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I, Soren G Palmer, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English & Comparative Literature.

It is entitled:

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# **The Swimming Rabbit**

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by

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## **Abstract**

The same week three friends open a restaurant called The Swimming Rabbit in Elora, South Carolina, a woman is murdered across town, leaving her twelve-year-old daughter, Jasmine, pregnant and orphaned. In the wake of the murder several lives are thrown into chaos. Swimming Rabbit owner Boyd Tennor wants to use the tragedy to his advantage, hoping a fundraiser for Jasmine will increase the restaurant's reputation and revenues. NFL icon Sterling Carroll offers to participate, wanting to help Jasmine stay at the home run by Boyd's ex-girlfriend Emily. Boyd and his business partners are thrilled, but Boyd's employee Lamont is not.

Lamont has been keeping secret not only that he's Sterling's brother, but that Sterling was kicked out of the NFL for gambling and is currently a bookie for Elora's biggest criminal. Lamont, a PhD candidate, waits tables only to help Sterling pay off his gambling debt. Preoccupied with his brother's financial troubles, his own struggles within the philosophy department, and his longing for an unavailable woman, Lamont fails to ask the most important question: Why is Sterling, recently fallen on hard times himself, so interested in helping this little girl? What might his involvement be in her mother's death?

As the fundraiser draws near, Sterling's past gambling problems begin to jeopardize The Swimming Rabbit's delicate balance. While the owners fight for control of the restaurant, Jasmine fights for a place to live.



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THE SWIMMING RABBIT

By

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**First Course: Amuse**  
**Chapter One**

The day Yolavia was to die she was walking to church with her daughter, Jasmine. It was a Wednesday evening during the second week in October and the bottom of the sun slipped into the horizon, as if it had no intention of circling back around. Mother Nature tossed a plastic bag past them that caught on the end of a branch but still bellowed out from the breeze, then tore itself free and tumbled down the street. When Yolavia and Jasmine came to the curb where Baker crossed Sixth, Jasmine started to step into the street without looking, and Yolavia shot out her arm, popping her daughter in the chest. *Not a car in sight*, Yolavia thought, *but that is not the point*. The point was, Jasmine always missed the point. Even now, Jasmine sighed dramatically, her mouth hanging open.

“Go ahead,” Yolavia said, her arm still against her daughter’s chest, “sigh like that again and see what happens.”

“Ain’t no cars coming.”

Yolavia dropped her arm. “Can you see what’s coming around the corner?”

Jasmine looked down, fingering a yellow bracelet she’d begun wearing two months ago, religiously, refusing to shed it for any occasion. “No.”

“That’s right. And we wouldn’t be in this mess if you’d stop and think. Think about what might be coming around the corner. Better pray when we get to Church because I have run out of answers.”

“I been praying,” Jasmine said, running her hand down the front of her light blue dress, trying to bend a ruffle over a small tear.

“And take off that bracelet – whatever it is. I don’t like the kind of girls I see wearing those.” Yolavia swore all the bad of the last six months had come from that bracelet, as if it was making Jasmine fight against the best parts of herself, the parts that had made her the perfect daughter.

“It ain’t hurting nothing.”

“It ain’t helping nothing. Give it here.”

Jasmine wrapped her right hand around the bracelet.

“Come on, then.” Yolavia zipped up her coat and stepped off the curb, still dressed in the blue pants and white blouse she wore working the front desk of a Best Western. She planned on being back there tonight, pulling a second shift, auditing the day’s numbers and drinking weak coffee. And since Jasmine could no longer be trusted she would sleep in a vacant room complete with the luxuries of cable TV. Some punishment. They didn’t have cable at home, and they didn’t have a computer, but working nights allowed Yolavia to take accounting classes online. It didn’t make her an accountant, but she could do the auditing and add another dollar an hour during the shift. It also made her realize she liked numbers. Liked how predictable and tidy they were. Liked how two plus two equaled four no matter how many times you added them up. And she especially liked how they didn’t come home and tell you they were pregnant.

A funky beat tumbled out an open front door up ahead, the words falling like an inebriated body at Yolavia’s feet: *Treasure, what’s your pleasure? Life is a, uh, depending on how you dress her. So if the devil wear Prada, Adam-Eve wear nada.* A teenager leaned against the doorjamb, his jeans barely clinging to his butt. He had already adopted the neighborhood colors, wearing a blue basketball jersey with the



number thirty, *Magic* above the number in white, pointed letters. *Cause when you try hard, that's when you die hard. Ya homies looking like "Why God?" When they reminisce over you, My God.* The boy in blue held a beer bottle in his left hand, tapping it against his hip to the beat. He nodded at Yolavia, solemnly, trying to be hard and polite at the same time. *Laaaaa-la-la-la. Wait till I get my mon-ey right.* Yolavia was thinking about how close she was to getting her money right, how close she was to not being behind, at least. She was considering more accounting classes, considering a computer for her and Jasmine. Not a new one, but a computer nonetheless – unless Jasmine had that baby. Then, Yolavia knew, she'd never get her money right. Ever.

They turned right on Rallfallen, starting up a long hill, and Yolavia cursed herself for not changing shoes. She'd gotten home and Jasmine wasn't ready. On purpose, surely. Being ornery, surely. Six months ago Jasmine had grabbed hold to the tail of anger and refused to let go. Mad she didn't have a daddy. Mad she didn't have an iPod. Mad Yolavia worked sixty hours a week only for them to be poor. Yolavia tried everything to douse her daughter's anger – being nice, being mean, ignoring her, grounding her – but always ended up blowing on that ember instead, Jasmine's anger blossoming. Soon she was acting just like Yolavia had at thirteen: an ungrateful little brat who did everything she could to anger her mother. Except Jasmine raised the stakes from talking back and smoking cigarettes to having sex and smoking crystal meth. Jasmine had stood there, swaying back and forth, a pinky hooked beneath that yellow bracelet, so high and whacked out it terrified Yolavia. She didn't know what to do, so she slapped her. The single second of that slap annihilated a fourteen-year promise she'd

made to herself after being slapped by her own mother, after becoming pregnant herself, “I will never do that to *my* daughter.”

There it was, her past scurrying into her present, the repetition piercing her heart, the reality allowing Yolavia to understand – finally and too late – that her own mother had been scared. Frightened, rightly, for Yolavia’s present and future. Terrified of the taunting in the halls and the whispers from other mothers. Afraid that she had failed Yolavia, that it had all happened because of something she had or had not done, had happened because she was one of those bad mothers. Yolavia understood, finally and too late, because it was how she felt: it was her own fault Jasmine was pregnant. She even sympathized what had come after the slap, her mother calling her a “whore,” that damning and indicting word that could endure for decades suddenly on the tip of her own tongue, like a diver waiting to summersault into water. Whore.

Those heels pinched on Yolavia’s toes, her arches aching, her calves stinging, and the top of that hill barely in sight. She unzipped her jacket, thinking that at least she had been seventeen when she got pregnant. At least she had been able to enjoy being a teenager for a while, enjoy being chased and caught by boys, escorted to dinner and dances. Jasmine was thirteen. One year past twelve. Seven years before twenty. No matter how Yolavia did the math it didn’t add up to any sense or answer the question she couldn’t shake from her mind: When did thirteen-year-olds start having sex?

Jasmine’s daddy, Jerome, had been one fine man. All muscles. So Yolavia understood about wanting to have sex at sixteen. She used to shave his head. Lather it up with shaving cream and pull that blade from just above his forehead to the back of his neck, leaving a clean black streak between the white lines. It made Yolavia wet, and

often she would only finish half of his head before swinging her body onto his lap, the post-coital evidence of shaving cream frosting her forearms and face. Football season had the same effect, Yolavia watching him break out of the huddle, watching him point across the line then bob up and down before taking his stance at left tackle. He always bragged about his job protecting the quarterback's blind side. Sometimes Yolavia thought Jerome was the blind one, her sitting right in front of him, wanting him. She wasn't stupid, though. She'd gotten tested. Gone on the pill and taken it every morning after she brushed her teeth. She admired the order of it all: the days of the week across the top of the pack, week one through four down the side; three rows of tiny orange pills and one row of white. It regulated her period. To, the, day. Let her postpone it, even, for Jerome's birthday or to wear a white dress on Easter. She thanked God every night for that little pill – until she found out about the one in ten-thousand chance of failure.

Yolavia always wondered why she couldn't have won the lottery with those odds, why she couldn't have been born with wealthy parents or a voice like Beyonce. One in ten thousand. It was like a single grain of sand falling between the rocks. She thought it was a sign, a message straight from God that she was *supposed* to have this baby. One in ten thousand had to be God – though Jerome thought she had to have an abortion. “An abortion,” she repeated, “that would be like spitting in the face of God.” A few days later Jerome essentially spit in her face, packing up his car and moving to Atlanta to become a rapper. *Please*, Yolavia thought, *that boy has no rhythm*. He couldn't even get the snap count right, always jumping off-sides, the referee blowing his whistle and tossing a yellow flag at Jerome's feet. Looking back, Yolavia didn't know who was more naïve,

him for thinking he could become a rapper or her for giving God credit for something that was no more than bad luck.

At the top of the hill, Yolavia paused in front of an abandoned youth center to catch up with her breath. Weathered boards covered the windows. Strange names spray-painted in red and blue decorated the white wood. She still had that song in her head: *Laaaaa-la-la-la, wait till I get my mon-ey right. Laaaaaa-la-la-la, then you can't tell me no-thin' right.* The sun was all but set, light trickling past the tree line like water in a stream. They took a right on Lee Street and Jasmine tripped on a crack in the sidewalk, Yolavia cupping a hand under Jasmine's shoulder to steady her. Jasmine was pudgy for her age, her big bones courtesy of Jerome, the only trace of his place as her father. There certainly weren't any CDs to speak of.

Up ahead, a strung-out punk was pacing around a yellow fire hydrant, his hands dug deep into his pockets. Yolavia had half a mind to slap him, selling rock two blocks away from the church – selling rock at all. She grabbed Jasmine's hand and took three quick steps towards him, words of hate foaming up in her mouth and ready to spill out – until she recognized him. She stopped, about five feet away, watching him circle the hydrant, his steps long, his attention not even taking notice of her. She said, "William?"

*Yes, she thought, William.*

She'd gone to high school with him, had a geometry class with him, both of them sitting in the back and cutting up. He was one of Jerome's boys, too skinny to play football – did he run track? *That's right, Yolavia remembered, he ran track.* Jerome used to make fun of him, saying stuff like, "What do you fools do in practice, just run around the track?" William had connections. He got Jerome weed. And now he was

walking around a fire hydrant, a pile of bones in tattered corduroys and an old flannel shirt. His ratty afro peaked out from under a fishing hat.

He stopped in front of them. Cold sores spotted his cracked lip and the bridge of his nose. He said, “What you tryin’ to get?”

“It’s me, Yolavia,” she said, touching her heart, “I used to be Jerome’s girl.”

He looked around, twitching, scratching his head, saying to himself, “Yolavia, Yolavia – I can’t member shit no more.”

“I know you remember, we used to hang out in Jerome’s ride, singing the Diggable Planets.”

“Diggable what?”

“You know, we used to sing that one song – how did it go? A nickel bag of funk, a nickel bag of funk.” She snapped her fingers, surprising herself by singing, “The sun, the kiss, the funk for a bliss, the lips of the soul and the jazz for your hips.”

His chin caught the beat, and he began to sing, “A nick-el bag, a nick-el bag, butterfly hit you with a nick-el bag – oh yeah!” He exclaimed, the pitch of his voice rising. “Yolavia! Check you out, all mom-like and shit.”

Jasmine kicked the ground. “Come on, mamma.”

“Hold on.”

“We’ll be late.”

“I said, hold on.”

“What happened to J? He left . . . why’d he leave?” William closed his eyes and opened his mouth, revealing a dozen rotten teeth. Quietly, he sang, “Nick-el bag, nick-el bag, butterfly hit you with a nick-el bag . . . sorry, Yolavia, can’t member shit no more.”

“It’s okay,” Yolavia said, “we’re on our way to Church so – ” Tires squealed behind her. William’s eyes got big and then his sneakers were slapping the pavement, his body seeming to lean ahead of himself, at an angle when two, three, then four shots were fired. A bullet chipped off the fire hydrant and Yolavia pushed Jasmine to the ground, starting to fall on top of her when something stood her up, straight, its momentum holding her still for a long second as William sprung over a wooden fence, his hands on top of it, his legs swinging over as Jasmine started to scream and Yolavia collapsed on top of her daughter.

## Chapter Two

If you drove north up Main Street in Elora, South Carolina, a town in the northeast corner of the state, the first thing to jump out at you would be the purple, two-foot-tall crab squatting in front of the Elora Crab Cabin, its pointed claws reaching towards the street. Given the tables shaded with red umbrellas and the silver buckets of beer, you'd be tempted to stop, at least for a quick one. If you happened through town in the fall, though, you would drive on, hypnotized by the trees lining the street, by the bright bulbs of yellow bleeding into browns and maroons. Limbs brushing against awnings of orange and red. Patios would be dotted with patrons. It would all be very quaint, you'd notice, very charming, the southern roots and the collegiate atmosphere coalescing into a town that seemed neither southern nor collegiate, that seemed, rather, to be quietly fighting itself, history battling the present for control of the future – though you wouldn't notice that, only that it felt comfortable. You'd meander along with the traffic, past a dozen restaurants and bars, past a newsstand and an ice-cream parlor and a few coffee shops. You might think, perhaps, that you could settle down here for a spell. Not long, but certainly a spell.

Six blocks up you would drive through Main Street's lone stoplight and Longstreet Avenue – named after the Confederate general – and follow traffic into the northern half of Main Street. Less restaurants and more retail. Fewer suits and more students. A movie marquee would advertise Rocky Horror on Fridays at midnight. City ordinances keep buildings under five stories and keep Main Street – the town's carotid artery – from becoming clotted with Gaps and Borders', though a Kinko's managed to slip in next to the vintage bookstore, a concession to students and faculty.

Undoubtedly, you would find it curious when cars ahead of you began turning onto side streets – until you realized that Main Street dead-ended into the college campus and became Elora State University’s central oval, circling a long median covered with rose bushes and yellow jessamine that surrounded a statue of Wade Hampton III. Ancient oak trees. Shaded sidewalks. White pillars flanking old brick buildings, their names etched in blocks of stone. The library standing at the oval’s pinnacle, where students would sit staggered on the twenty steps ascending to the entrance, plugged into iPods and campus prattle and pages of textbooks. It would seem like a good place to stop and look around, only there would be no place to park, and the security guard at the booth up ahead would tell you as much: “Nope. No parking here. Circle on back into town, that’s where everyone ends up anyway.”

So you’d circle back as instructed, and if it was Monday, close to three-thirty, you would see Lamont Carroll descending those library steps, mumbling to himself about running late to a meeting with his boss. He’d be wearing jeans and a white button down. A leather book satchel dangling from his shoulder. Despite running late, and despite hating running late, Lamont would stop to say hello to the security guard, who had two daughters and often a good story about the statue of Wade Hampton III being dressed in drag or crowned with an afro. It’s all in good fun, until it’s not.

A PhD candidate in philosophy, Lamont would be reading Nietzsche, whose maddening aphorisms and nihilistic diatribes evaporated time. After all, what is time to an angry philosopher? An angry philosopher who’d conceived of the “eternal return” and insisted that all moments in time continually repeated themselves. The concept captivated and baffled Lamont, who would have arrived at the library that morning in



search of a beginning to a twenty-page paper – due next week – but emerge disoriented. He had no beginning. He'd remove his glasses and clean them off with the end of his shirt. There was a psychological aspect to the eternal return that merited investigation, an aspect Nietzsche had, possibly, ignored.

Lamont usually savored this stroll down Main Street, a transition from campus to The Swimming Rabbit, the restaurant where he worked three shifts a week. Generally drowning under the pressure of taking three classes, teaching one, and waiting tables, the walk tendered an opportunity to be still, to let his mind meander around a chapter or a lecture, to utter a quick prayer. Stillness, in motion. It balanced him. Today, however, the walk was weighted down by a phone call he'd gotten from his brother, Sterling: a woman had been shot last week; a daughter had survived.

"Let's throw us a fundraiser," Sterling had said, "at that posh place you're working."

"You want to throw a fundraiser?"

"I want to throw a fundraiser. Is that so hard to believe?"

It was. And because of that, because it was so hard to believe, Lamont had to ask the question that no one should have to ask their older brother: "Did you kill her, Sterling?"

"I didn't kill that woman," Sterling said, embarrassed, despair displacing his usual bravado, "but it's my fault she's dead."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means this is one of them things you're better off not knowing about."

Seven years ago Sterling's life had become a series of things Lamont was better off not knowing about, and always returned to the same moment, the one where it started raining shit and Lamont found himself without as much as a slicker. The only reason he waited tables was to help pay off Sterling's debt.

"I just want to make this right," Sterling said, "will you help me out with that?"

"But you didn't kill her?"

"I have to say it twice?"

"You have to say it twice."

"That is some cold shit, little brother. Didn't I promise you I'd never kill nobody?"

He had. It was the arrangement they'd made when Sterling was forced into his distasteful occupation. Lamont wasn't supposed to ask questions, but Sterling was supposed to keep that part of his life in West Elora, and now he wanted to parade it right down Main Street. It all added up to Lamont's own eternal return, the question he asked himself daily: What do you do when your brother becomes a criminal?

Half a dozen people stood at the Longstreet light, waiting to cross into what Lamont considered an alternate universe; the north end of Main Street belonged to the college kids and the south end to the restaurant folk: Izzies. While ESU was the financial heart of Elora and anyone related to it its lifeblood, Izzies were the working force, making Longstreet Avenue an obvious but manageable battle line. The Izzies were named after Izzy Fountain, a service industry whore who spent his adulthood in eternal quest of the better gig. At forty-two and still bartending, he was changing a keg when he

slipped on a wet spot and fell over backwards. The keg crushed his chest. A rib bone pierced his heart. When someone was on their second restaurant job, they'd be warned: *Better be careful, you'll end up like Izzy.* It caught on.

Lamont was trying to be careful; the light changed and he followed the small crowd into the street.

Open a month, The Swimming Rabbit had yet to catch on, and many Izzies speculated that this was due to being located in the very building where Izzy Fountain had keeled over, keg in hand, the very building where eight other restaurants had since opened and closed, creating a new myth in Izzy lore: the space was cursed. Anthropologically, Lamont found this fascinating; logically, he found it absurd. He approached the Pyramid, the Izzy nation's favorite watering hole, two dozen of them drinking on the wooden deck, conversation spilling into the street and around Lamont's feet. *Lamont*, someone yelled, *in the name of all that is holy put down the book bag and have a beer.* Lamont laughed, then made a cross with his arms, drawing a chorus of "boooooos." Most restaurants in Elora – the Rabbit included – were closed on Sunday and Monday, creating a delayed weekend for the industry, making today a drinking day, though, for Izzies, most days were drinking days.

Lamont liked Izzies; he simply didn't have time to become one. ESU's Department of Philosophy was incredibly competitive and the economy had forced them into reevaluating students and their funding every semester. Lamont knew his funding was in jeopardy, his coursework deteriorating as a result of his restaurant work. If he lost his funding – he didn't even want to think about what would happen if he lost his funding. There was an unstated sentiment drifting around the department that this paper

on Nietzsche was Lamont's last chance to prove his worth and now, on a Monday when he should be working on that pivotal paper, here he was, on his way to a meeting with Boyd, after which everyone would find out he was Sterling Carroll's brother.

Once people found out you were the younger brother of the best football player ever to step foot on ESU's campus you became, well, the younger brother of the best football player ever to step foot on ESU's campus. Lamont liked being invisible, and preferred not to be reduced to narrator of his brother's failed NFL career, a tired narrative that obscured Sterling's present occupation. Lamont labored to keep his life ordered, to keep Sterling's past and present out of his own, and now it was all getting dumped into a black cauldron, three blind witches stirring caustically. But no one else was going to help this girl and, for once, Sterling was trying to atone for something, albeit something Lamont was better off not knowing about. He would help. But he was bringing an umbrella, and checking the forecast daily.

The front of The Swimming Rabbit was all windows that ran from the ground to the ceiling. Today, with the restaurant closed, the shades were drawn and Boyd was sitting out front, wearing khaki pants and a thin, black sweater with the sleeves pushed up to his forearms. Tall and skinny, Boyd had angular features and curly black hair that was its own paradox, appearing completely chaotic yet pristinely styled. Boyd managed the Rabbit while his best friend and business partner, Shawn Hallow, was the executive chef. Lamont strove to avoid restaurant politics, but coworkers mistook his silence for curiosity and told him things. For example, Boyd and Shawn had been unspoken godfathers of the Izzy nation, along with a third friend, Chase. BCS, they were called. But now they were only Boyd and Shawn as Chase had been left out of the Rabbit. Lamont didn't know why

Chase had been excluded, but suspected, sooner or later, someone would assume he wanted to know, and tell him. There were also whispers that Boyd's parents were in financial trouble, but that struck Lamont as straight gossip resulting from envy.

An empty chair sat next to Boyd and a wine bucket at his feet, a bottle sticking out. When he saw Lamont he stood up and smiled and opened his arms for a hug, a glass of wine in his right hand. "Lamont, how's my favorite African-American?"

"Four steps from perfection," Lamont said, accepting Boyd's embrace. "How's my favorite over-privileged WASP?" Lamont found Boyd's energy contagious, his use of hyperbole annoying, and his desire to be a good person admirable. Here was the rub: even though Boyd wanted to be a good person, Lamont wasn't sure he knew how. This could play into the aspect of the eternal return Lamont had been pondering: if you wanted to be a good person but had never quite managed to become one, what kept you returning to that undesired state of not-being-good?

"Are you kidding me?" Boyd asked. "Have you looked down the street?"

"You saw me walking down the street."

"Then you saw the leaves."

There were two glasses by the wine bucket, one with lipstick on the rim; Lamont picked up the clean one and asked, "What leaves?"

"Are you blind?" Boyd pointed back down the street. "Look at all those colors. God, do I love fall. It's so fucking beautiful I can barely stand it. I'm sitting in front of my own restaurant, on an amazing day, and have a meeting with my favorite server – this day couldn't get any better. You just missed Mallory, by the way."

"Really?"

“We tried your cell.”

“I turn it off in the library.”

“She waited but had to pick up her boyfriend.” Boyd pulled the bottle out of the bucket, the ice shifting, and poured white wine into Lamont’s glass. “Wait until you taste this. Ninety-nine Silex. And are you going to break them up, or what?”

“I don’t have time to be breaking people up.”

“Make time, you guys are perfect for each other. And make it soon.”

Lamont swirled the wine. “Did you start a pool on us?”

“I didn’t start it, but I did put twenty on next Wednesday.”

“You’re all going to be disappointed.” Lamont placed himself in the would-be disappointed as Mallory was not leaving her boyfriend. Exceptional women had boyfriends for that very reason: they were exceptional. Mallory was insightful and witty and her eyebrows danced when she talked and she laughed like she was keeping a secret. Lamont was crazy about her. Had she been hanging out with Boyd by chance, or could she have been waiting on Lamont? Nietzsche would be ecstatic that he’d kept Lamont from seeing Mallory; Nietzsche was a prick like that.

A girl with a purple apron thrown over her shoulder walked past and she and Boyd exchanged greetings. Boyd leaned forward, a long arm on his leg. He smiled, watching Lamont taste the wine. “Get that mango? Some grass?”

Boyd was the most the generous owner Lamont knew. He offered all his employees health insurance, unheard of in the industry, and would order them wine at cost. He opened bottles after shifts and was passionate about wine’s smallest details. Lamont said, “It’s outstanding.”

“*That* is what Sauvignon Blanc is supposed to taste like. This guy is a genius. And speaking of, how’s the Rabbit’s resident genius?”

The wine’s acidity picked at the tip of Lamont’s tongue. “I’m hardly a genius.”

“Whatever – so what’s up? I was so damn excited to get your text and have a chance to hang out, especially since you never come out after work. Though now you’re late and I have to meet Shawn in twenty minutes so that deep, philosophical discussion you promised will have to wait.”

“I’ll try to contain my disappointment.”

“Smart ass.” Boyd leaned back, jamming his nose into glass. “God, I love this wine. So quit making me beg. What does my favorite server need to talk about?”

“I’ve got kind of a favor to ask,” Lamont said, resisting the third person.

“Lamont, I’m here to serve you. We’re a family owned restaurant with a family philosophy – why doesn’t anyone believe me when I say that?”

“It’s not a favor for me, per se, and I completely apologize for asking.”

“Is there an actual question on the horizon?”

“Well, this woman got killed in West Elora last week. There’s no family to take care of her daughter, and my brother was hoping to have a fundraiser for her. It seemed like a natural with me working here, as far as naturals go.”

“I heard about that.” Boyd ran his left hand through his hair. “I guess it was her time.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means, you know, that God only takes people when it’s their time.”

“I didn’t know God was a killer.”

Boyd shook his head. "I did not say God was a killer."

"If he takes people isn't that the same as pulling the trigger?"

"Don't get philosophical on me, especially if you want to have this fundraiser."

"So we can have it?"

"Fundraisers are tricky, Lamont. We'd either have to close for a night or ask staff to come in on days off – Shawn included. I didn't even know you had a brother," Boyd said, emptying the bottle into both glasses. "What's his story?"

Here it came, the trick where Lamont suddenly appeared to the world. "He played a little football. His name's Sterling."

"I'm all in on this, but I'll have to sell Shawn and fundraisers are trick – " Boyd's angular face froze. "Sterling . . . Carroll?"

"That is my last name."

"You're fucking with me, right? Did Shawn put you up to this?"

"Why doesn't anyone believe me when I say Sterling Carroll is my brother?"

"Because he's a god, not the brother of one of my servers." Boyd pointed at Lamont. "And you said you didn't play football."

"I'm six-two."

"You've been working here for a month and failed to tell me," Boyd stood, his hands out and his voice rising, "that Sterling fucking Carroll is your brother."

"Occasionally, people react strangely."

Boyd took a couple steps towards the curb; two women pushed strollers between him and Lamont. The temperature was on the cusp of cooling, fall hanging on to the days but winter taking control of the nights. Boyd turned around, squinting in disbelief,



as if Lamont really had appeared out of thin air. “How could you keep something like this to yourself?”

“I sleep on shards of glass.”

“Unbelievable. So, basically, what you’re saying, is that the two-time All-American, Butkus award-winning linebacker who was the sixth pick in the NFL draft wants to come into my restaurant,” Boyd tapped his chest, “and hold a fundraiser for a girl who just lost her mother?”

“Still sound tricky?”

“For you, Lamont, I think we can swing it.”

Lamont ached for optimism, for his hope to run free into the fundraiser’s promise of tomorrow. But the past had its own promise of repetition, and the truth had a brazen way of asserting itself. Lamont wasn’t necessarily lying to Boyd, but he wasn’t being truthful either, which was a coward’s version of lying. He feared it would all evolve into a burden that neither his spirit nor the restaurant could carry, the last ounce of weight added to a racehorse to level the field. What do you do when your brother becomes a criminal?

### Chapter Three

Boyd was so fucking excited to tell Shawn that Sterling Carroll wanted to come into their restaurant that his hand actually shook as he circled the serrated blade of his wine key around the top of the bottle, cutting away the cover. Tilting the bottle, slightly, Boyd screwed in the coil, hooked the arm on the lip and pulled out the cork, which stuck a little, like it was wedged into a muscle. Aluminum foil climbed to the top of the bottle, which Boyd had brought, while Shawn's bottle was encased in a white sock, the elastic at the top tired, the edges wilting. It was their Monday ritual disguised as a business meeting: blind tasting.

Boyd glanced at the glass doors but the shades were drawn, his faint reflection distorted by the sun setting behind him. Shawn was inside talking to his wife, Amber. A cool breeze skipped past the Tiki Torches, around Shawn's monster grill, and up Boyd's bony back. He shivered, then pushed down his sleeves, feeling a little toasty from the day and the excitement and the wine he'd consumed. This was probably the last Monday they could taste outside which was too bad because Amber Chillington's backyard kicked some serious ass. Ten miles outside of Elora, the two-story Tudor sat on three acres that backed up to one of South Carolina's premier golf courses, a fence line of trees separating the spectacular yard from the thirteenth fairway. Leaves were straining to hold their color. A few golf balls peeked out of the grass, casualties of a dogleg that curled toward the green.

Boyd's father, a family physician by trade, was a casualty of the mortgage crisis. Boyd had taken the long way to Shawn's as to not drive past the unfinished subdivision

where his father had financed four spec houses, the foundations poured and the frames completed. Banking magicians had been pulling subprimes out of hats so when a developer approached Boyd's father about "a sleek new subdivision called Southern Charm," he wasn't immune to the illusion. It was a chance at early retirement, so Boyd's father rolled his retirement into it. Then everyone figured out it was an illusion and the developer disappeared, leaving a chiseled stone entrance and a mechanical waterfall that no one had bothered to turn off.

The loss would've been possibly recoverable for the Tennors if reimbursements from Medicare and insurance companies hadn't fallen off a cliff, if HMO's and PPO's hadn't frozen family practices like Boyd's father's out of their network, sending clients to larger practices and hospitals. Now Boyd's father was staring down the barrel of chapter eleven, which meant he would have to sell their house. THE house. Which had been in their family for three generations. Where Boyd had planned on raising his own family. Where the Izzies held barbeques every other weekend in the spring and fall. Boyd had all but said his goodbyes to the house until Lamont walked down the street, carrying a leather satchel full of hope in the form of a fundraiser.

The back door slid open and Shawn emerged carrying two more wine glasses, the stems crossed between the index finger and thumb of his left hand. An old Phish T-shirt stretched over his sizeable belly, topping a pair of faded jeans. A tiny island of black hair set atop his forehead, and more receded behind it. After he put the wine glasses on the picnic table, Shawn opened and closed his left hand, wiggling his fingers and giving Boyd a glimpse of the scar that cut across his palm. So predictable, Shawn was setting Boyd up to ask for more Percoset.

Eight months ago Boyd and Chase had been sitting at the Pyramid on Martini Monday when Shawn schlumped into the bar with a bloody T-shirt wrapped around his hand and wine all over his face. The wine turned out to be an expensive bottle of Barolo, so Boyd and Chase christened the fight “The Battle of Barolo,” a legend that grew as a result of Shawn’s refusal to reveal details. He would only say that he and Amber had broken up. A week later, sleeping on Boyd’s couch, he would still only say he and Amber had broken up. Sensitive material was certainly being omitted – like how Shawn cut his hand and got doused with pricey wine. Four weeks later Amber told Shawn she was pregnant. Two weeks later they married, Boyd standing as Shawn’s best man as Amber walked between two sections of folding chairs in this very backyard.

Like most Izzies, Shawn didn’t have health insurance and was probably looking at a thousand dollars to get his hand stitched up. So, at midnight, Boyd woke up his dad, who met them at his office and stitched up Shawn’s hand – for free. Ever since, Shawn had asked Boyd for more sample packets of Percocet; Boyd understood Shawn couldn’t cook with a bad hand, but he was starting to worry, and felt a little like a dealer.

“We should hit mine first,” Shawn said, offering a boyish grin. He sat down across from Boyd, his weight shifting the table. “It’s a white.”

Boyd jumped up and ran around the table, giving Shawn a bear hug from behind, shaking him back and forth. “I’ve got the best fucking news for us!”

“Great,” Shawn said, shrugging off Boyd, “but first why don’t you tell me why we ran out of two wines by the glass on Saturday and didn’t have a complete bank.”

“Okay, Cranky McCrank,” Boyd said. He walked back around the table then grabbing Shawn’s bottle, the old sock slippery against the glass. “We ran out of two

wines by the glass because we had a lot of customers, which is kind of a good thing.

How was I supposed to know Elora is on a Cab kick?”

“The whole country is on a Cab kick, and it makes us look bad.”

“The whole country is still on a Pinot kick because of that stupid movie. You’d think they could’ve picked something not over-oaked or that stood up to red meat.”

“What about the bank? I heard you had to run across the street and get change from the brewery.”

Boyd popped the cork and poured the wine, trying to keep a handle on his good mood. “Again, Shawn, business was good and we had an abnormal amount of people pay with cash over the weekend. Next weekend I’ll get a bigger bank, I promise.”

“So you ran next door and left the floor unattended?”

“For all of seven minutes, yes.”

“I just think if we had Chase helping you with the floor – ”

“Jesus, that again?” Boyd’s stomach grumbled, acid attacking the lining. It had been an agonizing decision, whether or not to bring in Chase. The three of them – Boyd, Chase, and Shawn – had been talking about opening their own place for five years, about showing Elora how a restaurant was really run. They were BCS. They’d be wildly successful. Except, all of that was in theory, drunkenly discussed over beer and bud and bottles of wine. When the space opened, Boyd had the sober task of considering his best friend’s flaws: Chase did too much blow; Chase gave too much shit away when he bartended. Even if Boyd put that aside and hired Chase, could Chase accept his role working *for* Boyd and Shawn? Or, more likely, would it turn into a situation where everyone started fighting, then hating each other? Would it turn into Vine?

Three years ago Boyd had started a band called Vine that caught fire in Elora and spread throughout the state. Boyd booked all of their gigs and financed their first CD. He was the lead singer and wrote the majority of the songs. He treated those guys like brothers. Those guys who now had a two record deal with Universal. Those guys who had cast Boyd out like an Old Testament prophet – Samuel? David? Whatever. Bands were for kids and Boyd was an adult. Vine was the past and the Rabbit was the future; Boyd just had to keep the past from repeating itself.

“Are you okay?” Boyd swirled the wine and breathed it in. “I’m getting some green apple out of this, some mineral.”

“I’m just stressed out.” Shawn swirled his wine. “The baby’s due in six weeks and I got another call from my parents pressuring me to come help with the stores.” Shawn’s dad owned the only grocery store in Bamberg, South Carolina, and two more in neighboring towns; Boyd knew that if the Rabbit didn’t succeed Shawn would be out of excuses to take over a family business he despised.

“No one wants you to run grocery stores less than me, Shawn, and after this week we might be looking to chain the Rabbit.” Boyd tasted the wine again, he couldn’t quite place the varietal; it wasn’t as sweet as Riesling. “I’ll call Chenin Blanc on this.”

“Right region.” Shawn pushed down the sock and revealed the wine as Vouvray, which probably retailed for twenty bucks. Shawn had a ton of great stuff in his cellar and he never broke out anything good. Boyd had brought a Thackrey Syrah he knew Shawn would peg as a Rhone. Eighty-five smacks. Cost.

“This smells great, lots of earth,” Shawn said, switching to the glass of red. “So what’s this great news?”

“I know how you love earth,” Boyd said, leading him. “I just had a meeting with Lamont. Did you know Sterling Carroll is his brother?”

“Now you’re fucking with me.”

“Weird, huh? I’d be telling everyone if Sterling Carroll was my brother.”

“This is funky, barn-yardy,” Shawn said. “What does that have to do with us?”

“Did you here about that woman getting shot in West Elora last week?” Boyd held the glass by the thin base, setting the wine in motion.

“Man,” Shawn said, “that is some neighborhood.”

“I know, right? Anyway, we might be able to help her and us at the same time.”

“Okay. How can we help?”

“I guess this woman had a teenage daughter who was pregnant and Sterling wants to hold a fundraiser for her, in our restaurant!”

Shawn’s small eyes widened. “Yeah?”

“Yeah! Lamont said Sterling would sign autographs and bring an old jersey to auction off!” Boyd raised his hand in the air and Shawn slapped it.

“Is there a catch?” Shawn asked.

“He wants fifty percent of the night’s proceeds to go to the girl.”

“I thought we were going to put everything we could towards the Ansul system.”

The Ansul system was a fire suppression system. Boyd had noticed the nozzles coming from the hoods over the stoves, had even seen the key you turned in case of a grease fire. It could also be triggered by intense heat, causing foam to shoot out of the nozzles. Boyd knew all of this – now. Two days before their grand opening the Fire Marshal had declared the Rabbit’s Ansul system defunct. It set their opening back a

week, pissed off their servers who'd quit other jobs and had bills to pay, and forced Shawn and Boyd's first big fight: Shawn yelling at Boyd for not checking the system on purchase, Boyd yelling back that it was Shawn's kitchen and Shawn's responsibility. Boyd had found the space, found the money, done all the paper work and the majority of the hiring, had done twice as much work as Shawn when they gutted and rebuilt the inside. He couldn't do everything. New systems ran seven grand, but Boyd found a used one online for three, which he drove twenty hours round trip to pick up from a failing restaurant in Chicago.

"We were," Boyd groaned, "but we can't buy this kind of exposure. Having Sterling in, helping this girl. We are a family owned restaurant and this is our chance to help someone without family. Plus, you know what big ESU boosters our investors are."

"We only have one investor."

"And he'll be excited. *And* that exposure could get us reviewed by *The Weekly*."

"I'd blow somebody to get that critic to try my food."

A restaurant didn't exist in Elora until it was not only reviewed by *The Weekly*, but reviewed well. South Carolina's most persuasive and caustic critic usually hit up new restaurants within two weeks of their opening but, for whatever reason, Boyd could not get that guy in the door. He called, e-mailed, and even sent over a hundred-dollar bottle of Bollinger. One critic was mysteriously standing between them and success.

"Sooo," Boyd said, "you're okay with this idea?"

"Hell, yeah. It sounds like the break we've been waiting for." Shawn tasted the wine, his chubby cheeks swishing it around his mouth. "I think this is a Rhone, but something lighter, like a Saint Joseph."



Boyd knew Shawn would guess Rhone; it was like pulling strings on a puppet. Control. He had lost it with Vine, the guitar player slowly turning everyone against Boyd, which was another reason Boyd wanted Shawn and not Chase: he didn't want Chase in Shawn's ear. At thirty-two, with a worthless degree in communications, all Boyd had to his name was his buyout from Vine, a buyout he'd only managed to get since he'd written most of the songs, a buyout he'd put squarely on Shawn's talent and the Swimming Rabbit.

"I think you'll be surprised," Boyd said, after ten more minutes of discussing the wine and possibility of a family meal for the staff, an idea that seemed to rankle Shawn. Boyd peeled off the foil, revealing Thackrey's black label.

"Neither one of us is right this week," Shawn said.

"Yeah, but one of us was on the right continent," Boyd said, playfully.

"So, what's next with this Sterling thing?"

"Get him in for a meeting and make it happen. Hopefully this weekend."

"Maybe that space isn't cursed." The tip of the sun glowed above the tree line, orange spreading across the horizon like gas.

"Curses-smurses. There's no such thing."

The glass door slid open, Amber and her pregnant belly filling the space. She wore a beige business suit with white Nikes. Eight months pregnant and still working. Impressive. No wonder she owned the leading real estate business in town. "Are you almost done with my husband, Boyd?" She offered an exhausted smile, rubbing her belly. "We're getting a little hungry in here."

"Amber," Boyd said, "you look absolutely radiant."

“Such a charmer, thank you.”

“Even uber-successful Vassar women need an occasional compliment, and I am done with your husband.”

Amber closed the door and Shawn stood up, shaking out his bad hand. “Hey, think your dad could get me some more sample packets?”

One string, then another. “I’ll ask, but pretty soon he’s going to say no – what are you guys having for dinner?” Boyd had an empty condo waiting for him, and kind of wished Shawn would invite him to stay; they used to do things like that.

“It just never healed up right. Maybe the way he stitched it or something.” Shawn collected the glasses then picked up the bottle of Syrah. “You going to take this?”

“Yeah,” Boyd laughed, “I paid for it.” He’d planned on leaving it, but something about the way Shawn picked it up before asking, it was so presumptuous. Not to mention ignoring Boyd’s question about dinner and the passive aggressive jab at his father.

“It’s just, sometimes we switch.” Shawn set down the Syrah, then picked up the Vouvray like a parting gift. Boyd was about to go ahead and give Shawn the bottle when Shawn said, “It’s weird, me being the one who’s called away after all those months of Emily fetching you.”

Boyd forced a smile. “Not any more.”

“I’ve never seen a girl get her hooks into you like that.”

“Easy, there were no hooks.”

There were all kinds of hooks. Razor sharp and piercing. The wine had made Boyd hungry and lonely – why couldn’t Shawn have asked him to stay? His parents were

playing bridge. Chase hated him. He tried Lamont's cell and a few other people from work but no one answered. So he called Emily, just to see how she was doing, and inexplicably ended up asking her to dinner.

Emily Lockley represented an imbalance of grace in the world, an absence of grace, even, and sometimes God needed some help redistributing. Emily's parents died in a hurricane when she was twelve. Raised by her grandparents, Emily graduated from Wellesley with a dual degree in finance and social work, then snagged a law degree from the University of Virginia. She returned to Elora and turned her inheritance and insurance money into the Lockley Home, a residence for underprivileged girls who'd lost their parents. She ran the entire operation, won charity award after charity award, had an adorable southern drawl, and was blazing hot. But something was off, Boyd never able to master that process of redistribution. There were these intense moments of sadness with Emily when Boyd could not veer her anxiety away from a vanishing point of trauma they'd never reach.

He broke up with her right before the Rabbit opened; it was too important not to get all of his attention. She cried. Called him "soulless." Capped that emotional dagger off with, "I knew you were going to leave me like everyone else." Boyd had a lot of character flaws, but he was not like everyone else. Since their breakup he'd crafted an entire list of traits that made him unlike everyone else, a list he couldn't wait to share with Emily – only a mind-blowing result of their breakup was that she had quit calling him. Cold turkey. It created an emotional cul-de-sac: he'd rather stick his dick in a wood chipper than call her; he had a phenomenal, visceral urge to call her.

Butterflies was an aging restaurant off Main Street with a steadily declining clientele. The only other customers were an elderly couple quietly picking at their entrees. Historical pictures of Elora plantations hung on the walls. Each maroon tablecloth had a yellow butterfly at its center, attempting to create the illusion of fluttering wings but failing, appearing stagnant. No ambiance whatsoever. Why didn't they close and be done with it?

"Can you believe Sterling Carroll wants my help?" Boyd dipped a piece of calamari into an aioli sauce that was too sweet.

"It sounds important," Emily said, as if it wasn't.

"It is, Em. Geez, I thought you'd be more excited about me helping, and you know how terrified I was about opening the Rabbit."

"It's a little interesting, don't you think?" Her drawl was light and wispy, like a kite gently tugging on a string, wanting to float away. "That you're putting yourself in the same situation where the same things can happen – as with Vine, I mean."

"It's not the same at all. Shawn's my best friend."

"You said the guys in Vine were like brothers."

"Well, yeah, at first, but I'd just met them. I've known Shawn forever."

"Okay." Emily pushed a remaining ring of calamari around the plate. "But it's not like you jumped into an office job or something entirely different. How many restaurants fail?"

"Three out of four, but that's not the point."

"It's not?"

"No, the point is that my parents are broke."

“Oh, I see,” Emily said, finally stabbing the calamari. “Lucky you’re relying on a business that has a seventy-five percent chance of failing to rescue them.”

“Shit, Em, what are you saying? That I’m drawn to things that fail.”

“I’m not saying anything, simply noting some similarities.” That was a southern trait, accusations disguised as observations, one Emily perfected in law school. A waiter cleared the calamari plate and re-marked them with silver, giving Boyd a flimsy steak knife with a plastic handle. A female server set down Emily’s salmon, which was drowning in a beurre-blanc sauce next to a pile of couscous. Boyd’s filet balanced on a stack of mashed potatoes. He asked for another Anchor Steam then tried to cut his steak, which slid off the potatoes.

Boyd said, “How’d things go at the capitol?”

Emily let out a loud, affected laugh, like a horseshoe ringing off a stake. She couldn’t simply say it went poorly, she had to let loose that laugh, as if her misery was comically tragic. “Kyle Pierce refused to grant me emergency funding.”

Boyd worked his knife against the steak – the center overcooked, pink instead of red – sorry he’d asked. Kyle Pierce was old school southern. A relic that refused retirement and once said of Elora, “They should move that town of freaks twenty miles north and let the other Carolina deal with them.” Boyd had never met Kyle Pierce, and hated him to the point of exhaustion. Boyd would come home from a perfectly pleasant day only to have Emily launch into a ten-minute litany on the way Kyle Pierce had punished the orphans of the Lockley Home with his ignorance and greed. Her small hands would be balled into fists, one grazing Boyd’s shoulder, all of that anger and frustration shooting inside him as with a syringe, spreading through his body until there

was no outlet for his own anger. When Boyd broke up with Emily, he felt like he was breaking up with Kyle Pierce as well.

“I’ve got this new girl, Jasmine,” Emily said, her hand out as if it had been severed and Boyd hadn’t noticed. “She’s thirteen, and pregnant. Last week her mother was shot walking to church.” Her eyes widened, her hand still out.

“What?”

“It’s the same girl, Boyd, the same one you want to have this fundraiser for, Jesus, the same one you’re so thrilled about helping.”

“Heyyyyyy!” Boyd exclaimed. “We’re on the same team.”

“Right.” Emily shook her head, slicing off some salmon. “Except I don’t have a bed for her, which is why I was trying to get emergency funding, so she can get an ultrasound and some prenatals. You’re trying to get people in the door.”

“We’re working towards the same end. I’ve got employees to – wait, you don’t have a bed for her?”

“No, I’m full.”

“But doesn’t that mean that you can’t officially get funding for her?”

“Which is what I’ve been trying to tell you for the last ten minutes. Which is why I drove all the way out to see Satan today.”

“But if something happens to her then it’s out of your pocket – right?”

“She’s thirteen.” Emily’s fork hit the plate. “And pregnant. With no family. Am I supposed to let her fall through the cracks of the system?”

“I think you’re supposed to follow protocol.”

“Funny, that’s what Satan said today.”

“I’m nothing like him. I’m trying to help.”

“Well, I guess I have nothing to worry about then since you and Sterling Carroll are going to save the day.” She dragged a piece of salmon through the sauce, tiny pieces of couscous sticking to the pink flesh. The waiter set down a fresh draft of Anchor Steam and took the empty, Boyd trying to figure out how he got here again, listening to all this again, Emily trying to save every girl in the world and being reckless in the process.

Boyd asked if her salmon was overdone.

“Of course it is, what did you expect bringing me here?”

“We can’t go to Edenic Proportions, Chase still hates me.”

“How strange,” Emily said, “one of your friends hating you.”

“Just because he helped you out once a month – ”

“Once a week. Chase came in once a week and the girls *loved* him.”

“He was probably coked up.”

“That’s remarkably unpleasant. And of course I haven’t seen him since you and Shawn so kindly left him out.”

“Enough, please. I couldn’t hire him, and we came here because I wanted to see what kept this place open, though I still have no idea.” Boyd gulped down some beer, wondering what had gotten into Emily. She was acting different. More confident. Seemingly unaffected by his charm. She was acting like someone who didn’t really like him, which kind of turned him on, which probably meant she wouldn’t go home with him. Not that he wanted her to go home with him, but he certainly wanted her to want to go home with him. He wanted to be wanted.

“It’s okay,” Emily said, swallowing, “you didn’t want anyone to see us together. I get it. But I’m not having sex with you tonight.”

“Who said anything about having sex?”

“What else am I supposed to think? You calling me out of the blue and wanting to have dinner. Unless it means you want to get back together, and I know neither one of us wants that.”

Boyd thought, *Wait –what? Neither of us?* He said, “We’re just two friends having dinner. Why does that mean I want to have sex with you?”

“You want to have sex with everyone.” She set down her fork, the plate clean. “I never knew men over nineteen wanted to have sex so much.”

“It’s a natural human desire, sweetie.”

“Please don’t call me that.”

“You said it was the best sex you ever had.”

“Oh, Boyd, I said so many things designed to make me the perfect little girlfriend.” She pushed her fork and knife together, setting them at eleven o’clock on the plate. “It’s rather humiliating, really, when I look back on the things I did wrong.”

“Stop it, you didn’t do anything wrong, I’ve told you that.”

“No,” she said, matter-of-factly, “I did.”

“I’ve told you – ”

“Can I say this, please?”

“Okay.”

“I made some mistakes. Nothing that could’ve saved the likes of us, but mistakes nonetheless. I was never willing to make you a higher priority than the girls and – ”



“I never asked you to make me a higher priority.”

“You’ve got a funny way of letting me say things.”

Boyd picked up his glass, then put it back down. He pulled two Gas-X from his pocket and chewed them. The old couple was counting out dollar bills. The four-top was starting on salads. “You also said I was soulless – was that designed to make you the perfect little girlfriend?”

“No, Boyd, that was designed to make me the perfect little martyr.”

“So you think I have a soul?” he asked, sincerely.

Emily smiled, her freckles trembling. “The jury’s still deliberating.”

“I’m going to have this fundraiser,” Boyd said, emphatically. “I’m going to help this girl and you’re going to see that I have a soul.”

## Chapter Four

Mallory sat at the Pyramid with her boyfriend, Greg, watching the small bubbles of her vodka and soda stick to the side of the glass, wondering how she had wound up with yet another loser. Another middle of the road guy who tricked her into thinking he was great by not being an asshole. It was Thursday night and Izzies were starting to filter in after their shifts. She hooked the thin sole of her flip-flop under a rung on the barstool, the metal cool on her heel. Did she pick the losers or did they pick her?

The Pyramid was big enough to seat the entire Izzy nation but still all kinds of comfortable. Leather couches lounged against the back wall. The bar – a giant horseshoe – circled out into the middle of the room, Mallory and Greg positioned at the bar’s pinnacle, barstools descending on both sides of them towards two flat screen TVs that flashed football highlights. Dim track lighting faded down brick walls. Ceiling fans spun in slow, lazy circles. Round and square tables weighed down the other half of the room – only a handful of them empty – and behind the tables was a fireplace that would burn through winter. A giant picture of Izzy Fountain hung above the fireplace, framed, Izzy clad in his daily attire of khaki shorts and flip-flops, holding out a martini.

“Hey,” Greg said, knocking his pint glass against the bar, “are you listening to me?” He had tan hands and dirty fingernails. He owned his own landscaping business, which might be impressive if he actually scaped some land as opposed to cutting grass, and if he didn’t smoke as much as he cut.

“Of course, I’m listening,” Mallory lied.

“What did I say?”

“You said,” she laughed, “wait – I know.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to go in the back with your friends?” Greg asked, the rasp of cigarettes like burnt crust on the edge of his voice. His beard needed trimming, black hairs losing direction as they grew away from his face.

“Pretty sure.”

“Whenever we come here it seems like you don’t listen to me. I hate this place.”

“I love this place,” Mallory said, “it’s like home.”

“A dysfunctional home.”

She shrugged, knowing he wanted to fight. Her only complaint about the Pyramid was the absence of music. On the one hand, you could always hear other people talk and the pool tables upstairs created a chaotic baseline. On the other hand, there was no music! In New Orleans Mallory danced all the time. Listening to Big Sam’s Funky Nation and The Radiators and Papa Grows Funk. She would let the music slip into her body, slowly, the beat working through her muscles, her body a muscle in the crowd and herself at the mercy of the music, Big Sam singing “Shake, shake, shake your thang!” Mallory shaking her thang. Greg despised dancing. When they first started dating this didn’t bother her; now she found it repugnant.

It was like that now, Mallory appalled at the red flags she’d flown past. Probably she’d never loved him. Had simply been anchored to the affection that settled into something like love because of routine. Because she woke up next to him. Because she pushed a shopping cart around the store with him, knowing he preferred shaving gel to shaving cream and the smell of Tide over Cheer. She knew what his farts smelled like and the corny looks that followed. She knew he fly fished every other Sunday in the

summer and spent the last two weeks of May practicing casting in their back yard, his arm whipping back and forth, landing lures around a red coffee can. It was routine's great prank, transforming the ordinary into intimacy.

"This place is like a cult haven for you Izzies," Greg said, finishing his beer.

"Jealous?"

"Of an industry that has a lower ceiling than a dollhouse?"

"No, of an industry that allows you to borrow money from me every winter and never pay me back." Mallory got so tired of that, of people ragging on the biz. Like putting on a smile five nights a week and eating people's shit was an easy living.

Greg pulled out a fresh pack of Marlboros wrapped safely in cellophane. "Well, can I come or not?"

"Come to what?"

"Jesus. You really weren't listening to me." He tapped that pack against the bar.

"Can I come to this big fundraiser you guys are having Saturday?"

"You don't like the people I work with."

"Yeah, but Sterling Carroll is going to be there," Greg said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Is his brother a good guy?"

Lamont was an amazing guy, so amazing that it turned work into something else. Each shift became an opportunity to see Lamont and flirt with Lamont and see if her crush was reciprocal. Usually, Mallory could tell, guys being crisp when it came to women, their actions obvious and their emotions brittle. Lamont was different. His delivery, it was perfect. So many things about Lamont seemed perfect, like he might be the guy to break her string of losers.

Except, he never flirted with her. And now there were these moments at the computer terminal when the flutter of wings tickled her stomach and she felt an impulse to say something clever, an impulse that didn't exist when she didn't know she liked him, when she'd instinctively say something clever because the moment was only a moment and not an opportunity to be impressive. Maybe he didn't flirt with her because she had a boyfriend. Or maybe he didn't date white girls. Or maybe he was one of those "don't shit where you eat" guys. But how could he not like her? She was the only one who could get a song stuck in his head.

It was a game they played at the Rabbit. One night, at the pre-shift meeting, Boyd started incessantly singing one of his Vine songs. He sang it at the host stand, on the line, and in servers' ears when he walked behind them. Pretty soon the entire staff was singing that annoying song. Now, during shifts, there was a running bet to get songs stuck in other people's heads, and you got extra points if it was a really bad one, like *Camp Town Ladies*. Boyd obnoxiously sang in people's faces. Lamont stood behind people, silent, then hummed something bizarre that seeped into your subconscious.

When the Rabbit first opened Lamont would say, "Dy-no-mite" without the least bit of inflection and at the most random times. Mallory knew that it was from the TV show *Good Times*, but she didn't know how the theme song went. She spent two weeks singing "Good Times" to Lamont a thousand different ways, each time him saying, "That's . . . not even close." Mallory didn't care for losing. So she found a TV theme song CD online and ordered it right up. Then she snuck up behind Lamont at the terminal, waited a few seconds, then softly sang, "Keeping your head above water, making a wave when you can . . ." and hummed the rest. Lamont spun around, eyed her,

and twenty minutes later she caught him humming it. Victory! Now, when someone had a table-full of campers or high-maintenance assholes or got a ten percent tip, they'd say, "Good Times," or "Dy-no-mite," because that's what they wanted to do to the table: blow it up. Everyone should have to wait tables, at least for a month.

"You're doing it again," Greg said, "can I come or not?"

"I'm not the boss of you."

"That's some invitation."

"Oh, honey," Mallory said, spinning her barstool towards him, clasping both hands over her heart, "please come to dinner."

"Fuck you, Mal."

"I just don't see what the big deal is."

"You didn't live here back then. Trust me, Sterling Carroll is a big deal."

Mallory figured this was true because even Jeremy showed up when Lamont brought Sterling in yesterday. If Boyd was the brains and Shawn was the talent, Jeremy was the money. Mallory had never seen Boyd so nervous, carrying around an old jersey – "CARROLL" stitched in white letters across the back – and throwing numbers back and forth with Jeremy about sacks and tackles. Mallory didn't like to profile people, but Jeremy knew a lot about football for a little gay man. People surprised you. Like Lamont. No one even knew he had a brother, much less this Elora legend. You could find out Lamont was king of the world and he wouldn't have mentioned it. Maybe she just needed to pick Lamont, pick him and tell him and see what happened.

No one could figure out what had happened with the Weekly shunning the Rabbit. It was weird and the staff was getting anxious. They'd left good jobs. Mallory had left

her job at Ovio, the premier restaurant in town whose chef, Chris Campbell, was the premier asshole in the industry. He rang a little bell during shifts that sent servers sprinting into the kitchen. But he sure could cook. Every restaurant in town wanted to be Ovio and every chef wanted to cook like Chris – even Shawn, who’d trained under Chris for five years. All week Boyd was talking about the customers Sterling could bring in. Mallory just wanted him to bring in the Davenports. Frank Davenport taught food courses at ESU and Lucy Davenport was a free-lance writer with connections to the likes of *Southern Living*. To make it in Elora, you needed the Davenports and the Weekly, and until they showed Mallory had no qualms thinking the place might be cursed.

She’d asked Lamont about that, about the place being cursed, and he said curses were mythologies used to make sense out of everyday events. So Mallory asked him what sarcasm was his mythology for, expecting a response along the lines of “ditsy redheads” or “stupid questions.” But Lamont said, “It’s not a mythology, it’s a defense.”

“A defense against what?” she asked, again expecting sarcasm.

Lamont shook his clean-shaven head. “Against everything.”

“You’re not sarcastic about your brother coming in.”

“That’s a moral aporia all of its own.”

“Oh, Lamont,” Mallory scoffed, “you’re so impressive, invoking Derrida.” As if she didn’t know who Derrida was. An aporia was a perplexing difficulty. She’d studied lit at Tulane. As if big words impressed her. Fine, maybe they did. She was dating a pothead, after all, who probably thought an aporia was a drink special.

“I wasn’t trying to be impressive,” Lamont said, “you’re an intelligent woman and I figured you knew what the word meant. Trust me, Sterling deserves that word.”

“I can’t imagine what he could’ve done to deserve French philosophy.”

“Imagine the worst. And do you think I’m some kind of snob?”

“I know you’re the worst kind of snob,” Mallory said, taken aback, using sarcasm as her own defense. Most guys liked her for her boobs, and here was Lamont *figuring* she was intelligent. She regretted not returning to Tulane after Katrina, and sometimes she could hear the city’s steady beat beckoning her to shake, shake, shake her thang.

“I don’t think I can get you a table,” Mallory said to Greg, knowing that wasn’t what he was he was asking.

Greg looked at his watch, then fingered the red piece of plastic that would unravel the cellophane around his cigarettes. “If you don’t want me to come, just say so.”

“Why wouldn’t I want you to come?”

He peeled the plastic off the cigarettes and balled it up. “You tell me.”

*Lamont would appreciate this, she thought, I just created my own conversational aporia.* And since she had zero interest in answering her own question, she started circling her finger around the rim of the glass, hoping to get Celia’s attention.

Celia was dropping cosmos a couple barstools down, thin twists of lemon floating in the pink liquid, each twist tied in a knot. It was one of Celia’s bartending trademarks – tying her twists in knots – along with the slew of bracelets that rattled up and down her arms. Short and Cuban, Celia had spiky black hair, and when she talked her native tongue rolled in and out of her words. She was wearing a tight orange T-shirt tonight, and she laughed when she saw Mallory running her finger around the glass as it had always been a sign of needing to be saved from the advances of undesirable men. They’d lived together for a while, and were so close their cycles became identical. Then they



entered supposedly promising relationships at the same time, both of which turned out to be duds. Celia was still with Darren, who owned the Pyramid.

“You kids ready for another drink?” Celia asked, drying her hands on a bar towel then popping the end towards Greg, the tip cracking the air.

“I’m ready,” Mallory said.

“I thought we were staying for one drink,” Greg said, pulling out his wallet.

“You said you were staying for one drink, I didn’t say anything.”

Celia’s eyes shifted from Mallory to Greg.

Greg unwrapped a beat-down look, like a guy who’d lost too many bets against the house. He slid his wallet back into his pocket, said he’d take another beer, then went outside to smoke. Celia walked the length of the bar, poured Greg another beer, and returned, switching out the empty. She set a rocks glass on the bar and said, “I love it when you get bitchy.”

“Did I pick Greg or did he pick me?”

Celia drummed her fingers on the bar. “He picked you – remember? He drove down and helped build all those houses.”

“Two weekends.” Mallory sighed. “And he had me.”

“Had you fooled.” Celia scooped some ice into the glass. “Maybe you need to become a pick-er, instead of a pick-ee.”

“Maybe I will,” Mallory said, in a sing-song voice.

Celia made eye contact with someone behind Mallory, smiled, and set a second rocks glass on the bar. A cold pair of hands covered Mallory’s eyes, sending a sweet little chill up her spine.

“Chase!” she exclaimed, popping off her barstool and reaching up to give him a hug, one of her forearms pinning down his ponytail.

“Now that’s what I call a warm reception,” Chase said, his toothpick arms around Mallory’s waist, one hand giving her ass a squeeze and his chin easily resting on top of her head. He had a flat face and a long neck. When he smiled, the left side of his mouth rose higher than the right, making his face seem unbalanced. He was still in his work garb of black pants and a baby-blue button down, the sleeves rolled up.

Celia poured Grey Goose into both glasses, shot soda into one, then held a small bottle of olive juice over the other. “Do you like it dirty, Chase?”

“Now why would I want to ruin a perfectly good glass of vodka?”

“I feel a CRL coming on,” Mallory said, sitting back down. CRL’s were “Chase’s rules to life,” and were kind of like him: funny and cute with good intentions.

“As a matter of fact,” Chase said, taking Greg’s stool, “CRL number twenty-six, no need to dirty something pure.”

Celia floated two napkins onto the bar. “What about love, Chase?”

Chase cocked his chin. “CRL number four, desire dirties everything pure.”

“Such a romantic,” Celia countered. Their flirting was always combative, as if that competitive essence meant they really weren’t flirting. Mallory knew better.

Chase raised his drink. “I simply speak the truth.”

“Boyd and Shawn are in the back,” Mallory said, knowing he wouldn’t go back there for a million dollars. It was sad what happened to them.

“Let me run right back there.” Chase sucked down half his drink. “Don’t get me wrong, Shawn and I are Kool and the Gang, but Boyd Tennor is another story. I’m not going to call the guy a backstabber, but he’s a backstabber, if you know what I mean.”

“I think we know,” Mallory said, feeling defensive, her foot tapping the stool.

“Darren’s waiting,” Celia said, “if you want to run upstairs and get some love.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Chase finished his drink, leaving a small pile of ice, the clear little bones of a dead relationship. “And Boyd will get his – no offense, Miss Mallory, but Karma is a crazy bitch.”

“Maybe if you ran upstairs a little less,” Mallory said, her voice dripping with sweetness, “people wouldn’t have the chance to stab you in the back.” Celia bounced Mallory a surprised look, and Mallory herself was surprised by how retaliatory that statement was. How violent. She knew it was a mean thing to say to someone as nice as Chase, especially since the person she was really mad at was walking back in the front door. The thing was, she did take offense to what Chase said. Boyd was her friend and the Rabbit was where she worked. It felt like Chase was not only insulting Mallory, but insulting a part of her she thought was good. Plus, she didn’t say anything that wasn’t true.

Chase stood up, holding his stomach and staggering around as if he’d been shot. “Ouch, Miss Mallory.”

Greg sat back down, smelling like a cloud of smoke. “What’s up, Chase?”

“I think your lady needs a little TLC.” Chase pulled a wad of bills from his back pocket and dropped a ten on the bar. “I’ll be back in twenty if anyone wants to round up some action and bet customers, and if Mallory has flipped that frown around.”

Mallory said, “Dy-no-mite.”

“Who are you pissing off now?” Greg asked.

“Apparently,” Mallory said, “everyone.”

Celia shook her head and laughed, then mouthed the word *bitch*, all the while backing away from Mallory and Greg as if they were dangerous. Down the bar, someone was holding out a twenty, folded in half like a small tent, and Mallory watched Celia stop and take their order. It was almost midnight and Izzies were lining up to drink away the shift that was behind them, yet still inside of them, lining up to get that post-shift release. On one of the couches against the wall a girl laughed, then fell off an armrest into someone’s lap, still laughing, as if there was nowhere else she’d rather be.

## Chapter Five

Chase took the first line through a rolled up twenty off a mirror Darren kept behind his desk. Darren always got quality cola so it didn't burn as much. Chase wiped his nose with the back of his hand and passed the mirror across the desk to Darren. Conversations floated up through the floor. Pool balls cracked off one another. Chase's heart shifted gears. Better.

There were a plethora of pluses to Darren's "love." It was generally free, always high-grade, and he had a tap line running from the kegs downstairs up to his office. A tap line! Talk about vision. Numero uno negativo was that the guy stayed stuck behind his desk, kicking the coke back and forth like you worked for him. Three Pilot Precise pens pointed at Chase and a yellow Hi-Lighter lay an inch away, ostracized for its color. Darren sniffed up the line and left the mirror in the middle of the desk. He stood up and slithered past Chase to a small fridge in the back corner. Numero duo negativo: You could ask for the first line, but never the second.

From behind Chase, Darren asked, "Water or beer?"

Chase considered it, then said, "Agua, if you'd be so kind."

Darren opened the fridge and light flooded into the room and then he was back in the leather chair behind the desk, holding two bottles of water in one hand.

Chase scooted his ass around on the metal folding chair, eying the empty seat next to him. Darren had a funky-dory face, a horsey face with pockmarks on his left cheek. He had dirty blonde hair and his beard never filled in. Someone turned up the volume on

the Pyramid's voices. A pool stick cracked violently against a cue ball, sending solids and stripes on their various paths.

"Has it started?" Darren asked. "The drip?"

"You know damn well that it has, so why don't you toss me that agua?"

"This agua?" Darren rolled the bottle back and forth across his desk.

"You're kind of a prick," Chase said, laughing, "how in the world did you land Celia?" Chase could ask that since they were coked up. Since he could taste the sulfur finish of the drip and hear the friction of the bottle rolling across the smooth surface like a metronome counting the crack of cue balls and beats of voices.

"I love the drip," Darren said.

"Hate it. Always have, always will."

"I can't say how I wound up with Celia, it was basically a moment that went right." He tossed the bottle across the desk where it glimmered in the light from the lamp in the corner and almost paused in mid-air before landing in Chase's hands. Why had Mallory said that, about running upstairs? Chase didn't party any more than the next Izzy. He swallowed again and tasted the drip again and opened the bottle and the water tasted so smooth and soothing rolling down his throat he didn't care about Mallory's little jab. What did she know, anyway? Probably not that her boyfriend was getting stoned off a one-hitter behind the back dumpster when Chase walked up.

"Boyd and Shawn," Darren said, "you over them leaving you out?"

"I wanted no part of that, thank you," Chase scoffed. "Shawn even asked my permission to partner with Boyd. Said if I said no, he wouldn't go. But I could hardly do that to a brother, especially one who'd been waiting a decade for his own kitchen."

“Doesn’t seem like much of a gamble on his part,” Darren said.

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning, don’t you think Shawn knew that? That you wouldn’t say no?”

Chase laughed. “Hadn’t considered that particular angle.”

“All the Izzies think it was bad form.”

It was bad form, though it did make that bottle of Bollinger Boyd had sent *The Weekly’s* food critic quite tasty. Chase got him stoned then they drank the champagne and ate some oysters off the half-shell. *You know what would be funny*, Chase said, *if you didn’t review the Rabbit*. The critic said he’d never step foot in the place. Chase liked the power of it all, bouncing the Rabbit’s success off the ground like a tennis ball.

Darren pushed the mirror forward. “Care for seconds?”

“You don’t have to ask me twice.” Chase rolled the twenty tight and sucked that line right off the mirror. Hell, yes. Drip, drop. He pulled his finger across the mirror, across the trace of the line and rubbed the residue on his gums. His heart was doing one funky jig. “And what the hell do you mean, a moment that went right?”

“You know,” Darren said, after he took down the line and ran his own finger across the mirror, “so much can hinge on a moment. It’s a split second you have no control over. It has all of these forces swirling around it and tugging you in different directions and it all happens so fast that the outcome is a matter of chance.”

Chase laughed. “That is some sugary shit.”

“Call it what you want,” Darren said, “but I’m the one with a bar and Celia and a drawer full of coke.”

Chase thought, *And I'm the one with nothing*, then said, "So, what you're saying, is that life is a matter of chance."

"No, only the moment, only whether it goes right or wrong."

Chase could see the moment, surrounded by a boisterous crowd, all by its small self like a raft in the middle of the ocean rising up and down with the waves and maybe it's raining or maybe the sun is shining or maybe sharks are circling or maybe you hear the sound of a helicopter approaching but either way you're going to sink or swim with that moment. Hot damn! Chase had a new rule to life. Number seventy-whatever with a bullet: People are at the mercy of moments, and moments are at the mercy of chance.

That's what Chase had to find: a moment that went right.

"You want a beer to chase that drip?" Darren asked.

"Whatcha pouring?"

"Magic Hat Pale Ale."

Chase pounded his chest with his fist, twice. "If I were gay, I'd blow you."

"I'll pass on the BJ, though I appreciate the sentiment." Darren stood up. "You know why I don't play music? I like the voices. You might think this is sugary, too, but I think they create one hell of a melody." He walked around the desk, past Chase to the back of the room where he bled out the tap line. "Listen for a second."

Chase listened.

And raise his rent if there wasn't a downright harmonious aspect to all those voices, each like an instrument in an orchestra, the beats of anxiety and grace and love so hypnotic Chase didn't realize he was grinding his teeth to the beat. Darren was back in his leather chair and the light from the corner was shining through the golden amber of a



Magic Hat Pale Ale, standing in front of Chase like a Greek god, with a perfect half-inch head of foam.

Darren said, "I hear Sterling Carroll is going to be in the Rabbit on Saturday."

"I hope they pull the string on that curveball, for Shawn and for that little girl. The Lockely Home is a first-rate place."

Chase used to go there once a week. Used to play board games and teach the girls to juggle and make bracelets out of beads. It was the best part of his week. Until his friendship with Boyd unraveled and Chase could feel Emily feeling bad whenever he showed up. Wondering what to say and what not to say and trying not to mention Boyd and Chase knew Emily had enough people to worry about and didn't want to put her in a sticky-Ricky-Ricardo situation. So he quit going.

Darren unscrewed the cap from his water, slowly, then took a sip. "Might not be so great for business, having Sterling around."

Chase sat up. Straight. "Do tell."

Darren scratched his splotchy beard. "I've heard some things about Sterling, from the people I," he pointed at the mirror, "do business with."

"Drugs?"

"No, not drugs, not really."

"Is it bad?"

"Bad enough."

"Well here's to bad enough," Chase said, raising his glass across the desk.

Darren tapped the tip of his bottle against Chase's glass then leaned back, stalling, returning to his prickdom. He took a swing of water and rolled the small white cap

around in his hand. Chase swallowed. He tasted the sour tang of the drip, his mouth dry, but he also tasted blood. No wonder Darren sat up here at the top of Pyramid: he knew everything. And now he was going to impart the sweet nectar of that knowledge onto Chase. He'd wait until after the fundraiser, to help out Emily, but after that, he was going to close those two assholes down.

## Chapter Six

Jasmine sat on the ground holding her knees to her chest, rocking back and forth, the concrete scratching her ass. *I killed my momma, killed her by getting pregnant.* If she hadn't gotten pregnant they wouldn't have been walking to church on a Wednesday and if they hadn't been walking to church they wouldn't have stopped to talk to the crank dealer with the ratty fishing hat. Three, four, then five shots. Her momma pushing her to the ground. Waves of blood, it seemed, soaking through Jasmine's dress until she pushed her momma off of her, until she just sat there, rocking back and forth. She had no one to call, making tomorrow one of those blank lines after a math problem.

A red spot blossomed through her momma's white blouse. One of her momma's shoes lay on its side, the short heel pointing down the dark hill they'd climbed. Her hip hurt from where she hit the cement and her right arm was scraped. Doors opened and closed without sound. Faces looked out windows. Was her baby dead? That baby. That baby killed her momma. That cool, cool boy with the intentional shuffle in his step, always carting around a brown can of RockStar. Supposedly something fierce on the basketball court. "Wicked handles," other kids said, "nigger's got that ball on a string." That cool, cool boy, even inside of her, painfully cool, his weight heavy on top of her, his hips trying to find a rhythm, trying to be cool but going too fast. All of it, over too fast. Jasmine bled on her sheets and stripped them off the bed and the cool, cool boy asked if he could stay. Stayed. Sitting on top of the washing machine in the building's basement while her momma worked that second shift, adding up those numbers while the machine jumped around the room, nervous. The heels of the cool, cool boy's Nikes tapped against

the machine and the sheets spun around inside of it and Jasmine's heart spun around inside her chest. Everything, then, spinning.

Everything, now, still.

Jasmine didn't have many friends, and the few she had were having sex. All the girls in school, it seemed, were having sex. They all wanted those bracelets that bragged about their sexual prowess: white to first base; blue to second; red to third; yellow meaning they would give it all away. Girls with yellow bracelets commanded space in the hallways, strutting past in their shimmering JLo camis and Baby Phat jeans. Fine boys leaned against lockers and nodded their heads as the pack passed by, saying, "I'm gonna hit that." No one looked at Jasmine except to call her "Platform," her ass like a platform you could somersault off. She didn't want to give it all away but she wanted those boys to look at her like that. She wanted that bracelet.

There were sirens, finally, whining their way towards her. The wind was cold and her muscles felt like Popsicles frozen together in a bag and her dress was stuck to her back from all the blood. Porch lights flipped on. Jasmine rocked back and forth, waiting, her hands locked over her shins. *I killed my momma.* Then the sirens were screaming and a car screeched to a stop and shiny black shoes with thick rubber soles were running towards her.

"Ten-thirteen. Two females." One of the men said, his voice sharp and fast, like a car taking corners. "There's blood all over her. We need an ambulance."

The other man gently took her arm and put his fingers on her wrist. He had a gray mustache and a deep voice and he asked if she was hurt.

"Did you see who did this?" The man with the fast voice asked.

“Slow down. Call CPS.”

“Did you see who did this?”

“Come on, sweetheart.” The man with the mustache picked her up and carried her towards the police car with the long antennas and the red and blue lights spinning in silent circles. Her arms fastened around his neck. She fingered the yellow bracelet, hating it, hating the cool, cool boy with the long arms and the brown can of RockStar who refused to admit he slept with her. “Shit, Platform?” she heard him say. “I got standards.” Jasmine thought about how nice he’d been, how he stayed up all night and held open the pillowcases while she eased in the pillows. “Platform? Nigger, please.”

The bracelet had to come from an older girl who walked in the pack, and giving it all away had to be verified by the boy or a friend in the next room. Jasmine begged the cool, cool boy to cop to it. Said she’d do it again. Said she’d suck his dick. Said she’d do anything but anything was nothing because he said he wouldn’t. Couldn’t. Said he was sorry and that it wasn’t personal only the way it was, the way it had to be.

There were more sirens and more cars and people talking into radios and a policewoman who Jasmine told about the man her momma called “William,” the man with the ten teeth and the old corduroys. Jasmine changed into green sweats and put her dress in a plastic bag and the policewoman introduced her to a stocky man with a scar on his cheek who sat her on the back of an ambulance. He draped a blanket over her shoulders and cleaned out her cuts and wrapped a black sleeve around her arm that took her pulse. He put the silver center of a stethoscope against her chest and asked her to take deep breaths. Innnnn and ouuuuuut.

Yellow tape stretched from a fire hydrant to a telephone pole to a stand with an orange light, forming a triangle around her momma's body. People from church stood behind the tape. Old women in large hats shook their heads and talked behind their hands. Wrinkled men wore old brown suits. One man was different, taller, standing like a giant in black sweat pants and a white shirt; when Jasmine looked at him, he waved and smiled the biggest smile she'd ever seen. The man with the scar on his cheek took a small light out of a red bag just as a fine black man walked up, so very fine, wearing a blue button-down shirt. He had brown eyes and a day's worth of stubble that blended into his dark skin. He was the finest man Jasmine had ever seen.

The man with the scar said hello to the fine man, like they knew each other, then shined the small light in Jasmine's eyes and asked her to follow it. She followed the light and it made her blink and the man with the scar ran it in front of her face two more times before asking the fine man, "Got a place tonight?"

"Not yet," the fine man said, "I'd call Emily Lockley but she's always full."

"Thank you, Jasmine," the man with the scar said, "you're not hurt."

"What about my baby?" Jasmine asked, wishing she hadn't.

Both of their eyes opened wide, like bread popping out of a toaster. The fine man walked away with a hand on his head. The sirens were still spinning silently, their red and blue illuminating the crowd of church people and the giant man with the big smile for a quick moment, then leaving them in the dark, flashing on two people zipping up her momma in a black bag then a white cat sitting on the fence the crank dealer had jumped over. Then starting over. Shining on things for a slow second then leaving them in the dark, the tall man with the giant smile gone the next time around.

The fine man came back and squatted down in front of Jasmine, next to the man with the scar. “How old are you, Jasmine?”

She swallowed. “Thirteen.”

“And how long have you been pregnant?”

She pulled on the blanket and looked down.

The fine man let out a long breath. “She is going to kill me,” he said, pulling out his cell phone, “that woman is going to kill me.”

Jasmine thought her momma was going to kill her after she smoked that meth. It made her feel like everything was made out of water, like waves were bouncing her up and down and the sun was shining and she could float along forever. She got it, then, why people did stuff like that: it made the pain stop. Made the feeling like she was nothing stop. She could see it getting easier every day, so easy that you didn’t really think you were doing it because it was just one more thing to get you through the day. But when it stopped – the floating, the feeling like something – she still wanted that bracelet.

So she slept with another boy, a boy who was not cool. A boy whose friends taunted him because he hadn’t “hit it” and called him “Dumbo” because his ears were so big. So she picked him. Picked Dumbo because she knew he’d tell everyone. It made her wonder if that was how the world worked, pretty people fucking pretty people and ugly people getting fucked. When he was on top of her – even more awkward than the cool, cool boy, even quicker – Jasmine studied his ears, thinking they weren’t all that big, thinking they might even be friends until he stood up like he was all of that – like those

boys by the lockers in the hall – and left without saying anything, left like he had done something when it was her who'd picked him.

Still, she couldn't wait to slide that bracelet onto her wrist. The older girls would gather around her and watch the bracelet slip past her fingers and over the back of her hand. Then they would take a victory stroll between those invisible barriers and be watched by all of those boys. Then they might ask her what she was doing after school. It wasn't like that. There was a paper bag filled with yellow bracelets, like popcorn, and after Jasmine slid one onto her wrist all the girls looked at her, like, "What?" No one asked her to walk down the hall. No one asked her anything. She just stood there until they walked away without her.

The fine man put her in his car and started the engine. The top two buttons of his blue shirt were undone. The dashboard was shiny and the mat under her feet didn't have any trash on it. An empty Diet Coke bottle rested against the emergency break and a smooth saxophone moaned sadly from the speakers. The man turned on the heat and air tumbled out of the vents, warming the car as they drove onto the highway. The motor hummed and the saxophone groaned and Jasmine felt her body thawing out, her body warming, the seat a large and comfortable lap.

They parked in front of a house three stories high with two big trees in front. It was an old house, what her momma called "a slave-owning house," but one someone had spent a lot of time making look new.

"Come on," the fine man said, turning off the car, "you'll love Emily. She's the nicest white woman on the planet."



“Is she the one that’s mad at you?”

He let out a short laugh through his nose. “We’ll see.”

Jasmine pressed the button on her seatbelt and it slowly slid away from her. They walked up a smooth cement path past a wooden sign that read “Lockley Home” in big blue letters. The front porch wrapped around the house and a flowerbed ran in front of it, flowers of all different colors leaning towards the ground. The bushes were neatly trimmed. Plants in red pots relaxed on the porch’s railing like they owned the place, their long skinny leaves frowning at Jasmine like she wasn’t welcome.

The fine man rang the doorbell and a short woman with blonde hair opened the door, wearing jeans and a white sweater. She floated the fine man a funny frown then smiled at Jasmine and extended her hand. “Hi there. I’m Emily.”

Her voice sounded like it had wings and her skin was translucent and her hair was tied in a knot on top of her head. Jasmine thought she had never seen a nicer face, Emily’s chin small and her cheekbones high, her face like a pincushion in the shape of a heart.

Jasmine shook Emily’s hand and said her own name and then Emily introduced Jasmine to a tall black girl, her hair braided in messy pigtails.

“She’ll take you up to shower,” Emily said, handing Jasmine some pink pajamas stacked on a red towel. Then to the older girl, “Then bring her to the kitchen, okay?”

Jasmine followed the older girl up the stairs and turned right down a hallway even though the stairs zigzagged up another floor towards faint laughter. The older girl was a light-skinned black girl and her pigtails were held with red ribbons. Her baggy white pajamas billowed out while she walked and her blue flip-flops slapped her heels. The

voices upstairs sounded like rubber balls bouncing along the floor. Chattering.

Laughing. Already, Jasmine didn't want to leave.

"You can shower in there," the older girl said, stopping in front of a white door.

"There's soap and stuff. I'll come back ten minutes."

"What is this place?" Jasmine asked.

"It's a home for girls without parents. Do you have parents?"

Jasmine looked at the carpet.

"Mine died in a fire," the older girl said, like she'd said it a thousand times. "I went to a bunch of places before I came here and it's the best."

"Can I stay here?"

"Go and get cleaned up." The older girl smiled. "Then we'll get you some food."

Warm water shot out of the nozzle. A circus procession marched across the shower curtain: a clown juggling; a tiger jumping through a ring of fire; a woman swinging from one trapeze to another. The warm water felt like pins against Jasmine's skin, peeling the blood off of her back and washing away her momma's smells of hotel disinfectant and perfume. Jasmine wrapped her hand around the yellow bracelet, hating it, wanting to rip it off but unable to. So she turned off the water, a few final drops dripping from the showerhead.

The older girl was sitting on the floor outside the bathroom, reading a book.

"Here," she said, standing, then holding open a black trash bag, which Jasmine dropped the green sweats and grey blanket into. The older girl pulled a red handle out of the plastic and let it fall from her fingers, the opening of the bag tightening into a small

circle. She nodded down the hall and started to walk. Upstairs, someone yelled, *Stop it!* “That’s Denise, she wets her bed every night and the other girls remind her every day.”

“How many girls live here?”

“Nine girls, plus me,” she said, as if she practiced it, “two in every room. I’m the oldest and been here the longest.”

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen. But there’s girls here as young as seven and eight.”

“Any of the girls pregnant?” Jasmine asked, wishing she hadn’t.

“Naw, but we’ve had pregnant girls before. Are you pregnant?”

The older girl turned right and Jasmine followed her down the stairs. Even if she was only staying for one night Jasmine didn’t want to be the only girl in the house with a baby like she’d been the only girl in school without a yellow bracelet. She didn’t want to take the place of the girl who wet her bed. The wooden stairs creaked nervously under her feet. More laughter bounced around upstairs, punctuated by another, *Stop it!* The older girl reached the bottom of the stairs and turned back, waiting for an answer.

“Naw,” Jasmine said, “I ain’t pregnant.”

The older girl shrugged, as if it didn’t matter, and Jasmine followed her down a hallway past a room with tan couches and a big television. The trash bag bobbed up and down with the older girl’s steps, keeping her beat, the red handle tight around her fingers. She placed her free hand on the doorknob then stopped, Jasmine stopping behind her.

From the other side of the door, Emily said, “You’re putting me in an awful place.”

“This is exactly the type of girl who gets lost in the system,” the fine man said.

“You can’t keep doing this to me.”

“It always works out.”

“I’m low on funds as it is,” Emily said. “You drop these girls off and I’m left begging Kyle Pierce for funding while you’re nowhere to be found.”

“I’m on the front lines.”

“No, I’m on the front lines – ”

“Emily.”

“You’re putting every girl here at risk, the entire place at risk.”

“She watched her mother get shot, Emily, watched her die. Can’t you keep her for a couple of days until I find something else.”

“You know there’s nothing else.”

Jasmine fingered the yellow bracelet, wanting to run back upstairs or back to the fine man’s car or back to yesterday before any of this happened. She wanted to snap her fingers and disappear. The older girl turned around, studying Jasmine, and Jasmine thought she was going to say something mean for putting everyone at risk. But the older girl set down the garbage bag, which sighed, air leaking out of the top. She squatted down in front of Jasmine. “Here,” she said, slipping the yellow bracelet off Jasmine’s wrist, “you don’t need to be wearing something like that around here.”

## Chapter Seven

The Swimming Rabbit was packed. Every table full, the bar full, stomachs becoming full on fantastic food. It was no small gesture, surely a divine gesture, having Sterling Carroll sitting with Jeremy and Emily at the best table in the restaurant – one of four by the front window – periodically and politely penning autographs. The auction would be at nine. Boyd's staff was going to make bank, he'd be able to save his parent's house, that little girl was going to get to stay with Emily, and Emily was going to see that Boyd had a soul. Hell, Boyd's soul was on display for all of Elora.

Now, if only the Davenports would make an appearance. Then the Weekly would *have* to review them. Then Boyd could set his sites on Ovio.

Sterling was a sight, looking sharp as shit in a silk, maroon shirt. "Lamont told me not to wear anything too black," Sterling had said, walking in the front door and spinning in a casual circle, "how'd I do?"

Boyd cracked up. "Your brother is a piece of work."

"Always told him it was the mailman, made him cry like a little bitch."

Boyd would've bought the mailman line if Sterling and Lamont didn't look so much alike. Sterling was a good three inches taller, though slender for a guy who became legend by flattening running backs. They both had shaved heads and wide noses. Lamont's eyes were more serious behind his wireless frames and Sterling had a thin goatee. Once they opened their mouths, however, you could barely tell the same blood ran through their veins. You had to beg Lamont to talk, and his sarcasm was desert dry. Sterling had a massive laugh that scraped the ceiling. He seemed comfortable with

attention, telling stories he'd probably told a thousand times, as if he'd spent his life being the center of everything, the lucky guy.

Tonight, Boyd felt like the center of everything. The restaurant was bustling and Prince was singing *Joooooy in Repetition*. It was the same kind of high he used to get singing for Vine: jumping around stage, the crowd dancing, Boyd summoning them to sing along, a slew of women waiting to have sex with him after the show. He feared he'd never feel that again, but here it was, more tranquil and mature. A healthy high. He wasn't on stage, but he was the ringleader of an extraordinary night, looking extraordinary himself in the suit he'd driven an hour to pick up that afternoon: black Hugo Boss with the hint of a chalk stripe. Three-button.

The bar took up the back wall – a door on both sides, one to the kitchen and one to the bathrooms – its top blood orange granite, its front zinc. Slanted wine shelves elevated from the tops of liquor bottles to the ceiling, the metal of the shelves so thin and dark that they seemed to disappear in the faint light, leaving the illusion of a floating wall of wine. Four cocktail tables had glass tops, a short wall of glass bricks separating them from fifteen dining room tables. Vision. The top half of the walls were a rustic sienna, the bottom a pale mocha, a short ledge extending where the colors converged holding two dozen votive candles in glass holders that surrounded the dining room in a trembling ring of fire. Perfect.

"I am de-lighted that Jasmine is with you," Sterling said to Emily. "I figured she'd wind up in some dump with forty other kids. I seen those places."

“She still could,” Emily said, “I can only keep her so long without funding.”

Emily wore the low-cut black dress that drove Boyd crazy, and he suspected she’d had her hair done. All to prove she was over him – could she really be over him? Already?

“Jeremy, man,” Sterling said, “when is your rich ass gonna shell out some dough for this girl?”

“Jeremy has written me plenty of checks,” Emily said.

“That’s because you’re my favorite of Boyd’s girlfriends,” Jeremy said. He had a voice that sounded like it was hooked up to helium and a monstrous cowlick.

“Sweet, Jeremy,” Emily cooed, her hand on his, “you know Boyd broke my heart two months ago.”

“Rewind,” Sterling said, then pointed at Boyd, “*you*, broke up with *her*?”

Emily flipped back a curl. “It wasn’t meant to be.”

“That’s foul.” Sterling shook his head. “If I had a woman like you, I’d never let her go. Beautiful *and* saving kids.”

How had Boyd become a piñata? He wanted to scream: *She’s crazy*.

“I always said you were the best thing that ever happened to him,” Jeremy remarked, taking his turn.

“I was busy opening a restaurant.” Boyd’s stomach grumbled, then pushed up a small burp. The CD kicked over to a Grateful Dead version of “Fire on the Mountain.”

“This is the busiest we’ve been,” Jeremy said, “thanks to you, Sterling.”

Sterling waved it off. “This is a cool spot, you guys just needed a break.”

“Like the time you picked off that pass in the flat,” Boyd said, “then ran it back to the two and we kicked a field goal to beat Miami.”

Jeremy said, “It was against Virginia.”

“I’m still pissed that little scat-back caught me,” Sterling said, pulling out his cell phone and checking a text. He shook his head and pocketed the phone.

Boyd was relieved to see Mallory approach the table. She presented a bottle of Zind-Humbrecht to Jeremy and said to Boyd, “Your presence is requested in the back, boss.” Then she whispered in his ear, “They’re going down.”

They were going down. When Boyd walked through the door Shawn was yelling at Lamont: “We know what we’re doing back here.”

Lamont shrugged his broad shoulders, unaffected, and left with four plates of food. Shawn and his sous chef, Eric Packson – “Pax,” as everyone called him – ran the line and a little Hispanic woman named Veronica put out salads and deserts from the pantry in the back of the room. Usually Shawn ran the grill and called the board without any problem but they’d never been this busy.

Was the pressure getting to Shawn? Boyd had already fed him two Percocet and twice ran back to the kitchen and ripped off a fart to keep Shawn laughing. And where was Amber? Boyd had expected and wanted her to be circling the restaurant with fliers from Chillington Real Estate, letting customers admire her pregnant belly. What better way to remind people that they were a mom-and-pop restaurant than with the chef’s pregnant wife? When Boyd asked Shawn if he wanted to hold a table for Amber, Shawn looked at Boyd like he’d come to work in a leotard and sparkling cape. Weird. Then again, Shawn’s own parents hadn’t been in to eat. So much for mom and pop.

A ticket printed out, four more attached to it that hadn’t been called out. Boyd ripped off the tickets. “Ordering in, two salmon, one filet, all mid-rare. Ordering second



course, two duck and one snapper, fire a goat and a shrimp. Fire table three, two filet, one lamb, one salmon. Order-fire two bunnies.”

Boyd slid the tickets under a holder at eye-level, grabbed a damp rag and began wiping sauces from the edge of plates that were pushed onto the silver shelf in front of him, above the tickets and below a heat lamp. Cool air crashed through the open back door, slamming into the heat like a bird flying into glass. Jesus, Boyd really did have to do everything: entertain Sterling, run the front of the house, and save the kitchen. He hung his suit coat from a fire extinguisher, rolled up his sleeves and started arranging the tickets. “I need runners!”

“Rock and roll!” Pax yelled. A yellow bandana covered his head, the knot tied on the side. He flipped pasta in a pan – a blue rag between his hand and the handle – then dropped a handful of popcorn shrimp into another pan, squeezing a bottle of olive oil over it. Flames danced wildly. Sauces sizzled. Shawn’s red face dripped with sweat. He touched the tops of two filets, flipped them with a pair of tongs, then threw two rabbits on sizzle trays and popped them in the oven. “Seven bunnies on the board, B.”

“Where are all my damn servers – I need a runner!” Boyd took six steps toward a white board hanging by the door to the dining room and wrote “rabbit” in red and the numbers eight down to one next to it and crossed out the eight.

Kay – the eldest member of Boyd’s staff; tall with short black hair – pinched his ear as she walked past him then left with three entrées.

Neil carried in four empty wine glasses. “B-man,” he said, sliding the glasses into a rack by the dishwasher, “I got a couple hicks who want the elk on mashers.”

Shawn shook his head, *no*.

Neil said, “fuck” under his breath.

Boyd understood that Shawn considered himself an artist. Every morsel on the plate had a specific purpose and every flavor worked in conjunction with another. Changing a side was like asking a painter to change a color. And Shawn trained under Chris Campbell, who even refused changes for allergies. But Shawn wasn’t Chris and they weren’t Ovio – yet. He asked Shawn, “Are you sure?”

“What you see is all I have left for the second turn.” Shawn opened the oven. “Unless you want to roll the dice – bunnies are up, Paxy.”

Pax emptied a pan of risotto into two bowls. Shawn pulled out the two-sizzle trays and, carefully, placed the rabbits atop the risotto. Pax poured gravy over each carcass. This was Shawn’s best dish, the dish the restaurant was named after. Shawn turned back to the oven. Boyd raised his eyebrows at Pax, pointing at the pan of potatoes. Pax nodded.

“Fine,” Boyd said, “we’ll roll the dice. We’re cooking for charity tonight.”

Shawn slapped the side of the oven with his tongs. Neil jumped. Pax contorted his face into a mock expression of fear.

“But quit pushing the filet,” Boyd said to Neil, “and run this food.”

Neil said: “I’ve got apps to ring in and drinks dying at the bar.”

“I’ve got apps to ring in and my name is Neil and I’m in the weeds,” Boyd said, raising the pitch of his voice. “Pull up your skirt and run some food.”

Boyd couldn’t stop thinking about how hot Emily looked in that dress. Not the best sex she ever had? Please. He had her moaning so loud it put the neighborhood

felines in song. If she really thought it wasn't the best sex she'd ever had then the record needed to be set straight. Jesus – what was he thinking?

Three more tickets printed out, the ribbon screaming across the paper. “Order in, for Jeremy, duck, lamb and salmon. Fire two bunnies and a soup.”

“Step back,” Pax said, bumping Shawn's shoulder, “that was three entrees.”

Shawn massaged his bad hand, finally smiling. “Who's the third?”

“Some chick.” Boyd stepped over to the white board and crossed off the 7 and the 6. “Five bunnies all day!”

“Would her initials be E and L?” Pax asked.

“Busted.” Shawn pointed his tongue at Boyd. “You caved.”

“I did no such thing.” Boyd wiped down the line with a wet rag, pivoted, faked two dribbles behind his back, and then fired a jump shot into the linen bag. “That girl is staying at the Lockley Home, I could hardly not invite Emily.”

“Hardly.” Pax winked at Shawn, spooning cassoulet onto a plate. “Funny he never mentioned that.”

“Yeah,” Shawn said, lifting two ducks off the grill, “ha-ha funny.”

“Could we focus on the full dining room outside?” Boyd raised up a ticket. “And firing two goats and one soup.”

Boyd yelled towards the door: “I need runners!”

Pax poured wine over a pan of vegetables and the alcohol caught fire in the pan. Shawn put down seven plates and dribbled demi-glaze around three of them, carefully, as if he was sculpting. Pax slid vegetables onto two of the naked plates.

“Those people are freaks,” Mallory said, carrying in a stack of app plates, forks balanced on top. Lamont followed behind her with an empty bottle of Viogner.

Mallory’s bangs were pinned back with a barrette and her hair clipped in a short ponytail.

Boyd picked up a water bottle and squirted some on his face. “What happened?”

“These complete freaks at Lamont’s table took my picture while I cleared.”

“Mind you,” Lamont interjected, “this directly followed the pictures they took of their empty plates.”

Boyd tore off a ticket. “Fire table four, salmon and snapper – have these people ever been out to eat?”

“It’s amateur night, everyone’s here to see Lamont’s faaaaaamous brother,”

Mallory mocked.

“Sterling said you came from the mailman,” Boyd added, “and that you used to cry like a little bitch.”

“And to think,” Lamont said, “last week I was happily nobody.”

“Right.” Mallory rolled her eyes. “It’s so bad out there, the Davenports are sitting at the bar.”

“The Davenports?” Boyd’s heart skipped a beat. “Why didn’t you tell me? I would’ve bumped someone to give them a table.”

“They like sitting there,” Mallory said, “they always did at Ovio.”

“Buy them a bottle of bubbles or something. I’ll be out as soon as I can.”

“I wouldn’t do that, they like to be treated like everyone else.” She tilted her head. “It’s kind of like Lamont, they try to be invisible even though it’s impossible.”

Lamont opened his book, flipping through tickets. “I’m invisible in the dark.”

The kitchen door swung open and Neil walked in. “What’s shaking?”

“Your table fifteen is up,” Boyd said, wiping the plates. “Salmon to the ladies, Mal will follow you with the filet and duck.”

Mallory belted out: “Good times!”

“I’m not listening to you,” Lamont said.

Mallory picked up the two plates. “That’s long been apparent.”

“Are we interrupting a moment?” Boyd asked.

At the door, Mallory spun around. “I’m coming back for your girlfriend’s apps, Boyd, and she sure dressed up purdy for ya.” She bumped the door with her butt and disappeared into the dining room.

“She’s not my girlfriend!” Boyd yelled. He should’ve just slept with Emily on Monday. What was the point in doing the right thing if no one noticed? He’d done the right thing in not hiring Chase and everyone thought he was an asshole. He’d done the right thing in not sleeping with Emily and everyone thought they were back together. Doing the right thing sucked.

“Boyd,” Lamont said, “in theory, would you classify a twenty-six minute fire time as too long?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Then, in practice, what would you suggest I do about the filet and snapper for table eleven?”

Boyd scanned the tickets in front of him. “Did you ring it in?”

“I thought we were communicating telepathically tonight.”

Boyd asked Shawn: “How many filets down?”

“Two fired and four on hold – why?”

“Fuck,” Boyd groaned, “we’re missing a ticket.”

Neil walked back in, holding a salmon. “This was supposed to be a snapper.”

“Did you repeat the order?” Boyd asked.

“Sorry,” Neil said, “I thought she said salmon.”

“Always repeat the fucking order.”

“Boyd,” Lamont said, his voice calm, “I bet if we think about it real hard, the food will appear on table eleven, like the transfiguration.”

“Smart ass.” Boyd shook his head. “On the fliest of flies, I need two snappers and one filet – ” He looked to Lamont.

“Mid-well.”

Shawn hit the oven with his tongs again. “Shit! It would be mid-well.”

“Paxy,” Boyd said, “fly me three soups.”

Neil put the salmon back in the window. Pax ladled out three soups, floated a crustini in each, and sprinkled Parmesan over the top, the cheese melting into the surface. Neil left with three salads from the pantry. Kay came in and took three plates. Shawn rubbed his bad hand, beads of sweat pasted across his forehead. “Lamont, why didn’t you come check on that ticket after fifteen minutes?”

Lamont took a deep breath. “You’ll just have to forgive me, Shawn.”

“That’s the first rule of a long ticket,” Shawn said. “We can’t fuck things up with stupid mistakes.”

Lamont took a step forward, his broad shoulders tense. Light reflected off his shaved head. “Actually, Shawn, exactly twelve minutes ago I did come and check but

you decided it was time to yell at the dumb nigger that you guys knew what you were doing when, clearly, you didn't."

Shawn held his silver tongs in the air, the two ends sticking straight up. Filets and ducks simmered on the grill, tips of flames touching their skin then engulfing them. Mallory and Neil walked into the kitchen, the tension so palpable that both of them stopped.

"Lamont," Boyd said, "I'm sure this is my fault. I probably lost the ticket when I moved everything around."

"I don't appreciate the implication that I'm too stupid to check on a ticket."

"No one thinks you're stupid." Boyd turned to the line. "Shawn, do you think Lamont is stupid?"

Shawn just stood there, his tongs still in the air, his chef coat soaked, his small eyes like raisins falling into flour. Pax stepped behind him and tapped the backs of filets and ducks, flipped four of them, then stepped back to sauté and stirred risotto. He opened the oven and pulled out two rabbits. Shawn swallowed, then said, "No, I don't."

Boyd handed Lamont a bowl of soup then took the other. For a few seconds, Lamont appeared to be whispering to himself, his lips moving quietly and quickly. Boyd led him towards the door, thinking this wasn't that big of a deal, that he could fix all this and they were still in the middle of a miraculous night when something clicked, then a series of thumps came from the hoods above the line. Pax looked up, his hands out as if waiting for rain. Shawn squinted in confusion. Water bounced around the dishwasher. Risotto bubbled in a sauté pan.

Then the Ansul system went off.

White foam shot out of nozzles. Sticky white foam showered the filets and ducks on the grill, showered the metal burners and the salmon and snapper in sauté pans. Pax leaned over sauté pans in vain, foam still spraying. It was like a snowstorm. A very, very expensive and sticky snowstorm. Shawn looked like a snowman. The spouts sputtered, then stopped, foam still drizzling out of them, slowing to a drip.

Pax yanked off his bandana, his head cleanly shaven above his frothy face. He shook out the bandana and wiped around his eyes. All of the flames under the grill and sauté station had been extinguished. All of the pans were filled with foam.

Boyd was thinking how close they were. The auction was only half an hour away. The dining room was filled and the Davenports – the fucking Davenports – were deciding what to order. They were about to get *The Weekly* in the door and instead they were going to look like a bunch of clueless kids. Half the room was going to leave hungry and walk the news of this disaster up and down Main Street. It would take them three days, at least, to get this mess cleaned up, and that girl wasn't going to get a dime out of this night. Boyd saw moving vans pulling up to his parents' house.

*Fuck, he thought, maybe this place is cursed.*



## Chapter Eight

Sterling got three texts from that crazy nigger Al during the fundraiser but it was Al's fault Sterling was there in the first place, so Sterling ignored the texts and the image they kindled of a mother's hand on her daughter's back. Besides, Sterling was busy. Busy dishing out autographs and spinning stories and pretending he meant something to a room full of white people. He was busy thinking the past was the present, that he could coax that ghost out of hiding with the swell of a small crowd and the smell of decadent food and the spell of making amends – and then some whacked out shit happened in the back and the bad luck that tracked Sterling through life reminded him not to get too comfortable in all of that pretending, reminded him that just because the past framed the present, didn't mean it colored it in. That chatty cat Boyd stood up on the bar and announced there wouldn't be any more food and half of the hands in the restaurant signaled for their checks.

Lamont stuck his head out of the kitchen door and all of the veins were about to pop from his forehead. Sterling knew that look: Lamont wanted to hurt somebody. From the day Lamont was born he had a temper, like this world really wasn't the place for him. Sterling used to make fun of the way Lamont talked, all smart and shit right out of the gate, and even at half Sterling's size Lamont would get that look and charge like a little bull, bouncing off Sterling's legs only to try again. Swinging those little fists. Lamont cast that attitude right onto the football field and it made Sterling wonder if Lamont even liked the game. Sterling loved it. Loved going to practice and getting taped up and squeezing everything out of his body until he was a mound of muscle and sweat. He

loved hanging out in the locker room before the game, feeling the slow beat of adrenaline wind him up until he sprinted out of the tunnel and the crowd roared. And he loved – *loved* – the moments before and after he made a big play, the moment when a gap opened in the line and the moment after he felt the quarterback crumble beneath him and the stadium exploded, the sound enveloping Sterling and washing him clean. It was like stealing fire from the gods. Lamont could’ve given a shit about any of that, but he did love hitting people. But he didn’t even love that like it was fun, like it was something he got to do, he loved it like it was something he *had* to do, and after each game he couldn’t shower off how it made him feel. Maybe that’s why he quit. Scholarship offers across the board and he quits football. Talk about whacked.

Jeremy flew off his chair, his white napkin landing on the floor. That fine little number Emily had one hand on her wine glass. Three appetizer plates waited in vain for the first course.

“That’s it?” Sterling asked. “We can still have the auction – right?”

Emily put her small white hand on his arm. “They won’t stay.”

“I’ll make them stay,” Sterling said, “I can fix this.” He stood up and stepped between a middle-aged couple and the door. “Come on, ya’ll, stick around.”

The man pushed his right arm through the sleeve of his coat and looked down, embarrassed. The woman shrugged and muttered an apology. Then they split away from each other and walked past Sterling who turned around and said, “Are you kidding?” His back was to the restaurant and four more people wedged past him so he turned around in time to put his hands in front of two older men with grey hair, their wives behind them. “Please, folks, let’s help this girl out.” They mumbled something about being hungry,

that they'd be happy to come back, and one man ducked under Sterling's arm and the other actually pushed away Sterling's hand and put his arm around his wife, as if protecting her for passage. Sterling asked and pleaded and even got a little angry but he could not stop the flood of people from exiting the restaurant. He used to stand up two-hundred-pound running backs with blinding speed and now middle-aged white people were walking right past him.

Pissed and hungry, Sterling grabbed two cheeseburgers on the way home. Those two hours of pretending had been the first time he'd been able to bat away the memory of the woman being stood straight by a bullet. He got home and ate the cheeseburgers and felt saturated in the guilt and the grease and the stillness of his apartment. So he rolled a joint. Stillness used to accost Sterling with his failed career and the burden he'd become to his brother, but that was all in the family and somehow he'd become accustomed to it. Now stillness rolled those images toward him like red dice across the green felt of a craps table: Jasmine's small hands in front of her as she fell to the ground; the look of surprise and sorrow and outrage on the woman's face as her body fought the momentum of the bullet; one of her shoes tumbling away as she fell on top of her daughter. All of it in Sterling's rearview mirror. He never got "stoned" anymore. Just numb. Just high enough to hover over those memories and when it didn't work he did the last thing he wanted to do, he texted Al. It was easier to hate the guy sitting next to you than hate yourself, even if there wasn't any difference.

Ten minutes later Al showed up in a black Beamer he'd probably jacked that day. He wore an ugly orange shirt and a leather jacket. Al was one of those hard niggers with

glassy eyes and cornrows. Sterling hated riding with him because he would shoot anyone at anytime. Sterling used to feel like that, like he was bulletproof. Once Al decided he was going to shoot somebody he didn't see nothing else: the police, if the person had a gun, what time of day it was, or whether there was a little girl walking with her momma.

"I been texting your black ass for an hour," Al said, pulling away from the curb. He had a deep and raspy voice that sounded like a match being struck. From the radio Outkast bragged about being fresh and clean.

"I was busy."

"I know, dawg, it was your big dinner." His right hand flashed in front of his face. "Sterling Carroll: Back in the spotlight."

"I thought we decided I wasn't going to ride with you anymore."

"You decided that, and as long as you got that note with Boras he's the decider of your life."

Sterling leaned back and watched Elora speed past, thinking it wasn't all that long ago that he liked being himself. People watched him on TV. Wore jerseys with his name. The dashboard was all bright and digital, the square shapes of speedometer accelerating with the engine. Sterling ran all of Boras' gambling and the only thing he liked about himself now was that he stayed away from the drugs and the killing, and Boras would kill you for walking too fast – or give Al the order.

Al took a left on Highway 22, which meant they weren't heading into West Elora. Sterling asked, "Where we goin'?"

"We goin' to see some white people and they like that famous face of yours."

"I already don't like this."

“Don’t worry, we’re just gonna say ‘boo.’ You ain’t going to get them clean hands dirty.”

“You already made them filthy.”

“That shit was your fault as much as mine.” He laughed a high, scratchy laugh.

“You still think you’re one of the good guys.”

“I still think I’m not a killer.”

“Whatever helps you sleep.”

Sterling didn’t sleep. At all. “Why’s Boras been dealing with so many white people lately?”

“He’s white.”

Sterling shook his head. “Nice shirt, man.”

“This shirt is on point.”

“I know Boras is white,” Sterling said, “but he’s always stayed in West Elora.”

“He’s a businessman. Says he’s branching out.”

“He’s a businessman like I’m a jazz singer.”

“Not in those threads, you aren’t.”

“You look like a fucking circus clown.”

“This cost three bills,” Al said, pulling at the fabric of the orange shirt. “I saw TO wearing one just like it.”

Fucking Al, he was Boras’ bitch and a poser besides, thinking if he dressed up nice enough he wasn’t a drug dealer. It was like Boras saying he was a businessman. Whoever said clothes made the man either sold clothes or was a pussy that dressed nice.

Al said, “You met him once, right? TO?”

“Did Boras really say he was branching out?”

“Answer my question, bitch.”

“Did Boras really say he was branching out?”

“Did you meet TO or not?”

“I’ve told you a thousand times I met TO. And I tackled Marshall Faulk and I had a two-thousand dollar dinner with Warren Sap because we had the same agent and now I’m driving around with a rotted nectarine so you can imagine how unhappy I am.”

“Should’ve laid off them spreads.”

“Did Boras say he was branching out?”

“Said it and mean it.”

Jesus, Al was a true believer. “Okay, Plato, but how?”

“Fuck if I know, wash-out, he wants to own some businesses and shit. Get more respectable. Probably he wants that big white fish.”

A thought floated to the surface of Sterling’s mind and even though he knew he should let it sink back down, he climbed on top to get a panoramic view of the situation. Boras didn’t know any respectable white people, but Sterling did, and he’d just had dinner with two of them. Maybe he could fix things for himself and Jasmine. Maybe he could hook Boras that big white fish and get he and Lamont’s lives back.

## Second Course: Appetizers

### Chapter One

From his basement apartment Lamont watched the sun ascend into the morning. Quarter to six. His dark fingers curled around the white handle of the coffee cup. Consistent and simplistic differences fascinated him, the fashion in which they were supposedly ignored until, manically, in the midst of a crisis, they were clung to like a life vest. Difference. Everything – race, class, gender – becoming the same difference. Lamont's spirit needed nourishment; he opened the Bible to the book of James.

Every Sunday in the fall Lamont and Sterling watched the Seahawks, the common language of football keeping them from drifting apart. Today, however, the ritual created a hint of resentment. That paper on Nietzsche was due tomorrow but if Lamont canceled, Sterling would offer the casual yet caustic, *I understand, little brother, them books are important. I'm only family*. Lamont didn't work Saturdays for this very reason, so the paper would be almost finished if Boyd hadn't laid down a guilt trip of Augustinian proportions. *You came to me with this, begged me to do this. Think of that little girl, and think of how uncomfortable your brother will be if you're not here*. Such dramatic and urgent circles Boyd's world spun in.

Lamont refused to let his spirit be submerged under the Rabbit's wake of secular prattle. Well, refused, it turned out, was rather unrealistic. Both customers and co-workers took part in the cathartic discourse disguised as guileless dialogue, an effortless and enveloping language that resulted in a methodical strangulation of Lamont's spirit. Each shift he vowed not to push anyone under the bus. Each shift – after a shitty tip or being spoken down to or sat poorly – he failed. Despite these failures Lamont had

managed to stay out of the fray until last night, when he became a disco ball reflecting the Rabbit's dazzling lights of violence.

So said the book of James: *For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, its beauty perishes.* Countless daily entities could prevent you from feeding your spirit. Small distractions. Days opened effortlessly for Lamont when he began with the Bible, his spirit buoyant, floating lazily above those distractions; this type of repetition provided the strength and stamina to stay buoyant. If Lamont missed a day, then two and three, he began to think the strength was his own and his spirit became bloated, which had been the case for the past week: two stacks of quizzes had to be graded, his paper researched, class work maintained, shifts at the Rabbit worked, all the while his Bible closed on his dining room table next to a fruit bowl, bananas becoming soft and brown.

Last night these factors culminated in a visceral urge to beat the shit out of Shawn Hallow. White people. Life rolled right along for most of them. That smug look on Shawn's face as if the Rabbit's kitchen was the Vatican, Lamont feeling that familiar pinch between his shoulder blades, the enticement of violence. He kicked free of Shawn's first attack, asking forgiveness. The repetition of the accusation, however, created a brief and powerful moment, created a formless and ephemeral fear that manifested itself in a violent retaliation.

More James: *[L]et everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.* The collision of anxiety and explosion of the moment left Lamont slow to listen and quick to anger. He'd spent the entire week anxious over any number of absurd scenarios: someone bursting into the



restaurant announcing his brother was a criminal, the police bursting into the restaurant and arresting Sterling; Sterling acting like a jackass. Instead, Lamont had acted like a jackass and resorted to a racial slur, which is what ignorant people did when they didn't have anything intelligent to say, when all differences became the same. *Therefore, rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank and growth of wickedness and welcome the meekness and implanted word that has the power to save your soul.*

After, Boyd handed Lamont a bowl of soup – the bottom hot – and Lamont prayed, silently, five or six times, *Jesus Christ, son of God, be merciful upon my soul, a sinner before you.* Meekness. Elevation. Boyd whispered to Lamont, “Ignore Shawn, he’s been acting like a baby all night.” It was an invitation to talk shit on Shawn, one Lamont would’ve eagerly accepted had he not prayed, none of which mattered a few seconds later when the room was covered with foam. It was an appropriate Old Testament disaster, the crisis blinding, everyone forgetting about Jasmine. *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

All the foam in South Carolina wasn't going to wash out those stains.

It was a mass exodus of customers and a pathetic picture of Boyd begging people to stay. He offered drinks and desserts, tried writing IOU's but couldn't keep up, tried buying a bottle of Champagne for that couple at the bar – the Davenports, Mallory said – who politely declined. They were hungry. People had come to eat. Those who had been served, stayed. Jeremy and Boyd screamed at each other outside the front window until a fire truck pulled up; the Ansul system had sent an alarm. Even if there was no fire, the

restaurant had to be evacuated. Suddenly Jeremy and Boyd were back on the same team, begging the fire captain not to empty the building.

An hour after the trucks left Lamont sat at the bar sipping a scotch. The staff was out back, smoking and speculating. Shawn and Boyd were upstairs. Plates were still on tables and candles still burned. It was rather lovely. Lamont liked how the flame of each candle bled into the next, becoming part of the light that circled the room. The scotch tasted smooth and warm and Lamont was wondering why he wanted a drink after every shift, why he *needed* a drink after every shift, when the kitchen door swung open and Mallory walked behind the bar to face him.

“I guess you’re not going out,” she said, “since you’ve got that paper due.” She had changed into jeans and a jazzy silver top that tied around her neck.

“You guessed correctly,” Lamont said, wondering if she changed for him.

“You never told me what Shawn said to you.” This invitation was more enticing than Boyd’s and Lamont wanted to spill out the entire episode.

“He said I was a great server, but that you needed some work.”

She crossed her arms, smiling. “This is that thing you do, using sarcasm as a defense.”

“I’m protecting us.”

Mallory scooped some ice into two glasses. “I need protection?”

“We all need protection.”

“From what, exactly?” She pivoted and grabbed a bottle of Grey Goose.

“You can’t see it.”

“No one’s ever accused you of being arrogant, have they?” She poured vodka into the two glasses, topped one with soda and one with tonic, then squeezed a wedge of lime over each.

“I’m putting my finger in the dam.”

“Uh, Lamont, I don’t know if you were here earlier, but the dam broke.” She set the vodka and tonic to Lamont’s left then popped open an Amstel Light and set it to his right. “We might not be open next week.”

“I know one little girl who hopes otherwise.”

Mallory bit her lip, nodding; Lamont thought she couldn’t be more beautiful. She said, “I’m breaking up with Greg.”

“Okay.” Lamont said, like a complete idiot.

“I wanted you to know, in case, well – ”

The kitchen door swung open and Kay walked behind Lamont, playfully slapping him on the side of the head. “Are you going to kick Shawn’s ass?”

“He’s putting his finger in the dam,” Mallory said, unclipping a beret, hair swinging in front of her face. In case what? In case he happened to absolutely adore her?

“The dam broke.” Kay took a drink of her vodka and tonic. “And we are not tipping out twenty-eight percent to be yelled at like children.”

“See?” Lamont said to Mallory.

“See what?” Mallory asked. “Tell us what happened.”

The door swung open again and Neil took the seat to Lamont’s right. “Thanks, Mal,” he said, taking a swig, then asking Lamont, “Did Shawn really call you a nigger?”

They were all waiting, loyally, patiently. A long thin shadow vacillated over the flames, rising, then dying beneath the sconces. The incident with Shawn was nauseating, alive even; it was inside of him and he wanted to vomit it all out, to purge himself of that animosity and hand it over to his friends, hand Shawn over to his friends who would quickly crucify him.

Lamont said: “He called me no such thing.”

A bowl of Rice Crispies chattered in milk, Lamont carrying it around a wooden futon – which cut the room in half – and to his desk against the back wall. Tall bookcases flanked each side of his desk, books stacked in front of books. Lamont set the cereal down on a pile of papers then loaded Miles Davis’ *In a Silent Way* into the CD player and backed it up with Public Enemy’s *Fear of a Black Planet*, which he pulled from a Bach case. It was juvenile to hide his hip-hop in classical cases, but he didn’t want to be stereotyped by his music – okay, he did, only the Bach. Miles would ease him into the morning then Public Enemy would match Nietzsche’s fascinating and furious prose. All philosophers beckoned their own beat, a beat you had to feel before you heard. *Shhh/Peaceful* begin with a single note on the keyboard, then a chord on the guitar from John McLaughlin, then a high-hat symbol picking up the tempo, Hancock and Corea on the keyboards echoing McLaughlin’s guitar in an ethereal in-and-out pattern. Miles was silent, waiting, for one minute and forty-five seconds, waiting, then entering the banter, his smooth horn the song’s musical glue.

The blue icon labeled *eternalreturn.doc* taunted Lamont: *I’m on-ly twelve pa-ges, I’m on-ly twelve pa-ges*. “I know,” Lamont said, “and twelve pages of shit, at that.”

Nietzsche deserved better; the Philosophy department demanded better if they were going to keep paying Lamont.

On the most basic level the eternal return was not impenetrable: Everyone returns to the same moments in life, continually. There was only so much time and only so many things that could happen; moments had to repeat themselves. This might be approachable if Nietzsche didn't write in maddening and mystifying aphorisms, vaguely referencing the eternal return in various texts, essentially refusing to clarify the theory. Lamont still thought there was a psychological aspect Nietzsche was missing, not that the eternal return was willed, per se, but people surely wanted some moments to return because they had been happy, and they wanted to be happy again.

Say it was willed, this return to the same moments in life, did that mean people "willed" the return of moments they despised – even subconsciously? Moments that were angry and painful and terrifying? It seemed unlikely; who wanted those back? And was there a distinction between a psychological return such as Sterling's bad luck and a cosmological return such as racism?

Lamont's father had been a pilot in Vietnam yet unable to endure the eternal return of racism. In the war, fighting side-by-side with other men, his father had felt the same as those men and thought that sameness would follow him home. He had fought for his country. He had returned with a Silver Star. If nothing else, he had earned respect. But the people of South Carolina still saw the same difference: he was black. White men had scurried up to Canada and Lamont's father was still called "boy." It took him eight months to get a job. Sterling liked to tell the story of how their father had dressed up in his uniform, pinned on his medals and taken Sterling to a restaurant where

he hadn't been allowed to eat. He walked up to the owner and said to Sterling, "See, son, this is what an ignorant racist looks like." He had given up by the time Lamont was born, and died of heart failure when Lamont was eight.

The cereal had become soggy; Lamont spooned in a mouthful. The bass began the trance-like track of *In A Silent Way/It's About That Time*, Miles again waiting on his entrance, the song dreamy and elusive for four minutes, Miles then guiding them on tangential solos, eventually returning to the dreamy melody that opened the track.

Lamont wanted to engage all of these questions in his paper, bring them into dialogue with psychology and Kierkegaard's notion of repetition. *That* would be a kick-ass paper. "It's too risky," Lamont said, "and your black ass is too cowardly." Lamont would write the paper he always wrote, regurgitating and footnoting other scholars, the paper that would land him an "A." That "A" would keep him in the program and allow him to keep paying off Sterling's debt with his Rabbit money. That "A" would keep Boras at bay. What do you do when your brother becomes a criminal? Adjust accordingly.

Hence, the safe paper, which was too bad because Lamont thought he might've discovered a governing psychological nuance of the eternal return: fear. It was too completely terrifying to think one had a hand in returning to a moment that was violent or isolating or heartbreaking – who wanted own up to something like that? Maybe Nietzsche, but if he did think the eternal return was "willed" it was probably so he could be in control of it, since he was in control of so little else, which made it a defense, which was what Lamont suspected: defense mechanisms motivated the eternal return, and the fear that kept people from owning up to it manifested itself in personal mythologies about

their own good intentions – like how another person forced them to do it. These mythologies exonerated people from the responsibility of the repetitious patterns in their lives. For instance, Sterling saying he was unlucky. Mythologies appeared as pointless platitudes such as *Everything happens for a reason* or *It was just meant to be*. When Sterling said he was unlucky, it revealed nothing and required nothing. He had been unlucky, but he'd also been stupid and lazy.

It made too much sense to be right. Lamont was already the department novelty and freak, so there was no reason to shoot for the trifecta and add departmental idiot by arrogantly attempting to explain one of the most mystifying philosophical concepts ever, especially for a class taught by the superstar of the department. No reason to take a leap of faith and fall on his face, especially with so much on the other side. He'd write the same paper he always wrote. Four pages and he'd go see his brother. Three letters – PhD – and he could write whatever he wanted. Two years until he got the letters. One day until he found out if Mallory broke up with Greg. Talk about wakes.

## Chapter Two

When that machine went off the Rabbit went from celebratory to somber, and Emily didn't think anyone was more upset than Sterling. It surprised her, his upset-ness, the naiveté that accompanied it. He had that dumbfounded look watching everyone leave, astonished they weren't more eager to help, the same look Emily must've worn her first year running The Lockley Home. She found it sweet, the palpable sadness of a man people had spent the evening describing as a monster on the football field. He took her card and she slipped out the front door in time to hear Jeremy threaten to buy every fire department in South Carolina.

It made her laugh, Jeremy's threat, which put a little weight on those floodgates. Her mother never would've stood for it, the tears, and Emily didn't want to stand for it considering the accompanying embarrassment. She'd parked on the street and had an eerie feeling walking to her car. She knew better than to turn around, but she was still tight-roping between laughter and tears and there was Boyd Tennor, watching her walk away, illuminated by the fire engine's red siren. It was a dreadful mistake, looking back, allowing an unspoken emotion to surface. He'd be at her door in twenty minutes, attempting to mend her sadness in spite of the night not mending anything for Jasmine. Some people just weren't lucky, Boyd and Jasmine being two of them, the difference being Jasmine's bad luck was tragic and Boyd's was a little less than terrible, even though it felt tragic to him. Everything felt tragic to him.

At home she opened a bottle of Syrah and wondered about the odds of that machine going off. A freak accident. Further evidence that some people were fated to be



unlucky. Jasmine was probably used to it. Poor people learned early that beams of hope were usually reflections off someone else's life. Boyd probably wasn't used to it, seeing as the first thirty years of his life were so charmed. That was the downside of a charmed life: it didn't prepare you for the alternative. Then you're left waiting for that charm to return even though it's a shooting star dying in the night. Boyd thought the death of anything was a reflection on him, that a really good guy would've prevented it before or fixed it after; he was awfully obsessed with being good.

There was this one night, they'd only been dating a couple of months, and something made it obvious he needed more attention than she had to give. He got all dramatic. Started throwing things into a black garbage bag – books on wine, lyrics he'd written, guitar picks – and then Emily took her turn at the dramatic and started crying. It was quite the performance, Boyd walking around the house with that bag and Emily telling herself, *Get it together, Emily Sue*, but completely incapable. Having endured the death of her parents she reckoned she could weather the loss of one Boyd Michael Tennor, though you'd never know it by the way she was carrying on. He took a couple of DVD's off the TV and said *That's it* and she said *Bye, then* and he walked out of the room and she kept waiting for the front door to open and close. For that final click. But then he was back, looking bewildered, Emily thinking *Just go* and Boyd saying *I don't want to go* which isn't quite the same as lying. Emotion was popping all over the room and since neither one of them knew what to say they started making out. Then, to show what a good guy he still was, Boyd went down on her. She faked an orgasm to make him happy. She faked so many things to make him happy. He thought he was being a good

guy by staying but a good guy would've left. There were flowers the next day, like they weren't winding back up a broken toy.

Two years later he said he was breaking up with her because the Rabbit demanded all of his time when, really, it was what she thought all along: he was too needy for her. He'd call five or six times a day, wanting to drop by for lunch or meet for happy hour. He'd call because he was bored or to sing her a song from Saturday Night Fever: *How deep is your love, how deep-is-your-love, I really need to learn*. She had a non-profit to run and he was singing the Bee Gees. So Boyd showed her and got a restaurant to run. Fancy that.

Emily poured herself a second glass of Syrah, thinking she should've changed into something less becoming. Good Lord, she should've at least taken off her make-up and messed up her hair. She'd had it treated for the board meeting that day, a meeting she'd called about Jasmine. Despite her law degree and passing the bar in South Carolina, Emily still had a tendency to make rash decisions when it came to the girls, so she created the board, which her grandmother chaired.

The knock was uniquely Boyd's in its hesitation, as if he was ambivalent about his grand entrance. She opened the door, but not all of the way, and there he was, looking regrettably handsome. The knot in his pink tie was loosened and the top button of his white shirt undone. A silver watch chain dangled from his coat pocket.

"Oh, Boyd," she said, leaning against the door, "is this really necessary?"

"What? You didn't say goodbye and I wanted to make sure you were okay."

Sometimes Boyd was too quick to speak, this particular line laced with Southern sugar.

"How chivalrous," she said, as if it wasn't at all.

“I’m serious.”

“And I’m okay, so goodnight.” She started to close the door.

“Can’t I come in?”

“Well, isn’t that about the worst idea ever?”

He started to say something, then stopped, and Emily thought, *Here it is, that long adhesive moment hovering between us.* The one where he couldn’t figure out how to fix everything and didn’t know what to say about it and she couldn’t tell him to leave and both of them wanted to feel something besides that disappointing night behind them.

“Fine,” she said, opening the door, “just this once.”

Emily was out of bed when her alarm went off at seven. She donned a white robe and left the radio playing classical to make sure Boyd woke up. She started coffee and checked her voicemail, hoping there were no new accidents waiting for her at work. The terror ten girls could create amazed her. It was always good then bad with them, as if the bad had a stranglehold on the good and only let it breathe as a form of teasing. She poured two cups of coffee and returned to her bedroom to find Boyd sitting up and leaning against the walnut headboard that had belonged to her parents. He had turned off the music and kicked away the comforter. His striped boxers clashed with her plaid sheets. She handed him a cup of coffee and sat down, gently, next to his legs but turned so she could see him.

He blew on his coffee and asked, “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“You know that I am.” She also blew on her coffee, even though she’d dropped in an ice cube. “I have to get to the house and you have to get that kitchen cleaned.”

“We have to hire a company to do that, at no small cost.” He sipped his coffee.

“We’ll be lucky to open by Thursday and not lose any staff in the process.” He shrugged.

“They’ve got bills. This is a real setback, Em. It’s official, God hates me.”

“God doesn’t hate people, though it’d be hard to convince Jasmine of that.”

“Huh. Lamont said something like that to me.” Boyd said it rather innocently, with a strange sense of introspection that startled her, and she stood up so quickly that his coffee spilled onto his stomach, legs and the sheets. “Shit, Em.”

“Sorry, I have to get ready.” She put her coffee down on the dresser and started brushing the sex tangles out of her hair. She could see him in the mirror, looking for something to clean up the mess, then stopping, as if it was all futile.

“We used to lounge around until church on Sundays.”

“We used to be a couple.”

“Thanks, like I’m not carrying around enough guilt.”

She stepped into underwear and jeans – both without taking off her robe.

Keeping her back to Boyd, she put on a bra and black top then dug a dark blue towel out of the wicker hamper and sat back down on the bed, handing the towel to Boyd.

He wiped off his stomach. “Aren’t you going to kiss it and make it feel better?”

“Hardly, but I do have an important question to ask you.”

He was dabbing the sheets, the towel in his left hand and the coffee cup in his right. “Shoot.”

“Do you think we can try it again?”

He suddenly looked nauseous. “Try what?”

“The auction,” she said, proud of her little prank. “Sterling said he’d come back next week.”

“As long as we’re open.” Boyd tossed the towel at the hamper like he was shooting a basketball, and missed. “Did you know Lucy Davenport freelances for Southern Living? Not even an app. What kind of luck is that?”

It exasperated Emily, all this doting over the Davenports. They were snobs. Emily said, “Almost the same kind of luck as your mother getting shot on the way to church.”

“I’m going to make that happen, okay?” He shook his head. “Jim Davenport would’ve loved the duck.”

“For God’s sake, Boyd, if you want the Davenports to try Shawn’s food so much, why don’t you take them some?”

“What did you say?”

“I said take them your product.”

“You mean, like to their house?”

“Sure, it’s basic sales.”

Oh, he was determined after that. On the phone with Shawn before she had stripped the bed. He showered and she sprayed the sheets with Shout! and then they drove off at the same time, which felt a little familiar. Both of them on their phones, waving to each other, Boyd speeding off into the morning where his goodness sold.

Since it was Sunday there was nothing structured going on at the Lockley Home, all of the girls hanging out in the rec room. Three girls were lying on their stomachs,

doing homework, a few bare feet kicking back and forth. Teyanna, the oldest, was doing a make-up session with three girls while Robin, the day's lead counselor, was playing Uno with three other girls, some sitting with their legs crossed and some also on their stomachs. Jasmine sat in the corner, listening to the house iPod.

New girls were usually shy and reserved, which was why Emily gave them the house iPod: it soothed them, and eased them out of their shell. The house psychologist called it a transitional object, and Emily thought maybe it was best that Jasmine hadn't completely transitioned in when Emily might have to transition her right back out. It broke her heart, Jasmine sitting there by herself. Jasmine wasn't showing but was still a bigger girl, and that could help as pretty girls had a harder time fitting in; it differentiated them too quickly, other girls instinctively envious and threatened. Emily tried to alleviate that, but once a pack of ten girls got going it was almost impossible to harness them, which was why she didn't force things. It never worked when you forced things.

Robin smiled and waved. Emily waved back and pointed to her hip, asking if Jasmine had turned off the iPod and socialized any. Robin shook her head and made a sad face so Emily went to her office and called her grandmother and Dixon from CPS with the bad news about the fundraiser. She read through the reports from last night and then threw together a fruit salad for the girls' lunch.

An hour had passed when she returned to the rec room, where Teyanna was standing behind Jasmine and straightening her hair. Teyanna was being careful. She talked to Jasmine as she slowly brought the flat iron down, straightening small sections of Jasmine's hair. Jasmine looked up when she saw Emily, half-wondering if it was okay and half proud, like she couldn't wait for Emily to see. Emily winked at Jasmine then

looked at Robin who mouthed, *She's doing so good* from behind her Uno cards. Emily put her hand over her heart and nodded, then caught herself and put a finger up to her lip, as if to say, *Let's not jinx it*. The girls hated thinking anyone was making a fuss over them, even though they also wanted everyone to make a fuss over them. I need you; I don't need anyone. Love me; hate me. Get out of here; please don't go. Such silly little stories.

By dinner Jasmine had handed the iPod off to another girl and sashayed into the conversation. She was starting to fit in and part of Emily wondered if she should cut Jasmine loose before she got too comfortable. The board said they could hold off the state for two weeks without funding, maybe, but what happened if those two weeks came and there was still no funding? There wasn't even a bed for her, Jasmine currently sleeping on a cot in the rec room. It was the cruelest kind of teasing, letting Jasmine think, *Maybe . . .* Whenever that happened, whenever Emily had to send a girl back into the system, she had to remind herself of the other girls, remind herself that if she broke the rules or ran out of money she'd have to send them all back into the system. Such an ugly place.

[cut the last paragraph?]

### Chapter Three

Strolling down Main Street with a giddy-giddy up in his step Chase was feeling G-O-O-D, good, fighting off the inclination to skip down Main Street. Late fall was fabulous in Elora. The temperature staying steady-Eddie sixty-five during the day and dipping down to a delightful forty-five at night. Trees lined both sides of the street, slowly shedding, gold and maroon leaves scampering along the sidewalk. Chase felt like a beach ball at a concert being bounced from one person to the next.

His spirits had been soaring since a little rendezvous with Mister Shawn Hallow on Saturday, and he had a couple hours before work so he paused in the Pyramid for a Wednesday afternoon beer with Miss Celia. Halfway through his Hoegaarden she propped the back of her hand against her diminutive hip and asked if he'd heard the good news.

"I have not," Chase answered.

"It's kind of a secret, at least for a couple of days." Her long eyelashes fluttered, her mascara a sexy shade of green. "I probably shouldn't tell you."

"You probably shouldn't be dating Darren, but not a ringy-ding-thing's been done about that."

"Interesting and invalid comparison. Still," she moved her hand to her chin, silver bracelets sliding down her arm, "you're pretty cute."

"I'm fucking adorable."

"You're pretty cute," she repeated, "and Mallory dumped Greg."

"Ho-ly hell, if that ain't been a long time coming."



“A long time. Greg sucks at life.”

“And relationships, apparently. Any idea what finally inspired this revelation?”

“A number of ideas, and if you *were* fucking adorable I’d probably share them.”

The streets of Elora were paved with superglue so when anyone got unstuck it called for a celebration; Chase had beer number two and drank to freedom, Mallory liberated from her relationship and Chase from his existence as a barkeep. Striding back down Main Street Chase tried Shawn’s cell and again got voicemail, considered calling the Rabbit but might get stuck talking to Boyd. Besides, Shawn could be having that chat with Boyd this very moment, the one that would change Chase’s life.

Chase passed by Elora Vibes, knocking on the window and waving at Wendy who was coloring a woman’s hair, aluminum foil pasted down the back. He didn’t have to be at EP for another hour but it was a kick-ass day so he was going to clock in an hour early and clean all the grime and gunk out of the beer cooler. He was whistling a giddy tune, and he wanted to pass it on. CRL #18: *Don’t screw your friends, and if you do, have the courtesy to lube up.* Chase wouldn’t necessarily be screwing Mitch and Touc by leaving to run the floor at the Rabbit, but they’d certainly be disappointed about losing the best bartender in Elora. A few days of foreplay were in order before he gave notice.

It had been a slow night at Edenic Proportions on Saturday, the second turn fizzling and the place empty by eleven. Chase was closing down the bar when Shawn schlumped in the back door, dropping his slobbery ball of problems in Chase’s lap. Boyd got a shitty Ansul system that went off in the middle of the shift, Boyd took the servers’ side and didn’t appreciate Shawn’s art, Boyd always controlled the limelight. Chase

poured Shawn two Jack and Cokes and resisting the urge to say he had told Shawn so, because nobody liked to hear that.

“I told you that man did not know how to run a restaurant.” Chase wiped down a bottle of Jim Beam. “That’s why he didn’t hire me, afraid I’d run off with his thunder.”

“He’s running off with our profits.”

“Here’s the problem as I see it, nobody there’s got your back. Know what I mean, Jelly Bean?”

“You’re right,” Shawn nodded, his small mouth brooding, “If you were there none of this would’ve happened.”

“You’re the head chef, make it happen.”

“It hardly matters now, we looked like idiots tonight.”

“Don’t you worry about that, old Chase has got a red-hot ace up his sleeve.”

And he did have that ace up his sleeve. He took a bag of whacky weed to *The Weekly’s* food critic, convincing the critic to not only review the Rabbit when they opened back up on Thursday, but guarantee he’d finish the review that night and have it in print for the Friday release. The critic wouldn’t promise Chase a good review, which was Cool Mo D because Shawn Hallow’s food would send your palate to another planet. The review would be good. That was phase one, and with phase one complete, Shawn was to strut into the Rabbit this very morning and slap Boyd Tennor with an ultimatum: Chase ran the front of the house, or Shawn walked. A near flawless plan, Chase not even having to play his true ace of what he’d found out about Sterling.

He tried Shawn again before walking in the back entrance, getting voicemail again. Where was that boy? It must be some knock-down-drag-out with Boyd, a *Battle of*

*Barolo Part Deux.* Robbie was peeling potatoes in the prep room, strips of brown skin piling up on a white cutting board. Stevie Wonder sang about superstition from a small boom box. Chase knocked his fist against Robbie's.

"My man, how many beers did we drink on Sunday?"

"No clue," Robbie said, dropping a naked potato into a pot.

"That's what I'm talking about," Chase said, happy to be at work amongst friends, belting out, "Very superstitious, writing's on the wall," as he bounced down the long hall that opened up into his beautiful bar – where Chase's boss, Mitch, was sitting with Boyd Tennor. Fuck. Chase felt a pop in his side, his good day deflating into a crumpled pile of colors.

"Heeeeeeeey, C-note!" Boyd exclaimed. Say what you wanted about Boyd Tennor, he always seemed happy to see you. His eyes wide, that Tennor smile spreading across his angular face, his voice energetic. He'd lost most of his facial jewelry, down to a gold hoop in his left ear, and was dressed unprofessionally in khaki shorts and a grey sweatshirt. Two empty pint glasses and one cell phone sat on the cement bar, which was open at both ends. Chase walked past the six taps and ran his hand along the rough surface, which had yellow and red crystals mixed in.

"Nice singing there, Tex," Mitch said, dryly. "What brings you in so early." A head shorter than Boyd, Mitch had curly brown hair and a tired face bruised by the industry and his brother's behavior. Mitch was the chef at EP and Touc ran the floor, both Izzies who'd taken the plunge and hired all their friends. It was like a bunch of kids at play whose parents were out of town for the weekend. Shifts were run loosely and customers were often wrong. After bars closed you could always meander over to EP for

late night love where Touc offered bumps and booze while Mitch slept soundly at home with his wife. Probably, it was a little too much freedom.

“I thought I’d give the bar a once over, seeing as the holidays are right around the corner.” Chase scooped some ice into a pint glass, stalling, pressing the “S” on the soda gun and shooting Sprite into the glass, the carbonation and the pressure a *Ssshhhhhhhh*. What the fuck was Boyd doing here? He and Mitch both had restaurants to run and here they were partaking in afternoon beers. The only thing *these* two owners could be discussing was Chase’s impending move to the Rabbit.

Boyd looked at Mitch, who grimaced, like Chase was full of shit. Should Chase spill the beans all over the bar? He pushed open the top of a cooler and pulled out an orange, rolling it five feet down the bar to Mitch, who caught it before it rolled off the edge, and dug a thumb under the skin. It was a tradition that went back to Ovio when Chase was bartending and Mitch was the sous.

Boyd said, “Just a skip on the record.”

Chase faked a laugh, like he understood, and laid down a napkin for Mitch.

Mitch thanked Chase, his hands working away the rind, and said to Boyd, “What the hell are you talking about?”

Chase stuck a straw in his Sprite, figuring they’d planned this entire performance.

“Our guitar player used to bitch about going on road trips,” Boyd said, his hands narrating, “and he bitched a lot. Our bass player was this functioning burnout who had Diet Coke and Milky Ways for breakfast, and he’d always respond, ‘Dude, it’s just a skip on the record.’ ”

Mitch winked at Chase. “Hey, Boyd, did you used to be in a band?”

The angles of Boyd's face tightened, his voice climbing a pitch, "Did you used to be in a band – and skip on a record is mine, C, don't go stealing it as one of your rules."

"I don't need your tired lines," Chase said. "Now, can I pour you gentlemen another beer, or is your drinking game dead?"

"Mine is," Mitch said, pulling off a piece of orange, "but Boyd might have another and drink to the Rabbit's good news – you heard?"

"I heard you might be getting *The Weekly* in this week," Chase said, wishing he could take the credit right now – maybe they were setting him up in a good way, maybe Mitch was going to say, *No, they're getting a new floor manager* then they'd all toast Chase's future. Maybe Shawn had dropped the hammer and Boyd was so relieved and excited he sprinted over to EP to ask Mitch's blessing and Mitch, being the stand up guy he was, cut Chase loose. This day kept getting better and better: Chase wasn't even going to have to give notice! What would they toast with? Scotch. Definitely eighteen-year-old McCallum scotch.

"That's penny-ante news," Boyd said. "You'll love this, Chase."

Chase had a bad feeling that particular emotion was not going to suit his fancy.

"After Saturday's unmitigated disaster I went home and drank a bottle of Flowers Perennial. There were so many things to be pissed off about, the one I kept coming back to was that we had the fucking Davenports at the bar and they didn't get to try *any* of Shawn's food. I felt so bad for him. Sunday, I woke up early – "

Mitch cleared his throat.

"Okay, early for me, nine-ish."

"That's what I'm talking about," Chase said.

“The point being that I woke with a premonition straight from heaven. I drive over to Shawn’s and ring the doorbell, both of them already up, reading the Sunday paper like any American couple. I brought biscuits from Intravenous Blend, fed them, then drove Shawn to the Rabbit. All our food is going to go bad anyway so I tell him to prepare his best meal, four or five courses.”

“You can’t cook there,” Chase noted, already feeling pushed out of the room.

“Slow down,” Boyd said.

“It’s a good story,” Mitch admitted, popping an orange wedge into his mouth.

“I clean the ovens while Shawn preps, and we might’ve put away a couple bottles of Jos Jos Prum Reisling but that’s neither here nor there. When Shawn’s done prepping we take all of the food and a bottle of 1993 Artadi back to his house where we cook everything up, me acting as Shawn’s sous. We pack up the cooked food, and take it over, to . . . Chase,” Boyd paused for effect, his hands out, “whose favorite wine is Artadi?”

“Missus Lucy Davenport,” Chase answered, flatly.

“Exactly! We ring the doorbell and I think for the first time there’s a good chance they won’t even be home. I swear to God, we stand there for five minutes . . .”

The thing that made Boyd such a good story-teller was that he really thought everyone wanted to listen to him talk, that they should listen to him talk as he relayed the smallest details, as if the existence of the human race relied on them. Chase knew it was terrible, but he found himself wishing the Davenports weren’t home.

“ . . . when Fred Davenport finally opens the door. I tell them we feel so bad about the other night, that we brought the Rabbit to them!”

“That’s . . . actually a really good idea,” Chase said, sincere as all hell.

“I told you it was heaven sent! They *loved* Shawn’s food. They brought up a bottle of Alvaros Palacio from their cellar and poured us glasses! They were so blown away by the food and broken hearted about Jasmine that Lucy Davenport said she was calling *Food and Wine* to come down and review us next week so we can do the fundraiser in front of a national audience. Can you believe that? That *Food* and fucking *Wine* is coming into The Swimming fucking Rabbit?”

Chase could believe it. Boyd stood up on his barstool and slapped Mitch a high five then reached towards Chase – when his cell phone started screaming ESU’s fight song, trumpets blaring. Boyd showed the number to Mitch, who said, “Answer it!”

Boyd flipped open the phone. “Is everything alright . . . no shit?!” He sprang off his barstool, his long body like a pogo stick. “That’s awesome! I’ll be right there, and I’m bringing Chase.” Boyd closed the phone and straightened his face. “It was nothing.”

“Shut up!” Mitch bounced up, giving Boyd a few fake jabs to the ribs.

“It’s a boy! Amber and the baby are fine. Pour us some shots, C!”

Mitch and Boyd hugged, the bar a barrier between Chase and their excitement. Chase sucked down the last of his Sprite, the straw gurgling at the bottom of the glass.

“Show some teeth, Chase,” Mitch said, “this is good news.”

“Why, hell yes it is. I’m shocked, is all. She wasn’t due for another, what, month?” Chase flipped a rocks glass in the air, caught it, and set it down in front of Mitch, setting two more next to it.

“Two weeks,” Boyd sat back down, “but her water broke this morning.”

Chase pulled the bottle of McCallum off the top shelf, certain Mitch would tell him to pour something less expensive. “This toast calls for the best, I assume?”

Mitch glanced at Boyd, a silent conversation Chase wasn't privy to. "Sure."

"Anyway," Boyd continued. "I'm waiting for Shawn this morning at the Rabbit because he wanted to talk to me about something, who knows what. He calls me on the way over to the hospital, barely audible, Amber screaming at him from the back seat – can't you see it, C-note? Shawn all over the road," Boyd put his hands on an imaginary wheel, turning it back and forth, "trying to talk on the phone and Amber giving him directions. Apparently he was pulling out of the driveway when . . ."

Chase knew the end of this story, because it was becoming the story of his life: once again, the Universe had conspired to screw him, Amber going into labor the very day Chase's life was about to change. This chance would get buried under Shawn's new life. Buried. Couldn't Amber's water have broken a day later? Even an hour later? Darren was right, so much could hinge on a moment, whether it went right or wrong, and moments were at the mercy of chance, a bitter-sweet CRL to swallow.

He poured the scotch and raised his glass. "To Shawn, may his happiness *not* be a skip on the record."

Boyd and Mitch looked at Chase like he'd swung before the bell, but this was his bar and he'd make the toasts. The three glasses clinked, lightly, the scotch shifting, rolling up the side, each of them sniffing it.

"So much smoother than those Islays," Chase said.

"Almonds," Boyd added, "maybe malted milk."

"Worn leather," Mitch said. They tipped their glasses, letting the scotch linger in their mouths, holding it there like a good mood before it fell down their throats. It



warmed Chase's insides, without the least bit of burn – kind of like good coke. That's what Chase wanted, some good coke.

"Ahhhh." Boyd set down his glass. "Let's get to the hospital, C-note o' mine."

"As much as I'd love to," Chase said, "I got a shift to work, right, boss?" He raised his eyebrows to Mitch, nodding.

"Get out of here," Mitch said, missing the sign, "there's nothing on the books."

"Is that going to be okay with your big bro – hold up. Where is Touc?" Touc was often late, but always in by two, Chase hadn't even noticed. Mitch and Boyd exchanged another look – what the hell was going on?

Mitch said, "Touc isn't coming in tonight."

Like everything in Elora, the hospital was five minutes away. Chase always said Elora was a five-minute town. You could get anywhere in five minutes, find anyone in five minutes, and get screwed in five minutes. Boyd's Jeep jumped all over the road, his CD player jamming some funky hip-hop. Boyd had been driving this wind-up ride for five years, which was surprising considering he used to get a new car every other year, his first stop off the lot always to pick up Chase. Chase figured Boyd would've graduated to a sweet SUV by now. Must be nice, having wealthy parents. Chase was his own man, happy to buy his own wheels, a classic El Camino with loads of character.

Chase turned down the radio. "That looked like one serious conversation I walked in on."

"There's the C-note I know and love." Boyd slowed to a stop behind a white Accord. "Making a quick move to dig up the dirt."

“Guilty, guilty. Surprised to see you there, is all, with so much cleaning to do.”

“The oven people are there right now. Mitch needed to bounce a few things off someone.” The light changed, Boyd turning right onto Highway 22 and shifting into second. “Can you believe Shawn is a father?”

“I always did think you’d be the first to spread your seed, and might I compliment you on the subject volley.”

Boyd laughed, patted Chase’s knee. “I’ve missed you, C-note.”

“Dit-to, dit-to.” Pine trees closed in on Highway 22, a four-lane job that ran through town and spliced into the interstate ten miles later. Chase could feel himself getting caught in Boyd’s energy. It was always like that with Boyd, you were going to run one small errand with him and next thing you knew it was tomorrow. As freshmen in college they’d bet a keg of the winner’s choice on who could take the longest to graduate. Boyd certainly could’ve outlasted Chase in terms of funding had his parents not threatened to pull the plug after five and a half years. Chase graduated a semester later, college not the same without Boyd – nothing was the same without Boyd. He was like a walking pill of ecstasy that made everything more fun, as long as you could handle the side effects. True to his word, Boyd bought Chase a keg of Bass for a May throw-down at his parents’ house. Talk about a place to party, a place that felt like home until Boyd and Shawn opened the Rabbit. Chase didn’t miss Boyd all *that* much, but he missed the Sunday barbeques something fierce.

“Hey, you’re folks aren’t looking to sell their place, are they?”

“Of course not. Why would think that?”

“You know, the whispers.”

“The whispers are on crack.” Boyd steered the jeep down a slopping curve then over a hill and back down it, passing three more cars and pulling into the middle lane, waiting for an opening. Five or six cars passed, slowly, before Boyd turned across two lanes into the hospital’s main entrance. “Bro, I know things about Amber.”

“Shawn’s Amber?”

“Uh-huh.”

*Shit*, Chase thought, *I should start a column.*

Boyd followed an arrow toward maternity and pulled into an open space, leaving the motor running. Sunlight reflected off the windshield of a blue Saturn parked in front of them. Boyd turned off the stereo. “It’s nothing too terrible, but when Amber invested in the Rabbit I hired someone to look into her past.”

Typical Boyd Tennor, poking his nose into someone else’s marriage, disregarding principle ethics of friendship. “Well,” Chase said, “don’t tease a brother.”

Boyd flashed that Tennor smile that, Chase had to admit, was like powder on a rash: smooth, soft, and soothing to irritation. It made you relax, and Chase wondered how many miles that smile had carried Boyd. “First, I need a favor.”

“*You* want a favor from me?” Chase asked.

“It’s not for me, it’s for Emily. Will you please start going back over to the Lockley Home? Emily says the girls really miss you.”

“Why don’t you go?”

“I’m not good at that, C, not like you are.”

“Consider it considered. Now, what you got on Amber?”

“For starters, she doesn’t have a degree from Vaaaaaaassar.”

“Step back. She brings that up in like every conversation she can.”

Boyd reached in front of Chase, popped open the glove box, and pulled out a silver flask that he handed to Chase. “She took a couple classes at a CC up in Albany.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Chase said, taking a pull. “That’s not so terrible.”

“She’s been married.”

Chase stopped in mid-swig. “BMT do not lie to a brother.”

“I swear on the Bible, that woman has been married.”

Chase took another pull, then handed the flask back to Boyd. “How could you keep this primo bit of information to yourself?”

Boyd threw up his free hand. “The only person I could trust with this was you, and . . .” He shrugged, then took a swig.

“Understood, understood. I’m deducing you decided against telling Shawn.”

“On the one hand Shawn’s my friend and I feel like I should tell him. I’d want to know. On the other hand . . .”

“You don’t want to mess with that fragile little heart.”

“Exactly.”

“You ever find out what happened that night? How Shawn cut his hand.”

Boyd screwed the cap back on the flask. “Never. And I tried.”

“We both did.”

“It had to be bad, right? Shawn holding it in like that?”

“Something funky-dory happened.”

“I know it whatever it was gave both of us our doubts about them but Amber’s a great lady and they seem to be doing a lot better.”

“You think they might make it?”

“I think so, which is why I was so sorry when I found out about his. It was those assholes from Vine,” Boyd said, “they really fucked me up, C. Made me paranoid so I did some routine background stuff.”

“And you thought you’d pass that routine stuff off on me?”

“I had to tell somebody.”

A young couple walked past the jeep, stopping at the Saturn; the woman carried a baby wrapped in a pink blanket and the man carried a suitcase and a vase of flowers, which he set on the roof of the car, by the back door but a little too close to the edge. Chase wanted to warn the man, that the vase was too close to the edge. He felt strangely close to Boyd. Not that he was necessarily ready to be his friend again, but he did feel intimate, as if they’d been enveloped in something. The man wore khaki pants, a yellow polo tucked in. He opened the trunk and gently set the suitcase in, as if he was practicing being careful. An older couple walked up behind them, the man handing a small bag to the younger man, the woman carrying a brown teddy bear, his paw stuck in a jar of honey. Chase wanted to ask Boyd why he hadn’t hired him, feeling the answer wouldn’t injure him, no matter what it was. Then, he might tell Boyd about Sterling. The question, though, would put Boyd on the defensive, would destroy the intimacy Chase was feeling. He thought he heard a whisper, or a murmur, the young man in the yellow shirt closing the trunk, the vase falling to the asphalt, shattering, all of them laughing, stems of flowers in different directions, surrounded by pieces of broken glass.

## Chapter Four

Squatting in front of his son's crib with one hand around a wooden bar, Shawn Hallow felt that before now, before Tristan Patrick Hallow, his marriage had been small pieces of pottery scattered around Elora. It seemed an accident, their marriage, and because accidents simply happened and were often forgotten, Shawn could not conceive of he and Amber lasting through the year, much less anyone remembering that they had been married. It was not that he did not love her – he did – or deserve her – he did not – but that their personalities and desires were estranged. They had different edges. Then Tristan was born and his birth gave them shape in a common desire: him.

It was just past ten on Saturday night and Boyd and Pax had sent Shawn home as soon as the second turn ended. Shawn was still in his black clogs and green chef pants, his shirt damp from the night which had been their busiest to date. Shawn shook out his left hand, surprised that he had not taken a Percocet since Tristan Patrick was born. Maybe his hand was finally healing. Red and black dice hung from a mobile, spinning sleepily. Tristan wore only a diaper, and some sweat glistened under the tiny roles of his neck. *Tristan Paaaaatricks, I love you.*

It had terrified Shawn, the responsibility of becoming a father, the countless possibilities open to catastrophe: changing diapers, changing his life, keeping the baby from crying, keeping Amber, holding on to money, holding on to his hours at the Rabbit – but no possibility was more frightening than being a carbon copy of his own father: providing, decent, absent, incapable of loving his son or, at least, communicating that love. So Shawn was practicing. Experimenting with various voices, placing the emphasis on different syllables, and while Tristan's mere presence silenced Shawn's

smallest terrors, the volume of his past still shouted loudly that it would not be denied its rightful place in Shawn's present. If Shawn did not know how good fathers acted, how could he become one? What if Hallow men were genetically predestined to be poor fathers?

Shawn slid his pinky up his son's soft leg, past the diaper, and over his tiny ribs. *Miiiiis-ter Triiiiiiii-stan Patrick*, Shawn said, his voice deep and jolly, *I love you*.

"He doesn't know how lucky that makes him," Amber said, from behind Shawn.

Shawn understood that he would understand his wife never; she could disperse the simplest sentence with complex ambiguity. Did she mean that Tristan Patrick was lucky to have parents that loved him? Lucky to have parents at all? Lucky to have Shawn say those words since he rarely uttered them to Amber. He stood up, kicking the kinks out of his stiff legs. "I love you, too, Amber."

The light behind her cast a long shadow that stopped short of Shawn's clogs. The loose bottoms of black sweat pants dangled down to her ankles, the toes of one bare foot bent against the arch of the other. "That'd be nice," she said, "if you did."

"I do. Everything's different now."

The Rabbit's prep room was up steel stairs that zigzagged next to the building from the backdoor of the kitchen, a characteristic Shawn initially overlooked as quirky but quickly revealed itself as a massive pain in the ass. Deliveries of food and wine and beer had to be carried up the stairs for storage and prepped food had to be carried down for service then back up for storage when the night was finished. Shawn felt like he was always climbing stairs. Friday afternoon he had been standing behind the silver prep

table, throwing together a batch of Gazpacho. Jalapeno cornbread cooked in an oven behind him. The door to the stairs was to Shawn's left and to his right the doorway to their office, which was flanked by the walk-in cooler and freezer.

The table was covered with tomatoes and cucumbers and the outside layers of red onions. Shawn picked up a tomato and cut it in half, red juice and small seeds spilling onto the cutting board. Footsteps quickly climbed the stairs then Boyd burst through the door with a stack of newspapers up to his chin, Pax in tow. Boyd was bouncing around the table and speaking so quickly Shawn could not understand him and Pax was letting out a long whistle and pointing at Shawn and screaming, "YOU are the man!" and then they were on either side of Shawn, hugging him, still bouncing, celebrating the four stars they'd received in *The Weekly*. It all created a sensation Shawn had never experienced; something shifting around his organs and sizzling his skin. Pride.

The review brought a slew of walk-ins on Friday night while the phone rang for Saturday reservations. Izzies brought congratulations and bottles of Champagne. When Shawn arrived at work Saturday morning he felt like a pitcher in the middle of a perfect game. He had a beautiful son, a four star review, a national magazine coming in, and the alligator ribs he'd ordered on Monday. He couldn't wait to funk them up and down. Fried alligator ribs. Kick ass. He covered them with cumin and olive oil. The ribs felt fragile and slippery in his hands. He was thinking that he and Amber should do something family-like tomorrow for his first day off – when the door to the prep room creaked open and Jeremy's mousy face appeared, the rest of his body still behind the door. Jeremy asked, "Is he here?"

"Who?"



“That *monster*.”

“What monster?”

Jeremy stepped inside; he wore black pants and a short-sleeve salmon colored shirt. “Boyd, Michael, Tennor,” he said, spitting on the “T.”

“No, but did you read the review?”

“If you mean the interview with Boyd, yes our little starlet, I read it. And I’m here to find out why I wasn’t informed.”

Shawn shook out his hands over the pan. “I just cook the food.”

“That looks quite bizarre.” Jeremy tilted his head. “What is it?”

“Alligator ribs.”

“Whatever will you do with them?”

“Fry them up and serve them over an arugula salad, maybe corn risotto.”

“I must come in tonight. I’ll have that table by the window at seven.” Jeremy shook his head, quickly, as if reminding himself to be angry. “I’ll be back in twenty-six minutes and I want that monster here or I’ll close this place down. Straightaway!”

“Did you try his cell?”

“What?” Jeremy’s face straightened. “Boyd has a cell?”

“Well, yeah – ”

“I’m hysterical and angry, Shawn, not an idiot. Did I try his cell?” Jeremy walked out of the room, his steps quickly descending the stairs then pausing, heavier steps climbing back up in their place; Pax walked in clad in jeans and cowboy boots.

“Dude,” Pax said, then spit in the trashcan, “an angry gay dwarf just about ran me off the stairwell.” Pax was absurdly superstitious, always putting in a dip of Copenhagen

right after he started his truck, one leg dangling out the door. He walked with a slight limp from a rodeo accident Shawn could never remember the details of.

“I need you to go wake Boyd,” Shawn said, “and have him back in twenty.”

“Can I take a rope?” Pax asked, laughing. He spit again and walked out the door. Shawn felt a hot flash of anger rising from his stomach up to his face, felt it threatening to take over his perfect game until he thought of his son. Of the four stars. That’s how it was with Boyd: up and down. The front of the house was Boyd’s problem. Jeremy was Boyd’s problem. Boyd would handle it.

And he did.

Shawn had never seen Boyd cower, and would have guessed cowering to be an action Boyd could not perform, even insincerely, as it contradicted the brazen confidence which ruddered him through his charmed life. In front of Jeremy, Boyd cowered. And apologized. Jeremy berated Boyd, his face a dark shade of red clashing with his salmon shirt. Boyd apologized again and pointed out that he had called Jeremy a “philanthropic pillar without whom the Elora community would crumble.” Shawn knew Jeremy was barely a philanthropic two-by-four.

“I don’t care what you called me,” Jeremy yelled, “I care that you didn’t call me.”

“You said you wanted to be a silent partner,” Boyd pleaded. “You said you only wanted to be involved in interesting things. How am I supposed to know what you consider interesting? I’m not a mind reader.”

“Do you think I’m a handsome man,” Jeremy asked, flatly.

“I’d fuck you,” Boyd said, “if I was into guys.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

“No,” Boyd said, with delicate honesty, “you are not a handsome man.”

Shawn could see the Rabbit falling from space, disintegrating in the earth’s atmosphere.

“Seeing as that’s the case,” Jeremy said, calmly, then yelled, “doesn’t it make sense that I’d find being interviewed by state’s only liberal newspaper interesting!”

“I’m sorry, Jer. It won’t happen again. Now how about giving me some love?” Boyd lifted him off the ground and planted a series of kisses on his face.

“Gross,” Jeremy said, “straight love. If this ever happens again I will close this place down.” But he didn’t seem quite as angry, and said he would be in at seven to try the ribs. Boyd left soon after to get everyone biscuits from Intravenous Blend which, for some reason, took an hour, which didn’t bother Shawn because it was just Boyd: he worked, but he didn’t. When they gutted and rebuilt the inside of the Rabbit, Boyd made daily trips to Home Depot for a caulking gun or lumber or a washer they wouldn’t need for days, but he would also stand in front of Jeremy and receive a verbal lashing Shawn would never succumb to, a lashing that increased Shawn’s respect for Boyd. On his own, Shawn knew he would never have the audacity to show up on the Davenports’ front steps, who, a bit confused, accepted the food and sent Boyd and Shawn on their way, only to call Boyd an hour later about *Food and Wine*. Shawn’s tongue felt like waterlogged leather during *The Weekly* interview, but Boyd spoke effortlessly, his self-assurance mesmerizing. They were different, and as long as they stayed on the same page those differences were essential as opposed to detrimental.

Tristan's cries caromed through the baby monitor Sunday morning at seven and Shawn turned it off quickly so Amber could sleep. Shawn lifted Tristan from his crib and applied a fresh diaper. He put a bottle on the stove and, with his free hand, turned on the burner, which clicked three times before a blue flame circled under the pan of water. "Whadaya-whadaya say Mister Tristan Patrick? Let's keep quiet for mommy." Shawn bounced his knees and swayed his hips. He poked Tristan's small stomach with his pinky. When the water began to boil Shawn removed the bottle and squirted a few drops on his arm. Perfect. He held the bottle in front of Tristan's mouth and waited for Tristan's lips to find it, a lesson he had learned from his mother two decades ago in feeding his twin sisters, Cara and Crystal.

Tristan's tiny cheeks worked the bottle. His face looked like a bruised peach, his fingers like tiny erasers. Shawn made coffee and retrieved the paper. In the yellow-walled breakfast room with the sliding glass door that looked into the back yard, Shawn pulled the sports page from the middle of the paper with his free hand. The morning gray threatened rain. Trees cast off leaves, a process that would soon make the thirteenth fairway visible through winter. Shawn drank his first cup of coffee and read the sports page to Tristan, then poured himself a second cup and grabbed *The Weekly* – so he could read the review to his son.

Ten minutes later Amber kissed the top of Tristan's head and sat down across from Shawn with an orange coffee cup, her cell phone, and their cordless. She had full lips and a strong jaw line. Her curly black hair was held back in a white headband and she wore a white, terrycloth robe. "Reading that article about Boyd?" she asked.

Shawn frowned. "All he does is talk about my food and Jeremy's philanthropy."

“The key words being Boyd and talk.” She took a drink of coffee and turned the paper towards her. “God, did I miss coffee.”

Shawn raised Tristan up a little. “Do you want to take him?”

“He looks quite content.” She leaned back, her brown eyes studying him. “I can’t tell you how much your parenting skills are assuaging my anxiety.”

“You know I don’t know what that means.”

“It means to alleviate, or lessen.”

“Why couldn’t you say alleviate or lessen?”

“Because I’m a big Vassar bitch, you know *that*.” She smiled, playfully, then flipped to the obituaries and opened them in front of her face. It was part of her morning routine, “farming the obits.” Monday she’d call families to offer her condolences and any other services they might need, like a real estate agent.

Shawn switched Tristan to his right hand and said, “I almost forgot, my staff gave us a hundred-dollar gift certificate to Baby USA.”

According to Mallory, Lamont had picked up the certificate on his own and then asked if anyone wanted to contribute, and everyone did. Maybe there was something to Boyd’s family philosophy.

“Awww,” Amber mocked from behind the paper. “I still say you coddle them.”

“You mean because they’re not scared of me?” Shawn wished he had not said it, the morning going so well, but his response seemed a second version of her accusation, as if his natural reaction – the only reaction – was to reflect the sentiment back toward her. It felt small, the exchange, but also familiar, and laced with vicious possibilities.

“My staff isn’t scared of me.” She closed the paper, revealing a mischievous sneer. “They’re terrified of me.”

“You mean you don’t subscribe to Boyd’s family philosophy?”

“Your friends and their silly philosophies.”

“They are pretty silly, aren’t they?”

Amber nodded. Shawn’s arms were tired so he carried Tristan into the living room to get the bassinette, which sat between the white leather couch and the matching love seat. A glass table with a brass frame used to be in front of the couch, but when Shawn moved back in – after the fight and before the wedding – it was gone. He’d asked her why she’d gotten rid of it. The question seemed to startle her, and she stood with one hand across her chest and the other around her pregnant stomach before walking out of the room. Now, for the second time that morning, Shawn felt on the edge of a previous experience, and he realized his hand was hurting from holding Tristan all morning so he popped a Percocet and returned to the breakfast room. He set Tristan in the bassinette, carefully, gave it a push, and then said to Amber, “I thought we might do something family-like today.”

Amber closed the paper. “You did?”

“I did.”

“And what did you have in mind for our family?”

“I didn’t, really, but catch seems out of the question.”

Amber curled both hands around her coffee cup. “Tristan doesn’t have a glove.”

Shawn picked up his cup. “We could call some people.”

“We could Google family,” Amber offered, unfolding a sincere smile Shawn had not seen. Most of her smiles seemed precisely manufactured, as if she’d pulled them from files for specific rooms in the house: a bright living room smile, a serious study smile, a seductive bedroom smile. This smile seemed honest and instinctive, as if she was smiling about them, her family. “I know,” she said, as if surprised by the thought, “why don’t we drive up and visit your parents?”

“Really? You feel up to that?”

“Sure, if you drive. Besides, I owe your mother a huge thank you for your parenting skills. And, maybe it can assuage,” she paused, smiling for effect, “your father’s resentment about you not throwing your life away on those stores.”

Shawn’s parents had paid for his culinary school – THE culinary school, CIA – on one condition: if Shawn did not have his own kitchen in ten years he would return to Bamberg and help run the stores. Ten years seemed a lifetime. CIA would have investors lining up to fund his brilliance. What it made him was an underpaid sous chef whom executive chefs salivated over because of his creativity and willingness to work long hours. That decade came and went last year and when he and Amber broke up he resigned himself to returning home. Then Amber was pregnant and Boyd was finally offering Shawn his own kitchen. It was fate. His parents had barely spoken to him since, but if he showed up with Tristan that miraculous presence would heal everything.

The cordless phone rang and Amber flipped it over, looking at the caller ID then handing the phone to Shawn. “What’s a Sunday morning without Boyd?”

“At least he didn’t show up with breakfast,” he said to Amber, then, into the phone, “Hey, B.”

*Morning, Bro, how's my little nephew?*

"Great. Just polished off a bottle of oh-seven breast milk."

*Lucky kid; great producer. Listen, stuff's blowing up. EP is closing.*

"You're kidding."

*That's not all, Touc's in rehab.*

"Jesus."

*Mitch actually told me it was going down last week and he'd love for us to take some of his staff. So we need to meet with Jeremy, like right now.*

Shawn's heart stuck on a beat, then skipped one. His father, he knew, would go to the meeting, and Shawn could feel his own instincts pointing that way, as if he was an arrow on a compass and his father's actions were due north. "Bro, Amber and I were about to drive up to see my parents. Think you could handle this without me?"

Amber walked into the kitchen, dragging a hand across Shawn's shoulders.

*Remember that family philosophy you're always mocking me for? This is why I preach it: there are always things bigger than the restaurant. But this stuff needs to be hammered out today, and I'm still not up for hiring Chase.*

Shawn tilted his coffee cup, rolling it around on its bottom's edge. He had been trying not to think about Chase, about the meeting and the promise that now seemed monumentally stupid. Shawn said, "I'm cool with that."

*Alright – oh, shit. The Food and Wine people are coming by in the morning to scout the place and do an informal interview.*

"I hated the last interview, but you might want to tell Jeremy."

*You're a funny guy. Give my love to Amber. I'm out.*



Amber returned with a fresh cup of coffee; Shawn told her EP was closing.

“You said that would happen when you worked there.”

“I did?”

“Actually,” she said, pointing at him, then tapping her top lip with the same finger, “never mind.”

“What?”

“It started that fight, Shawn, the one we never talk about.”

“Really?” Shawn asked, sincerely. “Well, no sense in rehashing the past.”

Amber nodded, skeptically. The rain began to fall harder, the rhythmic drumming quickening on the roof and attacking the sliding glass door. “It helps you guys, EP closing, I’m not surprised Boyd’s right on top of it.”

“Boyd didn’t want them to close.”

“I didn’t say that he did, just that he’d thought of the business repercussions.”

She tapped her head. “He’s savvy like that.”

There it was, the quick jab. Shawn said, “He still doesn’t want to hire Chase.”

“Hmm, Boyd is always looking for that next door to walk through.” She gave the bassinette a push, setting it in motion. “I have an idea about that, that might help later.”

## Chapter Five

All the girls called The Lockley Home “Emily’s Crib for the Homeless” or simply “Emily’s crib,” but they never called it The Lockley Home. It only took Jasmine half a morning to figure out they meant it in a caring kind of way, like how you tell someone you love them without saying the words. They still teased Emily though, an extension of that affection. Teased her about that drawl, all eleven of them putting the back of their hands to their foreheads and saying, “Oh, lawdy,” the youngest a second behind, repeating a shrill “lawdy.” Teased her about the polish always being chipped away from her nails and about being shorter than Teyanna, Teyanna standing behind Emily and Emily standing up on her tiptoes. The only thing they didn’t tease her about was being white – even though being white was boring, and even though four of the girls were white; it seemed like past the point of teasing, like using rocks in a pillow fight.

Even though Jasmine was still staying at Emily’s crib and even though Teyanna was being so nice to her, she still felt like it was all a tease, these seeds of kindness scattered around her momma’s death, those five quick shots teaching her that life hinged on the fragility of a moment: any second she could have to leave The Lockley Home or Teyanna would piece together her pregnancy. Jasmine was getting bigger. Was running to the bathroom and throwing up. Tearing off toilet paper and wiping the rim clean. The back of the seat and the corners of her mouth. One little lie. One second she wanted to erase. One thing that made her different than the other girls: she had a baby inside of her.

It was what she liked best about Emily’s crib: none of them had anyone to care about them except Emily. Jasmine didn’t need a bracelet. Didn’t need to worry about

being called “platform” since she wasn’t the heaviest or the lightest or the oldest or the youngest. Four above and six below. She was perfectly happy hiding in the middle, knowing that the two ends of the line got the attention: no one wanted to be last and everyone fought for first. As it stood, Denise was last, in age and rank. Other girls called her “little girl” and sucked their thumbs around her. They chanted, “De-nise needs a diiiiaper, De-nise needs a diiiiaper,” all the while Jasmine trying to keep her mouth shut, remembering what it was like to have those words collapsing on top of her but her lips still moving, glad she wasn’t the youngest or the shortest or fattest or the blackest.

Her momma had worked with a woman who trumpeted those kind of differences. They worked behind the same desk and passed out the same key-cards but once a week her momma would come home and mumble, “I am so tired of that woman treating me like a field nigger.” Jasmine had seen that at school, black girls with lighter skin thinking it put them at the front of the line, as if you had a choice about your skin color. As if anyone picked cotton anymore. Or swung a long blade at tobacco. Teyanna had lighter skin but she didn’t treat Jasmine like a field nigger so Jasmine treated Teyanna like she walked on water, especially since Teyanna held Jasmine’s hand along the way. Tight. If Teyanna ever let go Jasmine knew she’d be dogpaddling in the middle of all that emptiness and would have to find something else to fill her up, something she promised her momma she’d never do again. It surprised her, how easy it was to do the same stupid thing twice.

She kept expecting that fine, fine man to appear and take her away. To put her in his clean car with the soft horns and empty Diet Coke bottle and drive her to the system, a massive building as big as a city with dark smoke rising out of giant stacks. Monstrous

pulleys and levers. A gargantuan mechanical hand with screws as joints that would lift her into the air as the fine, fine man waved goodbye and those soft horns faded away. Or she kept expecting to wake up back in her tiny apartment, her momma sneaking in after a double, peeking in the door, a dull slice of light from the hallway behind her, one hosed-foot slipping in and out of a short heel. But she kept waking up at Emily's crib. On that small cot in the room downstairs where they watched TV and played cards.

Jasmine noticed things staying downstairs, since the rest of the girls slept two to a room on the second and third floors. She noticed that Emily worked really late but never stayed the night, and twice Jasmine heard her on the phone asking people to "Please, just wait until Tuesday." She noticed that the staff that spent the night on weekends – a white lady built like a football player – always fell asleep watching TV, the light from the screen flashing into the hallway. When Jasmine couldn't sleep, when she was missing her momma or thinking about her baby shitting or crying and needing things, she'd sit in the doorway of that room and watch TV while the big woman snored.

Or, she'd do other girls' math homework. Her momma liked math, and they always did Jasmine's homework together, multiplying and dividing fractions and decimals. And sometimes, when Jasmine stayed in the hotel, she'd walk down to the front desk and watch her momma put all of the hotel's numbers in columns on the computer screen, her long painted nails snipping at the keys. The first time, Jasmine did the homework for free. A girl had left her math book in the rec room, a page of unfinished homework stuck inside. Jasmine couldn't sleep so she opened the book and finished the homework and gave it back to the girl in the morning. The next night that same girl offered Jasmine a bag of Cheetos. And then another girl offered a Jay-Z CD.

She even did one girl's Algebra, which was a grade higher and took Jasmine most of the night and that girl gave Jasmine a black, bubble-tie top that said Baby Phat in gold letters, just like those girls wore walking down the halls at school. When she was done with the math she'd slip down the hallway and watch movies and infomercials and one night, late, she watched Violet sneak out the back door. Violet was quiet and kept to herself, and whoever picked her up always had her back before everyone woke up.

On Thursday Emily told the girls dinner would involve a surprise, so they all followed her around guessing until a skinny man with long hair walked in the door carrying three plastic bags of groceries. Jasmine had never seen the girls so excited, and even though she didn't know why they were all sprinting towards him she ran right along. The skinny man set down the bags and let himself be tackled by the girls, Jasmine stopping short while the rest piled on. When he sat up – his knees bent, Denise climbing on his back with her arms around his neck – his friendly brown eyes found Jasmine. “You must be the new girl I’ve heard so much about,” he held up his right hand. “I’m Chase. Slap me a high-five.” Jasmine liked how his smile was kind of crooked, like it had once been broken and then pasted back together. She slapped the man’s hand. “That’s what I’m talking about,” he said, “now who’s ready for Chase’s famous chili dogs?” All of the girls cheered and followed him into the kitchen where he started cutting up vegetables and meat and throwing it all in a pot while simultaneously playing a game of charades. Teyanna seemed smitten by Chase, talking to him through dinner, and Jasmine felt jealousy growing inside of her until after the meal when he let the two of them flat-iron his long, sandy hair and then braid it into pigtails, the whole time Jasmine forgetting she was pregnant.

It was Natalie who finally caught Jasmine throwing up, who walked into the downstairs bathroom when the tops of Jasmine's bare feet were against the cold tile floor and last night's dinner was splashing into the toilet, turning the water a cloudy yellow and brown. Jasmine would've liked it to be anyone but Natalie, who was a year older than Jasmine and ten pounds heavier. Natalie wore those baggy boy's clothes, Dickie work pants and white Adidas, the laces fat and untied. Natalie was Jasmine before Jasmine, braiding Teyanna's hair or painting dark eyeliner on her skin or making jewelry. Jasmine knew this from the other girls and also from the looks Natalie rifled towards her: mad looks and sad looks and wasn't life better yesterday looks. Then, when Natalie walked into the bathroom, a sizzling look of suspicion. Jasmine said it was probably them hot dogs from last night. That chili or the spicy mustard. Natalie nodded, her arms crossed. Jasmine washed her hands and rinsed off her face and when she looked in the mirror Natalie's reflection was staring back at her.

That evening the baby doctor came.

Most of the girls were watching a movie called Stomp the Yard. Jasmine and Teyanna were playing Speed. Quickly flipping cards over and racing to put them in stacks. Jasmine had her knees perched on a pillow just like Teyanna. On TV, kids stomped around the stage in black books. Then Emily walked in the room with a lady dressed in nice dark pants and a white blouse. Teyanna stopped – a red card in her hand – and said, "That's the baby doctor" and a few seconds later Emily asked Jasmine to come with them. Jasmine feigned surprise and shrugged. As she was standing up she glanced at Natalie who had a new look on her face, like crocodile's eyes waiting above the water.

While Jasmine's body walked to Emily's office her mind was returning to the rec room, back to where Natalie was probably whispering to Teyanna about Jasmine throwing up in the bathroom and it wasn't until after Jasmine had sat down that her mind caught up with her body. The baby doctor had short black hair and a small squint to her eyes. Emily sat on top of her desk behind the baby doctor, her feet dangling in the air, her polished toes pushing down the front of her fancy black flip-flop, its bottom tapping her heel. Papers were stacked on her desk, and pictures faced out. In the corner, behind the desk, a tall plant leaned towards the floor, the tips of its green leaves brown.

The baby doctor listened to Jasmine's heartbeat. She carefully pressed her fingers in different places of Jasmine's stomach, asking if it hurt then moving to another place, all the while Jasmine looking at the pictures on Emily's desk. A man in a tuxedo next to a woman in a red dress who had Emily's pretty hair and high cheekbones. In front of some books, on a shelf beside the desk, was another picture of Emily when she was younger with a group of girls, all of them in white dresses and long white gloves.

"Would you mind coming to my office?" the baby doctor asked, after Jasmine had sat back up. "That way we can take a picture of your baby and find out how old it is."

Jasmine nodded. "OK."

"How about Thursday?" She looked back at Emily for the first time, who nodded. "In the meantime I'm going to leave some pre-natal vitamins."

Jasmine nodded again.

"Thanks, Sweetie," Emily said, smiling, "you can go back with the girls now."

When Jasmine walked into the rec room she knew her little lie had shown. Natalie was playing Speed with Teyanna, sitting where Jasmine had been sitting, her

knees perched on the pillow. Natalie wore a yellow hoodie, “apple bottoms” printed on the back in glittering letters. Teyanna looked at Jasmine then said to Natalie, “It’s back.” Jasmine’s mouth was dry. She licked her lips. On TV a group of boys huddled up, their bodies bouncing to the beat, then one boy exploded out of the group on his butt and spun onto his shoulder. Denise stood up and looked at Teyanna, who nodded, and then Denise walked quickly up to Jasmine and said “Oink!” then ran off.

A bunch of the girls laughed.

Then Natalie said it: “Oink!”

Then all of them were oinking until Robin stood up and asked if she needed to start handing out consequences which shut everyone up but didn’t wipe that smile off Natalie’s face. It was a punishment, a consequence, an early bedtime or no snacks or phone or TV. Jasmine sat down on the floor and pulled her knees up to her chest, thinking her consequence was too much, that losing Teyanna weighed more than her teeny-tiny lie. All of those hours ahead for a single second. Cards slapped down behind her, fast, and Natalie let out a loud, phony laugh that made Jasmine feel exactly like she did after the cool, cool boy said he wouldn’t sleep with her. She thought it would hurt less this time, since she’d felt it before – wasn’t the second time supposed to be easier? People cheered on the TV, someone held up a trophy, then music prompted the closing credits. Jasmine looked across the room at Violet, waiting to make eye contact, waiting to let Violet know that Jasmine was following her right out the door tonight and back to West Elora.



## Chapter Six

Saturday night the Rabbit crushed its sales record, so Boyd took some of his staff to celebrate and called Chase to join them. A cold front had toppled down from the north signaling the beginning of fire season inside the Pyramid, the inaugural blaze directly behind Chase. Boyd sat to Chase's left, Mallory to Boyd's left, Lamont and Pax on the other side of her, Pax sporting a straw cowboy hat. The Pyramid was packed, the conversations a cacophony in critical need of direction – why the hell didn't Darren play music? Something like *Let it Bleed* would be perfect. When Boyd told Chase they'd set a sales record Chase whistled – a high note fading low – and said to Mallory, "You guys must've made bank."

"It's still not Ovio money," Mallory said.

"It was a great night," Lamont offered, flames reflecting off his glasses. A worn checkerboard was painted on the round table and cell phones spread like playing cards, each next to a drink. Boyd picked up his phone and checked his call log.

Mallory picked up her martini. "Not all of us have the luxury of a University stipend."

"If you got a stipend," Chase said, "why you schlepping food for Boyd?"

"Yeah, Lamont," Mallory said, sarcastically, "why you schlepping food for Boyd?"

Pax popped Lamont's shoulder. "He's trying to become one of us."

"That," Lamont said, frowning at Mallory, "and the edifying discourse."

“Speaking of edifying.” Mallory pulled a Scrunchie from her wrist and wrapped her red hair into a ponytail. “I was wondering, boss, when Price became head wait.”

Chase reached across the table towards Mallory, wiggling two fingers.

“Mal, hon, you know I don’t have head waits.” Boyd spread his arms wide. “You’re all equal in my eyes.”

“Well maybe you could tell Price that.” Mallory said, digging through her purse, then tossing Chase a black hair band. “He’s always telling people how to – I don’t know – layer cappuccinos. Like it’s art or something.”

Chase pulled back his hair and fanned his neck. “That boy does like to swing.”

Pax took a swig of PBR. “I could sure live without him prancing back into kitchen and announcing every bottle of wine he sells.”

Behind the bar, Celia popped open two Coronas and jammed limes down their throats. Boyd expected Lamont to join in the piling-on Price as Boyd had seen Price lecture Lamont on wine pronunciation and serving over the wrong shoulder. But Lamont leaned back and sipped his scotch, the conversation a scythe swinging past.

“Price does a good job,” Boyd said, the fire warm on his side. The fire crackled and the center of a log gave, sending sparks up the chimney. “He’s a little too proud of his palate, but he does a good job.”

Celia walked up to the table and started setting down drinks, leaning over, a silver cross dangling in front of her small breasts. She set down a pint of Flying Dog Pale Ale for Boyd and a martini for Mallory, a plastic sword piercing two olives submerged in the vodka. Small fists clasped around the cartilage of Celia’s ears and tiny faces stuck in her

lobes. She pinned the tray against her hip and said, "Alright, let's bet customers. Who's in?"

Betting customers was an Izzy ritual open to servers, bartenders, and managers, though managers had to double the odds since they dealt directly with more complaints. Antes started at five bucks, each entrant betting their worst customer experience of the night. Pots grew up to two-hundred-dollars. Izzies figured they might as well make something off the biggest assholes since they were often the worst tippers. Boyd dropped a ten on the table and everyone threw in five except Lamont.

Celia crossed her arms, the tray flat against her side. "Ante up, Lamont."

"Miss Celia," Lamont said, "wearer of medieval faces and a thousand bracelets. I'm not holding anything tonight."

Celia frowned. "All I've got is ten ESU guys who stiffed me on Appletinis."

"Appletinis?" Pax asked. "Were they gay?"

Celia shook her head. "One left me his number."

"And they wonder why we hate them," Chase said. "I'm sitting on a lady who sent her martini back because it had too much vermouth. Only I haven't used vermouth since ninety-six, so I made one with vermouth and she sucked it right down."

Boyd dropped down another ten. "I'll raise you both."

"You're bluffing," Chase said, matching him, Mallory doing the same.

"This party of six comes in," Boyd says, "and their table isn't ready so they head to the bar. One of them walks back outside and my bartender tells me this guy was livid that we didn't have Red Bull."

"Were they in college?" Celia asked.

“Mid-thirties. Old Southern money. Anyway, the guy who left returns toting a four-pack of Red Bull. I stop him and politely explain that it’s against the law for him to bring that in the restaurant. He asks why we don’t carry it and I tell him we don’t make drinks with training wheels.”

“Zinger,” Chase said, “BT trumps me.”

“It gets better. He looks me up and down and asks if I’m the manager. I say, ‘Yes, my name is Boyd Tennor and this is my fucking restaurant.’ ”

“And that was my fucking six top,” Lamont said, matter-of-factly, “that left.”

“Sorry, Lamont, some customers need to be fired.” Boyd wished Shawn could’ve heard that story. Or had seen Boyd standing his ground against that prick whose dad was probably in the KKK. The fight with Jeremy had emasculated Boyd, and Shawn’s front row seat made it all the more humiliating.

“I greet an older couple,” Mallory said, “fifty-five or sixty, immediately upset we don’t have Kendall Jackson.”

“No way,” Boyd groaned. “You can’t trump me with KJ.”

“I bring them our over-oaked alternative,” Mallory continued, patting Boyd’s hand, “the man orders the filet for himself and the salmon for his wife. I ask *her* how she would like it cooked and *he* says, well done.”

Pax spit into a bottle. “Because all idiots want the flavor cooked out their fish.”

“Which I start to explain to her, politely, and because I don’t want Shawn taking a trip to Pissy Land – ”

“Is that an actual place?” Lamont asked.

“It is, and you’re about to find out about it,” Mallory answered. “Anyway, I’m explaining all this, to the woman, and the man says to me, ‘She’d still like it well done’ and I look at him like, What’s the deal, bub? And he says to me, ‘She doesn’t talk to help.’ ”

“Sorry, B,” Chase said, “but her flush trumps your straight.”

“Fair enough,” Boyd resigned, “I wish you would’ve told me, Mall, I won’t have people talking to my staff like that.”

Mallory shuffled the bills into a stack. “I told Paxy.”

Pax pushed up the brim of his hat. “They got some special sauce.”

The table broke into laughter.

“You rock, Pax,” Celia said, “I could French you.”

“Hey,” Chase said, “I do shit like that all the time.”

Celia winked at him. “Gotta get back to work.”

“And of course,” Mallory added, “they left six on seventy.”

“I don’t understand why people don’t tip well,” Lamont said. “It’s a chance to be kind and make a positive impression on someone’s day.”

Chase pointed at Lamont: “CRL #37: People would rather be greedy than kind.”

“Actually,” Lamont said, “people would rather be kind in terms of their ontology, but often refuse to implement any kindness into their existence.”

“I’m a simple southern boy,” Pax said, “could you break that down?”

“Most people believe themselves to be kind without doing a single kind thing. They have to.” Lamont took off his glasses. “The alternative would be realizing that they are actually unkind, and no one wants to think that about themselves.”

“Like poor Boyd.” Mallory leaned her head on his shoulder. “Thinking he was kind in taking Emily back. I’ve made that mistake.”

“I’ve stood behind that horse,” Pax said, “and let it kick me more than once.”

“We’re not back together,” Boyd said. “And it has nothing to do with – Lamont, don’t you think it’s our Christian duty to care for those with less?”

Lamont spun around his glasses, the earpiece pinned between his index finger and thumb. “Absolutely.”

“I knew you’d get it, you’re smart.” Boyd waved. “Unlike the rest of the table.”

“However,” Lamont said, putting his glasses back on, “I don’t think it follows that we have to date them, especially at the expense of our own happiness.”

“Who said I wasn’t happy?”

Chase raised his hand. “I’ll say it: you were never happy with her.”

Pax tilted his bottle towards Chase. “I’ll say what Bigg’n here said.”

“But, Lamont,” Boyd said, “you understand, right?”

“Understand what? That it’s your job to save her?”

“Not save . . . exactly.”

Lamont started to say something, then laughed. “You’re right, Boyd, it has nothing to do with being kind, it has to do with you thinking you’re God.”

“I do *not* think I’m God.”

“You just admitted that it was your job to save her, which presupposes not only that you don’t think God is doing His job, but that you can do it better. Honestly, do you really think God is so uncreative that the only way He can think to help this affluent white woman is through you?”

Chase slapped the table, the drinks jumping. “I love this guy.”

“Lamont,” Boyd said, mocking a scowl, “you’re fired.”

“That certainly proves me wrong.”

“Fine, you’re rehired. But only because you’re bringing your brother in for the fundraiser.”

Boyd’s cell phone started rattling on the table and he thought, *finally*. Mallory put her hand over his phone and said, “Any takers?”

“There ain’t odds high enough,” Chase said.

Pax began packing a can of Copenhagen. “Back on the chain-gang.”

Boyd stood up, extended his middle finger, then rotated mechanically around the table. He pried his phone away from Mallory and walked outside where the cold wind worked through the thin cotton of his shirt. Tall heat lamps glowed next to metal tables, smokers banished and huddling around ashtrays. Boyd leaned against the wooden railing, a little miffed that Emily was just now calling to see how his night had gone. He was doing all this for her. “Hello, sweet Emily.”

*What are you doing?*

“Having a drink with my staff, we broke our sales record. I’m telling you, Em, there are going to be so many people at this fundraiser, you’ll be able to add on.”

*About that. Listen, I’m just now leaving work because Jasmine’s gone AWOL.*

Inside Boyd’s stomach, a meat grinder kicked on. “What? She ran away?”

*That’s what AWOL means. I feel so awful, I didn’t know she –*

“You have to find her, Em.”

*Well I certainly hadn't thought of that. Should I drive around West Elora tonight and knock on some doors?*

"If that's what it takes. I'll help."

*That would be so productive.* Boyd recognized that break in her voice. *Anyway, I just wanted to see if you wanted me to come over, and to make sure we were going to church tomorrow.*

With Jasmine missing he *had* to invite Emily over, even though it'd be their fourth night together that week. He pulled a roll of Tums from his pocket and peeled back the foil.

"Of course," he said, "come over and we'll go to church."

*Are you sure? I'm okay either way. Really.*

Okay either way – please, Boyd knew better. He popped two Tums. "I want to see you. Now can I please go back to my friends?"

*Yes – and see, that wasn't so hard. We just have to communicate better. I was telling Robin that yesterday, that communication is kind of a lost art. Sometimes you don't communicate that well, honey.*

"I'm communicating right now that I want to go back to my friends and it doesn't seem to be doing me any good."

Emily laughed. *Well you are, aren't you? I'll see you soon.*

Boyd loved church. Everything was so fucking beautiful, and Presbyterians knew how to do beautiful: mahogany pews; granite pillars; the imposing pipes of the organ that encased the back wall of the sanctuary and climbed thirty feet to the wooden beams of the



slanted ceiling. A kaleidoscope of colors usually shined through the stained glass windows, though today were diffused by cloud cover. JC healing the paralytic, JC walking on water, JC up on that cross with a crown of thorns on his head. A soft note from the organ prompted the congregation to stand as the choir began their entrance from the rear, singing in soft acapella and solemnly sauntering down the center and outside aisles. A soft crescendo rippled through the congregation. Then the pipes of the organ roared, rolling in from the back and colliding with the choir's crescendo in the middle of the sanctuary like two furious horizons bleeding in a pale blue sky.

The choir finished and hymnals scuffled against the backs of pews. Boyd scooted to his left so he and Emily could share. To his right, his mother was seasonally clad in a beige dress and white pearls. The ends of Emily's hair curled up against the top of her shoulders and her eyes imitated the dark blue of her dress. The organ struck a deep chord and Boyd belted out the beginning of *Awake, my soul, and with the sun*, his mother's voice bellowing over his, reminding him of that most treasured genetic gift: his singing voice. Emily sang timidly, and Boyd knew she was worried about Jasmine. He was worried about Jasmine. And the Rabbit. And the fact that his parents had had a realtor over on Wednesday. Boyd thought he had more time before they put it on the market. *Mustard seeds*, he thought, *faith the size of mustard seeds can move mountains*. God had been on point so far, even when it appeared He was pattering about in the rear.

The choir sat and the congregation followed suit. A bald man stepped out of the third pew and walked towards the pulpit – his footsteps echoing off the high ceiling and falling like confetti – then began to read from Mark. *He lived amongst the tombs . . . for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains* – what was an unclean spirit,

anyway? And how many unclean spirits could one fellow encounter? *My name is Legion: for we are many . . .* and JC sent all of those pigs squealing into the water. *Let us pray.* Boyd prepared himself for some serious prayer, was about to pray that *Food and Wine* would go orgasmic over Shawn's food when the cutest little girl in the pew in front of him turned around and stuck out her tongue. Boyd repeated the gesture. The girl giggled. Reverend Spindle rose up behind the pulpit like he was on a platform, all eyes on him. Boyd focused. Readied himself to receive the word and pin down a profound point to counter Lamont's theological argument – but then he started thinking about the fundraiser and how he was going to charm the socks right off the folks from *Food and Wine* and how once that write up circled the state and the nation Boyd would surely be able to save his parents' house and next thing he knew the sermon was over.

The organ moved into the Doxology. The congregation stood and Emily hooked her pinky around Boyd's. His father walked down the center aisle with the other deacons, each carrying a silver offering plate with bills and envelopes unevenly piled past the rim. *Praise God from whom all blessings flow* – Boyd did not think he was God. God had used the Ansul disaster so Boyd could deliver food to the Davenports and the Davenports could deliver *Food and Wine*. God had brought Emily back into Boyd's life as part of His plan, so she could see Boyd had a soul and so Boyd could help Jasmine. *Praise creatures all here below . . .* God made things happen and Boyd was a mere cog in the process – that was it: Boyd was God's cog. *Praise Him above the heavenly host . . .* Church really did put things into perspective. Emily's hand felt a little cold, Emily was always cold, even this morning wearing black tights and boots, Boyd wondering if he had time to get them off before brunch. Brunch. There was a ton of good football on and

Boyd was going to be stuck at the County Club with Emily and his parents – he'd like to see God do something about *that*. *Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*. Ahhhhhmen.

The chatter of conversation chewed through the silence and the organ moved into a zippy closing melody. Emily picked up her white scarf from the back of the pew and wrapped it loosely around her neck, lifting her hair over it. "That was some sermon," his mother said, "wasn't it?" Boyd nodded and opened his cell phone; Emily did the same and received reception first, quickly walking ahead of them and disappearing into the crowd. Boyd had a text from Mitch: WE R CLSING. CALL ASAP.

Boyd had known Edenic Proportions might close since the day Amber went into labor – talk about irony. Alanis Morissette had the right idea with that rotten song. If Boyd had written that song he'd have used examples that were actually ironic. A black fly in your Chardonnay was unfortunate, but not ironic, and probably God's way of telling you not to drink boring wine. Mitch's brother tanking their restaurant with his coke habit and late night festivities, now that was ironic.

"Why didn't you stop all of that?" Boyd had asked Mitch last Wednesday, right before Chase came in early for his shift – also ironic.

Mitch's face looked like a pillow trying to regain its shape. "Touc would swear they were putting money in the till. I never checked because I couldn't stand for my brother to be that guy." He shook his head. Trumpets tossed down the hall from the prep room. "What does that say about me?"

"Every person in this town has a ton of respect for you," Boyd said, squeezing the back of Mitch's neck. "If you have to close, everyone will know it was Touc's fault."

Mitch let out a short, giddy laugh. “And how do you think that’s going to make me feel? People saying those things about my brother?”

“You are not responsible for your brother.”

“You’re an only child, you don’t get it.”

“I may be an only child, bro, but I get it.” Smudges spotted the mirror behind the bar and tall bottles of booze blocked Boyd’s view of himself and Mitch, only the tops of their heads visible. “Those guys in Vine were like my brothers, and just like you created this place I created that band. When everything fell apart I felt the same way, like it was my fault.”

“I don’t care about fault. I care that my brother is going into rehab and I turned a blind eye. Rehab,” Mitch said, as if it was another planet, “it’s where addicts go, not my little brother. Now the Izzy lore will forever label him as the coke-head who tanked EP.”

“No one’s going to say that.”

“Are you insane?” Mitch laughed again, another giddy, almost maniacal laugh. “If you can count on one thing in this town, it’s the power of Izzy gossip.”

When you went to church, you got presents. Mitch announcing the closing today made it imperative that Boyd meet with Shawn and Jeremy about staffing. Present number one: no brunch. Emily’s phone call had been about Jasmine being found – though she was in the hospital – which was a present for everyone. When Boyd pulled into the parking lot of The Offensive Backfield raindrops were assaulting his windshield. Jeremy was already on the way and Boyd wanted ten minutes with him to explain why Chase couldn’t be hired so he’d waited to call Shawn, which turned out to be a moot

point because of present number three: Shawn was going to Bamberg. Mustard seeds.

One mountain at a time. Boyd took off his tie before jogging across the parking lot, glad that people could see he'd been to church.

Inside, giant TV's covered the walls and a soundtrack of referee whistles and smacking pads circulated the room. Pitchers of cheap beer on cheap tables. Bands of black Raider and blue Charger jerseys. Some Redskin fans with their faces painted. Groans, grunts, and high fives. Grown men screaming out death threats over off-sides penalties. This is what Sundays in the fall were about: adults cleansing themselves of violent tendencies and uniting with strangers by rooting for the same team, players either gods to be worshipped or enemies to be destroyed. There was no doubt about it: sports bars were sacred ground.

Boyd grabbed a Guinness and found a small table in front of the Redskins-Steelers game. He and Jeremy were both lifelong Skins fans and would sit here all afternoon if it wasn't for Jeremy's new boyfriend, which was fair enough: Boyd wasn't the kind of guy to stand between a buddy and sex. He did wish he would've stopped and changed clothes when Jeremy walked in wearing a maroon V-neck sweater and designer jeans, making them the best-dressed couple in a bar where they were likely to get lynched for it.

"Remind me why I drove all the way out here," Jeremy asked, the pitch of his like the whistles of the game. His massive cowlick was pouting about the weather.

"Any Izzy could hear us talking about our staffing on Main Street."

"Right, because every Izzy cares about our staffing. What's the score?"

“We’re down seven,” Boyd said, his pride suddenly stinging from yesterday’s confrontation. Jeremy was a silent partner, he should be glad when Boyd consulted him on the linen company.

“Typical,” Jeremy said. “Let’s get this over with. My new beau and I are driving to Charleston for the night.”

“But the interview – ”

“Worry not, I’ll be back in time for the interview tomorrow afternoon. Danny is so impressed that I’m going to be in *Food and Wine*.”

Boyd gulped down his Guinness. The interview was tomorrow morning. A woman in a gold Saints jersey walked in front of them with two pitchers of beer, winking at Boyd as she passed. A Saints jersey? What were the odds?

“You want a beer,” Boyd asked, needing a moment.

“Sure, while I’m awake. Something light.”

Boyd meandered up the bar and ordered two Bud Lights, wanting to slap God a high five. He hadn’t even lied. Jeremy had, in fact, interrupted him. Talk about divine intervention: even God knew it was a bad idea to have Jeremy at the interview. Why else would a woman in a Saints jersey wink at him that very moment? Jeremy could still get his picture taken Tuesday night and Boyd could still control the flow of information, which was exactly why he hadn’t told Jeremy about *The Weekly* interview: Jeremy would carry on about the gay community and fashion and all his tobacco money instead of this great new restaurant. Boyd was the General Manager of The Swimming Rabbit. These were his decisions to make. The information was his to control. In the morning, he

would do as he'd done with *The Weekly* reporter and talk only about Jeremy and Shawn. It was a painful lesson he'd learned from Vine: always talk up your boys.

Boyd returned with two beers and asked Jeremy what happened.

"The idiot threw into double coverage. He's played countless downs of football and still doesn't know how to look off the safety." Jeremy accepted the beer. "So, I take it you're still not going to hire Chase."

"No, it's too big a risk – wait, how did you know that?"

"Shawn called my cell on the drive over with some sob story about Chase being out of work." Jeremy took a drink of the beer, his face puckering. "This is awful – like it's my job to employ all of your friends."

*His job.* "That's so weird. Has he ever called you before?"

"I didn't even know he had my number. So, how much do you care about your unemployed friend?"

A group of Steelers gang-tackled a back. "You can't please everyone. I learned that in Vine –"

"Yes, yes, we've all heard that sob story. Poor little Boyd, being told to take his guitar and go home."

"Fuck off, Jer, I'm trying to protect your investment."

"So, sorry," Jeremy said, with the sincerity of a proctologist putting on a plastic glove, "I'm in complete agreement with you."

Boyd leaned back and took a hit off his watered down beer. Peyton Manning hit Pierre Garcon who tiptoed down the sideline before being pushed out at the ten. Games were shifting to halftime, men milling up to the bar for refills. Boyd got a text from

Emily saying she'd be at the hospital. He told Jeremy about his plans to bring Dana over from EP to run the floor then maybe Mitch's sous once the *Food and Wine* article came out. Jeremy acted put off that he'd driven out "for four lousy hires" but Boyd knew Jeremy was flattered to be involved. Outside, raindrops dented puddles and rustic streak of lightening spiced up the sky.

"That was almost productive," Jeremy said, "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Don't worry about dressing up, they're not taking pictures until Tuesday. It's weird, isn't it, to think Sterling would be playing on those TV's if it wasn't for that Achilles injury."

"Right," Jeremy said, "because that's what kept him out the game."

"What do you mean?"

Jeremy fumbled with his keys. "It doesn't matter."

"Actually, if it affects the Rabbit, I should know."

Jeremy squinted at Boyd, his lips pursed. "Fine. Apparently Mister Carroll developed quite the gambling problem after his injury. *That* kept him out of the league."

Boyd's stomach turned over. "Jer, we can't have someone with mob ties coming in the same night as *Food and Wine*. That could ruin us."

"Mob ties. Please. You're being dramatic."

"I know this town. If you can count on one thing it's the power of gossip."

"It's a fundraiser, we can hardly raise funds without him."

"Well, shit, let's just push the fundraiser back to Friday or something."

"Why not Tuesday?"



“Tuesday is too important. Elora could spin this Sterling gossip of control and ruin the *Food and Wine* review.” Boyd didn’t necessarily believe it when he said it, or only half believed it because the idea itself seemed so absurd and repulsive that he didn’t want it to be true. But Jeremy’s wealthy arrogance was blurring the idea, distorting it even, as if he knew a single thing about the restaurant industry, standing there in his four-hundred-dollar cashmere sweater. Scowling. Or smirking. Some gesture that parodied their various differences. Boyd was blinded by them, those differences, disgusted and dirtied and then consumed and controlled, as if the differences and the moment had mutated into an extraordinary force that tossed him into an abyss. And then, in an instant, Boyd knew not only that he was right, that Sterling could not come in, but that it was true, and that Boyd was at the mercy of that truth, the dread of its possibility snapping down on him like a bear trap. Boyd was the General Manager. People were counting on him. His parents, his staff, Shawn, Emily, that little girl; he couldn’t help any of them if the Rabbit was closed.

“You’re such a WASP,” Jeremy said.

“I’m not the millionaire jaunting off to Charleston. I’ve worked my ass off for you and you have to trust me that this is a bad idea.”

“Exactly. You,” Jeremy pointed at Boyd, “work for me.”

“This is my call.”

Jeremy rolled his shoulders, popping the left then the right. “Your call is for pizza. If you do one thing to alter this I will kick you out of this restaurant just like you were kicked out of that band.”

“We’re on the same team, Jer. You don’t realize what this could – ”

“Enough.” Jeremy sliced his hand through the air. He stormed across the parking lot, the bottoms of his jeans darkening, immediately soaked with water. The lights of his Escalade flashed on and off with the quick beep of his horn and water peeled off his tires as he drove away.

Adrenaline raced through Boyd’s body, searing his insides like lighter fluid, his muscles tense, that adrenaline in need of an outlet. He looked around. He screamed. Loudly. Inaudibly. This not only finalized the fact that Jeremy should not be at the interview tomorrow, but also vindicated Boyd for not having Jeremy at the last one: Jeremy had no concept of perception. Zero. A millionaire who inherited his lifestyle from decades of tobacco addictions. Boyd couldn’t save his parent’s house without *Food and Wine*. Sterling could ruin everything. Not because of anything he had done, but because in Elora, a town steeped in the veneer of southern tradition, perception was stronger than truth. Izzies spoke one language. Gossip. And it spread down Main Street like wildfire. It was just like those pigs Jesus sent running down the hill: once they got going, there was no stopping them.

### Third Course: Sorbet

#### Chapter One

Lamont sat on his futon, his mind drifting away from Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, forcing him to occasionally snap it back, like a dog on a choke chain.

Gadamer's complex, page-long sentences were so ripe with meaning you had to approach them cautiously, careful not to knock them from the vine. Hermeneutics. Only a German philosopher would write a five-hundred-page treatise on how to properly interpret a text that was almost impossible to interpret. Then again, considering how convoluted conversations had become, and seeing that conversations were a form of text, maybe Gadamer was ahead of the philosophical curve. Not only did people listen less, but they also rarely said what they meant. It was as if a set of mirrors stood between every conversation, reflecting words in different directions, fragmenting all dialogue.

Lamont stretched his legs across his father's Air Force trunk, which he used as a coffee table. The hinges were rusted and the lock dangled down, the inevitability of gravity and time pulling at the small bolts. Mallory half-sat, half-lay across the chair to his right, reading *Mumbo Jumbo*. She wore green and red plaid pajama bottoms and a white sweatshirt of Lamont's, green letters spelling Davidson in the shape of a half moon. Her back was against one armrest – a pillow propping her up – and her socked feet hung over the other. The day was lazy and gray, Coltrane's horn placid and seductive, and the email Lamont had gotten from Dr. Sponhiem unsurprisingly terrifying.

Dr. Sponhiem taught Lamont's Existential Thought class and was the endowed chair of the Philosophy Department. He'd published six books – two on Nietzsche – and was such a departmental deity that he only taught every other semester and was on very few dissertation committees, which left students racing downhill for those few sacred spots. Lamont only walked down that hill because Dr. Sponhiem disliked him, a sentiment illustrated by this morning's terse e-mail requesting a meeting with Lamont Wednesday morning "regarding" his paper. Regarding. Sponhiem might as well have written, "Regarding us pulling your funding." What would Boras do if Lamont couldn't help pay off Sterling's debt? Probably just ruin their lives, again.

Lamont's bare feet were crossed next to a short stack of books on the trunk, Kierkegaard's *Repetition* on top. He tapped the top book with his foot. *Repetition* was what he really wanted to be reading, especially with Nietzsche still chattering about the eternal return. Kierkegaard claimed true repetition was a religious movement, a getting back, like Job had gotten everything back. Kierkegaard called it a shattering of the self and likened it to a thunderstorm. Could Sterling's self be shattered?

"You're not reading," Mallory said to him. Four random freckles dotted her right cheek, three more across the bridge of her nose, and five on her left cheek, the last two trailing towards her lip like the tail of a comet.

"How do you like *Mumbo Jumbo*?" Lamont asked.

"I'm digging the Jes Grew phenomenon. Anything that can prompt people to dance in mass is okay with me. What do you think it is, the Jes Grew?"

"I think it's a positive contagion."

“Interesting . . . now get back to reading.” Her red hair pressed against the white pillowcase. “Unless you want to tell me why you don’t like to bet customers.”

“What makes you think I don’t like to bet customers?”

“Gee, I don’t know.” Mallory looked towards the ceiling. “Oh yeah – the fact that you never do. And you’ve had some killer hands.”

“I couldn’t have beaten you on Saturday.”

“You could’ve beaten me on Wednesday with those complete bitches who came in at six and camped until nine-thirty. They cost you an entire turn – they cost you like fifty bucks and didn’t have the courtesy to tip for the table time. God,” Mallory groaned, “I hate that. I don’t sit in my doctor’s office two hours after the appointment is over.”

“Doctors command a little more respect than servers.”

“It’s rude, Lamont. And what about the week before last when that guy threw down his empty wine bottle in the middle of the restaurant like he lived there. You had to sweep it up. Then he left you like twenty-five on two-fifty. *That* hand would’ve won you the tip back, which is the entire purpose of betting customers, to make up for the assholes. I can’t believe we didn’t do it in New Orleans. It’s brilliant.”

“It was twenty-five dollars more than I had.”

“That’s not what you said then.”

“I was mad then.”

An eerie phenomenon materialized during shifts. An incident that normally wouldn’t affect you made you want to attack customers with a machete. Mallory was right about the guy who broke the bottle. When Lamont was sweeping up the broken glass, he wanted to shove the guy’s face in the pile and smack him around. Another night

Lamont had yelled at Neil over who was next in line to do their check out. Service. On bad nights it turned you into a raving lunatic, on good nights it was joyously biblical.

Saturday, Lamont had waited on a twelve top celebrating a couple's fiftieth wedding anniversary. They were grateful and playful and Lamont felt privileged to be part of their night, felt privileged to serve them. Paul, in all his manic madness, had noted that: how hard was it to love the people who loved you? Relatively simple. The Christian calling was to love everyone, even the self-absorbed and rude women who sat at his table two hours after they were done eating, oblivious to the money they were costing Lamont.

Hence came the phenomenon: sometimes, if a person force-fed you shit from a spoon for long enough – your teeth clenched, your stomach on the verge of purging – you pried the spoon out of their hand and jammed the shit down their throat. Which Lamont had done to the two women. They'd demanded decaf after dinner, which Lamont served them, which sat untouched for twenty minutes. Eventually, one of the women pointed at her coffee and said to Lamont, "I didn't know this was the kind of place that served cold coffee." Lamont started to clear their cups and the other woman grabbed his arm and said, "And this is decaf, right? Because even the smallest drop of regular will keep me up all night." Lamont wondered if they would treat a white server the same. He dumped their coffee, a black ring around the inside of the cup; the seduction of jamming that spoonful of shit back into their mouths overpowered the theological opportunity to turn the other cheek. He poured them both regular. Then refilled them with regular. Twice. And he felt better. It was phenomenal how many opportunities a single day could offer to fail at being a Christian. Talk about an eternal return.

Mallory kicked her socked feet back and forth. “Why don’t you plaaaaaay?”

“You’ll think I’m weird.”

“I already think you’re a complete freak.”

Lamont laid the book across his thigh, open to keep the page. Raindrops tapped the window behind Mallory then slid down the glass. Two trees blocked his view of the yard. “This is God weird.”

“I already think you’re a cross between Othello and Kierkegaard,” she said, laying *Mumbo Jumbo* across her stomach, face down and open. “Hey, maybe we can find an Iago to talk you into killing me.”

“That’s not funny.”

“It doesn’t freak me out, you know.” She curled her toes, the arches of her feet tightening then relaxing. “Although the fact that you don’t trust me with something so personal is about to send me on that trip to Pissy Land.”

“I’d still like to know where that is.”

“It’s about to be in your living room. I left a three-year relationship for you.”

“I didn’t ask you to leave anything.”

“I didn’t say that you did.”

“You implied such, or wouldn’t have mentioned it.”

“I’m not Shawn or Boyd.”

Lamont laughed. “That certainly would’ve changed the dynamics of what we did this morning.”

“Quit hiding behind your rhetoric.” She swung her feet around. “Do you not believe me? That it doesn’t freak me out?”

“I believe that you believe it, but fear it’s part of the negative effect.”

“The negative effect, is that Nietzsche?”

Coltrane’s horn faded out and the CD shifted; Lamont remembered he’d left a Public Enemy disk in and reached behind him, skipping to Miles Davis’ *Sorcerer*.

“Actually, it’s Lamont Carroll, who claims that when you jump from person A to person B you’re immediately drawn to aspects of person B which person A lacked.”

Mallory’s nose twitched. “Where’s the problem?”

“The problem is that, eventually, the aspect which drew you to person B becomes commonplace at best, or annoying at worst, creating a second negation.”

“It’s comforting to know you think I’m so shallow.”

“It’s a consequence of being human, not shallow. It’s how the self is made.”

She threw *Mumbo Jumbo* at Lamont, who slapped it down. “You mean like using your rhetoric as a defense to not discuss your spiritual life?”

“See, I’m the one who’s shallow.”

Mallory stood up – the wrinkles of her red pajama bottoms falling out – and took two steps over to the futon. She sat down Indian style, facing Lamont. “Lamont, honey, does it help your spirit not to bet customers?”

He rotated his body to face Mallory, pulling his right leg foot under his left thigh. “When you guys are betting customers, I want to jump in. There’s this impulse to hate those people. The entire table hates them and they deserve it. I feel like it’s a bad impulse, is all, that I’m giving up part of my spirit when I play, which leads to the question you wanted to ask.”



Mallory tilted her head, her hair bunching on her left shoulder. “That was the question I wanted to ask.”

It wasn’t, she just didn’t know it yet. She really wanted to know why Lamont quit football. About watching Sterling lose his soul, lose everything because he thought he owned the world when, really, the world owned him just as it had owned their father. The world owned everyone. Lamont had to seize his own soul back from the world, as if it had been chained in a dungeon and guarded by a sleeping dragon. It had required patience. Small and silent steps. Daily repetition and daily failures; like those women: such a failure for his spirit and a victory for the world.

Mallory leaned in and kissed him. Her lips closed then opened, Miles pulled out a long beat then ran up a scale, Lamont fell into the kiss and leaned back, Mallory on top of him. His hands reached around her back and underneath the sweatshirt, her skin smooth and warm, his hands sliding around to her stomach with the phone rang and sliced open the moment. Mallory took the phone from the trunk.

“It’s Boyd,” she said, still on top of him and looking at the caller-ID. “I told you he would cancel once he found out.”

“And I told you he had every reason to.”

She sat up, pulling him forward. “Now the God thing is getting a little weird.”

Lamont leaned in to kiss her but she leaned back, eyeing him, relinquishing the phone and giving him a quick peck. Lamont pressed talk. “Yes, boss?”

*Hey, Lamont, is there any way you could bring that sense of humor over to the Rabbit? I really need to talk to you.*

“There are a number of ways: I could drive, walk, take a cab, none of which are going to happen. You’re welcome to come here.”

Mallory turned over her hands, confused. Lamont whispered: “He’ll never come.”

*I really don’t have time. Shawn and Jeremy both bailed on me and I’m left doing a hundred different things to get ready for Food and Wine.*

“I’m doing one thing, studying. Talk to me now.”

Mallory raised two fingers, wiggling them back and forth, mouthing, *Two things*. Lamont offered a consenting shrug then made a gun with his free hand and dropped his thumb, as if firing. Mallory dropped her index finger, leaving up the middle; it was a game they played: Shoot the Rabbit.

*It’s pretty sensitive, I’d just rather discuss it in person.*

“If you don’t want my brother to come in I completely understand.”

*It’s not that I don’t want him to come in, I just don’t want to use him as a publicity stunt. I’m pushing the fundraiser back to Friday. Plus, Price is really sick and I was hoping you’d work for him and wait on the Food and Wine people, considering you are my best server.*

“Oh, Boyd, I’m so flattered. Do you really consider me your best server?”

*I’m serious.*

Lamont felt a familiar pinch between his shoulder blades. “Fine.”

*You understand, right, that I’m looking out for you guys?*

“We can never have enough white people looking out for us.”

*I know how terrible you’d feel if we used your brother just to gain business.*

“Oh, I see, you’re looking out for my feelings.”

*Exactly.*

Miles screamed out a series of high notes, the drums maintaining the frantic tempo. “If that’s the case, then have him come in. Our first priority is helping Jasmine.”

*You say that now, but you’d feel bad, later, I know.*

“Just admit that it’s a bad idea, Boyd, that you found out about my brother’s past. I’m on your side.” Lamont couldn’t stand it when people lied to him *and* expected him to believe the lie. It made him feel dirty.

Mallory took Lamont’s free hand and started massaging the space between his index finger and thumb. Lamont jerked his hand away and stood up, the wooden floor cold on his feet, the pinch between his shoulder blades sharper, stinging.

*You have to believe me that I’m looking out for you guys –*

Lamont reached back, ready to throw the phone across the room – until he saw Mallory: her small shoulders were tense, her hands sucked back into the sleeves of the baggy sweatshirt like a turtle hiding in its shell. Lamont took a deep breath, thinking he should probably pray. “I teach until four, Boyd, I’ll be in by four-thirty.”

Miles was repeating a string of low notes, pausing with a quarter note, then repeating the string of low notes, then two eighth-notes, all the while the symbol steady behind him. He slid through the string again, changing it slightly, getting further away from the original rhythm. Miles made one more run, then stopped. Then, only piano. Lamont set the phone down on top of the television. “That’s why I don’t bet customers,” Lamont said, then thought: *And part of the reason I quit football.*

Mallory stood up, her hands still hiding in the sweatshirt's sleeves. "So, since I've never seen you like this, I'm not sure what to do."

"Do whatever you want."

Four fingers peeked out. "Do you want me to leave?"

God, no, he wanted to her to stay. His lungs expanded. The piano was a slow, hypnotic melody with only the symbol behind it, and then a horn. God, no, her presence would dilute his anger, would transcend him past this rage Boyd had shot hurdled through the phone and into Lamont's mind. He couldn't get the words out: Please, stay. They seemed childish, an admittance of vulnerability, the antithesis of the façade he'd spent the last six years assembling: an autonomous self. *I need you to stay*. Blood was running to his forehead, Boyd's spurious words resonating – *I know you'll feel bad* – coating Lamont like a gritty film. Lamont could feel his spirit stepping inside his pride, inside that filth, the power of the moment making what he wanted to request seem repulsive and alluring and alarmingly familiar. Violent, even.

"Like I said, do whatever you want."

## Chapter Two

Mallory stormed right out of Lamont's apartment. Still in her pajama bottoms. She went to a movie where Lamont couldn't find her and then to the Pyramid where he could. She was hiding on the backside of the horseshoe, drinking a glass of Viognier and pretending to read. Her foot wandered around the bottom of the barstool searching for a beat amidst the cracking pool balls and busy conversations. She really wanted to dance. Sing and sweat and shake the hate out. If she was in New Orleans she'd have gone straight to the Maple Leaf or Tiptina's or – oh! – Funky Butt and danced until dawn, danced until her body ached so her heart wouldn't. If she was back in New Orleans she'd have a real job and a degree from Tulane.

She had every intention of going back. Even took a trip down to find a place. She'd seen all the damage when she rebuilt houses but hadn't really seen it – God, could that sound more clichéd? It wasn't that she thought it was all going to be cleaned up, she just thought it was going to be better. Or bearable. She wasn't ready for the despair. The boarded up houses and the buildings with entire sides washed out and the deserted businesses of people who weren't offered compensation because of the wording in their insurance clauses. Mallory couldn't live down there and be ignored again with the rest of the city, pretending everything was copasetic when it wasn't. That was what really upset her about Lamont, the way he stood there with his eyes closed.

He let her leave. Allowed it. When she walked past him her shoulder grazed his bicep and it felt like she'd been shocked, like that prick of static electricity she received from her car door. It was spooky. She walked through his kitchen and pulled off her

socks and stepped into her flip-flops and when she looked back his eyes were *still* closed. Can you imagine? So she balled up the socks, reared back, and hurled them at him. Of course they hit the ceiling and rolled under the card table where Lamont kept his leather-bound Bible. If he'd only had his eyes open. They'd have laughed at her horrible throw then hopped aboard that laughter and coasted back to some amazing sex.

EP's demise was buzzing all over the bar, the staff understandably upset about not getting a heads up to look for other jobs. Mitch was a great guy but he should've given them a heads up. Maybe he couldn't. People usually gave you the best they could, which was kind of hard to remember when it didn't suit your needs. There was all kinds of talk about Touc's coke habit. About the late night drinking. About all of it. And Mallory knew that she'd be saying the same kind of things if she was sitting with them. Gossip was the opposite of Jes Grew, a negative contagion, and that's what Lamont had meant when he said it was the wrong impulse, even though it was the natural one. The easy one. His number flashed up on her phone for the fourth time in the last hour. She was dying to answer it – another wrong impulse – dying to accept his apology and drive right over for some makeup sex. No one ever considered the double entendre there: Makeup. As in, cosmetic. As in, to aesthetically improve the appearance.

Their appearance as a couple prompted staring as they roamed the aisles of the video store. They weren't even ashamed, the gawkers, looking at her like, *Oh, you're one of those*. It made Mallory want to scream: IT'S FUCKING SKIN. YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW HIM AND CAN'T TELL A THING ABOUT HIM FROM HIS FUCKING SKIN. It covered his body and protected him and was beautiful besides and had nothing do to with his soul or how he treated people. He was working on his PhD

and southern idiots who'd probably never graduated high school were looking at them like they were lepers.

In New Orleans there was a slew of racial disparity, but it kept its distance. She knew she was a middle-class brat who had more and she could live with that as long as the realization stayed out in bay. Then the levees broke and the disparity was all over town and the news and Mallory couldn't handle it. Driving by the overtly symbolic Superdome. People living in trailers the size of coffins that were laced with formaldehyde while Mallory could laissez-faire rent another place and carry on with her sixty-thousand-dollar education. There was still a filthy waterline around the city, on buildings and houses and the walls of the freeway. There were still giant X's spray-painted on houses with the date they were checked and the number of people found. Some said dog or cat. Some of the dates were from November. *November*. That was two months after Katrina's impact. Some houses were only repainted with one coat, the X still visible, like a veiled scar, like makeup sex without the sex. It made Mallory so angry and she just couldn't live like that, being angry every day at the injustice of it all. When one of her new neighbors in Elora found out she was from New Orleans he said, "Well, you sure picked yourself back up faster than all those monkeys down there." How in the world do you respond to something like that?

Celia finally freed herself and moseyed over with a couple of red shots. "This handsome man with a deep voice just called for you," she said, handing Mallory one of the glasses.

"And you told him I wasn't here – what is this?"

"I did, and it's a surprise. To not taking any shit." They tossed back the shots.

Mallory tilted the glass towards Celia. “Red-headed slut?”

Celia nodded, giggling. “He said that on the off-chance I saw you to say that he says bang. What does that mean?”

Mallory held up two fingers. “Shoot the rabbit.”

“I like violence.” Celia pretended to hold a rifle, closing one eye and lining up Mallory’s fingers. “Bang,” she said, pretending the gun bucked.

Mallory dropped her index finger. “He’s saying I should be flipping him off.”

“Awww, he’s trying. You should forgive him.”

“Not yet, he has to suffer.”

“All men should suffer. There was something else I was going to tell you.”

“That Chase was on his way over?” Mallory said, seeing him walk in.

“He just walked in, didn’t he?” Celia turned around and they watched Chase scan the tables and start towards the crowd from EP until he saw Mallory and Celia and stopped, then bowed, his blonde hair falling off his shoulders and towards the ground. He wore jeans and a casual cream-colored sweater. Celia scooped ice into a glass and Mallory stood to give him a hug.

“So,” Chase said to Mallory, “what is the most beautiful woman in Elora doing sitting alone?”

“Flexing her female muscles,” Celia said, pouring Grey Goose into the glass.

“And I thought I was the most beautiful woman in Elora.”

“You’re the sexiest,” Chase said.

“I’m not sexy?” Mallory teased.



“This is getting dangerous.” Chase sat down next to Mallory and cocked his chin.

“Do you need me to kick Lamont’s ass?”

“No.” Mallory kissed him on the cheek. “But thanks for the offer.”

“Thank God. That man would DE-stroy me.”

Celia pointed upstairs. “Darren said to go on up.”

“And walk away from the two hottest Izzies – see, I learn – without having a drink? That would be the sinniest of sins.”

“I’d hate for you to sin,” Celia said.

“If you knew the sin involved,” Chase said, lifting his glass, “I promise you wouldn’t hate it.”

“You’re pretty chipper,” Mallory said, “considering.”

“Considering I was briefly unemployed?”

“Briefly?” Celia asked. “I was about to offer you some shifts here.”

“I think your boss, Miss Mallory, has finally come to his senses.”

“I doubt that,” Mallory said, “but that doesn’t mean he didn’t do something right.”

“He wants me to come sit at the bar tomorrow night so he can have a second pair of eyes.” Chase smiled, proudly. “He all but offered me the front of the house gig.”

“Aww, Chasey,” Mallory cooed, “it will be great to have you on board.”

“It will be great to be had,” Chase said. “And tomorrow night we can finally put that curse to rest.”

“There’s something else,” Celia said, “that’s different about you.”

“There actually is,” Chase said, “but I’m keeping it to myself.”

“Is it a girl?” Mallory asked.

“It’s . . . a number of girls.”

“Such a player,” Celia frowned, “you’ll never figure it out.”

Mallory was tired and said her goodnights, knowing she was at the dangerous place where one more drink could easily roll into an entire night of drinking. Celia repeated her plea to forgive Lamont. He was trying. Greg never tried to get off the couch, and Mallory liked how Lamont tried *and* gave her space. She’d let Lamont out of jail if she wasn’t always so quick to forgive Greg for, well, just about everything: being late, spending money he owed her on pot, forgetting to record a show for her, forgetting to drop off their rent check. Her matter-of-fact forgiveness allowed him the luxury of never having to be repentant so he never thought twice about making the same mistakes. There were no consequences. Things with Lamont were not going to fall into that same cycle and if he was another asshole disguised in nice guy’s clothing then Mallory was going to find out and run for the hills. Besides, it was easy to take a stand when she was going to see him at work the next day.

Tuesday afternoon she parked her Jetta on a side street, grabbed her work shirt – which was on a hanger – and walked down a gravel alley towards the Rabbit. Past Hole in the Soul, which smelled liked hushpuppies and past Feather Records where she’d bought Lamont Kanye West’s new CD, which she still hadn’t given to him because she was afraid he didn’t like hip-hop. There wasn’t a single hip-hop CD in his collection. This was worrisome: if he didn’t like hip-hop he might not like to dance.

The wind was chilly and clouds were loitering in front of the sun. She heard Boyd and Shawn talking so she accidentally stopped behind Pax’s truck to make sure that

wasn't a diamond ring on the ground. Nope, just an old broken bottle. Shawn's back was to her, his large frame blocking out Boyd. Shawn had an ordinary voice that wanted to be something else, like girls who showed off cleavage they didn't have.

Shawn said to Boyd, "Can you believe she did that?"

"Actually, I can't, and it sucks," Boyd said. "But we have to keep our heads in the game. Someone stole all of the copper wiring out of my dad's spec houses. He's fucked, but I've got my head in the game."

"My head's in the game but my hand hurts like hell. Did you get any Percocet?"

"My dad wouldn't write me another script and I could only scrounge up one sample packet. You need to lay off these."

"Between Amber ruining our trip and Jeremy wanting to bring in a criminal," Shawn said, popping back his head.

"We don't know that he's a criminal, just that we don't want him in tonight."

Fat rolled over the elastic of Shawn's chef pants, which were checkered with black and white squares. "Or any night as far as I'm concerned."

"I'm serious about these Percocet. You're starting to scare me."

"Now whose head isn't in the game?"

Mallory bit down on the inside of her cheek and pushed a small pebble with the tip of her shoe, letting the rubber sole roll over it and push the pebble into a small puddle. Shawn didn't know the first thing about Sterling or his problems or how they'd fettered themselves to Lamont. Mallory pictured herself walking up to Shawn and slapping his fat face, the red print of her hand taking shape beneath his stubble. Wet dirt was scattered in the back of Pax's pickup, keeping company with an empty Jack Daniel's

bottle, a rusty shovel, and a few old cans of Copenhagen, the black labels peeling away from the soggy cardboard. Mallory walked towards Shawn and Boyd, her shirt draped over her shoulder and her elbow pointing forward. She kept her eyes on the screen door, and noticed a tear in the bottom right corner. Boyd reached out to give her shoulder a squeeze but Mallory stepped aside and refused eye contact. This was all Boyd's fault. Lamont never would've acted like he did if Boyd hadn't called.

Thievery Corporation boomed through the restaurant as the staff did their opening sidework, the electric percussion beneath the lounge-like melody. Say what you wanted about servers, but they knew when to bring their A game. There was an understood seriousness before a big shift that no detail would be neglected. Extra stemware had to be broken out and polished, back-up butters made, chit-sheets ready and features memorized down to the last ingredient. If *Food and Wine* left delighted it meant more money for everyone. Servers were lazy when it came to life, but worked their tails off during a money shift.

Mallory's leg kept up with the electronic beat as she polished stemware. The next glass waited upside down in a small, silver pitcher of hot water, a thin line of steam rising around the bulb and into the air. Usually she and Lamont did their sidework together but today there was fifteen feet of blood orange bar between them. Lamont stood at the other end of the bar, closest to the kitchen door; he pulled a candleholder from a tub of hot water and began scraping out the wax. Kay filled ramekins with freshly whipped butter, carefully pushing out the air bubbles then smoothing over the surface with the dull side of

a butter knife, a detail Shawn copied from Chris Campbell. Neil squatted underneath a table and jammed a rubber Shuv-it under one of the feet.

Ten minutes later Mallory watched Lamont methodically make his way down the west wall of the restaurant with a tray of fresh votives. His middle finger popped the bottom of the tray to the beat. He placed the candles six inches apart on the thin ledge – a fence separating the colors of maroon and mocha, as if they couldn't be trusted to play nicely. Kay moved the opposite direction of Lamont, whistling to the music, placing a ramekin of butter on each table. Neil straightened a tablecloth, pulling one side down while holding the other taut, whistling the next line with Kay; he stood up and they broke into dance moves, bumping their butts against each other. Lamont stepped over the glass wall of bricks and set down two more candles, the last one a few feet from Mallory. He dropped the tray to Mallory's left then walked behind her and stood to her right. Taking a glass from the pitcher of water, he said, "I'm in a bit of an aporia and could really use your advice."

Mallory set another glass in the pitcher. "You're supposed to replace the glass."

"Look, I was an idiot yesterday."

"And now you want my advice?"

"And now I want your advice."

Behind them, Kay sprayed down the cocktail tables with Windex. Will, the bartender, walked in from the kitchen and sat down two cases of bottled water on the other end of the bar. He looked at Mallory and Lamont, raised his eyebrows, said, "Okaaaaay" and walked back into the kitchen.

“It’s ironic, of course, since you didn’t want my help yesterday.” Mallory raised the glass, checking for spots in the light. “You didn’t even want me to stay.”

“Actually, definitively speaking, irony is –”

Mallory shot him a look.

“Right. Okay. The thing is, I did want you to stay yesterday, but as we established I was an idiot of – ”

“*We* didn’t establish anything.”

“Oh, you don’t think I acted like an idiot? I’ve been taking the wrong angle here.”

Mallory pulled back the reigns on a smile. “I didn’t say that.”

“Would you please, please listen to me for one minute?”

“Like you listened to me yesterday?”

He stopped polishing, his forehead furrowed, a vein on the left side pulsating, perpendicular to the earpiece of his glasses. “I see what you’re doing, okay, and we can continue it later because I deserve it but right now, I really, really need – ”

“Lamont,” Boyd said, suddenly standing in the doorway, a striped tie in hand.

“Can you come upstairs so we can go over the courses?”

Holding the glass by the stem, Mallory waved it back and forth. “Boyd beckons.”

The vein in Lamont’s forehead relaxed and his face turned inquisitive, his brown eyes soft under his glasses. She’d never seen that look, its layers of disappointment, and she knew she should take note of it and pay heed the next time it surfaced. He stuffed the polishing rag in the wineglass and left it on the bar, a corner pointing malevolently at Mallory.

“Aren’t we being a bitch,” Kay said, taking the rag out of the glass.

“I’ve been watching you,” Mallory answered.

“Perfect application. I’m impressed.”

Will returned with two cases of wine. A senior at Elora State, Will had that wholesome Midwestern thing working for him: a pretty boy with delicate features and dark hair that female customers – and Jeremy, for that matter – gushed over. Ripping open one of the boxes, he said, “Hey, Mall, why did Jeremy call Lamont this morning?”

Mallory snapped the rim off the glass and the entire bulb shattered. A small piece of glass remained pinned between her index finger and thumb, inside the polishing cloth. Shards spread across the bar’s blood orange surface and onto the floor.

“Are you OK?” Kay asked.

Mallory held the stem in her right hand, the end jagged. Will handed her a napkin and she realized her right hand was bleeding, right below her thumb where it wouldn’t hurt but would be a complete pain in the ass. She pressed the napkin against the cut and blood blossomed through. There was only one reason why Jeremy would call Lamont: Sterling.

### Chapter Three

The smell of rosemary and quail washed over Shawn, chased out of the oven by a wave of heat. He made a half turn to set down the pan on the prep table next to a rack of cooling sourdough bread. Two-dozen quail carcasses spread across the pan, headless, legs curled beneath their bodies and rosemary speckled across their back like stitches. Shawn touched a back with his pinky. Three more minutes. The anvil mixer whipped butter in methodical circles, the motor purring, the bowl spinning in the opposite direction of the blade. An electric beat rose through the air ducts.

Shawn had been sitting on this recipe since culinary school. He could see the dish on the glossy pages of the magazine, the quail perched atop a pile of mushroom risotto, red-eye gravy dribbled around the bowl. Chefs waited entire careers for chance or fate or luck to lure the likes of *Food and Wine* into their restaurant and describe the experience in a magazine that was circulated throughout the nation. James Beard winners were written up in *Food and Wine*. Gods of the industry. And Shawn's parents wanted him to fix up some grocery stores? Amazing. What a terrible idea that trip had been.

Amber and Tristan had slept while Shawn drove. It made him feel fatherly, their sleeping, the wheel of the Range Rover beneath his hands. A Leftover Salmon bootleg spun in the CD player. The wipers drug raindrops across the windshield and Highway 301 fused into the dark, gray horizon ahead. Even the violent weather seemed picturesque, part of Shawn's first patriarchal test. Amber's seat reclined back, her left hand on her stomach and her right above the black curls of her hair. She had dressed up in charcoal pants and a colorful sweater she described as her "small town ensemble." His



parents were nothing if not small town, and Amber's extra effort both surprised and pleased him. She'd even put on make-up.

Every few minutes Shawn checked the rearview mirror to make sure Tristan had not bounced from the harness of his car seat or been abducted by aliens. It was still astonishing to Shawn, the miracle of it all, his son, his family day transpiring better than he'd hoped, that hope spreading and scratching the granite surface of the strained relationship with his parents: maybe they would come to the *Food and Wine* dinner. Maybe the surprise of the visit and the excitement of their first grandchild and the fact that Shawn was paying homage to his mother by using one of her recipes would spackle over the various holes of their past. One meal. That was all Shawn wanted.

Tristan woke up cranky when they arrived. The hum of the engine was unable to be replicated by a bottle or a breast or his grandmother's arms so Amber accepted a shopping list and took Tristan for a drive. Shawn's father had been working since six and retired to the TV room where a football game would serve as his own humming engine, leaving Shawn to follow his mother to the kitchen. He sat in the doorway, straddling a wooden chair backwards.

The sink stood directly in front of Shawn, the black dishwasher to its right, then ten feet of checkered yellow and white tile squaring around to the double-door refrigerator where pictures of Crystal and Cara were pinned beneath magnets shaped like vegetables: one in prom dresses, another in T-shirts with Greek letters. Shawn had sent his parents a copy of the Rabbit's first menu and faxed the review to his father, but neither, apparently, were worthy of the Hallow display.

His mother's white Keds squeaked across the linoleum floor. Varicose veins scaled the back of her legs to khaki shorts. She was a large woman and, like Shawn, her body's temperature willfully emulated that of the room, staying in sync with the stove. Smells of bacon and syrup punctured the air. Potatoes boiled on a back burner and in front of them sat a cast-iron skillet with grease from the pork chops that were stacked on a plate, a paper towel between each soaking up the grease. Coffee percolated.

"Can I mash those potatoes for you?" Shawn asked, knowing the answer. The kitchen was her domain. When Shawn got to college he took the first cooking job he could find, flipping burgers, happy to finally be freed from the confinement of the doorway where he now, once again, found himself.

"You know I like doing it. Will Amber eat a pork chop?" She drew out the middle vowels of words and her voice sounded like a door in need of oil.

"She'll eat at it."

"Well, this is all I can do on such short notice. I sure wish you'd called."

"We wanted to surprise you."

"You certainly did that." She took a white onion off the counter and peeled away the outside layer. Holding the onion over the skillet, she used a Henkle knife to slice through the top of the onion, stopping at the bottom. She made parallel cuts then began crisscrossing those. "I sure do like these knives you gave me."

"Those pans I got you are non-stick."

"I know, Shawn, old habits and all."

"Dad seems quiet. I thought he'd be more excited about his first grandson."

"Well, that Walmart news has really been a burden."

“What Walmart news?”

“They’re opening one. Where the textile plant was.” She guided the knife through the side of the onions, layer by layer, small white squares falling into the skillet.

“Amber mentioned it.”

“She did? Jesus, mom, why didn’t you tell me?”

“You’ve got that restaurant to worry about, you’ve made that perfectly clear.”

She turned the burner to medium, stirred in the onions, and gave the pepper grinder three twists over the pan. “We hate to bother you.”

“He’ll be closed in a month.”

“Don’t you say that,” she snapped, pointing the wooden spoon at him, drops of grease falling to the floor. “This is a loyal town and people have grown up shopping at Hallow Grocery.” She ran a hand through her white hair then tore off a paper towel and wiped up the small pool of grease.

“He can’t match their prices, Mom, or their convenience.”

She pulled the potatoes from the stove and dumped them into a metal colander in the sink, a funnel of steam rising to the ceiling. “And how would you know that?”

“From doing his ordering, from doing my own ordering.” Shawn’s hand was falling asleep; he shook it out. “Can’t he close?”

“He’s got that mortgage on the third store and the girls’ tuition. Besides, he’s got some plans to fix up the stores. You can see why he needs your help.”

Fix up the stores? Was he going to put an electronics section in aisle five?

Shawn felt nauseous. Was he supposed to forgo his now attainable dream to help his father load up a pistol against the artillery of a corporation? Grease snapped in the pan,

Shawn thinking the onions were well past caramelized. Years of observation had allowed him to memorize his mother's movements, and he knew she was about to reach for the coffee, which she did, eyeballing three cups into the skillet. She returned the pot, added salt and pepper, then scooped out some bacon grease from the mason jar on the back of the stove. No wonder Shawn used bacon in everything.

He rested his chin on the back of the chair, stubble bristling against the wood.

"I'm using that recipe on Tuesday, when *Food and Wine* comes in."

"Red-eye gravy?" She added sugar. "At a fancy place like yours?"

"I jazzed it up a little."

"I sure hope so. There's just nothing interesting about this gravy. And after all of the money we put into that culinary school I'd hope you could come up with something better." She capped the gravy, pulled out a blue mixing bowl, and dumped in the potatoes from the colander. Too much butter, too much salt. Shawn wanted to add fontina and paprika. Maybe dill.

"It'd be nice if you and dad came down Tuesday, for the dinner. Then you could see what all the fuss is about. I did get a four-star review."

Her shoulder moved up and down, mashing the potatoes. Dark circles of sweat stained the armpits of her purple blouse. "Amber sure has been gone a long time."

A sharp pain cut across his palm, his fingers tingling. He dug a couple Percocet out of his pocket. The phone rang and his mother walked across the room to answer it.

"Why, hello, Mildred . . . You don't say?" She walked back to the stove, the phone's yellow cord stretching across the room, its small circles straightening. She lifted the top of the skillet and stirred the gravy, listening, then glancing at Shawn. "It doesn't

take long, does it? Thanks for calling . . . You take care, ya hear?” She walked back across the room and rested the phone in its cradle. “Mildred said there’s a Range Rover parked in front of the Winston place.”

“Our Range Rover?”

“No one in this town owns a car like *that*.” She slid a pan of yeast rolls into the oven, the pan scrapping against the rack, the flowered hand towels on the oven door brushing the floor then shaking when the door slammed shut. She gave the gravy a final stir and knocked the wooden spoon against the cast-iron skillet then rested it on edge, the handle a slanted line down to the tiled counter. The Winston place was owned by the town’s richest family. They’d made their money up north starting a company that made caskets and moved back to Bamberg to retire. Bill Winston died soon after building his wife the mansion.

Shawn leaned forward, his arms dangling toward the floor. “How old is Mrs. Winston now?”

“She died Thursday, Shawn, her heart finally gave. It was in the paper.”

*Of course*, Shawn thought, *the paper. The sweater. The makeup.* It wasn’t for his parents, it was for the Wintson place.

Will walked past Shawn and into the office then back out with two cases of wine, saying, “Your shit don’t stink, Shawn.” He stopped at the door and let Boyd enter before exiting, the stairs creaking, then silent for thirty seconds, then creaking again before Lamont walked in. A starched crease cut down the short-sleeve of his black button

down. He glared at Shawn, maliciously. Of course: Mallory had told Lamont what Shawn said about Sterling.

He'd said it accidentally and without malice and as a result of the anger and impotence Bamberg had served him. Anger at his parents' indifference and Amber's act which amounted to a betrayal at worst and dishonesty at best. Impotence at knowing he could no sooner will the creation of his parents' affection than revise his wife's nature: savvy, deceptive, able to disguise her emotions and manipulate the desires of others; qualities that made her a dubious spouse rocketed her to the top of the real estate market. He hadn't mentioned the Winston place at dinner or breakfast or during the drive back to Elora, hoping she would eventually say, *Hey, guess what I did?*

She never said anything. Shawn's anger and impotence were like confit, marinating in their own juices, so when Boyd asked Shawn how the weekend went Shawn was so saturated in it all that he had to ring out every detail. Then Boyd called Sterling a criminal. Then Shawn heard Boyd's phrase pop out of his own mouth when he didn't know the first thing about Sterling. It was like that at a restaurant: the person you were talking about always walked around the corner. Mallory slapping away Boyd's hand and slapping Shawn with the most disgusted look he'd ever seen from her, those red eyebrows ready to fly from her face and assault him. All because of something Boyd said.

Boyd. His mistakes were like buckshot, nothing outside the range of their spray.

Get Jeremy to the interview. Another seemingly simple task turned into an arduous adventure. Boyd claimed *Food and Wine* changed the time. What could he do? Tell them no and risk having the whole thing called off? "Besides," Boyd had said,

“Jeremy will get his picture taken and be over it.” It struck Shawn as strange, all this maneuvering, having Price pretend to be sick so Lamont had to come in, having Lamont come in so Sterling wouldn’t, but might on Friday.

“Alright,” Boyd said, flipping up his collar. “Let’s go over our game plan.”

“Did Kay tell you Jeremy called?” Lamont asked. “He’s bringing a third.”

“He’s already at a four-top.” Boyd pulled down the fat end of his tie, measuring it against the thin end. “Shawn, what should Lamont push?”

“Just these bad boys,” Shawn said, pulling the pan from the oven.

“These look *amazing*,” Boyd said, “you’re a genius.”

Shawn’s insides warmed. “Yeah?”

“Maybe you should check on that third,” Lamont offered.

Boyd pulled the knot of his tie up to his neck and offered a metallic and skeptical smile. “You just worry about philosophizing, let me worry about managing.”

“It was just a suggestion.”

“I’m relieved to hear that.” Boyd turned down his collar. The slanted stripes of his tie picked up the blue in his shirt. “So you’ll push the quail as a feel good story about Shawn’s family history and that’s that. And if they don’t order it we’ll send it out anyway. Now,” Boyd clapped his hands together, “Shawn and I just want to thank you for handling all this like a complete rock star. If there’s anything you or Sterling need, just let us know.”

Lamont nodded. “Because you’re looking out for us.”

“Exactly.” Boyd softly punched Lamont’s shoulder. “I knew we thought alike.”

Shawn didn't like the way Lamont was talking to Boyd: the sarcasm, the demeaning vocabulary, Boyd standing there taking it. Chris Campbell would fire a server for popping off like that, in the middle of a shift even. And because every server knew that they never popped off, unless Chris was sleeping with them. Which happened. If Boyd and Shawn didn't want Sterling to come in, they didn't want Sterling to come in. Shawn walked over to the anvil and turned it off, the blade slowing to a stop, some butter splattering up the side of the large bowl. "Lamont, do you know what the quail is going to be served over?"

"A mushroom risotto made with Arborio rice, cremini and oyster mushrooms, shallots, and garlic. It's topped with red-eye gravy which is a traditional southern dish made with coffee, though you add cream, cumin, and liquid smoke."

"What did I tell you," Boyd said, ripping off a corner of the sourdough bread. "Lamont knows his shit. We're tearing down the goal posts tonight."

Shawn slapped Boyd's hand when he went for another bite. "Cut it out."

"Quit cooking so good," Boyd said. "Plate one of those bad boys up for the staff, OK? Come on, Lamont."

"Coming, boss."

There it was again. The sarcasm. The attitude. Why didn't Boyd put a stop to that? Music rattled the floor. Something bad was going to happen tonight. Whether it was the curse of the building or the momentum of the weekend or Boyd's ability to fuck up everything simple, Shawn could tell this night was not going to go well.



## Chapter Four

Nothing put you in the weeds like cappuccinos. Lamont stuck a silver pitcher of milk under the machine's spout and turned the knob, the spout screaming, the milk steaming. It was eight o'clock. Any minute Jeremy would make his grand entrance with Sterling. The *Food and Wine* people were whispering over their entrees and their wine glasses needed to be refilled. Table four needed to be cleared. Table five was done with their apps and needed to be pre-bussed then remarked with fresh cutlery. A deuce had just been sat at six and wanted to talk about wine. The desserts that went with the currently-being-made cappuccinos were probably up, the ice cream probably melting atop the raspberry crisp. Meanwhile, Boyd was hanging out at the bar with Chase, flirting with two women while Emily looked on from a table with Boyd's parents.

Lamont's spirit felt like a game of Jenga: pieces stacked high and everyone taking their turn at pulling one out. Sterling needed Lamont to keep helping pay off his gambling debt. Mallory needed repentance but didn't seem to want it and Boyd wanted forgiveness for something he wasn't repentant about. Dr. Sponhiem wanted answers to why Lamont's paper was so awful and table seven wanted these cappuccinos. Eventually, someone would pull out the wrong piece and the structure of Lamont's spirit would topple into shambles. Jeremy had tried ten hours ago.

Lamont had the morning at the library rereading his paper on Nietzsche, hoping to discover an accidental kernel of truth or misplaced chain of argumentation, finding neither. The paper was crap. Pure, regurgitated crap. He was embarrassed by it, so he

could understand why the department was embarrassed to be funding him, and probably was no longer willing to do so.

He opened *Truth and Method* but yesterday's violence was still splattering around his mind. He'd been an unwilling conduit, passing anger from Boyd to Mallory, anger he could've harnessed by asking her to stay. Why was it so hard to ask for help? Boyd. Even though Boyd had said something racially insulting he was actually one of the least racist people Lamont knew: he desperately needed everyone to see what a good person he was. He couldn't *not* do it. The possibility of someone regarding him as a bad person was so terrifying that he continually pointed out his goodness; Lamont understood this and it still infuriated him. Imagine what it did to people who couldn't see it? It actually made Boyd a little tragic.

Lamont realized he'd read the same sentence six times – “To think historically means, in fact, to perform the transposition that the concepts of the past undergo when we try to think in them” – and decided on a change of scenery. One of his favorite nuances of the campus was that the football stadium was right in the middle, dug deep in the ground. He bought a cup of coffee and was walking across the quad when his cell phone vibrated inside his jacket pocket. A number he did not recognize flashed up on the screen.

*Lamont, Jeremy screeched, Boyd has to be stopped.*

Whenever anyone said another person “had to be stopped” Lamont pictured a boulder rolling down a mountain towards the person, their hands up and their mind filled with delusions of grandeur about their power to impede. It never worked out, their lives

or lies unable to stop the moment that created a trail of corpses. Lamont brushed some damp leaves off a brick wall and sat down. Students passed by in both directions.

Lamont asked, "Stopped from doing what?"

*Breathing would be a start.*

"I can't be partial to anything that might land me in jail."

*Don't get smart with me. That restaurant is not his.*

"I'm sure he knows that."

*That WASP doesn't know the first thing about anything, especially being a minority in today's society. I will not stand by and let your brother be treated like this.*

"Honestly, Jeremy, my brother's main concern is helping Jasmine and – "

*Give me his number.*

"Excuse me?" Lamont had not seen that coming.

*You heard me. Give me his number or I'll close that place down before Food and Wine walks in the door.*

"That would certainly show Boyd whose restaurant it is, by leaving a handful of minorities unemployed."

*There's nothing black about you except for your skin. Give me his number. And if you tell Boyd about this I'll close that place down, straightway!*

Maybe Jeremy was the boulder and Boyd was waiting at the bottom. Probably, Boyd was always waiting at the bottom. Wet leaves stuck to the cement, trampled over by the swarm of students' feet, some peeled away only to be trampled down again. If it was only Lamont's job in jeopardy he would not give Jeremy the number. But Kay's daughter needed braces and Will was still paying his tuition and Neil's car needed new

brakes. Not to mention that Boyd and Shawn could parlay this night into a major name for themselves. So Lamont gave Jeremy the number, begrudgingly, and headed towards the stadium.

He took a red, bucket seat under the protection of the upper deck. Another fifty rows of seats steeply descended towards the green turf marked with white sidelines and yard numbers. Yellow goal posts and blue end zones. The field was empty, but the team would be practicing this afternoon, drawing a small but unavoidable crowd. In high school, when he didn't have his own practice, Lamont used to study in this stadium and watch Sterling's ability ripple across the field. Watch the force of his tackles practically snap ball carriers in half. Maybe that was why Lamont still liked studying here. The nostalgia. A life before Boras. Now, he never watched practices, but he did enjoy the assortment of sports that spring would bring to the stadium.

Softballs would sail out of an end zone corner, shagged by students lazily dazing in the sun. Yellow Frisbees spun along a sideline. A soccer team practiced across the field, small orange cones representing goals. Sometimes there was flag football practice. Or female lacrosse players hurled small balls at an open net. Lamont admired the field's versatility, that the turf could serve softball or soccer or Frisbee or flag football – yet the yard-markers and end zones always remained, reminders that despite the versatility and adaptability, the field's essence was always that of football.

Jeremy's comment about Lamont's skin color made him wonder about his own essence: he was student and server and teacher and Christian, but regardless of the activities he scattered across his identity, the color of his skin would always be the world's yard marker. It's what the color line was: a metaphysical yard-marker that

stained people's consciousness. Only yard-makers stood for something: where a team was on the field and how many yards they needed for a first down. The end zones stood for something: scoring touchdowns. Skin color didn't stand for anything – at least it shouldn't.

Sterling's number flashed up on the screen of Lamont's cell phone, which he opened and said, "Hey, Foil."

*Little, brother. Giving my number out to crazy white people, are you?*

"Like you've never brought any crazy white people into my life."

*Touché, little brother, touché.*

"So?"

*So, guess who's coming to dinner?*

Espresso casually dripped into miniature pitchers. Herbie Hancock laid down some manic riffs on the keyboard, Miles Davis' horn popping in and out behind them, quickening the beat. Track four of *Bitches Brew*: "John McLaughlin." Phenomenal album. Perhaps Miles' last masterpiece. Definitely not dinner music. The bottom of the pitcher of milk grew hot on Lamont's hand so he turned the steamer down to a purr and began raising the pitcher up and down, foam forming at the surface. A man at table four pushed his empty plate forward – where was the backwait? Servers needed two minutes of help a night, and Lamont's two minutes were now.

From behind him, Mallory sang, "Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got." She appeared to his left, her hands patting the counter to John McLaughlin's guitar. "Taking a break from all your worries sure would help a lot."

“I don’t want to go where everyone knows my name.”

“I know, I was being ironic.” She smiled, sincerely. “You look like you could use some help.”

“Now *you* want to help me?” He placed a large spoon above the pitcher’s spout and poured steamed milk into two glass coffee cups, foam building up behind the spoon. The flame of a candle vacillated behind the cappuccino machine, its sinuous light stretching out below a shadow and towards the light of the next candle, as if trying to hold hands. Mallory’s shoulders shifted up and down to the beat of the drums. Lamont thought: *Violence is like music, you can get caught in the beat without even realizing it.*

“Now I,” Mallory placed both hands over her heart, “want to help you. I’m putting my finger in the dam.”

Slowly, he dribbled espresso through the white foam where it settled above the steamed milk creating a thin, dark line that gradually expanded. What a thing for Mallory to remember. He asked, “What does that mean, exactly?”

“So now I have to prove myself?”

“I’m just asking.”

“It means,” she said, playfully rolling her eyes, “that I’m acting like you were earlier, but not yesterday earlier, today earlier. Only you’re acting like I was today earlier, which is problematic because I was acting like a stubborn little bitch.”

“Why would I do such a foolish thing?” He dolloped foam over the espresso’s black point of entry.

“Because you like me, and you want to be like me.”

“I do?”

“Uh-huh.” Mallory nodded. “But I’m over being flattered so quit acting like a stubborn little bitch and accept some help. It’s what the guy I fell for would do.”

“Maybe you fell for the wrong guy.”

“Not a chance. I picked him.”

“You did?”

“I did.” Mallory snapped her fingers. “Come on, let’s start our own Jes Grew.”

Lamont’s heart expanded. He set the cappuccinos on a tray next to a sugar caddy and said, “It would help me if you could pour some wine for the VIPs and then work your way through my disaster of a section. And speaking of disasters, one might be walking through the door any minute.”

“How exciting,” Mallory said, then sang, “Believe it or not, I’m walking on air.” She turned and headed towards the sea of tables drifting candlelight. Lamont set a white napkin on the tray and laid four spoons on top of it. He took five steps toward the computer by the bar, printed out a ticket and slid it into a check presenter. Herbie Hancock closed out John McLaughlin with a frenzied repetition, then a snare-symbol rift commenced “Miles Runs the Voodoo Down,” which was a gradual crescendo into chaos.

Mallory poured wine at the VIP table, cleared table four, and got the backwait to pre-bus table five. Two minutes of help. Mallory’s gesture was generous, gracefully stepping outside the cycle of violence and offering help. Offering grace. Grace that stabilized his spirit. Lamont sung to himself, *Believe it or not I’m walking on air, I never thought I could feel so free-eee* – he dropped the cappuccinos and dessert spoons; a step behind him, Kay dropped his desserts – *flying away on a wing and a prayer, who could it beee, believe it or not, it’s just meee*. If he could get a quick wine order from the deuce at

six he could fire table five and maybe be out of the weeds. The man at table six asked Lamont if they had any sweet reds. Trouble.

“No, sir,” Lamont said, “but I can offer you a fruit-forward red.”

“Hmmm.” The man tapped his chin, looking at the list. “You mean out of all these reds none of them are sweet? Are you sure?”

*No, I’m a complete idiot and know nothing about this list.* “I’m pretty sure. May I tell you about a few other options or answer any questions?”

“No,” the man said, “just give me a second.”

Lamont could see the weeds growing back around him. This man clearly wasn’t ready to order, clearly didn’t want any help, so why couldn’t he admit those things and let Lamont return in exactly three minutes? Miles ran that voodoo down on his horn, quickly climbing up a scale and pulling out one long, ghostly note. Lamont’s back was to the front door. In the cocktail area, Boyd was making a toast with Chase and the girls.

The man tapped his chin. His wife looked sympathetically at Lamont and said, “Just get the Merlot, honey, it’s what you always get.”

“What do you think of this?” the man asked, pointing at the Silver Oak Cabernet.

*Over-priced and over-oaked, but I can’t wait to sell you a bottle for a buck fifty.*

“It’s the quintessential cab. They don’t do much wrong.”

“Just one more second.”

The candles were melting down, wax filling the glass votives, the flames dancing to John McLaughlin’s bluesy guitar, the beat beginning to fade away. Chase laughed, loudly, leaning back his head. The man asked something else about Silver Oak, if it was



dry. Then Boyd dropped his Champagne flute and stared past Lamont like that boulder was rolling through the front windows, immense and unstoppable.

## Chapter Five

Boyd stood at one of the four tables in the front window of the restaurant talking to his parents and Emily, in awe of how smoothly the night was rolling along. The Rabbit was packed. The folk from *Food and Wine* had died over the rabbit and been resuscitated by the quail. Boyd's staff was on top of every detail and his restaurant was on the verge of becoming Elora's culinary juggernaut. The front door separated his parents' table from *Food and Wine's*, so Boyd kept glancing over, and that was when the cutest little blonde walked in. Every head in the restaurant turned to look at her. A second later a tall brunette stood beside her.

"Hey, Em," Boyd said, a hand on her back, "don't you think that little blonde at the front door is perfect for Chase?"

Emily glanced up from her soup. She was wearing a swishy khaki skirt and a thin red sweater, her hair pulled back. "He'll like that taller one."

"You think?"

"Boyd Michael," his mother said, "don't meddle." Her grey roots were showing, and Boyd wished she'd just let them grow out.

"Meddling," his father said, "where would he learn such a southern trait?"

"Maybe from the man who meddled away our life savings," Boyd's mother said, stabbing some red leaf lettuce.

Boyd's father peeled the skin off the quail. "Could be."

"Do you guys need another bottle of wine?" Boyd asked. "And Chase is in the dumps about being unemployed. What would cheer him up more than a cute blonde?"

“Perhaps a tall brunette.” Emily rested the round end of her spoon on the lip of the almost empty bowl. “That is his type.”

His mother studied the two women, who were now talking to the hostess. “Emily’s right, dear, the taller one is Chase’s type.”

“How would you know Chase’s type, mom?”

“I’ve seen the women he brings on Sundays,” his mother said. “Have you?”

“You guys are insane. Watch me work.”

“Oh , Cupid,” Emily said, dapping the last swatch of soup with a piece of bread, “this is going to end beautifully.”

Boyd strutted up and introduced himself to the women, and then escorted them to the bar area where he introduced them to Chase. All of the barstools and cocktails tables were taken so the four of them stood in front of the stool where Chase had been sitting. From behind the bar Will handed Boyd a bottle of Champagne which he popped open. He’d have a quick glass and get back to work.

The blonde, Lindsey, wore cute black pants that tightened around her calves and a teal, V-neck sweater, the sleeves pushed up her forearms. Her green eyes circled the restaurant, as if following the ledge of candles. “Who designed this room?”

Boyd poured Champagne into her glass. “That would be yours truly.”

“I like where you placed the sconces,” Lindsey said. “They’re just far enough up the wall to leave that thin shadow above the candlelight.”

“You’re the first person to notice that,” Boyd said, pouring for Nancy and Chase. “Don’t you love how the shadow kind of shimmies around the room?”

“I do.” Lindsey sipped her Champagne. “And I also love how the candlelight makes all that wine look like it’s floating. Did you think of that?”

“I did.” This girl, Lindsey, she looked familiar to Boyd, with her high cheekbones and small chin. And he loved the wispy sound of her voice. Sincerely, he asked, “I’m sorry, but have we met before?”

“Oh, please,” Lindsey’s not-as-cute friend, Nancy, said. She had on one of those mini-dresses and dark jeans. Looking at Chase, she asked, “Is he serious?”

“Nancy,” Lindsey scolded. She put her hand on Boyd’s arm. “Forgive her. We just moved here from Austin.”

Nancy rolled her brown eyes around Lindsey’s apology. “She’s the nice one. I may not suit the South.”

“You’ll suit just fine.” Chase clinked his flute against Nancy’s. “And Boyd is serious, though he usually leads with a line about his band opening for Coldplay.”

Boyd topped off all four glasses. “Easy, C-note.”

“We got that story at the door,” Nancy said.

“Hey,” Boyd said, “you did not. And I just bought you Champagne.”

Nancy smiled, her lipstick a dark red. “I know. I can’t help myself.”

“She can’t,” Lindsey said, matter-of-factly. “They ran us out of Austin.”

Chase and Boyd looked at her, measuring the comment. Lindsey leaned her head forward and laughed, her free hand covering her mouth. Boyd and Chase laughed next, Nancy joining them. Then they toasted Austin. Boyd felt like he could tell Lindsey anything, like he could spill his entire soul and say, *Here, this is the worst of me, do with it what you will*. He wanted to stand there all night and listen to these two, but from the

kitchen Shawn yelled for runners. Lamont looked captured by a customer and table four needed to be reset. Plus, the music had gotten weird.

“Well, ladies, I’ve got to get back to running this restaurant.”

“Uh, BT.” Chase’s face froze. He nodded toward the front door where Jeremy was standing with his date and Sterling Carroll. Jesus. Someone bumped Boyd from behind and knocked the glass out of his hand, Champagne splashing all over Lindsey’s gold sandals and the glass shattering. Everyone turned around. A cell phone rang.

Chase said, “Now the party’s started.”

From behind the bar Will said, “B-man” and tossed Boyd a couple of bar rags. Boyd didn’t know whether to wipe off Lindsey’s feet or hand her a rag, which he did, along with a clumsy apology.

“It’s okay.” Lindsey giggled. “It tickles.”

Jeremy was still standing at the front door and everyone in the restaurant was looking at Sterling and since Boyd had no idea what to do he dropped down to the floor, wiped up the Champagne, and started picking up the broken glass. Lindsey’s toenails were dark pink and her gold sandals had a short heel. The buzz of conversation returned to the restaurant. The music took a bizarre turn. Shit. Boyd was the general manager of The Swimming Rabbit. He ran the office, ran the food, did the numbers, set up the wine list, bussed tables and polished stemware. He was the backbone of the restaurant. If he said it was a bad idea to bring Sterling in, then it was a bad idea. It wasn’t about race, it was about space. The space Boyd had gutted and rebuilt with his own two hands. He would walk up to Sterling and Jeremy, politely ask them to step outside, and tell Sterling to come back on Friday when they would actually be prepared to have the fundraiser.

Boyd stuck a pinky against the floor – a tiny shard of glass sticking to his skin – and thought, *I am completely fucked.*

“I think you got it all,” Lindsey said, squatting down in front of him. She pushed some blonde hair behind her ear. Boyd held the broken glass in one hand, a few edges picking at his skin. The collar of Lindsey’s teal sweater was thick, the neck low. Around them, people’s legs were like trees, the flickering candles like stars.

Boyd dropped the rag. “Have you ever been in a situation where you had absolutely no idea what to do?”

“You just spilled some Champagne.”

“That’s not really the problem.”

“I figured.” She smiled and put out her hand with the white rag he’d given her on top of it, like a magician about to make something appear. “Put the glass here.”

Boyd thought, *I am going to marry this girl*, and then did as instructed, carefully, piece by piece. It was official, God knew the Rabbit was going to get spanked and sent Boyd an angel. Chase and Nancy looked down at them, Chase’s hand down by his stomach pointing toward the door. Boyd put the last piece of glass in Lindsey’s hand.

“I have been in that situation,” she said, tying the corners of the rag in a knot around the glass. “And I always try to be nice.”

“Be nice?” Boyd was expecting more useful advice from a messenger of God.

Lindsey nodded. One of her front teeth was a tad crooked, which Boyd found adorable. “For some reason, people aren’t expecting that.”

“They aren’t?”

“Nope. And it’s always fun to do what people aren’t expecting.” Her small shoulders rose and fell. “Unless you have a better idea.”

“Actually, I don’t.”

“Well, then. It’s settled.”

“Yes,” Boyd said, feeling like they were talking about themselves, “it’s settled.”

So Boyd was nice. Sweet as cotton fucking candy. He complimented the attire of Jeremy’s beau even though it was gaudy and out of season. He praised Jeremy for bringing in Sterling even though it was vindictive and petty. He thanked Sterling for coming in even though it was like putting the Rabbit’s head in a guillotine. He pacified Shawn with a couple of Percocet he was saving for an emergency – since this seemed like one – and charmed the *Food and Wine* people who appeared to have no idea that Sterling probably broke people’s legs for a living.

The night was an exhaustive blur, and by the end of it Boyd felt like a two-by-four that had been pushed through a shredder. It was impossible to tell what kind of damage Sterling had done or how idiotic the Rabbit had looked, telling people Sterling wasn’t available only to have him show up. Boyd only wanted the simple pleasure of a drink with his friends at the Pyramid – where Chase happened to have taken Lindsey and Nancy. The staff looked like they’d been running wind sprints so Boyd helped them break down the dining room and took their checkouts at the bar. No one could get out of there fast enough.

Boyd locked the front door and turned out the dining room lights. He met Pax in the kitchen, who had changed into a black T-shirt. He had a dip in and a baseball hat on. Boyd said, “I’ve just got to run these checkouts upstairs.”

“Don’t go up there,” Pax said.

“Why not?”

“Shawn’s doing some Zen thing with shrimp. It’s weird.”

“Doesn’t he want to have a beer? He put out a killer meal tonight.”

“I don’t know what he wants.” Pax leaned over and spit in the sink. “I was like a cheerleader back there tonight, trying to – ” Pax stopped. The outside stairs creaked from footsteps and then Shawn walked in the back door. “There’s the man,” Pax said.

Brown rings of sweat stained the armpits of Shawn’s white T-shirt. His face looked like a fishbowl filled to the top with water, his eyes darting between Boyd and Pax. He walked past them and into the dining room. Pax mocked a spastic cheer, as if he had pom-poms. Boyd yelled, “Seriously, bro, *Food and Wine* raved. How about a celebration beer at the Pyramid?”

Shawn returned with a bottle of Bollinger and walked right past them and out the back door. The stairs creaked and the upstairs door opened and closed.

“Now, I ask you,” Pax said, “was that Shawn or the ghost of Izzy Fountain?”

Boyd shoved the checkouts into his back pocket. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Only Emily was waiting in the back parking lot, leaning against her white Accord with her arms crossed.

“Wonder if she wants to go to the Pyramid,” Pax said under his breath, as they walked down the four metal steps. The swishy skirt hung past her knees and some sequins on the hem caught the motion light above the back door. Emily uncrossed her arms. Her eyes were red, like they got when she drank too much. Boyd knew he was not going to step foot in the Pyramid tonight.



## Chapter Six

Shawn took a shrimp from the black tub of ice water and popped off the head. It was past eleven and he was in the prep room. He had not believed in curses, their premise reserved for people who continually sang the blues about their bad luck and would not will themselves out of their cycle of self-loathing. But now Shawn realized the fiscal skeletons this building left behind could not be coincidence or chance; owners and chefs and servers had come to battle and fought the good fight only to lose their shirts and have nothing left to wave as a white flag. A curse was the only explanation. The Rabbit was no different than the nine restaurants that had come before, all at the mercy of a power and history intent on repeating itself.

With his thumb and forefinger Shawn pulled away the shrimp's tiny legs then peeled the shell from the body and snapped off the tail. It gave easily, the tail, briefly bending like rubber. He made a small incision down the back, exposed the vein, then pulled out the intestine with the tip of his knife and flipped it into the trash can to his right. He could easily order shrimp that were already deveined but this was part of his craft. Painters did not let other people mix their colors.

Shawn had come through in the clutch tonight. With the lights on and the crowd roaring he had put the Swimming Rabbit on his back and carried them into the end zone by creating an amazing meal amidst the chaos of Boyd's continuous blunders. His head should be in the clouds right now, and even though it wasn't, that didn't mean he couldn't celebrate with a bottle of Bollinger rose Champagne and a groundbreaking batch of gumbo using sake as a base. Shrimp floated in the black tub of ice water, bumping into

one another, pushing the smaller bodies under. Kay and Mallory said no one thought twice about Sterling coming in; Boyd said everyone was instantly talking about it. Either way they'd again looked like amateurs, again. Boyd had told everyone the fundraiser was postponed until Friday because Sterling wasn't available and yet, there was Sterling, in the flesh. Were they having the fundraiser after all? Jeremy had brought Sterling but none of the football paraphernalia. Magnums of wine were at Shawn's house; gift certificates donated by other stores were at Boyd's. It was a cluster-fuck.

Shawn pulled the bottle of Bollinger from the bucket and refilled his glass, pink foam rising to the top before settling. Outside, someone screamed. With the dull side of his knife Shawn scraped shells into the trashcan and then walked to the back door and looked out the small window. Boyd and Emily were standing by the tall, blue recycling bins. Both of Boyd's hands were out, the breath of his explanation evaporating. Emily pointed at him. Boyd shook his head, still explaining. Explaining and explaining. Emily pointed at him, harder, the force of her accusation causing Boyd to turn and kick over a recycling bin – bottles and cans spilling out – then begin punching it before Emily finally pulled him off, her long skirt spinning out as she took a few steps back.

Shawn laughed. His hand hurt from the long night and he considered a last, emergency pack of Percocet that was hidden downstairs on the line. Was Boyd really going to cut him off? Shawn could certainly live without the Percocet, but he didn't know if he could cook without them. His cell phone started rattling around the prep table. He had feared his act of defiance was going unnoticed but, finally, here was the call he'd been expecting from his wife – except it was Jeremy.

*This mess is all Boyd's fault.*

“You bringing Sterling in is Boyd’s fault?”

*I’m so tired of people getting smart with me.*

“I’m the dumbest of the bunch.”

*I’ve got interested buyers so you better smarten up and pick a side.*

“I thought we were all on the same – ”

Jeremy had hung up. Shawn closed his phone and gave the black tub a push, ice water sloshing back and forth, the bodies of four-dozen shrimp knocking into one another. Interested buyers? Jeremy was probably talking out of his ass. Shawn walked back to the window but Emily’s white Accord was speeding away. The lights of Boyd’s Jeep turned on and he gave chase, his tires spinning in place before the tread took hold. Shawn walked back to the table and pulled another shrimp from the bucket. Pop the head, pull the legs, peel the shell, snap the tail and pluck the intestines. Twenty shrimp later his cell phone rattled again, *Home* flashing up on the screen.

“Hi, honey.”

*Are you out drinking?*

“I’m still at work, cleaning shrimp.”

*Tristan Patrick won’t go to sleep and I’m exhausted. Is work more important than your family?*

There it was, the rare slip from Amber, a grapefruit of a pitch Shawn could slam into the stands. “It seems to be for you.”

*What’s that supposed to mean?*

“Did you get a good look at the Winston Place?” He picked up the champagne flute and toasted his courage – but Amber was laughing. A soft cackle that quickly crescendoed. “What’s so funny?”

*That it took you two days to bring this up. We both have careers to maintain.*

“Yeah, but I don’t manipulate you and your family to succeed in mine.” He’d been practicing that line, and was rather proud of the delivery.

*You seem to be manipulating me right now – God, this is the exact same fight we had the night you pushed me.*

“Wait – what? I never pushed you.”

The line was quiet. Tiny bubbles rose from the bottom of the champagne flute and popped at the surface. Shells and tails filled the bottom of the trash can; intestines stuck to the side of the black lining. Amber said, *Yes, Shawn, you did. We had a fight and then you cut your hand and then you pushed me and we’ve never talked about it.*

Shawn heard himself scream: “Shut up! That’s not true!”

*It is true* – he dropped the phone as if it were a live rat. Pushed her? A current of electricity ran from the bottom of his palm to the top of his pinky. He massaged his hand then downed the champagne then walked out the back door where the sounds of Main Street were crashing over the building and then chasing into the dark and quiet kitchen where he opened a cooler where he had stashed his very last packet of Percocet. But it wasn’t there. He dropped to his knees and began pulling out clear containers of mint and berries that were sealed shut with saran wrap. He pulled out crème brûlees and apple crisps and some cherry coulis spilled on the floor and soon the cooler was empty and deserts and sauces and cheeses were spread around him on the floor and there was no

Percocet. It was rolling right towards him, the fight, gaining momentum so Shawn walked into the dining room and behind the bar where he filled a glass with bourbon that burned his throat and warmed his insides but could not stop the force of that memory that was about to take him under foot.

They were naked and post-coital on the couch – heads at opposite ends – drinking a bottle of '92 Barolo as if their sex life should be discussed or admired. The walls in Amber's living room were a dark red; all of the trim and the leather couch were white. Shawn's jeans and T-shirt were on the floor by Amber's black skirt that Shawn had raised up with one hand as they kissed, standing. Shawn had thought – kissing her, raising up her skirt – that he wanted to bend her over an arm of the couch with that skirt pushed over her bare ass and give it a slap but, as always, he dropped to his knees and gently laid her back against the white leather of the couch where he could easily nuzzle his face between her legs. Now, with their heads at opposite ends and his hand moving up and down her smooth calf, with the one end of the green and red plaid blanket covering her chest and the other sneaking over his stomach, Shawn wondered why he had not had the courage to do as he desired. It was all so middle-class, their sex, the bottle of Barolo sitting on top of the glass coffee table. Magazines fanned across the coffee table next to a yellow plate with the remains of a flourless chocolate torte.

Shawn was still working as Mitch's sous. He had made them a four-course meal using tilapia he'd brought from EP. They drank a bottle of Chablis with the fish and moved to the Barolo with dessert. After the sex, and after Shawn had poured them a second glass, Amber had dangled her familiar complaint about not getting to see him

enough. He slid his left hand down her calf, wiggled one of her toes, and said, “If Mitch would stay later, I could leave earlier.”

“Mitch has a wife at home,” she countered.

“Chris Campbell has a wife at home.”

“And he’s a Nazi. There’s that little bell he rings,” she said, ringing an imaginary bell, the half moon of her French-manicured nails tapping the air. “What is that?”

“It’s the respect of the staff. You of all people should understand that.”

“I don’t need a little bell to get respect. How archaically southern.”

Shawn reached across his body with his right hand and picked up his glass of Barolo. The wine was dark and dirty inside the glass. “It just pisses me off, that I work more hours than Mitch and it’s his restaurant.”

“Then go home,” Amber said, reaching for her glass. “Touc says people are always telling you to go home.”

“Touc is a coke head, why are you listening to him?”

“I thought he was your friend.”

“Mitch is my friend.”

“Have you told your friend that his brother’s affinity for nose candy is putting them in the red?” She shrugged, and gave her wine a swirl. When she looked like this – beautiful and elegant, her movements exquisitely sensual – Shawn thought, *What in the world is she doing with me?*

Shawn mumbled, “That’s not my place.”

“Sooo, working more hours against your friend’s wishes is your responsibility but being honest with him isn’t?” She smiled at him over the glass, smugly, then tapped the air with her fingers. “That’s a safe little place you’ve put yourself in.”

Shawn closed his eyes and breathed in the Barolo: earth, tar, tobacco, cherries. “The point is, Mitch would rather be at home.”

“And when we’re married I certainly hope you’d rather be at home.”

They were at that point, talking about marriage as if it were next Memorial Day, a long weekend they could spend at the beach, a long life they could spend married. There was no ring or date. She had once brought it up and Shawn had not objected, or had not thought to object – why would he? Then Amber was bringing it up more frequently, Shawn’s will a puree being reduced over low heat, Shawn thinking there was no reason for them not to get married – except for this: she did not understand. It wasn’t just his art, it was what made him him, and was the only thing he was good at; when she made light of this goodness, it provoked something feral inside of him.

“It would be my kitchen,” Shawn said, shifting his hips. “It’s the same thing as you not trusting your peons to close deals for you.”

“Riiiiiight. Except people live in a house and spend thirty years paying it off, as opposed to a meal they finish in an hour and put on a credit card.”

“Riiiiiight. Except I create those meals and all you do is sell the house. I mean, it’s not like you build them.” Were they really arguing about this? Shawn felt as if Amber was the Pied Piper and he was following along against his will.

“I sell peace of mind, Shawn, I sell the future.”

“That should go on a billboard.”

In one graceful movement, like a ballerina, Amber stood up and took the blanket with her, leaving Shawn naked on the couch. She held the blanket over her chest with her left hand, the fabric clenched in her fist, her right hand swirling the Barolo without missing a beat, the wine rising and falling, leaving a thin, red line around the glass that the wine swallowed when it circled back around. “While your food is amazing,” she said, “it will never support us. It goes from a plate to someone’s stomach then comes out their ass as shit. That’s the end result. Shit. It’s a mere moment in their lives while I sell an entire lifetime, sell something they can borrow against and raise a family in.”

“Yeah, except I make those moments because I’m talented and you sell those houses because you’re hot.”

Her wine slowed to a stop, the long thick legs sliding down the side of the glass. She took one step forward and hurled the wine at him, the glass still in her hand, Shawn’s face and chest and the couch suddenly speckled in red. His tongue circled his lips, tasting the wine, then he sat up and swung his feet to the floor and set his glass of wine back on the coffee table. “Well this appears to be over. I’ll be getting my *shit* and getting out.”

“Jesus,” she said, disappointed, “get a backbone.” Then she reached back and threw the wine glass. Shawn fell back against the couch and the glass turned over twice in the air then bounced off a cushion and shattered on the hardwood floor. When Shawn put down his hand to balance himself and stand up a piece of glass sliced his palm and pain shot down his arm. He grabbed his T-shirt off the floor and wrapped it around his bloody hand.

“Art,” she laughed, “please.”



It all coalesced to possess him – her laughter, the pain, her attack on his goodness – and he put his good hand under the brass frame of the coffee table and flipped it over. Wine and magazines spilled across the floor. The glass top of the table shattered. Amber was either screaming or laughing but he couldn't understand any of it, her laughing or screaming, her seeming crazy and Shawn feeling that same crazy and his hand throbbing and blood blossoming through the white T-shirt wrapped around his hand and he felt outside of his naked body as he walked toward Amber and ripped the blanket away from her. He was hot and angry and now and again and more than ever he wanted to bend her over an arm of the couch and ram his cock inside of her, hard. Fuck her, hard. Slap her ass so hard he'd leave the red print of his palm on her white skin. His good hand was on her shoulder and blood was dribbling down his other arm and onto the floor and he could not move, wanting to kiss her about to kiss her when she slapped him across the face. So he pushed her. Hard. So hard that she hit the wall two feet back and fell to the floor.

## Chapter Seven

It was odd for Lamont to witness Sterling's return to the restaurant, his presence scattering anxiety everywhere. Boyd dropped his Champagne. Shawn yelled at the staff. The *Food and Wine* people were almost finished and Lamont thought the Rabbit might swim through the current – until it was time for the picture. First the three owners in front of the glass windows, the light of the candles behind them, their smiles failing to construct a façade of friendship or disguise the animosity that had materialized between them. Then Jeremy demanded a picture with Sterling. Politely, Sterling declined. Jeremy demanded again. Sterling glanced at Lamont who glanced at Boyd who nodded, like a guy standing in front of a firing squad, and Sterling stepped into the picture.

An hour after the shift, at the Pyramid, Lamont could still feel the night's anxiety circling the table like the white ball on a roulette wheel, quickly chipping off the rims of slots in search of a place to land. From Lamont to Mallory to Celia to Will to Pax, who had just sat down with a tray of Prairie Fires, the mist of Tabasco floating in tequila. Everyone was in work clothes except Celia, who'd eaten at the Rabbit and wore a black cocktail dress and half the usual bracelets. Chase stood at the bar, talking to the two girls he'd met at the Rabbit. Mallory asked Pax where Boyd was.

"Emily was waiting outside," Pax said, passing out the shots, "so I bolted."

"Speaking of Emily," Lamont said, pointing towards Chase, "does anyone else think that young woman Chase is talking to looks exactly like her?" It was his first move to deflect the attention away from himself and his brother; instinctual and harmless.

"Carbon copy," Will said, taking a swig of his Sierra Nevada.

"I like her cigarette pants," Mallory added.

“I like the other girl’s tunic,” Celia said, fluttering her fingers at Chase.

Lamont sipped on his third bourbon. The Pyramid’s fire blazed. Chase walked the two girls to the door, punching numbers into his phone. He waved goodbye then made his way over to the table and took a chair between Celia and Will.

“Get digits?” Will asked.

“Of course not,” Celia said, “everyone knows he can’t close.”

“That’s because Boyd and I took your class on how to get out of a bad relationship,” Chase said, “and we want our money back.”

Celia scowled. “I am in complete control of my own destiny.”

“That’s impossible,” Lamont offered, “destiny, by definition, is not something that can be controlled.”

Celia turned to Mallory. “He does have a few brat-like qualities.”

“He’s got an important meeting tomorrow.” Mallory patted his forearm. “And feels like tonight was his fault.”

“I fail to see the night’s major malfunction,” Chase said, “except that everyone at the table has a shot except me.”

“We were waiting.” Pax handed Chase a shot. “Then Lamont’s going to explain everything.” Pax raised his shot in the air. “Here’s to not being Boyd right now.”

“To not being Boyd,” the table repeated.

Lamont took his shot, thinking, *I will not feed my brother to the crowd*. It felt like they were asking him to do a striptease, to not only perform but reveal. The Prairie Fire seared his senses. He swore, after, that the glasses landed on the table in a perfect rhythmic order, one-by-one, from Pax to Will to Chase to Celia to Mallory to Lamont, a

force moving towards him and demanding answers, that white ball finally rolling to a stop and everyone looking at him. Waiting.

Mallory said, “I don’t think he wants to talk about it.”

Chase said, “We’re one dysfunctional family.”

Celia lowered her voice. “Come on, Lamont.”

Pax knocked his bottle against the table. “Come clean, bigg’n.”

Lamont pulled out his wallet and dropped a twenty on the table. “Let’s bet customers.”

Mallory’s hand tightened around his forearm. Pax took off his baseball hat and ran a hand over his shaved head. Chase let out a long whistle, the pitch high then low. Celia said, “You can’t start with a twenty.”

“You want to see what I’m holding?” Lamont asked.

Will joined first, tentatively dropping a twenty. Chase and Celia followed, then Mallory. Even Pax threw in, unheard of for the back of the house. Lamont knew he would regret this in the morning but he could not stop himself, unable to get the words out fast enough so everyone would be clear about two things: tonight was not his fault and his brother was not a bad person. Wasn’t that what all human dialogue was about? Explaining away your sins so the mob would move on to someone else?

“I waited on this guy tonight,” Lamont said, leaning forward, “and you should have seen him play football in college. Insane speed and instincts. When he tackled people, he hurt them, he tackled through them. He was the sixth pick in the draft. Number six – can you imagine? Being so good at something that only five people are

seen as better? Then he blew out his Achilles. His rehab went poorly. He started betting, started losing, and quietly got kicked out of the league.”

Pax said, “Jesus.”

Lamont laughed. “Here’s the best part, the tragic irony if you will, he always bet on the Seahawks because they were his team, his family, and he lost every bet. He didn’t have his playbook, wasn’t going to meetings, and the Seahawks didn’t cover the spread all year. He lost everything betting on his own team.”

The fire was dying down, small flames rising off a lone, charred log. A pile of twenties waited for Lamont in the center of the table and he suddenly understood why Judas had hung himself.

The next morning, at seven forty-five, Lamont sat on the cold linoleum floor outside of Dr. Sponhiem’s office. His knees were up in the air, his paper on Nietzsche resting against his thighs. The hallway was empty. The small black letters on the white page seemed to tumble into one another, the first pebbles of an avalanche; perhaps the physical pain of his hangover trumped the psychological angst of being cast out of the department. He removed the plastic lid from a tall cup of coffee.

Lamont had not behaved well last night, and he knew this was because he had not been reading the Bible; his spirit lacked the stillness and repetition of prayer and his life lacked its proper rhythm. He was vulnerable. Such a strange paradox: life improved with repetition, everything improved with repetition, but once Lamont lost that beat not only was the rhythm difficult to retain, but became more difficult with each passing day, pride hardening around his spirit. Pride. Kierkegaard equated it to cowardliness.

The door at the far end of the hallway swung open and Lamont's heart tripped, clumsily, and then a cold breeze blew down the hall and a male undergrad schlepped past. Lamont sipped his coffee. It seemed fitting that the department should cast him out on this day, that he should suffer the historical and anthropological effects of being a Christian seven hours after he had failed entirely at imitating Christ. The double doors down the hall opened again and Dr. Sponhiem's small figure appeared. He took short steps towards Lamont, the rubber soles of his white tennis shoes squeaking against the floor. Lamont slid his paper back into his satchel, capped his coffee, and stood up.

"Good morning, Mister Carroll," Dr. Sponhiem said, his voice like a needle on vinyl. A short man, he wore black pants, a brown sweater, and a wool hat. Thin-rimmed spectacles were perched on the bridge of his nose. "Punctual as always, I see."

"Yes, sir."

"Early bird gets the worm kind of thing?" Dr. Sponhiem pushed open the door and flipped on the lights. Bookshelves lined the walls of the long rectangular room, his desk at the far end beneath the only window. A thin rug ran from his desk to the door, two small couches facing each other on either side of the rug; Dr. Sponhiem shed his coat and hat – revealing a thin rim of white hair – and sat on the couch to the left.

"I think it's more of an ontological issue," Lamont said, taking the opposite couch, "I don't like to *be* late."

"Right, right." Dr. Sponhiem opened his briefcase and began searching through papers. "Thus a defense against someone who is late, and therefore . . ." He looked up, briefly, leaving the question open, then returned to his briefcase.

“Irresponsible,” Lamont said, confused, “but this is not to say that everyone who is late is irresponsible.”

“Of course not, this is simply how you feel. Ah, here it is.” Dr. Sponhiem pulled Lamont’s paper from his briefcase and flipped through it. “Hence a defense against the anxiety of being perceived as someone who is irresponsible creates a repetitious pattern of behavior, which in your case is always being early.” He held up the paper.

“According to something quite provocative I recently read.”

Though Lamont had been afraid to write on his preferred topic, his fear had not kept him from footnoting the idea, which Dr. Harold Sponhiem, endowed chair of the philosophy department, recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, past president of American Philosophical Association, king of the universe, had not only quoted, but called provocative. “Yes, sir, I suppose it is.”

“And Nietzsche would say what of this?”

“That it was scientific, or what the will-to-power must overcome.”

“And according to your three-page footnote, which,” Dr. Sponhiem said, flipping a couple of pages, “Kierkegaard would laud but my old eyes did not, I take it you disagree with our German friend.”

Lamont shifted his weight. “With all due respect to Mr. Nietzsche . . .”

“Of course, Mister Carroll,” Dr. Sponhiem said, sarcastically, “you’re often too respectful if you don’t mind me saying so, and I know you don’t mind.”

Lamont felt as if he’d been dropped in the middle of the ocean; he picked up his cup of coffee from the floor as if it might inflate. “I would disagree. Though this

specific example of punctuality is a simplistic one, I believe my anxiety and the related defense mechanisms bring about this return.”

“So it is not willed? You do not choose to?”

“I cannot choose otherwise. I cannot *not* be punctual.”

“Now that’s interesting, isn’t it? So, according to our working thesis, one can be driven by their defenses to negative repetitions of behavior as well?”

“Most certainly. I’d say harmful, even – and often.”

“So it’s human nature then, your variation on the eternal return, even towards behavior that not only will harm a person, but has harmed them in the past?”

“I hadn’t considered that, but I suppose so.”

“And the reason you handed this in?” With a flick of his wrist, Dr. Sponhiem tossed the paper into air and it landed on the floor between them, the pages forming a small tent, the point of the staple holding them together. “A boring reiteration of Nietzsche through Kauffman via Heidegger via some old fool named Sponhiem – as if I don’t know what *he* thinks – instead of this fascinating and perhaps brilliant idea in your three-page footnote, was because?”

Lamont swallowed. “Of your previous observation of me not minding?”

“Which is to say?”

“I’m a cowardly man, Dr. Sponhiem.” Lamont understood now: Dr. Sponhiem had been setting him up, using Lamont’s own argument to illustrate why they were taking away his funding. After last night and today Lamont understood that his essence was not that of blackness or Christianity, but of cowardliness.



Dr. Sponhiem leaned back, crossing his right leg on top of his left. His face reminded Lamont of a metronome, his mind clicking back and forth, reasoning, always reasoning. Dr. Sponhiem said, “Have you thought of a topic for your dissertation?”

“I have not,” Lamont lied.

“I think you should explore this one.”

“You do?”

“Yes, and I would like be your chair.”

“You would?”

Dr. Sponhiem smiled, kindly but with a trace of sadness. “You don’t think much of your intelligence, do you Mister Carroll?”

“I’m not generally the kind of person good things happen to.”

“You think good things simply happen to people?”

“No, sir, I most certainly don’t, although they can, I’m just – forgive me if I seem ungrateful or indifferent, Dr. Sponhiem, I thought something else was going to happen here and I’m beyond flattered and would love the opportunity to work with you.”

“What did you think was going to happen?”

“I thought you were going to take away my funding.”

Dr. Sponhiem let out a surprise chirp of laughter. “We recruit students we like, Mister Carroll, and we prefer these students succeed. It works better all around.”

“I realize that, now.”

“Good, it’s settled then.” He slapped his knees with his hands. “Though I do have one request.”

“Of course,” Lamont said, “anything.”

“You’ll have to quit this restaurant job of yours. We offer generous stipends and, as I’m sure you know, I don’t work with many students any longer. The ones I do work with, generally graduate with job offers.”

## Fourth Course: Entrees

### Chapter One

Boyd woke with Emily's head heavy on his chest, rising and falling with his breath. 6:36. That meat grinder had hollowed out his insides. He remembered the gnawing from Vine, remembered it waking him every day. He had taken steps this time. Cognizant of his previous mistakes, he had surrounded himself with friends. Was friendship what jammed the gears? Got caught in the cogs of desire, and was immediately amputated with control at stake? Emily rolled from her stomach to her side. The blue comforter crept up Boyd's waist like the tide.

In theory, he could have gone to the Pyramid last night. Emily had even said to him – after the shift, and after he had kicked over the recycling bin – “Just leave me alone.” In practice he would suffer for that: he could see her at home, crying, pouring Stoli-Raz over ice. So he followed her, knowing he had to fix her hurt feelings. He would rather be miserable than the guy who let his drunk girlfriend drive home and cry herself to sleep and he knew that this choice made him a coward: no matter how badly he wanted her to drive away, and no matter how many times she did, he kept following her.

It had been the same on Sunday: after Jeremy's temper tantrum Boyd suddenly felt like he *had* to see Emily. Besides, while Shawn was in Bamberg and Jeremy was in Charleston someone had to be thinking about Jasmine, who'd ended up in the hospital. She'd scored some meth and was found shivering and stoned in front of her apartment.

Boyd didn't expect her to be so young. He knew she was thirteen, but he didn't know she was *thirteen*. When Boyd was thirteen he was chasing fly balls and baseball cards, and Jasmine was chasing down meth? She had a sweet, pudgy face. An IV was

hooked up to her hand and a tube stuck in her side. The electronic lines of two heartbeats zigzagged across the screen; Boyd asked if one was the baby's.

"It is," Emily said.

Boyd stood at the foot of the bed. Emily sat to his right, her chair pointed away from him and toward Jasmine. He asked, "Is the state paying for all of this?"

Emily let out that loud, affected laugh, tempering its volume. "It's unlikely."

"You can't afford it, can you?"

"Not out of pocket, of course not. It's a mess. She wasn't officially staying with me even though she was." Boyd started to say something but just shook his head, which Emily must've intuited, saying, "If you want me to say that you were right, that I should've let her fall into the system, I won't do that. I *can't* do that."

The two heartbeats were different colors, the pink line zigzagging faster than the blue. Boyd said, "I know you can't, Em, I really do."

"You do?" Emily asked, surprised. "Since when?"

"Since always. I love how passionate you are, how you want to save everyone. I mean, it hurts you sometimes, but it's who you are. You can't help who you are."

Emily turned toward Boyd. "It makes me terribly difficult, I know."

"I just wish you'd follow the rules sometimes."

"Breaking them is what always gets us back together."

Boyd laughed. "Like I said."

"Oh, Boyd, aren't we the biggest mess?"

Boyd was a regular Molly Maid service, and now Jeremy had made a mess of the Rabbit. Jeremy had changed. When Boyd first met him he'd moved back from New

York and seemed to not only hate his money, but where it came from. Now it was all he could think about. He'd become a vampire who wanted to suck the Rabbit dry. Become an unclean spirit that needed to be drowned. Of course, since God had that bang-up sense of humor Jeremy also had the most shares and Boyd couldn't buy him out without Shawn. He had to get Shawn.

He went home and chased Prilosec with Mylanta. Showered. Felt better, but the grimy film of the night remained. At seven-thirty he arrived at the Rabbit where Shawn had left his own mess upstairs. A trashcan filled with shrimp shells. Remains of red bells and onions. An empty bottle of Bollinger floated in a wine bucket. Artists. They really did expect everyone to clean up after them.

The smell of shrimp trailed Boyd into the office, trapped by the ceiling slanted at a forty-five degree angle. Shawn's desk was closest to the door, its top was a cemetery of scrap paper: hand-written recipes; articles ripped out of Wine Spectator; an article Boyd had printed out on '92 Barolo as a joke; receipts Shawn had yet to file away. The two desks made an L, Boyd's back against the slanted ceiling and his desk neatly organized.

He knocked out payroll. Entered last night's numbers and wrote checks for the servers. Ordered a keg of Chimay. Ordered espresso and coffee beans. Paid the electricity bill. Put the deposits together from last night and Saturday. He was looking over the contract when Shawn walked in around nine, carrying Tristan Patrick in a traveling bassinette that he set down on top of his desk, crunching some papers.

“Hey!” Boyd exclaimed, walking around his desk. “Look who came in to help out!” Tristan had a yellow hat pulled down to his big brown eyes and his cubby cheeks worked a pacifier. Boyd unbuckled the baby and lifted him from the bassinette.

“Amber had some stuff to do at the office, probably about the Wintson place.”

“Remember me? Remember uncle Boyd?” Boyd asked, raising the pitch of his voice. Then to Shawn, “Did you ask her about that?”

“What’s the point?” Shawn leaned against the front of his desk, his small eyes barely open. “Did you see that someone knocked over the recycling bin last night?”

“That was me. Got in a fight with Emily and took it out on the bin.” With his free hand, he showed Shawn his scratched knuckles. “I’ll have the dishwasher clean it up when he gets in.” Boyd raised Tristan in the air, his pinkies under Tristan’s tiny armpits. “And the point is communication, bro, all successful relationships are built on communication, which I think is becoming a lost art in the media age.”

“You know this from all your successful relationships?”

“I know this from all my failed relationships.” Boyd brought Tristan closer to his face and said, “Your daddy doesn’t like to talk about his scary-wary feelings.”

Shawn’s cheeks puffed in and out. “Have you talked to Jeremy? Started the apology process?”

“My whole life is apologizing to Jeremy.” Boyd cradled Tristan against his chest and mustered up a solemn look. “We need to be thinking of ways to buy him out.”

Shawn ran a hand over his short stubble that looked a few days away from a full beard. “You should’ve gotten him to that interview.”

“Should I have helicoptered him in when they changed the time?”

“You should’ve done something.”

“You like blaming me for things.”

“You like fucking them up.”

“You like drinking three-hundred-dollar bottles of Champagne.”

“I was working until three.”

“Hundred bucks an hour, that’s some wage.”

Shawn walked out of the office. Over his shoulder, he said, “Maybe if you apologize to Jeremy he won’t sell his shares.”

“What?” Boyd asked, following with Tristan. “Did he say something to you?”

Shawn stopped in front of the white board by the door and picked up a red marker, his back still to Boyd. “No, he’s just so unpredictable.”

Tristan reached out a tiny hand, as if waving, his small mouth still working the pacifier. Shawn’s shoulders were tense, the red tip of the marker against the board. In loopy letters he wrote: *sizzle trays, latex gloves, propane for torch.*

“Trust me,” Boyd said, “no one knows better than I do how unpredictable Jeremy is, I’m the one who saw him walk in with Sterling last night while I was bussing a table. We should be basking in the glow of *Food and Wine* right now and setting up the fundraiser for Friday and instead it’s going to be a day of damage control.”

“What damage?”

“The damage of us looking like idiots who can’t throw a fundraiser. The damage of that picture they took of us with Sterling last night when we said he wasn’t available, and the damage of everyone starting to associate us with a drug dealer.”

“I thought you said he had gambling problems.”

“Same difference. Look, if last night proves anything it’s that you and I are the only ones who care if this place stays open. It pains me to say this bro, but something has happened to Jeremy. It’s you and me against him.”

Shawn turned around, the tip of his index finger red. “I just want to cook.”

“Do you want a restaurant to cook *in*, or is your kitchen at home okay?”

Finally, Shawn smiled. “I’d prefer a restaurant.”

“That’s my man,” Boyd said, and handed Shawn his son. “I’m going to make the drop. Don’t forget we’re interviewing Dana at eleven.”

Boyd zipped up his coat and walked out the front door, charging into the wind. He was back at his best now, back at what he was born to do: talk people into things. It was how he helped people. He tried Jeremy so he could talk him off the ledge but got voicemail. He tried Chase to get Lindsey’s number and got voicemail. He tried Gail from *Food and Wine* and got voicemail but left a message: *Hello, sweet Gail, I just wanted to thank y’all again for coming in; it was beyond an honor. Anyway, I was hoping you wouldn’t use that picture with Sterling Carroll. His little brother, Lamont, waited on you last night and I think he’s always felt a little overshadowed by his brother. As I told you, we’re family owned and family driven so we want to keep our staff and food front and center. Please let me know if there’s anything else I can do, and as we like to say in the South, y’all come back now, ya hear?*

A block past Longstreet Avenue Boyd walked through the glass doors of the bank, made the deposit, then slipped down a hallway and stuck his head into Oliver’s office. Oliver stood behind his desk, a piece of paper in each hand. He was a shorter



man with a deep southern drawl. His silver hair was parted to the side and his eyes shifted back and forth between two pieces of paper that conspired to hide his blue tie. Oliver looked up from his papers long enough to say, "Mister Tennor, please come in."

"Sorry to barge in without an appointment."

"No such thing in this town," Oliver said, his eyes still darting back and forth.

"Give me just a minute, if you would."

Boyd dropped into a leather chair. A capped jar of Hershey's kisses stood near the front edge of Oliver's desk. Oliver was old school Elora, and had handled the Tennors' finances since Boyd could remember, had handled Boyd's split with Vine and even told Boyd's father not to invest in "Southern Charm," claiming it was all a façade about to crumble. It had been the only time Boyd's father had opposed Oliver's advice. There was a strange remoteness to his father's voice in describing the meeting, his words like bodies sinking under the water, "I didn't like the way Oliver presented it, almost like it was his money." Oliver was a machine of logic and impartial as a prostitute; Boyd couldn't imagine him taking that tone.

Without looking up, Oliver said, "Mitch was in yesterday."

"Chapter eleven?"

Oliver nodded.

"I feel like we didn't do them any favors opening when we did."

"They were headed downhill before you opened." Oliver sat down and fed one of the pieces of paper into a shredder beside him. "And you guys are going to be right behind them if you keep botching that fundraiser."

“I know,” Boyd groaned, “having Sterling in last night was a dreadful move, but that was all Jeremy.”

“Sterling isn’t the issue.”

“I thought he had some monstrous gambling addiction.”

“Who really knows?” Oliver said, sliding the second piece of paper into the shredder, a buzz starting then stopping. “People still see number fifty-five. And if you raise money to help Emily it will counteract any rumors about Sterling. The community worships her. People have tried to talk her into running for office.”

“I’m not sure we can afford to be associated too closely with the likes of Sterling. I don’t mean any disrespect. You may know money but I know people.”

“I’ve never seen much difference between the two.”

“Which is why I’m here: I want to buy Jeremy out.”

“If I remember correctly, you need Shawn for majority.”

“Shawn’s in my pocket, I just need the cash.”

Oliver let out a long, almost patronizing sigh, then leaned forward, resting both of his elbows on the desk. Light reflected off his silver cufflinks. “I can’t recommend that, Boyd, the life expectancy of a restaurant is too short in a good economy. But now? Look at Edenic Proportions.”

“I’m smarter than those guys. And honestly, Oliver, Jeremy does not have Shawn’s best interest at heart. This could be Shawn’s only chance and I can’t stand by and let Jeremy ruin that out of pettiness.”

Oliver pulled the lid off the glass jar and pulled out two kisses, tossing one to Boyd. “You don’t have anything left from Vine and your dad certainly can’t help you,

he's only a couple frames behind Mitch. Two out of three restaurants close within three years of opening, good restaurants – do you want to mortgage your future on that?"

"I've got an obligation to the people who work for me, and to Jasmine. Not to mention my parents. I've got to keep that house in the family."

Oliver started to say something then stopped, as if Boyd was about to walk into traffic and it was too late; Boyd wondered if that was the type of look that had turned his father. "Hold tight for a couple of days and I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, make that fundraiser happen."

Shawn had looked like he'd been up all night swimming after shrimp and Boyd was famished from his crazy make-up sex with Emily – could she really run for office? – so he stopped at Intravenous Blend for the supernatural healing power of IV's biscuits. Motion was good. Fixing things was good. Boyd felt like a running back avoiding tacklers. Xerox machines ran off copies at Kinkos. Boyd tried Chase again to no avail. Some crappy rap music clamored out of the record store, its beat deceptively brutal. About fifty yards away, Amber Chillington was walking towards Boyd, the front door of the Rabbit between them. Amber really was stunning. She walked confidently, her ass swinging just enough to point itself out without bragging. A white turtleneck hugged her breasts.

"Amber," Boyd said, opening his widest smile, "does Shawn wake up every day and tell you how beautiful you are?"

Amber smiled, like Boyd was full of shit but she appreciated the sentiment. "I can always count on your charm, Boyd. And no, he doesn't."

“I’ll get on him about that.”

“So,” she said, swinging her purse toward him, “how did last night go?”

Boyd switched the breakfast bag to his right hand. “He didn’t tell you?”

“He kind of hung up on me last night, a little misunderstanding about Bamberg.

I’m sure he told you all about that.”

Boyd quickly calculated the odds, and then gambled on honesty. “Yeah, he did.”

“I figured. I got the cold shoulder this morning.” She looked in the front door of the restaurant. “He won’t talk to me, Boyd. We’re married and he won’t talk to me.”

*Perfect*, Boyd thought, *absolutely perfect*. He and Amber could help each other. Sometimes you just had to patiently follow the path of God’s will because even when you didn’t realize it, God was on point.

## Chapter Two

Emily knew Boyd would be gone when she woke, even though she wished he'd stayed, just like she knew he would follow her home last night, even though she wanted to be alone. They excelled at that, at doing the wrong thing at the wrong time, at just not working. It felt like part of her self was trapped inside of him, maybe even a bad part, but regardless it was a part she couldn't pry away, a part she was scared to death of losing. Emily was always losing parts of herself, they were like lazy weekends that slipped into Monday without notice. She sighed, then threw off the covers and followed the trail of clothing down the hall, stepping over Boyd's socks and picking up her skirt. Once she'd like to talk after a fight. You'd think someone would've figured out sex didn't make anything better and told everyone else. It merely mended the moment, sex, the physical cadence and aesthetic sensation allowing you to feel something else.

She folded her skirt and set it on the kitchen table next to the note Boyd had left, the awkward blue letters of flattering phrases explaining how bad he felt about last night (which was true, but for the wrong reasons) and how he didn't wake Emily because he knew she needed to sleep (a flat-out lie). He didn't want to talk about what happened last night, before or after the sex. Boyd talked all the time but they never discussed anything. Maybe he was scared. She was scared. She was always telling her girls they needed to make good decisions, strong decisions, how they needed to use today to change tomorrow. Maybe they deserved someone better, someone actually able to execute a dying relationship. She just cared about the girls so much, like she cared about Boyd so

much, it reminded her of what her dad used to say: “Em-berry, caring doesn’t make it okay.” She always meant to ask him what did make it okay. Such a thing to put off.

Emily knew she didn’t have any real problems, which made being a part-time-basket-case full-time-frustrating. Her girls, they had problems. Jasmine, she had problems, and now one was running through her veins. Such a sweet girl. A sweet girl who had really put Emily in a bind: she was supposed to release girls who went AWOL, especially a girl she wasn’t supposed to have in the first place, and especially since there hadn’t been a fundraiser. People were expecting money. Tomorrow. Maybe she should release Jasmine. But how do you toss out a thirteen year-old pregnant girl? But Jasmine also had to learn about consequences, that you couldn’t do things like that, like getting back together with your ex because you’re both lonely and sad and apart the pain saturates every aspect of your day but together your days saturate the pain. Which was why Jasmine snuck out and smoked meth: she was lonely and her mother was dead and Teyanna had fed her to the girls. She wanted to feel something else. That’s why people do stupid things, to feel something else.

Emily wanted Teyanna’s backend to feel the sharp side of a switch when she found out what they’d done to Jasmine. She couldn’t remember being more disappointed in someone, which she told Teyanna, knowing it would hurt her, wanting to hurt her, thinking that hurt coming from Emily would be enough. Teyanna sat there quietly, her bottom lip out, Emily thinking that was the end of it until Teyanna piped out: *She lied to me about being pregnant.* Oh, Emily read her the riot act after that, consequences spinning out of her mouth like balls of fire: *Early bed time and no phone time and no weekends and forget about the Halloween dance and of course she lied to you, Teyanna,*

*she was scared and embarrassed and had watched her mother get shot. Have I not taught you anything about being kind to people? Especially the people everyone else forgets?* And then Emily had done it; she'd made Teyanna cry.

Boyd had set up the coffee maker, which was half of a gesture. The coffee percolated and she dropped in an ice cube. Grey cloud cover blocked out the sun. An empty birdfeeder stood in her back yard. The grass was turning brown, Mother Nature draining the color out of everything. Emily needed to get to the hospital. She needed to figure out how she was going to pay for Jasmine's hospital. Chase said he would take the girls trick-or-treating so Emily needed to get costumes and that meant the days were rolling toward Thanksgiving and Christmas and she needed more donors for presents. It also meant Boyd was thinking about breaking up with her again if it wasn't for the holidays, which wasn't true: he'd let part of himself get stuck inside of her, a different part, though, a part that was wrapped up in him being good. She knew that about him. She knew him right down to the ground. Mrs. Tennor thought they were going to get married, that God had brought them back together for a reason. Like it happened without them. A bullet firing on its own. What was the reason for Emily's parents drowning? Or Jasmine's mother getting shot? Mrs. Tennor looked right over the bad side of reason, like she looked over Boyd talking to that girl last night.

Boyd said it was part of his job, as if flirting with that little tramp was part of his job – that was awful. Emily was sympathetic towards the temptation: Boyd was like fuel on fire, and you just wanted to warm your hands by him for a while. It always seemed like something exciting was about to happen, that you could never feel cold or alone or bored around him. He was always out in front of what was going on, like a dog on scent;

that was another thing Emily's dad used to say, a dog on scent, mostly about people and money. Emily's mother would roll her eyes and wink at Emily, as if her dad was so predictable with his pithy sayings. She missed that about them now, his sayings and her eye rolls. She missed everything about them now. Boyd was always on the scent of fun, and always brought along a pack of people, making it one big hunting party. People forgot that about Boyd, that he included everyone. Emily had a feeling Shawn was starting to forget.

She was still crying when Boyd pulled up last night, disappointed in her own inability to stop and his predictability at coming. At having to wait through another long moment where he walked through the door and just stood there. A long moment when he started to say something – then stopped, his mouth open, one hand in the air like he was carrying a tray. He closed his eyes and sighed, as if he couldn't make sense of it all, couldn't articulate those complex emotions which really weren't all that complex: he didn't love Emily, even though he wanted to. They were a steel trap, those feelings, and since both of them were stuck back in that moment where they didn't know what to say they started making out. Emily thought it was their best sex, forget-me-if-you-can sex, the moment teasing them to forget, tomorrow taunting them because they couldn't use today to change it. Neither of them could forget the fight or the moment or admit that Boyd didn't love her and as long as they did the same thing today, tomorrow was a lie and fucking was to forget, even though neither of them would.

Boyd swung his feet off the bed after the sex and started to stand up. His butt lifted off the bed and then fell back down, as if he didn't have enough momentum. His back was to her. He started to cry. His spine was crooked and there was a triangular



patch of hair beneath his right shoulder blade. She put her hand flat against his back, feeling his sobs,. “It’s happening again, Em,” he said, “it’s happening again and I can’t stop it.” The flannel sheets were soft against Emily’s skin. She was sweating from the sex. There was a picture of Boyd and Emily on the dresser, they were at the beach, the ocean wild and lovely behind them and the wind having its way with her hair. Boyd kept crying and Emily couldn’t think of anything to say on account of a feeling she had that this wasn’t going to end well for him. Those things usually didn’t. It was like how the last thing Emily wanted to do when things went bad was cry, but she did anyway. *Some things, she thought, we can’t help ourselves from doing. Over and over again.*

She wanted to call Boyd, to hear the way he stressed words at the end of sentences, to tell him even though things might not work out the way he wanted, they would still work out. He would always be that guy people fell madly and instantly in love with and stayed madly in love with, right up until the point when they hated him. There was no in between for Boyd. Right now, he was out trying to fix everything, trying to stay on that scent. Sometimes, though, to keep from losing the scent you had to be still so you didn’t run past it or trail off onto the wrong one. That’s another thing her dad used to say, “There’s a lot of things to run after, but you can’t run after nothing.”

Emily’s coffee cup was empty and she needed to get to the hospital. She was a little uncomfortable to see Jasmine, who had been completely taken with Boyd when he surprised them by showing up on Sunday, making Emily think he was wonderful all over again. He made Jasmine laugh, made her forget for a few minutes. Sex, drugs, and laughter, they could all make you forget. After Boyd left, Jasmine asked Emily if she was going to marry him, because that’s the kind of question a thirteen-year-old asks,

because it all seems that simple. Emily said no, she wasn't going to marry him, and Jasmine said, *He's your boyfriend, right?* and Emily said he was because she didn't want to spill out the stupid platitudes disguised as complexities in adult relationships. Jasmine had tubes in her hands and arms. A wide elastic strap stretched over her belly and a tube was hooked up to that. Jesus, how do these things happen to people?

"If you're not going to marry him," Jasmine said, "then why is he your boyfriend?"

So Emily told Jasmine it was complicated, that they cared about each other, and it reminded her what her dad said, about caring not making it okay. Emily wished she didn't get so scared when she thought about her life without Boyd. Wished her chest didn't feel like all the blood had stopped pumping through it. That was why she was ashamed to see Jasmine, because she'd lied: there was nothing complicated about being a coward. It just meant that you were scared of the pain that would fill up tomorrow if you didn't do it differently today, and it was time Emily did something different.

### Chapter Three

Driving to IV in his El Camino a few shakes past nine Chase was C-O-L-D chilly. His hands were frozen to the wheel and his head felt like an orange on a juicer. His only solace was CRL #31: *To turn a bad morning into a good day, just tweak your tempo.* He hooked a Louie onto Main Street and saw Amber and Boyd in front of the Rabbit, probably *not* discussing her first marriage or phantom education. If Chase had his cell phone he'd dial Boyd up and get the 4-1-1 on that chat and then lay down some news that was going to tickle Boyd pinker than a tutu: Chase had a little double-datage lined up tonight with Lindsey and Nancy. Chase himself was tinkled pink to be getting his wingman back, and once they pulled Shawn out of his funk BCS would be back in full force and Chase hoped that full force of would help him overhaul the tempo of his own life – an overhaul that included laying off the blow, which he'd done for a week. Chase wasn't stupid, just stuck, and when he felt like he might have to chew off his leg to escape his existence a little nose-candy acted as the perfect anesthetic.

Chase found rock star parking right in front of IV. Despite his three A.M. trip to Hole in the Soul where he'd destroyed a plate of ribs and lost ten bucks when Pax dumped fifteen packets of Splenda into a glass of milk and took it down in three gulps, Chase had woken up hung over, alone, out of coffee, out of weed, without his cell phone, and with the sweet smell of IV's biscuits promising to transform his morning. After breakfast he'd hunt down his cell as Boyd and Shawn would be calling any minute to officially offer him the front of the house gig. His afternoon, however, was booked, with the lovely ladies of the Lockley Home. Dy-no-mite!

The cappuccino machine shrieked. The bustle of the blender broke up ice. IV smelled like bacon and fresh bread and ho-ly hell if Lamont Carroll wasn't reading at a table all by his lonesome. Another perfectly pleasant surprise from the Universe. Chase could get the skinny on Sterling and find out what needed to be change-change-changed for the Rabbit to paddle to the promised land. Chase ordered, then took his number and drinks over to Lamont, who was reading a book dense enough to double as a cinder block. His cell phone weighed down a yellow legal pad.

Chase said: "If it isn't the smartest server in Elora, already getting smarter."

Lamont looked up, as if he didn't recognize Chase.

"Hate to bother you while you're hitting the books," Chase continued, "but could you spare a chair for a brother?"

Lamont seemed to snap back to the world from whatever plane his brain had been residing on. "Of course, sit down."

"Much obliged, much obliged," Chase said, noticing Lamont's book was the Bible. "Reading that for school?"

"No, I'm reading it for me."

"For you?"

"It's kind of a guide when I've got a hard decision to make."

"I feel ya on that." Chase gulped down some water. "I wasn't sure if I should work for Boyd but I think it's going to work out well. Me running the Rabbit, that is."

"You're going to be running the Rabbit?"

"Mallory didn't tell you?"

"Two days a week we talk about something besides you."

“And here I thought I was the talk of the town.”

“Don’t hurt yourself with all of that thinking.” On top of the legal pad, Lamont’s cell phone vibrated. “Excuse me,” he said to Chase, then opened the phone, smiling, “Hey . . . I’m at IV, having coffee with Chase . . . it went really, really weird.”

A skinny kid in a baseball cap took Chase’s number and left a basket with two biscuits wrapped in foil. Chase rubbed his hands together. Grease and caffeine: the common cures for a hangover. He bit into the first biscuit then swung a hand at Lamont. “Ask her for Celia’s cell number.”

Lamont nodded, still talking, then writing something down on the yellow legal pad, tearing it off, and handing it to Chase. “I can meet you here or at the Pyramid after I teach, but then I have to head to the Rabbit,” Lamont said into the phone. “OK . . . bang.” He laughed to himself, that laugh reserved for people in love, as if it was funny that it finally came around, a big joke on everyone else watching from the stands.

“Answer me something?” Chase asked.

“I’ll try.”

“How did you land Mallory?”

“What is she, a marlin?”

Chase wiped grease from his chin. “You know, was it a moment that went right?”

“A moment that went right? What does that even mean?”

Chase chewed, stalling. “It means, in my very amateur opinion, that people are at the mercy of moments and moments are at the mercy of chance. That’s a CRL, by the way.”

“I still don’t know what it means.”

“Why you gotta play a brother like that?”

“It’s the small pleasures.”

“So you hear what I’m saying?”

“I hear you, but I’m not sure I understand.” Lamont tapped the open page of the Bible with his pen. “Are you asking me about moments or Mallory? Because I think the two are pretty exclusive. And while I’m certainly willing to give chance its merit as a distributor of one event leading to another, to say that people are at mercy of moments and moments are at the mercy of chance is, causally speaking, saying that people are at the mercy of chance, which I don’t buy.”

Chase balled up the foil from his first biscuit. “So moments are just moments?”

“No, moments are very powerful, but we have say in them. It’s called free will.”

“And Mallory?”

“Circle hook with live bait.”

“That’s what I thought, dumb luck – right?”

Lamont nodded. “God bless low standards.”

“You don’t believe that.”

Lamont shrugged. “I believe that I don’t deserve her.”

Chase polished off his water. “You know what I like about Mallory? She’s got this womanliness about her, and I don’t mean that in a sexual way.”

“I’m relieved to hear that.”

“Step back, Socrates.”

“My apologies.”

“You’re forgiven. Anyway, I don’t know how to explain this, but whenever I’m around Mallory I’m glad I’m a man, glad to know there’s women like her out there that just might make me feel good about, I don’t know, life. Mallory makes me think someone could make my life better. Every Izzy was waiting for her to dump that chump so they could have their shot and no one, I mean no one, thinks you don’t deserve her, yours truly included. We’re all relieved she’s finally punching her weight. Anyway,” Chase said, unwrapping his second biscuit, “that’s what I was trying to say.”

“Thank you, Chase, I’m completely humbled.”

“I’ve got my mo – ” Chase paused, then pointed at Lamont, smiling, “I make my moments.” He finished his second biscuit and used Lamont’s cell to call Celia who said she’d meet him at the Pyramid where, predictably, he’d left his phone last night. Stupid drunk. And to prove that Chase could and did change his tempo, Celia said she needed to talk to him besides, *and* that it was muy importante. Bingo-Jack! That’s what Chase was talking about! Maybe Chase was finally going to get his own shot at the title.

He walked in the back door and found Celia sitting on the bar, at the very top of the horseshoe’s arch. The bottoms of her jeans were frayed and her black boots were lace-ups. Holding his phone against her chest, she said, seductively, “Your battery is dead.”

“You gonna . . . charge it up for me?”

Large hoops dangled from her ears, smaller hoops rotating inside of them.

“We’ve been over this: you’re not that cute.”

“I’m adorable.” Chase took a quick step forward, pretending to make a swipe for the phone which Celia moved behind her back, leaving an inch between them. Their eyes

locked, her pupils black slits shifting in the brown of her irises; she leaned forward and quickly bit down in front of his nose and then swung her legs around and hopped down on the other side of the bar. She filled two footed glasses with ice, poured Grey Goose into each, sprinkled Tabasco and Worcester – Chase knew this drink: Celia’s Blood. Hot and spicy like her. Now *there* was a hangover cure.

“I’ve got booze and your phone.” She cracked pepper over each glass; black dots stuck to ice cubes and floated in the vodka. “What’d you bring to the party?”

Progress. “As always, I am my own greatest commodity.”

She poured Bloody Mary mix into each glass, the dark red liquid layered on top of the vodka, refusing to merge until she capped both glasses with a silver mixer and began shaking them over her head, one in each hand, the ice and liquid sloshing back and forth like maracas. “Got any herb?”

Setback. “Regrettably, my bag is empty, so to speak.”

“Porque puede ser que le haya hecho derecho aqui en la barra si usted tenia cualesquiera.”

“Now you’re speaking my language.”

She stopped shaking the drinks. “You understood that?”

“Hell, no, I’ll take a little trans-lay-she-on if you’d be so kind.”

“It means,” she dropped a blue straw into each glass, “drink up.”

Chase sat, knowing that was not what she’d said, thinking about what Lamont had said about moments and chance, this sure as shit seeming like a moment that went wrong. She took the long way around the bar, leaving a stool between them when she sat down.

“So,” Chase said, his mouth on fire, “what did you want to talk to me about?”



She gave her drink a stir, ice cubes bumping against the glass. “It’s probably nothing, but I kind of heard something last night.”

“Do tell.”

“Here’s the thing.” She bit down on her lip. “I kind of heard Dana was getting the Rabbit’s floor job.”

“Puh-leeze. Where’d you hear such nonsense?”

“Kara heard it last night tending bar,” Celia said, moving her hand on top of his, “I hope I did the right thing in telling you.”

“That sounds like pure Izzy gossip to me. Boyd has all but promised me that gig.” Chase thought: *Hasn’t he?* Chase pulled his hand away and took down half of his drink but it was like taking an aspirin for a third degree burn and he felt the pull for something stronger, a pull that always proved to be the chink in his armor. “Hey, is Darren here?”

Celia spun back and forth on her barstool, smiling. “You know he’s not.”

“Any chance we could, I don’t know, go upstairs and get some love?” Chase didn’t want to say it, really, didn’t even want that kind of love, really, but he couldn’t bear the thought that Boyd had lied to him again, that instead of being the guy who was running the hippest new joint in town, Chase was just a bartender – shit, wasn’t even that, was an unemployed bartender. He needed more than an aspirin.

Celia stopped in mid-spin, her back to Chase, the nape of her neck brown between her short black hair and fuzzy green sweater. Her hair spiked up in different directions, as if contradicting itself. Celia spun back around with a disappointed look on her face, as if Chase couldn’t have said anything more wrong. “I guess.”

Chase felt better after the first line, the thought of Dana running the Rabbit like an old car with a tarp thrown over it. Please. Celia sat to his right, both of them in metal chairs in front of Darren's desk. She leaned over the mirror and sucked down her first line and for the second time said she was more of a ganja-girl.

"Mind if I get us a couple bottles of water?" Chase asked.

"Get us a couple of beers," Celia said, rubbing a finger under her nose, "after you take down that second line."

"Suuuh-wheat! Darren always hoards that shit."

"You trying to kill my buzz?" Celia pushed the mirror towards Chase and handed him the rolled-up twenty that he touched to the glass and his nose. Now he could really talk to Celia.

"Whoa, Nellie!" Chase popped off his chair, tasting the first drip of the drop in the back of his throat. He bled the tap-line into an empty glass then filled two fresh ones with an amber-colored ale. He handed her a beer and said, "Miss Celia, are you aware how absolutely amazing you are?"

She blushed. "Don't say that."

"Why not?"

Her full-lipped smile reached around Chase and squeezed him tight. "Can I tell you something?"

"You can tell me anything."

She drummed on his knee, three quick pats followed by a lazy fourth. "I feel like a fraud most of the time."

Chase surprised himself by asking, “How so?”

“I feel stuck, Chase, like my life was something I started and didn’t mean to, or this part, anyway, that it was bigger than me and I didn’t know it until now. That probably doesn’t make any sense, but I thought I was bigger than my life, that at least I had it by the tail but it’s really dragging me downhill. Have you ever felt like that?”

Chase started to spout out a CRL, then thought better of it and said, “I feel like that every day.”

“Really?” she asked, her back straightening. “You’re like the most confident person I know. You’re like *the* Izzy touchstone.”

Maybe this was going to be his moment, the one the size of an elephant he’d been both avoiding and following through the jungle with a butterfly net. The one where he could finally admit how scared he was of being nothing. Boyd and Shawn would not do that again. Hell, no, Chase said so. He washed down the drip with what turned out to be a pumpkin ale which was light on his tongue and a little sweet with nutmeg and his heart was going giddy-giddy-up to that beat Celia was drumming on his knee. This was it. His moment. The one where he could be honest with himself and Celia and Jesus H. Christ what if he was wrong? What if Celia was simply being his friend? Suddenly Chase was scared of the moment. What if he leaned in for that first kiss and she turned away because why in the world would she be interested in a dead-end guy like him?

“All that confidence, Miss Celia, is one giant façade.”

She squinted at him. “You don’t have to say that to make me feel good.”

“I’m not. The CRL’s, the pot, the coke, the Grey Goose on the rocks, they’re all just dance steps so I don’t have to be still and realize what I’m not.”

“Gosh,” she said, “now you are adorable.” She gave his knee a squeeze and then her cell phone started singing a sweet song of love for which she apologized, saying it was Darren and she had to get it. “Hi, hon . . . yeah, we’re drinking some blood . . . sure – where are you?” Her petite shoulders popped back and forth. “That is weird,” she gave Chase a little kick and pointed to the mirror. “I’m sure he’ll want to know about that . . . okay . . . bye, sweets.”

Chase took down the next line. “Hon” and “Sweets” made him reconsider his moment but Celia’s sweet smile made him reconsider his reconsideration as she could’ve said them out of habit, said them so Darren would take his sweet time returning and then she told Chase that Darren would be another hour and Chase, feeling on top of the world but also nervous because of the vertigo asked where Darren was.

“Hung up in West Elora.”

“What’s he doing out there?”

“Uh, hello.” She tapped the mirror. “And he told me something interesting.”

“And what might that be?”

“Again, I have to ask: What’s in it for me?”

“Again, all I have is myself.”

“You make it so easy.” Celia laughed, those small shoulders still swinging back and forth.

“Oh, I can make it hard when it counts,” Chase said, wanting it back.

“Well, when you put it like that.” She laughed again, squeezed his knee again.

“Darren went to make his pick-up but got told to come back in an hour.”

“Drug dealers can be so inconsiderate.”

“Right? So, on his way out he saw Jeremy and Sterling – how weird is that?”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Boyd’s got to know about this. Shawn too.” He shot out of his chair. “I’ve got to run over to the Rabbit.”

“Chase, honey.” Celia grabbed his hand, “are you sure that’s such a good idea?”

It was not only a good idea, it was a great idea. Finally, the Universe was offering Chase his moment. His chance to swoop in and save The Swimming Rabbit. Everything *did* happen for a reason. Being out of coffee led him to Lamont and since he’d lost his cell he’d had to call Celia which led him to the Pyramid where he was fated to be when Darren called with the news about Jeremy and Sterling so all he had to do was run across the street. It *had* to be fate. Celia was still sitting, holding two of Chase’s fingers, her voice seductive, all of it so tempting, all of it pulling Chase in different directions. Celia gave his fingers another pull. She was looking at him like she wanted him, the look he’d always wanted from her versus the job and the moment he’d been waiting on his entire life, the chance dropped right into his life. Lamont was wrong. Dead wrong.

## Chapter Four

Shawn had always understood that his relationship with Boyd was unbalanced, the he would always need Boyd, or need a Boyd, while Boyd would always have people lining up to be his friend. It made Shawn feel inferior, as if he were Robin to Boyd's Batman. Plus, Shawn had always taken his problems to Boyd and always, when Boyd picked up the phone and heard Shawn's voice or opened the door and saw Shawn's face, he would say, "Aught oh, is this a light little Riesling problem or a serious and sinfully Zin problem?" Whatever Shawn answered, Boyd would open that bottle and by the time it was empty Shawn knew what to do. When he found out Amber was pregnant Shawn drove straight to Boyd's. Boyd opened his front door, looked at Shawn quizzically, and said, "I've never seen that look before, it's not sinfully Zin."

"I think it's supposed to be good news, but it doesn't feel like it."

"Oh," Boyd said, as if it were obvious, "it's a Champagne problem."

Now Shawn had a host of problems and no one to confide in; now Shawn had a terrifying version of himself and no place for it. He had pushed Amber. Hard. Though Amber had done her own pushing. It made Shawn wonder: had the moment been so manufactured that it was an isolated incident, or had Amber uncovered a part of Shawn's nature that he would have to come to terms with: he was a violent person. It made sense now, all of her strange looks, her seemingly abstract comments about a fight Boyd and Chase had unknowingly given a most fitting name: it had been a battle.

Wednesday morning, when Shawn arrived at work, Boyd's Jeep was arrogantly parked in Shawn's space. Not that they had spaces, but they had routines. Boyd knew Shawn preferred to begin the morning alone, to ease into the menu and consider recipe tweaks. Yet, here Boyd was, parked in Shawn's space and threatening Shawn's serene routine. Shawn would have to listen to Boyd's singsong voice all morning, self-assured by its own sound, oblivious that no one listened to the words. Shawn transferred Tristan from the car seat to the bassinette and carried him up the stairs and into the office where – before Shawn could stop him – Boyd lifted Tristan from the bassinette.

Boyd held Tristan in the air, gently, then brought Tristan down to his chest. Tristan seemed happy. Seemed to enjoy the attention. Then Boyd was talking about how dangerous Jeremy was and Shawn could feel the return of his affection for Boyd, could feel his anger retreating from the office so Shawn unsuccessfully chased it into the prep room. Was this how the rest of his life would be? When his son was happy, he would be as well? Such a small life. So much power.

“You're an amazing little man,” Shawn said to his son, “and when your Uncle Boyd gets back I'm going to tell him everything.” It would be like old times. Shawn would tell Boyd he had a problem, “A dirty Rhone problem” and Boyd would get down a bottle from the floating wall of wine and they would figure out what Shawn should do with this new self. Shawn put Tristan in his bassinette then put the gumbo he'd made last night on a low heat. The produce guy showed up so Shawn signed-in orders and stocked the produce and then pulled out the pork chops that had been marinating in buttermilk and papaya. His hand hurt so he took four aspirin. He greased a pan and his stomach grumbled and then Boyd walked in with biscuits from IV. It was a sign. They were back

on the same page. Shawn was opening his biscuit and considering the delivery of his “problem” line when Boyd announced he was going to pick up the liquor and walked out the back door, which was weird, because Boyd picked up the liquor on Thursdays.

Maybe they weren’t on the same page.

Shawn had been serving the pork chops over plantains and sautéed spinach, but they might go well over a white bean cassoulet if he tweaked the chutney. He finished the biscuit and washed his hands. A car pulled into the back parking lot and Shawn felt a surge in his spirits; the problem look had probably registered with Boyd as he was driving away so he’d turned back – but it was Amber who walked in the back door.

Shawn pulled a pork chop from the tub, wrapped his hand around it, and cleaned off the marinade, which globed back into the tub. The pork chop’s skin felt soft and spongy. Together, the buttermilk and papaya created a bittersweet smell charged with vinegar. Shawn could not bring himself to look at his wife.

“Why do you wipe the marinade off like that?” she asked.

“It would stick to the grill and tear off the skin.”

“That’s interesting,” Amber said, setting her black purse on the table, her hands still around the strap. “So, I was really tired last night. I’d had Tristan all day while you were getting ready for your big night.” She let go of the straps and clasped her hands together. “I guess – no, I know that it hurt my feelings that you didn’t want me here for what was the most important night of your career.”

“Who said I didn’t want you here?”

“You didn’t invite – would you please look at me?”

Shawn looked up, thinking he should apologize for any number of things.



“You didn’t invite me,” Amber repeated, “and when I tried to invite myself you said you didn’t want to use your son.”

“I didn’t, but Boyd sure seemed to think a lot of the idea.” Shawn picked up another pork chop and wiped it clean, thinking Rosemary would tie the chutney to the white beans. From his bassinette, Tristan began to cry.

Amber smiled, a smile Shawn imagined her offering customers who didn’t want to buy, a smile that masked her disapproval. She walked the length of the table, dragging her hand along the smooth surface. “I was doing a poor job of trying to make space for myself. These great things are always happening to you and I never feel a part of them.”

“So you laughed at me?”

She pulled a bottle from the baby bag and began shaking it. “I was exhausted, and hurt. You didn’t want me at the restaurant and you didn’t want to be at home with us so I did something that I thought would hurt you.” She lifted Tristan from the bassinette and held the bottle in front of his small lips. “I’m trying to apologize, Shawn.”

Shawn cleaned another pork chop and laid it on the pan, making an ordered row of four, each bone pointing towards the door.

Tristan’s small lips finally found the bottle. Amber said, “Is everything okay?”

Shawn opened and closed his left hand; aspirin was not the answer.

Amber rocked Tristan, slowly, her left arm underneath him and her right hand holding the bottle. “You know, I do run a pretty successful business which, like you, I started from scratch. We have that in common . . . if you ever have any questions.”

Shawn stuck his right hand in the tub; the pork chops were slippery, like dead bodies. “Can you tell me why everyone is always fighting?”

“People are scared, Shawn. You are The Swimming Rabbit and everyone else is lining up for a space behind you. It’s like recess. The bell rang and you were already there and all the other kids are pushing to be second.”

“It feels like they’re trying to push me out of line.”

“Why do you think I don’t have any partners?” She walked down the table back towards Shawn, still rocking Tristan, his lips still working the bottle. “You have to know who’d stab you in the back and who’d catch you if you fell.”

Shawn rested his wrists on the tub. He thought, *I pushed you and you fell*; he said, “Jeremy wouldn’t even notice if I fell.”

“Would Boyd?”

“If he wasn’t off who knows where. He’d at least pick me up when he got back.” He studied the scar running across his palm and remembered Boyd driving him to Dr. Tennor’s office at midnight. For two weeks after, he had slept on Boyd’s couch. “Boyd has always been there for me.”

“No one else was jumping to give you your own kitchen.”

“But you hate Boyd,” Shawn said, surprised, “don’t you?”

“I don’t hate him, and I certainly respect his business instincts. Plus, all Boyd has is this place, while this place just happens to be something Jeremy has.” She walked down to the bassinette and gently returned Tristan Patrick to it, strapping him in. “Don’t let Boyd keep you too late tonight, OK?”

With all of the beautiful women in Elora it surprised Shawn that Boyd had picked Dana to run the front of the house. She had short blonde hair and a strong jaw line. Her

eyes were brown and her skin was pale. She was like tomato soup that needed direction, basil to sweeten or fennel and sausage to add spice. And this was whom Boyd had chosen to stand at the front door and greet guests with a smile, to be the initial impression of Shawn's food and saddled with the responsibility of assuaging customers' anger? Probably, yesterday or this morning, Shawn would have rebelled against Dana as an extension of Boyd, but now his affection for his old friend had returned.

"Shawn gets tired of hearing this," Boyd said to Dana, "but we want our staff to be like a family. That's why we offer health insurance."

Shawn crunched some ice in his teeth, his tongue becoming numb. He regretted letting Boyd talk him into the health insurance; it cost too much with no return. It wasn't his job to insure people. The three of them were sitting at a cocktail table in front of the bar. Shawn noticed that during the day you could clearly see the wine shelves behind the bar, that they didn't seem to be floating at all. By Dana's cup, a spoon rested on two empty blue packets of Equal, their tops torn off and some white specks sticking to the glass surface.

"Impressive," Dana said, seeming sincere, "no one covers servers. Once your numbers jump you'll be able to hand-pick your staff."

Shawn hadn't thought of that. He couldn't remember much about Dana. She'd been hired toward the end of his stint at EP and they'd only overlapped a month, if not two. Or three.

"We want to be impressive," Boyd continued, "while staying true to our family philosophy. We also want to knock Chris Campbell and Ovio right off their pedestal – at

least that's what I've wanted, and I knew Shawn was the only guy in town with the talent to accomplish that."

"Shawn's the most talented chef I've ever worked for," Dana said, smiling at him.

"We look out for each other," Boyd continued. "Like the day before yesterday. Shawn went to Bamberg to see his parents so I got here early to sign in all of the food orders. There are always things more important than the restaurant."

Shawn shook out his hand; as soon as you loved Boyd, he gave you a reason to hate him. Where did the days Boyd left for hours on end fit into the family philosophy? The days he didn't show up until noon? Still, Amber was right: Boyd had stood by Shawn. After this meeting Shawn would tell Boyd about Jeremy's claim of "interested buyers." It was the right thing to do, and Shawn was a guy who did the right thing.

"Sounds ideal," Dana said, looking at Shawn, "the exact opposite of EP."

"It is," Shawn said, "so we do expect people to work a lot harder."

"You always set the bar for that," Dana said, "the work ethic and food quality dropped off a cliff when you left."

Shawn couldn't tell if Dana was feeding him a line, but he still blushed. "Yeah?"

"Everyone talked about that," Dana continued, "how there was no pressure on Mitch to actually work an exec's schedule once you left."

"Mitch is a great guy," Shawn said, thinking Dana was prettier than he'd given her credit for, "but sometimes I wonder if he really wanted it all that bad."

Dana sipped her coffee. "The results would certainly indicate that he didn't."

Boyd raised his eyebrows at Shawn, as if to say, *See, she rocks*. Just once, Shawn wanted Boyd to be wrong about something, and he wanted a front row seat. Once.

The kitchen door swung open and Pax walked in carrying a measuring cup. A black baseball cap was turned backwards on his head, a yellow catfish on the hat. Shawn thought Pax had in a dip, but he couldn't quite tell. "Don't mind me," Pax said, "just getting some amaretto for the buerre blanc."

"Come meet Dana," Boyd said, "she's going to be running the front of the house."

*Great, Shawn thought, another decision we never actually discussed.*

"I know Dana," Pax said, pulling a bottle of Amaretto from the well. "We worked together at the Tin Angel."

"We've closed down some restaurants," Dana said, "haven't we?"

Outside, someone ran up the back stairs and into the prep room.

Boyd looked at Shawn. "Who the hell is that?"

Shawn shrugged. Footsteps stomped back down the stairs. The back door opened and closed then the kitchen door swung open and Chase burst into the room as if he was crossing a finish line; he bent over and gasped for breath, both of his hands on his thighs.

"Boyd, Shawn, you guys have to know about this –" He saw Dana, his hands still on his thighs. Shawn knew that look on Chase's face, that cocaine look, and he wanted to crawl under the table. Great. One more thing Boyd got to be right about.

"No way," Chase said. "No fucking way."

## Chapter Five

Pax waltzed into work thinking the Rabbit needed a bullshit free day. By Pax's reasoning they'd had a slew of good days, days most restaurants would love to stick in their trophy case. But at the Rabbit, each of those days came with a healthy dose of bullshit. Having spent a spell on the rodeo circuit, Pax wasn't necessarily opposed to the smell, but there really wasn't a place for it on the menu and it was awful hard to pair with wine. Maybe the building was cursed.

Boyd didn't believe in curses and Pax couldn't point at what Shawn believed in, aside from himself. Shawn rubbed Pax wrong. But Boyd loved Shawn like a brother so Pax ignored his gut and fell into rank. Pax did worry about Boyd, that he let his love flow a little too freely, kind of like Izzy Fountain did with the booze. People never talked about that, about how the industry had beaten Izzy down to the point that he was always drunk or stoned, about how the reason he kept taking different jobs was because he kept getting fired for showing up drunk or stoned. Course, it wasn't difficult to forget that eight restaurants had opened and closed in this space since that rib bone pierced Izzy's heart. That was some run.

Pax never bought into curses until the circuit. For all their macho bravado cowboys were slaves to superstition, and Pax figured everybody needed a means of explaining away losing. Cowboys never put their hats on a bed. Ever. And when they did, it had to be upside down. He thought all of that was crap until he won six straight roping events, six more than he'd ever even placed in.

He got win number three in Oklahoma and walked out ahead of his friends to get a handle on it, not wanting to get too full of himself or the wins. It was one of those humid nights where dirt dangled in the air and the Oklahoma sky went on for miles. The broncs had started and Pax could hear them firing out of the shoot. Could hear the crowd oh-ing and ah-ing. He let down his tailgate and took a seat, admiring the shiny buckle he'd just won. Red dirt layered his boots and jeans. His rope was curled up beside him and he gave it a friendly pat, then started packing a can of Copenhagen, thinking a cold beer would hit the spot but not wanting to disturb the moment. And just like that an older roper who'd taken third walked up carrying two bottles of Bud in his right hand, the tops of the bottles almost kissing. He handed Pax a beer and said, "Got yourself a lucky rope, did ya?" Well, that was it. Pax couldn't get the idea out of his head that the winning was all rope and no Pax. It was bullshit. Pax had gotten used to the rope, was all. Its weight, the way it stuck to his gloves just so, how it gave perfectly in mid-air then tightened around the heels of a calf when Pax yanked it back. Some ropes are stubborn, but that one did just what Pax asked. Three wins later it wore out and Pax didn't win again. Three months and five ropes later he was leaning off his horse to throw his rope when he fell and his knees got caught up in the horse's hooves. It took a steady stream of painkillers to finish the season.

Pax knew that Izzies thought they were the drinking and drugging champions of the world, but they had nothing on cowboys. Pax had always thought cowboys were about cold cans of beer and tall bottles of bourbon and getting in fights and fighting through pain but two weeks on the tour taught him otherwise. Rodeoing wore down the body. Wore down bull-riders' backs and steer-wrestler's hips and Pax's knee was never

the same after he took that spill. As soon as one rodeo was over you drove to the next, your body broken and tired, caffeine a drop of water that couldn't keep you awake ten minutes much less from west Texas to east Tennessee. Uppers to finish the drive and coke to pick you up in the morning and pain pills when your shoulder hurt so much you couldn't raise it above your head much less throw a rope round the heels of a running calf. Pax had seen his fair share of addicts who swore and believed they weren't hooked and when he heard those same words coming out of his mouth he left the tour. And when he saw Chase ride that white horse into the Rabbit he knew his hope for a bullshit free day was dead and buried. When Chase saw his two pals sitting down with Dana he looked like a little kid who was the last pick in kickball. Probably, he could've used one of Shawn's painkillers.

“Oh, man,” Chase said, “not again.”

Boyd closed his eyes, like he was about to be punched. Shawn sat there with his dick in his hand. Dana impressed Pax by backing out her chair then walking out the front door. Pax had the amaretto he'd come for and a mouthful of spit and knew it would be pretty decent of him to leave but there was something seductive about the scene, like a guy who's hung up on a bull. Pax swallowed his spit. Chase rubbed his nose. Pax thought watching Touc tank EP would be enough to get Chase off that white horse but she did run fast. It was too bad because Chase liked helping people and Pax thought he would make one hell of a floor manager. Pax liked Chase. That was one guy who never bitched about picking up a tab or a shift or driving an hour outside of town when your truck broke down, even at four in the morning. If anyone deserved a break, it was Chase – but he also shouldn't have been telling people that job was his. There are a dozen



reasons not to talk about something before it happens, the number one being so you don't jinx yourself.

"Chase," Boyd said, standing up, "hold on."

"Fuck both of you assholes. Again? You said I was going to run the show."

Boyd looked at Shawn, surprised. "You told him that?"

Chase's face was red and he took quick breaths. "No, you told me, BT, told me to come in take notes and meanwhile you're hiring Dana? I was her boss."

"You were bar manager," Boyd said, chuckling, "and she was a server."

"Same difference," Chase said. "And in taking those notes I gotta say your staff needs some work. They need a pro."

Pax could tell that remark chafed Boyd a little by the way his face knotted up. "You mean like a guy doing lines before noon on a Wednesday?"

Chase let out a hard breath. "Your ass is just grasping for straws. Here I was thinking we were back to being friends and the whole time you were faking it."

"I am your fri –"

"No," Chase snapped, "you're a backstabber. A friend is a guy who sets up a double date for his pal, like I did with Lindsey and Nancy."

Boyd grimaced. "Look," Boyd said, stepping away from the table, "I'm sorry if you thought I was offering you the job, I really, really am. But look at yourself, C, it's not even noon and you're all coked up. This could be Shawn's only shot and someone has to stand up and be his friend."

Poor Chase, he looked like a roped calf. Then his facial expression changed, as if he'd been untied and let up. "Were you looking out for Shawn when you hired that PI to dig up shit on Amber?"

Pax had not see that coming. Boyd hadn't either, apparently. He swallowed hard, then said, "As a matter of fact, I was." The way he said it, though, it was like a guy pushing forward his last poker chip.

"Sure," Chase chirped, suddenly king of the world, "and is that what you and Amber were chatting about in front of the Rabbit this morning, being Shawn's friend?"

Boyd started to say something, then stopped. Shawn was staring at Boyd, like a kid who caught his dad slipping a dollar under his pillow. Chase rubbed his nose. These three, they'd been running buddies since Pax had known them and it looked like a force bigger than all of them was going to put that to an end. Boyd looked different than Chase and Shawn. Cleaner. Sharper. He wore a pair of slacks and a button down shirt but that wasn't it; he had something Chase and Shawn didn't, and whatever that was it would probably end up being his own personal curse.

## Chapter Six

Sterling thought Jeremy was a trip. And angry. He'd never met a cat so angry, and one that was like the richest little man in the state. Let Jeremy blow out his Achilles, get kicked out of the league and have his little brother pick up a second job – as a server, no less; might as well be servant – to pay off his debt and then he could piss and moan about finishing last. Jeremy's cowlick stood up all defiant-like and he drove hunched over like his spine might shoot out the bottom of his neck. They were on their way to West Elora to see Sterling's boss, Boras, and Jeremy was dressed like they were going clubbing, in a black turtleneck and designer jeans. Sterling glanced in the rearview mirror and there were Jasmine and her mother, lying in a pile of clothes and blood.

"Sterling," Jeremy said in his screechy little voice, "did you bring a gun?"

"What? I'm a thug so I gotta carry a gun?"

"You guys and that race card." Jeremy shook his head, both hands tight on the wheel. "You'll never hear me play the ugly faggot card."

"If I did have a gun I would shoot you right now."

Jeremy spun his head around, squinting. "Really?"

"Yes, really, you like to run that mouth."

Jeremy rolled his shoulders. "You're a bookie, why don't you carry a gun?"

"We're in West Elora, not West Harlem."

"Don't you ever have to like, I don't know, rough people up?"

"Man, you watch too many movies."

Truth was, Al did all the roughing up, and he was so crazy everyone did what he said, everyone except a corner dealer named Willie. Willie had owed Al a nickel for like six months, and that shit had gotten under Al's skin something fierce. Not the nickel, but the owing, the fact that some punk like Willie could keep getting the best of him. Nobody would let Al forget that shit, either, saying stuff like, *Hey, Al, where's Fast Willie?* or *Who's faster, LT sprinting for the end zone or Fast Willie running from Al?* It shouldn't have bothered Al, corner dealers being worthless as eight-track tapes and five hundred bucks being nothing to Al, but Sterling knew it wasn't the money, it was the not catching Willie. It was the losing. It was like that when Sterling first started losing money to Boras: he didn't care about the money; he cared about the losing. Losing to some white punk who acted like he got lucky while talking smack on Sterling's teammates. But that was Boras' M.O., pissing people off until they couldn't think straight. He even had a pool going on when Al would catch Willie, every day taking money from people while Al stood there fuming, looking like he might step right out of his skin.

So it shouldn't have surprised Sterling when, in the middle of a ride, Al yelled, *Pull over – it's Willie!* Sterling did love Al getting grief about Willie so he let off the gas, the speedometer dropping from twenty to ten. It was like a hiccup, and Sterling was planning to speed back up as soon as Al opened the door, not thinking that Al would lean out the window and start shooting up the street. Sterling sped back up but that lady got caught in the fray of Al's anger, all of it happening in Sterling's rearview mirror, and all because Al couldn't stand losing to a nobody. Maybe there was no such thing as a nobody when it came to losing, especially when people were riding your dick about it.

Sterling pointed up ahead and told Jeremy to take a right. They were into West Elora, one yard kept and the next filled with crap: beer bottles, furniture, rotting sheets of plywood, bicycle skeletons. Paint wore away from houses, and their bases seemed to buckle under the weight of poverty. Grass barely grew.

Jeremy flipped down his blinker. “You’re fucking with me, right? About not carrying a gun?”

“I don’t like guns. They kill people.”

“I thought people killed people.”

Sterling texted Boras that they were close. “Sure seems a lot easier with a gun.”

In certain situations Sterling could feel a rubber band popping against his pride. Taunting him. It was the feeling he’d get in a game right before the ball was snapped, or if he missed a tackle or lost a back in coverage. It made him want to hurt somebody. If he did carry a gun, and did feel that rubber band, he’d probably kill somebody. He’d have killed Al for killing Jasmine’s mom. He’d have killed Boras a thousand times for the way he talked down to people, acting all nice one minute and threatening your little brother the next. Sterling couldn’t even fathom the thrill he’d get out of killing Boras, but then he would be a thug, and knowing his luck he’d get caught, giving Lamont one more burden to stick in that book satchel.

Their momma was like that, putting everything on her back like God Himself had set it there. Lamont was just like her. *Just like her*. Smart like her and kind like her and believing in God no matter how much bad shit happened like her. Sterling was more like their dad. People made choices, he guessed. His choice on giving up his rehab was a whole lot easier after watching their dad give up on life. He just quit. Could fly a

hundred damn missions in Vietnam but couldn't bear getting shot down for jobs, each rejection coming with a friendly slap on the back that probably felt like a lashing.

When they were kids – Sterling must've been twelve, Lamont eight or nine – their dad drove them out to a small patch of woods, handed them each a pair of gloves and a shovel, and told them to start digging. Little Lamont could barely lift that shovel, the thing almost as tall as him, but he worked. They both worked. It was a muggy summer day and all the leaves were bright green. Lamont got blisters on his hands because the gloves were too big but he kept digging, his face all serious. His tennis shoes were quickly covered with dirt. They finally got the hole deep enough and their dad wrapped all his medals in a Confederate flag and tossed it into the hole. "You need to know this," their dad said, "racism trumps action, and country too. Those medals don't mean shit." Lamont started crying and swung his shovel at their dad but missed and that little kid would not help fill that hole. Their dad sat down on a log, took off his belt and whipped Lamont's ass but Lamont still would not help. The next day Sterling and Lamont hitchhiked out to the spot and dug up those medals. Lamont's blisters had split and he bit his lip the entire time but he kept digging, both of them did, shoveling out that dirt until they found those medals wrapped in that dirty Confederate flag.

Lamont was always saying there was no such thing as race, only racism, and Sterling would always counter by asking, "Why you wanna be white, then?" Like when he quit football right in the middle of his senior season. Nobody saw that coming. Then he asked Sterling to pay for his college. It was right when Sterling started losing all that money so he wrote Lamont a check and told him to cash it right then and to keep it in cash. Sterling always wondered what happened to make Lamont quit like that. People

hated him. But he owned up to it and then went to that college in North Carolina where you could line up all the brothers down one hallway. Sterling liked to give him shit about that, about the white college and wanting the life of a white professor, but he knew Lamont didn't really want to be white, he just wanted to be treated like a white person – or not like a black person. He wanted to be treated with respect. Sterling didn't have the heart to tell Lamont that no matter how many degrees he got, some people were still going to treat him like a stupid nigger. How wrong was that shit?

Jeremy was squinting at the houses, periodically shaking his head in disbelief. Every other house Sterling saw a little girl walking with her mom. God, did he want to stop seeing them.

“This guy, Boras,” Jeremy said, “he knows we’re coming.”

“He knows.”

“What’s he like?”

“You know,” Sterling said, “he’s into foreign films and shit like that.”

“Really?”

“No, not really. He’s a drug dealer.”

Jeremy rolled his shoulders again, the right then the left. “You and Lamont, you have that same smart mouth.”

“Jeremy, man, you better watch your mouth when we get in there. These people do carry guns and they will kill you.” Sterling shook his head. “Slow down up ahead.”

“Where?”

“Where the check marks the spot.” There was a big yellow checkmark spray-painted on the sidewalk in front of the house. Boras liked to move around and get cute

with his signs. Last week it was a Yankees flag and the week before that he found an old spelling bee trophy. He even got into the seasons, and would probably get down with some skeleton bones next week. It was what the world always needed, a clever drug dealer. The house was all whacked out with some kind of façade made out of grey brick like a castle. The entry way was circular and the top tiered. Jeremy pointed at the façade, a befuddled look on his face.

Sterling said, “I have no idea.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Jeremy said. “This is a business meeting.”

“Then why you want to sell that place? It was busy and the food was on point.”

“What do you know about good food?”

“See, that’s what I’m talking about,” Sterling said, feeling the pop of that rubber band. “I was in the NFL, dawg. I was a fucking millionaire.”

“Was. The game never slowed down for you.”

Sterling hated that Jeremy was right about that. In college his speed made up for all his mistakes but in the League he made all the wrong reads and couldn’t recover. *Everyone* was fast. Tight ends ran like wide receivers and wide receivers cut their routes on dimes. Pulling guards exploded through the line and running backs hit second gear like they were shot from a cannon. And the playbooks. They were five times as big and in a different language. They disguised zone as man and man as zone and faked blitzes and defensive ends dropped into coverage and Sterling couldn’t wrap his mind around it, always being in the wrong place at the wrong time, every week the evidence of his mistakes flashing up on a giant screen in the film room, all the veterans giving him shit.



Then – finally and in an instant – it slowed down. He could see the play developing just as it had in the film room: the running back sliding off a block and flaring out into the flat. It was the play the Cowboys loved to run on second and long. Sterling felt his feet moving towards the running back, his body in flow with the game and those forty yards of turf between him and the end zone and a split second to decide whether to play it safe and stick the back or go for the ball. The quarterback pump-faked down the middle but Sterling was still floating toward the flat where the back was waiting for the ball and Sterling could see himself crossing the goal line. Could see the highlights on SportsCenter and Lamont bragging to his friends – if he went for pick. If he played it safe and went for the tackle it would set up a third and long but he he'd catch all kinds of shit in the film room. Their cornerback would say, *I'd have taken that shit to the house*. Their weak-side linebacker would say, *Foil don't have those kind of instincts*. They all called him "Foil." As in, aluminum foil. In college everyone called him "Silver," as in sterling silver.

Maybe Sterling got greedy. It just felt so good to be swimming with the current of the game: the energy of the crowd, the rush of sprinting down the sideline with everyone giving chase and a hundred thousand people standing to cheer. He wanted everyone to forget about yesterday so he went for the pick and two steps from the ball his Achilles snapped. An explosion in his heel. He froze in mid-stride, reached back, then fell to the ground and watched the scat-back scamper past him for a first down. One play turned him into a falling star. One split-second where he got greedy.

Sterling popped Jeremy in face. Pretty hard. Partly because he was a little bitch who'd probably never been put over someone's knee and partly so he wouldn't go in there and get himself killed. Jeremy's head flew against the window.

"Like I was asking," Sterling said, "why you want to get rid of that place?"

Jeremy wiped some blood from his nose with the back of his hand. "Because, Boyd Tennor has to be shown."

"Shown what?"

"Who the boss is, and that he can't go around lying to people."

"What's that got to do with business?"

"Everything."

This tall ugly cat walked out the giant door of the façade and Sterling felt like he'd seen him before. He was all grumpy looking, and took a second glance at the Jaguar. Sterling said, "Seems like a shitty thing to do to your friends, is all."

"Why?" Jeremy asked, seeming excited. "What will Boras do to the place?"

"You know, hire a new pastry chef. Expand the wine list."

"You're getting smart with me again."

"What do you think he's gong to do? He's a criminal."

Jeremy chuckled and Sterling resisted the urge to blacken his other eye. He texted Boras that they were outside and wondered about the bad luck that landed him here. He won the Butkus. And now he was brokering a deal between two white assholes for he and his brother's freedom. And Lamont said there was no such thing as race.

## Chapter Seven

Lamont understood he had a tendency to over think problems. When he was younger he thought the difficult decisions of his past would swing forward to inform those annual and muddled moments of his present. Of course, decisions became more difficult, the process messy, forcing Lamont to create a dialectical checklist: his mother, his brother, and Christ. Christ came first, as the essence of being a Christian should involve imitating the religion's namesake; this turned out to be disheartening as what Christ would do naturally conflicted with what Lamont wanted to do, so he checked off to his highly pious mother who, surprisingly and often, said, "It's okay to be selfish once in a while, baby, just don't make a habit of it. As a black man not a whole lot of people are going to look out for you." Lastly, Lamont considered what his brother would do, and did the opposite. The entire process, at worst, gave him a clear cut two out of three. If he'd had this checklist when he'd quit football, he probably wouldn't have quit.

Not that Lamont regretted quitting football, but he regretted quitting in the middle of the season. He regretted letting his teammates down, letting an exceptionally selfish decision fall under the guise of being a Christian. Given the right bounces, they could've won state. To *be* state champions. To gain the world's applause. Which was why Lamont's teammates wanted to be state champions and Lamont did not: that very applause led to his brother's demise, led to Lamont getting that gun pulled on him, led to him wanting to be the antithesis of Sterling: seemingly, nothing.

In high school, Lamont was everything. Each call from a college coach, each scholarship offer, and each article in the paper added another bronze layer to the statue being built in place of his self. One reporter wrote of him: "A smaller yet faster and more

cerebral copy of Sterling Carroll who will follow the same path through college and into the NFL.” How could a seventeen-year-old not be inflated by that? Sterling, meanwhile, was slacking on his rehab, getting stoned and playing X-box, which infuriated Lamont. Unable to confront his brother, Lamont would lay in bed the night before a game and think about that first hit: the pinch between his shoulder blades, his helmet on the ball, the other body giving way to the momentum of his tackle. Six games into the season teams were running away from him, a fullback or pulling guard finding him on every running play, Lamont fighting through those blocks, coveting that first hit. It was the ultimate show of respect, running away from him, that respect ripening into pride with each scholarship offer – especially the one from Michigan, which he received after the seventh game when he had fourteen tackles and an interception return for a touchdown. Michigan: football and academics.

At a party, after that seventh game, Lamont felt invincible. High off the game and the offer and the moment when he realized no one could catch him. He was trying to hold on to it all – the way his cleats dug into the ground, the roar of the crowd on his heels as he sprinted down the sideline, his shoulders in perfect rhythm with his legs – but he could feel it wearing off. People drank beer from red plastic cups. Wire ran along the top of soft, white carpet and 2Pac thumped from tall speakers. Someone’s parents were out of town. Furniture was pushed against the wall. Bodies danced in the middle of the room, hips shifting, hands reaching into the air like they could push the ceiling through the roof.

Lamont was drinking a beer to temper the adrenaline that was uniting with his pride to form something combustible. He was thinking it all belonged to him – the party,

the night, the game of football itself – when someone said Sterling would never play another down. Lamont would not remember turning around and dropping the guy with one punch, he would not remember that the same thought had been haunting him daily. People stopped dancing and stepped back, their bodies instinctively forming the border of a boxing ring. The guy Lamont dropped was on his knees, bleeding and holding his nose, and Lamont stepped forward to kick him when he heard a click, and turned around.

A gun – of all things. The punk holding it wore a blue Broncos jersey with an orange “7” on the chest. He had small eyes and dark skin and was four inches shorter than Lamont, his arm reaching up to point the gun. 2Pac still boomed from the speakers, the base heavy. The only person moving was the guy Lamont had dropped. Lamont studied the gun, squinting, and then said, “You’re never going anywhere besides jail even if you don’t try to kill me.”

“Try? Motherfucker, I got your whole life in my hands.”

“My life is too big for your hands.”

“Are you blind?” He shook the gun. “This gun trumps everything.”

“I know you believe that,” Lamont said, calmly, “but it’s because you can’t see.”

“I’m the one who can’t see?”

Lamont suspected no one stood behind him but people squared off the other three sides. Girls were standing behind boys, peering over their shoulders, fingers creasing the sleeves of their shirts; it struck Lamont that no one had fled, that the possibility of violence was so mesmerizing and hypnotic it had blocked the exits. Despite the danger they stayed for the spectacle. The guy Lamont had dropped was still on his knees, his hands together in front of his face as if in prayer; blood dribbled through his hands,

falling from the point where his dark skin turned light. Base rattled the speakers. *Thump. Thump. Thump.* The punk with the gun had one eye closed and then Pooh – who played offensive guard – exploded out of the crowd and tackled him. The gun fell to floor and then Lamont and Pooh were whaling on the guy. The crowd suddenly erupted and quickly closed in around them, 2Pac’s lyrics still alive, rousing the crowd with his words and beat and Lamont could hear people screaming and chanting and could feel his own fury feeding off the screams which was a different version of how he felt sprinting towards the end zone – only this time the crowd had caught and consumed him.

Still and always Lamont would consider that moment the lowest in his life: devoured by violence, his fists repeatedly pummeling a person – was it the most or least like his true self? Was it created by the crowd? Embalmed in all the acclaim, Lamont could only see the shine of the brighter lights and the appetite of the more powerful crowds that awaited him. And then what? Then he was one freak play away from being like his brother: a fallen god who couldn’t get that high back. So Lamont quit football.

It made it harder that Pooh had saved his life, that no more college coaches would be coming to recruit Lamont, costing Pooh and other teammates possible opportunities to play at the next level. Lamont didn’t have his checklist or he would’ve understood that he was placing himself above everyone else, that while his suffering may have been Christ-like his motivations were not: he was being a martyr, not a Christian. People at school turned their backs on him in the halls. Players bumped him and chirped like chickens. Someone spray-painted “Pussy” across the hood of his car. Pooh was sure he could get a ride to a junior college if Lamont would keep playing but all those layers of praise had mutated into armor. Lamont had enough credits to graduate in December and

Sterling had enough money to send him to Davidson. Which saved him. Which was part of the reason Lamont worked at the Rabbit to pay off Sterling's debt. The other part was Boras: he already had Sterling's life; what else could he take?

Now Sponhiem was offering Lamont an academic lottery ticket, but the price of that ticket was no longer helping Sterling. Sterling, ironically, would take the gig with Sponhiem meaning Lamont should do the opposite. Even with Boras in play Lamont imagined his mother would tell him that he'd spent enough time making up for his brother's sins, which made it a push to Christ, who preached about putting other people first. That reminded him of something else his mother used to say, "Christians are losers, baby, keep that in mind if you want to follow a guy who hung out with sinners and climbed up on a cross."

Lamont had once looked up loser in the dictionary: "Someone who is unsuccessful or unlucky and seems destined to fail repeatedly." Insert "chooses" and delete a couple words and you had a working definition of a Christian: "Someone who chooses to be unsuccessful and fail repeatedly." That definition was probably what Kierkegaard had in mind with his concept of repetition. Lamont could tie all of that into his dissertation: the idea of things repeatedly going bad due to defense mechanisms contrasted with repeatedly choosing to put yourself last, choosing everyday to be like Christ. That could be contrasted with Nietzsche's eternal return – God, Lamont really wanted to work all of this out with Sponhiem, wanted it to be the rest of his life, and his own Christian ethic was going to force him to choose otherwise. No wonder so many people transformed Christianity into something else: Christ asked for too much.

Teaching relaxed Lamont and washed away the last of his hangover. When it went well, teaching was its own high: hopefully you'd opened up a new arena of thought where a young mind could roll around and get dirty. Lamont collected his notes and fell in line with the students exiting the classroom, all of them pulling out their phones or already having done so, one hand texting and the other reaching into the sleeve of a jacket. *Where are you? What are you doing? He did what?* Lamont took the stairs down two flights, fighting the urge not to check his own phone but knowing it was futile: he was more like them than he would care to admit; he wanted to know *right now* if his girlfriend had called and where they were meeting. Unfortunately, there was only a text from Sterling: HVE 2 TALK. URGENT.

Lamont followed the crowd outside where cold air eased through the opening of his jacket. Students on both sides of him milled down the stairs. A few students braved the cold and sat on the edge of the steps and Lamont stopped to admire an adorable redhead reading *Mumbo Jumbo*. The ends of her red hair curled out from under a white, wool hat and a long scarf checkered with yellows and oranges circled her neck. Lamont thought, *So this is what all of the fuss is about, the intensity of it all.*

He stopped in front of her. "Waiting for someone?"

She smiled, her comet of freckles diving into a dimple. "This hot professor."

"How'd he get so lucky?"

"Luck has nothing to do with character."

"I thought you said he was hot."

"That part was lucky," she said, standing to kiss him, "for me."



Lamont scanned the stairs for any of his students or Sponhiem. He was still uneasy about kissing a white girl in public, the mob having, historically, devoured people for much less, and for that specifically. “Might scare him off if he sees you kissing me.”

“Yeah,” she shrugged, “buy me dinner at the Rabbit and we’ll call it even.”

“You mean while I’m working?”

“Neil’s taking your shift.”

“I asked Neil three times.”

“I have persuasive powers you lack.” She looped her arm though his and they descended the cement steps. Lamont pictured all of this desire swimming around the Rabbit, a few drops of blood in the water, all of this desire fighting over space, all of this desire fighting over desire. Lamont knew Sterling had drifted into the middle of it all. People always drifted to the same place. With his free hand Lamont texted Sterling, then starting telling Mallory about his meeting with Sponhiem.

“This is where you and your brother meet?” Mallory asked as she pulled into a cemetery in West Elora. Grey tombstones cautiously staggered across the brown grass, as if embarrassed by their modesty and the sky was a wavy sheet of foil waiting to be torn off. Rain tapped the windshield of Mallory’s Jetta.

“Curve to the left,” Lamont said, pointing. “And yes, it is. We like to be around our mother when we have important talks. She always liked to be involved.”

“Aren’t I sensitive? What does he want to talk to you about?”

“He said it was good news, but that’s unlikely.”

“People can surprise you.”

“No,” Lamont said, “they really can’t. Sterling especially can’t.”

“You’re getting a little too immersed in this idea of repetition.”

“There’s his car, pull up behind it.”

“Yes, Miss Daisy.” Mallory downshifted into second and stopped behind Sterling’s black Lexus. A crease ran down the center of the back bumper and the muffler dangled a few inches from the ground. The tint of the windows was peeling away, creating light lines and disfigured splotches framed by the remaining coloration; it looked like his car had leprosy. Mallory said, “You never talk about your mother.”

The wipers swung back and forth, a random pattern of raindrops quickly replacing those wiped away. Lamont asked, “Do you ever listen to Kanye West?”

“I, uh.” Mallory let out a tender string of laughter. “I bought his new CD for you but I was afraid you didn’t like hip hop. I didn’t see any in your collection.”

“You wouldn’t,” Lamont said, flatly, “I keep it all in classical cases.”

“You are such a freak,” Mallory said, but the tone was, *You are so wonderful.*

“I am. And I usually don’t like letting other people speak for me, but Kanye – ”

“Hey Mama?”

Lamont nodded. “Hey Mama.”

Softly, Mallory sang, “Come on mommy come dance with me, let the whole world see your dancing feet.”

“It’s a love song, really. It’s so tender. It’s . . .”

“It’s how you feel.”

“It’s how I feel.”

The door to Sterling's Lexus swung open and he stepped out of the car with a bouquet of flowers. Mallory said, "Isn't he the good brother."

"He's the one people notice."

"You couldn't be more wrong about that." Mallory circled her lips with her pinky. "And it surprises me when you're wrong."

"Chase said that we deserve each other, and that he meant it in a good way."

"He's such a sweetheart. And he's scared to death of being nothing."

Lamont unbuckled his seatbelt. "I'm scared of that, too."

"No you're not," Mallory scoffed, "there's nothing you'd rather be." She laughed again, her laughter like paws hitting the ground, then kissed him. "Go talk to your brother, freak. I'm going to call Boyd and make sure he's got room for us tonight."

Lamont trailed Sterling into the sea of headstones, Sterling ten feet ahead and moving in long lazy strides. The flowers hung from his left hand, the yellow and white blossoms closer to the ground and the stems a slanted line wrapped in green paper. The wet ground gave under Lamont's feet. Rain dotted his glasses. He stepped over a grave and around a headstone, finally catching up with Sterling, and they walked silently for another ten yards until they reached his mother's grave.

Her headstone was granite and one of the largest in the cemetery, an anonymous booster donating it when she died. Sterling wiped leaves from the top and then set flowers at the base. A few cars sped by the backside of the cemetery.

"Looking slick, little brother," Sterling said. "Been teaching them young minds?"

"Been trying."

"What's the latest on Jasmine?"

“I haven’t heard anything,” Lamont said, embarrassed.

“I swear, Lamont, sometimes I think you forget you’re black.”

“I never forget I’m black,” Lamont said, “I just forget other people are.”

“Well, I need you to start remembering. Those white people will forget her.”

Sterling was right: poor people always got lost in the wash; they were like socks, and the middle class had plenty of socks so who cared if one occasionally disappeared.

“You ever going to tell me how you were involved in that?”

“Does it matter?”

“I guess not.” Lamont felt water drip down his neck and inside his collar. “Tell me this good news, then.”

Sterling had their father’s smile. Big and contagious. It was a smile with its own ontology, and Lamont had not seen it for a decade. “Little brother, I am about to give you your life back.”

Lamont frowned, betraying his brother’s excitement. “Please tell me this doesn’t have anything to do with Jeremy.”

“Does *that* matter? We can get out from under Boras.”

One of Sterling’s hands rested on the headstone, his thumb curled over the edge. He looked excited. Proud, even. It should be perfect: Lamont could quit the Rabbit and work with Sponhiem. Only, this did matter. Other people mattered. He said, “What did it take?”

“Man.” Sterling lifted his hand off the tombstone and punched the air, turning around in the process. “I knew you were going to get all moral about this.”

“What did it take, Sterling?”

Sterling turned back around, facing Lamont. Raindrops rolled down his face, a few wet trails ending in his goatee. The green paper around the flowers was pasted to the stems. "I brokered a deal between Jeremy and Boras, for Boras to buy out his shares."

"Aw, fuck, Foil, those people are my friends."

"Those white people don't care about you. We're blood."

"That doesn't matter. Whether or not they care about me doesn't matter."

"Did you hear that, momma?" Sterling asked, giving the headstone a knock.

"He's just like you, never seeing the big picture."

"And you're just like dad, letting the rest of the world fall out of focus while you get what you want."

"What we want, little brother," Sterling pleaded, his giant voice cracking. "You know your tips ain't putting much of a dent into what I owe. We might never get another chance like this."

"He will destroy that place."

"Your girl can get another job."

"People have put their lives into that restaurant. Boyd and Shawn –"

"Those cats don't care about you."

"That doesn't matter."

"What about me, little brother, do I matter?" Sterling walked around the back of the headstone. "You know how hard it is watching you work an extra job to pay off my debt? Knowing you hand over every penny you make because I couldn't stop dropping dimes on the worst team in football? It makes me crazy, Lamont. It was supposed to be the other way around." He put both of his hands on the headstone, then squeezed it. "I

promised mamma I'd take care of you. I promised her, and now I can finally do that. I can finally fix things."

"Why does it always break other people when you fix things?" Lamont thought of his teammates, how he'd let them all down when he quit under the guise of being a Christian. Here was a chance to do it differently, to do it right. Only in front of him his brother's heart was breaking. Sterling was right: they were blood. And Chase was wrong: people weren't at the mercy of moments, they were at the mercy of people, and nobody wanted to be a loser.

## Chapter Eight

Jasmine woke to the voice of the fine, fine man in the blue shirt. She didn't even have to open her eyes to know it was him, knew from the way his voice sounded like warm bathwater running into a tub and from the way it made her feel: grown up, want folding over her insides. Despite a paper-thin blue robe and three pink blankets, Jasmine's body was a cold case of rebellion, punishing her for the marvelous and awful flavor of the crystal meth. Maybe her body was betraying her for betraying it. A tit-for-tat. The next tit always one-upping the last tat. It was all too much, creating a second, stronger want, a craving for more of that meth even through it was the very, very last thing she wanted. How could you want two different things at the same time? Two things like being first and last.

"When she gets discharged," the fine man said, "we'll have to place her somewhere else."

"I hate this part," Emily said, "God, I hate it."

"I called Kyle Pierce and made a plea for emergency funding. He refused, of course, even to help with the hospital bills since she was officially in your care."

"She was officially in my care so he won't help but I couldn't officially get funding since I didn't officially have a place for her."

The fine man laughed, like it wasn't funny. "That's some system, huh?"

"That's some man, punishing a little girl for his vendetta against me."

"Any chance of that fundraiser happening this weekend?"

“I don’t think so,” Emily said, “Boyd’s caught up in something else now.”

Jasmine thought it was strange the way Emily said it, not really mean but not really nice.

“It’s about time you were done with him.”

“I won’t have you talk bad about him.”

“You deserve better.”

“Was I talking to myself?”

Jasmine’s mouth was dry. She could feel tape sticking to the top her left hand where the IV was stuck into her skin.

“There’s some talk,” the fine man said, hesitantly, “that Pierce might try to close you down, citing an inability to control your residents.”

“He might not have to try that hard,” Emily said, her voice a line disappearing in the sand. “How did this become such a mess?”

Jasmine knew “this” meant her, meant her baby and her sneaking out. All weekend people had been talking about Jasmine like she was something to be solved. Not a puzzle. Not like the pieces were spread out on a table and only needed to be put in place; start with the border and work your way in. Jasmine had no border. No pieces.

Jasmine had seen the baby doctor the last two days, the one who had tipped off Teyanna. The baby doctor had told Jasmine that her body was fighting to take care of her baby, fighting real hard which made it tired and meant it needed lots of help. Help from the medicine and help from Jasmine by letting it rest, which meant she had to stay in the uncomfortable bed with the metal frame, the frame Jasmine could move up and down by pressing a button. Up and down. Like all of the channels on the TV, more channels than the TVs at her momma’s hotel. Channels and channels. Even though Jasmine never



liked staying alone in those rooms she did like being close to her momma, liked being able to press zero on the phone and hear her momma say, *Front desk*.

It had been different this time, at the apartment, different in that she was excited instead of scared while the glass pipe circled the room. Different in how it made her feel after the meth filled her lungs. Everything else was the same: the same seven sad losers sitting in a broken circle; her friend's momma lounging across the couch in a ratty purple robe that flapped open, revealing a white T-shirt and black panties; ash trays and forty-ounce beer bottles scattered around the room; the man with the wolfish face who hid behind the sunglasses; the same skinny white fool sitting on a brown doormat in the corner, holding his knees to his chest, his eyes closed and his hands moving back and forth over bloody scabs on his arms. *Spiders*, her friend said, *they get under your skin*.

Jasmine didn't want the spiders but she did want that fierce rush that shot her into the air, the rush that left all of her problems on the ground, left them so small she couldn't see them anymore – only it stopped this time. That was different too, that it stopped, that it was like an escalator rising towards the ceiling only to stall instead of busting through the plaster. Right away she wanted another hit, wanted it before the escalator went back down. She wondered if anything was like the first time, wondered if that's all life was: trying to get that first time back but knowing, deep down, that you never could.

Wires ran to the stand without a TV. Jasmine wanted the pipe to move faster. The wolfish man with the sunglasses was holding it in his hand and talking to Jasmine's friend's mom. Jasmine leaned her head back against the wall, trying to focus, trying to stay calm, her mind suddenly scared of so many things: missing her ride back to Emily's crib and getting kicked out of Emily's crib and where she was going to spend the night

and where she was going to spend her life and all of it was beating so fast inside her chest that it made her scared that the beat would never slow down. Ever. The man in the corner wouldn't stop scratching his arms, Jasmine swearing she could see the skin peeling off, his ragged nails scratching and scratching and Jasmine starting to do the same, scratching and scratching, even though her arms didn't itch. It was something to do.

Then someone screamed *Willie!* and her friend's mom was off the couch and rubbing up against a man that Jasmine had seen before, a man her momma had called *William*. Her heart beat faster and she knew there must be bullets coming right behind William. The man in the corner barely had any skin left on his arms, all of it bloodied and piled up and Jasmine's friend's mom had her hand down William's pants, stroking him, trying to pull him into the bedroom but he wouldn't go, wouldn't stop looking at Jasmine, squinting at her, his lips starting to move, his words galloping towards her in slow motion. Jasmine's friend wasn't even embarrassed by her momma, staring at the space where the TV used to be, her head still swaying back and forth. Jasmine wanted the pipe but didn't want to get shot and didn't want to get kicked out of Emily's crib and just wanted to be back on that cot in the TV room. Why did she leave? Why did Teyanna hate her? If she could just smoke the pipe her heart would slow down and William's words finally made it across the room and he was singing, *Nick-el bag, nick-el bag, butterfly hit you with a nick-el bag*. And then he was walking towards her, saying, *Get up little girl*, his toes sticking out of his sneakers and cold sores all over his cheeks and forehead and Jasmine was thinking she was about to die. William was waving his arms and saying, *You Yolavia's little girl, You don't belong here* and everyone was

looking at him, Jasmine's friend and her friend's mom and the man in the corner, all of them laughing, laughing like it was a big joke on Jasmine for being scared.

Before William picked her up and carried her outside, before he told her *Don't ever come back here, little girl, I'll kill you if you ever come back here*, Jasmine swore all of the cold sores on his face healed up, that the dry cracks in his lips smoothed over and that glistening white teeth filled in the empty gaps of his rotted mouth.

## Chapter Nine

Boyd understood that being the lead singer in a band didn't demand the esteem of being a doctor or a lawyer, but it did supply the nightly high of being on stage: his band jamming behind him, the crowd cheering in front of him, the two forces fusing to produce a euphoric state. The crowd was at Boyd's mercy. Their lips would mimic his, singing along, Boyd maintaining the chaos, able to speed them up or slow them down all the while feeding off the energy and the power that came from being in control of it all. As soon as the encore ended Boyd was jonesing for the next show. So music couldn't save lives. It could change lives. You whistled a tune, sung a few bars, caught the beat and soon were in a better mood. Maybe the song helped you realize something about yourself or offered a language to clarify complex emotions. Music was art. When Boyd lost that art he feared he'd lost the ability to change lives – until he opened the Rabbit.

With Vine, Boyd's tragic flaw had been blindness, a refusal to recognize warning signs. He thought – no, he knew he was a good person. How could bad things happen to a good person trying to do the right thing? He'd been so naïve. With the Rabbit, however, Boyd was a practiced and savvy veteran matured by his past trials, trials that enabled him to control the present by paying heed to those same warning signs. It was all about experience. And control. And now the entire travesty of Vine made sense: God had let Boyd lose Vine so he'd be prepared to save the Rabbit. And this time, God was sending angels: last night Lindsey and this morning Amber. What were the odds that Amber would be walking into the Rabbit the exact same time as Boyd? Their alliance was predestined! Amber would push Shawn away from Jeremy. Boyd would convince

Shawn to let Amber explain what happened in Bamberg and get him home earlier.

Everyone was about to be happy. Until Chase busted into the room and raised his back leg. Some friend. Some God, letting Chase stumble in at the worst possible moment.

Chase stood there, triumphantly, as if striking a Heisman pose. His breaths were short and quick. His eyes were eighth notes frolicking across sheet music. “I’ll be sure and tell Lindsey you said hello when I see her tonight,” Chase boasted, “and that you couldn’t make it because of your *girlfriend*.”

Ouch. Definite setback.

Chase left and Pax followed. Shawn had a glazed look on his face, as if he’d seen an elevator crash to the ground. Boyd was thinking, *This is okay, I can fix this, this is not a big deal* when the house phone rang. Then rang again. The glass candleholders huddled on a round tray, hardened wax stuck to their sides and bottoms. White tablecloths stretched across tables, as if eighteen signs of surrender.

“Can you see why I don’t want him managing now?” Boyd asked.

Shawn’s thin lips stuck together. There were a few cuts on the tips of his fingers and a fresh burn on the underside of his right wrist. He leaned forward and picked up his plastic mug, revealing a water ring on the glass table. “That stuff Chase said, is it true?”

“What stuff? He was talking in cocaine language.”

Shawn set down the mug. “Did you hire someone to look into Amber’s past?”

“You and I were putting our lives on the line,” Boyd said, “I hired someone to look into everyone who works here. I was protecting us.”

“Even me?”

“You,” Boyd lied, “Pax, Jeremy, the dishwasher Jose.”

“What did he find out,” Shawn asked, still rubbing his hand, “about my wife?”

Boyd’s stomach grumbled. He pulled a pack of Gas-X from his pocket and popped two of them. He wanted to lie. But Shawn was his best friend and, sadly, Boyd was not a liar. He pushed out his chair, walked behind the bar and returned to the table with two short glasses and a bottle of Elijah Craig. He poured them both a shot and exposed Amber’s past. It was a zombie, the past, a zombie that kept crawling from its grave and haunting the present.

“I’m so, so sorry, bro,” Boyd said. “You have to believe me when I say was trying to protect your kitchen.”

Shawn circled the top of the short glass with his right index finger. The beginnings of his beard were splotchy, and Boyd thought that no matter how long Shawn grew it out, it would never fill in. Shawn dipped his finger into the glass of bourbon, disturbing the surface, and then flicked the trace of bourbon into the air behind him. He stood up and shuffled away from the table. At the kitchen door he stopped, and with his good hand scratched the top of his head, above the bald spot. “Dana’s great,” he said, without turning around, “call and offer her the job, again.”

Boyd took both shots. He hadn’t explained it well. He hadn’t properly expressed that he’d done it for them. Two white coffee cups, two rocks glasses, Shawn’s plastic mug and the bottle of bourbon remained on the table. Boyd tapped the table with his fist. He could feel Shawn’s misery inside of him. He hadn’t explained it well. Emily, he needed to talk to Emily. Needed to hear that sweet spell of her southern drawl. Voice mail. Fuck. He reached his arms across the table and wiped it clean, knocking

everything to the ground in a giant explosion of glass. Fuck. He took two more Gas-X, got a broom, and began cleaning up his mess.

He called Dana while sweeping and apologized for Chase's disruption. *It wasn't a surprise to see Chase coked up*, Dana said, *Touc ran EP with a rolled up twenty*. Boyd laughed, but what she said rankled him. Those guys had given Dana a job. Chase was still Boyd's friend. A thought crept up the back of Boyd's neck that maybe he shouldn't hire Dana, but he brushed the thought off and offered her the job, which she accepted, agreeing to be in that night to start training on the floor.

Boyd was mopping up the bourbon when the first vendor walked in with a slew of Spanish reds. He took a glass of Rioja upstairs where Shawn was rolling out dumplings. Flour was dusted all over the prep table. Pax stood at the far end quartering carrots.

"Hey," Boyd said to Shawn, "you want to give this Rioja a taste?"

Shawn pushed the rolling pin back and forth over the deformed square of dough.

Boyd said, "I think it would go great with the lamb."

Shawn set the rolling pin aside and picked up a short knife with a white handle. He cut a border around the dough, giving it shape by slicing away the uneven edges. Pax rolled his eyes. Boyd ordered the Rioja anyway. He signed in two more deliveries, tried Emily and Chase again, and was unloading the wine when Pax walked in and pointed to the front door.

Outside, rain drummed the black awning overhead and assaulted the cement without effect. Up and down the block, the squares of dirt that embedded trees had turned to mud. Pax pulled out a can of Copenhagen and began packing it, his finger slapping the tin top. "There's a major whine-a-thon going on upstairs."

“What’s he saying?”

“You know,” Pax puffed out his cheeks and lowered his voice, “I thought Boyd was my friend, I can’t believe he stabbed me in the back.” He shook out a pinch of Copenhagen over the can and put it inside his left cheek.

“Of course he’s not saying anything about how I was right about Chase.” Boyd rubbed his hands over his arms. “God, I’m glad you were there to see that.”

“I’m not surprised, I never liked Shawn that much.”

Boyd couldn’t believe how vindicated he felt to hear those words. It was a kind of ointment, Pax’s alliance. “I wish I didn’t need him to buy out Jeremy.”

“I gotta ask, did you really dig up that shit on Amber?”

“Those guys from Vine ruined me, Pax, I didn’t expect to find anything.”

“Well, spill it.”

Pax leaned outside the awning and spit on the cement; the rain started to break up the dirty salvia but Pax spread it across the cement with the bottom of his boot just the same. Cars drove past them both ways. Beside a blue newspaper dispenser the rain was rotting a section of want-ads, the paper stuck to the ground and the colors bleeding into one another. Boyd knew this wasn’t his information to share. It was between Shawn and Amber and his big mouth had done enough damage by telling Chase in the first place. But he was so glad to have someone on his side that he couldn’t stop himself.

“No wonder Shawn always works late,” Pax said, after Boyd had finished.

A wine truck slowed in front of the Rabbit and the driver signaled that he’d make the block and park in the back. “Don’t tell anyone, okay?”

“Who am I going to tell?”



Shawn sulked the rest of the afternoon, refusing eye contact when he and Boyd crossed paths, as if ignoring Boyd meant that Shawn's wife hadn't lied to him. Pax delivered periodic updates. Boyd returned calls on reservations but the book still looked a little lean considering the numbers they'd done last night. The last wine vendor finally showed at three and Boyd was about to run home and change for the dinner shift when the ring of the house phone yanked him back inside.

*Hey, Boyd, it's Mall.*

"Hey, Mall, you running late or something?"

*It's my night off, and I wanted to make sure you had room for Lamont and me to come in tonight.*

"I know it's not Lamont's night off."

*Neil's working for him.*

"You guys can't make schedule changes without telling me."

*I'm telling you now.*

"Well, I just hired Dana and I really need you or Lamont to train her tonight."

Boyd wasn't sure why he was saying that, someone else could easily train Dana.

*Have Price train her, he eats that stuff up.*

"Well, it's up to you, of course, but I know how bad you'd feel if Dana wasn't trained properly."

*What's gotten into you? Lamont came in last night on his night off and neither of us have been in once to eat. Where's that family philosophy you preach?*

Boyd said, “You tell me, you’re the one rearranging the entire schedule.” He wondered, *What has gotten into me?*

*I rearranged one shift. Jesus. Is it at all possible for you not get your way and accept it?*

“My entire life is not getting my way. You can’t go making schedule changes whenever you feel like it. I’m the general manager and I make those decisions. Besides, we’re too booked for you guys to come in and eat.”

*Fine, we’ll sit at the bar.*

“It’s just not a good night, Mall. One of you come work tonight and I’ll buy your entire meal this weekend.”

*You know what, Boyd, we’ll go to Ovio.*

“Mall, wait – ” She’d hung up. Was everyone around Boyd losing their mind? Was Boyd completely losing his mind? He’d just refused his two best employees service and had no idea why. Something toxic was seeping from his pores and making the space around him flammable. Shawn would appreciate this; he hated servers. Upstairs Shawn was peeling foil off some short ribs he’d smoked. The room smelled like cumin and soy sauce and Boyd wished he could come in for dinner.

“You are so right about servers,” Boyd said. “You won’t believe what Lamont and Mallory just did.”

Shawn picked at a stuck strip of foil. “Unless they found out some amazingly sensitive information and kept it from you, I probably would believe it.”

“I’m sorry, bro, but I’m not the one who lied to you.”

“Actually, Boyd, you are. You lied every time you saw me and didn’t tell me.”

“You and Amber were doing so well I – ”

In a spastic motion, Shawn closed his eyes and let out a painful growl, as if he'd been punched in the stomach. He picked the knife back up and for a split second Boyd really thought Shawn was going to throw it at him – but he just returned the short ribs.

It was official: God was out to get Boyd. Driving home, he tried Emily and Chase again with no luck. He tried his dad but got the answering service. He tried Mal to apologize and even Jeremy to apologize and when no one answered he had a premonition that he shouldn't do anything for a couple of hours. Everyone needed to settle down. But his fingers were squeezing the steering wheel and he couldn't keep his left knee still. He had to get Shawn back. So he called someone he couldn't believe he was calling, someone he'd surely regret calling later but someone who could empathize with the difficulty in dealing with Shawn's delicate demeanor. He called Amber Chillington.

## Chapter Ten

Amber Chillington stood in the foyer of her home watching Shawn sit in his grotesque Mustang. He was parked across the street. Tristan had been down for an hour. Amber leaned against the wall, able to see Shawn through one of two skinny windows that flanked the front door. From the room to her right, shards of television light disturbed the darkness of the foyer. The silk of Amber's pajamas felt sticky against her skin and she wore a sweatshirt over the black tank that matched the bottom. Poor Shawn. He'd already made the block once and returned to the same space. He couldn't even commit to parking in the driveway. Only in this world could a man with Shawn's passivity stumble into his own business.

The world was still slanted uphill against women. Not stacked against, per se, but definitely slanted a good twenty degrees. A woman in the business world without a degree was like a pulley without a rope. A divorced woman in the business world was either a closet lesbian or available to blow her way to the top. Amber wasn't fond of mass fellatio so she found other means of slanting things her way, things that had been working against women since long before Odysseus returned to save Penelope from those disreputable suitors. Amber leaned her head back against the wall and wondered out loud, "Where are all of today's heroes?"

What was more amazing, considering man's inherent nature for idiotic decisions, was that the balances hadn't been tipped in women's direction. Boyd telling Chase of all people what he'd dug up on Amber instead of simply sitting on it. Chase running over to the Rabbit all coked up, both events leading to Shawn sitting across the street. Sulking.

Meanwhile a brand new Navigator waited for him in the driveway. Boyd brought home the stupidity trophy though, hands down. His phone call allowed Amber time to run out and buy the Navigator. If Amber couldn't have a mythological hero to step in front of her, a stupid male would certainly suffice.

Amber loved Shawn – why couldn't anyone see that? She gave him money to invest with Boyd and Jeremy. She never charged him a cent of rent when he lived with her. She married him even though he'd tossed her against a wall, pretended it never happened, and she never told anyone. Unlike Boyd, whose mouth was a running fuse. Amber had never cared for Boyd, mostly because Shawn always loved Boyd more than her. Long before they opened The Drowning Rabbit it was *Boyd this* and *Boyd that* and *Boyd and I drank seventeen bottles of 1946 Syrah last night*. They used to go out a lot – Shawn and Amber, Boyd and his weekly “fiancé” – and Shawn would spend the entire night in Boyd's lap, getting stoned off every ridiculous word Boyd spit out. Boyd did have that excitement element Amber had never been able to match, which was surprising considering she had stacks of money and a body that could pop a corpse from a grave. Shawn only wanted to sleep with Amber; he wanted *to be* Boyd.

Amber was actually in agreement with Boyd this time: exterminate Jeremy. He didn't care about Shawn or the Rabbit. Sure, Boyd mostly cared about Boyd but Amber mostly cared about Amber. Everyone mostly cared about themselves. She still didn't like Boyd, but she'd take a narcissist who did want what was best for her husband over a spoiled brat who didn't. If she hadn't been on the losing end of that private dick move she'd have respected it. But Shawn already didn't trust Amber because of the Bamberg bungle and now she had to explain her previous marriage? Fuck Boyd Tennor.

Shawn's car door finally opened, the dome light illuminating his state of disorientation. Amber walked quickly into the TV room where a repeat of "The Closer" was running. She peeled off her sweatshirt and positioned herself on the couch. Shawn schlepped into the room and stood to Amber's right. Sauces speckled his chef pants and his damp T-shirt stuck to his flabby sides. Amber said "hi." Shawn slipped a socked foot in and out of a black clog. Such an artist. She waited half a minute then hit the mute button and asked Shawn if he'd noticed the shiny new Navigator in the driveway.

Shawn nodded, studying the floor for an approach. "Were you ever married? Before me, I mean."

Amber knew what people said: she got pregnant and trapped Shawn. She. Trapped. Shawn. Amber was a sharp and shrewd woman. She'd started her business with no property, one sign, and turned it into a real estate juggernaut. She had dumped Shawn. There was no Swimming Rabbit. If she was going to "trap" someone it wouldn't be the sous chef of a floundering Edenic Proportions who drove a car with a rotting floorboard. This was not to say that Shawn was not a good man, but a man worth trapping? Please.

Amber had climbed over a wall of anxiety to marry Shawn, even to tell him that she was pregnant. She didn't think Shawn loved her, he hadn't apologized much less acknowledged pushing her, and she could spend the entirety of their marriage supporting him. She was terrified of trying to raise a child and keep her hold on the real estate market. When she admitted her pregnancy it felt like a first sin, one that could resuscitate the violence of their past. She was scared he'd marry her and scared he wouldn't.

Amber mocked surprise after Shawn's question then pretended to ponder the matter, leaning forward so Shawn could get a good look at her now enormous tits. A practiced real estate tactic. On the TV Deputy Chief Brenda Lee Johnson was leaning across the interview table, breaking down a suspect. Amber said, "I was married to a man named Wes. For seven months, two weeks and six days, which was how long it took him to toss me into an abyss of debt." While Boyd's phone call was helpful, Amber knew her previous marriage would eventually surface. Everything came back around, especially the stuff you wanted to stay buried.

Shawn's good guy brain started processing that bit of information, working through all of the good guy angles. His index finger maneuvered the maze of his spasmodic beard. One perk of him being friends with Boyd and Chase was that he'd seek them out for advice. Amber could see those three, drinking beer, Chase spouting out, *CRL # 4632* and Shawn returning with that shrewd piece of male wisdom. Now, without the divine guidance of his two stooges, Shawn was a man without a strategy, which was a little exhausting for Amber, as she had to create arguments out of thin air.

"My first marriage was arbitrary," Amber said. "You and I dated longer than it lasted. And it's hard to love someone who wipes out your savings and runs up a slew of credit card debt."

It repulsed Amber to divulge that aspect of her past. She scorned the version of her self that had allowed all of the love and trust to be dusted out of her life. She'd fucked Wes. Made him meals and sucked his dick. Spray-spotted his laundry and told him that she loved him and all the while he was tangling her finances into a toxic knot. She was lost and broken for months after. Maybe she was still broken. She wasn't even

sure if she could relay the events without breaking down, but Boyd had backed her into a corner and it was far easier to forgive a victim than a liar.

Shawn walked into the kitchen and returned with a beer, finally sitting on the couch, smelling of sweat and sauces. He asked, “How did he steal from you?”

Good, Shawn had now lost sight of the fact that Amber had lied to him about a few major things. It was Amber’s preferred line of attack in selling a house: if someone doesn’t like the kitchen, talk about everything but the kitchen. “Oh, Shawn,” she said, “he had access to all my accounts. He applied for seven credit cards under my name and maxed them out, using a PO box for an address. I came home one day and, voila, no Wes. It’s why I’m so protective about *our* money.”

She knew she sounded flippant, but it was the only way she could talk about it, and maybe the only way she could talk. It had taken her four years to wander out of Wes’ mess and she swore she’d never be taken like that again, much less be poor like that again. Maybe that’s why she picked Shawn: she knew he would never do anything like that to her. Which was true: Shawn’s flaws were blatant and violent. Manageable. And now they had a child, they had Tristan Patrick, and his small life was melting away the hardened sides of her past.

He held his beer bottle in both hands. “Why didn’t you ever tell me about it?”

*Perfect!* Amber would’ve asked, *Why did you lie to me about it?* in order to keep the betrayal front and center, simultaneously raising the guilt factor. “I don’t even like thinking about it, Shawn. I was humiliated.”

Now Shawn felt bad. Who can be mad at a victim? Plus, Amber had been saved from breaking into her Bamberg defense. She should send Boyd flowers. She was going



to buy the Winston place, especially in this market. There was a Wal-Mart moving in and talk of a T-shirt factory. There was Tristan's college fund. And Amber was supposed to apologize for considering their son's future? If a man conducted some business on a trip no one would question *his* ethics. And it wasn't a man's world? Please.

"I'm curious," Amber said, "how long has Boyd known this?"

"How did you know it was Boyd?"

A rare slip. Amber could tell the truth: Boyd called her, and was Shawn's only friend with the business sense and foresight to manipulate such a maneuver. But Boyd had crossed Amber and she couldn't afford to have anyone in Elora thinking she could be crossed. Yesterday she was pushing Shawn and Boyd back together and today she was going to tear them apart. "Boyd is your only friend who wouldn't come straight to you with such sensitive information. He probably told Chase."

Shawn nodded, then revealed his own bit of sensitive information, which was his way of asking for help: Jeremy had left a number of messages on Shawn's cell about choosing a side. Such a dramatic little queen.

"Have you told Boyd about those calls?" Amber asked.

"No, I haven't told Boyd."

"Do you know what Jeremy is mad about?" Men tend to gloss over important details when they're running downhill, like if there's a lake at the bottom.

Shawn told Amber about the interviews. Amber wouldn't have wanted Jeremy at them either, but she would've been sharp and shrewd about it.

"Oh, yeah," Shawn said, "Jeremy claims to have interested buyers."

There was the lake. Amber knew she was far from a perfect wife and that Shawn was far from a perfect husband but maybe their imperfections could make the best of the situation. This business with the Rabbit, it had reached that macabre crossroads from which the faint of heart turned away. Amber's heart was not faint. "What do you really want, Shawn?"

"I want to keep the Rabbit."

"What about Boyd and Chase?"

"I want to keep the Rabbit."

If that was really what Shawn wanted then someone was going to have to explain what it was going to take, the exact steps he would have to make, the first being to call Jeremy. So Amber told him. After all, he was her husband, and she loved him.

## Chapter Eleven

Jeremy snapped his cell phone shut after a delightfully surprising conversation with Shawn, and Jeremy loved surprises. His face stung from where Sterling had slugged him and he could still feel the tissue swelling into a hideous bruise. He was sitting upstairs at the walnut desk that had belonged to his great grandfather. It was both beautiful and embarrassing, the desk, as bills of sale for the lives of slaves and the leaves of tobacco had been penned on its surface. Jeremy pulled down the roll top. Sometimes he wanted to destroy the desk in a futile attempt of symbolism and other times he felt it was his only tangible connection to the southern roots that had not grown past his father.

He leaned forward and pulled a crumpled envelope from his back pocket, an envelope he'd been carrying around since the fundraiser. A check for Emily. Nothing monstrous, but enough to buy her some time. He tossed the envelope at the slope of the roll top and watched it slide back towards him, a corner staggering against the thin wooden grooves before it fell to the floor in form of a crumpled "A." Jeremy's own little peak. Every day he put the envelope in his pocket and drove past the Lockley Home but ever since Boyd had started freezing Jeremy out he could not hand over that money. As if it was Emily's fault Boyd was an asshole. Stupid. It was all so stupid.

Into Jeremy's twenties he had been mortified by his birthright. He wanted to help people. Maybe make some amends. His monthly and anonymous donations to the American Lung Cancer foundation felt too far removed. So in 1989 he moved to New York City and started volunteering for ACT UP, *the* AIDS movement at the time. No one knew he was rich and no one cared that he was gay. He marched in front of City

Hall and Trump Plaza and was one of seven people to stop trading on the New York Stock Exchange by chaining themselves to a VIP balcony. God, what he would've given to see the look on his parents' faces when they saw the picture in the New York Times. He passed out condoms and clean needle pamphlets in front of high schools. He worked hospice for the homeless and organized soup kitchens. Then it all crumbled. A group of two thousand was driving up to Albany to protest the lack of AIDS funding in the budget and someone had tampered with their busses. People did that back then. Everyone was terrified. Seven busses broke down en route and they had to arrive before the congressional sessions started. Jeremy walked to a pay phone and presto! a slew of new busses arrived. It was grand. He was a hero. But the warts of his wealth had been revealed and suddenly he was being pulled from his hospice work into meetings with Larry Kramer and David Feinberg. Only they didn't want his opinion on anything, they wanted his money. They *expected* his money. Jeremy hated it when people expected money; it was like being dry fucked for six hours straight.

He picked up the envelope and headed downstairs.

He knew he was not an attractive man. He resembled something out of an animated Disney flick. For elementary school class pictures he was plopped in the second row behind the girls, their bows obstructing his mousy face and leaving a flawless view of his cowlick, which the boys behind him attempted to lob spitballs into. His pathetically competitive and class conscious mother took him to beauty parlors, used gobs of mousse, and had him pin down the cowlick with a brush while she unleashed a can of hairspray – and that wasn't why he was gay. As if he had a choice. As if God

wasn't punishing his parents for providing millions of people with lung cancer. All the money in the world and one ugly kid. And there was no such thing as Karma?

Then there was Boyd Tennor. Boyd Michael Tennor.

There was the son his parents wanted. The tall frame and the free-flowing hair that probably looked flawless when he stepped out of bed. Not to mention a personality that could draw crowds into the desert to examine lizard larvae or into Elora bars to hear a bad band, a band Boyd never would've started without a little motivation from Jeremy.

Boyd and Chase and Jeremy were at one of the Tennor's shindigs, drinking mimosas before the Izzy traffic started rolling in. Boyd always made sure Jeremy was invited to things. Jeremy had never been a person people invited unless writing a check was involved. Benefits. They loved him at benefits. He had no qualms admitting that it felt cool hanging out with those two before the crowd showed. Chase was being amicably obnoxious, skiing behind Boyd's wake and wearing an awful Hawaiian shirt. The sun was sneaking above all the trees that surrounded the Tennor place and the yard was ready with two grills, a keg and coolers of ice. Inside the house Boyd's parents could be heard creating various salads and side dishes. Chase was past his mimosa and into a Bloody Mary, raving about some band they'd seen the night before.

"That band sucked," Boyd said. He was still in his church clothes, his respectable Johnston and Murphys perched on the porch's white railing. "Elora isn't the music Mecca it used to be."

Chase spit out one of his ridiculous sayings: "CRL #32: Don't hate the game unless you play."

Boyd looked at Jeremy. "What does that mean?"

Jeremy said he hadn't the faintest idea.

"It means," Chase said, "why don't you start a band?"

"Yes," Jeremy said, "save Elora from it's musical freefall."

Boyd's face scrunched up like a used tissue. "Save Elora from its musical – fuck both of you assholes, I could start a band."

"Care to make it interesting?" Jeremy asked.

Boyd raised his mimosa. "How about a bottle of vino?"

"Fine."

"How about that 86 d'Yquem you've been sitting on?"

"Also fine."

"And by start," Chase said, "we mean an actual band with actual people who play actual instruments in actual gigs. Not Boyd Tennor unplugged at the Pyramid."

"A valid stipulation," Jeremy said, "there must be gigs."

"No d'Yquem for you, C-note," Boyd growled, dropping his feet from the rail.

"And what if I don't start a band, Jer?"

"I get to pick your wardrobe for a night."

Boyd swatted at a mosquito. "Done."

"And he has to go out in Elora," Chase added, pointing a finger at Boyd like a gun, "with us. On a weekend night. Right, Jer?"

"Another valid stipulation," Jeremy said.

Boyd downed his mimosa and threw the flute past Jeremy at Chase, who ducked, the flute shattering against the front door, pieces of glass all over the Welcome mat. Boyd's mother came outside and shook her head like it was the cutest thing she'd ever

seen. Jeremy's mother would've liked that, to have her son and his friends mucking it up on the front porch.

Jeremy was delighted to be a silent partner. All he wanted was for Boyd and Shawn to pretend he was involved, to be part of the fun things. Like interviews. Interviews were fun. And something Jeremy actually had experience in seeing as he was the sole heir to a billion dollar business that was in a constant process of trying to conceal its identity as a mass murderer. Jeremy knew how to spin. He could've spun right around Boyd's performance. He let *The Weekly* interview slide as an honest mistake even though Boyd's good intentions often sped right past honesty. The second time Jeremy understood that he really wasn't part of anything. Just as Boyd had brazenly thought he embodied Vine he now thought he embodied their bouncing little bunny.

Before that Jeremy had always thought Boyd didn't get enough credit for his generosity and loyalty. Every Izzy was invited to his parents' house in the spring and fall. Jeremy strongly suggested they hire a more experienced and dynamic chef but Boyd was bent on giving Shawn his shot. And Jeremy adored Boyd for treating him like everyone else – until it turned out that Boyd *was* like everyone else and embarrassed by Jeremy: he didn't want Jeremy's words next to his in print or Jeremy's face next to his on the page. All Boyd wanted was Jeremy's money. Well, fine. Jeremy was used to that. It was a remix of ACT UP.

Jeremy put the envelope on the kitchen counter next to his keys and dropped his gold Rolex on top of it. The silence was antagonizing. Plates were stacked behind the glass doors of cabinets. Wine glasses hung upside down above an island in the middle of the room. A snake of coffee grounds crept across the counter. Jeremy clicked on the

television mounted in the corner and found the replay of a weekend football game. He decanted a bottle of Chateau Margaux and poured himself a glass, thinking how much Boyd would love this wine.

His face still ached so he pulled a blue ice pack from the fridge and placed it against his eye. He didn't know why Boyd's betrayal had provoked such a violent desire for retaliation – oh, of course he did: he had believed he and Boyd to be friends. Back in New York, he had known the ACT UP people would eventually find out about his money but Boyd knew from the beginning, and liked him from the beginning. So Jeremy thought. Now he felt stupid and used and he wanted Boyd to feel the same, except worse. The essence of retaliation was escalation.

Which was why he floated the *Food and Wine* lady a hundred bucks to leak the picture, so Boyd would have to be seen next to Jeremy. It was also why Jeremy insisted that Sterling be in the picture: Sterling was a kindred castaway, a communal leper of the NFL. Jeremy's sins, Sterling's sins, they would be pasted next to Boyd for all of Elora to see. It would freak Boyd out and have no effect on the restaurant because despite Boyd's insistence, no one cared about Sterling's gambling problems except Sterling, Lamont and that Boras character.

Boras. Jeremy had been hoping for something a little more menacing. He wore pleated khakis for God's sake, with square-toed Kenneth Coles. The guy was a walking outlet mall. Jeremy got that Boras was aiming for the humble and submissive first impression bit, got that it allowed him to rise up through the vast Elora underworld, but the routine grated on Jeremy. For the five-foot life of him he couldn't understand why



Sterling hadn't whacked Boras and been done with it. That was something Jeremy learned from his father: losers are the ones afraid to pull the trigger.

The icepack was cold and the right side of Jeremy's face was almost numb. He wondered how long the black eye would linger. Maybe it would make him more menacing for the meeting he'd orchestrated with Boyd tomorrow. He'd liked being hit by Sterling. The violent surprise and the force of Sterling's fist and how fucking alive the pain made him feel. The Margaux was perfect. Gutsy and gravely. There were plenty of things money could not buy, but perfect wine it could. Despite being unimpressed by Boras the idea of Boyd taking orders from him seemed as perfect as the wine. Then – surprise! – that phone call from Shawn. Sure, Jeremy had warned Shawn, but he never figured Shawn had the moxie for such execution. Fortunately, Boyd did what he always did and pissed off his friends. How could someone be so generous and continually piss people off? Hate, it was the world's great motivator. Now Jeremy had the swing vote, which gave him options, and luxury of blindsiding Boyd. Maybe he'd sell to Boras. Or maybe he'd show Boyd how it felt to be expelled by his colleagues. Really, the decision wasn't even his, rather left to whichever way the rivalry moved him.

## Chapter Twelve

Chase woke up dazed. Out. Of. It. A tan tablecloth hung hardly an inch from his face. With the help of the table he pulled himself to a sitting position and surveyed the room, his organs sloshing around and his blood running from or to his head. His hair was a tangled mess and he could feel the remnants of cocaine deteriorating the walls of his arteries. He was in a booth for six in Edenic Proportions. On the table, a short glass sat next to a bottle of Oban scotch. From behind him streams of light stumbled in from the kitchen. Chase reached for his cell phone but remembered he'd left it with Celia, remembered that Celia had been making NFL type moves on him – and he'd left? Brilliant. But that wasn't even the worst part. The worst part was that he was supposed to go the Lockley Home, that he'd utterly failed ten sweet orphans. Fucking cocaine.

After bumping off each other the piece finally slid together: he'd walked back to the Pyramid from the Rabbit only to discover Darren's SUV, a blatant reminder that Celia was, in fact, a moment he had let go desperately wrong. He'd been too coked up to go see the girls which would've made him feel better, which was ironic since he'd only done the coke because he couldn't bear the possibility of being stabbed in the back again and once that happened he just wanted to be alone and drunk and he still had his keys to EP. That very morning Lamont had told him that people played a bigger part in moments than chance, and the Universe had slapped him with a day to prove Mr. Carroll correct.

Pans clanked in the kitchen and Chase's heart skidded past a stop sign. His jaw ached. His nose felt like someone had attacked it with a cheese grater. Turning around

onto his knees, he looked over the back of the booth to see Mitch walking toward him with a pitcher of water and a pint glass.

“Good,” Mitch said, “you’re awake.”

Chase fell back into an unflattering sitting position and asked what time it was.

“After nine,” Mitch answered, appearing to Chase’s left. He filled the pint glass and set both in front of Chase, a mass of ice cubes shifting inside the pitcher. Mitch picked up the bottle of Oban and the short glass. “Done with these?”

“I’m sorry about that, Mitch,” Chase said, humiliated, “I had a rough day.”

“I think we’re well past apologies.” Mitch flipped the bottle in the air, letting it turn over twice before catching it. His blue T-shirt and tattered khakis were scattered with flour. “I’m going to hit the lights.”

Chase rolled a rubber band from his ponytail, tearing off some hair. He was forgetting something. To the empty room, he said, “God, do I suck.”

It terrified Chase to think someone might leave his bar unhappy. This caused continual overcompensation leading to a long, seductive moment when he dropped the bill: what if the customer hadn’t had a good time? Chase had every intention of charging full price right up until the last second when a voice that didn’t feel like his own was cutting the bill in half or down to nothing. It was easy to fault Touc for EP’s fall but Chase had helped inject the needle. And Mitch had brought him a pitcher of water. Who did that? Mitch would probably let Chase rehydrate and send him on his way. It was all Chase deserved – minus the water.

Light toppled down on Chase and he closed his eyes until they adjusted to the brightness. He had downed two glasses of water when Mitch set down a decanter of red wine and two Riedel glasses. Crystal. “Here’s something Thackrey likes to call Orion.”

“Whoa, Nellie,” Chase said, “that is one expensive bottle of vino.”

“It’s your favorite – right?”

“Well, yeah, but what’s the occasion?”

“I felt like cooking,” Mitch offered, “and I figured you’d wake up hungry.”

Chase started to stand. “At least let me help.”

“Taste out the wine,” Mitch said, walking backwards. “Let me wait on you tonight.”

Chase poured wine into each glass, thinking how long it had been trapped in the bottle. Wine went through a rotten process to become good. Mitch walked out of the darkness carrying a tray with a white napkin draped over it, the corners dangling off the sides. Chase pushed a glass toward Mitch. “It’s your castle.”

“It’s the bank’s castle tomorrow.”

“CRL #11: Tomorrow’s a good day to worry about tomorrow.”

“Pretty sure I heard that one somewhere else.” Mitch smiled and swirled the wine under his pug nose. “That is some good juice.” He set the glass back down and disappeared again.

Chase gave the wine a swirl, some sticking to the side of the glass before sliding back down. God, did it smell good. Funky dark fruit, earth, whacky spice with cumin on the backside. Mitch returned with a basket of hot rolls and a plate of hushpuppies.

“Step back,” Chase said, “these smell spring-fresh. How long you been here?”

“Since four, packing stuff up.” Mitch took a hushpuppy off the plate, popped it in his mouth, and walked off.

Chase savored a quiet restaurant after close, a room that had recently bustled with customers suddenly silent and tranquil. The contrast was soothing. Tonight, however, that stillness was misplaced, or the element Chase could never place was absent, replaced by a sad nostalgia over all the shifts he’d worked here. Around him, the restaurant seemed to fill up, and he could see himself behind the bar, posturing, entertaining. Now he and Mitch were sitting down for a last supper. Mitch set down a bowl of mashed potatoes, a boat of white gravy, and two plates of southern delicacy.

“Chicken-fried steak?” Chase asked. “No you didn’t?”

“Actually, I didn’t.”

“Come back at me.”

Mitch finally sat down, and Chase thought some color and shape had returned to his face. “Chase, my friend, this is one my personal favorites: chicken-fried rib-eye.” He rubbed his hands together, splotches of dried flour pasted to his arms. “At some point I got away from cooking what I liked and this seemed like a good way to say farewell to the old EP. She was good to us, and we treated her like a whore.”

The breading around the rib-eyes was golden crisp. The gravy looked like velvet. This was beyond comfort food, it was undeserved kindness. Mitch had brought part of himself to the table and, as usual, Chase had brought nothing.

“Mitch, I don’t deserve this,” Chase said. “You trusted me and I gave shit away and came to work stoned and partied like Jim Morrison.”

Mitch tore two rolls apart and handed one to Chase. “You know what I wasn’t ready for?”

“Your staff drinking you dry?”

Mitch laughed, scooping potatoes onto each plate. “I was ready for that. I wasn’t ready for everyone second-guessing me. Everyday somebody was telling me I needed to fire my brother or my brother was telling me I needed to get food costs down because liquor costs were so high and Shawn wouldn’t stop with the passive-aggressive remarks that I needed to work more hours when I spent every night begging the guy to go home.”

“Every Izzy thinks they can run the show. Look at Boyd and Shawn, I thought they were going to do some good and help out Jasmine. And I’m here to tell you, that is one sweet girl.” *That I forgot about today* – what else was Chase forgetting about?

Mitch took a drink of his wine. “They’re probably doing the best they can.”

“So you’re saying I should keep my mouth shut.”

“I’m just saying that at some point people forget about the restaurant and start thinking about themselves. I didn’t know how to fix that. Chris Campbell does it by ringing a bell and screaming at everyone like they’re children. I thought I could do it by being nice and hiring my friends, but my friends were the least forgiving.” Mitch cut into his steak. “Maybe nice guys do finish last.”

Chase sliced away a piece of steak and dragged it through the gravy; the breading was delicate, the meat tender and flavorful. Amazing. A plate full of grace. “For my part, Mitch, I’m truly sorry.” Chase raised his glass. “This is the best meal I’ve ever had, and you’re the best chef I’ve ever worked for.”

“Cooking is the easy part, and the fun part.” Mitch tapped his glass against Chase’s. “People are what fuck everything up.”

“People, huh?”

“Yeah, people.”

“You’re the second person to tell me that today.”

“Must be true,” Mitch said, “but there’s also a flip side.”

“There’s always a flip side.”

“People also make everything better, especially your friends.”

Chase paced around the back lot of the Swimming Rabbit, Mitch’s unbelievable meal and Thackrey’s spicy Orion warming his insides. He had carried that kindness all the way down Main Street, smiling at every person he passed, fighting the direction Mitch’s forgiveness had mapped out for him. He’d figured on finding Shawn at the Rabbit, working late, but the Universe apparently had other plans for Chase as only Boyd’s Jeep and Pax’s truck remained. Fuck it. He climbed the backstairs to the kitchen.

Pax and Boyd were sitting at the bar, each with a half goblet of dark beer. Boyd was closest to Chase and the door, his cell and keys sat on top of a newspaper folded in half. A few sconces tossed down the only light. Chase thought: *Boyd really did create a beautiful space*. A yellow bandana was crumpled next to Pax’s beer, which he took a drink from, then elbowed Boyd, who winced when he saw Chase.

“Before you start yelling at me,” Chase said, walking behind the bar to face them, “I just need to tell you one th – ”

“There he is,” Boyd announced to the empty room, “my own personal Judas.”

All that food suddenly felt heavy in Chase's stomach. "I'm Judas?"

"You're Judas. Thanks to you my partner hates me."

"Before you girls get going," Pax said, pushing his now empty glass forward, "how about hooking a brother up?"

Boyd set his glass next to Pax's. "And set yourself up with one."

Chase tilted his head. "Chimay?"

Both Pax and Boyd nodded.

"Don't mind if I do." Chase took the two goblets in one hand, turned around, and filled both and third up. He set down the three beers then turned back around and hit *No Sale* on the register, ejecting the drawer. Chase put in a five and closed it back.

"I think I'm delirious," Boyd said, "I just saw Chase put a five in the drawer."

"I saw it too, Bigg'n."

"I get it." Boyd shook his head. "You came here to brag about your big date."

"Oy," Chase said. *That's* what he'd been forgetting.

The angles of Boyd's face tightened. "Tell me you went on that date, C-note, that you did not stand-up my fiancé."

Chase took a sip of Chimay. "I might've, kind of, slept through it."

"Jesus, no. They'll hate us." Boyd raised off his barstool and grabbed his cell phone. "Call them now. Quick. We can go meet them. For the love of God, call them."

"Left my cell phone at the Pyramid," Chase said.

Boyd fell back into a sitting position. "Between this and Emily not calling me back I'm having one hell of a bad phone day."

"He's a little worried about his little lady," Pax said, deadpan.



“I don’t know if either of you have ever met Emily, but pianos are always falling on her.” Boyd pointed at Chase. “How could you leave your cell phone somewhere in this day and age – oh yeah, you were in a hurry to fuck up my life.”

Chase rolled his eyes and caught a glimpse of the newspaper. “Is that you guys on the front page?”

“Yes,” Boyd groaned, “along with the guy who gambled his way out of the NFL.”

“Easy,” Chase said, “that’s Lamont’s brother.”

Boyd backhanded the air. “I begged that *Food and Wine* bitch not to leak this picture. Why does this stuff always happen to me?”

“Cause you’re trying to catch those pianos,” Pax said, raising his glass.

Chase clinked his glass against Pax’s. “He does like flexing for the ladies.”

“Comedians,” Boyd said, “the worst day of my life and I’m drinking with comedians.”

“We are funny,” Pax said.

“I crack us up,” Chase added.

Boyd laid his head down on the bar. “I am not a pussy, guys.”

Pax mouthed *Oookaaaaaay*. “No one said anything about you being a pussy.”

“I know what it must look like.” Boyd raised his head back up. “All I talk about is wanting to get rid of her and then I do the opposite. I should be thrilled when I don’t hear from her but instead I freak out,” Boyd spastically shook his hands, “like some alien force has a hold of me.” Boyd closed his eyes and let out a long breath. “You guys wouldn’t understand.”

“I think I might,” Chase said, thinking of his own, problematic “love.”

“You mean, your best friend has made your other best friend hate you?”

“Boyd Michael Tennor why do you make it so hard for a guy to help you?”

“Help me?” Boyd asked. “You’re going to help me?”

“If you’d just shut the – ”

Boyd’s cell rang. Boyd checked the number and said, “Finally.”

“Piano movers are us,” Chase quipped.

Boyd flipped Chase the bird and flipped open his phone. “What the hell, Em? I’ve been calling you all day – whoa . . . slow down . . . What?” Boyd’s voice rose an octave. “You’re doing this now, of all nows?”

Chase glanced at Pax who shrugged, then pushed his glass forward. Chase pointed at Boyd’s glass and Boyd nodded, still listening to Emily, his face crumpled in confusion. Chase filled up the glasses. He was feeling drunk again, feeling at home behind the bar and talking trash with his friends, as if this was his life’s missing ingredient – even though it wasn’t. It was what he had missed out on today. Helping. Maybe that was Chase’s moment gone right. Could it be that simple?

“This is insane,” Boyd said into the phone, “I’m coming over – I’m pretty sure – ” Boyd blinked, then closed his phone. He had a quizzical look on his face, like he was watching a boulder roll up hill. He took a swig of beer.

“Did the piano fall on her?” Pax asked.

“No,” Boyd said, “it fell on me. I think I just got dumped. Jesus, is there any possible way this day could get worse?”

Chase said, “About that.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Having been rebuked by Boyd for dinner on Wednesday night, Mallory and Lamont went to Ovio. She knew the entire staff and their frequent visits to the table fragmented the discussion about Sterling, a discussion on the cusp of a quarrel. Lamont was trying to work through his checklist before everyone's anger snatched the decision away from him. Problematically, by refusing Lamont and Mallory a table Boyd had performed his customary act of combustion and exacerbated the situation. Mallory was furious. Everyone, it seemed, was furious with Boyd and before Lamont realized it he was whistling that same angry tune, the tune that quickly catapulted Mallory to Sterling's side: "I can't believe you're even considering this. Do not tell them what's going on."

They were seated at a cozy two-top against a dark partition. A bottle of Bandal had been decanted and poured into two glasses, which were flanked by glasses of Cloudy Bay. Four wooden steps separated Ovio into two pristine dining levels. The restaurant was full but the conversation muted, like sneakers squeaking on a basketball court.

"Don't tell them a criminal is about to take over their restaurant?" Lamont asked. "Kay's daughter needs braces and Will's tuition is due. We'd lose our health coverage. Not to mention bankrupting Boyd and Shawn." Here it was, Lamont's own eternal return, a chance to save himself and let down his friends.

"You mean those two assholes who wouldn't let us come in for dinner?" When Mallory became competitive, her top lip quivered. It flattered Lamont that she was explaining away his sins before he'd even committed them.

"You're just angry," he said, knowing he was angry as well.

“It’s generally the reciprocal reaction when people treat you like shit.”

“Which is probably how Boyd feels right now. Anger develops its own momentum. We can’t let ourselves get caught up in it.”

In a playful voice, Mallory said, “Now the God thing is getting weird again.”

“Do you think we could enjoy our entrees without talking about Boyd?”

“I suppose.” Mallory finished off her white and slid forward her glass of red.

“But after dessert I get to bring it back up.”

And she did. The bill was paid, the black book closed on the edge of the table. Lamont was sipping a scotch, the intense flavors of peat and salt resonating on his palate.

Mallory leaned forward, an elbow on the table. Absently, she scratched behind her ear. “If you do tell Boyd, at least tell Sterling about Sponhiem’s offer.”

“Sterling generally wants what’s best for Sterling.”

“You never even give him the chance to surprise you.” She glanced past Lamont, her eyebrows curling in curiosity. “And speaking of surprises, Chris Campbell is walking toward our table.”

“I thought he hated you for quitting.”

Through a forced smile Mallory said, “He must have something to gloat about.”

“I’m sure he’s not as bad as everyone says.”

“It’s adorable how you think the best of everyone.”

Suddenly standing between them, Chris wore a starched chef coat. He had an oblong face and pointy nose that garnered most of the attention. A black skull cap inched down his forehead and he carried a rolled up newspaper in his right hand. Lamont

thought Chris looked like someone who always claimed to be having fun, but never had a lick of it.

“Chris,” Mallory said, as if greeting a traffic cop, “surprised to see you out amongst us peons.”

“I make appearances,” Chris said. “This must be your new beau. The man hand-picked to wait on *Food and Wine*. I taught Shawn everything he knows.”

“You’re responsible for that hair style.”

“I make the jokes around here,” Chris said, his voice like a propeller tearing through water.

“Okay,” Lamont conceded, “make one.”

“As usual, Chris,” Mallory said, as if jumping between them, “you are correct. This is Lamont.”

Lamont extended his hand without standing. “Thanks for fitting us in. It was an amazing meal.”

“That’s some grip.” Chris shook out his hand, dramatically. “Did you play ball?”

Often, Lamont wished he’d never played any kind of ball. Was that the only question white people could think to ask a tall black man?

“Lamont’s working on his PhD,” Mallory announced, “in philosophy.”

Lamont thought, *That’s interesting*.

“A smart guy, huh?” Chris said. “I’ve got some ideas. We should hang out.”

“You do make good jokes,” Lamont said, stunned by his own hostility. Mallory raised her eyebrows. Chris tapped the newspaper against the table. “Forgive me,” Lamont said, “I’ve had a lot to drink.”

“I been there,” Chris said. “Anyway, the reason I came out was to let both of you know that you’re welcome to come work here once that place of yours closes down.”

Lamont straightened in his chair. “Excuse me?”

“Please, Chris,” Mallory said, “we’ve had such a nice time.”

“I’m throwing you a rope after you jumped ship and offering your boyfriend a job on reputation alone.” He turned to Lamont. “You should especially be flattered, I’ve got people who’ve been waiting two years for shifts here.”

Mallory turned her palms over as if to say, *I told you*.

“This is no offense to either of you,” Chris continued, “but I give that place another month, if that.” He unrolled the newspaper, revealing Sterling with the Rabbit’s three owners. “Boyd’s got good instincts. I never figured him for a blunder like that.”

“Looks like good press to me,” Mallory said, “that guy was an All-American.”

“That All-American,” Chris said, “is an all-time loser.”

Lamont stood up. At the table next to them a man stopped cutting his steak, the knife stuck in the meat. Lamont felt a vein pulsating in his forehead. “You really shouldn’t talk that way about people you don’t know.”

“I shouldn’t?” Chris asked, taken aback but still displaying that animated, smug smile. “Look, bro, just because you work there doesn’t mean you need to get defensive.”

“Actually,” Lamont said, “it means exactly that. People get defensive when they feel attacked; it’s a psychological response to anxiety.” He could feel the attention of the room spraying him down. No one was eating.

“Lamont, honey,” Mallory said, matter-of-factly, “you’ll be sorry about this.”

“Listen to your girlfriend,” Chris mocked, “I can keep you from ever working in this town again.”

“You imbecile,” Lamont said, “she means I’ll be sorry about my spirit.”

Chris’ smugness turned to confusion, the skin above his small chin bunching together.

“Look,” Chris said, “this is my place and you can’t act like this.”

“Like what, exactly?”

“Like,” Chris moved his hands around, as if trying to sketch the answer, “*this*. That guy in the paper is a royal fuck-up and – ”

Lamont pushed Chris, hard, the starch of the coat crisp for an instant against Lamont’s palm before Chris flew into the back of a booth. He immediately feared that he had disappointed and humiliated Mallory, that he had revealed an element of his self she would no longer tolerate. She stood, took her purse from the back of the chair, and said, “Is this what you mean by not getting caught up in the momentum?”

“You’re right, I’m going to be sorry about this.” Servers gathered around Chris, helping him up.

Mallory looped her arm through Lamont’s. “We’ll be sorry together.”

At seven-thirty the next morning Lamont was back at IV, his body battling another hangover and his spirit struggling through another episode of embarrassing behavior. He really was becoming an Izzy. Shards of conversation shattered around the room then instantly pieced back together. A college kid with cropped brown hair pulled

two books, an iPod and a notebook from his backpack. Lamont was waiting on two biscuits. He opened the Bible to Job.

*Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.* Lamont was unclear at whom his anger was actually directed. Boyd? Sterling? Himself? Boyd had called Lamont at eleven-thirty last night and five more times in the next ten minutes before Lamont turned off his phone. This was the response Christ warned against: Fuck me? Fuck you!

*Then Satan answered the Lord, "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives."* Lamont had turned on his phone this morning to see that Boyd had called sixteen more times, leaving a litany of frenzied messages about Sterling and Jeremy. Again Lamont considered his checklist: Sterling wouldn't call Boyd back, which meant Lamont should, that his mother would say it was okay to be selfish. This was it, the Christian quandary: yourself or your neighbor.

*Then his wife said to him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die."* A smiling blonde with a maze tattooed up her right arm delivered Lamont's biscuits. He sighed, then texted Boyd that he was at IV. He finished his first biscuit and received a text from Boyd: B THER N 10. Eight minutes later Boyd walked in the door, waving to Lamont and pointing at the register. Lamont held up his coffee. Boyd nodded. Lamont returned to Job. Job. Who lost everything only to get it back, but that ending had been tacked on. In the unedited version, he simply lost everything.



Boyd set down his yellow laminated number and two lattes in glass mugs, each with a layer of dark espresso vacillating between layers of steamed milk. He wore a long-sleeved black T-shirt and an orange baseball hat, bright like a hunting vest.

Lamont said, "That's a funny looking cup of coffee."

"Even from the front of the restaurant I could tell you needed a latte."

"It's been a stressful couple of days."

"Tell me about it," Boyd said, "I don't know what else could go wrong."

"You could lose everything, your family could die, you could get cancer and develop lesions all over your body."

"For your information, Mister Reality Check, I am about to lose everything."

Boyd snapped two yellow packets of Splenda back and forth. "Not to mention Emily broke up with me last night."

"What's going on with Jasmine?"

"Did you hear me?" Boyd stirred in the Splenda, his spoon clinking off the insides of the glass, the brown line of espresso disappearing into a swirl of white. "I got dumped." Boyd tapped Lamont's Bible with his index finger. "That's me. I'm Job."

"You're not – all you ever talked about was what a burden she was to you."

"Burden-schmurden. She got me, and that's not nothing."

"Actually, Boyd, it is nothing. If you spend enough time around someone, they get you, even a conundrum like yourself."

"Your mocking me," Boyd said, incredulously. "Emily just wiped her feet on my heart and you're mocking me."

"Somehow, I see you bouncing back from this."

“Where’s your Christian sympathy?” Boyd scooped two ice cubes from his water into his latte. “And where are my biscuits?”

Lamont spotted the same tattooed blonde, shifting her hips to slide between two tables. “Ask and you shall receive.”

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Boyd said, as the girl set down his biscuits. He unwrapped the first one and said to Lamont, “Shawn left me a cryptic message at six this morning about Jeremy wanting to have a meeting. So now would be a good time to tell me that your bother and Jeremy were just out joy riding yesterday.”

“After you tell me what’s going on with Jasmine.”

“I have to help myself before I can help others.”

“What’s that from, Luke?”

“Quit making me feel bad,” Boyd said, biscuit in hand, “I’ll give you Emily’s number and you two can take the reins on this.”

“So I can set up the fundraiser this weekend?”

“I’m doing the best I can, Lamont. Will you just drop this and tell me whatever’s going on with your brother and Jeremy is nothing to worry about?”

Fuck me? Lamont crossed his arms. “It’s nothing to worry about.”

“Thank, God.” Boyd bit into his biscuit. A man to Lamont’s right clicked a pen open and closed. The kid to Lamont’s left was working out calculus equations, his pencil scratching the paper, his free hand patting the table next to his iPod. Lamont picked up a napkin off the table and worked over his hands.

“Actually,” Lamont said, “you should worry about it.”

Boyd set down his biscuit and closed his eyes. “Go ahead.”

Lamont went ahead. When he was finished, Boyd opened his eyes and said, “Fuck. Fuck-ity-fuck-fuck-fuck. Why does this always happen to me?” He opened his cell phone. “Daniel, it’s Boyd, I need to get all of that rolling, like an hour ago. Call me.” Boyd closed his phone. “What do you do, Lamont, when you don’t know what to do?”

Lamont told Boyd about his checklist: his mother, his brother, and Christ.

“I swear they put crack in these things,” Boyd said, swallowing. “And I figured you for a straight to the kid kind of guy. Why even mess around with the other two?”

Lamont shrugged. “Because I’m a coward.”

“Bro, you are not a coward. You came in here and flexed the truth in spite of me being a complete ass last night – which I’m sorry about, by the way. Jeremy is a vindictive coward. Shawn is a passive-aggressive coward. You, are not a coward.”

“I appreciate the pep talk, but the other two options are cowardly. Most of the time doing what Christ would do means giving up more than I want.”

“Really? It’s always worked out well for me.”

Lamont considered silence but honesty allowed him grounds for moralizing.

“That’s because you don’t take into account that Christians are losers.”

“Here we go. Please, professor Carroll, explain to me the error of my ways.”

“Turn the other cheek, forgive your neighbor seventy times seven, all who humble themselves will be exalted and all of those who exalt themselves will be humbled. If you apply Christ’s teachings to this situation, you should let Jeremy have the Rabbit.”

“I do not like your Christ.”

“It’s the Bible’s Christ.”

“Whatever. In exactly,” Boyd looked at his cell phone, “fifty-three minutes I’m walking into my bank and drawing up papers to buy Jeremy out. The Rabbit is my temple and I’m going to flip over some tables and drive out some sinners. Kick some hedonistic ass.”

“That’s the impulse, isn’t it? To treat them like they’re treating you?”

“Do you know how many things had to go right for me to find this out? If I hadn’t talked to you I would’ve gone into this meeting and gotten blindsided by those two assholes. Everything happens for a reason, and the reason here is that God wants me to save the Rabbit.” Boyd tossed the last bite of biscuit toward his mouth, but it bounced off his chin and he caught it against his chest, a few crumbs falling into his lap.

“John Calvin ruined everything for you Presbyterians.”

“If you don’t think I should save the Rabbit, then why did you tell me all of this?”

“It was the right thing to do.”

“I call bullshit. You’ve been riding my ass ever since I walked in the door.” He wagged a finger at Lamont. “There’s something else.”

Lamont considered it, surprised by the insight. He was using a theological argument to try and convince Boyd to let Jeremy have the Rabbit – why was he doing that? It was rather selfish . . . of course: it was selfish. Lamont was trying to follow the Christian ethic and still get what he wanted by circumventing the ethic itself: if Boyd let the Rabbit go there would no guilt in betraying Sterling and Lamont could work with Sponhiem. “I’m trying to escape my own eternal return.”

“English, please.”

“I’m trying not to repeat a huge mistake I made earlier in my life.”

“Duh,” Boyd said, “this is exactly what happened with me and Vine. It’s really amazing how much we have in common.”

“Astounding.”

“So, honestly, you think I should let this Boras character have the restaurant I built with my own two hands? Putting my employees jobs and Shawn’s career and my parents’ house all at risk because Christians are losers?”

“Of course not,” Lamont admitted. “If it was the other way around, if you could save them by giving up the Rabbit.”

“Buuuuut its noooo-oooo,” Boyd sang. Then he pointed both of his index fingers at Lamont and fired them off alternatively, making shooting sounds.

“What are you doing?”

Boyd kept firing. “I’m gunning down your argument.”

“That you are.”

“I was riiii—iight,” Boyd sang, “and Lamont was wrooo – ” Boyd’s cell phone started buzzing around the table. “Hey, Paxy . . . I’m having breakfast with him right now . . . what?” With the cell phone against his ear, Boyd asked Lamont, “Did you beat the shit out of Chris Campbell last night?”

Not even twelve hours. “No punches were thrown.”

Into the phone Boyd said, “I’ll call you back.” Then to Lamont, “Spill.”

Lamont conceded, and told Boyd the events as he remembered them, ending with Chris Campbell landing against the back of the booth. When Lamont was finished Boyd took off his orange hat and ran a hand through his hair. “What happened after that?”

“We fled, Boyd, I fear the mob.”

“That’s the best story I’ve ever heard.”

“That’s funny, I think it’s the worst.”

Boyd put his hat back on. “This cements you in Izzy lore as the guy who kicked Chris Campbell’s ass in the middle of a Saturday night shift.”

“It was Wednesday, and no punches were thrown.”

“You know that doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah,” Lamont said, “I know.”

Boyd’s cell phone buzzed again; he rolled his eyes when he checked the number. “Good morning Shawn . . . no, I haven’t heard anything about Lamont tearing up Ovio.” Boyd smiled at Lamont, boastfully. “I have no idea what Jeremy wants to meet about but I’ll be there – hey, I’m going to be a little late this morning. You don’t mind do you . . . thanks, partner.”

“Think Shawn knows about Boras?” Lamont asked.

“I think Jeremy is playing him like an X-box.” Boyd leaned back and threw up his arms. “Aren’t you amazed at this sequence of events? If Chase, of all people, hadn’t come into the Rabbit last night then I don’t call you and I lose the restaurant.”

“Or, if you simply would’ve let me and Mallory come in for dinner last night I would’ve told you then.”

“That wasn’t God’s plan.”

“People always think they’re tuned in to God’s plan after events unfold.”

“I’m Lamont and I’m smarter than everyone,” Boyd scoffed. “I’m serious. One minute Chase is busting into the Rabbit making Shawn hate me, and the next he’s saving my ass. If that’s not God’s will, I don’t know what is.”

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

“What else could make Chase do something like that?”

Lamont finished his latte, the last of it tepid. “Often it’s something unrelated.”

“And you?”

“And me, what?”

“I was a complete ass to you and Mallory last night and you could’ve easily not called me this morning. I wouldn’t have called me this morning.”

“We can both be grateful I have a higher moral standard than you.”

“You went through that checklist, didn’t you?”

Lamont nodded.

“See,” Boyd said, his hands out, “that’s God’s will. It happened for a reason.”

“No, it’s free will. And the reason things happen is people.”

“Whatever it’s called,” Boyd reached his hand across the table and grabbed Lamont’s forearm, “from the very bottom of my heart I thank you.”

Surprised by the gesture, Lamont said, “You’re welcome.”

“And you’re fired.”

“I don’t ever think that will be funny, Boyd.”

“I’m serious as syphilis. You’re fired. Don’t even think about coming to work tonight.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Riding high in his SUV, driving down Main Street at seven Thursday morning, Shawn felt as if he had palmed a hundred dollar bill to a bouncer and been granted access into a higher class of existence. Smaller cars slowed, allowing him to change lanes. He looked down into the lives of Civics and Tercels, watching people prattle on cell phones and struggle to fit coffee into cup holders. He felt powerful. In the past, parking his battered Mustang next to Boyd's Jeep produced feelings of inferiority; even covered in mud the Jeep seemed to epitomize their disparate personalities: everyone wanted to ride in a Jeep. It was fun. You could take the top off. Today, all of that would change. Boyd's Jeep didn't have power windows or a DVD player in the back. Boyd didn't have a GPS system.

Last night, during and after the shift, Shawn had not known where to turn for guidance. Chase had run into the restaurant on rails. Boyd had betrayed Shawn by hiring a private investigator. His wife had led him into their marriage with a series of lies, presenting them as breadcrumbs that Shawn supposed he could follow back home. His parents would only remind him of their present problems and his past promises. Shawn needed advice that was not tied to the sentimentality of the past and spoke to this new and violent version of himself. He needed the kind of person who found out where newly divorced men went for Happy Hour and flirted for their listings. So instead of getting angry with Amber, he told her what Boyd had done. Not because she would feel remorse, but because if Shawn understood one thing about his wife, it was her distaste for losing. At anything. If someone picked another agent it bothered her for months. When



she and Shawn used to play Spades against Boyd and Emily, Amber once walked out of Emily's house without saying a word when Shawn overbid and cost them the game. Amber would tell Shawn what to do, perhaps not out of marital duty, but certainly in the spirit of retaliation.

And she did, she told Shawn what to do. Most of Shawn could not wait to see the series of expressions on Boyd's face: surprise, disappointment, and finally despair. It was, at the very least, what Boyd deserved for the days and weeks he had hoarded Amber's past as if it was currency. Weren't they friends? They had been, and because of that friendship a small part of Shawn, a part that was like a single instrument in an orchestra, feared that he was not doing the right thing. As if by its own volition, the Navigator drove five miles south and parked behind Ovio.

Standing at the edge of a prep room Shawn had tried and failed to duplicate, he felt inept. While working at Ovio Shawn had become accustomed to the order of things and admired the results, so at the Rabbit he stacked the pans in the same places and put the oven against the back wall and the white board by the back door. Still, Shawn's handwriting was wretched and the Rabbit's prep room was undersized with harsh brick walls. Chris' handwriting was square and precise. Ovio's prep room was spacious with yellow walls and a linoleum floor. Imitation, it seemed, was more than setting.

Chris was leaning on the prep table against his elbows, reading the newspaper. His black skullcap waited patiently next to a white cup of coffee. "Good," Chris said, without looking up, "you came to apologize."

Shawn's palms began to sweat. He walked toward the table feeling as if he still worked for Chris. "For what?"

"Mallory's boyfriend. They came in last night and he caused a ruckus. Really embarrassed you guys." Chris tapped the table with both hands, his weight still on his elbows. "You'd never catch any of *my* servers acting like that. I assume you'll fire him."

"What do you mean, a ruckus?"

"You know," Chris said, finally pulling his weight from the table, "a ruckus."

"He's a pretty calm guy and an exceptional server." Shawn had never liked Lamont, and found the urge to defend him both surprising and disagreeable.

"I just showed him the picture from the paper."

"And I'm sure you said something condescending about his brother."

"His brother?"

"Yeah," Shawn said, "Sterling Carroll is his older brother."

"Oh, so I'm supposed to assume that all black people are related?" Chris returned his weight to his elbows and his attention to the paper, as if Shawn had left the room.

"God, you can be a dick."

Chris looked up, perplexed. "You can't come in here and talk to me like that."

Chris was always making those kinds of statements and people were always accepting them as law, Shawn included. But today Shawn felt powerful and said something he'd always wanted to say: "Why not?"

"Because it's my kitchen, and I won't allow it."

"I just talked to you like that and nothing happened."

Chris rolled his eyes, exasperated, then threw his cup of coffee at Shawn, who tried to step aside but the coffee still splashed down the front of his pants. The cup flew past him and shattered on the floor. “There,” Chris said, “something happened.”

Shawn shook out his legs. “Why do you act like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like a child. Throwing things. Screaming at people.”

“I hear you’ve been doing your own share of screaming. Why do you do it?”

“That’s different.”

“That’s not what I asked.” Chris closed the newspaper. “Why do you scream on the line?”

“People act like idiots.”

“How?”

“Name it. Somebody plating or cooking something wrong. Servers letting hot food get cold or cold food get hot or singing stupid TV songs so I can’t keep all of the orders straight. Pax dipping on the line. Boyd seating the entire restaurant at once.”

“It’s maddening, isn’t it? No one gets it.”

“Yeah,” Shawn said, “no one gets it.”

“This space,” Chris said, tapping the table with his index finger, “it’s mine, and I refuse to let anyone think they can have it, even for a second.”

“And if they try to take it from you?”

“You throw a cup of coffee at them.”

“Even if they’re your friend?”

“Fuck your friends, Shawn, and fuck their poor little feelings. That place of yours is in a freefall and you have to decide if you’re going to be the guy who makes sure his friends land safely or the guy who makes sure his kitchen does.” Chris pulled on his skullcap and straightened it, the bottom of his palms adjusting the fabric. “And start wearing a hat, to differentiate yourself.”

“A skullcap?”

“No, that’s my thing. Be an individual. Try a beret or something.”

Shawn called Boyd on his way to the Rabbit, out of courtesy or nerves, the conversation itself like a swerve to avoid an animal on the road. Once at work Shawn set to cleaning fish, starting with the ono. A lot of chefs ordered filets so they wouldn’t have to debone, but it was one of Shawn’s favorite aspects of the craft. He had worked on a fishing boat one summer, convincing his father it would eventually cut down on costs, which it did. Shawn thought of his father, tired and working the stores. He slid the knife behind the ono’s gill, quickly moving to the backbone and cutting straight to the tail, under the filet. Boyd would be fine. He had charisma. Allure. He would be fine.

Ten minutes later Pax walked in and unleashed a long whistle. “That is one sweet ride out back.”

Shawn tried not to smile. “Yeah?”

“Hell, yeah.” Pax let his backpack slide off his shoulder and into his hand.

“Things must be going pretty good around here for you to pony up for that puppy.”

Shawn flipped over the fish. “It was a present from Amber.”

“Maybe I’ll look into getting hitched,” Pax said, walking past Shawn and into the office.

Shawn cut away the rib bones. He had a son now. He needed a safer car. “Hey, did you hear about Lamont tearing up Ovio last night?”

Pax returned, tying the drawstring of his chef pants. “Our Lamont?”

“Apparently he caused some kind of ruckus.”

Pax laughed. “Can you describe the ruckus, sir?”

“Well, no, but that’s not a good look for us.”

“It was a line from – never mind. Sounds like Izzy gossip to me, bigg’n.”

“I heard it directly from Chris this morning.”

“Where’d you run into him?”

That was stupid. “I had to, uh, stop by there.”

“Uh-huh.” Pax nodded, then spun his baseball cap around and washed his hands. He pulled another cutting board from under the prep table, set it next to Shawn’s, and then got some grouper from the walk-in.

“Boyd won’t be in until this afternoon,” Shawn said, feeling exposed. He picked up a pair of needle-nosed pliers. “Big surprise, huh?”

“Boyd had a rough one last night, Emily dumped him.”

Shawn ran his fingertips down the fish, gently massaging the flesh, finally hitting the tip of a larger bone and using the pliers to pull it out. Pax unwrapped the grouper from the wax paper and dropped it on the cutting board, a small dead eye peering up at Shawn. “Don’t tell him I told you, but I think he’s clearing shit out of Emily’s place.”

Shawn traded cutting boards with Pax, relinquishing the deboned ono. Pax knew all of Shawn's steps, had known he would debone the grouper next without even asking. They had patterns. Shawn slid the knife under the gill of the grouper and found the backbone, the blade of the knife facing the tail. "It's probably nothing," Shawn said, "but Jeremy's been making some noise about selling his shares. If things start getting weird, I hope you'll stick around."

Pax slid his knife between the skin and the meat, moving down the body and cutting away the skin. "Hopefully things won't get weird. We got a good thing going here, and that's easy to forget."

Shawn plucked out the rib cage. "Sometimes, you've got to pick a side."

"I thought we were making people dinner," Pax said, working down the ono, slicing off filets every inch, "not going to war."

Jeremy's face was a scramble of anger accentuated by bruising around his left eye. The three of them sat at a square table in the middle of the restaurant, Shawn parallel to the kitchen door and facing Jeremy, both of them flanking Boyd whose back was to the bar. His keys and phone were perched on a manila folder and an orange hat hung behind him from the top right corner of his chair. The front curtains were drawn, as if concealing a crumbling regime. The cappuccino machine hissed. Shawn half-expected the wine bottles to shoot off the shelves in protest. Boyd had waltzed in a little past noon and surprised Shawn by having fired Lamont. It was one less thing Shawn had to do and one more thing he could blame on Boyd when, in exactly one hour, he would inform the

staff of the change. They'd all be glad Boyd was gone. They all talked about how little he did during a shift.

"Jer," Boyd said, "what happened to your eye?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Okaaaaay," Boyd said, "what do you want to talk about?"

Jeremy squinted at Shawn. "You didn't tell him?"

Shawn swallowed. "I thought we were going to tell him together."

"What is this, couples counseling?" Jeremy rolled his shoulders. "I'm so sick of your kind, both of your kinds."

"What kind is that, Jer?" Boyd asked, sarcastically.

"The cowardly kind," Jeremy snapped. "For your information, Boyd, Shawn called me last night and said he wanted to buy you out."

"Shawn, buddy," Boyd said, patronizingly, "did you go behind my back?"

"He said he had interested buyers," Shawn insisted, his armpits starting to perspire. "If you would've come in before noon I might've had a chance to tell you."

"You had two hours," Boyd said, "and we talked for ten minutes about Lamont – why didn't you tell me then?" Shawn fingered the end of the white tablecloth, wanting to flip over the table and punch Boyd's pompous face. "Okay," Boyd said, "another question. Do you know who those interested buyers are?"

"I thought he was just blowing smoke," Shawn mumbled.

"Did you hear that, Jer?" Boyd asked. "Shawn thought you were blowing smoke."

"You think you're so smart," Jeremy said.

“Don’t drive angry, Jer, I was complimenting you. Shawn doesn’t understand that a guy like you doesn’t blow smoke without a fire. So why don’t you tell him about those buyers.” Boyd folded his hands on top of the folder. “Go ahead, tell him.”

Jeremy’s tense face looked like a tomato, his black eye a bacterial spot. Through clenched teeth he said, “I’m telling you, Boyd, don’t fuck with me.”

“Alright,” Boyd said, “I’ll tell him. Shawn, there’s this guy named Boras. He, you know, deals drugs and ruins lives and kills at his leisure and is the one who Sterling owes all of that money to. That’s who Jeremy’s interested buyers are.”

Shawn held his left wrist in his right hand. “Is that true?”

“Of course it’s true,” Jeremy said. “And it wasn’t going to be a problem if you would’ve told Boyd what the meeting was about. You’re just like Boyd – ”

“I’m nothing like him.”

“You’re quite like him,” Jeremy said, flatly. “Which I’m glad I found out as I had every intention of going in with you and Amber.”

Shawn opened and closed his left hand. “Jesus, Jeremy, how was I supposed to know?”

“You just were.”

Boyd raised his eyebrows at Shawn as if to say, *I told you*, and then knocked on the manila folder. “Maybe I’ll buy you out, Jer.”

“That’s funny,” Jeremy squawked, “you don’t have the funds.”

“I worked it out with the bank.”

Jeremy eyed Boyd, appearing impressed and curious. “And why would I sell to you?”



“Because you don’t care about this place,” Boyd said, “and Shawn and I do.”

“It doesn’t matter what I care about. It matters that I have controlling interest and I can sell to whomever I please.”

“Come on,” Boyd said, the sarcasm replaced by sincerity, “we’ve all been friends a long time. Can’t we just stop and remember that?”

Jeremy rolled one shoulder and then the other, as if clicking through his options. Shawn knew, that for whatever reason – hate or pride or envy – they could not summon their past friendship to transcend what had transpired between them. It had grown too violent. A force of nature that held no regard for friendship or fondness or forgiveness. The small ledge that circled the room seemed to strain to keep the colors of maroon and mocha separate, as if they wanted to bleed together.

Boyd raised his arms and fell back into his chair. “Shawn and I have put our lives into this place. We love this place. Please, Jeremy, let us have it. Please.”

“You had your chances.”

Boyd looked at Shawn, surprised, then back at Jeremy. “Chances for what?”

“To make me feel part of everything,” Jeremy snapped. Then the skin around his eyes softened, the menacing bruise now a mark of meekness. Jeremy looked down. “I just wanted to feel like I was part of everything.”

“But you are a part, Jeremy, a huge part, that’s why we have you sit in the window with Sterling.”

“It’s okay,” Jeremy said, still looking at the floor, “you’re embarrassed by me.”

“Jesus, Jeremy,” Boyd said, “that couldn’t be further from the truth. Why would you even think that?”

“Because you didn’t want me at the interviews.”

“That’s just me being a control freak, being a fucking idiot. It doesn’t have anything to do with you. Look, why don’t we start all over, the three of us, and give it one more shot. I can do better. Really. I promise I can.”

Jeremy looked at Shawn. “Is that what you want?”

Shawn’s heartbeat quickened. Sweat trickled down his side. They were both looking at him, waiting, Shawn able to feel the intensity and power of the moment as if it was a sniper’s finger barely touching the trigger, evaluating the surrounding forces. There was the force of his responsibility to his wife and son, to provide for them, contrasted by the force of Boyd’s sorrow. But Shawn’s hate was appalled by such sympathy, appalled by the paltry past of their friendship Boyd had destroyed by hiring that PI. There was the force of having pushed Amber, the knowledge of what his nature was capable of and who he was becoming. There was the force of Elora and the Izzies, asking him if he could be a guy who turned his back on his friend. Of course he could. He wasn’t turning his back on anyone. He was taking the necessary steps to save his kitchen. He *was* doing the right thing.

“No,” Shawn said, “I don’t want to be partners with him.”

“Well there you have it,” Jeremy said, his face again rigid, as if masking his previous disclosure. “It looks like all of your maneuvers were for naught.”

Boyd leaned forward. “I could take you to court.”

“Take me to court?” Jeremy laughed. “I’ve got more lawyers on retainer than there are forks in this restaurant.”

“Jeremy – wait,” Shawn said. “Forget Boyd. You and I can run this place. You can be in all the articles. I hate those things. Everything will be better without Boyd.”

“I’m selling this place to Boras so you two will know it feels.”

“I know how it feels,” Shawn said, embarrassed by his own desperation. “This place is my only chance.”

“You poor, misunderstood artist, I gave you plenty of chances.” Jeremy was almost standing, his small fingers on the edge of the table and his bruise shifting into the shape of a small island.

Boyd’s eyes were red. He looked like a boxer too beaten to stand for the last round. He’d swaggered in with that Tennor confidence and thrown a flurry of punches that hadn’t even cracked a lip. It was the first time, Shawn thought, that Boyd looked like a loser. He blinked, then offered Shawn a strange and affectionate smile, a naked and pathetic smile that made Shawn turn away. “Don’t sell to Boras, Jer. You guys can have my shares.”

Jeremy’s lips pursed in surprise. “You’re bluffing.”

Boyd pushed his body from the chair and extended his hand. “Let’s shake on it. You guys can buy me out according to the contract.”

“No tricks?”

“No tricks, just don’t sell to Boras.”

Jeremy looked at Shawn, who shrugged, then nodded. It was perfect.

“Fine.” Jeremy shook Boyd’s hand. “According to the contract.”

Boyd fell back into his chair. “And for the record, Jer, I already knew what this felt like.”

“Peeeer-fect,” Jeremy purred, splitting the word in two. “You’ll be that much more accustomed to dealing with it this time.” He walked behind Boyd, around the wall of glass bricks, and past Mallory through the kitchen door. She was standing almost behind Shawn, so that he had to turn to see her. Her work shirt hung from a hanger, dangling from the bar. How long had she been there? She approached them slowly, her jaws working a piece of gum.

Shawn said, “Hey, Mal.”

She stopped behind Boyd and began massaging his shoulders. “Shawn, Shawn, Shawn.”

Shawn scooted back his chair. “What the hell happened at Ovio last night?”

She continued massaging Boyd’s shoulders, stoically, her fingers wrinkling the fabric of his black T-shirt.

“I’m sorry Boyd had to fire Lamont,” Shawn continued, “but that was just stupid. Maybe if he apologizes to Chris we can work something out.”

She leaned forward, wrapped her arms around Boyd’s neck, and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you, Boyd Tennor.”

Boyd rested his hand on her forearm. “I have my moments.”

“I will always love you for doing that for me.”

Shawn’s mouth was dry. His hand burned. “You know it was Boyd that fired Lamont, right? You know that.”

Mallory pulled away from Boyd, leaving her hands on his shoulders. “Boyd fired Lamont because I asked him to. You know, Shawn, I’m curious who started that rumor

that you were a good guy. It's so," she looked at the ceiling, and shrugged, "not true. You're an awful guy."

"Look, Mal, there are going to be some changes around here. This is my place now and you can't talk to me like that."

"Yes, I can. If you want to fire me, go ahead, you're already down one server tonight." She turned and left the room, a trail of malice following behind her, rattling chairs in its wake.

Shawn shook out his hand. He needed a Percocet. Badly. He asked, "How many servers do we have tonight?"

Boyd reached back and pulled his orange hat off of the chair. "We?"

"Well, yeah, I mean, I assume you're still going to run the floor tonight."

"I'm sorry, but were you just at the meeting where my partners gutted me like a pig? The meeting where you said, 'Everything will be better without him.' You were there, right?"

"I was trying to save this place. I have a family to consider."

"Your wife is loaded. And the person who saved this place was me. The least you could do is show some gratitude."

"You're the one who fucked everything up in the first place."

Boyd scratched his head. "So, if you were me, you'd stay and run the floor?"

"You can't just bail on us, I don't even know how to close the books. Much less write checks or pay the bills."

"Oh, so you don't want to be my partner but you want my help."

"I don't need anything from you, but I expect you to do the right thing."

“You should’ve considered that before stabbing me in the heart.”

“I did what anyone would’ve done.”

“Just thank me, Shawn, thank me and admit I fell on the sword and I’ll stay.”

“The only thing you fell on was your own two feet.”

Boyd shook his head and put on his hat, crushing his black curls. “You’ve got Mallory, Kay, and Price, that’s three strong servers. You might want to call Neil and see if he’ll come in, but he plays in some basketball league on Thursday nights.”

“Where’s his number?”

“Dana watched me close last night so she might be able to get through the numbers.”

“This is just like you, to cut and run when things don’t go your way.”

“And it’s just like you to sit there with your dick in your hand while everything happens around you. Like when I opened this place and you just sat there.”

“This place would be nothing without my food.”

Boyd collected his keys, phone and the manila folder. “And now this place is nothing but your food. Congratulations.” Boyd spun the keys around his index finger and left the room. Two red racks of wine glasses were stacked on the bar, waiting to be polished. Bottles of wine rested in shelves, waiting to be opened by servers and poured into glasses. All of this was his now. This beautiful, beautiful room where people would come and sit and pay money to be served a plate of Shawn’s food. He stood up, and felt he was tearing through his own skin. He wanted to consume every aspect of the room and the moment and the day in which he became this new and powerful person. The maroon and mocha now seemed content to stay on their respective sides of the ledge, as

if ordered by Shawn. He strolled through the kitchen and out the back door, stopping on the landing that led upstairs to the prep room.

Boyd, Pax and Mallory stood in the parking lot. Of course: Boyd was already trying to turn Shawn's staff against him. Boyd's back was to Shawn, but Shawn could see Boyd's pathetic reflection in the back window of his new Navigator. Shawn could hear their voices but not decipher the words. Pax nodded toward the door. Shawn climbed the stairs, slowly, without lifting his gaze. Pax slapped Boyd on the back and Mallory gave him a hug. When Shawn reached the top of the stairs he rested his hands on the railing and peered down at Boyd until he got into his puny little Jeep and drove away.

## Chapter Fifteen

Jasmine was playing Speed with Chase, flipping over and slapping down cards on the table that swung back and forth across her bed. It was Thursday afternoon and he had arrived two hours ago with balloons and burgers and a deck of cards. Emily had kissed Chase on the cheek and taken a burger to go, saying she had her cell phone, as if it was a joke between them. Jasmine and Chase had eaten the burgers and watched TV and now had been playing cards for over an hour.

“Snap,” Chase said, when Jasmine put down her last card. “No you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did,” Jasmine said, “again.” Jasmine took Chase’s cards and quickly added up the points in her head, then wrote down the score on a pad. “You’ve got three-hundred and six and I’ve got ninety-two.” She held out Chase’s cards.

“Gimme those,” Chase said, plucking the cards from her hand. “You got tubes in one of your hands and I still can’t beat you.” His skinny fingers pushed all the cards together in a stack. “You’re a card shark, aren’t you?”

Jasmine laughed. “No.”

“I never lose at cards.”

Chase started shuffling the cards and then Emily and the baby doctor walked in, the baby doctor rolling a machine right next to Jasmine’s bed. Jasmine knew the machine was going to take a picture of something she didn’t want to see.

“I think this is my cue,” Chase said, standing, “to make like the Commodores and sail on down the line.”

“Can I beat you at cards tomorrow?” Jasmine asked.



“Someone’s feeling better,” the baby doctor said, shaking up a bottle. She had on green scrubs today, like the nurses wore.

“You only saw my B game today.” Chase slipped on his jacket. “Tomorrow you’re going to see my A-plus game.” He slapped Jasmine a high-five and winked at Emily, who sat down in the chair where Chase had been sitting, across from the machine. Chase bowed at the door and said, “Ladies, thank you for this moment.” Then he disappeared into the hallway.

The baby doctor pulled down the elastic strap that covered Jasmine’s stomach and pushed up her ugly nightgown. Then she squeezed the bottle she’d been shaking and a cold gel spurted onto Jasmine’s skin. Jasmine shivered, then giggled.

“I know, it’s cold,” the baby doctor said, squeezing more gel onto a paddle. Jasmine wondered if her baby belonged to the cool, cool boy or if it belonged to Dumbo. Jasmine liked Chase, and thought Emily should marry him.

Emily twirled her hair around her finger.

The baby doctor began to move the paddle in a slow, circular motion, flattening out the pile of cold gel. Chills trickled down Jasmine’s spine. The machine hummed. Four balloons were tied with red ribbon to the paw of a teddy bear that sat on the windowsill. Three of the balloons stuck together, like they were friends, and one hovered a higher, occasionally bumping the window.

“Will you look at that,” the baby doctor said, pointing to the screen with her free hand, “we’ve got an embryo.”

There was white all around the screen, grainy white, and black inside of the white and a white blurb inside of the black. The baby doctor pointed to a small blip inside the blurb. “There’s the heart, beating right as it should.”

“Isn’t that exciting?” Emily said. She reached over the metal railing of the bed and placed a hand on Jasmine’s arm. “How far along does that make her?”

“About what we thought, seven weeks.” The baby doctor studied the screen, still moving the paddle around Jasmine’s stomach.

“I haven’t felt it kick or anything,” Jasmine said.

“That’s normal. You wouldn’t feel something like that for another ten weeks.”

Jasmine looked at the grainy picture and wanted to take the TV remote and turn it all off. She thought she’d be more excited once she saw the baby, thought she would feel something that pregnant women were supposed to feel. Happiness, maybe. Excitement. Instead, she only felt empty and full. Hate and want. The baby doctor turned off the machine and started wiping off Jasmine’s stomach with a towel.

“I can do that,” Jasmine said.

The baby doctor smiled, and surrendered the towel. “Of course you can.”

“Jasmine, sweetie,” Emily said, “did your mother talk to you at all about what you were going to do? Were you going to keep the baby?”

“We were going to church to pray about it.” Jasmine leaned forward, holding up her ugly robe with one hand and wiping off her stomach with the other. “She said, and I remember this, that she had run out of answers and hoped God had one.” It was some answer, Jasmine thought, all of those bullets.

“I like your mother’s answer,” Emily said. “Mr. Dixon is going to come by tomorrow and you and me and him and Sara are all going to talk about the different choices you have.”

Jasmine pulled the blanket up past her chest. “My momma and I talked some.”

Emily and the baby doctor exchanged a look. Then the baby doctor took a clipboard off the end of Jasmine’s bed and starting writing on it.

“Your body is doing a lot better,” the baby doctor said, returning the clipboard. “I think we can get you out of here at the end of the week.” She started pushing the cart toward the door. “I’ll see you two tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Sara,” Emily said, offering half a wave. She pulled her purse off the floor and then a math workbook from her purse. “Teyanna said you might like this. She made me promise to get one with algebra. I thought she was messing with me, like she does, but she insisted.”

“My momma liked math,” Jasmine said, taking the book.

“I heard you had a little enterprise going,” Emily said, smiling. “Suddenly the girls aren’t getting their math done.”

“I’m sorry,” Jasmine said, “sometimes I can’t sleep.”

“It’s okay,” Emily said, kind of stern. She pulled a yellow envelope out of her purse. “And this is also from Teyanna.”

Jasmine took the envelope. “She doesn’t hate me?”

“Of course not, she just got her feelings hurt.”

“I shouldn’t have lied to her.”

“My grandmother calls it storying, isn’t that funny? She always said, ‘Don’t you story to me.’ ”

Jasmine slowly tore open the card, digging her thumb under the seal. “Why did she call it that?”

“She’s really southern, more than me, and southern people have polite ways of saying things.”

The card had a bunch of fish on the front, all of them different colors with big fins and sparkling spots, six of them swimming together and one trailing behind. The inside of the card said, “Hurry and catch up. We miss you!” Underneath that Teyanna had written: *I’m sorry about being so mean. I hope you get to come back soon.* Jasmine slid the card into the envelope and said, “I’m not going to get to stay with you, am I?”

“That’s why it’s called storying,” Emily said, sadly, “because the story is always nice. We make it up so we don’t have to tell someone something ugly.”

“Like if you told me I was going to get to stay with you?”

“Yes, sweetie, it would be a story so I wouldn’t hurt you right now.”

Jasmine stuck the card in between the pages of the workbook. “Is it because I snuck out?”

Emily put both of her hands on the metal frame. Some hair fell in front of her face. “No, it’s because some people don’t get stories with happy endings.”

“Is that why we make them up?”

“Yes, it’s why we make them up.”

“Did you make up stories about that man?”

“Lordy, yes.” Emily pushed the hair away from her eyes, leaving one hand on the metal frame. “Every day I used to tell myself that he was going to love me, or that even if he didn’t, it was still enough. It was an awful, awful story but after I told it to myself enough times, I believed it.”

“What made you stop?”

Emily smiled, but it was the saddest smile Jasmine had ever seen. “You did, sweetie, you did.”

## Chapter Sixteen

Sterling had never understood Lamont's righteous streak, the way he would not take anything from anybody. He didn't even like trick or treating because he hadn't worked for the candy. The way Sterling saw it, black people had been getting dealt from the bottom for so long they should take anything that came their way. Not Lamont. Something as small as candy and immense as athletic ability, all that righteousness making Sterling want to take a shovel to Lamont's backside. Lamont never cared if Sterling drank or snuck out of the house, but he wouldn't hear of hundred dollar handshakes from boosters, even if Sterling passed that money right on to their momma. People didn't surprise you, so Sterling shouldn't have been surprised when Lamont ran that mouth and Jeremy backed out of the deal.

"Are you insane?" Sterling asked Jeremy over the phone. "You can't back out on Boras."

*What's he going to do to me?*

"I've seen him do a lot things to a lot of people and trust me, that is some nasty shit you don't want any part of."

*He doesn't scare me.*

"He scares me."

*That's your problem. You'd never be in this mess if you weren't scared of him.*

"Don't piss me off, dawg, I might be the only thing standing between you and some shit that's never crossed your mind."

*Get out of the way then.*

Sterling opened a beer and turned on SportsCenter. He picked up an X-box paddle and then tossed it back on the floor. His apartment wasn't much different than when he moved in, thinking then that he was only going to be back for some rehab. He didn't know why he'd had such a hard time rehabbing. He worked out like a Navy Seal when he was healthy, but it was different when you were trying to fix your body, knowing it might never be the same. He kept telling himself he'd start tomorrow but the MRI image of his snapped Achilles haunted him. What if he lost that explosive first step or his lateral movement? What would he be then? Probably what he'd become: a worthless burden.

Boras was pissed. Over a restaurant. He must've really thought he was about to become a businessman, must've had his three-piece suits marked and tailored because he said to bring Jeremy in. It was the way criminals were wired: if the next person knew you'd had your balls squeezed, they'd do the same thing. So you had to squeeze back. Harder. Sterling had taken people to be killed before, but it had always been because of what *they'd* done. This was all on him. Jasmine's death was already squatting in his conscience and he didn't know if there was room for Jeremy's as well. He already hated himself. He thought about what Lamont said, about Sterling always breaking people to fix things. That is some cold shit coming from your little brother.

Jeremy lived in the plantation part of town and the iron gate to his "house" was wide open. Sterling parked a little ways down the drive and snuck around the side of the house where he spotted Jeremy through a window, watching TV and drinking champagne. Sterling slipped in the back door. The sound of the TV ricocheted off a

couple of walls and Sterling followed it into a sick entertainment room with an oak bar. A sixty-inch plasma with a crystal clear picture. Bose speakers kicking in surround sound. Whacked out art made from dabbled lines of paint. Rustic leather couches. It was like Jeremy set up this room for other people to come and hang out, but nobody ever showed. His feet were propped up on an ottoman and the Champagne was stuck in a silver bucket of ice, the bucket on a stand at reaching distance. Jeremy was chilling with that Bill Murray movie about the groundhog.

Sterling took the couch to Jeremy's right. God, he was tired. "I like this movie."

"You want some Champagne? There's crystal behind the bar."

"Naw, man."

"It's Tattinger. Five-hundred a bottle."

"Where's that kid who ate dinner with us – what's his name?"

"Danny. His name is Danny."

"Right. Where's Danny?" Sterling walked back to the bar and returned with a Champagne flute. Jeremy pulled the bottle from the bucket and poured, foam filling half the glass on the first try.

"Something came up." Jeremy topped off Sterling's glass then dropped the bottle back in the bucket, the ice shifting. "Young guys tire of me quickly."

"I bet a lot of people tire of you quickly, you're a prick. When's the last time you did anything nice for anyone?"

"I did something nice for Shawn today and didn't sell to Boras."

The Champagne was tight, and had the tiniest bubbles Sterling had ever seen. This was almost Sterling's life – the big house, the big TV, the expensive Champagne



with the tiny bubbles – and now he was coming to take it away from somebody. Maybe Lamont was right, maybe everything Sterling touched did turn to shit. “That wasn’t nice, you only did that to punk Boyd.”

“The restaurant is better off without him.”

“I thought you didn’t care about that place.”

Jeremy looked at him sideways. “Fine, I did it to punk him, as you say. He had punked me and I wanted him to know how it felt.”

“And now he knows?”

“And now,” Jeremy toasted the air, “he knows.”

“You white people are a trip. At least black people just shoot each other and get it over with.”

“And?”

“And I just don’t see you doing any cartwheels around this big house.”

Jeremy rolled his shoulders. “Boras, how’d you get so in debt with him?”

“I ain’t the one who fucked over my friends.”

Jeremy pulled the bottle out of the bucket, showing it was half-full. On TV, Bill Murray drove his truck off a cliff, the groundhog sitting right beside him.

“I don’t know, man, it was the way he slinked in like he was nothing then started in the Seahawks, making it sound like he wasn’t talking shit. I knew what he was doing, but it still pissed me off.”

“And you didn’t want him to be right.”

“I wanted to throw him through a window but I thought I’d take some of his money instead.” Bill Murray took a nosedive off a building, then stepped in front of a

truck. “I didn’t even bet that much the first time. Then every week he’s talking more shit and taking more of my money and I just wanted him to be wrong once, for him to have to give me all of my money back. I would’ve stopped. All fucking year they don’t cover the spread – when does that ever happen?”

“Exactly, it was about him.” Jeremy leaned forward. “He punked you.”

“No, he was talking shit on my teammates. Aside from Lamont they were the only good thing in my life. I went through two-a-days with them.”

“It was the same with me and Boyd. I just wanted to show him. I said it was about the restaurant but it was about him.”

“That isn’t the same at all. I lost everything.”

“You’re not listening to me, which is fine, no one ever listens to me. If Boyd would’ve listened this never would’ve happened, but he wanted to show me. The whole world is about showing somebody.” Jeremy leaned back and looked at the ceiling like he was talking to a five-year old. “People are so predictable. They keep smoking cigarettes even though they know it will kill them. It’s printed on the package, Sterling! On the package! This will kill you. And they keep on buying them up. It’s human nature.”

“And?”

“And you kept betting on the Seahawks even though you knew better than anyone they sucked. Just to show Boras.”

“Why don’t you stop selling them cigarettes, then?”

“It’s not my job to save people.”

“That’s weak as hell, man, make it your job.”

“I tried once, it didn’t work.”

“Once? One fucking time?”

“Yes, one fucking time. Everyone just wanted my money.”

“Well try again you quittin’ motherfucker.” Sterling shook his head and downed his Champagne. “That’s what I’m talking about, man, people don’t like you because you’re a selfish prick. I bet you tell yourself every night that it’s because you’re gay and ugly, but it ain’t like that, dawg, it’s because you never do anything nice for anybody. Once, shit. You and Boras are the same, both getting rich off the bad side of human nature. Only difference is Boras’ job is easier because no one cares when black people die.”

Jeremy stood up. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Let’s. It’s your funeral.”

“Please.”

They pulled out of the driveway and Jeremy clicked a remote, the gate beginning a slow, mechanical swing shut. Jeremy fidgeted with his phone. Trashcans lined the street and Sterling wondered how many of these rich people took out their own trash, actually carried it down those long driveways to the curb. Slaves used to work and live behind those houses, getting whipped and beaten and raped, would’ve kept getting whipped and beaten and raped if it hadn’t been for the Civil War. Who would’ve ever thought that: while people killing each other over black people. And now black people were killing themselves over drugs and music. There wasn’t nothing to keep people from fighting with their own.

Sterling glanced in the rearview and there was Jasmine's mom, her eyes full of surprise. Every mirror. Every time he closed his eyes. He said, "Jeremy, how come you white people think nothing bad can ever happen to you?"

Jeremy laughed, small seeds of cold air. That rubber band popped Sterling's pride and he said, "What?"

"I can just see Boras lining you up. I bet he asked you for an autograph."

Sterling extended his fingers, his palms on the steering wheel. "He brought that Sports Illustrated, the one where I was on the cover."

"Perrrrfect!" Jeremy shook his head. "I can't believe you never killed him. He owns you Sterling, and Lamont for that matter – shit. I was your ticket out, wasn't I? I just realized that. How priceless."

Sterling hit the breaks, his tires squealing against the street as the car skidded to a stop. He pulled a Glock 22 from under his seat and pushed it against Jeremy's forehead. "How is it that you never learned to shut the fuck up?"

Jeremy's hands were up. "You said you didn't have a gun."

"I made a purchase."

"Was there a waiting period?"

"Do you really want to die? Because that's what's about to happen here. Boras lined you up just like me. You were his big fish, only you punked him and if criminals get punked they lose their cred. Violence is their banking system. That crazy nigger Al is either going to put a bag over your head or a bullet in your mouth. Then they'll wrap your body up in a blanket and drive it out to the sticks where no one will find it. And, really, no one's going to miss you until the paychecks don't come, are they?"

Jeremy's bottom lip was shivering, his teeth clenched. His right eye was bruised from yesterday. Sterling pushed the gun against Jeremy's forehead, leaving an imprint.

"Are they?"

"No."

"Is your life really that bad? That you want to die?"

Sterling's lights shined down the street, catching the sides of trashcans and recycling bins before ending in a bright vanishing point. Sterling flipped them off with his free hand, the street going dark. Jeremy swallowed, hard. "I don't have any friends," he almost screamed, "people only want my fucking money."

Sterling closed his eyes. "Listen to me, I'm going to take care of this, do you know what that means?"

Jeremy nodded.

"Good, because I want you to start doing some evening out."

"You mean for Lamont? Fine."

"God, do I want to kill you. Lamont would not take a dime from you if I put a gun to *his* head. You still don't get it." Sterling popped him in the forehead with the butt of the Glock. "I don't like you. So when I say I want you to do some evening out, I mean for both of us, and I mean for people you don't like. Because that's what I'm doing with you, trying to even shit out."

"If you think I'm going to sell Boyd his shares back then –" Sterling popped him in his other eye. Jeremy squealed, "Shit, Sterling."

"Now how nice would that be? Making a guy be partners again with two guys who punked him out in the first place."

Jeremy had both hands over his eye. Blood trickled down his forehead. “What, then?”

“Start with Jasmine. Do whatever it takes because I owe her. Then keep on evening out and don’t stop.”

“It’s not my job to make the world better.”

“It is now.”

“What have you ever done?”

“I ain’t done nothing. This world is no better for having my ass in it, yours either. So go make it better, for both our sorry asses. You want friends? Start doing some nice shit and they’ll come in droves.” Sterling reached in the back and grabbed an old sweatshirt. “Here, man.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Some evening out of my own.”

Jeremy wiped his face, smearing the blood, then held the sweatshirt against his forehead. “It’s not true, you know, what you said about your life.”

Sterling laughed. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. When you were on the football field you gave people amazing moments. I stood with seventy thousand people and cheered for you. Grown men and women cheering like idiots and slapping high-fives because you flattened a quarterback. This town’s never seen anything like that. You got us into the ACC. You were a god.”

“I was just a football player, dawg, and those were just moments. They didn’t add up to nothing.” Sterling reached across Jeremy and pulled the door handle, cold air coming in when the door swung open. “Now get out of the car.”

## Chapter Seventeen

Boyd sat on a wooden porch swing at his parents' house, peering out past the yard into the surrounding six acres, the trees indistinguishable in the dark. A gravel road wound out of the woods and evolved into a cement driveway that circled in front of the long porch where Boyd sat. In a matter of weeks his parents would put the house on the market. In a matter of months strangers would be residing in it. Boyd pulled a scarf tighter around his neck. Last check, thirty-eight degrees. The meat grinder had finally hollowed Boyd out, chewed all the fat and muscles from his bones and spit it all into a bucket that Shawn Hallow carted out with the trash. Boyd's feet were crossed on the wooden railing next to a bottle of Maker's Mark, its red teardrops of wax hardened around the spout. He pushed off the railing with his left foot, swinging back and forth a few times until the momentum slowed to a stop.

The front door opened and closed behind Boyd and a checkered blanket fell onto his shoulders. He shrugged it off. "I'm not cold, mom."

"I'm just trying to help." She walked around the swing and sat on the railing, steadying the bottle of bourbon with her right hand. She wore yellow pajamas and his father's trench coat, her ankles pale above her white slippers. "Your cell phone rang again."

"Can you tell me how it keeps ringing when I turned it off?"

"There are people who love you and are worried about you." She unclasped her hands and set them on her knees, then clasped them back. "Chase called."

"Jesus, mom, you went through my call log?"

“You’ll just have to forgive me. I thought Shawn might’ve changed his mind.”

Boyd looked out into the yard, trying to determine where the grass ended and the trees began. The clouds were low, the paucity of stars disheartening. “Shawn isn’t going to change his mind.”

“I don’t see how, after all you’ve done for him.” She rubbed her hands together, as if washing them. “The number his parents must’ve done on him.”

“We shook on it, mom. I agreed to sell.”

His mother let out a long sigh, the cold air giving it shape. “I just don’t understand, Boyd, what in God’s name would make you do such a thing?”

Lamont Carroll would make him do such a thing. Would inject him with the venomous notion that Christians were losers, would pervert his thoughts and prompt him to do such a thing. Once Boyd cleared the financial hurdle of getting the money it never occurred to him that things wouldn’t go his way. He was Boyd Tennor – how could they not? Now, he understood: he was Boyd Tennor – how could they? God had made His will quite clear. Unless Lamont was right and the reason things happened was people – but then whose fault was all of this?

That was a no-brainer: it was Shawn’s fault. Any idiot could tell that Boyd was the superior choice to Jeremy; he wasn’t about to sell his shares to a criminal. Shawn was denser than Boyd ever imagined. And more pathetic. Begging Jeremy not to sell to Boras. Boyd would do a lot of things, but he wouldn’t beg. Shawn was too blind to realize he’d won life’s lottery: he had a beautiful wife who happened to be loaded, an



adorable and healthy son, a sweet new ride and his own kitchen. Talk about myopic. Shawn couldn't see the earth for the solar system.

Boyd dragged his feet on the porch, stopping the swing. He took the bottle of bourbon from the rail. He had done the right thing. He had given up more than he wanted, so why did it feel like he was suffocating? Why did he feel like, well, a loser? No wonder people rarely did the right thing: there was no reward. Being a loser sucked.

The bourbon dribbled into his glass. The front door opened and a swatch of light flashed onto the porch and then his father was standing in front of him, holding out an empty glass. "Got a drink for your old man."

"Always."

The swing shifted when his father sat down, the links of the chain rattling and straining. "I suspect your mother will be out shortly with a space heater."

Boyd squeezed out a laugh. His father poured himself two fingers of bourbon and then held out his glass. "To my son, the bravest man I know."

"Maybe the bravest failure you know."

Boyd's father looked to have aged fifteen years. A once small tint of gray in his beard and hair had all but annihilated the black. Wrinkles pushed to his skin's surface. "That's simply not true, son. Thousands of bands and restaurants fail every month. Literally, thousands. I've looked this up. And you had the courage to start one of each, neither of which failed."

"I failed. I wanted to fix things for that little girl and I lost track of it all. I wanted to fix things for you and mom. I thought if the Rabbit did well enough," Boyd paused, thinking he saw a light in the trees, "I wanted to fix things."

“Things will fix themselves. After all,” he said, dryly, “your mother has that prayer chain working.”

“Do you really think God takes care of everything?”

“I don’t know. I think God gives us our shots and we do the best we can with them. You and I are gamblers. It hurts us and helps us. We took our shots.”

A square light from the window reflected in Boyd’s glass of bourbon, its shape floating and distorted. “I guess I blew my chance.”

“You’ll get another one. But it will take me a while to get used to the idea of someone else raising their children here. I always had a picture of that in my mind, of it being you, as did your grandfather.”

“Me, too,” Boyd said. He sipped his bourbon and wondered if that picture would ever fade. “Shawn’s parents still haven’t been in to eat.”

“It probably didn’t help that we came in once a week. I just liked watching you run that place, the way everyone responded to you.”

“It was really fun for a while, and once again I’ve got nothing to show for it.”

A pair of headlights emerged from the trees, bumping their way along the road, and a few seconds later Chase’s El Camino pulled right in front of Boyd and his father. The door swung open and Chase got out, his left arm resting on the door. “Boyd Michael Tennor, why don’t you answer your fucking cell – excuse me, Doc. I’ve been driving all around Elora trying to find your ass.”

“Did it ever occur to you that I didn’t want to be found?”

“It did, but I’ve never cared much for your wants. Now get in this here car. Some people are requesting your presence at the Pyramid.”

Boyd shook his head. Of all people, Chase. “I’ve had a hell of a bad day, C-note.”

“I suspected as much,” Chase said, “so I brought some muscle.”

Lamont emerged from the passenger side, laying his arms across the El Camino’s roof. “You’re not my boss anymore, Boyd, and my other boss said if I didn’t bring you back I’d be in big trouble.”

Boyd made a visor over his eyes. “Is that Lamont? I can’t see you in the dark.”

Chase pulled a beer bottle from behind the car door and took a swig. “At least his lousy sense of humor is still intact.”

“Just tell him about the girl,” Lamont said, “so we can go.”

“What girl?” Boyd asked.

Chase turned away from Boyd toward Lamont, laying his arms across the roof, the dark bottle in his right hand. Boyd wanted to freeze the moment. “He’s tired,” Chase whined, “and he’s had a bad day and he doesn’t want to hear about the girl.”

“You’re right,” Lamont said, “let’s get out of here.”

Neither of them moved. The El Camino’s lights shined into the forest, revealing long branches of trees reaching toward one another. Boyd felt a tinge of grace. He looked at his father, who, with a tender smile, said, “It’s a lot more than nothing.”

The entire Izzy nation erupted in applause when Boyd walked into the Pyramid. Mallory and Celia stood on the bar, blowing him kisses. Pax stuck a finger and a thumb into his mouth and released a screeching whistle. The room broke into a round of “For

he's a jolly good fellow" and Boyd felt his nascent spirit blossoming, welling up an emotion so intense he forced it back down.

Chase whispered in Boyd's ear, "Anything at the bar catch your fancy?"

Boyd's eyes moved from Mallory to Celia to Neil to Pax to Kay to Lindsey, who gave him a cute little wave, the bottom of her palm still, her fingers fluttering. Her tall friend stood beside her. Boyd said to Chase, "You are one good friend."

"Finally got my cell back," Chase said, bouncing it off his bicep then catching it.

Lamont gave Boyd a soft elbow. "You've got a lot of friends for a loser."

"You *so* oversold that."

The applause tumbled into a steady stream of conversation as Boyd made his way through the crowd, a pitter-patter of hands slapping him on the back. Someone handed him a bottle of Red Seal. Celia stepped down onto a cooler behind the bar, then onto the floor. Lamont placed both hands on Mallory's hips and lifted her into the air and down to the ground, as if she were weightless. She kissed Lamont, kissed Boyd, and then said, "It took you guys long enough."

"This man is not easy to find," Chase said, signaling Celia for a drink.

"Any word from Sterling?" Mallory asked.

Lamont shook his head. "It's probably nothing."

"What's nothing?" Boyd asked. Before he could get an answer Pax was giving him a bear hug and lifting him off the ground. Celia shook two silver shakers over her head. Boyd still thought Darren was crazy for not playing music because the beat of conversation was so chaotic and unpredictable. He took down half of his beer and more people were patting him on the back and then he was standing in front of Lindsey and she

was more beautiful than he remembered. She smiled, revealing that crooked front tooth Boyd found adorable, and now there was this fence of frazzled emotion between them, the fence that appeared when you liked someone and they liked you and it was only a question of how long it would take each of you to get around or over or under it.

“I hear you’ve been being nice to people,” Lindsey said, “what ever brought that on?” Her voice was an elixir that kick-started his heart. How could one day be so awful and amazing at the same time?

Boyd shrugged. “It was some good advice I got.”

“Reaaaally?” she asked, her eyes grabbing the green trim of her blouse.

“Boyd Tennor is always nice to people,” Chase said, “except when he isn’t.”

Boyd laughed. Chase was forever stepping on his lines. Pax broke into the group and handed Boyd a PBR, telling him he looked thirsty.

“Are you trying to get me drunk?” Boyd asked.

“You are a handsome devil,” Pax said, “and you complete me.”

“You had me with the beer,” Boyd said, “You had me with the beer.”

Lindsey and her friend laughed. No question about it, Boyd had his A game. Some servers from Ovio stuck out their fists for Boyd to bump and then made their way over to Lamont, who had his own little crowd. Boyd spotted Mitch at the bar, who nodded toward Chase then pointed to the door but Boyd did not want to leave Lindsey’s side. What if she left? Boyd held up a finger to Mitch then waved at Celia and pointed at Chase, motioning for a drink. He turned back to the group and said, “Hey, C-note, I think Celia’s got a drink waiting for you.”

“It appears she does,” Chase said, “if you ladies will pardon me.”

Boyd winked at Pax and said, “Did you ladies know that Pax used to rodeo?”

“It wasn’t much of a living,” Pax said, taking Boyd’s cue and starting into a story. Lindsey’s friend was watching Chase, who was leaning across the bar and talking to Celia. Boyd turned around and gave Mitch a hug, Mitch whispering in Boyd’s ear, “I had an interesting conversation with Daniel today.”

## Chapter Eighteen

Thursday night Chase got a call from Shawn who moaned and groaned about Boyd walking out on them and about the staff not taking to Dana, who would rather run the office during the day. The timbre of his voice bounced in desperation. “If you’re my friend,” Shawn said, “you’ll help me. I wanted you on board from the beginning.” Chase had a Twilight Zone feeling that he shouldn’t take the job, that he should parachute out of the industry before it crashed another ten years of his life. Emily thought she could pull some strings and get him into ESU’s Masters of Social Work Program, which meant Chase would have to take a pay cut for a few years – like the rest of his life. Money and lifestyle, they created the industry’s vortex. In the end, Chase was Shawn’s friend and always had wanted to try his hand at management, which was more or less helping people. So he accepted, surprised by his lack of excitement about the job that had recently been the pinnacle of his existence.

None of that had to do with Chase tracking down Boyd and getting him to the Pyramid. When the chicken came off the bones Boyd had fallen on the sword – so said Mallory and her supposed firsthand account that she flared around Elora in a matter of hours. That girl should be in marketing. Chase would’ve never figured Boyd for such altruism, which he told Lamont while they were driving around.

“I love that man like a brother,” Chase said, slapping the steering wheel, “but I never expected him for some shit like that.” They’d just left Emily’s house where both of them had been catracted by the news that Jasmine was headed into foster care. At the top of Chase’s list as manager of the Rabbit was to make that fundraiser happen.

“What kind of shit is that?” Lamont asked, sending his tenth text since they’d left.

“Do you play everyone like that or am I your special friend?”

“It’s the most fun with you.” Lamont pocketed his phone. “And I don’t know what to tell you. Boyd did a good thing. Why question it? And speaking of what you’d expect, you owe me twenty for him not being at Emily’s.”

Chase dug out his wallet. “It’s like that, is it?”

“It’s like this: we don’t know what people are capable of in a given moment.”

“It’s like I said yesterday, people are at the mercy of moments, and moments are at the mercy of chance.”

“People are at the mercy of people, and we never know what happened to them ten minutes ago.”

Chase steadied the steering wheel with the sides of his hands and fished out a twenty. “Isn’t that chance?”

“No,” Lamont said, taking the money, “it’s transference.”

It was Chili Palmer cool that so many Izzies rolled out to cradle Boyd’s broken heart, even offering a brief round of applause, mostly by what used to be his staff. Celia was showing Mallory some Cuban dance steps on the bar and they floated him kisses for effect. It didn’t raise the roof or anything, but it did raise Boyd’s spirits. He’d probably be pissed when he found out that Chase was going to work for Shawn, but there was no reason to let that ferocious feline out of the bag tonight. Tonight belonged to Boyd. Which mean Boyd could sing the blues all he wanted but under no circumstance would Chase tolerate an ounce of shit being talked on Shawn. Period.



Little Lindsey did light up when Boyd walked in the room, but Chase had a feeling that switch wasn't all that hard to flip. He'd done some serious sweet-talking to smooth over standing them up, most of which consisted of promising Nancy a job at the Rabbit. Boyd must've been exhausted or drunk as his foot caught the top of every line he tried to hurdle. Chase was relieved when Celia beckoned him to the bar. Too bad they couldn't go upstairs and pick up the moment Chase had clearly muffed. He reached for a drink she had waiting, which she pulled away.

"Is that your new girlfriend?" Large hoops dangled from her ears, Chase feeling like he had to jump through them.

"Yet to be determined, my lady, yet to be determined. My only concern tonight is making sure Boyd knows that he is a loved man."

"Speaking of love, you ran out on me yesterday." She pushed the drink toward him. "I'm not used to men running out on me."

"Maybe if you'd dump your boyfriend, men wouldn't run out on you."

"Maybe if you hadn't run out on me – " she stopped, and pointed behind him.

"Your yet-to-be-determined is giving us the evil eye."

Nancy pointed to her and Lindsey's drinks. "Can I get a couple of vodka-crans?"

"She's already got you fetching her drinks," Celia said, turning around to prevent a retort. Maybe that was a moment he'd never get right. When he returned with the drinks Mitch was offering his farewells.

"What's this?" Chase asked. "The night is still young."

"I'm not. And being unemployed I can't afford to get in Dutch with the wife."

Mitch gave Boyd a jovial punch to the chest. "Tomorrow, then?"

“Definitely,” Boyd said, “tomorrow.”

Chase had an eerie sense of déjà vu. Boyd put his arm around Chase and said, “Thanks again, C-note, you are one good friend.”

“CRL #8: A man is nothing without his friends.”

“What about a woman?” Nancy asked. “Are all of your rules so sexist?”

“Nancy,” Lindsey said, “that’s not a good way to get a job.”

“Where are you going to get her a job?” Boyd asked.

Chase said, “I got connections.”

“We were sorry to hear about the restaurant,” Nancy said, winking at Chase.

“I’m not,” Boyd said, “I’m relieved.”

“Relieved to leave us with the prince of darkness,” Pax said. “No offence, Chase.”

“Why would I be offended?” Chase asked. “Shawn can be one moody dude.”

Boyd squeezed Chase’s shoulder. “I appreciate the support, C-note, but you and Shawn should stay friends.”

Chase felt the pressure of Boyd’s hand. He laughed because he didn’t know what else to do. On the other side of the room someone tossed a log on the fire, sending a series of sparks up the chimney. His neck was hot so he pulled his hair into a ponytail. It felt like he might not make it out of the room alive unless he said, “Shawn hasn’t been much of a friend to anyone since he got tied in that marital knot.”

Pax said, “Step back.”

Lindsey put her drink to her mouth then stopped, pinning the straw between the back of her pinky and the glass. “I thought – ”

“That we were BCS?” Chase made eye contact with Lindsey, pleading. “We were. Bigger than the Bowl Championship Series.”

Lindsey giggled, her free hand over her mouth. “Right, I did hear that.”

“Not to be arrogant,” Boyd said, “But it’s hard not to hear about us in this town.”

Chase nodded a thank you to Lindsey who playfully tapped her palm to her forehead. He finished his drink and looked to signal Celia for another but saw Mallory up on her toes, talking to Celia across the bar, her heels an inch above the yellow soles of her flip-flops. Lamont walked briskly toward the door. Mallory kissed Celia on the cheek and then came over to the group and did the same to Boyd.

“What gives?” Chase asked.

“I’m sorry,” Mallory said, “we’ve really got to go.”

“Is everything okay?” Boyd asked.

“I don’t know,” Mallory answered, walking backwards, then turning around and running to the door. Boyd announced he needed another beer and he and Lindsey strolled up to the bar like they’d already slipped into a relationship. Pax and Kay and Neil bellied up beside him. Celia began setting shot glasses on the bar and then held two in the air towards Chase.

“She seems kind of bitchy,” Nancy said, “that bartender.”

“CRL #81: You never know what happened to someone ten minutes ago.” He loosened his ponytail, rolling back the band. “Now, come one, let’s go get in on those shots.”

## Chapter Nineteen

Sterling Carroll poured gas around the house with the strange façade and the check mark spray-painted on the sidewalk. His right hand held the back of the red can, taking on its gradually decreasing weight while his left hand balanced the front and guided the yellow spout. Every few feet he jerked up the can and splashed the side of the house. Inside, he could hear Al playing Madden football, talking shit to the television. *Take that, bitch!* and *First down, motherfucker!* Al's voice sounded like it was broken down in digital sound, all of the emotion stripped away save his malice and affliction. Sweat collected on Sterling's back and forehead. It was like when he used to creep up to the line of scrimmage for a blitz. Bouncing back and forth. Able to anticipate the snap from the quick cadence of the quarterback's voice. Able to feel the rabid pulse of the line, their adrenaline straining on the tips of their fingers, the tips of their fingers taut in the soft grass, all of it about to explode forward. Sterling's breathing balanced. He could force an audible by taking a single step forward. That was power.

Gas dribbled down the front of the can and soaked through his leather glove. He doused the grass and splashed the wooden siding. Weight poured from the can. Fumes rose from the ground and tracked Sterling around the house. Boras sat at a table in the front room, probably expecting Sterling to walk in the front door with Jeremy any minute now. Sterling would start the fire from the back and pray it circled the house fast enough to push them to the back door. That façade would light up like a scoreboard. It was too bad he had to shoot Boras first because as long as Sterling was going to become a killer he really, really wanted to make sure Al ate a bullet. If anybody had it coming, it was Al.

Inside, Boras said, *What's that smell?*

Sterling opened his phone and sent the text he'd already typed. FIRE AT 4224 SUMTER. FINALLY FIXN THIS. LOVE YOU, LITTLE BROTHER. He squatted, flipped open his Zippo, and lit the ground to his left and his right. Flames lapped at the grass, paused to catch their breath, then climbed the walls and sprinted around the house as if racing for the front door. *Step inside. Kill Boras. Kill Al. Pop back out.* He couldn't leave this to chance; with his luck, the fire department would show up and save Boras. The fire shrieked and danced. Al and Boras screamed at each other. Sterling pulled out his Glock and tried the back door, the knob easily turning to the right.

## **Fifth Course: Dessert**

### **Chapter One**

Boyd watched the printer spit out menus for the opening night of The Graceful Palate, the restaurant formerly known as Edenic Proportions. The font was Arial and the color was mauve. Faint ridges rose and fell in the texture of the paper. Here it was again, a process he'd gone through three months ago, taunting him like a courtside fan. On the Rabbit's opening night Boyd had been elated, had felt the rush of adrenaline with a trace of anxiety. Tonight he felt the rush of anxiety with a trace of adrenaline. Tonight he felt like he was insane.

"Do you have any answers?" Boyd asked the printer, its only response to print out another menu. *Of course*, Boyd thought, *printers print*.

This office was nicer than the Rabbit's, was an actual office with clean white walls as opposed to a large closet with slanted ceilings. Boyd's charcoal suit hung on a hanger behind him. Three ties were thrown over the pants. On the Rabbit's opening night Boyd had brought the wrong tie, driven home to get the right one, gotten hung up on the phone with Emily, and returned to the first of Shawn's numerous tantrums. Not this time. If Boyd fucked this up, he really was a loser.

Loser. It meant something entirely different now. It sketched out confusing connotations of loving your enemies and putting yourself last – was all of that really necessary? Boyd felt an unsettling stir of uncertainty around the importance of his actions. Even more perplexing was the mass resistance to discuss the matter. He'd started asking people, not even arguing, just asking if they thought Christians were losers.

"That's absurd," his mother replied, sifting flour into mixing a bowl. "Who would say such a thing?"

Boyd stood across from her, the kitchen's tiled island between them. "Uh, this guy named Jesus in this book called the Bible."

"He said no such thing." She cracked two eggs into the bowl. "We are winners though Christ, Boyd Michael, he triumphed over death."

"Sure, after he lost his life. After he chose to be crucified even though he wanted to pass that chalice right on by."

"That was God's will, which he prayed for I might add. 'Not my will be done, but yours.' Same guy, same book." She eyeballed a cup of milk and then pulled the bowl against her chest and started whipping the batter.

"But you said meeting Emily was God's will, that He brought her into my life for a reason."

"Well, He did. I was just wrong about the reason. I'm only human."

"Well, what about dad investing your retirement in Southern Charm and losing the house? Is that God's will?"

"It has to be," she said, stirring faster.

"It has to be?"

"Yes, Boyd Michael, it has to be." She set the bowl down. "Because if it's not I just, I just – " Her hands were shaking. She took a deep breath and smiled. "How is that Lindsey doing? Let's talk about her."

Boyd could talk about Lindsey for hours, and was planning to propose to her when she came in for The Graceful Palate's opening night. It would be perfect. Mitch and Pax would come out from the kitchen and Boyd would have Champagne flutes waiting. Lindsey would assume they were toasting the restaurant and the ring would be

at the bottom of her glass (which would be plastic). Boyd would hand out all of the flutes but drop Lindsey's, just like the night they met, and when he stooped down to pick it up he'd be on one knee to propose. Sure, they'd only known each other a month but that was long enough for Boyd to realize that she was it. Not proposing would be a lack of faith. Her it-ness aside, Lindsey was no help with the loser question.

"That's interesting," she said, "I've never thought about it like that."

"One of the first things you ever said to me was that you liked to surprise people by being nice, which is kind of like putting other people first."

"Are you sure I said that?" she asked, her voice frosted with sarcasm. "It doesn't sound like something I would say."

"I had just dropped my Champagne after being stunned by your beauty."

"You said someone bumped you."

"I didn't want you to know how smitten I was. A guy just can't reveal that sort of information right off the bat."

Lindsey's smile lifted burdens from Boyd's shoulders. "That's my mysterious man. My closed volume of *War and Peace*."

Boyd thumbed the soft velvet of the jewelry box, then flipped it open. Menus continued to print out, the ink cartridge buzzing back and forth. Outside the office, Boyd could hear servers chattering as they set up the floor, their voices pitched with excitement. Boyd was admiring the diamond when Mitch walked in and Boyd instinctively snapped the box shut. Mitch wore khaki pants and tattered Nikes, the swoosh a faded maroon. His face had narrowed to regain its shape, and the lines of stress



that had creased his cheeks vanished so quickly that Boyd had taken to asking him where he got his botox done.

“These look good,” Mitch said, taking a menu off the printer. “I like the mauve.”

“Are you sure? We can still go with the periwinkle.”

Mitch put the menu on top of the printer and smiled, wryly. “Pretty sure.”

“I guess Chase has been spouting off about how he saved the Rabbit.”

Three clipboards hung on the wall behind Mitch’s desk, an inch of white separating them. Mitch tapped all three like they were bongos and then took the middle one from its nail. “Chase will do that.”

“The Rabbit didn’t need saving,” Boyd said, with confident disgust. “Did it?”

“You mean since the last time you asked me?”

“You mean since the last time you were an asshole?” Boyd mimicked. “Bro, are you sure you don’t mind me proposing tonight? I don’t want to overshadow your food.”

Mitch made a few check marks. “Food is for celebration, Boyd, for family. I think a proposal qualifies as both.”

“I swear to God, I want to French you every time you say something like that.”

Mitch laughed to himself. “Then I’ll stop.”

“It’s just,” Boyd sighed, then walked around his desk and sat on top of it. “I think Shawn resented me for being bigger than his food, or thinking I was bigger than his food, which is absurd because all a restaurant is, is the food.”

The printer spit out a final menu. Mitch made two more check marks then scribbled a few notes. “I’m sorry, were you talking?”

Boyd picked up a pen off his desk and threw it at Mitch, who ducked. “You could be a little less of an asshole. I just don’t want things to get fucked up again.”

“Me either,” Mitch said, “me either.” He hung the clipboard back on the wall. “Is Jeremy coming tonight?”

“Who knows? He’s been acting so weird lately.”

“Weird, how?”

“Weird like a human.” Boyd thought about it, his hands slapping the front of his desk. “Like when I first met him, actually, when he basically hated his money. Apparently he’s refusing to have his name associated with the new digs he’s building for Emily, even though he’s financing it all.”

“I like the name they picked.”

“Yeah,” Boyd said, sadly, “me, too.”

“I really hope Jeremy shows. One kind gesture deserves another.”

Jeremy’s act was more kin to a miracle than a gesture. Mitch was about to file for bankruptcy when Daniel suggested he wait a couple of days and talk to Boyd. Boyd loved the idea of combining the knowledge of their respective failures but knew his buyout wouldn’t be enough to bail out Mitch, much less redesign Touc’s grotesque interior.

He had limped into the bank the day after agreeing to sell. Everyone was on time except Jeremy. Boyd’s lawyer, Tom, was sitting to Boyd’s right. Boyd had gone to college with Tom who had black hair and the jawbone of a hockey player. Daniel sat to Boyd’s right, the three of them facing Shawn and Amber, the shiny surface of the long conference table like barbed wire between them. Amber crossed her hands on top of a

yellow legal pad then uncrossed them and began tapping the end of her Mont Blanc pen against the pad.

Shawn refused eye contact. He looked different. Broken in. Like a new pair of work boots worn for two weeks, their shine scuffed away by foot traffic and corners.

Shawn looked up and said, "What?"

"Nothing," Boyd said, "you just look different."

"It's all the dead weight I'm about to lose."

Anger fumed through Boyd's hangover. He was about to withdraw his verbal agreement when Jeremy walked in, his other eye black and swollen, making him look like a raccoon that had wandered onto the highway. A gash creased his forehead.

"Jeremy, fuck," Boyd said, "are you okay?"

"I'm fine, and I don't want to discuss my pleasing appearance." Jeremy stood to Amber's right with his hands on the tall, round back of an empty chair. "Let's get this over with. I've got an appointment with a plastic surgeon."

Boyd glanced at Shawn, who turned over his palms in confusion.

Tom said, "Let's begin the negotiations then." He had told Boyd if they could shoulder into negotiations, then Tom might be able to get more money.

"They'll be no negotiations," Jeremy said, "I have one offer."

Shawn smiled, smugly. Daniel took off his glasses and said, "Generally we try to work toward a common ground."

"Common ground is for people who have ground to stand on," Jeremy said. He pulled the pad away from Amber and then opened his hand, Amber obliging him with the

Mont Blanc. Jeremy scribbled on the page and then ripped it off, the top a jagged and descending tear. He folded the piece of paper in half and slid it across the table to Tom.

Tom's eyes popped open like manholes. "Is this a joke?"

"What would be funny about that?" Jeremy asked.

Tom reached past Boyd and handed the paper to Daniel, who put his glasses back on. "*This* is your offer?"

Jeremy closed his swollen eyes and shook his head. "It's like I'm talking to myself."

The half moons of Amber's fingernails tapped the table. "May I see that, please?" She took the offer from Daniel, sighed like she'd been expectedly stabbed, then handed it to Shawn. "This is unacceptable."

Shawn looked past Amber at Jeremy, his chalky face awash in disillusion. "We didn't talk about this."

"Hello, I'm the majority shareholder," Jeremy said. "And you just want to punk your friend."

"Punk him?" Amber asked, curiously.

"I just want what's right," Shawn said.

"Do you want me to walk out of this room and sell my shares to Boras? I will."

Boyd leaned forward, reaching toward the piece of paper. "Can I see – "

Tom pushed Boyd's hand. Amber whispered something in Shawn's ear, her left hand on his back. Shawn said, "It's like nothing bad ever happens to him." Amber whispered something else. Shawn flailed a hand in the air and then blew out a loud, "Fuck. Fine."

“Perfect,” Jeremy said, “I love it when everyone is happy.”

“When can we expect a check?” Tom asked.

“You can expect it right now,” Jeremy answered, pulling his checkbook from his back pocket. “I’ve all but signed it.” He leaned over and put the tip of the pen to the check – but then stopped, and gritted his teeth like he was about to receive a shot. He tapped the check with the pen twice, closed his eyes, shook his head, and finally signed the check. “You’ll fax me a copy of the receipt and contract today?”

“Absolutely,” Tom said, a little too arrogantly, “as soon as the check clears.”

Jeremy rolled his shoulders. “You don’t get a cut.”

Tom said, “Excuse me?”

“All you did was accept a deal I put on the table. You can bill for the hours and that’s it.” Jeremy slid the check back toward his side of the table.

Boyd swallowed. Tom spun his pen around his thumb a few times and then said, “I don’t have a problem with that.”

“Splendid.” Jeremy dropped Amber’s Mont Blanc on the table and walked out of the room.

Amber grabbed the pen and stood up. “I’d love to know how you swung that.”

“I didn’t swing anything,” Boyd said. “I’m the only one in the room who doesn’t know how much that check is for.”

“Win big and play dumb,” Shawn said, “that’s what you’re good at.”

The check was double what Boyd had put into the Rabbit, and he knew that made him look like anything but a loser. Still, two of his friends had ripped out his heart and played horseshoes with it. Boyd liked it better when everything was God’s will because

it meant nothing was his fault. It required nothing of him. If Lamont was right, if the reason things happened was people, then there might be a more disturbing reason Boyd had been tossed from two business ventures: himself. The things he naturally did and said and wanted, the things that made him Boyd Michael Tennor. And if that was the case, how long before Mitch and Lindsey followed suit? What if Boyd was a born loser and not a Christian-loser but a loser-loser. He had to go to the source.

When Boyd asked Reverend Spindle the loser question it looked like he wanted to circle the spiritual wagons. He took a drink of water and scratched his gray beard.

“Gosh, Boyd, it’s been a while since I’ve heard that one.”

“Well, what do you think?” Boyd had come under the guise of discussing his proposal. Reverend Spindle sat behind his modest desk.

“I think it’s a good way to demoralize my congregation, instructing them to be losers.” Reverend Spindle fidgeted with a button. “I’d get run out of town preaching that.”

“Isn’t that what the sixth chapter of Luke is about?”

“You mean the sixth book?”

“Tom-A-to, tom-AH-to. All that stuff about loving your enemies and losing your self and giving up your cloak.”

“Luke is a complicated book.” Reverend Spindle coughed, then took another drink of water. “Certainly one could say that Christ wants us to lose ourselves in him.”

“Wouldn’t that mean acting like him?”

“Well, of course, but there’s a difference between basic imitation and theological manipulation. Imitating Christ can be as simple as following God’s will.”

Boyd leaned forward, a hand on Reverend Spindle's desk. "My friend Lamont says that we use God's will to keep from owning up to things, that saying 'it was God's will' is the same thing as saying 'shit happens.' "

"It sounds like he doesn't believe in God."

"He believes, probably too much."

"Oh," Reverend Spindle said, "he's a fundamentalist."

"He's not a fundy. Will you quit giving me the party lines? I'm trying to get some answers here and I feel like I'm talking to my congressman."

Reverend Spindle's face bruised with embarrassment. "Okay, do you think God brought Lindsey into your life for a reason?"

"Absolutely."

"Then it's God's will and it doesn't matter if you're a so called loser."

"I just don't know anymore." Boyd fell back into his chair. "That would mean it doesn't matter what we do. Don't you think it matters?"

When Boyd revisited his own insane actions he knew they had more than mattered, knew they had contaminated those two weeks that played out like the Blair Witch Project. He felt like he'd lost control of his body and mind, he felt like he'd been inhabited by an unclean spirit. Why else would he freeze Jeremy out of the second interview, refuse his two best servers admittance for dinner *and* postpone a fundraiser to help an orphan? An unclean spirit was the only logical answer. If he'd just had the fundraiser Sterling might still be alive.

There was a service for Sterling. Jeremy bought a beautiful headstone. ESU's football coach spoke. Lamont wept, and after the service disappeared for three weeks. He wouldn't answer his phone and wasn't staying at his apartment, which Boyd knew because he knocked on that door every day until Lamont finally resurfaced in November when he and Mallory came to Thanksgiving dinner Boyd's parents.

After dinner Boyd and Lamont took a couple of scotches outside. They were both standing, the porch's railing in front of them at waist level. A three-quarters moon hugged the tree line. "I've to got come clean about something," Boyd said, "it was my fault your brother died, and I'm sorry."

Lamont chuckled. "Boyd, your narcissism knows no bounds."

"Narcissism? I'm taking the blame. I should've had that fundraiser."

"My brother died because of things he did. It had nothing to do with you."

"I wouldn't say nothing."

Lamont set it on the rail, his hand resting next to the glass. "I would."

"But I was such a dick."

"Everyone involved was a dick, it's how those things work. If you get in a fight with a rabid dog, you're going to get rabies."

"Is Shawn the dog?"

"No more than you."

Boyd smelled his scotch, the peat powerful. "And I'm not completely taking the blame. It's just," he shook his head, "never mind."

"What, Boyd?"

"You won't believe me, but I think an unclean spirit took over my body."

Lamont picked up his glass. "That's kind of what I was talking about."



“It was?”

“It was.”

Boyd clinked his glass against Lamont’s. “Great fucking minds, Lamont, great fucking minds.”

Boyd knocked the stack of menus against the desk, straightening them. He opened the file for the wine list and set the printer in motion. Jeremy had been a dick, but he had also given Boyd his cloak, or a cloak. Maybe they could be friends again. Maybe Boyd and Shawn could be friends again, or maybe it had all gotten too dirty. Boyd didn’t know. The ink cartridge buzzed back and forth. He pulled the three ties from the hanger and draped them over his arm, like dead bodies hanging from the galleys.

He asked Mitch, “Which one do you like best?”

Mitch glanced at them. “The stripes, no question.”

“That’s my favorite, too. But it’s the one I wore the Rabbit’s opening night.”

“Perfect,” Mitch said, “it’s good luck.”

## Chapter Two

Jasmine sat in front of a vanity mirror, fidgeting with the tulle hem of her black dress and studying the places her had gotten fatter from that baby, the baby she was going to give away as soon as she pushed it out of her body. Teyanna stood behind Jasmine, flat ironing Jasmine's hair, and Jasmine could feel the heat of the iron straightening her faint curls. Jasmine occasionally counted how long it took Teyanna to bring the flat iron down, usually seven seconds, but sometimes six or ten. The vanity had belonged to Emily's mother, and that royal lineage plus the fact that it was now in Teyanna's room made it the place where all the girls went to get made up for special occasions. Dances and dates.

A new tweed coat hung on a hanger from the closet doorknob. Everything for Jasmine seemed brand new, and she had not learned how to harness the energy of the transition that was whipping through her life: one minute she was being discarded into "the system" and the next someone was building her a new house. Her and five other pregnant girls. They were "breaking ground" today, and Jasmine knew that because she'd heard it so many times this week and because Emily kept quizzing her on the name of the new house: The Sterling Carroll Center.

The door to Teyanna's room opened and Emily walked in, wearing a black skirt suit and dark pink top. She looked taller and more made up and Jasmine could tell she'd had her hair done from how shiny and stiff it was.

“How are we doing?” Emily asked. She stood behind them so Jasmine could see her in the mirror, studying herself and straightening her jacket. “I feel like my entire body has been starched.”

“You look hot,” Teyanna said, “and we’re almost done.”

“Don’t forget the bows,” Emily groaned, shaking her head, “a present for the press.”

“I won’t,” Teyanna said. “You should relax.”

“Of course I should, but that doesn’t have anything to do with it now, does it? I hate these things – you know that, Teyanna.” Emily made eye contact with Jasmine through the mirror. “I’m sorry about the fuss, sweetie.”

“Why do you keep saying you’re sorry?” Jasmine asked.

“Because my goal is to give girls a place to live, not dress them up like dolls.” She tapped her bottom lip. “Teyanna will explain it. And there are two gentlemen callers waiting downstairs. May I send them up?”

“Chase?” Jasmine asked, almost standing before Teyanna put a hand on her shoulder.

“Who’s Chase?” Emily winked and walked out of the room.

“Why does she keep saying she’s sorry?” Jasmine asked.

Teyanna turned off the flat iron and set it on the vanity. “She doesn’t like parading us out for the cameras. Says it’s a necessary evil.” She picked up a bottle of shine. “Close your eyes.”

Jasmine did as instructed. “Maybe it’s not evil.”

“Maybe.” Teyanna sprayed the shine around Jasmine’s head, and Jasmine felt a few stray drops dot her face. “But I know you don’t like these bows.”

“The bows are stupid.”

“I did it for a long time,” Teyanna said, wistfully, fastening the bows. “I was the one they took pictures of.”

“Did you hate it?”

“Stand up, I need to fix your mascara.” Jasmine stood up and turned around. She’d never had a brand new dress before, not one this expensive, and she couldn’t wait for Chase to see it. Teyanna touched up Jasmine’s eyelashes and said, “I liked it at first, but it made me feel weird after a while.”

“Weird, how?”

“Weird like, I don’t know, they weren’t really taking pictures of me, even though they were.” She pulled the tiny brush back from Jasmine’s face. “There. You look bangin’ hot.” She laughed, a hand over her mouth. “Except for those bows.”

Jasmine laughed, too, and their laughter was interrupted by a knock on the door. “Are there any card sharks in here?” Chase asked, pushing the door open.

Chase had cut his hair short and was wearing a white shirt and a tie. He tossed a red box of cards into the air that Jasmine caught. Then she raced toward Chase and almost collided with Teyanna hugging him, each taking a side, Chase squatting down and wrapping his arms around their waists. When Jasmine pulled away she ran her hands down the dress and noticed a tall man standing in the doorway. He had on a dark suit and a tie with slanted stripes.

“What happened to your hair?” Teyanna asked, rubbing her hand over what was left on Chase’s head.

“I am a professional now, and I must look the part. And speaking of looking the part, Miss Jasmine, you look like you just swished off a magazine cover. Lamont, did I not tell you this girl was drop-dead gorgeous?”

“You did,” the tall man said.

“Ladies, this is Mister Lamont Carroll. Lamont, this is Terrific Teyanna and Jammin’ Jasmine, resident queens of the Lockley Home.”

The tall man named Lamont sat down on the end of Teyanna’s twin bed, the mattress giving and the comforter wrinkling. His voice was soft but deep, like if the entire ocean was filled with foam.

Jasmine asked Chase, “Are you going to be in the picture with me?”

“My ugly mug would break the camera,” Chase said. “But this handsome man Mister Carroll might step into a couple shots with you.”

He was handsome, and Jasmine knew he was handsome because Teyanna sat next to him and started asking the kinds of questions Jasmine was afraid to ask: How old was he and did he have a girlfriend and what kind of music did he like? Then Teyanna asked if he was going to work at the new house.

“No,” Lamont said, “but I’d like to come by some, like Chase does.” He looked at Jasmine. “Is that okay with you?”

Teyanna winked at Jasmine and Jasmine told Lamont that would be okay – and then she remembered the name she’d been saying all week: The Sterling Carroll Center.

Lamont Carroll. Jasmine opened and closed the box of cards, and without looking at Lamont asked, “Was he related to you? Sterling Carroll?”

Red veins webbed into Lamont’s eyes and all the muscles in his face softened. Jasmine thought he might cry, but he pushed out a smile that was barely a smile, that was like a cake without any sugar or frosting. “He was my brother.”

It seemed like no one knew what to say, but luckily Emily called up from downstairs and Chase took the tweed coat off the hanger and held it up for Jasmine to put her arms through, which she did. She straightened out the shoulders like Emily had done and slipped the box of cards into the jacket pocket. She felt fat and pretty, sad and happy, blessed and cursed. She missed her mother terribly and knew she would always miss her terribly but that it would start to hurt a little less, like a broken bone that always made you limp, except the bone was her heart. She wanted to ask Lamont if that was how he felt about his brother, broken but healing. Next time. Chase stuck out his elbow, his arm forming a triangle at his side, and Jasmine looped her hand through it and started walking toward the door before glancing back. Teyanna was still sitting on the bed, both hands behind her, propping her up; she brought her right hand to her mouth and kissed the tips of her fingers, then tossed the kiss to Jasmine with the flip of her wrist.

Jasmine could feel Lamont following them out of the door and then Emily called for them again, her voice whistling up the stairs, and Chase told her to hold her horses, that they were coming. And they were. Walking down the stairs with her hand on Chase’s arm and Lamont a few steps behind Jasmine could already see herself in the picture with Lamont, a man so tall and handsome. She could see them standing together, like a couple, not holding hands or with their arms around each other but still like a

couple on the front page of the paper, two people with broken hearts that would never quite heal. She wanted to take a tall stack of papers to her old school and stand in front of her locker in between classes and pass out a paper to anyone who walked by. One for the older girl who pulled the yellow bracelet out of the brown paper bag and one for all of the girls who strutted down the hall in shimmering tops and tight jeans. One for the cool, cool boy with the wicked handles and all of the people he wouldn't tell one for the boy called Dumbo, who told everyone he could. One for her friend who took her to smoke the meth with and one for her friend's mom with the tattered purple robe and one for the man named William, who sang the song about the butterflies and carried her out of the apartment. She could feel the thin texture of the paper and see the folded crease down the middle. She wanted to hand a paper to everyone who walked by, to everyone in the world, to say, "Here. *See*. Even though you tried to break me, tried to break me and forget about me, I'm going to be okay. I'm going to be fine."

### Chapter Three

Shawn sat on his couch, flipping between football games and drinking a Dead Guy Ale. It was the Sunday before Christmas, which meant the entire Izzy nation was at the Tennor place celebrating the holidays and Izzy Fountain's birthday. It had been Shawn's favorite day of the year, the booze and the food and the football and the stream of Izzy cars flowing out that gravel road into the woods. Shawn always made ribs. Chase brought wings. Jeremy brought a case of Champagne for mimosas and Boyd kicked in a keg of holiday ale. It was *the* Izzy holiday. They were probably halfway through the Champagne by now. Mitch had probably made ribs this year. Mitch was Shawn now. Or Pax was Shawn. Shawn only knew that he wasn't Shawn.

His father was refusing to speak to him. Shawn's mother always picked up at home and said Patrick Hallow was taking a nap or at a store or out in the yard. After six weeks Shawn called from Chase's cell, ready with a litany of complaints but unable to unleash any of them once his father answered, unable to unleash more than a hello. Neither of them knew what to say and for the first time Shawn wondered if his relationship with his parents had run its course. Could your parents break up with you? If it wasn't for his new pills, it all might bother Shawn more.

What did bother Shawn more was Boyd being happy. It seemed immoral or unjust or un-something that Shawn could not explain to Amber or Chase or the psychiatrist he now saw twice a month. Boyd had tripped over a new restaurant, fallen for another hot girl, and become the darling of the Izzy nation in the process. Amber said it was because the world adored victims, but wasn't Shawn the real victim? He should be



the darling. Not the zealot who continually lured people into his cult of Tennor. Shawn knew he had to get over it. Was there a pill for that?

His anger had become a pack of wild dogs without the Percocet. Aspirin didn't help. Getting stoned was like antagonizing those dogs with a garden hose and suddenly Shawn was not only yelling on the line at work, but also yelling at home. Yelling at his angelic son for crying. Yelling at Amber for yelling at him for yelling at Tristan Patrick. He started jogging, hoping his anger only needed an outlet, but while the pounds peeled off the anger stuck like rusted barnacles and sometimes Shawn felt like he was standing outside of himself, watching a skinnier and more successful imposter blister people with his screams, those people looking at him like he was crazy. Was he? Crazy?

The Zyprexa helped. He could feel the pulse of his anger lurching forward, ready to attack – but then it was retreating. Shawn might believe that the retreat was final, might believe in the power of those little white pills if Jeremy had not given Boyd that buyout. It allowed Boyd the last laugh. Allowed him to slap high-fives with his attorney and wave that check in Shawn's face. Less than twenty-four hours before Shawn had thought Jeremy's anger trumped his own and he had not only respected Jeremy for that, but admired him. They were in it together – until they weren't. Until Jeremy was at The Graceful Palate's opening night with Lamont and Mallory. The Graceful Palate. What a stupid name.

Everything got better at the Rabbit after Boyd left. It vindicated Shawn, that improvement, it acted as evidence that he had done the right thing and that rightness was based on what was best for the restaurant. It wasn't personal; it was business. Dana ran the office during the day and, as Shawn had always insisted, having a day manager to

answer the phone exponentially upped reservations. He dropped their health insurance. Pax quit. Kay followed. Chase adroitly ran the floor, one more thing Shawn had been right about: Chase was management material. He'd quit the nose candy. He was firm and friendly with the staff and worked just as hard as anyone during a shift. Shawn got the bell and all of the servers fell in line, all except for Mallory, and the only thing Chase couldn't accomplish was discontinuing her quips. She'd only refer to him as "Mister Hallow." She'd mock his beret. If Shawn had a knife in his hand she would turn around and blatantly display her back and for a week straight she brought in Percocet packets filled with Skittles. She'd pass them out to the staff or slide one across the line as she picked up a plate of food, and only then were Dana and Shawn able to convince Chase to fire Mallory.

"Fine," Chase said, tossing one the Percocet packets in the air and catching it, "you guys win. I'll tell her after the shift tonight."

The reservation book was open in front of Dana, one page of lines and times and the other page a map of the floor. "Or," Dana said, "we could both tell her after the shift. To soften it."

"Sure, because that would be as soft as cement." Chase tossed the packet into the center of the table. "I'm in charge of the staff and Mallory is my friend."

Dana scratched her neck. "So?"

"So," Chase replied, "you hate her something fierce."

"I do not." Dana looked down at the book. "I just want to make sure it's handled correctly."

"Pretty hard to botch firing somebody."

Shawn picked up the Percocet packet and emptied the Skittles into his hand.

Would it always be something?

“Shawn,” Dana said, one hand on his arm. “I think two people should be there, for legal purposes. And why let her work the shift if we’re just going to fire her?”

“And I think,” Chase said, putting a hand on Dana’s arm, “you just want to see her face. Not to mention it’s two damn weeks before Christmas. Let her have the shift.”

“She’ll start working for Boyd tomorrow.” Dana jerked her arm away. “She’d already be there if they were half as busy as us.”

“This is my staff,” Chase said, “the best staff in Elora, I might add. I will handle it and that’s the end of this bedtime story.”

Chase stood up and walked out of the room. Shawn swallowed the last bite of Skittles, already chafed by their sugary aftertaste. He could feel his anger inching forward. Chase’s staff? Last time Shawn had checked the staff was part of the Rabbit and the Rabbit belonged to Shawn. Shawn’s restaurant, Shawn’s staff.

“We agreed to keep him on a short leash,” Dana said, “and liquor costs are up.”

“Let him do this,” Shawn said, “he’s right.”

Dana closed the reservation book. “I guess it is his staff.”

Probably, Shawn should not have slept with Dana, and probably he should stop. Chase had needed a night off to take the Lockley girls to the Nutcracker so Dana ran the floor. She finished the numbers and they had a glass of wine. Then they had another. Then she was looking at him like she wanted him. Amber looked at Shawn like the morning paper and he had always been comfortable with that dependability, with the black and white mixed with a little color. It suited him. But the four stars and the glossy

pages of *Food and Wine* and the bright hues of violence had created a new and insatiable self that craved more of everything. Dana wanted him. Him. Then she wanted him to fire Chase. Chase had served his purpose, she claimed, bridging the gap from Boyd's departure to "the new Rabbit." Of course, she had disregarded Chase's other purpose: he was Shawn's friend.

Last week, during a shift, Shawn had been standing at the bar talking to Jeremy, who was eating with Danny. The restaurant was bustling. Christmas lights entwined the trees of Main Street. Shawn glanced out at the tables and thought he saw Boyd's skinny frame moving in and out of the candlelight. He looked closer. It was Boyd's arrogant strut. Boyd stopping at a table with one hand on someone's chair and then laughing with his head back. Shawn wiggled his fingers. The figure walked clear of the candlelight's circular glare and Chase came into focus. He ambled up to Shawn and asked, "Will you go give a shout to the Davenports?"

Shawn said he would. He couldn't believe he'd spent two months as an executive chef and never strolled around the dining room. Every night his ego received a verbal fellatio.

Danny cleared his throat. Jeremy said to Chase, "Can we do something about this awful music?"

Chase laughed. "There is nothing wrong with Zero 7."

"There's one thing wrong," Jeremy said, "I don't like them."

"Bro," Shawn said, "it's not a big deal. Just change the playlist." Music was another aspect of the ambiance Shawn gladly left to Chase, who spent hours making

playlists. Shawn appreciated that. There had been compliments from customers. Shawn also painfully appreciated that pride only got you so far with Jeremy.

“You want to pick the tunes from now on?” Chase asked. “Fine with me. Run the floor while you’re at it.”

Price walked behind them with three plates of food. Neil picked up two glasses of wine from the service bar and stabbed his ticket. Chase’s uneven mouth shifted from one side of his face to the other. He ducked under the service bar and changed the song without as much as a fadeout. Half of the tables looked up. Danny smirked. Shawn wanted to punch him. Then he wanted to punch Chase for not doing his job, which was to make Shawn’s job easier.

“Tristan’s down and fed,” Amber said, taking the recliner to Shawn’s left. “I thought you and Chase were boycotting the Izzy festivities together.”

“Haven’t heard from him.” Shawn flipped channels and Notre Dame was getting pummeled, as they always did in bowl games. “I might head over to the Rabbit.”

Amber pulled a bare foot underneath her. “Whatever for?”

“I need to look over some comps, and you know how long those numbers take me.” He wondered if Dana would meet him there. “People are giving away too much shit.”

“It’s probably that bell.”

“You used to say I was too soft on my staff.”

“I didn’t say to treat them like children.”

Shawn took a drink of his beer. “It’s an industry of children.”

The cordless phone rang and Amber picked it up off an end table. “It’s Chase.”

She tossed the phone to Shawn who answered with a curt, “Hello.”

*Mis-ter Hallow, you’ll never guess where I am.*

Voices scissored around the background. “The Coach House?”

*I’m a the Tennors’, drinking beer with Boyd because they’re putting their house on the market. We were just lamenting how much better things would be if you were here.*

“I’m sure Boyd wasn’t lamenting that.”

*It was his idea to call – hold on.*

“No, wait – ”

The line went quiet and then Boyd’s whinny voice was cramming itself into Shawn’s ear. *Hey, Shawn, this is the last shindig here and it’s just not the same without you.*

“I didn’t know your parents were selling.”

*It is what it is. So what do you say we put everything behind us for a day and drink some beer for old time’s sake? I know my parents would love to see you, hell, everyone here would love to see you.*

“Amber ran to the office,” Shawn said, surprising himself, “and I have to watch Tristan Patrick.”

*Okay. Boyd offered a disbelieving laugh. We’ll be here all day if you change your mind.*

Then Chase was back on the phone begging Shawn to come over and Shawn was repeating his excuse and asking how Chase wound up over there in the first place and

Chase said that Boyd had called, wanting bygones to be bygones. *He said his parents selling their house made him realize how important friends are. Now get your ass over here. It's a wake for the Tennor place.* Shawn said he would try and hung up. He took a drink of beer. His fingers tingled.

“What was that about?” Amber asked.

“Chase is over at the Tennors. He and Boyd wanted me to come over.”

“Conversing with the enemy. How brazen.” She shook her shoulders, mocking Shawn. “Why don’t you go over there?”

“Uh, because I don’t want to.”

“Clearly. Look, there’s only one person out of a hundred you don’t like. You’re going to have to face him sooner or later.”

“It’s not about facing him.”

“Whatever it’s about, I wish you’d get over it. You won.”

Shawn wondered if anyone really won. “Did you know the Tennors were selling their place?”

“God, no. I’d have tried to stay friends with Boyd. I wonder who they got.”

“Amazing.”

“That’s a big commission, honey. You should go over there.”

“Amber, really.”

“Don’t mind me, I’m just the bread winner in this family.” She flipped down the footrest and walked out of the room.

Over at Boyd’s? It was brazen. A brazen betrayal from his best friend. Dana was right: Chase had gotten off his leash and was screwing everything in sight. Chase

and Boyd were the same – how could Shawn have missed that? The same arrogance and the same warped thinking that *they* were the Rabbit when it was all Shawn. Why did this always happen to him?

Amber returned and sat a small orange bottle on the table next to Shawn's beer.

“At the risk of being brazen myself.”

Shawn popped two pills. Chase had been unemployed and Shawn had given him a job, given him a chance to manage when everyone else had written him off as a cokehead. If liquor costs really were up, then something had to be done. Shawn had noticed some wine missing of late. First growth Bordeaux stuff. He stood up and announced he was going for a run. He'd take his cell phone if Amber needed anything.

It was so clear to him now: Chase had to be fired.



## Chapter Four

Lamont sprayed starch over the back of his blue shirt, small white bubbles sitting atop the cotton as if hesitating, before sinking in. The starch simmered beneath the iron. The ironing board stood behind Lamont's futon where Mallory sat, dressed in dark brown pants and a fuzzy, white, cowl neck sweater. It was Christmas Eve, but even that could not impede the process of Mallory's compulsion to exhaust every detail of being fired.

"Are you tired of this yet?" she asked. "Me bitching about the Rabbit?"

"It's a welcome distraction." This was true: Lamont had always gone to Church with Sterling on Christmas Eve, a ritual that shouldered a more considerable burden after his mother died. Now, he was an orphan.

"I think I need some tea. Would you like some tea?"

Lamont pulled a sleeve across the ironing board, sprayed it down, and then ironed a long crease down to the cuff. "I think I would."

"Being fired shouldn't even register after what happened with Sterling."

"Yes it should."

"Well," Mallory said, standing. "I still feel like a little brat bringing it up."

"And that's different how?"

"You want me to hurt you, don't you? On the eve of our savior's birthday."

Lamont laughed. "Kind of."

Mallory had been a delayed casualty of the Rabbit's violence, injured in the aftershock. Lamont watched it start as a single spark then blaze into ferocious shifts of

guerilla warfare. Then she had to purge herself of each shift, going on and on about the way Dana asked her to do things and Dana flirting with Shawn and Shawn's comments about "the new Rabbit" and how ridiculous Shawn looked in that ridiculous beret. It made Lamont hate Shawn again, and that hate singed at the hem of his sadness. It was bad enough that Shawn had gotten a little bell and started acting like another person Lamont woke up every day and prayed not to hate: Chris Campbell. Both of them and their little bells, ringing for help like slave owners. Mallory would end every story with Can you believe that? and Lamont could believe it because the Rabbit was an abyss. He wanted to Mallory to quit. To wave the white flag and escape the choleric maelstrom that was making her insane. When Chase finally fired her Lamont was relieved, even though he wasn't, even though his first instinct was to hate Chase and Shawn for making Mallory humiliated and upset.

"And then Chase said he was doing it for me," Mallory said the night she was fired, her head against Lamont's chest. "He said he couldn't have people talking shit on Shawn like that."

"Of course," Lamont said, "that makes sense."

Mallory pulled her head away, her eyes red. "Honey, your only job right now is to make me feel better."

"Right. Sorry. Chase sucks. If you want, I'll drive over there right now and kick his ass. Shawn too, since I've always wanted to do that anyway."

"Better," she said. "Go on."

"Well, Chase isn't as smart as either of us, and will probably never step foot out of the industry."

“And Dana?”

“She’s very, very ugly.”

“That’s a good boyfriend.” She pulled a Kleenex from the box on Lamont’s trunk. “Now go get me a beer and you can tell me what you really think.”

Lamont thought it was about difference. For Chase, the difference was Shawn: you were either with him or against him. Looking after Shawn made Chase sacred, which made pushing Shawn under the bus sacrilege, which made Mallory bad because of what it implied: Chase was not only looking after someone bad, but an idiot for doing so; only an idiot would look after an asshole. Sure, Chase was protecting Shawn, but not as much as he was protecting his own goodness. And couldn’t they have waited until after Christmas? Chase would call a few days later, to make sure they “were still cool.”

“We’re cool, Chase, as long as you don’t try to explain everything to me.”

I know I don’t have to explain anything because you understand that sneaky bitch Dana hung me out to dry. I knew Mallory would rather hear it from someone who actually cared about her.

“I’m about to hang up.”

There you go again. I’m just saying, I wasn’t going to give Dana the satisfa –

Lamont hung up.

A week later, phenomenally, Shawn fired Chase, and Lamont wondered what kind of difference had come between them to make Shawn expel the one person who was invested in protecting his goodness. Lamont considered some karmic satisfaction in the turn of events, but mostly he felt sad for Chase, who now had to search elsewhere for his goodness.

Lamont steered the iron around the white buttons of the shirt, the cotton hardening. Mallory was standing, bobbing a bag of tea into a white mug. She said, “You can stop that now.”

“Stop what?”

“Thinking that I hated working there and wanted to quit.”

“Why would I think that?”

“Maybe because you’d been saying it for a month.” She took a drink of tea, her pinky pulling away from the cup. “I should be happy about this. I was holding out until after the holidays to go work for Mitch and Boyd. The money at the Rabbit had just been so good. I’ll hand it to Chase, he knows how to run the floor. I still can’t believe Shawn fired him.”

“No one likes to get fired,” Lamont said, “it means days of explaining away why it wasn’t your fault.”

“It was my fault, I couldn’t let go.”

“You didn’t have it, it had you.”

“There’s always this little space where we know we should do one thing, and we still do the other.” She shook her head. “It’s such a teeny-tiny space and we always get it wrong. What happens there?”

Lamont turned off the iron, thinking how many times Sterling had ended up in that teeny-tiny space, how many times he’d gotten it wrong – until he didn’t. He had escaped his own eternal return, and Lamont wondered what kind of power and fear that

moment held, the moment when Sterling's actions rebelled against his constitutional inclinations and he had walked into that burning house.

Lamont had gone to the address Sterling had texted him, even though he could not imagine that had been Sterling's intent. Sterling's intent had been to make sure the fire did not spread. Surely he did not want Lamont and Mallory driving up to a house being devoured by flames. Surely he did not want Lamont to be restrained by police officers, none of whom could answer the question tangled in the long gray hoses and fierce streams of water and continual radio chatter: Is my brother in that house? Surely Sterling did not want Lamont and Mallory to stand outside of the yellow tape until morning, at first sweating from the heat of the burning house and later cold from the sweat as the sun rose and the fire smoldered and three burnt corpses. Lamont knew that he could more easily answer his own question – Is my brother in that house? – than the police officers or the firemen because Sterling would've called or texted or waved from the crowd of people in pajamas and winter coats if he had gotten out of that house. Surely.

Following the fire, Lamont had to wait five days for dental records to confirm that one of those charcoaled bodies was his brother, and he spent those five days at Sterling's apartment. Just in case. In case Sterling had lost his cell phone or gotten amnesia or been abducted by aliens who would only let him return to his apartment in thirty-second intervals. It was absurd. But hope in the face of grief fastened itself to absurdity. So Lamont tried to make funeral arrangements, which proved comically problematic because he wasn't actually sure if his brother was dead. So he watched movies and played three seasons of Madden football with his brother at middle linebacker. He prayed.

Finally, at a little past ten in the morning, one Detective Painter called and officially cast Lamont into the world of grieving, which was like giving someone a diploma after they'd graduated. One of the other bodies belonged to Boras, whom Detective Painter called a "slimy piece of greed." They were closing the case. There might be a brief arson investigation but, off the record, Jeremy had sent a portion of his legal team to the DA's office to make sure this was the end of it, which was fine with the Elora PD. "Your brother," Detective Painter said, before hanging up, "God, was he something on the football field. He died a hero." Sterling had done something heroic, but that heroism glossed over the mass of his sins, not the least of which was entering a burning house without considering that Lamont would gladly wait tables for the rest of his life if that life included his brother.

Sterling's apartment felt like a cell, but a monastic pull kept Lamont there for two more weeks. He wanted to name his grief. If he could name it, then it would place them on a more amicable plane, and if they were on a more amicable plane then he could enter into dialogue and defuse it. The pain began so sharp and precise that he could easily locate it – his chest, three inches from his heart, the bottom of his stomach – and that precision likened itself to a Rex. But the next day its appetite was so hostile and insatiable that it consumed his entire body, and Rex seemed too specific and monosyllabic. Jacqueline was more accurate. But then it was a slow bleed that forced him to tears on the couch. Or it was a memory day, flipping through photo albums and press clippings. Or it would trap him into wondering what could've been if Sterling hadn't snapped his Achilles or if their father would've been around to make Sterling rehab or if Lamont hadn't had the audacity to say, Why does it always break people when

you fix things? Now Sterling had fixed things but Lamont was broken, and only in that brokenness did he realize that he could not name or intellectualize his grief.

So he slept in Sterling's bed and drank his cheap beer and sent his expensive dope to Chase through Mallory. He read the Bible. He lamented that the last communication he'd received from Sterling had been a text message. There could be a commercial: Need to send a note before running into a burning house to kill some drug dealers? Get unlimited texting from Sprint! Lamont couldn't even throw away his phone in protest; it was a keepsake. So he boxed up clothes. Mallory sold some football paraphernalia on eBay and gave the money to Emily. Toward the end of the second week, in the back of a closet, he found a box that contained his father's medals, still wrapped in that dirty confederate flag.

He could not remember how the medals had wound up with Sterling when Lamont had been the one so determined to retrieve them. The day itself, Lamont remembered vividly. He had blisters from the previous day's digging and welts from his father's belt. Sterling was watching TV and Lamont carried two shovels almost as tall as him into the living room. "Come on," he said, "we're going back."

"Dad will whip your ass again."

"Let him."

Sterling laughed. "Let him."

"I'm goin'."

"Go, then."

So Lamont dropped one shovel and went, right out the front door and down the street, making it half the block before Sterling emerged and followed twenty feet behind.

An old white pickup chugged down the street and Lamont stuck out his thumb. Two black teenagers pulled over, both of them shirtless and smoking cigarettes. One of the teenagers lifted Lamont and his shovel into the back and by that time Sterling had caught up and he hopped over the tailgate and gave the driver directions to the patch of woods. Once there, the shirtless driver lit up a fresh cigarette and said they'd wait. Blacks were like that back then. Gangs hadn't broken up the community.

The shovel was heavy. Sterling relaxed on the log where their father had put Lamont over his knee, smoking a cigarette he'd gotten from the driver. Lamont's blisters rubbed against the gloves that fit like oven mitts. Sterling said, "This is what you wanted, dig that shit up." Lamont tried to throw a shovel full of dirt at Sterling but it only traveled a couple of feet. Sterling ashed his cigarette and cackled. Lamont put his head down and dug for what seemed like thirty minutes but was probably five, sweating and holding in his tears, his blisters broken, he dug until he felt Sterling's hand on his shoulder. "Alright, little brother. My turn."

Sterling took the gloves and the shovel and Lamont collapsed onto the log. Even at twelve Sterling was tall and developed. He had not put on a shirt and his long arms made quick work of the dirt. Everything was always too easy for him, until it wasn't. When he had dug out half the hole he set the tip of the shovel on the ground and leaned on the handle. "Why you want these so bad?"

"I don't know," Lamont said, even though he did.

"Come on. I know you got the words." Sterling was always saying that, that Lamont had the words.

"Because," Lamont said, "Dad is wrong."



Sterling wiped some sweat from his forehead with the back of his gloved hand.

“He is, huh?”

“He is. He did that, he won those, and that matters.”

Sterling laughed and drove the shovel into the ground, his triceps flexing. “That’s my stubborn little brother,” he said, throwing the dirt behind him, “always right.”

Lamont flipped up his collar and wound a tie around his neck. His cell phone rang so Mallory picked it up off the trunk, said it was Jeremy, and tossed it to him.

“Merry Christmas, Jeremy.”

Merry Christmas. How’s my second favorite black man?

“I’m fine. Are you on your way?”

I just picked up Chase.

“Mallory’s already here.”

Great. Does Boyd know I’m coming?

“Of course he knows.”

Have you ever heard him sing?

“Have I ever heard him sing? You’re too weird for words.”

Jeremy’s weirdness was morphing into the bizarre, but in a Saul-to-Paul kind of way. It seemed he was trying to stretch out his own teeny-tiny space. It was awkward at times, clumsy even. He’d accompanied Mallory and Lamont to The Graceful Palate’s opening night and brought Boyd and Mitch a bottle of D’yquem. He’d sent a bottle of Champagne to the Tennors. His quips, however, seemed to be what wouldn’t fit through

that space, and of Lindsey he said, “She looks an awful lot like someone else he used to date.”

“Play nice,” Mallory said, “they’re happy.”

“I’m just making an observation. How could you not notice?”

You’d have to be blind not to notice, which was also true of the fact that Boyd’s life had swung back around like a tetherball into his new restaurant and engagement. Maybe Boyd was a modern day Job. It was difficult for Lamont not to get envious when comparing Sterling’s outcome to Boyd’s, but he knew that swatch of envy easily evolved into resentment, that it was like picking a fight with that rabid dog. Maybe Job was the story of a middle class white man who could screw everything up and still get a second chance. Of course, Job never did anything wrong and the story was about faith. They never should’ve edited the end of that book, but that’s what white people did, edit the endings so everything worked out for them.

Part of keeping Lamont’s envy in check involved playing basketball with Boyd once a week. Sometimes they joined pick-up games and Lamont enjoyed the rush that came from liberating his athletic ability. Often, as with the week after Boyd’s proposal, they just shot baskets. Lamont had drained a jumper and Boyd picked up the ball off a bounce. He dribbled between his legs and asked, “Do you think I’m moving too fast?”

“Do you promise not to get your feelings hurt?”

Boyd whipped a two-handed pass to Lamont and, in deep voice, said, “I promise.”

“I think you’re moving too fast.” Lamont’s shot rimmed out and Boyd plucked the rebound from the air.

“But when you know, you know.”

“In the words of the Psalmist, ‘Be still and know that I am God.’ ”

“Sure bring in the Bible.” Boyd dribbled to the top of the key and then hiccupped his body in an exaggerated fake move. “And what does that even mean?”

“What’s wrong with waiting? You can get married later. They’ll let you.”

“This is God’s will. I’ve seen how fast He can take things away so I’m not messing around. I’m still not convinced everything doesn’t happen for a reason, and I’ve been researching.” Boyd made another exaggerated move to his left then crossed over his dribble and went by Lamont for a lay-up – that Lamont snatched out of the air. He took one dribble and dunked over Boyd with two hands, catching the ball after it went through the net.

“Hey,” Boyd said, “I thought we agreed on no dunking.”

“It must’ve happened for a reason,” Lamont said, dribbling back toward the free-throw line. “God made me dunk on you.”

First Presbyterian Church was beautiful. High ceilings. Intricate stained glass windows and stone archways horseshoed around the sanctuary. The choir walked down the outside aisles in song, their robes dusting the floor, their voices beginning behind Lamont and then rolling past him to a crescendo.

Mallory sat to Lamont’s left, Jeremy to her left and Chase on the other side of Jeremy. Boyd sat to Lamont’s right, Lindsey on the other side of him, and Boyd’s parents on the other side of her. They all had tall white candles with plastic handles shaped like skirts. The pastor offered a touching homily on the crisis of faith Joseph must’ve faced, finding out his wife to be was not only pregnant, but impregnated by God.

How many men would've run? Talk about a teeny-tiny space. A mixture of gratitude and grace and anguish foamed up inside Lamont, and he pretended to scratch the top of his head and then pulled the starched sleeve of his shirt across his face, dragging a few tears.

The homily ended. The choir stood and the congregation imitated. The organ wailed on an opening note that seemed to tilt the floor downhill.

When Boyd first started singing "Angels We Have Heard on High," Lamont thought that Boyd was making a bad joke, mocking the song. In fact, Boyd was a terrible singer. Terrible. Yet he sung loudly and proudly. Lamont bit his bottom lip. Jeremy and Chase's heads appeared on the other side of Mallory, their eyes boastfully wide. Lamont rolled his shoulders in jest. Mallory backhanded his chest. Lamont looked down at the hymnal to regain his composure but his laughter had been tickled. Jeremy's lips were pursed, his face red; Chase elbowed him. Lamont started snorting through his nose and Boyd continued to sing loud and off-key and neither Lamont nor Jeremy could contain their laughter. Mallory caught it next, sandwiched between them, and then all four of them were laughing while the congregation sang Glooooo-ooooo-oooo-ooo—ooria, in ex-cel-sis deeeeo. Boyd whispered, What the hell is wrong with you? and at a loss, Lamont resorted to, Jeremy farted and then Boyd was laughing too and Lamont was whispering to Mallory what he'd whispered to Boyd and as the song ended they were all barely hanging on to their composure, like a child clinging to the tail of a large dog as it trotted out of the room.

The choir granted them a pause before moving into "Silent Night."

Jeremy wiped his face. At end of each pew people lit their candles and tilted the burning wick toward the person next to them, the flame catching and running down the aisle while the congregation sang, Silent night, holy night. The overhead lights dimmed and each pew became a row of fire. It was lovely, all of those candles, all of those rows, each flame like a moment bleeding into the next. All is calm, all is bright. Lamont thought of him and his brother, riding in the back of that old, white pick-up after retrieving the merit of their father's past. The summer sun bore down and the old country road was lined with trees. Lamont and Sterling were both leaning against the back of the cab. Wind whipped by their heads and the two teenagers in the front seat sang along with Bob Marley, Don't wor-ry, about a thing. The medals were still bundled in the soiled confederate flag, its white stars brown, the bundle between their bare black legs on the chipped metal of the truck's bed. Some old newspapers flapped around. Pot holes bounced empty Coke cans into the air. Lamont basked in the brilliance of the sun and the day and his older brother's smile that seemed to stretch across the width of the cab. Sterling must've sensed it too, the splendor, the perfection, because he rubbed the top of Lamont's head and then pulled it to his chest. He swayed his shoulders to the beat of the music coming from the front seat and Lamont imitated him, his shoulders keeping time with Sterling, and then Sterling said, "Sing with me, little brother," so they sang, together, Three little birds, pitched on my doorstep, singing sweet songs, of melodies pure and true, and with each last word Sterling tapped the tip of his pinky to Lamont's forehead, Sayin', this is my mes-sage to you.

Lamont had been right about the medals, they had mattered, what people did mattered, but there was no way he could've known the rest was arbitrary: the color of

your skin and who your parents were, the way your defense mechanisms worked and the moments they returned you to and whether those moments resulted in the crowd wanting to kill you or crown you, making life a subconscious series of dodging bullets and forming alliances. Lamont looked to his left at Mallory and Jeremy and Chase, then to his right at Boyd and Lindsey and the Tennors, all of them in song, the entire congregation in song. White wax dribbled down the candles and pooled in the plastic skirts. Okay, Lamont thought, this is what I have now. These people are my family.

## Mimetic Anxieties

The essence of Harold Bloom's antithetical criticism can be summed up in the older poet's paradoxical charge to the younger poet: "Be me but not me" (70). This phrase not only reveals Bloom's own sibling rivalry with his Yale School brethren, but also the psychological simplicity of The Anxiety of Influence. While Bloom claims to be utilizing a "revised" Freudian method, the essence of "Be me but not me" lines up perfectly with Rene Girard's mimetic rivalry, and makes Girard's rich discussion of the ubiquity of the mimetic principles necessary. Hence, this essay will utilize Girard's mimetic theory to deconstruct The Anxiety of Influence and illustrate that Bloom repeats the very moves he identifies. Moreover, the confusing psychological model of Bloom's work would be clarified if he moved from his "revised" Freudian model to a Girardian "interdividual psychology" and this hypocritical repetition plays into the hostile reactions to his work. While finding its way into the critical cannon, Bloom's The Influence of Anxiety has been called "elitist," "hostile," "necessarily patriarchal," "violent," and "occluded." An example of such a reaction is Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's criticism of Bloom in their book, Madwoman in the Attic. I will further use Girard to deconstruct Gilbert and Gubar's analysis and illustrate their repetition of the move they identify in Bloom, trapping their argument in the same hostile and patriarchal structure (or, attic) that they criticize. To undertake these tasks, I will begin with a brief look at René Girard's theory of mimetic desire.

René Girard first set out to show that human desire was "mimetic" in Deceit, Desire, and the Novel, illustrating this mechanism of "mimesis" at work in some of the

world's great novels. He believed that the novelists who composed these masterpieces understood the basic psychology of mimetic desire and brought it to life in their art. Since then, and six books later, Girard's work has crossed the spectrums of literary criticism, anthropology, psychology, and Biblical studies. The basis behind "mimesis" is desire: "Desire is undoubtedly a distinctively human phenomenon that can only develop when a certain threshold of mimesis is transcended" (Girard, Things Hidden 283). Through mimesis we learn to satisfy basic appetites (eating, sleeping, etc.); eventually, and naturally, there is a progression to a more sophisticated set of desires. Desire is spontaneous, choosing "its objects through the mediation of a model; it is desire of and for the other [. . .] who appears more and more masterful, more autonomous than the self" (Girard, Double Business 39). Others (metaphysically larger in childhood, more prestigious in adulthood) appear not only to have more, but to *be* more. Anxious and insecure about our own selves, we mistakenly believe anyone from our friends, family and fellow employees (that is, our neighbors) to possess an ontological fullness that we must certainly lack – otherwise, why the anxiety? Thus, our desire is not necessarily for some external good but, rather, for that fullness (that is, prestige, fame, happiness) that we believe the third party walks gracefully through life with; this is metaphysical desire. Since we cannot snap our fingers and become that person we begin, subconsciously, to imitate them. We adopt the clothes they wear, the objects they possess, and the friends they have, since all must provide the key to that ontological fullness. Hence, without even realizing it we desire the same objects, beliefs and appearances as our models. When mimetic desire becomes reciprocal between two people (races, nations, etc.), mimetic rivalry is engendered.



Once an object attains the status of being disputed, envy runs wilds and rivalry begins to escalate. The object's value continues to grow in direct proportion with the amount of resistance, and as the value of the object increases, so does the value of the model whom originally possessed it. Girard explains this phenomenon as a double bind, which parallels the Bloomian claim of "Be me but not me":

Man [*sic*] cannot respond to that universal human injunction, "Imitate me!" without almost immediately encountering an inexplicable counterorder [*sic*]: "Don't imitate me!" (which really means, "Do not appropriate my object.") This second command fills man with *despair* and turns him into the slave of the involuntary tyrant. Man and his desires thus perpetually transmit *contradictory signals* to one another. (Violence and the Sacred 146; emphasis mine)

For Girard, this "double bind" is "the basis of all human relationships" (147) and naturally exacerbates itself. While the first party may come to realize the model does not possess the amount of ontological fullness they originally thought, the rivalry itself is enough to keep the person locked in and the escalation continues, heading towards violence. The metaphysical desire for the person's ontology has given way to the power of the rivalry, which both parties will eventually and unknowingly come to worship. The object, often, is simply symbolic of the model's ontological state, and rivalry can also escalate over (as we will see below) ontology itself: who is smarter, who is more famous, who is a better person.

The object, now unattainable due to the width of the gap, is soon forgotten and everything centers around the rival: she/he is either a god to be worshipped or a devil to be destroyed. It is at this point that the two rivals become “mimetic doubles.” They begin to hate each other with such ferocity that they believe they are completely different beings but in reality they are beginning to mimic each other emotionally and through action. “The more antagonists desire to become different from each other, they more the become identical. Identity is realized in the hatred of the individual” (Girard, I See Satan 22). When mimetic desire is first engendered between two people there is only difference (metaphysical, ontological, etc) between the two, difference which prompts imitation. Once the model invokes the mimetic double bind (“Imitate me! Don’t imitate me”) and desire escalates to rivalry, differences disappear and the two start to become identical; soon rivalry will escalate to an inevitable end, violence. All logic has been lost and the model has transformed from the god that should be worshipped to the devil that must be destroyed or, as Girard labels him/her, “monstrous double”: “When violent hysteria reaches a peak the monstrous double looms everywhere at once. The decisive act of violence is directed against this awesome version of evil and at the same time sponsored by it” (Girard, Violence and the Sacred 161).

It is from René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire that French physician and psychiatrist Jean-Michel Oughourlian establishes an “interdividual psychology” in his book, *The Puppet of Desire; the Psychology of Hysteria, Possession, and Hypnosis*. For Oughourlian, mimesis precedes consciousness and is as basic as gravity: “I have always thought that what one customarily calls the ‘I’ or the ‘self’ in psychology is an unstable, constantly changing, and ultimately evanescent structure [. . .]. Because desire is a

psychological motion, it, alone, seems to me is capable of producing the self and breathing life into it" (Oughourlian 11). An "individual" is autonomous, with subjective desires; an "interindividual," is constituted not only by mimetic desires, but the various relationships from which these desires are "caught," making this Girardian notion of the self relational. As we will see below, Bloom's project would be better suited by Oughourlian's interindividual psychology than the revision of Freud's family romance.

Critics disagree on whether Bloom's work is psychologically or textually driven, perhaps due to the confusing Freudian revision. Jonathan Culler claims Harold Bloom attempts "the development of a psychological model for describing the genesis of poems, and [that] he explicitly takes issue with deconstruction by insisting on the primacy of will: the will of strong poets locked in battle with their titanic precursors" (29). This synopsis, on the surface, seems to address all the pertinent issues in The Anxiety of Influence: one, Bloom's task is psychological; two, he is at the early stages of his own willful battle with Derrida and other Yale critics; three, strong poets have the same willful battle with their predecessors, their "poetic fathers" which, in their desire to be "Great Originals," creates the anxiety of influence. A high percentage of criticism sees Bloom's psychological model as Freudian, The Norton Anthology of Literature being no different, stating, "Bloom's basic model is Sigmund Freud's Oedipal conflict between sons and fathers – a masculinist paradigm that requires the male use of the pronoun throughout this headnote<sup>1</sup>" (1794). One can already see the hostility Bloom's work breeds: it requires one to use exclusivist language, a forced linguistic imitation. This hostility will be seen below in the work of Gilbert and Gubar, who also believe the work

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<sup>1</sup> This paper, as well, will be forced at times towards the same masculine language due to Bloom's patriarchal paradigm.

to be psychologically driven: “Like Freud, whose psychoanalytic postulates permeate Bloom’s literary psychoanalyses of the ‘anxiety of influence,’ Bloom has defined the process of interaction that his predecessors did not bother to consider because, among other reasons, they were caught themselves so caught up in such processes” (Gilbert and Gubar (47).

Peter de Bolla, in his book Harold Bloom: Towards a Historical Rhetorics, stands in opposition to the above quotes, claiming that Bloom’s work lends itself more towards deconstruction and poems than towards psychology and poets. While Bloom leans heavily on Freud to explicate anxiety in The Anxiety of Influence, Bolla claims this crutch should not be given too much credence: “[W]e should note as forcefully as possible that this is not to claim that [Bloom’s work] is psychoanalytic, or that it participates within a general literary critical project to adapt or connect Freudian psychoanalysis to the practice of criticism” (19). Perhaps Bloom is given too much psychoanalytic credence. While Bolla agrees that “influence” is centered on examining relationships, he argues that the center of Bloomian project is the relationship of one poem to another, as opposed to one poet to another, further illustrating the lack of psychological complexity in The Anxiety of Influence.

Bloom’s goal in The Anxiety of Influence is a “poetic theory of poetry,” which – as he states on the first page – will examine, “the story of intra-poetic relationships” and describe how “one poet helps to form another.” His theory is not a methodology of reading and is not an exegesis of text. It is a theory that claims the following:

The profundities of the poetic influence cannot be reduced to a source study, to the history of ideas, to the patterning of images. Poetic influence, or as I shall frequently

term it, poetic misprision, is necessarily a study of the life-cycle of poet as poet.

When such a study considers the context in which the life-style is enacted, it will be compelled to examine simultaneously the relations between poets as cases akin to what Freud called the family romance. (Bloom 7-8)

Bloom gives fair warning that his use of Freud's family romance will require some revision to fit his means, but insists that Freud (and Nietzsche) are "the prime influences upon the theory of influence presented in this book" (8). Despite this claim of influence, Bloom immediately rejects "the qualified Freudian optimism that happy substitution is possible" (8) and thinks that Nietzsche and Freud both "underestimated poets and poetry [ . . . ]" (8). Moreover, "Nietzsche's disciple, Yeats, and Freud's disciple, Otto Rank, show a greater awareness of the artist's fight against art, and of the relation of this struggle to the author's antithetical battle against his nature" (9). This begs the question: Why not use Yeats or Rank and avoid the confusion that surrounds revising Freud? It is no wonder that the criticism differs so vastly on the intent of Bloom's work; nine pages into the book one begins to wonder if Bloom really does know whom the prime influences on his book are.

Perhaps if Freud did not have to be revised, there would be less confusion and contrast in the criticism; that is, Bloom would certainly benefit from a psychological theory from a single critic which did not need revision or transformation: René Girard's mimetic theory. The "poetic lifecycles" and "relations" between poets that Bloom begins his book discussing would fit perfectly into Oughourlian's psychology of the interindividual: "It is mimesis, and that alone, that makes one human, that constitutes the self, and that makes possible one's entry into the sphere of language. This means that

from the very start psychological actuality is to be found *between* individuals” (Oughourlian 15; author’s emphasis). In mimetic theory the self is dynamic, not a fixed entity. Bloom’s “poetic-lifecycle” is dynamic and mimetic, the younger poet (Bloom’s ephebe) imitating the model, desiring to *be* the model, his current self constituted by his “relation” to his model (the precursor). The “sphere of language” which the ephebe enters into is mimetic, but manifests itself as poetry or, as Bloom calls it, “misprision.”

“Misprision” is the act of writing a new poem. The anxiety the younger poet (ephebe) feels in trying to match a poetic father (precursor) is internalized, but the anxiety is not the relation, anxiety is the poem itself and misprision (or, influence) is the act of creating a new poem. Hence, for Bolla, Bloom’s notion of “influence” is first the relationship between two poems, and second the relationship between two poets. This position is a bit surprising given Bloom’s own claim of (a slightly “revised”) Freudian psychology being the primary influence on The Anxiety of Influence. Bolla, however, is unwavering in this claim: “This weak appropriation [of Freud’s family romance] errs in one crucial respect: it makes of poetic history an enormous family romance, with one poet struggling against his poetic father, and so on [. . .] it is not what Bloom had in mind” (16). For Bolla, while Freud is useful in Bloom, the work itself is not a psychoanalytic study.

Bolla, however, does admit that Freud plays a role in defining Bloom’s concept of anxiety, but the anxiety itself is not Freudian in nature:

For the anxiety a poet feels in the face of his precursor is not something within *him*, it is not part of the psychic economy of a particular person, in this case a poet, rather it is the text. Thus, while a weak reading of anxiety remains within a

theory of a poet as individual, a strong reading turns from the neuroses and anxieties we impute to individuals to a consideration of the result of those anxieties, the text [. . .]. (20, author's emphasis)

Bolla gives text credence over psychology in the Bloomian project, so it makes perfect sense that the anxiety, while not Freudian, is carried by the poem as opposed to the poet. Still, this hardly clarifies the critical confusion we have been wading through. Perhaps a return to an earlier quote of Girard might help: "Man [*sic*] cannot respond to that universal human injunction, 'Imitate me!' without almost immediately encountering an inexplicable counterorder [*sic*]: 'Don't imitate me!' [. . .] This second command fills man with *despair* and turns him into the slave of the involuntary tyrant" (Violence and the Sacred 146). In a Girardian analysis the "despair" (anxiety) comes from the double bind of the relationship between the two poets, and this double bind is the center of Bloom's antithetical criticism: "Be me but not me." Does this mean Bolla's textual claim is superior to Culler's psychological? It is still difficult to say. Perhaps a direct quote from Bloom would help: "[T]he poet is condemned to learn his profoundest yearnings through an awareness of *other selves*. The poem is *within* him, yet he experiences the shame and splendor of *being found by* poems – great poems – outside him. To lose freedom in this center . . . is to learn the dread of threatened autonomy forever" (26; author's emphasis). Given that this is a psychoanalytic quote about text, it is still difficult to determine which critic is correct. That said, Bloom's own emphasis on "other selves" and the correlation of Girard's "despair" and Bloom's "dread" are more lucid through a Girardian hermeneutic, further illustrating the need for an interindividual psychology to clarify the mess Bloom has made of his own various influences.

Bloom's psychological task is, in fact, the mimetic process of desire, imitation, and rivalry. Bolla's insistence on the priority of the relationship of the text could subvert an argument for Girardian analysis – unless we consider the overall critical context of Bloom's work. Again we turn to Culler, "Though a skilled interpreter might reveal important affinities between Bloom and Derrida or de Man, Bloom strives mightily to *set his work against theirs*, insisting that the human subject is a ground or source rather than an effect of textuality [. . .]" (29, emphasis added). Just as the ephebes want to create their own "Great Original" poem, Bloom has the identical (mimetic) desire with his own critical work: "I propose, not another new poetics, but a *wholly different practical criticism*. Let us give up the failed enterprise of seeking to 'understand' a single poem as an entity in itself. Let us pursue the quest of learning to read any poem as its poet's deliberate misinterpretation, as a poet of a precursor poem or of poetry in general" (Bloom 43; emphasis added). Bloom does not simply want "another new poetics" because those are not original, much less a "Great Original." To swerve away from his siblings Bloom must create a criticism that is "wholly different," a criticism that no one has ever seen, a criticism such as deconstruction.

Bloom is experiencing a mimetic pull due to his own ontological lacking and aims to create his own misprision: a text in relation to the texts of his successful Yale brethren. Bloom's misprision will reveal a new way of reading poetry completely distinct from his rivals (cf. Bolla 32). In Frank Lentricchia's book, After the New Criticism, he observes that Bloom was not only haunted by his present rivalries: "W.K. Wimsatt, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren are Bloom's dangerous precursors, the impossibly demanding father-figures who must be symbolically slain in an act of 'misprision' or



willful misreading” (319). Lentricchia uses Bloomian terminology to emphasize how easily Bloom’s early work opened itself up for deconstruction based on, in essence, mimetic principles. Bloom’s major constitutive rivals however, are not in the past, but in the present<sup>2</sup>:

Bloom’s warfare with his New-Critical father-figures is not so much given up in his later books as it is augmented by sibling *rivalry*, another well-known cause of family disaster. The threatening siblings turn out to be no other than the New French critics, the structuralists, and particularly poststructuralist figures like Jacques Lacan and (most troublesome of Bloom’s siblings) Jacques Derrida. Against the New-Critical precursors in America and the new *rivals* from the Continent, Bloom continues, with unfortunately misleading emphasis, *to attempt to clear space for himself* in order to create his critical identity out of nothing. Despite his strenuous efforts, he remains a captive of the positions he opposes, a perfect illustration of his own theory. (326; my emphasis)

This is to say, if deconstructed, Bloom’s text repeats the move he identifies and criticizes in poets. Lentricchia emphasizes this deconstruction with the phrase, “to attempt to clear space for himself” as it is a line pulled straight from the first page of The Anxiety of Influence: “[S]trong poets make history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves” (Bloom 5). Bloom is no different than the ephebe poets he describes, no less immune to the anxiety of influence and no more autonomous, failing to bring forth a “Great Original” critical theory of reading poetry. He is imitating

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<sup>2</sup> Girard defines models that we know (parents, friends, teachers) as “internal models,” and those outside of our lives (the deceased, movie stars, Christ, Buddha) as “external models.” Models, of course, become rivals.

the likes of Derrida, but not really. He desires the same ontological fullness of prestige and praise that has been lauded upon them. Oughourlian perfectly describes this phenomenon: “[O]ntological desire aims at grasping the models knowledge, at stealing his secret, the secret that is Difference, the essential factor in the mimetic” (25). The Yale critics are both Bloom’s models and simultaneously his rivals. He wants to be Derrida, but also himself, illustrating the very double-bind which Girard identified above (“Imitate me! Don’t imitate me!”) and Bloom places at the heart of his criticism: “ ‘Be me but not me’ is the paradox of the precursor’s implicit charge to the ephebe. Less intensely, his poem says to its descendant poem: ‘Be like me but unlike me’ ” (Bloom 70). Again one can see the textual (the poem) being placed in a psychological context, but here the poet is given precedence, as the poem’s charge is given “less intensely.” Bloom labels this charge a double bind, a charge that appears Girardian to the core.

This double bind lies at the heart of Blooms “wholly different” criticism, again illustrating the lack of psychological complexity and the need for a Girardian hermeneutic. Even if one were to ignore the parallel use of the double bind, it is not difficult to determine that the ephebe’s relationship to his precursor is based on mimesis. Infatuated (and identifying) with the “strong poet,” Bloom emphasizes the notion of ontological desire that Girard claims is implicit in his mimetic theory: “*Where it, the precursor’s poem, is there let me poem be*; this is the rational formula of every strong poet [ . . . ]” (Bloom 80, author’s emphasis). The ephebe desires the strong poet’s ontological fullness, and can only attain such a fullness (status) if his poem is an ontological equivalent, just as Bloom can only attain Derrida’s ontological status if his own criticism can attain the same sweeping fame as Derrida’s. The desire is mimetic. As

stated above, for Girard, the model becomes either a god to be worshipped or a devil to be destroyed. In Bloom's antithetical criticism, the precursor is undoubtedly a god: "The ephebe *learns divination* first when he apprehends the appalling energy of his own precursor as being at one the *Wholly Other* yet also a possessing force. [ . . . ] *To divine the glory* one already is becomes a mixed blessing when there is a deep anxiety whether one has become truly oneself" (Bloom 101, emphasis added). Here one can see that the anxiety does not only come from the poem, as stated by Bolla, but also from the relation between ephebe and precursor, a relationship in which Bloom clearly believes the older poet to be a "Wholly Other" whom holds a divine status (ontology). Or, returning to an early quote from Girard, "Desire chooses its objects through the mediation of a model; it is desire of and for the other [ . . . ] who appears more and more masterful, more autonomous than the self" (Girard, Double Business 39).

Hence, this anxiety of influence is an anxiety over imitation; for Bloom, the suffering of the relationship (for Girard, despair over the double bind) manifests itself in the new poem, which is the above mentioned act of misreading/misprision and the manner in which the ephebe "separates space for himself." Bloom's "wholly different" antithetical criticism is based on this relationship: "True poetic history is the story of how poets as poets have suffered other poets [ . . . ]" (94). Just as the ephebe is indebted to their "more masterful" precursor, Bloom is indebted to the "more masterful" Derrida, but while this indebtedness clarifies the ephebe's work, it confuses Bloom's.

Like any hyper-mimetic individual (external rivals in the past, internal in the present), Bloom is caught vacillating between loathing his rivals to the point of trying "to separate a space for himself," and imitating them; he is an interdividual, psychologically

constituted by his relations to them, more “influenced” than he could bear to admit, using their “knowledge” and “secrets.” Bolla notes that the forward in Bloom’s book, A Map of Misreading, “is very close to de Man’s concept of reading in which the deconstructive work of a text exposes the impossibility of its reading” (26). This resemblance can also be seen in the point noted above regarding Bolla’s insistence on the precedence of poems over poets in The Anxiety of Influence: “We should also note that the claim that ‘there are no texts, only relationships between texts’ certainly looks as if it is connected to certain Derridean formulations<sup>3</sup> relating to the larger issues surrounding textuality and interpretation” (Bolla 26). Again: “Be me but don’t be me.” As Girard explained, the mimetic double bind has made Bloom “a slave to the involuntary tyrant” Derrida.

If Bloom is not to the point of mimetic doubling with The Anxiety of Influence, he will reach that point by the time he finishes the last book of his tetralogy, Poetry and Repression. Lentricchia notes that this later work becomes “self-consciously violent” and, moreover, that “Bloom’s critique of Derrida becomes anxiety-ridden rhetoric, not argument; assertion, not analysis” (335). Even in Bloom’s first book of the tetralogy, he does not know where his Yale brethren’s theories end and his begin. In his own quest to differentiate himself and his “poetic theory” from post-structuralism he continually creates new terms to explicate his theory. Bolla comments on “the intricacy and difficulty associated with Bloom’s private vocabulary, and the often occluded nature of his explanations” (Bolla 30). Lentricchia calls Bloom’s terminology “esoteric” and says that his revisionary ratios “are merely six strange names for the six strategies of evasion

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<sup>3</sup> This raises an interesting point regarding not only Bloom’s place in the critical cannon, but also how difficult it can be to place some critics. Culler notes that Bloom is “treated as a post-structuralist” (29) because he is not really a structuralist. Yet, Lentricchia notes that Bloom presents a “grotesque structural model” (328) for reading poetry and Bolla claims Bloom has post-structuralist tendencies.

which cannot succeed” (Lentricchia 331). In trying to create a complex, “wholly different” criticism, Bloom has stumbled over his own vocabulary and produced a psychologically confusing model.

Bloom is so consumed with becoming a “Great Original” and “clearing his own space,” that he has to create his own dense language, which muddles his argument. He cannot simply call a defense mechanism a defense mechanism, he has to call it a “revisionary ratio.” And each revisionary ratio has its own arcane name – from Greek. This use of language is one way that Bloom creates an elitist tone and text that feels exclusionary (see below) and that feels, as Lentricchia claims, “hostile.” While Bolla and Lentricchia are both examining a larger context of Bloom’s work, Lentricchia still spends only a few sentences on the revisionary ratios and Bolla only a page and half. They are confusing and muddled, with an unsurprising result:

It is hardly surprising, however [. . .] that articles and books on Romantic poetry, for example, have ignored completely the ‘revisionary ratios’ of clinamen, tessera, kenosis, daemonization, askesis and aphrodades since the publication of *The anxiety of influence* [sic]; still less that co-workers in the Romantic tradition have neglected to ‘map’ their favourite [sic] poems according to the schema set at the opening of *A map of misreading* [sic] [. . .]. (Bolla 8)

Bloom has created a vocabulary that is original, but hardly a “Great Original,” his work is a confused victim of his own anxiety of influence.

Bloom’s revisionary ratios are defenses against the anxiety of influence. Hence, this anxiety is over imitation and the realization that the self is relational as, Bloom states, “the poet is condemned to learn his profoundest yearnings through an awareness of *other*

*selves*” ( 26, author’s emphasis). The ephebe is on a “Promethean Quest” to become the next “Great Original,” but when they begin to sense that they are only copies of their models, they must resort to the six revisionary ratios in order to cope with the anxiety and keep producing work. Bloom calls this metaphysical desire of originality “discontinuity” as the poet seeks to break the continuity of their precursor. For example, with *clinamen*, the first revisionary ratio, Bloom describes the ephebe trying to establish difference through the text: “The *clinamen* or swerve [ . . . ] is necessarily the central working concept of the theory of Poetic Influence, for what divides each poet from his Poetic Father (and so saves, by division) is an instance of creative revisionism” (42, author’s emphasis). To be a Great Original, one must distance themselves from their models.

Hence, the progression of the revisionary ratios viewed through a mimetic lens make perfect sense: it is of an ontological and psychological urgency that the poet be unique, and he establishes this uniqueness through the process of mimetic rivalry, a result of the imitative desire to “be” the precursor. Bloom even foresees the natural progression of rivalry in a later revisionary ratio, *askesis*: “[I]n his purgatorial *askesis* the strong poet knows only himself and the Other he must at last destroy, his precursor . . . *askesis* is the contest proper, the match-to-the death with the dead” (121-122, author’s emphasis). Escalation in doubling results in violence, the natural conclusion for all mimetic rivalry, and the natural conclusion from Bloom’s poetic theory. Desire imitates desire and rivalry provokes rivalry; Girard describes the mimetic process as a contagion because its power is capable of sweeping up anyone who gets in the way. If we consider that rivalry is contagious, and Bloom’s various levels of rivalry (his own versus the Yale

Critics, ephebes versus their precursors), it might explain why his work has been called “hostile.”

In closing out his chapter, “Harold Bloom: The Spirit of Revenge,” Frank Lentricchia openly admits his lack of sympathy for Bloom while, begrudgingly, it would seem, stating: “No theorist writing in the United States today has succeeded, as Bloom has, in returning poetry to history [. . .]” (342). Still, Lentricchia questions the hostile and antagonistic nature of Bloom’s work, covering many of the above points: “The problems with the theory are not so much problems of principle as they are of tone, rhetoric, and scope. For reasons that are unclear to me, Bloom has chosen to articulate his position in ways that tend to guarantee a hostile rejoinder” (343). There are multiple elements which provoke this hostility, and Lentricchia does not hesitate to list them: the above mentioned tone, his “refusal to acknowledge philosophical debts,” the “onastic selfishness that Bloom attributes to strong poets,” and the exclusion of female poets. He is indebted to no one. He is the strong poet on a Promethean Quest to be a Great Original, and there is something offensive about a person continually screaming about their own greatness. For Lentricchia, this creates most of the hostility: “[Bloom] has permitted us to understand that what he desires most is not to engage in history but to make his own history in the face of the giants of English poetry; with his flamboyant habits as a writer Bloom has called attention to himself as the brightest particular star of our critical heavens” (345).

Lentricchia’s assessment is accurate, and encapsulates some of the most basic elements which provoke mimetic rivalry and, therefore, hostility. When someone claims to be “a giant” or their “own star” it diminishes the importance of others and, in doing so, prompts envy. This makes the braggart (Bloom, in this case) the object of everyone

else's resentment and provokes hostility by claiming to not only be better than everyone else, but so autonomous that they do not need anyone else, or any work anyone else might have done. Bloom places himself in an elite ontological position – being the smartest, the most original – by simply announcing it to be so<sup>4</sup>; this self-aggrandizing prompts hostility and rivalry by, first, implying that everyone else is less smart and/or original, and, second, prompting others to think, *I am smarter than him*, or, *That is my place*. It is no wonder so many negative essays have been written about Harold Bloom.

One need look no further than Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's Madwoman in the Attic for evidence of this “hostile rejoinder” (that is, mimetic rivalry) Lentricchia described in the above paragraph. Gilbert and Gubar aim to replace Bloom's “critical warfare” between male poets with a “secret sisterhood” of female poets; this seems like a natural comparative move but in doing so they are imitating Bloom's reductive structure. What follows is a tit-for-tat illustrating how much more afflicted female writers are than Bloom's male poets; this is certainly true. Problematically, however, in setting their argument against Bloom's and imitating his structure, Gilbert and Gubar create a literary gender face off and trap themselves in the structure of their own argument, a patriarchal structure that is actually Bloom's. That is, just as Bloom (in rivalry with his Yale brethren) repeated the move he identified in poets, Gilbert and Gubar repeat the move they identify in Bloom. It is a contagion.

One can see this mimetic problem developing from the beginning of Gilbert and Gubar's argument: they point out as politely possible the exclusionary and patriarchal nature of Bloom's model, trying it would seem, not to imitate his hostility. They are

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<sup>4</sup> This is similar to a certain President claiming to be “the decider:” it is decided, simply because he decides it.



above such imitation, explaining that Bloom's work "has seemed, and no doubt will continue to seem, offensively sexist to some critics" (47). Not them, but "some critics." Regardless of their intentions, Gilbert and Gubar are already locked into a rivalry over the minute space women have been given in Western literary history; they desire (again, rightly so) the metaphysical fullness of freedom and power and prestige men have been granted and women have been denied. One can see a structural imitation from the beginning of Gilbert and Gubar's argument: "For our purposes here, however, Bloom's *historical construct* is useful not only because it helps identify and define the patriarchal psychosexual context in which so much Western literature was authored, but also because it can help us *distinguish the anxieties* and achievements of female writers from those of male writers" (48; emphasis added). That single sentence presents all of their structural problems: trapping themselves in the very patriarchal construct they are trying to escape. In trying to differentiate female writers from male writers, they create a competition regarding whose anxiety is worse, adding a thematic and linguistic imitation to the structural. They have entered the same mimetic double-bind that Bloom entered with the Yale Critics and ephebes entered with their precursors: "Be me don't be me."

Of course, they are locked into a rivalry because, mimetically speaking, the desire the same ontological fullness as Bloom: they want to be a "Great Original." While Bloom wanted to create a "wholly different" criticism of poetry, Gilbert and Gubar seek to swerve away from Bloom and create their own space, a feminist poetics: "[W]e hope to show new ways in which all nineteenth century works by women can be interpreted" (xii). This hermeneutic is centered around dissecting the metaphors and images which have kept women trapped in a literary male construct – for instance, the looking glass.

As they explain, “Specifically, as we will try to show here. A woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ which male authors have generated for her” (17). Gilbert and Gubar do not stop at examining and transcending these images, marking the first move towards their own violent imagery. The images of “angel” and “monster” must be “killed” and in their “construction of a feminist poetics we really must dissect in order to *murder*” (17, emphasis added). What is the root of this violent imagery? It is the model and rival of their ontological desire, the model they cannot help but imitate: Harold Bloom. They, too, are “slaves to an involuntary tyrant.”

By setting their argument against (and in imitation of) Bloom, Gilbert and Gubar engage in a rivalrous tit-for-tat and create a gender face-off in Bloomian terminology and revisionary ratios, all of which mires them in dualistic essences. One can see this urge to differentiate through Bloomian language in the following: “Unlike her male counterpart, then, the female artists must first struggle against the effects of a socialization which makes conflict with the will of her (male) precursors seem inexpressibly absurd, futile, or even – as in the case of the Queen in ‘Little Snow White’ – self annihilation” (Gilbert and Gubar 50). The female writer’s battle is not against a single male precursor but against an entire patriarchal social structure. Her revisionary struggle is not simply a struggle, but an “act of survival” (49). While male authors suffered from an “anxiety of influence,” female authors suffered from an “anxiety of authorship” which is “profoundly debilitating.” Like any rivalry, this differentiation escalates throughout the chapter, gaining momentum, Gilbert and Gubar unknowingly caught in the very mimetic contagion they are criticizing. This escalation of violence is evident in their language:

“[E]very text can become a ‘sentence’ or a weapon in a kind of metaphorical germ warfare” (52). Literary texts are not acts of “misprision,” but “coercive, imprisoning, fever-inducing.” While Bloom utilizes Nietzsche and Freud and Lacan to illustrate anxiety, Gilbert and Gubar utilize striking and horrifying images to illustrate illnesses which they label – calling upon Kierkegaard but not mentioning his name (a soft echo, to be sure) – a “literal and figurative sickness unto death” (55). This “epidemic of illness” is more than apparent in the house of literature and Gilbert and Gubar make expert use of their hermeneutic to reveal and analyze the violent imagery in Anne Sexton, Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters, even returning to their trope of the looking glass: “Like the comb, stay-laces, and apple which the Queen in ‘Little Snow White’ uses as weapons against her hated stepdaughter, such afflictions as anorexia and agoraphobia simply carry patriarchal definitions of ‘femininity’ to absurd extremes, and thus function as essential or at least inescapable parodies of social prescriptions” (54). Male writers may have inherited anxiety, but female writers have inherited anorexia, agoraphobia, and eye troubles, diseases “caused by patriarchal socialization” (53). Sure male poets might have suffered from some anxiety, but look at all of the *real* afflictions women writers have suffered from.

Gilbert and Gubar are right, of course, patriarchal socialization has led to multiple afflictions for female authors to overcome, but in revealing both the afflictions and the means to overcome them, Gilbert and Gubar further entrench themselves in that very structure. In trying to find out where a woman “fits” in Western literature, they fail to get out of the house themselves. While it might be safer to simply avoid Bloom’s construct, their rival’s lure is too potent as Bloom calls out the same double bind as the precursor

("Be like me but unlike me") and Gilbert and Gubar can only oblige, seeking to redefine Bloom's terminology:

Certainly if we acquiesce in the patriarchal Bloomian model, we can be sure that the female poet does not experience the 'anxiety of influence' in the same way that her male counterpart would, for the simple reason that she must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male [ . . .]. Not only do these precursors incarnate patriarchal authority . . . they attempt to enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of self – that is, her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity. (Gilbert and Gubar 48)

These enclosing definitions and stereotypes lead to the female author's own double bind, with male authors calling out: "Imitate me. Don't imitate me!" Accordingly, female authors in the nineteenth century had a lack of female models and were isolated in a dark, literary subculture which proved "infectious," a term of which Girard would certainly approve. Women were not only imprisoned in their own bodies, but in male metaphors and texts, further emphasizing their lack of choices: "[T]he woman writers seemed locked into a disconcerting *double bind*: she had to choose between admitting she was 'only a woman' or protesting that she was 'as good as a man' " (64; my emphasis). By revisiting the double bind Gilbert and Gubar restrict themselves to the Bloomian structure they claim to be revising and, in doing so, return us to the Girardian hermeneutic. In continuing to one-up their rival, the double bind which Gilbert and Gubar reveal has more serious consequences that Bloom's ephebe could ever fathom: "[T]he literature produced by women . . . has

been strongly marked not only by an obsessive interest in these limited options but also by obsessive imagery of confinement that reveals the ways in which female artists feel trapped and sickened both by suffocating alternatives and the culture that created them" (64). Like Bloom and his ephebe, the female author is trying to carve out her own literary space, only her current space is truly confining and afflicting. How could female authors overcome such anxiety and continue to write?

One strategy was for female authors to literally imitate their rivals and present themselves as men. Male authors reaped all of the metaphysical and ontological rewards that women desired; their books were taken seriously and they were free to pursue work that carried intellectual weight. George Elliot and the Bronte sisters all sought to escape the confines of patriarchal structure and the "anxiety of authorship" by using male pseudonyms. As Gilbert and Gubar explain, "For all of these women, the cloak of maleness was obviously a practical seeming refuge from those claustrophobic *double binds* of 'femininity' which had given so much pain to writers like Bradstreet, Finch, and Cavendish" (65, my emphasis). Like any double bind this strategy did not come without serious risk, and often exacerbated the already confused, confined and anxious identity with which female authors were burdened, creating "even more radical psychic confusion" (66). Gilbert and Gubar adroitly use their feminist poetics to reveal this "schizophrenia of authorship" in two sonnets by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (momentarily escaping the Bloomian frame). The adroitly illustrate that his "schizophrenia of authorship" was not limited to identity; if a female author presented herself as male, she was restricted to "patriarchal plots and genres." Imitating a male author did not simply

mean using a male name, it also meant imitating the writing, a type of writing that had confined females for years. It is not difficult to see how this could easily create psychological confusion: “[S]uch self-denial may become even more than self-destructive when the female author finds herself creating works of fiction that subordinate other women by perpetuating a morality that sanctifies or vilifies all women into submission” (Gilbert and Gubar 69). Imitation has placed the female author in a position of hypocrisy and duplicity; a strategy that was supposed to overcome the anxiety of authorship often exacerbated it.

As a result of this exacerbated anxiety – whether the women authors were mimicking male writers, or not – female literature often seemed “odd,” making it even more difficult for female authors to “fit” into the current literary cannon. For Gilbert and Gubar, the “oddity” of female literature was the result of the constant struggle to “transcend their anxiety of authorship by *revising* male genres, using them to record their own stories *in disguise*” (73, author’s emphasis). This type of insight into the perils of female writers illustrates Gilbert and Gubar at the top of their theoretical game, moving toward their own “Great Original” criticism, but as quickly as this move is made, they return to Bloomian terminology: “Such writers, therefore, both participated in and – to use one of Harold Bloom’s key terms – ‘swerved’ from the central sequences of male literary history, enacting a uniquely female process of revision and redefinition that necessarily caused them to seem ‘odd’ ” (73). The “oddity,” in retrospect, was rather the process of female writers gaining autonomy and voice despite being confined to the patriarchal structures already in place. It was only odd to men. Gilbert and Gubar have no such excuse.

On the one hand, their own return to Bloom's patriarchal structure seems curious, and another example of them being guilty of the same move they criticize: just as female authors remained confined in patriarchal structures in trying to escape them, Gilbert and Gubar are still unable to escape the Bloomian structure they are trying to revise. On the other hand, if viewed through the Girardian hermeneutic, Gilbert and Gubar are simply responding to the mimetic double bind as all humans do, by imitating their rivals.

Swerving away from male texts through revision is the process through which the "Madwoman" truly emerges. To be sure, there is a double standard at work, but in revealing this double standard Gilbert and Gubar return to their now stale rhetoric of one-upping the male writers, again victims of the contagion that allows Bloom's hostility to seep into their own rhetoric. The male writer "swerves" for the sake of "originality," his rebelliousness viewed in the Bloomian construct as a matter of course for the strong poet; one can only become a "Great Original" if they make such moves. For the woman writer, "a literary 'swerve' is not a motion by which the writer prepares for the victorious accession to power but a necessary evasion" (74). Women writers did not have the luxury of being rebels, rather, they dreaded not being able to conform to the current cultural construct and agonized over their duplicity and concealment. The result, for Gilbert and Gubar, speaks to the disparity of the double standard: "The evasions and concealments of their art are therefore more elaborate than those of most male writers. For, given the patriarchal biases of nineteenth-century literary culture, the literary woman did have something crucial to hide" (75). Women writers were forced to hide their

entire agenda, their self and their story. The entire process of “healing her own infections and diseases” (76) was concealed in simultaneously revising and staying within the traditional male texts. This process could drive anyone mad.

The revisionary process becomes a significant metaphor for Gilbert and Gubar, in which the female writer “must exorcise the sentences which bred her infection [ . . . ]” (76); [it is the process in which the madwoman emerges]. The very metaphors which have enclosed female writers must be examined, revised and destroyed, and it is, ironically, within this process which Gilbert and Gubar fail: they revise Bloom, but fail to destroy the metaphors, language and themes of his patriarchal structure. The female writers of the nineteenth century were faced with the almost impossible task of shattering, for instance, the Queen’s looking class, not to mention the dualism of angel and monster. Rejecting such metaphors also meant rejecting the patriarchal society that created and utilized them, but such rhetoric could only take place on the most clandestine levels, including that of character:

[T]hese writers almost obsessively create characters who enact their own, covert authorial anger. [ . . . ] But over and over again they project what seems to be the energy of their own despair into passionate, even melodramatic characters who act out the subversive impulses every woman inevitably feels which contemplates the “deep-rooted” evils of patriarchy. (Gilbert and Gubar 77)

Women had been silenced for so long it is hardly surprising that “a madwoman, a crazy and angry woman” (77) emerged on the other side of the mirror. For Girard the process of mimetic rivalry that leads to doubling and violence; in a matter of two



pages Gilbert and Gubar use the terms “mad double,” “dark double” and “figure of rage” to describe the “author’s double, an image of her own anxiety and rage” (78). This double is set with the violent task of “murdering” the patriarchal metaphors and corresponding self definitions which have enclosed women, literally (in the men’s houses where they live) and metaphorically (in men’s texts). Hence, women’s texts in the nineteenth century continually emphasized spatial restrictions (Gilbert and Gubar 83) of place and metaphor, including gothic dungeons, “coffin-shaped beds” and “dramatizations of imprisonment and escape.” All the while, the female author’s mad double is at work in these texts, and Gilbert and Gubar’s analysis is strikingly Girardian: “For it is, after all, through the *violence of the double* that the female author enacts her own raging desire to escape male houses and male texts, while at the same time it is through *the double’s violence* that this anxious author articulates for herself the costly destructiveness of anger repressed until it can no longer be restrained” (85, emphasis added). This analysis is strikingly Girardian, and further emphasizes why Girard uses the phrase “monstrous double” to describe the anthropological phenomenon that results from the mimetic double bind and always ends in violence. The female author, as we have seen, desires the same metaphysical freedom and fullness that the male writer possess and proceeds to imitate the male writer to the point of pretending she is male; as noted earlier in the paper, this doubling naturally leads to violence: “When violent hysteria reaches a peak the monstrous double looms everywhere at once. The decisive act of violence is directed against this awesome version of evil and at the same time sponsored by it” (Girard, Violence and the Sacred 161). While the patriarchal structure and the

men who enable it were the “awesome version of evil,” women in the nineteenth century were unable to act out against it, their violence reduced to their own double and what happened on the page.

Gilbert and Gubar stay in within the confines of Bloom’s structure until the very end; for Bloom, misreading, swerving and revising lead the ephebe to “clear out a space for himself.” For Gilbert and Gubar the same process leads to the same metaphysical desire, complete with Bloomian terminology: “Thus [the female author] produces a public art which she herself rejects as inadequate but which she secretly uses to discover a *new aesthetic space for herself*” (81, emphasis added). Girard’s metaphysical desire for originality and ontological/metaphysical space is contagious on multiple levels: between ephebe and strong poet, between female author and male author, between Bloom and Derrida, and between Gilbert and Gubar and Bloom. Given their rightful insistence of the female author’s need to escape patriarchal structures, it is surprising that they stay tethered to Bloomian terminology and themes, especially considering their following quote which emphasizes the most pressing issues of their feminist literary criticism:

If the Queen’s looking glass speaks with the King’s voice, how do its perpetual kingly admonitions affect the Queen’s own voice? Since his is the chief voice she hears, does the Queen try to sound like the King, *imitating his tone*, his inflections, his phrasing, his point of view? Or does she talk back to him in her own vocabulary, her own timbre, insisting on her own viewpoint? (46, my emphasis)

Bloom is the chief voice Gilbert and Gubar heard and, accordingly, they were unable to escape it, “imitating his tone” and structure. As Girard explains, rivalry over a metaphysical space leads to doubling, and doubling results in a lack of difference: “The more antagonists desire to become different from each other, they more the become identical. Identity is realized in the hatred of the individual” (Girard, I See Satan 22). Gilbert and Gubar fail to escape the very structure they are criticizing and this failure is due to the mimetic contagion Bloom began with The Anxiety of Influence. Desire imitates desire and rivalry provokes rivalry. If Bloom is standing up and screaming, “Look how original I am!” Gilbert and Gubar have stood up right after him, screaming at the same time, “Look how much we have suffered and are more original, besides!” and no one can hear either of them. This should not be a discredit to Gilbert and Gubar as much as a credit to the power of the mimetic contagion; Gilbert and Gubar’s text is in “relation” to Bloom’s, constituting it, forcing imitations of structure and language and theme. Gilbert and Gubar even know this, stating “[Bloom’s model of a literary history] is not a recommendation for but an analysis of the patriarchal poetics (and attendant anxieties) which underlies our culture’s chief literary movements” (47-48). Yet, the rivalry is more powerful than their acknowledgment, meaning they imitate Bloom on another level: they are also repeat the move they identify and criticize, trapping themselves in the same double bind: “Be me but not me.”

Hence, the power of a mimetic contagion helps identify arguments vulnerable to deconstruction. It is surprising that sharp minds like Bloom and Gilbert and Gubar cannot identify these vulnerable points in their own texts, but as Girard explains, once the system of rivalry begins, differences end: “From within the system, only differences are

perceived; from without, the antagonists all seem alike. From inside, the sameness is not visible; from outside differences cannot be seen” (Violence and the Sacred 159). Gilbert and Gubar see only the differences between their work and Bloom’s because they are in the system of their own criticism; since we are outside, the sameness is glaring. In fact, Girard is also within a “system” that leaves him vulnerable for deconstruction. In his first three books he stays within his own system of literary criticism, using mimetic desire to interpret the likes of Proust and Dostoevsky. In his third book, however, Violence and the Sacred, Girard expands his mimetic theory outside of literary criticism and subsequently enters into a rivalry with Freud. While Girard’s first three books did not mention Freud, Violence and the Sacred dedicates two chapters to trumpeting the mimetic theory over Freudian thought, illustrating Girard’s own desire for the metaphysical fame Freud has established; Girard wants to be Freud. Girard even goes so far as to claim that Freud’s work tiptoes up to the mimetic theory: “The mimetic nature of desire plays an important role in Freud’s work – not important enough, however, to dominate and revolutionize his thinking. His mimetic intuitions are incompletely formulated; they constitute a dimension of his text that is only half visible and seems to disappear in transmission” (Violence and the Sacred 169). If only Freud had thought more like Girard, then his thinking would have *really* revolutionized the field of psychoanalysis. This speaks to the power of the mimetic contagion and the manner in which it can lend itself to deconstruction: Girard is trapped in his own system, guilty not only of the same move he identifies, but of the same move around which his entire oeuvre is based.

One might think that Bloom has not been given a fair shake in this essay, that it is unfair to label someone “hostile” based on one book. After all, Bloom may have softened over the years. To be fair, I offer a more recent quote from Bloom (provided by Bolla) in response to Gilbert and Gubar: “Most feminist poetry, of course, is like most black poetry. It isn’t even verse. It isn’t prose. It is just . . . I have no term for it” (Bolla 12). This quote, it seems, would speak for itself. But in case it does not, Bolla, an overall supporter of Bloom’s theories, states: “We can note from [the above quote] that the spirit of controversy is still very much alive and kicking in the Bloomian project; something which will almost certainly cause him to lose readers as well as enrage those he keeps” (12-13).

In closing, I would like to raise a reflective question: what can we learn about the act of writing from this essay? That is, if Girard is right, if desire imitates desire and leads to rivalry, are we all doomed to the same cyclical repetition of Derrida and Bloom, of Bloom and Gilbert and Gubar? Girard would say no, that if one can become comfortable with the imitative nature of their desires or find a type of transcendence (meditation, religion, prayer) rivalry can be avoided. Also, one can find positive models to imitate in their work. A good example is Bloom’s observation of Ben Johnson that quickly becomes a criticism. “So Ben Johnson has no anxiety as to imitation, for to him (refreshingly) art is *hard work*. But the shadow fell, and with the post-Enlightenment passion for Genius and the Sublime, there came anxiety too, for art was beyond hard work” (Bloom 27). Since Johnson’s quote does not fit within Bloom’s model, Bloom one-ups him by claiming art is “beyond hard work.” Hence, for Bloom, Johnson is not a

“strong poet.” Johnson, might, however, in being comfortable with his imitation, be less rivalrous, less anxiety ridden, and have more friends. Bloo – I mean, God, forbid.

Finally, one reason I wanted to write about Bloom is that I have always been a little hostile towards him, and not known where this hostility originated. Now I know: it originates from him, and I am no less immune than others to mimetic rivalry’s contagious nature. In fact, through the process of writing this paper, I found myself consistently siding with Frank Lentricchia, my hostility towards Bloom increasing as I wrote. This, to be sure, is no way to approach a text, and I am left wondering if I also trapped myself in Bloom’s structure in the process of becoming his rival. I am also “within the system.”

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