UNDER SILVER ASH

A Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty of The University of Akron

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts

Shurice Gross

August, 2011
DEDICATION

To my children, Brandon, Bria and Olivia, who have always been my loudest cheerleaders. I love you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. CHELSEA</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. HEATHER</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. JESILOWSKI</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. CHELSEA</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. HEATHER</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. JESILOWSKI</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. MRS. ANDERSON</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STORIES</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BIGGER</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALL THAT WE KNOW</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE BREAKING POINT</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOW IS COME A SEASON</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

iv
CHAPTER I
Chelsea

Chelsea didn’t remember dancing at homecoming. Mostly, she remembered the sharp chemical smell of her boyfriend’s tuxedo and how, hours later, as they lay together on his twin-sized mattress and she snuggled into his side, the odor lingered on his skin.

The horizontal blinds sliced the moonlight into slivers that spread across Torren’s upper body and Chelsea brushed a fingertip over a tattoo of illumination. The fine hairs on his chest were velour, like the blanket tangled up at their knees. She could feel his heartbeat thrumming steadily against the cave of her stomach. His eyes flickered beneath thin veils of skin. It must be a good dream, she thought. The corner of his mouth twitched in a smile. Maybe about her.

Chelsea moved the sheet aside and stood. Her homecoming dress lay on the floor, a purple puddle at the foot of the bed. She picked it up and shook it out, examining the wrinkled fabric before draping it over the back of Torren’s desk chair. She tossed his tuxedo jacket and pants on top of her dress. The week
before, she’d told him that he hadn’t had to rent a tuxedo, that homecoming wasn’t that big of a deal and most kids would probably wear suits.

“S’okay,” he’d said. “My stepdad knows the manager of Mayatux. He’ll probably give me a deal.” Then his lips lifted in the crooked smile that played on his face even as he slept. The rental smelled as though it had been peeled from a dead body. Her underwear and bra were there too, buried under Torren’s dress shirt, and she left them on the floor. She glanced at him. He hadn’t moved and lay still and peaceful in the middle of the bed, where she’d been squeezed in on the edge.

The clock on his nightstand read 12:27. Nearly a half-hour after curfew. Chelsea lifted Torren’s robe from the back of the door and slipped it on, leaving the belt ends dangling. She opened the bedroom door and squinted into the deep darkness of the hallway. The house was empty, but she stepped lightly on the carpet, unnerved at the thought of walking through her boyfriend’s parents’ home, naked in the dark. She walked to the bathroom, turned on the light and stared into the mirror hanging above the sink. Her makeup had smudged, making her green eyes look bruised and sick. She slid the large hairpins from her hair, allowing the heavy curls to fall on her neck.

With her eyes on the mirror, she pulled at the sleeve of the robe so she could admire her wrist corsage, amazingly uncrushed, considering. Purple orchids. She’d kept it on, even after everything else was on the floor. Torren had bought a matching boutonnière, which she’d earlier struggled to attach to his
tuxedo while her mother snapped pictures with a disposable Kodak. The camera flashed just as Chelsea slid the pin through the fabric. She had straightened his lapel and stepped away, having first noticed the cruel scent of his tuxedo combined with the heady smell of the orchid.

Chelsea left the bathroom and walked through the dark house, one hand trailing the wall, even though her eyes had readjusted to the dark and she knew the layout of the house. She stopped at the doorway to the kitchen, listening as Torren’s dog, Juanita, lapped water from her dish in the corner. The dog followed her as she crossed the cold linoleum and jogged down the stairs into the basement.

She flicked the switch at the foot of the stairs, blinded momentarily by the sudden light. A large rug covered most of the painted cement floor. The walls were paneled in a dark wood veneer, slightly warped with dampness. A set of drums sat in the corner, a single drumstick abandoned on the skin of the snare. The television and Torren’s Playstation had been stacked atop a card table.

Chelsea ignored the brown La-Z-Boy that was pocked with cigarette burns and smelled like stale beer and ass. The couch springs sagged low, making the cushions appear lopsided. She lay down, her head against the arm and her behind sinking into the crack between the seat pads. She rested the back of her hand on the carpet and Juanita nosed her palm, then licked the side of her face before Chelsea pushed her away. The dog whined, then settled on the floor.
She had lost her virginity there, on the couch. The experience had not been what she’d hoped it would be. Torren had been sick and in between kisses he would stop to blow his nose, then toss the Kleenex on the brass and glass coffee table next to the couch. She’d lain beneath him, listening to his sniffles and grunts as the dryer ran in the background and the damp funk of the couch invaded her nose. She’d been afraid that he would sneeze or worse, drip snot on her chest. He hadn’t, but when it was over and she was groping the floor for her underwear and he’d gotten up to blow his nose again, she wished they had waited at least until he was well.

Chelsea pulled the two sides of the robe together, rubbing the thick blue cotton between her fingers. Torren had surprised her that night, first with the corsage, which she had not been expecting, then with his confession as they stood in the middle of his darkened room. “I love you,” he’d said, and the moonlight that shone through his burgundy curtains made it look as if half his face was on fire. She had not been expecting it, but it made her happy.

She reached down to pat the dog’s head, and then put her hand back in her lap, running her fingers over the corsage, the soft petals and the knobby baby’s breath. “He loves me,” she whispered to the ceiling, as though her words could float through the two floors separating them.

There was a pipe leaking somewhere behind the couch, but the basement was mostly quiet. Juanita began to snore, sounding a little like Torren. Chelsea hummed a Black Eyed Peas song that had been playing at the dance right when
she and Torren walked in. She’d been floating then, buzzed from the joint they’d smoked in his car.

The gym had been decorated with black and white crepe streamers. Balloons had escaped their restrictive tethers and floated to the ceiling. The music was loud; Chelsea could feel the bass pounding through the soles of her silver heels. The D.J. was a tall black guy with thick dreads that hung down his back. He was bobbing his head so hard, his hair swung out like ropes in front of his face. She threaded her fingers through Torren’s, but he grimaced at the gym floor, already crowded with dancing bodies. She pulled away when her best friend bumped into her. Lisa pressed her mouth close to Chelsea’s ear and yelled something about Shatoria William’s slutty red dress and Chelsea had laughed so hard her stomach clenched into a hard knot and she put her arm across her abdomen.

She and Lisa toed the black sideline and laughed at their classmates until a new Beyoncé song blasted through the speakers and Lisa ran off to find her date, her blue dress disappeared into the throng of people. Chelsea stood on tiptoe in her pumps, trying to find her boyfriend within the crowd. There were a few other boys in tuxedos, but none as tall as Torren. He placed a hand on her shoulder and she’d turned and smiled, motioning towards the dance floor, but he’d wanted to get their pictures taken. They stood in front of a shaky white colonnade and posed, her back to his chest, a smile suspended on her face.

Afterwards, they sat on the bleachers and shared a Coke. When the principal,
Mr. Copeland stopped the music to announce the king and queen she felt some disappointment, but no surprise. Torren booed, shouting over the applause, “It should have been us.”

Soon after, he glanced at his phone and jerked his head towards the door. Lisa caught up with her on their way out, and Chelsea had been laughing again as she stepped outside. When she looked up, there was a large crowd on the yard near the parking lot where the floodlights didn't work. She and Torren had taken five steps in that direction, when he looped a heavy arm over her neck and turned her around.

“Let's go,” he said and she didn't object.

All she’d seen in the few seconds it took Torren to spin her around and wrap his smooth arm around her shoulders was a mob of dim bodies and the white sleeves of a letterman jacket.

“Hey, Jesilowski,” she said. “He came after all.”

Torren chuckled as he led her away, encased in the ripe smell of his tuxedo, the orchids, and the night air.

The morning of her senior homecoming, Chelsea lay in bed, staring up at the smoke detector on the ceiling above her. She’d been awake for some time, listening to the dark, the click of the refrigerator as it turned, the occasional car as it hummed past the window, then black faded into blue as the day began. Her mother’s slippers scuffed the carpet as she shuffled down the hall. The toilet
flushed and not long after, the smell of bacon slipped in under the door and
settled in the room like fog.

The green light of the smoke detector beamed like a laser into her skull.
There were two in her room, one over the bed, the other just inside the threshold,
a misplaced mistletoe. The alarms had always been there, steady and silent; their
unwavering green eyes had comforted her when she was younger.

Once, she’d stood on the bed, heels raised, with one hand on the wall,
pressing the test button on the alarm until its scream pierced the air in rhythmic
waves. Her mother had burst through the door, her eyes wide and wild. When
she asked Chelsea what she had been doing, exactly what the hell she had been
doing, Chelsea said she had only wanted to test the alarm, to see if it would
really work. But that was a lie. She’d wanted to test her mother.

The house she’d been born in, where her brother and father had died, had
been a duplex with another unit on the back side. The fire had started over there.
Electrical short maybe. A grease fire or a forgotten cigarette. Chelsea never knew.
The neighbor made it out. She’d been four.

The night of the fire was a blur, but she was sure that she’d been wearing
a Peanuts nightgown with images of Snoopy and Woodstock dotted all over.
She’d smelled smoke, but also her father’s sour breath as he lifted her from the
bed. She wrapped her arms around his neck, her thighs around his waist. His
heartbeat pounded in his chest, vibrating against her knee as it pressed into his
stomach. The smoke was too thick to see his face, inches away. He’d handed her
to her mother, who had grabbed Chelsea tightly, almost crushing her as she ran down the stairs. The metal clip of her mother’s hospital badge had pinched Chelsea’s skin. Then they were outside, gulping fresh air and squinting as the lights of the fire truck whirred, red, red, yellow against the black sky.

That was the memory.

It had really been her mother who had scooped her out of bed and carried her from the house. She hadn’t been working at the hospital, hadn’t even started nursing school yet. Her father had been in the next room, her brother’s bedroom. They had not made it outside to stand in the dew soaked lawn and watch the house burn and smolder, sending plumes of smoke to curl against the golds and reds of the rising sun.

Sometimes Chelsea dreamt that she was her mother that night. Blindly snatching away blankets in search of a child’s chubby leg, stumbling down stairs she knew but couldn’t see. She stood in the yard, clutching her young daughter to her chest and waiting for her husband to come down, come out of the burning house with their son. When Chelsea woke up safe in her bed and opened her eyes to a new day, she felt cheated.

That was the dream that woke her early that morning. Again, she was out in the yard with a little girl balanced on her hip, staring at the house as smoke escaped from the windows, but then the dream had turned and she was sitting at her desk in pre-calc. Mrs. Padilla wore a giant silver crown and flung her arms out, sprinkling fairy dust on the students, but when she threw the shimmering
powder on Chelsea, it was gritty and bitter and that’s when she had jerked awake, rubbing at her eyes.

“Chels.” Her mother’s voice sounded muffled through the door.

“Breakfast.”

“Yes,” she said. She got up, unplugged her cell phone from the charger and slipped it into the pocket of her pajama pants. She left her bedroom and walked down the hall. There was only one smoke alarm in the hallway, but two in the kitchen, one over the stove, the other directly over the round bistro table.

Her mother only made breakfast on Saturdays. Bacon, eggs and home fries, which Chelsea knew would be overcooked until they were translucent oil-filled husks on a greasy paper towel.

Her mother sat in the chair nearest the window that faced the driveway. Her plate was piled high with eggs and potatoes all jumbled together and drowning in ketchup.

“Morning, girl,” she crunched into a piece of bacon and motioned to the stove. “Hurry up, eggs getting cold.”

Chelsea got a carton of Tropicana from the refrigerator. “I’m not hungry.” She grabbed a plastic cup from the dish rack and filled it with juice.

Her mother shrugged, the rest of the bacon disappeared in her mouth.

“Okay,” she said when she’d swallowed. “What time do we pick up Lisa?”
“Mom,” Chelsea said, placing her cup on the counter. “You don’t have to come. I could drive.” She felt her mother’s eyes on her back as she refolded the cardboard spout.

“Chelsea, I switched shifts so I could be here while you get ready.”

“Oh,” she said, putting the orange juice back in the refrigerator. “Well, I didn’t know that you were off today.”

“I’m not off. I have to work eleven to seven, and probably stay over afterwards. But at least I’ll get to take some pictures.”

Chelsea felt that she was expected to say thank you, but she didn’t. She sat at the table and nibbled a piece of bacon.

“I won’t be here, but you better be home at midnight. I’m going to call.”

“Yeah,” Chelsea said, studying the chewy band of fat marbling the meat. “I’ll be here. We were just gonna go to dinner afterwards. Red Lobster or something.”

“Chels.” Her mother waited until she’d lifted her head before she spoke. “I’m going to call.” She turned the fork to the side and scraped the last bits of food from her plate.

“Okay, Mom. Call.” She rolled her eyes. “Knock yourself out.”

“I will,” her mother said.

She wouldn’t. She’d get busy and forget.
The fork clinked against the plate as her mother stood and walked to the sink. Chelsea watched as she tucked her hair behind her ear with a chapped hand. “Mom, why don’t you get your nails done too?”

Her mother held her hands up in the air and spread her thin fingers apart. The nails were varying lengths, some jagged and broken. “You think?”

“Yeah. You don’t have to get acrylic.”

Her mother made a face, scrunching her wide hazel eyes into slits. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Well, I’m going to get dressed. I told Lisa ten.” Chelsea stood and pushed her chair under the table. She left the kitchen and went to the bathroom down the hall. It was hardly big enough for a toilet, sink and shower, but her mother had made sure there was a smoke detector affixed to the ceiling, looming over the rug that contoured the toilet.

Her mother changed the batteries in the alarms every three months. She never nagged Chelsea to help her, just dragged a stool from room to room, balancing herself on the narrow step before untwisting each one away from the ceiling and prying the old battery out before replacing it with a new one.

As a young girl, Chelsea would lie on the floor and catch the batteries her mother tossed to the floor. She used them as dominoes and stacked them up into pyramids. She would take the 9-volts and place them against her tongue, one by one, surprised each time by the sting of electricity.
When she was 15, she’d searched the *Beacon Journal* archives for an article about the fire that had killed her father and brother. She knew what her mother had said, and she had her own vague memories, but she’d wanted to know exactly what had happened. A staff writer had composed 119 words about the incident. The last line read, “Fire investigators are still on site trying to determine the cause of the fire.”

On site. Where her father and brother had been buried under silver ash.

The newspaper article couldn’t answer the questions she had anyway; they were for her mother. How did she start over? Chelsea had often pondered this, as if it were an equation to be solved. What had she done the next day? The day after? Why hadn’t her father come down? She imagined that they had been in bed together, and then ran to their children’s bedrooms…he could only have been steps behind her mother. What had happened?

There was a picture of the house in the paper. She hadn’t recognized the charred porch beams, the muddy lawn. The turtle sandbox out front, overturned.

Her father had worked at the Little Tikes factory, in Hudson. After the toys came off the line, he shaved the excess plastic; curled ribbons fell to the floor as his hands worked and turned, following the rigid seams. He would have been like one of Santa’s elves.

Sometimes, Chelsea could almost picture him. She knew his smell, like a new shower curtain unfolded. She thought he had a beard. She was sure of it. But her mother said he hadn’t.
Her brother was a smear of a memory. She only remembered him safe inside her mother, when she would rest her head on her mother’s stiff skin and feel his infant extremities knocking against her skull. His face was blank and silent. Vincent Turner Jr. He hadn’t even had his own name.

She showered and dressed in jeans and a tee shirt. Her mother waited in the living room and Chelsea was surprised to see that she wasn’t in scrubs or pajamas. She wore jeans and a white shirt that read Nurses are Awesome! Chelsea frowned at the shirt, at the “o” in Awesome! that was shaped like a heart, but she didn’t say anything.

On the drive to Lisa’s, she offered her mother a cube of bubblegum. She slid her sunglasses on and rolled the window down to let the chilled air blow on her face. It had rained the entire week and the strong winds had relieved the trees of their leaves. They scattered the sidewalks and danced in the streets, swirling after cars. Chelsea leaned back against the seat and popped her headphones in her ears, but didn’t turn her iPod on. She could hear her mother, singing along with the radio, but pretended she couldn’t. She sat up when her mother tapped her leg.

“Cree or Kickapoo? I get mixed up over here. All these Indian names.”

“Kickapoo,” Chelsea said. She relaxed again and closed her eyes, waiting until her mother stopped the car to open them.

Lisa’s house sat far back from the street. A white two-story with red shutters. Her last name, Sullivan, was painted in white letters on the mailbox.
She was waiting on the porch when they pulled up and she ran towards the car, her brown hair flying out behind her like a cape. “Hey,” she said, sliding in the car. “Hi, Mrs. Turner.”

Her mother drove to the mall and parked, as she usually did, on the fringes of the lot.

“Good exercise,” she said.

Chelsea and Lisa walked towards the building together, leaving her mother behind. Inside the mall, Lisa wanted Chelsea to get a pair of sequined purple heels to match her dress.

“Don’t they almost look like shoes from The Wizard of Oz?” she said, balancing the shoe on her palm. “Like you could click your heels and get a wish?”

Chelsea didn’t remember the movie that way. Dorothy had fallen from the sky and crushed the witch and when they’d stolen her shoes, her stockinged feet had curled up, trying to join her body under the house. She chose a pair of silver pumps instead and she and Lisa walked ahead to the nail shop while her mother paid for the shoes.

The Asian ladies wore surgical masks while they worked. Chelsea wondered if it helped filter the rank smell permeating the store.

“What color do you think, Chels?” Her mother pointed at the colored nail polish bottles on display. “Red?”
Chelsea shrugged and spoke over the head of the woman filing her nails.

“If that’s what you want.”

“I used to get my nails done all the time when I was your age,” she said.

“Outrageous colors, neon green and orange. Don’t know what I was thinking. And then one day I came in here and my stomach flipped. The smell, it’s nauseating. Even now, I don’t know how they do it.” She nodded towards the woman in front of her, who raised her head slightly. “Found out I was pregnant a few weeks later.”

Chelsea didn’t respond to that, but plucked a bottle of purple polish from the rack on the table.

“What are your plans for college, Lisa?”

Lisa was having tiny hearts airbrushed on her fake nails. “I want to go to school in New York. I had my heart set on Columbia, but it’s too expensive. And I don’t think I got the grades for it anyway.”

“I’ve been telling Chelsea about Akron U,” her mother said. “I want to do a campus tour, it’s been a while since I was there. It’s different anyway for somebody just out of high school.”

Lisa nodded, but then glanced at Chelsea.

Her mother had been working in a mention of The University of Akron every opportunity she could since the last few weeks of summer. Chelsea hadn’t told her that she had already started sending out college applications. She paid the fees with money she’d saved from her summer job at Dairy Queen. Chelsea
didn’t know what she wanted to go to school for, but she knew that after graduation, she was leaving.

Her mother stopped by a Sheetz gas station after they left the mall and Chelsea and Lisa waited in the car while she went inside to pay for the gas. A maroon Honda pulled up to the pump in front of them. Chelsea recognized the license plate and the cracked bumper, secured with bungee cord. Jesilowski, Torren’s best friend, got out of the car and stood next to it. Chelsea shuddered, watching as he unscrewed his gas cap. Jesilowski was tall and thin, with brown hair and black eyes. His mouth was a badly repaired harelip over a lush bottom lip.

Chelsea had been going to school with Nick Jesilowski since the third grade. He was weird, but no more so than other boys. Pulling long strings of snot out of his nose and chasing girls with it on the tip of his finger before popping it in his mouth. Snapping bra straps in fifth grade. She only became fully aware of him in middle school.

Mr. Steinfeld was no nonsense about his classroom. He taught algebra as if it were common sense. There were assigned seats in his class and Chelsea sat in the second row to the back. She didn’t mind, because Mr. Steinfeld had a habit of only calling on people in the first three rows. Sometimes he would have equations already on the board before class started, and as students trudged into the room, he would assign random people a spot at the board.
One afternoon, right before winter break, the room had been quiet. They were having a quiz. Mr. Steinfeld was walking the aisles; placing test sheets face down on desks. Jesilowski’s desk, two rows ahead, squeaked against the floor as he stood up.

“I got something to show the class,” he said and lifted his book bag from the floor. He unzipped the bag and pulled something out of it. The boy sitting at the desk in front of Chelsea’s had flinched, pushing the back of his chair into hers and she’d had to sit up to see. A severed deer head sat on Jesilowski’s desk, right on top of his test sheet. Jesilowski smiled as if he’d pulled a rabbit out of a hat. The deer’s dark eyes had been open.

The classroom was stone silent for what seemed like forever before students jumped from their seats. Somebody screamed; somebody in the front row threw up. Mr. Steinfeld was frozen, one hand holding the stack of papers, the other still reaching for a desk. Then Leticia Simmons, from the back of the room, called out over all the noise. “Boy, you nasty as hell,” she said.

After that, he was Jesilowski, as if people had forgotten his first name.

Chelsea hadn’t even known that Torren knew him until one day she’d gone over Torren’s house and he was there, sitting on the basement couch, his bony knees spread wide as he leaned over, fingers moving rapidly on the buttons of a game controller.

“That kid’s weird,” Lisa said.
Although Chelsea knew Lisa would have laughed at the story, she chose not to tell it.

Lisa snapped her flip phone closed; the sound of the plastic smacking against itself was like applause. “And ugly too. Wonder if he’s going tonight.”

“I don’t know,” Chelsea shrugged and her eyes followed her mother as she walked in front of the car. She looked as if she was floating, her body bisected by the hood. The gas fumes infiltrated the car; the pump was loud and ticked as it filled the tank. Lisa kept snapping her phone open and closed.

Jesilowski opened his door and ducked into the car. His arm hung out of the window, hand patting the door to a rhythm as he pulled off. Chelsea wondered what he was listening to.

“When are you gonna talk to your mom about college?” The phone clapped again.

“Not tonight,” Chelsea said, watching the maroon car disappear into traffic.

On the drive back to her house, Lisa talked about her Coastal Scents pallet with 88 different eyeshadow colors, but no really good blues and how she’d have to beg her mother to stop by Macy’s so she could get something from the M.A.C. counter. Chelsea checked the glossy polish on her nails and hummed, pretending she was paying attention.

They dropped Lisa off at her house and Chelsea’s mother stopped by Kentucky Fried Chicken on the way home. They ate in the living room, and then
Chelsea took another shower and dressed in her room. She’d just sat down at her desk and opened her make-up case when her mother poked her head in the room.

“Can I help you with your makeup?”

“You know how to do a smoky eye?” Chelsea brushed her thumb over the bristles of an eyeshadow brush.

“A what?”

Chelsea shook her head and leaned over her mirror. “It’s okay, I got it.”

She wanted her mother to leave, go back to the living room and watch television, but she came in and sat on the bed.

“Think Torren’s going to get that tuxedo?” she asked.

“He said he was.” She closed one eye and worked the brush over her lid.

“I wonder why he would go through all the trouble.”

Chelsea looked beyond her reflection at her mother slouched on her bed.

“I don’t know. I don’t think he has a suit. Probably cheaper to rent than to buy one.” She sighed and put the brush down. “Mom, I can’t concentrate with you in here. My eyes will be all uneven.” Chelsea locked her bedroom door after her mother left.

Torren was late, and her mother kept peeking through the blinds to see if he was coming down the street. He came to the front door with her wrist corsage in a plastic container. When Chelsea let him in, he said, “This fucking suit smells.”
She couldn’t smell anything, but was aware of the whirling of her stomach under the purple band of taffeta. She would have left with him then, stepped out of the front door and shut it quietly behind her, but her mother had heard him knock.

“Look at you, you clean up really well.” She waved him inside and grabbed her camera. Her mother used almost the entire roll of film, then asked Torren to take a picture of her and Chelsea. She stood in front of the fireplace next to her mother. Even in her heels, she wasn’t near her mother’s height. Standing there, Chelsea knew she would hate the photo, her mother in the Nurses are Awesome! shirt, her long red nails flat against her jeans as she posed.

He opened the door of his white Blazer for her. “You look awesome,” he said.

She fingered his black bow tie. “So do you.”

When they got to the school, Torren parked near the back of the lot. He flipped open the lid of a tin of Altoids and took out a joint. He flicked his lighter, an engraved Zippo he’d stolen from his stepfather.

“Your mom’s home?” Chelsea asked.

He exhaled and shook his head, “Step-dad had to do a long haul to St. Louis. She went with him.”

“Well, guess what.” Chelsea took the joint from his fingers. “My mom switched shifts, she’s working tonight. So I don’t have to be home until late.”

“Yeah?”
“Yup.”

“So what’s that mean?”

“You know what it means.” She inhaled and held the smoke in her lungs, then relaxed and watched the other students go into the school.

Marijuana hit her like a wave and made her feel as if she was riding an electric current. Torren had cut the engine off, but the radio was still on, playing low and Chelsea felt like they were sitting on the music. She scooted across the bench seat and leaned against Torren’s side. They passed the joint back and forth until it burned his hand and he flicked it out the window.

He walked around the car to open the door for her, and as she swung her legs to the side, she thought about the ground, still damp from the rain and she hoped her shoes wouldn’t be ruined by the time they got to the door of the gym.
CHAPTER II

Heather

The scent of Chelsea’s perfume lingered in the bathroom. Fresh and fruity, in a red glass apple that resembled a small paperweight perched on the edge of the sink. It was heavier than I expected and I held it for a moment, warming the glass with my palm, wondering about the price per ounce. A gift from her boyfriend—no occasion that I knew of. I moved it to a safe corner of the counter so it wouldn’t fall and crack against the tile floor. Chelsea often left her things out. She’s careless that way, always has been.

I ran water over my wrists and pressed fingers to my face. Cool water on my puffy eyes, my tired crow’s feet. In the mirror, the red nails were garish against my skin. My scrubs were a plain blue, what the catalog describes as Ceil. I thought the color made my eyes stand out. But made my face look tired. Maybe I should get a cucumber one of these days. Place thin slices on my lids like they said in the magazines. I rubbed a hand over my neck, down into the V of my top. Another twelve-hour shift. I hated that I couldn’t be home when she got back.

A tube of Avon mascara was hidden behind Chelsea’s face wash and lotion. An earring was there too, a tiny purple stud rocked back and forth on the Formica. She’d worn silver chains to match her shoes and had probably
abandoned the studs after trying them on. I patted the counter behind the
toiletries, searching for the mate. Knelt and lifted the rug in front of the sink, then
the contoured one that surrounded the toilet. It was there, the post wedged
between two tiles. I pried it from the floor and dropped both in my palm.

“Come on, Chels.”

I took the earrings and the perfume to her room, pressed on the door to
open it. Pale yellow paint under posters torn from magazines. Lady Gaga in her
wild costumes right by the light switch, an old picture of Johnny Depp as a pirate
pinned up over her desk. No more Minnie Mouse rug at the foot of her bed.
She’d hidden her stuffed animals in the closet.

Clothes huddled in the corners of the room. Her sheets and pillows were
jumbled together in a thick pile. She had left her desk light on and I put her
things there, next to her makeup brushes. Bottles of fingernail polish sat in a line,
a row of squat men dressed in rainbowed coats and top hats.

“I don’t think I can do it.”

“Yes, you can.”

“No.”

“Mrs. Byrd, the chair is right here, only two steps away,” I said, pointing
to the small wood-trimmed chair next to the window. I touched the metal
walker, pulling it closer to the hospital bed. “The walker is right here. I’m right
here. I won’t let you fall.”
“No. My leg hurts too much.” Mrs. Byrd crossed her arms over her chest, the hospital gown drowning her small frame. “You know it’s only been a couple of days. That’s what’s wrong with hospitals today. You don’t give people enough time to recover before pushing them out the door. I already told you, I’m not ready to get up. I’m in pain.” She tucked a stray curl of white hair behind her ear with a trembling hand.

“Now, Mrs. Byrd.” I took a deep breath and made an effort to soften my voice. “Nobody is trying to push you out of here. But you have to sit in this chair for at least an hour. With hip fractures you have to keep that blood circulating. Movement helps lessen the risk of pneumonia or blood cl—”

“I know,” she interrupted me. “I can read the post-operative instructions. You know I used to be an English teacher.”

“Then you know how important this is.”

She glared at me. Her lips formed a circle and she forced the word out. “No.”

“Okay, Mrs. Byrd,” I said, shifting my weight from one shoe to the other. The pout on her thin lips reminded me of how Chelsea used to act when she was younger and didn’t get something she wanted. “I’m not trying to upset you. Why don’t we give those pain meds more time to kick in and I’ll come back a little later?”

She turned her head towards the television mounted on the wall.
I picked up her chart from the overbed table and held it under my arm.

“But you have to get up. Today.”

She ignored me and silently pushed the buttons on the remote in her lap, finally stopping at a sitcom.

I sighed and stepped in front of the bed, blocking her view of the screen.

“How’s that?”

“That will be fine.”

As a patient, she was a handful, but something about Mrs. Byrd put me at ease; I didn’t know why. There was a familiarity about her mannerisms, but I couldn’t place it. I shrugged and left the room, walking towards the nurses’ station. In ten years, there had been hundreds of Mrs. Byrds, no surprise she seemed familiar.

I didn’t see Lexi until I stopped in front of the raised counter. She slouched in a swivel chair, her Nikes resting on top of a patient chart on the counter. Her head was down and she toyed with the cell phone in her lap. Her scrubs were a ridiculous orange, with Looney Tunes characters in a random pattern. I had no idea how she even made it into nursing school. Standards surely had changed since I was in school.

“Good evening,” I said.

She jumped in the chair and slid her feet from the counter. “Oh, hey. I was just checking my Facebook while you…”
Not even sense enough to lie. I dropped Mrs. Byrd’s chart on the counter next to her, noting her wince as it slammed against the laminate. “Here. Type up the notes for this patient. Do you remember how to do that?”

“Yeah.” She flipped the phone over in her hand. “Yes, sure I do.”

“Good.” I sat on the other side of the circular nurses’ station and turned on the computer monitor. “When you finish there, you can restock the supplies in 542A.”

I grabbed the keyboard and attempted to type my password, but the acrylic nails kept hitting the wrong keys. My fingers felt heavy and smelled like embalming fluid. I shouldn’t have let Chelsea talk me into getting my nails done, but I’d wanted to do something with her—other than buy her dress and take pictures of her and Torren. Silly, once I thought about it, and I got the feeling she hadn’t really wanted me to shop with her and Lisa; she only humored me because she knew if I tagged along, I’d pay.

She might not have been thinking that at all. With Chelsea it’s hard to tell.

I should have thought about how many times I wash my hands in one shift; the red polish would be chipped and worn within a week.

But it had been nice to spend the afternoon with her, and she and Torren looked good standing in front of the fireplace. I checked the time on the computer screen. They should have already left homecoming by then, on their way to dinner. I thought about calling her cell phone, but decided to wait until after curfew. Let her enjoy herself.
Mrs. Byrd rolled her eyes when I reentered her room. “Not you again?”

“Yes,” I said, smiling. “It’s me again. Are you ready?”

“I suppose so. It’s not likely that you’ll leave me alone until I do…and I think the pain medication has taken hold.”

She pronounced “hold” with a “t” at the end, it came out “holt,” and I paused mid-step. Someone I knew used to say it like that.

Mrs. Byrd had three pins and a metal rod attached to her bone and she would probably never walk again without a limp. Her upper thigh was still bruised from the surgery, flashes of blue and green showed under the short gown.

I helped her swing her legs off the side of the bed and she gripped my waist with one arm. She ignored the walker and leaned against me, favoring her fractured leg, and I eased her into the chair. She’d been holding her breath and finally let it out in a big sigh.

She watched as I changed her bed sheets. “You okay, Mrs. Byrd?”

“I’m fine,” she said.

I glanced over my shoulder and she’d tipped her head back, exposing a veined patch of skin, dry and delicate, between the shoulder and chin. She tucked another curl behind her ear and with that movement; I was sure of who she reminded me of.

Miss Ellen.
“Well, I’m sitting here. Don’t need you babysitting me. And you’re blocking the TV. Wheel is on.”

“Excuse me.” I had been staring at her, holding the white sheet taut between my hands. “I’ll be back in an hour, Mrs. Byrd. You have the call button; just press that if you need me.”

My hands shook when I closed the door. I should have gone back to the nurse’s station, but instead I headed for the small supply closet across from Mrs. Byrd’s room.

Folded hospital gowns, sheets and towels were stacked on shelves, along with plastic bedpans and boxes of disposable exam gloves. I closed the door and turned off the light, resting my head on a stack of clean white towels.

It used to happen more often. Reminders of my life before. But not in a long while. The memory was heady, rising from the floor like poisonous vapor.

Vinny had been twenty-two days old. He’d been born in the middle of a heat wave and it had remained miserably hot the three weeks since we’d been home. The ground smoldered under our feet. The kids and I stayed inside mostly. I had all the windows open, hoping for a breeze to blow through and cool us down. But it was sticky and the baby’s face had broken out in tiny red pimples from where he’d been sweating. I didn’t even bother putting clothes on him, just lay him flat on the couch in his diaper. Small hands clutched together as if he were praying.
Chelsea had been begging for a popsicle since breakfast. She sat between my legs while I combed through her hair. I overlapped the silky strands into two dark braids, one on each side of her head.

“Mama,” she said, watching Big Bird. “Please get me a popsicle.”

We only had the one car, a green Reliant with rust-pocked doors and no air-conditioning. I considered the hassle of loading them in the car and driving to the nearest store. Looked down at Vinny who was finally drifting into a nap.

“Maybe the ice cream truck will come,” I said.

“I don’t hear it,” Chelsea said, crossing her arms over her small chest.

“Does Miss Ellen has some?”

“Have some. And I don’t know. We can go over and ask.”

She wouldn’t stop asking until she got her way. I moved the baby into his car seat and walked Chelsea down the driveway and up the back stairs that led to the apartment in back of ours.

Her house reeked of old people when we first walked in, but once we got settled inside, the smell disappeared. Her apartment was opposite of mine. Everything on the wrong side, the stove and fridge lined up on the left instead of the right, the bathroom to the right of the living room instead of the left. I always felt confused when I went back home.

Both houses had narrow staircases; doors trimmed in dark wood and cheap, thin carpet. The front rooms were long and narrow, with no really good
place to set the television. A toilet and sink at the top of the stair, bathtub downstairs. Three bedrooms, with the largest one in the back corner.

She was alone that afternoon, watching soaps on the small black and white on the kitchen table. There was a fan in front of the window, a bowl of ice on the sill. One of the kind with metal blades that kids could slice their fingers on. I couldn’t have one of those in my house.

Even though she was probably in her seventies, Miss Ellen had been watching kids for years, and had babysat Chelsea for me a few times back when I was working. Only four or five at a time; she swore they kept her young. I’d watched her love on those kids, kissing foreheads and feet, feeding them, rocking them. Of course she had popsicles.

She broke a green one in half and leaned over to give it to Chelsea. “Now what you say?”

My daughter took the popsicle from her mouth and said, “I’m happy you has one.”

“Chelsea, you say thank you,” I said.

But Miss Ellen was laughing, her head back to expose a smooth brown throat vibrating a clear melody into the air. She pointed Chelsea towards the toy chest in the living room, and sat down at the table. “That girl is something else.”

I’d wanted to ask her about something that had been bothering me. When we brought Vinny home, it was as if Chelsea was somebody else’s child. She was foreign to me. Bigger than she had been just a few days before. A little girl with
a swollen head and chunky body. When she crawled into my lap to give me a kiss, I stared at her, feeling her weight on my knee. I couldn’t lift her up anymore, only the baby.

Miss Ellen nodded as if she understood. “That’s just learning how to divide yourself between the two. That’s all that is.” She asked about my son. His height and weight. His head.

“You have to shape it,” she said, cupping her hands together as if she held a tiny globe. “Gently.” Her eyes drifted towards _The Young & the Restless_. “Who’s staying with the baby? Vince off today?”

“No, he’s working. The baby is napping.”

She glared at me. “Girl, don’t leave that baby alone like that. Don’t you know how dangerous that is?” She tucked wiry hairs behind her ears with a wrinkled finger.

“He’s fine,” I said, but my face was burning. “I put him in his car seat.”

“Y’all young mothers, I swear.” She turned the television dial with a sharp twist of her wrist.

“He’s fine,” I said again.

“Something happen to those kids, you’ll never forgive yourself.” She called Chelsea from the living room. “And I’d never forgive myself if I didn’t tell you.”
Vince worked second shift, but sometimes stayed over. The kids and I waited in the car for fifteen sweltering minutes. He complained from the time his butt hit the seat until Route 8 merged into 77. The boss, the co-workers, the weather. The plant was so hot inside, the cheese on his ham sandwiches had melted before he got to take his break. His work shoes were sticky on the floor. The thick plastic of the toys was more pliable in the heat, but it was damned hard to work with sweat dripping on his work gloves and burning his eyes.

I went through the drive-thru so he could get a beer. Vinny started getting fussy. His back was probably damp with sweat.

“IT’s so damn hot, too hot for the baby,” Vince said, setting the six-pack between his legs.

“So damn hot,” Chelsea said from the back seat.

I’d told Vince to stop cussing in front of her, but she was old enough to know better. She did it to make him laugh. She had him all twisted around her finger.

He turned in his seat and shook his head at her, but he was smiling as if it were an inside joke between the two of them. When we first started dating, I called him my comedian. I thought that was all I needed at the time—somebody to make me laugh. After the baby, it just got on my nerves. I’d asked Miss Ellen about that too.

“Hormones,” she’d said. “That’ll pass too.”
After dinner, I kept the kids in the living room while Vince made popcorn on the stove. I was trying to feed Vinny. I had trouble breastfeeding, not like with Chelsea, who’d taken to it easy. The baby wouldn’t latch on, then wouldn’t stay latched on, and I was frustrated with it, with his tiny mouth. Vince said, “Just give him a bottle, Heather” as if that was any type of fix. I could hear him in the kitchen, moving around in his bare feet, the pan scraping the electric coils.

Chelsea was just learning how to catch kernels in her mouth. Vince tossed them up in the air and she opened her mouth like a gulping fish, trying to get one to fall on her tongue.

She was normal then, with Vince. My little girl that looked more like her daddy than she did me.

I lifted the baby to burp him, but Vince held his arms out to take him. He sat on the edge of the sofa and held the baby in the crook of his arm. I couldn’t remember him being so awkward with Chelsea. He’d wanted a boy. Wanted a junior. I liked to see him with our son over his shoulder, rubbing his back patiently, waiting for the burp, the inevitable spit up. Staring at the blue veins running under the baby’s new skin like a map of possibility.

I put the baby in his room, in the crib that was too big for his tiny body. It was Vince’s turn to read to Chelsea and I could hear them from our room, his voice thick and deep and her muffled laughter. When he came in our room, he jumped on the mattress. I giggled in the darkness and waited until he settled on
his side, so I could wind my arm around his waist, the ribbing of his t-shirt rubbing my forearm.

Vinny saved us. I heard his cry before I smelled the smoke. I sat up, struggling to breathe, as if Vince had his arm over my mouth. The mattress moved as Vince jumped out of bed and we bumped into each other, knocking knees and arms before stumbling down the hallway in opposite directions. I found myself in Chelsea’s room, tossing covers to the floor, trying to find her in the dark. I felt a foot, an ankle, and she cried out when I yanked her towards me, snatched her up and carried her on my hip.

I couldn’t see, could only feel my way towards the stairs. I called for Vince, but could only hear sirens. A cloud of smoke rose and met me halfway down the stairs. Chelsea was sweating, her cheeks were slick when I covered her mouth. I held my breath against the heat and ran down the steps. The front door was right off the stairs, but I tripped over Vince’s work shoes and my shoulder slammed into the wall.

My fingers groped for the knob and I jerked the door open, almost fell onto the porch. It was technicolor outside. Fire truck lights and neighbors gawking at the house. Somebody put their hands on my shoulders. Somebody tried to take my daughter from my arms, but I wouldn’t let her go.

I thought Vince was with the crowd of people, our son in his arms. I thought he was looking for us like I was looking for him. I found Miss Ellen on
the other side of the street, standing on the curb in her bathrobe and houseshoes, pink rollers under a scarf. Looking as if she’d come outside to get her paper.

She put her hands on Chelsea’s cheeks, then on mine. “Thank God you’re alright.” Her voice sounded as if it were coming from under water.

“Where’s Vince?” I asked. “Have you seen him?”

Her mouth formed a circle before she forced the word out into the thick air. “No.”

I pressed Chelsea’s head down on my shoulder and ran to the fire truck.

“My husband,” I said, touching one of the firemen’s arms. “My husband and son are still in the house. You have to get them.”

“Ma’am,” he said, blinking at me. “We can’t go inside, the house is totally involved.”

Somebody caught me before I fell. Somebody did take Chelsea then. They put us in a police car and the house doubled in the reflection of the window. Chelsea crawled into my lap and watched.

There were smudges on her face, like black rouge. As if she were a pageant baby. Little Miss Ash.

After the fire, I smelled smoke for months. In my hair, no matter how many times I washed it. In the fabric of the clothes donated from the Red Cross. Seeping from Chelsea’s pores like sweat – streaming from her mouth when she called for me. It was like smelling my soul sear away from my body.
Chelsea drew pictures. With orange and red Crayolas worn down to the nub. It was a good way to let it out. A good way to deal. We colored together, brilliant flames, sometimes whole pages of fire. Entire afternoons, pages and pages. Until one day she drew a unicorn with a long pink mane and a purple horn drilling into the air. I thought she’d worked it out, with a box of colored wax and some manila paper.

They said it was electrical. Consumptive. They said the fire had burned away the floor under the baby’s room and when Vince stepped inside, it collapsed and they both fell. That’s what they said. It’s easier to think of them dropping into blackness than to imagine Vince screaming for me. To imagine the baby’s open mouth still crying.

The sky was a thatched blue, the same color as my scrubs. I didn’t remember the drive home. My eyes were gritty with exhaustion and I closed them for a moment, feeling the burn under my lids.

I got out of the car and looked up at the shadow passing overhead. The Goodyear blimp floated by, so low I could almost see into the windows of the gondola. I had never seen the blimp so close before, so close. It coasted overhead, the gray underbelly exposed. Who was in there, looking down at me?

I walked to Chelsea’s bedroom instead of my own. The fall morning sun strained through the curtains, bringing muted light into the room. The desk light was still on and I turned it off. Her homecoming dress hung over the edge of the
closet door. The silver shoes were heaped against themselves in the middle of the floor. She faced the window, burrowed under the blanket. Her leftover curls loose and wild on her pillow.

Chelsea had wanted to put her unicorn picture on the fridge, tack it up with alphabet magnets, but I put it away in a box in the closet. She’d drawn black lines all over all over all over—only the purple horn unmarked and pointing towards the sky.

I lay down on the edge of the bed. Let my tiredness sink into the mattress. She still smelled a little like that red apple perfume. When she woke up, I would ask her about the dance. Was it magical? Was it what she hoped it would be?
CHAPTER III

Jesilowski

The smoke pit. An alcove of bad design, a brick haven for those that want to see and not be seen. I’m not sure why it’s at the far end of the school lot. That seems like it would have been a stupid idea even back when kids could be trusted. First and foremost, it is a place where people smoke. Cigarettes before school, other things after.

Drug deals – not that they don’t happen inside the school. Skin sliding against skin, making the transaction into a handshake, a greeting. I heard one year somebody sold tickets and kids stood on the sides, watching some poor guy get pummeled. But they said it was a fair fight, one on one. Somebody told me cheerleaders used to practice their routines here. I have a hard time picturing that.

There’s been talk for years of paving it over. Talk. Until then, it’s the perfect place to party. It is almost like a church potluck. A BYOB. Bring your own bottle. Your own blunt. The alcohol is easy to get at the corner store near my
house. The man doesn’t see beyond the folded bill in my hand. Once they know you, they’ll sell you anything.

**Loitering** - Students are not to loiter on the way to or from school or during school hours. Students are not to loiter on the street, in neighborhoods, in driveway, in yards, or in the school building. Students who fail to follow directions will be disciplined accordingly.

We met down the street and walked. T.J. leading the way, as usual. The rest following behind. Some of them I know from school, from T.J. Some I don’t. Instead of suits, we are in our usual uniforms. Jeans and Timbs and Nikes. Two or three in dark hoodies. Some in white tees and wife-beaters, flexing biceps against the starchy breeze. My varsity jacket is heavy on my shoulders as if the letters of my last name are weights curved across my back.

We damn and fuck everything. Parents. School. Life. Pass amber bottles hand to hand to hand. I walk a little ways off into the grass. Alone. The smell of yeast on the clouds. Liquor sloshes in my insides and I pinch a bottle between my fingers. The sky is a flat gray with no sun and I feel small. A speck that could be blown away on a gust of wind.
Kids pull into the student lot. A few in limos, but most are everyday cars. Neons and Corollas with missing hubcaps and broken side mirrors. Girls dressed in every shade, boys suited in black or brown. Everybody on their way inside the school like obedient little lambs. Music pours from the open doors, but I can’t make out the song. I just hear the beat, pulsating in the cave of the gym. Welcome.

The curtain is closing on the sun, and the wind lifts my hair for a moment before spinning away. Leaves race across the grass towards the gym as if they also want to go inside. I’m glad for my jacket. I’m glad for the heat in the bottle.

More headlights circle the parking lot. Torren’s Blazer is near the back and I watch he and Chelsea inside. He walks around to her side and opens the door as if he’s a real gentleman. She steps down, smiling in his face. I think I can hear the tap of her heels on the concrete. It’s like my pulse jumping under my collar. I imagine the goosebumps rising across the skin of her back. Her belly is a down pillow. She sucks it in when she walks. Flattens her breath, presses it down into her soles.

When I think of Chelsea, I see this: her mouth. Bowed and glossy with Lipsmacker Strawberry. Torren jokes that she has a mouth perfect for giving
head, but I don’t want to think of her that way, on her knees, locked between Torren’s thighs.

Torren has one arm around her waist and his steps, sure and steady, pull her along. He tilts his head to the side, listening. Nodding now. Laughing as they pause outside the doors. He holds it open and ushers her inside, one hand riding her hip.

T.J. brings a girl into the circle. I don’t know her. He has an arm around her neck like a collar and she steps light and slow, scuffing her feet against the ground. Thin brown arms folded into her sides. Her smile is a painful stretch. Playing as if she’s comfortable and wants to be there with him instead of inside. Waiting for time to go. I’ve done that. Hidden inside myself.

--You look like you been kissing a lawnmower.

First grade. I ran all the way home. My mother’s face blurry through tears, snot on my cleft.

--Everyone has a handicap, she says. Some people are blind. Some are deaf. Would you rather be blind? Deaf?

She tickles my sides and her hair falls like a brown net over my face.

Could always be worse.

The scar is almost as old as I am. Cleft. A permanent embarrassment. Not like pissing yourself in third grade. Kids eventually forget that shit. The stench fades and they forgive. My face is a fresh shock every time, every new year. Still got that mouth, huh? Damn.

On TV, the bullies are always damaged. Fat, fatherless, poor. Stand up to them and they crumble. In the real world, some people just don’t give a fuck. Stand up to them and get beat down. And then live with that failure.

Fourth grade: I’m tucked into a ball, protecting my head and neck, waiting for the tornado of punches and kicks to end. It’s less painful to run. Straight home to my mother, every day until she stopped me at the door. Glanced down the street at the boys and then at me on the porch steps, huffing and wheezing.

--You can’t keep running from them, Nick. One hand on her hip, the other pointed towards the sidewalk.

--Go back and fight.

By fifth grade I’m on my feet. Enjoying the taste of blood on my lips. The soreness in my hands the day after. And then I have the power.
The girl has a brown bag to her red lips. A pinky finger hooked into the air as she swallows the sting. It will play out this way: T.J. will coo in her ear, smoothing her wariness with a slick tongue. His two hands will be four, caressing and somehow comforting at the same time. Talking shit. Laying it down like the bitch wanted it laid. His words, not mine.

--You should take notes, Nick.

Not interested. I’ve seen this trick too many times and I stay where I am on the edge of the lot and look in.
CHAPTER IV
Chelsea

Chelsea felt the rumble of the engine all through her body. Heat blasted from the Blazer’s floor vents and she wiggled her toes in the stream of hot air. Her homecoming dress was spread over her lap and the silver shoes lay sprawled between her bare feet. She had borrowed one of Torren’s T-shirts and a pair of sweat pants to wear home. The pants kept slipping from her waist and she gripped the fabric in a fist.

Daylight blurred the edges of the darkness. The sky was a strange blue, the color of night in its final moments. Torren had one hand on the steering wheel and the other on Chelsea’s headrest, fingertips grazing her nape. Juanita snored from the backseat and when Chelsea glanced at her, she could see the dog’s paws hanging over the edge of the seat.

They neared her house and Chelsea’s stomach flipped when she recognized her mother’s Honda parked next to the curb. She stiffened and squinted, trying to read the license plate. She exhaled and relaxed against the seat after she realized it was the neighbor’s car.

Of course. If her mother had gotten home from work and found that she wasn’t there, all the lights would have been on. The police would have been
trampling the grass in the front yard and Chelsea’s cell phone would have been
ringing nonstop. She didn’t even want to think of how her mother would look,
pacing the kitchen in her scrubs and chewing her newly manicured nails as she
waited anxiously for Chelsea to come home.

Torren pulled into the driveway and let the car idle, his foot on the brake.
The house was dark, only a patch of driveway illuminated by a bulb over the
side door.

Chelsea folded her dress over her forearm and picked up her shoes. She
reached for the door handle. “Call you later?”

“I’m working with my dad today, remember? Laying brick. I probably
won’t pick up. I’ll call you when I get home.”

“Okay,” she leaned across the seat for a kiss, and then opened the door
and stepped down, bare feet against the cool asphalt.

“I love you,” he said, the second time that night.

It was too dark to see the amber flecks in his eyes. The first time he’d said
it, hours earlier, she’d been too surprised to say anything. She knew he wanted
her to say something this time, to say she loved him as he’d done. He wanted her
to mean it. She reached across the seat for his hand.

“I love you too.” She squeezed his fingers with her own before shutting
the door.

She jogged to the house, wincing as a pebble cut into her heel. She
fumbled with the keys, then went inside and stuck her hand out of the screen
door and waved until he had backed down the driveway and pulled off. The kitchen was dark and quiet. Chelsea flicked the light switch and stood next to the refrigerator, warming her toes on a small braided rug.

Her mother had left a note on the table, propped on the salt and pepper shakers: Text me when you get home.

Chelsea left the note on the table. She walked down the hallway to her bedroom and dropped her shoes and dress on the floor. She fell on the cold bed, gathering the blankets around herself.

Her mother lay beside her when she woke up. Squeezed in on the edge of the mattress. She was still wearing her scrubs and smelled like the hospital, antiseptic and stale. Chelsea used to love for her mother to surprise her like that. When she was younger it was a comfort, knowing that her mother might appear in the bed as if she’d been conjured by Chelsea’s dreams.

But she hadn’t done it in a long time and Chelsea was annoyed at the intrusion. She had a slight crick in her neck. The bed was too small for both of them.

She got out of bed, careful not to bump her mother, and picked up her cell phone. In the kitchen, she grabbed a box of cereal from the top of the refrigerator. She sat at the table and stuffed her hand in the cellophane, munching a handful of Cap’n Crunch.

Chelsea smiled as she flicked through the pictures she’d taken with her phone the night before, she and Lisa laughing as she held the phone away from
their made-up faces. Lisa posing with her boyfriend, throwing up a peace sign with her fingers.

She’d taken pictures of Torren driving after they’d left the school. He was concentrating on the road, one steady hand on the wheel, the other on her knee. Pictures of the two of them as they sat on the same side of a booth in the dim restaurant.

She tucked her head into her chest and pulled the collar of the shirt over her nose. She could smell Torren on the fabric. Not the way he’d smelled at the dance, encased in the musty rental tuxedo, but afterwards as they lay together in his bed. It was how he had always smelled, from when she first noticed him sitting in front of her in their junior year English class. She had blushed every time he turned around to hand her a paper.

Chelsea couldn’t wait to tell Lisa that Torren had said I love you for the first time. She could hear her already, breathing “aww” into the phone. She knew Lisa would ask if she’d said it back and she would tell her that she had. Chelsea wouldn’t admit it to Lisa, but she wasn’t yet sure that she felt like she was in love. How was it supposed to feel?

She put the cereal away and went back to her room to get her laptop. She set it on the kitchen table and booted it up, then connected her phone to it and downloaded the pictures. She opened the Internet browser and went to Facebook and logged into her account and load the pictures to a new album.
Lisa’s profile page came up as the website uploaded the images. Her best friend had already posted some pictures and Chelsea clicked through her album. Pictures she hadn’t even realized had been taken. She paused at one of her sitting on the bleachers of the gym. She was alone, slightly hunched over, her shoes spread out in a V as if she had just clicked her heels. Must have been when she was waiting on Torren to bring her a Coke. Chelsea didn’t like the picture, didn’t like that she looked as though she were hoping for something to happen.

She scrolled down, reading the status updates of her classmates and glancing through their pictures. There were dozens of photos of couples posing together in front of fireplaces and rented limos and with parents dressed in jeans and t-shirts, just like the ones her mother had taken before she and Torren left the house. Most of the comments were almost the same.

--Too much fun, now for prom!

--Meh.

--Everybody looked good...well, almost ;-) 

Chelsea paused at David Holmes’ post.

--Fucking Smoke Pit! Homecoming - Look at this $hit!

He’d attached a video to his post and Chelsea clicked on the still image and chewed another handful of cereal as she waited for it to load. At first it was blurry, in and out of focus, pausing on a pair of sneakers, then the grass.

The camera moved fast, but Chelsea could see enough to recognize the smoke pit. There was audio, but she couldn’t make out anything but the rustling
of the camera as it shifted from side to side. A red high heel, a flash of skin, a thigh. Chelsea frowned, wondering if it was a prank, like a Blair Witch Project spoof.

The camera finally stopped roving and focused. Slender brown thighs spread open. Asscheeks pumping like pistons in between. There were hands on her ankles, hands on her red shoes. Chelsea couldn’t see their faces. She couldn’t see anything but her legs, her bare foot. The curved Nike symbol on the bottom of his shoes. The boy’s black shirt covered his back and his pants were bunched around his knees. His face was ground into her neck.

Chelsea could make out the voices then, chanting, “Fuck that hoe! Fuck that hoe!”

When he moved away, her red dress was under her like a puddle. Her arms were flat on the ground and her fingers were open, relaxed. Her head hung to the side, tilted to her shoulder.

Chelsea closed her eyes. She didn’t understand what she was seeing. Her cheeks warmed as she blushed and she felt as though she’d been caught watching porn, like she and Lisa used to do when she slept over Lisa’s house. They would sneak into Lisa’s brother’s room when they were downstairs watching TV. Lisa knew where he hid his movies, in the back of his closet under a ratty sleeping bag. She thought of a video they’d seen, a supposed rape scene. The girl with her hands tied behind her back and a half a dozen men standing
around her in a circle. She’d started off struggling, but then had started to grin for the camera.

Chelsea opened her eyes to watch the final seconds of the video. The girl was on her knees now, hands holding her still while someone stood in front of her. She didn’t even try to fight. She was skinny, all sharp angles, knees and elbows. Chelsea didn’t recognize her.

There were almost fifty comments and she scrolled through:

--Wow! THAT is some trifling shit!

--Now their tryng to sai it was rape. I dnt no.

--Was a fucking gangbang. Her stupid ass was probably drunk.

--Who is she?

--Who does a gangbang at homecoming?

Chelsea’s eyelids began to burn and she skimmed over most of the comments until she reached the end when she came across Lisa's name:

--What a whore. lol

Chelsea closed her laptop and went back to her room. Her mother was sprawled out on the bed, snoring softly. She held her hand out to touch her shoulder, but then pulled back. Her mother would have a hundred questions. She wanted to get back in bed and wrap her arm around her mother’s waist like an anchor.

She heard her phone ringing in the kitchen just as she was about to climb over her mother. It was Lisa.
“So you finally answered your phone, huh? I been calling you damn near all night.”

“Lisa, what the hell is that on Facebook? That video that David Holmes posted – is that real?”

“Yeah, that shit is real, Chels. Some freshman was out there at the smoke pit with a bunch of guys. Somebody found her, I guess. Came in the gym and said she was out there, passed out. She had been drinking, probably. We got out of there before the police pulled up.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“Chels, have you looked at your phone? I’ve called you like ten times.”

Chelsea hadn’t checked her phone. She hadn’t wanted to be interrupted while she was with Torren. Hadn’t wanted to know if her mother had called.

“Anyway, it was probably just some dumb girl getting a train ran on her,” Lisa said. She sounded as if she were talking about math homework.

“How can you say that?” Chelsea could hear her voice rising.

“You watched the video, she didn’t scream, she wasn’t fighting,” Lisa paused. “Don’t tell me…Chelsea, come on, that chick looked like she wanted to be there.”

“How could you say that? Why would you make a comment like that online?” Chelsea could feel her face getting hot, a blush rising up from her neck.
“That she's a whore? I’m just calling it like I see it. Some freshman, probably thought she had a crush on one of them and let them do her, let them all do her.”

“That’s just stupid, Lisa,” Chelsea said. “They were holding her down. Didn’t you see that?”

“Well.” Lisa paused. “Maybe she started to regret it.”

“Maybe she never wanted it in the first place,” Chelsea said. She made a fist, letting her nails cut into her palm.

“Chelsea.”

She looked up. Her mother stood just inside the doorway, her hands on her hips. “Why are you yelling?”

“I’ll call you back.” Chelsea ended the call and dropped the phone in the pocket of the sweatpants. She hadn’t realized she was yelling. “It was nothing.” She brushed past her mother to go back to her room.

“Wait.”

She stopped and turned around, watched as her mother studied her outfit.

“Where’d you get those clothes?”

“What?” She glanced down at herself. At the pants threatening to fall down. “Oh, they’re Lisa’s. I borrowed them a while ago.”

“Chelsea, those pants are too big for Lisa.”

“Well, maybe they’re her brothers. I don’t know, Mom. They’re comfortable.” She shrugged.
Her mother looked as though she were about to ask another question about the clothes, but reconsidered. “Tell me about homecoming. Was it fun?”

“Um, yeah,” she answered. “But I don’t want to talk about it right now. Later, okay?” She escaped to her room, hoping her mother wouldn’t call her again. Once inside, she put her phone on her desk and sat on the bed. She didn’t get Lisa. It was almost as if they’d watched two different videos.

She couldn’t see how it could have been like Lisa said, something the girl had wanted to do, but Lisa had a point. She hadn't been screaming, hadn't been fighting back. Lying there like a broken doll. Chelsea didn't remember any red dresses besides Shatoria Williams, and she knew it hadn’t been her in the video. The girl in the video was younger, didn't even look as if she were a freshman. A middle-schooler playing with the big kids.

Chelsea remembered seeing the crowd as she and Torren walked back to his car. His heat warming her sides. She had still been a little buzzed from the joint they’d smoked in his car before they went inside, but she’d noticed the group of people standing by the fence. Near the smoke pit, way back at the edge of the lot. Torren had even started walking that way before changing his mind and walking to his Blazer.

By that time it was already happening. The video. The girl spread on the ground like a sacrifice. While she had been safe inside the school, laughing with her friends and waiting for Torren to dance with her, all of that was outside. And
even when she'd left, when she had walked right past it, she hadn't known. She’d seen, and yet hadn’t seen anything.

She lay back on the bed and closed her eyes and remembered a varsity jacket. A leather jacket with white arms and a red trunk. An embroidered eagle. A brief glimpse of the first letter, a “J.”

“Jesilowski,” she whispered. “He was there.”

Chelsea went back to the kitchen to get her computer. She wanted to watch the video again to see if she could recognize Jesilowski in the crowd. But her mother was still there, digging in the freezer. Chelsea watched as she walked to the counter and dropped a block of frozen meat, wrapped in foil and plastic in the sink to thaw.

“I was thinking spaghetti for dinner,” she said. “What do you think?”

“I don’t care,” Chelsea said. She sat at the table and opened her laptop. She stared at the still image of the video.

“You want breakfast?” her mother asked. “I could make eggs or something.”

“Huh? No.” Chelsea could feel her mother’s eyes on her neck, trying to crawl up in her head.

“You haven’t said, Chels. How was the dance?”

Chelsea closed the computer and shrugged. “It...was nice.”

“That’s all, nice?” She didn't wait for a response. “I asked you to text me when you got in.”
“I know,” Chelsea said. “I'm sorry. I was...” She bit her lip and let the sentence sit in her throat.

“I don't ask you for a lot, Chelsea. Just to know where you are. That's not too much to ask, is it?”

Chelsea looked up and stared at her standing next to the sink in her scrubs. She wiped the counter with a dishtowel, scrubbing at a sticky spot. Chelsea wondered how her mother looked to her patients. Firm. Caring. Like she had a good life. A good daughter.

She was afraid that her mother would ask her where she’d been, if she’d come straight home like she’d been told to. She didn’t want to have to lie.

Her mother rummaged in the cabinets under the counter. “Well, just don’t do it again, Chels. I know you’re a senior and you might think you’re a grown woman, but you can’t do everything you want to do.”

Chelsea didn’t feel like a grown woman at all. “I'm sorry,” she said. She wanted to tell her mother. She wanted to tell her mother everything.

The clouds had merged into a smear of white against a darkening canvas. Torren had turned the Blazer off and he and Chelsea sat inside, listening to the engine tick as it settled.

“I know, we heard it on the radio while I was working,” Torren said, resting his head on the seat back. “It’s crazy that something like that would happen at our school.”
"I know," Chelsea said.

"Do you know who she is?"

She shook her head. "I couldn’t really see her face that clear."

"I thought it was just some guys messing around." He shrugged and Chelsea could hear his jacket rubbing against the seat.

"Me too," Chelsea said. She paused, tapping her finger on the door handle. "Jesilowski was there,"

He glanced at her. "What are you talking about?"

"He was there. I saw his jacket."

"Are you sure?" he asked. "You saw how thick the crowd was. Coulda been anybody."

"But it wasn’t anybody. It was him," she said.

Torren leaned over and scratched at his leg. "I don’t know, Chels." He shrugged. "It was dark as shit out there when we left."

"He was there. I know he was." Chelsea hadn’t been able to make herself watch the video again, but she knew she remembered the varsity jacket. "What are we going to do?"

Torren shook his head and frowned. "What do you mean?"

"What are we going to do? We have to tell the police that—"

"Whoa, Chelsea." Torren sat up in the driver's seat. "We ain’t saying anything. I didn’t see anything and you don’t know what you saw, there were at least twenty people over there."
Chelsea put her hand on his thigh, and leaned across the seat. “Torren, I’m telling you I saw him. I know I did.”

“You were freaking high, we were both high. Could you say, like, could you swear in court that it was him?”

“No,” she said.

“I didn’t think so.” He paused as if waiting for her to say something else, but continued when she didn’t. “It was dark as hell, they were way across the lot at the fucking pit, Chelsea. Way over there. Your eyes ain’t that damn good. Nobody’s are. Come on.”

“Torren…” She moved her hand back into her lap. “Why don’t you believe me?”

“I’m not saying I don’t believe you,” he said, stretching his arm out over the back of her seat. “I’m not saying that. But…I didn’t see him. And saying he was there, telling the police that he was there…that’s extreme. Shit, that’s my best friend, Chelsea.” He squeezed her shoulder before putting his hands back on the wheel. He turned to face the driveway. “And anyway, how do you know that it wasn’t…consensual?”

“You wouldn’t say that if you’d seen the video, Torren. And even so, you think she’d want it on Facebook all like that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know, Chels. I’m just saying…we don’t have all the facts about this. We don’t know what happened out there.”

“I know,” she said. “I know enough.”
He sighed. “Look, I’m tired. I’m dirty, I need to go home and get in the shower.” He cupped her face with his hand, the dried mortar on his fingers scratched her cheek. “Let me ask him about it, okay?”

He lifted her chin with a bent finger, made sure she was looking at him. “Promise you won't say anything to anybody until I talk to him?”

Chelsea pulled away and scooted closer to the door. “I don't know, Torren.” He didn't say anything and when she glanced at him, he was still, staring out the windshield. His fingers twisted around the steering wheel. “Okay,” she said. “I won't say anything.”

“Good,” he said. He put his arm over her shoulders and pulled her closer.

Chelsea turned her head towards the window and sighed. She could see the tiny blink of light as the first stars glowed in the darkness.
CHAPTER V

Heather

I could tell it was late by the shade of light coming in through the sheer curtains in my bedroom. Time to get up and make Chelsea’s dinner. I got out of bed and pulled the blanket back over my pillow. I’d been in my scrubs the entire day. Smelling like work and feeling like I hadn’t slept at all. Another reason I hated working nights; it’s hard to get the body back in the habit of sleeping at the right time. Daytime rest was never worth much, even with earplugs and a sleep mask.

Whole day gone and nothing accomplished. Not even a load of laundry. And back to the grind in a few hours. Another night shift with Lexi and Mrs. Byrd and a whole floor full of other patients, but at least it wasn’t a double. That I could be grateful for.

The fire was in my dreams for the first time in years. I had been walking the hallway of that old house, crying for Vince. It was a familiar dream, the same one I’d had every day for months after it happened. In the dream I check all the rooms, all the bedrooms. Every time I find him in our closet, his blackened body curled around our son.

I used to wonder how it would have been to walk into that room? Vinny just across the floor in his crib, crying out for me. Walk inside and get maybe
halfway, perhaps only a few steps inside and then the sudden pull and heat as we fell into nothing. But maybe Vince had made it across the room to the crib. Maybe he had lifted Vinny up off his mattress and held him, if only for a moment, before the floor dropped out from under them.

Maybe I would have made it across, weighing less than Vince. All the way across to pick up my baby, careful, even still to support his teetering head. Cover his small mouth and protect him from the streaming heat.

I hadn’t dreamt of Vince in a long time. When I did, his face would be blurred, but his hands like I remember. Firm, but not calloused. Sometimes when I woke up, I thought I could feel the heat of his fingers on my hip.

I got out of those old scrubs, took a shower and put on a new pair. Chelsea didn’t answer when I called for her and I checked her room to see if maybe she'd also taken a nap, but she wasn’t inside. When I walked into the kitchen, I could hear the faint sound of a car in the driveway. I peeked through the blinds and I saw her climbing in Torren’s truck. It was still light enough for me to see the outline of their faces as they leaned across the seat to kiss.

I let my finger slide from the blinds, let them pop back into place. The ground beef I left in the sink that morning had thawed and the foil was damp from where it had sweated. I poked at it with a finger to see if it was soft enough to cook.
The old black and white television on the counter usually kept me company while I cooked and I turned it on and let it run while I chopped an onion. I had bought the TV from a garage sale a few years ago. It was just like the television Vince had brought from his parents’ house when we first moved in together. We weren’t married then, but Chelsea was already well on her way. She was crawling and pulling up on chairs before we had saved up enough money to get a new television.

The onions hissed when I dumped them in a hot skillet. I added the meat, breaking it into chunks with a fork.

Vince worked long hours at the plant, but he wasn’t good at saving. I had to learn how to stretch a dollar five ways to cover the bills. When I got pregnant with Vinny, I started selling Avon, trying to save up some money for Pampers. I think the neighbors felt a little sorry for me walking around in the summer heat; all big and clumsy, trying to stick catalogues in their screen doors. They bought a few things here and there, body lotion, chapsticks, nothing I could brag on. Just a little money to help make ends meet.

Sometimes I couldn’t help but think of how things might have been if he hadn’t died in the fire. We might have raised Chelsea differently. Maybe I wouldn’t have been so tight with her. Let her date earlier. Stay out later. We may have laughed more. She might have been a different girl altogether.

Not that she was a bad kid. And she’d gone out and found a nice boyfriend, I thought, breaking spaghetti noodles in half. I dropped them into a
pot of boiling water. Hard-working. A sturdy head on his shoulders. Thoughtful for a teenager. When Chelsea brought him over to meet me the first time, he smiled, called me Mrs. Turner and gave me a few scratch-off lottery tickets.

Chelsea had told him that I used to buy them sometimes when I got gas for the car and I’d let her scratch the silver boxes with a nickel. I thanked him, didn’t bother telling either one of them that I hadn’t bought one in years. I didn’t think about it until later, but he was only 16 at the time. Not old enough to play the lottery.

She had wanted me to like him, had asked what I thought of him after he’d left. Not directly, but in her way.

“I didn’t tell him to get you those, Mom. It was his idea.”

I said it was a nice thing to do and he seemed to be a decent guy. I didn’t want it to look like I liked him too much. I knew she wouldn’t like that; I hadn’t liked it when my mother gushed over my boyfriends.

A few months later when I noticed love bruises circling her collarbone, I told her like my mother had told me, “Let him know you got some morals, Chelsea. Don’t disrespect his parents’ house. Mine either. You think you need birth control, come talk to me.” I had been in love at her age, or at least I thought I was at the time. I remembered how it could be. I could talk myself hoarse, but I’m still not sure she’d tell me if she were in trouble.

One of those judge shows played in the background while I stirred the beef with a wooden spoon, watching it turn from pink to brown. Hopefully,
Chelsea had more sense than I did when I was her age. I wanted her to go to college before she settled down and had kids. Life seemed to be easier on the women I knew that had lived it that way.

Not that I had any regrets about the path I’d taken. I used to though, when I had a colicky infant, a toddler already in her terrible twos, and a husband that worked all day. I remembered how I used to go in the bathroom and cry, wishing my load was a little lighter.

Sometimes I think that wish, that careless thought I’d made out of frustration was what started it all. But I know that’s not what happened. It was all, as Miss Ellen might have told me, in God’s plan. For my husband and son to burn to death. It had nothing to do with me.

God’s plan.

Maybe Vince had left the stove on. That would be like him, to forget. The empty pot streaked with melted butter and bits of popcorn; the dishtowel he’d wrapped around the handle still hanging there. It could be that he’d been more tired than I thought, that he just forgot to turn the dial all the way until it clicked. That too would be like him, moving too fast, doing too much to pay attention to the small details. Maybe that’s where it started, the frayed thread of the dishtowel wavering over the waiting eye.

We would have all been upstairs. The baby bathed and burped and finally asleep in his too big crib. I warmed up my side of the bed while Vince read to Chelsea in her room. He would have tucked Chelsea in her bed, a Little Tikes
princess house, with a rigid plastic roof as a canopy. He had put it together himself, all the knobs and screws holding together the plastic parts molded to look like white wood. He would have let her choose the book and maybe that night she chose the *Cat in the Hat*, one of her favorites.

Chelsea liked that Vince could read it fast without tripping over the words like I did. He would have sat on the edge of the bed as she curled up against her pillow and listened as if it were the first time she’d heard it. Or maybe she chose *Goodnight Moon*, and had slid the book from under her pillow to hand to her father, and then lay back on the sheets and listened to the crinkle of the paper as he turned the pages.

“And goodnight socks.” They both wiggled their toes, hers bare, his covered in his work socks. When he read the last line, “goodnight noises everywhere,” maybe they stopped and listened to the outside world for a moment, to the train passing a few miles away. Chelsea’s eyes may have started to close a little. Her blinks becoming longer and longer and the train whistle fading into the night. He would have kissed her on the forehead and eased off the bed and out of her room.

Maybe Vince smelled something when he stepped out into the hallway. Maybe he paused at the foot of the stairs. It could have been the popcorn; he always burned a few kernels at the bottom of the pan. He wouldn’t have thought much of it. He came in our room and got in bed, kissed me in the darkness. He
turned his back to me, sighed when his head hit the pillow, perhaps thinking of the work to be done the next day.

Downstairs, perhaps the red embers had begun to eat away at the frayed cloth of the dishtowel until it was a pile of fire that climbed up the wallpaper. All up in my cabinets and over my bowls and cups. Burning through glass and plastic, wood and wallpaper. Into the beams and floorboards. Chewing at the floor of my son’s room until the wood was threadbare. Waiting for my husband to step into it.

What if we had gone the other way—him to Chelsea and me to the baby. I should have, always felt that I should have gone for Vinny anyway. He was newborn, still fragile and soft. Lightweight. He was crying for me. I don’t know why I ran to her room. She was heavy to carry down, weighing on my hip like an anchor. If Vince had gone for her, he’d have slung her up, held her to his chest and ran out of the house.

He would have been looking for me. He wouldn’t have left me in that house, he’d have come after me. Back up the stairs to find us. The firemen wouldn’t have allowed it, they would have pulled him back, held him back, arms straining to get back inside and search for us.

Or maybe we both would have died in the fire with the baby. Left Chelsea an orphan.
The news had come on and my ears lifted when I heard “homecoming” and again when I heard “rape.” I set the pot in the sink and turned up the volume on the TV, letting my hand hover over the knob while the newswoman talked. The meat sizzled in the skillet, bits of grease and fat popped all over the stove.

The television was old and staticy, screen run through with wavering white lines. The newswoman’s forehead was skewed, everything above her nose dragged to the left and all I could see clear was her mouth moving as she talked. Saying impossible things. A bruised and broken body abandoned outside. People standing around watching as if it were a spectator sport. Twenty boys. My daughter’s school.

Chelsea hadn’t said anything. I wondered if she knew.

I lifted the blinds and looked outside again. They were still sitting in his car, but it was too dark for me to make out their faces. I was tempted to go outside and pull her out of the car. I wanted to grab her up and hold her.

The water for the noodles had boiled over when Chelsea came back in the house. Steam puffed from the eye of the stove. I grabbed the pot by the handle and poured off the water when I heard the door open. Noodles in the colander poked out like tendrils of hair.

“Chelsea,” I left the noodles in the sink, the meat, burning in the skillet. “What happened last night at school?” I pulled her against me, pulled her head down over my shoulder as if she were a baby.
“I didn’t see anything,” she said over my shoulder. “I didn’t see anything at all.”
Laughter sparks the air. Night hovers in the corners of my eyes. My feet are swollen but weightless, my steps slurred. I slam my empty bottle on the ground, laughing as it explodes into wet shards. Within seconds, there is a chorus of glass breaking.

I’m back in the circle and T.J. motions for the girl to toss her bottle too. An act of initiation. She does and then laughs behind her hands, but she is wobbly and sways into T.J.’s shoulder. I can tell the alcohol has blossomed inside her chest and spread to her legs. Her shoes dangle from her ankles like rubies on a dark chain.

We damn and fuck everything. Parents. School. Life.

The first thing I ever stole was a Wolverine action figure. X-Men was my favorite Saturday morning show. He was small enough to fit in my pocket and I ripped open the package and slipped him inside. My mother waited for me at the checkout, joking with the cashier while she loaded Charmin and frozen pizzas on
the counter. She put her hand on top of my head, wiggled her fingers against my forehead.

Excuse me, ma’am.

I’d thought the security guard was a real policeman with real power. I’d thought I was really going to jail.

She blushed, turning red all the way down into her shirt. She didn’t speak on the way home, but inhaled two Virginia Slims. Blew smoke from her ears. I got beat for it, but I didn’t care. I still had Wolverine’s mask hidden in my sleeve. A one-inch square of plastic I placed on my forehead and imagined stretching over my face.

T.J. was the only kid in juvie who didn’t try to punk me. We were freshmen. I suppose he still is one. We didn’t ask what the other had done and it didn’t matter anyway, all that mattered was that we were there. At night, we whispered our regrets into the ceiling, useless prayers masking our fear of the dark. During the day, we held on to what we had, one hand between our legs.

That was my only time inside. I went back to school. A junior now. A year behind Torren. T.J. and I hung out when he got out. Talked about his case. How he was going to change, finish up ninth grade and stay in school. Talking shit.
He’s short and skinny, a scar like a jagged crack on his forehead. He slid his palm against mine and then slapped my back.

--Stay out of trouble.

Chelsea and Torren hold hands as they leave the gym. I can see the white of her teeth as she laughs. He walks in our direction and for a second, I think Chelsea is looking dead at me. That maybe she can see me in the shadows of the smoke pit. Then Torren puts his arm around her neck and spins her away.

The girl holds on to T.J.’s shoulder and shakes her head. She squints as if she’s trying to see something far off.

--Hit this. Donnell squeezes the girl’s waist, checking her for ripeness. Lighters flicker. Cigarettes and blunts and Milds glow like lightening bugs hovering in red intervals.

--Suck this sweet herb, girl.

T.J.’s lips are close to her ear, but I’m hearing his words clear in my head.

--Suck it in. Hold it. Drown in it.

He could be saying something completely different. He could be talking about love.
--I love that girl. Torren said this weeks ago. We sat next to each other on the raggedy couch in his basement, but we didn’t look at each other, only stared at the television screen. I listened to the disc spinning in the Playstation. He could be in love. My thumbs twitched on the game controller. He probably is.

When we were younger it was Contra. Torren in blue and me in red playing on his hand-me down Nintendo. Up up down down left right left right B A B A Select Start. Thirty men for both of us.

--You’re the only one ‘sides me that’s good at this, he told me then.

Torren opens the car door for Chelsea and she leans into him, wrapping her arms around his neck. She tilts her face up, waiting for a kiss. I wonder how it would be if she looked at me like that.

--You’re the only one I’ve told, Torren said. I haven’t even told Chelsea. The screen read: Loading...

--Thank you, I said. But I wasn’t sure who I was speaking to.

Chelsea is like other girls I don’t know how to talk to. She doesn’t like me. When we are in the same space, her eyes never seem to meet mine, they settle on my neck and the nervous apple on my throat bobs, down and up, down and up. But I’m glad she doesn’t look at my face. My smashed nose and mouth.
A new layer of darkness settles on our shoulders like a royal cloak. The girl is choking on laughter or tears. I can’t tell. The look on her face is sorry sorry sorry. She’s between T.J. and Donell - a plucked wishbone and they each have a thigh. T.J. makes it sound sweet, like sucking a mouthful of Jolly Ranchers.

Donell’s hands press down on her shoulders and then she’s on her knees. Donell lifts the red dress over her head. She’s locked in the circle of our legs, no way out. T.J. is inside with her, safe in the circle of his friends. Shredded panties fall in front of me like a fallen cloud and land at the toe of my shoe. A white flag tossed to the ground.
CHAPTER VII

Mrs. Anderson

It was quiet in the hospital room, save the shuffling of feet as Kenny paced. He clenched his fists as he walked in front of the empty bed, turned and headed to the door. Then back towards the window. Over and over again, like to wear holes in his shoes. I sat in the only chair, my butt fused to the thin cushion. I didn’t move, just watched the clock hands tick round, watched my husband’s trained steps. We didn’t talk. Didn’t say nothing that would crack open the quiet in the room. What could be said anyway? I thought about that question for as long as I could hold it still before it slipped off into something terrible.

He reached the door and spun around, the sound of his sneakers squeaking against the tile sent an itch up my back. If I opened my mouth I might have said something that would have hurt us both.

When the police came to the house to tell us, I thought it was a misunderstanding. She’s in the hospital. Your granddaughter. Kenny and I had been watching the television while we waited for Nicole to phone and say she was ready to be picked up from school. It was late. Past time for her to call. And I was relieved when the doorbell rang. I thought maybe she had lost her key and I got up quick to answer the door, happy I could cross the thin line between
anxiousness and anger. Oh, she was in for it, worrying us like that. Grounded for a month, at least.

The police detective was a redhead. That was the first thing I noticed when I pulled the heavy front door open. That it wasn’t my grandchild standing on the porch, but a redheaded white woman looking like she was sorry to be there. Redheads bring bad news. I knew right then what she had to say wasn’t nothing I wanted to hear.

“Mrs. Anderson?”

She introduced herself as Detective Monroe. Kenny came up from behind me and I could feel his breath on my neck. She glanced down at the door handle like she was expecting us to let her in, as if I would invite bad news into my front room. She told us through the screen. Nicole was hurt. Something had happened at the school and we had to go to the hospital.

At some point while she was talking, I left my body at the door, holding it open like a big dumb block of wood. I took my mind to the couch and let it rest.

Kenny hadn’t wanted Nicole to go to homecoming. He thought she was too young. I had to talk him into it. Waited until we’d come home from church one Sunday. He was feeling the Word, feeling good. Humming as he loosened his tie and hung it on the peg behind our bedroom door.

“She been doing good,” I’d told him. “Her grades is real good. Besides math, and she’s getting better with that.” He grunted, his fingers working the
buttons on his shirt. “Ain’t like she asking to go with a boy, Kenny. She just
wants to go with friends.” I stepped out of my church shoes and into my
slippers. “What could go wrong, her and a few other girls?” I crossed the room to
help him with the last button. Slid the shirt from his arms and held it up to fold
it. I kept talking before he could say anything. “Three other young ladies. And
you know them. They all been over here before.”

“Lena, now you know a pack of females can be more worrisome than a
boy sometimes.” He took his shirt from my hands and tossed it on the bed.

“Who said anything about a pack? She just wants to go have a little fun.
Be like all the other kids. What’s so wrong with that?”

He unbuckled his dress slacks and let them slide from his hips, showing
his skinny legs. “She just too young is all.” He picked his pants up and threw
them next to the shirt. “Really ain’t nothing else to say on this one, Lena.” He
opened the dresser drawer and got out a pair of jeans.

“Plenty to be said.” I started plucking hairpins from my hair, tucked them
in between my teeth. “She’s not Billie.”

“What you say?” He had one leg in the jeans, glanced at me with his face
all screwed up. “I can’t understand a word you’re saying.”

“I said,” I took the pins out of my mouth. “I said Nicole ain’t her momma.
She ain’t like Billie.”

Kenny got his pants on and fastened them. “I know who is who in this
house,” he said.
“Well, act like you know. This is nothing but a school dance. You know them girls won’t be into no trouble.”

“I thought I said I was done talking about this? I still say she too young.”

He pulled a shirt over his head. “Maybe next year.”

I put the pins back in my mouth, might as well have sewed my mouth shut with them. It was quiet at dinner that night. Not that I expected him to change his mind just because I wasn’t speaking to him, I knew Kenny wouldn’t think of that as no type of punishment. I just hadn’t figured out a way to get around his stubbornness on the issue. His fear that our granddaughter would turn out anything like her mother.

The detective offered us a ride in her car, but Kenny wanted to drive. He followed behind her, mumbling the whole time about the way she was driving. “Why she going this way? We’d be there by now if she’d a got on the freeway ‘sted of taking the street.”

I didn’t say nothing, but I did wonder why she didn’t have her lights on. Wasn’t it an emergency? See, now that’s another reason why I thought it was a big mistake, a mean joke somebody was pulling over on us. If what Detective Monroe had said was true and my grandchild was really hurting, really needing me, I would have known it all through me.

She was driving that black sedan through the city as if we were on our way to a picnic. And Kenny sitting there next to me huffing and sucking his
teeth like it was Sunday noon instead of almost midnight on a Saturday. I pinched my arm to make sure I wasn’t having a nightmare.

We were halfway there when I realized I didn’t even have my purse. I had left it on my nightstand. And that wasn’t like me to walk out of my house without it. I felt naked and slight, as if I might be sucked out the car if Kenny rolled the window down. I moved my husband’s hand from his knee and set it in my lap.

“Maybe they got it all wrong, Lena.” He squeezed my thigh.

“Oh, I know they do,” I said. “I know they do. She’s fine.”

Things wasn’t adding up. That girl had gone to a dance at the school. Left the house only a few hours before. All the stuff the detective had said, that she had been beat up and…how she put it—assaulted? Naw, that didn’t make no sense. Right then I had to believe that she was somewhere safe and happy, just late getting home.

Detective Monroe pulled up to the emergency room entrance and parked her car next to the curb. A valet come over and opened the door for me, but I waited for a second while Kenny fumbled with the keys.

“Gone, now,” he said, his voice low. He knew I was stalling.

The valet helped me out of the car and I waited for Kenny to come around to my side. A breeze came through and blew over me, raised goose bumps all over my body. I had forgotten my jacket too, but supposed I was lucky to have remembered to put on my shoes, else I’d have left the house with my house
shoes on. It was chilly out by then and I folded my arms over my chest. A cloudless sky that seemed extra black. No moon.

Detective Monroe said she would take us to see the doctor. I noticed she didn’t say nothing about Nicole.

God, don’t let her be in here, I thought. Let this all be a lie.

Kenny took my hand and we walked behind the detective. She was tall, Kenny would have said lanky. Long arms and legs, like a giraffe. She took slow steps, her shoulders all bunched up as if the job had been too much for her. Or maybe she was just tired.

The automatic doors slid open as we went inside. I figured that if Nicole was really in there, I might hear her crying or screaming. But it was just the emergency room lobby, people stretched out on the stiff chairs and looking as if they were dying of waiting. Didn’t seem to be any true emergencies, folks might have been sitting there to have their blood pressure checked. The detective took us through another set of automatic doors and we entered the triage area. I heard some moaning then, but I knew it wasn’t Nicole. Most of the patterned curtains were pulled so that we couldn’t see anyone, but I could tell the people were hurting on the other side.

Hearing their pain made me think about my own. I got arthritis in my left knee and usually more than a few steps makes it act up, but I didn’t feel nothing that whole way down the hall. I pinched myself again to make sure it was real.
We followed the detective further on, past those groaning souls, and into an empty room. The sign above the door was marked “Patient Counseling.”

There was a doctor in there, a blonde this time. A short little thing with a pointy chin and big blue eyes. She had that same look on her face as the detective, as if she had the world weighing her down.

She gestured toward the chairs with the palm of her hand, offering us a seat around a small table. Detective Monroe sat across from Kenny.

“Mr. and Mrs. Anderson, I’m Dr. Brown,” she paused, and inhaled deep as if the introduction had taken all her strength. “I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but your granddaughter suffered serious injuries. She was unconscious when she arrived and she was bleeding profusely. We had to—”

“Are you talking about Nicole?” I said. Kenny gave me a look like I had missed the boat on something. But I couldn’t see how what she was describing had anything to do with Nicole.

“Yes, ma’am,” she said. She nodded. “Nicole was unconscious and bleeding profusely.” She repeated herself, speaking low and slow as if I were a frightened child. “When we couldn’t stop it, we had to take her to surgery.”

“But see,” I interrupted before she could continue. “Nicole didn’t have no identification on her. She didn’t carry no purse or anything like that. How you know that it’s her?”

They all stared at me. Kenny scooted his chair close to mine and put his hand on my shoulder. “Lena.”
“No,” I brushed him away and pointed at the police detective. “You say she down here. You say all this happened to her, but we ain’t seen her. Where is she? So we can know it’s really her.” I looked at my husband. “That’s all I’m saying, Kenny. I want to see her.” He blinked at me, his brown eyes big and round in his face. I turned to the doctor. “Where is she?”

She pressed her lips into a frown. “She’s still in surgery, Mrs. Anderson. I have to tell you,” she looked up at us, first at Kenny then me. “She was hemorrhaging very badly. She may need to have a hysterectomy if the surgical team can’t stop the bleeding.”

I got up so fast my chair tipped backwards and hit the floor. “I got to use the bathroom,” I said. Kenny called after me as I left the room, but I didn’t turn around. I walked back the way we came, past the triage rooms. I wanted to snatch all of the ugly curtains down, check every bed. Nicole wasn’t back there. Nicole had gone to homecoming. She was fine. Had to be.

“Excuse me.” I stopped at the nurse’s desk. “I need to use a phone.”

The woman glanced up at me and nodded, then put her telephone on the raised counter. “Press 9 to get out.”

I dialed, praying I got the number right. My neighbor picked up after the sixth ring. “Mrs. Curtis?” I said, breathless. “I’m so glad you picked up. I’m sorry to call so late, but could you please do me a favor? I know it’s an inconvenience, but would you mind peeking out your front door and checking to see if Nicole is
on the front porch? She got on a red dress…yes, thank you. I’ll call you back directly.”

I hung up and waited a few minutes. I thought, that poor child probably standing on the porch right then, worried sick about us. Mrs. Curtis was wheezing when she answered and I felt bad for having to ask, knowing she’d had to drag her oxygen tank behind her.

“I didn’t see her, Lena. You okay? Nothing happened to Kenny, did it?”

“Oh, no, we just had to step out a minute. We’ll be home soon. But if she come home before we get back, I imagine she’ll come over to your place. Could you—could you let her know we’ll be right back?”

“Oh, yeah. Lena, I’ll let her know.”

The line clicked off when she hung up, but I held the receiver until the busy signal squawked in my ear. I pushed the phone towards the woman behind the counter. “Thank you,” I said. So she wasn’t at home. And if she wasn’t at home, I didn’t know where she could be. She wouldn’t have run off, that was her mother’s way. Lord, I prayed, just don’t let her be down here.

My knee was full of pain when I started back down the hall.

I could tell Nicole was nervous the day of her freshman orientation. We were in the auditorium of the high school, squished into chairs made for smaller bodies than mine. Nicole kept crossing and uncrossing her arms, just couldn’t sit still. I had picked up a copy of her schedule for the year and she had it in her lap,
folding and refolding the paper until it was a thick little square. She hadn’t wanted to go off with everybody else and take a tour of the high school. She’d wanted me to go with her, but I knew I couldn’t make it up and down all those stairs like that.

“Nicole,” I said, easing her fingers from my arm. “Would you go on before everybody leaves? You need to know how to get to your classes so you don’t get lost the first day.” I stood up and stretched my leg out so I could walk on it.

She shook her head. “I don’t know anybody here, Grandma.”

I patted her back, pushing her towards the other freshman. “I bet you do, you just haven’t seen them yet. You’ll be fine.”

She finally went over, walking so slow I thought she would get left behind. She kept her arms crossed tight against her chest and made sure to stay on the outside of the group. They started filing out of the room and she glanced back at me one last time. I raised my hand and waved until she turned around.

“You’ll be fine,” I said, even though I knew she couldn’t hear me. Maybe I said it to comfort myself.

I waited in the auditorium with the other parents, standing next to the tiny chairs until my knee got to hurting so bad I had to sit back down. I hadn’t been in the school in a long time, not since Billie had graduated. I didn’t remember what the inside of the high school looked like until I stepped through the front doors. Then it all came back to me. The lacquered wood and large white
tiles. The smell of cafeteria food when I had to come down and pick Billie up after she had gotten in trouble. Fighting, skipping classes and mouthing off at the teachers. The principal and I were on a first name basis by the time she finally dropped out for good.

But that was Billie. Nicole would be different; Kenny and I had made sure of that. Church every Sunday. Private school all the way from kindergarten, until Kenny retired and we didn’t have the overtime money coming in to cover tuition. This child would graduate if I had to carry her across the stage myself.

Nicole was smiling when she got back from the tour, moving her hands fast like a bird.

“I thought I wouldn’t know anybody,” she said. “But I do know some of them.”

She started naming folks, counting them out on her fingers. I pulled myself up from the chair again and waited until my knee felt solid enough to stand on.

“You excited now, ain’t you?”

She smiled a little and stood close to me so I could lean on her for my first few steps up the aisle. “Just a little bit,” she said.

Dr. Brown was gone when I reached the room, but there was another woman sitting at the table. Angela Hacken, a social worker. Another tall girl, braids halfway down her back. Her handshake was cold and dry.
“Mrs. Anderson, are you the legal guardians?”

“Yes.”

“Where are Nicole’s parents, if I may ask?”

I knew what Kenny was going to say before he said it. “Dead.”

“Billie ain’t dead,” I said immediately. She was dead to him, dead for years. Kenny had let her go, cut her line like she was a kite string tangled up in a tree. It took me a long time to forgive him for that. “We don’t know where she is.”

“And the father?”

“We never knew nothing about him,” Kenny said.

Detective Monroe wanted to know what time Nicole had left and the names of the girls she’d gone with. I let Kenny do the talking except when it came to describing what she was wearing.

“It’s a red dress with straps,” I said. “Come down to her knees. We got it from up at Penney’s. She picked it out, got shoes to match. Her hair was down,” I touched my shoulders. “Curled. It took me hours to do, combing them kinks out first. She wears glasses.” I pinched my eyes closed. “Y’all got her glasses down here somewhere? Because if the girl y’all brought down here don’t have glasses, then it’s not Nicole.”

Kenny sighed, exhaling and hunching his shoulders in the same movement. “My wife’s having trouble accepting this.” He said it as though he were apologizing to them.
“I can’t believe you said that in front of these people.” The first time in almost forty years of marriage, I wanted to smack his face. “I’m not crazy, Kenny. I just want to see my granddaughter before I believe all this. Y’all are saying she been beaten, raped, that you might have to take out her womb—last time I saw her she was waving goodbye.” My voice caught in my throat. “And I told her to have a good time.”

We had prayed for Billie. For years after we got married I watched the other married women I knew fill their houses with babies. I would babysit their kids and go home with tears in my eyes because it hadn’t happened for us. We had almost given up when we got her. I thought I was going through menopause and come to find out I was finally pregnant. The girl was headstrong from the day she was born. Rotten spoiled. Ran away for a year when she was 16. When she came home, she was pregnant with Nicole. I had hoped that becoming a mother would bring a change on her. Nicole wasn’t even a month old when she left. Took my gold earrings and her father’s wallet, ain’t heard from her since.

Kenny and I were parents again, raising Nicole. But she turned out to be the total opposite of Billie. They didn’t even look alike. Billie is short and full-breasted, like me. She has my feet, high arches and stubby toes. Nicole is tall, thin arms and legs, big hands. She inherited somebody’s flat feet and long toes, maybe her father’s.
I knew my husband was afraid of Nicole turning wild like that. So scared of the possibility that he didn’t want Nicole to do anything Billie had done.

I let a few days pass before I brought up the subject of homecoming again. I knew from years of marriage the best way to get Kenny to let me have something is to ask him when he is almost asleep. I caught him napping in the living room, feet all propped up on my mother’s afghan.

“Kenny,” I said, easing the blanket from under his ankles. “I think you should let Nicole go to this dance.”

“Lena, what you talking about now?” he mumbled.

“I’m talking about Nicole wanting to go to homecoming. You can’t treat her like she’s Billie.”

I was surprised when he opened his eyes and looked at me. “Lena, I been thinking.”

“Yes?” I tucked the afghan until my arm.

“She is doing good in school…”

“Mm hmm.”

“She gone have to be home by ten o’clock.”

I leaned over and kissed his forehead. “I’ll let her know.”

“They’re coming,” Kenny said. He stopped pacing, stuffing his fists into his pockets.
The doctor came in first, and then an orderly wheeled the bed into the room and pushed it against the wall where my chair sat. My leg was stiff from sitting, but I didn’t want to get up anyway. Then I’d have to look. I’d have to know.

“She’ll probably be asleep for a few hours still,” Dr. Brown said.

Kenny stood still against the wall, staring at the bed. Maybe he didn’t recognize her. Maybe it wasn’t Nicole. I grabbed one of the bed rails and pulled myself up from the chair. The girl in the bed didn’t look anything like my grandchild. Or any child I knew. Her face was bruised dark and swollen. Her arms looked as though they had been pulled through a patch of thorns.

“Kenny, this isn’t Nicole,” I glanced at my husband. “Come here, see? This ain’t her.”

He leaned back against the wall and shook his head. I stared at the girl, so young, her chance at motherhood finished before it began. I put my hand up to touch her arm. “You poor child,” I said. I looked at her big hands, her narrow fingers. She had clear nail polish with sparkles in it. Like Nicole.

“No.” I took a step back, bumping in the chair behind me. “No.”

“Lena,” Kenny said. He caught me before I fell and tried to put his arms around me, but I pulled away.

“No,” I covered my face with my hands. “Can’t be. Can’t be.” I looked at Dr. Brown, then at my husband. He tried to hug me again and I let him hold me
for a second. “That just can’t be her.” I wanted it to be somebody else’s child.

Anybody else’s. I stepped to the end of the bed and pulled the sheet away.

I knew it was her when I saw the flat feet and long skinny toes. It had been her all the time. “You poor baby, you poor sweet child. What they done to you?” I grabbed her feet and bent over the bed, pressing her toes to my cheeks. My tears dripped onto her ankles. I rocked on my heels, ignoring the pains shooting up my leg.
T.J. held the handlebars of his blue BMX while his younger brother climbed on. Anthony’s legs dangled over the ground and he wobbled on the cushioned seat.

“You gotta hold your legs out so your feet don’t get caught in the spokes,” T.J. said as he straddled the crossbar. He raised the kickstand with the heel of his Converse. “You’re gonna lose those flip-flops.”

“I won’t,” Anthony said, wrapping his arms around T.J.’s waist. “I know how to keep them on.”

T.J. shook his head and lifted his feet onto the rigid pedals. Pebbles popped beneath the tires as they coasted down the gravel driveway. T.J. twisted the handlebars to the left when they reached the sidewalk and started to pedal.

It was a sticky summer day with breezes that only ruffled the tops of the tall maple trees lining the street. The smooth sidewalk was usually easy to ride on, but Anthony kept shifting on the seat and sweat beaded up on T.J.’s forehead as he struggled to maintain balance.

He paid no attention to the tidy yards of the neighboring houses. He’d been inside most of them and knew they were all the same, two-bedroom Cape Cods with leaky basements and small bedrooms. His mother had painted their garage red to make it stand out. T.J. kept his bike in the garage at night. During
the day, he was on it from sun-up until the streetlights came on. He tore through
the neighborhood, loving the sound of the tread gripping the sidewalk.

Too bad Anthony doesn’t have a bike, he thought.

They neared the end of the block and T.J. squeezed the handbrakes and
slowed to a stop near a brick building on the corner. He wasn’t allowed to ride
on main streets so he helped Anthony down and pushed the bike to the front of
the building.

“Hurry up,” he said, glancing back over his shoulder. Anthony poked his
tongue between his teeth and ran towards him.

His brother’s brown thighs jiggled beneath his shorts and he was out of
breath when he reached the corner. T.J. patted Anthony’s back and brushed a
hand over his curly hair.

They turned the corner and walked next to the building. T.J. checked his
reflection in the window. His tan skin shone bright in the glass and he noticed
an old scar, where his mother had once nicked him in the forehead with the
clippers. His hand-me-down red shirt had a hole in the side and he stuck his
finger through and touched his ribcage.

They stopped in front of The Newsstand and he motioned for Anthony to
take the handlebars. “Watch my bike, I’ll be back.”

He went inside and stood next to the counter, staring at the candy in the
case. Splaying his fingers on the glass, he counted the boxes of Jolly Joe’s and
Mike & Ike’s laid out in neat rows. Chocolate bars, Snickers, Babe Ruths and
Three Musketeers were stacked next to packages of Skittles and Starburst. The cheaper candies, plastic tubs filled with Twizzlers, Chick-O-Sticks and Jolly Ranchers, were on top of the counter.

The cashier was an elderly Arab woman with a large, hairy mole on her lip. T.J. had never been able to avoid staring at her mouth when he spoke to her. She had her back turned to him, punching numbers on the lottery machine.

“I want these boxed: 789, 542, 222 and 725.” A tall, lanky man leaned against the counter, chewing a toothpick as he read the numbers off a long sheet of paper. “These straight: 842, 389…”

“Too fast,” the woman interrupted, flapping one hand in the air. “Slow down.”

T.J. drummed his fingers against the glass and looked out the window. Four motorcycles roared down the street before the woman finished with her customer.

“Yes,” she said, walking towards him. She was dressed in what T.J. imagined to be strips of a faded blue bed sheet and he tried to concentrate on the large black dot on her forehead instead of the large black dot on her lip.

“Hey, just a minute,” the man said. “I thought of something else.” He motioned for the woman to come back to the lottery machine.

She stopped and spun around to face him. “The boy,” she said.

“That boy can hold his horses a few more minutes. What he got to do but ruin his teeth with all that sugar?” The man stood and chuckled. “That’s what’s
wrong with young people today.” He took the toothpick from his lips, picked
lightly at his front teeth and pointed the thin wooden stick at T.J. “You was my
boy you wouldn’t be wasting no money on no candy. I tell you that.”

“Sir, what you need?” the cashier asked. She stepped in front of the lottery
machine, blocking the man from T.J.’s view.

T.J. ignored the gravely voice listing a new set of numbers. Again, he
looked inside the case, at the slick wrappers with sweetness inside.

The old woman placed her veined hand on the glass. “You want your
usual?”

He nodded and watched as she plucked a bag of Skittles with two thick
fingers. She dug into a plastic tub and grabbed a handful of green apple Laffy
Taffys.

“Sixty-five cent,” she said.

T.J. reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled dollar bill. He
handed it to her and slid the candy off the counter. She dropped his change into
his hand.

“You have a good day,” she said.

T.J. meant to smile back, but when he looked up, his eyes found the mole
and he backed away from the counter. “Thanks,” he mumbled.

He met Anthony outside the store and gave him his candy. His brother
snatched the wrapper from the square taffy and bit it in half.

“Thanks,” he said. Green spittle flew from his mouth.
T.J. tore the corner from his bag of Skittles and poured candy into his palm. He popped the whole handful into his mouth and chewed. “Let’s go the long way,” he said, lifting the kickstand. He pushed the bike between them as they walked down the sidewalk of the busy street. The aroma of fresh pizza reached them before they passed Gino’s. He swallowed the wad of fruity sugar, and it dropped heavy into his empty stomach. He paused in front of the open door and watched as a man—his white apron covered in greasy stains—slid a hot pizza into a delivery box.

“Let’s go home,” he said to Anthony. “Get on.”

The itch in his belly gave him strength and he pedaled hard. The bike thumped over the cracked concrete as they picked up speed. They passed Johnnie’s Beauty Salon and Ray & Jim’s barbershop and T.J. tightened his grip on the half-empty bag of candy clutched in his fist along with the handlebar.

“Hold on,” he yelled to his brother. He cut through a crowd of people standing in front of Dairy Queen and laughed as they jumped out of his way. T.J. aimed the bike for the street and they shot out over the swell of pavement. He pulled up on the handlebars, trying to jump the curb.

The front wheel crashed into the raised concrete and the bike popped into the air. Anthony screamed as he tumbled into a heap on the ground and T.J.’s Skittles flew from his hand as his chest smashed into the handlebars. The bike fell back and T.J. landed hard on the crossbar before falling into the street.
“Y’all okay?” A woman left the crowd in front of Dairy Queen and walked towards them.

Anthony hollered from where he lay on the ground, holding his head with both hands.

T.J. ignored both of them and lifted the bike, setting it upright on the sidewalk. The metal rim of the front wheel had separated completely. He worked the kickstand with his foot, then kneeled down and tried to pull the rubber over the bent rim.

“You’re not broken,” T.J. overheard the woman say to his brother, “Just banged up a bit.”

Tears welled in T.J.’s eyes as he tried to stretch the tire back into place. The woman’s denim skirt blocked his blurry view.

“Are you okay, young man?”

He nodded and wiped his eyes with his hand before standing and kicking a few scattered candies.

“Better get him home, then.” She nodded towards Anthony. “Gonna need to put an icepack on that knot on his head.”

Anthony was still crying and T.J. could see the growing lump on his forehead.

“Come on,” he said, pushing the bike forward to see if the front wheel would roll on the bent frame. He continued to ignore his brother’s cries as he
wheeled it back down the street. Anthony followed behind, holding his hand over his bruised head.

T.J. finally turned around after they passed Gino’s Pizza for the second time. “Shut up,” he said. “It’s your stupid fault my bike is messed up.”

“It’s not my fault,” Anthony said, wiping his tears with chubby hands.

“Yeah it is,” T.J. said. “Woulda made it if you weren’t so fat.”

“I’m not fat. And I’m telling Mommy you crashed me.”

T.J. sighed and kept walking, his shirt growing damp under his arms. When they reached their house, he hid the bike behind the garage. He used his key to open the side door and they went inside to the kitchen. Anthony pulled out a chair at the small kitchen table and collapsed into it, his shoulders shaking as he sniffled. T.J. went to the sink and ran cold water on a dishtowel.

He twisted it in his hands, wringing out the extra water, and gave it to his brother. “Here,” he said. “Put that on your head.”

T.J. walked down the hallway to the bathroom and raised his shirt to look at his stomach. He had a few small scratches and he found two band-aids in the drawer. He looked at himself in the mirror over the sink and fingered the scar on his forehead.

The television was on in the living room when he went back down the hallway. Anthony lay on the couch with the remote in his hand and the towel on his forehead. Tearstains marked his face and he looked up when T.J. sat in the chair next to the couch.
“I’m hungry,” he whined.

“Yeah, me too.” T.J. went to the kitchen and searched the empty refrigerator before slamming it shut. He grabbed the near empty package of bread and made a mayonnaise and sugar sandwich with the last two slices.

“Ant,” he called, slicing the sandwich in half. “Come here.”

They sat at the kitchen table and ate. T.J. stared at the bump on his brother’s forehead and wished he could make it disappear.

“Your head hurt?”

Anthony shrugged his shoulders and stuffed the white bread into his mouth. “Not really,” he said, his cheeks full. “We got Kool-Aid?”

T.J. shook his head. “Sugar water.” He got two plastic cups from the counter and filled them with water, then added spoonfuls of sugar to each. He swirled the water with his finger and handed one cup to his brother. He sipped from his own, sloshing the gritty water around in his mouth before swallowing.

They were still sitting at the table when their mother rattled the side door. “Somebody come open the door,” she yelled.

T.J. got up to let her in and she stepped inside balancing her purse and two grocery bags in her arms. “Get the rest of the stuff from the car,” she said walking towards the counter.

When T.J. came back in the house with two more bags from the trunk of her Sentra, his mother was leaning over Anthony’s chair, examining the bump on his head.
“What happened?” She looked at her older son, her voice sharp.

Anthony spoke immediately, “T.J. crashed his bike in front of Dairy Queen.”

“I took him to get some candy,” he said.

“You rode that bike on Copley Road?” Her voice was lethal quiet.

He nodded.

“Ain’t I told you about that?”

He nodded again.

“Go outside and get a switch,” she turned her back on him and shooed Anthony out of the room.

The pear tree next to the garage was the only tree young enough for him to pull a small branch from. It suffered every time he was in trouble and he worried that he might one day kill it with his behavior.

He tested the flexibility of a few limbs before breaking one off. He plucked the leaves from the length, leaving small knobs that he knew would scratch against his skin.

His mother stood at the sink when he went back in the house. Barefoot and rinsing collard greens under running water. Anthony’s laughter traveled from the living room. She turned away from the sink and nodded, flicking extra water from her fingertips before holding out her hand for the switch.

T.J. was more afraid of his mother than his father. His father gave beatings for a reason, sat him down and explained his punishment in a clear
voice. His mother beat him as if it was a pastime, until she was tired and breathless.

In one fluid movement, she yanked his shirt up and twisted it in her fist, trapping his arms inside. In the hazy redness, Anthony could smell his musty shirt and hear the whistle of the switch before it sliced into his back.

“Listen. To what. I tell you,” her dark voice penetrated the fabric as she spun him around.

He hollered and tried to pull away, the tight space inside the shirt growing stuffy and humid as he struggled against her.

He heard the switch hit the floor and the sound of his mother’s bare feet scraping against the linoleum as she stepped away. His arms remained over his head as the shirt slipped into place. Through tears, he saw that his mother was back at the sink, her hands submerged under a sea of green leaves.

The switch, broken in half, lay at his feet.

T.J.’s father kneeled next to the broken bike and ran his oil-stained thumb over the cracked wheel frame. “We don’t buy you things for you to destroy them,” he said. “You know that, don’t you son?”

T.J. nodded, scuffing his toe against the cement floor of the garage. His father didn’t raise his head. “I didn’t hear you.”

“Yes, sir,” he said.
“I expect you to take better care of your things.” He wheeled the bike to the back of the garage and leaned it against the wall.

T.J. spoke to his father’s uniformed back. “But, Dad, Anthony was weighing me down. I wouldn’t have crashed if I wouldn’t have had to ride him.”

His father turned away from the bike and straightened his shoulders. He walked towards T.J and put a heavy hand on his shoulder. “I know it’s hard to have a younger brother,” he said, walking towards the driveway. “But it’s your responsibility to watch Anthony.”

“But, Dad, you don’t know what it’s like…” His voice faded out and he stared at the nametag on his father’s blue shirt. Tight white stitches, now mottled with flecks of motor oil, spelled “Thomas” against a black square.

“Sure I do.” His father reached for the heavy garage door and pulled it down. “You’ve got one brother, I have three.”

T.J. followed him into the house. His mother sat at the kitchen table, a dishtowel balled up in her left hand. She leaned back in the chair when they came in and crossed her legs at the ankle.

“Well,” she said, her brown eyes glanced at T.J., then his father. “Can you fix it?”

“Frame is bent.” His father washed his hands in the sink. T.J. leaned against the wall and watched as he kneaded the bar of Dial in his hands, the
yellow soapsuds turned gray before they were rinsed from his fingers. T.J. knew that skin around his nails would still be stained black.

“I can get a new one from a scrap yard,” his father said, wiping his hands on a paper towel. He crouched and aimed for the trashcan in the corner, then shot the crumpled napkin across the room.

“Why?” T.J.’s mother stood and walked to the stove and lifted the lid on the skillet to peek beneath. “So he can crash it into something else? Almost gave Anthony a concussion.”

“He’s a boy, Renee,” his father said, facing her. “Boys have accidents.”

His parents stood in the middle of the kitchen, his mother so much shorter than his father.

“You’re too hard on him,” his father said.

She shrugged, tracing the white lettering on his father’s shirt with a finger.

“T.J.,” she said. “Go wash up for dinner.”

He was on his way down the hall when he heard her response. “I got to be,” she said. “World ain’t gone be as soft as you are.”

“Slow down,” Anthony said.

“Shut up,” T.J. said.

“Slow down. I can’t walk that fast.”
T.J. stopped, but didn’t turn around. He kicked the grass with his sneaker and waited until he felt Anthony’s heat behind him. He started walking again, faster.

“T.J.” Anthony whined, “You’re sposed to be watching me.”

“I’m always supposed to be watching you.” He slowed his steps and waited for Anthony. “Just one more block.” He pointed towards their elementary school playground. “We’re almost there.” He set the pair of white leather skates on the ground and kneeled to tie his shoe. He’d found them in the back of his parents’ closet.

His mother hadn’t skated in a long time, and he remembered when she used to let him wear her skates and play in the basement. At first he’d had to hold on to the washer and dryer, but after a few days he could make it from one dusty corner to the other.

He shared the skates with Anthony when they got to the playground; they both wore one and used their other foot to help push them along. Then Anthony played on the swings while T.J. skated by himself.

T.J. sat on the bottom of the slide and put his sneakers back on. He examined the leather for scuffmarks. He tied the laces of the skates together and looped them around his neck.

“Ant,” he said, glancing up at his brother. “Let’s go.”
Anthony had just started climbing the monkey bars and he had his tongue poked between his teeth as he reached for another metal bar. “Hold on, T.J. I never been this high.”

T.J. set the skates on the ground. “I bet I can beat you to the top.” He grabbed a rung and started climbing.

“No, you can’t,” Anthony said.

T.J. was halfway to the top when he noticed a group of teenagers walking towards the playground.

“Hey, Ant, hurry up.”

“I’m scared, T.J.”

“Come on, you can make it,” T.J. said. He moved diagonally on the bars, towards his brother. “I’ll help you.” He braced Anthony’s back with his body.

“If you make it, I’ll get you some green apple Laffy Taffys the next time we go to the candy store.”

“I want banana this time,” Anthony said, grabbing the next rung.

“Okay, banana, sure.” T.J. glanced to where the teens had gotten closer.

“Come on, Ant.”

When they reached the top of the monkey bars, they sat on the flat triangular panel and stared down at the woodchip-covered ground.

“I made it,” Anthony said, smiling. “Never made it all the way before.”
“Come here, little man. I got something for you.” One of the teens had stepped away from the group and walked towards them. His denim shorts sagged below his knees and he held his crotch in one hand.

“Come here, little dude,” he said again.

T.J. put his arm around Anthony’s shoulders and shook his head.

“What you messing with them little kids for?” Another teenager spoke up, a girl with a tight purple shirt and hair to match.

“I just want to see if they want to hit this,” he said, waving his hand in the air.

He walked closer to the monkey bars and T.J. noticed that he held a small brown cigarette between his fingers.

“What’s these?” He leaned over and picked up the skates.

“Hey, those are Mommy’s,” Anthony yelled.

“Come get ‘em,” the teenager said. “What you doing wearing girls’ skates anyway?”

He glanced at a power cable overhead, stretching to the school. He tossed the skates in the air, but they fell and the heel of one skate smacked him in the shoulder. “Shit!”

The group of his friends burst into laughter as they continued walking through the playground.

“See, told you to stop messing with them kids.”
“Fuck y’all,” he said, holding his shoulder with one hand. He glanced at T.J. and Anthony on the monkey bars and bent down to get the skates again.

T.J. watched as he tossed them over his head and the tied laces looped once, twice around the electric cable.

The teenager laughed. “See can’t you get mommy’s skates down now, little faggots.” He grabbed his crotch again and jogged to catch with his friends.

T.J. waited until the teens had gone before he motioned to Anthony to climb down.

“Why they do that?” Anthony asked.

T.J. scratched his head. “Because,” he said. “They bigger than us.”

They didn’t speak as they climbed down from the monkey bars and left the playground. They walked side by side as they headed back home, cutting though a large field and over a small footbridge that crossed a small creek.

“Can you get Mommy’s skates down?” Anthony asked.

“No,” he spoke slowly, ending the word with a sigh. “They’re gone.”

And when his mother found out, she might beat him with the entire pear tree. He sat on grass that edged the creek and stared into the small stream of water.

“Are you gonna tell?” he asked.

“No,” Anthony shook his head and sat next to him. “I won’t.”

“Promise?”

Anthony nodded and ripped tufts of grass with his hands and threw them into the water.
“Is this where the toilet water goes?” Anthony asked.

T.J. sniffed. The water was clear and didn’t stink. “I think this is where it comes from. Look.” He pointed at a tiny frog swimming in the water. “He could be in the toilet tonight when we get home.”

“Really?” Anthony whispered, his wide eyes staring at the frog.

“Really,” T.J. said. “Let’s catch it and take it home.” He slid down the bank and into the water. He helped Anthony jump down and they crouched on the rocks, searching for the frog.

“Did you hear that?” Anthony whispered. He put his finger over his lips.

T.J. narrowed his eyes and waited until he heard the noise again. “It’s coming from there.” He pointed towards the large corrugated pipe under the footbridge and they tiptoed through the water.

“There.” Anthony pointed at a dirty orange and white striped kitten crouched next to a rock just inside the sewer.

“Ooh,” Anthony said. “Here, kitty.”

T.J. crept closer, dragging his knees in the mud. “Hi, cat,” he whispered.

The kitten brushed its raised back against the ridged metal wall, but as T.J. moved closer, it hissed and slowly moved backwards.

“Shh,” he said, reaching out his hand towards the animal. “Come here little kitty.”
The cat moved towards T.J.’s outstretched hand and he brushed his fingers over its furry head. He wished he could take it home and hide it in his room.

“He’s cute.” Anthony stepped forward and touched the kitten’s head.

“Where’s his mommy?”

“She left,” T.J. said. He frowned. “We can’t keep it,”

“I know. Mommy won’t let us.”

T.J. sighed and rested his back against the walls of the sewer. “I wish we could.”

“Me too.”

He felt the cat’s small ribcage when he picked it up and set it in his lap.

“Can we name it?”

T.J. shook his head. “Go away,” he said, pushing the cat off of his lap. It purred and rubbed against his hand and he pushed it away again and stood.

“Let’s go,” he said to Anthony.

“Let’s stay, T.J. and play with him.”

“No,” he yelled, his voice echoed in the pipe. He walked back out into the creek. “Let’s go.”

Anthony sighed and walked away from the kitten, but it trailed after them.

“T.J., look. It’s following us.”
T.J. turned around and watched the kitten as it stepped through the water.

“Go away,” he yelled. He picked up a rock, threw it at the kitten and watched as it ran back into the dark pipe.

“Why’d you do that?” Anthony asked.

“Because.” T.J. picked up another rock and threw it into the darkness after the cat. “Because.”
Angel never did know how to cut a pineapple. In her kitchen, cutting a pineapple was probably the only thing at which I excelled. She’d been gifted with culinary skills I would never possess and it felt good to better her at something, even something as trivial as slicing fruit.

I felt her breath on my neck as I cut away the thick, scaly skin. She slid her arms around my waist and I flipped the knife in my hand and used the tip to poke her forearm.

“You are like a pineapple, Gi,” she whispered. “Tough on the outside, but sweet inside.”

I cut a large chunk from the top and fed her over my shoulder.

“Yes,” she said, slurping it from my fingers. “This is you.” She returned to her side of the room, the fruit poking the skin of her cheek.

I diced the pineapple and tossed the chunks in a glass bowl, saving the bottom piece for myself. I bit into it and the juice ran down my forearm and dripped from my elbow. The fruit rested on my tongue, sweet and tart at the same time.
Angel glanced up, noting the puddle of yellow liquid on the blue stone tiles. “You’re making a mess.” She threw a dishtowel at me, but I moved so it landed in the sink. “Jeez,” she sighed.

I leaned one hip against the counter, chewing slowly. “What are you making?”

She unscrewed the top off of a gallon container of olive oil and poured a liberal amount into a measuring cup before answering me. “Moisturizer for Sean.”

I grabbed the towel from the sink and wiped my arms, then bent over to clean up the floor. “He’s such a queen.”

“Do I make fun of your friends?”

“Do you allow me to have friends, Angel?”

“Touché.” She laughed and dodged the towel I threw back at her.

I pulled the refrigerator door and leaned on it, staring at the food inside. “Did I ever tell you about the time—do you feel like salad?”

“That’s fine.”

I grabbed a bag of precut salad mix, a tomato and an onion. “The time I almost choked to death?”

She shook her head and smiled, “No, I’m sure you haven’t. Do tell.”

I ignored the mocking tone in her voice. “Grandmother and I had shared a can of pineapple slices. After we finished eating them, I drank the juice and I
swallowed one of the small spikes. It got caught in my throat and I couldn’t breathe.”

Her smile faded, and she lifted her head to stare at me.

“Grandmother grabbed my arms over my head and popped me on the back so hard my ribs rattled. I coughed it up and obviously I’m still here, but that was when I made up my mind to…”

“Never eat pineapples from the can.” We finished the sentence together and she pointed her finger at me. “You made that up.”

“I didn’t.”

She washed her hands in the sink, and then shooed me away from the salad mix. I stood next to her, watching as she diced the tomatoes and cut the onions. She tossed the salad and her hair fell down her back, gold and red curls jumbled together. I leaned over and kissed the lobe of her ear; Angel smelled of bergamot, even over the residual pineapple and the onion.

She smiled again, sad and wanting, and I thought of the argument we’d had the week before. She’d been making dinner at the time, stirring her version of pasta sauce, which is somehow both sticky and chunky, but doesn’t cling to the noodles so much as it drowns them. It gives me gas.

She’d abandoned the stove to walk towards the table, lifted my foot from the seat of the chair and slid in. “Gianna, I want this.” She squeezed my big toe between her thumb and index finger.

110
“Angel.” I touched the hand she’d rested on the table. “It won’t matter to anyone but us.”

“So what? Who else does it need to matter to? I want to have the ceremony.”

I cast my eyes towards the stove. The sauce bubbled, splattering the white counter with splotches of red. “Your sauce.”

She stared at me for a few long seconds, then sighed and pushed the chair back, allowing the heel of my foot to thump against the tiled floor.

It seemed a waste of time to me. But there would be no reasoning with her, her thin lips flattened and she pouted, choosing to eat her dinner from a bowl while standing in front of the microwave.

Later, I stood in the doorway of her office.

“You coming up?”

She replied to the computer screen. “I’m probably going to make a batch of soap, I’ll be up later.”

She slipped into bed much later, wound her arm around my waist and sighed.

I’d sent her flowers; we’d made love in her sacred space and on the surface all was well. However, there remained a silent existence in our house, her want and my resistance tousled as Isaac and the angel, each waiting on the other to give in.
The first woman I fell in love with was Lynda Carter. When I realized I was not like other girls I was terrified. No matter how hard I tried feign interest in boys, it didn’t take long for junior high school girls to figure out that I wasn’t like them. I never cared enough to deny it and for some reason, the rumors made me even more attractive to the boys. I was an enigma, a challenge, and I’d been told more than once, “girl, you don’t know what you’re missing.”

After I graduated from high school, I finally found the courage to tell Grandmother. She revved up her Hovercraft and ran over my feet as she sped from the room. We never spoke of it again. When she died, I was surprised that she had left her house to me instead of to my brother. I liked to think she was attempting to make amends.

Angel and I settled into bed, giggling as we discussed the hours of the day spent apart. The bed shifted as our cat, Walker, jumped on my feet. He crept between us; a velvet blade nestled amongst our shoulders, folds his paws under his chest and began to purr.

I sat up and scooped his black body from the bed, tucking him under my arm like a football. “Goodnight, Walker,” I said, tossing him out into the hallway. We heard his indignant meow from the other side of the closed door.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you,” Angel touched my arm as I returned to bed. “Paul came over today.”
The name was not familiar to me. “Paul?” I rearranged the blanket over our feet.

“You remember Paul, we went to school together? I introduced you to him at that Halloween party. I was Wonder Woman and you were—”

“Not enjoying myself,” I interrupted, punching a dent in my pillow. “I don’t remember him.”

“Doesn’t matter anyway,” she said. “We’re going out to lunch this Saturday. Do you want to come?”

I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head against the pillow. “Not interested.”

“Fine.” She sighed and turned her body away from me, facing the wall.

I could almost hear Angel’s frown and I knew she wanted me to touch her, place my palm on the smooth skin of her back or run my fingertip over the curve of her earlobe. I tucked my hands beneath my body and stared at the ceiling.

Frantic knocks accompanied the screeching doorbell and I met Walker in the foyer. He hissed at the door, his tail a shaggy exclamation point.

Angel’s twin sister, Courtney, huddled against the doorjamb, her two daughters stood beside her, hugging each other. Her lips and eyes were swollen and bruised and she wore nothing but a large T-shirt.
I heard Angel gasp, and her bare feet made slapping sounds against the hardwood floor as she hurried towards the door. She stepped around me and threw her arms around her sister’s neck.

“Oh, Courtney,” she cooed as if speaking to a newborn. I took the girls to the spare bedroom and made them lie down, knowing they wouldn’t sleep.

I went to the kitchen where Courtney and Angel were at the table. Angel held a towel-wrapped ice pack to her sister’s eye.

“Why do you let him do this to you?” she asked.

“Ang, I don’t know. He just—gets this way sometimes. I’m not going back, I swear it. I told him last time…” Courtney’s voice broke and she sobbed in her sister’s arms. “Oh, God, Ang. What am I going to do?”

Though Courtney and Angel shared the same features, Courtney’s were somehow softer. Dull green eyes and sunken cheeks. She had nothing but her children and a torn grocery bag full of panties. It wasn’t the first time she’d fled Brown, and I mentally prepared myself for the routine: chocolate smudged into the carpet, piss-stained mattresses, young laughter and loud tears.

The girls spent at least three months out of the year rooming at our house. Brown would come, his tail between his legs, wanting his family. And Courtney would go back.

Angel sent Courtney to bed with the girls and we sat at the small round table, my hand covering hers.
Brown waited two days.

He knocked on the front door and his daughters peeked through the blinds.

“It’s Daddy,” Kaila shouted, her face full of happy recognition. Morgan’s eyes widened and she tiptoed away from the window.

Kaila ran to the door; Morgan joined me in the shadow of the hallway. Brown lifted his younger daughter into his arms as he and Courtney spoke on the porch. Courtney’s fear was evident in her stance, legs askew, arms folded across her chest. Her eyes bounced off Kaila’s face, Brown’s chest, the painted wood of the porch, the doorknob; she never met his eyes.

“Gigi,” Morgan whispered and her hand crept up my thigh.

I smiled down at her. “You want a popsicle, muffin face?”

“Can I have red?”

“Of course.” I glanced at Courtney before we abandoned the hallway and went into the kitchen.

Morgan had just bitten off the tip of her cherry Popsicle when her mother called for her.

“Morgan, come say hi to Daddy.”

Empowered by the red Popsicle, she moved towards the door with proud strength.
The half-apologetic smile on Brown’s face disappeared when he saw me. He and I had spoken less than ten words to each other in five years. Our communication had been mostly gestural, consisting of grunts and nods.

“What the hell do you want?” he said, jerking his head towards me. He was built like the Juggernaut with a thick body, thick neck and thick head.

“Brown,” Courtney said, and her hands almost dared to touch his arm.

I ignored him and addressed his daughter. “Kaila, would you like a popsicle too?”

Kaila nodded and wiggled out of her father’s arms. The screen door barely closed behind us before Brown grunted.

“I told you I ain’t want my kids around them dykes, didn’t I?”

I ushered Kaila into the kitchen. She accepted the purple Popsicle I gave her, held her back straight and asked, her hazel eyes wide, “Gigi, what’s a dyke?”

The hot dogs sizzled as I slid them on the grill. I placed them between chicken breasts and wings. Waves of visible heat pushed against my forearms as I closed the lid. Morgan and Kaila ran past me, racing from one end of the yard to the other.

“I won,” Kaila screamed, jumping up and down. Two silky ponytails bounced against her shoulder blades. “I beat you.”
Morgan squealed and pawed the air near her sister’s back, but Kaila arched away and laughed as she escaped. Their tawny limbs circled their mother and aunt as they chased each other.

Angel and Courtney crawled on their knees, ripping up handfuls of grass within the square she had marked off with twine.

“Coming along,” I said, walking towards them.

Angel smiled at me from under her wide-brimmed hat; her face freckled from the sun.

“I’ll put the tomatoes here, by the fence.” She pointed at the bare dirt at the edge of the lawn. “Then rosemary here.” I followed the line of her thin finger. “Then lavender and basil.” She stood and brushed dirt from her knees. I stepped inside the square and she linked her arms through mine. “And here, okra. For you.”

I pulled my arm away from hers and took a step back. “Yuck, I hate okra.” She stared at me. “I thought you liked it.”

I shrugged. “Must have been some other black chick you dated.”

Courtney sat up, tufts of grass in each hand. Her sunhat slipped off as she tilted her head and laughed, deep and heavy as if it was a breathing exercise. Her mouth opened, exposing a missing molar.

I had never seen her laugh before.

“You two are funny,” she said, standing. She leaned over to pick up her hat and waved to the girls. “Come on girls. We have corn to shuck.”
Angel and I watched them troop towards the house. She turned to me, her hands on her hips. “Gi,” she said. “Our yard is big enough to have a ceremony out here.”

I squeezed her arm. “Let me check on the meat.”

I walked away, leaving her in the stripped patch of dirt.

I did not trust Paul. He looked to me like someone whose sister Angel would have dated. Light, both in build and in color. Towards me he was airy, a friend of a friend.

I followed their laughter from the front door to the kitchen. The arms of their chairs touched as they sat at the small table, their heads bent over a stack of paper. Walker, coiled up at their feet, raised his head when he saw me.

“Hello, Gianna,” Paul said.

“Paul.”

“Look,” Angel held a thin sheet of bumpy paper up towards the light.

“Paul brought handmade paper to package the soap in.”

“I thought you were making dinner.”

Her smile faded and Paul spoke up. “Angel,” he said, pride evident in his voice, “is going to do a show, she rented a booth at the art fair.”

Her smile restored itself and she beamed at him. “It was Paul’s idea. You know the craft fair they have every year at the St. Andrew’s? I never would have thought of it.”
I turned away and opened the refrigerator. “Then I guess it’s good that you have Paul.”

I heard her chair scrape against the floor as she pushed away from the table. She crossed the room and stepped in front of me, grabbing a package of ground beef from the bottom shelf of the refrigerator.

“You should come, Gianna.” She grabbed a fork from the drawer and pierced the plastic covering the meat.

“Yeah,” Paul said from the table. “You’re good at selling things.”

I turned my head to stare at him. “I’m a real estate agent, Paul. It’s not exactly the same thing.”

“Selling is selling,” he said, grinning.

I closed the refrigerator door harder than I’d meant to. “Where are Courtney and the girls?”

“Library,” Angel said, dumping the raw beef into a skillet.

I watched her shoulders move as she stabbed the meat with the fork. I imagined the basement of the Catholic church filled with rows of tables covered with knitted afghans. Homemade knickknacks with Shrinky Dinks tags labeling the prices. Not my idea of a good time.

I looped my arms around her waist and kissed her collarbone. “Do your thing, Ang. Have fun.”

I left the room, two pairs of green eyes cutting into my back.
“My classes start next week,” Courtney said. She smiled, pouring batter on the waffle iron. “I’m so excited.”

“What are you studying again?” I handed Angel a spatula and watched as she flipped an egg.

“Dental hygiene,” Angel reminded me.

“Hygienists make a nice amount of money,” Courtney sat at the table and helped the girls fit puzzle pieces together. “I get this degree and we can get our own place.” Her eyes traveled the cerulean walls towards the ceiling.

“It’s a fresh start,” Angel said.

We were all startled by a loud knock on the front door. Angel glanced at Courtney.

“It’s Brown,” she said. “I know it.”

They left the kitchen with Kaila following behind them. Angel returned a few seconds later, nodding when she met my eyes. She returned to the stove and I helped Morgan put her puzzle pieces back in the box.

Courtney appeared in the doorway a few moments later. “Morgan, go say hello.” She waited until her daughter disappeared down the hallway. “I wish he would stop coming over.”

“Tell him not to,” Angel said.

Courtney rolled her eyes. “Brown has never listened to anything I ever said.”

“Get a restraining order,” Angel said.
Courtney frowned, her lips curved in the same way Angel’s did when she was annoyed. “I can’t do that, Ang. I can’t cut him off from the girls.”

“I’ll talk to him,” I offered. I didn’t expect either one of them to take me seriously.

Angel looked up from the skillet and Courtney leaned over, her hazel eyes boring into mine. “He won’t listen to you either,” she said after a long pause. “He hates you, Gianna. More than Angel, I think. For being what you are.”

“Black?”

She shook her head. “No, gay.”

I shrugged. “It’s up to you.”

“No,” she said, stretching the word into two syllables. “No. This is something I have to do.” She flattened her palms on the table and stood. She glanced at Angel before leaving the kitchen.

Angel shook her head at me, pulling plates from the cabinet.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said, and her face broke into a smile. “I didn’t expect you to say that.”

I blew her a kiss and she raised her hand as if to catch a fly ball. A loud crash rattled the windows and we heard Courtney scream.

Angel still had the spatula gripped in her fist as she ran from the kitchen.

I grabbed the cordless and followed, my finger already resting on the nine.
Kaila and Morgan stood in the yard, watching with wide eyes as their father slammed the door to his car and threw it in reverse. Angel jumped off the porch and ran at the car, brandishing the utensil in the air. He sped down the driveway, tires squealing as he peeled down the street.

Courtney grabbed the painted railing and pulled herself up from the wooden floor, holding her hand over her face. I offered my hand to help her, but she brushed it away.

“I’m okay,” she said, wiping tears from her eyes. “I’m fine, dammit.”

I sat on the porch, watching as the sun set into a sea of purples and pinks. Lightning bugs dotted the front yard and katydids sang a chorus under the painted planks. Angel brushed her hands over my short Afro, jojoba oil coating her fingertips.

“It’s different, Gianna. When I am with Paul, the world assumes we are a couple. And...I like it. We fulfill this expectation—yet it’s our little secret that we don’t. That we’re really not a couple at all.”

“What does it matter how people view you, Angel?” I squeezed the half-empty bottle of oil between my fingers, making the plastic pop. “You are a lesbian.”

“You know how it is with us. They look at us and see colleagues, neighbors, at the most, good friends. Until we hold hands, or hug too long, or heaven forbid, kiss. Then...it’s different. You know how it is.”
“I know it doesn’t make a difference. Doesn’t make a damn bit of difference what people think.”

The hem of her floral summer dress swept across my toes as she stepped in front of me and sat on the porch swing. We rocked and stared out over the yard as the sky dimmed and stars began to twinkle.
Sascha stopped typing to reach across her desk and pick up the ringing phone. “Thank you for choosing Northern Trust, this is Sascha. How can I help you?”

“Sascha, this is Tracey.”

Sascha would have recognized her employee’s voice even without the smack of gum in her ear. She winced and tucked the phone into her shoulder so she could return her right hand to the keyboard. “Yes?”

“I’m calling off. I can’t come in today.”

“Tracey…” Third time in two weeks.

“Me and Greg got into a fight last night and he took the car when he left. I just—I don’t know what to do,” Tracey said, her voice wavering. The gum popping faded into loud sniffs.

The characters on her monitor blurred as Sascha narrowed her eyes at the screen. A fight this time, earlier this week it had been a sick baby and last week she’d had to take her mother to dialysis.

“You can’t keep doing this, Tracey. You’ve only been employed here for seven months—”
Tracey interrupted, “I know, I know. Just seems like everything is falling apart. I just don’t think I can do it by myself. I mean, the kids and my mother and everything.”

Sascha’s fingers slid from the keyboard and she leaned back in the ergonomic chair. “You’ve already been doing it by yourself,” she said.

“I know, but with everything going on...”

Sascha frowned and moved the phone from her ear as Tracey continued to whine. She glanced at the clock above her desk, then across the lobby of the bank to where Carrie stood in her window. She waved until Carrie looked over and then pointed towards the ATM machine. Carrie nodded and turned around, walking towards the back of the building. “Listen,” she said, interrupting Tracey mid-sentence. “I know you don’t believe it right now, but everything will work out. I have to help Carrie set up, so I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

She sat up and put the phone down slowly, tapping her fingers against the wood grain of her desk as she studied the lobby. Crimson chairs and fake potted plants lined the windows facing the parking lot. The vault stood directly across from her desk, the heavy silver door swung open to reveal rows of safety deposit boxes inside. She stood and crossed the lobby, walking past the teller windows and avoiding the velvet ropes designating the customer line. The vault was like a meat locker, freezing during the winter, and Sascha shuddered as she crossed the threshold. Bypassing the safety deposit boxes, she kneeled in front of the cash vault and spun the first half of the combination from memory. Carrie would
enter the second half after she finished servicing the ATM machine. She turned in the small space, avoiding the 15-pound sacks of loose change on the floor and unlocked her personal vault drawer.

Sascha abandoned the vault and carried her drawer to Tracey’s empty window. As she pried the lid from the drawer, she considered letting Tracey go. For an employee just out of her probationary period, she made way too many call-offs. But the branch was already short since Sharonda quit to go back to school. It was crazy to even think about firing Tracey until they’d at least found a replacement for Sharonda.

She logged onto the teller system at Tracey’s computer and grabbed a pack of fives from the drawer. Sascha split the stack of bills in half and let them glide through her fingers as she counted, her mind on all of the things that she probably wouldn’t get done. Tracy’s call-off meant that she had to work the line at least until after lunch. And there was that new accounts report that had to be finished; Mr. Johnson had an appointment…

Tracey had taped pictures of her children to the walls of her window. A cute little boy and a baby girl, about 6 months. She couldn’t remember their names. It was a cheap Polaroid with the kids crowded together on the Easter Bunny’s lap. Sascha smiled, thinking of her twin daughters, Noelle and Milan, when they were younger. Milan had always been afraid of costumed characters; the last time they’d gotten their pictures taken with Santa, she had peed on herself.
But that was years ago. Sascha frowned, squeezing the thick stack of fives in her hand. She slid a $500 strap over the bills and set them aside. Before she could enter the number into the computer, the paper strap popped apart and half of the fives floated to the floor.

“Dammit,” she said, bending to retrieve the money. She stood, firmly restrapping the money before tossing it back in the drawer. Sascha glanced up at the glass doors as a city snow truck passed, the angled plow spraying sludge beyond the curb and onto the sidewalk. Janice, the sales manager, had been behind the truck and Sascha watched as Janice turned into the parking lot and slid her Lexus in between Carrie’s Neon and her own Camry.

Janice’s red wool coat blew open in the wind, revealing her tight blue sweater, black skirt and mid-calf black leather boots. Not a professional bone in her body, Sascha thought. She always felt matronly around Janice, though she knew there was nothing wrong with her eight-year-old navy pantsuit.

Janice unlocked the door and came in, frowning when she noticed Sascha behind the teller line. “Tracey?” she asked. At Sascha’s nod, she shook her head, blonde curls moving slowly back and forth against the collar of her coat. “Gonna have to do something about that one.” She locked the door behind her and crossed the lobby to her desk, her stilettos clicking against the gray tiled floor.

“Anyway,” she said, speaking over her shoulder. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” Sascha returned, typing numbers on the computer.

“Isn’t Mr. Johnson coming in to sign off on his HELOC today?”
Sascha looked up from her computer screen to where Janice stood next to the coat rack. “Yes, he is.”

“Oh, okay,” she said, shaking her coat out before placing it on a hook.

“Well, since you’re going to be over there, I can meet with him for you.”

Carrie motioned from the ATM machine and Sascha chose not to answer Janice. After seven years, she knew her co-worker too well. Under the guise of helping, Janice would stick her pert little nose all up in Mr. Johnson’s face, trying to see if she could offer him something Sascha might have overlooked. Janice was the sales manager, but she liked to forget that everyone in the branch had to do a fair share of shucking and jiving in order to meet Northern Trust’s sales goals. Sascha practically had to pole dance to get that loan and she wasn’t planning on letting her younger, cleavage-showing co-worker mess up her deal.

After helping Carrie with the ATM machine, Sascha walked back to Tracey’s window and continued verifying her cash drawer.

“They’re waiting outside already?” Carrie said as she carried her own drawer to her window. “Well, it is the third.”

“Dammit,” Sascha said as she glanced up and saw the crowd of people gathering outside the door. “How could I have forgotten?”

Carrie chuckled, her fat fingers lighting fast on her keyboard. “I don’t know how you forgot Social Security check day, Sascha.”

Sascha glanced at the clock, two minutes to nine. “Where the hell is Amy?”

128
“Guess it’s just you and me.”

She stared at Carrie, the head teller, and seemingly, the only dependable employee working at the East River branch of Northern Trust Bank. “Well, at least you can laugh about it.”

Carrie shrugged and flipped her mousy brown hair off her shoulder. “What else can we do?” She stabbed the power button on the radio behind the counter and smiled when she found the jazz station. Kenny G’s cover of White Christmas. “Fifteen days, can you believe it?”

Sascha rolled her eyes. Christmas was the last thing on her mind. She saw Amy cutting through the throng of people outside and left the teller line to unlock the door. As soon as she touched the lock, the crowd moved forward, threatening to crush the small Asian teenager against the glass.

“Two more minutes,” Sascha said, opening the door and waving Amy inside.

“Aw, hell.” An old woman, her face lined with years of poverty, shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Watch say it’s 9 right now.”

“Two minutes,” Sascha said again, and then locked the door.

Amy had already shed her coat and ran into the vault to get her drawer. Sascha made a mental note to speak to her about her constant tardiness at the end of the day. She waited until Amy was at her window before unlocking the doors.
Customers streamed inside and lined up to either withdraw or cash their monthly social security benefit. Sascha thought fleetingly of returning to her desk to finish the report she’d been working on. It was due in the regional manager’s inbox by ten. One glance at the lobby and she knew she wasn’t going to make that deadline.

There was no break in the steady line of customers until just before lunch. Carrie took her half-hour break first and after Amy returned, five minutes late, with an Arby’s bag squished under her arm, Sascha had a chance to break for her desk.

She’d almost completed her report when Mr. Johnson’s lanky frame cast a shadow on her computer screen. “Mr. Johnson,” she said, standing to shake his hand. “Didn’t see you there. How are you?”

“Fair to middlin’,” he said, ignoring her hand. He tipped his tweed Kangol just slightly. “And you?”

Sascha pulled her hand back and crossed her arms over her chest. “Fine, thank you.”

“Look like y’all got a busy day,” He motioned his head over his shoulder at the customer line, which was beginning to lengthen again.

“Yes, sir,” Sascha said, nodding. She motioned for him to sit as she did and rummaged in her file drawer to get his folder.

Mr. Johnson leaned forward in his chair and winked. “You working hard or hardly working?”
Sascha smiled slightly. “Always working hard, Mr. Johnson,” she said.

Old flirt. Just sign the damn papers and go.

“How your husband?”

She opened the folder and slowly smoothed her palm against the cool manila before answering. “James is fine.”

Mr. Johnson lifted his hat to scratch his salt and pepper head. “Heard his daddy got sugar real bad.”

“Cancer,” she said, correcting him. “He’s supposed to start chemo this week.”

“James gone down?”

“Yes,” she said, her voice tight. Sascha had no doubt that Mr. Johnson knew the answer to every question he’d asked. It was a small town.

“Well, ain’t nothing wrong with a man going to see ‘bout his daddy,” Mr. Johnson said. He reclined in the chair and placed a cinnamon toothpick in the side of his mouth.

“No. Nothing wrong with that,” she said. Sascha could smell the cinnamon from across the desk. It made her nauseous. “We’re all praying he gets better soon. Now, I have the papers for your loan here—”

“Yeah, I got a few questions ‘bout that. I been talking with my wife—you know how y’all womens is—and she don’t think it’s a good time to be taking out no loan, what, with the economy the way it is and all. I was thinking, she might be right ‘bout this one. And that’s saying something right there.”
Sascha clenched her toes as he chuckled at his joke. She wanted to ram the loan papers down Mr. Johnson’s throat. But if she did that, she definitely wouldn’t meet her monthly sales goal. She had to put on her “Sascha charm,” as James called it, and talk Mr. Johnson into putting his signature on that dotted line.

Twenty minutes later, she was still talking, almost charmless, when Janice spoke up behind her.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Sascha, but there is a Mr. Garcia on line two.”

Janice stepped towards her desk and Sascha noticed Mr. Johnson’s brown eyes light up. She wouldn’t have been surprised if they’d rolled right out of his head and up Janice’s thighs. “Janice, can you take a message, please?”

“He says it’s urgent.”

Sascha glanced at Mr. Johnson, “Excuse me,” she said. She picked up her phone and pressed the line. “Yes, Mr. Garcia.”

Mr. Garcia, the principal of East River High School, had a mellow voice that was slightly pitched when he was angry. She’d gotten so used to hearing the annoying nasally tone that it was a surprise to hear him speak during school assemblies.

“Hello, Mrs. Love. I’ve been trying to reach you. I was calling to ask if you could come in for a conference this afternoon about your daughter.”

She vaguely remembered that he had left more than a few messages on her voice mail. Messages that she’d ignored. “Mr. Garcia, Noelle—”
“This is about Milan.”

Sascha’s eyebrows furrowed. “Milan?”

“I’m calling about her grades. She’s in my office right now.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand,” Sascha said. She looked up and Mr. Johnson waved before following Janice to her desk. Shit.

“—imperative that you come and speak with me as soon as possible.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose with her thumb and index finger. “I’ll be right down.”

Sascha nodded to the policeman standing next to the office door before she went inside. The redhead. He was the one that had slammed Noelle against a row of lockers that time. Said he was breaking up a fight.

The school secretary gave her a pained smile as she approached the desk. “He’s expecting you, go on in.”

“Thanks, Darlene,” Sascha said. She turned around, but the path to Mr. Garcia’s door was blocked by a set of legs. Somebody’s child, slumped down in the chair so far he was almost on the floor. The black hood covering his head didn’t even move when she cleared her throat.


“Man, come on,” he said from beneath his hood. He slid his pristine sneakers under the chair. “Damn.”
Sascha stared at the black hood for a moment before walking past. These kids. She gave a courtesy knock before opening the door.

Milan sat in one of the two chairs facing Mr. Garcia’s desk and Sascha took a seat in the other chair. She glanced at her daughter, but Milan didn’t look up. Brown strands veiled her eyes and Sascha could only see the tip of her nose, pointed towards the floor.

“Mrs. Love,” Mr. Garcia said. “As I mentioned on the phone, I’ve tried to reach you several times. I asked you to come down so we could discuss your daughter’s grades. As you know, the second grading period closes this week. In addition to failing four classes, Milan has been tardy quite a few times. Her teachers have expressed some concern since it’s unusual for—”

Sascha held up her hand to stop him. She turned to her daughter.

“Explain.”

Milan brushed the hair out of her face and shrugged, leaned forward in the chair and crossed her arms over her stomach.

“Milan, I am speaking to you.”

She shook her head, refused to look up.

Mr. Garcia cleared his throat. “I also noticed that Noelle has been absent for almost two weeks. Is she ill?”

“No,” Sascha said, her eyes still on Milan.
Sascha looked up as the principal rested his hairy arms on the thick piece of glass covering his desk. “East River prides itself on being a small, community-centered high school.”

She barely suppressed a groan. How many times had she heard this spiel? How many times had she delivered a watered-down version of this very same speech to James five years ago when she was trying to convince him to put a down payment on a house they both knew was way out of their price range?

He leaned forward as if he wanted to tell her a secret. “Sascha, I will remind you that we have free counseling available for our students. And the parents of our students.”

Sascha blinked at him. “Thank you, Mr. Garcia. It’s okay if I sign her out early?” She touched her daughter’s shoulder as she stood and held her hand out over the desk for the principal to shake.

It started sleeting as they left the school; the rhythmic tic of the windshield wipers was the only sound in the car. Sascha waited until they were a block away from the house before speaking. “What makes you think I have time for this, Milan? Running down here about your damn grades. Failing four classes—are you serious?” She asked. She slammed her foot against the brake pedal as they reached a stop sign. “So tell me, what is it?”

Milan didn’t answer.

“You and Roy have a fight?”
Milan wiped her eyes with one sleeve and turned her head towards the passenger window.

“Girl, I wish I had your problems. Some boy.” She reached across the seat and dug her index finger into her daughter’s shoulder. “You better get your shit together, Milan. I do not have the time or the energy to deal with your fuck-ups on top of everything else. I better not ever get another call from Mr. Garcia about you, you got that?”

“I’m sorry,” Milan said, her quiet voice echoed in the cabin.

“Well, that’s for damn sure,” Sascha said as she turned into the driveway. She pulled the collar of her navy pea coat tight around her neck as she got out of the car and jogged towards the side door. The mailbox was next to the door and she stuck her hand inside and got the damp envelopes before unlocking the door.

The sudden warmth welcomed her inside the kitchen and she shrugged off her coat and stepped out of her shoes. Sascha walked straight through the room, dropping her purse and keys on the breakfast table before heading down the hall to the living room.

Her favorite chair was right next to the door and she sank down on the brown leather. A movement caught her eye and she turned, her daughter hovered in the doorway. “Girl, if you don’t get out of my face.” Milan disappeared and a few seconds later, Sascha heard her going up the carpeted stairs.
She tucked her feet beneath her and leaned against the cushion. “Please,” she said, closing her eyes. The soft leather warmed slowly and Sascha felt as if she were being cradled. She opened her eyes and flipped through the mail. Bills. Cable, electric, gas, both credit cards and a bright pink envelope from Countrywide.

She leaned forward to toss the envelopes on the maple coffee table in front of the chair. Her eye caught the framed picture next to the mail and she picked it up. They’d been in South Carolina with James’ family. Probably six years ago. Milan and Noelle stood side by side, both of them holding up the striped bass they’d caught while fishing with their grandfather. She and James stood behind the girls, her arm wound around his waist as he beamed into the camera. He looked happy. She wanted to talk to her husband. The James that was in the picture.

Sascha wiped the dust from the glass over Noelle’s face with her finger before setting it down on the coffee table. She glanced at her watch and ran her fingers through her short bob before standing reluctantly. “Got to get back to work,” she muttered.

It was almost 6 o’clock when Sascha returned home from work. She stood in middle of the kitchen floor, her coat hanging off one arm as she ate a banana. Tossing her coat on the kitchen table, she went to the living room and sat down in the brown leather chair for the second time that day. She folded her arms over
her stomach and enjoyed the quiet. James had never cared for the beige Berber and heavy brown furniture, but it was her favorite room in the house.

Straining, she could hear music from Milan’s bedroom upstairs. Sascha leaned her head back on the chair and stared up at the ceiling. It wasn’t like Milan to be tardy. She’d never been in trouble at school. That was Noelle’s department. Sascha wished she would have asked that little punk J’Michael if he knew where her daughter was. He looked like the type she’d run around with.

She lifted her head and looked at the ugly framed mirror hanging over the fireplace. The room was too quiet. Her eyes fell on the empty spot in the corner. Normally by this time, she, James and the girls would have put up the Christmas tree.

“Momma,” Milan said, interrupting Sascha’s thoughts. She stood just inside the door, the cordless phone in her right hand. “Daddy wants to speak to you.”

Sascha held out her hand, then shooed Milan from the room. “Hello.”

“Sasch.”

His voice sent a warm tingle up her spine. “Yes.”

“Lanie told me about her grades. What’s going on?”

“She probably got into a fight with Roy. It’s nothing.”

“Did she tell you that?”

Sascha smoothed the textured arm of the couch with her palm. “What did she say to you?”

138
“She said she was having a hard time concentrating on her school work lately. She didn’t say why.”

Sascha shrugged. “It’s just that boy, James. It ain’t like she’s an A-student anyway.”

“I know she struggles. But she’s always tried and this isn’t like her. Failing four classes, Sascha, Jesus.”

“I know that,” she said, her voice sharper than she meant it to be.

“What about Noelle?”

“What about her?”

“How is she?”

Sascha paused, considering her options. “I haven’t seen her.”

“Today?”

“In a few days.”

“She ran away again? How long?”

She pictured him on the other end of the line, his forehead all puckered up as he shook his head. “James, Noelle is fine. I haven’t seen her in about a week but—”

“What? Why didn’t you call?”

“What were you going to do? Would you have come back home?”

“Sascha, you don’t know where she is – why haven’t you called the police?”
“She’s fine. I keep telling you. She comes home when we’re not here, taking food and clothes and stuff. She’s just rebelling right now.”

“You’ve always had excuses for her.”

“James, I’m not making excuses. I just don’t want her in any more trouble.”

“She’s already in trouble, Sascha,” he said, his voice flat. “Who is she staying with? Where is she sleeping? Call the police to find our daughter or I will.”

“Why don’t you then? Be more fathering than you’ve done in months,” she said. She ended the call and dropped the phone on the floor, then leaned forward and put her hands over her face. She’d forgotten to ask how his father was handling the chemotherapy. If he thought he might make it back home for Christmas. If he was working.

He wanted her to call the police, but she couldn’t. That was always his solution. Noe would come back home, she always did.

“Momma.”

Sascha raised her head and looked at her daughter. Milan leaned against the doorframe, wiggling her bare toes against the beige carpet. She was a teeny bit taller than her fraternal twin, a little heavier. They’d both inherited her husband’s nutty brown complexion, Sascha’s hazel eyes and sparse eyebrows. Milan had a birthmark the shape of a butterfly on the back of her left calf and
when the girls were babies that was the only way she and James could tell them apart.

“Did you eat lunch?” she asked.

Milan shook her head.

Sascha dug into her shirt and took a few bills from her bra. She unfolded the warm twenties in her hand before holding them out towards her daughter.

“Here, go get us something for dinner, please. Put the change in the tank and come straight back.”

Milan left and Sascha looked around the empty room. Things were different this year, but she and Milan could put up the tree over the weekend. She should have a tree.

She left the living room and went back to the kitchen. The oven light was on and she flicked it off. She opened the oven door and stuck her hand inside. It was cold. She frowned and walked to the refrigerator. Damn near empty except for condiments. She opened the freezer. Empty. Noelle had taken everything.

Sascha slammed the freezer door and walked out of the kitchen, jogged up the stairs and made a left into her bedroom. She brushed her hand against the light switch and started towards her bathroom, but stopped when she noticed her bedspread tangled up on the floor.

“I know she didn’t,” she said. She yanked the patterned flat sheet back to reveal a crumpled condom in the center of the mattress. Sascha snatched the fitted sheet from the bed and dumped it in on top of her bedspread. She sat on
the bare mattress and stared at the wall across from her bed. Heavy tears burned her cheeks and dripped from her chin, splashing against her clenched hands.

This is too much, she thought. Even for Noelle. She reached under her bedside table and lifted the phonebook on her lap, flipped to the L tab and searched for a 24-hour locksmith.
It was the winds that woke her; moaning and blowing against the house like a howling animal. Ongela sat up in bed and stared out into the black of the room, listening to the house creak in response to the wind outside. Moving the thin cover aside, she turned and lowered her feet to the carpet. She slid her palm against the warm sheet, under the pillow and over the mattress until her fingers met the comforting weight of the revolver. She gripped the handle, pulled it from the cocoon of percale and rested it in her lap.

A sliver of moonlight shone through the muslin curtains and the bulky shapes in the room revealed their familiar selves as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. She narrowed her eyes towards the corner as the cat stood and arched his brindled back into a long stretch. His long, sinuous tail extended towards the ceiling and from across the room his body looked like a lowercase h.

Ongela lost sight of him as he walked towards her and disappeared into the shadows at the foot of the bed. She felt the prickle of his whiskers on her ankle and raised one foot, splaying her toes against the thick fur on the back of his neck. He jumped on the bed, placing his feet in her lap, and kneaded her
thighs with his front paws before curling his purring body around the tepid metal of the gun.

Ongela planted her calloused heels in the carpet and listened to the wind, gun and cat in her lap, until the night sky softened into a feathered blue. There was something in the rush of air against the roof tiles, in the uneven load on her lap that spoke to her. “Today.” She breathed. The wind pressed against the house, as if to listen, then whipped away when she said nothing else.

The infant lying next to her stirred and whimpered. Ongela swatted the cat from her lap and placed the gun on top of her pillow before twisting around to lift her son from the mattress. She lifted him high in the air so his feet dangled and curled against each other before setting him down in her lap. She waited until he fully opened his eyes, her palms flat on his back as if she held an open book. “Good morning, boy,” she said.

The baby was quiet in her lap and stared up at her, his eyes the color of the sky before a heavy storm. Noah had eyes like his father, though Ongela couldn’t yet read the words in them. The first time she’d cupped Henry’s face with her palms and held him still, he’d brushed her hands away.

“You’re judging me,” he’d said.

“I’m understanding you,” she had corrected.

Henry had always kept his emotions just under the surface, like pebbles in a clear stream, all she’d had to do was reach in and pluck them out. But beyond hunger and weariness, Ongela couldn’t gauge the baby. She leaned forward to
press a kiss to his forehead. Shrugging the sleeve of the nightgown off her shoulder, she shifted Noah to the side and cradled his head in the crook of her arm. Humming softly, she lifted her breast to his mouth. Her mind drifted as he pulled at her body; she held him close and thought of the job ahead.

The strong winds died with the rising sun; Ongela turned her head towards the window at the trill of a finch nearby. The room was completely light now and she looked around again, as if to burn the layout of the room into her memory.

Last fall, she’d been canning tomatoes when Henry had come to her. He walked into the kitchen and stopped, standing in the middle of the room.

“It’s out there, Ongie,” he said. “They say it’s spreading quick.”

Ongela had been just over the retching; large and tired still, she hadn’t given Henry’s words any serious attention. He’d spoken before of a virus, but she didn’t see how a sickness in a far off land could affect them, didn’t understand his worry.

“I think you all upset over nothing,” she said, wrapping a towel around her hand so she could lift the hot Mason jars and move them from the kettle to the counter. “That ain’t here.”

He moved in front of her, blocking her path from the stove to the counter.

“It could be soon.”
She held a jar by the lid, trying not to drip boiling water on her stomach.

“Henry,” she said. She glanced up from the jar and read the panic on his face. The heat from the jar in her hand burned through the towel and she dropped it on the floor. Steam rose from the pile of broken glass. “Dammit, Henry. Look at this mess.”

“Ongela.” He stepped right into the puddle, the metal lid cracking under his boot. He set both of his heavy hands on her shoulders. “They say this is serious,” he said, and then brushed past her; his left foot left bits of glass and tomato juice trailed across the floor.

He was by the radio every night, adjusting the volume high so the inflected voices followed her from room to room. Talking of death in the bedroom, predicting doom in the kitchen. There were days when he didn’t go to work, just stayed home with the radio, biting his fingernails and pacing the floor. He was underfoot and she grew tired of him and his “they says.”

The house was too small to avoid him, and by the afternoons, the voices on the radio had chased her outside. She would stand in the yard and watch as one by one, the trees dropped their leaves.

Standing barefoot and still in the grass, she studied the land that had been her mother’s and grandmother’s and was now hers. The pear and apple trees dotted the yard, green sentries armed with ripe fruit. Neglected grass growing tall and thick brushed her calves.
Her toes lengthened into thick roots and buried themselves in the ground. The vibration of the earth warmed her body from her feet to her crown, and she stood for hours, until the dusk settled around her and Henry came to take her back inside.

Henry found a highway map, and the night of the first snow they sat in front of a fire while he pointed, outlining coastlines with a long, skinny finger. “Here, here and here,” he said, excited. “Close, Ongie.”

She wiggled her toes and fingers in the warmth, not listening, her thoughts on the strong movements of the baby inside her.

“Man at work says there’s a place not too far from here,” he said. “Say it’s only a few miles north of here, people are heading up there already.” His words were like shards of colored glass held up for her to see through. She didn’t understand how moving a few miles away would keep them any safer than staying put.

“I’m not leaving my house, Henry. I’ve lived here all my life.”

There was judgment in the look he gave her before turning his head towards the flames.

“Don’t make no sense to run from something you don’t even understand,” she said, and stopped rubbing her stomach to reach out for his arm. But his fingers were already on the map, tracking lines like a blind man reading.

After Noah was born and Henry held him for the first time, bawling and blood covered, he said, “Now we got to leave, for him.”
Ongela closed her eyes against the father and son and didn’t say anything.

Henry waited until Noah’s crusted cord dried and fell off before he started packing. The last time Ongela saw him he was lifting a plastic tote onto the back of his pickup truck.

She was standing in the doorway, Noah nursing in her arms.

He had his back to her as he wrenched the door open and got inside, but he glanced back at the house as he twisted his wrist to start the car.

Pushing the weak screen door open with her palm, she watched as he jerked the gearshift into reverse. She stepped out into the yard as he backed up, her shirt all bunched up on one side of her neck.

“Henry,” she said, but her voice had been sucked up into the swirling dust following the truck. Their eyes met one last time and the look on his face was the same as when Noah pushed his way out and she writhed and moaned in pain. An apology.

Ongela raised the baby over her shoulder and patted his back, waiting until he belched before she stood. She grabbed the gun from the pillow and walked towards the kitchen with the cat trailing behind. She set the baby on the kitchen floor; he was old enough now to hold his head up and watch the switch of the cat’s tail as it circled him.
The milk sizzled as she poured it into a pot and she measured the oats out in her hand before letting them slide from her fingertips. Ongela ate slowly, the gun laying next to her bowl as she lifted spoonfuls of oatmeal into her mouth.

After Henry left, the radio had become a comfort, filling the house with sound, with voices she could respond to. When Noah woke in the early hours of the night, she left the bedroom, sat down in the living room and listened to the radio as she nursed. The sickness was everywhere. A man’s voice, deep and thick like Henry’s, kept reading numbers. For hours, a long list of numbers. Ongela didn’t know if he was counting the dead or the living.

She got up from the table and rinsed the bowl in the sink. Left the baby on the floor and went back to the bedroom to get dressed. She pulled a pair of jeans up over her hips, tied one of Henry’s plaid shirts around her waist.

The evening after Henry had gone, Ongela found the revolver under her pillow. She had kept it there ever since, occasionally sneaking her hand under the pillow to touch the wooden handle. He had also left the compass, and she threw it into the bottom of a duffle bag. Diapers, a dozen loose bullets and a change of socks.

The cat followed her again to the kitchen and she dumped his entire bag of dry cat food into a pile on the floor and filled two plastic mixing bowls with water. She kneeled down to scratch his head. “Bye now,” she said. She scooped the baby up and set him on her hip, secured the gun in the pocket of her jeans, and stepped outside into the back yard.
There was no wind, but a stillness that rose up from the ground. She walked past the empty garden, the dirt overturned and dried. Past the newly budded pear trees that would bear fruit Noah would never taste. The wind had thrown a plastic beach ball into the yard and Ongela watched as it floated on the tall grass, like a boat in the sea.