

4-20-2017

Muscle & Bone

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Muscle & Bone

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MFA, Creative Writing, University of Missouri – St. Louis, 2017

BS, Personal Financial Planning, University of Missouri, 2012

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate School at the University of Missouri – St. Louis

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

May 2017

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Abstract

“Touch” is a short story set in the U.S., present day. Two young girls simultaneously explore the nature of their relationship while performing sexual acts for an online audience. The story investigates how female identity is defined through sexuality and how that affects interpersonal relationships.

“Muscle & Bone” is the beginning of a novel set in a fictional, rural town called Carrington in Southern Missouri. The story takes place on two timelines: one set in 1950, and the other in 1895. A teenage girl named Caroline is sexually assaulted, and as a result impregnated, and forced to marry her assaulter. After three years of quiet submission, Caroline sees a vision that inspires her to plot an escape. Unknown to her, this vision hints at a foundational evil put in place at Carrington’s origin. It is my intention that, as the story progresses, Caroline will eventually appropriate this evil to her own means.

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Touch

Fallon placed the laptop on her desk and closed the blinds behind it.

“What about the other windows?” Maggie asked.

Fallon considered the angle of the light. “I like them open. It adds a nice mood.”

“What sort of mood?”

“Looks less amateur I think.”

Maggie wondered whether she should remove her shoes now or wait until the show began. She had never sat on Fallon’s bed before; she’d never even been inside her room. She was surprised to see the walls were a common shade of off-white, bare and lifeless. “Should I take off my shoes now?”

Fallon leaned over the computer as Maggie sat uncomfortably behind her.

“Yes you weirdo. You’re on my bed.”

Maggie removed her shoes and tossed her backpack on the floor. “I have to do homework later.”

Fallon remained focused on the laptop. “This won’t take long. Maybe an hour or so.”

“When’s the last time you did this?”

“I’m looking at my profile right now and it says Thursday.”

“That’s not so long ago.”

Fallon turned around and walked to her closet. “I need a different shirt.”

“Your shirt is fine.”

She disappeared inside, but Maggie heard her sliding hangers across the rack.
“Yes but it’s covered in high school. Do *you* want another shirt?”

Maggie sat up in the bed and studied her reflection in a small mirror hanging on the opposite wall. “Do you think I need one?”

“Aren’t you wearing a sweater?”

“Is that bad?”

“You don’t have to be a slut. Just put on a t-shirt.”

“But we’re not the same size.” Fallon was only a few inches taller than Maggie, but her slim frame created an illusion of height. She returned wearing a light hoodie over a small tank top, having already changed in the closet.

She tossed Maggie a plain green t-shirt. “The pocket makes it look cute.”

Cute. Maggie’s mother called her cute. Her father probably would too if she’d grow her hair just a tad longer, or maybe if she wore a dress now and again. But then her defiant cankles would be exposed; her pail, fat, and creamy legs would no longer be left to others’ collective imaginations. Her wide shoulders would demand the attention her face and boobs so desperately craved, and her short, unnaturally red curls—her first act of defiance against the standards imposed by her parents—would become a mere accessory; they would fade into the stereotypical ensemble of a young hipster who sells cupcakes in a cupcake shop downtown, because that’s just what she’d be: a cupcake. Everyone loves cupcakes. They’re quirky and fun, but no one wants to fuck them.

“Should I change in the closet?” asked Maggie.

Fallon scoffed. “It’s only a shirt. Are you embarrassed of your tum?” Maggie sat at the edge of the bed with her back to Fallon. She removed the sweater and, feeling inexplicably embarrassed by her solid green bra, covered herself with the t-shirt. It was too small. Reflexively, she tried stretching it to make room for her stomach, but Fallon stopped her. “You look great.”

Fallon pulled the desk closer to the bed and positioned the computer directly in front of them. “Shouldn’t we get something to drink before we start?” asked Maggie.

“Like what? A juice box?”

“Or even wine. Does your mom have any around?”

“My parents don’t drink, and if they did, I’d drink it all myself.”

Maggie had only met her parents once. After Fallon was absent from school, Maggie delivered her homework, but Fallon’s mother didn’t allow her past the front door. From what she could see, Fallon’s mother was cooking dinner—something with potatoes—and her father played with his phone at the table. Her mother had straight, blonde hair—like Fallon’s but shorter—and wore a navy pantsuit. Her father was balding and wore wire-framed glasses with a polo and slacks. Typical parent stuff. She assumed Fallon was in her room. Just weeks before, over a series of late night text rants, Fallon had described a very different version of her home life. Maggie had imagined them barely clothed and screaming at one another across the kitchen, each holding a half bottle of whiskey, with only one having the courage to throw it.

Maggie had casually mentioned being hungry in hopes she'd be invited inside, but Fallon's mother wouldn't take the bait. "Better hurry home then," she had said, before abruptly shutting the door.

"Where are your parents?" Maggie asked.

"Dad's out of town or something and Mom works until 7."

"Does your mom have Xanax?"

Fallon patted Maggie's head. "This is going to be fun. We don't have to do anything we don't want to do. Right?"

She had told Maggie the same thing earlier that day at school, but she still wasn't sure what it was Fallon wanted to do. She had heard the term "camgirl" before, but she had always assumed they were sexually abused, lonely, forgotten, broken girls with bad parents, and one kid already in the can. They were also lean and beautiful. She had voiced this concern and many more over lunch, but Fallon always knew what to say. "Who wants to be beautiful? You're sexy."

"You say everything is 'sexy.'"

"Yeah but you really are. I'd bite a baby for those boobies." She stood up, bent across the table, and poked Maggie's chest. "Boobs!"

Maggie almost laughed again remembering it. Over the past several weeks, lunch with Fallon had become routine. At first, Maggie was unsure why, of everyone, she'd been selected as Fallon's exclusive lunch partner. But Fallon didn't really want a partner; she just wanted someone to listen—to observe. Mostly she talked about problems she was having with her parents, or with a new boy Maggie had never met,

or with classes, or with her friends. She didn't seek pity. She just needed someone to validate her feelings, and Maggie was happy to indulge her.

“Remember,” Fallon said. “For obvs reasons, no names.”

Maggie had not considered that; she was grateful for the reminder. Fallon turned on the camera and sat beside her on the bed. The screen looked so innocuous. Their faces, the image that 48 mysterious patrons were currently viewing from inside their own homes—possibly even their own bedrooms—occupied most of it. The number was growing, and those commenting in the chat sidebar wanted to know more about Fallon's friend.

“Hey guys!” Fallon's voice was slightly higher than normal. It was the voice she affected when flirting with the boys in Weightlifting. The other girls usually worked out with hand weights or ran on the treadmill, but Fallon avoided the other girls. She'd lie down on a bench press, cartoonishly struggling to support the unweighted bar above her body until one of the boys would come over to help. Chad definitely liked her the most, but Fallon said she'd never sleep with Chad, because she heard he had terrible back hair. In fact, she said, she'd probably never sleep with any of them. The week before, she attempted the lift with 5 lbs. added to each side, which made the struggle even more dramatic. She thought it was funny and enjoyed the attention. The boys surely knew they were being manipulated, Maggie thought, but they either didn't care or her big, green eyes and bubbly affect hypnotized them into believing the fantasy.

“So as you can see, today I am joined by a very special friend. Do you guys like her?”

The current number of viewers had jumped to 67, which as her profile stats noted, was a record high for user JazzKat99. Maggie wondered how she came up with the name; Fallon didn't even like jazz. Maggie read over the comments and was surprised by their overwhelming positivity. The first answer in response to her question came from the user RichyRich889 who described her as "beautiful" and the other commenters parroted his assessment.

"I'm so glad to hear that." Fallon looked at Maggie and smiled. "I really like her too." Fallon pulled the computer toward her and put her "Camming" playlist on shuffle. "I forgot the music! It's so much easier to have fun with music."

The commenters asked why Maggie hadn't spoken yet. "Yeah. I like music a lot," she said, feeling even more awkward than before.

Fallon pushed the computer back on the desk. "So since I'm not alone today, we're going to have some extra fun. What do you guys want to do?" Maggie watched Fallon reading over the comments. "Take off my hoodie? I don't know. It's kinda chilly in here."

The computer emitted the loud sound of a ringing bell. Fallon giggled, and Maggie looked at the screen. Sisco1984 donated \$5 just so Fallon would remove her hoodie. "Guess I'll have to deal. Thank you Sisco." She quickly threw her hoodie to the ground and typed a message to the commenters, but Maggie couldn't see it.

"Guys, I have to be off here by 6:30. If we keep going this slow, we'll never get anywhere."

Maggie leaned over and whispered to Fallon. "What am I supposed to be doing?"

Fallon stood up and coaxed her to do the same. “Show off your bod. These gentlemen need to know what they’re paying for.” Unsure of her persona, Maggie rose from the bed timidly. Fallon’s eyes expressed clear disappointment; she had already gone down the water slide, and now she needed Maggie to follow. Maggie turned to the screen and positioned her body into a classic Old Hollywood pose. She jutted her hips to one side, thrust out her chest, scowled at the camera, and pretended to dangle a cigarette from her lips. She knew she looked ridiculous. Like the rest of the show, it was meant as a joke.

Fallon slapped Maggie’s ass, disrupting the pose, and undoing whatever confidence she had managed to conjure. The computer jingled again...and again. The total was up to \$35. Fallon knelt in front of the screen and read the comments. “They wanna see skin!” Fallon jumped backwards onto the bed and wriggled out of her tight jeans. Blood rushed to Maggie’s face. Fear or excitement, she wasn’t sure, but it felt real now. She was here in Fallon’s bedroom watching her undress, and soon, she would be doing the same. Fallon threw her jeans to the ground on top of the hoodie and sat on her knees. She wore Hanes underwear. They were low cut and revealing in the back, but they were still just Hanes. They were striped salmon and matched Fallon’s sheets. Her sheets were the generic sort one could buy at a department store for less than \$30, yet somehow she managed to coordinate them to match her underwear. Maggie stood up to unbutton her jeans, and then fell back onto the bed to slowly push them down her legs. She was wearing fun undies that day—camouflage. The dark green matched her shirt and bra but clashed harshly with Fallon’s salmon sheets.

Jingle. Jingle.

“Our lovely viewers are now requesting we get down to some hardcore action.”

Fallon stood on top of the bed. “I guess that means it’s time for random dancing?”

Laughing at her own joke, she jumped down and turned up the volume on her laptop, before hopping back on top of the bed, and pulling Maggie up with her. Rihanna was playing. “Ok. Let’s go.” Fallon aggressively twisted her body back and forth, thrusting her fist in the air with the beat of the music. At first, Maggie tried to replicate her movements but it felt forced. She stopped to watch Fallon. Her eyes were closed. Her fists were clinched. Her body lacked any coordination, but her punches remained perfectly in time. She looked good. She looked happy. Rather than embarrass herself, Maggie twisted in rhythm, staying within her lines.

The song ended and Fallon jumped to the floor in dramatic fashion, landing hard, with her arms extended out, and her head tilted back, allowing her hair to fall behind her. “We’re up to 98 viewers!”

Maggie dropped onto the bed and bounced upright to join Fallon at the computer. “That’s a lot of strangers.”

“These guys are cool. Not a single dick pic so far.”

“Is that a lot, though?”

“Some get a lot more, but this Jazz Kat gotta keep things on the DL cause we’re just *barely* legal,” Fallon said, winking at the camera.

“You are so gross.”

“But we just broke a hundred, so you’re welcome.”

Maggie scanned the screen. “Only \$75?”

“Uhhh my previous high was \$50, so maybe keep the rich bitch comments to yourself.” Fallon typed a message to the chat. “What’s next?”

Maggie watched the comments scroll past her face.

“RomeAngel334 says he’ll give us \$50 to take off our shirts.” She straightened her body. “Okay Romey. Let’s see it.” The computer jingled immediately. “Big spender!” Fallon pulled her tank up over her head, whipped it around, and threw it to the other side of the room. Predictably, she wore a solid salmon colored bra that clasped in the front. In the past, Maggie had thought Salmon an unpleasant color, but now she was in love with it.

Fallon smiled at Maggie. “He said both of us, darling.”

As Maggie dropped her shirt by the desk, she expected to feel more shame. She’d never been proud of her body, but displaying it here, in front of Fallon—in front of these strange men—she felt oddly liberated. As far as she knew, everyone in the world sat on the other side of that camera, and she didn’t care.

Fallon slapped her ass again, this time causing Maggie to shriek. Fallon laughed. “This is fun, right?”

“I don’t understand why anyone is watching this.”

“That’s a nice bra by the way.”

Maggie looked down. “It might be my mom’s.”

Fallon read over the comments. “Oh my god. RomeAngel is now saying he’ll give us another \$50 just to kiss.”

“Kiss or make out?”

Fallon cocked her head. “Here at JazzKat we offer a bang for your buck.”

“Does anyone else have a request?”

“Who cares. They’re cheap. Okay Romey. Ring my bell and we’ll see if we can make this happen.”

As requested, the bell rang.

Maggie’s first kiss was with a boy named Devon. He was 16. She was 13. It happened in the bathroom at halftime of a high school basketball game. His lip was pierced, and she enjoyed rubbing the stud with her tongue. Next up had been Devon’s friend Christopher (not Chris). He was sweet and cute in the way plain looking young boys with shiny hair and straight teeth are sweet and cute, but his love of dry humping gave her a terrible rash, and he was saving everything else for marriage. Not until Maggie was 15 did anyone want more. Georgia was a senior, but she spent a lot of time with underclassmen. After the homecoming dance, she had invited Maggie and her friends back to her house to hang out. Four people showed up, but only Maggie stayed after midnight. Her phone vibrated incessantly with her mother’s worried, scolding texts, so Maggie shut it off. She followed Georgia to her room, where she was asked to lie down on the bed. Maggie tried to find a level spot, but the sheets and comforter were twisted together into an uneven mash of discomfort. One particular lump pushed up against the small of her back and left behind a sore knot Maggie would feel for the next week. Georgia removed her shirt and asked Maggie to do the same. Maggie agreed but revealed no more. Georgia threw her body on top of Maggie’s and kissed her lips just twice, before working her way around her neck and down the rest of her body, never lingering on any particular spot. She started to remove Maggie’s leggings but, for some reason, never did. She worked furiously,

rubbing at her crotch with both hands, but through the leggings, it felt just slightly more intimate than Christopher's dry humps. Georgia must have sensed her ineffectiveness, because she quickly shifted the focus onto herself. She didn't explicitly say, "Now you do me," but her inert, nude figure left little room for doubt. Maggie followed the established pattern, but Georgia had no patience for it. After the initial kiss on the lips, Georgia had forcefully guided Maggie's head below her waist. She had no experience in this area, of course, but she licked, kissed, and probed as hard as she could. When it seemed to work, she could feel Georgia's grip tighten around her head. When it didn't work, Georgia would refocus Maggie's attention on an area she felt needed more. Neither experienced what Maggie recognized as an orgasm, but eventually, either out of exhaustion or boredom, they stopped. On the drive home, they spoke as friends. She was excited for graduation—told Maggie she'd be hosting a party in May to celebrate and she should come. But Georgia never invited her over again.

Fallon approached Maggie and touched her shoulder. "Are you ready?"

Maggie nodded. Fallon leaned in for the kiss, attacking Maggie's mouth. Maggie tried to offer a response, but Fallon's tongue so aggressively filled her mouth she was forced to retreat. Fallon grabbed the back of Maggie's head and pressed it firmly against her face. Maggie tried to correct her by placing her hand on Fallon's hip and lightly brushing it up her side, but Fallon ignored this gentle touch. Maggie didn't hate it, but she had hoped for more. She was too conscious of her hands, her face, her body. She could see it standing there on the computer screen, stiff and

unsure. She wanted to lose herself in this moment, to feel and not see, but Fallon's groping hands grounded her in reality.

Finally, Fallon stopped to breathe.

Jingle. Jingle.

At least *they're* pleased, she thought.

"Did you enjoy that as much as we did?" The comments kept coming, some barely literate but all of them overwhelmingly positive. Fallon clapped her hands in excitement. "We're over \$100!"

"What happens now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is that it?"

"Of course not." She turned to the camera. "What do you guys want to see next?"

Maggie read the comments. "Romey says he'll give us \$25 to take off all our clothes."

Fallon batted her eyes in mocking shyness. "Oh Romey! Wanna be my internet boyfriend?" The bell rang again. "Alright settle down boy."

Fallon's undergarments quickly disappeared atop her bed. Feeling the rush and pressure of the moment, Maggie clumsily fumbled with the clasp of her bra until it was undone. For a moment, she held it there, reluctant to let go, but also afraid of being left behind. Whereas removing her shirt and pants had been a freeing experience, removing everything left her feeling average. She looked at Fallon, hoping to see a spark of inspiration, but her eyes were focused on the computer. Had

she ever imagined Maggie's naked body the way Maggie had imagined hers? Was she even curious? Unclothed, Fallon lost her mystique. Maggie noted the soft collection of fat just above Fallon's waist, her shapeless hips, and the stubble around her bikini line. She was suddenly so human, so obtainable. Maggie wanted her more.

"Everyone loves us," said Fallon.

"Why are we doing this?"

Fallon finally looked at Maggie. "We're having fun and making money."

"I didn't even want money. You know?"

"Romey says he'll give us \$100 if we 'go all the way.'" She chuckled at her use of air quotes.

"Do you want this?"

Fallon pulled her foot above her waist and stretched her quad. "It's not a big deal. We're having fun and putting on a show. What's wrong with you?"

"I don't know what you want."

Fallon's eyes locked onto Maggie's, her face expressionless, her eyes soft and tired, her mouth flat; she shrugged. Then, she turned to the camera, brushed the hair from her eyes, and said, "I want to fuck." The bell jingled a final time, and Maggie grudgingly crawled into Fallon's bed. Fallon instructed her to lie down, where she felt a familiar discomfort in the small of her back.

Maggie had first met Fallon, or at least become aware of her, a few months before, in History—her first period the previous semester. Fallon was asked to introduce herself to the class but only provided the most cursory personal details. "Hobbies? I like movies." She passed through Maggie's day without occupying

another moment of her thoughts. The next day was the same. Fallon never spoke, keeping her head down, her eyes affixed to a book resting in her lap. The cover art suggested fantasy, but Maggie couldn't make out the title. She only looked up when her name was called, but even then she'd offer the minimum response and return to her world of fiction. Of course she wasn't listening, but others would have pretended—would have hidden their indifference. Not Fallon. Her indifference defined her. She had no friends, she wasn't involved in any clubs or groups, no one invited her to parties, and she was barely passing her classes. And then something changed.

“Does that feel good?”

Maggie gently brushed Fallon's hair away from her stomach, where her chin rested, and locked onto her eyes: so eager. Fallon lightly rubbed the top of her clitoris, though Maggie could barely feel it.

For Misty Glazer's birthday, her mother rented out an entire karaoke bar. Everyone was invited. Over 200 people attended—most of them students—but a sizable group of parents had also gathered around the bar, so for Maggie, it was an epic stage. Maggie had stressed for weeks over the song she would perform. She wanted something fun, but slightly obscure, and within her limited vocal range. She decided on the Britney Spears ballad “Everytime.” As the birthday girl, Misty Glazer performed first, and of course, her song of choice was “Everytime.” Her rendition was flat and boring and lacked the complex blend of sincerity and irony Maggie felt it

deserved. She stuck around in hopes of witnessing a trainwreck or two, but her prior excitement had vanished.

An hour after the show began, Fallon stepped onto the stage. Without introduction, the synthesizers crept through the speakers and slowly filled the room. Before Maggie could identify the song, Fallon started singing. She sounded good, but she was impossible to understand. She seemed to be singing in German, but she wasn't sure. "*Hast Du etwas Zeit für mich,*" or something like that. Fallon marched from one side of the stage to the other, shouting the words perfectly in key, pumping her fist, jumping, owning the stage, owning the room, owning everyone. She had transformed. Maggie watched hypnotized, infatuated, in love.

Fallon placed her head between Maggie's legs. "Do you want me to go harder?"

The image briefly disappeared. "Yeah." Stop talking.

After the song, she stepped down off the stage where she was greeted by a mob of fresh admirers. Maggie was first among them. "I had no idea you spoke German."

Fallon smiled and rolled her eyes. "I don't. I faked it."

Others gathered around Fallon probing for answers. She casually drifted from one person to the next, allowing each of them to believe that they alone had seen her. But Maggie *had* seen her, and she needed more. As other performers took the stage, Fallon and a senior boy from History distanced themselves from the larger group and

found a booth in the back corner between the bar and the bathrooms. Maggie sat with her lunch friends at a table across the room, but while the rest mocked the embarrassing stage antics of a sophomore girl they all hated, Maggie watched Fallon. She and the senior boy sat beside each other—Fallon on the outside with her back turned. They talked incessantly, laughing, gesticulating. Half an hour passed. They became quieter. His hand touched her shoulder. They kissed, but only briefly. She drew closer. Maggie watched her hands slide gradually beneath the table. Her eyes were fixed on his. She grabbed him, moving her hands slowly at first, then faster. They were among the others, in the same room, but it was dark, and her back shielded them from view. However, Maggie could still see her hands under the table. She wanted to be closer, to see Fallon’s eyes, to know her.

Now, Fallon’s head rested between Maggie’s legs—her mouth searching for something—anything. The physical sensations failed to lift Maggie out of the present. She tried imagining Fallon on the stage again, or her hands under the booth, remembering how she felt: overwhelmed and nauseated in the best way. She closed her eyes and gently stroked Fallon’s hair. If she tried harder, she could maybe get there. She could restore the feelings. She could see Fallon all over again. She could finally feel her. Then it stopped. Maggie was cold and wished for her sweater. Fallon raised her head, her face still blank, and her eyes more tired than before. “Did you finish?”

Maggie smiled softly and sat up in the bed.

Fallon turned to the computer. “Well Romey, I hope you and everyone else...”

Maggie grabbed her sweater off the floor and pulled it over her head. Then, she discreetly slid across the sheets and into her underwear. Fallon was still naked, still filling the silence with words only her viewers would hear. Jeans. Socks. Her bra could wait in her backpack until she returned home. And finally, shoes. Composed, Maggie walked to the door. Fallon had finished the show. The laptop was closed, and her smile was gone. She sat on the bed and covered herself with the sheet. “You’re leaving?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m pretty hungry.”

“Mom will probably cook something when she gets home.”

Fallon’s eyes were so open. So needy. Maggie couldn’t look at them anymore. Instead, she again scanned the room. The bare walls made it feel empty. “I have homework.”

Fallon stood up and approached Maggie at the door. She lifted her hand to touch her shoulder, but stopped short, letting it dangle in the air until her hand closed and once again fell to her side. “Please sit down for a bit.”

Maggie shook her head and opened the door. “I’ll see you tomorrow at lunch.” She preferred the other Fallon: incomplete yet...exciting. “This was fun, though. We should do it again sometime.”

Muscle & Bone

Prologue

Carrington, 1895

As he'd done many times before, Raymond held his wife's head in his hands. This time, he pressed against her dry, weathered cheeks with added force. If he squeezed more, the soil permanently caked under his nails would penetrate her skin and embed itself in the muscle covering the bones in her cheeks, but where would the poison go?

"I hate when you get like this," Charlene said.

Raymond loved his family.

"Daniel, go lay down," she said.

Their son Daniel sat in an unfinished chair near the wood stove. Unmoving. Limp.

"Daniel."

Daniel ignored her. Raymond felt the poison flooding his face.

Charlene cautiously tried to pull away. "Don't let your son see you like this." One day, her powers of persuasion would fall impotent against the glaze over Raymond's eyes. Mood swings he called them—crediting them to anything from the increased humidity to the price of pork, depending on the season. I'd never hurt you, he'd always say, but they both knew he would. "Have you fed the hogs yet?"

Ah yes. It was already dark, and Raymond had forgotten to feed the hogs.

An iron hinge broke from the door as it slammed against the side of the house. Kerosene lamps hung near the windows and illuminated the yard as Raymond

exploded onto the porch. His mutterings had evolved into curses; the sounds distilled into a droning moan. A thick bile bubbled in his throat, making Raymond unable to speak. It pressed against the roof of his mouth and coated his tongue, but Raymond forced it down. The sludge mingled with his blood and curdled in his face. The sludge had been there for years—since Raymond was a teenage boy. “I’m fine,” he would always insist. He just needed to let it out sometimes.

The hogs squealed and leaned against the fence. The brittle wood grinded against itself creating a friction that vibrated through Raymond’s skull. “Gotta feed the hogs,” he managed to say.

He moved across the yard and into the barn. Two tin buckets rested against a wooden barrel of slop composed of dried corn, apples, and table scraps. A butcher knife with an oak handle stuck out of a post near the empty holding pen. Raymond stuck the knife under his belt and filled the buckets with slop as he walked just outside the barn to the main pen. The hogs gathered near the edge of the fence and waited as Raymond dumped the buckets out into their wooden trough. Two buckets were hardly enough for twenty hogs, but Raymond was tired.

While they fought over the scraps at the trough, his largest sow Sampson lingered behind. Raymond pulled the knife from his belt and stood atop the bottom rail. “Aren’t you hungry? Need to eat if you want to stay strong.” Hearing his voice, Sampson approached. The sludge pushed against his eyes, begging to be released. “Get back now. You won’t like this.” He held his hand out over the fence and quickly ran the knife over his palm. The pressure behind his eyes moved immediately down his body and pushed the sludge through the open wound. The thick, blackness

puddled near Sampson's feet, and Raymond watched as the pig lapped the poison out of the dirt.

Chapter I

Carrington, 1950

Caroline kicked Syl's stiff, dusty jeans away from the bed and sat at the edge. Syl had only worn the jeans for a short trip to town before taking them off again and returning to bed. Though he'd been out of work for two weeks, he insisted on maintaining certain routines. In the year he worked for the dam construction company, he came home for lunch everyday. Sometimes, he had lunch.

"Aren't you going to get naked?" he asked.

Caroline slid her panties down over her knees and unbuttoned her denim dress. All that remained was the thin, silky blouse. "You stink," she said.

Wearing only his beige socks and silver wrist watch, Syl fell into the bed on top of Caroline. "You don't like my stink anymore?"

His stink had been tolerable when masked by the smell of fresh concrete and gasoline. Now, it was the unfiltered odor of laziness. But even worse than Syl's smell was his placid gaze. His thighs and hands still eagerly consumed her body, but his eyes rested coolly on the tip of Caroline's nose—probably a trick he picked up in his brief time as a door-to-door man. It gave the illusion of eye contact without the intimacy.

Syl pulled away and stared into her eyes. "You look like a regular house wife all dolled up and ready to please her man."

"I swear to God, don't you dare say I look like your grandma again."

He smiled. His teeth were the straightest she'd ever seen in Carrington, and ill suited for his wide, unshaven face. "Let's go to the dresser," He said.

Syl rolled over her body across the bed and jumped up. Caroline followed and leaned over the top of the dresser. Over time, sex in this position had chipped the white paint, and the exposed wood beneath burrowed into the thin skin over her elbows. Syl pressed her face against the wide mirror on the wall and wrapped one arm around her torso.

“I’ll bite you if you don’t get off me,” she screamed.

Syl laughed but kept her face pinned against the mirror. He had complete command of her body. After exactly four more thrusts, Syl collapsed over Caroline’s back onto the painted oak. Her elbows and knees caved under his weight, and her nose smashed hard against the mirror’s cool surface.

Syl’s chuckle shook Caroline’s body. The patches of hair on his stomach rubbed against her skin creating an intense need to scratch. Finally acknowledging her discomfort, he backed away and sat on the bed. “Sorry,” he said. Caroline pulled the blouse down over her waist and smoothed her short, red hair in the mirror. Behind her, Syl dressed himself. His penis had retreated within his body’s girth. His thinning hair was so disheveled that, at a glance, one could mistakenly see curls. Naked and unaroused, Syl resembled a drawing of a cherub in her father’s old bible.

“What time is it?” he asked.

She said nothing, waiting for him to remember he was wearing his watch.

“I need a new battery for this thing.” Still sitting, he picked his bleached underwear up from the floor. “Sorry I took so long today. My head got cloudy or something.”

Caroline found her panties on the other side of the bed and discreetly slid them up her legs.

“Are you losing weight?” he asked.

She adjusted the top of her blouse. “I don’t know. Are you?”

“Not likely. I need a smoke.”

Caroline walked past him out of the bedroom and to the front door. “Rosa,” she called. “You can come back inside now.”

Syl followed closely behind in his boxers and undershirt, already lighting a cigarette in his mouth. “What’s for lunch?” he asked.

Caroline picked up Rosa and sat her on a stool by the table. “Rosa is having milk and toast.”

Syl brought the half filled pack of cigarettes to the table and sat next to his daughter. “Do we have any cheese left?”

“No.” Caroline held the carton of milk under her nose before pouring the remainder of its contents into a small glass. The smell of toasted bread briefly filled the small kitchenette before cigarette smoke overwhelmed it. They only had a half loaf to last them through breakfast the next day. “What were you doing in town this morning?”

Syl knocked the ashes off his cigarette and lit another. “Can I get some coffee at least? Or are we out of that too?”

Caroline dumped a few heaping spoonfuls of coffee into the percolator and placed it over the smallest burner on the stove. After a few clicks, the gas ignited and

the water began to rumble. She'd allow them each a cup. "What did your momma give us?"

"I'm tired of asking Momma for money."

Caroline chewed at the tip of her thumb. "Did you go talk to Alvin?"

Syl finished his cigarette and lit another. "I'll smoke my lunch I guess."

"You'll smoke your dinner too if you don't tell me something." Caroline smeared a small pat of butter over the toasted bread and gave it to Rosa. She'd already finished her milk.

"Alvin's not hiring 'til after winter."

The percolator hissed.

Pangs of dread crashed against her chest. She closed her eyes and struggled to maintain a regular pattern of breathing. Syl stood up and moved the percolator off the burner. "I'll pour the coffee."

These nervous attacks had become more common over the last year. Syl had known for months the dam was near completion, but work in Carrington was scarce. He had been a professional painter for three years during the war, but that experience didn't seem to matter now that the soldiers had returned.

Syl sipped coffee from a stained, cream-colored mug at the table and watched his daughter savor her toast. Caroline took Rosa's cup of milk and poured a splash into her coffee. "This is the last of our milk."

Syl nodded but said nothing.

"Alvin went to my daddy's church all my life, and now he's gonna sit there and watch our family starve?"

“He said he had some timber I could cut come the fall. He’d pay a reasonable wage: two dollars a cord.”

“Timber? Is a sack of potatoes meant to last us the winter?”

Syl sipped casually at his coffee. “It might be enough to get us by.” He laughed to himself. “You don’t eat too much.”

Caroline knelt beside her husband and draped her arms over his shoulder. “Honey, our rent’s paid up to the end of this month and that’s it. However much money you got in your pocket right now is all we have. Cuttin’ timber ain’t the answer. Your daughter is going to starve.”

Syl tipped his coffee cup back again, though it was already empty. “Harlan sold the lot.”

“What does that mean? Sold the lot to who?”

“We pay rent. They can’t just throw us out. I’m sure they’re good people.”

“I see people on the street all the time. They sleep in the woods behind Dr. Leak’s office. Somebody must’ve thrown *them* out.”

The weight of panic settled over her chest again. Harlan headed the company contracted to complete construction on the dam. The trailer park Syl and Caroline occupied was bought and renovated by the company to provide housing for the workers for the duration of the job. In the weeks leading up to its completion, Harlan talked often about the possibility of keeping the lot as an investment in the area. As Syl was the only member of the crew native to Carrington, he assured him that as long as the lot was in his name, Syl and Caroline would have a place to raise their family. Once the work was finished, though, Harlan was gone.

Caroline shrunk onto the ground and hugged her knees. She wanted her body to absorb itself and disappear. She was silent this time. He reacted less when she was silent.

Rosa started to cry.

“You shouldn’t let Rosa see you like this.”

She gritted her teeth together hoping that something might break.

Caroline inhaled and smoothed her hair back over her head. Standing up, she apologized for her outburst and held Rosa against her chest. “Syl, why don’t you run to the store and pick us up some steaks.”

Syl stared back at her blankly.

“Pork or beef?” she asked. “Pork is cheaper, but you know I haven’t tasted beef in months it seems. Daddy used to cook us steak every Saturday—even after Mom died. I miss those times.” This was partially true. Her father did cook steak every Saturday but only for himself. It was his way of honoring the Sabbath in preparation for the evening service.

Syl opened his wallet sitting on the table and counted the bills. “I have been craving beef myself.”

“And pick up some milk for Rosa?”

Syl stood up and looked for his jeans. “How are we paying for this?”

“Why you’re going to stop at your mother’s first. And you’re going to take Rosa with you so she can see how hungry our little baby has been.”

“I hate asking Momma for money.”

The repeated objections rankled her. She wouldn't bother asking how he alone intended to support them. She knew he hadn't once considered the long-term consequences of his unemployment—let alone formulated a plan. In his mind, things would always be taken care of. When he was hungry, he would be fed. When he needed sleep, he'd have a bed. When he needed money, there would be money. In fact, any problem could be alleviated if only he gave voice to his discomfort.

“Don't you want a steak for dinner tonight?”

Syl smiled sheepishly. “Since you mentioned it, I can't think of anything else.”

“I'd love to cook a big steak for you. But we can't afford steak without your mother's help. We just can't. And you know, it's only temporary. Because sooner or later, you're going to get the job you deserve. And we'll pay your mother back, if that's what you want.”

Syl buttoned his pants. “You're right. I'll find a job soon.”

Caroline handed Rosa to Syl and shuffled them outside, but Syl stopped at the doorway.

“Have *you* thought about getting a job?” he asked. “Temporarily I mean...just until I find something stable. Momma said she could watch Rosa while you're out.”

Now Caroline understood what had happened; he had stopped at his mother's earlier that day, but instead of giving Syl money, Margarete had poisoned him against her.

“I'm seventeen years old and I've not worked a day in my life. What am I supposed to do?”

“Work at a shop. Is Hendrickson’s hiring? I see girls your age in there all the time. They stock shelves or...something.”

“Trailer trash whores, more like.”

“Caroline, watch your mouth around Rosa. Jesus.”

Caroline opened the door and spit outside on the top step.

“I’ll talk to Mom, okay?” Syl said stepping over the glob. “But if she’s going to keep helping us, you might need to get a job.”

Caroline wiped the excess saliva off her mouth and closed the screen door on Syl’s face. “I don’t like my steak too fatty.”

Rosa squirmed in her father’s arms. “Okay,” he said.

“And don’t forget Rosa’s milk. And grab a bag of potatoes.”

Syl nodded and carried Rosa into cab of their Ford truck.

Alone for the first time in weeks, Caroline pulled a partial pack of cigarettes from beneath the sink and reclined over their bed. She struck a match across the side of the box and inhaled deeply. If Syl noticed the smell, she’d convince him his old work clothes had done the damage. He disapproved of her smoking, or drinking, or swearing—especially in front of Rosa. He even frowned at her wearing a sundress out to the store in the middle of summer.

After stubbing her cigarette out on one of Syl’s old boots, Caroline waltzed around the bedroom to a hymn that had been stuck in her head for days. *Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves/We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.* The sing-songy melody bored its way through her head until the already ambiguous

lyrics lost all meaning and crashed together into a single, monotonous sound. Hepsy Watkins played it on the piano every Sunday at her father's church, and later insisted it be performed at his funeral. Her shrill rendition was the definitive version still echoing through Caroline's memory.

Her father Pastor Rick—he insisted that even his family use the title—was wearing only his watch and socks when she found him dead the year before, hunched over a toilet with his hand draped in the bowl. She was bringing him groceries. He'd died of a heart attack they said, but that didn't explain the watch and socks. Did her father routinely remove his clothes to use the bathroom, or had something compelled him on this one occasion? She should have covered him—spared him the shame—but the thought came too late. In the moment, she dropped the groceries on the floor and sat at the edge of the tub next to his body. She dared not disturb his peace; she just wanted to understand it. She'd never spent time with a body before and would likely never do so again. She closed her eyes and imagined it was her. Her hand would be cold and shriveled, but she wouldn't feel it. The right hand touched the floor, and the right leg was just barely curled around the toilet's base. The pose was unnatural, but she wouldn't feel the discomfort. At first, her father's face was twisted into a horrible grimace, but after a few minutes resting beside her, it softened into a sort of smile. Thank you for the groceries, he seemed to say. I'm sure they were nice. He had rarely been so kind. After an hour or so, Hepsy arrived holding a meatloaf, as women of the church routinely brought him food after her mother passed. She screamed. Caroline had just found him, she explained. Just that second.

Caroline sat on the linoleum bathroom floor in front of the toilet, stuck her hand in the water, and wondered how she might die. On the mystery radio programs people were either shot, stabbed, or poisoned, but in the case of suicide, a gun in the mouth or to the temple were the most common methods. However, the only guns Syl owned were hunting rifles—impractical tools for self-harm. She supposed she could poison herself, but with what? And how much? And wouldn't it be painful? And what would become of her soul?

The cold water in the toilet bowl reminded Caroline that heated water would soon be in short supply. If they sacrificed meals and paid the electric bill, they'd run out of gas for the stove, and come winter the trailer would turn unbearably cold. If they instead paid the gas bill, they would need to heat all their water atop the stove, toast their bread beneath the broiler, and light the rooms with kerosene. Kerosene lamps were dangerous in trailers, though. But if the trailer happened to catch fire, and Syl and Rosa managed to escape, Caroline's accidental death would hold her blameless in the eyes of the Lord...but oh the agony of burning alive.

Her father never discussed the issue of suicide in service, but God's position was clear: Jesus forgives all sins save for blasphemy and, due to its finality, suicide. Unless, in the brief moments between stepping off the stool and breathing her last breath she was able to whisper—or at least conjure the thought of—a final plea for forgiveness. The death itself presented no such complications. She imagined it would feel like sleeping. Then, when Christ returned, she would awaken. Without Caroline, Rosa would be fine. Though she despised Syl's mother, she knew Margarete would

provide a loving home for Rosa, and Syl would continue to live as he always had: poor and alone.

The overwhelming uncertainty that had crippled her just an hour before seemed deep in the past. Having settled on a decision, Caroline jumped from the floor and walked to the kitchen to prep for dinner. The sink was filled with unwashed dishes, and without the mask of cigarettes or gasoline or propane, the odor provoked her to gag. Syl and Rosa would return home soon, she imagined. She hoped he had found a decent roast, as it would likely be her last.

Chapter II

Carrington, 1950

Endon Crawley stepped aside as Parsch Clemons rummaged through his nose and flicked away the debris onto the shop floor where he'd been standing. Intentional or not, Endon no longer cared to decipher his interactions with Parsch. In a few minutes, he'd walk away forever—he promised—and Endon could finally stake his claim in Carrington. Endon had worked under Parsch at the filling station for five years. Six days a week for five years Endon had heard the rusted brass bell jingle above the front door and promptly marched outside to pump the gas, wash the windshield, check the tires, and extended his empty hand in the motion of a shake while expecting a quarter back. In all those days, Parsch had never commented on the weather, or offered criticism or praise, or exchanged a single pleasantry with Endon. Then, a month before, at the end of Endon's shift, Parsch asked Endon if he'd be interested in "running the old place." Endon wondered if he'd sensed his growing restlessness as a gas station attendant. He'd been fishing for other opportunities all across Carrington. His father Garland ran the drugstore and had insisted he stay in Carrington, though Endon had never been so desperate to leave. As he later learned, Parsch was looking for his own way out.

"I'm too old now to do much else, but I've always wanted a little spot in Tulsa. So I believe that's what I'm going to do. Get me and the wife a cabin of sorts. Running water and all that, but you wake up to the smell of loblolly pine every morning."

In the years he'd worked there, Endon noticed Parsch's face had grown gaunt and yellowed. He could barely walk from one end of the store to the other without crumbling into a wheezing heap, and Endon had never seen him eat a full plate of food. He shook Parsch's knotty, trembling hand, knowing he'd not make it long in Tulsa—if he made it there at all. “Years you've put in this place, Parsch, you deserve it.”

“Pa opened this place back in 1895. Died right here behind that counter,” he said gesturing to the register. Endon nodded, but Parsch coaxed him towards the spot. “Look,” he said. “Here.”

Endon half expected remnants of blood or even a worn spot in the floor where his father's stool once sat. Instead, Parsch's finger pointed to an empty space.

“Nothing. Owned this place for thirty years and not a speck of Arvey Clemons remains in this town.”

Confused, Endon furrowed his brow into a concerned face. “I'm sorry.”

Parsch opened the back door behind the counter and walked into the supply closet. A mop sat in a tin pail filled with soap and water from God-knows-when. A few basic tools were scattered over a bench parked against the wall, along with an extra air pump and grease can. Everything would need to be replaced, Endon thought. The room was big enough to hold a car, though he doubted it had ever served that purpose. In the years Endon had spent working under Parsch, he'd never shown him the back room. His imagination had wandered between Arvey's tomb or an old Chevy V8 Parsch was saving for retirement. Though disappointing, the reality would be easier to clean up.

“Used to do repairs before more shops opened down the road, and cars got so damned complicated.”

Endon picked up the grease can and gave it a gentle shake—hadn’t been touched in years. “Wouldn’t hurt to offer a little roadside repair now and then. I know my way around a car alright.”

Parsch opened the back latch to the outside. “Back when Pa opened this place, this whole part was a smokehouse. The first around he always said.”

“Is that right?”

“Probably. I imagine he kept mostly pork. Bacon and all that. But then, you know, the markets started selling all that stuff. People settled for the cheap stuff. But before all that, this was the general store.”

The back latch opened onto a short set of steps leading down to a small yard just outside a wooded area. Parsch led Endon back through the yard, past a few trees, and to the head of a steep ditch. The shop sat right at the edge of the treeline at the end of Carrington’s main strip. Behind it, the woods extended beyond Endon’s sight—probably all the way to the nearest cow pasture. Further down the road was a little plot of land reserved for a movie theater that had yet to be built, and after that, there was nothing. The next gas station was another seventy-five miles north.

Endon hadn’t thought to ask where Parsch was leading him. By then, he had learned to simply obey. In a hundred yards the land dropped off. A heavy layer of fallen leaves covered the ground on all sides, but Endon could tell the ditch went deep.

“Is that a sinkhole?” he asked.

“I expect so.”

Endon frantically scanned the area. “Parsch, what’s going on here? You mean to tell me there’s a sinkhole situated right behind your place? In all my time here, you’ve never once mentioned that sinkhole.”

“Shouldn’t give you too much concern.”

“Is it active?”

“Active? It ain’t about to swallow us up whole, if that’s what you’re worried about. I s’pose it could one day though. Thought you should be aware.”

Endon needed to tell his father. Perhaps there was still some way to undo the deal. “Now, this just isn’t the way honest men do business. I took you to be an honest man.”

“That sinkhole’s been here a lot longer than you and I. Pa used to toss the old pig bones down there. God knows what manner of filth and decay percolates under this earth. Damned convenient...’til it isn’t—like most things.”

“I think my dad and I need to have a talk about all this. It’s not common sense to have a business not a hundred yards from a sinkhole.”

“Settle.” Parsch took off back to the shop. Endon continued to follow. “There was a point in my life where I thought I’d live in this place forever. I was wrong. But I was just right enough to make sure I’d not stray far.” Parsch bypassed the back entrance and walked straight to front where his pickup was parked. “Won’t miss it, I reckon.” He smiled, but he meant it. “Woman’s full up, huh?”

Endon struggled to process the sinkhole. His dad would know what to do. “Imogene’s six months pregnant now. Won’t be long.”

“A bit of advice. World needs doctors and teachers. We got plenty o’ gas station attendants, if you catch my meaning.” He opened the driver’s side door and crawled inside his truck without indulging in a final bout of nostalgia. “Luck to you,” he mumbled.

That evening, Imogene invited her sister to join them in their home for a dinner of fried venison and boiled red potatoes. Endon and Imogene had just purchased the two-bedroom-one-bath home in June. Before then, they had rented a trailer near Parsch’s station, but as Endon grew older, he found the arrangement distasteful. A man of his age with his prospects ought to have a house, he reasoned. At first, Imogene had talked of grand renovations—they’d knock out the wall between the dining room and kitchen, turn the back porch into a sunroom, erect a trellis in the back yard, and repaint those horrid olive green walls in the living room—but in the two months since moving, she had settled for a flower garden under the picture window in front and new curtains in the bedroom. He hoped her sister Krysta didn’t mention the green walls at dinner.

Endon had killed the deer the night before in hopes of holding it for a pot of stew that weekend. But he had not revealed his intentions to Imogene, and as usual, she had unknowingly undone his plans. She was a sweet girl, though. His father and mother both said so the first time he brought her home. At the time, the term baffled Endon. Imogene was nice enough, but she wasn’t the nicest girl he’d ever been with. Compared to others, she was overbearing and loud. She laughed obnoxiously around company and was quick to criticize Endon’s business decisions. But when Endon was

drafted into the Army, he began to understand what they meant. While overseas, many men in his company received heartbreaking letters of rejection from women back home. He and Imogene wrote occasionally but never out of obligation, and that was just fine. Other men were certainly attracted to Imogene's pudgy, pasty, redheaded charm, but Endon never had cause for worry. Imogene was a sweet girl.

As Imogene plated the food between snorts and guffaws, Endon kept his eyes on the clock hanging on the wall in the kitchen. He hoped to finish dinner by seven, so he could speak privately to his father before nightfall.

"How much did this place cost Imogene?" Krysta asked. It was the first time she'd been over for dinner in the new house.

"Krysta," Imogene said. "Such questions are impolite."

"Howard and I have been thinking about getting our own place after we're married. Did Daddy help you?"

Imogene looked at Endon as if to ask if she should answer.

He swallowed the remaining potatoes in his mouth and took a drink of water. "It's just a loan," he said. "We'll pay him back as soon as things improve. But he and I agreed his future grandchild shouldn't grow up in a trailer park."

Krysta's eyes widened. "Imogene, you're not pregnant...?"

"We are not pregnant yet," Imogene said, finally sitting down behind her plate of food. "But we're still trying. Endon? You couldn't wait for me?"

Endon tore a piece of fried venison in half and shoved it into his mouth.

"Sorry. I'm running over to Dad's in a bit."

"Can't it wait?" Krysta asked.

Krysta was a taller, leaner version of her sister. The Irish influence in both was pronounced. He'd never been attracted to her, though. Her insincere tone of voice put him off from the start. "Business," he said before pulling his hand away to take another drink of water.

"Oooh! How did things go today with Parsch? Is the deal done?" Imogene asked.

He suddenly wished he had kept quiet. Rather than discuss the particulars of the situation in front of Krysta, Endon smiled and shrugged. "There are a few more details to iron out."

Imogene stopped cutting her meat and looked suddenly alarmed. "What details?"

He felt the muscles in his jaws tighten but tried to continue chewing. "It's nothing. Just a few little things."

"Endon Crawley, you're keeping things from me." She turned to her sister. "His face gets so red when he's storying."

He hated when she spoke in that babying tone. "It's nothing."

Krysta cut into one of her potatoes and changed the subject. "Howard's parents are lovely—don't get me wrong—but they could never help him buy a business. You two are lucky. You're getting it from both sides."

Endon finished chewing his meat slammed his fork on his plate. As intended, the noise silenced Krysta and drew attention to him. "Sometimes when you talk Krysta, I about lose my head."

Imogene glared at him but said nothing.

“You talk like the family is throwing money at us left and right. These are not handouts. Your father gave us a loan for this house, and my father will own a stake in the station. That’s how business works, but you wouldn’t know anything about that.”

Krysta placed her silverware beside her plate and folded her hands in her lap. “Endon there is no need to turn nasty. I didn’t mean anything against you.”

“I was in Japan for eighteen months.”

Imogene stood from the table and carried her plate into the kitchen. He knew she hated hearing him talk about his service. Everyone was tired of Endon’s same old war stories. He remembered, after the war, others saying they wanted to return to their lives as if no time had passed. Endon, on the other hand, wanted to be seen—to be acknowledged. But no one in the family seemed to understand that, especially Imogene. Upon returning, after giving the customary hugs and kisses to his mother and father, he remembered Imogene standing casually with her hands folded behind her back saying, “Now we can start planning the wedding.” And just like that, his next life began.

“And I was lucky,” he continued. “I didn’t kill anybody, but I saw horrible things—things you’ll never see in a movie.”

Imogene clanged dishes together in the sink.

“My own daddy offers to help me finally make something of myself, and you act like it’s some sort of handout. What is owed to me?”

Krysta took a final sip of her water and stood up. “I think I’ll be heading home.”

Still, there was no acknowledgement.

Imogene returned carrying a pie, but she didn't object. "Let me cut you a slice to take with you. It's just vinegar pie, but it tastes nice with coffee."

Endon took another bite of venison and wiped his mouth. "I should be getting over to Dad's."

When Endon pulled up, Garland was sitting outside on a grayed hickory stump next to the front porch smoking his pipe. Endon's arrival did not cause him to stir. His mother and father lived a mile behind the grocery store, at the end of a winding dirt road. They'd bought the house soon after Garland took over the drugstore. It was roughly twice the size of Endon's, with two full stories, an attic, and a finished cellar. A homemade fishnet hammock hung between two Bradford Pear trees in the front yard, and a large vegetable garden occupied the back. As a grown man, Endon envied his parents, but he appreciated the struggle necessary to attain these luxuries.

"Did you just finish dinner?" Endon asked.

Garland nodded.

Even at dusk, he wore his wide brimmed, straw hat outside to cover his head. Endon did not remember a time when his father had hair. At some point it must have been a choice, he thought. While at work he wore a long white coat and polished black shoes, at home he relaxed in overalls and cracked work boots. Seeing the overalls sag around his stomach, Endon thought his father might be losing weight.

"It's Monday. Ham and beans?" Endon guessed.

Garland nodded again and blew smoke over his lap. “Tomorrow’s the day isn’t it? You’re officially taking over?”

Endon explained how Parsch had shown him the sinkhole less than a hundred yards behind the store. He wondered about Parsch’s intentions and suggested Garland try to meet with him. Parsch still owned the lot where the stations sat, so technically the sinkhole was still his problem. But Endon and his father now owned the building, and as far as Endon knew, there was no form of insurance to protect them against a collapsing sinkhole. He presented all the facts as he understood them, but Garland did not seem concerned.

“If it’s not on the property, I don’t imagine Parsch has any obligation to tell you about it,” he explained. “And if Parsch isn’t obliged, you can be sure he won’t go out of his way.”

“So that’s it? I worked with that man for five years, and he never said a word about a sinkhole. And the day our deal is finalized he pulls the rug out from under us, and says ‘good luck’ and that’s all fair and legal?” Endon asked.

Garland smiled. “Welcome to the world of business.”

Endon loathed the condescension in his father’s voice. As if he had known about the sinkhole from the beginning. As if he could not be surprised.

Garland stood up from the stump and brushed the dandelion florets off his legs. “My great Uncle Peter had a sinkhole on his place some years ago, but he just thought it was a pond. Ran cattle over the place. Used it as a water hole. Then one day Granddad tried to drill a well out there, and the ground nearly gave out beneath him. I believe he lost a horse in the process. He told Peter, ‘Get rid of this land; that

sinkhole is liable to ruin you.’ But Peter didn’t listen. A year or so later a tornado came through and destroyed everything—including the cattle. Then everyone forgot all about the sinkhole.”

Endon tried to contain his frustration. “What’s the message? That no man can prepare against the will of God?”

“Ain’t no message. It just happened. Your sinkhole reminded me of it.”

Garland dumped the ashes from his pipe onto the ground. “But speaking of,” he continued. “Have you been paying your tithes? That is certainly one way to insure yourself against disaster.”

“I haven’t warmed to the new pastor yet.” In fact he hated Pastor James. He was Texan—an extreme evangelical “healing power of Jesus” type. During his first week at the church, he called Darla Dietrich to the front of the church for prayer. She’d just returned from her third surgery to remove the cancers that had sprouted all over her face and chest. She wore a veil to hide the freshly stitched wounds. The doctors had told her there would be no more surgeries, and she would likely not survive more than a few months. Pastor James rebuked their diagnosis and asked Darla to expose her scars to the church—to be a witness for the power of God. Darla did as asked. The tissue was so swollen she could barely open her eyes, and most of her nose had been carved away. He called upon the church to lay hands on Darla in prayer—to demand that she be healed. Everyone prayed, and as expected Pastor James declared that a healing had indeed occurred. A few weeks later, Darla died.

“I didn’t think you liked Pastor Rick all that much either.”

“I tell you what I don’t like: the idea of some preacher living high on the hog off working people’s money. The Bible says the money goes to Jesus but Pastor James is the one with a new truck.”

“He cleans deer.”

“Come on Dad. Cleaning deer isn’t steady work. It ain’t paying for a new truck.”

Garland reflexively put his pipe in his mouth and studied the grass. “Yard’s getting patchy. Might have to reseed next spring.” He brushed over the top with his boot. “This is a dangerous line of thinking, son.”

He wanted to respond, but his father believed what he wanted to believe.

Garland looked past Endon at the sunset. “Getting dark. I’ll probably head inside soon.” He hugged his son and kissed him on the cheek. When Endon was younger, he hated the physical affection his family shared with one another. Now, he cherished his father’s kiss. “So I don’t understand. Are you giving up on the church, then?” Garland asked.

Conversations were in their earliest stages. He had tried several times to communicate his vision to Imogene, but she hadn’t quite come around yet. And they’d need to find a space, of course. But it would happen, and his father needed to know. “Actually, Imogene and I are starting a place of our own.”

Chapter III

Carrington, 1950

Caroline decided that Thursday was just the right day to die. After eating fried eggs for the past four days, Syl agreed to talk to his mother about a more regular cash stipend, at least until Syl found steady employment. In the meantime, Caroline would get a job at Hendrickson's stocking shelves. The work was not challenging—and the pay reflected it—but Margarete had made clear to Syl that she would only subsidize them if Caroline worked. On Thursday, Syl would be at Margarete's with Rosa until the afternoon, and Caroline was scheduled to work until 4:00 p.m. If she left right then, this gave her plenty of time to buy a rope.

That morning, Syl and Rosa shared a pot of oatmeal while Caroline stuck to toast. She worried the porridge would bloat her on the bike ride to town.

"Where did you find the blackberries?" Syl asked stuffing a spoonful of purple oatmeal into his mouth.

Caroline stood by the sink, apart from her family, and forced a smile. "There's a bush full of them by the road."

"They're sour."

She snapped. "What's the goddam sugar for?"

Syl wiped the milk from his upper lip. She had meant to agitate him, and she succeeded. "Don't use that filthy language in front of our daughter." But Rosa hadn't registered the curse; she was busy smashing the cooked blackberries inside her bowl.

The thought occurred to Caroline that this would be the last time she and Syl would ever speak. By the time he returned home with Rosa, she'd be dead. Since their

first night together in his truck, she had imagined such a scenario: the opportunity to hurt him without consequences.

“No consequences,” she said, allowing her hatred to escape from her mouth.

Syl shook his head.

“What are you going to do about it?” she prodded. She wanted him to stand up, to get angry, to get violent.

Syl ignored her and took another bite of oatmeal.

Caroline marched over to the table and spit in his bowl. “That should sweeten it up.”

Syl seemed more confused than angry. “What is wrong with you?”

Immediately the act felt childish. She had exposed her juvenile nature and undermined her position. He wouldn’t hear her now. Her feelings didn’t count. She was “acting out” or “having an episode” again. The time for parting words had passed, and Caroline would die without anyone ever seeing inside her.

“Sorry. I’m just stressed about work. I’m not used to it, yet.”

Syl smirked and nodded as if she had finally said the truth—a truth he understood. The stresses of the working world were too much for little, spoiled Caroline. He smiled because she had glimpsed *his* struggle, the struggle of the working man, the struggle she routinely took for granted. And Caroline allowed him to believe this lie, because *her* moment of truth had passed.

Syl finished his breakfast and plucked his hat off the wall hook by the door.

“You’ll get used to it,” he assured her. “You’ll have to.”

Rosa followed him, grabbing a handful of crayons and three sheets drawing paper. Caroline kissed her daughter on the cheek and pulled her to her chest. She hoped with her disappearance that life would be better for Rosa. As she aged, she might grow to hate Caroline. She might also escape Carrington.

After Syl and Rosa had gone, Caroline unthinkingly cleared away the dishes and filled the sink with hot, soapy water. She laughed at her inability to stray from routine; she wouldn't scrub and rinse them though.

Outside, she wrested her blue bike from against the mailbox, smoothed her denim dress against her thighs, and pushed the bike onto the road. An initial burst of momentum carried her down the hill just beyond the limits of their park. The retriever mutt the park had collectively named Shadow followed her to the end of the road but not up the other side of the hill. In spite of its humble appearance, he was an effective watchdog over the park. Since the dam was completed, most of the park's inhabitants had moved away, leaving Shadow to starve. If she remembered, she'd give him an extra helping of scraps when she got back.

Caroline's legs pumped steadily as sweat formed on her back and chest: she'd look a mess by the time she reached Hendrickson's General. A new Ford car came up behind her and passed on the left. The driver waved and blew a cloud of dust into Caroline's eyes and mouth. A coughing fit nearly drove her into the ditch, but she pulled over and used her dress to wipe her face.

She'd ridden less than a mile before running out of breath. Since Syl lost his job, she'd made fewer trips to town, and her body had fallen out of practice. Down

the side of the hill, a few hundred yards from the road, she saw the remains of old Carrington: a row of empty wooden buildings, a church bell, and a jailhouse.

Throughout her life, the town had slowly migrated to a higher elevation where it currently stood. As she understood it, with the completion of the dam, everything that remained of the old town would slowly disappear beneath the rising water. Caroline remembered Pastor Rick had used the dam as an example in one of his sermons. The message was something about the emptiness of good works. He said, “We Christians say water washes away our sins, but it just hides them. When the water dries up, they’re still there. Water ain’t enough for us. We need the blood.”

On the other side of the town, at the river’s bank, what appeared to be a pig emerged from within the weeds. Pigs were a common sight in Carrington—many still farmed them in and around the town—but she’d never seen one roam wild. She’d heard people talk of hunting wild hogs in Arkansas, but this one didn’t have tusks; it was a regular, domesticated pig. As it passed through the overgrown, former street paths more pigs appeared from out of the weeds. They moved together in a growing cluster toward the bottom of the hill. Caroline watched them transfixed. As they came closer, she could see their unblinking black eyes, their mouths draped open, dried soil flaked from their skin. They moved in unison, breathing and walking as one. Caroline watched until they reached the bottom of the hill, just a dozen yards below her now. They stopped and stared up. She counted twenty of them.

“What do you want?” she asked.

They stared silently—breathing. Flies gathered around their backs, but none of them bothered to twitch.

She knelt to the ground. She sensed their hunger—their desperation. “You can’t climb up, can you? Can’t find your way out. You’ll all drown soon.” She imagined them with their mouths gaping up at the clouds as the water rushed in around them, surrendering.

All the pigs moved back except the first one. The first one flopped onto its side but kept his hollow eyes on Caroline. The other pigs watched for a moment, but slowly, they surrounded him. He never blinked. He never moved. He never made a sound. He lay inanimate on the ground as the pigs swarmed his body and tore at his loose flesh with their sharp, mangled teeth. His eyes remained fixed on Caroline, and Caroline never looked away. She expected to scream or turn away from the scene, but instead she studied them. They struck without hesitation and they wouldn’t stop until the job was finished. And the first pig understood his role.

“I am the first pig,” she muttered. But no, that wasn’t right. The first pig served his purpose by sacrificing himself to the others. They would eat of his flesh, gather their strength, and survive the coming floods. Like her, they would see the floods come. She knew in her heart it was true. In her struggle, God had revealed himself. Though her purpose was still unclear, she had a purpose.

Blood spattered over the group as all of them fought for a piece of his body. A few nibbled at his feet, and others swiped at his ears. She eventually lost sight of his eyes. The feeding only lasted a few minutes, and when it stopped, the pig was gone. The others collected themselves into a group and ambled back toward the weeds by the river, with their mouths still covered in blood. They disappeared, leaving no trace

of their presence. But she smelled them. She always had. Old Carrington had always smelled like a pigsty.

Caroline rubbed the dust from her eyes and jumped back onto her bike. “It wasn’t real,” she muttered, but she didn’t believe it. Her father always told her she saw things. The bats in the closet, the snakes in the bed, the blood in the well water—these were all fantasies from childhood, but she hadn’t had one in years. She breathed deeply and occupied her mind with the view from the road. If it wasn’t real, and she knew it wasn’t real, then she wasn’t crazy.

She put the incident out of her mind and continued on, unsure of where she was going or why. She didn’t need rope, because suicide was no longer a consideration. When Syl and Rosa returned home that night, they would eat meat and celebrate. But what would they celebrate? Caroline wasn’t certain yet, but something new was happening. For the first time in many years, life excited her. Her mind drifted again to the vision...if it was a vision. Real or not, it was a message from God—a path forward. She just needed to find it.

The drugstore signaled the halfway point between the park and the store. Teenagers sat in the bed of a Chevy pickup talking. The boys were shirtless and spit tobacco juice over the side of the truck. The girls wore shorts and fanned themselves with comics. She recognized one of the girls from school, but none of them acknowledged her. It had been too long, she thought.

Across from the drugstore, the doctor’s parking lot was filled with cars but none looked familiar. Dr. Leak had cared for her father prior to his death, but she hadn’t seen him since they took the body. Cancer had just started to kill him before

the heart attack saved it the trouble. Beside Dr. Leak's office, the Fox Café lunch crowd had thinned to a few lingering veterans. Just a few years before, her father had been among them. Caroline loved the Café's tuna melts.

Her legs were tired, but she kept moving, knowing the return trip would be mostly downhill. Across from the gas station, her father's old church appeared vacant. Caroline and Syl had tried going there a few times when they lived with Margarete, but after he lost his painting job, they couldn't afford the new mandatory tithes. Caroline hated the new pastor, anyways. He was a Baptist sent from Texas, and Carrington had been Pentecostal as long as Caroline had been alive. The town's acceptance of Pastor James disgusted her. She'd never even heard him speak in tongues.

After two more miles of effort, she rode up to the side of Hendrickson's Grocery store and leaned her bike against the wall. Now drenched in sweat and still shaken by the violence, she rushed inside to collect herself under the large ceiling fans in the produce section. She still had a few minutes before she was scheduled to work, so she sat on the floor and rested her eyes. Soon, the mundane would overtake the spectacular, and her mind would once again drift toward cool reality. "But it was real," she insisted to herself.

Practicing the routine she'd learned over the previous few days, Caroline went to the back and changed out of her dress and into the green skirt and apron combo the store had provided. For the rest of the day, she'd pull cans from boxes and place them on shelves. At noon, George the manager checked on her and suggested she pick up the pace. He noted how the green beans labels clashed with the corn and considered

separating them with beets, before ultimately leaving them as they were. Caroline nodded and pretended she hadn't heard him speak these words just the day before. She had practiced submission all her life—she was good at it.

After her shift, she drifted lazily down the produce aisle until she found a tall, gangly black man stocking a bin with carrots.

“I've never seen you around here,” she said. “I don't think I've seen any black man before. Do you live in Carrington?”

He nodded silently and continued lining the carrots side by side, so the tops collected into a flowering green bush. The man wore the standard uniform for men at Hendrickson's: brown pants, a white button-up, and a brown apron. She checked his shoes, hoping for some mark of insight, but their scuffed leather made them indistinguishable from any other man's shoes. He looked about Syl's age.

“They let you touch the vegetables?” she asked.

“When it suits them,” he said.

His voice was higher than she expected. All the black men on radio had deep, baritone voices, and they often slipped into song—sometimes by accident. But she wondered if his voice could even carry a tune.

“How long you been here?” she asked. “I've been here all day. I stock shelves too, and I've never seen you.”

After placing the last carrot inside the shallow, rectangle bin, he picked up his basket and looked at Caroline. “Can I help you with something?”

“Now that you mention it, I'd love a cup of water,” she said.

“This ain't a restaurant.”

“They got water for you, don’t they?”

The man gave her a blank stare. “Wait here.”

“What if I want to follow you?”

“The faucet’s in the back.”

“I can walk to the back.” Caroline saw the uneasiness mounting across his face. “Or I can wait here.”

The man sat the basket on the floor and swiftly jogged to the back of the store. If his hair wasn’t graying around the sides, she easily would have mistook him for a younger man. His voice and frame reminded her of the young boys she knew in school. She’d seen many older men who’d maintained their boyish build, but she’d never heard one with that high pitched, nasally voice.

In a few minutes, the man returned with a small coffee mug. “Here you go ma’am.”

The water was ice cold as if drawn straight from a well. “What’s your name?” she asked.

The man seemed puzzled at the question but responded in kind. “Mark. Now I need to get back to work if you don’t mind.”

She gulped the rest of the water and handed the mug back to Mark. “Just as well with me. I got some meat to fetch.”

“I’m sorry. The butcher’s out sick today.”

“Can *you* help me, Mark?”

“I don’t know too much about the meat.”

She let the disappointment flow from here eyes into his. “That’s too bad. All I wanted was a chicken.”

“Let me see if we have some already prepped in the back.”

“This time, I’m coming with you.”

Without either a nod of approval or agreement, Mark took off toward the back of the store where he’d retrieved the mug of water. At the back of the store, a wooden door led to a metal door, and behind the metal door was the meat.

Caroline had never pondered the reality of the meat locker. In her mind, the meat sat in the back as it appeared in the case: divided into roasts and steaks and ground into hamburger. In fact, the store seemed to obtain a great deal of their meat in the form of whole animals. On her left hung three beef carcasses, on her right hung six pork carcasses, and in the back sat a whole rack of plucked chickens. Behind the chickens, there was a gate where she assumed trucks made deliveries. Overall, the entire room was about the size of her trailer. She tried to see into one of the pig’s eyes, but they had almost surely been removed.

“Which one do you want?” he asked.

Caroline ignored his question and ran her hand over the back of a pig. “Where do we get this stuff?”

“Get what you want and let’s go,” he said.

“Touch it,” she said stroking the pig.

“No. Get what you came for and leave or I’m telling George.”

“I will,” she promised. “But feel this animal. It was probably alive just a few days ago. And now it’s so cold. It doesn’t feel alive. It feels like meat.” Words fell

out of her mouth as she tried to convince Mark to stroke the side of this pig. But her words were imprecise, and Mark seemed to grow more tense. He wrapped one of the smaller chickens in a sheet of paper handed it Caroline before walking out of the cooler.

She couldn't resist laying her hands on these beasts. The beef was so mutilated it no longer resembled the cows from which it came, and the chickens were stripped and plucked down to a mass of breasts, thighs, and legs. But aside from the massive incision down the front of their stomachs, the pigs remained relatively in tact. Within them, she felt a presence.

For three days, that chicken sat in their fridge untouched, but Caroline insisted to Syl she could not cook a proper chicken without butter.

"Why didn't you ask first?" he had said about the chicken. "You wasted half a day's wages on one chicken."

The truth was more complicated than he could understand, so she couched it in the proverbial "surprise." He accepted the explanation but cautioned her against such financial indulgences in the future. Initially he had objected to spending more, but when Caroline asked, "When's the last time you had a decent roast chicken with margarine?" he had no reply.

"Ill pick some up after work."

During her shift, Caroline kept a close watch on the store's comings and goings of in hopes of spotting Mark, but he wasn't around. She had hoped to enlist Mark in her ideas for escape. His part was unclear, but like the pigs of old Carrington,

he seemed an appointment from God. She considered asking other employees if they had seen him but doubted any had bothered to learn his name. Besides, inquiring about “the negro” would draw attention. For now, she preferred to live unseen.

The humming ceiling fans lulled Caroline into a serene state of exhaustion. Rather than return home so quickly after work, she found an empty wooden crate near the burlap sacks of potatoes and positioned it against a barrel of vinegar. The oil soaked floor planks were covered in a mixture of water leached from the produce and grime carried in by customers’ shoes. She watched an ant follow an uncluttered path through the chaos to a bruised apple resting near her feet. She smiled watching the ant try to carry it back to the other ants in his group. She knew he’d fail and eventually go back for help, but by then, the apple would be gone.

Sitting down for the first time that day, Caroline nodded off briefly before she was awakened at the sound of her name.

“Caroline? I haven’t seen you in years. Where’ve you been?”

The speaker was a smiling young with tight jeans, cracked leather boots, a tank top, and a glistening brown comb-over. He looked familiar, but she couldn’t place the face. She stayed seated on the wooden crate waiting for an explanation.

The smile faded. “I’m Levi. From school.”

Caroline stood up. “My word Levi, you’ve grown at least a foot. And you ain’t so chubby either.”

His smile returned. “I’ve been working with my uncle all summer, tossin’ hay around. It’s a good way to lose a pound or two. What have you been up to? Where y’all live now?”

Shame compelled her to lie. “Not too far from Dad’s old house actually.”

“I haul feed through there all the time. It’s a wonder I haven’t run into you. I’m sorry to hear about your dad, by the way. We used to attend his services when I was younger. He was a spiritual man.”

“Yeah.”

He scanned the store behind her for a few moments before returning his eyes to her. “Can I ask about the baby?”

“She’s a brat for sure. Cute though.”

“How old is she?”

“Three, I guess.”

“You still with…”

“Syl. He’s her daddy. Of course we’re still together. You think I just hop from one man to the next with that little baby strapped to my leg?”

“Of course not. I’m sorry.” He stared at the floor. “I just miss seeing you around, I guess. You ever think about coming back to school?”

“That’s all over now. Don’t even give it a second thought.”

“School, you mean?”

“Yeah—school.” She brushed her dress with both hands and smoothed her hair. “I’m having a chicken tonight. All I needed was butter.” She held it up for Levi to see. “I could have waited ‘til tomorrow, but it sure felt like I needed to have it today. I should pay for the butter and get back home.”

“Yeah, I just came here to get a sandwich,” he said motioning to the wrapped square in his hand.

Caroline smiled and started to walk away.

“I’d like to see you sometime though,” he said.

“I’m busy...with the baby and all.”

“Yeah I figured. Just thought I’d ask.”

Caroline continued moving, barely hearing what Levi had said, to the front counter where she was third in line. She marveled at the colorful candies on the shelf behind the desk. Since marrying Syl, she’d had her fill. Their flavors were no longer a mystery, but they were so beautiful she wished she had a jar of peppermint sticks just to adorn her kitchen table. They would make a perfect centerpiece, she thought.

“Just getting the butter today?”

A new man stood behind the counter. He was short, bald, bearded, and smelled of sawdust. “How much for the jar of peppermint sticks?” she asked.

“Hmm?”

“Jar included. I don’t have a jar like that at home.”

“We don’t sell jars.”

“Just the peppermint sticks then.”

“A jar holds eighteen.”

“So how much?”

“Ninety cents I figure.”

“I’d really like that jar though.”

The man licked his fingers and ran them through the few strands of hair sitting atop his head. “I’ll give you the whole thing for three dollars.”

Caroline counted her cash again. Her remaining four dollars would cover the peppermint sticks and carrots with change to spare. “I’ll take it.”

Once outside, she realized the foolishness of her decision. Her bike had no basket to carry the large jar of peppermints, and she couldn’t balance something of that size in her lap. She considered throwing the entire jar against the building. It would cause a scene and be a terrible waste. Glass shavings would litter the ground, and she’d step on them, cutting her feet in a dozen places. She’d scream she was hurt and run inside the store where splinters would further embed themselves in her heels, and her bleeding feet would soak through the wood. After that, she wasn’t sure.

“Now how’re you going to tote that all the way back to your house on a bicycle?”

Levi climbed out of his idling truck.

Before she and Syl conceived, her romantic history was limited to a handful of kisses from Levi in the school bathroom. He somehow always knew when the other girls had gone, and she always knew when he wanted it. Caroline smiled, because she wanted him to like her again. She wanted him to remember old feelings, to take pity, to believe that one thing could indeed lead to another. Levi smiled back.

He too had been appointed.

“Why don’t you throw that bike in the back of my truck and hop in. My uncle won’t care if I take a little extra time getting back.”

Caroline stared into the ground so as not to seem too eager. She needed convincing. Alone in another man’s truck? Too risky. What if someone saw? They

might get the wrong impression. These are things that good girls thought. At least, that's what men chose to believe.

"It's no big deal. Your house is right on the way back to my uncle's."

She shook her head. "I lied before. I live over in the trailer park where the dam workers used to be."

His head tilted. He was saying she need not be ashamed. It wasn't her fault. It was Syl's. A man his age couldn't even provide a decent place to raise his family? Despicable.

She allowed her smile to fade. It's hard being so young and raising a child in a trailer park amongst all variety scoundrels.

"That's no trouble," he said. "It's a short drive."

He had received the message.

Caroline rolled her bike to the back of the truck and awkwardly attempted to lift it onto the bed, but Levi stepped in. She smiled again. He liked it when she smiled, as he always smiled back. Maybe she'd just keep smiling.

The drive home was quiet. Levi wordlessly shifted between second and third. Caroline studied his calloused hands while picking the dried skin off her own. They passed old Carrington, and she looked through her window to find a sign of the horrific scene she had witnessed days before. She didn't see any pigs, but there was a small spot of something—maybe blood—in the place where the first pig had been eaten. She wanted it to be real. She still didn't understand why the pig sacrificed himself, but she knew it was right. His sacrifice would save them, somehow.

"Aren't you going to ask me about the jar of peppermint sticks?" she said.

“I’m not sure what to ask, I guess.”

“I thought they’d look nice sitting on the table. Really make the place start to feel like a home. Rosa loves peppermints.” She wondered if Rosa had ever tried peppermints. She could never predict that girl’s tastes.

“I love peppermints too.” He let out a small laugh. “Her and I will get along.”
Cute.

As they drove into the park, Caroline navigated them to her trailer. Levi pulled the truck into the small driveway and allowed it to run.

“Do you need help carrying anything in?” he asked.

Caroline looked into the large jar of peppermints. “You can come inside for a bit...catch up.”

“I should probably be getting back. What time is it?”

“No later than one.”

The trailer park mutt barked outside his door. “I should go.”

Caroline moved her hand off the jar and neatly slid it over the top of Levi’s leg. She didn’t know she would touch him, but she wasn’t surprised. “Please stay.”

Levi looked out his window and scanned the park, but he didn’t brush her hand away. “Just for a minute,” he said finally.

Caroline led him inside and placed the peppermints on the table. Syl had gotten some temporary work picking apples for Gary Johnson and would not be home for a few hours, and Rosa was staying with Margarete. She and Levi had time. Time for what, though? She still hadn’t decided. Seeing Levi walk freely through her home

made her heart flutter. He could have been any man, really, because aside from her husband, no other man had ever set foot in their home.

The house was undisturbed save for the small collection of eggs Rosa had spread over the countertop. She had drawn faces on their shells. Had Syl even bothered to watch her after Caroline left? Caroline almost cursed but caught herself. “Rosa’s going to be a little artist,” she said collecting the eggs into her hands.

“I was hoping she’d be here,” he said.

She sensed the uneasiness in his voice but restrained her impulse to ramble. “She’s at Syl’s mother’s right now.” Caroline returned the eggs to the fridge and pulled a pitcher out from under the sink. “Can I make us some tea?”

“I should probably go.”

Before he could move, she was already filling the pitcher with water. “All I have is instant. I hope that’s okay. Do you prefer it sweetened?”

Levi ran his hand through his hair and sat at the table. “Yes please,” he said finally.

“Good. I wasn’t going to say anything, but I won’t hardly take tea without sugar.” She opened the canister sitting atop the refrigerator and spooned in enough tea to color the water and not much more. “You know, most people keep instant coffee around, but my dad preferred tea. Isn’t that strange? Kept it in the ice box—said it kept it fresh or something. I don’t know about all that, but I’ve never had it go bad on me.” She added at least a half-cup of sugar and stirred it with a short, wooden spoon.

Levi smiled politely, but the rest of his face was fixed in the same tense expression Mark had given her in the meat locker.

Caroline poured the tea over two glasses filled with ice and sat across from Levi at the table. “We said we were gonna catch up, but you ain’t had much to say.”

Levi took the tea and held it against his chest. “I don’t know what to say. School’s been fine.”

Sitting with Levi made her feel old. After having Rosa, completing school was impossible. Her absence had prompted rumors, but the wedding put an end to those, just as Pastor Rick intended. She wasn’t showing too much at the wedding, so he allowed her to wear white. He reasoned that if made public her shame would undo the church’s credibility. Therefore, for the sake of the church, no one ever heard about the blood stained dress.

“What are you going to do with the rest of your life?” she asked.

The question seemed to catch him off guard. “I just want what everybody else wants I guess. My uncle’s got steady work for now, but eventually I’ll strike out on my own, get my own place.” He hesitated before continuing. “Maybe even get a wife,” he said stumbling over the words.

His clumsiness was adorable. Even before he said the words, she sensed him growing more comfortable.

“Tell me about your wife, Levi.”

“But I ain’t married,” he said, not catching on.

“The way you talked it made me think you had someone in mind.”

Finally, Levi took a long drink of sweet tea and gently sat the glass on the table. His hands trembled. He started to say one thing but caught himself and settled for something else. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Caroline sipped at her tea calmly. “Are you seeing anybody?” Levi smiled and turned his head toward the window over the sink. He was still looking for a way out, but her voice lured him back. “You can tell me. We’re friends aren’t we? I just want to know what you’ve been up to.” She’d never heard herself sound this way—soft yet imposing. Levi’s shoulders slumped as he shifted his focus to his lap. He still couldn’t meet her eyes, but his guard had receded.

“You were my first kiss,” he said.

She smiled, sharing the memory. He’d been hers as well, but the specific kiss was lost within the larger idea of them kissing. Their time together had coalesced into a single memory, and the action itself survived as a composite of the many times she was certain these kisses had occurred.

“And I reckon you were also my last.” He started to laugh, perhaps at his own pathetic admission, but her smile seemed to calm him.

“Tell me about your wife,” she said again.

Levi looked up into her welcoming eyes and said the words she had willed him to say. “Caroline, if I could find a wife as beautiful as you, I’d be the happiest man in the world.” The following moment of silence brought an awareness of passing time, and Levi again directed his eyes to the window. “I should probably get going,” he said, unaware of how little authority his voice carried.

He had succumbed so easily it was almost embarrassing. Caroline reached forward, dragging her hand down his face and settling on his shoulder. “No, no, no. Stay,” she said quietly, knowing this simple protest would keep him in place.

“Caroline, I really don’t have time.”

“I miss you.”

“This isn’t a good time.”

Caroline moved her hands over the crotch of his pants. He was hard. “Will you stay?”

Levi seemed flustered, but once again, he allowed her hands to linger. He started to say something—probably something about Syl—but Caroline was already unbuttoning his pants.

Levi shook his head, but Caroline directed him into a chair and pulled his jeans and underwear below his knees. Levi breathed loudly but never spoke. He was uncircumcised—something Caroline had expected—but the strong odor of sweat and semen almost forced her away. She couldn’t stand to get closer, so Caroline rested her elbows on his knees, gripped his penis, and stroked as quickly as she could. Levi closed his eyes and hunched forward. Caroline stroked faster. Levi let out a shrill yelp as he ejaculated into Caroline’s waiting hand. Immediately, she pulled a kitchen towel off the table and cleaned the mess.

Levi’s cheeks flushed. “I’m so sorry.”

Caroline smiled and touched his face. “Don’t be sorry.”

Levi pulled up his jeans and buckled his belt. His cheeks were flushed.

“Thank you.”

“Syl raped me, you know.”

Levi coughed and scrambled to stand up. He said nothing.

“The first time. I guess you’d say Rosa’s a rape baby. I don’t hate her for it. She’s a good girl, but I know I’m cold to her.”

Levi finally acquiesced and held her hand. He was clammy. “What happened?”

Add additional text here. “You know Dad was the one who set us up? Syl lived here all his life, but he wasn’t a ‘man of God’ ‘til he started going to Daddy’s church.” Syl and Caroline had never spoken, but he had apparently taken an interest in her from afar. He told her father he was twenty-five, but even she could see he was older. “Knowing Syl, he was probably fishing for customers, but Dad took a real liking to him. I’d see him here and there but I don’t think I ever spoke two words to him. Then after service one day, Dad came over and introduced me—said Syl’d like to take me out that next Saturday. I’m not sure what Dad knew. Maybe he was afraid I’d end up without a good man. My mom died during birth, did you know that? Dad raised me my whole life. He didn’t know anything about raising girls, but he did the best he could. I’m sure of it.

“Anyway, that next Saturday Syl took me for a drive down by the river. He hardly spoke he was so shy. So we drove by the river in his blue Ford until he said he’d like to rest a bit and he pulled over. We took a walk around the creek before we made our way back to the truck. I asked if he packed a lunch, and he leaned over and kissed me. Then his hands started moving all over me. He was real careful taking my clothes off. Nothing ripped, I know that. I was so stupid. I had no idea *what* was going on. I just froze like an idiot. I was all naked out in broad daylight inside his truck. He undid his pants and climbed on top of me. I almost couldn’t breathe. Syl’s such a big man.”

After a walk around the water, Syl became more confident—the buttons undone quickly, the blouse pulled down to her knees, and the floral patterned dress

thrown over her back on the bench seat of his truck, all in less than a minute. But his eyes could not settle. At first, he had flipped her on her stomach. Though at fourteen she didn't quite understand what was happening, she knew he was committing a shameful act. Everyone always said she looked just like her father, and perhaps in that moment, Syl saw the pastor's face and was ashamed. He had entered her briskly and without warning. She screamed more from the shock than from the pain, but that position did not satisfy him. So he flipped her again. She had seen his erect penis hovering above his brass colored belt buckle, covered in what must have been *her* blood. Everything inside her throbbed, but she didn't move. His eyes darted out the window as he threw the entirety of his weight on top of her small frame. The eyes alternated between her and the window. Caroline couldn't breathe. She had feared she would suffocate against his shoulder. But the thrusting only lasted a few moments before she felt the warm liquid release inside her. At the time, she had thought it was more blood as a result of the trauma to her body. Immediately after, he had lifted himself away and stuffed his deflating penis into his pants.

It didn't hurt much. She remembered that. Knowing Syl better now, she probably could've stopped him. He wasn't a violent man; he was just dumb. He'd have stopped for her.

“You didn't try to stop him?”

“Course I tried to stop him. But Syl's twice my size.” She had tried and failed. There were no other excuses for young and foolish girls.

“Why didn't you tell someone?”

Blood on the dress. Over and over again she saw the blood on the dress. Without seeing, everyone saw. Upon her return home, she feared her father's anger. She had hoped Syl might follow her inside, but he never even got out of the truck. Her father shook his head knowingly at the blood covering her dress. She thought her father would be upset—or at least embarrassed—that this man had treated her so roughly. But Pastor Rick was not given to outbursts of any kind. He expressed both approval and disappointment with the same silent, unmoving, pinched face. Instead, he led her inside the house, handed her a clean pair of underwear, and said “Guess you’ll be married, then.”

“Either way,” she said to Levi. “I was still gonna have that baby, and babies need a daddy. I did the right thing. I don’t doubt that.”

Levi knelt down and kissed her hand. She wondered where he’d learned about men’s responsibility to women. Was it something in his genes? Or was it passed down from father to son? Either way, he performed his role exactly as she knew he would. “Let me take care of you, Caroline.”

“I’d like that Levi, but what about Syl?” She was running out of time. Syl would be home soon. “He won’t just let me go.”

“I’ll figure it out. I mean, not right now maybe.”

“He’s violent, Levi.”

“I can take care of him too. We’ll wait ‘til I’m settled. Then I can give you and Rosa a proper home like you deserve.”

She could see he truly believed it.

“I should start dinner.” Caroline reached inside the refrigerator and removed the chicken, still wrapped in butcher’s paper.

Levi looked around for a clock. “What time is it? My uncle’s expecting me back at some point.”

Caroline moved the meat inside a roasting pan beside the small cutting board beside the stove. She lit the pilot and turned the dial to 350 degrees. “You’re staying for dinner, though. Syl will be home any minute.”

Anxiety poured over Levi’s face. “I need to leave. This was bad.”

“I thought you were gonna take care of me,” she said half mocking.

She’d heard somewhere that keeping the peeling on the carrots added flavor. Using a small paring knife, she chopped three carrots into manageable sections and arranged them around the edge of the chicken. She removed an onion from the cabinet above her, quartered it—again leaving the peeling in tact for flavor—and shoved the pieces inside the cavity. “Things will work out. We just have to make due as best we can.” She held her hand up for Levi to see and laughed. “I’m so nervous I forgot to wash your gunk off my hands.”

“I meant what I said earlier. I want to be with you, but this is happening too fast. I’m not ready.”

Caroline tore apart a whole head of garlic and threw it inside the chicken. Then, she rubbed a good helping of butter and salt all over the skin. Finally, she placed it in the oven.

“It’s too late,” she said. “He’s coming down that driveway right now.”

The roiling engine tumbled closer to the door until it reverberated through the trailer. Gasoline overwhelmed the smell of propane from the oven. Levi jumped away from the door. “What do we do?”

“He won’t like you in his house.”

Syl’s heavy boots kicked against the concrete block positioned outside their door. Dried dirt crumbled down the steps.

Levi retreated from the door looking panicked and weak. After all that work, Caroline realized she hadn’t needed Levi at all.

Syl opened the door and Rosa trotted inside. “Hello family,” he said before noticing Levi.

“Who’s this?” he asked.

No one spoke.

“I smell chicken.”

In spite of Levi being there, Syl had that same placid look on his face—the same look he wore in bed. His face never changed, because to him, the world was a safe place. Hard work earned a fair wage, and a fair wage earned a family. He trusted her implicitly, just as he trusted his truck would start each day. But of course one day that truck would break down, but Syl couldn’t see that. For the first time since meeting Syl, she pitied him.

Yet, the path forward was clear.

Caroline lunged forward and smashed the large jar of peppermints over Syl’s head. Shards of glass and peppermint scattered across the floor and Syl stumbled onto

the rug. A small trickle of blood poured from the top of his scalp. Rosa began crying. Levi screamed and scurried back toward the kitchen.

“Oh my God. What are we doing? What’s happening here?”

Caroline ignored Levi’s frantic pleas and leaned over the body. “He’s still breathing.”

“Thank God.”

Caroline kicked a piece of glass into Syl’s face. Rosa screamed and ran toward the body. “Grab her Levi.”

Levi complied.

“You’re so stupid,” she shouted at Syl. Tears welled in her eyes. “All you had to do was keep a job.”

“Let’s call someone, say it was a mistake. Say we thought he was an intruder,” Levi said.

Caroline pulled Rosa away from Levi and held her close. “We need to finish this before he wakes up.”

Levi winced and rubbed at his eyes, but he couldn’t suppress his tears. “This is crazy.”

“He raped me, Levi. Remember? He raped me. You think it’s right for a man to rape a girl my age and get away with it? What kind of man are you?”

“I don’t know what you want me to do. I’m so scared. I just want to go home. I didn’t mean to hurt anyone. I’m sorry for what I did to you.”

“Levi, if you leave now, I’ll tell Syl everything. And he ain’t gonna be made a fool. He’ll find you and he’s liable to kill you.”

Levi folded his arms over his face and screamed. “What can I do? I don’t know what to do,” he muttered through sobs.

Caroline reached for the knife she used to trim the chicken. “Just finish it.”

Emotion passed from Levi’s face. “I’m so sorry,” he said. “But I can’t.” Levi carefully stepped over Syl’s body and dashed out the door. Caroline stood still, holding her distraught daughter, and listened as Levi started his truck and drove away.

Blood continued to spread over the floor, but his breathing was steady. Caroline stared at the knife and wondered if she had the necessary strength to slice through his thick neck. His skin would cut easy enough, but then what would become of her soul? She wasn’t ready for this step. Not yet.

Caroline dropped the knife on the table and carried Rosa out the door. She’d go on foot, as Syl’s truck would be too easy to spot.

“I’m taking you to Grandma’s,” she told her daughter.

After that, Caroline wasn’t sure, but she was never going back to the trailer.

Chapter IV

Carrington, 1895

Raymond Kelley turned the faded aluminum pail upside down and took a seat on its end; the hog watched placidly from behind the iron gate. “Skin looks clean to me. You ain’t sick.” Raymond could see in her eyes that Sampson still possessed her characteristic strength. Years before, one of the farmhands, Kenneth—a kid: ignorant and headstrong—fell into the pen during feeding. As he mounted the fence to escape, his foot dangled for a moment in front of Sampson’s frenzied eyes. She latched on and never let go. Raymond was mixing slop and had his back turned, but he heard the break, and he heard the boy’s scream. Looking over to the pen, he saw Kenneth desperately clawing at the gate begging Sampson to let go. Sampson stood firm, holding the foot in her mouth, forcing Kenneth to finish the tear himself.

Raymond felt sorry for the boy, but more than that, he gained a new respect for Sampson. “It’s how you got your name, you know,” he mumbled to the pig. “You’re strong. Only animal I ever named.” She could have pulled Kenneth in. She could have eaten the boy alive. But the attack was territorial, not malicious. Kenneth lived, but the maiming rendered him useless as a farmhand. He soon moved back to his parents’ place in New Hampshire. Last Raymond heard, he’d acquired a wooden foot and got a job in a candy shop with his uncle.

Sampson woke from her daze and shuffled forward.

Behind Raymond, the barn door creaked open. He kept his eyes on Sampson. Daniel approached slowly. “How does she look?”

Raymond chewed at the inside of his cheek and finally acknowledged his son.

“You ain’t blind. How does she look to you?”

“A little slow maybe.”

He could see the boy spoke from ignorance. Daniel’s desperation to please disgusted him. “Oh yeah?”

“Maybe.”

Try harder. “What makes you say that?”

“Maybe she’s just tired.”

No conviction in anything he said. Just words. “What would make her tired? You sayin’ she’s sick?”

Daniel shook his head. “I don’t know what I’m sayin’.”

“Then maybe think before you go spoutin’ your mouth off about something.”

The impulse to strike him passed. The boy wasn’t wasting his potential—he had none.

“Sorry.”

“You know what would happen to this family if she *was* sick?”

“I shouldn’t have said nothing.”

Raymond grabbed his son’s shoulder and pinched it between his large fingers. “You ever seen a nigger on the side of the road picking his feet? Nothing better to do and nowhere better to do it at? This time next year, things don’t change, we’ll be right beside him, asking to borrow his pick.” Daniel winced, and Raymond released him from his grip. “Now go get some apples for your mother.”

Daniel fled the barn.

Over the past few months, shops all around Southwest Missouri had canceled their orders, explaining that the meat had made people ill. Raymond had heard a rumor that a boy in Northwest Arkansas died after eating one of his fresh pork steaks, but he gave no credence to those that slandered him. He knew the rumors likely came from enemies—farms competing for his business. In time, the rumors would stop. He truly believed it.

Raymond stepped outside and called for his farmhand Langston to join him in the barn. He led him inside to Sampson's pen. She was still on the floor and, save for the rise and fall of her breath, motionless. Raymond opened the neighboring gate and walked around to the other side of her pen. "We got a hog to butcher. Need it done today."

"This one?" Langston asked.

Raymond nodded.

"She'd command a fair price on the market." The farmhand removed the rag from around his neck and dabbed sweat away from his exposed brow. "Checked with Arvey at the store? He'd take her off your hands for sure."

Briefly, Raymond imagined the Negro's tongue tumbling out of his mouth and onto the ground, depriving him of speech. "Fill it with slop," he said handing him the bucket.

Without words, he took the bucket and stepped outside.

For a moment, Raymond looked out the window and watched his son gather apples. Daniel collected only those within reach. Raymond scoffed. Easier to let those at the top rot.

Then, Raymond climbed a small stepladder and laid down on a wooden platform just a few feet from the ground, facing away from Sampson. When Langston returned, Raymond asked him to place the bucket of slop in front of the small hole in the panel, just below the platform. “See that knife stickin’ out of the block on the wall? Hand it to me.” Knife in hand and bucket in place, he instructed Langston to give it a rattle. Upon hearing the sound, Sampson perked immediately and ambled over to the hole. The hole was such that Sampson’s head could barely squeeze through, and the bucket was positioned just slightly out of her reach. As she stretched her neck to taste the slop, Raymond lowered his knife, dug it into her throat, and pulled it across her thick, fibrous neck before she could retreat. The violent squeals lasted only for a few moments. Raymond and Langston watched as she stumbled around, spraying blood throughout the pen.

Langston dropped his bucket. “Christ. Ain’t there a better way to do this?”

Raymond shook his head. “Not if you wanna save the head.”

“No disrespect, but I seen Arvey kill a hog a lot cleaner than this. Shot him square in the head. I tasted the cheese myself. Top notch.”

The tongue—damn the tongue. “Quiet, now.”

The farmhand sat the slop bucket on the ground and rubbed his face with the soiled rag. “What you have in store for this farm? I got a kid in Mississippi needs money for shoes, and I ain’t got one nickel to send.”

Cut out the nigger’s tongue and force it down the throat.

“Carrington’s coming along real nice. You been to the post office, yet? My wife says I should carry mail. I could do it, you know. Or work at the train station or Arvey’s shop. A young man’s got options.”

Most of the workers didn’t stay more than a few months, so Raymond rarely bothered learning their names. Whites tended to stay longer, but in the farm’s current situation, he couldn’t afford them.

Everything hinged on the city of Brenner. If the deal went through, he could afford more workers—better workers. If it didn’t, the bank would take everything within the year. Langston would carry on to other farms. He’d pick cotton or corn or wheat or whatever he pleased. He’d continue patching his shoes with money leeches away from the next poor farmer down the road, until he too went bankrupt.

Sampson’s cries became faint, and she collapsed onto the dirt floor. Raymond and Langston stepped inside the pen and hooked the carcass to a pulley anchored to the barn’s ceiling. As they hoisted her up, blood pooled from her throat and mouth. Raymond sliced open her stomach. It was cool enough that steam poured over him as he reached his hands inside. “Warm,” he whispered. “You can still feel her power.” Langston watched. “Clean her up, salt her down, and get her to the smoke house.”

Though Raymond had repainted the porch just months before, the white was already stained with mud. As Raymond walked up the steps, he noticed the top one bend beneath his weight. His father had built their house years before, just after they arrived. Raymond was only a boy at the time, but his father used him like a man. Every piece of wood in the house had passed through his hands. The house was one

story with a small attic above and a basement below, but as the farm grew, he hoped the house might as well. He'd leave the sanding to others now. He could hear Charlene preparing the previous day's kill in the kitchen. Daniel played with the dog behind the house. The workers had retired to their rooms. The buyers from Brenner would arrive soon.

He pulled his stool to the edge of the porch and sat down, carefully balancing himself on its back legs. He stared out across the farm looking for any sign of movement along the road. Woodpile's getting low, he thought. After this mess was sorted out, he'd take an axe behind the place and cut more. This time, Daniel would go with him. He needed to learn a skill. He spent too much of his time behind the house with the dog. But he entertained no illusions of Daniel ever taking over the farm. Daniel was eleven now, and he'd never held an axe—or even a knife. He'd shown no interest in that or anything else. He could barely manage to dress himself without the supervision of his mother.

Charlene stepped outside. “Anything?”

“No. The pie?”

“Cooling. But you needn't worry about the pie.”

“Oh yeah? What need I worry about then?”

“Your filthy hogs.”

Raymond scratched his face. “I got any cigars left in my cabinet?”

“I ain't eatin' that meat. You hear me? I won't embarrass you in front of these men, but there is something wrong with our hogs. It's why Arvey won't do business with us anymore. The meat's making people sick.”

Raymond sat up. "Get me a cigar." Charlene went inside and quickly returned with the cigar. Raymond pulled a match from his shirt pocket and struck it on the wooden bannister. The cigar tasted old. "Daniel and I was talkin' earlier."

"He told me what you said."

Raymond stood up and turned to Charlene. She backed toward the door. "You got some illusions about things, I think." He flicked the ashes at Charlene's bare feet.

"You're one to talk."

He raised his hand to silence her. "You come from good stock. That's what your father said. Remember?"

"Our family's been here a lot longer than yours. I can tell you that."

"You're always tellin' people you got *family in Maine* like that's supposed to mean somethin' to folks in Missouri." He gripped her hips, pinning her against the door, and spoke softly into her ear. "Like you think if we lose this farm, you'll just trot on back up to your daddy and leave this whole place behind."

Charlene squirmed, but Raymond's hold was firm. "Nothing is working out the way you planned," she said. "No one wants your dirty hogs. These men are trying to play you for a fool."

He shook his head. "No. I don't think so." He puffed at the cigar and blew the smoke in her face.

Charlene tore herself from his grip.

He turned back to the road and watched for an approaching wagon.

The buyers' wagon arrived soon after. One of the men was tall, heavy-set, and wearing a poncho that looked to be woven from old burlap sacks. The other was a small man wearing a heavily used tailored jacket, a dingy white shirt, and gold cuff links. The heavy-set gentleman introduced himself as H.R. He was the head of the butchers' union in Brenner, and the smaller man, Mr. Harris, was his accountant. Mr. Harris carried a small leather bag, but between them, they packed no other luggage. "Not staying the night? How far a trip is Brenner?" Raymond asked.

The two gentlemen looked at each other in search of an answer. "We've got matters in the morning," H.R. said. "Our driver is prepared to drive through the night to catch the last train."

"Well I don't want to keep you then. Let's go inside. Tell your driver he's welcome to join us."

H.R. shook his head. "He prefers to stay in the wagon."

Raymond looked to the driver for confirmation, but got no response. "Fine," he said, and led them through the yard and toward the house. He started to direct their attention to the barn as they passed, but they seemed uninterested in anything beyond their private mumblings. Raymond opened the front door and asked that they have a seat at the table. H.R. and Mr. Harris sat beside each other, while Raymond took the seat across from them. The house was scented with a mixture of fried meat and baked apples. Raymond hoped the men were pleased. "Shame you didn't make it earlier. In the light, we could have toured the farm."

H.R. chuckled. "What sort of novelty does your farm hold that I haven't seen dozens of times before?"

Raymond stared into the floor. “I suppose that’s right. Can we get you gentlemen some water?”

H.R. tossed his hat on the wooden rocking chair across the room. “Have anything stronger?”

“Fraid not. I’ve never been much for that stuff.”

Mr. Harris sat his leather bag atop the table. “No problem, H.R. I’ve got just the thing.” He pulled out a bottle of whiskey and two shot glasses. “May I tempt you sir?” he asked Raymond.

“We don’t drink in this house.”

“I’ll take his share,” H.R. chuckled.

“Sirs, I ask you to please respect the rules of this house.”

Mr. Harris ignored the plea and poured two shots. Drink. Drink. Two more. “For sipping,” he said.

They had already smelled of whiskey when they walked in. Raymond excused himself from the table to check the food. Next to the stove, Charlene had arranged five plates in a line, each topped with a freshly cooked butt steak. Five plates—one for all of them. While Charlene fried the potatoes, Raymond whispered into her ear from behind, “Thank you.”

“Potatoes are nearly done,” she said but didn’t turn around. Raymond walked back to the table and sat down.

Mr. Harris rubbed his eyes. “Would you like to do a little business, H.R.?”

“I had hoped to wait ‘til after dinner, but I’m afraid we *are* pressed.”

Raymond sipped his water. “I am eager to get started.”

“Mr. Kelley, I believe rumors are best dispelled in person.” Whiskey dribbled down H.R.’s chin.

“Rumors...”

Mr. Harris rested his elbows on the table. “You’re aware?”

Raymond turned his head to the kitchen. “Charlene!” She appeared quickly in the doorway. “How many cigars I got left?”

“One.”

“Bring it to me. I’ll smoke it now.”

Charlene marched past the table to their bedroom. They waited in silence until she returned with Raymond’s last cigar. He bit the end and spit it on the table. It crunched like dead oak leaves in his mouth. He pulled a match from his shirt pocket and struck it against the table’s leg. The cigar lit immediately.

H.R. coughed. “I believe your cigar has expired.”

Raymond stared at H.R. and inhaled deeply. He held it there, letting the smoke burn his lungs, and then blew it across the table. “Say what you came to say.”

Mr. Harris scratched lightly at the table’s surface. “People say your meat is tainted.”

Raymond smiled for the first time all day. “Tainted with what?”

“We don’t know.”

“Who told you that? Clemons?”

“We’ve heard from multiple—”

“Clemons is just trying to snake my business. Any one could see that...”

H.R. interrupted. “Mr. Kelley, we have not spoken to Mr. Clemons. We have no interest in doing business with Clemons. He doesn’t have your capacity. You know, even in these times of economic despair, they say Brenner is expanding faster than Chicago? Can you imagine?”

“I’ve heard it said.”

“So far, farmers have largely been immune to the crisis.”

Raymond cut him off. “Nobody’s immune to homeless niggers begging for food, stealing any and everything, and doing God knows what else. I turned away two just last week. Covered in mites.”

“Largely, I said. But who’s to say tomorrow won’t be different? What your town needs is stability. As the saying goes, a whole pie can feed the house, and we want Carrington to have a thumb in Brenner’s pie.” Finally reaching his limit, H.R. pushed his shot glass to the side. “When exactly did your family settle down here? You’re originally from Oshkinosh, right?”

Raymond blasted another cloud of smoke in his direction. This time, H.R. seemed to enjoy it. “What about it?”

H.R. smiled. “You know my daddy had a small place in Oshkinosh? It was probably just about the time your daddy had his shop down there.”

Raymond again drew from his cigar, his face still. “Is that right?”

“Your father was a butcher, was he not?”

“He was.”

“Seems likely my daddy must have bought a roast from your daddy back in the day. Can you believe that?”

“Hard to say.”

“Now here we are: two grown men of business, and my family’s *still* looking to buy a roast from your family. In a sense, anyways. Funny how things work out.”

H.R. leaned back in his chair. “Seeing you smoke that cigar has given me a real craving.”

“Sorry sir. This was my last.”

“We brought our own,” Mr. Harris explained. He pulled one from the bag and handed it to H.R. “I’m saving mine ‘til after dinner.”

H.R. held the cigar next to his mouth. His left hand appeared from beneath the poncho holding a silver cutter. With a magician’s grace, he clipped the cigar, returned the cutter to its pocket, and with the same hand, struck a match and lit the new end. He drew from it slowly, savoring the smoke just a moment too long. “Smells like cherries don’t it?” As he spoke, the smoke drifted lazily across the table and into Raymond’s eyes. “Better than that compost you’re used to, I’m sure.”

Raymond’s cigar had gone out.

“There are men who’ll swear that your meat nearly killed their children with fever. Rumors, I’m sure.” said Mr. Harris.

Raymond leaned back in his chair. “Why are you here?”

Mr. Harris sipped the whiskey. “We are not men of the cloth, Mr. Kelley. We are businessmen, just like yourself. We see an opportunity and we exploit it. The bank’s got you in a bit of a bind, don’t it?”

Raymond crossed his arms but didn’t respond.

“We figured you just might be in a position to negotiate—compromise, say.”

“Out with it then.”

“We’ve got a buyer who’ll take your farm, hogs, and crew all at 10% above loan value. Give you room to breathe.”

H.R. continued. “This is a fair piece of property, Mr. Kelley, but you just ain’t the man to run it. You’ve got this place in such a mess that no man will come near it for fear of catching the plague. This is your chance to start over. Find a line of work without as much... baggage.”

Charlene appeared from inside the kitchen carrying a large platter of fried potatoes and placed it on the table. “Dinner’s ready.”

“Tell Daniel to come inside,” Raymond said.

Charlene came from the kitchen carrying five plates atop her arms. Each plate held a large slice of meat with a thick bone stretching across the middle.

H.R. continued to smoke. “I’m almost afraid to ask, but what are we having?”

“Butt steak. From one of my best.”

Mr. Harris studied his portion. “Why not chops?”

“Or even a roast,” suggested H.R.

Mr. Harris finished his whiskey and sat the glass aside. “Or better yet, a sausage.”

Raymond slapped the table. “Christ.”

Charlene went back to the kitchen and returned for a final time with a pot of polk greens and a pan of cornbread. “That’s everything.”

Raymond pulled a chair back from the table. "Sit down then." Charlene did as instructed but never took her eyes away from the table. "I'll say grace." Raymond loosely folded his hands, bowed his head, and in a single breath recited the Lord's Prayer. H.R.'s cigar remained in his mouth. Raymond picked up the pan of potatoes, scooped a pile onto his plate, and passed them to Daniel. "These greens look pretty fair."

Mr. Harris laughed. "I suspect even the greens are flavored with your animals."

Raymond picked up his fork and shoveled a helping of greens directly into his mouth. As he spoke, bits of polk spewed over his plate. "Taste as fair as they look." Everyone else sat still. "Now gentlemen, you don't eat your greens, you can't have any pie. And Charlene here makes a mean one: apple." He looked at Charlene, but she was still focused on the table. "Eat," he said.

She shook her head. "I'm not hungry."

"Yes you are." He tried to grab her shoulder but she pulled away.

He lowered his head. "Five plates and five steaks. Enough for everybody." He mixed a few potatoes in with his greens and took another bite. "Why not chops, Mr. Harris? Anyone can eat and understand the appeal of a chop. Thick or thin, juicy or dry, tender or tough, it's a solid chunk of meat. You pick it up." Raymond mimed the action with his hands. "And you eat it and it tastes just fine. Every time. The shoulder, though. That's the poor man's cut." With his fork, he dragged the steak to the center of his plate. "Too much gristle and bone. No pattern to it. Just there. And everywhere." He picked up his knife and cut a layer of fat off the side and put it in his mouth. "You work, but the work pays off. It's the gristle that gives the lean its flavor. Without the

gristle, without the bone, without the work, you'd have nothing but a dry piece of pig jerky. You'd have a chop."

H.R. chuckled and pushed his plate toward the center of the table. "Sounds like you share your daddy's affinity for horseshit."

Fat dripping through his beard, meat stuck between his teeth, Raymond looked to his son. He paused. Knife and fork on the table. He nearly touched him, but that would be too much. "Son, eat your meat."

Charlene shook her head. "Raymond, this is your business," she started to say, but he stopped her.

"Come on, son." Daniel picked at the steak with his fork but hesitated to cut through the tissue. The fork tapped the bone. Again. Again. In rhythm. *Thud. Thud.* Not hollow but dead. Dull. Raymond's hand touched Daniel's shoulder. Stop, he thought. And Daniel stopped. Raymond tightened his grip only slightly. Eat the pork. With his left hand, Daniel picked up the knife and, mimicking his father, sliced a layer of fat from the side, and pushed it to the edge of his plate.

"I don't like the fat."

Raymond closed his mouth and swallowed. Dry. "Skin starts to crack this time of year."

Daniel nodded as if he understood, and cut a small piece from around the bone. But Daniel's hands didn't crack—not now, not any other time of the year. His flesh was smooth. The fat of his mother's milk seeped through his pores. Daniel held the meat to his lips. Moist. Moldy. Sour. Raymond could smell him. The meat moved through his lips and settled in his mouth. He chewed slowly as the fat around his

cheeks throbbed and squirmed. It begged to be free. Raymond could take his knife, the same knife that bled out Sampson. He'd run the knife right across Daniel's cheek and white pillows of fat would fall into his hands. Just one cut. His eyes glaze. They stare ahead at nothing. They consider nothing. They understand nothing. Moist. Dull. *Thud. Thud.* Cut them out. Cut out the tongue. Stop the squirming. Stop the chewing. Head and arms useless. Cut him at the knees and work up. Fat and bone. Cut again. More fat and bone. Finally, Daniel swallows. Cut him wide open. See Sampson pass. The power is gone—wasted. Sampson is waste. Daniel is waste. Cannot hold the axe, the knife. Even the fork barely clings to his hand. Another bite. Sampson is erased...gently.

“Thank you, son,” he says—ashamed, because he is not thankful. He feels the sludge coursing through his intestines. Heavy. They rot. Raymond smiles, but he cannot hold the rot inside. He tells him to eat more. Eat quickly. Chew. Swallow. Now. Daniel tries. The meat is too tough, but he chews more—harder. Eat it all, Raymond says, and Daniel does. He does it for Raymond. He hates the fat, but he eats it: his final bite. Still, Raymond is not pleased. He stands up. The rot spills out.

Three nights later, Raymond awoke to a silent house. The rain had cleared a few hours before, and the winds softly rippled through the oak and cedar surrounding the farm. It was dark but clear. Raymond threw his dampened quilt on the floor. Using the chair's arm as a brace, Raymond slowly propped himself into a standing position. The cold air had made his knees stiff. Blood rushed to his head and clouded his vision; patiently, he waited for the distortions to pass. Though the windows were

open, Raymond still smelled the rot festering on the table from a week before. He could work the rest of his life to remove the rot—wipe it off, sand it down, paint over it—but it would never leave.

An impulse carried him through the door and outside into the front yard. Raymond hadn't changed his clothes in days, but he hardly cared. The fever made it difficult to even walk. It wasn't just a fever though. The poison still tainted Raymond's blood. He assumed he'd die within days. A heavy layer of frost covered the ground; the grass crunched beneath Raymond's thick, leather boots. He heard the hogs stirring behind the barn and wondered when last they'd eaten. The farmhands were gone. Charlene had been gone for two days—Daniel a day more. Raymond supposed the meat had killed him. "Better feed the hogs," he mumbled.

The cold tore through Raymond. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but his walk continued. The sun rose from behind the barn. Its warmth guided him forward. The hogs rustled. Coming, he wanted to say, but his mouth was too dry. The fence that ran around the pen was built a year after his father had passed. Like the porch, it had fallen into disrepair. Sampson had broken through the section furthest from the barn just before he moved her inside. He patched it up as best he could, but Raymond never had his father's knack for construction. The patch had already given way to the anxious livestock. A few had escaped but most remained.

Raymond opened his eyes and pulled his father's hatchet off the stump. Years before—when they had chickens—they used it to kill the hens that stopped laying. They'd make stew. He rubbed the blade. It rusted on his thumb. Leaning over the

fence, he counted at least twenty pigs and smiled. Bank thinks they're gettin' forty.
He climbed the gate and perched himself on top, holding the hatchet in his right hand.

I got something inside me that's coming out. In my blood. My hands. Demons
got an affinity for swine, sayeth the Lord.

He smiled briefly at his own joke.

The cowards have gone, and only the faithful remain.

He gasped for air and grabbed the post for support.

I ain't leaving here. Hear me? If the bank is gonna take my land, my home,
and my hogs... Did the Negro feed you before he left? Imagine not. No ownership of
nothin'. Left to chew at your own flesh.

Raymond laid his left hand over the top of the post.

They take everything and leave nothing behind.

He tried to spit on the barren soil, but nothing came out.

They'll rape this place my father built. He lives in this soil. *We* live in this soil.

Raymond held the hatchet above his head for only a moment, because there
was no need to hesitate. He brought it down on his wrist as swiftly as he could
manage. The blade struck the bone but couldn't break through. He screamed—
couldn't breathe—but he didn't allow the pain to overtake his reason. The job was
unfinished. Again, he held the blade over his head and hacked at the joint binding his
hand to his body. The bone broke—he heard it... could see the blood, but the hand
dangled. Raymond fell forward off the gate and onto the dirt below. He barely noticed
the impact of his body hitting the ground, but he was too conscious to fade. The
hatchet fell outside his reach. He'd not get another chance.

His blood watered the earth. The hogs gathered.