else could she look so much like his own? Max's mom had only met him once, and Jay's mom'd had years to learn to hate him. But Jay didn't have a leather jacket to cut the cold.

He pedaled slowly down the street, four blocks from home. As he passed his own street, he glanced down the block and nodded to himself when he saw the yellow station wagon in the driveway. She was running late again. His feet pushed another round and took him on a lap of the neighborhood. The next time he passed his street, the wagon was on its Monday mission to market. He turned down the alley between the houses.

It was always better to come in the back gate. Mr. Hayes across the street was nose-y, always looking out his window, always talking to Jay's mom. She suspected that he cut school, but she'd never caught him at it yet. The other two, the little, cute ones were enough for her to handle, and she always ran to them, whatever they needed. Scraped knee? Here's a Band-Aid. Bloody nose? Pinch your nose and tilt your head forward. Hungry? Mama'll make you a sandwich. She didn't have time for anything else. As long as no one else bugged her to do something about him, Jay thought, she would ignore him.

He felt a pang but squashed it immediately. And anyway, she had to. Her guilt trips just made things a drag, but she couldn't make him do anything. He was big enough now that his father was the only one who told Jay anything, and pretty soon that wouldn't be the case either.

Jay pushed at the back gate, but the jingle on the other side told him she'd chained it like when they went on vacation. *Bitch*. Fine. Around front, then. What would she do, ground him? Dad was on a business trip.

The worst thing that would happen is she'd cart him down the street to youth group at the church and pass him off to Art, the bald, beefed up guy who always wore a polo and tried to be everyone's uncle or dad or big brother. He'd bought into that when he was younger when he thought that Art teaching him to wrestle meant they were real friends, but then he saw through that mess. Art talked to everyone, spending more time with kids who were in trouble. Not much incentive to do the right thing since no one paid attention to Jay when he was doing what he was supposed to do. When Art had less and less time for him, Jay realized that he wasn't one of Art's causes anymore, and it wouldn't matter when he was too old for youth group anyway. So now, whenever Jay landed up in youth group, he just sat there and shrugged if Art put him on the spot. Jay wasn't a charity case, so he wouldn't waste his energy acting like one. There was no money in it.

Back around the front of the house, Jay grabbed his bike and trampled through the junipers instead of going around to the sidewalk. His feet left dark holes in the mass of green branches he'd cut so smooth and even last weekend. Dad hadn't even noticed that Jay had done something well, and Mom hadn't bothered to say anything. She would notice this, though.

He dropped his bike on this side of the bushes and dug the house key out of his pocket. He walked into the smell of green chili and beans. Every fricking Monday. The smell lessened as he walked down the hall to his room, and with the door closed and the window open it almost disappeared. He stretched out on the bed and buried his face in the pillow. It was going to be a long night.

* * *

Jay woke to his mother's persistent shakes. Before he had a chance to open his eyes, she said, "Get out."

Jay wiped a hand across his face, but that didn't clear away the dark that had crept into his room while he was sleeping. Not that it really mattered, he thought. He didn't need to see to know the look that was on her face. "I'm sleeping." He immediately regretted speaking. His voice was thick, and it sounded more confused than convicted, even to him.

"I don't care where you go," she said. "Just get out."

The breeze that came through the window was cold now, and he tried to pull a blanket over himself. She yanked it back. He buried his face in the pillow, but he could still hear her.

"You don't go to school. You don't get a job. You hang out with *cholos*, and you get into trouble. I don't want your friends coming around here. I don't care where you go," she repeated. "Just go."

He released the pillow and rolled into a sitting position, met slitted eyes and thin lips with lifted chin and heavy eyelids. Goosebumps raised on his arms, but he made no attempt to hide them. "What did I do this time?" he asked. He concentrated all of his discomfort on her, settled in to stare her down. A little brown head peeked around the doorframe and distracted him. The tiny chin lifted, and a thin voice drawled a rasping, "Hey, man." Jay couldn't help it. He laughed.

He watched his mom whirl, scoop Dee Dee up and swat her on the butt. He heard the wailing begin and continue on into the next room as his mom carried his little sister away. The low, harsh murmur he was used to hearing began, but for once it wasn't directed at him. His mother didn't yell, but he knew every word she was saying by the rise and fall of her voice.

“Lazy talk. Don’t you use that disrespectful tone in this house. You waste your breath.” That had never worked on him.

Whatever. He had to go anyway. She’d never really throw him out, not for good. As much as venom as she had, she couldn’t bring him down. He laughed again and grabbed his sweatshirt before she could come back and fill out the rest of the scene: take his keys, tell him he was no good, threaten she’d call the cops if he came back. It might ruin his good mood, and it was all crap anyway. He kept on laughing right out the front door.

His sweatshirt wasn’t enough that night. Jay had to sneak into the dollar theater just to keep off the cold. Shouldn’t have been bad, except he had to watch some stupid love story about a guy and a girl who never touched each other until the very last moment. Right. No one wastes that much time talking. Take Candy, for instance. She would never have bothered saying no when she meant yes. Shit, she’d been in his pants before he realized she wasn’t just flirting, and they barely made it to the bathroom before all their clothes were off. She almost didn’t wait for him to finish, so she sure as hell wouldn’t have waited for him to tell her he loved her. Good thing, because he would’ve left her ass at home if she had.

Jay pedaled past her dark windows on his way to Max’s. She was out already, otherwise there would have been a light on in her window. His stomach tightened. She hadn’t said anything about a party tonight. Whatever. She was getting fat, anyway.

Max’s house came up a moment later, the P.O.S. sitting out front grinning at him. Damn thing should be up on blocks. He glided past and turned the corner, stashing his bike in the mound of ivy that had taken over the corner lot’s flowerbed. Wouldn’t get stolen. Maybe wouldn’t get found, either. Jay kicked apart the leaves over his back wheel, yanked it a little

closer to the edge so he could just see the metal gleam in the street light. A few months from now, he'd have keys to his ride and wouldn't have to go through this shit.

He walked back to Max's and sat on the rusty bumper. Arms crossed tightly against the cold, he eyeballed the side of the house for movement. The street light ruined his view.

Right next to his ear—"Dicklicker."

"Dammit. Stupid." Jay's fist relaxed, but he could hear the blood pounding in his ears. "You sneak up like that all the damn time." For a big guy, Todd never made a sound. Stupid as all hell, but quiet. Jay would've hit him for punking him again, but he knew Todd would hit back, and it'd probably knock him out. Instead, he ranted. "Shit like that'll get you killed." He didn't lean back on the bumper again but moved across the street to sit on the curb.

Todd snort-grunted at the end of his controlled fall onto the curb next to Jay. "You got to stop sitting in streetlights. Shit like that'll get you killed."

"What time is it?"

"Time to go." Todd pointed to the side of the house behind the streetlight. Max's crouching run made them snicker. Asshole acted like the sun would stop rising at his say so, but his mommy still made him hide. Jay was glad he had his mom in line.

Max pulled out his keys and opened the door as if it were made of thin glass. He waved the other two to the back and released the parking brake. Jay rolled his eyes and pretended to shove, glad it was Todd's bulky form next to him so he could do as little as possible. Max made them push a whole block before he started the engine. Dick pulled forward for another two before he let them get in. He laughed all the way to Isaac's.

They rolled up in front of the hulking adobe structure, lights off before they had stopped moving. Max grabbed Jay by the sweatshirt before he could reach for the door handle. "When

we go in, don't go looking for him. Not just anyone gets to talk to Isaac." Jay felt like punching that smug mouth. "I'll come get you if he wants to see you."

Jay's eyes narrowed. "Bullshit. You said he wanted to meet me." Jackass wanted to run the show. That was not going to happen.

"I said he told me to bring you. Didn't say he wanted to talk." Max yanked him close. "You look for him, you get hurt." His lips drew tight over the words.

Jay stopped breathing. Max didn't look like Max for that second. His words burrowed through the brick wall between them. Jay looked at him eye to eye, no raised chins or hooded glares between them. He saw a flicker of something, but then it was gone. Max pushed him back against the seat and let himself out of the car.

The three of them sauntered up the front walk. Dark windows peered at them, and a low, rhythmic booming came from the back of the house. Max pounded on the door and then stepped back. The dark rectangle receded into a hazy gray that looked as if it could seep out of the house like smoke. Jay expected a challenge from inside, but neither Max nor the reedy-looking guy who had opened the door spoke. What the hell kind of security was this? They could just push past him. But Max stood still until the guy at the door tipped his head back, said, "Max."

"Hey, Chuck."

"You got friends."

"Yeah. Jay. Todd."

"I know Jay—"

Me? Jay wondered. How?

"—but Isaac's not looking for a Todd."

"He's Tina's brother."

“Tina?” Hint of a smile.

“She here?”

“Never leaves.” Chuck’s jaw clenched. “Bitch can’t save him, though. Watch his ass.”

Chuck raised his fist, palm-side down, and knocked knuckles with Max. A glint of metal caught Jay’s eye, extending four inches past the heel of Chuck’s hand. The knife’s gleam matched the stripes that crisscrossed the extended forearm. He’d seen a few scars like that, but he’d never met anyone committed to using a blade. This was the kind of guy who would risk getting cut so he could get close enough to make a personal impression. Jay’s arm burned inside his sleeve, riddled in that moment with those countless slices. He forgot to look down his nose. Chuck saw his noticing, stood aside to let them pass, smirked at Jay as he slunk past and hit his shoulder on the doorway while trying to give Chuck as much room as possible.

Max led the way down the hall past open doors spilling half light and moans. Jay looked into one. Several people huddled on the floor around a pipe. One chick was passed out in the corner, a guy bent over her too messed up to figure out his belt. He felt Todd nudge him, but he didn’t stop, and he didn’t look again.

They came out of the hallway into the rhythm that beat like the heart of the house. It was not turned up, but the bass carried through his bones as if miniature speakers had been implanted in his joints. A few people were scattered around the room on couches and chairs. As Todd pushed past him, a gaunt figure rose from the couch directly in front of them. It raised itself unsteadily and flowed forward.

“Todd!”

Todd recoiled, and then his face paled. He recognized her, and so did Jay. Tina’s eyes burned red, and her hair was matted on one side. Her skin seemed too generous for her face, and

any make up she'd had was rubbed off except for the red ring around her cracked lips. There was a crusty streak along one side of her skirt. She flung her arms wide, trailing an arc of beer with one hand.

That arc ended in the lap of one of the guys she passed. "Watch it, bitch," he said, voice loud even over the beat of the music.

The room watched as she dropped to her knees and whined an apology to the offended, smearing the wet spots on his pants with her hand. The sour smell of beer increased. Todd's face turned from white to green, but he didn't move forward to help her. He stepped back from her bent form and the short, muscular man standing over it.

"C'mon." Max and Jay pulled Todd away where he didn't have to watch his sister brush at the pants of the man standing over her, didn't quite have to hear the man say, "You're going to clean them better than that," didn't have to see the man pull her up by the arm and shove her down the hall.

Max shook Todd's shoulder, made him look Max in the eye. "Don't get stupid."

Todd's eyes narrowed. His shoulders stiffened, and his chin came up. Jay braced and waited, but nothing happened. Todd's lips pressed into a hard line, and he shifted back onto his heels. Max nodded once, then crossed the room and disappeared behind the door across the room.

Jay turned back to Todd, who did not move a muscle. Jay shifted his weight so that he was in Todd's line of sight, but nothing registered in his face. Todd looked at a space both closer and further away than anything in that room. He was done. Jay pushed him a couple of steps closer to the wall and stood beside him, watching the door across the room. No one seemed to notice them or care that they were there. The short man and Todd's sister came back into the

room, and then it was as if the Jay and Todd, ghosts in the corner, had never come. They stood like that for a long time, and nothing. Jay didn't bother to watch the clock. The music beat out the wasted time, and he scanned the room impatiently for Max.

When Jay's feet had begun to hurt past the point that shifting weight was a relief and he had begun to hope Max would come back out and take them home, he made a move. Jay dragged Todd down the hall and out the front door. They stood by Max's car where the air was clearer and they could put their backs against something. If Isaac wanted to see him, Max could walk his ass out here to get him, Jay thought.

Jay kept scanning the front yard, noticing that there was no place for anybody to hide. Isaac was smart. Not only did he have a lookout, but his place was a fortress. Jay kept his eyes moving, aware that here, not like home, he had more to fear than Todd's pranks. Especially since Todd was sitting on the curb, hunched over his drawn up knees. He had definitely checked out.

As he scanned the street, Jay saw another man approaching the house. His bald head shone in the lamplight. His chinos were creased, and his white tee shirt was spotless under a black leather jacket. The only element that wasn't quite right was the pair of shitkickers that peaked from under his khaki cuffs. He popped his knuckles and glanced around. As he turned his gaze toward Max's car, Jay recognized him.

How'd he find me here? Jay wondered.

The man sauntered across the distance between them, nodding slowly and screwing his mouth into a grimace, eyes clouded. He looked so different without his polo. Jay puffed out his chest and raised his chin. The man shook his head.

“So this is where you want to be.”

“Hey, Artie. Nice threads.” Dip shit thought some rags made him hard. Couldn’t do a damn thing. Not my father, Jay thought. “Not exactly youth group, is it?”

“Not exactly.”

“How’d you find me?”

“You leave tracks.”

Jay nodded. Sure, play the mystic savior. He bet his mom had called in reinforcements.

“You want to be one of them?” Art jerked a thumb toward the house.

“Apparently *you* do.” Jay snickered. Cold knots twisted tighter inside him.

“Not now. But I did.”

“Bet you did.”

“I used to be.”

“What?”

“One of them.”

Jay tilted his head further back. He knew he looked ridiculous. He couldn’t stop.

“Right. You were one of them.”

Art pulled the collar of his tee shirt down a few inches, showed the tattoo: crisp fedora, sunglasses, moustache. Black had faded to green. “Right where everyone could see it. No shoulder or chest for me.” He rubbed at it with one finger. “Not even a real face, is it?”

“You defected. Found God, huh?”

“And you.”

“Leave me alone,” Jay scoffed. Whatever this guy thought he was, he wasn’t nearly half of it. “You’re not my dad,” he said, spreading his arms out, down and low. “He’s out of town, though. Go bang my mom or something.”

The hand came up, swift and smart across Jay's face. It turned his head and stole his breath. He could feel where the hand had been, knew it could have been a fist. It was humiliating. He heard Chuck laughing up at the door and knew he'd seen that punk slap. He could probably hear the whole stupid conversation.

As mad as he was, the eyes that looked down on him now were hard and dark, and Jay couldn't meet them. Art didn't look like Art.

"Respect," Art barked. "Don't forget it again." The arms beneath the leather seemed to ripple and grow. Art was the one who taught him about strength and balance. Jay knew he couldn't win. "You're coming home now."

Jay wouldn't just go. He felt his chin begin to rise.

Art looked into his face, and then tipped his head back and a little to one side, pursing his lips. "You seen Todd's sister?" he asked, those dark eyes piercing.

Todd moved for the first time in an hour, giving Jay something else to look at for moment. The boy rocked forward slightly on the curb, and he turned his head toward Art. Then he turned away and vomited in the gutter, on the curb, on himself. Jay's stomach turned as Todd's body heaved. When Todd was done, Jay helped him stand up.

"Need a ride?" Art wasn't looking at Jay anymore. His hand and his eyes held Todd steady, leaning forward again, non-confrontational. He'd found a new soul to save.

Todd wiped the back of his hand across his face, green even in the bizarre orange hue of the streetlamp, and nodded.

Art tilted his head back, looking down his nose at Jay. "And you?"

Jay looked around. He knew more people than Chuck had seen the slap, had seen him and Todd standing like piles of shit in the corner and on the curb. Max was nowhere to be found.

This night was over. He could hear the bass beating inside the house, but his own rhythm couldn't keep up. Not yet.

Jay met Art's eyes and shrugged. "Sure," he said. It was better than walking.

A Prayer for Wisdom

Alicia leaned forward against her seatbelt and peered into the evening twilight. There was nothing to see but scrubby pines and parched clay. Sheets of spring rain had fallen this afternoon, hitting the earth so hard that the fat drops shattered into spray and covered the ground like fog. Now, just a few hours later, the water that had washed everything clean had disappeared, leaving only dust behind. It looked like the highlands of New Mexico hadn't seen rain in a year or better.

“We’re getting close,” her father said over the hum of the van’s engine. “You excited?”

With those words, the excitement that had filled her all day disappeared through the cracks of uncertainty. Alicia’s mouth felt dry.

Alicia settled back into her seat and turned her head toward her father. His eyes were shadowed, but his grin gleamed, a white crescent in the dim light of the dashboard. She bobbed her head and smiled. Sure, she was ready to get up in front of a group of kids she’d never met, kids who’d already committed crimes she didn’t know kids could do, and act like she was in charge. Sure, she was ready to say all the right things and save souls for Christ. She must not have been convincing because his grin softened into sympathy. She looked away out into the blue and purple night and nibbled at an index finger, worrying a hangnail with her teeth.

“Your fingers are going to be sore enough by the end of the night,” her father said. He gripped the steering wheel with one hand and dug into his jacket pocket with the other, producing a tube of lip balm.

Alicia smoothed on some of the balm and then rubbed the sore finger against her bottom lip. Back and forth the finger went until she could no longer feel the scratch of hard, cracked

skin. One by one, she treated her other cuticles, careful to keep the callused pads of her fingers free of the ointment. When the last pinky was rubbed soft, she handed the tube back to her father. Her hands dropped into her lap and twisted around each other. She squeezed them together to stop the motion, but when she did she felt a roiling churn in her stomach.

Her father reached over and squeezed her hands. “Why don’t you warm up?”

Alicia tugged at the gray bandana wrapped around her blonde curls. She relaxed her fingers and wrists, then shook them. “Don’t know why I’m so jumpy,” she said, attempting a laugh, but her breath caught. She laced her fingers together and extended them in front of her, palms out, breathing out through pursed lips the way her mother had taught her.

“You’re used to playing that guitar in front of moms and grandmas,” he teased as she brought her hands back in towards her body and massaged the knuckles of one hand with the other. “You’ve never ministered to kids your own age before.”

Yeah, high school kids weren’t exactly known for gushing like the members of her small church. And definitely not these kids. She clasped her hands in front of her and rolled first one wrist and then the other, back and forth, faster and faster, until they moved loosely. “How different can it be?” she asked, meaning it to come out as a statement. She knew it was really a question, and that made her stomach tighten. Even more so when moment after moment of silence confirmed that her father wasn’t going to answer her.

She reached behind her seat and dragged her guitar forward. As she fumbled with the latch – fat lot of good that coordination would do her – she felt his hand press hers a second time. “You’re going to be fine,” he said. “I promise I won’t overload you.” He let go of her hand, and she pulled her guitar into her lap. “We won’t break into small groups tonight,” he said, and she sighed with relief. “We’ll save that for next week.”

Next week was fine with her. As long as it wasn't tonight. Even when it was in her regular Bible study on Sunday mornings among people she'd known all her life, Alicia got nervous when she was asked to lead one of the small groups. It only meant talking in front of a few of the kids, five or six at most, and then she was only supposed to lead the group in prayer and ask a few discussion questions. It was her brain's fault. It just didn't work fast enough to field the group members' questions, and everyone had questions. Her father had told her that she didn't have to have those answers, but how could she avoid the pressure of being in charge? That's why she liked singing and playing music. It moved people, and the words and notes were already there to be played as well as possible. She liked lifting up people's spirits with song, and she was even good at one-on-one conversations because they had a rhythm of their own that was easy to improvise. Those felt simple, and she could feel her way through. But a group was so hard to follow. Still, seven days lay between Alicia and next week. She'd study her father's lesson all week and be ready for next Sunday. For now, she could concentrate on the fingerings of chords and melody.

"What songs are we going to do?" she asked, pulling her guitar onto her lap and finding the strings with her fingertips.

Her father hummed for a moment. "Since it's just you and me," he continued, "we'll probably start with 'Amazing Grace.'"

Alicia wrinkled her nose. "Really?" she asked. She used it to open and close her own practices only because it had such a good range. It seemed like such an oldish, reverent kind of hymn, too slow and serious for a bunch of hard core youth camp kids. Especially that bit about being blind and then suddenly seeing. Wouldn't they find it hard to relate? Even she had to add different flourishes every time to keep herself interested in the melody.

But her father nodded. “They like that one because they know it,” he explained, “and I play it like we do at home.”

Alicia grunted, nodded though she was unconvinced, and began fingering the low notes, a simple swapping out of the higher, hard-to-hit notes that made it difficult for some people to sing. “But it’s so slow,” she mused. “Wouldn’t something faster get them more excited?” She thought of them clapping, maybe even raising their hands. That would be such a small thing compared to all the old school miracles like lame men walking and the dead coming back to life.

“What, on fire for the Lord?” her father asked, and she could hear the smirk in his voice. “This isn’t a youth rally.” He shook his head. “We’ve got one hour, maybe less if the kids get rowdy.”

Alicia’s heart jumped.

“‘Amazing Grace’ is one of those old time songs that a lot of people recognize, and these kids tend to respect that,” he said.

Alicia’s fingers finished their soft dance across the strings. “OK, boss,” she said, shrugging, “What’s next?”

He rattled off a few more, all fairly easy. In the deepening darkness, she traced the path of each song, sliding her fingers lightly over the strings, humming and strumming the prescribed list. This should be a piece of cake.

Her father turned the van off the paved road onto a narrow, dusty lane, and a few minutes later they were headed down a path lined with rocks. Alicia put her guitar back in its case and slid it back behind her seat. The tires crunched over gravel, and dust rose around them as the van rolled up to a small wooden building with a sign that read “Main Office.”

Her father shut off the engine. “This is it,” he said.

Alicia looked around. “It” looked like nowhere. Aside from the main office, she could see very little in the night, not a tree or a bush. Not even an arroyo. “Wait, where’s the camp?” No place that housed fifty or sixty teenagers could be this quiet at seven o’clock.

She looked across the nothing darkness in the direction her father’s finger pointed. As her eyes adjusted, points of light stood out, orange against the black. She was able to make out the shapes of several buildings that stood around the wide, clear space. Looking back at her father, she said, “There’s nothing here.”

His smile was thin. “It’s La Ultima Vez, kid, not summer camp.”

Alicia’s tongue slipped out and made a quick circuit of lips gone dry. “Where is everybody?” she asked.

Patting her on the shoulder, he said, “We have to sign in.” He got out of the van and poked his head back in. “Remember to lock your door.”

She took a deep breath and got out of the van. The dry air struck her, and she wished she hadn’t already emptied her water bottle. The air smelled like dust and pine. She wondered what else was out there that she couldn’t see. Her skin prickled. Raising a hand to the lock, she thought she could count the number of times she’d ever locked the van before. She hurried around the vehicle and followed her father in through the heavy wooden door.

The office was as empty as the yard outside. Nothing but a desk and a few file cabinets along the back wall. A woman sat behind the desk, brown hair pulled back in a thick bun. Her black polo shirt was wrinkled, and her eyes were bloodshot. A large black binder dominated the desk in front of her. She turned it towards them as the door banged shut. Alicia winced. The woman did not look up.

“Dan. Late again,” she said

“Evening, Jory.” Alicia’s father replied, stooping over the desk and filling out a line in the book. Before handing the pen to Alicia, he cocked his head to the side, caught Jory’s attention and winked. Her thin lips relaxed from their scowl into a tired smile. “How’s your son?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Well, he’s not here yet, so I guess we’re making it OK.”

Alicia ducked her head and signed on the next open line, trying to look like she wasn’t listening.

“Who’s with him now?” he asked.

“He’s at his uncle’s in Gallinas for the summer,” Jory said, sighing. Alicia looked up and found the woman’s dark eyes on her. “This one yours?” she asked.

“Yup,” he said, putting a hand on Alicia’s shoulder. “Jory, this is my daughter, Alicia. She’s sixteen, same as your boy.”

Jory offered a hand for shaking, and Alicia took it, wilting a bit beneath Jory’s measuring gaze. Then the counselor grinned and shoed them towards the door.

“Wish we had more time to talk, but you guys better get in there before they get bored.” Jory’s finger shot up and pointed at Alicia’s father. “Remember, if they act up, no soda.”

“I know, I know,” he grunted. “Leave it by the door.”

Alicia scooted out after him as he led the way through the door. The *whump* of it shutting behind them made her jump. She followed her father around the van and helped as he pulled their guitar cases from the back seat. “Why do we have to leave the soda by the door?” she asked as she hefted the cases, one in each hand.

He pulled out a flat of soda, balancing it on one hand as he locked the door. When he turned to face her, he peered at her in the orange light of the office's door lamp. “It’s just a

precaution,” he said, but she couldn't see enough of his expression to know if he was leaving something out.

“Tell me later?” she tested.

“If you want, but don't worry about it, Al,” he said, taking his case from her.

“Sometimes it's better to focus on what's happening around you than to worry about what's already happened.”

She shrugged. Her fingers itched. She needed to get them moving.

Her father sighed and let his arm drop. He walked past the main office and toward the next orange pinpoint of light. Alicia followed him out of the glow cast by the main office and found that he had become no more than a gray outline. She quickened the pace, rolling her feet heel-to-toe so she wouldn't trip on ground she couldn't see. There were too many clouds for the moon to brighten the way, and no town lights to reflect off the clouds.

She couldn't see the size of the building they approached, but the door was the same rough wood panel as the main office. Her father pushed the door open and poked his head inside, then stood back to let Alicia through. She lengthened her stride and slipped quickly past him, but she stopped short on the other side. The room was huge, probably the one they used for a gym. A few voices that had been chattering at the other end of the long room quieted. She counted nine, not including the two bored characters with black polo shirts and walkie talkies. Alicia was surprised to see that there were a couple of kids younger than herself, and one seemed like he was a good three or four years older. But that couldn't be, she knew, because this camp was for minors.

Her father set the flat of soda down behind her with a thump, which got her feet moving again. Alicia's boots echoed more against the wood floor than her father's tennis shoes as they

approached the circle of chairs at the center of the room. She felt a flood of relief when her father's strides took him past her and his voice filled the room.

"Hey, Penny, you thirsty again?" he asked a girl with spiky black hair.

Penny rubbed her hand over her head and grinned. "You know I'm just here for the soda," she said, settling into her seat and stretching her legs out in front of her.

Alicia shook her head and smiled. He acted like he was just helping out with youth group at the church. Maybe that was the key. He went around the circle, greeting several more by name, but Alicia couldn't keep up, so she watched. This wasn't a hi-five crowd, for sure, but pretty much everyone sat down as he waved them into the circle, even the big guy with the five o'clock shadow and shoulders like an NFL linebacker. The only one who didn't comply was a wiry guy with blond hair, one of the kids Alicia thought was younger than she was. He stood behind his chair until one of the counselors called, "I'm sure the KP crew would love your help, Jerry." He grumbled something that sounded not very nice and sat down, but his feet were tucked up under his chair and his arms crossed tightly over his chest. Alicia wondered why he would bother with the attitude, even if he only came for the soda.

She smiled and gave a little wave when her father introduced her – "This is Alicia, and she'll be with us from now on" – but she couldn't keep eye contact with any one person for very long. Even when she looked away, she could feel so many narrowed eyes on her, tracing cool paths up and down her body as if they were laser X-rays from some sci-fi movie. She busied herself with uncasing their guitars and the light music of guitar tuning.

Their instruments were ready in a few minutes, so she settled into her chair and let her fingers move over the familiar tension of strings. She kept her eyes focused on her fingers, not quite closing her eyes, and took refuge behind the wood, metal, and nylon. Soft notes drifted

from her fingertips through the banter and beyond the self-introduction of two kids her father didn't know, until he finally said, "Let us pray."

Alicia's fingers stilled the strings, creating an instant, deep silence. Head bowed and eyes closed, she felt relief run through her to the tips of fingers and toes. Her body fairly vibrated with the energy of months of expectation. The smooth wood, warmed by the body that cradled it, gave back the heat it had been given. Her bones ached with anticipation. *Let them hear, Lord. Just let them hear.* The seconds and words of her father's prayer dragged on in her ears as her fingers itched for the "Amen" and his signal to start.

Her fingers wandered over the strings for a few beats as her father threw the strap of his guitar over his shoulder, and then she began the opening strains of "Amazing Grace." Her father's deep voice led them in the first verse, which most of them knew. Alicia glanced up a couple of times, amused by the mouths that struggled to form half-remembered phrases. When she passed into the second verse, no voices followed. She sang on, raising her voice and trying to fill the surrounding quiet with the melody and flourishes that inspired her. After a few moments, her father's guitar picked up the melody. She switched over and harmonized, and they sang that verse as a duet. Her voice faltered when she noticed that the kids were shifting in their seats and raising eyebrows at each other. She followed her father's signal with relief and changed keys, transitioning into the next song.

Alicia played while the group sang for almost half an hour, running longer than she thought they would because a girl asked for "just one more verse" of "Sweet Song." Alicia tried to hide her smile. She'd been working with this tune, changing the timing and adding flourishes. It felt like the girl was complimenting her. Alicia savored the last vibrations as she massaged her sore fingertips.

She sat with her guitar in her lap as her father talked about faith. The kids in the circle sat too far apart to elbow or poke one another, although a few would make eye contact with someone across the circle and crack up. If Alicia had been the one talking, she would have gotten flustered, but her father used that messing around as an opportunity to get the kids to talk. Mostly, they trained their eyes on her father and listened, all except Jerry, who gazed with open longing at the flat of soda by the door.

Her father cited only two verses that evening, Proverbs 3:5-6: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” Her father talked about trust, how important it is and how hard to come by.

“Who do you trust?” he asked. They all looked at each other, but no one said anything. “OK,” he nodded, trying again, “How about this: when is it a bad idea to trust someone?”

“When they’re stupid,” Penny, the girl with short, dark hair, said and crossed her arms over her chest. She got a low chuckle from a few of the kids.

Alicia rolled her eyes. That girl was like the guy who sat behind Alicia in history. If all she wanted was a soda, why talk? Next thing, she’d be farting for laughs. Please, God, no, she thought.

But her father’s eyebrows shot up, and he leaned forward like he did when Alicia was starting to understand her math homework. “Exactly. How do you know they’re stupid?”

“They get caught,” one big guy said, tilting his chin up and smirking when he got a “Yeah!” from his friend. Everyone else was nodding too.

“But why do they get caught?” her father pressed on.

“Cause they’re stupid,” the big guy joked back, and the room erupted in laughter.

Alicia felt her face go warm, but her father laughed along with them. “Come on, Marcus,” he said once the outburst faded, “rise above your stereotype.”

Marcus settled back, but he was grinning. “All right, all right,” he said, uncrossing his arms. He leaned forward and put one forearm on each thigh, and then he dropped his head in his hands to think. “What about,” he said, head down, “they get caught because they don’t pay attention.”

“Right,” her father said, nodding again. “What distracts them?” Blank faces all around. Alicia wasn’t sure what he was fishing for. He looked up at the ceiling, then back at the kids before him. “Think movies,” he started again. “Villains go along doing their evil deeds,” snickers flitted around the circle, “and then suddenly they go too far. Why do they do it? What is it that wrecks their evil genius?”

“Maybe they think it’s worth the money,” said one kid. “Or power,” said another, and Marcus said, “They get greedy.” Penny’s voice rang out: “They only see what’s right in front of them.” Her eyes were hard, black points.

Alicia’s father nodded slowly, holding Penny’s gaze. “Exactly,” he said.

The questions were simple, and it seemed to take forever, but he got them talking, one by one. They had a lot to say about stupidity and almost nothing to say about trust. What had made them all so bitter?, Alicia wondered. Penny sat directly across from her, and her face flashed from understanding to disgust to anger and back to understanding so quickly that Alicia found it difficult to look away. When Alicia’s father asked, “Can you trust your parents?” Penny’s “Not anymore” was loudest, and when he asked, “Can you trust yourself?” Penny’s face froze. That set Alicia’s mind a-buzz with ideas. How could someone go through life without trusting anyone? Penny probably ignored the people who most wanted to help her, acting like she knew

everything. Must have gotten her into a lot of trouble. Alicia's lips twitched into a sympathetic smile. Penny just needed someone to trust.

Alicia's father waved them all in and had them pull their chairs close together. The scrape of metal on wood flooring echoed in the room. "Are there any prayer requests tonight?"

The room fell quiet, and every murmur of behind-the-hand snickering died away. Several people shifted back into their seats, and one girl busied herself with retying her ponytail. Alicia peered around the room, wondering which one would say something. All eyes remained focused on the floor, and she thought for a moment that the center of the circle might burst into flames any moment.

Her father let the silence stretch out. Alicia straightened in her chair, the metal creaking beneath her. After another minute, she ached to move again just so she could break that silence. Why was he waiting so long? They had to be prodded to conversation, and half of that was joking around. No one here would give up a real worry.

Marcus shifted, coughed, and then said, "My little sister's sick. My mom says she keeps getting ear infections."

Alicia trained her eyes on the burning center of the circle.

One chair squeak later, a girl next to her father said, "Our car broke down. My dad can't get to his job without it, and we're too far out in the sticks for him to get a ride every day." Alicia heard faint whispers of "damn" and "that sucks" ripple through the group.

Someone said, "Next Friday is my last day here," and the room got very quiet, except for a few complaining chairs. The floor again mesmerized them. Almost a full minute passed, and Alicia looked at her father. He was scanning the circle of faces, glancing at Penny who kept biting her lips. When he caught Alicia's eyes, he shook his head. She should have been

concentrating on her own requests, not staring at the other kids. Blushing, she went back to her deep contemplation of the floorboards.

When Penny spoke, there was a shrug in her voice. “It’s hard for me to trust people, even when I know they’re right.”

Alicia kept her eyes low but bobbed her head and allowed the corners of her mouth to turn up in a sympathetic grin. It was amazing what opening the mind and heart could do. She was proud of Penny.

Another few beats of quiet, then her father’s voice startled her out of her smile. “Alicia, why don’t you close us in prayer,” he said. A command, not a suggestion.

Warning bells sounded in her head, and her entire body tensed. He knew she hated to do this. But she couldn’t say no. Instead, she said, “Please bow your heads and close your eyes.” She pretended she was in the room alone. She broke the silence with “Lord, thank you for bringing us together today.” Her mind raced over faces and names, forgetting even the few she knew. “We thank you for the Word and the understanding you’ve given us.” She was glad no one was looking at the redness she could feel tingling in her cheeks. “Help us through the week ahead,” she floundered. Then she remembered short black hair and a name, and she prayed the most directed prayer of the evening. As she said it, she knew it was perfect: “Lord, give Penny, and all of us, the wisdom to trust people, and help her to realize when she’s being stubborn and forgetting about the kindnesses they want to give.” She prayed some more about “discernment” and ended with a plea for their “hearts’ surrender.”

Her “amen” stood alone for a split second before her father’s voice prompted the others to echo it. She was gratified that they had all waited a beat, the beat she knew was reserved for great performers. When she lifted her head, her eyes were shining, and so were Penny’s.

Dan stood and clapped his hands once, and all eyes turned to him. “We’re glad you all came tonight, and it would be great if you’d stay and have a soda with us.” Murmurs began, and he moved around the circle to speak with the kids who had offered prayer requests. Alicia busied herself putting their guitars away then bounded across the room to put them by the door and get the sodas.

One of the counselors stopped her on her way back and took two of the six-packs from the flat. “Leave the rest by the door. They get one apiece.” All business, the counselor’s blonde ponytail swished away all questions as she sauntered back towards the group and started handing out the sodas.

Alicia’s eyebrows drew together in momentary confusion, but then she walked back the way she’d come and set the extra sodas by the door. She indulged in a grimace while her back was to the room. If she had handed them out, Alicia would have gotten to talk to Penny. She brushed her hands against her jeans and walked back to the circle of chairs that had been broken by jokes and chatter. Her father stood in the midst of it.

To her delight, Penny was on the edge of things. Alicia caught her glance and smiled, making her way towards her target. She wanted to give this girl a hug; her arms ached to do it. Maybe that was why God had brought her here this night. Alicia wanted to give God an opportunity to work in Penny’s life, and she wanted Penny to know that she was someone to be trusted. Alicia’s grin widened with every step.

Using a person’s name lets her know you cared enough to remember, Alicia reminded herself. “I’m really glad I got to meet you tonight, Penny,” she said.

“Thanks a bunch.” Penny shifted her weight to one leg and looked past her. She lifted the bright green can to her lips and sipped.

Alicia tried to sound reassuring. Maybe she just had a hard time talking to new people, too. Tilting her head a bit, Alicia said, “Did you get a lot out of tonight’s message?”

Penny crossed her free arm across her chest, propping up the arm holding the can. “Yeah, it was just super,” she said, raising an eyebrow.

Alicia’s mind raced in two directions at once. Was Penny being sarcastic? Alicia knew her father’s words had reached her because she’d watched Penny laugh and nod, and then Penny had made that great prayer request. She’d obviously been paying attention. Alicia tried to understand the moment while she groped for something to say. There wasn’t time to think.

Penny’s eyes glinted. “Maybe God’ll make me cute and sweet and give me all the answers too,” she said.

All the...what? Alicia’s face burned. She wanted to say something, but her tongue lay frozen in her mouth. Penny shook her head and walked away. Alicia watched her drop the can in the garbage. It thudded.

Alicia stewed while her father hummed to himself in the van on the way home. She glared out into the black night. She didn’t know when her father had fallen silent, but the moment after she realized it, he cleared his throat. She cringed.

“So,” he began, “how do you think it went tonight?”

She bobbed her head noncommittally.

“Feel like you shed some light?” he pressed.

She nodded, she shrugged, and then she sighed. If she could only exhale her anger and the stupid humiliation Penny’s attitude made her feel, maybe she could find something positive to say. Something that would keep her dad from thinking that, just maybe, letting her come had

been a mistake. Alicia stalled. It was going to take more than one breath. Her anger would come out in her voice. She knew it.

“What, something wrong?” he asked, and out of the corner of her eye, she could see him glance at her.

She did her best to release the weight that dragged at the corners of her mouth. “No,” she said, shrugging, but the heaviness remained. “It’s just that one girl gave me attitude.”

“Who, Penny?” he asked.

Alicia nodded at him, surprised. Had he heard their conversation?

“What’d she say?” he asked.

“It wasn’t really what she said...” Alicia paused and then changed her mind. She didn’t see any point in being tactful. Penny hadn’t been. “No, it was what she said. She made it sound like I think I know it all.” She nibbled on her index finger. “Like I’ve had everything handed to me.”

Her father nodded, but he didn’t say anything for a minute. “Why are you upset?” he asked finally.

Alicia’s hand dropped into her lap. What kind of question was that? “I don’t know,” she said, searching for words she hadn’t thought she would need. “It was just rude.”

“True,” he said.

Alicia adjusted her bandana. “So,” she said, “it was totally without provocation.”

His silence denied her confirmation, but the words that followed it were worse: “Well, but you did call her stubborn.”

“What?” she protested. “I did not.”

“Yes, you did,” he said, “in your prayer.”

Something cold and hard took over the heat in her belly. “She admitted she was stubborn,” Alicia said, and then faltered. “You heard her. She doesn’t listen, even when she knows someone is telling her the truth.” There it was. How could anyone argue with that?

Her father didn’t argue. He didn’t say anything.

Alicia’s lips were dry, dry. She wanted to ask her father a question, but she wasn’t sure what it was that she needed to know. The thud of the can in the garbage echoed in her ears. Alicia’s heart thudded and her face grew hot. Rubbing her thumbs over her callused fingertips, she wished the rest of her worked the way they did, hitting the strings when and where they were supposed to.

There wasn’t enough time to do all the studying she needed to do before next week because there was no book on Penny or any of the girls like her. Alicia felt the pressure of the seatbelt cutting into her collarbone and the side of her neck. The seven days between her and next week seemed far too few, and she knew they would seep through the cracks before she was ready.

Kindling

Jesse sacrificed one arm to the morning chill, reaching from beneath seven layers of blankets to grope for the snooze button. He peeked at the clock and groaned, closing his eyes as he wished for ten minutes of the hazy comfort of bed-warmth instead of the brisk wakefulness of shower-warmth. But the day was always colder when he had no time for a hot shower. He steeled himself and slid out from beneath the mountain of covers, even though he knew every fold would be cold when he got home after school.

The worn hardwood floor stole heat from his bare feet as he hopped into stiff jeans and a heavy sweatshirt. Goosebumps spilled across his skin several times before the weight of cold clothing eased into warmth around him. With a pair of socks in one hand and his boots in the other, he tiptoed back to his bed and sat while he pulled on the gray wool. He rubbed each foot before sliding it into its boot, knowing the leather would keep his toes cold all day if they didn't start off warm. That was the only real thing his father had taught him before he wrapped his car around a light pole and left them for good. So much the better. Even at ten, Jesse had known his mom's tears were better in the light of the church than in the dark of their living room at midnight, waiting.

Jesse glanced out the high narrow window by his bed. Even through the blur of heavy plastic he'd put up to keep the worst of the drafts out, he could see the fresh layer of snow that had fallen in the night. Last Christmas, when his mom still had work in Santa Fe, he'd wished for just one inch that would stick. They'd had freezing cold mornings once, maybe twice a year. Back then, he'd thought the worst thing about winter was the coming of the snowplows that ruined the pristine white with black lines of pavement. Now, an hour and a half north of where

they used to be, he knew the worst of it was the collection of dark, muddy mounds of ice that dripped slow, icy puddles in the shadows of buildings and kept the town cold until June.

Flor, New Mexico. Some flower this turned out to be. The cold wasn't the only thing that was different. It wasn't until they moved here that he realized they were in debt. He had seen the bill from the credit card company when he was clearing the counter yesterday. The only charge listed was the finance charge, and it took his breath away. That amount was almost as much as they paid for rent. Rent for this crappy little place with no insulation and no bedroom doors. Flor, New Mexico. Not even on the map.

He ran a hand over his short black hair, then shook his head to clear it. Pasting a smile on his face, he pushed through the curtain that covered his doorway.

Behind the breakfast bar, Jesse's mother flitted around the small kitchen. A skillet warmed on one burner and a small pot on the one behind it. A third was lit, and she passed her hands over it every now and again. "Morning," she called, waving him over. She emptied the contents of a cutting board into the skillet. Over its sizzle, she asked, "Would you whisk some eggs for me, please?"

Jesse glanced at the skillet: potatoes and onions. He slid past her to the refrigerator, popping open the egg carton. There were two left. He paused, then pulled out the whole thing. He turned away from his mother and took down a bowl from the upper cabinet, cracking the eggs into it and beating them with a fork. He reached back into the fridge and pulled out the milk, splashing a bit of it into the eggs and beating them again. A hand touched his shoulder. He turned toward his mother, tried to ignore her small twist of a smile, and handed the bowl into her waiting palm. She added another splash of milk and whipped the fork through the mixture again.

"Want me to make toast?" Jesse asked.

“No more bread.” Turning away from him, she poured the eggs over the potatoes and onions. She stirred a small pot of green chili just behind the skillet, salted the eggs, then reached into the fridge. “We’ll have to share these,” she said, pulling out the bag of tortillas. “I’ll go to the store tonight.”

Jesse busied himself with the tortillas. He turned down the flame on the idle burner and laid one tortilla across it for several seconds, then flipped it over. As he warmed his hands and the tortillas, he sneaked a peek at the Mason jar on top of the fridge. In Santa Fe, that had been their funny money jar, and his mother had pulled from it to pay for Friday night pizzas and ice cream binges. They hadn’t done that in awhile, ever since she’d had to pull from the jar to get groceries about two months ago. He knew her payday was a few days away this time too, so she’d have to pull from the jar again. He pressed his lips together and scowled at the couple of dollar bills and all-too-copper collection of coins at the bottom. There had been almost twenty dollars in there yesterday. He’d counted. Jesse slipped the warmed tortillas between two potholders and set them on the counter, peeking over at the wood stove in the family room. Sure enough, a new box of wood pellets sat next to it, and for the first time in a week the fire within spilled orange light onto the floor before it. He hung his head.

“Mom, I said I could get us some pellets,” he said. “Why’d you buy them?”

His mother gazed down into the skillet, raising her pencil thin eyebrows and smiling tightly as she folded the omelet, pressed it, then flipped it. “Hijo, we pay for what we need,” she said, turning to face him. Her light brown eyes looked straight into his. “Nothing is free.”

He flushed. “I wasn’t going to steal anything,” he muttered, looking away.

His mother turned back to the stove, divided the omelet onto three plates, and put a tortilla on two of them. She reached across the counter and touched Jesse’s cheek, brushing her

thumb over a freckle that had landed like a teardrop beneath his eye. “I know you weren’t,” she said, and then shook her head. “But you don’t need to do anyone any favors for those little bits of wood, either.”

Jesse’s heartbeat quickened. “If I get a job, I can help pay for things,” he blurted, seeing a chance to renew his cause. Fifteen was old enough, and she’d held him back for almost an entire year. She said his grades would suffer, but Jesse had worked hard and they were high now. He’d been doing way more than his chores, cleaning up the house so well that she barely had to do a thing when she came home except cook, so she knew he had time and energy. Maybe now he could convince her.

Her eyes shone, and she did not smile. But she didn’t say no. “Go get your sister so we can eat,” she said. She turned again and fiddled with the knob of the skillet’s burner, then passed her hands over the idle burner one more time before turning it off as well.

Jesse pushed past the orange curtain into the bedroom his mother and sister shared. Marie sat in bed, her blue turtleneck and purple hoodie already on. No doubt she already had on her jeans and several pairs of socks under the layers of blankets she had pulled up over her legs. There was a large, heavy textbook spread open before her, but she wasn’t reading it. He was startled by the clarity of the eyes that met his, a match for his mother’s.

“She’s not going to let you get a job still?” Marie asked, cocking her head.

Jesse’s shoulders slumped, and the corner of his mouth twisted up in a grimace. “I don’t know, but if you can hear that well,” he grumbled, “I guess I didn’t need to come get you.”

“I could cover for you,” she said, so low he almost missed it. He glanced back at her, not sure he’d heard right. Her black hair was pulled back into a ponytail, her fourteen-year-old face blank and innocent. “If she says no again, I mean.” She closed her book and climbed out of bed,

her eyes gleaming. “We could slip extra money in the jar sometimes, and we wouldn’t ever have to ask her for anything.”

His eyes narrowed. “See this curtain?” he asked. “We can’t have secrets in this house.” “Not even good ones,” he muttered to himself.

“Thank God Fernando didn’t forget to plow our driveway again,” his mother said as she maneuvered the truck down the road of mud-slush-snow. “Didn’t realize we were going to need a sled and snow dogs up here.” She sighed and patted Marie’s head, which she had laid on her mother’s shoulder.

Jesse stared out at the monotonous white expanse. At least fresh snow covered some of the ugliness of the town itself, he thought. Their route was an uncomplicated mile, straight along the mucky main drag. They passed houses that, at their best, sported peeling paint and claimed yards with patchy fences. About half of the buildings were abandoned, most in various stages of collapse. No one seemed to care, and the snow helped Jesse not to care about the hulking piles of brittle wood. It was an eerie walk to make in the early morning light when he was running late and missed the Mom Bus.

Jesse’s mother was making the best of this new job, which Jesse was pretty sure was a big step down. She had taken the position as Flor’s school counselor, not exactly the same as the social work position she’d had. Still, Mom kept smiling and talking about her contacts in Las Vegas. Not the Vegas of high rollers, lost wages and neon lights. This Vegas was a tiny town about a half hour south that was home to nothing good except New Mexico Highlands University, where she hoped to get a job teaching. He loved the way her eyes lit up when she talked about it. She acted like teaching at college was better than winning the lottery, and color

came into her cheeks. The thought of that made him smile. As did the thought that, when she got that position, she could afford the commute from Santa Fe. Then they could move home.

Few students were at school this early, so Jesse led Marie down the hall, past the lockers, and up the stairs to a small alcove on the landing. She looked at him as he turned to face her, a Cheshire cat grin spreading across her lips.

“No,” he said. “Not so fast.”

Her grin faltered. “What?” she asked.

“I don’t want you covering for me,” he said bluntly, crossing his arms over his chest.

“You’re not a liar, and I can take care of my own business.”

As Marie’s lips thinned, her eyes lost some of their light. Jesse’s stomach dropped. She looked just like her new friend Maricela. She had this fantastic trick of squeezing him out of existence just by looking at him. “Just trying to help,” Marie said, raising an eyebrow Maricela style, and turning to walk away.

“Hey,” he said, catching her arm. “Hey, don’t do that. And don’t make that face.” He hunched and squirmed to get back into her line of sight. “You are not your friends,” he said and ignored her groan. “I know,” he said, squeezing her arm, “I know what kind of girls they are. Do you?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Marie scoffed, but she avoided his eyes. The flush on her face was no longer from the cold.

“You study, you’re smart,” he said, casting about, “you’re funny and nice,” but his words were escaping him. Big brothers didn’t do this kind of thing. “You’re better than that,” he insisted. She rolled her eyes. He wasn’t sticking to the script. “Listen to me,” Jesse said, trying

to shut out the image he'd seen yesterday, trying to keep the pleading out of his voice, "just don't hang out with that kid Justin, OK?" Justin, with his slick hair and weaseley face. Every time Jesse saw him with Marie, he wanted to punch him, just on principle.

"Who said I was?" she demanded, staring him in the eyes, but now her face was losing its color. "Just stay out of it. I never say anything about your red-eyed crew." Her eyes flashed. Jesse had to keep himself from backing up a step. Direct hit. "I'm surprised you can see anything through that haze of smoke."

Jesse shook his head. "Maybe," he admitted, "but Justin sees a little too well around you." Marie snorted, barely hiding a smile. She looked pleased. Jesse felt his stomach clench. "Those guys are vultures." He spat, heart beating hard. "You are way out of their league."

Marie's eyes had narrowed a bit, and her face was still pale. Her breathing slowed as she considered his words. "Whatever," she said after a moment. "I just thought you'd want some help." She looked down at the hand still holding her arm. "You gonna let me go, or are we gonna go to class together?"

Jesse wanted to shake her, but he made his fingers relax, made his arm drop to his side. "Just be good," he said lamely as she bounded down the stairs to her locker.

He was going to have to watch her more carefully. She hadn't been like this at all in Santa Fe. Her friends had all been kind of goofy, and they'd gone over to each other's houses a lot. He wracked his brain trying to remember the last time she'd stayed at someone's house, but he came up with nothing. Maybe his mother was right about him not getting a job. Someone needed to keep an eye on Marie. But still. That jar on the fridge was empty. He had to do something.

* * *

“Jesse,” Marco called out, pushing himself off from the wall across the hall as Jesse approached his third period class.

Jesse stopped, then changed course. “What’s up, man?” he replied, knocking knuckles with the heavysset guy who had addressed him. Marco, as usual, didn’t have his book bag anywhere near him, and his glasses were fogged up. He took them off and wiped the lenses on his shirt.

“You want something better to do for the next couple of hours?” he asked, grinning.

Jesse smirked. Anything’s better than economics, he thought. “Yeah, but you know my mom’s in the administration office,” he said instead, shaking his head. “She’s gonna know if I cut class.”

“Nah, she won’t,” Marco said, winking. “I fixed it. Come on.”

“Fixed it, how?” he asked.

Marco grunted. “You want this or not?” he asked, flashing a couple of folded bills. “And I got those wood pellets you wanted in my truck,” he added, walking away. “You coming?” he called over his shoulder, blending into the trickle of students headed down the stairs.

Jesse looked back at the door he had been about to enter, made sure his teacher hadn’t seen him, then slipped off after Marco.

“So what’s the deal, man?” Jesse asked as soon as they were in Marco’s truck headed down the road.

“We’re going to Vegas,” Marco said.

Jesse made a face. “There’s nothing there but the college,” he said. “What, are we going to sneak into harder classes or something?”

“That’s not the only thing in Vegas,” Marco said, pausing dramatically. Jesse could tell Marco wanted him to ask. After a few moments, Marco said, “We’ll drop these pellets off at your house first, then we’ll hit the highway.”

Jesse nodded, staring out the window. He wanted to ask what the money was all about, but instead he waited a minute and then asked, “What’s in Vegas?”

Marco smiled. “We’re going to make a little stop there. Just a quick drop.” He turned his head to look at Jesse. “No big deal.”

“Yeah, right, ‘no big deal,’” Jesse muttered uneasily. He’d noticed that Marco liked being the one with the details. He wanted to have some idea of the risk he was taking. “It’s so not a big deal that you have a wad of cash in your jeans.”

“That’s not money, that’s all me,” Marco smirked, then rolled his eyes when Jesse barely cracked a smile. “You gonna puss out?” he taunted.

“I’m not pussing out,” Jesse protested. “Just,” he stalled, searching for a way in, “what is it we’re doing there?”

“Like I said,” Marco repeated, raising his eyebrows, “just a quick drop and carry. You could use the extra cash, no?” he asked, shrugging, as he pulled into Jesse’s driveway.

“I don’t like not knowing what I’m carrying,” Jesse said, hopping out and going for the box of pellets. There were two boxes under the snow-covered tarp, both banged up pretty good, as if they’d been dropped a few times. “Does it matter which one of these I take?” he asked as Marco shut the driver side door.

“They’re both yours,” Marco said, grinning across the truck bed. “I don’t keep shit laying around.”

Jesse shook his head. “I only asked for one,” he said.

“Take them both,” Marco said, picking up the second box and carrying it to the front door. Jesse’s stomach clenched. His mom might not say anything if he could sneak a refill now and then, but if the box she bought didn’t run out within a reasonable length of time, she wouldn’t be able to ignore it. “You gonna make me hold this forever?” Marco shouted, stamping his feet to get the snow off.

Jesse felt the bite of cold-wet on his toes. He hoisted the box onto his shoulder. No matter what his mom said, she couldn’t argue with warmth, not during a winter like this.

“Look, thanks for the pellets,” Jesse said, letting them both inside and leading Marco into his room to set the boxes down in the bottom of his closet. “But this Vegas thing’s not my bag.”

Instead of answering, Marco pulled his jacket tighter around his body. “Damn, it’s cold in here,” he said, looking around.

Jesse felt warmth in his cheeks. “Yeah, we don’t have the best insulation,” he muttered.

Marco looked at him, and then grinned. “OK, I can drop you back at school if you want. But you know,” he said, as he wandered back toward the door, “it’s a hundred bucks for just a couple of hours.”

A hundred. Jesse clenched his jaw, shooting a glance at the Mason jar atop the fridge, but then he remembered the feel of his mother’s hand on his face just that morning. “A hundred bucks is good,” he admitted. “I don’t know, maybe. Not today, though.”

Just as Jesse was closing the door, he heard a thunk and a gasp. His stomach lurched, then he pushed his way back inside. As he moved, he gained momentum, crossing to the orange curtain and shoving it aside, but what he saw made him stop short. Marie sat on the bed putting her socks and shoes on. She looked up and smiled blandly at him.

“What are you doing home?” he asked.

“Taking a nap,” she said, tying double knots.

Her hair was tousled, but there was no hint of sleep about her. “Who else is here?” he demanded, glancing around the room.

“No one,” she said, but he’d seen that look earlier today. He knew her lying face. When he rounded the corner of the bed, no one was there. No one under the bed. No one in the closet. “What are you looking for?” she asked, her voice wavering, hinting of laughter.

He turned away from the closet, hands empty. “It was him, wasn’t it?” Jesse said, his voice low.

“Him, who?” she asked, eyes wide.

“Justin,” he growled, stalking over to the window and inspecting the sill. He couldn’t see any sign on it. No dirt, no snow, nothing he could tell, but that didn’t mean Justin hadn’t gone out that way. Jesse pounded the frame with his fist.

“You’re nuts,” she said into the silence.

Jesse studied the lacey pattern of ice that coated one of the window panes. The fog of condensation had crystallized. He’d not realized that those patterns, when viewed up close, looked like cracks. “Why are you here?” he asked, clenching and then relaxing his fists.

“Why are you?” That voice, the taunting in it, could have belonged to any one of the girls in this town. He closed his eyes and exhaled. “Don’t worry,” she said, her voice lilting, “I’ll cover for you.”

Cover for me. Cover for you. I can’t do this, he thought. He had to get her out of here. He needed money to do that. Not little money. Not pellet money.

“I’ll be back in a couple of hours,” he said. Confusion replaced the flashing fight in her eyes. I won’t hit you back, he thought. I just have to stay one step ahead of you.

Jesse walked out the front door and locked it behind him. He wasn't going to fight her. How could he? He looked around the yard, but he couldn't find any footprints leading around the house. No Justin to hit right now, but even if he found him he knew Marie already liked him more than she cared about her brother's opinion. As much as Jesse wanted to wipe that blank look off her face, he would only make it worse as he had this morning. She might even figure out how to lie better. She'd already fooled him once. Maybe more. Cutting class wasn't that big a deal, and he'd been doing it too, so he couldn't rat her out for that. And he didn't want to. Stupid little punishments wouldn't help. But he could take her someplace else, buy a car and drive the two hours to Santa Fe on the weekends. Keep her away from Flor at least, give her shopping malls and her old friends back, and when he had real money saved up he'd move them all to a house with heat and doors and a full refrigerator. Mom wouldn't get bright shiny eyes near the end of every month. Once he had the money to make it happen. A couple of hours here and there could add up to a lot.

"You all right, Jess?" Marco asked as Jesse slammed the passenger side door shut.

"Yeah," Jesse said, throat dry. "Yeah, I'm fine." He looked across the cab at Marco.

"Actually, I changed my mind. Let's go to Vegas."

Fret

Alicia sat on the floor in her bedroom, shoulders sagging, papers strewn across the carpet like the snow falling outside. She'd gotten last semester's grades today, and it was a disaster. There was only one A. A for art, she thought, fingering the white and gray envelope as the queasiness set in. The rest were B's and C's.

No. Not the rest. Alicia closed her eyes but could not erase the neat column of letters from her mind. There were two D's in there, a grade she'd rarely seen next to her own name. Her first thought was that someone must have mixed up her grade sheet with someone else's. After a flurry of papers and two very short lists of assignments and earned points, she realized that no one had made a mistake, no one except her. She had passed all of her tests with Bs, or at worst a C, but when she looked at the grade breakdown for each class, she realized that the homework assignments were worth about a third of her grade in English and about half in Civics and Economics.

Alicia pulled curly blonde locks back into a loose ponytail, but without a hair tie handy she had to let them go. As they fell across her face, she had to close her eyes for a second, which at least gave some blessed relief from looking at her black and white failure. Her late assignments had sometimes – too often, she realized – not gotten turned in at all. She had done that last year a couple of times out of embarrassment, and her grades hadn't changed too much then. This year's teachers didn't even ask her about homework, simply collecting it at the start of class and never mentioning it again, so she figured they had forgotten because the work was just practice. Gina said it happened all the time, teachers giving out busy work that they never

even looked at. “I barely ever do my homework,” she had told Alicia last week, and Gina had never gotten anything lower than a C+.

But apparently, neither of these teachers had forgotten or neglected anything. The tally in Civics was just under sixty-nine percent, and the new English teacher’s adjusted scale made an honest seventy-five into a D instead of a C. She’d forgotten about that stupid scale. Who graded like that? It made good grades hard to get. Too hard.

The floor was covered in notes that used to represent her ability to get the work done. Her father used to call those notes the basis of her future. He had taught her to outline the chapters she studied before the teacher went over them in class so she knew how everything worked together. Now, she mostly skimmed the headings and bolded words because actual reading just took too long, and it was all too boring for words. But as she looked at the mess before her, she knew that each sheet was too white, flat and empty.

Alicia needed to do something instead of just sit there in the middle of so much white, so she padded down the stairs into the kitchen to call Gina. Since they were kids, G had a knack for making impossible situations seem manageable. C student though she was, she still seemed to think she’d be able to wangle her way into a good school and a bright future, so why couldn’t Alicia? Gina always said she worried too much, and maybe she was right. All Alicia needed was to be able to laugh a little and have a friend point out some simple solution she’d missed, like maybe talking the teachers into giving her higher grades. She was so close in Civ, and the other was just unfair, but even the thought of trying to approach either of her teachers, their eyes steely and uncompromising, put a sour tang in Alicia’s mouth. That was not a conversation she wanted to have, especially not twice. Still, Gina could tell her what to do when Alicia’s parents found out. Alicia wondered if there was any hope for damage control. Maybe there was some

way she could make them believe that getting two D's in her senior year wouldn't affect her future. G would know.

Talking to Gina would have been nice. Would have. But instead, all Alicia got was a user-is-out-of-service-area message. Right. Alicia set the phone back on its charger and leaned against the counter, inhaling deeply to calm her heart, which had started racing again. Gina was in Gallinas that weekend with her boyfriend.

Alicia pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes. She didn't want to think about it. Gina's boy was a whole other problem she didn't know how to deal with, especially since Gina didn't want to talk about how she was too good for him. Point was, she wasn't there for Alicia to talk to.

Alicia looked out the window and examined one big, fat snowflake that had stuck to the glass and refused to melt. Who was she kidding? Her parents were going to flip out. They'd been pushing her to put her guitar down and study more. "You play so well already," her mom had said just a few days ago. "Those kids at La Ultima Vez can't learn to be responsible from you if you let your own life get away from you." She reached out and caressed Alicia's cheek. "Your future is important, too."

Months of these comments, and this time Alicia had wanted to push her mother's hand away and make her understand: that residential camp and those at-risk teens were her future. Everything she wanted to be and do was there, and she was already involved. All she wanted to do was to talk with them, to minister to them, and to answer questions when she could. What more purpose and good could a person do than give angry, confused or hurting people some hope and direction? Any career she could ever have, anything else she could ever do had to give way to that.

Maybe college wasn't for her, she thought. Her mother didn't need a degree to be an amazing painter. Alicia's father had learned how to build houses from the ground up, and he'd built a reputation as the best carpenter in the county. People in Albuquerque had heard about him, and they sometimes made him good enough offers that he drove two hours there and back for a couple of weeks to do a job or two. More importantly, he learned how to lead people to worship without ever setting foot into a college classroom. This no college business was a family tradition.

Besides, college was just a bigger and better high school. Alicia wanted to do more than sit still in a classroom and listen to stuff she already knew or didn't care about. She wanted to use her hands and connect with people. She couldn't apologize for spending time thinking about how to answer real questions – “Why does God let good people suffer?” and “How are we supposed to make the right decision all the time?” – instead of trying to memorize the Supreme Court justices or pulling out every single reference to white and black in *Heart of Darkness*. We all have different things we're good at, she thought. Why can't everyone just let me do mine?

Through the window, movement from the house next door caught her eye, and she refocused. Her neighbor, Peter, leaned halfway out of the window, arms waving madly. Good old Peter. His black, curly hair flopped in his eyes. He'd had a crush on her for forever, which had been annoying until last year, when she'd settled things by telling him as nicely as she could that it was never going to happen. It had been rough for a week while he walked around looking like a whipped puppy, and he had been over-sensitive about everything she said for awhile, but he hadn't walked away hurt in a long time. Maybe it was time they could be alone together again, and she wouldn't have to be so careful to not say or do anything that he would think was hurtful or, worse, flirtatious. She waved back to him and found herself smiling.

Maybe he had some ideas, she thought. He obviously wasn't doing anything that couldn't wait, so she made motions for him to come over. Peter made it to her front door almost faster than she did. That was flattering on the one hand, but she also thought it might be nice if he didn't hop to quite so fast. That thought was buried in the next moments as she unloaded everything into his lap and reveled in the gravity with which his brown eyes regarded her every word.

"Can I come in?" he had to ask, and she felt her cheeks flush despite the cold air pouring in the doorway. She waved him onto the couch in the front room and made a show of grabbing them some sodas before settling into her father's big, brown leather chair. Then the words just tumbled out of her.

Peter was a good listener. He grumbled appropriately when she told him about the crazy adjusted grade scale in her English class and snorted when she complained about Civ and Econ. When she told him her folks had suggested that she might need to take some Sunday nights off from going to minister at the troubled youth camp so she could study, he didn't give her grief like he would have done a year ago by pointing out that he and Gina had seen this coming. Instead, he took her side. "But you live for Sunday nights," he said, his brow furrowed. "And it's church work. I mean, what comes first, school or God?"

She threw her hands out wide. "It's like they don't know I'm already freaked out about what happens after I graduate," she complained. "I don't need them to take the rest of my life away." She let her hands drop to the armrests.

"That's crap," Peter said. The words sat in the silence, the harshness of them filling the room. "And really," Peter continued when the silence had stretched too long, "who gives a shit about grades anyway?" softening the swear with a lowered voice.

Right, who cared? But in the pause that followed, she realized they were both avoiding the point, and Peter's little spate of swearing proved it. His mother's scolding had left an impression on him, and Gina often teased him for substituting "sugar" for "shit." The boy even said fudge on occasion. He only stepped out of that when he couldn't express his solidarity with a friend in a bad situation in any other way.

Problem was, she thought, lots of people cared about grades and college and money and the future, including her parents. Including her. She guessed she'd assumed she would go off to college and land a good job because that's what her parents talked about. Her idea had been that her job would be one she could take time off of to do special things with youth ministry, missions trips and such, and maybe even have enough money to sponsor one or two kids who otherwise wouldn't be able to go. But she was pretty sure no one was going to hand her a job like that without some kind of college to back it up. The thought of a committee of admissions officers looking at those grades made her cringe.

The grandfather clock in the corner, the one her grandfather had actually made, chimed four in the afternoon. She thought about her grandfather and the attention he had put into every last detail. Why couldn't she do that anymore, she wondered. She shook her head as if to clear that thought out of it. It was a cop out. She knew she could have done more. She should have done so much more. It was such a part of her life to compare herself with the kids at L.U.V. and give thanks for what she had, but sometimes the contrast made her lose sight of things. Lately, she'd been feeling so blessed that she'd been lulled into thinking that she was good as she was. It felt like enough to be in school, helping her father lead Sunday night meetings, and staying out of trouble. But she had stopped moving forward, and she was letting good possibilities slip away.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Peter cock his head to the side. He had let go of his support-my-friend's-anger attitude, and she recognized a softening that looked like sympathy in his eyes. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

She shook her head. She studied the clock as she thought. The carving was beautiful and intricate. Her mother loved that clock and kept it, and all of its nooks and crannies, polished to a shine. "What can I do?"

"I don't know," Peter said, and shrugged.

"I wish I could just make it go away," she said, chafing her cheeks with both hands as if trying to wake herself from a bad dream.

Peter brightened. "What if you just don't show it to them?" he asked. He assumed a bland expression. "You know, maybe it just," spreading his hands wide, "didn't show up."

She laughed, but it sounded harsh even in her own ears. That plan would so never work. She'd never tried it, but then she'd never had to. It seemed such a low-handed way out, and she'd have to lie to do it. Everyone knew she was a terrible liar.

"They haven't seen it yet, have they?" Peter asked. He leaned across the space between them to touch her hand. She was surprised by its warmth. "You wouldn't have to lie," he said.

She pulled her hand away, guarded. "Peter," she said, "I can't."

His face clouded. He leaned back and shrugged. "Just trying to help," he muttered.

Alicia sat in the long recreation room of La Ultima Vez, hunched over her knees on the metal fold out chair, cupping her chin in her hands. The squeak of a rubber sole and the sigh of breath from her father echoed across the smooth wood boards, whispers of waiting. He stood looking out the window into the winter-dark evening.

As empty as this room was, it had the warmth of her years in it. Being there and interacting with the kids filled her with purpose and puzzles for the rest of the week. She could look at them and find little bits of herself, and always she hoped to say or do something meaningful to one of them. But tonight she was thinking about the report card lying on her bedroom floor amid the mess of papers she'd never cleaned up yesterday. No one had asked about it, and she hadn't mentioned it.

Alicia would normally be tuning her guitar, making sure the hour-long ride into the highlands desert hadn't loosened any of the strings too badly, or reading over the Bible verses for the night, or even just praying. But she couldn't focus enough to decide what to do. She was familiar with the night's verses, and her strings would be fine either way. Each of those activities felt like busy work that couldn't touch the heaviness in her gut.

She knew she should get up and move around and try to forget that her father hesitated an extra moment after he suggested she stay home and study tonight. Tonight felt a little bit like a trial, and she knew she should start thinking about the kids she knew and try to anticipate what questions they would ask. They would be coming in through the rec room doors any minute, and she had to be up for what lay ahead. These people were sharp, at least when it came to finding the negative. They'd learned one way or another to expect pain from every human transaction, and over the last two years of Sunday nights she'd learned that some of them would try to make her feel bad about the fact that she'd gotten better than a fair shake. Now, in the hole in which she found herself, she didn't think she could take many insinuations that her life was cream puff easy. Especially since the reason it was hard was because she cared so much about them, no matter how mad and ungrateful they were. Tonight, they'd have a better shot at her. And she was pretty sure her father would be watching.

She shook her head and pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes. Some of the kids who'd been around for a couple of months would be getting back out into the world in a month or two, and Alicia had been counseling them about taking care of business before it got out of hand and became the stuff of emergency. She couldn't quite see herself giving anyone advice tonight. It would be too hypocritical, and if there's one thing these kids could sniff out, it was hypocrisy. But the lesson was all still true: plan ahead, do a little at a time, leave room for error or unavoidable disaster, and, when all else fails, pray. Pretty much the only step she'd managed lately was the last one.

The familiar clack and whine of the rec doors brought Alicia back to the long, empty room and the circle of empty chairs before her. She reached down and swept up the guitar that lay at her feet, settling it into her lap and curling herself around it, strumming a few quick chords and making a business of tuning while people trickled in. She watched Kim saunter over and take a seat directly across from her. Kim's blonde hair had been chopped short since last week, and the job wasn't a smooth one. Alicia wondered if she did it herself, but then Kim ran a hand through her hair, her usual gesture, and Alicia saw the barest hiccup in the motion as her fingers came to the abrupt end of things. No, someone gave her a present in the night, Alicia was pretty certain. She scanned the faces of the others coming in ones and twos through the doors, but all of the regulars were here. Couldn't have been one of them, or they would have lost the privilege of tonight's meeting. Alicia lifted her hand to the gray bandana wrapped around her blond curls, skimming the cotton with her palm and checking the ponytail that poked out from the open back. It was such a basic thing, and now it was another difference between them.

Alicia thought about what she might say tonight and hoped she would have a chance to talk to Kim. Tonight wasn't going to be about planning, apparently.

A new guy sat down in one of the last unoccupied seats. He sat with his chin up, surveying the others in the room, forearms seeming to rest on his thighs, but Alicia thought he looked tense in this attitude of cool. His eyes were dark like his hair, and she noticed what looked like a teardrop on his cheek. She wondered if it was one of those tattoos that gang members get. Then she realized with a start that his eyes were really a light brown and he was staring back at her, grinning. She felt herself flush and pretended to be busy tuning again. She heard her father greet him – “Hey, bud, glad you could make it” – and heard that his name was Jesse. His voice was low, and she thought he must be just barely eligible for this camp because he couldn’t be much younger than eighteen. She wondered when his birthday was. Beyond that, all she could think to do was strum low notes in the background as her father welcomed everyone and led them in the opening prayer. She felt the gentle vibrations of the guitar run through her as she tried to clear her mind of light brown eyes and crooked smiles.

Yes, she was going to have to come up with something good when they broke up into small groups. What it would be, she wasn’t sure. But she’d best keep it short and in their court because her balance was definitely off, and she didn’t want anyone to see her sweat.

A cool prickle passed down Alicia’s spine. Small group time had come quickly this night. Alicia’s stomach churned, and she realized that she’d missed most of her father’s mini-sermon. Can’t check out like that, she chided herself, rifling through her hazy short-term memory for the high points of the talk. She’d gone over the parable of the talents with her father in the car, but his “sermons” weren’t really sermons so much as a summary and discussion with the kids about selected verses. She could know that parable up and down, could know that it was about a master with three servants who were entrusted with the master’s possessions and rewarded or

punished for what they did with that trust, but she felt herself drifting out to sea without the handhold of specific discussion. Focus, she told herself, breathing in slowly and making sure her long exhale didn't draw any attention. The people here were masters when it came to picking up on any indication of weakness and her group of five was intimidating.

She settled into the chair between Kim and Jay, both kids who'd been at L.U.V. for several months now. Jay hadn't stopped getting himself into trouble, or causing trouble for others, for that matter. Alicia wished for a moment that he would just disappear.

Jay leaned away from her, looking at her from beneath lowered eyelids, and said to Jesse, "Preacher's kid," without looking away. Jesse glanced at him but didn't say anything, just raised an eyebrow. Alicia felt thin like tissue paper. Kim and the other kids snickered. Alicia felt her temperature rise and resisted the reflex of a tight smile. Responses to personal attacks were usually a bad idea.

"So," she began, flipping through the Bible open on her lap, "the parable of the talents." She paused, thought dribbling out of her like water from a sieve. "What's the point?" she asked. It was her usual question to get them to summarize group discussion so they could segue into small group concerns, but tonight it just felt lame. It felt like the first time she'd done it, like it was just a stock question to fill the silence. Which is what it was tonight. She looked at the faces, as she often did, but this time she had to try not to linger on Jesse's, and she felt the pressure close in on her throat as the silence drew out. Her eyebrows rose almost against her will, expressing what her father called self-righteous impatience, and she struggled to get that expression off her face. Something, something, she screamed at herself, give them something to talk about.

"Fear," Kim mumbled, the sound ringing softly in Alicia's ear.

Oh, thank God, Alicia thought. The pressure in her throat eased as she remembered bits of a discussion about fear of failure. “Yes,” she said, nodding sagely, “what does fear do?”

“Like Dan said,” Jay said, voice a flattened out singsong beside her, “we’re afraid of messing up, so we don’t do nothing with the stuff we’re given.” He didn’t move his head in the same way as someone mocking the school kid’s rote response, but the tone was the same.

Her stomach tightened, and she fought her knee jerk reaction to Jay. Exasperation that bubbled up and threatened to slump her shoulders and roll her eyes for her was not what she needed to express at this moment. That wasn’t what her father had meant, she was sure. But now that she thought about it, she couldn’t quite remember what he’d said. “Kind of,” she said. She waited, hoping someone would offer another version. When no one did and the silence had dragged on almost too long, she turned her head to look at Jay, putting as much emotional distance between herself and him as she could. “You know,” she said, “he did say something about how some people assume others who don’t have much are poor because they’re lazy.”

“Yeah,” the guy next to Kim said, rubbing his palm on his thigh. “My uncle don’t do shit, but my mom works all the time.”

“Right,” Alicia nodded, her mind racing away. She knew this was going to come up. “So the stuff you have doesn’t show what kind of person you are?” she suggested.

He shook his head, not buying it. “We all live in the same neighborhood, though,” he said, “and we all got the same things. So what’s the point of working hard?” he asked.

She wracked her mind for her father’s advice on how to redirect. “Money definitely isn’t handed out equally,” she said. “But what if the goal of everything isn’t money or stuff?”

“What else could it be?” Kim asked. “We got to have money to pay rent and for food and stuff.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Can’t run around naked.”

The other kids laughed, and so did Alicia. “All right,” she said, raising an eyebrow as they quieted down. “But how many of you have actually reached the point of having just a single pair of clothes rather than a selection?”

“Come on,” Jay scoffed. “You have to have more than one pair of clothes.”

Alicia felt the lightness of the moment drain away. “Sure,” she said, nodding. “That’s a bit extreme, I agree. But let’s say you even have a full week’s worth of clothes.” She looked around at them. “Tally it up. How much is that?” No one would answer an obvious question like that. Stupid. She plowed on. “How many of you have only seven shirts, seven pairs of pants, seven sets of underwear?” She looked around at their faces. “Even here.”

A few people nodded. Kim didn’t. “What, so we should only have the littlest bit to live on?” she said, a barking laugh breaking from her throat. “What kind of life is that?”

“That’s a good question,” Alicia said. “Any ideas?” This was slipping away from her a little at a time. How could she get them to see beyond money to actual talent?

“Maybe it’s like Dan said,” Jesse spoke up. “What we got isn’t really ours.”

Alicia’s eyebrows shot up. Her father had told her they’d surprise her tonight. She let her eyes settle on him for the first time since he’d caught her staring earlier, careful not to stare again or narrow her eyes or challenge him like she would one of her regular Bible study friends from church. “Go on,” she prompted.

“The servants were cared for, weren’t they?” he asked.

“Yes,” Alicia answered. “Probably all the essentials: food, water, clothes, homes.”

Jesse leaned forward, and she resisted the urge to mimic his movement. “Then they had everything they needed.” He scratched his cheek. “The money wasn’t theirs, so they didn’t have anything to lose.”

“But that’s bullshit,” Jay said.

Her father looked over from his small circle and caught Alicia’s eye. She shook her head slightly, trying to tell him she had it under control without anyone else noticing. It annoyed her that he still did that and drew attention to the possibility that she needed his help. She hated it; all it did was make her look weak if anyone noticed.

Jesse had leaned back, and now he ran a hand over his short, black hair. Getting him to speak up again tonight would be next to impossible. What next?

Alicia knew from past experience that it wouldn’t do any good to try to explain the point to Jay. Instead, she needed to get him to talk it out. “Is it?” she asked, looking at him out of the corner of her eye.

“Damn straight,” Jay nodded. “You can’t tell me I’ve got nothing to lose after you take away my car and my clothes and my friends and stuff me in here for months. I got plenty to lose.”

Well, when he put it like that... “OK,” she nodded. “But if your car gets wrecked,” she pointed out, “you can save up and buy another.” Jesse nodded slightly. “And those clothes you miss, did you always dress like that, or will you someday throw those things away anyway?” Kim pursed her lips, and Alicia could see the thought processes going in a couple of faces. “If all that stuff is just stuff that’s going to change anyway, could it be that it’s not worth blood, sweat, and tears to get or hold on to it?”

“I worked for my shit,” Jay said, crossing his arms and stretching his legs out in front of him. “I earned it. And you can’t tell me anyone has a right to steal it from me.”

Alicia came up blank. This was so off the point. “But the value in life is the stuff you do, not the stuff you have,” she blurted.

Jay looked her dead in the eye. “And you’re going to tell me that nothing I’ve done or earned has any value?”

What? Alicia couldn’t think of a thing to say. He was determined to make this a personal attack. Crap, she thought. “No, that’s not what I meant,” she floundered.

“Shit,” Jay went on, “that guy who buried his one coin, he was just keeping himself from getting beaten or put in jail.” He threw his hands wide. “Like this.” He glared at Alicia. “That next verse proves it: those who have get more, and those who got nothing get beat down.”

Alicia felt the heat in her face and the cold on her neck. She couldn’t argue with this, because in a lot of ways what Jay was saying felt true to the core, even if he was off point. Each and every one of these kids had experience with losing every freedom in this place, and they came from a place of nothing. All the little bits she’d prepared about being a good steward with skills and talents and affecting people’s lives sounded hollow as she considered saying them out loud. She was not prepared. She should have talked this over more with her father. “But,” she tried weakly, “if it’s not ours to begin with, we can’t lose it, can we?” She looked around the circle before her, hoping someone would have the answer she didn’t have. But no one was looking at her anymore. Their gazes had drifted to the floor in the middle of the circle or wandered over the heads across from them. The only eyes that met hers were Jesse’s, and he wasn’t smiling. She couldn’t tell what that look was, but it broke through her like a dart. She felt like crying.

Thankfully, she heard her father’s voice calling them in for closing prayer. Alicia helped scoot the chairs back into a semblance of a circle. She avoided the eyes of her small group mates, which wasn’t hard because no one was bothering to look at her. She sat and bowed her head, willing the darkness behind her eyelids to swallow her whole.

* * *

Alicia was curled up in her dad's chair, staring at but not reading the photocopied short story her English teacher had handed out last week, which had to be read by tomorrow. She heard the mailman at the door. She threw down the short story, her mind full of Jesse's brown eyes and crooked smile anyway, and ran to the door. What was one more distraction? "Arnold!" she called out after the gaunt, uniformed figure retreating down the snow-dusted walk. He turned and waved.

"Thanks, girl, but no coffee break today," he called. "I got to finish before the snow starts for real."

"Kay," she called, waving him on. "We'll talk tomorrow."

"How did those grades turn out?" he asked, stopping for a moment, his hand on catch of the white picket gate. His voice took on a teasing note. "Another one full of gold stars, pointy letters and perfection?"

A cold gust swirled around her, and she shuddered, but only partly from the wind. "Oh, they're fine," she lied, feeling the words drop like leaden balls back down her throat and into her stomach. She waved as he moved on and shut the door to block out the chill.

Alicia grabbed the mail from the floor and leafed through it, pulling out a brochure for the university just down the street. She looked at the pictures, amazed at the green grass in front of the administration building. The school must have paid some good money for sod or something, because it never looked like that when she went by. It wasn't a bad school, she guessed, but the brochure definitely made it look like a fine institution that had never been robbed blind by any of the administration, as if it was a growing entity rather than a dying one. Her mother said that every year the university had to cut more and more programs until it was

little more than a glorified community college. Alicia felt a cool finger of fear trace a line down her neck. That's where she'd be headed if she couldn't work some magic.

She crumpled the brochure and headed to the kitchen, tossing the ball of glossy half-truths into the garbage and dropping the rest of the mail on the counter by her mother, who was chopping onions into the stew pot. "I'm going to study for a little while," she said, heading up the stairs. Behind her, she heard the whisper of a relieved sigh. Alicia felt a pang.

The papers were still strewn about her floor, and she sat in the bare spot she'd been in two days before. Slowly, methodically, she gathered up each test, quiz, essay, and page of notes, separating them into their folders. Finally, there was nothing left but the report card with its simple statement of fact. She folded it in half and put it on top of her folders, and then slipped the whole stack into her bag.

Pulling out her civics book, *The Government and You*, she settled onto her bed and began to study for the civics test the next day. If she could pull an A on this test, maybe she could convince her teacher to raise her grade to a C before her transcripts were mailed out to colleges. Her fingers itched to strum a few chords, but she plowed on, bending her will to it. She made it through an entire page before Jesse's brown eyes popped into her mind again, a lightness welling up inside her and pushing aside the disappointment in her inability to focus. She shook her head and refocused on the page, but the words dragged at her. Maybe it wouldn't be a big deal to just look out the window and think for a few minutes, she supposed. Alicia gave in and watched as the white swirl outside her window thickened, blocking out the last of the afternoon light.

Don't Leave

Kim's parents didn't bring her to the ranch themselves. She figured it was probably easier for them to sell her out when they only had to see her for just that split second of her *you're-gonna-what?*-screaming anger before the black shirts carted her off to the middle of nowhere. Every time she thought about it, her stomach clenched, and she felt the sourness of the moment twist her face into the smirk her mom hated. *Sin verguenza*, her mother would say, Kim's shamelessness so profound that it could only be expressed in her mother's native Spanish.

Kim's parents had dragged her "home" to their house, tired her out with all their nagging, and kept her up until she passed out on the couch. She was surprised they didn't tether her to the stair railing. If she'd known they were just corralling her so they could force her into exile, she would have found a way to outlast them. She would've "gone to sleep" until they went upstairs, like she'd done a hundred times before while she was still living with them, and then she'd have been out the door without a sound, free and on her way home to her friends before midnight.

But then the transport bastards knocked on the door so early the next morning that she wasn't even sure it was morning until she watched the sun rise from the window of the transport van a half hour later. When the yahoos in the black polos called Kim by name – her parents hadn't introduced – she knew that all that "We love you so much and only want the best for you," blah-blah-blah the night before had been bullshit. No one wanted Kim to come back home. Her parents just wanted to stop getting calls about her, and they'd probably find a way to keep sending her off so they wouldn't have to deal with their mess of a daughter. Her mother wouldn't look anyone in the eye. Confirmed dirty, shameless. Kim bet that's what she was thinking. Her mother was so Catholic.

Well, who asked her? Kim left in the first place because of her mom, all those frowns and tongue clucks. Maybe if Kim had moved in with only one boy, her mom wouldn't have cared. Right. As if her mom could ever approve of something Kim wanted to do. So what if she wanted to live with guys? Who wouldn't want to live with their best friends? Lee and Marc protected her better than her mother ever could. Her mother had no idea what was out there.

But no, her mom couldn't respect Kim's choices, so Kim ended up stuck in a smelly white van with two other girls and a couple of lame-ass counselor types who thought they had something to say to her. The dark-haired one wouldn't stop talking. Three hours out from Albuquerque into the sticks, and not one full minute of quiet. "D'you know anything about La Ultima Vez, Kim?" she had asked, chopping up the syllables like they belonged to different words. Her eyes were wide and blue. Kim thought she was probably from Utah. Freaky Mormons came to "save" kids like Kim. Blue Eyes had no idea the kind of ride she was on. Kim settled back into her seat and gave Blue Eyes the look that she gave would-be johns. Those scuzz bags never misunderstood the rejection. Apparently it was a universal language because the counselor broke eye contact and moved on to the next girl.

They blah blahed, those other girls, stinking up the cramped space with a nose-numbing wintergreen stench of gum and mints that didn't cover the reek of stale fast food and a lingering vomit-smell. Kim's eyes burned the whole trip through. First, at the butt crack of dawn, it was the heater; then it was the air conditioning; and then it was the friggin sun, even though the tinted windows blocked out most of the bone-white New Mexico desert. Still, it was better to think about watering eyes and yesterday's streaked mascara than having to waste thought on judgmental jerks and their retarded sense of right and wrong. Sitting up there, poking at Kim's life. Where she should be, who she should trust. Like they knew anything about "quality of

life.” She was so much better off with her boys, and they were so much better off with her. Together, they had enough. No one ever went hungry or wondered where they were going to sleep. Marc was still afraid of the dark, but they didn’t make fun of him because they knew he had been molested by his stepdad after bedtime. Instead, they lit candles to keep the dark away. They all had weaknesses and nightmares, but together they were safe.

The driver stopped in the middle of nowhere and said, “We’re here.” Kim knew she should be floored like the other girls. That was the point, wasn’t it? But the nothingness that surrounded her was just like her parents. Aside from a handful of scrubby trees, all she could see was a cabin that looked like it been carved out of the hard white rock of the mesa. The black shirts made the girls get out and stand around for something like twenty minutes while one of the counselors hopped inside and did whatever they had to do to pull their shit together.

Kim walked around to the other side of the van, half expecting Chatty Cathy to follow her, but the counselor kept her business going with the other two girls, yackety-clackety. They weren’t so noisy out where the hot air was moving, so Kim used the bulk of the van to keep their voices on that side of things.

Kim had to narrow her eyes to slits so she could see in all that white light. Neither of those assholes thought to pack her sunglasses. Her eyes kept watering, which pissed her off because she knew the others would take the tears as some sort of repentance. Screw that. But the tears turned out to be kinda useful, like magnifying glasses, and they helped her follow the zigzagged cracks across the earth to some low shapes in the distance. She thought at first that they were rocks because they were bleach-white and so far off, and the ugly, stubby trees around them looked like weeds. But then she saw some tiny but distinctly human forms emerge from them. There were no fences anywhere.

And then the chipper voice came around the corner of the van: “Giddyap.” It pissed Kim off.

A long string of people had been pissing Kim off ever since then. The place was a nightmare. Kim definitely couldn’t do anything she wanted, and the jailors made all the inmates do stupid stuff all day long. Bullshit cleaning and repairing. They said it was for the comfort of the kids, but Kim knew she’d be way more comfortable sleeping in and screwing around with Lee, or Marc when he wasn’t baked, than re-grouting the bathroom tile. If the big wigs were really concerned about Kim or anyone else, they wouldn’t make ten people share one cabin, and they definitely wouldn’t deprive everyone of all forms of caffeine.

It was no joke. They really couldn’t do anything at the camp. Kim couldn’t wear a single thing she liked. It was all plain T-shirts and jeans that didn’t fit right. Kim hadn’t worn pants that came up to her bellybutton since her mom was responsible for buying clothes. Of course, her folks were the ones who packed her bags, so they were full of crap that wasn’t even hers, and it all still stank of Wal-Mart. All of it was too big, and it was all shapeless and drab. It looked like they got whatever was on sale. Figured.

Penny, the girl who slept in the bed closest to the door, kept bitching about her steel-toe boots. She was crazy, though, and Kim was glad she didn’t have them. Penny always had her head down, something on her mind, Kim guessed, and talking to her just seemed to interrupt her train of thought. Kim had heard Penny’d been to the camp once before, for stabbing her dad or something. Whatever the story, Kim figured it was best to steer clear. Rumor was that this time she messed some guy up real bad. Not a coma or anything, but Kim had heard he wasn’t going to be shaking hands with himself anytime soon. Penny reminded Kim of the lady who stayed in the room next to hers at the first motel she and the guys had stayed at. She never looked directly

at anyone, but Kim could tell she'd stick you if you got too close. Nothing personal, you know, just piss off. So Kim always let Penny go out the door before her. That way, Kim could keep an eye on her. They got along, but Kim was still glad she didn't have those boots.

As for Kim, she just missed her halter tops. It was too damn hot out there to be messing around with sleeves and pants. And Josie, Kim's chief annoyer, insisted that Kim wear a bra. Like that made the heat less of a problem. "You should at least give us shorts or something," Kim told her, but Josie and the other counselors kept talking about sunstroke. "Just let us stay inside and give us water, you stupid assholes," Kim wanted to tell them, but swearing at them was the fastest way to get stuck with bathroom clean-up on a regular basis. They probably got paid to not think. What the hell problem would it be for any of them to stay inside, out of the sun and in a lot less clothing? But no, they had to be out there in thick cotton, sweating like crazy. Not one of them was human anymore; they were frigging animals. Just one decent tank top, that was all Kim wanted. Besides, what was the good of having a tattoo on her chest if no one could see it? Lee had bought it for her when they moved in together: a bull, because she was a Taurus and the toughest girl he knew. People saw that, and even though they didn't get where it came from they had to deal with the fact that it was there. Kim hated covering it up.

Plus, Kim had to admit, there was a guy there that she really wanted to hang out with, Jeremy. He was no-bullshit. He smiled when he was happy, yelled when he was mad. She'd heard him across the courtyard – that's what they called that huge empty space between the buildings – she heard him yelling. He had almost been kicked out three different times in the month she'd been there. "Disrespect," or something like that. Seemed like the wardens could give the kids some damn respect for putting up with a hell hole. Those assholes chose to be there. The kids didn't. That was what Jeremy had said when she heard him that night. She

wanted him to see her in make up and her real clothes. She knew they'd have some things to say to each other.

“He reminds me of Lee,” she told Kara one night before lights out. Kara was the perfect person to talk to because she had the worst memory. “Lee, my best friend,” Kim reminded her, “my protector.” Kara nodded her bleach-blond head.

“Jeremy’s tough,” she said.

Kim would have waited for more, but she knew there wouldn’t be any. Kara was messing with an emery board and lotion; what she missed most was getting her nails done. She should have missed the dye. Two months was way too long to go without a touch up.

Kim looked around the cabin and made sure the losers by the window were still giggling over some new guy who’d come earlier that day. You’d have thought pale, skinny and silent were the end-all of hottie-dom, the way they went on and on. Like that slack-ass would ever be able to give them the clothes or cars they wanted. Most he would ever be able to afford was a ten dollar blow on payday. Go ahead girls, have a feast.

“You think he’s hot?” Kim asked, preferring to talk about her own, much more worthy interest.

“Who?” Kara drew the emery board across her thumbnail.

Kim rolled her eyes, but oh, well. What else did she have to do? “Jeremy,” she said.

Kara stuck her tongue out as she rounded the nail. “Oh, yeah, well if you like ‘em brown,” she said. Glancing at Kim, she snickered. “I guess, since you’re Catholic, his mom won’t mind.”

A sound ripped its way out of Kim, and it sounded a lot like, “Ha!” Her jaw tingled, and there was a bad taste in her mouth. Kara stared at her, eyebrow cocked. Kim couldn’t just sit

there and say nothing, so she shrugged and wiped the corner of her mouth with her thumb like Lee used to before saying something ugly. She said, “Didn’t make a difference with Lee’s mom. She’s too much like mine. Hated me from day one.” As she said it, she imagined that woman looking at her with the same expression as Kim’s mom: cold eyes that could see through Kim to some repulsive world behind her. That was not what she wanted to think about just then. But Kara wasn’t paying attention anymore, and Kim couldn’t remember what they’d been saying.

Kim had tried not to go over to Lee’s house when they were still living with their parents because she didn’t want to have to deal with Lee’s mom, too. Her own mother was one thing; Kim could ignore her. But even though she had no history with Lee’s mom, still that woman couldn’t stand her. So Lee used to keep his bedroom window open for Kim to poke her head in and see if he was home. She never bothered knocking on the front door again, or even calling since his mom always told Kim he wasn’t home, even when Kim was on her cell phone across the street and could see that his bike was propped next to the front stoop.

She was pretty sure his mom thought that she was the reason he started dealing. That was how she looked at Kim: like there was something poisonous and illegal about her. Not that Kim gave a damn about what his mom thought, but it was like when people you were talking to kept wiping their noses or running their tongues over their teeth: you began to think that maybe you had a booger hanging out or some green flag planted below your gums. It was embarrassing, even when you made it to the bathroom and saw that you looked fine. Maybe you had only lost that humiliating thing on the way to the mirror. Maybe there had been something there after all. Some mornings, when she climbed out of bed and spotted herself in the mirror before showering, she thought she could see something there. Maybe there was too much red in her eyes; maybe that little paunchy belly below her waist wasn’t natural, and instead it was cancer; maybe that

faint line that separated her right half from her left was just the line of the door behind her. The memory of that look set loose a shudder that made its way over her whole body.

Kara wouldn't have understood any of that. She sat there, staring at her pointer finger, her eyes glazed with the back and forth motion of the emery board. If Kim had snapped her fingers and said, "Asleep," like that magician, Kara might have been hers to command, maybe walk like a chicken. Kim had heard once that there was no such thing as real hypnotism, only people who wanted to believe in it. Whatever it was that made prudes moan like phone sex operators and shy people crouch, spring and roar like lions, something took an impossible moment and turned it into a reality. It didn't matter later if the person couldn't remember a thing, because there were witnesses. But Kim thought those people really did remember. She was pretty sure they held onto that moment and denied it harder than anything because they were under a spell they wanted to obey, and they didn't know why. Everyone was supposed to want control over themselves, but Kim was willing to bet that those who'd been hypnotized were the ones who figured out that it was easier to let someone else tell them what to do.

Kim wanted Kara to ask her about Lee, about how she'd met him. She'd told Kara some stuff before, little things, but she needed to say more. Being away from him felt like part of Kim was stretched real thin and tight between her throat and her chest. She wanted to talk him into the room with them. But Kara wasn't going to ask. Didn't matter, though. It was better she didn't ask, anyway. Kim couldn't stand nosey people. That was one of the best things about Lee. "He's always seen me," Kim said to herself.

"Who, Lee?" Kara asked.

Snap that. Maybe Kara really was listening. But no, she was working on her middle finger. It was probably just a reflex; like when someone you didn't know asked you how you

were, you just said fine even if your grandma just died. “Lee just came up one day and asked me if I wanted to go to the river. We skipped biology.” Kim smiled. “And history.” The river had been only knee deep that year, so they hadn’t gone swimming, but they settled under a tree near a big bunch of cattails. They didn’t have sex right at first. They’d talked at each other for hours, sharing a bag of potato chips and sipping on Tallsups, his Mountain Dew and hers Diet Coke with a splash of rootbeer. He’d made fun of Kim for that one, and she threw chips at him. She hadn’t made it home until midnight.

“He the one who went with you?” Kara asked, yanking Kim back to the cabin. “Or was that the other one?”

“Uh, no,” Kim said, shaking her head to break the two worlds apart. Lee didn’t belong in the pit she’d been thrown into. It took Kim a second to remember what she’d last said to Kara. “Marc was the one who sat in the car.” Kim’s stomach felt tight. “He’s stronger, and stupider,” she said, though she couldn’t have said why. She laughed a little, but it was too loud, so she stopped. That silence seemed wrong, too, so she said, “I love that boy.” Kara didn’t even look up.

Kim decided to shut up, but then Kara asked, “How much did you have to pay him, again?”

It felt like a vacuum opened up inside Kim. Dammit. Kara remembered just a few things, and they were all wrong. Kim should’ve kept her damn mouth shut, she thought. People just twisted your shit around until you didn’t even recognize it. “You make it sound like he was my pimp.” Kim tried not to sound annoyed; Kara would probably remember that, too. “He was taking a risk to keep me safe. I was the one who offered. It was fair.” Still, it was as if a coat of slime had begun to creep over everything, and it was hard to hold onto the certainty Kim had

always taken for granted, that love and loyalty cancelled out the ugly. Talking to Kara colored everything in new shades, and some of it wasn't pretty.

Kara shrugged and kept filing, now on to her ring finger. "Just looking for ideas for when I get out of here," she said, the emery board slowing. "There's no fucking way I'm going home after this." Though Kim resented Kara's assumptions, the look in her eyes was one Kim understood. The familiarity of it unnerved her, and she looked away. Then there was nothing but the scritch scritch scritch of emery board.

Kim thought about Lee all night and wondered what he and Marc were doing. They were probably playing video games and smoking weed. She stretched out on her lumpy bed, missing her new pillow top mattress. Maybe they had been able to make the rent that month, she hoped, but she knew the only way they could do it without her was if Lee was dealing more. He'd get caught again. She'd been trying to keep from happening, figuring if she brought home enough money he wouldn't have an excuse to take the risk. With her gone, and the money she made, he would go back to a sure thing. And once he got comfortable, he'd get careless. Kim's stomach turned at the thought.

Nothing of Kim's life would be the same when she got back. She closed her eyes against the buzzing florescent bulbs, but even that was too much. The image of everything she'd seen the moment before she shut out the world lingered on in the bruise-green-black.

When lights out came, Kim was glad. She needed to rest her eyes from all that blinding illumination.

Self-Portrait in G Minor

Pale and blank as the canvas she'd left at home, the New Mexico plateau glared at Alicia through the tinted windows of her father's van. Just that morning, Daylight Savings Time had pushed back the clock, so the sun that beat down at five-thirty was still strong enough to make her eyes water. She reached up and took the sunglasses from the passenger side visor above her and slipped on the oversized aviator lenses. She peered at her reflection in the side view mirror. They were ridiculously huge on her head, which looked so much smaller when her curly blonde hair was trapped under a gray bandana. She lifted a hand to remove the lenses, but the sun was so bright that she hesitated and finally left them perched on her nose.

No one in the van cared what she looked like, she reasoned, looking out again at the bare expanse of cracked dust. Just her and Dad and Joe, who came to La Ultima Vez with them to play his bongos while she and her father sang worship songs to the kids there. His forty-something years and fatherly attitude worked well at L.U.V., not to mention the blue spider web tattoo that blossomed out from his elbow. Alicia knew he'd gotten it while he was in prison years ago, but she'd never had the nerve to ask him what he'd done to get there. To her knowledge, no one but her father and the pastor knew. None of the L.U.V. kids ever talked about it within earshot of her, although sometimes the newer ones spent an entire Bible study sneaking peeks at it. It was much more controversial than the black rooster outlined on her dad's shoulder. The blue ink spoke of a different kind of experience.

Alicia peered ahead, looking for the scrubby trees and tumbleweeds of the highlands that would tell her that their last fifteen minutes of travel had begun. No luck. There was at least one more rise between them and the camp. She propped her elbow up on the door's window sill and

tried to fill the white expanse before her with ideas for her senior project. She had to create a self-portrait, but Ms. Suarez said no more simple copies of her class picture. This year it had to be oils and canvas, and no mirror or reflective glass to help. She'd taken painting for the last three semesters, so Ms. Suarez considered her an advanced student and required more than a mirror and a piece of charcoal. She had clucked her tongue when she looked at the portfolio Alicia wanted to send out with her college applications. "You need more diversity," her teacher said, one gentle hand on Alicia's shoulder. "No face this year. Make this one more than what other people can see with their eyes. What's the view like from where you stand?"

What the heck does that mean, Alicia wondered and, catching another glimpse of herself in the side view, stuck her tongue out. Should I draw my blood and guts and frame out a skeleton that shows where I broke my right arm in two places? Alicia had a suspicion that was not what Ms. Suarez had in mind. Well, maybe it was. But that wasn't the way she saw herself. Even so, she couldn't screw this up and ruin her only reliable A. Problem was, she thought as she looked back at the reflection of herself with the oversized sunglasses sliding down her nose, how could you see yourself from the inside?

From somewhere near her feet, the Mexican Hat Dance sounded. Dad looked at his watch and clucked his tongue. "Forty-five minutes, Gina. You're slipping."

Alicia reached down, dug her cell phone out of her purse, and grinned when she saw the caller ID display flash her best friend's name. Squeezing one eye shut, she punched the answer button with her thumb and put the phone close to her ear. She knew she wouldn't be able to get in her hello, so she didn't even try.

"You promised you'd tell me the very second you got asked." The voice that wailed from the earpiece was thin, high, and irate.

“Gina,” Alicia said, voice shaking with laughter, “he asked me today, right before we left. I didn’t have time to call.” She winked at her father, who mouthed, “I told you so,” in great, exaggerated grimaces.

“Excuse me,” Gina huffed. “What is it about ‘the very second’ that you don’t understand? What are we doing right now? You had a phone,” she accused, “a whole hour, and nothing to do.” In the next breath, in perfect Gina fashion, her tone shifted from affronted to avid. “So, we’re talking about prom here. Don’t be blasé. Did he do anything special? What did he say? How did he ask you?”

Alicia sighed. “Please,” she said. “It’s Peter. You know how he is.” She caught her father’s raised eyebrow and blushed. She bobbed her head a little from side to side. “No, OK,” she amended, “it was sweet. Flowers on the doorstep, rang the bell, sat on our porch swing and watched me find them and read the note.” Prom stuff. It was all the sappy sweet, made-for-TV events that people acted out because they thought they were supposed to. Really, it just made her feel stupid. He had sat on that swing smiling like he’d done something amazing, even though he should have known it was pointless to romance her since she was just a friend. And, anyway, he’d done it that way because he was too much of a chicken to ask her face-to-face. He’d been like that since they were kids. It’s not like everyone didn’t already know he still had a crush on her, but she’d settled that a long time ago. It couldn’t still be an issue.

“And then?” Gina persisted, her voice settling into a sedate psychotherapist’s tone.

“We’re just going as friends,” Alicia said flatly. And I’m only going because you keep bugging me about it, she thought. “Do not make this into anything.”

Gina let the silence hang for a moment, and then made one syllable into a statement. “Right,” her voice drawled across the phone line, heavy on the taunt.

Alicia wrinkled her nose. Gina was convinced Alicia was going to “come around” someday and fall madly in love with the boy next door. She wouldn’t believe Alicia saw that Peter had added broad shoulders to his list of attributes by working with his father to frame out new additions to houses, and yet still she only wanted him as a friend. In any case, Gina never lost a chance to push things along, and Alicia never won these battles. “What I want to know,” she said instead, “is, how did you find out about this so fast?”

Gina’s howl of amusement was loud enough to make Alicia’s father chuckle, and even Joe’s rarer bass sounded from the seat behind her. Gina crowed, “Are you kidding? My *tías*, girl.” Oh, the aunties. Alicia couldn’t help but laugh instead of groan. Sophia lived across the street. Duh. She should have known that at least one-family grapevine would be in full effect around prom season.

As she put her cell phone away, she noticed that her father was looking at her more than the road. She raised her eyebrows and widened her eyes as if to suggest that she was interested in what he was thinking, but she knew what he would say, the same thing since middle school: “Give Peter a break. Poor guy’s smitten, that’s all.”

But he didn’t. Instead: “Prom, huh?”

Alicia sensed a ribbing coming on, so she narrowed her eyes defensively, playfully. “Yeah,” she drawled. “What about it?”

Dad shrugged his shoulders and kept his eyes on the road. Joe piped up from the back: “Well, are you excited or not?” He reached forward and tapped her on the head. “I couldn’t tell from that conversation.”

“Of course I’m excited,” Alicia said, annoyed to find that she was blushing again. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Her father glanced into the rearview mirror and winked. He and Joe had ideas about her and Peter. “I’m excited about prom,” she said, emphasizing the last word.

“OK, OK,” her father said, lifting both hands in a gesture of surrender. “You’ve got a lot on your mind in this your senior year of high school.” She hated when he used a million words to say something so simple. “What is your final GPA going to be, do you know?” he asked, his voice lilting upward strangely.

Alicia heard a faint ringing in her ears, and she struggled to relax suddenly tense muscles. This was the closest either of her parents had gotten to mentioning grades or her missing report card. Maybe they’d noticed its absence. “Umm,” she hummed, trying to think of something to say that wouldn’t exactly be a lie about the report card with its two D’s that was still stuffed at the bottom of her book bag. “I don’t think I’ll know for sure until I actually graduate.”

“You’re not even going to guess?” Joe rumbled.

Her father laughed, saving Alicia from having to answer. “What am I saying? It has to be above a 3.0, because all she ever gets are A’s and B’s,” he said. He patted her leg. “I don’t even know why I asked. It’s the difference between great and really great, isn’t it?” He looked at her out of the corner of his eye.

Alicia ignored it, forced a smile and stayed quiet, and after a few moments her father looked away.

In L.U.V.’s rec room, Alicia’s fingertips itched. Her guitar was out and tuned, and Joe’s bongos were set up in front of the chair next to her. Fold out seats were arranged in a semicircle in front of her. Same time, same place. These kids, taken from their families and homes because they couldn’t follow their parents’ rules or the school’s rules, or maybe even that law that sent Joe to

prison to get his tattoo, these kids were stuck out in the boondocks, and they were mad about it. They scowled and sometimes heckled, but she had grown to enjoy it and loved to listen as their negativity faded away. No one here was stagnant, and not a single one of them would take Bible study for granted. They might rail against it, but they reacted. That was so much better than the vacant eyes she sometimes saw when she sang in worship service at her small church. But though she'd been coming with her father to L.U.V. for two years now, her stomach lurched.

She tried not to look up towards the door again, but her neck and eyes made it impossible. Every time she did, her father or Joe or one of the counselors was watching her. She couldn't help but keep looking, even though nothing she did would change anything. They'd gotten to the camp early, that was all. And pretty soon people would be coming through those doors. Jesse would either be among them tonight or he wouldn't.

The last couple of weeks had gone by almost too fast to keep track of. Every Sunday night had provided another opportunity for her to talk to Jesse, even though she was very conscious of the fact that she wasn't there to land herself a boyfriend. She worried that the counselors or her father or Joe might stop taking her seriously, or that the other kids would use her behavior as another point of attack. But when he lingered to talk more with her about family after most of the kids had moved toward the door and he'd said in a low voice, "I miss my mom," what could she do? Of course, she responded by telling him that she was really close to her parents and had a hard time imagining living on her own. And when he told her about his little sister the next week as they picked up empty soda cans that hadn't quite made it into the garbage, she was impressed by the responsibility he felt toward Marie, who was on her way to joining him at L.U.V. For two months, Alicia had been able to talk to him about real stuff that they both understood – family they loved, fear of the future, uncertainty they tried not to let

anyone else see. Why would she cut that short just because she also thought he was handsome or because the way he looked at her made her skin tingle? She couldn't feel as if any connection she had with him could possibly be wrong.

A hand settled on her shoulder, warm and steady, her father's. "Maybe you should go get a drink of water or take a stretch," he advised.

She twisted her neck to look up at him. His eyes were trained on the door, and so she knew it wasn't just her that was getting antsy. "I'm just not used to them coming in after us," she said.

"I know," he answered. "Throws me off too." He looked down at her and frowned. "Usually means something bad happened." Alicia worried the grand intimidator Jay had finally gotten too far out of hand. Jesse had a hard time listening to him run his mouth, she knew. His jaw had clenched last week when Jay had given one of the new kids a hard time, even though Jay had lost his return privilege to Bible Study this week for tripping that boy. She wondered if someone else had gotten hurt today. She imagined Jesse with a black eye, a broken nose, blood everywhere, and felt sick.

Her father raised an eyebrow. He said, "Sometimes waiting is the hardest part of a thing, you think?" His eyes missed nothing.

Alicia ducked her head, mostly to avoid that direct gaze. She was transparent enough. If he looked hard enough, he might also invade her memory and know that, not only had Jesse hugged her goodbye last time, but he'd also whispered, "You smell like summer." Every time she thought about it, she felt like the sun was shining on her.

Finally, there was noise at the door as a counselor led the kids through it. A couple of guys sauntered in, one at a time, then a girl she'd met last week. She began to look for new

faces, and then she quit looking entirely. It occurred to her that she might continue looking for a face that might not be there. That shouldn't matter, she reminded herself. She felt the pressure of her father's hand lift as he moved away to greet the kids and check with the counselors.

The thing to do was to occupy herself while she waited to see what the night would hold for them. She made some show of plucking at her already-tuned guitar and then began an intricate little melody she'd been playing with all week. Closing her eyes against the sounds of scraping chairs, she tried not to wonder which one Jesse might sit in. Instead, she focused on the pressure of the strings against her callused fingertips. Alicia wasn't a song writer, so her tune had no words. But, ever since she'd read that a minor key would set a haunting, introspective mood, it had been working its way into her blood. "Haunting" might not be quite right for Bible study, but maybe that whole introspective aspect would be a good thing. Even if no one else felt the need for that, she knew she did, and her father had never protested her choice before.

As she played, the tune eased the tension at her core and allowed her to feel the motion around her. She incorporated the increases and decreases of sound and emotion, as if she could tie the emotions in the room into an intricate bow. The notes spilled into the quiet and echoed across the wood floor, back through the guitar and into her flesh before dying away.

So perfectly had she imagined Jesse's light brown eyes with a freckle just below one of them, and so firmly had she drawn the lines of his jaw and high cheekbones in her mind's eye that when she met the blue eyes of a short, red-headed punk kid – Tony, she thought his name was – it was all Alicia could do to not let her face show her disappointment. Tony winked at her, though, and that helped her cover with a grin.

Just as her father began the opening prayer, the squeak of the front door echoed through the room again. Alicia looked up over the bowed heads and saw the tear drop freckle. She felt a

smile spread across her face, all the energy from her toes to her fingertips drawing into a tight mass in her chest until she had to bite her lip hard to keep her from beaming. Jesse's answering smile was knowing enough to be almost a smirk, and he jutted his chin out a little farther. He ducked his head as he passed behind Alicia's father, and when he did she met her father's eyes. They were dark and still, and she suddenly felt very young. She lowered her gaze to the floor.

Alicia had no chance to talk to Jesse that night. Her father put himself in charge of the small group Jesse was in and put her in charge of the one group of all girls. That couldn't be a coincidence, she thought with a sinking heart. And when the sodas were passed out and the kids were given ten minutes to socialize after the meeting, she found that one or the other of the camp's counselors was always standing near Jesse. She couldn't bring herself to approach him this time because she knew she wouldn't be able to pull it off as a nonchalant move.

If he hadn't said that thing to me, I could do this, she thought to herself. But the warmth that moment of sunshine lent to her, just in thinking of it, made her regret the idea that she could have been better off without it. She watched him pass out the door and wondered if she'd imagined it.

The clock next to Alicia's bed told her it was past midnight, and she had to be up at six the next morning, but she could not sleep. That blank canvas glared white in the darkness. She could see it all the way across the room. If she could just cover it up, she thought that maybe she could get some sleep.

She pushed the covers aside and turned on the bedside lamp. She didn't need more light than that. Gliding across the hardwood floor, she missed as many of the creaky boards as she could as she made her way to the plastic panel that was set up beneath her easel. She pulled out

the bottle of cheap black paint she used for dark backgrounds, found her largest brush, and went to work.

When she was done, most of the canvas had been covered in a streaky black. After all, she wasn't trying to paint a wall, just get some of that white toned down. She had taken a liking to a couple of spots that had swirled themselves into shapes, and so had spent a bit more time working them out. A swoosh here, a spiral there. As she stood back, she was startled by the eyes that looked back at her. Round. Dark. Still. The paint, heavier here than on the rest of the canvas, gleamed.

She was tempted to cover them, but she didn't know how.

Travel Plans

Alicia felt the train lurch into motion. She readjusted the sweater she had been using as a makeshift pillow and wondered when she'd be able to fall asleep. She had been awake since leaving Seattle yesterday, and it was probably already tomorrow.

She drew her fingertips across her lower lids, rubbing away a thin crust of dried tears. Yesterday had been eaten up one drop at a time. People had settled in around her, traveled for a stretch, and then gotten off again. Their distance from her was welcome. When people who knew you saw you cry, they did the I-understand look. Gina made that face when she met Alicia in Seattle: head cocked to the side, eyes intent and faintly dewy, filled with understanding. To Alicia, that understanding felt more like pity mixed with a desire to help, neither of which could do her a bit of good. Pity made her angry, and no one could unmake her situation.

Strangers didn't make that face, though. They left her alone and let her stop crying when she didn't want to cry anymore.

Not one of the passengers she'd gotten on with over a day ago was still around. Apparently, no one else had signed up for such a long journey. She was pretty sure she understood why. The recycled air blasting from the A/C vent in the window well had dried out every last ounce of moisture that hadn't leaked out through her eyes, and the seats that reclined almost flat were no longer comfortable. She raised the seat back again, kicked off her shoes, and turned sideways in an attempt to lie across the empty seat next to her. The armrest dug into her back, and she wished she had a pillow.

She swallowed and felt her throat stick. She wished again that she'd brought a gallon of water with her. The snack car had already cleaned out her wallet, which hadn't had more than a

few dollars in it to begin with. She'd run out of everything, and now she was headed home to her parents because she couldn't think of anywhere else to go.

Alicia sat up and pushed the red curtains aside with one hand, peering out into the night. Flagstaff looked like any other city in the wee hours of the morning: dark and cold. She knew it was hot out there in the August desert, but all the same she felt the chill of loneliness wrap its fingers around her. Then she remembered that she wasn't, strictly speaking, alone. Her hand drifted to the hard lump below her bellybutton that grew a little more each day. She wouldn't be alone again for a long time. That thought would have been nice, but she felt the weight of it spread all through her body. Her hand slipped down to the seat beside her.

A shriek and a shush drew Alicia's attention to the top of the stairs. A woman, Alicia guessed she was in her twenties, took the last step up and made her labored way down the aisle with two little ones. Alicia heard the boy call her "Ama." They stopped in the aisle next to Alicia's seat, and the young mother held the baby in one arm as she stuffed a pink duffel bag in the overhead compartment. The boy busied himself with the safety cards in the seat pockets while his mother settled their larger bag next to the window seat. She pulled out a blanket and a tiny pillow for his makeshift bed, and the boy looked over at Alicia and grinned. Alicia managed to twitch the corners of her mouth up into a tiny smile, but her eyes filled with tears and she turned back to the window. She watched her faint reflection grow fuzzy then clear, fuzzy and clear. Alicia could feel a feverish heat running over her skin. Her father would have pointed out that it was a good time to get humble, but Alicia didn't feel like praying. She closed her eyes against the feeling and tried to calm herself.

Her mind would not be still, despite her careful, measured breathing. In fact, she found herself counting out beats like she used to do when she was learning guitar. Only this time, there

was no tune, and her breath came according to the beat of her heart, which sped up the more she paid attention to it. The beats sounded like *no-one, no-one, no-one*.

She forced herself to open her eyes and breathe in deeply, through her mouth this time, forcing herself to break out of the pattern. Even though the coach lights were dim and the reading light across the aisle was on, the car was dark except for infrequent flickers of passing light posts. Alicia examined everything, staring at the stitching on the curtains until she found one place where the precise machine zigzag overlapped and created little diamonds. Out the window, there was nothing to look at, no lights as they passed through the open Arizona desert. She could see her reflection in the dark glass, eyes indistinct, the line of shadow under her lips curving down. She looked so sad.

A sniffle broke the quiet. Alicia looked around, noticing that the car was nearly empty except for her and the mother with her two little ones. The boy was sprawled across one of the seats, and “Ama” still held the baby, her head bent over the small form. The reading light shone down over them, the light gleaming on Ama’s dark brown hair. The mother made small gasping noises, as if she were periodically holding her breath. Alicia’s chest hurt, and her heartbeat quickened, this time in sympathy. She knew how the effort of holding back made the blood pound in her head, how it made the crying harder to stop. Alicia turned away, conscious that what she wanted when she felt like that was for everyone to leave her alone.

But Alicia could not stop watching. Even when she turned away, the window reflected the woman’s hunched form. The head tipped back, and she imagined the feel of tears streaming from the corners of her own eyes, and then the head came down, and the shoulders shook in tight, jerky motions. Alicia thought that the woman must have been holding in great shudders of sobs. The hopelessness of those tiny motions filled Alicia with a need to move.

She got up to go to the bathroom, more a restless trip than anything, but instead of heading down the aisle Alicia found herself kneeling at the seat across the aisle from hers. “Ma’am,” she said softly, reaching out to touch the woman’s elbow. The woman’s head lifted slowly, eyes so tired that they made Alicia’s burn. “Ma’am, can I do anything to help?”

Ama stared at Alicia for a long moment, almost as if she didn’t see her kneeling there before her. Then her eyebrows drew up and fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. She whispered, “Would you hold my baby for just a minute? I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Sure,” Alicia agreed, rising and holding out her arms for the sleeping infant, even though the tiny body looked too fragile to be passed from one to another. Ama got carefully to her feet and shifted the baby’s weight from her arms to Alicia’s, reminding Alicia to be sure to support the neck. That directive set Alicia’s heart thumping with misgiving, but she let the woman slide by and then gingerly lifted one of the boy’s legs out of her way, easing into the seat under it before resting the leg across her lap. She settled back and let the rolling motion of the train steady her breathing.

Alicia couldn’t believe she’d approached this woman, and being entrusted with her children for however short a time felt unreal. So did the fact that the baby in her arms had settled so completely into the crook of her arm. The little mouth contorted into several different shapes, all of which were strange to see on a baby’s face because the expressions seemed too old for such a tiny, round one. Alicia’s favorite expression was made up of puckered lips and scrunched eyebrows that reminded her of her grandfather’s mmmm-that’s-good face. It almost made her giggle. She settled into counting and naming the different faces of the sleeping baby.

An hour later, counting and naming faces lost their charm, as futile in passing the time as counting sheep had been with getting Alicia to sleep. Her arms ached, and she was terrified the

baby would wake up any minute wanting to be fed or changed. The constant clatter of the train's wheels had become a buzz in her ears, and her bladder had started screaming at her. More than that, the train had made a stop a few minutes before.

What if she just got off at the last stop and left them?, Alicia thought. What happens to these kids? I can't be responsible for them. What do I tell my parents? Where is the conductor? I don't even know their names. Is the baby I'm holding a girl or a boy?

When the train had come whistling to a stop at the platform yesterday, Alicia had climbed aboard and made the narrow way up the stairs with her bags before and behind her, and then wandered down the aisle to her window seat. She had had visions of herself passing over tons of dirt and gravel, swaying around hills and over bumps in the tracks, seeing every inch between Seattle and New Mexico flick past. Thousands of telephone poles, hundreds of thousands of trees, trillions of blades of grass, they would all tell her how far she had come, and she would still be miles and miles from where she was headed. Her mind and heart would have time to process and plan and get ready, and all the while she could watch the world go by and know how small her life was in it. The tightness in her throat had eased at the thought.

Now Alicia's skin began to tingle, and the softness of the baby blanket seemed suddenly rough. Everywhere it touched her, she felt the pressure and heat of the weight she carried. She tried to relax, but the rhythm of the wheels could not chase the feeling away. What she wouldn't give to have Gina by her side now. She had hugged her best friend and Gina's baby girl goodbye yesterday, thankful for the refuge they'd provided for the past three months, but thankful too that she could get away from what would shortly be her reality. Right now, she'd take their reality. It, at least, had seemed stable. This was nothing she could plan for, and she felt panic hit her like a cold splash across her neck that dribbled lingering tendrils of cold discomfort over her whole

body. She closed her eyes, and for the first time in months she bowed her head. Please God, she prayed, don't let this be what I think it is. Over and over, she repeated her plea as the walls of the train car closed in around her.

She heard a rustle across the aisle, and her eyes popped open. Ama sat on the edge of her seat looking sheepish. Her eyes were puffy and red, but she had a small smile on her lips. She bobbed her head at Alicia and came across the aisle to retrieve her child. "Sorry it took so long," she said. "I just needed to be away for a minute."

Alicia's arms felt frozen as Ama took back her charge. She shook her arms out and tried to smile as she stepped back across the aisle. "That minute was an hour," she said, trying to hold back the accusation. "I was afraid you weren't coming back."

Ama made a harrumphing sound. "I'll always come back," she said. "This," she nodded at the bundle in her arms, "is my heart, and this," cocking her head toward the boy still sprawled across his seat, "is my soul." She looked into Alicia's eyes, her own steely. Alicia felt distinctly that she was being measured, but she could not look away. After a long moment, Ama nodded. "It's not easy to do it alone, but it's my life," she said, and maneuvered back into her seat. "I am sorry you worried, though."

Alicia said it was fine and then excused herself, making her way down the aisle and the stairs to the first level, where she found the big bathroom open, complete with a sink and a mirror. There was even a bench across from the toilet. After taking care of her immediate need, she took her time washing her hands, letting the cool water spread over hot, dry skin. She touched wet fingers to her forehead and neck, running her hands over blond curls to get rid of the last of the dampness. The eyes swollen from crying that looked back at her from the mirror were not familiar. She looked almost as tired as Ama.

Alicia sat in the tiny seat next to the sink. It didn't have the cool bite that plastic usually had, and she wondered if Ama had spent her last hour right there, in that seat. She leaned her head back and rested it on the wall. Tensing all her muscles, she tried breathing deeply again and relaxed them one by one with each exhale. What would happen if she ended up like that? Alicia didn't want to have to handle this baby all by herself, but she hadn't told Jesse yet. She didn't know if she'd be able to.

Jesse had been so excited about getting the scholarship to the seminary in Texas. He had spent two years making up for all the classes he'd missed when he was cutting class to get into trouble, and then later when he was stuck in halfway houses and residential camps. His mother had gotten a handle on their finances, and she'd been able to move into town and get a position with the state social work department, so he didn't feel the pressure to make money appear from any source he could think of, especially not acting as errand boy for the drug dealers up the road in Flor again. She and Jesse had looked at each other more than once in the months before he got the scholarship, and he'd said, "Gotta get out of New Mexico." The day the admissions office had called to tell him he had been cleared for tuition, fees, and books, the tears in his eyes outshone those she'd seen in her own eyes that same morning when she realized she had missed her period by two weeks. He had made it out, and Alicia couldn't bear the thought of being the one to drag him back now that he'd gone.

But she couldn't go on hiding this. She took a deep breath and stood up, a dull ache in the small of her back. As she put a hand over the sore spot, she realized that pretty soon she would look like all the other pregnant women she'd ever known. Alicia pushed her way out of the stall and made her way back up the narrow stairs to her seat. She nodded at Ama, who smiled back and closed tired, red eyes.

As Alicia sat and curled her legs under her, she knew she wasn't that kind of strong, the one that can go away for an hour and then come back to the weight of three lives, or even two. But paring it down to one wasn't an option. This baby was her responsibility now, and it was just a matter of figuring out how not to stand in the way of Jesse's chance at chasing his future. If she told him she was pregnant, all that independence and possibility would be gone. Over the past few months, while she was in Seattle, she had called him less and less, and each phone call had become a little shorter. It helped that he was busy with his summer coursework, which he was doing so he could catch up on some basic skills he hadn't quite mastered. And all those new people he was meeting.

She felt a pang as she imagined his brilliant smile. More than anything, Alicia wanted Jesse next to her. He could hold her hand at just the moment she started feeling lonely or put his arms around her when she felt weak, ignoring the defensive independence which usually left her feeling stranded. When her father had suffered a heart attack the year before, Jesse had been there with her, holding her up while she struggled to do everything for her mother, who had let go of her entire world to focus on her husband. Jesse had stayed with them at the hospital for the first day, and then he took on the task of shuttling her mother back and forth, always coming back to make sure Alicia was able to deal with the constant flow of well-wishers bearing food. After the fourth day, when her parents' freezer and fridge had hit capacity, Alicia's shaky hands had dropped a full container of lasagna, and the resulting splatter reduced her to a puddle of tears. He took charge of receiving the donations, and the greatest blessing was that he also made them disappear. Alicia found out later that he had enlisted one of his friends to redistribute the food to hungry college kids. Exactly what her father would have done, she thought, smiling. Alicia didn't doubt that he would come if she called, even if she didn't actually say, "come."

But then what?, she chided herself. They couldn't afford to be out on their own. What would they do, live in her parents' house or with his mom? She shook her head at the awkwardness of the situation. He would get some dead end job so he could take care of her and the baby, but never more than that. They'd be stuck for years, still kids in Mom and Dad's house. She'd seen Gina's sisters do it, and it hadn't worked out yet. How could love survive stress like that? The worst thing would be watching Jesse's love for her sour as he tried to be a good man and father.

Bunching up her sweater, Alicia buried her face in it. She closed her eyes and let a couple of tears escape without trying to breathe them away, the last of her energy exhausted.

At some point, she must have actually drifted off, because Alicia awoke the next morning and the little family was already gone. Relief flooded through her, but she felt a dull ache of regret for not having done more for Ama while she could, or at least for not saying goodbye. Alicia pushed the curtains aside and let the sunlight in. It would have been nice to see what color the baby's eyes were. Maybe they were clear hazel like Gina's daughter.

When Alicia had first come to Seattle, it had seemed like every time she came home she heard the baby crying. The only room in the apartment that had a door to it was Gina's, and Alicia refused to take over Gina's personal space. So Alicia spent a lot of time walking around the neighborhood trying to get Claire's wail out of her head. It made her imagine herself, hair mussed, spit up everywhere, unable to do anything to get clean. Those images wrapped chains of iron around her chest, and every wail pulled those bonds tight. She looked everywhere for new images, just so she could breathe. She wished she could give Gina a break and babysit for her while she was working at the hospital so she could save some money on daycare, but for the

first month Alicia had found it difficult to be alone with Claire. Her chest would contract, and her body would fill with a nervous energy until Gina came back into the room. Fortunately, Gina worked four long days a week, so when Alicia came home from her part-time job at the coffee house down the street she could sit on the couch in the small apartment's main room, pull the blinds and watch movies until she fell asleep.

But one day, Alicia came home and heard laughing. Instead of heading back out to spend another rainy day in the park, she closed the door behind her and made her way toward the kitchen. Gina sat on the tile floor with her daughter Claire, whose dark hair curled out in big, messy loops and bobbed as she trundled toward her mother's outstretched arms. Alicia watched the toddler take her first steps and saw the glow grow around Gina, and she realized how different their lives had become. Gina had become wrapped up in this child, and her whole life pivoted on Claire's smiles and tears. She could support them both, and her job made it possible for her to afford daycare and spend a few days a week doing nothing but being mommy. It certainly wasn't a bad life. But it was Gina's, not hers, she thought. She had slipped off to Gina's room and slept for the rest of the afternoon.

Alicia looked out the window. She knew in her head that she was in New Mexico, but mostly the world around her looked the same as ever. Very little of the train ride down the California coast had come close enough to the ocean to let her see the waves, and so she'd seen the same heaps of sand as she had when she was surrounded by hundreds of miles of desert and mesa in every direction. The only difference was that the coast had tiny clumps of green, but even so the similarities depressed her. Her eyelids grew heavy, and she let them drop down.

So much of the same, just passing by. Alicia let her mind go so numb that she almost missed her stop. "Las Vegas, New Mexico, five minutes. Five minutes to the Las Vegas

station,” bawled the conductor as he sauntered by in his black polyester uniform. “Not Sin City, folks. If you were waiting for Sin City, you missed it yesterday.” He plucked tickets from their holders over the heads of those who had come to the end of their journey. “Need help with that bag, ma’am?” he asked Alicia. When she shook her head, he moved on down the aisle, intoning, “Take your luggage downstairs and be ready to disembark.”

Alicia shouldered her bag one more time and squeezed her way down the stairs. She was the first one off. She stepped forward out of the way of the people waiting behind her and then walked toward the tiny, tumble down station, intending to settle herself into one of the weathered, wooden benches. Her parents’ house was five blocks from the station, so she hadn’t called them to pick her up. They didn’t know she was coming, actually. She had thought that the train ride would give her ideas for how to reintroduce herself after months of no contact, but she was still stalling on what to say. She couldn’t just say, “Hi,” and she didn’t know if she’d want to hug them or not.

Her breath quickened as she set eyes on her father. How did he know she was coming? she wondered, and then she thought, Gina.

Her father looked thinner than when she’d left a few months ago, and his eyes were bright. She didn’t know what to say. Was he angry? She couldn’t tell. Three months ago, when Gina had dialed the number and made her call to let them know that she was in Seattle and that she was OK, he had been very quiet. All she could tell them was, “I’m trying to figure some things out,” and all her mother’s questions had wrung the tears from her, though she kept her voice dead level.

He held out a hand, callused on the fingertips from playing his guitar and on the palms from swinging his hammer. A big, capable hand, but she waved it away. “I’m OK,” she said,

hiking the bag further up so it wouldn't cut into her shoulder. He shrugged but said nothing, leading her toward the van she'd ridden in so many times. It looked more battered than she remembered it, and she wondered if it had always been that dusty gray.

As they drove up, Alicia saw her mother on the porch, waiting for them. She sat in the rocking chair Alicia's father had made for her mother when she was pregnant with Alicia. She lifted her bowed head as the van approached.

Alicia climbed out of the van, shouldered her bag, and made her way through the front gate. Her heart contracted when she stepped past the broken sprinkler head that stuck up next to the pavement by the front walk. She remembered the first time she'd tripped over the thing and nearly broken her toe. Stupid, wasn't it, to feel sad over something that was busted. Nothing had changed.

Three steps up to the porch, tongue frozen in her mouth, Alicia wrestled with a heart so full that she could find nothing to say. It would begin now, she thought, trying to decide what her first move should be.

But her mother left no room for awkwardness or posturing. She embraced Alicia as soon as she was close enough, gathering her in, bag and all. After the first long hug, she held Alicia away from her and studied her daughter's face. Alicia avoided the scrutiny, staring at her chin, her forehead, her nose. Her mother's hand cupped Alicia's cheek and startled her into meeting her mother's eyes. Alicia felt the sting of tears. Her mother wrapped her arms around Alicia again.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" she whispered into Alicia's hair.

Alicia shook her head and clung to her mother. "No," she choked out, a flood bursting inside her. She felt her father's arms around them both. They held her up while her body shook.

* * *

It felt good to unload it all. Alicia had thought it would be hard, but when her parents just kept nodding, she realized that she hadn't really hidden any truth from anyone. "There are only a few things a strong girl like you would ever run away from," her mother said, brushing a strand of hair off of Alicia's cheek. "The school sent your grades here, and those were obviously not the problem this time," she said, and Alicia groaned, her face flushing as she remembered when they had confronted her with the crumpled bit of paper that had finally slipped out of her book bag a month before graduation. They hadn't been really angry, and they were definitely not surprised. All of her little white lies and delays hadn't hidden a thing from them.

"I'm such a bad liar," she sighed.

Her father snorted. "Don't say that like it's a bad thing, girl," he said. He looked at her intently from his chair. He scratched his chin. "You know, we've been talking to Jesse every now and then."

Alicia's stomach dropped out. She hadn't spoken to him in a week, even though she wanted to call him every day.

Her father studied her, and she looked away. "You haven't told him yet, have you?" he asked, but it was more of a statement than any real question.

She shook her head.

Her mother stroked Alicia's hair. "I think I can safely bet, although I'm not a betting woman," her mother said, "that he's the kind of man who would want to know."

The leather of his chair creaked as her father leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. "I know I did," he said.

Alicia looked up, straight into his eyes.

He smiled, and for the first time that day he didn't look tired. "You bet," he said. "It gave me good ammunition for getting your mom to marry me." He looked at Alicia's mother and winked.

Alicia felt her mother's shoulders shake as she chuckled. "Right," she said, "as if it hadn't been a foregone conclusion since the second we met."

Her father met Alicia's eyes again. "Yup," he said, the intent look back. "I knew love when I saw it the second time." He sat back in his seat, still holding her gaze. "It's pretty startling from the outside, to tell the truth."

Alicia felt the warmth creeping into her cheeks. It was a lot of information they'd piled up in just a few words. She needed to process. Wiping a hand across her face, she rose from the couch and excused herself to the bathroom. When she came back out, she knew she needed to go for a walk. She set herself for a battle, but her parents studied her carefully, then hugged her and let her go.

The breeze felt good on her skin. Instead of Seattle's sticky, humid cool of fog and coming rain, the dry breath of New Mexico caressed her neck and cheeks. The streets were so quiet compared to the city she'd come from. She walked up to the college, just a few blocks from her parents' house, and passed by her old apartment. She remembered closing the orange door behind her and leaning against it the day Jesse left. She had let her tears blur the unbroken white of a mostly empty room. She'd never really moved in, hung pictures, considered it her home in all the time she'd lived there. The days she didn't spend in class or in the library, she'd spent going places with him. They went to the hot springs, up into the mountains, out to the drive-in. They walked all over town, and when they'd come home they would talk about Dallas. His laugh had echoed through that spartan apartment the day he found out he got the scholarship.

She didn't have it in her to stop him from running out the door to pack. If he had known, he would have given it all up so he could stay with her, near their families and a stable support system. She passed the apartment quickly and circled back toward Main Street.

As she walked along the main drag, she saw the star crack in front of the antique store. When she was little, she thought it was a sign, like the X over buried treasure. Sometimes, when she prayed for specific things like a pony or a rainbow, she made her dad take her for a walk past that spot. If anywhere, she thought, her prayer would be answered there. And once, she had seen her rainbow as she stood in the center of that crack. She had still believed in it, just a little, before she left home. She stepped around it and crossed the street.

On University Avenue, a tiny old lady waved her down. Alicia had seen her wandering around the edges of campus, but they'd never spoken more than a brief greeting to each other. The ladies in the art department office talked about her and called her Nina.

"Would you mind helping me with my bags?" Nina wheezed, her eyes dark and moist. The lady's hair was white and wispy, her skin wrinkled and loose. Her cream-colored wool sweater hung on her arms. Piled on the sidewalk was a heap of plastic shopping bags, the contents of which Alicia couldn't quite make out.

"Sure," Alicia said. Gesturing to the cars along the street, she asked, "Which one's yours?"

"Don't have a car," Nina puffed. "Just taking 'em across the road."

"To your house?"

"Nope." She brushed a few stray white hairs back behind one ear, away from her mouth.

"Well," Alicia said, confused, "where are we taking the bags to? I'll help you get them to where you're going."

“Don’t need that kind of help,” Nina said, “I just need to get ‘em across.”

Alicia shrugged but picked up as many plastic bags as she could hold. She waited for a car to pass, then walked across the street and deposited the bags on the sidewalk. “Here?” she called across the street, and Nina nodded enthusiastically. Alicia made seven more trips from curb to curb, then walked with the woman across the street to her pile. “Are you sure you’re OK?” Alicia asked.

“Yes, yes.” Nina’s smile was small and sparkling. “I’m in the shade now.”

Alicia looked back at the street she’d just crossed, and the shadow of the building behind her fell just in the gutter on this side. For the rest of the day, this curb would be shaded.

As she walked away, Alicia’s eyebrows drew together. She glanced back, and the lady had settled down onto the curb next to her bags, producing an apple from one. She bit into it and watched a red truck pass by. Despite the legion of wrinkles on her face, Nina looked content. Alicia wanted that.

Alicia stared at the telephone. Her parents were right. Jesse needed to know, and now.

When her father left for La Ultima Vez last night, no one bothered to ask if she would go with him. All he’d said was, “Are you sure you’re ready for this?” Her nod had not only been accepted, but his answering bob seemed a confirmation of expectation as well. It’s like he could see the need in her, though even she didn’t know how the tension of the night’s tightrope walk with a Bible study for at-risk kids could be a positive thing. But that night she had seen those people for what seemed like the first time. They came into the rec room, younger than she was, and they didn’t look angry to her anymore. They looked scared. Even the ones with their heads tilted so far back that she couldn’t imagine how strong their necks had to be to stay like that.

Their postures said stay away, but they were poised for engagement. One girl in particular oozed that need, green eyes flashing in a frame of dark brown hair. She laughed, but her eyes never smiled.

Alicia's heart resonated with the naked loneliness of one quiet moment when her father asked, "Where do you go when it seems like no one will forgive you for all the things you've done that were not right?" The girl had looked at her, green eyes shining. A couple of sparkles flashed down her cheeks before she looked away. She was careful not to wipe them away but let them dry on her cheeks before rubbing her whole face as if she were tired. Alicia tried not to look directly at her. After the meeting, Alicia hugged everyone, making her way to Green Eyes so she could say, "Come back next week," and let her go. The corner of the girl's mouth had quivered, but she nodded as she turned away.

Alicia wanted that girl to know she wasn't alone. And then Alicia felt the truth of her own situation. The baby that grew inside Alicia wasn't so quiet anymore. Alicia felt all those fluttering movements forcing words into her heart, throat, mouth, and she needed to tell Jesse everything. All the way home, she tried to think of something she could say that could begin to fill the past three months.

What she said after his hello was, "Jesse, I'm pregnant." She bit her tongue and pounded her fist on her thigh, mortified by the sledgehammer bluntness of her delivery. Every word, every phrase disintegrated on her tongue, leaving a bitter tang.

The sound of clattering dishes filled the empty air for a few moments, and then it disappeared. "Are you OK?" he asked, his deep voice coming clear across the line. She felt a shiver run through her as his words washed over her.

"Yes," she said, "but did you hear me?"

“Sure did,” he said, and she wasn’t sure what his tone was, but he didn’t sound upset. “I’ll be home in three days, so we can talk about it more then. But first,” he said, interrupting her protest, “I need to know how you are.”

Three days. She would see him in three days. And he wasn’t upset. “I’m better now,” she said. They talked until his next class that afternoon, and she felt the lightness of her body again for the first time in months as she lay back on her bed and listened to the familiar cadence of his voice. Before he said goodbye, he made her promise that she would hold off looking at baby names until he got home to see her. Smiling, she gave her word.

Afterwards she went to the park and lay out under the blue sky like she and Gina used to do when they were kids. Instead of feeling the pressures of the earth pushing against her back and the deepness of the blue sucking her up-up-up, she felt each blade of grass tickle her skin and listened to the bees buzz. Everything made music, and the sky was a giant canvas for her to paint on.

Vita

Rachel Trujillo calls Pleasanton, California, her childhood home. She has lived in three different time zones and is steadily making her way east across the North American continent. She should be living in a sea lab on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge by Fall of 2010. No matter where she ends up, she hopes to be always blessed with amazing friends, good conversation, and brilliant stories.