

Eight the Hard Way

and Other Stories

by

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## ABSTRACT

In this collection of stories, people find themselves face to face with great trouble: a house lost to flood, a brother lost to the river, a girl on the edge of an adulthood she can't possibly survive. Set in Northern California along the banks of the Sacramento and American Rivers, the stories feature characters who live below the radar of the middle-class. Central to the narratives are notions of loss, lust, pleasure, and struggle.

## DEDICATION

*Dedicated to my baby, due September 2013: In some ways, I hope you'll never read this;  
in other ways, I can't wait until you do.*

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me to Phoenix, Arizona. How can I repay this vote of confidence, this leap of faith? I'll spend my life figuring it out. I am so excited about what's next.

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## CHAPTER 1

### SERVICE INDUSTRY NIGHT

Amy and Ray worked at the salvage yard on the east side of Long Beach near the border of Compton and the work wasn't enough. For a few weeks, they had been burning through ways to make ends meet: selling her dead mother's earrings, pawning his 9mm berretta, paycheck advances. The lights had been off for two weeks and everything rotted in the refrigerator. The landlord had let them slide on the last month's rent, but they knew she wouldn't be so generous for long. It was the lien on Ray's earnings every month that wouldn't let them get ahead: his two-and-a-half year stint in prison for meth production was served, but he owed thousands in court, tax, and legal fees.

They sat side by side on the bus to work. Amy put her head on Ray's shoulder and watched their reflection in the window they faced. His head was back against the bus and his headphones were leaking death metal drumbeats that sounded to Amy like a jackhammer. She had thought about it all night and decided it was finally time to ask her sister for help. Tina was the only real option. Amy counted on her fingers the months it had been since she had seen her. Sixteen months. The timeline was miserable to think about: Ray in jail, their mother ill, mistakes, death, bitterness.

The idea of calling Tina gave her an upset stomach, but she would do it when she got to work. The bus flew over a speed bump. She felt a lift and then nausea. A week straight of nauseous mornings. She had spent the night thinking about this too: she was pregnant. She had known right away, her breasts were sore and there were the faintest of drops in her underwear, little moons. She had known in the ninth grade, too, when her

mother made her ask the boy for the money, plus enough for gas. The doctor had wrenched at her insides and that was that.

Ray stood around the cashier booth while Amy called her sister, the number jotted down on an old utility bill they had searched for in the mess of the dark house. Tina was suspicious, but invited them to dinner. Amy felt a tug in her abdomen at the sound of her sister's voice. It was edged with mistrust and with anger. When she hung up, Amy shrugged her shoulders hopefully at Ray. Tonight she would make things better. She would tell Tina about the baby and maybe Tina would open her arms and all of the hardness between them would soften.

“Tonight?” Ray said.

She nodded.

“We'll need a car then, to get to Anaheim.” She cocked her head at him.

“We can take a bus.”

“And get back how? That's two hours there and back, stopping every minute.” He flipped his hat backwards and took off from the yard. Half an hour later he returned in a sedan, which he parked in the inner lot behind the big fence that surrounded the whole place. He walked right by Amy without saying a word.

She waited until he was deep in the yard, until the top of his head disappeared among the rows of pick-up trucks, to search the stolen car. She liked to pick through the cars in the yard for signs of their previous owners. Some came from repossessions, stripped clean of belongings in anticipation of the loss. Others came straight from wrecks, their seats stained with blood, glass shattered. She knew where to look for the evidence:

the tight gulch at the base of a bench seat, the clean carpet beneath a center console.

The car Ray had popped was almost brand new: it was strange to inspect a car with so little trauma. She found the gun underneath the owner's manual in the glove box, a crushed bag of potato chips between the seats, and a brand new baby bottle just lying on the back seat. She snuck the bottle into her purse and took it back to the cashier's booth, where she stuffed it into the drawer with all of the old Kelly Blue Books.

Every day, she spent her lunch breaks crunching through the gravel to the back of the lot, where the new cars got towed first for inventory. Right off of the tow-deck, they were at their most telling, all of their clues still intact. She was building her own from things she could pull from the yard. For some reason she couldn't articulate, she kept it a secret from Ray. She kept it in one of the covered spaces with a locking door at the far right of the lot. She had all of the keys in the cashier booth and could secure it during the day so they couldn't try to take the parts she'd already assembled. She worked on the car in little bursts when she could steal away, streaking her clothes and limbs with axle grease. So far, she had secured the body, the rolling chassis, a 1996 Toyota Camry painted a brilliant, perfect green. It had no engine yet, no door handles, and she searched every compatible car that came in for a catalytic converter--they were the first to go, with their precious bits of gold and platinum inside. Mostly they were stolen, wrapped inside rolls of ripped upholstery (cheap, only one dollar for each seat's worth). She watched the men stream into the lot all day with sledgehammers and wrenches, methodically removing the parts they needed or could sell. She noted what they took: tires, steering wheels, hood ornaments. She made her lists and kept vigil over the yard. The rows of cars

on blocks looked like a cemetery: the men, like grave robbers, prying inside to take the best things for themselves first. When it was done, she would need someone to teach her to drive it. She'd never gotten a license because it never made sense to. When she was old enough, her mother didn't even have a car for her to drive. She got used to finding rides. For a long time she accepted that it was something she'd do for the rest of her life.

Before she knew it they were halfway down Harbor Boulevard toward Disneyland. Tina was working at a taco shop that her boyfriend Marco owned across the street from the park. The sedan humped along the dips in the road, past the strip malls full of laundromats and liquor stores. He was driving aggressively and it made her nervous. Down the road she could see where the streets had been repaved and twinkle lights glittered in the suddenly plentiful trees along the center divider. They were nearing the park, and that strange and clean part of Anaheim where tourists were funneled from the freeway.

"What's the matter with you?" Ray said, smacking his palm on the top of her thigh. His smile was irritating. It was a twitchy; it had bad intentions. He thumbed at his nose.

"Nothing," she said.

She leaned back in the seat to appear more relaxed and stuck her ankles out of her open window. After a moment, though, she pulled them back in, remembering the handgun in the glove box. She didn't want to draw any attention to the car.

The signs for the park were enormous and colorful. Families crowded the

sidewalks. He steered the car into the lot with the taco shop.

Tina and Marco lived above the business in a little apartment. The restaurant was staying afloat, even in this economy, because families were leaving the park to eat cheaply as they could before reentering. No one washed their hands in the bathroom, her sister told her, because they were afraid to wash the re-entry stamp right off and lose half of the hundred-dollar day. They sold tons of tacos, the line winding right out the door.

“She’s not going to say no to you,” Ray said, “not if they’re doing business like that. Shit.” They pulled off of Harbor into the strip mall lot and Amy felt relief at the site of the patrons—it was real.

They found their way to the back of the strip mall and he turned off the ignition. The key was not stolen: it was on a ring of keys Ray kept from several car makes that were shaved down enough to start just about any car.

“Ray,” she said.

“What? I got us here.” He jutted his chin toward her, as if she were about to say something quietly.

“I’m nervous,” she said. There were children and mothers all over the place. Strollers loaded up with big jugs of water and backpacks, toddlers walking. It was lunchtime.

She met Ray at a night club when she was just out of high school and when her clothes fit her the way they clothes fit in magazines. This was years earlier, before her mother died, before all of the mess, when Ray used to take Tina and Amy out in his Camaro and spin them around in donuts through empty parking lots. Tina tolerated him—

liked him, even--back then but had warned Amy about settling for someone like him. His temper was terrible and he drank too much. But Amy felt ambivalent about the word *settling*. She never had a pretty face and Ray was good-looking. He had no tattoos then, had not yet been convicted of trafficking, had not spent the years in a San Bernardino state prison that left him with no choice but to pick a group to protect him. The Aryan brotherhood did not protect him though, when he left a drug debt unpaid and as a result, found himself alone on the yard, jumped by a gang of Norteños, the brothers of the man whom Ray owed thirty dollars.

He was tapping his knee now and she could tell he was chewing on his cheek, something he did when he was upset or tweaking or both. Today it was both.

“Do you want to stay here, in the car?” Amy asked. She was hopeful that he would say yes. He took a look around them, his defenses up. She looked around too, but the only people they could see were the droves of Disneyland visitors toddling down the side streets on their way to find something reasonable to eat. Still, Ray looked at her with on corner of his mouth curled up in protest.

“Do I want to stay *here*? In this fucking car?”

“I just mean, if you don’t feel like seeing Tina,” she said.

“Oh no, I’m coming in because you know what happens if I don’t? You don’t ask for the money. You’ll come back out here and blame it on her but it will really be because you were chicken shit to ask her.”

She was quiet. In truth, she had been planning on just that. Go upstairs, tell her about the baby, and hope that Tina would offer.

He leaned over her and reached out toward the glove box.

“Oh my fucking god, no,” she said. “Let’s just leave. Please?”

“Relax,” he said.

“You’re not bringing it,” she said, “you are not going to need that. No fucking way.”

“There’s no clip.” He opened the glove box and pulled the gun out by the barrel.

“See?”

The magazine was missing.

“I think it makes it legal to carry,” Ray said and he tucked the gun into his waistband.

She picked some light colored hairs from her lap. The car owner must have a cat, she thought.

“Put it back,” she said, “I’m not going in unless you put it back.”

He pulled it out of his waistband and slammed it back in the glove box.

“Wasn’t even loaded.”

“It’s the principle of the thing.”

“The principle of the thing is you better get this money, Amy.”

She nodded. “I will,” she said.

He shivered then like he had a chill—a little zap Amy recognized as something he did when he took too much speed. A zap she knew well: it started at the back of the neck and zipped down the spine. He opened his mouth to pop his jaw like a knuckle. He was wired.

Tina met them at the door with the baby in her arms.

“What up, Tina,” Ray said. He had put his sunglasses on right before they got to the door.

“Tina,” Amy said. When Tina hesitated, she turned to the baby. “Hi, Celeste, I’m your aunty.” The baby girl looked like their mother in the space between her eyebrows, in a worried flinch followed by a quick softening of the face, as if she were trying to mask distaste or heartbreak. It was hard to explain, but unmistakable. She reached out to the baby’s open hand and the baby grasped her finger.

“She has mom’s eyes,” Amy said, finally. It was the wrong thing to say.

“Her eyes were blue,” Tina said.

The little apartment above the strip mall smelled like meat. There were plastic chairs and a card table in the dining room. A small flat-screen television sat upon a TV tray in the front room opposite a sofa.

Ray took his baseball cap off once inside the house and held it in his lap while he sat on the sofa. Amy wanted to take Tina aside and point this out to her.

“Do you want anything to drink?” she asked them.

“I’m fine,” Amy said. She cheered herself at her restraint.

“Got any beer?” Ray said and Amy couldn’t help a little pang of annoyance. She stood up to help her sister.

In the kitchen were bunches of porcelain chili peppers on a string and the cookie jar shaped like a goose that was their mother’s. The tile was yellow and sparking clean.

She was immediately comfortable in here. Tina had habits like their mother: she kept rubber bands on the knob of the cupboard, a box of tea bags on the counter. She felt a surge of warmth for her sister and her life here and found herself wrapping her arms around her sister's waist at the fridge, her cheek against her back. Tina stiffened. They had not been this close in two years.

“Careful-- the baby,” she said, but reached back and touched Amy's head for a moment.

Amy stood back and let Tina pull a beer from the case and bring it out to Ray in the front room. She looked over the photos on the fridge: portraits of Celeste from the mall, pictures of Tina and Marco fishing in Mexico, Tina smiling. A photo of their parents in the seventies: their mother slim and serious, their father with his white jeans and menacing eyes, gold rings on his fingers that she knew had been used more than once like brass knuckles. She wanted very much to take it from under its magnet: she had seen so few pictures of their father.

“Amy?” Tina said. “Do you need something out of there?”

“No,” she said, and came back into the living room to show she was not looking in drawers, the way she might have done before.

They sat together in the living room with the television on, watching a show about buying real estate. A young couple toured a series of houses, deciding ultimately which one they would buy. It was an easy show to watch and comment on because all it required was judgment.

“What an ugly kitchen,” Tina said of a black and white, very modern-looking

kitchen.

“Yes,” Amy said, “I think so, too.”

“And um, we’ll just wait for a bit until eight, when Marco will meet us for dinner, if that’s all right.”

“Oh, no problem,” Amy said, “we are in no hurry.”

“Ray looks like he’s in a hurry,” Tina said, in a voice that sounded like she meant to joke, but came out as harsh as Amy was sure she meant it. Ray took his sunglasses off and they were quiet for an entire episode of the house show.

Ray helped himself to another four beers, saying that he’d buy a six-pack to replace them from the liquor store at the corner. He stood up and put his hat on. She calculated the number of ounces he could afford, subtracted that from how many he could drink before returning.

She tried to imagine herself with her own child in another life—one like Tina’s where she’d go downstairs for work in the little restaurant then come right back upstairs afterwards, where Ray’s mom would be watching TV in her slippers, the baby asleep beside her in a sweet bassinette. In her actual life, though, she had never even met Ray’s mother. And she worked long hours at the Pick ‘n Pull sitting in the cashier booth, ringing up rearview mirrors and greasy wheel wells, part by part. Whole doors cost thirty-five dollars. Engines—if they worked—were priced according the thin-papered catalog in the booth. If they didn’t work, they were sold by the pound as scrap metal. She understood the science of hydraulics and of making change. The men who visited the yard were not always kind and not always honest: they were men like Ray. But being

with him was like having a bodyguard. They didn't mess with her.

Tina folded some cloth diapers in a pile. She lifted Celeste from her bouncy seat and held her to her breast to feed her. Amy tried not to look. The baby reached out to Amy's arm. She could see her tiny, perfect fingernails.

"So, you're still playing house with him, huh?" Tina asked, adjusting the baby.

Tina could never understand her willingness to remain faithful to Ray while he was locked up. But he wrote her letters, sent poems, pledged himself to her. The envelopes would arrive to the house that she, Tina, and their mother lived in, stamped with the prison security stamp and it felt like getting mail from another country. Like getting mail from a soldier maybe. She was not like Tina, a capable beauty, someone who starts and finishes things. Amy knew what kind of girl she was. The same kind of girl her mother had been. Ray was trouble, but he would not leave her. They were the best they both could do.

They had at one point discussed marriage freely, years earlier while fresh in love, as if it were an inevitability. In recent months, however, it was a dark and terrible word to her, one that might cement them in their current state if said out loud.

"I can smell the tweak on him, you know," Tina said. "I remember that smell. From your room."

"He's working on it. We're trying real hard."

"Why are you here, Amy?"

"Because I missed you."

“Leave him,” she said, putting her hand on Amy’s knee, “I’ll help you if you leave him.”

Then the commercials were over and they sat back on the couch.

When Marco got off of work, they went downstairs to meet him for dinner at the Italian restaurant next to his own where they could eat for free. Amy was dreading this meeting. She was not sure what Tina had told Marco about her, whether he knew that the last time Amy had been allowed into Tina’s house was when their mother was living with her. She wondered if he knew about the checkbook she stole her mother’s wallet during her illness, running the account into the ground before she died and while the medical bills piled up, and while the house was slipping away.

Amy stopped Ray before they went in. “Please don’t embarrass me,” she said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He was listing to one side. It made her chest hurt.

“It means don’t be a dick,” she said. “Go in.”

When they got to the booth, Marco was already there, chatting with one of the servers. Amy walked up to his side of the table and stuck out her hand.

“Thank you, for having us over, to your lovely home,” she said. She was sweating.

“I don’t live here,” he said, indicating the restaurant. The server laughed. Amy did not move.

“Sit down,” he said.

Tina slid in next to him and hooked the baby carrier to the table so that it became a high chair.

“Marco, this is my--fiancé--Ray,” Amy said, stumbling over the word and gesturing to him. Ray shot her a look at the word they didn’t say anymore. Tina noticed. Amy felt her ears burn. Marco stuck his hand out and Ray shook it quickly before getting into the booth after Amy.

The server brought menus and they looked over them quietly. Ray brought a forty-ounce bottle of beer out from the bag under the table.

“They won’t let you have that in here, buddy,” Marco said to him.

“Is that right?” Ray said. “Okay. Waiter. Excuse me.” He called over the server and ordered a large draft.

“Sure,” the waiter said, “we’re going to have to put those on another tab, though. Can’t comp beer.”

Amy pushed her sandal into the back of his knee. He was ruining it.

“Okay,” Ray said, “That’s cool.” She had irritated him. He was becoming intoxicated and coming down from tweaking at the same time. She felt fearful, suddenly, and disappointed that she had not stopped him from going to the liquor store, and also, in strange way, upset that he didn’t have enough speed to bump and stay up. It was the combination she dreaded—it made him irritable, afraid, and she had caught the hard end of his fear in the face more than once.

“So when’s this wedding?” Tina asked. “First I’ve heard of it.” The edge to her voice was back.

“Maybe the spring,” Amy said quickly. Ray snorted and she felt her chest tighten.

“Where will you have it?”

“I was thinking about St. Rose, you know, getting Monsignor to do it.” It was where their parents had married. There were no pictures, but their mother had taken them there as girls so that they could imagine what it had been like.

“Celeste was baptized there,” Tina said. “Remember? I invited you.”

“I’m sorry,” Amy said. “We couldn’t get there. There wasn’t a bus route.”

“Lay off her,” Ray said. Amy winced. She would rather have him upset at herself than get defensive with Tina. She felt Ray’s irritation redirect itself at Tina. He wiped at his mouth with a napkin.

“So,” Marco said, “you two work in auto parts. Is that right?”

“Yup,” Ray said.

“Mechanic?” he asked.

“He’s not a mechanic,” Tina said.

“Salvage yard. We don’t fix shit. Shit’s all busted to fuck.”

“I used to work in an auto shop. Just assisting the mechanics. This guy they helped me restore an old Camaro. It’s still running,” Marco said, crunching ice cubes from his cup.

“Did you start with just a body?” Amy asked. “Did you have to find everything else?”

“Yeah, we went to places like the one you work at, found some custom seats, all leather. I envy you, man, you can find treasure in those places.”

Ray had finished the beer and pulled out the forty from under the table again.

“Stop it,” Amy said under her breath to him.

“Yeah, I’ll get you another beer, buddy. This place is my neighbor’s. We’re like a family, you know, helping each other out. So go ahead and put that one away.” He rubbed Tina on the shoulder. She was looking straight down at the table. Marco, Amy realized, was attempting to keep her calm.

“Who are you, Obama?” Ray said. He chugged the forty.

“Ray,” she said.

“He’s so charming,” Tina said.

“Ask them,” Ray said. “Quit bullshitting and ask *ese* here for what we came for.”

They were quiet. Celeste banged her spoon against the highchair. Tina looked hard at Amy. She hesitated for a moment and then reached for her purse, for the stack of utility bills she brought with her as evidence.

“See?” Tina said. “See what I told you, Marco?”

“Fuck you,” Ray said. His head was drooping.

“So,” Tina said to Amy, “you came for money after all.”

“We came to see Celeste,” Amy said, touching the child’s head, a silhouette in the restaurant light like a photo of herself at that age. Or a photo of Tina. Their mother. Their features so strong they beat out Marco’s save for her soft skin, a honeyed version of themselves.

“You know, I should be the one asking you for money,” Tina said, her voice warbling. “You drained Mom’s bank account before her fucking headstone was paid off.

Did you know that? They dragged it out of there. I can't even find where she's buried without help. She's in the ground without a fucking headstone so you could get fucked up."

"I could help you—" Amy said, helpless, picturing men dragging the headstone away, somewhere, off the stage in her mind.

"And now you bring this shitbag here with the nerve to ask for money." Tina put her face in her hands.

Amy wanted to reach her hands across the table and smooth her sister's hair, wipe her tears the way she might have done after a fight then they were young and forgiving. She tried to imagine Tina's reaction now, all of that soft space between them hardening like cement.

"I'm a shit bag? Oh for real?" Ray said, pointing at Marco. "Disgrace, right there. Fucking disgraceful." Amy looked at Marco, who was slowly straightening up in his seat, eyeing Ray. He was shorter than Ray, but muscled with rugged looking arms and a narrow waist.

"Your mom would have loved that, right? Guess what, their mom fucking hated Mexicans and she would have hated you," Ray said, keeping himself upright, "would have hated you more than she hated me."

The server came over from the kitchen with the food, plates of lasagna and a basket filled with garlic bread.

"Everything all right?" the server asked Marco.

"It's fine," Marco said. "This guy was just leaving."

“I’m not going anywhere,” Ray said.

“Come on, guys, get going,” Marco said.

“He can’t drive like this, we’ll—“

“Where’d you guys steal the car from?” Tina said.

“We borrowed it.” Amy looked out of the windows at the back of the restaurant to the parking lot where the sedan was parked

“You think you’re so fucking good,” Ray said, “with your fucking slob baby.”

Then Marco was up and his arm came across the table at Ray’s head. He knocked him sideways. Tina jumped out of her end of the booth and Marco grabbed Ray by the collar. The server and another man from the kitchen rushed out to help. Amy paled and looked away. She kept her eyes on Celeste’s delicate features, the baby’s uncanny resemblance to her mother. She felt the gentle judgment of her mother’s eyes. There were sounds of boot meeting abdomen. Of back door forced open. Amy reached out to Celeste’s small hand.

“I miss you,” she said.

Tina grabbed both sides of Amy’s face by her hair. Her face was twisted with anger. Worse than the day they buried their mother. Like the day the bank took the house. Amy cried out, but Tina didn’t let go, didn’t say anything for a moment. She bit her bottom lip between her teeth and shook her once to let go. Then she picked Celeste up out of the seat and walked out of the front door.

The rest of the customers were standing. They were on cell phones, some of them talking, some of them using them as cameras. The police, she realized. They were calling

the police. Outside, she heard shots. It sounded like hundreds of shots. She ran to the back door of the restaurant which faced the lot and the entrance to the park, full of gleaming cars in the moonlight. Ray was gone. The car was gone. Marco was standing at the edge of the lot, hands on hips, looking up at the sky. Fireworks from Disneyland exploded in blues, reds, and yellows above them, impossibly large and so close that she thought they would hit her before they fizzled into nothing.

“Where did he go?” she asked.

“Fuck off,” he said. “Get out.”

“Please,” she said. Her head hurt. The bursts of light were dazzling.

“Don’t come back. Don’t call her, don’t write, don’t show up at my fucking door.

All you have ever brought her is trouble.”

“Please help me get home,” she said, “he’s left me.”

He drew his fist back and she took off.

Several miles down Harbor were different kinds of motels than the ones next to Disneyland—ones that didn’t have complimentary hot breakfasts or large sparkling swimming pools. She looked in the windows from the street as she walked and wondered what they cost for a night. Maybe she could get a job at one of them, cleaning. She could clean the rooms in exchange for a place to live. These kinds of thoughts came easily. It was nearing one in the morning. She slung her purse around to the front to count her money. She had four dollars and thirty-seven cents.

Inside the bar, the light was dim and comfortable. The bar’s interior was mostly

dark wood and weathered posters on the wall from the Olympic Dream Team and long-ago baseball legends. She hesitated at the door, but went in. There was nothing else open for a mile in either direction: she had looked. She had stopped crying only because it eventually seemed silly when no one could see her.

She asked if there were any specials and the bartender told her that it was Service Industry Night and that waiters and waitresses got drinks two for one. Was she a server, he asked her. She said that yes, she was, she was a server at the taco shop across the street from the park. He said he knew it. She said it was hard work, especially with a little baby at home. She told him about the way people didn't wash their hands when they used the bathroom and the bartender laughed and poured her very stiff vodka waters. Out-of-towners—fathers mostly-- sometimes found their way down here to find a date, for the night, he said. Something about the way he said it made her think that he was trying to help her.

There was a man sitting two stools down who was listening to them, drumming his fingers rapidly on the bar. He slid his drink and napkin toward them.

“I'm from out of town,” he said, taking the stool next to her. He smiled. “What can I get you?”

“Vodka water,” she said.

“Get her two more,” he said, snapping. She relaxed her shoulders and leaned on her elbows, easing into the worn wooden groove of the bar.

The man was staying at a motel walking distance to the bar. On the walk there, he

pulled out a little glass speed pipe and a lighter. He looked up and down the street. It was deserted. He took a hit and handed it to her.

“Thanks,” she said, and hit it hard. It was sweet and plastic and familiar.

She let him do what he wanted to her while she retreated deep into her head. He bit her thighs, her breasts, and she felt none of it.

When he was done, he put his head on her belly. She remembered the baby and wept.

“Who’s Celeste?” he asked.

“My mother,” she said.

“I’m sobering up,” he said, weakly.

“Let’s do some more.”

“I don’t have any,” he said, “I don’t know where to get any.”

“I know where,” she said, “I can go get some.” The room was closing her in. The freeway to Long Beach was just down the street. She knew the way.

“I can’t drive right now.” He looked terrible.

“Give me the keys,” she said, “I’ll be right back. Just down the street.”

“Okay,” he said.

He must sell these, she thought as she picked through the car. Vacuums. The back seat was full of boxes of hoses and attachments. There was a receipt for a chicken sandwich and a root beer at Fantasy Castle Gentlemen’s Club. There was another pipe in the center console. She was looking for something to tell her if he had any children. He

must have at least a girlfriend because the car smelled like a pina colada. Men usually picked something like pine on their own. He is a decent man, she concluded, and he is trying to be better. She felt relief at the idea of getting to be better.

She put the keys into the ignition and turned too much. It screeched. She put her hands on the steering wheel and bit her lip. She wondered if she could remove the catalytic converter without the right tools. Her mind drifted to her car back in the yard: its clean doorless body, engineless, no brakes, no gas tank, no belts. She recalled her first day of the build: she felt exhilarated pushing the chassis into the shed, her own project, a freedom in the future. Here in the salesman's car she felt overwhelmed. She had never driven one, but she knew the names to every part and so she recited them to herself: driveshaft, dashboard, engine lights, gearshift. Start there, she reasoned. She pushed the button in on the gearshift and put the car into reverse and slowly, so slowly, backed out of the parking lot and into the street. She felt the hum of the engine, the clean and easy stopping of the brake pads, all of it working in unison. What had made her think she could build one of these? What had made her think she could make anything so complicated work?

It would be morning soon. She could still see the park lights like a perpetual Christmas in the distance, the snow-covered peak of the Matterhorn. She imagined real mountains and decided that they must be east. West could only be the ocean. She put the car into drive and drove toward the freeway entrance, toward Long Beach. She was breathing quickly, driving slowly, focusing on keeping the car between the lines, on sobering up, on not feeling her body panic.

She could barely convince herself to look away from the road, but a flickering caught her eye. She was passing an abandoned-looking apartment complex that was lit up. It was on fire. There was smoke pouring out of the windows. And a woman, waving her arms wildly, motioning for her to stop.

Amy panicked for a moment and felt her first instinct: push the gas pedal. But her first instincts were usually wrong and so she forced herself to turn the wheel to the curb. She put the car in park and left it running.

“Help me!” the woman was screaming, her hands at both sides of her face. She had short-cropped hair and ragged clothes. “We have to get in there!”

Amy ran around the circumference of the complex—it was maybe eight units, two stories tall. The fire was in the four units on one side, top and bottom.

“Is there someone in there?” Amy screamed.

“There is someone in there!”

“Where?”

“In this door,” the woman motioned to the door in front of them, banging on the downstairs apartment closest to them. It was half full of flames but the room at the front, the kitchen, was still unburned. Amy looked in the window and could see through the smoke a bedroom door slightly ajar past the kitchen. There was a crib inside.

“Is it a baby? Is there a baby inside?”

“A baby!” The woman covered her face with her hands. “A baby who is Christ the Lord!”

Amy looked around for something heavy. She found a broken cinder block near the gate, heavy and dirt-clodded. She lifted it and with great effort threw it at the glass of the window.

“Help me!” Amy said. The woman was hysterical. She was shouting at the sky. Okay, Amy thought, she was not right in the head, but what if. There could be news reporters; there could be a happy mother.

With the window busted open, she reached her hand in and could just reach the doorknob. She cut her upper arm on the glass as she reached, but pushed forward. The door opened. She could hear sirens. They sounded far down the street. She felt the sudden desire to save the baby before they got there.

She rushed through the kitchen, so full of smoke, to the bedroom door. She pushed, but there was something blocking it. For a moment, she recalled her mother locked in her room in the days before her death, refusing to let her in—only Tina. They knew what she had done and they turned her away. Her mother did not want to look at her face even as she lay dying. She could not apologize, could not say goodbye. What was left for her, but Ray behind bars? She had left the house sullen and emptied and in a few days, her mother was gone. But here, she threw her whole body against the door. She could break it, she thought, this cheap wooden thing. She backed up and rammed the door again. Again. It wouldn't give. If the baby was crying, she couldn't hear it. She backed up and rammed the door again, her shoulder numb now, desperate. Finally the sirens reached her and the firemen rushed toward her, pulling her back from the door.

“There's a baby!” she cried at their masked faces as they handed her off to one

another and out of the smoke. “There’s a baby in that room!”

“There’s nothing in there,” one of them said back to her. “It’s abandoned.”

The firemen sat her in an ambulance but kept her on the scene until the police had arrived. She waited on the gurney and watched while the firemen hosed down the charred building. Outside, the sun was coming up. A female police officer arrived to take her statement and to read her her rights. The sedan had been reported stolen. There was drug paraphernalia inside that the owner claimed was not his. The officer and her partner thanked her for making it easy, for cooperating.

On the ride to the hospital, she watched the morning traffic build up to a steady hum. She’d never been this far into Anaheim. Away from the bigness and color of Disneyland, so much of it looked like everywhere else.

Before the officers could take her to the city jail for processing, it was required that she be treated for smoke inhalation and some cuts on her upper arm which needed stitches. She didn’t cry although the pain was incredible. They removed her handcuffs before they x-rayed her shoulder for any broken bones and let her go inside the room by herself. The powerful x-rays, the sign on the door read, could be harmful to the body and its insides, even while wearing the lead vest over the abdomen. Before she flipped the switch, the nurse asked if she had any other outstanding conditions that could be complicated by the workings of the machine, and with her hands on her belly she replied that no, she had none.

## CHAPTER 2

### EIGHT THE HARD WAY

The day Frank was getting out of prison, I woke up before Leroy and shaved myself smooth in the little trailer bathroom. On the car ride to the swap meet, I told Leroy the best way to make money fast was if he gave me the cash we made from that day's sales and I'd take it to the track and play the ponies. He was gripping the steering wheel, half because the power steering fluid was out and half because Frank's brother would be out to the house with a baseball bat if we didn't have four hundred bucks for him after work.

"You're not going to the track. We're in this mess because of the ponies," he said.

At the end of our row, we waved at Connie Lutz who was sitting in her rollers at the picnic table in front of her trailer with her coffee cup. She didn't wave back. We hit the dip in the road coming out of the park and bounced, sending junk flying up from the boxes in the back and spilling the dirt from the old terra cotta pots in my lap.

"Every time," I said.

"I want you to swear you're not going to the track today," Leroy said, "swear on your mother."

"With what money?" I said.

"Verna."

"I swear," I said, "Lordy."

Frank and I moved to Corcoran after he lost his position with the Teamster Union. We had been on the road and settling down was hard for Frank. He liked his routes and

his rig. It was a terrible struggle to keep him home with me when we first got to town, but we got along best at the track, where we could watch the ponies and I could watch him, and as far as we knew, no one was watching us. When we were making good money, we had Frank's brother move down with us and we opened a pawnshop that also handled a shitload of off-track betting. Frank got locked up for loansharking and aggravated assault. Frank was muscle but his brother was just a numbers guy--a businessman—so none of his charges stuck. When Frank went in, I kept my job working for his brother at the pawnshop—mostly as a favor to Frank; I was no good at it.

Leroy worked there too. I watched Leroy working and liked the way he shined up all the stuff in the shop like he really cared about it. The rest of us, we just threw the new stuff into cubbies and waited for the owners to claim it or not. Leroy took in something—a trombone maybe, or a VCR—and wiped it down, used his fingernails to get stickers off of it, that kind of thing. He was very careful and respectful of the stuff. The heart wants what the heart wants, is what Frank's brother said when I told him I was moving out. But you can't be working here if you're sleeping around on my brother, he said. That's fair, I told him. I said one more thing: we're going to need a loan. By now, we owed Frank's brother a shitload of money---a couple thousand dollars in cash loans, plus the trailer we lived in which we paid down a hundred dollars or so every month. We tried to get jobs: the super market fired me after I took home some day-old loaves of French bread and a six pack of beer missing one can. I'd heard they just threw that stuff away. Leroy couldn't pass a piss test to save his life and the background check would have come up dirty. He took a job with the Salvation Army as a bell ringer outside the post office, but

that was seasonal. That's when we started collecting.

It wasn't hard to do: Leroy already obsessed over trash. I had to sneak used paper towels into the garbage, because he'd been raised to rinse them out and hang them up like washcloths. Same for the greased stained plastic forks we kept in the drawer until they warped. He drove me crazy emptying the dirt from the disposable vacuum bags and then sticking them right back on, dust flying everywhere and making the room dirtier than before. Collecting junk came naturally to him and he loved finding something perfectly good that could sell. Every time he found something it was like a victory in our ongoing battle over whether or not this was stupid and we were doomed. He'd hold up his find, like a china doll with curly brown hair, a bonnet, and a miniature umbrella rubber banded to the wrist and say, Christ, that's great, it even looks like you.

It was a selling day not a collecting day, and we sold out of the parking lot of the Love's gas station alongside Interstate Five. The town of Corcoran has a population of 24,000 but they count the inmates at the state prison, which makes up half that number. When an inmate is released, they send him in a cab anywhere he wants to go in Corcoran or to the Greyhound station. I knew that day that Frank was taking a cab to the track.

By six a.m., he parked the car and we started hauling out the stuff and laying it out on our spot. He was showing his age that morning, lifting the heavy milk crates in his skinny arms, walking them over, setting them down carefully, then putting his hands on his hips and looking at the sky for a second. The gas station had a big dirt lot adjacent to it that you could see from the freeway which they rented out as a swap meet site. There were usually about ten different sellers--some Mexican families, a group from the farm

co-op the town over that Leroy called a cult, and, always, a tweaker named Jerry who sold dented cans of vegetables and fruit cocktail, but more importantly, speed to the truckers. A decent number of people stopped in off of the freeway despite the reflective yellow signs posted for a few miles in either direction that read: PRISON AREA DO NOT PICK UP HITCHHIKERS.

Traffic on the freeway was light: minivans making trips from Northern California to Disneyland, full size vans carrying workers to the farms, and some big rigs. This early in the morning, the Love's parking lot was still full of rigs with their drivers asleep inside. Frank was a truck driver when I met him. I was seventeen and hanging out at a truck stop trying to get car dates. Frank's truck had a sleeper that pulled out to make a little bed. I fell in love with him when he turned off the cabin light and glow in the dark stars spelled out the word Lucy above us. Lucy was his mama's name.

Leroy pulled a milk crate full of happy meal toys from the back of the car, little plastic arms sticking out and catching the upholstery.

"We should have left those things in the garbage," I said. He dropped them down on the tarp and dust flew up around them. The sun started coming up over the foothills across the freeway. It would be directly in our eyes soon.

"This is a new tactic I'm calling Swap Meet Daycare. What's our number one problem with family shoppers?"

"I don't know. Not enough of them."

"They get distracted by the damn kids wanting a treat inside Love's. We got the treats now."

“What time are we leaving today?”

“Noon, because I need to hit the recycling center and then hell, I don’t know, I don’t know.”

The five o’clock deadline was giving him little waves of panic, I could tell. We wouldn’t make more than a hundred dollars by noon; there was no way.

I helped him lug the stacks of waiting room magazines tied up in string which he took from a dumpster outside the hospital. Then the boxes of pure junk--broken watches, sunglasses, wind breakers, a mink stole with a hard little mink face at the end, books with fancy covers, splintered wicker baskets, silverware, a cuckoo clock. When I started out here selling this stuff with him, I thought we should lay it out real nice, all the good stuff up front. But Leroy knew about people, said that they like to find a deal and feel smart. So we just smeared it around in piles, all the tangled necklaces, the key chains, the framed prints of church-looking angels. And he was right--people would come to our spot and spend their time digging through and thinking we didn’t know what we had. But we knew every single thing we had and the trick was to make it look like we were stupid. If we had a teacup and a matching saucer, then we’d put the cup in one pile and the saucer in another. It happened more than once--when someone found a match, they acted like they discovered some cure for something. And Leroy and me would play along and look shocked and pleased and take their five dollars then laugh and laugh. Leroy taught me that people like to feel like they know more than the rest of us. And when they feel smart, that’s when you’ve got them.

Leroy pulled the last box from the car and carried it to the lot. One of the early

birds from town walked up to offer to carry it for him because he wanted first crack at what was inside. Leroy shrugged him off and carried it himself, which I knew was so the guy would think there was something good inside, creating anticipation and such. We knew this particular guy since he owned a consignment store in town. He was looking for jewelry and clothes to sell and would haggle until either he or Leroy got tired or mad and took the deal. This is what I hated most--Leroy would go on and on and get madder and madder. Part of it was what he called his technique, making people feel like they got the deal which made them feel like buying it--but part of it was he just liked to bargain and go back and forth. He did it at home too. If I said all we had was chili noodles for dinner, he'd come back with a request for one of the Red Baron pizzas in the freezer, which he knew I hated. If I said fine, Red Baron, he'd say, now wait, don't we have a box of hamburger helper and some meat in the freezer and I'd say, damnit, that's for the lasagna I'm making Sunday. Just for the fight of it, just so it felt like he was in charge of dinner. I'd end up making chili noodles anyway, but he'd won.

Frank didn't like to fight. He liked quiet and for me to just know what he wanted, and I did. He wanted beer and pain pills, he wanted chicken in the broiler, he wanted to watch a mafia movie. He wanted me home in the kitchen like old fashioned times.

Before I met him, I used to car-date up and down the Interstate 99 with a friend of mine name Shirl. She was maybe forty and took care of me, would come and pick me up if I got stranded, that kind of thing. It didn't happen much. I was good at picking out which man to approach. First, I looked at what they hung in the rearview mirror. The meaner the stuff they hung in the rearview, the sweeter they were. Skulls and flames and

devil flags, those guys worked to look tough on the road because they weren't all that tough. The ones with crosses hanging from the mirror, those were the ones to run from. It took me one car-date with a cross-hanger to learn that lesson. He cracked me over the head with a flashlight. Also: I picked the ones that keep their heads down on the walk to the cashier at the gas station. They're the thinkers. I liked the thinkers. The ones with their heads up, looking around, looking to be flashy, I didn't need any of them. The ones with their heads down were either tired or new: they paid and were quick. When I met Frank outside Fresno, he wanted to know this kind of thing—how my business worked and the like. Frank was a great thinker with nothing hanging in the rearview. Hard to read. After our first night together, he took me with him on a long haul from California to Illinois, four nights in the truck cabin and then a night in a Chicago motel where we fucked all the way around the room and spread out on the bed because we were tired of being cramped in the truck. On the way back, he started calling me his wife.

I checked in with Frank about two weeks before all this. I'd told Leroy I was going to the grocery store, but instead drove two miles away to the post office where there was still a payphone.

“Tell me about your legs, baby.”

“They're smooth,” I said, “ready for you.” I listened to him breathe and checked my complexion in the scratched glass of the phone booth.

“Fourteen more days.” I said.

“More like one minute. Make that sound, baby.”

“It's still two weeks, right? You're going to meet me at the track?”

“Do it.”

I looked around and then moaned quietly into the receiver, my lips so close to the mouthpiece I could taste dirt and plastic on the inhale.

At 10, a minivan pulled into the gas station and four or five kids spilled out to go to the bathroom inside Love’s. When they passed us, I called over to them.

“Toys,” I said, “do you guys like toys?”

But they looked at me like they were scared. Their mother followed them in, glancing over at our spot for a second longer than I thought she would.

“It’s free to look,” Leroy said. He said this about a hundred times a day. The woman ushered the youngest ones through the glass doors.

“She’ll come back out and look,” I said.

“No she won’t. You scared them kids.”

“Bet you a buck.”

“I’m not betting you a thing, Verna.”

Before we moved down to Corcoran, when he was still a Southern California rep for the Teamster Union, we spent nearly every day he wasn’t driving at the Santa Anita racetrack, drinking beer and studying the Daily Racing Form. He said I’d be a natural at handicapping. I’d been doing it for years. We read up on speed and pace, checked to see if any horses had recently moved up or down a class, and what their odds looked like.

Then we walked down to look at the horses themselves--we looked for their ears to swing

back when they heard something behind them because this meant they were alert and sharp. We looked for calm tails, because swishes meant that they were upset about something. We considered the weather, if the track was wet, tried to find out if a jockey had a drinking problem or woman troubles. When we had a good fix, we bet to win. On our best day, I hit a trifecta with 80:1 odds and made \$5,750 bucks all because I noticed the odds-on winner flicking his tail up a storm that morning and so I bet against him. There was something troubling that horse. I wonder if he knew, waiting in the starting gate before the gunshot, that he was going to blow the race, get tangled in his own feet, and break a leg coming out of the first stretch. They put him down on the field.

When the kids came back out their mother halted them and they looked over our stuff. The kids pulled out half of the happy meal toys and started begging, which was the best possible outcome. These folks were on their way *to* a vacation and hadn't spent the money yet. I looked over at Leroy and he looked on straight ahead.

By two, we'd made fifty dollars selling most of the books to the book guy, the broken hammock to a vacationing man, two portable lawn chairs and some junk jewelry along with all those toys. The sun was hot, sitting right on top of us. The other sellers were packing up. Jerry had long since scooped up all his dented cans and fled, once the highway patrol stopped in and gave him a scare.

"I don't know," Leroy said. He took his bandana from his pocket and wiped his

forehead.

“Let’s call it,” I said.

“Awhile longer, let’s wait for the last bit of lunch traffic.”

“Fine.”

He slid his chair back under the umbrella that provided some shade and thumbed through the money again. Frank could have been released any time of the day. For all I knew, he was already at the track. I turned on the little radio we hadn’t sold yet and the country songs sounded far away on the shitty speakers, which made them even sadder.

When the parking lot got empty, Leroy exhaled through his teeth. His anxiety was bad; he’d never been homeless before.

“Don’t worry,” I said, “whatever happens.” I rubbed his knee, feeling the bone through the denim. He had fifty-year-old knees and they were the widest part of his leg. His calves thinned down into nothing.

He looked out across the freeway at the steady traffic in both directions, yellow hills with little dots of black cows to the north and south.

“Whatever happens. Christ, Verna.”

“There are shelters and soup kitchens and stuff. Churches, that kind of thing.”

I’d told him about life before Frank, because that’s the part he’d let me talk about. He didn’t like to hear Frank stories.

“Listen, it’s Friday, the races go till four today,” I said, “it’s not too late. You could just drop me off.”

Leroy stood up and wiped his hands on his jeans. The other sellers were packing

up, tarping down pick up trucks and trailers. I leaned forward in my folding chair and took his hand loosely at the tips of his fingers. He still faced the freeway, away from me.

“You got your makeup on today,” he said.

“I wear makeup sometimes,” I said.

“He’s back, isn’t he?”

I let go of his fingers. Leroy kicked at some dirt. I felt my neck, which had sunburned.

“If I give you a hundred bucks, how much can you make by five?”

“Depends, but a lot. I mean, a whole lot.”

“You’re not going to fuck me, are you?”

“Leroy,” I said.

“God damn.” he said.

At 3:15, we got to the track. I was biting my lower lip hoping I hadn’t missed him. He slowed down in front of the entrance to let me out. He was furious, I could tell, because of the way he took turns too fast on the ride there. He wanted to scare me. This was worse than going back and forth arguing.

“He’s my husband, Lee,” I said. He kept his hands on the wheel, but was bouncing his left knee.

“According to who,” he said, which was a low blow because we were married in our hearts.

“And he was going to get out someday, you know, and we, well, we’re.”

He sucked his lower lip into his mouth.

“I really loved--”

“Fucking fuck,” he said.

“Leroy,” I said.

“Go on,” he said.

One important thing to remember about horse racing is that when you bet right, you don't lose a race. Sometimes you make the right bet and *it* loses. There is a difference; you can't get down on yourself. It's not like I put on some tennis shoes and ran down there with the horses. I didn't break my leg, I didn't lose my postposition advantage coming out of the turn--the horse did. I bet right, and the bet lost.

The grandstand was in full sun. I shaded my eyes and scanned the track from left to right. It was not crowded. It smelled like wet hay and the call to post echoed all the way around the place and back to me. I walked in to the cashier, spent six dollars on the Daily Racing Form, and sat down with a pencil to start figuring things out. I could see the entrance and looked from the form to the gate and back, looking for the right bet and for Frank.

I wasn't ready to bet the first race. I hadn't been to the track in a long time and I felt like I wasn't sure of myself. I was hoping Frank would have been here already, would have talked to his brother who was the best handicapper we knew, would have scooped me up in his big arms and kissed me hard in front of the betting window. If I were to have bet, I would have boxed a perfecta between horses two and six, meaning if horse two and

horse six got first and second place, in either order, I'd have won some good money. The gun went off and I ran to the stands to watch. They ran the sprint, and sure enough two and six took first and second. The winnings would have been three-fifty if I'd bet it all. I've got this, I told myself, you're smart and you've got this.

I made my notes and walked down to the railing near the starting gate, where the horses for the last race were standing before their parade in front of the spectators. I looked for number four, the odds-on horse named Pumpkin Eater. He was chestnut all over but his chest, which had a white patch like a bull's-eye. He had won his last three races in the class below and had qualified to move up. He stamped his feet and I didn't like the look of him--like he was angry. Beside him was number one, another chestnut named Eight the Hard Way, who stood calm and beautiful. His jockey smoothed down his mane. I checked his odds; they were pretty good even though he was running a maiden race--he hadn't won yet, but was probably going to do well. He was going to prove himself.

It wasn't that I wanted to hurt Leroy. I was afraid when Frank went to prison and I was sleeping on a cot in the back of the pawnshop with all of the guns and the chainsaws. My mother had seven of us, with me in the middle and didn't say a word when I left because it was a mercy to her. The second night I lived at Leroy's he said, didn't your mother teach you to reuse paper towels? And I said, my mother taught me to get fed where I could and that there was never a problem too big you couldn't run from it, unless you had seven kids. Leroy would forgive me someday, when Frank was back to driving and I could pay him all the way back. But I hoped to be out of Corcoran forever, riding

shotgun in the truck cab that sat up high above all the other cars, crossing all kinds of landscapes, pretending to be from every town we stopped in.

The odds on the board changed as bets were made. I hung out at the railing for the post parade to make my final decision before the bell. Eight the Hard Way walked out steady in front of Pumpkin Eater, whose gait was just a little off. Their jockeys turned and walked them back to the chute and I headed up to get in line at the betting window, where there was a rush just before the post and where I hoped Frank would be, getting ready to make the right bet.

The man and woman in front of me in line were on a date. I could tell because he let her pick the horses and she looked down at the race card and picked the one with the prettiest name--a horse with no chance of winning called Miss Pretty Promises. Frank would have never let me throw money away like that.

At the window, I bet eighty to win on Eight the Hard Way, as well as a trifecta bet with Pumpkin Eater in second and a filly, Go Baby Just Maybe, in third, which cost me ten. Depending on the odds fluctuating in the last minutes before the race, the potential winnings were eight hundred dollars, enough to keep Leroy in the trailer, and a start on paying down some of the loans.

I stuck the last four bucks in my pocket for beer. The call to post rang, meaning I'd have a good ten minutes before the race. I walked to the entrance and looked out at the parking lot for Frank or a cab or anything. Beyond the cyclone fence around the lot, I saw Leroy's car, posted up so that I didn't run off with the money, I guessed. I walked back in and bought two beers with my last four bucks and downed them as fast as I could

before taking my seat right next to the couple betting on Miss Pretty Promises. The man had his hands in his pockets and looked over at me for a moment before slipping an arm around the woman. She was the noisy type.

The horses were in the chute. Eight the Hard Way was in the first chute, looking perfect. I'm counting on you, I said to him in my head. And you Pumpkin Eater, and you, too, Go Baby Just Maybe. I'd made the right bet now I was just waiting for the gunshot, as if it were me who had to sprint around the track three times with all of my heart and I was in the chute, shaking and eager.

The gun went off.

"Miss Pretty! Come on Miss Pretty!" the woman was shouting. But Miss Pretty was behind from the start. The man took his hat off, wiped his brow, and put it back on. He had no ring and wore a big watch—the expensive kind, not the kind you wear to look expensive.

Eight the Hard Way shot out ahead of them all and was a furlong in front for the first half of the lap until the group caught up. Around the far side of the track, it was hard to tell which chestnut horse was leading.

"Hold it," I said, and then louder, "hold it! Get!"

I took my eyes off the track for a second to turn and look for Frank. If he was coming, this was it. I could imagine him rushing the prison guards to get himself here before the last post. He would have been charming, he would have bribed if he had to, to get to me. The crowd stood up as they came around for the last lap, but I couldn't stop watching the entrance. There was no one up there for me but Leroy out waiting in the car.

The woman rooting for Miss Pretty made a horrible sound.

Eight was running funny, kicking his front legs in front of him. Then he went down on his front knees, his nose in the dirt, dragging it side to side. Pumpkin ran right into the back of him and caught his hind legs, knocking his own jockey off into the middle of the track and before rolling over onto his back and then standing right up again. The rest of the horses ran hard to the finish, where Go Baby Just Maybe finished first followed by Miss Pretty Promises.

“Is that horse okay? Is that horse okay?” The woman was frantic now, grabbing her date’s arms.

Eight fell forward to the shoulder and his leg twisted in a way that made me feel like I was going to be sick right then. It looked like an ankle break and another break right below the knee. The follow car sped onto the track followed by an ambulance for the jockey. Two men pulled out a tarp and set it up in front of the horse. The vet went behind the curtain and the whole crowd could hear him whinnying and shrieking until it was quiet. Then the crowd thinned out toward the betting windows to collect winnings or go home.

“Will he be okay?” She was crying now.

“If it’s busted they’ll probably put him down.” I liked the unemotional way he handled this. He accepted things.

“Give him to me,” she screamed to the field in the saddest voice I ever heard. The men on the track looked up to the grandstand then back at what they were doing. “I’ll take that horse, please give him to me!”

Frank loved for me to cry, because he was so good at getting me to stop. I'd start and he'd go right for my belly, pulling my shirt up and blowing raspberries until I couldn't breathe I was laughing so hard. Crying and laughing, that's how it is with Frank. I looked back for him one more time. It was a few minutes after four. It was the bet that had lost. It was the right bet but it had lost.

On the field, they took the tarp away, and the horse was standing up. The woman put her hands to her head and laughed out loud. She trucked down carefully in her heels down to the trackside, leaving the man behind her.

He stood at the end of the aisle, looking down at the ground as if he'd made a bad bet. I watched him tuck his betting sheets into his back pocket. He looked up and over at me and I gave him a kind of half smile. Frank could have been on a greyhound headed anywhere, back to LA, to Chicago—any city could be his home.

“I can't believe that horse is going to make it,” the man said, “I'll be damned.”

The jockey led the horse by its reins to the gate. It was walking with its head up, a little bounce to its trot, ears back. I wouldn't bet on it anytime soon, but it looked all right. The man's date walked down to where the horse was heading. She was waving her arms at it. He shook his head.

Say,” I said, and he looked.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE SETTLEMENT

The rape had not made her any more careful, Angela thought as she walked ten paces behind her daughter. She watched Darlene shift the boxes from one hip to the other in a herky-jerky motion that made her nervous that Darlene would hurt herself. They were heavy and poorly packed. Darlene was wearing her dark eye makeup and a pair of denim short-shorts. To Angela, this was baffling—the whole ordeal had changed nothing about Darlene except her desire to suddenly leave the family home. So far, Angela had done a terrible job of talking her out of moving. She was completely helpless in the face of Darlene's new determination to be separate from her.

The minute she's got a little money, she's leaving, Angela said to her husband in the middle of the night before the move. In some ways, Angela was not surprised. Darlene had a tendency toward lip service, toward saying just the thing that Angela wanted to hear, or enough of what she wanted to hear, at least, to soothe her anxieties about the kind of life she was leading under her nose. All these years, constantly the talk of starting community college and then running out most nights to be with friends. Never once volunteering to take over care for her disabled brother so that Angela and her husband could have a night off from the feeding schedule, the cleaning. And then the trial and the money, and she's gone. Angela felt these things deep inside her body—a physical pain that started as anguish and burned slowly into anger. When she tried to say them to Darlene though, it was like trying to carry water from one bucket to another in her hands. She lost the reasons. Darlene's face was full of pain and it pulled the rage right out of her.

The settlement left Darlene with enough money to move out of her parents' house. With her bank statement, she qualified for a one-bedroom on the north side of Sacramento in the generally considered terrible neighborhood of Del Paso Heights. It was really nothing more than trading one shit neighborhood for another. The same number of used tire places, tow lots, the same convenience store corners dominating empty strip malls where, depending on the street, the Bloods or the Norteños posted up after about seven, everybody in red. She took the apartment because she toured the building on a hot day and the place had a pool with no children in it. She liked the idea of swimming alone.

She hadn't considered, however, that it had been a school day. The day she moved in there were a pack of children running around the pool. As she lugged her boxes across the courtyard, she watched them narrowly miss clipping their little heads against the cement edge as they jackknifed into the water.

The ordeal of moving out had been nearly as difficult as the civil trial. Her father summarily refused to be part of Darlene's leaving and had spent the weeks before she found her apartment slamming cupboard doors and ignoring her. When she would speak in the living room, he turned the volume up on the television and leaned forward to hear it. Darlene suspected that, yes, it was difficult to lose your only daughter to the big bad world, but that the true source of his anger was that she would be taking all of her settlement money with her in an account under her name, a suggestion from her lawyer which she took immediately. The lawyer had taken his fees from the winnings and then taxes also took a percentage, and all in all, she was left with \$11,000 dollars, a sum which

at first had seemed impossibly large to all of them.

Her immediate concern was a place of her own. The house was suffocating her. She couldn't find work. Before the whole mess, she could put on her cute business pumps and leave the house to sit at the desk in that big building. Powerful people knew her name, if only to retrieve messages from her. She could forget about the loud hollow of the front room where they all worked to investigate one another's lives while simultaneously ignoring whatever pain it was each was suffering. What was clear was that she could not go on watching her father pick on her mother, her mother feign martyrdom, and Brian, silent but watching, his head askew and his mouth producing those low moans toward her. The television volume could not drown out the animal sound of it and they looked on ahead determined. Nothing was worse than this—nothing she'd been through was worse.

Her mother stood still on the breezeway with her hands above her hips in the slouchy posture Darlene could identify from any distance. Once everything was in the apartment, the adrenaline that had been pushing them to finish subsided and the room looked pitifully empty. Darlene could sense her mother gathering her thoughts and figuring out how to present them to her in a new way which wouldn't send Darlene into a yelling fit. Darlene had spent the past few days keeping extremely busy so as not to allow time to pool like this.

Her mother took the moment. "Now if you change her mind—"

"Ma, I'm not going to change my mind."

“Well, or if you don’t like it.”

“Stop.”

Angela felt beads of sweat roll down the backs of her knees. She watched as Darlene rifled through her five or six boxes and knew from twenty-four years of being her mother that the pinch between her eyebrows meant she was unsure. Here she was with barely any furniture and no idea about how to take care of herself and after having gone through so much trauma with that man. It was giving her a headache and a feeling of breathlessness in her chest.

“Do you have any Diet Coke?” Darlene’s mother asked.

“You know I don’t have anything yet.”

“Fish me a vicodin out of my purse, then. Two.”

Darlene stuck her hand into the abyss of her mother’s purse, tilting it to one side so that all of the change and pills would pool in the corner. They took them for everything, thanks to her brother Brian’s unlimited prescription. It cost them less than Tylenol. If someone complained of a stomachache, her mother would hand the complainer one with a concerned look and a push toward the kitchen for a drink of water.

She swallowed it dry and leaned back against the wall with her arm crooked behind her head—another of her signature postures.

“I think they converted this place from a motel.”

“Mom, please.”

“Look—that breakfast nook thing wasn’t there originally. And you have a built-in

ironing board.”

Darlene looked and the dining area did kind of look like a motel room that had been converted by adding a little half-wall between the impossibly small kitchen and the space where she hoped to put a table. She dragged a trash bag of her clothing into the bedroom and opened the closet but found that there was a hot water heater inside taking up most of the space.

“That’s not safe,” her mother said from her spot on the floor.

“I’m sure it’s safe, they wouldn’t do it if it wasn’t safe.” She closed up the closet.

“Over here, they do anything.”

“What’s that supposed to mean,” Darlene said, throwing armfuls of clothes from the trash bags onto the twin mattress on the floor.

“Nothing,”

“Don’t be so freaking racist, ma.”

“They aren’t as concerned with building codes. It’s just a thing. I’m not saying anything! Maybe it’s cultural.”

Darlene balled up the empty trash bag and threw it in the corner of the room. She would need a garbage can. And curtains. And a television.

“All right, well, I think I’ve got this whole apartment situation under control, so it’s probably—“

“Are you kicking me out? Because of the Mexican thing I said?”

“No, because I’m ready to have my own apartment now.”

A car, the mortgage, medical bills—couldn't she see that the family had been there for her through the darkest nights? Angela stopped herself there as she recalled laying cool washcloths on Darlene's forehead as she sobbed through a panic attack. *Everything reminds me of it, she'd said, even your face right now.*

Her mother stood up then because being a little over-worried was one thing, but being made to feel like a bother was another. She could go home if she wanted to feel like that. On the drive across town, she practiced what she would say to her husband. What she decided on was to describe her apartment, safe, cute as a button, and Darlene's face: the happiest she'd seen it since before all the trouble.

Darlene didn't go back inside until she saw the car leave the parking lot. She could hear the children squealing from where she stood outside her door. The complex was shaped like a fortress with a courtyard in the middle. From the third floor breezeway, she looked over the balcony and there were even more children in the pool than there had been before.

Somewhere in San Francisco, a man who until very recently had been an Executive Account Manager sat with his hard-faced wife and daughter at the dinner table in uncomfortable silence. Despite all the discord it had caused in the home (his daughter now wore a permanent frown of disapproval), the lawyer had been very good. He made sure that the footage from the security camera which caught several frames of him walking a wobbly young woman down the street was inadmissible in court. He had found

character witnesses through Facebook (two ex-friends, an ex-lover) of the plaintiff who were willing to testify to the plaintiff's drinking and cocaine habits as well as general wild behavior, unsafe sex included. Criminal charges were dropped in the discovery phase; the civil suit resulted in his paying a pittance for damages. He was counseled that he would lose his job, since he did admit to being in the hotel with the girl (on his lawyer's advice) but it was generally understood that he would be given the same position in their brother company. He was an invaluable part of the firm: he could make ugly red numbers sing. At his unofficial going away party, someone made a toast which chided him for his love of room service. Everyone felt better cheering.

Her first week passed by so quickly, she couldn't even be lonely: she bought a couch and had it delivered along with a table for the dining room and a dresser. She went to the grocery store and wandered the aisles, choosing only the things she loved best. She signed up for cable and the internet, and what the hell, a house phone. They came in a bundle and that all sounded fine. After a few days of ordering whatever she wanted at meals and then the clearing of the check she wrote for the security deposit on her apartment, the sinking feeling she had was that she wouldn't be able to take that trip to Europe she had been casually envisioning. In the two weeks after the check was cut, those things seemed less possible.

One disadvantage of her new neighborhood was its distance from the downtown nightlife. She used to depend on friends to swing by and pick her up on their way out to the clubs. Surely, she thought, they would still be willing to take a moment to come out to

her new place. But her friends were quiet and made excuses for not being able to make it. She suspected it was more than the drive. In the weeks before the civil suit, when nothing was certain, when she was being drilled by investigators about whether or not she was drunk—those nights out were difficult. She ended up drinking until numbness. She ended up falling over. She ended up kicked out of places her friends liked very much. Perhaps she had been hard to handle, she thought.

Keeping busy could only stave off her old loneliness for so long. She talked to the television for company. She tried to make friends with people at the pool. She circled jobs in the PennySaver and surfed Craigslist. Her mother called twice to check in and to say her father had asked her to say hello for him. Darlene was skeptical. She told her mother to give her love to Brian.

At night, she stared at the popcorn surface of the ceiling and tried to ignore the feeling that she could see something out of the corner of her eye. During the day, she caught herself double-taking: a grocery bag floating to the floor just behind her, the quick strobe of a car's headlights would suddenly warp into the feeling of an intruder in the apartment. One night after not having slept well all week, she had finally drifted into a light sleep when she sensed movement in the room. She opened her eyes to see the figure of a man looming in the corner, featureless and soft-edged. She opened her eyes as wide as they would allow and reached her arms out to swat the vision away. She stared until a breeze lifted the blinds just enough to pour some streetlight into the room and the figure dissolved. She panted while trying to will her body to stop sweating. Her eyes were dishonest. She played solitaire on her phone until sunrise when she fell asleep.

She woke up around four. A guy she went to high school with lived in the neighborhood according to Facebook so she messaged him saying hey, long time no see, and that she wanted to buy a large quantity of weed. He came over within the hour with some excellent bud, of which she ended up buying two ounces because that's how much he had. She sat a bit closer to him on the couch and he stood up; it was palpably awkward and he left.

The walls of Darlene's apartment were absolutely bare. She wanted to decorate but had no feeling about where to start. The couch was pushed up against one wall facing the television she bought in a moment of impulse from the electronic store. It was too big, cost several hundred dollars and dwarfed everything in the room. She checked her balance for the third time that day and turned the massive screen on. She would enjoy this. It was dark in her living room and she was alone. She got high and watched the cooking channel until she realized she was starving. She'd finished all the chips and cheese spread and had accidentally left the deli macaroni salad on the counter for an undetermined length of time. It was dark. She slipped her flip-flops on to walk down to the Circle K on the corner.

When she opened her door, she heard someone call out "Hey," from the apartment next to hers. The door was open so she looked in to see a guy standing just beyond the doorway, mid-twenties maybe, Mexican, and, she immediately decided, attractive.

"Hey," she said.

"You just moved in, right?"

“Like a week ago.”

“Yeah.”

“Darlene,” she said, touching her own shoulder. He wasn’t moving toward the door like you normally would when you introduce yourself.

“Could you do me like a really huge favor?”

“What,” she said. She stepped a little closer to see into the apartment. It was dark, but she could make out a tidy living room and stacks of boxes against the back wall.

“I got this rent check that needs to go in the mail box at the office. It’s already a day late. You think you could drop it off? It looks like you’re going out?”

She felt like he could tell she was attracted to him and that she would do it. She didn’t like the feeling. She put her hand to her hip and gave him what she deemed an appropriate amount of attitude.

“You’re telling me you can’t walk over to the office and drop this check off yourself? You need a woman to do this for you?” She hoped it didn’t come off as too playful, the kind of sarcasm that can get a woman in trouble.

He lifted the pant leg of his sweats to reveal a black monitor strapped to his ankle with a tiny green light like an eye. She stared at it until it registered what it was for.

“I can’t go past the door,” he said.

He let go of his pant leg and Darlene felt her defenses go down. He said it without any embarrassment or apology.

“And my little boy’s asleep. He’d usually do it,” he said, “but I can’t leave the house until Monday for work. So, yeah, I’m kind of desperate.”

His immobility and the fact that he had a kid instantly made her feel the familiar sense of wrongness in her gut for misjudging how to act around him. She reached into his doorway and took the envelope from him. He had the word *familia* in script down his forearm and an image of only the face of the Pietá on his bicep and shoulder: her downcast eyes and full lips in the calm resolve of grief inked perfectly in black and gray. It was the exact image she wore on a pendant before her First Holy Communion and every day until she lost it at a water park in the eighth grade, an image so familiar to her that she could see it on his arm even as she walked to the office under the orange glare of streetlights and could recall it in the Circle K as she overfilled a styrofoam cup with crushed ice.

Angela blanched green beans and put them in the blender with the boiled chicken, the vitamins, and the protein powder. When the mixture was cool, she spooned it into the large syringe and took it into the front room where Brian was watching MTV: she left it on because she thought it's what he would be watching if none of it had happened. She lifted his shirt and inserted the contents into his feeding tube. Brian rolled his head toward her slightly and looked up into her eyes.

“Green beans and chicken,” she said.

He blinked.

He had been a heavy child. He loved food and on holidays, with no supervision, he would eat himself sick on the spiral cut ham and mashed potatoes. After his injury, he lost the ability to swallow: she had wept at the notion of his never tasting food again. Her

husband called this silly when she said it out loud--he was alive, wasn't he? And yet she grieved his loss of pleasure. What pleasure would he have left? He couldn't walk, couldn't move his arms with any real direction, would never have children. He would never lose his virginity or find himself stammering through a marriage proposal. No, the loss of the pleasure of appetite was not silly.

She removed the syringe and smoothed his shirt back down. She did the dishes and then ate a sandwich in front of the sink. In an hour, she would empty his colostomy bag. Some time after that, her husband would return home to sit on the entire house with his anger. One of the worst parts of Darlene's absence was the missing buffer. Before, when came home upset, there was a fifty percent chance of him directing that negativity toward Darlene—for making messes, for her clothing, for taking some money from the dresser drawer that acted as his savings account. And Darlene was usually game to snap back, leaving Angela untroubled for a while. Without her, she braced for his homecoming in the evening, awaiting his displeasure with dinner or the state of the house.

Before Brian's accident, she had a career. She was moving up in her job in orthopedic shoe retail—from cashier to inventory control to key holder, which is a type a manger position. There was talk of sending her to night school for some business classes. After that, she would have been eligible for an Assistant Manager position and benefits. But the accident happened before any of that could get rolling and Angela suddenly found herself tasked with the least desirable job in the world. She was a custodian, really. Cleaning, sterilizing, dumping, refilling. She could not relax—there were timed events that happened on a regular schedule and enormous consequences if she took a rest: the

bags had to be changed precisely in time with his digestion cycle to avoid the risk overflowing or backing up, the vitamins had to be measured cleanly or she faced the ever-present threat of constipation from all of the iron. Constipation could devastate things for days until things moved again. She was familiar with all forms of his stool—about what each color and softness meant. These were his communications with her—too much, not enough, just right. The vacuuming and the dusting to keep lungs clear. These tasks overshadowed, say, her husband’s laundry. She was saving a life every day. There would be very little pleasure for either of them, she thought, but there were no real choices.

When Lorenzo watched her walk to the office with his rent check, he could tell that she was younger than he thought. She was sweet, though, when she dropped the attitude and he could smell the weed when she opened the door. He’d been hesitant to ask her anything. For the previous week, he’d seen her coming in and out of the apartment with groceries, shyly directing delivery men carrying furniture and then a big television. One afternoon, he was sitting on his bed watching game highlights when he caught a glimpse of her between the blinds standing on the breezeway in a bathing suit. She put a hand on the railing and leaned forward slightly, the other hand at her neckline, untwisting the strap and then adjusting the fabric of the suit. She looked down at the pool and then turned around and went back inside. Later that night when he jacked off, he found himself picturing her with her hand so near her breasts, her dark blond hair down her back.

The woman who lived in that apartment before her was in her forties, wore short shorts, and drank every night. Some nights she'd cry about her babies, babies, babies, and he could hear it through the wall. Some nights she'd knock on his door and want a hug. She'd bring beer. He felt bad for letting her in, but as long as she didn't wake Little, it was okay. Twice, she drank until her eyes were low and asked him if she was beautiful. The truth was that she was, a little. Or at least he could see that she had at one time been beautiful. A woman his father would have liked. Both times she blew him and one time he fucked her. When she cried, he tried to comfort her but mostly needed her to leave because his probation officer was coming in the morning and he needed to get the beer cans out of the house. He piled them into a shopping bag and sent her home with them, her wedge heels clapping from his door to hers, her bra strap down her arm, her wild brown hair a mass at the top of her head. She moved out, or was evicted, maybe two weeks later and he was still not done feeling unsettled by her. She was somewhere else while they did it, her eyes far away while he focused on getting off quickly. He was glad, though, that she was gone because he didn't want to see her sad face again and didn't trust himself to say no either. Company was hard to come by.

In a short time, she found herself falling into Lorenzo's life. He'd knock on her wall and she'd come over. There was the kind of eye contact that was like a promise. His being right next door was exciting. She stopped by on her way to the store to see if he needed anything and he was grateful. She saw his mom walk past her window to his apartment and then watched her take the kid with her somewhere. She knocked on the

wall and he knocked back.

She actually liked the job at the Circle K. She was within walking distance of the apartment. Her duties were simple: fill the coffee makers, put the out-of-order sign on the slush machines if they didn't work, rotate the hot dogs. She brought home treats after work to Lorenzo and Little. She won the favor of Lorenzo's mother, she hoped, because she brought her a case of the orange jelly slices covered in course sugar that they sold in big bags. She loved them.

In bed, she traced the face of the Pieta on his shoulder.

"Did you get this in jail?" she asked.

"This? Look at it. I paid a lot of money for it."

"It's perfect."

"So, then I obviously didn't get it in there."

"Sorry," she said. She rolled over. She rolled back over.

"I'm saying that I wasn't going to assume that talented people don't go to jail.

You're talented."

"Well, I fucking went to school for it."

She sighed.

"Why are you being like this?"

"What am I being like?"

"Like, you don't want me here. Like you're not--I don't get it, I'm here every day, helping Little, bringing you groceries, I don't even like kids and, anyone else—"

"Anyone else what? Wouldn't do it?"

“You’re in a mood,” she said. He was far away. She had become very used to their routine. He was home at the same time every day. She met Little at the bus stop and walked him home. If he needed help with his homework, she helped him. He cooked dinner. They put Little to bed and fucked quietly until it was late and Lorenzo needed her to go back to her apartment so he could sleep. She couldn’t help the nighttime panics that woke Little, that left her grabbing at Lorenzo’s throat as if he were attacking her. And he didn’t blame her. But at the same time, he needed to sleep. Still, as the weeks went on, his nightly dismissal of her felt like rejection.

“Yeah, I’m in a mood, I guess.” He set his alarm, her signal that it was time to go. She slipped on her flip-flops and walked heavily down the breezeway to her place.

The next day, a group of guys came in the Circle K loud and rowdy around noon. The type of group whose energy you can feel from down the street. They weren’t in the right neighborhood, in long tank tops and trucker hats. One of them held a skateboard. She didn’t want them to come to the counter. They all got huge 44-ounce soft drinks and she told them to take them for free so they wouldn’t come to the counter. One took a pack of gum with him on the way out. She watched the clock until three o’clock when she walked to get Little from the bus stop.

He was quiet and affectionate. He asked her questions and let her talk. All of a sudden she had so much to say. She told him everything, too quickly, probably, about the man in San Francisco, how her father interrogated her for his name so that he could find him. Her father had honestly and truly planned to find him and shoot his gut full of buckshot so that he died slowly. She begged him not to do anything to that man so that he

could be put on trial and sent to jail where, her mother had said, he would be raped. This was not the case. She told him about Brian, about his paralysis, the wheelchair he controlled with his mouth since the day he rolled his car on the way back from Lake Tahoe in high school, killing his best friend in the passenger seat and ejecting a girl he liked very much across the icy street where she landed hard in a slushy snow bank.

Lorenzo watched her body language change as she jumped from heavy topic to heavy topic, her excitement, if that was the word, growing as the story took terrible turns. He was sympathetic but weary of her comfort with grief. It struck him as odd. As he could not stop himself from doing since he became a father five years earlier, he imagined this girl he was about to fuck as the mother of his child. Would she help Little if his jacket was inside out or let him struggle with it? Was she the type to spank or what? In bed, he made sure to keep his ankle out of the way so that he wouldn't accidentally clip her with it and so that he could forget about it for a little bit.

If Darlene brought the groceries, Lorenzo would cook up something for dinner. She couldn't cook at all and didn't care to learn, which, for Lorenzo, was a point deduction. On Mondays through Fridays his GPS monitor was programmed to allow him a one-way trip to work and a one-way trip back. He had to drive the one route the GPS allowed, even if that meant traffic. If he needed to stop for gas, he had to call his P.O. to stop the alarm from tripping, to stop her from filing a single-page report that could send him back.

He worked as much overtime as they would allow at the golf course clubhouse

where he was the sous chef. Even though the menu was mostly club sandwiches and chicken alfredos, the chef let him play around with the ingredients and propose different specials for the menu. The chef, Ralphie, didn't care that he'd been to prison, that he would be on house arrest until New Year's Eve, unable to come in on short notice, that he looked a little rough. Ralphie had been there. "When you're done," Ralphie said, "I'll take you up to that restaurant you're always talking about in Folsom. The one with the foam shit you like." In culinary school, Lorenzo was captivated by a young chef who came and did a guest presentation one afternoon about molecular gastronomy. He liked that the way is sounded, the way it involved tanks of pressurized gas, blowtorches, sealed vacuum bags. It was like combining his father's use of tools and machinery at the plant with his mother's knack for distilling comfort and peace in a single bite of her food.

In his daydreams, he could see himself opening a restaurant with his brother to keep him out of trouble maybe. They'd create a menu of deconstructed Mexican dishes. He had an idea for a shrimp cocktail which used a tomato foam and souv-vide shrimp over flash-frozen cucumbers and emulsified avocado. For Lorenzo's birthday, Ralphie took all of the petty cash and bought a can of nitrous oxide for freezing and an immersion blender to make the foams. The dish was beautiful and delicious, even Ralphie, with his steak and potatoes sensibilities, had to admit. When his paycheck came, he sent a check to the DOC for the money he still owed on his sentence and a check to his little brother in San Francisco who was working as a bouncer as a strip club in the city. Julian's rent in the city was twice what he was making at the club, and he knew Julian would supplement with selling ecstasy despite the pleading he'd done with him to quit that shit.

Julian could just have easily spent those four years with him inside. The morning the DEA stormed into the house, Julian had spent the night at his girlfriend's house. The search warrant did not identify him specifically, as the house was not listed as his place of residence. Lorenzo's roommate, Tommy, a fat white guy from the richest part of Sacramento was the name on the lease. He was the moneyman. He put up everything up front, handled all of the cash. He had a crazy white-boy love for guns and kept them stockpiled in his room—all kinds of calibers including a fully automatic tommy gun he bought in Arizona for vanity, being that they shared a name. He got off easy in court—good lawyers, family connections, etc.

Lorenzo's attorney was appointed to him by the State and from the get-go had a defeatist attitude. He encouraged him to take the plea, which left him sentenced to five years mandatory time because of the weapons charge. When Little's mother lost custody rights in his fourth year of prison, he filed an appeal to serve out his time on house arrest to take care of him. The countdown was on to freedom: four months to New Year's.

He was quiet when he got home, which made Angela nervous. He walked into the kitchen and opened a bottle of wine for himself. He placed his shoes neatly in the front room beside his place on the house. He patted Brian's arm and said Hey Bud.

"Hear from Darlene?" He asked this while trying to sound casual. He had not asked about her since the day she moved out.

"She got a job," Angela said.

"Where's that?"

"She's a cashier," Angela said. She was glad they were speaking and that she had

information for him.

“A cashier where?”

“The Circle K, right on the corner down from where she lives.”

He made a sound that meant he was not impressed.

“Sounds like she’s really, uh, living the good life.” He sat back in his seat. The exchange was over.

Later, when he erupted over tripping over his own pile of dirty laundry, she erupted right back at him that his clothes were not life and death but caring for their son was.

“You’re a goddamned martyr,” he said.

She walked out to the kitchen and braced her arms on either side of the sink. It was time to change the bag.

Darlene waited but Little didn’t get off the bus. With two hours until Lorenzo would be home, she drove to the school and looked to see if he had missed it. Then she panicked that maybe another bus comes and drops off a later batch of kids and that she had missed that bus, so she drove home and there was no one. She found a number for Lorenzo’s mom, but she didn’t pick up. When Lorenzo didn’t come home, she was beside herself that he had gotten a call from the school saying no one had retrieved him, that he would go back to jail just because she hadn’t been there, even though that sounded impossible. Surely the PO would understand.

Darlene made peace with the two alternatives: one, a worst-case scenario which

she would for now put on hold. The second was that Little was fine and Lorenzo was still angry with her. They were with his mother, all together somewhere. The PO knew. It was fine. Lorenzo was still angry, but the freedom of being outside of his small apartment would refresh him, push him out of the funk they had been in. He would come home and make love to her in the quiet of the apartment. She pulled all bedding from Little's room along with the towels and a load of Lorenzo's laundry. She trucked them down to the laundromat and thought of Brian, his unfocused eyes when their mother changes his clothes. His adult body and child's mind, the way his mouth always seemed just about to say something. If he could speak, she thought he might tell her to go away anyway. Her attempts had never made a difference. She shook the thought of him away and instead folded clothes into neat piles of light and dark the way a good wife might, before tossing it all into the hot soapy water.

In San Francisco, the man was fitted for a new suit in an Italian haberdashery in North Beach. He'd gained weight around the middle and could no longer button the blue Brooks Brothers number he wore for company events. He'd have a new suit for the new job. It was the same job, really, with a partner company in the middle of the city. His office view was actually better: the Golden Gate was unobstructed. His new apartment was another thing. His wife took the house in San Rafael and he finally understood the golf-course talk about alimony. It was more than he expected. Still, it was almost the New Year. New year, new job, new life. He had practically erased the girl from his memory until he received the letter from her mother. Her handwriting looked like his

wife's, a mark of their generation. In what he read of it, he could make out that things had gone poorly for her. It was the first time he felt remorse: not for what he'd done, but for feeling even less now in the face of her mother's anguish. What had happened in the hotel room, as far as he could remember, had been upsetting to them both. When she was gone in the morning and he was back in his town car to the City, he had nearly forgotten about it. When the whole business reared up again, all felt was rage and fear. He had seen the girl several times in court. She looked terrible. But he could not make himself care about her. Nor the mother. The tailor tugged at his arms and he adjusted. In the mirror he tried to stand straighter, to tuck in the parts of himself that spilled over.

In another neighborhood in San Francisco, Little and Lorenzo along with his mother stood in the basement of the St. Francis Memorial hospital. A doctor appeared to take Lorenzo inside where he positively identified his baby brother, shot twice in the chest. The doctor unzipped the bag just enough to show Julian's face. His eyes were closed but his tongue did not hang from his mouth the way it did when they played dead as kids, shooting at each other from couch-and-table forts. The doctor tapped his pen against his clipboard. Outside the room, Lorenzo's mother waited for the whole thing not to be true. Lorenzo felt his face get hot in the cold green-walled basement and he sat down. He was not yet ready to accept this. Instead, he recalled the story of Darlene's brother, tall and beautiful, compressed into a wheelchair permanently three feet tall. He saw her eyes while she told the story, as if watching something grander just past him that only she could see.



## CHAPTER 4

### WEDDING AT THE TRI-LEVEL HOUSE

Two hours before his cousin's wedding, Jake sat in his car in a grocery store parking lot and tried not to get worked up. In the seat next to him, Shana changed her shirt. She slipped out of the tank top and into the halter before unhooking her bra and sliding it out of her shirt so that her shoulders were bare.

"Could you just wait until your shift to take your clothes off?" Jake said.

"I can't walk in there in a dirty tank top."

"And I don't want some cop coming over here trying to get you on soliciting."

"Nice," she said, "really nice."

The parking lot was busy at six o'clock, busy enough to conduct business right in the middle of it. Jake and Shana waited in the car for people to approach the window and buy whatever they needed--weed, crystal, crack, oxy if they had it. They usually had it; Shana's grandmother had recently broken a hip.

It was still at least a hundred degrees outside so Jake had parked under a tree. From their spot in the middle, they could see both the store entrance--in case some employee was sent to shoo them away--and the street, where they could keep an eye out for patrol cars.

Jake had not been invited to the wedding, but had somehow ended up on the bridal registry email list, which provided him the bride's quart preference on a two hundred dollar Dutch oven.

"You're doing that thing where you scrunch your toes," Shana said.

He looked down at his sandaled feet, clenched like making a fist. He spread his toes out and took a breath.

“Why don’t we just show up at the wedding anyway. I love weddings.”

“It just pisses me the fuck off. Like I’m not family anymore? Like I didn’t take care of him when he was a kid?”

“I know, baby,” she said, “they’re just hella judgmental.”

“I fucking took care of that kid.”

“I know,” she said.

“And they want to blame me for--?” He could feel himself getting shaky. His toes were clenched again.

“I know, baby,” she said.

A man approached the window. Jake waited until he could see his teeth to tell if he was a cop. They were sufficiently fucked.

“What’s good,” the man asked.

“What are you looking for, boss.”

He had a terrible face, gray and pockmarked.

“Horse, man, I need it.” He pulled a five-dollar bill from his pocket.

“Sorry, partner,” Jake said, “don’t have any. That shit will kill you.”

“How about some weed?”

“Not for five bucks.”

“Can you help me out man, I’m--I’m going to throw up.” The man teetered back a little, as if to prove this.

Jake pulled a nugget about the size of a pencil eraser from his ashtray and handed it to him.

“You’re a good man,” he said, giving him the five.

When he was gone, Shana chopped up a very small line of speed on a cd case and railed it quickly. She chopped a larger one for him.

“You *are* a good man,” she said, passing him the case.

“If I’m a good man, then everybody is.”

“Well, maybe they are then.”

“We’re going,” he said, “call the club and tell them you’re taking a sick day.”

Back when his Uncle Marty went to state-mandated rehab instead of jail, his cousin Garret moved in with Jake’s family for eighty-seven days. Marty almost made it through his ninety day program before being kicked out when the House Manager discovered that he had been making hooch in his room using a trash bag, a straw and all of the cinnamon raisin toast he could steal from the kitchen.

While Garret lived at Jake’s house, Jake taught him to play seven chords on the guitar, to catch crawdads in the creek using hot dogs and shoe laces, and to kiss a woman by convincing his then-girlfriend to let Garret practice on her in the backyard. By the middle of his stay, Garret could roll a tight joint. Jake wouldn’t let him smoke it--twelve was too young--but Jake hoped it was a skill that would someday garner him some respect. Garret would be heading into eighth grade the next year and he was bound to be

tortured: his thick glasses and pitifully thin frame were almost cartoonish. Jake's mother worked a night shift and slept during the day and his father drove long haul routes, coming home just a few days at a time, leaving Jake and Garret virtually by themselves all summer. Jake would have done anything for that kid after the nightmare of a year that the family had been through. Jake's brother had been over six feet tall and strong as a horse but he had a trick heart and it took him down on their driveway in late winter like a snap of God's fingers. That was how Jake's father had put it. Like a match, like a bullet, like a ton of bricks. Jake had never forgotten, all these years later, that his younger cousin never shamed him at all for crying. That Garret physically held Jake through fits of heaving. And Garret had cried to—over his mother being gone, Jake's brother being gone, his father in so much trouble, over their mutual realization that sometimes there is nothing a man can do in this life to keep from being very suddenly alone.

Jake was planning on going into the church when they got there—right down the aisle and sitting on the groom's side and making everyone uncomfortable. But when they got there, he lost his nerve and instead they sat in the car outside, snorting up the rest of the speed for bravery.

“I even have a dress back here,” Shana said, twisting in her seat and pulling a tube dress from the floor. It was one she wore during a routine she did at the club wherein she portrayed a beach babe, first stripping off a towel, then the tube dress, and finally a gold lamé bikini. Jake had seen it a hundred times when he worked as a bouncer at the club. She shook the dress out in the car and he could see the individual flecks of glitter catch

the light as they jumped out of the fabric.

“They did our baptisms and shit here, mine and my brother’s.” Jake said.

“It’s nice,” Shana said.

“My brother’s funeral, too.”

“Shit,” she said, “I’m sorry baby, here.” She handed him the last bump off of the cd case. For the rest of the night, they’d have to switch to coke, which was unfortunate because it was more expensive and if they took it, they of course couldn’t sell it, and therefore could not pay back the guy he owed for it. He looked out at the front of the church and tried to remember walking up the steps in shiny dress shoes as a child, but could only drag up the last time he was here, more than a year ago, for Uncle Marty’s funeral, which was the last time he had any contact with his family.

“Go see what that sign says,” Jake said.

Shana got out of the car and trotted up the steps. She looked the paper sign on the door over for a moment before ripping it off and bringing it back.

“Reception info,” she said, handing it to him.

It took Jake a moment to recognize the address.

“My dad is giving the reception at his house.”

“That’s fucked up,” Shana said.

“Damn,” Jake said, “I loved that house.”

“Why?”

“It’s one of those tri-level ones, you know? Kind of sunk half into the ground. We moved in right before my brother died. We’d only lived there maybe a year or so before

he, you know. We had the whole lower level. It was, fuck. Before he died, it was a good house, I guess, is all.”

He parked across the street and left the car running for the air and the radio. They would just wait until the guests showed up and he would march in and give them exactly what they wanted. He could be the fuck up, sure, but he would show them what that meant. Throw a big fucking fit. Destroy the cake, tear up the bouquet, spit at the bride’s father, cold-cock his own.

They could blame Jake for all of it, for Marty’s death, but as far as Jake was concerned, it was his father who started this. Uncle Marty got out of rehab and life returned to normal for awhile, but Marty couldn’t stop drinking and doing cocaine, both of which made him violent and the violence was what had landed him in court in the first place. Jake’s dad asked if he didn’t have something that would calm Uncle Marty down and take the edge off. So that was the first time he sold his uncle anything, with not only the seal of approval from his father, but a direct request. Eventually, Marty wanted something stronger. He showed up to the house one day and asked for pain pills. Jake didn’t have any, but he did have something that would put him out for a while—his exact question. *What do you have that will put me out for a while?* So Jake sold him a tiny blue balloon with enough heroin inside for two, maybe three hits. He showed him how to bend the spoon so that it sat level on the counter, how to heat the mixture, how to use a tiny cotton ball to help catch anything that wasn’t diluted smooth. He wasn’t at all afraid of the needle and he had good, big veins. They when they’d each shot up, they sank into the carpet of the basement room in the tri level house, listening to records and feeling the

floor melt beneath them. Uncle Marty became Jake's best customer: best because he bought the most, and best because he stuck around when his own father was driving across country.

Jake turned the engine over and circled the block again. He was anxious and the speed was not helping. When he felt like he'd surveyed the scene, he pulled up to the curb across the street. The lawn looked better than any lawn they'd had growing up. The resentment built within him like a creek rising.

"I lived in a house just like this," Shana said, "just exactly like it."

"What?" Jake said.

"For real," she said, "when I was a little girl." She pulled the tube dress over her clothes and shimmied it down her body, then began untying the halter.

"What are you doing, now?" he said, looking around and suddenly dreading taking her inside.

"I'm putting my dress on, Jesus."

"You never lived in a house like this," he said.

"Bet your fucking bottom dollar I did, see that top story? I bet you when we go inside, there's two bedrooms up there and then the middle has a--it has a kitchen and a big front room that sort of wraps around and there's a lower level and it will have two more bedrooms and an office. Am I right?"

"You never lived in a house like that," he said again.

She pulled her jeans off from under her dress and tossed them inside out onto the

backseat.

“I don’t understand you,” she said, “why you care so much. It’s not like you’re trying to go back and live with your dad.”

He didn’t say anything.

“Let’s just go get fucked up for free and then leave,” she said, “simple as that. Don’t worry about them judging you.”

He turned off the ignition. She took his face in her hands.

“Baby, they already judged you.”

He’d been living with Shana at her grandmother’s house for six months.

Everything had become routine: their meals, the care of her grandmother which required more of him than he’d given to anyone, the laundry, the too-hard scratch of her nails down his back which she thought he liked. She had done it every time they fucked since the first time, when it had made him come instantly. In truth, it had only been the surprise of her aggression, the way it had suggested that she wanted him so completely, that had triggered him. After that, it was predictably painful.

He did not mind her dancing, but every once in a while—another routine--she did side work and that made him furious. One week, a man paid her a hundred dollars to crush strawberries with her stiletto heel in his trailer home bathroom. That was upsetting, though he couldn’t articulate what he was angry about exactly. Something undefined. But the next week, a US Airways pilot paid her four hundred bucks to let him fuck her feet and suddenly her feet became alien to him. He had never thought to fuck them, these

perpetually cold feet that found their way under his warm calves in bed sending a chill through his body, these feet that he watched her wrap up in sandals and platform shoes before work. He'd never thought to claim them--never thought she would parcel out pieces of herself if he didn't speak up first. There were days he thought to leave: long days spent alone when he could imagine another life or what his life would have been if he'd been different. He could see the other life, just across town in his father's house. But then she'd come home, rub his head, interrupt his thoughts. The power and the ease of the routine took him under like a warm, soft wing. After all, she had a job, she had a car and she loved the idea of him.

The front yard had more signs stuck into the gravel that pointed guests to the side gate, where they could reach the wedding reception in the back. People began to arrive in little packs. He didn't see anyone he recognized yet.

"Where are they?" Jake said, "there are a shitload of people here already."

"Probably taking pictures at the church." Shana said.

Or the cemetery behind it, Jake thought. If his mother were here, she would have wanted to take pictures in front of Uncle Marty's grave. He had not known the strangeness of this custom as a youth, but neither had he anyone to compare notes with. After she left for Arizona, he found himself missing it. For several years in a row, his mother took him and, when the road allowed, his father out to the cemetery for a Christmas card picture with his older brother's headstone. He imagined his father out there in front of it now, the cold marble flatness of it. And here was Jake, alive and warm

just outside his house.

The sun was setting before the limo arrived. Garret and his bride stepped carefully out of the car, along with some groomsmen, the bridesmaids in a satiny pink clump, and his father who exited the limo last. Jake knew him by his legs. He was wearing his cowboy boots, which were his preferred shoe when he was driving long hauls because he could drive with just the tip of his toe.

“Come on,” Jake said.

“Thank God, I’m so tired of sitting in that car.”

They walked up to the side gate behind the bridal party, waiting for all of them to filter in through the gate. They moved like a herd over to the head table in front of the sliding glass doors at the back of the house.

“Dang,” Shana said, “I wanted to go inside.” Her dress looked cheap in full light, thin and sheer. Jake wished she had another dress in the car. “I wanted to see if the layout is the same. Maybe this *was* my house.”

“Will you quit with this? It’s not your fucking house.”

She set her jaw and brushed her hair behind her shoulder.

“It’s not your fucking house either.”

She strolled into the wedding ahead of him like she was invited, smiling at the military officers in uniform and the two women wearing flowered hats and looking around until she plopped her big faux leather purse on a table with two empty seats. From the gate he could now see some great aunts and a few other cousins from Garret’s mother’s side--people he and Garret barely knew. This further infuriated him. He put his

head down and walked straight to the seat beside Shana.

He knew no one at the table and did not intend on talking to anyone. The old couple at the table though, would be the type to ask questions. In their seventies, likely. The wife turned to Jake with an open mouthed smile.

“How do you folks know the bride and groom?” she asked. She was wearing pearls and had a tight, hungry face. She searched over Shana’s tits with her eyes while keeping her stiff smile.

“Old friends,” Jake said.

“And this is your--?”

“I’m Shana. Pleased to meet you,” Shana said, extending her hand and Jake felt, impersonating the role of responsible adult. She played this role like a stripper, however, and did more touching than normal people do in real life.

“I really like your tie,” she said to the woman’s husband, seated directly to her left. She took the tie in her hands and examined the print. “Horse shoes are lucky.”

“Oh, luck,” he said, putting his chin to his chest and looking at her hands on his tie. He couldn’t seem to come up with something to say. “Yes, luck. Thank you. Yes.”

The caterers served dinner. They looked like they could be friends of Jake’s scrubbed up for a job. Evidence of their visible piercings and tattoos covered up with band-aids. Forced thin smiles. They had to slip past one another to reach each of the tables. Shana slipped the dinner roll in her purse.

“Do you want yours?” she asked the man with the horse-show tie. “My grandmother loves these. And they’re like four bucks a package.”

“Take it,” the man said, “Dear?”

“I’d like mine, actually,” his wife said, and bit it.

Jake looked up to the bridal table where Garret and his father were already eating. He watched his father signal to get Garret’s attention from the end of the table. Garret sent back a thumbs-up.

“How do you know the bride and groom?” Shana asked the man with the horseshoe tie, who seemed to be enjoying her conversation like the regulars at the White Stallion.

“I’m their pastor. I did the ceremony.”

“At the church,” Shana said, nodding her head, “super pretty.”

Jake tapped Shana’s leg under the table.

“It’s not the Taj Mahal,” his wife said, “but we like it.”

Jake took a bite of a roll.

“For sure,” Shana said.

“Where do you folks worship?” The pastor folded his hands on the table when he said this and focused his gaze on Shana. Jake thought he sounded like a teacher asking about homework he knew they hadn’t completed.

“Well, so it’s hard for us, because we both work on Sundays. But my grandmother turns on the preachers on the TV. She broke her hip, so, you know, she can’t go anywhere.”

“Well, I do make house calls,” the pastor said, wiping his mouth.

“Only if you think she’d like that, dear,” his wife said, leaning further into the

conversation, “that’s rather forward.”

“I think she’d just love that, wouldn’t Gram love that, Jake? Hey, Jake?”

The head table caught his eye again, where Garret and his father were living the new life they had begun without him a year ago. When he imagined their lives from Shana’s bedroom on good days, he imagined them broken, sad men who had lost everything, even their living link to Marty, to Jake’s brother. But there weren’t so many good days. On the bad days, lonely ones when Shana worked late and drove to neighboring cities for side work and he was left to crush pain pills into pudding, to lift bedpans, to indulge an old woman’s ideas about him and his goodness, this is the way he imagined them: comfortable, fluent, smiling in relief.

“I’m just going to powder my nose,” Shana said, “Now don’t you guys run off!”

Her heels sank unevenly into the grass as she walked through the maze of small round tables. Jake watched people turn heads to look at her, obviously out of place, while she stumbled toward the sliding glass doors behind the bridal party. Garret did not notice her: he sat facing his new bride who looked so young, like girls Jake had slept with in high school and nothing like Shana at all: she had a clear, bright face and held herself up carefully. It occurred to Jake that he must have met her at the church Garret joined when his dad was going sideways again after rehab. The kind of church where people talked too friendly, like they were selling vacuums, and like they knew you already--like this pastor at the table. Garret took right to it.

The last batch of heroin he sold his Uncle Marty came from a guy he’d never met

before. Jake was selling in the park down the street from the house, when he noticed a guy in an orange vest waving him over with a rake in the other hand. He said that he was going to be searched by his parole officer and that he was carrying a pocket full of balloons that he needed to unload immediately for any price at all. He gave the guy twenty bucks for what should have cost him two hundred.

It was a bad batch. Or a good batch, if you ask a heroin junkie, stronger than the heart can take at normal doses. Jake called Marty and he came right over. He shot up just a little bit in the bathroom after dinner and by the time he was back in the car, he was overdosing. When his hands left the wheel to grab at his collar for air, the coroner presumed, he lost control and couldn't correct fast enough to avoid the spin out, the tree that took the car around itself like a saddle.

Shana returned from the bathroom elated. She smiled at each person she passed on her way back to the table. She sat down and smoothed her short dress and said to the table, "Well, I'm not sure exactly yet, but I am pretty damn sure that I lived in this house when I was a little girl."

"Really," said the pastor. "What an amazing coincidence."

"Oh, father, it's a miracle."

"It's just John," he said, touching his neckline, "no collar, see."

"I can't even believe it, John, it looks just the same in there. My grandmother slept on the couch and it looked an awful lot like the couch they have in there now except it was red and made of leather, or the fake leather, I can't remember, and I slept on the

other couch and--”

“Shana,” Jake said.

“What,” Shana said, “I was just saying that we all lived in this house, my uncles and aunts and cousins and some other folks sometimes and holy Jesus I think I remember this backyard now, yep, it’s coming back to me. I am ninety percent sure.”

“Shana,” Jake said, “give me your purse.”

She handed him the bag and he set it on the ground. He ducked down, dipped his car key into the little baggie of coke and sniffed it up quick. When he came back up his head was buzzing and he was making direct eye contact with Garret, who looked hard at him. Shana’s voice was high and clear, like a child’s.

“Just about ninety percent. I need to check one more thing and that will be the sure thing.”

“That’s absolutely amazing,” the pastor’s wife said.

“It’s not true,” Jake said and the whole table looked at him sharply.

Someone clinked a glass at the bridal table.

The best man got up to give a speech, a thin man with a sparse beard from the church who told a story about Garret catching the most fish on a camping trip. His father watched the speech intently, laughing at the appropriate moments. Jake watched his father look proud. Garret had begun to hate Jake well before his father died. He resented the hours Jake and his father spent in the basement, the way it had deadened them both. He could feel Garret hating him but couldn’t feel it deep enough to say it to himself or to change one thing about his life. Everything he could feel was at the bottom of a well

somewhere inside him, echoing up faint sounds. The sound of Garret's hate was like a quiet murmur. It was easy to ignore.

Shana pulled her purse from the table, dragging the tablecloth with her a bit, disrupting all of the glassware. "Just one more thing," she said, too loudly. She stood up and made for the house, walking behind the best man and back toward the sliding glass doors, bumping her purse against a woman's shoulder and then knocking the vase off of the dessert table before ducking inside.

A bridesmaid took the microphone. Garret looked away from the party and right at Jake. He mouthed something to him and pointed to the gate. *Get out.* The bridesmaid talked on about Garret being the bride's perfect match, a marriage of equals, love being patient and kind, slow to anger and quick to something, and then some more church talk, a marriage made in heaven. It was hard to get a handle on what would come next. Garret ran his hands through his hair. Pissed, Jake thought. But worried, too. His father had his long legs crossed at the end of the table, listening to the bridesmaid rattle on. Each moment seemed like it was the moment just before he would say something, to stand up and make himself known. He wanted a silent moment--funeral quiet--a moment like the one Garret and his father had given him at his Uncle Marty's funeral, which took place after the coroner's report came back and the theory was out that Jake was ultimately responsible, Jake in his black t-shirts and long dark bruises in the crooks of his arms, Jake, who slept downstairs in the basement of the tri-level until two or three in the afternoon, who stayed out all night until he'd bought or sold everything he'd wanted to a community of customers who trusted his products and the fairness of his digital scale like

he was a small business owner. He dumped the rest of the batch that killed Marty like he was getting rid of a handgun.

By the time Marty's body was lowered into the ground, he wished his father would have just beaten the shit out of him, like he wanted to do. Anything would have been better than the still and quiet hatred. A kick from the tip of that boot to the chest, to the head, Jake would have taken it. But after the internment, his father kicked the headstone and spit at his son's feet. Today, Jake's mind was clearer than it had been for years--since the day they buried his brother--and he remembered the uncanny experience of grief, his shoulders carrying absolutely nothing, his head a knife slicing through the air.

And now the maid of honor handed the microphone to Jake's father, who stood up and pulled some notes from his suit pocket. Jake tried to unclench his toes. Shana had been gone too long. Garret looked from Jake to his father and seemed to be making his own calculation about when to say something. Jake tapped his foot and held his breath for a pause.

"Hello, everyone" his father said. "Thanks for coming, thanks for coming to my house to celebrate with us today. Well, what can you say. I guess I just wanted to take a moment to talk about these two, and how proud I am of them. I've gotten to sort of see what they are really like together since they have been living here for a few months. Oh, joy, right. Living with your uncle is so romantic." The crowd laughed good-naturedly. Garret looked over before turning back to his bride. Jake drank down his glass of champagne and reached for Shana's. The moment was coming.

“First, they really love each other and respect each other. That’s the most important thing. If he’s talking she’s listening, she’s talking, he’s listening, you know? Garret is a stand-up kid, a good boy, and he will make a great father himself someday. He sure has been--”

The speech was interrupted by a vaguely familiar sound. There was a moment of confusion before the sprinklers heads turned on in succession across the entire yard. Jake’s father grabbed a napkin from the table and wiped his dripping face, his right arm. Guests stood up and knocked chairs over getting to the patio. The table with the cake was overturned over by the bride’s grandmother in the fur coat. A woman in a thin dress tripped over a sprinkler head and sat rocking, clutching her foot, not bothering to move out of the spray. Some children took the opportunity to scream and run toward one another as if it were a playground game. Jake reacted to the sudden spray of water, hunching over, covering his face with his arm, and shuffling to the patio like the rest of the guests before realizing how close he was standing to his cousin and his father.

His father saw him first. Guests pushed between them and into the house. The caterers reappeared from their long cigarette breaks to clear tables away from the water. The high-powered sprinkler heads were shush-shush-shushing in a swiveling movement from left to right and then chugging back left. Some women darted back to grab left behind purses.

“Jake?” He had a fraction of a second to read his father’s expression before the sliding doors flew open and Shana yelled out into the yard, her hair wild behind her, “Jake! Jake! Come here, I’ve found something! Also I think I set off the sprinklers.”

Several of the groomsmen were looking for the sprinkler controls, running toward the side of the house and checking the faucet near the glass door.

“Jake,” his father said, “Wait, wait right there. I need to shut these off. Hold up.”

“Everyone, I used to live in this exact house! Come look, come look, you guys. And yeah, I’m actually pretty positive I turned on those sprinklers, I’m real sorry.”

Shana dipped back into the house and his father followed her to turn off the water.

Jake felt a hand on his shoulder.

“What are you doing here, man?” Garret said quietly.

“Hey,” Jake said, “I got something to say.”

“Just take it easy and get out of here,” he said and shoved off from his shoulder to face his guests. He spoke to them in a louder, happier voice.

Jake went inside to the kitchen where his father stood face-to-face with Shana, who was nearly crying she was so happy. On the counters were a pile of soaked gifts and envelopes as well as cups and saucers and bowls, some of which he recognized from his childhood. On another counter, all of the food had been pulled from another cupboard.

“Explain this to me again,” his father was saying.

“I carved my name here in the cupboard under the wall paper stuff you got covering the shelves. This is my name, right here. I was eight or so. See? S-h-a-n-a”

“Shana,” Jake said, “we’re leaving.”

“I know you’re Jake’s dad and this an important day and I’m sorry, but I used to live in this house which is a miracle because I lived in a lot of houses since I didn’t, you know, have my mom and dad, and this was the best one and we hid something behind

this weird box thing in the kitchen when I was younger, my grandmother did, to hide it from her son who would steal from her. And I found the spot where she hid it before because I remember it perfectly. So I am the one who turned the sprinklers on. I was looking in that box. In the sprinkler control thing, you know?”

“Shana, what the fuck, come on, we’re leaving now.”

His father put his hand up.

“You said you left something in there.” Jake’s dad shook his head. “Was it a ring?”

“Yes!” Shana said, “A purple ring. With diamonds.”

“Stay here.” He went down the stairs into the basement.

“Let’s go,” Jake said, “this was a fucking mistake. Come on.”

“I am experiencing a miracle here, we are not just here for you anymore.”

His father came back up the stairs two at a time. He held out in his hand an amethyst ring missing a few stones, the band slightly bent. Shana’s eyes were wide with the glory of something lost and then found. She took the ring from his hand and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“This is a true miracle. This is the biggest miracle I ever seen. And it’s also a real pleasure to meet you.”

“I’ll be damned,” his father said, “my oldest found that when we moved in. Called it his treasure. Remember that, boy?”

“No, sir,” Jake said.

“He still had it in his dresser drawer when he, you know.”

The bridesmaids ushered the bride back out of the bathroom where they whisked her to clean up the dripping makeup. The music had started up on the patio and guests were filtering back to restart the party. The general mood was good and these cheerful people seemed willing to push through the set back. The cuffs of Jake's pants were wet and he felt sick.

Garret came into the kitchen from backyard with his arms crossed.

"Hi," he said. He stared at the tile floor.

"Let's get you out there, Gar," his father said.

The DJ set up his equipment on the patio so it wouldn't ruin the speakers. Garret danced the first dance with his wife and Shana went to talk with the pastor about how to thank God for miracles and how to get more of them. Jake sat out on the front porch step and smoked a cigarette, half hoping his father would come out to find him. There had been a moment when he could have seized his father's body; he could have held on or thrown him to the ground. Garret's car was in the driveway, just above where he found his brother, the windshield written on in soap: Just Married. At the side of the house, a long shadow appeared. Jake watched his father look up and down the street. When he turned his head and realized Jake was fifteen feet away sitting on the porch step, he walked over slowly.

"She's some girl," he said.

"Yeah," Jake said. "Do you love her?"

"I don't think so."

"Garret's furious."

“I know.” He took in a breath and looked hard at his father. His thin legs, the new tufts of gray at the sides of his temples.

“What do you want to do about this son?”

The creek that had been rising in him overflowed its banks, flooding everything.

“I want to come home,” he said.

“So come home,” he said, and walked back into the yard that had belonged to each of them.

## CHAPTER 5

### LISA AND THE FLOOD

At five o'clock the librarian makes a sweep through the row of computers and gives the patrons a five-minute warning. The library will be closing. Critter prints the four pages of the chat log and two pages of pictures he has been cultivating over the last hour. He holds his breath while a pair of breasts materialize line by line on the black and white printer at an excruciating speed. He looks around to see if anyone is watching.

"Who's that?" Frank says. He always sits closest to the printer. He is maybe forty-five and sleeps in the laundromat down the street where Critter sometimes meets him for a beer or a joint behind the supermarket. Frank is at the library every day for what he calls his MySpace Fix. They are trolling the profiles and sending messages to all of the eligible girls in the area. They search by school and hometown. When they make dates, they make a list and print them for ten cents a page on the library printers.

"It's my date," Critter says.

"She could be your mother," Frank says.

"She's thirty."

"Bullshit."

"Her name is Lisa and she is a dental, what's that job, with the dentist, but you're not a dentist, but you brush the teeth?"

"She looks like an old stripper."

The printer finally spits out the last page and Critter stuffs them into his Marilyn Manson sweatshirt before clearing his history and logging out of the library computer.

Frank is having cybersex with a 19 year old who works at the supermarket. Critter can see the words *jizz*, *member*, and *bosoms*. Frank is of another generation.

“Perfect,” Frank says, “she’s literally around the corner from where I live.” Critter taps him on the shoulder to say goodbye. At the door, he pulls his hood up over his head. The rain is coming down hard.

Online, Critter told them he was seventeen, which was almost true. He will be seventeen in two years. When he gets back, he picks up the mail from the mailbox and tosses everything addressed to his mother in the trashcan on the street. He is careful to wipe his shoes before trucking though the entryway. In the bathroom, he runs a wet comb through his hair, trying out several new parts, before slicking it all back in his usual fashion. He pulls on his combat boots, which he has worn exactly twice: once to the Nine Inch Nails concert he went to by himself, and the other time to church wedding as a sign of supreme irreverence. No one had noticed them standing beside his mother in a black lace top, tight jeans and heels.

In the rain, it’s hard to get a signal on the rabbit ears. Critter twists them until the weather report comes into soft focus on the screen. The storm has washed out the bridge between his house and the freeway out of Sacramento, meaning his father’s haul will be delayed. He’ll have the house to himself until the storm clears. Thunderstorms expected until Friday with winds up to fifty miles an hour. Floods predicted in low-lying areas. Critter hops off the bed and checks the garage for sand bags. There are forty or so in the corner, ready to be stacked alongside the house if it keeps up.

His parents didn’t know anything about flood plains when they bought the house.

After the first storm season, they learned not to keep photo boxes on the floor. His mother wept for days about losing her headshots. They were taken when she had what she called her “model body,” working as the spotlight dancer at Ernie’s Interlude right before she had Critter. There is a box of her costumes in the garage. She still fits into the tops. Sometimes she’d pull one out, black crumpled leather with fringe, and come out of her room with a dance she’d choreographed herself ten years earlier. There are still opportunities for her type of talent in Reno and Laughlin. Vegas, his mother had said, was out, but who needed it. Things had changed out there.

The house is so quiet that the sound of the storm fills it up. He is too old to be frightened of the thunder, but turns on the light in the living room anyway. The armchair is draped with a blanket his mother left. In some places, it smells like her. He picks it up and runs it along his face, sniffing for remnants of her. He finds a spot in the corner along the satin edge. Faint traces of her White Shoulders perfume, a particular detergent he cannot find in the grocery store. He is vaguely aware that she would love to know that he does this. When she gets around to making a phone call, she spends most of it teasing out his love for her. He spends most of it quiet except for mumbles of agreement or protest. If his father is home, he tries to muffle the receiver when her voice carries into the small interior of the house: *“Do you miss me? Do you miss Mommy?”*

The calendar on the fridge features centerfolds of the Barbi twins late in their career at about forty years old, with yellow blond hair and pink lipstick. Lost in the flooded photo box was a picture of his mother with the Barbi twins he was not allowed to see. They did a photo shoot together in the late seventies and she buys their calendar

every year. This year she could only find it at the dollar store. In the November picture, their hard, tan bodies are in bikinis and they are squirting one another with a garden hose. Critter runs his finger along the weekdays with the red ink that says “SHORT HAUL—Sacramento to Reno—Back FRIDAY.” He figures his father will be delayed until Saturday: the rig is old and is rented anyway—he won’t risk the bad weather. Critter takes the calendar with its sexy-enough pictures back to his room.

In the instant messages, the couple had wanted to meet him at a hotel near their house, out in Rio Linda. But Critter told them he couldn’t drive, didn’t have a license and they said that it was no problem: they’d meet him at the Motel Six in his neighborhood, near the Cal Skate Skating Rink that everybody knows. The walk would take no more than twenty minutes. Outside, the clouds are already dark enough to be night. He puts his backpack with a toothbrush, t-shirt, and spare boxer shorts by the door.

Critter heads out back to cover the rabbit hutch with a tarp. The long eared flop is bunched up in the corner with the two spotted greys on either side, each pushing for the warm wooden corner. He sticks his hand in and pulls up one of the babies from under the flop. It shivers in his palm so he covers it with his other hand. He rubs the fur between its ears because he imagines that it feels good. He puts the baby back and pulls the flop up by its scruff to check on the other three. One looks fine. The other two are cold. He picks them up to try to warm them, but they are too far gone, already stiffened. He would bury them right now if it weren’t raining so hard, but leaving them there under the mother seems cruel and so he puts them in a plastic bag and tucks them under the hutch, out of her sight. He counts the number of bunnies lost this year. Seven. He is doing something

wrong. His mother once brought a whole litter of stillborn bunnies back to life—five of them—by rubbing them between her palms one at a time and blowing her warm breath on their faces. One by one, they twitched their ears and lived.

The dental hygienist's first picture, sent days before, was blurry, but she was obviously sexy. The extra pictures he got today were sent from her husband without her permission, he'd said: one from behind and his favorite one with her from the side, one leg up on the bathroom counter and her hands holding her breasts up. He has almost memorized their chat.

HotRodDave916: she wants a young guy

HotRodDave916: i think it will be hot for us to do it to her

HotRodDave916: both of us

HotRodDave916: what u think?

MetalxxThrasher: fuck yeah hot for sure

HotRodDave916: she wants u to describe urself

HotRodDave916: shes touching her pussy right now

MetalxxThrasher: 5'8 160lbs brown hair, blue eyes, athletic

HotRodDave916: sexy she likes that how big is ur dick? pic?

MetalxxThrasher: whats her name?

HotRodDave916: lisa

HotRodDave916: do u have a pic of it?

Lisa. He walks uphill toward the main boulevard. His pants are already soaking wet at the hems and he tries to remember if rain ruins leather boots or if it's the opposite, that leather is natural and therefore waterproof. He thinks about cows standing in a wet field. His mother would know. Her manager has her wear a lot of leather. Bill, who she

calls her manager but who is an ex-Hell's Angel and even though he has renounced the affiliation, Critter once saw him put his father in a chokehold and drop him. They had gone to high school together, had fought over his mother even then. Bill has connections at a dozen bars between Tahoe and Reno where he gets his mother work dancing on certain nights. He said she'd have to leave Sacramento if she wanted to make a living at it. She couldn't say no. "They're my crowd, baby," she'd said to Critter before she left, pushing his hair off his forehead and looking him right in his eyes, "good old boys." After the altercation with Bill, his father didn't stop her. He pushed her clothes back deep into the closet and took his wedding ring to pawn. He took longer and longer jobs, routes that took him all the way to Chicago or Detroit and back. He drank about the same. The house was no longer full of her performance but was also rid of her tirades in which she would set dishtowels on fire inside the kitchen or toss his father's keys over the fence at the back of their property into the creek. It was quiet now.

The gel he slicked his hair back with mixes with the rain and collects at his forehead. Cars that pass him spin water across his shins. He thinks of Lisa's tan lines, her skin under a hot sun. She knows how to hold her body the way they do in the movies. Lisa knows. She is the most beautiful and open-minded woman he has met online. Just last week he met up with a girl named Amanda who had pink hair and a lip ring. A car had pulled up into the driveway of her house where they were lying on her bed and she turned on him suddenly, snatching his jacket from the floor and shoving it at him moments after he had, patiently as he could, written the alphabet with his mouth between her thighs. She threw the sliding glass door open and kicked him into the backyard,

where he climbed a fence and made the long trek back to his empty house. She blocked him from her instant message list.

All of his favorite movies have more than one man in them. It has gotten to the point where he only searches for movies featuring a woman being stuffed with as many men as she can take. One on one encounters seem tame by comparison and he glosses over them in the lists of video thumbnails, scrolling through hundreds at a time for one that has the right look: piles of people, limbs pointing every direction, a room in which everything could happen. Almost there, he is too excited to keep walking and ducks into the Circle K to use the restroom. He pulls the chat log out and scans it again for the moment of possibility.

HotRodDave916: this is lisa. heres a pic of us at a winery

MetalxxThrasher: wow u r beautiful

HotRodDave916: ty!!! U like?

MetalxxThrasher: hell yea

HotRodDave916: i have more...

HotRodDave916: but they are in the bedroom lol

HotRodDave916: cant trust u yet.

HotRodDave916: brb, here talk to Dave

MetalxxThrasher: ur wife is sexy

HotRodDave916: i know im a lucky guy

HotRodDave916: hey u want to see those other pics? ill send

HotRodDave916: i can tell she wants u to see them we r looking for someone like u...

The man at the front desk asks him if he knows what room he's headed to and he says yes while pushing the button on the elevator. He doesn't turn around to face the

desk, as if this man could somehow prevent him from going up to room 312, third on the left from the ice machine. He has been in this elevator before, the year El Nino sent violent unrelenting storms to the area. The Sacramento River overflowed, testing the strength of the levees and filling the tributary creeks in a matter of hours. The slow creek behind their house became a roaring, debris-filled terror by the fourth day of the storm, tumbling past with tremendous oak branches catching along the creek banks and forming temporary dams. The water came closer and closer to the house until the sheriff's department ordered their evacuation. Critter and his father worked quickly to put things their best things on shelves—a pair of boxing gloves signed by Mohammed Ali, the 1970s pre-Fender Guild guitar with the ivory binding. His mother took a cardboard box out to the yard and scooped up her rabbits, twelve of them then, and they thrashed with their muddy paws, running gashes down her wrists. With a scrambling box of rabbits between them, they were driven with their neighbors in a paddy wagon to the Motel Six, which sat perched on a hill near the freeway entrance, above the projected flood line. Sometime in the middle of the night, one those impromptu dams broke through and a wave of silty river water poured through the door of the kitchen, through the living room and kept rising after that, steadily flooding the garage and the bedrooms, until it soaked the drywall about waist-high. They came home the next week to find the house as if a thief had ransacked it but taken nothing: the television on its side, muddy clothes in piles, the pantry filled with three feet of dirty water, cereal boxes and oatmeal packets like flotsam which spilled out when Critter opened the door. His father stood out front and looked at the houses up the street, the gentle elevation on either side of their home which

spared many of the neighbors. It was as if the whole city was in on it, building them a house where a drain should be, a great hole in the earth. There was nothing that could be done; their beds were full of rot and mildew, silt-soaked sheets, spore-blackened comforters.

The hallway smells like coffee and cleanser. He checks his appearance in the reflective surface of the coke machine, does of a run-through of possible faces. No one appears to be coming in either direction so he shoves his hands down the front of his pants facing the machine. Lisa said she wanted him to enter the room hard.

When Dave opens the door, Critter can't remember exactly what he looked like in the picture, but here he seems a bit older. Not quite his father's age, maybe forty. He has a small goatee under his lip and is wearing a Sacramento Kings t-shirt.

"Come on in," he says, standing back to allow entry.

Critter looks around for Lisa, checking quickly for a light under the bathroom door. Behind him, he hears the chain slide into a locked position. He spins around.

"It's coming down out there," Dave says cordially, but is sliding the chain back as if it were a mistake.

Critter is still holding his bag. Dave's jacket is hanging on the back of the chair along with a small duffel.

"Here, I'll take your coat, take a seat, get comfortable, Lisa will be here soon."

Critter attempts to relax his shoulders. He had been worried for a moment that this was a mistake. Dave opens the duffel and pulls out a six-pack of beer.

“Where is she?”

“She was waiting for the babysitter to get to our house and I came over here so that you wouldn’t think we stood you up. She’ll be here any minute. Seriously, sit down, here,” he says, scooting over on the bed so that Critter can sit beside him and handing him a beer.

Critter sits lightly on the mattress. It’s cheap and oversized for the box spring, bending over the side and sloping downward. He scoots, out of necessity, a bit closer to the middle.

“That’s it,” Dave says, “I’m so glad you came. You look just like your picture. That’s rare you know.”

“Yeah,” Critter says.

“Lisa looks just like her picture, too.”

“Yeah?” Critter has his hands in his lap, his legs crossed at the ankle. His boots are muddied and the laces have been dragging; the ends are frayed and wet. When he uncrosses his ankles, the ends of the laces wrap around his pant leg and stick.

“She’s fucking beautiful, man. And fucks like you can’t believe.”

“Like how?” Critter feels a sense of possibility return. He recalls the number of girls he has met online, how each girl was like a stepping stone building up to his real, true fantasy. He is accomplishing something.

“Like she just can’t get enough, like she could fuck her whole life.”

“That sounds good,” Critter says. He tips the beer back and takes some difficult gulps. It is dark and bitter.

“We should be ready for her when she gets here,” Dave says.

“How do you mean?”

“I ordered a movie.”

They each sit back against the headboard, Critter with a pillow in his lap, while a group of shirtless men surround a girl in neon spandex shorts on the screen. They are speaking French and he is disappointed: the dialog provides a great deal of the excitement, negotiating the terms of the encounter, determining a vocabulary which can be revisited in his mind long after the images have faded from memory.

The actress in the movie has eyes like the head of the deer mounted in his father’s garage. She is squatting, legs splayed to the camera, hands busy. Dave unzips his fly.

“Go ahead,” he says, not looking, “go ahead, man.”

Critter tucks the pillow between them and leans back to unbuckle his belt as quietly as he can, careful not to look over. The air in the room is cool and his hands are warm. He relaxes back into the headboard, focuses on the actress and her bouncing hair, stiletto heels, melting purple eye shadow. She is sweating and saying something desperate in French.

“I could help you,” Dave says. He is looking now, eyes locked on his his.

“Oh,” Critter says.

“I just want to do something for you,” he says. He leans across the pillow then. Critter is frozen, his hands up like he is shielding his body from an oncoming car. And then the feel of a warm mouth.

When it’s over, Critter stands up and zips himself, spins around looking for his

backpack. It's as if he's just woken up.

"Kid, are you okay?" From the look on his face, Dave feels terrible and it makes Critter feel terrible.

Critter unbolts the door and pulls it closed behind him with both hands to combat the pressure of the pneumatic door closer. Dave is laying down. The last vision of the hotel room before the jamb closes up is of the French girl, nearing the end of the film as she lies still for each man to come on her, and likely, Critter realizes, waiting for the whole thing to be over so she can go home.

It is dark outside and the force of the wind is the soundtrack of past storms. Trees whip hard in one direction, let up for a moment, and then whip hard in the other. The rain hits his face sideways and slices right into his jacket. Water is pooling in gutters and running downstream, toward his house.

The laundromat is still open. Frank is sitting on the hard wooden bench facing a row of tumble dryers. The exhaust from the vents is warm and scented.

"You look like shit," Frank says. He has a forty in a paper bag and a word search puzzle.

"Thanks," Critter says, plopping down on the bench. Frank hands him a lit cigarette.

"She was a stripper, huh?"

"Yep," he says, taking a long drag. There is a familiar odor coming from the other side of the room. He knows it, stamps out the cigarette so he can smell it better.

"Kind of weird, your mom being a stripper and all."

“What kind of soap is that?”

“You’re a fucked up kid, man.”

Critter walks over to the row of washers and identifies the one on the spin cycle. There is an empty single use box of store-brand detergent sitting on top. Critter sniffs deeply. It’s close, but not it. Too floral.

“You want to come with me to the recycling center?”

“Sure.”

Frank and Critter walk to the recycling center behind the grocery store. Frank has bags of aluminum cans, a few bags of glass, and some copper wire. They toss the glass into the bucket on the scale. The attendant rolls a cigarette and looks past them when he talks. He looks ready for them to leave. Critter feels his gut churn. He has been buzzing since he left the hotel. When these things go bad, he has the urge to forget them immediately, bury them deep in the darkest pools of his mind and hope that they don’t come up. But Frank won’t leave it alone.

“So her tits, man. Compare them to a fruit.”

“Come on Frank.”

“Come on you, I’m the one dying for a good story. I got nothing. The grocery store girl? Nope, she wasn’t having it. You’re getting it in at least once a week.”

“Apples.”

“Apples. That’s nice. What about her pussy?”

The attendant caught the word through the gusts of wind and raised his eyebrows.

“Well get this, I’m meeting someone at the McDonalds on Franklin tonight and

I'm not going to tell you shit about her.”

Frank makes seventeen dollars from his recycling and they walk to the liquor store across the street. Frank buys them each a pack of cigarettes. Outside they light one. Critter looks at the ground. All he wants is his own bed, his mother's cool hands on his face like when he was very young and the things she really wanted seemed dormant inside her for a time. If he's learned anything from her, it's that you can't change what makes you feel good.

“I need some help with my profile tomorrow. I think I'm coming off as too old,” Frank says.

“I don't think I can go tomorrow.” Critter says. He is aware that he sounds down. Frank is examining him.

“You know what's wrong with you,” Frank says.

“All kinds of shit.”

“No. You just need to know that you're not that fucked up. I was kidding about what I said earlier. Everyone telling you that you're fucked up, well you're not, okay, you're a nice kid.”

“Thanks,” Critter says.

From a block away, he can see the rig parked in the driveway.

Inside, the house is still dark. There is light coming from the garage. His father is hunched over the pile of sandbags, heaving one up over his shoulder.

“Want to give me a hand, son?”

“How’d you get here—the bridge is out.”

“I went around, came up through the bay area. Soon as I heard the river was rising, I high-tailed it home. Worried about you.”

“I was at the library.”

“Okay,” his father said.

His father hands him a sandbag and then another. They truck them out, four at a time, to the side of the house, shoring up the places made weak by the last flood, especially the black and crumbled portions of stucco and the crack in the foundation that has made the house impossible to sell. It has anchored them here indefinitely. In the backyard, they dam up the kitchen door and together lift the rabbit hutch to the patio under the awning. The plastic bag falls out from where Critter had tucked it in earlier.

“What’s this?” his father asks.

“Two of the babies, dead.”

“That’s a shame,” he says, opening it up then tying the ends of the bag together, “you want to bury them or can I put them in the dumpster?”

“Mom could have saved them.”

“Now,” he says, “come on. That was just luck.” There is thunder behind him. The creek is higher than it was when he left the yard earlier.

His father lets him bring the mother and the two live babies back in the house, something he hasn’t let happen since before she left. Critter cleans their paws with baby wipes and sets them on the floor in the front room. They huddle together for a second, afraid, but the mother slowly remembers the feeling of being in the home. She sniffs and

takes a step and is soon exploring the perimeters of the room without hesitation. One of the babies hops toward the base of the armchair, onto his father's foot and for the first time Critter can ever remember seeing, he leans down and pets it right between the ears. Together they watch the late night talk shows and listen for the frightening sound of water.

## CHAPTER 6

### GOLD RUSH RESORT: SUMMER 1997

About the middle of summer, me, Pops, and my half-brother Logan sat in back of the motor home to watch one of the Shark Week tapes Pops had ordered on VHS. The episode, which we'd seen a few times before, featured a woman whose leg had been bitten clean off at the knee by a Great White. She claimed that she didn't know it was gone while they dragged her to the beach and that even as she looked down at it, she could feel her toes wiggling.

"I'm not the type to believe what I'm told," the woman said. I repeated the sentence in an exaggeration of her voice--pitchy, a little southern--and Pops laughed the way he did every time we watched that tape and I mocked the woman. It was a little ritual we had, and he liked it so much that it felt like a contract.

When it was over, Logan unplugged the television and I plugged the lamp back in for light. We'd had a long day at the river: pulled up thirteen painter's buckets of pay dirt from the claim. Logan took to converting the table into the bed. Pops tucked himself into the bathroom to read. I opened up the plastic door by its trick handle and hopped out for some air. The fire inside the wheel well we used as a pit was almost burnt out and the last log glowed red surrounded by the ash of maybe a week's worth of fires. I dreaded cleaning it out, but it was getting to be that time. I pulled the pockets of my jeans inside out to let loose the sand that had collected there after squatting at the bank all morning, pulling dark sand from under the granite boulders where gold liked to stick. Then I stood and listened for the sounds of people in the dark: it was Friday, which meant camping

trips and youth retreats would likely be set up in the nearby lots. I made out some voices, but the way sound carried through the trees, they were probably far away. Logan came out and lit a cigarette.

“You’re too young to smoke,” I told him.

“Pops said I could.”

“Pops!” The bathroom window was right above us.

“He’s almost twelve, for Christ’s sake,” Pops said, “lay off him.”

“Give me one,” I said.

We smoked quietly, me stretching, Logan scratching his leg with his other foot.

“You look like mom,” he said.

“These are her jeans.”

“That’s why.”

We’d been living in the RV park for two months without her while she recuperated. Pops bought the timeshare sight unseen from an infomercial while he was upside-down on his mortgage. He had been watching the Ken Burns documentary about the gold rush and felt the pull of all that wildness and opportunity. There was still gold in the hills, trickling out of the motherlode through the thousands of milky quartz veins and down into the American River. About an hour outside of Sacramento, in the ghost town of Coloma where John Sutter first spotted gold at the timber mills in 1848, Pops bought a twentieth of an acre shaped like a pie slice at the bank of the American River. He spent a few months organizing supplies and ignoring phone calls from Wells Fargo, and finally, after Christmas, drove away from his house in the middle of the night in the camper.

Pops was glad for our company—he was having trouble moving the larger rocks, his balance in the water wasn't what he'd thought it would be, and he was writing his memoirs on his electric typewriter. He needed first readers. This was all right with us because we loved his stories. He had a way of telling them that made you feel right at first—that you knew what was coming, that the story was familiar. There were tales he'd told a million times. But every time he told them, we got another part of the picture, something he'd tack on at the end that would leave us gut-punched about what we thought we'd known before. We listened hard to each telling because they might change just enough to change the whole world.

Logan liked the ones about our mother as a girl and all the trouble she got into. I preferred his Korean War memories, the heroic myths of our cowboy relatives, and the peculiar ways he got confessions out of suspects in the homicide cases he worked during his detective careers. For most of our childhood, Pops drank like a fish until his guts nearly fell out of his body and he had so many feet of them cut out because they were wrecked. He couldn't drink if he wanted to now. It had made him gentler. I still remembered the knock-down drag-out fights between Pops and our uncles, between Pops and my father. There had been sloppy, scary holidays where my mother and I watched the faces of the men in our family for trouble. Now Pops could barely lift a bucket from the water. It was comforting to re-see all of this in the light of our new life with him, one ruled by revisions of the past and the soothing presence of all those pine trees along the riverbank, with the power of the rapids pulling debris past us and down to the depths of the riverbed where tree trunks and kayak oars stuck forever in the silty mud. We'd lost so

many pairs of shoes, sunglasses, hats, and all that gold slipping past us. There was only so much you could do.

Logan practiced blowing smoke rings.

“No,” I said, “Don’t blow out. Just make a ‘puh.’” I popped my lips together. He tried it.

“You’re still blowing out,” I said, “this is not about breathing.”

It was getting dark and visiting hours would be over at the hospital soon and the nurse’s station wouldn’t transfer our calls after eight. I stomped my cig into the dirt and hopped back into the camper to grab a flashlight and some coins for the payphone.

“Pops,” I said, “We’re heading to the lodge. You want anything from the snack bar?”

“Honey buns,” he said from the bathroom. I could hear him turning pages, and then: “Two packs.”

Logan and I walked the gravel road to the lodge, keeping the flashlight beam ahead of us to look for mountain lions or bullfrogs in our path. The place smelled perpetually of wood smoke. The trees obscured most of the campsites but carried the sounds of their talk to the road.

“I feel like we work here,” Logan said.

“We do,” I said. We had the blisters and bruises to prove it.

“Listen to them,” he said. I clicked the flashlight off and we stopped for a second. Above all of the voices, a woman’s laughing came through the trees and the wind swept it past us.

“I wonder what’s so funny,” he said.

I clicked the light back on and shined it toward the trees.

“Drunk, probably,” I said. “Maybe they don’t know the woods are haunted.”

Even in the dark I knew he was smiling.

“We better let them know, huh. Can we? Tonight?”

“We’ll see,” I said and shined the light back down the road. There was a bull frog about ten feet up and Logan ran ahead to lift it and move it to the side of the road. We’d seen enough splattered frogs to feel merciful.

The park was full. Summer was winding down and it wasn’t as hot during the day. The Gold Rush Resort sold their spots as timeshares, monthly rentals, and daily camp spots. People came and went all summer long: Logan and I made bets about who would stick around and who had made a mistake when planning a vacation by choosing Gold Rush. They made brochures that featured the above ground swimming pool and the fishpond which they stocked about once every two weeks with itty-bitty bass and trout.

The lodge was dark and cold. On hot days, we were grateful for the damp freeze of the swamp cooler, which seemed to run twenty-four hours a day. Walking into the lodge with its sticky floor and dark wood-paneled walls felt like descending into the underworld. Millie, the owner, was a thin bottle blond with deep lines in her face and a froggy voice. She wasn’t mean, but the good old boys who hung out all day at the bar inside called her Mean Millie. She treated Logan and I fine, likely because we never caused her the trouble that the good old boys did. And she had a little thing for Pops, who was sweet to her and kept his distance from the locals who used the lodge like a

clubhouse.

They called themselves good old boys but it's not something I would have coined for them. I was fifteen and getting used to living in the world a different way: I was keenly aware of my body, of the way it looked when I walked, when I stopped and stood still, when I lifted my arm to pull the handset from the pay phone. The world was suddenly aware, it seemed, of me. It was different at school. It was safer there to feel your body move powerfully through the library, for example, with only the boys from Algebra 1 to look at you. I was taller than most of them anyway. In the lodge, I only wanted to walk invisibly, the way Logan could, the way Pops could. I wondered if Millie felt the same way.

I put the coins in the slot and dialed the long number. Logan stood next to me, leaning his head against the wall. I tried not to think that he looked just like his dad, but he really did. The same pronounced forehead and dark eyes, the pinch beneath his nose and upper lip. I thought of his dad, Charlie, the ex-Hell's Angel, current asshole, loading his things into saddlebags on his bike and zipping away. Unwillingly, I pictured this every time Logan made a blank face. He was nothing like his father except in the face.

"Fifth floor," someone said on the line.

"Is Dolores there?"

I heard the phone being put down and the sounds of the hospital floor came in muffled through the receiver. Earlier in the day, standing knee deep in the water, counter-levering myself against the current to pull up a bucket of mud, I'd come up with a list of things I was angry about and that I needed to say. Some days I felt angry. To be honest, it

was a cycle: I'd be sad for a few days, hopeful the next two, and then anger would rise up in me for having to endure it all. Wet hand-me-down Levis and fresh blisters on my hands did it for me that morning. One, I was angry that we didn't know how long we'd be here. School would be starting soon back in Sacramento and I wanted to go back. I was angry that we didn't have any way to get there. I was mad that Logan didn't have any clothes that fit him anymore. Logan was wearing Pops' clothes and I was trying to make my fourteen-year-old wardrobe fit my new fifteen-year-old body. I wanted to walk through the neighborhood, into my classrooms, in tight jeans to classes where I could feel the gaze of the boys on body and feel not afraid but excited. The idea of the return distracted me while I dumped buckets of silt and squatted over the shallows to pan out a scoop of pay dirt, dipping and swirling away the lighter rocks and sand until the heavy black ore and flecks of gold clung to the ridge of the pan. I thought about Abraham Ruiz and the look he gave me at the end-of-the-year dance when he stuck his hand right up against the crotch of my jeans as we danced close. His breath was hot and smoky. I had been afraid in the moment, but in the months after it happened, I thought about it all the time: the determination and want in his eyes. I wished I would have let him do everything that he wanted to me.

The phone clicked over to another line.

"Bethany?" my mother said. Her voice was weak and the engine of my anger died.

"Ma," I said, "how are you today?"

Not better, not worse. The doctor had been by. If she went down to the second

floor, they would cut her hair for free.

“Not that I care what it looks like but it might feel nice to have someone brush it.”

“I’d brush it for you, if I were there,” Logan said into the phone when it was his turn and I felt a strain behind my eyeballs but I didn’t cry.

From Millie, we bought six packs of honey buns and she put an extra one in the bag. I felt the men at the bar follow me out with their eyes and I rolled my shoulders back to stand straighter. On our way back to camp, Logan picked out a site to haunt. We listened for the woman we heard earlier but couldn’t hear her now. He settled for campsite just around the bend from our lot, a daily site that would likely clear out the next day. It sounded like a bunch of men. We could hear their beer bottles clinking against one another.

“This one,” he said.

When we got back, Pops was sitting at the picnic table outside the camper with his typewriter and the lantern. We ate honeybuns while Pops read us his pages for the day.

“We held the man over the I Street Bridge by his feet,” Pops said. He had his reading glasses on and held the page about a foot from his face near the bluish light of the lantern. He read in a voice that I imagined he would use if he were a narrator on the History Channel. “He was tall and I imagine that made it worse. We’d chased him down in the squad car through downtown and headed him off before he got to West Sacramento across the river. He was shaking when we pulled him out of his car. My partner held the left foot and I held the right.

‘Say you did it,’ I demanded.

‘Come on, you bastard,’ my partner said.

‘Admit you killed that man so I can go home and feed my kids,’ I said. I thought about my six kids at home with their crippled mother, eating mashed potatoes for breakfast, lunch, and dinner because I’d spent all the rent money on booze and prostitutes.” He paused here. “Do you think it’s going to upset your mother to read this stuff?”

Logan licked icing from the corner of his mouth and looked around thoughtfully. I thought of my father. Even years after she’d finally left him, she had days where all she could do is recount his sins to me, getting angrier and angrier while she talked, as if I could make any of it better by virtue of his blood running through me. But I was as afraid of him as she was.

“Maybe she might,” I said, “you know how she gets.”

“Well I can’t change the truth,” Pops said.

I shrugged.

He leaned forward and put his chin in his hand. “One time she got so mad at me for ruining Easter in front of your dad that she stuck rusty nails into my baby grass. All over my front yard and she must have done it in the middle of the night. Do you know what rusty nails does to baby grass?”

“What?” Logan couldn’t wait to find out.

“Big ass orange circles all across the lawn. Kills it. Dead and good luck trying to get it back.”

“She’s reactionary,” I said. It was a way of describing things that we had picked up from our mother’s doctor.

“What happened to the guy on the bridge?” Logan said.

Pops held his pages back up to the light and continued.

“He only spoke Laotian and my partner and I didn’t know a word of it. I am hesitant to write this, but my partner is long dead now and the truth should be told. We didn’t know if he did it or not, only that he fit the description and that we had a stack of cases on our desks that needed undoing. My brother was running for city manager at the time and we needed as many cases solved as we could get solved because that was part of the platform he was running on: the Kelly brothers were good for Sacramento because they kept it safe. But we didn’t really. The only thing that got accomplished that night was my partner and I taught a Laotian man to say yes.”

“Wow,” Logan said.

“What do you think?” Pops said. He opened his honey bun and bit half of it off in one chew.

“I like the last line,” I said. “‘I taught a Laotian man to say yes.’ It sounds just like a real book.”

“It is a real book,” Pops said, chewing. He stacked his pages and folded the typewriter into its case. “So how was your mother, anyway?”

“She was real tired,” Logan said, “but okay.”

“Did she want to talk about anything?”

“No,” I said.

“Okay. I’m getting to bed now, my bones hurt. Early morning, tomorrow. Got to empty these buckets.”

“Yes, sir,” we said.

Logan and I sat up playing war with the cards and waiting for it to get late.

“She sounded off today,” Logan said, another term her doctor had coined for her behavior.

“Yeah, I hope they have the meds right this time.”

“Do you think it runs in families?” Logan asked.

“What, being crazy?”

“Yeah,” he said. In the lantern light, he looked younger than eleven. He was young for his age anyway. He clung desperately to a belief in Santa Claus even through the last Christmas when all the presents said Love, Pops. I wanted him to get tougher. I was never naïve enough to say *things can’t get any worse*. Of course not. But sometimes I thought it, and that was a mistake, too. I didn’t know if our mother would ever work again. Pops was old and had filed bankruptcy. We were sleeping in our entire inheritance and it didn’t run anymore after sitting for a few months in the woods. I thought about school, about the friends I had made—very casual, they didn’t know much about me—and considered trying to bring up mental illness, debt, and suffering over lunch while they wanted to discuss, I imagined, homecoming. It was impossible to imagine.

“I think it might run in families,” I said, “but you don’t need to worry about it.”

“Sometimes I feel off,” Logan said.

“Like how?”

“Like I want to live in the woods forever and never have to talk.”

“That’s off,” I said. I flipped my card over and it beat his. I took both cards and put them in my stack.

“I’m serious,” he said, “I don’t want to go back.”

When we could hear Pops snoring, Logan filled a grocery bag full of wrappers and trash from the camper. I pulled my backpack onto my shoulders. We walked down around the bend in the road to check out the campsite of the men we’d heard earlier. They had set up two four-person tents on the lot and the fire was still smoldering between them. They had a cooler next to one, so I opened it and started loading the contents into my backpack: beers, a package of bologna, a jar of huge dill pickles and a bunch of protein shakes. I was careful that the bottles didn’t clink. Then I turned it on its side and let the things that wouldn’t fit spill over. The buzzing of cicadas and other night sounds muffled the splash of melted cooler water as it sank into the dirt. Logan spread the wrappers on the ground and dragged a stick through the dirt like claw marks. He lifted a magazine carefully from the picnic table but then threw it down on the ground, where it splayed open to the centerfold spread-eagle on a motorcycle.

“Let’s go,” I whispered.

We jogged up the road and spread the haul out over the table. It was a silly thing to do, but once in a while we felt reckless and we had never been caught. We called it haunting because we felt like ghosts at Gold Rush Resort. We weren’t the type to make neighborhood friends, even though there were plenty of kids around. We shied away from them, kept our heads down when we found ourselves having to cross paths. If some

showed up at the lake or near the bank of our claim, we packed it up and went back to the camper just to be safe. If they approached, we made up conversations and looked busy. We didn't want to have to explain ourselves because it was all a long story and we got the feeling that most people would be sorry they asked anyway.

Logan opened the jar of pickles and crunched one up with his mouth open.

“Let's pretend we're on a desert island and the U.S. Army dropped this care package for us, but the weather conditions are bad so we have to live on these pickles and protein shakes until conditions improve.” When he was happy like this, I relaxed because my mother's features suddenly showed themselves in his smile and jawline.

“What if conditions don't improve?” I said.

“We'll wait for another care package like Pops did in Korea.”

In the cool early morning, we trucked our lawn chairs down to the bank and sat three of us in a row with our ankles in the water, pitched forward with our black gold pans swirling and swirling and dipping. First we scraped a trowel's worth of the pay dirt into the pan and filled it the rest of the way up with river water. Then we shook the whole thing so that all of the mud and silt and sand mixed up with the water and lifted the lightest things to the top. Pops taught us to trust the weight of the gold. Every pour of the water felt dangerous, like we were dumping hope back in the river, but if we were patient, the gold would show its face to us every time. We raced through the last little bit in the pans and passed around a squeeze bottle with a plastic tip we used to suck up the gold from the rim. It sank fast to the bottom of the squeeze bottle and Logan and I loved

to look closely at the miracle of real gold sitting in clean water right before our eyes.

We only made about forty dollars a day if we got through enough buckets. We sucked up the specks with the squeeze bottle and squirted them into a little jar with a tight lid that we took to the Millie at the end of the week. She'd weigh it, bring out her big calculator and give us the best price she could. We took lots of days off. As long as we had enough money to make the payments and enough left over for food from the lodge, things were okay. We were always waiting patiently for the big nugget.

"More stuff?" Pops said and we took another panful. By noon, we had cleared three buckets and our backs were sore. Logan and I tied our buckets to the oak near the bank. Further up the river before the bend, I saw a man watching us and I felt the impulse to hide.

"Look, up the bank," I said.

"What's he doing there," Logan said.

"He's watching us." When we both looked back, the man had turned to face up the river toward a group of rafters coming down the rapids. There were three rafts of the sort we saw many times a day during the summer weekends, full of orange-vested people with oars. There had already been a drowning in the area in the past month and even though we saw the rafters so often, I held my breath when they bobbed by our claim.

Pop's biggest rule about standing in the river was that while you were in it, you could never turn your back to it: we watched and watched and tried to learn its secrets—its depths and the topography of the riverbed, where the largest boulders lay, the slickest rocks. We had stared out at our section of the river so long I thought I knew it.

Logan moved farther out into the water to see the raft. He took two steps before he slipped and I popped out of my seat to grab him. Three feet out the water pulled like strong men grabbing at your ankles. I had him by his collar and he got his footing closet to the shore.

“Sorry,” Logan said.

“Yeesh,” I said. The rafters came slipping by and everyone stayed in the raft. I looked up to where the man had been standing, watching us and then the rafters. He was gone. We packed up the chairs and hauled them back up to camp.

We took our afternoon naps, Pops and Logan in the pull out bed in the back of the camper and me in the loft above the truck cabin. When the two of them were sleeping, I stared at the headliner above me and thought of Abraham Ruiz and his hot breath. I put my hand against the crotch of my jeans and closed my eyes.

We called mom and she was asleep. That was no surprise. She didn't sleep like normal people. She could sleep for days at a time without stirring, her forehead damp and feverish. This time, though, the nurse asked us to hold for the doctor, who was on duty and wanted to speak to a family member.

“Is this the oldest daughter?” he said.

“Bethany,” I said, “yes.”

“I talked to a discharge planner today. She had a hearing with the hospital and has been determined ready for discharge. She'll start an outpatient program tomorrow and when that finishes up in two weeks, she'll need to be referred to a counselor in the

community to monitor her progress.”

I took this in. We would need to go get her. She would not have anywhere to go.

“Bethany?”

“Yes, sorry. So, the problem is, I don’t know how to do this. My brother and I live with our grandfather up in Coloma and we don’t have a way to get her here. And then getting her back and forth to the place.”

“Her notes here say that she—and I’m not happy about this, I think it’s a reactionary move, but she is an adult—but that she and another patient became quite close and that she’ll be moving in with him. He was discharged a little over a week ago and has been visiting.”

“So,” I said, “what do we need to do.”

“It appears that you and your brother are right where you need to be, in custody of your grandfather while she figures things out and works on finding stability and simplicity. Can you help her do that?”

“How do I do that?”

“Just keep things simple and factual and objective. If she wants to live with this person, say, okay, that is a choice you are making and I accept that and try to take care of yourself. You can have compassion for your mother, but you can’t change her. And she needs to be monitored. Her last attempt was very nearly fatal.”

“I know,” I said. When Pops found her, she was seizing.

“Look, I know you have been through a lot. I know she has put you through most of it. It sounds like you’re in a good place. Stay put and we’ll talk again when she’s done

with outpatient. That's often where we see the biggest breakthroughs. It's real work. Sometimes it's just like a very sensitive hotel in here."

Logan was waiting for his turn when I hung up the phone.

"Doesn't she want to talk to me?"

"That was the doctor," I said.

By the time we were walking back to camp, he was sobbing.

"I thought you wanted to stay here," I said.

"With mom," he said and I hated her for a moment.

Pops was ready with his pages when we got back.

"Snacks?" he said and I dumped over the bag of red vines and Hostess cupcakes.

"Look at that haul. This is the life," he said. I sat at the picnic table with my head down. Logan leaned against my shoulder.

Pops cleared his throat.

"I picked up a box of cheese horns and a bottle of whiskey on the way home from the place on Freeport that stayed open all night for cops like me. I drove home with both open on my lap, thinking about the Laotian man and his whimpers from over the bridge. When we dragged him up, his right eye was terribly red: he'd popped a blood vessel from hanging there so long. When we put the cuffs on him and stuffed him in the squad car he cursed at us in Laotian until he couldn't speak anymore. When we left him for booking he spit on me. I swallowed half that bottle on the drive home. When I got to the front door, I could hear the kids chattering. Still awake at three in the morning: life of a cop's child. I didn't want to go inside. All I wanted to do was sit for a minute in the quiet of the

night and get drunk. I sat on the porch and drank the rest of the whiskey. I listened to my wife bitch and bitch at them, bitch about me. I was piss drunk and the rest had to be recounted to me from my children and my wife when I sobered up.

‘Who is she,’ my wife said when I opened the door. She was sitting in my armchair with her crutches next to her. She used them to swat at the kids when they misbehaved.

‘Excuse me?’ I said. Consequently, I was seeing a woman named Juanita but that was beside the point.

‘It’s three in the morning and your children are hungry,’ she said.

Little Lola was sitting on the floor and she wrapped her arms around my leg. She was twelve, too old for such childish behavior. I shook her off and to this day I regret it. She never recovered from all of it between her mother and me. I took my tie off and threw it over the back of the couch with my suit jacket. By this time, I was skunked. I dumped the box of cheese horns to the floor.

I said ‘Happy?’ and my wife hurled her crutch at me, but Polio had zapped the strength from her arms and she couldn’t get it across the room. It grazed James Junior’s ear. I regret the rest of the night with all of my heart. According to witness accounts, I took the revolver from my belt and pointed it right at my wife. The children screamed so loud the neighbors came by, but I don’t remember any of it. In the middle of it all, Lola stood up and pulled the nose of the gun to her belly.

‘Shoot me, Dad, not mom,’ she said. I couldn’t bear it. I took off to the bedroom with the gun and locked myself inside. They said they could hear my spinning and

spinning the barrel. I passed out with the grip in my hand. In the morning they had all gone to school and my wife lay asleep in my armchair. After that week, we never spoke of it again.”

Pops looked at us thoughtfully.

“Wow,” I said.

“I don’t like this story,” Logan said.

“You’ve heard it before,” Pops said.

“Not all of it,” I said.

“You should have shot her,” Logan said. He got up from the picnic table and climbed into the camper. He slammed the door shut.

“He’s upset with her,” I said, “she’s being discharged and is apparently moving in with a guy she met at the hospital.”

“Oh, Lola,” he said, “she falls in love everywhere she goes.”

“Tell me about it,” I said.

“I will. That’s the next chapter.”

“Should I go in and check on him?”

“Nah. It’s his first heartbreak. Your mother is always your first heartbreak.”

I put my flip-flops on. I needed to get out of the camp. I wanted to be a stranger somewhere. “I think I’m going to go back to the claim,” I said. “I forgot my book.”

“Be careful,” Pops said, “don’t turn your back to the river.”

I sat at the bar like I knew what I was doing. It was Saturday night and the locals

came in to use the jukebox. They were playing fast country songs and some of the women knew the dances to them.

Millie eyed me a warning but she served me a gin and tonic anyway. It was what my mother drank and it tasted to me like pine trees. I ran my fingers along the grooves in the shellacked bar top and looked at the men sitting at the bar with me. After my drink I felt brave and beautiful. I went into the bathroom and pulled my hair down from its ponytail. I pinched my cheeks to make them red and flushed. I ordered another drink from Millie and stayed standing next to the bar. I tried to elongate my body, imagined it stretching gracefully like a portrait I'd probably seen in a textbook.

The man was in his twenties and wearing a plaid Pendleton. He walked over from a group of older men and stood next to me. A son of one of the good old boys, almost as awful as them.

“How old are you?” he said.

“Old,” I said, because I felt it. He wanted to flirt with me.

“You want another one of those.”

“Yes,” I said.

An hour later he pushed me up against a tree behind the lodge and ran his rough cheek against mine while he pulled his pants down. I put my arms around his neck and felt band-aids on one side. I pulled my hands away.

“You have a cut?” I said.

“Cat,” he said, muffled into my neck. His hands were pulling at my shirt and then

they were up underneath it. I tried to call up the promise I had made to myself to take advantage of the next chance I had like this. I put my arms back around his neck and let him left me up against the tree. He kissed and kissed and kissed me until I was numb while shifting my weight against the tree and his hips, pulling further and further into me. I bit my lip and focused on the scratch of the bark on my back, trying to tell if I was cut.

The walk back to the camp was painful. I had dropped my sandals and the gravel hurt my feet. It distracted me from the scratches on my back, from the throbbing between my legs. It hadn't felt great, but in my mind I had acquired something and now that I knew how to get it, I could do it again.

Pops was still sitting at the picnic table when I got back.

“Why are you sitting in the dark, Pops?”

“What do you mean? I gave Logan the lantern. Where's Logan?”

“I don't know.” I felt the swell of panic in my lungs and throat.

“He went down to the claim to check on you when you didn't come back right away. It's been a half an hour, forty-five minutes at least. You didn't see him?” Pops was standing up, slipping shoes on. I grabbed another flashlight.

The claim was dark and there was no sign of him. Pops and I tumbled over the roots and rocks along the bank of the river. We followed the flow of the water. I stared at the white caps of the rapids and felt that it might be possible to duck my head into the water, to look, to see his arms reaching for me through the silt and the sloshing. I scanned the bank of our claim, the divots made by our chairs, the soda cans crushed and tossed to the wildness around it and imagined him arriving at the bank to look for me, not seeing

me, and feeling the very panic I felt at that moment. I felt terrified enough to jump in and start feeling around the bottom with my hands. If I couldn't find him, I wanted to jump anyway. I took two steps into the water and it took my breath from my chest. I took another step and felt the immediate and unceasing pull of the water, the impossibility of that constant pressure tumbling down from the tops of the mountains. It wouldn't stop for anything. Pops walked up ahead and shined the flashlight across the river. Maybe he had come out the other side. I looked briefly back at the woods but mostly scanned the wide expanse of water I stood in, aided by the weak glow of moonlight and the narrow beam against all the rushing water. I looked for him to pop up like so many rafters. His face, his body felt inevitable.

We tore back through the woods to trace his steps, calling for him like volume was what could do it. Pops voice was getting horse. My jeans were wet. When we got to the lodge, Millie called the Sherriff direct.

Later, when they would find his body pinned beneath a rapid in a still space between a drop and a boulder, I would react by slinking back to the bar to look for that man, but he wasn't there and it was a Thursday in September when all the vacations were over. This is what mom's doctor would call reactionary. Later, Pops would finish his memoirs, ending with the chapter about Logan. My mother would never read it and but I kept a copy of it with me in a yellowed manila envelope for years after they both were gone. I never lived with my mother again. She had the man she was living with drive her up from Sacramento to where we were in Coloma. I thought I'd go back down the mountain with her, but there was nowhere for me to go back to. I'd have to find a school

up in the hills for the Spring: I'd blinked and missed the start of semester. We sat through his funeral in a little chapel near the Gold Rush and afterward, held the reception at the lodge. I chipped Logan's name into the bar top with a penknife and Millie kicked me out of there. On the way back to the camper, I walked into half of the campsites, pulling what I wanted from coolers and knocking over trashcans. I didn't bother to drag claw marks through the sites. Moonlight was weak. If anyone saw me, I hoped they'd take me to jail. Back in the camper loft, I stuck my hand between my legs and rubbed until I wasn't crying, my hot breath so hard against the headliner it came back and hit me. 125