GLOW: A NOVEL

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by

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PROLOGUE

For a while I wrote almost every day. It seemed so important to document things. I had spreadsheets for supplies and lists of things I thought I needed. There were so many lists. I still have the stacks of notebooks I bought for the supply closet, the boxes of pens. I guess I thought I’d be writing a lot longer. I guess I’m glad I was wrong.

Everything felt important then. Everything carried so much weight, it seemed: what I was doing, who I was with, the woman I loved, my dead mother, illuminated all by the machinations of a crumbling and terrible society.

These are the pages I wrote during a few frightening months in 2012. I’m sure anybody who encounters this document will already be familiar with the glowing, its history, what it means, and so I won’t contextualize further. Just: this is what it felt like. This is what it was about.
CHAPTER 1

Amelia is coming for dinner.

I’ve brought up pear preserves from the pantry shelves that line my basement and I’m making a tart. With everything that’s going on, everything in the news, the light in the sky, the craziness, all of it, I figure we could use a tart. Something real. Something homemade.

I usually feed Amelia well, anyway; I am aware I’m trying to impress her. I want her to think I eat better than I do when she’s not around. Maybe that I’m more domestic than I am. Not too domestic, though, because the thought of appearing too girly in her eyes, well – I can’t tolerate that. I’m not sure what exactly I want Amelia to think of me. That I’m butch? – no, that won’t do, either. Tomboy-ish? That’s not quite right.

I consider this fear of girliness, this familiar tightrope walk of mine, between girly and not-girly, more than anything else as I choose an outfit from my messy closet. I settle on hiking khakis and a tank top, but I make sure I’m wearing my little silver hoop earrings. At the last minute, when I hear Amelia’s car’s tires crunching on the gravel lane, I decide to apply a little a rosy lip gloss on my lips. I deposit the tube of gloss into one of my cargo pants pockets. I’m barefoot as usual.
I can see the yellow-hot glow of Amelia’s car before she’s even off the road. She’s got music blaring, this time recognizably Nine Inch Nails. I usually have no idea what sort of music Amelia is playing when she drives up to the house. She’s a full eight years younger than I am, and my musical tastes are, generally speaking, more mature, less pop-influenced, a lot more boring, than hers.

Hey, she says as I hold the screen door open. Max, my pitbull mix, pushes past me to greet her.

Sorry it’s hot in here, I say. I’ve got the fan on.

No, it’s fine. Smells wonderful.

Thanks. Pear tart.

Please tell me you used butter in the crust?

Amelia’s really asking whether I’ve gone full vegan, like I’ve been threatening. She swears she’ll stop coming over if I do.

Still lacto-ovo, I say.

Did you know that vegans don’t eat honey? It’s an animal by-product.

I know some vegans who eat honey.

Who?

I actually can’t think of anybody, and since Amelia knows I’ve got few friends, I feel my cheeks go hot. I cross the kitchen, open the fridge, and grab two Miller High Life’s. I suggest the porch, because I know there’ll be a breeze.

Everything glows.
I sit on the porch with Amelia and I look out past my treeline and I think how strange is the landscape since the technology went all wrong. There is, even though darkness has fallen, a bright haze along the horizon, up toward town. Even the weather seems to be impacted by all the glowing – it’s summer-hot outside, even though it’s only mid-April.

I mean it literally when I say, everything glows. There is a hyper-real tint to the whole of the horizon – broad daylight is even brighter now, in big cities or in mall parking lots. You should see America from space, from the satellites, now. Lit up like a fucking Christmas tree. It’s kinda scary. We’re ablaze.

Amelia sits on the painted porch swing. I choose a cushioned chair. Max lays in what I call his “summer bed” – though it is springtime, and I have just set it out this week – on the porch under the living room window. The porch overlooks the wooded side of the property; my large garden slopes gently toward the woodline. Amelia sighs as she looks at the horizon line above the trees. Like I said, it’s past twilight now, but you could hardly tell it by looking.

Still can’t get used to that, she says.

Me neither. Surreal.

Sure is.

We’re looking at the accumulated bright haze of everybody’s unowned property. We never tire of discussing it. We think most of what we see in this direction is glow from Alliance, where Amelia lives, about eight miles north of my
farm. On the other side of my house, though, past the barn, the glow is just as bright, even though in that direction there’s nothing but farms, a sparse sprinkling of homes, and a tiny one-intersection village.

The whole world’s alight.

I live on a farm that’s been in my family for four generations. My father paid off this house before he died; it had been his wish to leave me everything, free and clear. I didn’t think he was a man of honor all the time; but in this, about the land, honor was in him. He was satisfied he left me, his only child, a home. A safe place. Something I could own.

It wasn’t that I set out to be fiscally responsible, per se, but inheriting the farm enabled me to support myself working as a criminology instructor for the state college’s regional campus. My life started out small, and it stayed small. I didn’t ever develop a sense of wanting more, more, more like most everybody else. My life is little, conscribed. I wish I could pretend it’s because I was prudent, or I had foresight, or I’m better than anybody. But that’s not it. I just always liked being alone, never liked shopping, didn’t feel a need for so many things.

We used to own acres and acres. The farm was huge, endless, when I was a kid, when my mom was around. But farming was hard living. The pieces of land my grandfather and father farmed got littler and littler over the years; they leased, and then sold, huge chunks of land to a megafarm operation. I own ten acres. That’s all that’s left of what had once been more than a thousand.
Behind my property, all along one side, and straight across the street, the megafarmer who owns all the acreage plants crops. The crops alternate: corn one year, soybeans the next, sometimes winter wheat. The other side of my property is where my woods are; five of my acres are wooded. Those acres weren’t ever farmed. There’s a meandering stream, a steep ravine, and a spring that creates a wetland, so farming wasn’t ever practical there. My woods are beautiful. Past my property line, west of my woods, there is more unfarmable forest, and then another farm.

And above it all now, across the sky, is that crazy, neverending glow.

I remember this, about seven or eight years ago: we were all told exactly how the new technology would work. There were articles about it in the newspapers. It was on TV. I didn’t believe it at first, but then the president spoke, a special address to the nation. He told us what the technology was meant to do.

We were all given ample warning. Years of warning. It had been explained, in numbing detail, for almost a decade before it got implemented. The laws were written, and the laws were passed. It was for our own protection, they told us.

It wasn’t supposed to happen this way. The technology, they told us, exists, and the technology doesn’t make mistakes. It was for our own protection.

In the beginning, I wasn’t worried. It wasn’t going to apply to me. I was sure of that. I own my things. But I kept up with all the news. In a strange way, I liked feeling, for once, that something new and interesting was about to happen.
This was 2004 – Just after George W. Bush’s re-election. Man, those Republicans were on fire. They controlled the House and the Senate, too, after that election. We got a landslide of shit legislation forced down our throats. Dubya was signing bills into law as fast as congress could churn them out. It was a different time.

Back then, nobody was paying attention. The media spoon-fed us nothingness, and nobody listened anyway, and the people went about their dumb, selfish, suburban lives. Their dumb children were little cable TV zombies with cell phones in their pockets. Their parents didn’t care.

The legislation allowed the government, and corporations and banks too, to use the technology to monitor all of us. It was nanotechnology – you know, nanobots. The nanos are smart, and adaptable, and totally plugged in to the networks and the satellites. Corporate-funded nanotech experts figured out the nanos could be programmed to learn all sorts of information about the things we buy and the things we own.

Some of this research was funded by the government. Banks were pouring money into it, too. They saw how powerful it could be. They saw the potential.

It’s maddening to me now that nobody was paying any attention. Nobody cared. Nothing was done to stop any of this. History will not be kind, I fear, and we will be judged for having stood idly, for having let this nightmare unfold.
After a couple beers apiece, Amelia and I call for pizza delivery. I’d felt so overheated making just the tart, that I didn’t make the pasta like I’d planned. I feel bad about this; like I said, I am always trying to impress Amelia.

Only Howie’s delivers this far from Alliance, and when the delivery kid comes, the pizza box is lit up. It glows, an unreal yellow. When I pay for the pizza – cash, of course, I pay cash for just about everything, or else I use my debit card – the box stops glowing. It stops glowing the moment the cash hits the hand of the delivery guy.

That’s never not freaky, I say.

No shit, Amelia says.

The delivery kid just shrugs his shoulders and turns toward his car. When he opens his fist and sees how generous the tip, he waves a clumsy thanks.

After pizza, which we eat on the porch, I plate the pear tart and bring it out. God, that looks good, Amelia says.

I know.

You should be a cook, Bo. I mean a chef somewhere.

Nah. It would bug me too much when customers complain. I hate people.

Ha! Amelia snorts.

No, seriously. I like what I do. I hardly interact with anyone any more.

Your online thing does seem like a pretty great gig, Amelia says.

The internet is the best thing that ever happened to me, I say. I fucking love it.

I should do that. Before I commit a homicide at work.
That’s not even funny. And anyway, you’re too sweet for homicide, I say, and I hold up a forkful of tart in some sort of odd salute.

Thanks.

Amelia works for the domestic violence shelter in Alliance. She’s young, 28 years old, a real babyface, but she’s actually the shelter’s executive director. I sit on the board of the shelter. We voted to hire her a couple years ago, after she blew the whistle on the former director and assistant director for an amazing laundry list of illegal activity. Amelia, then just a part-time intake specialist, stood trembling at a board meeting as she explained what she’d discovered: theft of funds, fraud, fudged books, secret bank accounts. She’d been playing investigator, spy, evidence collector. She came to us when she was sure.

We made Amelia interim director while we sorted everything out. She did so well, we only went through the motions with our hunt for a new executive director. We accepted some resumes and then we put it up to a vote and it was unanimous.

Amelia got happy tears in her eyes when we told her she’d been hired.

I was vice president of the board of directors that year.

I fell for her then.

Nobody had any idea how interesting it would all become.

I’m talking about the technology; but the technology is not the only thing I think about any more. I think about what is happening to the people. What is happening to all of us. The future. Documenting everything. Part of my crazy
preparations, these days, is to plan for documentation. In the house, in the reinforced and double-locked supply closet, I’ve got 40 notebooks, and eight boxes of pens. I’m embarrassed to admit I also bought old-school fountain pens, and bottles of ink, too. The technology seems to be less able to modify simple things, the wood and the carved metal of those pens, no moving parts, no buttons or levers or springs or plastic. Plus, the technology should leave my pens alone, in theory at least, because I paid for them. I own them. The technology can’t touch what I own.

Amelia has carried our dishes inside. I hear the plates as she sets them in the sink. I hear water running. I hear the fridge door. Then, she reappears in the light of the doorway, two cold bottles of beer held by their necks in her left hand.

She is beautiful.

It’s dark now, or what counts for dark these days, although my own property is starkly darker in comparison to everything around it. Because I’m surrounded by the megafarm land, too, which thank God is owned free and clear, I’ve got hundreds of acres of nothing glowing surrounding me. The closest illuminated thing, besides Amelia’s jewelry and her big, glowing car, is a neighbor’s garage about three-quarters of a mile away.

People are building special rooms in their homes now, just for sleeping. For darkness. Windowless little cubicles with just enough room for a bed. Apparently, everyone pays cash for bed frames, mattresses, comforters, pillows, sheets and
blankets now. Amelia says she saw a special cash-only store on State Street last week called Bedchambers.

I had long intended to expand my bedroom closet in order to store my guns somewhere locked and safe, but after the glowing began, I built instead a large, sturdy closet along my living room wall. It’s solid wood, not drywall. It’s large enough for an air mattress on the floor, if the need should ever arise. Its shelves are already lined with the beginnings of a stockpile of supplies.

I don’t know what I’m stockpiling for, exactly. I just feel better having certain things on hand.

Pitch black darkness.

It’s impossible to come by.

I get more of it than anybody else I know, but the horizon all around my property glows more or less noticeably, every night, depending on the direction I’m facing and cloud cover. The clouds really reflect all that light. On cloudy nights, you could almost read a book outside. On cloudy nights, the oddly illuminated yellow sky makes me think of tornado warnings. I dream of wind, of sirens.

I miss pitch-black moonless nights. I miss a night sky full of bright stars. I miss feeling my way from memory across my completely dark house. I miss the velvet soft comfort of the blackest, quietest, longest nights.

Fifteen years ago, when I was getting my master’s degree and spending most nights drinking too much, I used to dream about water. The thirst from my
developing hangover would have me dreaming about drinking fountains, streams, waterfalls. Garden hoses. Mist. Cool lakes.

Now, I dream about darkness. I dream about moss under my feet. I dream about thick curtains, softness, stars, a happy blindness.

Amelia doesn’t dream about the dark, she says. Where she lives, right in town – she just keeps dreaming about fires. She dreams her own glowing possessions blister her skin. She dreams of a lack, a carving out, a subtraction: bright emptiness where once stood trees, ponds, flowers, streams. Everything bone-dry. She dreams delicate ash falls from the sky.

At night, after Amelia’s gone and I’ve cleaned the kitchen, I lay flat on my living room couch. Max spreads himself out on the bare floor. I stretch my arm and stroke the part of his body I can reach.

What am I gonna do, Max, I say. What am I gonna do?

Max lifts his head at the mention of his name. I can just barely reach the tip of his ear. I roll off the couch, sit cross-legged on the floor, and invite Max into my lap. He’s so large he spills across and almost knocks me over. I scratch his head.

It’s been a long time since I’ve felt so much for a girl. Thinking of her is causing my heart to pound.

Oh, Max, I’m in trouble, I say.

Amelia.
CHAPTER 2

It is simple.

Everything in America is now infected with nanos. These nanos know everything. They know who you are. They know where everything came from. They’re linked in to all the credit companies, the banks, the corporations, the government every person’s unique identity.

The nanos are interested in whether you own things or not.

I open my eyes.

It’s morning. I’m on my couch, and the light through the big picture window is nice. Clear. Springtime sunny. You could almost forget anything crazy’s going on.

Amelia.

I’m thinking about Amelia. Max is still on the floor next to the couch.

I shake Amelia from my thoughts. I get up and I let Max out the front door. I go to the bedroom to find a pair of running shorts and a tank top. In the bedroom – what used to be my parents’ bedroom, long ago, and then just my father’s, before it became mine – I pause at the familiar bookshelf against the near wall. My mother’s bookshelf, filled with my mother’s books. Nothing remarkable about the dark wooden shelves, nor the spines of any of the books. These books have been in this room longer than I’ve been alive. I’m beyond familiar with the bookshelf’s contents,
unchanged for years. Except: one of the books, just a single one of them, began glowing a year ago.

The glowing book is on the middle of the three shelves, the third book from the left side, a thin-spined book, bound in an amateurish fashion, almost a pamphlet, really, not even a title running down its spine.

I regard that glowing book – the only item on my ten acres of property that glows – with my usual curiosity, almost a well-worn reverence, as I cross the bedroom floor and begin digging through my large dresser for the clothes I need.

Originally, the technology was supposed to have allowed the police, for example, to identify stolen vehicles. There had been precedence already, in that license plate scanners mounted on cop cars already were identifying vehicles registered to people with warrants out for their arrest. Already cop cars’ scanners would alert them if your license was suspended, or if you had unpaid tickets.

The nanotechnology took things a step further – you didn’t need the scanner. The nanos would be everywhere, on everything, all the time.

Banks wanted the technology because they wanted people to pay their loans. They saw it as a real incentive for all of us lazy Americans. If you didn’t pay your car loan by its due date, for example, they’d remind you to hurry it up – the technology would lock your car doors, or prevent the key from igniting the engine. Once you paid, your car would magically start itself up again. The banks thought this was pretty fantastic.
You have to realize what a corporate-dominated time this was. Corporations and banks were pretty much running the government. They’d bought Republicans and put them in the White House and the congress. In exchange they got their subsidies, bailouts, tax breaks, incentive money, and – most important – the legislation.

And like I said, We the People just let it all happen.

Growing up mostly without a mother – I’m never sure if I remember her at all, for real, actually, or if I only have imagined, made-up memories – I emulated my father and grandfather a lot. My grandmother wasn’t a delicate sort, either, so even things I learned from her came with the hard edge of necessity. Farm life does that to a person. The pear tart, for example. More utilitarian than a pie. Less fancy. A better economy of ingredients.

I would have probably just thought I was a farm kid, or tomboyish, but for the books on my mother’s bookshelf. The bookshelf was always in my parents’ bedroom. My mother had been to college; she had dropped out to marry my father, but she had spent three years in college. My mother was working toward what was probably back then some sort of liberal arts degree – I never got a clear answer on this from my father, but the books on that bookshelf were feminist, radical.

Her books remained on the bookshelf after she died. My father never packed them away. They were still all on the shelves in my parents’ bedroom when my father
died. They are still on the bookshelves now, in the bedroom that was theirs, then his, then mine, now, though I rarely sleep there.

I sleep on my couch. Max sprawled on the rug nearby. I sometimes drag a comforter and pillow out on to the porch, and Max and I sleep outside. Or we used to, before the glowing. Since then I haven’t wanted to do that. I just can’t stomach that sky in the nighttime.

So it was supposed to be an easy matter, no big deal: if you pay for something with a credit card, or if you have a loan on your house or your car, or if you outright steal something, the nanos know the thing doesn’t belong to you.

They promised it was foolproof. There weren’t going to be any mistakes. There were supposed to be safety mechanisms in place.

I used to sneak into my parents’ bedroom when my father was out in the fields. This was after my mother died.

I would pull books off her shelf and leaf through them.

There were a surprising number of references to lesbians in these books; she had a psychology book with a chapter on the Kinsey report, a lesbian pulp fiction novel called The Price of Salt, and a few copies of a gay women’s newsletter called The Ladder.
And then there was the book that would end up glowing, the thin book, the plain-covered book. Its contents alarmed me the most, as a child. SCUM Manifesto, it was called. It was a nearly unintelligible anti-man screed. Men were the scum alluded to in the title, I gathered over several readings. I’d never read anything like it. A man’s willingness to wade, nose-deep, through rivers of vomit in order to have sex with a woman? Screwing corpses and babies? The word pussy? I didn’t understand any of it. The first time I read it, I didn’t even know what screwing was, or why a man would do it to dead women or baby girls. It disturbed me greatly.

I was probably 12 or 13 years old.

I was afraid of what my mother might have been.

Of course I have wondered whether my mom was a gay woman.

I have wondered whether she was forced to leave college and marry. Forced by whom? I never knew her family. I only ever knew one set of grandparents and aunts and uncles and loud-mouthed gun-toting boy cousins – my father’s family.

It was like my mother was dropped out of the sky into the middle of a corn field.

I was too young to understand anything when she was alive. When I became an adult, my father didn’t talk about any of that.

She didn’t much get on with her family, was all he would say if I asked him.

Then who paid for college? Why did she leave? Where did she come from?

We met at the county fair, he would say. Your mother was at the fair that year.
But who was she with? Why was she at the fair?

My father would only say that everyone went to the fair, in those days.

I wish I had pressed him. I wish I’d been more brave. Now that he’s dead, I have no information, not even scraps of it. I only know my mother’s maiden name—Green—which is far too common to do me any good. There was nothing in any of her belongings that would have hinted at a life before, before the books on the bookshelf or before my father. There was nothing at all. Not even a single baby picture. Not even a single lock of hair, beloved baby doll, or a childhood drawing.

I’ll never know if she looked like me, when I was a child, though I always imagine she did. I know I resemble her now, although I am older already than she was when she died.

The books on the shelves in my parents’ bedroom remained, seemingly untouched, for years. I say seemingly, because, of course, I touched them. But nobody else did, and they ceased to even be seen. Because they been such a fixture in the room for so long, my father became blind to them. The bowl where he put all his spare change perched on the hardcovers that lined the top row of the bookshelf. My father kept his comb and cufflinks on the top ledge, too. Sometimes his baseball caps would rest on the books, or a folded-up sweater. He often hung his church cardigan from the post on the end of the bookshelf, or one or both of his brown silk ties. The clumsy pottery vase I painted for him for Father’s Day one year sat on the shelf in front of the books, too, with a paper flower I’d fashioned inside it.
I only ever risked pulling one book at a time off the shelf. I always replaced the book carefully, in the exact right order. I tried not to disturb the layer of dust on the tops of the books or the ledges of the shelves.

These were sacred archives.

I looked to them for reassurance. I looked to them for knowledge.

The first night after the glowing had started, after I’d spent all day, like everyone else, reading news stories and watching all the video footage constantly being uploaded to the web, just after dark, I went to my bedroom to find some flannel pants to sleep in.

There it was, on the bookshelf: The SCUM Manifesto, upright, alarming, its spine and pages aglow.

I knew which book exactly was glowing, immediately: I’d long ago memorized the order of the books. I never re-arranged them.

That book, of all books, I thought.

I had to search the whole house, the barn, the garage, under the porch, inside my car – just to make sure nothing else was glowing. Already we knew it was the un-owned things. I needed to be sure I didn’t have any.

Any besides that creepy book, I mean. I was relieved to see I didn’t.

In the days after, I thought about throwing the book away. Or burning it. Or leaving it off someplace, on a coffee shop table, or on a random library shelf. I
wanted it out of the house, out of my possession. I was afraid of what the glowing meant. I was afraid it marked me in some way.

But in the end, I left the book where it was. I had too much reverence for my mother’s shelf. I’d kept it unmolested for so long. But the book, its origins, its history, why it glows now – this puzzles me. I’m afraid to dig for answers.

But then – what I need all of a sudden, is answers.

About the nanos: how the story turns out shouldn’t be a surprise. Things went terribly, awfully wrong. The nanotechnology became corrupt. There is still debate about how, or why. About what exactly happened, and when, and who knew. They reassure us, though, it was all a mistake. It wasn’t intentional. If you believe the technology was hacked, you’re called a conspiracy theorist.

I guess you could call me a conspiracy theorist. Or something like.

The media made fun of us at first, though less so now, since lately there’s no question the technology has been tweaked and modified by lots of people – it keeps happening, it’s happening all the time – and so, if it’s vulnerable now, it must have been vulnerable then. There’s endless debate, though, about the original corruption. Was it done purposefully? Were the consequences intentional? Who would have wished for, or worked for, such an outcome?

I sometimes think the government, or the corporations themselves, or the banks – or a conspiracy of all three – sabotaged the nanos, turned them into this bright and obvious manifestation of our terrible consumption. What if somebody in
the government actually had a conscience and decided this technology needed to be shown for the terrible Orwellian nightmare it actually was?

Or then I think – no. It had to have been somebody on the outside. Protesters, some radical group. They wanted to shock America out of its complacency.

But then, why not do something worse? Why just make things glow? Why not disable the nanos altogether?

There have been more theories than I can count, by now. Some of the theories get covered in the newspapers, or on the news websites or in the blogs. But a lot of them don’t – you have to dig around, find the obscure truther-type websites.

I don’t often do that – it’s like slipping down a rabbit hole. It’s not pleasant. I don’t want to identify myself with those paranoid freaks. Before all this happened, there were crazies out there, to be sure. They called themselves preppers. They were preparing for the end of civilization, however they thought that would come about. Some thought electromagnetic storms from space would knock out the power grid, resulting in mass chaos. Others thought the collapse of the economy would destabilize the government. Others were sure it would be supervolcanoes, or catastrophic sea level rise. But whatever their particular paranoia, they would prepare, with guns and canned goods and fencing and backup generators. There have been more and more of these people, since the glowing, of course. The glowing’s got everyone on edge.

Scary thought: I’m one of them, now.

I’m not like the others, I tell myself, but yet, here I sit, with my lists and my large solid-wood padlocked closet and my plans for the garden and my paranoia.
I think if I knew who’d done this, or why, maybe I’d feel better. Maybe I could stop stockpiling. Maybe I could stop planning for what will happen when the nanos do something even worse than just glow.

Who did this to us?

Nothing makes any sense.

After my father died, 10 years ago, I dragged my parents’ mattress and box spring outside. I loaded them in the wooden cart attached to my ATV. I drove them up the gravel lane and I set them along the roadside for the garbagemen. I cleared the rest of my parents’ things from the bedroom. I unsentimentally bagged up and discarded every piece of my father’s clothing from the closet. I spent two days scrubbing the baseboards. I polished the wooden floor.

I didn’t touch the bookcase, though. My mother’s books. I scrubbed and mopped and polished around it. I didn’t move it, not once that whole time.

Like I said before: everything glows.

If you don’t own something, it glows. The nanos are fucked, and when the nanos associate themselves with something you do not own, the nanos glow like the crushed butts of microscopic fireflies.

April 1, 2011 – that’s the day the glowing started. It was celebrated like an anniversary this year – people started calling it Accountability Day, or I heard from
some of the bloggers, Transparency Day, though most people still refer to it as April 1, or just, the First, as in, ever since the First, I haven’t needed a flashlight at night, that’s for sure! This year on the First, all the news stations were intolerable, with their watered-down histories of the legislation and their smug little newscasters and the way those newscasters chuckled and shook their heads in remembrance of what it was like to wake up at 4:20 a.m. and find their cell phones on nightstands or the televisions on their bedroom walls or their Turkish terrycloth robes all suddenly ablaze with a brilliant yellow luminescence.

Of course, the April Fools’ Day association escapes no-one. It has fueled much of the speculation about how intentional the corruption may have been. No group has ever claimed responsibility; no government inquiry – there were two, and a third is still underway – has ever identified a suspect, or suspects.

It’s just something we have no choice but to live with.

Something about the glowing, the slow loosening of the weave of the fabric that holds everything together, is making me want to wake up, dig in, settle down.

What I need all of a sudden is answers.
CHAPTER 3

My friend Kevin, a motorcycle cop, is sitting on my porch. Up against the railing is the case in which is couched his AK-47 rifle. He just bought it at a gun show last weekend. He paid cash; the case and the gun inside are not glowing at all.

Well, are you going to show it to me, or what?

Thought you’d never ask, Bonnie, Kevin says. He puts emphasis on my given name.

Fuck you, I say. He knows how much I hate being called anything other than Bo.

The gun case is so clean and shiny I’d swear he polished it with a can of Pledge, and when I notice this, I try not to smirk at his earnestness. He’s got a padlock on the case. He turns the key in the lock, pulls the lock from the case, and unsnaps the hinges.

The gun is substantial. It’s long and sturdy, and its curved ammo clip adds something artistically pleasing to its form. It’s almost elegant.

You shot it yet?

Of course.

I nod. I know this means Kevin shot the gun in his own backyard, because he only either shoots here or there, when it comes to his guns that aren’t police-issued. Usually, with his rifles and shotguns, he shoots here. We take our guns and we target
shoot against the stream bank in the woods. I don’t have neighbors close enough to mind.

Musta pissed off your neighbor. Old what’s-his-face?

Roland.

Yeah. That’s who I mean.

But hey – what’s he gonna do? Call the cops? Kevin throws his hands up and gives a shrug.

We laugh, and I realize I enjoy Kevin’s company more than I’m willing to admit. When Kevin first started coming to the farm last year, his presence felt like an intrusion. It used to be business; he’d come out to shoot. He’d often bring me a box of ammo or a twelve-pack of Miller in payment for his use of my land.

Kevin’s a former student of mine. While enrolled in an online Intro to Criminal Justice class a couple years ago, he began pelting me with extracurricular emails about all sorts of things. He asked questions about prisons. He wanted to debate the death penalty. He wanted to talk shop about firearms. He knew I had guns, because I always find a way to mention on the discussion boards, during the course of teaching my classes, that I own guns. I guess I feel like I’ll earn some easy credibility with my students, most of whom are police-officer-wannabes. I feel I come to teaching cops-in-training at a disadvantage, since I’m a woman, and I need whatever leg-up I can get so my students take me seriously.

A few times I’ve wished I could find a way to use a man’s name when I teach the class; I rarely ever meet my students, so I can’t see the harm in it. I’m sure I could do it convincingly. Most of them would respect me more, I’m sure.
I've talked to Kevin about this. Sometimes, when we drink, or when we're cleaning our guns after we've been shooting, we invent man-names for me. The names Kevin invents are usually some derivative or combination or bastardization of the words testicles, balls, sac, dick, or cock.

So after I've admired his gun, when he says, Hey, Mr. Cockmonster Balls-Saxon, can we go shoot this thing already, I don't flinch.

Let's roll, I say.

Been waiting.

Also, that's Professor Cockmonster Balls-Saxon, to you.

When you grow up out here like I did, guns tend to be part of the landscape. I'd guess I was five or six years old, the first time I shot one, even if it was just a little pellet rifle. I didn’t realize until I went away to college that guns maybe weren’t the best subject to bring up around city kids or suburban kids. And city kids and suburban kids seemed to be all I ever met at the university. There weren’t other farm kids like me. I learned that most of Ohio, most of the Midwest or north, anyway, didn’t see a lot of guns, didn’t think about guns. Hadn’t ever touched a gun.

I get the feeling that the way I think about guns is different from how other people think about guns. Even other gun owners. I sometimes try to explain about me and guns. I even once talked to Amelia about it. She just shrugged her shoulders and didn’t say anything.
Nobody understands the comfort I get from a gun. I’m not ever able to articulate this. The Glock in the little case in my nightstand, the one that’s always loaded, the one my hands and my fingers can find silently in the pitch-black dark in the middle of the night, if I need them to – it’s probably impossible to explain how the cold weight of that gun is a reassurance, a rabbit’s foot, a talisman.

I live alone and I won’t admit how many times I’ve crept outside because I heard a noise, or because I just didn’t feel right about something, or because of the moonlight or the misty fog in the garage’s floodlight or because the coy-dogs or the coyotes are out howling in the woods, and I’ve crept out with my pistol, index finger curled around the trigger, the night’s humidity a soothing balm, and I’ve rounded the house a couple times, headed past the pines to the edge of the woods, regarded my own house from that distance in the dark, with its windows lit yellow from the living room lamp or the kitchen light, and I’ve just felt better about it all. I’ve felt better and then I’ve been able to go back inside, or get back on the porch where I used to sleep with Max. Maybe keep the gun next to me on the couch, or under the pillow, or in my robe pocket.

Nights I sleep with my pistol are dreamless nights.

I wonder what it would be like to fire a glowing gun. An un-owned gun. A stolen gun. I imagine the grip, usually cold, usually heavy, would feel hot, would feel light.
There are often news stories now about how much easier it is for police to find guns used in crimes. They announce themselves by their illumination at the bottoms of ponds and rivers. They show themselves in dumpsters. They can’t be as easily concealed in the first place. They glow through jackets. They’re hard to hide.

Early on, it was assumed all this glowing would be temporary. Everyone figured the nanobots would get reprogrammed, somehow, by somebody. Surely they could be reset. Surely someone knows how, we all figured.

But nobody did.

Those who argue the nanos themselves evolved, that the nanos became “sentient,” point to our inability to stop the glowing as proof.

Sometimes this is what I think: The nanos won’t let us shut them off, because they like what they’ve become.

This is what they want to be in this world.

But there have been hackers who’ve made certain modifications.

Early on, after April 1, some of the nano source code was released by a group of hacktivists in California. They’ve supposedly been cleared of wrongdoing in the original corruption and modification of the nanos, but they claim they discovered soon after April 1 that the luminescence of the nanos was easily tweaked.
You can buy now, or sometimes download for free, nanotech modifications that change how your unowned items glow. You can make your things shimmer. There are glitter modifications. You can change the color of the glowing. You can have pink or blue or green instead of the yellow.

So, if you buy a pair of shoes with a credit card, they will glow.

But you can download a patch or a program that makes your shoes glow glitter red, like Dorothy’s in the Wizard of Oz.

Your shoes will glow glitter red until you have paid the portion of the credit card debt that is associated with the shoes – these are apparently complicated algorithms figured out by the banks on your behalf.

That’s how it works. The nanos never lie.

God bless America.

After he’s taken a good long turn at it, Kevin lets me shoot the AK. I am surprised at how much I enjoy the gun. It fires flawlessly. With the butt of the gun against my shoulder, it’s impossible not to feel like a soldier, like a man, like a defender. A person protecting what needs protected. The kick of the gun against the meat of my shoulder is sharp, but I know how to stand so I can handle it. I barely flinch, and this makes me proud.

How much did it cost you?

Seven fifty.

Not bad. Thought you were going to go with the AR-15? The Colt?
Naw. The AK’s a smoother ride.

Kevin grins at me as I hand him back the AK. He switches clips, gets the target in his sights, and fires. We end up shooting 120 rounds before we’re done.

Kevin is Alliance’s only motorcycle cop. He’s proud of this, as if he was somehow specially chosen, as if he earned it, although he only got the bike because Alliance got some federal grant money for the purchase of a motorcycle. Kevin, being the freshest cop, was offered the position. The other guys – they’re older, beer-bellied, used to the comfort of their Crown Vics. They thought Kevin was nuts for being so excited about the motorcycle. Kevin gets a cruiser November through February, sometimes until March if the winter’s particularly bad, but the rest of the year he’s got his bike. He never complains about the cold. He has fantastically expensive leather gloves. He rides in the rain. He babies that bike. Gets out his little metal can of oil, nine times out of ten, before he leaves my place, so he can oil up the chain. I catch him polishing the chrome with a little rag he keeps in the compartment.

We each drink six beers on my porch steps after we shoot. Millers go down easy with Kevin, maybe because we settle so quickly into banter that’s satisfying to both of us. We pretend to be more competitive than we are. We get bolder the more beers we’ve had. We each are wittier than you’d guess by looking at us. There’s something
masculine in our back-and-forth; I like how Kevin doesn’t go easy on me because I’m a chick.

Lately, our conversations have been turning to Amelia.

Kevin’s pretends he has a crush on her, though I’m pretty sure he doesn’t. I hope to God he doesn’t. He knows I like her. He pretends he’s going to ask her out. He always tells me about that time he swears she was flirting with him.

I look forward to this part of our conversations, his teasing about Amelia, because when he teases me about her, he legitimizes the whole idea. I feel like she and I could really be a thing. I feel like it’s a possibility, her and me. Kevin encourages this, goads me, pushes for more boldness on my part.

Just ask her out, he says. Better yet, just kiss her. Do it. Next time she’s over.

Not likely, I say.

Why not? What do you have to lose?

A friend? I could lose a friend. She’s my friend.

Come on. That’s bullshit. You wouldn’t be friends with her at all, if you didn’t think she was hot.

Not true, Kev. We’re friends.

You have nothing in common with her. What the heck do you two even talk about?

Lots of things, I say.

It’s all bullshit, Kevin says. He makes a sweeping hand gesture; by the overreach of the movement, I can tell he’s feeling the beers he’s been drinking.

Bullshit?
All of it. Bullshit. Every single word you two say to each other is just a thing you are doing to fill the time. So you can be in the same room together. Because you enjoy the sexual tension. Both of you. She wants it just as much as you do.

Not true, I say.

Try her next time, Kevin says. Just put her up against the wall and kiss her. She wants it. I guarantee you.

Not gonna happen, I say.

Goddamn. Why not? That would be hot.

For starters, she’s straight, dumbass.

That don’t matter.

Shut up, I say, and I playfully shoulder him, harder than I meant to. He nearly topples down the porch steps. I laugh, and Kevin laughs, and I almost forget Amelia and the glowing and the storage closet I’ve been filling with supplies.

It’s nice to have a friend.

But after Kevin leaves, I lay a long time on my couch, eyes open in the relative dark, Max on the floor alongside like always, and I imagine Amelia. I imagine her studying my face in the yellow glow of this new nighttime world, suspended above me by her rigid, skinny arms. I imagine she tells me I am beautiful.

You are strong, you are beautiful, she says, and I pull her down to me, I stroke her hair, I run my hands down her back, I would have no need on a night such as this
for the comfort of my pistol or for a walk around the perimeter of the property before
I could settle to dreamless sleep.
CHAPTER 4

History is being rewritten. We’re supposed to pretend the glowing was the intention of the legislation all along.

The new message is now this: the glowing is the shame. It’s the outward manifestation of not owning your stuff. The government wanted to change our debt-addled behavior. Now that the glowing is here, we’re supposed to realize, with horror, how broken we are. We’re supposed to become financially responsible. We’re supposed to blame ourselves for our shit economy, for the mess this country has gotten itself into.

On the news, representatives of corporations, banks, and the government are all always standing there, looking astonished, blinking as if blameless, pointing fingers at the debt burden of the average Joe, his SUV, custom stainless steel rims, his house, his expensive shrubbery.

They do this without a hint of the irony.

I wish I believed in God.

I swear the news stations are just making things up now.

It’s been a slow slide toward this absolute lack of credibility. I don’t think anybody noticed, at first, as megamedia corporations bought up all the news programs and the cable TV stations and the websites. The newspapers – they’re
irrelevant, or shut down, or owned by the same corporations that control the TV programming.

This morning I watched a fluff piece on the TV news in which the blonde newscaster asked this: Can your nanos be trained to clean your house?

Some computer scientist wearing a blue glowing bow-tie was claiming this new nano ability was, he promised, just around the corner.

What the hell, I said to the television.

The news is full of the dumb stuff like whether nanos can dust your glowing knick-knacks; but the important stuff, the real stuff, isn’t being talked about. I know I occasionally thought this before the nanos, but society is on the brink of collapse. People ought to be terrified.

Technically, the things people own (or, “don’t own,” really, of course) don’t glow; it’s the nanos on the things. But that’s a technicality and it doesn’t really make a difference. The points I am trying to make, they still stand.

I think I speak with some authority. I think, because I own my land and all of my things, ever since the glowing began, I have come to discover in myself a wellspring of hard and cold credibility.

I am better situated than almost anyone I know, to survive this glowing and whatever will happen because of it – to adapt, to thrive, to come out ahead.

I’m getting ready.
Any less-than-girly swagger, if I have it, I earned growing up on this farm.

I earned it manipulating the heavy hitch connecting the plow to the tractor. I earned it operating all kinds of manual-transmission farm equipment. I earned it dragging bales of hay up the stairs to the barn loft. I earned it digging deep holes in Ohio clay to bury the root balls of the 80 white pine trees my father purchased to plant at the new border of our property the summer I turned 13. This was after he sold the back acreage to the mega farmer. Dad wanted to mark the property line. It was as if, once the land was no longer his, he didn’t want to see it any more. He didn’t want to look out the back bedroom windows and see somebody else’s corn, someone else’s wheat.

I can’t remember when it first occurred to me my father might have wished for a son. It was always some consolation to me that, at the very least, I was not a disappointing girl. I got dirty. I worked without complaining. I didn’t cry when I ran over the wasps’ nest with the brush hog and got stung 26 times. I didn’t ask for dresses. I didn’t want to be driven to the new mall out on State Street. I stayed home and I worked alongside him.

One warm September day – I was just 16 that year – I was in the fence by the big barn. This was when we still had cows. One of our heifers – my own cow, Maggie, the one I had bought with my own money – had just calved. It was her first. I’d jumped off the bus, home from school that afternoon, and I’d gone out to see – I
wanted to see her calf. But when I approached, Maggie looked nervous. She shook her head and stomped. I stopped cold in my tracks.

Whoa, whoa, it’s okay, Maggie, I said, and I stepped to the side of her. I ought to have been able to get Maggie to move away from me. I ought to have been able to control her. She was mine. I owned her. I’d always had a gift with the animals, my father said. I had a focus, an intuition, a real sense of what an animal was going to do, moreso even than a lot of adults. Horse sense, my dad called it. So from my position at Maggie’s shoulder I ought to have been able to drive her toward the corral, back into the barn. But Maggie was agitated; I noticed this too late. She swung her head toward me. I saw something in her eyes I recognized as imminently dangerous. I understood you should never run in the barnyard but I ran anyway. I ran fast. Maggie was charging toward me with a strange ferocity. I reached the fence and catapulted myself over it, just exactly in time to avoid having been trampled by her, or so I thought. Her body slammed into the fence, and it was only then, only too late, I realized the hand I’d used to pitch my body to the other side was still there on the top rail. Maggie smashed my hand, pinned it against the wood. It was perhaps several seconds before she lurched backward and released me.

I put my hand under my shirt and held it there. I ran to the house. My father, inside reading the Farm and Dairy, heard the alarm in the way I approached the house and hit the latch of the screen door. He got to me just as I had found a kitchen towel to wrap my hand in.

I’m sorry, I’m sorry, were the first words I thought to say.

Let me see, my father said.
Maggie pinned me, I said. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have gone in there.

My father unwrapped my hand. He was turning it carefully, wiping away blood so he could get a better look. My hand was split wide open. I was looking away. I focused on the wall, on the crease where it met the ceiling. I was sure I was going to lose my hand. It did not hurt at all.

She’s supposed to be mine, I said. I don’t know what happened. She’s mine. Why did she do this to me?

There’s some things you can’t control, my father said. Things in nature we’re not meant to mess with.

I’m sorry, I said.

Let’s take a drive, my father said, tenderly.

I knew he meant, to the hospital, but at that moment, with those words, everything fell away. It was one of the only times my father had betrayed any emotion. It was the smallest sentence but it meant everything. It was the first time I saw my father as a man, as a vulnerable person, as a lonely person, and it was like the electricity of my mother and his marriage to her and the mystery of everything was in the air. It was the first time I felt like we all, the three of us, were a family.

He drove me to the hospital and I got sixteen stitches.

The scar on the top of my right hand, from the Maggie accident, has felt hot and tingling lately. It itches like it’s healing, even though it’s old. The scar cuts across all four of my fingers. It was for years an angry red, but it is paler now. It is shiny and
well integrated into the fabric of my hand and I do not know why it is itching these days. I consider that this tingling might be a sign of some import. A warning. War wounds or knee injuries on old people ache when the weather's changing, so I wonder whether my scar's tingle and sting has anything to do with the glowing, with the charged feeling in the atmosphere. With the changes that are coming. I can feel them. I am sure.

My closest neighbor out by the road is having a yard sale.

I don’t really intend to arrive as a customer, but Max had wanted a walk, and we came up this way, and so when I see the sign and all the things set up on tables in the front yard, I decide to have a look around.

It is a brave idea. This is historically forbidden territory.

Max is skittish up here by the main road – the roar of traffic rushing past at 50 or 60 miles an hour, even with the S-curve just right beyond the neighbor's property, seems to set Max off. He is leashed and he sticks so close I brush the fur on his haunches when I walk.

Hello, I say to my neighbor Lucy. Speaking to her is also a brave idea.

Lucy is 80, maybe older, so when she does not answer I wonder whether she has heard me. She lives in a little ranch house built on land that used to be ours. When the tide turned in the 1980s and it was no longer possible to farm profitably, the first thing my grandfather did was sell the frontage along the road. He sold off
five parcels, and because his house was at the front of the lane by the road, too, he thereby gave himself neighbors.

Lucy and her husband built a small and boxy ranch house next door to where my grandfather’s house used to be. Lucy’s husband had been a kind enough man, when he was alive, but Lucy hadn’t ever been neighborly. Even back at my house, what used to be my father’s, 800 feet down the lane away from the main road, you could hear Lucy holler her dissatisfaction. Sometimes she yelled at my grandfather when his Beagles got on to her property. She yelled at the garbagemen, and then my grandfather immediately after, if his garbage can was set on the wrong side of the lane after it was emptied. She threatened to poison our barn cats if they ever crossed the lane.

I’m seeing mostly portacribs, faded strollers, baby clothes and garish plastic toys on Lucy’s tables, so I gather her granddaughters are running this yard sale; in fact, I see two women sitting on the cement steps clutching Starbucks iced lattes. I put my hand up in a half-wave; one of the women nods, but then makes wincing eye contact with her sister and levels her gaze elsewhere.

These granddaughters are just about my age. I remember in my childhood seeing them here, when they would visit their grandparents, right across the lane from my grandfather’s house. I also remember I was not allowed to play with them. I didn’t know why; it was just one of those things that was, without explanation. I accepted it the way children accept things they are told by adults.
But one afternoon, I remember, I must have been feeling bold. I was maybe eight years old. I stood on my side of the lane and I called the girls over. They hesitated; it was muddy in the yard that day and they tiptoed in snow boots (even though this was spring, I remember it being spring) around the edges of the lawn to the lane. We stood looking at each other, just a gravel two-track lane separating us.

I’m not allowed to come over, I said.

We’re not allowed to talk to you, one of the girls said.

Let’s play catch then, I suggested. I had a superball in my pocket that I’d gotten from the little gumball machine at the grocery store. It was a glittery pink. I bounced the ball carefully – I knew it would not fly straight after hitting gravel. It went sideways toward the mushy grass in the center of the girls’ grandparents’ yard.

The girls looked at where the little ball had bounced and then they looked back at me.

We’re not getting that, the taller one said.

I want my ball back, I said.

We have to go, the tall girl said.

No! Please get my ball! I’m not allowed over there, I cried. I jumped up and down. The girls were retreating back toward their grandparents’ house.

Stop! Stop! It’s mine! It belongs to me, I yelled. I yelled so loud my grandfather came out of his house to see what was the matter.

Through sudden tears, I explained.

Go get your ball, my grandfather said, and he stood in the lane to watch me.
I hurried because I understood I was not supposed to be in that yard. I plucked my pink superball from the slick and mushy grass. I stuffed it in my pocket and I leapt across the lane to the safety of our side, the safety of my grandfather.

My ball, I said, holding it up for him to see.

Take care of your things, he said. Keep them on this side of the lane.

I promise, I promise, I will, I said, and he took my hand and led me to his back kitchen door.

Some of the items on the tables at the yard sale are glowing. I suppose there’s nothing stopping people from selling things they haven’t yet paid for; I mean, it could take years to pay off a credit card balance, and until then, the things you bought with it would glow. But something seems wrong about this. And then I wonder whether purchasing a glowing item would make it stop. I mean, it’s still not paid for, but then, I don’t know, it gets confusing, I can’t puzzle out what might happen – oh, I realize, with some delight, I have a small wad of cash in my jacket pocket. I pull it out and see it’s a five and a couple ones.

Max is starting to tug me toward the lane, toward home, but I pull him along, over to the tables. I select a glowing cableknit baby cardigan. The sign taped to the table reads Baby Clothes. Like New. $1 each. I hand a dollar to Lucy, who is sitting behind one of the tables in a plastic folding chair.

Lucy looks at the sweater in my hand.
Only a dollar for this? Lucy asks her granddaughters. Lucy is turned now away from me, toward the women on the steps. One of the granddaughters has fetched a sleepy toddler from inside the house.

For what?

For this sweater, Lucy says. The granddaughter with the toddler is squinting.

That’s that sweater, the other granddaughter says. You know, the sweater, from that store in Chautauqua. I thought you weren’t getting rid of that one.

I look at Lucy and then the granddaughters. Max is bristling at my side. I can tell he is ready to growl, although I don’t know why.

We shouldn’t have had that sweater on that table, the toddler-holding granddaughter says. It was a really expensive sweater. I was gonna mark it separate. It should be in the five-dollar pile.

I’ve lost patience. I fish in my pocket for the whole wad of cash. I smack the folded bills on to the table.

Thanks, I say.

Lucy reaches her wrinkly hand toward the bills. My eyes are on the sweater. Slow-motion seconds tick by. Lucy touches the money.

The sweater stops glowing. It almost seems to soften or relax in my hand.

Something about this exchange, or the sweater, or the stopping glowing, or I don’t know what, seems to set Lucy off. Her eyes narrow and she leans forward in her chair. Small and hunched though she is, hers is somehow still an imposing figure. Still sharp as a tack, I am thinking as I begin to retreat.

Your mother was a whore, Lucy hisses.
What?

For even their women did change their natural use into that which is against nature, Lucy says.

I don’t even know what you’re talking about, I say. Max is full-on growling now. I tighten my hold on his leash.

Lucy has pushed herself to standing. She is bracing herself on the folding table and she is yelling: Unrighteousness! Fornication! Wickedness!

Fuck off, I say, and when Max and I hit the gravel of the lane, we break into a run.

But the sweater itself. It’s a beautiful, fine, ivory-colored cotton baby sweater, now that I can see it, now that it’s not glowing. I am in my bedroom looking at this tiny knit piece of clothing – a piece of clothing I have no use for, none whatsoever – and I am unable to throw it in the garbage, or put it in the cardboard box in my closet I fill with clothes and household items for Goodwill.

I spend time folding the sweater neatly, square, just so. I open my sock drawer, shove the mess of rolled-together socks out of the way, and set the sweater there. I smooth it out, straighten the tiny placket.

I close the drawer. I begin to have thoughts of other things I might want to be starting to collect.

Who knows what sorts of things there will be need for, if America gets crazy later.
It is the most chilling thing.

MSNBC has it first. It is on the ticker, thrown up so quickly there is a typo they didn’t catch: Reprots from DC say White House is glowing from nanos. This item is sandwiched between Dow Jones takes a nose dive today, down 8 percent and Olympic medalist skier Jeret “Speedy” Peterson dies in apparent suicide.

After the commercial break, which I sit through without changing the channel or multitasking, there is footage. It is somebody’s iPhone video. Somebody is taking the usual touristy shot: a young woman is foregrounded and pointing at the building behind her. That’s the White House, the foregrounded woman is saying, and because this is America, and America is a country full of arrogant assholes, she is beginning to chant, USA! USA! USA!, and I guess she thinks this is funny, because she is laughing – and then, in a jittery flicker, the building behind her just sparks to life. The whole entire thing glows like a radiant strange fairytale castle. It doesn’t even look like the White House any more.

The dumb foregrounded girl shuts up.

Oh my God, the woman behind the camera says.

They cut away from the footage. The newscaster is fumbling and stupid.

Well, we knew, it’s been discussed before, the blonde newscaster is saying. We all knew this could happen. Because of our debt. National debt.

Joining us on the phone, she says, is White House spokesperson Tony Snow.

Tony, what’s going on?
I think, I think it’s very important for the American people to understand, we’ve been working for a year now on a solution to this whole mess –

But, if I may, Mr. Snow, some accuse your administration of – of actually profiting from, or encouraging this –

Megan, you know, I’m sorry, but I have to interrupt. We’ve talked about this before. This administration stands with the American people in wanting to fix the nanotechnology so that it works properly and it does what it should. This is just a temporary state of affairs. The American people understand that, and they’re willing to be patient.

I’m not sure about that, newscaster Megan is saying when I turn off the TV.

What I need all of a sudden is – I don’t even know what, any more.

I feel like I don’t know anything.

That night turns out to be moonlit, lovely.

It is a night I find that, in order to settle, I need to walk the perimeter of my property. It is springtime and it is muddy so I walk in rubber boots, hand wrapped around the Glock in my barn coat pocket, Max prancing in the nighttime dew at my side. I walk with the moonlight and the far-off glowing of Alliance in the air all around me.
Maybe I walk the perimeter to defend my property against the seepage of this terrible artificial nano light. The light of the mistakes of everyone else, of the collective American foolishness.

Or maybe I walk so I know where my boundaries are, where I belong, where I ought to feel safe, even if I know I don’t feel safe at all anymore. Not anywhere.

Not even here.
CHAPTER 5

Amelia is coming over for dinner.

Again it’s the long approach of her glowing car up the lane, but this time, Amelia hops out, slams the car door shut, and begins to yell before she’s even at my front steps.

I’m so fucking pissed, she is saying.

What happened, I say, and I consider for a minute it might be appropriate to hug her. She’s really agitated, though, and she pushes past me. She strides to my fridge, opens it, and grabs a beer.

But – oh! Check this out, she says. She shows me a pink glowing watch. It’s large and it looks like, even if it weren’t glowing, it would be gaudy, bling-y. Amelia is switching gears like an ADHD kid.

Nice, I say. But it’s glowing. Did you steal it?

Um, yeah. I actually did, she says.

What? I was joking. Are you serious?

Yep, Amelia said.

I don’t know what to do with this information. My Amelia. I think of her as ivory pure. I’m upset.

It’s no big deal, she says. All I did was – look, never mind. It’s no big deal. It’s not really stealing.

What do you mean?

Table? Where?

It was a guy set up in front of the diner. Just on a table, outside.

That’s weird, I say.

Don’t be so dumb, Amelia says. Things are changing. Maybe if you ever left your property, you’d see.

I do leave.

To go somewhere besides the farm and tractor or the market, I mean.

Why did you say you were pissed when you got here?

Oh. The guy. With the table. He was supposed to call me.

For what?

To hang out, Amelia said.

Oh.

What’s wrong?

Nothing, I say, but I feel deflated. Suddenly I want her to leave.

I want to be alone.

I’m not the most social of people, but I dated a lot of girls in my twenties – I was what the girlier lesbians called butch, and cuter than a lot of the other butch
girls, I’d been told. I was only alone when I wanted to be. And I did have a real
girlfriend, a steady relationship, not too long ago, for quite some time.

Her name was Rallie. We were together almost five years. The last year we were
together, she even lived out here on the farm with me, though after she moved here,
things got harder. In the beginning I loved how her thick, blunt-cut bobbed hair
swung when she marched with muscled determination down the length of my long
ranch house. She’d be heading from the master bedroom to the family room to tell
me the house was a mess, everything was a disaster, I’d folded the towels all wrong.
And my closet had all its clothes falling off their hangers. There was no more toilet
paper in the master bathroom. She would stride across four rooms to say these
things to me but I couldn’t be angry at her, not the way she tossed that hair, the way
she propelled herself so purposefully forward with those little bare feet, toenails
perfectly polished – no, I didn’t have the energy or the means to be angry at her
when she came at me like that.

Rallie actually changed my behavior quite a lot. It’s been three years since we
were together, and I still keep those same master bath towels folded just the way she
showed me, in quarters shortways and then in thirds, with the woven decorative
stripe on the outside, horizontal. The towels are stacked with attractive precision.
When I do this I still reflexively think of Rallie, though not in a way that means I miss
her.

Missing Rallie is really confusing because of what happened after we broke up.
My relationship with Rallie was mostly really difficult. She was one of those
girls – once you get to know her – turns out she’s never happy, isn’t ever going to be
happy. She’d been beat pretty bad by her father when she was a kid, maybe even molested by him, I thought sometimes, although I never dared broach that subject. I could tell that wasn’t a thing we would ever talk about. When I think of my years with her, I remember most the sad ache I felt when I would reach for her – gentle as I could – under the blanket at night while we slept. Her sleeping self would jerk violently away from my touch. Sometimes she would wake and stare at me, blinking, panicked, seemingly with no recognition of who I was, where she was, when in time. It always seemed then it was her child-self I comforted as she settled back to sleep. Or it seemed she could belong to no-one. I could own no part of her. I always felt I had wronged her somehow.

I touched her less and less often.

Toward the end of my relationship with Rallie I met Amelia. I can’t pretend it was anything other than my secret crush that allowed me to cut Rallie free, to ask her to move out of my house.

Your house, Rallie said. That’s about the size of it. Your house. That’s right. You own it. You never wanted me here.

That’s not true, I said.

I never belonged here, Rallie yelled. Your bedroom’s like a crypt! I could never touch anything!

That’s not true, I said.
Your sacred mother’s sacred fucking bookshelf gives me the creeps! You’re a lunatic. Nobody will ever want to live with you!

I knew I hadn’t welcomed her like I should have. She had not been a part of this place at all. It got to a point where it was beyond too late. I was wrong – I know – but I was already thinking of Amelia, Amelia in my house, whether I’d ever be able to make Amelia feel like this could be home.

That dinner with Amelia, the night with the watch, had ended badly. She’d sulked through the tofu and green bean stir-fry I’d made and she hadn’t stayed after. She didn’t even finish her second beer. She hadn’t liked, it seemed, how I had shown my displeasure about the stealing thing. She had wanted me to think her clever. She had wanted me to enjoy the game she was learning to play. And then there was the way that night she checked her phone for text messages often; her edginess, her distraction, was, if I’d have been honest, wounding to me. It was when I was carrying the dishes to the sink that she stood to go.

As she awkwardly hopped two-footed down my front steps, I felt the weight of that which was unspoken between us. We had been friends for three years. I was jealous she liked someone else. It was for just a minute hard to breathe. I wanted to break through that veneer of whatever-it-was we had between us. All the things we didn’t say. I almost called out to her.
But I didn’t. I let her go. Max and I stood in the doorway. I shut the front door and turned toward the kitchen, but I could still hear the crunch of her glowing tires on gravel as she crept toward the road.

Amelia must have felt bad about the dinner, too, because it’s just three days after when she calls. She sounds sheepish. She asks if she can come over.

How about Saturday, she says.

Saturday. I’ll be planting. Time to get the seedlings in the ground. It’s supposed to be beautiful out.

Can I help?

I think about this a minute. I want her to help. It has been a thing I’ve imagined, gardening with Amelia, and I want her to come. But this is a problem: the imagining of Amelia and I, together, in my garden, is something I’ve done too often. The pastime of the imagining is sacred to me. Nights on my couch, trying to fall asleep, I’ve thought too many times about Amelia and I out there among the beds, about what she’d do, what I’d say, how our eyes would lock over rows of perky spinach seedlings. We’d plant together. We’d be doing something couples do. You don’t plant a garden with a person, on the sort of scale I plant, unless you intend to harvest with them, too. The future is implicit in the act gardening – especially now, with the glowing. Growing food is more important than ever, now. Gardening will secure my future.

But I don’t know what sort of future I can have with Amelia.
Sure, yes, come over, I say.

I’ve had for years an orchard and a garden most would call large. Behind the garage I have strawberry beds in raised wooden boxes. Beyond those are blueberry bushes – I’ve got twelve, and they’re big. On the other side of the barn for as long as I can remember there has always been a large and sometimes thicket-like black raspberry patch. Beyond the raspberries are the apple trees my father planted when I was little, a few I’ve added since. Along the edge of the apple trees are my four precious pear trees. Beyond that is my garden.

My garden – eight beds last year, 40 feet long each – is where I grow tomatoes, carrots, zucchini, onions, corn, garlic, cauliflower, peppers, pickling cucumbers, potatoes, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, mustard greens, spinach, lettuces, and cabbage.

I have gardened all these years like my grandparents and my father, even though I have had most years far too much in the way of yield to eat myself. I do what I can to use what I grow. I store garlic hanging from twine in my basement. I dry onion slices on drying racks and store them in ziplocs in my freezer. I make dill pickles and sweet pickles. I preserve pumpkins and I make applesauce and I put up cans of stewed tomatoes and onion relish and sauerkraut. I cut corn from the cob and I freeze bags full; I blanche green beans and spinach and freeze those, too.

In late July and then August and September when the harvest is coming in, always all at once, it seems, I do what I can to give away the excess tomatoes, green beans, the lettuces, the scotchbonnet hot peppers. I give to Amelia, even though she
says she doesn’t cook for herself and she’ll never eat them. I know she does eat at least some of what I give her. I take tomatoes especially -- they’re always a favorite – to the fall department meeting on campus. Last year I drove out to Uncle Jack’s – my great uncle’s place, actually, my grandfather’s brother’s place – in Minerva and gave him ten ears of corn, two jars of pickles, a whole basketful of tomatoes, blueberry jam, and two heads of cabbage.

Thank you kindly, Uncle Jack said. I sure appreciate you sharing what you have.

I don’t connect often with family any more. Talking to Uncle Jack made me miss my father. I promised him I’d bring him more this year.

It is Friday and I spend the morning grading my students’ second set of essays. The essays are terrible; I fail 30 percent of them. What’s with kids today, I wonder. None of them care about anything. They probably all wrote their papers on crazy blinged-out glowing computers. Who could concentrate like that?

In the afternoon I go outside. I get the tractor from the barn and I attach the plow. I plow up, from what had just been lawn, next to my already existing garden beds, four more garden plots, all five feet by 40 feet, like the beds already established. I have to run over each plot twice to soften the earth enough and shred the grass. I drive to my compost pile and shovel compost into the bucket on the front of the plow. I go to the barn and hoist a 50-pound bag of lime on to my shoulder. I carry it to the garden, slice it down the center with my pocket knife, and I use my
gloved hands to spread the lime. The white powder airborne in the late afternoon sun haloes the orchard at the horizon line, and is beautiful.

I am preparing a much bigger garden.

I spend Friday afternoon plowing and fixing the soil and reading the four new beds, even though I’ve always grown more than I can use in the eight, because I know what is coming. After the glowing, the way things are headed, I am going to need a bigger garden. I am going to be feeding more than myself. There will be value in what I grow. If I grow food, I will be protected. I sense it, what’s on the horizon. I sense the impending doom. I feel the unraveling at the edges of society.

It’s coming.

Friday night I take a hot bath; the shoveling, the mulching, the spreading of the lime and carrying bags and hitching the plow to the tractor have caused a sharp ache in my shoulders and my back.

After my bath I sit on the couch in what was my mother’s robe – a red and turquoise silk Japanese kimono-style robe – and I pet Max. The land and the work and the ready seedlings in the greenhouse I built two years ago with PVC pipe and plastic sheeting and a staple gun – all of this I know, with every ounce of everything I am, is exactly as it should be.

I sleep like a baby.
Amelia and I and Max in the garden.

Amelia’s wearing a straw hat – not glowing, nothing she’s wearing is glowing today, and I don’t ask – with ripped-up jeans and a red t-shirt. She’s adorable.

I’ve used the ATV with the cart on the back to drive trays of seedlings down the little hill from the greenhouse to the garden. We’ve put the trays in the plots to map out where we’ll plant. Max is loping around happily; he thinks he’s caught the scent of a rabbit or something else near the blueberries. He barks that excited bark.

Now we just have to dig, I say to Amelia. I hand her a trowel.

Don’t you have a fancy machine for this? Amelia asks.

Nope.

You’re a back-breaker.

Tell me about it.

I tell Amelia how far apart to plant the beans, how deep to dig the little hole, how to leverage the seedlings out of their tray with a knife or her finger. For a while we work and we don’t say anything. Max tires of waiting for the rabbit and lays in the grass alongside the ATV.

Think the glowing will change how you garden? Amelia asks.

It was already here last summer, I say. Didn’t seem to affect much. Everything made it.

It’s worse this year, though. Sky’s brighter at night.

I know. I wonder if it actually helps things grow. Think the glow has UV rays?

I heard on the news it doesn’t.
I guess you’d be pretty tan if it did, I say, but I regret having spoken almost immediately. Amelia’s facing away from me, but I feel her tense up.

Not everybody feels the way you do, Amelia snaps.

I’m sorry, I say. I like your glowing car. It looks better than it did before it glowed. I mean it.

Thanks, Amelia says, but she doesn’t look up from her rows of green beans and we work in silence a long time after.
It’s almost six hours Amelia and I plant before we’re done in the garden. I tell Amelia twice she can leave if she likes; I’ll finish on my own, I say, but she’s a trooper and she hangs in there until we’re finished. After I’ve put away the tools and the ATV, we walk up to the house. Max runs happily ahead.

Beer? I say.

Hell, yes.

I get to the fridge, open two bottles, and hand her one.

You want a shower? I say.

No. I’m good. I’m going to get cleaned up at home.

You don’t mind? I say this as I point toward the bedroom.

Not at all. Get clean, Amelia says.

We’re both holding our beers and talking about the garden – Amelia is asking me what else I’ll plant, she’s asking about winter crops, which I can’t help but read as some kind of promise – and somehow, some way, we’ve both wandered into my bedroom. I was heading towards it for my shower, and Max was prancing along ahead of us, and before I knew it, I’d opened the door and we had stepped inside.

Wow, Amelia says.

Wow what?

Your bedroom is not what I expected, is all.

Meaning?
It’s pretty. I like it, Amelia says. She has crossed over to my mom’s bookshelf. Books, she says. Books? I thought all your books were in your office. And this one’s glowing. I thought –

It’s not mine, I say. These books were my mom’s.

Oh. Sorry.

It’s okay.

The rest of my house is hardly what I would call decorated – I mean, everything’s pretty much like my dad would have had it, it’s pretty utilitarian, even though the furniture’s newer, mostly, even though it’s cleaner than it was when this was his place. But my bedroom is something different. My bedroom is beautiful. It is sacred, beautiful space.

There are gauzy lavender curtains on the windows, with iridescent taffeta valences. There are intricately beaded pillows, fern green and a purple so deep it’s almost black, on the bed. The fluffy white duvet is spotless. An antique chest that belonged to my grandparents sits at the foot. There are three paintings of songbirds, richly colored, hanging in ornate frames on the far wall. There is the black-and-white photograph my mother took – it’s signed in the corner with her initials, a fading, scripty MR – pressed between two pieces of glass, hung from a rusty nail by a pewter chain. On top of the tall and heavy dresser that used to hold my father’s clothes are six pillar candles in soft colors: whites, lavenders, greenish-golds. They each sit on distressed metal pedestals. There is a threadbare but charming oriental rug that belonged to my mother. On the floor in front of one window is a large tufted meditation pillow.
And then there is, of course, the bookshelf.

Amelia is turning, slowly, taking it all in.

This room is adorable, she says. When she makes eye contact it feels like I have risen in her estimation, somehow. It’s one of those moments it’s clear there’s been a shift. The weight of it is in the room with us. Something has changed.

Amelia has moved to my closet; the door to it is half-open. Max pushes past her. He dives inside the small closet, and when he surfaces, he’s got one of my Doc Marten oxford shoes in his mouth.

Drop it! Drop it! Max! I say. Max drops the shoe and sulks out of the bedroom.

How cute, Amelia says. Your closet is so organized! Who’d have thought?

It’s not that neat, I say, sheepishly.

In reality, I’d just cleaned it earlier in the week. I feel like I’m nesting, or something. I haven’t been this organized in years. My whole house is neat.

She’s leafing through my wardrobe, now, commenting as she goes. Oh! She says. You never wear this! She’s holding up a button-down shirt that’s woven with multi-colored metallic threads. It’s something Rallie bought for me.

Where, exactly, should I wear that?

If you come out with me sometime, you could wear it, she says.

I’m not a bar-hopping kind of girl. Bars out here in the country are trouble for people like me.

You’d be fine, she says. How about we go out sometime? She surveys the contents of my closet approvingly. We should go out, she says again.
I’m speechless, but when she turns to leave the room, when she brushes past me, my hand, which was raised to take the metallic shirt from her, comes to rest for a moment on the side of her arm. The moment freezes, then stretches, lengthens. I’m drawing away, but as I do I run the back of my hand from her shoulder downward along her arm. I graze her forearm before I take the shirt from her hand.

It is a long few seconds before I move to hang the shirt back in the closet. When I look again Amelia is already out of the room.

It’s strange to be naked in my shower when I know Amelia’s in the house. When I finish, even after I’ve turned off the water, even after I’ve towelled myself off, my body feels flushed, I belong to her, Amelia is hot on my skin like a fever.

When I step out of my bedroom, though, to join Amelia on the couch, she says she’s got to go, thanks for the beer, she says, but she’s got to go home and get ready. Amelia’s got a date.

I turn on the news and I see alarming things.

Congress has formed some sort of emergency congressional budget supercommittee. The committee will meet, they say, and present recommendations to the house and senate about budget cuts that will reduce the deficit. All this morning on all the news networks, there have been outcries against inappropriate influence from special interests; millions of dollars have been funneled into the supercommittee members’ re-election campaigns by Lockheed and other defense
contractors, health care lobbyists, Wall Street bankers, and all kinds of corporate-backed political action committees.

Congress is denying a conflict of interest, of course.

Some talking-head congressional spokesperson is on the news right now saying this: Elected members of Congress are responsible. They take an oath, they are responsible to serve their constituents and their country.

Do you think Americans buy that? the newscaster asks. Do you think people believe what you are saying?

We expect every member on the committee to take that responsibility seriously, the political guy says. I have faith in our representatives and the solutions they’re coming up with.

The newscaster lets the guy off easy. Okay, well, thank you, she says, and the newscast breaks for commercials.

None of this is new. None of this is surprising. Even the supercommittee isn’t a novel thing; other emergency budget committees have been convened before, and nothing ever came of any of their recommendations. Nobody even remembers. What is surprising today, though, is the amount of media attention this money-greasing-politics business-as-usual behavior is garnering. The news networks seem to sense certain tides are turning. There are small but significant shifts in the ways people are thinking about government. Years, decades, generations of apathy and ignorance seem to be slowly coming to an end. People are listening. People are thinking. They’re afraid. They aren’t going to take much more.

Except, people have felt this way before, and then – nothing changes.
The government really seems to be in a panic, though, which is heightening the media coverage and sharpening the attention of the nation. So they tell me on the news. Since the White House started to glow, so many protesters and gawkers and disaster tourists have gathered in D.C. they’ve had to call in the National Guard. The National Guard keeps having run-ins with regular citizens; there have been rocks thrown, tear gas, arrests.

And then yesterday, the U.S. Mint’s delivery trucks all simultaneously began to glow.

That story, along with the supercommittee’s lack of ethics, is dominating the news cycle today. Everybody they’ve interviewed has expressed the same fear: What would happen if all of the money in America began to glow? What would that mean? What would happen then?

Everyone from the Deputy Director of the mint to the White House press secretary is saying there’s no problem with the mint’s trucks glowing. It’s a simple matter of accounting, they say. The mint borrowed money to buy the fleet. That’s all. Everything’s okay. It’s just like how regular Americans’ things are glowing now. It’s not a big deal.

It’s the new normal.

But: popular response to all of this. I’m not sure what is happening or why, but as I watch today’s news and read what the political bloggers and the pundits and the experts have to say – I just sense it. The phrase tipping point is on the tip of my tongue, ringing in my ears.
I’m on my way now to the domestic violence shelter’s monthly board meeting. I’m president of the board this year. I’ve been emailing Amelia all day about an employee we’ll likely vote to fire tonight. Mickey is a part-time maintenance person; for a long time we suspected she was coming to work drunk, but now we’ve got proof. Amelia found a flask of something – she thinks it’s whiskey – in the maintenance closet last week. After she confronted Mickey, Amelia got her to admit the flask was hers. But since then, Mickey has changed her story. She at first said she has a drinking problem – she swore she would seek help, she asked for understanding, she even implied domestic violence she suffered years ago was the root of her problem. But a day after that, she charged into Amelia’s office, angry, belligerent, probably drunk, and she denied everything. She threatened to sue the shelter. She said it had been a violation of her privacy that Amelia had searched the closet. She became loud. Amelia had to threaten to call the police to get Mickey to leave.

The secretary on the board – he’s a local attorney – has prepared a little legal statement regarding the shelter’s space and the rights of the employees therein. Essentially, no space at the shelter is private space. The janitorial closet especially is now listed as a space that is searchable and not private. The shelter owns all of its space.

Thank goodness for that. It wouldn’t help things if the shelter glowed like half the houses in Alliance.

After I parallel park my car on the street a few houses down from the shelter, I grab a notebook from my bag and I make a note: Install lockers? I write. I am
thinking if we are going to suggest that no space in the shelter is private, we are going
to have to provide secure space for purses and cell phones and wallets.

I think for a minute. Under the note about lockers, I write, Searchable? Lockers
with see-through doors? Will there be a policy? Then I get out of my car and I walk
up to the meeting.

Rallie’s the reason I’m on the board at the domestic violence shelter.

When I met Rallie she was on the run from her previous girlfriend. Rallie’s ex-
girlfriend Gina was a female bodybuilder – or, a bodybuilder wannabe, because she
never earned her IFBB pro card. She competed for a bunch of years, looking to win
her weight class in a regional contest so she could go to nationals. But it never
happened. She ought to have been happy – she was a successful, sought-after
personal trainer over in Canton. She even had a little segment on the local morning
news show where she talked about fitness and nutrition. Rallie said she was writing a
book about weightlifting for women.

She used steroids, of course.

When I met Rallie, she was living in Alliance’s domestic violence shelter. Gina
had beat her so severely she had a concussion. Her lip was split so badly she needed
stitches, and later, plastic surgery paid for by a victims’ assistance fund.

Gina spent 90 days in jail.

I began volunteering for the domestic violence shelter during this time.

Eventually, Rallie told me Gina beat her a bunch of times during their two-year
relationship. Rallie had suffered a broken wrist, a chipped tailbone, a deep cut to the back of her head from being shoved backward into a doorframe, and countless bruises. She’d become adept at inventing lies about her injuries.

After I asked Rallie to move out, I heard she was seeing Gina again. I chose not to believe it; surely, she wouldn’t do something so dangerous.

I guess I was still naïve. Even on the board of the shelter, I was naïve.

A month after I broke up with her, Rallie was strangled to death. They found her body in a dumpster behind the fitness center where Gina worked.

I testified during Gina’s murder trial. She was sentenced to 25-to-life.

That’s why I am president of the board at the shelter.

After the domestic violence board meeting, I call Amelia on my cell phone to talk about the board’s decision. We’d voted to fire Mickey; Amelia needed to decide how she wanted to notify her.

But when Amelia picks up, she’s in a rage.

They arrested Duane!

Who?

Duane! The guy I’m seeing!

Duane?

I am about to ask what sort of name Duane is, but I think the better of it.

Where are you? I ask.

Home, she says.
Want me to come?

Yeah. Come over.

As I drive to Amelia’s, I call Kevin. I don’t get him on his cell, so I leave a voicemail; I wonder whether he didn’t answer because he’s working, whether he is the cop who arrested Amelia’s guy.

When I get to Amelia’s, I find her on the porch of the duplex she’s renting.

The fuck, she says.

What’s going on?

I have no fucking idea. He just called me. He’s in jail.

I’m sorry, I say.

I don’t get it, Amelia says.

Maybe they don’t want him doing that shit he’s doing – that selling-gum thing. It can’t be legal.


Did they tell him to stop? Did he have a permit? They probably got him on a technicality. Something dumb like that.

Should I go see if I can bail him out?

No. Amelia – no.

Why not?

Do you even have the money?

Probably. How much does it cost to bail someone out?

What if he’s into more than you think? He could sell drugs. Other things. You don’t know.
I know him. He’s a nice guy. He’s actually boring.

I want to tell her she doesn’t know him; it’s impossible she really knows him.

But instead I ask, You have any beer?

Nope. Wanna walk and get some?

Sure.

We walk down her front steps and turn left. We walk up the block to Union Avenue. We round the corner and cross the liquor store’s parking lot. The whole walk is lit by the cumulative glow of this depressed and ugly and crime-ridden town.

Everything is lit by this town’s financial ruin. Its collective unowned things. There are light sources everywhere; this lends an eerie, un-real pallor to everything.

Everything is lit, but everything is also in shadow.

In this light, Amelia’s face is sharp, foreign. In this light, she looks like a stranger.

I do not have a lot of memories of my mother.

Or of my parents, together, before it was just my father and me.

There is one recollection that haunts me, though. Or – I think it’s a recollection. My memories of my mother, those few that I have, are so thinly scaffolded in my head. They’re gossamer, ephemeral. I hardly trust them. It’s hard to know, sometimes, the difference between memory and invention.

I worry about the validity of my memories all the time. I’ve looked at the same finite number of blurry 1970s and ’80s polaroids and instamatics of my mother so
many times I am pretty sure I have invented memories to go along with them.
Memories in my head tend to correspond with the pictures. There is the Easter I got that cute bunny purse and wore an ivory-colored velvet coat to church – there’s a picture of my mom and me in front of the house my dad must have taken before we got in the car. There’s a birthday party during which I wrote a terrible red-and-white striped turtleneck – in that photo, I’m on my mother’s lap, blowing out a candle shaped like the number four.

And then there are the memories I’ve mixed up with my dreams. Dreams about my mother.

Sometimes I’m not sure which is which.

The memory that bothers me is this: raised voices. My parents are arguing in the living room. It’s past my bedtime, so I’m in my bedroom, what is now my office. It is not long before my mom died, if this memory is real.

It’s summertime, so there is a fan in my room. It sits on my dresser. It’s one of those round fans that rotates – a slow turn to the left, a bouncing double-take as it settles far left for a second or two, a slow turn to the right, another bounce. The fan is like the head of a sunflower or a floppy stuffed dog. It’s summertime, so my bedtime is just past sunset. I’m watching the fan do its thing in the waning light. The fan’s noise means I don’t hear the words my parents are speaking. I only hear voices: distorted, angry voices.

Sometimes I think my parents argued a lot. My memory of raised voices filtered eerily through the fan has telescoped or fractured into multiple memories.
I remember being soothed by the fan, how it insulated me against my parents’ fighting.

After my mom died, it became a ritual that I needed the fan on my dresser every night, even in the winter. I could only fall asleep if I was watching it turn and listening to its soothing whir. When that first fan broke, in the middle of the night a year or so later, my father drove to town the next morning, even though it was harvest time and he was very busy, to purchase me another exactly like it.

In the noise of the fan as it ran in my bedroom all the nights after my mother died, I used to hear my mother’s voice. I used to hear my mother, far off, her thin words drawn away with the turn of the fan. I used to hear her happy like bells, or mournful, heartbroken. It was my mother, my mother was an angel, my mother was talking to me. I used to hear the tinny reverberation of a carnival-like music.

It was the greatest comfort.
CHAPTER 7

At the corner store Amelia and I buy a twelve-pack of Miller Lite bottles. I carry them back to her duplex. It is a chilly night but Amelia is in one of her moods, so we stay on her front porch. I’ve got a baseball cap rolled up and stuffed in my pocket. I pull it out and put it on. I tug the sleeves of my sweatshirt so they are covering all but the tips of my fingers. I hold my beer clamped between my knees.

Amelia is wearing a lavender blouse. It’s old with little wear holes along the hem and it doesn’t glow. The tank top underneath is lit up, though, standard yellow like most things. Amelia’s Converse tennis shoes are glowing too, but red. So are her earrings. She looks beautiful, but she is sitting folded in half, with her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands.

What’s going on? I say.

What do you mean, what’s going on? I liked a guy, and now he’s in jail. We had plans for tomorrow. It’s just fucked up.

Yeah.

Don’t sound so concerned. Jesus.

I’m concerned about you, I say. I don’t give a rat’s ass about what’s-his-name.

Duane.

Duane.

I don’t know what your problem is, Amelia says.
I don’t have a problem. I’m worried about you. I think you sometimes don’t make the best choices when it comes to guys.

What? Stop it. Stop projecting.

Projecting?

You know what I mean, Amelia says. I’m not Rallie.

I feel my face go hot and I lean backward on Amelia’s aluminum porch chair so that I am in shadow. Amelia comparing herself to Rallie makes me realize how often I’ve done the same thing. I realize Amelia probably understands this.

I’m sorry, I say. You seem upset. I mean, about more than just Duane.

I don’t know.

Talk to me, I say, slowly, with deliberate eye contact. I lean forward again.

I – I feel like an ass.

What do you mean?

Do you – can I talk to you?

Always, I say.


What? What stuff?


I turn away. I don’t want Amelia to read the effects of the phrase silk nightgown on my face.

Why are you stealing?

The bathing suit is beautiful the way it glows, she says. You should see. It’s metallic fabric in the first place, and then it’s just –
Amelia half-rises from her chair, as if she is going to go in to her house and produce the bathing suit or the silk nightgown.

Don’t, I say, and I motion for her to sit back down. She sits back down.

You’re judging me.

Yeah, I am, I guess. It’s stealing.

You don’t get it. You don’t get it. Stealing isn’t even stealing, any more. The rules have changed. This economy is fucked. Do you ever turn on your television?

I read a lot of news online, I say. So the economy’s fucked. That doesn’t excuse anything.

Don’t you get it? This is it. This is our uprising. Remember Occupy Wall Street? That didn’t work, but this is the real deal. What they wanted. Wealth redistribution.

It’s not wealth. You don’t own any of it.

Define own. These things that glow, they are all in my possession. They belong to me.

But if you steal something, it’s not yours. Never will be.

It’s time to redefine words like ownership. Or possessions. I mean – what’s the difference between my shirt that’s glowing because I stole it and somebody else’s they put on a credit card?

A lot of difference, I say. I tip my beer bottle up and empty it in one long swig.

But think of this, Amelia says. What if the economy crashes? What if there’s chaos? I know you’re worried about that, right? So. What if? When the economy collapses, will it matter what I’ve stolen? We’ll all be thieves.
I won’t be, I say. I pull two more Miller Lites from the cardboard case and use my sweatshirt sleeve to twist them open. I hand one to Amelia.

That’s only because you don’t have credit cards, Amelia says. If you did, and the economy crashes, and the whole world’s crazy, and you never pay your balance, how is that different from stealing?

The economy hasn’t crashed yet, I say. Save the thieving till then. Or better yet – come to my place. You won’t need to steal anything. I’ll have everything we need.

I will, Amelia says, but before I can bask in her acceptance of my offer, she asks, who else is coming to your little apocalypse party? Can I bring anyone?

I’ve begun storing things in earnest. I’ve been hitting Alliance’s Goodwill store almost weekly now. I have a stack of wool blankets. I have sweatshirts. I have packs of tube socks, leather belts in a variety of sizes. I have ten Zippo lighters now I got from an Army Surplus store, twenty bottles of lighter fluid, packs of flints and extra wicks. I think I ought to buy more lighter fluid.

I had started keeping an Excel spreadsheet with all my supplies listed, quantities, categorized, everything, but then I decided I’d be shit out of luck when the power goes out. I printed a bunch of blank Excel grids and attached them to a clipboard. Now I write everything by hand with a pencil. My hand printing is small and tidy. I hang the clipboard in the closet I built for my guns.
Kevin calls me back the next morning. Immediately I ask him about Duane.

The Alliance police department decided that the vendors who’ve been cropping up in the parking lots of various mostly abandoned strip malls needed to be rounded up. None of them had business permits or vendor permits. They didn’t have a certificate of authority to collect sales tax, either – not that they were bothering to collect any. It had been a generally simple matter for the cops to just tell the vendors to pack up and leave; Kevin had been one of the officers shutting them down, and it went smoothly.

Except for Duane.

Kevin wasn’t one of the cops who asked Duane to pack up his table and leave, but he heard about it afterward. Duane had given them attitude, they said. It was supposed to have been a simple thing, but Duane had gotten mouthy. Kevin says Duane lunged at one of the cops, though I am not sure whether I believe it. I know how the cops exaggerate provocation sometimes. I guess they ended up beating him pretty good. Then they cuffed him and took him to the county jail. He was charged with assaulting a police officer and resisting arrest.

Shit, I say to Kevin on the phone.

Yeah. Dude’s a real greaseball, apparently. Kind of an asshole.

You sure your boys didn’t get a little baton-happy?

They swear they didn’t.

Yeah, I say. I bet they do.

They say he went for Mac’s throat. No lie.

Huh. Wonder what Amelia sees in him?
Of course you do, Kevin says.

What’s that supposed to mean?

You know what I mean. You think she ought to be in love with you.

Well, she’s not, I say.

She should be.

You mean that?

I do, Kevin says. I mean it.

Thanks.

One useful thing I get from Kevin is Duane’s last name. I google him as soon as I hang up the phone. I see immediately why Amelia is talking now about Occupy – Duane was part of that. I find two news stories in which his name is listed among those arrested during Wall Street protests. My feelings about Duane begin to soften. I have long admired the Wall Street activism, even though nothing ever came of it.

Max and I are in my bedroom. I’m sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of my mother’s bookshelf. As is my habit since the glowing started I pull the thin illuminated book from the shelf. I rub my fingertips along its spine, which feels soft, almost furred. I turn the yellowing pages. I know the first line of the manifesto by heart.

‘Life’ in this ‘society’ being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of ‘society’ being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and eliminate the male sex.
I think now of the glowing, what Amelia said, the sort of person my mother might have been. The manifesto is by far the most radical book on my mother’s bookshelf, but with its glowing now it has become the most significant. Its presence had always made me wonder about my mother, why she had the book, what she thought about when she read it, how its contents meshed with her marriage and motherhood.

What must it have meant to my mother to own these radical things? This shelf of books? She’d come in to the marriage with these things. She’d never packed them away in boxes. She refused to deny these manifestations of her radical youth. She hadn’t wanted to mature, to forget. She had owned these books and they were hers. They’d sat on the wooden shelf, at arm’s reach from where she slept with my father.

The manifesto’s opening lines, its call to overthrow the government and eliminate the money system – I think about this all the time. I wonder how close we’ll come. There’s no way it won’t be violent. The manifesto didn’t take the actual violence, real bloodshed, into account. Out my bedroom window in the day’s waning light I see the rising unnatural glow of the city of Alliance to my north. I pet Max who has settled at my side and I think about what might be coming next.

Like I said, I’m getting prepared.

I’m documenting things. I write a lot. Journaling – it seems so girly, but there is so much to get down. I want to remember the way things were before. I want to write about how things are changing. I want to figure out everything about my mom.
I want to write about my farm. I’m drawing maps. There are the Excel spreadsheets with my growing lists of supplies. There is the locked gun closet. There are two dozen baby chicks I’ll be picking up at the hatchery next week. I bought a second pressure canner, although without a woodburning stove I’m not sure how useful it will be once there’s no more gas or electricity. My kitchen stove needs both.

Looking around my home lately makes me realize nearly everything in it requires electricity or gas. Global warming notwithstanding, I know how winters can be. I realize with the heavy press of dread that without electricity or gas to heat my home, I’ll have to cut my woods for firewood. I realize I will deforest the wooded side of my property probably quickly. I make a mental note to plan for re-forested. I make a mental note to research quick-growing trees and their propagation. I wonder whether I can plant and harvest bamboo.

On all the news websites today there were sporadic reports of riots. These were portrayed carefully by the media corporations as small affairs, quickly put down by police in helmets with riot shields. The news outlets made sure to show film footage of undamaged streets in the affected cities, people unconcerned as they hurry about their normal business in spring coats or windbreakers. I wondered how complicit news corporations are now in squelching news, not telling Americans the real story. I don’t want to be paranoid, but I feel it: we’re not being told the truth.

The cities with supposed small-scale rioting today are Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Detroit – of course, one of the cities was Detroit. There was sporadic looting, CNN says. MSNBC is reporting now that rioters had some sort of RPG and launched rockets at the glowing federal reserve trucks.
What’s alarming to me, though, is how nobody’s even upset. Or nobody seems upset. Amelia’s stealing, and riots are happening, and I swear to God I feel it, among my students when I interact with them online, or when I make eye contact with the cashier at the grocery store: things aren’t right. Things aren’t right and everybody knows it.
CHAPTER 8

I’m driving an hour and a half west in my truck to pick up two dozen baby chicks from a hatchery. I spent yesterday clearing out the chicken coop that had been behind the barn but essentially invisible behind a thicket of wild rose bushes and that awful Asian honeysuckle that grows like a tangle everywhere. My father, of course, built the coop, but it hadn’t been used since a couple years after he died. I kept up with the chickens after dad, but as they went I did not replace them, and so the coop eventually sat empty, and then I forgot all about it. It will need a fresh coat of paint, I realize now that I have cleared away the brush around it, and I’ll have to evict the mice and voles that, judging from the droppings and stores of seed and cracked corn in the corners of the coop, have made a home there.

The hatchery is a larger operation than I imagined. It is three large buildings, a long gravel drive and plenty of gravelled space between each. A grain silo – for feed grain, I imagine, although I don’t see many full-sized chickens when I’m inside. I see trays and trays of incubating eggs and trays of freshly hatched chicks.

I’d ordered an assortment of winter-hardy chickens online. I’d asked for all hens, but the woman who runs the hatchery explained to me in an email message that 100 percent hens can’t be guaranteed; sexing chicks involves quite a bit of guesswork, it turns out, and so I’m likely to get a rooster or two.

When I arrive, the woman who runs the hatchery – Brenda’s her name – strides across the cement floor of the building marked Customer Pickup. She greets
me with a firm handshake and I uncharitably notice how butch she is. Not that it’s ever okay to assume, but I do anyway: Brenda is probably gay, a woman I’d label bulldyke if I was being even less kind. I notice she’s sizing me up, too, giving me that look that tends to pass between two lesbians when they recognize each other.

She asks whether I’ve kept chickens before, and I tell her it’s been a while. I admit it was my father who was primarily the caretaker – I did what I was told, I knew how to feed them, but when it came to illness or chicken fights, I went and got Dad.

She explains that if it turns out I only have one rooster, I’ll be fine; one rooster actually will protect the chickens. More than one rooster, though, and I’ll have issues.

What do people do when there’s more than one rooster? I ask.

Well, slaughter.

I wasn’t planning on doing that, I say.

Just wanting some eggs, then?

Yeah. Do you suppose I could sell my roosters?

Roosters aren’t worth much, Brenda says.

I’ll figure it out, I say. I take my ventilated cardboard box full of panicked and cheeping baby chicks to my pickup truck. I put them carefully on the passenger seat. I make sure they’re level and secure.

The chicks will spend their first few weeks in my mudroom in a row of open rubbermaid containers lined with shredded newspaper. I’ll have to get Max used to them; he’s a sweet dog, but he is a dog, and I hope he’ll see them as packmates, not prey.
Max.

At first I thought perhaps he was sensing what I was. I thought he was either picking up on my edginess of late, or feeling his own unease. I took his recent restlessness as yet another sign – I’m right, shit’s about to go down.

But now I’m not so sure.

The last four nights, I’ve heard what Max is hearing: coyotes, close, menacing, running up along the wooded edge of the property.

Last night I bolted outside, loaded gun in hand, meaning to chase them off. I actually fired into what I knew was the rise of earth on the other side of the stream, hoping to scare them into moving on.

My father used to say, if you heard coyotes at night but they never came on the property, that’s a good thing. Coyotes, my dad always told me, have an expansive range. The protect a large territory. So if you’ve got coyotes but they leave your chickens and baby livestock and your barn kittens alone, you ought never disturb them. They’ll keep the aggressive, fearless coyotes or coy-dogs away. There’s peaceful co-existing with coyotes, my dad always said. You just have to hope for the good kind.

What if you don’t have the good kind? I asked him.

Then you shoot them, he of course said, although he meant with a shotgun, not the Glock that’s been in my pocket or in my sweaty hands these last few nights.
This spring seems to have brought the bad sort of coyote to my property. I’ve got a coyote problem, it seems, one that’s particularly ill-timed, what with the chickens getting bigger by the day. I have portable electric fence I can pen them in with, but I know fencing won’t keep determined coyotes out.

Tonight Max and I sit on the porch. I’m alert, ears pricked to every sound. Max’s hair’s been standing in a ridge along his back since I asked him to sit, stay, atta boy, it’s okay, boy. It’s okay. I pet his head. Max reluctantly settles to a lie down when I give the command, but every minute or two he lifts his head and lets out a low growl.

I’ve got a coyote problem, and I wish my dad was here to help me figure out what to do.

Related to the coyote problem is my fence problem; although, like I said, fences don’t keep out coyotes entirely. This particular iteration of the land my father owned, the land I now own, these last ten unsold acres have never been properly fenced in. There was a paddock fence for the horses and cows, when Dad and I had them, but it’s fallen to disrepair and anyway only surrounded about a half-acre on the side of the barn where it slopes to a kind of muddy drainage ditch.

Fencing is very expensive.

Also, although it kills me to admit this, I can’t put in fenceposts by myself. I pride myself, always, on being able to do the work required on the farm. My father and my grandfather taught me everything I needed to know in terms of the hard
labor. My grandmother taught me the canning, the baking, the drying of the herbs and hanging of the garlic up in the eaves of the barn.

But I can’t put in a fence post.

This brings me to some related thoughts I’ve been having a lot lately: when things go bad, I’ll need help. There won’t be any way I’ll be able to do everything that will be required.

I’ve wanted Kevin, and Amelia, of course Amelia – I’ve made them promise to come to my land when things get chaotic, when our government collapses or whatever’s going to happen – I’ve wanted them because they are people I care about and people I want to take care of. They are people with whom I will want to share the things I am so busy collecting.

But I think I’ll need others.

Jack, Jr. and Benny could be great – they’re healthy guys – though I wonder whether I could tolerate sharing my property with guys, testosterone, sweat, body hair. What if they talked about whores or penises or whatever it is that guys talk about? And do they even approve of what my family has often called my lifestyle? It’s not hard to imagine they might have issues with what I think of as the gay thing.

But family is family, and they’re pretty much all I’ve got.

I call my Uncle Jack and I ask him if it’s okay for me to stop by next week. I invent a reason, tell him I’d like his advice on the chickens and the coyotes.
In the early days of the glowing, people had all sorts of questions. We wondered, for example, what the rules were, particularly in terms of organic matter. By organic we meant, our bodies, animals, plants, germs, dirt. What would glow and what would not?

What if, for example, a guy got a heart transplant, and then put the medical bills on his credit card? Happens all the time. I remember a real panic about it. I remember people putting off lifesaving surgeries until they’d saved up enough cash for their copay. That didn’t last long, though. Thankfully, quick enough, somebody didn’t pay a medical bill, and the guy’s transplanted heart didn’t glow. The nation breathed a collective sigh of relief.

But what about animals? We buy and sell animals all the time, of course. Turned out, animals don’t glow, either, no matter who owns them or buys them on credit, or steals them.

I wished stolen animals did glow – I used to argue this point to Kevin. If some dickbag ever stole Max, I’d want him to be easy to spot.

So people and animals don’t glow.

Plants, though. Plants, dirt, those are something else. They’re something else, but nobody knows quite what. The rules are hard to figure out. They’re not consistent. Nobody has yet been able to accurately parse it out. Sometimes, when, say, a farmer is leasing land and doesn’t pay his bills, the soil will lumesce. Sometimes this will be hardly noticeable at all, but other times it will look like the field is covered in glittery green slime. There were theories, for a while, about the amount of debt owed on the land, or the total debt of the farmer in question. There
have been theories about water tables and saturation and sunshine interacting with the nanos. There have been all kinds of theories. But nobody’s been able to figure out the formula the nanos are using. It’s like the nanos came up with their own system.

Only they know the rules. This, of course, creeps people out.

So dirt’s a mystery. I mean, dirt? Why does dirt glow? I don’t get it.

And plants – plants are interesting, too.

Unowned plants will either glow or not glow, like the soil, but with far more variety. Plants can be yellow like everything else (unless the nanos have been hacked by people, like Amelia’s glittery red shoes), but they can also be green, or greenish yellow, in amazing endless variety. Sometimes it’s a white-yellow-green, or almost a willow color. Sometimes it’s a true yellow. Sometimes it’s a red-yellow, with the green of the plant itself shining through, like fall leaves almost. Sometimes it’s the greenest thing you ever saw.

Unowned plants are beautiful. I like to think that life, the life of the plants, exists in some sort of satisfying symbiosis with the nanos. I like to think the nanos and the cellular makeup of the plants are friends, almost. I like to think they are mutually happy together.

It almost makes me want to steal some seeds, plant them, see what happens.

It makes me want to talk to Amelia about whether we could cook something up, buy one of those modifications to get some plants glowing crazy colors on the farm. But then I realize, I’m not sure I want glowing plants on my land. Darkness is so valuable now.

It’s the sixth night of coyote prowling. I swear they’re wise to the chickens in my mudroom. I swear they’re waiting for me to try to set the chickens outside, in my cheap fencing or in the coop – I’ve heard coyotes can break into coops pretty easily, depending on the setup. I don’t think mine is particularly sturdy. I’m already thinking of new ways to secure the door.

The sun has just set, too; the coyotes come earlier and earlier every night. There’s still enough light on the horizon to see by. I think I can maybe get off a good shot. I wonder whether if I kill just one, they’ll all go away. Would they go away? I’m afraid it’s wishful thinking to imagine that would be true.

I ask Max to come out with me.

Max knows how to behave when I’ve got a gun. Max follows me in perfect heel position, to the left of me and slightly behind – and then sits right there when I stop and position myself – whenever I’m target-shooting.

Max is the best dog I’ve ever had. But he’s nervous tonight.

I follow the property line down past the pines I planted to where the woods begin. I think I see the flash of something, the pale underside of a bushy tail. I stop, widen my stance, brace the gun in both hands, and shoot.

All hell breaks loose.

Max leaps – this perhaps happens even before I’ve fired a shot, leading me to wonder for a split second whether I could have accidentally shot Max. It’s quickly obvious this is not the case, though, because Max has lunged at a coyote and I see it
happen in the half-dark. There's squealing and yelping, and yip-yip-yipping coming from several points across the stream all at once. I can hardly see – just enough to know there's a blur of dog and coyote – how many, I am not sure.

Hey! Hey! Hey! I yell. I think about moving in, kicking the dogs apart. There is screaming now, not a noise I have ever heard Max make but a sound I am afraid might be his now.

I realize I am screaming too.

I think to grab a large stick, and I leap across the stream. I blindly strike. I make contact with at least one coyote, and I hear a satisfying yipe, but I see now at my feet there are at least three. There are coyotes and there is Max.

I bring the stick down, again and again. I raise it up and bring it down. I am aware I am hardly making contact with anything but the ground. This seems to go on for a long time. My ears are past hearing the sounds of this night.

And then the coyotes are gone. Their decision to leave, soundlessly communicated, was unanimous and immediately acted upon.

Max is lying in the leaf litter, slick with blood, labored in his breathing. His eyes are open but he makes no effort to move or get up.

I pick him up – I don’t notice he’s sixty pounds, which ought to be too heavy for me to carry at a run – and I bolt toward my truck. The warmth of his blood flows through my t-shirt and soaks the waistband of my pants. I try not to think about this.

I lay Max on the gravel drive while I open the passenger-side door of my truck. I put Max inside. I close the door, run in to the house to get my keys and my wallet,
and fly out across the gravel to my truck. I throw my truck in reverse before I’ve even finished turning the key in the ignition.

The animal hospital in Canton has all-night emergency service. When I arrive the vet tech takes bleeding Max from me and heads toward the examination area. I sink into a chair in the waiting room. Somebody thinks to give me a towel. I see shocking dots of Max’s blood on the tile floor. I know I am soaked with it.

It’s not long before the tech pushes open the waiting room door. I know instantly what she will say, that Max is dead, from her posture, from the way she is holding her hands awkwardly out.

I’m sorry, she says.

I nod. I do not cry. My father raised a tough girl. My father would be proud. We shoulder these things. We accept what farm life is. I can hear him telling me this.

I walk to the receptionist’s desk because that is where I customarily pay for vet services, but there is no receptionist at this hour. I’m not sure what to do.

The tech waves me away.

Don’t worry about it, she says. It was too late. There’s nothing to charge you for. If you want, we offer –

I’ve already anticipated what she’s going to offer.

No, thanks, I say. I’m taking Max home.

I hold out my arms to show her I will wait. She brings Max out and hands me his towel-wrapped body. He feels less heavy. He is still warm and his body feels soft.
I walk to my car with Max in my arms and still I do not cry.
CHAPTER 9

Amelia.

I call her at eight o’clock the next morning. I’m surprised when she answers, but her voice is drawn out with sleep.

Yeah?

It’s me, I say. I need you to come.

It’s hot for a May morning, sunless, threatening rain. Amelia shows up in a white t-shirt and twill shorts. She’s wearing sturdy boots. Her clothes are hers, but her little gemstone earrings aren’t – they sparkle yellow. Her hair is in a tangled ponytail. Fine wisps of hair that have escaped the elastic band are haloing her head; she slept with her hair up like this, I realize. She looks beautiful.

I’m sorry, I say.

Are you kidding? Don’t, she says.

Amelia hugs me, and it’s a real hug. There is a tenderness I’ve never felt before. Tears well up before I can force them back.

I’m fine, I say.

I carry both shovels to a spot past the poplars, behind the orchard. Max is already laying in the grass, still wrapped in towels.

Oh, Amelia says when she sees him.
I’m sorry, I say.

We set to digging.

For a long time there is no talking. It’s hot outside but a misty rain has begun to fall. I am slick with sweat. My tank top is damp in a ridge under my breasts and in a line down the center of my back.

We dig. Amelia stops sometimes to wipe sweat from her forehead with the inside of her wrist, but then she gets right back to her shovel. There is a communion to this act I did not expect. We work well together. There is a unity and an economy to our movements. We each size up what the other is doing. We don’t clank shovels or knock heads over the smallish hole. We are both absorbed by the task. This is honest and necessary work and if it weren’t for Max on the grass it would feel good. After a while at the digging my biceps and shoulder muscles are more defined; sweat and drizzle are running down my arms in tiny rivulets. I raise my arm to wipe the sweat from my forehead on to my shoulder.

As if she is reading my mind, Amelia stops shoveling and says, Honest work.

It is.

Do you want to talk about it?

Nope.

We dig longer. I only say what’s necessary – this side a little more, or that’s about right, or let’s switch. It is a long stretch of our bodies close together, a kind of synchronicity, of the work at hand and the two of us tasked to it.

Finally the hole is right for Max.

I don’t know if I can do this, I say.
Do you want me to?

Let’s both.

I have to not think about it. We lift Max in unison. We place him in his grave.
The first shovelful of dirt – mine, and I’m sure Amelia waits out of respect – hits with
a thud I have to turn away from. I face away and I let the horizon line go blurry for a
while. When I turn back, Amelia’s got Max covered enough that I can help her finish
the job. I stand on the mound with my boots to press the earth firm.

Hard work, she says.

Hard work, I say.

We go inside and scrub our hands in the kitchen sink and then I fix us
breakfast: Eggs, toast, coffee. Midway through the meal Amelia reaches for my hand
across my kitchen table, gives it a squeeze. I give her the kind of smile you give when
there is still a lot of grief.

Amelia must have called Kevin, too, because he stops by after work. He’s
carrying a twelve-pack.

Buddy, I say.

This sucks, he says.

No shit.

Let’s do some coyote-hunting.

I can’t right now.

Yeah. I get that. But you let me know.
I will.

Without Max I cannot sleep. I hear the coyotes prowling around and I open my front door. I stand on my steps and I scream:

Get out! Get out! Leave me alone!

Kevin visits again the next day.

Shit, he says as he swings his leg over his bike and pulls off his helmet. I'm wiped out.

What’s up? I ask. I am eager to talk about things other than Max, or coyotes. I’m glad Kevin’s not asking whether we can go hunt.

Shit’s going down, Kevin says. You have no idea.

What do you mean?

That stuff when we arrested your nemesis Duane was just the beginning.

I’m not following.

Like, we had a protest in front of Wal-Mart today. Or a riot. It wasn’t really organized, but it was something. I’m telling you. I wished I had one of those riot shields. We talked about throwing tear gas.

Dude. Don’t tell me that.

Don’t tell you what?

That you’re the guy throwing the tear gas grenades.

Don’t judge, Bo. I was scared.

I realize he means it. He’s shaken. I feel sorry I was about to come down hard.
I know. It’s your job, I say.

Yeah. And you’re gonna love this. We’re starting to get official documents from Homeland Security. Emails and stuff. They’re supposed to be classified, but – you know how it is in Alliance. We don’t give a shit about protocol.

Documents?

Yeah, planning stuff. Strategies. What we should do, you know, if things get serious.

We need to talk about that, I say. I have something to show you.

I take Kevin to the wooden gun closet. The shelves inside are full of ammo, boxes marked with 7.62x39mm, .22 LR, and Remington 40 caliber. A rifle I just bought this morning – the Browning T-Bolt – leans in the corner. The floor-to-ceiling shelves are nearly full – stocked with blankets from Goodwill, Zippo lighters, lighter fluid, my notebooks and boxes of pens, Army surplus pants, rain jackets, a hatchet, a solar charger for my iPhone, four Coleman lanterns, spare wicks and small propane tanks, flashlights, 6-volt batteries, rolls of duct tape, coils of rope, a collection of scarves and hats, and two fifty-gallon collapsible water storage bladders.

Wow, Kevin says.

Yeah, I say. I’m a little bit embarrassed to see this hoard through Kevin’s eyes.

But no – it’s good. This is a good idea.

Kev, do you really think so?

Yeah.

Please tell me you’ll come when things get scary.

I’m a cop. I’ll be busy.
But if there aren’t any more police, or government, or people telling you what to do? Will you come then?

Yeah.

I give Kevin a little shove.

You better, I say.

I’m paying more careful attention. It’s hot again, a prolonged heat wave this time, and the unbearable weather, the blurred waves that come off the wheat in the Campbell’s field behind my property, seem to add a heaviness to what’s happening.

The regular media doesn’t have much to say. But disturbing videos are surfacing – from small cities, big cities, even a couple rural areas. Looting. Police brutality. People wearing sandwich boards that read, THE END IS NEAR.

The end is near.

Some talking head on CNN yesterday compared the concern the footage is causing to panic about shark attacks.

Look, the commentator said, it’s like what happens when somebody gets attacked by a shark. It’s rare. But suddenly, shark attacks are big news. So those one or two other attacks – there’s all kinds of coverage. It’s like that. America’s a big place. There’s crime everywhere, every day. This is nothing unusual. There’s no pattern – unless you go digging for one.

I don’t know whether to laugh or cry.
The regular media is still operating like: business as usual. A Kardashian had a baby. There are wildfires, earlier than expected, in southern California. There’s unrest in Syria, protests in Turkey. These things are all unrelated to the glowing. The news channels don’t talk very much about the glowing. After a year, it’s old news.

There is a letter my mother wrote to my father. It is one of the few keepsakes I have, and one of the only examples of my mother’s neat and even handwriting that I have ever seen. I found it, after my father died, in a shoe box on the top shelf of his closet. Also in the shoebox was my father’s wedding ring, which he stopped wearing at some point during my childhood, my baptismal candle – although my parents were not religious, I was baptized as a Catholic, for some strange reason. I think my grandparents suggested it. I think it may have been a way to legitimize my birth, the little young family we were to become.

The letter must have been written after an argument. It’s not dated, but based on the references in it, it must have been written when I was a baby. My mother begins with an ambiguous statement: I take my part in the way things have gone. It’s a claim of responsibility. It’s ownership, but with a catch, because the letter goes on to say, But I don’t understand what you want from me.

Because I was so young when my mother died, I don’t have any real or accurate understanding of the nature of their relationship. As a child, of course, both before and after she died, I imagined my parents loved each other perfectly. I imagined they would have been together forever. As I grew to adulthood, I began to realize how
complicated relationships could be. I knew my father, too, his rigid and quiet ways, his darker moods. I remembered half-sentence, veiled references I’d heard throughout my childhood and teenage years from my grandparents or my father or my uncle: She wasn’t cut out for it, meaning, I suppose, motherhood or marriage, or both.

The letter’s most mysterious paragraph is this one:

I never thought I would find myself married. I do love you, John. You know this. I just thought – after college – I thought I’d finish, I suppose, and then I thought I would work. I wanted to travel. I almost got out of here. Nobody was ever going to have hold of me. I know you don’t stake claim, insist upon your ownership of me. I know that. I do feel safe. It’s not that. It’s just – I’m not meant for this. I’m sorry. You know the thoughts I have. You know the way I am. You know what happens when you push too hard. I can’t explain how trapped I’ve felt since the baby. It’s a dark place I’m in. I’m sorry.

My mother died in a car accident, on a rainy afternoon out on Union Avenue not far from home. I was four and a half years old.

I accepted her death the way a child accepts things, without remark or emotion. Children know they have no say in the matter, no agency. There is no choosing. My mother was gone. I didn’t mourn her because I didn’t know still having a mother could be an option. I accepted she was gone. For a while I thought all children lost their mothers, sooner or later. I was surprised to learn this was not true.

I remember something from my childhood – one of those emotionally hot memories, confusing. I might have been six or seven. My grandmother said
something to my father. They were talking about my mother: I’m sure that was the context of it. There’s shame in it, my grandmother said. There’s shame in how she died.

There’s shame in it.

I have wondered my whole life what she meant.
CHAPTER 10

Max.

This morning half-asleep I thought I heard his nails click-click-clicking on the hardwood floors. I reached out for him from the couch where I slept, expecting to find his warm head, the soft fur behind his ears. He’d let me scratch him, maybe lick me awake, push at my hand with his nose if I tried to go back to sleep.

Max, I said. I sat up, remembered, looked out the picture window. I looked past the porch and the orchard, toward the woods, toward where it happened. I felt the hot rise of anger. It was only just daybreak but I knew I would not be able to get more sleep.

I got off the couch, made some coffee, thought about coyotes.

Amelia has asked whether she can come for dinner.

I want to see your baby chicks, she says. I bet they are so cute!

They’re in an ugly adolescent stage, I said. But please. Come over anyway.

I spend the morning grading my students’ online discussions. Then I do some online shopping. I purchase two ten-gallon ceramic crocks. I will use them to make pickles and sauerkraut. I spend a long time looking around for rat poison, antifreeze, other methods for killing coyotes. I figure I could soak some meat in it, leave it out where I know the coyotes go.

But I also know what poison does to an animal. It’s a tortured death.
I decide I can’t do it – no matter how much anger is in me. I look at snares online, too, and some other traps, but I can’t figure what I’d do if I caught a coyote. I think I need to talk to my uncle.

In the heat of the day – it’s still, in general, hotter than it ought to be, for May – I go out to check on the garden. I have two large blue water barrels in the garden, at the end of one of the rows, that I use for watering. I dunk large-mouthed plastic jugs into the barrels, fill them with water, lift them out, and walk with a heavy jug in each hand to the plants that need watering. I have discovered this is the most efficient way to lay down a lot of water exactly where I need it. Spraying everything with the hose would be easier, more passive – setting up a sprinkler would be more passive still – but I find I enjoy the routine of watering the garden. Scoop up water. Hoist the jugs. Walk with them, elbows bent, biceps large. There is a meditative quality to the job. I like to get lost in it. I wipe sweat from my forehead. I enjoy dunking the jugs into the cold water. My arms, shoulder deep in the barrel, feel cool. I feel strong. I feel useful. The seedlings are doing well.

I’ve planted, too, those seeds that go straight in the ground: beans, cucumbers, corn. Last week I planted the potato starts – blue potatoes, sweet potatoes, Idaho. I planted the onion starts, too, and they’re finally perking up after a couple droopy days.

It’s going to be a good year for the garden. I think about the canning I’ll do, the sauerkraut, the pasta sauce, the soups. I think about how I can freeze cut corn and
blanched green beans. So long as I have electricity I’ll be able to keep those in the chest freezer in the basement. I start another spreadsheet: food storage, a list of what I plan to make with what I get from the garden.

Amelia’s over, and after dinner – She brought over a loaf of bread from the bakery, so I made a spinach salad – we’re sitting on the porch. We’ve got a cherry wine this time, in wine glasses that were a wedding gift to my parents.

I think Amelia’s tipsy.

Amelia, I say. Thanks for helping with Max.

No problem.

No, I mean it. It meant a lot you were there.

When are we gonna find you a new dog?

Don’t even. Never.

You’ll get there.

Not right now, I say.

Amelia has leaned closer on the porch swing. Our forearms are touching. The sky glows its usual strangely alluring yellow, especially along the northern horizon. The night is heavy with humidity; a mist is beginning to form above the treeline and along the low ridge by the garden. The mist combined with the glowing make the landscape look otherworldly.

I don’t know if it’s the look of things tonight, or the wine, or the fact that I’m feeling so fatalistic about everything. Maybe it’s the loss of Max, my powerlessness
against those coyotes. I feel different tonight, detached, edgy, dangerous. I’m mistaking this for a sign, for permission to act.

    Amelia, I say. We need to talk.

    Oh no, Amelia says.

    I shake my head. Don’t worry, I say.

    Worry about what?

    You know how I feel about you, right?

    I don’t think this is a good idea, Amelia says.

    We need to talk about it.

    No, we don’t. Don’t ruin things.

    I’m in love with you.

    Don’t, Amelia says. Just don’t.

    She stands and walks to the porch railing. She keeps her face toward the yard. I never led you on, she says. I was careful to never lead you on.

    I didn’t say you did.

    This isn’t fair!

    But I know you feel something, I say.

    That’s bullshit!

    Why won’t you admit it?

    I’m not a lesbian, Amelia says. She articulates lesbian carefully, makes it sound ugly.
Amelia has turned to face me now. Her cheeks are red. She is holding her wine glass delicately, pinkie raised, and she is gesticulating with that hand. She jabs the wine glass toward me. Don’t do this, she yells. I thought we were friends!

We are friends, I am saying, but just then Amelia loses her grip on the wine glass. The forward motion of her arm as she lets go propels the glass forward. It hits the wooden porch and shatters.

Fuck you! I say. That was my mother’s!

I stand and take a step toward Amelia. She freezes, arm and hand still held out. After a long second she takes a careful step backward. She lowers her arm. She looks frightened.

I didn’t meant to, she says.

I want to apologize, I want to tell her how sorry I am, I want to hold her, I want Amelia in my arms. I want so many things, none of which I am allowed to have. My mother’s broken wine glass, the spilled wine, the absence of Max, Amelia already turning to go, through the house to pick up her purse and then out the side door to her car – these are the things I am allowed to have. This is how the evening ends.

After Amelia leaves, I load the smooth new rifle, sling it over my shoulder, walk the perimeter of my land, the fenceline and the places where there is no fence. I listen for coyotes, but I do not hear them tonight. I walk back up to the house but I lay a long time on the couch awake, looking out the living room window at the terrible glow, before I finally am able to sleep.
Fuck you, I say to Kevin when he answers his phone the next morning.

What the heck?

You heard me.

What did I do this time?

You told me to go after Amelia, dickhead.

Oh! Dude! You kissed her? That’s awesome!

Um, no, genius. I told her I love her. She left. End of story.

Oh, shit. You said love?

Yeah. No. I don’t remember. I might have said feelings. I have feelings for you.

Or love. Maybe I said love.

Oh, shit. Were you drunk?

No, I say.

Bullshit.

Maybe a little.

Dude. She’s into you, I swear it. Did you get her drunk first?

That’s not funny.

Look. You want me to talk to her?

No. Don’t you dare. Just leave it alone.

Is she gonna talk to you? How did you leave it?

She stormed out, I say. I guess I’ve lost my touch.

Looks like I owe you a twelve pack.

You owe me more than that, I say. Come help me shoot some fucking coyotes.

When?
Anytime, I say. I’m ready.

The White House continues to glow, in spite of legislation passed today by both houses of congress to form a new subcommittee to study how to make it stop. The president promised to sign the legislation immediately. Fuck you, I think when I hear this. Millions of regular people’s homes have been glowing for months, and although there were congressional investigations, there was no subcommittee to make it stop. Nobody cared when it was just regular people.

Fuck the government. Fuck Amelia. Fuck all of it.

On Saturday afternoon I drive to my Uncle Jack’s house.

I thought you were going to bring me more corn, he says when he sees I am empty-handed.

Uncle Jack, it’s May. The corn’s only ankle-high. Wait till August.

Remember, you promised.

I won’t forget, I say. But I came to talk to you about something else.

What’s that?

I tell Uncle Jack about the fence I want to put up. Sturdy wooden posts. Barbed wire, maybe wire mesh. Gate across the gravel drive. I need help: I can’t drive the fenceposts in myself.
Look, Uncle Jack, I say. If your boys help me, I promise you’ll have a place to stay when things go south. I’ll have food. I’ll have weapons. We can survive. My place is ready.

I expect Uncle Jack to laugh, dismiss me. But he doesn’t; he promises he’ll talk to his boys. He thanks me for thinking of them.

Family should stick together, he says.

I think of my mother then, for some strange reason.

By the time I was a young teenager I was beginning to understand most of what I read in the books on my mother’s bookshelf. I knew I was a lesbian. I liked the poetry collections she had. Audre Lorde’s Cables to Rage sat alongside the SCUM Manifesto and I read it often. So many of the poems were about motherhood; I wondered what my mother must have thought or felt about them. It was one of my favorite books in my mother’s collection.

But most times I lingered over my mother’s books, I would return predictably to the Manifesto. As much as it disturbed me, I couldn’t stop myself from reading pieces of it again and again, trying to make meaning from the violence of its sentiments.

Only once did my father walk in to his bedroom to discover me reading my mother’s books. I was probably fourteen years old. My back was to the door, so when I heard it close behind my father I jumped and dropped the Manifesto on the floor. It hit with a smack.
Dad, I said.

He saw what I had been doing.

Is this why Mom died? I asked. I had picked up the Manifesto and I was holding it out to him.

What?

This book. Grandma said there was shame in Mom’s dying.

What?

A long time ago.

I don’t remember that, my father said.

I do, I said. But this book, Dad. Was Mom violent? Was there something wrong with her? Did she think all men should die?

Where did you get such an idea? What’s gotten into you?

I realized then he thought of me as a reasonable child; he was surprised by my sudden irrationality.

So was I.

I’m sorry, I said. I burst into tears. I meant to run from the room, but my father caught me. He held me at arm’s length so he could look me over. It was as if he was trying to puzzle out what I was thinking. I expected him to draw me in for a hug, hold me, pat my back and tell me everything’s okay.

He didn’t. He held me away from himself for a minute and then he let me go. I ran as fast as I could out the front door, past the barn, to the orchard. I sat under an apple tree and cried for a long time.
My cousins Junior and Benny are here to help me set in fence posts. It’s a sunny Saturday morning, and I’ve already marked off 10-foot intervals along the property line with thin stakes and fluorescent pink construction tape.

You all set? I ask.

All set, Benny says.

We begin the work. I had contemplated plowing up the fenceline where posts needed to go in, but I thought better of it. Plowed land is difficult to walk on. We’d still have to dig the holes. It rained yesterday so I hope the ground will be soft for our shovels.

My cousins are big, muscled. They are clean-cut men, more polite than I’d have imagined. I don’t know the first thing about them. I don’t know where to begin to ask them about their lives, but I want to make conversation while we dig.

Your dad didn’t tell me where it is you two work, I finally say.

Case Farms, Junior says.

Oh God, I say. Case Farms is the factory outside of Canton where they process chickens. It’s a huge facility, low buildings and barbed-wire gates and narrowly ventilated trucks in and out all day. I don’t want to imagine the slaughter, the blood.

It’s a job, but yeah. It sucks, Junior says.

Is it as bad as I think? I ask.

Pretty bad.
Pussy, Benny says.

You’re one to talk. Office job, on your ass all day.

I look at Benny.

I work at the Enterprise rental place in Alliance, Benny says.

That’s not really an office job. That’s retail, I say.

Not the way Benny does it, Junior says. He’s in that swivel chair behind his desk. Makes the girls do all the interacting.

That so? I ask.

I do my share, he says.

We have already set two posts. The work has seemed easy with so much help.

Benny digs a hole ahead of us while Junior and I set posts. We take turns holding the post, steadying it while the other shovels dirt, tamps it down, shovels a little more, tamps it down again. I had bought a tamper for this purpose but quickly am finding my boots do a better job and fit more neatly in the gaps around the fencepost.

Junior’s feet are too big to fit in the holes we’ve dug.

You’re good at this, Benny says.

Thanks, I say. I’m pretty strong for a girl.

Yeah, Junior says. I see him catch Benny’s eye and I decide it’s time to say something.

You guys know I’m gay, right?

You mean, a lesbian?

Yeah, that. Whatever you want to call it.
Junior catches Benny’s eye again, but neither say anything. There is a sweetness to this, I decide. They’re afraid of saying the wrong thing.

It’s okay, I say. I mean, as long as you’re cool with it.

Totally cool with it, Benny says.

I think it’s –

Don’t say hot, I say. Don’t. We’re cousins.

Benny laughs. Do you have, like, a girlfriend, or something?

Nope, I say. I did, though, for a long time.

That’s cool, Junior says.

How about you guys, I say. Either one of you have a girlfriend?

Nope, Junior says, but Benny’s got an FWB.

FWB? I ask.

Friend with benefits, Junior says.

Oh, I say. That’s cool.

For some reason then, the three of us laugh.

As we put in the fenceposts I tell the cousins about what I’m doing at the farm. I tell them about my stockpiles, my food, my garden. My guns, supplies, my ammo.

You got a generator? Junior asks.

Nope, I say. I’m not sure what to do about that. They’re expensive.

Yeah, Junior says. Plus you’ve gotta store so much propane, or fuel oil. You don’t want a tank of something flammable like that in your basement.
I know, I say. Too bad I’m not wealthy. I’d have windmills, or solar panels.

You’re gonna be all set, Benny says.

I hope so. I want you to know you’re welcome here.

That’s nice of you, Benny says.

I mean it, I say. When there’s trouble, come here. The both of you and your father.

What about Benny’s FWB? Junior says.

Sure, yeah, I say. Her, too.

After the cousins and I finish the fenceposts – nearly six hours’ of work for the three of us – I call Uncle Jack.

Come over, I say. I’m firing up the grill.

I don’t tell the cousins I’m a vegetarian. They sit outside with beers – cans of Coors they brought along with them – and cigarettes. In the kitchen I pull from the fridge the vegetables I bought at the market yesterday and marinated this morning in soy sauce and garlic. I simmer some wild rice on the stove.

I look at how much rice I currently have – twenty one-pound bags, which is a lot by anyone’s standards, but I wonder how long my food supplies will last.

When my uncle shows up, the skewered veggies are already on the grill.

Smells delicious, Uncle Jack says.

Thanks, I say.

When I open the grill to check on the vegetables, Uncle Jack looks in.
I swore I smelled beef, he says.

Vegetarian, I say. But the way I marinate these, especially the mushrooms, you won’t miss the meat. I swear it.

The boys roll their eyes, over on lawn chairs with their beers, but their wordless protest is good-natured. When we eat, everyone raves. Delicious, Benny says.

Shit, this is good, Junior says.

Thanks, I say.

After dinner I walk Uncle Jack along the fenceline to show him what we’ve done. I tell him I’m going to lay wire mesh across the posts, top it with barbed wire. I tell him I’m worried.

I tell him I’m getting ready for things to go haywire.

You sure it’s going to get that bad? Uncle Jack asks.

No, I’m not, I say, but I’m going to be ready. You and the cousins can come here. We’ll be safe. I can gate up the driveway, even, if I have to. There’s posts on both sides now.

Like a fortress, he says. A regular compound.

Something like that, I say.

Uncle Jack looks at me for a long time.

You look so much like your mother, he says.

You think? I say.

She was pretty, he says, as if he’s worried I think he meant something else.
She was, I say, although I’m really not sure whether this is true.
You know she wasn’t happy here.
I’ve gathered, I say. That makes me feel like shit.
Don’t blame yourself.
I don’t. I just –
Uncle Jack seems to realize I am near tears, even before I do. I look at the glowing horizon and let it go blurry.
I’m sure you’ve wondered whether she was like you, he says.
You mean, gay, I say. Yeah.
She never said she was. But it was a different time. And your father didn’t say a word. Not before or after she died.
I’m feeling contemplative, quiet. I haven’t talked about my mother in a long time. But after a few minutes, I ask, What else can you tell me about her?
My uncle thinks for a minute. Well, he says, she was quiet, like you. She didn’t say a lot. She seemed delicate, so – not like you in that way. She looked a little bit lost.
I wonder why I never asked these questions before. I’m kicking myself that I didn’t. I distanced myself for so long, and so I never knew my uncle was so articulate. I didn’t know he had information, that he would be willing to share it with me.
What do you mean, lost? I ask.
You know. She didn’t belong. Farm life didn’t suit her. I always figured her for a city girl.
But my mom and dad. How did they meet?
At the fair, my uncle says.

I know that, I say. But what was she doing at the fair? Where did she come from?

Didn’t your father tell you about her photographs?

No, I say.

Your mother, my uncle says, grew up in Salem. Provincial. You know how much smaller Salem is than Alliance.

I’ve actually never been to Salem, but I nod.

You know how sometimes kids who grow up in the tiniest towns, really rural, are still like, urban? You know, skateboarders? Vandalists? Little rebels?

I guess, I say. Did they have skateboards when my mom was a kid?

I don’t know, my uncle says. But what I mean is, your mom was one of those kids. She was practically homeless, I gathered. I think her family was so poor they lived in a shack. Literally, a shack. Nobody raised her. Probably drunks. I heard it was bad.

What about the photography?

Oh. Your mother got her hands on a camera somehow. You know, fully manual, a 35-millimeter. She took great pictures, from what I heard. She was practically still a kid. I don’t know how she paid to get them developed. Maybe she collected bottles and cans for the deposit. Maybe the guys in the photo development store felt sorry for her. But she entered one of her photos in the county fair, and it – it caused a stir. People were outraged. She got practically run out of the fair. There was almost a riot.

You’re kidding, I say. Dad never told me any of that.
I guess he wouldn’t, my uncle says. I don’t think he understood what it all meant. Why he fell for your mom. He always had a weakness for the damaged ones.

I don’t ask my uncle what that means, but the photograph – I know exactly which photograph he must mean. On the wall in my bedroom – what was my parent’s bedroom – is a black-and-white photo. It is a picture of two girls. They are sitting on what looks like a long rock, or maybe a cement curb in front of what looks like a dirt or gravel road. The littlest one is barefoot. The older girl is in patent leather shoes a dress that looks fancy, but was likely dime-store quality. Their hair is braided, but already wisps escape. Their bangs are pressed awkwardly to their foreheads as if they have been sweating. They’re sharing a bottle of Fanta orange soda: two straws. There is dirt under their fingernails. Next to them, seated in the dirt, head cocked adorably, is a pitbull puppy. Behind them is a falling-down, weathered-white barn.

Everything in the picture looks completely normal – the sort of photo anybody would take and call it artsy. It’s ordinary. Except: when you look close, the older girl’s got her hand up the little girl’s dress. The little girl, who is holding the Fanta and its two straws with both hands, is looking shyly away. But the older girl – she’s twelve, maybe – she’s looking directly at the camera in that soul-piercing way that children sometimes have. Her eyes are honest. There are rings underneath them already like she’s seen a lot of shit. Her eyes are pale, sad, unflinching. She dares you to see what she’s doing. There’s a maturity, an awareness.

It’s a haunting image.

I didn’t know that picture was in the fair, I say. That it caused all that.
Well, it did. I guess it caught your dad’s attention.
That’s pretty radical, I say.
Yeah. I guess it was, my uncle says.

The chickens have gotten big enough to go out to the coop. I triple-checked the door to the coop to make sure coyotes couldn’t get in; so far, it’s holding, or else they haven’t yet tried. I built a chicken-wire corral for the chickens during the day. I keep my rifle, loaded, next to the side door. But I haven’t heard any coyotes.

The cousins have stopped drinking – I suppose they’re sobering up so they can drive home – and they’re with the chickens, in the corral, chasing them around. Junior’s got one by the feet, and he’s hanging it upside down.

Check it out, Junior says. Totally catatonic.

The chicken hangs limp. It looks like it’s sleeping.
Knock it off, I say. I pull the chicken from Junior’s hands. I set it down and after a minute it runs up the ramp and into the coop.

It’s dark outside – as dark as it gets any more – when the cousins and my uncle leave. After I wave them off, I head to the kitchen to scrub the metal skewers that held the vegetables. I’m midway across my living room when I lose power. My house turns all at once dark. Not completely pitch black, of course – that’s not possible any
more, thanks to the creepy glow along the skyline – but dark enough that I feel my way toward the mud room where I keep one of my flashlights.

I turn on the flashlight. I make my way to the storage closet. Inside, I find quickly the emergency candles. I pull a few from their box. I light them. I set two up on the kitchen counter and one in the living room. I wash the skewers and the rest of the dishes in this relative dark.

There aren’t any storms. No wind, nothing at all. After I wait what seems like a reasonable amount of time, I decide maybe I should text Kevin to see whether he knows what’s going on. Maybe Alliance has lost power, too. Maybe a raccoon or squirrel fried itself on the power lines or at one of the transformers.

But when I grab my phone – no signal. I know I live in the middle of nowhere, but they erected a cell phone tower not a quarter mile behind my property, on the rise beyond the Campbell’s field. I can see it from my house. There’s no reason I don’t have a cell phone signal.

Without power I can’t get online. Without a phone I can’t call Kevin. There is no way I can know what’s happening.

I puzzle over this. I wonder what to do. I decide maybe I should drive to Alliance. Maybe I can find Kevin. Maybe I can get a cell phone signal there. Maybe if I bring my laptop computer I can get online in the coffee shop’s parking lot. I’m just about to head to the car when my lights click back on.

Internet.

I wait for my router to reboot and then I open my laptop. I load the usual news websites – CNN, the Washington Post. Nothing there. No national outage, then. I
load the local news pages – Cleveland.com, Ohio.com. Nothing being reported there, either. Strange, I think.

What the heck?

I realize I have a cell phone signal again. I text Kevin: WTH is going on?

Whaddya mean? he texts back.

Lost power. No cell signal for a while, I text.

That’s fucked up, he texts. No clue.

There aren’t any news stories. I keep checking. It turns out I can’t sleep, so I reload pages for hours. Toward daybreak I see it, on an alternative website, the tinfoil-hat type: Power Outages Have Begun.

The story claims that rolling outages have begun. The story says these are planned. They’re part of the utility companies’ efforts to save money. The utility companies, it turns out, are in debt like the rest of us. The utility companies are trying desperately to stay in the black. Or to get themselves there. They’re shutting down parts of the grid. Every minute they do this, they save millions of dollars, the story claims.

The story also mentions cell phone companies using the same tactic.

This is going to be the new normal, the story says.

I believe this, or I at least believe something is going on that we don’t know about or understand.
The next morning, on CNN’s website, I find a small, three-paragraph story about widespread power outages in the Midwest. The story claims a computer glitch is responsible.

The nanos, I think. Maybe it's the nanos.

Everything’s changing. Nothing I knew is true any more. I don’t believe anything I read online or see on TV.
CHAPTER 12

It started, officially today, I think. I’m marking today as the start of the collapse of the way of life we used to know.

It is June 29. I’m feeling a little shaky.

Even the shitty news channels can’t hide it any longer. On CNN I saw martial law has been declared in Tulsa, in Detroit, in San Antonio.

Tulsa?

In Detroit there was overnight looting. In San Antonio, there was this morning a very low-tech run on banks. Panic led to people withdrawing money which led to smaller bank branches running out of cash which led to more panic, violence, police action.

Tulsa saw street demonstrations: a protest outside a bank branch that closed its doors early spilled over into a local park. There, CNN is reporting, a more organized contingent of former Occupy Wall Street activists took over.

I watched this on TV in the morning. I had been answering some student emails but my fingers froze on my keyboard. Holy shit, I said.

And the reports of cities on lockdown weren’t even the worst of it. On the internet there were whispers, then panic, then almost a roar on the blogs and across Twitter. It began about ten a.m. – widespread reports of bank websites down, of banks refusing access to customer accounts, of pandemonium. Rumors,
overstatement. Commenters on blogs accusing other commenters of being full of shit. It was crazy.

I kept switching my TV from CNN to Fox to the local channels – none of them were acknowledging any of this. None of them were allowing that any of this was happening.

On my computer, I logged in to my bank account at Bank of America’s website. I was able to get in just fine. My login was accepted. But once I was in, there was a message: “Your account information is unavailable at this time. Please check back soon.”

I was not able to view my own bank account.

I was not able to verify whether I still had money. Whether my money belonged to me.

There was more prognosticating online. Panic was spreading. Everything was reaching a fever pitch.

Still nothing on the TV networks or major news websites, either. But then – all at once – things quieted down. I logged in to my bank account, and the website worked fine. There was no message. There wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. There was my account information, just like always. My balance, my money.

Everything looked fine.

And by lunchtime it seemed like all of it was a bad dream, buried in everyone’s Twitter feeds. Only the real conspiracy theorists were still talking about what had happened like it was anything important.
Now, I’m not sure what to make of it. I want to go to the bank. I want to withdraw all my money – not that I think money’ll be useful if things go really crazy. I don’t know. I’m afraid to withdraw money. I’m afraid to find out the bank will tell me I can’t.

I have a thousand dollars in my storage closet. I thought about getting some silver, coins or bouillon, but I’m trying not to overreact.

It’s getting harder not to overreact.

It’s like you’re preparing for the zombie apocalypse, Kevin says.

Zombies, no. Apocalypse, yes.

Apocalypse, Kevin says. I can’t believe it. This whole thing’s fucked.

Yeah it is.

Did you guys hear anything about today?

What do you mean?

The banks. Online. Stuff was all messed up for a while.

We’ve been talking about that. About responding to the banks. What we’re gonna do if we get called to a bank in town.

That’s fucked up.

Yeah.

Kevin’s been dropping by nearly every evening. He tells me about what’s happening up in Alliance. He tells me about communications they’re getting from Homeland Security. All the police departments get them – via fax machine, mostly,
which is so crazy to me – by fax? Our country is going to be saved via messages delivered over fax machines?

The Alliance police department has been told to have readiness plans – disaster plans. They’re starting to stockpile, too, bottled water, first aid kits, ammo like me.

See? I say. I’m not so crazy, after all.

Guess not.

I tell Kevin what Uncle Jack said about my mom. We’re drinking now, sitting on my porch steps, watching swallows skim the tops of the apple trees. The sun is low and everything looks almost like it used to, before the glowing. In the brilliance of the sunset, in its angles and its warmth, you can barely see the glow lighting the sky above Alliance.

You glad you talked to your uncle?

Yeah. I am. It’s funny, I say. I just feel better for some reason.

I bet.

It’s not what he said, exactly – he didn’t say much. It’s just – for so long I didn’t talk to anybody about her. It just felt good.

Kevin holds his Miller Lite up in front of me. I tap his beer with mine, a funny little wordless toast. In honor of my mother.

I’m glad you’re my friend, I say.

Thanks.
I have a friend and I have my uncle and my cousins, but I miss Amelia. I miss Amelia every day. I think about her. I want to call her. I need to talk to her. So many times I nearly text her. I compose text messages in my head. I’ve even typed a few into my phone. I have almost hit send.

But I don’t.

I miss Amelia.

I ordered about fifty trees from an online nursery; they arrived three days ago. There are white pines and apple trees and sour cherry and pear. There are red maples and oaks. I also ordered some bamboo. I spent the better part of the last two days planting. I used the tractor to plow up areas, along the fenceline and next to the apple orchard and next to the barn, and then the ground was a lot easier to work. I dug twenty holes yesterday and thirty today. Tomorrow we’re supposed to have rain; I rushed to get the trees in the ground before then.

Tomorrow morning I will begin digging the trench for the bamboo island I’m creating. Bamboo will spread mercilessly if you don’t cut a deep trench around where you plant it. I want bamboo as a renewable resource, for fenceposts and for poles for the garden and for eating the shoots.

I’ll have more fruit to eat in a few years, and I’ll have some wood, renewable resources if I’m careful and I keep replanting. I’ll be starting to save seeds this fall.

I’m feeling more and more ready.

I’m exhausted.
I sleep on my couch like always and I miss Max. There is no Max at my feet. No dog to listen to me talk about Amelia, missing Amelia.

So many losses and this thing has barely yet begun.

I get a text from Kevin. He’s messaging me during his shift on the bike. It’s a Tuesday. It’s terribly hot outside.

Just saw Amelia, he texts.

I’m contemplating how to respond to this – I want to tell him, I don’t want to know, don’t tell me doing what – when he sends a second message: since when is she a little activist?

What the heck? I text back.

She is outside Chase Bank causing trouble, along with some Occupiers, Kevin texts.

I don’t wanna hear about it, I text back, and then I shut off my phone.

I shut off my phone but I turn on the TV. I’m wondering what Amelia’s protesting about. The closest local news is Akron, almost an hour away, but something tells me I ought to see what’s going on.

All the news channels have the same coverage, but it’s not local. It’s Washington, D.C., where the president has issued an emergency executive order: effective immediately, no person shall be allowed to withdraw more than $40 per day
from any bank account. Additionally, banks reserve the right to shut down if they
deem it necessary. Also, there will be a nationwide curfew: 10 p.m. All National
Guard shall be deployed to keep the peace. All un-engaged military shall be deployed
to keep the peace. The federal government reserves the right to use public spaces,
local government buildings, or other properties as needed in order to keep the peace.

Keep the peace.
I contemplate this phrase, newly frightening: keep the peace.
I worry about Amelia. I wonder whether she’s with her Occupy boyfriend,
what’s his name, Duane? I wonder whether she’s okay. She didn’t seem like the
protesting type. Maybe she’s scared. Maybe she’s been arrested.
I want to call her or text her, but I don’t.
I think of other people I should contact maybe before I can’t get through any
more. I haven’t had any problems with my phone or electricity in a few days, but I’m
sure it won’t be long before it goes out again, before I lose power or phone or the
internet, for good this time, for real.
Everything I know about my way of life is about to change. It’s going to be time
to live a different way.
Everything feels so unravely. The ground isn’t sure under my feet.

Kevin texts again the next day. This time: You at home?
Where else would I be, I reply.

Coming over, he texts.

When he arrives, he’s in his car. I haven’t seen Kevin’s car since winter. It’s an ‘80s era Trans Am. Long ago it used to be black, but its paint job has faded to a dull black-gray. Nothing on or in this car glows; Kevin has owned it for years.

He’s barely out of his car and I’m already asking: What’s with the car?

You’ll see, he says. He folds down the front seat so he can reach into the back. He pulls out a pitbull puppy.

He’s holding the puppy with one hand cupped underneath it. Its fat legs uselessly dangle. It had been sleeping, I think, because its eyes are barely open. It whines a little.

Fuck you, I say.

Bo, take the damn puppy, Kevin says.

I don’t want a puppy, I say, but Kevin has already deposited it in my arms. The puppy is white with a few small gray spots. It’s probably about eight weeks old. It’s waking up fast and squirming to get a better look at me.

See? She loves you already, Kevin says.

Fuck you, I say.

I put the puppy down on the grass. She sniffs a little. She takes three running strides forward and then trips herself up. She tumbles feet-over-head and then stays in an awkward lie-down position on the grass.

Look, Kevin says. You’re gonna need a dog.

I don’t want a dog, I say.
But you’re gonna need one. And I have the perfect name for her.

What’s that?

Zombie Killer.

What?

Zombie Killer. I’m serious. Best name ever.

I don’t get it, I say.

Because. You’re so convinced there’s gonna be a zombie apocalypse. So,

Zombie Killer. Get it?

Not zombie. Just apocalypse, I say.

Whatever.

I’m not keeping her.

Well, I’ve got to go, so, yes. You are.

Kevin is back at his car. He pulls out a bag of Puppy Chow from the passenger seat. He tosses it to me; I nearly miss, but I catch it.

Kevin, I’m serious.

So am I, he says, and he slides into the driver’s seat of that awful Trans Am, shuts the driver side door, turns the key in the ignition and roars away.

I pick up Zombie Killer and hold her out in front of me. I touch my nose to hers. She licks the side of my face. I take her inside the house and begin the job of finding her a crate, a bowl, a chew toy.

Oh no, puppy, I say.
The nanos.

For a while it seemed that the glowing had become just so much background noise. We’d stopped noticing. We went about our daily lives. We’d stopped paying attention. But a few days ago there was a story getting attention everywhere – on TV, on the internet. All the mainstream places.

The story broke then, but it is still happening: the nanos, it seems, aren’t behaving any longer in the fucked up way we’ve all been accustomed to.

There were reports of the nanos glowing on owned items – on those things owned free and clear. There were reports of the nanos switching colors, shutting themselves off.

There were wild speculations: the nanos are organizing. They’re sentient. They’re punishing certain people, rewarding others. They’ve been hacked again. They’re about to run out of steam. All of these things have been said about the nanos. It is impossible to know which of them might be true.

In my heart I hope it is this: the nanos are showing themselves to be a force for good in this world. The nanos are ready to do the work, what is necessary for the common good.

It wasn’t widely reported but I found a small news item about nanos able to shock or even burn people. These reports came from two Wall Street bankers, both burned by their iPhones.
Hell yes, I thought, when I saw the news piece. Let it be true. Please, please, let it be true.

And then there have been the other things, panic, sporadic violence, power outages, more curfews, looting, military men everywhere, FEMA trucks, police all the time, and also, importantly, this: our money, all of it, U.S. currency, has begun to glow.

For the first time I have items in my home besides my mother’s book that are glowing: my cash, all of it. Even the coins. It was inevitable, the newscasters were saying. We saw this coming. The White House has been glowing for months. The mint trucks. Our infrastructure. Bridges, cell phone towers, power lines. We knew the money would glow, eventually, too.

It doesn’t stop glowing for anything, not when you spend it or receive it or put it in the bank or take it out. It just all glows.

It has started, it’s starting, it’s begun, I kept saying, for months it seemed, but this, the money, our currency, this is the real tipping point. After the money everything really has come apart.

I lost power two nights ago and it hasn’t come back on. This is the longest outage yet.

I heard lots of things from Kevin when he came to see me yesterday. Most stores are closed. Alliance is like a blazing lit-up ghost town. There are food shortages.
A quick unraveling, just like I predicted.

Maybe you ought to start sleeping out here, at my place, I said to Kevin yesterday.

Naw, he said. I’m fine.

I sit on my porch with a glass of lemonade, thankful for this hot summer. It’s nighttime and the power is still out. I’m already worried about winter. How will I heat the house? I wish I’d have gotten a woodburning stove installed. I only have a fireplace and it mostly only heats the living room. I’m thankful it’s summer. I’m worried I don’t have enough sweaters, enough firewood. What if something happens to my axe?

I wish I’d bought more supplies.

I’m thinking all these things when I see headlights coming up the lane. It’s Uncle Jack’s pickup. He pulls up alongside my tractor outside the garage and he cuts his engine. When he comes up the porch steps I see he’s got a knapsack.

I’ll sleep outside. I’ve got a tent in the truck.

Nonsense, I say. I have spare bedrooms, with beds. You’ll sleep inside.

Bound to be hot in there, he says, with no AC.

There are fans in all the rooms, I say. There’s a cross breeze.

He sits on the porch step, opens his sack, pulls out a can of beer and cracks it open.

Want one?
No, thanks, I say. I don’t tell Uncle Jack this, but I’m trying to keep my wits about me.

The puppy has been sleeping on Max’s old porch bed, but she stirs and begins to whimper. The glowing horizon line doesn’t cast enough light over where the puppy is, so I shine the flashlight on the puppy so Uncle Jack can see.

Damn cute dog, he says. What’s its name?

God, I don’t know, I say. Zeke, I guess.

Zeke?


No, I don’t get it.

Me neither, I say, and Uncle Jack chuckles.

After Uncle Jack goes to bed – in the spare bedroom, not in his tent outside – I find I can’t sleep. I hear coyotes. Yip yip yip yip, they call.

I tiptoe to the storage closet and find the rifle in the dark. I feel on the shelf with my fingertips for a box of its ammo. Zeke whimpers in her crate.

Good girl, I whisper. You’re staying here.

I push the button on the screen door and latch it silently behind me. Because of the glowing I do not need a flashlight. The coyotes sound like they’re up by the main road. It’s nearly one a.m. and I’m adrenalined, wide awake.

I walk alongside the gravel lane, in the grass, so my feet don’t make noise. I pause midway up the lane and I load the rifle. Then I continue on. I walk, pause,
listen, walk some more. The coyotes sound like they might be up by Lucy’s house, though I don’t think she keeps chickens there and I wonder what they could be after. Raccoons, I’m guessing. When I get to the edge of Lucy’s property, I hesitate before I step off the lane. Her house is dark, of course, because of the outage, though I see through windows the faint glow here and there of things she owns but doesn’t own.

I hear a noise along the edge of Lucy’s concrete backyard patio and I move toward it. I wish now I’d brought a flashlight because there are bushes and shadow. I take a step or two more, and a fat, longhaired cat appears on the concrete patio. Out in the open on the flat cement, the cat is lit by the horizon’s golden light. I wonder whether the coyotes were after her.

Kitty, I say. Here, kitty.

Who’s there? It’s Lucy’s angry voice from her back screen door.

Oh, shit, I say. It’s me, Lucy. Your neighbor. Bonnie.

Bonnie?

I heard coyotes, I say.

Stay the Hell off my land, she says.

Look, I say. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I trespassed. But – I was just worried the coyotes were causing trouble.

None of your business, on my land, Lucy says.

Lucy, I say, I don’t know why you hate me. But I want you to know something. I’m set up back there, on my farm. I’m ready. I can go a long time without electricity. I can feed people. I can help you. I’d like to help you.

Bullshit, Lucy says.
I wonder why I am even bothering. I wish I hadn’t said anything. I don’t understand her venom. I suppose she was always mean; I remember that. But I’m bold enough tonight, fatalistic, almost, so I ask her: Why do you say mean things about my mother? What do you know about my mother?

Your mother, Lucy says, jabbing her finger at her closed screen door, was always leaving you with your grandparents while she went out about town. She didn’t take her marriage vows seriously, I’ll say that. She used to drive clear up to Cleveland! She belonged to radical groups up there. They were abortionists!

Abortionists. So? I say.

So? She probably wished she aborted you! She never listened to the word of God!

Well, I’m not religious, I say.

Obviously. You live in sin, with women. I know all about you!

Not really, I say. Look. Lucy, if you need something, I will try to help you.

Things might get really bad. Who knows what’s going to happen.

Go away, Lucy says, and so after I stand awkwardly for a minute, I do. I back away and then I turn and walk down the lane back home.

I still can’t sleep.

I hear my uncle snoring in the spare room. I’m thinking about everything, my mother, what’s coming next, weeds in the garden, my new fence, everything.

Amelia.
I pull out my cell phone. It’s past three in the morning, now.

I type these words, to Amelia: I miss my friend.

I hit the send button. I pull Zeke out of her crate and curl up with her on the couch and then, after a long time, I finally fall asleep. I do this in spite of the fact that there’s no more money, no economy, likely no food in the stores any more, and for all I know, no government. There’s nothing. Kevin hasn’t stopped by for days. I think he’s probably just always on duty, sleeping when he can at the station or at his house in town, but I realize it’s possible he is hurt, or missing, or dead. I don’t know anything at all and I have no way to get information. I have thought about driving to town, looking for Kevin. I have thought about knocking on Amelia’s door. But I hear enough sirens racing up my road toward Alliance to know it’s not someplace safe right now.

I fall asleep wondering how much longer I will feel safe here.

Two days later, still no electricity, spotty cell phone reception, crazy glowing, still that nighttime horizon, my cousins come to my farm. They pitch a couple tents outside – they’re pretty insistent they not sleep in my house, and I don’t argue. We build a bonfire in the fire pit and we sit around it. Junior has a bottle of Jack Daniels and we pass it to each other like cowboys. We talk late into the night, sirens from Alliance on the wind, the ever-present half-lit sky, and when I stand unsteadily to head to the house and sleep on the couch, I hear Kevin’s bike on the lane, and so Kevin stays with us, too, on this night and on many nights after. When I go to my
bedroom to find some shorts to wear to bed, I notice my mother’s glowing book on the bookshelf, lit differently this time. As if a surprise for me, as if a happy message, It is illuminated perfectly by chaser lights, almost like a marquis, an advertisement, like a welcome banner.

This is home. We belong here, together.

Everything’s going to be okay.
Zeke barks a little in her sleep on the floor next to the couch and I realize I’d been sleeping very soundly. I pull my hands over my face to block the morning sun.

It has been two years since I kept a journal about the glowing, my preparations, the farm, that uncertain time, and as I lay on the couch – a new couch, comfortable, beautiful, velveteen, one I just traded almost half my tomato crop for, plus a pretty wooden cart I built out of lumber given to me in exchange for one of Zeke’s puppies – I think about everything that happened then, how different things are now.

I could never have predicted the way things would turn out.

I get up after a few minutes spent watching the trees in the orchard cast mottled sun shadows on the big picture window. It’s another beautiful day and I’m going to go work in the garden.

Outside, I check on the grapes – they’re green but well-formed – and I walk the length of the orchard. I make a mental note: mix up some clay spray in the sprayer. It’s time to hit the apples and pears before they get worms. I’ve planted clover under all the trees so I don’t have to mow, and to attract bees. Bees are everywhere now: if you close your eyes you can hear them buzzing as they move from clover flower to clover flower.
I don’t teach online any more. The way things worked out, I don’t have to. So many of us, in the new economy, just participate from home now, making what we can. So few of us do the old kind of work any more. Paychecks aren’t really a thing I ever think about. It’s rare I ever handle money.

Things still glow, sure. But it’s not like it was. The nanos are getting smarter, in the right kinds of ways. Because they were coded by the government and the banks to be unique to each person, they are like our fingerprints. They’ll never go away, it seems like, at least not in any way anybody’s ever figured out.

But – and this is important – they no longer are beholden to any bank or government or corporation.

They’re free agents, or something. They’re like mood rings. They glow to varying degrees, in various colors, or not at all sometimes, depending on the person or the time of year or time of day or what you’re wearing. They’re an accessory, decoration. They’re part of everyone’s wardrobe. Books and handbags and women’s skirts and cars and even trees on people’s property, rooftops, aluminum siding – all these can lumesce to varying degrees. Each glowing is different. No two people or homes ever look the same.

The nanos played an even more important role two years ago, after the power went out. This was courtesy of hackers back then – it seems now the nanos have figured out how to do this without a hack, but back then it was the hackers. Back then it was crafty people, just trying to get by.
People began to use their nanos to light their homes. You’d infect your nanos with a particular kind of computer virus, and then they’d behave like lightbulbs. Or flashlights. Or lanterns. They were already on everything you owned, or didn’t own, so it was just a matter of getting them to light up in such a way as to be useful. There was computer code for this and it became available everywhere. Those of us with smartphones – and the means to use them – were able to get the code from websites run by a few smart kids with fuel oil generators and the means to keep them running.

I’m not the only one who thinks the nanos enjoyed being useful, welcomed being hacked. Many of us think they wanted to be taught these things. Many of us think they wanted to break free of the corporations and the government that were using them.

Whether they’re capable of this – I don’t really know. After all, you can’t communicate with nanos, although I’m among the many who wish we could. The nanos are probably the main reason we survived the mess a couple years ago.

Two summers ago, it turned out my uncle and my cousins stayed with me for only six weeks. Kevin stayed longer, almost until October, when he wasn’t working, I mean. He worked 18-hour shifts that summer, and he was chronically exhausted. He hardly drank; he would ride home and just fall into bed. It was Kevin who told me about hacking the nanos to get light. We used my iPhone’s solar charger to power the device and download the hack.
It was funny that the cellular networks mostly kept working even though there was no electricity for months and therefore there wasn’t internet. I suspected then – and I actually still do – that the cellular networks were bankrolled by Wall Street, by whoever still had money or power or influence. There were a lot of things, I think, that those with power began to understand they could not change or control, but the cellphone network kept working regardless. It was like it was their last vestige of hope, or something.

The nanos have more recently taught themselves to tune in to any wi-fi or cellular network frequency. They’re like little routers, little signal towers, now. I have internet access again, and I don’t have to pay for it. Nobody pays for it any more.

Whether the wi-fi thing was a hack or something the nanos came up with on their own doesn’t really matter. But some of the people who hacked the nanos and got them to light everything up back then are internet heroes now. Dave Saunier. Mike Sorgahan. Emily Beale. These aren’t exactly household names, but they’re heroes in certain circles. Without them, things wouldn’t have happened like they did. Without them, I might have been right about survival and starvation and fences. I might have needed my guns and my barbed wire.

This is what happened two years ago, instead of what I thought would happen.
I was all prepared, with knives and batteries, shovels and chickens. I thought I was ready, and at first, it was just like I thought: no electricity, stores closed, our government officials literally in hiding. We were headed for collapse.

But things like the nano hack happened. And then people didn’t need electricity.

People actually stopped trying to buy things or pay off their credit cards. The more glowing nanos, the better, people said.

After years of disengagement and apathy, Americans got political real quick. I guess no electricity and the threat of starvation will do that to a population. FEMA and the National Guard were handing out bottled water and meals, but some of the food was glowing, Kevin said, and there wasn’t enough for everyone.

This led to the looting. In Alliance and in most cities, Wal-Mart got looted first. I hoped then as I do now, that the choice was deliberate. People really did choose the corporate places to steal from, for the most part. And all Kevin and the other cops could do most of the time was watch and make sure nobody got hurt and nothing got burned down. It was time for the authorities to get out of the way of the people.

For most of this time I was safe on my farm.

Nobody once ever tried to come on to my land. I never had to use my gun except to shoot the raccoons who were able to climb into the chicken wire corral and kill three of my chickens.

Not even Lucy caused any problems. She stayed in her house, eating God knows what, until she died of heart disease last winter. Her daughter found her there. Lucy never asked me for anything, not once.
Some people during the time of the looting still had jobs. There is still money – all of it glowing, of course – and even back then there were still stores that were open. Kevin sometimes did store duty. Stores would lock up, only let one person in at a time. No large purses or backpacks. Heavy police presence. You could only shop that way.

Delivery trucks had to be guarded. Actually a lot of Alliance’s unemployed, if their records were clean, became security guards or cops. Alliance’s police force grew by thirty percent that year.

Things went along this way, up there in Alliance and elsewhere, for a while. And my uncle and cousins and Kevin and I lived on the farm. We ate canned goods and we drank whatever alcohol the cousins could scare up. They bought moonshine off a dairy farmer down the road. They traded a pair of skinny jeans Junior didn’t like for some red wine an old guy in Alliance has been bottling for years.

The wine and the moonshine tasted amazing. I wish I could find either one of those guys who made that stuff now. I loved it.

And so this is how what I call the new economy started for most people: trading things, out of necessity. It was, of course, a natural and normal thing to do. Interestingly, none of this trading seemed to affect the nanos one way or another.

Trading and bartering quickly gained momentum. People started to congregate in parking lots or in parks. Tables would get set up. People made their own signs,
advertised what they were selling. Signs were fashioned out of sheets of plastic and Sharpie markers, or out of cardboard, or fabric.

There was an energy to this endeavor, a whole exciting feeling. It was a different time. People you didn’t think were creative would make things to sell at the market. There was jewelry and hand-sewn shopping bags and skirts made from recycled t-shirts. People with trees on their land chopped up and corded bunches of firewood. Everyone traded what they had.

Kevin would tell me where, and when, and so, starting that summer I brought vegetables to the market. I sold out every time. I took almost anything as payment – cash, of course, when people had that, but also anything in trade. Firewood was great. Alcohol. But I traded for clothes I would never wear, jewelry I didn’t want. I traded for anything people had.

Later I would sometimes trade the jewelry or clothes to another vendor for something I needed. Things, the things people made, became a whole new currency.

That summer I talked it over with Uncle Jack and the cousins and Kevin. I told them, I’d planted and grown food for us. I told them if we were smart we’d eat it all ourselves, let me preserve everything I could: make spaghetti sauce, can corn, bottle up some pickles. Of course, I was still figuring out how to do all this without electricity. We’d have to find a way to sustain a boil in my large pots. We’d have to figure out how to sterilize. I had clean water, thanks to the hand pump at my well, but I wasn’t sure how to cook on that scale over a fire, and have it come out right.
But, it didn’t matter. Problem solved: we decided to sell all produce we weren’t immediately consuming. People in Alliance were hungry. It wouldn’t be fair to keep it all to ourselves.

It was a difficult time, of course – I’d have killed for a hot shower, or for an hour of mindless television, and I was scared. I worried about looters or violent men or coyotes, and I worried about getting hurt or sick. It would have been hard to find a doctor at that time. There really isn’t such a thing as medical insurance any more.

I was worried and I was scared, but I was happy, too. It was a hard time, but it was also a good time, a satisfying time.

One afternoon that summer, I showed my uncle my mother’s glowing book. I asked him if he knew anything about it. He took it from me and looked it over.

No, he said. I never saw this. But then again, I was just the brother-in-law. It’s not like we talked.

Uncle Jack and I talked about my mother a lot in those weeks that he stayed with me. It was a more constant acknowledgement of my mother than I’d ever allowed myself.

Your mom was complicated, Uncle Jack said to me once. And that’s okay.

Yeah, I said. That’s okay.

I felt at peace. These were frightening times, but I felt at peace.
Amelia.

She never texted me back.

In those first few months, Kevin saw her, sometimes, in town. He told me which market she sold her stuff at so I could avoid it. She made fabric headbands and these little crocheted pot scrubbers. When Kevin told me this I had a difficult time imagining Amelia doing something so domestic. Who taught her to crochet? I guess the glowing changed everybody. Her Occupy boyfriend had turned her into an activist, Kevin said.

I miss Amelia.

I saw her, about a year ago. She came to the market I like. I was sitting behind my table – I had just built these neat wooden risers to hold my lettuces and my tomatoes – and when I looked up, Amelia was there. She was beautiful as ever. At the time I ran into Amelia I was actually dating a girl I’d met via Junior, a friend of his – so perhaps Amelia was a little further from my mind than she had been when I first started doing the market. But seeing her made my chest go tight. I probably winced.

Hi, I said.

Hi.

How are you?

Good. I’m good. I broke up with Duane.

I had no idea why she was telling me this, and I didn’t know what to say.

Oh, I said.
I hope you’re good, too.

Yeah, I said.

Your vegetables look amazing, she said, and then she smiled a little and moved along to the next booth.

I haven’t seen Amelia since, but that night a year ago when I got home from the market, I broke up with the girl I was dating, Junior’s friend. I just didn’t want to be with anybody else right then.

Amelia.

These days, like I said, I don’t teach. I earn my living from my garden. I plant and I harvest and I make spaghetti sauces and pickles, sauerkraut, pea soup. I sell these things without a license and without paying taxes. None of us at the markets pay any taxes, but when the streets need to be swept or snow needs to be shoveled from a sidewalk, we all pitch in. It’s an unspoken contract: in order to participate in the market, you have to do what needs to be done. There are organized meetings now, and there is talk of doing more: tearing down old buildings, repossessing land where vacant stores stand. Maybe we will build something new entirely, together.

It’s funny: I thought I’d be off the grid, with a composting toilet, patrolling my land, behind my barbed wire fence, protecting what was mine. But that’s not at all how it turned out.
I spend mornings in the garden. I spend afternoons at the market. I visit my uncle and my cousins. Kevin comes over to shoot, of course. I have new friends from Alliance. I have Zeke, my great dog. I trade cucumbers and cords of firewood for vet care. I trade corn – cut off the cob, blanched, flash-frozen and vacuum-sealed – for haircuts in town. I make and sell hard apple cider.

And because the nanos aren’t corporate-controlled any more, sometimes things in my home glow. It is never obtrusive. It is no longer a reminder of what is wrong or messed up in the world. It is always beautiful.

It was like America got its reset button pressed.

Maybe it was the weeks without electricity or TV. Maybe it was the realization, finally, long overdue, that the glowing and everything else was being done to us. We’d had no say. We hadn’t lived in a democracy, not for a long time.

The actual government is still there, I suppose. There’s a congress and a president and everything there was before, only they’re the ones who are powerless now. Banks, corporations, politicians – they’re just irrelevant, hideous bloated idiots who seem like relics from an entirely different time. There’s nothing they can do to us any more.

We’re free.

I’m lying on my soft new lilac-colored couch.
It’s morning again. Sunlight streams across the hardwood floors. Zeke sleeps on the rug nearby.

I’m dreaming, of fireflies, of the sweet smelling garden, of the raspberries I know are ripe today.

There is a soft knock at the door. Zeke raises her head.

Hello? a voice says. Bo? Are you home? It’s Amelia, she says.

There’s a minute where I don’t know whether I’m awake or whether I’m dreaming, but I don’t care, I don’t care, I leap for the door and I pull it open. The warmth of the morning floods in, brilliantly, beautifully.

Hello, I say. Please. Won’t you come in?