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Best Laid Plans and Other Betrayals

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Best Laid Plans and Other Betrayals

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

by

Kimberly Clouse

B.A. Western Washington University, 1988

August 2012

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Dedication

For Abraham, my wellspring of courage and joy.
Without you, these pages may well have landed in a dark drawer.

Acknowledgments

I took a rather circuitous route to get here. I would sometimes miss the signs, pull over with a flat tire, or veer off into a ditch. If it hadn't been for the continuous and invaluable support from a number of people who answered my call at those pesky detours, unmarked junctures, and dangerous washouts threatening to derail my journey, I might still be stuck in the mud on some back road.

While my committee may be the last part of the process, they are the first I must thank. I'm ever grateful to my Advisor, Joanna Leake, who gave her time generously and guided me every step of the way. She taught me the importance of nuance in character. She challenged me to go beyond my stubborn limitations and even beyond my myopic understanding at times in order "to serve the heart of the story." Many, many thanks to Amanda Boyden and Joseph Boyden who welcomed me into their hearts and home and nurtured my soul as well as my work. From Amanda I learned to balance character with plot and to "bring authenticity to the narrative." Joseph taught me to "force [my] protagonist to act by internal quakes." While in the solitary act of revisions, their advice and mentorship replayed in my head and kept me company. All of their efforts spoke of their belief in me and kept me going.

There are no words big enough to express the gratitude I have for my teacher and extraordinary friend, Kay Murphy. She read and reread every story in this collection and then some. When I was scattered and in parts she collected me. When I didn't have it, she gave me confidence. She taught me more than poetry, she taught me the true meaning of friendship.

Many thanks to the outstanding professors I had the good fortune to study under: Jim Grimsley, Randy Bates, Barb Johnson, Bill Lavender, Henry Griffin, and Bill Loehfelm.

I am grateful to the incredible UNO CWW family who not only made me feel like part of the gang but also made it fun along the way. After soul searching, heart wrenching, bloodletting, workshops, I could always count on a revival of some kind such as the gatherings at Parkview, Gold Room, prom nights, a Boyden party, or any number of extracurricular assemblies. Bonds have been made. I am grateful to a number of my classmates who slogged through my messy first drafts and helped me to find the story hidden there. I am particularly thankful to the following: Cate Root with her insightful and erudite comments, and who happened to be in nearly every fiction workshop with me. Jamie Amos with her wise and compassionate advice. April Blevins whose humor, kindness, and talent never cease to amaze me. Maurice Ruffin who gets into the deep of things and can banter expertly back and forth about ideas and possibilities.

I owe much to my family who never let my wild imagination get in the way of loving me. When I tripped over the cracks of self-doubt, my son, Abraham Clouse, rushed to my side and kept me from falling. When I pulled the covers over my head to block out the light,

my mother, Karlene Faith, opened the window and let the fresh air in, luring me out to play again. When I wrapped my mind into tangles of what-ifs, my brother, Todd Clouse, showed me what it means to think from the heart and whose indomitable spirit has shown me what true strength and courage really are, and how to live life as a peaceful warrior.

I am lucky to have so many friends who put up with my erratic availability and crazy dreams, and yet cheered me on and were there for me anyway. My long time friends from California: Jo Lauer, Anne Marie Cheney, Dmitri Morningstar, Nancy Sinsheimer, Gayle Shirley, Robert Siegal, Marjorie Mann-Geisberg, Leon Geisberg and Marilyn Mann Matthews. And my new New Orleans friends: Jeni Stewart, Eva Langston, Merridith Allen, Melanie Fitch, Colleen Pawling, Barry Fitzpatrick, Adam Falik, Veronica Marquez, Nira Agrawal, Tanja Milosavljevic, Lorraine LeBlanc, Dorian Rush, and Patrick Flynn.

*“I know who the girl is,
know there is no stopping her,
know,
in whatever time it takes,
she is circling the block.”
~Kay Murphy*

*“Every time I write a short story, I am certain that I have come to the end.
There is no more. I’m finished. But the stories are rarely finished with me.”
~Louise Erdrich*

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Best Laid Plans

We are on the couch. Leonard sits on one side of Camille, our niece, and I sit on the other. He pulls her close for a hug; she drops her head onto his chest, wails some more, and lets the tears decorate Leonard's pocket. I pat her back. Her mouth quivers as she tries to stop crying so she can speak, but the words don't come, and she wails again. Snot collects at the tip of her nose. I hand her another Kleenex. Camille is suffering from romantic disillusionment of galactic proportions for the very first time.

"Why?" she wails. "What did I do wrong, Aunt Mimi?"

Why she directs this question at me, I don't know. Maybe because I'm a woman and as comforting as a man's chest is, it is a man who's broken her heart. At first, she only wants the pain to go away, wants her husband, Nick, to beg for her forgiveness, to beg for the opportunity to prove the sincerity of his love and the shame of his mistake. But Nick hasn't told her any of this. Instead, he's told her that he doesn't know what he wants any more. And now she thinks it's her fault and can get him back by fixing something in herself.

"Oh, honey," I say. "I thought women stopped blaming themselves in the last century." I grew up in the age of the sexual revolution and the second wave of women's liberation. I'd like to believe that our struggle for equality and sexual freedom paid off so that the young women of today wouldn't fall victim to defining their worth based on a man loving them. But love and romance seem as confusing today as they did yesterday.

"I don't want to live without him."

Ugh, I say to myself, although, if I'm honest, I have to admit that I was once just like my niece.

"He's scum," I say. Camille cries louder.

"Mimi," Leonard says and pulls Camille closer. "You're not helping." He tries another tactic. "Look, Camille, what your aunt is trying to say is that you are smart, talented, beautiful and you deserve to be happy. You deserve to be treated right. It's not your fault if he messed up, and you can do a lot better than Nick."

This doesn't help, either. Camille grabs a tissue for herself and covers her mouth and nose as if this will hold off the wails and fluids from flowing. It's not successful.

"But, I want *him*," she says and collapses into sobs.

Leonard opens his hands, palms up, as if pleading for my help. I shrug my shoulders, equally clueless.

He tries another approach. "I'm going to go kick that guy's ass. Anybody who hurts our girl deserves a can of whoop ass!" He stands up with a huff to show he means business. "You want me to kick that guy's ass?"

Camille falls sideways on the couch in his vacancy.

I look Leonard up and down with a frown and roll my eyes. I mean, look at him. He's got that fifties-something potbelly, his half crown of hair has turned gray, his biceps have gone soft, and even his anchor tattoo has faded to a sickly army green.

I wish Camille's mother were here to handle this moment. She went to an early grave. It's not that my sister would know what to do any better than I do. It's just that it would spare me from having to deal with it. I shoo Leonard out of the room with a wave of my hand and a request for some tea.

“Sure. Sure,” he says and ambles off toward the kitchen.

I think about Drake, my first serious boyfriend. I think about telling Camille about Drake, but I don’t know if that will make her feel better or worse. He was a serial cheater. On one hand, Camille might give me points for knowing what I’m talking about, and on the other she might think I was a fool for taking so long to figure out what a great guy he was and deem my advice useless. I hold off.

I take her hand. “Now, honey,” I say, trying again, “you really can’t blame yourself. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but maybe if I hadn’t nagged him about having a baby so much.”

I think about how Drake insisted I get an abortion when he found out I was pregnant. “Puh-leez,” I say.

“Maybe if I’d watched football with him,” she says.

Drake wasn’t the football-watching type. He was into movies, but still I know it has nothing to do with football. “What has gotten into you?” I squeeze her hand.

“Maybe if we’d gone out more, you know, dancing or something.”

Drake was big on dancing. Friday nights at the pub when the whole countryside, singles and couples alike, broke away from a demanding week of work to let loose with a little Jim Beam, peppermint schnapps, Captain Morgan and a few twirls around the dance floor. Dancing didn’t stop him.

“Camille.” I lean in close so she has to look me in the eye. “You’ve got to stop thinking like this. You’re going to drive yourself crazy. I know.”

“What do you mean, you know?” I guess I got her attention. Before I can backpedal, she gets kind of quiet and grabs my other hand. “Aunt Mimi, did Uncle Leonard—”

“Don’t be silly. It was long before I met your uncle.” I realize as soon as the words are out that I’ve just made an admission. Of course, Camille wants me to tell her all about it, but I didn’t exactly behave well either and decide to keep it to myself. Even so, the sting of the first time I discovered Drake with someone else floods me momentarily.

I remember going out to run errands. It’d gone quicker than I expected, and I headed back to the farmhouse a couple hours early. I pulled into my usual spot near the barn next to Drake’s truck and headed into the house with a couple bags of groceries in hand. Music greeted me as I came through the kitchen door. I looked forward to having a glass of wine over dinner with him that night. I put the bags on the kitchen table and walked through the dining room. Just as I called out his name, I saw him. And I saw her, too. Tonya, our neighbor. On her knees leaning into the couch, biting a pillow, Drake behind her, both of them with their pants down, him groaning, quivering in that climactic moment.

The teakettle whistles in the kitchen. I hear Leonard clink teacups on the tile counter.

“How did I miss the signs?” Camille wants to know. “I thought it was forever. We said it was forever.”

I see the look of defeat in my niece’s eyes. She has confused the failure of love with one man to be a failure of her character. She is mistaken.

“Twenty-four is still very young.”

She gives me that look of disdain that young people often give when their elders tell them how young they are and drops my hands.

“Who knows?” I try being the voice of reason. “You and Nick still might work it out. But if not, you have lots of time to find someone else.”

Suddenly she sits on the edge of the couch and balls her hands into fists. “I—I—I just want to hurt him!”

“It won’t help,” I advise. “Maybe if you try counseling—”

“Counseling! Maybe if I put sugar in his gas tank.”

She is no longer having a pity party. This was not quite the effect I was hoping to have.

“Maybe if I slash his tires.” She thumps her fists on her thighs. “And hers!”

Leonard comes back in carrying a tray with tea and cookies. He sets the tray on the coffee table.

“Have you thought of trying counseling first?” Leonard’s no better at this than I am.

“Geez, you and Mimi think alike,” she says to Leonard. Camille crosses her arms and pouts. “He doesn’t want to go to counseling. I already asked.”

“Do you know who it is?” I ask, a little worried Camille might actually go after her.

“I don’t know who the hell it is.” She clenches her teeth and fists. “But when I find out, I’m going to kill her.”

Hmm, maybe that wasn’t the best question. It’s just the pain talking I’m sure, but talk of killing always makes me nervous. “Kill her?” I ask. “Maybe she didn’t know he was married.”

“Now you’re going to take her side!” Camille looks at me with murder in her eyes.

“Mimi!” Leonard steals a look at me with mock shock in his eyes. “She *knew*,” he says as if he knows and sits next to Camille again; he leans back, so she can’t see him, and gives me a wink.

“No, no, you’re right,” I say. “I’m sure she knew.”

Camille retracts. “Actually, it doesn’t matter if she knew or not. Nick knew.” She breaks down again.

Leonard pulls her back into his chest and gives her a squeeze.

Certainly the women around the county knew I was living with Drake. It wouldn't have done any good if I'd gone after them, not that I didn't think about it, too. But, just in sheer numbers, I couldn't have gotten to them all anyway. And, like Camille, I missed the signs until it was too late. I just thought he was the affectionate type and that it was part of his charm. In my naïveté, I thought he felt as deeply for me as I felt for him. Cheating never crossed my mind, and the idea that it might cross his mind, never crossed my mind either. When he first took me back to Indiana to live with him on the farm he inherited when his parents died, all the women around welcomed me with open arms and said it took a special woman to get Drake to settle down. I thought they wanted to be my friends and were glad for a new face in such a remote area. Little did I know they were just trying to scope me out to see what they were up against. Not much, I'm sure they decided.

I remember Elise and Kevin. We'd take turns going over to each other's houses for dinner. Elise was a beautiful potter with long blond hair who ran marathons. She would run by our place during the day, waving to me as she crested the hill that led to our driveway. Kevin was an attorney who drove two hours each way to and from Louisville several days a week to work. More than once, Elise would stop by when Kevin was gone for the day and ask Drake to come over because the generator broke down, or the faucet was leaking, or the sheep had gotten out, or something. Honestly, I don't know why they lived in the country. I guess they thought it was the cool thing to do—being the 70's and all—but they were more the yuppie type than hippie type. I thought Drake was awfully good-natured about helping Elise out, until one day a crate of exotic baby chicks arrived that he'd been waiting for. I figured he'd want me to let him know right away, so I skipped on down the hill to tell him. There they were, Drake and Elise,

standing in the pottery studio with their arms wrapped around each other. They broke away when I came in, and Drake announced in his best sad voice that Elise just found out her favorite lamb had been killed by a coyote or something. Of course, I embraced Elise, too, and felt just awful for the brief moment of suspicion that they surely must have read on my face. That was before the encounter with Tonya, of course.

“I mean if it’s not all right with you, that’s okay.” Camille gives my arm a squeeze. She and Leonard obviously kept the conversation going.

“Well...” I nod my head in that slow motion kind of way hoping I won’t have to confess that I was thinking about something else and hoping to avoid any questions about exactly what that something else was.

“Hopefully, it’ll be for just a couple of nights.”

“Of course you can stay.” Leonard saves me.

“Of course you can.” I pour each of us a cup of tea. “For as long as you like,” I add and take a bite out of a shortbread cookie.

Leonard flips on the TV and starts scrolling through channels.

“Stop right there,” Camille says.

It’s the Lifetime channel. I groan a little inside because it’s probably a movie about a cheating husband, and I’m afraid it will get Camille all worked up again. Sure enough, that’s what it is. Leonard gets up, announces that he’ll make popcorn for everyone, and disappears into the kitchen. I sip my tea and decide maybe it will be cathartic and Camille will see that it’s the oldest story in the book. But then the wife starts plotting the husband’s murder. Camille gets a look in her eye that makes me a little nervous. I hear the kernels popping.

*

When the movie is over, Leonard and I give Camille a big hug and wish her sweet dreams. She shuffles down the hall to the guest room, her old bedroom. We snuggle up in our own bed and pretty soon Leonard is snoring in that methodical purr-like way he does. I lie there with the lights out hoping Camille isn't plotting revenge or going over all the signs she missed, like I am right now.

Melissa was a mousy little thing with a squeaky voice and irritating laugh. She wasn't much to look at either. I kind of felt sorry for her. She lived down the road, alone. Like Elise, she popped in more and more often to see if Drake could come by to help repair some minor annoyance that any country woman with any pride could have easily taken care of herself: a stuck window, a creaky door hinge, a frightened possum that found its way into her garage and couldn't find its way out. Drake would drop whatever he was doing, give me a kiss and a sad look like he hated to leave, and rush out the door with her, promising to be back in a couple of hours. When he came back smelling like Melissa, I realized a woman didn't have to be beautiful to get Drake's attention, and I became convinced that he wasn't the good Samaritan he was pretending to be.

By the time Camille wakes up in the morning, Leonard has gone to work, and I'm answering emails in the study. Really, it's our son's old bedroom we converted into an office when he moved out. What a strange world we live in; no one writes letters any more. I point to the futon and tell Camille to have a seat, and that I'll be right back with a cup of coffee for her. When I return she's pulled out an old family photo album—nobody has photo albums any more either.

She's looking at a photo of her mother holding her when she was almost a year old. Her father has his arm wrapped around her mother's shoulders, and they are all smiling eagerly into the camera. She turns a few more pages. There are no more pictures of her father.

"She died of a broken heart, didn't she?" she asks. Camille knows the story. She knows that her father left before her first birthday. She knows he went to meet a friend and never came back. She knows her mother died a year later of a mysterious disease that the doctors never figured out. She knows we raised her ever since.

I hand her the coffee.

"I married my father, didn't I?" she asks. "He cheated, didn't he?"

"No one knows for sure," I say to answer the last question, but mean it to apply to all three.

Camille closes the album. She puts it back on the shelf and without a word opens the closet door, stands there a minute, then shoves her way behind all the extra clothes we keep hanging in there hoping to fit into them again some day. She rustles around looking for something and finally comes out holding Leonard's old rifle. I'd forgotten all about it, and I suppose he had too. It's an antique that his father gave him.

She cocks the rifle, holds it to her shoulder, closes one eye, and looks through the sight like she's taking aim at something on the other side of the window. A man walks by on the sidewalk across the street. "I think it's time we put an end to all cheating men."

I don't think there are any bullets in that old thing, and I seriously doubt Camille would know how to use it even if there were. "That doesn't stop them," I say. "Think about Lorena Bobbit. There's been lots of cheaters since then."

“She didn’t cut him for cheating. She cut him for rape.” Camille is awfully cool-headed and self-possessed for a woman who was out of control the night before.

“Still, you know what I mean. Killing him won’t stop anyone else from cheating, but it will put you behind bars.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Camille says and puts the rifle down. That was too easy. “Maybe there’s another way I can get even.”

Here it comes, I think. Camille is not herself. I’m afraid to ask, but maybe I can talk some sense into her. “What are you thinking?”

“Jeremy, that’s Nick’s friend. He’s known him since they were kids, and they’re always hanging out together. Jeremy always finds excuses to stop by, even when Nick’s not home. He’s always flirting with me.”

“I’ve met Jeremy.” I see where she’s going with this, and I’m afraid she’s as delusional as I was if she thinks that’s going to get Nick to be forever faithful hereafter. If ever there were a time to say something, this would be it.

I take a deep breath, and I tell her about Drake, and Elise, and Melissa, and Tonya. And, I tell her about Tyler, Drake’s best friend from childhood. He was always popping over, and on Friday nights when we’d all go out dancing and drinking, he’d come with us. I’m selective about the details I say out loud.

A few days after I told Tonya to put on her pants and never come back, Elise ran by the house and asked for Drake’s services. The smaller their silhouette became as I watched them walk down the hill, the bigger the pain of losing him swelled in me and I knew it was over. Like Nick, Drake couldn’t promise me anything in our late night talks.

*

I tell Camille I understand how much it hurts if she feels anything like I did back then. I tell her how it was in that moment of watching Drake walk away with Elise, that I no longer hoped to work things out, and only wished instead that some day he would feel the pain I was feeling. I tell her how I turned and headed back into the house, and just as I twisted the knob to the kitchen door, Tyler drove up. I kept my back to him and stared at the door to compose myself while he parked. I tried to wipe my eyes before he could see, but the look on his face and the tone in his voice told me he knew.

“Hey, Mimi,” he said, turned me around, and let me collapse in his arms. I broke down with that quiet act of kindness and cried, much like Camille last night, although I’d like to think I didn’t wail quite so much, but I did leave a wet spot on Tyler’s shirt pocket. We headed to the cellar and tapped a new batch of brew—I’ve never tasted better beer to this day—and spent the next couple of hours doing our best to empty the barrel. We brought a jug up and made ourselves comfortable at the dining room table. We talked about the weather, about the upcoming harvest, about the band on Friday night. We talked about the neighbors—with a couple of exceptions. We didn’t talk about Drake. But, when I went in the kitchen and opened the refrigerator to pull out the leftovers, Tyler followed. I felt his hands on my hips as he turned me around to face him. He took the casserole and put it in the oven; it occurred to me then that this might be an opportunity for revenge. I knew it was close to the time when Drake would return from his escapade, and I became hopeful about the possibility of him walking in while I was in the arms of his best friend.

Camille looks away despite my care not to give her too many details.

Somehow between the clothes coming off and the groping, Tyler and I ended up sprawled out on the dining room table. I heard the front door open. Tyler heard it too; his eyes

fixed onto mine as he held himself perched above me, frozen. I still remember the smell of that casserole heating up, a spicy mix of meat and pasta in a rich tomato base and cheese. I couldn't have planned the timing better, I thought, and waited expectantly to witness the regret I hoped Drake would feel. The footsteps came closer from down the hall, and then they stopped.

Tyler and I held our breath in the eerie silence until finally I propped myself up on one elbow and looked past his bare shoulders hovering above me. Drake stood in the doorway. His eyes open wide, sparkling, mischievous. He popped open the top two buttons of his shirt, rubbed his hand across his chest, and moved into the room. The pain I hoped to see, even the anger, did not etch on his face, only titillation. I dropped back onto the table, disappointed, defeated. Tyler straightened himself but left his hands on my thighs and smiled almost apologetically to me. I covered my eyes, wanting nothing more than to escape from the humiliation of having let myself sink to Drake's level. But then, familiar hands cupped my breasts, familiar lips pressed my lips, and the hands on my thighs, larger hands, inched ever higher, smoothing away any thought of embarrassment or of retreat. I found myself powerless to resist the pleasure of the moment and willingly accepted the defeat of my thwarted revenge.

"So what are you trying to tell me?" Camille seems more inspired than frustrated. "Are you suggesting maybe Jeremy—"

"Ugh, Camille," I say, "you're impossible. No, the point is *not* to go that route. It won't make Nick jealous, and it won't get him back." But, I think to myself, maybe she'll discover even loveless sex can be kind of fun.

"Not to go what route?" Leonard stands in the doorway. I glance at the clock. He's home right on time for lunch. "Is your aunt telling stories again?"

"Just girl talk, Uncle Leonard," Camille says. "Just girl talk."

“You hungry?” I ask.

“Ravenous,” he says.

Camille goes off to take a shower, and Leonard and I head into the kitchen. I pull out the leftovers.

Stuck in Baton Rouge

Bobby threw a couple extra T-shirts into his backpack and joined the girls in the living room. Kathy held Becky on her lap, trying to pull a clean top over the wiggling girl's head. Lindsey struggled to tie her tennis shoes. Bobby leaned down, and, even though he felt the pressure to get going, patiently reminded his daughter how to make the loops and fold them into a bow. He hugged Lindsey as she beamed with success then picked up Kathy's suitcase, the diaper bag, and the girls' overnight bag stacked by the couch. He made it halfway to the front door when the landline rang. Kathy ignored it, laid Becky on her back, and stuck a clean diaper under her.

Bobby hesitated, but Kathy signaled for him to answer, and he picked up the receiver. Before he could say hello Ken started in telling him to get over there 'cause Mom was refusing to leave the house and get out of town before Gerard hit. Bobby told his younger brother to calm down, but it was his mother who answered back in a high-pitched voice saying they had no place to go, and even if they did, Ken's driving made her nervous, and she'd be safer staying right where she was.

"Hang on just a second now, Mom," Bobby said, covered the receiver, mumbled "God damn it" under his breath, and turned to Kathy now stuffing Becky into a pair of clean pants. Kathy rolled her eyes at him.

Before he could say anything, Kathy told Bobby she and the girls would meet him at the car and to hurry up and get off the phone. Bobby heard the panic in her voice and decided not to

ask just yet if his mom and brother could stay with them in Jackson. Kathy stood up, swung Becky onto her hip, and grabbed Lindsey by the hand, scooting them out the front door.

He yelled to Kathy that he was right behind her and put the phone back to his ear. “Stay put, I’m on my way over,” he said, hung up, and stuck his cowboy hat on his head.

Bobby adjusted the bags on his shoulders, locked up the apartment, and ran down the steps to the parking lot. A vicious gust blew his hat off. He chased it down and hurried over to the car. He took out his box of landscaping tools to make room and threw the bags in the trunk while Kathy buckled Becky into the baby seat in the back; Lindsey climbed into her car seat next to her little sister. As Bobby reached to close the trunk, he caught sight of the neck of a whiskey bottle sticking out from under a picnic blanket. He wondered how he missed that one when he threw out all the alcohol, almost grabbed it, decided now wasn’t the time to run across the parking lot to throw it in the bin, and slammed the trunk down. He hurried over to Lindsey, buckled her in, and kissed both the girls. He jumped into the driver’s side but didn’t start the car.

“That was Ken and Mom,” he said, taking Kathy’s hand. “They’re both freaking out. We’re gonna have to swing by there.”

“Are you out of your ever-loving mind?” Kathy pulled her hand away, her voice shaky, maybe angry, maybe scared. “We got to get these girls out of town—now. Why can’t Ken drive them?”

“Mom’s refusing to leave, and Ken can’t handle her.” Bobby gently squeezed Kathy’s shoulder. Knowing how she felt about Ken and Mom, he decided, after all, not to ask if they could stay at Kathy’s parents’ place, too. “Listen, I’ll take the truck over so you can get going. Let me talk some sense into ’em, get ’em on the road, and I’ll be right behind you.” Better to let Kathy get the kids to her mom and dad’s safely, and he’d get Ken and Mom settled in at a hotel

near them. Jackson was only a three-hour drive, maybe more in this weather. If Kathy left now she might make it before dark.

Kathy bit her nails and nodded. "Okay."

He blew kisses to the girls, gave Kathy a kiss, stepped out of the car, and picked up the box of tools. The raindrops started to fall as she drove off, and he stood pointlessly waving at the glow of the taillights zooming away.

Between the weather and the traffic, it took Bobby over an hour to make the twenty-minute drive to his mother's place. He dashed from his truck to the house and found his mother and brother sitting in the living room glued to the TV with a bottle of whiskey and a couple glasses resting on the coffee table.

Bobby clapped to get their attention. "This ain't no picnic. Come on, let's go."

His mother waved him away and turned up the volume. "I don't see any point in leaving. This is my home."

"I told you," Ken said. "She's not going to budge."

A reporter stood under a tree in full rain gear with a closed-off residential street in the background urging viewers to evacuate while it was still possible. A few days ago, Gerard had slowed to a tropical storm after hitting Haiti but was now approaching hurricane status again, and tomorrow might be too late to leave, he warned.

Bobby reached for the remote, but his mother slapped his hand away.

"We gotta go," he said. "Get your bags."

"I ain't packed," Mom said.

“Good luck,” Ken said and sunk further into his seat. “She’s too damn stubborn.”

The anchor at the studio appeared in a split screen, thanked the reporter, and suggested maybe it was time for him and the crew to pack it in.

“This ain’t no Katrina,” Mom said. “Everyone’s overreacting.”

“No, Mom, they’re not. It’s looking pretty bad.” Bobby pulled back the curtains. “Take a look for yourself.”

Night pressed on the edges of the horizon, taking away the last of what little light had come through all day. Tree branches thrashed against the wind, and water rose in the street to near curb height, no longer draining down the gutters.

The TV suddenly beeped in measured tones, glowed red, and scrolled the words “Emergency Alert” across the screen followed by flash flood warnings and local road closures in Baton Rouge. The anchor returned with a list of closed roads and read them off one by one. The urgency to get out of town that had driven Bobby since Kathy’s departure abruptly screeched to a halt in the pit of his stomach. They were blocked in.

“Looks like that changes our plans,” Bobby said and took a seat next to his mother on the couch. The table lamp and TV flickered as the anchor advised people to stay away from windows, keep water bottles and a flashlight handy, and not to panic.

A sharp crack and a bolt of lightening split the clouds, zapping the electric pole across the street. Sparks flew off the power line, and immediately the TV sizzled to black, and the lights blew out. Mom screeched, then covered her mouth, and the three sat silently in the dark, listening to the rumbles of the storm.

Bobby waited until his eyes adjusted. Shadows transformed into the shapes of objects and furniture. He felt his way to the hall leading to the kitchen, leaving his mother on the couch cursing him for not getting there sooner, and Ken yelling at her to shut up.

Bobby retrieved the flashlight off the top of the refrigerator and came back, shining the light in the living room. His mother put her hand out for him to hand it over. She scrounged through the coffee table drawer and pulled out a few of her scented candles. Ken took out his lighter, and the room took on an increasingly orange, flickering glow. In the candlelight, Mom refilled Ken's glass then her own. They clinked glasses, nodded to each other, and slugged down their shots in unison.

"Anyone getting hungry?" Mom asked and pushed herself up to standing. The three moved into the kitchen, bringing the candles and whiskey with them. The acoustics in the room seemed to accentuate the howling of the wind, low then high, as it whistled through the frame of the picture window by the kitchen table. Trees rustled in the yard, the window over the sink rattled.

"Maybe we should board up the windows," Bobby said. "We should check the garage for plywood."

"You can check," Ken said, "but you won't find none that's worth a damn."

"You don't know. Dad kept all kinds of crap in there." Bobby set his candle down.

"All kinds of crap that's been rusting away for years."

Bobby ignored Ken and opened the back door. He struggled to keep the wind from whipping it out of his hold. He shoved it closed with his shoulder, grabbed the box out of the back of his truck, and jogged over to the garage, getting drenched in the few short steps it took him to cross the driveway. Old, tarnished tools of his dead father lay across the workbench like

they had for the last seven years, more avoided than forgotten. Bobby picked up a small, brown paper bag and peered inside—nothing but rusty nails. A few decaying scraps of lumber lay beneath the bench, nothing useable. Their father had never bothered to keep things put away when he was alive, and no one had bothered to clean up the tools and junk lying around since he passed. Nothing made Bobby feel like drinking more than thinking about his father, a man who'd just as soon hit him as look at him.

Glad to be out of earshot of his mother and brother, Bobby pulled out his cell phone to call Kathy. No signal. He kicked a few two-by-fours hoping to unearth something useful, or maybe just hoping to blow off a little steam, wishing he'd gone with Kathy and the girls. He kicked another board, knowing Ken would gloat and tease him for the rest of the night when he walked back in empty handed.

Bobby jogged back to the house. Ken started in even as Bobby wrestled with the door. Ken leaned back in his chair, pointed at his brother, and whacked the table. "Ha, I told you so, you moron. Not a thing, right? You look like a drowned rat. Ha, ha."

"It doesn't take much," Mom said, "to get you going, now does it, Kennel Dog?" She was slathering mayonnaise on bread and had sandwich-fixings spread across the table.

"Very funny, Ma-mouth Park." Ken set his chair right and slapped some bologna on the piece of bread his mother handed to him.

Bobby took the receiver off the wall phone and held it to his ear. "Dead."

"The phone or your girl?" Ken laughed.

In a flash Bobby reached across the table and grabbed Ken by the collar, pulling him up face-to-face. "I'm warning you," he hissed.

“Geez, I’m just joking.” Ken smoothed out his shirt. “Can’t you take a joke?” He got up and used the flashlight to rummage around in one of the drawers. He pulled out a deck of cards and a few rolls of pennies. “Come on, let’s play some penny poker.”

Mom handed Bobby a sandwich, took a bite out of her own, and got going about worse storms they’d lived through. Ken shuffled and handed out the cards.

“You remember the time,” Mom said, “when you were just kids. I think it was Hurricane Andrew, or Opal, or whatever, was coming. Your dad found you boys hiding up in the tree house. Just about the worst place you could be.” She traded two cards.

“Yeah,” Ken said. “I remember Dad just about beat us to a pulp for being such idiots.” He traded two cards for himself.

“You mean me,” Bobby said. “Just about beat me to a pulp for taking you up there. You were only about three or four. I was the dumb one.” Bobby traded his three of hearts.

“You were only about seven or eight yourself.” Mom emptied the last of the Ten High and grabbed a fresh bottle out of the cupboard along with an extra glass. She poured a shot and set it in front of Bobby. She poured a refill for Ken. “Drink up. It’s gonna be a long night, boys.” She threw her shot back.

“Mom, you know I don’t drink anymore.” Bobby pushed the glass away.

“Come on, son, on a night like tonight, it’ll do you good.”

“No, I promised Kathy. Those days are behind me.” Without Kathy, Bobby thought, I’d probably be back in jail right now for stealing or dealing or something.

“Don’t let that girl tell you what to do.” Ken held up his shot. “Come on, here’s to being your own man.”

“You got it all wrong, Ken.” Bobby kept his eyes on his hand. The wind whistled louder through the window frames, and the leaves brushed against the panes. He switched his cards around, putting a pair of jacks together. “Your turn, Mom.”

Ken slid the drink under Bobby’s nose. Bobby shoved it to the other side of the table. “Come on, let’s play.”

Bobby pretended to ignore the waft of whiskey filling the room, heavier with each hand it seemed. His mother and brother finished the liter by the end of the night and sat with their eyes at half-mast.

“We better see if we can get some sleep.” Bobby scooped up his handful of pennies. “Maybe this thing will blow over by morning.” The wind had held steady, blowing hard but not really getting any worse. He stretched, grabbed a candle, gave Mom the flashlight, and headed to his old room. He noticed a few of her sewing boxes piled in the corner. Maybe she was finally accepting that he lived with Kathy now. He’d tell Mom to take over the whole room in the morning.

Bobby could see the tornado coming. They were driving straight into it. Kathy sat on her knees leaning into the back seat, playing patty-cake with the girls. The cars ahead of him fishtailed and spun out of control. Trees swirled out of the earth, snatched up by the tornado. Bobby tried to pull off the road, but the winds pushed the car sideways, careening it right into the side of a school bus, metal scraping and screeching against metal, ending in one earsplitting crash.

“Help! Bobby! Ken!”

Bobby woke to a loud crashing sound, punishing winds tearing at the house, and Mom's screams. He shook off the dream and ran into her room to find a pole poking through the roof and his mother standing on her bed clinging to the backboard. Ken ran in behind him. Wind and rain came through the hole and whipped loose clothes through the air, the blanket off the bed, and jewelry off the dresser. Bobby grabbed Mom by the hand and dragged her down the hall to the bathroom, the only room without any windows, Ken pushing her from behind. The three huddled on the floor, engulfed in darkness, listening to the sounds of objects thudding against walls and the clatter of glass breaking. Sheets of rain pelted down louder than hail, and the wind rumbled like warriors rushing in for an attack. They sat for what seemed like hours in pitch black.

"Help me up," Mom finally said. Bobby stood, blindly feeling for his mother's hands and pulled her to standing. She inched away from him, stopping at arm's length.

The cabinet hinges squeaked, followed by bottles clanking against one another. "Give me your hand," she demanded.

Bobby found his mother's extended hand and guided her back to her spot on the floor. He heard her gulp and swallow. "Here," she said and stuck a whiskey bottle in his gut. "Go on, it'll calm your nerves."

It'd be just like Mom to have a stash in every room. Bobby pushed the bottle away.

His mother shoved it back at him. "Pass it to Ken."

Bobby's nostrils flared, catching a waft of the pungent aroma as he passed the bottle. Ken gulped and passed it back. Bobby took it, clutched it, paused, and tentatively put the bottle to his nose.

"Go on," Mom said. "One little sip ain't gonna hurt you."

Bobby wanted it. Maybe it'd be okay—just a little something to make being stuck with his drunken mother and brother in the middle of a hurricane a little more bearable. Kathy was nowhere near, and it didn't look like he'd be getting out of Baton Rouge any time soon. He put the bottle to his lips before he could change his mind. The familiar burn oozed down his throat, warming his whole body. His muscles relaxed in a way he hadn't felt for months. He passed the bottle to Ken, Ken passed it to Mom, and she passed it back to Bobby.

He took another swig and let out a loud, triumphant wail as if to ward off the howls of the storm. He took a second swig without passing the bottle.

"Damn, Bobby, you 'bout scared me to death," Ken said and grabbed the bottle, letting out a wail of his own.

Mom laughed, if cackling can be called laughing. "Not bad," she said, then cupped her mouth and sent out a blood-curdling cry of her own. "You boys ain't got nothing on me."

They agreed and laughed, too. Bobby started the next round of howls and gulps. The tension between himself, his mother and brother, seemed to lessen with each swallow, like he was back in the fold, like he'd found a hiding place, a brief reprieve from trying to outrun a relentless demon hot on his heels. Maybe he'd regret it tomorrow, but, at the moment, it felt like this was his best chance of getting to tomorrow. By the time the bottle was empty, their voices croaked and a weird calm filled the air, the storm noises gone. Bobby cracked the bathroom door open. It wasn't the light of morning that greeted him, but the depressing gray of a heavy sky. He pulled himself up and took his first wobbly step into the hall to assess the damage.

*

Bobby grabbed a can of beer and left Mom and Ken passed out on the couch. He staggered outside to the front yard looking for a little relief from the stuffy heat of the afternoon. The air felt eerily still, even now, six days after Gerard had passed. He sat on the trunk of a downed tree, surrounded by debris everywhere. As stifling as it had been inside, it was worse outside. He took a mouthful of warm beer, pulled out his cell phone and checked for service—two bars and the battery indicator down in the red zone. He dialed Kathy's number. He'd tried every day without getting so much as a dial tone. Her phone rang, and Bobby jumped up, nearly tripping over his own feet, excited and nervous at the prospect of speaking to her. He resettled himself on the tree trunk.

“Bobby?”

“Bay-bee! You're there.” Bobby heaved a sigh of relief and held back the tears. “I'm s' sorry, baby. I jus' really wanna know if you made it. You aw' right? The girlz, aw' right?”

“Yeah, yeah, we made it,” Kathy answered. “We're okay. I must have checked my phone a thousand times.” Her voice cracked.

“Thaz good. I mean, you're safe. Thaz good. I been tryin' to call but service—”

“I know. Me too. We were so scared.”

“Me too, baby, me too.” Bobby swiped the corners of his eyes with his sleeve, and took another swallow of beer.

“Where are you, Bobby?”

“At Mom's. When I got, I mean, by the time...I got, ta Mom's, it wus bad, the storm wus like.... They'd closed the roads. Hey, I'm sorry, I'm s' sorry.”

“Bobby, you aren't drinking, are you?”

“Naw, naw, I’m jus’ ’motion’l. Ya’ know how I get...I wus so worried. I fel’ s’ bad leavin’ you an’ the girls.”

“I knew it. I knew if you went over there...you know, Bobby.” Kathy paused and let out a big breath. “I’m done. I can’t do this any more.”

“Baby, lis’n ta me. You gotta lis’n. You should see th’ house, th’ whole damn neighb’hood. I couldn’t ’ve left ’em here ‘lone, ya’ know. I couldn’t ’ve—”

“No, Bobby, you listen to me. We needed you, and you ran off and left me to drive through that hurricane with our two little girls alone. I’m—”

“Don’ talk like that, Baby. I din’ wan’ ta. I din’ have a choice. I said I wus sorry—”

“You really are a fucking lousy father, you know that?”

The words stung. Even through the fog of alcohol and the landscape of destruction, the words penetrated, cutting deep. His body froze, and Bobby imagined himself looking down from a tree limb, himself outside of himself, watching himself, hoping that somehow between the guy in the tree and the guy on the tree trunk, he’d say the right thing.

“Bobby,” Kathy said. “It’s over.”

He heard the click, but Bobby kept sitting there holding the phone to his ear.

Bobby flicked the light switch again, up and down, up and down. It’d been a week since the storm and three days since he’d talked to Kathy—still no power, no television, no radio, and soon, they’d be out of cigarettes. But they had booze. Plenty of booze. He shouted “good morning” to his mother and brother, and when they didn’t answer, he grabbed a beer and flopped

down onto the Lazy Boy in the living room, and covered his eyes against the high noon sun shining through the open slats of the blinds, wishing he could block out his thoughts as easily.

Nine days ago when they came out of the bathroom, Bobby and Ken had picked their way around broken lamps, busted doo wackies, and toppled furniture. A family portrait from years ago lay smashed on the floor near the front door. Ken sat on their mother's lap, Bobby's two front teeth were missing, and their father refused to grin, even then. Bobby had crushed what was left of the frame under his boot and cleared a spot for their mother on the couch. He remembered leaving her there so he and Ken could make their way out to the street and check out the neighborhood. He remembered how relieved they were to see a few neighbors. A young couple from down the block stood in old Mrs. Cooper's driveway, surrounded by debris, talking to her and old Mr. Sanchez from a couple doors down.

"Hey, look who's here," Mr. Sanchez had said and waved Bobby and Ken over to join them as they came out the front door.

"What'r you guys doing here?" Bobby asked and jostled his way through the piles, Ken right behind him, and shook hands with the men: Ken doing the same.

"We didn't think it'd be that bad," the young man said.

"Where else would I go?" Mrs. Cooper said. "This is my home."

"Yeah," Ken said, "that's what Mom said, too."

"I'm the same way," Mr. Sanchez said. "Besides, I prepared after I saw what happened with Katrina."

"He looked after me," Mrs. Cooper said. Bobby remembered her exchanging smiles with Mr. Sanchez when she said it.

A stab of loneliness hit Bobby, and he sank deeper into the Lazy Boy, wincing at the thought of having left Kathy on her own. He rubbed his temples, feeling the pressure build. Each passing day since they'd talked put him in a fouler and fouler mood. He was suffocating here, and it wasn't just the heat.

Mr. Sanchez had told them that his house came through okay, other than a little roof damage over a back bedroom. That day after the storm, he fired up his generator and everyone had been going over to charge their cell phones and listen to the news every day since. It wasn't good. It could be weeks before most roads would be cleared and power restored. Mr. Sanchez got the men to team up on the heavy lifting to clear their street, and they heaved aside street lamps, blown down roofing, siding, busted up sheds, downed trees, felled street signs, scattered garbage cans, toppled freestanding basketball hoops, outdoor toys, and yard furniture. It took the whole week, but they cleared a path wide enough for cars to navigate. According to the news, the local grocery store and Home Depot would be opening their doors tomorrow.

Earlier in the week, Bobby and Ken had climbed onto the roof and, by sheer force, removed the pole sticking into their mother's bedroom. Ever since they came out of the bathroom, Mom had been bugging them to board up the hole. A blue tarp wouldn't do, she insisted, not after those winds, and told them they'd have to get some plywood at the lumberyard until she could get a roofer.

The sunrays cast a drowsy spell over Bobby. He guzzled his beer, pushed back the Lazy Boy to get comfortable, and remembered his conversation with Mr. Sanchez from last night. Bobby had gone outside while everyone visited after the news. He sat on the edge of the low brick wall, the border for the raised flowerbed wrapping around Mr. Sanchez's house. Bobby had

dialed Kathy and while he waited for his call to go to voice mail, as usual, he'd noticed that a single geranium had managed to stay in the ground.

Mr. Sanchez came out the side door with a bag of garbage in his hand. "You still not getting any answer?"

"Nope." Bobby said. Voice mail came on, and he snapped his phone shut. "I don't know why I even try."

Mr. Sanchez sat next to Bobby. "You love her?"

"I don't know any more."

"Oh," Mr. Sanchez said, drawing it out, nodding his head. "That makes it harder. But those girls, they need you." He patted Bobby's shoulder and stood up. "You keep trying," he said and went back in the house.

Bobby remembered hearing his mother laugh—that cackle laugh—from inside the house, followed by one of her howls. Mrs. Cooper and Mr. Sanchez had laughed, too.

"You should have heard Bobby," Mom said and howled again.

He had left his mother and brother there and headed home to open a new bottle of Ten High.

Bobby felt someone kick his foot, and he opened his eyes to see his mother looming over him.

"Come on, son, get up. We've got to get to the lumberyard and grocery store."

"Get Ken to take you."

"How many times I got to tell you, I'm not getting in a car with Ken driving."

Bobby reached for his beer, but his mother swiped it off the coffee table before he could get it.

“Uh-uh. Get your lazy ass up and let’s get going. Plenty of time for that tonight. We got work to do.”

Bobby scowled at her but roused himself from the chair, headed to the kitchen, grabbed the half-empty Ten High off the table, changed his mind, and left it there. He’d had enough, of everybody, of everything. He didn’t know why he was still here anymore. What more did his mother want? “You’re a fucking bitch, you know that?” he shouted into the other room and opened the fridge. Nothing but beer. He grabbed one and wondered why they bothered to put the beer in the fridge since they didn’t have power anyway. Bobby kicked the door shut, and, on second thought, grabbed the whiskey off the table and headed to the garage to think, slamming the back door on his way out.

Bobby lit up a smoke and found himself staring at some old engine his dad had pulled apart and never put back together. The old man had never taken the time to teach Bobby the first thing about mechanics. Naw, Bobby didn’t miss the old bastard, not even a little bit. His mother was a damn drunk, and his father had been a damn drunk too—and a prick. He’d been a lousy father.

That seemed to be Kathy’s favorite word for Bobby lately, *lousy*: a lousy boyfriend who kept her hanging, a lousy father who put his girls last. Maybe if he’d had a halfway decent father, Bobby would’ve turned out to be a halfway decent dad himself.

On the other hand, maybe if his father were still alive Bobby would’ve run off long ago and never met Kathy. He’d be living in Texas somewhere, working rodeos or wrangling cattle instead of stuck in Baton Rouge tied down to a girlfriend and two kids and a drunken mom.

Maybe it'd be best if he couldn't work it out with Kathy. He was only twenty-two, still young. Maybe it'd be better if he got the hell out of town and out of their lives and made a new start of things. Now that Ken was eighteen, it was time for him to step up and help out a little more.

Bobby took a puff of his cigarette. The heat in the garage felt stifling, and he tore off his soaked T-shirt. The air hung heavy and humid, a cruel, muggy heat that clung to his skin. He grabbed a screwdriver off the bench and poked at the engine. A wrench, or something, stuck on a bolt too far down for him to reach. That was just like his father. Leaving a job halfway done.

"I'll be damned if I'm going to do to my girls what you did to me," he announced to the ghost of a dead man and took another puff. As much as Bobby wanted to run off, the last thing he wanted to do was hurt those girls. He wanted to be a good dad to Becky and Lindsey. And he still wanted to do right by Kathy. He'd been saving a little every month from his landscaping job and was just three hundred shy of buying her that diamond ring and proposing. He couldn't blame her for getting impatient. She deserved better. Bobby made up his mind he'd do what he'd have to do to prove to her what a good husband and father he could be.

"Ain't no way," he said, "no way I'm turning out like you." He gave the wrench a sharp jab with the screwdriver, and it clanged to the floor. He picked it up and set both tools on the workbench. "If I lose her, it's my own damn fault," Bobby muttered and wiped the sweat dripping off his brow. I'm an idiot, he thought, I should've evacuated with Kathy and the girls while I had the chance. He took a last puff, stamped out the butt, and slugged back a couple gulps of Ten High. He heard the kitchen door slam.

"Hey," Ken shouted. "Come on, dude, shake a leg! We got some shopping to do."

"I've been thinking." Bobby crossed his arms and leaned against the workbench as Ken walked in. "Maybe I should get on up to Jackson."

“Dude, you can’t leave me here alone with Mom.”

“The hell I can’t.” Bobby took another swallow. “I can’t leave my girls, that’s who I can’t leave any more.”

“I can’t fix that roof without you. Probably just take a couple hours.”

Bobby glared at his brother.

Ken punched Bobby’s shoulder in play, gave a pouty face and said, “Come on, please, pretty please.”

“Okay, okay. Let’s go get the fucking wood, get the fucking roof fixed, and then I’m outta here. You hear?” Bobby took a drink.

“Starting early today.” Ken grabbed the bottle. “Might as well.” He took a gulp and handed it back to Bobby.

Bobby headed out to the truck to wait, and Ken headed in to get their mother.

“Grab my hat and a dry T-shirt while you’re in there,” Bobby shouted just before the kitchen door slammed shut. He sat behind the wheel, rolled down the window, and tried calling Kathy again. Nothing. It struck him that she had no right to cut him off. Those were his girls, too. He was trying, and she had no right to shame him. Bobby felt the pain turn to anger and washed it down with another drink. He got out, opened the kitchen door, and shouted, “You get out here in two minutes or I’m heading to Jackson.” He banged the door closed and climbed back into the cab. He fired up the truck and turned on the radio. No music, just updates about what wasn’t getting done to clean up after the storm.

Ken hurried out the kitchen door, Mom trailing behind him carrying Bobby’s hat and T-shirt.

“Geez, Bobby, now who’s in a hurry?” his mother said as she passed in front of the truck. Bobby leaned over the seat to open the passenger door and pulled the seat forward; she threw Bobby his hat and shirt and climbed into the back seat. Ken climbed into the front.

Mr. Sanchez and Mrs. Cooper stood out in her front yard. They waved as Bobby pulled out of the driveway. Mr. Sanchez had told Bobby to keep trying. Maybe he knew something Bobby didn’t. Mr. Sanchez was nothing like Bobby’s father, a man who didn’t know the meaning of “try” and seemed to spend his life giving up before he ever got around to trying anything. Bobby inched his way through the cleared-out pathway to Highland Road. What was once a decent neighborhood was now a dump yard.

He took another drink, passed the bottle to Ken, and promised himself that as soon as the bottle was gone, that was it. No more drinking.

Bobby stopped at the red light and pulled out his cell phone again. “I got to call Kathy.”

“Right now?” His mother reached over the seat to take the phone out of his hand.

Bobby jerked his hand away and held the phone to his ear. “You’re gonna piss me off, Mom.”

“She’s not going anywhere. Call when we get home.” Mom sat back again. “The light’s green.”

Bobby pressed the accelerator, flipped his phone closed, and threw it on the seat between him and Ken. “Still no answer.”

“Would’ya slow down?” Mom said. “You’re driving worse than Ken.”

“Shut up, Mom,” Ken said. “Hey, watch the guy on the right. Shit, Bobby.”

Bobby stepped on the brakes and honked his horn.

“What’s your rush?” Ken said. “If you ask me—”

“Well, I didn’t ask you.” Bobby took a breath. “I want to get this done so I can head up to Jackson.”

Another car off a side street tried to squeeze in front of the truck to get onto Highland. Bobby accelerated, putting his bumper as close to the car ahead as possible, stopping anyone else from trying. Cars stretched out ahead of them as far as he could see. Maybe it’d be faster to go down Staring Drive and cut over on Boone to get to Kenilworth Parkway. While they crawled their way to the turn-off, he flipped open his phone again and dialed.

“Kathy?” Bobby laughed in disbelief. “Hey listen, Baby. I know you’re mad at me, but I’m going to make it up to you and the girls. I’m coming up there later today. Just as soon as—”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Bobby,” Kathy said.

“Tell her you’ll go tomorrow.” Mom just had to butt in.

“Don’t be like that, Baby.” Bobby took the next right onto Staring. The road was clear. He zoomed up to Boone and took the corner onto Kenilworth with his tires squealing.

“I only answered to tell you to quit calling and leave me and the girls alone.”

“That’s not right, and you know it.” He straightened the wheel.

“You left us in the middle of a storm and now you’re drink—”

“What else was I supposed to do? I couldn’t just leave ’em.”

“Bobby,” Mom yelled. “Watch out!”

“Shit!” Bobby hit the brakes. Several cars ahead crept along.

“You’re driving, aren’t you?” Kathy asked. “And probably drinking, too. Don’t come tonight. Just stay away. I told you, we’re done, Bobby. We’re done.”

“Kathy, come on, now.” Bobby wiped the sweat off his brow with his forearm. He leaned out the window to get a better look. An old Chevy was at the head of the pack slowing everybody down. He heard a click. “Kathy?”

Ken banged on the dashboard. “What the fuck is that guy’s problem? Why’s he going so slow?” He kneeled on the seat and stuck his torso out the window. “Why the hell you going so slow, asshole!”

“School zone,” Mom said.

“Kathy? You there?” Bobby flung his phone down and leaned on the horn.

“Come on.” Ken urged Bobby. “Go around him.”

Traffic stopped. Bobby let out a sigh of exasperation, drank the last drop out of the bottle, and tried to relax, tried to calm down.

“What’d she say?” Ken asked.

“She hung up.” Bobby hit the steering wheel. “What the hell is that guy doing? Schools aren’t even open. Someone needs to teach him a lesson.”

Bobby steered the truck over the curb, two wheels on the sidewalk, two on the road, and shot ahead, positioning the truck sideways in front of the Chevy—blocking traffic in both directions. He jumped out and slammed his door shut. Ken followed on his big brother’s heels, leaving the passenger door open. Mom climbed out of the back seat to get out, too, but Bobby shot her a look from over his shoulder. She took the hint, settled into the front seat, her feet on the runner, and fanned herself against the heat.

Bobby stomped over to the Chevy, leaned hard into his walk, Ken at his side. They stopped on the driver’s side and waited with their arms folded. The door opened, and a scrawny

old man stepped out, smiling. Figures, Bobby thought, some old grandpa type probably thinking everyone in the world has time on their hands like he does.

The old man stuck out his hand. “What seems to be the—”

Bobby was in no mood to be humored and swatted the old man’s hand away. “You’re fucking stopping traffic, you old geezer.”

“It’s a school zone, son.”

Bobby didn’t need some old man idiot talking down to him. “Aren’t you smart?”

“Smart enough to hold up traffic,” Ken added and poked the old man in the chest.

“Now boys... I didn’t mean—” the old man said. He wasn’t smiling now. Bobby could see him shaking a little, wiping the spittle from his mouth.

“You been living under a rock,” Bobby said. “Gerard shut down all the schools.”

“I know, but if I can explain—”

“What’s to explain? You were holding up traffic.” This guy was starting to get to Bobby.

“Now, just a minute. If you try to calm down, I can ex—”

Bobby put his face up to the old man’s face. “*Try to calm down?*” This was the second old man telling him to try. Trying hadn’t worked out so well with Kathy. Maybe Bobby was starting to understand why his dad never put too much stock in trying.

“Bobby.” His mother suddenly appeared next to him and placed her hand on his arm.

“We should get going. You can still make it to Kathy’s tonight to see your girls.”

Why the hell did she get out of the truck? Bobby threw her hand off. “Kathy doesn’t want me to come, Mom.”

“Well, she’s just mad. She’ll get over—”

“No. She won’t.” Bobby cut off his mother, remembering Kathy telling him, again, what a lousy father he was. “She said not tonight. Not ever.”

“Fucking bitch,” Ken spit out.

“Shut up, Ken,” Bobby snapped.

“You got a girl, a family?” The old man asked Bobby.

“What the hell do you care?” Bobby said. “Just get your ass off the road.”

“I got a family,” the old man said. “I know it’s not easy.” He pulled out his wallet. “I’ve raised three of my own.” He flipped it open to two pictures side-by-side, the old man’s hand trembling. “Me and the Mrs. We had our share of problems, but it was worth it. See here, I got four grand—”

“I don’t care what you got,” Bobby said and knocked the wallet out of his hand. Knocked away the superiority of some self-righteous asshole reminding Bobby of what he didn’t have. This was not show and tell.

“Now, that’s no way to act, son,” the old man said and bent down to pick it up.

“Who you telling how to act?” Bobby said. And *son*? Who the hell was this son of a bitch to call him son? Not even his own father had called him son.

“Yeah,” Ken said. “You *act* like everyone’s got all day holding up traffic, waiting for you.”

“We’re wasting our time,” Mom said. “Come on, Ken. Bobby.” She pulled on Bobby’s shoulder.

Bobby knocked her hand off and pointed his finger in her face. “Look, Mom, if you don’t like it, you can go wait in the truck, like I told you to in the first place.”

His mother pursed her lips, shook her head but took a couple steps back.

The old man grabbed Bobby's upraised hand by the wrist. "Now, son, that's no way to treat your mother."

"Don't call me son!" Bobby felt a surge of adrenaline and the last of trying leave him and threw a punch straight into the old man's solar plexus, dropping him down to his knees.

"Yeah, fucker." Ken kicked the old man in the chest, knocking him to the ground.

"And don't tell us what to do."

The old man struggled to his knees, gasping for air, one hand over his chest. He reached a hand toward Bobby's mother. "Ma'am" the old man sputtered.

Bobby shot a look over his shoulder at Mom. She stood slumped, one arm tight against her torso, one fist pressed against her mouth. It was the same look she had when he was seven, maybe eight, standing in the hall, looking through the opened door to his bedroom, watching Bobby reach for her, screaming "Mom! Mom!" and his father beat him all the harder for calling for his mother like a little sissy. Anger boiled in Bobby as he lay in bed that night, trying not to move, not to feel his ribs ache with each breath. He didn't know if he was madder at his mother or his father then.

Bobby raised a fist at Mom. She winced, squeezed her eyes shut. The full life of the anger he thought he'd buried long ago rose from that dead place in himself and this time it strangled any hope of stopping it from coming out. He turned his attention to the old man.

"You just don't know when to quit, do you?" Bobby sent the point of his boot into the old guy's rib cage.

The old man crumpled back down, curling up on his side.

A woman stood on the sidewalk in front of the school and screamed, "Stop it!"

"Please, lady." The old man turned to Bobby's mother again.

Bobby glared at his mother, his face hard. She took her hand away from her face, straightened her posture, took a deep breath and looked, unflinching, straight into Bobby's eyes.

"Please, son," the old man said to Bobby again.

Ken brought a foot down on the old man's head.

Bobby kicked at the old man's face, heard the crack of bone or teeth, and recoiled at his own volatility. The old man lay still, his head, and Bobby's boot, covered in blood.

"That'll shut him up," Ken said.

"Come on, boys." Mom pressed the ball of her foot against the old man's back and her eyes darted up and down the street. "He's not moving. Let's get outta here."

The woman in front of the school screamed, "Police, somebody call the police."

Bobby flipped her the bird. "Come on," he said and grabbed his mother by the arm. He marched her over to the truck. Ken threw out a fuck you to a man yelling obscenities at them from the safety of his car. They all piled into the truck. Bobby left tire marks as he peeled out.

He heard the sirens just before the turn into Home Depot. Blue lights flashed in the side mirror, and a cop car pulled up behind them. Bobby looked in the rearview mirror to see his mother throwing her hands over her face. Ken sank low into the seat. Bobby pulled over to the side of the road. He rolled down his window and waited for the officer to approach. He could all ready feel the handcuffs tighten around his wrists. He would not resist.

Hector Gets Taken

The kid punches and scratches at us and screams bloody murder. I've got his legs, and Blaze's got his arms. We try to swing him into the back seat of my car in the same way that we throw our buddies into the Russian river, but he fights back so hard we barely manage to bend him into a ball and stuff him in head first on the passenger side. Just as we get him half way in, Chelsea comes out of the diner with Emilia trailing behind her.

"Get your fiddle out of there," I yell to Chelsea before she can ask what the hell is going on.

"Oh my god!" She runs to the back door on the driver's side and grabs her violin right before Blaze falls on the seat with the kid on top of him, slugging away like his life depends on it, clipping Blaze on the chin. Chelsea tries to push the kid back, but he turns and lunges at her.

Blaze grabs the kid, throws him on the seat and sits on top of him, pinning his arms above his head.

Chelsea slams the door shut and runs around the car to where I'm standing. *Then* she blurts out, "What the hell is going on?"

"Damn punk's a thief," Blaze says between huffs and puffs, struggling to keep the kid from twisting out from under him.

The kid bucks and squirms, trying to flip Blaze off. I reach in and grab the kid's legs again and help hold him down. Emilia stands with her mouth open staring at us.

"David, tie his legs," Blaze says to me.

“Get the keys out of my pocket,” I say to Emilia so I don’t have to let go of my hold.

“And get the bungee cords out of the back.”

Emilia finds the keys and pops open the hatch. I hear her scrounging around. “It’s too dark. I don’t see them.”

“Look under my guitar.”

Chelsea helps her look.

“I got ’em,” Chelsea says and hurries a knotted-up bundle over to me. On the count of three Blaze and I flip the kid on his belly. Blaze presses a knee into his back, while I untangle a bungee cord and wrap it real tight around the kid’s ankles. I hand the bundle to Blaze and step out of the car only to find Chelsea in my face.

“Well, David?” She pops her eyes wide, cocks her head to the side, slams her hands on her hips, and demands an explanation.

That just goes to show how things can change on a dime. Seems like just five minutes ago we were eating dinner, flirting and winking at each other at this two-bit, 50’s style diner. We were sitting in there chomping on our burgers, and I tried to figure out how to break in on all the back and forth and tell my home buds that I have to quit the band—my jamming days are done. I took on more hours at the skating rink, and I can’t keep up with school, work, helping out at home, and being in a band. I headed to the bathroom, to give myself time to think about what I wanted to say, and on my way, I plopped some quarters in the jukebox and punched the numbers for a few tunes. I know what Chelsea likes. When I came out, she was nodding her head in time and tapping her fingers, laughing at something Blaze said. Emilia rolled her eyes like she’d already heard his joke three times today, but she still hung on his arm, smiling. Chelsea winked as I took my seat again. I winked back—that’s our thing—and I tried to find an opening in the

conversation to give them the news. Blaze got up to go outside for a smoke, and I decided to follow him out for a chat, thinking it'd be easier to tell them one at a time.

Chelsea hasn't moved and asks again, "What'd that kid do?"

To answer her question, I tell Chelsea, "Blaze is right. The damn punk is a thief. He tried to steal my car." I tell her Blaze and I saw him and some bigger guy trying to break in when we came outside: two guys wearing black hoodies, moving real stealth like scoping out the cars in the parking lot. The big guy had a jimmy stick and was going for my car.

I tell her how Blaze didn't hesitate and yelled out, "Hey, assholes!"

They looked up but stood there frozen like it would make them invisible or something. Blaze puffed out his chest and stomped across the pavement in his black combat boots. I puffed out my chest, too, and brought up the rear. The thieves took off behind the diner and ran straight up the incline into the trees. The kid slipped and slid back down toward the parking lot. Blaze shot ahead like a track star and tackled the punk before he could get up again. The big guy looked back when he got to the top of the incline but ran off when he saw his friend laid out flat with his face in the dirt and disappeared into the woods.

Now that I think about it, I guess my old Chevy Aveo piece of crap is easy pickings. It can't set off any alarms, and it'd be easy to jump start with wires if they were trying to get someplace in a hurry. I know it's not worth much, but there's no way I'm going to let somebody get away with trying to take away my wheels—the only way I have to get around and get there on time. I reached in my pocket for my cell phone to call the cops, but it wasn't there, and I remembered I left it in my car. Somehow we managed to get the little hoodlum back to the Aveo with the way he was carrying on.

Now Emelia and Chelsea jump in the front seat, Chelsea on the driver's side. They sit on their knees facing the back. I close the back door and come around to grab my phone from under the driver's seat. Blaze has still got his knee pressed into the kid's back, and he's yelling all kinds of obscenities.

"Let me go, asshole, or my friend's going to fuck you up." He sounds like a pipsqueak.

"Your friend is gone," Emilia says.

"Turn him over," Chelsea says.

Blaze does.

She flips on the overhead light. "Damn, he looks like he's ten."

"I am not!" He tries to pull away. "I'm thirteen!"

With his hands and feet tied, he only manages to wiggle onto the floorboard. Blaze pulls him up on the seat next to him, and I hear the kid mumble "almost" underneath his breath.

"I know that guy," I say. "Let him go." It's the scrawny kid who plays baseball in the park across from Chelsea's house and keeps hitting foul balls. Almost every time I go over there, I see him strike out, and he reminds me of myself when I was his age, trying to fit in by playing sports before I found music. I hated sports. I suddenly feel sorry for the boy.

"Are you crazy?" all three say together like they're a chorus.

"No way," Blaze says. "I didn't take one on the chin for nothing. We're turning him in."

"He tried to steal your car," Chelsea reminds me.

Everyone raises their voices and argues about what we should do with the kid while he shouts, "Let me go" over and over and threatens to turn us in for kidnapping until Blaze puts a hand over his mouth. In the middle of all this, my phone rings.

It's my thirteen year-old sister. "Hey, Piper." Everyone quiets down.

“Mom won’t answer her door, and she won’t come out of her room.”

“She probably just went to bed early. Did she make you dinner?”

Mom seemed together enough when I left, told me not to worry about dinner and promised to make Piper macaroni and cheese. But you never know about Mom.

“She started to. She boiled water two hours ago then went in her room and never came back out.”

I can tell Piper is walking down the hall by the echo of her footsteps. I hear muffled growls, sudden laughter, and then a wail.

“Mom’s making weird noises,” Piper says.

I tell her to hang tight—I’m on my way.

Thief or no thief, I’ve got to get home. Emilia climbs in back and sits on the other side of the punk. Chelsea moves to the passenger seat, and I climb behind the wheel. I pull out of the parking lot, and the kid starts squawking about having us all arrested for kidnapping if we don’t let him go. Blaze takes the red bandana off his neck, ties it around the kid’s mouth to shut him up, and tells me to hit it. I make it to the first stoplight, and my phone rings again. Piper tells me Mom is now in the living room going through all the albums tearing Dad out of the pictures.

“How much longer before you get here?” Piper asks.

I tell her no more than five minutes and pull over to the curb. I tell the band I don’t want to get arrested for kidnapping and to let the kid go. Blaze and Emilia shout that the punk was the one stealing, and they refuse. I don’t have time to argue so I pull out into traffic again. I’m trying to make a ten-minute drive in five minutes, and Emilia starts in drilling me on why I’m not at band practice any more these days. When the wheels squeal around a corner for the third time, Chelsea says maybe this isn’t the best time to talk about it but promises we will. I know

Chelsea's hoping they can talk me out of quitting the band. She wasn't too happy when I told her my decision.

Chelsea had moved off the couch to get away from me and sat at the bay window, refusing to look in my direction. She stiffened her body the way she does when she doesn't want to hear something and turned her head to look at the kids playing baseball at the park across the street. She had one leg tucked up under her and the other bent at the knee, wrapped in her arms. Her layered, purple skirt billowed out around her.

"You're going to regret it," she said.

"I don't have a choice right now," I told her.

"The band needs you, David."

"My mom needs me."

A scrawny looking kid went up to bat. Ever since the town asked us to play for the Harvest Festival, Chelsea thinks our band is about to take off and this isn't the time to quit. She wants me to stick it out since we've only got less than a year of high school left. She told me I'm throwing something valuable away. That's when the kid hit a pop ball. From my angle I couldn't tell if it was a hit or a foul. It landed behind the plate: a foul.

"It's just for a little while," I said. "Not forever. I'm not throwing anything away."

"A little while can last a long time," she warned. "You're making a mistake, David. You have to answer your calling."

The next kid up to bat hit it out of the park and sent the two guys ahead of him running around the bases. All three slid into home. The scrawny kid just sat on the bench watching, his elbow on his knee, his chin in his hand. Chelsea unraveled her legs.

“What calling?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “I better get to my homework,” she said, but she meant it’s time for me to go.

I tried anyway. “You want some help?”

“No. I can do it on my own.” She stood and headed to the hall. I grabbed my guitar case and backpack off the floor and followed behind. Chelsea reached for the handle, but I put my hand on hers before she could open the front door and leaned down for a hug, hoping for a kiss. She patted my back like I was a stranger and pulled away. I got the message and moseyed on out into the twilight. She pulled the door almost shut so it framed her face and said, “See you at school tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” I said, “tomorrow.” The latch clicked into place, and she disappeared behind the heavy oak door. My footsteps echoed like an empty drumbeat as I dropped down one front porch step at a time, empty like Chelsea’s good-bye.

I got in my car and took one last look back, hoping to see her waving at me from the big bay window like she usually does. Instead I saw Mr. Hawkins, Chelsea’s dad, sitting down next to her on the cushions. She leaned into him. He put his arm around her and gave her a squeeze.

*

I check out the kid in the rearview mirror. Yep, I can tell—he’s gnawing at the bandana tied around his mouth, but that’s him—he’s that scrawny kid who was hitting fouls in the park across from Chelsea’s house.

I pull into the driveway, and Piper runs out to meet us before I even come to a full stop. She’s carrying a family photo taken last year that’s still intact, the four of us sitting in front of the Christmas tree.

“Hurry!” Piper’s crying and opens my door before I get a chance to. She grabs my hand and pulls me out of the car.

I practically beg Blaze to let the kid go, but he tells me to go on, he and Emilia will stay in the car with the kid.

I run up the front steps after Piper. I hear a scuffle coming from the car and look back to see the kid head-butting Blaze. Blaze pushes him down, and I see the kid’s tied feet swing up and kick at the door. Blaze grabs his legs and shouts, “Don’t get any ideas.” Blaze seems to get the kid under control, and I follow Piper into the house and down the hall to Mom’s bedroom.

“Hey, Mom,” I yell and twist on the doorknob, but it doesn’t budge. I pound and shout, but she doesn’t answer, so I throw my weight against the door until the doorjamb breaks. Mom’s sprawled across the bed with a mess of torn up letters and photos spread around her. There is a half empty glass on the nightstand and three different prescription bottles lying on their sides with their tops off. I don’t see any pills. I yell “Mom” again and try shaking her. Nothing.

“Is she dead?” Piper asks. She stares at me, her eyes wide, waiting for me to tell her it’s okay.

I hover my hand over Mom’s nose and mouth.

“She’s breathing,” I say. What I don’t say is just how faint it feels.

I hear stomping and banging and muffled shouts coming into the house. I peek out and see Chelsea coming down the hall with Blaze behind her dragging the kid down with him. Blaze has the punk in a chokehold. His feet are still tied, and his mouth is still gagged, but his hands are free, and he’s throwing punches at Blaze while grunting noises that come out sounding like “Kidnappers! Help! Kidnappers!”

Blaze shouts, “Thanks a lot, Emilia!”

Emilia comes in last, yelling, “It’s not my fault. It’s not my fault.”

Chelsea sticks her head in the room as I’m checking Mom’s pulse. She takes a look at me holding two fingers to Mom’s neck, a look at the expression on Piper’s face which hasn’t changed, and a look at the empty pill bottles on the bed stand. She picks one up.

Blaze hauls the kid into the room and shoves him in the far corner. “Get me that,” he says to Emilia who’s standing in the threshold, and he points to a belt on the floor. She rushes it over to him.

I can’t find a pulse. I feel for Mom’s breath again. Nothing. I put my cheek close to her face. Still nothing.

“Call 911,” I say and press on Mom’s chest. She bounces with the compression on the mattress. “Help me get her on the floor.”

Blaze doesn’t hesitate: he lets go of the punk’s hands, drops the belt, and helps me. As I lean down to give her CPR, I come eye to eye with the kid in the corner. He’s untying the bandana around his mouth.

“We need an ambulance,” Chelsea says into her cell.

“Get the hell out of here,” I say real low without taking my eyes off the punk. “I don’t want you around when the cops get here.”

“Forget it, David.” Blaze looks at me, and I know he’s heard me. He lays Mom’s head gently on the floor and reaches for the belt. “After all the shit he’s pulled, we’re turning him in.”

“I don’t want to sit in jail for kidnapping while my mom’s dying in a hospital,” I growl at Blaze. Piper starts wailing, and I start pressing on Mom’s chest again. This time she doesn’t bounce. I turn my cheek to feel for her breath again. Nothing.

Sirens whir in the night, getting pitchier and louder as they get closer. I keep pressing, willing Mom not to die. I wonder if maybe she’s been dying that slow death like Chelsea was talking about last week, and now she’s trying to speed things up. A little panic rises in me. Mom gave up dancing when she married Dad, and now that he’s gone maybe she’s lost her will to go on.

Chelsea and I sat on the concrete bench at the edge of the high school quad with the small patch of woods behind us. She leaned in until her forehead pressed against mine, her long black hair tickling my cheek. I put my arm around her in the chill air, hoping to soften the serious look on her face. Music is your gift, Chelsea told me, and if you stop writing songs or playing guitar you will lose it. It will leave you to find someone else who will bring it to life.

“You mean, you will leave me,” I said and pulled away.

“No,” she said, “I mean your gift will leave you. Gifts are like souls: they need a body to breathe life into them.”

The quad became quiet. Everyone had gone home except the basketball players getting ready for Friday night's game against our chief rival, the Pirates or Penguins or who gives a rat's ass. I zipped and unzipped my jacket, feeling frustrated.

"I can't do it all right now." Even to myself, I sounded whiny. "When do I have time to be in a band? I *have* to work." I shouldn't have had to explain that to Chelsea. Of all people, I thought she'd understand. She knows Dad ran off last summer with some boob he got pregnant, and she knows Mom lost her job at the cable company two months later. By the time I get home after working the night shift at the skating rink, I'm too tired to practice my guitar and write songs. "Mom's losing it," I reminded Chelsea. "Someone has to take care of her and Piper."

"I'm just saying..." She shrugged her shoulders. "All I know is ignoring your music will eat you up from the inside out until you become a shell of a thing or a ravenous monster—something empty or destructive."

"You're being ridiculous."

"You're being stupid. I can't stand to be around you right now, watching you die a slow death, decaying away." Chelsea burst into tears then and ran off to cry in the bathroom. But she got to me. I sat there and thought about how long it'd been since I'd written a song. The last one was a while ago, all about how cute she is—her winks and quirky little smile, the way she falls over when she laughs and the puffed out skirts she likes to wear in all kinds of wild colors. I wrote that the week before my dad left, and I haven't written anything since. That forlorn feeling came over me then like I get when she plays the violin on the "Ghosts of the Night" song I wrote for her after her grandmother died last winter.

*

The color has gone out of my mother's face, and forlorn doesn't begin to describe how I feel now. Now I'm starting to get really scared.

"You're not doing that right." It's the kid. "You gotta breathe into her." He pushes my hands out of the way, pinches Mom's nose and blows air into her mouth. I hear footsteps running into the house.

"In here," I yell and watch the punk puff another breath into my mom. And then another. The paramedics rush into the room.

Chelsea and I try to keep Piper entertained with a game of connect the dots while we sit in the waiting room at the hospital, but no one can concentrate, and we've only put about six cock-eyed lines on the page. Blaze and Emilia sit across from us, and the kid sits alone kitty corner, watching our game. We haven't heard a word since Mom went into the emergency room.

"Hey, kid," I say. "You can go home now."

"No way," he says. "Quit calling me that. I'm not a kid."

There's no getting rid of this guy. Blaze finally let up on the dude and told him to scat when the ambulance drove off with Mom to the hospital, but the pipsqueak dove into my car with the rest of us, and he's been sitting here with us ever since. He's done a 180, like he *wants* to be kidnapped. Instead of demanding we let him go, he's insisting we keep him with us.

"You want to play?" Piper hands him her pen. He takes it.

"Call me Hector," he says.

We've been here for almost two hours now. Chelsea's dad said he was on his way to come get her nearly an hour ago, but she rests her head on my arm, and I'm glad he's late. Finally the doctor comes out with someone trailing behind him. When we got to the hospital I gave the doctor the empty bottles that were on Mom's nightstand. We all gather around him in a circle now. He looks serious and stands there for a minute rubbing his chin. The doctor asks if our dad is around, and I have to explain that he's no longer in the picture. I ask the doc if Mom's going to be okay. His shoulders drop, and he suddenly looks very tired.

"We're keeping a close eye on her," he finally says. He rubs his chin again. "We need to watch her for a little while." He tells us we should go on home and get some rest and motions to the person behind him to step up. I expect to see a nurse, but it's Mrs. Runyan, the social worker who tried to put me and Piper in foster care this past summer when Mom had her nervous break down and landed in the hospital. If Mom hadn't come home a week later, who knows where Piper and I would be right now. For the first time, I see Hector drop the tough guy act, and he suddenly gets in a real hurry to leave.

"This is Mrs. Runyan," the doctor says. "She'd like to talk to you." He disappears behind a heavy door marked "Authorized Personnel Only".

Mrs. Runyan's eyes dart around the circle looking for a face to fall on. We all start fidgeting. She has that affect on people. Blaze shoves his hands in his pockets; Emilia stands pigeon-toed, bending and unbending one knee. Even Piper gets in on the action and starts cracking her knuckles. Hector flips his hood up to hide his face, but as he does, Mrs. Runyan locks eyes with him. He doesn't waste any time and darts half way across the room.

"Not so fast, young man," Mrs. Runyan says and has Hector by the arm before he reaches the hall door. I don't blame him for trying to get away. He squirms, and Mrs. R grabs both arms,

holding him from behind, and snarls at him, “I guess the Thompson place wasn’t good enough for you, was it?”

She marches him back to where we all stand watching and forces a smile across her face. “Your mom,” she says, turning to me, “is going to need to rest for a while. I think—we think—it’d be best if you kids have someone to look out for you.” She doesn’t say who “we” is.

I’m about to protest when Mr. Hawkins walks in.

“They have someone,” Mr. Hawkins says and stands between Chelsea and me.

“Yeah,” I say, “we have someone.”

“And just who would that be?” Mrs. R makes everyone out to sound like a liar.

“Me,” I say. “I’ll be eighteen in sixteen days and—”

“And in the meantime,” Mr. Hawkins says, “they got me and my wife.”

“He’ll still need guardianship of his sister,” Mrs. Runyan says, “and that can take at least a year, maybe more.” Hector tries to jerk out of her hold, but Mrs. Runyan tightens her grip.

“Like I said, they’ve got me and Mrs. Hawkins.”

“That’s very nice of you.” She tries to smile, but it comes out looking like a grimace. “We’ll need to contact their father first, of course. Right now I need to take care of this young man, but why don’t you and your wife bring David to the counseling office after school tomorrow, and we’ll discuss the options.”

Chelsea’s dad agrees and shifts his gaze to Hector. “If you don’t mind my asking, who do you have here?”

Mrs. R smiles one of her cover up smiles, gives a fake, short-lived laugh and loosens her grip on Hector. He immediately twists out of her hold, spins on his heels, and makes a dash for it. A woman pushing a pole with a bag full of fluid dripping into her arm is on the other side of

the door, and Hector ends up tripping over his own feet trying to avoid her. A security guard the size of a body builder stands at the end of the hall near the lobby. Mr. Hawkins hurries over to where Hector's sprawled out on the hospital floor and helps him to his feet. Mrs. Runyan comes up from behind, clamps Hector's arms down and yells, "Guard! This kid is a runaway." The lady with the pole shuffles to the side against the wall as the guard comes running down the hall.

Hector starts kicking and screaming bloody murder like he did with me and Blaze. He kicks Mrs. R in the shin, leaves her hopping on one leg, shrieking, and makes a run for the door. The guard reaches out his arm, scoops up Hector like he's nothing, and throws him over his shoulder. Mrs. R tells him to take Hector into the security office until the cops arrive. She points her finger at me, tells me she'll deal with me tomorrow, and follows the guard.

"Come on," Mr. Hawkins says, "it's getting pretty late."

Everyone's quiet while we walk down the hall. We pass through the lobby, and over to the right I see Hector behind glass windows with thin wires crisscrossed through them in the security office. He's slumped over, hiding his head in his hoodie, waiting for his fate to arrive.

We step outside. I don't see a moon anywhere, and for the first time tonight I notice how dark it is outside of the artificial overhead parking lot lights. Now that the excitement is over, it's like Sandman came and sprinkled sleep dust on everyone. We're barely still standing: Chelsea's leaning into me, Piper's leaning into Chelsea, and Blaze and Emilia have their arms around each other, yawning.

"How about I give Blaze and Emilia a ride home?" Chelsea's dad says with a yawn.

"Piper can stay at our house tonight. You go on home and get some rest."

I tell him it sounds like a good idea. I walk them to their car and give Piper and Chelsea a hug goodnight. I start heading over to the Aveo, but half way across the parking lot, I find myself

going back into the hospital. I hurry past the security office. Mrs. R's got her back to the windows talking to a cop, leaning over the desk, reading a document with a pen in her hand. When I'm about to turn the hall corner to my mom's room, I look back and see Hector staring at me.

Mom looks peaceful, even with the tubes stuck into her arm, but I feel anything but peaceful.

"Why'd you do it, Mom?" My words land without resonance in the sparsely furnished room. "Don't Piper and I mean anything to you?" Again, I notice how my voice doesn't reverberate like a voice should, and that empty feeling comes over me again like when I left Chelsea's house without a hug. I turn away to compose myself. I lean on the windowsill. The parking lot is still; no one is going anywhere. I don't hear a sound, but a crack of bright light falls across my hand telling me someone has opened the door. I expect a nurse to kick me out, but when I turn around it's the pipsqueak.

He slides through the crack in the door and whispers, "Get me out of here."

"Yeah." I don't know why I say it, but I say, it again. "Yeah, kid. Come on, let's get out of here." We slip out a side door and hop in my car. "Where to, kid?"

"*David.*" He draws out my name. "The name's Hector."

"Okay," I say. "Where to, Hector?"

"How about home?"

I don't know where Hector lives, but I know that's not what he means.

*

The whole house is dark and quiet, lonely. I flick on the switch and light floods the kitchen. I lean my guitar against the wall in the corner. For the first time since Dad left, I suddenly miss him. If he were here right now, he'd be making me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and asking how rehearsal went. I wish he were here. No sooner do I wish for that and it gets swallowed up. Anger takes its place, and I'm really pissed. If he were still here I would just be another kid in high school, saving money for senior prom, planning my life after graduation, playing guitar with my buddies, and arguing with my dad about curfews. It's good he's gone 'cause if he walked through the door right now, I'd just want to punch him.

I get out the peanut butter and jelly, and Hector takes my guitar out of the case. While I'm putting the sandwiches together, Hector strums a few chords and it comes out sounding all messy, but the dude's got his tongue working the corner of his mouth and he's doing his best to get his small hand around the frets.

I put a PB & J with a glass of milk in front of him. "That's not half bad," I say. "I could show you a thing or two if you want."

We eat, and I tell him he can have Piper's bed for tonight. I show him his room, grab my guitar, and head to bed. I want to call Chelsea just to hear her voice, but I don't want to wake her mom or dad, or Piper. I stare at the shadows on the wall coming through the partly pulled curtain and the way the tree leaves sway like fans at a rock concert. I can't sleep. I pick up my guitar and pluck out a few notes in the dark. The strings are out of tune and make a dull twangy thud like a baseball falling in hard dirt behind the foul line. I think about Hector, and I think about Mom. I don't know people the way Chelsea does, but one thing I know is how to tune a guitar. I send

Chelsea a text telling her she doesn't have to worry any more. I'll be there—I'll be there after school. I'll be at practice.

First Snow

My wife, Lizzie Mae, comes out of the kitchen and passes by me on the couch. She sets the baby bottle on the coffee table and walks outside, clutching a fistful of something in one hand. I watch her through the half-open door, standing there in the moonlight. She swings her arm over the porch railing. Breadcrumbs fall onto the first blanket of winter snow.

Katie crawls across the living room to where I sit and pulls herself up to standing by gripping my pant leg. She smiles, and I can't help but chuckle. She looks up at me with that infectious grin, her whole body smiling. She slaps my thigh and bounces on her chubby, little legs, dancing to an imaginary beat. I pick her up and blow a bucker jean on her soft, round cheek. Katie Pie lets out a robust giggle, her green eyes twinkling.

Lizzie Mae has both hands on the porch rail, her head back, chest up, leaning into the wind; she's Jacque Cousteau on the prow of Calypso or maybe Long John Silver scoping out the horizon for hidden treasures. She doesn't have a coat on, only a light sweater. I fell in love with her free-spirited, mischievous nature when I met her back at Rocky Mountain College in Montana.

She's got her dark brown hair cut like that movie star Elizabeth Taylor in *Cat On a Hot Tin Roof*; the waves fall to her shoulders, frame her oval face, and tumble over her eyes every now and then. She has the same color eyes as her sister, Wanda, and the same color as those chestnut brown, winter wrens she's been feeding. Most of the time, her lips are parted as if she's about to speak, but it's only to make room for her slightly buck teeth. She's not quite the prettiest

pony in the pack, but she is awfully cute in her own way; she's got a certain something—and the spunk to back it up. I'll never forget the first time I noticed her. Hard to believe that was a short three years ago. It was fall semester of my senior year; she was eighteen and I was twenty-one. The quarterback slapped her on the behind as she walked past him, and she turned around and slapped him on his behind, gave him a wink, and kept right on going.

She is the first woman I ever really loved. And the only woman who has ever made me cry. A chilly gust sweeps in.

“You're letting in the cold, Elizabeth.” I use her full name like she wants me to.

I never thought she'd turn out to be so serious when I married her. I call everybody by a nickname. It's a lot more fun to say Sally *Sue*, or *Big Ben*, or *Pixie Patti*. *Lizzie Mae* seemed to like it when we were dating back in Billings. Lately, nothing seems to make her laugh. She's something more than serious now. I'd almost say sad. I don't know if it was the move to North Dakota that made her change or being a new mama; they both happened pretty close together. My sister doesn't think it has to do with having babies and tells me the happiest days of her life were when her babies were born. They say becoming a mother makes you grow up. They think *Lizzie Mae's* growing up, that's all.

She comes back inside and kisses Katie on the top of her head. “Walt, I want to have a party.” She says it as if she doesn't expect to get what she wants, but she has that look in her eye she gets when she's made up her mind. She sits next to me.

I bounce Katie on my knee. “For the kids' birthdays?”

“A birthday party for them, but a party for us, too,” she says and goes into the kitchen.

I hear the dishwater running in the sink.

“I think it'd do you good,” I say.

The doctor tells me it's just hormones and not to worry. She had our two babies one right after the other. Bobby was barely three months old when Lizzie got pregnant with his baby sister. He's going to be two in a couple of weeks, and Katie will be one a couple weeks after that. I figured Lizzie'd tame down after we got hitched and she had a baby in her arms. She has changed, but not the way I thought she would. Lizzie wasn't so bad after Bobby was born, but she hasn't seemed herself ever since Katie came along. Things are just...different, somehow. I'm not complaining.

We bought our first TV set last year, that fancy new pedestal model, the kind Lizzie Mae wanted. I thought it'd make her feel better about moving to North Dakota. It's not cheap setting up a household from scratch. She wanted to move to California, but I couldn't refuse the job offer here in Linton. I thought it'd be a good place to raise a family. And besides, not only would I be teaching PE, but I'd be head coach for the boy's basketball team. I actually whooped—*me*, I whooped—when I found out I got the job. I'm not the whooping type—that's Lizzie Mae's department.

I'd noticed her around campus before, but the first time I met her was near the end of the fall semester at a frat house party. I had a boxing match coming up in a few weeks so before heading over to the party, I went to watch my opponent to study his moves. By the time I showed up, the party was in full swing. I walked into the living room where all the stomping and laughter and music were coming from. Lizzie Mae was dancing up a storm, giving the jitterbug all she had. Stu Mitchell was on her left and Joe Luckey on her right. She'd fall backwards, and Mitchell would catch her then toss her to her feet. She'd twirl round with a little two-step, fall back, and

Luckey would catch her, he'd toss her, she'd do the two-step and fall towards Mitchell. Then Luckey gave her a spin, lifted her up by the waist, and tucked her hip up to his as she kicked her legs up and somersaulted over him, landed on her feet, and kept on dancing without missing a beat.

I never expected she'd notice me; I busied myself talking with a couple of girls I knew from class. When I got up to grab another beer, she came up from behind and leaned past me to get a soda out of the cooler as if I wasn't even there. But then she paused, looked at me, and suddenly we were face to face real close. She smiled like she was pleasantly surprised and said, "Well, hello, handsome." She dropped the Coke back in the cooler, took the beer out of my hand, told me to come on, and dragged me onto the dance floor. I dreaded the next moment because there was no way I could compete with Luckey's moves. But I did get lucky in one way. As soon as we reached the dance floor a slow song came on and spared me from looking like a fool. I guess holding her so close had an affect on me.

I hear Bobby crying from his bedroom and Lizzie Mae going down the hall singing "Goodnight, Irene, Goodnight," before she even opens his door. He always fusses at bedtime. I've told her to let him cry it out and he'll learn soon enough, but she can't stand the sound of a baby crying. He's almost getting too big to still be calling him a baby. These days small things seem to get to her, even a little crying; she'll pick them up, coo, do whatever it takes to get them happy again. But then sometimes I'll get home, and the kids will be playing out in the backyard, dumping dirt over their heads, smelly with dirty diapers, and she'll be sitting there on the steps reading a book, not paying any attention.

*

One day I was walking across campus on my way to the gym when I saw a group of girls sitting up on the knoll near the student center. It was a spring day, and everyone was out enjoying the weather, throwing Frisbees, and soaking in the sun. A peal of laughter made me take a closer look, and sure enough, Lizzie Mae was there giggly as all get out while her friend whispered something in her ear. I sat on a bench and pretended to be looking for something in my notebook. Next thing I know, Lizzie and a couple of other girls rolled down the hill. They piled into each other at the bottom and a squeal went up.

“Oh, look!” It was Lizzie Mae. “Daisies!”

They each picked a flower for themselves and plucked off the petals one at a time as they repeated, “He loves me, he loves me not.”

They seemed to be concentrating pretty hard until Lizzie grabbed a fistful of flowers and playfully flung them at the other two girls. “Who cares?” she said, jumped up and ran back up the hill with her friends chasing after her, and I scooted off to class.

That night, I stopped by her dormitory. The dorm mother made me wait on the front step while she sent a runner to go tell Lizzie to come down to the foyer to meet her “gentleman caller.” Of course, it seemed like half the girls starting peeking out windows and gathering behind the half-opened door when they heard that. I was practically sweating from nerves, even though it was a cool night, but she finally came down, and I handed her a makeshift paper cone filled to the top with tiny daisies. I plucked nearly a whole cluster to fill up that darn cone. I stammered out something about going out on Saturday, and when she accepted, a big “ah” went up from the girls eavesdropping behind the door. The dorm mother appeared, shooed them away, and made Lizzie go back inside.

*

Katie fusses, and I know she's getting tired. I make myself comfortable, lay her across my lap, and put the bottle in her mouth. She's not like Bobby; within seconds her eyes start to droop and before you know it, she's out. Bobby will pop up if he sees me with Katie, so I wait on the couch for Lizzie to come out.

We'd been dating about three months by the time we won the men's basketball title at the Frontier Conference. I was so high off our win I couldn't even feel my feet touch the ground. I practically floated my way out of the locker room and over to the celebration at the residence hall. At the party that night, things were getting pretty crazy. People kept pounding me on the back and handing me beers to slug down. I saw Lizzie Mae across the room and started over to her, but she bolted past me, practically knocking me over, and ran outside with her sister, Wanda, right behind her. I made my way through the crowd, but by the time I got outside I couldn't see them anywhere. I felt kind of woozy, happy but woozy, and plopped myself on the lawn. I stretched my limbs out and just lay there taking it all in, trying to make out the constellations in the night sky. I'd never seen so many stars in my life.

That's when I heard her stifle a sob. I couldn't see them, but I could hear their feet shifting on the ground and the chafing of coats coming in contact.

"Hey, come here, it's all right." Wanda said.

"No. It's not." Lizzie talked barely above a whisper. "I haven't had my, you know, in two months."

"You can't keep it." Wanda didn't even hesitate.

“I don’t know what to do.”

“I know someone, not exactly a doctor but....”

That got me up. They must have heard me moving because they got quiet then. I walked off the path toward the nearby grove of trees where I’d heard their voices and found them huddled together on a bench. Lizzie Mae’s mouth was puckered into itself to keep from crying, and her hair fell over her eyes.

“Walt.” Wanda looked surprised and maybe a little scared. She opened her mouth to speak, but I’d heard enough and punched my fist into the palm of my other hand like I do when I step into the ring.

“No,” I said.

Now Lizzie looked scared. “Tell me what to do,” she said and looked at Wanda.

“We get married, that’s what we do.” I sat down beside her and put my arm around her shoulders. The floodgates opened then. She buried her face in her hands. Wanda stood up to leave, saying she’d let us talk. We sat there alone, just sitting, watching the stars, watching the future arrive. When the world gets so big it seems to want to swallow you up, sometimes you gotta go ahead and fall into it. We sat there a while before we rejoined the party.

“He’s asleep,” she says when she reappears. I tell her I’ll be right back and go put Katie in her crib. I’m not gone long, but Lizzie is lying on the couch staring at the ceiling with tears rolling down her cheeks when I come out. I sit next to her, lean over, and kiss her forehead. She wipes her eyes, smiles, and pushes me away. I fall to the floor with a fake groan. She frowns. I can’t

seem to get a laugh out of her any more like I used to, but I at least have to try. I whimper like a hurt puppy dog.

Lizzie gets up and shoves me aside with her foot. She gives a half laugh and says, “Poor puppy.” I roll onto my knees, my hands held like paws, and pant expectantly. She ignores me and switches the TV on, turning it to her favorite show, *I Love Lucy*. I don’t fight her tonight even though it means I won’t get to know what happens on *Gunsmoke* and how Marshall Dillon handles Miss Kitty’s rebellion. I pull her onto the couch with me and snuggle her up close under my arm.

I’m tired when I get home today. A few of the boys were goofing off, and I had to make them stay an extra hour to run the track and lift weights. It’s almost dark, but the house is empty so I go out onto the back porch and find Lizzie Mae lying on the ground under the poplar tree in the backyard. Her arm is covering her eyes, and she’s holding Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Bobby and Katie are covering her with fallen leaves and climbing over her. She isn’t moving. I call her name, she stirs, and the kids squeal. Katie claps her hands, and Bobby comes running over to me. Katie crawls through the leaves, trying to keep up with her big brother. I come down the stairs, pick up Bobby and throw him into the air. I put him down, swing my baby girl onto my hip, and go over to Lizzie. She looks up at me, and puddles of tears threaten to spill over the rims of her eyes.

“What’s the matter?” I ask and sit on the pile of leaves next to her; I put Katie in my lap.

I don’t catch her answer because Bobby jumps on my back, and I play wrestle him to the ground. Katie gets in on the action, too; I let them push me over and bury me with leaves while I

feign cries for help. The kids giggle. I tell them it's time to go in, sling Bobby onto my back and lift Katie into my arms. I offer a hand to Lizzie. She takes it; I pull her to her feet, put my arm around her slender waist, and walk us all inside.

"Why don't you go lie down?" I tell her. "I got the kids."

"They need a bath," she says. I can barely hear her. She rests her head on the doorjamb and holds her arms over her stomach as if she's getting sick.

"Go on," I say. "I got 'em."

She heads for the bedroom, and I give the kids a bath, feed them, tuck them in, and read them bedtime stories. I wake up next to Bobby with *Peter Rabbit* on my lap and a crook in my neck. He's kicking me and rolling around in his sleep. I get up to go to my own bed with Lizzie, but I stop on my way to get a drink of water and find her sprawled across the couch. The TV has gone all snowy and her eyes are red, staring off into space. I turn off the TV and sit next to her.

"Lizzie Mae, now, it can't be that bad."

"Elizabeth. My name is—"

"I know, I know—Elizabeth. When do you want to have your party?"

"It's a stupid idea." She covers her eyes with her arm and clenches her jaw.

I know by now that no matter what I say it will be the wrong thing, but for some dumb reason I open my mouth. "I think it's a good idea. I'll invite some teachers from school. You can invite the neighbors, and..." I try to think of more people, but I'm stuck. "I think it'd be nice."

"Yeah, teachers and neighbors."

"How about Sherry down the street? With the two boys? Didn't you take Bobby to her kid's birthday party? She seems nice. And her husband, Barry?"

“Bert.” Lizzie rolls her eyes and sits up. “If I have to listen to her praise Jesus one more time.” She shakes her head fast, oscillating like a plucked string. She stands up and paces the room. “There’s just so little here. So much of so little.”

“How about...” I draw a blank. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Tell me this isn’t my life. Tell me there’s more in this world than wheat fields and housecleaning and church socials.”

“But you never go to the church—”

“You’re missing the point, Walt.” Her face knots up, and I want Lizzie Mae back. I want that girl from Billings who had more passion than I knew what to do with. I want to put my arms around her and hear her breath against my ear with that moan that used to let me know I was her world. I haven’t heard that moan since Katie was born. I stand to go to her, but she snaps her palm up in front of me like a traffic cop.

“Don’t,” she says.

“Elizabeth.” It comes out as if I’m exhausted. Really, I just feel defeated. But I don’t know what it is I’ve lost; what battle this is. I’m fighting a phantom. I wish it’d show its ugly face and step into the ring with me. Then I’d know what to do.

She drops her arm to her side and swallows hard. Her voice comes out in a squeak.

“Sometimes, I feel like I’m going crazy.” She squeezes her fists so hard her arms tremble.

It’s probably not a good idea, but I take a step towards her. I’ve got to do something, right or wrong. Lizzie Mae puts her head down and wraps her arms around her body, hugging herself. This time, she doesn’t protest when I hold her to me.

“Maybe if you get involved in something, maybe take another class at the community—”

“What? Take up knitting with a bunch of old ladies?” She wipes her eyes. “Walt, you can teach anywhere. Wanda told me the DOD is hiring teachers for Europe.”

I know what’s coming. We’ve been through this before. I try not to feel exasperated and remind her this is not the time. I’ve got a bunch of rag tag boys, but the team is coming along and the school board just approved the wrestling program for next year. Lizzie Mae buries her face into my chest, her body tensing, and I stroke her back. She wants things that don’t seem natural for a young mother. She wants to travel around the world. Hell if I know why. It just seems like a lot of work to me. I took a trip not long before I met her. A couple of buddies and I went to see Sugar Ray Robinson fight Bobo Olson in Los Angeles. That was worth putting up with all those people in the city, rushing to get to where they were going, cars everywhere. But barely. We slept in fleabag hotels and ate cheap diner food. I could have lived on what I had to spend to get there and back for a month, but I had to see Sugar Ray. I guess if you have a good reason, it makes all the trouble worth it. I don’t understand traveling just to travel, which is what she seems to want to do. She lets out the sob she’s been holding in and relaxes in my arms.

I wonder, sometimes, if we would have married if she hadn’t been expecting. We’d only been dating a few months, and I’d never been in love before. But I knew I felt something when Lizzie Mae kept looking at me the way she did, and I knew she was the one. I always thought she felt the same way. I know I played a better game when she was leading those cheers. The first time she kissed me was when we won our first game of the season. She ran out on the court with everyone else and planted one right on my lips. I never could get her to go to my boxing matches though. She said she couldn’t understand why grown men wanted to get in a ring and beat each other up like that. Now, I can’t even get her to go to the boys’ basketball games. Being a wife and mother doesn’t seem to be enough any more. This week she’s been talking about going back

to school. She's been reading Margaret Mead lately, and says she wants to be an anthropologist, too. Children need their mother, and I don't think it's a good idea. Her tears keep coming, and I keep holding her.

Two weeks before I graduated at Rocky Mountain, I told Lizzie Mae I wanted to take her someplace special. I had something to celebrate and wanted to surprise her. I tucked the letter I'd received the day before into my jacket and could hardly keep quiet on the way to the restaurant. The waiter gave us our menus, and as soon as he walked away I handed the envelope to her, grinning like a dumb hyena. The sparkle in her eyes faded as she read, and I thought maybe she was going to tear up out of relief. I was wrong.

"Walt, you can't accept this." Her voice was hard.

"Damn straight, I can."

"You promised me we'd go to California." She said it as if she believed it.

"I didn't promise California." I kept my voice calm. "I said I'd try. I promised I'd get a job."

"In Podunk, Nowhere, USA?" She glared at me from across the table.

"I thought you'd be happy. It's a lot closer to your family."

"I don't want to be closer to my family. I want to go see what else the world has to offer."

"I thought that might have changed, now that we're going to have a baby."

"It hasn't changed." She picked up the menu and studied it pretty closely.

I reached for a roll and knocked the butter knife out of the butter bowl. I tried to grab it before it clanked to the floor but missed and knocked my glass of water over onto my lap.

“That was stupid,” I said and laughed. “Go ahead, you can laugh.”

“Stupid is not funny.” She didn’t laugh. She put the letter on the table and when the waiter came back to take our order, she looked at him and said, “I’m sure Walt would be happy to tell you what I want.”

That stung. It was the first time I found out what a sharp tongue she can have when things don’t go her way.

She tried to talk me out of taking the job for a week, but I prefer a small town where you know everyone and everyone knows you. Lizzie doesn’t seem to feel the same way I do. I don’t understand it. She grew up right across the border in Saskatchewan, raised by salt of the earth kind of people, good ranching folks. I finally got her to agree to go to North Dakota for a year, and if she didn’t like it, I promised I’d get a job in California. But at the end of the year, she was pregnant with Katie and I’d thought it’d be better to wait until the baby was born.

She cries for a long time before she lifts her head from my chest. My shirt is soaked to the skin. Lizzie Mae laughs and points at the spot on my shirt. She laughs a little too hard, but I’m relieved and laugh, too. Her hands stroke my back, pressing firm, then light and tickly. Her laughter fades.

“Come on,” I say. “Let’s go to bed.” She seems better now that she’s cried it all out.

She cups my face in her hands; I feel her breath against my ear, her kisses on my cheek, her hands moving to my chest, and her fingers releasing the buttons on my shirt. She pulls me close and kisses me hard, and I take her hand, guiding her to the bedroom, but she backs me into

the couch and when I fall onto it, she straddles me. I've never known a woman like Lizzie Mae. I like being married.

We crawl into bed, and she curls up against me. "Let's go to Europe," she says.

"Lizzie Mae." It pops out before I can stop myself. She doesn't correct me this time.

"You know we can't do that."

"Just for the summer." She rubs her hand over my belly. "You have the whole summer off."

"Yeah, but Europe's expensive."

"I know," she says and turns over.

I can feel her disappointment, and I feel bad. "Maybe we can drive out to California," I offer to compensate.

"Maybe," she says.

I curl myself around her. She feels tense and distant, and I move away. I lie on my back and slip off to sleep.

I wake up with a chill; it's pitch black, and I start to pull the blankets back up around us when I realize Lizzie Mae isn't there. I figure she's gone to the bathroom, but the house is too quiet, and I get up to look for her. The whole house is dark except for the dim glow under the door from the night-light in the kids' bedroom. I feel a draft and make my way to the living room. A sliver of moonlight is coming through the front door left ajar.

I expect to see Lizzie on the porch leaning over the rail like a pirate, but she's not there. There are footprints going down the steps. I worry when I see the imprint of her bare feet in the freshly fallen snow. I follow them into the front yard. There's hardly any wind, and the snowflakes fall gently to the ground. Lizzie Mae is lying on the lawn with nothing more than her

nightgown on. I want to yell at her and tell her what a fool she's being, but the worry overpowers the frustration. My feet are stinging from the cold.

"Elizabeth, what are you doing?"

"The moon is so beautiful," she says and points to the sky, shivering.

I look up and see for the first time tonight how full it is. I grab her hand and try to pull her to standing, but she resists. Her hand is freezing.

"You can't." She laughs between chattering teeth. "The man in the moon is pulling me in."

I kneel beside her. "Here, put your arms around my neck." I lean my body over her so she can hold on, but she's so cold she has no strength in her grip. I pick her up, carry her inside and put her to bed. I pile on extra blankets and crawl in beside her, but she still shivers as the frost wears off. I wrap the warmth of my body more tightly around her.

In the morning, I feed the kids breakfast and let her sleep. After they eat, Bobby runs into our bedroom, and Katie crawls after him. Lizzie Mae smiles weakly at the kids and doesn't even sit up. I've never seen her quite like this and decide it might not be a good idea to leave her alone today. I tell her I can call for a substitute and stay home. She promises me she's fine, just tired from the cold last night and lack of sleep. She shoos me away and tells me to go on, to go get ready. The kids cuddle up with their mama while I go to shave. When I come back in to dress, they are playing Patty Cake. Bobby starts bouncing on the bed and tells me they are going to have a party.

"Maybe you can plan your party, too, today," I tell Lizzie Mae.

"I don't want a party any more," she says.

Bobby looks like he's about to cry. "I wanna paw-dee," he whines.

“I mean I don’t want a little party,” Elizabeth says. “I want a big party for Bobby and Katie.” But I know what she means.

“Yea!” Bobby claps his hands and bounces again.

I kiss them good-bye.

The principal comes on the loud speaker at the beginning of fifth period and announces that a nasty northeaster is blowing in and the classes are cancelled. The students are to board their buses immediately. They all dash off, and I hurriedly lock up the gym equipment and head for home. When I walk in the door, I can hear the kids crying in their room. I find Katie in her crib, and Bobby standing next to her, reaching through the rails, patting her head, but I don’t see Lizzie anywhere. I put a kid on each hip and go outside to the backyard. She’s not there. I hurry back inside and check the bathroom. The door is locked. I call out her name and put the kids on the floor. I pound on the door, but there’s no answer.

“Elizabeth, are you in there?” I pound some more, and the kids start to cry again. I bust out the latch and see her in the tub. She’s not moving. Her head rests against the hard porcelain, turned to one side, barely above the water line. Bobby tries to follow me in. I tell him Mommy is taking a bath and close the door behind me. A bottle of Landers Bubble Bath floats amid a thin film of faded bubbles tinged pink. I pull her hand out of chilly water and see the cut in her wrist. Her body lies underneath in a pool of red. I grab the kids on my way to the phone and call the hospital. I don’t cry until the ambulance pulls away and the siren fills the air.

*

The hospital doctor asks me to come to his office. He is standing at the foot of Lizzie Mae's bed. Her hair has fallen across her eyes; I brush it aside, and it frames her face separating the white of her skin from the white of the pillow. She is cool to the touch. I don't want to leave, but I let go of her hand and follow the doctor into the hall. He's not her regular doctor, but he tells me he's talked to him. The doctor takes me into his office and sits behind his desk. He points to the chair across from him, and I sit.

“How long has she been depressed?” he asks.

The word sounds faint and distant. “Depressed?” Everyone gets down sometimes, but the way he says it makes it sound more serious, more permanent. I think of the girl rolling down the hill, of the girl cheering me at the games, of the girl banging out a dance tune, and I think of the girl at the restaurant, the one who said she didn't want to move here, the one who feeds birds at night, the one who gets buried in leaves and doesn't stir while her children clamber over her, and I know the answer to his question. He's talking, but half of what he says sounds muddled like he's talking under water. I force myself to listen.

“—for a few weeks, let her get some rest, do some evaluations. Psychiatry has come a long way. They have some new medications we can try, possibly a new kind of treatment, electric shock therapy. Depression is something we need to take seriously,” he says and pauses for me to answer. When I don't he says, “I know this must be hard for you.”

That is not the woman I married. I married a woman full of life and dreams. I want her back, but his words have taken her away. I want to punch him. I want to punch something. This isn't supposed to be how it is. I grip the armrests.

“Walter?” He leans forward with his elbows on his desk. I loosen my grip and fold my hands in my lap. “Walter,” he says again. He pushes a paper over the top of the desk and holds a pen out to me.

“I need a minute,” I say.

I get up and walk back to Lizzie Mae’s room. The IV drips into her arm; both wrists are wrapped up in white gauze, resting at her sides on top of the blanket. She looks peaceful lying there. I wonder why she looks more beautiful now than on our wedding day. I don’t want to lose her. I don’t want to disturb her, but I want to feel her next to me again. I put my cheek to her cheek. I hope for a sign, maybe for her eyes to flutter.

“Tell me what to do,” I whisper. I can barely see her chest lift and fall. I hear footsteps behind me.

The doctor comes in and stands across from me on the other side of the bed. “It’s the best thing for her. I promise we’ll take good care of her.”

I straighten my back, but I don’t take my eyes off Elizabeth. I touch the palm of her hand. Her fingers slip into mine and squeeze ever so slightly; her head drops gently toward me, but her eyes stay closed.

“It’s just for a little while. So we can observe her, maybe try the treatments. You can visit on Saturdays.” He keeps standing there. Finally he says, “When you’re ready, I’ll be in my office.”

My feet no longer feel attached to my body. I float in slow motion down the hallway and find myself across from the doctor’s desk in a chair that is now so large that it swallows me up. I sink into it. The only thing I can see is a huge fountain pen hovering in the air before me. Everything else is overshadowed by its size.

The Crunch of Gravel

A dark cloud spreads wide across the horizon, hanging low at the far end of the pasture where the fence line stops the horses from climbing into the hills. A crack of lightning illuminates the valley. The thunder tumbles down the mountainside landing with a thud against the foothills below. Wayne's chest hurts. His heart pounds as if mimicking the weather. He's always had a good heart; he knows there's no physical reason for the pain. Other than a few broken bones, he's never had more than indigestion in his seventy-two years. The ache is just the pangs of regret, the pain of questionable decisions. Annie Oakley rests curled up at his feet. The fluff of her long red hair dusted with white makes the red heeler nearly blend into the red clay soil and bleached rocks around them.

Wayne's hipbones ache from sitting on the boulder at the edge of the bluff for too long, his eyes on the weather, his mind on Bonnie. Wayne shoves the birthday card from his daughter back into its envelope, sticks it into the interior pocket of his jacket, and buttons up against the sudden drop in temperature. Bonnie didn't mention the lawsuit he filed against her to stop the sale of the ranch, but in true Bonnie style, she pointed at the estrangement between them, shooting with both guns loaded. His stallion, Sanchez, nudges Wayne's shoulder, and Wayne gives Sanchez a pat. He takes in what he knows will be one of the last looks he'll get of the spread from this height. In just five short weeks, he and Carol, his wife of four years, will be lugging boxes and hauling the herd of horses three miles down the road. Wayne groans at the thought of moving fifteen head, two at a time, in his rusty old truck and the two-horse trailer, to

set up house in a measly rental. With half the acreage and only a six-stall barn, he'll have to hustle to put up a couple of shelters and sell half the herd before winter. It'll be easier, he decides, to put the horses on a line and lead them down the road.

He sees them gathered under the oak tree on the north side of the pasture near the creek, the grass brown at the end of summer. Wayne reaches down, rubs Annie between her ears, and watches Cochise nestle his muzzle into Tangle's chest. The other mares, geldings, and foals huddle close to the pair, their heads bowed. Wayne pats the card from Bonnie through his plaid, flannel jacket, presses his heart, and the ache lifts a little. He forces himself to his feet. Annie jumps up, too, looks to Wayne for a signal, alert and ready to follow his directives. He rubs the throb out of his boney hips, grabs Sanchez's reins, and releases the ground tie. Sanchez nickers and bobs his head, then presses his nose into Wayne's chest.

"Yeah, big boy, I know." Wayne strokes Sanchez's blaze again, pats his neck, and rubs his withers. "What d'ya say? You ready to compete tomorrow?"

The bay stallion snorts and paws at the ground, his patience fading with the light.

"I was hoping that's what you'd say." Wayne throws the reins around Sanchez's neck. "Come on. We better get the brood into the barn."

Wayne tightens the cinch before mounting, landing lightly in the saddle. Sanchez nickers again and starts the descent. Annie darts a little ahead, crisscrossing the path, sniffing the ground as she goes. Wayne sucks air through clenched teeth. "Damn, Bonnie. Damn." He drags his hand across his bald head, soothing out the wrinkles on his forehead but not the regret. *I wish....* A stab of futility overtakes him. There's no use in trying to wish away something too big to cure by wishing—the bad blood between father and daughter.

The dark cloud completely engulfs the fence line now and creeps across the field, rapidly ascending the hill as Sanchez descends into the mist. The decline of the trail steepens and Sanchez picks up speed, mistaking Wayne's tension as a directive to hurry it along. Wayne relaxes his thighs and leans back against the cantle, adjusting to the steeper angle. "Easy, boy, easy." Annie stops on a turn, watches to make sure Wayne stays close behind, then darts ahead again.

Before Wayne can whistle to the herd, Cochise trots towards him, never one to need any coaxing. At this time of day, Wayne knows just the sight of him riding Sanchez through the pasture only means one thing to the mustang, dinnertime and shelter for the night. Cochise, a gelding but still full of stallion fire, knows his place and falls in line behind Sanchez. Tangle follows Cochise, her nursing filly close on her heels, then the other mares with their colts and fillies. Annie circles around behind the herd, bringing the other geldings in line at the rear. The idea of moving again and all the work involved in setting up the new place overwhelms Wayne. The thought of losing the ranch and everything that's gone into it sickens him. How can Bonnie justify taking it away? He fights off the anger rising in his belly, forces a smile as he approaches the gate.

Carol stands at the barn with a lead rope in one hand and oats in the other. He doesn't want his bad mood to get her going again, asking questions he doesn't want to answer. Wayne dismounts and together they put the horses in their stalls. Carol tosses a flake of alfalfa to Tangle, works her way down the row, and finishes feeding by the time Wayne has removed Sanchez's tack, brushed him, and put him away.

Lightning crackles through the dense clouds, and the rain finally delivers on its threat, plunking down one heavy raindrop at a time on the parched land.

“Perfect timing,” Carol announces, giving a salute to the sky.

“Go on in,” Wayne yells over to her at the other end of the barn. “I’ll water ‘em, if you wan’ta start dinner.” Annie trots after Carol but looks back for Wayne. He waves “high on,” but, oblivious to the weather, she returns to his side, sits, raises her brows, watches, panting while she waits for his approval. He chuckles. “All right, come on then.”

Wayne dallies in the tack room until he hears the screen door slam. He leans against the sawhorse, takes the envelope out of his pocket again and sticks his head out the door, sneaking a peek toward the house. The kitchen light flickers on. Wayne strokes his thumb across the address. “Louisville,” he mumbles. “Damn, Bonnie. Half way across the damn country.” He wonders when his daughter made the move. It hits him just how far apart they are: Bonnie two thousand miles away from California. He wonders how many other letters he might have missed. The last letter he got was about a year ago before Carol insisted on collecting the mail herself. He pulls the card out of the envelope and with it the anger surges into his hands. Before he can rip it up sorrow sweeps down as if from the dampened sky and falls on his bent frame, stopping him, softening him.

He steals another look towards the house, sees all is as it should be, and reads Bonnie’s note one last time: *Happy Birthday, Dad! If I could give you anything, it would be to reverse time and go back to how things were. No matter what, I will always be your daughter, and you will always be my father. I hope you know I did everything I could to save the ranch. I’m so sorry I couldn’t. I miss you more than you know. Hasn’t it been long enough? Please call.* He tucks her words into a corner of his mind, safely away, dangerously present.

Long enough? It’d only been five months since the place sold, only two months since the new owners gave notice, still weeks before the move. Bonnie never did have the best timing.

Even so, it might take him forever to get over Bonnie selling the ranch. Selling him out. He may have won the lawsuit against her and got a few thousand dollars, but it didn't stop the sale. He has to admit, technically, the ranch had never really been his, not on paper. Bonnie was the one with the good credit and the down payment, *and* the title. Did everything she could? Bullshit. She should've helped out more when times were tight. She said she would consider the place his as long as he paid the mortgage and took care of the maintenance, and in return the ranch would be hers when he was dead and gone. Hadn't he kept up his end of the bargain? Hadn't he made the payments? Well, most of the time. Bonnie had helped out a time or two, and she'd paid for the round pen, a few improvements, repairs—but, hell, she was supposed to get the whole damn thing some day. So what if he missed a payment or two?

Wayne reaches down and pets Annie sitting at his feet. He lets out his breath, conceding that if he's honest with himself, his daughter had been there for him when he asked. But it came at a price he hadn't counted on. His self-respect. He should have been helping his daughter, not the other way around. Wayne wills the ferocious tug-of-war between gratitude and anger to each lay down its end of the rope.

Even if he wanted to make amends, when Carol started insisting on collecting the mail herself, she'd promised she'd be out the door if he ever spoke to that no-good excuse of a daughter of his ever again—his choice. Losing Carol wasn't a price he was willing to pay. After three failed marriages, he was determined to make this one work. At his age, he couldn't imagine starting over again, nor could he see himself living alone, and now, not with his daughter.

He crushes the card, walks over to the water hose and turns on the faucet, Annie at his heels. He props the nozzle into Cochise's tank, unfolds and flattens Bonnie's note, shreds it into tiny pieces, and hurries over to the garbage bins outside the barn entrance; he stands exposed to

the rain, now steady and solid, nearly torrential. Annie waits under the eaves. He shoves the fragments to the bottom of the can and dashes back into the barn hoping Carol hasn't seen him. He grabs the hose out of Cochise's tank, kinks the water flow, and moves to the next stall. When all the tanks are filled, Wayne takes a look at Tangle's saddle sore and treats it with a salve before heading in. The driver's side window on the truck is rolled down. He stops to roll it up and grabs the rifle off the rack.

Wayne sets the Winchester in the kitchen corner and holds the back of a chair for balance as he pulls off each boot. "Any mail today?"

"Just bills." Carol rinses carrots and places them on the counter. Wayne fills Annie's bowl with chow and replenishes her water.

"Here." Carol grabs a knife and places it on the cutting board next to the pile of vegetables. "You chop. They're already washed, except the mushrooms."

Wayne peels off his jacket, lays it on the back of his chair, and rolls up his sleeves. "Smells good." He washes his hands and grabs a green pepper to chop.

Carol pokes at a chicken leg in the frying pan. "Why? You expecting something?"

"Not really." Wayne silently kicks himself. He never asks about the mail. "Just thought the boys might drop me a line." Annie finishes eating and settles herself at her usual spot on the floor by his seat at the table.

Why he checked the mailbox this afternoon, he can't say. While Carol was grocery shopping, curiosity got the best of him. The only thing he took was Bonnie's card and left the rest for Carol. She probably never would have insisted on getting the mail herself if she hadn't found Wayne wiping his eyes over that letter from Bonnie a year ago. Carol didn't like seeing a grown man cry, and he didn't like doing it any better than Carol liked seeing it. *That's it*, she had

said, *better if you don't read that shit any more and get all twisted up like a caterpillar hanging on the end of stick*. The last time he actually talked to Bonnie was two years ago when he sued her to stop her from trying to sell the ranch. He'd told his daughter that it'd be best if they didn't talk until the lawsuit was over, and ever since then she'd been sending letters steady as the creek flows, one or two every month. Well, the lawsuit ended a year ago, but right after it did the "For Sale" sign went up, and Wayne couldn't bring himself to call her even though he had cash in his pocket from the settlement. And, besides, whatever small gratification Carol felt by getting the money, it didn't go so far as for her to accept any reconciliation on Wayne's part toward his daughter.

He sets a bowl of chopped onions next to the bowl of peppers. Carol throws the onions into the pan, and they sizzle as they hit the hot oil. She checks the rice.

"They'll call tomorrow." Carol takes the bowl of diced bell peppers and tosses them in with the onions. "You know they always call on your birthday."

"I know."

Carol places her hand on his arm. "Look at me," she says.

Wayne faces Carol. He stops mid-chop but keeps his eyes on the zucchini.

"You're not hoping to hear from that so-called daughter of yours, now are you?"

"Pssh." Wayne hisses and gives her a *yeah-right* look. Annie lifts her head. Wayne tosses Carol's hand off his arm and goes back to chopping. Annie lays her head across her front paws again, closing her eyes.

"She took everything we care about," Carol says.

"Only the ranch."

It wasn't until right after Father's Day last year when he dug through the trash to find a receipt he'd tossed out by accident that he knew Bonnie was still writing to him which meant Carol had to be tossing the letters. He didn't blame her. The last letter he'd read—the one he'd cried over—had sounded like a cross between a curse and a farewell. Bonnie accused him of breaking his promise to make the mortgage payments and to keep up the place. She said *he* was the one turning his back on her. She accused Carol of being the one behind the lawsuit. Even accused her of pocketing, or gambling away, the money that she was supposedly sending to Bonnie for the mortgage, suggesting that was why she wasn't getting the payments. At the time, he didn't think it was like Bonnie to lie, but he didn't think it was like Carol to steal either, although, as much as he hated to admit it, it was like her to gamble on occasion, but nothing he ever worried about. Despite his best efforts not to let the letter get to him, he found himself paying a little closer attention to the checks he handed over to Carol and the balance in their bank account. Bonnie went on to say he had thrown her to the wolves—to Carol—a blood thirsty, gold-digging wolf that had only married him for the money she thought he must have. Bonnie warned him that Carol would leave the second the settlement money was gone.

Wayne puts the mushrooms in the sink and wipes them clean. Well, she's still here, he reassures himself, and the money's pretty much gone. He never blamed Bonnie for blaming Carol—something Carol will never forgive him for. When Carol snatched the letter out of his hand, she read Bonnie's accusations and told him Bonnie could try all she wanted to make her out to be the younger, evil stepmom, but it was all Wayne who signed the documents, Carol had reminded him, even if she was the one who suggested he sue his daughter to compensate for losing the ranch. He'd tried to explain that no matter how old children get, they never take to a new wife easily. Carol wasn't buying it even though Bonnie had recanted half of what she'd said

by the end of the letter and promised to leave him alone if he didn't want her in his life. She didn't want to impose, she wrote, but if he ever needed her she'd be there. Then Bonnie forgave him. Carol spewed like a busted main line when she read that. Bonnie forgave *him*? Underneath all the chatter about not imposing herself on him, she was a freckle shy of doing so.

Wayne sliced the mushrooms as if that could help him cut through what had gone wrong. He handled the training and boarding and Carol handled everything else. He'd always let her handle the finances, like he had with his previous wives. Wayne was the first to admit he wasn't very good with money and didn't like being bothered. If anyone's been there for him it's been Carol. She was the first partner who actually took part in running things, actually loved the horses and didn't just go off and do her own thing leaving him to do his. She managed the ranch, booked the training and boarding, billed the clients, handled the books, paid the bills, did the shopping, and kept the house. Still does. All the day-to-day stuff. She always had everything under control. She didn't step on his toes, and he didn't step on hers. All the money in the world can't replace Carol. Knowing how she feels about Bonnie, he knows better than to say anything about the card, about Bonnie reaching out. And, he knows better than to tell Carol he misses his daughter. Given what happened, the feeling surprises him. Without wanting it to, getting the card meant something. Not many daughters would stick around, or try to, after their father sues them?

Carol slaps Wayne on his bicep. "I said did you check Tangle's saddle sore?"

"Yeah." Wayne lets out a breath and hardens his resolve. "Yeah I did. I put some salve on it." He lays down the knife. "She'll be good to ride by next week." He hands Carol the bowl of sliced mushrooms. "Anything else?"

"Here." Carol chucks a couple stalks of broccoli onto the cutting board.

Getting Bonnie's card today put an end to wondering if she'd given up trying to reach him. She had pleaded with him not to lock her out in every letter before Carol took the mail away. He'd been tempted to call a time or two but hadn't. He's stayed true to his word to Carol and hasn't given Bonnie any reason to hope, but now she's asking again for him to call. With the pending move and everything that led up to it, he's trying to see Bonnie's side of things. Wayne picks up the knife again. He peels the thick skin off the broccoli stems. Annie Oakley whimpers in her sleep, her paws sawing the air, like she's chasing something that's getting away from her.

He chops the stalk of broccoli until he gets to the florets and then just stares at the bunch like he doesn't know what to do next, his hand holding the knife, resting on the counter. Deep down Wayne wants to make amends, but he doesn't know where to begin and still isn't convinced that he should. He imagines that sometimes Carol had to choose between paying the mortgage or paying other expenses, what with all the dressage competitions, pasture lean-to's, a broken tractor, new tack and gear, feed, vet bills, etc., but he can't wrap his head around Carol pissing away the money. He's sure Carol would have sent Bonnie the payments if they'd had it; it was probably just that some months the piper played more songs than they had pennies to pay for. As a horse-trainer herself, Bonnie should have understood: he needed to compete if he was going to get horse-training clients, and that takes money. Besides, it looked like she was doing all right with her own business. In the beginning, he remembers, she offered to help with expenses. She just stepped in.

Wayne shakes his head trying to jog loose a clue about what changed and when. Before they stopped talking, Wayne had called Bonnie to let her know about the tractor breaking down. Instead of offering to help like she usually did, Bonnie scolded him for another missed payment, said she wasn't going to bail him out any more, and threatened to sell the ranch if they missed

any more so he couldn't ruin her credit like he had his own, before he and Carol married. It was the first he'd heard of a missed payment.

Carol snaps her fingers in front of Wayne's nose. "What? You forget how to chop broccoli, or did someone put a spell on you?"

"Sorry. Got my mind on the competition, I guess." Annie stands lazily, circles the spot she's been sleeping on, and lies back down in the same position.

"You think Sanchez is ready?"

Wayne goes back to chopping. "Yeah, he's ready." *Unlike, me*, he thinks. *I sure as hell wasn't ready when Bonnie made good on her promise.* As far as he knew, they'd only missed half a payment that time.

An ache spreads through his chest. He shifts his back to Carol so she doesn't see him deep breathing to ease the pain in his heart. Try as he might he can't shake Bonnie from his mind. He peers out the window. The back of the For Sale sign, now with a "Sold" placard across it, stares back at him. Maybe he'd asked for too much, but when Bonnie hired a realtor, Carol convinced Wayne to do something he never imagined doing. He forced himself to make the call and hire the attorney to sue for fifty thousand.

Bonnie called in tears. Carol answered the phone and handed Wayne the receiver. She grabbed a pen and pad, sat next to him on the couch and listened in, pressing her head up to his.

"How can you do this to me, Dad?" Bonnie had asked. "I don't know where you think I can get the money to pay you."

Carol scribbled down *she'll make plenty off the sale.* Wayne repeated the words to his daughter.

“That’s ridiculous,” Bonnie said. “Dad, even if it sells, I’m not going to make anything, and I still won’t have any money to give you. We owe more on the ranch than what we can sell it for. I’m trying to stop a bleeding artery. And now, you want the money before we’ve even got an offer. I’ve told you before, we have to sell because I don’t have the money to keep covering the payments for you? And now you want me to come up with \$50,000 out of thin air.”

“What do you mean ‘*keep* covering the payments’?” Wayne ignored Carol’s angry glare.

“What do you mean, what do I mean? In four years you’ve missed at least a third of the payments.”

Carol shook her head furiously, scribbled “liar” and underlined it three times.

“Now Bonnie, you know that’s not true. Maybe once or twice....” Wayne heard Bonnie groan.

“Dad, what’s happened to you? You’ve changed. I feel like I hardly know you, anymore.”

Yeah, maybe he had changed, he remembers thinking. Maybe he didn’t want anyone telling him what to do anymore. Carol handed Wayne the pad: *She doesn’t know jack shit. She owes you.* Maybe Carol was right: If Bonnie was going to take it all away, she owed him something.

“Dad?”

“I guess that’s right, Bonnie,” Wayne said. “I guess you don’t know me.”

“Dad, you know selling is the last thing I want, but every time I tried to talk to you about the finances—”

“Tried to tell me what to do, you mean.”

“Tried to explain—”

“You don’t need to explain. I understand. I pay, you get the ranch.”

“Oh, boy.” Even now, remembering, Wayne can hear Bonnie letting out her breath. “Did you forget? I wiped out my entire retirement account for the down?”

Carol spelled out *She’ll get that back*.

“You’ll get that back when it sells,” Wayne answered.

“No, Dad, I won’t. The market’s crashed. We owe more than it’s worth.”

Carol scribbled out *She’s lying. She’ll make a killing!!!*

“I know, and you know, Bonnie, you’re going to make plenty off the sale.”

“Dad. I’m going to lose money.” All the urgency went out of her voice. “If I could just give it to you, you know I would. If I could pay off the loan and just hand over the title, I swear I’d do it. But, I can’t. Since George and I—Dad, I’m barely making my own payments.”

Poor baby, Carol mouthed. If Carol hadn’t been sitting there next to him maybe things would have turned out differently. Wayne choked off his sympathy with a forced cough and told Bonnie he had to go.

Wayne finishes slicing the last of the florets into bite-sized portions and hands the bowl over to Carol. A week later, Bonnie called again to try to talk him out of the lawsuit. She convinced him she would have to get a loan to pay him for the settlement. He agreed to only take \$30,000 even though he knew he’d catch hell from Carol as soon as he hung up. Like a coward, to soften the backlash, before saying good-bye he told his daughter not to call any more. That was the last time they talked. When he put the receiver down, Carol didn’t mince her words:

Bonnie is a lazy, lying, greedy whore who’s going to make out like a bandit.

Wayne winces remembering Carol’s tirade. Growing up, Bonnie couldn’t pull off a lie any better than a mule could knit, but he’s lived long enough to know people change. It was the

one time he yelled at his wife, telling her she'd gone too far and didn't want to hear any more out of her before slamming the door and taking Sanchez for a ride into the hills for the rest of the afternoon. By the time he got home that evening, he had calmed down enough to agree to let Carol answer the phone from then on to intercept all the calls.

He takes another deep breath, and the physical pain in his chest subsides. No sooner is it gone than another kind of pain fills him, a swell of regret for cutting his daughter off at a time when she was losing her marriage. A harrumph escapes before Wayne can stifle it. Maybe Bonnie really didn't have a choice but to sell. Ever since her divorce, Bonnie busted her ass to raise her two boys without getting so much as a single child support check from George.

"Geez, Wayne, I've never seen you so loony before a show." Carol waves him away from the counter. "Go on, go set the table."

Wayne decides that if he doesn't want to spend the whole night taking orders, he'd better lighten the mood. "Come on over here, you feisty thing, you." Wayne pulls Carol away from the stove, takes the fork out of her hand, and puts it down. Annie leaps up with a yelp. He wraps his arms around Carol's slender frame. "Come on. Give me some good luck. Give it to me right here." Wayne taps his lips. Annie bounces in circles around them. Carol laughs and grabs Wayne's ass with both hands. She pulls him in for a smacker, planted hard, until he has to come up for air.

"How's that for luck?" Carol sashays back to the stove.

"About all the luck this old man can handle in one night."

Wayne places the plates and silverware in their usual spots. Annie follows back and forth between the cabinet and the table. Maybe the money wasn't worth losing Bonnie and the boys.

Damn, he misses his grandsons. He kicks himself now for letting Carol talk him into trying to double their pot at the local casino, but she'd given him such a hard time when he questioned her about the money, he wanted to prove that he trusted her. They lost half the money! Half! He should have put his foot down: he knew better than to put their fate in the hands of lady luck.

The scavengers circled like buzzards looking for easy pickings when word got around that the ranch was for sale. Wayne and Carol had had enough the day she ran some real estate agent off the property with the rifle. Some trendy lady in a business suit, running in four-inch heels with an oversized, ritzy bag slung over her shoulder, screaming like a banshee, and catching her fancy hairdo in the lemon tree stumbling her way to her snazzy convertible. Wayne chuckles at the memory then sits at the table and stares at the empty plate.

"What's gotten into you, tonight?" Carol stirs the simmering veggies.

"What?"

"One minute grumpy, the next giggling, now glum. You got the jitters or something?" Carol grabs the plates, fills them up, and puts them on the placemats. "Eat up. You got a big day tomorrow."

"If the rain lets up."

"When did a little drizzle ever stop you?"

The sky is dry and the clouds have lifted. Wayne turns off the highway onto the back road to the MacAvoy Redwood Ranch, Carol by his side, Annie Oakley at Carol's feet. He pulls the trailer into the long driveway, and the soft whirl of pavement under the wheels turns to the crunch of gravel, letting him know they were leaving the main road behind. Wayne tips his hat to the man

in the orange jacket directing him to drive into the dewy field to park. By mid-morning the heat will bake the moistened dirt back into billows of fine dust powder as the crowd arrives and people, horses, and dogs shuffle back and forth on their way to the arena.

Sanchez moves like a ballet dancer. Under Wayne's deft hands, Sanchez collects his feet under his haunches perfectly for the final trot around the warm-up arena. Wayne is pleased with the curve of Sanchez's neck and the placement of his head. They are ready. A sense of confidence flushes through him. Sanchez passed the dressage training level tests in half the time Wayne thought it would take, and he's eager to see how Sanchez does now competing at First Level, Test 1. Cochise is coming along nicely, but Sanchez has a grace and elegance that just can't be taught.

Carol stands on the bottom rail leaning into the corral with her arms folded over the top rail, beaming at the pair. "Looking good." Annie pokes her head over the bottom rail, her ears perked high, her collar clipped to a leash held by Carol. Carol climbs down and opens the gate. Wayne pauses while she checks the ribbons braided into Sanchez's mane one last time.

"You're next, cowboy." She strokes the crest of Sanchez's neck and gives his withers a squeeze. "Knock 'em dead." Wayne leans down to meet Carol stretching upward on her tiptoes to give him a good luck kiss. "Happy Birthday." Annie gives an excited bark and prances at the end of her leash.

Wayne pats Sanchez's chest and leans back up, tall in his seat, relaxed, centered in the saddle. It's time. Carol gives Sanchez two pats on his rump and leads Annie over to the stands. Wayne gives a light squeeze with his thighs. The stallion moves forward, stops at the gate, waits their turn, still and alert. Wayne's name echoes over the loud speaker, and he ushers Sanchez in with a working trot. Wayne doesn't feel the sun beating down or taste the dust rising to his

nostrils. He doesn't hear the rustling in the stands or the chirping of the birds. Wayne guides Sanchez to center line, halts and salutes the judges: the stands become quiet. Sanchez glides effortlessly from medium walk to free walk, his transitions smooth, supple, and in balance. He half circles left, then right, lengthens his stride in trot, hits each point in canter, changes lead through trot, moves into working trot down the center line and halts, his performance graceful, poised.

They finish exactly on point before the judges, and Wayne salutes. The usual polite applause gives way to a more exuberant cheer, and yet a shroud seems to descend, engulfing him. As big as this moment is, something feels too small inside. Something—someone—is missing. He holds steady, keeps his head high, does not yield to the instinct to drop his chin to hide the tremor in his lips. He smiles in the triumph of the moment, unwilling to blemish what is good. But still he hears her voice rise above the others. “Way to go, Dad!” It is not Bonnie’s voice, he tells himself, but his memory of her voice haunting him. Even after he banished her from his life she stubbornly dared to attend the dressage competitions for months afterward. She knew better than to approach him, but, after he changed out of his dressage garb and back into his ranch clothes, he would find notes of congratulations or condolences tucked inside his jean pocket. He hasn’t found one of those notes for the last few competitions. Wayne tips his hat and, on cue, Sanchez trots out the gate.

“What do you think, old man?” Wayne stops Sanchez by the scoreboard before the barn. “Ready for the pirouette? Maybe a flying change?” They have a little time before the scores post. Wayne dismounts and walks Sanchez around the grounds, letting him cool down while waiting for Carol and Annie to make their way from the bleachers to find them. They stop in the shade

under the boxelder tree near the stables. Wayne leans into the trunk to stretch his calves out behind him.

“Dad.”

Wayne freezes. He is not given to imaginary whims, hallucinations, or even second-guessing himself. Except lately. Lately, he has given in to questioning his decisions, to chewing things over long after the bite is gone. He doesn’t want to turn around to see who stands behind him. He imagines a phantom sneering at him, a ghost reminding him of what he hopes to forget. He imagines a shadow without a body, lost and looking for the one who’s cast her. The voice he hears, he imagines, is nothing more than a boomerang of his own vengeance coming back at him. Surely, it’s not the voice of a woman of flesh and blood, not the voice of his daughter, not the voice of the woman who forgives him even when he has not asked to be forgiven, does not want to be forgiven. He rights his posture and releases the tree but doesn’t turn around.

“Dad?” He feels her fingertips on his shoulder.

Sanchez nudges Wayne from behind. He stumbles and loses contact with Bonnie’s touch. He catches his footing and turns to face his daughter. “I thought you were in Louisville.”

“I guess that means you got my card.” Bonnie’s blue eyes reflect back his own to him. They don’t hug. Wayne looks past Bonnie expecting to see Carol approaching by now, but she is standing with the crowd in front of the boards, eager to see the scores. He removes his hat and sweeps his hand across his head. Bonnie squeezes her eyes shut for half a second, looks away, swipes her cheek, smiles.

“Come on,” he says and leads his daughter by the elbow out of sight behind the barn. Wayne holds the reins loosely; Sanchez drops his head and follows. “Why Louisville?”

Bonnie kicks at the dirt. “A job offer.”

Wayne nods his head. “How are the boys?”

“Okay. They miss it here. The place. Their friends. You.”

“You still have your place?”

“Gone,” Bonnie says matter-of-factly. “I filed bankruptcy.” Wayne expects Bonnie to rip into him; he kind of wishes she would. She just strokes Sanchez’s head with one hand and pets his neck with the other. “That was quite a ride just now.” Bonnie smiles at her father. Sanchez tucks his muzzle between the crook of Bonnie’s arm and waist and swishes his tail from side to side. She presses her forehead to his forehead. “I miss you, ol’ boy,” she whispers, but Wayne hears.

“Yep. Quite a ride.” Wayne lowers his head, fixates on the green fluorescent wings of a black beetle struggling to carry a dead bug twice its body size through the dry, stubble grass.

“I hope—I’m hoping that.” Bonnie lets out a breath, not quite a laugh. “This is harder than I thought.” She kicks a dirt clod. “I’ve sent so many letters, you know, so many, but when I didn’t get an answer, I didn’t know if you were getting them and just didn’t, you know, answer, or I guess I thought maybe you hadn’t got them. And, I guess, I just had to know if you were the one who....” She kicks the clod again. “If you were the one who wanted to cut things off.”

Wayne watches the beetle disappear from view, deeper into the grass.

“I thought maybe things might be different alone face-to-face,” she says.

His eyes briefly meet Bonnie’s. The empty feeling lifts at the sight of his daughter and, in its place, his love for his only girl fills him, burying the last of yesterday’s anger. But, as he struggles to find the words, to look her in the eye, another feeling surfaces, one he’s kept at bay, one he thought he’d banished long ago: a feeling of fear. He barely has time to weigh the cost of reconnecting with Bonnie and losing Carol against the grief of losing his daughter.

“No. Nothin’s different. He wants you to leave him alone.” The barrel of the Winchester points directly at Bonnie with Carol at the other end, a firm grip on the stock, a finger on the trigger.

Sanchez jerks his head, whinnies, and shoots his ears forward. Wayne shortens the reins, purrs to ease the nerves in his stallion. In the distance Annie barks and strains against the leash tied to the boxelder.

Shouts go up from the crowd standing around the scoreboard. Wayne hears his name, then cheers, even whistles. A chorus of dogs bark, horses neigh. The noise puts Wayne on edge. Frustration surges in him, feeling forced to choose between the two women he loves in his life. He grips too hard on the reins, unintentionally yanking the end of Sanchez’s bridle. He jerks his head fighting the stab of the bit and skitters backward, brushing his flank against the side of the barn, and rears. Wayne shoves his daughter behind him, shields her from the end of the barrel, simultaneously purrs, coos until Sanchez calms. He hands the reins to Bonnie.

“Carol,” Wayne says and gently places his hand around the Winchester’s muzzle, pushing the barrel toward the sky. “Come on, let me have that.”

“I want her out of here.” She doesn’t let go of the rifle.

“She was just leaving, weren’t you Bonnie?” He faces his daughter, unquestionable determination in his eyes. Beneath her tremors, he sees her courage, her strength, two qualities he lacks, and knows it is because of that that she will understand, will be okay.

“If that’s what you want,” she says.

Wayne sees the unspoken plea brimming in her eyes before the tears fall.

“That’s what I want,” he says.

Wayne feels the weight of the Winchester in his hand as Carol loosens her grip. He lowers the shotgun and turns his back to Bonnie. He closes his eyes and hears the crunch of gravel as she walks away. Annie stops barking, and he imagines Bonnie with her arms around Annie. He imagines himself sitting on the edge of the boulder looking down from the height of the bluff. He imagines watching the lightning expose the valley below, illuminating the horses huddled together, Cochise next to Tangle, the foals nestled between the mares and geldings. He doesn't want to open his eyes ever again.

After What You Did

I pull out another loose thread, blood red, from our autumn patterned comforter; the leaves are perpetually falling. I fixate on the bedspread, variations of orange, red, and amber shades. You return from making the phone call and settle yourself back on the bed, leaning against your pillow, and extending your legs before you. I'm sitting right where you left me, on my side, my legs tucked up. I didn't try to listen in. I didn't want to hear your good-byes, and you wanted me to trust you, our first step in trying to repair our marriage.

"She agreed? No more contact?"

"Yes. It's over."

I look away. I don't want to look at you right now. If I do I'll break down, and I'm not ready to do that. Really, I want to call you names, make threats, reduce you to something pathetic, but that would be unfair. I'm not exactly innocent myself. I knew confronting you about the credit card charges for the hotel in town—even on nights you were home with me—meant risking a confession of my own. Maybe that would be the best thing.

"Lydia," you say, "talk to me. Tell me what you're thinking."

I'm thinking about how I've ignored odd purchases over the last two years or so, all those typical clues left for a wife to find in these kinds of situations: coded discarded scribbled notes, extended working hours, and mostly the far away look during intimate moments.

"I'm thinking about the kids," I say. Scott is at basketball practice. Paige is at rehearsal. They're good kids, mostly. I don't want to think about them right now, but a stab goes through

my heart. I still want you, Gordon. That's why I'm fighting for you, for us, for all that we've worked for these last nineteen years. I wonder if this would be easier if we had made it to twenty. I imagine a nice round number would be comforting somehow; I know I'm grasping for comfort in useless places because there is no comfort in betrayal. I stop plucking at loose threads and accept that this feels lousy. Not much will bring me comfort, certainly not a number.

"I'm thinking I've lost you, Gordon. I feel lost."

"Come here." You reach for me.

I move away from your outstretched hand and stand up, my back to the bed. It's king size means we can sleep through the night without ever touching each other. Maybe that's what started it all. We bought it about two years ago to replace the queen-size one we bought nine years before that.

"I can't take it all in right now," I say and go into the walk-in closet, but I don't know what I'm doing in here. I run my hand across the sleeves of your button down dress shirts and watch them flutter back in place. Your side is sparse with room to add more. When I first started suspecting you were involved with another woman, you had just been promoted to Vice President, so I tried to believe the strange expenses and longer hours were due to the new work demands and berated myself for not trusting you. Then I found the note in your shirt pocket: no name, just a simple "I will never forget today." I tell myself your affair is what drove me to do what I did, starting soon after I found the note. The right thing would be to tell you, too, but I'm not ready to spare you the guilt. My overnight bag sits in the far corner. I grab it and know what I'll do now. "I need to think," I say. I throw in a few items for the night and grab my toothbrush out of the master bathroom. A box of black hair dye to touch up your gray side burns sits on the

counter. “I’ll be at Rene’s or maybe Janelle’s for the night.” I pass you on the bed and grab my cell off the dresser.

“Can we talk tomorrow?” you want to know.

“Yes. I think so. I’ll call you.” I stop at the bedroom threshold and add, “You’ll need to pick up the kids tonight.”

“What’ll I tell them?” you ask.

“Tell them I had to deliver a last minute order in San Francisco,” I say.

I get half way down the stairs and come back up. You haven’t moved. Your eyes, brooding, look up at me—know me. You wait. There are lines around your eyes, creases in your forehead. Even so, you look dignified, healthy, fit for your age, attractive.

“Who was it?” I demand, once again, even though you have refused to answer each time.

“Don’t,” you say. “Don’t do that. It doesn’t matter. It’s over.”

“It doesn’t matter?” I sound shrill. I have no right to make demands. I should tell you, too. I can’t. We stare without flinching, willing—daring—the other to give in. Finally, I give you this round and leave.

Rene doesn’t answer her phone. Neither do you, Janelle, but I drive by and see the lights are on at your place, illuminating the brilliant yellow leaves of the poplar trees surrounding your house. I pull into your driveway lined with azalea bushes whose petals, turning to brown, now carpet the ground beneath them and park behind your coupe.

You crack the door open before I can ring the doorbell. You have a pink, pastel towel wrapped around your head like a turban and pull your white robe close, tightening the belt

around your slender waist. Your eyes are red, your “Hi, Lydia” too perky, making your smile look forced and tentative.

“Is something the matter?” I ask and scold myself for rushing over, for not asking if now is a good time. You’ve always felt like my big sister even though you’re a couple of years younger than I am. You were there for me when I turned to you for help as the only other “older” student when I went back to school to finish my business degree eleven years ago, when Scott was seven and Paige was five. You were newly divorced and had returned to school the semester before me. Our kids were close to the same age, and we’ve practically raised them together ever since.

“I tried to call.”

“I was in the shower.” You don’t move, your head still poking through the crack, still smiling. “And I guess I turned my phone off.”

“Are you okay?” I try again.

“I’m sorry,” you say and open the door wider but don’t invite me in. You step onto the porch, come up close to me. Even without your make up you are beautiful, but the imperfections in your skin show. You drop the smile, take my hands in yours, blink a tear out and say, “I’m so sorry, Lydia.” You squeeze your eyes. “Really, I’m so, so, sorry.”

“What are you talk—” Before I finish the thought, I know the answer. I throw your hands away with force. “You?” I step back. “It was you?”

You put your head in your hands. “I didn’t mean for things...” You drop your hands and take a step toward me. “You have Paul.”

“Paul came after.” I’m shaking, enraged. “You know that, Janelle.” I ball up my fists to gain some control. You step backward over the threshold, one hand on the frame, one on the door. You’re wearing black nail polish, the color once reserved only for Goth teenagers.

I want to spit on your floral welcome mat. “Promise me you’ll never contact either one of us again—”

“I promise,” you say. “I promise.”

“You owe me that.” I run down the stairs, fish the keys out of my purse, almost trip but catch myself by grabbing the rail.

You stand on the top step. “I never told Gordon about Paul,” you say. “I swear, I never said a word.”

“How noble of you.” I say as I get in the car and slam my door shut. I back out across your manicured lawn and press the accelerator so hard the tires spin. I have to ease up to get back on the road.

“Hi Paul,” I say when you open the door. You wave me inside.

You are surprised to see me, of course, but wrap your arms around me anyway. You pull back and hold me at arms length for a moment. “You’re trembling,” you say. A slight smile plays on the corner of your lips, but you have the patience, the confidence, to wait and let me tell you in my own good time why I’m here. I wonder if I would be here now if I didn’t know about Janelle. You pull me back into your embrace. I was going to try to stay away, but now I don’t know if I will say my good-byes after all. It’s this unflappable, slightly amused, way of watching the world that initially drew me to you. It calms me now; all the adrenaline drains out of me.

I lift my face expecting a kiss, but the intensity in your eyes stops me. It is the same expression you gave me when I hired you for the sales position at the boutique and asked how you felt about working with a mostly female clientele: an expression that says you know more than you are saying. When we're at work, we sneak off to take inventory in the back room where the new clothing shipments are received. We lock the door to my office for a meeting. We take our lunches at the same time to discuss promotion plans for the opening of the new sister store. I'm the owner, you're the manager; it's only natural. You schedule afternoons or mornings off for yourself to coincide with convenient times for me to get away so we can meet at your house without having to rush. We meet almost always by day, before dark.

Now, we settle ourselves onto the sofa. I feel giddy, excited, flush with the memory of those five nights we've managed to sneak in over the last two years, always at your house, always carefully planned. Maybe we really can have more now. I'm usually home with my family at this time of night, and you're out with friends, catching a local band or show of some kind, or home playing around in your wood shop. A glass of wine is on the coffee table; you reach for it but stop midway and jump back up.

"Let me get you a glass," you say and disappear into the kitchen. The minute you're out of sight, I let out a sigh of relief and with it my fear that I would find you with someone else, but I can't sit still. I fidget with my skirt. I've always had Gordon: you've always had your freedom. I've never considered anything else, never wanted anything more, until now. We're alone together, unplanned and unannounced for the first time, as if this is as it should be. Ever since we got involved, you've watched me, encouraged me as I expanded my business, pursued my dreams. There are no messy memories. The nerves subside. I push away crowded thoughts of my husband. We've survived car accidents, job firings, long nights nursing fevers, parents' funerals.

We've cheered our children's wins, fought over money, splashed in the Caribbean on family vacations, disagreed on discipline, appeared at award ceremonies.

Somehow Gordon's confession, and refusal to tell me with whom, opens up possibilities with you that I had never considered before and that you and I have certainly never discussed before. I am not the same person I was when we started seeing each other. I don't want to lose the person I am now, and I'm afraid letting you go would mean letting that part of me go. When I only suspected Gordon's betrayal the most I could let myself want was a harmless fling to even up the score. My nerves return. I feel like I'm standing at the edge of a newly frozen lake, still too thin in parts. I don't want to wait for a deeper freeze. I want to put my skates on and glide over the surface.

You come back with a glass of red wine in one hand and the bottle in the other. That familiar longing surges through me as I watch you walk across the room. The extra two seconds it takes for you to sit back down next to me feels like two seconds too long. I will myself to hold back, not to pounce on you.

"So, Lydia," you say and raise your eyes. You look tickled and concerned all at once. This strikes me as funny, and I can't help but laugh. You laugh, too. Nervous laughter, both of us, like our first time. And then we're kissing. I'm happy for the distraction, the postponement. I don't know where to begin or what to tell you. We go up to your room.

After, you ask, "How did you get away tonight? Why aren't you home?" You pull me closer, smooth my hair away from my face, kiss my brow, saying without saying it just how much you ache for me, my body next to yours, my company, this inexplicable bond between us. The only life we've ever known is one that fits neatly between the sheets of our real lives.

*

Scott and Paige take the dirty dishes from the dining room into the kitchen. We've agreed to go through the motions of family life for now to give the kids a sense of normalcy. I tell them to pick out a game while you and I finish putting everything away. We'll make popcorn while they set up. I rinse off the dishes and put them in the dishwasher. You bring in the serving dishes and set them on the counter near the sink. I expect you to get out the Tupperware, but you don't.

"Where did you go last night?" you ask.

"Rene's," I lie. I don't know if I'm testing you or if I'm avoiding the truth. Either way it's a risk. You could've broken your promise, called Janelle to see if I stopped by, see if I know. But you let out a sigh that sounds like relief then stand behind me and wrap your arms around my body. Your breath warm against my skin, your face nestled into my neck. I have silverware in one hand and a sponge in the other. I'm pinned in your embrace and can't turn to face you. I wrestle with my desire to pull away and to be pulled in. I let the water run and pick up another dish.

"Janelle called," you say and tighten your grip, stopping me from turning around.

"What did she want?" I ask and hope for a clue in your voice revealing what I really want to know. Did she tell you I know she was the one? More importantly, did she tell you about Paul?

"To talk to you." Now you spin me around to face you but pin me against the counter with your pelvis pressed into mine. I push against your chest to get away, but you grab my wrists pushing me back.

The children call to us to hurry. They've chosen Trivial Pursuit.

You shout, “Be right there,” and release your hold. “She told me you were there. Where did you go when you left Janelle’s?”

“I told you.” I wipe my hands on the dishtowel. “To Rene’s.”

“I don’t think so.”

You follow behind me through the living room, down the hall, into the family room; every object seems to jump out at me, heightening the reminders of our existence together. The walls are lined with photos of Scott throwing basketballs from kindergarten through senior year and Paige in various costumes from a munchkin in *The Wizard of Oz* to Frenchy in the high school production of *Grease* this year. A large family portrait hangs above the brown, leather sofa.

“You forgot the popcorn,” Paige says.

I tell them to start without me and leave to make it. When I return, my game piece is in last place.

“Dad’s been playing for you,” Scott says.

Tonight, I put on my nightgown. You’re unbuttoning your shirt but look uncertain about undressing in front of me now. I go into the bathroom. I expect to see a jilted woman staring back at me. I don’t. I see bright hazel eyes lined in black, shadowed in green, a little dangerous in the way they glint, shoulder length black hair putting a frame around them. I smile at myself, coyly as if my reflection knows something I don’t.

“You promised you wouldn’t talk to her anymore,” I say, giving away that I know who it was. “Why did you take Janelle’s call?”

“I thought it might be you.” You pull a T-shirt over your head. I see you behind me in the mirror. “I wanted to spare you.”

“Spare me?” I hiss. “Yeah, it was so much better to find out from her.” I turn on the faucet. “You’re a fucking coward.” I splash water on my face.

“I was hoping if you didn’t know it was Janelle it wouldn’t affect your friendship.” You put the toilet seat down and sit on it. “She promised me she wouldn’t tell you.”

“Just like she swore she didn’t tell you, I’m sure.” I turn off the water.

“Tell me what?”

“Don’t play stupid with me, Gordon.” I grab my toothbrush.

“Tell me what?” You stand and take the toothbrush out of my hand.

“She really didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what!” You throw the toothbrush. It lands in the bathtub.

“Really? Of all people.” I get the toothbrush out of the tub. “With my best friend!”

“Where did you go after you left Janelle’s last night?”

“I told you,” I say. “To Rene’s.” I reach past you for the toothpaste on the counter.

“No, you didn’t. I called Rene.” You grab my hand.

I twist my hand free and throw the toothpaste and toothbrush at you. I go back in the bedroom and pull open my jeans drawer.

You come up from behind and slam it shut. “You aren’t going anywhere.”

“How dare you tell me what I will and won’t do. After what you did.” I open the drawer again. “You have no right.”

“I cut it off!” you shout, your face red, inches from mine. “Now what aren’t you telling me?”

I wipe your spittle off my cheeks, pull on my jeans, and pull off my nightgown. I grab a bra and a shirt. You snatch them from me and try to rip the bra, but it flaps out of your hands. I go to grab it, but you shove me on the bed, pull my jeans off, and climb on top of me. You raise your fist, and I scream, crossing my arms in front of me to block the blow. It doesn't come. Instead, you fall in a crumpled heap beside me.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

There's a knock on the door. "Mom? Dad?" It's Scott. "Are you all right?"

I throw on my robe and crack the door open. I tell him to go back to bed. Everything's okay. He tries to peek past me, but I tell him we'll see him in the morning and close the door. I sit on my side of the bed, too angry to comfort you. I want you to feel what it feels like. To be the one betrayed.

"You're right," I say. "I didn't go to Rene's last night." And I tell you where I was. I tell you about Paul. You listen; pain replaces the anger on your face.

"You should've told me yesterday." You move to the edge of the bed.

"You should've told me about Janelle."

You rub your face and heave a sigh of defeat. "What do you want to know? I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

In a strained voice I ask questions I already know the answers to: How long—three years. Where—her house. How did it start—the trip to the coast.

Your surrender begins to soften me, but I'm not sure I'm ready to do the same. I run my hand across the bedspread. "I don't want a divorce, Gordon, but I want to keep seeing him." I tell you that I can't choose, don't want to choose. I tell you that I don't want to disrupt the kids' lives. I find myself pulling out an amber thread.

You stand and pace the floor. “So now that I’ve cut things off with Janelle you want to have an open marriage?” The earth has flipped on its axis and now you are the one asking how long, where, when. I answer honestly.

“If you keep seeing Paul, then I want to keep seeing Janelle.”

“I can’t handle that.”

“It’s okay for you but not for me?”

“I don’t mean that. It’s just that Janelle was my friend.”

“You have Paul.”

“Ha!” It’s not a laugh. “That’s what she said. It’s different.”

You throw your hands up in the air. “How is it any different?”

“Anyone else, Gordon, if you want, just not Janelle.”

“I don’t blame you for getting even.” You get your pants back out of the closet and pull them on. “I deserved it, but I can’t do this. I want you back, Lydia. I want our marriage back, but not at this price.”

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Rene’s. Maybe Janelle’s.”

“Don’t,” I say. “Don’t be cruel.”

You stand frozen. I tell you to come here and take your arm, sit you next to me on the bed. You stare at the ceiling, frowning. I pull down the blankets and pat the mattress. I get under the covers and run my hand down your back. You turn to look at me, and we stare at each other for what feels like a long time, lost for words. You crawl over me, pull your pants off, throw them on the floor, and climb between the sheets. We turn out the lights.

“I just want things to go back to normal,” you say.

“Me too,” I say.

You place your hand on my belly, palm up, stretch your fingers open. I intertwine my fingers with yours. I don’t know how much time passes before I hear the steady sound of your rhythmic breathing. Outside, the wind swooshes the leaves against the bedroom window. I can’t sleep. I don’t know how we’ll fix this, but I know that it’s still too early for the sun to rise, and it’s too late for things to go back to normal.

Vita

Kimberly Dawn Clouse was born in Linton, North Dakota and spent much of her childhood in California and other parts of the world.

The journey she refers to in the Acknowledgements was meant not only metaphorically but literally as well. In her search for an M.F.A. program, Kimberly took a four-month trek across the southwest on Route 66 before landing at the University of New Orleans driving an old thirty-two-foot Chevy RV.

While earning her M.F.A. at UNO, Kimberly worked as a Graduate Assistant in the Writing Center as a tutor, taught Freshman Composition as a Teaching Assistant, and assisted Anne Boyd Rioux with research on Constance Fenimore Woolson as a Research Assistant. She also volunteered as a reader each year for *Bayou Magazine* and for the Tennessee Williams Festival play competition.

Kimberly holds a B.A. in English Education from Western Washington University. She taught middle and high school English and Drama for ten years. She then obtained her real estate license and became a Realtor for eight years. Previous professional incarnations include fine carpenter, actor, waitress, administrative assistant, editorial assistant, and bookstore sales clerk. She currently resides in New Orleans.