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# That Road, Brother

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That Road, Brother

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## Abstract

*That Road, Brother* is a collection of short fiction set in towns along Highway 55 between St. Louis, Missouri and Memphis, Tennessee. The collection deals with themes of family, connection, responsibility, guilt, and abandonment. The characters in *That Road, Brother* have all either been abandoned by someone at an early age or have abandoned someone themselves. Because of this—or maybe in spite of this—they are all searching for connections. Some of them are searching for family, and the collection questions what the word “family” actually means. Does family end with blood relationships, or can a person find family in someone unrelated? What sorts of responsibilities does a person have toward his or her family, and what kind of guilt can arise if those perceived responsibilities aren’t fulfilled?

Class issues also arise in the stories in *That Road, Brother*. The characters in the collection have very little money or resources. Most are from small, southern towns and have to survive and make lives with what little they’re given or what they can grab for themselves. They are often judged harshly for just being who they are. All of this makes the search for family and connection all the more urgent. They are characters who are on the edge of society, and they run the risk of connecting with no one at all if they can’t connect with others who are out on the edge with them.

## Table of Contents

Single Memphis .....	3
That Road, Brother, It Leads Two Ways .....	24
There's a Moaning in the Fields .....	51
Driving to Memphis, Early May, My Brother Beside Me .....	79

### Single Memphis

Josey hadn't been with a man in almost a year. She'd been pregnant at fifteen and then again at eighteen. She'd given both up for adoption. After that, she'd doubled up—condoms and birth control; that did the trick for a couple of years. It kept her from getting pregnant, anyway, but it didn't do a damn thing to keep her from choosing the wrong man. Josey was twenty-one now and celibate. She was gettin' good at gettin' none, she liked to say.

Jefferson Davis made Josey sing a different tune the day he walked into the Tigermart where she worked looking for a Blue Freeze slushie and a 5-hour Energy drink. He was a cop—tall, with barely-there muscles that peeked out from the short sleeves of his uniform shirt, and he had smooth black skin and a shaved bald head Josey knew would feel like silk against her cheek when she held him in bed. They talked, and she watched as the slushie turned his tongue a deeper and deeper blue the longer the conversation went on. He showed up at the Tigermart almost every morning after that.

A few weeks after she'd first seen Jefferson, Josey had lunch with her friend Martha. They shared a plate of barbeque pork nachos and drank Bud Light out of plastic glasses on the patio behind The Barbeque Shop. The plastic sweated and slipped in Josey's hand, and she felt her skin flush under the late August sun. The humidity made everything damp; Martha's curls were wild with frizz. Josey reached out and smoothed a curl down, smiled at Martha, then asked for help.

“What to do with a girl like Josey,” Martha said.

“I like him,” Josey said.

“You like every boy. That’s just what you do.” Martha shrugged.

“Jefferson’s not a boy, though. He’s gotta be at least twenty-six.” Josey licked her fingers clean. “He likes me, too. I know it. You shoulda seen him. He set me on fire.”

“It’s not fair. I can’t find a boy to take me to dinner in the whole of U-Memphis, but you can just pick them out of line at the Tigermart.”

“Maybe you’re the lucky one,” Josey said. “Boys only lead to trouble.” She thought of a thumbnail small as an ant, of pursed little duck lips, all she could picture of her second son. The first was a complete blank; she’d been too far gone on pain, hadn’t even wanted to see it. “Maybe hot cop should just stay a fantasy.”

“You just gotta be careful. You could get your tubes tied. That’s what my mom did after she had me.”

“Nuh-uh,” Josey said. “I want to have babies eventually.”

“You’ve had babies.”

“Yeah, but I wanna keep one.”

\*\*\*

Josey sometimes watched the college kids while she stood behind her cash register, especially this time of year when the schools were starting to fill up again. Her Tigermart was situated at the corner of Poplar and McLean, and there were three colleges near by. Josey could have had that, she knew. Her high school counselor had told her she was smart enough, but she didn’t have the grades; she wasn’t getting scholarships to anywhere. She wanted to go to college, though, maybe do a nursing program. So she worked. And she saved.

Josey was working the morning shift as usual when a couple of college kids walked in. One poked around the refrigerated section, loaded his arms with sodas and bottles of vitamin water. The other looked at the egg sandwiches wrapped in their red and white checked wrapping. Josey had just put them in the warming bins a few minutes before. She wondered how Jefferson took his eggs. She wouldn't mind making him a breakfast that didn't come out of a microwave. Her grandma had taught her how to make homemade biscuits and cheese grits with shrimp when she was just a little girl, and Josey's least complicated and most favorite fantasy consisted of serving a man she'd just pleased in bed her grandma's best recipes.

The first kid walked up to her counter and put his drinks down. He wore a shirt with "Habitat for Humanity" faded across his chest. When he looked at her, his eyes were bloodshot. He said "hello" then collapsed in front of her.

"Oh," Josey said. She walked around the front of her counter, kneeled and put a hand to the boy's chest. She didn't feel it move. She looked at his friend. "I don't think he's breathing."

The friend sunk to the floor, sat cross-legged. He pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and called 911.

"Do you know CPR?" Josey said.

"We should stay calm," he said. He explained to the person on the phone where they were and what had happened. He looked at Josey. "The lady on the phone says we should try to do CPR while we wait."

"Okay," Josey said.

“I don’t know how,” he said. He scooted on his butt toward them until his knee touched Josey’s leg.

Josey thought she knew. She took the phone from the boy, tucked it between her ear and shoulder, and listened as the voice on the other end talked her through the steps. The Tigermart floor was greasy beneath her bare knees. She pinched the boy’s nose shut and pressed her lips to his. His mouth wasn’t open; he wasn’t responsive, so she had to tug at his chin a bit, though it was stiff as if he’d clenched his teeth. It reminded her of in high school when they’d dissected a baby pig and had to break its jaw. Though she didn’t remember why they’d done that, she remembered sticking her thumb in the pig’s mouth and tugging. Josey blew a breath in the boy’s mouth then sat up, folded her hands over where she thought his heart might be, did five chest compressions, then did the whole thing over again.

She felt hands on her shoulders and the phone fell to the ground as she was pulled away. It was Jefferson, come for his Slushie. He took over for her, pumped and pumped until the ambulance showed and the EMT tried the paddles. In the end, the kid was dead.

Josey waited outside with the other boy while they loaded his friend on a stretcher. A man walked up, scuffing across the brown grass between the sidewalk and parking lot, and complained at her about not being able to buy his cigarettes. Josey flipped him off and asked him if he didn’t have an ounce of respect in his body.

The boy watched her. She felt her face heat when she turned back to him.



“Am I supposed to go to the hospital now?” the boy asked. “Is that how this works?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you should call his family?”

“He doesn’t have any here. He’s not from Memphis.”

“Do you know how to get in touch with them?”

“He’s only been my roommate for two weeks.” He smiled a little.

“What’s your name?”

“Mike,” the kid said. “I liked him.”

Josey squeezed his hand. Jefferson stepped up just then. “You two all right?”

“Mike here isn’t quite sure what to do. Maybe you could help him some?”

“I don’t know his family,” Mike said.

“That’s okay. You give me his name and what you do know and we’ll get in touch with who matters.”

Josey went back to work, though she squinted through the spaces between the Pall Mall and Coke ads hung in the windows and watched while Mike and Jefferson talked. After a time, Jefferson held the passenger door to his squad car open for Mike. Jefferson got in on the other side. They left.

The next day was Josey’s day off. She woke early, her body not used to sleeping much past five a.m., though it wasn’t late enough in the year for that to mean she woke in the dark. She was grateful for that. Come November, she’d trek to work in the dark and slouch home in the dark and she’d feel so depressed at only seeing the sun through a dirty window covered in signs that she’d start to

think about how this wasn't her life. Maybe it was time to move on to something new. But that wasn't possible yet, and those thoughts only complicated things, so she was grateful for the days she had without them.

She ate toast and grape jelly at the kitchen counter, squinting into the dusty light. She listened to her mom who was on the couch in the next room, muttering in her sleep. Some nights her mom made it to bed; some she didn't. Her mom had tried to be a lawyer once, but it didn't pan out. She was a paralegal, and Josey thought she was okay with the position. Mom liked her alcohol, though. She drank Ice Picks—sweet tea and vodka—and Josey suspected she started at lunch most days. Ice Picks and all, Josey felt a devotion to her mom. She'd kept a roof over Josey's head, and she'd put all her extra money into sending Josey to private school to get her away from those damn city schools that weren't worth a shit.

Her mom hadn't been mad the first time Josey came home pregnant, but she'd sat in their kitchen for a long time, hands clenched over her knees. When she'd finally walked back into the living room, there was a run in her RiteAid pantyhose where one of her nails had caught the fabric. She didn't chastise Josey, just offered to help her out if she'd wanted to get an abortion. But Josey didn't want that. She thought maybe she didn't deserve to take such an easy way out. Better for her to have 9 months of a reminder, to work to make sure the baby had a good home. Better to teach herself that lesson. Not that it took, considering she was pregnant again a couple years later.

Josey brushed her toast crumbs into the sink and looked around the kitchen. She was restless. There were some old bananas sitting on the microwave,

peels spotted black-brown. Josey grabbed the bunch and peeled them one by one and put them in a bowl. She mashed them with a fork. She grabbed her grandma's recipe book down from on top of the refrigerator, then she made banana bread. She put chocolate chips in it for good measure.

While the loaves baked, Josey got dressed. She put on a jean skirt, long enough to avoid what Martha called "slut syndrome" but short enough to show some leg, and she curled long, loose ringlets into her red hair. She knew when she wore it like that instead of in the ponytail she always wore at work, her face looked soft and round, and she could get any guy to turn his eyes her way.

Josey pulled the bread out of the oven and set it on a rack to cool. She shook her mom awake and got her up and sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee. Mom yawned around a "Good morning," then sprawled on the table, all elbows and long limbs like a teenager.

"What's the occasion, Josey baby?" she said.

"I think maybe I met someone," Josey said.

"This someone gonna be trouble?"

"They always are." Josey grinned. She sliced the bread. She'd never brought a man baked goods before. She wanted it to look nice on the plate.

"I'm serious."

"No, mamma. It ain't like that. He's sweet. He's a cop."

"Well good. Cause all cops got good morals." Her mom raised an eyebrow.

"That ain't fair."

“You just be careful.”

Josey smiled. “I’m gonna woo him today.”

“Oh, Josey.” Her mom’s mouth wobbled and she hid it behind her coffee.

Josey went to the police station at what she hoped was the end of Jefferson’s shift. She knew from their morning talks he worked long days and he had to drop his cruiser off before going home. She perched on a low concrete wall that ran around the building, lifted her face into the sun and kicked her legs while she waited for him, the bread in neat slices on a platter in her lap. Half an hour or so later, Jefferson stepped outside and Josey hopped down.

“Josey?” he said. He tilted his head to the side, his eyes wrinkled in the corners as he smiled a little. “What’re you doing here?”

“I wanted to say thanks,” Josey said. She held the plate in front of her. “For what you did yesterday.”

“It was my job. Besides, you did just as much. You coulda saved his life. You coulda been a real hero.” He stepped closer. “Seemed like you knew what you were doing.”

“I took a few babysitting classes when I was a teenager. They make you get certified to do CPR. In case a kid falls in a pool, or something.”

“Or something,” Jefferson agreed.

He still hadn’t taken the plate. “Here,” Josey said. “Banana bread. It makes good peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.”

He took it from her. Josey bit her lip, wanting to sigh at the way his hands were big enough to dwarf the plate.

“Hey,” he said. “You wanna have dinner?”

\*\*\*

It was weeks later when Josey decided she was in love with Jefferson. She and Martha were at the movies. It was an old theater, the kind that didn't even have stadium seating and that really fat people were uncomfortable in because the seats were too small. It was the first week of October, and the theater was playing *Night of the Living Dead*. They would play a horror movie classic each night leading up to Halloween, and Josey knew she and Martha would see at least one a week. Jefferson wasn't interested. He said he saw enough horror on the job, which Josey secretly rolled her eyes at because she was pretty sure he just dealt with crack addicts and prostitutes, no blood or guts at all.

Josey ate a handful of popcorn. Her palm was buttery. Had they been kids, she would have wiped it on Martha's shirt to gross her out. She wiped it on a napkin instead and set her popcorn on the floor.

“I think this is good for me,” Josey whispered. “It's like a real, mature relationship.”

“That's good, girlie.” Martha slid down in her seat, propped her feet up on the chair in front of her, and looked up at Josey. “I think that's good for you.”

Josey agreed. She did. But the problem was, they hadn't had sex. Not once in a month. Jefferson wanted to wait. Josey didn't want to scare him off, and she knew it was probably good to continue her no sex streak, but she didn't understand it. She was used to boys who wanted to grope her in the backseat

before they'd even gotten to the date part of the date. She was used to fast and dirty. She was used to rough. She liked it that way.

The night before, Jefferson had pulled her into his bed and held her. He'd run one of his big hands through her hair and he'd said her name and she'd felt so cherished she'd wanted to cry. They'd made out with long, slow kisses, and Jefferson had touched every part of her body except for where it really mattered.

Josey had woken in his bed that morning and she'd watched him sleep. She'd touched with light fingers the bridge of his nose, his morning stubble, his shoulder blades. She liked how pronounced they were while he slept, always on his stomach. He was thin. She could see his ribs if he stretched the right way. She touched the bare skin just behind his ear. He'd told her he'd had dreads once, but he'd shaved them down when he'd become a cop. It was better anyway, he'd said. He'd said a black man with dreads has more problems than most. She didn't know what he meant, exactly, but she believed him.

He opened his eyes at the feel of her fingers. "That tickles," he'd said. "Feels like cobwebs brushing on my skin."

"Maybe I'm a spider."

He smiled.

"Brown recluse."

"Naw," he said. "You ain't that dangerous."

"Maybe I am," she said. "Maybe you should be scared of me." She gripped his bicep, tugged him, nudged at him until he was flipped over and she

crawled on top, straddled across his thighs. She slid her hands up his arms until she held his wrists above his head. “I wanna break you.”

He smirked at her. “You could try.”

She pressed a hand to his crotch. He was almost hard beneath his boxers. He lost his smirk. “Don’t,” he said.

“I’ll make it good. Don’t you want that?”

Jefferson tugged his hands free and pushed her to the bed. He sat up. “Just,” he said. His fingers twitched. “I want it. But sex ain’t easy for me.”

Josey went to her knees, the tips of her fingers pressed into the bed sheets. “Why not?” she said.

“Do we have to talk about this now? I gotta get ready for work.”

“You got an hour.”

“You keeping tabs on my schedule?”

Josey smiled. “Maybe.”

“That’s cute.”

She wouldn’t be derailed. “It’s not normal,” she said. “I never met a man before who didn’t want to come if it was on offer.”

“Jesus.”

“Is it,” Josey paused. She waved her hand through the air. “You’re all right down there?”

Jefferson shook his head. “Everything works.” Josey tightened her grip on the sheets. She could tell he was angry. “I guess I just thought, with what you told me about your past, sex might not be easy for you, too.”

“All right.” She pressed her palm to his chest. “It’s all right,” she’d said.

“What do you think it is?” Josey said now, looking down at Martha who was still slouched in her seat. Josey could make out the details of her face only occasionally, when the theater screen brightened for an instant.

“Dunno,” Martha said.

“It ain’t that important, right?” Josey said. “Sex?”

Martha shrugged. “I wouldn’t know.”

Josey shoved her shoulder a bit. “You’ll get there. You just gotta stop hanging out with me all the damn time. Let’s go home, huh? We’ve seen this one. And Jefferson said he’d call.”

\*\*\*

At the Tigermart the next day, Josey flipped through an issue of “Single Memphis” she’d stolen from the floorboard of Martha’s car. It was a cheap newsprint ‘zine she and Martha used to make fun of when they were in high school, though she’d seen Martha with them on more than one occasion since then. It ran pages of ads for dating services and features on the most eligible singles in Memphis. Jefferson told her he’d been featured once, when he was only twenty-two. She wondered if she’d been pregnant when he’d put himself out there for all of Memphis. She did the math. When he was twenty-two, she would have been fifteen—pregnant and boy crazy and in love with the world anyway. She smiled at the thought. She wondered if he still had a copy.



She was drawing hearts in the corners of every page and wondering why Jefferson wouldn't go all the way when Mike walked in. Or Mike with the Dead Friend, as she thought of him in that moment.

"You remember me?" he said.

Josey nodded. "You need some gas?"

"No. Are you busy?"

"I'm working."

They both looked around at the empty store.

"Yeah," he said.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm real sorry about what happened with your friend."

"Thanks," he said.

"Nothing to thank me for."

"That's actually why I came," he said. "I sort of froze when it happened.

But you tried to help. So thanks."

"Sure."

Mike put his hands in his pockets.

"You want a Coke or something?" Josey said. She walked to the fountain.

"All right."

She grabbed a cup.

"Lots of ice," he said.

"Coming right up."

When she handed him the Coke, he was smiling at her and playing with the blow pops set along side the register. "I should be the one buying you a Coke."

"You see me get out any money? Just don't tell any of the other customers. They'll be jealous."

She walked behind her counter and leaned against it, chin propped on her palm, elbow against the hard plastic that covered the ads spread atop the counter.

"Did they ever find out what happened? With your friend?"

"Aneurism."

"Yikes."

"I know."

"That's scary," she said.

He leaned against the counter from the other side. She touched his shoulder.

A customer walked in and they pulled apart.

"Thirty on pump two," the customer said. He tugged his pants up by the belt, though not enough to cover his boxers. He threw a twenty and a ten on the counter.

"Gotcha," Josey said. She set the pump from the register and put the money in her drawer. She leaned against the counter again.

"It's just weird," Mike said, after a time. "I didn't know him all that well, and I sort of just keep picturing him like that. Dead like that, lying on the floor. I can't picture him alive, like at all." He shrugged. "It's weird."

“My daddy died when I was little,” Josey said. “I was ten. I can only picture him in his coffin.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah.”

“The guys in my dorm keep coming to my room. They’ve stopped asking me what it was like, but now I’m the only one with a room to myself. I can’t decide if I like them hanging around all the time or if I just want to scream. I want the privacy. I guess it’s kind of shitty of me to be happy I have my own room, huh?”

“Well, you didn’t know him.”

“Yeah.”

Another customer came in.

“I better go,” Mike said. “Class.”

“Yeah,” Josey said. He walked out the door and across the lot. Josey watched until he rounded the corner. She rang up the new customer’s Mountain Dew and microwave burrito.

\*\*\*

Josey let herself into Jefferson’s apartment that night. She’d gotten paid that day, so she’d gone to Kroger first to get groceries. Now she set everything out on Jefferson’s counters and went about the business of making her grandma’s chicken and dumplings. Josey had been eating these same dumplings since she’d cut her first teeth.

It was dark out by the time Jefferson got home. The food was simmering on the stove, and Josey was lying on Jefferson's couch with a copy of the Jefferson issue of "Single Memphis."

Jefferson grinned, lopsided like he was embarrassed. He shook his head. "Where'd you find that, Joz?"

"Under your bed. You take it out and look at it now and again? Dream of what you used to be?"

"Nope. I got everything I need right here. That kid? He doesn't exist no more." He leaned over her, kissed her right between the eyes. He slid the magazine from her hand and dropped it on the floor.

"I like the dreads." She cupped the back of his head with her hand. "I like this better."

He put both hands in her hair, straddled her so that they were both on the couch.

"You cooked," he said.

"Uh huh."

"You make me crazy, I love you so much."

"Is that what you were looking for when you posed for that picture? Someone to cook you dinner?"

"Maybe. What about you? What were you looking for when you slept with all those boys?"

Josey stilled. "Jefferson."

“I don’t like thinking about you with them. I don’t like thinking you had someone else’s babies first.”

Josey sat up. Jefferson followed. He looked at the magazine on the floor.

“So don’t think about it,” Josey said.

“I can’t help it.” He laughed a little. He scratched the nape of his neck. “I been thinking about you all day.”

“I’m right here.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

Josey cradled the back of his head in her hand. She rubbed her thumb behind his ear. “What’s going on in here,” she said.

Jefferson shook his head.

“You can talk to me. You just nervous, or something? Are you a virgin?”

Josey half whispered the last word, like it was dirty.

“No.” Jefferson pulled away. “I’ve been having sex since I was fourteen.”

“All right,” Josey said.

Jefferson rubbed a hand across his mouth, glanced at her sideways. “My first was my momma’s friend,” he said. “She was thirty-two, I think, older than me.” He dragged his shoe along the carpet. “I used to let her tie me up. Do things to me.” He shrugged. “When I told her I loved her for real she laughed at me. Left me tied to my own bed for my dad to find.”

Josey wanted to touch him again but kept her hands to herself. “What happened?” she said.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re mine, right Josey? You and me? This is real?”

Josey hoped so. She'd started to feel like she had a plan now. Jefferson. College. No more TigerMart, and no more Mom's apartment.

"Of course, baby," she said.

\*\*\*

Mike started showing up at the TigerMart regular—for an hour or so between or after classes and all day on Fridays. Sometimes he read the newspapers and dollar paperbacks that never got sold, but most of the time Josey let him hang out behind the counter with her, let him spread out and work on his homework as long as he didn't get in her way.

Three weeks into this new thing between the two of them, Josey felt restless. Mike was perched on a stool behind her, a pen cap in his mouth, ink on his hands—he was a lefty, and while writing, he had a habit of smearing his words behind him as his hand moved across the page. His eyes were on Josey instead of his books. Josey knew he watched her. She noticed it the very first time he'd just hung around without talking. She knew what he wanted, too. He wasn't any different from any other boy.

Josey wanted him to watch her. Fridays, she spent all day feeling his eyes roaming between his books and her body, her face, and she went home to Jefferson so horny that their no sex situation was making her feel like she would strangle someone. Jefferson knew, and he tried. He made her come with his hands and his mouth, but he wouldn't let Josey reciprocate, and he wouldn't give her what she really wanted. Josey wanted him inside of her. Josey wanted to consume him.

Josey felt Mike watching her and it was too much. She turned to him.

“What are you staring at?”

“Sorry,” Mike said. He looked back at his notes. He smiled.

Josey leaned against the counter. “You like me, Mike?” she said.

“You know I do, Josey.”

“Yeah, but I mean, do you *like* me, like me?”

“Yeah, I *like* you, like you.”

“You wanna fuck me?”

Mike’s smile dropped. He turned back to his work, flipped a page in his notes. “Yes,” he almost whispered.

“I thought so.” Josey turned around. Mike watched her for another minute then packed up and left.

He came back the next day at the end of her shift. They stood in the parking lot together.

“How did you think this would work?” Josey said.

Mike shrugged. He leaned against the trunk of his car. “I didn’t really think it would. That’s not the only reason I’ve been coming to see you. I guess I thought we could be friends. But if you want? Maybe we could be more.”

“I’ve got a boyfriend.”

“That cop, right? He’s cool. He was really helpful that day.”

“That’s Jefferson for you.”

“You two are like,” he waved a hand through the air, “serious, or whatever?”

Josey caught his hand. She turned into him, tilted her face up, kissed him on the lips. “Yeah,” she said. “We’re serious.”

“Oh.”

Mike followed her home, their cars like hitched train cars he tailgated her so closely. Josey’s mom wasn’t home yet, and they stumble-walked to the sofa, kissing and groping as they went. Josey shoved Mike down and crawled on top of him. They had sex, fast and rough. Mike’s cock was inside her almost before she could get her underwear off, foreplay obviously a foreign concept, and when she felt him come inside of her, it was too early, and she hadn’t even gotten any pleasure out of it.

“Sorry,” he said when it was over. He touched her shoulder. “Sorry, Josey.”

“It’s okay,” she said.

Mike left, and Jefferson called hours later. She didn’t answer. She sat in the kitchen and she cried.

She and Martha went to the movies together the next day. Afterwards, the parking lot was filled with wind and fallen, blowing leaves. Josey hugged herself against the chill. She was wearing one of Jefferson’s jackets, and she tucked it against her chin. She looped her arm with Martha’s; they leaned against each other as they walked.

“You think I’m screwed up?” Josey asked. She hoped her words would blow away with the wind.

“What do you want me to say to that, Josey?”



*Tell the truth*, Josey wanted to say, but she already knew what that was. She shrugged instead.

Martha, her fingertips chilled, wrapped her hand around Josey's.

When Martha dropped Josey at home, Josey went inside and laid in the dark. She listened to the wind and the rush of leaves tapping against her window. She listened to her mom snoring in the next room. She listened to the absence of Jefferson's breathing beside her. In just the couple of months they'd been together, she'd already gotten used to that sound. She liked sleeping with him. It meant actually sleeping. It meant pillows and blankets and bodies, warm and heavy, wrapped together until there were dreams, and it meant waking up together and blinking bleary-eyed across the bed until one of them smiled.

She gathered herself and a few things and drove to Jefferson's. She used the key he kept under the cracked sun tea jug on the porch and snuck in. He was home, asleep on his stomach, the blankets kicked off. Josey stripped. She ran a hand up his calf. He jumped, waking suddenly, and she smiled when he looked back at her.

"Hey, Joz," he said.

"Hey," she said.

She crawled onto the bed, lifted his arm, and tucked herself beneath. She pressed her nose to his skin.

### **That Road, Brother, It Leads Two Ways**

They lived far outside of town at the time, out by the old Blytheville Air Force Base that wasn't in use any more. Their duplex was at the end of a run-down street that hadn't been paved in more than twenty years. The sidewalks were all cracked and, in the heat of the summer like it was, grass and daffodils poked up through the cement—little bursts of color. If they followed their street south, it would take them into town; empty fields stretched in every other direction. But it didn't matter which direction you picked. As far as Dylan was concerned, every single road led to the ass end of nowhere. He preferred it out here on the edges, though, where there was less chance of being noticed.

The summer Mrs. Brown was murdered, Dylan was sixteen and Patrick eighteen. They were both at home when her body was found. They lived on the second floor of the duplex, and the Browns lived on the first. It was summer break, and the brothers were sitting in boxers and t-shirts in their living room in the early morning. Their sister Mollie had just left for work. Dylan was eating breakfast and watching Patrick play Metal Gear Solid, his sniper riddle at the bottom edge of the screen picking off almost real-looking computer enemies one by one. Patrick had come home late the night before with a bottom lip swollen fat enough to slur his words. When Dylan had asked what happened, Patrick told him it wasn't his business then kicked off his shoes and dropped to his bed. There was a bloody crack right down the center of his lip this morning, and Patrick kept nudging at it with his tongue then swearing a muttered *shit!* under his breath.

The boys heard the sounds of Mr. Brown arriving home from his night shift—the clunk of his boots on the wood porch, the screech of his screen door, the rattle of keys. They only knew something was wrong when Mr. Brown’s noises went from usual to unusual, and his cries floated up through the floor of the boys’ living room, a sound that made all the hairs on Dylan’s arms go up like the hackles on a wary dog. Patrick was up first and down the front stairs to their porch before Dylan could set down his cereal bowl. Dylan didn’t really want to move, but Patrick’s banging on the Browns’ front door and his shouts got Dylan going anyway.

Once on the porch, Dylan shut the screen door behind him and looked at his brother. The cries had stopped.

Patrick looked back at Dylan and shrugged. “I dunno,” he said. “He won’t answer.”

But then the inside door cracked open and Mr. Brown stared at them through the screen. They stared back. A bit of time swelled out before them until Mr. Brown made the first move, opening the screen door outwards, forcing Patrick to take one step back then two, almost to the edge of the porch. Mr. Brown had blood on his hands and on his work shirt. He was a janitor at the TJ Maxx and worked overnights polishing the floors. The mixed scent of floor wax and blood—it smelled like the Ransom farm when they slaughtered their pigs—made Dylan’s scalp tingle. Mr. Brown looked at them with no expression at all.

“Boys. The police is gonna be here soon. You better stay outta their way.”

“What happened?” Dylan said. He stepped in close and tried to peer around the door frame into the front room, but Patrick grabbed his arm right as he started to get a peek.

“Dylan, man, come on,” Patrick said. He looked uneasy.

They went upstairs and put jeans on. Patrick grabbed a little bit of cash from the Tupperware they kept in the pantry. Mollie put money there for them when she could from her tips at the restaurant. In the summer, she tried to keep it a little extra full because she wanted them to have some kind of allowance. But Dylan bristled when he saw Patrick grab it. Patrick had his own job now; he shouldn't be taking that money if he didn't need to.

“Come on,” Patrick said when he had what he wanted.

“Where're we going?” Dylan said. “We should stay and find out what's happening. You think he's serious about the cops coming? I wanna see.”

Patrick snorted a laugh. “You watch that goddamn TV show too much. You think you're gonna see something exciting? Shit. It'll be Sheriff Wallace and one fucking deputy. They'd probably chase us off, anyway.”

“Fine. You go, but I'm staying.”

“You're coming, you fucking dick.” Patrick grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and flung him toward the door. Dylan looked at the ground and rubbed at his neck where his collar had stretched. “Something bad happened,” Patrick said, a little quieter this time. “It ain't polite to sit and watch.”

“Since when do you care about being polite?” Dylan said.

“I don’t,” Patrick said. He touched his lip with his thumb and made a face at the pain.

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They spent the day roaming hot and sweaty under the July sun. They walked the outer road that ran up to Highway 55—the road out of town—occasionally weaving into one of the cotton fields and rushing at hawks that perched on fence posts and only grudgingly flew away when the boys got too close, birds ballsy enough they flew right in front of trucks on the highway as they swooped for prey.

Patrick took his shirt off after a while and tucked it into his back pocket. Dylan’s own t-shirt was soaked through, the back and underarms clinging, but he didn’t like the thought of the passing cars getting a look at his chest. He’d grown past six foot that year and his whole body was stretched thin like a pole bean, chest hollow and ribs showing at his sides. He could eat and eat and never put on any weight. Height wasn’t good for anything but standing out in a crowd.

Patrick seemed distracted. Dylan wondered if it was because of Mr. Brown and wished again he’d stayed to see what all the blood had been about. He hoped Mrs. Brown wasn’t hurt. He knew Patrick liked her. She shared a beer with him occasionally, when Mollie wasn’t home to be mad about it, and she brought them Tupperwares full of homemade cookies. All different kinds. They were usually burned on the bottom, but neither Dylan nor Patrick was picky when it came to free food.

“They’re supposed to open up the old drive-in this August,” Dylan said. He shortened his stride so he wasn’t walking faster than his brother. Lately his legs seemed to carry him two steps ahead of everyone else.

“Oh yeah?” Patrick said. He spit into the dirt at the side of the road, then looked up at Dylan, a sudden grin on his face.

“What?” Dylan said.

Patrick responded by flaring his nostrils and, sounding like one of the Ransom’s hogs, pulled phlegm into his mouth.

“Don’t you dare, asshole,” Dylan said, but Patrick was already on him. Too quick for Dylan, who hadn’t yet learned to use his size to his advantage, Patrick had him in a headlock that ended with Dylan slung onto his back in the dirt with his brother over him, a loogie hanging from his mouth, dangling an inch from Dylan’s face like a spider dropped from a web. Dylan shut his eyes and his mouth, turned his face from side to side.

Patrick tap-slapped him twice on the cheek and laughed. When Dylan opened his eyes, the spit was gone, sucked back into Patrick’s mouth, probably. Patrick was fond of that little trick.

“Get offa me,” Dylan said.

Patrick shoved off of him, held a hand down to help Dylan up. “One day you’re gonna learn to fight me off, man.”

Dust clung to the back of Dylan’s arms and legs. He smelled of sweat and dirt, and he turned and kept walking down the road, at full stride now. Patrick jogged to follow.

“Don’t be pissed,” Patrick said when he’d caught up.

“I ain’t.”

“You are, but whatever. So what about the drive-in?”

Dylan glanced at Patrick sideways. “Nothing,” he said.

“Uh-huh.”

“They’re gonna show slasher movies,” Dylan said, slowly because he wanted to stay mad. “At midnight and everything.”

Patrick looked pleased by that, like Dylan had known he would.

“We should go,” Patrick said. “Seriously. See every fucking one of them.”

“Gotta be seventeen,” Dylan said.

Patrick waved a hand through the air. “I’ll sneak you in. Whatever. Like sixteen ain’t old enough for that. Too bad everyone knows your big ugly mug, otherwise I’d say it’s about time you got a fake ID.”

Dylan smiled at that. He sort of wanted to hug Patrick but punched him instead and was secretly happy when Patrick grunted like it hurt.

Around lunchtime they cut through fields heading toward town and made their way to the Luau Café where Mollie waited tables. It was near the highway and attracted mostly truckers, and Mollie with her wide hips and small waist raked in enough tips to keep the three of them in groceries. She sat them at the bar and got them both a Coke while Dylan squirmed, trying to get himself comfortable on the stool that looked like the bottom half of a tiger, four legs and a tail. Patrick’s stool was a parrot with two ridged yellow legs that ended in talons gripping the ground for support. An arc of plastic feathers plumed out from

behind the chair and Patrick patted it twice. "Doesn't get much better than this," he said.

"What the fuck's going on?" Mollie said.

"Whoa," Patrick said. "Language, sister."

"Landlord called. She said Mrs. Brown's dead?"

Patrick pressed his cold glass to his split lip.

"She's dead?" Dylan said.

"Landlord said there's cops all over the place. She called because our porch is taped off. Y'all didn't see it?"

Dylan said, "We saw something. Mr. Brown had a lot of blood on him. We asked if he needed help." He shrugged, looked at Patrick, who looked pale in the red and green bar lights.

Mollie said, "You see some dude covered in blood, some dude who lives right below us, I might add, and you don't think anything's strange? You don't think to call someone? Me? The sheriff?"

"Mr. Brown said he called the cops," Patrick said.

"I wanted to stay," Dylan said.

Mollie looked at Patrick. "And what the hell happened to your lip?" She said. "Did you get in another fight?"

"Would everyone just lay off me about my fucking lip?" Patrick said.

"Whatever," Mollie said. She shook her head. "Just stay here for the afternoon. I want you where I can see you. There's a heat warning on, for god's sake, and you two are out there roaming around like a couple of street urchins."



“What’s a street urchin?” Dylan said. Mollie just rolled her eyes at him and disappeared into the kitchen.

“We may be orphans but this sure as hell ain’t no *Oliver Twist*,” Patrick said. He tied his straw in a knot around his finger.

“What does that *mean*?” Dylan said. “You two are always speaking your own language. Always leaving me out.”

Patrick stared him right in the face. “I’m not even responding to that, man.”

“Whatever. You think Mr. Brown did it? Killed his wife?”

Patrick twitched his shoulders, barely a shrug, and looked down at the bar top.

“I bet he did,” Dylan said. “He always seemed so nice, but that’s how it always is. Psychos are really good at pretending to be normal. That’s why they’re so good at killing. They know how to make people trust them. They’re charming.”

“We don’t even know what happened and you’re already calling the poor man a psychopath? That’s what’s wrong with this fucking town. Everybody so quick to judge everybody else.”

“I’m not judging him,” Dylan said. “It just could be the case. That’s all I’m saying. It *could be the case*.”

“Doubtful,” Patrick said. “Only something like two percent of the population is psychopaths.”

“How do you know that?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Patrick said. “I read it somewhere. Pick up a book sometime.”

“I will,” Dylan said. “I’m gonna be a criminal psychologist.”

“Is that right.”

Dylan rubbed his thumb across the top of the bar, ran it in a circle around the sweat ring from his glass. “Sometimes I just wonder why people do things.” He was embarrassed suddenly. He hadn’t meant to talk about this.

“You should do that, then,” Patrick said, finally. “I think your teachers might faint if you actually turned in any homework, but you should go for it. Find yourself something to study. A little fuck you to every one of them who think you won’t amount to nothing.”

“I will,” Dylan said.

“Good,” Patrick said.

Things were all right then and should have stayed that way. But a few hours later, the Sheriff came to find Patrick. He and Dylan were outside the Café waiting for Mollie to finish up for the night when the squad car pulled up.

“Boys,” the sheriff said. He nodded at Dylan then fixed his gaze on Patrick. “We gotta talk, Pat,” he said. “You probably know I got some questions for you.”

Patrick looked at Dylan. He prodded at his lip with his thumb, then looked to the sherriff. “Yes, sir,” he said.

“Mrs. Brown’s dead. I got a tip you’ve been seeing a lot of her lately.”

“So what?” Patrick said. “That don’t mean anything.”

“Maybe not. What happened to your lip?”

“Got in a fight.”

“Of course you did,” the sheriff said. He sighed then, big and noisy like something in his chest hurt. “I gotta take you in.”

“Wait,” Dylan said. “You’re arresting him? You can’t.”

“I ain’t arresting anyone. I just wanna ask your brother some questions. You understand,” he said, “don’t you, Pat?”

“What’d he do?” Dylan said.

“Stop it, Dylan,” Patrick said.

“No,” he said. “This don’t make sense.”

“Just go inside,” Patrick said. He gave his brother a shove. “Tell Mollie I went with Sheriff Wallace. Tell her I’ll be home later.”

Dylan watched his brother get in the squad car. There weren’t even any handcuffs. But Dylan knew how these things went; he’d seen enough cop shows to know that it was questions then a trial then a prison cell. Dylan backed up a few steps then sat cross-legged in the dirt under the big fake palm tree outside the restaurant. His legs were too shaky to hold him.

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Dylan sat in the passenger seat of Mollie’s car. She said she didn’t want to go home, so she drove toward the center of town where her boyfriend Mike lived. When Dylan asked her why, she said she thought the police tape might still be up, that it might still be a crime scene.

For Dylan, though, there was a morbid curiosity. He wanted to see if Mr. Brown would be sitting on the front porch listening to the old emergency radio he listened to on nights he had off. He played Christian Radio usually, and on Wednesday nights like tonight there'd be sermons crackling through the speakers, preachers shouting their love for Jesus loud like maybe Jesus was somewhere out there in the ether and their radio waves would make it to Him. But there was also the simple fact that Dylan wanted his own bed. He didn't want to sleep on Mike's couch in his jeans that were still dirty from his tussle with Patrick. And he didn't like the idea of leaving all of Patrick's stuff at their own place unguarded. He worried that Mr. Brown, drunk and mourning and mean besides, might try to break in and do something as payback.

Halfway down the main road towards town, Dylan broke and begged his sister. "Please, Mollie. I just want to go home," he said.

"That's not a good idea."

Dylan could barely see her in the lights from the dashboard. "I can't," Dylan shook his head, swallowed. "It's been such a bad day."

"I know, kiddo," she said.

"Don't call me that."

She let out all her breath in a rush.

"Please," he said again. "At least let's go home and get some stuff. Some clothes? I'm dirty. And I want my guitar."

"You can borrow something of Mike's."

"He's tiny."

“Jesus.”

“Mol?”

“What?”

“He didn’t do it.”

“I know.”

Dylan was glad she sounded so certain; because Dylan wasn’t certain at all. He slouched in his seat and put his knees against the dashboard. Mollie turned on the radio to fill the silence.

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Patrick wasn’t there when Dylan woke up the next day. Mike cooked breakfast, and Mollie went to the jail to see if she could talk to Patrick, bring him home. Dylan hunched over Mike’s table, ran a finger along a deep groove in the wood. Mike hummed along to a Kansas song on the radio, occasionally singing out a lyric or two in a rasp that seemed incongruous with the size of him. He was five-foot-seven at most, maybe one-hundred and fifty pounds. Dylan watched him and, not for the first time since he himself had grown so much, wondered what it would be like to grab him around the waist and hoist him into a fireman’s hold.

Mike had been around since before their mom left. When Dylan was thirteen, their mom had said she was going to find work in Memphis and had promised them a monthly check. Neither check nor mom had ever turned up again, but months after that, months after the people in the town had stopped bringing casseroles and asking had they heard from their momma, months after their mom had become another story the townspeople told whenever Patrick got

into trouble—as he always seemed to do, and wasn't that just that woman's fault? Maybe the poor boy would have turned out better had she stuck around—months after all of that, Mike had still been around. His own parents had adopted him from Vietnam when he was a baby, so Dylan guessed Mike knew a thing or two about being abandoned.

Mike threw a paper plate down in front of Dylan and scooped him some eggs straight from the pan. They were scrambled almost to brown.

“Thanks,” Dylan said.

“Don't mention it.” Mike sat across from him with his own eggs. “You gonna see Patrick later?” he said.

“No.”

“He'd probably like to see you.”

“I disagree.”

Mike raised an eyebrow.

“You think he'd want me seeing him like that?” Dylan said. “Well you're wrong.”

“I think he'd rather see you than not. What if it was you?”

“Wouldn't be me,” Dylan said.

“You think he did it.”

Dylan jabbed his fork into his eggs. The metal tines made four perfect divots in the waxed surface of the plate. “No,” he said.

“You do.”

“Well there's gotta be a reason they arrested him.”

Because Dylan had been thinking about this. He hadn't slept until almost morning. He'd laid in Mike's moonlit living room, the sound of the clock ticking, the sound of Mike and Mollie's hushed talk quiet through the thin walls, the sound of the cicadas after the talk tapered off, none of these things a distraction from the thoughts that circled over Dylan throughout those awake moments: The Sheriff had come straight for Patrick, like he'd had a reason. The sheriff always picked on Patrick, but that didn't explain where Patrick had gotten the fat lip and why he'd been so cagey about explaining it. It also didn't explain the fact that Patrick had a connection to Mrs. Brown and had never told Dylan. If Dylan could put an image to the path of his thoughts, it would be that of a hawk circling the sky, wings outspread, dipping closer and closer to the highway until it circled into the path of an onrushing semi.

"You can't think like that," Mike said, and Dylan twitched his eyes toward him, the intrusion of Mike's words an almost physical pull.

"Yeah I know," Dylan said. He shrugged and scooped eggs into his mouth until his cheeks puffed out.

"Your sister knows someone in Fayetteville from when she was at school there. He graduated law school about a year ago. She's gonna call and see if he can help."

Dylan just shoveled more eggs into his mouth and asked around his mouthful if there was anything else to eat.

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By the afternoon the entire town knew that Patrick had been taken in for questioning. At the Luau Café, where Mollie hadn't shown for work, the waitresses all told stories they'd heard that morning. Some had heard that Mrs. Brown had been stabbed to death, some that she'd been bludgeoned with a hammer; the manager had heard that she'd been tortured first, and that Patrick had cut the ring finger off her left hand and taken it with him. By that time, the rumor that Patrick and Mrs. Brown had been fucking might as well have been truth as far as most people were concerned, so the manager's story was the one most seemed to settle on. Ask anyone in town and they'd probably tell you Patrick had wanted Mrs. Brown to leave her husband and, when she'd refused, he'd killed her in a jealous rage. They couldn't say they were surprised. That boy had a violent streak in him; he'd been scrapping with other boys since he was little. It was a damn shame, though. Those poor siblings had been through enough.

That afternoon, Dylan went into the grocer's to buy a Coke before wandering off to find somewhere he could put his head down and hope no one would notice him while he got some thinking done. The owner's son was watching over the cash register and did a good job of watching over Dylan, too. The kid's eyes tracked Dylan through the store, and he leaned one way then the next so he could see Dylan past the boxes of cereal and oatmeal on the top shelves that blocked his view of the refrigerated section in the back. Dylan didn't want the Coke anymore, but he thought leaving without it would draw even more attention so he went to the front and handed the kid some change. The kid stared at Dylan, lips slightly parted, breathing through his nose.



“What?” Dylan said when the kid didn’t immediately take his money.

“Your brother’s one fucked up dude,” the kid said.

Dylan cleared his throat. “Can I just get my Coke?”

“Feel like I shouldn’t give you anything.”

“Why? I didn’t do nothing.”

“You saying your brother did?”

“I didn’t say that.” Dylan felt sick.

“The things they’re saying—”

“Yeah, I know what they’re saying.”

“Fucked up,” the kid said.

“Keep your fucking Coke,” Dylan said. “I don’t fucking want it.” He kicked the counter in front of him, the thud of it loud in the empty store, and Dylan, surprised at himself, jumped just the same as the kid. The kid backed up a step, and he looked up as if he’d only just noticed Dylan’s size.

“Take it,” he said, nervous. “Don’t come back.”

Dylan walked straight up the main road out past the reaches of town, following a different route than the one he’d taken with his brother the day before. He held the sweating Coke bottle, occasionally shifting it from hand to hand. A hawk cried from somewhere above him and he stopped walking. When he looked around, turned a complete three-sixty, the only building in sight was an old farm house set back in a low green field that had probably been soybeans a month or two before. Dylan must have walked for more than an hour without even realizing it. A tractor drove lazily in the distance. It looked like a toy from this far away.

He took his shirt off and wiped his face. He sat by the side of the road, twisted the cap off the Coke bottle and chugged. The Coke was warm and too sweet and it did nothing to kill the dryness of Dylan's mouth and throat, but he finished it anyway and belched into the silence then chucked the empty bottle into the field.

He thought over some of the stories he'd heard, the things Mollie had related to him when she'd gotten home from the station. She hadn't been allowed to see Patrick—according to the Sherriff, they could hold him forty-eight hours without pressing charges—but the Sherriff's secretary had been more than happy to tell Mollie what Patrick had done. None of the rumors made sense to Dylan. If Patrick had done it, he wouldn't have done it like that. Dylan knew his brother. Patrick was smart. If Patrick were going to kill someone, he'd be like Jason Bourne, quick and efficient, leave no evidence behind. Dylan imagined poison. He imagined two bullets from a silenced gun: one to the head, one to the heart.

But Patrick hadn't been home the night before, and Dylan thought of the slasher movies Patrick loved, of how many times he'd seen Patrick happy at the sight of blood on the screen, eating greasy handfuls of popcorn and laughing while he moaned about how awesome it all was. If Patrick were going to kill someone, then it was possible that killing them bloody might be his style after all.

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Patrick looked pale and sick when Mollie brought him home the next afternoon after her lawyer friend had gotten into town. When Patrick walked past him, Dylan caught the scent of sour sweat and days-old dirt. Patrick stopped in the

doorway to Mike's bedroom and tapped at the door frame, restless. He looked at Dylan for a second. Dylan dropped his eyes; when he looked up again, Patrick was shutting the door.

The shower started up a few minutes later, and Dylan listened as Mike and Mollie talked in the kitchen, their voices a murmur just loud enough for Dylan to make out the words.

"How is he?"

"Okay, I guess. Considering. They were pretty rough with him. They didn't have any evidence, really, so they just kept trying to get him to confess."

"And he didn't?"

Mollie shook her head. "Can we stay here again tonight? I gotta get the boys home, but Patrick seemed pretty happy about it when I told him we were coming here."

"I wanna go home," Dylan said.

Mike and Mollie looked over at him, their heads turning at the exact same moment. Mollie's arms were crossed over her stomach, and Mike had his hand on one of her elbows. They were the same goddamned height. "Not now, kiddo," Mollie said.

"I can't stay here anymore." He looked at Mike. "No offense."

"None taken," Mike said. "But try to go easy on your sister. She's had a tough few days."

"And I haven't?"

“Christ, Dylan,” Mollie said. “Could you try to not be so selfish for just one minute?”

Mike let out a breath and tilted his head back until he was looking at the ceiling. “Here we go.”

“Well I’m leaving,” Dylan said. “You two can stay here, but I ain’t.” He backed toward the door.

“Stop being like this,” Mollie said. She looked at the closed bedroom door. “I need you to help me out here. He’ll talk to you, you know? He’s not gonna talk to me.”

Dylan knew. He was more than a little afraid of what Patrick might say.

“I’m going,” Dylan said. “I’ll be there when y’all decide to come home.”

The first thing Dylan saw when he walked up to the duplex was “murderer” spray-painted across the front windows on the bottom level. They were Mr. Brown’s windows, and Dylan’s first thought was “stupid motherfuckers,” but then he noticed their front screen door was open, stuck outwards like someone had opened it so far the hinges had just held. The inside door was open, too.

Dylan walked to the doorway and looked up the stairs. “Hello?” he said. When no one responded, he made his way up, taking each step slow and dragging his hand along the railing. Once at the top, he said “Hello?” again, but he could already tell no one was there.

He stood in the doorway for a long time, not sure what to do. Everything in their place was in disarray. The couch had been slashed open with a knife, the

yellow foam padding beneath the fabric exposed and gaping open like a mouth widened in surprise. All the cabinets in their kitchen were open. What was breakable lay in pieces on the counters and floor, and what wasn't sat whole amongst the debris. Their television was overturned, and someone had put their foot through the thin bathroom door.

After a bit, Dylan talked himself into moving. He kept his eyes straight ahead and walked through the living room and down the hall toward his and Patrick's shared room. He thought he'd try to pack a bag, bring some clothes back for himself and Patrick, but when he got to their room, he saw that it was a lost cause. The drawers and closets had been emptied, and someone had shredded most of the contents. Dylan's guitar was in the pile, the neck broken and a few of the strings snapped. When Dylan saw that, he folded himself cross-legged onto the floor next to it and grabbed it and tugged in into his lap. It was just a second hand thing Patrick had given to him one Christmas, but it had worked and it had been one of the few things Dylan was actually good at.

When he could, he went through the apartment with his school bag. He packed a few things: Patrick's swim meet trophy; a couple of CDs they'd been listening to on an endless loop that summer—The Smashing Pumpkins and Nirvana Unplugged—because Patrick had found a CD player and a small collection cheap at the Salvation Army; a box of picks Dylan had gotten into the habit of buying, whether he needed them or not; the three vampire romance novels Mollie kept under her mattress that she thought Patrick and Dylan knew nothing about. When Dylan left, he shut the door and locked it behind him.

The open land around him seemed endless. There was the road leading toward farmland and the highway, the road back into town, and the spread of fields moving out towards everything else. Dylan knew they ended somewhere. He wasn't some backwoods idiot who'd never been out of Blytheville; he knew there were cities beyond. But in that moment, those fields might as well have been the fucking ocean. He walked toward the old drive-in when the feeling of all that space overwhelmed him. There were tracks in the grass where cars had been driving and parking for years, and Dylan settled into the dirt, the movie screen tall above him. He opened his bag and set everything out on the ground. Seven things. After the sun set, Dylan stood and walked back toward town. He didn't bother bringing the seven things with him.

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When Dylan got back to Mike's place, the lights were all off in the living room and Patrick was on the couch. Dylan tried not to wake him, but when he turned back around after shutting the door, Patrick was propped on one elbow watching him.

"It's late," Patrick said.

"I know," Dylan said.

"Mollie was worried."

Dylan shrugged. He walked into the room and moved the coffee table out of the way so he could sleep on the floor.

"That was a dick move," Patrick said. "Leaving like that."

"Give me a pillow," Dylan said.

“No,” Patrick said. “We gotta talk.” He sat all the way up and tilted his head toward the empty space on the couch. “Sit.”

Dylan sat on the floor then rolled to his side, facing away from Patrick.

“Hey,” Patrick said. He kneeled on the floor behind Dylan and shook his shoulder. “Come on, man. Sit up. Talk to me.”

“No.”

“I know you’re freaked, but I’m okay. Look—no harm no foul. A couple of days in jail ain’t nothing.”

Dylan shook his head. He finally sat up and turned around to look at Patrick who was smiling at him, teeth a flash of white in the dim-lit room. The swelling of his lip had gone down.

“I ain’t worried about *you*,” Dylan said. “It is possible for a person to have something else on their mind besides you.”

Patrick nodded. “Yeah? Well after today, that’d be a nice change.” He settled onto the floor and leaned back against the couch. “I felt all cooped up after I got here, so I tried to go into town. Big fucking mistake.”

“I could’ve told you that.”

“You weren’t around. Doesn’t matter anyway. Joke’s on them. What the fuck do I care what they think of me?”

“No. The joke’s right where it always is. Right on us. Like we got a big target on our backs.”

Patrick was quiet for a minute. He said, “It’ll blow over. It always does.”

“Our place is a wreck,” Dylan said “Someone trashed it.”

“Fuck.”

“That’s all you’re gonna say?” Dylan said.

“We gotta tell Mollie,” Patrick said.

“You wanna be the one to go in there? Wake her up? Make her cry?

Haven’t done enough already?”

“This ain’t my fault,” Patrick said. His eyes narrowed and he looked at Dylan hard. “Don’t you put this shit on me.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t do a goddamned thing.”

“Oh yeah? Well alls I know is one day you’re arrested for murder and the next day I ain’t got a home. Who the hell am I supposed to blame if not you?”

“Blame the asshole who did it.”

Dylan looked into his lap.

“You don’t actually think I did it,” Patrick said. “You don’t believe that bullshit.”

“You were fucking her.”

Patrick stood. He ran a hand across his face and Dylan heard the rasp of stubble against his palm. “I didn’t do it, Dylan. Seriously,” he said. “I don’t wanna beg you here, man.”

Dylan lay back down and rolled over. “I just wanna sleep.”

Patrick stood there for what seemed like a long time to Dylan, who’d shut his eyes and tried to pretend he didn’t notice his brother watching him. When



Patrick stepped around him and went outside, Dylan stayed on the floor, listening to the creek of the old rocker on Mike's front porch.

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Mollie shook Dylan awake early that morning. Dylan's whole body ached from being stretched out on the floor, and he stood and cracked his neck and shoulders and looked down at his sister. She looked angry enough that Dylan thought of the day their mom left, of the moment Mollie realized she wouldn't be going back to school at the end of winter break.

"What?" Dylan said.

"I'll tell you what." She shoved him hard in the chest and Dylan stumbled backwards a step. "Patrick's gone." She waved a note in front of Dylan's face. "He left last night. You think I'm going to coddle you because you're only sixteen? You're wrong. What the hell did you say to him last night?"

"Nothing."

"We heard you two fighting."

"Shit."

"Yeah, shit."

"I fucked up."

"Mike told me what you two talked about the other day. You can have all the doubts you want, but just tell me you didn't tell Patrick you think he did this. At least tell me that."

Dylan looked at his feet. He hunched his shoulders.

"Why do you have to be so difficult, huh?" Mollie flopped on the couch.

Dylan found his shoes and pulled them on. "I'll fix this," he said. Mollie didn't say anything.

Dylan followed the road they'd taken the day Patrick was arrested, but when he got near the highway he turned left instead of right and walked toward the truck stop down half a mile from the Luau Café. There was only one truck parked in the lot and Dylan hoped that Patrick hadn't found someone to hitch a ride with yet. He poked his head into the restroom, then walked inside and looked in each stall. He didn't see his brother. He was about to give up when he saw Patrick a little ways in the distance. He was sitting on a fence post that ran along the edge of the service road leading to the highway. A duffel lay in the dirt at his feet.

Dylan walked to Patrick. He didn't know what to say, so he just climbed onto the fence and sat next to his brother. With the sun rising behind them, their shadows on the dirt seemed impossibly long. They sat in silence for a few minutes.

"Come home," Dylan said.

"No."

"I didn't mean it last night. I know you didn't do it. I know you."

"You don't want to *believe* I did it maybe," Patrick craned his neck to look at his brother, "but that doesn't mean you think I couldn't have."

Dylan toed his foot through the dirt.

“It doesn’t matter,” Patrick said. “They all believe it. I lost my job because I missed one fucking day while I was in custody. Who else is gonna hire me? The steel plant? No way.”

“They don’t have any evidence.”

“They don’t need any,” Patrick said. He stood up and turned to look at Dylan. “Take care of Mollie, okay?”

“No,” Dylan said. He stood. “You don’t get to do this.”

“It’s done.”

“I could come with you.”

“Fuck off, Dylan.”

“Take me with you.”

“No,” Patrick said.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want you with me.” Patrick frowned. “Fuck,” he said.

Dylan grabbed his shoulder, and Patrick shoved him away, hard enough he landed in the dirt.

“Do you know how it felt last night to find out my own fucking brother doesn’t believe me? I can’t be here anymore. I can’t look you in the fucking face.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Get out of here,” Patrick said. When Dylan didn’t move, Patrick pulled him up by the arm until Dylan was standing. He shoved him in the back. “Get the fuck gone.”

Dylan turned back to reach for his brother, but Patrick lashed out. He punched Dylan, and his fist caught him right under the chin. Dylan bit down hard on his tongue and felt one of his teeth crack with the force. He found himself in the dirt, then, and he didn't even remember falling.

"Dylan," Patrick said. "Shit." He put his hand out to help Dylan up.

Dylan looked at it, scooted backwards, then stood on his own, and Patrick was crowded into his space immediately.

"You're okay," Patrick said. He patted at Dylan's arms then tried to make him still so he could get a look at Dylan's jaw. "You'll be okay."

Dylan pushed him off. "Don't," he said.

"I'm sorry," Patrick said.

Dylan shook his head. He felt dizzy and sick, and he pushed his tongue into his broken tooth. "I'm going home," he said.

He turned and began walking the road toward town. He felt Patrick watching him walk away, imagined him standing with his fists clenched at his sides, his shoes scuffing dirt, and in that moment didn't care at all whether or not Patrick followed him home.

### **There's a Moaning in the Fields**

After almost a year of service with the United States Marine Corps, Patrick was given an “Other than Honorable Conditions” discharge. He’d made it through boot camp, through MOS training, and had been assigned to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina for his first duty station. He would have been deployed to Iraq soon had he not slammed the butt of a rifle into his Staff Sergeant’s jaw one week after receiving notice from his sister that their mother had passed.

The official explanation was that grief had fueled the attack and that Patrick wasn’t to be blamed. Nevertheless, it was a violent act, and there had been a pattern of misconduct, so Patrick was considered too unstable to continue on with the USMC. Privately Patrick thought grief had nothing to do with it; his mother had been figuratively dead to him long before she was literally dead, and Staff Sergeant Martin Lanis was just a dick who deserved to have his jaw broken. But Patrick was lucky, he knew, because he could have been up for court-martial. It was rare that Patrick had that kind of luck. He was grateful.

After almost three weeks of walking and hitching and a day’s-long bus trip that took him from Atlanta to St. Louis, Patrick worked his way toward home. It had been four years since he’d been in Blytheville, Arkansas, even longer since he’d wanted to be, and he wasn’t sure his presence would be welcome. But Patrick didn’t have any other options, and he had a suspicion that he didn’t have anything left inside him that would push him to find something better. He had left the bus ticket given to him by the Corps as a final send-off in the bus depot trashcan, and he’d spent the last of what money he had in a savings account he’d

had since he was sixteen on a dented, old, white Dodge Neon with no radio and close to two-hundred-thousand miles on the odometer.

Currently Patrick was in a small town in the Missouri Bootheel trapped in the food pantry of a Wendy's and waiting out a tornado. He was sitting on a couple of boxes filled with Frosty mix and was listening to the chatter of two teens in rumpled Wendy's uniforms who smelled of fries and pot and probably wished they'd called in sick to work that morning.

"Oh, god," one of them said. "My dog, man."

"Your dog?" the other said. It was the tall dopey-looking one that reminded Patrick of his kid brother, Dylan.

"She's home alone. We left her outside."

"You got more things to worry about than your dog, dude," the tall one said. Then he fucking giggled, and Patrick wanted to close his eyes and wish himself someplace else.

"You scared?"

Patrick opened his eyes and saw the tall kid was looking at him.

"No," Patrick said.

"You look scared."

"This ain't the first tornado I sat through." Patrick's home town, Blytheville, was all flat land stretched for miles, and it sat right in the middle of Tornado Alley. It didn't seem to matter that his particular section of Tornado Alley was also part of the Bible belt. People could talk to God all they wanted; something like prayer wouldn't stop something like a tornado.

Patrick thought of his sister back home, of how they didn't have a basement in their place, and how they used to stand in their bathroom huddled together away from the windows when the tornado sirens blew. He thought of how Mollie would push Dylan's hair back from his forehead when the windows rattled from the force of the wind, like that touch could save him.

The kid said, "Where you from? You ain't from town. I'd know."

"No," Patrick said. "I ain't."

"You from the city?"

Patrick let a breath out through his nose, leaned his head back against the wall. When he swallowed in this position, his esophagus stretched too tight, and he felt his Adam's apple roll in his throat—up then drop. He felt trapped. He itched under his skin. He sat up straight.

"I'm getting the fuck outta here," he said.

"Where are you going?" the other kid said. "It's a fucking tornado."

"It's been ten minutes since we heard anything. It's gone by now." When they'd first hid, the noise had been tremendous—a wall-trembling sound that reminded Patrick of the Union Pacific freight trains that used to pass by his family's apartment when he was growing up, and of how they used to shake the whole goddamned place.

Patrick hitched down the lever that opened the pantry door from the inside. The door popped unlocked then swung out. He walked through the restaurant's kitchen. Oil bubbled in the fryers. When he stepped up to the counter behind the registers, he saw the entire front of the restaurant had been ripped off

and carried away in the storm. Sun peeked through the opening, innocent, like the sky hadn't just dropped a twister minutes before.

“Jesus,” Patrick said. He walked around the counter into the restaurant, righted an overturned chair.

“Holy shit.”

Patrick turned to see the two teens making their way into the restaurant. One had his cell phone in his hand, already snapping pictures of the damage, a grin on his face, but the tall one walked up and stood right in the center of the gaping hole. His sneakers crunched glass. “*Ho-lee-shit,*” he said. “There used to be a wall here.”

Patrick patted the kid on the shoulder then walked past him out to the parking lot.

Patrick raised a hand to shield his eyes from the sun. He was trembling, the sudden adrenalin from chance survival jacking through his bloodstream like speed. The McDonald's across the street had been leveled. There was a lone figure in the parking lot, sitting cross-legged on the tarmac, head in hands. Patrick's car sat in the middle of a field to the right. It had been picked up and set down. He was too far away from it to tell how bad the damage was. There was another car flipped upside down in the middle of the Wendy's lot, its roof crumpled inwards like an accordion.

The whole thing felt too close for comfort. Patrick had managed not to get himself killed in the Marines even though he'd been stupid enough to join in the middle of a war. It would be just his luck to die in a tornado immediately after he



was officially discharged. At least if he'd been killed while on duty, his siblings would have been notified, but if he'd died out here in the middle of nowhere, would they have even known?

He was eighteen when he'd left home. It wasn't that he never looked back or anything; he'd thought about home all the time at first—He thought about his books. Most of them were stolen from the county library, but he'd had a nice collection going and he missed the feel and smell of them, missed the way it pissed Dylan off that they took up so much space in their shared room. He'd thought about Sarah Walker, who'd been the first girl to let him stick his hand up her skirt and his tongue in her mouth, feel what a girl felt like on the inside. And he thought about Mrs. Brown. She'd been the first woman he'd fucked who'd had any real experience, who'd been *woman* and not *girl*. Mostly, though, he'd missed his siblings.

When Patrick had first joined up, he'd sent his sister a letter from boot camp telling her where he was. It was the first time he'd contacted her in almost three years. He didn't expect to hear back, but a few weeks later he got the first postcard from Dylan. On the front was a picture of what looked like an Old West saloon, the words Cowboy's Hitchin' Post Baptist Church in sprawled red ink across the top; the back just said *Hope u die in battel*. Eighteen-years-old and the boy still couldn't spell for shit; he had handwriting that looked like it came from a third grader with a crayon. Another week passed, and Patrick got a second postcard, this one from the Spring Meadows Motel. The message was a bit longer: *Dear Patrick. I didn't mean the previous, its just im still mad u left. Don't die.*

*Sincerely Dylan.* Well Patrick was still mad, too, and as he read Dylan's postcard he wished he hadn't bothered to let them know where he was. By the time he was discharged, he'd almost convinced himself that it didn't matter he'd never heard from his sister and brother again.

Now, Patrick sucked air in through his teeth, ran a hand back and forth over his hair. It was starting to grow out, felt coarse and bushy, and he wished he could buy some pomade, style it like he used to. He wondered how long it would be until someone showed to see if anyone had been hurt in the storm—police, fireman, someone. He wondered if he could be gone first.

Patrick went to look at his car. The field beneath his feet was marshy and wet from the storm, big swatches of it hidden beneath puddles Patrick had to avoid as he walked. It was a longer walk than it should have been. Patrick felt sweaty under the sun and had to swat at more than a few mosquitoes. They left little red smudges on his forearms, like they were giving back the blood they'd taken. He wanted a shower. If there was anything he missed about the Marines, it was the regularity of it all—the up at oh five hundred for a five minute shower then the walk to the mess hall. He knew what to expect from each day. Now he just felt as if he floated by from minute to minute, like when a little kid loses a balloon to the sky and it just goes up and up, nothing to stop it nor guide it. Patrick had thought it'd be freeing to be away from that structure; instead, he just felt weary.

His car was a lost cause, all four tires flat and, from the way the back two tilted inward, tail of the car almost buried in the muddy ground, it looked like the

axle was broke. Most of the windows were busted out, too, though the rear passenger window was still there, clean and glinting in the sun.

The tall kid walked up behind Patrick. "Don't look good," he said.

"No, it don't," Patrick said.

"My dad's a mechanic. He could tow it for you. Take a look."

"That'd be good," Patrick said.

The kid grinned when Patrick squinted up at him. "Awesome," he said.

"Cause I already called him. He's on his way with the truck."

"What's your name?" Patrick said.

"Jason," the kid said, pointing to his chest where there should've been a name tag.

"You okay, Jason?"

He nodded. "We got a storm cellar at home. Just would've rather been there, you know?"

"Yeah," Patrick said. "I know."

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Patrick sat in the waiting room of "Dean and Mike's Auto" staring at a blank television, at the tin foil-wrapped antennae perched on top, and worrying about the moment he'd have to tell Dean, Jason's dad, that he couldn't afford anything that needed to be done to the car. He couldn't even really afford the tow he'd accepted. Jason sat in the chair next to him, leaning backwards, legs sprawled in front, the heel of his foot *tap tapping* against the sticky tile floor and

his fingers drumming a silent cadence against his leg. It was putting Patrick on edge. He reached out and stilled the kid's hand.

Jason looked at him. "My dad knows I'm baked, man."

That surprised a laugh out of Patrick. "Of course he does. You smell like you been dipped in bong water."

"What do I do?"

Patrick shrugged.

"He'll skin me alive."

"I don't know your dad," Patrick said, "but seems to me like he's probably just happy you're alive right now."

"No. No he's just waiting till we ain't in front of company."

Patrick wondered if there was any work to be had in this town. He stood and walked to the window that looked out over the garage. His car was levered up by a hoist. He didn't see Dean anywhere.

"You ain't gotta worry," Jason said. "My dad's good with cars."

"I ain't worried about that."

"You on the lamb?" Jason said.

Patrick turned to look at him. Raised an eyebrow.

"It's just, you didn't want nothing to do with them cops back there when they showed up at the restaurant."

"No one says 'on the lam,'" Patrick said. "This ain't no film noir."

"You are, aren't you?"

“No, I ain’t *on the lam*,” Patrick said. “I just ain’t had good luck with police in the past. I avoid them when I can.”

Jason nodded. “The sheriff, he’s a good sort. And his son’s mayor.”

“That makes him ‘a good sort,’ does it?”

Jason shrugged.

Dean showed then. He was as tall as his son with a wide chest and trim waist, like he’d probably played football in high school and hadn’t let his body go to seed.

“The axle needs replacing,” he said, “but you knew that. The bigger problem is the crack in the exhaust manifold. That could’ve been done when the tornado dropped it, but it’s more likely it was there already. Don’t see how you could’ve driven it very far, though, if that’s the case.”

“I hadn’t been driving it long,” Patrick said.

Dean nodded. “You a drifter?”

Patrick tensed. “What do you care?” he said. Through his head ran all the ways he’d been taught to disable a man with his hands. He didn’t like small towns, and he didn’t like questions.

“I don’t. Not really,” Dean said. “Look, kid, it don’t matter to me why you’re here, but these repairs, they’re gonna cost you a lot of money. It’s just maybe better if you total the damn thing. Sell it for parts.”

Patrick cleared his throat. “I don’t have any money,” he admitted.

“I didn’t think so.”

“Who can I sell it to?” Patrick asked. He wondered if he could at least get enough for a hotel room for the night since he wouldn’t even have the car to sleep in anymore. He’d hitch a ride out in the morning, or walk if he couldn’t find someone trusting to pick him up. He hoped he wouldn’t have to beg his sister to take him in if he made it home.

“I’ll tow it to the junk yard in the morning, see what I can get. It ain’t open on a Sunday, or I’d do it now.”

Patrick nodded. “I’ll get outta your hair, then, come by in the morning.”

“Dad,” Jason said.

Dean looked at his son until the kid dropped his gaze. He turned to look at Patrick, rolled his eyes and laughed. “Jason over here likes to take in strays.”

“What?” Patrick said.

“You got anywhere to stay, kid?” Dean asked.

Patrick shook his head.

“You’ll come home with us, then.”

\*\*\*

Patrick had heard of people like the Walkers. He’d heard of this kind of picturesque, small-town do-goodery and domesticity, seen it in movies and after school specials. But Patrick was born and raised small-town, and all small-town folks ever did for him was cause trouble. He associated small-town with eyes watching and judging his every move, with being ostracized for having second hand clothes and an absent mother and father, like those things alone made a person bad. In small towns, it was the sheriff’s deputy hassling you just because

you went out on a Friday night. It was people blaming you for every trouble, whether that trouble was your fault or not.

But this—this sit down to Sunday dinner, pass the mashed potatoes, can I have the carrots, honey did you wash your hands—this stuff Patrick didn't know what to do with. He sat in a low-backed, maple chair at the Walkers' dining table, his own back military straight, left hand in his lap, right holding his utensil, heels jammed together so that his feet formed a right angle just like he'd learned his first day in boot camp, and he watched this father and son, though they were absent a mother, go through the ritual of a family meal. He took food when it was passed to him, a polite "sir" attached to his "thank you," and he waited for the punch line. He waited for someone to grab him by the collar, haul him out of the chair, and throw him back out onto the street. Instead there was just idle talk—about the tornado and how it was lucky it had only hit the edge of town, about how Jason wouldn't have to go into work the next day and now his summer was wide open, about how he could help out at the garage if his summer was *that* wide open.

Jason gave an embarrassed grin at that, his eyes locking with Patrick's across the table for a second before looking back to his dad. "You know I'd just break more than I'd fix," he said.

"Maybe," Dean said. "What about you, Patrick?"

"Sir?" Patrick said.

“You know your way around an engine? I figure you’re probably looking for work. My partner took ill a couple of months back, can’t really help run the shop. I’ve been looking for someone to work a few hours a week for me.”

“I know a little,” Patrick said.

“Enough you could learn more?”

“I did a little work with engines back in MOS school, but it wasn’t my specialty.”

Dean raised an eyebrow.

“Military occupational specialty school,” Patrick explained. “For the Marines.”

“You’re a Marine?” Dean looked impressed.

Patrick put some mashed potatoes in his mouth and swallowed his mouthful in a lump. “Not anymore, sir,” Patrick said. “I was discharged.”

“Honorably?”

Patrick thought about lying. If they were going to judge him, this was the moment. But he thought about how, if he was going to stay here in this town, that one lie would set in motion a series of other lies and Patrick was just far enough off-kilter in this situation to not know if he could handle that. So Patrick shook his head once then looked down at his plate. “No, sir,” he said.

“What happened?” Dean said.

“I’m not sure that’s your business,” Patrick said.

Dean nodded. “Jason,” he said. “Get to your room.”



Patrick watched Jason open his mouth to protest, but he seemed to think better of it and stopped himself. The kid was practically wiggling in his seat as if Patrick's discomfort was the juiciest thing to have happened to him in a long time. And who knows? For a kid growing up in a town like Hayti, Missouri, it probably was. Jason got up and left.

Dean looked at Patrick. "If you're gonna be staying here? Under my roof? My boy down the hall from where you'll be sleeping? I think it's my business."

"I don't have to stay here," Patrick said.

"But you want to."

Patrick pushed his plate away. He didn't respond.

"Kid, I'm not trying to be hard on you. But I don't think you've got anywhere else to go and I'm offering help."

Patrick ran his thumb along the edge of his plate. It was good china, white edged with barn door red. There was a rooster in the center beneath his meat and potatoes. Patrick gave it up. "It's called an 'other than honorable conditions' discharge," he said. "I got in a fight with my Staff Sergeant. Hurt him pretty bad. I wasn't court-martialed or anything, but," Patrick shrugged.

"Why not?"

"My mom had just died. They said it was grief."

"Was it?"

Patrick ran a hand over his hair. Wondered what this man would do if he told the truth, if Patrick looked him in the eye and said that no, it wasn't grief.

He'd wanted to hurt him. He'd wanted to kill him. Sometimes he felt like a coiled snake in the grass, ready to bite. Instead, Patrick nodded once. *Yeah. It was grief.*

Dean shook his head. "You see any action?"

"No, sir."

"So I don't have some trauma case on my hands, then?"

"No."

"I don't want any trouble. My son don't need that," Dean said. He shifted in his chair. "He's sort of...easily influenced."

"You don't have to worry," Patrick said. "I won't be any trouble."

\*\*\*

That night Patrick lay in the dark in a strange bed in a strange house. The room he was in was maybe Jason's bedroom from when he was little. It had light grey walls and a wallpaper border stamped with baseballs and bats; the furniture all looked handmade and like it had come out of the same maple the dining room set was carved from. He wondered if Dean had made it all or if they were family heirlooms.

Patrick listened as the house settled around him, tried to pattern the creaks and groans. By the time he'd finally closed the bedroom door, the night sky—deep blues and blacks and grays—had still looked heavy with storm clouds, and now the wind moaned off the fields and around the house. It shook the windows every few minutes, and the sound of it made Patrick feel lonely in a way he hadn't felt in a long time, like there was nothing outside of him, like if he crawled out the window right now, he'd crawl into a world where every single human besides

himself had disappeared, so that it was just Patrick left with empty space all around.

He'd rarely slept in a bedroom alone. When he was a kid and then a teenager, there'd been Dylan in the bed next to his. Dylan thrashed in his sleep, and he talked, and sometimes Patrick felt like the reason he knew his brother so well was because even the conversations Dylan had in his dreams weren't private. When Patrick first left home, the silence at night had been the hardest thing to get used to. But then he'd stayed in cities and let the sirens and the shouting teenagers who wandered the streets at night lull him into sleep. And he'd brought girls to his place often, as many as he could talk into bed, as long as they didn't seem the type to want to stick around after. Patrick shifted in the twin bed he was in now, pulled his feet up a bit so they didn't hang off the edge. He thought about jerking off. In boot camp, he'd gotten good at staying quiet while he touched himself, but he didn't want that now. He wanted to scream into an orgasm; he wanted to find a woman and fuck her until her cries were the only thing he heard.

There was a noise at the window, and Patrick sat up. In the dim light cast by the moon, he saw shadowed hands against the outside of the glass. The window creaked open, and Jason poked his head in. Patrick reached over and turned on the lamp next to the bed. Jason smiled and blinked at the light, the look a little sheepish and a lot stoned.

"Did I wake you?" Jason's voice was a stage whisper. He crawled the rest of the way through the window, landing in a crouch before pushing to his feet.

"You gonna explain this?" Patrick asked.

“There ain’t a screen on this window. I use it to sneak out at night.”

Patrick dragged a hand across his face. “Knock next time,” he said.

“You staying then?” Jason said. “For more than just tonight?”

He sat cross-legged next to the bed and looked up at Patrick. The kid’s face was shadowy in the lamplight, and his pupils were blown wide. His hair was sweaty at his temples. Patrick wondered what he was on. Wondered if thirty miles south of here Dylan was doing drugs too, or if Mollie had managed to keep him away from shit like that.

“You should go to bed,” Patrick said.

Jason shook his head. “Can’t sleep. I’m all jazzed up.”

“What are you on?”

“It ain’t the drugs,” Jason said. “I don’t never sleep. Don’t know why. They sent me to this sleep clinic when I was a kid to figure it out. Hooked me up to all kinds of machines and everything.” He shrugged, breathed quick through his open mouth, like a dog panting. “Don’t know. Just don’t sleep more than a few hours every night. It ain’t so bad.”

“Well I do sleep, so get gone.”

“What was my dad asking you about earlier?”

“Nothing.”

“Didn’t sound like nothing,” Jason said. “You was in the Marines?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you go to Iraq?”

“No,” Patrick said.

“You ever kill anyone?”

Wind rattled through the still open window and Patrick shivered, wished he were wearing a shirt, wished he could just stand up and crawl out into the night. “I just said I ain’t been to Iraq,” he said. He stood and pulled the t-shirt he was wearing earlier from the floor, slipped it over his head. It smelled like dirt and sweat.

Jason shrugged. His too-wide eyes tracked Patrick across the room. “But they taught you how to kill someone,” he said. “That’s sort of the point, isn’t it? Of the Marines?”

Patrick started to object, to say that there was more to being a Marine, *Semper Fidelis* and all that bullshit, but in the end he dropped it. He wasn’t sure the kid was that far off base.

“How old are you?” Patrick asked instead.

“Sixteen,” Jason said.

“Don’t you think you’re too young to be messing with whatever you’re messing with? Huh? Or to be thinking about killing people?”

“You ain’t that much older than me.”

“I’m twenty-two.”

“See,” Jason said, like Patrick’s answer proved his point.

“There’s a huge difference between the two. A lot happens in those six years.” Patrick shook his head. “What were you out there doing, anyway? You go out every night?”

Jason grinned. “Yep.”

“With that dorky kid you work with?”

“Naw,” Jason said. “We ain’t really friends. I just gotta see him at work. His brother gets us pot, though.”

“You got a girl, then?” Patrick said. “You go meet up with her, make-out out there in the fields?” He raised an eyebrow.

Jason looked at his hands. “No,” he said. “No girlfriend.”

Patrick started to tease him further, but something about the way the kid was clenching his hands together in his lap made Patrick keep his mouth shut.

Jason stood. “I’d better go to bed.”

Jason had his hand on the door knob. Patrick stopped him.

“Maybe tomorrow night we could hang out,” he said. “I’m gonna be sticking around, I guess, so I might as well get to know the place.”

“There ain’t much to get to know,” Jason said.

“I don’t care,” Patrick said. “Show me where you go every night.”

“All right,” Jason said. He smiled before opening the door and slipping into the hallway. Patrick locked the door and the window after he’d gone.

\*\*\*

Patrick’s car was in the lot behind Dean’s garage. They’d decided together that Patrick would work off the cost of the repairs, so Patrick rode with Dean into town the next morning and would be doing so for all mornings in the foreseeable future. It seemed to Patrick like a better option than walking out of town. At least this way Patrick had a bed to sleep in and food to eat.

At the garage, Patrick did whatever Dean said. He walked Patrick through simple things, oil changes and engine flushes, things Patrick already knew, and Patrick felt a sense of impatience coiled deep inside. He had an hour off for lunch every day, and he'd take Dean's homemade sandwiches wrapped in cling wrap and he'd wander the town. He'd pass single bedroom home after single bedroom home, all with faded red brick walls and cement porches and steps that led to lawns baked brown in the summer sun. Some were decorated with metal flowers and frogs made by some townie, others had pristine American flags. There wasn't far to go and soon Patrick would find himself out by the rusted town water tower, and he'd sit beneath it in the shade and eat his sandwiches and think about people and places other than here.

Jason went out to the water tower every night. When he showed Patrick and Patrick asked what he did there all the time, Jason said he did whatever drugs he had, if he had them, and lay in the fields stoned and staring at the sky. When he wasn't stoned, he wrote poetry. He hadn't told Patrick that, but on one lunch break Patrick had found the notebook Jason kept hidden on a ledge a little ways up the ladder that led to the top of the water tower. Patrick didn't think Jason had any friends, and he wondered at that because there were teenagers Jason's age all over this goddamned place, but then Patrick knew that people could be cruel and that boys who didn't have girlfriends and wrote poetry tended to catch the brunt of that cruelty. So Patrick tried to be nice to Jason. Even on days when Patrick itched under his skin badly enough that he'd walk right past the water tower and halfway out into the field toward the highway before turning back to the garage,

even on those days when he followed Jason out to the water tower at night and wanted to grab him by the shoulders and hold him down, force that manic energy out of him so that he'd just be silent for a minute, even on those days Patrick just tried to be Jason's friend.

When Jason showed up at the garage one afternoon with a bloodied nose and a cut down his cheek that Patrick thought might scar, he put an ice pack on the kid's face before Dean could see him, put him in Dean's car, and drove him out to the water tower. He let the kid talk.

"I must look pretty tough now, huh?" Jason said. He was sitting in the grass and peering up at Patrick around the ice pack. Patrick could only see one of his eyes. His mouth hung open like he couldn't breathe through his nose.

"Yeah, you're tough all right," Patrick said.

"Bet you've had lots a black eyes. Bet you get in fights all the time."

"I try to avoid them."

"I can see why," Jason said.

"How come you couldn't avoid this one?"

Jason shrugged.

Patrick tried to remember how he'd handled it when kids picked on Dylan, but he couldn't really remember that happening. Dylan had been taller than Patrick by the time he was fifteen, and there weren't many kids willing to bully someone that size.

"So why'd they hit you?" Patrick said.



Jason shrugged. “No one likes me much. First time they’ve showed it with their fists, though. I preferred it when they just called me fag.”

“And are you?” Patrick asked.

“What? A fag?”

“Are you gay?”

“You gonna punch me if I am?” Jason said. He stared hard at the ground, pulled a tuft of grass from the dirt.

“No,” Patrick said. He sat in the grass in front of Jason. Their knees touched.

Jason nodded. He took a long breath. “Can I kiss you?” he asked.

Patrick laughed, but then he realized Jason was looking at him with both eyes now, the wilting ice pack forgotten in his lap. There was dried blood below his nose and on his lip, and everything about his expression said he was laying it all on the line.

“No,” Patrick said.

“Okay,” Jason said. He looked away.

Patrick stood. “I better get you home and get back to work. Is your dad gonna be mad when he sees your face?”

“He’ll be worried, but not mad.”

In the car, Jason looked at him. “You won’t tell him, will you? Why they beat me up?”

Patrick hesitated. That morning Dean had set him to work on replacing a timing belt. They were tricky things; a lot could go wrong if the repair wasn’t

done right. It wasn't until Patrick finished that he'd realized Dean had trusted him to do the job without help. Patrick had smiled as he'd handed the keys over to the car's owner, and he'd spent the morning smiling, pleased with himself, and after a little while he almost felt ashamed for feeling such pride over such a small thing. But then Dean took him out to lunch to celebrate, and Patrick thought that if Dean was proud of him, then maybe he could be proud of himself, too. Patrick liked Dean. He didn't want to be the one to bring him this kind of news about his son.

"No," Patrick said. "I won't tell him.

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A month after he'd arrived in Hayti, Patrick had worked enough for the repairs on his car.

"Thank you," Patrick said when Dean gave him the news.

Dean shrugged.

"I mean it," Patrick said.

"It wasn't a hardship, kid," Dean said. "You've been a help. And you've been good for Jason."

"He reminds me of my brother a bit," Patrick said. He glanced up at Dean, shrugged. "I guess I like looking out for him." He scuffed his shoe against the dirt then tamped it flat and wished he could do the same with the emotion tightening his throat. He swallowed, his Adam's apple working clumsily up and down.

"You can stay if you want, you know," Dean said. "I'm not kicking you out."

Patrick spread his hand out across the roof of his car. The heat of the metal stung his palm. “Yeah,” he said. “I should probably leave, though. Get going.”

“You probably should.”

But with each day that passed, Patrick found himself making excuses for why he shouldn't leave. He had a steady job and he was learning a trade, and there was a community college not too far away. Dean encouraged Patrick to go back to school. He even let him have a day off to go look at the campus and talk to a counselor. Patrick wasn't eligible for any kind of government aid after his discharge, but Dean was giving him a paycheck now, and he thought he could swing a night class or two a semester.

Patrick took Jason to see a movie the weekend before school started up for the year. He'd been in Hayti for two months, and he'd wanted to celebrate. They had to drive west a bit into Kennett to find a theater, but Patrick thought maybe the drive was worth it when he saw Libby Wilson working the popcorn machine. Patrick flirted with her and it felt good to him. It had been far too long since he'd done anything more than smile at a woman who'd come into the garage. Midway through the movie he'd leaned over and told Jason he was going to the bathroom. Instead, he'd taken Libby to his car and fucked her in the cramped backseat. He'd gotten her pants off then kissed her and touched her until she was wet and panting. When he couldn't stand it anymore, he'd pulled the crotch of her panties aside, too impatient to get her all the way naked.

Jason was silent on the drive back to Hayti, and the car smelled like spunk and sweat despite the open windows, but Patrick had Libby's number in his pocket and he'd be going back to Kennett the next weekend.

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The weeks passed, and Patrick fell into a rhythm—work during the day, school two nights a week, hanging out with Jason on his off nights or maybe driving over to Kennett to see Libby. It was the most normal he'd felt in too long of a time.

“What's sex like?” Jason wanted to know.

They were underneath the water tower late on a Thursday night. Patrick had a six pack with him, and he'd just taken his first test at the community college for his economics class, which seemed to Patrick easier than he'd heard economics should be.

“You should ask your dad that one.” Jason was just an outline in the shadows beneath the tower. “You've never done it?” Patrick asked. Jason didn't say anything. Patrick didn't say anything else.

After a few minutes, during which Patrick finished his beer and opened another, Jason said, “I know about Libby.”

“I know you do,” Patrick said.

“Everyone knows about Libby,” Jason said. “She's had sex with all of Hayti and half of Kennett.”

“That's her business,” Patrick said. In Patrick's mind, there wasn't anything wrong with a girl who liked to have her needs met; it suited his purposes

just fine. But Patrick didn't say this. "It's not always good to listen to what people say," he said, instead. "They don't always know what they're about."

"I think they're right about Libby," Jason said.

"Yeah?" Patrick said. "You think they're right about you?"

Jason stood and wandered off into the field. After a while, Patrick followed him.

"Don't be mad," Patrick said. "I don't care who anyone fucks."

Jason turned to him, then, his hands in fists by his legs. "You don't need to go all the way to Kennett," he said. "There are people right here who like you."

"I know," Patrick said.

"Sometimes I want to rip your throat out with my bare hands. That's how much I hate you."

"Jesus, Jason."

Jason sat in the grass, pulled out tufts of it with his fists and threw them aside.

Patrick sat next to him.

"Can I have a beer?" Jason said.

Patrick stood, grabbed the six pack, twisted the top off a beer and handed it to Jason. He sat again. He watched while Jason drank the last four, slowly working his way through the bottles. When he came to the end of one, he'd tilt his head back to get all he could, and Patrick watched as his Adam's apple bobbed with every swallow. Jason was drunk by the time Patrick got him back into the car.

When Patrick got him home, he brought him through the front door because he didn't think Jason could make it through the window. Patrick was worried Jason would be noisy, that he'd wake Dean, but drunkenness seemed to silence Jason in a way nothing else could, and Jason let Patrick lead him to his bedroom, take his shoes off, and put him into his bed.

Once he was settled, Jason looked at Patrick. "I can see everyone in town from the top of that water tower. I know them in ways they don't know themselves."

Patrick hesitated before turning off the light. "Sleep," he said, finally.

"You'll be here in here morning, won't you?" Jason said. "You'll take me to school?"

"Yeah, kid," Patrick said. "Of course I will."

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Patrick didn't go to sleep. He lay on top of the bed he'd come to think of as his and hated himself for being too selfish to leave this place. If he were a better man, he'd leave before Jason got too attached to him, before Jason's crush grew into something more painful. But he didn't want to leave. He *wanted* this. He was building something here. Maybe these people weren't his family, but maybe they could be, and that was something he'd spent years trying to forget he wanted.

When the silence in the small room was too much, Patrick crawled out the window Jason had crawled in that first night. He sat in the long grasses that grew up along side of the house and let his palm trail along the soft tops of them. Fall

was waning, and there was a coldness to the air that hadn't been there a few weeks before. He wondered if they felt it yet in Blytheville, if Mollie was stitching her old winter coat and hunting down a new one for Dylan, who grew so much each year he always needed a new one. He hoped they missed him, but he knew they probably didn't.

The next morning, Patrick walked into the kitchen to find Dean sitting at the table.

"I think you should leave," Dean said.

Patrick froze midway to the coffee pot. "What?" he said.

"Jason told me what went on last night," Dean said.

Patrick swallowed; his throat was dry, and it ticked like an old man's. He thought Dean must be talking about the beer, but the anger in his voice seemed too much for something like that.

"I'm sorry," Patrick said.

"I told you he was impressionable," Dean said. "I trusted you with him."

"I know," Patrick said. "It was just a few beers. I didn't think it was a big deal."

"I ain't talking about the beers, boy. I'm talking about you making a pass at my son."

Patrick felt sick to his stomach, an immediate and overwhelming feeling that made him want to fold to the floor right where he stood.

“He’s sixteen-years-old,” Dean said. “I could have the sheriff on you if I wanted to. And I’m tempted. But if you ain’t gone in ten minutes? The sheriff’ll be the least of your problems.”

“Yes, sir,” Patrick said.

Patrick didn’t hesitate, didn’t try to explain. He grabbed all the cash he had and the few belongings he’d collected since he’d been in Hayti, got in his car, and pointed it toward Highway 55. An hour after he’d left, he pulled over to the side of the road. That sick feeling had never left him. He clenched the steering wheel in his fists and stared at the expanse of fields all around. He wondered what it would be like to drive and drive and find nothing but those fields everywhere he looked. The whole of the earth covered in flat lands and nothing but Patrick right in the middle.



### **Driving to Memphis, Early May, My Brother Beside Me**

About three hours into the drive between St. Louis and Memphis, once you've made it past Cape and Sikeston—the only two towns of note—you start getting into the flat lands in the Bootheel of Missouri. There are fields of soy beans here, their leaves plush and green, low, almost level with the highway, like someone spread a blanket across the land.

My brother and I pulled onto the shoulder of the road because he wanted to stretch his legs. He smoked a cigarette and I crouched into a perfect Brave Warrior from the yoga videos I'd been playing every morning, my arms stretched above my head, my legs spread. I let out a yowl that I imagined would echo across the fields and maybe scare some farmer and his wife in the house I could see a mile or so away. Adam laughed before shoving me out of position.

“Asshole,” I said.

“Idiot.”

I wondered if we would make a strange picture to the people in this area, my brother and I—Adam with his eyeliner and his jeans he liked so tight and low he bought them from the girls' section, and me because, though I'm a girl, I look the way my brother should and date the girls he wants to date. At home it was no big deal the way we were, but I thought maybe here we'd stand out in the crowd.

Adam ground his cigarette into the asphalt. He'd taken up smoking again. I'm not sure when that happened. We'd both been smokers since we were teens, and though I'd kept smoking right on through—my whole growing life, each year linked by a chain of cigarettes—he'd supposedly quit a couple of years before.

Maybe it was nerves. He'd found out a month before this that his wife Sarah was pregnant.

"How's Mallory?" Adam said. He scratched at his stomach through his faded *Ramones* t-shirt he'd stolen from our dad years before, then stretched long limbs and crouched down, looked up at the sky. The clouds were thick and low, dark on the underside but bright up top; with the sun just hinting through the cracks, the light effect was that of a Rembrandt in Technicolor.

"Fine," I said.

"She didn't wanna come?"

"I guess not," I said.

He lit another cigarette, gave me a sidelong look, and I smiled.

"Sarah?" I said.

"Guess she didn't want to come, either."

I thought of her back in the city, round with pregnancy and stuck in her and Adam's messy apartment with the cracked ceilings and floorboards and the silverfish in the bathtub. When we'd left her that morning, she'd been sitting cross-legged on their hardwood floor, shooting a laser pen across the room and at the walls while her cat skittered after the beam. Her stomach had been a perfect mass cradled in the circle of her legs, and the sight made something turn over inside of me. Pregnancy was a thing I neither understood nor desired.

"It's uncomfortable sometimes," she'd said, when she'd seen me looking, "but it's not like it's not worth it. *Life*, you know? He'll be all wrinkly and pink and shit. I can't wait to meet the little bastard."

“Uh huh,” I’d said.

This whole trip was Adam’s gig. The night he’d called me up, I’d been drinking a beer on my balcony amidst the forest of fake plants Mallory had collected that winter because she’d thought the bare trees had been too depressing to look at. She’d left me two days before Adam’s call, and my weekend plans until that point had consisted of either drinking a bottle of five buck chuck until I passed out on my couch or using a bottle of lighter fluid to see how long it took to burn down a forest of plastic. Memphis with my brother sounded like the healthier option.

“C’mon, Nora,” Adam said. “Let’s get back on the road before it rains.”

Sometimes, on this highway, the land is so flat that you can see the rain before you’re in it, like a gray wall ahead of you or to the side of you or behind, stretched right down from the sky. We got back into the car and pulled onto the highway, our eyes trained southwest where the wall was building.

It’s because we were both watching the storm that we didn’t see the hawk dive from the sky, a five-pound feathered kamikaze headed straight for our windshield. When it hit, we both shouted. Adam jerked the steering wheel to the left. The car fishtailed a bit then came to a rolling stop in the grassy median between the southbound and northbound lanes of the highway. A semi going north honked—a long, bleating tone—then everything was quiet.

“Fuck,” Adam said, and I agreed.

The windshield was a mess—a bloody crush of glass dented at the driver’s side with fissures reaching out and stretching across the breadth of the rest of it.

Feathers were everywhere—where the bird had hit, stuck in the blood sprayed across the glass, sticking up from the wiper blades and vibrating in the breeze.

Adam ran a shaky hand across his face before getting out of the car. I followed.

“What the hell just happened?” I said.

“It was a hawk, I think,” Adam said.

“Does that happen? Do hawks dive like that?”

“I guess.”

“A god-damned suicidal bird,” I said.

Adam shrugged. “I can’t drive it like that,” he said. “I can’t see through the windshield.”

“What are you saying?”

“We pull over. Get it fixed.”

“Adam,” I said. I looked into the distance at the nearest exit. I looked back at my brother. “Come on. Memphis isn’t that much further.”

“Nora, I can’t goddamned see through the windshield. It doesn’t matter how far it is.”

“Fine,” I said. “Tow truck?”

He shook his head. “I guess I can get it off the highway.”

He managed, but it wasn’t easy. He put on the hazard lights and drove crouched low over the steering wheel, peering through the unaffected glass at the bottom of the windshield. I tried to navigate a bit, but by the time we got onto the

exit ramp, Adam growled, “Stop talking,” and threatened to leave me by the side of the road if I didn’t. Not that he meant it. He was used to my chatter.

Mallory had told me once that I was the personification of noise. I talked too much, she said. I didn’t know how to be quiet. She could never handle it. She would disappear onto our balcony and sit with the fake plants or take long walks at night and leave me to rattle about the apartment. She would come back when she thought I might have gotten it out of my system, and we would cook and eat together or watch a movie or she would take me to bed where I could be as noisy as I wanted. It had worked. We’d had a system. She had been unhappy.

I know that I bother people. And there are times when I think I’d be better off just leaving everyone alone. But then I think about what that would be like, just me left to myself, talking to myself or to my fake plants, or maybe I’d get a few cats and be one of those ninety-year-old ladies with no one, no siblings or friends or family at all, just the sound of my own voice or my own silence filling up empty rooms. I could talk and talk, but if no one was around to listen, it would be like I didn’t even exist.

“Adam,” I said. “I’m glad I came with you.”

“You choose now to say that?”

He pulled over at what looked like a service station.

“I’m just saying,” I said. “I think we’re gonna have fun. I mean, I don’t really know what’s in Memphis that’s got you so excited, but this is good. You and me. Brother and sister. On the road.”

“That’s great, Kerouac. I’m glad you’re so thrilled. Now I’m gonna go inside and see if I can find us some help.”

I followed Adam out of the car, but didn’t go inside with him. With the rain rolling in, it was a little cool for May, like winter was still shaking the frost from its back. I hopped in place a few times to warm up, then walked around the side of the building to see what I could see further down the street, see if I could get a read on the town.

There was a guy crouched and leaning against the wall next to an ice tank. He unfolded and stood, gave me a once over, then said, “Hey,” like we were old friends or something.

“I was looking for the bathroom,” I said, just to say something.

“It’s inside,” he said.

“I thought this might be one of those places where you had to get the key and take it around back.”

“Then wouldn’t you have gone inside for the key first?”

“Oh,” I said. “You got me there. You smoke?” I asked.

“No,” he said.

“That’s a shame,” I said. “I thought you might have a cigarette.”

“If I was gonna kill myself, I’d do it quicker than that,” he said. He leaned back against the wall. “What’s someone like you doing somewhere like Blytheville?” Though he said the town name like *Bly-vul*, like the whole middle part of the word didn’t exist.

“Someone like me?” I said.

He raised an eyebrow. I knew what he meant. He meant the fact that I'd shaved my head into a Mohawk two days ago, that I had a tattoo crawling up one side of my neck and one on each wrist, that it wasn't unusual for someone to mistake me for a boy. But I wanted him to work for it.

He laughed suddenly and didn't answer, just shook his head and looked back out across the field behind the service station.

"You work here?" I asked.

"I did," he said. "Got fired about half an hour ago."

I nodded my head in sympathy. "What happened?"

"My boss thought I was stealing from the register."

"Were you?"

"What do you think?" he said.

"I think you'd have to be pretty stupid to do something like that."

"Is that right," he said.

"What's your name?" I said.

"Patrick," he said.

"I'm Nora."

"Well, Nora," he said. "Do yourself a favor. Get the fuck outta this town fast as you can."

"Nor?"

I turned, and my brother was watching me.

"What are you doing back here?" he said.

I shrugged. "This is Patrick."

Adam nodded in that way boys did, hiking his chin up once, like he was too cool to wave or say hello. “The guy inside said there’s someone who can fix the windshield, but he’s out sick today.”

Patrick snorted behind us, and we both turned to look at him.

“He ain’t out sick,” Patrick said. “He was fired.”

“You’re the guy?” I said.

“Looks like.”

I hiked a thumb at Patrick. “He can fix it.”

Adam looked skeptical, which wasn’t helped by Patrick’s, “Nope. Half an hour ago I could’ve fixed it. Now I’m just some guy standing outside a service station.”

“Come on,” I said. “Don’t be a dick. We’ll pay you.”

“I don’t work here anymore. Even if I did want to help you, where the fuck am I gonna get the materials?”

“There’s no one else in this whole town who can fix a windshield?” Adam said. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Believe what you want,” Patrick said.

“Nora,” Adam said. “Come on. Forget this asshole.”

“All right,” I said. “Jesus,” I said. “Thanks for nothing.”

Patrick smirked, pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, tapped one out, and lit up.

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We sat in a Crystal's eating soggy sliders gooey with cheese and onion, and I flipped through a yellowed copy of the restaurant's White Pages.

"Well," I said. "This is a one horse kinda town, brother."

I looked at Adam who was grimacing and dragging his thumb across the table top. He made *blech* noise and wiped his thumb prissily across his black jeans.

"What?" he said.

"One horse."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means we're screwed. It means we gotta get it towed down the highway to the next place with a mechanic, unless that Phillips station really does have another person out sick who could fix it tomorrow."

"I thought there were people you called and they could just, you know, come put a windshield in while the car sat in the parking lot, or something."

"Did you not hear me say one horse?" I said. I stuffed a slider in my mouth whole, and Adam grimaced again.

"Ug," he said. "This shit's toxic."

I chewed. "I read somewhere they don't even use real onions. It's dehydrated cabbage flavored to taste oniony. That's kinda cool."

He watched me eat. "I'm suddenly very glad I don't have to get back into a car with you."

“Y’all ain’t seen one horse, you think this is it.” Patrick appeared from nowhere and slid into the booth next to me. “You gonna eat that?” he said. He grabbed one of Adam’s burgers.

“What the fuck, man?” Adam said.

Patrick looked over at me and winked. “How you doing, sweetheart?”

Adam and I death glared this punk. I was getting ready to shove him out of the booth, but he grinned and put his hands up and said, “All right, all right. I was being a jerk. You didn’t catch me in a giving mood.”

“So you thought, what?” I said. “That you’d just follow us across the street and eat our food? Bug the shit outta us?”

He looked down at the table and after a beat said, “Naw,” the sound of the word dragged out slow, like a dipper pulling honey out of a pot. “I thought things through a little. Thought I’d help you out.”

“Oh, yeah?” Adam said, skeptical.

“Look,” Patrick said. “I’m not a bad guy, all right? I’d just lost my job.”

Adam looked at me. I shrugged.

Patrick said, “I’m good at this. Good with cars. Changing out a windshield’s an easy fix. A new piece of glass, some tools. It’s done.”

“And what do you want from us?” I said. I leaned back against the wall and looked at this guy. White blonde hair, cropped close to the scalp; a light sunburn across the bridge of his nose where there was a spatter of freckles; frown lines at the corners of his mouth that made me realize I hadn’t once seen him smile, even when he’d called me sweetheart, which was strange because he

looked like the kind of guy who could coax a girl into doing just about anything without much effort. “You have to want something,” I said. “If you’re gonna try to rip us off, don’t even bother. We can get it towed.”

“No,” he said. “I don’t want your money. I just,” he looked between me and my brother, nodded his head. “Yeah,” he said. “A ride, maybe? To wherever it is you’re going.”

“You don’t have any clue where we’re going,” Adam said.

“I don’t give a shit *where* you’re going. Just give a shit that it ain’t this place.”

He snort-laughed—a bitter sound—and I wondered for a minute what had happened to this person that had spilled all the humor out of him. Or maybe it had happened over time, like a paper cup full of soda left in a car in the summer months, just a little leaked from the bottom every day until you were left with empty, soggy cardboard and a puddle of sticky liquid. That kind of thing appealed to me. I knew what that felt like.

“I’m in,” I said.

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Adam was unsure of Patrick, which, given everything about Patrick so far, was probably the right attitude. He told us he could replace our windshield, that he had a friend who would let him into the service station after hours to get to the tools he needed. There was a motel within walking distance and Adam and I followed Patrick so we could check into a room. The rain started while we were

walking—little drops at first, then bigger, pelting bullet drops that thickened into a downpour by the time we'd reached the motel.

From what I could see through the rain, the hotel was nicer than you'd think, like the town had planned on having a lot of tourists who had never shown. It was the kind of hotel with only two floors, and all the doors lead straight to the outside, but the lighted sign was missing none of its letters, and the rain pummeled fresh landscape and flowers all about the place. We had to go to the office across the parking lot to get a room. Patrick went inside with us because he said he knew the guy manning the desk.

The guy turned out to be a mammoth of a teenager, easily over six foot, with a patchy beard, wide-spread nose, and a black baseball cap turned backwards with a white "B" stitched at his forehead. He was lying on the check-in counter, hands tucked behind his head, feet crossed at the ankles, staring at the television in the corner of the room. He slid down from the counter and stood looking sheepishly at Adam and me as we tried to wipe the wetness off our faces and out of our hair with wet hands. He frowned, though, when he saw Patrick.

"Ain't you supposed to be at work?" he said. The 'supposed' came out as one syllable—'sposed.'

"I left early."

"How come?"

"That ain't your business," Patrick said. "These people need a room."

The kid turned his gaze to me and Adam. He sucked his bottom lip into his mouth then let it back out with a wet little *pop*. “Oh,” he said. He disappeared into a door behind him.

“Don’t mind Dylan,” Patrick said.

“You know him?” Adam said.

“He’s my brother.”

The kid reappeared. He slid a key and a slip of paper onto the counter.

“Need you to fill this out,” he said.

While Adam wrote, the kid looked from Patrick to me then back again.

“Mollie won’t like it if you was fired again,” he said.

“Jesus,” Patrick said. He looked embarrassed. “That ain’t Mollie’s business.”

“Everything’s Mollie’s business.”

“Well, I can’t argue that,” Patrick said. “I’m gonna go have a cigarette. Take care of these people.”

Adam finished the form and the kid took it and slid a key across the counter. “How do you know my brother?” he said.

“He’s fixing our windshield.”

“Well, just be careful of him,” Dylan said.

“He doesn’t really know how to fix cars, does he,” Adam said.

“Naw,” Dylan said. “He’s good with cars. If he says he’ll fix it, he will. It’s the other stuff you gotta watch out for.”

“What other stuff?” I said.

Dylan just shrugged then sat in a chair too small to be comfortable and turned his attention back to the television.

Outside the hotel, Adam and I stood under the office awning and watched the rain.

“We might as well make a run for it,” he said. “It’s not like we’re not already wet.”

“Yeah,” I said. “So, these people are strange, huh? What do you think the room’ll be like? Norman Bates in the shower?”

“Come stains on the duvets, probably,” he said.

“Brown water? Roaches?”

“All of the above.”

“Well damn, brother. We found ourselves a real five-star kind of place.”

“Hey,” he said. “Nothing less than the best. That’s my motto.” He faked a smile in my direction.

“What’s going on in your head, bro?” I said.

“Nothing special. There’s nothing up there but cobwebs, Sarah would say.”

“Yeah, well,” I said. “What does she know?”

Adam shrugged. “Let’s go find our room.”

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We took turns in the bathroom changing into dry clothes. I went first, then when my brother disappeared behind the door, I threw myself on the bed he hadn’t claimed and looked around. The lights were dim; we’d only turned one

lamp on, so any other light in the room came from the green light of the storm filtering in through the curtains and spotlighting one strip of the tidy but outdated room—a stiff blue armchair with little pink flowers in one corner, a small television. The rain fell on the roof—a gentle, steady sound, like cat’s paws on a hardwood floor—and it soothed the anxiety I hadn’t even realized I’d been feeling. This was the quietest I had felt all day.

My brother’s low voice seeped through the thin bathroom door. I crept off the bed. I almost called out to him, but something—the tone of his voice, its cadence—told me he was talking to Sarah. I ran a hand over my scalp, the soft hair in the middle, the prickly sides. I let out all the breath in my lungs. I breathed in deep, filling them again. “Be aware of your body,” I whispered, “be aware of the space it occupies.” I left my brother to his phone call.

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When I found the vending machine, Patrick was there, leaning against the wall, smoking, letting out breaths of smoke into the air in front of him.

“Can I bum one of those now?” I said.

“I suppose.”

“Thanks,” I said. “That’s real gentlemanly of you.”

“Well,” he said. “I am a gentleman.”

I lit my cigarette and savored the dizzy feeling of the first hit and the heat of the smoke in my lungs. I didn’t give a shit how bad they were for me; there were some days I’d give up just about anything for a cigarette. I’d take all the

bad—the yellow teeth and fingertips, the smoker’s rattle and hack—if it meant I could feel the good that came off that first drag of the first cigarette of the day.

“Did you know,” Patrick said, “that in this part of Arkansas, almost six million gallons of rain falls per person per year?”

“No,” I said. “I can’t say I knew that.”

“I read that somewhere.”

“Your brother says I should be worried about you,” I said.

“He would say that,” he said.

“Should I be?”

“I’m not going to try to sleep with you, if that’s what you mean.”

“Good,” I said, though it wasn’t what I meant.

He stared out at the rain, smoked his cigarette. “Dylan don’t like me much,” he said.

“Why’s that?”

He shrugged. Then, “You seem to get along with your brother.”

“We fight sometimes, but yeah,” I said. “He’s the only family I have.”

“No parents?” he said.

“We don’t really get along.”

“But they’re alive?” he said. “They’re around at least?”

“Yeah. Might as well not be, though,” I said.

Patrick huffed air out through his nose, coughed around his cigarette. “I don’t remember much about my parents,” he said. “My dad left before I was born.



And my mom, she left too, when me and Dylan was kids. She wasn't much of a mom anyway, though."

"Why are you telling me this?" I said.

"It's just on my mind, I guess."

I wanted to say something brilliant, to comfort him in some way, but what I did say was, "I could really use some coffee."

Patrick just nodded.

I bounced in place a bit.

"There's always some in the office," he said. "Come on."

I followed Patrick. Dylan watched us, though he didn't say anything when Patrick walked behind the office desk and waved at me to follow him. He led me into a back room where there was a gray futon, lumpy and sad and shoved against one wall. A book shelf leaned next to it stuffed full of books and DVD cases, and I went to that while Patrick went to a little kitchenette in the corner where there was a sink, a mini fridge, and a coffee pot.

"How do you take it?" he said.

"Cream," I said. I poked through the book case. "Whose books are these?"

Patrick glanced back at me. "Dylan's."

"Does he live here or something?"

Patrick shrugged. "Or something."

"Your brother likes crime novels, huh?" I said.

"I suppose."

He handed me a Styrofoam cup full of milky coffee. I raised an eyebrow at him.

“Dylan’s liked that shit since he was a kid. He used to make me watch ‘America’s Most Wanted’ and all those ‘Dateline’ specials all the time when we were little.”

He sounded exasperated, but there was a smile tugging the corners of his eyes and lips.

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t go through my stuff.”

I turned around and Dylan was hunched in the doorway, his hands in loose fists at his sides.

“Sorry,” I said, but he was looking at Patrick.

“This is my private room.”

“I know, man,” Patrick said. “Sorry. We just wanted some coffee.”

“Yeah, well. There’s a Starbucks down the street.”

“Fair enough,” Patrick said.

Dylan seemed to back down a bit. He looked at me, his lips pursed, then back to Patrick. “You know Mollie’s birthday dinner’s tonight, right? Mike’s cooking.”

“Am I invited?”

“Would you come if you was?”

“Of course I would. Jesus, Dylan.”

“Whatever.” He disappeared back up front.

“Jesus,” Patrick repeated.

“What was that about?” I said.

“My family hates me, that’s what.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

“How do you deal with it?” he said.

“With what?”

“You said your brother’s the only family you got. That your parents...I mean, what? Did they kick you out or something?”

“Or something,” I said.

“Look,” he said, “I know I said I’d fix your windshield, and I will, but I gotta do this thing tonight.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Of course.”

He nodded a little then sat on the futon with a groan.

“Mollie?” I said. “Is she your mom? Step-mom?”

“Sister.”

I sat next to him

“Look,” he said. “Do you mind leaving me alone for a little while?”

“Oh,” I said. “Sure.” I stood and rubbed my hand back and forth across my scalp. “Later, then. I guess.”

“Whatever,” he said.

I left him sitting on that futon, and Dylan watched me walk out, like he was suspicious of me. I wondered if it was suspicion by association, if Dylan thought anyone who knew his brother was bad news.

“You smoke, Dylan?” I said.

“Yeah.”

“Help a girl out?” I said.

He untangled a cigarette from the hair behind his ear and tossed it at me.

“Really?” I said.

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” he said.

I lit up in the office. “Yeah,” I said. “I guess that’s probably true.”

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It had stopped raining, but everything still felt damp—my skin, the hair against my scalp, the air I pulled in and pushed out of my lungs. Adam found me like that, standing out in the parking lot. I’d finished the cigarette and was just tasting the air, testing out the weight of its molecules.

“How’s Sarah?” I said.

“Pregnant. Like usual,” he said.

“Is she complaining about it?”

“Yeah. Her back hurts all the time now. And she can’t sleep. The baby keeps waking up when she tries.”

“Waking up?” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “You know, like moving? She thinks she saw its elbow this morning after we left. She was all excited.”

“Its *elbow*?” I said.

“Freaks you out, huh?”

“Don’t ever tell me things like that again,” I said. “I’m so glad you aren’t one of those people who talks about the baby all the time. Who stops having like *normal, adult* conversations.”

“I hate to break it to you, sister, but that is a *normal, adult* conversation,” he said. “Most people aren’t scared of babies.”

“Says you,” I said. “Besides, it’s not the baby I’m scared of. The physicality of it just freaks the shit out of me.”

“Mallory’s cool with that?” he said. “She doesn’t want kids?”

“It’s not really a problem.”

“Well, obviously, but I mean, there’s adoption and...other things.” He grimaced.

“It really isn’t a problem,” I said. I crossed an arm across my chest and tugged at my left shirt sleeve. “She left,” I said. “I mean, we broke up.”

“Shit,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Damn,” he said. “What happened?”

“Do we have to talk about this?” I said.

He pulled me to face him when I started to pull away.

“Yes, Nora,” he said. “We have to talk about this. She’s been the only thing holding you together for three years now.”

“Give me some credit. Do you see me falling apart here? Does anything about me right now look like I’m *not* keeping it together?”

He shook his head, but he was looking me up and down at the same time, warily, like he was waiting for something to happen, like the restlessness inside me might press up from beneath the surface, show an imprint of itself on my skin, like that baby's elbow had made itself known.

"It wasn't really a shock, all right?" I said. "It's not like I didn't see it coming."

"This is the first I've heard about it."

"I don't tell you everything."

"Since when?"

"I need a cigarette," I said.

"Tell me about it," he said.

"How is it that you look more shaken up than me right now?" I said.

He took his cigarettes out of his back pocket. Lit one, passed it to me, then lit another for himself. He shrugged.

"I'll be okay," I said.

"I'll believe that when I see it," he said. "Are you taking your meds?"

"Of course."

"Don't do that," he said. "Don't just say 'of course' like it's completely outside the realm of possibility that you would stop taking them."

"Fair enough," I said.

"Something like this happens, you tell someone, Nor. That's how this shit works."

"I told Sarah," I said.

“You told Sarah.”

“To be honest, I thought she’d tell you,” I said.

“Did you tell her not to tell me?” he said.

“Yeah.”

“Then of course she’s not going to tell me.”

“I guess I didn’t know she was so good with a secret,” I said.

“You’re infuriating,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I know.”

“Are you gonna be okay?” he said, his voice soft now, like he was all out of anger. “I mean, do you need to come stay with us for awhile?”

“No. Jesus,” I said. “Adam. Really. I’m fine. I’m not gonna go off the rails. This isn’t going to be like before, all right?”

“If you say so.”

“No,” I said. I grabbed his forearm, the leather band at his wrist warm against my skin. My brother. My *family*. I needed him to believe me. “I’m going to be okay, all right? I’m all drugged up. Like a good little crazy person.”

“Don’t say things like that.” His lips twisted a bit, like he found this whole discussion distasteful.

“You love it when I say things like that,” I said.

“It makes me want to grab you by the ankles, turn you upside down, and shake you until something normal comes out.”

“You’ll be shaking me for a long time,” I said.

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

I imagined him really doing it, imagined the loose change and bits of fluff that would fall out of my pockets, the stripe of my hair dangling straight down against the backdrop of cotton fields and sky. “Yeah,” I said. I scuffed the toe of my shoe against the side of his. “Me too.”

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The clock on the bedside table told me it was only eight o’clock. I’d been napping, and now I stretched my body across the bed and let that delicious, after-sleep languidness fall over me. I could feel each muscle in my body as a separate thing, each its own separate point of focus. I reveled in it until there was a knock at the door.

When I opened it, I found Patrick outside, leaning against the railing and looking out over the parking lot. He looked back at me over his shoulder, tossed out a sloppy grin. I stepped out next to him. The rain had stopped, and the night was dark and clear and endless, the sky a deep foggy blue touched by pinpricks of stars.

“Hey,” Patrick said.

“Hey,” I said.

“Where’s your brother?” he said.

“Don’t know,” I said. “Where’s yours?”

“Don’t care,” he said. “What do you say we steal us some tools? Fix us a windshield?”

“Sounds perfect,” I said.

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There was no friend waiting to let us in at the service station, just me and Patrick and a lock on a garage that Patrick was determined to figure out how to pick. I stood watch, shivering in my t-shirt until Patrick finally did something with the bobby pins he'd said he'd stolen off his sister that made him so happy he let a *whoop!* out into the quiet.

"That's stealthy," I said.

He grinned and pulled a lever; the garage door crashed and rattled open in front of us. Patrick turned on all the lights in the garage, then he rolled my brother's car in on neutral.

"No one will notice the lights?" I said.

"Naw," Patrick said. "It ain't a problem. Now, my guess is the boss man got the piece of glass you'd need this afternoon so he could do it for you himself tomorrow." He disappeared into some sort of storage area. I walked to my brother's car, picked a bloody feather from the wiper blade. It was a good six inches long, soft white at the bottom, edging into tan then dark brown at the very tip.

"Thinking of keeping a souvenir?" Patrick said. He had tools in his hands that he set down on the hood of the car before spreading a tarp out on the garage floor. He disappeared again, reappeared with the new windshield and set it on the tarp.

"It's a crazy thing to have happened," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "Hawks'll dive occasionally like that."

I watched him work for awhile. He removed the wipers first before taking a blade to the sealant around the glass. The blade had a piece of twine wrapped around the handle, and he used it as a grip to help tug it around the windshield's perimeter. I tried to stay out of his way, but I couldn't stay quiet for long.

I pulled a stool out from under a work bench and rolled it over. "You're a mechanic, then?" I said.

He shrugged, glanced back at me. "I've been working in shops off and on for more than a few years now."

"Is that something you have to go to school for?"

"Some people do. But I can tell you one thing: if I was gonna go to school again, it sure as hell wouldn't be for this shit."

"What would you do?"

He grunted as he pulled the old glass out with what looked like giant suction cups. It made me think of a story my brother told me when we were teenagers, about a man who'd scaled the St. Louis Arch with industrial suction cups only to hurl himself from it once he reached the top. If you look closely, you can still see the suction rings, imprints on the metal of the man who'd been there.

Patrick set the glass on the tarp he'd spread beside the car. "You ask a lot of questions," he said.

"Well, you were pretty free with the life story earlier," I said. "What can I say? You interest me."

"Gotta give a little to get a little," he said.

“Fair enough,” I said. I talked while he used a sponge to spread something around the edge of the new piece of glass. “I’ve got a printmaking degree, but I went to school for a bit after that, tried to get a Master’s in social work.”

“Tried?”

I nodded. “Didn’t finish.”

“So what do you do now?”

“I take customer service calls for 1-800-Flowers.”

“No shit,” he said. He smiled, stood up straight and looked at me. “I got a girl flowers from them once. Was in North Carolina. I thought she might have sex with me, but she was already fucking one of the other Marines.”

“You’re a Marine?” I said.

He shrugged. “Not anymore,” he said. “Didn’t finish.”

He continued to work, using what looked like a huge hot glue gun to line the edges of where the new windshield would lay. After a bit, he attached the suction cups to the new piece of glass.

“Come here,” he said.

I walked to him

“You think you can help?”

“Do I look delicate to you?” I said.

“Grab up that handle. We gotta lay the new glass in place. I can’t line it up on my own.”

I grunted picking up the glass, but once it was in, I brushed my hands off and smiled. “Look at that,” I said.

“It ain’t nothing.”

“Whatever,” I said. “This was cool of you, you know? Thanks.”

“It’s what I’m good at,” he said. “You shouldn’t drive it right away. Gotta let the adhesive set.”

“Makes sense.”

“Why didn’t you finish school?” he said.

“That’s a little private,” I said.

“What can I say? I’m interested.”

I looked him in the face while I said it. “I’m bipolar,” I said. “I went through a manic phase, jumped out of a window and broke my leg. I spent a few months in an institution. Couldn’t really keep up with my graduate work.”

He nodded. “I hit my commanding officer,” he said. “I was kicked out.”

“Well,” I said. “Aren’t we a pair.”

We rolled the car back out into the lot and walked across the street to a Waffle House that stood glowing in the night—a Mecca for all good truckers, drunks, and drug addicts, and maybe for people who had no where else to be. And that seemed like Patrick. He seemed to me like a man who had no place. It occurred to me then that I felt that way most of the time, too, and I wondered if maybe Patrick and I could be friends.

I ordered an egg sandwich with bacon and ham and cheese and piled my side of hashbrowns on top of it all, and Patrick ate a stack of waffles ladled with syrup. He’d asked the waitress for a scoop of peanut butter, and she’d smeared it on the edge of the plate. When she set it in front of him, she touched his cheek

like she knew him, and Patrick turned his eyes away and blushed. I raised an eyebrow at him, but he shoved a forkful in his mouth and started talking about something else.

“When I was a kid,” he said, “my momma used to drop us off at this old lady’s house. I don’t remember her name now, but she’d make us these great big stacks of waffles then smear them with molasses she’d mixed with butter to make a paste.” He paused, then, “Wish they had molasses here,” he said.

“We just ate cereal when I was a kid.”

“That’s a damn shame,” he said.

When we finished eating, we walked. I followed Patrick into town. He seemed to know it well. He kept mostly to side streets. The rain had gone and with it the night’s chill. The air was thick, and I could almost imagine the sweat on my skin was the feel of the air itself, its thickness and weight given form. We shared a cigarette between us, then another. Patrick told me that the first time he’d ever smoked had been with an older woman he’d been sleeping with when he was just a teen. He said she was dead now. I told him my brother gave me my first cigarette. My brother gave me most of my first things—my first drink, my first joint, my first pill after they’d told me I was sick and I’d refused to take any medicine.

We came to a field that Patrick said used to be an old drive in movie theatre, though they’d torn the screen down a few years before and were thinking of building a Piggly Wiggly.

“You two are pretty close then?” he said.

“I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for him,” I said. “And I mean that sincerely. No bullshit. I don’t tell him that enough.”

“He probably knows.”

“Your brother?” I said.

“You’ve seen him. He hates me.”

“I doubt that,” I said. I lay down on my back in the field and stretched out. Patrick lay beside me, and I turned to look at him. “No one hates their own brother. No matter how much they say it or believe it. Siblings are important. That’s in your blood.”

“I left them,” Patrick said. “I left them both alone for years and years, and they hate me for it.”

“They don’t.”

“I deserve it. I deserve to be hated,” he said. “I ain’t a good person.”

I sat up cross-legged and scooted closer to him. My knees pressed against him, one at his chest, one at his hip. I leaned over him, clasped his face in my hands. I felt stoned off the night and off this new friendship. “You aren’t a bad person, either,” I said.

“You can’t know that,” he said.

I shrugged. “I know what I know.”

He grabbed my wrists to pull my hands from his face. He sat up. Our knees met.

“I used to think my parents hated me,” I said. “And not because I’m gay. It goes further than that. Our house had this unfinished basement when I was a kid.

It was constantly cold and wet, constantly leaking every time it rained, but I loved it. It was full of all these nooks and storage closets. It was so easy to get lost down there for hours, and I'd pretend I'd been kidnapped and wait for my parents to come rescue me."

"Did they?" Patrick said.

"They never once found me. As far as I know, they never even knew I was gone. I would stay there until the quiet scared me then go upstairs and follow my mom around the house all day. She once told me she was going to zipper my mouth shut if I didn't stop talking to her all the damn time." I smiled, but Patrick reached out and tugged the corners of my mouth into a frown.

"Don't smile if you don't mean it," he said.

I nodded, took a breath before going on. "But Adam," I said. "I hid once when he was watching me. He found me an hour later. He was frantic. He was actually crying. It was the year they'd started with all that AMBER alert stuff. He shook me so hard when he found me that my neck hurt for a few days. I didn't hide again after that."

"Dylan used to do that shit all the time. One minute, he'd be all over me, following me all over the place. The next he'd just be gone and want nothing to do with me. I could never figure him out. He ain't the sharpest knife, but his brain goes and goes. When he gets something in his head, can't no one disturb him while he tries to work it out."

"You love him," I said.

"Yeah," he said.

“Then why are you leaving? I mean, you are leaving right? You want to come with us?”

He watched himself drag his thumb through the dirt next to his knee. “My sister turned thirty-three tonight. I didn’t know what to get her. And I didn’t have the money to get her anything besides.”

“Presents aren’t important,” I said.

“It’s not that.”

“Then what?” I said.

“I just can’t stay in this town,” he said. “I’ve only been back four weeks and I itch under my goddamn skin.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I know what that feels like.”

He stood. “I wanna get drunk,” he said. “I wanna get so drunk so that everything around me looks blurred.”

We bought a case of beer and sat in the parking lot of the motel. Adam was nowhere in sight, but neither one of us wanted to go into the room, so we sat on the pavement and drank. We talked, and as the hours passed, Patrick got drunk enough that his words slurred, and when he tried to stand, he shuffle-stepped across the lot sideways and landed back on his ass with a giggle. I got him standing after that and put my arm under his shoulder to help him up to my room.

I laid him out on my bed, and once he’d passed out, I lay down on the other. I wondered where my brother was. When the darkness in the room turned to early morning pink-gold, I got up and walked out the door. Adam was there,



leaning against the railing and smoking. He had a grass stain on the back of his shirt, and his hair looked oily black in the light.

“You ready to get going?” he said.

“The car,” I said.

“I know about the windshield,” he said. “I had the sheriff knocking on our door last night. Apparently there was a break in at the service station. The owner noticed our windshield was miraculously repaired.”

“Oh,” I said. “Are we in trouble?”

“I told them about your new friend in there. His brother backed up my story. Apparently the sheriff’s familiar with Patrick. He let it go after I gave the owner cash for the materials.”

“Sorry,” I said.

He shrugged. “Whatever. I’m just happy I didn’t have to bail your ass out of jail.”

“I’ll grab my stuff, wake Patrick up so we can go,” I said.

“He’s not coming,” Adam said.

“Oh come on,” I said. “He fixed our windshield and no one’s in trouble, so who cares how it happened?”

“That’s not why,” he said. “I don’t want him with us.”

“You’ll like him,” I said. “I got to know him last night. He’s cool.”

Adam looked at me, his eyes careful on my face. “You made a new friend,” he said.

“Is that bad?” I said.

“No,” he said, “it’s just that I’m sorry. I didn’t know you liked him that much.”

“Well I do,” I said. “I can talk to him.”

“That’s good, Nor.”

“So what’s the problem? He can come, right?”

“What I have to do in Memphis?” he said. “I don’t want him there for it.”

“What do you have to do?”

“I have a son,” he said. His voice was so quiet I had to work to hear it. He lit another cigarette, took a too-deep drag and coughed the smoke into the air. “I had a kid with a girl I met during Freshman year. I didn’t come home because I couldn’t afford the school; I came home because I had a fucking kid and I couldn’t handle it.”

“Fuck,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Does Sarah know?”

He laughed bitterly through his nose, shook his head. “I need you there, Nora,” he said. “You. Not some random asshole neither of us know.”

“Maybe we just drive him into town, then. Drop him off somewhere,” I said. I scooted up close and leaned against him at the railing. He was looking out into the parking lot like nothing he saw made sense. “Please, Adam,” I said. “I want this.”

“I don’t care what you want,” Adam said. “It’s always about what you want.”

“That’s not true,” I said.

“Stay here, then,” he said, “if he’s more important to you than me.”

“You know it’s not like that,” I said. I knocked my knuckles against his.

The skin of his hands was chapped. When he didn’t say anything else, I nodded.

“I’ll get my things,” I said.

There wasn’t much to gather because I hadn’t really unpacked. I looked at Patrick where he lay sleeping, his face pressed into the pillow, nose mashed sideways, wide-open yawn of a mouth. I pulled his shoes off one by one and placed them next to the door. I hoped things wouldn’t be too bad for him when he woke up, that there wouldn’t be trouble because he’d helped us out.

I don’t make connections like this, and when I do, they always seem so tenuous. That’s how it was with Patrick. There was a thread spun between us, but I wanted to make it stronger. I wrote him a note on hotel stationery: *I’ve got this thing I need to do with my brother, and I’m sorry I had to leave, but they don’t hate you.* I left it on his pillow, then I took it back, balled it up, and jammed it in my pocket.