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THE LOST FATHERS OF THE DEPRESSION

Rebecca Brown Gregory
B.A., Southeast Missouri State University, 2002

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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CREATIVE WRITING

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Advisory Committee

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Abstract of
LOST FATHERS OF THE DEPRESSION
by Rebecca Brown Gregory
A Novel Excerpt and Two Short Stories

This project is a collection of four novel chapters and two short stories, ranging from the tragic to the comic. All feature characters forced to confront and adapt to a changing world. In *The Lost Fathers of the Depression*, a journalist travels to a depressed town to cover the story of a murder-suicide, attributed in part to the recession, only to find himself out of a job. Abby, the main character in “Lake Contrary,” must alter her optimistic worldview when her neighbor’s son returns from Iraq and she becomes entangled with his family. And finally, in “The Last Boy Band,” Chuck resorts to desperate measures after his line of work becomes obsolete.

LOST FATHERS OF THE DEPRESSION

A Novel Excerpt

Chapter One

Bonne-Pomme is a town born of strife. Straddling an ancient railroad, it sits on the opposite side of the Missouri River from Interstate 70, halfway between Columbia and Kansas City. Thousands of drivers pass that stretch of interstate en route from one side of Missouri to the other without reason to stop, unaware that a dwindling population of 8,000 exists tucked there amongst farmland and oak forests. Of the few who do stop, even fewer ever learn the history of the town's founding, not even those who grew up in Bonne-Pomme since it isn't taught in school, not even this year, as locals prepare for its sesquicentennial celebration and parade. But here and there, a grandparent or an aunt or uncle has passed the story down, and if you looked, you would find a small exhibit in the museum in the basement of the Joseph R. Lamonte Library.

In 1859, in a village called Lafayette, a brawl erupted on a Sunday afternoon and spilled out of the local tavern onto the narrow lane in front of the One Tree First Baptist

Church. The cause of the brawl can be traced back to Lucy May Hillman, the unwed daughter of one of Bonne-Pomme's most respected citizens, who had confessed to a cousin that she carried the child of either the married town doctor or Jonas Miller, one of her father's farmhands. She couldn't know for sure, or if she did know, she never said. Her father received this information secondhand from Louis Bertrand, the tavern owner—how he knew is lost to history—while enjoying an irreverent after-church whiskey. Jonas had the bad luck to have come to the tavern that same afternoon and sat on the opposite side of the bar. When the fight broke out, a few of the patrons took up with Jonas, but most took up with Lucy May's father. No one knows for sure who threw the first punch, but by the end of the day, Lucy May's reputation as the town hussy had been settled, the Hillman family reputation sullied, and Jonas Miller's life ended by a crudely broken chair leg to the skull.

A town meeting convened the following day at which the town's strongest proponent of Sunday prohibition laws delivered a stirring speech, the conclusion being that if no liquor had been served that day, the whole fiasco might have been avoided, and no blood would have been shed on the front church steps. The town council passed the new law within the week. Louis Bertrand, on the other hand, maintained that the events could only truly have been prevented if Lucy May had kept her legs closed, and before the year ended, he had gathered enough signatures to charter a new town with its border at the east side of Lafayette, where his tavern sat, and he named the town Bonne-Pomme.

Eventually, Bonne-Pomme outgrew Lafayette, and in 1927, annexed the smaller village. To this day, a modest iron cross marks the spot in front of One Tree First Baptist

Church where Jonas Miller had crawled to rest his bloodied head for the last time. It was placed there according to the wishes of Lucy May Hillman, as instructed in her will, so long had she regretted all that happened that infamous Sunday. “I never meant to split the town in two,” her granddaughter recalled her saying.

Frannie Moorland had lived in Bonne-Pomme her whole life, long enough to have heard this story at least a dozen times, and to have repeated it a time or two herself. Her family once owned the hundred or so acres beneath the Prairie Hills subdivision, and the half-acre parcel of land beneath her modest ranch-style home was now the only land in town with the Moorland name attached to it. Sometimes it pained her to think that her great grandparents must have imagined their hundred-acre spread would always pass from generation to generation, and that she had finally traded it all in for comfort and convenience. With money from the sale, she could have afforded one of the more expensive houses in the back of the subdivision, one of the brick mini-estates that lined a man-made lake with a fountain in the middle that spurted water sporadically. But she had instead selected one of the smaller, more generic floor plans on Plum Creek Court. Partly out of guilt, and partly because it reminded her of the simple two-bedroom home she had grown up in, and then returned to with her husband Wilbur. He had passed almost ten years ago.

Tonight, she sat in the swing of her screened porch, her two pudgy legs, bruised in spots like pears, dangling so that her toes occasionally touched the cold wood floorboards and then pushed off again to propel the swing forward and back. Her hair, thin and dull

gray, was pinned back at the temple with tiny silver barrettes that made her appear childlike from a distance. She held a cup--the saucer in her lap--filled with coffee and a splash of bourbon. The night was unseasonably cool for late August and she rocked in time to the gentle whoosh and hum of cars on the highway and crickets so loud and fervent they threatened to drown out even the traffic. Frannie claimed to be of an age at which sleep was a luxury not easily attained, and so she had gotten into the habit of sitting out here late into the night. This house sat in place of the woods she once navigated with her sister --so mysterious and untamed only fifty years ago. Now they had been laid open and flooded with motion-sensing lights and the din of televisions sets and stereos. She fancied that some of the older oaks still stood in the wooded common ground. But the scrawny pear trees that lined her street were a poor replacement.

Frannie was acquainted with the sound of a gun. She had shot a rifle herself on several occasions, taught by her father to scare off coyotes and whatever it was that terrorized the chickens every summer, and she kept one under her bed ever since Wilbur passed. So she understood the sound she heard to be two gunshots, and it wasn't even that strange to hear such a thing out here at night, just on the outskirts of town, shoulder to shoulder with the country. What confused her, what gave her pause, was that the sound seemed to come from right there in the cul-de-sac. And not just from the cul-de-sac, but from inside her neighbor's house.

Frannie met Brian and Lisa when they were still hauling boxes into their new house from the back of Brian's pickup. Lisa was just twenty-one then, and she was striking with her thick brown curls and a tiny figure that Frannie fretted over. Eat, girl,

she'd chided her, eat. Lisa also descended from a prominent Bonne-Pomme family, though not one Frannie particularly cared for—a fact she never held against Lisa. Brian had been a little rougher around the edges, she thought, though he'd changed a little over the last four years. He had a gentle voice, but he hardly ever spoke when he didn't have to. Frannie learned most of what she knew about him from Lisa, who occasionally joined her on the screened porch or asked for gardening advice—though she never seemed to benefit from it. Frannie met their young son Ryan later. Frannie recalled that he had celebrated his eighth birthday in February, an affair for which Brian and Lisa spared no expense, renting an inflatable bouncing tent and inviting, it seemed, every child in Bonne-Pomme. When she was his age, Frannie could have never imagined such a thing. But she adored Ryan, would have taken him as her own. And then two years ago, Emily had been born, and Frannie had been one of the first to hold her when Brian and Lisa brought her home from the hospital. She had a bottomless amount of affection for that family, and really everyone in Prairie Hills. She still considered this land her land in a sense, and every resident as taken into her fold.

The gun shots had interrupted the rhythm of her rocking. She should check on things, but she remembered she was hardly dressed in her housecoat and bare feet. Anyway, she couldn't trust her ears well enough anymore to gauge distance. Everything was more than likely just fine. She pushed off the ground with her foot and relaxed back into the swing. Then she heard two more shots. And then another.

Earlier in the evening, Cassie Miller had turned into the subdivision with

trepidation, greeted by a stone entrance sign etched with the silhouette of a pioneer woman, her loose hair blowing back and converging into a cursive 'P'. Unaccustomed to this side of town, she was overly conscious of the state of her little hatchback car, marred here and there by dents and spots of rust. When she parked in front of Brian and Lisa's house, she felt slightly relieved. Not quite as big as she recalled. She hadn't visited since the first few months they'd lived there, and even then only briefly, but the house had loomed large in her mind.

Even though Lisa had promised to call after they ran into each other by chance at Wal-Mart last week, Cassie had no reason to expect she would. It had been so long that Cassie had pushed her cart past Lisa before she recognized her. It was the straight as an arrow posture that gave her away. And sure enough, when she stopped her cart there in front of the glue and crayons, and glanced back, it was her old friend. The clothes had confused her. Lisa wore an oversized t-shirt over track pants and her hair hung limply down her back--not the Lisa she had known. She picked up two boxes of crayons, pretended to compare the color assortment in each and debated whether to say anything. And then Lisa had touched her elbow, her fingers light and cold.

“Cass,” she had said, drawing out the 's' in her faint lisp. “What on earth have you been up to?”

And she'd wondered how to answer such a question when they both knew what she'd been up to. Same thing as always. In some ways, it was easier to meet new people and start over from scratch, then to try to explain the gaps in time, to reconcile who you had been with who you had become. And so they'd gone their separate ways, Lisa

promising to call, and Cassie indifferent to the fact that she most likely never would. But then she had, an hour ago, saying, “Come on over. You can bring Lilly and we can have a drink.”

When she rang the doorbell, she heard Lisa's voice from within, “It isn't locked.”

She stood in the living room with its imposing fireplace that stretched from the floor to the vaulted ceiling, a shock of red paint on one wall, two wine glasses filled and set out on the coffee table. “My mother-in-law cleaned yesterday. You should have seen this place before. Disgusting.” She was uncharacteristically self-deprecating. “You didn't bring Lilly.”

“No, my stepmom watches her while I work,” Cassie said. She still wore her work clothes and they smelled like diner. “It really helps me out. You heard about Kyle, right?”

“I heard.” This wasn't the Lisa she had encountered at Wal-Mart, but still not the one she had known. Now she wore a French blue oxford tucked into smooth khaki pants. Her hair was swept up into a knot, though it had begun to slip loose. The Lisa she had known flaunted snug jeans and cut-off tank tops. She sat down in a leather armchair and reached down to tug her suede boots off. “I put the kids to bed early. Relax, drink your drink.”

“You're so dressed up,” Cassie said. She sat on the sofa, and picked nervously at a scab on her elbow.

“Oh this outfit? This isn't even me. No, I had to go see my mom about something.”

“How is she?”

“Same bitch as always,” Lisa laughed.

Cassie laughed too, relaxing into the sofa a little now. “I guess it's good that some things never change.” She had always hated Suzanne because Suzanne had never liked her, always seemed at the ready to make her the scapegoat for all of Lisa's wrongdoings. Because her family didn't have enough money, she was the bad influence on Lisa, not the other way around.

“I'm glad you're here,” Lisa said, but she wasn't looking at Cassie. She stared into her wine glass, swirling the liquid gently around inside. Cassie noticed then how tired she looked. And she remembered that the plant where Brian worked had closed, and she felt guilty for thinking Lisa a snob, for thinking she had everything. In her jealousy, she hadn't considered that they probably lived from paycheck to paycheck. And though it was nicer than Cassie's, this was just a house, newer perhaps than her parents' but no better.

“Brian's been in Kansas City putting in applications all day.” Lisa said. “It gets so quiet in this house.”

“I know the feeling,” Cassie said. For a time, right after high school, she had felt that she and Lisa were on the same playing field.

“I've been thinking about when we were all young lately,” Lisa said. “Do you remember the first time we hung out? You were so shy and so awkward. Those glasses! I didn't think you liked me at first.”

Cassie felt self consciously thirteen again. “Well, I was a little scared of you.” She sipped her red wine slowly. She hardly ever drank wine and could hardly bear the taste of it, but she didn't want to say so.

“Ha,” Lisa said. “Remember how I borrowed my mom's convertible and we cruised up and down Main Street with the top down in January?”

“Cruising Main Street. That right there is the reason we should have moved away when we had the chance.” Cassie recalled the bitter cold whipping her hair into a bird's nest and dust catching in her eyes and making her cry black tears. “You taught me how to put on eyeliner that night.”

“That's right.” Lisa took a gulp of wine and held it in her mouth for a long time before swallowing. Light from a table lamp shone through the glass and cast a kaleidoscope of maroon and gold on her cheek. “What would you have done without me?”

“You told me I looked like Ozzy Osbourne when we got back.”

“Because your make-up was all smeared.” Her shoulders quaked with a whinny of laughter. Color had returned to her cheeks, and she didn't look as tired. “And your hair. I wish I had taken a picture.”

“And you told your mom it was my fault that we were out past curfew.” The memory of what it was like to spend time with Lisa came back to Cassie. She had the power to make people feel chosen just by turning her attention to them.

“Have another glass of wine,” Lisa said.

Cassie wanted to leave. “I don't know.”

Lisa leaned forward and poured it anyway, then hooked her arm around Cassie's neck and kissed the top of her head. “I missed you, Cass. We let it get too long. We shouldn't have done that.”

“I tried calling so many times,” Cassie said. “I never felt good about the way things ended.”

“I didn’t call you here to talk about that. It took me a long time to realize it, but I was the one who messed up.”

Cassie realized then that Lisa looked tired. She had partially slumped over the arm of her chair and she stared at her friend as if waiting for something. There may have been a time in their relationship, years ago, when she could have guessed what Lisa wanted, but that time was long gone. The weight of Lisa’s melancholy bore down on Cassie until she could only think of escape routes.

“Listen, my stepmom has to work in the morning, so I can’t stay.” Lisa would know she was lying—they knew each other that well—but she was ready to finally cut whatever invisible thread still held them together. “Thank you for the wine. And for inviting me over.”

“Oh. Sure, of course,” Lisa said. “I’ll walk you out.”

“You can call me if you want to.” They hugged at the door. Cassie drove home with her stomach in knots, replaying the conversation over and over again in her head, trying to disassemble the conversation into parts so she could identify exactly what had happened. It would be years before she stopped reconstructing that night.

Around the same time, Wesley Scott sat at Riley's in the town square, agitated because his wife had called the bar looking for him. When his cellular service had been disconnected last month, he felt almost relieved. Deborah called several times a day—

can you pick up formula at the store? Did you remember to check in at the unemployment office? Will you check your e-mail when you get home, I forwarded this video of a cat stuck in a trash can and, honey, you will just die. But he'd much rather field calls on his cell than watch Maurice answer the phone, and then hold it out to him with a smirk, saying "It's your boss." This time she just wanted to know when to expect him, and he told her he would be home in an hour and he meant it, because as much as a nuisance as she could be, he loved that woman.

"Where would I be without her?" he said to Brian Prouhaus, who sat in the bar stool next to him. Brian had been at the bar since Wes arrived, dressed in what Wes recognized as his interview clothes, a polo shirt tucked into khaki pants with polished work boots. "She just makes me crazy."

Brian nodded. "Lisa's the same way."

"To the nags of our lives," Wes said, holding up his beer mug, and then took a drink when Brian made no motion to raise his.

Both had worked at Sherman-Stiles until it closed in June. Prior to shutting down, it had been the pride of Bonne-Pomme and one of the largest upholstery manufacturers in North America. If you were unlucky enough to get stuck in town for your whole life, at least you could hope for a pretty decent and steady job at the plant. Most of its employees had never held jobs anywhere else, going straight from the halls of the high school to the factory floor, occasionally with a stint in the military in between.

When James Sherman and Ronald Stiles founded the company in 1901, in a building near the river, they crafted saddles and interiors for horse-drawn carriages and

only entered the automobile market in 1934. Stiles never married and left behind no descendants, but Jimmy Sherman's family still resided in Bonne-Pomme. In fact, his son lived in the Prairie Hills subdivision and it was he who sold the company to CalAent, the mega-corporation that eventually shut the plant down. Sometimes Wes wanted to go stomping up the long driveway to the Sherman's mini-mansion with its pretentious stone facade and give the brat a piece of his mind.

Brian said. "I can't be in that house. The way Lisa looks at me."

"Well, she ought to get a job," Wes said. He scratched at his sideburns which he'd allowed to grow thick and bushy. "Deborah's doing secretarial stuff for that attorney."

"She's tried."

"Something's going to come."

"No," Brian said. He stared into the mirror behind the bar. A car's headlights shone through the glass block windows into the darkened bar and reflected onto his face.

"Why don't you ask those parents of hers for some money," Wes said. "No shame in that. They're rolling in it anyway. Should've offered it already if you ask me."

Everyone knew or knew of Lisa's family, the Moriartys. The fact that Lisa had grown up with money was half of Brian's problem. Lisa had become accustomed to a certain lifestyle, and Brian worked hard to give her the life she wanted. When he couldn't work any harder, they borrowed. Wes and Deborah had been invited to a barbecue at the Prouhaus's once, and Deborah had been shocked to learn that both men earned the same salary. Somebody's living high on the hog, she said on the way home.

Brian shook his head. "No, I won't. Not now."

Wes checked the bar clock, subtracted fifteen minutes. “One more beer, Maury,” he said to the bartender. “For me and him both.”

Of that night, Wes recalled that he had not kept his promise to his wife. He stumbled home three hours later than he said. His only excuse was that he just sensed something was wrong with Brian, something he couldn't put his finger on. Not that he sounded angry or violent or anything like that. Others would say that Brian had been more withdrawn, perhaps even moodier than normal. Wes would say they were all wrong, that it was nothing so obvious. And besides, nobody in Bonne-Pomme had been their normal selves for a long time.

Lisa Prouhaus had asked her parents for money. Earlier that day, she had gotten out of the t-shirt and track pants that had become her uniform of late, and dressed in the French blue oxford, blazer, and khaki slacks that her mother had given her last Christmas. She arrived at the brick, gingerbread-style house in the part of town formerly known as Lafayette around noon.

Suzanne didn't answer the door right away. She had been vacuuming one of the upstairs bedrooms and thought she'd heard the doorbell, but it sounded so faint and distant over the steady roar of the vacuum that she thought it could be her imagination. When she heard it the second time, she clicked the machine off with the ball of her foot and walked downstairs, preparing to defend her home against Mormons, or worse the candy bar kids. The ones who said they were selling them for their school fundraiser, but she suspected pocketed the money themselves.

When she finally opened the door, she was relieved to find her youngest daughter. But the relief turned to a different kind of defensiveness when she saw how Lisa was dressed. Suzanne knew immediately that she wanted something. Probably money.

“Hi mom,” Lisa said, and she smiled but the smile struck Suzanne as desperate.

“What a surprise,” Suzanne said, hugging her daughter with one arm, the other holding the screen door open. The shoulder of Lisa's blazer caved slightly against Suzanne. Too thin. “I was just about to make lunch. Why don't you join me?”

Lisa hesitated but finally agreed after they stood on the porch in an awkward silence.

“Well, come on in then. Come on.” Suzanne's Westhighland Terrier, Harry, had crept up behind her and she nudged him back into the house.

Suzanne and Lisa stepped together into the sunlit kitchen. It had once been cramped and dated, but last year Michael finally gave in on a full remodel, and they had added an addition with a solarium. For years, she and her three daughters had tripped over one another in that kitchen, baking, washing dishes. She recalled that she had done a lot of yelling in those days. Now, she removed sandwich bread, turkey, and mayonnaise from the stainless steel refrigerator and arranged them in a row on the counter. She took plates out of the cabinet and piled two slices of bread on each. It occurred to her that since the remodel, she hardly ever actually cooked.

“I'm not really hungry. I'll just watch you,” Lisa said.

“Nonsense.” She took an avocado from a brown paper bag and sat it on a cutting board with a knife. “Here, you do this part. Now, tell me about my grandkids. You never

bring them over here. How's Ryan doing in school?"

"Fine," she said. "Good." She turned the avocado over in her hands, examining it as if she wasn't sure where to cut.

"Give it to me," Suzanne said after a minute and then sliced it herself. "You're on your way to an interview then?"

"An interview?"

"Oh, you're so dressed up. I thought you must be on your way somewhere."

Lisa looked down. "I just feel like dressing up every once in a while."

"Okay," Suzanne said. She carried the finished sandwiches to the little glass-top table in the solarium. "Get yourself whatever you want to drink."

Lisa sat down across from her and looked down at the sandwich.

"What? You want me to cut the crust off, too?" Suzanne spoke only to her youngest daughter this way. The elder girls, one an attorney in Kansas City and one a graduate student at Columbia, actually intimidated her at times. They seemed already wiser and more worldly than their mother. Lisa had always been the difficult one. It was easier for Suzanne to think of her as the bratty, insolent child she'd once been, even though she was twenty-four. Could a daughter hurt a mother any more than this one had? Well, somehow, these days, she had built up an immunity.

"You're thinking of Andrea, mom. I like crust."

Suzanne bit into her sandwich delicately. She was ready to hear it, whatever it was that Lisa wanted. "You're going to have to tell me what brings you here. You never just stop by."

“Neither do you,” Lisa said. She sat with her elbow on the table, gazing out into the backyard, tugging at her earlobe, a habit Suzanne hated. “It’s okay. Here’s the thing, me and Brian are just a little short on money right now.”

“I’m aware, Lisa, and I’m very sorry,” Suzanne said, sitting her sandwich on the plate. She dabbed her mouth with a napkin and it clung to her lipstick. “Any time you need to talk about it, I’m here. You never do call.”

“I’m sorry, mom. Brian doesn’t even know I’m here. He would be so embarrassed.”

“Look, Lisa, you’re asking me for money. I want to give it to you,” Suzanne said. She’d been thinking of her response even as soon as she opened the front door. “First of all, I don’t have money to give you. Don’t worry, your father and I are fine, but everything is tied up in accounts we just don’t have access to right now. Secondly, you know that your father and I have given you a lot. Perhaps it’s time for you and Brian to step up to the plate. Get a job. Sell the house and buy something more modest. I said that house was too much for you.”

“Mom,” Lisa said. The word came out softly, as if she’d lost her voice. “We’ll pay it back.”

“You’ve never paid a dime back to me that you’ve claimed you would. But it doesn’t matter. We don’t have the money to lend, so don’t bother going to your dad next.”

Suzanne would carry that conversation with her for a long time. She’d tell herself that she didn’t know all the facts at the time. She didn’t know how bad things really were because Lisa never said. For a long time and perhaps for the rest of her life, she would

remember how Lisa had gotten up from the table, kissed her on the cheek, and set her plate on the floor in front of Harry. She walked out alone. Suzanne would recall how pretty and grownup she had looked in the blazer with her hair twisted into a French knot. She had not begged. She had not pleaded. At that moment, Suzanne had glimpsed a different daughter, a woman that Lisa still could become. Even after she had gotten used to the idea that Lisa could never change. That she would always remain the tempest of her teenage years.

Marie Prouhaus, Brian's mother, had seen the foreclosure notice, tucked haphazardly into the overflowing garbage can in the kitchen. Brian had asked her to babysit Ryan and Emily while they visited friends. She hadn't intended to snoop, but felt compelled to clean the house as a favor to them after the children had fallen asleep. Well, she had already known things were rough, that money was tight. And it wasn't at all like Lisa to keep an untidy house. Usually, her daughter-in-law put her to shame. Now, dirty dishes, pots, and pans caked with old food filled the sink and still more lined the counter tops in precarious stacks. Carrying Emily upstairs to bed, she had noticed the mass of laundry that carpeted the master bedroom floor and tissues that spilled off the nightstand and encroached onto the bed.

In the kitchen, she tugged at the edges of a trash bag to lift it out of the can, but it was too full to tie shut, so she found a second bag and migrated the top layer into it. A tri-folded sheet of paper fluttered out and onto the vinyl floor. She bent to pick it up. Foreclosure proceeding. The two words startled her. The bank logo stood out in bright

blue and red. Marie thought of their first fourth of July in the house. Everyone had come, old high school friends, Brian's work friends, even Lisa's parents who had been so icy to her until Suzanne had a few drinks in her and then both she and Michael had loosened up. Brian stood on the deck, skinny Lisa wrapped in his arms, and all obstacles that had lined up against them disappeared. It no longer mattered that Lisa had gotten pregnant in the eleventh grade. It didn't matter that Brian never went to college because the plant paid him just fine. It didn't matter that Ryan had spent the first few years of his life in a cramped apartment above Riley's on the square. Even the Moriartys seemed proud of them. They had a house with a wide and welcoming front porch, a breakfast nook, a fireplace, a two-car garage. They had everything they needed.

Marie picked up the paper and unfolded it. She noticed the date, July 13. She slid it into the trash bag. She wished she could unsee it. She wished it even still. When they returned home, she hugged Brian, and Lisa, too. Even Lisa, who never welcomed her embraces. Had she anything to give them, she'd have given it all.

Even as Frannie dialed the number for the sheriff, she knew she should have paid more attention to the number and sequence of gunshots. Already, she knew it would be important. She intended to wait until he arrived, but after pacing back and forth on the front porch, she'd decided that at this point in her life, there wasn't much left to be afraid of. So she found her rifle, loaded and hidden beneath her bed, and carried it with her to the Prouhaus's. There was a little distance between the two houses. She crossed through her front yard, the grass cold and damp on her bare feet, and as she approached, she

listened intently for voices inside the house. She looked for strange cars, and though she saw none, she recalled the tiny blonde that had pulled up in a beat-up car earlier in the evening, but that car had left hours before Brian came home. The porch light was on and moths fluttered into it; occasionally a soft, barely audible thud could be heard as they danced against the glass globe.

First she rang the doorbell, and when no one answered, she tried the knob and found the door unlocked. But she didn't open it right away. She walked to the window that looked out onto the porch and peered in. Lisa had hung gauzy white curtains, and beyond them, Frannie could only just make out the shapes and colors of things. No movement inside that she could tell. She walked back to the door, and pushed it open slightly. "Lisa? Brian?" she said, and her own voice sounded hollow reverberating through the house and back to her.

She heard a car pull into the cul-de-sac, and she turned her back on the house to watch it pull into the driveway. It was Daniel Culler. He looked young for a sheriff's deputy, but almost everyone looked young to her these days.

"Mrs. Moorland?" he said. "You said you heard gunshots?"

"Yes, sir." She straightened her housecoat and then smoothed her hair. "I'm sorry. Didn't think I'd be seeing anyone again at this late hour."

"It's Brian and Lisa, correct?"

He sounded so professional, Frannie thought. She had known him since he was a baby, when his family started coming to her church. She fought the urge to straighten his collar, to call him Danny.

He approached the door and— she didn't know why—pulled it shut and knocked loudly. “Mr. and Mrs. Prouhaus,” he said, and it was a wonder no one else in the neighborhood woke up. No, someone had. She noticed the faint outline of someone peering out a window at the Elwoods'. “Brian,” he said, with even more force. “Lisa.”

Now the porch light at the Elwoods' came on, and John stepped out onto his front step.

“I guess I better go in,” Daniel said, almost as if asking a question.

Frannie watched him open the door and step through cautiously. Then he stopped and drew his gun, but said nothing, just moved as slowly and carefully as before. She thought she heard him cough, but it hadn't been a cough really. No, an abrupt gasp, and it caused her heart to shudder, made her lean into the doorway. Daniel stepped around something in front of the stairs. Everything draped in a haze as if she still viewed the room through the curtains, but it was just because she needed to breathe. She inhaled with her eyes closed and then opened them again. Daniel was on the landing now. She saw the vibrant red of the living room walls, the leather arm chair, past that the cherry dining room table. And through the legs of the table, she could just make out a pile of clothes. Only it wasn't clothes; it was a person. She heard the floorboards above creak with Daniel's footsteps, heard him call for an ambulance with panic in his voice. She saw the palm of an upturned foot, the heal and toes rosy pink. Lisa.

Chapter Two

Eli Woods felt certain that he had something truly great in the half-written article saved to his laptop. His first major assignment had all the promising elements—a fallen man, murder, suicide, grieving mothers—yes! grieving mothers, a small town setting, and the young ingénue, Cassie Miller. Eli had even retraced Brian Prouhaus's last steps, from the downtown dive bar called Riley's, where Eli might have even occupied the same bar stool as the man himself—to the quiet subdivision home on the edge of town. There might be awards. Maybe a promotion. The only damper on his mood was the text message he'd gotten an hour ago from his editor: “Mandatory meeting 4:30 pm.” And he'd wanted to call and say, “Not yet, Ernie, this is the story of a lifetime.” But then he realized how ridiculous that might sound and said okay instead. He was terrified that the writing would not come back to him in the same fever rush that had struck him when he'd finished his meal at the Oh My Darlin' Diner and the story had begun to pour out. He'd

felt like he'd already lost something as he snapped the laptop shut and slid it into its cushioned carrier.

But even worse was the sense of foreboding that had crept in when he realized there'd never been an emergency meeting like this in his seven years at the St. Louis Inquisitor.

It was morning, and Eli sat alone in the breakfast nook, listening to the sounds of his wife and child in the family room of their split level home. He could hear the click and clack of blocks being stacked. Julie had gotten up this morning without waking him, cooked breakfast for herself and Benny, and Julie had not said one word to him. All this signaled to him that he was in exile. Well, of course he was. At least when he stumbled into the kitchen, he found a plate of cold sausages and a rubbery fried egg in his place at the table, and now he sat alone chewing and swallowing without tasting.

“What do you think, Benny?” He heard Julie say in that way that made him cringe. “Do you think this block might look good here?” She spoke to their four year old the same way she asked Eli about furniture arrangements or what they should have for dinner, offering the illusion of a choice. “Oh, it does look good, doesn't it?”

He could just make out Benny's meek “mm hm” punctuating each of Julie's questions.

Well, the subject of the meeting yesterday had been Gather Your Things Because We Are Shutting Down and You Are All Fired. He pushed his chair out from the table and stood up. He had put it off for too long. He was going down there to tell Julie the

news right now.

“Your turn,” Julie said to Benny. Eli made it down to the family room in time to see Benny lift a yellow cylinder from the box. They sat in the center of an impressively complex structure with a towering central building surrounded by a system of cloisters with matchstick cars passing in and out of arched openings. Clearly, Julie had engineered the whole thing.

“Yellow? Are you sure?” Julie said.

Benny nodded, and raised the cylinder clutched in his hand, his lips pressed tightly together as he concentrated.

“No, Benny, not there,” Julie said, reaching her arm out to catch his, but she was too late. The structure crashed down around them. “Oh, dear. Sweetheart, it’s okay. We’ll rebuild it.”

Eli watched Benny's face crumple, and he realized now was probably not the time to say it, but he was going to say it anyway. Go on, he prodded himself. And then something else came out instead, before he had time to think it through. “You're ruining his childhood, you know.”

An incredible transformation took place before him, just as it always did on the few occasions that he lost his temper. Her bottom lip dropped slightly, showing a perfect row of white teeth. Her eyes moistened. The meanness he found so often in her eyes lately disappeared and he could actually see the tears gather in their ducts and begin to run over, an army of tiny infantrymen. Her most effective weapon. He wanted to take his words back, to take her and Benny in his arms, but he saw that Benny mirrored her

shocked and hurt expression. Their matched set of blue eyes regarded him with disbelief.

“Go on upstairs, Benny,” Julie said.

Eli knelt in front of his son. “Hey, bud, I wasn't yelling at you. Come here.”

But Benny would not move toward him. And Julie looked on as the reigning champion of filial devotion. Well, there it was. The two of them against him. The funny thing was that though the kid had inherited Julie's serious chestnut hair and sublimely delicate nose, his personality was distinctly Eli's. He even recognized his blind devotion to Julie from the early days of their relationship in Benny's unwavering support of his mother. But like Eli, he was doomed to grow up to be what Eli's mother called a 'bumbler,' a klutz, someone not quite suited for the physical realities of life on earth. He still wet his pants, even though he started kindergarten this year. Yes, he had inherited that trait from Eli, and Eli's own mother had let that fact slip to Julie the first time he brought her home. Eli was certain, every time that telltale streak formed on Benny's pant leg and stretched down toward his shoe, that Julie blamed him. And yet, those times, times when Benny knocked a picture frame off the wall or woke up sobbing and tugging at his damp pajamas, those were the times when Eli loved him best. Loved him and hated himself. He believed that any parent's worst nightmare was simply that they would pass on their worst characteristics, all their own self-loathing, onto their offspring. It was enough to live with it yourself. It was downright unbearable to watch your loved ones experience the same brand of humiliation. But there was nothing he could do for the boy as long as he cleaved so tightly to his mother.

“I just mean that every kid needs space. I don't think your hovering is good for

him.” He had already lost this fight, and he knew it, but he kicked a stray block for good measure anyway.

“I already know how you feel about it. Kids want structure,” Julie said, likely reciting something she'd read on a mommy message board or in a parenting book. He'd skimmed them at her request, but they all seemed at odds with one another. As it turned out, he was rarely consulted on any childcare matters anyway. “Look, Eli, let's not right now, in front of him? Benny has play group in half an hour.” She looked at Benny. “Do you want to go find your shoes?”

Benny nodded. He let Julie kiss his forehead, and then she stood up and tugged him to his feet.

“Jules, wait. I'm sorry. I've got a lot on mind right now.”

“Well, maybe you'll do me the honor of filling me in at some point. Perhaps you'll share with me why you didn't come home until after midnight last night.” She gave him a perfunctory hug. “Have a good day at work.”

Something in her tone hinted that she already knew anyway. Perhaps she had heard the news through an old colleague. Eli and Julie had met in college, both in pursuit of journalism degrees. Only after graduation, she had found a job at the more reputable Post-Dispatch, and after searching for a few months, he had settled for the St. Louis Inquisitor. Julie had always been the more driven partner in their relationship, but after a few successful years as a political reporter, Julie had made the surprising decision to stay home with Benny. These days, she did the occasional freelance work, but devoted most of her energy to managing their home and Eli's career. He had never been comfortable

with the arrangement. He'd always been miserable in her shadow, but somehow this was worse. At first, Julie pushed him to ask for raises, to keep applying to the Post, to move to a better department, but recently, her push came from a different direction. Last year, she said, "We're dinosaurs already, Eli. Why don't you get a job in marketing or PR? That's what Parker did and he's making so much more money."

But he hadn't listened. Maybe it would be better if she did hear the news from someone else. Perhaps she'd come home and put her arms around him and say, "I'm so sorry honey. I understand why it was so hard for you to tell me." But no, she'd be angry. She'd cite it as another example of how he shut himself off from people, his persistent failure to communicate. The air in the house would change as if it had been turned into a hyperbaric chamber, and he could already feel it pressing in against him, pushing the breath out of his lungs. He had to admit though that he'd only made it worse for himself by not coming home until late into the night, long after Julie had placed his uneaten dinner in a Tupperware container. There would never be a right time, no right way, to deliver the news. For now, he preferred this time in limbo to the time after.

Eli's grandmother Hildy, always gaunt and sad in his childhood memories, spoke often of the Great Depression. Perhaps she would laugh at his present situation, how truly trivial his concerns were in comparison to the times she lived through. She liked to tell a story about her pet rabbit, a luxury that her parents permitted her only briefly. Robert, she called him. One night at dinner, her mother placed before her a platter, and her father invited her to say grace for the family, and while she was at it, to thank Robert for giving his life to provide their sustenance. Hildy had begun her prayer before it sunk in that the

neatly trussed and delicately browned carcass was Robert, and she stopped mid-sentence, stood up, and went to the little room she shared with her sisters and brothers. She had never been certain if it had been an act of sheer desperation in the face of starvation, or her father's cruel joke because she could hear him chuckling in the kitchen until her mother made him stop.

“Well, what did I think would happen,” Hildy laughed when she repeated the story to a horrified young Eli. “Too many mouths to feed and not enough to go around.”

Hildy died when Eli was eleven, long before he took an interest in matters of family history, but he did know that not long after that dinner, Hildy's father disappeared forever. No one ever heard from him again. People could do a thing like that back then, before social security numbers and GPS. Leave off one place and take up again somewhere else. Hundreds of thousands of men did it during the Great Depression. Perhaps they left for work, promising to send money, but in any case, they never returned.

Eli thought of the agencies created to track down deadbeat fathers these days. No, such a thing wouldn't be possible anymore. Perhaps things would have turned out differently for the Prouhaus family if Brian could have simply walked away. He must have felt backed into a corner, the sole breadwinner without a job. It was a situation Eli was coming to understand.

The story pressed against him with more urgency than before, and watching Julie back her car out of the driveway, it occurred to him that there was nothing that precluded him from finishing it. He could take a daytrip back to Bonne-Pomme and do a little more

digging around. Besides, Julie would know something was up when she came home and he hadn't ever let for work. He packed his laptop and filled his travel mug with coffee. He peered into Benny's room, brimming over with toys and books, his bed made, his ratty stuffed armadillo on the nightstand tucked carefully under its own blanket, and then he closed the door behind him.

Interstate driving had always relaxed him, nothing so scenic to distract him from his own thoughts. Green signs with white lettering floated toward him, Danville, High Hill, Kingdom City. Ridges of orange-hued limestone rose up on either side of the interstate and then disappeared under sparse evergreens and farmland. He wondered who bought the houses whose front porches virtually opened up onto the highway. He passed a whole village for sale—including a church with a modest steeple and general store. He almost stopped to peer in windows and walk the gravel streets. How much could such a thing cost? What if he bought it? He imagined moving himself and his family into their own tourist trap. Benny would love it, of course. Any kid would. Eli could still follow the next cloverleaf around and toward home, but he kept passing the exits, pushing farther and farther out into the land of rest areas and adult video stores.

He only realized how long he'd been driving when he saw the exit for Bonne-Pomme. Three hours. He followed the exit to a narrow highway that crossed a bridge over the Missouri River. Downtown spread out, gray and ominous, beneath a brilliant blue sky, but he kept driving over the railroad tracks to a second highway, the obligatory Walmart on one side, McDonalds on the other. It was early afternoon when he parked in

front of Brian Prouhaus's two-story cast in shadow though the front windows reflected linen white clouds. The clouds would pass in a moment and light the house up.

Next door, Frannie Moorland clipped deadheads from the rosebushes that flanked her front porch, discarding them into a bucket at her side. Eli ignored her and approached the house as if he had every right to be there. He didn't know why he felt scared except that no one knew where he was, and technically, he was trespassing. His greatest disappointment on his last trip out was that no one could get him into the house. Now, he stood on the front porch peering into the windows like a peeping tom. Or like Frannie herself had on that night when she looked through the living room window and only saw gossamer drapes. This time, the drapes had been drawn to one side, but all signs of the struggle that had taken place there appeared to have been erased. He walked to the door and, casually as possible, leaned down to lift the doormat with two fingers and peer under it.

“Mr. Woods?” Frannie had spotted him.

He let go of the doormat and blushed. She dropped her shears and gloves into the bucket and crossed her arms over her chest. “It's you, right? My sight isn't so good.”

“It's me, Mrs. Moorland.” He waved and tried not to look like a creep. “I didn't think you'd remember me. You must have met so many reporters.”

“I doubt I'll ever forget much about this week.”

A group of boys on bicycles and a scooter turned onto the street and they slowed as they passed by.

“Thought all you reporters had gone on home to wherever you came from.”

“I did actually, but it turns out, I didn't get everything I needed.”

Frannie squinted at him. “You're not going to find a key under there. They've locked it all up and cleaned it out. Why don't you come on inside and have a cup of coffee?”

Eli consented because he felt embarrassed at being caught and also because of the oddity of this woman inviting a perfect stranger into her home. She held her front door open for him and then led him past a living room with lace curtains and prim mauve furniture and into her over-warm kitchen. “Let me open a window here. I don't like to start up the air conditioner unless it's really hot.”

Eli thought this day qualified as really hot, but he didn't say so. Instead, he unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up his sleeves. Frannie told him to take a seat at the breakfast bar, and he did, finding himself surrounded by frogs—ceramic frogs in tutus and top hats, frogs cross-stitched on dish towels, and a frog cookie jar with a golden crown.

“I never liked frogs,” she said. “At some point, they got me confused with my sister who loved frogs, and I never corrected them. Used to drive me nuts, but now that she's passed, the frogs remind me she's still around.”

She placed a gold-rimmed tea cup in front of him and filled it with coffee from a percolator. “Eli, you didn't have to drive all the way back here just to find out what happened is something you'll never understand. It's just one of those things. If there's a God in heaven, even he doesn't understand a man killing his family and himself like that.”

“Maybe it's not understanding so much as insight I'm looking for,” Eli said, almost ready to spill everything to her, the loss of his job, his crumbling marriage.

“I can't help you. There was just the Brian before and the Brian after. He was a good kid long as I knew him.” She measured flour and butter into a bowl and began cutting them together. “Sorry, I can't keep still these days. I worry that once I stop, I'll be stopped for good.”

He watched her work in silence. Slowly, the butter and flour came together in the shape of a ball, and she smashed it into a flat disc on the counter.

“Look, you know what I was doing over there. I don't suppose they ever gave you a spare key or anything?” Eli asked.

She moved the rolling pin over the dough with confident skill, pushing it out into a perfectly smooth circle. “I never want to set foot in that house again,” she said, looking up at him without missing a beat.

“I know,” he said, still hopeful. “I can go in by myself.”

She lifted the sheet of dough into a glass dish and pressed it against the sides with the tips of her fingers. The veins on her hands were vibrant indigo and seemed ready to pop out from under the skin. “What exactly do you expect to find?”

“I don't know. Sorry for asking. I know it must be hard for you.”

Without responding or looking up, she poured in a magenta concoction she had simmered on the stove and arranged strips of more pie dough across the top in a crisscross pattern that resembled the downtown streets of Bonne-Pomme. “I'll never forget it,” she said finally. “So much blood. A thick streak of it behind her, the width of

her body. It could have been that she was dragged, but I think she dragged herself there to the stairs to try to get to the kids. Her arm was stretched up like she was reaching for the banister. And then, then he must have shot her again.”

“I'm sorry, Mrs. Moorland. I can go.”

“No.” She shut the pie in the oven, and then opened a drawer and fished around inside until she produced a key. “Take it. Don't say I'm the one that let you in. I'm staying right here.”

Eli thanked her. He couldn't guess at her reasons for relenting, and he didn't ask. When he'd come yesterday, he'd been one of the last reporters to arrive and he felt like the last vulture to come to feast on a corpse. The detectives weren't letting anyone else in the house and had grown weary of talking to any more reporters. He walked to his car, the key in his front pocket. The group of boys circled the cul-de-sac now on their bikes and scooter. Round and around they went, but they somehow always seemed to be watching him. He would wait to go into the house.

Eli's stomach growled, so he drove back downtown to Oh My Darlin's, the place he had stopped on his first trip to Bonne-Pomme. The waitresses wore orange and brown striped shirtwaist dresses that must have been passed on from one employee to the next for at least a couple of generations because he didn't know where anyone could find one new.

His waitress this time was a busty woman with tiny, close-together features that seemed huddled together on her broad face. Her name tag read 'Tammy.'

“Sir, I was wondering what type of laptop that is,” she said, cocking her head down at an angle so that an extra chin appeared lopsided. “I been thinking I might like to get one.”

“I wouldn't recommend this one,” he said. He had just opened it up to keep him company while he ate.

“Oh, you're an honest one,” she laughed. “I like that. You from out of town or what?”

He nodded. The sun shone through the window in defined rays of light that illuminated the dust suspended in the air. Someone passed behind Tammy and Eli watched the dust particles stir frantically.

“You're a reporter, aren't you? We had a bunch of them in here, working away just like you are now. So I been keeping a tally of what kind of laptop they got.” Tammy flipped over her order pad and held it out for him to see a list of laptop brands with a number next to each. He wondered if something was wrong with her.

“So what can I get you?” She fished a pen out of the pocket of her apron and flipped her pad back over. “You ought to try our corned beef hash,” she said as if by rote.

“No thank you. I'd actually prefer a hamburger.”

She wrote. “A double, right?”

A slender blond swished by in one of the shirtwaist uniforms. He recognized the sway of the ponytail pulled tight high at the crown. “I'm sorry. What?”

“You wanted the double.”

“No, no, a single.” His eyes were trained on the blond, waiting for her to turn just

slightly.

“Oh sure. Just a single then. How about some onion rings?”

“Fries, please.” Yes, it was Cassie. He waved his hand at her when she faced his direction, but she didn't seem to notice him. How he hated the feeling of waving at someone who does not seem to recognize you.

“And a chocolate milkshake? We make the best in the Midwest!”

“Water is fine.”

Tammy the waitress shrunk away from the table, defeated.

Now Cassie was headed back in his direction, and when she started to pass his table, he exclaimed her name with an air of surprise as if he'd just noticed her, but she didn't stop. His heart sank. He watched her move deftly through the rows of tables with narrow spaces in between, her hips swaying to and fro as she dodged chairs and patrons. He noticed that though she was attentive, she didn't smile at everyone. And in fact, there was a certain amount of reserve in her body language, in the way she folded her arms around her when she took orders, as if she were cold. Across the dining room, hunched over the cash register, she blew the flyaways that had fallen from her ponytail out of her face, and then as if she felt his eyes on her, she looked at him and smiled again, a more sly, almost conspiratorial smile, as if they shared a secret.

Eli parked his car outside the Prairie Hills subdivision and walked up the main street to Plum Creek Court. The sun had begun to set, teasing out pinks and lavenders on the horizon and bathing the houses in golden light. The kids from the cul-de-sac had

disappeared, no doubt safe in their respective homes eating dinner, and if Frannie was at home, she was not to be found outside. Eli slipped the key into the deadbolt of the front door and held his breath as he turned it. When he pushed the door open, a musty smell wafted out even though the house couldn't have been shut up more than a day. Was that the smell of dead people? It certainly called up every mortuary he'd had the misfortune of visiting. All other signs that something vile had taken place in the house had been carefully wiped away. He wondered, in a town this small, how they could ever expect to sell the house. Everyone would know what had happened here.

He closed the door behind him and crept through the living room where Cassie and Lisa sat together that last night to the kitchen where he found a stack of dirty dishes and a pair of wine glasses in the sink. He picked up one of them and held the stem between his thumb and forefinger, examining the ruby crystallization inside. The cabinets were nearly empty of any food, but he supposed there wasn't anything abnormal about that, thinking of his own cabinets when neither he nor Julie had bothered going to the store. There was a planning desk built in next to the breakfast bar, and he sat in the chair, and pulled each of its drawers open, not knowing what he was looking for. Anything of importance would have been removed by the police. He found a water color paint set, crayons, coloring books, recipe cards, and a Montana snow globe that he shook up to watch the snow settle again over the miniature house inside, but the house had come loose and bounced around as if in a tornado. A rubber banded stack of bills all seemed to be stamped past due or threatened to turn the balance over to collection agencies. Eli imagined Brian hunched over the desk, each bill a strain on each string of his nervous

system, listening to the sound of Ryan and Lisa playing in the next room the same way Eli had listened to his own son and his wife that morning.

In the dining room, he squatted near where Frannie had described her Lisa's final resting place, but the hardwood gleamed fresh and clean. He retraced Brian's last steps up the staircase to the hallway, the purple master bedroom on one side with its leopard print bedspread, a pink nursery with white letters on the wall that spelled out 'Emily,' and then at the end of the hall, the room that had to belong to Ryan. The floor was littered with toys, cars and trucks and Legos, but a path had been cleared to the bed. Eli stood still in front of the bed frame—the mattress and all the bedding had been removed. He ran his fingers over the notch in the drywall where a bullet had been embedded. This is where Brian had been found with his head bowed over his son as if in prayer.

Eli appreciated the evening breeze as he walked the distance to his car, and then drove across town to Riley's with the windows rolled down. He felt flush and out of body, and the cool air helped to revive him, but it didn't ease the turning in his stomach. Julie had called and left a message but he didn't dare listen to it. He'd meant to eventually call her and tell her where he was, but now he'd waited too long and didn't know what to say to her. This was a mistake he made over and over in his life. The bar sat sandwiched between two antique stores with only a neon Pabst Blue Ribbon logo to identify it. That it was called Riley's was just something its patrons seemed to know. Inside, tin signs lined the utilitarian green walls, only identifiable where light shone in through the glass block windows. Outdoor carpeting covered the floor in a shade Eli couldn't make out but he

imagined to be brown. The same bartender helmed the bar again as when he'd come in two nights earlier, when he'd had to wait for all the regulars to be served before the bartender even glanced in his direction. He gathered there was a pecking order at Riley's and one had to earn his place.

This time, Maury, a gray-haired man with wispy sideburns and soft cascading wrinkles like an aged hound dog, greeted him right away and by name. He filled a mug to the brim and slid it in front of Eli before wiping his hands in a towel slung over his shoulder.

Eli sipped the beer slowly and then when it was low twirled the remaining liquid absent-mindedly. A faint lipstick imprint remained from the mug's previous holder. He couldn't decide whether or not to drive back to St. Louis, or if he didn't, where he might stay for the night. Last time, he'd found a room at the edge of town in a charmingly dated motel. Well, perhaps charming wasn't the word as the whole place stank of stale cigarette smoke and urine. And not pet urine, but the smell he'd heard to be associated with meth production. He'd never slept in his car before. Something about the idea of hitting bottom seemed attractive to him in the moment. But only in a sort of recreational way.

Eli did not recognize the songs that poured out of the juke box, except that the songs it played sounded like a blend of many songs he'd heard before. Behind the bar hung a yellowed 1998 calendar with muscle cars, their hoods angled wide open so that their insides could be seen. Car porn, Eli thought. In a booth by the door, a group of ancient men in overalls and plaid shirts with perlite buttons sat chain-smoking so much that an otherworldly cloud hovered above their table. Three younger men tossed darts at a

board beside the bar and joked about some girl's rear end that was "big enough for all of Bonne-Pomme to use for a sofa." This separated the bar from the ones Eli was used to in that the old occupied the same space as the young. He felt out of place, but he couldn't honestly say he felt like he didn't belong. There was an indescribable easiness about the town and the people in it that he thought he could get used to. He rarely smoked, but breathing second hand smoke didn't bother him when he himself created it, so he purchased a pack from the machine beside the men's room.

In the mirror behind the bar, Eli saw the heavy wooden front door push open. Cassie. She and a friend took a table by the door and then Cassie left her and walked to the bar stool next to Eli. "Can I get two PBRs?" she said to Maury.

"You aren't going to ignore me again, are you?" Eli said and then immediately his face began to feel warm. "I mean, I'm just kidding. I saw you at the diner earlier but you didn't see me."

Cassie smiled. "I'm so sorry. The place can get pretty busy. You should have just grabbed me. You weren't having trouble getting service, were you?" She seemed genuinely concerned.

"No, really. I was only kidding."

Since he saw her at the diner, she had let her hair down, and smelled fresh like she had just taken a shower. "How's your article going? I probably wasn't much help to you." She reached up to push her hair back behind one ear and he notice for the first time a freckle on her ear lobe. "Do you have to travel a lot? For the paper, I mean?"

"Oh, sure," he lied. He hadn't meant to. The words slipped out involuntarily.

Something deep in him wanted to impress her. “Occasionally anyway.”

“Your wife must worry,” she said, her eyes lingering over his left hand.

“Yes, right.” His face burned even hotter.

Cassie touched her hand to her clavicle, blushing too, and looked over her shoulder at her friend. The dartboard players had joined her at the table.

“Are you leaving soon?” she asked, her eyes a bright blue-green.

“Probably tomorrow,” Eli said, making the decision just then.

Cassie's friend intervened, nudging a shoulder in between them. He wondered if Cassie had signaled to her somehow. “Cassie, come see this guy's tongue. It's split right at the end.” To demonstrate, she stuck her own tongue out and pressed her finger into the tip. “He's from Kansas City.”

“Eli, this is my friend Meg. I better go. Have a safe trip home, okay?”

Meg was dressed from head to toe like an advertisement for Hot Topic. He watched her shuffle Cassie back to the table and listened as Cassie gasped with surprise when the kid stuck his tongue out at her and wiggled it. Then he swigged the last of his beer and walked outside. When he checked his Blackberry, the light blinked red, red, red like an emergency beacon. He lit a cigarette, and then scrolled down the missed calls with his free hand. He had eight voicemails and a text message. Julie never sent texts, so this was serious. “I just need 2 know ur safe,” she wrote.

He sat down on the curb and rested his cigarette in the sidewalk crack beside him. “Be home soon. In Bonne Pomme. More work to do,” he wrote back, and then picked his cigarette up. He couldn't justify the expense of another night in a hotel, but he parked his

car there in the nearly vacant lot. He was, after all, unemployed. He felt a bit of a thrill letting his seat back into a horizontal position, but it took him a long time to drift into sleep. Instead he thought of Cassie. The faint freckles dispersed across her nose and cheek bones. The way her shoulders folded inward just slightly when she leaned forward, like wings in reverse.

Chapter Three

It had been at least an hour since Cassie left that reporter alone at the bar, swilling the last of the beer he must have nursed all evening. She felt like a talking doll programmed with only a handful of phrases: “I don't know,” “Nothing seemed out of the ordinary,” and “Brian was always nice to me.” She was as tired of the rote repetition of these answers as she was the cycle of questions that prompted them. When Meg dragged her over here to the cramped booth to meet Pete's friends, she introduced her as “the last person to see Lisa Prouhaus alive,” and the questions started all over again. She had decided to sit next to the one they called Kev because with his dark hair, thick and roughly cut, he'd seemed childlike and harmless, safe compared to Ty, the one with the tongue and the piercings, who talked and laughed so loud he made her nervous. She realized her mistake soon after because Kev kept letting his knee rest against hers and he leaned in so close she could smell him, and he smelled like Dunkin Donuts, offensively

sweet and greasy.

Kev kept asking her questions about Lisa and Brian and he feigned surprise at her every response, or she assumed he was feigning because no one could be so consistently and completely shocked by such insignificant details. He spoke in an exaggerated whisper. “Like she had no idea it was all about to be over?”

“I don't know,” she said. The air in the bar had grown thick with smoke and body odor. Cassie pressed her empty mug to her cheek to absorb its coolness. Every time she finished a beer, one of the guys ran to the bar to bring back another one, but thankfully none of them seemed to have noticed this time.

“What if Brian had come home when you were still there?” Kev said. “You could be—I wish I'd have met you already. I'd have protected you.”

“Well, it wasn't necessary though, was it?” she said. She worried about Lilly, who was spending the weekend with her father and stepmother. Marilyn often volunteered to keep Lilly during Cassie's shifts at work, but never for a whole weekend and Cassie worried that any moment, her cell phone would ring and it would be Marilyn saying that Lilly wanted to come home, that she was inconsolable. And here she was, too drunk to drive to pick her up, and she would have to make up some excuse or else admit to her stepmother what she'd been up to tonight as if she owed an explanation.

“It gives me chills when I think about you out there,” Kev said, his face near hers but his eyes focused on her forehead. She had the impression that Kev was normally shy, but something in the whiskey he was drinking or the fact that he was in a small town where he knew no one had emboldened him. It explained his peculiar manner of speaking

and lack of social skills, a thing Cassie could relate to.

On the opposite side of the booth, Meg sat in Pete's lap, and tugged at Ty's ear plug, asking playfully, "Did that hurt?" When she saw Cassie looking, she cocked her head to the side and said, "Aw, I'm so glad you got to come out, Cassie."

Cassie smiled. Meg was a few years younger than her. They'd worked together at the diner for a couple of years, and Cassie would on occasion buy beer for her and her friends though she had always hated doing it. Back then, the age gap felt huge, but as they both aged and most of Meg's friends, just like Cassie's, went away to college or just away, the difference didn't seem to matter much. They were both stuck here after all, the ones who got left behind.

She had been at work on Wednesday morning when her father called because her aunt, a police dispatcher, had told him something happened at the Prouhaus's. Cassie had not slept well after her visit with Lisa, and deep violet half moons could not be erased with the ice cubes she pressed against her eyes after looking in the mirror.

Then, the family that lived at the end of Lisa's cul-de-sac turned out to be her first customers, and Cassie knew it because they did not speak discretely about what they had woken up to. Police cars lined the block and the county police streamed in and out of the house. The mother said she saw someone carried out on a stretcher. No, two stretchers, the daughter interjected. No, the father said firmly, they carried in stretchers but didn't bring anyone out. Cassie, who waited to take the smallest boy's drink order, felt her knees threaten to buckle. "Excuse me," she said, and ran to the back room to the walk-in

refrigerator to cool her face.

Tammy walked in on her and said, "I guess you heard."

"Heard what?" she said, not wanting to hear the answer.

"Oh, I thought you would have heard by now. That girl you used to run around with, she's dead. Her whole family."

"Oh," she said, the breath knocked out of her.

"They say the husband went nuts."

"Not Brian," she said. "You're confused."

She shrugged. "What do I know?" she said, slipping back through the dangling plastic flaps.

Cassie sat on a crate of iceberg lettuce until Tammy came back for her.

The reporters showed up in droves that morning, and many of them had asked to interview her. She spoke with a few over the phone, but the only one she met in person was Eli Woods. Maybe because he sounded a little nervous and it made him seem safe. She agreed to meet him at McDonalds, neutral territory in which one could get in and get out easily. From his voice on the phone, she had pictured a short and slightly overweight man, but Eli was tall and lanky with thick-framed glasses balanced on a nose that was almost too pointy and his eyebrows too deeply arched, giving him a look that bordered on the villainous and the comical. When she talked, he scribbled notes into a pad, and she felt panicked watching him do it. She worried that she was saying everything wrong, and that the evidence now on paper would somehow incriminate her. Not that she had done anything, just that she had a hard time figuring out what was important to the story. To

explain what she had been doing there that night, must she explain how they had encountered one another at Wal-Mart last week? How they hardly spoke for years before that? Or did the answer go all the way back to the first time they met in kindergarten, or the first time she considered Lisa a friend, in the seventh grade? No, Cassie stuck to the essentials of that evening, but still she felt like a liar of omission.

In any case, Eli didn't seem to notice, but he did squint his eyes in the long gaps during which she took time to think over each answer. And he would say, "That's okay, just take your time," over and over, as if he imagined that's what he was supposed to say. And she hadn't thought too much about him as she gathered Lilly and her things and drove her downtown to her dance class. It was when she was sitting on the bench outside the dance studio, listening to the muffled taps through the wall, that she realized how much she had enjoyed the attention.

Cassie grew up on the outskirts of Bonne-Pomme with her father, an awkward and reserved man who never felt familiar to her. Her mother left when Cassie was twelve for a man in another town who she'd been corresponding with over the internet. Cassie and her father continued to live together in their untidy two-story, roommates who rarely spoke to one another. Not that she ever doubted her father loved her. He let her know in his quiet ways, giving her fifty dollars a week for groceries on Sundays, and bashfully leaving a boxed and wrapped gift on her bed for every birthday. They went to her aunt's for holidays and sat on the love seat in the corner, sometimes joking together about the out-of-town relatives who came to visit, even though deep down they both envied their

neat nuclear families.

As a result, Cassie had always observed Lisa's relationship with her father with amusement and envy. They joked and laughed together to the point that Cassie would notice Lisa's mother standing in the doorway looking on, her own jealousy showing in her forced smile and folded arms. Lisa still called her father "daddy." But she guessed that's what had made it so hard for Lisa and Brian. How could working-class Brian ever compete with a father who called Lisa his sugarbear and handed out hundred dollar bills anytime she asked? Still, things hadn't worked out so well for Cassie and her husband either even though her father had not set a very high precedent. The damage done to her was more subtle. She never really knew how to talk to Kyle, just getting mad when he couldn't interpret what she wanted and needed, and he'd palmed his shaven head and shouted, "Why can't you talk to me? Why can't you just tell me what you need?"

And then, like Cassie's mother, Kyle left. Only she'd been prepared for his leaving because he had never been around much anyway, and they'd only dated for a little while before she got pregnant with Lilly. She never blamed him. That new girl probably told him everything.

"A small town like this probably just makes people go crazy, huh?" Kev said. Someone pushed open the bathroom door next to their booth, and the incandescent light within momentarily lit up his face, revealing pocked skin and crow's feet that stretched like a web from his eyes to his temples. In the time it took for the door to close, she realized he was much older than she first guessed.

“Hell yeah it does,” Meg cried from the other side of the booth, and then she cuddled close to Pete. “When are you going to get me out of here, baby?”

Pete pulled her head close and pressed his ear against the crown, pretending to listen. “Sorry kid, it's too late for you.”

Kev watched them but didn't laugh. “You girls really should come to Kansas City sometime. You can stay with me if Pete's too worried about your mental state.” He looked at Cassie.

“I'm really warm,” she said to Meg. “I think I should go.”

“Walk with her, Kev,” Meg said. He started to stand.

“No, no, I'll be fine on my own. Please.”

“Let me up, Pete,” Meg said, and Pete pushed her out of his lap and onto Ty's who held onto her waist a moment before she broke free of him and stood. “We're going to the falls tomorrow if you want to go.”

“Maybe,” she said, though she knew she'd make an excuse. The falls reminded her of Brian and Lisa.

One thing Cassie hadn't told Eli was that she liked Brian first. Ages ago. When he moved to Bonne-Pomme in the middle of their eighth grade year. She remembered Brian walking into her history class with his backpack over one shoulder, and she remembered that he had been scrawny and mop-haired then. He wore a flannel shirt with the sleeves unbuttoned and pulled down over his fists, and his jeans were loose and long so that they nearly concealed his red Chuck Taylors. And when he chose the desk next to hers, she

felt herself blush, and when he asked to borrow a pen, she thought she could faint. At lunch, she whispered to Lisa how he had leaned in close to ask and how their hands had touched when she passed him one. And he was from somewhere in California.

“I’ll find out if he likes you,” Lisa had said, the beginnings of a backdoor transaction, the details of which Cassie would never know. Cassie met Lisa outside to walk home after school, asking what he’d said, and Lisa had laughed. “No way, Cassie, that guy is dork-city. I forbid you from going out with him.”

“You didn’t even ask him?” Cassie asked.

Lisa squeezed her shoulder. “He said no, Cass. Forget about him.”

He sat next to her for rest of the year, but she kept her eyes trained on the blackboard, running her pencil eraser into the back of her arm until deep red marks appeared. He seemed always to be forgetting things—his notebook, a text book, and she shared with him, always passing whatever it was in stone-faced silence, but always hoping secretly that Lisa had been wrong, or that he had misrepresented his feelings for some reason teenage girls cannot understand about teenage boys. Sometimes he even cracked jokes in her direction, as if to make her laugh, and it encouraged her to hope. Meanwhile, he was changing, his muscles filling in, his legs growing longer inch by inch.

In the summer, Cassie and Lisa would walk down to the football field and watch him practice, and sometimes even follow him home at a safe distance, giggling and clutching at each other if he stopped and turned in their direction. They pretended he didn’t know what they were doing, even though a satisfied smirk always broke out across his face when he said: “Afternoon, girls.” At the end of the summer they went to the falls,

and found him there drinking beer with his friends. And Lisa had become confident and walked right up to him and said, “You shouldn't swim in that water. It'll melt your skin off. You should come to my house. We've got a pool.”

And the next weekend, he did. Cassie took the money she had earned at the diner and splurged on a new swimsuit at Wal-Mart, a green gingham bikini that she thought complemented her skin tone, and she shaved her legs with her dad's razor and shaving cream and put on a touch of lipgloss. But by the time she walked to Lisa's, Brian was already there, Lisa in a gold-tone bikini, her skin tanned deeply and her waist cut like an hourglass. And cleavage! Somehow she had developed cleavage over the summer without Cassie even noticing. Cassie stood on the opposite side of the sliding glass doors, wondering whether she even wanted to cross over to the other side. Lisa floated on her back in a raft, splashing water at Brian, and Brian came nearer and nearer, and then Cassie slid the door open and startled them both.

“Cassie,” Lisa said. “Good God, where'd you get that swimsuit. It's practically hanging off of you.” And Cassie had looked at Lisa in her golden suit, and then down at her own jutting pelvic bones and a slight rise of belly and the bikini she now found distasteful.

“It's just an old thing,” she said, and dove into the water and stayed under for as long as she could hold her breath. How wrong she had been to think that Lisa had invited him there for her.

Cassie walked home with a knot in her stomach. When the phone rang that evening and her dad called down the hall that it was Lisa, Cassie said to tell her she was

taking a nap. Lisa continued to call for three days, and then she stopped, and they did not speak until the first day of school one week later. Cassie sat on the bottom front step of the high school when Lisa walked past with Brian, her hand in his. She wore a clingy polo shirt, unbuttoned at the top and a short ruffled skirt. Her mom had obviously allowed her to get highlights. Cassie cowered close to the rail, hoping Lisa would walk on past, but she didn't. She whispered something to Brian and then tugged her hand free to come sit beside Cassie.

“You have to talk to me sometime, Cass,” Lisa said, giving her shoulder a little shove.

Cassie shook her head and shuffled through the books in her backpack.

“It's not something I planned.”

They sat next to each other in silence until finally the bell rang, and Lisa stood up and straightened her skirt. “Well, you obviously aren't ready to let this go.” And she skulked off with the other students into the building.

For almost the entire first quarter, they passed each other in the halls, sat in the same classrooms, ate at different tables in the lunch room. Cassie made friends with some other girls who lived near her, but none of them compared to Lisa. It was only a matter of time, Cassie thought, before Lisa found someone to replace her, but Lisa proved her wrong. Now that Brian played for the football team, his small group of friends included the upper echelon of the freshman class, but though Lisa mingled well with them, she never took to them like she had Cassie. Instead, she wrote long, flowery notes of apology and slipped them into Cassie's locker. When Cassie finally relented, Lisa made her into a

pet project. She dragged her along on shopping trips and helped her pick out tops to “maximize her cleavage” and taught her to use makeup properly. And even though Lisa set her up with that stocky football player that always smelled like onions and the meth head that lived next door to Brian, Cassie gradually got over the betrayal. She still kept Lisa's letters in a shoebox in her closet, decorated in highlighter and White-out. Even she had to admit that the Brian that Lisa now dated was not the Brian that Cassie once imagined him to be, and that really he and Lisa belonged together.

The second and final split had come years later, only that time it had been Cassie's fault. She'd been more than a little pleased when in the middle of their senior year, amidst talks of college plans, Lisa had called Cassie into the bathroom with her while she peed on a plastic stick and then two blue lines appeared. Cassie had never been a good enough student to hope for scholarships. Plus, there was the anxiety of leaving her father behind to fend for himself, so she already knew she would not be going anywhere. All that year, she felt a tinge of anxiety every time Lisa complained that her parents were pushing her to pick a college. Lisa swore they would stay in touch but Cassie couldn't bear the feeling that she would be left behind. Suddenly, with a baby on the way, Lisa tossed the college bulletins she had accumulated into the trash. The Monday after their graduation, Cassie stood next to Lisa and Brian as a witness before the Justice of the Peace. Three months later, Ryan was born.

Cassie still remembered that year as one of the best in her life. Brian and Lisa moved into an efficiency apartment above Riley's, and Cassie moved into her father's

rental on Marley Street only three blocks away. At night, she walked from the diner to Lisa's in the evening to help with the baby and then they would share amaretto sours and screwdrivers after he fell asleep.

One September night, Lisa came home to find a group of guys gathered outside the door to Riley's. The bartender never carded, but there had been a rash of busts in the area, and this group of nineteen and twenty year olds had been turned away. On a whim, Lisa invited them up to her apartment, and that was the night that Cassie met Kyle. He was tall with deep-set eyes so sharply blue that she had trouble looking into them. And when she said that boys always liked Lisa better, he brushed a strand of hair behind her ear and said he preferred her. The next day, he invited her to a party at his parent's cedar and glass mini-mansion in the woods. Cassie begged Lisa to go with her, and so they found a sitter for Ryan and went. The night had been good until Lisa and Cassie separated. In the early morning hours, Kyle took Cassie's hand and tugged her along to his bedroom. When they got there, they discovered Lisa on top of the covers with Kyle's friend Mack.

In the car on the way back, Lisa cried. She said, "I feel trapped, Cassie. You couldn't understand. It's just a one-time thing. Please swear that Brian will never, ever know."

Cassie swore, and she meant it. But she couldn't have predicted the terrible mood that would fall over her when Kyle didn't call, and she felt horrible about herself and about Lisa because Lisa not only always got what she wanted but got double. After an entire week had passed, she walked to Lisa's because she needed someone's reassurance

that he would call, that he certainly liked her. Instead, she found Brian at home alone with Ryan. And she confided in him instead.

“I wouldn't worry about it,” Brian said. “He'd be lucky to have you.” And he ruffled her hair as though she were a younger sister, but then he handed her a whiskey, and they played rummy while Ryan fell asleep. Brian had just gotten the job at the plant. Cassie's father worked there too back then, and she recognized the scent of burnt plastic that no one who worked there seemed to be able to wash away.

He seemed agitated that Lisa wasn't home yet. None of them carried cell phones then. “God, I suck tonight,” he said, throwing his cards down after he lost for the third time. “I just wish Lisa would call. She's been so weird lately.”

“Yeah,” Cassie said.

“Has she said anything to you?”

“Not really,” Cassie said, but she gave him a look that she knew he would pick up on and press her.

“What is it? I won't get mad.”

“Give me a cigarette,” Cassie said. “I really shouldn't say anything.”

He handed her a smoke and lit it for her. “Maybe I already know. Maybe I just need to hear it from someone else.”

“It's not my place.” She took a drag and exhaled, watching the smoke curl around the table lamp. It was nice wielding this kind of power.

“Please, Cassie,” he said, “You are as much my friend as you are Lisa's now.”

And that was all the persuasion she needed. “There was a guy last weekend.”

“A guy,” Brian said. “What do you mean there was a guy?” His voice stretched into a whine.

“You're just going to have to ask her. I can't say anymore.” Cassie stuttered, suddenly mortified at what she had done. Was it so wrong for her to tell? It would surely come out one way or another. Maybe it was best that he had heard it from her.

And then they heard Lisa's keys jangling in the lock, and Cassie stood up. “Oh God,” she said.

“You're staying here,” Brian said. “Sit down.”

Lisa appeared at the top of the stairwell, flush from the cold outside. “Hi guys. What's going on?”

“Maybe you want to tell me,” Brian said. His eyes were fixed on Lisa, so Cassie sidestepped toward the door.

“Seriously,” Lisa said. “Cassie, what's going on?”

“I really had better go.” Cassie said, hearing the blood pump through her ears. Her legs felt heavy as she stumbled down the stairs and into the cool night without her jacket, Lisa calling after her, a desperation in her voice, as if she knew what she had just walked into but didn't want to believe it.

And yet Lisa and Brian had gone on to buy their dream house, and Cassie had married Kyle before he left for base training. His sister had served as her best maid because Cassie no longer had any close friends. Now at twenty-six, Cassie had worked at Oh My Darlin for almost half her life, bussing tables at thirteen just to get out of the

house every once in a while. Then she graduated to maintaining the buffet on All-You-Can Eat Catfish Fridays, and then finally she moved up to waitressing. That was the top of the ladder at the diner. The owner had no need for a manager because he ran the place himself, from the time it opened until the time it closed, seven days a week. It hadn't quite been half her life because she had quit after her first semester at River Valley Community College, thinking she would get her art degree and never look back at this town. She worked at the Quick Mart for three months, and then she got pregnant, and then she got married. After her baby was born and with Kyle long gone, she returned to the diner because there was really nowhere else to go. By any account, she knew she had wasted her life. Already at twenty-six, it had gone.

Cassie woke up in her underwear, covered only by the thin sheet. She could hear her phone ringing from inside her purse, and slithered halfway off the bed to reach it. Marilyn. "I don't see Lilly's tap shoes in her overnight bag," she said when Cassie answered.

"Crap," Cassie said, pushing herself back up onto the bed and struggling to get her bearings. "Hold on. I knew I had forgotten something." Marilyn had planned to drop Lilly off for her dance rehearsal for the parade the next day.

"We're running late, so can you meet us?"

She dug through yesterday's laundry that had not yet been put away until she found a pair of shorts and tank top. Lilly's shoes were still laid out on her bed, patent leather with a ribbon fastener that brought back her own childhood memories, her own

mother shuttling her back and forth for lessons until she finally announced that she was too old for tap dance. She'd preferred ballet but her mother insisted that she didn't have the grace for it. Lilly, on the other hand, always wanted to do tap. She wore her shoes constantly in the house, tapping across the hardwood floors from one end of the house to the other until Cassie couldn't take it anymore and made her take them off. She must have inherited something from Kyle's side of the family that Cassie lacked, because she was good at it too.

Cassie found Lilly and Marilyn sitting on the bench outside the courthouse watching the rest of the dance troop who had already warmed up and were now halfway through the routine. Lilly worked her dangling feet in time with the rest of the dancers. Shuffle step shuffle step. When she saw her mother, she gave her a look of unbearable disappointment.

"I'm sorry, baby," Cassie said, kissing her forehead, and then bent down in front of her to tie on the shoes.

"Thanks for dropping them off," Marilyn said.

"Oh no, it's my fault," Cassie said.

"I'm awfully behind. I've got to hurry off to get my booth set up." The Sesquicentennial celebrations included a craft fair at the Civic Center, a squat cinderblock building across the street from the courthouse. Marilyn planned to debut her new business venture, selling kitchen towels and potholders embroidered with sayings like "get baked."

"No, of course not, go on."

Lilly slid off the bench, but before she could scuttle off to join her fellow dancers,

Cassie made her sit still so she could fix the messy ponytail that Marilyn had given her.

“Ouch,” Lilly said. “Grandma does it better. You make it hurt.”

Lilly found her place in the formation and caught up to the routine with a natural grace.

Cassie watched Marilyn struggle pointedly with a load of bags she had pulled out of her trunk. Her stepmother would not ask for help, but she was making enough of a show about it that Cassie knew she should offer to assist. “Marilyn, let me help.”

“Oh, no, sweetie, I've got it.”

Cassie took two bags of neatly folded towels, and then held the door open when they reached the Civic Center. The air conditioning inside raised instant goose bumps on her thin arms, and she savored the warm, damp air on her skin when she walked back outside. Hot weather had never been a problem for her; in fact she looked forward to the most sweltering months of the year, as if, she told people, she needed to soak in enough warmth now to get through the winter months. She wasn't prepared to see Eli stepping out of his car and tugging the wrinkles out his shirt and smoothing his pants. He didn't see her, and she felt odd watching him when he didn't know she was looking. When she saw him again at Riley's last night, and he touched her elbow as they spoke, she had the sensory hallucination that she was falling over—she could see herself falling sideways—and then instead of landing hard on the floor, she was confused to find herself still standing upright.

“You're coming with us to the falls, right?” Meg said. She worked at the Dollar

General on the square, and Cassie had been sitting on the park bench outside, waiting for her to take one of her frequent smoke breaks. From this vantage point, they could see Lilly and her troop across the street. Cassie didn't think she'd ever seen so many people descended on the square at once.

“I don't know, that guy, Kev, was a little...”

“Oh, Cassie, I thought you'd like him,” Meg said. She handed Cassie a cigarette and then lit them both. “He's kind of quiet like you are.”

“Meg, he looked like he was forty, and I'm pretty sure he was a mouth breather.” The morning which had been so still was interrupted by a strong wind that tossed ashes from Meg's cigarette into Cassie's face. “It's in my hair, isn't it?”

“Here.” She pulled at a strand of Cassie's hair and then flicked the stray ashes to the ground. “I guess I knew you wouldn't like him. You're so picky. Well, he's not going anyway, so you've got no excuse.”

They sat and drew on their cigarettes, like a pair of old maids who had known each other for too long. Meg was pretty but had an anemic look about her in the full sun with her dyed black hair and blunt cut bangs that hung just past her high brow. Two years ago, she'd had her nose pierced but then removed the ring when an allergic reaction caused her nostril to scab over, but in sunlight, Cassie could still see the tiny hole.

“What's Pete doing while you're at work?”

“Fucking around over at his mom's. You know he has to spend a requisite amount of time with her when he comes home.” She leaned over, startled at something just beyond Cassie. “Don't look,” she said, “but that guy was in my class. No, don't look.”

Cassie looked anyway and recognized the guy in a Mizzou hoodie as an underclassmen when she was a senior. The sesquicentennial was a homecoming of sorts, and Cassie dreaded the constant running into of people she only ever encountered now on MySpace, and even then begrudgingly. On her profile, she put Kansas City for her current town because she felt sort of embarrassed that she still lived in the same town working the same job, when most of her classmates had moved on from college to grad school or to real employment in cities worth living in. She thought there must have been some point in time when it was perfectly acceptable, even expected to put down permanent roots where you grew up, but that time certainly wasn't now.

“Oh! You were going to tell me about that reporter guy last night. What's that all about?”

“He’s married. And he doesn't live around here.”

“Sounds like a nice situation to me,” Meg said. “Why didn't you introduce us?”

Cassie pressed her shoulders backward into the bench to stretch her back. “It's really nothing. He's here, actually. I just saw him.”

“Did you say hi to him?”

Cassie noticed that the other parents were beginning to collect their children. She tossed her cigarette on the ground and squelched it with the ball of her shoe. “Hold on.”

“I just freaking swept out here,” she heard Meg say as she walked away.

“Parents, please remember they have to be here no later than seven a.m. tomorrow morning, and they should be dressed and ready to go, including shoes.” The teacher cast a meaningful glance in Cassie's direction. She wanted to leave. “This is all on the handouts,

but they're to wear their blue leotards with the green tights. I've got their sashes right here, which Miss Danielle was kind enough to make for us." There were polite claps.

"Okay, I think we're ready. Are we ready girls?"

"Wooo," the girls said.

Cassie took Lilly's hand and led her finally back across the street where Meg still waited to finish their conversation. "I was just thinking you should invite him to the falls."

"Oh no. He's probably leaving soon."

"Who?" Lilly said, hugging Meg's thigh.

"Nobody," Meg said. "Where is he anyway? I want to get a look at him in the daylight. We can be sneaky. He doesn't even have to know."

"Who? Who doesn't have to know?" Lilly asked in a breathless voice.

"Forget it," Cassie said, taking Lilly's hand in hers again, but when she started toward her car, she saw him standing in front of the courthouse, watching the mass of volunteers crawling over the lawn in an attempt to beautify it for the next day's festivities.

When Cassie was Lilly's age, the square had always been beautiful to her. Her parents would take her to sit in the park by the river and buy her spumoni ice cream—she may have been the only kid who liked spumoni—at the shop that sold popcorn and ice cream. Then she would hop on one of the swings, her back to the river that she could hear roiling behind her, moving her legs harder and harder until the swing jumped at the crest of each swing. She could see higher and higher, all the way up the steep concrete stairs that led up to the square. First the tip top of the clock tower would appear and then the

courthouse, a cool gray against the deep blue sky—because in her memory it was always that shade of blue with thick white clouds, then the roofs of the shops that flanked it, and then their striped awnings, and then finally, she knew she couldn't go any higher when she saw the hair of the pioneer statue on the courthouse lawn. That was just as high as she could ever go.

Chapter Four

In the morning, Eli got out of his car, so warm and damp inside his glasses had fogged, and tried to stretch the kink out of his back before driving downtown. He still wore the same plaid shirt and wrinkled khaki pants of the day before. He had waited so long to call Julie now that he felt like he'd made a decision about his marriage by default, although he wasn't quite sure what that decision was. Separation? Divorce? A lack of sleep left him with a feeling of disconnect from the world. All that existed for him now were these houses flashing by on the left and right, front yards shrinking from expansive to virtually non-existent, some neatly manicured and some bone dry with rusted car graveyards, and the courthouse clock tower looming above it all. A dog caught up to the car and kept up for a full block. He thought of his lost great grandfather spending long days in search of the odd job that could feed his family, trekking from one side of the city to the other, shoes worn through, until he was too tired or too discouraged to remember

the way home. He ate from dumpsters and slept under a bridge with a hundred other men who had forgotten any other home—the hungry mouths, the wives wringing hands in filthy aprons. One day, Eli’s grandmother would be selling apples at the bus stop and look over and find a familiar man watching her. She would never forget his dirty overcoat, his matted hair, his face heart-shaped like hers, and she would always wonder if she had glimpsed her long gone father. Eli knew he had to shake whatever it was that lent a certain romance to the idea of disappearing so completely.

The square, desolate on his previous visits, teemed with life this morning. At the diner, he had to wait a full fifteen minutes before a boy, dense acne blooming on the back of his neck, led him to a table by the window. From Eli’s vantage point, he could see the rows of businesses adjacent to the diner. One sign read “Shamrock Auto Supply” in green Helvetica letters. Next to it sat the building belonging to the Bonne-Pomme Tribune. Then an empty building marked with the letters SMI, an upside down T, and then the faint outlines of an H, and another word that he couldn't quite make out. “What's the statue?” he asked his waiter when he returned with a glass of ice water. The statue was a man and a woman in some kind of old-fashioned garb, the man seated on a rock, and the woman standing above him looking off over her shoulder, her hair loose and wild. It reminded him of the entrance marker to the Prouhaus's subdivision.

“Got me,” the kid said.

“I didn't realize so many people lived around here,” Eli said.

“There aren't that many. Lots of people came back for the parade and stuff.”

After consuming a buffet breakfast, he returned to his car, but he just stood over it.

It had grown hot and he felt listless. This is what he always needed Julie for. Planning his next steps. Nearby, a flatbed truck backed up onto the courthouse lawn, delivering a gazebo. He recognized the man guiding the movers as the mayor from a billboard he saw on the way into town. After a moment, he gathered his courage and strolled over to greet him.

“You're Mr. Montgomery,” he said as he approached.

Garland Montgomery glanced back at him as if trying to place his face. He struck Eli as a man with a natural inclination for smiling, even when his eyes didn't quite match up with the expression. From the billboard, Eli would have guessed him to be a well-manicured sixty year old who colored his hair and had the wrinkles airbrushed away, but in person he seemed only a few years older than Eli. That dated haircut, parted and brushed uniformly to the side, just made him seem older.

“Eli Woods. I work for the St. Louis Inquisitor. I've been here about the Prouhauses. I wondered if you might be able to comment about how the deaths have impacted the celebrations?”

Garland glanced nervously from the gazebo to Eli. “Let's be honest, this may be the last time our town puts on any kind of celebration this size, so we're just going to make the best of it. We're honoring our past triumphs, and hoping we find the strength to overcome for the futu—No! No! No!” He ran toward the truck, gesturing wildly as it veered too close to the courthouse, and then retreated backward when it appeared to be back on track. “Sorry about that,” he said, and extended his hand to Eli. “Have you met Frannie Moorland? She donated the money for the gazebo. Used to be one there when she

was young, and she said it's where her husband proposed. It got torn down, oh, about twenty years ago. We're going to have a band playing there. We'll set up the barbecue booth over here."

A group of women had gone to work pulling weeds while a second group planted mums along the walkway that led to the courthouse. Shop owners were sweeping sidewalks and repairing awnings. They'd allowed high school students to color their front windows with elaborate chalk murals that said things like "Way 2 Go BP."

"I think we all know the town is disappearing off the map," Garland said. "Last year they closed the high school and we merged with the Smithville district. Now that Sherman-Stiles is gone, there's not much left."

Eli's phone rang, and he reached into his pocket to silence it, but accidentally answered it instead. He could hear Julie call his name from inside the pocket. "Eli? Eli?" she kept repeating. "Are you there? Eli?"

He quickly disconnected the call, but the phone rang again immediately. She knew he was there. Steeling himself, he answered on purpose this time. "Hello? My signal's bad. I can barely hear you."

"Oh my God, Eli, you're there."

He didn't say anything, just listened to her breathe on the other end of the line.

"Eli? Where are you? When are you coming back?"

After a long pause that he knew must be killing her, he spoke. "Tonight. I'm just finishing up. I'll be back sometime tonight."

"Okay. Is there anything else going on? I called your work, and the phone just

rang and rang.”

“Nothing, everything’s fine. I mean, as far as I know. We’ll talk when I get back.”

“Okay,” she said. “I love you, Eli. Eli?”

He felt a hand on his arm. “Cassie,” he said, and snapped the phone shut and slid it back into his pocket.

She had come up behind him with her daughter and her friend from the bar.

“You’re still here.”

He couldn’t help but grin at her. He wondered what she must think of him, this awkward, married reporter who couldn’t take his eyes off of her. She couldn’t be more than five years younger than him, but she had such a charming naiveté about her, that he felt lecherous nonetheless. “I’ll be here a little longer, wrapping up the story.”

Meg pushed her hand in front of Eli. “I don’t think we’ve been formally introduced.”

Eli noticed Cassie’s cheeks had turned red and pink blotches surfaced on her neck and chest. Lilly tugged at her arm, trying to pull her in the direction of the playground.

“We should be going,” Cassie said.

“Eli,” Meg said. “We were going to invite you to come out with us tonight, if you’ll still be here.”

“Sure, of course.” So now he had lied to Julie. So be it. “I’ll be around.”

There had been only one other woman in Eli’s adult life. A girl named Veronica. For two months in college, during a trial breakup period, during which Julie had claimed

to need time to figure out who she was without Eli. He always thought it was a funny excuse because if anyone had lost themselves in this relationship, it was Eli. For him, there were never keg parties, or one night stands, or any of the typical collegiate activities of the single male. Eli spent virtually every night and weekend with Julie since they met at freshman orientation. Half their classes were together. Why had he pursued journalism after all? He couldn't even remember now. He did remember how Julie waxed poetic about what important work it was, maybe even the most important of all, she said, even more than medical doctors and soldiers. Information was power. Information for all was democracy.

He met Veronica, a sweet and timid girl, in his political science class, and mostly fueled by the desire to infuriate Julie, he mustered the courage to ask her out. She was in every way Julie's opposite, lacking in direction, unfettered by routine or purpose. They became as serious as two people could get in the short time before Julie essentially called him back. It had broken Veronica's heart, he heard through mutual friends. He wondered whatever became of her, this one casualty of he and Julie's long relationship. He fantasized that some rather bleak poetry had been written about it.

When Julie found out about Veronica, she hadn't been angry as he anticipated. She'd said, as if there'd never been any doubt he'd come back to her when she was ready: "You've only proven what I always suspected, Eli. You're the kind of person who can never be alone." He recalled her words with a twinge but he also remembered how truly dark those two months had been without her. He skipped more classes than he had in his entire five years of college. He would stay awake for two days at a time and then sleep

for twenty-four hours. By the end of that semester, he'd had to go to each professor and beg for an extension on papers and second opportunities on tests. And Julie had stayed up with him and brought him coffee and done his proofreading. And the thing he'd forgotten: Julie said she'd had a vision of her life without him, a life with small successes but a life of loneliness, devoid of any real joy because without him, she did not know how to have fun or make friends. Veronica acquiesced to what he wanted, a welcome feeling but also an unbearable responsibility. If that brief relationship taught him anything, it had been what it was like for Julie to be with him.

Eli drove back out toward the motel, but continued on the main highway all the way out of the city limits. Last May, in Alton, Illinois, a depressed town opposite the Mississippi from St. Louis, John Payne Tyler, unemployed for six months, had strangled his wife and three children as they slept before sprinkling gasoline on the carpets and furniture. His burnt body was discovered curled around his wife's. Last year, Peter Knowles in Wichita, Kansas crashed his ex-wife's third anniversary party with her new husband with a shotgun in tow. He managed to kill his teenage daughter, his father-in-law, and his ex-wife before a guest attempted to wrestle the gun away and Peter managed to turn it on himself. A third family piled into their Dodge Caravan one unseasonably cool July night and, having sealed the garage door, they let the van run until they fell asleep. It was the real estate agent who discovered them weeks later, preparing to list the foreclosure property for sale. She found the mother with her toddler son's face nuzzled against her neck. Two twin daughters leaned against one another in the backseat. The

father slumped over the steering wheel. Only the family cocker spaniel, who had presumably been brought into the car with them made any effort to escape, crawling out the passenger side window, leaving strands of golden fur caught in the corners, only to perish at the garage door. He left behind scratches in the fiber glass door a quarter of an inch deep.

It was a curious instinct, when you know you are going down, to want to take it all with you. Your entire lineage, the only lasting proof of your existence on this earth. The captain does not go down with his ship; the captain takes his ship down with him. Experts attributed the sudden increase to the economic decline, the worst since the Great Depression, they liked to say. But in his research, Eli could not find a single incident of murder-suicide during the Great Depression, save for one botched attempt in which the children died, but the parents did not.

The Sherman-Stiles plant where Brian had worked appeared as if it could have shut down yesterday with light visible through its narrow, glass block windows, but the gravel parking lot was vacant and grass had already begun to reclaim patches. There was no tell-tale ribbon of cloud rising from the smokestack at the opposite end of the building. Out of curiosity, he parked his car and tried the door to the human resources office. Of course it wouldn't budge. Eli had attempted several times to reach someone at CalAent, the conglomerate that had most recently purchased the plant, but each time he'd been directed to voicemail. He understood. Closing the plant was only business for them.

A patrol car turned into the parking lot and approached Eli cautiously. The driver side window rolled down when it came to a stop. "Can I help you with something, son?"

Eli walked up the window. “Hi officer. I’m Elliot Woods with the St. Louis Inquisitor.”

“I thought most of you folks had gone on back to wherever you came from.” The officer shut his car off and then stepped out, leaning his chest into the crook between the opened car door and its frame. “Probably would have come as a surprise to Mr. Prouhaus to know he'd bring more publicity to this town than we seen in years. Difficult to understand how he could do a thing like that. I got two kids of my own”

He took his hat off and looked inside of it as if he expected something to be there, then put it back on. “Listen, I can't let you stay here.”

“I understand,” Eli said, and the officer continued to stand next to his car until Eli had gotten back into his. Brian drove out of this lot once for the last time, his car kicking up dust and gravel, more than usual because he had been aggravated and it showed in his driving. And then two months later, he pushed himself up out of his barstool, said goodnight to his friends. He drove home, and sat in the car parked in front of his house for a long time, staring inside at the light shining through his living room bay window, saw Lisa, just a shadow, a shape, moving past the curtains. He reached into the glove box and felt the cool metal of the twenty-two caliber, then he stepped out into the August night, neither warm nor cool so that the normal separation between self and atmosphere could barely be perceived.

At least, that's how Eli imagined it.

Eli clung to his seatbelt as Meg took the curves tight and the hills fast, so fast that

her Ford Focus took momentary flight at the peak of each hill. Cassie rode shotgun and he could see that she held onto the handle on the ceiling tight enough to turn her knuckles white, but she laughed anyway, and held her hair back with her free hand to fend off the wind as it whipped it wildly around her face.

“Where are we going?” Eli asked from the backseat. A creek snaked past on one side of the road, wrapping itself in front of and behind country houses and then disappeared momentarily under a foot bridge and then reappearing on the other side. The trees were so green against the piercing blue sky, he felt a sense of elation rise up inside him.

“We’re almost there,” Cassie said.

“There’s a real castle on top of that hill,” Meg said.

Eli could barely make it out through the trees.

“Some railroad guy built that in the forties. My boyfriend used to mow their lawn and he said the people that live there now are real assholes. They’re all like ‘my special, rare flower this,’ and ‘my thousand-dollar shrub that.’ He says they’re always getting a discount on their mowing because they’re such complainers.” She turned around in her seat, and Eli braced himself for her to swerve off the narrow highway. “Hope you brought a bathing suit.”

“Nobody told me to bring a bathing suit,” he said, hearing the whine in his own voice and deploring it. “I’ll just watch.” And now he sounded like a pervert.

The car wound through a forested area until they reached a stretch of road lined on both sides with parked cars. Meg pulled in behind a dinged-up station wagon. “Well,

we're here at last, kids.”

Cassie reached into the backseat for a stack of towels. “Grab the beer, will you, Eli?”

Meg and Cassie skipped ahead with Eli trudging behind. The ground was rocky with pools of stagnant water collected in the crevices. The bright sun reflected off the water and caused Eli's eyes to tear up so that it took him a minute to realize what was right in front of him. At first he thought he must have misinterpreted the steady roar ahead as the sound of rushing water, but when his eyes finally adjusted, he saw it: two waterfalls, each about six feet high, and each spanning about one hundred feet. Men sat in lawn chairs with fishing poles and families with children waded in the more shallow sections.

“Welcome to Lincoln Falls,” Cassie said. “It'll clear out when it gets dark.”

With her back to Eli, Cassie pulled her babydoll t-shirt over her head and tugged off her shorts. The bikini underneath was a shimmering blue. Eli's eyes were drawn to the negative space between her arm and the inward curve of her waist. Her spine and ribs stuck out a bit too much, but still he wanted to slip his arm inside that space and pull her close to him. She looked back and saw him watching her. She smiled.

Meg waited by the water in her bathing suit. “What are you waiting for, Eli? You didn't forget your underwear, too, did you?”

“You guys go on ahead,” he said, and sat on a rock that jutted out of the ground. Once again, the world had reached that golden hour as the sun dipped lower into the sky.

Cassie and Meg dove into the water, and then emerged, hair slicked back and

dripping onto their shoulders. Cassie splashed Meg. Meg grabbed her by the shoulders and dunked her. Eli at last found himself moved to join them. He left his clothes on the towels and waded into the water. People were watching him. He felt incredible.

“Whitie tighties,” Meg called, laughing at him, and the group of fisherman nearby all turned to look. He took her by the waist with one arm, and Cassie in the other arm and plunged them into the river. They regained footing, coughing and laughing, and then converged on him, but they couldn’t wrestle him off his feet. He stood chest-deep in the cold water, just savoring the warmth of Cassie’s skin on his as she struggled against him. Finally, he swung around to Meg and sunk her again. When he turned back to Cassie, she started to run away but he wrapped his arms around her and let his body slip backward into the water, holding her body against his.

The sun had gone down and everyone else had packed up their picnic lunches and fishing poles and gone by the time Pete arrived. Meg and Cassie had wrapped beach towels tight around their shoulders and stood to watch as Pete pulled his truck all the way out onto the rocks, leaving the headlights and radio on.

“What took you so long?” Meg said, but Pete just pulled her up into a bear hug, her feet dangling a few inches from the ground.

“You know how my mom is. She cooked a big dinner.”

“Thanks for the invitation.”

“You said you were heading out here early. I don't want to have that fight again. My mom likes you fine.”

Eli willed his ears to tune them out. Their squabble reminded him too much of home.

Meg sulked off to sit by the water, and Cassie and Pete followed. Pete passed beers around to everyone, and Eli waited for someone to break the awkward silence.

“Tell Eli about Angie Sutherland,” Cassie said.

“This girl, Angie—she was a couple years ahead of us in high school,” Meg said, and Eli could tell she enjoyed the attention and was used to it. “She was speeding down that road back there when a cop caught her and went to pull her over. Well, she had like ten pounds of weed on her and she just, I guess, started to freaking out.”

“Pounds? More like ounces,” Pete corrected her.

“Whatever, it was a whole lot. And she’d already been in trouble. She would have gone to jail for sure. So she doesn’t stop, she just puts the pedal to the metal, and the cop car loses sight of her. Now the cop—“

“Wasn’t it Pedo Eddie?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.”

“Eddie ain’t a cop no more,” Pete snickered. “He got caught foolin’ around with—“

Meg smacked him in the back of the head. “We get it. Let me finish. So Eddie said she flipped her headlights off so he couldn’t see her and she just kept driving. She went right off the road over here and stopped the car before it hit the water, and then she got out and just dove right into the river thinking she’d swim down a ways and get out when she was a safe distance away.”

Pete took over. “When Eddie caught up to her car, he found it packed full of drugs and no sign of Angie.”

“What a story it could have been if she had gotten away,” Cassie said. “Like a movie.”

“Yeah, well, they searched for her for about a week before her body washed up downriver,” Pete said.

Eli strained to see past the headlights to the river, imagining the girl’s final dive, drifting in the dark to her death.

“I want to go back in the water,” Meg said. “Who’s with me?”

“Too cold, and besides, I don’t like swimming in the dark,” Cassie said. She sat cross-legged next to Eli and let her knee rest against his. He scooted closer to her, and she didn’t move away.

Pete scooped Meg up and ran with her to the edge of the water where he tossed her in and then dove in after her. Eli was grateful to be alone with Cassie. He lay back on the rocks and stared up at the night sky, which was clear enough for him to make out what he guessed to be the milky way, white and serpentine, an astrological reflection of the creek they’d passed on the way. The night sounds of crickets or katydids or maybe it was some kind of tree frog—Eli really didn’t know—had almost grown loud enough that he could imagine that he and Cassie were completely alone. As if Peter and Meg didn’t exist. Nor did Julie or the St. Louis Inquisitor or even Bonne-Pomme.

“Cassie, lay back and look at this,” he said. She lay down beside him, and allowed her fingers to graze his. His stomach flipped. “You don’t see anything like this in the

city.”

“That’s just how it always is out here,” she said.

“You ought to come to St. Louis sometime,” he said. He couldn’t see her face, which was turned toward her friends in the water. “Tell me. What did you want to do when you grew up?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, surely you didn't say I want to be a single mom in this small town.” He cringed a bit, hoping he hadn't offended her by implying that the life she had was not enough. “Not that there's anything wrong with that.”

Cassie laughed. “I'm not an idiot, Eli. I know there's something wrong with that. I wanted to be all the things little kids want to be—first a doctor, then a vet, then I realized I was not good at biology. I thought I might like to be a teacher, but I don't like talking in front of people. I wanted to be an artist, too. Then I realized I wasn't any good at that either.”

“I can picture you as an artist,” Eli said, and he could. He pictured her hunched over an easel in that way she did with her shoulders, and in his mind, she was in Montmartre and she spoke French fluidly. “I bet you were better than you realized.”

“Oh, come on, you hardly know me,” she said, and he knew that she was right. But it was because he didn't know her that he could imagine her to be anything he wanted. “When you're little, people tell you that you could be anything. You could be president. And you believe it. You feel like the window is huge and wide open for you. And it just closes a little bit every day of your life.”

“You are breaking my heart, Cassie.”

“But look at you, a fancypants reporter.”

He almost told her then that he was no longer a reporter, and even when he had been, there was nothing fancy about it. Instead, he said that just because you become something, doesn't mean you are good at it.

“By the time I got to high school, I guess I knew what was ahead for me.”

“You're young,” he said, moving his hand over hers and then threading his fingers through her fingers. “You'd be amazed how much things can change for you, what possibilities there may be.” He didn't want her to see that he was terrified that what he was about to do might change him forever. Even if he never left Julie. Even if she never knew about any of this. He would be a different kind of person than he had been before. “You never thought about getting married?”

There was enough silence from her to make him nervous. “I'm married, Eli.”

This news struck him with a mix of confusion and relief. He remembered something he'd heard a long time ago from a co-worker: two married people can have an affair because they cancel each other out. Not that he believed that. Not that he believed that Cassie was that kind of person.

“I mean separated,” she continued. “For longer than you think two people could be separated. Me and Lilly's dad never really got a divorce, but it's been four years.”

“He sounds like an idiot to me.”

“I don't know. He had his reasons,” she said. “I don't want to talk about that.”

He squeezed her hand.

“I don't want to do this,” she said. The shadows concealed her face from him. In his mind, he saw Veronica's small lips that always seemed to be pouting, her perpetually sad eyes. The casualty. “I don't want to do the thing to another woman that was done to me.”

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I never thought you were like that.” He reached over to touch her hair that had dried now but clung in strands soft as silk ribbons. “I just can't figure out, why do I feel like I've always known you?”

Pete reappeared without warning. “What are you two cocksuckers doing?” he said, and Cassie sat up quickly, but she leaned into Eli's ear. “Lilly's staying with my parents again tonight.”

He didn't tell her he'd slept in his car. Her hands were soft and weightless as bird bones.

Eli woke up alone in Cassie's bedroom. “Jesus God,” he muttered, dragging himself into a sitting position. He heard her clanging about in the kitchen, and the sound reverberated uncomfortably through his skull. The night had ended in a blur, but he remembered her showing him into the room, and then leaving him there to sleep on the couch. He remembered his humiliation at making Meg pull over so he could vomit into the ditch, and then racing again later to Cassie's bathroom. Her bringing him a cup of water and a fistful of individually wrapped Saltine crackers. No, the night had certainly not gone the way he'd hoped. He found a smashed pack of cigarettes on the nightstand and he took one and lit it. When he stood, one of his legs tingled painfully and he nearly

stumbled into the doorframe, but he caught himself with one arm and stood there for a moment. On the wall hung a painting of a cat curled up in a windowsill with Cassie's initials, C.M., inscribed in the corner. It wasn't well done, but Eli was touched by it all the same.

In the kitchen, he found Lilly seated at the table, pitting a fork against a knife in some kind of battle to the death. "Who's winning?" he asked.

She smiled, but didn't answer, just looked to her mother who ladled pancake batter onto a griddle. Lilly was the spitting image of her mother, as if there had been no father at all.

"Bet you didn't think I could cook, did you?" Cassie said. "Lilly, this is my friend, Eli."

"Hi, Eli," she said shyly. He wondered how many strange men she had been introduced to over breakfast.

Cassie cursed. The smell of burnt batter filled the room. "Okay, so maybe I can't cook after all."

"Here, let me see," Eli said, coming up behind her and taking the spatula out of her hand. He hoped his cooking would distract her from the fact that he wouldn't eat. His stomach still felt volatile, and he didn't want to hurt her feelings. "See, you've just got the heat up too high. You've got to let them cook slowly. Why don't you sit. Let me cook you breakfast."

"Now that's what I like to hear. Lilly, why don't you go find your dance costume? Do you want bacon with your pancakes? Sorry, she got homesick early this morning, and

my stepmom dropped her off.”

“I sort of embarrassed myself last night.”

“Trust me. I've been there.”

“I forget how old I'm getting. Is it possible that last night added even more years on?”

She laughed, not insincerely, but in that way that let him know she didn't think he was that funny.

He heard her pull the refrigerator door open behind him. “I guess you have to head back to St. Louis today, huh?”

“I should.”

She laid strips of bacon out onto a skillet next to the griddle and ignited the burner. She let her hip graze his thigh. “Will you come with us to the parade?”

He wondered whether it was ethical to downsize to a family just like you can with a car or a house. Could one say this family here doesn't require so much, hasn't acquired the desire for more, always more. This family will do.

He drove them to the sesquicentennial parade in his car after a stop at Walmart. He couldn't keep wearing the same clothes. Julie would have been mortified to find out he'd shopped there. They're destroying the middle class, she'd say. Their clothes were made in sweatshops. But the truth was, the clothes they bought from Macy's or H&M were made in the same places. He actually enjoyed walking the aisles with Cassie and Lilly, Cassie holding out button down shirts and khaki pants for him to try because she

thought he wanted something similar to what he'd been wearing. Of course she didn't know him well enough to picture him in anything else. He'd laughed, "A t-shirt and jeans would be just fine for today."

And then in the underwear aisle, she'd said, "no more whitie-tighties" before tossing a package of boxer-briefs to him. He enjoyed the humorous intimacy of it.

They arrived on the square two hours early so Lilly's dance troop could run through one last rehearsal. Banners had been hung across main street, and local businesses and high school students were no doubt putting the finishing touches on their floats for the parade. A group of cheerleaders had gathered in the street in front of the Dollar General, and were attempting over and over to form a pyramid. One or the other kept falling out of place.

He found Frannie Moorland hanging garlands from the gazebo. She kept pausing in her work to glance up at the sky. "It's going to rain," she said. "It may not look like it now, but you can feel it."

Frannie looked around at the others who were decorating ticket booths and setting up games. "I guess it's what you get though," she said. "Celebrating at a time like this."

There certainly was a density in the air, a visceral weight that Eli felt pushing in on him. Across the road, there was a familiar car parked next to his, Julie's jeep. It was unmistakable.

He felt suddenly exposed, cast out of a dream. He scanned the crowd of people that were scattered across the square to see if Julie might be out there among them, then quickly read through the text messages he had ignored that morning. The last one

announced that she'd come to find him. How had it never occurred to him that she might do this? His heart beat in his ears, keeping time it seemed, with the fat, heavy rain drops that had begun to strike the ground.

Lake Contrary

The world is an uglier place than it ever was, Abby thought. Funny that those words, not her own, should return to her at this peculiar moment, on a sticky couch with a man's hand, not her husband's, on her bare knee, nudging up under the edge of her skirt. She felt sexy and scared out of her mind. The living room was dark even in mid-afternoon, its heavy drapes drawn closed, the television altering the shadows cast by the furniture. She could hear the kids, his kids, in the next room.

Abby suspected those words would haunt her for some time to come, particularly because she had disagreed with them so fervently last summer at the neighborhood block party, and especially because she had managed to make such an ass of herself that day. She hadn't wanted to go, not really. Her husband Jonathon said they should, to be "neighborly." And as with most gatherings these days, Abby found herself humiliatingly overdressed. In her wedge heels, tripping across a neighbor's front lawn with its deceptively

level grass that concealed bumps and indentations, she had realized how foolish she must look. The other women her age wore fitted tank tops and flip flops and cargo shorts, and though they all complimented her dress and hair, she felt like an idiot.

Jonathon had navigated the party like a pro, moving nimbly from cluster to cluster, shaking hands and brandishing the wholesome smile that served him better here in St. Joseph than it had in Chicago. Abby searched for Monica, her only ally in the neighborhood, even though Monica liked to wear cowboy hats whenever she drank. Monica held court now with a group of neighborhood women by the beverage table. Abby crept up to her side and stood silently, waiting for a lull in the conversation to jump in.

And that's when Monica said it: "The world is an uglier place than it ever was." Then she shook her head slowly, creating a dramatic pause before she continued. "You've got these greedy corporations now, the environment going to hell in a hand basket, and the schools, I could tell you stories about my niece--"

"Uglier than it ever was? That's a bit of an overstatement." Abby had said. She never hesitated to take on an argument against someone she knew she could beat. "How can you think it was ever any better? Just think if we lived six hundred years ago. We'd be somebody's serfs. Even a hundred years ago, we'd be working twelve hours a day in some shirtwaist factory till it burned down with us inside."

Some other neighbors had drawn up close around them, and she felt slightly exhilarated, thinking she had an audience. Abby had loved living in Chicago, though she had never been terribly good at it. The cold winters and traffic she had eventually adapted to, but never the people. She loathed to admit it, but she thrived on impressing people, and

here it was so much easier to do. That's why she'd chosen this dress and the terrible shoes and why she hadn't simply nodded and sipped her Bud Light and lamented the end of life as we know it.

"In another time, we'd already be in old age. We'd have six kids and two of them would be dead." Abby felt uncharacteristically optimistic because the election was coming, and she was certain that Bush would be defeated for his second term. Though most of her neighbors disagreed with her, she knew that outside this blue collar town, there were plenty of people just like her, and she would soon be vindicated. Whoever kept stealing her Kerry/Edwards signs would feel ashamed.

"In fact," she continued. "I think this is truly the best time to be alive, and I don't think there's any other way to look at it." She waved her hands emphatically, and then quickly dropped them when she looked, really looked, at the expressions of the people surrounding her.

"This country is at war, sweetheart," said her next door neighbor, a brusque, heavysset woman who Jonathon referred to in private as Fatty Boom Boom. She often sat on her front porch sucking on cigarettes while the grandkids who lived with her picked through the rocks and dirt underneath. Jonathon used to say, one of these days that porch is going to give, and those kids better get out of the way.

"I know that." Abby's confidence shaken now, her voice wavered. "It's just that it doesn't affect us much here. It's not like Vietnam or World War II. I'm not saying it's right, it's just how it is."

“It doesn’t affect you kids because you don’t care,” the woman said. “It’s okay, sweetheart.” And now her voice, though gruff, turned condescendingly saccharine. “My son is over there fighting this war so you don’t have to be ‘directly affected’.”

Abby hadn’t known. “Of course I care about it.”

“Of course you do,” the woman said, one of her eyebrows cocked.

“You know it’s not like there’s a draft,” Abby blurted, and then as she continued, realized that simultaneously talking and thinking was not her strong suit, like rubbing her belly and patting her head at the same time. “It was his choice to join,” she said, regretting it even as she finished.

The woman produced a smile more akin to a snarl, like those dogs whose owners teach them to smile on command. All it amounted to was the bearing of teeth. “Seems the world is worse than I ever seen it,” she said. “You got your Iraqis coming over here, blowing up buildings on our soil, cooking up biological weapons to kill us with. And then you kids, just goofing around with your little video games. They got you so distracted, you don’t know what’s what.”

Abby was not a kid. She was twenty-seven, but she didn’t correct the woman. Instead, she smiled desperately, and as she stepped backward her ankle caught on a sprinkler head and twisted violently.

The woman laughed heartily and, Abby felt, at her expense. “Look Ron,” she said to the old man who stood next to her. “I scared the shit out of this little girl.” And then to Abby: “I’m Tina. I don’t think you ever introduced yourself since you moved in.”

“Abby.” She extended her hand out of habit.

But Tina didn't take it. Instead she nodded slowly, said, "Nice to meet you. It's good to see the world through them rosy-colored glasses while you can. Life sure will knock them off your face."

Abby had to admit that this town would lead anyone to believe the world was in an irretrievable downward spiral. Where they lived, the south side, the most remarkable landmark was King Hill, a mound of earth that towered over them, and on top of it, a flagpole stuck out like a branchless tree. Lightning had long ago broken off the top and the flag had never been replaced. The apex of the hill offered an unflattering view of the city, a gray landscape populated by the former stockyard and factories, many of which sat empty, and once middle-class housing, now abandoned by taste for newer subdivisions far away on the north side of town. You could see the Missouri River winding past town too, but even it wasn't so spectacular anymore. The base of the hill was ringed with consignment shops, greasy bars, and title loan companies. Abby's parents had taken her to the overlook a few times when she was little, and then to the Dairy Queen, a family ritual that started when her grandparents were children. She was dismayed to find when she moved back to St. Joseph that the Dairy Queen had been converted to a check-cashing center.

Their return was supposed to be temporary. Her grandparents moved to Tampa years ago, and concerned about their old house sitting empty had sold it to Abby and Jonathon at a good price. The original plan had been to fix up the house, sell it, and then move back to Chicago, or at least Kansas City. And yet they were still here because

Jonathon had fallen in love with the house. She knew it because after he finished renovating the kitchen and tiling the bathrooms, he constructed a darkroom in the basement. And then he found the job he loved, as a photographer with the small news press. In Chicago, neither of them had managed to land the jobs they really wanted. As for Abby, she took a job at a second-hand store near the house, where at least she got first pick of all the donations, even if her pay was only minimum wage. After all, she insisted, this was only a temporary living arrangement. When they moved to an acceptable city, she had explained to Jonathon, she would look for something serious.

Since it seemed they would not be moving for some time, she resolved to make things right with Tina. Abby found it difficult enough to live in an atmosphere of animosity, especially with someone as overbearing and unavoidable as Tina. In that year of part-time work, she learned to bake, and so she spent the following Saturday pouring through cookbooks her grandmother had left behind, and settled on a peace offering of spiced tea cookies.

Now, she hesitated at Tina's front door, realizing what a terrible choice it had been. *Tea cookies?* She mocked herself. Tina opened the door before she knocked, and it was too late to turn back. She was a large woman at six feet tall, and any excess weight she carried—and there did seem to be a lot of it—appeared to be brought on by a resolution on Tina's part, not the accident of poor diet or mere laziness.

“Oh, sweetheart, no,” Tina said when she saw the cookies. “I'm diabetic.”

Abby looked down at the cookies and then at her apron, covered in flour and dried patches of dough. Why was she still wearing the apron? “For your grandkids, then?”

Tina nodded but did not reach for the cookies. “You just take the cookies on into them then.” She stepped out onto the porch, the screen door propped against her back, and motioned for Abby to go inside. “Listen,” she said. “I wonder if you could just stay here a minute while I run over to my sister’s.”

Abby opened her mouth to say no, but found herself silenced by the absurdity of the request. Perhaps this was Tina’s way of allowing her to do penance for her ignorant remarks. And anyway, she almost felt flattered that, in spite of their differences, Tina thought enough of her to leave her grandkids in Abby’s care. “Does your sister live nearby?”

“They’ll watch television while I’m gone. I’m just going to go pick up some things from her.” Tina dug through her purse without looking, produced a cigarette, and let the screen door close, Abby on the other side.

In the living room, identical in size and shape to her own, a small boy and girl sat on the couch. The house appeared clean but still smelled of stale food and too many people in a small house.

“Well, hi,” she said to the children. “I brought you some cookies.”

They were both in pajamas. The little girl, the older of the two, said, “Are you friends with my Grandma?”

“Yes.” There seemed to be no other answer.

“Okay, I’ll take your cookie.” She had gotten up off the couch, and now she took the plate and handed one to the little boy. “I’m Leigh, and this is Kyle. Our little brother

is Skylar, but he's asleep." She lounged on the couch again, the plate of cookies balanced on her belly.

"Why are you still standing up?" Kyle asked. He looked about six with curly brown hair, just a bit too long at the back.

"Oh, your grandma said she'd just be right back."

"She told us an hour," he said. "What's your name?"

She told them.

"That's pretty," Leigh said. "I think you're pretty."

"My dad's in the war," Kyle said. "He shoots Iraqis."

"Yes, I know. I bet you miss him." Abby sat down in a chair near the door.

Kyle leaned over the arm of the couch, and she realized both children stared intently at her as if they'd been waiting all day for someone to talk to them. "Iraqis don't love Jesus," Kyle said in a half whisper.

"Well, it's a little more complicated than that," Abby said. She had no idea how to talk to children.

"My mom lives in Iowa," Leigh said. "She works twenty-four hours a day in a restaurant. That's why we can't live with her."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"She has a boyfriend," Leigh said, "but it's not my daddy." Then she covered her conspiratorial smile with her hand.

Children, Abby thought, good for flattery but not for keeping secrets.

She glanced around the room for a clock. The walls were painted a taupe that clashed ever so slightly with the sofa. A palm plant grew in the corner under a spotlight. A computer sat on a desk on the opposite wall but the keyboard was piled with unopened mail so she wondered whether it even worked. The television dominated the room; it was an old-fashioned large screen and occupied the entire wall that divided the living room and kitchen. She couldn't tell how much time had passed.

“Can I brush your hair?” Leigh said, and when Abby agreed, she pulled a kitchen chair into the living room, saying, “Okay, we're going to play beauty shop.”

Abby sat down, and Leigh combed and then fussed with the blond strands until they were tangled again. When she got home much later, Abby could hardly brush it back out.

Abby felt confident that she had redeemed herself in Tina's eyes, though Tina seemed no more or less friendly than she ever had. She caught sight of the kids playing out in the yard on occasion and they always wanted to know when Abby could bring more cookies or come over and let Leigh 'fix her hair back up'. One day in the early fall, she and Jonathon noticed a banner hung across the front porch of Tina's house. “Welcome Home Daddy!” it read in bold blue letters and then underneath, “We're so proud of you!”

“Her son is coming home, I suppose,” Jonathon said.

“Thank God,” Abby said. “I would've felt like shit after what I said at the block party if he hadn't.”

“Yeah you would,” Jonathon said.

They sat on the front porch, curious to get a peek at Tina’s son. Would he be a male version of her? It was easy to imagine, with Tina’s deep, husky voice and impressive build. But they never saw anyone go into or come out of Tina’s house. By the next morning, the banner had blown off the porch and was snagged on Abby’s fence. Jonathon crumpled it up and threw it in the trash before he mowed the lawn.

The following week, she saw him for the first time. He sat in Tina’s smoking chair on the front porch, shirtless, in white sweatpants. There was never an excuse for white sweatpants as far as Abby was concerned, and even though they were having an Indian summer, he looked overexposed out there without a shirt. She waved at him but he did not wave back. He seemed not to notice her, and it gave her license to stare at him longer than she should have as she walked from her car to her house. He was deeply tanned and toned, but the features of his face were much finer than Tina’s. A faint scar ran from the outer edge of his left eyebrow almost to his hairline.

Once inside, she decided to bake another batch of cookies. Not really for the kids, but because she wanted an excuse to meet him. She wanted a reason for him to have to talk to her. This time though, she stuck with chocolate chip.

She called Jonathon at work while the cookies baked. “I saw him,” she said. “He’s sitting outside.”

He had been the topic of endless speculation in the neighborhood. The soldier who had lost his mind. They had heard he was having trouble adjusting, that perhaps he had been dishonorably discharged, though no one could say for what.

“He looks really crazy,” Abby said, a little gleefully. She didn’t know why the word excited her.

Leigh answered the door, grinning at the plate of cookies. “My daddy’s home.”

“I know,” Abby said. “I brought these for you to share with him.”

“Do you want to meet him?”

Before she could answer, Leigh stepped back from the doorway to allow Abby inside. “Grandma,” she yelled. “Our neighbor is here to meet daddy.”

Abby felt unaccountably embarrassed.

Tina and her son sat across from each other at the kitchen table. Tony wore a hooded sweatshirt now, and lifted his eyes from a stack of newspapers spread out before him.

“How thoughtful,” Tina said, eyeing the plate in Abby’s hands. “I hope you used Splenda this time.”

“Sorry.”

“We’re just looking for an apartment for him.”

“That’s great,” Abby said. “You should look online too.”

“Tony,” Tina said. “This is the neighbor-girl.”

“It’s Abby,” she introduced herself.

Tony reached for her hand. His skin was rough and his grip tight as she would have expected. "I saw you outside," he said.

She felt herself blush at this, recalling her flagrant staring earlier.

"Yes, welcome back," she said. But what did you say to a returning soldier? Thank you? Good job? "I saw the great banner the kids made for you."

"I did it," Kyle said, having appeared in the doorway to the living room.

"No, Kyle, you can't write," Leigh said. "I did it."

"That wasn't such a good day," Tina said, "Was it Tony?"

Tony didn't respond, but Abby caught the look of disdain he cast at his mother.

"I'm sure the transition isn't easy," Abby offered.

"No," Tony said, and looked up at her for the first time. "But it is good to be back."

"Their house is just like ours on the inside, only reversed," Abby mused one evening to Jonathon. "I mean, before we redid the kitchen. The same ugly pine cabinets, same awful arrangement where you feel trapped between the stove and the sink."

"Is there anything besides those people you'd like to talk about?" he'd asked, only half-kidding, she thought. She realized she talked about them a lot, about Tina, about the kids, but she had been careful not to talk too much about Tony. Partly out of fear that something in her voice would betray her. But partly because she'd rather keep those thoughts to herself. To savor them in her free moments. The curious way the scar moved just slightly with his brow on the rare occasion that he smiled. The way he ran his fingers

over his close-shaven head in the mornings when he stepped out to smoke. The way he always seemed pleased to see her on the occasions that they encountered each other outside. Every time she stepped out the door, she felt a sharp twist in the stomach even though she rarely saw him.

Once, she ran into him at a bar downtown, the Galaxy, and she resisted the idea that it was divine providence, even though she hardly went to bars. And especially not this one, with its roped-off dance floor where people with cowboy hats like Monica's bumped and grinded against one another. This time, she was glad Monica had talked her into coming, and relieved that Jonathon had stayed home. What a surprise to find him there, to find him with friends.

When he caught sight of her across the bar and waved, she smiled shyly to disguise the fact that she had been waiting anxiously for him to take notice of her.

"Did you have any luck finding an apartment?" she asked casually when he took the barstool beside her.

"No," he said. "But my friend has a place at Lake Contrary. I might just rent it from him."

"That sounds good," she said, but it didn't. "You know, my mom inherited this set of old postcards that show Lake Contrary at the turn of the century," she said, in an effort to mask her disappointment. He leaned in close, perhaps straining to hear her over the blaring Kid Rock song. "It's hard to imagine it the way it was then. There was this fancy place called the Lotus Club and boat docks. Even an amusement park."

She had seen photos from the fifties, too, the merry-go-round poking up out of a flooded lake. The park never recovered. People still went there to swim and picnic, but the only houses around it were trailers, and you'd have to be crazy to even stick a toe in the water as far as she was concerned.

"Hard to believe," he said. He yawned and she glimpsed the blank space where one of his molars had been. She wondered what happened to it, where the scar on his brow had come from.

"Will you be taking the kids, then?" she asked.

"Oh, nah. They'll be better at mom's for now. Once I get a bigger place, then maybe," he ran his hand across his forehead. "You know, they like you a lot, my kids."

He touched her shoulder then as he stood to leave, and it felt as if he had tugged a string connected to her lungs that briefly collapsed them.

Monica had been watching the whole time. "Every woman gets one man before any woman gets two," she said when Tony was gone. "Why didn't you introduce me to the soldier?"

Abby didn't understand where the fixation came from, except that things had always come so easily for her and Jonathon. She knew she would meet the man she'd marry in college, and she did. She knew he'd be creative and smart and funny, and Jonathon was all of those things. But for all of her good luck, what had she really learned about anything?

If she had met Tony in high school, and he had dared to speak to her, she would have turned her back on him. If she had moved in next door, and he was just some guy

who worked in a factory on the south side, she would have paid him no attention. No, it was something about what he had done, how he had left town, just like she did, but returned, sun-stained and lithe and strange. It was what he knew that she did not.

Tony moved out in the spring. He hadn't said goodbye to her, but why would he? They weren't friends in any true sense of the word. Nevertheless, that April, when Tina banged on her door just before lunch, looking more disheveled than usual and growling that her sitter had cancelled, Abby volunteered in the simple hope that she might get some tidbit of information about how Tony was doing, but Tina was curt at best when Abby asked after him.

"You know I don't think Grandma even knows this," Leigh said to her later that day. "but Kyle isn't even my real brother."

"He's not?" Abby thought of Kyle's curls in contrast with Leigh and Skylar's thick dark hair.

"No, he has our same mommy but not our same daddy."

"Oh, so he's your half brother, then."

"Half brother, yes," Leigh said, as though she had just heard the word for the first time.

"You know something else?"

"What?"

"When Daddy came back, he went to see Mommy. And then he went cuh-razy," she said this as she wound her finger around her ear and rolled her eyes around in their

sockets. Children could be so detached sometimes, in the same way that Abby's cousins had run around and goofed off in the funeral home where their own father had been laid out. "That's why he sleeps all the time, and that's why Grandma made him leave."

"I wondered," Abby said. "Do you still miss him?"

"Yes, but," she lowered her voice. "This one time, he pushed me down on the ground and then layed on top of me. And I was like 'get up, Daddy, you're squishing my leg' because I thought he was just playing around. And when Grandma pulled him off, he said he just got confused. He thought he heard a bomb or something, but we didn't hear anything. And then he got upset."

She shrugged and sighed such a soft, world-weary sigh that Abby felt momentarily inferior.

When Abby heard the back screen door slam shut in the kitchen, and then Kyle came running into the living room, she was not alarmed, not immediately. He and Skylar had been digging in the dirt out back, collecting whatever detritus landed in their backyard, and who knows what he might have discovered. He was a very excitable little boy.

"Skylar's gone. He left with Daddy."

Abby marked her place in the book she was reading and looked up. "He left?" She asked, the information not immediately registering. "He left?" She said again, and stood abruptly, realizing she should have disguised the panic in her voice that time.

"I told him not to go," he said, his face crumpling as if he himself had done something wrong. "I told Daddy he had to ask Grandma."

“Get your sister. She’s upstairs.” Abby rang Tina at work.

“Well, you have to go and get him back,” she said without hesitating. “You let him go, now fix it. I can’t leave work.”

“Should I call the police?”

“No,” she said. “We don’t need to get anybody in trouble. Tony’s got enough problems as it is. Anyway, you should have been watching them better.”

Abby felt anger rise in her chest, hot and white. She wanted to say, I wasn’t prepared to watch them today in the first place. It’s not my fault you raised a fucked-up son. But somewhere between her chest and her throat, anger always turned to tears, and that would have been humiliating. Better to just keep her mouth shut.

Tina gave her directions to the trailer at the lake. She felt as if she were descending as she drove the little way to Lake Contrary, past King Hill, past the former Dairy Queen, past the interstate they built when they thought the city would grow to the south and it had stubbornly grown to the north instead. The little trailer park surprised her; people seemed to be tending their yards. One even had a row of sunflowers forming a privacy fence at one side. But the stray cats that lurked around the dumpsters alarmed her—they looked cross-eyed, too many toed, and they stopped whatever they were doing to eye her car as she pulled slowly down the gravel drive to the blue aluminum trailer where Tina said she would find Tony and Skylar. It was not at all like her to do this, to be the hero, and she was nervous. Nervous about taking the kids in her car. (Shouldn’t they have car seats? Why had she brought them along at all? Even at five, Kyle still wet his pants

with much regularity and she had cloth seats.) And she was nervous about approaching the trailer, what she might find inside. Under any other circumstances, she would have called Jonathon to help her, but she was drawn to Tony in a way in a way that did not equate to logic.

She told the kids to wait in the car, and then leaned against her door for a moment, inhaling deeply, filling her chest with air where it lacked in confidence. There was no porch, only a few narrow steps that led up to a door. She knocked and then took a step back. No answer. She knocked again, more forcefully. After a minute the door cracked open, and she could see a sliver of Tony's face, that curious scar. He said nothing.

"Is Skylar here?" she asked, attempting to mask her fear and desperation. But he must have been expert at recognizing fear in others. He could reach out one of his big hands and shove her backward down the steps if he wished. "I was supposed to be watching him. Your mother is very upset with me."

"I need time with my kids," he said. "I won't hurt them. They're my kids."

"I know," she said. The wind whipped through the thin skirt she had put on that morning, in anticipation of a warm spring day that had turned cold mid-afternoon. She hugged her elbows in an attempt to stay warm, trying unsuccessfully to maintain an upright and confident posture at the same time.

"I just got to thinking, you know? That nobody else could protect them like I could. I mean, they were out playing in the back by themselves."

She felt a pang of guilt, but she nodded.

“My mom’s good, but she doesn’t always take the best care of them. She doesn’t know the real dangers like I do. She doesn’t know how to handle an emergency. I got to thinking I’m the only one who can protect them.”

“Well, can I come in and just, we talk about it in there? It’s just a little cold out here.”

“I want to see Kyle and Leigh.”

She hesitated.

“Just for a little bit. See they’re okay and then you can go on your way, make nice with my mom. I didn’t mean for you to get involved.”

She knew she was treading in dangerous water now, but she thought if she could at least get in the house, and see if Skylar was okay, she could get them all back out and safely home. She motioned to the kids in the car, and then watched as Leigh unbuckled her seatbelt, then leaned over to help Kyle do the same. They were holding hands as they approached. When Tony opened the door, she realized that Skylar had been in his arms the whole time, his head resting against Tony’s right shoulder, previously obscured by the door.

“Well, give me a hug,” he said to Kyle and Leigh, and they did, hugging the side that was not occupied by their younger brother.

He motioned for Abby to sit down on the couch and she did, with the kids next to her on one side. Tony sat on the other, right up against her with Skylar still in his arm, though the toddler squirmed against him.

“They like this show,” he said, motioning toward the television. It was Dora the Explorer. She didn’t point out that Leigh had already outgrown it.

“I know they can’t live here with me,” he said. “I don’t even want it. But it’s not right for her to keep them from me. I’m their dad.”

“Yes, I know.”

Skylar finally wriggled free of his father’s embrace and began to wander the trailer, then settled on pulling paperback books off a shelf and piling them in different stacks based on some criteria known only to him.

“I think she just worries about you. She wants you to get better,” she said, though she didn’t know what Tina thought or wanted. His body was so close to her now; it was making her feel flushed, light-headed.

“I haven’t been thinking right since I’ve been back,” he admitted.

“Did you get hurt?” she asked. “Your scar?”

He ran his finger along the cross-hatched skin above his brow. “Do I have a head injury, you mean?”

“I didn’t mean to pry.”

“No, it’s okay. I would ask too. This is from when I was very little. I don’t even remember it. I fell down the stairs.”

He leaned in close to her, his eyes expressing a clarity she hadn’t seen in them before. She felt like pulling his forehead to her lips, kissing the scar, running her fingertips over it. The trailer, just like his mother’s place, was surprisingly well-kept, but had a dis-

tinct odor, much more pungent here, partly organic, partly something blowing in off the lake. And he had the heat turned up too high, which only intensified it.

Leigh and Kyle had gotten up off the couch and she hadn't even noticed. She could hear them in another room. What if she lived here with them, instead of across town, in her grandparent's comfortable house with Jonathon? She imagined lying with Tony at night, holding him when he woke up screaming. Fighting his demons with him, night after night, if that's what it took.

She felt his hand on her thigh then, like some sort of wish fulfillment. Her skin underneath his hand became the center of her body and all feeling radiated from it. He just held it there and stared into her eyes until she felt he had read too much of her and she turned her face away. Whatever was happening she did not know if she could stop, now that she had set it in motion. She was excited, and scared suddenly that he would never let her leave. Her mind wandered to Jonathon--how long would she have to be gone before he'd go looking for her? How had she ended up here anyway? And then she remembered the block party, and her uncharacteristic optimism, though she had to admit now that it hadn't really been optimism at all, just her being the contrarian as always.

Tony's hand edged up, just under the hem of her skirt, and she jumped. It seemed to have startled him too. "I'm sorry!" she said. "I'm sorry." And she was even more frightened now because of the look of alarm on his face. "I'm married. I'm sorry."

He stood now, too, and he walked away from her, into the kitchen where his face was out of view, blocked by a row of cabinets. She could see that his arms were raised,

and she assumed that his hands were covering his face. She could hear him breathing through the hands.

“Do you want to know what it was like over there?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, okay, and then we had better go.”

“It’s kind of like this, right here,” he said. “You’re standing there, scared of me.”

She started to shake her head, though she knew he knew he was right.

“No, it’s okay. You don’t know me, or what I might do. We’re just standing here, having a conversation, and eventually, if we talk long enough, you might even start to get comfortable.” He shrugged. “That’s what it was like. We’d go out on the road and come back without a scratch for weeks on end. You get comfortable.”

Abby could only nod, taking account of where the kids were in the trailer by the sound of their voices.

“When it happens, it’s always, always a surprise,”

“Sure.”

“Like this guy Jamie, he always wore this Dungeons and Dragons necklace and we made fun of him for it, but he thought it was lucky. We all had stuff like that. My wife sent me a lock of Leigh’s hair and I kept it in my pocket in a little envelope. You get superstitious. If you forgot it one day, you were on edge. Do you know what I mean?”

Abby nodded.

“So one day, we were on the road and came up on this bridge. There were four of us and we were laughing about this dog that lived on the base that was always humping something. You get all these easy days in a row and you start to relax. So like I said, it

was a surprise when, like, half the truck was blown off. I was okay but one of the guys in back, and Jamie...”

“I’m sorry,” Abby said, uncertain of what response he wanted.

“You should’ve seen his face. He fell over on me, and on one side, he still looked whole. But on the other side, the skin was all gone and you could see inside his cheek like this.”

Tony pulled his lip as far back as he could as if it were caught on a hook, far enough to reveal his gums and the row of yellowing teeth with the black gap where one was missing. “You could see his jaw bone, with a couple of teeth still in place, and his tongue just laying in his mouth as if nothing had happened, but I could see it go all the way back into his throat, way too long. Just meat.”

Abby ran her thumb along her own jaw. “Oh,” she said. “Oh, Jesus.”

Tony let out a little laugh she couldn’t interpret. “We said it was because he forgot to wear that stupid necklace, but nobody ever checked.”

“I don’t think I will ever understand what it was like.”

“No,” he said.

She gathered up the kids—he did not try to stop her—and walked them back to the car, buckling each of them in. And then she drove very carefully, feeling too aware of every tendon, muscle, nerve, vein--it all seemed so tenuous. So delicate. It was all she could do just to get them home safe.

When Tina got home from work, Abby walked to her own house and found Jonathon stretched out on the couch in his boxers, watching a rerun of Seinfeld. She lay

down on top of him, her belly matching up to his belly, her chest against his chest, and then finally pressed her cheek to his. Sometimes he shaved before bed so he wouldn't have to worry about it in the morning, and his skin was smooth and soft.

The Last Boy Band

You should know that it was never my dream to be part of the LuvThugz. It was my twin brother, your Uncle Tommy, who had taken the dance lessons and the voice lessons and attended the Rick Manning Finishing School for the Young Male Performer, frequently advertised on late-night television back then (it was really just a box containing an instructional video, microphone, and workbook). It was Tommy who said to me, “Chuck, just come to the audition with me!” And reluctantly, I did, I boarded the plane and flew all the way to L.A., even though I felt that at twenty-four, we were both far too old to make good boy band material. And yet, they loved Tommy. And by extension, me, even though I had not auditioned.

“Twins!” they said. “They’ll love this!”

Of course I pointed out that I didn't dance or sing, and I didn't have the advantage of the Rick Manning Finishing School diploma. “Oh, we can teach you as long as you are willing to work really hard.”

And I said, “But what will you pay me?”

“Enough that you don't have to worry,” they said.

“I guess there will be lots of girls,” I said, thinking of how your mom had just

dumped me.

“Lots of girls,” they said.

“And what about boys,” Tommy said then, because he had never been discreet about his preferences.

“Yes, probably there will be boys, but we will not market that part so much,” they said, which is funny because of how things changed years later.

So I agreed. Because what else was I doing at the time? As far as having a job, I didn't and hadn't for about six months. A lot of people overlook this fact but I did go to college, and that's important for you to know about me. I didn't graduate, but still. I only dropped out of school because my parents, your grandparents, felt their funds were better spent on Tommy. They have always been big supporters of the performing arts, what with your grandpa being in all those cornflake commercials when he was a kid and your grandma in that horror film about orangutans whose DNA gets mixed up with humans. I'm sure she will have told you all about it.

And of course, there was your mom, my high school sweetheart, who had broken up with me because I was a “poor communicator” and an “insensitive lover.” You will understand what that means when you are a little older. I think she might have felt differently if she had stuck around through the LuvThugz days, when I soloed on songs like “I Can't Help Feeling Your Love,” and “I Want to Hold Your Hand (While You Cry for the Loss of Your Grandmother).” The second one I actually wrote for her, but I'm not sure she ever heard it because LuvThugz was never really her thing, and anyway, it was only released as a b-side in Germany. I'm certain her roommate was baffled as to why a

former LuvThug kept telephoning at 3 am. I used to imagine, during those lonely and crazy days on the road, that your mother would turn up after one of our concerts, and she would be bawling just like all the thirteen year olds when they came backstage. Our bodyguard would deny her entrance, but I'd step in and say, "I know her. Let her through." And she would see how merciful I was and how successful, and she would know what a mistake she had make breaking up with me. Of course, you wouldn't be here if she hadn't eventually seen the error of her ways, but that came much later, long after the LuvThugz had disbanded and I was back in Kansas City.

When I started training for the LoveThugz, we all had to meet with our personal Image Consultant. My Image Consultant's name was Mimi. She looked to me about forty-three but still very thin and pretty. "Chuck," she said. "We want to give people the impression that you are eighteen, not twenty-four. Of course we're not going to lie about it, per se. But your actual age is not something we will publicly broadcast, so to speak. Your physical age is not going to be integral to what I like to call your Public Person.

"Also, we're not going to change your name or anything like that. We certainly want you to feel good about who you are. Chuck is a great name. It's a sturdy name. A little old for your years, but who knows? Maybe it would work in Idaho or Kansas. But here's what I see for you: we call you by your last name. McKnight. It's dashing, chivalrous even. You are blessed with a truly fabulous last name—think of the girls whose minds will instantly be flooded with images of castles and dragon slayings. So we will mostly just call you McKnight. You may want to practice looking in the mirror and thinking of yourself as such."

All of our Image Consultations were private and therefore I don't know the goings-on of the other LuvThugz member's meetings with their personal consultants. I only discovered Triple T's real name to be Theo months later, his nickname derived from his full name Theodore Thomas Tucker. For a couple of the guys, I can assume there was some coaching that involved displaying a physical affection for the ladies, as opposed to boys, because girls were our target market after all. Mimi told me there would be a lot of pressure on me, or rather my Public Person, to be the ladies' man to take some pressure off certain others.

By then they had moved us all into an amazing loft in LA, which had once been, I think, a slaughterhouse or something. But that can't be right. I remember the first night, me and Tommy and the rest of the guys sat out on the balcony drinking champagne out of the bottle. We looked out across the L.A. skyline, so foreign from the Midwestern one we were used to, and all the lights transformed it into some kind of magical wonderland. I remember looking at Tommy and thinking how blessed with good looks I was, because looking at Tommy was like looking in a mirror. Mom used to call us her little cherubs because of our golden blonde curls and fair skin with cheeks that flushed easily, and by then all the workouts had chiseled our bodies pretty nicely, too. I guess that's sort of a conceited thing to think about yourself. Over the years, it seems, we look less and less alike. Tommy's left eyelid droops just a little bit, and I think I've gotten a few more wrinkles, no thanks to my tanning addiction.

There were enough bedrooms for all of us, although Tommy decided to bunk with Triple T, which at first made me jealous because we were, after all, twins. But then I

realized that Tommy and T had a different kind of relationship. Tommy fell in love with T's long, lithe dancer's body and his dark hair that was already turning to salt and pepper at the temples, even though he was only twenty-two, and lent him an air of beyond-his-age wisdom. I would grow to love T almost as much as Tommy did, just in a different way. It was hard to stay upset about anything with the gourmet kitchen where we plowed through bowls of cereal until the sink was stacked with dishes just like in Special K commercials, and private bathrooms with whirlpools big enough for me and three or four girls. I didn't know it yet then, but all the guys would become as much brothers to me as Tommy, which isn't surprising given how much time we spent together during those four years and three albums. Blake, the little one with an incredible head of thick, dark hair that fell to the sides in just the right way, would eventually spend a good part of his adult life battling a pill addiction. And Corey, handsome but quite honestly a little on the heavy side, would go on to become a banker on Wall Street. He always knew the best dirty jokes, that guy.

By the time I made my way to the studio this morning, your mother was already there seated at a bistro set that was designed to mimic a sidewalk cafe, but it didn't remotely resemble one I'd seen before, not even when we toured Europe. That probably sounds romantic to you, that we toured all over the world, but the truth is, we were too busy to see any of it. We were always trying to just catch up on sleep in the back of a tour bus or a jet. Anyway, think of all the gaudy sets you might have seen on other CBN programs if you ever flip past that channel, but I hope that in the future we have cable

and you don't have to. It was a sidewalk cafe if Michael Jackson had commissioned the interior decorating. We sat at a marble-topped table with gilded, scroll legs and a gold-leaf candelabra in the middle for ambiance. All the sets were like this. I think they just recycled the furniture from other programs, like *The Praise Hour* with the blue-haired lady. But even still, your mother just took my breath away, same as she always has, sitting there in her starched white shirt unbuttoned down to the camisole underneath. I was used to the lights and cameramen, but she wasn't, and I could tell by the way she kept licking her lips. They always got dry when she was nervous.

When the cameras started to roll, she leaned over the table, and the lighting created this weird effect where her body from the neck down fell into shadow, and her face loomed larger than life, as if floating in thin air. She said, "What did you bring me here to tell me, Chuck?"

Good, I thought, she's playing along. I looked around at all the people in the room with us—the two camera men, the boom guy, a couple of handlers, the Reality Coach, Joe. I think you'd like Joe if you ever met him. "I'm sorry, Lacy," I said.

"Cut!" Joe cried. "I know this is tough for you, Chuck, but I'm not getting the real raw emotion here. I know it's there, but I need to see it. Take it slow this time, and why don't you take a hold of her hand."

I said sure.

"Okay, let's do this again," Joe said. "Lacy?"

She shrugged, then leaned close into the table, her face once again looming before me like a cartoon moon. I couldn't tell if it was all the pancake makeup they put on her or

the lighting or what, but I had this curious feeling that the person in front of me wasn't my Lacy. She smiled, but her smile was insincere. There was a coldness in her that I hadn't seen in her in years. "What did you bring me here to tell me, Chuck?" she said.

This time, I did take her hand. I reached across the table and cupped her hand in both of mine, a nice touch I thought. It reminded me of this video we did in the early days where the LuvThugz were superheroes who went out to save the world, but in doing so, we neglected our beautiful girlfriends. In my scene, I fly home to my girlfriend (played by Katie Holmes before she got really famous and married Tom Cruise, I swear to God) who is crying at the kitchen table, and I take her hand in my hand, just like now, and sing the chorus to "I Fly High on Your Lovin.'" And that thought left me with the image of me in that orange and white spandex suit that hugged my genitals uncomfortably and I almost laughed out loud, and then remembered how important it was that I stay serious. I concentrated on your mother's eyes even though they were unnerving me a little. Again, I said: "I'm so sorry."

"Oh stop," Lacy said, and a tear streaked her makeup mask. "I can't do this right now. Can I just talk to him off camera for a minute?"

"You agreed to do this on camera," Joe said gently. "Now, Chuck has something important to tell you."

"No, I can't do this," she said, and I just wanted to wrap her in my arms and get the heck out of there.

"You don't have to do this, baby, if you don't want to."

"Oh, what the devil, cut!" Joe said, which is just about as close to cussing as he

gets.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “Lace, we can do this, can't we? Can we start again, Joe?”

She just nodded. A makeup girl rushed up on stage and blotted away her tear streaks and repowdered her cheeks and then she powdered my face too for good measure.

“Let's do this. We can do this. Roll again, guys. From the beginning.”

Again, I took her hand and I held it and I said I was sorry for what I was about to tell her. “I have been led astray. I have been unable to control my attraction to men. I see now how my behavior has hurt you.”

Let me back up a second, this is the third desperate thing I've done in my life due to a lack of a job. Here's the thing, sometime after the band fell apart, I think I had just turned thirty, but it's a little blurry for me because I was at the tail end of a very dark period. Our manager owned the rights to our albums, not that we'd be earning any residuals anyway, as all our pre-teen fans had grown up and moved onto the next thing, which I think was nu-metal or neo-grunge or some such thing. And there was no one to replace them. Suddenly preteens wore eyeliner and cut themselves. God, how I missed the simpler times. I never even heard any of our old songs on Muzak. Toward the end of the LuvThugz, rumors flew that I was a twenty-seven-year-old man (which by then, I was), and that I had used my notoriety to sleep with underage girls (you may as well hear it from me, son). There were also the rumors that we were all gay, which in my case didn't even make sense, but I could hardly present evidence contrary lest I tempt criminal charges. We were all down on our luck, even Tommy and Triple T, who had held up so

well over the years, probably because of the strength of their relationship. They seemed relatively content in their one-bedroom apartment tucked up above Triple T's dance studio with their miniature pinscher, Chauncy.

The reason I finally came out of that dark spell is your mother. One day, out of the blue, she walked into the hip hop dance/exercise class in which I was the instructor. Triple T had given me the job after he opened it in Kansas City. He had returned with Uncle Tommy to our hometown. He felt sorry for me I guess, holed up in your grandma and grandpa's basement, subsisting on whatever was left of our surprisingly insubstantial fortunes. I will tell you what I am proud about in that time is that I did not do drugs and I did not drink excessively, except for the six or so times I drunk-dialed your mom which suddenly seemed to be paying off in dividends. So other than those times, and two or three drugs prescribed to me by my doctor to combat an understandable bout of depression combined with severe anxiety, I did not sink as low as I could have, which would have also been understandable given the circumstances, as with Blake, who was in rehab for a love of taking things into his nose.

So into the dance studio walked your mother on a Thursday evening with her brunette hair pulled into a bun at the nape of her neck, and she looked even more beautiful than she had on the day she broke up with me. I know that time will eventually muddle those good looks, so I especially want to paint a picture for you of how she looked. Her eyes won't have changed, those dark blue jewels, though the years have already dulled a little of their youthful sparkle. Your mom always had these broad, commanding shoulders that could have seemed masculine on any other woman, but she

had the narrow waist of a Victorian and hips that flared out like a bell I could ring and ring and ring. Her silken skin was almost terracotta from the tan she maintained back then. That day, she wore a black leotard and a denim mini-skirt. For a moment, I thought I had heartburn from the chili dog I ate for lunch, but it was just the longing I pushed down and compressed in my heart for all the years without her, and now it had expanded until my chest could burst. Well, I could hardly teach the class without tripping over my own feet. I couldn't even do a simple pirouette without coming back down on the hardwood floor with an amateurish thump.

After class, she admitted that she'd taken the class only because she heard I taught it, and that after all these years, she still thought about me. She said she was ready to take me seriously again, and she even went so far as to say that when a LuvThugz song came on the radio, she turned it up—though she'd never have purchased an album.

“You don't hate me, do you?” she asked, and I responded by wrapping my arm around her waist and pulling her close enough that I could kiss her full on the mouth. Six months later, we had moved into an apartment together, scraping by on my dance instructor salary and her full-time job waiting tables at Applebee's.

The only problem was that Triple T's studio was struggling.

Which brings me to the second desperate thing. There was this really popular show on at the time called “Queer Eye for a Straight Guy,” where five guys of the homosexual persuasion swarm into a straight guy's house and teach him how to live a more stylish and camera-ready lifestyle. It was actually something that us guys in the LuvThugz knew a little bit about, so this network pitched this knock-off to us, wherein

we basically did the same thing, only when we showed up at the victim's house, we would all jump out and say "You've been Luvthug'd!" The only catch being that they were only interested in making the show if the whole band was on board, and the material fact that I was a straight male didn't seem so important. I really didn't have to lie though; people made their own assumptions. I was the mood consultant, charged with teaching the poor dude how to create ambiance through use of color, lighting, and music. Like for example, if the dude of the week needed a makeover so he could propose to his girlfriend, I would change out all the light bulbs in the room to pink ones, put a little Enya on the stereo, and make sure there were plenty of soft throws and pillows in the room. (She said yes.)

"LuvThug'd" only lasted one season, but Lacy and I had to live apart during that whole time because the producer said it was important for me to maintain a certain persona. The reward seemed to be worth it though because when it was all over and I moved back to Kansas City again, we were able to put a down payment on this dynamite little house with a three-car garage and a marble jacuzzi. I wish you could see that house. I think you would have just really loved growing up in it. Oh, the treehouse I could have built for you there. You know, once the saplings grew big enough.

Lies build on top of one another, and that's really how I ended up here at Camp Change-of-Heart, the institution responsible for a reality show contest that aimed to turn gay men straight, live before your very eyes. I hadn't heard from my agent in over a year, and then out of the blue, she called. "I may have an opportunity for you," she said. "I got a call from Bill Patton's people at the Christian Broadcasting Network. They see the

success the big networks have had with reality shows, and they've been working on a few of their own. You know, Bill's daughters were big fans of yours back in the day.”

In my defense, I had just been laid off from Circuit City. The house had been foreclosed on, and we had to pawn the engagement ring I had purchased for your mother. The stipend we would get for participating in the show was minimal, but the money awarded for successfully completing the program was \$100,000. So every week, we completed these assignments and at the end of the show, if Brother Bill determined that we had been successfully cured, we'd get the money. Our plan was simple. All I had to do was bide my time, pretending to enter the camp as a sexually confused, former boy band star, and emerge the truck driving, boob-loving American man I already am. For Tommy, it meant gradually implementing the straight man act he'd perfected years ago. And he agreed to do it because once again the dance studio had fallen on hard times, but more than that, the love of his life, the man you would have called Uncle Theo had died.

It happened fast. Some people said that was a blessing, but I'm not sure. There was no time for last-minute dream vacations, no time for the trip to Paris he and Tommy had always hoped to take, one without the exhausting schedule of shows and interviews. There were too few lucid moments during which Tommy could say his goodbyes. One day, Tommy left T alone in the apartment making breakfast to pick up two lattes from the shop down the street, their Sunday morning ritual. It had been busy, and Tommy had waited in line longer than usual. When he returned, he found T in the living room, stark naked, his bathrobe slung over the arm chair, our first single, “Yo, Girl!” blaring loud from the stereo. He was in the middle of retracing every step of the original routine.

Tommy laughed at first. It seemed impossible that T could still recall the whole thing after all this time, hitting every mark with determined confidence. But T stopped when he saw him. He shouted, “You’re late. Where is everyone? The show starts in an hour.” When he finally snapped out it, Tommy drove him to the hospital. The MRI revealed a tumor so large and so malevolent, it had wrapped itself almost entirely around T’s brain like a crown of Laurels on the inside.

Blake and Corey booked plane tickets to Kansas City to say their final goodbyes, but they didn’t make it in time. Two months after T started treatment, Tommy woke up to an empty space in the bed where T should have been. He heard the shower running at full blast, and he lay awake listening to it. He knew that the hot water and steam soothed T’s aches and pains from the chemo, but after at least half an hour, he got up to check on him. T sat on the floor of the tub, his head bowed over between his legs. Tommy pulled back the shower curtain and shook him, but he knew immediately that he was already gone. He told me he climbed into the tub with T, and all the hot water had run out so that the water that poured down on them both was ice cold, and he slid in behind T’s body and just sat there holding him for a long time before he called the ambulance.

Back in the beginning of the program, we had to create a list of all the people we had hurt over the course of our lives, and your mother was on my list. I didn’t exactly realize that part of the program included bringing those people here so that we could apologize to them in person on camera. Your mother was well aware of our plan, but she had been against it from the very beginning, saying, “I can’t believe that you of all

people, Tommy, would participate in this ugliness.” So I really didn’t know how she would react being dragged into it now, and I had not been allowed to speak to her since I’d been at the Camp. We weren’t allowed to talk to anyone in the outside world.

So, there she was. Normally, when your mother gets angry her chest and face get all blotchy, so I didn't even notice the anger building up in her because it was concealed by all the makeup.

“Lacy?” I said. “Say something, baby girl.”

Her jaw shifted, but she didn't speak. She had sucked her lips in and I could see that she was now biting them. The lights were hot, and the weight of a thin layer of sweat on my eyelids made me feel sleepy. I get sleepy when I'm stressed out.

“You're gay,” she said. “Gay. Right.” She let out a little laugh or a huff of air.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Joe nodding his head vigorously.

“Yes, baby girl, I'm so sorry, but that's why I'm here. All these years, I never committed emotionally to you, and it's because I was wrestling with something I couldn't handle on my own. But I've got Jesus on my side now, and I'm trying to have a change of heart.”

“Oh Chuck,” she said. I could almost hear the theme music that would swell at this point when and if the episode ever aired on television. “Brother Bill's Camp Change-of-Heart. Changing Hearts. Changing Minds. Changing Lives.”

Your mom pushed her chair back and stood up. I thought maybe she wanted a hug, so I stood up and moved toward her. I could feel everyone in the studio mentally nudge me to do it.

“Get away from me,” she said.

“Lace,” I said.

“No, get back. Everyone. I can't do this. No more pretending, Chuck.” She turned toward the camera. “He's not gay.”

Joe stepped onto the stage and crept up until he was right behind her, and then he put his hand on the small of her back as if to reassure her. “But that's what he's trying to tell you, Miss Jones. I know it's hard to hear, but he's got to purge himself of the lies before he can get well.”

She laughed. “He will never purge himself of all his lies. There aren't enough hours in a lifetime. Joe, he's not gay. I know.”

“Not gay,” Joe repeated. “Well, that's good, right? That's what we're trying to do here.” Honestly, I felt bad for Joe just then. I think he totally believed in what Brother Bill's camp was doing. In the mornings, when he'd come to brief me on the day's assignments, he used to tell me over and over how lucky we were. To be paid to be here for this reality show. Most men paid thousands of dollars for this program, unless of course, their church could afford to offer a scholarship. “I've never been gay, praise the Lord,” he'd say, “but brother, I know what temptation is and you're going to get through this.” He was the most sincere man I had met at the camp, I mean, except for coaching us in these phony, sentimental moments, but he felt he was doing it for a worthy cause.

Your mom wiped her forearm across her face, leaving a deep flesh-colored streak on her white shirt sleeve. “How can you expect me to go along with this, Chuck?” She looked completely deflated, like her skin might implode and sink into a pool on the floor.

I felt terrible. “He's scamming you, sir. He's scamming all of you. It's all he's ever done.”

“Chuck?” Joe said.

“Tell him, Chuck. Tell your unborn child too while you're at it.”

And that's how I found out about you. In that terrible moment under the burning hot lights with this terrible black hole growing inside me while you grew inside your mother's belly. I fell back into the chair behind me.

“That's right, Chuck. I'm pregnant,” she said, crying so hard she had begun to hickup. “And you will never, ever see your baby because no baby deserves to grow up in this kind of bullshit. Someone, get me out of here right now.”

One of the handlers stepped out from behind a camera man. “Let's stop rolling, guys. Why don't you go up to your room, Chuck? We're gonna need to talk to Brother Bill about this.”

The handler who accompanied me to my room said, “I had money placed on you, boy. I knew you weren't gay.” I felt too mixed up and confused to smile back or argue. The whole place was kind of a joke. You should see my room—a Kathy Ireland poster, a maroon and navy plaid bedspread and wood panel walls—basically my bedroom when I was twelve. Our dormitory is called the Lodge and our rooms are arranged around a gigantic vaulted dining and recreation room at the front with taxidermy moose heads and a whole bear in the corner. Someone told me Bill killed the bear himself. It's like they're trying to reinforce all the manly stereotypes they think we missed out on as boys. So I sat in my room, marveling at Kathy Ireland's horse-shaped face, wondering how Brother Bill

would handle my situation. After a while, my nerves got to me and I crept down to your Uncle Tommy's room. He was doing so well at this, and he really is gay. He was working on one of his assignments where he was supposed to stare at a poster of Loni Anderson until he found something attractive about her body.

When he heard me, he said, "If you look the right way, you can kind of see a bulge in the crotch of her swimsuit."

"No you can't, Tommy," I said. It was only then that I realized how thoroughly worn out I was from pretending that I was something I was not. For instance, that I have fantasies about baseball players in their underwear. I mean it wasn't so difficult at first. In spite of everything I am secure enough in my masculinity to admit that back in the locker room after we sang the national anthem at the Mets game, those boys did look pretty fit. "I've ruined it all. It's over."

He looked up at me then. "Oh, come on, we've only got three weeks of taping left and then we're home free. We'll have enough money to save the studio and you can buy Lacy a new ring."

"I'm serious. They know about me."

He sat up. "Do they know about our plan?"

"I don't know. Lacy just lost it. She told them about me." I'm always the one blowing it. I feel like I'm living the LuvThugz poster that came out during promotion for our second album. Tommy is in a white suit, bathed in golden light, and I, the dark twin, stand behind, half-submerged in shadow, looking sad and a little bit dirty. But I guess these days neither one of us is all good or all bad.

“I knew she'd flake out on us.”

“Tommy, you don't understand. It's just like hormones or something. I'm going to be a father.” The word sounded weird coming from my lips at first, but I'm starting to like the sound of it.

At dinner tonight, I sat by myself, and I thought about you. It helped keep my mind off my impending meeting with Brother Bill. If you're a boy, I hope we'll call you Theo. It would sure mean an awful lot to your uncle.

Of course, the competitor in me felt like it would be a shame to get kicked out now. Especially since, after three weeks, a couple of guys had already quit. There were only five of us now, including me and Tommy. There's Frank “The Bear” Wilson. He hosted a hunting and fishing show until an angry ex-boyfriend outed him, and his ratings plummeted. I'd heard that if he made it to the end, he'd been promised a new show on CBN. Larry Crockett, a former state senator, was only on the show to appease his wife, who happened to be a regular performer on CBN's Musical Power Hour. Billy Diamond was the youngest of all of us at twenty-three. He had just begun a promising career as a country musician after winning some competition, and then rumors began to circulate that he had a boyfriend as well as a girlfriend. Out of everybody, I felt sorriest for him. If I did get the boot, I swore I would grab that boy by the shoulders and tell him to get the heck out of here. It's not worth the money. There's nothing wrong with you, I'd say.

I had only managed to cut my steak into bite-sized pieces and push them around

on my plate when the handler squeezed my shoulder. “Brother Bill is waiting for you in your room,” he said.

I found him seated in my desk chair, his face red and glistening with beads of sweat that clung to his forehead and eyebrows. He motioned for me to take a seat across from him on my bed. “Have to tell you, I thought I'd seen it all, but a straight man pretending to be gay? Heh,” he said. “Here's the thing, Chuck I've talked to the guys up at CBN, and they say we can't fire you for a few reasons. Mainly, we've invested a lot of money in this show, trying to help you people, and we're not going to let you take the whole thing down with you.”

His eyes wandered across the sparse desktop, and then rested on a stack of fresh towels that had been delivered for my nightly shower. “May I?” he said, taking a washcloth from the pile. He dragged it across his forehead, and then wadded it in his fist. “Against my better judgment, we're going to keep you here until the end. We'll still pay you. Sort of a win-win situation, right?”

I wasn't prepared for this outcome. The fact that I was going to have to stay through to the end seemed unbearable. “But what about Lacy? She'll talk. She's awfully mad at me right now.” I didn't really believe that about your mother, but I was looking for a way out.

“That's not going to be a problem. Lacy sat down with one of our attorneys and signed an agreement not to talk with anyone about your, uh, situation. But I'll tell you, brother, it wasn't cheap, and I want to be frank with you, I don't appreciate your dishonesty. If it were up to me, you'd be out of here. I know you think this is a joke, that

I'm a joke, but I tell you what, all this stuff, this homosexuality is a real detriment to families and to the country. We're doing important work here.”

With that, he got up to leave, pausing to toss the sweaty washcloth into my clothes hamper. He looked back at me from the doorway. For a moment, I was worried he was actually going to spit on me.

I reached into my desk drawer and pulled out a red sharpie. On the Lamborghini calendar above my bed, I circled August 22. Only twenty-three days left in this place. The door to the Lodge closed with a thud that reverberated through the walls of my room. Brother Bill was off to wherever it was that he lived when he wasn't here. Some of the handlers said it was a mansion.

I feel like a man who has stepped out of the closet in a sense, but really I just walked straight out of one closet into an even bigger closet, and I could keep walking out of closets for my whole life because my life is basically just a house built of closets. And this last closet is the size of a warehouse. It has a soundstage. But the minute I found out about you, I knew I would have to leave this house once and for all. And not just for you, for Triple T, too. For Theodore.

I took that red sharpie and drew a wide ‘x’ all the way across the Lamborghini calendar, and then I started gathering the things I had brought to the camp with me. I didn't know where they had stored our luggage, so I just started piling it in the middle of the bed, and when I was done I rolled the whole thing up hobo style. I tiptoed into Tommy's room and opened the door as quietly as I could and stepped inside.

“Get your things, Tommy, we're getting the heck out of here.”

“They kicked us out?”

“No, even worse. They’re letting me stay, but we can’t stay, Tommy. I’ve got a kid on the way now, and quite frankly, T would have never wanted you to do this.”

Tommy lay on his back in the darkened room. I knew how it must have hit him to hear Theo’s name, and I heard his breathing change and wondered if he was crying.

I helped Tommy gather his things because his whole body trembled as if the last throes of grief for Theo had hit him all at once. The only way out was through the emergency exit, and we knew as soon as we opened it, an alarm would go off that would alert the handlers. We had to be fast. We stood in front of it for several minutes, glancing back at the long wood-paneled hall, and then back at each other, until finally, we nodded in unison, and I pushed the door open and just started running like hell. We could hear the alarm growing faint in the distance, but we kept on running, straight into a cornfield. Each time I noticed Tommy falling behind, I took a hold of his arm and ran hard enough for both of us. We were both gasping for air when we reached the road and collapsed in the ditch. Tommy started to laugh.

“We don’t know where we are,” he said.

“I know.”

“We’re wearing our pajamas.”

“Oh yeah. Well, at least we remembered our shoes.”

I don’t know how long we walked, hours it seemed, until we reached a gas station. The lone clerk eyed us suspiciously in our Camp Change-of-Heart t-shirts and striped

pajama pants, but somehow Tommy charmed her into letting us use the phone. We didn't know anyone else to call, so we called your mother. Though she sounded reluctant, she let the clerk give her directions from the motel Brother Bill had booked for her, and half an hour later, she picked us up and we started on the road back to Kansas City. Your mother would not let me touch her, but somehow I know she is going to forgive me. I saw just a hint of relief in her eyes when she saw us standing there by the gas pumps, waiting for her. She insisted that we stop at a hotel on the way because she said she could hardly keep her eyes open. She took one room, and made me and Tommy stay in an adjacent one. Only I can't sleep. All that adrenaline.

I look at my life until now in three parts. Once, I was just a normal kid. I wanted to play football when I grew up or maybe be a cowboy, if cowboys still existed. And then there was the the LuvThugz. It's true our first album received scathing reviews but it got a great deal of Total Request Live buzz, and it actually made me proud to see my face on the cover and my name in the liner notes, Vocals: McKnight.

The year leading up to the release had been a tough one. There were vocal and dance lessons—a crash course for me, since the other LuvThugz had already completed a great deal of training on their own time. Then there was weight-training, aerobics, yoga, Pilates, and our choice of regular church or Kabbalah on Sundays for spiritual strengthening. After six months, full-on rehearsals started, and let me tell you, we were exhausted by our twelve-hour work days. And I was not at all emasculated, as I had feared, by the dancing or the singing because I had begun to think of it as a sport. There

was rumor that there was another boy band brewing overseas, and I was ready to crush them like a rival football team in a home game.

Our first show, a small-scale test run at Disney Land, made me feel like a god. All these little girls crowded around the stage, screaming and occasionally passing out from the heat or excitement, their parents on the sidelines. I was so exhilarated that at the closing notes of the final encore, I actually posed like the hulk and screamed “Rowr!” which our manager later asked me never to do again under any circumstances, and I never did.

It’s that primal roar I think of to this day. If you take anything away from what I’m telling you, it’s that so many things are possible for you if you work hard enough. But never let go of that “Rowr!” inside you. That’s where I went wrong. Oh, and the third part of my life is just beginning. The third part is in the next room, safely curled inside your sleeping mother until you’re ready to come out.