JESUS’ PRISON: A NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

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JESUS’ PRISON is a novel in twenty-six chapters. It follows Jonathan Beacon, a young English teacher from a small, emotionally-distant family. A call from his mother soon changes that as he learns that an Aunt and an Uncle he believed were dead are both alive, but unwell. Both Aunt Clara, who regularly talks to Jesus, and Uncle Arthur, who blames Jesus for his problems, need something from Jonathan, who also discovers that he needs something from them in return. However, time is running out for all as Uncle Arthur counts down to the end of his life and Aunt Clara readies herself to meet Jesus in person. The only thing keeping Jonathan sane in the new mess of family chaos is Destiny, a woman Jonathan is discovering he can’t live without.
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Chapter 1 – The Drive

As he drove through the fog of the October morning, his eyes lost focus; his thoughts drifted to yesterday’s conversation with his mother who had sent him on this God-forsaken errand. He wondered if he would ever forgive her, stop resenting her. He had learned and could not unlearn. And as long as the knowledge stayed, he did not see a way to let the bitterness go.

His hands drummed on the steering wheel as he passed the city’s main cemetery. Rolling hills and spans of carpet-like grass made it attractive and yet distressingly home-like. A better place to be, perhaps, than where he was going. Her house was a few blocks beyond the cemetery. He would be there in just a few minutes. She lived so close to him, only a brief drive away. He could have been there hundreds of times. He could have made this trip before, had he known. But now it was too late to make a causal visit to a genial aunt’s house – that time was gone.

Turning the radio volume significantly louder to block out the dread rising in his mind, he bit into his thumb nail.

*Oh God, please don’t let her be creepy and* . . . he forced his mind to trail off before he came up with the next word. He couldn’t stomach it popping into his head. But, truthfully, it was not the word in his mind that disturbed him, but the vision that word might create. Once that image stood before him, he might not ever scour his mind clean.
of it. Had he allowed his thoughts their freedom, the word might have been “brittle” or “emaciated” or . . . “skeletal.”

It was all too much for Jonathan, who felt like a childhood nightmare was coming true. He tried to hum along with the music on the radio, but realized it was only a jingle and felt embarrassed, despite his solitude.

“Alright, come on, Jonathan, it will all be fine,” he whispered to himself. But the assurance turned to dread when the whisper fell flat into the car where there were no sympathetic ears.

Suddenly, there it was, in front of him: Rose Street. He slowed the car and clicked his left turn signal. No cars were in sight. His turn was clear. He tried to force himself to turn the wheel, but his arm was frozen, obeying the part of himself that was screaming Turn back! rather than the voice telling him get it over with.

What’s the worst that could happen? he thought, but refused to allow his overeager mind to play out the scenarios, which were sure to be horror movies in the making.

Finally, he managed to jerk the wheel and stomp the gas, screeching out of his lane. Just like jumping into a cold pool, he reasoned as he drove down Rose Street toward what he knew to be his doom.

Glancing at the seat next to him, he reached for the wad of paper sitting there, having balled it up and thrown it there last night after leaving his parents’ house. “2797 Rose St.” the paper read. “2797,” Jonathan said aloud, and then repeated until he spied it ahead.
The house claiming that address was set back from the other houses on the street, which, save for 2797, made a neat row, straight down the neighborhood.

He pulled into the gravel driveway only enough to keep from being in the street. The gravel crunched under his tires, louder, it seemed, the slower he went, and loudest, perhaps when he came to a halt at the edge of the driveway. As he looked at 2797 Rose Street, he had one thought in his head: *Who on earth has a gravel driveway in this neighborhood?* And, indeed, as he scanned in both directions from the safety of his car, he got an answer to his question: only Clara Beacon.

It had been yesterday evening when he sat like this in his parents’ driveway, dreading his exit from the safety of his car. Part of him was still struck with the utter surprise of his mother’s mysterious phone call.

“Can you come over tonight? I need to talk to you” she had said casually. Seemingly benign, sure. But, not to Jonathan; he knew better.

He knew that not a day in his life had his mother consciously or willingly *talked* to him. Sure, they had had the usual banter: “What-do-you-want-for-dinner? Have-you-done-your-chores? Why-are-there-muddy-shoes-in-my-washing-machine?” However, when it came to true *talking*, his mother was exclusively a captive audience, never a voluntary one.

She had never discussed the birds and the bees, nor did she tell childhood stories of broken bones or first dates. (The sudden thought of his mother even on a date made Jonathan smile unconsciously.) In short, she was not the kind of woman to utter the
words “we need to talk.” Anything she needed to say was done so quickly and without announcement or planning.

Yet, here he was at 2797 Rose Street, by her request.
Chapter 2 – The Memory

Jonathan sat still in his car, gazing unbelievingly at Clara’s house. It seemed not a house at all, but a kind of jungle. Flowers bloomed at will among vines and trees, all unkempt and wild. And although the place had that desperate, teeming feel (almost as if it had a pulse of its own) it was not frightening in any way. In fact, to Jonathan, the house and its grounds were downright disarming. When this thought struck him, he let out a breath that he seemed to have been holding since turning onto Rose Street.

Feeling naked, as if he had forgotten something vital, he got out of the car and stepped onto the gravel of her narrow drive-way. As he walked to her door, he might have been halted by the strange objects in the front yard – a large turquoise globe encompassed by and hanging from a white rope, an old wicker rocking chair tattered and weathered by exposure and entangled by growing vegetation; however, he never once looked around him. His eyes, glazed but fixed, were leading him to her door. His feet obeyed. *Thank God*, he thought. *Thank God, I’m managing, I’m—*

But there she was, a shadow beyond the screen with her hand jiggling the knob.

He didn’t see her. He didn’t see the shadow. He didn’t even see the knob turning. What he saw was the portrait. It blazed in front of his face. In it, she was a child bride, draped in what might have been white, but in his mind was antique yellow. It was an ill-fitting wedding dress and her expression was a deep, melancholic resignation. This was the figure in every childhood (and truth be told, adulthood) nightmare Jonathan had had.
It was the tragic look on her face and vengeance in her future. It was the idea that this child turned into an adult and then a corpse. Sometimes, as a child, Jonathan pictured her underground in this dress with insects polluting her solemn face. This figure, hanging always in the same spot in the hallway, was the source of all the fear that seized Jonathan. It was, in fact, the reason Jonathan stopped cold at the sound of the knob.

Clara opened the door and stepped onto the porch.

She was an elderly, kind-faced woman. She was not decrepit, not emaciated, not skeletal. Jonathan exhaled for only the second time (or so it seemed to him) since turning onto Rose Street.

“Jonnie!” she said, stepping down from the porch to greet him where he stood, still stone from his vision.

“Jonnie, honey, I haven’t seen you since you were a tiny baby!” she said. She grinned a wide, genuine smile that formed faint dimples among paths of jovial wrinkles.

As she came to Jonathan, she placed both of her cool, soft hands on either side of his face. He absently placed one of his hands on her hand, feeling the loose flesh over her semi-ancient bones. He grinned at the greeting. She excitedly ushered him into the house, where it struck him that the inside looked very much like the outside, wild. Not messy, not trashy, not junked, just wild. There was no one place to fix one’s eyes. Too many furnishings, knickknacks, pictures, and adornments to possibly fixate on one. The place had to be taken in and evaluated whole.

Taking it in, breathing it in, as he was, one interesting and important thing escaped Jonathan’s notice. A woman, long, leaning, and quite distracted sat in a dilapidated armchair, almost whispering to herself.
“Constance!” she shouted, calling into another room and scaring the already-on-edge Jonathan nearly to death. He had had only one other fright in memory even marginally close to this one. It was as a seven year old on a haunted fair ride. The ride itself failed to give even one decent jump and he was riding the cart out into the sunshine. “That sucked,” he remarked to his friend in the seat next to him. However, seconds before alighting a figure came from nowhere and lunged for him. The next thing he knew his underwear were soaked and he ashamedly left the ride, the fair, and his friend.

Remembering the former fright, Jonathan thanked God once again, this time because his pants remained dry. The only remnants of this scare were the jangling nerves running throughout his still shaking frame like small fireworks.

Clara must have seen this alarm because she put her hand on his arm and whispered an inaudible, but somehow calming word of assurance. She then turned to the woman and shouted “Leah!”

Leah turned to her without a shred of recognition on her face.

“Leah, honey, I’m calling Reginald to come and get you. Are you ready?”

“What’s that, Constance?” Leah asked.

Reginald, it turned out, was Leah’s son, and Leah was Clara’s neighbor. Constance was nobody, as far as Jonathan could see. Five minutes later when they were gone, Clara explained that Alzheimer’s had turned an otherwise competent, composed friend and neighbor into a twenty-four hour a day babysitting job. Clara had not used such terms with Jonathan, but he got the idea. Interjections such as “ain’t it a shame,” and “I do what I can to help,” completed her brief explanation of Jonathan’s encounter with the scariest thing since a childhood fun-house demon.
Jonathan actually listened to little of Clara’s small talk about her neighbor, waiting for her to get around to the *real* talk, the so-what-the-hell-are-we-doing-here talk.

Jonathan’s mother had been vague. Vague, to say the least.

“Aunt Clara needs to see you,” she had said. At first, he thought it a joke, although his mother was not prone to joking. He waited sufficient time for further explanation that did not come.

“I should visit her grave?” he asked.

“No, Jonathan, Clara’s not dead,” she explained. “I’m sorry we gave you that . . . impression,” she added.

“Well . . .” Jonathan stood, outraged. He wanted to point out the flaws in her argument. He wanted to yell that it wasn’t an impression, but a lie. He had been *told* she was dead. But that was almost secondary to what really stood out to him – it was the “we.” She meant his father and herself, though his father had had little to do with the spoken lie. He was the person *behind* the lie, Jonathan suspected. His mother now took the blame, if you could call it that, but she wasn’t the one to blame. He pulled the strings, and she danced.

Jonathan said none of this; he knew better. He simply took the outstretched slip of paper containing Clara’s address and walked out of the house. But, his mother was not done with him. She caught up with him at his car and said, “Don’t tell your father.” Each word had been separately and succinctly enunciated as if each were its own command. Enough had been said; she walked away. Jonathan left without comment.

“Without comment.” It could have been their family motto. All events occurred without discussion, emotion, connection. As an English teacher, Jonathan spent weeks
each year trying to break his own students’ use of passive voice. But passive voice was the only tense appropriate for his family. They were as non-committal, non-active, non-participatory as humans could be. Jonathan despised this, and yet often succumbed to it, even though deep in his soul, he knew a passive life was more like dying than living.
Chapter 3 – Clara’s Jesus

Clara was not one of them. She had married into the family, or half into it, technically. When she was only 16, she married Arthur Beacon, the older, half-brother of James Beacon, Jonathan’s father. Their shared parent was their father, Sidney Beacon, a hard, distant, unloving man. They were brothers despite having different natural mothers, and grew to be similar men in their character and disposition. Clara, young and optimistic, agreed to marry Arthur with grand hopes for a large and loving family.

She must have been disappointed beyond reason.

This much is basically common knowledge in the overall tight-lipped family. It seemed to Jonathan that the look of bewilderment in her wedding photo might have been the instant that she realized what the future actually held.

He often wondered what it must have been like for her, especially considering that she probably came from a loving and close family. Jonathan himself always had the feeling that being born into a family such as his was like being born missing a limb – always knowing that you’re missing something vital, but never having had it, not truly mourning its loss. However, Clara was probably more like the war veteran amputee – remembering what it’s like to have and use the limb and regretting its loss forever. Though, strictly speaking, Jonathan didn’t know a thing about Clara’s family, so maybe he was wrong. Maybe she just barely escaped an even more horrific situation. (But he suspected that even violence wasn’t worse than the absence of all feeling.)
Now, looking at Clara in all her genuineness and affection, he felt vindicated in his suspicions of her origins, and again, a bit sad for her. As her eyes lit up with the smile, he knew. He was right.

He liked Clara, and was glad she was not dead as his parents had “led” him to believe. Bitterness rose in him for the lie that kept him from a family member who had actual love to give.

Much of his previous nervousness dissipated in her smile, but he could still feel a cold sweat under his arms, around his neck, and across his palms. And, he could still feel the bitter hatred burning for the lies and deceit.

They sat at the dining room table, a creaking, leaning contraption that increased the panic rolling through his body. At any moment this table and this chair might collapse, thought Jonathan. As they settled into their seats, Clara patted his hand (already more affection than his mother had given him in his entire conscious memory, and though he staunchly believed it would, it did not make him uncomfortable in the least.)

Directly above the dining room table was a long, antique rendition of “The Last Supper.” It startled him just a bit since his parents were as unreligious as wandering specks of dust. It had never occurred to him that anyone in the family might have any feelings about God or religion. In addition, as he continued to look, he found more religious icons, statues, pictures, and of course, crucifixes complete with anguished Jesus, eyes rolled upward, pleading for deliverance. Religious affiliation or no, Jonathan might begin doing some deliverance pleading of his own.

He noticed the walls. Their color was a kind of yellow, but felt dark (maybe it’s the lighting?) and they reminded him of something . . . ? Something he couldn’t quite
grasp. As he stared, their color seemed to darken, and they began to close in on him. The air got thicker and he felt a panic overcome him. It was far worse than the dread of turning onto Rose Street, or the fear of pulling in the driveway. Yes, it was like being choked by darkness—it was like . . . a coffin.

Jonathan stood up suddenly, knocking the chair over with a thud. Surprisingly, it didn’t break into pieces like its previous creaking indicated it would. Clara had been in mid-sentence, rambling about the summer weather—strange for October, and fooling all the plants! But he had not heard a word. Instead, he heard a muffled droning that sounded as if, indeed, he had been enclosed in a coffin and Clara were outside, speaking.

But at his abrupt rising, she stopped and simply stared up. Jonathan gasped for air and headed for the door as calmly as he could force himself to. Half-way toward the door, though, he stopped. Leaving the dining room and Jesus’ cool gaze relieved him of all the panic and stress. Here the icons of Jesus were all the betrayed, crucified savior with the pleading full moon shaped eyes. So unlike the Last Supper Jesus with outstretched hands and divine half smile and half moon eyes. Jesus! Why am I obsessing over some eyes in a painting? thought Jonathan. Then, he thought of Clara and looked over at her. She must think I’m an idiot! But she sat solemnly as if in reflection, not even so much as glancing at him. He ashamedly took his seat at the dining table once again, this time not allowing his eyes to meet Jesus’.

After a considerable silence so long that Jonathan began to feel he would succumb to the same panic, Clara leaned back a little, fingering a slim, leather-bound book and opened her mouth, taking a short breath. He knew she was about to make conversation and possibly end the big mystery, so he leaned in to hear. And though she
had taken the breath that was universal language for I’m-about-to-speak, she waited a
beat or so before beginning.

“Do you read the Bible, Jonnie?” The question was simple and disarming.
Jonathan stared, mute. He could not respond. Sure, he read the Bible, and probably knew
it better than most of your average church-going folk, but he didn’t read it for the same
reason. As a student, and then a teacher of literature, a solid knowledge of the Bible was
essential. But he knew the difficulty of the answer – saying yes meant that he read it as a
follower of Jesus’, not of World Literature. On the other hand, saying no would be a lie.
He could feel Jesus staring down at him, waiting for an answer – it came from Clara.

“You don’t mind if I call you Jonnie, do you?” she smiled. “That’s what I used to
call you when you were a baby. Jonathan seemed like too big a name for such a tiny
thing!”

“No, it’s fine,” Jonathan stammered, much relieved that the Bible question was
rhetorical.

Clara continued, “Do you know what the very first Commandment is? Do you
know what it commands us to do?” Jonathan waited; it had to be another rhetorical
question. She seemed to be carrying on a conversation with herself, or possibly Jesus up
there. Jonathan began to wonder how many of these one-sided conversations she had with
Jesus, or possibly her senile neighbor. No wonder she expects no answers to her
questions – no one competent enough to answer her.

“It’s the one that says you shall have no other gods before Him,” she continued.
“Now, what do you suppose that means?” Here, Clara slowly turned her face directly
toward Jonathan’s. Her features had a quizzical, but patient quality to them. At this, he knew this was no rhetorical question.

“Um,” mumbled Jonathan, looking away, buying time, and desperately searching for an acceptable answer. “I supposed it’s meant to deter people from following religions that—“

“Yes, yes, honey, but what does it mean,” interrupted Clara, a little more impatiently than her facial features indicated she would be.

Jonathan felt a little like he did in elementary school when his teacher, Mrs. Bryant called on him to answer an impossibly long math problem. She was a twitchy, happy woman who called each student by last name, with proper mister or miss in front. She seemed to believe that the more formal she was, the more the students would behave and respect her. It didn’t really work. But there was the identical feeling – “Mr. Beacon, do you have the equation for story problem number seven?” Then, of course, just like a teacher would with a silent, confused child, Clara led him to the answer she sought.

“Do you think he means that we worship only Him or that we love Him supremely, above all else?” Jonathan continued the mute, confused stare and Clara went on, “It seems like both, doesn’t it?”

“I guess it does . . . I never really thought about it.”

“Well, why would you? You have no reason to, do you?” Clara declared, more than asked. Her voice rose considerably, like she herself was preaching the gospel to true sinners in need of reform. I must be one of those sinners, thought Jonathan. Now he was self-conscious and could feel his heart pounding. Did she bring me here to give me religion? Jonathan wanted it all to end – he wanted to get the information and go. It just
takes balls, Jonathan repeated in his head, the equivalent of a school yard bully calling you chicken. That was it.

“Look, I . . .” Jonathan began, but the small hesitation was all it took for Clara to interject.

“Would you like some tea and cookies?” Clara asked in her best grandmotherly tone. But before Jonathan could refuse, she got up and went into the kitchen behind him. She returned instantly with a plate of hard, tea-cookies. What is it with old folks and hard cookies? Luckily, there was no tea in sight.

“No, thanks, I really just—“ Jonathan attempted again. But there was fate, (Jesus?) again laughing at him, for no sooner had he uttered the words than a loud banging and a simultaneous “Constance!” rose from the dead, making Jonathan jump yet again.

“Constance, Mom told me to call you for lunch!” the spooky voice from nowhere again. Clara simply stood up like this was part of her routine.

“Leah, honey, Constance isn’t here. Did Reginald leave? Are you alone?” Clara turned back to Jonathan, “I’ll be right back.” Jonathan heard her voice fading as she walked away, “Come on, Leah, let’s go home.”

Clara walked out into the sunshine and hooked her arm in Leah’s. They looked like old friends going for a stroll. Jonathan watched them for a moment and turned back to Jesus. His smile seemed broader.

“Yeah, you think this is real funny, don’t you?” he said aloud, though he mostly meant to keep it to himself. “Shit, shit, shit” he began to whisper in a voice he only partly wished would reach Jesus and the disciples.
Clara came back and patted his hand before sitting again.

“I can imagine you’d like to know why I wanted you here today.” She sounded kind and a relief filled Jonathan, but only for the second before she said, “Well, it’s about Arthur.”

“Dead Arthur?” Jonathan blurted, hoping fiercely that yet another relative didn’t recently rise from the grave.

“Dead? No, Jonnie, Arthur’s not technically dead . . . although he has been dead to me for many, many years.”

Jonathan was stunned. The words rolled around in his head for awhile without actually attaching anywhere, to anything meaningful. After a moment, he tried piecing it together with words.

“Your husband, Arthur . . . my uncle, isn’t dead? But didn’t I attend his funeral? Haven’t I visited his grave?”

“I don’t know, honey, did you?” Clara consoled, and then smiled faintly, as if remembering something funny. Something only she knew. She tried to suppress it.

“JESUS! What else?! Lying fucking family!”

“Look, Jonnie,” Clara put her hand back on his and looked him in the eyes. “I know this is a lot, but I won’t have the Lord’s name spoken in vain in my house, or in my presence.” There was a certain finality in what she said, like Jesus might strike him down next time.

“Arthur has been dead to his family since he broke the sixth commandment, and so your family didn’t completely lie.” Clara took a deep breath and continued. “When he left out that very door,” she pointed to the place where Leah, only minutes before,
appeared hunting an old ghost, “I told him that if he went through with it, that he was entirely dead to me and that was that. I haven’t spoken to him or of him in more than twenty years. But . . .” Clara sighed and Jonathan heard deep resignation in it, “Jesus has different plans for me now.”

As soon as she said “Jesus” Jonathan involuntarily looked at the painting the way one might look at a person being talked about. Now His smile seemed almost mocking. What kind of plans does Jesus have now? thought Jonathan with equal mocking scorn.

“Jesus needs me to deliver some news to Arthur, but I can’t do it. I can’t break my promise. I meant it. I didn’t lie. Speaking about him feels wrong enough. Jonnie, I need you to do it for me.”

The logical part of Jonathan’s brain began to ache. He was getting that frustrated, lump-in-his-throat feeling like when he needed to make an emotional student or parent see reason. “Why don’t you just write him a letter? Why don’t you hire a courier? Why does Jesus—?” here he stopped. He couldn’t call her crazy, nor could he rant about how Jesus didn’t do any of this. He wanted to. He wanted to shout the logic at her, make her see, but instead, he bit the inside of his cheek and tried again, appearing only slightly calmer, despite his best efforts.

“Why me?” he tried.

“Honey, that’s a better question for Jesus, because you’re the only option he gave me.” At this she offered him a neatly folded piece of paper. He had a sickening moment of déjà-vu.

Why do these illogical, lying, crazy women keep sending me out on their errands with tiny sheets of paper?
“This is the message I need delivered. Arthur’s address is on the back. If you could, though, Jonnie, deliver it to him from your own mouth, not from this scrap of paper. That’s my final request. After that, if you wish, you don’t have to see me again. You have no obligation.” She paused. “Of course, I’d love to see you again. But, it’s up to you. Jesus told me that you need to walk your own path. But, I’ll be praying for you. Don’t worry, He knows what He’s doing.”

Jonathan knew this was it; this was the get out, get going, don’t forget to follow my exact orders, scram, speech.

He walked out with no memory of his goodbye or even if he said any. Hearing the door click behind him and feeling the hateful scrap of paper in his hand is the last thing he remembered before heading down Rose Street and back to his own life. His sane life.
Chapter 4 – Leah

Jonathan’s car backed out of Clara’s gravel drive and sped toward the main road. Leah sat on her porch, dazed. She stared up at the afternoon sun, almost as if she were unaware of its purpose, or even its existence. She sat in this spot, still as stone, gazing up curiously for almost an hour. Her eyes and head ached, but she did not connect these pains with the sun that so perplexed her. Finally, with care and effort, she rose and opened her front door. Here she paused, reluctant to enter what may very well be a stranger’s house. But, eventually she seemed to forget this trepidation, and crossed the threshold into her home.

Leah chose the nearest chair, a hard, creaky arm-chair that could have been older than she herself was. 83 years. She had lived a long time, but remembered very little. Her children, now approaching their golden years, were casual helpers who did their obligatory duties, but little else, for, two years ago, perhaps more, she had lost all knowledge of them. They were strangers who trespassed in her home, changed her linens, stocked her refrigerator, and set thermostats. They were strangers who came with weary looks and disappointed tones. Each question more condescending than the last. Each visit shorter and more hurried than the last. Each time Leah watched helplessly as they rushed about asking futile questions about the goings-on of her life. Their visits disoriented Leah so much that she often wandered to her neighbor’s house until she no longer remembered
that she was evading the presence of strangers. Clara, also elderly, but with full faculties, was infinitely patient with her, though often felt that she was doing little real good.

*Why don’t those rotten children put her somewhere safe?* Clara would think each time Leah wandered unknowingly. Clara worried endlessly about Leah’s safety, especially since lately, she didn’t even know the difference between a microwave and a toaster. Clara spent hours each day checking on, correcting, guiding, fixing, cleaning, feeding, and watching. All for Leah. Leah had been a neighbor for all of Clara’s adult life. They had been friends. Now, however, Clara felt that she had completely lost her friend, and instead, found a ward.

Oh, how changed Leah was.

She had been a vibrant, striking woman. She had been articulate, graceful, collected. The ghost of that woman lingered about the new Leah. Each day the disease encroached further. At first, she forgot appointments, dates, and friends’ names. Then, she forgot the names of basic objects and would substitute “Uh, you know” for any word that she couldn’t bring to the surface. Then, she would find herself in places and not remember how she got there, or how to get back. Finally, she lost people. Each person, in turn was erased from her mind and her being, as if they never really existed. It started with friends, like her walking buddy from down the street. Next, tragically, came her grandchildren and their spouses and then her children’s spouses, much to the disbelief and sorrow of her children. Then, her children, too, were relics of her previous life, her previous self.

Although they clung, for months, to knowing glances or a random memory, ultimately, they too took their places among the ghosts of Leah’s former life. They
mistakenly believed they had hit bottom. But eventually, Leah lost other people (younger siblings, cousins, and childhood friends) and the names of most objects or concepts. Among the biggest losses were words like love, hope, and feel. Sometimes, she did produce these words, but for the most part she stammered until she or the other person lost interest. At this point, she would smile awkwardly, and avert her eyes, knowing somehow that she “did something wrong” and perhaps should be ashamed for it.

Mostly, she just stopped talking. She would often point, or use single words or sounds, but the loss of language itself was not such a loss considering she had no one left to engage in conversation.

But there was one word that she used unfailingly. One word was never lost to Leah, no matter how many connections severed in her mind. Those who heard her blurt, interject, and just plain shout this word did not know if she was vigilantly virtuous, or reviving a name from the past. But really, both would have been true. The word, the virtue, the name: “Constance.”

Constance was the name of Leah’s older sister. Five years her junior, Leah adored, admired, and emulated Constance, but not so much that they weren’t interested in the same things. Luckily for Leah, Constance tolerated all of it. Sure, when Leah reached nine and became just pesky enough, there were rules for her when she was around her older sister – Don’t speak, just listen – Don’t touch, just look – Don’t come closer than 5 feet when you follow. But secretly, Leah liked the rules. She liked that her sister made rules just for her. She liked being special, and being allowed to be in the presence of such perfection and privilege.
And, oh, the things she learned. Boys, bras, bands, beauty, Constance knew it all. Constance had it all. Especially when it came to boys. She was never without a date. Often, much to Leah’s great joy, Constance would take Leah with her on these dates.

“Alright, listen, Lee, you can go out with Jake and me, but you have to obey the rules. No funny stuff,” warned Constance.

“I’ll be good,” Leah promised.

“Good, you’ll be my buffer.”

“Your what?” Leah never understood such sophisticated terms. Still innocent at twelve, she always wondered when she would.

“You know, like, I like this guy, but I don’t want him to get any ideas. Got it?” Constance asked.

Constance had that way of stressing ideas, like Leah should immediately get her drift, but she never entirely did. She understood that it probably had something to do with boyfriend stuff, but was afraid to ask and sound ignorant.

Leah envied Constance her beauty and poise. This is one of the things she tried desperately to watch and learn when in her presence. What kinds of things did she do, what did she wear, how did she put her make-up on? Leah tried her best to study the answers to these questions in the hopes of someday being like her.

But more than her physical appearance and her actions, Leah admired the virtue that was Constance. She had that great, solid, virtuous name, Constance. It even sounded perfect. Leah’s was merely lifted from the Bible, she reasoned. Constance’s actually stood for something. And what’s more, she embodied it. She was reasonable, secure, confident, principled – in other words, everything embodied in the word that was her
name. When all “the other girls” were going too far with boys, she was Constance. When
all the kids at school cheated for their grades, and coaxed teachers into A’s, she was
Constance. And more importantly for Leah, as a sister, she was Constance. (Later, when
Leah reached adulthood, she realized that “constance” in and of itself was not a word, nor
a virtue, but “constancy” was. It did not change how she used the word.)

However, the day came when she was Constance only in name. This was the first
of Leah’s many great losses, and probably why she never lost Constance again, even
when every other worthwhile thing was gone from her mind.

Leah later recalled only snippets of what had happened when the police
questioned her, and when it really mattered. She tried to have constance and come to her
sister’s rescue, but she discovered yet again that she was Leah, and not Constance. Leah
had been Constance’s buffer for a reluctant drive to the town’s famous lake (otherwise
known as make-out point) with Billy, an “academically minded” student headed for Ivy
League, but destined for jail. Leah, no matter how hard she tried, never remembered at
what point they exited the car. She had blanked about almost the entire evening. What
she could recall is that she heard a muffled, angry discussion coming from behind the car,
she said, tentatively to the detectives on her sister’s case. What she did remember clearly
is hearing a loud “Damn it, Billy!” and Constance’s stumps as she marched away from
the scene.

Although Leah was almost sure that Billy had followed, almost wasn’t good
enough to charge Billy with the disappearance of Constance.

Leah was later found desperately wandering near the lake shouting “Constance!
Constance!”
“Constance! Constance!” Leah screamed from her bed as Clara gently attempted to nudge Leah back to reality. At least as close to reality as she might come.

“It’s alright, honey, just calm down,” directed Clara soothingly.

“Constance?!” tried Leah one last time.

“No, Leah, it’s me, Clara, from next door. I heard you shouting and thought you might need some help.” Clara tried to make this sound like a question.

Leah did not answer. She looked around the room with wide, unblinking, unbelieving eyes. Her eyes reeled about the room, but refused to rest on one spot. They never looked at Clara. Although Clara had seen this type of complete disorientation from Leah before, it was disconcerting. It disturbed Clara on a deep, almost spiritual level, not because Leah’s eyes were dinner plate size, or because she didn’t answer or respond to her, but because she seemed not to know that there was even another human in the room. She seemed, as her final loss, to no longer recognize the presence of a person.

Oh, dear Lord, what am I going to do? thought Clara. I’m going to have to call one of her children, or some authorities or . . .

But Leah seemed to answer by relaxing her previously tense neck, laying her head back on the pillow and closing her eyes.

Clara stood for a moment over Leah’s bed, looking down at her with a mixture of dread and sympathy. She said a mumbled, heartfelt prayer for Leah to gain some rest from her troubles in this unkind, unforgiving world. She instinctively fingered the crucifix around her neck, tracing the mountains and valleys that made the dying body of
Jesus. “This world is unforgiving, but You’re not,” Clara said aloud, although with a hushed tone, like one might speak to a tired baby.

With a shrug of her shoulders, and a small step backwards, she declared “nothing more I can do!” a little louder than she meant, trying to convince herself of this fact, but failing. All the while, she kept her eyes fixed on Leah, as if she might awaken, sit up and protest, but Leah lay silent, perfectly motionless.

*Is she still breathing?* Clara wondered, taking a step closer to Leah, trying to find a sign of life (or death). But from her position, she could not be sure, and somehow didn’t want to venture any closer. She wondered if she should wait for that indication that Leah was still in this world, and not yet departed to the next, but she just couldn’t force herself to stay.

Clara left with a sick, disturbed feeling which did not go away when she left Leah’s presence. In fact, Clara looked behind her while leaving the house and during the trek back to her own house. She looked back as a shaken movie goer might after watching a particularly horrific movie. She almost felt as though Leah’s ghost might trail her. *It’s silly* she told herself, yet couldn’t shake it.

And as spooked as Clara was, there was one detail that chilled her long after the feeling of Leah’s creeping ghost left her. It was this: in her bed, lying stiffly on her back, her neck and face muscles taut from nervous tension, Leah had skin of white glass. She had not a single wrinkle or line on her face. This lack of lines did not make her look young, but unreal. Her porcelain face seemed to be shoved into this world from the next, her eyes unable to place her existence in this life.
That night in her own bed, Clara wondered if she didn’t actually receive the sign she was looking for from Leah, if perhaps that unearthly skin was a sign that she had passed on to the next world. *Maybe she’s already with Jesus now, and her suffering is over,* thought Clara optimistically.

But Leah lived on. She did not die that night in that bed, nor after wandering in the dark looking for Constance. She lived to breathe another day, free to walk the earth, imprisoned in her own world of inconstance.
Chapter 5 – The Note

Jonathan trudged through the door and threw his keys. He looked momentarily at the balled up paper in his fist. He could not face it. Throwing it wildly, he made sure he did not look at where it landed. The contrast between his own empty, stark living space and Clara’s live, teeming one was immediate. He had never bothered decorating. He did little to his rented duplex other than occupy it. This followed his parents’ example. They were utilitarian, Spartan-like. Many of their furnishings were older than Jonathan. They never thought to replace them. Jonathan wondered if any of it was ever in fashion. He felt uncomfortable in his parents’ home. It was always too cold in the winter and frying hot in the summer. They cared little for comfort or luxury. But why would they? They had no friends. No one would visit. No one would sit on their outdated and unwelcoming furniture. No one would look around judgmentally at the lack of recent décor. And family? Family was no more than an obligation. Why would they care to make their house comfortable?

Jonathan sighed. He felt doomed to the same existence. He saw Clara’s house. He felt the warmth coming from within. It moved with life and meaning. He would never have that. He would never cover his walls with religious icons that gave life purpose and depth. He would never nurture a thick and colorful garden. He was already too dead inside. He was already apathetic like his parents. He was used to living without color.
Now he had a dilemma. He had to see Arthur. He had to face yet another resurrected family member. He must be reminded yet again that his family was not as dead as he had thought. How would he do it? He was ill-equipped to deal with such things. He wanted it all to be over. He wanted to be able to face the hateful slip of paper and walk right back out to deliver Clara’s message and wash his hands of the whole ordeal. But he couldn’t.

Instead, he plopped down on his couch and turned on the television. His eyes lacked focus, so channels flew by without a thought. Until . . . he happened upon a familiar image that made him stop instantly. He stared blankly at the image for a moment. The History Channel. Another of those shows on finding the historical Jesus. They never did, of course, but that didn’t stop them from trying.

The image facing him from the dim screen was “The Last Supper.” Jonathan felt like he couldn’t breathe. Jesus. His eyes were not mocking; they were closed. His mouth was not a wry smile, but slightly open as if about to speak ancient words of wisdom.

Had he imagined it? Had he gone temporarily insane in that house? He was under pressure from the moment he entered it. Maybe Clara had a different version on her wall. But there couldn’t be another such version, could there?

Unwilling to entertain such thoughts, Jonathan decided a nap was in order. Once his mind was rested and clear, he would return to the issue.

Pulling the covers over him and feeling deep relief at the comfort of it, he drifted into fitful sleep. First, he could see Jesus’ hands outstretched to him. He didn’t know if he was supposed to take these hands. Did Jesus want to lead him somewhere? So, he looked up into Jesus’ face. He saw those lips parted like He was about to say something
important, to give Jonathan directions, to impart wisdom necessary for Jonathan’s survival, but instead of wise, calm words, a terrible screeching issued forth.

Jonathan jumped in his sleep and woke to the phone ringing next to his bed.

“Hello?”

“Beacon, its Angler, what are you doing, sleeping?”

“Uh, yeah, what time is it?”

“It’s freaking noon, get up, let’s go to lunch!”

“Alright, where?”

“Joe’s? Meet you there in half an hour?”

“K’ see you then.”

“Bye.”

Angler. Yes. Destiny Angler, the Spanish teacher across the hall from him. He had such a thing for her. All of the male teachers did, even the married ones. She wasn’t even all that attractive. She didn’t need it. She had something far more alluring. She had a way of dealing with the world like it wasn’t there. She was short and olive-skinned, but with long dark flowing hair that not even Disney could invent. She had equally dark and deep eyes that seemed to take in everything at once. She had some scars on her face, from what Jonathan didn’t know. They lined her face with age she didn’t have. She plucked her eyebrows too thin and her lips seemed equally thin and pressed too close. Her features by themselves (save for her incredible hair) were plain and even unattractive. But somehow, all together they made a stunning woman.

She had an inner confidence that Jonathan had never seen in another person. She seemed not to care that there were people in the world, that they might judge her or that
they even considered her. Her control of the world seemed absolute. It was illogically appealing. Jonathan had no idea why Destiny was his friend. They were allies on their end of the hallway. They enjoyed chatting between classes. It really should have been just a casual, professional relationship, but Destiny seemed to like seeing Jonathan outside of school too. She wanted Jonathan. Not sexually, at least not so far, but she wanted friendship. She wanted him. Amazing.

Everyday, five times a day, Jonathan watched Destiny bound into her class, and practically sing “Hola clasé! Cómo estás?!” Each time he would stand a moment and take in her beauty and presence. His class would patiently wait as he stared out into the hallway. He dreaded that moment when Destiny was lost in the world of foreign language, and he had to face the bored 9th graders staring back at him. He envied Destiny. She seemed to love to teach and to be so good at it. Jonathan was not. He fell into teaching when there was nothing else to do with his degree in literature. He never connected with his students or got them to connect with the literature in turn.

Literature fascinated Jonathan. It was the one passion he had in life. The ability to escape his banal world into the multifoliate rose of fiction was infinitely worthwhile. But he couldn’t share this. He didn’t know how. Sure, he still did his job. His students still passed their standardized tests and no one questioned him. This created a sense of guilt and longing in Jonathan. He wanted to be more than just barely competent. He wanted to inspire students. But how could he? He wasn’t inspired himself.

He wasn’t just attracted to Destiny; he wanted to be her, in a sense. She seemed so happy and so comfortable in her skin, in her job, in her life. Jonathan wanted that. He wanted something beyond his colorless existence.
He redressed in clothes that weren’t wrinkled from an afternoon nap and drove to Joe’s Café. Jonathan was on time. Destiny was not. She never was. Having no concept of time was a part of not realizing that the world went on around her.

Feeling self-conscious by himself, Jonathan felt relieved when he saw Destiny glide through the door, only ten minutes late. He smiled and waved. She spotted him and smiled a warm and genuine one back. Jonathan’s heart raced. Knowing that she smiled like that for him made the day’s earlier events vanish like the morning fog.

She sat across from him in the grungy booth. Joe’s was a greasy spoon kind of dive, but they both liked it; here there was never a chance of running into students who tended to congregate at the chain restaurants and the eateries around the mall. Not running into students was always a top priority.

“So, what have you been up to today, sleepyhead?” kidded Destiny.

“Oh, it’s a long story. We need some food first.” Jonathan hated to have to relive it all by telling the story, but knew he’d be more than willing to in order to gain some perspective. And to let Destiny in on some personal stuff would feel nice, intimate.

They ordered amid Destiny’s prattling about her sister who sounded about as crazy and free-spirited as she was. Destiny also fielded a call from her mother on her sleek, red cell phone. She invited her mother to come and join her and Jonathan for lunch. He was suddenly envious again. He could never just invite his mother to lunch with a friend. Just thinking it made his head hurt. His mother would be downright angry at the proposition. She would be instantly indignant and make excuse after excuse about being tired and busy (how could he believe she didn’t have more important things to do?) and she would launch into a tirade about how unhealthy it is to eat out, clogging the arteries.
and creating a myriad of health problems. She would end the whole thing in a declaration of how little money she had to be wasting. It would truly boil down to his mother being uncomfortable out and in the presence of people. His heart broke a little at the thought that there were mothers in the world who did not act like vampires in sunlight when confronted with social situations.

Destiny clicked her phone closed. “Don’t worry, I knew she had other plans. I just invited her to be polite. Whenever she knows I’m somewhere without her, I think she feels a little left out. You didn’t mind, did you?” She sounded perturbed, considering the sullen look on Jonathan’s face and misinterpreting it.

“No, that’s fine. It’s a shame she couldn’t join us... I’d like to meet her... someday.”

The waitress sat plates of steaming food in front of them that, indeed, looked unhealthy but appetizing enough.

“So, let’s hear it. I was promised a long and interesting story.”

“I never said ‘interesting,’ so don’t get your hopes up.”

“Okay, long and boring, let’s have it.”

“Well, first you need some context, so you understand how weird it is.”

Destiny nodded, ready, excited at the prospect of “weird.”

“I come from cold, distant people. I honestly can’t think how any of them actually got together to reproduce. Though I’m an only child, so maybe it was just that once.”

Jonathan smiled at just how weird this already sounded. Destiny was enthralled.

“They don’t talk. Not about anything they don’t have to and especially not about feelings or thoughts or anything vaguely intimate. To sum it up: we’re not close. I don’t expect
much from them and nothing ever really happens. They’re not social, so it’s not like they ever go out or get involved in anything that would result in drama or conflict or anything like that.” Jonathan found himself failing at the attempt to explain exactly how awful his family was. He continued to try, knowing she would never really understand. “They don’t call and invite me over or have family dinners or chat about their lives. If I ever do get a phone call from one of them it’s because they want to remind me to turn my clocks back or because they heard a report about a recall on a product they think I have. It’s like they’re a news service, not a family.” Jonathan paused, considered where to go from here and what else needed explanation. “But . . . they never call to update me about other family members or check in on me. They don’t really care how I’m doing; they care about me spending too much money or sleeping when I should be at work.

“So, last week I get a call from my mother saying she needs to talk to me. Shit, something must really be up, you know?” Destiny nodded, completely absorbed in where this might be going. Her eyes were wells of concern and thoughtfulness and this momentarily distracted Jonathan.

“So, what did she want?” inquired Destiny.

Jonathan ate slowly and replayed the entire thing for her. Her responses were typical “Shit . . . NO SHIT . . . Holy shit . . . seriously? . . . oh my God” and the whole thing ended with “fuck me!” which made Jonathan smile. It was so Destiny.

“Damn, Beacon, why didn’t you call me? You let me go this long without hearing all about the drama on Rose Street!” She made it sound like the latest titillating soap opera. “Okay, so, what did the note say?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t read it yet.”
“DIDN’T READ IT YET, ARE YOU CRAZY?!” Destiny got so loud that numerous patrons turned to look.

“Well, I . . . I needed to take that nap to clear my head and I . . . just couldn’t face dealing with it. And, then you called and I came right here and . . .” Jonathan was a little shame-faced. It was kind of stupid that he hadn’t seen what message was so important that Clara had returned from the dead to deliver it.

“You’re killing me” Destiny wailed.

“Sorry.”

“Do you even know where you’re delivering this message to? I mean, where does Arthur live? For all you know you need to go to Antarctica, and that’s why it had to be you!”

“What do you mean, ‘why it had to be me?’”

“Well, no offense, Beacon, but you’re kind of nice. Too nice. I can’t imagine you saying no even if the request were for Antarctica.”

“Thanks.” Jonathan didn’t know what to say, or if he should take offense.

Destiny leaned forward, taking Jonathan’s hand lightly.

“No, I like that about you. It’s . . . perfect—for you.” She smiled warmly and a little shyly. She let go of Jonathan’s hand. Her smile changed to a mischievous one.

“Well, I can be nice, too.” She waited. Jonathan wasn’t sure why.

“Yeah, how’s that?”

“Well, how about I look at the note first and break it to you gently?”

_Something else to do with Destiny? Absolutely._

“Oh, when?”
“How about now? I’ll follow you to your house.”

Now? She had never been to Jonathan’s house. What would she think when she got there? When she saw how plain and unlived in it was, what would she think?

But, he couldn’t lose this opportunity. And it was enticing to think someone else could deliver the news to him. That’d be a change. Also, he would hear the impact of the news and know what reaction he was likely to get from Arthur. Perfect.

Destiny followed him to his duplex. In the driveway, he sat in his car, reluctant to get out and show her what the inside looked like. And then he had another thought that froze him in his seat. What were they going to do after she read the note to him? Would they sit there in awkward silence?

Destiny knocked on the window of his car and put up her hands in a questioning gesture. Jonathan gave an embarrassed grin and got out of the car.

“Sorry, I was lost in thought,” explained Jonathan.

“S’okay, you ready?”

“Yeah.”

As they walked through the door, Jonathan held his breath. Destiny looked around but said nothing at first.

“So, where’s this note?”

Jonathan searched around, producing it after a few minutes. He handed it over.

Destiny read both sides of the scrap of paper, sighed deeply, sat down, looked up at Jonathan. He couldn’t read her face.

“So, you don’t . . . don’t know where you’re supposed to go to deliver this message?” Destiny spoke quietly like she was talking to a dying patient.
“No, I told you I didn’t,” said Jonathan.

“Shit, Beacon. Why did your parents tell you Arthur was *dead*?”

“I don’t know, because they’re worthless.”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Okay, so what is it?”

“Well, Beacon, Arthur seems to be doing time. The address on this is the penitentiary in Lorraine.”

Jonathan sat, stunned. Clara could have *told* him this.

“The sixth commandment,” Jonathan whispered.

“What?”

“It’s something Clara said. She said Arthur broke the sixth commandment. What’s the sixth?”

They both sat for a moment, thinking about the commandments. What *was* the sixth? Jonathan searched for his Bible. He hadn’t touched it since his college days; it was probably still in a box that he hadn’t yet unpacked.

“Wait, do you have a computer?”

“Yeah, but the internet is really slow,” confessed Jonathan, as he continued to search through piles of books stacked near a bookcase in his living room. “Got it!” he said, holding up a blue bound copy of the King James Bible. “It’s got to be Exodus, right?” He looked up at Destiny for confirmation.

“Are you kidding, I teach *Spanish*! I don’t know a single thing about the Bible. Last time I set foot in church was for a wedding. I’m going to trust *you*—Exodus.” She nodded to emphasize the last word.
“Okay,” said Jonathan thumbing through Exodus. “Here it is.”

“And?” inquired Destiny. There was a long pause. “And?” she asked again.

“Well, they’re not exactly numbered . . . wait. No other gods, one,” counted Jonathan on his fingers, balancing the book on one knee. “Graven images, two.”

“Graven images?” asked Destiny.

“What, you never heard of that one?”

“Nope, can’t say as I have,” admitted Destiny.

“Lord’s name in vain, three. Sabbath day, four. Honor your parents, five” counted Jonathan on his free hand. Then, he jerked his head up. “It’s murder.”

Destiny stared back at him. She said, “Well, shit, I don’t imagine he would have been better dead to your family for stealing or adultery.” She had meant to keep it light and buoy the mood, but failed, leaving a bleakness hovering around them. Knowing the atmosphere was already heavy, she said, “Who do you think he killed?”

“God, I hadn’t thought about that. I was selfishly thinking about how I was going to have to go to that prison and face him.”

“You know, you don’t have to. Fuck them. What real obligation do you have to them? Let them learn to use a phone or the fucking postal service!” She meant it to reassure him, but he knew it was too late to refuse to deliver the message, so her words only reinforced the impossibility of the situation.

“Well . . .” Jonathan lost any sense of how to respond.

“Okay, look, since you’re already in a bad place, I want to hurry and tell you the other part of the message.”

Jonathan looked up at her, ready.
“Clara’s dying.”

He tried to let the words sink in. He tried to reconcile the real-life warm, loving woman with the dying one in the message and couldn’t do it.

“Does it say why?” Jonathan asked, hoping for answers that might make it all clear.

“No. Sorry.” She waited a few minutes and then asked, “Do you have any coffee?”

Jonathan waved a hand toward the kitchen, and Destiny was back instantly with two cups of black coffee. Jonathan took his, but did not drink it. He sat like stone in front of the bookcase.

“Hey, I can help,” tried Destiny.

Jonathan looked up, skeptically.

“I can find out about visiting and I can arrange it.”

“Thanks,” said Jonathan, with no intention of accepting her help.
Chapter 6 – Arthur’s Prison

*I’ll just do this and be done with it,* Jonathan repeated to himself as he clumsily attempted to follow the bright yellow visitor signs directing him to his almost certain doom (again). *Damn Destiny and her helpfulness!* He easily could have ignored this until Clara was dead. It was an awful thought, but he was in an awful place. Somehow, Destiny had managed to arrange this visit. She probably lied and told them she was family. *She’s a really good liar,* he thought a little enviously since he had always sucked at lying. He couldn’t even lie when she had bounded in one morning and handed him a paper with directions to the prison along with a date and time. He couldn’t thank her politely like he should have as his internal organs were churning at the sight of yet another hateful scrap of paper in his hand. He should have hugged her gratefully, but instead he looked at his feet. Now he would have to do this. “Well, I guess that’s it,” he mumbled and walked away. He was glad he didn’t see the look on her face.

He pulled up to the penitentiary at 3:00. The sun blazed hot in the car, making Jonathan feel wrong. The sick feeling in his stomach, however, could not be blamed entirely on the sun. The majority of the turning in his gut came from the message that was written in Clara’s perfect script on the small square of paper in his hand. Moreover, *he* had to deliver this message, in person, face-to-face. Every time he thought about it, he came close to vomiting, and then seriously considered following the same highways back
to his quiet, beckoning life. Destiny, and Clara, for that matter, wouldn’t have to know that he didn’t actually go through with it.

*I’ll just do this and be done*, he continued to reason with himself. If he *did* turn back, this business would never be done, and he would never be rid of it. And the guilt of lying. *What commandment would that break?* Then, too, a perverse part of him wanted to know what this mysterious half-uncle would be like, look like, and say to him. Also, he felt a considerable responsibility to Clara, even though she just recently came into his life (as a *living* person, that is.) This whole thing was strange; Clara hadn’t been Arthur’s wife (in any way that mattered) for as long as Jonathan had been alive.

*What was wrong with mailing Arthur a letter?* “Oh, yeah, *Jesus* told her it had to be me,” Jonathan muttered contemptuously, feeling the whole thing must be some huge cosmic joke. Being raised by parents who were expressly devoid of religion, Jonathan didn’t have much to do with Jesus, and couldn’t imagine that Jesus thought much of him either.

Eventually, Jonathan found himself in the right place, turning over his meager belongings to be reviewed by a stone-faced officer who offered little in the way of polite conversation. He was moved through hallways, and buzzed through various secure doors until he found himself in a large common room with round, cafeteria-like tables sprinkled throughout. A handful of prisoners sat at scattered tables, many waiting the arrival of guests, some already engaged in visiting.

Upon entering the room, Jonathan felt his unease rise in sickening waves that forced him to look for the nearest seat. *This feels wrong*, thought Jonathan. *What is it?* What is so wrong here?
And then it came to him, the sense of wrong, the sense of incongruity: Prison, in Jonathan’s mind, was a gritty, seedy, sordid place packed with the dirty, back-alley thugs who appeared in every crime drama worth the price of admission. But this was not that place. This place was white, clean, stark, and sterile.

Sterile. That was it; this prison felt more like a hospital than an edifice of punishment. Where were the crumbling walls? Where were the cries of the hopelessly miserable? Where was the atmosphere of death, destruction, and danger? These prisoners didn’t look dangerous; they looked resigned.

The despondent countenances that lingered on each of their faces seemed to mirror their vacuous environment. This is its own type of punishment, thought Jonathan; they’ve had the fight taken out of them. They’re like McMurphy after the lobotomy. Jonathan almost looked around for Nurse Ratched and the smug, triumphant smile that might appear on her face. When this thought flashed through his mind, Jonathan relaxed a little and a faint, private smile brightened his previously sick face.

Wondering if he would know him by sight, Jonathan scanned the room for Arthur. I wish they had name tags, thought Jonathan, who needed this to be easier. But then, it seemed that probably the numbers appearing on their shirts standing in place of a name was part of the process of taking the fight out of them. Force them to disassociate with their former identities. Their empty faces revealed the success of this separation; currently, they had no real selves. Possibly, each claimed and even clung to former selves, but in front of Jonathan sat only shadows men.

Jonathan knew Arthur from the other prisoners because when he got closer, Arthur stood up. This told Jonathan that his visit most probably had been announced to
Arthur, possibly when Destiny called the prison earlier for his visitor’s pass. Jonathan guessed at how Arthur knew him from the other visitors drifting in, old pictures, perhaps?

Jonathan pulled out a chair at Arthur’s table and for a moment the two just stood, unable to venture the first word, or even meet one another’s eyes. Jonathan did, however, manage to observe Arthur. He could have been a sailor, Jonathan thought. Arthur had rough, dark, wind-blown skin. Jonathan knew that neither the sun nor the wind could have created such a look on a man who spent at least 22 hours a day inside, but his impression was not changed by this knowledge. Arthur’s eyes were hard and sad, and never seemed to fix on one spot. His dark, reddish skin belied a faded, amorphous, bluish tattoo on his right forearm. (Jonathan wondered if this helped significantly in his impression that Arthur resembled a sailor.) When the awkward moment of standing and sly glances passed, the two men seated themselves and began halting, hesitating conversation, that was perhaps even more awkward than their first encounter.

“You look ‘lot like yur mother,” Arthur began, not really looking at Jonathan at all. Jonathan didn’t know how to respond, so he nodded his head in agreement.

“I haven’t hadda visitor here since my lawyer stopped comin’,” continued Arthur, trying to be funny and continue the conversation, such as it was.

“Well, I’m glad to meet you.” Jonathan tried to sound convincing.

“Yeah, look, kid, I’m sorry I never knew you, really.” Arthur tried to produce the right words. “I always wanted tuh . . . I always wisht our families was . . . Well, I’m sorry as hell you had tuh meet me here.” Arthur looked around to emphasize “here,” and to avoid meeting Jonathan’s eyes.
Jonathan simply nodded. There was nothing to say back, not unless, *Yeah, this isn’t exactly my idea of a family reunion either!* was acceptable.

“Look, Jon, I shouldn’t be here . . . I mean, this wun’t just my fault . . . I mean, *God* had it in fur me, ya know?”

Jonathan nodded as if to say “sure, I know” but did so out of courtesy. He had no fucking idea. Furthermore, he wasn’t sure at all that he wanted to know.

“I was doomed from th’ beginnin’, Jon. God didn’t want me tuh succeed. God didn’t put me here fur nothin’ ‘cept tuh laugh at me.” Arthur began to get louder, and talk faster. Jonathan began to feel anxious again. He wanted to thrust Clara’s note at him and run, but he forced himself to nod along, the only visitor Arthur had had in nearly three decades.

“I was born withoutta chance. When I think a what I coulda been . . .” Arthur gazed at the ceiling as if the answers to his what-if questions were written there, and he were reading them carefully. Eventually, he looked down and continued. “My mother had breast cancer when I was a tiny baby.” He said the words “tiny baby” softly, expressing unutterable sympathy for the child he was. “In those days, th’ cure fur breast cancer was tuh remove everythin’ – not jus’ a breast, but muscle too.” Jonathan was embarrassed for this stranger to be pouring his life out on the table like an overfilled jar of sugar.

*He’s not really a stranger*, Jonathan tried to reason with himself. But it didn’t work. Common blood or not, this person had exchanged only a few words before dumping his emotional garbage on Jonathan’s lap, who, in turn tried to be sympathetic. He tried to be the one person in decades to listen. He tried to wrinkle his brow in an appropriately compassionate way. He tried, but it probably would not have mattered one
way or the other, for, Arthur was off and running, and little but his own tale of misery motivated his thoughts.

“An’ it wun’t just muscle behind th’ breast,” Arthur continued.

*Oh, please, stop saying “breast!”* Jonathan thought.

“No, it was alla muscle alla way down to th’ elbow,” Arthur demonstrated with his hand, gripping the muscle that seemed to plague him. The claw-like grip that he had on the fleshy, inner portion of his arm tightened for effect and Jonathan wondered if it hurt.

“So, she couldn’t hold her first an’ only baby son. She was just about a invalid, but what she couldn’t do fur herself . . . well, that didn’t matter as much as what she couldn’t do fur *me*.” Arthur sounded downright selfish with his pronouncement of “me.” Jonathan wondered if he knew this “fact” or only guessed at it.

“She was dead by ‘a time I was three, but I never hadder arms ‘round me. When I saw other mothers pick up their children, or hold their babies, I imagined th’ feelin’ they musta had. Safe. Comfortable. But I never had it.” To Jonathan it felt like Arthur had rehearsed this story, but he couldn’t quite be sure. Even if he had, who could blame him considering the time, the decades, he had, alone, to do it.

“An’ my father . . .” here Arthur let out a small puff of air through his pursed lips. It was almost a sigh. “My father . . . well, you an’ me had more words between us than me an’ my ol’ man ever did. An’ a course he remarried, and I hadda step-mom, but she had ‘er own children. Yep, I always envied yur dad, because, sure, he was stuck with th’ same father, but a’ lease he hadda mother. I usta watch her hold ‘im, you know, an’ I’d pretend it was me.”
After drifting off for awhile, he started again. “Yur gran’mother,” he nodded, “she was a good woman. She loved music, big band music an’ she’d play it when my father was gone. I usta love it! It filled th’ house with horns an’ drums.” Arthur had truly drifted off into his own, sweet memory. It was a stark contrast to the previous ones. “It usta feel like th’ place wun’t so lonely anymore an’ I ‘member I wanted that feelin’ always. I loved th’ sounds uh those names: Tommy Dorsey, Jimmie Lunceford, Charlie Barnet . . . an’ I wanted tuh be ‘um!”

Jonathan smiled, feeling for the first time a real connection between Arthur and himself, not because he too liked big band music, but because this part of the story made him feel connected to his family, and proud to be so. He could just picture his grandma, choosing her favorite record, marching around the house, dancing with her children. At least he wanted this picture, especially since he himself had no such memories.

“I decided that I wanted tuh be a band leader!” declared Arthur.

“Really?” It was the first verbal answer that Jonathan had given Arthur, who looked up at the word and nodded, smiling.

“Yes, it was th’ only thing I ever really wanted tuh be.”

“What happened?” Jonathan ventured, fearing the answer.

“Well,” Arthur shook his head despairingly, “God needed ‘nother good laugh at my ‘spense.”

For a moment, Jonathan thought Arthur might leave it at this bitter, ominous point, but he continued.

“You see, tuh play music in college an’ getta degree, you needed to play a instrument. But, I couldn’t play a instrument in high school, because tuh join th’ high
school band, you needed tuh play a instrument in junior high band. But, tuh play inna junior high band, you needed tuh play in 5th grade band. An’ you know what you needed tuh play inna 5th grade band?” Here, Arthur looked up and actually waited for a response.

“No.”

“You needed a dollar.” Despite his often clipped, lazy language, Arthur spoke each word clearly and distinctly, emphasizing the extreme injustice that each word brought to the memory.

Jonathan tried to think: *What year would that have been? How much money was a dollar?*

“It’s not like I didn’t try an’ earn th’ money,” said Arthur. “I kep’ my milk money, an’ tol my teacher I didn’t need milk tha’ day. I did odd jobs for neighbors, carryin’, sweepin’, paintin’. I sold odds an’ ends. I looked fur pennies tha’ may’ve dropped onna street or inna store. I even offered tuh work math problems fur kids at school, but by ‘a time th’ money was due, I had only 23 cents. They wouldn’t take it with my promise of th’ other 77.” Arthur paused, feeling the pain all over again. “Seventy-seven cents stood between me and my dream.” Arthur emphasized this by slamming one hand representing him and one representing his dream far apart on the table in front of him. “Seventy-seven cents was alla needed. Look ‘round, Jon; this is what 23 cents buys you.”

Jonathan could say nothing. He didn’t see the connection between not having enough money to participate in 5th grade band and being in prison. He didn’t understand why parents would not simply hand over the dollar or why a school system would be so rigid. He also didn’t want to ask.
“You see, tha’s why this is jus’ ‘bout th’ end fur me, Jon. This year, I’ll be 77 years old, an’ tha’s ‘bout all I’m gunna be given on this earth. I’ll be dead ‘fore th’ new year.” The declaration hung in the air. Jonathan didn’t know what to say and hoped that Arthur was just playing up the drama. But, Arthur was sure, or at least his authoritative tone and dead-pan expression communicated as much.

“Shit,” said Jonathan, intending that it be a declaration for the insanity of Arthur’s statement, and a pronouncement on his impending duty. It can’t get much worse, Jonathan told himself in order to build up his courage to deliver the message left deteriorating in his sweaty palm.

“If you’re going to . . .” Jonathan couldn’t bring himself to say “die,” so he chose one of the many euphemisms, “pass away soon, this might not matter to you anyway, but, I have a message from Clara.” Jonathan waited for a response, got none, and continued down his awkward road, hoping that Arthur might relieve some of the strain by guessing or asking specifics. Let’s play twenty questions! Jonathan wanted to say.

But, by the grace of God, Jonathan was relieved of his strain by a loud bell and the subsequent announcement of a statuesque guard at the end of the room near the door that visiting hour was over and guests should proceed to the exit.

While others around them murmured hushed goodbyes, Jonathan suddenly stood up, pushed the scrap of paper toward Arthur, and said, “Uh, I’m really sorry, but here’s Clara’s message, and I’m sure I’ll see you again . . . some time.” He held out his hand for Arthur to shake. Arthur took it, shook it firmly, and resigned himself to a return to the cold loneliness of his cell. Jonathan hurried out, trying desperately not to glance back over his shoulder to see if Arthur was reading the message.
Arthur watched Jonathan go, opened the neatly folded, but dirty scrap of paper.

He stared at the paper for a full minute, left it on the table, and rose to return to his confinement. He need not have taken the paper, for, he had memorized its brief contents and allowed them to echo in his head until he finally slept that night.

Clara, in her perfect, cursive script, had written:

“Jonathan, please tell Arthur that I am dying, and that Jesus forgives him.”
Chapter 7 – Destiny’s Family

It took Jonathan a while to recover from the shock of visiting Arthur. Almost a week passed before he could recount the story for the stunned Destiny who wanted more details than he was willing or able to provide. After the shock wore off, he was left with an empty and aching core. He felt the need to see Clara. Hopefully, Clara could relieve the aching and void. He didn’t know how, but something had to be done.

He walked through his life. He ceased the little living that he had been doing. Destiny, his one ally, seemed to thrive on the drama, and although she realized the trauma that paralyzed Jonathan, she couldn’t ease it.

One day, close to the end of October, Jonathan pulled onto Rose Street without thought or decision. He hadn’t planned on going to Clara’s house, but here he was, pulling into her driveway. Stopping at the end as he had before, he stared at the overgrown yard and peaceful house. In Clara’s yard was an unusual Halloween decoration. Seven ghosts were standing in a ring with hands joined as if playing a game of ring-around-the-rosy. Jonathan fixed his eyes on them, thinking at any minute that it might all make sense.

First, he had a hard time understanding how Clara had created the illusion. They weren’t elaborate ghosts, but very basic creations, probably made from old sheets. Jonathan couldn’t even reason how he believed they had “hands.” But also, something about the figures disturbed him. He couldn’t put his finger on it. It was a simple
Halloween decoration. He could swear, though, that the ghosts were happy, smiling, laughing, playing. It was beyond disturbing. Jonathan put his car in reverse and backed out of Clara’s drive without looking at her house, her windows, where her figure might be poised, waiting, watching.

Leah, however, sat at her porch, dressed in light clothing too cool for the weather, looking out at Jonathan and chuckling slightly. She probably wasn’t laughing at him, probably didn’t even know why he had left or what he had seen. She most likely had some distant, private joke in her head that often amused her when nothing else could.

When Jonathan reached the end of Rose Street, Leah gave a half-hearted wave, rose, and strode to Clara’s house.

Jonathan could not force himself to go back. October and November drifted quietly by. For Thanksgiving, a holiday he never bothered celebrating, he was invited to Destiny’s mother, Millie’s house, which turned out to be on Hyacinth Drive, one street over from Rose.

Jonathan let out a little gasp as they had passed Clara’s street. If Destiny noticed, she said nothing. As they turned onto Millie’s street, he asked, “Have you lived here your whole life?”

She smiled. “Well, except for when I moved out on my own.”

“You know what I meant,” Jonathan said through his own embarrassed smile.

“Come on,” she said, getting out of the driver’s seat while he looked up at the house she had pulled up to. Trying to open the car door, but finding his hand slide from the handle, he could barely hide his nervousness. The house looked ordinary, much like the houses in Clara’s neighborhood.
Destiny hooked her arm in Jonathan’s and led him to the front door where Millie was waiting for them.

“Don’t worry, everyone will love you,” said Destiny who sensed his reluctance.

“Welcome!” cried Millie, kissing Jonathan on the cheek warmly.

“Thanks, it’s nice to meet you. Thanks for having me,” he began awkwardly.

Millie was exuberant, smiling, and had a spirited, bouncing gait that made her look like she was skipping. She had dark hair like Destiny, but it was short, displaying her long neck and dangling, vibrant earrings which matched silver bangles that made light music as she moved. Her clothes matched her jewelry, light and flowing over her slim figure.

Strange smells greeted him at the door. Although he immediately liked Millie, he was suddenly very worried about what she might attempt to serve for dinner and how he could spare her feelings.

As if reading his mind, she said, “Hope you don’t mind exotic food.”

“No, not at all.” He shot Destiny a worried glance. In answer, she gave him a reassuring smile.

“You see,” explained Millie, “our tradition is to each make a foreign dish from a distant country. Mashed potatoes and turkey are so boring. We don’t do a whole lot of boring around here,” she added.

Jonathan knew what she meant. The walls were covered with tapestries and paintings and other objects that looked like she had gathered them from the four corners of the earth. Most were bright, primary-colored or jeweled but some were dark and even
a little frightening: masks from dark wilderneses of Africa or statues of naked, contorted figures he didn’t want to study too closely.

Overall, though, the house was warm and inviting, if a bit cluttered. The exotic smells fit in perfectly with the atmosphere of the place. Jonathan considered the great contrast between the ordinary appearance of the exterior of the house and the cultural wonderland he stepped into.

Sitting below what could only be some Middle Eastern representation of a goddess, he jumped slightly at the sound of the doorbell. Destiny jumped up with an “I’ll get it!” and flung open the door to reveal a taller, wider version of Destiny. “Why’d you ring the bell?” she accused.

“My hands are full!” the other Destiny said. And as she stepped in Jonathan saw that she had a covered dish – no doubt one more exotic item on the menu.

“Jonathan, this is my sister, Georgia.”

He rose to greet her. Handing the dish awkwardly to Destiny, she held out her hand for him. They shook hands; he was grateful she didn’t greet him like Millie did. Someone who looks this much like Destiny should not be kissing him. When he got closer, however, he saw that she didn’t resemble her sister as much as he first thought. She had no scars on her face, her hair was less full, lighter, and her complexion was paler.

“Dinner!” called Millie from the kitchen.

They had an adventurous meal, braving the strange flavors and daring each other to mix them or try them with various mystery sauces. By the end of it, Jonathan thought he had eaten food from Pakistan, Paraguay, and Peru (it was “P” Thanksgiving this year),
but he was unsure if he remembered the countries exactly and doubted if the dishes had been made properly. Unconcerned with accurate representation of food of native lands, it was more their fun, carefree day. He doubted, in fact, if any of them had bothered following actual recipes considering their contempt for all things regimented or traditional. Jonathan could see them simply tossing ingredients and spices they thought would match into a dish.

At the end of dinner, the phone rang. Millie got up to answer it and spoke in hushed tones so that, although he was close, Jonathan could not hear who it was or what he or she might have wanted. But after a minute or so, she looked up at her daughters and said: “Girls, it’s your father.”

They both jumped up. Georgia took the outstretched phone and Destiny bounded up the steps to pick up an extension. They both seemed excited to talk to him and Jonathan wondered what the situation was. He had never before asked Destiny about her family. He did not know her parents were divorced. Although, even that would be jumping to conclusions considering for all he knew, her father was off on a business trip. *Could a man who worked in business survive in this house?* The two seemed incompatible.

Millie walked Jonathan to the living room as Georgia, on the phone in the kitchen, and Destiny, on the phone in an upstairs bedroom, spoke to their father.

“So, Jonathan, Destiny tells me you’re a teacher,” Millie began as a conversation opener.

“Yes, I teach English,” said Jonathan who couldn’t think of anything interesting to add.
“What grade?”

“9th. All freshmen all day. It’s very exciting,” he tried to laugh.

“Well, you must read literature with them,” she said as a way of countering the idea that it is not exciting to teach English to freshmen. He could see where Destiny got her unadulterated enthusiasm. There was no arguing. So, they began a stimulating conversation about writers, books, and “deeper meanings.” He did not remember the last time (if ever) he had talked like this with someone about his greatest passion.

Minutes or hours could have passed for all that Jonathan was paying attention, lost as he was in dialogue with Millie, before Destiny came downstairs announcing “Grandma Angler says ‘hello’ and ‘happy Thanksgiving.’” Georgia too came in from the kitchen.

Now all four of them sat in the living room, Destiny taking up residence on the floor where she seemed unnaturally comfortable. He tried to offer her his chair, but she truly wanted to lounge right where she was, head on Georgia’s lap. Her pose, leaning across her sister, reminded Jonathan of one of his favorite paintings called “Flaming June.” And although the image was nice, the name recalled his mother so he quickly sought to drive it from his mind.

The four visitors fell into quiet conversation about nothing in particular, yet seemed important and worthwhile. He noticed that the living room contained no television and was, therefore, arranged for just this purpose.

When it was time to leave, late into the evening, he was sad at the prospect of going back to his empty place. Is this how real families act?
As Destiny and Jonathan walked to her car, he ventured a question that had been in the back of his mind throughout the Thanksgiving festivities.

“Where’s your father?”

“Oh, my parents are divorced. Have been since I was four. I still see him plenty, but he doesn’t come for Thanksgiving. He thinks we’re crazy. He’d rather have turkey and stuffing with his mother than come try our mystery flavors. We won’t change for him though. I think that was the premise of the divorce. But, we’re all on good terms.”

“Oh, well, that’s good. I was just wondering. Wasn’t trying to be nosy or anything.”

“No problem.”

The rest of the drive was quiet. It was not an awkward silence; they seemed to have an understanding. Jonathan was immensely glad he had spent Thanksgiving with Destiny’s family.

“I’m jealous,” he turned to her as they approached his street.

“What?” she laughed.

“You have a really great family. Thanks so much for inviting me. I’ve never had such an enjoyable Thanksgiving.”

She was laughing at his exaggeration until she looked up at him and saw the earnestness of what he was saying.

“Absolutely. Any time. I could see they loved you,” she added.

As they pulled into his driveway, he reached over and squeezed her hand. It seemed too presumptuous to kiss her.

“Thanks again,” Jonathan said as he alighted from the car.
That night he hated his house more than ever.

December came and began to wane. Jonathan returned to his thoughts about Clara. Christmas drew nearer and he wondered what she did during the holidays. He pictured her alone with Jesus staring down at her. Perhaps Leah came for a non-visit. Maybe he would send her a card to let her know he was thinking of her. Another visit seemed impossible. Destiny and her family had helped him get back to living and he felt that a trip to see Clara would remind him why it had been so difficult to live life normally.

Destiny dragged him to an antique shop looking for the perfect gift for Millie. Jonathan was always kind of creeped-out by antique stores. It was like looking at ghosts of the past. He could only picture the people, now dead and in coffins with mounds of earth above them, who previously owned these objects. The air was stifling; Jonathan could barely see the portraits of the dead with their hollow eyes staring out at him. He tried to distract himself by perusing the jewelry. He saw the usual brooches and rings and watches. But, his eye caught on a bright, beautiful piece of jade. It was a pendant, a crucifix; he immediately thought of Clara. Destiny walked over and Jonathan showed her the necklace.

“"I thought of Clara,” explained Jonathan.

“Yes,” answered Destiny.

Jonathan had the antique store wrap it up for him.

They had a pleasant but quiet drive home as Jonathan clutched the box in his hands. Destiny drove, recklessly as usual. He tried not to watch, staring down at the box.
As she pulled into Jonathan’s driveway, Destiny turned to him. She watched him for a
moment and then said, “I’m sure she’ll love it.”

“Yeah, it seemed like it called her name,” replied Jonathan.
Chapter 8 – Destiny

Destiny watched Jonathan for a second, then peeled out of the driveway carelessly. She loved to drive like there were no other people on the road. It gave her a sense of freedom that she longed for in every part of her life.

She had no specific plans for the rest of the day. She wished she had had the guts to be more blunt with Jonathan. She had wanted to go in. She had wanted to kiss him. But, she could see, with that gift clutched in his hands, that he had other things on his mind. She felt like a coward and drove even more recklessly to make up for it. She hated this feeling. She wasn’t used to it. Whatever she wanted in the world was what she went after, with little forethought or decision-making logic. Her mother had imparted this freedom. Perhaps her sister too. They all lived in worlds of their own making.

Destiny was four when her father had moved out of the family’s home. It had been a “trial” separation – at least, that’s what her father had said years later.

That morning Destiny had been in a dancing mood. She had danced through the house singing a song of her own invention. She was twirling and jumping until her father had chastised her for bumping into his desk. Then, she went upstairs and put on her ballerina tutu. If she couldn’t twirl until she was dizzy, at least she would look like a dancer.
Her mother had found her pulling on her tutu and helped, tying pink ribbons around her waist and legs. Destiny bounded around her room for the next hour, knocking things around without once looking up to survey the damage.

In the next room, her father was packing clothes into suitcases while her mother watched from a cool distance. Every now and again they spoke in hushed tones. No anger or venom leaked from the room. Destiny remained oblivious to the life-changing event taking place near her.

She found spinning tiresome after awhile and decided her outfit needed some flair. She dragged a step stool to her closet where she found a pair of red cowboy boots and a green velvet button down top with spiral embroidery. Both seemed like perfect companions for her current pink-ribboned tutu. After putting her ensemble together she admired the menagerie in her full-length mirror. She saw that her head was grossly neglected in the reverie. Going back to her closet, she found the perfect finishing touch: a white, wide-brimmed hat.

Destiny emerged from her room to find her mother leaning against the wall outside her room.

“Do you want to go to the store?” asked Millie.

“Yes! What store, Mama? Can I get a toy?”

At the sound of the word “toy,” Georgia, Destiny’s older sister who had been quietly playing Barbie party in her room, joined the two in the hall.

“Who’s getting a toy?” asked Georgia.

“Do you want to go to the store?” Millie asked her six year old daughter.

“Sure.”
“Yea, we’re going to the store!” shouted Destiny who now jumped up and down, shaking her tutu and clanging her boots on the wooden floor.

Her father emerged from her parents’ room and stood in the doorway. He looked disgusted as he took in Destiny’s creation.

“You’re not letting her go in that – are you?” he asked Millie.

“Get over yourself, she’s four,” she answered.

“Good Lord,” he said to himself, bending down to hug Destiny.

“Don’t worry, Daddy, everyone will love it,” she tried to comfort her father.

“Listen, honey, I’m going away for a while, but I’ll be back . . . to visit. Okay?”

Destiny hugged him around the neck and then bounced down the stairs to find the beaded bracelets that would make her outfit sing. She also could not resist her sister’s baton leaning against the wall near the back door.

Georgia similarly hugged her father and strode back into her room to find her shoes.

Millie looked her husband in the eyes and said “Goodbye.” She walked away as if they were parting for the afternoon, but would see each other at dinner.

He waited until he heard the car back out of the driveway, carried his suitcases downstairs and called his mother for a ride to her house where he would stay, until . . .

Millie, Georgia, and Destiny arrived at the grocery store ready for adventure. Millie never gave the slightest hint that something might be wrong, that her husband had recently relinquished that role.

Destiny marched up and down the aisles using her baton to lead the troops behind her and sometimes twirling it awkwardly. Georgia marched behind her, often catching the
wayward baton so as not to disturb the carefully stacked food around them. Millie smiled at them both, grateful for the distraction. The other patrons did not feel as amenable. Many frowned and whispered. Others were bold enough to actually speak, using words like “disgraceful” and “pathetic.” The family ignored them and smiled back at those who were not disapproving.

In the frozen food section, Destiny opened the door near the ice cream and traced the outline of her hand in the fog of the chill. She smiled at her creation and began to sing a song about “ice cream steam.”

When they returned nobody mentioned or even noticed that Mr. Angler was gone. He had been such a non-presence in the household, trying carefully to ignore all of the “outrageous” behavior, that his absence was not tangible. In fact, despite the realization that this was the day her father left permanently, one of Destiny’s happiest memories was skipping through the aisles in her fashion creation and leading her family to marching band victory.

Two years later the divorce was settled. She had never missed her father the way she thought she should have. She enjoyed their visits, but did not need him around consistently.

Really, in her 25 years of life, Jonathan was the first man she longed for. She had had boyfriends, but they were all the take-or-leave type – no one she actually needed. But she felt a physical need for Jonathan and a connection with him that she could not describe. It was actually quite scary for her, a helpless, vulnerable feeling she didn’t like. A feeling that made her drive more recklessly still.
Chapter 9 – Clara’s Confession

Jonathan had put Clara’s wrapped present in his car, having convinced himself that one day when he was near her house, he would take it to her.

On Christmas Eve, he found the courage to do it – or maybe he was desperate for a little warmth and familial companionship. Anyway, a Christmas gift would only make sense before or on Christmas, not months later when he finally had the courage.

Clara seemed to be waiting for him. He saw her in the window, a lone figure in the darkness. But, the darkness was only in her house, for the outside had been lit by white Christmas lights that framed the shabby dwelling. The light gave it a crisp, new feel that invited Jonathan. The ring of ghosts, thank God, was gone.

Jonathan wondered how she had managed the climb to affix lights to her roof.

Clara sensed his wonderment and remarked first thing: “You like them?” She gazed at the bright glow that came from every corner of her house.

“How did you get them up there?” asked Jonathan.

“Well, they’re always there, I just turn them on at Christmas time.”

“How long have they been up?” he wondered aloud.

“Years,” said Clara. Then, she turned to Jonathan like she was seeing him for the first time. She stretched out her arms as if for a hug, but instead she gripped his arms in her strong hands. She kissed him lightly on the cheek. They exchanged no words, but a welcoming smile was spread across Clara’s face. He held out the small present to her; she
took it, smiled wider, patted his arm gratefully, and sat the present on a closely cluttered buffet.

“Shall we sit?” asked Clara.

“Sure.”

They walked to faded couches in the front living room that Jonathan assumed she didn’t use. Older people seemed to have these types of rooms: mini museums not meant for public consumption. Then it occurred to him that considering the size of the house this was probably the only living room; most likely, it just wasn’t used much since Clara didn’t seem the “entertaining” type. He imagined she spent much more time in the kitchen and dining room and in that strange space before the dining room that housed a recliner (the one he had seen Leah in on his first visit) and an old television that he could not picture Clara using.

She sat next to him on the longer couch. She never offered him tea or hard cookies. Other things occupied her mind and intentions.

Jonathan began tentatively: “I delivered your message. To Arthur” he added as an afterthought.

“I know you did, honey, thank you.”

Jonathan began to ask her how she knew, but he figured Jesus had been informing on him and so he didn’t bother.

“He’s . . .” Jonathan trailed off, not really knowing where he was going with the Arthur conversation. She smiled up innocently. He didn’t know if all of this would hurt her now or not. But, unable to help it as he looked at the compassionate and well-intentioned Clara, he inadvertently told the truth. “He’s convinced he’s dying.”
The word “dying” hung in the air and pinioned around menacingly. Jonathan tried to ignore it. Clara managed a nonchalance that he couldn’t fathom.

“Yes, well, I suppose he’s about to be 77, and it’s all closing in on him,” countered Clara.

“How’d you know?” stammered Jonathan, amazed.

“His time in prison wasn’t what got him believin’ 77 was his unlucky number. No, he’s been on about that band director business his whole life. As if being a delivery driver wasn’t good enough. ‘You’re nothing’ without a college degree in this world!’ he used to say. I ignored him. Never thought much of it, honestly. Don’t know where he got it, either. Neither of his parents were college educated. Guess that was the problem, though, since he thought their lives came to nothing. But, I suppose he’ll just will himself to die. Stubborn old man. He’ll be right if it means he’s got to die to do it. He never did figure out that Jesus was the only one truly allowed to be right – that right, anyway. Life and death right – He’s the only one.”

Jonathan stared at her. He watched the lines on her face as she talked, smiled, concentrated.

Clara was silent. Jonathan hoped it was not the end of an explanation he desperately wanted. Although he was afraid to know about Arthur, afraid to picture the man as a murderer, he couldn’t help being drawn into the story like one of his fictions. He felt like Destiny – intrigued by the sheer drama of it, even if he was ensnared by it.

“Clara?” Jonathan began.

Clara looked up, a promising smile spreading across her face, showing her soft dimples. He hated to force her to remember, to do this to her for his own curiosity.
“What happened . . . with Arthur? What did he do?”

Clara waited, staring out at the ever-present lighted wonderland. She patted his knee lightly as if waving off his question like she might with a bothersome child.

Jonathan’s heart sank. He began to scheme other ways of discovering: old news papers? Court documents? But, then Clara spoke, startling him.

“You know, Jonnie, this house used to be filled with life. We had a happy family. We didn’t have much, but we loved each other. I never thought I could be so happy and so in love . . .” she trailed off making Jonathan feel as though he should interject.

“Yes, when God gave me Simon, I thought my heart couldn’t hold so much love.”

“Simon?” questioned Jonathan.

“Didn’t know about him?”

“No . . . I--“

“He was my son. The most beautiful, loving child I could’ve known.”

She patted his knee again like before and rose from the sofa. Tottering toward a mantle, she selected a gold-framed picture and handed it to him. Jonathan stared at the aged photo. He was a child much like Jonathan himself had been. In the photo, he was perhaps five and his eyes contained a wildness that reminded Jonathan of the garden outside. He held a kick-ball next to his side. He grinned a wide, mischievous smile that revealed dimples similar to Clara’s. Although the photo was black and white, Jonathan could tell he had almost black hair and dirty overalls covering an equally dirty child.

Jonathan could see him in the driveway, kicking his ball against the wall of the house. Arthur would not have liked this, especially while trying to read the Sunday paper.
Surely, Arthur would scold the boy “stop that racket!” and Clara would have turned on her admonishing tone and reluctant smile. “Oh, Arthur, he’s just a boy, let him play.” Arthur would have grudgingly returned to his paper, distracted by each boom on the wall, reminding him Clara cared more for Simon than for him. It flashed across Jonathan’s eyes like an invisible truth.

He gripped the picture, trying not to envy the child for the irresponsible love poured on him by Clara everyday of his existence. He said nothing, looking at Clara who had resumed her seat.

He loved her. He put his arm around her hunched and bony shoulders and squeezed, hoping he communicated his silent love. She stared at Simon resting in Jonathan’s hand.

“But that was the problem” resumed Clara like she never stopped. “I loved him far too much. I knew it. Knew – deep in the bottom of my stomach – I loved him too much. It was coming. I lived like it wasn’t, but I knew. All the time I had him here with me I could feel the danger of that much love. God sees fit to command us. ‘Only ten rules you got to follow,’ he says and first, very first, is to love Him above all. I didn’t do that.

“‘Have no other gods before me’ He commands. But I failed in that. I worshipped my son. I wanted him more than God. My life, my world revolved around Simon. I might not have believed him the true God, but he was my god. He was perfect. I felt my choice and I made it. I chose Simon. And I thought him mine, but the truth was he was God’s, and God reminded me of that. The second commandment too . . . part of it, even warned me ‘I the Lord thy God am a jealous God!’

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“My love for him scared me. Oh, Lord, the day I realized I thought my own heart would quit beating out of fear. Yes, I am God-fearing, but the day I truly knew that I loved Simon more than Him, I felt the awesome power of God’s Justice looming right over me.” Clara began to sound like a preacher.

Jonathan listened, dumbstruck, unable to process Clara’s words.

“I counted the days, Jonnie, ‘cause I knew that God wouldn’t withhold His Justice forever.”

Jonathan was reminded of “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” a Puritan sermon filled with concrete metaphors of God’s Justice. Every year, he drew the images on the board for his students, so that “extended metaphor” might become clear to them. Justice was a bow and arrow, floodwaters, and burning flames, all aimed toward the lowly sinner. Jonathan wondered which metaphor Clara might find most apt since God’s Justice was an equally tangible thing to her.

“Only . . . I thought that the Justice was coming for me. I was the one destined for Hell, my heart was the sinner. But, I underestimated God’s Divine Justice. True punishment for me isn’t my death or my eternal damnation. That wouldn’t be real recompense for my sin. God took my son because there was no better way to punish me for my betrayal of His love. Of course, what perfect punishment. What better way to show me my error? So then . . . then Simon was gone. ‘Just an accident’ everyone said, but I knew. I knew that God’s Justice was no accident.”

Clara looked up into Jonathan’s wide eyes. He waited for her to go on. She began ringing her hands as silent tears fell on them.
“He was playing in a neighbor’s yard. It was a hot summer day. And bright – blinding bright, which is why I’m sure he didn’t see Simon behind his car when he backed out of his driveway.” Clara fell silent.

“Who?” asked Jonathan.

“The neighbor.” Clara rose and pointed, diagonally across the street. Jonathan got up and allowed his eyes to follow Clara’s accusing finger.

It was a small, brick house, still and unassuming.

“Roger Coyle.”

“Does he still live there?” Jonathan glared at the snow-covered house and driveway where he imagined Clara’s greatest love dead under a car.

Clara patted his arm patronizingly.

“No, honey, he’s dead. I tried to tell Arthur. I explained that it was my fault that Simon was gone. I told him that God took him to punish me, but he couldn’t hear . . . or wouldn’t. I thought the thing was for show. I didn’t even know it worked. But he walked out the door with it. And I caught him just barely. I held him – my hand on his arm and my eyes telling him Truth. And I said: ‘You leave here with that pistol and no matter what happens, how it all turns out, you are no longer my husband.’ Just those words – nothing more. But, he looked down in shame and kept right on walking – out into the glare, into the hot day.

Arthur wrenched himself free of Clara’s grip and stomped through the drought-dried grass. He saw nothing around him. He fixed his eyes on the house and the death-car that remained at the end of their driveway – the last place Simon ever drew breath.
Clara had collapsed onto the floor of her entry way, leaving the door wide. She tried to cry, to sob uncontrollably, but she was totally numb, her mind having divorced itself from all events and emotions. She lifted her head to watch Arthur disappear across the street. She slammed the door and chained the lock. Minutes later, she was speaking calmly on the phone to the police, explaining that her distraught “former” husband had a gun. She gave them the address of the neighbor’s and walked to her kitchen, unsure of what she wanted or would do. As she stood stone still in the middle of the stifling kitchen, a light knock came from the back door. It was Leah.

Leah walked Clara to the kitchen table, held her hand and spoke in soothing tones. Simon had been killed two days ago. Earlier that morning, Clara and Arthur made funeral arrangements. It sent Arthur over the edge; before he had been in the same numb state as Clara, but, somehow, choosing hymns for his son’s service added an unbearable weight. The police had finished “investigating” and easily determined that it was a pure accident. Arthur spent hours watching Mr. Coyle’s house, imagining him walking about carefree and fine. He stared out the window, mumbling low threats that Clara believed empty and useless.

But, they were more than threats; they were plans.

Arthur used the pistol to knock at the Coyle’s door; it resonated with a crisp, metallic sound that almost brought Arthur to his senses. But, before reality crashed in around him, the door swung open. Standing in the harsh glare was Mrs. Coyle who looked back at Arthur through grief-mangled tears.

“Where is he?” demanded Arthur.
“Look . . . we can’t . . . we’re sorry . . . like you can’t imagine. Roger hasn’t
gotten out of bed since the police released him.” Mrs. Coyle began sobbing. Her clothes
were crumpled and her hair disheveled.

“Please, don’t do this,” she begged.

Arthur shoved past her and strode up the stairs, taking two at a time. She
remained where she was, unblinking, unbelieving.

Arthur tried every door until he came to one that yielded Roger Coyle, supine on
his bed. He barely lifted his head when Arthur came in. If he sensed danger, he didn’t
show it; his face remained blank. He said nothing, nor did Arthur who simply the pistol
and fired until he no longer saw the form of the offender’s face. By the time he walked
down the stairs, the police, responding to Clara’s call, were there, ready for exactly what
they found.

Mrs. Coyle had flattened herself against the wall and watched the scene unfold
around her. Her son, who had been staying with her parents since the accident that had
killed his friend, was reunited with his mother later that evening. She had endured a few
hours of questions from falsely sympathetic police and then drove away from her
previous home to which she would never return.

Arthur pled guilty so no trial ensued to amplify the tragedy. Roger Coyle had a
quiet, closed-casket funeral two days after Simon’s.

“I never saw Arthur again. My grief was for my son and for the life I had. Arthur
made his choice; I had made mine. Jesus is forgiving and I know he’s forgiven. I didn’t
think I was for a long time. Well, I sat in church one day, my face in my hands, ashamed
of my sin, of showing myself in the House of the Lord. And, a kindly woman sat an old hymn book in my lap. I took it home and read through the old hymns, knowing that one couldn’t pass my sinning lips. But, I read it just the same. It didn’t take long before I got to ‘Amazing Grace’ and read through it, unable to believe that God’s Grace might extend to me too. Along with the hymn was a short explanation of the origin of the song. See, this man, Newton, was involved in the slave trade. I might have loved another beyond God, but this man was trying to be God, possessing human lives and selling them for money. The ‘wretch’ was saved, though! And I realized that I too deserved God’s Grace after all.” Clara paused.

She pressed an ancient copy of a hymnal into Jonathan’s hand. He looked at it, afraid to open it, for its fragile nature appeared ready to render it dust.

“That Grace is for you too, Jonnie.”

Jonathan couldn’t speak. He really wanted to argue the logic of Clara’s self-blame. He knew, though, that it would do no good. There is no logic in the face of “Jesus.”

His heart broke for Clara, and even Arthur who was too ill-equipped to handle the grief Clara had pulled herself out of. He couldn’t imagine Arthur’s living death in that sterile wasteland. Although he wondered if it wasn’t finally the case that his surroundings matched the blankness inside him, the sterility begun by his father and continued by his external prison, with just a brief hiatus thanks to Clara.

Clara probably didn’t know, as Jonathan did, that Arthur ended up as he had started his life.
“My son died because I loved him too much,” Clara said like last words. “God gave His son, surly I could give mine. And I would see him again when I was through with my penance on Earth.”

Clara rose with a finality that made Jonathan realize their time was up. It was like the bell for visitors at the Lorraine Penitentiary. He stood up in deference to her; he kissed her cheek and walked from her house with the deteriorating copy of the hymnal that had saved Clara’s soul. Before he got to his car, Clara called to him.

“Come back any time. I miss you when you’re not here.”

“Merry Christmas!” Jonathan called back, not having any other idea for a parting response.
Chapter 10 – The Beacon House

Jonathan went home with an empty feeling. He wanted to cry, to sit down on his hard floor and sob into his hands, but the feeling overwhelming him was one of complete emptiness. Sadness would be a relief. Any emotion would be relief.

He wanted to call Destiny. But, Christmas Eve meant she would surely be at Millie’s dancing around the May Pole or whatever it was they did at Christmas. In any case, she would be immersed in the constant joy that seemed to emanate from her and contaminate the space around her. Jonathan needed that joy. His emptiness slipped away in her presence. How could one person do that? Needing her despite his reservations of intruding, he chanced a text to her cell.

If ur not busy, call me.
-Beacon

Fifteen minutes later, Destiny called. “I’m sorry if I’ve disturbed you,” Jonathan began.

“S’alright, we’re wrapping it up here. You want me to come by when I’m done?”

“Yes, I’d like that a lot.” Feeling a bit silly, Jonathan tried not to sound too enthusiastic.

An hour later, Destiny was at his door.
“Beacon!” She greeted him with a hug. It felt like cold water on a burn and he held her in it longer, probably, than she would have liked. It began to fill the void that had permeated his whole being.

“You alright?” she asked tentatively.

“Yep, now” he answered.

As they broke from the embrace, Jonathan stepped back and finally saw Destiny. Maybe it was being away from school or the extra joy of the holiday, but she looked stunning. A rose hue lit up her cheeks from the inside, creating a look far softer than her normal. It momentarily awed him, and he failed to speak.

“So, you saw Clara?” ventured Destiny, removing her coat, hat, gloves, and scarf. She had a way of layering for the winter elegantly, rather than bulkily like the rest of the world.

“Yeah, just got back before you called,” he responded.

“So, give me details. What happened?”

“Oh, God, you won’t believe it,” Jonathan said. He relayed the scene and Clara’s insane belief, to Destiny’s wide and sympathetic eyes. She did not, though, see the insanity that Jonathan did.

“I’m not saying I agree that she’s to blame, but you must know about survivor’s guilt. Not to mention the common religious belief that all struggles and crises and even tragedies are God’s lessons for us. When you combine those two, Clara’s need to accept responsibility makes sense.”

Jonathan contemplated and grudgingly nodded his head. He didn’t often bother seeing others’ perspectives; nor was he any good at empathy. It was, however, one of the
traits he admired in Destiny: she was really good at walking in another’s shoes. It was annoying too as he wanted to be entirely outside any camp in which blaming Clara would make sense.

Destiny saw his reluctant agreement. She patted his arm, reminding him of Clara.

“You want some dinner?” she asked.

“Didn’t you just have dinner with your family?”

“Well, we ate early. I’m ready to eat again.” She sauntered into the kitchen and began investigating Jonathan’s food stores. “You don’t have much,” she admitted after a thorough search. “But, I think we can still salvage a meal.”

After twenty minutes in the kitchen, she presented Jonathan with some kind of omelet and toast.

“You only had American cheese,” she apologized.

“Don’t be ridiculous, this looks fantastic,” he lied. Cutting into it skeptically, he found a variety of odd vegetables and spices. It didn’t matter, though, because he barely tasted it, and his stomach lurched sickeningly every time he allowed his thoughts to wander back to Clara. Nevertheless, they spent a pleasant enough evening together. Jonathan was immeasurably grateful to Destiny who seemed to be taken with rescuing him.

Before saying her final goodbye, well after midnight, she handed him a carefully wrapped present that he had not seen her bring in. He stared at it, ashamed at having nothing for her. There were so many reasons he didn’t get her anything – which to use? He didn’t know he would see her at Christmas; he hadn’t wanted to presume; he couldn’t imagine a present special enough for her . . .
“It’s okay – I just wanted to give you this. I didn’t want anything in return.” She turned to leave and opened the front door. “Good luck tomorrow,” she added as a final statement.

Jonathan caught her arm at the threshold. He pulled her in and gave her a kiss that he meant to be a simple thank you and goodbye. But, taking the opportunity given her, she wound her fingers into his hair and kissed him back forcefully.

“Thank you,” he said ambiguously.

“Merry Christmas,” she said and disappeared into the darkness. When she had gone, he sat at his too bright kitchen table and opened her present. It was a crimson, leather-bound journal. It was beautiful. The lines on the pages were gold and a black ribbon ran down the center. It reminded him of a Bible, making him smile at the way Jesus enjoyed taunting him. He thought it too beautiful to write in, yet found himself opening it as he sat in bed that night.

Closing his eyes, he saw Clara and Simon, together and happy. And so, he began to write. He wrote of the small boy in the gold framed photo and of the bitter Arthur alone in his cell. Exorcising ghosts plaguing him for months, the writing went on for hours. By the time he curled into the sleep of the dead, children in houses around him were waking to the warmth of Christmas morning.

At ten o’clock, after fewer than five hours sleep, his phone rang. His mother’s curt voice was at the other end.

“Coming for Christmas?” she accused more than asked.

“Yeah, what time do you want me there?”

“Noon.”
At noon, Jonathan pulled into his parents’ drive. In truth, they lived entirely too close. He would love the excuse of being too far or the snow-covered roads being too dangerous, but none of that worked for him.

He dreaded this. Uninterrupted time with his parents. Ugh. He wondered if it was too late to get in on the May Pole dancing at Millie’s.

He trudged up the neatly shoveled steps to the front door and let himself in. No tree was up, no waiting presents stacked in a corner, no visible signs would ever clue a visitor in that it was Christmas. He laid their card down at the coffee table in the living room and went searching for signs of life.

His mother, June, sat at the kitchen table flipping through a tattered cookbook.

“Jonathan, what would you like for dinner?” she asked as a greeting.

“What are my options?” he asked, taking a seat across from her. He looked around the gloomy, out-dated kitchen, thinking of a thousand other places he’d rather be.

“I was thinking of soup,” she responded.

“Okay, soup it is!” he tried to sound enthusiastic, at least for his own sake, but his misery continued, and it was lost on her. She rose and began gathering ingredients for her Christmas soup.

“Where’s Dad?” he asked more for conversation’s sake than because he actually cared.

“Up in his office.”

She began peeling carrots and tossing them into a simmering pot on the stove. He guessed that she had already had her mind set on soup and wondered what she would have done had he objected when she asked.
He took a deep breath and balled his fists up for courage. Actually speaking to her, talking about life rather than soup, that was going to take balls.

“I met Clara,” he tried.

She had her back to him and simply inclined her head to indicate she heard. She made no attempt to respond otherwise.

“She’s really nice,” he tried again. He could hear the shaking in his voice. Surely she could just answer and relieve his nervous dread. Instead, a perceptible and silent nod came from June.

“I’m glad I got the chance to know her because she’s dying,” Jonathan ventured, trying to get at least some response with the shocking information. Feeling his nails dig into his palms and realizing that no reaction was coming no matter what he said, he allowed himself to give up. He had failed.

June had frozen a moment in her peeling and chopping, quickly returning, though, to her task. That was the best he could hope for. He changed tack.

“Dad coming down?”

“When he’s done, I suppose,” she said stiffly. He wondered if she heard the veiled threat in his question. She had asked that he not tell his father about the whole Clara situation. He could use that. But he didn’t see the point. He didn’t think any of it would come to good.

Then, he left her to soup-making and went to the living room where he clicked on a parade that was unobtrusively moving through television land. He wished he had brought a book and considered how it had been so easy to become a lover of literature in this house. An escape into the bright sounds of fiction was always a necessity here.
Staring blankly at the parade for what seemed like hours, Jonathan finally heard his father emerge from his office. He was an accounts manager at a local bank and somehow, he brought much of it home. Probably, none of it needed to be done after hours. James simply used it as an excuse to check himself out of the family, especially since June had never had a career beyond the cooking and cleaning that had filled her life with meaning. They had had typical roles and never sought for life outside of them. Growing up around this, and yet never wanting it for himself, Jonathan thought about how he was so drawn to the entirely unconventional Destiny. Perhaps that was what drew him in: the guarantee that he would not end up in this sterile, comatose existence.

It was an early and quiet dinner – nothing more than vegetable soup which satisfied his parents who never needed to derive pleasure from food. Jonathan entertained himself through their awkward, soup-slurping meal by imagining what Destiny, Millie, and Georgia might be eating, or doing.

After dinner, they exchanged gifts in the living room where the television droned on with a football game. He had known better than to buy actual presents. Instead, he got them a gift card to an office supply store and placed it in a generic card to which he did no more than sign his name.

They gave him an electric razor which he pretended to like. Then, they all sat in discomfited silence broken only by the sports commentator’s voice from the football game they all feigned interest in to avoid each other. He kept this charade up for nearly an hour (which seemed adequate for “family togetherness”) before he made up an excuse about needing to grade student essays and hastily exited.
Outside, he took a deep breath of cold air that felt like freedom. Thank God that Christmas was the only day he was required to do this. The rest of the year, quick phone calls to check up and rushed visits to give or take necessary car parts or tools seemed to fill all familial obligation.
Chapter 11 – June

June stood at the large window in the living room watching her son walk and then drive away. The game droned on, neglected behind her. Her eyes stayed fixed in the spot where Jonathan’s car had been for many minutes after he left.

James gave a disapproving grunt that was intended for his wife, snapping her out of the stupor that had dropped on her like incoming fog. He opened the newspaper noisily, purposefully ruffling pages open until she stepped away from the window. Despite her eyes losing contact with the spot where they had been fixed, she remained impassive as a recently lobotomized patient.

“I’m going upstairs . . . to read,” she informed her husband.

He gave a disinterested grunt.

June stepped upstairs lightly, attempting her constant imitation of a non-person. At their shared bedroom, June closed the door behind her and sat on the bed. She turned to her neatly arranged nightstand where her well-loved copy of Gone with the Wind sat. Its corners were bent and frayed, the cover was nearly severed from the whole and all color had long faded from it.

June picked it up gingerly, out of both necessity and reverence. In the same spot it always occupied, the book had sat on her nightstand for more than twenty years. Every night she picked it up and opened to a random place. Never bothering with bookmarks,
she read snippets, passages, or single words, taking inspiration from them as others might
The Bible. But, neither the words nor inspiration was the purpose of this novel for her.

When June had married James, quiet and introspective though he was, she had
pictured a lively existence with many children playing, running, laughing through their
home and lives. James was a loving man and June was desperately in love with him. She
knew about his difficult childhood with a rough and neglectful father, and a caring but
overall helpless mother. He was so much his mother’s son, so affectionate and attentive.
And, so June felt good about the husband and father he would make.

She married with no reservations.

Four years later they had Jonathan. James allowed her to name him, their first son.
Jonathan was a name that June loved, holding a certain reverence that was inexplicable
and yet fitting.

June fell in deep love with him, watching him sleep for hours, playing on the floor
with the rolling but not yet crawling baby, holding him until he fell asleep at naptime,
most entirely unseen by James who worked long hours at the bank trying to be promoted.

Although he was relatively disengaged from his son, June shrugged it off as
natural for fathers to be less demonstrative than mothers.

She and Clara would get together some days for lunch. Simon was too old to play
with Jonathan who did little more than drool, but the two women passed hours together,
commiserating about the difficulties of motherhood and delighting over the small joys of
their beautiful children. In the meanwhile, Simon busied himself, and Jonathan wrapped
baby fingers around the teething toys that never could be shoved far enough into his
mouth. Sometimes, Simon would stop digging in the dirt long enough to shake a few toys in front of his baby cousin.

She had been glad that James’ old-fashioned values kept her at home because she had no career to miss and no fulfillment beyond the lovely creature who so completely relied on her. But, had she been more cynical, she might have seen the tide turning in James’ head. Becoming a father had somehow begun to make him more like his father. Everyday, he got more distant, less affectionate, his eyes betraying the cold constant he became.

June lived in denial, pouring herself into her son, finding it easier each day to ignore her unrecognizable husband. But in time, he could not be ignored. He began grumbling when he watched June with Jonathan. He shot venomous glances that she always feared when she saw.

Finally, James spoke.

“You are spoiling the mess out of that child!” he pointed at his son.

June looked up, dumbfounded.

“You are going to turn him into a sissy! I can’t watch you two!” At this he stomped up the stairs to his office and stayed there until bedtime.

June ate a quiet, sullen dinner with Jonathan in his high chair, banging on the tray with his baby spoon.

She tried terribly to rationalize James’ behavior with possibilities of a bad day or a distemper easily cured with rest. But it felt false. Really, this was just the culmination of weeks of nasty looks and sounds from him. She felt a dread, real and permanent, that the James she had married was gone now, and this was a life sentence.
Days later, in the midst of June’s internal crisis, Simon was dead and life took a new and irrevocable turn.

In the middle of a bright day that June had closed the heavy curtains on, wishing a dark, numb peace, she received a call from an incoherent Clara. Clara, like June, had no extended family so June was the only person she could think to call. James was at work with the family car, so June put Jonathan in his seldom-used baby carriage and walked at a half-run three miles to the hospital where she arrived red-faced, sun-burned, and panting. Jonathan was quiet most of the way, rocked into and out of sleep by the movement of the stroller.

When she inquired at the front desk, she got a reluctant, mournful glance from the receptionist who rose and disappeared behind a door. When she returned, a small, blank-faced man in a heavy suit strode along beside her. He walked over to June and said: “Come with me, please,” and led her to an elevator where he turned to her and in hushed tones said, “Thank you for coming. Mrs. Beacon asked to see her son’s body and has refused to leave. We could have her forcibly removed or sedated, but we thought a family member could try to help before we resorted to such measures.”

June began to search her mind for possibilities. She didn’t understand. Had Clara asked to see Simon after her call to June? How long had she been there next to the body? How was June going to help? A thought crossed her mind: who else had they called? Where were the psychologists or clergy? It was impossible to articulate any of this on top of the other thirty or so less clear thoughts that rumbled through her mind. She chose the last of the thoughts as a starting point.

“Did you call her priest?”
They entered the elevator.

“We knew you were coming . . . we wanted to see if a family member could . . .”

As he trailed off, June had another thought that she couldn’t believe wasn’t foremost in her mind: “Where’s Arthur?”

“Well, he was here at first, but left shortly after to make a report at the police station. We did contact him, but he said that you . . . would be . . . the one who could help her. We knew you were on the way.” He was so genuinely uncomfortable with the conversation that veiled her clear accusations that she actually felt a little sorry for him.

As she stepped off the elevator, she felt determined to help Clara. Someone had to—these men are useless, thought June.

“Can you watch my son?” she asked, feeling insecure leaving Jonathan with the insensitive man in the stiff suit, but not seeing a choice. He nodded once and pointed her to a door behind which Clara sat with her dead son.

June took a deep breath and opened the door.

Simon had not turned an unnatural hue, merely looking asleep in the shade. Death had cast a shadow over him and left deep, clean gashes on his head. Damage beyond that was impossible to note as a sheet covered him from the chest down.

With Clara, she found not a sobbing, shaking, incoherent wreck, but a still, staring figure holding a tiny hand in both of hers. Clara sat on a rusty chair facing Simon but not looking at him. Instead, she stared at the wall behind his head.

Clara’s head, with its fine dark curls, was tilted like she was attempting to identify a far-off sound. Her round eyes were puffed and stationary as though they might never move again. Her lips were pressed together, seeming to stifle a noise building deep within
her. She looked strikingly beautiful in her tragic but contained pose. June had never seen anything like it; she never wanted to again.

Clara did not look up, speak, or in any way acknowledge she knew June entered the room. June approached slowly until she reached Clara, gently putting her hands on both shoulders.

“Clara? Honey?” she tried.

Getting no response, she walked around to view Clara from the front, placing herself in her line of vision, but when June saw her eyes and their unbelieving gaze, she knew Clara was not seeing her.

In another world entirely, one in which her son was playing, sleeping, or hiding, Clara sat peacefully. Then, June lifted her chin toward the face of a sympathetic friend and Clara managed to refocus on June, coming back to the small, bleak room in the hospital basement where Simon lay dead. As soon as the world Clara had retreated to vanished, and she recalled the life around her, the lack of life around her, grief settled on her face in deep lines and in her chest with sharp sobs.

She broke into jagged pieces before the increasingly panicked June, who tried in vain to hold them together with halting words and comforting hands. This terrible and desperate scene seemed to last for hours, but was probably only minutes. She could hear the happy cooings of her son in the hall and could see the noises haunted Clara, acting like weights tied to points on her face and heart. They seemed to pull Clara’s face toward Simon whom she kissed on the hand and then the face for the last time. Rising from her metallic chair, every movement was wrought with struggle and pain.
Taking June’s hand, she walked through the door, not once looking back at her lost son.

Through that day and the next few, the only thing June could see was Clara’s grief-drawn face. It followed her, crept behind her, hung around her neck like a dead albatross. She knew why but didn’t want to face it. She avoided Clara when possible, orbiting around her for only minutes at a time, realizing that not only could she do nothing, but with her friend’s retreat into the other world where lives continued and hearts beat on (both Simon’s and Clara’s) there was no reaching or comforting her anyway.

June knew that one of Clara’s close friends lived next door (although she couldn’t remember her name) and so convinced herself that she wasn’t needed since Clara was properly taken care of.

By the time she began to brace herself to go to Simon’s funeral and look into the face that would essentially be a mirror of the grief that flooded every waking nightmare of her own life, Arthur was in police custody for killing his son’s killer. The funeral would go on, but June and the increasingly cold James would not go. James explained it all to her like he would explain interest rates to one of his customers. Arthur, having disgraced the Beacon name by murdering another would become a non-person, permanently dead to them both. June was appalled and thought of refusing. What would James do if she continued to see Clara? How would he keep her from her friend and sister-in-law?

But, in the end, it was far easier to simply agree with him, not because standing against him was difficult, but because the intolerable grief smeared across Clara’s face,
redrawing it into the grotesque and unendurable, burned into June’s heart and consciousness, making it easy to pretend her dead.

She knew Clara had paid a high price for the depth, extent, and completeness of her love for Simon. This was a love that June knew and experienced too well. Clara’s pain reminded her of her own terrible love for Jonathan and the debt she too owed for such a love. She gave up Clara and then, heartbreakingly, Jonathan, for, she saw in Clara’s face her future – a future that was too dark, too awful. It was too high a price.

It was more than grief June feared; it was also an unknown lying in wait for her. Clara was religious. She had beliefs and faith and knew she’d meet Simon again. June had none of this. She would not be comforted by divine love or an afterlife, would not find solace in something greater than herself.

In the minutes she had been with Clara after they left the hospital, once Simon’s death settled on her heart and swept through her body, the childless mother began a kind of mumbling about God and Christ and Mary. She seemed to think she understood Mary’s pain at losing her son. “She watched Him die for the sins of mankind, but Simon . . . I watched him die for my sins,” June heard Clara say. At this June crept out of the house and did not return. These words had decided her, though. She would not walk willingly to Mary’s grief, would not be vulnerable to the agony of the destruction of such love.

And so, another decision was made. James would never again need to yell that she was smothering her son, that she was spoiling him. She needed some detachment to cure it all. She could do it; she could distance herself emotionally. She could do it. She had to believe it because her fate would not be Clara’s or Mary’s.
So, June lived a quiet life, detached from her son, her husband, her sister-in-law, her emotions . . . mostly. For, she allowed herself one minute attachment – to *Gone with the Wind*, every night before bed. Warm in her flannel pajamas as families around her neighborhood and city sat in Christmas afterglow, looking into the faces of loved ones, she looked into the still and perfect face of the love she had and then relinquished out of fear and cowardice. Jonathan’s face, at various ages, pasted into random pages of the book, looked back at her with no return or rejection. It was a face that despite her best efforts, she loved and cherished.
Chapter 12 – The Call

Jonathan awoke on December 26th with thoughts of Destiny. He had intentionally left her to her family on Christmas but now he felt compelled to talk to her, see her, be next to her. He wasn’t sure that she knew how he felt about her. They had been playing casual, friendly roles, merely hinting that great desire lurked under the façades. He knew Destiny was ready just as he was. Before coyly shutting her classroom door, she would pause long enough to meet his eyes and flash a warm smile that lit her face with welcome. It was only seconds, but it was a change from the beginning of the year when she was entirely unaware of him or his lingering. And so it was.

He was left to take action. Destiny might if he didn’t, but if she didn’t the stagnancy would overwhelm him, and if she did he would be left feeling inadequate and cowardly.

It was time to live, to engage and connect with the world he had been sure he could leave or at least ignore. Destiny was impossible to ignore. When Jonathan closed his eyes, to sleep, in the dark and silence, Destiny rose before him, waiting. Her dark hair framed her increasingly beautiful face and her slight figure pressed close to him. He dreamed of the evening she would be laying with him, the actual her, not just the image.

He could make it happen. He thought of Arthur, Clara, and both of his parents, all having wasted or lost their potential for love.
Not taking his opportunity with Destiny would have been akin to Arthur’s imprisonment: self-inflicted (though blind to that fact), cursing his lot both in this world and the next. Jonathan could feel it – his potential to end up there – bitter, alone, cursed. He could feel the other possibility too – a fun, comfortable, loving existence with Destiny.

He had his hand on the phone for three full minutes considering what he would say to her. *How would he do it?* As he had decided to simply invite her to lunch and face it all, the phone rang, making him jump back as if it were red hot and had burned him. He even looked down at his fingers like they had made it ring. It was too much to hope that the voice at the end of the ring were Destiny’s.

He picked it up reluctantly.

“Hello?” Jonathan sounded tentative.

“J-Jon?” answered a gruff but shaky voice.

Recognizing its timbre and tone, but hearing the added strain and weariness, he managed a reply.

“Arthur?” Surely not. He felt stupid even asking. *How could it be?* Once he had gotten a wrong number from the Lorraine prison and a recorded voice asked him to push a button to receive or reject a call from a prisoner. Knowing it had been a wrong number, he had rejected, but it made him sure that all calls from a prison were announced, allowing the recipient to make a choice. *Where was his choice? Could Arthur have been let out or . . . the thought made his throat tighten . . . escape? Shit, you’ve seen too many movies,* he told himself.

“Yeah . . . hey. H-how are you?”
Jonathan, still stunned and with closed throat, could not call up his polite tone so instead he was flatly honest.

“What are you doing? How did you manage to contact me?” It sounded rude.

“Well, Jon,” he had a slow drawl that made him sound like he was telling a story. “I’m in th’ hospital. I ast th’ warden for th’ contact information you gave when you visited. I . . . I hope you don’t mind.” Jonathan could hear the tension behind the words and knew it had taken courage for Arthur to call him. He felt overwhelming guilt and attempted to backpedal.

“It’s fine.” The last word sounded false. Jonathan didn’t know how to lie properly.

“I want you tuh visit. I . . . was hopin’ you would . . . if you hadda chance.” Jonathan thought about the nervousness in Arthur’s voice like a junior high student calling to ask a girl to a dance. He considered the way his voice might have sounded to Destiny had he picked up the phone only three minutes earlier. He wondered if missing this call from Arthur would have been a loss or a beautiful reprieve, a stay of execution.

Like the girl being asked to the dance, Jonathan felt sorry for Arthur and couldn’t reject him. It would be a pity “yes,” born from the guilt of saying “no,” but that probably didn’t matter to Arthur.

“Okay, sure, I’ll come visit. When . . . when would be a good time for you?”

“Well, time a day dun’t matter, as long as you come ‘fore th’ New Year. It’s important.” The last words had weight and fell into Jonathan’s lap, forcing him to confront them and their gravity.

For a moment, he couldn’t respond.

“I’m at th’ Mother a Mercy hospital in Lorraine,” prompted Arthur.
“Okay, hang on,” he felt the need to write it down since his mind had a way of blocking unpleasant things. He fumbled in his top nightstand drawer and finally came up with a stubby pencil and an old receipt and shakily wrote the hospital’s name.

“Got it,” he said after a minute.

“Thanks, Jon,” said Arthur.

“Well . . . I’ll see you,” tried Jonathan, hoping it didn’t sound too abrupt.

“Good,” said Arthur with a relief in his voice that made it sound lighter and less strained than Jonathan had ever heard it.

Then, he hung up and Jonathan was left awkwardly holding the phone in a stupor of disbelief. Things with Arthur and Clara never felt settled. Ever since that first cryptic call from his mother his life had been in constant turmoil.

But, the thing that felt the worst was that sitting on the edge of his rumpled bed, holding the phone and looking out into a gray, snowy day, he no longer had the courage to call Destiny. The desire and longing spurring him on to confess his love drained out of him, leaving him empty and numb again.

Despair painted his vision and washed over everything with a gray tint. Sitting down to grade student essays on *Romeo and Juliet*, he got through the entire stack before realizing he had not registered a single word of any of them. He could not, however, bring himself to care about the random, red grades perched on top of each paper that signified, from what he could tell, nothing other than how legible the essays were. So, he sat at the computer and entered the arbitrary grades into his electronic grade book.
Once he finished and the computer screen glowed in front of him, he decided to look up the address of the hospital, having resigned to go tomorrow to relieve the emptiness and despair inflicting him.

Realizing that he already forgot the name of the accursed place, he retrieved the scrap of paper and scribbled the address below it.

He looked down at the scrap of paper and dreaded encountering the Mother of Mercy. Arthur had been enough doom and death in the prison, but laying on what he surely would believe to be his death bed could not be much fun either.

Two text messages came in on his cell phone that he never picked up. He knew Destiny was at the other end of them. Wanting to be with her and speak to her, he desperately wanted to answer them. Facing it all at one time was too much, though, so he resolved to be done with this first.

Still facing the green glow of the computer, he sent an email to Destiny that read:

Dear Destiny,
For the next 2 days, I’m going to be taking care of some family stuff. I’ll call you as soon as I’m done. Sorry.
Love,
Jonathan
Chapter 13 – Death by Water

Jonathan woke to a bright, stiffly cold morning. He tried to force himself from bed, but the extraordinary cold clamped around him, paralyzing every part of him. Though he was warm under the covers, his exposed skin was near numb with cold and his breath was almost visible.

*Something’s got to be wrong with the heat.* He jumped out of bed, pulling the top two covers off quickly and wrapping them around him. Shuffling out of the room, Jonathan got to the thermostat and stared in disbelief: 48 degrees. Outside snow fell in a shroud of white.

He sighed; with any luck it was a simple pilot light and could be fixed immediately. At the utility closet, Jonathan crouched on the floor with a flash light. Right away he knew that it was nothing as simple as relighting the pilot: no gas was running. He could hear the ominous silence that meant no gas was getting to the heater or hot water heater. To test his theory, he went to the kitchen sink and tried the hot water – ice cold.

There would be no shower for Jonathan. Instead, he was forced to fling off the protective covers and dress in the inhuman chill. A call to the gas company was a disheartening experience – the snow and ice had slowed the progress of repairs – it might be later that evening or the next day.
Jonathan prepared himself for a harsh day. He layered clothes and winter gear to face the outdoors. Had he clicked on the television, he probably would have discovered that driving conditions were unsafe. Instead, he shoveled his walk and a strip of his driveway. Sitting in his car, waiting for it to warm, he considered the task ahead of him. Most likely, this was the last time he would see Arthur.

It was a slow drive. Jonathan passed the Green Hills Cemetery and noticed that they were white hills now. Covering the stones and the earth below lay a sheet of forgetful snow. Under that sheet might not be a terrible place to be. Once he had read about a castle near Dublin that had a small dungeon – not a huge torture chamber, but a kind of closet that made for convenient solitary confinement. The word for this place in Gaelic he didn’t remember, but he did remember that it translated to “a little place of forgetting.” It didn’t seem such a bad place – to forget. To know, to remember, that was the torture.

Prison had been hell for Arthur because he remembered it all and allowed it to brew into bitterness and living death. If only he could be in a little place of forgetting. (It certainly occurred to Jonathan that the “forgetting” alluded to in the dungeon was done by the people imprisoning rather than the prisoner, but the feeling of the place remained the same for him.) Arthur had had that form of forgetting – abandoned by his family and classified as dead. Was it now more painful for Arthur after being resurrected by at least one family member?

Remembering and being remembered: that’s where pain lived. Forgetting was a numbness, a shield. This made Jonathan involuntarily think of Leah. How protected she must be in her eternal state of forgetting.
After the slow drive that took hours, he was in front of the Mother of Mercy before he was prepared for it. From the safety of his car, he stared up at the large white figure with her hands proffered like Jesus at the Last Supper. Chunks of snow swirled around her, sending chills through Jonathan despite the heater that had been on full blast since he pulled from his driveway.

Muster ing as much courage as he could, he waded through the thick snow, ensuring no eye contact with the Mother of Mercy. Avoiding her gaze and therefore her judgment or sympathy, he entered the hospital and found the information desk.

An elderly woman whose gleaming gold badge proclaimed her a volunteer greeted him. The volunteer looked perplexed when Jonathan asked for the floor where prisoners might be housed. She most likely thought him a loon who had mistaken the hospital for the prison. He tried a different tack.

―Can you tell me what room Arthur Beacon is in?‖

―Beacon?‖ She searched through a computer read-out stacked accordion style. It was stupid of him not to ask this to begin with, for who would alert this white-haired grandmother that along with the innocents in need of care there were murderers also being nursed back to health only floors away from her.

―Oh,‖ she said finally, ―this is a guarded floor – you’ll need clearance.‖

―That’s what I tried to--‖

―I’ll just call for the floor manager,‖ she interrupted.

Ten minutes later a man in casual attire, khakis and a blue button down shirt, open at the top, but with a holstered gun and handcuffs across his midsection, came to greet him. In the “manager’s” left hand was a clipboard and paperwork; he held out his right in
a formal gesture. Jonathan shook his hand, though his eyes scanned the paperwork rather than meeting those of the business-cop.

“I’m Grant Halloman,” he began, waiting for a proper response.

“Jonathan Beacon.”

“So, you’re here to see Arthur, right?”

“Yes . . . he called,” added Jonathan.

“Okay, well, we need you to fill out a few forms for our own records.” He handed the clipboard over along with a pen. Jonathan took the paperwork and sat unnecessarily hard like a pouting child. To give him time and space, Mr. Halloman walked over to the volunteer, leaned on her counter, and made small talk.

The forms were a blur, mostly standard information that Jonathan scribbled through thoughtlessly. Before long, elevator doors were closing on him. To get off of the elevator at the 9th floor, the guarded floor, Halloman had to insert and turn a key.

Alighting from the elevator, he saw that this floor looked like any other in a hospital save for the utter lack of medical personnel.

“. . . only one nurse at a time staffs this floor . . . but we never have more than four or five patients at a time . . . is Judy and on night shift is Kara, but . . .” His voice drifted into and out of Jonathan’s consciousness as panic began to flood his lungs and lead filled his shoes.

They were in front of room 909 where the door was gaping wide, though Jonathan did not look in, concentrating on Halloman’s face as he droned on.
“. . . won’t be too far away . . . stationed at the desk. Call if you need anything.”
Halloman began to walk away, but saw the drained, panicked look on Jonathan’s face and stopped.

“He’s pretty weak – not dangerous at all – but I’m close if you need me.” At this he patted Jonathan on the back with two firm, reassuring hits and gestured toward Arthur.

Jonathan nodded and stepped into the room. Arthur looked to be asleep and made a rasping, gurgling noise with every breath. The noise set his nerves on edge so that at any moment he felt ready to bolt. Despite this, he forced himself to sit in a chair next to Arthur’s bed and let his mind drift. He saw the machines and fluids. This was a first for him; he had never before had to visit a critically-ill person. His family was sparse – his mother’s family (there had only been her parents and one younger sibling) were all dead and his father’s parents were dead and here was his father’s brother. This was it. And now he was at a loss how to react or what was appropriate to say.

Jonathan forced himself to look at Arthur’s face. His skin still had that rough, weathered look, but was paler. His eyes had sunken deep into his head and swam in dark, circular fields. His mouth was open and sucking in air that met with an unwelcome reception in the lungs.

Jonathan felt deep pity for Arthur. It was difficult to imagine the frail creature in front of him emptying a gun into a man’s head. At this thought Arthur jerked awake and looked around until his eyes met Jonathan’s. A peaceful smile spread across his face though the harsh breathing continued. The two were incongruous and made the scene surreal for Jonathan.

“Jon,” said Arthur as enthusiastically as he could manage.
“Hey, Arthur,” said Jonathan as enthusiastically as he could manage.

“I’m glad you could come . . . I wanted to see you one last time.” Arthur rasped, becoming almost unintelligible on the last three words and then declining into a drumroll-like coughing that seemed to last forever.

Jonathan waited uncomfortably, unsure what to do or how to respond.

“It’s water . . . in my lungs,” explained Arthur to no one in particular, but perhaps to the wide room where other visitors did not stand, worried over his life and its near end.

“They’ve tried to . . . get ridda it . . . pills an’ tubes an’ whatnot, but it comes back an’ . . .” coughing that rattled the walls took over for three full minutes, but he continued like it had not interrupted him. “. . . it’s goin’ tuh drown me soon.”

“I’m sure--” began Jonathan in order to reassure falsely.

“No, Jon, it’s my time an’ I gotta go. Jesus wants me e’en though I lived a . . . a life all wrong. And I ‘spect He’s got somethin’ better in mine fur me.”

Arthur’s eyes finally met Jonathan’s and he was no longer declaring the aptness of his demise to the absent friends and relatives that only he could see.

“I shot Roger an’ I shouldn’t’ve . . . an’ I been paying, but more payment’s due an’ I’m ready,” declared Arthur.

Jonathan had no way to respond, though his mouth remained open like he was ready if words found their way out.

“I understan’ Clara’s ready too an’ I’m hopin’ I might see her on th’ other side. That might be too much tuh ask considering I may be goin’ tuh hell, but I’m hopin’ she’s wrong an’ there in’t such a place.” He paused; Jonathan waited. “I think tha’s why she sent that note, so’s I could get ready tuh see her. She wants me tuh ask forgiveness so that
we’ll be in th’ same spot. She don’t know I asked forgiveness when I dunnit. I whispered
tuh God th’ whole time. I knew I shoul’n’t of . . . but I thought God may forgive.”

“I’m sure--” said Jonathan again.

“I jus’ loved Simon an’ it turns out tha’ th’ pain from it . . . I needed tuh give tha’
pain away. I shoulda given it to Jesus – tha’s what Clara tole me.” Despite the calm, soft
words that had flowed from his still figure, these last three sent more violent coughs
through his frame, startling Jonathan, already on edge from Arthur’s ominous
monologue.

“But I gave it tuh Roger instead – I give it all away. I sat in prison for more than
20 years, not angry, jus’ lonely an’ sad an’ bitter. It seem like God didn’t want any more
fur me. Jus’ tuh rot away in lonely bitterness . . .” At this Arthur’s eyes drifted toward the
ceiling like God was waiting right there, judging with His eyes alone. “. . . an’ then you
show’d up.” He looked back at Jonathan who suddenly felt accused. Shifting in his seat,
Jonathan watched a wry smile cross Arthur’s face. “You know . . . I had you on my
visitor’s list from th’ day you turned 18. I knew it was a long shot ‘cause I knew your
father, but it was th’ last bitta hope I had fur my life. You made me ‘member I hava
family . . .” His rasping became louder so that the next few words were only barely
intelligible. “I can tell you care – th’ best present . . . on my death bed.”

Jonathan involuntarily moved forward, sitting on the edge of his chair, and placed
his hand on Arthur’s arm. The thought that he was the most meaningful thing in a man’s
life, a family member’s life, made a warmth spread through his core like strong liquor.
“Thanks fur coming, Jon . . . I couldn’t ask fur anythin’ else. I ‘preciate you – I wanted tuh . . . I wanted you tuh know tha’ an’ . . . tuh have one mourner – one person who grieves when I go.”

Jonathan waited, but Arthur didn’t continue.

“Certainly,” said Jonathan. He could not think of any other response that might be fitting.

“Thanks, Jon. I love you.” It sounded strange and awkward, hanging in the disquieted air. However, it made hot tears well up in Jonathan’s eyes. He gripped his uncle’s arm a little tighter and bowed his head as if in prayer.

“I love you too,” Jonathan finally whispered through a tight throat. He wasn’t sure he meant the words, or felt them if he did mean them, but he knew that not giving a simple gift to such a wounded man would have filled him with steely regret.

Jonathan never looked up to see how Arthur reacted to the sentiment. In fact, both stayed in their respective poses until, when Jonathan did finally look up, Arthur was asleep, looking peaceful but sounding close to death like a drowning man whose eyes alone remained above water.

Having felt that everything had been said, Jonathan got up quietly and crept toward the door. He looked back at Arthur. It was ironic that the only time he didn’t feel fear at the sight of him would be his last glimpse. It felt unfair. The feeling was similar to that he had for Clara: as soon as he was connected, he was bound to grieve for the loss.

He didn’t linger; one last look and he strode through the door. He walked until he no longer heard the death rasp. Then, he waited at the elevator until Mr. Halloman came to assist him.
Deep snow, a frozen, empty house, and a unique, vibrant woman were all that he had waiting for him. Right now, it was enough.
Chapter 14 – Arthur

Arthur woke when he heard Jon’s chair scrape across the floor. He left his eyes closed for Jon’s sake. Jon deserved a peaceful exit. Something Arthur would not be granted. He was glad to be awake, though. He momentarily peeked to see Jon’s back as he crept out. Unable to stop a few stray tears, Arthur found himself choked up at the sight of Jon who had the same noble profile and stance of his own father. Arthur’s father had a great, powerful look to him. It was an illusion. He had not been a great man. This was the emotional part of meeting Jonathan, a man who looked noble and had a personality to match. Arthur could see that Jon had the potential to be what his father failed at being.

He left his eyes wide until Jonathan was out of sight entirely. When he finally closed them, more tears leaked down his temples and soaked his white hair. He thought of the water filling his lungs and the eventual peace it would bring. Peace he had not known since his stepmother died.

She fussed over something in the kitchen. Arthur heard a sizzle and some pans clanging. He waited at the dining room table, eyeing the small record collection leaning against the hutch. His legs swung back and forth, a full foot from reaching the ground. Already, in his head the trumpets were swelling and the drums thumped the rhythm. His feet swung faster. He sat straighter.
Cocking one ear toward the kitchen, he listened for the sound of the oven door. The oven meant that whatever meat just finished cooking on the stove-top was destined for the warming wait. Sidney Beacon was never home on time. Arthur didn’t know what his dad did for a living. He wore suits and carried a briefcase. He came home stressed and late, every day. Dinner always waited for him.

Eleanor Beacon did not complain. She cooked the food. She waited.

While the food waged the warm war, it was official Arthur-and-Eleanor time. James obliviously chewed his teething ring in the playpen.

Arthur could hardly stand the excitement. He heard the oven door. Then, Eleanor stood in front of him wiping her hands on an apron tied at her waist. She winked at him. He smiled, and his feet were now swinging into one another like clashing cymbals.

Eleanor fingered the records. She selected. Arthur clapped.

It didn’t matter which she chose. Arthur had no favorites in particular. All of them spoke to him in the same language. He hopped down from his seat.

She put the record on. Her favorite: Jimmy Dorsey’s *Contrasts*.

Arthur smiled up at her, offering his hands. He loved it when they danced together. But, she didn’t take them.

“She have a surprise,” she said.

Arthur’s eyes widened in delight.

She produced a slender, metal object from behind the hutch. It was a kind of tarnished brass. Arthur thought it might belong in a pipe organ. He saw one in a movie once.

“I salvaged it from the garbage behind the junior college,” she said.
“What is it?”

“I’m not sure what it was used for, but I know that right now it looks an awful lot like a band leader’s baton,” she said.

Arthur gasped. He grabbed it in his right hand and pumped it up and down as he imagined a great band leader might.

Eleanor marched behind him until the record ran dry. It was perfect timing. They heard the front door open. Arthur hid the baton behind the hutch as Eleanor put the record back in its sleeve.

Sidney was hanging his suit jacket in the hall closet when Eleanor went to greet him. Arthur picked up James out of his playpen and put him in his high chair. Arthur fed James while Eleanor and Sidney ate in absolute silence. By the time Arthur sat down to his own cold, rubbery meat, Sidney was lounging in the den with his newspaper.

On days like this, Arthur could not remember the sound of his father’s voice.

Eleanor took Arthur’s plate and kissed the top of his head.

“Better go get ready for bed,” she whispered.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

“Good boy.”

She washed the dishes, talking the whole time to James who was still squirming in his high chair.

Later, Arthur lay in bed, tapping his fingers to a phantom rhythm and smiling at the possibilities – big brass, wind, and music on his terms.
New Year’s Eve. Arthur would not live to see this New Year. It was apparent with every water-drenched breath he took.

Jonathan looked around. He saw the plain, white walls of his house. How were they any different than the sterile walls of Arthur’s prison? Was there any difference between a life wasted in prison and one wasted in this bare half-duplex? Jonathan thought not.

He could hear Clara’s voice saying, “He made his choice.” Arthur blamed Jesus; he blamed fate. Jonathan could see Arthur’s choices clearly. More importantly, he could see his own. Today was it. New Year’s Eve dinner party at Destiny’s apartment.

Towel around his waist and hair dripping from his shower, Jonathan agonized over what to wear. It was a fine line – to be dressed too formally would look lame and desperate, to be dressed too casually would look flippant and unconcerned. He finally opted for dressier pants and a button-down shirt worn casually, sleeves rolled up.

Appraising himself in the full-length mirror attached to his bathroom door, he decided his look was acceptable, if not somewhat plain. He looked closely. His dark hair was too long and messy. It fell around his face and into his eyes. He pushed it back.
He could use a shave. But, if he shaved, his face would be neat and clean while his hair remained messy. Better to have continuity. Messy all around would seem purposeful.

He arrived early. Destiny’s apartment was in the rough part of town – she had no fear. He loved that about her. He parked in front of the building. It looked like he might be the first one to arrive.

There were four apartments in her building. She lived in the front upstairs one. It looked shabby, at least the exterior did. Jonathan pressed the button mounted outside the door.

Destiny buzzed him in.

Jonathan climbed the stairs and knocked at her door, hands clasped behind his back, nervous. Destiny appeared in seconds. She wore her long, sleek hair twisted up so that Jonathan could see the tanned curve of her neck. His instinct was to put his hand on the back of her neck and pull her into a kiss. He forced his eyes away from the bare neck and down to her clothes. A long, black cotton gown with thin, crossing straps draped her body in all the right places. She was barefoot. She looked a bit like she was ready for a midnight stroll across a beach, but the look was perfect on her.

“Hey, beautiful,” she said.

“Me? Look at you,” he said.

She went for a hug, reaching up to his taller frame, kissing him lightly on the cheek as she released him. His hands on the bare skin of her back felt so good that even as she pulled away from the hug, he left his arms around her. They stayed in the half embrace, looking at each other for a minute before she said, “Ready?” and he nodded.
The apartment was done in rich, dark colors. Reds, browns, and purples drenched the walls, the furniture, the rugs. The décor was not exotic like at Millie’s, but it was unique to Destiny. He could feel her in every fabric and color that surrounded him.

He sat at a stool in the kitchen while she finished cooking dinner. She needed updates, and he found himself unfolding the tales with colorful details and passion that caused tears to well up in her eyes, especially when he described Arthur’s last words to him and his final goodbye.

“At least you still have Clara,” she said, wiping tears from her eyes and cheeks.

“For now,” he said.

“Oh, Beacon, I’m so sorry,” she said.

She walked to him, putting her hand behind his head, lacing her fingers in his hair and pulling him to her. His head rested on her chest, right above her breasts, and he put his arms around her waist. He could have stayed there forever. Inhaling the sweet perfume of her neck, he nuzzled his face closer to hers.

“It’s alright,” he said.

She ruffled his hair as she pulled out of the embrace.

“You’re distracting me from cooking,” she said. A sly smile lit her face. “I’m about to burn the stir-fry, and it’ll be your fault.”

“I will take full responsibility.”

She gave him an admonishing look.

“Here, make yourself useful. Set the table.” She handed him a stack of plates.

Her friends arrived in groups of twos shortly after the table was set. There were twelve of them total. All were fun, carefree, just as he imagined they would be. In fact,
the lot of them missed the midnight mark of the New Year because they were engrossed in Amelia and David’s story of getting lost in Cairo. At first Jonathan felt self-conscious in this group of strangers, but eventually he slipped into an easy familiarity with them.

When they all left, drunk from the considerable amount of wine passed around at dinner and dessert, swearing they would walk rather than drive, Jonathan found himself alone with Destiny.

Alone. Finally.

His cheeks were warmed from the wine that he drank just enough of to feel relaxed and not so much that he would make a fool of himself.

Hiking the long dress up to her knees, Destiny sat cross-legged, next to him on the sofa. Want, want, want. His brain buzzed with it. He wanted her; he wanted to profess his love; he wanted to see her naked; he wanted her skin next to his.

He turned his face to her. She smiled. He knew he had to make the first move.

This was the tricky part. When he was nineteen, he had his first serious girlfriend – Claudia. Even after months of dating, the most they had done was make-out, until one evening Jonathan tried to move his hand up her skirt. She jumped like he had bitten her. That was the end of the relationship since, in her mind, he had attained pervert status. It’s always so hard to read women. Some want the super-aggressor. Some want to be coaxed. Some want a man with no desires at all. Reading them – that was the trick.

He went in for the kiss. She leaned toward him.

She tasted like red wine. He put his hand on her bare knee. She didn’t jump.
He slid his hand up her leg, reaching her hip. Her legs were smooth, warm, ready. He moved closer to her on the sofa. She leaned in further. He reached around, sliding his hand across her underwear – lace, he thought. She didn’t object.

As he maneuvered his hand under the lace, tugging it gently down, feeling the firm ass beneath, he moved his kiss from her red-wine lips to the seductive curve of her neck. Her skin tasted, or maybe just smelled, like rose-water. His lips found her collar bone just as his hand had freed her perfect ass from the lace panties. She responded to every touch and every kiss with a soft moan or a slight thrust toward him.

Now that his hand was under her, he used it to lift her up toward him. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and her feet entwined behind him as he stood up and made his way to her bedroom.

The bed was a mess of sheets and clothes, but he put her down on top of it anyway. He stood at the foot, trying to make the right decision. He could take his clothes off now or he could get in bed with her and allow her to take the initiative.

In one swift, deft movement, she lifted her dress over her head. Her pink lace undies were down around her thighs and a black lace bra was the only barrier left.

He unbuttoned his shirt and discarded it behind him before joining her on the bed. He took in the tan, almost naked body in front of him. She concerned herself with his belt and pants, which she seemed to discard as easily as her dress.

He unfastened her bra and worked his way down her body with his mouth. He worried about the scratch of the stubble on his face against her soft skin, but she made no objections. At her breasts, he noticed that they were much smaller than he imagined. They were certainly smaller than what he was used to. He liked the curve of the female
form; the stronger the curve, the more pleasing he found it. But, as he worked his tongue across her breasts and nipples, he found them perfectly suited to her overall slight frame. They were perfectly suited to him.

Foreplay, though, was taking too long for Destiny, who easily pushed Jonathan over onto his back and mounted him. He smiled; an aggressive woman was a new kind of pleasure. As she straddled him, he noticed that the curve of her hips was also very slight, but that was the last thing he noticed.
Chapter 16 – The Awakening

“What are these scars?”

Jonathan traced the harsh, white lines across Destiny’s face.

“They’re all the products of too much freedom as a child,” she said, smiling.

“Ah.”

“You know, a lot of falling out of trees and crap.” She giggled. “Once, I found these big, like, industrial screws in the garage and used them to hang an old hammock from the overhang on our porch. I wasn’t in that hammock for ten minutes before the whole thing came crashing down. A piece of the overhang came down on my face, and I got this.” She indicated a jagged scar on her upper lip that pointed down to her mouth like an arrow.

Jonathan kissed it.

They still lay naked in Destiny’s messy bed, blue light streaming across their bodies from the curtained window. Jonathan had no idea what time it was.

“I love you,” he said.

Destiny laughed. “Don’t you know anything?” she said. “You’re supposed to profess your love before sex. That’s the best way to get into a girl’s pants. Waiting till after, well, that’s just silly.”

Jonathan propped himself up on his elbow.
“I’m serious. You don’t have to . . . say anything back. I’m not expecting you to. But, it’s important to me that you . . . understand how I feel.”

“Beacon,” she sighed, “you’re so sweet. And stupid. Don’t you have any idea how I feel about you?”

Jonathan raised his brows.

“Shit, I’ve loved you for the last, like, two months. Longer, maybe.”

She looked embarrassed. He put his arm around her body, feeling the smooth skin on her back. She buried her face in his chest. They stayed like this until Jonathan thought he might fall asleep again.

“You want breakfast?” she asked.

“Sure.”

Breakfast time, then lunch passed while they chatted and laughed and played.

Jonathan could not remember ever being this happy. He knew it couldn’t last.

“Ugh. Why do we have school tomorrow?” she said.

“I know. My lesson plans aren’t even done,” he said.

Then, he realized. Something else awaited him. Some inarticulate thing that felt like familial obligation.

“I have to go,” he said.

“Yeah, okay.”

They said long goodbyes, and Jonathan felt a little like crying as he walked back to his car.

Walking through his door was like a slap in the face. He knew he couldn’t live this way any longer. He meant to go straight to his computer and begin his lesson plans.
Instead, he went to the garage where he found broken-down boxes in a pile. Dragging them inside, he set to work. First, he would pack up his books, then, his clothes. He had no idea where he thought he was going, but taking steps to make his place more *impermanent* was what he felt he needed.

Only one shelf of the bookcase in his living room was cleared when the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Beacon?”

Jonathan had a sinking feeling. He knew this voice.

“Yes?”

“This is Grant Halloman. Do you remember me?”

“Of course.” Jonathan couldn’t keep the shaking out of his voice.

“I wanted to let you know that Arthur Beacon passed on this morning. He mentioned you. He wanted you to have his possessions. And his – remains.”

Halloman waited.

“Mr. Beacon?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. He wants me to have his what?”

“Arthur will be cremated tomorrow. You can pick up his ashes any time after tomorrow at the Taylor Wainwright Funeral Home right down the street from the penitentiary. We can send his belongings there too for you. That way, you’d only have to make one stop.”

Halloman paused again.

“Did he say why me? I mean, I really just met him.”
“Perhaps, he . . . felt a little more strongly toward you. Your visit meant a lot to him, you know. When he had the breath to do it, you were all he talked about.”

Jonathan could say nothing.

“Can I tell the funeral director that you will be by to get the remains?”

“Yes. Thank you for calling.”

“And am I to assume you’d like his possessions to be sent to the funeral home too?”

“Yes. Thank you very much.”

He hung up and went back to his box in the living room. Through tear-blurred eyes, he tried to see the books in his hands, but could not. It was not Arthur’s death that caused tears to soak the cardboard and book pages below. It was Halloman’s declaration that Jonathan had meant so much to Arthur.

Jonathan couldn’t help but feel the loss of the relationship he had with Arthur, no matter how brief it had been. When he first met his uncle, Arthur had insisted that the two of them had exchanged more words than Arthur and Arthur’s father had. At the time, Jonathan was convinced that Arthur was whining. Looking back, however, he wondered at the truth of the statement. Considering his own relationship with his father, Jonathan now believed that he really had had more conversation with Arthur than his own father. Two face-to-face visits and one phone conversation equaled more than every single exchange with his father throughout his entire life.

Jonathan knew exactly how Arthur felt. If only he had bothered to try to understand then. He was filled with regret. He knew he would mourn Arthur’s loss more than his own father’s. Arthur, who had made all the wrong choices. Arthur, who had
dumped all responsibility on Jesus’ shoulders. Arthur, who had looked at Jonathan and called him “son.” Arthur, who would soon be reduced to ash.
When Jonathan opened his eyes on the second of January, the first thing he noticed was a pounding headache, wrapping the circumference of his skull. At the bathroom mirror, he noticed that his eyes were puffy from the combination of too little sleep and too much weeping. He couldn’t help it. Over and over again, he told himself to stop, but he could neither stop crying nor stop packing. Every book in his house, along with his entire summer wardrobe was packed up and sealed in wet boxes.

He debated calling in sick to work for about ten minutes, dismissing the idea finally because it would mean that he would not see Destiny.

When she saw him in the hall that morning, she hugged him and asked, “Is everything okay?”

“Got the call yesterday. Arthur’s dead.”

“Beacon? What are you doing here? Go home!” She hugged him tighter.

“Yeah, but I don’t wanna be there either. All those blank walls. But, I never did get those lesson plans done.”

“Just show a movie.”

“You’ve never shown a movie in your life,” he teased.

“True, but I teach Spanish. Let’s be honest. No high school student is going to understand a movie in Spanish. You teach English. That’s a movie waiting to happen!”

“Very funny,” he said.
They went to their respective classrooms before the few early students meandering through the halls got an idea that Miss Angler and Mr. Beacon were an item. Back at his classroom, Jonathan stared at the shelf where he stored movies. He was looking at them, but not really seeing them. None seemed right. Before he had even narrowed it down, students began to fill the room. He greeted them as they spoke to him, never looking up from his immense task. Finally, the last bell rang, and when he turned to his class, every student sat quietly waiting for him.

It was unusual for them to be so quiet and for them to all be looking at the front of the room rather than turned around chatting. Some mornings, he even pulled a page from an elementary teacher’s book, saying, “All eyes on me.”

Now they stared at him. He looked from face to face. He saw genuine concern and a bit of fear painted across almost each one. They said nothing. Waiting.

“Okay. I’m going to be honest with you. I don’t have a lesson plan today. I’m . . . distracted. I couldn’t even decide on a movie for you.” He gestured to the shelf where he had been transfixed moments earlier.

Silence.

“I’m sorry. I’m sure that each of you has reading or some other assignment you could do. Like a study hall. I just can’t teach you today,” he admitted.

One brave freshman in the back of the room raised his hand.

“Eric?”

“What’s wrong? Can we help?”

The rest of the class silently nodded assent. They all wanted to help. They cared.
At first, Jonathan wanted to dismiss the whole thing as “no big deal.” His instinct was to brush off their concern with excuses about a terrible night’s sleep and a pounding head. But, he didn’t.

“It’s nice of you to ask,” he said.

“You just look like you need something,” said Eric.

“Yeah. I need all kinds of things. Starting with some solid sleep. But, more than anything, I need one more visit with my uncle. . . . I need one more chance to tell him that he meant something to me. I need to not feel like I just lost the best father figure I’ve ever known.

Trisha raised her hand.

“Yes?”

“What happened, Mr. Beacon? Did your uncle die?”

“Yeah, he did. I didn’t know him very well. I think that’s partly my fault. I had other chances to see him, but I was being selfish. Now, I miss him.”

“My uncle died last year,” Brandon, in the second row, offered.

“My grandfather died two months ago,” said Rachel who hadn’t said two words in class all year.

Jonathan looked up in shock at them. None of them were taking advantage of the situation. None of them thought of anything other than helping.

“You guys are young. It’s not fair you’ve had to deal with death already,” Jonathan said.
“It’s really common in my neighborhood,” said Raphael. “My cousin Amanda was killed by a stray bullet. She was only seven. She was just sitting in the car waiting for her mom to pay for gas.”

“Good Lord,” Jonathan said.

He listened in disbelief as these fourteen and fifteen year olds described experiences with death and how they coped. He was ashamed at how he had cried all night. Some of these teenagers in front of him had dealt with far deeper tragedy with far more aplomb.

“Well, I admire you guys,” Jonathan said. “Next time I need grief counseling, I know exactly where to come.”

Each student sat up a little straighter. Jonathan had never before considered the effect he had on these kids. And, he certainly never knew that they could affect him in return.

At the end of the day, Destiny walked into his room.

“How’s it going?” she asked.

“Actually, it’s going great,” he said.

“What? Great?”

“Yes. I discovered something today.”

“What’s that?” she sounded skeptical.

“I have fantastic students.”

“Beacon! It’s January. You’re only now getting to know them?”

“It’s crazy, I know. But, I swear, it’s like I’ve been in a cave or something. I didn’t consider that they were worth getting to know.”
She punched him in the arm playfully.

“You should be ashamed.”

“I am. Very.” He looked down with his most contrite face.

“You’re rotten,” she teased.

“Wanna have dinner?”

“Hell, yes.”
Chapter 18 – Jonathan

“So this is what teaching’s been for you all along, huh?”

“You mean fun and worthwhile,” she laughed.

“Yeah, I do,” he said.

“Yes, the whole time.”

“Damn. I can’t believe it,” he said.

“What’s it been to you?”

“Work. A ton of fucking work, every day.”

“God, Beacon. You’ve hated your job . . . for how many years?”

“It never was what I wanted it to be.”

They were back at Joe’s. Greasy, delicious food sat in front of them. They ate in silence for a while.

“I remember last time we were here,” she said. “You were telling me all about your family.”

“Yeah. Them.”

“I’d like to meet them.”

“Are you crazy? Did you hear a word I said about them?”

“I heard you, but good, bad, apathetic, whatever . . . I’d like to know them. And . . . I’d like them to know me.”

He heard it in her voice – expectation.
Expectation was something he knew all about. It was something he once had too.

One of the times his hopes were at their highest was because of a friend who lived down the street from him. He and Michael were daring each other to perform stunts on Michael’s bicycle. The leap-over-an-obstacle stunt went wrong for Michael, and he ended up leaving some skin on the sidewalk.

Back at Michael’s house, Teresa, Michael’s mother, lifted him onto the kitchen counter while Jonathan watched unobtrusively from the corner. She washed the bloody knee, and put a band-aide on it, cooing to Michael the entire time. As she lifted him off of the counter, she hugged him and kissed the side of his face.

Later, when Michael and Jonathan were catching fireflies in the yard, Jonathan questioned his friend.

“What are you talking about? My mom is mean. She sends me to my room like six times a day.”

“Yeah, but when you skinned your knee, she was like—“

“Oh, sure. Getting’ hurt is the way to make it happen. See, normally, moms’re all business, but if you hurt yourself, they’re like ‘my poor baby,’ and ‘I’ll make it better.’”

He mocked the cooing voice his mother used.

“I guess I’ve never really been hurt enough.”

“Just wait and see. You turn on the tears, they turn on the love,” said Michael.

With the expectation that this would finally be the key, Jonathan tried it out. He considered diving from the porch, falling in the street and other painful accidents like them, but in the end decided just to make a cut with his Swiss Army knife to ensure that
he was not hurt in ways he did not mean to be. He could envision breaking his neck or
having to pick gravel out of a cut or some other terrible fate.

He chose the back of his right forearm. It was exactly the place you’d be cut if
you were shielding your face from something. June would likely not ask the specifics, but
just in case, he wanted to have a reasonable story.

Flicking his knife open, Jonathan took a deep breath for courage. He found the
right spot, closed his eyes, and pulled the knife down his arm, leaving a four inch gash. It
began bleeding immediately. Suddenly, this didn’t seem like such a good idea.

His breathing became shallow pants and tears formed in his eyes. He almost
restricted them from falling until he remembered his larger purpose. Dropping the knife
on the ground, Jonathan pulled his shirt up to cover the wound and went into the house.

“Mom!” he shouted.

No answer. He’d have to go looking.

He found her in the laundry room, hanging shirts to dry.

“Mom? I – I had an accident,” he whined.

“Jonathan! Are you dripping blood in here?”

“Sorry. But, I accidentally cut myself.” Now tears were flowing freely. “I need
help.” He tried his most pathetic voice.

Without a word, she pulled him by his good arm. When they reached the
bathroom, June wrenched the tub’s cold tap on and motioned to it. Jonathan stared up at
her questioningly. Because June said nothing, Jonathan stuck his injured arm under the
freezing cold water. June left the bathroom.
She came back a few minutes later with a washcloth, a bar of soap, and a tin of band-aides.

“Here.” She held out the washcloth and soap.

Jonathan began cleaning the cut which was already numb from minutes under the cold water. It had already stopped bleeding. Stupid shallow cut.

She handed him a towel, waited for him to dry his arm, then handed him the band-aides.

“Next time, be more careful,” she said.

Jonathan nodded.

He never again expected real love or concern from his mother. From that point on, he knew better.

Instead of retrieving the knife, he stomped it way down into the earth. He stomped until his knees hurt and tears blurred his vision. He stomped until his love for his mother was buried just as deep as that knife.
Chapter 19 – Retrieval

This time, Jonathan didn’t bother with directions. He wanted to be lost. There was always that feeling that came with getting lost; it was a mixture of fear and excitement. It was also a time of no obligation because there isn’t a single productive thing to do when you’re lost. It feels like adventure.

So, he headed toward the prison in Lorraine, unsure of exactly how to get there. Once he got close to the city, though, signs directed him to the penitentiary. He drove past it slowly, staring up.

Halloman had said that the funeral home was right down the street. Jonathan wasn’t sure if he even remembered the name of it. Minutes later, however, he saw the modest building on the right – Taylor Wainwright Funeral Home.

Parking in the deserted lot, Jonathan wondered if they were open. He found the entrance unlocked, though, and stepped into the building. Funeral homes always had a very unreal feeling for Jonathan. It was like walking onto a stage fully designed and set for a play. The illusion was real enough, but your brain always constructed a backstage, a place where you knew the illusion would stop.

“Hello?” called Jonathan.

“Can I help you, sir?” The man came out of nowhere. He was middle-aged and short. Jonathan thought he bordered on dwarf.

“Yes, I’m here for the remains of Arthur Beacon.”
“Certainly, sir. Why don’t you have a seat? I’ll get them for you,” he said.

Jonathan reluctantly sat in one of the overly-formal chairs that the midget had motioned to. He felt uncomfortable and fidgeted around until he decided there was no comfort in this seat and slid to the edge.

When the midget returned, he carried a plain, silver-colored urn. Behind him strode a much younger and taller man carrying a fairly large box. The midget handed him the urn while the taller man put the box on the empty seat next to him and walked away.

Jonathan stared at the urn in his hands for a moment, then looked at the midget.

“Do I owe you any money?” Jonathan sounded awkward.

“No, sir. Mr. Beacon . . . prearranged everything.”

“Okay, thank you,” Jonathan said, standing to leave.

“Allow me to help,” the midget said.

He picked up the box. Jonathan almost took it from him, convinced he would not be able to wield it, but he was apparently more capable than he looked.

Box in the trunk and urn in the passenger seat, Jonathan started toward home. He hadn’t gotten lost. Not even once.

It was days before Jonathan could bring himself to open the box. He thought of asking Destiny to open it with him, but then felt like he might need some privacy. He wasn’t sure if he’d be crying or if the whole thing would be one huge disappointment, like maybe he expected treasure, and would get used tissues or something.

When he opened the box, he saw that someone had grossly overestimated the need for space since Arthur’s meager belongings barely filled the bottom.
First, Jonathan pulled out a green, tattered Bible. He flipped through it to see if Arthur had written in it or left notes jammed in between pages, but it was just a plain Bible.

Next, he found a picture. It was a black and white, square photo of Clara and Simon. Jonathan thought it might have been something Arthur carried in his wallet. Before the shooting, anyway. In it Simon looked like he had just learned to walk. He was standing, both fists clenched around Clara’s index fingers as she crouched into the parent position. She was obviously toddling him around in an attempt to train him in the art of independent walking. Her face was toward the camera, with the pleased grin of a proud mother.

Jonathan stared at this picture for a long time, memorizing its details, envying the young Simon, mourning for the soon-to-be grieving Clara. He wondered how many hours Arthur did this same thing, picture in hand, cursing his fate, remembering the joy, considering what could have been.

He put the picture in the Bible, and found more treasure: a plain, school-style notebook. In it were journal entries that started with the first day Jonathan had gone to see Arthur.

Jonathan read:

I just met Jon. Hes a nice boy. Glad James didnt mess him up to bad. Im sad he had to see me like this. I would have made a good uncle for him. He tells me Claras dieing. Its sad. But she will be happy with jesus. I think I mite beat her there. I hope thats where im going. Clara tells me its forgive by jesus an I belive her. I want to see her agin.
Jonathan couldn’t read any more. He put the notebook on top of the Bible and went to his bed. He curled up on it, sobbing himself to sleep.

Part way through his nap, his recovery, the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“God, Beacon, you sound like shit. What’s going on?” It was Destiny.

“Oh, you won’t believe what I found. Fuck, what time is it?”

“What time is it? Have you been sleeping? It’s . . . four.”

“Four?”

“Yeah, how long you been out?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t look at the clock when I laid down.”

“Okay, so, tell me what you found.”

“Journals. Arthur’s journals. I read one. It was about me. And Clara. And Jesus. I don’t know . . . I kinda lost it. Then, I fell asleep.”

“Damn. I always miss all the fun.”

“Those journals. I want to read them. But, they’re going to tear me up,” he said.

“I’ll be right over.”

“Where are the journals?”

“Nice to see you, too.” Jonathan kissed Destiny lightly on the lips.

She smiled guiltily.

“Here you are.” He handed her the notebook.

“Ooo . . . inside the mind of a killer,” she joked.

Jonathan gave her the look.
“Sorry. It’s just very exciting.”

She sat on the couch with the notebook on her lap.

“What’s with the boxes? You planning on moving?”

“No.” He didn’t know exactly what to say. He had packed them because it felt good, not because it was necessary.

“Okay. You’re strange,” she said.

“Yeah. I know. It was just something I wanted to do. I can’t really explain.”

Tired of his explanation or lack of it, she waved him away and focused on the notebook.

He backed off, letting her read. He watched her, nervously. Having only read the very first entry, he was unsure of what the rest of the journals held.

Finding himself unconsciously holding his breath, he decided to go to the kitchen rather than watch her. He sorted through the cabinets. What to pack? What to leave out?

He was half way through his fourth cabinet, when Destiny entered behind him.

She had the notebook clutched to her chest like a shy school-girl.

“There’s one I want to read to you,” she said.

“Okay,” he said, plopping onto the floor and folding his legs under him.

“Ready?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I gotta clean up some of the grammar and syntax,” she prefaced.

Jonathan nodded.

“I know. I read the first one, remember?”
“Some of the writing is really shaky, too, so I might be guessing on words here and there.” She paused, possibly waiting for him to stop her. “Alright, here goes.
December 24th. ‘I’m pretty sure my days are just about up. I’ll be leaving this cruel world. I hope I won’t be going to one even crueler. I spent most of my time here blaming everyone else for my problems. I blamed my dad and my mom, my teachers, my bosses, then of course, I blamed Roger for running over my son, and Clara for not watching him better. If I had been telling myself truth, I would have never hurt Roger because I would know I was to blame. I killed Roger because I didn’t want to face that. Every night when I close my eyes I see Roger’s face when I came in with the gun and what his face looked like when I was done. The way I figure it, I won’t be going to hell because I’ve been in it for the last twenty-six years. Not . . .’” Destiny struggled over the words.

Jonathan wasn’t breathing.

“’Not . . . prison is hell.’” She looked up. “Sorry.”

Jonathan waved away the mistake, the apology.

“I think he’s saying prison wasn’t hell.”

Jonathan nodded. Destiny continued.

“’My mind was hell. Living there every day is hell. I didn’t get to go to my own son’s funeral. I pictured Roger’s children at his. My thoughts are like poison to me. I will be glad when it’s time for me to leave this world because no punishment Jesus has in store for me can compare to how I’ve punished myself all these years. I hope Clara finds the peace I couldn’t find. I loved her. Even when she didn’t want me anymore. And, God help me, I love Jon. I pray he makes better choices than I did. I want him to live since I
never did. I want him to live the life that Simon never could.’ That’s basically the end of that entry.

“I can’t hear any more,” Jonathan said.

Destiny sat the notebook on the kitchen table. She went to Jonathan and offered her hand. He took it, rising from off of the floor.

“Ever,” he said.

“You’re not going to read any more of the journal entries?” she asked.

“No. I’m happy with the two I’ve read. I’ve learned everything I need to know.”

“What will you do with it?”

“Let’s take it to Clara,” he said.

“Us?”

“Yes. Wanna come? At least there will be one family member you’ve met.”

“Absolutely. I will take what I can get.”

Jonathan kissed her.
Chapter 20 – The Drop Off

Destiny arrived perfectly punctual, dressed in her usual colorful layers.

“Who’s ready to meet Clara?” she sang.

“Apparently, you are,” he said.

“What? Not looking forward to it?”

“Sure, it’ll be great. Let’s go.”

“You have the notebook?”

Jonathan retrieved it and handed it over.

“Here. You take it.”

“Great! Now, we’re ready.”

In Clara’s driveway, Destiny was mesmerized. Though it was too cold to linger outside, she stood near the car gazing toward Clara’s house. The Christmas lights were still on, sparkling off of every surface, including the glazed snow of the yard.

Jonathan held his hand out to her. She seemed not to notice.

“I could look at this all day,” she said.

“Yes, and freeze to death while you’re at it. Come on.”

She took his hand, and they walked up to Clara’s door. It was noon. Cloudy and dark, but noon. Clara opened the door for them.

“Welcome,” she said.

Destiny stepped forward, in front of Jonathan, like she was cutting in line.
“I’m Destiny,” she said, holding out her hand.

“Oh, honey,” Clara said, reaching for a hug instead. “You are definitely Destiny, his at least.”

Destiny giggled. “I like you,” she whispered to Clara.

Clara patted her arm.

“Hey, Aunt Clara,” Jonathan said.

“Jonnie, I’ve missed you,” she said, kissing the side of his cheek.

“I’ve missed you, too,” he answered.

“Come on and sit down,” Clara instructed.

They all sat in the front room that Jonathan had first mistaken for a show room, the one where Clara laid out the tale of Simon.

Once they were all seated, Jonathan noticed how sick Clara really looked. She had lost at least fifteen pounds since the last time he had seen her. Her clothes were hanging off of her, and her eyes seemed to sink into her skull. It did not change her upbeat nature. Her smile was a permanent fixture, as were her dimples.

Destiny put the notebook on the coffee table in front of Clara.

“Arthur’s gone. I’m not sure if you know that or not, but he is. I went to pick up his ashes and his personal effects. In the box, was this notebook. It has journal entries from Arthur,” Jonathan was stumbling. “I read some, but I think they’re more for . . . you. I mean, a lot of them are about you. I didn’t want to keep it. I kept his Bible and a picture, but I wanted you to have this.”

“You’re so sweet, Jonnie. I’m glad to have it. But, you know what? I love even more that you brought Destiny here for me. I wanted nothing more than to meet her.”
Clara turned to Destiny. She was being so kind, considering she didn’t know of Destiny’s existence until Jonathan called her to ask about dropping by. Unless Jesus told her. *That’s totally possible*, thought Jonathan.

“Tell me all about yourself,” Clara said to Destiny.

Destiny and Clara chatted for hours. Jonathan chimed in here and there, but the two women were like long lost family. As he watched them, listening to their secrets and their silences, he felt a deep happiness at knowing that both loved him and were loved by him.

*So, this is family.*

Clara managed to pull herself away from Destiny long enough to make them sandwiches for dinner. She moved slowly and asked for help with anything heavier than a couple of pounds. Jonathan had a sick feeling about it. He just lost Arthur. Clara was next.

She confirmed this as Destiny and Jonathan were leaving.

“Jonnie, Destiny, I love you both. And I love you two together. I know you’re going to be so happy. Please light a candle for me on my birthday at Saint Katherine’s.”

“Aunt Clara, I—“

“Don’t, Jonnie. I’m not willing myself to die like Arthur, but Jesus tells me it’s close. I want you to be happy. Don’t worry yourself about me at all.”

“Yes, but Aunt Clara, I don’t know when your birthday is.”

She giggled. Destiny had tears in her eyes.

“It’s April 20th.”

“April 20th, it is,” he said.
“Thanks, Jonnie. Goodbye.”

She hugged him as tight as she could.

She hugged Destiny and whispered something in her ear.

Back at the car, silent tears streamed down Destiny’s face. Jonathan comforted her for minutes before they drove away.

“So, what did Clara say to you?”

“Sorry, Jonnie, that’s mine and Clara’s.”

“Okay. I still love you,” he said.
Chapter 21 – Clara and June

Clara watched from her window as Destiny and Jonathan sat in his car. Jonathan was being strong, probably for Destiny. Clara was glad to see it. She wanted to give them privacy, but she couldn’t tear her eyes away from Jonathan. She couldn’t help feeling that Simon would have turned out just like him. When she really looked at Jonnie, she saw her son.

A few minutes later, they backed out of the driveway, and Clara waved her last goodbye. She knew this feeling, this terrible permanent goodbye to Jonathan. She had done it once before.

The day after Simon’s funeral was especially hard for Clara. There was nothing but emptiness all around her. Arthur was gone, forever. She felt her self slipping away into the nothingness too. There was no reason to stop it. She was guilty of Simon’s death, and she had been unable to stop Arthur from his despicable act. She was a wretched sinner and a worthless human being.

Sobbing, thinking these horrid thoughts, sinking into her misery, Clara began to consider suicide. Just the first hint of the thought crept into her mind when the doorbell rang. It was June. She had Jonathan on her hip. Clara held the door open for her to enter, but said nothing.
They sat in the front room. Jonathan busied himself by trying to shove his fists into his mouth. Clara watched him intently.

“Clara, I’m so sorry,” June said.

Clara nodded, staying silent.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get to see you at the funeral. James, he—“

Clara nodded again, but didn’t take her eyes off of Jonathan.

“James is . . . crazy or something. He won’t let me see you. I snuck out today when he went to work. A neighbor gave me a ride here. I think I’ll walk home . . .”

Clara began to stroke Jonathan’s hair, still saying nothing and not looking at June.

“Clara, listen, he says that you and Arthur are dead to us. That we can’t see you anymore. At all.”

At this, Clara looked up. She allowed her tear-puffed eyes to meet June’s. June looked away, guilty.

“You’re agreeing to this?” Clara asked.

“You don’t know how crazy he’s gotten. I can’t . . . I can’t go against him. I want Jonathan to be safe. I think he might take Jonathan and leave if I disobey. I don’t trust him anymore. He’s so different since Jonathan was born. I don’t know what else I can do, Clara. Tell me. Tell me what to do!”

Clara shook her head.

“Well, you sure don’t turn your back on your family.”

“I know.” June’s voice was quiet.

They sat in silence for a while.
“I just need some time. After James isn’t angry with Arthur anymore, I can get him to see reason. I just need you to give us some time. Don’t contact us. I will call you when things are better.”

“I can’t do that,” said Clara.

“It won’t be forever,” said June.

Clara heard the falseness of the words. She knew this would be permanent. One more family member trying to disappear.

“I can’t do it. Mostly because of Jonathan. I love him. He’s my nephew. Look at him.” Clara began to cry, again. “He’s so sweet. He’s the only thing I have left. You can’t take him from me!”

Now Clara was angry. She rose and went to the sofa closest to the window, needing distance from June. At this moment, she knew her punishment wasn’t just losing Simon. It was losing everyone.

They were silent for a long time. Clara stared out of the window, her eyes narrowed, her brow furrowed into stubborn creases. June busied herself with Jonathan, unsure of how to proceed, feeling the intense awkwardness of the situation.

They may have stayed in this deadlock forever if Jesus hadn’t intervened. For, at that moment, He spoke to Clara for the first time.

*Make the bargain, Clara.*

“What?” she said aloud.

June tried to take Clara breaking the silence as a good sign.

“What, what?” June asked.

“Not you!” Clara said.
June refocused her attention on Jonathan.

*Go ahead and tell June that you will stay away, but ask her for a favor in return.*

Clara knew that questioning Jesus was futile, so instead she decided to follow Jesus’ instructions.

“Fine. I will stay away. But, someday, I’m going to need a favor. You will have to honor it.”

“Okay, I understand,” June said, rising off of the sofa.

Clara looked at her sweet Jonnie. She picked him up and held him against her, trying to take in his essence, to remember him forever.

*Say goodbye now, but know that you will see Jonathan again.*

Clara knew that it may be not be in this life that she was destined to see Jonathan again.

“Goodbye, Jonnie. I will miss you,” said Clara.

“Thanks, Clara,” June said, taking Jonathan from her.

June seemed like she was going to hug Clara goodbye, but she only gave her arm a squeeze and walked out the door.

Clara was elated when Jesus told her it was time to see Jonathan again.

*Redeem your favor from June. Ask that Jonathan come here. It is time that he met both you and Arthur.*

She spoke aloud to Jesus:

“You sure about this? That’s asking a lot of a young man.”

*Yes, Clara. I’m sure.*
When she called June, she didn’t know what to expect. She called in the middle of the day so that James wouldn’t answer. Clara was sure he was still working himself to death.

“Hello?” Her voice sounded so old.

“June? This is Clara. I’m calling in my favor.”
Chapter 22 – A Request

Because his work-life had improved drastically, Jonathan’s weeks went fast. He discovered that connecting with his students meant he also connected with staff members he had never spoken to despite working at his school for more than three years.

Ophelia Runkle, the choir teacher sought him out in the staff lounge.

“One of my students was telling me how much he’s been enjoying your class, Mr. Beacon,” she said.

“Really? Which one?”

“Eric Ivy. He said you’ve been reading some really good books and having some interesting discussions.”

“Wow. I had no idea. Thanks for letting me know.”

“Of course. All I ever usually hear is how terrible this or that teacher is. I always try to pass it on when I hear something positive. Keeps us going, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. It does. Thanks again.”

Ophelia smiled. She grabbed her mail and walked out, singing a vaguely familiar hymn. Jonathan almost called her back, asked what she was singing, but her voice was so beautiful that it transfixed him, and he just listened until he couldn’t hear anymore.

Weekends that did not involve an intense amount of time with Destiny went much slower than weekdays. It was hard to pass the time.
Jonathan was packing again. It had been a month since he last had been at it, but he woke up this Sunday morning with a feeling. It was an indescribable one – one that he got rid of by packing. His books, his summer clothes, and his entire kitchen was already packed. Now, he focused on the hall cabinets where he kept sheets, towels, and all of his cleaning products. There was little else to pack – his winter clothes, maybe. He had no pictures or art framed on the walls. He had no movies or photo albums or knick-knacks.

He sealed up the first box. The phone rang. Déjà vu.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Beacon?”

“Yes.”

“My name is Randall Henry, and I’m your Aunt Clara’s lawyer. I have some news and I have a request.”

“Okay,” Jonathan said, skeptically.

“Unfortunately, your Aunt Clara passed away this morning.”

Despite the sad shape Clara had been in the last time Jonathan was there and the fact that a lawyer calling is never a good thing, Jonathan was shocked.

He sucked in a huge breath.

“I’m so sorry about your loss,” Mr. Henry said.

“Thank you,” Jonathan choked out.

“I will leave you to your grieving, but first a request. I need you and your girlfriend, Destiny, in my office sometime in the next few days. Is that possible?”

Jonathan was dumbstruck.

“Why – why do you need Destiny?”
“Certain elements of Clara’s will concern her,” Mr. Henry said.

“Okay. Can you tell me where your office is?”

They made an appointment for the next day. Jonathan called Destiny.

“I need you,” he said.

“I’ll be right there,” she responded.

An hour later, Destiny walked through his door.

“Clara’s gone,” Jonathan said.

Destiny said nothing. She took her coat off, threw it on a nearby couch, and plopped down next to it.

“That’s what I was afraid of,” she said.

Jonathan sat next to her. They held each other. As they both cried, it was impossible to tell who was comforting whom.

Long after they cried themselves out, Jonathan remembered.

“We need to go to see her lawyer. I made an appointment with him tomorrow, for eleven o’clock.”

“Did you say ‘we?’”

“Yeah. He says you too.”

“Oh, um, okay. What are we going to do about school?”

“I was just about to log onto the system and enter my absence. You wanna do the same?”

“I guess. I didn’t leave any lesson plans, but I’m sure my students will survive.”

“Mine will, too,” he said.

At the computer, their sick leave was verified.
“Students will begin to suspect us when we keep missing the same days,” Destiny teased.

“Yes, I guess they will.”

Then, they laid down on Jonathan’s bed and slept.

Jonathan woke at four in the morning. For a while, Jonathan watched Destiny sleep. She was still in her jeans and the bright orange camisole she wore under the sweater she had stripped off before collapsing on top of the covers that she was now wound up in. Her feet were bare. Jonathan tried to remember her taking off her shoes and socks, but could not.

He showered while she slept. His wet hair still flopped down in his eyes. He read until Destiny woke around first light.

“I would say we should make breakfast, but somehow I think everything in the kitchen might be packed up,” she said.

“You would be correct,” he said.

“What is with you and the boxes?”

“I just needed to feel like I wasn’t staying here forever. I don’t know. It’s crazy. I just had the urge. I can’t explain.”

“S’alright.” She held up her hand in the stop motion. “Don’t bother.”

She laughed.

“So, what’s the plan?” he asked.

“Joe’s?” she tried.

“Are they open for breakfast?”
“Sure. I drive past in the morning. Can I use your shower first?”

“Of course.”

She was in and out in ten minutes, hair damp, wearing an old shirt of Jonathan’s.

“Where’d you find that?” he said, pointing at the oversized shirt.

“Bottom drawer.”

“It looks great on you. You should keep it.”

Breakfast at Joe’s was good, but quiet. By the time they got their food, the reality of where they were going had set in. They mostly held hands in silence, picking at their food.

At Mr. Henry’s office, Destiny began to shake, almost imperceptibly.

“It’s all right,” Jonathan said.

He put an arm around her. They sat in old armchairs facing Mr. Henry’s desk.

Jonathan wondered how successful a lawyer Russell Henry was considering how shabby everything looked. Leave it to Clara to choose the only lawyer in town not making money.

Mr. Henry was an older man, early to mid-sixties. He wore a bolo tie that came to an end right on top of his pudgy belly.

“Thank you both for coming. Clara wanted you both to hear this. First, let me say again that I’m very sorry for your loss. I went to church with her for the last twenty years. She was a good friend, and a wonderful, God-fearing woman.”

Destiny and Jonathan nodded. They understood exactly why Clara had chosen him; for her, it was love, friendship, not business.
“I want you both to know that all arrangements have been made. You don’t have to worry about the funeral or any of those details. Clara did all of that before she . . . was called home. She also had every detail of her will in order. Jonathan, she left you her house and all the possessions in it.”

“She did what?” he asked.

“Everything is yours, Mr. Beacon.”

Destiny squeezed his hand.

“You will have to pay the annual taxes on the property which is . . .” he shuffled through papers, “valued at ninety thousand. Approximately.”

“I don’t understand,” Jonathan said.

“Well, you’re still responsible for the—“

“No. I don’t understand why she willed me her house,” he said.

“Oh, I see. Let me read you the note she left with the will for you. For both of you.”

Destiny squeezed Jonathan’s hand again.

“Jonnie and Destiny, I know it will be surprising to you to be left the house, but before you try to refuse it, I want you to know what I’m doing. You both deserve to be happy. If I had had surviving children, they would get my house, but all I have is you, Jonnie. You and Destiny are made for each other. I could tell. So could Jesus. You deserve a good start together. It would make me so happy if you chose to live at the house, but even if you choose to sell it, use the money you get for a good down payment on your own house. Of course, you don’t have to feel pressure to move in together right away. Take your time. Just remember that you’re destined to be together. As far as
everything in the house, I’ve already given away every possession that I wanted to go to particular friends, so when you clean out the house do whatever you want with the stuff. If you don’t want it, you can always donate it to Saint Katherine’s. Please treat each other well, and don’t forget about my candle. I love you both, Aunt Clara.’”

Mr. Henry let the information soak in. Jonathan and Destiny both had their heads down as if in silent prayer. When they finally looked up, Jonathan saw Destiny’s tear-filled eyes, got up from his chair, and knelt down next to her.

She put her head down on his shoulder. She was shaking.

“How could she leave us her house?” Destiny asked him.

“She was a good person,” Jonathan said.

“Yes, but . . .”

“I know,” he said.

Finally, Jonathan looked up at Mr. Henry.

“About the funeral, I do have one request,” said Jonathan.
Chapter 23 – The Funeral

Jonathan and Destiny climbed up the steep, stone stairs leading to Saint Katherine’s. They had both taken another day off of school together. People would definitely start to suspect. *Let them.*

Neither Jonathan nor Destiny had talked about the idea of moving in together. Those packed boxes screamed at Jonathan, though, every time he walked through his door. He knew he’d be moving as soon as possible whether Destiny chose to go with him or not.

Inside the ancient Catholic Church, Jonathan was awed by the elaborate stained glass. He realized this was the first time he had been in a Catholic church. As Jonathan attempted to choose seats in the cavernous church, he was struck by how empty the place would be. Jonathan was her only family. He had called his mother in an attempt to get her to pay her last respects, but it had done no good.

In the pews on the right sat Leah and some of her children. She stared forward with wide, empty eyes while the children looked around like they were waiting for something. A few other mourners were scattered about. Jonathan thought they might be church friends because Mr. Henry was making his rounds with many of them, shaking hands, and speaking to them in hushed tones. Today he was sans bolo tie, but with the same white shirt and black pants.
With his hand on Destiny’s lower back, Jonathan guided them to the second pew on the left. She had dressed herself in shades of pink and red. This made her stand out like a brilliant spot of sun breaking through thick, dark clouds. It made Jonathan feel ashamed of his somber, navy suit. As he looked at Destiny, he knew that Clara would want vibrant; she would want life here.

Jonathan forced his eyes from Destiny and looked toward the altar. Clara’s plain, black casket sat right in front of the altar. Its top half was open, so Jonathan could see Clara’s serene profile. He stared at her face and the expression on it. It said, “I’m with Jesus now.” At this thought, Jonathan’s heart ached, and though his left arm was around Destiny, his right hand automatically clutched at his heart. Destiny put her hand on his knee and squeezed lightly.

The priest walked out, dressed in white, flowing layers that Jonathan had only seen in movies. A shortened version of a Catholic mass ensued. Jonathan paid little attention to it. He watched Clara. He knew that she had found Simon and Arthur. He imagined the peace she finally found after so many lonely, difficult years.

At the end of the ceremony, after Mr. Henry and one of Leah’s sons had gone to the podium and delivered kind words about Clara, Ophelia Runkle stood up from the side of the church. Jonathan had not noticed her there until she stood. The priest invited the mourners to come say goodbye to Clara. Ophelia took the microphone and sang the most heartbreaking version of “Amazing Grace” Jonathan had ever heard.

By the time the first of the mourners, Leah and her children, were up at the casket, Ophelia was already on verse two:
“T’was Grace that taught my heart to fear.
And Grace, my fears relieved.
How precious did that Grace appear
The hour I first believed.”

Destiny was next at the casket. She put her arm around Clara, holding onto her shoulder. Destiny leaned down and said something. Jonathan could hear the third verse of Ophelia’s beautiful song:

“Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
’Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far
and Grace will lead me home.”

When Destiny was done, she stepped aside, waiting for Jonathan. Up close, it looked like the mortician had smoothed out all of Clara’s wrinkles, making her look years younger and completely unreal. This disturbed him. He could not touch her as Destiny had done. But he did lean down to speak to her. As he leaned in, he saw she wore the jade crucifix he gave her for Christmas, the one he and Destiny picked out for her.

“I love you, Aunt Clara. I know you’re much happier now, but I can’t help wishing you were still here. I will miss everything about you. Thanks for the house. Destiny and I will be very happy there. Please say hello to Arthur for me. Tell him I love him. I will see you all again someday.”

Jonathan listened to the next verse of the song as he took one last look.

“The Lord has promised good to me.
His word my hope secures.
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.’”

Jonathan and Destiny took their seats. He found the tissue he folded up and put in his pocket earlier that morning and handed it to Destiny. Pulling her close, she laid her head against his chest, and they listened to the last verse echo against the stained glass depictions of Jesus’ struggle and triumph.

“Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.”

The priest replaced Ophelia at the podium.

“Go in peace now, to love and serve the Lord.”

Jonathan guessed that was the cue to leave. He made his way to Ophelia, who, like Destiny, was dressed in vibrant colors.

He hugged her.

“Thank you so much for that,” he said. “It was the most beautiful song I’ve ever heard.”

“Yes, it was amazing,” Destiny agreed.

“Of course. I was happy to do it,” Ophelia said.

“You have no idea how much Clara would have loved that,” he said.

“I’m so glad,” she said. “Hey, you two look adorable together,” she added.

Destiny blushed.

“Thanks,” Jonathan said.
“Well, I only took half a day, so I gotta get back to school,” Ophelia said.

“We appreciate that you took the time,” Destiny said.

Ophelia ducked out of the church, waving back at them.

After thanking the priest and the other mourners, Jonathan and Destiny walked out, hand in hand.

“This pink is really beautiful,” Jonathan said.

Destiny smiled a wry smile.

“What?” he asked.

“It’s what Clara said to me when we left her house. ‘Wear pink to my funeral. I want to be able to spot you from my place in Heaven.’”
Chapter 24 – The Move

Once Jonathan had picked up Clara’s keys from Mr. Henry, he and Destiny sorted through her house.

The majority of the religious pictures and paraphernalia went in the Saint Katherine’s pile.

“I kinda feel bad about eliminating Jesus from this house. It just seems wrong,” Jonathan said.

“Yeah, let’s keep a few things to remind us of Clara,” Destiny said.

“Suggestions?”

“Well, I think we should keep the Last Supper over there,” she said.

“Yeah, that one is important,” he agreed.

Destiny stared at the picture for a while.

“Jesus was sexy,” she said.

“Destiny!” He sounded like he was scolding a small child.

“What? I can’t help it. He was always walking around half-naked. He’s got that long hair and that rough look. And, he was always healing the sick. He was like a super-hero. Sexy.” She pretended to shiver.

“You’ve thought this out, have you?”

She shrugged.

“You’re sick,” he said.
“Okay, I’m sick, but Jesus is still sexy,” she taunted.

“Now I’m thinking twice about keeping it. And, I’m waiting for lightening to strike you,” he said.

“Alright, fine, He’s not sexy. What else should we keep?” Jonathan pointed to an intricately knotted crucifix above the front door.

“How about that?” he asked.

“Ooo, that one’s pretty,” she said.

They were standing close to the front door, looking up at the crucifix, otherwise the noise wouldn’t have scared them. Bang, bang, bang.

“Constance!” Destiny yelped in surprise. Jonathan put his arm around her.

“Don’t worry. I know who this is.” He opened the door. Leah stood facing them, looking confused as ever.

“Leah, honey, Constance isn’t here, but I think she went next door. To that house.” He pointed to Leah’s house.

“Oh, okay,” she said.

When she was gone, Destiny leaned out the door, watching as she went.

“Damn. That was creepy. She doesn’t even have a coat on. Who is she?”

“Clara’s next door neighbor. She has Alzheimer’s and she is constantly looking for her dead sister, Constance. Or, at least, I assume she’s dead.”

“She looks way too confused to live on her own.”

“I know. Her children come by and check on her, but she seems to need a whole lot more supervision than she gets.”
“I hope she’s not too pesky of a neighbor for us,” Destiny said.

“’Us’ huh? You’re moving in with me?”

“Yes. If that’s okay.”

“I want nothing more,” he said.

Once they had Clara’s things sorted into “keep,” and “donate,” they called Saint Katherine’s to pick up the donate pile. They kept most of her furniture since neither of them had anything worth moving. They also kept all of her pictures and some of her other personal effects.

That evening, they were sorting through boxes they brought from their respective apartments. Arguing about whose dishes were in better shape, they were surprised again when a loud knock came from the front door.

“We gotta get used to that,” he said.

“Think it’s Leah again?”

“It’s already dark, who else could it be?”

At the front door stood a middle-aged man, looking frantic.

“Can I help you?” Jonathan asked.

“Oh, shit. That’s right. Clara’s gone. I forgot.” He spoke these words to himself.

“Is there something we can do for you?” Jonathan asked.

“I don’t suppose you might have seen the woman next door? Leah? I’m her son. She’s missing. I come every night at the same time and help her get ready for bed. But, she’s not there. Sometimes, Clara’s with her, but I didn’t remember until just now that . . .”
This was not the son who came to the funeral.

“We saw Leah about four or five hours ago. She came here. I told her to go home, even directed her there. She went off in that direction. I’m sure she’s not far.”

“We’ll help you look,” Destiny offered.

“Thanks,” said the son who had not introduced himself by name.

Destiny put her coat on. She tugged on Jonathan’s arm.

“Come on,” she said.

Jonathan put his coat on, and they drove up and down every side street they could find. They even stopped at Millie’s house, one street over and asked her if she may have seen Leah.

An hour later with no luck finding her, they met the son back at Leah’s house.

“You’re going to have to call the police,” Jonathan said.

“I will. Thanks for trying. Please keep a look out in case she comes back this way,” he said.

“Of course we will,” Destiny said.

Back at their new house, misfortune clouded their previous happiness.

“I’m sure they’ll find her. She probably wandered into a store somewhere. Alzheimer’s patients wander all the time, I’m sure—”

“I hope she’s not cold. Freezing to death somewhere,” Destiny said.

“Don’t think like that. I’m sure it will be fine.”

“We should have walked her back to her house,” she said.

Jonathan hugged her.
“Yeah, I know. But don’t worry, they’ll find her. You shouldn’t feel guilty – she obviously should not be living on her own.”

“I know. I just feel bad.”

“That’s what you get for calling Jesus sexy,” he teased.

Destiny gave him a few playful hits.

“You gotta watch out. Jesus hears everything,” he said, laughing.

Despite trying desperately not to, she burst out laughing. But even in their laughter, both of them knew that in this house, Jesus was everywhere.
Chapter 25 – The Disappearance

Leah’s thin canvas shoes were far from adequate for the cold February night. Each time her feet hurt, she would look down and remember that she needed to go home. But, when she looked up, everything around her was unfamiliar. Not even the street signs made sense. Mom and Dad were going to be so angry at Constance for staying out so late. Constance! She needed to find her.

She walked forward. Her stomach growled, reminding her she was hungry. Mom would have a meal ready, waiting. Home? Which direction was it?

A light glowed from windows ahead, and she walked toward it. Her feet felt like she had walked miles; they hurt, and she looked down and noticed her shoes were too thin for this weather. She shivered, wanting somewhere warm to rest until she found her home. What street did she live on? She stopped in the street to think of the name. She knew the number of her house: eleven o’ nine. But, what was the street? She lived there her whole life; she just needed a quiet, warm place to think.

Constance would remember. Why couldn’t she?

She began walking toward the lights up ahead. Her feet really hurt, but she didn’t know why. When she finally reached the lighted place, she saw it was a public place. There was a word for it, but the word didn’t come to mind. Letters on the outside of the building were nonsensical. There were numbers too. None of it made any sense to her.
She opened the door, pausing with it open. Where was she headed? Why was she going in this place when she needed to go home? A man walked past her into the lighted place. She followed him.

Suddenly, she found herself in a room filled with tables, chairs, and a long counter. A few people were scattered at various tables. Some were standing.

Leah stood near the counter, lost. What was she doing here? Her feet hurt; she thought sitting may help, so she chose the closest chair. Leaning against the counter, her head in her hands, she tried to think. How would she get home?

“What can I get you, miss?”

Leah smiled. She was uncomfortable. What was she supposed to say?

“Uh. I’m going home.”

“Can I call you a taxi?”

*Taxi?* What was that?

“I, uh, you know . . .”

The cook joined the man questioning Leah.

“She seems confused,” the cook said.

“Yeah, it’s sad. Reminds me of my grandma, like she just needs someone to take care of her,” the other one said.

“Why don’t you call the police?” the cook suggested.

“Eleven o’ nine,” said Leah.

“Let’s give her something to eat first,” the other one said.

He left, but came back a bit later with a sandwich. He set it in front of her. She looked down at it.
“It’s food,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Leah, nodding.

But, she did not eat it.

“You look like my grandma,” he said to her. “My grandma was an angel.”

Leah kept nodding. It was an automatic reaction rather than an indication of assent or understanding.

She waited until the man walked away and laid her head down on the counter.

Within a few minutes, she was snoring lightly.

The man covertly dialed a number on his cell.

“Connie? Hey, is the spare room clean?”

On his way out, the cook saw Leah sleeping on the counter. He sought out the waiter.

“What is she doing here? I thought you were going to call the police.”

“I will. If your shift is over, go ahead and go home. I’ve got this.”

“Alright, man. Hey, tell Constance I said ‘hello.’”

“Will do.”

The waiter sat on the stool next to Leah, watching her sleep.

“She looks like my grandma. She looks like an angel of God,” he said to no one in particular.
Chapter 26 – Introductions

“Are you sure you wanna do this?” Jonathan asked.

“Of course. Why not?”

“Sure, you say that now. Don’t be angry later that I subjected you to them. Remember that this was all your idea and that I tried to warn you.”

“You’re so melodramatic, Beacon,” said Destiny.

“Okay. You seem to know what you’re getting yourself into.”

They exited the car. Destiny looked up at the house.

“Nice place,” she said.

“Yeah, big and empty,” he said.

June greeted them at the door. She ignored Jonathan.

“You must be Destiny,” she said.

Destiny nodded.

“I am so glad to meet you,” she said, pulling Destiny into a hug so unexpected that it took her seconds to respond.

Jonathan’s mouth hung open. He had never seen his mother hug anyone. Not in his entire life.

“Come in,” June said.

She led Destiny to a couch in the living room.

“Jonathan told me nothing. I want to know everything about you,” June said.
Jonathan sat on a couch opposite them. He was reminded of the scene at Clara’s. Destiny had a way of being instant family. Right now, she was more family to June than Jonathan had ever been.

He walked into the kitchen to see what was creating the smell of food (unusual at his parents’ home). His dad sat at the kitchen table, reading a newspaper. Ignoring his father and going to the stove, Jonathan saw that June was cooking Italian. Some red sauce was simmering and noodles were boiling. In the oven, he saw bread, and a big bowl of salad sat on the counter. Jonathan looked around, this was not his parents’ house. He had to be walking in a dream or into the twilight zone or something.

He sat down at the table. James lowered the newspaper to look at him.

“So, you bringing a girl over?” he asked.

“Yeah, she’s in there with Mom. Can’t you hear them gossiping like old women at a beauty parlor?”

James listened for a minute

“Hmph,” he grunted.

The newspaper went back up.

Jonathan tried to wait patiently until his mother decided it was enough with the conversation and time for dinner, but that never happened. The water boiling for the noodles bubbled up over the edge and hissed on the burner. He went to it, took the pot off of the burner, and marched to his mother.

“Your pots are boiling over,” he said to her.

“Sorry. Excuse me for a moment, Destiny,” June said.

Jonathan took her seat on the sofa next to Destiny.
“I don’t know what the fuck is up with her,” he said, confidentially.

“What do you mean? She seems perfectly pleasant,” Destiny said.

“Yeah. Okay. You should know, though, that she’s been possessed. At any moment, the real June Beacon will show up. Just wait for it,” he said.

Destiny shook her head. June bounded in the room.

“Who’s ready for dinner?” she asked.

“I am,” said Destiny, leaping off of the sofa.

Jonathan felt like he might be walking into an ambush. Dinner, however, was pleasant enough. June and Destiny kept up the conversation, including Jonathan here and there. James stayed quiet until Destiny addressed a few direct questions to him. He answered, not politely, but at least he spoke.

Jonathan heaved a huge sigh of relief when they finally walked out of the house without any trauma. June and James had successfully imitated human beings, something Jonathan had never seen before.

“I liked your mom. She was really sweet,” Destiny said.

“Yeah, well, you are the only one,” he said.

“Whatever.”

“Seriously. She has no friends, no family left except me and James up there, and he and I sure as hell don’t like her. She doesn’t go to church or over to neighbors’ houses. You, literally, may be the only person alive who enjoys June Beacon’s company.”

Destiny just stared at him. She saw the look on his face that said this-is-no-exaggeration.

“That is so sad,” she said.
“I think the whole thing is a miracle. You’re a miracle,” he said.

She smiled.

Back on Rose Street, both fell silent as they passed Leah’s house, now up for sale. Both of them felt a little guilty about her disappearance. Her children wasted no time in disposing of the property, believing that if she happened to be found, she belonged in a care facility anyway.

In Clara’s house, Jonathan enjoyed the mixture of Clara’s memory and Destiny’s touch. The atmosphere was warm and homey. Jonathan had gathered every picture he had of Clara, Simon, and Arthur, including the one from Arthur’s meager possessions, and framed them in rich golds and silvers. He arranged them on the mantle in the front room as a kind of shrine to the lost family. Right in the center, was a framed picture of Jesus that Destiny had found in Clara’s bedroom closet. It was an image of Jesus that Jonathan had never seen before. He looked gaunt and alone. Destiny agreed that this one was not sexy Jesus; He was Clara’s Jesus. He shared in her grief and misery, and now he shared a place among the faces from a time long gone.

To complete the shrine, Jonathan stacked Clara’s hymnal (the one featuring Amazing Grace) and Arthur’s Bible on the end of the mantle. Jonathan briefly considered asking June for the picture of Clara and Arthur on their wedding day, the one that had haunted him as a child, but figured that it was better off in his parents’ home. Clara was no longer a haunting figure for him.

Jonathan enjoyed visiting the shrine, remembering how these dead and gone figures had brought him back to life. One day, he discovered that Destiny also visited the
shrine. He stood in the hall, listening to her talking to Clara. He would not have been surprised if Clara answered her back.