

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA
JOE C. JACKSON COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES & RESEARCH
Edmond, Oklahoma

HATCH

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH
WITH CREATIVE WRITING EMPHASIS

By

MELONIE HAU

Edmond, Oklahoma

2008

NAME: Melonie Hau

TITLE OF THESIS: Hatch

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Dr. Constance Squires

PAGES: 251

ABSTRACT:

Hatch is a novel which examines the struggles of urbanization, drug addiction, alienation from community, and shame which threaten a rural Oklahoma family. The Metzgers live on a farm in Hatch, a town formed in the 1890s from the enthusiasm and idealism of Land Run pioneers and German immigrants. The story juxtaposes traditional rural life with contemporary issues such as adultery, addiction, and race and illustrates how characters resist their insulated environment.


Told alternately from the points of view of three characters, Gloria Metzger, Ben Metzger, and their son, Thomas Metzger, the work follows each character's decisions as each is tested emotionally and spiritually. Gloria, Ben, and Thomas must learn to honor their own power in making choices for their lives. Issues of spirituality immerse as each character faces moral and ethical dilemmas based on their choices.

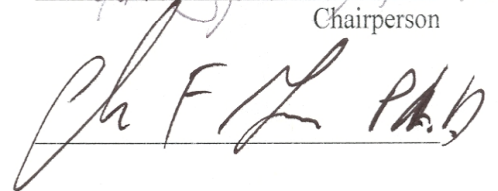
Set in intense heat of a drought-ridden summer, the novel utilizes a sense of history and place in order to highlight the struggles of each character.

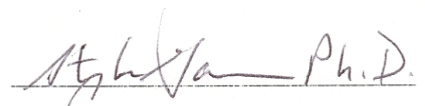
HATCH

A THESIS
APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
DECEMBER 5, 2008

By


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Ph.D.


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Introduction

I set out to write a novel about Oklahoma that does not drip with homespun cliché and language. I hope I have at least partially accomplished this goal. I wanted to describe characters and places which felt authentic without being awash in the shallow platitudes of Okie life. The characters in *Hatch* must face hardships which have not only been created by their physical and cultural circumstances but also by individual choices. Each tries to come to terms with the isolation inherent in dysfunctional relationships. Other writers have established similar characters and circumstances. Rilla Askew, Toni Morrison, Edna Ferber, and Larry McMurtry have helped to establish a literary tradition of regional literature which reveals how imperfect, and sometimes tragic, individuals withstand the crucible of familial conflicts in rural settings. Working in that tradition, I present the story contained in *Hatch*.

Gloria Metzer, the main female character in this manuscript, has been married to Ben for twelve years. From the beginning, Gloria expresses her dissatisfaction with her marriage. Many examples of a woman's feelings of detachment in marriage exist in literature. I am especially drawn to the character of Sharon in Rilla Askew's *Harpsong* because Sharon and Gloria share a similar sense of place. Oklahoma's pioneering history fostered a culture in which women and men have had distinctly different roles in society. Although it is not an absolute, there are still examples in rural areas where women and men continue to lead lives where roles are defined by "women's work" and "men's work." It is this separation in daily life which may create a lack of shared language or communication. As a result the opposite sex becomes "the other" in ways unique to rural

life. Sharon and Gloria are from different time periods but each struggles in her relationship with her husband.

Set in Depression-era Oklahoma, *Harpson* follows the physical and emotional journey of Sharon and self-named Harlan Singer. Sharon agrees to run off with Harlan, but she states her lack of understanding for her husband after she marries him in a humdrum ceremony at the Muskogee justice of the peace. In a conversation which takes place a few hours after they are married, Sharon realizes that Harlan's intentions are not hers. Sharon's goal is to return home to her family and farm, but Harlan wants to ride the rails. It is at this point that Sharon begins to grasp the consequences of marriage: "I said to myself, I don't know this man. [...] That's what I did. I married him. That's me now, Sharon Singer. Sharon Singer. Of course, I didn't know then he'd made the name up" (37). Sharon follows Harlan, in part, because of her marital promise to him. As she repeats her new name over again, she reaffirms her decision: She made a commitment and she will stick with it in spite of her longing for home and family.

It is the denial of self in a marriage relationship that I wanted to explore through Gloria in *Hatch*. Her growing resentment toward Ben after twelve years of marriage is clearly stated in Chapter 1 as she watches Ben plow the field in front of their farm house: "When Gloria took time to resent the choices she had made for herself, it was in the morning" (21). Disillusionment with married life is the primary narrative for Gloria, and she has lost sight of her own identity apart from her husband and her family. I tried to symbolize Gloria's separation from self by creating the image of the skink at the end of Chapter 1. She remembers the lizard after a heated argument with her husband:

“Images of the skink she and the kids had found yesterday entered her mind.

Thomas, determined to catch it for Cassie and Chad so that they could hold it, had grabbed it by its tail, but its tail separated from its body, snapping off and landing in the dirt. The kids watched as the discarded part wiggled on the ground, looking like it was alive. Eventually, though, the piece turned blue then white and stopped writhing, lying dead, a sacrifice, a decoy, so that the whole could scamper away to safety under a rock or into cracks in the foundation. Standing on the driveway as the sun began to shout its heat to the day, that’s what she felt like. Snap. She would break off this piece (33-34).

Gloria is surviving in her marriage by breaking off pieces of herself and by attempting to become numb to the relationships around her. Like Sharon, Gloria has difficulty recognizing the person she has become. Gloria Metzger and Sharon Singer do not progress in the same manner, however.

After all the violence and heartbreak she experiences by sticking with Harlan Singer, Sharon grows to love him. Sharon is left alone by the end of the novel and her affection toward him is expressed as she tries to play his harmonica:

“I kept the harp in my apron pocket. Sometimes I’d take it out and blow on it while I was trying to do a few chores. I couldn’t play worth anything, of course, but I breathed in and out on it because Harlan breathed in and out on it and I wanted to believe some of his breath was still in there, hiding inside the square holes” (241-242).

Although Harlan remains a mystery to Sharon, her commitment to him overshadows all doubts. By the end of *Harpsong*, Sharon reconciles herself to the

promises of marriage. It is not just about the obligation but about mutual love and understanding.

By the end of Gloria's story, she understands that she has choices in her marriage, but she still feels obligated to her commitment to marriage. The tenderness which Sharon feels for Harlan is absent in Gloria's feelings for Ben. After a brief sexual encounter with a co-worker, she considers returning to Ben as she sits at the edge of a ravine behind her grandmother's house:

“She loved him. The best parts of him. Their life together flickered through her mind. [...] It was their history as layered as the soil in the ravine. It was her history and as exhausted as she was, she wasn't ready to abandon him. After tonight she realized she could walk away, but Gloria could not imagine starting over with someone else” (197).

In the beginning neither Sharon nor Gloria identifies with the self as a married woman. Whereas Sharon becomes more than just the wife of Harlan Singer, making a true emotional connection to him, Gloria resigns herself to being only the wife of Ben Metzger. The emotional connection is unclear – at least in the last chapter. In the end, Gloria lies to Ben about her tryst. I want the reader to feel that their marriage is still in a critical state. *Hatch* is not a love story. Gloria returns to Ben because of their history together, but not because she feels real passion for him. Gloria's journey is about the choices she continues to make for herself. I wanted to create a story in which the female character could be just as heroic or flawed as the male, and sometimes women stay in marriages absent love.

Another influence on my writing has been Toni Morrison and especially her works about female relationships such as *Sula*. In the novel Morrison not only creates sympathy for deeply flawed characters but she also manages to do this with an omniscient narrator. Hannah Peace and my character Stacy are both women who have been shunned from the community, yet evoke sympathy from the reader.

Hannah Peace is Sula's mother. She lives in the community of Medallion in a female-dominated, multi-generational home. Hannah's tremendous sex drive alienates her from the other women in the community, yet instead of setting her up as a villain, the narrator allows the reader to see her in a sympathetic light:

“Hannah exasperated the women in the town – the ‘good’ women who said, ‘One thing I can’t stand is a nasty woman’; the whores, who were hard put to find trade among black men anyway and who resented Hannah’s generosity; the middling women, who had both husbands and affairs, because Hannah seemed so unlike them, having no passion attached to her relationships and being wholly incapable of jealousy. She could break up a marriage before it had even become one – she would make love to the new groom and wash his wife’s dishes all in an afternoon. What she wanted, after Rekus died, and she succeeded in having more often than not, was some touching everyday” (44).

I aspire to Morrison's rhythm and her ability to accurately represent the interior life of women, but I am also interested in her ability to utilize the narrator as an advocate for a fallen woman. The narrator in *Sula* offers no judgment about Hannah; in fact, the narrator points to the reasons behind Hannah's actions. It is the women of the

community who have shunned her. As readers we understand the motivations behind the character's immoral behavior and we have compassion for her.

Because she is a methamphetamine addict and, as a result, an unfit mother, Stacy represents a type of degenerate Oklahomans know all too well. In Chapter 14, I show Stacy's struggle with the drug and her dealer, Kendall. I also wanted to explain Stacy's cycle of addiction in an attempt to depict the tragedy of women like her. In flashback, Stacy recalls a therapy session:

“Looking around the circle, Stacy realized that a shower and clean sheets couldn't dissolve the residue of meth. Together, they formed a hoop of stringy hair, vacant eyes, and melted faces; they opened their mouths to speak through corroded teeth. Through the black gaps lolled sickly colored tongues telling the disenchanted why, the horror of who. Then finally, after thirty or so minutes, Stacy would hear a rattled bawl come from inside one hollow gourd. [...] But while the other women surrounded the wailing mess, Stacy raised her knees to her chin. She could smell them as they moved around the circle, dragging ribbons of rock; she could tell how long they'd used by their smell. She thought of Michaela. She thought of Kendall” (204).

Separation from the group, isolation from her daughter, alienation from the expectations of others: these feelings emotionally paralyze Stacy. She raises her knees to protect herself. Not only is she stirred by the smell of crystal meth, but she also remembers what should be her most significant relationship: her daughter Michaela. However, right after that thought she remembers Kendall.

Both Hannah and Stacy endure a need they cannot control: Hannah's her desire to be touched everyday and Stacy's her addiction to crystal meth. And because the reader has an open heart and mind toward these fallen women, it is even more poignant when each dies. Hannah is killed by fire; Stacy by gunshot. They are tragic deaths because we hold out hope for their happiness until the very end.

Accurate and realistic description of agrarian work is also a concern of mine in this novel. Generations of Oklahoma families continue to farm despite its hardships. Urban sprawl has created new opportunities for farm communities and now farmers find themselves stewards of the land in a new capacity. *Hatch* begins with an obvious farm cliché: Ben is in danger of losing the family farm. I do not try to obfuscate this cliché. Instead I have tried to explain why this threat is still a reality. I hope to make it feel modern by putting it in a modern context.

However, I found it difficult at times to balance the tone of realism and sentimentality when discussing Ben Metzger's relationship to the land. Edna Ferber's *So Big* is a book I have come to respect, although at times her descriptions of farm life border on condescension. Yet, I found myself thinking about her style as I struggled with scenes depicting Ben's work life. Other times I attempt to imitate Larry McMurty's realism as rendered in *Horseman, Pass By*.

In *So Big*, Ferber uses a distinctly female narrator, Selina DeJong, who describes farm life as an outsider: "For the rest, the crops were moderately successful on the DeJong place. But the work necessary to make this so was heartbreaking. [...] It seemed to Selina that they were slaves to these buds, shoots, and roots that clamoured with a hundred thousand voices, 'Let me out! Let me out!'" (84).

Epic language such as the use of the word “heartbreaking” seems to indicate a lack of understanding for the work of farm life. The work of a farmer appears to be all drudgery through this narrator’s eyes and a respect for rural life is lost.

In *Horseman, Pass By*, McMurtry elevates the agrarian life to the spiritual without epic language. It is romantic in its humility and its utilitarian worship of the land.

McMurtry describes a scene in which Lonnie, his teenage narrator, is driving cattle along with his grandfather:

“Right at sundown we were driving them along the high ridge toward headquarters, with another mile and a half to go. In front of us the red sun was dropping cleanly down the last few feet of sky, falling into the gold thicket of mesquite on the far hill. [...] The evening air was cool, but heavy with the smells of dust and cattle piss and prairie weed. The grass was already browning under the long days of the sun. Before us the trail ran downward like a slack lariat rope, ending at the big water trough” (51-52).

McMurtry employs explicit, sometimes unattractive, details, even mentioning piss in his description of the work, but he also uses the light as a way to infuse beauty on to the landscape. In the same section Lonnie describes the scene as, “perfect as some ranch pictures on a serum calendar” (51). The land is a gift from God and it is as if God’s heavenly light shines down as these cowboys drive their herd home, but it is also beautiful because these men admire the land as it is, raw and natural.

As I examine my own writing, I see that my language is at times a combination of the two styles. In Chapter 10, Ben is seeding the field in preparation to plant wheat. Two examples show my vacillation between Ferber and McMurtry:

“Yet, every year Ben offered up the evidence of his hard work, the sacrament of man’s manipulation of the soil. But turning over this dirt meant less over time, and Ben’s desperate hunger to salvage it meant little in a disposable society” (143).

When I lean toward political diatribe, the scene begins to feel like Ferber. The use of the word “sacrament” attempts to elevate the spiritual importance of Ben’s work. Sticking to the details of the landscape, helps show the mutually beneficial relationship between Ben as a farmer and nature:

“Ben checked behind him and noticed that the egrets had found him. Circling around the disc, they split the dust, arcing and weaving a net to snap up beetles and other insects. Turning around, he faced the sun in the northwestern sky, the glare stung his eyes. Taking off his cap, he wiped his face with his shirtsleeve. He edged the tractor along a gully of sunflowers, careful not to run the disc off into the low places” (146-147).

As the banal farmer, Ben is connected to the land, a conqueror. The language which is best to describe him and his work should be as grounded as he is. It is appealing, though, to want to mythologize an agrarian way of life, especially in a society which believes it should honor past culture.

I was inspired to write about Ben as I watched men plow wheat fields preparing for harvest in Piedmont. It struck me as a very sensual and masculine activity, harnessing the power of machine to force creation. It is a romantic silhouette and because Ben is a farmer in Oklahoma, he is also grounded in the Western tradition.

Ben experiences his own emergence. He must separate from the control of his father, his family name, and the history of the land he has inherited. Larry McMurtry focuses on the cowboy in his works, but his description of the western male applies to Ben as well. McMurtry's collection of essays, *In a Narrow Grave*, defines these characteristics:

“The view is often proffered by worshippers of the cowboy that he is a realist of the first order, but that view is an extravagant and imperceptive fiction. Cowboys are romantics, extreme romantics, and ninety-nine out of a hundred of them are sentimental to the core. They are oriented toward the past and face the present only under duress, and then with extreme reluctance” (149).

An example of western male sentimentality can be seen in *Horseman, Pass By* as the cantankerous Hud confronts his stepfather:

“Hud was talking slow, and watching the road, but the words he said came spurting out in the close cab like blood from a chicken's neck. ‘You're too old to know what I want,’ he said. ‘You always were. Not only too old, but too blind an' stingy an' contrary’” (78).

Readers might be tempted to think that Hud is a character without the capacity to express feelings of neglect. It is obvious in his words here that he has been hurt by a stepfather who did not take the time to understand him. It is this acknowledgement of the sentimentality of the western male that I admire in McMurtry.

Today's farmers, like McMurtry's cowboys, are men living in the twenty-first century, dealing with modern problems and raising children who must learn to use modern technologies. In Chapter 10, Ben's father, Wilhelm, threatens to replace Ben as

farm manager. Working on the family farm is the only life Ben has known and this threat forces him to confront his long held anger toward his father:

“Ben stood up and faced Wilhelm, ‘That’s it, huh? That’s all you got to say to me after all this? Who are you going to get to run this place? Who else is going to give two cents about how the crops are coming along or whether or not we’re building good stock? No one cares as much as I do.’ Ben moved in closer until he was chin to chin with his father. ‘This is my life goddammit!’” (148-149).

Ben is caught between Wilhelm’s rigid, conventional views and a world in which land itself is a commodity. Ben was raised to respect his father by asking no questions, yet now he finds himself in a situation when he must decide to defy his father.

These characters are deeply rooted in place. Having lived in a rural setting most of my life, I understand that rural life has as much capacity for compassion and meanness, for righteousness and immortality, as anywhere else. Resources are limited and small communities are not necessarily supportive; in fact, in the small town of Hatch, the feeling of community which birthed the town has been lost one hundred years later.

Overcoming family history is the driving force for Gloria, Stacy, and Ben. I wanted to show a family that is made up of extremely strong and extremely flawed people, the stubborn type of people who would live in a harsh landscape and struggle to create a life in it.

Prologue

Between Ft. Reno and Buffalo Springs

History boils down to people who move on or stay put. Dreamers and settlers. Sometimes those people are one and the same. I could tell you about Kentucky Daisy, one of the glorified settlers of this place. A story about a wild, determined woman who traveled to Oklahoma Territory on her own, rode the train to the opening of the unassigned lands, and jumped from the cow-catcher to stake her claim. She was full of spunk, optimistic and eager to begin a new life on the plains. But she is only a snapshot, like all the other romantic legends about the land runs. Those stories only focus on the dreaming, not the settling, because the hard work of settling is never romantic.

And there's a parallel narrative here, about the Cheyenne-Arapaho tribe. About their forced removal and the atrocities enacted upon them by the U. S. Government and

the Indian fighters. About promises made by men who looked past the humanity in front of them and saw only profit. Perhaps, not telling that story is another insult. Saying what I am now is only a small attempt at explaining the complexity of this place. It is the result of people defining us based on hearsay. History is about point of view and the point of view here is as skewed as any other.

I'm only giving you the history to make sense. Because adolescence needs guidance. And if we only recognize our beginning from the start of a race, the promise of an audacious dream, it can be hard to settle down and thrive where we are transplanted.

Hatch originated from the consummation of progress and optimism, an American ideology. The town and the people in it embraced a sense of identity that came with the knowledge of creation. It would become what every little city on the plains became. It prospered via boundless hope and potential, community effort and good will. Yet 100 years later, its offspring would lose all the momentum of a rush for land and settle into self-important factions. In a small town, history has a long memory and a short leash.

So the best place to start is with C. W. Hatch. Riding in the red stage coach across the Chisholm Trail, he never doubted that it was a good idea to come to Oklahoma Territory, although he did doubt his choice of transportation. By 1891, the time of his arrival, the trail was well-worn and every time his head slammed against the top or sides of the carriage, he noted that the autumn rains had carved out significant ruts. The train would have been a smoother ride, but he had decided he wanted to see the trail up close traveling from Ft. Reno north. Not long after he had settled into the cracked leather seat, the coach took off with a driver's whistle and the horses' jolt. After ten minutes at pony express speed and between bumping his head and sloshing around the carriage from door

to door, he had not been able to steady himself long enough to see anything outside the window. The doors rattled, the axles groaned, and the joints nearly screamed from the strain, but everything remained fastened. It was obvious to C. W. that the driver was as familiar with this route as he was his own boots because neither a bottomless gulley nor a wayward rabbit slowed his progress.

Cowhands had told C. W. about the Territory. He spent his teenage years trying to be one of them. Born and raised in Texas, his father owned a small ranch. Hoping that C. W. would learn more about ranching, his father hired him out to the bigger operations around Ft. Worth. The ranch hands talked about working the trail north to Abilene, Kansas, and their stories captured C. W.'s imagination as cowboy stories do. The Chisholm Trail wasn't used as much as it used to be, they said. Too much traffic, the old ones insisted, more settlers coming through every day. Now it shared the plains with coaches and the railroad and a few mercantile outposts. Even though The Medicine Lodge Treaty had made promises and moved the Indians to that god-forsaken land, everyone speculated that it would not be long before it was open to white settlement.

After a season of wrangling and castrating, C. W. decided he was not a cowhand, but he thought he knew something about making a buck. He had discovered that he was money-wise, or rather money-lucky, around the glow of the bunkhouse table. Late night card games roused the magician in him. C. W. had a blessing, a gift. Not that he won every hand – that would have been suspicious. On payday when the hands were itching for risk and chance, he always came out ahead. It was a feeling in his gut, a heat that rose up his neck, making his scalp tingle and his ears buzz slightly. He moved in a dream, slow and graceful, a waltz of deals, fanned cards, and wooden-chip drops. Most knew

what a clumsy cowboy he was and couldn't believe that he was so savvy at cards. He was baby-faced and puny, the boys teased. It was as if he had to prove himself to them over and over. Their doubt and his good sense created a mystical chemistry in the bunkhouse which conjured up an Angel of Fortune, who sat gleefully on C. W.'s shoulder. He knew he would win, every time.

A rancher by the name of Huntington was planning one last drive on the trail starting in the spring, but C. W. had a feeling that he shouldn't follow the cattle on the trail. Besides if Indian Territory had begun to attract as much traffic as the cowboys had said, he knew he needed to leave soon. At 20, he boarded the train in Ft. Worth and he rode to Ft. Reno. His destination – the cattle depot north of the fort. The driver knew the place and was willing to stop there on his way to Buffalo Springs. But as they raced down and through the ruts of the Chisholm Trail, they hit a hole as deep as a child is tall, causing C. W. to not only smash his head on the roof of the coach but his neck and back as well. Then he was thrust to the right, and he could feel the bottom of the wooden carriage scrape along the road until the horses came to a stop.

After gathering his senses, he stumbled from the coach and met the driver who was standing on the trail looking over the slumped end of the coach.

“What happened?” C. W. attempted to dust off his jacket around the shoulders. Next to him the driver knelt down, grabbed the axle, and rubbed his thumb along jagged, splintered end. C. W. took in the driver's appearance from the blackened thumbnail up the man's wrist to his red powdered, wool shirt. He noticed the only place on the driver not covered in dirt was the patch of salt and pepper beard and mustache around his nose, mouth, and chin which earlier was covered with a handkerchief.

“Popped a wheel. Prob’ly back there a few yards.” The driver turned back toward the horses, “Jack, leave the horses and c’mere.”

A teenage boy ran around to them. When C. W. had met them at the fort, this same boy had insisted on helping C. W. with his one bag despite his objections. Eager, wanting a tip, he had thought and he liked the boy right away. The driver instructed Jack to go find the wheel. A cool stiff breeze hit C. W.’s back and inflated goose bumps across his neck. He turned and looked across the horizon to the North. A low, heavy mass, solid and linear as a steel-blue train, appeared to be blasting in.

“How long will this take?” C. W. had heard plenty about weather on the trail. Cowboys suffered through soaking rain which later turned to steamy humidity and brewed up the sour stench of moldy clothes. The cowhands loved to tell bizarre tales about one of the common ways a man could be killed, lightning. Details of charred remains found under a cedar could turn frightening or comical, depending on the teller’s mood. To C.W. these images were never funny.

The driver had noticed the weather too, but didn’t seem to be as worried.

“Hard to say.” He began to unhitch the horses.

C. W. was torn between satisfying his slight panic by asking the driver to give him more information and knowing that haranguing him anymore would slow down the process of fixing the wheel. Maybe being stranded in the elements was normal for this old coyote but C. W. didn’t want to leave anything else to chance. Being out in the open wasn’t the same as playing cards. The stakes were much higher. He didn’t like doubting himself, and it made him itch to move on.

Despite his gut feeling, he had taken a risk coming to Indian Territory. His father had wanted him to stay in Texas, didn't understand what else C. W. could possibly want. The land there was already proven, productive, the community already established and growing, and the Indians already agreeable. Somehow his father didn't see that C. W. was only doing what he himself had done after the Civil War. Moving to the unknown to make it known by your own hands. Taking pure, natural adventure and taming it in your image.

He looked south back down the trail. Jack was nowhere to be seen. He looked north and faced another gust emerging from the monster rolling in.

"Depot's just over that ridge," the driver pointed to the distance in the northeast. "Maybe 15 minutes. You ken walk it. Save me time dropping ya off."

"You'll be all right here?" C. W. hoisted himself up on the side ladder and started un-strapping his bag. The driver didn't bother to answer such a question. C. W. grabbed his bag and hopped down, losing his balance a little on the landing. He took off in the direction the man had pointed, "This way?" No answer again, only a nod.

It was the end of September 1891, and this area had had much more rain than down in Texas. The low grass still had some green to it, but C. W. could see why the cattle men had chosen not to use this trail anymore. Cattle didn't pull up the roots of the plant like horses did so the grass was green but very short. Years of use, millions of hooves slowly plodding down the soil had caused it to be eroded to the clay. No, not so different from his home, he thought, or what his home used to be. To the west, only short grass and low hills to the horizon. To the east, a thick forest of squat scrub trees. It wasn't the landscape that attracted people to this place, it was the potential.

He walked along over short-cropped ridges and rust-red ravines until he came to a large creek. Must be Uncle John's, he thought, remembering the much talked about watering spot along the trail. The depot would be just over the hill.

C. W. liked to say later that the little outpost was exactly as he had expected it, two wooden sheds bumped up against the railroad tracks and surrounded by a small corral crowded with cattle. He was a practical man and he liked to make the most of his accomplishments. If the cattle depot had been more than its name described, it would have made his later stories seem less like Ragged Dick of the Horatio Alger fame and more like the exaggerated tales of P. T. Barnum. There was no other structure for miles, and no other human besides the elderly bachelor who worked as the depot manager. Only ten short years from this very moment a town would thrive here. C. W. would always marvel at its sparse beginnings.

Standing on that ridge that September afternoon he reviewed the reasons he had come. He knew that even Jesse Chisholm with his chain of outposts had missed putting a mercantile here. Therefore, there was no place to rest or gather supplies between Ft. Reno and Buffalo Springs. He knew that there was a creek nearby and the land was fairly gentle, enough for a plow and a strong will. He knew this based on cowboy tales and now he had seen it himself. He knew that it would not be long before this land would be pulled from the Cheyenne-Arapaho tribe. Newspapers had reported that the Jerome Commission was hard at work trying to convince the tribe to give up its land after less than twenty years of settlement, and the federal government always got its way. Finally, C. W. knew that there were very few places on earth where land would be given away for free. After the run of '89, the stories of the masses amazed tellers and listeners alike.

Each individual in that throng needed something that only a merchant could provide. C. W. knew that he could be that merchant. If not him it would be some other man.

A vision of a wooden structure next to the depot came to his mind's eye. A store with all the supplies needed to build a town and the farms which would surround it. And he boldly charged down the ridge to claim what would later be his namesake.

After introducing himself to the depot manager and making his purpose known, he ate a meal of biscuit and jerky and camped in the lobby of the depot, making a pallet on the wooden floor out of a wool blanket he had packed. Listening to the bawls of the bovine next door and the rattle of windows and wood from the storm, C. W. thought about the path of money, what he needed to spend in order for it to grow. He imagined his place as an oasis on the prairie for all those settlers to come.

The next day he jumped on an empty Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific car and headed back to Ft. Reno. He followed up on his earlier inquiries and purchased the lot next to the depot from the government claims office. Next, he used most of the other half of his money to buy food for himself and lumber and nails for construction. He rented a team and a wagon to haul it back to the depot and within months completed a store with a narrow dusty alley between the two structures.

Progress happened quickly. After two months a priest came to the cattle depot looking for a new mission. The school in Darlington just outside of Ft. Reno had sent him to reach more Indians. Father Mallory also brought word that negotiations with the tribes were moving forward. One treaty after another shrunk their land until it was finally decided by the Jerome Commission that the lands would be open for good in '92. The

government did grant the Indians first choice in staking claims so on that day in April 1892 flags were already in the ground – the white flags of the tribes.

With the rumor of more land opening for settlement, people began to appear everyday, wandering over the ridge taking root like well-planned garden plants. As C. W. predicted, the stage coach route along the Chisholm Trail and the railroad began to attract more than cowboys and renegades, and the government of Oklahoma Territory decided to establish a post office. Hatch officially became a town with 10 citizens, C.W., the depot manager, a blacksmith and his wife, and a priest and five nuns.

By March of 1892, C. W. had neighbors on each side of his mercantile. It was not unusual to see a new investor step off the train or even a family in a wagon cross the tracks from the east. A friend of his from Texas was among them. Jonathan Petree and his Creole wife Bellina made the trip north in early March. C. W. had earlier decided that his town needed a newspaper and he convinced Jonathan to come to Indian Territory. Jonathan was known back home as a well-educated young man and a storyteller and C. W. was anxious to have a good friend join him while establishing a new town.

Jonathan went right to work as soon as he arrived. C. W. set up a press in a side room he had built after he purchased the alley rights from A. J. Thompson who opened a boarding house earlier that fall. He was sure he could run his first paper, the *Hatch Daily Register*, within ten days. He spent first days tinkering with the rotary and typesetter. It wasn't the latest steam-powered press, but C. W. and Jonathan's eagerness made up for its lack of efficiency. Within days of his arrival, the news of the land run proclamation broke.

C. W. almost jerked the door off its hinges as he entered the press office with Lieutenant Fuller, a cavalry officer whose job it was to manage the earlier settlers of the unassigned lands. Officially, all these people were intruders and it was up to Fuller to keep the white settlers away from the Indians as much as possible. But as the Cattle Depot grew, his job became harder to do. Lieutenant Fuller couldn't stop white expansion along the railroad.

“Jonathan, wait ‘till you hear this. Our first big story,” C. W. turned to the Lieutenant who was standing in the doorway holding his hat.

Jonathan walked around the press to shake the officer's hand, wiping oil on his apron.

“Sorry, Lieutenant we haven't met. Name's Jonathan Petree.”

“Mr. Petree. C. W. tells me you're ready to print your first paper.”

“Yes, sir. Every town worth its salt has a paper. Why not Hatch?”

“Enough chit chat. Tell ‘em Lieutenant,” C. W. motioned for Lieutenant Fuller to step down from the threshold and take a seat at the desk by the widow. His boot steps echoed as he crossed in front of the press, which dominated the middle of the room like a hulking inky beast. Fuller groaned a little as sat, stretching his left leg and rubbing his knee cap. The three men crowded around a messy wooden desk in the corner.

“They announced the date of the next run by proclamation in Washington yesterday. They'll open Cheyenne-Arapaho lands on April 19th.”

“Really?” Jonathan asked.

“So, it’s official,” C. W. smacked Jonathan’s arm, openly delighted by the idea, “White settlers can now come into the territory legally. Stake their claim on 160 acres of land and homestead this place without fear of intrusion.”

Lieutenant Fuller continued, “What it also means is that more people than you’ve ever seen in your life will invade the territory, bringing horses, wagons, tents, and all their bad habits and expect an orderly run. You think keeping up with Indians and outlaws is tough, try tens of thousands of land grabbers. Hell, some of them won’t even speak English.”

“So you were there for the run of ’89?” Jonathan grabbed a chair and sat down next to Fuller eager to get an eyewitness account.

“Yep. Buffalo Springs was the western boundary. And I’m sure Hatch’ll be a staging area, this close to the railroad.”

C. W. put his hand on Jonathan’s shoulder again and this time let it rest, “Here’s our big story. One we can wire across the country. Eyewitnesses to a land rush.”

“But how do they know to show up? It’s only three weeks away.”

“Are you kidding? It’ll be printed in every newspaper in the country. On flyers in every post office. When the U. S. government gives away free land, people all over the world find out. Irish, Italians, Germans, Poles, Czechs, blacks, whites, outlaws and single women. Just telling ya about it doesn’t do it justice.” Lieutenant Fuller said.

“We need to get a photographer here, Jonathan. Don’t you know someone in Dallas? The man that did the portrait for Bellina?” C. W. noticed Jonathan staring out the window toward the railroad tracks. He looked to see what had captured him so –

grass waved up the ridge through the expanse of unsettled land, uninterrupted to the horizon.

“Jonathan...”

“C. W., we have to act fast.” Jonathan jerked out of his trance. Both came to the same conclusion, “What will stop them from going to Ft. Reno instead of here? And how will we be sure to attract the best people to Hatch?”

C. W. watched as Jonathan stood up, kicking over his chair. He began shuffling through papers on the desk frantically searching for something.

“You’re right. We want families, hard working folks and young men who are ready to invest.”

“Where’s paper?” Jonathan found a pencil and sat back down at the desk, “We need to sell this town, C. W.”

“Yes,” Just like his coming here, C. W. knew it was the next step toward progress in building a town, a utopian model. What was Dallas before it became a county seat and now the largest city in north Texas? It was only an outpost on the Trinity River. Not so different from Hatch, C. W. reasoned. He turned to Lieutenant Fuller who had been grinning in his seat watching the excitement of the young men.

“Lieutenant Fuller, what do you think? Where would be the best places to send our ad?”

“It won’t matter boys,” he stood up, groaning again, and headed toward the door. “You can send it to Nebraska to the Germans or Massachusetts to the Irish or even New York City, but you won’t stop the rag tag throng that’ll be coming. There’ll be speculators trying to make quick money. In it for the chase and then sell the claim. Land

may lay barren for years. All you can do is hope for the best.” He put on his hat and walked through the door, “I’ll see ya in a few weeks.”

The two young men froze, taking in Lieutenant Fuller’s words as they heard the front door of the store close. Then C. W. rallied, “Don’t mind him. He’s gotten cynical after being out here so long.”

Jonathan didn’t need the encouragement. He happily went back to the task of creating the advertisement, “Why did you come here, C. W.? Why did any of us come? That’s what we need to write.”

“It’s a place to start fresh. No interference.” C. W. said.

“True, but that sounds like it would appeal to the outlaw type the Lieutenant mentioned.”

C. W. began to rub his ear lobe, circling the press, turning words over in his head, “It’s as good as any other place. No, even better, I’d say.”

The swish of taffeta stopped their talk. Bellina took a step off the threshold and entered the room in a flourish of femininity that always caught C. W. off guard.

“Better than any other place? If you like dust and cow manure, maybe.” Bellina whooshed behind Jonathan and looked over his shoulder, “Working on a story already? I thought you were having trouble with the fine machine C. W. found for you?”

C. W. picked up the chair Jonathan had knocked over earlier and offered it to her in spite of the insult. She accepted and he caught a stream of her perfume as she walked in front of him. Roses. He often thought how different her life was here compared to Texas. Dallas was only a carriage ride from their former home. Before she married Jonathan she had lived in a fine house in Louisiana. Jonathan had promised an adventure

and if Hatch had not had the mission of St. Agnes, she might not have come to Indian Territory. C. W. was sure that she thought of Hatch as a temporary stop in their lives. She believed she would spend a couple of years here and then go back home to start her family. He had other ideas, however. Bellina was good for Hatch and he wanted to keep her around as long as possible. If the town became the Dallas of Indian Territory, she could be the grand dame.

Jonathan scooted his chair around to face his young wife, “Lena, they’re opening up the territory. They made the announcement yesterday in Washington. Another land run. Can you imagine it?”

“Really?” It was obvious by the way she picked at her skirt that she did not share their excitement.

C. W. persisted, “Yes, so we’re writing an ad to attract families to Hatch.”

“And what have you written so far?” she said, appearing slightly bored.

Jonathan turned back to the desk, “We haven’t really started.”

“Well, I don’t see the attraction. You’ve seen the land. They’ll come here, bust the sod until they realize it won’t grow cotton, corn, or anything for that matter but thorns and weeds. Then they’ll all go back home. Why do you think they gave this place to the Indians?”

C. W. had heard these arguments before. Bellina’s candor was not shocking. Since she and Jonathan had arrived, they’d spent many meals together in debates about everything from cattle investments to reconstruction. Still, he wanted her on his side.

“Bellina, look what we’ve done in this town in the year I’ve been here. Why, it was nothing but a shed by the railroad tracks when I came here.”

“Darling, I hate to tell you, but now it’s just three sheds by the railroad tracks. Anyway, I don’t want to interrupt your dream selling but Father Mallory is in the store and he’d like some supplies. I’m going with him back out to the mission. If we’re going to have Mass out there, I’d like to see the sanctuary. C. W. do you mind coming in to help us?”

C. W. headed toward the doorway, “Father Mallory’s here? I know he wants to build a church closer to town. Need people to build a church. Need more people to fill it up,” he stopped and turned back toward Jonathan. “We need to appeal to immigrants, Catholics…”

“C. W., he’s waiting,” Bellina rose from her chair.

“Oh sure. I’ll be out in a minute.”

“C. W.’s going write this with me, Lena. We’re sending this around the world.”

She brushed past both men, “I’d rather you send me around the world, Johnny.”

With Bellina’s voice echoing around the tiny side room, Jonathan put pencil to paper again. Then he looked up at C. W. and shook his head, “Dream selling,” he grunted.

“She’s right,” C. W. couldn’t help defending her. Then he was encouraged by her ideas, “But what’s wrong with that? Isn’t that why I came here? Isn’t that why you came?”

#

The day of the run C.W. was up early. He hadn’t slept the night before. How could he with the town so full of potential energy? The cavalry was there all night to keep boomers from crossing the line but they couldn’t keep some boys from carousing

until daybreak. Even from his back room behind the store C. W. could hear an occasional body stumbling in the alley and ricocheting against the buildings, and the most frightening, gun shots coming from the camps across the railroad tracks. For ten months his little town sat in orderly silence – if noises had interrupted his sense of propriety it was noises of progress – the click clack of the train, the rattle of a coach, the low moans of cattle. But now they had fashioned a storm of human vice and virtue, and all he had witnessed from last night was the vice. He hoped at least some of these people were well-intended farmers who came in response to their advertisement.

Before the run proclamation, C. W. had known everyone in Hatch. They had elected a mayor and a territorial sheriff. Cheyenne and Arapaho regularly came into his store, and he knew a relationship with the tribes that most early settlers knew, amiable, cooperative, an exchange of services, basic commerce which all men respect. He knew the satisfaction of applied order and was rewarded for clear thinking and honoring a handshake.

He considered himself while he laced his shoes. Probably if he had come to Oklahoma Territory as one of these speculators, he would have celebrated all night as well. What else would a young man do with all that anticipation? Now he had the sense that ownership brings and he wanted to see his investment protected. It was well known that most people didn't stay long after the run in '89. Some came for the pure adventure and never intended to stay and make a home. Some came with grand ideas thinking that the land and weather would be as fair as back home in Tennessee or Iowa. Some weren't farmers at all but renegades in financial or legal trouble. They were looking for a new way to live and thought 160 acres would solve their personality defects. But C. W.

believed what the cowboys said, “Only the government would give you 160 acres and bet that you couldn’t farm it.”

When C. W. opened the back door of his shop to toss out his wash bowl, he came face to face with a young black man. No, a young black woman. He changed his mind as she raised her hand and took a drag from a thin rolled cigarette. She was dressed in men’s clothing and wore a floppy brimmed hat, the kind cowboys wear. C. W. stood a little startled. Not because of her skin color but because of her gender. He’d been around plenty of Negro cowboys, but rarely had he come across a woman dressed this way. He spoke first, “Howdya do?”

“Mister, you the owner?”

“Yes.”

“Can I get some supplies?”

“You alone?”

“Mister, I don’t want to be disrespectful but I’d rather not talk about me.”

C.W. had never been a southern sympathizer. He was born in Texas after the Civil War and even though his family came from Georgia and talked about the atrocities the Yankee troops had committed, he was the type who looked forward not back. Still he didn’t know if he should encourage her. He was sure what she’d heard based on letters and newspaper stories sent back East after the ’89 run made it seem easy. Free land was all anyone really wanted. What people didn’t hear about were the claims that were abandoned or the Indian raids. Women who made the run had it doubly hard, trying to buy supplies and hire workers. He couldn’t imagine the trouble a Negro woman would

encounter. Most white men in these outposts saw white women as a novelty. He could only guess how they would treat a black woman.

“How much ya need?” He looked around and didn’t see a horse. Was she planning to run on foot?

“Jus’ a few. Jus’ enough to get me started.”

He turned around and headed back inside, “Follow me.”

Besides the girl, C. W. must have sold supplies to seventy-five people that morning. He had been upset that two other general stores had set up tents two weeks before the run, but on that morning he was thankful. He couldn’t have supplied the numbers of settlers that had come to Hatch that day. Around 9:00 a.m. the train sauntered into town loaded inside and out with prospective settlers. Bellina and Jonathan told him later that people had hung off the tops of boxcars and out the windows and doors. They were amazed no one was injured in the rush to make it to the line.

At 11:30 a.m. he closed his shop, mounted his horse, and made his way out of town. The early morning mist had not dissipated, and its filtered light created a sepia vision of people in procession, the few still left in town heading toward the starting line outside of Hatch. The gun and bugle were to go off at noon sharp. C. W. rode his horse south of the 98 meridian and was shocked by the depth and breadth of horses, wagons, bikes, and people. There was a young horseman in uniform trying to maintain order at the back of the line. C. W. asked for Lieutenant Fuller and the kid waved him toward the front. He jostled his way through people, horses, and dogs, through wagons, litters, and bicycles, until he reached the temporary platform.

Lieutenant Fuller waved him up and C. W. tied his horse tight against the scaffolding. When he reached the top, he paused while Lieutenant Fuller surveyed the line with a spyglass, "Looking for line jumpers."

C. W. took in the scene. Thousands of people were stretched left to right from one horizon to the next.

"Around twenty-five thousand, the homestead office in Kingfisher said. Have you ever seen such a mass of humanity?"

C. W. had to say no. Only those who would have witnessed the first run could have said such a thing. He had come quietly to Oklahoma Territory, not in a swarm. It wasn't his way to push and shove or scare up horses and dust to race another man, or woman, to get what he wanted.

Standing at the top of the platform he understood why Lieutenant Fuller needed his spyglass. The crowd agitated like an ant hill. He was amazed that the cavalry had ever managed to set up a line of any sort. There were mostly people on horseback. He couldn't say that they were mostly men, although they looked like men, but after his encounter with the Negro girl he assumed some of these fellows dressed in wide brimmed hats and tall boots might be female. As noon approached, the horses became harder to control, feeling the anxiety of their riders. In turn, the teams hooked to wagons began to jostle. People on foot or bicycles had to be careful not to get caught under a Conestoga's wheel.

"Here, take a look for yourself," Fuller handed C. W. the spyglass.

Through the lens he could make out a few faces. He saw young men, eyes wide, noses as flared as their horses', ready to prove that adventure and possibility were their

birthright. Single women, some disguised, but a few brave enough to face their gender and the adversity it would bring by staking a claim in that sod. Couples with all their belongings in tied-down trunks. He trusting that she would provide a softness for the hard days to come and she trusting that he could fulfill the promises he had made which convinced her to join him. C. W. could see that these people came here because they had no where else to go. Reconstruction was not fulfilling its promise for everyone in the South. German, Irish, Polish, Czech, and Italian immigrants, former slaves, widowed and single women, all attempting to run for land, trying for that lost dream of autonomy and room to build little countries of their own. Photographs of the event would later show serious-looking men, a row of bushy eyebrows and mustaches. In reality, anyone 21 or older could stake a claim, man or woman, black or white. It was the third in a governmental experiment like no other, and when the gunshot was heard at noon, the swarm broke free. It was now up to them to make this place a home worth staying for.

After the prairie had settled, C. W., rattled a little by the excitement, decided to walk his horse back to Hatch. Along the way, he stumbled upon an abandoned campsite, noticed the orange coals of the fire, and began kicking dirt up around it to put out them out. The mist became heavier, turning to a gauzy April rain. Among the debris of tattered blankets and horse manure were newspapers and flyers. He snatched piece of paper from the mud and unfolded it.

Hatch is located on the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific railroad between Ft. Reno and Buffalo Springs. It has the most beautiful and healthful location of any town in the territory. It is supported by the best and most productive farm land anywhere and it would be possible to grow cotton, corn, and wheat here. In fact, any crop that will grow

in Kansas or Texas will thrive here. The climate is delightful and the winters short and mild. New businesses and houses are going up here everyday. Strangers coming to town always remark about the unusually large and well selected stocks carried by our merchants. Two passenger trains stop here daily. The town has a mercantile, a blacksmith, a boarding house, a post office, a restaurant, and St. Agnes mission and school.

Parties wishing to locate in the best town or the best farming community in the territory are invited to come to Hatch. Hatch is the best little town to help you build your dream.

Chapter 1

After Harvest Will You Fight for Me?

When Gloria was three, she sat between her mother's knees and listened to stories of adventure. Boys on rivers and girls who joined the circus. When she was ten, she wanted to be an astronaut. She had learned the constellations in fourth grade science and would spend evenings lying on her back, a blanket spread out on the prairie grass, tracing satellites across the expansive Oklahoma sky. When she was seventeen, she wrote folk songs, hoping to be the next Woody Guthrie. Her English teacher gave her a second hand guitar and introduced her to a college boy named Russell. Once a week he taught her guitar basics in exchange for her grandmother's dinners. They went out a few times and he showed her all the things about sex that she had only imagined by reading teen romance novels. Her mother left that year with a man to join the carnival circuit, which wasn't a joke, even though people in Buffalo Springs were shocked into low chuckles.

When she was twenty-one, she met another boy at college who put her to bed drunk. He was nice, handsome, and homey. She liked the way he smelled, a fusion of Right Guard and clay. They met by the duck pond on campus and he laughed at her jokes and her sarcastic, critical nature. He had a home he wanted to go back to, while she felt like she was floating on dreams. At twenty-two she married him, dropped out of college, and settled for the anachronistic life of a farmer's wife.

On this Friday morning in late June, she watched her husband's combine roll across the eastern field in front of their house as he finished the last of the harvest. The land lay simple and plump along the horizon. The rust colored dirt of the turned up field in front of her house was the same clay the Indians used to make pottery – now it made wheat. Trees, the few that survived the harsh droughts of the plains, bent obligingly to the north, the constant south wind coaxing the growth of branches in curious arcs. Cedar, blackjack, mulberry, cottonwood, and elm – not charming or tall – stubbornly insisted on surviving. Next to the wheat field was a pasture of milkweed and thistle, sand burs and cattle, the former thriving on the heat of summer, the latter finding comfort in a stagnant, quickly disappearing farm pond. An antiquated windmill, tin blades missing, once watered the cattle, but it was no help to them now. Stillness and birdcalls bore witness to what the rest of summer would bring, wind and heat. The weather matched her mood – dry, cloudless, brown-grass dreary.

When Gloria took time to resent the choices she had made for herself, it was in the morning. As long as she could remember, she had fought to wake up. It would seem that her mother Starla should have been the one to struggle after honky-tonk nights, but even as Gloria had stayed home and took care of her little sister Stacy, she knew her

mother would beat her to the sunrise. Her longing wrinkled the blankets and her shame counted the knobs on the popcorn ceiling. Worry made for a groggy head and crusty eyes by morning, but Starla slid easily into coffee and sunshine. Her grandmother, Mama Jodi, could console with regular meals and soft, plump affection, but even after Starla left, all Gloria wanted was for her to return.

Gloria moved her feet from ball to heel, propelling the wooden swing on her front porch. She spent time enough in this swing for it to be named "Mama's Swing" by her three children, which struck her as funny, as if anything on this place really belonged to her, and they all knew where to find her if she slipped away. Sipping coffee with too much sugar and cream, she watched birds as she did most mornings. Some of them she could name: killdeer, meadowlarks, robins, cardinals, but not the common wrens. She vowed she would get a book which would help her identify each bird she saw and heard, categorize them, teach them to her children, put them in their place. It was something she thought she should do.

Gloria hadn't been able to reach Stacy since Monday. It was now Friday, and she was sure Stacy's phone had been disconnected. She could imagine her up all night sweeping the wooden floors of her two bedroom rent house. That broom had become rigid from so much sweeping. She had helped Stacy move several weeks ago, in the spring. All Stacy owned fit into the back of Gloria's Explorer. She had no furniture, no linens, no vacuum, no pots and pans, no real possessions except a few clothes and toys for Stacy's daughter Michaela. If Gloria hadn't given her an old mattress, Stacy and Michaela would have slept in a faded sleeping bag on the floor.

The combine stopped and she watched Ben's silhouette stride across the field to his truck. He would be in soon and he would be hungry as would the kids. She knew she could choose not to cook for them. Plenty of women her age popped frozen waffles in the toaster or slid bowls of cold cereal in front of their children. But at twenty-six, when Thomas was only two years old, she felt she must make the decision to do things the old-fashioned way. Gloria had grown into the expectation of the nostalgic homemaker that conservative Bible belt preachers exalted. It once made her proud. Now, as she thought about cooking Ben's bacon to the right texture, not too crispy, she wished she had started out setting boundaries on her willingness to accommodate him. He didn't help her move Stacy that day. He loaded the mattress in the back of the SUV, kissed her on the cheek, and said he was heading to his father's place.

A killdeer screamed as it canvassed the pasture. Now, at thirty-five Gloria wondered if leaving, driving her kids away from the farm and back to Buffalo Springs to Mama Jodi's, might be the best boundary she could set.

The front door sucked open. "Mama, I want somepin' to eat."

Chad, her youngest, looked up at her with his ashen eyes, sticking a pixie nose out the door. All her thoughts evaporated and she smiled back at him. She waved him out and in quick hops he moved to the front of the porch, leaving the door wide open. One of three, he played the role of the baby perfectly. He demanded Gloria's attention and he liked to show off.

"Watch this," he said as he jumped off the top step and onto the front sidewalk.

Gloria's response was automatic, "Be careful. You'll scrape your knee."

“No I won’t.” He had already landed, rubbing his bottom on the concrete. He noticed something in the flower bed. “What’s this?” He had picked up what looked like a black stem and lumbered back up the step to her.

Gloria looked at it and realized it was what was left over from the skink’s tail that the kids had found yesterday. Chad and Cassie had been amazed when her oldest Thomas showed them how the skink would break off its tail as a way to defend itself.

“It’s a lizard’s tail, remember?” She took it from him and tossed it back into the withering begonias. Gloria sighed and rose grudgingly from the swing. Placing her hand on his small shoulder, she walked with him into the house.

“Whatcha want to eat, baby?”

“Candy,” he looked up at her, batting his eyelashes.

“Not an option,” she answered grabbing his chin and giving it a gentle go back and forth.

“How ‘bout some eggs?”

“O.K.”

She followed him into the kitchen, watching his behind twist in his "big boy" underwear. At three he had just finished potty training and Gloria was glad to make it through one night with no accidents. He scooted into the recliner after turning on the television.

Gloria moved absent-mindedly around her kitchen. Making breakfast was the same dance she had done every morning for thirteen years. Begin at the refrigerator, three steps to the cabinet for the mixing bowl, two steps to the left for the flour – open the cabinet, shut the cabinet, turn and lean. Cooking in this kitchen was so familiar she could

prepare a meal without even thinking about how it happened. She and Ben moved into the 60s ranch right after they were married. The house once belonged to Ben's parents, but after his mother died it sat vacant for years. It reflected a farmer's and a farm wife's sense of efficiency and necessity. A kitchen, living room, three bedrooms, one and half baths, all decorated in moderately priced materials, gold speckled Formica, plastic handled faucets, beige linoleum tiles, fruitwood stained cabinets with cutout scrolls, the only evidence of indulgence.

Gloria at first believed that she and Ben would remodel the entire house. Their first project was to redo the master bedroom and bath. Many trips to the big box hardware store on a Friday night had transitioned them into the typical married couple. They found they shared the same ideas about the right shade of taupe semi-gloss paint, the amount of shelves for the new walk-in closet, and the practicality of dual sinks. Ben had insisted on an over-large Jacuzzi tub for her. She was flattered by his thoughtfulness and attention to the details she wanted. Framed mirrors and satin nickel plated faucets seemed the way to her newlywed heart. For her part, she believed she should be as considerate as he and didn't ask for too much, keeping the budget always in mind. When it was done, they made love in the new suite, in the big bath, in the closet. They joked about marking their territory. The house sure didn't belong to his parents anymore. But the newness stopped at the bedroom door.

Eventually, the pragmatic décor of the rest of the house, the nicks in the baseboards from toy cars sent racing too fast against them, the limestone stains in the children's tub from bath after bath cleansing dirty, playful kids, began to grow on her. It spoke a history of family, something she had never had. The house's voluminous

imperfections had once inspired her to raise a family. But she hadn't felt the same about this house in years, and the dream of further remodeling faded as she and Ben settled in.

She looked up in time to see Cassie, in her pink ruffled nightgown, skip into a chair next to her brother. Cassie pushed her blonde curls out of her brown eyes and then began to pat Chad's arm.

"Morning pumpkin," Gloria said.

"Morning Mama. You know what? I had a dream about horses last night."

"You did?" Gloria called over her shoulder while she pulled biscuits out of the oven.

"Yes. Daddy bought one for me and I named him Magic and he let me ride him and we got him a pink and purple saddle and I had a pink cowgirl hat with a purple ribbon and a pink jacket with fringy stuff hanging from the arms and from the back."

Cassie continued her chatter and Gloria grinned not at her narrative but because she was so animated. She had twisted around in the chair with her knees in the seat. She almost knocked Chad in the head as she demonstrated the style of the jacket by holding out her small arm and swishing her other hand with flair. Gloria, puzzled by Cassie's ease at being a pink and purple little girl, remembered herself at Cassie's age. She had climbed trees and built forts, played cowboys and Indians, or invented elaborate stories with imaginary friends to the tune of Pippi Longstocking.

"... and Mama I think I need to tell Daddy about my dream so he can know how bad I want a horsey. Don't you?"

“Cassie, I know your Daddy would love to buy you a horse, but we aren't getting one right now. Plus, Daddy's not feeling well these days so don't talk about the horse to him just yet, okay?”

“Well, I'll just keep it to myself now, but I still want a horsey and I still want a pink and purple cowgirl outfit.”

Satisfied to give her the last word Gloria continued breakfast. As she was just turning the heat off the eggs, Ben walked in the back door trailing in dust and motor oil. He came in quietly this morning, his broad shoulders slightly slumped. Gloria realized that today he had made an appointment with David at the bank to ask for an extension. With dread, she also remembered that Ben had asked her yesterday to get the paperwork ready.

“Hi,” he said as he shut the door gently.

“Hi,” Gloria responded not making eye contact. She couldn't remember the last time she and Ben had a real conversation that did not end in a fight. Resentment flared automatically, it began in her chest and rested in the tight clench of her jaw. Even though she could tell he was troubled this morning and even though she knew why, she couldn't muster much sympathy for him. She went about the breakfast and quietly waited. Lately, she understood that she counted on their confrontations. Knowing just how far she could push him stimulated something in her – passion maybe. Their bickering created an intimacy she missed. She began to set plates on the round oak table in the dining room, measuring each movement to settle her mind. The anticipation of what surely brewed up in him needed to be controlled, subdued. If she let it loose, set it free, it would ravage their house like a summer storm.

Ben moved across the kitchen to the chair where the kids sat, stiffly bent his stout frame over, and delivered a kiss to each child. Each one stretched arms up for a hug and each knew the soft embrace against a sweaty t-shirt. Most mornings Gloria watched him greet the little ones this way, but lately he would slip past her as if he had forgotten that she was the one he used to kiss first.

Cassie looked up at him. “Hi, Daddy!”

“Hey, baby. How are you this morning?”

“I’m fine,” she motioned with her finger for him to come closer. In what she thought was a whisper she said, “Daddy, I had a dream last night but I’m not ‘sposed to tell you about it.”

“Oh really,” Ben said, interested.

“Yeah. Mama said not to bother you about me wanting a horsey.”

“She did?” Ben looked at Gloria, raising an eyebrow which caused his cap to rise slightly on his head. Gloria stopped, considered them both, but didn’t acknowledge the conversation. She had finished putting the food on the table and said, “I’ll go get Thomas out of bed.”

“He’s still in bed?” Ben took off his grimy cap and set it on the table between the biscuits and the butter.

Walking down the long hall to the Thomas’s room, Gloria heard thick, heavy pages turning. He was probably reading his favorite book, a cross section of Egyptian Pyramids. She could also hear the bed springs creak and knew that he would greet her with an excuse for staying in bed so long.

Thomas had been somber lately and he had begun to remove himself from the family. Gloria had asked Ben to talk to him but he had brushed her concerns aside, saying that it was just the way eleven-year-olds acted. It was unusual for Ben to ignore Thomas. He used to hound him to be around everyone, even if they were just watching television. Ben's most desperate attempts had been when he forced Thomas to help him on the farm. He had insisted that Thomas learn to work, whether that meant driving a truck or a nail. Yet no matter how much Ben had tried to teach him, Thomas didn't learn it, and no matter how much Ben had tried to make farming interesting and important, Thomas remained aloof and non responsive. Thomas wasn't going to be a farmer, and Gloria knew that Ben would never change his oldest son.

Maybe that's why he had taken in Josh so quickly. Ben had finally found the boy who wanted to learn everything he could teach about cattle and wheat. When Josh had been so badly hurt in March, Ben must have felt like he had almost killed his own son. Even though Gloria understood Ben's detachment from Thomas, she had lost patience for it. Eleven-year-olds don't stay eleven forever. Eventually, without proper guidance, they grow up to be the brooding men their mothers fear they will be.

"Morning, Thomas," Gloria noticed that his comforter was on the floor and his sheets looked like he had wadded them up all night.

Thomas responded with a sigh, "Hi, Mama."

His eyes were large and sad, begging for reassurance. How much had he heard when she and Ben fought? She couldn't be sure.

"Rough night?"

"Yes. I'll make my bed."

“Don’t worry. You’ll fix it later. C’mon, everybody’s waiting.”

He joined her at the door. Gloria put her hand on his head and ran her fingers through his chestnut hair. She bent down and kissed him on the forehead. He wanted to be grown up and he was willing to accept more responsibility. Knowing that Josh’s accident caused strain on the family, Thomas had offered to get a job mowing lawns in town this summer. He said that the money could help pay for Cassie’s dance lessons so she could still practice for the Independence Day parade. Ben had refused, telling him that he didn’t have time to take him to town. Gloria knew Ben didn’t want to worry about Thomas hurting himself. Gloria couldn’t imagine that Ben would endure another accident.

She would have denied it if asked, but Thomas touched Gloria’s heart more than her other children. He was wearing Batman pajamas, but he was almost as tall as she, coming up to her chest. Horribly in-between, she thought. She felt for him, but couldn’t really talk to him about it. Gloria was mystified by the father and son relationship, and she didn’t even know how to handle Ben these days. All she could do was give kisses on foreheads, pats on the shoulders, and quick hugs, hoping that Thomas understood she wished things could be easier.

He looked up at her and straightened his shoulders, “O.K.”

At the table they began the blessing in unison, making the sign of the cross.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Bless us O Lord for these thy gifts which we are about to receive through the bounty of Christ, our Lord.

Amen.

Silence settled in the circle. Gloria picked up a biscuit and broke one up for Chad. Spoons and forks clinked against dishes, the percussion to accompany their meal.

“Could I get some bacon?” Ben asked. Gloria could feel his annoyance at her lack of effort to make this a sunny breakfast. He had accused her lately of not caring about the farm as much as he did, tried to make her feel she was the reason for Josh’s accident, the lack of rain, the price of cattle. It was never like Ben to be so irrational. Lately, however, irrationality smothered anything she ever knew about him. It had seeped in like a poison and snuffed out the man she once loved.

“Thomas, when we go check the calves later, I’m going to let you give the little one a shot.”

Thomas responded, head down, “O.K., Dad.”

Gloria threw Ben a look, “Are you sure he can do that?”

“Well, sure he can. Didn’t you say you wanted him to start helping around here more? Don’t worry Gloria. I’ll be there. Did you think I wouldn’t?”

His tone invited a flippant reply, but she held her tongue. She couldn’t win this one. Ben was only following her suggestion, but they had had enough accidents to make them all jittery. Ben waited then began, “Did you happen to find the papers I need?”

“No, I forgot,” Gloria’s jaw tightened again. Honestly, she forgot, but this was no excuse, she knew.

Gloria jumped as Ben’s fork hit his plate with a loud clink and he swiftly pushed himself away from the table.

“Damn it, Gloria. I asked you last night if you would find those for me and you said you would. You know how I feel about being on time for this meeting, and now I’ll have to look for those papers myself.”

His heavy boots sounded his path to their bedroom. Gloria looked at the kids. They were frozen, eyes wide.

“Stay put and finish up,” Gloria told them as she calmly put down her napkin and followed Ben.

He was rifling through a large brown accordion file. He had already thrown the drawers of the small desk on the floor. Receipts, envelopes, and cancelled checks littered the carpet. In only a few seconds, he had made a mess big enough to take an hour’s worth of cleaning.

“Ben, if you would just calm down, I’ll get those papers for you.” His anger gulped all the air out of the room. How angry would he get this time? How should she respond? In the past she was the one who stomped out of a room and slammed doors, not him.

“Goddammit Gloria, you couldn’t even remember to do a simple thing for me. I don’t know why I even asked you. You could care less if we lose this place. You never wanted it anyway!” Ben wasn’t even looking at her. She could see his face turning blue, his fury rushing to the surface.

“Ben,” Gloria tried to use disbelief to calm him down, “It’s just a piece of paper. I know exactly where it is.” She surveyed the room. Everything was a mess and it all seemed so ridiculous. That’s why she didn’t think about what she said next. It was as if she were watching someone else’s drama play out. “Or I did.”

He was sitting on the bed still looking through the file. He rose up and with full force hurled the file at Gloria. It flew past her face, barely missing her.

“Then fucking find it so I can get the hell out of here!”

She remained a stone as he pushed his way past her. She could still feel his heavy hands on her forearm as she heard him in the kitchen ordering Thomas to get in the truck. Then she heard the door slam behind them. Cassie and Chad came running down the hall. Gloria swung around to greet them, not wanting them to see the mess in the room.

“Go back to the kitchen,” she tried to keep her voice steady.

“But Mama,” Cassie started.

“I said get back to that kitchen right now!” she yelled without meaning to. She couldn’t stop it from coming out.

Chad started to cry and Cassie looked like she had been punched in the stomach. She put her dimpled hand on Chad’s shoulders, turned him around gently, and took him back down the hall.

Gloria covered her eyes with her hands and stepping over the papers which had landed at her feet, she picked up the file to get the loan papers. Once she located them, she walked outside to give them to Ben who was waiting in the truck with a sad-faced Thomas.

Gloria handed the papers to Ben, trying to find in his eyes something of the husband she knew, “Here.”

Glaring out the windshield of his truck, he snatched them from her hand and backed out of the driveway. Speeding down the dusty road, he left her feeling like a nobody.

Images of the skink she and the kids had found yesterday entered her mind. Thomas, determined to catch it for Cassie and Chad so that they could hold it, had grabbed it by its tail, but its tail separated from its body, snapping off and landing in the dirt. The kids watched as the discarded part wiggled on the ground, looking like it was alive. Eventually, though, the piece turned blue then white and stopped writhing, lying dead, a sacrifice, a decoy, so that the whole could scamper away to safety under a rock or into cracks in the foundation.

Standing on the driveway as the sun began to shout its heat to the day, that's what she felt like. Snap. She would break off this piece.

"Mama?" Cassie was standing in the back door. "Chad spilt his juice all over the kitchen table"

A sticky floor brought Gloria back to the kitchen. She hoped he would regret what he had done later. That he would come back and apologize. That he would find a way to be stronger and make their problems disappear. But after she cleans up the floor and the kids, after she drops them off at Mama Jodi's, she will go to work at the Cedar County Rural Electric and try to pretend this never happened.

Chapter 2

Hawks on Fences

“Daddy, could you slow down?” Thomas asked his father nervously as they sped down the graveled country road.

“Huh?” Ben did not look at his son, but continued to concentrate on the road, holding the steering wheel in a tight grip. “Oh, sure, Thomas,”

He studied his father. He knew he was angry with Mama, but today he didn’t quite know why. They had argued a lot since the accident, and he worried that soon they would sit him down and have “the talk,” the one when they would tell him they were getting a divorce.

His dad was a big man, tall and thick framed. His brown hair and eyes matched the olive complexion, which over time had gained a bronze from the countless days in the

sun. Reddish stubble on his face reminded Thomas of the times Ben would blow on his belly when he was little, the way he did Chad now. It would scratch and tickle and he wasn't sure if he should squirm away from his father's grip or endure and enjoy the smell of dirt and the force of his father's large hands. His daddy didn't tickle him like that anymore.

Wearing a stained and tattered green John Deer hat and a red T-shirt, his dad looked worried. His thick lips made a straight line across his face. He was thinking hard, Thomas knew. He was unhappy. Thomas knew that too.

He wondered if he should make conversation. Should he try to cheer him up, maybe tell him about the deer tracks he had found yesterday down by the creek? Instead Thomas looked at the passing fence posts. Oil wells of black and green, their hammers pumping, part of the collage of standard oil field equipment, stood next to natural gas tanks which looked like enormous soup cans without labels. Houses were as sparse as the trees and when they came upon one, it was surrounded by barbed wire fences, tin cattle sheds, large tractor barns, and maybe a silo or two. Telephone poles and electrical poles broke up the line where the turquoise sky met the red fields. Thomas noticed a red-tailed hawk perched on a fence post. He just glimpsed the brown feathers splotched with white and its burnt orange tail as they sped by. The wind blew up feathers around the hawk's head creating a crowning effect. He liked watching for hawks. He thought they were magic somehow and noble, and every time he saw one, he believed it was a sign of good luck. Once after seeing one in the cottonwood behind his house, his Grandpa Wilhelm gave them tickets to an amusement park. He later found out that he had won them in a school raffle, but still, Grandpa didn't usually give away anything.

Thomas automatically asked, “Daddy, do you think seeing hawk is good luck?”

“A hawk’s a hawk, Thomas. What does luck have to do with it?” Ben didn’t take his eyes off the road.

“Well, don’t the Indians believe that animals show you things – give you signs? I just thought maybe a hawk means something.”

“Superstitions. That’s what you’re talking about.” Ben grunted, “I don’t believe in luck. If I did, I’d spend my time doing rain dances instead of working. As dry as it is, my feet would probably rub up a fire instead of bringing down rain. Life don’t work like that Thomas.”

Thomas looked down at his hands, “But Daddy, there’s got to be something that helps us out sometimes.”

“Sure – that’s what we go to church for.” Ben glanced at Thomas, “We go to church every Sunday, don’t we?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, don’t you feel better when we go?”

“I guess, but I don’t always know what all it means. Like when Father chants sometimes and when he swings the smoking ball around.”

“You don’t have to know. God tells us to go and we go. Look, I don’t know what it all means either. When I was younger, I read lots of books about history, just like you. Searching for answers. But here I am, here we are, struggling. Those books haven’t helped any.”

Thomas noticed his father’s eyebrows come together, creating a deep crease between his eyes.

“I’m tired of talking about this. I’ve got a lot on my mind and I’m not in the mood to discuss religion.”

Thomas was disappointed. Figures, he thought, just when he was getting somewhere, Dad shuts up. He looked back out the window to the landscape rushing by. The fields were dry and dusty. He remembered the last time it had rained, probably two months ago. He, Cassie, and Chad had played in the puddles at Mama Jodi’s. Chad ended up throwing the thick, gooey mud and Cassie ended up crying because it got in her hair. Thomas took her in and helped her clean up, but he laughed at her. She liked to play with them until she got dirty, and when Chad was around there was always dirt. That was the same day Mama Jodi had taken them out for one of her walks.

They had crossed the back barbed wire fence. Thomas went through first and then held the fence open for Cassie and Chad. He stretched it wider for Mama Jodi to fit through. He watched her elastic waist jeans slide down exposing her large pink nylon panties beneath the hem of her cotton shirt, a shirt she had made herself. Thomas had watched her sew on the buttons just a few days ago. She passed through clumsily but with a quick hop which startled him. He wasn’t embarrassed by seeing her undergarments or her stumbling – they had spent too much time together to hold on to modesty. Mama Jodi was his great-grandmother but she had never acted her age. It was only recently Thomas noticed that she leaned on him more for balance, and she asked him to remind her of what other people had said.

They headed for the gully, a dry creek bed behind her trailer. Even in wet spring-time Thomas had not seen much water in the creek. Mama Jodi held on to Thomas’s shoulder as they lumbered down the incline to the bottom of the ravine. But it

was Thomas who lost his balance and slid down the bank. He caught himself by throwing his hand behind him. The iron red pellets of soil were hot to the touch.

“You all right?” Mama Jodi held back a chuckle.

Thomas nodded his head, “Yeah.” He stood up and brushed himself off. He knew that she would tell his Mama about his fall later. Continuing along the winding bed, Chad darted ahead with Cassie running after him, telling him “Don’t touch. That could be poisonous!” Mama Jodi began to tell Thomas again about her grandmother and the way she would use native plants.

“She came from Texas in a covered wagon. They were looking for land to farm.”

“In the run?” Thomas kicked at piece of granite and then bent to pick it up. It was pink and jagged.

“No, this was before the run. She was a Creole, and the story goes that she came from a wealthy family, but after the run they lost everything. Eventually, they settled on the old Brock place south of Hatch. They were so poor. If it hadn’t been for what they knew about plants and how to stretch the last bit of use out of an animal, they wouldn’t have survived. They had to make their own fortune. No one was gonna do it for them.”

“If she was so rich, why didn’t she go back home to her family?”

“I’m not sure. She lost her first husband and remarried. Maybe it was pride.”

Mama Jodi stopped, bent over, and snatched a weed from the bank. “Take this for instance.” She held it out to Thomas, “Smell it.” Thomas noticed that it was oozing a white milky liquid. He sniffed it and then jerked his head back. The smell was strong and it made him wrinkle his nose.

“Milkweed. Eases stress or kills your husband.” She laughed, “Or both.” She tossed the weed down and wiped her hands, “Sticky stuff.”

Chad rounded a sharp bend ahead of them. Being in the gulley seemed to fascinate him and Thomas could understand why. It was like a miniature grand canyon. Both sides of the bank looked like red layered cake with bands of white icing in between. Small willows and cedars clung to its edges, maybe they had seeped water from a creek at one time, but the water was long gone now. The wind and rain pounded away the loose soil, so all they could do now was hold on to the hope of borrowed time, their exposed roots falling away and blowing with the breeze.

Chad came back around to them and climbed up on one of these balls of roots. He grabbed a hold of a thick one and used it to swing back and forth from the bank, like a mountain climber holds onto a guide rope.

“Hey, Cassie found bones. Come look.” He jumped down, landed on his haunches, but then just as quickly scampered off.

Mama Jodi and Thomas followed and soon came up behind Cassie. She pointed to a carcass behind a clump of blue stem grass, “What do you think it is, Mama Jodi?”

She struggled to get down on one knee and she landed with a grunt, her knee squishing the loose red soil.

Thomas expected her to pick up part of the carcass, he would have, but instead she brushed her index finger along its front leg and then its spine. He thought it might be a fox or a raccoon.

“A dog. A stray. Just died here. Probably starved to death.”

“Do you think someone dumped it? How come it didn’t come up to the trailer?”

“Probably didn’t know to. Sometimes animals, just like people, don’t know how to look for help or they don’t trust no one to help them. This animal was probably scared and sick. Someone got tired of messing with and dumped it. Come on, let’s head back before the heat gets us.”

They walked in silence. Thomas knew people could be mean. He had seen plenty of boys in his class shoot birds and even cats with BB guns. But those were boys. For someone to drop off this dog meant they had to be old enough to drive and that would mean that they should be old enough to know better.

“This is a hard place to live, Thomas.”

Gravel rocks clunked into the side of the truck and the road rattled the vehicle. Thomas’ thoughts rose out of the gulley with Mama Jodi and he realized where he was. He noticed that his Dad was speeding again. The dust from the road seeped in and it began to choke him.

“What’s wrong, son?” Ben noticed Thomas covering his nose and mouth.

“Nothing Dad. I’m having a hard time breathing.”

“The dust? I’ll slow down. Sorry. Hey, how about some music?” Ben turned the radio to the oldies country station. Thomas hoped they would play some Merle Haggard or Conway Twitty, something he knew his father would like.

Chapter 3

Hatch

Ben turned on to the blacktop and the five miles to town flew by, the only sound between father and son a rhythmic moan from the truck's tires. He dreaded what lay ahead of him this Friday morning, had dreaded it all spring. Now that it was summer and after harvest, it was time to face up to what he knew would probably have to happen since Josh's accident. Gloria had gone back to work to help pay some of the bills, but her salary at the rural electric wasn't enough. They had talked about selling land, but Ben couldn't disappoint his father.

Ben had begun to avoid the late night conversations between husband and wife, the stressful pillow talk of debts unpaid and bank overdrafts. He had begun to stay up too late after the news, falling asleep in the recliner, while Gloria went on to bed. Ben

watched Thomas stare out the window beside him. It hadn't always been this way between him and Gloria, and despite his recent moodiness, he wished things could be different.

He remembered when he first met her. She had been in her underwear. She had fallen out of the ground floor window of her apartment house and passed out drunk in the hedge. Ben, on his way to another party a few houses down, had picked her up and carried her in. Her roommate, a girl in a yellow tube top and boxer shorts, slurred the directions to her bed. Covering her with a rough wool blanket, he noticed she wore hot lips underwear and a Nitty Gritty Dirt Band t-shirt and she smelled like an ashtray. He wrote a note in eyeliner on the dresser mirror: Tucked you in. Don't be a drunk! He had looked around to be sure the girls would be safe when he left. To be sure, he kicked out a half-awake, mouthy drunk who he had found face to fur with the shag carpet. Ben noticed the lock on the inside door handle was loose, but he locked it anyway and strutted down the sidewalk shaking his head.

Ben didn't consider the incident with the girl anything special; he'd seen plenty of nude or half-nude girls drunk and passed out. He thought he was doing a good deed – one of the many acts of kindness a country boy executes everyday, and he did not intend to try to meet her again until he saw her by the duck pond on campus.

It was her hair that caught his attention. Most girls frizzed and hair sprayed their hair until it stood high on their foreheads and puffed like Chia pets off their shoulders. Ben never enjoyed running his fingers through hair like that. He had learned early on not to touch the stuff. But Gloria's hair helped him make the connection. When he flipped

on her bedroom light, that hair took him by surprise – wavy, sleek and dark. He had noticed how simple she looked and he liked it.

As he drove the final few miles into Hatch, he replayed the scene of their first conversation, remembering how young they were.

She had been sitting under a sycamore tree, surrounded by the litter of October seed pods, she plucked a guitar, and when she leaned down to move her fingers over the strings, she pushed back strands of her hair with her little finger. She wore a gray sweatshirt and jeans - her white socks peeking out below the cuffs.

Ben had walked over to her. "Hi." He stood above her, between her and the pond.

She looked up and squinted, trying to refocus her attention from the guitar to him, "Hi."

"Uh, I saw you here. I thought I recognized you. I'm the guy who wrote you the note on your mirror."

"Oh?...Ohh yeah," Gloria palmed her forehead and shook her head, "I don't remember much about that night. Sorry." She lifted her eyes and smiled. Her eyes and smile were so soft and clean.

"Well, I didn't think you would. You were in pretty bad shape." He felt himself being pulled down to her and he sat and stretched out his legs. She looked at him suspiciously. He could tell it occurred to her that he might have taken advantage of her that night.

"Oh, don't worry. I just took you in and dropped you in bed. You may not have been awake, but your roommate was. Ask her."

"Are you a frat boy? You look like a frat boy." Gloria went back to her guitar, ready to dismiss him.

Ben looked down at his clothes, his sleeves rolled up on his yellow oxford, his wranglers snug around his hips and boots. She was teasing him. He rolled over on one elbow.

"No. Frat boys only spend time talking to bow-headed chicks. But I'm here talking to you and I don't even know your name. I'm Ben Metzger." He stuck out his hand to shake. She waited, looked him in the eye, and consented, grasping his hand, "I'm Gloria Lyons."

He held her bold gaze long enough to blush and then look down and pick up a fallen leaf.

"How long have you played the guitar?"

Gloria ran her index finger along the stock, "Since I was 14. My music teacher gave me this guitar."

"So how good are you?"

She shrugged her shoulders, "I can play the slow ones well. Folk songs, a few hymns."

"Let's hear one." He watched her lean away from him a little, ready to tell him no.

"Come on," he nudged her thigh, "After all you owe me."

Gloria groaned but began to play. She started singing, to herself it seemed, and he listened to her soft voice. He recognized the words: Puff the magic dragon lived by the sea. Any other time he might have made fun: it was a silly song and she wasn't the best he'd heard sing, but her soulful voice enchanted him. He thought she would be embarrassed when she finished but instead she turned her full face to him.

"My mother used to sing that song to me. It was one of the first ones I learned to play."

Ben couldn't speak. After a few seconds, Gloria continued, "Well, there you go. My gift to the western hero."

Her comeback made him laugh and he fell back on the grass rubbing his stomach. Gloria laughed too and they both waited until the last echoes of shared amusement glided over the pond. The sound of a car horn broke their comfortable solitude. Gloria picked up the conversation.

"So what do you do when you're not carrying scantily clad girls to bed?"

Still reclined, Ben said, "Right now I'm studying new farming methods, that's what the catalogue says, so I can go back to the same old farm. What about you?"

"I don't know yet. All I know for sure is that I'm not going back home."

"That bad, huh? Where's home? I'll try to stay away from there too."

"It's a little town. You've probably never heard of it. Buffalo Springs."

"Seriously? I know exactly where that is. I'm from Hatch."

He had expected her to be excited to find out that they were from towns only a few miles apart. Instead Gloria pulled up her knees and plunged her hands into the pocket in the front of her sweatshirt. Clouds had begun to linger, turning the shade from cool to cold. Ben sensed that she would soon want to leave, but he wasn't ready to see her walk away. He sat up ready for a plan of action.

"Hey, do you want to go grab something to eat? I'll treat and I'll take you to my favorite burger joint. You probably know it. It's across the street." He pointed to a row

businesses near campus: Quick Clean Laundromat, a Fellows Bookstore, and Rashid's Burgers

"What if I said I didn't eat meat? Would you still want to take me, cowboy?"

"Of course, it's not everyday I meet a girl like you. I need to know all your secrets." He went around her to pick up her guitar. He lifted it up gently and held it out to her, "Will you teach me to play?"

Gloria stood up and brushed off her bottom. Lifting her chin, she slipped a strand of hair behind her ear, and walked toward him, "I'll teach you all I know."

He put his hand in the small of her back and let her lead the way.

But it was Ben who had led her back to his hometown and not far from where she started. Once they had gotten to know each other better, he realized that he had known about her family, about her mother leaving. He had taken her back to the root of her problems, and although he had thought he could make it all better for her what he had really done was add to them. He had hired Josh Brehm as a favor to Josh's father. Had he known that helping Josh's family would jeopardize his own, he would never have allowed the boy to step foot on his farm.

Driving on that blacktop, the view of the grain silos in Hatch rising, Ben gathered his strength. Harvesting or sowing, he loved the cycle of every season. During sowing time the weather turned tolerable. The mornings surprised with a hint of dew and the evenings treated with a cool breeze from the north – the first whisper of fall, a distant breath from Canada, its full sound would not arrive until December. After a June harvest, farmers and fields rested, recovering from hard labor. Then a few weeks later, the yellow

stubble, stiff on the field, marked a contrast to the green summer weeds which surround it.

Ben had grown up watching his father sow wheat. As a boy he would stand behind the barbed wire fence and watch the sequence. One day the tractor would disc the field, turning under the brittle stubble. The smell of loam perfumed the air and rushed up his nose. Dust, blown about by the wind and the heavy penetration of the disc, speckled his face. The next day Ben would watch as his father scattered seed, methodically mapping a nautilus pattern, around the perimeter, towards the center, and around again.

#

As the '93 Chevy approached Hatch the entire town rose up from the surrounding wheat fields. The white tower of the Co-op stood like a fortress next to the railroad tracks. The fields met the small streets, from First Street on the east to Twelfth Street on the west. Main Street was an asphalt ribbon with an unnecessary stoplight to decorate its middle. The truer purpose for the light was to slow down out of town traffic traveling the state highway which intersected Main – otherwise people would have breezed right through. The only other landmarks in the small town's skyline were the steeples of the Catholic and Lutheran churches and the silver water tower, looking like the Tin Man with long spindly legs.

Victorian, craftsman, and ranch houses testified to the architectural progression of the town, much like many small towns in the plains, but they all stood well-kept with carefully tended yards and flower gardens. Sprinklers were still on this early in the morning to preserve the pink and red snapdragons and caladiums which grew in brick

lined beds. Hatch wasn't quaint, no tree-lined streets or fancy lamp posts downtown, but it was clean, showing its German immigrant roots.

Hatch sprung up when the Cheyenne-Arapaho territory opened by land-run. Now the booming wheat town of the end of the nineteenth century was struggling to remain productive at the beginning of the twenty-first. Early on Main Street was crowded with businesses from millenaries to photography studios. Now, with new structures being built on the edge of town, now most store fronts were abandoned. There were only a few businesses still operating in town. Cameron Studiner's Insurance Agency and Lou Ann's hair salon shared a two-story red brick building known as the CW Building. No one in town knew what the CW stood for, but the decorative C and W above the double door indicated that it must have been an important place early in the town's history. Some of the older people said it was a grocery store. Next to Cameron and Lou Ann was the *Hatch Daily Register* and next to that was video store with a hand painted sign that read "Videoz" above the front entrance. Ben and Thomas quickly passed them all and parked in front of the First Bank of Hatch.

With its wide gray cement trim encasing the windows and doors, it was clear that the bank had been standing since the town began. A cornerstone on the northeast side facing the two-lane street read 1896. It was the bank most people in Hatch used. Its imposing structure evoked opposing feelings of security and trepidation.

Ben opened the glass door for Thomas and a musty, damp smell of old wood and old money wafted in their faces.

"Hi, Benjamin," the teller, Mrs. Meyers, greeted Ben as he walked in. She had worked here at least since he was a little boy. He remembered coming into the bank with

his father and seeing her in the same place, same window, same guard dog smile. Her delight was keeping tabs on who withdrew what amount and when and why, not for bank records, but for the record she kept in her head of who was deserving and who was not.

“How are you, Mrs. Meyers?” Ben responded, tipping the worn bill of his cap.

“Can I help you with something?” asked her syrupy sweet voice with a bite. Ben could read her mind – Why was Ben Metzger here today? Ah, his loan is due – time for begging.

“Oh no, I’m here to see David. Is he free?” Ben glanced across the lobby to the vice president’s office. He could see the door open, David inside, sandy head down, writing.

“Well, he should be able to see you. I’ll check,” She sashayed her heavy body around the teller’s counter, flashing a smile to Ben and briefly resting a plump, liver-spotted hand on Thomas’s shoulder. She reminded Ben of an old Appaloosa mare he once had; she was a pain to work with, cantankerous to the other horses, and even though she was over 20 years old, he thought she’d never die.

Ben could see David sitting behind the oversized oak desk signing papers. David Schmidt was bank vice president now. Fifteen years ago he was just one of the elect moneyed kids in Ben’s class. He and Ben had gotten along some of the time in school, but mostly David had been too busy being a Schmidt with all the power that name held to notice Ben Metzger. The town was small and these German families had long histories with each other. At one time Ben’s family and David’s had owned a store together. But an uncle of Ben’s sold his half to the Schmidts to go to California, and this began the economic split between the two. The Metzgers continued to farm and break their backs over the land, while the Schmidts had invested in other ventures around town, including

the local bank. By the time this Metzger and this Schmidt came of age the tension was already established, Ben and David just had to play it out.

As Ben waited for Mrs. Meyers to announce his arrival, his worst memory of the early competition between the two flashed in his head. It was during a close basketball game in the semifinals of an area tournament. Being on a fifth year winning streak, the entire town showed up to support the team. The year before the team had gone to the quarterfinals at state, and everyone in town believed that this year would be the year they would win it all. Ben and David were seniors, and they had competed against each other most of the year for point totals and free throw percentage. But Ben, as talented as he was, could not overcome his nerves when it came down the crunch. David, on the other hand, remained always cool and calm, his pretty boy exterior wouldn't be cracked, his inherit leadership wouldn't falter. It was during this game with Brenfield when the score was tied 77 – 77 with 30 seconds left in the fourth quarter that Ben was fouled going for a basket and stood at the free throw line ready to take his foul shots.

“Two shots,” said the referee as he handed Ben the ball.

Ben looked at the players, in uniforms of green and white, lining the key and caught David's eye, giving him a look which dared him to miss. Ben bounced the ball twice, his free throw ritual, then readied himself for the shot. He could tell as soon as he released it that it would miss. The crowd groaned, then as he received the ball again the small town fans cheered encouragement. Catching David out of the corner of his eye, Ben saw him shake his head in shame. Ben turned his neck to shake it off and began the ritual again. Bounce, bounce, ready, shoot....miss, again. The ball was knocked out of

bounds in the scuffle underneath the goal, and as the other team was taking the ball out of bounds, David ran past Ben and said, “Don’t worry Metzger, I’ll take care of this game.”

And he did. After a turn over on the next possession down the court, David carried the ball all the way to the three-point line, shot a beautiful jumper, and won the game. After that Ben knew that David would always have some kind of power in him that Ben couldn’t have. Whether it was money or family name or just plain guts, David possessed it and Ben wished he could harness it.

But as Ben saw David smiling at him now from his vice president’s office, he knew that it would never change. David not only had his family’s history but his own history with Ben. David graduated from some university back East with an MBA while Ben dropped out after two years at state college. David worked in an office while Ben labored in the fields and wrestled with cattle. David golfed on Saturdays while Ben repaired farm machinery. David had control over Ben’s loan while Ben could only beg him for an extension. Ben didn’t agree with his father often, but he was right about the small town politics of Hatch. He was indoctrinated on the populist ideas of the haves and have nots, and as a member of the have nots, Ben must try his hardest to keep his dignity against any condescension on the part of the haves. They may have the power, but they should always be forced answer for it. But today Ben knew an appearance of dignity would be only for show.

“He’ll see you right now,” Mrs. Meyers acted as if she had just negotiated a United Nations treaty and walked back to her post by the door.

David came out to shake Ben’s hand, “Hello, Ben. How are you doing today?” He was very formal, too formal for this small town setting. “Goodness, Ben, is this your

boy? Thomas isn't it? He has grown a foot since I saw him last." David stuck his smooth manicured hand out to shake Thomas's. Thomas shook it back, uneasy.

"Really? I'm sure you must have seen him with me at the café a couple of weeks ago." That'll teach him to be so smug, Ben thought.

David met Ben's eyes steadily, "Sure, sure. Come on in and sit down. Thomas, why don't you have a seat right out here while your Daddy and I talk." He showed Thomas to an old wooden chair with a green leather seat and back which faced the main lobby and the large window looking out onto the street.

"So, Ben, what brings you in today?" David fiddled with some papers on his desk, arranging things into neat piles before looking up.

"Well, I'm here today to talk about my loan." Ben responded, rubbing his hands down the length of his thighs to his knees. David knew why he was here. Ben had made the appointment a week ago.

"Yes, let me get your file ready. You're here to make a payment right? On the interest?" David shuffled more papers then swung his large black chair around to his file cabinet, opened the drawer smoothly, and pulled a manila folder. He spun back around to the neatness of his desk, placed the file down, and began looking for the latest loan agreement.

"Uh, no. That's what I came here to talk to you about." Ben noticed he was still stroking his thighs and quit, he didn't want to look too much like a fool. "I'm not gonna be able to make that payment now, David. The harvest didn't bring in as much as expected and if I pay you I won't be able to feed my cattle – or keep up on my other payments."

“No? Well, now Ben, I thought we agreed back in January that when this crop of wheat was in you’d be in to pay the interest on your loan.”

David looked at Ben as if he were a pile of manure in his tidy office. Then he just shook his head, “Ben, I don’t know if I can give you another extension. You’re already about at the end of your rope here. I know things have been rough for you because of the drought and especially since you had to pay for that boy’s medical bills last fall, but things are rough for everybody. You’re not the only one whose harvest didn’t produce this year, and they’re not coming in here asking for an extension.”

Ben felt his shoulders stiffen and his chest swell. He raised his right foot and rested his ankle on his left knee, taking his time, trying to decide if he should call David a liar. There were plenty of other guys coming in asking for more time. Ben also knew most of those guys had more to bargain with. They owned more land and could recover by selling off sections and quarter sections without feeling like they were missing a leg or an arm. For them it was just clipping a fingernail. Also that was because they had invested in other things, stocks, mostly to cushion themselves in bad times. But Ben didn’t have any of those resources. All he had was the land and the cattle because his father had been too conservative to risk anything else. All he had was what his father gave him and he kicked himself now for not being able to avoid all this. Most guys like Ben had sold out already, liquidated what they could, settled for cash, and went to work at the meat packing plant in east of town.

“Look, David, I knew you wouldn’t be happy about this...”

“It’s not a matter of being happy, Ben. It’s a matter of protecting this bank and its investments.”

“Ok, if you want to protect your investment, you wouldn’t want to sell off that entire farm for half of what you’ve got in it, would you?”

David shook his head knowingly, “Oh, Ben, there are plenty of people that would buy that place for whatever price is on it.”

Ben studied David suspiciously, “With the house and the barns?”

“Yes.”

Ben paused, measuring his words, “Here’s what I thought I would suggest. I will sell more cattle this fall than normal in order to cover the interest payment. I’ll cut back my herd, but you’ll have to wait until October.”

David looked down at the top of his desk and smiled, “But Ben, what then? What about next year? What if harvest doesn’t go well then?” Then he looked up, smiling through his thin lips which pulled back over white, straight teeth, “Why don’t you just take care of this now? I know some people who would be interested in the half section you have that borders the north side of town, closest to the highway. They would be willing to pay the highest price. It’s a pretty valuable piece of land.”

“For tract houses, right?” Ben sat back in his chair now, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

“Well, yes. You know more and more people are moving out of the city, and they are looking for little towns just like ours to settle in. That piece of land is just perfect. People can live here, pay taxes here, but drive to the city on the highway.”

Shaking his head, Ben looked down at his worn out work boots, “I don’t know David. I know my dad is not interested in selling that land. He’s not interested in selling any land.”

“Yes, well, how would he feel about a farm foreclosure? You know, you can’t depend on your dad to keep making the decisions about your farm. He’s getting older, and since your mother’s death, well, most people think he really hasn’t gotten over it.”

Ben shot a look at David who was again looking straight at him, and Ben knew he was thinking he was going to take care of the whole thing. He wanted to hit him, reach over his desk and choke the teeth right out of him. This is what it felt like to wobble on the edge of emasculation, and if he lost his temper now, it would shatter any dignity remaining in him.

Ben stood up calmly, “David, what happens between my father and me or whatever decisions about the farm we make as a family are between us. I’m not looking out for your best interest, but for ours. Now, you may have the upper hand right now, and I may decide eventually to sell that land, but it will be because Metzgers decided it, not Schmidts. I came in early to talk about all this in good faith, but technically, I have until a week from Monday to give you my decision.”

“All right, I understand your position,” David held up his hands as if trying to calm Ben down, “But really, Ben, what’s going to change by next week?”

Ben turned to leave and then stopped at the office door, “A lot can happen in a week. Or maybe nothing, but it’s still my week.”

#

The café was a Texaco station with a grill behind the cash register, but it didn’t matter to the old men. It provided them a place to drink coffee and discuss politics and tell off-color jokes. Ben pulled up against the backside of the station, still hot and dazed

from his meeting with David. He knew he'd find Wilhem here and as much as he dreaded telling his father about the land and the loan he knew he must.

Wilhem Metzger had a less than savory reputation around Hatch and since Eva's death, he had become even more prickly. The patience of a rattlesnake and the business sense of a badger, he bullied his ideas on family, friend, and foe, and any conversation with him ended with the receiver either climbing on his shoulder in agreement or hunkering down for a fight. Only newcomers dared cross him. On the rare occasions when a new state trooper or real estate agent came through town, trying to talk up the locals, the café cleared out when Wil Metzger unleashed his rabid opinions and backed the fresh victim into a corner.

The bell on the glass door jangled as Ben and Thomas walked through. Ben inhaled the smell of eggs lingering over beef and grilled onions. He had lost track of time but realized it must be close to 10:30. Spotting Wade standing over the grill, he gave him a small wave. Wade like to keep ahead of the lunch crowd. The café was the only place to grab a bite in town and most days Wade was the only employee working the counter.

"Dad, can I have a hamburger?" Thomas said. Ben remembered that their breakfast had been interrupted.

"Sure, here. Get what you want. Your Grandpa and I are going outside to talk," Ben handed him a crumpled five and walked around the back to the old men. The heads of the most respected farm families in Hatch usually gathered around two wobbly square tables pushed together in the back of the station behind the motor oil aisle. All gray, all in caps, all in denim and plaid, only when they began to speak did they distinguish

themselves from one another. Each had his own story but put the strands all together and you had the history of Hatch convened every morning from 9:30 to 10:30.

“Well, look who’s here.”

“Hello, Frank,” Ben shook Frank Willis’s hand, “Where’s everyone else?” Frank owned the farm next to his and it had been since Ben took the grain in that he had seen him. Sitting next to Frank was Dexter Bachmeier, and on the opposite side of the table sat Wilhelm and Edward Grunwald.

“Aw, we ran ‘em all off already. Are you here to chew the fat? We’ve been discussing the elections. Seems your dad believes we’re one step away from corporate farming.”

“Damn right,” Wilhem tapped his foam cup on the table, “And next thing you know we’ll all be living in little white houses farming our own land for some guy sitting behind a desk in a silk tie and leather wing-tips.”

A chorus of nods followed. They all knew better than to disagree, not because most at the table were more hopeful than Wilhem, but because it would be a shame to stir up trouble on one of the few relaxed mornings before seeding.

Ben teased back, “I’m sure ya’ll be a real help when the boys in Washington call you up to the big leagues.”

Thomas came over, carrying his hamburger and fries. Dexter pulled up a chair, “Have a seat, Tommy. I think I’m getting hungry myself.” Thomas grinned and took a seat.

“Hey, Dad, could I talk to you a minute?” Ben motioned his thumb towards the door.

“Hell, why not. These old farts haven’t said anything interesting in years.”

Ben held the door open for Wilhelm, they walked to the truck and settled their elbows on either side of the bed.

“What is it?”

“I went to see David this morning.” Ben began to rub the back of his neck.

“Yeah, get on with it. Is there a problem?”

“Things had been going pretty good since you let me start making more decisions on the farm. We’ve, well, I’ve hit a bad patch.”

“Lots of folks have. What makes us so different?”

Ben couldn’t believe he needed to explain all this to him. Wilhelm knew about Josh’s accident. He had had to call Wilhelm to help him get Josh to the hospital. His behavior today only added to the list of irrational actions Wilhelm had taken lately. As much as Ben hated to admit it, maybe David had been right. But Ben could only deal with what was immediate and the best he could do now was try to reason with his father.

“I can’t make the payment so he wants be to sell part of the section by the highway.”

Wilhelm kicked the side panel, leaving a dent twice the size of his boot, “The hell he does! He wants to develop that land. Did he tell you that? He’s got plans to build cracker-box houses all along that highway and roll up those fat wads of money and stick in his bank. He’s been waiting on one of us to get hard up enough to let go and now you’re the stupid son of a bitch who’s gonna give him what he wants!”

Ben didn't have time to be shocked by his father's reaction. The decision had to be made quickly. Ben moved around the truck and closer to Wilhelm in an attempt to calm him down.

"Listen, when I took over the farm all we had to show for generations of hard work was an old combine and tractor put together with bailing wire. I repaneled all those barns and built miles of new fences. God knows, you never wanted to spend the money on new equipment. Make do – you'd say. But making do without buying new land makes nothing. So here we are 15 years later and all I've been able to do is maintain. Then Paul's boy got hurt last year because you talked me out of buying a new combine. What was cheaper dad? Do you know how much it costs to pay for a hospital bed while a kid's recovering from a bloody gash in his head? So don't tell me not to sell because it will hurt your pride. Worrying about pride is a luxury to me right now."

Ben turned his back on his father and moved toward the store.

"Let me tell you something. I still own part of that land and I'll kick your ass off or tie you up in court. Don't play poker with me, boy. I'll always have the upper hand."

"You do what you've got to do, Daddy. I'm just trying to keep up."

#

In the truck again, they rode home on the same road on which they had come and in the same brooding silence. Ben wondered what he would tell Gloria. She would depend on him to make a plan, decide on a process for solving a situation in which he felt buried alive. How does a man dig himself out of his own grave? He felt responsible for it all and he felt it must be his responsibility to make it right. Talking just to talk

wouldn't get him any closer to a solution. Besides, enough words had been spoken today. He was too tired to talk anymore.

Chapter 4

Community Pool

Mama Jodi was watering her roses when Gloria drove up with the kids. She had driven the twelve miles out to Buffalo Springs to pick up Michaela. Worried about her sister Stacy, Gloria finally called her grandmother last night and she wasn't surprised to find that Stacy and Michaela had been staying at the trailer since Stacy's power had been cut off.

The kids jumped out of the car and scattered. Cassie went inside to get Michaela, Chad ran over to the old tire swing which hung from a Mimosa tree branch, and even Thomas took off in a run down to the ravine. They loved it here, and despite all her bad memories about Starla there were just as many good ones because of Mama Jodi. It was home to her.

“Ya’ll not even gonna give me a hug?” Mama Jodi jerked the hose around, attempting to spray the kids as they ran by her. Chad squealed and tumbled in the grass. “Can’t you even say ‘Hi’?”

Cassie had already disappeared behind the front door but Chad ran back, gave Mama Jodi a hug around one of her large thighs, and said, “Spray me again!”

“All right, take off.” Mama Jodi pointed the sprayer at his back, a buckshot of water sprinkling his entire backside.

“I’ll be back in a minute, Mama J,” Thomas shouted.

“Where’s he going?” Gloria said as she kissed her grandmother on the cheek.

“Ah, he’s headed down the creek. All sorts of things down there.” Mama Jodi was still in her night dress. Gloria admired her grandmother’s lack of concern for what others thought. Although Mama Jodi had practically raised her and Stacy, Gloria still felt like she needed to look out for her.

“You want me to spray you too?” Mama Jodi teased, soaking Gloria’s toes. She was wearing her flip flops, dressed for the pool.

“Only if you want to wrestle.”

Mama Jodi chuckled, “Only if you were a man.” She dragged the hose toward the trailer and then began looping it on a metal hook. The charm of Mama Jodi’s house did not spring from the rusted metal of the trailer but from the earth around it. She kept purple irises and tiger lilies around the edges to cover up the metal skirting, and there was always a chair available to watch the birds land in the three or four bird feeders staked in the yard.

“Is Michaela ready? I thought I’d take the kids to the pool.” Gloria headed for the front door.

“I thought you hated that place?” Mama Jodi grunted as she made her way down into a chair on her little brick patio to the left of the door.

“Yeah, but it’s too hot to do anything else,” Gloria opened the door and stuck her head inside, “Girls, let’s go!”

Mama Jodi lifted up the collar of her nightdress and wiped her chin with it, “So what happened at the bank? With Ben?”

“David wants him to sell.” Gloria made her way into the chair next to Mama Jodi’s.

“What does Ben want?”

“Mama J, you know what Ben wants – whatever his Daddy wants and Wilhelm would never sell.”

“That family’s had that farm a long time. I guess it’s right to hold on to it.”

“I guess. But when something isn’t working, isn’t it time to move on? Try something better?”

“That’s what you want? To move on?”

“I don’t know. I would hold on if I knew it would be worth it.” Just then the girls came bounding out of the trailer, “I have to worry about these kids, too.”

#

With its tropical plants and shady lobby the aquatic center offered an oasis from the draining heat of summer, but to Gloria it felt like an enormous bell jar. The air in the indoor pool suffocated her, covering nose and mouth like a snorkel mask too tight.

Trying to get comfortable in the Adirondack chair beside the pool, she waved half-heartedly as Cassie and Michaela jogged across the concrete beach, leaving a caterpillar shaped ripple behind them. They bounced over an orange polyester clown fish, the lost top of a foam noodle, which had washed up on the beach. Bringing the kids here, left her with a headache for the rest of the day. They were the same height, but with Cassie's blonde hair and fair skin and Mikey's chocolate hair and olive complexion, they looked like salt and pepper shakers. The shrill laughter of children, the grating *sprong* of the diving board, and the crackle splash of water amplified through her ears like a bad radio connection. Gloria wondered why the lifeguards hadn't opened the bay doors so some of the humid air and hollow echoes could escape the building. Nausea drowned her – it was all too synthetic: the recycled air, the mechanical waves, the florescent lights.

The center had been built two years ago when Hatch received a federal grant as part of a small town preservation and beautification program. Sketches of the elevation had been printed in color on the front page of the *Hatch Daily Register* and the plan was to build it on the edge of town. The architect created a brick façade which mirrored the few original Victorian buildings downtown, but the large windows and low roof indicated its a modern design. During the groundbreaking, small crowds had gathered around the plastic mesh construction fence to watch. Gloria brought the kids to see the backhoe crack through the hard clay. She smiled as she thought, it's so easy to break through when you have the right equipment. Used by the entire town, no gym memberships required, the pool brought everyone together for swimming lessons, water aerobics classes, birthday parties, and general recreation on a late June day.

Gloria came to the pool for the kids. Other mothers used pool time to socialize, catch up on gossip, plan Bunko parties, or family barbeques. But after earlier experiences with these women, Gloria shied away from the Hatch social set. After she and Ben had married, Gloria attempted to break into the circle of young married women through church activities. As a German Catholic community, generations of Metzgers walked through the same arched doors of St. Agnes Church. Ben's great-grandfather helped brick the structure, and Ben's grandparents and parents, as well as most all his aunts, uncles, and cousins were married in this church. Every Sunday the sixth pew to the left of the altar was reserved for the family of Wilhelm Metzger, just as most pews were invisibly assigned to other families. A stranger visiting the church and sitting down anywhere would automatically displace an entire household.

Gloria didn't grow up Catholic. Her decision to convert stemmed from her ambivalence toward religion and Ben's heritage of Catholicism. She didn't grow up with these girls, but Ben had told her about them. He had learned as early as the eighth grade to classify them as snotty girls who would never consider going to get a coke much less strike up a genuine conversation in the lunchroom or at a basketball game. Trying to make friends with them was a waste of time according to him. But Gloria volunteered to be a part of the Altar Society, a group that provided dishes for funeral dinners, hoping to meet a girlfriend who would help her feel less of a stranger. The day Gloria walked into the St. Agnes community room with her Mexican casserole; she had been determined to prove Ben wrong.

Light pine paneling trimmed the walls all the way up to the sharp angled ceiling. Large round tables and metal fold out chairs filled the space, but she could see broad

blue, red, and black lines marked on the floor where a basketball or volleyball court could emerge when the tables were put away. The church school also used this room for a cafeteria and a gym during the day. Gloria wiggled her head and shoulders as a chill ran through her body, a squirrel running over her grave, she thought – the way Mama Jodi would say it.

Smelling the faint burning of dust, she knew someone must have recently turned on the heater. It was December and the children were still on Christmas vacation. Levered windows, the transoms decorated with blocks of stain glass, filtered in a milky light. Gloria spotted a rectangular table covered in a mauve tablecloth against a far wall. Her white pumps echoed across the cavernous room as she walked to set down her dish among the others: potato salad, corn, and ham. She decided to wear one of her Sunday dresses, in case she was asked to help serve the family. Hearing voices, she tiptoed toward a doorway to her right. Gloria moved just inside the door to the edge of a kitchen counter. It was a time after overblown Catholic weddings but before frilly pastel baby showers, and plans for girls' nights out, Saturday garage sale excursions, and double or triple dates to the movies filled the chatter in the back kitchen. A group of four women in their twenties turned, and one, Michelle Schmidt, said, "Hi, who are you?"

"I brought in my dish. I'm Gloria Metzer, Ben's wife." Gloria started to move toward the group, but then Michelle waved her hand as if to shoo her away.

"Oh well, just set it out on the table. When we're done here, we'll wash it up and leave it for you to pick up later." Michelle turned back to the group. Together they looked like models posing for one of those group shots in a *Seventeen* magazine: the prep school girls in fresh pressed skirts and button up shirts, the stiff pointed collars neatly

turned out from under the v-neck sweaters. Polished and wrinkle free, they emitted an aura of privilege that only rural girls know, caught up in their own microcosm of mid-American landed gentry.

Gloria looked beyond the group and noticed two silver-headed women scurrying around the sink. One, wearing green rubber gloves, cleaned out the coffee urn and another, her front covered in a bleached white apron, gathered paper napkins in a square basket. Both were too busy to notice Gloria standing near the door. Feeling goose bumps emerge again, she left the kitchen and walked out of the community building, hugging her arms to her chest.

And now she did her best to smile when she saw those popular girls, who now had become the popular moms, for her kid's sake. She hoped they would forget who she was and welcome her children with a fresh start. A part of that same group, Michelle Schmidt, Jennifer Bruner, Heather Thiems, sat in the shallowest part of the concrete beach each dipping the latest baby into the chlorinated waves.

Gloria recalled how Jennifer had tried to befriend her after the encounter at the church. A few times they had gone shopping together, trying to find common ground while discussing perfume at the cosmetics counter. Eventually, Jennifer wanted Michelle and Heather to join them. Gloria tried to be a part of the group, but she never did learn the language of girl talk. Jennifer quit calling. Their circle didn't really embrace her, so coming the pool where most all young mothers gathered on Saturdays in summer was a gauntlet of taut red-lipped smiles and gesticulating manicured fingernails that Gloria dreaded.

Tomboyish and athletic, her looks never attracted much attention. She had always thought she was above worrying about fashion trends and salon treatments. Gloria had never paid attention to her body when she was younger. It was just the vehicle that moved her around.

Clothes, hair, make-up were all secondary to the words people used. Lately, though she had begun to think that being young and fresh-faced had afforded her such a cavalier opinion in her teens and early twenties. Jeans and sweatshirts on a twenty-one year old: cute and carefree. The same outfit on a woman in her thirties: frumpy and farcical.

Today, for instance, she knew coming to the pool in a pair of Thomas's mesh gym shorts and an oversized tank top would classify her as a sloppy mom compared to the bright-colored bikinis and matching sarongs of the others. But Gloria opted for comfort, not because she wouldn't want a sassy pool ensemble, but because she knew that having one wouldn't change the feeling that her appearance didn't matter to anyone but her. She looked down at her pocked thighs. Were they like this when she was seventeen? She was the same size now, so why the lunar surface at thirty-five? She knew in her head that after three children and ten years her body should show signs of change, but with each bulge and pain, she longed for the time when thinking about her body didn't take so much energy.

She looked across the pool at the grated clock. They had only been here forty-five minutes.

"Mama, look!" Chad leaned over the retaining wall of the kiddie pool smashing his life vest up around his neck. It made him look like a turtle.

"I'm looking,"

She watched as he trudged his way up the ladder, paddled to the small yellow slide, and careened down on his belly. He skimmed the surface of the pool and when he settled he looked up in time to notice his Aunt Stacy enter through the double glass door.

“Aunt Stacy, come play with me!” Chad sang. He scuttled up the ladder again and greeted Gloria’s sister with a wet hug. Stacy’s thin arms splayed around Chad’s slick life vest.

By this time Michaela and Cassie had joined Stacy and she began moving the kids to where Gloria sat. Thomas waved from the line at the high dive but didn’t make an effort to join them. She didn’t expect Stacy to show up here and she was anxious about what she should do with her now that she had arrived. Gloria noticed the heads of the other women turn to follow Stacy and then they leaned to speak into each other’s ears. She imagined them whispering, “Look who’s here. Shouldn’t she be in jail by now?”

Even though Gloria and Ben had wished she hadn’t, Stacy insisted on finding a rent house in Hatch and had moved in. Stacy was known in Hatch before she moved there, however. Buffalo Springs was only a few miles away, and bad reputations travel fast in sparsely populated counties. Gossip holds relationships together, and the fact that Stacy was Gloria’s sister made her even more of an outsider. Gloria had to acknowledge that if she saw Stacy not as a sister but the way those women saw her, she would be shocked by Stacy’s appearance too.

Stacy’s hair and skin told the story first. Blonde hair, dry brittle wisps and heavier dirty strands, edged out around the bottom of an old Hatch baseball cap. The oily bill made Gloria think that Stacy might have collected it from a dumpster somewhere. Stacy’s face haunted anyone who saw her: cheeks so sunken in they looked bruised, dark

circles under her tired wild eyes, and coral colored acne scars underneath fresh breakouts. Add to this her sharp-boned frame, hunching over more every year, the long sleeved shirts – even in summer, and her yellowed teeth – anyone could see that Stacy was abusing something.

“What are you doing here?” Gloria tried not to sound too confrontational. The last thing she needed was a scene in front of everyone, especially the kids.

“Mama J told me you’d be here with the kids. I have a right to know where Mikey is don’t I?”

“But where have you been? You left Michaela at the trailer.”

“Oh yeah? I went to Trevor’s and lost track of time.” Michaela’s father, Trevor Bell, lived on the Cheyenne-Arapaho lands with his mother and sisters. His uncle, a member of the tribal administration, tried to take Michaela away from Stacy after her first arrest. But Stacy went to rehab, said she had cleaned herself up, and with the support of Gloria, who cared for her while Stacy was away, Stacy kept custody of her daughter.

“Come on, Mikey. Let’s swim now.” Chad hopped on his toes and patted Michaela’s chest.

Gloria watched the kids jump in the pool again. Michaela wore one of Cassie’s old swimsuits, the pink one with green piping and yellow dots that she had bought for their first real vacation in San Antonio. It was the year Ben taught Cassie to swim in the hotel pool and the summer she and Ben had conceived Chad.

She studied Stacy and recognized the signs that she’d been using again. Stacy pulled the cuffs of her long-sleeves down to her palms. She wore a stained white t-shirt under a hooded jacket and denim cut-offs, frayed, too short, and thin around the crotch.

She began to tap her foot quickly and her plastic flip-flop made a thick slapping sound on the wet cement. She was in no shape to be around Michaela. Gloria would gladly kept Michaela overnight or longer if needed.

“I guess I’ll sit down,” Stacy scooted around another chair, which created a noise as loud as a foghorn, the echo of wood scraping cement refracted by water. Her dramatics caused the moms to turn their heads again and sensing trouble ahead, they hoisted their babies to their hips and made their way out of the pool. Since Gloria had settled in front of the concrete beach, the women had to walk past them.

“How ya’ll doing? Haven’t seen you ladies in a while,” Stacy said acknowledging them as she finished placing her chair. The mothers stared her down and silently walked to their beach chairs. The whispers started after they settled down and began to dry off.

Gloria scolded her, “That’s great Stacy. You know, sometimes I have to deal with those women.”

“Hell, I don’t care anything about those bitches. You shouldn’t either. They’re all inbreds and besides, Glory, they’ll never like you. They just play nice because you don’t threaten them. Behind your back they hate your ass as much as they hate mine.”

“Why did you go to Concho?”

“We took Michaela out there the other day to see Nani and I had to go back.”

Gloria kept her eyes steady on Stacy, trying to find the truth behind her answer.

“I thought you told me that if he wanted to see Mikey, he’d have to come to your house. You don’t have gas money to go all the way out there, anyway.”

“Teresa took me out there in her car first. She needed cigarettes so we went. When we got to the Smoke Shop, Michaela started asking if she could go see her Granny Nani and that old horse. When I told her we didn’t have time, she started that silent cry in the backseat, fat tears running out of those big brown eyes. Every time she does that it reminds me of that damn Indian in those old commercials. Making me feel guilty. You know I can’t stand to see her cry.”

Gloria thought about what that trip must have been like. Teresa was Stacy old pot buddy. She pictured them in Teresa faded silver cutlass, windows rolled down, driving too fast, music too loud, Michaela’s long dark hair tangled around her face while she covered her ears in the backseat. It was Teresa who had first introduced Stacy to Trevor.

“When did you start seeing Teresa again?” Gloria’s voice turned monotone, a voice reserved for distracted listening or protection from bad news. If Stacy had been with Teresa, she also been with Kendall and if she had been with Kendall she’d been using.

“Oh you know, she just called this morning and we went. Just to get out of the house. By the way, I got a favor to ask you. They turned my electricity off again and I wondered if you could help me get it back on.” Stacy grabbed Gloria’s hand in both of hers and kissed Gloria’s fingers. “Push some buttons on your old computer at the rural electric?”

Gloria looked at her sister’s dirty fingernails, the skin around them bitten and bloody. She took in her chemical smell, mayonnaise and rotten eggs, her shifting hollow eyes, no soul behind them only a parasitic sibling. Pulling her hand back from her sister’s, Gloria stood up and started packing little shoes into the pool bag. Too sad to be

angry, she shook her head in disbelief. Just when she felt overjoyed at Stacy's resurrection, Stacy died again.

"What are you doing?" Stacy jumped up from the chair and grabbed the bottom of the bag.

Gloria spotted Cassie sitting on the edge of the pool, watching divers go off the high board. "Cassie! Let's go!" Gloria jerked the bag from Stacy's grip.

Cassie came over and Gloria handed her a towel. "Mama, can we get ice cream?"

"Sure, go tell Chad and Mikey and we'll go. Take them these towels and I'll meet you by the door."

Gloria walked away from her sister to the pool entrance. Stacy followed tugging at Gloria's shirt.

"Wait, I just got here. You can't leave yet!" Her voice roared through the atrium and the all the action in community pool came to a halt. A teenage lifeguard moved toward her. She became more hysterical, pointing back to one of the mothers, "What are you looking at, whore!"

Gloria grabbed Stacy by the arm and pointed to the lifeguard that she was already on her way out.

"I'll take Mikey home with me. She can spend the night or the rest of the weekend. Stacy let's go outside, okay?"

"Yeah, I'll go outside. Who wants to come to this fucking place anyway?" Stacy slammed her hands against the metal bar on the door swooping it open. She walked through the lobby and through the outside door to the bench beside the front entrance and sat down.

Gloria bought three ice-cream bars from the vending machines, gave the kids their sandals, and walked them outside to the playground beside the center.

“Stay here and eat your ice-cream. When you’re done, you can play for a little while.” Gloria met Stacy at the bench where she was biting her little finger and swinging her leg widely from side to side. She took a deep breath – the hot air of summer.

“Stacy, I knew when I hadn’t heard from you that something was wrong. You’re back with those people again.” Gloria lowered her voice, “You’re using again, aren’t you?”

“Look Gloria all I wanted was some help with my electricity. It’s too hot for Mikey even at night.”

“But this isn’t the first time. I can’t do what I did last time or I’ll lose my job. How much is your bill? I’ll just pay it.”

“I don’t know, two hundred, three hundred dollars.”

“Stacy! How long has it been since you paid? You lost your job didn’t you? What’ve you been doing with your checks? Stacy?” Gloria called after her as Stacy got up and walked toward the children sitting under the pavilion.

She turned around and walked backwards, “Forget it Glory, it’s no sweat. I’m easy, breezy, beautiful!”

“What?” Gloria noticed that she bounced as she walked. Her mood changed like the flip of a coin. It would have surprised Gloria except that Stacy’s erratic behavior was what she expected by now. Gloria met her just as she was kissing Michaela on the head. “Mama’s got to take care of something, baby. You stay with Aunt Gloria and I’ll be back to getcha later.”

“When will you be back?” Michaela glanced up at her mother and then licked the vanilla drip running down her wrist.

“Don’t worry, in a couple of days.” Stacy looked at Gloria and pushed away a strand of hair that had blown into her eyes. She kissed her sister on her cheek. “Don’t look for me, okay?”

Gloria walked with her to the street. She knew Stacy would go to the Texaco station and make some phone calls. Someone, maybe Trevor would come pick her up and after that Gloria didn’t want to know.

“Hey, I’ll pay your electric bill. I’ll get them to let me pay it off a little each month. They can take it out of my check.”

“Are you kidding me? Remember, I didn’t ask you for money. You have enough troubles. I know that’s why you took that job in the first place. Naw, I’ve got other options.”

“It doesn’t have to be this way.” Gloria pleaded with her sister, thinking if she kept urging her back, Stacy could slough off her sallow hide and emerge as the charming belle.

“Oh sure it does. It’s either this or ...boom.” Stacy made fingers into a gun and pointed it next to her temple. Walking away she continued, “Or this...” she gestured a rope twisting her neck. “Or this...” knives slashing her wrist.

Living with an addict had made Gloria numb to morbid humor. It had been so long with Stacy that Gloria knew she couldn’t help her unless she helped herself. The best way to help her sister was to help Michaela.

She went back to the pavilion, picked up the wooden sticks left by the kids, and sat down to watch them play. Michaela was quiet like Stacy was. But although she had spent most of her time alone in the Mimosa tree, Stacy also nurtured Gloria and Mama Jodi in her quiet way. At night in the small bedroom the sisters shared, Gloria went to sleep as Stacy's dimpled hand rubbed her arm. As the older sister, Gloria tried to veil her frustrations with their mother or her anticipation about leaving the boredom of Buffalo Springs, but Stacy always seemed to know when Gloria needed comfort. Thinking back, Gloria wondered if the strain of her voice or the rush in her walk gave her away. As a girl Stacy's generosity of spirit had failed to catch her attention. Looking back, Gloria envisioned that same little girl as tragic, and it made her think that if she hadn't been in such a hurry to leave, she might have saved Stacy.

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After the kids were tucked in, Gloria knew it would be time to face Ben again. Through dinner they allowed the chatter of children to disguise their disconnect. They were a photograph of a happy family, two-dimensional characters.

Gloria finished her shower, wrapped her robe around her, and began cleaning the paper mess in the bedroom. The mess had been on the floor since yesterday morning. She picked up a stack of envelopes held together with a rubber band and sat down at the foot of the bed. These were the hospital bill's which had begun their dissolution. Every month when one arrived, Gloria had laid it out on the counter for Ben to see when he walked in for dinner. She watched Ben turn quiet and then retreat to the bedroom desk. She would find him sitting with his back to the door, head in his hand, the light of the small desk lamp casting a shadow over the top of his face.

Last August, when Ben was preparing to sow the fields, he had hired Paul Brehm's son Joshua to help him. At just sixteen, Josh was eager – his father hired out help and Josh's older brothers took up the slack, so Josh did what he was told, no questions, no hesitation. Ben said he liked the way Josh looked him in the eye, said "Yes, sir," and quickly headed off to do the work assigned. Ben had felt confident in Josh, but later he knew he had underestimated his excitement and Ben's need for help. He told Gloria that it had happened so fast. Josh mounted the auger. Ben turned to start the tractor. Josh had slipped on the step and was pulled in.

Ben drove the bloody boy to the hospital in Ft. Reno but he was too mangled for the small town hospital to help. They took him by ambulance to a hospital in Oklahoma City. Josh's skull was crushed on his left side and his arm had to be amputated. He would live, but he might have been better off dead. He wouldn't work or go to school again.

Ben had agreed to pay his medical bills because it was the right thing to do. For most people around Hatch, insurance was a luxury. Neither Ben nor Paul had enough to cover the price of modern medicine's commitment to repairing shredded bone and flesh.

Josh had saved Ben when he needed it most. Ben's brother Danny chose the rodeo not the farm. Wilhelm had become more bitter and withdrawn since Eva's death. Thomas was only old enough to do small jobs. Ben wanted Josh to help pull the farm back in the black, but he had neglected to see Josh for what he was – a kid too anxious to please.

It was her idea to take the job to help with expenses. But when evening dinners began to be fast food take out or cold sandwiches, Ben asked her to quit. Gloria knew it

was wishful talk: her job provided insurance and steady money. Ben's vision of their life together became more out of focus each day and although Gloria felt sorry for him she realized that her own vision hadn't even begun to take shape.

Gloria lived her life like most women in the community: marry a hard working man, raise respectable children, bring home-made casseroles to community dinners. Women who didn't follow this prescription were sinister or defective. And Gloria knew enough to know that there were women who go and women who stay. She had made a vow not to be like her mother. She had made a commitment to stay.

Ben came to her while she sat on the end of the bed. He knelt in front of her and rubbed his large callused hands on her knees. Lowering his head, he said, "Gloria, I'm sorry. Please know I'm sorry." He put his head in her lap and Gloria put down the bills and began rubbing his head like she would Thomas or Chad.

Although she didn't speak, Ben, comforted by her touch, moved in toward her. He began kissing her skin above her breast and he undid the front of her robe. He stood up to remove his jeans and shirt and only then did he look her in the eye, asking permission for what he was about to do. She loved him too much to deny him but not enough to be aroused by him. She nodded her head and turned her eyes away as Ben gently pushed her back on the bed.

Chapter 5

Saints and Secrets

Sunday morning Mass and Thomas sat next to his father knowing that to speak broke some sort of rule established long ago, maybe even before his great grandfather sat in this same pew. Everyone faced the altar and waited stoically during the fifteen or ten minutes before the bell rang which would signal the beginning of service.

To Thomas the church smelled old, like stale fabrics and chalky medicine. Not like Mama Jodi but like Grandpa Wilhelm, a smell that punctured his nostrils and sped right down to his stomach, making him slightly sick. The church probably had not changed ever, Thomas decided, with its red carpet running down the aisles and pushing up against creaking pews. Wood paneling and stark white paint took the eye to the ceiling which curved like the insides of barrels. Spatters of gold popped out around candles on the altar which, according to Grandpa, came from Germany. A red candle

enclosed in glass hung above the front rail. The spindles around it bloomed gold branches. Possibly it was supposed to be beautiful, but it reminded him of a prickly pear cactus and he wouldn't want to touch it. Statues of angels watched from everywhere. He'd been in other Catholic churches. Once for a Metzger family reunion they went to church in Ft. Reno. At first that Church seemed different – plain with its simple glass mosaic tile and long pews in wide rows. It was newer, modern. But once you looked passed the open aisles, it contained the same knowing faces, Mary, sometimes Joseph, and always Jesus on the cross.

Today the sun infused the most brilliant colors from the windows of stained glass. There were eighteen in all. He had counted them at least three times that he could remember. Most were saints, their names listed in curly letters below each image, but the German names he couldn't read. One simply had the letters DEI underneath and an image of a woman in a cloak the color of a stormy sky. She wore a pink veil and a round yellow circle rested behind her head. Thomas knew she was Mary because she always wore blue. However, most all of the people in the windows wore cloaks of deep blues, greens, reds, and purples, and their skin radiated a creamy butter color.

Thomas felt the jumbling of his family sitting around him and shuffled his feet to scoot back into his seat. They barely fit in the short pew. It was one along the wall under the windows and the first six Stations of the Cross.

His mother sat on one end and his dad on the other, smooshing the kids in between. Gloria lifted Chad onto her lap to retie his shoe. Cassie and Michaela shared a book about princesses. Chad began to mumble and hum, a song to the tune of his favorite TV show. Thomas was struck by Chad's inattention, and he thought about how

he must have been at three, how he didn't realize that Church had an order and routine. How his mom had to push his bottom off the pew when they knelt during the Eucharist. Now he could go through the service without being told when to kneel and when to stand, a rhythm created after years of cursory and consistent training.

Thomas couldn't help but feel like it was supposed to mean more to him.

Elizabeth Jenkins, a girl in his class, had given him a booklet on the last day of school. It looked like a black and white comic book, and it told the story of a man who went to Hell because he had not been saved. The pictures were simple, drawn with bold black lines, but they were still pretty scary. On page 8 it showed people in Hell with their skin melting off. When Elizabeth had handed it to Thomas, she asked him if he had been saved. Thomas didn't know what that meant so he was honest and said, "I don't know."

Elizabeth had said, "Well, you better find out. I'm praying for you." And she walked off. He knew she went to the Assembly of God church on the outskirts of town, but he had not really thought about what that meant until she gave him the booklet.

He kept it in a drawer in his bedside table. It turns out that in the end, the man was having a nightmare. God had given him a vision of what his life after death would be if he did not ask for forgiveness. The man asks God to save him and Thomas guessed God heard him because on the last page there is a picture with the man looking happy. Three angels hover at the top of the page and beams of light point down on the man's face.

Thomas glanced up at Ben who sat next to him and against the wall, not moving his eyes from some fixed point at the front of the row. Thomas tried to find what held his father's attention and he noticed the back of Grandpa Wilhem's gray head. He used to sit

in the same pew or the one just in front, but this Sunday he had moved closer toward the altar and away from them. Friday, after the argument outside the café, Thomas knew that his dad and grandfather would not talk for a few days. They fought like that sometimes. But seeing Grandpa Wilhelm move away from them to sit up front surprised him. Thomas gently jostled Ben with his elbow and when Ben looked down, Thomas gave him a closed mouth grin, one that says, How's it going? But Ben knitted his eyebrows together and resumed his watch on the altar. Thomas felt scolded and then mad at himself for even trying.

Every Sunday they sat in the pew under the window of St. Christopher. He had heard of him in the religion classes he took before his first communion, and he guessed he was the same saint that was on the medal his dad kept on a visor in his truck. St. Christopher wore a purple outfit, like a sack cinched at the waist, and a child rested on his shoulder. In the scene it looked like he had just carried the child across a creek. The water glowed calm and blue. The kid carried some sort of ball in his hand, and he too had a round yellow circle behind his head. St. Christopher smiled up at the kid, who looked really small next to St. Christopher's big arm. He looked proud and confident like this is what he was born to do – carry little children across dangerous water. His blonde hair was short and wavy and well-defined muscles protruded from his arms, chest, and legs. One foot was still underwater and the other was firmly planted on a gray rock. The whole depiction reminded Thomas of a pirate with a parrot on his shoulder. He kind of laughed when thought of St. Christopher as a pirate. Seeing the image every Sunday accomplished its goal, Thomas guessed. St. Christopher was always there, doing his job.

Watching the light shift through the colors sometimes drew Thomas's attention to other details, like the mountains in the background or the way St. Christopher's blue eyes twinkled. He never grew tired of it. Most Sundays, after standing for the Gospel and pronouncing Praise be the Lord Jesus Christ, he sat back down with his eyes on the window. He knew he was supposed to concentrate on Father Byrd's message, and he was listening – sometimes it was like the words were coming from St. Christopher's mouth as if he were talking directly to him.

Maybe he would explain one day why he carried people. It seemed to Thomas that he was not supposed to know the reasons why things happened in his Church unless his parents or Father Byrd or his religious education teacher Mrs. Keller were ready to tell him. When he was preparing for first communion, he had taken classes and they talked about Jesus. Thomas felt he understood about the bread and the wine pretty well and any baby knew about Jesus dying on the cross. Although he still couldn't see why a father would let his son suffer, especially in front of other people. But that was the story and it happened so long ago he didn't think it would change now.

In second grade he had learned about the Egyptians. They believed in many gods and buried everyday objects with them so that they could use them in the after-life, even cats. In fourth grade he had learned about Native Americans. Each tribe had different gods but they all believed that animals and plants had spirits. Last year, Mr. Groom had told his class that in England there had been a group of people called the Celts. They followed a leader who was known as a Druid and they worshiped trees. Thomas had checked out books from his school library to learn as much about them as he could and he had even researched them on the Internet when his dad would let him use the

computer. All of these religions seemed much more interesting than his own. Every time he looked up information about Catholicism, he found himself more confused. Some sites only described prayers, some wanted him to give money, and some only had negative things to say about how the Church ignored the bad things priests did.

Making up his own reasons why things happened offered some relief to his insistent questions. Every thing seemed to signal something else. Thomas decided that at one time people must not have been able to talk to one another – maybe they didn't speak the same language – so the bells helped them remember when to stand, when to sing, when to sit, and when to kneel. And on the occasions when Father used the ball of smoke that smelled like aftershave, that was to get rid of all the bad smells that had built up over the year. Yet that trick hadn't seemed to work all that well. Whatever the reasons for things, he couldn't say and he had learned not to ask. Based on how his dad reacted the other day in his truck, Thomas guessed he was too caught up to care. He wondered if Ben even knew.

Thomas let out a slow sigh and thought about how little anyone said anything to him anymore. His dad stayed gone most of the day now and his mom was busy working plus she was worried about Aunt Stacy. This thought immediately stirred up bad feelings. It was because of her that Michaela lived with them again. He stared sideways at Michaela. She didn't look like any of them. Black hair. Muddy skin. She didn't have anywhere to sleep – their house was too small for one more kid. And his mom treated her special, making sure Cassie shared her toys and clothes, and the last of whatever treat was in the pantry. There were times when Gloria seemed to forget Thomas was even

around, except when he had to take care of Chad or make Chad leave the girls alone.

This morning, he even had to help get breakfast for Chad.

He gritted his teeth a little. Last night, she yelled at him for kicking Michaela out of his room. Why should she be allowed to go through his stuff? Just because her mom's on drugs? Or because Michaela's poor? Or because she's Indian?

But he began to feel guilty. His mom always told him how much she needed him to help. They were all going through a rough time, she said. It will be over soon, have faith, she said. But Thomas did not know how to do that. Does faith happen because you wish for it? Did he need to hold something in his hands and pray like the older women in the front pews held their rosaries? Faith is hard to get when you don't know what it is. He rubbed his eyes, and a bell sounded from the back of the sanctuary. He stood automatically.

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"Finish up. We're running to Ft. Reno after dinner." Gloria spoke only to the children who were around the table shuffling legs and knees around in their chairs and picking up food with their hands. It looked more like a pre-school class at lunch time with Gloria as the teacher, moving back glasses that had shifted too close to the table's edge and wiping off gravy from the fronts of shirts. Thomas gawked at the scene. He secretly wished he could eat in his room, by himself.

Ben had left the table early, after only a few bites of roast and two big spoonfuls of mashed potatoes. Thomas had not seen his mom and dad speak to each other in days and if he considered it, he had not seen them in the same room except at meal times. Ben

had worked late last night, coming home only at dark and then eating in front of the TV while Gloria put the kids to bath and bed.

Since Michaela had moved in again she slept with Cassie. Chad had to move into Thomas's room, and at first he didn't mind because Chad was supposed to sleep on a pallet beside Thomas's bed. But last night Chad had heard coyotes howling, and he jumped into bed with him. Chad ground his teeth while he slept and snuggled his head into Thomas's neck. The whole house seemed turned upside down and Michaela being around didn't help. Aunt Stacy just walked away and left Michaela with them. The events of the last few days linked together and lassoed his gut. Everything was wobbling out of control.

Gloria reached over and pulled Michaela's hair away from her sticky face.

"Michaela, we're going to Nani's."

"Really?" She asked, sputtering bread out of her mouth.

"Yes, she has made some things for you and we're going to get them. Plus she wants to see you." Gloria spoke in a soft voice, a voice Thomas barely recognized. Michaela stopped and looked down. She froze in an odd way like a painting. Thomas worried a little that something had happened to her, but then she reanimated and he became annoyed at the scare.

"Will I get to see Toby too?" She bounced a little in her seat almost poking herself in the eye with her fork. Chad took notice of the excitement and started pounding his potatoes with his spoon. Gloria gave Thomas a look that said Take care of that so he reached over and grabbed the spoon out of his little brother's hand.

"Who's Toby?" Cassie turned Michaela around to face her.

"He's Nani's horse."

"A horse! Wow!" Cassie got up from her seat. "Let's go!" She pushed Michaela from her chair.

"Wait a minute," Gloria surveyed the wrecked table, "Are we all done?" Thomas was still eating, but Gloria only noticed the little ones. He could offer to stay home and clean up. He was old enough and then he could eat in peace. But he had never been to Nani's, and he wanted to see where she lived. He might convince Gloria to let Michaela stay there a while.

"Thomas would you take Chad to the bathroom and wash his hands and face while I clear the table." Gloria started to pick up his plate.

He slid his chair away from the table, "All right." He pulled Chad by his greasy hand.

He had not even finished his green beans and roast. He liked to eat one thing at a time and he had only made it around to his bread and potatoes. He would be hungry when he got back home – he just knew it.

Pulling into Nani's long red dirt driveway, Thomas read the name Bell in black stickers on a slanting mailbox. He was surprised he did not see more houses. This was the reservation. He expected that there would be more houses and other buildings.

"Where's all the Indians?" Chad asked.

"What Indians?" Gloria glanced out her window and back at Chad.

"You know the Indians that live here."

"First of all, these people are part of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes. And there are buildings in town but we're not going that way."

“Why does she live way out here?” Thomas asked. He wanted to see Indians too. That was the reason he came in the first place. Indians being Indian. Doing whatever Indians do.

“She just does Thomas. She and her husband farmed out here.”

“The Indians farmed?” Chad piped up again.

“Yes, what’d you think? They sit out here dancing and making buckskin clothes all day?”

Thomas knew all that but he expected scenes like he had read about. He slunk down in the front seat of the Explorer and watched the ditch wind along the road until they stopped in front of a rectangular brick house with white trim. He did not exactly know what Indians did. All he knew was from stories at school and TV, after all Hatch wasn’t exactly welcoming to many Indians. Now he wished he had pleaded to stay home, grunted around like his Dad, became generally unpleasant so she would not talk to him.

Nani greeted them at her backdoor. A tube hung from a green band around her neck like a necklace. In her excitement, Michaela had run out of her flip flops. Gloria scooped up Michaela’s shoes and coaxed the children toward the door. Michaela ran to Nani and gave her a gentle squeeze around the waist, her head lost in the folds of Nani’s loose dress. Thomas walked behind them through the galley kitchen and into a dark living room. Nani offered them a seat. He looked around the dark room. Nani keep the curtains closed, probably to keep the heat out. The air felt stuffy. He could hear the slight hum of the air conditioner in the kitchen and a small fan whirred next to the couch. Nani took short steps to her recliner, adjusted the brown, yellow, and orange afghan

which had fallen off the back, and sat down with a groan. The kids flopped down on an oversized couch, and Thomas took a recliner opposite Nani as Gloria sat in a small wooden rocker next to her.

“I’m so glad you’re here. I didn’t know when I’d get to see you again.” She smiled and he noticed wrinkles bunch up around her eyes and mouth. Her smooth silver hair pulled back in a pony tail shocked him. He had never seen an older woman with such long hair. Nani motioned Michaela to come sit in her lap, and they all watched Nani’s nimble fingers kneading Michaela’s arms and hands. Seeing them together, he began to hope that Nani may ask to keep her. Michaela’s Indian, Nani’s Indian. Shouldn’t Michaela be with people that were more like her?

Conversation lagged a little as Nani continued to talk to Michaela. Gloria told Nani that they had been swimming, but she left out the part about Aunt Stacy going crazy in front of the whole town. The TV was on but the sound was muted. It was running an old movie. Her hair was huge and curly and she wore heavy eyeliner and big round earrings that practically covered her entire ear. She was struggling to get into a car and a man grabbed her arm and turned her around. Nani must have noticed it too and thought it was not appropriate for children because she turned the TV off with the remote. Thomas watched the screen warp to black.

“Gloria, I got cookies in the kitchen. Why don’t you let the kids eat while I finish my treatment? I’m almost done.” After scooting Michaela from her lap, she puffed a little, picked up the white tube with a blue stem from the front of her chest, and put it to her mouth. “They’re in the cookie jar on the counter,” she said before her lips clamped down.

Gloria nodded to Thomas, “You help the kids. I’ve got some things to say to Nani.” She began to help Nani reconnect with a machine which rested on the floor beside her chair.

Thomas rose reluctantly. He would like to be in on the discussion about Michaela, but the others had already placed themselves around Nani’s small bar. Telling him they each wanted the first one, Thomas hushed them while he scanned the kitchen for a cookie jar. He spotted a ceramic bear by the refrigerator and lifted its head from its body. A stale sugar aroma hit his nose. Inside were the hard ginger cookies Thomas hated. Waiting anxiously, feet kicking the underside of the bar, the other three made it clear that they did not care as long as the cookies were sweet. He snagged paper towels from the roll, distributed the cookies, and made each one sit still on a stool.

Chad, Cassie, and Michaela jabbered on about cookies while Thomas leaned on the counter. Nani’s machine hissed and chugged. Thomas wondered what kind of sickness Nani had. He looked around the kitchen and noticed jars of pickles and other pickled things – like carrots and tomatoes and peppers mixed together. Crochet pot holders hung from the oven door. By the sink two white ceramic ducks squatted, one held soap and the other a limp nylon scrubber. A brown bottle of medicine, another white tube, and a box of saltine crackers stood on the sill of the window above the sink. It looked no different from Mama Jodi’s kitchen, straight and small, but Nani’s smelled like pickles and spices.

Then the children jumped from their stools and ran to the larger window behind the kitchen table. Chad had knocked over his stool, causing a crash. The machine went silent and Gloria stepped into the kitchen and set the stool upright.

“It’s probably the dog.” Nani said as she came around the corner.

Gloria stood behind the kids, resting her hands on small shoulders as she peaked out with them. “Yeah, it’s digging in your garden.”

“Well, she eats my tomatoes. We’d better go and get her out.” With permission to go outside, the children formed a mass and clomped their way out the back door.

Gloria let Nani go ahead through the kitchen and waited by the door while Nani put on her slippers.

“You coming, Thomas?”

He had no intentions of running outside like those three to look at a dog. By now he was ready to leave Michaela here and get back home. He had seen all he wanted.

“Nah, I’ll clean up.” Gloria nodded and followed Nani out the door.

Looking out the kitchen window, Thomas noticed a large garden to the left and a syrup-colored horse behind a barbed wire fence. Michaela ran past the dog to the horse which had come running up to the fence. She raised her hand up as a form of introduction and he snorted and rubbed his fuzzy nose against her palm. Then the others reached to touch him. The horse began to tussle Michael’s hair with his lips. Thomas could see the kids pat their hands up and around the horse’s nose and then jerk them back again with giggles and squeals.

He thought about joining them, but he held back even though he wanted to touch the horse too. When he was little he had a horse of his own named Esther. Ben would sometimes take Thomas out with him to ride. Thomas sat on the front, grabbing the horn of the saddle with his father’s hands resting on of his.

When Esther died, they did not replace her. Thomas had found her bloated body in the creek. Ben called a place in Ft. Reno to come get her. When Thomas asked what happened to her, Ben said they would use her for dog food and left it at that. Since the accident, they had gotten rid of lots of things, farm equipment, the four wheeler. Now Thomas realized he missed these things more than he thought.

Thomas picked up the paper towels, swept the crumbs into his hand, and threw them in the trash at the end of the bar. The house, quiet now except for the air conditioner in the dining room window, left him feeling a little awkward. He sat down at the dining room table and let the forced air blow his bangs out of his eyes. The table was really in an eat-in kitchen. Nani's house was not big enough for dining room. He thought maybe there might be two bedrooms and a bathroom down the hallway. He turned so the air could blow on the back of his head and noticed the hutch along the wall. It looked like the one they had at home, glass doors guarding glass dishes, more ceramic figures, and salt and pepper shakers. Beaded chains dangled from the knobs. Patterns of blues, greens, yellows, and whites zig-zagged wildly across them. The bottom half of the hutch kept its contents hidden behind solid doors.

Thomas heard the dog bark and looked out the window to see her chasing the kids around the yard. By now all three of them had taken off their shoes. He watched as the dog knocked one kid down and the others piled on top. Nani pointed to her plants and Gloria followed nodding. Except for her complexion and the lilt of her voice, Nani did not seem like any Indian he was expecting. He surveyed her rooms again and noticed a set of black and white photos hanging in frames on the other side of the hutch. Moving to get a closer look, he also saw several pictures of kids stuck in frame of the glass door

to the hutch. The black and whites were of pow wows, Indians in feathers and fringe dancing in a circle. The snapshots on the door frame were school pictures of kids. They looked like normal school pictures, one boy had his two front teeth missing, so Thomas went back to studying the pow wow.

A chapter in his social studies book showed a picture of Cheyenne Indians doing a Sun Dance and it talked about how it was illegal. If Nani lived out here with the other Cheyennes, they might keep doing these ceremonies. What secrets did Nani have in her cupboards? What rituals and chants did she know? Without thinking, Thomas moved to the hutch and opened a drawer. Cloth napkins, vinyl placemats. He opened the cabinet below it. Baskets, plates, Indian dolls, and candles. He moved to the other drawer and stopped. He found a worn leather pouch wrapped loosely with a cord. He lifted it gently, checking out the window to see that Nani and Gloria were still talking in the yard. It was light but bulky about the size of a notebook. A sweet peppery smell emerged as he unfastened the cord. Unfolding the layers, he found a full feather, a hawk's, an owl's? It was large, larger than any he had seen. And then opening another fold, a bundle of dried grass of some kind. The smell was stronger now, and it reminded him of the incense smoke Father used in Church.

He checked outside again. The horse had moved toward the garden and stretched his neck over the fence probably hoping for more attention. The sun fired bright and harsh on its back. His skin rippled across his flanks as he shook off flies, and he stamped his hooves on the dry ground, the grass around him as brown as his mane. On the horizon the sky had turned a deep turquoise. Somewhere it was raining – maybe. Maybe it would rain here. Fill the creeks. Thomas imagined so much rain that the creeks would

run wild rapids like he had seen in movies. White caps over rocks. Him in a canoe dodging logs and debris.

Thomas's attention turned back toward the pouch. Did Cheyenne know how to make it rain? That was stupid, he knew. He knew he should fold it all up before he got caught. Looking back at the drawer, he noticed a beaded wheel with four spokes and small brown feathers. Beside it, a lighter. What would happen if he took something? That was stupid too. He had never stolen anything, ever. He had never really been in trouble except for forgetting to do a chore. He ran his fingers across the grass and its scent rose stronger. It looked familiar and he knew if he asked Mama Jodi she would be able to help him find some. These things felt important. Nani used them for something special.

The dog barked again and he looked up in time to see everyone moving to the house. He quickly folded up the pouch and re-tied it as he remembered finding it. He stuffed it back in the drawer and pushed it closed with his rear end, but not without the glass panes rattling behind him. As the group entered, Thomas panicked. The feather was still on the table. He swept it up and stuffed it under his shirt, wedging it between the waistband of his jeans and his belly.

“Oh my, that horse is sure starved for attention.”

He turned to see an old woman standing at the back door holding the screen open with a shriveled brown arm. His eyes met Nani's as she moved through the kitchen.

“What have you been doing, Thomas?” She looked him up and down but smiled warmly just the same.

“Oh, waiting here. Watching ya’ll out the window.” It wasn’t quite a lie. “Uh, it looks like it might rain.”

Nani shuffled to the window and bent down to see the horizon. “No, not yet, but it will, you know. It will sometime. Sometimes we have to wait for things.”

Cassie joined Nani at the window, “Can you make it rain, Nani?”

Thomas huffed, “That’s stupid.” He moved away from them.

“No, but we can pray. It will rain when it is supposed to rain.”

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He waited in the Explorer while Nani hugged them all and said good-bye. The feather inside his shirt scratched his skin and he was afraid he would break it the longer he sat. He thought it would be safer up against his back so he slyly moved it around under his t-shirt until it rested against his spine. He felt bad for taking it, but he knew he could not admit that he had been snooping around Nani’s cabinets. Despite its size, it was only a feather. Surely Nani could replace it. He planned to research the grass and the wheel, though. He might be able to make his own.

Nani held Michaela’s face in her hands as she talked to her. Michaela was coming back with them. If Nani used Cheyenne prayers to get what she wants, maybe he could use them too. Get Michaela to go back home, get Aunt Stacy to be normal, get his mom and dad to stop fighting.

Chapter 6

The Metzger Boys

Ben got out of his truck and looked toward the corral for Danny. Ben heard a clump of tin cans that Danny had crafted into a kind of wind chime rattle under the rafters of the front porch. He hoped he would catch him outside and not have to go into the cabin Danny had built from scrap plywood and sheet metal. He had traded out work for the windows, but most of them would not open because they had some defect. Add to this the lack of heat and air and the place was no better than a sod house. Knowing his brother lived in this third-world looking structure did not really bother him, but the fact that their parents had given him the land for free gnawed at Ben a little.

Danny seemed to get Wilhelm's blessing no matter what. When Danny decided to rodeo at fourteen, Wilhelm immediately agreed, buying tack, and Danny's first horse.

When Danny showed a talent for all around, he followed Danny to events. After harvest Wilhelm spent his time on the road with Danny, tramping along the youth rodeo circuit in an extended cab Ford, and by then, pulling two horses in a used trailer. Ben decided Danny tapped into the quixotic side of Wilhelm, the Western hero capacity that he thought he had. Knowing his little brother could help talk to their father, did not make Ben rest any easier. He would have to handle Danny just right, and even if Ben did manage to get him to listen, Danny could still stubbornly refuse.

Ben scanned the front porch checking to see if Danny was still asleep. He spent most of his time outdoors in the summer, and when it was hot like this, even at mid-morning, he slept on the porch. Danny had never wanted much and now he had just what he wanted. No cell phone, no real job, no wife or kids. He had this cabin, a truck, two horses, a trailer, a corral, and a dog. In Danny's mind, everything a cowboy really needed.

Danny came from behind the weathered barn lugging a bale of hay. His shepard bounced around his feet and followed him to the corral where a sorrel and a buckskin waited along the water trough.

Ben walked up, picked at the flaking paint on the fence, and then hung his arms off the top rail.

“Have to feed them up here?”

Danny tilted his head to look from under the brim of his staw hat, “Yeah, grass is almost gone.” Resting the bale on his knees, he unlatched the gate. “This hay is about the last I have left. I may have to move them to Henry's place soon. He'll let them graze for a week or so.”

Ben watched Danny pull off the baling wire with his bare hands and noticed the cuts on his knuckles. Danny never would wear gloves and another sign of his hard-headedness. Ben noticed how much thinner he'd gotten since the season started, but Danny had his mother's frame whereas Ben inherited the stout German bodies of the Metzgers. Except for their thick noses and square chin, most people might not think they were brothers.

"Why not use Daddy's north pasture?"

"Thanks to you, Wilhelm's not too generous these days." Danny finished shaking out the bale, wrapped the wire in thin loops, and hooked it on the gate. Walking behind the horses, he took a brush from his back pocket and began to rub down the sorrel.

Ben looked out over the pasture. The cattle had eaten everything they could and the only thing left, milkweed and gourds, were not fit to eat. Grass had gone as dead as winter. Ben watched a row of cedars shimmy in the wind. They were about the only thing to survive in this damn place. A fire could easily spark that row. Someone throws out a cigarette and the whole pasture would be gone.

"Yeah, about that. I need you to help me with him. Aren't you leaving for Ruidoso soon?"

"Tomorrow. The rodeo's not until next weekend but I can get some work if I go down early." Danny moved out of sight behind the other horse. "And that's why I'm not taking him."

"Look Danny, he likes to go with you. Hell, it's been a while since you've taken him. I need him out of here. Just for a few days."

Ben tried to not to sound desperate. If Danny didn't take Wilhelm, he would have to confront him. How could he explain to Gloria that they would have to lose their house because he couldn't stand up to his father?

"Nah, he's gotten too fussy. I tried to take him after Mama died. He griped the whole time. Like I said, I've got a job and I'm sleeping in my truck, anyway." Flies gathered on the horses flanks, and Ben watched as their tails swished them away. The shepard found a cool place to lie down in the sand under the water trough and spread out its front paws. Big drops slid from its panting tongue.

An image of Eva, slumped in her bed, flickered in Ben's head. Danny hadn't been there to help that night, and Ben never told him what happened to her. What Wilhelm did.

"Mama didn't just die."

Danny looked over the back of the buckskin, "What?"

Ben did not bother to repeat himself. He took off his cap and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. It was already getting too hot to work this morning. It might have been wrong to come out here asking for help. Talking to Danny would not be easy, he knew, and his lack of cooperation shouldn't have surprised him.

His frustration rose, "You know what, Danny, I don't ask for much. You come to my house. Gloria feeds you. Hell, I even have Thomas come and help you when you need it. You live out here without paying anything. I just want you to take him this one last time while I figure out how to get out of this mess. He's getting harder to live with everyday."

“Ben, this is between you and Wilhelm.” Danny patted the sorrel, stroked its blaze a couple of times, and then picked up its front hoof, “It’s always been between the two of you. You think I want to get in the middle of a storm that’s been brewing for 20 years? I got my troubles with him and you got yours. You don’t seem to want to be in my business and I’ll stay out of yours.”

“Most of your troubles are caused by you.”

Danny came around from behind the horses, “What does that mean? Who am I hurting? I don’t have responsibilities except to these animals. You chose your life. Just tell me if I’m not wanted at your house anymore.”

Ben propped his foot on the bottom rail of the fence and sighed. He did not want to fight. He and Danny had never really fought. The only real fight between the two was over Angela Baumer. She played them both, gathering up trinkets from the Metzger boys. Ben wrapped up a heart shaped locket in a gold box and presented it to her one Sunday, and by Tuesday Danny tried to top him by giving her pharmacy perfume and a cassette tape of love songs. Eventually they spent a good deal of their summer work money on her, trying to be the most romantic farm boy in Hatch.

When Wilhelm found out he shamed them both, but Danny wouldn’t give up. He thought the best way to settle it was to fight. Danny’s vigor stunned Ben and he almost took it as a joke, but he agreed to follow his brother out behind the tractor shed. Ben’s dull punches were meant to spare Danny. He didn’t want to embarrass his little brother, but Ben’s restraint backfired and Danny fought back with all the heroics of adolescent rage. He knocked Ben to the ground only stopping when he busted Ben’s lip. Ben gave up and gave up the girl. Danny dated her a while longer and then he broke up with her.

Ben believed Danny loved her, as much as a sixteen year old can love, and he admired the fight Danny put up for her.

Except for Angela, the two boys grew up together, but never shared the same interests. They looked out for each other, but not because they felt obligated to. It was out of familiarity rather than any value of family loyalty. Ben knew other families in Hatch that would fight for one another, even if they were in the wrong. The family formed a law unto itself. But Wilhelm railed against that type of outlaw mentality. He preached personal responsibility above all, which is why his actions toward Ben now seemed so contradictory.

“Okay, forget it. It’ll probably blow over anyway.” A dust devil kicked up the dirt around the corral and the dog scurried to chase it. Ben was out of ideas.

Danny opened the gate and walked out, “You got time for a beer at least? Tell me about the wife and kids?”

Ben followed Danny under the lean-to porch attached to the cabin. Just like the rest of the structure it had its junkyard appeal. Danny’s system of organization consisted of a series of five gallon buckets, some filled with old shoes, some with rope, and others with tools. Spiral fly traps, black banded strips dangling, snapped against one another, beating time with the cans Ben recognized from earlier. The roof’s rusty sheet metal scraped and puffed as the wind slid through, but the bent nails and beams of scrap two by fours seemed to hold it pretty steady.

On one end of the porch, Danny kept his sagging cot and beside it a mini-refrigerator. He leaned and opened it, scooped up two bottles, tossed one to Ben before settling down on Mexican blanket which covered his summer bed. He leaned his back

against the rough cabin wall. Ben found a metal porch chair, recognized it as one from Grandma Metzger's place, and took a seat.

"How's Gloria?" Danny took off his hat and laid it upside down on the refrigerator next to a lamp without a shade.

Ben swallowed hard, "Fine, I suppose. I don't see her much these days. She's working for Garret now."

"Yeah, I saw her Explorer up there the other day. They're hiring new linemen I heard."

"Really? That'd be a good job for you. You thinking about applying?"

"No." Danny tipped his bottle took a drink, "Are you?"

"Not yet, anyway." Ben caught his brother smoothing down his handle bar mustache. He noticed how the grey had begun to creep in and wondered when he'd shave the damn thing.

"How long you and Gloria been married? Ten years?"

"Twelve."

Ben remembered Danny two-stepping with Gloria at their wedding dance. She had worn a dress with ruffles on the wrists. She danced barefoot because she wasn't used to her shoes and they hurt her feet.

"Twelve years. Well, you've got past that seven year itch, right?"

"I guess." Ben rocked back in his chair almost knocking off a coffee can bird feeder from a shelf behind him. He reached around to steady it.

"I don't think I could do it."

“Hell, Danny what woman in her right mind would want to live out here like this anyway?”

He wasn't perfect, but he managed to keep a house, take care of his kids when they were sick, keep the bills paid. Every time he saw photos of the Farm Family of the Year printed in the newspaper, he thought that his family could be nominated. Until recently, Ben believed he could stand with the most successful farm families in Hatch.

“What? You know what a woman would want?”

“She'd want more than this.”

“Shit, I've had my share of women. I know what they'd want. There are other ways to keep a woman happy besides a nice house”

“Don't start bragging Danny. The last skank you brought around here wasn't even fit to look at.”

“Who?” Danny reached up, grabbed a lariat from a nail above him, and began unraveling it.

“Some lazy-eyed girl you brought back from Shawnee. I don't remember her name. All I remember was when you introduced me to her I thought she was winking at me but come to find out she could barely open her eye.”

“Well, goddamn Ben, I don't even remember that. You're making it up.”

Ben finished his beer and got up to get another one. Handed Danny one and went back to his chair.

“No, I'm not. You've been with some real doozies, Danny.”

“Hell, what do you know, you've been out of circulation too long.”

“I do remember Kim, though. What was wrong with her? How come you wouldn’t settle down with her?”

Danny stopped fiddling with the rope. Ben heard him shift in his bed. The shepard finally wandered up, wet from wading in the creek.

“I wanted to. I don’t know. Took her for granted, I guess. So she said.”

The dog shook out its fur and wagged up to Ben. He reached down, patted its back, and then grabbed its snout, using his hand as a muzzle. How do you take someone for granted? Ben knew that Wilhelm had taken Eva for granted, but when did it start? Is neglect purposeful? Did Danny look at Kim sometimes hating her and then choose to hurt her? Ben couldn’t remember the last time he looked Gloria in the eye.

“That’s the golden rule, huh.” Ben’s hollow voice competed with the creaking roof. “The woman’s always right.”

“No, she’s not always right. She just wants to be noticed.” Danny hooked the rope around his wrists and ankles. “How ‘bout you, Ben? You been noticing lately?”

The dog finally yelped and Ben let go, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Danny undid his bulldog posture and sat up on the side of the cot, “I don’t know. Just seems to me you reach a certain point when things are either working or they’re not. Lot of men recognize this fact and start making choices.”

Ben was a little confused but decided to go along, “If a man has choices to make.”

“Always got choices, Ben.”

Holding down his anger, Ben gripped the arms of the metal chair. Choices were easy for a man with no wife, no children, no debt. He tried to picture what Danny would

do if the situation were reversed. Leave. Walk away and let someone else sort it out. He decided to turn the tables on Danny and let him give his free advice.

“You’ve got plenty of choices. Go to Ruidoso alone or take Wilhelm. You made that choice all right. See, my choice was made for me. Before you get so smug, handing out suggestions for what I should do, maybe you should consider that you and I are living different lives.”

“Okay, okay. Don’t get upset. I see you’ve got problems, but you also have a partner to help you and I don’t think you really see it.”

A truck’s muffler echoed up Danny’s drive. Ben could see Wade Corman’s Dodge bouncing along the ruts, and knowing that he’d have to encounter one of Danny’s nastier rodeo bums, he decided it was time to go.

“No time to notice. Besides I’ll mind my business and you’ll mind yours, right? She’s a grown woman. She’ll have to take care of herself for a while.” Ben finished his beer and got up to go.

“I hope she will. For your sake. Otherwise you’ll be shacking up with me in cowboy luxury.” Danny grabbed his hat and hobbled up to meet Wade.

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On his way back home, he thought of his father and gripped the pickup’s wheel tighter. Usually, Ben could be counted on to do what his father wanted. Danny left. Ben was the one who stayed. Signing over the land angered Wilhelm, but Ben would never be able to explain to his father the circumstances which led to his decision to sell. Explanations were excuses to Wilhelm.

Eva had been gone four years, and since then, Wilhelm seemed to harbor a loathing no one understood. Eva had been diagnosed with breast cancer. It was in an advanced stage when the doctors caught it because as quiet as she was, she never complained or hinted that she was worried about being ill. Finally, she passed out one morning on her way to her car – she was on her way to the post office. Wilhelm found her in the grass, on her side; he had been calling her and she didn't answer. He then phoned Ben and told him to hurry, his mom was sick, and hung up. Ben rushed to their house and found them still in the yard, his mom with her head in Wilhelm's lap. Wilhelm stroked her hair but his voice was gruff and his legs shook, bouncing her slightly.

"Mom?" Ben had walked up on them, scared of what he might really discover.

"She's sick. So help me get her up and in the car," Wilhelm started to lift up the top half of Eva's body.

"What happened?" Ben didn't want to risk moving her until he knew more. "Did she fall? Did she break anything?" His mom, at fifty one, had a gossamer quality. Ben always approached her with caution afraid he might frighten her.

"Just help me, dammit! Right now!" Wilhelm glared at him.

They helped Eva into the truck and drove to the emergency room in Ft. Reno. Wilhelm cradled her head in his lap just as he had been doing when Ben first arrived. Ben sped down the highway and every now and then stole quick glances at his parents. To see them touching one another disoriented Ben. His mom seemed satisfied to stay on the periphery of any occasion while his dad took center stage. If they ever were in the same room, they barely acknowledged one another. It wasn't that she was absent; she could always be counted on to do what was needed, bake a pie for his baseball fundraiser,

serve in the kitchen for funerals, have his clothes washed when he was ready to return to college. He knew she would do what was needed so he didn't need her to talk. Wilhelm didn't either, Ben guessed. But seeing her so vulnerable, not on her feet, he could see her gone for good and he wondered what they would do then.

When the doctors diagnosed her and said that she had six months, the men in the family did fall apart with concern, about how to let her know that they loved her. Eva must have sensed their frustration and discomfort. In fact, it was only two months after she saw the doctor that she took her own life. Enough time, they found later, to fill the deep freeze with fully cooked dinners for Wilhelm.

Ben stopped at the box to grab the mail. Shuffling through Josh's hospital bills, he remembered Eva's pills. She'd overdosed. He had gone to borrow the air compressor.

Both his parents' cars were in the drive, but that day, no one came out to greet him so he went inside the house. The heavy drapes were still drawn, and the TV wasn't on. Usually, if Wilhelm was home he was watching news or a ball game. Eva wasn't in the kitchen either, and it smelled like bleach and meat, not the fresh aroma of something cooking, just a rumor of roast, maybe from the night before. Ben walked through the entry hall to the living room where he was surprised to see his father sitting in the recliner.

"Your mother's dead." The voice muttered from the chair.

Ben walked to the bedroom and found what looked like a struggle. His mother's body slumped in half, her arms splayed out in supplication, her left cheek up, her hair disheveled and wrapped about her eyes, nose, and lips.

Ben rushed back into see his father. "What happened? What did you do to her?"

"She won't wake up, god dammit!" Wilhelm stood up and faced off with Ben, "All I tried to do was wake her up. Now I don't know what the hell to do. What in Christ's name do we do?" He turned away, walked a few steps, and then came back to Ben. "You've got to deal with it now. I'm leaving."

Ben reached after him but his father was already making his way out the door. Wilhelm stopped to grab his stained Stetson off the hat rack and his keys off the entryway table and left. Alone in the house, Ben wasn't sure what to do. He should call someone. Danny was gone, so he called Gloria.

Ben pieced together afterwards what had happened. Eva couldn't be awakened that Thursday morning, and Wilhelm after a few firm nudges began to panic, and he shook her harder, her head swinging side to side forcing her smoky hair apart from its night time braid. Most people in Hatch still thought Eva had died of cancer, but a few knew it was too soon, and it was those few that Wilhelm suspected spread rumors that he couldn't control.

Since his mother's death, Wilhelm became a callous man. He had always been rough, but at least he flashed a charismatic style, and now any charm gave way to meanness. Wilhelm lost interest his grandchildren, didn't call except to complain, and Ben knew that when Wilhelm wasn't at the coffee shop from seven to eight o'clock in the morning, he sat in his recliner most of the day, the television his only company.

It was forbidden to ever talk about what really happened around his father, and it occurred to Ben that Eva, in someway, unleashed a revenge, a way to escape and let the bastard have what he deserved, and as he got out of his truck and headed toward the barn,

he thought about the type of courage his mother had, making Wilhelm have to face things for once.

Chapter 7

Rural Electric

Gloria attempted to pull her short skirt over her knees while she waited for the computer to boot up. She came in early this Monday, around 8:15, so she could make the adjustments alone, without Ann looking over her shoulder or Robyn distracting her with her weekend stories. If she was going to erase Stacy's bill, she had to make sure it could not be traced. This morning on the way in to work she had thought about whether she should try to protect Stacy again, whether she should try to make up for her sister's mistakes. A year ago she would not have considered it. She and Mama Jodi had tried tough love approaches in the past. They had tried an intervention after that. Today Gloria decided that really there are no clear right or wrong decisions in life. It is easy to think in absolute terms when a person is not in the middle of it all. She also decided that she was not only doing this for Stacy and Michaela, but for her peace of mind as well. It

would be one less situation for her and Ben to fight about. Gloria could not take the high ground on this one.

Sitting in Garrett's office, feeling the loose swivel of his leather chair, she read his community achievements: Rotary Club President, Junior League Charity Gold Member Award. She began to realize how much he had helped her. Two months ago, when she had seen the posting for the clerk's job in the newsletter that came with their bill every month, Gloria decided to apply. Getting extra money would elevate the stress on Ben and hopefully keep them from selling any land. The farm had been in Ben's family since the land run and Gloria knew the disgrace Ben would feel if he were the generation that let it go. When Gloria came in for the job interview, Garrett had given her the position after only fifteen minutes.

"You've been to college," Garrett leaned back in his office chair, so far that Gloria thought he might fall over. Just ten years older than Ben, Garrett already had lost most of the middle section of his hair. He combed it over the top, the dark strands holding down the shiny white skin which planned mutiny underneath.

"Just two years. I never finished." Gloria crossed her legs and smoothed her blouse, worrying that the buttons were gapping.

The last time she had been to an interview was before Thomas was born and that was at the gas station. Really, it couldn't have been called an interview because the manager had hired her over the phone. At the time, just weeks after their wedding, she and Ben had needed money to buy a second car, and although she had not made much, it paid the note for a used Ford Escort.

Gloria had started working at sixteen at the grocery store in Ft. Reno. At first it was money to help pay for college, but when Starla left, Gloria had worked to help take care of herself and Stacy, so Mama Jodi wouldn't be burdened. She had worked to help out and never allowed herself to enjoy any of the money she made.

Garrett's computer requested his password. Gloria typed it in. He knew nothing about computer security and all three women had access to his computer files. She recalled how he had trusted her from the start.

"Two years is more than any of these other girls have. You're hired, honey. When do you want to start?"

"Oh? Next week? I need to make arrangements for my kids. Garrett, I really appreciate this. I'm not sure exactly what you need me to do here, but I'll learn fast."

"Gloria, don't mention it. Ann'll teach you everything you need to know. I know how hard it's been for ya'll. Besides, what's a small town for if we can't rally together to help one another."

A purr from the CPU brought her attention back to the screen and she pulled up the records for Stacy's bill. Three months past due. Ann had ignored it without telling Gloria what was going on, taking mercy on Gloria's family or waiting like a fox to snag its prey, she wasn't sure. Garrett probably approved it because Stacy was Gloria's sister. Now Gloria was going to wipe it clean without telling either of them. If she got caught, Garrett would have to fire her. He had members to answer to. The Cedar Country Rural Electric Cooperative was owned by all its members. All who paid their bills. Erasing Stacy's debt was as good as stealing money from them, and Garrett couldn't allow any of his employees grace for stealing.

After five months of working as a bill clerk, Gloria knew how she to manipulate Stacy's bill. The computer kept track of accounts; it was just a matter of changing the numbers. By the time the bank and the company accountant balanced the books, Gloria would pay back what Stacy owed. She didn't know how, but she was sure she could find a way. Using her own computer would be too risky, however, and that's why she was in Garrett's office this morning.

Moving the cursor to the amount owed column, she typed in amount paid: \$359.16. The box asked for the check or credit card number. Gloria knew she'd have to make up a number. As she began typing in the fake check number, she heard a click in the front doors. All she had to do was finish the number, toggle *Paid*, and log out. But then she might not make it out of Garrett's office in time. She looked at the clock. 8:23. Ann opened up in the mornings and it would be just like her to get here extra early on the day Gloria attempted to fix the account.

Gloria quickly exited out of the program and shut down Garrett's computer. It would have to wait. She heard Ann's purse plop on the desk. It was too late. Now she would have to explain why she was in his office this early in the morning. Bumping her thigh on the corner of the desk, she moved to Garrett's file cabinets, opened a middle drawer, and began rifling through the files.

"Ann? Is that you?" Gloria knew it was better to be on offense when dealing with Ann.

Ann appeared in the doorway. "Gloria, what are you doing here? You usually make it to work right on time. Never early." Ann knew that with small children Gloria struggled to get out of the house in the mornings, but she didn't allow that as an excuse.

She continually made comments about working mothers and the stress it caused young children today. Gloria dismissed most of what Ann had said about the demise of traditional American values. She had heard other women in the community rail against the onslaught of secular humanism before, but she had not had to work with these women for eight hours a day.

Ann speculated about the damage to the future of America because mothers were too busy taking care of *their* needs instead of their children's, and she provided the statistics she'd read in Dr. Dobson's *Focus on the Family* newsletter which proved that American culture had suffered beginning with the Women's Rights Movement when mothers starting pursuing careers.

"Women trying to be super moms, eliminating prayer in schools, that's when it all started." Ann preached from her desk in the center of the office. Even though Robyn was the receptionist for the small front office, Ann's was the first desk any visitor saw, the power position, like a pulpit. In her early sixties, Ann had worked in the office for six years as Garrett's secretary, but it was longer than Robyn or Gloria so she held the keys to the vault, she made the brand coffee she liked, and she set office policy. And before Gloria could call Ann's hand and ask why *she* had taken a job, Ann had anticipated her argument.

"I started after my kids were raised. I only work to give me a little casino money and get out of the house so I don't kill Clayton." Clayton, her retired husband, proved early on that he could be as much work as raising children. Some days it felt like Ann used Gloria as a receptacle to dump all her political frustrations. As if she were on the

front lines fighting the righteous war for America and Robyn and Gloria were the enemies.

"Garrett mentioned that he needed some old files cleaned out. I thought I'd come in early and work on it." Gloria hoped she would buy it.

"Why didn't he ask me to do it? You don't know what should be thrown away or kept." Ann moved over to Gloria and pushed the drawer closed almost smashing Gloria's finger.

"I think he didn't want to bother you, Ann. You're so busy right now with the quarterly report. Garrett knows that you shouldn't be bothered with cleaning duties." Gloria moved back, giving Ann room to guard the file cabinets, playing subservient to avoid suspicion.

Ann squinted, cocked her head, and considered Gloria. Ann was shrewd and she was not always softened by flattery. "I think if you really want to clean, Gloria, you should start with the closet in the copy room, don't you?"

"Oh yeah, you're right. I'll go right now and see what I can do before the phones start ringing." Gloria took long strides to the little room in the back of the office. She opened the plywood door and shut it behind her. She leaned her head against one of the shelves. Smelling the metallic of paper clips mingled with the convenient store odor of a pine tree air freshener and copier toner, she thought she would vomit.

#

"He ordered me the lobster. Can you believe it? I ate every bit of it but I sat there thinking *Who the hell am I?* I've never dated anyone who's treated me this nice." Licking her finger to get a better pull on the pages, Robyn spilled the news about her weekend

with a man she had recently met on Match.com while she sorted through receipts. It was 9:30 and they all had settled into their morning routine. Ann, Robyn, and Gloria were the only "girls," as most of the men referred to them, in the office. Robyn answered the phones, greeted customers, and handled any paper work Ann did not want to do. Ann hated Robyn's stories of her "gallivanting around," so when Robyn told her date stories, they were always directed toward Gloria. But Gloria had heard about twelve too many. Robyn was already divorced when Gloria began working there. She had married her high school sweetheart at 20, but they had only lasted a couple of years. Too young to know what they were doing Robyn said. Then she married a man twenty-five years older. It was a small scandal around town and most people said he'd lost his mind. But after only a year, Robyn caught him cheating on her with a fifth grade schoolteacher, and she divorced him also. Since then she'd sworn off marriage, but not dating.

"But you know what I say, Gloria, I'm along for the ride. Who needs to marry a man these days?" Robyn stopped sorting long enough to take a sip of coffee from her "God is a Woman" coffee mug. She kept it hidden in her desk because once Ann found it on the rim of the sink in the bathroom and threw it in the trash. Robyn dug it out but didn't say anything. Instead she taunted Ann by continuing to use it everyday even though the rim was chipped.

Something caught Robyn's eye outside the front glass door. "Crap. Here comes Max Teague. He still won't quit calling me. I bet he's here to ask me to go his family reunion. He's that type, you know. Wants me to meet his Mama, learn to bake her chocolate sheet cake." Robyn got up to go to the copy room, but then stopped. "Wait a minute. He's got someone with him."

Gloria's desk was to the right of the front door so all she saw was Max Teague's rough hand grasp the handle and pull the door open. A young man entered instead. The three women straighten as the stranger stood before them. He wore a white t-shirt and jeans. Dark curly hair fluted out beneath a navy bandana. The new guy greeted Robyn right away and then looked around to Ann and Gloria, taking in the office. Max lumbered in behind and introduced him.

"These are the girls. Robyn, Gloria, and Ann. Ann runs things around here so you'd better be nicest to her." Max pointed to each one. "Girls, this here's Drew Devilbiss. He's from Kansas."

Robyn quickly moved from behind her desk. Flipping her long bangs out of her face, she walked toward Drew and held out her hand for a shake in one balletic motion. She wore a tangerine scooped neck summer sweater and a khaki skirt with a slit up the back, stylishly cute with a touch of tart.

"Kansas? What are you doing down here?" She held his hand bit longer than should be comfortable for a first introduction, but Drew grinned back at her, suggesting he knew her game.

"I came in earlier this year when the ice storm hit. Helped you all with the downed power lines. I met some good people here and I'm not tied down up there so I'd thought I see what it's like to be an Okie for a while."

He had a nice voice, deep and fluid and Gloria felt a small shift in the energy of the office. All three women paused a little longer than necessary. Finally Robyn spoke.

"Free as a bird, huh?" Robyn said, "Don't I know all about that." Now sitting on the edge of her desk, Robyn posted both hands down on the desktop, on either side of her hips, a position which thrust her chest forward and created a dart of cleavage.

Drew turned his head and noticed Gloria sitting at her desk. He smiled and she felt a slight flutter in her chest. What was that? An instant chemistry? Feeling a little silly, she straightened her back and went back to her computer. Happy to let Robyn talk, she kept her ear on the conversation. She wanted to know as much about this man as possible, but did not want to appear to be too nosy.

Ann quickly intervened, calling from her desk, "Max didn't you bring him in here for something?"

Max, caught up in Robyn's lip gloss smile, shook his head slightly, "Oh yeah, Drew's gonna work for us now. Tommy hired him full time this morning. He needs to fill out his paperwork."

"Well, Gloria'll get you the papers and when you finish, come see me. Until then, we all better get back to work."

"Ok, I guess I'll leave you to it. Drew, when you finish up here, meet me back at the garage. We'll get you on a crew that's going to Buffalo Springs today."

Drew saluted Max as he walked out the door. Gloria turned to a file cabinet behind her desk to get the new employee forms. Fastening them to a clipboard, she turned back around to see Drew sitting across the desk from her.

"Here's what you need. Be sure to complete everything." Gloria made eye contact. He looked right at her, not around her or at her hands or at the clipboard. She began to feel warm and could sense a blush rising on her neck.

"I always do." His blue eyes crinkled as his face opened up in an impish smile. For a moment she forgot what she was going to say. She noticed the smoothness of his chin and cleared her throat. What was he – 24, 26? Cocky and not even old enough to know when to tone it down. She tried not to be flattered.

"Oh, I bet you do." Robyn chimed from her chair. Somehow she had moved back behind her desk and began tending her receipts again.

"Robyn, isn't time for you to go to the bank with the nighttime deposit?" Ann called. The suggestive turn in the conversation didn't please her.

"Yeah, I'll go." Robyn pulled open her bottom desk drawer to retrieve her purse, a zebra striped affair with pink ostrich feathers around the lip. "Now, Drew don't be a stranger around here. We girls could use some excitement every now and again."

"I'll come see you again. I'm positive. I'd like to know what you guys do for fun."

"Well, don't ask Gloria – she's married with three kids." Robyn may have had to leave, but she made it clear that Gloria was unavailable. "She hasn't been anywhere in years."

Gloria nodded her head, "It's true. Saturday nights are usually spent at the Supercenter, buying groceries." That sealed it. She hated to admit it, but why play coy? She was tired, she was married, she was boring.

"So if you want to know anything, I'm your woman. See ya later," Robyn winked as she flounced out the door.

"She's a pistol," Drew gestured with the clipboard.

Ann rose from her chair, plucked a file from her desk, and went to the copy room.

"Umph, you got that right. I don't know you very well, Drew, but if I was you, I'd stay away from Robyn Taylor."

"Oh yeah? What do you think, Gloria?" He was doing it again. Looking her in the eye. Gloria shrugged her shoulders.

"So how long have you been married?" He asked as he began starting the form.

"Thirteen years this November." Gloria began shuffling papers. She readjusted her stapler. She was ready for him to finish and leave so she could get back to normal office routine. He was interesting at first, when he was flirting with Robyn, but now he made her think about the things she might be missing: nights out laughing with friends, smoky bars, liquor that burned the worry from your stomach, dancing, a muscular arm around her waist. After the scare this morning in Garrett's office, the day couldn't go by fast enough. This whole morning had rattled her nerves.

"What does your husband do?" His voice sounded truly interested. He had gone from flirting to making conversation. She had misread the whole situation, thinking about chemical attraction, the stuff of romantic movies.

"He farms - wheat, alfalfa. Cattle."

"Really, not many working farms these days. But I guess around here it's pretty typical."

She thought this was a funny thing to say. He was from Kansas after all.

"Somewhat. But it's getting harder. Hard to find good help, you know? All the kids want to move away. Live in the city. We've had to make adjustments because it's getting

to be more work than we can handle." And because they were in debt, had no insurance, and her crank addicted sister had left Gloria another child to raise.

"I worked on a farm when I was in high school. I know how tough it can be. Why don't I come out to your place and meet your husband? Maybe I can help you out some days. I'm all alone here. What else am I supposed to do with my time?" He smiled at Gloria again and this time it was clear. Drew met everyone with the same geniality.

She hesitated. Gloria did not want Ben to meet Drew. Their lives were too complicated right now for new friendships. Instead she nurtured the idea of Drew coming into the office everyday, listening to Robyn's naughty banter. When did flirting become something shameful? Gloria didn't have the ability to distinguish. Starla flirted constantly with men, and for that she had earned a reputation. While they were dating, Ben would say, "As long as you don't turn out like your mother." Gloria wasn't sure where that line was, and but usually around Hatch it was easy not to cross. Most of the men in town were more like uncles and the ones her age were so close to being family that it seemed incestuous to even consider more than a good-natured sibling-like relationship. All young marrieds kept clear boundaries with each other like icy ponds one dared not cross. The town loved gossip and no one, with the exception of women like Robyn, wanted to be caught in the snare of suspected adultery. But Drew wanted simple hospitality. It would be rude not to extend an invitation.

"Sure. You can come out for dinner sometime," she said.

"What about this Friday? I don't want to interrupt your grocery shopping on Saturday."

Gloria's mouth gaped open. She didn't expect him to be so bold. "Well, all right."

"Good. Give me your number and I'll call you later to get directions."

She pushed her chair away from her desk a little and fumbled for a sticky note. Should she give him her cell or home number? Writing down cell her number, she hoped he would forget or call later and cancel. She could alert Robyn and she'd be glad to intercept the meeting for her. Convinced that Robyn was the card up her sleeve, she handed Drew the note. "Here ya go. So, yeah, Friday it is."

"Aren't you done yet?" Ann came back in with a large glass of sweating ice tea and a bosom full of copies. She sat the glass on a mouse pad that she used for a coaster and marched over to Gloria. "Here, collate and staple these. I'll take care of him. Come on, Drew. Let's see if we can't finally get you out of this office."

"Yes ma'am," He chuckled as he moved his chair to Ann's domain. Picking up the copies Ann dumped on her desk, she started separating the sections until she sliced her index finger. It was a deep paper cut on the tip, and it bled a large droplet immediately. Gloria brought her finger to her mouth and sucked it, noting the throbbing pain. She kept a container of adhesive bandages in her desk, but she didn't reach for them. She stopped and watched Drew sit, relaxed, legs sprawled out, talking to Ann.

Chapter 8

Whispering Angels

Thomas had picked up a stick and was now snaking it behind him as he walked the freshly chat road. He left the trailer to explore. Cassie, Chad and Michaela were watching their afternoon cartoons and Mama Jodi had fallen asleep in her recliner. Being by himself was his best form of entertainment, and now that he had the feather, Thomas wanted to walk and think.

Mama Jodi took care of them during the day. Thomas liked staying with her. Her trailer smelled of a sweet must, like the inside of a cellar and Mama Jodi's kitchen was as warm as her skin. She made everything relaxed, and when she needed help with anything, Thomas jumped up to volunteer. Sometimes he and Cassie would fight over jobs to do for her and then she would have to make up more work just to please them.

He had only walked a little way, sucking the heat deep in his chest. It had been too hot to play outside earlier, and now even though it was late afternoon, the sun still launched throbbing, drowsy waves. It must have been over 100 degrees, and Thomas's sleeveless t-shirt began to stick to his back and stomach. He headed for the cemetery which was only half a mile from Mama Jodi's house, but by the time he arrived he would be wet and salty with sweat. Thomas liked to come to the cemetery and sit in the crook of the roots of a maple tree. The tree was planted in the oldest part of the grounds and it was full of squirrels. He knew the dirt around the roots would be cool and once he got still the wind under the branches would dry him off.

Whispering Angels served as cemetery for Methodist churches in Hatch and Buffalo Springs. It once was a part of another smaller settlement called Matheson, which had a church and a general store. But like most small outposts in Oklahoma, Matheson didn't survive. With faster transportation, people could travel to Hatch or Ft. Reno to buy what they needed. Eventually the two main buildings turned ash with age and collapsed. Not even the footings could be located now. The cemetery remained though, surrounded by wheat fields.

Mama Jodi told him there was sagebrush in a ravine down by the cemetery's back gate. After looking on the Internet, he found that the grass in Nani's drawer was probably sage. It was used in a ceremony called smudging to bless a house and cast out bad spirits. He could wrap the sage together in a bundle, light it, and smudge his house, praying that good things would happen under his roof. Mama Jodi wanted to know why he needed sage, and he told her that he had seen it on TV. He was curious that's all. She did not question him further and told him to bring back some for her.

He followed the narrow gravel road through the cemetery and walked through the far gate. Stumbling a little down the ridge, he found the red crevice Mama Jodi said would be there and a clump of the slivery green shrubs with woody stems. As he rubbed his fingers across it, he smelled the peppery scent, the same as the plant in the pouch at Nani's. He twisted the stems until he gathered a large bunch. It was harder to break off the branches than he realized, and some of the feathery leaves stuck to his fingers. He bundled the branches with a rubber band and started back to his maple tree.

Thomas found his spot under the tree and took off his sneakers. He wiggled his ankles, brushed away the dirt creased in between his toes, and settled back up against the tree, using one of his shoes as a pillow. Mama Jodi had first brought him here when he was eight or nine. She showed him the graves of the pioneers and those of their babies, their markers pitted by erosion and veiled in thin layers of moss. The names were hard to read but some were as old as the Land Run from 1889 to 1890. This fact made Thomas think that some of these people settled the land before the whistle blew on that April day or some of them died shortly after the rush. From what, he couldn't say. Maybe they were sick when they came here. There were no doctors or hospitals on the plains.

He'd taken a field trip once to a pioneer museum where the museum people acted the parts of homesteaders who made the Land Run. They had also made the kids do chores, like washing laundry, beating rugs, and plowing a garden with a blade attached to wooden handles, kind of like a wheelbarrow. His teachers said they had to work so they could get a feel for what it would have been like to be a pioneer child. Thomas remembered it being more work in one day than he'd ever had to do in his eleven years, so maybe they died because they were too tired. The babies' markers were all white and a

small lamb rested on top. Most didn't have names but only *Baby Johnson* or *Baby Boy Jech*. Gardens were eventually added to the graves. The big cedars, probably 100 years old, lorded next to graves, their roots pushing up the narrow headstones. Beds of iris covered entire plots, and a few sprouted rose-of-Sharon bushes to mark the foot of the grave. People continued the tradition in the newest section of the cemetery by planting Bradford Pear on either side of the markers.

Thomas's tree was in the older section and as he sat under the hulky maple, he wondered if in their grief people forgot how trees grow large and spread their roots wide enough to upturn marble. He snoozed a little under the flopping leaves and listened to the branches grind up top, resisting the incessant blow. He thought about how to conduct his own smudging ceremony. Would it be better to be alone in the house or should he try to convince the others to be involved? How long would it take the sage to dry? A couple of days he decided. That would mean he could try by Friday, and by then he could find out more about the words he was supposed to say.

A hoist chain slammed and clanked into its flagpole posted near the front gate. Thomas rarely saw a flag flying here, except on Memorial Day. On that day a steady stream of visitors made their way to Whispering Angels to place plastic flowers on graves. The churches in town made sure that even the older graves were decorated. Most people came back out a few days later to collect their decorations, but a few forgot or thought someone else would take care of it and the flowers ended up blown off the graves, littering the chain linked fence in a spectacle of artificial blues, pinks, and yellows.

He began to doze off, his eyes closing with the length of each breeze, his eyes opening again with the clank of the chain. He noticed a redtail circling low around the wheat field beyond. It swooped down and landed in the stubble. The wheat had been harvested a few days before.

He shut his eyes again and traced the lines of light under his eyelids. Swooping like the hawk, one line became two, then four. He followed one until it burst into a flame of blue light. He searched in the blackness between his eye ball and eye lid for the next, follow it to its end another blue flame, seeping into the blackness. His body softened within the roots of the maple, softened behind his eyes and beyond his thoughts. The blackness grew to blue then green then gold.

A man began to emerge from the gold. His shoulders became defined first and then his neck and head, in silhouette. In a snap, with a jerky motion, the man's face moved forward and his identity became clear. Curly hair and a full beard. Thomas's brain linked the image to St. Christopher he knew well from the church. It was like a simple equation.

The image snapped again. St. Christopher stood in the red ravine behind Mama Jodi's house. He looked down at the bones of the dead dog which Chad had found there. Thomas wanted St. Christopher to speak. Explain why he was standing in the ravine. Even in this dream Thomas wanted answers. But St. Christopher did not speak. He had a hawk on this shoulder and like liquid the hawk poured off St. Christopher's muscled frame, swooped low, and then flew off toward the horizon.

Another snap and Thomas was now on St. Christopher's shoulder and they were walking through the red ravine. In one stride St. Christopher stepped out of the dented

earth and began stepping across the fields full of wheat, along the blacktop, along the gravel roads, up Thomas's dusty driveway until they reached his house.

With yet another snap, Thomas stood in front of his house with St. Christopher in between. St. Christopher raised his arms and stretched them out wide then he disintegrated into orange smoke which grew thick and covered the house and the barns.

Thomas woke to the sound of a blue jay squawking on the branch just above him. Then he heard tires crunching the chat and an engine slow down. Thomas opened one eye to see a black truck idling in front of the long gate. A man in black trousers, a white shirt, with a red tie, stepped out of the truck and swung open the entrance, hopped back in the truck, and drove on through to the far side of the cemetery. Thomas turned and watched as he pulled up to a grave along the short road. The man loosened his tie and pulled it from around his neck before leaving the truck. He reached down, grabbed something from the floorboard, and then got out and walked toward the grave.

Two pear trees stood like nannies a small coffin's length from the headstone with a tiny garden of pink periwinkles planted beneath each, the hem of their skirts. A pole with a swinging yellow birdhouse bent slightly over the flowers, a child's garden tenderly created by a childless parent.

Thomas had seen him here before and each time was caught off guard. The first time he had heard the man talk to the headstone. Thomas had felt like he was intruding so he quietly slipped off behind the cedars, climbed the fence, and went back to Mama Jodi's. He had found her pinning up a pair of pants for Chad, and she swatted his thigh as he danced around on her kitchen chair. When he asked her who it was, she told him it

was probably Mark Nospers from Buffalo Springs. He and his wife had lost their little girl four years ago to Meningitis.

"Four years ago," Thomas had thought by the way the man was acting that it had happened just weeks ago. "Why does he still go out there and talk to her like that?"

Mama Jodi swept the pins from her mouth. "He and his wife didn't have anymore children. She was the only one and now his wife has left him. Besides, it's not for you to judge how he chooses to grieve his daughter, Thomas. If he wants to go out there everyday, it's none of your business." Mama Jodi had stuck three pins back in her mouth and accidentally poked Chad's ankle with the fourth.

"Ow!" Chad yelped as he hopped on one foot.

"Well, be still. I'm almost done." She quickly swooped up the legs of the jeans, a pair of Thomas's hand-me-downs, and fastened the inseam. "There," she unbuttoned the waist, grabbed Chad under the arms, and set him on his back on the kitchen floor. "Now give me back these jeans, you little monkey." She scrunched the jeans from his skinny body and smacked him on the bottom as he ran off in his underwear.

Mama Jodi pressed her hand on her knee and got up slowly with a small grunt. Thomas sat at the table chin in his hand. "What's the matter?" she said.

"It's just sad is all. Why did something like that have to happen to him? He seems so nice."

"He is nice, I guess. But that doesn't have anything to do with bad things happening to people, Thomas." He didn't look consoled. Mama Jodi sat down beside him and folded her hands in front of her. "You know, we're all different. I've had a lot of grief in my life. My husband died when I was just a young mother, and then I watched

my mom and dad both die slow deaths to sickness. It's not that bad things won't happen; it's how we handle it."

"Yeah, but you seem happy, Mama Jodi. He seems so sad."

"The death of a child is the worst kind of death. No parent wants to outlive his child."

"How long will he stay like this?"

"Who knows, child. Only God knows. But until then you'll still see him tending to that grave. Perhaps he'll tend it to his dying day. There are worse habits don't ya think? Come to think of it maybe he's not sad at all. Maybe you make him out to be sad."

But as Thomas watched him now, the man looked sad. He had crossed his legs in front of him, he was still wearing his dress pants from work, and began to pick weeds from the grass around the plot. No one really close to Thomas had ever died. He did go to a funeral once – Mama Jodi's cousin. He suspected that they made him go just to say he'd been to one. But Mama Jodi didn't really look sad then – not even when they went up to the casket after the sermon.

It scared Thomas to think of his family getting by with good grace in life, and that it might soon end. Eventually someone had to die. He looked up and noticed the sun setting beyond the wheat field, a giant orange orb melting into the freshly disced soil. The pioneers probably picked this spot because it was on a rise – a good place for the dead to watch the sun go down. He'd been out here long enough. Gloria was probably at the trailer waiting for him, letting Mama Jodi feed everybody supper before they went home. Thomas put on his shoes and grabbed his knees to wait.

Finally, the man rose and unraveled a piece of fabric from his pocket and hung it from a low branch on one of the pear trees. It was a pink and green windsock, which immediately caught the wind, elongating it in jagged shifts. Mesmerized by the whipping sound of the nylon and the small loops of movement, Thomas didn't realize the man left until he heard the tires peel out on the road.

He knew he could walk to the grave and get a closer look if he wanted, trace with his fingers the name on the headstone, rustle the windsock. Standing up, he started in the direction of the new graves. He hadn't bothered to put on his shoes and he felt the dry grass crunch under his bare feet. The wind pushed at his back, making his shirt billow in front. But he stopped. It didn't seem right. He went through the front gate and as he turned to fasten the latch, he could hear a soft moan as the massive cedars rocked. Thomas paused and listened, letting the scene soak in before he went on.

Chapter 9

Starfire

Starfire Indian Gaming Center beckoned you in to spend your time and cash. Gloria thought it looked like a merger of mega church and mall, the allure of purification and big money, wholesomeness and Harley give-aways. Outside was calm, only the vibrations of the pulsating stucco, but inside rattled the constant ding of payout as flashing kaleidoscopic lights hypnotized.

When Robyn had asked Gloria to go out, she was surprised she'd said yes so quickly. After Ben's outburst about the bank papers, Stacy's rant at the pool, and her near miss with Ann, Gloria figured a night out was the least she deserved. Can't make things right – have a drink. It had been since college that she had been out drinking with friends, going to the bathroom in packs, dancing with old men.

Robyn's haunt was the *Rez* in the Indian casino off Highway 18. Gloria agreed to come because she hadn't been to Starfire since it had become a Las Vegas style casino, like the commercials said. Only a year ago it was a gas station with a metal bingo hall attached and a small wood-framed smoke shop, complete with drive thru window, in the parking lot. Now it was neon on the prairie, the sanctuary for naughty Christian suburbanites, eighteen-year-old high school seniors skipping school, and on the first of the month, section eighters with fresh checks. But it was Thursday night and Robyn had assured her it was the best night to avoid the usual crowd.

They walked through the numerous banks of slots, a metal maze of harmonic and animated leprechauns, iconic cartoon characters, American flags and fierce bald eagles. The zombie-like gamblers who sat on stools drooling in front of them did not look up as Gloria brushed past. All they could see in the glow of the triple, or in some cases sextuple, rows were lines of sevens and black bars. Robyn stopped at the black jack pit, separated from the main floor by an iron rail and the plush garnet carpet below. Employees dressed in black pants and white long-sleeved shirts guarded the open-arched entry. More serious than the slot pullers, the clientele here were treated to personal service. Men and women smoked cigars and ordered drinks at the felted tables and exhibited such a fierce concentration that they never acknowledged the petty looky lous lined up along the rail. Standing and gawking in, made Gloria feel slightly embarrassed and she pushed Robyn along.

Moving on to the back of the casino, Gloria wondered if they would ever stop. Then over the low tones of the machines, she picked up the gritty sound of a live band and followed Robyn around the slots to the bar. Robyn led her to a table next to a

wooden half wall which separated the lower floor, closest to the band, from the upper floor, closest to the bar. They sat down and from here Gloria could see the casino floor. She guessed this building sprawled over three acres, and she tried to find a pattern to the rows of slots planted on the Berber floor. Most machines only asked for nickels or dimes, but she wondered how long some of these people had been here and how many nickels added up to not being able to pay an electric bill. She thought about Stacy. Would it be easier to keep Stacy away from a place like this? Did the lights and whirs stir the brain as much as a pipe full of meth?

"This is for smoking is that okay?" Robyn reached over, fumbled her fingers through her purse, and produced a cigarette case. "Yeah, sure." Gloria noticed that the entire bar was filled with smoke.

Tonight Robyn wore a white spaghetti strap dress, which Gloria thought was very pretty except for the mesh waist. But she noticed that other women in the bar were dressed like Robyn. One bleach-blond at the bar swung a strappy stiletto to the lead singer's rhythm, and as she leaned in to talk to the pudgy man beside her, the cowl of her sequined halter slipped like a napkin to her lap. The woman raised up and so did the halter. The man, of course, didn't mind, and Gloria wondered how it must feel to go all night without a bra. In her denim capris and brown sandals, she felt ordinary.

"May I take your order?" a girl with black hair asked. She was dressed like the employees Gloria saw in the black jack pits, but she did not look old enough to be working in a bar.

"What do ya want to drink, honey?" Robyn nudged her.

"Oh, I guess I'll just have a coke."

"Are you kidding me?" Robyn flicked her wrist and pointed a blue frosted fingernail at the waitress. "Bring her a rum and coke to start. We'll warm her up first."

"Yes, ma'am, and you?"

"I want a whiskey sour."

Gloria watched the girl walk away, noticed her hair pulled back in a tight bun. She wondered what the girl did when she wasn't working here, and she imagined her living in Ft. Reno, in one of those clapboard houses along the highway on the north side of town. Maybe she used her money to support her parents or to pay for college, but whatever she did outside didn't match her formal demeanor at the *Rez*. However she had been trained to be inside this gaming oasis could not be how she really lived, and Gloria suspected that all the tribal people felt that way. Whatever these white people think doesn't matter as long as they come out and spend their money. Even the name of the bar made her smirk, especially since she'd scolded Thomas for his misunderstanding when they had visited Nani. Gloria leaned over to make a comment to Robyn, but she was scanning the room, searching for something, like a hunter looking for prey through binoculars.

She refocused on Gloria, "What'ya think?"

"Well, it's not the honky-tonks I've been in before."

"By the way, how'd you get Ben to let you out of the house tonight? Did you have to make his dinner or something before you left?"

"No, Mama Jodi has them until bedtime. She said she'd even make sure they had their baths before she brought them home. That way all Ben has to do is put them to bed."

Robyn looked over her shoulder, "Hell, why don't they just stay the night?"

"Ben likes them to be home at night."

The waitress brought their drinks and they listened to the music a little. Four people made up the band, two guitarists, a drummer, and a female lead singer who grabbed a tambourine from time to time. They covered 60s and 70s rock songs. Typical, Gloria thought, the bar's attempt to appeal to the boomer-set.

She sipped her drink. "My mom would like this place."

"You should bring her here sometime. Where is she now?"

"Huh," Gloria sat her drink on a standard cocktail napkin, "Who knows."

"What do you mean?" Robyn smiled at the man at the next table. He wore a leather bomber jacket and fiddled with the aviators which rested on top of his head. He winked at her. Robyn turned back to Gloria.

"You'll laugh when I tell you the last place we found her."

"Me? Why?"

"With the circus – didn't you hear?"

"You're joking."

"Naw, she's not with the circus she's with the fair. You know, running with carnies"

Robyn laughed loud throwing her dark head back so that Gloria could see the roof of her mouth. "For real? That's awesome. Hell, that's hot. When did this happen? When you were little or what?"

"No." Gloria never hid her mother's choices from anyone, so telling Robyn about Starla seemed like a good way to make conversation. "I was in high school. We were

living with Mama Jodi anyway. Starla had a habit of coming and going. I'm surprised you didn't know about it. It seems like everyone in town knows. They either look at me thinking 'That poor girl, I don't know how she got through it' or 'That girl is a prime example of white trash.' Now with Stacy living the way she does it makes it worse."

"I guess, but who gives a damn about what those bastards think. With my reputation I'd have left town or holed myself up with the curtains drawn if I let people get to me." Robyn took a swig, "But this is me. If it there wasn't a me in Hatch, it be someone else like me in Hatch. I can play this drama out 'til I die."

Gloria took a napkin and wiped the sweat from around her glass, "I read this book in junior high by S.E. Hinton..."

"Yeah, every kid in Oklahoma's read her books. I loved them. I wanted to run off to Tulsa and be in that movie – the one with Matt Dillon."

"*Tex*. That's the book. At the end of the book Tex says to Mason 'There are people who go and people who stay' Starla was a people who go. Staying at home made her antsy. One time she left without even taking her clothes."

"So what are you?"

"I guess a people who stay."

Robyn nodded to a place by the slots, "Look, Drew's here."

Gloria turned around, saw Drew's lanky frame stop as he searched for a familiar face. His hair, usually covered by a bandana at work, curled up in soft wisps around his ears, and she noticed his red t-shirt tucked into his jeans in the front, exposing a silver buckle. Her throat burned and she felt a slight panic rise from her stomach. "What's he

doing here?”

“I invited him.” Robyn waved him over. He nodded his chin and ambled over.

“Robyn, why?” Gloria’s jerky movement caused her hand to bump her drink and a small slosh hit the table. She quickly sopped it up.

Robyn picked up the drink and moved it out of Gloria’s way, “God, Gloria, settle down. He’s for me okay? Shit, has it been so long since you’ve been out of the house?”

Drew walked up behind them and put one hand on each of the women’s shoulders. “Hey, have you been here long? How you doing Gloria?”

He smelled like the college boys Gloria used to date, fresh, musky. “Uh, fine, as soon as I find the ladies’ room – excuse me.”

Gloria headed out on the floor and found an alcove next to the theater box office, a place where she could hide and think. From where she stood she could see Drew and Robyn at the table. Gloria watched as Robyn took his wrist and ran her finger around the leather bracelet he wore. Drew leaned in talking over the band and their heads touched slightly.

The bathrooms were nearby and she pushed the women’s room door so hard that it knocked loudly against the interior wall. A young woman in a mini-skirt, fishnets, and a ripped black t-shirt glanced at Gloria as she scooted past. The girl looked out of place here and then Gloria remembered seeing posters for a RATT performance later in the theater.

She walked passed the female bathroom attendant to the sink and waved her hand in front of the sensor. Arcs of water hushed from the basin. This place wasn’t like a circus. It was like being stuck in some kind of psychedelic womb, a warm fluid place

where everyone felt welcomed. Hell, she realized, even the bathroom hummed with that synthetic melody. Away from the bar, she relaxed and gathered her thoughts.

Drew had been to the office everyday since she'd met him. He would chat and flirt with Robyn until they laughed like conspirators, and Ann would shoo him away from Robyn's desk, sending her on some file finding errand. Then he'd sit in the chair in front of Gloria's desk, rest one ankle on the opposite knee, twist his boot laces, and ask her about life in Hatch – who owned the gas station, when construction would end on the bypass, little league baseball teams. He told a story about his mother and sister driving down to Enid to pick up Yorkshire Terrier and how the silly dog latched herself to his father after they got home and barked and bit both women.

He found out that she could play guitar. When he found out that she didn't play much anymore, he had said, "That's a shame."

Two women came through the bathroom door and their voices softened as they approached her. The women looked to be in their sixties and reminded Gloria of Ann, too short hair, too big purse, too thick waist. One told the other, her double, that she hated to leave her lucky slot, but it was getting late and she had to be up early to babysit her grandkids tomorrow.

Gloria moved into a stall and stripped off a piece of toilet paper. Back at the mirror, she wiped away the caking, creeping eyeliner under her eyes. She'd put on too much make-up in her excitement at finally having a night out.

Trying to husk back the layers to that girl behind her eyes, Gloria considered what she might have done with a Drew then. Dared him to like her. Challenged every point in his attempted at conversation. Locked eyes long enough to be understood – I know you

like me but you'll have to try damn hard to get me. That must be it. She realized it as she looked at the sag under her chin and traced the line that had formed above her left eyebrow. If Drew did try whether being polite or being sincere, she wouldn't play coy girl now. It had been too long since she was used to male eyes sizing her up, not lustfully, but as a man fascinated because she was real and interesting. Not as an extension of his ego, but as a separate self.

Robyn was right – he'd come for her anyway and why not play? It was just flirting and in some places this kind of interaction went on at parties every weekend, she told herself as she used her fingers to comb her curls. Rummaging through her purse, she wanted lip-gloss instinctively. Pulling out old grocery lists, gas station receipts, a credit card bill she'd been waiting to pay, and an old pacifier of Chad's, she finally found lip balm. It would have to do. She smeared a layer on her lips with her little finger, smacked a couple of times, checked her nose and exited the bathroom, but not before the easy glide door bopped her in the forehead.

Drew smiled as she came back to the table, "Hey, there you are. We thought maybe you'd been picked up by one of those bikers over there."

"Damn, Gloria, did ya fall in?" Robyn nudged Drew with her elbow and let out an audible *Ha*.

Gloria sat back down across from Drew, "No, there was a line." She started the shifting glasses on the table. Taking a breath, she looked right at Drew, "So what have you two been talking about while I've been gone," then over to Robyn, "the stock market? Emily Post?"

Robyn shifted her grin and narrowed her eyes at Gloria, "No," now she grabbed Drew's arm, "Drew was just telling me about hiking in Colorado."

"Yeah, just a couple of buddies and me. We hike up in the forest where we're completely isolated, camp for about a week, and then hike out." He took a gulp, finished his drink, and flagged down the waitress for another one.

Gloria took in the muscular arch of his back and his dark skin. She couldn't come up with anything clever to say.

"I'd always wanted to do something like that," Robyn's high pitched voice became more like southern sap.

"Well, it's pretty rugged. No showers, no real toilets. When we do bathe, it's in a cold stream."

Robyn grinned, "Do you skinny dip in that stream, Drew? Makes me want to come camping with you even more." She leaned in close again, brushing her breasts up against Drew's arm.

"If it's a cold stream there's not much to see," Gloria picked out the straw from her drink and butted the end a few times, a pah pah tum to the line.

Robyn looked startled, "I guess we'd have to know what he started with." Breast bump again, this time the momentum tipped him over a bit.

"Whoa now, if that's how it will be I'm not taking you ladies past the state line."

"Who said we were going," Gloria sat back and crossed her arms over her stomach, "Robyn started this business."

Drew paused. Gloria could see he was deciding whether to quit or come back for more.

"Come on Gloria, you wouldn't go anywhere with me?" He leaned forward. She felt his hand cup her knee under the table. Her face flushed. She had been picturing Drew in that stream as much as Robyn had.

Someone belted out a "Hey, Where ya been?" at the bar, and Gloria realized she'd hesitated too long. Drew took her silence as a yes, she would go anywhere with him. She couldn't speak. Robyn sat slack jawed surprised by this turn of events.

Drew continued, lifting his hand, "Maybe not camping but somewhere else? Where would you like to go? I'll take you anywhere."

"Gloria's not going *anywhere*, remember – wife, mother, roots firmly cemented – die where she was born and so on?" Robyn smiled but it was the smile women give to other women to mean you pitiful thing, with contemptuous I'll put you back in your place teeth. But Gloria had had enough. She thought this was going to be a night out with Robyn, hopefully build a friendship, something she needed desperately right now. If she had known that Robyn had set this up as some sort of dating game, she wouldn't have come. Why did she invite Gloria and Drew together?

Then kittens began meowing from her purse. Robyn and Drew shared confused glances, but Gloria knew it was her phone. Cassie had changed her ring tone again. More meows as she found it, and she saw Ben's number on her screen.

"I'll be right back," she said and flipped the phone open to answer. "Wait a minute," cupping her hand over the phone and her ear, she walked back to the hallway by the bathrooms where she'd been before and wedged herself up against the carpeted wall and a column.

"Yeah. No, just Robyn.

Are the kids okay? Why did you call me?

Her what? Oh, it's in the dryer."

She looked up in time to see Drew coming toward her.

"Yeah, it's pretty noisy."

He stopped, blocking her view of the casino floor, and leaned on the wall next to her. She turned away and felt her shoulder brush up against his chest.

"I'll be home later. No, not right now. Okay, bye."

Drew bent down catching her with his blue eyes. "Everything okay?"

Whiskey drifted from his lips, and she felt all of him envelop her, his warmth pressing against her.

"Oh, Ben had a question about the kids." She thought she should move, but she didn't. "Where's Robyn? I'm surprised she let you get away."

"I told her I saw somebody from work. She said she'd order me another drink." He grinned, a charming one which exposed the tip of his tongue. He liked that he'd outsmarted Robyn. She noticed his right eyebrow cock and the slight lines crinkle above his cheekbones. He put his fingers lightly on her elbow and began to stroke the soft skin around it, "I didn't mean to make you mad, Gloria." He said her name clearly, all the vowels low and sweet. The apology wasn't delivered with embarrassment. He didn't hang his head or use his hands fretfully. He stood his ground, too close, eyes fixed straight into her.

She started shuffling her purse and put her phone back in, "I'm not mad. I don't have time to play Robyn's games, that's all."

Drew waited until she'd placed her purse over her shoulder and then took her left hand. "I'm not playing games." His tender face spoke his honest focus on her. He would kiss her. She imagined his stubbled lip on hers. Somehow he had turned their meeting into something intimate, and she lost track of the lights and pings and the pounding of the drums. She allowed herself to be backed into the corner, his thigh brushing hers, and his buckle poking her hip. Gloria realized that this is how women find themselves entangled by another man. It's a longing for the sensual, that primal intent, which was lost long ago. The desire muted by the clatter of kids and work, but screams like a survivor when awakened by another's magnetic touch. She could choose now, at this second, and she wanted to choose yes. What would it matter? Drew was a wanderer. Gone in a few months.

She reached for his forearm. She ran her fingers under the sleeve of his t-shirt. She became numb to everyone else. The drums throbbed in her head and the guitar pulled out her craving, exposing it for him. With his thumb he rubbed the small round diamond on her wedding ring, "Your not happy, Gloria. Don't you deserve to be?"

An electric guitar struck a jarring chord and Gloria winced. He had said too much, and the desire faded again. Gloria suddenly understood she didn't have time for this.

She shook her head and pushed away from the wall, "What do you know about happiness, Drew?"

When she made her way back to Robyn, some guy in a red tie and white dress shirt was on his cell phone at the next table. Gloria could hear his loud conversation. "Yeah, move those funds to the other account. What?" He pushed his stumpy finger into

his free ear and turned his head toward the phone. The people he'd come with sat quietly gawking at him.

Gloria stood with her hands clasped. Drew had come up behind her and sat down next to Robyn. Watching him take a seat so casually angered Gloria immediately. "I'm ready to go. I've things to worry over and the two of you don't even rank in the top 50."

Robyn looked suspiciously at Gloria, "Yeah, well I'm not ready to go yet and you rode with me remember. Where have you two been?"

Gloria conceded. Let Robyn have all of it, the bar, the guy, the cleavage. "Look, all I know is Ben's worried about wheat and cattle, the kids can't take a step without me... I've got typical domestic problems. Make another date with wonder boy here and let's go. I'll be up front."

Outside waiting by Robyn's car, Drew put his hand on her back, "Gloria, it seems like I'm only apologizing to you tonight. I don't want any more from you than you're ready to give. Please don't think I'm a jerk. Can I still come talk to you in the office?" She didn't speak but all her short lived dislike of him had melted like shavings of ice. He backed up, "Tomorrow, okay?"

Robyn finally came from behind and broke in, "Drew, I know another place to show you if you want to dance. Gloria can take my car home and I'll go with you. What do you think?"

"Yeah, sure."

Robyn handed Gloria the keys with a wink and grabbed Drew's hand. From the driver's seat of Robyn's Honda, she watched them rebound across the parking lot.

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Back home, she quietly opened the kitchen door and felt her way through to the bedroom and then the closet off the master bathroom. She couldn't tell if Ben was pretending to sleep; he wasn't a snorer, but he was not a light sleeper either.

She lifted her shirt over her head and sniffed the lingering cigarette smoke. Robyn's words about Starla came back to her. Gloria had never made plans to leave. She couldn't imagine walking away from her children and now that Stacy was gone, Michaela was her responsibility too. Although Drew somehow made the impossible possible, entertaining what ifs scared her. She had never allowed that kind of thinking before – if she did, where would it stop? Starla kept company with what ifs. Gloria's moral compass always pointed in the opposite direction of her mother. She tried hard to do what was right in the eyes of Ben and his family, and now that she had children, in the eyes of Hatch. Starla was the well from which to dip indignation and shame and let it run through the Gloria's fingers as so much tainted water.

She had heard Ben say it before, "Just don't do what your mother did." As if she would unconsciously walk out on her family and not realize that she'd abandon her children until it was too late. Not a phone call, not a decision to come back home, would make it right. Once she left she could never be forgiven.

Gloria finished dressing in an old t-shirt and a pair of cotton shorts and crawled slowly into bed. Ben didn't move. His back faced her and she reached out and caressed his shoulder. He turned to her without a word and ran his hand across her jaw. Kissing her roughly on the neck, he moved his fingers to her breast. Gloria knew his hand's next move, swiftly to her waist and then her groin. Within minutes, he entered her, and she

held on to his forearms trying to find the muscles she had learned by heart when they were younger.

After he finished, he rested on top of her and nestled his face in her neck. She thought he might be crying, but she could not be sure, and instead of sympathy she felt disgust.

Tonight was one more in a series of failed encounters. She wouldn't do this anymore. Turning away from him, she moved to the edge of the bed. She fell asleep, thinking of Drew.

Chapter 10

Ready for Seeding

Ben rode the sun-bleached tractor over the contour of the field, watching behind him as the caked metal from the disc cracked through the earth and turned under the wheat stubble. After harvest the fields were tilled under, the stubble and weeds massaged back into the earth and ground to shreds, ready to receive new seeds for planting in September. Usually Ben would wait until morning or late evening to disc a field, letting the cooler temperature tame the dust. But now it was mid-afternoon and sweltering, so hot and muggy the sky sagged under its own weight: flaccid, deflated. The roar and the dust and the heat tranquilized the amputation of the land from Ben's life. Working the field was all Ben could think of doing this afternoon.

That morning, he had signed over a quarter section to Pioneer Standard Development Corporation. Sitting in the bank office, clean and chill, David Schmidt

acted as the company's representative, and he antiseptically moved the money from one account to the other. David had said that he would take care of everything, and Ben had self-consciously shifted from one hip to the other in the stiff office chair as David's nimble fingers alternately pulled affidavits from the printer and smoothed his silk tie. As if begging for an extension the week before hadn't made Ben feel inadequate enough, he felt completely castrated now. Since the funds from the land sale would pay off part of Ben's loan from the bank, he would never have his hands on any of it. Being forced to sell, facing a man who controlled his fate simply because their grandfathers chose to see money differently – Ben's family deciding to farm and David's deciding to finance them – it was all Ben could do to hold in his anger. Despite how independent Ben felt in the field or on those red roads, when the bills came due, he was reminded that a working man owned nothing.

David had smiled pulling his thin lips over his white teeth, shook Ben's rough hand, and said, "I think you'll be surprised what will happen to our little town because of your decision, Ben." Ben muttered, "Sure," and walked out of the bank his gut churning.

No rain since April caused the drought stricken clay to turn up clods of dirt the size of a man's head. Grit stuck to Ben's face and arms, and he felt it between his teeth as he ran his tongue over his dry lips. He reached for a thermos of ice water that he kept close by; the ribbon of liquid washed the dirt down his throat. He'd left the windows down. Wilhelm had purchased this tractor used from a farm auction several years ago and the air conditioning had broken shortly thereafter. Fixing such a luxury seemed a waste of time. Sitting high in the cab, he could see for miles around him – fields belonging to his family or his neighbors. Nothing blocked his view. Looking up he

could see the prairie skyscrapers of Hatch: the steeple of the church and the towers of the grain elevator. Like bits of fur on a mangy dog, tufts of trees broke up the horizon only slightly. With only one tractor, he alone was responsible for plowing up the fields they had left. No money to hire extra hands, no son old enough to be of any real help – if the job didn't get done, it was Ben's fault.

When Ben was little, he had ridden next to Wilhelm in the cab. They had had a better tractor then. In fact, they had more than one. Ben's grandfather had insisted that the entire family be involved in the farm. At eight, he had helped stack hay in the barn and when his little brother Danny was old enough, Ben taught him to use a scoop shovel. During planting or harvest, his Grandfather Metzger worked one end of the field while Wilhelm worked the other. Ben sat on a bucket between his father and the closed door. He rested his hand on his father's shoulder to steady himself, and Wilhelm sang Jim Reeves songs: "My cathedral has a ceiling of blue, my cathedral 'neath the sky." Ben had run his fingers across the nubs in Wilhelm's old plaid shirt, and he remembered the damp, tangy odor when Wilhelm put his cap on Ben's head. Riding with his father, Ben learned the quality of soil and the importance of terraces. Every trip out with his father was a lesson which ended with "You understand?"; then Wilhelm would tousle Ben's hair and smile and nod. At eleven, the same age as Thomas, Ben drove the tractor between fields while his father followed behind him in his truck, and he sang his own songs at twelve while he turned under the small field which surrounded their farmhouse. For Ben, the universe was nothing but wheat fields and cattle.

Today, singing did not occur to Ben. He fought back his disgust at letting go. Plenty of farmers were selling out. All around he saw evidence that land didn't mean

what it used to. Families sold off entire sections to housing developers and everyone was happy. The farmer saw a huge return on his investment – much more than a crop could pull in. In fact, the government made it a practice to pay farmers for fields that remained fallow. The real estate agent obtained a hefty commission; the developer passed the money on to the builder, who paid his immigrant crew a wad full of cash; then the Mexicans sent American dollars home through Western Union and fed entire villages. And in the end, prospective suburbanites mortgaged a brand new house in a country-like setting, but not too far from a mega-discount store. A new sorority of PTA moms moved in and took control of the small school which now became a larger school much like the one they escaped, but at least now they muscled in a say. Hell, even the oil and gas industry picked up a cut – the commute required twice as much fuel. So why be upset? This morning he had contributed to what made American great – the freedom to sprawl.

What he couldn't see from the tractor, but what he knew oozed out of the city, beyond the eastern horizon, were developments named in memory of what concrete slabs covered: Still Meadows and Lone Oak and Pheasant Run. Land today is disposable just like everything else, he thought. It means no more to most people than passing the collection plate in church. It sifts through various preoccupied hands until it passes to some lawyer or computer analyst who is satisfied with a quarter of an acre, and he cannot possibly understand the potential of it.

Yet, every year Ben offered up the evidence of his hard work, the sacrament of man's manipulation of the soil. But turning over this dirt meant less over time, and Ben's desperate hunger to salvage it meant little in a disposable society. From an early age he had absorbed the difference between families who owned land and those who leased it.

His grandparents told stories of the Depression and the Dust Bowl: "Owning this farm was the only thing that saved us from starving." It was his grandfather's soapbox and Ben still stood straight-legged on the frame despite how rickety it had become. Owning land meant keeping your independence; it meant an investment for your children. His father would say, "What good is cash? It gets you into trouble and makes you greedy." But very few Land Run families were still farming, and somehow he couldn't help but think that he had missed the message of the changing world.

The wheel slipped a little as Ben dug through a clump of Blue Stem. He'd let the tractor venture out of its path. Pulling it back, he took another drink of ice water, washing away the dust in his throat. He took comfort in the thought of Gloria from the night before. She had come to him and he realized how much he needed the softness and security of her.

During past harvests, when his mother and Gloria brought food to the fields, Ben felt the happiest. He had jumped from the combine to find the tailgate of the truck pulled down, covered in a bed sheet. Summer sausages, ears of corn, potato salad, and biscuits, all wrapped in foil, anchored the makeshift tablecloth against gusts of wind. He would sit on the tire well inside the truck bed and watch Gloria help his mother. Eva, in jeans and a prim cotton button-up shirt, made sure the harvesters ate first, pointing to each item as if the men couldn't fill their own plates. In the beginning, she gave Gloria the job of pouring ice tea from a large orange jug. One summer image burned clearly in his mind, watching his young wife, standing awkwardly, one ankle turned down, her belly beginning to bulge. She was pregnant with Thomas, and Ben's pride rose with each

phase of her gestation. He understood that with this new child another seed had been planted, another keeper of Metzger values.

Gloria had not grown up on a farm, and early on, she had shown her inexperience, using the wrong names for equipment, misjudging the importance of time. She eventually caught on, and he began to count on her to share his vision for their life together. But now his mother was gone and Gloria had taken a job to help pay Josh's hospital bills. They had added their own three children and their own burdens, and now when Gloria brought food to the harvesters, it was hamburgers and fries wrapped in paper.

Ben checked behind him and noticed that the egrets had found him. Circling around the disc, they split the dust, arcing and weaving a net to snap up beetles and other insects. Turning around, he faced the sun in the northwestern sky; the glare stung his eyes. Taking off his cap, he wiped his face with his shirtsleeve. He edged the tractor along a gully of sunflowers, careful not to run the disc off into the low places.

The tractor chugged on, bouncing slightly. The earthy smells of sweat and dirt lined the inside of the cab. He rounded the outer edge of the section and started a new path, repeating the pattern, working out and in and then in and out. Then the tractor sputtered, jerked, and rolled to a stop.

"Dammit to hell!" Ben slapped his hat against the gearshift. "Goddamn carburetor." He swiped his hat back on, opened the door, and jumped down.

With his head stuck in the side of the unreliable hulk, he heard a honk and turned to see Wilhelm's truck charging across the field. He stopped the Dually behind the tractor, and Ben approached his father, noticing another person sitting in the truck –

Lester Fisk, Wilhelm's CPA and part time attorney. Lester struggled to get his short squat body to swing around and out. When he landed in the freshly turned soil, his leather lace ups sunk down to his trouser cuffs. Dad must have drug him straight from his office, Ben thought, and he could just see that sycophant toss down his sloppy convenient store burrito and hop in the truck with no questions asked.

Wilhelm rushed toward Ben meeting him in the open field. Ben noticed his western shirt tucked tightly in his crisp jeans, his buckle catching a flash from the sun. He wore a stiff, straw cowboy hat. He'd dressed up to come find him. Wilhelm always dressed neatly when he went to town to do business and dragging Lester out here didn't appear to be in Ben's favor.

"You've done it now, boy."

Ben rubbed his forehead with an oily hand, "Done what, Dad? Just what have I done now?"

"You think you can sell land without me finding out? You think you can keep secrets from me? I told you a week ago not to sell and you did it anyway. Now those Schmidts have their greedy hands on something that's ours, something they've been wanting for years, and you roll over like pup and give it to 'em without a fight."

Wilhelm, planting his boots firmly in the rows, pointed his finger at Ben.

"It's just one section. David used the extra money to cover the interest and next year's got to be better." Ben nodded toward the tractor, "I've got to fix this beast. You got any suggestions for this?" He forced a weak laugh, hoping to calm his father, but Wilhelm stood like an obelisk, unyielding, eyes boring into Ben, "Look, Dad, I told you what was going to happen and I didn't do it because I wanted to. I had to."

"Then I guess you'll understand when I've got to do what I've got to do."

Wilhelm's tall frame cast a shadow across the field. He turned and brusquely gestured to Lester to come closer. "Lester here is filing some paper work for me. You really leave me no choice, son."

"Dad, that piece of land was mine. Grandfather Metzger left it to me. If I needed to sell it, then it only hurt me. We needed the money. David's been down my throat and if he didn't get that, he would've come after much more – the house, the barns, the equipment. I had to. Can't you see I had to?"

Ben hoped to talk some sense into his father before he spoke words that couldn't be taken back. He knew that once his father had said something it became immutable in Wilhelm's mind.

"You're right about your section, but I'll be damned if I'll let you have anymore of it. We're trying to keep up a farm not sell off bits here and there. Selling out means you can't be trusted and there's no way in hell I'll have someone running my place who doesn't understand how to hold on to it. What're you gonna do after I'm gone? You gonna save any of it for Thomas, for Chad? Will there be anything left for them? I thought I knew you, Ben. Thought you were the one who understood. Now..."

Wilhelm bowed his head. Ben noticed the valley at the top of Wilhelm's hat; no smudges and the shape still thick and supple, no creases. The son of a bitch had bought a new hat. Here Ben was struggling and Wilhelm had the time and money to buy a goddamn new hat?

Ben began to circle his father, wringing his hands in his shirttails. He had to keep moving or he would explode; he felt he would truly tear something to pieces. This was

worse than the day he fought with Gloria; he knew he would never really hurt her. But his father, the man who expected so much yet never acknowledged how hard he worked, he could feel it – right on the surface – he could deliver a blow to the head, a fist in the gut.

"Dad, I'm telling you it bothers me more than you! Hell, it was mine with no strings attached to you! Dammit I'm old enough to make my own decisions about my property. When do I get to have a say?"

His father ignored Ben's question. "So that's why Lester is here. I want you to go home and don't think about working with me again. I'll hire a manager before I'll let you step foot on another piece of this farm, and then I'll leave everything to Danny and the kids."

"Are you forcing me out?" Ben looked over at Lester who stood sweating behind Wilhelm. Lester wiped his face with his bare hands and Ben could see blobs of sweat stains forming under his arms and around his chest.

Wilhelm turned to Lester, "Now you talk."

Lester stepped forward awkwardly nearly tripping in the mounds of dirt. "Ben, you know that your father hasn't legally signed this farm over to you yet. And he has the right to take you out of his will at any time, and as such he may declare that you are not allowed to be anywhere on his property. Once this happens you could be arrested for trespassing if you refuse to cooperate and continue to go on as usual."

"Hell, no." Ben slid off his hat and let it fall to the ground. He looked at Wilhelm in awe. He had believed, naively and like most children do of their parents, that Wilhelm would regret being too gruff with his family; that one day his father would return to him

with soft eyes and apologize for not being that same man that Ben remembered as a little boy. Turning his back on the two men, Ben walked over to the tractor and leaned his head on the door of the cab.

Lester cleared his throat and continued, "This is an unusual circumstance, Ben. I hope you'll understand and do what your father says."

Ben slid down to the tractor's side foot rail. Do what his father says. He'd always done what his father said. With his back to the door he bent down and let his elbows rest on his knees, "I don't know what else I could've done."

Wilhelm jumped in, "You could have kept it all together but you didn't. Sometimes we just have to recognize that a job's too big for us, Ben. You're just not the right man for this job." He turned to Lester, "Ain't we about done? It's damn hot out here."

"Well, I need to give Ben a copy of the papers you filed. I'll get them." Lester high-stepped it back to the truck.

Ben stood up and faced Wilhelm, "That's it, huh? That's all you got to say to me after all this? Who are you going to get to run this place? Who else is going to give two cents about how the crops are coming along or whether or not we're building good stock? No one cares as much as I do." Ben moved in closer until he was chin to chin with his father. "This is my life goddammit!"

Wilhelm turned his head slightly as Lester walked up on the scene. "You'll find something else to do. I hear the plant is hiring. I'll put a word in for you." He backed away from Ben and started toward his truck, "Hurry up, Lester."

Ben no longer recognized the man in the field as his father. Frozen, realizing that the requirement to leave became real with his father's suggestion to work on an assembly line, he snapped, "You nasty old son of a bitch! I've worked my ass off for you and this is the thanks I get. Come back here so I can knock the hell out of you." Ben took wide steps across the field, the red dirt crunching, puffs of red vapor blowing up from his boots. More swiftly than Ben thought possible, Lester Fisk found himself between Ben and Wilhelm. He held up a hand in an attempt to settle Ben down.

"Now Ben don't do anything you'll regret. This situation may still be repairable. Here take these and I'll see what I can do." His sweaty hand held out large envelope.

Wilhelm called from behind the wheel, "Just throw them down Lester and get in the damn truck. I've wasted too much time out here already."

Ben noticed sweat running into Lester's squinty eyes. Ben realized that he was like every coward who worked for Wilhelm. Lester was the kid on the playground who started the fights for the bully, the one who teased the kid who would stand up for himself, pulling him in so the mean kid could fight him. Lester never fought though, he whored himself out so that he didn't have to fight. And at this moment Ben recognized that hitting Lester was just like hitting his father.

In one swift movement he punched Lester in the face. It sounded like a hammer hitting a watermelon, and Lester went down with a thud and a huff as the ground knocked the breath out of him. Ben reached down, snatched the envelope from Lester's stiff fingers, and kicked the dirt where he lay. Without a word he walked away.

Wilhelm scrambled from the truck. "Now look what you did. You crazy bastard. You'll be lucky if he doesn't file assault charges on you."

Ben looked back to see Wilhelm helping Lester up. Instead of driving back home, he took off across the field. He didn't know where to go or what to do next. He could lie down in these fields, let the dirt blow up around him. Or he could wander, walk the roads until he no longer recognized the grasses or the gulleys. Or he could let the hateful July sun bake him dry, as dry as he felt, no trickle of hope, leathery and tough.

Chapter 11

Independence Day

Thomas scooped up a butterscotch candy from the street. His plastic bag rattled as his hand found the opening between the loops and he dropped it inside. More candy peppered down on the street from the trailers and bed of pickup trucks. It was the Fourth of July parade, the first of the day's activities in Hatch's annual summer celebration. People sat, bottoms sagging, in canvas pop out lawn chairs along the only main street in town, while Thomas and his friend Zack along with other kids wove in and out of grandmas and farmers, moms and merchants who cheered as they watched their family members slowly ride past. Thomas and Zack had left Mama Jodi and Chad to race against the other kids to see who could pick up the most sweets tossed out by the cheerleaders, harvest queens, and Kiwanis.

The high school marching band, only three columns full, just passed and now the cheerleaders in red and white skirts and sleeveless knit tops whooped by in a trailer pulled by a Chevy. They always threw the best candy. Zack jerked forward to grab a piece of chocolate taffy. He scared Thomas sometimes. Zack had been his friend since they were four and he always liked doing dares. Thomas sometimes went along, mostly when they were at Zach's house. Like the day they went next door and stole Mrs. Meyers' big panties off her clothesline. They had only moved them to her mailbox, so she found them later, but sometimes Zack wanted to go a little too far for comfort and Thomas would chicken out and say he had to go home. Zack would make fun, but he would never rat Thomas out so they stayed good friends.

He watched as Zack moved up and down the front of the line of spectators in quick rabbit steps, picking up candy. Thomas noticed that a few pieces had landed over their head in the grassy ditch behind them and he took off to get that candy instead. He heard his name, "Thomas!" and he turned around to see Cassie waving from the Little Chicks float.

He nodded back and then looked for this mother. She had come back from helping Cassie onto the trailer and was sitting next to Mama Jodi in canvas lawn chairs along the curb.

The truck and trailer slowed to a stop in the middle of the street, forcing the horses and riders from the Hatch Round-up Club to stop as well, along with all the county politicians, waving from cars behind them. Every year, the last participant in the parade was the mayor, Ron Schmidt, dressed as Uncle Sam, and Thomas could see his stove-pipe hat bobbing in the distance.

He turned his attention back to his sister. Music began crackling from a CD player in the back window of the truck. “You’re a grand ol’ flag. You’re a high flyin’ flag”

The girls moved in a wobbly fashion, bumping into each other. The trailer was smaller than the floor of the dance studio where they had practiced and Thomas chuckled as elbows flew into chests and cheeks and spins created domino stumbles. He took his bag of candy over to Gloria. Chad and Michaela saw him coming and started begging for the bag. Thomas handed it over and stood beside Gloria.

“Mama”

“Yeah?” Gloria moved her feet in small steps echoing the scattered choreography of the Little Chicks.

“I’m going to the carnival.” Thomas willed her to look at him, but it was Mama Jodi who looked up and smiled then began patting his arm with her blue-veined hand.

“Don’t you want to watch your sister?”

“I’ve seen ya’ll practice this dance in the front yard since May. Besides they’ll be moving on soon enough.

And almost because Thomas said so, Mrs. Simon told the girls to take a seat. The crowd clapped and the truck jerked the trailer forward. The girls leaned on top of one another and shrieked which made everyone laugh.

“Okay, but stay around the booths, and if you see your daddy tell him I’ll be at the Church with Chad and the girls.”

Thomas nodded to Zack who came running and they took off to the empty lots behind the police station. The carnival set up rides and booths here every year. It

amazed Thomas that except for two days in July, these lots were nothing but dry yellow grass, jagged cracks in clay, and fire ants. But on Independence Day when the carnival came, and he could only imagine where these carnival people really lived, the lots transformed into reds, yellows, and blues and smells of warm sugar and fried dough. There was a Ferris wheel and an Octopus and swings and the high school football team had created a fun house this year.

“How much money you got?” Zack asked as they passed a booth full of plastic toys and inflatable animals on sticks.

“Five dollars.” Thomas stopped but he didn’t want to. He wanted to head to the games. He was determined to win any prize this year for shooting a basketball through the hoop. Last year he had almost won it, then his dad made him quit too early.

“Your mom give it to ya?”

“No, it’s mine. I got it mowing Mama Jodi’s yard. Why, how much you got?” Thomas didn’t want to talk about money with Zack now. It wasn’t his business where he got his money or how much money he had anyway.

“Twenty. My dad just handed it to me and said bring him back the change.”

Thomas saw Zack pick up a package with a plastic set of gray handcuffs and a cap gun. It was small and cheap-looking and the sign above it read \$5.

“I’m getting it.” Zack said, reaching in his pocket without even considering whether it was worth the money or not.

Thomas thought it was stupid for Zack to give up five dollars for something that would break after a couple of minutes of hard play. Not only that, but to give it up to

some guy that made a living ripping off kids made him even madder. He had plenty of stuff in his room worth more than that.

“Wait, Zack. I have a set of handcuffs at home, metal ones my uncle Danny gave me. He got them in Ft. Worth. I’ll sell them to you and they’re close to real.”

Zack held out the cardboard package and looked at Thomas, “Well, okay. But let’s go now.”

“I don’t want to go now. We just got here.”

“If we don’t go now you’ll forget. Besides, this is baby stuff anyway. We come here every year and it’s the same old thing.”

Even though he wanted to stay, he let Zach talk him into leaving, “I’ve got to find my dad and see if he’ll take us home.”

#

Gloria walked with Mama Jodi, carrying both canvas chairs and the plastic bags full of candy which whipped and bumped her thighs. She helped Mama Jodi across the grassy ditches while Chad held onto her t-shirt from behind. Cassie and Michaela, hands clasped, ran ahead, blonde and dark strands of hair flapping like two flags from different nations in the wind.

As they approached the carnival’s music and fatty smells, Chad started tugging hard on her shirt-tail.

“I want to ride the big wheel, Mama.”

“We have to go to the Church first. Then we’ll go.”

“How long will that take?” He’d let go of her shirt and was now stiff and red in the parking lot. Gloria knew his next move: fall to the ground and refuse to get up until

he got his way. It was already at least ninety-five degrees and sweat dripped down the back of her thighs, collecting at the back of her knees. She hated that feeling and fighting with Chad in the middle of the parking lot behind the Co-op was the first sign that things were going to go badly that day. All Gloria could think of now was getting home as soon as possible.

Mama Jodi walked over to Chad and put her hand on his shoulder. “Come on, baby. I’ll get you an snow cone at the church. Wouldn’t you like that?”

Chad nodded, bottom lip protruding and grabbed onto the hem of Mama Jodi’s shirt. Gloria watched him sulk away and she should have been relieved that Mama Jodi intervened, but instead she felt like a mother who couldn’t handle her own children. If Ben could be more involved, it would help, but he had no patience with them either. He lost his temper easily now.

It hadn’t surprised her when he told her that he had hit Lester. When Ben told her that he was going to ask Luke Schumer for a job at the processing plant, she was relieved. No matter what Ben said, Gloria was upset that their lives had come to this, begging for a factory job. She had loved the farm as much as he did. What it meant and what working the land stood for. But why keep doing something that can’t feed three kids or pay for their college. Thomas didn’t want to be a farmer. Why not let him go on – learn to make a new way.

The group reached the Explorer and deposited the chairs in the back. She put the bags of candy under the seat, hoping it wouldn’t melt in the heat. She wished she hadn’t agreed to work at the church bazaar.

“Let’s get to the church where it’s cool.” She shut the back hatch and they headed across carnival-filled Hatch, stifling from the mid-morning sun and community good humor.

#

Ben had watched the parade from the Texaco station parking lot. He did not want to miss seeing Cassie dance, but he’d been in the café hoping to find Luke Schumer. The last person he wanted to run into to was Wilhelm. He was around, probably trying to drum up sympathy from the scene Ben had created in the field. Ben knew the whole town had the story by now. Everyone knew that he had punched Lester and everyone knew why – Ben was being forced off his land.

He went inside to get something to drink. It was hot and Ben lifted off his cap to wipe his forehead. He noticed the drinks on ice in a large cylinder next to the front counter and picked up one. As he reached in his back pocket for his wallet, he saw a young man with dark curly hair approach the cashier. Ben waited. The guy then turned on the charm for Mandy, the cashier.

“Hey, how’s it going?” He did the chin nod then the big smile. He put a large water and a pack of gum on the counter. Mandy couldn’t help herself – she flipped her hair behind her ears and gave a big smile back.

“Hi, hey, I’ve seen you around. Drew, right?”

The guy let out a deep-throated, “Huh. How’d you know?”

Mandy rang up his purchase but never took her eyes off him. “1.97. Robyn told me about you. She’s my aunt.”

He handed over two dollar bills. “Yeah? Robyn’s a nice girl. We work together. And she did take me out to the casino the other night. Maybe you should go with us sometime. You 18 yet?”

Ben stiffened a little. Gloria was with Robyn at the casino on Thursday.

Mandy giggled, too long and shrill. “Yeah. I’m nineteen as a matter of fact.”

“Well, then you’re perfectly legal. Thanks, darling” And with that they guy loped out the door and onto the street.

Mandy was still distracted until Ben put a dollar on the counter. “Here you go.”

“Oh, sorry, Ben.”

“Who was that guy?”

“He just moved here from Kansas. Came to work. It’s nice to have a new face around here, isn’t it?” Mandy shut the register door and handed Ben his change while looking out the front glass of the Texaco.

Ben didn’t agree. A new face, especially one that belonged to a young roamer, didn’t equal nice.

He walked out of the store and across the street among the other pedestrians for the day to the carnival. Why hadn’t Gloria mentioned that this Drew guy would be with her and Robyn at the casino? For that matter why hadn’t she mentioned that Garrett had hired a new lineman? Questions wrapped in anger swirled up in Ben’s gut. He hadn’t felt this way about Gloria since they were in college. Would she be tempted? Hatch was a safe place for married couples usually, and Ben had never worried that Gloria might even consider being with another man. He watched people mill about the streets of Hatch, move in and out of the carnival booths. He knew all these people, knew them all

since he was small, knew their mothers, father, sisters, brothers, cousins, aunts, and uncles. They were either friends or enemies and either way the thought of any kind of sexual temptation seemed like incest.

Ben spotted Luke Schumer with his granddaughter in line to ride the sad looking ponies from Hank's Animal Adventures. Ben's thoughts shifted to the humiliating conversation in front of him. He thought about timing, decided it didn't matter. Luke had had these conversations before. What did it matter if it were here in the middle of Hatch's Independence Day celebration or late at night, the phone call that Ben imagined had awakened Luke before.

Ben took a swig from his bottle and took two steps toward his fate when he felt a hand on his forearm.

"Hey, Dad." Ben turned to see Thomas and his friend Zack. Ben noticed Zack had grown pudgier. Thomas had out grown him by two inches.

"Yeah?"

"Zack and me want to go back to the house."

"Yeah?"

"This stuff is boring so we want to go back home."

Ben was shocked by Thomas' request. He'd never thought Thomas had been bored in his life.

"How you going to get home?"

"Can you take us?"

"No. Not now."

"Can Mom?"

“You’ll have to ask her.” He put his hand on Thomas’s shoulder and pushed him away, “Look, I’ve got to go talk to someone.”

“Do you know where she is?”

“Try the Church. She’s working at the bazaar until noon.”

Ben walked away, back on the task of getting a new job. The first job he’d have since college.

#

“Now what?” Zack slapped his palms on the sides of his thighs.

“We’ll find my mom, I guess.”

“You know she’ll never take us. Let’s hitch a ride.” Zack’s eyes grew wide as this new idea blossomed.

“What?”

“Look someone’s got to be headed out that way. Let’s ask my brother. Come on.”

#

Gloria took her chair behind the fruit pie booth. She looked around and found herself to be the youngest one there. Mama Jodi had taken Cassie, Chad, and Michaela to the carnival so Gloria could work her shift.

The money from the fried pies was going toward a new altar piece, sterling vessels for the bread and wine. “Proper utensils on which to serve Christ’s body and blood,” Mary Agnes had said the day she’d called Gloria and asked her to volunteer.

Gloria watched as Mary Agnes Bauman fussed over the pies, lining them up over and over according to their flavor. They had a good variety this year – like every year:

apple, cherry, peach, and Betty Haas's old German mincemeat recipe. The arts and crafts bazaar was an annual Fourth of July event. The church hall was a busy gathering place lined with booths selling crocheted pot holders, dried flower wreaths, and handmade soaps and candles.

Gloria was here mostly out of principle more than to really lend a hand. If she hadn't signed up, it would have appeared as if she didn't want to contribute, and service no matter how unneeded meant showing up.

Betty and Mary Agnes were closer to Mama Jodi's age, and they alternated sitting and standing like two matronly weights on a pulley. Reva Schumer helped the customers as they came by. Reva was a few years older than Gloria, closer to her experiences. Reva's two boys were in college and it seemed to Gloria that Reva like her empty nest. It was around noon and people were buying dessert to eat along with their hot dogs and hamburgers which were made by the Knights of Columbus. A few people were coming by to get pies in bulk for their family picnics later that evening.

Reva chatted with the other women like they were her sister, but she especially flirted with the older men. She had struck up a conversation with Mr. Lang, "No, probably no fireworks tonight. Not unless you get into with your wife, Mr. Lang." She nudged his arm as she joked.

She patted and flirted, he nodded and exposed a tobacco-stained grin. When he left, Reva sat down in the folding metal chair next to Gloria. Betty, finally resting after scooting pies said, "I used to date him you know."

"Really," Reva said. Then she leaned in closer to Betty and swiped her knee with a limp hand, "Was he a good kisser?"

The older women giggled. Mary Agnes covered her mouth with her hand. She still wore her wedding ring. It was so loose it slipped and wiggled around her finger. Her habit when she wasn't fussing with pies was to turn it around.

Betty gathered herself again and then matched Reva's conspiratorial lean, "Why no – too rough and too sloppy."

Reva wouldn't be stopped. She looked around and took a survey of all the older farmers who were shuffling through the crowds with their wives, "So who in this bunch of old farts was the best kisser?"

Betty and Mary Agnes giggled again but their eyes had begun to twinkle. Their tone moved from girlish embarrassment to mature straight talk and Gloria could tell they were going to dish it up.

"Well, every girl wanted to go out with Frank Willis. Oh, what a dream," Martha clasped her hands together.

Gloria spoke up, "My neighbor Frank?" She pictured Frank in his overalls and cap, slightly hunched with thick eyeglasses.

"Oh yes. Danced like Gene Kelly," Betty confirmed and Mary Agnes nodded.

"Yeah, but was he a good kisser?" Reva stretched the tease.

"You'll have to ask Mary Agnes. She went out with him," Betty said.

"As good as he was a dancer," Mary Agnes blushed a little.

And they all chuckled together. Even Gloria had to laugh as she imagined a young Mary Agnes in a 1946 Packard with Frank Willis.

They were interrupted by a group of women in their twenties, young mothers with babies in strollers each with at least one toddler hanging on to the sides.

Mary Agnes got up and crooned to the little ones while Reva filled their order. Gloria watched how effortlessly these two women interacted with the younger women. The transaction was smooth and pleasant, and then they joined the group behind the table again.

“No disrespect, Gloria, but your father-in-law was another catch in town,” Betty said.

“Wilhelm?” Gloria only saw Wilhelm as someone to be tolerated, not adored.

“Oh yes. Good-time Charlie, he was. But he knew his limits too. Strawberry-blond with eyes so blue-green, like tropical water,” Mary Agnes added.

“So did either of you ladies go out with Wilhelm?” Gloria was eager to hear more, despite her believe that something must be wrong with the memories of these old women.

“No, he tired not to have a steady girl. He liked to play and flirt with all the girls – that’s why we all wanted him.”

Betty hummed in agreement to Mary Agnes’ story, “Then when he got back from Korea he fell in love with Eva and that was that. Most of us were married by then but we were all a little let down.”

“Wil was that boy you hope you can always flirt with. The one who always makes you feel charming and beautiful,” Mary Agnes was spinning her ring now with a far away look. Gloria thought about Edward, the husband Mary Agnes had lost nine years ago. At his funeral Mary Agnes had remained stoic. Gloria remembered their five children around her, waiting to console her if she broke down, but she didn’t. It had been her oldest daughter, Vicky, who was inconsolable.

Gloria wondered if Mary Agnes' thoughts were still about Wilhelm as a young man or if they had moved to Edward as an old man. What image did a woman in her seventies hold on to? The fluttery tingle of sex appeal or the warmth of fifty years of marriage?

"So once he married Eva it was all over, huh?" Reva kept the tempo light.

"Oh, he loved her," Betty smiled.

Gloria noticed Mary Agnes look away toward the candle booth.

Betty continued, "The whole town talked about their romance. It was like watching two celebrities court."

"Huh," Gloria said, "That doesn't sound like the Wilhelm I know."

"You just can't predict how men will change, Gloria," Mary Agnes jumped back in.

Gloria didn't quite know how to respond. Mary Agnes seemed defensive, and now she had put Gloria a bit on the defense as well. Hadn't she been married long enough to see men change? To see Ben change? He certainly wasn't the easy-going man she had married thirteen years ago, and she was quickly becoming the woman who didn't have the patience for his weaknesses. So if Mary Agnes was implying that women have to remain the rock, while the men around her cycle through their shifting emotional stages, she didn't want to hear it.

Out of respect Gloria remained quiet and shifted in her chair.

"They all change don't they?" Reva said, "that's why it's so much fun looking at the young ones." She pointed across the gym. Gloria looked up and there was Drew.

He saw her, too, and she was afraid he'd come over. What would she say to him in front of these women? Maybe he was smart enough to know to avoid her.

He walked toward the hamburger stand and Gloria lost him in the crowd.

“Isn't that the new guy Garrett hired?” Reva nudged Gloria.

She swallowed, “Yeah, just this week.”

“What's his name?”

“Uh, Drew.”

Gloria spotted him again in line at the food stand. All she could see was the back of his head. He had his thumbs hooked inside the back pockets of his jeans and he wore that same dark color t-shirt. Almost as if she willed it, he turned around and their eyes met but only for a second. He made like he was looking around then turned back toward the front of the line.

“Is he single?” Gloria had to think for minute. She expected the question from Reva but instead it had come from Betty.

“I guess.” It amused her that all these women were interested in Drew. What she felt was normal and his flirting with her would be no different than if he flirted with Robyn or Reva or Betty and Mary Agnes for that matter. “Well, yeah and Robyn's got her eyes on him, so don't be planning any moves, Betty unless you willing to fight for him.”

The women chuckled again at the image of seventy-five- year-old Betty tackling a feisty Robyn for a man. The air tingled with good natured banter so when Drew approached their booth Gloria felt quite confident that she could handle anything. She felt comfortable with him and the natural order of chemistry between men and women.

Older women flirt with younger men and it meant nothing. It's how everyone gets their jollies in the mundane life of a small town.

She greeted him first. Better to be in control, she knew.

"Drew, gonna buy some pies today? Goes toward the altar fund."

He froze for a second. Gloria kept smiling. He hadn't expected her to be so bold, she thought. Then he grinned. He liked her new approach, she could tell. She felt a surge of excitement race between them, the same feeling that she had had in the casino. It made her knees shake but she held steady.

Reva joined the sales pitch, "Yeah, looks like you could use something sweet to eat."

Drew laughed and wiped his mouth with his fingers, "Okay, whatcha got?"

Gloria let Reva handle the purchases and she decided to sit down, thinking that it would make it look like she didn't care what he did once he bought the pies.

Before he left, he said, "See ya at work, Gloria," and with a nod he was off, walking across the gym floor.

"Oh my Lord, look at that ass," Reva blurted out and then covered her mouth.

The older women gasped and then busted into a laugh. Gloria laughed too, relieved that Reva was too caught up in her own thoughts to notice Gloria's flushed face.

Then Mary Agnes spoke, "A young man like that means trouble for someone."

"What do you mean? Maybe I'd like to have trouble like that," Reva said.

"No, no honey," Betty's tone matched Mary Agnes's, "He's all sex. He's the devil in disguise for some unhappy farmer's wife."

Mary Agnes looked at Gloria, "Yes, but you're not the one he's after."

#

“Ben, I can give you a job on the floor but I can’t pay you what you’re worth now,” Luke and Ben watched as his chubby granddaughter flapped her thick legs against a pony’s sides. There were six ponies harnessed to a wheel and they clopped around the circle giving rides to kids. Ben was slightly disgusted by the set up. These ponies were too old to be giving kids rides.

“I’m kind of in a fix, Luke, so I’d appreciate anything you can do. I’ll work overtime and weekends if I need to.”

Ben watched the ponies go around, felt the futility of it all. For what? So some kid could experience riding a sunken back animal? That wasn’t riding. That wasn’t feeling the breeze blow around your temples and the heat against your thighs.

“All right, then. Come down and fill out the paperwork on Monday. Does your Dad know you’re planning on doing this?”

Ben huffed, “He suggested it.”

Luke shook his head, “Well, it’s not the first time this kind of thing has happened, Ben, and it won’t be the last. Carl Latham came in last year and now he’s shift manager.”

Carl Latham’s story didn’t comfort Ben. Carl had lost his land because he was stupid. He speculated, planted too much wheat and couldn’t afford to harvest it. He was already in too much debt when he had started gambling. Sneaking off to the casino on poker nights. Being shift manager didn’t offer any kind of dignity as far as Ben was concerned.

Ben remembered that it was about time for him to pick up Gloria and the kids.

“Okay, I’ll see ya Monday, Luke,” he stuck out his hand and Luke gave it a quick shake.

The civil patrol warning sirens went off. It was noon. Ben noticed the ponies had finished, they seemed to know when their ten minutes were up.

Chapter 12

Smudging the House

Zack's brother sped away, slinging gravel from the driveway. He had dropped off the boys at Thomas' house. Thomas wished he had never agreed to ride with him.

"He didn't have to drive so fast," he said, brushing gray dust out of his eyes.

"Yeah, but that's how he drives," Zack replied. "He's rude and reckless, just like my dad says."

They both turned and headed for the house. Thomas realized as they were walking that the house was probably locked. He hadn't told anybody they were coming home. If he and Zack had to break in, he would get into trouble later. Automatically, they tried the back door, but no luck.

"Why do ya'll keep your house locked up, Thomas? You live way the hell out here."

“That’s why, I guess.” Thomas looked around, trying to think of the next step. The garage doors were down. Zack followed him around to the front porch. Without talking he tried the door. Locked.

“Now what?” Zack said, “It’s hot, Thomas. I don’t want to fry out here. Why didn’t you think of this before we drove all the way out here?”

“We’ll try the window.”

Thomas went around to his bedroom windows. He chose one and tried to lift out the screen using his thumbnail to pull it free. It was covered in red dust which made it slippery and he bent back his nail on the first try.

“Crap!” This whole thing was a bad idea, he thought. He looked at Zack and Zack looked back and shook his head, “You’re such a fag.”

He tried again until it popped out and landed against his forehead. He handed it to Zack who tossed it on the dry grass. Thomas then put his palms against the glass and threw his weight against the window. He tried to push up on it. It budged a little but not enough to be encouraging. Zack shoved Thomas out of the way.

“Let me try.” He applied the same technique – palms flat and Zack’s faced turned as red as his hair. He puffed his cheeks out so that he looked like one of those Kewpie dolls Thomas had seen at Mama Jodi’s house. The window cracked and Zack lifted it a couple of inches.

Zack backed away and smirked, “Never send a boy to do a man’s job.” He swiped his hands back and forth and then started to climb in, but Thomas shoved him out of the way.

“Whatever, it’s my house, freak.” He pushed the window up even more, “Help me up.”

Zack went down on one knee, cupped his hands together to give Thomas a boost. He climbed in half-way then lifted up a knee and scooted inside. After helping Zack in, Thomas shut the window, thinking he would put the screen back later.

“God, Thomas, why’s your room so clean?”

He felt slightly embarrassed. Zack had not been over in while, since Michaela had started living with them and since his parents were fighting all the time. Thomas had started keeping his room in order instead of hanging out with Zack. He spent most of his time lately ordering and re-ordering his stuff. He had not realized how weird it was until now. Having someone come in from the outside made him see how un-normal things had been.

“The handcuffs are in here.” He knew exactly where to look. He used a number system to prioritize his things. Objects in the shoe box marked three meant he would trade. The shoe box marked two meant he would keep it awhile and then pass it down to Cassie or Chad, but the box marked one meant that he would keep it until he died. He kept each shoebox under his bed.

He leaned down and dragged the number three box out, but Zack stuck his head under the bed and grabbed the box labeled one. Zack pulled it out and opened it before Thomas could stop him.

“What the hell?” Zack pulled out the feather Thomas had stolen from Nani’s house. It was obvious by its size that it was not a regular feather, one that could be found down by the creek or in the pasture. Thomas could smell the sage once the lid was

opened and knew Zack would pull it out next. Zack looked down and lifted the brown bundle.

“Give them back.” Thomas reached out, but Zack turned around, his back against Thomas’ chest. He blocked Thomas with his hip and then elbowed him in the stomach. Thomas folded in half and landed on his knees on the carpet. Zack came and sat next to him. He sniffed the sage bundle.

“This ain’t weed, even I know that, so what is it?”

“It’s sage – I think.” The pain in his stomach began to go away and he resigned himself to letting Zack in on the secret.

“Really? How’d you get it?”

Thomas looked at the sage and feather in Zack’s hand. It didn’t belong in Zack’s hand and Thomas sighed. He’d hidden them away thinking it was a stupid idea to use them and he felt so guilty for stealing them that he had wanted them to disappear. But hiding them away hadn’t stopped him from looking up smudging ceremonies on the internet. After all his research, he secretly hoped that they would banish all the bad thoughts from his home. Somehow seeing Zack touch them made them real and valuable. Having Zack do the ceremony with him might make it all work.

Thomas straightened his back and decided today was as good a day as any. They were home alone. By the time his mom and dad got back from Hatch, the cleansing would be done and he could really see if it made a difference.

“It’s for an Indian blessing. Do you want to help me do it?”

Zack grinned and nodded yes.

“We’ll have to burn the sage. As the smoke rises, we wave the feather and say a prayer and the smoke smudges the house. Clears the house of any bad spirits.”

“Whatcha wanna do that for?”

Thomas studied Zack’s face. He couldn’t tell him the real reason. Wanting his mom to look him in the eyes again, wanting to see her smile, to see that one slightly crooked tooth when she smiled. Wanting his dad to talk again, wanting him to tell stories of when he was a boy, to hear the laugh that came from behind the fourth button on his cotton shirt. Wanting his room back, wanting Michaela to go back to Aunt Stacy, and wanting Aunt Stacy to be a mother so he could have his own mother back. He did feel old enough to have to worry about every adult in his life much less take care of all their kids. Thomas wanted it all to go away so he could be eleven, and he understood standing in front of Zack that Zack could be eleven as long as he liked.

“I don’t know. Sounds interesting to me. Have you ever done it before?”

Thomas said.

He felt good being the one in charge this time. Zack followed Thomas around the house as he gathered twine and the long blue-handled propane lighter that his mom used to light the grill. He sat in the living room floor binding the sage even tighter until it looked like an exaggerated cartoon cigar. When Thomas was done, Zack picked it up and pretended to smoke it. Thomas yanked it out of his hand.

“Zack, we may just be kids, but this is serious business.” Thomas took advantage of his new leadership status to scold his friend. “If we do this and aren’t serious then the bad spirits can become even stronger.”

He went on making up a story so Zack would quit joking around. “Instead of cleansing a house it can make a house haunted.”

“So, it’s your house not mine.” Zack stood up and started flicking the lighter on and off.

“So, what I read said that the ghost spirit will attach itself to the people doing the smudging,” Thomas grabbed the lighter from Zack’s hand, “that means it can follow you home.” He stood still, waiting to see if Zack bought the story.

“Really?” Zack’s eyes went wide.

“Yeah, now follow me,” Thomas turned with authority and headed to his parents bedroom. “We’ll start here.”

He stretched his arms and held the bundled sage and the lighter ceremonially in front of him. Flicking the lighter a couple of times, caused no flame and his hands began to shake. Zack started to grab the lighter again, but Thomas jerked his hand back. “No, I’ll do it.” He tried again and this time the flame popped from the end of the black tube. He moved the flame under the tip of the sage, but it wouldn’t catch. He worried that the sage might be too green since he’d only picked it a week ago. Then the grass flickered and smoke began to rise from the tip of the bundle. He blew on it to help it catch.

A few embers dropped to the carpet. Thomas hadn’t thought about catching anything else on fire and he quickly stomped them out. But they caused black smudges on the floor. He was worried about what his parents would say but he was more concerned about performing the ceremony so he continued. He tossed the lighter to the floor. With the sage in one hand and the feather in the other, he began crossing his arms high over his head. Clouds rose in jagged strips to the ceiling. He then traced the edge of

the door with the sage, swooshing the feather behind it, scattering the smoke and the smell.

“Okay, we are supposed to say a prayer and then go around making sure the smoke hits all the doorways and stuff.”

“What do we say?” Zack asked.

“Well, I guess we say what we want,” Thomas realized that having Zack with him made the ceremony harder. He couldn’t get too personal in a prayer with him around. He would have to keep things general.

“Lord,”

“What? Don’t you have to pray to some Indian god or something?” Zack interrupted.

“No, you pray to your own God,” Thomas had learned this much in his searches. “Lord, please bless this house and take away all the bad spirits.” The bundle smoldered. It wasn’t quite as dramatic as Thomas would have liked but he was encouraged by the sharp smell. He was doing it. He was making things right. He moved the sage around the door to his parents’ bedroom and then began to walk down the hall. Breaking into the Lord’s prayer, he went first to Cassie’s room, then Chad’s and then his own.

“Our father, who art in Heaven,” he swiped each doorway, “hallowed be thy name.” By the time he had finished the prayer he knew by heart, he had made his way back to the living room. Zack followed, waiting to see what Thomas would do next. They stood silent for a while. Thomas looked at the clock above the mantle. It was 12:15. He knew his mom was supposed to finish working at the church at noon, so they might be home any minute.

“We’re supposed to do all the outside doors next.” Thomas said, looking over his shoulder toward Zack. “We’ll do the back door first.”

“Okay. Hey, I want to try too.”

“No, I’ll smudge, but you can say something if you want.” Thomas felt like the smudging would only work if the person holding the bundle and the feather knew what to do. It couldn’t hurt anything to let Zack pray, however.

“Uh, I don’t know any prayers.”

“You could say what you want to happen.” Thomas replied as he jumped up a little to brush the top of the back door.

“Uh, well, please help Thomas get all the bad spirits out of his house.” Zack stopped and sat down in a barstool at the bar. “Ah, Thomas, this is stupid. All we’re doing is stinking up your house and your parents will smell it when they get back and accuse us of smoking or something.”

“Shut up, Zack,” Thomas would not be stopped now. He could feel it working and he wasn’t going to let Zack tell him otherwise. The house did smell funny but it felt different. Thomas couldn’t explain it, but he felt changed. Bolder than ever, he turned to Zack, “Now we have to do the outside doorframes and then we’re done. If you want to help, come with me. If you want to whine like a baby, just stay inside.”

Thomas marched to the front door and began the Lord’s prayer again, chanting as he reached around the frame. He opened the door and turned to see Zack coming toward him.

Once on the porch Thomas finished the prayer and swept the bundle around the outside frame. He stood still a moment. Was he done? Had he smudged everything?

“Come on.” He tugged at Zack’s shirt sleeve.

“Where are we going” Zack said, following Thomas off the porch.

As Thomas rounded the corner of the house, the wind swept across his body, slapping his t-shirt to his chest and sending him off balance. The bundle of sage he held flew out of his hands and rolled along the dry grass. Thomas crouched and scrambled to stop it. The wind also caught the hawk’s feather. It blew tight against his shoulder, rested there a while, and then a gust sent it swooping toward the barn. Thomas ran after it and caught it in mid-air. He then went back to the bundle, but by the time he had reached it and picked it up, the sage was no longer smoldering. The glow had gone out.

“Shit!” Thomas examined the sage. All that was left were the fleshy parts of the stalk. He didn’t know if it would light again.

“What’s wrong?” Zack leaned over to see.

“Go inside and get me the lighter.” Zack did as he was told.

While Thomas waited, he thought about quitting. His parents would probably be home soon. If he went back and opened all the doors, like he was supposed to according to smudging instructions online, the house wouldn’t smell like sage by the time they arrived and he wouldn’t have to explain anything. But he wanted to smudge the barn too. Why not smudge every part of the place? His dad spends most of his time in the barn when he’s not in the field or in his truck. Smudging it only makes sense if he wanted to make everything right.

“Here,” Zack handed Thomas the lighter. He flicked it a couple of times trying to light the bundle again, but the wind snuffed it out each time.

“It’s not gonna light out here. We need a windbreak.” Thomas headed toward the barn. He walked fast with Zack behind him as he had been all day and then Thomas remembered the embers on the bedroom carpet and thought better of lighting the bundle in the barn. He looked for a place where the barn wall blocked the wind. .

He found a sandy spot and told Zack to stand south of him and the bundle. He stuck the feather in his back pocket and began to flick the lighter a couple of times. Why did it never light the first time? Holding the flame up to the sage, he knew he’d be lucky if it lit again. It smoldered a little and Thomas told Zack to blow on it.

Zack’s spit sprinkled down on his hand, but Thomas’ mind concentrated on the bundle. Now he prayed that it would light. Finally, a glow slowly spread across the cluster. Zack let out a little shout and Thomas shut his eyes thanking God that it had started again. He felt a pinch on his forefinger and then on this thumb. Looking down, he noticed the flame had gotten stronger and then he realized that the twine was burning. Reacting to the pain, he instinctively tossed the bundle away from him and began sucking his thumb. He could hear Zack laughing.

Thomas turned to see that the sage hadn’t landed in the sand but in a clump of dry weeds. They were now on fire, deep red-orange flames with black bases snaking across the ground.

“What do we do?” Zack screamed.

“Go get a horse blanket out of the barn,” Thomas scooped up sand and began tossing it on the flames. After a few tosses he began to stomp on the fire, but it was burning too quickly. The wind was blowing it away from the barn. It was headed out to

the pasture and the cedars beyond. Once it got that far, Thomas knew he'd never be able to stop it.

“Now what?” Zack handed Thomas the blanket.

“You keep throwing sand and I'll beat the flames with this.”

Both boys started to work, but each could see that the flames were faster. Thomas hurled the blanket over his head and down to the ground. He could feel his hair matting to his forehead and trickles of sweat running around his ear and down his jaw line. On one pass the blanket stirred up the bundle of sage and scattered more embers across the dry grass. He stopped, flung the blanket in the fire and began to cry in panic.

“Thomas!”

He heard his father's voice. He turned around and started to speak but Ben grabbed his t-shirt and pulled him out of the flames. Ben had pushed him so hard that he landed in the sand and up against the barn wall.

“Gloria! Call for help!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Thomas caught the sight of his mother, running back to the Explorer. She picked up her cell phone. Ben scooped up the horse blanket out of the flames and started beating the fire. He turned to Thomas, “Hook up the hose to the spigot and bring it here!”

Thomas hurried as fast as he could. Watching his father try to put out the flames scared him even more. Some were as tall as Ben and the rolling smoke surrounded his father. The wind carried the heat away from the barn and toward a clump of trees on the other side of the fence. He carried the hose toward Ben and wondered what had

happened to Zack. He spotted him next to the truck with Cassie, Chad, and Michaela. Just like a baby, Thomas thought.

He handed the hose to Ben, coughing as the smoke burned through his throat. Ben did his best to spray down the flames, but then a loud snap and whoosh stopped his effort. Thomas knew that the fire had reached the cedars. He and Ben both backed out of the smoke and watched them burn. Ben's boot cracked the case of the propane lighter. He bent down to pick it up and then stared at Thomas in disbelief.

"Ben! Thomas!" Gloria came up from behind and began pulling them both away from the fire. "The fire department's on their way! It's out of control now. We'll just have to wait"

Ben rounded on Thomas, his large frame blocking out the smoke and heat from the flames. "Goddammit Thomas!" Ben shoved him in the chest. He backed away in clumsy steps. He had seen Ben this angry before but not over something so deserved. Thomas could only imagine what his father was going to do to him.

"What happened?" Ben demanded grabbing Thomas by his upper arm, jerking him straight and shaking the broken lighter in his face.

Soot and sweat did not hide the panic in Thomas's eyes. He only knew to tell the truth. Any lie he could tell would not explain how it all happened.

"We were smudging the house. I wanted to smudge the barn too and that's how it started," Thomas felt like sobbing, but he controlled the muscles in his neck and chest. Crying would do no good.

"You were what?" Ben looked at Gloria. "What the hell is he talking about?"

“Smudging. To get out bad spirits.” It was no use explaining the rest. Thomas knew it was the worst thing he had ever done.

“So that’s where the feather and sage went,” Gloria said.

The wail of sirens from tanker trucks coming up the drive bled through the wind. Thomas walked past Zack and his family, back to the front porch and sat on the steps alone. He reached for the feather in his back pocket and held it tight as he said another prayer.

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“Over 20 acres, Gloria!”

“He’s just a boy, Ben. I know he should be punished, but this could affect him forever. Are we going to love him or hate him for it?”

“I don’t know.”

Thomas could hear the disappointment in his father’s voice through the bedroom door. It was late. The fire burned most of the afternoon and the volunteer fire fighter in Hatch had to call in other volunteer departments from Buffalo Springs. It was only when the wind died down after dark that they began to control it. Not only did Ben lose pasture grass, but he also lost a small barn full of hay and the worst was that the Willis’s, who owned the other half of the section, had to be evacuated. Now the whole town of Hatch would know what he did and they would eventually know why – know that Thomas had burned down his farm trying to be Indian.

Thomas leaned his head against the door and listened. He didn’t care about getting caught eavesdropping. What could they do to him that would be worse than the embarrassment and shame he felt on his own?

“Come in, Thomas,” She sighed as she said it. He swung the door open wider and found his mother sitting on the end of the bed and his father in the wooden rocking chair crowded between the chest of drawers and the TV cabinet.

“Thomas, what the hell you were thinking?” He sounded disgusted. It was as if his father was saying I hate you, I wish you were never born.

“Ben, please. Can’t we let Thomas talk?”

“I don’t think he gets to say anything, Gloria. What can he say? There’s no excuse for what he did.” Ben’s face began to turn red. He’d cleaned up since the fire, but Thomas could see soot smudged on his temples around the same place where his veins were bulging.

Gloria moved forward like she wanted to pull him next to her, but she stopped. “I do want to know why you wanted to smudge the house. You know those things belonged to Nani. Why did you take them Thomas?”

Thomas wished she would hold him, but he would never have asked. “I don’t know.”

“This isn’t like you Thomas. Stealing things, sneaking around. Did you even tell anyone you were coming home from the carnival?”

“No.”

“So let me get this straight, Thomas. You stole, lied, and vandalized. You purposely lead some hokey, hippy Indian ceremony, denying your own religion, and almost destroyed everything we own.”

“I guess,” Thomas could not speak. His father put what he had done in a context much worse than he could have ever imagined. What could he ever do to make it up?

Ben rose from the rocking chair, “You guess?” He stood over Thomas like he had earlier when the flames and smoke billowed around him.

Gloria stood up too, “Ben, sit down. How can he comprehend all that? It’s too big for him. He’s only eleven.” She nudged a shoulder between Ben and Thomas, trying to block his father from him. Thomas could smell smoke and peach pie in his mother’s hair.

“How else is he going to understand? What do you want him to be, Gloria? Responsible? Remorseful? Or like your bunch? You knew he stole that stuff from Nani and you didn’t even ask him about it.”

“You wait a minute, Ben. This is about Thomas not about me and my family. And I didn’t ask him about it because Nani told me not to. Besides I didn’t really believe he took it.” Gloria turned to Thomas and put her hands on his shoulders. He was almost tall enough to look right into her eyes. “It’s not like you, Thomas. But I guess we’ve all done things lately that are out of character.”

“No, I don’t think so.” Ben sat back down in the rocker, “I think this is who we are. A failure, a thief, and a cheat. Huh, wonder what the others will turn out like. Well, we know one will be just like her mama – a whore.”

His mother turned quickly and then moved to stand over Ben. “Who are you talking about?” She began flailing her arms and bent down so that she was face to face with his father. “Who are you talking about!”

Ben looked amused, “Have you gone crazy? What are you doing?”

Thomas could not believe what he was hearing. He wished his father would get angry again. He wished his mother would calm down. The whole situation had gone topsy-turvy.

“Let’s go, Thomas. I’m not doing this anymore.” Gloria turned him around and pushed him out the door.

“Go where, Gloria? What, truth too much for you?” Ben shouted from the dark corner.

“Go get in the car. We’ll go to Mama Jodi’s. You don’t need your things.”

“If you leave tonight, that’s it, Gloria!” Ben hadn’t moved, his tone hadn’t changed.

Thomas stood at the backdoor. He heard his mother go down the hall to get the other kids. Ben didn’t make a sound from the bedroom. Thomas wondered if he would get up and come stop them. Maybe he would say he was sorry and beg them not to leave. Or maybe he would come storming out of the shadows and hurt them all.

Gloria came back with the little ones and shuffled them past Thomas out the door. She pushed him out last, “Go on.”

“Fuck all of ya’ll! Why not go? What else have I got left?” Thomas heard Ben’s last words as Gloria shut the door.

Chapter 13

Leaving

Gloria had lived in this trailer from the time she was seventeen until she left for college. It was too much to think that she might live here again. She struggled to consider her next step. All she could do was breathe and let thoughts come to her. The trailer was quiet except for the battery-tick of Mama Jodi's bird clock. It was seven minutes to one and at one o'clock she would hear the shriek of a song sparrow. The kids had been tucked into bed thanks to Mama Jodi. Now, after insisting that Mama Jodi go to bed herself, Gloria sat in a chair under the faint glow of a table lamp, trying to calm down.

She remembered vividly the day Starla had called to say she had left for good. The phone had rung during dinner, during Mama Jodi's story about Benny Wetzel

sneaking back into the cafeteria line to get seconds on her blackberry cobbler. Mama Jodi worked in the Hatch school cafeteria, and she liked to describe the students and their quirks to the girls.

The girls continued to eat while Mama Jodi leaned over the bar to reach the phone, her large breasts sprawled across the avocado-colored counter, her bottom bulging through pink sweat pants.

"Heello," Mama Jodi's "hello" set her apart. "Yeah, Starla, where ya been?"

She stood up and faced the girls. They looked back, forks in mid-air. Starla had left three weeks ago to see a friend in Texas. The woman had just had a new baby and Starla wanted to help her out. They didn't expect her to call while she was gone; that wouldn't be like Starla, but after three weeks they began to wonder. Gloria especially worried if she'd been robbed while on the road or maybe even kidnapped. Mama Jodi didn't buy it, "Starla'd like that.

Quite an adventure being kidnapped." Still the girls worried and Mama Jodi didn't like not knowing. Even though she'd come to expect Starla to be flighty, she wanted to at least know she was alive somewhere.

"Really? You met him where? Huh," Mama Jodi looked at the girls and rolled her eyes. Starla must have met another man. The one constant with Starla was a man. Mama Jodi had know it early when Starla was just a girl of eleven or twelve.

Gloria pointed her fork at Stacy, "You just wait she's bringing this new guy here." She jabbed at a piece of ham but didn't attempt to pick it up and eat it. Stacy shrugged and nibbled a green bean.

Stacy looked like Starla. At ten she was already beautiful, the sun browned her long arms and legs and streaked gold her honey-colored hair. Stacy didn't care what Starla did. It was Mama Jodi who had cooked her dinner and ironed her clothes; it was Gloria who had helped her with math and gave advice when the girls wouldn't play with her. Anytime Gloria would try to sway Stacy to disgust with her mother's actions, Gloria stopped herself. Stacy was just a girl and Gloria saw how much she really loved Starla because Stacy didn't know their mother. She never got mad at her.

"Oh, I see," Mama Jodi's face fell from an amused to concerned. She turned away from the girls and began twisting the phone cord around her finger. "Well, sure I know you need to work, Starla, but what about these girls?"

Gloria saw her grandmother bow her head. She felt something had changed. She turned her chair around so she could watch and listen more closely.

"O.K. but what about your clothes? Don't you want to come by to say goodbye?" Mama Jodi looked over her shoulder at Gloria who'd now joined her by the counter. "Well, they're right here." She handed the phone to Gloria, but she just looked into her grandmother's eyes.

"What is it?" Gloria refused to take the phone.

"She's going away to work, with the fair, she won't be back for a year or two."

"What? How can she decide that? Why?"

"I don't know. Why don't you talk to her Gloria? Let her tell you."

"No. I'm done. Let her talk to Stacy." Gloria pivoted on her left foot and walked to her room. The floorboards of the trailer sagged as she walked and she used both hands to guide her way steadying her balance against the paneling. She had to make it to the

room before she began to cry. The bed she and Stacy shared overpowered the tiny trailer bedroom, but there was a spot in the corner between the bed and the wall where Gloria wedge in. She covered herself with the afghan her mother had made her when she was little and let the tears come.

The hurt came from deep inside, a part of Gloria that she had never let anyone see. As a little girl, Gloria knew she could make Starla feel better. Her mother played dolls with her better than any other little girl did. Starla showed her how to make baby cribs out of shoe boxes or use cardboard to stiffen up paper dolls cut from the JC Penny catalogue. When she combed Gloria's hair before bedtime, she told mystery stories about ghosts or hidden gold. Gloria knew that these times were the times when Starla could forget whatever troubled her. Because when she didn't play with Gloria, she retreated inside herself, ignoring everyone and going through the motions of work. As Gloria got older, it was harder to hold her mother's attention. Gloria began to take care of her more, bringing her food, telling her stories, supplying good grades, restoring her reputation in Buffalo Springs. The more Gloria did for Starla the more Starla held back. But what Gloria couldn't say was that the older she got the more she needed her mother.

Stacy had come in and crawled over to Gloria on the floor, "Gloria, why are you crying?" She rested her small hands on Gloria's afghan covered knees, the white skin peeking through the crochet.

"Did you talk to her?" Gloria kept her head covered so Stacy couldn't see her face.

"Yeah, she said she had to leave to go to work. She said that we're big now and don't need her around anyway. She said Mama Jodi would take good care of us. She said she might come home Christmas."

"Christmas! She might be home Christmas!" Gloria pulled the blanket down and now Stacy could see how upset she was.

"Get out!" Gloria yelled, "Go away now!" Stacy backed up slowly all the way to the door. "Get out you little twerp!" Gloria picked up a pillow and threw at Stacy hitting her in the face. Stacy's look went from amazement to betrayal and she turned and ran from the room.

Gloria heard the storm door click open and Mama Jodi call after Stacy, but she was too angry to feel guilty. Stacy would run to the tree like she always did and sulk. Gloria knew Stacy would be all right. What did she care if Starla left? It was Gloria who'd blown her chances with her mother.

The memory of Starla's leaving faded with the prolonged *shriek* of the clock. "Damn birds," Gloria muttered.

She wasn't like Starla, though. Gloria had brought her children with her. She stood up and located her purse on the floor under a barstool. She had tossed it there during the hectic shift of scooting the kids inside and explaining the situation in code to Mama Jodi. Standing over the kitchen counter, she dug until she found her wallet. Twenty two dollars was all the cash she had. Their credit cards had been maxed out months ago. Would she need to work two jobs? How long could they stay with Mama Jodi? A rush of helplessness went through her. She could feel frustration grow into self-

pity and then a sob constrict the back of her throat. She gave way to her tears and allowed herself to crumple like a towel to the floor.

Her phone rang. She reached up over her head and grabbed it. It was Ben. She answered it out of habit. “Hello?”

“Gloria, I’m sorry.” His strained voice sounded like it was coming through a tunnel. It was obvious that he had been crying too, but she wasn’t sure that she cared. Gloria did not speak. What should she say? Sure, I’ll load up the kids and come home. Or forget it, it’s over. She felt like she should know what came next. That there should be a script she could follow.

“Are you there? Are you listening to me?” He was pleading.

“Yes.”

“Please. Please come home. Bring the kids home.”

She still didn’t speak.

“Gloria, why won’t you talk to me?”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Why did you leave? You’ve never left. All those years and all those times we’ve fought. Why this time, Gloria?”

“I’m tired, Ben. I don’t want to do this now.”

“Gloria, I don’t think I can stay in this house by myself. It’s too much. All I can think about is Daddy and you. How I’ve fucked everything up. You know he’s getting worse, don’t you? I haven’t even had time to tell you that.”

Anger rose. He wanted pity again? Why should she care about Wilhelm going crazy or that Ben couldn't manage a farm? Then the words finally came to her, she was finished caring.

"Ben, you're going to have to deal with Wilhelm without me. I can only take care of me and the kids now."

"What are you saying?"

A beep in her ear interrupted their conversation. She looked at her phone and it was a number she didn't recognize. She decided to use it as an excuse, "I've got to go."

"What's that? Are you getting another call?"

"No, my battery's running down."

"Really, Gloria? It's not someone else?"

"Bye, Ben," she switched lines, "Hello?"

"Gloria? It's Drew."

"What?" She tried to remember to keep her voice down. Instinctively, she got up and moved outside to the front steps.

"Are you all right? Robyn told me about the fire and then she gave me your number so I could call you."

"Is Robyn there with you?" She searched for the real reason he would call her. He and Robyn were together tonight? Why hadn't she called?

"No. I saw her earlier."

"Why are you calling me now? It's one o'clock."

“We were at Max’s watching the fireworks. Are you okay? Robyn’s mom has a police scanner. She’s the one who told Robyn.” She could hear the muffled sound of tires on asphalt.

About right, Gloria thought. By tomorrow everyone would also know that she’d left too. Right now, though, from 1:10 a.m. to daybreak, she didn’t have to answer to anybody, and that thought lifted her mood.

“So was Robyn your date?” Why not get to the point. She wanted to know if he treated all women like he treated her.

“No. Max invited me and Robyn. We thought we’d go together.”

“Whose idea was that?”

“I don’t know. She was going by herself and so was I. Why not?”

“Why did you call me, Drew?”

“I honestly want to know if you’re okay.” His car had stopped and she could hear the key chime. He must be getting out.

“Yeah, I’m okay. Now what?” She wanted to know his intentions. Feeling reckless, all she needed was to know that he felt some sort of honest attraction to her. That what happened at the casino hadn’t been some sort of challenge or something he regretted.

“Where are you?”

“Where are you?”

“I’m just walking in my door. You sound funny.”

“I’m at Mama Jodi’s, my grandmother’s. I took the kids and left.”

“Oh.”

“Can I come over?” she asked.

“What? Yeah, of course.”

“I don’t want to talk about this over the phone. You’re at Schmidt’s rent house, right?” She had already gone back inside and gathered her purse and keys. “I’ll be there in 15 minutes.”

Sitting in her Explorer, Gloria hesitated. Shoulds keep popping in her head. She should go back inside. She should call Ben. She should not be doing this. Yet an urge as strong as any other jammed the key into the ignition, forced the car into drive, and pushed hard on the pedal all the way to Drew’s.

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He greeted her like an old friend. On the drive over, she wondered if he would meet her at her car. She halfway imagined that she would fall into his arms when she arrived. That his steady eyes would guide her to him. That his behavior at the casino was only a teaser to the passionate way he would kiss her. But he let her in only after she knocked on the storm door. His eyes darted about as he simultaneously showed her to the couch and offered her a drink.

“I don’t have much. Pop or beer.” He wore what looked like the same pair of jeans she had seen him in before, but instead of a t-shirt he had on a loose bowling shirt. His shoes were off and he padded through the living room and around the corner.

“Beer.” Gloria said and she sat down. Platonic. It all felt awkwardly familiar, like she was visiting a cousin she hadn’t seen in years.

The house reminded her of her own, a ranch which had been left to the fields when the owners moved to town. Everything looked just as it might have been when the

Schmidt's moved out years ago. Furniture and curtains could have been used on the set of an old sit-com. Next to the brick fireplace, and the only clue that she wasn't in a time capsule, stood a TV/stereo combination with two child-size speakers flanking the sides. Gloria could hear an air conditioner hum from the kitchen window. The air was heavy. The ceiling fan above her kicked around a sigh of old tobacco.

Drew came back with a bottle much taller than she expected. It was already open and he handed it to her. Smiling he settled down on the opposite end of the couch.

She decided to start, "So, how were the fireworks?" The beer tasted like metal in the back of her throat, and the earthy odor began to dislodge old memory. She used to drink when she was younger, closer to Drew's age. Before she met Ben. When she felt less attached, less responsible, more bold and more fun.

"You're not here to talk about that, Gloria. You haven't told me about the fire or the kids. Or Ben."

Her stomach twisted when he said her name, just as it had the other night. Now, however, she decided not to resist. Her body reacted as if it had no past. Only say my name. Don't say his name, she thought. It will ruin everything.

"Thomas is fine." She tried to refocus, "He feels so bad."

"What was damaged?" His journalistic tone helped her maintain balance. She imagined a headline in the *Hatch Daily Register*: Local Family Narrowly Escapes Careless Fire.

"A few acres. Hay in the barn. We're lucky, I guess."

He shifted, opening his full body to her, placing his arm over the top of the couch. A tint of cologne and black powder drifted her way. The combination interested her.

He'd been setting off fireworks earlier. Maybe the smell shouldn't have aroused her, but the awareness of it created an intimacy. She wanted to move closer, tuck her nose under his chin, so she could breathe in that smell until it consumed her. The space narrowed between them. The sofa seemed much smaller than it had seconds ago. The solid platonic boundary melted like sugar.

Gloria cleared her throat and started scratching the textured plaid weave on the arm of the couch. She had decided to come here and she did not want to explain her complicated marriage to him. She did want him to know that she had left Ben, and for as much as she could see into the future, it was permanent.

"I left with the kids because I needed to. It was too much for us. For me. I got lost along the way."

Neither spoke for a while. Finishing her beer, she set it on an end table. She stretched her legs in front of her, relaxed her arms to her sides, and leaned her head back. Gloria shut her eyes and let her senses take hold. She listened to his breathing, noticing each time he raised his bottle to his lips. He was considering her situation, she suspected. What did it mean to Drew that she was here with him? If he were a decent man, he would send her home. But he was young and didn't realize yet what an older man would sense immediately. A woman in this state should be handled carefully. Besides, in her experience, decent men were tedious.

His silence made him seem vulnerable. Gloria began to feel empowered and the wild, girlish emotions began to be tamed. It occurred to her that she had caught him off guard by coming over. What did it matter if he was manipulating her? If this were all a game for him? She wanted to play now.

She snatched her empty bottle off the table, “Can you get me another one?”

“Sure.” She watched him leave the room and the night’s agenda crystallized. She had a right to be attracted to him. He was a sexy as any man she had ever met. He liked her. She liked him. People do this sort of thing all the time. Scandals fade. Life goes on.

She heard the water run in the sink and the clink of bottles. Standing up, she looked around the room. Noticing a bass guitar in the dining room, she called out to him, “You play bass?”

Drew rounded the corner a second time with two more beers. A good sign, Gloria thought, and she took one from him, brushing his hand with her fingers.

“Yeah. I was in a band once. In Salina.” He picked up the bass and sat down in front of her. Before beginning, he turned on the amp which was sitting on the floor. She watched as he plucked a few cords, the long fingers of his left hand nimble on the stock.

“What happened to the band?” She said, smiling down at him.

“We were just messing around after high school. None of us were interested in going to college, so having a band made us seem like we were doing something.” He continued to play, looking up between notes to grin at her. It was a bluesy funk rhythm. She liked it. It stirred up the nerves at the bottom of her spine. Drew felt it too. He bit his bottom lip and tapped his bare right foot. Gloria noticed the curve of his second toe and the plump blue veins which ran along the long ridge at the top of his foot and under the ragged cuff of his jeans. As it tapped, she liked its narrow width and smooth surface. Just a little tuft of hair on each perfectly shaped toe. She compared it to the other foot and it was an exact match.

“I play.”

Drew didn't stop strumming as he looked up again, “I remember.”

He stopped and gazed at her. She quit thinking for a second. The zap she felt the day he had walked into her office jolted her again, and all she could focus on was his blue eyes. He knew her, they said. And she knew him.

His eyes softened to a mischievous sparkle, “Show me.”

“What?”

“I've got a guitar. I'll get it.” Before she could say anything, he had unloaded the bass from his lap and walked away, disappearing around the corner again.

She popped her knuckles and began to stretch her fingers. The thought of playing after so long excited her more than made her nervous. Embarrassing herself in front of Drew didn't occur to her either. It felt natural that they would play together. She sat down in a dining room chair and waited for him.

He brought back a flesh-tone Martin. It was stunning, creamy and glossy, and he carefully placed it in her lap. Its heaviness surprised her. She clumsily wrapped her elbow around the body and grasped the neck with her left hand. In a burst of confidence, after adjusting her hips, she started to play. She closed her eyes to remember. A U2 song, “With or Without You,” one she had taught herself. After purchasing the album, she had practiced over and over in her dorm until she had adjusted the tabs for her acoustic. Her roommate Sarah hated the band and would leave in a huff every time Gloria put it on her portable record player.

Gloria forgot Drew was in the room until the last chorus. Now, he was smiling down at her, his expression revealing his true feelings. She sang to him, feeling like a

Siren, stretching the notes like a snare until she was sure he was completely captured.

When she finished, he fell to the floor like he'd been knocked down, an attempt at comic relief.

“Surprised?” She laughed.

“Sure, but in the most amazing way. What other secret talents are you keeping from me?”

It was a veiled invitation. She thought about joining him on the floor. “That’s for me to know and you to find out.” Not as clever as she would have liked, but she knew it matched his subtext. She found her beer and took a drink. He lounged on the floor for moment, his long legs splayed, resting on his elbows. His awkward angle caused his shirt to open at the neck and the crest of his collar bone peaked through. A fine layer of dark stubble covered his jaw line and she traced it up around his full lips. The curls in his thick hair were more defined and one strand had found its way out of the mass to rest on his forehead. Her eyes surveyed every part of his body, which created a chain reaction, revving up her other senses.

“I have that album.” He hopped up in one sinewy motion. She watched him dig through the television cabinet. He pulled out a CD and held it up, “See. *The Joshua Tree*, 1987. I was just a little kid, but my mom used to play it on housecleaning day.” He put the CD in the stereo.

Gloria rolled her eyes, “Why’d you have to say that?”

He glanced over his shoulder, frowning, “Oh, come on, Gloria.”

The haunting opening chords of the song she sang earlier pushed themselves out of the speakers. Drew turned and swayed to her. He held out a hand, “Come on, Gloria.”

She took it, stood up, and found herself swaying with him chest to chest. A part of her realized that this was not what she imagined. This wasn't the most romantic song. It would only be on the soundtrack to the creepiest love story. Slightly amused by the irony she decided she didn't care. Now that she was in his arms, wasn't the first step over? If she had made this choice, surely there was no turning back? Their movement didn't match the beat. They found their own way. Drew relaxed his hands on her lower back and she rested her temple on his collar bone taking in the scent she had longed for. If she raised her head, he would kiss her and that's where her imagination stopped.

Slowly he worked his thumbs and then his fingertips under her shirt. She felt his hands move down between the waistband of her jeans and her skin. He pushed her tighter to him. All restraint left. Gloria raised her head and kissed him. His lips were firm and warm and the taste of beer on his tongue excited her more. She found her hands moving everywhere her eyes had already been, grasping his shoulders, cupping his jaw, clutching his hair. Her hands moved with a motivation all their own. Automatic and natural. From a memory thawed which had been iced over from years of ritual lovemaking. She unbuttoned his shirt and reached through. He kissed her still as she used to fingers to map the muscled geography of his back. The buckle of his belt dug into her. She remembered her hesitation the night at the casino. Not this time, she thought.

He unbuttoned her jeans and pulled her down to the floor. She straddled him, could feel his excitement between her legs. She tightened her thighs around his hips. He tugged at her shirt, lifting it up over her head. Rising up to look at him, she took a breath.

His was not the face she was used to seeing. A hint of guilt crept in, settled like a squatter in her stomach.

“Gloria?” He gently took her hands, rubbed her wrists with his thumbs. She wanted this, wanted him. More than anything else right now. She deserved it. Had put everything else on hold for years. Had been good while everyone else around her lived life giving in to their vices. No one would know. One night was all she needed.

She smiled, “Yes?” She reached up to trace Drew’s eyebrows, sliding her finger to his lips.

“I’m not thinking about housecleaning anymore.” His hands dropped hers and he slowly moved them across her breasts. Moving down, he unzipped her jeans. But a flash of Drew as a little boy entered Gloria’s mind. She tried to swat it away. Tried to enjoy his hands on her stomach, below her belly button. Then an image of Thomas standing in their bedroom after the fire caused her to bolt up and scoot across the floor as far away from Drew as she could.

“Shit!” She screamed when she could go no farther.

Startled, Drew rushed to her. “What the hell?”

“Don’t touch me!” She would have backed away more but she was up against the wall already. She raised her knees up to cover herself.

“God, just tell me what’s wrong.” Suddenly the music became too loud. Drew reached over and turned off the stereo, killing all the vigor it had created.

She started to cry and hated herself for it. Fat globs popped from her eyes without her permission. She would have wiped them away with her sleeve but she became even more enraged when she realized she wasn’t wearing a shirt.

“I’m sorry, Drew. Can you hand me my goddamn shirt please?”

Drew reached over and gave her the shirt. She used it to wipe both cheeks before putting it on.

“Isn’t this just typical?” She said, “I can’t even be bad when I really want to.”

“Is that what this is about?” Drew stood up.

“Are you kidding me? What the hell did you think this was about?” She watched him put on his shirt, leaving it open.

“I thought you wanted to be with me.”

“I did.” She sighed. Seeing him now, after the spark had faded, she didn’t believe it would come back. Much calmer now, she got up to leave. She didn’t need to explain anymore.

“You’re leaving?” He moved toward her and shadowed her as she walked to the door. Her elbow brushed against his stomach as she fastened her jeans. She felt nothing.

#

If she could have found a store open at four in the morning in this rural landscape, she would have purchased beer and cigarettes. Instead she sat on a rock at the edge of the ravine behind Mama Jodi’s house, chewing a piece of gum she had found in the cup holder of the Explorer. The shifting light of the moon and the rising purple glow in the east told her she had been out here over an hour. With morning came decisions. She could take charge now or be swept away by circumstances like Ben.

She loved him. The best parts of him. Their life together flickered through her mind. When they were younger, newly married, he had known how to make her laugh. Teased her for being too serious. It was his idea to remodel the house, and she had sat

with him at the kitchen table while he sketched each new project. He had eagerly set up a swing set for Thomas when he was only two and could barely walk. She could see Ben swinging with Thomas on his lap. It made her smile. It was their history as layered as the soil in the ravine. It was her history and as exhausted as she was, she wasn't ready to abandon him. After tonight she realized she could walk away, but Gloria could not imagine starting over with someone else.

She sighed into the sunrise. She would call Ben, go back home and give it another try. But she would never tell him about Drew.

The sun rose and again Gloria struggled to move. A hawk began its cycle of glide and perch and a heat-soaked haze settled over the pasture. She reached in front of her and snapped a dry stalk from a clump of blue stem. Thomas' fire could have been much worse. Should she say a prayer of thanks? She recalled the pleas posted in the church bulletin and on roadside signs. Pray for rain. As if she could pray these things away.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. She pulled it out and expected to see Ben's name on the display. It was Robyn.

"Gloria, you've got to get to the hospital in Ft. Reno, now. Go to the emergency room."

Chapter 14

The Shed

From the road, Kendall's farmhouse was the perfect camouflage. A rusty swing set, the slide missing, straddled a patch of sand, and a couple of bicycles lay tangled beside it. People who drove by would sometimes see friends of the family repairing the roof or putting up fence: five or so men steadily working while the women hustled around the flowerbeds weeding. On most weekends they barbecued outside. Lawn chairs in a circle, watching the children play tag and then, as the evening wore on, catching lightning bugs. A commune-like reputation settled over the place, and most people let it go, but it's what these passersby didn't see that should have caused them the most concern – junkies as amateur chemists.

Teresa pulled her Cutlass into Kendall's driveway and Stacy felt a sense of homecoming and dread. It was about three o'clock and it looked like no one was home,

but Stacy could smell signs that people were there, addicts were there, cooking in the back shed. Kendall bought the acreage five years ago when he first started making crank. The house was surrounded by rough pasture and scraggly elm trees. The nearest family lived a mile down the road.

Teresa climbed out on her side first and came around to Stacy. Gazing out the window, Stacy let the heavy wind blow the fumes in her face. Her vision blurred and refocused on the last time she'd been here. Kendall had screwed her twice. Once in his room; the second time when he asked her to deliver rocks on her way home. She had been pulled over and arrested.

Teresa opened the heavy car door, "Whatta ya doing? Let's go."

Stacy swung her skeletal legs out of the car and let Teresa shut the door. "Fresh batch, can you smell it?" Teresa rubbed her hands together in mock excitement. Of course, she could smell it. Candied ammonia, burnt sulfur, a smell that made addicts salivate and neighbors curious. The odor drew attention – that's why they were out in the middle of nowhere. Kendall still kept his head clear about cooking and selling and stealing. A lot of users became so wasted that they started cooking anywhere: trailer parks, apartment buildings. Dumbasses, Stacy thought, so lost they had forgotten that just the smell can bring cops.

Teresa stopped on a patch of dirt in front of the covered porch. "Hey, ya'll? It's Teresa, and Stacy's with me. Anybody in there?"

The announcement was necessary. They didn't know who was in and they didn't know how jumpy people would be. Looking around, Stacy saw that the front windows

were broken, and one had been shot, the top radiated shards of glass around a rough hole the size of a bullet, the bottom glass had shattered in the sand and grass below the sill.

Stacy started picking at her neck with her fingernail, "Didn't you call?"

"The phone's cut off." Teresa grabbed Stacy's hand and pulled it away from her face, "Stop. You're making it worse. It's bad enough you're so skinny."

"Didn't you try Kendall's cell?" Stacy asked hooking her thumbs in the belt loops of her cutoffs.

"Yeah, he knows, but he quit answering his phone," Teresa said.

Stacy looked at her and realized that minus the thrift store clothes, she could be one of her Gloria's friends. She'd started using the same time Stacy did. They'd learned together. Kendall taught them how to use the pipe and how to suck it up slow and hard. Since then, they had shared a sisterhood of binging and sleeping, sucking dick and stealing, lying and hiding that Stacy could never explain to anyone who didn't use. But Teresa somehow didn't look like an addict. Her face, still a little chubby and clear, her hair still light brown and fresh cut – Teresa knew enough to keep herself together. She had never been caught, never arrested. Since this last stint in rehab, Stacy wondered if Teresa had ever used as much as she said she did.

Teresa pulled a crumpled pack of Virginia Slims from her front jeans pocket and tugged out a cigarette slightly bent on the tip. "You want one?" Stacy nodded no and Teresa lit it with a gold lighter; it had a mother of pearl inlay with the initial D.

"Where'd you get that?"

"Isn't fancy? I found it in the car of the last run we had. Kendall said I should sell it, said it was probably worth 25 dollars, but I'm keeping it." She took a drag and

swallowed. "Dammit these assholes. They're probably all out in the shed and no one's even looking out. Come on." She grabbed Stacy by the arm, a handle encircled by Teresa's stout fingers, and she allowed herself to be hoisted up the crumbling concrete steps to the house.

Stacy pulled back the screen door and walked in. The windows were all open and a swift breeze twisted the sheets Kendall used as curtains. A labored tinkling of wind chimes from the kitchen reminded her that Regina was here, somewhere. They stepped in over piles of clothes and dirty diapers, pizza boxes and hamburger wrappers. Plates, crusted with spaghetti sauce, looked like dried blood to Stacy. She felt a half moon of crust disintegrate under her flip-flop. The only air moving was from the windows, there were no fans; the electricity was probably cut off too. Stacy covered her nose and mouth: somehow she'd kicked up a whiff of sour milk and urine.

Humps under blankets littered the worn sofas – bodies exhausted, in need. Teresa stepped over an arm flung out on the ash-covered rug and then pulled the slick sleeping bag away from a face. Regina, Kendall's now girlfriend, didn't budge. Stacy could see Regina's son, Cory, tucked under her armpit, his small back softened against her breast and belly.

Teresa patted Regina's cheek, "Gina, where's Kendall?" Her cigarette hung out of the corner of her mouth.

"Uh?" She moved her head away from Teresa's taps and curled up around Cory. Teresa took a hold of her thigh and shook hard enough to jostle the sleeping bag to a nylon puddle beside her. Regina quickly covered her torso with her gangling arms, clipping the top of Cory's head with her elbow. He whimpered a little but then found his

shirt collar and began sucking on it. His collar was always wet; Stacy saw flashes of Cory, Michaela, and the other kids swinging on the swing set out front, and without fail Cory kept his lips clamped down on the cotton. All the kids had odd habits, Stacy thought. When he woke up and saw Stacy, he'd ask her about Michaela. Seeing him lying there gave her comfort that she'd made one decent decision recently.

"It's cold!" Regina rolled her puffy eyes around, the whites a sickly olive. Her skin was green too, and her arms bruised blue and purple. She looked like a woman-sized lizard, an alien from outer space or deep underground. She slithered back down under the sleeping bag, taking her offspring with her, and didn't answer.

Teresa stood up, kicked Regina's feet, and put out her cigarette with the tips of her fingers, "Let's just go out back."

They walked through the house to the kitchen and out. A worn path marked the way from the backdoor to the rotting wooden shed, the cooking house. Stacy glanced back nervously to the road, but large elms blocked her view. Once Kendall saw her, saw that she didn't make it through rehab again, he'd smile and take her back into the group, but not without making her pay. But Kendall's humiliation was nothing compared to her stay Heartland Drug and Alcohol Recovery Center. Humiliation at Heartland disguised itself as therapy and medication.

Stacy had spent most of her time at Heartland in a chair by the window watching a blue jay protect its nest. She would dive at squirrels or other birds that tried to share the same oak tree. She would have liked a little fresh air, the pungency of disinfectant made her dizzy, but the windows were the kind that wouldn't open. She had a roommate, Dana, who spent her free time in the halls or in the commons, chatting up the nurses. Dana was

in for meth addiction also, but her approach to rehab was different from Stacy's. "This place is like fucking King Tut's tomb," she had said the day Stacy arrived. Dana sat on her twin bed, her back to the door. Her stringy hair hung over her face and she was stuffing pills into a sock.

Stacy had been expected to attend two group sessions a day. In a circle of twelve other women, "Trey," as he liked to be called, took them through, "behavior mod." Stacy, irritated by his Polo cologne smell and nautical clothing, couldn't believe that some of the women seemed to be moved by his tangents and pleas, as if they wanted to do better for him: this yesterday college grad who grew up in a gated community on the north side of Oklahoma City and was only doing this job until he could open his private practice to help rich ass junkies instead of these throwaways. Looking around the circle, Stacy realized that a shower and clean sheets couldn't dissolve the residue of meth. Together, they formed a hoop of stringy hair, vacant eyes, and melted faces; they opened their mouths to speak through corroded teeth. Through the black gaps lolled sickly colored tongues telling the disenchanted why, the horror of who. Then finally, after thirty or so minutes, Stacy would hear a rattled bawl come from inside one hollow gourd. Trey always said this part was important. But while the other women surrounded the wailing mess, Stacy raised her knees to her chin. She could smell them as they moved around the circle, dragging ribbons of rock; she could tell how long they'd used by their smell. She thought of Michaela. She thought of Kendall.

The women at Heartland described jail as survival – they became warrior women. In rehab, a warrior woman was considered belligerent so instead of melting jagged rocks, she ingested Heartland's smooth little pills. Coming out of jail a woman could feel tough

– she had survived battles for territory, battles for hierarchy. Coming out of rehab, she felt bare and degenerate – her buzz gone, her family gone, her dignity gone. But Stacy always chose rehab over jail.

Every time Stacy was busted, Kendall and the group took a risk of being caught. The state aggressively hunted down cooking labs, and the punishment for meth users was becoming more severe. If she were caught again, she wouldn't have a choice between jail or rehab – all the upright citizens of Oklahoma now agreed – jail is the only place for an addict.

After Teresa knocked at the shed door, it swung open and the fumes brushed their faces and then drifted with the wind toward the house. Stacy walked in, adjusting her eyes to the darkness. She noticed Cook in the middle of the shed, sitting on an overturned five gallon bucket, pouring liquid from one plastic bottle to another. Stacy had watched them mix meth before but she'd never done it herself.

Cook was a guy Kendall knew from his work. He made the rounds to different labs, cooking batches and teaching others how to cook. But Kendall, even though he could mix a batch if he really needed it, relied on Cook to fix the stuff. Cook could be trusted not to blend shit with it or use pills with a lot of binders. He didn't look up as the girls walked in, but Stacy watched his every move. She didn't know his name, none of them did except Kendall. To her he'd hardly spoken, each time making a batch, taking a few hits, and leaving. He'd been doing this a long time and his shaman-like motions indicated that he understood the value of his work. Barefoot, he shuffled his feet up and back in the powdery dirt floor of the shed and loose pools of it collected where his toes joined the top of his foot. His white knees were exposed through rips in his jeans, like

two glaucomic eyes watching the chemicals bubble and the vapors rise. A long sleeved shirt, tied in a knot around his waist, soaked up the sweat running down his thorny back, some droplets doing a shalom to reach the cotton-polyester net at the bottom. A scar, the skin grey and calcified, ran from his wrist to his elbow. Stacy guessed it was a chemical burn; his skin looked melted, like she'd seen when Michaela dropped one of her dolls onto the kitchen stove. He wasn't old, but he did have a deep pleat of skin between his eyebrows. Whenever she had seen him cook, he pulled his shaggy hair back with a bandana and preformed each step with the same intense look of concentration. Stacy's body began to shake, her mouth watered – with every pour, every cut he came closer to conjuring the thing she craved. Standing spellbound in the shed, she forgot all she was before. All her senses demanded to be mollified. Watching him cook was the only magic she believed in anymore.

From one of the dark corners, Kendall bellowed, "Shut the damn door!" He moved toward them, and flung his long arm in the direction of Teresa and Stacy, giving a glance at Cook, he said, "These bitches don't know shit." In two steps he was beside Teresa as she fumbled to shut the shed door. He pushed her out of the way and latched the rusted metal hook, "Let these fumes out and every fucking junkie in that house is gonna be out here crowding the door like goddamn Pavlov's dogs." Stacy wouldn't dare tell him that they had caught fumes in the drive.

Kendall stood with his arms crossed and glared at them. Teresa took his unyielding silence as her time to speak. "Look who I brought with me." She pushed Stacy in front of Kendall.

"Yeah, I'm not blind. I saw her sorry ass as soon as she walked in." They stood facing each other; he sized her up while he ran the tips of his fingers along the waist of his shorts. Kendall was tall, very thin but not emaciated and not hunched over. He had a sinewy quality like a mountain lion and he rubbed his shirtless belly. Stacy felt the urge to bolt. Now was her time to run, to unlatch the door and take Teresa's car and go back to Gloria's, go back to Michaela. For an instant she saw herself cleaned up: fleshy, shiny, skin clear, bruises evaporated into the past she'd never remember because her life was so happy. Just like the miracle of television she would fade from before to after and people would only see her for what she had become. But she waited, held down by Kendall's familiar smile and the heaviness of the chemical fumes.

She knew better than to speak to Kendall until he had asked her a question. So she directed her eyes downward. He wore moccasins, the left one had lost its stitching around the toes. Spindly hairy legs jutted out from a pair of khaki cutoffs.

He grabbed her by the back of her hair and pulled her closer to him. "Look at you. You look like shit. A tweaker. Goddamn clothes falling off. I couldn't take you nowhere before someone would call the bureau and report a crank head. Hell, we should just take you out and shoot you in the head and put you out of your misery." Kendall's spittle landed on her nose, but she didn't raise a hand to wipe it off. He laughed and turned back to Cook. "Whadya think, Cook. Just shoot her like an old horse? Put her out of her misery?" He smelled like menthol and mayonnaise.

Cook nodded, "Seen it done before, but looking at her she still looks like she could be of some use." Just like Cook to play diplomat, Stacy thought. He had to keep a lot of junkies happy and he didn't do that by taking sides.

"Yeah, Kendall, I know she'd be willing to do whatever you say. She'd be more willing than me that's for sure." Teresa stood out of Kendall's reach in front of a shelf full of plastic bottles and tubs, empty ones on their sides, the orange warning labels crinkling from exposure to fumes and combustibles. Kendall was strong enough to manhandle both of them at the same time. Once Stacy had seen Kendall hold Regina down on the floor; he sat on her chest and pinned her arms with his knees while he slapped her in the face. Globes of blood and spit had flung out of her mouth with each blow and landed on Cory who sat crying next to his mother holding his GI Joe doll. Teresa had tried to pull him off but Kendall grabbed her by her hair and punched her in the face until she went limp. Then he flung her down on top of Cory and walked away for three days. Michaela had been there too, she had hidden in the hall closet. After Kendall left, Stacy helped calm the babies while Teresa and Regina helped each other. When he came back, he brought Cook and another woman, and they all picked up just like it never happened.

"I do have something." Kendall quickly moved his grip from Stacy's hair to her upper arm. "You're going with me and Doughboy tonight." Stacy knew what this meant and so did Teresa. Kendall only took Doughboy out when he expected that he might have to fight back. Stacy and Teresa had heard stories about Kendall and Doughboy's early runs, usually stealing trailers and tractors. They used to take Doughboy's half-ton and simply hook up the trailer and drive off, taking the trailer to a warehouse on Doughboy's farm and leaving it there until it was safe to sell it at auction. After they'd stolen the flatbed, they had another friend repaint it so that they could use it themselves to haul off small tractors and even equipment used by the state road crews. Most of the time

it was easy money. Addicts see the money in anything, especially heavy equipment. It was like picking wildflowers off the side of the road.

"Oh come on, Kendall," Teresa started to move toward him but she pulled herself back. She grabbed a shed pole instead.

"Hell, no. She's going. Or she can take her ass back home. But you won't will ya. Smell that? Cook's almost done. What are ya gonna do for that?" He pulled Stacy close to him. He bent down and rubbed his nose against her ear. She felt his hot breath rush on her earlobe. "That's what you want. I know it. But it's mine and I don't give nothing away for free." Kendall's other hand snaked its way up her belly to her breast. She felt her nipple harden. She needed it – her body knew it. Kendall kept his promises, all she had to do was one little job. She'd done worse.

Stacy nodded. "That's good," he whispered. He shoved her hard into Teresa's direction and Stacy bounced off the pole and landed in a heap at Teresa's feet. She bent down and lifted Stacy out of the dirt, a dusty Raggedy Ann.

"We're leaving late tonight." Kendall turned back to Cook. "Bitches. Like I don't have enough trouble."

Teresa opened the shed door and led Stacy out to the back landing where she gently slid her to the concrete steps.

"Look, Stacy, you don't have to do this." Teresa sat down next to her and got out another cigarette. She offered one to Stacy and this time Stacy took it.

"No, this is the train I'm on, might as well ride it. Besides it ain't so bad."

Teresa looked over at Stacy and chuckled, "Yep, just like we'd planned it."

Teresa's cheeks collapsed as she took a drag.

Sitting between Doughboy and Kendall, Stacy squirmed on the seat in the truck. Doughboy had to lift the console to make a place for her. It wasn't really meant to seat a person, and Stacy's bony rear-end couldn't mold itself to the awkward curve. They'd hardly said a word. Doughboy put a CD in his player and the speakers popped when he turned the volume up too high, but he left it there and now the cab filled with the static reverb of the bass as the speakers strained to keep up. He only played the gritty fast songs, reaching down, pressing skip for the ballads, and he pounded the steering wheel with his meaty fingers keeping a violent rhythm. Kendall added a foot stomp on the floorboard. The moon was almost full and it was bright. Stacy could see the euphoria on their faces. They moved in quick strobe light motions. This must be a job they're sure about, an easy one.

Stacy watched the clouds zoom across the night sky like time lapse special effects. She had never felt happier. Her head purred and hummed; she could feel every pore every hair on her body. Kendall coughed in a fit beside her and rolled down the window. The air rushed in, tickled her nose and cheeks. She giggled and pulled her hair back to one side to keep it from flying. Letting her fingers glide across her neck and down her chest, she felt her heart pound with the speakers and her belly bounce with the truck as they sped down the gravel road.

Doughboy took the back roads around Hatch to avoid Brad the local sheriff and headed east of town. She didn't care where they were going and she knew better than to ask. She was only along for the ride, for now. What Kendall had in mind for her to do she could only guess. Cause a distraction. Drive the truck. Help steal small items while Kendall and Doughboy carried away the big stuff. She was there because she had to be;

Kendall kept his word: he'd given her a hit before they left. Now she'd do whatever he asked.

Doughboy flicked the knob on the stereo and the music went low. "You know, if we get caught I'm in deep shit." He talked over Stacy's head. Doughboy had already spent time in jail for burglary, robbing the lawn and garden store in Hatch.

"Aren't we all, Sherlock. Jesus, why'd you have to bring that up now? Hell, here we are on our way and you bring this shit up now?" Kendall slammed his hands down on the dashboard.

"I'm just thinking is all." Doughboy pulled his cap down on his forehead and jerked his head from side to side, popping his neck. He started shrugging his shoulders like Stacy had seen prize fighters do in movies.

"That's your problem Doughboy. Now why don't you shut the fuck up before you jinx the whole thing." Kendall slapped Stacy's thigh, "Besides Stace's here to help us. Aren't ya babe?" He reached around her shoulders and gave her brotherly squeeze. His fingers felt like blades on her skin, but then his quick hands popped open the glove box. He moved aside a 9mm and pulled out a plastic bag, opened it, tucked it between his legs, and began rolling a joint.

"This is what we need right here! You all need to get focused." He smiled.

Stacy had watched Kendall roll lots of weed. One of the regulars when she and Teresa worked at the café in Ft. Reno, he'd come in on his lunch hour from his job at the Federal Prison. A prisoner from California told Kendall that he could make meth at home from ingredients bought at a drugstore. Kendall always wanted to prove how smart he was, Teresa said that he only hung around because he could convince them to play

roles in his own sick dramas, so he created a batch in his kitchen. Since then, he'd established his own network. He could get high when he wanted; he could get laid when he wanted; he took special pleasure in outwitting the Bureau of Narcotics. He'd say, "Loopholes are like vacations to paradise. Slip right through and find yourself in pure bliss."

Kendall had only been arrested once. It was before the reform in methamphetamine laws. When a junkie could loophole the system: arrest, bail, hearing, a light sentence (prison overcrowding), probation, and the cycle started all over again. Between the time of arrest and the time for a hearing, Kendall had a good six months to hide evidence, and the flow of business was hardly affected. Now jail time was guaranteed – six months – no exceptions. All three had reason to worry, all three had prior records. But Doughboy and Kendall had Stacy.

Doughboy cranked up the volume on the stereo, pushed his size thirteen to the pedal, and fixed his eyes on the road ahead.

Since the time of her arrest four months ago, Stacy could still feel the cold metal handcuffs around her wrist and the baggy inseam of the county jail jumpsuit flapping against her inner thighs. Earlier that day, after picking up Michaela from Gloria's, she had been pulled over for an expired tag, the state trooper then asked if he could search her car. She knew she had a makeshift pipe and Kendall's crank in the backseat. Saying no to the search was possible, she knew, but that would only make the trooper suspicious. He was young, a little older than Stacy. She noticed the razor burn on his neck and she smelled the starch in his uniform. He'd have something to prove and he'd arrest her for

something else if she refused the search. Staring at his face, the brim of his hat cast a shadow down to the tip of his nose, she nodded *yes*.

After he'd patted her down, he had pushed her firmly to the front of the car. Stacy bent down to look through the front windshield, "My daughter's in the backseat. She's scared of men in hats." Maybe he wouldn't search now or maybe Michaela would start crying and he'd forget searching the backseat. But he had flipped the seat forward, sweet-talking her out, and that's when he found the pipe. He had arrested her while Michaela watched. Stacy was handcuffed, read her rights, and folded into the backseat of the black and white. Before he shut the door, he said with disgust, "My wife and I have been trying to have a baby for three years. Here you are so wasted you can't even see what you've got." He carried Michaela to the ditch and Stacy watched him put firm hands on her shoulder while he bent down and spoke to her. He went back to finish the search of the car and Stacy knew he'd find the glass. She watched Michaela sitting in the early grass, looking for a four-leaf clover.

Working at right angles along the section lines, Doughboy finally slowed to a stop and turned off his lights. They were parked at the end of a drive and Stacy noticed the name Metzger on the mailbox in the moonlight. At first she thought Kendall was bringing her to Gloria's, but then she realized that Kendall would never think to be that kind.

"What are we doing here?" she said.

The men didn't answer. Instead they sat for a few minutes before Doughboy began to move slowly into and up the drive. When they could see the house, Doughboy turned to the right. Stacy knew they were going to the shop.

"Hey, Kendall, we can't rob this place. Why here?"

“You know what’s here.” He answered without looking at her.

“Kendall, there’s plenty of other places. Let’s go get a trailer from Frank Willis’s place. We’ll steal a few cows. That’d be just as good, right?” She turned toward him and placed both palms on his thigh.

He grabbed her hard. “No, you’re gonna get out of this truck and do what I tell you. Because if you don’t, I’ll beat the hell outta ya, and there’s nobody here that’ll say anything about it if you end up at the bottom of a pond. So I suggest you shut up and tell me what’s here.”

“I don’t know, four wheelers, I guess. A boat maybe. Tools. The usual stuff.”

He dropped his hands and pointed toward a flat bed trailer beside the shop, “Pull around here. We’ll have to hook up the trailer.”

After Doughboy had backed up and stopped the truck, Kendall pulled Stacy out, “Go check to see if that side door is locked. Then if you get in, raise the garage door – slow.” He shoved a flashlight in her hand.

It was too late to argue so she walked to the metal door hoping it would be locked, but knew that it wouldn’t be and that it wouldn’t matter anyway. He needed the money to make connections in Mexico.

She turned the knob and the door popped open. The odor of gasoline and filthy oil rose from the concrete floor. Starting to sweat, she pulled up the bottom of her t-shirt to wipe her upper lip. With her thumb she clicked on the flashlight, sent the murky beam to the floor and then up along the wall. There was one large garage door to her left and another door on the opposite wall across the building. In the expanse were shadows of

the machines she remembered when she'd come out to the farm for Metzger family reunions and birthdays.

She found her way to the fat chain which opened the garaged door and began to pull it down. The large door jerked open enough for Kendall to get his shoulder underneath and hoist it up. He turned on a larger flashlight and swiped the bright beam across the shop.

"Yeah," he nodded. Stacy could see his stubbled jaw stretch into a grin.

"I'll wait in the truck," she said as she attempted to brush past him.

"No, you're gonna grab anything you can carry. Doughboy, let's get the four wheelers first and then the welders."

Doughboy came around and put the ATV in neutral and they began backing it up. Stacy made her way to the cabinets and benches along the wall. She could go to the house, she thought. But what good would it do? She was here. She was with Kendall. Who would believe that it wasn't her idea? She gripped the handle of a chainsaw and dragged it across the workbench toward her. It was heavier than she imagined. She heaved it onto her hip and turned to see one four wheeler loaded and Kendall and Doughboy coming off the trailer.

She heard the knob on the door next to her click and a man walked in, the barrel of a shotgun leading the way.

"I've called the police," he said, "But I'll shoot every damn one of ya if I have to."

Stacy recognized not only Wilhelm's voice but also his slim frame standing silhouette with the blue night behind him. She froze, wondering if she should speak.

Would it calm him down or enrage him more? She kept quiet. The guys shut off their lights and kept quiet also.

“You better show yourself, you lousy sons-a-bitches. You think you can rob me? You picked the wrong old farmer.”

Still no one moved. But Wilhelm must have seen Kendall and Doughboy in the shadows by the trailer and truck because he stepped slowly past Stacy toward them. She could hear their boots crunch on the gravel and sensed them backing away toward the cab of the truck. She thought they would leave her – if they could run away without being shot. Remembering the 9mm in the glove box, she also knew that Kendall might have another outcome in mind. Wilhelm had moved away from the door, and she thought she could make it out of the barn and run down the road. She stepped forward to put the chainsaw back on the bench. It slipped and she dropped it on the concrete.

She heard boots pivot on the gritty floor and then a boom. She felt shards of heat eat into her neck and shoulder and she stumbled back against the table and then slumped down. She could hear the shotgun pump and a hollow pop on the slab. She closed her eyes and inhaled the oily dust. Something trickled across her cheek and onto her lips. She tasted something metallic and smoky. She heard shoes scratch along the concrete. She heard a smack, a grunt, and finally, a thud.

Chapter 15

Mourning

Gloria's feet ached. She wore a new pair of heels, purchased on yesterday's trip to Oklahoma City. Chad needed dress pants for the funeral, Thomas wanted a jacket, and on the spur of the moment Gloria bought a pair of strappy black sandals, telling herself she deserved at least one thing new. Earlier the same day, Cassie had dug through her closet while Gloria watched from the bed.

"I'll help you find a dress, Mama." To Cassie it was a game of dress-up. For Gloria it was the punctuation of misfortune. She had no idea what to wear to her sister's funeral. Arms up stretched, Cassie used her whole body to push aside thick wedges of hanging clothes in Ben and Gloria's cramped closet. A few times her small body would get lost between sections and all Gloria could see were spindly brown legs tripping over Ben's boots.

“Oh, this one’s pretty,” Cassie jumped to loosen the hanger and held up a shirt dress. It was black with a humble print of vivid blue flowers. She noticed the tie-back. The style and pattern were undeniably out of fashion. She had bought it several years ago, before Chad was born, to wear to the annual Cedar county farmer’s banquet, an event that seemed important at the time because Ben was thinking of joining the board.

Cassie spread the pitiful thing out on the bed next to Gloria. “Try it on, Mama.”

She had refused. Instead she asked Cassie to find earrings and a necklace to match. The calm of the moment, hearing Cassie sing “Jesus Loves Me” as she shifted through and tried to untangle delicate chains, caused Gloria to bury her head in the pillow and she prayed.

She had hoped the shoes would make up for the dress. At the time the sandals lifted her spirits. Now the thin feminine straps cut into the top of each foot, rubbing blisters along each toe. She tried to walk steady into the fellowship hall, ushering the kids in front of her. During the funeral and at the graveside, she hadn’t noticed how much the shoes bothered her. She waited at the end of the vestibule, looking for a place to sit down.

Ben stayed by her side during the entire service. She felt his hand on her back the all morning. He was there now, stroking her arm. He was trying to be comforting, but really his warm palm caused her to sweat.

“Gloria, find a place to sit. I’ll bring you a plate.” She nodded and she watched Ben move up to the front of the hall to the kitchen. Gloria could hear women’s voices, members of the Altar Society, strung together with an occasional swoosh from the faucet and the clink of serving spoons. Soon the long folding tables in the front of the hall,

already draped with white linens, would be arranged with fried chicken, fresh green beans cooked in bacon fat, corn, homemade potato salad, and host of ambrosia salads. Familiar foods that Gloria herself had dropped off or helped serve at other funerals. She knew from experience how much it helped comfort families. She had seen it in their faces. Usually these meals provided conversation which distracted from grief, threads that bind, as it were, but Gloria felt that the entire experience would be the string that would finally unravel her.

Before she could move to a table, Starla came from behind and put her arm around Gloria's waist.

"Where's the bar?" Gloria knew it was a joke, her mother's attempt to deny the next step in this process, facing the few people of Hatch who decided to come back to the hall and support the family. She leaned in and wrapped her arm around her mother's thick waist.

"It's BYOB. I hope you've got vodka in that bag of yours."

Starla lifted up and began to shake the over-sized purple satchel hanging over her shoulder that she had asked Gloria earlier to carry around. Gloria had shrugged her shoulders, but seeing Starla fidgeting with it in the church, delving into its gut to find tissues, it proved to be the best distraction for her mother. All the Lyons women had ways of coping. Starla's was diversion.

"Pills, maybe," Starla said.

It was a completely inappropriate thing to say at Stacy's funeral and it truncated the light-hearted mood they had manufactured. Since Starla had come home, it had been like this – a homecoming and a heartbreak. Stacy's funeral had been delayed while they

tried to locate her. They finally tracked her down in Colorado. She was working a rodeo. Once she did arrive, between weeping over Stacy and clinging to Gloria, she behaved as if she had never been gone. Gloria slipped back into the role of comforting her mother. Being angry did not have its desired effect. Starla was too inattentive to notice. Or at times she was oblivious, not consistently. Stacy's death must have triggered some motherly instinct. Like now as she continued to hold Gloria close to her, standing beside her as they offered one another mutual support.

Starla made another attempt, "Come on, let's sit down. Aren't those new shoes killing you?" She led Gloria to a table where they sat down. Starla leaned over and smoothed down the fabric between Gloria's breasts.

"Starla, what are you doing?" She brushed her mother's hand aside and felt the gape as buttons threatened to pop. She pulled the dress down at the waist, sucking in her stomach as much as her depleted energy allowed.

"Have you gained weight?" Starla tugged at the tie cinched around Gloria's mid-section.

Gloria swatted Starla's hand away again in frustration. Whether Gloria had gained weight or not shouldn't matter to her. She had no right to comment on something as intimate as weight when she hadn't been around for the big events, the birth of her children, their birthdays, the near death of Josh, the slow death of her sister. Before anger could take hold, before Gloria could storm away from the table, she looked at Starla and she saw herself. She saw Stacy and Mama Jodi, Cassie and Michaela.

Cassie, Michaela, and Chad ran up to the table. "Where have you three been?" Starla asked.

“We took Michaela to see the fountain,” Cassie said. Gloria noticed that all three had splashes of water on their clothes. The left knee of Chad’s new pants sported a grass stain. Michaela stood between them. Chad and Cassie each had one of her hands. Her mouth turned down and her eyes gloomy revealed that she knew her mother would never come back. Gloria wanted to take her in her lap and rock her like she had when she told Michaela that her mother was gone. Michaela cried into her shoulder and Gloria’s tears mingled with her niece’s dark hair. But now was not the time. To her relief Starla saved her from breaking down.

“I saw some fried chicken on the table up there. Aren’t ya’ll hungry?” In different ways they all said yes and Starla moved with her grandchildren to the buffet. She loved them because they were a part of her but she didn’t know them. Starla left her relationships behind. Performed the unburdening of husband and children. Eliminated the traditional notion of family from her life. Was she happier than Gloria? If she had stayed would she have learned to be happy? Could she have suffered, sacrificed herself for her daughters like the mythology of motherhood prescribed? Would Stacy be alive if Starla had stayed? Or can a woman’s misery, when hidden from her children, make them better people? If Starla had stayed maybe Gloria would be the one dead.

Starla had broken down at the graveside. Gloria noticed Father Byrd’s frown of regret as he continued the Lord’s Prayer over her gut-wrenching sobs. He hadn’t wanted to conduct Stacy’s funeral at all, and it was only after Gloria begged that he relented. Maybe Starla’s intensity was what Gloria should have shown, but she knew Stacy would probably have to die before the shame would be over. When Stacy walked away that day at the pool, Gloria knew she might never see Stacy again.

Mama Jodi had patted her daughter, ran a liver-spotted hand over Starla's cheek, tried to comfort her. Gloria hadn't thought of her mother as a child. She always thought Starla made decisions with complete confidence. They may not have been responsible but they were bold, and she had mistaken the adventurous for contentment. Gloria realized that she would take care of her mother because her mother could not take care of her.

Her stomach rumbled. She couldn't remember the last time she had eaten. She looked over her shoulder and saw Garrett talking to Ben, who was holding a paper plate full of food. He must have forgotten where he was going with that, she decided. She thought about joining them but chose instead to get some fresh air and headed toward the back door. The children's idea of splashing in the fountain appealed to her more than ambrosia now.

She had her hand on the door knob when Reva Schumer stopped her.

"Gloria, I'm so sorry about your sister," she said as she turned Gloria around by the shoulder. Reva had been working in the kitchen. She wore a yellow cotton apron with white embroidered daisies. Gloria had worn it herself a few times and always wondered who had taken the time to stitch flowers on an apron.

"Thank you, Reva." She had nothing else to say after and held out hope that Reva would let her go, sensing that she wanted to be alone. Reva held true to her reputation, however, and taking off the apron, launched into a full conversation.

"I see your mother came back. Where on earth did you find her?"

"In Colorado."

“Hmm.” Reva paused. Gloria knew she wasn’t trying to be rude. Reva’s good-natured bravado was hardly ever received with irritation. Gloria liked her, especially when she stirred up a crowd like she had on Independence Day. Gloria did not want to talk to her about Stacy. She decided to talk husbands instead.

“Luke working today?”

“Yes, they’ve been pretty busy. I guess Ben’s not coming to the plant then?”

“What?” She turned to Reva, “I’m not sure what you’re asking.”

“Well, Ben asked Luke for a job. Are you telling me you didn’t know?” Gloria felt caught. Everyone in Hatch knew too much about their business as it was. Immediately, Gloria could see the ripple of rumors which would be created if Reva realized Ben hadn’t told her about this. She didn’t want people to think she and Ben never talked about major decisions like him leaving the farm and taking a job at the plant. Stacy and the fire had already attracted too much attention. Next they would snoop out her connection to Drew.

“Yeah. I knew,” Gloria lied. “You know, Reva, it’s been a long day.”

“Oh sure, honey,” Reva said, returning her hand briefly to Gloria’s shoulder. “So, I guess now that Wilhelm’s down, Ben will stay on the farm?”

She just wouldn’t give up. Gloria nodded and smiled. Stacy had died before the paramedics arrived but she had almost caused two deaths. Wilhelm was still in ICU in Oklahoma City, recovering from the beating. The paramedics had taken them both to the hospital in Ft. Reno. Doughboy had called them after he and Kendall left. He told the police later that Kendall held him at gun point, that Kendall had forced both him and Stacy to commit the robbery. Gloria did not believe him, but if he had not called,

Wilhelm would be dead. Ben spent time with this father while Gloria dealt with the police and made funeral arrangements. She found out later that the bullet that had killed her sister came from Wilhelm's gun.

“You know, we all suspected that Wilhelm had dementia or something. He just wasn't the same after Eva died. Ben must have been too close to see it, and Danny, well. I guess he's still off rodeoing?”

“Yeah.” Gloria desperately searched for someone in the hall to rescue her. Mama Jodi was sitting with Starla and the kids, working their way through cake and cobbler. Ben had moved a few feet from where he was before. The plate was gone and Garrett had been replaced by Frank Willis.

“And now this with Stacy. I tell ya, Gloria, I just don't know how much one family can take. Not that we don't all know about tragedy.” Reva didn't take a breath. Gloria's mind wandered as she babbled on.

After Father had finished his prayer, he dismissed the small crowd and invited them back to the Fellowship Hall for dinner. Because they understood the importance of such rituals, mostly older people, neighbors and fellow church members, in the community attended. The only younger ones were people Stacy knew in high school. Of course, Teresa was there, lurking around the edges, but she didn't say anything to the family or to Michaela. It was just as well. Gloria was not indignant. Stacy was gone. Seeing Teresa had forced Gloria to think about criminal charges. There could be a trial. She pushed it out of her mind and concentrated on the steady, wind-blown flaps of the tent fringe.

Gloria had held Mama Jodi's hand as the line of elderly mourners had filtered past the casket. The heat fermented their odor of perfumed power and aftershave. Each one had bent over her, said "I'm so sorry." Gloria dutifully thanked them. Shame and tragedy were what they added as they had walked away, when they thought she couldn't hear. "What a shame." "Such a tragedy." As if they had a right to label it. As if they had a right to define Stacy or their family circumstances. They had made her nauseous.

"Isn't that the girl you work with?" Reva jostled Gloria with her elbow.

To her relief Robyn was coming her way. Gloria noticed Robyn's black bra strap fall down her shoulder below the arm of her yellow sun dress. It comforted her. Only Robyn would be audacious enough to wear any color other than black. It delighted Gloria even more that Robyn did not bother to return the strap to its rightful place.

Robyn stepped between Reva and Gloria, "Hello, Reva. Do you mind if I take Gloria with me a second?" She didn't wait for an answer as she opened the glass door and pushed Gloria outside. They walked in silence until they reached a concrete bench beside the fountain. It was a classic fountain, a life-size statue of St. Agnes with a lamb in her lap and a palm frond in her right hand. Water bubbled from around the base below her feet.

"How'r you doing?" Robyn started.

"Well," Gloria waved her hand in the direction of the hall. "I'm at my sister's funeral in front of people who are here out of obligation and voyeurism, so I guess I can't decide whether to play the righteous victim or tell these fuckers off."

"No, you forget the third option," Robyn reached inside a pocket, hidden in the seam of her skirt.

“What?”

“Live your own life – right in front of them.”

Gloria looked at her, “What the hell does that mean?”

“Did you just get here?” Gloria didn’t remember seeing her in the church or the cemetery.

“Sort of.”

“I saw the kids with Mama Jodi and some other women. You’re mother’s the blonde, right?”

“Yeah. Other women?”

“Looked like two Indian women.”

“Oh, that’s Nani and her younger sister Jewell. They came for Michaela’s sake.”

Except for Michaela’s nose and mouth she looked like Nani. She had her eyes and complexion. If Nani fought for Michaela, Gloria would give in. The tribe would want her now. Gloria did not know if she and Ben would make it, and she couldn’t see causing any more turmoil for Michaela.

“What do you mean, sort of?”

“I’ve thought about us, and I’ve decided I like our friendship. Not many people are like you. You’re so damn conflicted. I like that.”

Gloria had to laugh. Robyn was the closest thing Gloria ever had to a girlfriend. Maybe they got along so well because they were the extreme ends of passion – repressed resentment and naked enthusiasm.

“Gloria, you’re not your sister. You’re not your mother, and Lord knows you’ll never be like Mama Jodi. Quit thinking so much and quit being something you’re not.

You're too hard on yourself. You're not being graded every damn second." Robyn pulled a white envelope from her pocket and set it in Gloria's lap.

"What's this?" Gloria picked up it up but didn't open it.

"From Drew. He left yesterday. Gone back to Kansas."

Gloria stopped, "I don't want to read it."

"Come on Gloria. He's gone. What will it hurt?"

"What did he say when he gave it to you?"

Robyn shrugged her bare shoulders.

"Did you like him, Robyn?" Gloria wanted to know how much time they had really spent together. Did he tell her about that night at his house?

"He was cute, and all," Robyn paused. She began to play with her nails, looking a little uncomfortable. "He was just here for a good time."

Suddenly she felt like bolting. She wasn't mad at Robyn. She was angry at herself. The guilty thoughts of the night with Drew hit her again.

"I can't do this now," Gloria said as stood up and headed back inside the hall.

Robyn shouted after her, "Gloria, don't get mad. I think he really liked you. He might have taken you with him, you know."

Inside, she folded the card in half and found the nearest trash can. Before she threw the note away, she tore it into pieces, shredded it until it was nothing more than bits of white confetti. She hoped it would leave her memory just as easily, melt like tissue paper in rain. She scanned the room, looking for Ben. Her thoughts were clearer than they had been in months. It was if she had been encased in a shell, confined to a cruel type of narcissism. Finally, she had broken free.

Ben had full control of the farm. He always had. It didn't have to take Wilhelm being sick for them to know that. Someone had to die, almost die before Ben could take charge, Gloria realized. Nothing ever happened because of confidence. It always happened out of necessity. Every decision they had made together was part of a self-inflicted blindness. The bumbling through of people who can barely take care of themselves much less an entire family. It was time to face him, make it plain that if she stayed, they would do things because it was what they decided, not because they were trapped.

Everyone had gone except the ladies cleaning the tables and Mama Jodi. Thomas sat next to Father Byrd, who was making diagrams with his finger on the table. They looked as if they were in deep conversation. Gloria did not see Ben anywhere. Feeling a little dejected she took a seat next to Mama Jodi.

“Have you seen Ben? And where are the kids?”

“Nani and Jewell agreed to take the little ones back to Concho. Ben went to the hospital.”

“Why didn't he come find me?”

Mama Jodi shifted in the metal chair, “You were with Robyn. He didn't want to interrupt, so he told me.”

Gloria wondered what Ben thought about Robyn, wondered if he could possibly know their conversations. She fiddled a sugar packet which had been left on the table.

“What about Starla?”

“She drove my car back to the trailer. Said she was tired.”

“How long do you think she’ll stay?” Gloria knew the answer. In Starla’s mind she didn’t have a reason to stay. Gloria gave her two more days.

“Huh, what do you think?” Mama Jodi knew what she thought. “Did you see Thomas with Father Byrd? He’s been talking to him for an hour, Gloria.”

Gloria turned to watch them. Thomas looked rapt, appearing to absorb every word. “How did that happen?”

“Beats me. I’m sure Thomas asked a question and Father Byrd thinks he’s hooked a possible priest. At least I hope that’s why he’s paying so much attention to him.” Mama Jodi snickered at her own joke.

Gloria gently slapped her grandmother’s hand. “Mama J, at least have some respect for the church today. Father Byrd did us a favor.” She turned back to the table, “It surprises me. Thomas is usually so shy.”

“Gloria, hasn’t the way he’s been acting lately made any sense to you? That boy’s looking for answers. Why do you think he smudged your house? Do you think Thomas would steal without a reason?”

“I thought it was because he was eleven. Don’t boys normally do stupid things, like stealing Indian feathers?”

“Thomas isn’t a normal boy. I generally try to stay out of your business, Gloria. You seemed to have your life pretty set, on the right track, until that boy’s accident. Since then I’ve watched you and Ben struggle. I thought you’d be smart enough to figure things out by yourself, but seeing you these last few days, I know you don’t have all the answers. You just pretend like you do.”

Gloria listened. It was rare that Mama Jodi used this tone. When she did, Gloria knew it meant that she would deliver a wisdom she should heed.

“Personally, I don’t know why you need a man. You and the kids could have stayed with me. The night you left I felt bad for Ben, but I knew you had given all you had. When I woke up the next morning and saw that you were gone, I suspected that you were up to no good. But I decided that you’re a grown woman and sometimes grown women do things out of a need they can’t control.” Mama Jodi sighed. Her lip began to quiver and Gloria thought she would finally break down. She held steady, though, and continued.

“Then all this happened with Stacy and Wilhelm. So now it looks like you’ve decided to make it work with Ben?”

It was a question she hadn’t expected. Gloria didn’t answer.

“Well, you went back home anyway. He’s a good man, Gloria. He’s always been a hard worker but not much of a leader. I guess he’ll have to grow into that, especially now that his daddy’s down.”

“Do you think I’ll be happy if I stay? I don’t know if I’m strong enough to hold everyone together and be happy too.” Gloria said.

Mama Jodi took both of Gloria’s hands into her own. “Girl, you’re happy if you want to be happy. It’s not about whether you stay with Ben or leave. You don’t even know what you want. You’ll have to decide that first before you’re content.”

Mama Jodi pushed her chair back. “Take me home.” She motioned for Thomas to join her. He said his goodbyes to Father Byrd and joined Mama Jodi’s side. Gloria

stayed back to thank the ladies of the Altar Society and slipped Father twenty extra dollars for his services.

She came out as Thomas was helping Mama Jodi into the Explorer. After she was settled, Mama Jodi waved him closer and kissed him on the forehead. Thomas beamed as he shut the door. Gloria hadn't seen him smile in weeks.

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She sat in her swing with her legs underneath her, letting the wind push her back and forth. She could feel the cool breeze on her bare feet. It felt good to have her heels. The aroma of burnt grass mixed with rain bumped her to and fro, between reality and hope. Since they had buried Stacy that morning, fat thunderclouds had rolled in from the southwest. The ground they dug up had been hard and dry, but if a storm came in it would all turn to mud. All Gloria could think about was the heavy wet clay that would surround Stacy's casket.

It never rained when it was supposed to, but they had learned to work around it. You learned to appreciate what you had and tried not to hope for things that aren't possible, but then something could change, the weather, a partnership, faith, fate, and all you thought was impossible became time to take action. A chance to drive you dreams forward. Gloria noticed that Ben had the field on the horizon ready for seeding wheat and realized that he had plans from now until he died, a cycle which could go on with out her.

She saw his truck come up the gravel drive. He pulled around behind the house and she heard his truck stop. Waiting, she wondered if he would bother to come out and

talk to her. He finally came through the front door and stood at the edge of the porch without looking at her.

“What are you doing out here?”

“Sitting.”

“Where are the kids?”

“The little ones are at Concho. I left Thomas with Mama Jodi. Starla wanted to spend some time with him.”

“Huh,” Still not looking at her he dragged a wooden rocker from the other side of the porch next to the swing and sat down. He had not changed out of his dress jeans and shirt. She had watched him starch both this morning before he left for the funeral, a job she normally did.

“What are we gonna do about Thomas? We haven’t even had time to punish him since all of this happened.”

“Does he need a punishment?” He wouldn’t like this answer, she knew, but punishing Thomas seemed cruel at this point.

“I don’t even know anymore what to think. I don’t even know you anymore, Gloria.”

“Did you ever know me, Ben?” She believed he would get angry after she said it. She imagined he would explode out of the chair and go back into the house. Maybe pack her things or his and leave. But he stayed in the rocker.

“I thought so, but I know now that you are thinking about leaving me for good.”

She didn’t say anything and let him continue.

“A few days ago I would have thought it would be for the best too, Gloria. I would have thought this is too hard to keep it all together. I’ve been too hard. It shouldn’t be like this. But today and after all that’s happened, I don’t think I can do this on my own. For the first time I see a way, a way to make this all work, but if you leave, it all falls to nothingness again.”

So she should stay for him. Is that it? She buried her sister today and all he can think about is his way.

“What’s in it for me?” Gloria felt strong saying it. For the first time she demanded something in return. “What’s really keeping me here, Ben? Everything I have is for your benefit. We live in your parents’ old house. We farm your family’s land. I can take those kids and start over and I haven’t lost a thing. None of it was really ever mine.”

“I was yours, Gloria.”

She studied him. His face had softened and he turned to face her. She glimpsed the young man she had met years ago.

“All of this is yours. I’m not as strong as you, Gloria, but I’m committed. Did you sleep with him?”

“Who?”

“You know. The night you were supposed to be with Robyn. Were you really with him?”

Gloria laughed. It all seemed too melodramatic for their rural life. “I was with Robyn at Starfire. Hell, Ben this isn’t TV.”

Ben began to laugh, “What’s going to happen to us?”

A rumble rolled in from the west and the cool wind died down. Gloria noticed ragged splotches appearing on the sidewalk.

“It’s going to rain,” she said.

“Nah. It’ll only be enough to soften the top not soak through.”

“A little rain’s better than no rain.” Gloria said.

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