At the End of the World

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At the End of the World

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

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CHAPTER ONE

Benji

On the day that all the shit went down, Benji Landry sat in class and spent most of his morning fantasizing about being someone else. When he was angry, which was most of the time since he hated school, he pretended to be his idol, John Cena, the pro wrestler. He waved his hand in front of his face like John’s signature move.

You can’t see me, Benji thought. He watched all the dumbasses in his class act a fool while Ms. Caldwell, their newbie teacher at St. Bernard High School, tried to control them. The mayhem was free entertainment until he could leave.

When the time came for journal writing that day, Ms. Caldwell told them they had a choice of what to write about.

“Today, I want you to tell me one thing about yourself that you’re most proud of,” she said. “Or the one thing you’d change about yourself if you could.”

Some boys in the class called out their answers, saying something about how they were proud of being badass thugs, trying to make everyone laugh. A few others made jokes about
what they would change, like making bank and getting out of St. Bernard. Fewer laughed then.

Benji stayed quiet.

Ms. Caldwell ignored them. “Don’t forget to explain why in your explanation,” she said. And then she started her stopwatch, which meant they were supposed to get working.

Four minutes went by, and Benji’s notebook remained closed on his desk. He didn’t have an answer to either of those questions, and he didn’t care that Ms. Caldwell could see he wasn’t trying. So he sat and stared out the window. From his seat in the back of the room, the back right corner, where he always sat, he had a good view of the football field right behind the school and the refineries in the distance beyond it. He watched the white steam spill out from the smoke stacks and into the blue sky.

The day before Ms. Caldwell had asked them to describe their favorite childhood memory. The day before that they were supposed to write about how someone in their lives had influenced them. Benji hadn’t answered any of the prompts, except one. The time he hadn’t been able to help himself.

On the first day of the school year, Ms. Caldwell had stood up in the front of the class, looking all nervous, like all these big scary boys were about to attack. Benji had wanted to tell her to relax. They might be the bad class, but they weren’t that bad. She was up there looking like she was about to pass out. The first assignment she gave them was to describe St. Bernard Parish in a single word.

“I’m new here,” she said in an accent that told Benji that fact the first time she opened her mouth. She sounded too clean. “So, help me get to know my new region.” She smiled, but her hands shook. Benji saw them. “And maybe that will help me get to know you, too.”
Benji had watched her move around the room that first day. He wondered why she was so stiff. People in his parish moved with a kind of slowness that reminded him of the water in the bayous out where he lived. Way out down the road. That water only moved when something else moved it.

Benji opened his brand new notebook, the one that Ms. Caldwell had given to him when she passed out their new school supplies. She probably knew these kids never would have bought them on their own.

He wrote the word, “struggle.”

Ms. Caldwell stopped by his desk on one of her laps around the room. “What do you mean by that?” she asked.

He shrugged.

“Well, I need you to explain it to me so I can understand why you think that way.” She spoke in slow, even tones.

So Benji added, “Just is.”

Ms. Caldwell said she’d expect more from him in the future or something like that and walked on to the next kid. She reminded him of a little chicken, pecking at everyone she saw.

Benji didn’t think he needed to explain himself. He could have written a lot of things. He could have told her that being a poor white kid living in St. Bernard meant having your life story told for you. St. Bernard wasn’t like the city with so many people around, where you could blend in and disappear. He’d been to New Orleans before; sure, he knew how it was there. All those people just mixing it up together. He’d only seen it at Mardi Gras, but that still counted. People there didn’t care about each other’s business the way they did in this parish.
He could have told her that when he walked into the Wal-Mart, everyone in the store knew who he was, even if he’d never seen them before. They knew he wasn’t Catholic or Baptist or part of the Pentecost. That was his first problem—being a sinner. They knew he lived in the trailers, and he was one of the Landry boys, the ones with all the anger issues. They remembered that Benji beat up Will Jeansonne in the seventh grade, and because Will happened to fall against a brick wall, and because his daddy was on the parish council, Benji got stuck in the behavior class. Everyone knew he was a troubled kid. But they also knew his mama. And that was the worst part.

Benji could have asked little Ms. Caldwell, “Hey, you ever been walking around the Wal-Mart looking for bread or some shit, and you hear them buzzing about you?” He could hear it now. “She was loaded again, almost ran me over right there in the parking lot.” And before he could get up out of there, that story would be the truth. It didn’t matter that his mama was high because she stole the meds from his dresser, the ones that numbed him and kept his “deviant” behavior under control, and she only ever took them when she ran out of booze. And she only drank because the smell of shrimp in the salty air made her think of Benji’s daddy, and she couldn’t stand it no more. It smelled like marshy shrimpy dankness all the time though in their trailer park, so that didn’t go so well for his mama’s being sober. He could have told Ms. Caldwell that.

People there loved, what was the word, *promoting* the shrimping in St. Bernard, like pimping them out. Somehow it was supposed to bring the parish back. They put it up on the board at the parish line, the one saying “Welcome to St. Bernard Parish, Rebuilding Together.” They announced all the stuff about the crawfish festival, the fishing contests, the shrimping seasons, trying to get some tourists out there or to show everyone how good the parish was
recovering from Katrina. It was all bullshit. People who used “shrimping” to describe “da parish” were the ones who had never been on a shrimp boat in their lives.

Benji’s daddy had been a shrimper. Hell, he could still be shrimping, wherever he was living now. Benji used to go on the boats with him some days. They’d set out real early, when the sky was still so dark that it didn’t look like morning was planning on coming. They’d be out on the boat all day, and Benji would help put out the nets and reel them back in. He’d sort through all the wiggly, little shrimps and put them into the buckets for selling at the docks. His daddy gave him a pair of white, rubber shrimping boots to wear around the boat. He still had them, too.

That first year after his daddy left, Benji used to lie awake at night and think about where he might be. He imagined his daddy sailing his boat to the Bahamas. His daddy was probably eating some coconuts and lying on the beach, cooking up some stories to bring home. He might even bring Benji along next time. Benji told one of his older brothers, Ray, about it once.

“He didn’t own that boat, dumbass,” Ray said. “He was a hired-on shrimper, lowest on the food chain.”

Benji’s oldest brother Kevin chimed in then. “He got nothing, and he ain’t coming back,” Kevin said. “He’s a deadbeat, always was. Quit being a little bitch and grow up.”

Benji didn’t think about his daddy much anymore. He had never felt real angry with him for leaving, not like his brothers did. He understood why his daddy wanted to leave. Benji just wished his daddy had taken him along. But Benji did grow up, had to with his mama needing to be looked after all the time, and he figured Ray was right. And if their daddy was lowest on the chain, what did that make them? Delinquent kids left with a crazy mama, no point in dreaming about the Bahamas. He was never leaving the parish. He’d figured that much out at least.
Struggle. There was no other way around it—if you were born in St. Bernard, your story was written by everyone around you. Benji’s mama was on every page, his daddy already been erased, and he’d always be stuck in the stories everyone else wrote. A sinner from a family of sinners, doomed to hell and all that shit. He could have written that down, but he figured this new bitch teacher wouldn’t understand a word of it.

That was why her newest question was so stupid. No point in asking people what they could change about themselves—they wouldn’t be able to do it anyway. And was he proud of anything? Maybe proud that he hadn’t freaked out on anyone, not since that day in seventh grade when he beat Will Jeansonne’s ass. But he tried not to think about that. He just kept on going.

Ms. Caldwell started walking around the room, which meant they probably only had two more minutes to finish their work. She was always timing them. “We need to be efficient,” she would say. “We can’t waste any learning time.”

Leon said it was because she was using military tactics on them. “This is like basic training shit she got going on, trying to make us like those clone drone things.” Benji had laughed. Leon always said crazy shit.

Benji looked over at him, a couple rows up and in the middle. Leon wasn’t writing either. He stabbed his pencil through the front cover of his notebook over and over. Ms. Caldwell stopped by his desk. “Are we going to have a good day today, Leon?” Ms. Caldwell asked. She held her hands in front of her, like she was saying a prayer. Her fingers looked extra pale pressed together like that.

“Just don’t mess with me, and we all good,” Leon said. He didn’t look at her. He just kept stabbing that notebook with his pencil. Ms. Caldwell didn’t ask him to stop either; she just turned and kept walking down the row.
Benji looked out the window again. He wanted to savor the last minutes of this journal time because it was the only time the room was quiet, and he could think in total peace. He liked having time to think. Most of the time, his thoughts felt like they were jumping all over each other in his head, lit up like fireworks, and then when he was on his meds, the thoughts froze up and didn’t seem to come at all. But every once in a while, he got a time when the meds leveled off and the idiots in his class got quiet and his thoughts could flow through his mind in smooth waves. He wanted to hold onto that for a little while.

He thought about that girl again, Delia, the one who lived in his trailer park. She hadn’t been living there long. She’d shown up at the bus stop about two weeks ago, and now Benji looked for her every day. She was pretty; that was a fact. She had long brown hair and large brown eyes, which always had a serious look. But there was something else, something in the way she stayed so quiet all the time. He liked that she was quiet like him. She looked like someone who was comfortable being quiet, but she also looked kind of sad all the time. The more he watched her with those big, serious eyes full of her sad secrets, the more he wondered what they were. He wondered what it would take to make her laugh. But he hadn’t talked to her. He just looked at her sad eyes and wondered. Man, she didn’t even know how good she had it, being from somewhere else because people like him could only guess at her story.

The time kept ticking. Ms. Caldwell made her rounds and headed down Benji’s row.

He put his head down.

“Benji?”

He snapped his head up.

“Are you going to share your writing today?” Ms. Caldwell looked at him, and a few other boys who’d stopped writing turned and looked at him too. Leon grinned.
Benji shook his head. “No ma’am.”

She placed her hand on his desk and leaned towards him. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Benji sat low in his chair, his hands clenched beneath the desk.

“I know you have a lot of great ideas that the class would love to hear.” Ms. Caldwell’s voice sounded all sugary sweet. She was way too close to him.

“Ain’t got nothing you’d want to hear,” Benji said. He added “ma’am” like he was spitting it out. He could hear the John Cena side of him coming out, cold and hard.

Ms. Caldwell must have heard it too because she stepped back from him. “All right then,” she said with a sigh. “You don’t have to share if you don’t want to.” She walked through the row of desks towards the front as the buzzer on her timer went off. “Okay that’s time, pencils down. Anyone willing to share what they wrote?”

Jason the kid with the real crazy ADHD raised his hand. He always told Benji he could fight any kid in the school and if anyone tried anything, they’d be dead before they knew it. He was so full of shit, but still, Benji stayed away from him on the days he was off his meds.

“I’m most proud of my daddy because he’s taking me to the Saints game on Sunday. He won a raffle at his job and got the tickets. He makes me and my mama proud at his job.” He read in a halted way like he wasn’t sure what any of the words were even though he wrote them. “And that’s why I’m proud.”

Benji smirked.

“Okay, Jason,” Ms. Caldwell said, nodding really big. “That’s great that you’re proud of your dad, but the question asked what’s something about you that you’re proud of? Can you think of anything?”
He stared at her. “Um…I’m proud that I got all my behavior points yesterday,” he finally answered.

“Okay, good!” Ms. Caldwell smiled at him. “Yes, that was a big accomplishment. You should definitely be proud of that. Okay, who else?”

No one raised a hand.

“What about the second question, about what you would change about yourself?” she asked.

Still, no one raised a hand. Benji went back to staring out the window.

“Leon, what about you?” Ms. Caldwell asked. “Would you change anything about yourself?”

Benji looked over. Ms. Caldwell’s eyes were stuck on Leon as though willing him to answer her. Benji didn’t know why she couldn’t just let him be. It was like she wanted him to give her shit.

“I’d change from being in this dumbass class,” Leon said. He went back to punching holes into his tattered notebook. A couple of the other guys laughed.

“Language, please,” Ms. Caldwell said, but her voice was much quieter now.

Leon didn’t say anything else, and Ms. Caldwell moved on to having them do their vocabulary definitions.

Ms. Caldwell and Leon had been getting into it a lot lately. Even more than she and the other boys although she picked fights with all of them at one point or another. Ms. Caldwell was always on their case to finish their homework, write longer essays, read books full of big words like they were some kind of geniuses. She worked them too hard. She said stuff about how they were a team, and they needed to complete their goals together. They had to prove to all the haters
how much potential they had. “We have to work harder than all the other students here,” she would say. “You have a lot to prove, and if you learn to be disciplined in your work now, you will excel in college.”

“Bitch, ain’t no one here going to college,” Leon had yelled out one time when she was going on about their “college readiness.” He’d gotten a referral for that.

She just didn’t get it.

Benji continued to focus his “potential” on imagining himself as someone else and counting the minutes until school was over.

The bell rang then. “I’ll see you guys after lunch,” Ms. Caldwell said.

Benji fell into line behind Leon. When they walked by Ms. Caldwell, she whispered something to Leon. He scoffed and kept walking. Benji glanced at her, but she didn’t notice. She was rubbing her temples.

Mr. Perez, the vice principal, stood outside the classroom. “How are things going today, Ms. Caldwell?” he asked.

“Just fine,” Ms. Caldwell said.

“No one giving you trouble?”

“No,” she said. “Not yet anyway.”

Benji turned around. Mr. Perez raised his eyebrows at Ms. Caldwell who nodded and shrugged. Benji frowned.

Mr. Perez clapped a big hand on Benji’s shoulder. “How you making out today, son?”

“All right,” Benji muttered. He kind of wiggled his shoulder to get the man’s hand off him and then squeezed past him. He heard Mr. Perez asking Ms. Caldwell about Leon, but he didn’t hear exactly what he said. He couldn’t hear anything because just then he saw Delia
Simmons, from his bus stop. She stood next to an open locker with a few other seniors. Benji recognized Danny Thibodeaux, one of the football players, standing next to her. Benji wondered if she liked him. He wondered why she was standing there, right outside his classroom. He was thinking so hard, so many questions flying in his head, that when he passed by her, he forgot to look away. She looked over at him, and her eyes locked in on his. She didn’t indicate that she recognized him at all. She just looked blank. He turned his head quickly and pulled the hood up on his school uniform sweatshirt.

“Hey, young man, take that hood off,” Mr. Perez called after him.

Benji pushed it back down and cursed under his breath. His face felt hot. He could feel that whole group staring at him.

“That’s them BD kids,” Danny said. Someone else laughed.

“BD kids?” Delia asked.

“Yeah, behavior disabilities,” Danny answered. “Also known as backwoods dumbasses.” The rest of the group busted up laughing, all except for Delia. She stared at Benji again.

His stomach tightened, and he started sweating. If there was ever a time for him to be invisible, it was now. He pulled his hood back up and kept walking.

***

Leon and Benji had been running together since back in the eighth grade. They were the only guys in their class with any balls, so it had been easy for them to become friends. And Benji knew that having a black kid for a best friend meant something at this school. In the parish, most
black kids and white kids stayed separate. That Benji wasn’t a typical redneck like the rest of the white kids from the trailer park was another strike against him, but he didn’t care.

When they walked through school, people noticed them. Leon might be the man, all loud and making people laugh and shit like that, but Benji had a place beside him. They would ride together, die together, they always said.

In the cafeteria, Benji got in the pizza line. Leon stopped to talk to someone, and Benji lost him. He stood in line by himself. He’d been in the BD class long enough that other kids just left him alone, and he was fine with that.

More students poured into the cafeteria. Since it was nice out, the doors to the courtyard were open, and everyone took their usual spots. It was easy to tell who was in which class at school—the seniors got to take the outdoor tables near the gate to the football field as a way to get as far from the building as they could; the juniors took the tables on the opposite side of the courtyard near the library; the sophomores bunched themselves up in the cafeteria but close to the courtyard; and the freshmen got what was left. Knowing where everyone would sit was easy. What took more skill was figuring out where each person fit. Benji waited out his time in line by scouring the crowds to pick out the ones who would leave the parish and the ones who were there to stay, the lifers. Like him. He always did shit like that, didn’t even know why, but somehow it helped him figure things out. It calmed him down to know where he stood.

The lifers would end up working on the shrimp boats or at the Domino factory. Or end up in jail like their daddies. These were the facts. It wasn’t only the kids in the bad behavior class who got mixed up in shit. Benji knew that, but he kept a little layer of hope tucked far away in his brain that he was done with his trouble days. All he needed to do was keep his anger in check, and he’d been doing pretty well with that, even on the days without his meds. He kept that
hope there, along with that one that said his daddy was coming back for him with riches from the Bahamas. The hope was there, but he also knew it didn’t mean much, buried under all that weight of people telling him he was nothing.

There was a story Benji remembered from somewhere, probably in grade school, about a farmer’s old horse. The farmer didn’t think the horse was worth nothing, being all old and broken down, so he tried to bury him in a hole even though the horse was still alive and kicking. It was a pretty messed up story actually. But Benji remembered it went that the farmer kept piling dirt on the horse, only that old horse just kept on brushing off the dirt and stamping it down. Pretty soon, the farmer looked up and saw that the horse was standing on level ground again, all that dirt stomped down under his hooves. The story was one of those with a hidden meaning, about rising above all your problems or something, and Benji had always remembered it because he knew that feeling of all that dirt on his back. He just wasn’t sure how someone could keep shaking off that much shit. After a while, he figured he’d just give up and let himself get buried.

A hairnetted lunch lady held out to Benji a paper plate with a greasy pizza slice on it, so he took it from her and headed towards the football field. Leon was already there sitting at a table and drumming his fingers in a fast rhythm. He didn’t have any food with him.

“What’s up, man?” Benji asked. He sat down across from Leon. “You eat already?”

Leon didn’t answer. Benji knew to drop it. Their table filled up with several other seniors, mostly guys who were tight with Leon. Benji was the only white kid at the table. He usually left the other guys alone, and they did the same with him. Benji looked around at the other senior tables. The loudest table was full of football guys, all looking like muscled up bumblebees in their yellow and black letterman jackets. When Benji ever wondered about the ones who were
going to get out of the parish, he looked at the football players. They could get scholarships and
at least make it on to one of the UL teams if not LSU. He watched Danny Thibodeaux and a
jacked up dude named Marcus yell at some cheerleaders as they walked by. The girls smiled and
kept walking.

Danny would go somewhere, Benji knew, but he might come back. He was a golden
child of the parish. His daddy was a lawyer getting people settlements since Katrina. He would
probably be parish president some day. That other kid, Marcus, was from the Lower Ninth, and
people said he was a dealer over there. His mama wanted to get him away from the drugs, so she
moved him to St. Bernard. Folks around da parish probably would have cared more about getting
rid of this thug kid if Marcus hadn’t turned out to be God’s gift to football. He wasn’t going
anywhere, drugs or no drugs.

“You staying for the football game tonight?” Benji asked Leon. He took a bite of his
pizza. It was cold, and the cheese was all gummy.

“Nah, man,” Leon said. “I’m staying by my brother’s place tonight down in Violet, gotta
catch the bus before it stops running.”

Benji raised his eyebrows. Leon almost never stayed with his brother who lived in a tiny
trailer with his girlfriend and her two kids. The girlfriend hated Leon and always made him sleep
on the floor of their back room like a dog. “Why you going there? You get kicked out again?”

Leon nodded. He looked around but kept drumming his fingers on the table. “The new
boyfriend done with me, I guess.”

“What’s his problem now?”
Leon stopped his rhythm and put his fingertips against each other almost like he was praying. “Said I’m too much trouble, that Moms don’t want me around no more, that I need to grow the fuck up and get the fuck out. For good.”

“How you know it’s for good?”

Leon pulled up his uniform shirt then to reveal a dark bruise, spreading deep and black, across his stomach. “Actions speak louder than words, homie.”

Benji didn’t know what to say. He passed his half eaten piece of pizza to Leon. Leon picked it up and started eating, and for a moment, neither of them spoke. The guys farther down the table were taking turns finishing each other’s rhymes while one of them beat boxed.

“How long you gonna stay by your brother’s?” Benji asked after a while.

Leon shrugged. They went back to sitting in silence. Leon could be wild and crazy, but Benji knew that sometimes it helped him just to be quiet and figure out his next move. Benji knew that feeling all too well. Not many people got to see that side of Leon, he figured. Definitely not Ms. Caldwell with her fussing all the time. Always thinking she knew so much about them when she didn’t know shit.

“Hey, what did Ms. Caldwell say to you when we were leaving?” Benji asked.

Leon snorted. “Some kind of reverse psychology shit. About how she knows that I want to be good, and she’s gonna help me see how.”

“The hell does that mean?” Benji asked. “Is that a threat?”

Leon laughed. “Who the fuck knows, man. She just don’t want to leave me alone. She one of those teachers.”

“What teachers?”
“I had teachers like her before,” Leon continued. “Back at my old school in Jeff Parish. White ladies, always thinking they can change you, make you like who they are, stay on your case because you’re their fucking project.” Leon shook his head. “Why they always think there’s something wrong with me? They need to look at themselves in the mirror.”

Benji nodded. “True dat.”

The table of football players got up and made their way back to the cafeteria to start torturing the freshmen like they did every day. On his way by them, Marcus stopped short and sat down by Leon. “Yo, I been hearing you might be needing to make some extra scrilla?” Marcus said real low but not so quiet that Benji couldn’t hear.

Benji stared at his empty, greasy plate. He wished Marcus wasn’t so close to him.

“Where you hear that?” Leon asked. His head was cocked to the side slightly, not really looking at Marcus but being real still.

“Your bro and my bro go way back,” Marcus said. “I know he don’t need another roommate with them kids he got over there. I got a business proposition for you, get you out of that trailer life for real, man.” Marcus started whispering to Leon about being a lookout for one of his boys out in the Lower Ninth, how the cops were scattered with their precinct still fucked up from the storm, and there were about a million abandoned houses over there that no one was checking on, so it was easy money. “You start as a lookout, get a pretty good cut, you move up quick, I promise you. You’ll do good, fast and skinny as you is.”

Leon still had his head cocked, not answering yes or no. Benji could almost see him turning it over in his mind.

“Don’t sound worth it,” Benji said before he could stop himself.
Marcus lifted his eyes slowly but didn’t move his head an inch as though to show Benji he didn’t matter enough for a real look. “Anyone asking you, cracker?” he snapped.

Benji shook his head, but he felt something shift inside him, beneath the thaw of the meds that were starting to wear off. He felt that old anger waking up a little.

“Then you best look another way,” Marcus said and went back to mumbling to Leon.

Benji tried to ignore them. He started scanning the tables around him, trying to look like he had someone else to talk to. He went back to categorizing the other seniors around him. He saw a group of girls at the table across from his. They were giggling the way girls do when they’re all together, but Benji knew that only girls like Maggie Boudreaux, the class president, would get out of the parish. The ones who didn’t leave would get pregnant and do whatever was left to do, probably waitressing at Rocky and Carlo’s or some other little seafood place until they were old and wrinkled like that lady who served him the pizza.

Benji was still looking around when he saw Delia sit down at the table across from him. He straightened up and stared at her hard. She was harder to figure out. As far as he could tell, she could probably go either way. She was from somewhere else, so she knew more about what it was to leave a place. And even though she lived in the trailer park too, she didn’t seem like she belonged there. Benji tried to picture her as a college girl or an outsider, just passing through, who came to Rocky and Carlo’s from the city to try the local cuisine she read about in the tourist guidebooks. She could be someone completely different. Maybe that’s what Benji liked about her after all. Delia looked in his direction then, not at him exactly, but Benji felt his ears redden just the same as if she were standing in front of his face.

“Aw, does little cracker ass have himself a girlfriend?” Marcus said loudly.
Benji felt himself go even hotter and stared at his tray. He didn’t know if Delia was looking at him, and he didn’t want to know. His hands started to shake as the anger grew a little louder inside him, and he tried to think of John Cena then.

“Why don’t you go ask her out?” Marcus said. “What’s the matter, you scared? Want my help?” He stood up. “Hey, girl!” he yelled in Delia’s direction. This time Benji snapped his head up. He tried to see Delia’s face, but she was talking to the girl next to her. He hoped she’d keep ignoring them.

“Man, leave him alone,” Leon said.

Benji didn’t know what was wrong with Leon, always needing to talk back.

“Why? Who’s he to you?” Marcus said. “You’re too welcoming at your table, Leon.”

Benji looked at Leon, expecting him to say something to that. Benji had been knowing Leon all his life. Marcus was the new one.

But Leon stayed quiet and looked between Benji and Marcus like he was weighing his options. Marcus stood very close to Benji. Benji knew that if he stood up, they’d be face to face. He knew he wouldn’t be able to control the anger then. He’d see Marcus’s smirking face and Benji’s muscles would tighten, and he would lunge at him. He knew exactly what would happen if he stood up. But if he kept sitting, he’d be known as a pussy.

“What’s wrong, little boy?” Marcus crouched a little towards Benji then. He was so close that Benji could smell his nasty body spray. Marcus stared at him, like he was daring him to do anything. Benji stared back right at his eyes. They were dead-looking, beady, like a snake’s.

“What, just because you’re one of those fucked up trailer kids you think you can roll with us?”
Benji pressed his hands against the lunch table. He hadn’t been in a fight since that time with Will Jeansonne. He couldn’t break that streak now with a football player who could probably break his legs. Not in front of Delia.

“Come on, man,” Leon said. “He didn’t do nothing. Don’t mess with him.”

“What, you gonna stop me?”

Benji wondered the same thing. He’d never in a million years think that Leon would choose him over his own kind, even though they had a history. Blackness meant something.

The kids at the tables around them stood up, sensing a fight. Benji stayed sitting. Marcus towered over him. He poked Benji in the back. “Get up, pussy,” he whispered in Benji’s ear.

“He’s cool, man,” Leon said. He stood up then. “He’s cool, I swear. Maybe you got room in your crew for him, too?”

“Fuck no,” Marcus said, but he shifted away from Benji. “I’m only recruiting you. But you wanna work for me, you best learn something about loyalty, Leon.” He turned to go but not before smacking Benji in the back of the head. “Stupid cracker.”

Benji leapt up then. “Touch me one more time,” he said and shoved Marcus hard.

For a moment, Marcus only looked at Benji like he couldn’t believe that this white boy would dare fight back. Then he came up on Benji quick, but Leon stepped between them. “Be cool, y’all,” he said. “Be cool.”

“What I say about loyalty, Leon?” Marcus shouted in Leon’s face. He reached around and grabbed at Benji’s shirt collar.

“Man, I am being loyal!” Leon said. “I got your back here, ain’t I? You wanna get kicked off the football team?”
Benji breathed evenly, in and out, but there was a growing roar in his head. He felt like one of those fighter bulls probably felt when they’d been poked one too many times. Now he just needed Leon to get out of the fucking way.

Marcus didn’t say anything but let go of Benji. “Ain’t worth my time anyhow.” He started to walk away. Benji tried to run after him, but Leon held him back.

“Man, lemme go!” he yelled, but Leon just kept telling him to chill out.

“Good thing you got your handler there, cracker ass,” Marcus yelled over his should. “I would’ve whipped you otherwise.”

Benji’s face burned, and he knew he was sweating. He waited until he was sure Marcus was gone to look up. Half of the senior class was staring at him, including Delia. She looked at him with those wide eyes and a furrowed brow, and he wondered how much she’d seen and if she thought he was a huge pussy.

“What the fuck, man?” Benji whispered to Leon. “Why’d you play me like that?”

“Man, this ain’t how it’s going down,” Leon said. “Not here, not now. I got my loyalty to you, too. You don’t need no more fights at school.”

Some of the guys at Benji’s table started laughing, and Benji’s face burned a second time. He thought maybe he should just walk out of school. He could jump the fence by the football field. He tried to keep his breath even, but he knew he was shaking.

Leon looked around like he suddenly realized they had an audience. “Hey y’all, listen up right quick,” he said. He jumped on top of the lunch table. A few kids laughed. Some hollered. “Homie, give me a rhyme.”

A kid wearing a gold chain at their table who had been doing the beat boxing stared at Leon a second, then smirked. “This boy here a cracker!” The other guys laughed.
“Best you got?” Leon shook his head. He stood up then and started rapping real loud.

“This boy here a cracker, his skin so pale, but he run with the best, an’ he always make bail. Fuck all the haters, y’all be afraid, he ain’t BD for nothing, he’d kick yo’ ass, yo’ ass, and yo’ ass, ain’t no point in throwing shade.” Leon danced around on the table to his own beat and pointed at each of the boys as he rapped. He wiggled his ass, and soon, everyone busted up laughing.

A teacher came running over to them, and Leon got down before she said too much to him. Benji slapped hands with Leon. Man, he wished he could do something like that. Leon was the man.

“Don’t worry about Marcus, man,” Leon whispered.

“Hey Leon,” the boy with the chain called. “You keep that shit up, you probably turn into a whiteass cracker too!”

“Man, you know I keep it real!” Leon started another freestyle rap then, and in a few minutes, no one seemed to remember the almost-fight between Marcus and Benji. Leon had his audience, and people left Benji alone.

On their way back to class, Leon and Benji kept laughing and slapping hands with guys who rapped about his “cracker ass.” Benji turned to Leon once they got in their hallway. “Yo, you can come stay by my place tonight,” Benji said. “If you want.”

Leon raised his eyebrows. “How many times I need to say I don’t need fucking charity?”

Benji nodded. “Sorry man,” he said.

“Nah, it’s all right,” Leon said. “We good. I’m getting close to saving up some.”

Benji thought about that. “You thinking of trying to get your own place?” He didn’t want to ask if Leon was going to take Marcus up on his offer.
“That’s the plan, my main man,” Leon said and started drumming his fingers against a locker.

“Boys, get on into class now,” a teacher down the hall called to them. They kept walking.

“Hey, um, thanks for stepping up back there.” Benji shuffled his feet and didn’t look at Leon directly. The roaring in his head had stopped, and his muscles had relaxed some. The anger had left him for now.

“What, that little old thing?” Leon said and laughed again. Then he held up his hand for a dap. “This is how we do. Like I said, loyalty, man.”

Benji nodded and grinned. “Yes sir.” He pounded Leon’s fist right back. “You think you can teach me how to do that?”

“What, rap? Man, that shit can’t be taught. You gotta be born with the skills, mother fucker.” Leon pretended to dust his shoulders off and laughed.

Benji nodded. He made up raps in his head sometimes. He just wasn’t good at making them up on the spot. Maybe that was a skill he didn’t have.

“Hey,” Leon said. “You like that girl Marcus was talking about?”

Benji shrugged. He didn’t want to think about what Delia might have seen during lunch.

“I don’t know, man.”

Leon laughed. “I think you do,” he said. “You want some help with that?”

“No who’s talking about charity,” Benji said. But he said he’d think about it. He probably wouldn’t think about much else for the rest of the day.
Caitlin Caldwell glanced at the clock on the wall. Only five more minutes of lunch time. Her shoulders immediately tensed up, and she winced as she massaged her fingers into them. She went back to picking at her tuna sandwich. Three months into the school year, nothing had gotten easier. She knew she’d have it rough when they told her she was assigned to the remedial English class for behavioral problem kids.

“Behavior disorders are a growing trend with the male students here,” her principal, Mr. Wilson, had said as he escorted her to the classroom on her first day at St. Bernard High School. He opened a door at the end of a hallway and revealed a dingy room that resembled a refurbished janitor’s closet. He let out a small cough. “We try to find ways to address all of their issues, and well, we think they work best in self-contained classrooms where they can work with other boys like themselves.”
Caitlin let out a low whistle as she surveyed the room. Desks were stacked up against the back walls, and she tried to calculate how many could reasonably fit in the small space. “How many students will I have?”

“Right now, there’s sixteen students assigned to this class,” he said. “You’ll have them for a double block, to cover both reading and writing, and sometimes you’ll need to pull them out of their other classes for even more remediation. These are students who have already failed the state tests once, and your job will be to try to get them up to the basic level. Some will make it, but don’t worry, there will be some who drop out or screw up in the first week and end up at Arabi.” Arabi Academy was the parish alternative school. At least Caitlin wasn’t teaching there. Jesus, sixteen kids in this tiny room. She felt like it wasn’t even real, like she could turn around and walk out of there and go do what everyone else her age was doing in this bad economy—working retail and getting drunk every night. Maybe it wasn’t too late to get out of there.

“St. Bernard is lucky to have you,” Mr. Wilson continued. “We need more young blood in here. You’ll be good for these boys.” With that, he left her to set up her janitor closet.

Caitlin moved the desks into groups of four, then decided against it and organized them into rows, which seemed more dignified somehow. She sighed. As if arranging the desks a certain way would ensure that these kids would respect her. She looked around at what remaining space she had. She found an old table that inexplicably sloped to one side and decided that it would become her teacher station. She put it under the lone window. Thank god for that window. Against all the concrete in the room, there was that one long rectangle of light and sky. The room wouldn’t be so bad as long as she knew she wasn’t trapped.

The school itself looked pretty well kept up, which surprised her. She’d learned from the new teacher orientation that it had been one of the few structures in St. Bernard that hadn’t been
washed away in Hurricane Katrina. It had even served as a shelter for those stranded during the flood. She looked around the room and tried to imagine helpless citizens crawling in through the window, lying exhausted on the floor in the heat, and scared out of their minds as the water rushed by the school. But she couldn’t actually picture any of that. She had watched the news coverage on Katrina from the safety of her dorm room at Northwestern. Until now, the storm existed only in those images. But after seeing abandoned house after abandoned house on her drive out to the school, the devastation became real. She also realized that she might have taken on more than she could handle.

She had only learned a week before the day she saw her classroom that she would be teaching all the way out in the parish. It seemed like a foreign land. Caitlin had balked at the assignment at first. She hadn’t joined the No Excuses Teaching program and moved all the way from Chicago only to be assigned to teach in some small nothing town. She had pictured herself in New Orleans as part of the recovery movement. Education reform had a new battleground, and she wanted to be on the front lines, not out in the boondocks. She had tried to complain to her Teacher Mentor, Jeremy, who answered that NET teachers needed to be flexible and go where they were needed.

“You are here to serve,” he said. “You need to represent the program out there and make a difference for those kids.”

So she had arranged her desks and put up chart paper full of motivational quotes that she’d Googled about college readiness. She posted graphs to track their reading goals. She planned lessons about Shakespeare and the Classics for boys who turned out to be mostly interested in punching each other and throwing pens at her when her back was turned. But thus far, all sixteen students had remained in her class. Caitlin took it as one small victory that no one
had dropped out on her—she had to be doing something right. Most days, though, she was pretty sure they came to school just to make her life hell.

Caitlin had known teaching would be a challenge. From day one in the NET program, the executive board members for the Greater New Orleans branch had emphasized that the new teachers would face some setbacks. “There’s a reason why we’re here,” they told their new recruits over and over. “The system is broken, and it’s up to us to fix it.”

That first training back in June had wavered between positive affirmations of their future accomplishments as NET teachers and lessons in some sort of perverse psychology.

“Every day, when I drove to school, I thought about how nice it would be to have a minor car accident,” the executive director said in a speech to the entire incoming class of teachers.

Thinking it was a poorly executed joke, Caitlin had laughed along with everyone else. Four months later, however, she understood exactly what that impulse felt like. Every day when she made the commute from her house in uptown New Orleans, she counted the landmarks she passed in anticipation of the day ahead. She came up with pointless superstitions, like if she heard a good song on the radio as she pulled onto the highway, it would be a good day. Or if she made it through the upper Ninth Ward without hitting a pothole, it would be a good day. Or if the Claiborne bridge was open for traffic to cross the canal to the Lower Ninth, it would definitely be a good day. But the radio stations were all crap here, and she always hit potholes. And most of the time, that bridge was closed, causing her to take a longer route out to the parish, making her late and flustered by the time she reached her classroom. Needless to say, she had more bad days than good.

If it wasn’t Jason acting up, it was Sean having one of his fits. Or it was Benji being a moody little punk. Or it was Leon. Actually, it was always Leon. She just didn’t know how to
deal with that kid. He came in every day acting like he was ready to give some performance of insanity, and the class was his audience. Sometimes he showed up wearing sweatpants and slippers. He’d say that he’d thrown his school uniform into the river and was instituting a new dress code. One day he walked in wearing several strands of Mardi Gras beads like a tourist who had just wandered off of Bourbon Street. For all Caitlin knew, he probably had. He’d started throwing the beads around the classroom to the other boys. The kid was a mess. Sometimes he was high or fell asleep in class from his regular medication, which meant Caitlin got an easier day. But most of the time, he forgot to take his meds altogether. When that happened, he was almost impossible to handle. He wouldn’t follow directions, he wouldn’t do his work, and more often than not, Caitlin’s consequences meant nothing to him. He was the badass of the badass class.

Just last week, she had tried to give Leon a detention after he blew through her first three steps in behavior management. She remembered exactly how it went down. She’d started taking meticulous notes after each day so afterwards she could recount to Jeremy each stressful episode as accurately as possible. And as far as she could tell, she’d done everything right, the way NET had taught her.

Caitlin had been trying to introduce the class to poetry. Students were supposed to take turns reading from the hand-out she gave them about Walt Whitman. Leon was leaning back in his chair, not paying attention as usual.

“Leon,” she had asked. “Could you read for us what transcendentalism means?”

He squinted up at her. “Not interested,” he said.

Caitlin took a deep breath. “I didn’t ask if you were interested,” she said. “I asked if you would read for us.”
“Well, asking doesn’t always get you what you want,” Leon said and then laughed, which cued the other boys to start laughing too.

“Fine,” Caitlin said and slapped her book of her custom-made detention slips onto his desk. “If you want to play it that way, you can spend some time with me after school.”

“Oooh!” The other boys did not help the situation, of course, but it was a stand-off between her and Leon. She didn’t care who the hell he thought he was, this was her classroom. He needed to obey. She began filling out a slip for him.

“How about no, aright?” he said. He stood up.

“Hey, you need to sit back down—”

But he pushed his desk away from him. Caitlin had jumped backwards in shock when Leon came towards her. She stared at him. This kid was so much bigger than she was. He could break her like a twig if he wanted.

He leaned towards her and said, “No dumb bitch is giving me detention.” Then he walked out.

Caitlin, shocked at how little her authority mattered, buzzed the office, and voice shaking, said, “Can someone come down and look for Leon?…No, I don’t know where he is. He left.”

She asked for help from everyone she thought of. The social worker said she would call Leon’s mama to find out about those meds as soon as she was done with her mountain of paperwork. Her administrators just suggested that she call them any time he acted up, and he could spend extra time in in-school suspension. Caitlin knew enough to know that wouldn’t be the long-term solution, so she opted to keep Leon in class as much as possible.
Caitlin searched for answers everywhere, but not surprisingly, the professors that she chatted with in her online teaching certificate courses couldn’t relate to her specific issues. So she turned to NET, which promised an extensive support network for their teachers. Everyone was assigned a teacher mentor, someone who had taught the same subjects and could give the newbies advice and problem-solving techniques. Jeremy was a former fifth grade teacher at a charter school in New Orleans. He had moved his kids up two reading levels. They had written essays about how they would get to college and what they would do with their lives. They marched through the hallways of their brand new school in silent, straight lines. His class could not have been more different than hers. Still, Caitlin figured she had a lot to learn from him and insisted they had weekly meetings, usually at a bar. At their meeting the night before, he’d tried to give her one of his usual unhelpful pep talks.

“We call it ‘Helltober,’” he said.

“Huh?”

He spoke a little more loudly, as though he thought that Caitlin just hadn’t heard his asinine joke. “You know, instead of October, it’s Helltober.” He laughed. “It’s the longest part of the year without a break, and the honeymoon period from the first few weeks has passed.”

“Great,” Caitlin had answered. She slurped the slush of her melted margarita and wondered if she could get a new TM or if they were all idiots like this guy.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get through it. This is what every first year teacher experiences.”

Caitlin wasn’t so sure about that. Did every new teacher have to deal with students yelling at them? Throwing stuff around the room? Running out of the classroom? Maybe they did, but she doubted that.
All her life, she’d had it pretty good. She knew that; she wasn’t naive. She’d gone to good schools, the ones in the suburbs made up mostly of white kids like her. Then she’d gotten into an elite university and graduated with honors. She could do practically anything after college, and she knew it. She had thought about taking the LSAT and going straight to law school, or maybe taking a job with a start-up, some kind of amazing entrepreneurial experience. But what she needed next was some sort of life-altering experience, something she would remember once she landed a cushy job with her own office, something that would flash back into her mind when she least expected it in the middle of an executive meeting, and she could think with pride, “Wow, I did that.” In short, she needed to experience life.

Joining NET had seemed like a logical next step. She figured she could teach for a few years and learn about this other world—the one of failing schools in poor, black neighborhoods. She could help these students. She would make a difference in their lives. And with this prestigious program on her resume, she could go on to law school or business school and move back onto the track her life had been set. NET was exactly what she needed. The only thing she hadn’t anticipated was students not wanting all this help she could bestow.

Jeremy had patted her hand and told her to stop worrying so much. “Everyone has a rough time at some point. You need to relax more. Just focus on one thing at a time.” His hand lingered a little too long on hers.

Caitlin pulled her hand away. “I don’t have time to relax. I work twelve-hour days. How the hell can I relax? What I need is for someone to give me a break.”

“I’m trying to give you a break.” He smiled. “The drinks are on me tonight.”

“I’m talking about the students,” she said. “I need them to give me a break for once.”
“Well, you need to gain their respect,” he said. “And you can only do that by showing them you respect them too. Get on their level.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” Caitlin asked. “Be their best friend? Let everything slide?”

Jeremy sighed. “No, you need to focus on the things that are going well, tell them when they’re being good. And when things aren’t going well, focus on one thing at a time. Next time Leon leaves the classroom without permission, go talk to him.”

Caitlin took a deep breath to keep from yelling at him. Why would she try to reason with a thug kid who thought he was too good to listen to anyone? “And why should I do that, so he can tell me to go fuck myself?”

Jeremy frowned. “No, so you can figure out what’s going on with him. His misbehavior isn’t just because he wants to defy you. There’s always something else going on with these kids.”

Caitlin nodded but didn’t say much more. She ended their meeting early and thanked Jeremy for meeting with her. The meeting had seemed pointless like the others, but at least she didn’t have to pay for her terrible margarita.

She hadn’t slept much that night although that was nothing new. Her brain never wanted to turn itself off, and she found herself presented with the most obscure memories that had been tucked away behind layers of her more recent life. She half-dozed while a memory of her childhood swim coach flashed into her mind.

She was twelve, fully into her awkward stage and shivering in her swimsuit on the side of the pool. Her entire team had been told to stop practicing and get out of the pool while the coach lectured them. The coach growled something about a meet they should’ve dominated,
races lost that should’ve been easy wins, disqualifications that were unacceptable. The entire team had failed.

Her coach had yelled at them for probably ten minutes although Caitlin remembered it feeling like an hour. She was freezing and huddled in a ball to keep warm, the water from her swimsuit puddling at her feet.

“None of you want this badly enough,” he’d said. “If you did, you wouldn’t even make failing an option.”

Caitlin remembered thinking that was an odd statement, even at twelve years old. Failing was always an option. It wasn’t the option anyone usually wanted, but it was an option, it was a possible outcome in any situation. And it wasn’t a big deal to fail, in her mind, if you had done everything you could to try to avoid it. But ultimately, it didn’t matter what Caitlin thought. The coach wanted to put all the blame on them because he was the one in charge. He had done what he could for them, and after he let them go, they had failed him. He needed to regain control.

He made the entire team recreate the meet for the rest of their practice. They had to complete each race as they had the weekend before, and sometimes more than once. If the coach didn’t like the effort he saw, he made them swim again. The practice went far over its usual time limit as parents who arrived to take their kids home sat in the bleachers and watched the marathon meet.

One boy who was a few years older than Caitlin complained after having to swim his 50-yard freestyle three different times. He still couldn’t swim the time that the coach had demanded.

“This was the winning time from Saturday! If you can’t swim this time, then you don’t deserve to be here.” The coach had turned his back on the boy and addressed the rest of the kids in the pool. “I only want to coach people who want to be winners.”
Some parents didn’t like the coach’s strict approach and pulled their kids off the team that day, but Caitlin stayed on. Her parents didn’t see the lecture, but she knew they wouldn’t have objected and neither did she. She wanted to be a winner.

That memory somehow melded with her NET teacher training during the past summer. She had been assigned to teach a high school writing course to kids in summer school, eighth graders who had failed the LEAP state test and needed remediation before trying again. She sat in training sessions in the mornings and taught her classes in the afternoons.

The training sessions gave her information on how to structure lessons, how to create behavior management plans, how to keep her students on track for their goals, but putting everything into practice was much harder. Some days, she was amazed at how ballsy these kids could be.

She taught her summer school class how to write a persuasive essay with the topic, “Convince your principal you are ready for high school and give three reasons why.” After the kids had handed in their first drafts, Caitlin marked them up with her red pen. Her students were much farther behind than she had thought, but she also thought maybe they were not trying hard enough.

She handed one particularly bad essay back to a kid who spent more time and effort trying to get out of doing work than actually doing it.

“Why’s this have an ‘incomplete’ on it?” he called out.

“Because it’s not finished,” Caitlin said. She continued passing out essays. She hadn’t given anyone above a B. “You didn’t follow the rules of the assignment.”

“Yeah I did,” he answered.
“‘Meeting new girls’ is not a reason that we discussed about why you’re ready for high school.” Caitlin didn’t even bother looking up at him before she moved his popsicle stick down to the yellow section of her traffic light-colored felt behavior board. “You need to re-write it.”

“I wrote it the way I want it,” the boy said. He crumpled up his essay and threw it on the floor.

“Pick that up and start working,” Caitlin said.

He refused.

“Okay, you can either pick that up and start fixing it, or you forfeit all credit for this assignment.”

She went around helping other students for the rest of the class, assuming that the boy would take her threat seriously. But when class ended, the crumpled piece of paper lay on the floor, and he got a zero in her grade book.

Caitlin had a mentor teacher in her training classroom. The woman took notes on her laptop in the back of the room while Caitlin taught, and then later, they debriefed the lesson.

“What do you think you did wrong in that situation?” the mentor asked in their debrief session that day. She held her fingers steady on her keyboard, ready to start clacking away again.

Caitlin was dumbfounded. She didn’t think she’d done anything wrong, and she told the woman so.

“You think it’s acceptable for students to crumple up their essays?”

Caitlin stared at her. “Well, no, of course not, but how was I supposed to stop that from happening?”

“By not giving him the chance to think that crumpling up the paper is an option,” the mentor said slowly as though Caitlin should’ve known.
“Okay,” Caitlin said. “But if he wants to crumple up the paper, he’s going to crumple up the paper.” She shrugged. “He got a consequence from it.”

“Yes, and that was the right thing to do, but then, did you get the outcome you wanted from him?”

Caitlin began picking at one of her fingernails. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, did you get a successfully written essay from him?”

“Well, no,” Caitlin said. She wished this woman would stop acting like this was her fault.

“Here’s what I think you could have done in that situation.” The mentor looked up from her typing. “Explain why the answer he wrote wasn’t acceptable, and discuss what he could write instead. Help him get started on a new draft. Basically, you need to make your expectations clearer. Take control of his expectations.” She looked back at her computer screen. “This was a teachable moment for you.”

Caitlin hadn’t known what to say. She just nodded.

“You lost control of this student, Caitlin. You need to do better.” The mentor teacher had closed her laptop, and Caitlin had given herself a mental F for the day.

Those memories swam around in her head, and Caitlin thought about the ideas of options and failure as she fell asleep. When she’d woken that morning, Caitlin felt focused. Jeremy really was an idiot. The teacher-student relationship didn’t depend on respect, not initially. It was about control. Whoever had the control had everything. And the only way to gain that control and keep it was to hit these kids with harsh reality. Respect would come after that. This was a psychological game, and she knew how it needed to be played.

The bell rang, signaling the end of lunch. Caitlin swept a few remaining crumbs off of her desk and stood up. Her back ached dully, and all she wanted to do was sit back down. But she
had an idea for the lesson that she thought just might get these boys back on track, especially
Leon. Somehow in the months since that school year had started, Caitlin had lost focus of what
she was supposed to be doing—saving these kids from themselves. They were stuck in St.
Bernard, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t still rise above it.

The students ambled into the room. They were all talking loudly and laughing about
whatever stupidity had happened at lunch. Leon and Benji came in last, making it in just before
the bell rang.

“You know what you gotta do,” Leon was saying to Benji. “You gotta make her pay
attention to you. Like you’re the boss!”

Benji laughed. “Whatever you say, man,” he said.

Were they talking about her? Caitlin pushed it out of her mind. Control. She needed to
gain control. “Okay everyone, settle down,” she said. The boys all took their seats, but only
about half were looking at her. Stay focused, she thought. “Before we continue with *Huck Finn*, I
want to try something different. We’re going to start reading something every day that we can
use as a daily inspiration. Has anyone ever read motivational quotes to help them?”

No one answered.

“Okay, that’s fine. But who can tell me what motivate means?”

Again no one answered. Jason yawned loudly, and a few boys snickered.

Caitlin turned on the overhead projector to display the poem she’d printed out during
lunch. “Well, motivation is something that inspires you to be better, to do better, to become the
best version of yourself you can be. So with that in mind, we’re going to read the poem, ‘If’ by
Rudyard Kipling.”

“Rudyard?” someone called out. “What kind of retard name is that?”
The class started up with their laughing. Caitlin clapped her hands once to get their attention, but only three boys stopped. She slammed her hands down on her teacher’s station, and the room became silent.

“Whoa,” someone whispered.

“I chose this poem because I think it has some valuable lessons for all of you in it,” Caitlin said in an even, almost pleasant tone. The control started with her voice control. The slamming had gotten their attention, but she needed to keep her emotions in check.

She passed out copies of the poem. She had mostly chosen the poem because she remembered reciting it for speech team in high school and still looked back on it years later with a sense of old world dignity. The words made her think about discipline and honor and respect—all qualities that these boys should learn. At the end of her tenure on the youth swim team, Caitlin had become one of the top swimmers. She had worked hard to get there, but beyond that, she had realized that she didn’t want to become acquainted with the alternative. She really didn’t want to fail at swimming, just like she didn’t want to fail at teaching. And she needed these kids to understand what that kind of drive was.

When everyone had a copy, Caitlin started reading the first stanza. “Now this poem starts with the word ‘if,’ which lets us know that the speaker is giving us a conditional situation. If we do one thing, something else will happen as a result. But that something will only happen when the first thing is done.”

The class was quiet, but Caitlin wasn’t sure she had them under control just yet. She needed to get them engaged, one by one.

The boy in the NET summer school class had fallen into line once she posted his essay on the overhead for everyone in the class to see. She had removed his name, of course, but that
didn’t stop her from pointing out every ludicrous thing that he’d written. “Does this student seem like he’s ready for high school?” The class had laughed, and some had yelled out “no!”

She called on Benji. “What does the speaker say you’ll get to be if you do everything he says to do?”

Benji almost never answered questions, but he must have been in a good mood because he said, “I don’t know, become a man, I guess.”

The boy in the summer school class had acted like he hadn’t cared at first about seeing his essay on the overhead. He acted like he hadn’t cared that the other kids laughed at him or that he might not pass the LEAP test and advance to high school. But Caitlin knew he did care. That was why she pushed him.

“And how do you learn to be a man, would you say?” Caitlin asked.

Benji shrugged. He was done answering, she guessed, but that was fine. She’d gotten what she needed from him, and she still had control of the class. She approached Leon’s desk.

She remembered learning in her training about how the close proximity of a teacher made a student nervous.

In the summer school class, she had taken the paper off the overhead and handed it back to the student with the rest of the class watching. He looked much more anxious then. “Your classmates seem to think you could write a better essay too,” she’d said. “I expect a revised version tomorrow.” He’d turned in an adequately written essay and passed the class. Simple as that.

“Tell me, Leon,” Caitlin said, slowly and precisely. “What does it mean to be a man?”

Leon shrugged. “Don’t know, you treat us like babies in here, so how the hell should I know?”
“Language,” Caitlin said. She walked to the board and marked a demerit next to his name.

“Kiss my ass,” Leon shot back.

“No,” she said, sending the word like a dart back at him. “You’re not getting to me today. You’re not getting sent out today either. You are going to finish this lesson.”

“What is your problem?” Leon still sounded tough, but he looked a little shaken. Good, it was working.

“My problem is that I need you to finish the task I give you. Now, what does it mean to be a man?”

Leon stared at her for a while, and Caitlin didn’t think he was going to answer her. Just when she thought maybe she should move on to someone else before she lost the momentum, he said, “I think it means you need to take what’s yours.”

“Interesting,” she said. “And what do you mean by that?”

Leon shrugged. “Meaning that you can’t wait around for nothing. You have to go after what you want, however you can. That makes you a man.” He sat back in his desk and folded his arms across his chest. “And don’t let no bitch push you around.”

A few students laughed, but not many. They could probably feel the tension mounting as Caitlin took back the control that Leon had had over them. This was working better than she’d thought. “That is a very interesting point, Leon,” she said. She went back to the board and put another mark by his name. “And when you say you have to go after what you want, well, how do you do that?”

“Man, call on someone else.”
“But I want to hear what you think,” Caitlin said. “I mean, in this poem, Kipling is saying that you should go after what you want but keep your dignity at the same time. How do you think you do that?” Everyone in the room was staring at them now. Caitlin was pretty sure her class had never been so quiet. Leon looked like he was done answering her questions, so Caitlin went on. “I think it means that you need to make sure you’re a good man. You need to have discipline, respect for others, and respect for yourself. You should care how you come across to other people.”

“Why you messing with me? What’s your point?”

“My point is you need to help me help you,” she said. “You need to care about your education. Show me some respect as your teacher.”

Leon rubbed his face with his hands. “How many times do I have to tell you I don’t care?”

“But you should care,” Caitlin said. Time to lock it down. Exert control. “You should care about what happens to you. And what you do in this classroom directly affects what will happen to you when you leave it.” She walked back towards Leon’s desk. “Did you know that as a black man in this state, you’re more likely to end up in prison than graduate from high school?”

“Aw hell naw,” Leon yelled. “I ain’t going out like that!”

“How can you say that, Leon?” Caitlin went on. “You don’t yet know what the future holds. But I do. I can see two paths for you. One where you keep getting in trouble at school, maybe you get kicked out, and without a diploma, you can’t get a decent job. So you get into crime to get by, only you get caught. The end.”

Leon sat back in his chair, not looking at Caitlin, but she could feel that something had shifted.
“Or you could listen to me, your teacher, and finish high school, get your diploma, and find a respectable job and have a decent life. Which sounds more like being a man, Leon?”

“What you trying to say?” he snarled. “That if I don’t listen to you, I’m going to prison?”

He sucked his teeth.

“I’m not saying that at all,” Caitlin said. “But it doesn’t sound far from the truth.”

“Why do you think you’re so much better than us?” someone else yelled from the back of the room. Caitlin looked up and saw that it was Benji.

“Why?” Her breath came in quick gasps. She could feel the control slipping. She needed to regain the upper hand. “Because I am,” she finally said, heaving. Well, it was true. “I went to college. I’m the successful one here, so you should be listening to me.”

“You gonna take it there, huh?” Leon said. He stood up and started walking towards the back of the room.

“Leon, sit down!”

“Nah, I ain’t sitting down,” Leon said. He stood next to Benji’s desk. “I’m going to stand up now and tell you how it is!” He started pacing behind Benji. “You don’t know nothing about our lives, about what it means to be a man here, so step off bitch!”

For a moment, no one spoke. Caitlin stared at Leon, watching him as though they were in a standoff.

“Leon,” Caitlin spoke more quietly this time. “I’m sorry if I’ve upset you.” She thought maybe a new approach might work—pretend to be his buddy as a new way of gaining some control. She couldn’t let this backfire. “I really am. I just wanted you to see how hard you make things sometimes.” This was a teachable moment, she knew it. “I know what I’m talking about
here, and all I want to do is help you become a better man, see? But when you don’t listen to me, when you don’t care about what I’m trying to teach you, you make my life so much harder.”

“Your life’s hard?” He spat back at her. “Your life ain’t shit!” Leon looked like a crazed animal, trying to plot out an escape route.

Caitlin stood in front of the door. She didn’t care how much bigger he was. She would make him obey. “Okay, so I don’t know what it’s like to be a black man, but I really don’t care right now! You need to respect me enough to shut up and sit down! Or you really will go down the path to prison like every other black man these days!” She heard herself yelling, but she felt disconnected from the noise somehow, like it belonged to some other deranged woman screaming at a teenager to understand her.

Leon walked up his row towards the door. “This bitch is racist, y’all!”

“Oh, you’ve gone and done it now!” Benji yelled.

Caitlin whipped her head to look at him. What did he care? He was whiter than she.

“I’m taking this to Mr. Wilson!” Leon yelled.

Caitlin felt herself faltering. She wanted to sit down. She wanted to start over. She rubbed her eyes and felt in the space behind them that she shouldn’t have said what she said. She hadn’t meant to say any of it. She walked to the markerboard and picked up an eraser. She stared at the board, unsure of what to do.

The mentor from the summer training had told her she’d done better with her assertiveness after she dissected the student’s essay in front of the whole class. “But you know you humiliated him, right?” she’d said to Caitlin, looking at her like she was some sort of leper. Caitlin hadn’t minded the comment at the time. Sometimes that’s what it takes, she’d thought to herself.
And now, Leon seemed delighted. “This bitch is going down, y’all! Who’s with me?”

The rest of the class—boys who had never stayed quiet in their lives—sat dumbfounded and silent. Caitlin shouldn’t have said what she said.

“I said, who’s coming with me?” Leon yelled again.

“I’m with ya, solja!” Benji said. He stood up and jumped over his desk.

“You’re going down, bitch,” Leon said. He walked out of the classroom, and Benji followed him, whooping up a storm.

What if Mr. Wilson took Leon’s side? An image flashed into Caitlin’s mind of a newspaper headline that said “NET teacher fired for harassing students.” Caitlin felt like she might be sick. She could hear her swim coach; she could hear her mentors, Jeremy and that lady from the summer school who was always typing. They were all disapproving of her. She was failing. “Leon, get back here!” Caitlin seethed. She couldn’t lose control like this, not again. She ran to the doorway. “You need to calm down, and get back in this room!”

Heat flashed across her forehead, her eyes. A migraine was starting to form from pure rage. Tears stung at her eyes. A logical part of Caitlin knew that crying in front of them wouldn’t be the worst thing that ever happened. She would recover, she could tell Leon he was right; she shouldn’t have said what she said. She could have calmly asked him to come back into the room. She could have resumed the lesson. Hell, she could have given them candy and put on a movie and called it a day. But that logical part of her brain couldn’t argue with the part that wouldn’t accept defeat. That part was unstoppable.

Caitlin caught up to Leon. “Get back in the room.”
Leon didn’t turn around. “I’m not going anywhere with you, you racist bitch!” He yelled it loud enough for neighboring classrooms to hear. He didn’t walk any faster than normal. In fact, he seemed to be moving slow on purpose.

Caitlin stopped walking. She knew that he wouldn’t turn around, he wouldn’t listen to her. He wasn’t going to stop until he’d gotten to Mr. Wilson’s office. All her preparation and work on him would be for nothing. She watched him saunter down the hallway. She was aware that she still clutched the eraser in one hand, and then, the rage completely took over. She hurled the eraser at Leon’s retreating back as hard as she could.

It struck Leon in the back of his head. He whipped his head around and stared at her with his mouth open for a second. “You throw that? You throwing shit now?” He started back towards her.

Caitlin watched him. He might hit her back. He might do anything. She tried to keep her voice calm. “You need to get back in that room and finish the lesson with the rest of the class.”

Leon came up to Caitlin until his face was inches from hers. “You can’t make me do shit!” he hissed back at her. His eyes looked crazy then, bulging out of his head.

Benji came up behind him and whispered, “Don’t do nothing, man.”

Caitlin trembled with her anger. “I’m glad we can all go see Mr. Wilson then. I’m sure he’d love to hear about how you’re out of line once again.”

“You’re out of line, bitch! You think you can get away with throwing shit at me? That’s assault!” Leon lunged towards Caitlin.

“Leon, no!” Benji wrestled him back.

But Caitlin wanted to fight for her rightful place. She was the one in charge; she would show him.
Leon put his hands up, and Caitlin grabbed them. She didn’t know why, and she had no idea what to do once his clammy hands were in hers. But she held on, even as he threw his weight against her. She held them even as her back slammed into the lockers. Leon didn’t let go. He slammed her into the lockers again. Caitlin would think about it later, and she could never remember who let go first. All she could remember was that Leon’s eyes looked red and glazed white at the same time. His nostrils flared, and he’d stopped screaming at her. All he wanted to do was hurt her. She would remember that he wanted to hurt her.

She heard Benji yelling again. She saw the two boys fighting, and then they were on top of her. No, it was Leon. He smacked her across the face, and fire lit up her left eye. Her head hit against the lockers. Caitlin sank to the floor then.

“Good god, what is happening here?” Some part of Caitlin’s brain recognized it as Mr. Perez’s voice. A moment later, Leon was wrenched away from her.

She rested her head against the cold metal. Someone wrestled Leon to the ground. Then there were people everywhere—students, teachers, everyone. Someone lifted her, comforted her, and helped her towards the office. She walked blindly. She didn’t know who had control anymore, but she was pretty sure it wasn’t she. She had failed yet again.
Delia

Delia had never been in a principal’s office before. She was not that kind of kid. She followed the rules because it was easier than breaking them. After going to five different schools in the past seven years, she had learned that it was best not to stand out too much. Being the new kid brought its own kind of attention.

Mr. Wilson’s office was covered in tiger memorabilia. Her new school had a lot of school spirit, and the tiger mascot seemed to be everywhere. She looked at the stuffed tiger sitting atop his bookshelf lined with tiger-striped photo frames full of students who had graduated in years past. Most of them wore the black and gold braided ropes around their shoulders that showed they were valedictorians of their year. They were the ones who’d gone to college. Delia concentrated on their smiling faces so that she wouldn’t have to look at Mr. Wilson.

Mr. Wilson sat at his big desk with his hands resting on a yellow notepad. He was old, maybe in his seventies. Delia watched him every day on the morning announcements broadcasted on the TVs in each classroom. He always finished his morning speech by saying,
“Your choices make you who you are. Choose wisely.” A lot of the teachers seemed to like that phrase. Delia thought it sounded ominous. If you didn’t choose wisely, what happened then? Were you doomed?

Mr. Wilson smiled at Delia and leaned forward on his desk. She could see white hairs sprouting from his nostrils. “Now, tell me from the beginning, what exactly did you see happen?” he asked.

Delia thought back to what happened over the past hour. Ms. Melancon had given her a pass to get her math book from her locker. She remembered the look on that lady’s face, all puckered up in disdain. “Hurry up and don’t make it a habit,” she said when she handed Delia the hall pass.

Delia had walked to her locker, which was on the second floor and way down towards the end. She’d just gotten the locker assignment a few days ago, and she figured it was another part of her bad luck that it was right by the BD class. She only knew a little about that class, but she had heard it was for kids who were one step away from Arabi. Or jail.

There was no one else in the hall. Delia stood with her locker open for several seconds. She found the book and glanced at the little mirror she kept in her locker. Her hair had fallen flat even though Samantha Jane had promised the curls would hold all day. Delia tried to scrunch some of the curl back in, but the brown locks just drooped more. Oh well, Samantha Jane was a good friend for trying. She was Delia’s best friend. Well, best and only friend. She knew a lot about how to do hair and makeup and liked to practice on Delia. Delia didn’t mind; she figured she needed all the help she could get.

A door opened across the hall from her. The door hit the wall on the opposite side with a bang, and that black boy, Leon, stormed out. Delia had seen him before. Everyone knew him. He
was always yelling and carrying on, but most of the time, he was pretty funny. Earlier at lunch, he’d gotten up on one of the tables and started dancing and shaking his ass. Everyone was laughing, even the dean who was in there supervising. He knew Leon was just playing around. But when Delia saw him come out of that classroom, he wasn’t playing. He looked ready to kill someone.

“I ain’t putting up with this bullshit!” he yelled.

His teacher came out right behind him. Delia had seen her around too. She was real young, like she just finished college. Delia didn’t know how she could handle being with those rough boys all the time. The teacher yelled back at Leon, something about how he needed to get it together and calm down. Another boy followed them out into the hallway. Delia couldn’t remember his name, but he lived in her trailer park. She recognized him from the school bus. He never talked to anyone, never really smiled either. He ran up behind Leon and grabbed him around his waist. “Come on, man, chill out!” he yelled.

“This bitch thinks she can say whatever she wants!” Leon’s dreads were flying in all directions as he thrashed around and turned towards the teacher. “I’m not going anywhere with you, you racist bitch!” He looked wild, scary. His friend must have been lot stronger than he looked because Leon struggled against him to try to get free and charge at that teacher. Delia thought that the lady was going to get it.

That’s what she told Mr. Wilson.

“You were afraid for Ms. Caldwell?” he asked.

“Yeah, I mean, that boy was really mad,” Delia said. “She must have really pissed him off.”
Mr. Wilson frowned. His bald head gleamed. “Ms. Simmons, can you please rephrase that?” he said. “With more appropriate language this time.”

Delia straightened up. “Sorry, I just meant, he looked really upset,” she said. “He looked really mad about something that the teacher said to him.”

“Did you hear her say anything to him?”

Delia hesitated. “No…well she said he needed to calm down and get a hold of himself.” She knew the woman was scared though. She could see it in her face. The teacher kept saying that he needed to calm down, count to ten, get control of his anger. But the lady’s face didn’t lie—she knew she couldn’t win a fight with him. Delia knew that look. She’d seen it plenty of times on her own mama’s face. “And she said she was sorry,” Delia said.

“She said she was sorry? To the student?”

“Yeah,” Delia said. “She kept saying she didn’t mean what she said, and he needed to calm down. She said he didn’t know what he was doing.”

“And that’s when he hit her?”

“Well…” That was when the teacher threw something at Leon. Delia couldn’t tell what it was, but she definitely saw that lady chuck something at the back of Leon’s head after he starting walking away again.

“You’re telling me Ms. Caldwell threw something at Mr. Duplessis?” Mr. Wilson asked. He was giving Delia a look like adults did sometimes, like he didn’t believe her. “A little woman like Ms. Caldwell threw something at this boy?”

“Yeah…yes.” Delia nodded slowly. She knew what she’d seen. After that, Leon came back towards the teacher, and that other boy tried to hold him back again. Leon broke free from the other boy’s grip because that other boy was so much smaller. There was no way he would
have been able to hold him any longer. The teacher put up her hands as though to push Leon back but caught him by the hands instead. Delia remembered that very clearly because she had thought about how strange it looked, almost like the lady and the boy were dancing, their hands locked together in that struggle.

“That’s when they ran into the lockers,” Delia said. She remembered the loud bang as they both hit against them.

“Did Mr. Duplessis throw Ms. Caldwell against the lockers?” Mr. Wilson asked. His pen hovered over his notepad.

“No,” Delia said. She frowned. “No, they both threw each other against the lockers. They were kind of locked together for a second.”

“You mean to tell me that little Ms. Caldwell threw herself and Leon against the lockers?” Mr. Wilson sighed and leaned back in his chair. He started talking more slowly, quietly. “Okay, so they’re both against the lockers. What happened next?”

“Well, Leon wrenched his arm away from her,” Delia said. “He was trying to hit her. But that other boy stopped him.”

“The other boy? Benji Landry?”

Delia nodded. “Yeah, I think that’s his name.”

“How did he stop him?” Mr. Wilson asked.

“He…well, he kind of blocked his punch.”

“So how did Ms. Caldwell get that black eye? Did Mr. Landry hit her?”

“No,” Delia said. “He hit Leon.”

Benji had lunged at Leon. He’d yelled something like no, no man, not a woman, no, man. The two boys had wrestled then against the lockers, and Ms. Caldwell was behind them. She
wasn’t sure what happened next. Delia thought maybe they had thrown themselves against her, maybe one of them elbowed her in the eye. Maybe that’s how she got that black eye. Maybe it was just all a big mess, and it was everyone’s fault. That’s what Delia told Mr. Wilson.

“Can I go now?” she asked. She still had her math book clutched in her hands. She wondered for a moment about Ms. Melancon, if she’d be in trouble for missing class.

“Not yet, Ms. Simmons.” Mr. Wilson scribbled notes on some sort of form. “You’re the only credible witness to the incident, besides Ms. Caldwell of course, and I just want to confirm a few things with you.”

Delia glanced at the clock. The bell would ring in ten minutes. “I have to make the bus though,” she said. “If I miss it, I don’t have a way home. My mama works late.”

Mr. Wilson looked up at her. “Where y’all staying?” he asked. His tone was kinder, more relaxed.

Delia looked down. “Just, um…just a place down the road,” she said. “In the Cypress Wood Park? Just until my mama gets some money saved up.”

“Is it just you and your mama?” Mr. Wilson asked. He cocked his head slightly and sat back in his chair again.

Delia shook her head. “There’s my brother too. He graduated high school last year, when we lived in Memphis.”

Mr. Wilson nodded. “Still though, probably hard with just the one parent.”

Delia didn’t say anything.

“Don’t I know it,” he continued. “My mama raised me up all by herself too. Strong women, mothers.” He smiled.

Delia tried to smile back. She was itching to leave.
“It’s hard to be a single woman these days,” Mr. Wilson said. “So many people trying to take advantage of them, getting away with things, trying to hurt them.”

Delia’s mouth went dry. Her mind went back to a night soon before they’d left for St. Bernard, when they were back in Memphis. How angry her daddy had looked as he screamed at her mama. Like he wanted to kill her.

“Now, what makes it worse is when we let people get away with those things.” Mr. Wilson looked at Delia straight in the eye. “Don’t you think?”

Delia nodded. “I hope I helped,” she whispered. “But I don’t want to miss—”

“Don’t worry, we’ll get you on that bus. Now one more time, you said that Leon Duplessis looked like he wanted to harm Ms. Caldwell, is that right?”

Delia looked down at her hands and pictured the crazy-looking boy and the scared teacher and how they had locked hands. That other boy held him back. He knew what that guy was capable of.

“Ms. Simmons,” Mr. Wilson said. “Is that right?”

Delia nodded. “Yeah,” she said, thinking about the boy and how he was so much stronger than the teacher. Guys like him could always beat up on women. “He looked like he wanted to kill her.” She looked up to see Mr. Wilson writing something on his notepad. “The thing is, the teacher threw something at him before he even touched her. I think…I think she wanted to kill him too.”

Mr. Wilson raised his eyebrows. “Can you be sure he didn’t start attacking her while they were still in the classroom?”

Delia shrugged. “No. I don’t know.”
“Now, I know this is the first time I’ve seen you in here,” Mr. Wilson said. “But this is not the first time Mr. Duplessis has been in this office, I can assure you. That boy gives Ms. Caldwell trouble on a daily basis.” He folded his hands and leaned forward. “I want you to think for a second Ms. Simmons. Did you hear anything from inside the classroom before you saw them come out?”

Delia frowned. She had been too busy fussing with her hair to notice. She shook her head.

“But you did say that you knew they had been arguing when Mr. Duplessis left the classroom?”

Delia nodded. “Leon slammed the door against the wall when he left. He was…really mad.”

Mr. Wilson continued leaning forward on his desk. He seemed very close to Delia now, like he was confiding in her. “And you also said you were afraid for Ms. Caldwell, is that correct?”

Delia nodded.

“And that’s because you knew what Mr. Duplessis was capable of,” Mr. Wilson said. He leaned back then with a more satisfied look on his face. “Ms. Caldwell had the right to defend herself.”

Delia shrugged. Maybe that lady was trying to defend herself. Delia wished she hadn’t seen any of it at all. She wished she’d remembered her math book and never gone to her locker.

“You can’t really blame her then,” Mr. Wilson continued. “A boy like that starts attacking you, wouldn’t you want to kill him, too?”
Delia hesitated for a moment and stared at the bald man in the room full of tigers.

“Yeah,” she whispered. “I suppose I would.”

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“Damn, so you’re like the snitch, huh?” Samantha Jane said to Delia.

They lay on Samantha Jane’s bed eating cheese nips and watching MTV like they did most days after school.

“No I’m not,” Delia said. She sat up. “I didn’t tell him anything. I mean, I told him the truth. I told him what I saw.”

Samantha Jane shrugged. She took another handful of cheese nips. “He got what he wanted though, right?”

“Like what?”

Samantha Jane wiped cheese dust on her comforter. “He wanted you to blame Leon. He’s been wanting him out of this school forever.”

“Why?” Delia asked.

“Because he’s always cutting up. None of the administrators like any of those BD kids.”

“So, he wanted me to get him in trouble?”

Samantha Jane shrugged again. “Mr. Wilson knew Leon would get in trouble sooner or later. You just helped him get there.”

Delia thought about what she’d told Mr. Wilson. She knew that Leon was to blame. The teacher riled him up, she knew that, but that kid was being bad. He pushed the teacher. Delia had
“Do you know him?”


Delia pictured him looking all wild, like he would kill someone. She pictured the teacher hurling something at Leon. She saw her whispering into his ear. The way she blocked his hands.

“Do you really think I’m a snitch?”

“Oh girl, I was just kidding,” Samantha Jane said. She stood up and brushed crumbs off of her school skirt. “Come on, I’m bored. Let’s do something.”

Samantha Jane and her mama were the only ones staying in the trailer, and it felt bigger than Delia’s somehow. She had only met Samantha Jane’s mama once, but that was normal. Delia’s mama worked all the time too. Either that or she was out with Hank somewhere. Samantha Jane’s mama worked at a casino across the river, she said. But everyone else said her mama was a prostitute. They whispered it around school, the trailer park, everywhere. Actually, what they said was she was a whore, but that word didn’t sit well with Delia, not since her daddy had called her mama that before he left the last time.

The day she’d met Samantha Jane in gym class, her first day at St. Bernard High School, Delia had stood on one side of the volleyball court and surveyed the girls in her class. They were bunched together at different intervals as though they were clinging to life rafts, and there were none left for her. They all looked at Delia like she was trash even though most of them lived out in the trailers too. So when Samantha Jane emerged from the locker room, Delia waited for her to join one of the groups whispering about her. But she came right up to Delia and said hi to her in front of everyone. She told her she liked her bracelet, the one with the different colored
gemstones that Delia’s mama got her from her trip to Florida last year with Hank. Delia thanked her. She decided then that she didn’t care what people said about Samantha Jane’s mama.

“What should we do now?” Delia asked. “Want to go to my place?” Her older brother Pat and his friend Chase Hebert were probably there. Chase lived in their trailer park, and he’d gotten Pat a job on a shrimping boat. Now he was always hanging around after they were done with work. He wore a Saints hat on backwards over his shaggy hair. Delia liked the hat, though, because then she could see his eyes, which were very blue.

Samantha Jane shook her head. “I know why you want to go over there,” she smirked.

Delia felt herself blush.

“How about you let me practice on you again?” Samantha Jane said. “This time, full on makeover! Then you can go home and show it off.”

Delia tried to shrug, but she knew her face was still burning. She followed Samantha Jane into her mama’s room, and they rummaged through her closet. Delia picked through some of the high heels strewn around the floor.

“Here, try this on.” Samantha Jane held up a skirt covered in gold sequins. “It’ll look good on you, trust me.”

Delia held the skirt up to her waist. Samantha Jane knew a lot about fashion and was always telling her what was hot. “How does your mama get all these clothes?” Delia asked. She shimmied into the skirt and zipped it up the back. The skirt hugged her thighs.

“She’s real good at thrift shopping,” Samantha Jane replied. “She says she can smell a good bargain from a hundred feet away.” She puckered her lips at her mama’s full-length mirror propped in the corner and smeared on some red lipstick. “And sometimes men buy them for her.”

Delia looked up. “Really? They buy them for her? What men?”
“Just guys who like her,” Samantha Jane said. She blotted her lips on a tissue. “She says they want to do nice things for her, so she lets them buy her clothes. She never leaves here without looking good. Always says you need to take every opportunity to get men to notice you.”

Delia nodded slowly. She thought about her own mama always chasing men from city to city. Maybe her mama could learn something from Samantha Jane’s.

Samantha Jane pulled on a tight black dress with spaghetti straps. She stepped back and looked at her reflection. “You think Derek would like this?” Samantha Jane turned around so that she could look at her ass and get the full picture. She wrinkled her nose.

“Yeah,” Delia said. “You look hot.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” Delia nodded emphatically. “Of course.”

Derek Lopez was Samantha Jane’s new boyfriend, or, at least, he would be soon. They’d been talking at lunch today. Derek came up to her, smirking and full of swagger, and tried to tease her. He said she looked like she could use a good licking. He kind of howled after that, and all the boys with him laughed. Delia’s mouth had dropped open. She wouldn’t have known what to do if a boy said that to her. But Samantha Jane always knew what to say to boys and threw it right back at him.

“Why, are you a dog?” she had asked him. “Because I’m not looking for a dog. I’d like a real man, thank you very much.”

And just like that, everyone at their table was laughing at Derek, who was blushing and grinning at Samantha Jane. She just smiled with her head cocked to one side like she was looking at an adorable puppy. Delia was in awe of how Samantha Jane could do shit like that.
Samantha Jane slipped on some gold stilettos and tried to walk through the narrow bedroom as though it was a catwalk. She flipped her long, blonde hair as she turned around and stared into the mirror. She looked glamorous. Delia frowned at her own reflection in the mirror. The skirt was pretty, but it didn’t look good on her. She looked so plain, so boring.

Samantha Jane went back to applying more lipstick.

“Do me now?” Delia asked.

Samantha Jane took her makeup bag and found some deep purple eyeshadow. “Ooh, this will look real good, girl,” she said. “Make your eyes pop. Chase’ll love it!”

Delia rolled her eyes, but she sat very still while Samantha Jane worked her magic. She re-curled Delia’s hair into soft ringlets. She gave Delia a leopard-print top to wear with the skirt. When she was finished, she pushed Delia in front of the mirror. “What do you think?” she asked.

Delia smoothed the skirt and thought she probably looked pretty sexy. She definitely didn’t look plain anymore. Samantha Jane held up her cell phone and took a photo of them.

“Damn,” Samantha Jane said. “We look good, girl!”

Delia looked at their picture. She figured Samantha Jane was right. They looked good enough for people to notice.

“You think I can keep this?” Delia asked. She was kidding of course, but she took in how the skirt fit her, how it looked on her. She wanted to commit it to memory.

Samantha Jane didn’t hear her. She was busy giggling at something on her phone. “Guess Derek does like this outfit,” she said.

They took a few more photos, posing in different ways like they’d seen girls do on Facebook. After a while, they got bored and changed back into their school clothes. Delia didn’t leave until it started to get dark. Pat would give her shit if she stayed out too late. He was
protective like that. Delia sometimes thought that Pat believed he was both her brother and her
daddy. But he needed to remember she was almost eighteen now, and she didn’t need anyone
telling her what to do. Seeing the lights on in their trailer, glowing from every window, made her
feel like she was walking to a home filled up with family. She liked knowing he was there.

Pat and Chase sat in the living room watching wrestling on TV and spitting dip into
empty soda bottles. Chase gave her a smile when Delia walked in.

“Looking good there, little Delia,” Chase said. “Why don’t you look like that all the
time?”

Pat swiped at him and knocked off Chase’s hat. “Come on man, leave her alone.”

Chase laughed and picked up his hat. “I didn’t mean nothing by it. You’ve got a pretty
sister.”

“I swear, you always have to piss me off,” Pat said. He turned back to Delia and shook
his head. “Delia, go wash that stuff off before I have to send this boy home.”

Delia rolled her eyes and went to fridge to see if there was anything to eat. She saw the
already expired gallon of milk and a half carton of eggs, a bottle of ketchup, ranch dressing, and
several bottles of wine.

“I heard some kids talking at the Circle K today,” Pat called after her. “Something about
a fight at your school today? A kid attacked a teacher?”

“I don’t know if it was that big a deal,” Delia said quietly.

“Sure was,” Pat said. “I heard the kid almost shot her ’til someone wrestled him to the
ground.”

“Dude’s fucking crazy,” Chase said. “I remember him from when I was at St. Bernard.
He was just a freshman and fucking crazy back then too.”
Delia turned and went into the bathroom. She had almost been able to forget about what had happened in the hallway earlier. Now she saw Leon and Ms. Caldwell and Benji in the hallway even as she checked herself out in the mirror. She tried to focus on the makeup job that Samantha Jane had done instead. When she squinted, she figured she could see what she might look like as she got older. She wondered if she made herself look like that every day if Chase would keep noticing her. She opened her eyes wide again. She pursed her lips into a bow shape, like she and Samantha Jane had practiced in front of the mirror. Everyone would notice her, Delia decided. She would get them all to notice her, and maybe she would have a better story after all.

After a few minutes, she washed the makeup off. She watched the colors accumulate on her washcloth, all mixed together. The girl she saw in the mirror looked plain once again, bland like a potato chip.

She yelled to Pat to order a pizza and ducked into her room to start her homework. She started on an English essay but mostly listened to Pat and Chase in the living room, hooting about WWE. She wondered if Chase had a girlfriend. When the pizza came, Chase said he’d go on home and let them eat dinner in peace.

Delia walked into the kitchen and sidled up to the kitchen table. She smiled at Chase as he said good-bye. She thought about how Samantha Jane made jokes around the guys she liked. She racked her brain for something to say while Pat paid the pizza guy. She came up with nothing, and Chase turned to go.

He opened the screen door but turned back to look at Delia. “Ya know, you look pretty good like that too,” Chase whispered when Pat had gone to the kitchen to get some paper plates. He winked and then walked out into the night.
There wasn’t much to do for fun in the parish. The plan every weekend was the same: find someone with a car or, at least, find someone who could steal their parents’ keys. And the night after the fight at school was the same as any other. Delia found herself in her mama’s jeep with Pat at the wheel. Their mama had left for the weekend with Hank in his pickup, and there was no telling when she’d be back. Delia didn’t care so much, driving with Pat and Samantha Jane wherever they wanted to go. They cruised up and down the highway roads with the windows down and country music blasting. Delia and Samantha Jane shrieked as the wind whipped their hair.

They met other cars, taillights blinking like demons out there in the blackness. The cars followed each other down the winding roads to Highway 300. At the end of Highway 300, right past Delacroix, the road ran out, right into the bayou. A battered tin sign at the edge of the water read, “You’re at the End of the World.”

Most kids ended up at the End of the World on Saturday nights. No cops came down there to mess with them, so someone always brought a keg or two and lit a fire down on the oyster shell beach. Delia and Samantha Jane wore tight jeans and sequined tank tops they took from Samantha Jane’s mama’s closet. A full moon shone, coloring everything bright and silvery. The air down by the bayou was briny and tinged with the scent of shrimp fresh from the boats across the water. Theirs was one of the first cars to arrive, and Delia liked knowing that she was somewhere where other people wanted to be, that everyone was driving in her direction right at that moment.
Samantha Jane climbed down from the jeep and straightened herself out. “You see Derek anywhere?”

“No,” Delia said. She hopped down from the jeep and held the sequined shirt down to keep it from riding up her belly. “I’m sure you’ll know when he gets here though.”

“I don’t know what you could mean,” Samantha Jane said in a drawl like she was that Scarlett girl from the *Gone With the Wind* movie.

Delia rolled her eyes.

“Oh, come on,” Samantha Jane said and dragged Delia over to the keg that had been set up in the bed of someone’s pickup truck. A bunch of guys, some of them Delia recognized from school, others who looked like they had graduated years ago, stood next to the keg chugging from their red cups. Most of them looked up when Samantha Jane walked by them. She kind of swung her hips when she walked. Delia idly wondered if Samantha Jane was prettier than she was.

They helped themselves to the cheap beer. Delia didn’t like beer much, but she liked that drinking it gave her something to do, especially since it was something everyone else was doing. She took sips and looked around. Kids from school stood in little packs around the beach. Between the firelight and the moonlight, no one looked the same as they did at school. Delia could almost swear they were all different people, just there to drink and laugh and make out with someone. Samantha Jane said it was all that social lubricant. Delia nodded like she knew what she meant and took another gulp of beer.

The beach filled up with more pickups, and Derek climbed out of one of them. He tried sauntering over to them like all he wanted was a drink, but when Samantha Jane flipped her hair
as he walked by, he suddenly changed course and went right to her. They started flirting, and Delia went to refill her cup. When she turned around, they had gone off somewhere.

Delia figured they went to make out behind some trees in the dark, but she wished Samantha Jane had given her a heads up. She sighed and decided to see if she could find Pat. She started to push by a group of girls when she overheard them talking about the fight at school.

“I heard he tried to strangle her.”

“Man, he could’ve killed her.”

“I never thought Leon was that bad! That’s so fucked up!”

“You were there, right, Delia?”

Delia turned to see Maggie Boudreaux looking at her. Maggie had never said more than two words to Delia since she’d started at St. Bernard High even though they were in three of the same classes. Delia even sat next to her in English. Maggie was a cheerleader, popular and pretty with hair that was always perfectly curled, and she didn’t usually have a reason to look in Delia’s direction. Hearing her name come out of Maggie’s mouth felt like a little jolt of electricity to Delia, something to wake her up.

“Yeah,” Delia stammered. “I was by my locker…when the fight started.”

Maggie’s eyes grew wide. “So you saw everything?”

Delia nodded. “Yeah,” she said. She wasn’t sure what to say next, so she drank some more of her beer while she thought on it.

“What was it like?” the girl next to Maggie asked. She was another cheerleader, a really pretty but prissy girl named Beth. “Were you scared?”

Delia thought about it a moment. “I don’t know, it all happened kind of fast. I think I was too…shocked, I guess.”
“I know what you mean,” another girl said. “I mean, I knew those BD kids were crazy, but I can’t believe something like this happened at St. Bernard.”

“Yeah,” Delia chimed in again. “And that teacher Ms. Caldwell is just so young. I was actually scared for her, once I realized how mad Leon was. I just wish I could have stopped it.” Delia meant what she said, but it was nice being able to say it to these popular girls who never would have talked to her otherwise. They were staring at her like they were looking at someone who’d survived a war.

“You’re so lucky he didn’t go after you next,” Beth said.

Delia nodded and acted like she had feared for her life that day. Danny Thibodeaux came up to them then. He had a cup of beer in each hand, and some of it had sloshed onto his shirt.

“What y’all talking about?” he said.

“How Leon Duplessis almost killed that teacher on Friday,” Maggie said. “Delia saw the whole thing. She almost tried to break it up.”

“You’re a brave one, girl,” Danny said. “I know if I’d been there, I woulda knocked him out.” He winked at Delia. “I got your back.”

Delia laughed. “I’ll look for you next time.”

Danny tipped his ballcap to her. “That’s right.”

Maggie and the other girls turned towards each other and started talking about something else. Danny bobbed to the country song coming from the pickup near them and stumbled against Delia. “Sorry cutie, I’m just trying to dance.” He tried some other dance moves, looking sillier by the minute.

Delia smiled. Samantha Jane was always saying that she thought Danny liked Delia. He did talk to her at school a lot, but Delia wasn’t so sure. He probably liked everyone, and he could
go out with any girl he wanted, being a cool football player and all. But Delia wondered if she could like him. He did have nice eyes and had that cute preppy boy charm, but he was no Chase. She figured if he kept talking to her though, she had a reason to keep standing there. Delia sipped from her cup and wondered if she’d feel like dancing soon enough.

“You wanna go for a walk, cutie?” Danny asked. Delia choked out a yes. She wasn’t drunk enough not to feel her face burn at the thought of a boy asking her to go somewhere at the End of the World.

They walked towards the water, and Danny handed her one of his cups. Delia smelled a whiff of something alcoholic, but it wasn’t filled with beer.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Just some juice,” he said and laughed.

She took a sip. It burned her throat on the way down. She coughed.

“Oh, and some rum,” he said. “Gonna get this party started!” He started yelling at some football players nearby. They held up their cups and cheered.

Delia drank more of the rum and wondered if Danny wanted to make out with her. Delia had only made out with one boy before, Ryan Shipley, back in Memphis, a year before they’d moved here. She hadn’t kissed anyone since they’d moved to Louisiana.

Danny said he’d be right back and headed off towards the bushes. She drank more of his rum drink while she waited for him to come back. The water lapped lazily at the shore, and the reflection of the moon broke up into little ripples of light. She could hear night birds and frogs chirping in the shadows. Fireflies winked their lights as they bobbed lazily over the water.

Delia downed the rest of Danny’s drink and set the cup down. She gathered a few stones from the beach and tried to skip them across the water. She tried to get them to skim the surface
like her daddy had shown her once, but most of them just dropped into the water and stayed there. She saw out of the corner of her eye that someone else was skipping stones too. He seemed pretty good too; they were actually skipping over the water.

“Hey,” she called out, louder than she meant to. Her voice echoed out over the water.

“How are you doing that?”

The boy turned to look at her. It was Benji, the boy from the fight. Delia looked around quickly, but she didn’t see Leon anywhere. Of course he wasn’t there. He was probably still locked up. Hauled off to jail because of what she said. Delia felt a little queasy then, but something compelled her to walk over to him.

“Hey,” she said again. “You, um, are you doing okay?”

He shrugged. Delia had never talked to him before, and she didn’t know what else to say. He looked all slouchy and turned away from her like he didn’t want to talk to her. She figured he saw her as the enemy too. She did feel kind of bad though. “I’m sorry about your friend,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said. “Whatcha gonna do though? He’s screwed.” He picked up another rock and chucked it. It skipped perfectly across the calm water.

“Why did he do it?” she asked. “It was so stupid and so…so wrong.”

“So what?”

“So what?” She thought about what Mr. Wilson had said to her. Delia felt hot again but this time with anger. “What, you think it’s okay to go around attacking teachers? Female teachers?”

Benji didn’t look at her. “You wouldn’t get it,” he said softly. “Ain’t no one ever going to know the real story.”
Delia didn’t lower her voice. “I was right there,” she said. “I know the whole story.”

He didn’t answer. He was looking at his hands, like he wanted her to go away.

“What?” Delia crossed her arms and stumbled a little on the shells and gravel. “I know what I saw.”

Benji picked up another stone. “Yeah, you see her throw that eraser at him?”

Delia looked down as though she was trying to find a stone. “I…she was just defending herself.” She was pretty sure that was what happened.

Benji skipped the stone. He had great rhythm or whatever it was you needed to skip a stone. “You can call it whatever you want.” He turned to look at her. The firelight from farther up the beach flickered on his face. His eyes glittered in it. “I know you shouldn’t hit a woman, I know that, I’m not the asshole everyone thinks I am. But that woman had no right to fuck with Leon the way she did. If I were him, I would have hit her too.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t think you would.”

“Why’s that?” he asked.

“Because you had a chance, and you tried to stop him.” She thought back to that moment. Benji had held Leon back, she was certain. “You’re not an asshole because you tried to stop it.”

Benji shrugged. “I just tried to do right by him. Didn’t make no difference anyhow.”

“You really care about him, huh?” Delia said quietly.

Benji didn’t answer. He went back to skipping stones.

Delia could hear the whooping from up the beach where someone was doing a keg stand. She could also hear the soft lapping of the water onto the crushed oyster shells and stones at their feet.

“Ya know,” Benji finally said. “You’re different than I thought you’d be.”
Delia narrowed her eyes. “Different how?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Feistier.” He grinned.

Delia grinned back. Maybe everyone was completely different at the End of the World.

“Thanks,” she said, “I guess.”

“Leave her alone, little man.” Danny’s voice came from behind them. Delia turned to see him strolling up to her. He held another cup in his hand. “I brought you a shot,” he said. “Come on back to the fire pit. Everyone’s doing them.”

“Yeah, okay,” Delia said. She turned to Benji. “Um, you coming?” She felt bad just leaving him there.

Danny scoffed. “Yeah, sorry man, we only have shots for people who aren’t BD kids.” He held his hands up in front of him like he was trying to keep the peace. “We don’t need any more fights tonight.”

Benji muttered something under his breath, but when Delia said bye to him, he gave her a quick smile.

“Sorry about that, cutie,” Danny said. “That guy doesn’t know where he belongs, I guess.” He slung his arm around her, a little too hard. She stumbled, her heels slipping on the oyster shells again. She leaned into him to gain her balance, and they fell against each other. Danny smelled like sweat and something else, probably rum. “Hold on there, girl!” Danny laughed.

Delia straightened up a little. She didn’t want everyone around them to think she was being slutty or something. She wondered if Benji saw. Or if Chase saw. She couldn’t tell where everyone was anymore, but she let Danny pull her towards the fire.
Delia stood in a circle with Maggie and her girlfriends and some of the football guys. One of the guys was pouring shots from a plastic bottle of something clear. She had no idea what it was, but she took the cup from Danny who held his cup to hers in a cheer.

“To senior year!” he yelled. Everyone whooped in excitement and drank. Delia did too, but the liquid burned worse than Danny’s drink from before. She sputtered and coughed. A few of the guys laughed and said she was a lightweight. Delia smiled but kept coughing. She could see Benji walking by on the other side of the fire. She turned away from him and offered her cup to the guy with the bottle for her next shot.

Three shots later, Delia thought she might get sick. She thought about finding her mama’s jeep and lying down for a minute. She walked towards where she thought they’d parked earlier. She thought absently about where in the world Samantha Jane was. Lights from someone’s headlights danced across her eyes, and she stumbled. Someone grabbed her by the arms before she fully wiped out on the oyster shells.

“You all right there, little one?”

Delia looked up to see a hazy image of Chase holding onto her. “Yeah,” she said. She hoped to God she didn’t barf now.

“Maybe we oughta get you home,” he said. He was still holding onto her.

She nodded. “Yeah,” she said. She let him guide her, and then she felt the metal of a truckbed as Chase lay her down.

“Don’t worry,” Chase said. “You’ll be okay.” She could feel his hand rubbing her back.

She could hear Pat calling her name. Delia sat up. “Pat?” she said feebly.

“Delia,” Pat said. He sounded out of breath as he walked over to them. “What are you doing over here?”
Delia squinted at Pat but wasn’t sure what he was even asking. Her head ached, and she felt dizzy, like she’d just gotten off a merry-go-round. She lay back down and closed her eyes. She could hear Pat and Chase arguing, but at the same time, she wasn’t sure if she was dreaming. Her head hurt so bad.

“You just thought you’d take her off by herself, huh?” Pat sounded mad now.

“Whoa, whoa, man,” Chase said. “I’m just trying to help out. She looked like she needed to lie down.”

“And your truck was the best place for that?”

“You need to watch it now,” Chase said quietly. “I’m just trying to help.”

“You wanna help? Help me get her to my car.”

Delia felt hands under each of her armpits, forcing her to sit up. Somehow they got back to her mama’s jeep, and Pat tucked her into the backseat. She lay down. Chase helped prop her feet up on something. Delia closed her eyes tight to try to keep the world as still as possible.

“You coming with or something?” Pat asked someone.

Delia realized dully that Chase was still there. God, she hoped she didn’t vomit with him standing there.

“Nah, man, I’m going now,” Chase said. “Just wanted to make sure she’s doing okay.”

“She’ll be fine, Romeo,” Pat said. “She just needs to sleep it off.”

Delia fell asleep at some point after that and woke up to feel Pat carrying her into the trailer. But when she fell asleep again, she dreamt of Romeo and Juliet, skipping rocks together on an oyster shell beach.
CHAPTER FOUR

Ms. Caldwell

Caitlin flung open the bathroom cabinets looking for the aspirin she was sure her roommate had put somewhere. After searching each shelf, she found two dead roaches but no aspirin. She slumped onto the floor and pulled her knees to her chest. It was eleven in the morning. She couldn’t remember the last time she had slept that late.

Caitlin’s cell phone vibrated on the counter. Jeremy’s number flashed onto the screen. She figured she couldn’t ignore his calls forever and picked up the phone.

“I called your school to see if I could schedule a quick visit with you,” he said when she answered. “They told me you were home sick.” He sounded skeptical.

“Yeah, I’m feeling pretty terrible,” Caitlin said. She held the phone against her ear with one hand and held her head with the other.

“Well, I don’t think I need to remind you that you can’t make a habit out of taking days off,” he went on. “We need our teachers to be in the schools. But besides that, I wanted to talk to you about the incident that happened last Friday.”
Caitlin sighed. “What about it?”

“I want to know how you want to handle this…this unfortunate situation.”

“I don’t need to do anything,” she said calmly. “The unfortunate situation, if you want to call him that, is at Arabi Academy now.”

“That might be the case,” Jeremy said, “but that doesn’t mean this is over.”

“Why not?” Caitlin asked. She tried to breathe evenly. If this guy was going to try to suggest that she could have done more for this kid, she might lose it. “He couldn’t stay in my room after what he did, no way.” She slowed her breath even more like she did when she was talking to one of her slower students, like she was talking to a child. “He needs to learn there are consequences for his actions.”

After Ms. Miller, the home economics teacher across the hall, had helped Caitlin up and walked with her to the main office, the rest of the day had become a blur. She remembered someone, a secretary from the office maybe, saying she’d cover her class. “What are they learning about this period?” the woman asked.

Caitlin had looked at her, still dazed, and said, “We were reading about how to be real men. I guess keep trying to teach them that.”

Mr. Wilson ushered her into his office. At one point, she remembered having a blanket put around her shoulders like she was a refugee fleeing from some war-torn country. “Ms. Caldwell, I’m so sorry this happened to you. I want you to know you have our full support in this.”

Caitlin had simply nodded while he kept talking about their policies for assault at the school. Her head hurt a little from when it had been slammed against the lockers. Her hands also
hurt some from where Leon had twisted them. Her wrists would probably be sore for a week. Overall, though, she just felt numb. Numb and overwhelmingly tired.

“What’s going to happen to him?” she asked, interrupting Mr. Wilson mid-speech about their code of conduct.

“Well, he’ll be expelled, of course, and sent to Arabi.” Mr. Wilson had been pacing around the room, and now he went to Caitlin and put his hand on her shoulder. “We can’t have thugs like him attacking teachers in our school. No way.”

Caitlin nodded again. “Where is he now?” she asked.

Mr. Wilson pursed his lips. “I assume he’s still with Mr. Perez, but the police will be here shortly to escort him to the station.”

“The police?” Caitlin stood up quickly, but her legs shook. She had to grab onto Mr. Wilson’s desk for support.

“Now, don’t worry, I’m sure he’ll go quietly. The police will be very discreet too. You won’t even have to see any of that mess.” Mr. Wilson looked at her like she might be losing her mind, like the stress of a student attack was too much for poor, little Ms. Caldwell.

“No, it’s not that,” Caitlin said more calmly. She shrugged the blanket off of her shoulders and stood up straight. Her head felt clearer. “I don’t think we should involve the police.”

“Ms. Caldwell,” Mr. Wilson said in a voice he reserved for slower students. “I know you’ve suffered a big shock, but this boy attacked you. He assaulted you on school grounds. And he’s eighteen years old! He’s an adult, for crying out loud! He needs to be arrested.”

Caitlin nodded. “I know that, but I don’t want him to get in worse trouble. He shouldn’t have to go to jail.” She wondered how Mr. Wilson would react if she asked to speak to Leon. She
could see the hatred in Leon’s eyes again, and she wanted to take everything back. She wondered what would happen if she apologized. Caitlin trembled again slightly. She just needed a do-over.

“That’s not your decision,” Mr. Wilson said quietly. “This is a school safety issue. I called the police myself.”

Caitlin had spent the rest of the day in Mr. Wilson’s office filling out disciplinary paperwork. She never saw Leon, but she overheard Mr. Wilson’s personal secretary Ms. Guidry whisper to him that the police had come and gone. They’d taken Leon. “It’s all over,” she said and smiled at Caitlin. Caitlin hadn’t returned the smile. She knew it was far from over.

Jeremy had been rambling on for several minutes about procedure and that they needed to treat this matter delicately, but the phone had gone silent. Caitlin thought he might have asked her a question, but she went back to looking for some aspirin for her pounding head while she waited for him to say what he needed to say.

Jeremy paused for several seconds. “And what would you say he did exactly?”

Caitlin clenched the phone. “You know what he did, Jeremy.”

“Well, I need to hear you say it in a complete statement.”

“Okay, fine. He attacked me! He attacked a goddamn teacher!” This is what she’d written on the forms for Mr. Wilson. She had signed her name on the “recommendation for expulsion” paper. And in the end, she even signed a statement for the police. As far as she knew, Leon was still in custody. And Caitlin needed some damn aspirin.

“Okay then,” Jeremy said. “That’s what we need to make sure everyone understands.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.
“There’s going to be more press,” he continued. “The program is always under a lot of scrutiny, and we just need to make sure that we keep a unified message. And to be honest, we need to make sure that you are regarded as the victim in this scenario.”

Caitlin paused in her search through the medicine cabinet. “You think I’m the one at fault here?” Well, she was, wasn’t she? But Mr. Wilson and the police had her statement. No matter what happened, Leon had been the one to snap. He’d put his hands on her, a teacher. There was no denying that. No one else had to know what she had done before that.

“I didn’t say that,” Jeremy said, but he didn’t sound very convincing. He sighed. “Look, a blog post was sent to NET admins today. It’s already starting to go viral in New Orleans.”

“A blog post?” Caitlin asked. “What are you talking about?”

“A teacher who works at your school wrote a post saying that Leon was provoked,” Jeremy said. “That you attacked him first.”

Caitlin inhaled sharply. She didn’t need the aspirin anymore. She felt like she might vomit.

“We need to make sure that the media knows that this student caused the incident,” Jeremy said. “For the media, there’s only one side to the story. This blog post isn’t winning you any allies, but it helps that this boy was a thug.”

Caitlin winced at the word. But it was true, wasn’t it? She had called him a thug. Mr. Wilson had called him a thug. And Leon had acted like a thug. She had pushed Leon to the point of bringing out that behavior. And she had struck first. She had been a thug too.

She felt like she was recovering from some bad night out. Even now, her memory held that day at bay, lost in a haze of bad decisions, but her constant headache let her know that she had done something awful, something that she couldn’t take back. She went back to rummaging
through the medicine cabinet. Her fingers landed on a bottle of Vicodin prescribed to her roommate after her knee surgery last year. She grabbed it.

Jeremy continued to talk into her ear. “Caitlin, we recommend using our lawyer for your own personal counsel.”

Caitlin closed her eyes and pictured more mountains of paperwork, an interrogation committee. Was NET going to sue her? Was she about to get kicked out of the program? “What does that mean?”

“It means that we want you to be prepared,” Jeremy answered. “The police brought the evidence to the DA already, and he has decided to press charges against Leon.”

“But wouldn’t I be the one to press charges?” she said. “I don’t want to press charges! Can’t we just drop the whole thing?”

“That’s not how it works in Louisiana.”

Caitlin bent over and let her forehead rest on the cool of the porcelain sink. Jesus, all she wanted was a do-over.

Jeremy spoke more quietly. “Is there any truth in this blog post? You didn’t in any way provoke him, did you?”

“No,” she said quickly. She sunk to her knees, feeling weaker by the second. Stick to the story. She felt like she might vomit again. Or faint. “Of course not.”

“I know you were having a hard time, and the night before it all happened, you seemed pretty angry at Leon.”

Good god, stop the questioning. “Yeah, I was angry. You would be too if you had kids defying you left and right, feeling like you had no control over your own life—”
“We’re not talking about life and death here,” Jeremy said. “We’re talking about a classroom. Full of kids.”

“They’re practically grown men,” Caitlin sneered. “And this classroom *is* my life now. If they can’t control themselves at this point, then that’s not because of anything I did. It’s because they are incapable of obeying authority.” She paused and reaffirmed that she was in the right. She’d been telling herself that all weekend. “Leon Duplessis is incapable of respecting any authority. He would rather physically attack a teacher than listen to her.” That much was true. She knew it.

“Well, that’s why we need you to cooperate with the DA’s office, to help their case.”

Caitlin hesitated just as she’d done with Mr. Wilson. “I don’t know, I mean, I don’t think I need to go that far—”

“You just said he attacked you, unprovoked, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” she said. Her stomach turned bitterly. “But I don’t think I need to ruin this kid’s life over this. Isn’t the point of this program to keep these students out of jail?”

“The point is to get them to college,” Jeremy said. “But we’re a little past that now.”

Right. Of course. Caitlin had screamed about how she had gone to college, and they never would because they were trash, they weren’t real men, and that’s why a thug kid threw her into some lockers. She opened the Vicodin bottle and popped two into her mouth. “I’ll think about it.”

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The girl had to be drunk out of her mind. There was no other way Caitlin could explain this young woman on a Bourbon Street balcony—clearly a tourist—who had pulled her shirt up almost over her head in her quest for strands of beads from some equally drunk frat boys. The girl had a tattoo of a star across one nipple. Caitlin squinted at her in an attempt not to look fully at the girl, and she thought she could see the boobs winking back at her. Caitlin, slightly drunk herself, couldn’t tear herself away from such a pathetic scene. She would never be able to understand how some girls had so little self respect. How did they explain to themselves once they were sober why they did such ridiculous things? How could anyone explain it? But then again, she never would have been able to explain to anyone why she was there, in the same spot as this girl, at four in the afternoon, on a Monday. She couldn’t explain why she’d yelled at Leon the way she did, why she’d thrown an eraser at him, why she’d tried to fight him. Instead, she slurped on her frozen daiquiri.

The drunk girl caught a string of large, bulb-like beads from one of the guys, and clutching it like a prized possession, she sauntered off down the street with her girlfriends cackling on either side of her. Caitlin held up her drink in salute to them and started walking in the other direction.

Jesus, October was a nice month in New Orleans. The choking humidity of summer had finally faded away and left nothing but this gorgeous sunlight soaking into everything. Caitlin felt pleasantly warm and light. The Vicodin were working amazingly. Her headache was gone, and all she wanted to do now was relax and enjoy herself. God, when was the last time she’d done that? She needed this. She needed one day to escape from all the bullshit and Leon and get herself ready to go back to that school. And besides, she never got to see all of this sunlight other than from her classroom window.
Caitlin could feel her phone buzz inside her pocket. It had been going off almost non-stop for the past several hours. She had answered the concerned texts and emails and even a few phone calls at first. She’d repeated her story, that Leon had attacked her first, no she was fine, but she needed a little time to get over it. Then for the past hour, she’d started ignoring everyone, which had become easier once the Vicodin had kicked in. It seemed all of her NET friends had seen the blog post that was now floating around in the Internet ether.

She wandered off of Bourbon onto a side street that led towards the Mississippi River. She had been in the French Quarter a few times since she moved to New Orleans, but only at night and only with a few of her NET friends. Walking the old streets in daylight, everything looked completely different. When Caitlin had told her parents she was moving to New Orleans, they had both scoffed.

“Why would you want to go to that boozy, ridiculous town?” her dad had said.

“Please just promise me you’ll stay off of Bourbon Street,” her mother had chimed in.

Caitlin had pretty much agreed with them, at least in her impressions of New Orleans. She wanted to go there to solve the education problem, but that didn’t mean she was going to get sucked into any party lifestyle. Her only knowledge of New Orleans nightlife came from Girls Gone Wild commercials—lots of trashy, drunk people getting naked for no apparent reason. And there was plenty of that, but walking around the Quarter on a clear day made her think that maybe there actually was something to this town that was more than booze and boobs and beads. There was lightness in the air like nothing had to happen that day, and that would be okay. She thought about trying to describe this feeling to her parents, but she figured it would be useless. A day of nothing did not exist in her family.
Caitlin had never taken a day off in her entire life. Well, except for that time in third grade when she got the chickenpox. But other than that, she had always shown up. She’d always done what was expected of her, always finished whatever task was put before her, always done the right thing. She never took vacations. But that morning, the first school day after instigating a fight that got one of her students expelled and very likely sent to jail, Caitlin just couldn’t get out of bed. She couldn’t fathom going to school, facing the students, trying to teach them something else they didn’t care about while they all hated her for the fact that Leon was gone. She just couldn’t do it. She knew that she had crossed the line, and she had no idea how to come back.

She thought about the drunk girls in the street. They clearly weren’t worried about the effects of their actions. She wished she could be more like them and have more days like this. Days of nothing. Days of drinking and walking outside in sunshine. It definitely sounded better than teaching.

She bought another daiquiri from a hole in the wall place. A pipe organ melody floated from a steamboat somewhere on the river. The breeze was stronger now that she was closer to the river, and all she wanted was to feel that wind on her face.

Jeremy had told her about the lawyer that NET kept on retainer.

“You have a lot of teachers pressing charges against students?” Caitlin asked.

He ignored her question. “We feel it’s good to have someone on call to handle any legal issues that may arise, and he can be your legal counsel as the case goes forward.”

“Why do I need counsel?” she asked. “Can’t the DA just handle it all if that’s how it’s done here?”

“Sure,” Jeremy said. “But we want to support you through this ordeal.”
Caitlin pictured headlines again and TV news stories. NET needed to make sure she didn’t become a liability. People in the city would know her name as the teacher putting her student behind bars.

Caitlin kept walking towards the river. She climbed some steps until she saw the muddied water of the Mississippi. The pipe organ had stopped, and other than a few gulls and some tourists several yards from her, she couldn’t hear anything but the sound of the wind. The water roiled, churning foam out over its surface as it floated by her, heading down towards St. Bernard Parish and then out to the Gulf, far away from there.

Caitlin took a seat on a bench and watched the water. A few barges drifted in the distance, and the steamboat started up its tune again. She sipped her daiquiri and wondered how in the hell she’d gotten there. She’d always pictured her life as a path. Just like she’d laid out for Leon, Caitlin couldn’t help but see pathways sprouting out from every decision that she made. She closed her eyes and envisioned the path that had led her there. Visualizing her life path usually gave her peace of mind, but since she’d started NET, all it did was give her anxiety. She constantly questioned if she had made the right choice in coming here because the path had branched off in ways she’d never expected. She wanted a new path for herself more than anything. She had never been a quitter though, not in swim team or anything. Even now, she couldn’t fathom quitting. The only option she saw was carving out some new path from the mess she’d made.

Caitlin saw herself retracing her steps, not ordering that second daiquiri, heading back to Bourbon Street, leaving before she could witness the tourist girl with her top up, not taking the Vicodin, not skipping school that morning, not having the fight with Leon. She was running backwards faster in her mind now. She pictured not putting the summer school student’s essay
on the overhead. She saw herself not moving to New Orleans, walking away from the NET acceptance offer. She watched herself take off her cap and gown at college graduation and removing the ideas of taking on the broken education system. Caitlin opened her eyes and squinted at the rushing water in the sunlight. How far back would she have to go to actually make her life the way she wanted it? How far back until she felt happy again?

Caitlin took out her phone and opened one of the emails she’d gotten that morning from her friend Kyle. “Hope you’re doing okay,” he’d written. “Wanted to know if you’d seen this.” He’d included a link. Caitlin sighed and clicked on it.

The blog post popped up with the headline, “NET Teacher vs. Student: What she’s not telling you.” Caitlin opened her eyes wider when she saw that the author was Bradley Davis. He taught English at St. Bernard, and Caitlin didn’t think she’d ever said more than a few words to him. How in the world did he know what happened? She skimmed through the post. It recounted the incident fairly accurately, but Mr. Davis definitely had no sympathy for Caitlin. She gritted her teeth as she read on.

“When it comes to taking on students who have been diagnosed with a wide range of behavioral disabilities, I would expect their teacher to have specialized training in this area. However, Ms. Caldwell is part of the No Excuses Teaching program, a program that hand picks recent college graduates—not just any college graduates, only the ones with the shiniest pedigrees—to teach in the nation’s toughest classrooms. Like most NET teachers, Ms. Caldwell has no educational background, let alone experience with students with special needs. But what does that matter if she went to a fancy university? Being successful in college automatically qualifies you to be a great teacher, right? It’s absurd
that she was placed in that classroom. She isn’t qualified to be in any classroom. But then again, I shouldn’t be making excuses for her, should I?”

Caitlin sucked in her breath. She felt a headache coming on again, but she couldn’t look away from her phone. She couldn’t really dispute anything Mr. Davis asserted in his post, but she’d thought that most people revered NET. It sure as hell wasn’t easy to get selected into it, and if passionate NET teachers weren’t in these classrooms, who would be? More of the same ineffective teachers that had been there before? She shook her head but kept reading.

“When I first heard what had happened to Ms. Caldwell, I was, of course, concerned for her well-being and shocked that anything like that could happen at St. Bernard High. But when I asked a school administrator about the incident, he mentioned something that repulses me even now as I write this. He told me about how poor Ms. Caldwell always had her hands full with this student, that he couldn’t believe she’d lasted this long, and then here’s the kicker: he said if he was her, he would’ve done a lot worse than throw an eraser at that kid. I stared at him in dismay, but he acted as though it wasn’t a big deal. And then it all started to make sense. Ms. Caldwell provoked this student. That’s the only explanation for this mess that he now finds himself in. But is she going to tell you this? Are school officials going to tell you this? Of course not. They’d rather blame the students instead of unqualified, overwhelmed ‘teachers’ who attack teenagers. Ms. Caldwell is the problem here, not this student.”
Caitlin had a full on migraine now. She let the phone fall next to her on the bench and looked out at the water again. A barge coming through sounded a horn, and she jumped a little. She felt dizzy and closed her eyes to the bright sunlight. In her mind, she went over everything she’d said to Mr. Wilson. She’d been careful not to say anything about what she had done to Leon, and Mr. Wilson had told her that a student, Delia Simmons, had witnessed the whole thing. She’d reported to him that Leon had pushed Caitlin into some lockers. Delia had said it was all his fault. Delia never mentioned an eraser. Caitlin’s story was backed up by an eyewitness account. Caitlin breathed in slowly and reminded herself that the blog post wouldn’t hold up in court but official reports would. She was in the clear. As far as everyone else was concerned, it was over. Caitlin was the victim.

But Caitlin could see the path of victimhood, and it didn’t look much better than the one she had been on. She was still trapped in one role. She would have to tell the same story over and over, especially now that this blog post was out there. She would have to go back and face her school and her students with a cloud of distrust hanging over them. She would be a spokesperson for NET, a face for a scandal, a survivor of violence that never had to occur. And in following this path, she would set Leon on the path to prison just like she’d laid out for him that day in class.

She pictured Leon in an orange jumpsuit. She saw the cellblock, the bars that kept him locked in. A label hung over Leon’s head that read “more black men end up in prison than graduate from high school.” She saw the statistic that she’d made him into.

Caitlin drank down her daiquiri. She wondered what would happen if she walked into Mr. Wilson’s office the next day and told him that Delia Simmons had been wrong. Sure, Leon had pushed her, but Caitlin had deserved it. She’d yelled at him, basically taunted him for his lot in
life. She’d insulted him and thrown something at him, and she could tell Mr. Wilson that. She could admit all of her sins. She watched her path take shape from there. Losing her job, getting kicked out of NET. She’d probably move away from New Orleans. Where would she go then? Probably back to Chicago, where her parents lived. Her parents. How would they react to finding out what she’d done? Or her friends? Would she get another job? She could probably kiss law school goodbye. There’d be more headlines too, and she didn’t think she could survive the story that might be portrayed in the media if the truth was really known.

Her throat tightened, and tears began to blur her vision of the Mississippi, making it look more like a distortion of murky green-brown contrasting with the blue of the sky. She looked at her phone again and punched in her mother’s office number.

“Gail Caldwell,” her mother answered. She sounded busy, important, like always.

“Hey, Mom, it’s me,” Caitlin said. “Can you talk?”

“Oh, hi, honey,” her mother said. “Make it quick. I only have a second. What is it?”

“Um… I just, I miss you.”

Caitlin could hear typing in the background. “That’s sweet,” her mother said. “But if that’s all you had to say, you could’ve sent me an email.” Caitlin pictured her mother wearing one of her crisp blouses with a neat stack of folders on her desk at her law firm.

“I know,” Caitlin sniffed. “I’m just having a rough time right now. This job…it’s really hard, Mom—”

“Well, no one ever said teaching was easy, now did they?”

“I know, but—”

“Look, honey,” her mother said. “I have a lot of work to do, and I really don’t have time to stop and coddle you right now.”
Caitlin nodded as tears spilled down her face. “Right.”

“You chose to become a teacher,” her mother said. “You need to suck it up and finish the job.” There was talking in the background. “I have to go. We can talk later, okay?”

“Okay,” Caitlin answered. She tried to make her voice sound normal.

“Unless you want to talk about quitting or something stupid like that,” her mother said. “Because then I don’t want to hear it.”

“No,” Caitlin said. “I’m not a quitter.”

“Okay then, talk to you later.” Her mother hung up, and Caitlin wiped the tears off her face. There was no point in crying.

Caitlin’s path was clear. She didn’t have a choice in the matter. She would play the victim in order to make it through. She could pay the penance later in some way, but she would live this new story. Just like Leon would live his. She looked out across the water. The river rolled on in its constant churning.

She pulled out her phone and found Jeremy’s number in her contacts. When he picked up, she told him she was ready. “What do you need me to do?”
The Monday after the fight Benji skipped school. He skipped it the next day too, waiting for his mom to notice and yell at him. But she was even more zombie-like than usual, sprawled out in the living room in front of her soaps, so Benji just did whatever he wanted. And what he wanted more than anything was to punch something, or someone, good and hard, but knowing that Leon was still locked up made him think more about disappearing instead. Benji didn’t want to think what Leon might be going through. He pulled his John Cena move three days in a row, leaving the house in the morning, walking the highway, going into town some days, other days just wandering the woods by the bayou.

He always came back, but he didn’t really know why. The trailer looked the same as when he’d left. The trash can overflowed with empty bottles and fast food bags, and beer cans decorated the scuffed up coffee table along with celebrity magazines and horoscope pamphlets that his mama got at the store. The place reeked of cigarettes and booze all the time, and his
mama never seemed to leave the couch. And whenever his two stupid brothers were home, it was even worse.

“Your teacher called,” Ray said one night when Benji came back from walking. Ray and Kevin were home from the construction site where they both worked. Ray had a grocery sack with him.

“Oh yeah?” Benji walked past him and opened the fridge. “What’s that bitch want?”

“Wanted to know where you’ve been.” Ray folded his arms against his chest. “She says you ain’t been in school all week.”

Kevin came up behind Benji and punched him in the arm. “You gotta stop skipping school, dumbass,” he said. “Get a truancy officer up in here, and you’ll get Ma locked up too, just like your dumbass friend.”

“Shut up,” Benji said. He rubbed his arm. “They can’t arrest her for that, right?”

“Just go to school,” Ray said. He unloaded a case of beer and some hot Cheetos from their grocery sack. “You want me to tell her?”

“Sure, tell her,” Benji said. “If you think she can even hear you.” He tried to get a look in the grocery sack. “Got anything for dinner?”

“Not for you, asswipe,” Kevin said and pushed him out of the way.

Benji came back after him and smacked Kevin on the side of his head.

“Hey, quit it!” Benji’s mama rasped.

Benji turned to see her stumbling into the kitchen. She was wearing her pink bathrobe, and her hair was matted to one side from where she’d been lying passed out all day. “Leave your brother alone,” she said to Benji. Kevin smirked at Benji. “Quit all this fussing,” she continued.
“I got me one of my headaches.” She rummaged through a drawer. “Anyone seen my cigarettes?”

“Here, Ma,” Ray said. He tossed her a pack from his shirt pocket.

“What are you whining about anyhow?” his mama said to Benji. She shook out a cigarette. Her fingernails looked ashy gray and were rimmed with black.

Benji shrugged. “Is there anything for dinner?” he asked.

“I ain’t feeling like cooking tonight,” Benji’s mama said as she lit her cigarette. “Just order a pizza or something.”

“I don’t got any money,” Benji said.

“Kev, give your brother some money for a pizza,” their mama said.

Kevin shook his head behind their mama’s back and grinned at Benji. He was nothing but a shithead. All he ever did was push around people who were smaller than he was. When he’d been in school, he’d gotten kicked out for fighting. Now he worked with Ray during the day and got into bar fights at night. Benji gritted his teeth at Kevin, but their mama caught him.

“I said, quit it!” she yelled at Benji. “My head hurts, y’all, cut it out.”

Benji asked Ray for some pizza money, but Ray kept texting on his phone and acted like he hadn’t heard him. Kevin brought their beers and chips in front of the TV. He took up most of the couch but made room for their mama. Ray sat in the armchair and turned on WWE Raw. Benji took a seat on the floor by the couch. He was too pissed off to show how hungry he was. He just grabbed handfuls of hot Cheetos when his brothers weren’t looking.

Kevin and Ray left after Raw was over and went out somewhere. Their mama said she still didn’t feel well and needed to lie down. She told Benji to keep the TV low, and she shuffled off to her bedroom.
Benji tried to remember what nights were like back when his daddy was around. Most nights when his daddy was home from shrimping, he liked to keep to himself. He’d sit out on the grassy patch in front of their house in a lawn chair and drink beer until the sun went down. He never liked being inside.

“It’s not right for a human being to be cooped up in a cage,” he’d say.

Benji remembered one time in third grade he got sent home from school early for getting in a shoving match with Danny Thibodeaux. His mama picked him up, fussing at him, back when she cared about shit. His daddy was sitting in his lawn chair when they got home. Benji sat down on the ground next to him, figuring he was about to get punished. His daddy stayed quiet for a while, and Benji picked at blades of grass, threading them through his fingers.

“Ya know, I used to get into fights too,” his daddy said.

Benji looked up at him. “Really?” He couldn’t imagine his quiet, calm daddy ever getting in fights.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “I used to swing at anyone who looked at me wrong. I was mad all the time for no reason at all.” He took a swig of beer.

“I was mad too,” Benji said quietly. Danny had cut in front of him in the lunch line. “He started it.”

“Don’t matter,” Benji’s daddy said. “Ain’t no one’s fault but your own if you can’t walk away.”

Benji looked up at him. “So how come you’re not mad anymore?” he asked.

“Learned my lesson,” his daddy said. He didn’t give any more details, and Benji was too in awe to ask any questions.
“Point is, you gotta control that stuff,” his daddy said. “You spend all your time being mad at the world, and it’ll eat you alive.”

And Benji had tried. He tried not to get mad at his brothers when they picked on him or at the other boys at school for calling him trailer trash. But after his daddy left, it got a lot harder to ignore the anger inside of him. His daddy wasn’t there to sit quietly with him in the yard and watch the day turn into night.

Benji flopped onto the couch. He never got to have the TV to himself, and now that he did, there was nothing good to watch. He flipped through the channels and landed on the news. Before he could change the channel again, Leon’s face popped up on the TV screen. Benji dropped the remote. He heard the news anchor’s voice in the background.

“Coming up next, the District Attorney’s office in St. Bernard is filing a bill of information to pursue the battery case against the student who attacked his teacher last week at St. Bernard High School. More on that story along with the weather, when we return.”

Benji had heard all he needed. He grabbed his booksack and ran out of the door.

He couldn’t believe that bitch Ms. Caldwell. Now the parish was pressing charges! For what? Because Leon stood up to someone trying to tear him down? Benji rubbed his face with his hands. God, the world was full of bullshit sometimes.

He started walking again. He headed toward St. Bernard Highway to walk back into town. He wanted to see Leon. He knew visiting hours were probably over for the day, but he couldn’t stay in the trailer all night and think about Leon’s face on that TV screen. Leon probably already knew about the charges by now, but Benji still felt like he needed to go see him, let him know he was there for him and all that shit.
He passed a trailer at the far end of the park where he could see old Mr. Walter sitting out on his porch. Mr. Walter had been living there for as long as Benji had and probably longer. He kind of looked over the neighborhood from his porch, just sitting there all day, sometimes playing checkers and drinking beers with a few other old guys. They were all old shrimpers long off their boats and stuck sitting in their trailer homes every day now.

“How’s your mama making out?” Mr. Walter called out along with his hellos.

“Fine,” Benji said.

“Good, that’s good,” Mr. Walter said. He motioned for Benji to come over. “Say, she was by here last week.” His voice was quieter. “I seen her…well she looked like maybe she just be feeling ill, she tripped and dropped a lot of pills on the ground an’ she trying to gather ‘em up, said she came from the pharmacy up the road. When I asked her if she was all right, she says she got one of those real bad migraines.” Mr. Walter kept rubbing his hands together like he did when he had a lot of money riding on a game, and he was nervous for it. “Then she starts asking me for extra food stamps from my check. Can you tell her I wish I could help, but the state don’t give me more’n enough to get me by.” He coughed. “And, listen here, you let me know if y’all need some help any other way, aright?” It was too dark for Benji to see Mr. Walter’s face under his weathered Saints cap.

Benji hoped he couldn’t see his face either. He cleared his throat. “I’ll do that, Mr. Walter.”

Mr. Walter nodded. “An’ tell her I hope she be feeling better.”

Benji nodded too. “Will do, Mr. Walter. You have a good night now.”

Benji walked on and tried not to think about his mama carrying around more pills. Were they his meds or other meds? And then asking Mr. Walter for food stamps. He shoved his hands
in his pockets and walked faster. He didn’t want to think on any of it. She never said nothing about nothing to him. Last he knew, they were getting checks from his daddy. Benji kicked at the gravel as he walked alongside the road. Maybe if his mama would get out of the house, find a job or something, she wouldn’t need to be worrying Mr. Walter about taking his government money. And she wouldn’t need to be acting like pills were her food, like she had nothing else.

Benji stayed close to the road but made sure to duck down whenever he saw headlights approaching. He didn’t need shit from some cop or, worse, his brothers.

Benji walked until he got to the parish jail. It stood close to the levee, a short brick building that was being used while they rebuilt the sheriff’s office. Benji had been there once before with his mama to bail Kevin out after another one of his fights. The building looked quiet and shut down for the night, just like he’d figured. He stood in the parking lot for a second and looked at the lights on the barges out in the river. The bar across the street was playing some loud country music he could hear every time someone opened the door. He wasn’t sure where to go, but he knew he didn’t want to go home.

Benji wandered around until he ended up at the old Chalmette battlefield. He remembered that a famous battle had been fought there a long time ago in their little stupid parish. War of 1812 or something like that. He’d gone to the battlefield on field trips when he was younger. The teachers told them about the fighting that had happened there. He remembered one teacher saying that when the battle was fought, the war had already ended. Sounded like people died there for pretty much no reason. If that didn’t sum up St. Bernard, he didn’t know what did.

On one side of the wide open field was a cemetery. Benji remembered a teacher telling his class that it was for soldiers for all different wars from American history. Rows and rows of
white tombstones, all exactly alike, other than how old and crumbly some looked even after being restored since Katrina. In the dark, they all looked like when egrets gathered on the bayou and sat real still, floating on the water, not moving, just sitting. It was eerie, but not in a way that scared Benji. It felt more like time had slowed down or stopped altogether.

The night was warm, and Benji lay down on the cemetery grass. He put his booksack behind his head for a pillow. He could see grey clouds overhead, lit from underneath with lights from the city across the river. He pretended they were the smoke from cannons. He’d seen one up by the monument on the battlefield. He tried to picture what it would be like to fire one. Those soldiers probably stood in that field all day long for days and weeks, loading and firing and reloading that cannon. And they did it because they thought they were fighting for their lives. Man, the world was full of bullshit sometimes. Those people didn’t die for nothing. They were just trying to survive the only way they knew how.

Benji stretched his arms out over the damp grass. Leon had done the only thing he knew how—he fought back, he defended himself. Benji wondered what might have happened if he hadn’t held Leon’s arm back. Ms. Caldwell might have gotten worse than what she did. At the time, all he had thought of was trying to keep Leon from making a big mistake. But Leon had still pushed her into those lockers, and that was enough to stick a battery charge on him. Benji knew it was wrong, what Leon did, but no one knew how much Ms. Caldwell had pushed him. She yelled at him, even threw that fucking eraser at him, but no one would believe that over her word anyhow.

Still, though, what the hell was Leon thinking? Benji knew there had to be a moment that flashed through Leon’s head, a moment where he thought there ain’t no going back from this. Benji had that moment when he was beating Will Jeansonne’s ass six years ago. Actually, it had
felt a lot like it did when he went drinking at the End of the World, like a real satisfied feeling at the time, but then later, he felt all dragged down and wondered what he’d done. That was what it felt like to beat Will Jeansonne, even though he had deserved it.

Benji figured Leon hadn’t thought at all. Six years ago, Benji almost wished he hadn’t let himself think about it. Trying to remember the fight now, Benji could only pick out details—the overgrown baseball field behind the middle school where he and Will had played in the youth baseball league; the bright sunshine, a warm day near the end of seventh grade; Benji just trying to get home; his mama having a meltdown at the Winn Dixie a few days before; his daddy leaving the week before that. Will and his friends were hanging around the field waiting for their baseball practice to start. “Hey Benji,” Will had called out. “I hear your mama’s crazy now. Your daddy finally have enough or something?” That was all it took.

All the anger that Benji had been holding back came out at once. Benji moved across the field in what seemed like three swift steps. As he came up on Will, Benji saw the kid’s eyes widen in fear, and Benji thought back to what his daddy had told him about walking away. But then he remembered his daddy had left. He’d walked away for good and hurt plenty of people anyway so it didn’t matter what the fuck he had said.

Benji started whaling on Will. He tackled him to the ground first and then sat on top of Will’s chest while he swung at him over and over. Benji remembered thinking how good it felt when Will’s flesh gave way to his fist and split open. Will’s friends tried to pull Benji off, and Benji heard one say he was going to get Coach Thompson.

When Benji realized Will’s white T-shirt was covered in blood from his gushing nose, Benji stopped and took a breath. He had never hit someone like that. His hand hurt, and his brain felt all fuzzy.
“What the fuck is your problem, man?” Will had mumbled. “You turning crazy like your mama?”

Benji pulled Will up by his shirt collar. “Don’t ever talk about—” They were standing in the shadow of the squat, brick building that housed the dugout.

Benji wondered if he should push him or not. But even thinking about it made Benji angrier. Of course he had to push him. If he didn’t bring Will Jeansonne down, he’d never teach him his lesson. He’d never get out the anger. He had to unleash it. Benji could see his daddy standing there, telling him not to do it. Screw him. Benji threw Will against the dugout building.

But after the fight, no one remembered how Benji had been disrespected, how his family’s name had been torn down. All they talked about was how poor Will had cracked his head on the dugout’s wall. He’d needed six stitches. People said Benji was murderous, he was crazy, he should be locked up. At the time, the principal told Benji he was lucky only to get expelled for a semester. When he came back to the middle school, he was in the BD class. Benji didn’t know what was so lucky about it, but he knew he’d made the choice that got him there. He knew what he was doing when he beat Will, and he did it anyway.

Will went to a Catholic high school in the city now, and the story of the dangerous and delinquent Benji had morphed into a weird kind of myth. Some kids still remembered the details while others just made them up. But no one could say he hadn’t answered to the consequences. He had his behavior under control now. And he’d never been prosecuted, yet he felt like he was in prison every day. Those were the real consequences, living with everyone looking at you like you were a criminal.

He must have slept a few hours because soon he opened his eyes to see daylight spreading over the levees up ahead. He stood up and brushed himself off. He was a little wet
from the morning dew and hungry as all hell, but he knew he needed to get to Leon. He made his way over to the jail, hoping that it was time for visiting hours.

Once inside, he had to fill out some forms with guards looking at him every which way. They searched him and his booksack. Benji didn’t think he could be so nervous without doing anything wrong. One big guard pointed at a hard, plastic chair in the corner and told him to wait. He didn’t know how long he sat there. He dozed off, seeing fields of white tombstones that never ended. The big guy shook him awake and brought him to a room with rows of seats on either side of a piece of glass. The seats were partitioned off into little cubby holes. No one else was in there. Benji took a seat. He was back to feeling nervous. A door opened on the other side, and another guard hauled Leon in.

Leon really did look like a criminal in his orange jumpsuit and all shackled up. The guard undid his cuffs so he could sit and talk to Benji, but the glass between them did its job at making them feel like they were in separate compartments, like rats in a maze or some shit.

“How you making out?” Benji’s voice squeaked a little like it did when he went through puberty. He cleared his throat.

“I been better,” Leon said. He looked like it too. His eyes were all bloodshot like he hadn’t slept since it all happened.

“How long you have to stay in here?”

“Don’t know,” Leon said. He rubbed his face. “Going in to face the judge tomorrow, find out about my bond. Who knows when my moms can get the money anyway. Last time I seen her, she screamed at me so bad, saying she might just leave me in here.”

Benji nodded. “She’ll get over that though.”

“Probably so,” Leon said. “How’s it out there?”
Benji shrugged. “Same old shit.”

Leon pursed his lips. “How’s that bitch going on with life?”

“Don’t know,” Benji said. “I ain’t been back.” He wasn’t sure if he should bring up the charges or not.

“She’s probably real satisfied with herself,” Leon said. He scowled, and Benji could see that old anger wash over his face.

So there it was. He knew about it already. Of course he did. Probably couldn’t think about nothing else. Benji scrambled to get into his booksack. “Hey man, wanted to show you something,” he said. He pulled out his notebook from school. “I been thinking about that rhyme you made back in the cafeteria that day.”

Leon’s eyes lit up a little. “Oh yeah? You seeing if you got what it takes?” He laughed.

“Trying to,” Benji said. He opened up to a back page. “Let me know what you think.” He found the lyrics and starting rapping to the rhythm he’d come up with in his head. “Who you callin’ a cracker, you colorblind bitch? Don’t know my story, I got more layers to that shit. I lay ‘em on you, I lay you down, I bury you, put dirt on that mound. You can’t see me, but I’m everywhere. I been here forever, ain’t going nowhere. Only the strong survive da parish, you ain’t got what it takes. Ya think y’all thugs? Y’all too fake. This struggle is real, you forgettin’? Time for you to leave, y’all just visitin’.”

When Benji was done, they both sat for a second without talking. Leon had his eyes closed and was bobbing his head like there was a beat in his head. When he finally opened his eyes, he let out a slow whistle.

“I got you,” Leon said. “Need a little work, but that shit’s tight man. It’s a little country, but can’t nobody say you can’t rhyme.”
Benji laughed. “I figure, there’s always shit about you that people have a problem with,” he said. “Your color, where you come from, all that, but why not just take your roots and make it into a rhyme? Own it, ya know?”

Leon nodded slowly like he was thinking it over. “That’s some deep shit, man,” he said. “I like it.”

The guard announced that their time was up.

“Thanks for coming to see me, man,” Leon said. He nodded at Benji as he stood up. “Appreciate it.”

Benji stood up too, but seeing the guard put shackles back on his best friend made him panic. “Yeah, man,” he said. “I still got your back. That’s…that’s what brothers do.”

Leon looked up at him and smiled. “That’s right,” Leon said. “I’ll be out soon, ya heard?” He was hustled away from Benji, but Benji could hear him whoop as he walked off. He grinned. Typical Leon, even locked up.

Benji walked out of the jail into bright sunlight. He was feeling good, thinking about walking back home along the levee so he could watch the river. His stomach growled, but he felt too good to care about being hungry.

Benji passed by a black hoopty with tinted windows sitting near the back of the parking lot, bass rumbling real low and heavy. Benji glanced at it and slowed his roll. He didn’t need any shit. As he was walked by, the driver’s side opened and rap music spilled out, the beat so loud now in the morning light. Marcus stepped out from the car.

“Whatcha looking at little bitch?” Marcus asked. “You ain’t got your partner out here now. Whatcha gonna do?”
Benji didn’t say a word and kept walking by like he didn’t see Marcus. He rapped his lyrics in his head again, thinking about how he was untouchable. Marcus didn’t say anything else, so Benji just kept walking. It wasn’t until he was halfway up the levee that Benji turned around to see Marcus walking into the jail.

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Benji waited by the keg with a cup in hand. He figured he’d catch Delia as soon as she rolled in. She’d been drinking a lot last time he’d seen her there, so he was sure she’d make a stop at the keg. He hadn’t picked her for a partier, but he had to admit he didn’t know her really. He took a sip of the beer and peered at his classmates as they shuffled onto the beach. He knew one thing—she shouldn’t be hanging around with that shithead Danny Thibodeaux. She was better than that. Benji shook it off. He needed to get ready to talk to her again. She’d surprised him last time, coming up to him and talking to him just like that, like they’d been knowing each other for years. Wouldn’t that be something, knowing Delia for years. Benji tried to picture them talking and hanging out back at the trailer park, going to the show together, meeting up at the Sonic that stayed open late. None of that seemed real. But neither did the fact that she’d talked to him a week ago.

Benji had gotten there early, walked all the way down to Highway 300 as soon as the sun started going down. He didn’t need to be around the trailer anyhow. It was payday, which meant Ray and Kevin would be rowdier than usual. And his mama would probably booze it up with them. Benji took one last gulp of the beer and threw his empty cup into the woods behind him. Fuck it. He’d talk to her without it.
Leon was still locked up. It had been two days since Benji had been by the jail, and he had heard on the news that the judge had set Leon’s bond at $50,000. Leon’s family hadn’t come up with any of the money yet. Benji didn’t want to think about Leon still being in that place, but he remembered how Marcus had gone in right after him. Maybe jail was the best place for Leon right now.

More trucks pulled into the gravel lot, including Danny Thibodeaux’s. The truckbed was packed with people who jumped out as soon as the truck stopped. Delia got out of the passenger’s seat. She looked a little different. She was still dressed up like she got when she came out there, lots of makeup and all that. But she strutted from the truck like she was one of those popular girls, like Maggie Boudreaux or Beth Dupre. Benji wondered where her sidekick Samantha Jane was.

Benji had thought right—Delia went straight to the keg. And so did all her posse. They seemed liquored up already, the girls cackling the way they did when they stood together in groups, the guys were all challenging each other to chugging contests. But Benji was on a mission. He couldn’t bitch out now.

He came up behind Delia while she was filling her cup. “You hear that the DA’s pressing charges?” he blurted out.

Delia turned to look at him but only in short glances, like she didn’t want those dumbass rich kids she was with to notice she was talking to him. “Huh?”

“Yeah,” Benji went on. He didn’t feel nervous talking to her now. He just felt the rush of what he needed to say. “He’s pressing charges against Leon. White teacher against black dude. Who you think’s gonna win?”
“Who you think you’re talking to, douchebag?” Danny had come up behind Benji, and he pushed against Benji’s shoulder as he walked over to Delia. Danny was almost twice Benji’s size, and Benji stumbled a little from the bump. “What do you want?”

Everyone was staring at them now.

Danny put his arm around Delia. “He bothering you again? Dumb shit just never learns his lesson.”

“I was just asking her a question,” Benji mumbled. He looked up at Delia. “I said, who do you think’s going to win?”

Delia didn’t answer. She was looking at her cup of beer.

Danny burst out laughing. “What, between me and you, who you think, little bitch? You might’ve almost killed Will Jeansonne, but that was a million years ago. I could crush you.”

Benji started backing away. “No one was talking to you. That’s not why I came here tonight. All I want is some justice.” He looked at Delia.

She looked at him then, her eyes so big and wide. But she still didn’t say anything. Fuck it.

“What the fuck is he talking about?” Benji heard Danny say to Delia as he walked away. He didn’t hear if she answered him or not. She probably didn’t want to be seen talking to him, white trash BD kid, in front of her friends. Benji kicked at the dirt and kept walking. He had been so stupid to try to talk to her. She really was just a party girl, trying to be popular and all that. Maybe she didn’t care about people like him even though she was from the trailers too. She got to hang out with football players and cheerleaders, and they saw her as a victim, just like Ms. Caldwell. It was all such a joke.

“Hey! Wait!”
Benji heard Delia’s voice behind him. He didn’t want to turn around. He needed to show her he couldn’t be treated like he was nothing. He could go somewhere else for help, maybe try to find a lawyer.

“Benji! I said wait!” Delia caught up to him. She was breathing hard. “Why…shouldn’t…the…DA…press…charges?” she gasped. “Leon’s guilty.”

“She aggravated him until he snapped!” Benji shouted. He wanted to shout to everyone.

“Ms. Caldwell told him he was never gonna be nothing, that he was gonna go to prison. She riled him up on purpose. And don’t tell me you missed the part where she started throwing shit!”

“She said he was going to prison?”

Benji nodded. “Look, it’s not right that he hit her, but it’s not right that she treated him like shit either.”

Delia frowned. “Well, what do you want me to do about it? I didn’t hear her say any of that stuff.”

“But you saw the fight part,” Benji said. “What did it look like to you? Who started it? Was Ms. Caldwell afraid of Leon or was she fighting back?”

Delia bit her lip like she was trying to remember. “Yeah, okay, she threw something at his head, and then she grabbed at his wrists. But I thought that she was just trying to keep him from hitting her.”

“Okay, well do you think she was scared at all? She didn’t even yell for help! She didn’t care about getting help because she wanted to take Leon down.”

Delia didn’t look convinced. “I already told Mr. Wilson everything. I don’t know what you want from me.”
“Whatever, go back to your friends; let an innocent man go to jail.” Benji started walking off.

“Hey,” she said. “Stop walking away from me!” She walked close to Benji. She was almost as tall as he was in her high-heeled sandals.

Benji smirked. He couldn’t help himself.

“What now?” Delia put her hands on her hips.

“Nothing,” he said. “It’s just…there’s your feisty side again.”

Delia smiled. “You think you know what I’m thinking? You gotta give me more credit than that.”

“Fair enough,” Benji said. She was standing very close to him, and he could smell her perfume, something all flowery and sweet. His mind flashed to being in a truck with her, driving around somewhere. He needed her to see it his way. “Look, the way I see it is, you’re the only witness anyone will actually listen to. You’re not some BD crazy kid. You’re normal. People will believe what you say.”

“So…?”

“So,” Benji continued, “you know what you saw. It wasn’t right. Do you know what it’s like to be told that you’re nothing, that you’ll always be nothing? How would you feel?”

Delia looked over at the group standing around the keg. She didn’t say anything for a long moment, and Benji could hear a chant of some kind starting up at the keg. “Okay,” she finally said. “If they call me up, I’ll tell them I heard her yelling at him right before she threw that eraser.”

“Really?”
“Yeah,” Delia said. “I could tell something fucked up was going on before she threw it.”

She looked at him, and Benji saw her eyes reflect the firelight behind him. “So, I could say he was provoked. I don’t want to hurt him.”

“Well, thanks,” Benji said. “It means a lot.”

They stood in silence for a few seconds. Now that Benji had said his part, he had no idea what to talk to her about. Another round of chants from the beach broke the quiet, and Delia told him she’d see him later. She went back to her friends. Benji walked off into the night, but he could smell her perfume all the way back home.
CHAPTER SIX

Delia

Even though a month had passed since the fight in the hallway, Delia hadn’t been called on to do anything. If she got called to testify, she had promised Benji she’d be on his side, on Leon’s side, but that didn’t mean she had to advertise it to everyone. She sat next to Maggie in English class after all, and she was trying to make a good impression still. Maggie never really talked to her at school though. She was usually too busy talking to her other girlfriends or the boys who liked to flirt with her. She also answered most of the questions their English teacher, Mr. Davis, asked. And she did it without looking like a know-it-all, Delia had noticed.

“Now this will be on the GEE test at the end of the year,” Mr. Davis said one day, “so we need to make sure we’ve got it.”

They were going over something called constructed responses for the test they had to take at the end of the year, the one that told them if they passed high school or not. Delia guessed it was probably a big deal since all the teachers were always on about it, but she couldn’t care less. She was thinking about Chase again. Whenever regular life got too boring, Delia thought about
him. He’d been going to the End of the World most weekends, and she had started thinking seriously about trying to get his attention again now that she was sick of flirting with Danny.

Danny had been nice and all, but he was kind of stupid. All he seemed to want to do was get drunk and do dumb things with the other high school boys, like challenge each other to wrestling competitions or do keg stands until they threw up. She’d noticed that the older guys, like Pat and Chase, didn’t do stuff like that. They would drink from the keg, but then they would stand by the pick-ups and smoke cigarettes, laughing at the dumb stuff the high school boys did. Delia wondered if Chase thought she was like the other high school kids.

Mr. Davis had them write a sample paragraph about a little story that was on the overhead. Delia wrote a few sentences based on what she thought he’d want and passed her paper forward. The bell rang then.

“God, I’m getting sick of this GEE stuff, and we still have forever until we have to take the test.” Maggie was looking right at Delia and smiling. She had always been so nice to Delia at the End of the World. Delia had wondered why she didn’t act the same at school, but maybe she’d been overthinking it. Maybe Delia had proven she was cool after all.

Delia smiled and nodded. She started to say something back about how she didn’t know why they were studying for it already, but she was sure Maggie would do great on the test when it came around, and which line should they stand in for lunch? But when she opened her mouth, she heard Beth from behind her answer first.

“Yeah, I know,” Beth said. “I mean, can’t we just graduate already if all we’re going to do is talk about this stupid test?”

The girls met up at the end of Delia’s row, never looking in her direction, and walked out together.
Delia turned her nod into a cough as she knelt over her booksack. Her face burned.

“Delia, can you stay after class for a second?” Mr. Davis asked as the rest of the class began to file out for lunch. He was piling the papers he’d just collected and putting them into manila folders.

Delia wondered if he was going to chew her out for day dreaming during class. She stood by the marker board at the front of the room and idly wiped away the edges of a few letters from the constructed response questions on the board. Mr. Davis began shuffling more papers on his desk.

“What are your plans for next year?” he asked over his shoulder.

Delia shrugged. “I haven’t really thought about it,” she admitted. “I might try some classes over at Nunez.”

Mr. Davis nodded and turned around. He was rummaging through several folders. “Sure, sure, there’s nothing wrong with starting off at a community college, but you should really consider applying to some four-year universities. Ah, found it.” He held up a maroon packet. “Here’s some information on Loyola over in New Orleans. Look it over; let me know what you think. I have a friend in admissions, and I could set up a meeting if you’d like.”

Delia took the packet and flipped through it. She was greeted by pictures of smiling students in a lecture hall, a cafeteria, sitting in a group on the grass. “Yeah, okay,” she said. “That might be cool.”

“There are scholarships you can get, too,” Mr. Davis added. “I can help you apply for those as well.”

Delia nodded. Did Mr. Davis know she needed charity? How could he tell? Could you just tell that about a person? She figured she already knew the answer to that. It was probably
why Maggie didn’t talk to her when they were at school. She thanked Mr. Davis for the packet and walked out of class.

At the doorway to the cafeteria, Delia waited for Samantha Jane and started reading the Loyola packet. She wanted to know why everyone in it was so damn happy. What was it about college anyway? Their teachers were always talking about it these days. Delia hadn’t thought much about it before this year, and now, here it was in her face everywhere she turned. Her mama hadn’t gone to college. She always told them it was because she got pregnant with Pat, but Delia couldn’t imagine her mom being like one of the kids in the pamphlet. The same with Samantha Jane’s mama. Pat hadn’t gone to college either. He hadn’t been doing much at all until Chase got him that shrimping job. In fact, Delia couldn’t picture anyone she knew from her neighborhood going to college. She wasn’t sure they were those kind of people.

Delia could see Maggie Boudreaux in one of these pictures, probably the one with the pretty girl situated perfectly on the green, green grass. Actually, Delia knew Maggie wanted to go to LSU. She’d already sent in her application. Maggie had told her all about it one night at the End of the World after they’d had several jello shots that someone had brought out. Maggie had said that both her parents had gone to LSU. She shrugged as she said it was kind of expected of her. She said she was excited though, sorority rush and football games and all that. Delia had nodded casually like she knew exactly what Maggie was talking about, but she knew she wouldn’t be joining her.

If she had told Mr. Davis the truth, she would have said she had no idea what her plans were for next year. She knew exactly what she would be doing every day until graduation—going to school, thinking about Chase, hanging out with Samantha Jane, going to the End of the World on the weekends. But the day after graduation just looked blank, empty of any certainty.
Delia figured she’d just try to get a job, maybe be a waitress or work at the Winn Dixie checking people out. She’d stay in the trailer with Pat and hang out at the End of World on the weekends. That didn’t seem so bad.

Delia squinted at the photos. Could she be one of those girls instead?

Samantha Jane bounded up then. “Guess what Derek just gave me?” She dangled her pale wrist in front of Delia’s. On it was a shiny gold bracelet with a large heart charm hanging from it. “Isn’t it pretty?”

Delia laughed.

“I know, it’s cheesy,” Samantha Jane said, but Delia assured her it was cute. Samantha Jane couldn’t stop staring at her wrist as they walked through the lunch line.

Delia told her about how Mr. Davis gave her the Loyola pamphlet. “You ever think about applying to college?” she asked.

Samantha Jane didn’t answer her right away. She flicked her wrist back and forth as though trying to catch the light in each spot of the heart. “Huh?”

“Never mind,” Delia said.

They grabbed their trays and made their way outside, and as they passed by Maggie’s table, where everyone was laughing and happy about something, Delia followed her pathway to the table where she always sat, far away from them.

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The week before Thanksgiving, the days stayed warm, but the rain started up again. It blasted against the tin roof of the trailer early in the mornings when Delia had to get up for.
school, and the trailer park was dotted with puddles everywhere. The lower roads were flooded, and Pat couldn’t get down to the docks for work. Delia hated when it rained here because rain was different in Louisiana. It all came at once, and she ended up trapped inside the trailer, which was too small to begin with. While Pat watched sports on TV, Delia watched the gray-green skies outside, willing them to change, until the windows fogged up.

Nothing did change, except for one thing. The deluge washed Delia’s mama all the way back to St. Bernard. She’d been gone with Hank for three weeks on a road trip out west to Santa Fe to “commune with the desert” as she had explained while she’d rushed to pack. Hank had just been laid off from whatever he’d been doing, and he’d bought an RV camper. Why her mama thought it sounded like fun to live in a camper when she hated staying in their trailer, Delia didn’t know.

But that wet morning as Delia lay in bed contemplating skipping school and whether or not Pat would let her get away with it, she heard their door slam open and her mama’s voice roaring through it.

“Hey y’all! Anyone home?”

Delia came into the living room to see her mama, water beading off of her leather jacket, her short bleached blonde hair slicked to her head. “There’s my baby!” Her mama held her arms open to her, and Delia did as she always did and went to hug her mama.

Delia had figured out when she was young that her mama was many different people all rolled up into one. She was like a little kid who couldn’t make up her mind about what to be for Halloween. She tried on so many different lifestyles that Delia wasn’t completely sure she knew which one was her real mama. Her mama would get a nice paying job and start thinking she was a rich lady. She would drag Delia and Pat to fancy restaurants, talking about how if you wanted
to be rich you had to play the part and eat the food. She’d buy fancier clothes and take Delia to look at nice apartments they’d never be able to afford.

Whenever she lost a job, she’d try to meet boyfriends who could pay the bills. Delia had lost track of the times her mama had come home telling her she’d found the one. “This one is so much better than your bastard father. This one’s a winner!” Her mama would start acting like a girlfriend instead of a mother—leaving all the time to go on dates and worrying about what her boyfriend thought about how she looked. She’d dye her hair, buy new clothes, and then she’d pack up for some trip or expensive weekend away. When the relationship failed, as they always did, her mama would come back to the trailer and try to live like a normal mother, acting like nothing had changed at all. So Delia had learned it was best to act that way too.

Her mama dragged in several soaked suitcases from the porch. “I have to tell you all about the desert, Delia,” she said. “It’s the most magical place.” She opened one suitcase to show Delia a bag of crystals she’d brought back to “ward off evil spirits.” She also had a small drum and a very pretty woven cloth that she claimed were blessed by a medicine man. She didn’t say anything about school, and Delia was glad that Pat was out and couldn’t remind her. Her mama started boiling water for tea she’d also brought with her. “I swear to you, this tea will change your life. You will be cleansed of all the bad that has ever entered your thoughts.”

Delia sat at the kitchen table and watched her mama flit around the kitchen like a hummingbird. She went on and on about the mystical healing powers of the desert and kept saying things like, “I feel so centered” and “Can you see how my aura is glowing?”

Delia nodded and pretended she knew what her mama was talking about. “How long you staying for, Mama?” she asked. She sipped the tea that her mama handed her. It tasted like hot tree bark.
“Oh, I’ll be around,” her mama said. “I wouldn’t miss the holidays with my babies.” She started looking around like she’d just remembered where she was. “Where’s Pat anyhow?”

Delia shrugged. “I think he went into town to do some errands. He hasn’t been able to get to work with all the rain.”

“Ah,” her mama said and nodded. “Let me tell you, it never rained in the desert, except for this one time. We were walking around downtown Santa Fe, and all of a sudden, there was this downpour, the whole street starts flooding, and Hank is so soaked, but he tries to put his sombrero over me to shield me.” He mama laughed. “Such a gentleman.”

“Where is Hank?” Delia didn’t mind this latest boyfriend. She had only really talked to him a few times, usually when he was there to pick up her mama or drop her off. He didn’t say much, which was okay by her. And she liked that he had his own place. She didn’t have to see much of him, which was also okay by her.

“He’s checking on things over in the city. He’s got a lead on a job,” her mama answered. She sipped on some of her tea. “Oh! I brought you a present! From one of the artists out there.” She pulled out a small canvas from one of her bags and handed it to Delia.

The painting showed the desert sky at sunset, horizontal swathes of yellows, oranges, pinks, and reds. Black table-top mountains stood against the sky. Delia looked up at her mama who was clasping her hands in front of her.

“Do you like it?” she asked. Her mama was always bringing her presents from her trips. She figured it was how she kept herself from feeling too guilty about leaving, and just as she always hugged her mama when she got back, Delia told her it was lovely and she would cherish it. Pat came through the door then, and Delia’s mama went over to hug him and tell him the same stories. Delia disappeared to her bedroom and stared at the desert sky painting and wondered if
her mama knew that the sunset looked the same here. It might not have mountains, but the sky was the same. She probably didn’t care.

On Thanksgiving day, the sun finally came back. Pat went out to get a turkey from Popeye’s, which had been their family tradition since the first Thanksgiving after their daddy had left. Delia lay in her bed, loving the fact that she didn’t have to worry about school and thinking about college and Maggie and all the other cool kids. Today, she got to see Pat and her mama, and later, she could go over and watch movies with Samantha Jane. It would be a great day.

Someone banged on the screen door. “Hello there Chase,” Delia heard her mama say.

Delia’s heart started jumping in her chest. Who knew what her mama would say to him. She leapt out of bed and pulled on some jeans and a T-shirt.

“Hi Ms. Simmons,” Chase answered. “Pat home?”

“Hey, Chase,” Delia called out as she came up behind her mama. “Pat’s not here.”

“All right then,” Chase said. He smiled. There was some stubble growing on his chin that made him look rugged and sexy.

Delia closed the door on her mama and followed him outside. “You doing anything for Thanksgiving?”

Chase shrugged. “Yeah, my stepdad’s frying up the turkey right now. I just gotta make sure I’m home in time before he’s had his fifth beer and lights himself on fire.”

Delia laughed nervously. They walked towards Chase’s truck. Delia didn’t want him to leave just yet, but she had no idea what to say to him. He was kind of staring at her, and she wondered if he thought she was going with Danny since he’d seen them at the End of the World. She hoped he knew she was single. “So, um, you bring him a present or something?” She peered into Chase’s truck.
“Huh?”

“The thing for Pat?” Delia asked.

Chase laughed. “I didn’t bring him nothing,” he said. “I just wanted an excuse to talk to you.”

Delia felt her face burn. She knew she was blushing all over, but she didn’t even care. “Well, that’s...that’s real nice.” She hated herself.

“You’re a real nice girl,” he said. He leaned close to her. “Something about you, little Delia. Makes me want to find out more.” He winked and started to get into his truck.

Delia had no idea what that meant, but she felt like shouting. She wished she could run over to Samantha Jane’s right then. Instead, she gave him a wave.

Chase revved his engine and began to back out of their lot. “Hey, Delia,” Chase called out.

“Yeah?”

“Happy Thanksgiving.”

She smiled. “Happy Thanksgiving to you too.”

“Delia Joy,” her mama said when Delia walked back into the trailer. “What did that little hottie want with you?” She was leaning against the counter holding a glass of wine in one hand and a large blue crystal in the other.

“God, Mama,” Delia said and tried to change the subject. “What’s that blue thing for?”

“This is to bring us Thanksgiving tidings of great joy!” Her mama waved the crystal in circles around the kitchen. “There, now this kitchen is free of bad juju. All ready for making Thanksgiving.”

“Good thing we’re not cooking,” Delia said.
Pat came back with the turkey and all the sides mid-morning. Delia mentioned that Chase had dropped by, but she didn’t say anything else. Her mama, starting to get a little tipsy from her boxed wine, blessedly stayed silent about the whole thing. They sat down at their cramped kitchen table. Delia wasn’t used to their mama being there, so she had most of her school stuff piled on the table for homework. They’d cleared it and set the table for the first time in months.

“Well, my little babies, another Thanksgiving together!” Their mama held up her glass. “To us and our pure spiritual energy! May it see us through another year.” She held up the blue crystal she’d been carrying around.

Delia rolled her eyes at Pat across the table as they tried not to laugh.

Their mama took a long drink and raised her glass a second time. “And I’d like to propose a toast to your good-for-nothing bastard of a father for leaving us in peace. We can be thankful for that!”

“All right, Ma,” Pat said. “Let’s focus on the positives.”

Delia certainly was. All through dinner, she kept picturing Chase outside in their yard, telling her he’d come to see her. He wanted to know her. He wanted her. She didn’t think about anything else, not even when her mama put on her old records and started singing. Not even when Hank showed up later that day, and he and their mama got hammered. She didn’t care about anything else except for Chase.

A few days later, Delia was in her room trying to copy a hairstyle from a magazine she got at the Wal-Mart when she heard Pat and Chase talking outside.

“What’s the deal with you and her, man?” she heard Pat say.

“I just like her is all,” Chase answered. “I wanted to let you know since you’re my best friend.”
“You like her because you think you can fuck her. She’s my little sister.”

Delia walked to her window. She couldn’t see Chase’s face because Pat stood in front of him, almost towering over him. She wondered if Pat might try to hit him.

“Nah man,” Chase said. “I just like her. I think she’s sweet. And I know she’s your sister. What you think I’m trying to do, fight you? I’ll be good to her.”

Delia held her breath, afraid that if she even moved, Chase might change his mind. He might take back what he said. Pat didn’t say anything for a few minutes. Delia could hear someone coughing from a few lots over.

“If you mean it, you better do right by her.” Pat’s voice was full of emotion. Delia had never heard her brother talk like that. She wanted to give him a hug, tell him she was a good girl, and he didn’t need to worry. He didn’t need to always try to be her father.

“I will,” Chase said.

Pat motioned for Chase to walk past him. “Then go on in.”

Delia ran from the window and looked in the mirror. Her makeup looked all right, but her hair was a mess. Still up in all the curlers. She tugged it out as she heard the door open.

“Delia?”

“Hey,” Delia said. “I’ll, um, I’ll be right there.” She fluffed up her hair as best she could and went out to the kitchen.

Chase leaned against the countertop. “I been talking to your brother.”

“Oh yeah?” Delia tried to sound casual, but her heart felt like it was rattling against her ribs. She almost felt like throwing up.

“Yeah,” Chase said. He looked at her steadily. “Seems like he’s given me the blessing to ask you out.”
Delia nodded. Her palms felt sweaty.

“So what do you think, little Delia?” He took two steps toward her. “You want to go out with me?”

Delia smiled. “Yeah, that sounds good to me.”

“Okay then,” he said. “How about I come pick you up later, and we’ll go down by the End of the World?”

Delia nodded. “See you later.”

Chase said good bye and left. She waited until he got into his truck before she exhaled. She heard his engine rev up, and as soon as he pealed out, she ran out the door and across the drive to Samantha Jane’s trailer. She walked right in, like she always did.

“Samantha Jane, you won’t believe what just happened—” Delia walked through the trailer, poked her head in Samantha Jane’s room, didn’t see her, and kept walking. “Where you at, girl?”

She heard a choked sob in response, coming from the bathroom. When Delia looked in, Samantha Jane was lying on the floor, crying.

“Girl, what’s wrong?” Delia went to her friend and sat beside her. She reached out and took Samantha Jane’s hand. “Are you okay? What happened?”

Samantha Jane cried harder and didn’t answer. Delia rocked her. Where was her mama? Delia looked around. She’d seen them both Thanksgiving night when she’d come over. Samantha Jane’s mama had a boyfriend over, so they’d gone into Samantha Jane’s room to watch movies like they’d planned. Samantha Jane had been quiet, but Delia figured that was because the boyfriend was there. Samantha Jane never seemed to like when her mama brought someone home. She wondered if something had happened. She started to ask what was wrong
again when Samantha Jane grabbed the toilet and stood up, shaking Delia’s arms off of her shoulders. Samantha Jane picked a white stick up off of the counter and held it out to Delia.

“I’m pregnant,” Samantha Jane finally choked out.

Delia looked at the pink plus sign on the stick. She’d forgotten what she had come over to tell her friend. “Okay,” Delia said. “Okay.”

The two girls sat down on the bathroom floor again. They sat cross-legged on the cold linoleum, their knees touching. Delia held Samantha Jane’s hands, and she thought about pathways again. Samantha Jane’s path was clear cut now, cemented in place. Delia knew it, Samantha Jane knew it, there was no sense in denying it. So they sat and held hands until it grew dark and Delia had to go home.
Caitlin turned on the overhead projector to display a grainy black and white photo of Langston Hughes next to the words to his poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” She turned to face the group of boys in front of her. “Today, we’re going to start a poetry workshop, and we’ll start by talking about some pretty influential poetry inspired by New Orleans and the south.”

“We don’t live in New Orleans,” Benji called out.

Caitlin smiled and took a deep breath before answering. The Vicodin was taking far too long to kick in, and she wished Benji was still skipping school like he’d done the first few weeks after Leon was expelled. “I know that,” she said. “But this entire area is influenced by it. Now this is a poem by Langston Hughes. Who can tell me anything about Langston Hughes?”

“It ain’t black history month!” someone yelled out.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Caitlin took a deep breath again.

“Because we only ever talk about Langston Hughes in black history month,” Jason said.
“Yeah,” Benji chimed in. “You want us to know about a black poet now?” He raised his eyebrows at her. “Leon’s not even here! You asking him for forgiveness by teaching us about black people?”

Caitlin tried to smile again. “Learning about African American authors isn’t just for other African Americans. We all need to learn about authors from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.”

“Yeah, especially you,” Benji said.

Caitlin ignored him and turned to the oversized poem. She looked for the line she wanted to start with.

“It’s all right,” Jason said. “Ms. C. knows what she needs to do. She be needing that good karma now, trying to make it right.”

The class started in on that. Benji said nothing, but Caitlin felt him staring at her. His eyes were laughing at her. So he’d gotten the rest of the class to go against her too now. Well, she probably should’ve seen that coming. It was the first week in her class since the incident in which Mr. Perez hadn’t sat in the back of her classroom as a way of keeping the peace. He said he wanted to make sure she had all the behavior support she needed, but Caitlin was pretty sure the school was just trying to cover its ass after Mr. Davis’s blog post went viral and with the publicity around the impending trial.

For her part, Caitlin was trying to make amends with her students. Jeremy had insisted that she try to start over with them because with Leon being gone, it was the chance to reestablish a positive classroom culture. And besides, she still had another seven months to go in the school year, so she may as well try to make them worthwhile. And then after this year, she still had another year before she was free from her NET commitment. It seemed like an eternity.
She read through the poem loud enough that she could be heard over the boys still arguing over her need to redeem herself. “Now, in this poem, the speaker mentions four different rivers,” she said. “Three of them are in Africa, and the last one he mentions is the Mississippi. What does that tell us about the speaker and his history?”

“He’s probably a slave,” Jason said. “Got sold out down the river.”

“That sucks,” Sean said.

“Langston Hughes was a slave?” someone else said.

That went on for a few minutes before Caitlin was able to get them to make a few logical connections about the poem, and she felt like they could move on. She put another Langston Hughes poem, “Po’ Boy Blues,” on the overhead. “This is an example of a blues poem,” she said. “See how he makes a pattern with these repeating lines?”

“Is this on the state test?” Sean asked. “I thought you said we was supposed to be getting ready for the test in the spring.”

“We are,” Caitlin said. “But I think it would be good for all of you to learn to express yourselves through writing.”

“Yeah, not through violence,” Benji called out.

Caitlin ignored him and pointed to the lines that repeated. “We’re going to refer to these lines with letters. The lines that repeat will be the same letter. So, for instance, lines one and three will be letter A and lines two and four will be letter B. Label those lines on your papers, please.” Caitlin waited for the boys to start following her directions. Benji leaned back in his chair in the last row, staring at her. He never picked up his pencil. “Benji,” Caitlin called to him. “Can you tell us what the speaker is talking about in this poem?”

“Yeah,” Benji said. “He’s hungry. He wants a po’boy.”
Caitlin wanted to bang her head against the board. “No, he doesn’t. The title means he’s a 
*poor boy*, not a po’boy sandwich.”

“Then, I don’t know what the hell it means,” Benji said.

“I wouldn’t expect you to,” Caitlin snapped back. As soon as she said it, she regretted it.

Benji whistled low. “You going to call me ignorant just like Leon, huh?”

Caitlin attempted a smile at him and shook her head. She gave the instructions for how 
students should practice coming up with rhymes in their poetry journals, following the same 
rhyming strategies as those in “Po’ Boy Blues.” The pills finally kicked in as the students started 
working. Caitlin felt exhausted and wanted to sit down, but something was distracting her. 
Someone had disrespected her. Benji. She needed to start her new plan of attack.

“Benji, can I see you for a second, please?”

Benji looked up. “You seeing me right now.”

“Out in the hallway, please,” Caitlin said.

Benji huffed loudly, but he stood up and walked out to the hallway. Caitlin followed him.

“Okay, I’m here,” he said. “Whatcha want?” He stood with his hands in his pockets, kind 
of leaning to one side.

If it had been any other day, Caitlin might have been impressed with how vocal and 
brazen this kid was being. He was finally coming out of his shell. Too bad it was only to provoke 
er. “I want to talk to you about what’s going on with Leon,” she said. She’d avoided bringing 
Leon’s name up in class, especially to Benji, but she didn’t think she could ignore it anymore.

Benji didn’t look at her. “Why? He’s kicked out. He ain’t coming back, and you’re the 
one to blame for that. And he’s probably going to jail. You’re the one to blame for that too.”
Caitlin sighed. She couldn’t let him go down the same road that Leon went down. He was a lost cause, but Benji wasn’t. “I know that you’re angry,” she started.

“So whatcha gonna do? Hit me like you did with Leon? Mr. Perez isn’t here for you to suck up to anymore.” He got close to her. “If you want to hit me, go right ahead.”

Caitlin didn’t move.

“I forgot, you only go after black guys.” He started walking down the hallway.

Caitlin heard what he was saying but didn’t even care. She had no reaction. Thank god for painkillers. “Benji,” she said. “I just wanted to…ask you how he’s doing.”

Benji stopped walking and whipped around. “How he’s doing? How he’s doing is he spent two weeks in that jail ’til his moms got his bond together. They had to pay a bail bondsman and everything. Gonna be in debt forever now. You know what that’s like? He’s getting fuc ked over, that’s how he’s doing.”

Okay, maybe she deserved that, but Caitlin wouldn’t let him get to her. Standing out in the hallway, she was already getting serious déjà vu as it was. “Benji, wait a second,” she said. “I want you to know, I really am sorry for what happened.”

Benji didn’t say anything.

“If I could take it back, I would,” she continued. She didn’t know if it was the Vicodin, but she was getting emotional. She felt tears come to her eyes. “But I can’t. I can only move forward, and one way I need to do that is with your cooperation.”

Benji still said nothing.

Caitlin felt tears spill onto her cheeks now. She was crying in front of a student. And not just any student, she was crying in front of Benji. “I need your help to make things right.”

Benji sucked his teeth.
“I mean it,” she said. “Please come back to the classroom.” She waited to see if it would work. If her vulnerability could conquer this kid.

Benji started walking back towards her. “All right, fine,” he said. “You don’t gotta cry about it.”

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Caitlin walked through the door to the bar and immediately had to stop to catch her bearings in the dark, smoky room. She had never been to this bar before, a divey place on Frenchmen Street that was mostly lit by candles and Christmas lights. Her friend Kyle had invited her out after she’d admitted she hadn’t seen any music yet in the city. She finally spotted him through the haze sitting at a table near the back. Kyle was another NET first year teacher who had done his training at the same school as Caitlin, and he was one of the only friends she’d made since moving to the city. He was sitting with some other first years whom she had hung out with a few times—two girls, Brittany and Sarah, who were roommates and taught at the same school and two guys, Dave and Andrew, who lived with Kyle. Kyle waved when he saw her walking up and stood up.

“You made it,” he said. He gave her a hug. “How’s my favorite wounded warrior doing?”

Caitlin gave him a weak smile. “Please don’t call me that.”

“Whatever, you’re a hero,” he said. “You came out on the other side! I’ll go get you a drink.” He walked to the bar and left Caitlin at the table with the others.

No one really looked at her. They all nodded hello and then went back to watching the band, which was some local New Orleans group. A scrawny white guy played a guitar while a
big black man played a beat-up looking tuba. A scruffy-looking black guy played a washboard strapped to his chest. Well, there was a first time for everything.

Kyle handed a beer to Caitlin. “I think this has your name on it.”

She thanked him and sat down next to him.

“I heard about what happened in your class,” Brittany said to Caitlin and then went back to drinking her cocktail.

“Oh,” Caitlin said. You and everyone else in this city, she thought. “Yeah…it’s rough out there.” She sipped on her beer and wondered if she could get away with not talking about it. She turned towards the band.

“I read the blog about it too,” Brittany pressed on. “The guy who wrote it works at your school, right?”

Caitlin barely nodded. She wondered if anyone would ever stop talking about that damn blog. She turned back and noticed that Sarah was staring at her now, too. In the dim candlelight of the bar, the girls’ eyes glittered and reminded Caitlin of cats about to pounce. “Yeah,” she said. “I don’t know where he got his information though. I’ve never really talked to him.”

The girls nodded slowly. “That’s interesting,” Sarah said. “Considering he seemed to know a lot about what happened.”

Caitlin felt her face burn. “I’m sorry, were you there?” she snapped. She remembered again why she’d been avoiding people.

“Come on, guys,” Kyle said. “Leave her alone.”

Caitlin glanced at him with a quick smile. The girls stopped talking to her and turned their attention to the band. The washboard guy started singing along with the music. It sounded very bluesy. If she could remember the words, she could teach it in the next poetry workshop.
She thought about mentioning the poetry workshop to Brittany but decided against opening her
mouth unless she had to.

She looked around the bar. Most of the tables were filled up with people glued to the
music. Some people had started dancing near the stage doing some moves that looked like swing
dancing. Couples twirled around each other. Caitlin couldn’t remember the last time she’d been
to a bar where people danced. She definitely had never seen people dancing like this. She tapped
her foot along with the music.

“Did you go home for Thanksgiving?” Andrew asked Caitlin.

She shook her head. “I stayed here. Just had a quiet one by myself.” Just me, Law and
Order, and my roommate’s pain pills, she thought.

“I didn’t know you were in town,” Andrew said. “Why didn’t you come to the NET
Thanksgiving? It was awesome! So many different kinds of pies.”

Caitlin stared at him blankly and then shrugged. Brittany and Sarah both gave Andrew
death glares.

“What?” Andrew asked.

“I think they’re trying to point out to you that I wasn’t invited,” Caitlin said coolly. She
sipped her drink. “It’s fine, guys, I wouldn’t have wanted to ruin your Thanksgiving dinner with
my scandal.”

Brittany raised her eyebrows but didn’t say anything. Sarah sighed and kept sipping her
drink.

“Damn, that’s harsh,” Kyle said. “Way to be bitches on Thanksgiving.”

“Hey, it was our party,” Sarah snapped. “And what are you saying? That you agree with
what she did?”
“All I know is she defended herself against a badass kid,” Kyle said. He squeezed
Caitlin’s shoulder. “I would do the same thing. These kids are fucking insane. They don’t give a
shit about their teachers. They don’t give a shit about anything.”

“I can’t even believe I’m hearing this,” Sarah said. “What kind of teacher could say that?
You should have better expectations for them! I mean, for some of them, we’re all they have.
Their lives are at stake here, and she wants to throw them in jail!” Sarah had turned red in the
face, and Caitlin wished she’d never come to the bar.

She didn’t need them to remind her what a shitty person she was. But then she
remembered that Sarah worked for a pretty prestigious charter school, one that was both lauded
for the way it had raised students’ test scores along with its strict lottery system for getting into
the school. She’d never had to deal with a student like Leon. She had no idea what she was
talking about.

“Go drink more of the NET Kool-Aid,” Kyle said. “I’ll be here drinking my sorrows
away.” He held up his beer. “Here’s to only one and a half more years of this bullshit!”

The guys laughed and clinked their glasses against his, but Brittany and Sarah got up and
said they were leaving. Caitlin downed her beer and left the table to try to find the girls.

She saw them half a block away and ran to catch up. “Hey,” Caitlin said, a little out of
breath. “Just so you know, it’s not all what you think.”

Brittany smirked. “What, you’re not pressing charges after all?”

“Or it is that that kid didn’t do anything wrong?” Sarah said. “His only crime is being
young and black.”

Caitlin sighed. “The DA’s pressing charges. I have nothing to do with it.”

“You have nothing to do with it?” Sarah scoffed. “Right.”
“In case you didn’t know, it’s considered assault when a student attacks a teacher,” Caitlin muttered.

“And what about when the teacher attacks a student?” Sarah asked.

“You don’t even know my side of the story,” Caitlin said halfheartedly. She felt lightheaded from the beer and running. She wondered what her side of the story had to do with it anymore.

“Then tell us,” Brittany said. She folded her arms across her chest. “We just want to know what really happened. We’re in NET too, you know. We have the right to know what kind of people we’re associated with.”

Caitlin stared at her. “Well…you have to understand, this kid, Leon, he’s got behavior issues. He’s been acting up all year, and it just escalated!”

“So what you’re saying is that you let his behavior escalate instead of managing it?” Sarah said as though she was a Teacher Mentor.

“Um, no, you can’t just manage kids like that,” Caitlin said.

“See, Caitlin, that’s the problem,” Brittany chimed in. “You’re just like all of the people we came here to fight against. Whose side are you on anyway?”

Caitlin opened her mouth but had nothing to say.

“Look,” Sarah said quietly. “That blog post has everyone questioning NET now. This isn’t just about you.” She hailed a cab. “Don’t drag the rest of us down with you.”

The girls got into the cab, leaving Caitlin alone on the sidewalk. She felt like sitting down there on the grimy street and never moving from the spot. Jeremy had been right about there only being one side of the story. He just hadn’t mentioned that sometimes people decided the story for themselves before anyone got a chance to explain.
Caitlin went back into the bar and told the guys she would buy the next round. At the bar, Caitlin sifted through her purse for her wallet and felt the pill bottle she’d slipped in there. The bartender set her beers in front of her, and Caitlin turned away from him to pop a Vicodin. She gulped down half her beer before heading back to the table.

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The lights in the television studio were intensely bright. Caitlin thought that this must be what an interrogation room would look like—too bright to be able to gather one’s thoughts. She felt scattered enough as it was these days, especially after the other night at the bar, and now she was going to be on the five o’clock news making her story—her lie—even more public.

Jeremy told her that this was all part of the strategy. “As much as the DA can get a jury on your side, we need the public on your side as well,” he’d said. He didn’t mention the blog post by name, but she knew that’s what he was saying. He meant that NET needed her to follow all of their instructions not because they believed her or empathized with her. They saw her as a loose cannon, a walking liability, and they needed to control her. Caitlin at least understood that impulse. She’d gone along with everything, and now she was sitting in front of the city’s top news anchor recounting her fight with Leon for the greater New Orleans area.

“Ms. Caldwell, we can’t begin to imagine what you went through, what you continue to go through, as a result of being attacked by one of your own students.” Miranda Holmes was a pretty damn good journalist, always able to cut to the chase but keep her voice full of concern, her body language showing nothing but sympathy. She sat under those bright lights in a smart deep purple blazer and matching skirt and her blonde hair all shiny.
Caitlin wanted to say, you’re a lot like me, Miranda. An outsider, someone who doesn’t belong, someone who will never really understand the weird world they have here. It’s us against South Louisiana, Miranda.

She could feel Jeremy’s eyes, beaming into her along with those bright lights, and she continued the lie she had been living for the past month. She was the victim, the survivor of school violence. She thought about what Benji Landry had written in his journal on the first day of school.

“Every day is a struggle,” Caitlin said. “All I want to do is help my students succeed. That’s why I came here. But that’s much easier said than done.” She laughed nervously. She knew she sounded like an idiot.

“That’s right,” Miranda continued. “You’re part of the No Excuses Teaching program here in the Greater New Orleans area. How would you say your training prepared you for this teaching environment?”

Caitlin had been waiting for this question. Jeremy and the lawyer had coached her on every possible scenario that Miranda might introduce. Jeremy had told her that no matter what other answers she gave on the news, what she said about NET was the most important. “Don’t forget you’re representing NET,” he said. “To the people watching TV, you might be the only NET teacher they ever see. Make us proud.” Don’t fuck this up is what he meant.

Caitlin cleared her throat. She’d rehearsed her answer so many times it spilled out of her easily like water. “I’d say that my training was as good as any other teacher education program,” she said. “I learned how to plan and teach lessons and how to discipline my students in an effective way. My training also included diversity sensitivity training and frank discussions about race and poverty. I felt very prepared coming into the classroom, knowing the many
unique challenges I might face in the Greater New Orleans region.” When she finished, she felt a little lightheaded as though she’d just been holding her breath for a long time.

Miranda nodded with concern. “And in your opinion, what kinds of challenges plague our region?”

“Well,” Caitlin said. She could feel herself sweating under the hot lights. They hadn’t anticipated a question like this. “I think that a lot of young people here are stuck…in a cycle of poverty and despair…despite all the help we’re giving them. They see someone like me, someone who’s different, who’s had opportunities they could only dream of, and they don’t even want to…People like me make them angry for all the things they don’t have.” She’d done it again. She’d said one of the things she was never supposed to say.

“And do you think Leon Duplessis suffers from some of these issues?” Miranda wasn’t going to let this opportunity slip away, that was for sure.

“Yes, I do,” Caitlin said. She knew she probably sounded defensive, but she didn’t care. “I think there’s a lot of kids like him who expect the system to pass them along without challenging them and making them work. They should realize that NET teachers, all good teachers, want them to succeed, but they have to put forth an effort. We need them to work with us, not against us.”

“You’re a courageous young woman,” Miranda said as she finished up their segment. “We can only hope to have more teachers like you in our fair city. Next up, is LSU’s offense in trouble without running back Cody Tucker? Troy Meyers will have that story along with the rest of your important sports updates after this commercial break.”
The blinking red lights of the cameras cut out, and a few of the overhead lights seemed to lose their intensity. Miranda thanked Caitlin before being enveloped by hair and makeup specialists. Caitlin took off her mic and handed it to the tech, and that was it.

“How’d I do?” Caitlin asked when she saw Jeremy at the back of the studio.

He motioned for her to follow him with a finger over his lips. Right Caitlin, she thought, stop talking. You’ve done enough damage.
Benji watched the clouds float lazily through the sky out the classroom window like he usually did. It was a clear day, not too cold, even though Christmas was getting close. It would be a perfect day to walk along the levee. If it wasn’t for his loyalty to Leon, he wouldn’t even be in school anymore. But he had to keep an eye on that bitch. He glanced at the front of the room.

Ms. Caldwell was up at the overhead projector trying and failing to get everyone in the class to help her brainstorm imagery, or something like that, about St. Bernard. Only dumbass Jason and Sean kept answering, and they might as well have been in kindergarten with the dumb shit they kept saying. They obviously didn’t know what imagery was. Benji looked at the clouds again. They reminded him of watching the clouds reflected in the water when he was out on the boat with his daddy.

He thought about what Ms. Caldwell had said in the hallway the other day. She seemed pretty desperate to get him on her side, or at least, make him think she was sorry. Almost like she felt guilty. She better be feeling guilty.
“Put in something about the water,” Benji blurted out.

Ms. Caldwell stared at him like she couldn’t believe he’d said anything. “Okay,” she said and nodded. “Yes, good idea. Because we live near the Mississippi, is that what you mean?”

“Nah man,” Benji said. “I mean, yeah, but I’m talking about the bayous. This ain’t Langston Hughes writing this now.”

Ms. Caldwell laughed. What, she thought he was being cute? He just knew his shit.

“Good point, Benji,” she said. She added “bayous” to the list of “shrimp,” “Chalmette battlefield,” “St. Bernard High School,” and “Red beans.” Pretty sad list. Most of it was because of his dumbass classmates, but he didn’t know much else to add to it. He just liked throwing in ideas here and there to make Ms. Caldwell think he was trying. So far, it seemed to be working.

She told them to take some of their ideas and start working on a blues poem about St. Bernard to express an emotion they feel about da parish. She’d been making them write poems all the time now. Benji would never admit it, but it turned out he liked writing. It felt kind of good putting all his thoughts down in an organized way. Most of it was stuff he thought about anyway, so he just put that to rhymes.

He opened his notebook and turned to the pages where he’d been writing his poems. He thought about the water and the clouds again and just started writing.

“The sky so blue, blue, blue,
The sky so blue, blue, blue,
Too bad it’s so thin.

And the water so wide, wide, wide,
And the water so wide, wide, wide,
Too bad you can’t swim.

If you can’t open your eyes,
If you can’t open your eyes,
You’ll miss the clouds go by.

Better get to shore,
Better get to shore,
Before the water runs dry.”

He held it up for Ms. Caldwell to see. “I’m done,” he said.

She came over and looked at his paper. “This is a great start, Benji,” she said. “Now, if I can make a suggestion—”

Benji sucked his teeth. Bitch needed to get it together. He was doing her a favor by being good and doing his work.

“But, like I said,” Ms. Caldwell said quickly as though she could sense what a dumb bitch she was being, “excellent first draft of your blues poem. Now you can get started on another poem, about anything you want.”

Benji waited until she’d walked off to talk to someone else before he flipped to the back of his notebook. He liked messing with her. It made him feel like he had some power, like he was in her head. Actually, he knew he was. She was all desperate to get him to “start fresh.” He let her think he wanted to start over too.
Benji flipped through his notebook. He didn’t give a shit about Langston Hughes or anybody else, but at least he could work on his rap rhymes without Ms. Caldwell getting on his case. He looked at what he and Leon had been working on. He hadn’t seen Leon a lot with him being at Arabi, but whenever they got together, they added to their song. It was sounding pretty good too.

Benji looked at their rhymes now to try to add to them, but nothing was coming to him. All he could think about was his daddy. Probably those stupid clouds floating by outside. Benji kept seeing himself back on that boat. When he picked up his pencil, he wrote quickly, getting out all the thoughts that kept coming to him.

“My daddy lives at the End of the World,
He sailed away there one day.
He don’t want nobody to find him,
That’s why he covered his trace.
Now he lives in the clouds,
Can’t nobody find him there,
He’s part of the the ones who left,
They don’t want us no more.”

He stopped then. He didn’t really know where he was going to go with that. His daddy may have left, but he was a cracker ass too, just like Benji, like father like son. And maybe he was right for leaving, seeing how crazy his mama had turned out. Will Jeansonne had known it before Benji did.
The day before he beat Will’s ass, Benji’s mama had come to school to pick Benji up. She showed up really early though, like right after lunch. Kids were still leaving the cafeteria. Benji was one of them. As he came around the corner into the hallway, his mama was there, yelling at the principal. She demanded to see her son. Benji started backing away, trying to get back to the cafeteria before she saw him.

“You trying to run away like your daddy did?” his mama yelled. “You get the fuck back here!”

The principal held his mama’s arms back when she started running down the hallway towards Benji. She kept screaming, “He left us! How dare he leave us?” Benji had looked up to see half his class staring at him in the hallway.

He scribbled over the first lines and started writing again.

“That little bitch Will shoulda watched his back,
But really, I shoulda known I wouldn’t come back.
I’m stuck here now,
My cracker ass gone,
I’m at the End of the World,
I ain’t ever coming back down.
This is where I was always gonna be,
My daddy barely made it out alive,
But me, I ain’t so lucky,
I just came here to die.”
Benji put his pencil down. Putting all those words on the page felt so damn good. He thought about writing something about Leon and Ms. Caldwell. He figured since he was turning bad shit into rhymes he finally had a place to put all his anger. John Cena became invisible; Benji Landry became words.

He started thinking about what beats he could put to the rhymes when the bell rang. So many things were going through his head—rhymes, clouds, writing—that he couldn’t wait to tell Leon about. He got halfway down the hallway when he realized that he didn’t have his notebook with him. He rushed back, pushing against the crowds, to Ms. Caldwell’s room. He walked in and saw her standing in the back of the room near his desk. She had his notebook open in her hands.

“Hey!” he said. “That’s private!”

Ms. Caldwell looked up. “Sorry,” she said. “I was trying to see whose it was.” She snapped it shut. “But I have to say, Benji, this is some really good stuff.”

He snatched the notebook from her. “Thanks,” he mumbled. He hoped that she hadn’t been looking in the back at the rhymes. She didn’t need to know about any of that.

“Can I ask you a question though?” she asked.

He shrugged.

“Why do you call yourself a cracker in there?” She looked confused. “I mean, that’s a derogatory term, I’m sure you know. Why would you call yourself that?”

He smirked. He tried to think of one of her fancy terms from class, throw her off, make her think he was trying to impress her again. “It’s, um, a metaphor.”

“But I don’t get it.”

“It’s poetry, Ms. Caldwell,” he said finally. “You ain’t supposed to know it all.”
Benji stood in the bus line later that day and saw Delia. He watched her standing by herself while she waited to get on the bus. He didn’t see her by herself much these days. She always seemed to have people around her, like the popular kids at the End of the World or her sidekick from the trailer park. Standing there by herself, Delia looked younger and smaller, like she was trying to blend in, fade away.

The bus driver finally opened up the doors, and everyone started climbing on. Benji watched where Delia sat, three rows from the back, and followed her to her seat.

“This seat taken?” Benji asked.

She glanced up and shook her head.

“Where’s your friend?” Benji asked as he sat down.

“Huh?”

“That girl who lives in the trailer park too. Samantha Jane.”

“Oh,” Delia said. She turned back to the window. “She, um, she’s sick.”

“Hope she feels better soon,” Benji said. He didn’t really. He wanted Samantha Jane to be sick for as many days as he could keep sitting next to Delia on the bus. She looked so pretty, and he’d never gotten to talk to her at school before. Even on a bus leaving school, it was different than at the End of the World. Sitting close together on a the bus felt like a new bond.

They rode in silence for several minutes, and Benji watched as the Dollar Trees and the Walgreens whipped by until they were out in the country. It took less than five minutes. They passed a field of cows, and then they could see water peeking through the trees. The bayous
looked like grey glass, winking at them when the light hit. Benji thought about the water again. He wanted to tell Delia about his rhymes, but he didn’t know if she’d laugh at him. He had to say something though, or they might not talk the whole rest of the way home.

“I got Ms. Caldwell thinking I’m on her side,” Benji said.

Delia frowned. “What do you mean? You’re taking her side now?”

“No way,” he said. “But she thinks I am. She’s gonna start telling me things, and I’m gonna get her to admit that she riled Leon up. She thinks I’m her good student now.”

“So you’re being a teacher’s pet, huh?” Delia laughed.

Benji laughed too. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“You think she’s actually going to change her mind? Just because you’re being good now doesn’t mean she’s good too.”

Benji thought about that. “I don’t think she’ll ever be good. But good or bad, people gotta feel guilt. Just takes the bad ones longer to crack.” He nodded. “She will though.”

“Sounds like you’ve got it figured out,” Delia said. “Good luck getting that confession. I feel like you’re a detective from one of those police shows.”

“Yeah, well, I’m tired of bitches like her thinking they’re all better than us,” Benji said. “Besides, Leon would help me out if it was the other way around.”

“How is Leon doing anyhow?”

“He’s chillin’,” Benji said. He looked straight ahead. Truth was, Benji had a bad feeling about Leon lately. He’d been blowing Benji off a lot, saying he was busy. Benji knew he was working for Marcus, but he just didn’t want to ask him about it. He thought Leon would be smarter than that, but he knew his family had a lot of debt now after paying all that bail money. Benji bit his lip. Another reason why Ms. Caldwell needed to go down.
“You, um, you have a good Thanksgiving?” Delia asked.

Benji nodded quickly because he didn’t want her to stop talking. “Yeah,” he said, which might have been true if he counted his mama passing out at four thirty before they’d even eaten dinner and his brothers getting drunk and playing video games while they ate Chinese take-out as “good.” “How ‘bout you?”

“Yeah,” she said. “It was all right. Holidays are always a little weird now.”

“What do you mean?” Benji didn’t know much about her family other than she had that big brother Pat, and her mama worked a lot. She was always gone. He wished his mama worked that much.

She shrugged like there wasn’t much to say. “My daddy was never good to us, especially not my mama. They always fought, but now that he’s gone and we’re here, it’s like, we’re not really a family anymore.” She turned to him. “Does that sound crazy?”

Benji shook his head. “No, not at all. You and Pat seem tight though.” He always saw Pat driving her around. He seemed like the overprotective brother-type.

Delia nodded. “Yeah, we are. He’s always been there for me.” She turned to him.

“Maybe let’s talk about something else?”

Benji nodded. “Yeah, sure.” He could have told her that his family was plenty fucked up too, but he didn’t know if that would help or not. Probably best not to scare her off.

They talked about school, who was doing what next year. Delia mentioned that she was going to apply to Loyola over in New Orleans. Benji had never heard of it, but he’d never thought about any college.

“I don’t know if I’ll go though,” she said. “Even if I do get in. Tuition and all that.”
Benji thought about Delia going to college. It made sense. She didn’t really belong in the trailer park; anyone could see that. He wished she wouldn’t leave, though. “Well, good luck, I guess,” he said. “You should go, if you get in. You deserve it.”

Delia smiled. “Thanks,” she said. “Do you think you’ll go to college?”

He shook his head. “Nah, I don’t think colleges let in BD kids. An’ I don’t really want to do any more school.” He pictured being in school with someone like Ms. Caldwell for four more years. “Every time I’m at school, I just wanna get out of there.”

“I guess I could see that,” Delia said. “Except I think college is different. It’s not like teachers telling you what to do all the time.” She turned towards him and gave him a half smile. “But don’t say that’s ‘cuz you’re BD. I know you’re not.”

Benji almost blushed. He could feel his face getting all hot, and he had to turn away from her. “What, we becoming friends now?” he asked.

Delia laughed. It felt good making her laugh. He wished he could keep thinking of things to make her laugh. The bus pulled into their trailer park then, and they got off. Delia said goodbye and walked towards Samantha Jane’s trailer.

Benji didn’t know what made him do it, but he walked after her. “Hey!” he called out.

Delia turned around. “Yeah?”

A million thoughts clogged his brain, wanting to get out. He wanted to tell her that she looked really pretty or that she was so much better than the trailer park and she should know it or would she maybe want to go to the show with him some time? But she stared at him with her big eyes, and Benji couldn’t organize any of those thoughts into a real sentence. “I’m, um…glad you’ve got Pat,” Benji stammered. “That he’s a good brother to you. That’s, um…that makes all the other shit better.” What the hell was he even saying?
Delia furrowed her eyebrows but smiled. “Thanks,” she said and waved.

He nodded. At least he’d gotten to talk to her. He watched her go inside before he turned towards his trailer. His mama was sitting on the porch.

“Hey there, sugar,” she called out to him. She was wearing a clean, white, button up shirt and jeans. Her hair looked nice, all slicked back, and she had makeup on. Benji didn’t remember the last time he’d seen her like this.

“Hi, Mama,” Benji said. “What’s going on?”

She smiled. Her teeth were yellowed, and one was cracked. But she looked happy, sober.

“I’m feeling good, honey. Something about this weather I think. What you say we go out to dinner tonight? Just me and you, huh?”

“Sure thing,” he said.

He didn’t stop to wait to see if his mama was serious or if she would change her mind in a half an hour and start drinking her dinner. He went straight to his room and started on another set of rhymes, all about Delia.
Delia didn’t like Christmas. When she was growing up, while most parents were decorating trees and buying presents for their kids, her parents were fighting or splitting up. When she was in kindergarten, all the other kids in her class were really excited when Santa Claus came to visit them at school. Delia was the only one who refused to sit on his lap, and when the man in the Santa suit promised to bring her something special for Christmas, Delia told him he was a liar. Her teacher asked her why she said that, and Delia told her it was because Santa usually forgot to bring her and Pat anything. Delia remembered that the teacher cried. The next day, she brought her a teddy bear. Just as Delia had predicted, it was the only Christmas present she got that year. She kept it for years until it fell apart.

This Christmas seemed like it would be more of the same. Her mama was home, but it didn’t feel like it. She was always out with Hank, usually in the city. Most nights she didn’t come home at all. Pat was around, but he’d been staying a lot later at work on the boats than he
used to. Even Samantha Jane seemed to be gone all the time. She had started parenting classes at
the rec center, and when she wasn’t at a class, she was with Derek.

The only thing getting Delia through the Christmas season was Chase. She saw him
almost every day since they’d started dating. He was sweet, always telling her she looked pretty,
opening doors for her. He called every night to tell her good night. When she was with him, she
never worried about anything else. Delia had never breathed so easy in her life.

Chase came to pick her up one night wearing a nice sweater and shiny shoes instead of
his usual beat up boots. His Saints hat was gone, and his hair was combed with some gel.

“We going somewhere fancy?” Delia asked when she came out to his truck. She was
wearing her jeans that had a hole in the knee.

“I got something planned,” Chase said. “Go back and change into something nice.” He
winked.

Delia raised her eyebrows in surprise. Usually on their date nights, they just got some
food at Rocky and Carlo’s or went to the movie theater that had just been rebuilt. And they
always ended up driving to the End of the World.

She went back inside and rummaged through her closet until she found a dress that
belonged to Samantha Jane’s mama that Samantha Jane had let Delia wear to a school dance that
fall. It was midnight blue with silver beads on it that looked like starbursts. She pulled it on and
looked at herself in the mirror. She thought she looked sophisticated, like someone in a movie.

Before her first date with Chase, she’d spent hours trying to figure out what to wear.
Samantha Jane had pulled out all the stops in her mama’s closet, and they’d finally decided on a
mini skirt with black tights and a low cut shirt. Samantha Jane insisted it was the perfect first
date outfit, complete with some five inch heels she lent Delia from her own closet.
That first night Chase took Delia out to dinner at a pizza place near their trailer park, and then they’d gone down to the End of the World. Because it was a school night, no one else was there. Delia had felt a little ridiculous walking over the oyster shells and gravel in her super high heels, but she made it to the water’s edge without wiping out in front of Chase. The water was bright with the light of a full moon. Delia had never realized how romantic that little beach could be.

Chase picked up a few rocks and skipped them across the water. They created puddles in the moonlight as they skipped along.

“I wanted to take you out here because it’s the first place I really saw you,” Chase had said. “I mean, I saw you when I hung out with Pat, but here it was different.”

Delia smiled and was glad it was dark enough that he couldn’t see if her cheeks were turning red.

He dug a flask out of his jacket and took a swig. “You want some?” He held it out to her. “Whiskey. Keep you nice and warm on a night like this.”

Delia took the flask and tasted the whiskey. It burned her throat, and she didn’t drink much. Chase picked up another stone and skipped it across the water.

“How do you do that?” Delia asked.

“Do what?”

“Keep the stones from falling in the water when you skip them. I always try to do it, but I can’t get it.”

“Sounds like we need to fix that right now,” Chase said. He bent and inspected the rocky shore. “First you need to find a really flat rock.” He gathered a few stones and stood up. “Then, you gotta work your wrist when you throw it.” He showed Delia how to flick her wrist. He took
one of the stones and flicked his wrist just the same way. The stone skipped across the water’s surface four times before dropping in. “Now you try.”

Delia tried to skip a few of the rocks like he’d shown her, but they didn’t go any further than one jump in the water.

Chase laughed. “You’re hopeless, but at least you look good doing it.”

Later, they sat in his truck to warm up. Chase put his arm around her. Delia could smell his cologne, a woodsy scent. She wanted to smell that scent for the rest of her life, she decided then. She knew what a crazy thought that was, and she thought about Samantha Jane and Derek. So that’s what it was like.

“What made you want to ask me out?” Delia said suddenly.

They’d been sitting quietly, listening to the night birds while Chase held her close.

“Like I said, you’re different,” Chase said. He touched her cheek with his finger. “You’re something special.” He leaned in and kissed her then. She hadn’t kissed many boys, but this one felt different than all of them. He thought she was special.

They made out for a while until Delia stopped it. She told Chase she was saving herself and then immediately regretted saying that. She didn’t know why she’d said it and on their first night together too.

“You’re a good girl, huh?” Chase said.

“Is that…is that okay?” Delia asked.

“Of course it is, baby,” Chase said. “As long as you’re all mine, that’s all I care about.” He held her close. “We’ll wait until you’re ready.”

He was the first real boyfriend she’d ever had, and Delia had never felt so lucky.

Delia came back outside wearing the sparkly dress, and Chase let out a low whistle.
“I don’t know how it’s possible, but you keep getting prettier every time I see you.”

“Aw thanks, babe,” Delia said and kissed him.

They headed out of the trailer park, and Chase whipped up St. Bernard Highway. It wasn’t until they were heading over the canal bridge and she could see the city skyline in the distance that Delia realized they were heading into New Orleans.

They drove for a while until Chase turned into a long drive leading up to a white marble building that looked like a mansion or a courthouse. A sign said it was the New Orleans Museum of Art. It looked regal, all lit up against the dark night. They drove around it, and beyond it, Delia could see lights hanging from trees, lights on the ground, lights everywhere.

“Where are we?” Delia asked.

“Christmas in the Oaks,” Chase said. “They do it every year in City Park. I used to come here when I was a kid with my mama.”

They pulled up to an entrance to a garden. There were lots of people walking around while Christmas music played from speakers hanging from the trees.

“I know you said you’re not really into Christmas,” Chase said. “But you haven’t seen Christmas like this.”

Delia figured he was right. Chase grabbed a small duffel bag from his trunk and led her to the entrance. They walked down a pathway lined with decorated trees in every color. There were giant teddy bears, trains, animals, and even a Saints helmet made out of lights. They passed an old-fashioned carousel. There was a long line to get on it, so they just watched for a moment. The carousel was beautiful with old-fashioned, painted horses.
They turned down into a maze of hedges and followed the path until they came into a
clearing that had what looked like a lit up shack. A neon green alligator glowed nearby. A sign
spelled out “It’s a Cajun Christmas Carol!” in cursive letters of yellow light.

“Merry Christmas, Delia,” Chase said. He opened the duffel and pulled out a blanket, a
bottle of champagne, and some plastic cups.

Chase spread out the blanket on the ground in front of the shack. They sat down, and
Chase put his arms around Delia. A pre-recorded sound of frogs came from somewhere behind
the bushes. Delia felt like she was in a very romantic swamp.

“You happy, little Delia?” Chase asked.

She smiled and snuggled against him. “Hell yeah,” she said.

“I imagine if our whole lives were like this,” he said. “You and me, always together.” He
sat up and popped open the champagne. He poured her a cupful. “I can picture it,” he said and
handed her the cup. “We could get married some day, have a little place out near the bayou.”

Delia sipped the champagne. She liked the sound of Mrs. Delia Hebert. She pictured
coming back to a house every night where her husband was always there and always happy to
see her. “Can we have a real house?” Delia asked.


Delia kissed him. He was right; he’d made her the perfect Christmas surprise. They
cozied and drank champagne until Delia said she was cold.

They stopped at a po’boy place for dinner before heading back to the parish. When Chase
started walking her to her door, he pulled her in suddenly and kissed her. Delia felt like she had
already been proposed to—she felt that good.
“Hey, man,” Pat said when they walked in. He gave Chase a hard look but didn’t look at Delia. “Time to go.”

“Pat, where are you going?” Delia asked.

“Out with your boyfriend, if I got your permission.” Pat pulled on a leather jacket that Delia hadn’t seen before. It looked brand new.

“Wait, why can’t y’all hang out here?” Delia asked. She picked up Chase’s hand and gave him her best lovey dovey eyes. “I thought maybe we could watch a movie.”

“Sorry babe,” Chase said. “I forgot, um, that I have to go do something with your brother.” Delia saw him glance at Pat. “But I’ll text you later, okay?” He gave her a kiss on the cheek so quickly that his lips felt like a match being struck against her skin. He left with Pat.

Delia went to her mama’s bedroom. They used to have mama-daughter movie nights, and Delia figured they could rekindle that now that her mama was back. Her mama had other plans though. She was frantically grabbing clothes off of hangers and stuffing them into a suitcase.

“Mama, you leaving again?” Delia asked.

Her mama didn’t look up as she threw more clothes into her suitcase. “Yeah, sweetie, Hank won this big poker game the other day, and he got entered into a competition in St. Louis. Keep your fingers crossed for us!”

Delia sank onto her mama’s bed. “Why do you have to go though?”

“I’m sorry, baby,” her mama said. “It’s a lucky streak, one of those things you can’t pass up.” She gave Delia a kiss on the forehead. “You be good now.” She pushed her suitcase out of the door ahead of her. She shut the door.

Delia sat all by herself in a tiny trailer that seemed more and more like a prison every day.
A week before Christmas, an envelope came for Delia. The paper was thick and looked very official with the Loyola University emblem printed across the top. Delia held the envelope in her hands for a while, not sure if she wanted to open it. One half of her was convinced that she’d gotten rejected while the other half was overwhelmed by the possibility that she’d been accepted. She felt paralyzed.

A few weeks earlier, Mr. Davis had asked Delia if she’d thought more about applying. She told him no since, truthfully, it was the furthest thing from her mind. Between her mama’s being back, dating Chase, and Samantha Jane finding out she was pregnant, Delia’s future looked a little more defined, and she figured she may as well as admit that she was never leaving this parish, at least not with a college degree.

“I really think you should at least apply,” Mr. Davis had said. “Don’t purposely close yourself off from opportunity.”

Delia shrugged. He kept saying stuff like that, but she’d started to wonder what the big deal was about college. Was it just because only some kids got to go? “Where’d you go to college, Mr. Davis?” Delia asked.

“I went to Tulane,” he said. “It’s right next to Loyola, as a matter of fact.”

Delia pulled at a loose thread on her school uniform shirt. “And what was so great about it?”

Mr. Davis leaned back in his chair. “Well, there were all the fun things—meeting new people, some of them became my best friends, classes were interesting, I got to study abroad.”
He pointed his finger at Delia. “You should definitely do that at some point. I was in Prague for a semester, and it was the best thing I ever did in college. Traveling is where you’ll learn the most.”

“Okay,” Delia said. She tried to remember where Prague was. “Is that it?”

Mr. Davis stood up and started erasing the board. “No. When I first got to college, I had no idea who I was. That’s the most important thing that college can do, help you figure out who you are.”

“How?” Delia asked.

“Katrina hit at the beginning of my senior year,” he said. “I ended up at the University of Kansas for a semester.” He shook his head. “Man, I was miserable. I wanted to get back here so badly, and when I finally did, I saw what a mess it had become. I saw that the world was bigger than my little campus, and it was time to do my part.”

Delia waited for him to go on.

“And that was when I figured out that I wanted to be a teacher.” Mr. Davis shrugged like it was as easy as that.

“It took the storm for you to decide to be a teacher?” Delia sighed. That didn’t make a whole lot of sense.

“Technically, yes,” Mr. Davis said. “I wanted to contribute to the recovery efforts, and teaching made a lot of sense.”

“You’re from up north? Like Ms. Caldwell?”

Mr. Davis looked uncomfortable. “Well, I’m from California,” he said, “and I wouldn’t say we’re very similar. My point is, I wanted to teach so that the new generation—you—would be able to help your world too.” He smiled. “Don’t tell Mr. Wilson, but I hope you’ll learn a lot
more from me than just what you can put on a standardized test. College will do that for you at
an even greater level. You’ll discover what you’re passionate about.”

Delia nodded slowly. She tried to imagine herself doing something that would help other
people, living somewhere other than the parish. She didn’t know what she was passionate about
yet, but she knew she didn’t want her life to stay the same. Now it was starting to make sense.

“Okay,” she said. “How do I get started?”

“I can help you,” Mr. Davis said. “The application’s not so hard. I’ve got some time after
school today if you can stay.”

She’d stayed after school that day, and he helped her fill out the application. She worked
on a few drafts of her essay, he helped edit it, and within a week, she was finished. Mr. Davis
said he’d drop off the application forms himself for his admissions friend.

And now an envelope had shown up. It could hold her ticket out of there, on to a life
away from trailer parks and flaky mamas and drunk daddies. Or it might tell her she was stuck
where she was. She thought of Chase and the life he’d pictured for them. Maybe that wouldn’t be
so bad. She knew she could be happy with him.

Either way, Delia wasn’t sure she was ready to find out the answer. She went to her room
and shoved the envelope under her pillow.

Delia walked over to Samantha Jane’s. She wanted to ask her advice on college and see
what she thought about the whole thing. When she got there though, Samantha Jane was crying,
and she threw her phone at the wall, narrowly missing Delia as she walked through the door.

“What the hell are you doing?” Delia yelled. “What’s wrong?”

“Sorry.” Samantha Jane sniffed. “I’m just really pissed off. Derek’s parents are such
assholes!”
“What’d they do?” Delia asked.

“They want a paternity test,” she said. She started crying again. “Can you fucking believe that? They say I’m nothing but a no-good slut just like my mama!” She threw a balled up tissue across the room. “Those fuckers!”

Delia sighed and sank onto the couch. “Damn. What’s Derek say?”

“He’s saying he’ll help me take care of the baby,” Samantha Jane said. “He says he don’t care what his parents say, but how does he think he’s gonna help with the baby if his parents aren’t going to support him? He don’t got a job yet!”

Delia sat down next to her and tried to comfort her as she had been doing for the past month. There was nothing else to do really. She’d asked her once, early on, in a whisper, if Samantha Jane wanted to get rid of it. But Samantha Jane shook her head vehemently no.

“I’m Catholic,” she’d said and shook her head like there was no other answer. “I might not be a good one, but I’m no sinner. Not like that. Besides, my mama always says a baby is a blessing.” Samantha Jane had looked miserable.

She still looked miserable, pacing around her trailer with her hands on her belly.

“Are you going to take the paternity test?” Delia asked.

Samantha Jane stopped walking. “Hell no!” she said. “If they don’t want to recognize their own blood, that’s their problem. All I need is Derek, and that’s all this baby needs anyhow.” She rubbed her belly. It had hardly gotten big at all, but she held her stomach like she was trying to keep someone from taking something from her.

Delia tried to say everything she could think of—that they were idiots, that Derek loved Samantha Jane and he’d take care of her and the baby. Delia had no idea if any of it was true. At her old school whenever a girl got pregnant, it was like she had crossed over into another world,
a world where everyone from her first life no longer knew her. Kids treated her like she was invisible. When adults looked at her, it was either with disdain or sadness. No one wanted to say what it really meant when a young girl got pregnant but everyone thought it: her life was over.

Delia couldn’t help but notice that none of the girls with rich parents ever got pregnant. It was always the girls where she was from, the ones without daddies and with mamas who stayed out all night or had boyfriends who hit them. Babies having babies was just another part of the life there. Delia decided it was the trailer park curse. That’s why she wanted to stay a good girl.

Samantha Jane’s mama still hadn’t been around much although she’d told Samantha Jane she would help her out. She was excited to be a grandma. Delia tried to think of what her mama would say if Delia was the one pregnant. She couldn’t imagine her mama caring either way.

Derek showed up a little while later, so Delia left. She saw how he put his hands on Samantha Jane’s belly, and she thought that it might all be okay after all.

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Delia’s mama showed up again two days before Christmas. Hank wasn’t with her, and she said she was done with him. Done with all men, as a matter of fact. She swore she was done running off. She would be around more. She’d be there to take care of things and help Delia more. She looked pathetic sitting at the kitchen table with her mascara tears running down her face, but Delia didn’t feel any sympathy. She hated it when her mama came back home with her tail between her legs, expecting Delia to believe any of her bullshit.

“Help me do what, Mama?” Delia asked. She felt anger flashing through her that she didn’t even know was there.“I’m almost done with high school. I even applied to college without
your help!” She opened a cabinet so hard that the door banged against the wall. She took out some Cheerios.

Her mama stared at her, looking like a raccoon with her eyes wide and white against her pools of mascara. “You applied to college?”

Delia kept moving around the kitchen taking out a bowl, a spoon, the milk she’d bought at the Wal-Mart all by herself. “Yep,” she said. “So I guess that means I’m pretty much an adult. What do I need you for?”

“Don’t you talk to me like that,” her mama said. “I’m still your mama.”

Delia sat down at the table across from her. “Then act like it.”

They stared at each other like it was a stand-off in an old wild west movie. Her mama was the first to back down.

“That’s not really fair,” she said and started to cry again. “I’ve tried, I swear, all I ever wanted to do was keep this family together.”

“That’s funny,” Delia said with a mouthful of cereal. “Because all you seem to do is leave.” She’d never given her mama this much shit before, and it felt damn good.

“I was trying to find you a good daddy,” her mama mumbled. “Trying to make this a real family all those times. I know I screwed up.”

Delia didn’t say anything.

“I’m gonna do better,” her mama said.

Delia nodded. “Okay then,” Delia said. “We’ll see.”

She’d learned to stop trusting her mama years ago, and that coping mechanism was helpful whenever the woman flip-flopped through their lives. She and Pat did just fine without
her, so it didn’t really matter if she was there. Still, though, it was nice her mama was having one of her guilt trips at Christmas.

Delia left for most of the day to hang out with Chase at his place. She came home to the smell of chicken roasting, and the trailer looked like Christmas had thrown up all over it. There were garlands of shredded sheets of red aluminum posing as tinsel and flimsy plastic Santa hats and wreaths taped to the walls. Her mama had also strung up some flashing colored lights around the big window in the living room. Delia had a flash of Maggie Boudreaux coming to her house and seeing this tacky mess. She turned to see her mama beaming, her face full of pride.

“Feels festive in here, don’t you think?” her mama said.

Delia nodded. “Sure thing, Mama.”

“I’m going to get a tree at the lot tomorrow. They’re all on Christmas Eve discount.”

Delia acted as a quiet observer, taking mental notes of what her mama did, ready to declare the experiment in her mama’s domesticity a failure at a moment’s notice. But the next day, a tree appeared in the living room. It was a little scrawny, but her mama had somehow found shiny ornaments and more lights to decorate it with. Pat was still working late, but he texted Delia to say he’d had breakfast with her mama.

“She even made the smiley face with the bacon and eggs,” he’d said.

Delia would have to compare her notes with him again when he came back that night, but she agreed that her mama was making a hell of an effort.

Delia walked back from Samantha Jane’s later that night. She’d been comforting Samantha Jane after another one of her fights with Derek. She wanted to spend Christmas with him, but his family still hated her. He didn’t seem to be on her side as much as he’d first sworn he would be.
Delia’s mama was sitting on their little porch wrapped up in an old afghan. She had a glass of wine in her hand. “It’s nice out here,” her mama said. “I didn’t realize how peaceful it is living out in the country.”

“You’ll have to spend more nights here,” Delia said.

“I guess so,” her mama said. “Everything okay over there?” She cocked her head towards Samantha Jane’s trailer. “You been over there a lot lately, and your friend always looks real sad.”

Delia shrugged. She positioned the toe of her boot on a rung of the porch railing.

“Okay, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but we do need to talk.” Her mama patted the green plastic deck chair next to her. “Sit with me a while.”

Delia sat down and tugged at the corner of her mama’s afghan and wrapped it around her knees. “What’s up?”

“Your brother was telling me something about a court case with a kid at school? He said you’re involved?” She sighed. “You’ve always been such a good kid.”

Delia shook her head. “Mama, I’m not in trouble. I was just there when it happened. I was a witness.”

“Oh thank god,” her mama said.

Delia frowned. “Yeah,” she said. “And I’m going to help take down the teacher that started it all.” She wanted her mama to know how important she was.

“Take down the teacher?” her mama said. “The teacher attacked a kid?”

“Well, sorta,” Delia said. “He pushed her into lockers and stuff…but only because she made him do it. She started it!”
Delia’s mama whistled. “What in the world are you talking about girl? How could she make him do that?”

Delia tried to explain about how Ms. Caldwell had been provoking Leon, telling him she was better than him and that he had no future and how she chased him down the hallway and threw an eraser at his head.

“Well, if that’s true, that woman needs to get the hell outta that profession right quick,” her mama said. “But that doesn’t mean she deserved what he did to her.”

Delia shrugged. “You just don’t get it.”

“Pretty sure I do,” her mama said with a harsh laugh.

Delia felt her face get hot. “It’s not the same thing, Mama. He was trying to stick up for himself.” She thought about the way Benji’s face looked when he’d pleaded Leon’s case to her.

“No one else is going to stand up for him. He shouldn’t go to jail over this.” She looked up at the dark starless sky. “If they call me up on that stand, I’m going to make sure they know that.”

Her mama sipped on her wine and thought for a moment. “Ya know, this is one of those moments in life where you’re about to make a decision that will impact generations to come.”

Delia frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, what side of history do you want to end up on, Delia? There’s this boy, going around thinking he can do whatever he wants, pushing this lady teacher around, who knows what else he could do, bring a gun to school and all that.” Her mama shook her head. “It wasn’t like that when I was in school, no way. You’ve got the chance to help stop all this school violence.”

“Oh please, Mama,” Delia said. “Now you’re being all dramatic.”

“Hey,” her mama said. Her voice sounded hoarse. “You know I thank god your daddy was only violent with me and not with you kids, but I would give anything to take back those
years when I put up with all that shit.” She cleared her throat. “It was wrong, Delia, to put you
and Pat through that.”

Delia looked at her mama to see her crying again. She hadn’t seen her mama cry this
much since their daddy left.

“The most important thing is standing up for what’s right,” her mama finally choked out.
“And this ain’t right.”

Delia sat down next to her mama and took her hand. “You can’t blame yourself, Mama,”
she said.

“Then don’t blame this teacher,” her mama answered. “Don’t blame her for this boy’s
violence.”

Delia didn’t say anything, but she stroked her mama’s hand. They sat and listened to the
sounds coming from other trailers, a TV blaring some Christmas special. They could smell
woodsmoke from somewhere else in the park. After a while, Delia told her mama she was
heading to bed. She gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Hey,” Delia said. “I love you.” She hadn’t said that in years.

“I love you too,” her mama said. “Merry Christmas, darlin’.”

“Merry Christmas Mama.”

When she got in her room, Delia sat on her bed for a long time, hugging her knees to her
chest and not moving. Her mama’s words anchored her to the spot. She thought about when her
daddy used to hit her mama. She had never heard her mama talk about it before. She wondered if
her mama’s biggest sense of guilt wasn’t from leaving so many times but from not being able to
stay. Maybe Delia and Pat reminded their mama of those hard times.
Delia got up and turned off the light. She’d only told Benji she’d help him on the stand because he’d said Ms. Caldwell had it out for Leon. But Benji hated Ms. Caldwell because he hated school and teachers and having to be in the BD class. Probably the only thing he liked about school was having Leon around. As far as Delia could tell, he was Benji’s only friend. Of course Benji wanted help keeping him out of jail, and he’d probably make up any story that could help his case. She should’ve stuck to her gut since day one. She knew what she’d seen—a boy hurting a woman. End of story.

Delia lay down and heard the crinkle of the Loyola envelope she’d left there. She flicked the light back on. She pulled out the envelope and stared at it. The paper felt thinner than she’d remembered. How funny that a little piece of paper told her her fate, like a fortune in a Chinese fortune cookie. She ripped the paper open and pulled out a letter paper-clipped to a packet.

Across the top of the letter in bold print were the words Congratulations Ms. Delia Simmons!
CHAPTER TEN

Benji

Benji went by Leon’s place on Christmas day. He was back living with his mama until his court date. She’d given the boyfriend the boot, at least for now, and Leon didn’t have to sleep on his brother’s floor anymore. Benji didn’t want to be home on Christmas. Ray had gotten himself a girlfriend and was by her house for the holiday. Kevin told their mama for her Christmas present he’d take her out to a casino over in Biloxi, so Benji was by himself anyway.

Christmas with the Duplessis family was better than any Christmas Benji had ever had with his. Leon’s mama made some gumbo and turkey necks, and Leon picked up some chicken wings from over on Claiborne Avenue.

Benji and Leon posted up on the front stoop to eat their chicken wings. They threw the bones into the yard for the stray dog that lived in the neighborhood.

Leon started up a rhyme while he beat a rhythm on the stair steps with his greasy fingers. “Me and my boys gonna show you what’s up, We ain’t welcome you here, We running these streets, Da Parish, son, you got a lot to fear.”
Benji picked it up. “If you stay by here, you gonna see real quick, we ain’t messing around, and you ain’t shit.”

Leon laughed loudly. “Hell yeah, son!”

Benji laughed too. “I been practicing,” he said.

Leon gave him a dap, and they went back to eating wings.

A car rode slowly through the neighborhood. Benji could hear its bass bumping before he saw it roll up. The car was all black with tinted windows. Leon stood up quickly and put his hand near his back. The car kind of inched slowly along when it passed by Leon’s house.

“Benji,” Leon said through a clenched jaw. “You best get in the house.”

Before Benji could register what was happening, the car sped off. He was about to ask Leon what the hell was going on when he realized what Leon had been reaching for. Leon had a gun.

“So you working for Marcus now, huh?” Benji said quietly. He’d had his suspicions, of course, but it hadn’t occurred to him that Leon was stupid enough to actually become a lookout.

Leon sat back down, but he rocked a little on the steps. “You gotta do what you gotta do,” he finally said.

“This ain’t what you gotta do, man.”

“Mind your business, little man,” Leon said.

Benji stared at him. “‘Little man’? What the fuck, man?”

Leon shook his head. “Sorry. Just mind your business. I don’t need my moms hearing us.”

Benji shook his head. What the hell was Leon thinking? “You think we should go inside?” Benji said. He looked around, worried that the car might swing back around.
“Just let them come back,” Leon said. “I’ll show ‘em what’s up.” He made a gun with his hands. “*Pop pop! Right up in their ass.*”

Benji had never messed with guns. His brothers had some. They hunted duck in the winter, but Benji had never taken to it. Something didn’t sit well with him about weapons. Street guns were even worse.

“You know how to use that thing?” Benji asked.

“Ain’t nothing to it,” Leon said, but he didn’t sound so sure. That made Benji feel better; at least he knew he hadn’t used it yet.

Benji had thought he had enough to worry about with Leon maybe going to jail for Ms. Caldwell’s shit. He hadn’t thought he might have to worry about him killing someone, or, worse, getting killed. Shit, Leon was his ride or die brother. If Leon got fucked up somehow, Benji knew what he might have to do—find a gun too and let all his anger out into a tiny bullet that could tear someone apart in seconds. Or he could run away like his daddy did. He thought on that for a second, and his head felt fuzzy. He shivered. He couldn’t think about either options. He figured he should focus on what was happening right there—Christmas, good food, and no one yelling at him. Besides, Leon knew what he was doing. Benji went back to eating chicken wings.

A few days later, on New Year’s Eve, Benji started walking along the highway back to Leon’s like he always did. A black Escalade pulled up next to him. Its windows were tinted black. Benji panicked. Someone from that car on Christmas must have recognized him as being Leon’s friend. He wondered if he could somehow make it to the bushes off the roadside before getting shot.

The window rolled down. “Get in man,” Leon said from the driver’s side. “You can’t be walking along the road like an old bum!”
Benji saw someone in the passenger seat so he opened up a back door and slid in. “Jesus, Leon,” he said. “You scared the shit out of me.” He stopped when he realized Marcus was sitting in the passenger seat.

Marcus grinned at Benji. He had a new gold tooth right in the front of his mouth and was smoking a swisher. “What’s up, cracker ass?”

Benji nodded at him. He wondered what the hell Leon was thinking. Benji was sure he wouldn’t come out that car alive.

“Your boy here’s trying to convince me you’re legit,” Marcus continued.

Benji didn’t say anything.

“But I knew you were just a cracker ass little bitch. What are you doing on the side of the road anyhow? Gonna give some head for cash?” Marcus blew his smoke into Benji’s face.

Benji trembled with the effort of not spitting in the asshole’s face. “What were y’all doing way out here?”

Marcus laughed. “Looking for you, son.”

Leon looked at Benji in the rearview mirror. “I told him maybe you wanted a job,” Leon said.

Benji glared back at him in the mirror. Why the fuck would he think that?

“Unless you’re too much of a pussy to do what we do,” Marcus said.

“I ain’t a pussy,” Benji said, staring out the window now. He didn’t know what was going on, but he needed to pay attention to where they were going.

“Maybe you’re not such a little bitch after all,” Marcus said. “But you’ll have to prove it. You wanna come work for me, you let me know.”
Leon pulled into a parking lot that was full of other tricked out cars. When he parked, Marcus got out and walked over to a group of black dudes gathered in a circle where they were playing dice.

Leon got out too and walked to the rear of the SUV. Benji jumped out and grabbed his arm. “Leon, what the fuck man?” Benji whispered to him.

Leon shrugged. “Sorry,” he said. “I was on the job tonight, and I knew you were coming in, so I asked him if I could pick you up.”

Benji looked at Leon like he couldn’t have been more stupid if he tried. “You asked to pick me up.”

“Yeah,” Leon said. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “He’s offering you a good business opportunity. Think it over, man.” He started rummaging in the back of the truck and brought out two big boxes of fireworks.

“Where’d you get these?” Benji looked them over. Their labels made them look more dangerous than the fireworks he and his brothers used to buy at the stand in the abandoned lot behind the animal shelter.

“Don’t worry about it,” Leon said. “Just don’t get your head blown off now.”

It was four hours until midnight, and Benji had to act like everything was cool as he drank a forty with Marcus and gang members of all kinds. He was the only white guy there, and he knew they were watching him even when they didn’t look at him directly. He was too hard to miss. A group of girls joined the guys, and someone played music from the speakers in their trunk. The girls danced while the guys whooped and hollered.

Leon got wasted on a purple punch that someone had. He started rapping and carrying on, but Benji stayed on the sidelines.
“Whatchu think about that one, man?” Leon asked. He stumbled as he tried to sit on the gate of the Escalade.

Benji shrugged.

“What’s your problem?” Leon’s voice sounded like Benji’s mama’s when she started to get in one of her drunk angry moods. It was like being around a tiger waking up and seeing some prey was within his reach, and you had to be careful what you said.

“Nothing,” Benji said. “I’m just chilling.”

“Don’t worry, man,” Leon said. “When you work for Marcus, he got your back. Everyone looks out for each other, like a family.”

Benji glanced at him. “Not sure I need more family.”

“Whatever. You can go on home if you’re gonna be a little bitch about it.”

But Benji couldn’t do that. Even though he was pissed off and his best friend was being a fucking jackass, he couldn’t leave. What if Leon blew his drunken head off? So at ten minutes before midnight, he helped Leon set up the fireworks. He took Leon’s lighter away from him, and he tried to face the fireworks in the direction he thought would make them go away from the group.

One of the girls started counting down to the new year, and when she got to zero, they all looked at Benji.

“Light that shit up!” someone yelled.

Benji lit the fuse that was connected to all of the explosives. He ran for cover behind a bush, dragging Leon with him, while the fireworks exploded every which way.

The dark sky lit up in flashes of light, and the group behind him cheered. He sat in the bushes and watched each girl kiss a guy.
“Happy New Year, baby,” he heard a girl say. She caressed Marcus’s face and kissed him again.

Benji felt woozy, and all he wanted to do was go home. He looked at Leon passed out in the bushes beside him and got up to go. He figured Marcus could help Leon out. Benji hoped everyone was too drunk and stoned to notice him leave.

“Cracker bitch,” Marcus called to him. “Don’t forget what I said now. I’ll be looking out for you!”

Benji nodded in his direction but stumbled towards the highway. As Benji walked away, he heard Marcus say something that he couldn’t make out, and then the group laughed.

The whole way back, all Benji could think about was Delia. He’d never been to a real New Year’s Eve party, but he wished he could’ve been at one with her. Maybe he could’ve finally gotten up the nerve to kiss her. He wondered what she was doing that night. Maybe she was at home with her friend Samantha Jane. She went and got herself pregnant, so they probably stayed in. Delia might be lonely and wanting company too. He was drunk enough to stop by and see.

When he got to Delia’s place though, her trailer was dark, so Benji went home. A few hours later, he heard a car pull up. He looked out his window to see an old truck in front of Delia’s trailer. Benji recognized Chase, the guy who was always hanging around with Delia’s brother Pat. Chase opened the passenger door, and Delia was the one who came out. She looked beautiful, like she always did, but Benji wanted to puke when he saw her kiss Chase. That guy was trash through and through. He was always preying on high school girls. He knew of a girl last year who’d dated him and wound up pregnant. Chase had moved onto another girl before the baby was even born.
Benji felt anger rumble through him, but he couldn’t tell if he was more mad at Delia for being dumb enough to go out with someone like Chase or mad that she didn’t know how much better she was than Chase, than all of them. He watched them walk to her door. They started making out, and Benji had to turn away.

Something in his chest hurt like he’d been punctured. He’d been stupid to ever think he had a chance with Delia, but even if she didn’t like him, why’d she have to end up with Chase? Benji knew trash. It took one to know one, or something like that.
Caitlin spent her Christmas in Chicago’s near arctic temperatures. She hadn’t been looking forward to the holidays and seeing her family, but she’d promised to be there. Her family gatherings always seemed even colder than it felt outside.

Everyone in her family acted like Caitlin lived in a third world country doing missionary work. She had been inclined to agree with them until the incident with Leon. Now all their remarks seemed extra tedious and condescending. She even heard her mother refer to her job as “helping the underprivileged recover from Katrina” when she was talking to her grandmother at Christmas dinner.

“You must find that so rewarding,” her grandmother said to her.

Caitlin shrugged. “Sometimes,” she said. “Other times, it’s like hell on earth.” She hadn’t meant to say it. It just slipped out.
“Caitlin, watch your language,” her mother said sharply. Her father coughed, and her older brother Greg snickered. Luckily, her grandmother didn’t seem to have heard because she asked Caitlin’s mother what she had said.

“She said that it can be a demanding job,” her mother answered.

“Oh, yes, I’m sure about that,” her grandmother said and then asked for more potatoes.

Caitlin lowered her head and tried to keep eating her turkey. Even though she’d been publicly playing her victim role for months, she hadn’t told her family about the incident. Christmas dinner could be as good a time as any. “No, it really is,” she said. “I’ve been meaning to tell you actually. One of my student’s attacked me.” She swallowed hard.

“What are you talking about?” her mother asked. She sounded exasperated like Caitlin was a child wasting her time with stories.

“The DA’s pressing charges,” Caitlin said. “And I’m going to have to testify against the kid.” She looked around the table and saw that for once everyone was paying attention to her.

“What?” Greg asked.

“What happened?” Caitlin’s father asked.

Caitlin told them an abbreviated version of the episode, leaving out the part about how she’d baited Leon and then hurled an eraser at him. She also neglected to tell them how she’d held his wrists and wanted to fight back.

“Dear god,” her mother said. “For all the things to tell us at Christmas.”

Caitlin looked at each of them. Her grandmother had a perplexed look on her face, but Caitlin’s mother didn’t even try to explain what she’d just said.

“So how is the case progressing?” her father asked.
Caitlin shrugged. She helped herself to mashed potatoes. “I don’t really know,” she said. “The lawyer that NET has representing me hasn’t told me much in a while.”

“But the case seems to be going well?” Greg asked.

Caitlin chewed slowly. “Yeah,” she said. “I think so. The DA wants someone to pay for this, and the student, Leon, is probably going to go to jail.”

Greg furrowed his brow. “Yeah, of course. Who else would be going to jail?”

Caitlin shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Her mother spooned more green beans onto Caitlin’s plate. “Well, one thing’s for sure, he sounds like a thug who belongs there. You could’ve been killed.”

“We’ll see if justice gets served,” Caitlin’s dad chimed in. “So many times these perpetrators get off scot-free.”

“You know,” Caitlin said. “I don’t really want to talk about the case anymore, if that’s okay. Can someone please pass me more turkey?”

Her mother set the platter down with a thud. “I can’t believe you never told us this,” she said. She had stopped eating.

“What does it matter to you?” Caitlin snapped. “I was just trying to suck it up and finish the job I was so stupid to take.”

“Caitlin, don’t talk to your mother like that,” her father said.

Later, after they’d opened the presents around the tree, and Greg drove their grandmother back to her nursing home, Caitlin lay in her childhood bedroom and stared at the ceiling. Someone knocked on her bedroom door. “Come in,” she called out but didn’t sit up.

Her father opened the door, and her mother stood behind him.

“Honey,” her mother said. “We’ve been talking about this…incident you’re involved in.”
“And?” Caitlin asked, but she knew what was coming next.

“We don’t think that you should be down there,” her father said.

“You tried it your way, moving down there to teach,” her mom said. “But look at what’s happened. You’re in some legal mess now, and you’re not getting anywhere closer to law school like this.”

Caitlin sighed. “It has been a pretty rough year.”

“Exactly,” her mom said. “We don’t want you to feel pressured to finish it. It’s perfectly fine for you to bow out now.”

Caitlin stared at her mother. Her parents would never say it was perfectly acceptable to quit anything, and then it dawned on her. They were embarrassed by her. Here they were at Christmas, the one time of year when her family gathered, and her parents could show off their accomplished children to their various friends and family. But she wasn’t accomplished anymore. Greg was in his third year of medical school, but Caitlin had nothing to show for her year, as far as they were concerned. That was something that needed to be remedied as quickly as possible.

Two days later, Caitlin packed her bags. She wasn’t supposed to go back to New Orleans until after New Year’s, but she couldn’t stay in that house any longer with her disapproving family. She’d rather be alone than do that. Her father said he’d drive her to the airport.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay?” he asked when they pulled up to Midway.

“Positive,” Caitlin said.

He didn’t try any harder to convince her and wished her a good flight.

When Caitlin got back to New Orleans, she tried to focus on prepping for the new semester. She sat in her room with the door shut and stared at a blank computer screen. She knew
she needed to plan lessons, but she couldn’t. She knew she could go out and have fun on her vacation, but she couldn’t do that either. All she could do was sit in her room.

The morning of New Year’s Eve, Caitlin’s roommate told her she’d invited people over.

“You can hang out with us too,” she added. “If you want.” Caitlin figured what she meant was, *I’m afraid you’re becoming suicidal and you should probably come out and play with the living for a while.* Caitlin took the hint and offered to pick up the food. Since her roommate was in med school and none of her friends were teachers, Caitlin figured it wouldn’t be terrible. At the very least, she could spend all night in the kitchen.

Kyle called her when she got back from the grocery store. “What are you doing tonight?” he yelled. He sounded like he was in the middle of a huge party.

“I’m…I’m staying in,” she said. She started setting things up in the kitchen.

“What?” he said. “No, you can’t do that. Come down to the Quarter. It’s going to be epic! Get down here.”

“Who are you with?” Caitlin asked.

“Oh the usual,” Kyle said. “NET people…”

“Brittany and Sarah?”

“Well, yeah, of course.”

“I don’t think I’m going to make it out,” Caitlin said. “We’re having a pretty big party here ourselves.”

She hung up with Kyle and popped a Vicodin before she started cooking. She’d decided on crab cakes and baked brie and little sausages wrapped in bacon. She tossed a salad and even made chocolate-covered strawberries for dessert.
Her roommate’s friends started coming over around nine. Caitlin watched as they ate up her dinner and told her how good it was and how nice it was for her to cook. She told them it was nothing. They ate and talked, and Caitlin watched until all the food was gone. There was nothing left from everything she’d made except for crumbs and greasy dishes.

She suddenly couldn’t stand being in the apartment anymore, so she took a bottle of champagne she was sure they wouldn’t miss and slipped out into the street. She texted Kyle who told her to come to Jackson Square.

Caitlin walked all the way there from uptown, which she knew was probably stupid, but there were no cabs in sight. The air felt damp but not altogether cold, and it felt good to be walking. She opened the bottle and drank as she walked.

She made it to Jackson Square a few minutes before midnight. The place was mobbed. There was a stage at one end where they were set to drop a ball like they did in New York, except the ball looked misshapen. She squinted up at the glowing thing and realized it was a baby. New Orleans was going to celebrate the new year by dropping a baby.

“Why not,” Caitlin said.

She got out her phone and texted Kyle, but she knew with so many people around, he probably wouldn’t get it. She started weaving her way through the crowds, champagne still in hand. She continued pushing through the crowds even as people started counting down for midnight. As everyone chanted back from ten, Caitlin looked up to watch the illuminated baby descend from the sky.

The crowd erupted with “Happy New Year”’s all around her, and Caitlin guzzled down her champagne.
“Hey!” Someone grabbed her arm. It was Kyle in fleur-de-lis decorated glasses. “You made it!” He stood with several NET teachers Caitlin recognized but didn’t say hi to.

She lifted her champagne bottle in a cheers with Kyle as he gave her a hug, but a girl he stood next to pulled him away for a kiss. No one else from the group said anything to her.

Loud cracks rumbled above them as fireworks started exploding across the sky. Caitlin watched yellow sparkles raining down behind lampposts. *Well this year has to be better than the last,* she thought. She downed the rest of her champagne.

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Caitlin was sure she’d never get used to winter in the south. It was mid-January and yet the day was mild, sunny, almost spring-like. Perfect for the field trip she’d planned, but she heard her mother’s voice in her head telling her not to get too comfortable. But maybe the weather was like a karmic retribution. Her parents would freeze to death in their frigid ways while their wayward daughter basked in the warmth of her new hell. Caitlin laughed at herself. Good lord, she’d gotten dark.

She stood in front of the monument at the Chalmette battlefield looking at the bored faces of her class. “I think this is a good place for you to get in touch with St. Bernard history,” Caitlin told them.

“So, what do we do?” Sean asked. “Write about the monument and stuff?”

“Just take a minute and look around,” Caitlin said. “Close your eyes, smell the grass. Think about what it might have been like to be here during the battle in 1812. I want you to describe this place with all the sights and sounds that make it a part of St. Bernard history.”
Benji groaned. “So we have to write about some battle that happened a million years ago?”

“You know, Benji,” Caitlin said. “I was looking up some stuff on the internet about the battlefield and found something really interesting.” She raised her voice for the rest of the class to hear her. “I bet most of you didn’t know there used to be a village here, many years after the war, an all-black village, called Fazendeville.”

A few of the students looked around the empty field. “Where did all the people go?” one of them called out.

“Well, they were moved out,” Caitlin started to explain. “The people were asked to leave, so this memorial could be made.”

Someone whistled, and another one sucked his teeth.

“Is that ‘cuz of racism?” Jason asked.

“Duh,” Sean said. “People in da parish always scared of mixing it up. The blacks and whites don’t like each other, never have, never will.”

Caitlin felt herself losing control again. She felt shaky every time one of them started talking over her. “Okay, Sean, that’s enough,” she said. “I do think Jason made a good point though. It’s safe to say that when St. Bernard Parish officials asked the villagers to leave, it wasn’t only because they wanted land for the memorial. I think they may have wanted this land in particular because it contained a village of black people, a village that was independent of their power.”

Benji tapped his pencil against his notebook. “So why’d you want us to know about that?”
“It’s another thing you can write about,” Caitlin said. “It sounded like you guys got pretty worked up thinking about the racism that moved people from their homes.” She took a deep breath and smiled. Her control was back. “Write about this place with the idea of injustice in mind.”

“Kind of like what you’re doing to Leon, huh?” Benji said.

Caitlin pulled him aside. She couldn’t lose her control again. “It’s not like that, Benji,” she said quietly, “and you know it.” She turned back to the rest of the class. “So find a place on the lawn, and get to writing. I’ll go around and check in with you after a little while.” She sat down on the grass not far from Benji. She wanted to keep an eye on him, but truthfully, she had stopped caring about trying to get him to like her. She thought his writing was good, and he might actually be a good kid after all. Caitlin hoped she could use his work and behavior turn-around in her portfolio to show Jeremy that she was actually improving as a teacher.

Benji sat a few feet away from her, but he hadn’t started writing. Instead he was ripping pages out of his notebook.

“Are you stuck on what to write about?” Caitlin asked.

Benji shrugged and went back to ripping out his pages.

“If I were you, I’d probably choose to write about the village, Fazendeville. Maybe even make up a character who lived there.” She paused to see if he seemed interesting. Nothing. “Do you know why I’d choose to write about that?”

Benji snapped his head up. “I don’t know why you do anything you do.” Then he went back to ripping his paper.

Caitlin sighed. “Some days I don’t know that either.”

Benji didn’t say anything.
“Benji, stop doing that to your notebook.”

He stopped. “Where you from, Ms. Caldwell?” Benji asked after a few minutes.

“I’m from Chicago,” Caitlin answered. “Do you know where that is?”

“Yeah, I heard of it,” he said. “Why’d you come down here if your people way up north?”

Caitlin shook her head and let out a harsh laugh. “That’s a damn good question, Benji. I ask myself that all the time.”

“Damn, Ms. Caldwell, language,” he said.

“Yeah, yeah, just do what I say, not what I do,” she said. She looked around at the battlefield. Most students were writing in their notebooks, so that was a success.

“You ask me,” he said. “You got yourself some anger problems. I would know.”

“Excuse me?”

“Because of the way you freak out every time someone doesn’t do what you want.” He had his notebook spread open on his lap now. He tapped his pen against it. “And the way you talked to Leon that day.”

Caitlin sighed. “Benji. I know, I shouldn’t have said what I said. There’s nothing I can do about it now.”

“You could drop the charges,” he said.

So there it was. Her reconciliation with Benji was all so he could butter her up. “It’s not up to me,” Caitlin said. She wasn’t going to say anything else about the case, and he must have sensed that because he stopped pestering her. He even picked up his pencil and started writing.

“But why did you say all that stuff?” he said.

“Benji, get to work.”
“But I’m trying to write about white people hating black people here.” He gestured to the field.

“Hey,” Caitlin said. “I do not hate black people.” She opened her binder to jot down some notes about Benji’s behavior. She was still writing down everything that happened every day with each student. “I don’t know why I said that stuff,” she continued. “I was…I was angry, like you said.” She looked at him. “But not because he’s black.” Next to Benji’s name, she wrote, “very attentive.” She thought for a minute and then added, “believe it or not.”

“You writing some poetry over there, Ms. Caldwell?” Benji asked.

“No, that’s your assignment,” Caitlin said. She put her pen down and picked some blades of grass in frustration. She didn’t know why she had yelled at Leon other than he was making her fail as a teacher. And now every day since, she’d felt like even more of a failure. She was drowning. How could she explain that to this kid? She flicked the bits of grass, and the wind carried them a few feet.

“Maybe you should though,” Benji said.

“Should what?”

“Write some poetry,” Benji said. “It would probably help you with all that anger. Take it from a BD kid.”

Caitlin laughed. “Maybe I will,” she said. She closed her eyes and let the warmth of the sun wash over her. “You seem to like writing.”

“Yeah, so?”

She held up her hands. “I’m just making an observation,” she said. “You’re really good at it. You ever think about applying to college? You could study writing.”

“I ain’t going to college,” Benji answered.
“You could start out with a writing course at Nunez.”

“I don’t want to go to any college,” he said. He bent back down over his notebook.

Caitlin sighed. She pulled more pieces of grass and twirled them in her hands. “What do you want to do then?” she asked.

“Go work on the shrimp boats,” he said. “Like my daddy.”

“Oh? Your dad’s a fisherman?”

“Used to be,” Benji said. “Before he left. Probably still is though. He used to take me out on the boat with him. Being out on the water is the best place to be.”

Caitlin nodded slowly. She had never really thought about Benji’s home life. She knew that he only had a mother, and based on phone conversations with the woman about Benji’s behavior, she seemed like a piece of work too. For the first time, Caitlin wondered what it was like to be Benji. “Your writing is really good though,” she said quietly. “You’ve got a lot of talent. I wouldn’t want to see that go to waste.”

Benji didn’t say anything. He kept scribbling away in his notebook.

“And you could get scholarships and other financial aid,” she said. “If you’re worried about that part of it.”

Benji laughed. “You teachers always on about that scholarship stuff,” he said. “Me and Delia was talking about it the other day, how you all think we’re just going to magically be able to do all this stuff.” He laughed again.

“Delia?” Caitlin said. “Delia Simmons? You were talking to her?”

Benji looked up. His face turned red. “Yeah,” he said. “She lives in my trailer park.”

“Hmm,” Caitlin said. Delia was the girl who had apparently witnessed that day in the hallway with Leon. “Do you talk to her a lot?” she asked.
“Yeah,” Benji said. “Sometimes.”

Caitlin tried to keep her voice as even as possible. “Do you ever talk about that day with Leon?”

“Yeah,” Benji said. He sounded like his usual angry self again. Whatever door he had opened to Caitlin was promptly closed. “She knows everything.” He snapped his notebook shut and stood up. “She’s on our side, and soon everyone be knowing the truth.” He walked away.

Caitlin didn’t go after him. She’d made some progress, but with these kids, it was always one step forward, two steps backward. She brushed the grass from her fingertips and watched the wind carry them away.

***

Caitlin scrolled through the sample lessons on the NET website. The field trip had gone well, and now she’d had lots of ideas for how to keep the momentum going. Her New Year’s resolution was to work even harder. She figured if she threw herself into her work, she would start feeling better.

The NET site had a place for its teachers to share lesson plans with each other. Caitlin found lots of lessons that were closely aligned with material that would be covered on the state tests, but she was looking for something more interesting. She knew she was supposed to stick more closely to the required curriculum, especially with the state testing coming up in April, but she was more concerned with engaging these kids. The poetry workshops had been working so well that she’d switched her tactics entirely. These kids didn’t care about passing a test, and she didn’t care about it much either, not anymore. She wanted them to feel like they had some
practical skills for life along with the ability to express themselves. If she could accomplish those tasks, she might feel like she actually did something with her time this year.

She clicked through until she landed on the discussion board. There were discussions about what the easiest way to teach phonics; how to get more students mastering algebra; the benefits of longer school days in order to prepare students for the state tests. Then she saw a thread titled “our biggest threat.” She clicked on it and started reading.

“The biggest threat to our students is not apathetic parents or difficult coursework or even inability to access technology. No, the biggest threat to our students is their teachers. Obviously, most of us are doing all we can for our students—sacrificing our free time to spend more time prepping for lessons, taking students out to lunch with us when they’ve improved their grades, trying every technique possible until we see growth in our students’ test scores. I’m not talking about us. I’m talking about the teachers who are too lazy to try those things and instead resort to business as usual with mediocre lessons and no extra effort. Or even worse, as with the case of Caitlin Caldwell (NET GNO ’08), some teachers are outright cruel to their students and would rather see them expelled than given the help they deserve…”

Caitlin felt her face grow hot. She stopped reading and scrolled to the bottom. There were 378 comments and counting. She didn’t read them. She didn’t think she could take it, but she was sure none of them were from Kyle or any other of her very few sympathizers. Reading Mr. Davis’s blog hadn’t seemed to matter as much because it was by someone outside of the program. But she didn’t expect to be vilified in print by someone from NET, one of her own
people. Caitlin shook her head. They weren’t really her own people though. They never had been.

She closed the browser and clicked her computer shut. She hadn’t had a Vicodin in a few weeks after her roommate had caught on to her, but she had never needed one more than in that moment.

Her phone vibrated next to her.

“Great news,” the DA said when she answered. “Everything’s moving forward with the trial.”

“What?”

“The judge set a court date for the end of May,” he answered. “And we’ve subpoenaed Delia Simmons to testify on your behalf.”

Caitlin let her breath out slowly. “And she’s going to?” she said. “Testify on my behalf?”

“We have the testimony from what she told the principal,” he said. “It all points to how you acted in self-defense. We don’t need more than that.”

Caitlin knew she should feel relief, but she felt nothing. Nothing but the same constant state of fear and guilt. “Great,” she said. “I guess justice can be served now.”
CHAPTER TWELVE

Benji

Benji climbed onto the school bus and searched for an empty seat. He found one at the back and sank low into it. He closed his eyes. He felt so tired these days.

“Can I sit with you?”

He opened his eyes and saw Delia standing there. She looked anxious. “I have to tell you something,” she said.

“Yeah, sure,” Benji said and sat up. He could’ve told her she could sit with him any day.

“I got called up,” she said. “The DA had someone come to my house with papers saying I have to testify for them.”

“Okay,” he said. “That’s okay. We’ll just stick with the plan.” He turned towards her. “You make sure they know who started the fight.”

“Yeah,” she said. She didn’t look at him. “I mean, the fight started before they left the classroom…I don’t know if I can say I know who started it.”
“What are you talking about?” Benji said. “I told you what she said to Leon! And you saw her throw shit at him! And I’m getting close to getting that bitch to admit it!”

“Oh yeah? What’re you gonna do?” Delia said. “Wear a microphone? Get a cop to go under cover with you? Please, even if she said something, it wouldn’t change the fact that he attacked her! What he did was way worse than what she did.”

Benji slammed his hand against the leather of the seat in front of them.

“Hey,” she said. She sounded alarmed now. “Chill out! What’s your problem?”

Benji turned towards the window. “My problem is that you can’t trust no one no more.” He didn’t want to look at her. He was afraid what he might do. “I thought you were different, you were this sweet girl, comes here to da parish, gonna be different from everyone else. But you’re just like everyone else! All caught up in the gossip and the bullshit and doing what everyone expects you to!” He punched the seat again.

“Cut it out!” Delia yelled. Her voice sounded shrill. “Is this why you’re in BD, huh? Quit it, or I’ll tell the bus driver!”

Benji took some deep breaths. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Yeah, you should be,” Delia said. “Jesus, why do you care so much?”

Benji stared at her. She looked pissed, her eyes narrowed and her hands across her chest. He thought about how badly he’d wanted to kiss her and then imagined her in bed with Chase. It made him mad all over again. “I care because no one else does,” he finally said. “I care because I thought you could understand.”

Delia’s face stayed twisted in anger. “You’re right,” she said. “No one cares about what happens to Leon. And I do understand. I understand that you’re some messed up, angry boy, who just wants his friend out of trouble. But you know what, Benji? Leon’s guilty! That’s what I’m
going to say, and I’m not going to let you try to change my mind anymore!” She stood up and walked to another seat a few rows up.

“You do that,” Benji called to her. He could barely see the city turn to country as the bus drove on. He was too angry to see straight. Who the fuck did that girl think she was? She thought she could go around stringing people along, getting their hopes up and then crushing them. When the bus got to their stop, he stalked off after her.

“Hey,” he called out to Delia. She didn’t turn around. “Hey!” he called again. “You know what? It don’t matter what you say on that stand because who’s gonna believe trailer trash anyway?”

Delia turned around then. Her mouth hung open, and her eyes were filled with tears. He waited for her to say something back to him, but she didn’t. She just walked into her trailer and slammed the door.

Benji started to head towards his trailer, but when he got there, he slammed his hand against the tin siding wall. He couldn’t go in. He needed to walk a ways. The day had started off warm, but now clouds had rolled in. He absently wished he had a jacket, but he wasn’t turning back for anything. He didn’t want to come back until it got dark. He was walking through a denser part of the woods, towards the water, when he heard a noise.

Delia’s brother Pat and her douchebag boyfriend Chase were walking down towards the bayou together. What in the hell were they doing down there? He was so pissed off he almost walked after them. He thought maybe he’d punch Chase’s lights out just to prove he could, but something made him hang back. He watched as they got to a bald cypress with a big knob on its side.
A man came walking up then, from the opposite direction, like he’d come out of the swamp. He had on dark glasses and a camo hat.

The three of them huddled together real close, and Benji slunk back towards the highway. He didn’t know what was going on down there, and he wanted to keep it that way. He knew two things though—everyone did fucked up shit, and Delia wasn’t the girl he thought she was.

***

That night, Benji woke up to a crashing sound. Someone had dropped something in the bathroom behind his room. He rubbed his eyes and groaned, and he heard his mama cry out. His heart started beating faster, and he leapt out of bed to investigate. He found his mama sitting on the floor with her legs under her, kneeling forward almost like she’d been praying. Her hands were scouring the floor.

“Mama?” Benji pushed into the room. “What in the world are you doing?”

She didn’t look at him. She kept running her hands over the dirty floor. “I just gotta get all this,” she said. “You help me?”

Benji blinked his eyes. It took him a second to realize his mama was trying to pick up pills, little pink ones, bigger green ones. All sorts of pills. Benji grabbed an orange pill bottle from the counter.

“Jesus, Mama,” Benji said. “This ain’t even your name! Where the hell you get this?”

She looked up at him then, her eyes all glassy and unfocused. Benji didn’t think she could see him at all.
“Come on, Mama,” he said. “We need to get you to bed.” He grabbed her from her under the armpits and tried to lift her up.

“No!” she yelled. She pushed Benji away and went back to picking up spilled pills.

“Either help me get these up or leave!”

Benji sighed. He rubbed his head. He didn’t know what the hell to do. He knelt next to his mama. “Mama, it’s the middle of the night,” he said in a soothing voice. “You have to get up and go to bed.”

“No!” she yelled. “I need these. Either help me or get the hell out!” She pushed against Benji.

He lost his balance and fell to his knees, but then he grabbed his mama around the shoulders. She felt so bony like she was nothing but a skeleton. “I’m not letting you stay in here and take more pills.” He tried to stop her hands from grasping at the floor. “You need to stop.”

“God dammit, Benji,” his mama said. “Leave me alone!”

She threw her shoulder into him, and she knocked him back off his feet and against the wall. His head hurt a little from where he’d hit it. His mama looked like a wild animal. She didn’t look like his mama at all.

She was breathing hard. “I been sick, baby,” she told him. “These pills…they make me better.” Her voice sounded sickly sweet like it had when Benji was little, and she was trying to convince him to go to bed or to eat all his dinner.

“You are sick,” Benji said quietly. “But you don’t need those damn pills.”

“What the fuck do you know?” she yelled out. She started gathering the pills into her hands, which she piled in the folds of her bathrobe. “Ya know what your problem is? You’re too much like your daddy.”
“What?”

But she didn’t answer. She muttered too herself as she started dropping the pills back into the pill bottle.

“Mama?” Benji whispered.

“I don’t need your help!” she screamed.

Benji didn’t say anything else, but he stayed with her an hour before she finally let him help her back to bed. She fell asleep without saying anything else to him.

The next morning, Leon called to say he was coming by Benji’s to pick him up. Benji didn’t want to go with him. He was worried about his mama and wanted to see if she would talk about his daddy again. But Leon said Marcus was watching Benji.

“Either come with me now, or Marcus will be picking you up later. He thinks he needs to use you now since you been knowing all about his operation.”

“I don’t know shit.” Benji sighed. “All right. Where we going?”

Leon said it was a ride-along. He showed up driving Marcus’s Escalade again. He told Benji not to worry when he got in. “Marcus and me,” Leon said. “We run these streets.”

Benji’s anger flickered for a moment hearing Leon saying he and Marcus were bros like he and Leon were. Or at least, how they used to be. He yawned and tried to think about something else. “Ya know, Ms. Caldwell’s being all nice now,” he said.

Leon sucked his teeth. “Bitch feeling guilty?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Benji said. “I’m being good now too.”

Leon laughed. “What? Why? You should be in there raising hell!”

“Nah man,” Benji said. “It’s all part of my plan. See, I’m going to get her to confess about what she did to you.”
“How the fuck you gonna do that?”

“If I’m real nice to her and do my work and all that,” Benji said, “she’ll slip up because she’ll be trusting me. She’s gotta admit it.”

“You think that will work?” Leon asked.

“Worth a try,” Benji said.

Leon pulled down a street and brought the car down to a crawl. “Show time, motherfucker,” he said. He reached into the back of his pants and pulled out his gun. Benji hadn’t actually seen it the last time. Leon didn’t even look like himself holding it.

Benji looked around. “Leon…what…”

Leon kept the car at a slow pace as he drove by a shotgun house with two black dudes sitting outside. They stared at them and brought their hands to their pockets slowly. Leon set his piece against the window at the ready.

Benji ducked down low. “What the fuck, man? This is just like those dudes who drove by on Christmas.”

“I know,” Leon said. “Now we gotta show ’em we don’t play like that. We’re the real bosses here.”

Benji stayed still, trying to think of a way to block himself from bullets. His heart beat loudly in his chest. Leon didn’t stop driving though. He passed the house and then picked up his speed again, rounding a corner.

Benji sat back up, panting. “That was fucked up, man,” he said.

Leon took out a swisher and lit it. “Marcus say it’s good for business.”
“How the fuck is that good for business?” Benji wanted to throw up. “Why are you trying to make more trouble for yourself? I’m trying to help you, and you’re just digging the hole deeper!”

“Man, it don’t matter no more,” Leon said. “Working for Marcus gives me money and protection. That case don’t matter. I’ll be out on these streets ’til I die!”

*Which might be tomorrow*, Benji thought. “Whatever man,” he said. He needed to get out of that car for the second time in a few weeks.

A second line was coming towards them. Men in colorful suits danced in the streets with signs decorated with feathers, and a brass band marched behind them.

“Happy Carnival, y’all!” someone yelled.

Leon turned the corner and sped on past them.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Delia

In all the times she had come to New Orleans, which really weren’t very many, Delia had never been to this part of town. She’d always seen the old buildings in the French Quarter, the ones that made her think of fancy parties and horse-drawn carriages even though most of the people she saw walking around there were drinking out of plastic cups and wearing beads.

This part of New Orleans was so green. She peered out the window at the live oaks that towered above them as they drove down St. Charles Avenue. The streetcar rumbled by her on the other side of her as she rode to Loyola in Mr. Davis’s little Subaru.

Mr. Davis had asked Delia and two other seniors who had gotten into Loyola to come on a tour of the campus. Delia sat next to a guy named Troy who was in her math class and also happened to be class treasurer while Candace, a girl who acted in all of the school plays, sat next to Mr. Davis.

“You think you’re going to go to Loyola?” Troy asked Delia.

She shrugged. “Maybe. What about you?”
“I’m looking at ULL, UNO, and Louisiana Tech too,” he said. “Loyola’s my top choice, but it’s the most expensive.”

“That’s for sure,” Delia said.

“Remember to keep an open mind,” Mr. Davis called from the front seat. “There’s a lot of scholarships out there.”

“Yeah, okay,” she said.

She was excited to be going to the campus even if she still couldn’t figure out how she felt about going there. They pulled into a parking garage, and then Mr. Davis led them down to the quad. The quad was also bright green in the sunshine, and it was surrounded by towering brick buildings. Delia peered up at the giant cathedral. The campus looked regal and much bigger than she’d realized. Mr. Davis corralled them towards a group of people gathering in front of large whitewashed letters that spelled out Loyola on the lawn.

The tour guide, a tall, skinny guy, told them all to please quiet down, the tour was starting. He said his name was Tom, and he was a junior. He pointed at each building from the center of the quad, telling everyone its name and what year it was built.

He moved them through the quad into the chemistry building, followed by the music building, and then the business building. Delia lost track of where they were. She liked seeing one of the dorms though. She heard a few girls behind her complaining about how small the rooms were, but she bet they’d never lived in a trailer before.

Afterwards, Mr. Davis treated them to lunch in the student union.

“What do you think?” Mr. Davis asked them.

Candace wasn’t all that impressed, but Troy loved it. He kept going on about how cool the center for social justice was. He was already thinking about law school, he said.
“And Delia,” Mr. Davis said. “What did you think about everything?”

Delia said it was nice, very pretty. She didn’t tell him that she couldn’t picture herself there though. None of it felt real. She felt like she was at the zoo, looking at a different world from the other side of the glass.

Before they went back to the parish, Mr. Davis showed them Audubon Park, which was across St. Charles Avenue from the campus.

“I used to come here all the time,” he said. “I still do, when I can. I only live a few miles away.”

“You live in New Orleans?” Delia asked.

“Yep,” Mr. Davis said. “Rent’s higher than the parish, but I just can’t leave my city.”

They walked around the park, which was full of live oaks and different pathways. There was a big garden, a fountain, a pond. It was probably the prettiest place Delia had ever seen. She turned around and looked back at Loyola’s campus. She saw some girls pass by her, chattering on about a party that night. They looked like a flock of birds in their colorful tops with sorority letters on them.

Looking at them, Delia had that zoo feeling again, being so close yet so far away.

***

That Friday, Chase picked Delia up at her trailer like he did every weekend. But when Delia got in the truck and leaned over to give him a kiss, he pulled away.

“What’s this I hear about you going to Loyola now? Your mind’s all made up, huh?” He looked straight ahead.
Delia had told him about getting into Loyola, but she’d also said she probably wouldn’t go. He wanted her to stay near him. But she’d been thinking about the school a lot since visiting, about walking through the grassy quad on her way to class, going to parties, figuring out her life away from St. Bernard, and every time she thought about it, she pictured Chase with her. He could live in the city, maybe they’d share an apartment. It would be almost the same as the story he’d told her, only better. “No, not exactly,” she said. “But I do want to talk to you about that.”

“Oh, so now you come clean! Your brother told me you went on a visit there.” Chase turned the car sharply as he pulled onto the highway. “You pick out your room too? Start moving your stuff in?”

Delia rolled her eyes. “Chase, chill out. It was just a visit, and actually—”

“It’d just be nice if I knew that my girlfriend was planning to leave me,” Chase said. He gunned his truck down the dark highway.

“Whoa,” Delia said. “Babe, I’m not leaving you. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Promise?” Chase asked.

“Yeah, of course,” she said. She dropped it. She didn’t want to fight with him. She’d let him get used to the idea of Loyola, and she could bring it up later.

They made it down to the End of the World, but Chase kept driving. He took the truck off-roading into some the woods.

“Where are we going?” Delia asked.

“Just thought it would be nice to have some privacy,” Chase said. “Get away a little bit.”

He stopped the truck in a clearing. He hopped out, and Delia followed. He let down the truck gate and spread out a blanket. He opened the cooler that was always in the truckbed and took out two beers.
“I come down here sometimes,” he said, “when I’m on break from shrimping.” He motioned to the cypress trees and oaks covered in Spanish moss. “It’s kind of peaceful, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” Delia said. Chase was a hopeless romantic when it came down to it. She snuggled up to him and sipped on her beer.

They lay on the truckbed for a while. Chase told Delia stories about being out on the shrimping boats and going fishing with his older brother a few days ago. While he talked, he stroked Delia’s hair. It was nice, but her mind was elsewhere.

“Babe,” she whispered after a lull in Chase’s stories. “What would be so bad about me going to college? New Orleans isn’t even far.”

He pulled his arm from around her shoulders.

“Hey,” she said and sat up. “What’s wrong?”

“You know what’s wrong,” he said.

“But me going to college doesn’t mean we’d have to break up!”

He looked at her then. His face was hard. “I thought you loved me.”

Delia almost laughed. “I do love you!” she said. “Of course I do.” She rubbed his arm.

“And we could stay together.”

Chase yanked his arm from her hand. “No,” he said. “We couldn’t.”

Delia was dumbfounded. “Why not?”

Chase kicked at the cooler. “Because you’re gonna go off and get all smart and see that you don’t want someone like me no more.”
“That’s not true,” Delia whispered. She’d never had someone love her so much. Her own mother didn’t even love her that much. “Hey,” she said and grabbed his arm again. “You’ll always have me.”

“You’re gonna stay here with me?” Chase looked at Delia then. In the moonlight, his eyes looked shiny, almost like he was crying.

“Well…”

“I need my girl,” Chase pleaded.

“Okay,” Delia said. “I, um, I’m not going anywhere.”

Chase kissed her then, a little harder than normal, but Delia figured he was just so happy. She hadn’t realized how much the idea of college would affect him, and she never wanted to hurt him. He kept kissing her and started feeling her up. She’d let him do that a few times before, but this time, he was moving really fast. He started pulling at the button on her jeans.

“Chase,” Delia whispered in between kisses. “Quit it.”

Chase stopped kissing her. “I thought you said you loved me,” he said.

“I do!”

“Then prove it,” Chase said.

Delia hesitated. Chase started kissing her neck, and he started whispering about how he wanted to be with her forever, how they’d get married, have a great life. All those nice things again. And when he started pulling at the button on her jeans again, she didn’t stop him. Her heart was pounding, but she wanted everything he told her. She wanted everything from him, and he only wanted one thing from her. She didn’t want to keep it from him anymore. “Okay,” she whispered.
When they were both stripped down, Chase climbed on top of her. He pushed himself into her, and pain shot through Delia. She whimpered.

“What?” Chase panted. “You okay?”

“I don’t know,” Delia said.

Chase caressed her hair. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll go slow.”

He pushed into her again, and all Delia could feel was pain. She closed her eyes and tried to move so it would hurt less. But Chase kept thrusting, and Delia couldn’t move. She felt like crying. She felt like it lasted forever, but with a final groan, Chase was finished.

He collapsed next to Delia and leaned over to kiss her forehead. “Thanks babe,” he said. “We needed that.”

Delia didn’t say anything. After a few minutes, Chase rolled over and fell asleep. Delia sat up and hugged her knees to her chest.

She thought back to a time when she was ten and she went with her parents and her brother to see someone, a family counselor or something. Her mama had been on a church-going kick, and the man’s office was in the church. Delia remembered that the counselor called in both of her parents first and told Pat and her to stay in a waiting room. While her parents screamed at each other from behind the closed doors, Delia leafed through a pile of pamphlets about God’s plans for sex and marriage and babies. One of them was titled “Moral Standards: Being a Good Girl.” It told a story about good girls and bad girls. Delia remembered her mama sounded a lot like one of the bad girls. She’d had Pat when she was seventeen and always fought with their daddy. She was never happy, and it was because she had shamed God.

The good girls, on the other hand, looked so happy. The pamphlet said that they respected God and respected their bodies, so they never had to worry about babies or angry parents or
shame from God. Delia didn’t know about any of that God stuff, but she knew she wanted to be one of the good ones. She had decided that day she wanted to be a good girl. She wanted to save herself for marriage and be happy like those girls in the pamphlet.

Delia looked over at Chase and watched his back rise and fall as he snored. She knew the pamphlets were just pamphlets. No one would even have to know what she had done. She shivered and pulled the blanket over her shoulders. She just hoped Chase could hold up his end of the bargain.

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For weeks now, people had been speaking of Mardi Gras like it was a second Christmas. Delia didn’t really know what Mardi Gras was other than a big party where girls took their tops off. People didn’t celebrate it where she’d come from.

Samantha Jane tried to explain it to her. “It’s not about getting naked, that’s just something the tourists do,” she said. “We all just go to the parades and catch the beads. The parades are so cool, you’ll love them.” She wasn’t going to go though. She was feeling too pregnant, she said. Samantha Jane had also found out she was having a boy. “Thank god,” she said. “We need a good man around here.”

“Yeah ‘cuz you’ll raise him right,” Delia said.

“Damn straight,” Samantha Jane said.

Delia’s mama was back with Hank, who she said “learned the error of his ways,” and she’d been going to lots of Mardi Gras parades in the city. Delia wasn’t ready yet to admit it, but she knew her mama was gone again. Christmas had been too good to be true.
The big parade for St. Bernard was for the Knights of Nemesis. Chase told her he’d take her to it. Delia wondered if she should bring up what had happened the other night. She didn’t talk much when Chase picked her up. He sang along with the songs on the country music station and didn’t talk to her about it either. He held her hand as he drove though, and Delia tried to relax. She knew he loved her still.

When they got into Chalmette, the streets were already filled with cars, drivers parking up on sidewalks, people’s yards. Lots of people walked by them, carrying lawn chairs and dragging coolers. Chase found a spot for the truck and yelled out the window to someone he knew. He glanced back at Delia. “Ready to go?” he said. She nodded. He took a cooler out of the trunk, and they started walking.

“You doing okay?” Chase asked her as they walked.

Delia nodded.

Chase put his arm around her and pulled her into him while they walked. Delia had to skip along to keep up with him. “Well, good,” he said. “I’m just glad I know how much you love me. Because I’m yours, and you’re mine.” He kissed her on the forehead.

Delia smiled.

“Right?” Chase asked. “You’re mine?”

“Yes,” she said. “All yours!”

They took a place on the neutral ground as near to the street as they could get. The parade didn’t start for another half an hour, but the street was almost completely packed. Delia looked around to see who she knew from school. Chase put down the cooler and took out a beer. He offered one to Delia, who took it. She slurped and people watched. There were mostly families
near them, but Delia recognized someone who she wished she hadn’t. Derek stood a few feet from them with his arm around Jenny Alfonso, a skanky sophomore.

“Oh my god,” Delia said.

“What?” Chase rummaged in the cooler and took out a flask. He held it in one hand the beer in the other.

“That’s Derek,” Delia said. “Samantha Jane’s boyfriend.” She shook her head in disgust. “I can’t believe what an asshole he is!”

“Samantha Jane’s pregnant, right?”

“Yeah,” Delia said. “That’s why she’s not here. I can’t believe he’d do that to her. He should be with her!”

“Are they still together?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “He’s been kind of a dick lately, but he said he’d be there for her and the baby.”

Chase smirked. “Yeah, I’m sure he meant it too.”

“Hey,” Delia said. She punched him in the arm. “Take that back!”

Chase held up his hands in surrender. “Hey babe, sorry, but that’s how it is sometimes.”

“But you’d never be like that, right?” She glared at him, wondering if she should bring up Loyola again.

“No babe,” he said and put his arm around her. Some of his beer spilled on her jacket. “I’ll always be there for you. That’s my promise to you.” He kissed her. “Remember, long as you’re mine, I’ll be there for you.”

There were loud cheers from farther down the road, and Delia could hear a marching band. The parade had started rolling. Samantha Jane had been right. The floats were amazing.
They were all decorated differently, and the riders threw all kinds of things. The colored beads she knew of, but she also saw cups, stuffed animals, tiaras, feather boas. Each time a float passed by them, Delia ran up to the front to try to catch something from the riders. Chase stayed by their cooler and kept drinking.

After a while, Delia forgot about Derek and his skank. She went back to Chase with a stuffed alligator she’d caught and held it up like she’d won a prize. He passed her another beer.

“Nice throw you got there,” Chase said. “Hey, a buddy of mine is in the city and said we should come out there for the next parade, wanna go?”

“Yeah,” Delia said. This was perfect. She could bring up living in the city again while they were there. She saw the pathway of their lives together stretching out longer and longer. She knew she could convince him.

When the parade ended, they started walking back to the car. Delia was loaded down with beads and hugged her alligator to her chest. So far, Mardi Gras was pretty great.

“Hey babe, I have an idea about me going to Loyola,” Delia started to say.

“You already said you wouldn’t go,” Chase said. “End of discussion.”

“I know, sweetie,” she said. “But I’m thinking, why don’t you come with me?”

Chase shook his head and spilled some of his beer. “And how do you think I’m going to do that?”

Delia shrugged. “I don’t know, I thought you could get a job in the city. Or you could drive back out here for work. Mr. Davis does that.”

Chase nodded slowly. His eyes looked glassy, and he didn’t look at her. “So you want me to be shrimping while you’re in fancy classes with rich dudes.”
“What are you even talking about?” Delia said. “I’m talking about making a good future for both of us. I want you there with me.”

“I ain’t a college boy,” Chase said. “You wanna be with a college boy, then go ahead on over there.”

He pushed her a little, probably just meaning to give her a playful shove, but Delia hit a crack in the sidewalk and stumbled. She put her hands out to catch herself as she fell.

“What the hell, Chase?” she said. Her palms were a little scraped up, but she was more mad that he wouldn’t listen to reason. “What’s your problem?”

Chase set down his beer and the cooler. “Aw babe,” he slurred. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean it.” He put his arms around her.

“It’s okay, I guess,” Delia said. She hugged him back.

“Let me make it up to you.” Chase kept his arms around her but moved them so that Delia’s back was against his truck. He started kissing her neck, and his hands were going all over.

“Chase, stop!” Delia tried to break free. “Not here!”

“Sorry, little Delia,” Chase said. He opened the passenger side door. “Ladies first.” Delia crossed her arms. “What about going to the city?”

“Parades will still be rolling when we get there,” Chase said. “Come on, just a quickie.” Delia bit her lip and looked around. “I don’t...really want to.”

“What, you too good for me now?” Chase said. “Going to college and suddenly you’re too good for your man?”

“No,” Delia said. “Of course not.” She felt like crying.
Chase kissed her again and put his arms around her waist. He tried to pull her into the truckbed. “Then, come on, be my good girl.”

Tears sprung into Delia’s eyes. “I want to go home,” she said.

“You best find yourself another ride then ‘cuz I’m going to the parades.” Chase got in his truck and started up the engine. “And maybe I oughta find someone who wants to be with me.”

It took him pealing out for Delia to realize he was seriously leaving her there. She watched as he swerved down the street and rounded a corner, disappearing in a cloud of exhaust.

***

A few weeks after Mardi Gras, Delia got a job waitressing at Rocky and Carlo’s Seafood Place. She figured she’d need some extra money for prom and spring break. Maybe plan a special date night for her and Chase. She wanted to get things back the way they’d used to be between them. Even after the Mardi Gras fight, she knew he still loved her. Maybe she shouldn’t go to Loyola. Plus, waitressing was more fun than she’d thought it would be. Making her own money felt good, and her boss said she was one of the quickest learners he’d ever seen.

Pat and Chase were on the shrimp boats all the time now it seemed. Delia wondered if Chase might still be mad at her since she hadn’t heard from him, but Pat had been coming home late and was usually gone before she left for school in the morning. Delia figured Chase had been working just as hard. She had barely seen him in weeks. When she did get him on the phone, he didn’t talk much. She’d apologized probably a hundred times, but he told her not to worry about it. He sounded distracted and said spring was always the busiest time because of crawfish season.
He said he’d probably see her at the crawfish festival in a few weeks, and they could have a nice day together again.

So when Delia saw Chase sitting at one of her tables at the restaurant one night, she thought it was one of his sweet surprises, like the time he took her to Christmas in the Oaks. That was until she saw his arm around a girl sitting next to him. Delia faltered on her way to their table. She knew she’d seen him before he saw her, and in those ten seconds, she felt the wave of knowledge that he didn’t want her anymore rush over her. She tried to compose herself, but her head felt fuzzy and her lungs felt heavy, and she swore she was drowning.

Delia stood in front of Chase with her pen poised above her order pad and racked her brain for nasty yet detached things to say. She came up with nothing and just stared at the two of them. She should’ve been sitting in that girl’s seat. The world seemed so upside down.

Chase didn’t notice Delia right away. He was too busy feeling up that skanky girl. When he finally saw Delia, he acted like everything was normal, like she was just another friend of his. Or just his best friend’s little sister. “Hey Delia,” he said. He didn’t move his arm from the girl. “I didn’t know you were working here. Um, this is Jessica.”

The girl nodded at Delia. Delia recognized her from school. She was one of the juniors on the dance team. Delia thought back to all of Chase’s phone conversations when he said he was too busy to see her. Is this the boat you’ve been on, she wanted to ask.

“Hey,” Delia said. She gripped her order pad. “Y’all know what you want?”

“Ladies first,” Chase said. He squeezed Jessica’s shoulder, and Delia wanted to scream.

The girl ordered a salad, and Chase asked for the oyster po’boy and a plate of fries for the two of them to share.
Delia somehow made it back to the kitchen. Her knees shook as she put in the order, but she resisted the urge to spit in the fries. She found another waitress and asked her to take the food to her table. She needed to take her break.

When they finally left, Delia came to collect the bill and clear the plates. There was a scribble at the bottom of the check that said “see you around.”

Delia waited until she got back to the trailer to break down. She opened the screen door and collapsed onto the floor of the living room and wailed. She couldn’t believe she’d been so stupid. She sat in the same spot and cried for what felt like an hour. No one was going to come comfort her. Pat was working, unlike his friend, and her mama was nowhere to be found as usual. Delia had to pull herself off of the linoleum. She changed out of her waitress uniform. The smell of fried shrimp was stuck in the fabric, and she felt greasy and dirty. She was a nothing waitress in a nothing town. Alone in a trailer.

She stood in her bra and underwear and looked at herself in the mirror. She felt like she was looking in a fun house mirror. Her arms and legs looked too long and skinny, her breasts much too small, her stomach a little too pudgy, her eyes too wide. No wonder he didn’t want her. But he’d told her he wanted to marry her. He’d told her those stories about their lives together. Delia placed her hand against the cool surface of the mirror, blocking out her face.

All that time, Delia had been focused on being the good girl, thinking that she was smarter than all of the other girls, than Samantha Jane. She wasn’t going to be a white trash statistic. But she hadn’t been smart enough to see through Chase. She’d given him what he wanted, and when he was done, he moved to the next one. In the end, she was as stupid as the rest of them.

The following week at school, Delia took her time leaving English class.
“Everything okay, Delia?” Mr. Davis asked.

Delia nodded, but she knew she had dark circles under her eyes. Whenever she was alone, she cried. She couldn’t help it. She had stopped crying for Chase, that piece of swamp trash. Now she mostly cried for herself. “Do you think I could still fill out that application now?”

Mr. Davis nodded. “Of course, it’s not due for two weeks, but it would be good to get it done, the sooner the better.”

“And you think I might get it?”

“Sure thing,” he said. “You’re a great candidate for one. I’ll print it out and bring it in for you tomorrow.” He looked concerned. “You sure you’re okay?”

Delia nodded. “Yeah,” she said. “I just really want to get this college stuff figured out.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” he said. “We’ll get it figured out for you, don’t worry.”

Delia thanked him and left the classroom. She walked into the lunchroom that day feeling alive the way she’d felt on all those nights out with Chase. Only this time, she felt a delicious sense of freedom. She was hurtling towards the future with no one to hold on to anymore, but she was starting to think maybe that was the best way to do it.

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Delia smoothed her polyester graduation gown. It was way too damn hot in that auditorium, and the starchy fabric felt like it was chafing against the back of her legs. But she loved sitting there in a sea of other gold gowns and black hats.

She looked down at the program in her hands, which she had flipped open to her page. 

*Ms. Simmons will be attending Loyola University of New Orleans in the fall.* Delia smiled. Her
scholarship had come through, and she’d officially accepted a few weeks before. She knew that everyone who saw the program would know she was going to college. Everyone would know she wasn’t a St. Bernard lifer. Maybe she’d frame it when she got home.

She scanned through the rest of the program. Maggie Boudreaux’s spot said she was going to LSU, of course, Danny Thibodeaux’s said he was going to University of Louisiana-Lafeyette on a football scholarship. Most people had a college listed next to their name. Even if they weren’t going anywhere, they had the sense to put Nunez Community College just to have something. But next to Benji’s name, nothing was listed. She looked around the auditorium for him. She scanned a few rows up where he should be sitting, but she didn’t see him.

Delia glanced up at the stands. She saw Pat sitting next to Samantha Jane with her big round belly. Samantha Jane had failed two classes and couldn’t graduate. But she’d told Delia she wanted to watch her graduate.

“You’re doing it for both of us,” she’d said. “Of course I’ll be there.”

Samantha Jane waved, and Delia waved back. Delia caught Pat’s eye and mouthed, “where’s Mama?” But Pat only shrugged.

Some music started playing then, and Mr. Wilson walked on stage. “I’d like to say a big congratulations to our newest class of graduates.” He told them all how proud he was of them and then introduced Maggie, who was the class valedictorian.

She looked beautiful as always. She didn’t even seem to be sweating in her gown. “My fellow classmates,” she said. “I think I speak for all of us when I say that we have overcome a lot. When Katrina hit at the beginning of our freshman year, I know we all thought that life as we knew it was over. And we were right; nothing would be the same.” Students around Delia murmured in agreement. She nodded too even though she hadn’t been there for the storm.
Maggie went on. “We persevered, and now look where we are, about to graduate from high school. And I want to tell you that just like with the storm, everything’s about to change for us. Whatever your next adventure will bring, I know that you’re ready for anything that comes your way. You can overcome any obstacle because you’ve already overcome so much.” Delia looked around. The auditorium was silent except for a few people crying. “We might be the Katrina class, but we’re not defined by our past. In fact, every step we take forward gives us a new chance to redefine ourselves and become the most successful version of ourselves we can be. So, my fellow graduates, I say, go forward and conquer that path ahead of you. Thank you.”

When Maggie finished, the place erupted. She got a standing ovation. Delia clapped as loud as the rest of them. Maggie was like a preacher, and Delia wanted to believe her more than anything.

When the ceremony was over, everyone poured out onto the sidewalk out front where it was a little cooler. A breeze was picking up, and it looked like rain. No one seemed to mind though. All the graduates milled around looking for their families or hugging their friends. Several people threw their mortarboard hats into the air. Delia looked around for her people but didn’t see anyone.

“Delia Simmons, you’re a woman now!”

Delia turned around to see her mama standing there with a big balloon in the shape of a mortarboard. Hank stood next to her holding two daiquiri cups.

“Mama!” Delia ran over to them. “Hush up! Why are you yelling?”

“Because you did it, girl! Can’t a mama be proud of her daughter for once?” Her mama stumbled a little as she tried to hand Delia the balloon. Hank cracked up.

“Easy there,” he said. He held his cups up in Delia’s direction. “Congrats, little lady.”
“Did you miss the whole thing?” Delia asked. “Are you drunk right now?” She whipped around to see if anyone from her class had noticed the two loud idiots she was talking to.

“Oh, don’t be such a party pooper,” her mama said. “We’re here now, and that’s what matters.” She tried to hand Delia the balloon again, but Delia kept looking around for Pat and Samantha Jane.

Mr. Davis came up to them. “Congrats, Delia,” he said and gave her a hug. “Big day!”

“You the one who got little Delia into college?” Delia’s mama called out.

Mr. Davis turned to her. “Uh, well she got herself into college,” he answered. “I just helped with the details. You must be Mrs. Simmons?”

“You can call me Joan.” She held out her hand to Mr. Davis like she expected him to kiss it.

Delia gaped at her.

“Pleased to meet ya,” Hank said. He turned to Delia’s mama. “I’m gonna go take a leak.”

Delia cringed. She could see someone large waddling towards her from the corner of her eye and turned to see Samantha Jane and Pat heading her way. Pat gave Delia a hug but then his phone rang. He walked a few feet away to answer it and turned his back to them.

“Guess who I just ran into?” Samantha Jane asked.

Delia shook her head although she could probably guess.

“Only the winner of the world’s greatest father award!” Samantha Jane threw up her hands. “Says I’m a crazy bitch now, ooh I can’t even tell you how bad I would beat on him if I wasn’t a huge, fucking whale.”

Delia could feel herself starting to sweat again. Mr. Davis was still talking to her mama. All Delia wanted was one night where things didn’t get so trashy. One night where graduation
meant something, and everyone looked at her and knew she was getting out of there. She wanted
to feel like a sophisticated, college girl and forget about the whole trailer-parkness of her life.

Pat hung up his phone and came over. “Proud of you, little sister,” he said. He squeezed her shoulder.

“Thanks,” Delia said. She smiled. She could always count on Pat at least.

He looked around. “Hey, I’ll see ya later back at the house.”

“You’re not coming out to eat with us?” Delia could hear herself whining, but she didn’t care. This night was turning into a disaster.

Pat shook his head. “I’ll make it up to you soon, sweetie. Have fun, and, um, try to keep those two away from the booze.” He pointed to her mama and Hank, who was back from the bathroom.

Delia sighed. Luckily, someone called Mr. Davis away, and people had started to disperse to take shelter from the impending rain. Delia’s mama and Hank were getting into it over whether or not they should have brought Delia the balloon.

“Mama,” Delia called to them. “Thanks for the balloon. It was nice of y’all to show up.”

They both stared at her, clearly not catching her sarcasm. Hank offered one of the daiquiri cups to her mama, who refused it.

“Honey,” her mama said to Delia. “I’m not feeling great all of a sudden. Do you mind if we skip dinner tonight? I’ll take you out somewhere nice tomorrow, I promise.”

Delia felt relieved. “Yeah, that’s fine,” she said. “I’ll just see you later.”

Samantha Jane and Delia went to dinner by themselves just as the rain came. It hammered down on the roof of the IHOP that had just been rebuilt. Samantha Jane said she was
craving pancakes, and Delia had no problem with that. Samantha Jane was the only one who was celebrating with her anyway.

“You were always the good one,” Samantha Jane told her. “And the smart one. I’m real proud of you, girl.” She held Delia’s hand across the table, and tears formed in her eyes.

“I’m sorry about Derek,” Delia whispered. “He’s an asshole.”

“Yeah, what else is new?” Samantha Jane said. “Stupid boy meets crazy girl, everyone knows that story.” She put Delia’s mortarboard back on her head. “Now smile, and say Loyola!” Delia did, and she snapped a photo with her phone. “Good luck, girl. You’re gonna make us proud.”

Delia squeezed Samantha Jane’s hand. “Thanks for talking to me in gym class.”

Samantha Jane laughed. “Us being friends was meant to be.”

Delia nodded. “Friends forever,” she said.

“So now we gotta get you ready for college, huh?” Samantha Jane asked. “What do you think you’re going to major in?”

Delia shrugged. “Hey, maybe I’ll become a teacher,” she said. “I’ll come back and teach your son! How crazy would that be?” She laughed.

Samantha Jane didn’t laugh. “No,” she said. “You can be a teacher but not here. I don’t want you to come back.”

Delia squeezed Samantha Jane’s hand again, and they kept eating.

As they finished up, Derek and his new girlfriend Jenny walked into the restaurant. Samantha Jane made a hissing sound like a cat, and Delia rushed her out the door.

After she got Samantha Jane home, Delia walked up the steps to the dark trailer and looked around. She’d never been more sure that she wanted to leave it. She couldn’t believe
she’d even questioned it at one point. She shook her head. Being in love could make you do some dumb things.

She opened the door and accidentally kicked something leaning against it. Delia knelt down to pick up a white envelope with her name on it. Her heart jumped a little. Maybe Chase had realized he’d been an asshole and was trying to beg for her forgiveness. She ripped it open and unfolded a piece of lined notebook paper. There were lines to a poem written in very neat handwriting.

“Ain’t no hope in these washed down parts,
That’s all I know.
Ain’t no hope when there’s no fair start,
I been sitting here frozen, no way to grow.
But the day you floated down this way,
The water stopped being so dark,
So deep.
Because I saw you rise above it.
On the water, I saw you walk, run, leap.
You don’t belong here,
Because I see you rise above.
You have no fear
You rise and you love.”
The poem wasn’t signed, but Delia knew it wasn’t from Chase. She thought about how Benji hadn’t shown up to graduation. She hadn’t seen him in a long time and thought he was still mad about her having to testify against Leon. She reread the poem before carefully folding it and putting it away. She sat down in the empty trailer. The poem was beautiful, but she wasn’t sure it was true. Benji, the boy from the BD class, the boy from the trailer park and the crazy family, truly saw her. Or at least, he saw the person she wished she could be but had never become. She thought about Maggie’s speech. Maybe she was right after all. Delia could forge a new path any time she wanted. And she wanted to be the girl from the poem.
The DA was a short, stocky man with very thick, brown hair that he had combed severely to one side so that it almost made a wave on the left side of his head. Caitlin tried to concentrate on his hair and other mundane details she could see while she sat on the courtroom stand. She was so nervous. Her palms were sweating even though this was just a practice run-through.

“Ms. Caldwell, can you tell me what happened on the day in question?” the DA asked.

“The students came back from lunch, a little hyperactive like usual,” Caitlin began.

“So, they’re usually a little wound up after lunch?” the DA butted in.

“Yes,” Caitlin said. “But I got them in their seats and quiet so that we could get started.”

“What kind of lesson did you teach them that day, Ms. Caldwell?”

“I was…I was trying something new with them,” she said. “I thought that if we talked about things that were motivational, they would get inspired to do their work.”

“Was Mr. Duplessis in need of motivation?” he asked.
Caitlin nodded. “Yes,” she said. “They all were, but Leon especially. He never seemed to care about what I was trying to teach him.”

“And that upset you, didn’t it?”

“Yes, of course.” She shifted a little in her chair. She hoped she was doing a good job.

“What motivation did you use with the student in question that day?” the DA asked.

“We read ‘If’ by Rudyard Kipling,” she said.

“And why did you chose that poem in particular?”

“It’s about what it takes to be a man,” Caitlin said. “My class is all boys with behavior issues, and they need help becoming functioning adults.”

She glanced at her NET attorney, who nodded at her.

“So you talked with the defendant about what it takes to be a man?” the DA continued.

Caitlin nodded. “Yes,” she said. “I wanted to make a connection between education and being a real man, so I was pushing him to understand that he needed to listen to his teacher to get ahead.”

“Was the defendant responsive to what you were trying to tell him?”

Caitlin thought back over that day. She had been so angry at Leon for making her life hard, so she’d pushed him until he cracked. “No,” she said. “He wasn’t. He, um, got really angry when I told him what it takes to be a man.”

“So, you’re saying that on the day in question, the defendant came back from lunch a little wound up, and you proceeded to tell him that he wasn’t a real man and that he would never be unless he listened to you?” The DA looked up at her.

“I mean…yes,” Caitlin said. “But that was only—”

“No further questions,” the DA said and sat down.
Caitlin stared at him. She was stunned. What the hell was that?

“And you’ve just made it sound like you tried to humiliate your students right before the attack,” Caitlin’s lawyer said from where he sat in the gallery.

“I was just trying to explain what happened that day,” Caitlin said.

“The defense will ask you questions like these,” he said. “They want to make you seem like an ineffective teacher, and beyond that, a bully. You need to be prepared for everything they throw at you.”

“I’m not…I’m not a bully,” Caitlin said. “And that is what my classroom is like. What do you want me to do, lie? Most days it’s like a freaking battle zone in there.”

“Okay, don’t say anything like that,” her lawyer said. “Remember, you’re the victim of classroom violence here. Don’t make it seem like there’s some ongoing fight between you and your students. The jury needs to see you in a sympathetic light.”


The DA suggested they take a little break while he went over some notes. Caitlin’s phone began to ring, and she recognized the school’s number. She waved to the lawyers that she was taking a call and walked out into the courthouse hallway.

“Hello?” she answered.

“Ms. Caldwell?” Mr. Wilson’s secretary’s voice was on the other line. “We need to schedule a meeting to talk about your class tests scores some time this week. Mr. Wilson wants to meet with all the teachers to go over them before everyone gets settled into summer vacation.”

Caitlin sucked in her breath. She had a feeling that whatever the scores were, they weren’t great. “Okay,” she said. “I can come in any time this week.”

“Is tomorrow fine?” the woman asked.
Caitlin said she could be there first thing in the morning. “Is there anything I can do to be prepared for this meeting?” she asked the woman.

“Just be thorough in telling us how you taught your class this year,” the woman answered.

Caitlin wondered how thorough she should be.

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Caitlin met with Mr. Wilson a few days before the trial was scheduled to start. School had been out for a week, and the building was eerily quiet with only a few people in it.

When she walked into Mr. Wilson’s office, he had her students’ test scores in front of him and nothing else. He asked her to have a seat and told her that the scores were not good.

“Only two of your students achieved a Basic,” he said. “Frankly, that’s just not acceptable.”

Caitlin whistled low. She hadn’t expected them to be high, but she hadn’t realized how bad they would be. “You have to understand,” she said. “With all of their behavior issues, they aren’t good test takers. But beyond the tests, they did so much great work this year.” She sounded like a whiny teenager, and she knew it.

“I gotta say, Ms. Caldwell,” he said. “I feel for you after what happened to you, I do, and I think it’s real brave that you stuck out the year after that. But—” He motioned to the test score sheet. “—I’m not sure I could say you really did much in that classroom after all.”

Caitlin pursed her lips. “To be fair, Mr. Wilson,” she said. “I don’t think those test scores accurately reflect how much my students learned this year.” She rummaged in her school bag
and took out Benji’s poetry portfolio he’d turned in at the end of the year. “They all completed poetry portfolios that show immense growth and literary ability—”

“I’m sure they did,” he said. He took the portfolio from her but didn’t even glance at it. “But that’s not what shows up on school performance scores.” He folded his hands. “In order to bring our school up to A status, we need to keep improving in our school performance scores. To do that, our students need to perform well on the state tests.” He pointed at her. “You are the key to that.”

“Right.”

“Our teachers are a reflection of their students’ scores.” He sighed. “And well, we’re going to have to let you go.” He held his hands up like it was out of his control. “It’s nothing personal. This is what happens when teachers don’t perform.”

Caitlin scoffed. She couldn’t help herself. “I didn’t perform?” she said. “Let’s go through everything that affected my performance this year.” She started ticking off all her grievances on her fingers. “I got stuck with a class of delinquents who no one else wanted to teach, no one gave me any support in teaching them, oh, and let’s not forget that I was attacked by one of them.”

“Again, I know you’ve had a tough year,” Mr. Wilson said. “But that doesn’t excuse your poor performance.” He was like a brick wall, sturdy and unmoving. He didn’t resemble the understanding man who had patted her hand a few months ago in that same office.

“Is this because of the trial?” she asked. “And what Mr. Davis wrote?”

Mr. Wilson blinked. “As I’ve said, we can’t keep teachers who aren’t performing,” he said. “You should make sure to get any of your personal things out of your classroom by the end of the day.”
Caitlin had walked out of his office in a daze. She had been fired! She let out a laugh. She had failed so badly she had actually been fired! She kept laughing and heard it echo in the empty hallway. She knew she should be upset, but all she could think was what a relief it was to not have to come back next year. Life was about to get easier. She started walking towards her classroom, trying to process what this meant for her. She cringed at the thought of telling her parents. They may not have approved of her taking this job, but they weren’t going to be happy to hear she’d been fired.

In her classroom, Caitlin assembled a cardboard box and started filling it with supplies from her desk. She wanted to leave most of the books and anything else that the students might need next year. She didn’t want all of her hard work to go to waste.

“Ms. Caldwell?”

Caitlin turned to see Delia Simmons standing in the doorway. “Delia, you didn’t have to come by. I’ll see you at the courthouse Friday.” Caitlin hadn’t talked to the girl other than to thank her once for testifying on her behalf. Delia had looked stunned, almost afraid, to talk to Caitlin, but she’d said she just wanted to help.

And now Delia looked nervous again. She shifted her feet. “I’m, um, I’m not going to the courthouse.”

Caitlin felt her stomach sink. It was taking everything she had just to go through with this trial, and now this. “But you were subpoenaed,” she said. “You have to go to the courthouse.”

“Oh,” Delia said.

Caitlin walked over to the girl. “Are you nervous about the trial?” she asked. “Because all of you have to do is answer the lawyers’ questions truthfully. That’s all it is.”
Delia looked down at her hands, which were intertwined in front of her. “I’ve…um, I just don’t want to say anything against Leon.” She took a deep breath but still didn’t look at Caitlin. “I don’t agree with what he did, but I don’t think he was, um, completely at fault.” When she finished, she glanced up at Caitlin with a terrified look on her face.

Caitlin let out a low whistle. “So you did see everything that day,” she said. She sat down at her mostly empty desk. This girl had more guts than she did.

“I’m sorry,” Delia said.

“Don’t be,” Caitlin said. She waved her hand at the girl. “You don’t want to cover up the truth. That’s never a good thing.”

“But I still have to go to court?”

“I’m afraid so,” Caitlin said. “You were summoned by the district attorney’s office. You have to go.” She went back to packing up her desk and tried to quiet the swirling of the thoughts within her head. She was so tired of it all. “They’re going to ask you questions about what Leon did. You’ll have to tell them what he did.”

Neither of them spoke for several minutes while Caitlin packed.

“Are you leaving?” Delia asked. “Like, for good?”

Caitlin nodded and kept throwing things into the box. “Yes,” she said. “I…this wasn’t the right job for me.” She gave Delia a weak smile.

She watched Delia leave the room after she assured her that she was going to be fine. All she needed to do was tell the truth. They were all going to be fine. She picked up her phone and called her NET attorney.

“I want to drop the case,” Caitlin said.
“It’s not up to you,” the lawyer said. He sighed. “I can talk to the DA, but it’s up to him to drop the case. That’s how it works here in Louisiana.”

“Well,” she said. It was now or never. “He might want to drop the charges once I tell him that I provoked Leon.” She was done with it all. “And that blog post was true. I threw an eraser at him. I started that fight.”

The lawyer didn’t speak for a few seconds. “Can anyone testify to seeing that happen?” he asked.

Caitlin took a deep breath. “Yes,” she said. “Delia Simmons.”

“Delia Simmons’s preliminary testimony says she saw you acting in self defense,” the attorney said. “Look, if you don’t want to testify, the DA doesn’t need you or her. They can introduce the original report from what she told the principal and use Leon’s track record and his lack of remorse to show his pattern of behavior. That alone will make the case.”

Caitlin couldn’t believe what he was saying. “But I want to…I’m telling the truth.” She didn’t feel any better though.

“You know,” he said. “They’re going to take this kid down. Isn’t that what you want?”

Caitlin thought about that. What she wanted was to do something that she wouldn’t fail at, something that she felt proud of. A bubble of panic settled in her stomach. Everything had gotten so out of control. She thought of her parents, how they’d never wanted her to be here. They’d never been proud of the choice she’d made to come teach with NET. Running away from it would be doing exactly what they wanted. But then again, they wanted her to testify against Leon and continue proving that she and her family were better than everyone. This could be one small victory against that.

“No,” she finally said. “I’m not sure what I want, but I know this isn’t it.”
Caitlin sipped her margarita. Even under the bar’s patio awning, she was sweating down the back of her sundress. Summer in New Orleans was never subtle. She had invited Jeremy out that night for one more debrief session over margaritas.

“If he hadn’t fired me, I would’ve quit,” she told him. “This just isn’t for me. I’m going to withdraw from NET and take my name out of the interview pool for next year.”

“I can’t say I’m not disappointed,” Jeremy said. “But I’m also not surprised. You had a tough year.”

Caitlin nodded wearily. “I’m just not cut out for this after all,” she admitted. “I’ll just be known as that teacher whose student assaulted her. Or worse, the teacher who provoked her own assault.”

Jeremy shook his head. “You saw that thread on the NET website?”

She nodded again. “It’s true,” she said. “What everyone’s been saying. I lashed out at Leon and all those kids. I tried to get better, but I was not the teacher they deserved.”

“Who knows what else might have happened with Leon this year,” Jeremy said. “He gave you trouble every day. He would have been put out one way or another.”

“Maybe,” Caitlin said. Maybe a lot of things could’ve happened differently.

“Look,” he continued. “You had a rough start, but you stuck it out and got those kids to learn. That’s all that matters.” He put his hand on hers. “You’re not a failure.”

“Thanks,” Caitlin said.

“What are you going to do now?” he asked.
“I don’t know,” she said. It didn’t seem to matter what she did next. That didn’t even seem real. The only thing that seemed real to her was the cold margarita and the hot day.

After she said goodbye to Jeremy, she went for a walk through the French Quarter. She couldn’t believe she wouldn’t get to walk through the old streets much longer. The heat was intense, so she made her way to the river. The breeze blew in from the gulf, and Caitlin could smell briny air. She watched the water flow onwards and thought about how it was flowing towards St. Bernard. She felt moved to make an offering to the river somehow. She needed forgiveness from this place for coming here and thinking she could change it. For thinking it needed to be changed. There were problems, sure, but just like with her students, there was much more good than bad.

Over the next few days, Caitlin packed up her belongings. She’d found someone to take over her lease, and so that was it. She figured she’d go back to Chicago, at least for a little while. She hadn’t told her parents she was coming back. She wanted to delay their satisfaction at regaining control over her for as long as she could.

The day of Leon’s trial was an especially humid morning, and Caitlin spent it loading up her car. The threat of rain hung thick in the air, and she hesitated about what she was about to do. She’d probably beat the rain if she got on the I-10 now and started heading west, but she’d told herself she had one more thing to do before she could leave. She drove to St. Bernard.

She had never gone farther down the road into the parish than to St. Bernard High School, but she knew the address of the trailer park from Benji’s file and kept following the winding road until she got there. Caitlin asked an old man sitting on his porch if he knew where Delia Simmons lived. He pointed, and just as Caitlin walked up the steps to knock on the door, it
opened. Delia walked out first and an older boy followed. Delia wore a floral print dress and had her hair neatly tied back.

“Ms. Caldwell,” Delia said. “What are you doing here?”

“Hi Delia,” Caitlin said. “You look nice. Are you headed to the courthouse?”

“Yeah. My brother Pat’s taking us.” Delia nodded to the boy behind her.

“I’m so glad I caught you,” Caitlin said. “I need to talk to you before you go.”

“You’re not coming?” Delia asked her.

Caitlin shook her head. “No,” she said. “I don’t want to be a part of it anymore.”

Delia looked confused. “Do I still have to go?”

“Yes, you do,” Caitlin said. “And I want you to tell the truth about what happened. All of it.”

“Really?” Delia asked.

Caitlin nodded.

“You trying to tell her what to say or something?” someone said behind Caitlin.

She turned to see Benji standing there.

“Y’all ready?” he asked Delia and Pat. He turned to Caitlin. “Ain’t nobody going to have your back in there.”

“I don’t expect them to,” Caitlin said. “I was telling Delia that she should tell the truth.”

Benji came close to Caitlin. “What happened, Ms. Caldwell? You grew a conscience?”

“Yes,” she said. “I think I finally did.”

Benji smirked. “This doesn’t change anything. You still fucked up his life.”

Caitlin nodded. “I know,” she said. “But I’m trying to do the right thing now.”

Benji didn’t say anything, and Delia told him they needed to get going.
“Bye Ms. Caldwell,” Delia said. “Um, good luck wherever you end up.”

Caitlin thanked her. Delia and Pat walked towards a jeep parked in front of their trailer. Benji started to follow them but then turned back towards Caitlin. He looked right into her eyes, and Caitlin was struck with how young he looked. “I’ll tell Leon what you said,” he said.

“Thank you,” Caitlin said.

She didn’t really expect Leon to forgive her, but she had done everything she could to make it right. She got into her car and turned back to the city. She made it about three miles out of New Orleans when the rain started. It came down in a torrent, and she had to put on her flashers and drive ten miles an hour. She drove in a long line of cars, their taillights blinking in warning. It made sense that she would leave this way. The water kept coming down, and she hoped it was enough to wash away her sins.
Delia spent most of her summer hanging out with Samantha Jane. They lay in Samantha Jane’s bed, eating cookie dough ice cream and watching movies. Samantha Jane’s belly got hugely round. Delia loved feeling the baby kick. They didn’t usually talk about Derek although one day Samantha Jane casually slid a wad of cash from under her bed and held it up to Delia.

“Look what Derek brought me,” she said. “For the baby.”

Delia almost choked on her double fudge ice cream. “How’d he get all that?” she asked.

“He wouldn’t tell me,” Samantha Jane said. She flopped back down onto the bed. “He’s probably dealing. It doesn’t matter if he keeps helping me though.” She fingered the money.

“Maybe this means he wants to be a part of our lives again, me and the baby’s.”

“Samantha Jane,” Delia warned. She didn’t want her friend getting her hopes up, especially if Derek was dealing. Lord knows she didn’t need that extra worry.

Delia was with Samantha Jane the night she went into labor. She rode with Samantha Jane and her mama who left the casino early. Her mama sped the whole way to Tulane
University Hospital in the city while Delia held Samantha Jane’s hand. Samantha Jane’s son was born while Delia slept in the waiting room.

Delia went in later and held the tiny boy. “Have you heard from Derek?” she asked Samantha Jane.

“He’s not coming out here,” Samantha Jane said. She stared up at the ceiling.

Delia didn’t press it. “What are you going to name this sweet little man?” Delia asked. She knew that Samantha Jane had been planning on naming him after Derek since the day he’d shown up with a bunch of baby clothes he’d bought at a garage sale.

“Not Derek, that’s for damn sure,” she said and rolled away from Delia. “We had another fight a couple days ago.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Samantha Jane shook her head. Her hair was matted from the sweat of her labor. “I was too pissed off. You know what he said to me? He said he can’t deal with me anymore. That I’m always in his business, and he wants to do what he wants to do. Never mind that I just had his baby.”

Delia sat down on the bed next to Samantha Jane. She held the baby against her chest with one hand and rubbed his mama’s back with the other until Samantha Jane fell asleep. Samantha Jane was discharged the next day with little Sam, and they went home to the trailer park. A week later, Delia left for school.

Living in New Orleans was completely different from anything Delia could have imagined. She spent her first few weeks trying to acclimate. Her roommate was a girl named Sophia who’d graduated from Mount Carmel in the city. Delia was immediately intimidated,
thinking of her as Maggie Boudreaux, only richer. Sophia was actually pretty nice, but Delia knew they weren’t going to be close friends. She was no Samantha Jane.

Delia missed St. Bernard more than she’d thought she would but not in a way that made her want to go back. She missed the idea of being from somewhere, having a home, more than she missed the place itself. Life in the parish kept going on as usual. The trial against Leon had only lasted a few days, but it had become the scandal of the summer. She remembered pulling up to the courthouse the first day and being confused as to why there were so many people outside. Then she saw that many of them had signs saying things like “Say No to NET!” and “Educate, Don’t Incarcerate!” She was shocked to see Mr. Davis among the protesters.

Benji threw his fist in the air when they got out of the car. “Hell yeah!” he yelled. He told Delia that there was no way Leon could go away with all this support. “Ms. Caldwell messed with the wrong people,” he said.

But the first day didn’t go so well for Leon. The DA didn’t call Delia to the stand after all. Instead, he called Mr. Wilson and asked him about what she had told him she’d seen. Mr. Wilson said it was clear from Delia’s version of the attack that Ms. Caldwell had been acting in self-defense. He also talked about Leon’s disciplinary record. It looked like Leon was definitely going down.

On the second day, both Delia and Benji were called to the stand by Leon’s defense attorney. The DA used Benji’s BD background against him, so Delia wasn’t so sure the jury believed what he said. When she took the stand, she made sure to say that Ms. Caldwell had thrown an eraser at Leon.

“And why isn’t that in the official record of what you told Mr. Wilson?” the defense attorney asked her.
“I guess he didn’t write it down,” Delia said. “But I definitely told him I saw her throw something at Leon.” She glanced at Mr. Wilson who sat in the gallery. “I think, um, I think maybe he wanted to make it seem more like Ms. Caldwell was defending herself, but I could tell she started the fight.”

The DA objected to that, and the judge told her not to speculate about what Mr. Wilson thought. Delia started sweating then. Telling the truth was harder than she’d thought.

The DA asked her a few questions after that, about how she’d seen Leon acting around school, if he was a troublemaker, and what state of mind he was in when she saw him in the hallway. By the time she was done on the stand, Delia felt like she’d hurt Leon without even meaning to. The next day, she and Benji were told that Leon had accepted a plea bargain from the DA. He had changed his plea to guilty, and the jury convicted him of attempted battery.

When they left the courthouse that day, Delia asked Benji why Leon had decided to plead guilty.

“I don’t know,” Benji said. “I guess he thought that the evidence had stacked up against him, and he needed to cut his losses.” He looked at her with cold hard eyes, and she knew that he blamed her. She hadn’t seen Benji since that day.

A few days into the semester at Loyola, Delia was in the campus bookstore searching for a book for her sociology class when she heard someone say her name. She looked up and saw Troy, the boy from her high school who’d sat next to her in Mr. Davis’s car when they’d come to visit Loyola. She’d last seen him on the stage at graduation as salutatorian for their class.

“I can’t believe I haven’t run into you before now,” he said. “It’s great to see you.” He smiled wide, and behind his glasses, his eyes lit up. He was a little nerdy, but he was cute all the same.
“How’s it going for you?” she asked him.

Troy talked a lot as he had that day they’d taken the tour. He told Delia how much he loved his classes and that he was taking eighteen credit hours, which might seem like a lot, but he wanted to get all of his required classes done early. He wanted to started focusing on the next step as soon as possible.

“My roommate’s brother is having a party tonight,” Troy said, finally breaking his monologue. “Do you… want to come?”

Delia figured it was better than sitting in her dorm room alone. She nodded. “Yeah, okay.”

He met her outside her dorm later that night, and they walked to a house a few blocks off campus. Everyone there was older and seemed really mature. They mostly sat in groups drinking quietly while some soft-sounding rock music played that Delia had never heard of. She thought about how the pickups used to blast country music from the speakers so that it echoed out over the water at the End of the World. Troy grabbed her a beer from the cooler, and they went out to sit on the porch.

“You ever go to the End of the World back in St. Bernard?” Delia asked Troy.

He shook his head. “No, not really my scene,” he said. “I think that was the place for the cool kids. I don’t know if you noticed, but I was kind of a big nerd in high school.” He laughed.

Delia smiled. She drank some of her beer. “I don’t care,” she said. “I’m a girl from the trailer park, so I don’t think I can judge anyone.”

“None of them know that though,” Troy said. He gestured at all of the people around them. “They don’t know I was a nerd in high school either, so to them, I’m just Troy.” He turned back to her. “And you’re not a trailer park girl to them. You can be anyone you want.”
“Thanks, Troy,” Delia said. “You’re sweet for saying that.”

“To new lives,” he said and held his beer up to hers.

She clinked the plastic cup against his and let him kiss her on that porch a few beers later. He called her a couple times after that night, but she stopped calling him back. She knew she could be someone new, but he was no Chase.

Classes weren’t too hard, but Delia studied for several hours a day to make sure she didn’t miss anything. She didn’t feel like she belonged yet, but she would be damned if she would give the school any reason to doubt her. Her scholarship only paid for part of her new life, so Delia applied for a job waiting tables at a cafe near campus.

When she walked to work, she liked to take new routes every time. She would walk by the mansions that dotted most of the blocks in that area of uptown New Orleans. The houses looked like they could hold twenty people, and each could have her own room. One night, Delia stopped outside one of the houses. She could see the glow of a flat-screen TV inside a cream-colored living room. There were paintings on the walls, and a chandelier hung from the ceiling. It reminded her of a museum or a really nice hotel. She couldn’t even picture Maggie Boudreaux, rich as she was, in one of those places. It was too grand even for her.

When Delia got to work, the place was packed already. The cafe was a nicer place than Rocky and Carlo’s, but Delia still had to serve her classmates. Fortunately, now she also worked with a lot of other students too. Jaclyn was from Nashville and had come to Loyola on a music scholarship. She had a nose piercing and a tattoo of a swan curling around her neck. Delia thought she was the most badass girl she’d ever met.

“Delia, I just seated a group of sorostitutes in your section,” Jaclyn said to her when Delia clocked in. “Sorry about that. I’ll buy you a beer after our shift.”
“No problem,” Delia said. “I once served my ex while he was on a date.”

“No shit,” Jaclyn said. “Girl, I’ll buy you two beers then.”

After work that night, Jaclyn held up her end of the bargain. They went to a bar around the corner from the restaurant. When Delia whispered to Jaclyn that she didn’t have a fake ID, Jaclyn told her to relax. “This is New Orleans,” she said.

Jaclyn led Delia straight to the bar where she gave the bartender a kiss hello. He was dressed all in black with a black fedora, even his hair was jet black, which Delia was pretty sure wasn’t natural.

“Delia, this is Mike,” Jaclyn said. “Mike, Delia. She’s the newbie at work.”

“Ah, then you probably need this,” he said and poured her a shot of something dark. “Don’t let those frat dudes get to you.”

Delia drank the shot, which tasted like licorice, and she let Jaclyn parade her around the bar, introducing her to her friends. They were all very different from anyone Delia had met before, but they all seemed happy to meet her, which was a great feeling. She also recognized some of the servers from work.

A band started setting up on the stage. “That’s my cue,” Jaclyn said. She downed her shot. “Wish me luck.”

“Break a leg,” Mike said.

Delia watched Jaclyn hop up on the stage and talk to the guys setting up. “She’s in a band?” Delia asked Mike.

“Yes,” he said. “The Sugar Cane Gang. They’ve been playing together a few months now. Getting pretty good. You can say you knew her when.” He poured Delia another drink, which she took and went to sit closer to the stage.
The band started playing. There was a guy playing the trombone, one playing the tuba, a drummer, and a piano player. Another guy had a washboard strapped to his chest, which he strummed with his fingers. The music sounded lop-sided somehow. The trombone would sound something long and slow, and the drummer answered with a faster beat. The guy with the washboard on his chest kept another beat altogether with a *rat-a-tat-tat*. Jaclyn sang along with the music, and she seemed to bring it all together with her bluesy voice.

“Don’t leave me baby,” she sang. “I’m just getting started. Don’t leave me, my sweet man, you gotta stay for the full show.”

Delia had never heard anything like it, but she loved it. When the band finished their set, Jaclyn sat with Delia at the bar. Jaclyn bought Delia the beers she’d promised. “So,” she said. “What’s your story?”

Delia told her about life back in St. Bernard, mostly about Chase and how he’d broken her heart. She’d thought she was going to marry him, she said. She told her about hanging out with Troy, but he just wasn’t her type. She was about to mention Benji when Jaclyn started laughing.

“Jesus girl, do dudes run your life?” she asked.

Delia felt her face burn. “No,” she said.

“Look,” she said. “Heartache makes for great songs, don’t get me wrong. But that’s it. You can’t base the crux of your life on the guys in it.”

Delia must’ve let the hurt show on her face because Jaclyn put her arm around her.

“You have so much going for you!” she told Delia. She shook her shoulders a little. “Fuck guys. Don’t let them have more control over you than *you* do.”
Delia felt her face flush again. Samantha Jane would’ve never said anything like that. No one in da parish would have. Delia thanked Jaclyn for saying it. She figured Jaclyn was right.

After that night, Delia spent most nights with Jaclyn and her other new friends from work. She had a group that felt like a new family and a place to go when she felt lonely. She thought about St. Bernard less and less.

Delia didn’t go home for Thanksgiving. She told Samantha Jane she had too much work to do, and Pat would be working. Her mama wasn’t around as usual. Delia spent the holiday at Jaclyn’s apartment and spent the rest of the time studying for her first finals. The rest of the semester went by quickly, and soon Delia headed back to the parish for Christmas break.

Delia spent most of the break with Samantha Jane and baby Sam since Pat was on the boat working, and Delia’s mama only made one brief appearance.

“How’s my college girl doing?” she asked while she packed her bags for her trip with Hank to Miami. Delia told her a few details and watched her leave, like always.

A few nights before Christmas, Delia went down to the End of the World with Pat. She looked around, but Chase wasn’t there. Someone had draped the End of the World sign with blinking Christmas lights. Delia recognized a lot of kids from her class. Maggie Boudreaux was there, wearing an LSU sweatshirt. She was in a group of her friends drinking beer like usual. Everyone from her graduating year was swapping stories about college. Delia grabbed a cup and filled it at the keg.

“Hey, Delia,” Maggie said.

Delia was surprised to see she moved out of the circle to come talk to her, but Maggie had always been nicer to her at the End of the World. And now that high school was over, and
they were both in college, maybe it was all an equal playing field. Delia said hi to her and took a sip of her beer.

“You’re at Loyola right?” Maggie asked. “How are you liking it?”

Delia smiled and told her she loved it. “It’s awesome meeting all the new people.”

“That’s great,” Maggie said. “Yeah, college is so much better than high school, don’t you think?”

Delia nodded and almost laughed. She chatted with Maggie for a few more minutes. Maggie had joined a sorority, she said. Delia added in a few of her details but not much. She didn’t feel like she had to compete anymore. She was out of the St. Bernard bubble. She drank her beer and moved around the beach, talking to a few of her old classmates here and there.

Delia stopped every few feet and looked around for Benji. She didn’t know why exactly. She wasn’t sure what she would say if she saw him. She hadn’t seen him since the trial, and it was so chaotic then that she hadn’t remembered to thank him for the poem. She’d brought it with her to school and kept it hidden under her dorm room pillow. She read it whenever she felt lonely. The Christmas lights on the sign blinked idly, and Delia wondered if she’d see Benji ever again.
Benji stood on a corner in the Ninth Ward next to a squat, boarded up church. The little church was made out of brick, and the water line from Katrina was branded across it, almost slicing it in two. There were parts where a few boards were missing, and the windows had been smashed in. There were pieces of stained glass all over the yard. He thought they might have looked beautiful if the sun hit them just right, and that might have changed the whole day, seeing glittering holy glass. It might reassure him to see that. But it was a grey fall day, looking like rain any minute.

Benji stood around the corner from Leon, who was pacing back and forth smoking a swisher at the church’s side entrance. Leon had told him to meet him there for his first test. Leon was working that corner now because no one came by there except for junkies looking to score, and Benji needed to learn the business.

“You’re gonna be the lookout man,” Leon said. “You don’t speak to the customers, just point ‘em to me and watch the business.”
If Benji passed this test, Leon said Marcus would move him up to lookout for a few different spots. Benji had agreed to start working with Leon because he had nothing else going on in his life, and Leon was still his only friend. Since graduation, Benji hadn’t found a job yet. He had a high school diploma now, but he may as well have dropped out. Everyone in St. Bernard remembered his history, and no one would hire him.

He’d applied to the Domino factory, the Winn Dixie, the Wal-Mart, but everyone he interviewed with knew his mama, his family, his whole business. He’d even applied to the same construction company that his brothers worked for, hoping that the boss would hire another Landry boy. But the first thing the man said when Benji walked in was, “Aren’t you the thug who almost killed Steve Jeansonne’s boy?” Benji had pretty much given up, so he’d turned to Marcus and Leon to help him get some money.

He was still living in the trailer with his mama and brothers, but he wanted to get enough saved up so he could get out of there. The trailer felt even smaller than usual, like it was shrinking around him and ready to choke him out. He’d started having dreams about being stuck in a tin can, and every time he busted out, the sharp edges of the can cut him to shreds. There was no easy way out, that was for sure.

Delia had gotten out though. Benji had sat on his porch and watched her pull away with Pat in her mama’s jeep, packed full of her college stuff. He hadn’t said good bye to her. He hadn’t said more than two words to her since the trial had ended. Every time he’d seen her over the summer, he’d just gotten angry. He didn’t really know why until the day he saw her pull away in the jeep. He was pissed that she got to leave.

The wind picked up, and Benji was glad he was wearing a jacket. It was almost noon, and no one had come by yet. He was getting antsy. He didn’t like the feeling of being out there on the
church’s front lawn. He felt exposed somehow, as though the vine-covered decrepit shotgun houses all around him were watching him from being their plywood shades.

“Any update on the case?” he called over to Leon from his post. They didn’t talk about the trial much, but it was on both of their minds all the time. Even though Leon had been convicted, he hadn’t yet been sentenced.

Leon nodded methodically. “Ain’t nothing happened. That’s the update.” He looked around. “Don’t yell so much.”

Benji shoved his hands into his pockets to keep them warm. He took a few steps towards Leon. “I know the judge’s gonna go easy on you. After all those people showed up for you, he’s gotta see that she was the guilty one.”

“Those people weren’t there for me,” Leon scoffed. “They just needed a token black dude for their self-righteous shit. And if they want to lock me up, they will.” He looked around again. “Now get the fuck back to where you’re supposed to be. Marcus drives by, you’re fucked.”

Benji trudged back to the front of the church and leaned against its brick wall. Benji knew Leon was his boss now, but he didn’t know why he had to act like such a dick.

A beat up station wagon pulled up. A woman in the driver’s seat stared out at him. For a split second, Benji thought it was his mama. She had the same haunted eyes and stringy hair, but he knew it couldn’t be her. She was a customer. She got out of the car and walked towards Benji.

“What the hell are you?” She narrowed her eyes at Benji. “You a cop?”

Benji stared into her yellowed eyes and didn’t say anything. He suddenly felt exhausted.

Leon sucked his teeth at her, and she turned towards his direction. “Bitch, no!” Leon said. He gestured to her to come around the corner by him. “Why you asking him if he a cop? That’s
the first way to get people looking at you, hearing you talk about cops. Shut the hell up.” He sat back down on the side steps of the church.

The woman almost skipped around the side of the building to where Leon was. Now was time for Benji’s test, he guessed. He propped himself up against the corner of the church, looking around for anyone who might see the deal going down. He heard some birds picking at something squished up in the street, but other than that, all he could hear was the wind. There was no one around.

He glanced back to watch the deal go down. Leon was shaking his head, and the lady seemed to be begging him. Benji could hear the lady say, “wait, wait, wait.” She was searching through her ratty bag, pouring all the contents onto the sidewalk. A perfume bottle broke, and the liquid got on Leon’s shoe.

“Jesus, bitch,” Leon called out. He used the woman’s back to wipe his shoe. “I don’t need all your business! I’ll give you half, and you can get the rest when you come back with the money.”

When the woman left and peeled out in her junky car, Leon came by Benji.


Leon lit another swisher. Benji didn’t remember him ever smoking before he started working for Marcus. “Man, that lady is so fueled up. She’s a regular, always tweakin’ out, but she do some dumb shit. She lucky I didn’t make her buy me new shoes.” He sat down on the crumbling front steps of the church. Benji stood next to them, leaning against the stair railing.

“She looked like my mama,” Benji said.

“She could probably be a lotta people’s mamas.” Leon dragged on his swisher.
The wind picked up more, and Benji watched a plastic bag catch in the telephone wire above their heads.

“You think we was going to end up doing this?” Benji asked, breaking the silence.

“What, selling rock?” Leon said. “Yeah probably. It pays the bills.”

“Yeah, but a year ago, did you think we were going to be doing this?”

“A year ago, I had a bitch get me kicked out of school. What else would I be doing?”

Benji barely heard him. He was thinking about that day that Leon and Ms. Caldwell fought. He heard Ms. Caldwell’s voice in his head, telling Leon he wasn’t a man. “Remember that shit she said about black men in jail?”

“Ain’t nobody here talking about jail,” Leon said.

Benji shook his head. “Not yet.” He looked around at the abandoned church and the abandoned houses on an abandoned street. He pictured the woman with the gaunt face and stringy hair. “I never wanted to be here.”

“You telling me you got anything better?” Leon’s voice was hard and cold.

Benji realized he never saw Leon laugh and act like his old silly ass anymore. He never busted out rhymes anymore either. He’d become hard like the pavement he paced every day watching for customers, watching for cops, never resting.

“Nah,” Benji said. “But I ain’t doing this. Tell Marcus I’m out.”

“Hold up,” Leon said. He grabbed Benji’s arm. “You can’t just leave and think you done. You know most everything about Marcus’s business now. You think he gonna let you walk away?”
Benji shrugged and looked his friend straight on. “I guess not, but if you’re my boy, you’ll tell him something.” He looked at the friend he had only ever wanted to help. “And you should come with me.” He started to walk towards the main road.

“Hey,” Leon called after him. “I told you, you ain’t walking away!”

Benji heard Leon walking after him, his footsteps getting faster.

“Bitch, you turn around when I’m talking to you!” Leon pushed Benji from behind, and Benji stumbled.

He whirled around and grabbed Leon by his shirt collar. Anger burned like bile in Benji’s throat. “Whatchu call me?”

“You heard me, you little cracker ass bitch,” Leon said. He pushed Benji again, but Benji didn’t let go of him. “Get your hands off me if you don’t want your ass beat!”

Benji still didn’t let go. He’d been fighting off his anger for so long, ignoring it because Leon was his boy, his brother. They’d been through everything together, and Leon always had his back. He was the only one Benji could trust. But when Benji looked at Leon’s face, twisted into an ugly smirk, like he was daring Benji to do something, he didn’t even recognize him.

Something in Benji’s head roared, like a train blowing its horn at everything in its path to get out of the way. He could hear the blasting in his head, loud as anything.

“Whatchu looking at, cracker?” Leon growled at him and spit into Benji’s face.

The train kept roaring through Benji’s head, and he swung and hit Leon hard in the jaw. Leon toppled over, and before he could think at all about stopping, Benji was on top of him, punching him over and over.

“Man, get off me!” Leon yelled in between blows.
But Benji felt like a machine, an unstoppable force. He felt the punches go into Leon’s flesh and bone like he had the day he kicked Will Jeansonne’s ass. Benji was so sick of Leon’s shit. He was sick of everything. All he’d ever wanted to do was help Leon. All he ever wanted was to stop struggling.

Leon got in a good blow, knocking Benji square in his left eye. But Benji kept right on hitting him. “You motherfucker!” he yelled. Benji thought he could feel Leon’s skin turning to pulp under his hands. No one was around for miles.

“Stop, dammit!” Leon cried out. “Stop!” he pleaded with Benji.

Benji looked down at the boy beneath him, his best friend covered in blood, and he finally stopped. He climbed off of his chest.

Leon sat up. “Man, what the fuck is your problem?” He used his T-shirt to wipe the blood that trickled from his nose.

“I’m out,” Benji panted. “I’m done with this shit. Marcus can come after me, or whatever, but I’m out.” He rubbed his eye where Leon had clocked him.

Leon didn’t say anything. He kept wiping his face and didn’t look at Benji.

“It’s all so fucked up,” Benji said. He felt like crying. “It ain’t gotta be like this, man.”

Leon looked around. “I ain’t got no more options,” he said.

Benji stood up. “You wanna get arrested again, that’s on you,” Benji said. “But I ain’t staying around to watch it happen.” He turned and walked all the way back to the trailer park.

“Marcus gonna find you!” Leon called out after Benji.

Nothing was fair in this life. That was Benji’s only conclusion. The clouds looked like they were sinking lower and lower. The grey color filled his lungs. If Marcus really did come
after him, he was a dead man walking. He didn’t care though. He may as well already be dead. He sure didn’t feel alive.

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“Hey, jackass is home!” Kevin yelled from where he leaned against the kitchen counter. Benji ignored him and headed straight to his bedroom. He went to slam the door behind him, but someone was in there already, digging through the bottom drawer of his dresser.

“Mama, what are you doing?”

His mama stopped quickly like an animal that had been caught in headlights. “Benji, you been taking your medication?” she asked. She straightened up. Her face looked ashen, and she was sweaty.

“I ain’t in school no more,” he said. Ever since graduation, his Medicaid had stopped covering his meds, which was fine by him since he didn’t want to take them anyway. He’d come to the conclusion that nothing much was wrong with him. Anyone stuck in a fucked up life like his would be angry too.

“I know that,” his mama snapped. “But what’s that mean? You think you’re cured? You need those meds to control yourself.”

Benji looked around the room. His sheets had been torn off his bed, and his clothes had pulled out his drawers. “Don’t you mean you need them Mama?”

His mama blinked a few times. “Don’t talk to your mother that way,” she said.
“Are you fucking serious?” He stormed out of his room but stopped in the kitchen, wondering if he should go back, wondering how he could stop her. His hands still throbbed from beating Leon, but he felt like he was back on that train again.

“What’s wrong with your face, dumbass?” Kevin smirked at Benji. He shoved half of a po’boy into his big, piggy mouth, and then while he was still chewing held up the chewed off end in Benji’s direction. “You hungry, little boy?”

The blasting went off in Benji’s head again, and he lunged at Kevin. He shoved him hard against the wall. Kevin dropped the rest of the sandwich onto the floor and tried to get Benji off of him. But Benji felt unleashed. The anger pulsed through him, and he felt like he couldn’t stop. He didn’t want to stop. He had nothing to lose anymore.

Kevin knocked Benji in the side of the head. Benji’s ear stung, and he felt the warmth of blood dribbling down his neck. He didn’t stop though. He kept tearing into Kevin.

Benji’s mama came tearing out of Benji’s room. “Stop fighting! You’re brothers, dammit,” she yelled. “See, Benji, this is why you need those meds. You’re out of control!”

Benji laughed. “Oh, I’m out of control?” Benji yelled. “Come on, y’all, let’s watch Mama get loaded up.” He turned to face his mama with his fists still raised. “Sorry, but I ain’t helping with your addiction anymore, Mama.”

Her eyes bulged at him. “What in the hell are you saying, Benji?”

“You know what I’m saying,” he panted. “You’re an addict!” Once he started he couldn’t stop. “You’re a goddamn addict!” he shouted over and over. His mama started crying.

“Stop it,” she yelled. Her voice grew hoarse. She looked like she might collapse.

“Shut the fuck up, you asshole!” Kevin said. He was panting too, and blood flowed from a cut above his eyebrow.
“This whole family’s fucked up!” Benji continued. “You and Ray let her be like this, like it’s okay because y’all are never here! What about me?” He turned to his mama and stood right in front of her weepy, red face. “What about me, goddammit? Be a fucking mother!”

“Hey!” Kevin yelled. He smacked Benji across the face. “I swear to god I’ll knock your teeth out. Stop talking to her like that!”

Benji wiped the blood from his lips and held his hand against his ear. “I don’t care anymore,” he said. He looked back and forth between the two of them. “I don’t blame Daddy for leaving. No one can live in a family like this.”

The room was silent. Benji knew he’d crossed the line, but saying it made him feel free. He stared defiantly at his mother.

“Get out, Benji,” she said quietly.

“You heard her,” Kevin growled. “Get the fuck out of here!”

“I’m already gone!” Benji shouted back and ran out of the door. He slammed it behind him and walked off like he always did.

Benji went down to the End of the World and spent the whole night sitting by the water. He didn’t have no one no more. Leon, Delia, his good-for-nothing family. He thought about staying in that exact spot and never moving. He pictured the tide coming in and then carrying him out to sea.

Benji thought about the poems he’d written about his daddy, being at the end of the world. All that time Benji had thought he was mad at his daddy for leaving, but he was really mad that his father didn’t take Benji with him. Benji watched the stars come out and the moon move across the sky. He made a wish on each one, swearing he was never going back to that trailer again.
 CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Delia

A few weeks into the spring semester, Delia had settled back into her routine of studying and working. She thought about declaring a major, maybe social work. She wanted to help out fucked up families like hers. Now that she was out of the trailer, the possibility of helping others seemed much easier. She remembered how Mr. Davis said that college would help her find her passion. She guessed he was right. Every night when she walked to work, she still looked at the mansions, but now she started to picture herself living in one.

One night, Delia lay on her bed in her dorm, looking through her political science textbook when Samantha Jane called. Samantha Jane spoke low, like she was afraid to wake the baby, or she was trying to make sure no one heard her. “The cops stopped the boat that Pat’s been working on outside Venice. They found a couple hundred pounds of coke. He got locked up.”
Delia sucked in her breath. She felt like she’d been punched in the stomach. “Fuck.” She glanced at Sophia, who was studying chemistry flashcards laid out on the floor. Delia ducked out of the room and tried to keep her voice down too. “They only locked him up? Where’s Chase?”

“I don’t know. Pat’s the only one who got caught. Chase must’ve run off.”

Delia hung up with Samantha Jane after a few minutes. She promised to call once she heard from Pat. Samantha Jane had told her not to worry about it too much, to stay at school. She and her mama could help. But Delia could feel the reality of Pat’s arrest like a slap in the face. How could she have been here, going to parties with rich college kids and taking classes like “Dissecting Selfhood in the Modern World,” when there were real problems back home?

Delia called her mama and left a message. She and Hank had been staying in Shreveport lately. Delia hadn’t really talked to her mama in months, but she figured this wasn’t something she could keep from her. She hoped that Pat’s arrest might be enough to bring her mama back home, but her mama texted back that she wasn’t coming down to bail him out. “Let him deal with his shit,” she wrote. Delia snapped her phone shut and decided to go for a walk.

Delia crossed St. Charles Avenue and headed into Audubon Park. In the dark, the giant trees seemed vigilant. There was no wind, and they stood like sentries poised over her head. They were protecting her but also keeping a close watch over her. *Not so fast,* they seemed to say. *Are you sure you belong here?*

Her brother was a criminal, a drug dealer. She shook her head. There was no way she could believe that. Chase had to be the guilty one. If he hadn’t been for him, Pat never would’ve been there. She felt numb and remembered the night she had slept with Chase. When would he stop taking things from her?
Delia sat there in the cold damp night and listened to the sounds of night birds screeching at each other. Delia recognized the same sounds of birds she’d heard down by the End of the World. She stared at the dark water and thought about how strange that was, that the birds could be there too, that there could be anything that existed in both worlds.

A little before dawn, Delia’s phone buzzed with a strange number. By the time she answered and heard Pat’s voice, she knew exactly what she had to do.

“Don’t worry,” she told him. “I’ll figure out a way to get you out. I’m coming home.”

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Samantha Jane said Delia could stay on the couch in her trailer until Pat got out. Delia just couldn’t deal with staying at her mama’s trailer all by herself.

“You know I love you,” Samantha Jane said when she opened the door to see Delia. “But I really didn’t want to see you back here. Not like this.”

Delia was able to withdraw from school before she got charged for the second semester, and she had some loan money left over from the first semester. Samantha Jane gave her some of her savings from working at the grocery to add to the loan money, but even with that, Delia didn’t have enough to cover Pat’s bond. The public defender told her Pat was looking at a felony and could end up sitting in that jail for sixty days unless they could get the money. She left messages on her mama’s cell begging her to come back and help them. Every night, she cried herself to sleep on Samantha Jane’s couch. No one had found Chase yet.

Mr. Parker, Delia’s old manager at Rocky and Carlo’s, gave her her job back, and before long, she was spending every day waitressing and counting up every penny she had. Somehow
she convinced herself that she was going to get the money together. Or that her mama would come through and help. There was just no other option. Every day that Pat sat in jail, she felt guilty. She felt like she did when she was little, and her mama would come home, drunk and mad at her daddy and scream at her about leaving her toys out, like she’d somehow caused it all. She was upset for not being able to control anything and for trusting Chase and for going away to college. She let herself spin in the guilt until she felt sick. She had stopped sleeping.

Pat stayed in the jail for almost a month before Delia’s mama came through with the bond money.

“Don’t say I never done nothing for you,” her mama told Delia on the phone before she hung up.

Delia went to pick Pat up in her mama’s old jeep. She thought about how Pat used to drive her around, down to the End of the World. It seemed like a million years ago.

Pat’s face was as white as his shrimping boots. He smelled terrible and looked like he hadn’t slept that whole month. Delia figured he probably hadn’t. She hadn’t, that’s for sure. Her heart broke seeing him like that.

“Looks like both of us should stay away from Chase,” she said and tried to laugh.

Pat didn’t crack a smile. He looked like a ghost, but he gave Delia a hug and that was enough.

Delia moved back into the trailer now that Pat was home. They both waited for his trial as though they were waiting in exile. Pat only left the house to stock up on more beer. Delia brought home take-out every night, and she sat with Pat on their porch until the sun set.

“Ya know, this is your first offense,” Delia said one night. “I bet the judge will go easy on you.”
Pat smirked. “Is that right? You study law over in that college?” He downed his beer and wouldn’t look at her.

Delia let her questions hang in the silence for a little while until their weight became too heavy in the damp air. “Pat,” Delia said quietly. “How did it all start? Out there on the boat…I mean, Chase was the one who hooked you up with that job.”

“Drop it, Delia,” Pat said. He took another beer out of the cooler by their feet. “Don’t get yourself concerned with any of this.”

“I’m just saying, if Chase got you into this, if he’s the one who’s guilty—”

“I said leave it alone, little girl,” Pat snarled. He drank in silence until he passed out, and Delia finally went to bed.

Delia still stopped at Samantha Jane’s every night when she got off work. She played with Sam while Samantha Jane got things done around the trailer. Samantha Jane said she was going to start taking classes at Nunez Community College. “You inspired me, girl,” Samantha Jane said. She beamed at Delia. Delia tried to smile back while she jiggled baby Sam.

Samantha Jane’s mama quit her job at the casino so she could be around to help with the baby more. She opened up a beauty salon in their trailer. “Cuts by Kim” read the hand-painted sign that sat outside.

One night when Delia came over, Samantha Jane wasn’t home. She’d been called in to the grocery store to fill in for someone, but her mama let Delia in.

“You wanna stick around? I can give you a quick trim,” Samantha Jane’s mama said. “I just put the little man down for the night, and you can keep me company. Free of charge.” Samantha Jane’s mama was still so pretty even though she looked older than the last time Delia
had seen her. The makeup she wore gathered in the wrinkles of her face, and she looked tired, worn out.

Delia settled into an old barber chair that had been set up in part of their small kitchen. There was a big mirror screwed into the wall. It all looked cheap as hell but somehow very cozy.

“How are you doing sweetie?” Samantha Jane’s mama asked. She started combing through Delia’s hair, tugging gently at the tangles.

“Oh, could be better,” Delia said. She tried to smile at the woman. She remembered all those times she had tried on her clothes, the shiny dresses, the high heels.

“You like being home?” Samantha Jane’s mama went right to work. She didn’t try to look her in the eyes and get too nosy while she cut her hair like other hairdressers did. Delia appreciated that small courtesy.

“It’s all right, I guess,” Delia said. “Waiting tables isn’t too bad.”

Samantha Jane’s mama nodded and kept trimming.

“Do you like being back here more than being at the casino?” Delia asked and then blushed when the woman met her eyes in the mirror.

She smiled. “Oh yeah,” she said. “It was time for me to settle down, be home more. I’m a maw-maw now.”

“That mean you’re done trying to get men to notice you?” Delia didn’t know why she said it, but seeing the woman in the mirror, the one wearing the full face of makeup and hair all teased up, she kept thinking of the life she’d had.

Samantha Jane’s mama gave her a funny look, but then she laughed. “Not anymore, that was in my youth. You gotta get ‘em while you’re young, girl.” She spun Delia in the chair so that she faced her. She gently pulled the strands from either side of Delia’s face to see how they lined
Delia could smell the cigarette smoke on her breath. “But then again, when you’re young, you do a lot of stupid things. I think now, it’s best to leave them all well enough alone. There, that should do it.” She handed Delia a hand mirror so she could check out her reflection from the back. “Yeah girl, I say go it alone and do the best you can.”

Delia thanked her for the haircut, and even though the woman protested, she slipped a few bucks into the tip jar on the counter.

Pat was almost always in the trailer. He’d sleep all day and then come out at night and sit on the porch drinking until dawn. Delia knew he didn’t want to see anyone. He’d become like a zombie, stumbling around in a half-life, waiting on his trial. She knew he was still living in jail in his mind. The trailer wasn’t only a jail for her. Delia started getting her news about the case from the paper. Chase was still a wanted man.

The days were getting warmer and wetter, each one blending gray and green into the next. Mardi Gras came and went. Delia didn’t go to parades. She remembered last year’s parade, how silly and naive she’d been. She couldn’t cross the chasm from who she’d been to who she was now. And she couldn’t stand the idea of running into anyone she knew, so she stayed home with Pat, drinking and waiting for the party to be over.

One day at the restaurant, Delia saw Maggie Boudreaux and some of her friends from high school sitting in her section. Delia took a deep breath and walked up to their table. They were home for spring break and chattered on about the parties they all went to and their summer plans. Most of them were wearing bright pastel shirts with Greek letters for their sororities on them. They reminded Delia of the Easter eggs she’d help put up on the restaurant windows.
“What can I get y’all?” she said as though she was just another waitress, and they were everyday customers. She thought that maybe if she kept the small talk to a minimum maybe she could get through it without many questions.

“Hey, Delia,” Maggie said. She seemed genuinely happy to see her, but she cocked her head slightly to the side with confusion. “What are you doing here? I thought Loyola didn’t have break until next week. My cousin goes there.”

“Oh, well, I’m taking this semester off,” Delia answered. “I’ll probably be back next fall.”

Maggie nodded slowly. “Oh okay, cool. Well, good to see you again.”

The other girls nodded slowly and talked about how hard college was. On another day, Delia might have appreciated their attempt to sympathize with her, but when she walked away to put in their order, she distinctly heard Pat’s name come out of one of their lip-glossed mouths. And it was all over. Before she could bring them their Diet Cokes, Delia would have a drug dealer for a brother, and she was a college dropout. That was her new story, and that would be all they would remember about her now.

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Spring came to the bayou country in bursts of green and lots of rain. The Spanish moss hung thick from the live oaks, and Delia started spending more time outside. She took long walks through the woods between rainstorms. Cypress trees rose out of swamp water covered in the violent green of algae bloom. Delia wandered aimlessly through the back country for hours at a time. She didn’t want to go home.
She walked by Benji’s trailer on her way to the woods every day, but she never saw him. She still had his poem but never read it anymore. It lay buried in a shoebox of old photos and things from high school, which seemed so long ago now. Walking by Benji’s trailer again one day, she noticed it looked abandoned. She wondered if he’d gotten out of there and where he had gone. She hoped he’d gotten out of there for good.

Delia’s mama came back to their place one day. She said she was there to get her stuff. Shreveport was nice, she said. She and Hank both had good jobs, and they were staying put, even saved up enough to buy a real house.

“You can come stay with us if you want,” her mama said.

Delia shook her head. Her mama might have a house now, but she was never going to be able to take care of them the way they needed. Delia would stay there and look after Pat. She was in charge now. It was her job to pay the rent, buy them some groceries, take care of things. That was her new role. The DA kept saying he was going to bring charges against Pat, but no court date had been set yet. All they could do was wait.

One day after she got done with a morning shift, Delia didn’t drive right back to the trailer park. She kept going down the back winding roads, gunning the jeep the whole way. She followed the highway until it ran out, and she ended up down by the End of the World. She hadn’t been there in half a year, and it looked a lot different in daylight. Barely a strip of beach that was littered with beer cans. Nothing special, just another place for trash.

Delia walked to the edge of the water and tried skipping a few stones. They mostly just plopped into the water, like they always had when she’d tried skipping them with Chase.

He was still missing, and Pat still wouldn’t talk about it. Delia had picked up gossip from people around town about the case. Chase’s uncle, who owned the shrimp boat, got them
involved in the drug smuggling. People said Pat had been made the point man so that the uncle could keep Chase under the radar. Pat had the weight of the entire operation on his shoulders.

Delia tried to picture their lives if they had never moved to St. Bernard. They weren’t any better off in Tennessee, but there was no Chase in Tennessee. There was no Hank either. But her mama would have found another Hank, Delia knew. And there might have been another Chase or at least another thing to keep them stuck where they were.

Delia knelt and picked up a large, jagged stone. She felt its weight in her hands and figured it had been part of a foundation, washed away in some storm. She chucked it into the water and watched how the ripples spread out in all directions, some away into the bayou, some back to her, curling in small waves at the shore. She watched the water go in so many different directions, each path predetermined, and she wondered if she should have known all along that her story would end up this way.
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Benji

Benji waded through the water in his gaiters until he was standing knee high in it. The water was brown-green, and it was impossible to see anything a few inches below the surface so he relied on the cord he held to find the crawfish traps. Since he was a rookie on the crew, they made him get into the water to find the traps instead of just trawling them in. Had to break him into it, they said, but Benji didn’t mind. The water was nice and cool, and even though he knew there were all kinds of things—snakes, gators, who knew what else—lurking in it, he liked the calm feel of being in the water. Hell, he’d always loved the water.

Benji had been working with the fishing company for a few months now, since crawfish season had started. It wasn’t always fun work, but he got to be outside, the guys didn’t give him too much shit, and he could spend a lot of time on his own, just thinking or writing in his journal, which he took everywhere he went. He’d been adding more rhymes to his collection.

Since the day he left the trailer, he’d kept his word. He’d bounced around, sleeping wherever he could find a place, sometimes staying in abandoned houses. He even stayed in a
rusting, abandoned boat for a few nights. But then he’d gotten a unit in the new housing project that the parish had built despite all the yelling about it from the white people around town. As usual, they didn’t want anyone mixing it up, but the apartments were nice, brand new, and cheap. Plus, he didn’t mind living around black people. This was a good start for him. He was out of the trailer park for good, and nothing could be better than that.

He’d worried about running into Marcus for the first few weeks he was living closer to the Ninth Ward. But he never saw him. Leon had covered for him.

The week after Benji got himself kicked out of the trailer, Leon found him as he was walking to the battlefield cemetery to sleep one night. Leon told Benji he needed to stay out of sight. He’d told Marcus that Benji still needed more time to learn the ropes. Leon pretended that Benji was still learning from him while they figured out a way for Benji to get away.

Leon hadn’t looked at Benji when he apologized, but when he looked up, Benji could see his face. His hardness was gone, and he was the same skinny, goofy-looking kid he’d always been. “I figure I owe you,” Leon said. “All that stuff you did, trying to help me with my case with Ms. Caldwell. You’re still my brother, man.”

Benji knew that Leon was sorry if he was willing to stick his neck out for him like that and buy him some time. Benji gave him a dap and thanked him.

“Ride together, die together,” he told Leon.

Benji laid low, staying way out near Delacroix and all the fishing crews for a few weeks, but he still carried a knife with him wherever he went. That was until the day he heard about Marcus accidentally selling to an undercover cop himself. With Marcus in jail, Benji expected any day after that Leon would be arrested and probably him too. But nothing happened. Leon figured that Marcus had ratted on someone even higher up, and they were home free. Well, Benji
was anyway. Leon got hauled in a few weeks later for his sentencing hearing on his battery charge.

Benji went to the hearing as loyalty to Leon. The DA said he wanted to set an example that violence against teachers would not be tolerated.

“Leon Duplessis needs to see that there are consequences for his actions,” the DA said.

The judge said he accepted the plea bargain and sentenced Leon to six months in Elayn Hunt. Benji wrote Leon letters, and Leon wrote back. He seemed to be doing okay. He even started taking classes for his GED. In his last letter, he confessed that he was glad he was in there and not out on the streets anymore.

“My moms is always saying that guilt catches up with people,” he wrote. “I don’t feel much guilt for being in here, other than not listening to you. You tried to stop me from doing what I did. And you tried to stop me from doing other stupid shit too. You always looking out for me, bro. Thank you.”

Benji pulled up his last crawfish trap. It was teeming with the little mudbugs, who were crawling all over each other, and he hollered towards the crew. They idled in a little closer, and he tossed the trap on board.

“You did good, Benji,” his boss Jimmy said.

Benji climbed into the boat and started cleaning himself off. A couple of the guys he worked with now had known Benji’s daddy. He was hesitant to ask them much, but every once in a while, especially after work back at one of the dockside bars, they would tell him a story or two. He was working up the courage to ask them more and maybe piece together where his daddy might be now.
Benji went back to the trailer park once a month to check on his mama. He’d gone two months without talking to her after he’d yelled at her, and when he finally saw her, she was on her way to a pharmacy. She broke down and cried right there in front of him and told him she was sorry. He’d helped her check into an outpatient rehab in New Orleans, and now that that new hospital was being built in St. Bernard, she’d agreed to have more counseling sessions there. She had been sticking to the program so far, and without Kevin and Ray around as much now that they’d finally moved out, she seemed to be more under control.

Once the boat docked that day, he headed over to the trailer park on his way home. He had a pound of boiled crawfish he’d gotten at a little seafood store by the docks to bring his mama as a surprise. When he pulled in, he saw Delia Simmons sitting on her front porch. She had her legs propped like she was relaxing, but he could tell she was watching him. He waved.

“Hey,” he called. He knew about the drug bust with Pat. He knew that Delia had moved back home, that she had been dragged back in after getting away.

“Hey yourself,” she replied. She sat up. “I didn’t know anyone was still living at your place.”

“Just my mama,” he said. He walked over to her. “Well, she’s here on a part-time basis. I got her going in to rehab, and she spends the night sometimes.”

Delia nodded. “That’s good,” she said. “I mean, not that your mama needs help, but it’s nice that she has it.”

Benji nodded. Delia looked terrible. He felt bad about how she was now. Even the times when he’d been most mad at her about dumb shit in the past, he wouldn’t have wished this on her. He didn’t want her to have to come back at all.

“I heard about Leon,” she whispered. “He doing okay?”
“Yeah,” Benji said. “He’ll be out in October.” He leaned closer to her. “Listen, um, I just wanted to say, I’m sorry.”

She squinted in the sun. “It’s okay,” she said.

He shook his head. “No,” he said. “It’s not. I been letting my anger control a lot of what I do for a long time now, but not anymore. I’m sorry for being such an asshole.”

She laughed. “Okay then, apology accepted,” she said. “And I want to say, thank you for the poem. It means more to me than you know.” She leaned in and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Benji smiled a little. “I’ll see ya,” he said.

She nodded at him and went back to staring towards the sun.

Benji visited with his mama for a few hours. When he left, he looked towards Delia’s porch, but she had gone.

He still liked to walk for hours at a time. He lived close to the river now and would walk along the levee. It had become a nightly ritual. He went out there after he got back from his mama’s with his journal in hand. The sun set behind the clouds, sending chutes of light out in all directions. He could see the lights of New Orleans in the distance beginning to light up the sky like little neon stars.

He thought about Delia again back in the trailer park. He had stopped categorizing people, about who was going to leave St. Bernard and who would stay. He couldn’t even say who was good and who was bad. Everyone seemed to be changing all the time.

He watched the river and remembered that Langston Hughes’s poem that Ms. Caldwell had tried to get them to read one time, the one about rivers. Langston had been saying how rivers made up his whole life. Benji thought maybe he knew the feeling a little more now.

He sat down on the levee, opened his journal, and began to write.
“The water goes forever.
It flows onwards, never stopping.
Swimming in it,
I nearly drowned.
I thought the river brought me to the end of it all,
And I struggled and fought against the current.
But the river stopped me.
Let me flow on, it said.
Let me take you with me.
And the water took me on.
It flows onward, never stopping.”

It wasn’t finished, but he liked it enough. He closed his notebook and watched the sky’s colors fade to darkness.

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VITA

The author grew up in Bloomington, Illinois. She earned her Bachelor’s degree in English and Communication and Culture from Indiana University in 2008. In 2011, she joined the Creative Writing Workshop at the University of New Orleans to pursue a Master of Fine Arts degree in fiction. While there, she served as a graduate assistant at the University of New Orleans Press.