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The Pop-Up Principle

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The Pop-Up Principle

A THESIS

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ABTRACT OF THESIS

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This collection of short stories follows the conventions of postmodern literary fiction, and features conflicts between middle-class family members who predominantly live in Texas and Oklahoma. My main objective in this thesis is twofold. First, I want to encourage my reader to step outside of his or her worldview and into a life unlike their own. The narrators in this collection range from a game warden in California to an eight-year-old schoolgirl from Texas. Each point-of-view character differs from the preceding or succeeding narrator in categories such as gender, age, location, and occupation. Secondly, I want readers to contemplate the “pop-up principle,” namely the notion that we are all flat characters in someone else’s story. Like turning the pages of a children’s pop-up book, every speaker first appears as a rounded individual, full of his or her own memories and goals and troubles, but in each ensuing tale, that same person flattens and merely serves as a background character in someone else’s life. The narrators in these stories evaluate each other, and even judge one another, without fully understanding the situation of the previous speaker. This allows for a postmodern collection with a sense of dramatic irony between each segment—only the reader realizes the deeper connection between the individuals narrating.

The Pop-Up Principle

We are all flat characters in someone else's story.

How Can Man

I am coming to America for the first time, and I am visiting a park near Oklahoma City. I am looking around at all the pine trees and smelling the clean air. It seems *genauso wie*—I mean, exactly like—a German forest, and I am getting so caught up in this setting that I begin to think in German. I look behind me and see another man sitting on a park bench, so I say hello and ask him if he would like to play cards. I always carry a pack of cards with me, because cards are a language most people understand and almost every country has games to play.

The man on the bench looks at me with a strange face, and I am suddenly realizing that I have asked this to him in my language. „*Haben Sie Lust, eine Partie Karten zu spielen?*“

I stand there in shock, because it is my first time speaking to an American and I have already spoken in German. My brain begins to panic, because I cannot remember how to say this sentence in English. I have always been a nervous speaker, even in German, and now it seems like all the English I learned in school leaves my brain as I stare in silence at this man.

He repeats one of my words. “Lust? Man, I really get off on talk like that.”

I scratch my chin through my beard, trying to hide that I don’t understand because he will know that I don’t know English as well as I want him to *think* I know English. But inside my head, I am confused. *Wie kann man*—How can man get “off on” something? These are... *Wie sagt man? Gegenteile*. Opposites, yes? So I am thinking to myself, how can both opposites be true at the same time? But I am then remembering how to say my

question in English. I am thinking back in school about the student from the United States that visited our class, and she said Americans don't always speak in full sentences. So I say to the man in the park, "Would you like to?" And I point over to a stone table near some tall green bushes.

The man looks at me with a strange smile. "What, you're gonna help me get off?"

I am then remembering this word from my classes. "Get off" is both an order to another person and a two-part verb meaning to move, like to get up. This man was not telling me to go away, so he must mean "stand up." And so I am thinking, *Well, if you want to come to the card table, you must get off your bench.* So I say in the clearest American accent I can, "Yes, of course." And I hold out my hand to help the man stand from the bench.

He smiles bigger and takes my hand. His fingers feel soft, and he has an odd look in his eyes. I don't know exactly what he says, because I don't know all those words, but he says "Europeans," which I know means me, and he ends with "kinky." I remember the last part because as he says it, he holds my fingers in a strange way... I forget how to say this. But he plays with my hand in his, like I am his...like I am someone very close to him, and I realize that my words have not meant what I thought they must mean. So I pull my hand from his, which makes him frown, then I tell him goodbye, that I have to go now (here I may have used bad grammar), and I leave the park.

I go back to my hotel room to look up slang words and *Präpositionen*—prepositions, I mean. And I am learning that this word-pair, "get off," has many meanings in English, and that "Lust" still means "desire," but in a very different way. And so I am

staying up the whole night to learn this American slang. And I am never going to this park again.

Namesake

I never wanted to be a truck driver, but growing up in a place like Greenville, Oklahoma, I never wanted to be much else, either. When you've lived in the same place for so long, it's hard not to think of travel. And what other way is a guy like me gonna see the States? I left San Antonio this morning, and I'm on my way back to Ardmore to meet my old friend, Sue, for the first time in ages. Won't be long now 'til I cross the Texas-Oklahoma border over the Red River. I've been driving these eighteen-wheelers full of cables and hardware clear across the country for decades now. Twenty-nine years.

It started out I was real keen to see the sights, the Hoover Dam and Grand Canyon, Mount Rushmore and Prairie Dog Town. Then after a while, I realized for every landmark I get to see, I get to see five hundred miles of concrete and asphalt. Long rows of grey rectangles, some with black cracks and oil stains, yellow paint and white paint. They just keep coming over the horizon, long and low and flat and they never end. And I'll tell you something, when you're sitting up in a cab and it's just you and the road rolling by, well, you start to think about things. Worse still, you start to remember.

People don't really put too much stock into their names. Some kids are named after their parents or grandparents, some for cousins or close friends of the family. Growing up in a small orphanage in Greenville, Oklahoma, I never gave much thought to things like namesakes. Hell, I never even learned my last name 'til I was near fourteen years old. The ladies at the orphanage just called me Jack. I was four when I first went to live there, and after a while, one of only three kids older than ten. Sue, Nate, and Jack. Just us three kids about the same age, and the best of friends until Nate split his head

open on the concrete and Sue got adopted and moved away.

See, most people don't drive through a place like Greenville, Oklahoma just looking to adopt a teenage boy. Aren't too many folks about who say, "Hey, let's go drive way out in the sticks and find us an uneducated bumpkin to take home." Whenever a new car or truck rolled up, the people driving always picked a younger child. Except in Sue Cooper's case, that is, but that was once out of dozens. Maybe the adopting parents wanted a better chance at fighting the real parents' genes, hoping they could mold a good kid out of the orphan they take home. 'Cause kids are like dogs or cats, really. Just a pet that slowly learns how to talk. You train 'em to walk and how to eat and how to sit still and be quiet, and they'll turn out all right, mostly, if you just coach them long enough.

Now, me, I don't remember much from before the orphanage. I was old enough to dress myself, and I knew my colors, and even an address and phone number for home, though I've forgotten the exact numbers by now. Somewhere on Terry Street, that's all I've got. Maybe if I took a drive down Terry Street one day, I'd spot the little white house with a willow tree in the front yard. More than forty years have gone by, but I might still recognize the place if it hasn't been knocked down or rebuilt too different.

I never did get adopted, just sent out with a suitcase when I hit legal age. Good luck, here's your stuff, we'll send you a Christmas card. I walked out the front gate with my brown suitcase, the one I'd carried in from the hospital, the one I'd packed myself before the car accident that killed my father. I still remember his deep voice from when I was four saying I'd done a good job loading up my own bag.

That's the only echo of my father's voice in my head. "Such a big, strong man, packing your own suitcase. Let's see if you can carry it to the car." Whenever I think

back on it, I see quick flashes of grass and gravel, big hands helping me push my brown bag into the trunk. I don't know where we were going, who we were meeting, how long we were staying. I just remember a big, silver bumper in front of my face, and laughing when my face stretched and swelled in the reflection.

But back to what I was saying about names. I first got interested in where they come from and what they mean when I found out my last name. Messer.

Now, I know what a mess is, anything from a spill to a pig-sty. And I know that “e-r” on the end of a word usually means a person does that job. Builder, painter, plumber—Well, a plumber doesn't plumb, but never mind. You know what I mean. So the first time I heard my full name, I thought maybe it meant I'm someone who always makes a mess. And I thought, sure, that's true. I made plenty of messes as a kid, and all of them had to be cleaned up.

But then one day when I was eighteen or so, I went to the library trying to look up my father or our family tree or some kind of record of either, and the librarian at the help desk found me a source with that word in it. So I went to pull that book off the shelf, and what did I find? A German dictionary. And I learned that “Messer” is German for “knife.”

So now I've got even more questions, right? Did my father speak German, was he born there, did they have any ties back to the old country at all? Or did some World War Two soldier shack up with some *hausfrau* and have a kid by accident?

And why knife, you know? Back in old times, people had names that told you their jobs, what they did for a living. Farmer, Baker, that kind of thing. And in German, names like Schneider meant tailor. Schwimmer and Fischer you can probably figure out

for yourself. So why Messer? Why not Löffel, the spoon? Sticking those two little dots on my last name would have helped me figure out I was German sooner. And should that fellow Clark Gable have pronounced his name GAH-bel, like the fork?

Well, then I got to thinking, my granddaddy or great-granddaddy probably made knives like Sue Cooper's ancestors made barrels. So I went back to researching, and I pulled up as many books as I could about knives. German ones, if I could find them.

And I don't just mean kitchen knives, either. I started way back when, when people first started pressing metal into a weapon. The Bronze Age, they called it. I studied swords and daggers, Egyptian kriss blades and hacksaws. I looked into everything from butter knives to band-saws, teeth and sharpened edges and blacksmiths to forge them. And every time I saw a picture of war or even a shot from a movie where someone got run through, I saw Nate's head bashed in on the concrete and had to hurry and look away.

'Cause seeing that much blood is something nobody forgets, right? Nate didn't die from a knife, but, I mean, he died in a bad way. Look, I was a teenager then, and if I can remember pushing a suitcase into a trunk at four years old, I can remember Nate lying there on the ground, his blood staining his plaid shirt and blue jeans, the summer heat driving sweat into my eyes and leaving a weird, hazy fog around him, like I'd slipped into a dream. Then Sue Cooper screamed, and I'll tell you, I could never imagine a sound as loud and shrill and heart-breaking as that.

So after a while of staring at the pictures, I started to wonder if maybe it wasn't the name itself but the country I should have been focusing on. 'Cause even if a German soldier just knocked up some woman without building much of a family, odds were I'd

have some taste for the culture left over. So I put down the books about knives, and I went to look up ones about Germany.

I started on food first, 'cause food's one of the biggest parts of a culture, but reading about taste and spices doesn't have the flavor of really eating, you know? I'll tell you something, it's even harder to find actual German food, or actual Germans, in Greenville, Oklahoma. No wonder I never made the Messer connection until I was eighteen years old. Even today, there's no authentic German restaurant within a hundred miles of my house outside Ardmore.

Speaking of food, there's a little place right up here that would make a nice pit-stop. I pass it every time I cut through Texas. It looks like it came straight out of the library's travel books of Germany. A little cottage on a hillside with white walls, brown criss-crossing beams, a thick wooden door and wooden shutters on the windows. I keep wanting to stop there, but I always tell myself I can wait 'til next time. Well, today, I'm going in.

Aw, hell, there's nowhere to park. They have a few spaces in the lot, but a rig like mine won't fit. I'll have to drive on to the gas station and walk over.

Wow, what a place. I didn't expect everything inside to be made of wood, too. All the tables and floorboards and wall paneling and beams in the ceiling. A guy at the bar has a beer glass shaped like a giant boot. I've never seen that before. It probably holds three or four normal beers. If I didn't have to drive all the way back to Ardmore, I'd order one and try to finish the whole thing just to say I did it.

And there's something else I've never seen before. The menu's written in German and English. I've had schnitzel once. It was pretty much the same as a chicken fried

steak. But this one comes with sauerkraut. That stuff means sour cabbage for a reason. Yellow or red, I hate it. The cheese spread on the table has a bunch of speckly-looking herbs in it. It's kind of hot. Kind of zesty. I like it.

A man with a big, graying beard comes up to my table.

"Are you ready for the ordering?"

"Yeah, sure." I hand him the menu. "I'll have the schnitzel."

"Schmeckt goot," he says. Then he stops.

He's gone stiff all of a sudden. Jeez, what's this guy's deal?

"I am sorry," he says, pulling at the tip of his beard. "I am meaning to say that it tastes good."

"Um, not a problem. You German?"

"Yes," he says, smiling now. "I come out of Frankfurt."

"How long you been in the States?"

He looks down at his notepad. "Not so much."

I have no idea what he's talking about. Did he even understand what I asked him? Well, it doesn't matter. I ordered schnitzel and he knows what that is, so I should be set.

"Just the schnitzel," I tell him again. He seems relieved to scamper off to the kitchen.

Weird little guy. But still, I don't know how well I'd do overseas. Germans do some strange stuff to their food. I read up on it a while back. Tuna fish on pizza. Mayonnaise on French fries. Loads and loads of mayo, too. Gobs of it, half a jar. I nearly threw up just reading about it. And pig fat spread on top of bread like a jelly? What the hell? That's just plain unnatural. Who slapped that stuff together and thought it would

taste good? Parts of that book had me gagging, and I'm not much of a picky eater. Nah, I think the pickiest eater I've ever met was Sue Cooper. The ladies at the orphanage had taped a list inside the kitchen cabinet of all the foods Sue couldn't eat. She was allergic to peanuts and strawberries and I don't even remember what all else. It seemed like every time we ate, she scraped tomatoes or pickles or some type of sauce off her sandwiches. Sue didn't like bran or shredded wheat cereal, and she said peppermint and root beer burned her tongue. She didn't like lemonade or sour anything, and she always ate one section of her plate at a time, never blended flavors or let those little pools of juice run and mix together.

I kept wondering what happened to Sue Cooper after she moved. I never had any idea where she went. The only way I thought I could find out would be to ask at the orphanage, find a record of where her adopted family moved. But how pathetic would that have been? To deliberately try and find her. To go back to the orphanage and ask about a girl that lived there decades ago?

Still, I gave it some thought. Quite a bit of thought, actually, especially in the first few years I started driving trucks for a living. I remember imagining that I found out where she lived, and then made it seem like I just happened to bump into her in a grocery store or somewhere, acting all surprised about it. We started catching up and talking and I found out what she's been up to. Then I asked her to dinner and we went to eat and finished our talki—

“You are liking this, yes?” the waiter says. He sets down my plate with a thunk on the tabletop.

I sit up in my chair. “Yeah, smells great.”

The waiter nods. “Would you like the reckoning now?”

“What?”

His face goes blank again and he just stands there staring at me. Is this a normal thing with this guy?

He holds out a slip of paper.

“Oh,” I say, “the bill. Right. Lemme just—”

“The *bill*,” he repeats loudly. “Yes, I meant the *bill*.”

Right. I grab the check and sign as fast as I can. Tip. Tip well so he’ll go away. I hand it back to him.

“Heisst doo *Messer*?” he asks in excitement, slapping the ticket down onto the table and pointing at it. “Kannst doo feel deutsch?”

“Um, no.”

He picks up the receipt again. “Oh, yes, I am sorry. So you cannot much German, then?”

“Speak it? No.”

“But you should learn. You know so much already! Here, here, apple is *apfel*.”

I just look at him, so he taps the table and says it again. “*Apfel*.”

“Ahp-fell.”

“Yes, yes,” he says, clapping and even stamping his feet a little.

It’s all so silly, but his enthusiasm gets to me and I laugh.

“And fish is *fisch*, a salad is *salat*. But you make the sounds, yes? Say *ich*.”

“Ish.”

“No, no, say *ich*.”

There's a kind of deep gargling noise when he says it, like hissing out the word "ick."

"Yes, *ich!*" he says after what felt like my fifteenth try. "You must learn *Hochdeutsch*. Don't say *ish*, that is South Germany."

"Okay. *Ich*."

"Wonderful! You are true German now, yes?"

He claps me on the shoulder, then smiles and walks away.

This is probably the silliest thing that has ever happened to me. I don't even mean the language lesson out of nowhere. How is it that a man I've just met can ask a simple question and make me this happy?

I finish the schnitzel and walk back to my cab, making my way along the service road and up to the highway. As I turn north and merge onto the Interstate, I think of the waiter and chuckle. My day's only halfway over, but if this is a sign of where it's headed—

A car honks at me and I slam on the brakes. Jesus. I was drifting into their lane. Almost smashed right into them. They'd have been the ones dead, not me, but still. Shit. What was I saying?

Nate and Sue, they would never have believed I'd sit at a table speaking German one day. I was pretty quiet most of the time, but maybe that was just because Nate would do all the talking. Dear God, asking that boy to put a sock in it was about as pointless as trying to jump into a river and come out dry. He talked about anything and everything, from what he thought of Miss Mabel's cooking to how many trees he'd climbed that afternoon.

That boy never would sit down and be quiet. Pissed the orphanage ladies off something rotten. He'd climb trees and climb rocks and come back covered in dirt and grime, his hands all muddied and mucky. Kept sneaking in frogs, no matter how many times they got thrown back out once they were found. I swear to God, I think he caught the same one four or five times and renamed it every time. He swore up and down that it wasn't the same one, said the speckles were different or the coloring was faded in places. I never saw much of a difference between them.

But he'd pocket the frogs anyway, or spend forever roaming around in the woods climbing and jumping down from different heights. Said he liked that feeling just before his feet hit the ground, that weightless part of the fall where it was just the air around him. He said it felt like flying for a second. No better feeling on earth.

And he almost always went around barefoot. I never did understand that, how he put up with the scratchy tree bark and twigs and rocks in the creeks. Even when the cold winter air started blowing in, he would head outside barefoot and the ladies would have to nag him. Since he hardly ever wore his shoes, he would give the pairs he outgrew to the younger boys. Practically brand new. Just some mud in the cracks on the bottom.

My house is upstream of that same creek he always went to. I'm never really home that often. See, lots of truck drivers go out and deliver the stuff, then turn right back around and head home. Most guys, they've got kids or wives or families. Holiday get-togethers to make. Well, I pick up a lot more hours because I've got nothing much else going on. I don't pay a lot for electricity and bills, don't even have cable. No point. I've got a radio that tells me about bad weather coming my way, and that's all I need. And I don't have a pet or plants, so I can do two or three runs back to back and don't mind

being away for so long.

But lately my back's been tensing up real stiff, and my sight's starting to give out. It got harder to read Interstate signs further off in the distance, so I got myself some glasses. I get down out of the cab slower than I used to, and I have to piss three or four times per trip. Maybe my body's just trying to tell me it's tired.

See, I started driving delivery trucks for the main grocery store in Greenville, Oklahoma when I was eighteen, and did that for a while to pay rent. I didn't buy much or spend much, so when some old man's house went up for sale in '84, I used the little bit I had saved up to buy it. Wasn't too expensive, really. More like a shack than a house, with a messed-up air conditioner that just blew hot air and some kind of bad plumbing problem in the main bathroom, so the old man had just used the little toilet closet by the back door. Still, a place to stay that was all my own. And who would ever break into such a run-down little house, honestly? It's not like there's gonna be a big television inside. Some books and a radio are the most expensive things to take. Like robbing a library.

I drove for the grocery store for a while, but then I started looking into the eighteen-wheelers. More in the way of adventure and travel. And when I saw that big white truck with "Koch" written in red on the side, I knew that's who I wanted to drive for. The guy who started the company, his granddaddy or great-granddaddy was a cook.

Been driving for the Kochs for twenty-eight years, this last October. You wouldn't believe the benefits I've got built up by now. Heck, I barely paid one red cent for my glasses. And I've probably got a good chunk of change piled up in my savings account. Interest just slowly adding up. I wonder if I could afford to fly to Germany.

Sue said she had been born way up north somewhere, like Connecticut or Maine

or something. Hartford, I think she said. That's the capitol of Connecticut, right? Anyway, her mother didn't live there, she was just passing through on her way back to Oklahoma and went into labor a week or two earlier than she expected.

Turns out Sue went back to Hartford. When I heard about that, my first thought was that I was scheduled to make a delivery to New York City that next week, and the Big Apple wasn't too awful far from Connecticut, especially because all those northeastern states are so tiny. The settlers that first came here carved up the coast, claiming their property, their own little spot of land. You go out further west, and the states get bigger and squarer. New Jersey looks nothing like Colorado, you know? Not in landscape or shape. So how long could it have possibly taken me to get from New York to Connecticut? Maybe two or three hours. Not like driving across Texas. A full day's ride and you're still in the same state. It took me eight hours to get down to San Antonio from Ardmore. How long does it take to drive through Rhode Island? Thirty minutes? I've never been there. I'll have to remember to time it if I go.

But I didn't need any elaborate plan to find Sue, because as fate would have it, she found me. Being one of the only two close friends in her childhood, it turns out she remembered me just like I remember her. I don't know why I decided to check my mail before I left my house, 'cause I never get anything other than bills now and again, but I opened up that metal flap and found a letter from Sue, asking me to meet her. And she gave me her phone number, so I called her that same afternoon. We're meeting up in Greenville after I make my stop in Ardmore. She had vacation hours coming up from her job—I forgot to ask her what job she has—and she's making a trip out here to OKC. She said she wanted to drive out to Greenville to visit the orphanage, see how much has

changed over the years. I'll be back home in about four hours. Not too long now.

Christ, only four hours. I signal right and exit at the first off-ramp to circle south again. I just saw a Pilot Flying J's, and this one in Fort Worth is the last one I'll pass today. There's one along I-35 up around Oklahoma City, but I'm not going that far north. No, I'm going to take a nice, hot shower and get cleaned up here before I get back to Greenville. Can't do that at any normal gas station, just a Flying J's.

I top off my gas tank, take my shower as quick as I can, then hop back into the cab. I had wanted to buy some flowers because I had seen some beside the register at a different gas station somewhere, maybe a 7-11, but they didn't have any here. Plus the ones I'd seen were scrawny and wilted and Sue deserves better than those. Now that I think about it, there's a Target back south. Last time I stopped at one, they had a better selection of flowers. There's not another Target that I know of anywhere between here and Ardmore—Greenville doesn't have one, that's for sure. I don't know where else there's a flower shop. It won't take long to circle back to the Fort Worth Target.

The second I walk through the automatic doors, I head for the souvenir and car maintenance area out of habit before I realize I don't need anything. When I'm on the road, I like to buy a little gift-shop knickknack like a shot glass or a magnet every time I get to a state I've never been to. I've driven to Texas hundreds of times, so this trip's nothing different. It's not too often I go anywhere else, really, outside of Oklahoma. But where do they keep the flowers here?

I walk around for a few minutes until I hit the air freshener aisle. No, buying one of those for Sue would send the wrong signals, I think. But maybe I could get one for the cab. Tahitian Bayberry. Jamaican Breeze. I don't have a clue what those smell like. Don't

they have something more normal? But then I see New Car Smell and bust out laughing. Some uptight-looking woman across the way stares at me funny, but I don't care. I snatch up a two-pack, already set on buying it. 'Cause I don't think any of the rigs I've driven have ever smelled like that. The cabs always reek of stale cigarette smoke and car fluids like gas or oil.

I still don't see any flowers anywhere, even though I thought they had some last time I'd been in. But then I wander into the home decoration area and find a lot of little glass vases with fake flowers glued inside. One of those would last longer than real flowers anyway, so I grab one filled with what looks like purple daisies, then get in line and check out. Back at my truck, I set up the air freshener, peel the price tag off the vase, then put the present down beside me on the seat and head back to the Interstate.

I like driving up in a cab. All the little cars rush by, acting like they're in such a hurry to get somewhere. Sometimes they pass me going eighty, dashing in front of me and barely giving me enough room. One time a cop pulled over a little red Volkswagen after they did that, which was just fine by me. And sometimes kids pump their arms in the air, trying to get me to honk my horn. I did that the first few times until I scared that white Jeep and they dove into the next lane and almost got into an accident. Haven't done it since.

I think this feeling I get when I'm riding up here is kind of like how Nate felt when he climbed around in trees. Way above the ground, it gives the world a whole new perspective. It's like I'm up on a mountain, watching from above while all the little people race by.

I remember the day when Nate came running into the kitchen telling me and Sue

he'd found it, he'd found it. Neither of us knew what the heck he was talking about, but we finished up our breakfast and went running outside with him. He led us out into the woods behind the orphanage and stopped at the base of a really big tree, pointing up at it.

"This. This is perfect for a tree house." He climbed up to the break in the trunk and held down a hand to help me and Sue up after him. "We just get some boards and some nails and a hammer, and we could have our own place out here."

Sue seemed real excited about that idea, so all three of us agreed to help build it. Nate went into town with Miss Mabel and came back with a big old bundle of wooden planks and a bucket of nails. Said he'd gone to a junkyard or lumberyard or some kind of yard, anyway, and convinced the guy running it to let him have some spare wooden boards for a tree house. He'd said the boards didn't need to match or anything, just so they weren't rotten or too wobbly. And he came back with enough to build the floor and most of the walls.

We didn't have a roof and had a big chunk of wall missing, but we called that the door. And we draped a thick blanket over the top and nailed the edges down, so we sort of had a roof. We just had to hope it didn't rain, is all.

Nate was real proud of that tree fort. He took an old bedsheet from the linen cupboard and nailed it up above the hole in the wall to drape down for a door, and he brought out some books and some magazines and a few small toys like his jacks and cards. But Sue put her foot down and wouldn't let him bring the frogs up. She blocked the doorway and said, "No way are you bringing those in here." And she made him leave the frogs outside.

Sue and Nate, they both really enjoyed that tree house. Sue took to decorating the

inside with little flowers she picked, and Nate was almost always sitting up there reading when he wasn't running around and jumping down out of trees. We started to spend a whole awful lot of time up there, and the ladies from the orphanage had to come find us to make us come in for meals.

Then I remember, one day I woke up and Nate wasn't in his bed. So I only ate a banana at the breakfast table and then went to look for him. He and Sue were already up in the tree house reading a book. Sue was reading out loud, and I could hear her voice as I climbed up. She never stumbled or hesitated, and she always stressed the words just like people do when they speak. I always liked listening to her read. She knew all kinds of real big words, too. Sue was reading one of the Hardy Boys mystery books of Nate's, but she stopped and looked up when I came walking through the bedsheet.

"Hey, Jack," she said. "Go ahead and sit down. We're getting to the really good part."

I sat with my legs crossed and listened to her finish the book, but all the same, I couldn't help but think about how they'd started reading without me, and how Nate had gotten up without waking me, too. And I let it go, I tried not to worry about it, but they did the same thing the next morning.

And after a few more days, I noticed tiny little changes in how Nate acted. Not just getting up early. Like he stopped bringing in frogs, and he washed his hands without Miss Mabel having to nag him. He sat up straight at the table and started wearing shoes more often. And he started looking for flowers and giving them to Sue to put up in the tree house.

So one day right after that, the three of us were playing around on the side of the

orphanage and Nate starts talking about wanting to go to the tree house. And I felt like I'd seen enough of the tree house for a while, so I told him so. He looked at me funny, like nobody in the world could ever get tired of sitting around doing not much of anything in a tree house. So he spun around and asked Sue if she'd rather keep walking around on top of the stone wall with me or if she wanted to go back to the tree house with him to read more Hardy Boys.

Sue turned and looked at the two of us standing there. After a few seconds, she said, "I'd like to get out from under the sun for a little while."

So Sue hopped down from the wall and started heading off toward the tree house. And Nate looked over his shoulder at me with a look in his eye like he'd won some kind of big fight, and started walking along the wall after her to jump off at the lower part on the end.

I don't remember exactly what happened. I remember the sun beating down real hot on me all of a sudden, and I felt like just being me wasn't good enough for them anymore, like they'd both rather be alone than spend time with me. Like Nate was telling me I should go find something else to do, to stop bugging him and Sue and just plain go away.

When I think back on it, it looks kind of like my daddy's hands pushing that brown suitcase. I just remember the stone wall, my white sneakers, and a pair of hands shoving. Then Nate went toppling onto the concrete headfirst, shouting as he went, and Sue turned and screamed.

'Cause that's what us Messers are really good at, aren't they? Making a mess. Biggest one I ever made in my life. So now I'm staring out of this truck looking down at

the road, and I can't help but think... Nate wasn't killed by a knife, but he was killed by a Knife. And I've got another hundred miles of concrete before I meet Sue in Greenville.

Impregnable

Lily looked away from her husband, her hand tightening on the red shopping cart handle. Just moments before, she'd been enjoying her trip to Target. Garrett had tossed the two-pack of paper towels at her and she'd flung her arms up to protect herself, laughing as the plastic-wrapped bundle bounced off her wrist. But when Garrett had mentioned stopping by the Guest Service kiosk to get the blue registry printout for his brother's wedding, Lily had turned her head, pretending to scold their five-year-old son, Tommy, for picking up a glass jar of grape jelly. Why had Jasmine set up her registry here? This was Lily's favorite store.

Lily glanced back at Garrett. Her stall tactic hadn't gone unnoticed. Garrett's face had drooped a fraction. Though only a minute change, that slight drop of his natural smiling expression somehow dragged down his entire appearance along with it, from his dark sideburns to his chin.

"Lily."

She kept her tone innocent and pleasant. "Yes?" Lily leaned closer to the white price label on the shelf. She ran her finger along the blue paper labels on the tuna cans.

Her husband's voice was flat and serious. "Lily."

She pulled her son's hand away from the shelf before turning her attention back to Garrett. He stood leaning against the end of the shopping basket, effectively blocking her only escape route.

"Do you have some sort of problem with my brother?"

"What? Of course not."

Garrett simply stood and looked at her.

Lily kept her face still with a slight frown. She had no problem at all with Seth, but she'd been smothering her dislike for Jasmine for the longest time. Going silent whenever she came into the room or making up some excuse to slip out altogether. In truth, Garrett and Seth hadn't even noticed Lily's aversion to her at first. Jasmine's exuberant, overzealous personality almost always made her the center of attention, and it more than made up for Lily's silence. Garrett had finally seemed to notice Lily's detached responses the day after she'd moved into his apartment with him, the week Seth went to Louisiana on business and Garrett lost his voice, so Lily had to make up their lack of conversation. Garrett had sat in his brown, square chair, taking small sips of his scotch while Lily commented just enough to be polite. Jasmine perched on the arm of the matching sofa across from her, waving her right hand as she talked and holding a wine glass cupped in her left, one leg crossed over the other beneath her long, silky, striped skirt. Garrett had sat there watching them interact, both women covering each moment of silence with a sip from their glasses. Jasmine switched subjects about a dozen times, whenever Lily ran out of things to say.

Lily had never admitted she didn't like Seth's girlfriend because it had never seemed like much of a problem. That is, until Jasmine became his fiancée and Lily realized she'd have to sit through dozens more evenings like the last one. The problem was that Jasmine didn't share many of Lily's interests. In fact, she didn't seem to *have* many interests. Jasmine always talked about clothes, either going on about some new dress she wanted or criticizing the costumes in whatever movie or television show they were watching together. She had flunked most of her college classes as a young adult, so

her parents had stopped paying for it—now she worked in a small fashion store in the strip mall, only a few blocks away in downtown Fort Worth. Once in a while, she'd say she wanted to go back to school, but Lily never believed it.

But whenever Jasmine invited Lily to go shopping or to come over to her house for some girl time, Jasmine would go into a lot of detail about her sex life, and that subject usually turned into talking badly about her most recent boyfriends. Clothes and sex were her two main topics of conversation, and most of it focused on complaining about other people. Once Lily realized that, her dislike for Jasmine had grown to the point where she felt that spending even ten minutes with Seth's fiancée was almost unbearable. Honestly, Lily didn't want to talk about Jasmine because she didn't really know why her frustration had increased even more lately. But the look on Garrett's face told Lily that her husband was going to insist on dragging it out of her this time. How did he expect her to explain what she didn't understand herself?

"Mom, Mom, look!" Tommy said, pointing up at a shelf high above his head. "They have chocolate pudding. Can we get some chocolate pudding?"

"Oh, they have Jell-O, too." Lily turned to her son, grateful for his interruption. She gestured to the small, multicolored boxes beside the premade pudding containers. "I could make a Jell-O pie. Do you want strawberry or raspberry?"

"Strawberry." The five-year-old stood on his tiptoes, and with only a little stretching, managed to pull the red cardboard box down. He turned and tossed it into the basket.

"Tommy! Don't throw like that."

“But Dad did it a minute ago,” he said, pointing at the paper towels in the shopping cart.

“Tommy, just don’t do that.” Lily nudged the basket forward.

“We should go get a registry,” Garrett said, “just to see what Seth and Jasmine want.”

“Tommy, put that back,” Lily said, grabbing the maple syrup her son was shaking upside-down. She crammed the plastic container onto the shelf next to all the others. The air bubble inside the bottle floated to the top.

“Can we get some ice cream bars, Mom?”

“You have popsicles at home.” Lily pulled a bag of pretzels from the shelf beside her and tossed them in the top of the cart next to her dark leather purse.

“Ooh, can we get a slushie from the food thingy at the front?”

“You have popsicles at home.” She turned to glare at her husband. “Did you give Tommy sugar?”

“While you were in the bathroom, I gave him the last of my Dr. Pepper.”

Lily shut her eyes and breathed in, exhaling slowly. She felt Garrett’s hand on hers.

“Honey, it was maybe four ounces.”

She massaged her temples. The last thing a child with ADHD tendencies needed was caffeine right before an hour-long shopping trip. The other parents would think she was a horrible mother for letting Tommy run wild like this. Lily pushed the basket forward.

Garrett moved out of her way and fell into step alongside her. “It might be a good idea to get Tommy a new tie for the wedding. We should go find one before we get anything that needs refrigeration. What do you say?” Garrett asked, tapping his son’s arm. “You want a new tie?”

“Yeah!” the five-year-old said.

Garrett patted Tommy’s back and steered him down the grocery aisle. Lily followed them through the middle of the store, past the porcelain dishes and women’s blouses, then she turned the shopping cart onto the gray carpeted area of the boy’s department. Tommy ran ahead, but he stopped at the table with a pile of clip-on ties, so Lily didn’t call after him.

“Which one do you like best?” Garrett asked, looking over the various patterns.

“This one!” Tommy grabbed a violent orange and yellow polka dot tie and held it up for his parents to see. Like Lily really needed to strain to see that monstrosity. Jasmine would complain about her behind her back for the rest of her life if she let Tommy wear that in the wedding photos.

“What about this one?” Lily said, picking up one with crimson and maroon diagonal stripes. “It’s red, like Mario.”

“No, I like Luigi better!” The five-year-old dropped the neon traffic cone tie and picked up a green and blue one instead.

“That’s a first,” Garrett said, bending to retrieve the orange clip-on from the carpeted floor. “Nobody I grew up with ever wanted to be Luigi. ‘Let’s play *Super Mario Bros.*’ meant ‘Let’s fist-fight for Mario.’” He set the tie back on the table.

Garrett turned to face Lily. “What about you?” he asked. “Do you have everything you need for the wedding?”

“I’m all set,” she said.

“How about a new necklace?”

“Well, let’s finish up and go home.” Lily turned the cart around, steering it down the main aisle and toward the groceries.

“Babe?”

Lily slowed. She inhaled deeply, suddenly feeling more on edge than she’d expected. Her nerves felt as electrified and alive as the first time she’d kissed a boy. Or the time she’d found herself alone with her first serious boyfriend, when the unspoken attraction seemed to fill the air, pulling the two of them together and into his bed. Lily wanted to look away from her husband, to go back to talking about some inane topic instead of what she knew was coming.

Garrett approached her. He looked at Tommy, who was spinning in small circles beside the basket, before asking in a low voice, “Now, Lily, I mean it. Do you have a problem with Seth?”

Lily met her husband’s eyes. “No.”

“Do you hate Jasmine?”

“No, of course I don’t *hate* her.”

Lily sensed Tommy walking away. She snapped her head toward him. Her son sped down the outer aisle of the lingerie section, running his hand across the silky nightgowns hanging on the racks.

“Tommy, don’t do that!”

“Okay, Mom.” Tommy slowed and started stepping on one white floor tile at a time, hopping to each new square. He stopped in place and balanced on one leg, waving his arms at his side for balance. After a few seconds, the five-year-old stumbled forward and caught his fall with his other foot. His dark bangs swished forward at his sudden halt. Lily made up her mind to trim his hair once they got back to the house.

“Buddy, get back over here,” Garrett called.

Tommy ran toward him, but then past him, his small blue sandals slapping against the tile. Garrett grabbed his arm.

“Slow down,” he said, pointing a large finger at Tommy’s face. Then he let him go. “Hand on the basket.”

Lily looked back at Garrett. “I just—Jasmine has a way of—” Lily started to push the red shopping cart toward the kitchenware aisle when she heard a muted, jazzy riff of “In the Mood” playing. She stopped, unzipped her purse in the top of the basket, and dug through its contents for her cell phone. Speak of the devil. Jasmine had texted her. She had sent a picture, too. Lily slid her finger across her smart phone and opened the message.

Jasmine had written, “For real, what the fuck is this guy’s problem? Why does he think I want to see this?”

Lily scrolled down to the image. She shrieked and dropped her phone into her purse.

Garrett was staring at her. So were a lot of other people in the store. Tommy, too.

“Mommy, what’s the matter?”

Lily let her face fall into her palms. She felt her husband's arm brush hers as he reached for her cell phone.

"What the fuck?" Garrett said.

Lily lowered her hands. "That! *That* is why I don't like her!" She pointed at the screen, at the naked photograph of Jasmine's sister's ex-husband. "Why the fuck does she think it's okay to send me that?"

Garrett stared. "Why the fuck *did* she send you that?"

Lily grabbed the phone, scrolling down the message. She had no idea in hell what was wrong with Jasmine, why she would send a woman who had a little boy a picture like that. Tommy could've been watching a video or playing a game on her phone, and that would've popped up in the corner for him to see. He might've even clicked it by accident and enlarged the photo. Then everybody would've thought she was a negligent mother.

She stopped at the forwarded message under the image. "This is what your sister will be missing."

"Oh, for God's sake." Lily thrust the phone toward Garrett. He took it, his eyes scanning left and right as he read the text.

"Really?" Lily pointed at the photo. "Her idiot sister breaks up with her husband because he goes to jail for helping her grow pot and he sends *Jasmine* that picture? And then she forwards it to *me*? 'Why does he think *I* want to see that,' why the hell did Jasmine think *I* wanted to see that?"

Garrett looked around, then at Tommy. He clicked Lily's phone off.

Lily's tensed hands turned into claws. "Why does she tell me these things? Why does she tell me about having—" Lily glanced at Tommy as he stood by the cart, waiting. She lowered her voice. "About doing it with her ex in a tunnel at a children's playground? Or about how Seth has a piercing on his—down there?"

Garrett's mouth dropped open. "He has a *what*?"

"See? Why do *I* know these things about your brother and you don't? Why do we know at all? I don't ever want to talk to Jasmine because she does stuff like this." Lily jabbed a finger at the darkened screen. "She spends 'girl time' telling me horrible stories I shouldn't hear or don't want to hear. Like the time her dog chewed up her dildo." Lily leaned forward. "Garrett, she dug it out of the trash to show it to me! She's crass and irresponsible and does whatever the hell she wants whenever she wants to, she isn't even married and gets pregnant by accident, but I try for months and months to have a baby with my husband and I just can't do it—"

Garrett looked sharply toward her. "Lily."

"And when I finally do, I'm lying there in the hospital with C-section scars and my tubes tied, and in so much pain I can't even move, thankful that I'll even get to go home again, much less see my only son grow up, and she sits there and acts like getting pregnant's no big deal—"

Garrett stepped closer and took her arm. "Honey, calm down."

Lily put her head into her hands and tried not to cry. From an aisle or two away, she heard a deep laugh. She whipped her head toward the sound, toward an old trucker in overalls and a green hat. He was holding an air freshener and nearly bent double,

slapping his knee. The man pulled his glasses from his eyes and wiped away a tear. What the hell was he so happy about?

An elderly lady a few feet to Lily's right stood staring at her and Garrett.

"Mind your own business," Lily snapped.

The woman wheeled her cart in the other direction.

Lily closed her eyes and tried to slow her breathing. In her mind, she replayed the old lady's shocked expression, remembering with a thrill of shame that she had been shouting personal information for the whole store to hear. Well, screw it. Nothing she could do about it now. She just wanted to head home.

Garrett's voice rang out. "Tommy, get back here!"

Lily spun around. Their five-year-old had run down to the cleaning equipment on the adjacent shelves and stood flipping a vacuum hose around on his face like an elephant's trunk. Garrett dashed across the wide gap between the aisles to grab Tommy's hand.

"Come on," Lily said, wiping her face, "let's go home."

The three of them walked toward the front lanes to check out. Lily led them through the shampoo section, willing to put up with the odd mixture of flowery fragrances if it meant avoiding the candy aisles in front of the pharmacy. They went past a rack of loofas and facial cleansers, then stopped and surveyed the checkout lanes. More than half of the lighted signs were out, and at least two other shoppers stood in every available line. Lily made her way to lane twenty.

A short, skinny blonde wearing a red shirt and khaki pants said something into a walkie and then called out, "I've got a cashier opening up on thirteen!"

Lily ignored her, stepped closer to the whirring conveyor belt. She pulled the basket forward, unloading the produce and arranging the boxes in clusters. Lily picked up the clip-on tie. She looked down at Tommy, whose head drooped as he stared at his toes, only wiggling them in his sandals a little. Honestly, his day had been kind of terrible. Garrett had hyped him up on caffeine and then she and her husband had kept scolding Tommy for running around. And he also had to stand there listening to his parents talk badly about his future aunt right before her wedding. Even if Tommy wasn't sure what she and Garrett had been talking about, he knew upset voices when he heard them.

Pulling her son's arms toward her, Lily crouched down and smiled at him. "Hey, guess what?"

Tommy's forehead creased in concern. Lily pointed past checklane twenty-four to a wall of colorful packets of trading cards.

"They have baseball cards like the ones Grandpa gave you. Want to get some?"

Tommy looked around her toward the bright packages, a large grin spreading across his face.

She nudged him in that direction. "Go ahead. But just one."

The five-year-old hurried over to the cards. Lily heard his shoes slapping as he dashed from one display to the next.

"How are you?" the teenage cashier asked, rapidly typing produce codes into the computer despite her long, painted fingernails.

"Doing fine," Garrett answered, swiping his credit card and signing ahead of time. "How about you? Tommy, hurry up!"

“We’ve got some cards coming,” Lily said. The brunette nodded and continued ringing up the sale.

Garrett steered the empty cart to the end of the lane and reloaded the plastic bags inside it. Behind Lily, a tall, older man with large glasses set the plastic dividing bar down onto the conveyor belt to separate his items from hers. He smiled at her in greeting, then began to pile his groceries onto the counter.

“Fifty-two ninety-six,” the cashier said, tapping a key with a note of finality. “Oh, wait.” She pressed another button on the register. “You had a pack of cards still.”

“Tommy,” Lily called, “make up your mind. We’re done.”

“I’ll go and get him,” Garrett said, shooting an apologetic look at the teenager behind the counter. He hurried off toward checklane twenty-four. The cashier hit another key, and a slip of paper with a barcode shot out of the printer. She scanned the miniature receipt with a loud electronic beep. Lily watched as a blur of green words raced across the computer readout screen, listing off every item the girl had rung up.

“I’m sorry about this,” Lily said to the older man standing behind her.

“Not in a hurry,” he replied, setting a bag of Tootsie Rolls next to his coffee cans.

Lily tapped her fingers on the plastic ledge of the checklane. She stared at the shining lines of water that had fallen from her produce onto the black conveyor belt, listening to keyboards clacking behind her, a toilet flush from the restrooms to her right, a male cashier asking to see a driver’s license, someone else running. Loud, pounding footfalls, too. In the distance, she heard a woman’s voice ask, “Can I help you find something?” Probably the blonde with the walkie. It sounded like her.

Lily glanced guiltily at the cashier and the man in line, then stood on her toes, peering over the racks of gum to checklane twenty-four. She couldn't see Tommy or Garrett.

Behind Lily, the blonde with the walkie announced in a booming voice, "L-O-D? Code yellow on the checklanes." She repeated her statement three times, then cut behind Lily's cashier and strode over to the electronic doors beside all the shopping carts. The woman turned and stood in front of the exit, a nervous expression on her face.

"Garrett?" Lily circled her cart at the end of the checkout counter. She jogged over to the trading cards. No one stood in the aisle.

Lily spun to look down the other side of the long store. A few people in red and khaki hurried in different directions, a couple of shoppers walked lazily to the exits, a security guard with curly brown hair and a beard came out of a white door next to the rock salt display... Then she saw Garrett sprint out of the bathroom and down the front lanes, shouting Tommy's name.

Lily broke into a run. A tall, slender man with white hair and a moustache waved to Garrett, who raced over to him. Lily hurried to catch up to them.

"—plaid shirt, shorts, sandals, over by lane twenty-four," Garrett was saying.

The man with the moustache repeated the information into a small microphone attached to his earpiece, then returned his attention to Garrett and Lily. "We've got all our available team members searching the store."

Garrett nodded.

Lily turned and sprinted toward the grocery side. As she passed by the lane with her shopping cart, the cashier set aside the white slip of paper and began ringing up the

older man's purchase. Both of them looked her way. So did the blonde by the doors. Lily ran past a display of oranges, whipping her head in every direction. It was pretty busy on the sales floor. Lots of teenagers and couples and families.

She ran down the main aisle between the medicine and the groceries, shouting for Tommy. Most people slowed or scooted to the side to let her pass. Lily nearly knocked over a skinny boy in a Target uniform, realizing as she turned to stare in surprise that he was deaf. The boy said something loud but unintelligible, pointing toward the fitting room. Lily signed that she was sorry and then sprinted through the rack of shelves and down the larger aisle on the other side. Dog toys, dishes, corkscrews and cutting boards. To her right, a Target worker with his hair in small spikes brushed aside the skirts on women's dress racks, peering underneath them.

Lily hurried back to the front of the store and ran through an empty checklane, stopping on the other side in front of an ice storage box. She looked down both ways. Garrett appeared in the distance, across from the photography studio. The man with the white moustache followed him. Lily felt herself starting to cry. Garrett ran toward her.

Her husband pulled her close, kissing the top of her head and rubbing her arm. Lily wound her fingers through his. She stared out into the sales floor. Several red-and-khaki-clad workers hurried across the aisles. A group of teenagers walked past Garrett and Lily, strolling and carrying on their normal lives like a five-year-old child hadn't gone missing.

The man with the moustache pinched the button on his earpiece and spoke into his mic. "Target team, if we do not locate the missing child in two minutes, we must inform the police." He turned to face them. "Security's checking the surveillance tapes."

Lily clutched the bottom of Garrett's shirt in her fist. His hand rubbed her arm more quickly.

A Target worker with a serious expression walked around the back of checklane twenty-four and came up to their group. Lily's eyes locked onto the tall, dark girl.

"Hey, Cody, could I talk to you in your office?"

Lily wanted to slap her.

The manager held up a hand. "Hold on." He pressed the button on his mic. "This is the L-O-D."

He stood in silence for a moment, listening. Lily stared at the earpiece, willing the speaker on the other end to hurry up. A few seconds later, the manager said, "All right." He released the black button and looked up at her and Garrett.

"Brenda in Softlines found a boy in Ready to Wear, near the fitting rooms. He matches your son's description. She's staying there with him."

Hardly waiting for him to finish, Lily tore through the store. She heard Garrett and the manager hurry after her. Lily ran into the young women's clothing section and jogged through the dresses. She circled back when she saw a girl in a Target uniform squatting to the ground, peering behind a long lavender skirt she held out of her way. Past her legs, Lily saw little feet in flip-flops.

Lily slowed as she approached Brenda and the child. Then she saw a small face turn to look at her. Her eyes focused on his smile, one that looked so much like Garrett's, and she watched as Tommy's tiny lips formed the words, "Hi, Mommy."

A Shot at the Sugar Barrel

Andy McNeil looked into the metal barrel and stared down at the donuts inside it. His eyes glided over the syrupy glaze that had begun to harden into white crystal-like flakes. Most people wouldn't expect to find donuts in a giant tub like this. They'd shake their heads and laugh, and probably walk away indifferent. But up here in the mountains of California, here a game warden like Andy knew that a barrel full of sweets could only mean one thing: bear bait.

Even from a few feet away, Andy smelled the sugar pasted onto the dough. A black bear would locate that sweet scent just as easily, would come sloping down the mountain and nose through the bin for lunch. And these animals weren't exactly the "pic-a-nic basket" type.

Andy had seen a man mauled once when he was a kid. The guy had done everything he was told to do—he flopped down on the ground and lay still—which explained why he'd been attacked. People need to make a lot of noise and stand as tall as possible to intimidate a bear. The man at the campsite had played dead, so the bear pawed at him and gnawed at him, broke a couple bones and tore into flesh before it was satisfied its prey was dead. To the man's credit, he stayed flat and unresponsive the whole time, even held back from screaming. The black bear only batted at him a little. Still, the guy had some deep scratches on his face afterward, blood pouring down his neck and staining his shirt. A heck of a sight for seven-year-old Andy to see. It took his parents a while to talk him down out of the tree. They didn't go camping again for a few years after that.

Andy crouched down beside the barrel and started shifting through the fallen

leaves around it. Nothing. He dusted off his hands and stood. Andy examined the metal sides one more time, then drew back with a shake of his head. People shouldn't mess with bears. That should be fairly obvious, but no. More often than he'd care to think about, he found poachers setting up shop out here, even teenagers sneaking through the woods on a dare. What a stupid thing to do.

Andy circled through the surrounding trees, looking in the foliage for anything out of the ordinary. His footsteps rustled in the undergrowth and snapped twigs. A chilly December wind whistled in his ears.

Despite what some people thought, bear hunting itself wasn't prohibited. It actually helped control the population out in the wild, and the data on a harvest tag gave wildlife biologists a truckload of useful information even if the hunter never bagged anything. But Section 365 of the Mammal Hunting Regulations said that feeding and baiting bears was illegal in California. 365, as in unlawful every day of the year. And the department had already hit their cap of 1,700 bears reported taken nearly a month before—the season was closed.

Andy turned to face the barrel again. Well, he was looking at a couple of different violations, easy. The season and the bait, to start with. Plus these people probably didn't have a harvest tag. Heck, they might not even have a hunting license.

Better get going, then. Surveillance equipment wouldn't set itself up. Andy headed back to the truck, walking sideways down the steep hill to keep himself from falling. His boots kicked up fallen leaves and pinecones as he went. Andy glanced up at the sky, cloudy with a wisp of cold air sneaking through the trees. The weather advisory had predicted a chance of snow over the weekend for this district, and he believed it.

Winter was coming. He smelled it in the air. Bears were out sniffing around for food to store up some extra snacks before hibernation, and poachers were looking to bag themselves a kill or two before the animals holed up for the next few months. He needed to get a move on.

Andy scrambled down the last few steps of the hill, hopped into his truck, and drove back to his house. When he got there, he headed straight for his office and into the equipment cabinet, pulling out his cameras and checking they had enough power to run for at least twenty-four hours. Andy had to admit, he had been pretty excited when he'd learned that game wardens got to use such amazing technology, even if only so often. These bad boys were top of the line, high definition, motion-sensor activated. If so much as a leaf fell in front of the lens, he'd get a picture of it, with such good detail he could see every little vein going up the side.

Andy tucked a digital camera under each arm.

"Time to go set this up," he said aloud, patting his pocket for his key ring and heading back outside.

He locked the door, then clambered back into his truck. Starting the engine, Andy turned back up the mountain toward the clearing with the donut barrel. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and glanced over at the cameras in the passenger seat before returning his eyes to the road.

Back in high school, he'd wanted to be a photographer. He helped take the yearbook pictures and used to wander around the woods behind his house snapping photos of whatever interested him—sometimes a rabbit or a fox, sometimes just things like the light filtering through the leaves above him or the white reflection of the sun on

the river surface. Andy had three full albums tucked away somewhere in his closet of nothing more exciting than a snail and a silvery smear of ooze behind it.

He'd always had a knack for catching glimpses of fish lurking in the waters or rabbits as they ran across the trails. It was almost like he knew they were there somehow. Andy's little brother, Will, had said he wanted to come out with him once, so they went together. That was back before digital technology. They had used those yellow disposable cameras with the gray windup button in the top right corner. Andy still loved that sound, the seven heavy *click-click-clicks* between each photo. He and Will spent all afternoon wandering around the trails, and every time Andy stopped to take a picture or point out an animal, Will snapped a shot. When they got their film developed, nearly every one on Will's roll came out blurry or the animal was almost completely out of frame. Will sat there at their parents' kitchen table sorting through his packet of photographs, looking over each one closely, and then he went through Andy's stack, once in a while even holding his own up beside them.

"How do you do that, Andy?" he asked, giving his brother a deep stare.

"I don't know," Andy said, picking up the pictures and comparing them himself. In Andy's, the jackrabbit bounded mid-leap across the gravel path, long legs extended, his body a near-perfect arc sailing through the air. In Will's, he saw a tail and foot, some grass, and a giant orange finger blocking the lens. Andy chuckled. Will slapped his packet down on the table and stomped off down the hall.

"Aw, come on, they're not that bad!" Andy called after him. And they hadn't been terrible, for a twelve-year-old, anyway.

Andy had looked back at the images laid out before him, and that's when he

realized, sitting there at his parents' wooden kitchen table, the reason he loved photography. Pictures were portals in time. It suddenly struck him that he'd never see that rabbit again, but he'd still have the image of it long after the rabbit disappeared in the undergrowth, and even years after its death. The fleeting instant when the photographer had taken the picture had been lost forever. Andy stared down at the image, marveling at the moment frozen in time. Just like his brother suddenly getting up from the table, the rabbit had gone and the previous moment existed only in his memory. The photo was the only proof it had ever been real.

Andy shook his head and made himself focus on the road and the situation at hand. He still had time to catch these poachers. Judging by the amount of fresh donuts inside the barrel when he'd found it, they'd only set it out this morning, so they'd wait at least a day to come back with their guns and their dogs, long enough for a bear to find the bait and lead them up the mountain to its den.

He parked the truck and grabbed his equipment, climbing the slope toward the clearing. The steep angle strained his leg muscles. Andy resisted the urge to stop and massage his knees. He came to the top of the hill. There was no one near the barrel and no sign anyone had been around recently. No bears had come by, either.

He walked up the incline a little further and strapped one of his cameras to a tree trunk. After he turned on the power and made sure the barrel was in the frame, he camouflaged the device with leaves. Perfect. Next, he went to the other side of the clearing and set up the second camera, attaching it to a tree facing the trail down the hill. Andy aimed the lens at his truck as a rough idea of where the poachers would park. These guys had to use the same path he'd taken. With any luck, he'd catch a clear photo of their

license plate. Even if he didn't, he'd still get a few shots of their vehicle—and of their faces as they came up the hill.

Andy took a step back and checked his work. Unless he looked for the cameras, he wouldn't notice them. Mission complete, Andy headed down the slope toward his Chevy. His eyes stopped on the silver logo stamped onto his green door, the six-pointed star with a ribbon across the top that read "Warden."

Sometimes Andy still thought it was kind of funny he ended up as a game warden. Ever since he was a kid, he'd thought he'd become a photographer one day. Even in high school, he'd made a decent spot of pay shooting for special occasions like a wedding here and there. And he still had offers. Just a few days before, his cousin Jasmine had asked him to fly out to Fort Worth to take photos of her wedding. Andy had never even met this Seth guy.

"Come on, Andy," Jasmine had said on the phone. Andy could imagine the begging, slightly pouting, expression on her face—the same one she'd used on him when they were kids at the reunion in Wimberley, trying to get him to go play in the river or squish a scorpion.

Andy had given her a vague response, a lengthy maybe. Because personally, though he'd never tell anyone this, he didn't care for the pressure that photo shoots put him under. It sounded a little odd to say he avoided stress by roaming around in woods filled with wild animals, but he always felt compelled to document absolutely everything that happened at a wedding or at any other of those major events in people's lives. They were a one-time deal, one day only. And if anything went wrong with his camera or in developing the film, every one of those shots would be lost. All that time, effort, energy

put into planning the perfect day, and Andy holding the responsibility of carrying those images on... If he messed up, they were gone. For good. No coming back. Screwing up someone's wedding, an important, life-changing ceremony like that—

Well, he had just stopped finding spare time to accept photography job offers, especially once he got into studying for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife exams and completed all the cadet training he needed to become a game warden. Andy had gone to a law enforcement academy the same as the average police officer in training, and he'd learned how to seize evidence and make arrests and interview witnesses and testify in court just like a policeman. He knew the laws and enforced them. For instance, regulations only allowed one adult bear per hunting license year.

There was a time, years ago, when the CDFW didn't have such strict limitations on bear hunting. But after black bears went on the threatened endangered species list—and after the extinction of the California grizzly—the CDFW had changed the laws to prohibit hunters from taking cubs and from taking females with cubs in tow. That was why the season ended when hunters reported 1,700 black bears harvested—the maximum number helped keep up the animal population, and the CDFW closed the season early whenever their records hit that cap amount. But the kind of guy who'd come up to the mountains and set bait out, that type of hunter planned on bringing a dog or two with him, and maybe even a group of friends, then tracking the bear back to its den. Killing the whole family, cubs and all. And Andy wasn't about to let them get away with it.

He tore his gaze away from the game warden logo, climbed into the truck, and headed back down the road. All throughout the rest of the day, no matter what happened, Andy kept thinking about the clearing just up the hill. When he drove out to a local

landowner's residence to check how things were going, he wondered around what time the poachers would go back to their bait site. When he answered a call from his supervisor, he wondered how many hunters would come for the barrel. And when he lay down to sleep that night, he stared up at the ceiling for a while, hoping he'd get a good photo of their license plate so authorities could find them.

Andy knew activist groups like PETA stood up for animal rights and argued the CDFW shouldn't sit back and let these hunters go out and shoot that poor, defenseless creature at all. But bears could be dangerous. If someone from PETA met up with a black bear out in the woods, would they rush forward and try to cuddle with it? Second, hunting reduced the number of animals, and that kept a healthy population thriving. Too many bears in one place meant not enough food for them all, which meant they'd start dying out anyway. And one lightning-fast gunshot was a quick and almost painless death. But on the other hand, did he think people should run through the woods shooting waves of bullets into the forest? No. Safety was important. Besides that, California law prohibited wasting meat, and he'd never thought killing just to kill was a good thing.

That's what really had him worked up about this whole poaching business. It was the kind of people who baited and tracked like this, who broke the law and did whatever the hell they wanted. They were the type who'd leave a dead bear carcass on a beach by Lake Tahoe and let some teenage amateur photographer stumble across it at six in the morning.

Andy shut his eyes and rolled to face the wall, trying to get that image out of his head, but it came anyway. Junior year. His father had taken him on a summer camping trip with his friend Peter, who lived out near Homewood. Andy had gotten up a few

minutes before dawn and strolled along the shore to get a few pictures of the sunrise over the water. He walked down to the pier to pick a good spot, and that's when he saw it. A dead bear, lying there on the ground outside the tree line.

Andy dropped his camera and ran over to it. Blood had soaked into its fur all around the gunshot wound. It lay on its right side, tongue peeking out of its mouth, brown eyes dark, unmoving. Andy hadn't known what to do. He'd felt like he'd just stumbled onto a homicide. Without another thought, he ran back to the tent. The second Andy described what he'd seen, his dad got on the phone and reported it.

A game warden came out to the beach and interviewed Andy, writing down everything he said. Then Andy called his mother, who insisted that he and his father come home that same day. After they got back from the lake, Andy followed the story in the newspapers, but the articles only said the wardens hadn't found any more blood in the woods or any shell casings from the weapon to pinpoint the initial shooting location. The incident had caused quite a stir in Homewood. People called in with all kinds of tips and misinformation, and like it usually turns out, the department spent a lot of man-hours investigating all those phony leads. They didn't turn up much of anything. But Andy felt sure it was the same with murder cases and kidnappings, too—authorities asked for any information to help out, and about half the people who phoned in sincerely wanted to help and half of them just wanted to feel important for a minute or two, maybe get their names in the paper. There was no way to avoid it, either. Investigators had to slug through all the useless information, bit by bit, in the hope of getting something genuine.

Thinking back on the incident as a trained game warden, Andy realized what must have happened out there at Lake Tahoe. The bear got shot in the chest, and then

wandered around in the woods for a while until it smelled the water down the hill and headed in that direction. That bear limped around for who knows how long before it finally slumped down and died. That wasn't a lightning-fast death, it was slow and drawn-out and painful.

Andy draped his bed sheet over his face and made himself stop thinking about it. The next thing he knew, his alarm clock buzzed and he sat up in the faint morning light, his mind already centered on the donut barrel in the clearing. Andy yanked on his uniform and looped his belt in upside-down, wondering at first why it wouldn't buckle. He decided to skip breakfast and poured himself a thermos of coffee instead, then he went down the hall and into his office.

He sat at his desk and flipped a pen through his fingers, tapping it rapidly on the wooden desktop. More than anything, Andy wanted to go up the mountain and retrieve the cameras. But he needed to wait for undeniable evidence. Give the poachers time to check on the site themselves. What good would it do anyone if he went up there and started taking down his equipment right when they came back? Technically, he'd know those guys were there for the bait, but it wasn't concrete. They could argue they were just passing through or something, or hunting for a Nelson bighorn ram, that they had no idea about the donut barrel. He could write them a citation if they didn't have a harvest tag or a hunting license, and also for using dogs to hunt the bear or even the supposed ram, but more than likely, they'd get away with the attempted poaching. He had to wait.

Andy jiggled his foot and took a swig from his thermos. The bitter flavor of his coffee surprised him. He'd forgotten to add cream and sugar. Too distracted this morning. He needed to get a grip.

He put down his pen and pulled forward a framed photo sitting on the right-hand side of his desk, running his fingers over the smooth, metal edges. Andy's favorite picture he'd ever taken. His nephew, Jim, had been coming around the corner at Will's house, wearing little green swimming trunks and carrying a white washcloth as big as his face. He was four in the photo. He looked just like Will with his spiky red shock of hair, better proof of the McNeil bloodline than a DNA test. Andy had snapped that picture with a bright flash before Jim even knew he was there. It was the greatest photo of all time—the towel suspended in midair, perpetually falling in a gentle “S” shape, Jim's mouth a horrified “O” of surprise, his fingers splayed out in the air. Andy had a dozen copies, and always pulled one out if he needed a laugh. Jim gaping up in terror. He'd started crying right afterward, but Andy had rushed forward to hug him and Jim had started smiling again a few seconds later.

Andy set the frame down and stared blankly at his desktop. He should probably have kids of his own pretty soon. He was already thirty-two. His nephew was six. Well, having children involved finding himself a woman, and Andy had a bit of a track record with girlfriends—a lot of relationships that only lasted a few weeks, maybe a month or two if he was lucky.

A few of Andy's girlfriends found the game warden thing exciting but didn't like how much time it took out of his life. Most people probably didn't realize game wardens were on call twenty-four hours a day, and if the department office got a report of illegal activity in his area, Andy had to go. On the other hand, more than a few of Andy's dates thought his job was really dangerous and wanted nothing to do with it. He'd lost Carol that way, for sure.

An even bigger issue Andy faced was that women seemed to think being with him would require them to live in a tent in the woods, smelling of skunks and mosquito repellent for the rest of their lives. He had a house. Yes, it was kind of out in the middle of the California wilderness, but it wasn't a shack or anything. It had a scenic mountain view. Jeez, people had a lot of misconceptions about his job. Andy alone controlled his particular district. He was in charge of maintaining the peace. Aside from his supervisor, Andy was king of his realm. Friend of the community. A man who worked out of his own home, who made four thousand dollars every month, not a pathetic recluse who lived in the middle of nowhere.

Andy sighed and rolled his neck. He decided to start writing up the case just so he'd feel better. After that, he'd probably head out to make the rounds, chat with a few of the local landowners. Circle through and talk with the hunters, make his presence known. He'd wait until that evening to check on the bait site. That would give the potential suspects a less likely chance of seeing him.

He managed to keep himself busy for most of the day, but the instant his watch read seven o'clock, Andy hopped into his truck and drove to the clearing on the mountainside. As he pulled up to the bottom of the hill, he reflected that he had no way of hiding a giant green Chevy with silver game warden logos stamped on its doors. He'd have to hurry just in case.

Andy parked and walked quickly up the slope, glancing around through the trees. When he crested the hilltop, he stopped and stared. The barrel was missing.

His hand went to his belt and unsnapped his firearm from its case. Keeping his right palm on his weapon, Andy crossed the clearing. He took down both of the cameras,

looking over them for a moment, and saw no sign that either had been discovered or tampered with. Tucking one under each arm, he clambered back down to the truck.

Andy let out a breath. Well, something had happened there earlier that day. And no matter what, the barrel was gone, so the poachers probably wouldn't be back. Not for a while, anyway. The question was, had he gotten a good photo of their faces? He'd have to wait until he got back to his computer to find out.

He climbed behind the wheel and drove to his house. Only as he crossed the threshold did he feel a faint grumble in his stomach from lack of food. On the way to his office, Andy slipped into the kitchen to grab a banana and unpeeled the skin as he walked, balancing his equipment under his arm while eating. He booted up his computer and plugged a cable into the first camera to transfer the photos onto the desktop. The screen finished loading and he clicked the icon to open the pictures.

Andy tossed his banana peel into the trash can under his desk and focused on the computer. He started with the camera that had pointed down the mountain. Very little activity at first, but not too far into the snapshots, a white truck stopped at the base of the hill, doors open as people climbed out of the cab. He zoomed in until the image started going fuzzy, then panned the screen toward the license plate.

Damn, too blurry. He couldn't make out the letters and numbers. Still, he had the vehicle's make and model. Andy resumed normal view and clicked to the next photo.

The two men came close enough that Andy could make out their faces. The guy leading the way was big and broad, wearing a white baseball cap, dark jacket, jeans. The one following had a smaller frame, stringy blond hair, lighter jacket and jeans. Both seemed to be at least Andy's age, maybe more in their forties, not quite early fifties. They

each carried a rifle and led a hunting dog. That was all Andy needed from this camera. Any remaining pictures would just show them getting back into the truck and leaving. Besides, he'd gotten a description of the poachers and of their vehicle. The police could find these guys and pick them up. Andy unplugged the cord and switched to the second camera.

The first few photos on the screen were blank landscapes, no doubt from leaves falling in front of the lens. Not much happening for a while, then a shot of a black bear heading toward the barrel. Like a flip-book progressing, the animal moved toward the donuts a fraction at a time. Knocked over the tub. A dozen frames of the bear eating. Andy compared the creature's size to the metal bin and guessed it was a female. Too big for a cub. It turned away from the sweets. Walked back out of the shot up the mountain.

Blank. Blank. The same two men coming into the clearing. Letting the dogs sniff the bait barrel. The hound on the left running away. Andy stopped and zoomed in again. The dog had ripped himself loose of his leash. Andy pulled the image across the screen to look at the two men. The guy with stringy blond hair held the end of the broken leash. He looked surprised. Strange that the other man didn't seem as shocked.

In the next photograph, the first dog had disappeared. Must have run off after the bear scent. The hunters stood yelling at each other.

Shouting. Shouting. The blond man on the ground.

Wait, what had he missed?

Andy flipped back to the other photograph. The guy in the baseball hat shouting. The blond man waving his hand.

The next picture. The blond man twisted around, face-first on the ground. The

broad man pointing his rifle at him. Then a shot of the man in the white ball cap standing closer and aiming his barrel down at the injured man's skull.

Andy clicked the photos forward, eyes locked onto the screen. The man in the baseball hat held the other hunter's feet. Pulling him out of the shot, up the mountain. Dragging. Dragging. Blank. The man reappearing alone in the shot. Pulling the barrel of leftover donuts in the same direction. Coming back empty-handed. He bent down for the rifles, stood with two fingers stuck in his mouth. The other dog returning. The man and his hunting dogs leaving the clearing.

Andy sat back in his chair, clenching the mouse. With his free hand, he reached across the desk to the phone resting in its charger. He couldn't look away from the screen. Almost like a compulsion, he went back a few frames. The blond man stood there, hands splayed in the air, his mouth a furious "O" as he yelled. Andy stared at the photo, at the figure frozen there. The blond man looked like Andy's favorite picture. He looked like Jim. Andy leaned closer to the computer. This image on the screen, these little pixelated dots of color, were the only proof he had that the man had ever existed. Then Andy clicked the mouse again and the body fell to the ground.

Bottled Up

As I walk up to the white counter, I replay the whole stupid mess in my mind. It isn't my fault. Circumstances beyond my control have led me here, to this horrible place. Okay, okay, fine. The building itself isn't terrible, and neither are the people who work here. But I really, really don't want to be at the pharmacy.

See, I'm careful about getting sick. I hate it. I hate blowing my nose and coughing and getting that weird dizzy-floating-head feeling like I'm gonna fall over if I walk more than four steps in a row. Breaking out in a fever and calling into my job. I work in a deli in Midwest City, Oklahoma, and I can't handle people's food if I'm sick. My sleep hours get screwed up, too, so going back to my normal schedule always sucks. I go in at six A.M. to have the sandwiches and salads ready by eight, and I have to get used to waking up that early all over again. My boss really doesn't like it when people don't show up for shifts, 'cause we're part of a team—you can't spell meat without team—and she acts bitchy no matter the reason for a call-in.

If someone walks by me and coughs, I hold my breath. Have since I was a little girl. I wash my hands if I get anything sticky on them, and I always wash my hands after I use the toilet. I really hate it when people in other stalls flush and then walk out of the restroom. Hepatitis-spreading a-holes. After I dry my hands, I've started using that wad of paper to open the door. Maybe one reason I like working at the deli is that I get to wash my hands all the time. It's part of the job.

Another thing I hate about being sick is I keep forgetting some of the little treatments that can help make you better faster. I never remember if people are supposed

to “feed a cold, starve a fever” or if it’s the other way around. I’ll need to remember to ask the lady at the counter.

I’m trying to convince myself not to worry about being at the pharmacy by repeating the same thing I say when I go to the dentist. It’s a place of renewal, a place of healing. It’s like a spa, kind of. Some people are terrified of going to the dentist. I’m not scared of being in a pharmacy, I just really don’t like coming here.

I know exactly why I’m sick, too. I started coughing in late December. My older sister, Carol, babysat the weekend before, and the mother, father, and baby all had the same illness. So Carol spread the germs to me. Merry Christmas to you, too, sis. And I would have been fine just taking normal old cough syrup if my sister hadn’t started the cycle all over again.

Every Monday night, I get together with a group of friends from Rose State College: Vince, Carol, Brian, and me. We usually go out to eat and then regroup at my apartment. Brian likes to bring over different bottles of alcohol to share, and last Monday he brought a couple different flavors of Smirnoff and some honey mead.

I sat in my wicker chair taking small sips of apple Smirnoff and listening to Brian and Carol talk back and forth. They tend to take over the conversation and Vince and I usually just sit back and listen. Brian was telling us how, in high school, he had wrestled a 200-pound man with no legs. I had seen the photo of this guy in the school paper, and he was 200 pounds of upper body strength. A giant block of muscles.

“No, guys, I’m serious,” Brian said, setting down his glass of mead. “This dude picked me up by my ankles and flipped me in the air. I’ve never been more afraid in my

life.”

I guess the word “afraid” is what started Carol off. Even as her sister, it’s hard to figure out why her brain goes off on these weird tangents every once in a while. Carol sat up, slapped her hand down on my blue ottoman, and said, “Arachibutyrophobia.”

There was a moment of surprised silence. Vince burst out laughing.

“What the hell is that?” he asked.

Carol sneezed into the crook of her sleeve, her red hair shooting forward over her shoulder. “Arachibutyrophobia: fear of peanut-butter sticking to the roof of your mouth.”

I shook my head and took another sip from my bottle. Carol brings up the weirdest shit sometimes. Like this one day—right after Carol moved back here from college in California—we were driving through the farmland northeast of Oklahoma City, we passed a field of cows, and Carol told me she could easily kidnap a baby cow. “That little one there, away from the herd,” she said, pointing out the window. I just kept driving, didn’t say anything at all. And I did the same thing on Monday night. Just kept going.

Carol sneezed again, wiping her nose discreetly on the edge of her sleeve before lowering her arm. “And triskaidekaphobia, fear of the number thirteen.”

Brian tilted his glass in my direction. “How about you, Nat? Strange fears? Irrational ones?”

I hesitated, and took a sip to cover the awkward pause. The only weird “phobia” word I knew was the number thirteen one. “Um, arachnophobia.”

Vince wrinkled his nose at me. Even past his blond beard, I could tell that his face was already turning red. He’d only had one drink. “No, come on, something better than

that.”

I drummed my fingers on the side of my cool glass bottle, searching my memory for something a little more out-of-the-ordinary. There were people who were afraid of dogs, snakes, spiders. Heights. Um... I heard the refrigerator door open behind me. Brian had gotten up to get a drink. People that were afraid of the dark. Strangers. Germs. Social pressure. I twirled the tip of my red braid, then finally blurted out, “There are some people who just can’t take pills.”

Vince scratched his chin. “Well, that’s not so bad. It’s not as stupid as being afraid of feathers. Chickens I can understand. Flying at you, clawing you with their talons. But feathers?”

Brian shut the refrigerator door and came back to his seat next to me. “Hey, there are people who have trouble with that kind of thing. That’s why I buy chewy vitamins—I’ve got this weird mental block about swallowing pills.” He pried off the lid of his Smirnoff and took a swig.

I glanced over at him. He had chosen apple, too.

“Hey, are the daiquiri packets frozen yet?” Vince asked.

Carol sneezed into her sleeve. “No, they take like eight hours.”

“Well, why’d you buy them tonight?” Brian asked, pushing up his glasses.

“So we could have them eventually. Duh.”

I got up and went to the freezer, pulling open the door and reading the package.

“Yep. Eight hours.”

Vince gave Carol an exaggerated sigh of disappointment, then poured himself another half-cup of mead.

Vince and Brian both left my apartment sick that night. We all caught it, we just didn't know until later. Carol sat there and sneezed on us like twenty times, and every one of us had to call into work a few days afterward. I thought I just had a cold or the flu, the same type of illness I always get on those rare occasions when I actually get sick. But after a few weeks, I still wasn't feeling better. And then I noticed I couldn't hear much out of my right ear. When I stuck my finger in my left ear to check, I could hear my heartbeat really loudly like I had both ears blocked. That's when I decided to go to the doctor. And now here I am. Making eye contact with the brunette at the pharmacy counter. Can't walk away now.

"Do you need some help, ma'am?"

"Hello." I pull the two blue papers and my insurance card out of my purse and hand them to the lady. "I need to fill these prescriptions."

She takes the pages and types the information into her computer, then slides me my insurance card back. "All right, we'll need about twenty minutes to get that ready for you."

"Okay, thank you."

I put the insurance card back in my wallet, then I start to look up and down the medicinal aisles for a pill-cutter. I used to have one. I had it in the back of my car at one point. But then, after the accident in November that totaled my Buick, I had to move everything out of the backseat to send the car to the repair shop—before I found out the car was totaled, of course. That stupid sixteen-year-old boy, turning left on a yield-to-oncoming-traffic green light. Now I have no idea where the pill-cutter is, and I'm

probably going to need one tonight. But I don't see one anywhere.

"You finding everything all right?"

I turn to the voice. A blond man standing behind the pharmacy counter is looking at me. He's leaning with one elbow on the desk. A slow smile spreads across his face as we make eye-contact.

"Yes, I'm fine."

He stares at me. Six seconds, seven seconds, not saying a word, just grinning. His eyes glide down my figure and linger. I look away. On the shelf beside the counter, I spot the row of magnifiers and pill-cutters. Walking quickly to the pegs, I take the least expensive package from the display. "Found it."

His arm stays on the counter. "Well, you be sure and let me know if you need anything else. My phone number, a prescription filled... Anything else filled."

He winks. I turn down the next aisle, staring at the blue and white tiles on the floor as I walk. Shit, fuck. Not happening. Not ready. No way. My birthday was three days ago. As far as I'm concerned, I'm still nineteen.

But the legal age for sex is eighteen. Crap.

I wander to the front of the store, passing through an aisle filled with cards and candy. The next row is stocked for Valentine's Day already. In early January. Seriously? Five weeks early. I walk by the shelves crammed with plush animals and heart-shaped boxes of chocolate. I don't have a boyfriend, so no need to run off and stock up on gifts. Something tells me a guy wouldn't want Valentine's Day cards with teenage boy bands on them anyway. Or sparkly pens and spinning lights. Or "I ♥ Mommy" t-shirts.

I keep forgetting my cousin Melody is pregnant. Probably because we live eight

hours apart and only see each other in the summer. And Carol had been dating a game warden out there in California, but something happened with him. She never told me exactly. Well, I don't guess it matters. I mean, it's not like I knew him or anything. I can't even think of his name.

Vince just told me over the weekend that he's saving up for an engagement ring for his girlfriend. And one of Carol's friends lost a baby in a miscarriage and then found herself pregnant again. Her boy turned two in October. It seems like all my friends are getting engaged and married and having children. My oldest cousin just adopted a son. Still, I'm just nineteen, for Pete's sake. Well, twenty. Three whole days. But my mom was married and pregnant at my age. Even my aunt and uncle who divorced a year ago have both met someone new. Shit.

Brian hasn't explicitly asked me to be his girlfriend. Sure, we've had plenty of I-Like-You moments, sharing food and going to the same parties and hanging out together. I gave him a Christmas gift after my party one night. I nearly fell over in nervousness when I realized he stood unwrapping a gift in my apartment, just the two of us, alone. Brian hugged me, briefly but tightly. But it's probably asking a little too much to expect some kind of valentine from him.

"Natalie, you're needed at the pharmacy. Natalie."

I turn around and make my way to the back of the store. A different woman with little square glasses and curly black hair stands at the window, so I tell her my name and hand her my credit card. She puts the white paper bag of medicine on the counter and rings up the sale.

"Do you have any questions about your prescriptions?"

I glance over the instructions for a moment, then hold up the booklet for the antibiotic. “Is it all right to cut this one if I needed to?”

She tilts her head. “I—don’t understand. Why would you want to cut it?”

I study the grey freckles in the counter surface. “Sometimes I have trouble taking bigger pills.”

“Oh. Well, that one comes apart, so if you need to, you could pour out the powder into some applesauce or some food. But make sure you take all the medicine.”

“Okay, thank you.” I slip my card into my wallet and head for the front of the store. On my way, I grab a six-pack of applesauce, only as a backup plan. Then I check out as fast as I can and drive back to my apartment.

I set the paper sack on my round ottoman, sit on the floor with my legs crossed, and pull out the first plastic bottle. The cough suppressant. Forty clear, yellowish spheres with a little Z printed on the front. They look like tiny bath beads, except they rattle. I set the bottle aside and start reading the warnings and instructions for the medicine.

“BENZONATATE (ben-ZOE-na-tate). Take 1-2 capsules by mouth three times daily as needed.” I skip down to POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS. Holy crap. Seriously? The *incomplete* list on the paper mentions dizziness, drowsiness, confusion, hallucinations, bizarre behavior, mental or mood changes... How exactly do they expect me to contact an emergency center if I experience “loss of consciousness; coma; seizures; heart attack (cardiac arrest)?”

I backtrack to a line and a half written in solid capitals under CAUTIONS. “Do not break, crush, chew, dissolve, or suck on this medicine before swallowing. Numbness or tingling of the mouth, tongue, throat, or face may occur. Choking and severe allergic

reactions (eg, trouble breathing, shock, loss of consciou—" Shit, fuck.

I drop the pamphlet. Dr. Hamill had said the cough suppressant was optional. Forty count, one or two to take three times a day. No wonder people overdose. "Have I taken six today, or eight?" Dear God. Optional. Well, I'm opting out of a coma, thank you so much.

I pick up the instructions for my second prescription, the purple and green pills. "CEFDINIR (SEF-di-ner)." Who names this stuff, Tolkien? My eyes jump down the page. "Swelling of the eyelids, face, or lips— If moderate to severe diarrhea occurs— Check with your doctor if you experience vaginal discharge—"

I throw down the booklet and look over the last item in the pharmacy bag, a bottle of heavy-duty nasal spray. What would this one say? Consult your doctor if your eyeball blows out of the socket?

No, not as bad. Just the chance of wheezing, frequent or severe nosebleeds, sores in the nose, voice changes... I briefly imagine all the effects hitting a patient at once, someone already sick who suddenly sneezed, vomited, and had a seizure. I live alone. What are people supposed to do if they live alone? If I slip into a coma overnight, who would notice in time? And doctors expect everyone to fully read and comprehend these labels before use? How does anyone take medicine?

The green and purple capsules are huge. As long as the last joint of my fingers. No way, not happening. I could barely swallow the little muscle relaxants after the car accident, much less these. I scan over the instructions again. At least there are no face-numbing side-effects to breaking them open.

I go to the kitchen and get a paper plate, then bring it back and set it on the

ottoman. I need a makeshift splatter-guard in case I try to cough up the pill mid-swallow. I've done that before. I shake out two of the green and purple capsules from the bottle and set them on the plate.

Several moments later, I realize I've been staring at them in silence. I carefully pick up the first one. Light. Smooth. It weighs less than the muscle relaxants. But these new pills are three times bigger than the car wreck ones.

My only other option is to take the capsule apart and hide the powder in the applesauce. I would need to pop apart the pill and pour out its dusty center like some kind of coke addict, then stir it into the applesauce. I'm not a patient in a nursing home, for Pete's sake. And I'm not four years old. I'm nineteen—twenty. Not quite twenty-one, sure, but legally an adult. I pay my own rent, my own bills. I drive myself to work at the deli every day, I'd made the appointment to see the doctor, I'd picked up the pills. And now I need to take them. Seriously. I need to lift up that little cylinder and put it in my mouth. That's all. Just a tiny piece of pseudo-plastic wrapped around a bitter powder. Nothing to be afraid of.

Damn it, it's unnatural. Some chemist threw random ingredients together and prayed they actually worked. Test subjects volunteered to trust the chemists and put themselves at risk, and some of those living lab-rats probably had seizures and died. Comas and kidney failures. Yellowing of the skin and abdominal pains. Voice changes and consult a doctor if experiencing hallucinations. And they ask patients to read the directions beforehand, because that'll reassure everybody. "If you die, well, we warned you."

Loud baritone lawyers always come on television saying, "Did you or a loved one

take Lipsoflavanoidsomil? If you or a loved one took Lipsoflavanoidsomil and suffered a stroke or fatality, you may be entitled to compensation.” People who suffered a fatality can’t sue anybody for it. “Please, sir, might I have my beating heart back?”

Tylenol. Now that’s a reliable medicine. People have taken it for over fifty years. Pretty much the only way Tylenol can kill anybody is if somebody takes twenty at a time and overdoses. Unless they choke on the pill bottle cap like Tennessee Williams.

I turn to read the clock beside the door. 9:40 P.M. I slap the footstool. Twenty minutes. I’ve been mentally torturing myself for nearly half an hour over a process that takes seconds to complete. I look down at the paper plate. Two capsules, half green, half purple. Like Barney the dinosaur. Seriously? God, who picks these colors, the Joker?

I grip the sides of the ottoman tightly. In my head, I see Jack Nicholson’s evil grin, the dead anchorwoman, chemical tampering killing half the residents of Gotham City. Shit, fuck.

I slide my hands down to my ankles and rapidly tap out the beat to a song. It takes me a few seconds to recognize the tune I heard on the radio earlier: Lady Gaga, “Born This Way.” I don’t even like Gaga that much, but the tune’s stuck in my head. The radio wouldn’t stop playing it. I pat the beat on my socks for a few seconds, then push the ottoman away. I’m going to use the nose spray first. That will be easier, and I can get half the medicine out of the way. I need a break from this, anyway.

I carry the bottle of nasal spray to the bathroom, gently shake the container as instructed, pull off the plastic cap, and squeeze the white nozzle over the sink. A stream of clear liquid spurts up. It reminds me of babysitting, how little boys sometimes pee in the middle of a diaper-change. I grimace.

I press the nozzle a few more times until the fluid comes out a mist. Dear God, it smells terrible. Like that old cologne bottle in my grandfather's back room. I'll have to smell that all night. Using the spray first will make breathing harder, and that will make swallowing the pills harder. Better to take the pills first. Damn it.

I go back to the living room, sit on the floor, and pull up the ottoman. My hands tap out "Born This Way" on the fabric top, and I start to hum along. I suddenly stop singing and slap the footstool. I hadn't been born this way. Okay, maybe I *had* been born afraid of everything, but that's over now. I'm an adult. Seriously. The landlord and bankers and insurance agents all say I am. Brian will never kiss me if I don't start acting like a grown-up. The nurse wouldn't have asked if I was sexually active if I wasn't old enough to do whatever I want with my own body, legally. The blond pharmacist wouldn't have eyed my curves if I didn't look like a mature woman. And the doctor had given me pills, not liquids.

It's a rite of passage, a mark of honor, to receive capsules automatically like that. "Oh, you're ten? Here's some bubble-gum-flavored cough suppressant. Have fun playing with your dollies. Oh, you turned twenty? Well, here's a bottle of pills. You're old enough to take 'em."

Swallowing a medicine tablet is the same as trying a piece of foreign cuisine. If it tastes bad, I just need to hurry up and swallow it, not spit it out all over everything. The second it leaves my mouth, my throat will relax and my heart will resume its normal rhythm. Nothing to worry about. Two seconds, and it's done.

I wriggle my blue ottoman closer and pick up the first capsule. I'm going to take them this time. Seriously. No joke. Payback, this time it's for real. I even talked about

this kind of weird phobia with Vince, Carol, and Brian. Irrational fears. And if I don't take the medicine, I might lose some of my hearing. My God-given ability to hear out of the right side of my head, gone. I risk losing that just because I don't want to swallow a stupid pill.

I fill my mouth with water and drop the capsule into it. I can feel the weight of the medicine resting on my tongue, just behind my front teeth. As long as my brain knows where it is, I can't trick myself into taking it. I violently swish the water around until I can't tell where the pill is, then throw my head back and make myself swallow.

The water rushes backwards into my throat. Then I remember the last time I freaked out mid-swallow. I had managed to force down the water and the tablet, but my throat surged and gurgled and then pushed the entire gulp back up into my mouth. Why do I have to remember that now? The pill is in my mouth. In my mouth.

In my head, I hear my father's voice from half a decade before. "You swallow bigger bites of food than this every day!" That was when he tried to make me take the antihistamine gel caps. The liquid coating had broken open after a minute or two, and the sickening, bitter flavor had spread through my teeth. That was the night before Dad started hiding my medicine in Snickers bars. To this day, if I eat Snickers and bite down directly on a peanut, I'll panic and expect it to taste like a pill.

The water surges in my throat and I gag. Instinctively, I pin the foreign substance to the roof of my mouth and drink the water, then spit the medicine out onto the paper plate. So much for fooling my brain.

The green and purple capsule lies in front of me, a little wrinkly but otherwise intact. I tip the plate and the pill coating gradually pulls away in a gooey mess.

Wonderful.

I sit back away from the ottoman and cross my arms. I'm tired of being afraid all the time. Afraid of other people when they walked too close to me in parking lots or outside my complex. Wanting to check all the rooms in my apartment for intruders every time I come home, even though the front door never shows signs of forced entry. I'm always too embarrassed to talk in big parties or large groups of people, worried I might interrupt someone else. Scared of falling down my staircase. Telling people what I really think. Telling Brian I really like him.

I live inside my own head, squashing my opinions before they escape. I'm always too anxious about hurting other people's feelings or making them uncomfortable, so much that I inconvenience myself or never tell anyone how I feel. Well, I'm going to stop that crap right now. Adults don't dodge their problems or avoid facing their issues. If everybody bottles up their feelings, how can anyone be part of a relationship? How can I expect Brian to know I really like him if I never tell him so? Friends smile at each other and share food and go to parties together, too. I have to cross that friendship line or else I'll never see if we can have a relationship.

Women wear pants and vote and run businesses. They can ask guys out if they want to. Granted, most girls want the guy to ask them out. Tradition, probably. But it's not socially taboo to break that rule. Casually, calmly, maintaining some control of my emotions...I need to tell Brian. Or at least talk to him about it. What if I wait too long and he gets engaged like Vince?

Brian always sits next to me, at dinner and at the movies and in my apartment. Last time we went to the movies, he kind of speed-walked past Carol to sit next to me. At

dinner, he always orders his drink after me and gets the same thing I do, like he chose apple Smirnoff over honey mead. He playfully pokes me in the side, and started picking on me even more heavily that day I wore the denim skirt a little shorter than knee-length. And when we stayed up watching *Aliens* until three in the morning with Carol, I snuggled down in my armchair and Brian lay down on the couch, his head only inches from mine.

The way I'm feeling, it's like I'm walking down a dark hallway late at night, and I imagine something waiting to get me, maybe an intruder jumping out of the shadows. I reach out my hand into the darkness, and then suddenly the light is on, I can see the furniture in the room, and I know that everything's going to be okay. That's what I feel like when I'm with Brian. I'm almost paralyzed trying to guess how I'm supposed to act around a potential boyfriend, but then that goes away because I'm with Brian, and I know it's all right to act like me.

I wriggle the ottoman back in front of my armchair, and I see a flash of light on metal. A Smirnoff bottle cap is on the floor where the footstool had been. I pick it up and twirl it in my fingers. Green, white, silver. Smooth on one side, spiky on the edges. It still smells like apple.

I flip the bottle cap into the air. Then the doorbell rings and I jolt and miss catching it as it falls. It bounces under my wicker chair. I get up and walk quietly over to the door, just in case it's my cranky downstairs neighbor or the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses. I can pretend I'm not home. I stand on tip-toe and look through the peep hole.

Brian.

My hand reaches for the doorknob. I stop. I look back at the ottoman. At the paper plate, the half-wrinkled pill, the second capsule I haven't even touched. I turn back to the

peep-hole.

Brian knocks.

I hurry away from the door and snatch up the medicine.

“Just a second!”

I look down at the green and purple capsules, one sticking to my palm a little and leaving a spot of goo behind. Yuck. I throw both pills into my mouth and take a huge mouthful of water from my cup, swishing everything around rapidly and then swallowing. I smack my tongue. Empty mouth, obligation complete. Two seconds, like I'd been saying. I toss the plate into the garbage and rush to the apartment door, unlocking the deadbolt and opening up.

Cole on a Roll

Cole Stott pulled up alongside the curb of the Grisham household and honked the horn. Within seconds, Liam stepped out onto the porch. He waved at the idling silver car. Liam didn't know what Cole intended to do for the evening just like Cole didn't know that Liam's half-written essay about Hamlet was due online by eight A.M. (and neither knew that Mrs. Anderson had decided to hold Liam back a year at Midwest City High School if any more homework got turned in late or not at all), but Liam had forgotten about his paper and what Cole didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

"What up?" Liam said as he climbed into the Chevy. "Nice wheels."

Cole peeled away the second Liam shut the door. "It's my dad's."

Liam scratched his neck. He looked out the window. Cole's tone and tight grip on the wheel hinted that he'd fought with his parents again. The best way to avoid hearing him rant about it was to get his mind off the subject. "So, where are we going?"

"Party at Brandon's."

Liam stared at him. Everyone at school knew Brandon hated Cole. Even the janitor could have told him that. If Cole got pissed off, he lashed out at anybody involved. Liam had never been on the receiving end, but he'd seen Cole snap at almost every other person he knew. Like the time Brandon and Kelley ran out of gas in OKC—Cole went to help, but he wouldn't stop complaining about leaving the Halloween bash, even after Brandon and Kelley got in the car.

"At Brandon's," Liam repeated.

Cole looked over at him. "Yeah."

“Please don’t tell me this is about Sonia.”

Cole frowned. He glared at the red light as he slowed. So what if it was? Sonia was beautiful. She had honey-blond hair. She liked art. She liked ballet. She liked Green Day. She wore little quippy buttons. And Brandon’s girlfriend was her best friend, which put Kelley as Cole’s best shot at hanging out with Sonia. She’d be at the party tonight. He knew it.

“Jesus.” Liam crossed his arms. No wonder Cole had never said anything about their plans. He wanted to use Liam as a shield, as an excuse for attending. Well, Sonia didn’t seem any more interested in chilling with Cole than Brandon and Kelley did. She never refused, but she never offered, either.

Liam rubbed a hand across his face. But then something dawned on him. “Wait a second. Who told you about the party?”

Cole kept his gaze on the road. “Brandon,” he said after a moment. He glanced at Liam, who continued to give him a stony face. “Well, I mean, he didn’t tell me, exactly. He told you and Sonia after your English class on Thursday.”

Liam slid back in his seat and shut his eyes. So Cole really wasn’t invited at all. He probably wasn’t even supposed to know.

Liam pinched the bridge of his nose and scrunched his brow. In the back of his mind, a thought nagged at him. He was forgetting something important. The reason he planned to stay at the house tonight. Oh, it was right there on the tip of his tongue. And it would have to be a big deal to keep him home during Brandon’s party. But he couldn’t put his finger on it. Ah, whatever. Something that huge, he’d think of it sooner or later.

“Don’t worry about it,” Cole said. He switched on the radio and tapped a few

buttons on his phone plugged into the dashboard. The woman from The Electric Neglected sang as guitars, drums, and a piano played. Cole cranked the volume.

Liam nudged the knob to a lower setting. “You can’t just bust in, you know.”

“Dude, you’re acting like my parents.” Cole turned up the music again. “Don’t blare the radio, don’t speed, don’t use the rear-view mirror to back up because you might run over a vampire, blah, blah, blah.”

“Brandon won’t be cool with this,” Liam shouted over the song.

Cole whipped around a corner. “He invited friends. What’s wrong with friends of friends? Besides—” he pointed out the window, “we’re here.”

He threw the Chevy into park. As Cole shut off the car, Liam’s eye lingered on the key ring in the ignition. A clear ornament with dried flowers inside dangled from it.

“Aren’t those your mom’s?”

“So?” Cole slammed the door and started heading up the lawn.

Liam sighed and got out of the car. He heard the locks chirp after him as Cole hit a button on the remote. Brandon’s house rested atop a fairly steep slope. On the porch, Zoe and Andria sat in the green swing, talking to DeWayne in a plastic chair opposite them. They all looked up as Cole and Liam approached.

“Hey, guys,” Zoe said. She elbowed Andria. They both turned to DeWayne, who was already glowering. Everybody had heard about his fight with Cole after the game on Friday. Coaches and teachers had intervened before the shoving could turn into punches.

“Hey,” Liam said, stepping between Cole and DeWayne. “Sup?”

“Why don’t you tell me?” DeWayne leaned forward and cracked his knuckles.

Liam chuckled as believably as he could and nudged Cole toward the front door.

Cole strode into the living room. He paused just inside the door. Sonia rested her back against the brick wall of the unlit fireplace. She wore a knitted cap with a green button pinned to it that said “True Dat.” Cole smiled and walked toward her. She’d remember him, for sure. Maybe after a while, he could offer to drive her to get a coffee somewhere. After all, he had his license and a sweet ride to pretend he owned.

Sonia heard her name. She turned to see Liam’s friend grinning at her. Chris? No, Colt. “Hey, how’s it going?” she asked.

Sonia tilted her head a little as he approached. She knew Brandon and Kelley hated him, pretty much, but he didn’t seem so bad. Not yet, anyway. Sonia had only hung out with him a couple times. Maybe Brandon had invited him over to give him another chance, or maybe he’d just let him come because Liam was one of his only friends. Sonia smiled at him and nodded as he started small-talk.

Liam stepped inside. Kelley stood by the stereo, pressing buttons. She turned as she heard the screen clatter shut. Kelley shouted Liam’s name, shoved a plastic CD case into Brandon’s hands, and rushed toward the door. She gave Liam a forceful hug that pinned his arms to his sides.

“Hey,” Liam said, smiling.

Brandon started the new disc and came toward them, clapping Liam on the shoulder. “How’s it going, man? I thought you couldn’t come. Did you already finish your paper?”

The words sank in. Liam clenched his hair. “Holy motherfuck!”

Brandon and Kelley stared at Liam as he shoved his way through chatting groups of friends, shouting over the music for Cole. After a moment, he saw him leaning one

elbow against the mantelpiece and sipping from a red plastic cup. He was chatting with Sonia. He looked up as he heard his name.

Oh, son of a bitch. Cole tucked his half-empty cup behind a picture of Brandon's parents with their arms draped around a man in graduation robes. Liam would flip his shit if he knew he'd been drinking beer. But he hadn't had much. He wasn't even buzzed.

"The fuck, dude?" Cole said.

"We have to get out of here." Liam pulled at Cole's elbow.

"But I was—" Cole gestured over his shoulder at Sonia.

"Now. Right now!"

Liam shoved him toward the front door.

Cole twisted around. "See you at school?" he shouted to Sonia just before he lost sight of her. She gaped at them in surprise and didn't answer.

"Goddamn it!" Cole said as he and Liam crashed onto the porch. He regained his footing and slugged Liam hard in the shoulder.

Without thinking about it, Liam shoved Cole backward.

"Hey!" DeWayne said, jumping up from his seat. Zoe and Andria went still.

Liam pressed on his aching arm, but held up his free hand to DeWayne. "It's cool," he said. Liam squeezed his tender muscle, and a spark of pain shot through him. He'd have a bruise for sure.

DeWayne stayed on his feet. His fists clenched as he glared at Cole.

"Look, it's important," Liam said, hurrying down the porch. "I'll tell you on the way."

Cole gave DeWayne a nasty look, but jogged toward his father's car and unlocked

it. Liam scrambled inside, clicking his seatbelt. Cole opened his door, but he stopped and turned around. “Fuck you!” he shouted at DeWayne. Then he got in. As they took off, DeWayne ran out into the street, shouting. He shot Cole his middle finger.

Cole popped his neck. He reached to his phone still plugged into the dashboard and started up his favorite playlist. Fuck DeWayne, acting like it was his house. His party. Just because kids at school liked him didn’t make him king of the universe.

Beside him, Liam turned the music down. Cole glared and moved to crank it up.

No, wait. It wasn’t Liam fucking with his shit again. The volume lowered, but something also buzzed. Cole’s cell phone vibrated inside the cup holder. Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Simple Man” played.

Liam looked toward the iPhone. An image of Cole’s mom filled the screen. She posed with a prize certificate and a huge potted plant.

Cole took a right. “Don’t answer it.”

His mother’s picture disappeared. Cole’s lock screen went fuzzy and dark. Seconds later, a klaxon alert went off and a banner popped up. It read, “Mom now Voicemail (2) & Missed Call (12) slide to listen.”

“She’s called twelve times,” Liam said.

“I don’t give a fuck,” Cole said. “What the hell was your problem back there?”

“I haven’t finished my Hamlet essay. It’s due tomorrow morning.”

Cole slammed his palm against the steering wheel. “*That’s* what this is about? You dragged me away from Sonia for a fucking *paper*?”

Liam dropped his head back against the headrest. Here we go.

“So what if Anderson docks you ten percent? Tell that bitch to shove it.”

Liam balled up his fists. “She’s getting pretty serious about my grade.”

In fact, at that precise moment in Del City, Mrs. Anderson entered her home office to get a head-start on grading, clicked the link to the Hamlet essays, and noticed Liam’s missing paper. “Last chance, kid,” she muttered, opening Dominick’s to read.

“Who gives a shit?” Cole said. “I can’t go back to the party now. That asshole DeWayne’s on the porch like a fucking guard dog.”

Liam’s face twisted. “At least he was invited.”

Cole gunned the engine. The streetlight turned red before he even got up to the intersection, much less across the road.

“Jesus!” Liam grabbed the handlebar above him.

A yellow Audi swerved and honked. Cole cleared all four traffic lanes without getting hit. Liam peeked over his shoulder for police lights. He didn’t see any.

“Dude—” Liam swallowed a few times. His heart pounded. “Slow down and stop driving like a douche.”

“Simple Man” played as the phone rang again. Cole’s mother smiled up from the cup holder. Liam looked at her picture, then to the clear flower decoration hanging from the keys in the ignition, and suddenly it made sense.

“You stole the car, didn’t you?”

Cole clenched his jaw. “I asked. They said no.”

“That doesn’t make—”

Cole turned the radio up. The woman from The Electric Neglected began to sing “Static Motion.”

Liam glared and moved to turn it down, but withdrew his hand. The noise wasn’t

unbearable, and messing with Cole's music would just piss him off even more.

"Oh, no," Cole said over the tune. He pressed the brakes. "That light might change. I need to be careful."

Liam looked out the windshield at the traffic signal a yard or two away. "Move it, you dick!" He banged his fist on the door. "It's still green."

"Ah-buh-buh," Cole said. "Safety is important." He continued to crawl forward. By the time he pulled up to the light, it had turned yellow. He stopped and it went red.

"Goddamn it." Liam kicked at the panel underneath the glove box. The clock in the dash said 11:40 P.M. "I'm sorry I wrenched you away from Sonia, but she probably doesn't even remember you, and this is important, you douchebag."

Cole gripped the steering wheel tightly. "Just shut the fuck up and let me drive."

Liam fought against every vile word forming in his mouth and clamped it shut. Cole was already mad enough to force him out of the car, and he might. Liam only needed a ride for another mile, maybe three more minutes. If he got shoved out or jumped out himself, he'd be stuck walking for half an hour. It took everything Liam had to force himself to stay quiet. The only sound came from the idling engine and from The Electric Neglected CD as the woman sang the chorus.

So live your life, while I'm stuck here in...

The traffic signal changed. The left-turn arrow light next to the glowing green circle stayed dark. Cole hit the gas.

Static motion.

The musicians all repeated the same note a few times. Cole started turning left. On the other side of the road, a maroon Buick crested the hill, going forty miles per hour

and coming through the intersection in their direction.

Static motion.

“Yield!” Liam screamed.

The silver Chevy slid in front of the other car, and the Buick smashed into Cole’s father’s passenger side. The force of the collision shimmied the engine sideways. Cole shouted and clutched the wheel as the impact rocked the car. Liam’s head flew sideways. It bumped into the window. Both their seatbelts stiffened and locked in place. The vehicles came to an abrupt stop.

Loud guitar screeched from the radio. Cole slammed his hand on the power button and killed the music. He switched on his hazard lights and unbuckled. Liam rubbed the side of his head. He looked out the window at the pretty woman with a red braid as she climbed out of the wrecked Buick.

“Are you all right?” she called.

Liam nodded at her. She looked at Cole, who opened his door and stepped out.

The woman leaned against her car. She pulled a cell phone out of her purse and dialed. “Hi, yes, my name’s Natalie Silverman. I need to report an accident.”

Liam unbuckled. The metal siding on Cole’s father’s car bent in at an odd angle and Liam had to shove the door panel with both hands to open the gap wide enough to slip through. A thick bolt jammed against his ribs and he gasped, but he wriggled past it.

“No,” the redhead said into her phone. “No airbags deployed. We don’t need an ambulance.”

Liam massaged his side. He turned to Cole. “You think you oughta call your mom back now?”

Cole stared down at the mangled hunk of metal. “Holy fuck.” His gaze shifted from the wreck to the ground beneath their cars. Shards of shattered glass and shrapnel littered the intersection. The lady’s Buick had a mashed-up fender and grill, and a broken windshield, but it didn’t look like it had taken nearly as bad a beating as the Chevy. Holy shit. Cole couldn’t tear his eyes from the shredded fragments of his father’s car. The one his parents had told him not to take. The one he wasn’t allowed to drive after nine P.M. without a licensed driver supervising. The one—

The woman with the braid hung up. “Are you guys okay?”

Cole and Liam turned toward her.

“Look, it’s fine,” she said, pointing behind them. “Police are here.”

Cole crossed his arms and pulled them tightly into his chest. Son of a goddamn holy motherfucking piece of shit!

An officer got out of his car and escorted the woman who owned the Buick over to the sidewalk on the corner. He started talking to her. Cole and Liam stepped out of the way as a tow truck parked in the intersection. A man hopped down out of the cab.

“Lemme have your key,” he said, holding out his hand.

Cole slipped the key and remote off his mother’s ring and gave them to him.

“If you need anything out of there,” the tow truck driver said, motioning to the Chevy, “you better get it now.”

Liam popped open his door again and squirmed through the narrow space to grab Cole’s phone. He unplugged the cord connecting it to the dashboard and hurried over to the sidewalk beside Cole. Liam slid the lock screen open and dialed his home number.

“Grisham residence, Harry speaking.”

“Dad, it’s Liam.”

He summarized the accident as quickly as he could, throwing nervous glances at Cole in case it sounded like he was blaming him. Even though Cole was a fucking moron who drove like a dick and smashed into cars instead of yielding to oncoming traffic, saying that right now was probably not the smartest move. But it didn’t look like Cole was listening at all.

Cole squinted down the pavement at the redhead, trying to read her lips. The streetlight above her cast a shadow across her face. She was blaming him for this. He knew it. He could see it in the sneer hiding behind her look of false concern. ‘Are you guys okay?’ Yeah, right. Nobody was buying it. Well, the cop might, for all he knew. Cole’d had a green signal to turn. The redhead must’ve run the light. Why had Liam screamed for *him* to yield? Green meant go. He’d had every right to turn left.

The officer came toward them. His golden nameplate read D. Goetz.

“All right,” he said, looking back and forth between them. “Who was driving?”

Liam nodded toward Cole.

Cole raised his chin. “Me.”

“Can I see your license and registration?”

Cole snapped his head toward his father’s car already loaded up to tow.

“Wait!” he shouted, rushing over.

The tow truck driver paused, his leg hiked up to climb behind the wheel.

“I need the stuff in the glove box!”

The guy sighed loudly and lowered his foot. He circled around to the passenger side of the Chevy and jumped up, digging through the papers and handing down the right

ones.

Cole passed everything to the policeman.

Officer Goetz spun the ID on its side. He glanced up at the boy who'd been driving. Only learner's permits and intermediate licenses printed longways. Stott here was underage, all right. The officer's eye landed on the giant red square all teenagers got that pinpointed the date of their twenty-first birthday. He calculated in his head. The kid turned seventeen in February.

Goetz flipped his wrist over and read his watch, not that he needed to check that it was well after nine o'clock. Five after midnight, in fact. There was no way the friend riding in the car was twenty-one. Stott was over permitted curfew by three hours. Goetz jotted that down.

"Could I see your license?" he asked the other young man, who handed him a laminated card. Liam Grisham, sixteen. He only had a learner's permit. Goetz wrote that down, too.

"Okay, guys," the officer said, still writing. "Want to tell me what happened?"

Cole answered. "I was driving home from a party—" He snapped his mouth shut.

The officer looked up. "A party, huh?" He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, subtly stepping closer. He thought he'd caught a whiff of alcohol as the Stott boy spoke. "Go on."

"I was driving him home," Cole said, bobbing his head at Liam, "and I turned left on a green light. She plowed through the intersection and hit us."

"Uh-huh." Bingo on the booze breath. He'd give him the breathalyzer test to confirm in a minute. Goetz turned to Liam. "That what happened?"

“Yeah.”

All three men heard a car beep and loud footsteps behind them. Mr. and Mrs. Grisham had parked at the gas station on the corner and now hurried across the gravel and down the grassy hill to the group standing on the sidewalk.

“Evening,” Goetz said.

“Harry Grisham,” Liam’s dad said, placing a hand on Liam’s shoulder. “This one’s my son.”

The officer nodded. “We’re about done, if you wanted to take him now.” He pointed at Cole. “But I need you to hang out here a bit longer.”

Paula Grisham took Liam’s hand and rubbed her thumb across it. “We need to get him to a hospital.” She looked around for a moment at everyone, then at Cole. “Have you called your parents?”

“No.”

Liam passed Cole his phone.

“Oh, is it dead?” Mrs. Grisham asked. “I’ll call them for you.”

“No,” Cole said, “you don’t need to.”

“Excuse me,” an elderly woman’s voice said behind them.

Everyone turned. The lady came toward them on the pavement, limping slightly and leaning on a four-footed walking cane. Officer Goetz walked to meet her.

“Help you, ma’am?”

“I was waiting at the light behind the silver car,” she said, pointing a withered finger at Cole. “I saw the accident.”

“Let’s talk over here,” Goetz said, gesturing her further up the path, the opposite

direction from the crowd on the corner.

Cole glared at her as she hobbled away. Every woman tonight was against him. The redhead, the old biddy, Liam's mom, his own mom, Kelley and Zoe and Andria and Sonia... Even Mrs. Anderson and her stupid Hamlet paper.

Mr. Grisham patted Liam's shoulder. "Come on. He said we could go."

Cole spun around. "You're just gonna leave me here?"

"Baby, you're bleeding!" Mrs. Grisham stared down at Liam's throat. The seatbelt had cut into his skin and scrubbed his neck. Mrs. Grisham produced a tissue from her purse and handed it to him.

Liam pressed it against the sore spot. He moaned. Not from the cut, but man, did that sting, too. No, his neck hurt, but so did his chest and shoulder. He poked at his ribs and pulled his collar away from him. Already he saw the traces of broken blood vessels, of a long bruise slashing down his chest. The seatbelt had done a number on him, for sure. But at least he hadn't gone soaring through his window. And then through the redhead's windshield.

"Bro," Cole said, "don't leave."

Liam groaned and pressed his palm against the side of his head. It throbbed. So did his shoulder, but that one came from Cole slugging him on the porch. Everything hurt and now everything started spinning.

"I need to go," he said, turning to his father's Ford and climbing the grassy hill. He staggered. His dad took his arm to steady him.

Mrs. Grisham retrieved her phone from her purse. She dialed and held it to her ear as she followed her family to the car. Cole watched her, wide-eyed.

“Hello, Ellie? It’s Paula.” She paused. “Yes, he’s right here.”

Her worried expression frowned even further. Cole heard his own mother’s voice talking loudly. She was snitching on him. He knew it.

“Really,” Mrs. Grisham said. “Hold on just one minute.” She pressed the phone to her coat and called up the hill. “Harry, wait a second.”

Mrs. Grisham raised the phone. “Now, Ellie, I need you to listen. There’s been an accident.” She glanced at Cole, who stared at her as if she had no right to call his mother. Well, really. Despite her concern for the boy, and for her own son, Paula Grisham felt her heart harden. Cole had stolen his parents’ car to go to a party and had nearly killed Liam in the process. Oh, her son wouldn’t spend time with him for weeks and weeks, not if she could help it.

Paula hurried over to the officer interviewing the old woman.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she said. They both met her gaze. “Cole’s mother says he stole the car. She’s been trying to reach him for hours.” She told the officer the Stotts’ home phone number, then returned to her call. “Ellie? I just gave the policeman your information. We’re at the gas station up the street, across from the newspaper offices. That’s right, two blocks. But I have to go. Talk to you later, hon.”

Paula Grisham hung up, cast one fierce look at Cole, then jogged up the incline to her husband’s Ford. She got into the car. The Grishams disappeared down the road.

Cole stuffed his hands in his pockets and waited for the old bag to finish ratting him out. He turned in the direction of the hospital, blinking into the darkness where his only friend had gone. Now he was stuck here with three people who hated him, who blamed him, who judged him—and also waiting on a fourth and maybe fifth accuser if

his mother brought his father along with her. Cole heard the redhead on the phone again. It sounded like her family was coming to get her, too.

He leaned against the lamppost and shut his eyes. His chest and side ached. The cold November breeze bit at his face. Metal scraped while the cleanup crew scooped up shrapnel. The old woman stopped talking. A car parked nearby, a door slammed, a female babbled. The redhead's sister, again with the everybody-all-rights. A deeper voice saying Cole's last name. A shriller one calling his first name.

Cole opened his eyes. The policeman stood beside him on his left. His mother and father joined the officer. There was anger and also concern in his parents' tones. Cole's brain had shut off. He didn't hear words anymore, just a stream of noises. High-pitched, low-pitched, louder and then lesser. But then he heard something change.

His mother had flipped open her phone. She clasped the speaker tightly to her ear. She started crying. She handed the call to her husband. Cole's father spoke now. He wrung his hand over his mustache. They kept repeating the same thing. They even told the police officer. Liam had hit his head. Liam was dead.

But that couldn't be right. Cole pushed off the light post to stand upright. Liam had gone to the hospital down the road. He'd gotten out of the car. They both had. He'd walked away from the wreck.

Cole shook his head. It couldn't be what happened. Liam had been right here, maybe twenty minutes ago. He had a paper due the next morning. Hamlet. He needed his books. He needed to study. He needed to go home. His house was only two blocks away. Just past the trees down the street, right there. Cole could see it where they stood. They all could, if they looked. Cole blinked around the circle at all the faces surrounding him.

A Matter of Perspective

The cool October wind sends autumn leaves drifting down from the trees, skimming along the cement sidewalks of Dickson Street in Fayetteville, Arkansas. A warm, sweet aroma of hotdogs and pretzels floats through the air from the stand on the corner. Street musicians strum guitars and scrape violins, the interior of their open instrument cases peppered with coins before them. Making full use of Fall Break, the college students of the nearby U of A crowd the walkways, enjoying the row of restaurants and bars broken only by a set of newspaper vending machines and the blue awning of a single store, Condom Sense. But only the most diligent of passers-by might notice a small brown and black signpost, half-hidden by a massive oak tree, or the narrow alley between a metal fence and concrete wall that leads to the Smoke and Barrel Tavern.

Home Free

Vivian stepped through the door and blinked, letting her eyes adjust to the dim room. Neon signs flickered on the walls and lighted shelves of bottles behind the bar sent a white glow onto the faces of the people sipping drinks. To her left, billiard balls clacked while a guy wearing a frat T-shirt attempted a series of pool tricks. Vivian felt herself tense up. She never came to places like this.

A tired-looking man in his forties sat beside the door. "ID?" he asked.

Vivian flipped open her purse and produced her wallet, showing her Oklahoma license through its tiny plastic window.

"I need to have it out."

Vivian sighed and wriggled her fingers underneath the clear flap, tugging at the card. She stopped and changed angles. After a minute, the ID popped out. She handed it over.

The man barely glanced at it before giving it back and nodding her in.

“Thanks.” Vivian rubbed her aching index finger and stepped past him.

She had no intention of going to the bar. Or of returning the eye-contact the pool-player was casting her way. She hadn’t driven four hours to hook up with some random college bro, and she couldn’t get drunk because she couldn’t pay for a motel room for the night. She could barely afford gas for the trip back.

Vivian walked toward the small stage in the corner and slid up against a pole facing it.

Sing us a song, you’re the piano man...

Billy Joel’s tinny electronic voice rang out as Vivian’s purse vibrated. She took out her phone. The screen read “Unknown number,” but the area code said 405. Oklahoma.

“Hello?”

“Hey,” her brother said, “what are you doing?”

Vivian glanced up at the empty stage and turned away. “What’s up?”

“I need you to come bail me out.”

Vivian let her head fall backward against the post. “Can’t.”

“I’ll pay you back,” Matt said.

“Can’t.” Vivian preemptively nudged the volume button lower. “I’m in Arkansas.”

“The hell?” Matt’s voice exploded from the speakers. “How the fuck did you get to Arkansas?”

“Drove.”

“Goddamn it, you know that’s not what I mean. How’d you pay for it?”

“Sold your hunting knife.”

Vivian held the phone away from her ear just in time for Matt to shout again. She didn’t bother listening to him cuss her out. She just waited for him to stop.

“Consider it rent for crashing on my couch for a month. You want it back? It’s at the pawn shop on Broadway.”

She heard him yelling as she ended the call.

Back Against the Wall

Richie leaned against the brick building and lit a cigarette, breathing in each drag slowly. The warmth of the glowing ember fought against a chilly breeze that whipped through the parking lot. Richie exhaled a stream of smoke, staring off into the distance. Was he really about to do a show?

It had been nearly two years since The Electric Neglected had performed live, and never outside of Texas. A gig like this was different than scraping together a CD or filming a video and posting it to YouTube. You had to roll with the crowd. Listen for applause, throw in jokes if people got restless, keep the mood going.

Richie inhaled from his cig again, trying and failing to blow a smoke ring. Even with a piano as a barrier between himself and the audience, he felt nervous. Out of practice. Well, at least he had Nikki wailing on lead guitar to distract them.

He took another drag of his smoke, savoring the warmth. He'd quit a couple years ago. Richie tapped the ashes from the tip and smiled. Old habits might die hard, but they started up again pretty easily.

"Yo!"

Richie turned. Jordan and the new bass player stood at the rear of the rented van. Nikki's hand shot out of the open back, holding the smallest of Jordan's drums.

"You gonna help any time today?" Jordan called.

Richie finished his cigarette and crushed the burning tobacco under his shoe, watching as the wind swept the butt onto a pile collecting in the corner. He rubbed his neck. Ah, it wasn't a big deal. He'd get into the rhythm of the thing soon enough. Richie hopped down off the curb and headed toward the truck.

Do the Math

Chloe drained another Blue Moon and set it on the coaster in front of her. The bartender came to collect the empty bottle and she gazed at him, flicking the tip of her tongue up to her lip to lick away a stray drop of beer. He never noticed.

She leaned forward against the bar, shooting him a slight pout. She was ready for whatever the evening threw her way. She'd worn her white, ruched dress, the strapless one with the sweetheart neckline and a jeweled decoration at the hip, and had a matching butterfly clip pinning her blonde hair loosely at the back. Chloe felt the stray tendrils brush her neck when she turned her head. She was sexy. She was single. She was out for Fall Break.

Fuck Professor Donahue and her that's-the-grade-you-earned-on-the-midterms. Her subtle threats to give Chloe a D if she didn't get an A on the final. Trapezoids and inverted integers and contrapositives. The only calculating Chloe had to do here was her booze intake to pocketbook ratio. And how far she should take hitting on the bartender.

Chloe watched him strain a drink from a cocktail shaker into a shot glass. Ah, shit, he was married. She saw a ring. Well, hell with him. He wasn't meet-me-in-the-bathroom-in-two-minutes hot anyway. Was there anybody here who was?

He turned back to her. "Like something else?"

"What do you recommend?"

The bartender gestured to her beer bottle. "If you want something Halloween-y, how about Harvest Moon? It's Pumpkin Ale with a wedge of orange on the glass."

"Mmm. Got anything fruity?"

He thought a second. "You ever had a White Gummy Bear shot?"

Chloe shook her head. He started ticking off on his fingers.

"Cherry vodka, peach schnapps, lemon-lime—"

"Sounds great."

A boy wearing Greek letters on U of A colors had slid up beside Chloe on a barstool. He smelled wonderful.

What Were the Cons?

Lee gave a long flourish on his piano and ended his final song with a glissando. The crowd applauded. He smiled and reached for the water bottle resting on a stool

nearby. The warm glow of the stage lights beat down on his face. He'd forgotten how hot they made his skin after an hour set. Lee wiped his forehead.

The sound technician bounded up to the mic. "Give it up for Lee Walters." He paused for another round of cheers. "Up next is our local legend himself, Travis Harvey!"

Lee picked up his bag of merchandise and made his way to the table at the back. The Electric Neglected were heading toward him.

"Dude, you killed it," the pianist said with a smile. He shook Lee's hand. "We were going to head out back for a smoke. Want to come?"

"Nah, I've already had too many today. Thanks, though."

"See you in a bit," the female guitarist called over her shoulder as they left.

Lee set his canvas bag on the bench behind the table and pulled out his merchandise. He arranged the T-shirts by size and laid out a row of his CDs, then produced the index card with the price list on it that he'd "laminated" with tape. Lee looked up at the room. He had a decent line of people waiting on him.

"Hey, how's it going?" he said to the guy at the front, who approached the table.

"What up, dude?" he said, handing Lee a folded ten-dollar bill. "I wanted to get one of your—"

A roar of metal from an electric guitar blasted out of the speakers, and Lee didn't catch the last of what he had said. The guy tapped a finger on the top CD and mimed writing on it.

Lee nodded and produced a silver Sharpie from his bag. He spun the case around on the table and signed the front cover. The man touched two fingers to his brow and gave a miniature salute, walking away with the disc.

Lee tucked the ten dollars into his cash box and focused on the next person in line. He straightened. The lady in the orange blouse.

He'd seen her before he went on, leaning against a wooden post between the bar and the pool table, facing the stage. She'd been on her cell phone. She'd looked sad and also a little angry. Maybe she had planned to meet a date here and he'd flaked on her.

Compared to all the women in miniskirts, with their short dresses and bare shoulders, this lady seemed a bit out of place. For starters, her blouse only showed a little cleavage, her denim skirt went down to her shins, and she wore slip-on shoes instead of four-inch heels. She even wore her hair differently than all the other girls in the bar. She had braided a small strand on each side and pulled them together at the back to make a ponytail on top of the rest of her hair.

"Hi," Lee said over the deafening music.

He could tell she said, "How are you?" and saw her point to herself, but Lee lost her sentence to a frenzied guitar riff. He looked over her shoulder at the local legend up on the stage, rocking back and forth as he played. Lee returned his attention to the woman in orange, studying her face. Now that he was standing closer to her, she looked a little familiar. But he couldn't place meeting her before.

Lee slowly gave gestures for each word, as if playing Charades. "I—can't—hear—you," he said. "But—that's—okay." He flashed her a thumbs-up.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Lee smiled. The way her laugh burst out and faded, it sounded a little like the opening piano of Bob Seger's "Old Time Rock and Roll." He leaned forward. "Did you want to buy a CD?" he shouted, pointing at the row of disc cases.

She shook her head and called back, “I got one at ConnectiCon.”

Lee looked more closely at her. Now he remembered standing with her in the lobby of the Connecticut Convention Center in Hartford, talking about a song he’d debuted that weekend. For the life of him, though, he couldn’t think of which one.

“I thought you looked familiar,” Lee said. “We walked out together.” Then another flash of recognition hit him. “You’re Vivian Sullivan, aren’t you?”

She looked surprised, but nodded.

“I’m subscribed to you on YouTube.”

Vivian tapped her ear and mimed slamming a guitar chord.

Fuck. Lee grabbed a napkin from the table and scribbled on it with his Sharpie. ‘I’m subscribed to you.’ He slid it across to her. No wonder it had taken him so long to place her. She looked so different without a rabbit suit or other heavy costume makeup.

Vivian motioned for the Sharpie. He passed it to her.

‘Are you going to VidCon?’ she wrote.

Lee nodded.

She smiled. ‘I got invited, too.’

“That’s awesome.” He flashed another thumbs-up. “Hey, listen,” he shouted, really wishing the guitarist would come to the end of his first song, “I’m gonna be here for a couple more hours—” He gestured to his chair and tapped a pretend watch on his wrist.

Vivian shook her head. She pulled out her wallet and pointed to an Oklahoma license, then moved her hands back and forth as if driving a car. She turned to look at the line behind her and hurriedly scribbled on the napkin.

‘See you at VidCon?’

“Sure. Hey, thanks for coming out.”

He offered her a hug and she accepted. Vivian cut her way through the clusters of people, heading toward the door. Lee watched as she stepped outside and disappeared.

Fuck This Noise

Derek lifted a coaster and wiped up a spilled beer. The bands were rocking it tonight. He paused to look toward the guitarist on stage and drummed his fingers on the bar in rhythm with the music, creating a three-four time that sounded like a horse galloping. Thank God the local legend was done playing metal. Derek’s ears were still ringing.

He returned his attention to the patrons at the bar. The blonde’s shot glass was empty again. Derek went to collect it, pretending to itch his nose so he wouldn’t have to breathe in the Axe wafting from the man sitting next to her. The guy had really overdone it with the body spray, but the blonde didn’t seem to mind.

“That’s the way I see it, anyway,” the man was saying to her. He spotted Derek heading their way and pointed at him. “Hey, let me get a shot of whiskey.”

Derek held back a skeptical expression. The guy had gone with plain beer all night, but now suddenly he wanted hard liquor. Did the ladies really buy that macho bullshit?

He fetched a bottle and glass, pouring one. The man picked up the shot, tipped it to the blonde and winked, and then threw back his head and drank. He lurched forward

and began coughing loudly, spilling whiskey and saliva down his chin and all over the bar. Derek grimaced and leapt back to avoid getting slobbered on. Classy.

The blonde let out a long, cackly laugh, banging her hand on the edge of the counter. The guy grabbed a wad of napkins. He started wiping his face and soaking up the mess in front of him.

The blonde was still hooting. The man shot her a dirty look. She had her face down nearly level with the bar and didn't see it.

"I'm—no, I'm sorry," she said, raising her head and laughing so hard she snorted. "It was just like, BLUUUGH!" She put a hand to her mouth and mimed spewing. That sent her into even higher-pitched hysterics and she lowered her head again.

The man glared at her. "Fuck this noise." He flicked a couple of wrinkled-up bills at Derek and stood from his stool, marching out of the bar.

Derek picked up the cash, the sideways whiskey glass, and then he used Gummy Bear shot glass in front of the blonde. She lifted her head to inhale and nearly smacked into him.

"Oh, hey," she said, steadying herself on the wooden counter. Her eyes shifted to her empty glass he held. "Those are really good! Let me have another one."

"Forget it," Derek said, grabbing a towel. "You've had enough."

The blonde pointed a manicured nail at him. "I'll tell you when I've had enough."

"No, I tell *you* when you've had enough." Derek draped the rag across the soppy mess in front of her. "You're not getting any more drinks, lady."

She screwed up her face in a pout. It looked more like someone had socked her in the jaw. Derek focused on clean-up but kept her in his peripheral vision. He heard the

guitar on stage change to a more somber melody. The blonde opened her mouth and Derek braced himself for the upcoming argument.

“Oh my god, I love this song!” She swirled around and hopped down from her seat, nearly tripping on her heels in the process.

It was a kind of morbid fascination that kept Derek’s eyes locked onto her. The blonde stumbled toward the stage, catching herself on a pillar and letting out an *oof*, but took it all in stride and started singing along with the guitarist.

Derek leaned forward against the bar. Something was wrong. The blonde and the musician had both started with “A long, long time ago,” but after that, she sang about music making her smile and the guy on the mic had said something about a galaxy far away. They couldn’t have mixed up the song. They were singing the same tune.

The blonde seemed to notice the difference in lyrics. Her face twisted and she started shouting over the guitarist. He compensated by strumming harder and leaning closer to the mic.

Derek let his chin fall into his hand. Their duet formed the worst cacophony he had heard in years. He found himself longing for the local legend’s metal. Both singers yelled at the top of their voices to where neither of their lyrics stood out over the other. The guitarist focused on playing, but he was also scowling, and so were a lot of people in the crowd. A few of the onlookers supported the musician by singing along with him, and the noisy mess swelled even louder. Derek slapped a hand to his face. His palm smelled like booze and he remembered it probably had college kid drool all over it, too. Derek yanked it away and wiped his skin with the clean edge of his towel.

On the floor, the blonde was screaming about pie as the guitarist sang something about Anakin and Vader. So the guy's was based on Star Wars, then. The musician paused his strumming long enough to raise his arms above his head and start clapping. Oh, dear God, no. As the audience joined in, Derek resisted the urge to cover his ears. The ruckus bounced off the walls, ricocheting around the tiny bar. For a fleeting instant, Derek worried the bottles behind him would rattle off the shelves.

"Anakin's a little bitch!" the blonde shrieked.

"So are yoooooooo." The guitarist held the word out for six notes as the melody he sang slipped down the register and rose up again.

Several people in the crowd cheered. The blonde whirled around and started coming back toward the bar. Derek leaned his chin on his palm to maintain a composed face.

"Can you believe that shit?" she asked, sliding onto her seat.

Derek kept his mouth shut. He poured her a glass of water and placed it on the napkin in front of her.

Let's Bounce

Stan stretched and leaned backward on his barstool. This job was a mind-numbing waste of time. He sat there at the door, checking IDs and getting griped at when patrons didn't want to hand them over. Some girl from Oklahoma came through earlier and gave him attitude for asking her to take it out of her wallet. Man, he wanted to mouth off to these people once in a while. He wasn't sitting here because he wanted to be here, to pull some kind of egotistical power-play on customers or inconvenience them just because he

felt like it. He took the job because it paid the bills, and it didn't demand heavy lifting like being a mover or require a bartender license plus knowledge of how to mix all those drinks. Sometimes Stan thought of his work as enforcing the law, other times as getting paid to sit on his butt all day. Either way was fine with him.

The door swung open and two college kids stepped inside. Stan had to choke back a laugh. They were freshmen, sophomores at best. They didn't even look old enough to shave, much less to enter a bar.

"Can I help you boys?"

The leader spoke up first. "We're here for the concert."

"Can I see some ID?"

The kid reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a laminated card. Stan took it from him.

"Not a school ID. Driver's license."

"Oh, come on," the second one said. "The Electric Neglected is playing tonight."

"They were opening." Stan flicked the card back to the first guy. "They finished an hour ago."

"What?" He snatched his ID back.

"Man, it's not our fault," the boy behind him said. "We couldn't find the damn place."

"Yeah, you guys should fix your stupid sign."

Stan leaned back on the stool. "I'll get right on that."

The one in the doorway hit his friend on the shoulder. "Psssh, let's go."

The two kids turned and started walking away down the alley. The first looked back and flipped Stan off.

Stan smiled, returned the gesture with both hands, and slammed the door after them.

Rotten

Ed took a large gulp of his beer and looked out at the multitude of people surrounding him. If he'd realized tonight was the first night of Fall Break, he would've just stopped at Dickson Street Liquor and bought himself a bottle of hooch. Shit, he wouldn't have even needed to get out of the car. The liquor store had a drive-thru.

College kids got even rowdier this time of year. But this was his favorite bar, and tonight's crowd hadn't seemed so bad at first. The group of four with the drums, piano, and two guitars had sounded great. So had the piano-player that followed. Still, Ed had gotten the feeling that he should leave around the time the "local legend" was invited onstage.

But Ed wasn't about to waste good bourbon. He'd have to pay for it anyway. So he finished his drink, and by that time, a new guitarist had leapt up to the mic and started more laid-back playing. Ed had settled in and ordered himself a beer. And that's when the screaming started. Some ditzy blonde got out there on the floor and started having herself a vocal battle with the guitarist. At that point, Ed gave some real thought to leaving his half-finished glass on the table and walking out.

But right as he made to stand, the girl whirled around and clickety-clacked her way back to the bar. She nearly fell just walking twelve steps. Ed studied the blonde from

across the room. Drunk women shouldn't wear heels. No, more like women shouldn't wear heels if they plan on getting drunk. Ah, hell with it. Women shouldn't wear heels.

Ed took another sip of beer. His eye landed on the stub of his left wrist beside him on the table. He slid his arm down into his lap.

He really wished he hadn't jumped off that cliff in '65. But he was young, and he was stupid, and he was in love with Trixie. And if she went sailing over a ledge and into the California ocean, by God, he would, too.

When people had first started asking him how he'd lost his hand, he'd come up with the craziest stories he could think of. Chainsaw accident. Mauled by a runaway tiger. Fended off a hundred bloodthirsty sharks. Freak power surge during garbage disposal maintenance. Somehow he thought the truth was scarier than anything he could make up. All he'd done was hit his hand against a rocky cliff and scrape a little skin off.

He'd caught necrotizing fasciitis. What a mouthful that was. Ed had come up with a simpler name, rotting flesh disease. Long story short, he'd gotten a fever and chills and searing pain when the cut had turned red, swollen, and hot, so Trixie had taken him to the hospital. The doctors told him he had a flesh-eating bacterial infection that would kill him if he wasn't treated. And that, in the simplest of summaries, is why the surgeon had amputated Ed's left hand.

Ed set his stubby wrist on the table and gazed at it. He had skirted death at twenty-six. It was a rare disease, but a lot of people who caught that stuff didn't survive it. Jim Henson, the guy who created the Muppets, keeled over dead from the same sort of infection in his lungs. But still people were surprised to find out about it.

Ed looked out at the college students in the bar, at all sort of kids with all sorts of futures waiting for them. A familiar tune drifted over from the stage. He turned his head to the performer. The guitarist that had fought with the blonde girl stood plucking out the opening to “Sound of Silence.” He was playing the upbeat version, the one Hollywood had put into the movie *The Graduate*. The one Simon and Garfunkel’s producer had remixed without the musicians’ knowledge or permission, giving it a faster beat and overdubbing it with drums and electric guitars. Ed shook his head. Paul Simon wrote the original song at half this tempo for a reason.

And then Ed heard another familiar sound, one nowhere near as pleasant.

“Oh my god, I love this song!”

The blonde at the bar hopped down off her barstool and hurried toward the dance floor in front of the stage. She was standing right next to Ed now, singing along loudly as she swayed to the music and flailed her arms. Ed leaned sideways so she wouldn’t slap him by mistake. Did she realize this song had come out in the wake of President Kennedy’s assassination?

“Whoo, hell, yeah!” The blonde turned to Ed’s table. “Come on, old timer, get up and dance!”

She grabbed him and went to pull him up by both arms. Her hands slid down to catch onto his wrists and then her right one kept on sliding. As the guitarist sang, “And touched the soooound,” the blonde looked at Ed’s missing left hand.

She gave a horrible, ear-piercing scream. The guitarist struck a disharmonious chord. He stopped playing. Everyone in the bar turned to stare in Ed’s direction. The blonde stumbled backward and tripped on her heels, falling heavily to the ground. She

looked at Ed again. A split-second later, she threw up all over the floor. And her dress.
And her legs.

Ed stuffed his wrist down into his jeans pocket. He threw a few bills on the table
and called it a night.

Taking a Banjo to Bobby

I looped my fingers around the handle of my sister's big blue suitcase and dragged it through the hallway toward the front door. The bottom of the case had little golden feet on it, so I made sure to tilt it at an angle so I wouldn't scratch the floor. The hard plastic side still made a long, scrappy noise against the wood. I stopped. Nikki called from the bathroom down the hall, her voice muffled through the door.

"Thetis Diana, I told you I would get that."

She didn't usually say my full name. Most people called me Di, just like most people didn't know my sister's real name is Nike Eurydice. It's always funny when people look at her middle name on paper and ask her how to say it. She gets all red and starts whispering. But Mom had told me about how Nike was a symbol for victory and how loved Eurydice was, and how important and beautiful Thetis and Diana were. She told me all the stories about them and showed me paintings in books of them and showed me pictures of her and Dad on their honeymoon in Greece standing next to statues of them. I really like my name. It reminds me of all of Mom's stories and how excited her eyes got when she talked about them.

I knew Nikki didn't really need such a big suitcase for her trip, but she always liked to play it safe, so I figured she'd want a spare couple of outfits to take with her to Arkansas. Nikki had packed up three tops and two pairs of pants and a lacy strappy undershirt thing in case the stage lights went through her normal shirt, and she made sure to slip on her black jacket with her band name, "The Electric Neglected," on the back. Nikki started the group and plays lead guitar, and she'd already shown me how to make

some chords. So far I could play “Mary Had a Little Lamb” and “Smoke on the Water,” and I’d done both for the third grade talent show last year, but I didn’t really like the guitar very much because it hurt my fingers. Nikki said my skin would stiffen up if I kept practicing every day and my hands would stop aching like hers had, but it seemed silly to me that anybody would do something over and over if it just kept hurting them. Adults are weird that way sometimes.

Nikki came out of the bathroom and took the suitcase from me, carrying it over to the door. I looked at her face when she went past, trying to tell if she was angry because I hadn’t listened to her, but she looked worried instead. Nikki had never done a show in a different state before. She had been telling me all week about how exciting this was for The Electric Neglected to book a gig in Fayetteville, Arkansas, instead of another local show here in San Marcos, but now that she had a bag packed, she was biting her lip.

Nikki went to open the door, but then she stopped and dug through her purse. I flopped onto the couch cushion and started swinging my feet. That’s when I saw Bobby’s banjo sitting up against the wall behind the arm of the sofa.

Bobby is my sister’s boyfriend, and he comes to visit our house once in a while. Usually he brings his Gibson SG to play, but the last couple of times he’s come over, he’s brought this banjo with him. When he first showed up with it, Nikki took it and started playing that “I caught myself a baby bumblebee” song that Dad had taught her, but when I started to sing along, she’d said the song was really called “The Arkansas Traveler.” That’s when she’d told us about her trip to Fayetteville.

Nikki pulled her keys out of her purse with a loud jangle, then turned and crouched down in front of me. She put a hand on my shoulder. A strand of her bright red

hair draped against her cheek just like a magazine picture. “I’m only going for one night, all right? You have all the important phone numbers on the fridge, I’ll have my cell with me, and Mrs. Ortega next door will come watch you when she gets back from work.”

“Okie-doke. When did Bobby get here last night?”

Nikki’s wrinkled-up brow got even wrinklier. “What?”

I pointed at the banjo. “He left that here.”

Nikki turned and straightened. “Fuck.” She went over to the wall and picked up Bobby’s banjo. “I’ll have to give this back to him later.”

Nikki rested the instrument across the cushion, probably so she wouldn’t forget about it. She walked back to the front door, but looked around at me again before she left. “I made you a sandwich. It’s in the fridge. Mrs. Ortega will get here around six, so in less than an hour. Just stay inside and be a big girl until she comes over, okay?”

“Have a good flight! Tell Richie and Jordan I said hi. And that new bass player, too, I guess.”

Nikki smiled and shut the door behind her. I heard her keys rattle and watched the lock spin closed. Jumping up on the wooden cabinet built into the wall, I leaned toward the little square window in the door and pushed the musty curtain aside to wave at Nikki. She started her car, but sat frowning in the driveway for a second or two. Then she looked up and saw me waving and waved back. I watched her drive up the street until she turned by the old church and I couldn’t see her anymore.

I slid down from the storage cabinet and walked around and around the red woven rug in the living room, dancing and spinning while I wondered what to do first. Nearly a whole hour. My mountain goat doll Freya probably missed Odin the Octopus, but

yesterday Odin had thrown down his paper guitar and said, “The goddamn piece of shit never wants to fucking play right,” and Nikki had put him in time-out, so he should probably stay there for a while.

My daisies in the backyard needed water, but Nikki had said to stay inside. I had a page of long-division homework to finish, but that was boring and I needed Nikki’s help because Mrs. Carlson hadn’t explained it very well. I thought about painting a picture or maybe practicing “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” But then my stomach gurgled, so I went to the kitchen.

I opened the fridge. Nikki had left me a bologna sandwich. Gross. I frowned at the paper plate. I missed Mom’s cooking. No, it wasn’t really the cooking. It was the way she made stories out of the food. One time she made me dinosaur chicken nuggets with broccoli for trees and a mashed potato mountain that had gravy dripping down like lava. Then she dropped a circle-shaped cracker onto my plate from above my head and told me it was a meteor.

I didn’t like bologna. I wanted something warm. So I ate the handful of green grapes on the plate, then shut the door and hopped up on my stool in the pantry to look at all our food. Chicken noodle soup sounded nice. I took a can from the shelf. The label said, “Stovetop: Heat until warm.” Well, duh. I could do that.

I dug through the cabinet beside the sink for a pot, then opened the can and dumped the soup inside. The noodles slopped out, spraying oily drops all across the counter. I’d clean that later. Pouring a can’s worth of water into the pot, I put it onto the stovetop, then turned the dial and watched the swirly black burner change from a pale reddish-purple to bright orange. That was my favorite part of cooking with the stove.

I let the soup heat up for a minute, but then I remembered I'd need to stir it. I got out a big spoon from the silverware drawer and dragged my footstool in front of the stove. When I climbed up to stir the soup, I saw the yellow dish towel beside the burner. Actually, it was a little bit *on* the burner. And a second after I looked at it, the corner of the towel caught fire.

I dropped the spoon into the pot and grabbed the dish cloth, throwing it to the tile and stomping up and down on it. I should've been wearing shoes. Part of the fire caught onto my sock and flickered up my leg. I started shaking my foot, but then I remembered my teacher had said to stop, drop, and roll. So I did. I rolled across the floor until I smashed against the sink. I sat up, rubbing my head. The fire on my foot had gone out. But the towel was still burning. I grabbed the black hose thingy connected to the sink and aimed at the flames. When I squeezed the lever, no water came out. I stared down at the hose. I hadn't turned on the faucet yet. Crap.

I reached across the sink. After a second or two of wiggling my fingers in the air just in front of the knob, I looked back over my shoulder. The towel lay between me and my footstool and the fire was spreading down the fabric and getting bigger. I stood on my toes and stretched toward the tap until my middle finger turned it enough to start the faucet. The water shot through the hose toward the burning yellow dish cloth. After a few seconds, the fire went out.

I turned off the faucet and twisted my feet to look at my socks. The flames had burned the toe of my left one, and had gone all the way to the lacy cuff on my right one. The skin on my right ankle had turned a little red. I pulled the messed-up socks off my feet and buried them deep in the trash so Nikki wouldn't see them.

I didn't want to use the stove again. Not anymore. So I turned off the sink and the burner dial and pulled the pot down to me. My spoon had sunk to the bottom, so I reached into the still-kind-of-cold soup to get it back and gave everything a quick stir. It wasn't cooked enough yet.

I popped the soup into the microwave and hit the button for thirty seconds. The small window filled up with orange light and the container started to spin around. I picked up the blacked yellow dish cloth, stuffing it down in the garbage can. As I walked away, my feet slid on the wet tile and I almost fell. I took a paper towel and wiped the floor, then double-checked that I'd turned off the stove. It would totally suck if I started a fire all over again.

Behind me, the microwave popped. It always did that when it heated up soup or hot chocolate or some type of watery stuff in a big container like that, so I didn't really mind. Until it popped again. Really loud.

I turned around. Through the black meshy dots on the window, I saw a bright spark shoot up from the rim of the metal pot. Then another one. I ran across the kitchen and slammed my hand down on the microwave button. The light cut out when the door swung open.

My spoon was still propped up against the inside of the bowl, so I tapped the handle to make sure it wasn't really hot, then tasted my soup. It was still a little cold, but I didn't care. I used a sunflower potholder to carry the whole thing to the table and sat there eating straight out of the pot.

I took the dirty dishes to the sink and rinsed them, then wiped my mouth. What should I do next? I wanted to get really good at playing the A, C, and E chords Nikki had

shown me to surprise her when she came back from her gig. I still didn't like that the wiry guitar strings hurt my fingers, but Nikki really liked music and I wanted to show her I liked music, too.

My sister kept her acoustic guitar in her closet. I found it half-hidden behind her big winter coat. Struggling to carry the bulky black case, I laid it on the bed and unsnapped the square golden clasps holding the lid shut. Nikki used Dad's old guitar strap to keep her acoustic in place while she played. I ran my finger down the blue and white diamond pattern before slipping the woven strap over my shoulder. I could kind of remember Dad standing on stage playing, but not really.

A, C, E. Dang it.

I hadn't told Nikki, but I'd known Bobby had been over last night before I saw his banjo. I'd woken up because I'd had one of my alligator dreams again. I'd been neck-deep in water and Nikki was trying to push me up out of the lake because there were alligators all around us, but I felt something snap around my arm and start pulling me down under the water. That's when I woke up and went to the bathroom and heard Bobby's banjo in the front room. The song sounded like it was supposed to be fast, except whoever was playing was really slow and kept hitting a bad note and then fixing it every once in a while, so I knew it was Bobby in there for sure. I sat down to pee, and then the music stopped and a little bit later I started hearing those weird noises coming from Nikki's room again. I'd asked Nikki about them last time, and she'd told me all about playing Zookeeper with Bobby, but I still don't see what's so fun about grunting like a monkey and flopping around on the bed like a dolphin.

A, C. I couldn't make my fingers move all fast and smooth like Nikki's, but I strummed the right chords after a couple of mistakes. When Mrs. Ortega stayed and babysat me, she always wanted to watch game shows. Every time she came over, she'd make me put away my crayons or my music and sit and watch TV with her. I needed to practice really good before she got here. A, C, E.

I played the chords about four or five times without making a mistake before I put the guitar back in the red-lined case and into Nikki's closet again. I went to the front room, sat on the couch, and stared at Bobby's banjo. How different was it to play? I plucked at the biggest string, trying to pick out the note by ear. G, maybe?

I touched each little white dot painted onto the neck, bouncing my fingers around like they were playing hopscotch. Just then I thought about something even nicer I could do for Nikki. I could take Bobby his banjo.

I got up off the couch and went to the front door to start looking for my shoes. Yes, Nikki had said not to leave the house, but Bobby lived just a couple blocks up the road. The last time he'd left something behind after a visit—his lighter and his box of guitar picks—I'd waited in the car while Nikki ran up to his apartment to give them back. Nikki kept our spare key hidden under a loose brick behind the aloe vera plant on the porch, and I could reach the higher door lock if I stood on my tippy-toes. I'd take the banjo to Bobby. That way Nikki would have one less thing to worry about when she got back from Arkansas.

I slipped on my purple flip-flops, and I made sure to put on my windbreaker, because I knew Nikki wouldn't like me going out without my jacket. The wind stirred up right when I went outside. I looked up at the sky. There were a lot of gray clouds, but

they weren't black-gray like maybe I would get rained on before I got to Bobby's apartment. I thought about going back inside for my umbrella just in case, but I wouldn't be gone long.

The door snapped shut behind me. I set down Bobby's banjo and then twisted the doorknob and pushed to make sure it had locked. It stayed closed. I picked the banjo up again, zipped my blue windbreaker, and stuffed my right hand into my pocket. I could write good with both hands, but I liked carrying things with my left. Especially important things like someone else's banjo. Nikki and Bobby would kill me if I messed this up, for sure.

I walked down the street toward the old church. Bobby's apartment building was just down the sidewalk from there. I only needed to follow the dirt path with all the bushes and trees for about two blocks. As I walked, I hummed one of the new songs by The Electric Neglected, "Static Motion," wondering if I might see a squirrel or a scissortail on my way over to Bobby's. The pathway was just off the main road, and there was a bus stop nearby, so there might be too many people or it might be too noisy to see any animals.

I toyed with the white drawstring cords on my hoodie, twirling them and flipping them against my jacket. The wind picked up again and whipped the string across my face, and I maybe felt a raindrop hit my shoulder when I turned the corner. I looked at the sky again, hurrying a little more. I didn't want the banjo getting rained on.

I walked around the big maple tree and toward the Fieldview Apartments. That name didn't make sense to me. We lived in San Marcos, not Fieldview. The apartments weren't anywhere near a field, and the only view was either the little lawn in the center of

all the buildings or the roads around it. I walked past the bus stop, glancing over at the white bench with its faded dentist ad. Sometimes an old black man with a rolly backpack crammed full of stuff would sit there. Actually, most of the times I'd seen him, he was sleeping and using his backpack as a pillow. But he wasn't there this time.

Cars rushed by me on the road, the wind roaring and then getting quieter as each one sped past. I pushed the button at the crosswalk and waited for the lighted sign on the other side of the street to change for my turn. When it did, I dashed across.

I walked over the rectangle of grass, looking up at the white and brown walls. Bobby's apartment faced the road on the second story, the third door from the stairway... Now that I thought about it, I wasn't sure if Bobby lived in the second or third building from the entrance. I'd only come here one time before, and that had been months ago. I hadn't even gotten out of the car. Nikki had run up the stairs to give him back his stuff and then we'd left. I stopped and stared at the windows, trying to remember. I really wasn't sure. Well, I'd try the second building first.

I climbed the green wooden steps, went to the third door from the stairs, and leaned the banjo against the wall. I could hear someone talking inside, too low for me to pick out the words, but the real deep voice told me it was a man. He sounded like he was in a back room. Or maybe he was just quiet. I knocked. The sound stopped.

I took a step back and waited. The light changed underneath the door, so I knew the man had come up to answer. But he didn't. I could see his shadow still waiting there, so I tapped again.

"Who's there?"

Bobby's voice. I knew for sure.

“It’s me, Bobby!” I said.

A second later, a chain rattled and the door swung open. Bobby stared down at me, his face wrinkled up like he hadn’t expected to see me. Good, I had surprised him.

“What are you doing here? Is Nikki here, too?” He ran his fingers through his hair a few times and leaned out into the hall, peering toward the parking lot.

“No, she’s in Arkansas.”

Bobby turned back my way. “What are you doing here?” he repeated.

I picked up his banjo and held it out to him. “Ta-da!”

“Oh, cool.” He took the instrument from me and held it loosely at his side, still looking at me with that weird expression. Well, maybe his *expression* wasn’t weird, maybe he just looked different than when he came to our house. Normally Bobby wore baggy jeans, a printed shirt of some kind, and a belt with square silver studs, and his black hair was in tiny spikes. But I guess he hadn’t expected to see anybody today. He had matted bed hair and was wearing a wrinkly white shirt and loose plaid boxers. Wow, he had hairy legs and long toes. I hadn’t ever seen them before. He also smelled funny. Like that silver bucket on a chain the boys in white waved in church, the kind that sent puffs of smoke out into the audience like the mass was a really lame rock concert. Bobby kinda smelled like that.

He glanced down the hallway again, then looked back at me. “Come on in,” he said. Bobby stepped back to let me through. I walked past him, circling around the banjo tilted in my way, and he shut the door behind us.

There was a skinny man on the couch. He had a long face and frizzy brown hair. His head rested backward and he stared up at the ceiling, but he looked over at us when he heard the door close.

“You for real, bro?” he said, but the whole time he was talking to Bobby, he sat there blinking at me. His eyes were big and red. Nikki sometimes looked that way whenever she took me to school after coming home from her night job.

“Put that out,” Bobby said.

The skinny man lifted his hand, and I saw a tiny cigarette in his fingers. No wonder it smelled funny in here. Bobby didn’t have the fan going or a window open or anything.

The man on the couch put the cigarette to his lips and inhaled. He held the smoke in his mouth and then let the cloud flow out. His hand dropped to the side of the couch, but then he looked up at me again. He held out the nub. “Want a hit?”

“Are you fucking serious right now?” Bobby marched around the coffee table and grabbed the tiny bit of cigarette left. He crushed it in an ashtray.

“Hey, man,” the guy said. He held out the “A” sound for a lot longer than I would have. “I started when I was twelve.”

“Well, she’s eight.”

Bobby reached up and pulled the chain for the ceiling fan. “Cam, get out.”

The skinny man’s eyes followed the blades as they spun around, but after a few seconds, he shook his head and let it fall to the side. He looked really tired.

“For real,” Bobby said. He leaned on the bedroom doorframe, one leg crossed in front of the other, tapping and bending his toes on the floor.

The man rolled his head on its other side to face Bobby. They just looked at each other for a second.

Bobby's friend grunted, but I couldn't tell if he was mad or not. He pulled himself off the couch, moving really slow and draggy, then he went to the door and leaned one hand against the wall as he shoved his feet into his old, torn-up tennis shoes. The man called over his shoulder as he left, "Don't forget this weekend is the third and fourth. Rent's late by Monday."

"Will do," Bobby said to the closing door.

Bobby set his banjo down on a black stand beside his couch. "Have a seat," he said to me. He motioned toward the sofa cushions, then turned and went into a room in the back. All I could see in there was the end of his bed, a big computer on a brown desk, and a bunch of crumpled-up tissues on the floor around the rolling chair. I guess Bobby had allergies.

I sat down in the middle of the faded blue couch and swung my feet back and forth for a little bit. Then I turned to look at the wall on my right and nearly screamed. Bobby had a wicked-looking poster hanging there. A clown burst out of the background with sharp, red-tipped teeth and claws, glaring down at me like he wanted to kill me. His thin, spiky teeth reminded me of my alligator dream. I kicked myself across the sofa, shoving my back against the arm of the couch. My hand slapped against Bobby's banjo and I heard it twang.

It was just a picture. No reason to be afraid. But I couldn't look away. It reminded me of that movie Nikki had been watching years and years back, the one where the clown

ate the little boy and pulled him down into the sewer. Mom had come in and yelled at Nikki for letting me see that. But Nikki hadn't known I was there. It wasn't her fault.

I made myself turn away from the evil clown. My eyes landed on a set of weights on the floor beside the television. Bobby had some books and movies and video games on a shelf. A black laptop on the coffee table. A Gibson SG. A really scary clown poster.

The toilet flushed and then Bobby came back in. He circled the bar between the front room and the kitchen.

"I don't have any juice or anything. Want some water?"

I swung my legs down to hang off the couch. "Nah, I'm okay."

The fridge door opened and shut and I heard a small piece of metal clatter. Bobby sat down on the opposite end of the sofa and took a sip of beer.

"So, how's life?" he asked.

"I set my socks on fire today."

"Rad." He drank another mouthful.

"And I practiced the guitar."

Bobby nodded to his Gibson SG. "Me, too. 'Hotel California.'" He looked at me for a second. "What, you don't know that one?"

I didn't think I did. Not by name, anyway. I shook my head.

Bobby set his beer on the coffee table, picked up his Gibson, and started to play the intro. It was a little slow and twangy.

"Fuck." Bobby dropped his head. Then he started again.

I thought maybe I had heard that song before, but it was hard to tell.

“Goddamn piece of shit!” Bobby slapped his hand against the guitar neck. He put his Gibson back on its stand and flipped open the laptop on the coffee table instead. The screen lit up his face in a blue light. He typed in a long password and clicked a few times, his eyes moving left and right while he looked for something.

“Here.”

He set the computer down on the table facing me. He’d pulled up a YouTube video. Bobby clicked the play button. I sat there looking at the screen. It was just a picture of a building with skinny trees in the background. That was it. Whenever Nikki showed me music videos, she always picked concerts with the real band playing. This one was kind of boring. But the song was nice. Not as slow and twangy as before.

Bobby took a sip of his beer and leaned back against the couch, closing his eyes and tapping his left hand along to the beat. He let the whole video play. I tried to imagine the guitarist standing on a stage, strumming along and swaying to the music. I didn’t really understand the words, but I liked the song. After a few minutes, the man quit singing and the band started looping the same melody. Then that stopped, too.

Bobby sat forward and clicked the tab shut. YouTube disappeared. I looked at the image on his desktop background. It was a girl. She had long, blonde hair and pale arms. She was turned to the side, reaching up to put a silver ornament on a Christmas tree. The way she leaned, I could see a white snowflake on her red underwear dotting the “I” in “Naughty or Nice?”

Bobby was looking at the picture, too. His eyes moved up and down.

He turned to me.

“I like plaid myself.” Bobby nodded at his blue and purple boxers. “How about you?”

I tilted my head. “What do you mean?”

“Do you wear patterns on your panties?”

I glanced back at the screen. “Not really.” Not like *that*.

Bobby turned a little more toward me. “How about colors? Or do you just wear white?”

I sat up straighter, looking at him. His voice had changed a little. It hadn’t gotten louder or lower, just slower, I guess. Like how Mrs. Carlson sounds when she’s trying to get me to figure out how to do a math problem. Long, drawn-out questions like she really wants to hear me say the answer.

“Do you like taking pictures?”

I kept watching him. Normally, I didn’t mind taking pictures. But I wasn’t sure what he was trying to say, and I got the feeling I shouldn’t answer.

He smiled. Very slow and warm. “I have a camera on my phone.”

I frowned and leaned back into the arm of the couch.

“Come on.”

Bobby got up and took my arm like he was going to help me stand. I tugged back. His hand gripped my wrist tighter and he started to pull me to my feet. I wriggled and flailed and started to cry as his fingers pinched down on me. It hurt worse than the alligators in my dream. He yanked harder. I scrabbled with my left hand behind me, trying to grab the corner of the couch to hold myself there or help me pull back or something. Anything. My hand brushed against the wiry strings of Bobby’s banjo. I

gripped the neck and then wrenched the banjo around, smashing it into Bobby's forehead. It connected with a jarring clang and knocked him sideways. The metal spiky lines on the side cut into his skin. A stream of blood came rushing down his face and he fell, half on top of me and the sofa and half draped onto the floor.

I shoved him off me and jumped up from the couch. The blood kept tricking onto the cushions. I backed away quickly, still looking at him even though he was face-down and not moving. The red line near the cut on his forehead had smeared. I looked at my hands. Bobby's blood was all over me from pushing him up.

My shoulders hit the wall. I turned and ran out of the apartment. I don't even think I shut the door behind me. My feet pounded on the wooden stairs and then kept running through the buildings toward the road. When I got closer, I saw the streetlight change. The white figure on the crosswalk sign lit up across the road. I didn't slow down and sprinted out into the street. A black Toyota ran the red light and almost hit me. They honked. I screamed something not very nice at the car. The man driving didn't look back.

I dashed across the road. Not looking at any of the other cars waiting at the light, I hopped up onto the curb, then cut through the trees and around the old church on the corner by my house. I couldn't stop crying, and running at the same time made my chest hurt. I just wanted to get home.

I yanked my head up. Even from way down the street, I could see a police car parked in our driveway. I didn't know why the cops were there, but it didn't matter. I sprinted faster.

The front door was halfway open. Before I got to the porch, I could hear Mrs. Ortega shouting in English and Spanish. I'm pretty sure she was swearing.

I pushed the door open the rest of the way as I rushed in. Mrs. Ortega stood clenching a wad of tissues, crying and shouting and pacing all at the same time. Her long, patterned skirt whipped around as she walked. An officer with broad shoulders and a bald head stood near her, holding a notepad and trying to calm her.

Through the gap in the policeman's arm, Mrs. Ortega saw me. She shrieked so loud and high that it took me a second to figure out she'd said, "Thetis Diana, where have you been?"

The officer whirled around to face me. His eyes widened. "Is that blood?" he asked, coming toward me.

I braced my arms on my knees and took in big, shaky breaths, trying to stop crying.

The officer stopped. "Are you all right?"

Mrs. Ortega hurried over to me and took my face in her tear-soaked hands. I wriggled away and dropped down onto the couch. She sat down beside me and brushed my bangs aside, looking at me real close.

A loud voice rang out and I jolted. Through the black speaker on the officer's shoulder, I heard a woman saying a lot of numbers and weird words, but then she said she'd gotten a call about a little girl covered in blood and sprinting through traffic. West out of the Fieldview Apartments. The officer grabbed the walkie and answered her.

Mrs. Ortega ran her hand through my hair. The policeman crouched down in front of me. He started asking me questions. I wasn't listening. I sat there panting and crying, my chest hurting and my legs hurting and my arms streaked in bright, fresh blood. I

closed my eyes and flopped my head back on the couch. I really hoped Nikki was having a good time in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Distance

The pattering sound grew louder and I looked up from my history chapter. Snow slid down the window and built up at the bottom until I could hardly even see the swing set on the playground. I frowned and shoved my book away. Dad had said it was going to snow. But even while I had stood there at the door winding a scarf around my face and cramming my feet into new, heavy plastic boots that still smelled like pool floaties, I had hoped he would be wrong about the weather. And now he wasn't.

The icy rain blew harder against the glass, smacking over and over like a huge cloud of summer bugs, but even that thought didn't make me feel any better. They probably didn't have Texan bugs out here in Maryland, but I knew what they did have, and that was really bad blizzards. Snowdrifts that bury trashcans and park benches, that wall in cars on all sides and the people trapped inside freeze to death. It was already Thursday, only a half-hour of school left. We had Friday out. All I needed to do was live long enough to get into Dad's car and back to my house. I'd rather die in a new bedroom than at a school with a bunch of people I didn't know.

I heard my teacher call me, but I didn't look at her. I closed my eyes and clasped my hands tightly together. Wait. Just wait.

Mitch stared out the window, wishing more than anything that the snow would just dry up or melt or melt and then dry up. It hardly ever snowed this badly in San Marcos. Mitch put his pencil in the crease of his history book and pushed it away. He had a full page of questions in front of him, and the answers were supposed to be somewhere

in chapter five, but he really, really didn't want to read any more about Washington crossing the Delaware. He'd covered this lesson right before he moved to Maryland, but Miss Dammeyer didn't seem to think that Texans knew nearly as much about the War for Independence as the people who lived where it took place. Well, that was more than two hundred years ago, and Mrs. Carlson could read a bunch of old books the same as Miss Dammeyer and her lousy family farm outside of Trenton.

Mitch heard his teacher call his name. He didn't turn away from the window. A big gust of wind blew the snow harder against the pane. Mitch shivered and pulled his hands into his sweater sleeves. He could see the classroom lights mirrored in the glass. Just beside the swing set in the playground, Mitch watched Miss Dammeyer's reflection as she stood up. She called him again. He could feel his whole class staring at him. Mitch pulled his turtleneck up over his chin and slumped down in his seat.

The first few flakes swirled down from the clouds, blanketing the streets and buildings and birdhouses of Pomfret, Maryland in the first snowfall of the 2009 winter. Windshield wipers activated, headlights switched on, drivers slowed cautiously or raced home before the weather worsened. And in a small window of Dr. James Craik Elementary School, eight-year-old Mitch Hudson exhaled and drew a rocket ship in the fog on the pane.

Mitch stared out the window, looking to the casual passersby like an average school boy bored with lessons. He hated living in Pomfret, though he had hidden his true feelings from his father during the usual well-wishing questions at breakfast. No matter how many times his parents had explained that his mom and aunt had won \$10,000 in a

baking contest and had opened up a new shop out here to be nearer to his aging grandparents, all Mitch heard was that he had to move 1,500 miles from home. Mitch's silence unnerved his classmates, and none of them save for Tess Reid had approached him for anything more than a spare eraser. Tess had moved three times in her life, and she knew his quiet disposition stemmed from unfamiliarity, though she hadn't known the words to express her idea when she tried to explain his sullenness to the other children.

Out of everyone in the class, Miss Dammeyer was the most concerned about Mitch. She knew that transferred children needed time to adjust to the changes that moving brought on, but at the same time, she couldn't help but feel that Mitch's unwillingness to make eye-contact pointed to a larger attitude problem that would soon surface. He'd seemed particularly uninterested in her story about her family farm just outside of Trenton, right along the Delaware where Washington crossed in 1776.

"Mitch," Miss Dammeyer said.

Mitch heard his teacher's voice, but never turned from the window. Tess bit her lip and wished she knew how to tell everyone what was wrong. Miss Dammeyer counted to ten in her head and then called Mitch again. And outside the window, snow continued to fall, slowly collecting on the pane and building up to what would soon set the state record as the most snowfall in a single winter.

At the End of Creation

I step into the rental car, and as we pull away from the Los Angeles International Airport, my mind races with all the possibilities of what my sister Cathy and I will face when we get to the Cupcake Creations competition. Until today, I've never set foot outside of the Texas panhandle. I look out the window at the tall, skinny palm trees lining the road, the skyscrapers gleaming against the early evening sky, the shining cars whizzing past, and I feel like a single sprinkle jostling around in a canister, just one out of millions, hoping to be part of something bigger.

I flip down the visor and look into the mirror. My stupid, crinkly, frizzy hair. I'd used a can of spray on it that morning, but I'd gone outside since then. I look like Goldilocks if she'd just touched an electric fence. Fishing a comb out of my purse, I try to smooth it down.

Beside me, Cathy hums so faintly I hardly hear her. She murmurs the lyrics to the song, and all I catch is "top of the world" before she clamps her mouth shut. Cathy glances at me and then flicks her eyes back to the road.

I snap the visor closed and turn to face her. She's singing The Carpenters. She's trying to get to a happy place in her head. Goddamn it, the last thing I need right now is for her to freak out and give me some kind of bullshit I-can't-go-through-with-it speech. We have less than a half hour until the contest starts, and if she goes to pieces and ruins everything and makes us lose—

Cathy looks like she's working up to say something when, without warning, her expression changes and she blurts out, "Oh my gosh, I just realized I didn't bring the map."

I pinch the bridge of my nose to cover my frustrated sigh. I'd seen her holding the directions in the kitchen right before we left. I should've snatched the bundle of papers out of her hand. When she'd stopped to fill her coffee thermos, she'd left the directions on the counter, wrapped securely around our plane tickets. No, no, please. Let *me* argue with the man at the airport until he rolls our tickets over to the next available flight. We'd almost missed the competition. I squeeze my eyes shut and let my hand drop back to my lap. It doesn't really matter that Cathy left the directions at home. I had already memorized the route. Four months ago, that is, but I trust my memory. Well enough. I search for the nearest street sign to confirm we're still on World Way. "Take the left fork in a minute to Century. We don't have time to check in at the hotel. Just go straight to the contest."

Cathy's face relaxes and she veers left.

I'd told Cathy she was in charge of directions and driving from the airport because I wanted her to feel at least a little involved in planning the trip, but I'd confirmed the address and plotted the easiest way to get there the moment I'd gotten the invitation to attend Cupcake Creations. I'd even traced the route on Google Earth. The roads and underpasses on the computer screen had looked exactly the same as they do now.

I watch the buildings whizz past the passenger window, trying not to think about the challenges we're about to face because there's no way of predicting what ingredients

we'll get to use. Still, a crisp raspberry's always nice and I'm partial to lemon. I stop myself every time I start planning out how best to spend the \$10,000 prize. We haven't even caught sight of the building yet, but I know we could replace our ovens and maybe change our display cases and pay off the rest of Mom's final expenses. Plus winning this would give Compote Cupcakes great credibility and open up a whole new division of customers. Word of mouth is as important as flavor in our line of work. This opportunity is great for business all the way around.

"Alyssa?"

"Hmm?"

Cathy focuses on the road ahead, but past the shaggy blonde hair draping down her cheek, I can see her taut jawline. She sits in silence for a moment. "We've got a real shot at this. You know? I mean, here we are, in LA, competing against three other cupcake bakeries, but we're one out of four. You know what I mean?" She looks across at me. "We've got a chance."

"We've just got to stay cool, that's all." I roll my shoulder and pull at the seatbelt to try and loosen it. It's cutting into my skin and I can't get it to stop. "You handle the batter, I'll start on frostings and compote, when the last batch goes in, you switch to candied fruit or chocolate designs or whatever decorations go on top. Then I'll jump over and help when I finish."

"Trade off. Good idea."

I yank at my seatbelt. "Keep it simple. But fabulous."

She smiles.

"Take a left up here," I say, pointing to the street sign up ahead.

She signals and merges. After a few more turns, we're finally outside Cupcake Creations. Cathy throws the rental car into park, and we rush up to the front entrance of the giant glass building. A bald man waiting at the doors checks off our names on a clipboard, then holds down a microphone button attached to a curling white cord dangling from his ear.

"Alyssa and Cathy from Compote Cupcakes are here," he says, then presses the earpiece closer to his ear as he listens to the response. He winces at the woman's final word, shouted loudly enough that even I can hear her say, "Now!"

The man gestures to our right. "Down that hall, second door on the left is makeup, the Third AD will meet you in a minute."

I have no idea what he means, but I nod. "Okay, thank you."

Cathy and I hurry down the hallway. I hadn't considered that we'd have to report to makeup for this contest, but in hindsight, I knew we'd be on camera. We reach a green door with a gold star on it. Cathy knocks. Seconds later, a woman with a blonde ponytail and thick glasses opens it.

"Oh, so you made it after all," she says. "Come on, come on. Let's go." She practically shoves us into the chairs in front of the light bulb-framed mirror. "Which of you is Alyssa?"

I raise my hand. Cathy points at me.

"Judy, get her mic going," the woman calls over her shoulder, jerking her head at me.

The makeup artist smears a pale paste onto Cathy's face, quickly spreading the mess around with a white, triangular sponge. She turns to pick up a poofy black brush

and applies a layer of pale powder next. I stare at her rapid, practiced movements. Mom was a country girl, and she never wore makeup. Cathy and I don't, either.

A different lady comes toward me, carrying a tiny microphone dangling from a cord draped over her arm. She fastens the battery pack to the back of my pants, and then feeds the cord around my waist and up my shirt. Her wedding ring scratches against my bare side and I flinch, but she ignores me, circling around to stand in front of me and clipping the mic to the top of my bra. The wire tickles, but I forget about it almost instantly. The assistant steps back and the makeup artist takes her place, wiping my cheeks, brow, and neck with a sponge covered in the same type of pale paste she'd used on Cathy. She sets that aside and picks up the poofy brush.

"Close your eyes," she says. A moment later, I feel the bristles glide across my skin, sweeping professionally from my forehead to my jaw. She pauses and goes over my cheekbones again, then again. Her hand lifts my chin and I look up at her. She takes a black pencil from her belt and jabs it toward my face. I squirm away, half-expecting her to blind me, but she grasps my chin tightly and puts eyeliner on me.

"Beauty in thirty seconds," she mutters. Throwing the pencil onto the counter, she pulls a tube of mascara from her tool belt and applies heavy brushstrokes to my lashes.

I hear a knock. In the mirror, I see a pixie-faced brunette come through the door behind me. She introduces herself as the "Third Assistant Director," whatever that means.

"Is Alyssa ready yet?"

"Hang on," the makeup artist answers, adding a quick dab of lipstick and rubbing her finger along the rim of my mouth to touch up her work. "Done."

"Come with me," the Third AD says.

I jump out of the chair a little less gracefully than I intend. The makeup woman turns around and resumes her assault on Cathy.

“Be ready in five,” the brunette calls over her shoulder, showing me out of the room. I hear the makeup artist scoff.

The Third AD hurries down the hall. I follow her as quickly as I can, trying not to blink too much because the thick mascara glues my eyelids together. We pass more green doors with gold stars on them, walking through a series of white hallways leading Lord knows where. When we reach a small waiting room with plush white sofas, we stop.

Three people stand in line near the opposite door. I join them, sneaking my first glimpse of the other competitors. A woman with a short black bob stands at the front, nibbling her thumbnail. After her, a man with scraggly gray hair and a tie-dye shirt, and behind him, a red-headed woman in her thirties wearing a top with a winking cartoon cupcake. All three of my opponents have logos of their companies stamped across their shirts. I glance at my solid green blouse and put a hand to my forehead. I had planned to change at the hotel—but that was before Cathy had screwed up our flight plans. In all the rush, I’d forgotten about changing and had left my Compote Cupcakes shirt folded in the trunk. I massage my temples, but then I realize I’m probably smearing the makeup and I whip my arms back down to my sides.

The Third AD turns to us, and in a booming voice I never expected from a woman so wispy thin, she shouts, “Rolling! Quiet!”

A hush falls over the group. Moments later, I hear the announcer in the next room prompting us out. The Third AD gestures to the door.

I walk on set. Sweeping my gaze out as I go, I locate the cameras and make a point not to look directly at them, then I stand in a row beside the three other bakery owners. Mom had left me fifty-one percent of the shop—the only reason Cathy’s not the one facing down the judges. I turn toward the three people seated at the table: a woman with spiky white hair, a man with large glasses and a dark goatee, and a lady with massive red curls. The announcer introduces us to the judges, but my nerves are so tense I’m shaking and I forget their names the moment he says them. I try to smile.

“All right, contestants!” The host speaks in a clear and articulated way that sounds unnatural to me at first. “You have one hour to create three awe-inspiring cupcakes for the judges. Show us your best. The winner will receive \$10,000 and display their cupcakes at Jacqueline’s birthday party in Hollywood.”

The woman with red curls nods.

The announcer turns to a long table behind him, gesturing to a giant mound of fruit, chocolate, and other edible ingredients resting on top of it. “Choose anything you’d like. Your time starts now.”

On the wall behind him, a digital clock lights up and bright red numbers begin counting down the time.

The other participants rush toward the table and I hurry to catch up. I step around the tie-dye man, who stops to heft a watermelon up into his arms, and move to the side with the smaller fruit. A hand taps me on the shoulder. Cathy steps up beside me.

“Okay, so what are we thinking?” I ask.

“They have blood orange,” she says, pointing to the pile. “We could do Mom’s recipe.”

“Mom’s *secret* recipe.” I meet her gaze and gesture with my eyes to the cameraman filming us, giving her the tiniest shake of my head I can manage.

Cathy brushes a knuckle at the corner of her eye, sending a surreptitious glance past her hand at the man. “All right, what about sour cherry?”

“Sour cherry compote, sweet vanilla cake, white chocolate ganache plus cherry compote topping, and a chocolate-dipped cherry.”

“Nice.” Cathy scoops up two handfuls and I follow suit, taking them to our cooking station. “They pitted them already,” she says, staring down at the fruit. “Look at that.”

We drop the cherries into a bowl and rush back to the other ingredients. I grab some white and dark chocolate and hand it to Cathy.

“Ganache. You make that. Dark chocolate, chili powder, buttercream.”

“Pumpkin,” she says, pointing to the far end of the table. “Cream cheese, maple syrup.”

“Let’s go.” I snag a silver can from the stack along with a little white bottle of syrup and hurry back to the workstation.

Cathy pulls forward canisters of flour and sugar, then stoops to a cabinet and searches through the cookware.

“Just start in this,” I say, tapping the rim of the silver bowl beneath the mixer.

“Which flavor first?”

“Pumpkin. I’ll work on the cherry compote and white ganache.”

“Got it.”

I cross to the stove and take up a saucepan, pouring in measurements of water, sugar, and lemon juice. I boil that with a little vanilla bean and let the mixture simmer for a few minutes until it thins to a syrup, then the time comes to add the cherries. A minute or two of stirring, cherry compote complete. I always loved making compotes back in baking school, probably because Mom taught me so many combinations growing up. I drag the pan to a cool back burner and switch off the hot one, then turn to work on the white chocolate ganache.

Cathy steps around me with loaded cupcake liners of pumpkin batter. She pops the tray into the oven behind me.

“Work on the vanilla ones for the cherries next.” I bob my head in the direction of the cooling compote on the stove.

“No, I need to make the chocolate,” she says. “The cherries can sit for a while. I’ll finish the chocolate batter and then start the dark ganache, but I can do that and mix the vanilla batter at the same time.”

“Okay, I’ll switch to frosting in a sec.”

Cathy’s blender whirs to life behind me. I concentrate on the white ganache, pouring cream into a saucepan and cranking the burner dial up beneath it. I chop up the white chocolate on a cutting board, watching the stove for any sign of boiling. When the first few bubbles pop up, I remove the pan from the heat, scrape the shards of candy into the cream, and let it stand for a few minutes until the chocolate melts all the way.

I know I really need to focus, but in the few free seconds I have while I’m waiting, all I can think about is the blood orange recipe. Maybe we should go with that instead of pumpkin. It was Mom’s favorite, and she always said it was her best. Cathy

already did the pumpkin batter, but we still have time to make another batch of orange. I look over my shoulder. A cameraman stands filming our every move. Cathy scoops rapidly from the silver bowl, slopping drizzles of brown batter all over the cupcake pan and her apron and the counter. I turn back to my station, clean except for a few crumbs on the cutting board. I shake my head. Absolutely not. I'm not letting these people film me making Mom's secret recipe.

I stir the white ganache until it changes to a smooth, glossy texture, then transfer the majority of it into a small bowl and set it in the refrigerator to cool. That part will go into the frosting. We'll need the second portion to dip the cherries.

I step away from the stove, trading it with Cathy and taking her place at the counter. She pulls another saucepan from the cabinet and starts the dark ganache. I pour maple syrup, sugar, cream cheese, and butter into a bowl, then beat them all together until they turn a fluffy consistency. Done. Going more quickly than I expected, I set aside my frosting bowl for the pumpkin cupcakes and go on to the buttercream for the chocolate ones.

A strange aroma hits me. Sniffing the air, I look over to my right at the red-headed woman's station, then turn in a circle, following the smell around behind me. I gasp and rush over to the unmanned stove.

"Cathy, the ganache is burning!"

I turn down the dial for the burner, waving my hand above the bubbling brown liquid to cool it. "Come on, come on," I mutter, stirring at the dark sludge. "Cathy, can you hand me—"

I look over my shoulder and stop. My sister crouches to the ground by the oven, gathering up six or seven fallen pumpkin cupcakes from the tiled floor.

“Don’t you dare think of serving those!” I shout.

“I wouldn’t!” She tosses the ruined ones into the garbage bin. “We still have five. We only need three.”

I choose not to answer and instead jog to the refrigerator. Pulling out a carton of cream, I hurry back to the saucepan and stir some into the ganache. I let out a shaky breath and close my eyes for a moment, stirring. When I open them again, the ganache looks much better, but the burnt aroma still hovers in the air around me. We don’t have time for this. Cathy needs to pull her shit together.

“Thirty minutes left,” the announcer calls. “Who will make the best Cupcake Creations?”

I glance up at the red digital clock. Fuck.

Using a pink potholder, I pull the hot ganache pan to a different burner to help it cool a little faster and turn off the stovetop. I step over a broken pumpkin cupcake Cathy missed and return to my buttercream icing for the chocolate ones. Beating the butter and shortening, I add vanilla and a little salt, then my sugar and a few tablespoons of milk to give the mixture a creamy spreading consistency. Cathy sets a warm tray of dark chocolate cupcakes down on the counter beside me. I tap the crown of the closest pumpkin cake. That batch has cooled enough to start shaping rose petals for the top design, so I push aside the buttercream bowl and scoop the maple syrup frosting into my piping bag. I set to work, imagining for a moment that I’m back in baking school. Back in the kitchen with Mom.

Behind me, Cathy screams. My rose petal explodes into a giant line of icing across the countertop. I whip my head around. Cathy races to the sink and turns on the cold tap, shoving her right hand beneath the running water.

“I thought you pulled the ganache off the heat!” she shouts.

“I did, but I had to fix it first! You shouldn’t have let it burn.”

“I was getting the pumpkin cupcakes out of the oven so *they* wouldn’t burn!”

“You ladies need any help over there?” a male voice calls. I turn to the sound. The tie-dye man stands at his counter facing us, already working on his toppers. He smirks, never taking his eyes from his candied watermelon wedges.

I look back at Cathy. “Just go.”

She twists the sink handle off and gingerly wipes her palm with a towel. I return to my rose petal piping, finishing all five just in case. Cathy steps up beside me, her right hand stuffed into an oven mitt, and pours some of her ganache into a chocolate cupcake.

“Stop! Stop!”

She jerks away from the tray, nearly spilling the whole pan. “What’s your problem?”

“The ganache is too hot. You’ll burn straight through the—” I pick up the cupcake and a trail of chocolate sauce gushes from the bottom. “You’re in too much of a rush. Slow down and do it right!” My voice comes out a shriek. I shut my mouth. Taking a deep breath, I start again. “Leave that with me, and go make the vanilla batter instead.”

“Okay, okay,” Cathy says, waving her hands in the air a few times, the first sign of legitimate panic taking over her. She hurries across to the mixer again.

I stir the dark liquid for a few minutes to help it cool. As I do, I take a second to evaluate everyone else's progress. Cathy closes our oven door, staring at the pale vanilla batter through the window and wringing the corner of her apron. Across the room, the tie-dye man adds decorative chocolate pieces to the tops of his cupcakes. The red-headed woman brings her last batch out of the oven. The woman with the black bob dashes across her station, stretching out anxious fingers toward a tray of cupcakes with the icing melting straight off. Okay, so we're doing better than one person, at least. I look to the far end of the room. A makeup artist touches up the judges, while men and women dressed in solid black hurry back and forth, fiddling with cords and speaking in television jargon to one another. I don't understand a word of it.

"Yeah!" a deep voice cheers.

I turn around. The tie-dye man high-fives his teammate with a resounding smack of palms, then leans against the counter behind him, crossing his arms and waiting for the time to run out. He meets my gaze and sends me a smug grin.

I spin back to the refrigerator, checking on the white chocolate ganache. It still hasn't hardened enough to mix into the frosting. Hurry up, hurry up. Cathy pulls her vanilla tray out of the oven, using both mitten-covered hands to set it down. I pick up the remaining handful of cherries and dip the bottom half of each into the spare white chocolate compote, placing them on waxy paper to dry. It takes longer to do so many, but I'd rather have extras than not enough.

"Ten minutes remaining!"

"Oh my god." I speed up even more. We still have two different sets of cupcakes we have to pipe icing onto, plus add their toppings. I pull forward the dark ganache and

fill the first of the chocolate batch. “Cathy, grab the ganache from the fridge and start on the vanilla icing!”

I finish filling the cupcakes, then I put a star tip on a piping bag and scoop the buttercream frosting inside it. I look over at Cathy, doing the same with the—

“Wait!”

Cathy snaps her head up.

“You didn’t put in the cherry compote sauce! Half a cup. Just stir it in the bag!”

Goddamn it, why do I have to correct Cathy on every stupid little thing? Making sour cherry was her idea! I shut my eyes, wishing Mom could be here to help me instead. These are her recipes. She created them and perfected them, and she should be here to compete with them.

Cathy crosses to the stove and adds about the right amount of sauce to the plain white topping. She jams a spoon down into the piping bag. After a few seconds of mashing it around, the ganache turns mostly pinkish.

I work as quickly as I can to make a solid swirl of buttercream for each cupcake. One, two, three, spiky tip. One, two, three, spiky tip.

“Five minutes!”

I hear a clattering noise on the counter behind me. Cathy curses and stoops to the ground, gathering up most of my chocolate-dipped cherries. She stands and yells, throwing them as hard as she can across the room and into the sink. They bounce as they hit the basin and scatter all over, some landing on the counter, others falling to the floor.

“Do we still have three?” I ask, on the verge of tears.

“Four stuck a bit to the paper.” She violently shoves them further back and away from her station.

I let out a short chuckle, even though I don’t feel happy at all. Ignore and push through. I set three chocolate and three pumpkin cupcakes on their individual white serving plates and place them on the tray, but then I realize I still haven’t topped off the frosting. Where had Cathy put the spices after she finished the batter? I shift the used silver bowls aside, looking for the little circular bottles of chili powder and nutmeg. I check the stovetop, then over by the mixer, and then my own station again, sending dirty spatulas scattering across the counter.

“Cathy, what the hell did you do with the nutmeg?”

She turns her neck, her eyes following a measuring cup as it clatters to the ground. “I put all the little bottles back on the spice rack so I wouldn’t lose them.”

Why couldn’t she just leave them next to the mixer? I hurry across to the rotating spice rack and run my fingers across the flat tops. Chili Powder. Chives. Cilantro.

“Alyssa...”

“What? *What?*” I grab the chili powder and spin the spice rack, looking for the nutmeg. What the hell does Cathy *need*? Can’t she see I’m busy?

“You’re not acting all pissy because you’re mad at me, are you?”

I slap the plastic container down and whirl to face my sister. “Are you kidding me? You forgot the plane tickets at home, you left the map in Texas, you drop everything, you burn everything—including yourself! Why do you think Mom left me fifty-one percent? Because she liked me better, or because you’re such a fuck-up?”

Cathy stares at me, her expression blank except for a crease between her eyebrows. Finally, she looks away, up at the clock on the wall behind me. “Two minutes,” she says in a low voice. She turns her back to me and plucks the remaining chocolate-dipped cherries from the paper, arranging them on the tips of the compote frosting.

I close my eyes for a second, forcing myself to stop thinking about how Cathy always shows up late to the shop or how she constantly leaves dirty dishes in the sink or how she steps out to use the bathroom during prep and stays gone so long I end up doing most of it myself. Or how she’s almost gone out of her way to ruin this entire opportunity for us. I spin the spice rack around, looking for the nutmeg. I grab it. The red digital numbers on the wall click down from ten. Nine. Eight. I rush back to the other counter and quickly season the first three with nutmeg. Cathy had better plate the cherry ones *now*. My fingers scramble to sprinkle chili powder onto the last three cupcakes.

“Alyssa. Alyssa!”

I whip my head around. “What the fuck did you do now?”

Cathy’s anxious expression disappears. Her mouth grows taut. Without a word, she points down at my plate. I look at the cupcakes I just finished. Beneath the dusty red chili powder and off-white icing, I see the spongy orange top of the pumpkin cake. I snap my head toward the other tray, toward the chocolate and chili powder cupcakes I’d just sprinkled with nutmeg, not chili powder. A loud buzzer rings out as the clock changes to zero.

Frozen Tootsies

Casey Denton opened the door to her green Beetle and helped her great-uncle step inside. He took her hand to steady himself and his leathery fingers slid across hers. Casey looked down at his arthritic thumb joint twisted a little sideways, the bony lines cutting down the back of his hand, the winding blue veins criss-crossing each other under his thin layer of skin. Yeesh, staring at it creeped her out.

“All set?” she said.

“Sure am. Thank you, sweetheart.” He smiled up at her, gripping the weathered metal carousel tin in his lap more securely.

Casey smiled back and shut the door, but the moment she straightened, her face fell. She sighed and circled around the trunk of the car. She didn’t have anything against the old guy, but she really didn’t know him, and having to drive all the way out to the senior home to pick him up was such bullshit. Her mom had said she would do it, but she had fallen behind in making Thanksgiving dinner, and Dad had to go to the grocery store because Mom had forgotten to grab a few things. So now Casey was stuck picking up Uncle Will. And taking him back tonight, too.

Casey climbed behind the wheel and drove toward the Interstate, merging into the flow of traffic. She bobbed her head. The silence was terrible. “So...” She looked across at her great-uncle. Small-talk really wasn’t her strong suit. “Did you hear Mom and Aunt Ginny won that cupcake contest?”

“Yeah,” Uncle Will said, “sure did. Do they have any plans on how to spend all that money?”

“Aunt Ginny and Uncle Drew and Mitch are gonna open a bakery in Maryland.”

Casey let the conversation ebb into silence again. She exited I-35 on the way through downtown San Marcos. As she came to the feeder road, the cars in front of her slowed to a stop. Oh, traffic at the intersection ahead was doubly backed-up because of the holiday. Casey signaled and cut through the strip mall on her right. She could circle around the Lowe’s to get over to Mockingbird Hills. They drove past all the fast-food restaurants, then turned left at the Starplex. Its marquee sign still said it was closed for repairs. Casey frowned. The ceiling had collapsed after the really heavy winter storm the year before, the one that had shut down the highway and left cars stranded in the street.

Uncle Will’s head followed the theater as they passed. “When I was a kid, I could take a dime and pay for a movie and a piece of candy on the way home.”

“Nice.” Casey exhaled quietly. The last thing she wanted was to sit through a series of back-in-my-day stories, but she couldn’t think of anything new to say.

Uncle Will ran his thumbs along the edges of the carousel lid. “Would you like a Tootsie Roll?”

“No, thanks.” Casey shook her head, but it came more out of annoyance than gesturing no. Tootsies weren’t exactly a staple of Thanksgiving, and he brought a huge tin full of them every year. Well, whatever. He could pass them out to all the kiddoes.

She looked toward her great-uncle again, her mouth open to say something else, but he was staring blankly at the metal container. Casey turned away and focused on driving.

*

When I pried open that lid and found myself staring at a whole carton of nothing but Tootsie Rolls, my first thought was, “What in the goddamn hell is this?” A parachute drop usually had C-rations or ammunition stuffed inside, but here was a box full of chocolate. I chuckled, and a puffy cloud of warmth formed in the air in front of me. Was this all part of General MacArthur’s master plan, or had someone’s supply request gotten garbled over the radio? Well, candy or not, out here in the Chosin Reservoir, where chill winds all but wiped us off our feet and steep Korean hills made my legs ache just to look at ’em, food was food. I put the lid back on and carted it off to the PX. The camp store would probably give me the same guff. Still, maybe the Tootsies would come in handy.

Now, the official word from Washington was that we weren’t at war. X Corps was just gonna pull off one last quick offensive to push back a few commies. Truman himself said we’d be Stateside before Christmas. Somebody should’ve told the Chinese that. The scuttlebutt was that a troop of CCF soldiers were spotted massing around the Yalu River. Still, that was a hundred miles to the north.

It was already night when I got back to base, but it was dark out here most of the day. The temperature had dropped below freezing, and the wind only made it worse. But carriers had air-dropped us a turkey dinner with all the trimmings just a few days ago, something everyone was thankful for, hands down, and we were on our way to regroup with the rest of the UNF troops. Orders were to push toward the coast and join General Smith at Hagaru-ri. We were getting out and going home.

I dropped off the new supplies at the PX, then hit the latrine. And I was just about finished taking a piss when the most god-awful noise busted out over the camp. Shouting

and whistles and a lot of bup-bup-bup sounds. Burpguns. Then loads and loads of machine guns firing. I grabbed my M-1 and ran out into the firefight.

*

Justin loaded the caps into his rifle and aimed at the row of used soda cans he'd lined up on the picnic table in the yard. He closed one eye, then fired with a loud snap. Justin peered out at the lawn. All seven cans still stood where he'd put them. Shoot.

He flopped his head backward. He could do this. He'd set up the targets way further back than normal, but he'd been practicing. Dylan had gone out hunting for real with Dad, and he'd bagged a deer all on his own. Justin knew to be careful, and he'd made a double-pinky-swear spit promise with Uncle Trent that he would. In return, Uncle Trent had agreed to trust him out here by himself and also to keep an eye on his youngest cousins and make sure they stayed inside.

Justin raised the rifle and squared his shoulders. He pulled the trigger. The second shot sailed past the table and disappeared into a pile of leaves.

With a groan, Justin threw himself against the porch railing and let his arms dangle over the other side. Behind him, he heard the glass door slide open. Justin whirled around.

His great-uncle stepped onto the deck. "Your daddy said you were out here."

Justin straightened.

Uncle Will shut the door after himself. His head turned toward the line of aluminum cans and he grinned. "Having trouble?"

Justin twisted the barrel in his hands. He nodded.

"Lemme show you something."

His great-uncle gestured for him to come over. Justin held out the rifle. Instead of taking it, Uncle Will twirled him to face the backyard and helped him aim.

“Keep your head up,” he said. “Now get your target in sight. Relax. Breathe.”

Justin inhaled and let the air out again slowly. He squeezed the trigger. The can on the left pinged as the cap knocked it off the table.

With a huge smile, Justin looked back at his great-uncle.

“That’s how it’s done,” Uncle Will said, winking.

Justin held out the gun. “Here. You want to do it?”

Uncle Will accepted it. He tucked it in the crook of his elbow long enough to rub his eyes under his glasses. Then he stood tall and rolled his shoulders. “It’s been a while, so don’t hold me to this.”

He aimed. Two seconds and three shots later, all his targeted cans hit the ground. Justin stared up at him.

Uncle Will smiled and handed him the rifle. “That wasn’t so bad. The real thing will kick back and bruise your shoulder.”

Uncle Will patted him on the arm and then lowered himself into a cushioned chair by the door.

Justin jogged over to the seat beside him. “So when’d you learn to shoot?”

His great-uncle leaned back and folded his hands across his stomach. “Let’s see. I was about your brother’s age when I first shipped out...”

“You were in the army?” Justin rested the gun on his lap and leaned forward. “Were you in World War II?”

Uncle Will laughed. He shook his head. “I was only your age then.”

Justin frowned. “What war’d you mean?”

“Korea.”

“Oh.” Justin scratched his ear. He looked at his finger, then wiped the skin flakes and ear wax on the knee of his jeans. “So when was that one?”

“1950.”

“When were you born?”

“In ’29.”

“How old are you now?”

Uncle Will stretched his legs, crossing his booted feet. “You always ask this many questions?”

Justin shut his mouth. He looked at his shoes.

A moment later, his great-uncle elbowed him. “Eighty.”

“Neat.” Justin blinked up at him. “You must’ve seen some cool stuff.”

Uncle Will nodded. He stared out into the yard at the fallen soda cans and his smile faded. “You bet.”

*

I lifted the soldier’s arms and a private and I passed him up to the marine waiting in the truck. Now that the gunfire had stopped, the hills had gone so silent my ears rang. I bent to the ground again. A powerful gust of wind blasted my parka against the side of my head. I turned my face away until the gale dwindled a bit, then moved to pick up the next one’s shoulders. He was a lieutenant. A line of blood had frozen on his face, and it made him look like he was wearing a monocle. I closed his eyes and helped raise him

high enough to load into the back. Never leave a man behind, even if it meant packing truck after truck with nothing but corpses.

The Chinese had come out of nowhere. One minute we were resting up to move out in the morning, the next a hundred thousand CCF soldiers had us surrounded. Both sides of the reservoir. They wore thick padded suits, so white they disappeared into the snow around them. I'd seen a Michelin Man ad back home in Texas, and that's what they'd looked like except for the red star badge on their hats. With the moonlight streaming down on a shroud of pure white, I saw more shadows than enemy soldiers. Every shot felt like firing at a ghost.

Things just got worse as the fight wore on. The cold froze the carbines and Browning Automatic Rifles, and they'd jam up and stop working. Men stuck with BARs had no idea if pulling the trigger would have any effect at all. We probably lost a couple thousand to malfunctioning equipment. I was never gladder to have an M-1. It held up all night.

Icy bodies were scattered up and down the mountainside. Ammunition was low. A couple CCF had snuck past our sentries and bayoneted a slew of men in their sleeping bags.

I walked over to the closest soldier draped across the snow. Some of the guys had built a fire and were heating up coffee. The smell carried over to me on the wind, mingling with the bitter scent of garlic drifting from the Chinese troops. I ran my glove under my running nose. I could feel the liquid collecting in my moustache. It crunched a little under my finger. The marine in the truck waved and called that the bed was full. I frowned at the crusty snot in his facial hair, knowing that's what I looked like, too.

He got down out of the back and walked with us toward the fire. Someone handed me a cup of coffee. I lifted it to my lips and held it there, letting the faint warmth soak into my nose. The marine took his cup and tipped it in my direction, then turned and did the same toward the bodies stacked up in the truck. He toasted in Spanish. Or Italian. Hell, it could've been French, for all I knew.

I sat by the fire and huddled with the others. Hardly any of us had slept, or eaten. We'd been out in the wind all last night and the evening before when the shooting started. My feet had gone numb.

Another gale swelled and stung my face. I ducked my head and sipped my coffee, stretching my legs toward the heat. The second we finished loading up the bodies and the wounded, we were moving out again. The Chinese had pulled back for now, but the hike to Hagaru-ri was gonna be a fighting retreat.

*

Maggie clicked the metal card table legs in place and flipped it upright, pressing down on the green plastic top to make sure it was steady. She flapped the orange tablecloth once before letting it float down in place. Oh, where had she put the little turkey?

Never mind, there it was, under the folding chair. Maggie settled the plastic ornament in the center of the table, then placed a ring of fake autumn leaves around it. She turned and picked up the stack of red styrofoam plates. Her mom had set out four. Maggie paused. That wasn't right. Only three of her younger cousins were coming for dinner. Maggie set the extra plate behind her on the chair and reached for the stack of plastic cups, each labeled with a strip of tape and black permanent marker. She read the

names as she arranged the cups at their place settings: Donna's, Mitch's, Justin's—Maggie's.

Maggie clenched the cup in her hand, marching through the dining room and into the kitchen. "Mom! Mom!"

Her mother stood at the stove, stirring a steaming pot that smelled like corn on the cob. "What's the matter?"

"You promised!" Maggie slammed the plastic cup down on the counter. "You promised I could sit at the adults' table this year."

Her mother lowered the heat on the burner and turned to face her. "Well, yes, but I think you'd be more comfortable sitting with your cousins."

Maggie's arms fell to her sides. How could she explain how important this was? The adults' table used real porcelain for Thanksgiving dinner. Real serving plates, real gravy boats, real silverware—they even drank from those heavy glass tumblers. She never got to use that kind of stuff at the kiddie table. Her mother wouldn't allow it. And Maggie was dying to hear about Amanda's first semester of college. Her younger cousins spent most of their time throwing food at each other.

"I just—I really..."

A timer buzzed. Her mother spun around, grabbed a pink potholder, and pulled a tray of rolls out of the oven. She scooted a pumpkin pie out of her way, then picked up a pastry brush and spread a thin layer of melted butter over the bread. "Look, sweetie, I thought you could keep an eye on your little cousins."

"I really don't want to sit with them."

Her mother turned and started chopping up some carrots on the cutting board. Her knife slapped down loudly. “You’re setting the tables, aren’t you? Just go fix it!”

Maggie ducked out of the kitchen and back into the dining room. She paused for a moment, looking in surprise at the fancy display laid out this year. Her mother had decorated the table with glass bowl centerpieces filled with candles, resting atop a new, white tablecloth with golden swirls in the fabric. Maggie lifted the first of the porcelain plates, turning it over in her hands. Her mother hadn’t let her anywhere near the good dishes last Thanksgiving. Maggie carefully set each down, imagining a hundred different punishments she could get if she broke one of them. She moved another chair up to the end of the table and squeezed in an extra place setting for herself next to Amanda’s. Maggie ran her fingers over her gold napkin ring and smiled.

A hand patted her on the shoulder. Maggie jerked away from the table. Her father walked past her into the kitchen.

“Helen,” he said, stopping in the doorway and leaning in. “Ginny just got here.”

Her mother rushed out of the kitchen and down the hall toward the front door. Maggie heard her go into the living room, calling excitedly to Aunt Ginny before she even circled the corner. They were both so loud.

“Come on,” her father said, nudging Maggie’s shoulder. “Let’s finish setting up.”

Maggie followed him to the kitchen. She helped him scoop steaming side-dishes into bowls and arrange the food on serving plates, then they carried everything into the dining room. Maggie backed up against the wall as her dad lifted the turkey on its silver platter, only moving again when she was sure he had set the tray down firmly. A few

minutes later, her mother led everyone to their seats. Her dad asked Grandpa Denton's brother to say grace.

Uncle Will stood up and bowed his head. He didn't say the Catholic prayer Grandpa Denton always said before dinner, "Bless us, Oh Lord, and these Thy gifts, which we're about to receive from Thy bounty, through Christ, our Lord, amen," but instead spent a lot of time talking about their nice warm home and all the healthy children, and he said "delicious meal" twice. Then he sat back down. Grandpa Denton put an arm around Uncle Will and patted his shoulder a couple times, then the family started to eat.

Maggie sat in silence, listening. She prodded her turkey with her fork. Her parents and all her aunts and uncles were talking about their jobs, or paying bills, or mortgages. What made her even madder was that Amanda was paying really close attention to all that boring stuff.

Maggie set down her napkin and stood. She picked up her dinner.

"Where are you going?" her mother asked.

"I'm gonna go watch the kids," Maggie said.

"Not with my good plate, you're not."

Maggie set the porcelain on the table. She went to the kitchen and got a styrofoam plate, then headed back to the dining room. Maggie kept her face down as she scooped her food.

"What are you crying for?" her mother snapped. "You were the one who wanted to move."

Maggie wiped at her face and didn't answer. As she walked away, she heard her mother mutter to Aunt Ginny, "I swear, that kid." Maggie bit her lip and dropped into her folding chair.

*

I huddled down as far as I could in the shallow trench and wriggled my canteen out from under my clothes to take a drink. Ground was so damn frozen we couldn't dig in if we tried. Most of the troops were taking shelter under some type of natural cover. That, or lined up on stacks of straw outside the medic tent, waiting their turn for treatment and shielded from the weather by a tarp. Wasn't much warmer once they got inside, even with the field range blazing to heat up soup. The doctors and nurses had taken to carrying syrette tubes of morphine in their mouths. Body heat was the only thing keeping half our supplies usable. Even the Tootsie Rolls turned to icicles if they weren't kept warm in a pocket.

We'd burned through C-rations more quickly than we'd expected, with nobody getting much sleep, the hills wiping us out, thousands of wounded soldiers needing food to regain their strength. And now the Chinese had blown up the goddamn bridge.

The only route over the gorge, and it was gone. There were ten thousand of us, easy, up here on the mountain. And we were trapped waiting with our thumbs up our asses while the CCF fortified their positions in front of us and moved in from behind.

Maybe it's times like these that make the little things funnier. The supply clerks had given out the recreation packs air-dropped to our division, and someone from an Army unit must've filled them, because the boxes had paper plates and napkins in them.

As I'd wiped my moustache, I tried to think of the last time I'd actually held a napkin. Never in my life had I been more grateful for a tiny wad of tissue.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a Tootsie Roll. My gloved hands fumbled to untwist the wrapper. Finally getting the candy loose, I popped it into my mouth and chewed. My stomach rumbled. Tootsies were all I'd eaten in four days.

A plane buzzed overhead, its sides riddled with holes, and made another air drop. I watched the supplies fall, then looked on for a while as engineers sorted through the new bridge materials and set to work repairing the path. We'd be on the move again soon.

*

Dylan flicked on the switch in the den and the ceiling fan began to whirl, slowly gaining speed. He blinked in the dim light. Aunt Helen had taken Grandma Frank's chifferobe. It was stuffed in the corner in front of the closet door. Dylan frowned as he pulled up a chair. He wondered who had gotten the grandfather clock in her will.

Casey and Amanda sat across from him on the sofa. Casey stretched her arms with a sigh. She smacked her lips and patted her stomach.

"Best damn s'mores pie on the planet."

Amanda laughed. "Thank God I tried the recipe beforehand. I put a layer of marshmallow on top of the chocolate like the directions said, instead of melting it into the filling, and it was disgusting. The two halves came apart, and trying to cut down through solid marshmallow made me use so much force the crust crumbled to a heap of powder. I threw that pie out."

Casey smiled. "So you're in baking school now?"

Amanda nodded. "Aunt Helen said you work at the library on campus."

“Oh my god, it’s the worst job *ever*.” Casey rested her head against the couch, looking at Amanda. “I sit at a desk on the third floor—I swear, hardly anybody even goes up there—and I used to try and study a little, but my boss told me if she catches me doing homework again, she’d fire me. It’s such bullshit.”

Amanda leaned sideways and propped her cheekbone on her knuckles. “Yeah, if there’s nobody there, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Casey looked at Dylan. “Where are you working these days?”

Dylan pushed the brim of his camouflage cap backward. “There’s a garage a block or so from campus. Check this out.” He rolled his sleeve to his elbow and twisted his forearm toward them. A shiny pink spot of skin stood out against his dark arm hair.

“What you got there?” a voice said behind them.

Dylan turned. Great-uncle Will walked around the coffee table and eased himself onto the low sofa. He pulled his right boot up to lay his ankle across his knee.

Dylan tapped the smooth dot on his wrist and tugged his sleeve down again. “Just showing the girls what happens when you let scalding oil drip down on a bare arm.”

“Got a few battle scars, do you?” Uncle Will smiled. He motioned to his foot. “You wouldn’t know it to look at me, but I lost my little toe in Korea.”

“No shit.” Dylan stared at the point of his great-uncle’s thick sole.

Uncle Will nodded. “I hadn’t felt my feet in four or five days. But I didn’t have time to worry about it. We had thousands of soldiers worse off than me.”

Dylan draped his arm behind his chair. “So you lost it to frostbite?”

Uncle Will gave a small chuckle. “I didn’t lose it. I asked if I could have it.” He looked at his boot. “Not many can say they went around with their own severed toe tucked in their pocket.”

“No kidding,” Dylan said. He glanced at his cousins, suddenly curious how they were handling the new conversation. Amanda gazed at Uncle Will, wide-eyed. Beside her, Casey looked less than amused. Dylan wondered if she might throw up.

He shifted in his seat, facing their great-uncle again. “So how cold was it?”

Uncle Will slid his foot to the ground. “Cold enough.”

Dylan shut his mouth. Dumb question. Really, really dumb.

“Well, it’s getting kind of late,” Casey said, sitting forward and looking at their uncle. “What do you say we get you back home?”

Uncle Will didn’t answer. Dylan turned back to him. Their great-uncle stared across the room at an empty space of wall. His eyes didn’t move, and he didn’t give any sign he’d heard her.

“Uncle Will?” Casey waited, then repeated his name more firmly.

Their great-uncle blinked and met her gaze.

“I said it’s getting late. Do you want me to drive you home now?”

“Sure, sounds good. Let me just run to the restroom first.” He shifted to stand, but the couch sat too low and he rocked backward again. Amanda and Casey hurried to help him up. Uncle Will groaned as he rose.

“Thank you, girls. Back in a minute.”

Dylan watched their great-uncle turn the corner into the kitchen before leaning toward his cousins. “Guys, does Uncle Will seem a little strange this year?”

“He’s strange every year,” Casey said, sitting back against the couch. “Who brings Tootsie Rolls to Thanksgiving dinner? But every freaking year, he goes around offering that silly tin to everyone at the house, and he gets maybe a dozen takers.”

“The youngest cousins, mostly,” Amanda said.

“Well, a few adults, too,” Dylan said with a shrug. But still, Casey had a point. Uncle Will had done the same thing every Thanksgiving since he could remember. Since Dylan had been Donna’s age, much smaller than Justin. It hadn’t seemed odd back then.

“Hey, Uncle Trent?” Amanda called over Dylan’s shoulder.

Dylan twisted in his chair. Uncle Trent poked his head around the doorframe, his body paused mid-stride past the den. He raised an eyebrow at them.

“Yes?”

“Can we ask you a question?” Amanda said.

“Sure thing.” Uncle Trent came in and took a seat next to her. He pulled a toothpick he’d been chewing from his mouth. “What’s on your mind?”

“It’s about Uncle Will.”

Uncle Trent frowned. “What do you mean? What’s wrong?”

“No, no, everything’s fine,” Dylan said, but he thought of Uncle Will’s blank stare and hesitated. “We just...”

Casey sighed. “Why is he so weird? I mean, we’re just sitting here talking about work, and all of a sudden he starts going on about a toe he lost in Korea!”

Uncle Trent’s brow creased. “He talked to you about Korea?”

Casey waved a hand. “Couldn’t get him to stop.”

Instantly, Uncle Trent leaned forward. “What did Uncle Will say to you?”

Amanda sat back in surprise. “Um...”

Dylan jumped in. “Nothing much, really.”

Uncle Trent threw his toothpick in a trash can beside the bed. “I asked him. I tried to interview him back in high school and he wouldn’t say shit.”

“Well, what *do* you know about it?” Dylan asked.

“Only what dad told me. Which wasn’t much. Grandpa Denton was a son of a bitch.” Uncle Trent stopped. “*My* Grandpa Denton, I mean. Not my dad. Your great-granddaddy.”

Uncle Trent stood and crossed the room to the chifferobe. He opened the drawer underneath the smaller mirror on the left and pulled out a big red album, flicking through the first few pages. “I never met him. Dad left when Grandma Denton died. He was seventeen, so I guess ’51? Never went back. Uncle Will had already enlisted.”

Uncle Trent passed Dylan the open book. Amanda and Casey leaned forward to see it, too. It was a black and white photo from maybe the 1920s. A thin man with little glasses on a chain had his arm looped around a smiling woman.

“What you got there?” Uncle Will said from the door.

Dylan snapped the book closed.

Uncle Trent placed a hand on Dylan’s shoulder and took the album from him. “Just an old picture book.”

“All right,” Casey said, scrambling to her feet. She walked over to Uncle Will. “You ready to get out of here?”

Uncle Will gave her a small smile. “Getting out, going home.”

*

I lugged the carton of rations out of the C-47 and passed it to the guy waiting at the side hatch. That was the last of the supplies, I told him. He nodded, and seconds later, we started filling the carrier with injured soldiers.

Inside the plane, and shielded from nonstop wind, I got my sense of smell back. Just in time for the thirty-minute process of loading up litters full of wounded men. Dried blood, fresh blood, dirty armpits, sweat, gunpowder, napalm... They bombarded my nose, one after the other, 'til I thought I'd gag.

It was hard to tell who had the worst job: the guys constantly clearing and sanding the landing strip, the ones who did nothing but chip away the ice built up on airplanes and restart engines every couple hours so the fluids wouldn't freeze over, or the dozens of workers like me who spent half-hour blocks unloading supplies only to turn right around and refill the planes with injured soldiers—as carefully as possible so the wounds wouldn't get any worse before the men could get treatment. I dunno, maybe the “control tower” radio operator had the roughest time, standing beside his jeep and stomping back and forth to keep warm. Then again, all the pilots risked getting shot right out of the sky because of their slow-moving aircrafts, or maybe ejecting into water and freezing to death if they weren't rescued in twenty minutes.

All of this trekking across the countryside, gorges and rice paddies and hip-high snow, and each time we got to a haven, it wasn't a haven anymore. Yudam-ni had been that way. Yudam-right. And now Hagaru-ri, too. Our land of milk and honey, complete with pancakes and toast, and what little relief we'd felt had shattered almost immediately. General Smith's new plan was that we were completely and utterly surrounded, so we couldn't even call it retreating anymore. We were going to bust our way through the CCF

troops and run all the way to the coast. Thank Christ the Chinese didn't have planes. But the maneuver was put on hold while we evacuated four thousand or so wounded men by air. Five straight days of carriers now, and we were just looking like we'd be done soon. But at least the worst off were getting out of here ASAP. One quick trip to the port and straight onto a hospital ship. As long as the plane didn't get shot down.

I stretched my back, then flicked my silky scarf out of my way as I bent low again. Someone had gotten creative with the piles of parachutes we had lying around and had made nearly everybody a colored shawl. Use it if you've got it.

I lifted the litter into the C-47, loading up what had to have been my couple-hundredth injured man. Setting him in place, I paused to dig into my pockets for another Tootsie Roll. The second this plane took off, I was hitting the PX for a cigar, if we had any left.

*

Uncle Will waited in the hall while Casey pushed open the door to his room at the senior home and led him inside.

"Here we are."

She switched on the light as she entered. Uncle Will followed her, tightly carrying his carousel tin. He shrugged out of his coat and hung it on the hook beside the door.

"Okay," Casey said, "well, I'll let you get some rest."

"No, stay a while." Uncle Will shuffled across the room, using the table edge to steady himself as he slowly sat on the bed. He set his tin beside him on the quilt and pulled his feet from his boots. "I didn't get to visit with you much today."

Casey clapped her hands together a few times. “Not much to tell. I’m working at the library. Going to college next year. Well, maybe.”

“Sounds like plenty to start with.” Uncle Will bobbed his head toward the sofa as he propped his boots against the wall.

Casey took the seat nearest the bed. “Well, I’m stalling for now. I graduate in May, so I’ve got half a year to give Mom a direct answer.”

“About what, now?”

Uncle Will pulled his foot across his knee and massaged it. He found himself staring at the empty corner of sock that flapped, at the gap caused by his missing toe.

“What I’m doing,” Casey said. “Where I’m going. If I’m getting a four-year degree or going to baking school like her. And Aunt Ginny. And Amanda.”

“Oh.” Uncle Will lowered his leg. “What do you want to do?”

“Like that matters.” Casey crossed her arms. “Mom’s pressuring me to go to baking school so I can take over her shop eventually.”

“Well, what would you do if she wasn’t?”

“It doesn’t matter, because she is.”

“Well, pretend she wasn’t.” Uncle Will sat forward. “It’s your life. What do you want to do with it?”

“It doesn’t matter, because Mom always get what she wants.”

“Horse shit.”

Casey sat up straight. “Uncle Will—”

“No, you need to understand what I’m telling you.” He was on his feet now, right in front of her, though he didn’t remember standing up. His hands were clenching the

carousel tin. “You have the choice. That’s all that matters. You don’t have to worry about getting drafted and killed, or watching it happen to your cousins or your boyfriend. You don’t have to worry about diving into a foot-deep trench and catching a bullet in the calf, or the chest, or the throat. Losing your nose to frostbite like those poor bastards in the POW camp. Freezing to death like all those marines. You can go to college, learn what you want, do whatever you want with your life.”

Casey gazed up at him in shock. Uncle Will let out a breath. Well, it made sense that she’d never thought about any of this. She’d never heard about it. For fifty years, he hadn’t said anything about his life, the war, his parents. Content to let the past stay buried. But that was just the problem. This time of year, the past wouldn’t stay buried.

He eased himself onto the sofa cushion beside her, slipped his glasses on top of his head to rub his eyelids, and then blinked back at her. “They drafted over a million men. Your grandpa didn’t have to go because he was studying to be a preacher. I joined before they could make me. Snatched that victory from them, at least. But you know what my mom said to me when I got back? She looked up at me through her delirium and asked what I’d been doing, how’d I get so skinny. My dad didn’t even tell her.”

Uncle Will tossed the tin can onto the table next to him. The Tootsie Rolls rattled loudly against the metal container. Casey jumped and clenched her hands in her lap.

“I got into a fight with my dad, stormed out of the house, and went straight to enlist. Mom didn’t know I joined the army. That we deployed to Korea. My dad told her I’d run off. That I was too scared to face my duty like a man. Got rid of all my letters before she saw them. That son of a bitch stole them from her. He told your grandpa I’d run away, too, that I’d hopped a train out to Tennessee. I think he hoped I’d die in

Korea.” Uncle Will stopped for a moment, then slammed a fist on his knee. “And I was the dumbass who didn’t stop in and say bye to Lucy before I went. Well, I didn’t expect the Army to send us straight to basic once we joined, and I didn’t expect my dad to tell the whole town I was a runaway chickenshit. Lucy was married when I got back.”

Slipping his glasses back into place, Uncle Will met Casey’s gaze and his voice softened. “Your mom and dad love you. They want you to do well. You could tell ’em you wanted to be a librarian forever, and they wouldn’t mind. Go to baking school like your mom, study to be a psychiatrist, join your cousin Dylan in the grease pit if it makes you happy—just figure out what you want to do and get out there and do it.”

He leaned back in his seat. Uncle Will shut his eyes again, his mind a blur of thoughts. Places he’d been, people he’d known in 1950 that were long dead now, everything that had happened since. It was too much to straighten out all at once. He rested his head against the sofa. A moment later, he yawned. He felt Casey pat his arm.

“You need to get some sleep.”

Uncle Will looked at her and shook his head, fighting back another yawn, but it escaped anyway. He squeezed his eyes shut and covered his mouth.

Casey took his free hand. “I’ll be fine. Really. Now, come on.” Casey helped him stand and walked him over to his bed.

“Go and talk with your cousins,” Uncle Will said as he unbuttoned his collar. “Families hardly get to see everybody all at once anymore.”

Casey searched her jacket pockets for her keys. She turned to leave, but paused in the doorway. “Night, Uncle Will.”

He nodded and held up a hand in goodbye, his face scrunching as another yawn came. Casey shut the door after herself.

Uncle Will sat blinking back sleep from his eyes. After a moment, he stood and strode over to his window overlooking the parking lot. In the front row, he saw Casey climbing into her Beetle. Uncle Will watched her turn onto the Interstate toward downtown San Marcos, heading back to Trent and Helen's. He looked out the window at the rows of yellow streetlamps glittering against the night sky, dipping and curving with the road like a golden river above the highway. Uncle Will pressed a finger against the pane, tracing the trail of lights. Life could be whatever you wanted it to be. And right now, he felt thankful for it, and thankful for every member of his family he had left.