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The Places We Called Home

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The Places We Called Home

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
the Department of Writing and Linguistics.

By
Paige Peterson

Under the mentorship of Dr. Lisa Costello & Professor Christina Olson

ABSTRACT

An excerpt from a novel-in-progress following the lives of three related women, told via interconnected chapters. This thesis represents the stories of two women: Esther and Robin. Borrowing the technique of memoir to tell an account of their lives in the genre of fictional autobiography, these stories are finally being shared in effort to recast societal narratives and reveal empowerment in the unlikeliest places.

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By Paige Peterson

Esther

Chapter 1

The bus we lived in was yellow, like any other school bus. After the auction we took it home and I scraped the letters and numbers off the side using an old plaster mallet. When the black letters were gone, a lighter ghost of them was left behind to remind us of the buses' roots. The kids helped me unscrew all of the old, torn and tarnished seats from their anchors in the floor. We only had one wrench, so Jessie was given the job of loosening all screws a few turns, while Robin followed behind, twisting them out with her small fingers. Two of my eldest, Rob and Mary hauled each of the seats off as the younger girls finished. My first born, Jay, was away working somewhere out East.

Rob and Mary lifted each seat to the back, Richard didn't want them scratching up the aisle by pushing or dragging them. They would reach the back of the bus and swing each until they had enough momentum to throw them a few feet from the tail of the bus. They'd land in the black dirt with a thud, sinking in two or three inches, rooting lopsided into the almost-frozen ground. Richard and I then took each seat and stacked them onto an old mower trailer attached to the back of the truck. Back then everything was made so heavy. There was a good bit of steel and aluminum used in making the anchors for those seats and scrap prices were pretty high. Once we finished gutting the bus, we took all the extra pieces to the scrap yard to make some money to pay for gas.

That old school bus was dreadful, but we tried to make do. After the house had burned we were left with nothing but odds and ends and ash. There was a lot of ash. After the mess had cooled, Mary and I waded through the black thickness that had once been our home.

We tied shirts over our noses and searched until our skin was dark and smudged. Everything was gone. I still wish I could go back and save the box of pictures and crafts the kids had made over the years. Pictures were important then. We couldn't afford them often, so the memories we had captured were treasured, locked away from grimy fingers and only to be brought out on Christmas and Easter, when we would take more to add to the pile. But now, those memories were left to stand on their own, without a house to live in, no structure, no base. I wouldn't cry though. Not for the lost memories, not for the lost possessions, not until I was alone and away from my family. Mary didn't cry either. She knew she was expected to be strong for her younger sisters.

We didn't speak, we just searched. In the places where the house had been mostly soft wood the ashes were almost soft, velvety. In other places it was tough, sometimes reaching as high as our waists and scratching through our jeans. Mary would occasionally reach in shoulder deep, nearly swimming in the ash, and sway her arms hopefully. Hard disappointment showed on her brow when she'd pull up a piece of metal sheet from the old roof. I wondered what it was she was hopeful to find in the mess, but we didn't speak, and I didn't ask. It wouldn't've helped nothing anyway.

In the end we had collected some tarnished silverware, the frame to a bunk bed, a few toys, an old perfume bottle, and the blackened bones of our dog. Smoke lingered in our lungs, ash coated our flannel make-shift face masks and lined our nostrils. I wondered if that's what it felt like to Richard as he fell asleep lounging in our bed, hand rolled cigarette hanging from his lip. I wondered if the tobacco felt different in the back of his throat than the smoke of our

bedsheets. Maybe they felt the same, and perhaps that's why he slept until the flames began to lick his arm, at which point it was too late to save anything except the singed clothes on his back. I'd always scolded him for smoking on the furniture, and he knew I didn't like him smoking in the bedroom at all, but we weren't home when the house burnt, and he had no one to tell him to take his cigarette outside.

The kids and I were at my mother's when we got the news. Our next door neighbor had taken Richard in and given him some clean clothes before rushing over and leaving him in their sitting room. My neighbor embraced me and took me outside. The only other time she'd hugged me was when her mother passed, so by the time we'd made it to Ma's porch I was shaking.

The house was gone. Richard was fine. The dog was missing. I nodded without saying a word.

I didn't want to go back. We had been leaving, for good this time. I was fed up with Richard's always being gone, and him being unkind when he was. The man didn't think much about anyone but himself, but he hadn't always been that way. Now, he was set on not changing, and if he wasn't going to change we were going to leave. We made it most of the year without him anyway, so I figured we could do it on our own now.

I brought the kids to my mother's house to wait until Richard went to work the next morning, so we could gather our belongings and ready ourselves for a new start, on our own. We couldn't do that now, I saw it then. Richard needed us. I didn't say a thing as I loaded the

kids back into the old truck. I fought to steady my shaking hands as we putted and sputtered back to what had been our home.

“Well, I guess we’re getting that new start you wanted Ma.” Rob shrugged his shoulders as we came to a stop on our lot. The neighbor had been right, there was nothing left. Nothing but a big pile of ash and a scorched yard.

I’d never heard of a house going so fast. It was only a few hours ago that we had all risen from our beds. The younger girls gathered eggs from the chicken coop, and I’d made French toast on the old skillet my mother had given me the day of my second wedding. I wondered if skillets would burn, and I didn’t think so. It was those darn skillets Mary and I had been in search of when we’d waded through the ashes where the kitchen used to be.

But the house was gone, and there was no real point of talking about it anymore. The Red Cross came when our church reported our situation. They gave us enough food and water to last a few weeks. Our neighbors were kind enough to let us stay with them through the rest of the winter while donations of bedding and money came in through our friends at the church. We sold off what remained of our belongings that had been stored in the outbuildings away from the fire’s reach. The empty and burned shells of appliances were hauled off and sold as scrap. We gave the chickens to our neighbor and used what was left of the money to bid on a retired school bus at the Police Station’s annual Spring auction. Richard, known as Dickie by his friends, was a deputy at the time, so he was able to get us a good deal.

Mary helped me pull the bunk bed frame from the ash, and the younger girls wiped it down. We mounted them to the anchors that once held down the seats. Rob insisted on

mounting an old canvas couch we'd found at the dump as well. After I'd scrubbed it with vinegar it didn't smell so bad. Once we were content with the bus, we loaded up what little we had and parted ways with the blackened lot we once called home.

Since we had been married, Dickie would take a trip every September to hunt bears and elk in Oregon and Washington. He'd sell the meat and hides of what he killed and return home in time for Christmas with the spoils of his hunt. This is where we would go, to the Washington mountains, where Dickie had friends who would let us all stay. Normally the trip took Dickie and his cousins two days, but our rattling old bus drug that trip out to five, and those five days were worse than hell.

The bus has no air conditioning, and no heat. The yellow tin can blistered in the sun, heat waves visibly rolling off the hood and sides. We all broiled for five days in that bus; opening the windows didn't do anything but rattle our belongings and make us all even more nervous. It had to be over 100 degrees, and the children were miserable, especially Robin. Only five years old, she was terrified of just about everything and spent most of the trip in a panicked state. We'd come to a hissing and sizzling stop at rest areas every two hours or so, just before the engine overheated. While the engine cooled, we opened the doors and let the kids run and play through the sprinklers that were meant for watering the grass.

Oh boy, I was embarrassed. Dickie posted up under a shade tree, pulled his western cap low, and smoked a cigarette I had rolled him when I wasn't too anxious to take my eyes off the

road. I'd been bitter when he first told me to roll him a few, images of the quilt my mother made for our bed on fire licking at the back of my mind. But, we all had our vices and I knew being angry and refusing to roll the cigarettes for Richard would only make the trip more miserable for everyone. He wouldn't be quitting anytime soon, so I rolled the thin papers just like my dad had shown me as a child, and looked away when Richard smoked them.

At the rest areas, the kids would strip down to their undergarments and laugh, scream, and tear through the cool water. We dressed in rags and looked to be something between hippies and rednecks. Families would pull into the parking lot and hold their children a little closer on their way to the restrooms. Men averted their attention and women rolled their eyes and sighed. How could I tell them why we were there, my children behaving like hoodlums on the state-owned grass? That this was the closest they would get to a real shower for maybe weeks? I wanted to tell every one of those pretty women, that maybe if I hadn't lost everything again, my hair would be curled tight like theirs, and my children would be dressed sharp.

Our fourth or fifth stop was at a little rest area just outside of Wall, South Dakota. The building was small, but had running water restrooms. The sprinkler system covered the whole lot around it. It was about three in the afternoon, and we were all hungry and hot. This kids piled out, Rob wrestling past Mary carrying Robin over his shoulder, racing to be the first out the door.

“Please!” I hollered at the kids, grabbing a loaf of bread and some peanut butter and fruit on my way out the door behind them. “Hush! For goodness sakes, there’s other people here, too!” I shook my head.

The air outside the bus was fresh, warm still, but at least it didn’t smell like old socks. I instructed the kids to sit at a picnic table under an old oak. Jessie and Robin shifted excitedly in their seats. Mary and Rob sat as told, and Richard opted for leaning against the tree itself, slowly puffing on a cigarette. I made them each a sandwich, serving Richard first, then the kids starting with the youngest.

The kids ate greedily, the youngest eyeing the in ground sprinklers, waiting for the slightest drop to signal their next spray.

“Mommy! Look at them! Are they from the circus?” A small boy, maybe Robin’s age, walked with his parents. His mom grabbed him by the shoulder and shushed him. “They have a bed in that bus, mommy! A bed! See, in the window?” The young, thin woman shot the boy a cool look and he quieted. They shuffled into the restroom.

The boy didn’t mean anything, but my chest bubbled with heat, my cheeks burning pink. We wouldn’t be living in a bus if anything could help it. I made Richard and a second sandwich before making myself one. The kids munched on fruits, and I let Robin have a banana though she hadn’t finished her crust. When the family with the boy came back out of the restroom the mother walked with her shoulders back, not even glancing back at us. She drug her boy by his wrist. Unlike her, he watched us, smiling and giving a small wave with his free arm. The sprinklers flicked on and within moments the younger girls were in their

underwear, the older kids yelling and running with them towards the water. I shifted to stop them, but changed my mind.

The collected family climbed back into their car, the man taking his place behind the wheel. The woman watched us from the corner of her eye, not bothering to turn her head. They drove off down the highway, fading in the distance without even a little bit of smoke spilling from their exhaust.

The kids wrestled and raced in the sprinklers. They laughed even. After everything, they still laughed and played. Their skin glistened in the warm sun, water beading on their shoulders and dripping from their hair. There was no mistaking that they were siblings. Even Mary looked like the rest of them, though her red curls came from her paternal father. Jay had the same curls too, and for a moment I wished he could have been there to run and play with his siblings. They all had my fair skin, except for Robin who looked much more like Richard with chestnut skin and near black hair. But laughing and playing amidst everything, the kids made me full of hope knowing at least we all had each other.

After that stop I ignored the attention we were getting and stopped hushing the kids. They deserved a little happiness in all that mess. Plus, being stopped was much better than driving through those mountains in that yellow deathtrap that Jessie and Rob had deemed 'The Yellow Turd'. Despite the nerve inducing risk, our trip had a destination that we had to meet, so we'd board back on the bus when the engine had quieted and cooled, rattling our way

back through the mountains, hoping and wishing for the flat ground on the other side to come into sight.

“Esther Ann,” Richard glanced back at me quickly, returning his eyes to the sharp curves of the steeply inclined interstate. “I need you to come here.” My heart was racing. I rose and grabbed the bunk bed frame to steady myself as I made my way to the front of the bus. The road was smooth, but I’d never seen mountains like these. With each turn, the bus swayed and hugged the corner, like batter in an overfilled mixing bowl. I gripped the back of the driver’s seat, leaning so my head was level with Dickie’s over his shoulder. After driving hours through steep ups and downs, it was easy to get disoriented, but we were nearing the top of an incline it seemed. Big yellow signs warned of a high grade downward slope ahead.

“I want you to know that I love you.” Dickie’s knuckles were white, he glanced up again. There was a look in his eyes I hadn’t seen many times before. I couldn’t quite place it. A lump settled heavily on top of my pounding heart. I felt my face blush and my shoulders and neck began to tingle.

“Well I love you too, Richard.” I wouldn’t let my voice give me away. I kept it low and steady.

“I need you to listen, Esther Ann.” His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. “I don’t want you to worry, but there might be something wrong. I’ve got a feeling about the gears on this piece of shit.” Richard’s teeth clenched as he steadied the big yellow beast around another corner, managing to stay within the yellow lines. “It’s been jumping gears all over the last

twenty or so miles. It don't mean nothing much, but something might go wrong in these damn windy hills."

"Hills?! Richard, we need to stop. Now. Pull over." I knew we couldn't, there wasn't but a few feet from the edge of the lane to the whimsy metal lining that gave the illusion of safety from the massive cliff drop off just feet on the other side.

"Listen." His voice was now steady and deep. He meant what he was saying. "If there's going to be a problem it's going to be on the other side, going down. If we go over one of these edges, we're all dead- no question. If I tell you to, I want you to take the kids and jump out the back. I'm serious."

I stood, slack-jawed in awe of what he'd asked me to do. I looked out the window over the massive drop offs. The tops of enormous trees were still at least fifty feet below the road over the edge. "Are you kidding me? There is no way in hell am I taking our children and jumping off this bus. You think we can just roll to safety down the mountain behind you? We'd be dead on this highway in seconds, look at these people!" Cars sped by the bus, barely audible above clinking hodge-podge of dishes and cooking utensils mounted on the wall. "It's so easy for them, isn't it? I don't ask much of you Richard, but you got us into this mess, you are going to get us out of these mountains. Alive. Today. Like it or not. And if this death trap rolls right off the mountainside, for God's sake, we're going too." I grabbed his shoulder tight and shook it, hoping that feigning strength could give him courage.

Returning to the old couch to sit beside Rob, Robin rushed to curl up, head on my lap, ragged cloth doll clung tightly to her chest. I wrapped my arm around Rob and brushed

Robin's matted hair with shaking fingertips. Mary played a game of Rummy with Jessie on the bottom bunk. Richard's knuckles grew whiter, his strong arms tightening, jaw set, his eyes strained to navigate the mountains. I closed my eyes and breathed deep, willing the minutes to pass, colors whooshing in the darkness behind my closed eyes with each passing car. I hoped the children thought I was sleeping. Slowly the mountains turned into hills, then hills into long flat valleys. The buses' roar and clunking calmed into a mere growl and tapping.

When the mountains in the distance faded, we sputtered to a stop at another small rest area. The kids piled out the emergency exit door in the back, running to the restrooms, shouting and jumping, excited to have a chance to move about. Dickie sat still, hands steady gripping the steering wheel, shoulders heaving with deep breaths. I stood, brushing my already greasy hair back out of my face, tucking it behind my ears. After a few moments of stillness, I rose and went to him.

"You did it." I ran my hands through his dark hair. Cherokee, he'd said years before. Head full of thick black hair, thanks to his Cherokee grandmother.

Dickie wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me onto his lap. "I'll do better this time, I swear. I'm sorry, Esther. Everything back home, I mean- my job, the travelling, late nights, your ex and mine, all of this... really, I'll do better." He squeezed me tighter, rocking slowly.

"I know, I know you will." I kissed his salty forehead. "Now let's go wash up. We'll find our new home by this time tomorrow."

We stayed there that night, at that tiny little rest area. The kids had run, jumped, screamed, and tackled each other into exhaustion. Rob passed out on the couch, and the girls shared the bunk beds. Windows open, just the hint of a breeze snuck in. I began my night stretched out on the floor, where the center aisle once was. Now it was just a thin rubber lining, barely cushioning the warm metal ground. The air was tinged with sweat and the smell of warm produce that our neighbors had given us upon our departure. Though it was dark, the steady hum of semis and warm, pulsating air kept me stirring. I had just begun to doze when I'd felt a tapping on my ankle.

“Esther, baby.” Dickie whispered, running his hand up my leg. “Come on, this way.”

I slowly rose to a crawl, scraping my knees on the cracked rubber liner to meet my husband at the front of the bus. As I grew near he ran his fingers through my hair, pulling me close, he kissed me. I breathed him in, American Tobacco, sweat, and the slight musk of aftershave from before we'd left. He took my hand and led me down the steps, swinging me onto the soft grass. He had laid a blanket out under a tree near the bus. There only a few sleeping semis scattered about the parking lot.

“It's ten degrees cooler out here.” He laid on the blanket. “And we could have a little privacy.” I grabbed the hand he had extended to me and let him lower me to the ground next to him. He pulled me in and held me tight against his chest, something I hadn't remembered him doing in years. When he wasn't away hunting or travelling he spent many night shifts working at the police station. We hardly went to bed together.

That night I didn't worry about what the passing drivers would think. I knew we'd be up before the sun rose. Instead, I laid there, looking skyward. Something about the stars out here looked brighter, more vast than they did at home. I let Dickie caress my skin with his calloused fingertips and closed my eyes, breathing to the rhythm of the big engines speeding by on the highway.

This time would be different. Richard wouldn't be gone half of the year as he was before, and there wouldn't be as much of a reason to fight. He would be around to help with the kids, and hopefully see when I was struggling and be there to help me through it. My ex husband wouldn't be a looming threat, and I wouldn't have to be afraid anymore. I wouldn't be lonely anymore. This wasn't the new start I'd been expecting, but it was new start after all.

Chapter 2

We had finally arrived in Washington, except when we found the friend Dickie said had promised us a place to stay we were turned away. Something about him agreeing to house us all before talking to the Missus. She'd assumed it would just be Richard staying with them, so when we rolled up with a bus full of kids and things she wasn't too pleased. I'd bit my tongue and held my breath climbing back into the bus, homeless again, after we thought we found a safe haven. I knew that I could have never turned away a family in need.

So, with Richard as frustrated as myself, we loaded back up on the bus and found a campground to stay at while Dickie looked for work. The second day he returned from his search to proudly announce that we were now working tenants on a piece of farm land owned by a couple of the most important ranchers in the state, the Cowen Brothers. I didn't argue. It was better than what we had now, and we were running out of money and food. Cowen had promised us a house on the land, food, and stipends.

We sold the bus real cheap to a group of young rag-tag hippies passing through the grounds. On the very next day, stood in our empty camping spot and waited for Mr. Cowen himself to pull in a rusty old pickup.

"Dickie!" Mr. Cowen shouted through the rolled down window. He was well groomed, dusty brown hair cut short, soft eyes that matched in color. He looked kind. "I'm so glad you found me yesterday. We've been dying for some extra hands. Come on, pile on in, let's get you to your new home."

Dickie motioned for the kids to climb in the bed of the truck. I helped lift the few boxes we did have and set them against the inside of the tailgate. Rob and Mary sat on either side, and I quietly instructed Jessie and Robin each to sit tight against the corners backing the cab.

“But I won’t be able to see anything at all!” Jessie’s voice was long and high. “We just got here. How am I s’posed to find my way back if I can’t see?” Mr. Cowen laughed as my eyes met hers sternly beneath raised brows.

“What’s your name, dear?” Mr. Cowen had gotten out to help load the truck. He approached my wild-haired middle daughter.

“It’s Jessie. Most of my friends call me Jess. But I’m not sure if we can be friends yet. You talk kinda funny, and I’m not all that sure about that.” She looked him up and down, eyes lingering on the pack of cigarettes still wrapped in shiny plastic peeking out of his flannel shirt pocket. I felt my cheeks grow red. I’d never met a child with such a mouth on her and I wasn’t sure where exactly she picked it up. I’d like to blame her teacher, third grade could be a tough year. But I knew ultimately the blame was mine. She was a tough kid though, I’d give her that much.

“I like your spirit, Jessie.” He laughed again. “I’ll tell you what. Your new house isn’t too far from the river. There’s lots of critters and plenty of big fish to catch.” He grinned as her eyes widened. “I’ll bring you out a brand new pole if you’d like.”

“Oh you don’t need to do all that.” Dickie nudged Jessie. “She’ll just catch ‘em with her teeth, this girl.”

“No! I think I’d like a pole very much. Maybe you can call me Jess. But only after I get a pole. A good one.”

“You got yourself a deal, little girl.” He looked at the older kids. “Rob, Mary, your dad told me all about you. I think it’s very brave you came with your parents all this way. I’m going to make sure you’re paid for the work you do. There’s a nice High School you’ll go to when the season’s right, I’ll get you signed up on the bus route. You’ll get to pick your driving horses, too. We’ve got plenty to choose from. You too, Mrs. Esther. Now sit down and hold on, we’ve got a while to go.”

Jessie scooted back in her corner and Robin cowered in hers, clutching her doll. I hoisted myself into the center half-seat of the cab, the tall gear shift raising up between my knees. Dickie scooted in beside me, resting his hand on my thigh. Mr. Cowen slammed the drivers side door, it giving an enthusiastic creak. He reached behind my head, pushing open the center sliding window.

“You guys ready? Just holler if you need anything.” The truck grumbled to life, and we were off. The men talked over business, establishing who we were and the experience we had. I nodded occasionally, watching the land move outside the small cab. It felt compact and intimate, unlike the bus. Mr. Cowen’s arm pressed against mine, his sleeve brushed over my knee each time he reached to shift the gear. He apologized the first time.

The further from the campsite we got, the tighter Dickie’s hand squeezed on my leg. He was nervous, too. Something small and cold touched my shoulder, a hand, frail fingers bending and clinging near my neck. Robin had scooted several inches and curled just beneath

the window, hair over her face, small body bouncing with the road. I squeezed my own hand around hers, letting her hold tight to my thumb.

“She’s a panicky little thing, ain’t she?” Mr. Cowen drove on, passing onion fields and green pastures on the way to our new home.

The house was small, but comfortable, a quaint little one room shack. Beds lined two of the walls, so it was a bit crowded, but the house was sturdy. We didn’t spend much time inside anyway. The floor was hard-pressed dirt. I was glad I didn’t have to do much sweeping. We had an old wood stove but did most of our cooking over the fire outdoors.

All our work was done outside. We spent almost every day on horseback, and my god, it was then I decided I belonged on the back of a horse. We’d rise before the sun and I’d tack up Bruce, my dark chestnut quarter horse, while Rob, Mary, and Richard readied their own. Jessie and Robin would stay home under the watch of other farm hands, helping to pick green onions and play in the dirt while we were gone.

It was best to get going before the sun got hot, so we could make it back in time for dinner. We’d wear our long sleeve button downs, Levi’s, and big western hats. It warmed up here in the afternoon, but not like one may expect. The sun was sneaky, it would burn your skin in only an hours time, though it felt nice enough you could lay out underneath it all day if you had the time.

We were so happy then, rounding up the cattle just before the sun rose, when the black sky was beginning to fade into purple but the frogs and crickets hadn't yet quieted down. We would drive the cattle down the bank of the river for miles, galloping after any stragglers to round them back into the herd. After loading the cattle on the ferry we would stop for lunch of ham on homemade bread, sometimes fresh picked cherries or apples from the trees on the land we stayed on, if the season was right. We didn't talk much, except to the horses. But there was nothing as wonderful as a deep breathe of Washington air. In the fall, when the leaves would crisp, or spring when everything was wet and alive, the summer air was laced with fresh fruit and sweet, ripe green onions. Even the winter, the coolness tasted of a fresh start, chilly and pure.

On the back of a horse, I was no longer just one person. We were a team, Bruce's skin quivering with every fly and surprise. We drove hundreds of cattle those eight miles every day to the Queen Anne Ferry, where we would load them up using old paddock gates, rounding, and urging them onto the ferry's platform. We'd send them on their way with the residents the Cowen's had hired for the other side of the river, one step closer to being sold for meat, milk, or showing. When we were done we would all turn around and ride the two hours back home, whooping and racing now and then, teasing each other.

When we got home Robin would be hanging off the gate of the horse's pasture, waiting to climb up my saddle for a hug before I had the chance to dismount. Jessie would be cleaning the fish she'd caught near the house, dumping the heads and guts where Richard had instructed her. I would prepare dinner for the for the family, recruiting the kids to clean and

peel potatoes, my legs tired from a day of riding. Late to bed, early to rise, we'd do the same thing each day. We were so exhausted by the end of the day that we'd all fall asleep near each other, no energy to fight or bicker, no ruse big enough to cause sleepless nights.

Dickie hadn't been my first husband, and that was a topic of contempt back when we'd had the time to argue, though I wasn't his first wife either. Mark was my High School sweetheart, and my husband of just a few years. He was the father to my two oldest, Jay and Mary. Both had taken to Richard as young kids, but now Jay was off travelling the country for work, making it impossible to talk too much.

At first I didn't know that I could tell Richard no. Mark was always sure to make it clear that defiance wasn't an option. He'd wag his finger in my face, "I'm smarter than you," and "Without me you'd be a goner- dumber than a bat." I would believe him, too. I wasn't educated. Some of the girls I graduated with went to college to be secretaries, but not me. I didn't have the money, and Mark made sure I knew I didn't have the wit.

Mark would push me around, breathing hot, harsh words down across my neck. If my skirt was too short or my lipstick too bright he'd call me a whore and accuse me of cheating. When the housework wasn't done right he'd call me a freeloader, and worse. I never served him dinner cool, always fresh and hot, ready as soon as he walked through the door. I'd learned that if I sat a plate in front of him that wasn't steaming that I would soon have to wear sleeved blouses to cover where he'd struck me.

One time he had heard a rumor that I'd been flirting with the cashier on my weekly trip uptown to the small grocery store. He came home, slamming the door hard enough to shake the pictures on the walls.

"Esther Ann!" He'd yelled. I peaked out from the kitchen where I was simmering gravy and waiting for the biscuits to be done. "I heard what you been doin' today." He took his jacket off, throwing it to the floor.

"Your dinners about ready, Mark. Why don't you sit? I'll grab you some ice water." I'd turned and wiped my lips on a dishrag to be sure they weren't too bright.

"No, I don't think so. Brian's wife came by the shop today to bring him some lunch. She said she saw you down at Garv's Market. Said you were gettin' real friendly with that lad up at the checkout." He stood in the doorway to the small kitchen. The gravy bubbled. Mark was taller than me, and much stronger. He took up most of the doorway, cutting off the extra light spilling in from the dining room. The kitchen glowed yellow from the dim bulb above the stove.

"Lucille? I didn't see her there, today. You know how women like to talk." I stirred the gravy, trying not to look at Mark.

"You aren't calling her a liar, are you? Lucy's a great girl, you know. Not all women go around lying like you do." He stomped his foot, rattling the baking sheet in the oven. "Damn it, Esther! Look at me!" He grabbed my arm, spinning me around with the gravy covered spatula. Splashes of gray liquid scalded my arm. I squealed at the heat on my wrist, dropping

the spatula to the speckled linoleum floor, gravy cooled to a warm by the time it splashed across the floor, soaking my stockinged feet.

“Well, fuck, woman. Look what you done now. A whore and a bungler.” He squeezed my petite shoulders tight in his big, strong hands. My skin burned against his grip.

“Please, Mark. Stop.” He squeezed harder, nearly lifting me off the ground. “For chrissake, you’re hurting me!” I kicked my foot against his knee, surprising him enough to drop me. I had never hit him back, and he hit me often. I slipped in the gravy, catching my balance and backing away from him, further into the small kitchen. He lunged at me, grabbing my hair in his fist and yanking back. I shrieked again as he forced me to the floor, slipping and holding me down, belly in the cooled, sticky gravy. I tried to move, kick, slip out from his grip, but every time I did he held tighter.

“You think you’re a big girl now, huh? Think you can fight me? You’re all wrong, Esther Ann. You’re a child. If you ain’t gonna listen I’m goin’ to have to treat you like a child.”

“No, Mark. Please. I’ll stop. I’m good now. I’ll listen!” He held my arms behind my back, slipping them from the grip of his hand and pinning me tight beneath his knee. I struggled to breathe.

“Oh, no. I don’t think so. You know how we take care of bad kids?” He pulled at his belt, sliding it from his waist. I squeezed my eyes shut tight as he rolled it in his hand. Three times was all it took, three strikes against my thighs to keep me from fighting back. I held still as he hit me again and again.

He left me, whimpering and bruised in the spilled gravy, biscuits burning in the oven, and went to the strip club on the other side of town. I tended to the blisters on my wrist and finished cleaning the kitchen, wrapping myself in a quilt my mother made us before he returned in the small hours of the morning, stumbling and reeking of whiskey. I pretended to be asleep when he fell into bed and tried to rouse me.

Mark was in charge, but that's the way that it was supposed to be. All the women I knew walked around with bruises under their blouses, and no one blamed her husband. Each purple mark was earned. She must've talked back, sassied him, or worse. The children weren't much better off. There were rules, and we had to follow them. The first and most important: The man was the head of the house, and Mark was no exception. He was brutal, crazy even. After two years and two children I left, afraid Mark would snap and kill us like he threatened.

We moved back in with my mother. Mark followed me then, calling the landline at the house and threatening to burn it to the ground if I didn't come home. He'd find me in the grocery store and stop by whenever word got around that I'd picked up a seasonal job. When I took Jay and Mary out in the yard he would drive by slowly, yelling and throwing things at us, threatening to run us right over if we didn't get into his car. Ma got the police involved, scared Mark wasn't bluffing. Richard was one of the new, young deputy's assigned to watch out for me.

I realized Richard was different than Mark. For the first year he was a sweet man, in all regards. Then, things changed. Richard never hit us, though he was quick to anger, storming out of the house and disappearing for days, showing us just how much worth we held. He grew up in a traditional household with a German mother who wasn't afraid to hit her children. He once told me that as punishment his mother would make him stand against a wall while she threw knives at him, laughing the whole time. I think it was his mom that made him wary of physical punishment, and he knew that Mark had been terrible. Though he hardly showed any physical aggression, Richard would be the first man I defied.

The air had grown crisp when the kids started back to school just a few miles from the ranch, leaving Richard and I to herd the cattle alone each day. This time of year there were less cattle so it was doable. The old school bus would pull around a quarter mile from the house and pick up the kids, rolling down the dirt road, tossing reddish dust behind it. Mary was in High School now, interested in sports and boys. She had gotten into the habit of lying about who she was with or forgetting to tell us where she'd gone, and this made Richard livid. I knew he was angry because he really cared, but he wouldn't tell Mary that.

I'd just brushed Bruce and gotten him a fresh bucket of oats when I went to the house. Richard and Mary were yelling at each other. They had been at odds for the last few weeks, avoiding each other and never talking at meals. Mary had told me it was nothing and Richard

didn't want to talk about it so I'd let them deal with their own issues this far. But now Mary's voice shook, high and bitter.

"Does it even matter? I'm here now! I went to school, went on a date- just like I said, and now I'm home. I don't see a god-damned thing wrong with any that. It's not like we do anything but work anyways. I just needed a break."

"You went somewhere without telling us, Mary. We were expecting you home on that bus with your brother and sisters. You weren't on it. You hadn't told us anything otherwise. You had your mother crazy with worry. You should be ashamed!" Richard was yelling. A pang of guilt shot through my chest. I hadn't even noticed Mary was missing. I'd been distracted with the horses all evening. Richard was lying. "You can't just do that. I don't give a fuck if you're out with every guy in your class, you need to let us know where you are and when to expect you."

I stood in the doorway to the side, where I remained clouded in the growing shadows of dusk.

"Oh yeah? You want to track my every move? Like you do with Mom? Like I'm not already an adult, uprooting my whole life to follow you and Mom across the country? I do just as much here as the rest of you! I'm not a kid, damnit! You're not even my real dad. You probably burnt the last house down on purpose. Mom hates you, you know. She was going to leave! She was leaving and we were all going with her."

Richard flushed red, he pulled back his right hand quickly, striking Mary across the cheek. She shrunk into herself, falling to the floor, cheek stinging red within seconds. He pulled his hand back again.

I ran into the room. I had to stop him. I had to. I didn't care that he was a foot taller than me and much heavier. I'd grown stronger working on the ranch over the last year. This wouldn't be like Mark. This time I could defend myself and my daughter. I threw my body against his hard enough to knock him to the hard-pressed ground, a cloud of dust filling my eyes and nose. My arms flailed against him hitting him with enough force to vary his breaths. "Esther! Mary was just... I didn't.. I don't.. I can't..." He covered his face with his arms.

I didn't care. I wouldn't deal with that kind of behavior. I swore I would never let another man hit any of my children. My fists pounded Richard's arm and chest.

"You can't just hit her like that!" I screamed. My energy faded as he pushed me off him onto the floor. "You won't fix anything that way," I said, trying not to sob. A knot formed in the back of my throat, stuck unmoving, hard like a plum pit. "Don't you ever touch her again, Richard. We'll be long gone if it ever happens again. I swear this time." I stood and brushed the dirt from my pants, pushing my hair back behind my ears and straightening myself. Richard sat on the ground and looked at me, eyebrows furrowed, almost puzzled, leaning back on the palms of his hands. Mary flew up from the ground, wiped her eyes and rushed out the door.

"I didn't even think, Esther Ann. I never meant to-"

"I don't care, Richard. I don't care. I can't do that again. I won't watch you hurt my

kids.” My voice was no longer shaking, but my cheeks flushed with shame. I knew I shouldn’t have jumped on him. I wasn’t really sure why I had. Watching him hit Mary filled me instantly with rage, but now I felt as if I had made my point, though embarrassed I had acted like a child. “Go get tonight’s meat from the cooler in the barn. It’s getting late.”

“Okay.”

I left him sitting on the floor and went outside to start the fire for cooking. The younger kids were playing in the setting sun, chasing the chickens and throwing kernels of corn to them, scurrying away from the roosters spurred feet. Rob was splitting firewood on the far side of the yard and Mary sat near the fire pit, staring at the charred wood from last night’s dinner.

“Mary?” She looked up, meeting my eyes. I raised my eyebrows, she nodded and stood to help me fill the pit with fresh cut wood. She was tough. She would be fine. That night dinner was eaten in silence, only Jessie and Robin dancing in the light of the flames, fighting over how many fish Jessie had caught that day.

Days passed, then weeks. Richard and I herded the cattle, slowing to just a few times a week in the winter. We prepared for Spring when the calves would be born, keeping all the pregnant heifers in a special pen near our driving horses. Mr. Cowen would come out every other week to check on them to give any necessary injections and make sure the calves were growing at a normal rate. He was always sure to stick around long enough to welcome the kids

home after school, having candy for Jessie and Robin, chocolate for Mary, and fresh jerky for Rob. The kids would follow him to pet the cows, laughing at the immense size of their bellies and learning how to find where they could feel the unborn calves' heartbeats and movements. March came and the heifers grew closer to calving. Mr. Cowen was due for his check-in any day.

I was washing up some dishes in the spigot outside our little home when I heard the school bus pull around one afternoon. It was beginning to warm, moisture drawing in the air, leaves beginning to emerge from dead branches on blackberry bushes and cherry trees.

“Mom! Mom!” Robin screamed. She slid around the corner and clinged to my knees. She was covered in slick mud. “She’s dead! We went to see, and she’s dead! Come on, come!” Robin sobbed, pulling me around the corner. I quickened my pace, leaving the spigot running behind us.

“Who’s dead, Robin? Who died?” My heart raced in my chest as I imagined Jessie spilled across the ground pinned beneath a car. She pulled me to the heifer’s pen where Jessie stood, calming my worry a bit. Jessie had mud caked to her knees. She was petting a black heifer that had afterbirth hanging from beneath her tail.

“The baby, the baby cow is dead. Why didn’t you help her? You could have saved her, mom!” Robin sobbed, rubbing her small face into my belly. Only in second grade, I couldn’t remember if she’d ever seen anything dead before.

I opened the gate and went to Jessie. At her feet was a small calf a few weeks premature, thin and covered in pink and black slime. Its’ tongue hung from its slack-jaw unmoving. The

mother cow didn't seem to notice, standing warily a few feet away jaw slowly chewing on cud.

Robin fell to her knees and put her small hands on the dead fetus.

"She would have been so sweet. What happened? *How* could it happen?" Her wide eyes scurried between the stillborn and myself, desperate and searching. I kneeled to the ground, my legs sinking in the guck, and took Robin in my arms.

"Jessie, why don't you go grab Dad and let him know. He'll want to go down the road and talk to Cowen." Jessie nodded and shucked through the mud back past the gate. Robin wiped her snot on my shoulder. Mud covered my jeans and blouse.

"These things just happen sometimes, Robin. It's sad, but it happens. Not every creature that starts to grow is quite ready for this Earth. Sometimes God sees something so beautiful that he thinks we can't handle it, and finds a better place for it up in heaven."

Robin's body shuddered, and she struggled to catch her breath, but her crying slowed. "Can we bury her?"

"Let's see what Dad has to say about that, all right? Come on." I stood and turned to leave, but Robin threw herself into the sludge.

"No!" Her face was red and streaked. "We can't just leave her here! She'll be trampled!"

"All right." I sighed. For what Mary had in strength and Jessie had in will, Robin had in heart. "You go on out, hold the gate for me. I'll bring her." The calf was heavy and limp in my arms, still barely warm. The birth sack broke off and I left it lying in the mud, the goo that coated the calf soaked into my top, fetid and tainted with blood. I laid the body right outside the gate, beyond the reach of the cows. Robin followed me hesitantly, looking back every few

steps. We met Richard and Jessie in front of the house where they were climbing in the truck to fetch Mr. Cowen.

“Sure. Bury the thing.” He kissed my forehead, then bent to kiss Robin’s. “And you help!” He shouted at Mary, who rolled her eyes and groaned, dropping her school book to the ground.

We buried the premature calf at the end of the property near the road where the bus picked up the children, lanky legs folded beneath her. Robin cried. Rob, Mary and I sweat, loping heavy, wet shovelfuls on the small grave.

Soon our lives would return to just the way they were before. Robin would stop leaving flowers on the small gravesite she had marked with a broken rock. After a few weeks hundreds of calves were born. We were careful not to let her see the tens more that were born just to live moments in this world before departing. Mr. Cowen assured us it was normal, a tenth of calves were expected to die within the first few hours of their life each birthing season and the rates were even higher for those cattle who had never calved before.

Mary, Richard, and I would carry the lanky bodies to a pit at the far back of the property and call Mr. Cowen who would arrive promptly to take the mothers to the dairy farm portion of Cowen Incorporated. Mary wouldn’t look at the calves directly. I hoped that by making her help I wasn’t messing up her mind. Rob didn’t seem to care, but a small part of me wish he did. The world needs more men to care about the weak and dead.

What truly broke my heart was the heifers. Some didn't seem to notice what they'd lost but others acted as if they were being parted from their very soul. They ran and bucked when we tried to herd them in, protecting their dead young, accidentally trampling them to bits as we backed them into a corner and drug them from the pen. They'd beckon and moo low and loud enough I could hear them from down the road from the back of Cowen's trailer.

"Cows don't really have no feelings," Dickie would tell me when I'd wipe tears from my cheek after an exhausting hour of catching the calfless heifer.

Who's he to say they don't feel, I'd think. He's never been a cow, and he's never been a mother. Thank goodness there were only a few weeks a year that heifers calved because I don't think I could have handled it all year round.

Spring was fleeting and warming up quickly. Sweet blossom petals dropped to the ground making room for dark green leaves. The mushy ground became firm and the baby green blades of grass darkened, the horses whinnying with glee each time we moved the bounds of their pasture, providing fresh, unchomped ground. Our maternity cow pen morphed back to temporary housing for the cattle we'd drive the next day up the river to the ferry. I was glad to have more time to ride and less mud to scrub from Jessie's skin.

"Mom. You're not even listening to me!" Jessie yelled from behind me, kicking her foot across the ground, sending a bright yellow dandelion head tumbling through the air.

“Yes, Jess. I hear you.” I was bent over the garden, weeding around the peppers and carrots. Mary was a few feet away, mud up to her elbows, tending to the potato sprouts. I sat back, taking off my old gardening gloves and I looked at Jessie. She was covered in mud, denim shorts soaked, legs covered in bruises of various shades and sizes. She’d been fishing.

“She ruined our dinner! She did it! It’s always her!” Jessie shook her arm towards Robin who was hanging on the pasture gate across the yard petting the horses. Robin must have heard the ruckus. She jumped from the fence and ran to the garden, tripping on the molehills along the way.

“Okay, girls. Why don’t you tell me what exactly happened?”

“She took the bucket of fish I caught and dumped ‘em right back in the river! Snot nosed, goody-girl!”

“Did not!” Robin’s voice grew shrill. “You only say that ‘cause you don’t want to feel bad about catching no fish today. I saw you out there in the river, smackin’ it with your pole ‘cause them fish know better than to bite on the end of your line! You’ll just kill ‘em! And they know it!”

“Mom!” Jessie groaned. “You seen it before! She drags my bucket back down there when I go to get my knives, little sneak! She done it! You told me fish don’t have no feelings, tell her. Tell sour-puss that they don’t feel nothin’ when the hook get ‘em. Those fish keep your belly full.” She stomped her feet, cheeks flushed, she turned and pushed Robin to the ground pulling back her little leg, ready to kick her sister.

“Jessie! Absolutely not. That’s not how we handle things.” I flew to my feet. Every time I saw Jessie act towards Robin in violence, I flickered back to Mark and the way he would push me around, spit in my face, kick me in places the bruises couldn’t be seen. Jessie wasn’t Mark’s child biologically, but they had a similar fire. I grabbed Jessie hard by the arm and pulled her to the house. Pushing past the bug net we’d fashioned after last year’s mosquito fiasco, I sat her on Rob’s cot.

“You listen good, girl.” Jessie’s eyes welled. She never cried, but now no one was looking. “I don’t care what your sister did. Dump some fish? Yeah, that’s not too good, but you know what? You come to me. I will have a talk with her. You don’t just push people around like they’re little toys, all right?” I gripped her shoulders in my hands, hard enough to keep her still and make her look me in the eyes, but I was careful with her young skin beneath my fingertips. I didn’t want to hurt her. My own shoulders ached with memory of Mark’s tight grip. I loosened mine.

Jessie shook her head yes.

“Now I want you to go out there and apologize to your sister, you hear? Say sorry for pushing her down.” A lump formed in the back of my throat, the space beneath my eyes grew warm.

“But-“ she stammered.

“But, nothing. Don’t apologize for anything else. Just for pushing her down. You really believe she dumped your fish?” Her eyes were wide but still mad. She did. “Then we’re going to talk to her about it and deal with it accordingly. No pushing. No hitting. We’re going

to talk it out. Whether it's you or her, or you're guilty, or she is, or no one is, we're all people, okay? No one deserves to be hurt. Even if it seems like they deserve it. We find a different way. Okay?"

"Okay."

I hugged Jessie, letting her wipe her sniffling face in my shoulder. I didn't let me see my own face, pink and running. I wished for a moment that the world could hear what I'd said and take it to heart, but I couldn't teach the world. I blinked away the blur and we rose, heading to the garden where Robin and Mary were eating unripe tomatoes, laughing at the grimaces on each other's faces as they chewed the green bulbs.

I took Bruce out after dinner many nights that year. We'd ride slow, his back bare beneath my jeans. When we herded the cattle I always had his saddle fastened tight so it wouldn't leave me sliding mid-canter a few hours into the day. Our night rides were much slower and relaxed. I'd slip the bit into his mouth and bridle over his head to rest behind his ears. Too short to mount without a stirrup, I had to climb up on the fence to mount. I felt safe here, high on Bruce's back in slow gate near the blackberry bushes where his head would occasionally lower to nibble on the lush Creeping Charlie.

Two years on horseback had made me stronger. I was positive that if I needed to run my legs could carry me. Endless hours of pushing and guiding cattle had narrowed my hips and tightened my core. Evenings of chopping and moving firewood had given me arms strong

enough to bare my own weight and more. I had always known I was small in stature and for the first time I felt physically strong. My legs tightened around Bruce's round bare belly to guide him and urge him into a gallop, and now I was strong enough for him to recognize and respect my efforts.

I leaned forward, scratching Bruce beneath his chestnut mane, laughing at his shivered reaction. Like a cat, I thought, when you'd pet the base of their tail. He would shiver and whiny and throw his head for more. This was a closeness I thought that neither of us afforded often. The sun began to set in the distance, dipping beyond the far foothills of the mountains. The frogs began to chirp, reminding me again of the loud cicadas back where I grew up. Only now, this felt like home

Not everything here had been easy. In fact, most of it was hard. We didn't have much and we worked for every piece of food that passed our lips. All of us sweat more than we had thought possible, but to me everything was worth the work we had to put in. The girls had never caught so many fireflies and the older kids were fitting in great, often out and away with friends when we weren't hard at work. Richard liked his work, and so did I. Here I wasn't afraid. I didn't have to be. It wasn't easy, but we were all so happy on the ranch.

Chapter 3

The afternoons grew sticky. We spent them bumbling on horseback each day after driving the cattle North. Richard and the kids were back at their play, racing and galloping in circles about the cherry trees that lined the green onion fields. The onions were ripening, slowly filling the air with their sharp, lush aroma. This year I stayed back. Bruce was growing old and didn't seem to mind missing out on the gallops and canters of the younger driving horses. It was hard work, gathering and guiding the cattle up the bank. It was nice to sit and watch my family play ahead of me while I moseyed my way home slow enough to reach out and pull cherries from the nearby trees one at a time. They burst between my molars, tart and spurting with juice.

We made our way home, meeting the younger girls at cabin. Robin scrambled up Bruce's back and into my lap as she had the year before. Jessie continued to catch her fish and clean them for dinner but was now typically done fishing by noon since she'd gotten pretty quick at catching more than enough for us to eat. We would find her on the upper loft of a barn crafting weapons from stone and sticks. She'd go hunting for rabbit and squirrel with her homemade weapons. I told her I didn't mind as long as she helped me clean them and she promised never to bring home any dead rats. The thought of cleaning a rat and eating it made my stomach turn. I'd never been that hungry.

I was helping Jessie clean three plump squirrels on a table a couple dozen feet from the house when I heard a metallic ringing from inside. Handing the now skinned squirrel back to Jessie I rushed inside, wiping the critter's blood on the dingy gray apron tied around my waist.

I pushed passed the mosquito net fashioned over the doorway, picking up the corded receiver and pressing it to my ear.

“Mr. Cowen?”

“Six times.” I could hear the annoyance in my mother’s voice. “I’ve dialed you six times.” Her voice sounded higher than it actually was. I’d like to think that was because of the thousand miles of thin cord that carried it this far, perched on by birds and grazed by old pine and oak.

“Sorry, Ma.” I twisted the thick waxed phone cord in my fingers. “We’re busy here, you know. Driving cattle. Tending the horses. I’ve told you in the letters.” I wrote weekly, or at least I tried to. Mostly I stamped an envelope or two a month. We only made \$250 a year after the food and land that Mr. Cowen provided us. It was enough for the things that we weren’t given, but didn’t allow for much leisure. But my mother wouldn’t care if I was living in a cardboard box on the street. I was expected to write, and I missed her.

“Busy!” She huffed. I could almost see her blue eyes rolling, hair gray and straightened, held in place with a bit of beeswax. “Tell me that husband is behaving. And those children. They can’t be doing too much better since you took them from their grandmother! Oh, your father is just miserable.”

“You’ve told me, Ma. But how is he?” I tried to peek around the corner, poking my head past the net as far as the phone cord allowed. I couldn’t see Jessie, but it sounded like she was doing all right. Robin was just in view, sitting in the dirt playing with two small potatoes as if they were toys, her doll propped next to her.

“Forget him. How’s my babies?”

“Oh they’re all great. Rob and Ang both are growing up, have their own things going. Rob works for Cowen quite a bit. They help me out real good. And Jules, my god, you’ve never seen a happier child, fishin’ pole in hand. She’s been asking for a gun, but I’ll be damned... Robin, she’s fire and ice, as always. Pure passion that one. She’s doing real good, too.” Outside of Richard my mother was the only person I ever really talked to. I never really had a whole lot of friends since school. When we finally got a chance to talk I found myself struggling to hold back.

Mom laughed, coughing every few chuckles. She settled down, catching her breath.

“You, Esther Ann? What about you, dear?”

“I’m all right.”

“No more dead baby cows, you poor girl?” Her voice chilled, shaking at the end.

“No, no more dead baby cows.” We’d all seen worse. I didn’t really understand her concern, but it still nibbled at my ribs. Ma never worried much. Chin up, mouth shut, a stable woman will make it through, she’d say. And that’s what I was. Robin slipped through the door, knocking the net askew.

“Momma?” Robin pulled on my apron.

“Hold on, Ma.” I put my hand over the receiver, crouching to look at Robin. “Has your sister finished with the meat yet?” Robin nodded. “All right then, baby. I need you two to wash up and finish getting ready to cook. Scrub them potatoes and go get your dad. I’ll be out in a minute.” Robin threw her head back, groaning her way back through the door.

“Sorry, Ma. I’m back. Now tell me, how’s Pa?”

“Men. Men, I tell you.” She groaned too, sounding much like my youngest. “Ever since your father broke his toe he’s been ridiculous. I bore his children! Grew them in my very body, all eight, then pushed them out into the world. Did I complain one time? Not one time! But the man has so much as a sniffle and he’s in bed, begging for his nurse of a wife. A broken toe, nonetheless! This man has got a silver bell to chime at me, Lord knows who gave him that! A back rub, a meal, a cup of joe! You wouldn’t believe it. He just rang me this afternoon saying he’s lonely, all tucked in his bed, foot iced and resting on some pillows. ‘Read to me’ he says, like this man doesn’t know I don’t read too well. And my eyes hurt with the words so small, those thin pages in that dark back room. I don’t even think he’s even really broken his toe. It’s just the little one all swollen and purple. But his doctor is a man too, and I’ve always swore them types are on the same team. Can you believe that, Esther Ann?”

“Oh, Ma, yes I can.” Ma had always thought mankind had barred up against us womenfolk in some sort of secret brigade. Almost like they’d meet up after work once a week to have a brew and discuss the plans to oppress us women. I’d heard her fighting with Pa when I was younger. He’d stare at her, eyes big and dulled from drink, as she yelled at him somewhere between gibberish and anger about the way he’d treat her different around his coworkers and after their Thursday nights at the bar. She was vocal about it, this supposed coalition of men, until a man came into the room. It was as if she knew their secrets, but they couldn’t know that she knew. I didn’t particularly agree with her. There was good and bad in

every person regardless of what they had hiding between their legs. I leaned against the small counter, sighing. “They’re all working together to control us.”

“When they see us catching on, they try to act all sweet-like.”

“Oh, I know, Ma. Kissin’ our necks and callin’ us pretty.”

“That’s why you should wear your pearls, Esther Ann. Protect that neck of yours.”

I laughed, twisting the accordion-like cord in my fingers, wax rubbing in the creases of my hand. “Out here all them shiny things call in all the bears. They’d be biting at our neck, takin’ our pearls and our throats. That’s why we can’t wear perfume and smell sweet neither. They’d be thinking we’d marinated ourselves in honey just for their tasting.”

“Come home, Esther Ann. Don’t be joking with me like that. You’ll drive your father up the wall and put me six foot in the ground with worry. When are you coming home, dear?”

I never had an answer for her, no matter how many times she’d ask. Instead, I told her how much I loved her and hung up to go make dinner for my family. I missed her and Pa, of course. But I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to come back home to the same places I’d spent my teenage years. The town where for the last several years I’d jump at each turn in the grocery store, expecting Mark to be standing just beyond view, ready to swoop in and grab me with his talons, ripping at my skin and eyes.

Small town, where word got around faster than the people, and the false rumor of Mark and my elopement would urge forward our actual ceremony. But once fingers were ringed, and vows said, I was his property, and as long as I never whispered about the bruises to my ribs, back, neck, thighs, no one would speak about it, let alone know about. Here in

Washington, I'd escaped Mark for the most part. Only a raised fist would spin my vision and confuse my senses bringing me back to the fear and anger I'd harbored during our relationship. A thousand miles away, I was no longer afraid to round the corner. He was far from here, worlds away, a thousand miles of wire dangling from whimsy posts, only accessible through the agency of a telephone operator.

I was unsearchable, unfindable, untouchable.

Our job may have seemed simple, but it was never ending. The cattle driving cycle buried a comfort at the base of my throat. I knew what needed to be done day in and day out and I did it. Richard and the kids raced and played after work, then I could feed my family the meat from Jessie and Rob's hunts and the vegetables we'd grown from last years' seeds.

Everyone slept close, with full bellies and tired legs. Richard held me close, and every now and then whispered in my ear, guiding me outside to the bed of his truck. We'd drag our bedding along, listening to the croaking frogs and laughing at how similarly obnoxious they were to the cicadas of the Midwest. We'd stay the night in the back of the truck, clinging to each other as we had when we'd first collided years ago. We'd both been scared of the dark, afraid of the abuse we'd both left. With Mark, the fighting seemed condemned to the night, whisky drunken and bruise ridden. Only after work had been done, dinner on the oven, and floors sparkling from a day of work did the fighting start. The mornings were calm and cool, silent except for the birds outside our window, and Mark's deep, slow breaths.

Richard had told me his first wife was a lot like his mother, greeting him after work with a knife in hand, waving it in his face and threatening him, calling him lousy and worthless. She'd threaten to kill herself while he slept. For both of us the night had been a place we'd shrunk against, wary and untrusting. But we were different with each other, both with our first marriages left behind. Hard battles that became lessons we thought we had learned. In the small hours of the morning we were the closest. This was a place for healing and growth. We were getting better.

"Richard, the sun's rising." Through the layers of blankets the beveled metal surface of the truck bed kept me floating somewhere between sleep and lucidity. Frogs still sang their high pitched songs, ringing together in a continuous chorus.

Richard snored quietly, grunting. His hands rested on my hips beneath my disheveled nightgown. My bare hips itched against the wool blanket that weighed over us.

"I've got to get some eggs frying for the kids." I pulled away but he gripped my waist, pulling me tight against his hips. His strong, warm arms wrapped around my body.

"No, no," he grumbled. "You'll lay here a bit longer." He kissed my spine, then my shoulder. I laid still and sank into his embrace. The kids would complain about their bread and butter breakfast, but it was well worth it. The warmth of Richard's body balanced the sharp nip of the early morning air in my lungs.

Like that we'd lay several times a week, when the season allowed. Fortunately, it never really got too cold here in the winter and it hardly ever snowed. Neither did it get too hot in the summer. Mr. Cowen told me it was because of a rainforest or something near here. I didn't

know much of a different though. I'd learned about rainforests in grade school and never would have thought there would be one here in the United States. I'd always imagined them to be thick with those low trees, rubber-like leaves the size of umbrellas. Here we just had monstrous pines, towering higher than I would ever dare climb, so high you couldn't see the pinecones at the top, though you'd know they were there. At first that made me nervous. I wondered if a pinecone dropped from up there if it would knock you straight down, maybe even kill you. But that fear quickly faded and I began to think the trees were lovely.

Those nights in the truck bed the dark Washington skies were almost black except in a small area near the horizon just north where Seattle was. There the sky glowed a light orange, quickly giving way to the dark skies that cradled millions of pin-pricked lights I had to convince myself were stars and not individual blessings of God himself. We'd watch those stars shift with the season, heavy wool blanket keeping us from floating off into them.

The summer was nearing its end, as was our second year on the ranch. Rob was a year from graduation and Mary was not far behind him. The cattle driving began its' slow back down, falling from seven days a week, to six, and then to five. Apples begin to ripen, less of them green. They took more of a sweet red color, ready to pick and eat and bake into pies. Only a couple weeks stood between the kids and the beginning of the school year.

Richard often ate the low hanging apples when he was out mending fences and taking care of the other chores. Some afternoons he would bring me home a great big bucket of them

to can for the winter or to bake him and Mr. Cowen a pie for their monthly trips into town for supplies.

I was looking forward to the next trip they'd take even though it was still three weeks or so away. We were running low on coffee and flour and Richard had forgot both the last trip. I bent over the spigot at the back of the house and washed dishes from breakfast. It was Sunday, the only day we didn't have to drive cattle to the ferry. I had let the kids run after they'd finished their morning chores, giving them the rest of the afternoon to do whatever they wanted.

On Sundays I found solace in doing my chores alone. Sometimes when I finished I would take Bruce out, other times I would walk along the river or sneak up on the younger girls to toss dandelion heads at them from a distance.

The homemade lye soap bubbled against the mismatched dishes. I was sure to rinse all the bubbles off well. Lye was great for cleaning but left a bitter taste behind. I scrubbed and listened the bellowing of the cattle. Until there was a noise apart from the cattle.

At first it was higher pitched, but hardly distinguishable. I hummed my own tune and tried to ignore it. Until it grew louder, higher and fading halfway through, then again at the end, just before it started again. It was more than just a finicky cow, loud then quiet and loud again, almost desperate. It grew by the second, rising from a low and grumbly moan to a shriek. I set down my wash rag and looked up, squinting through the light of the afternoon sun to see a shape in the distance at the far end of the property, low against the ground. I dropped the wash and turned off the spigot, standing and shielding my eyes from the light. It was Richard.

“Esther!” Again he screamed. He was beyond the cow and horse pens, barely within sight. He screamed. His belly was in the dirt and he seemed to be pulling himself forward with his arms. I ran in his direction. He yelled my name over and over again, shrill and shaking, until I reached his side.

He rolled to his side, eyes desperate, he grabbed at my hand and gripped it tightly.

“My leg... For god’s sake, my fucking leg. Esther, my leg!”

My cheeks flushed, and I ripped my hand from his, feeling down his leg from his thick thigh past his bony knee to his strong calf. My heart pounded as I pressed my fingertips against his bone and muscle, hoping to find an answer to what hurt bad enough to cause Richard to drag himself over an acre of land by his fingertips. I found nothing. His legs felt normal beneath his thin, light blue jeans. Richard lay in front of me, covered in dirt, face red and sweaty, panting for breath.

“Esther!” He screamed, buckling over. He reached for his right foot. “It’s in my damn boot, help me take this thing off. Careful, to hell with it all, careful! For fuck’s sake I feel it all the way to my hip, damn it! Careful!”

“What’s in your boot, Richard?” I looked over him again. I hoped to God he hadn’t drug himself all this way with a snake or something in there. Nothing was bleeding and nothing seemed overly out of place, so my heart slowed. I reached for his boot, loosening the laces as far as they would go. He squeezed his eyes shut and gasped every time I moved his old brown work boot.

“Take it off, already! Just take it off!” Richard’s black hair brushed over his dark eyes, desperate and pleading towards me. I tried to pull the boot from his foot gently. He shrieked. Goosebumps spread from my shoulders to my wrists and pricking beneath my pant-legs. The boot stuck stubborn in its’ place.

“Jesus Christ, Esther! If it wasn’t broke before you sure as hell broke it now! Fuck! Just take it off gentle.” He squeezed his eyes shut again, clenching his fists, arms tucked tightly against his chest. “Please, for god’s sake be gentle.” I loosened the laces as far as they would go, finally pulling them out of the boot all together. I angled it upward, and carefully, I pulled. The boot didn’t budge, but Richard yelled again.

“Woman, stupid! Don’t you see I’m in pain here? I’m hurt, woman! Take the boot off. Just take it off! I’m in pain, Jesus! Are you stupid? Incapable?”

My chest filled with anger, hot breath just beneath my ribs. I was on my knees. Richard laid just in front of me, helpless. He’d always been dramatic, a poor man dying from a cold. I tightened my fingers around his stiff steel-toed boot and yanked as hard as I could, falling back when it flew free, leaving him doubled over, face bright red and shining with sweat. He cursed while I pulled myself upright, sitting tall in front of him.

His foot was swollen and crooking outwards, far beyond a natural shape. I pulled off his sock. Everything beneath it was a bright purple, swelling to a few sizes larger than normal. The color was starting to reach just above his ankle. Purple, the color of the mountain tops in the distance when lighting hit, illuminating our surroundings with the deep echoing from all

around. But it was just purple. No blood. He wasn't dying, and it was just his damned foot causing all of this ruckus. I stood, grabbing his arm and yanking him to his good foot.

“Come on, Richard. Stop being a baby. It's just your foot, you'll be fine. Let's take you in and get it looked at.” He limped against me, weight heavy against my shoulder. His bottom lip stuck out, quivering like that of a scorned child. His dark hair curled into his face. Defeated, his face lightened my chest, despite his occasional grimace. He looked as young as when we met and he'd always been a handsome man.

A week after Richard's emergency room visit we got the bill. The invoice had a long list of tests and categories, though we'd denied many of them, and I couldn't recall each of them under their titles. The total invoice had a few more zeros than our yearly earnings. Richard cursed, limping against a \$8 crutch we'd picked up from a thrift store a block from the emergency room. He'd refused pain medication, which probably saved us a few hundred dollars, but also granted me the gift of dealing with his endless griping.

We didn't tell Mr. Cowen. Richard laid at home the first two days while the kids and I drove the cattle on our own. The first day was the hardest. All of a sudden we were a man short, making it an even harder feat to push the thousand pound beasts up on the boat.

The ferry was unimpressive in size, but stout and sturdy. The boat seemed more of a flat, raised platform, the level floor contained by three thick bars welded into high railing. The Captain's small wheelhouse was more towards the center of the oddly shaped boat, specially

made for the transport of large livestock. When the ferry docked the two deckhands would swing open a hinged portion of the railing, closing the space between the boat and shore with the longest and thickest singular board of light-colored pinewood that I'd ever seen. The boat itself was only about twenty foot wide, and probably double that in length. It was largely made of some sort of metal, sturdy but dinged and beaten. You could tell it had once been painted red, the color still clung to the top half of the Captain's wheelhouse and to the heads of the thick, round screws that held the small barge together. The rest of the surface had been worn to silver and gray, mud caking near everywhere by the time we'd gotten the cattle pushed on board.

Normally we'd ride up and the ferry would be setting up the board-ramp. We'd round the cattle together as closely as we could before Richard dismounted and brought us each our repurposed paddock gates from the small tool shed just next to the dock. There were enough of us that by the time we each had our gate in hand we could walk forward in a sort of half-circle to slowly work the cows onboard, close enough that there was hardly ever enough of a gap to allow for a stray. When a cow happened to break free, one of us would drop our gate and remount to round her back in, the others moving in closer and continuing to push the rest of the cattle forward. The deckhands stayed on the boat, pushing and moving the cattle in so that they would all fit and disperse weight about equal throughout the boat. The whole ordeal only took us about an hour or so usually. Those days without Richard worked a bit differently.

The first day without him started about like normal. It was cool and dark when we'd left in the morning but warmed quickly. The sky was a light blue, bright and clear like a spread of cotton material before it's had its' first wash. I was glad that I'd worn a thin white button down and grateful that my hat was just long enough to keep the sun from my face. We'd ridden an hour or so and only had one instance of a cow trying to walk off, which I was pretty fast to correct. We moved a little slower, but not so much so that I worried about being late or anything.

When we got to the ferry the deckhands already had their board set up. They sat on the railing, dangling their legs over the edge so that they swung a few feet above the chilly water. I thought they looked quite young, their dark skin and hair reminded me a lot of Richard, but I didn't know much about race and didn't care much either. I thought maybe one day I'd ask them if they were Indians too, maybe they were even Cherokee, but probably not. We had about fifty head of cattle, and they bellowed and mooed as we rounded them closer together. We slowly whistled and snickered at them occasionally to get their attention.

When I thought the cattle were close enough together I swung my leg over, sliding from Bruce's saddle. The horses were trained well enough they stayed near and ready without tying up.

"Keep 'em tight, kids! Don't let 'em fall loose." I grabbed the first gate and brought it over to Rob who quickly dismounted and took it from me. Jogging back for another gate, I swung a second from off the wall of the small tool shed and rushed back to Mary. She swung herself down from her horse, except when she landed two cattle broke free from the tight,

bustling group, each trotting in different directions. One began to gallop, the other slowed as it reached the shade of a tree. My heart dropped into my stomach. I'd hoped it would be an easy day.

"Ang!" I yelled, louder than I meant. She took the gate from me, her eyes wide and busy, scurrying between the loose cattle and forty-some still clambering in front of us. "Sorry, no, I got them. You push. Help Rob. I got it."

I ran to Bruce, swinging myself fast into the saddle, nudging him with the heel of my boots and clicking my tongue to hasten him. We took off, quickly speeding into a canter, catching close up behind the more energetic of the escapees. The wide heels of my boots held my feet tight in the stirrups so that I could balance my weight in the center of my foot, gliding with Bruce, rather than bouncing as I would had I kept the weight in my rear. I hardly had to pull on the reins, Bruce was well experienced in his job.

We circled around the cow, slowing it by cutting it off, walking close and circling back around to guide it back to the ferry. After a few minutes we'd made it back. Rob and Mary looked frantic. There was too much open space without Richard and I holding gates. They'd only pushed four or five on board and sort of ran back and forth with their gates in front of them to make up for the area lost. It seemed to be working, though much slower than we usually did. I knew they would be tired out before long.

"Good job, keep going! Just one more and I'll be back." I pushed the first loose cow back into the herd and heeled Bruce back into a gallop. My heart pounded but I wasn't nervous or upset anymore. We slowed to a trot and circle the second cow, which was gnawing

lazily on a mouthful of fresh grass. As we worked our way back to the group I watched Rob and Mary struggle to push the group up just far enough to move another three cattle on board. Stepping over that ramp always made the cattle nervous. They would pace back and forth just in front of it, some breaking out in a gallop or even trying to jump over the others to try to avoid the unfamiliar.

Just as I dismounted and moved the second cow back into the group Rob lost his footing, tripping and slamming his gate into the ground. He landed on top of it and caught his wrist beneath it. I rushed to him, waving my arms as wide and fast as I could, hollering loud to try to keep the cows in their place, but that didn't stop four more from breaking free. Rob scrambled to his feet, lucky to have not gotten trampled. He tried to pick up his gate again but cringed and dropped it again. Picking it up myself, I pushed back two more trying to break free. They mooed loud, turning and giving up.

"You okay, baby?" I balanced the gate against my shoulder for a moment, taking his hand in mine and flipping it over, moving it back and forth. It was red and starting to swell, but nothing seemed broken.

Rob nodded. "Yeah, Ma. I'm good."

"Get on, then." I picked up his gate again, diverting my attention back to the cattle. Another one had trotted by as I looked at his wrist. I wasn't going to let another get by that easy. "Get on, go get the rest. I've got this for now. Get on." He ran off, and I looked to Mary. She was tough, face red and sweaty, but she moved swiftly back and forth, yelling and hooting when anything got too close. She pushed the twenty-pound gate forward into the massive

animals. Her hat had fallen off, her bright strawberry blonde hair flew in messy curls, bouncing about as she scrambled.

I tried to match her energy. “Ey, ey, ey!” I yelled as loud as I could when a cow tried to push back against the gate. Sweat ran down my face, burning the corners of my eyes and dripping onto my chest. The ground was soft and mushy closer to the shore, making it harder to move fast and keep our balance, but we did the best we could slowly pushing back the herd. A few boarded at a time when there was no more room to pace. Every now and then another one would get loose or Rob would push another back into the herd. I’m not sure how long it took us. Time didn’t make sense when we were concentrating and running back and forth, but it sure did feel like forever.

When we had got every last cow pushed on board we helped the deckhands push the gates closed, out of breath and shaking. Mary and I carried our gates back to the shed where Rob mounted them back to the wall. We sat in the shade of a tree right beside the shed and ate our lunches, laughing and recounting the day. My heart had slowed, but there was still this feeling in my chest, something like exhilaration. It was a feeling that you would have got after a big promotion at work, I thought. Or something like when they hand you your diploma after four long years of study, but I didn’t really know much of either of those things so I couldn’t quite place it. Somewhere between pride and excitement. Man, we were beat, and I didn’t really tell anyone, but I was really okay with that. It had almost been fun.

Richard hadn’t thought it was fun though, but then again he’d been stuck at home with the girls all day. He seemed to stay relatively still all day, reclining with his leg up at the

empty firepit when we'd made it back at the end of the day. He was sour and gripey, complaining that he was hungry and that we were late and that he had to gather wood for the fire all by himself when he should have stayed off his blasted foot. He couldn't ruin my fun though. I made him dinner and played with the girls before bed, looking forward to the next day.

To my surprise it had gone much easier than the day before, only a few cattle breaking free. I still left with the same feeling, like I'd conquered something. But by the end of the second day Richard was dragging himself place to place trying to keep himself from going stir crazy, forgetting his promise from the day before to rest. All evening he complained about how much his foot hurt, in the place just halfway between his ankle and pinky toe, right there, right there he'd point. He was bored and wanted to help. I told him we were fine, though it still took an hour or so more to get the cattle loaded.

By the second week, Richard was getting antsy. I'd roll out of the bed in the morning, just to hear him grumbling and moaning, tossing in his place. We'd return a few hours later than normal, and he'd curse at us.

"You need to hurry your asses up, or Cowen will have it will all of us! Ain't that hard, you idiots. Them's just cows!" He'd shout from a seat in front of the cabin, calling for Robin to bring him a drink. If Rob, Mary, or I tried to defend ourselves we'd get the brunt of his frustration, mostly in the form of name calling and insults. After hours of hard work in the sun the kids and I were tired. We'd learned to come home and go about our business, ignoring Richard's remarks and orders.

It was the third week after Richard crawled across the property that Cowen came for his monthly visit. I was beginning to wonder if he'd gotten word yet from the ferryman or his deckhands on Richard's absence, or at least in the time disturbance from our struggle. It was a Saturday afternoon and I was working in the garden while Richard sat in the shade nearby, foot elevated on an old, upturned five-gallon bucket. Cowen's truck could be heard from a half-mile away, just before you could see it over the hill and beyond the horse pasture.

"Well, there's our eviction notice." Richard sat up, lowering his leg to the ground. He stood, gazing towards the dirt road, leaving his crutch leaned up against the tree.

"All we can do is pray. Not good of you to talk that way, Richard." I picked at the low weeds that were trying to blend in with the carrot sprouts. They were only distinguishable by a subtle texture in their stem. Otherwise they looked the same in color, shape, and size. Funny, how things learn to pretend to be something they weren't to live somewhere they don't belong, I thought. Mr. Cowen pulled into the driveway. Richard fought to minimize his limp, tipping his hat towards Cowen. Within moments, Cowen was out of his truck to greet us, a small brown paper bag in his hand. Robin and Jessie came running from around the truck, barreling into Mr. Cowen, grappling for the crinkling bag.

"Girls!" I hollered above their squeals. "Behave! Manners! For heaven's sake!" I stood removing my garden gloves and smacking them against each other to fall the extra dirt from

the fingertips and creases in the palm. They had grown thin, leaving dirt caked beneath my fingernails.

“Esther Ann!” Mr. Cowen hugged me politely, laughing at the younger kids. The girls had opened the bag and each found their treats, running off to deliver Rob and Mary’s before I could scold them. “Beating up on the old man here? Nothing too serious, I hope. You’ve got some of that sweet tea made up, don’t you?” His smile was warm, the wrinkles on his face pressed there from the timeless touch of the sun. He was getting old, but so were we. Cowen seemed different than the rest of us grumps, though. He always looked so kind.

“Yes, sir. Just for you! I’ll go fetch us some glasses and a seat.” I rushed off and grabbed three glasses from the cabin and went to the icebox in the barn at the end of the fenced property. I watched the men as I walked back, both looking serious and flat. Richard’s mouth moved quick, his face pointed groundward. Cowen shook his head occasionally, watching Richard, hands fidgeting in his pockets.

I looked at Richard as I got closer, hoping to read his eyes in some way but his focus didn’t budge from the dirt. I handed Mr. Cowen the one of the cups balancing in by hands, shuffling to hand Richard the second. The men drew silent.

“Thank you, Esther Ann. Do you think I could have a moment more with Richard here?” Mr. Cowen looked hard. Kind still, but hard. I knew what it was they were talking about. I looked around at the yard for a moment. Jessie had demolished her treat, evidence spread across her face in the form of crumbs and smears of which I assumed were chocolate or peanut butter. She was playing with Robin in front of the garden, who had likely stuck a bite

of her own treat in the roof of her mouth and hidden the rest. The other kids were gone, busy at work or play. But we were here, next to the garden we had grown from seed. The horses grazed in the nearest pasture, the horses we had chosen from Cowen's herd. Cattle bellowed in the distance, a sound that had become familiar over the past two years after we'd herded and taken care of thousands. They weren't just talking about a job anymore, they were talking about our lives.

"I don't think so. I think I'll sit in on this one." I sat onto the bucket Richard had rested his leg on earlier, sipping my minty blackberry tea. "Come on, now. Sit. Let's talk."

They sat, and we talked. Mr. Cowen talked about all of the work that was too hard for women and children alone. He reminded us that the kids would be going back to school in just a few weeks. He told us that I wouldn't be able to do it alone, apologizing to me along the way. I nodded. He was right. Some things I could not do alone, at least not as quickly as he wanted it done. Richard's foot wouldn't be healed enough to ride for another six weeks of more and we were nearing brunt of the herding season.

Richard was silent, his eyes settling hard at the base of a tree. Tea untouched in his clutched fists, condensation rolled over his knuckles. Mr. Cowen gave us a week but I argued for two. He agreed for another week of work then a week of teaching our replacements before we had to be gone.

When Mr. Cowen was done he invited Richard on their monthly run to town, promising to provide us a few provisions for our next move. Richard limped just behind him, refusing his crutch, but grimacing as he fought to keep up. I smiled politely and waved as the

truck pulled away, retreating to the house when they were out of sight. Just beside the oven, I sunk onto the floor, pulling my muddied knees to my chest, I struggled to catch my breath.

Again, I thought, starting over again. I let myself sit there, alone and curled tightly into myself for some time. The crickets outside chirped, the light spilling into the cabin began to take on a more golden hue and I knew it was getting close to dinner time. We had early peas ready for picking, carrots in the icebox, and a fresh-cleaned chicken to roast. I brushed the dirt from my bottom and looked in the small mirror hanging on the wall behind one of the beds. I wiped my eyes dry and patted my cheeks pink again. Supper had to be made and the kids needed to be told what was going to happen.

Chapter 4

Two weeks passed quicker than I'd hoped. I let myself work a little slower. Coming home from driving the cattle we would take a little more time to explore, eating a handful or so more berries on the way home. I let Jessie stay out a little longer to fish or play in the woods. The rest of the kids knew they had a responsibility to help with the chores, but then they could do as they pleased with the rest of our time on the farm. Mary spent a lot of her time out riding, and I wasn't quite sure what Rob did. Robin cried a lot and insisted on telling each of the horses goodbye, crowning them one by one with clover crowns she'd made each day. But when it came time to actually leave she wouldn't even look at them. She just sat, her stringy arms crossed tight across her chest and eyes set in a deep glare. I knew she was biting her tongue to keep herself from crying, I had to do the same every now and then. We didn't have much on the ranch, but I knew that we were all pretty happy there.

"Ain't nothin' like a fresh start." Rob carried Robin to the car. We all said our silent goodbyes, rolling down the road until the dust cloud behind us misted the sight of our most recent home. "At least we got to say goodbye this time." Rob squeezed Robin into a hug. It was refreshing to see them supporting each other instead of terrorizing each other as siblings do. I hoped that would last a little longer.\

There was a woman a few towns over that owned a small Inn who would let us stay for a few weeks, thanks to Mr. Cowen's trading a full cow's meat for a room for us. It was in a

town called Tacoma, a bustling city just outside of Seattle. It was a lot different than anything we'd been used to before. Towns merged and switched into others without so much as a warning and the streets were full of vehicles and bikes, people walking and roller skating. Most of the locals were polite, but cold and silent in public. There was no chatting at the Supermarket like there had always been back home. If you said so much as 'hello' they would look at you as if you grew a second head. Everyone was to mind their own business, it seemed. I wondered if an old woman were to fall down in the middle of a crowd if anyone would stop to help, or even look for that matter. It was a different kind of busy here.

Tacoma was full of all sorts of people, and it had something for everyone. I thought maybe it was just the cheaper housing of Seattle, far enough from the big hustle and bustle but still close enough to go to work in the city every day. There were markets and stores for everything and everyone. Four blocks down there was a little Chinatown block where all the signs were in some sort of foreign print and another street after that there was a market filled with fruits I'd never seen, chickens sold by the whole, and foreign dresses and hats. All around was people who spoke languages I didn't understand, their skin and hair ranging to any color you could imagine.

It was quite thrilling to be in a place with so much new. My favorite was the music they all played, though. On every corner there were people toting guitars and drums. Men and women sang and slapped their legs and hands, making music with near anything they had. An Indian man who played a small wooden flute was often playing just a block away from the Inn, close enough I could hear his sounds when I was doing the dishes or washing the floors.

Our room at the Inn was bigger than the cabin we'd lived in, but there was no room to run outside of it. The Inn sat wide and sturdy on the corner of a busy intersection. It was a great big two-story house with eight rooms, each rented out. The building was painted a dainty yellow, the dusty matte color sticking to the sturdy original siding. Each of the rooms had several windows, our room had three, making it a pretty well-lit room, which was nice considering we only had one lamp for lighting. Outside there was only about two feet between the wall and the sidewalk, rounded decorative rocks covering the ground between them. On the other side of the walkway was another three foot or so of grassy area before the bustling two-way road. It was pretty for a place in the city but it all seemed so cold and hard. I missed the wide open fields of the ranch, but I knew we all did. It was something we just didn't talk about.

The Inn was old, but in a charming way, like one of those big cottages you see in the picture books. There were two doors, one in the front and the other in the back, though the owner had gone through the trouble of making them both appear as equally important entrances. Both the doors and the shutters were a robin-egg blue, more striking than the yellow paint, but not so bright.

Our room was the same square as the house at the ranch. There was a kitchenette, complete with a miniature stove that had two burners. Beside that was about a square-foot of counter space, with a sink on the other side. Above and below the appliances were cabinets, a large pantry cabinet on the other side of the sink. We put two sets of bunk beds in the far left corner, one against each wall and a bed for ourselves in the right corner. I'd found some old

rugs to throw over the creaky hardwood floors to try to make it feel a little homier but it didn't do much but stifle the creaking of the floor, which was just fine by me.

The sounds of chirping frogs in the night had been replaced with the sounds of car engines on the road and the echoes of meandering people, their cigarette lighters sparking as they walked in groups laughing, or silently alone, kicking the smooth decorative bedding rocks sending them bouncing off the side of the Inn with a loud *tink*.

The city did not feel like home, but I knew we would get used to it if we weren't pushed onto the next home so soon. The kids seemed to enjoy it, their schools were fancier and offered sports. Jessie was miserable until she started playing everything that was offered, but she still complained every time she caught glimpse of her chipped fishing pole leaning in the corner of the room. Moving when we did put Rob and Mary behind a little in school, there was talk of holding them back a year, but they were smart kids, I knew that they'd make it through all right.

Looking for a job was nearly impossible. It seemed that there were businesses on every corner, factories every other block, but without a college degree there was no work for me and without the use of both his legs Richard struggled to get as far as an interview. He'd gone back to the doctor six weeks after getting his original cast only to be told that he wasn't getting better and needed to stay off of it a bit longer. We were getting frustrated and were both so bored. Our savings were dwindling and we had to plan meals accordingly. Poor Man's Soup, a vegetable and chicken stock concoction, and homemade cornbread was eaten several times a

week, leftovers kept in the fridge and heated on the stove for breakfast and lunch the following days.

“How long do you think we can keep on like this, Esther?” Richard spooned the crust of two-day old cornbread into his mouth before dropping his spoon against the plate, sending dried crumbs all over the floor.

I’d never been much of a breakfast eater, especially when I didn’t have anywhere to be, so I just drank my coffee. “Well you’re heading over to the Sound today, right? Surely you’ll find something there.” Puget Sound wasn’t far and Richard had talked about seeing about a job on a fishing boat. He’d been in the service before he’d joined the police force and before I’d met him. He thought maybe his time in the Navy would help his chances.

“I don’t know. An old sailor isn’t really much use with all this fishing and crabbing. Water’s a lot colder than I’m used to.” He wiped his mouth with the cuff of his sleeve, crumbs clinging to the thick cotton.

“Then I s’pose we’ll stay hungrier than we’re used to.” I stood, grabbing a wet rag from the sink and brushing it over the table where Dickie was eating. I took the coffee pot from the burner and dumped the rest of the warm brew into his cup. “I’ll be heading back out today. I’m not giving up. The market or something. Go shave your face, we’ll find something.”

I came home that day just before the kids. The street market two blocks down had not yielded a job, but Miss Mary, a friend I’d made the week before, had given me a basket of

produce from her farm and kept me company for a while. She told me to come back at the end of the week and I could have what was left of this week's produce. Jobs are tough around here, she'd said, that's why she married a farmer. I didn't know if she'd been kidding, but I really believed she wasn't.

I was stirring a pot of fresh vegetables and last week's chicken broth when Richard burst through the door, crutch waving in the air.

"Put it down, Esther Ann! No more soup!" He danced around me, laughing loudly. Startled, I dropped my wooden ladle, warm liquid splashing against my knees. "I've found it! Our way out. I've got it!" He grabbed me in his arms and hugged me tightly, twirling me fast and humming to himself. He kissed me before I could even realize what was going on, his face already prickly.

"A job? Down at Puget Sound?" My cheeks flushed, excited.

Richard had dropped his crutch, balanced on his booted foot and he shook his hips and danced his fingers. "No. It's even better than that!" He grinned and kissed my forehead. "It's you."

I thought he'd gone mad. Too bored and unwanted for so long could leave a man somewhere awful. He dug into his pocket and pulled out his old trifold wallet, shuffling through it before thrusting an old photo at me. I didn't even realize he'd kept photos or that any had been saved from the fire. It was almost shocking to see the old familiar polaroid.

"You made this, yeah? Think you can do it again? Maybe five or ten of 'em?" His finger was about a quarter the size of the photo itself, but I knew what he was talking about. In

the picture I stood in front of our old house before it had burned, holding an infant Robin in my arms, Rob, Mary, and Jay standing beside me. It was one of the very few photos of the children and me. I was usually the one to take them. Men never really thought much of taking photos. Hanging from Mary's neck was a toy I had made, a plush monkey made of the remaining cloth of old teddy bears, arms and legs about a foot and a half each with a bit of Velcro sewed onto the fingers and toes so that the arms could fasten around your neck and the legs around your waist. 'Body puppets' Rob had named them. I'd made several that year and donated to the local hospital's children's ward, but Mary had held onto hers until the house burnt.

“Body puppets? Well, I'm sure I can. But—”

“Puget was a bust!” Richard interrupted me, throwing his arms in the air. “But I had enough time to take the ferry up to Pike Place, there in Seattle. My, oh my, you wouldn't've believed it!” He spun me in a quick circle, my pot bubbling on the stove behind me, sizzling every now and then when a little bubbled over. “All the people! People from all sorts of different places, artists, poets for chrissake. And people just like us! Selling things, all sorts of things. You would love it.” His eyes brimmed with excitement.

I still wasn't so sure he hadn't lost his mind.

“You're going to do it for us! You'll make those puppet things and we'll sell them up there while the kids are at school. I already got some interest, and you, my dear, can sell a painting to a blind man! I even got an investment, look!” He pulled a \$20 bill from his wallet,

handing it to me. “Go on, now. Stores don’t close for another hour. Get enough to make as many as you can. I’ll stir the damn soup and in a few days we’ll be eating meat again.”

He picked up my ladle from the ground and wiped it on his shirt before putting it back in the pot. Faster than necessary, he stirred, knocking chunks of cabbage and carrot onto the miniature stovetop. The dim room was nearly lit by his grin, and I’ll tell you, I hadn’t seen him in such a mood since we’d gotten the jobs on the ranch and maybe not even then. He used to grin like that all the time before we were married, when we’d gotten a chance to slip off together out of sight in the alley behind the police station or after dark down by the river. Back when my stomach was thick with nervous butterflies, but not the bad kind. The days he’d bring me flowers when he’d pick me up from my mom’s house for a date. There was a young energy about him that put a spark in my chest and made me walk a little lighter on my tired legs.

The craft store was only four blocks down so it didn’t take me too long to walk there. I bought several yards of clearance material of various cotton textures and patterns, a pack of mixed buttons for eyes, a bag of stuffing, and a yard of Velcro. I had my sewing needles and some thread back at the Inn. I only spent half of the money Richard had given me but bought enough material to make at least five toy and I knew he probably wouldn’t know a difference. I didn’t think he’d ever bought a yard of material in his life, and sure as heck had never patched his own pants. I thanked the cashier and tucked the bills into the very bottom of my back pocket, dropping the quarters and dimes into the Salvation Army tin at the end of counter. I’d

hide the bills in my panty drawer when I got home and save it in case Richard's plan didn't work out right and in the end and we needed a meal.

The next two days were spent pricking my fingers with dull needles and planning out patterns. I'd managed six body puppets from the material I'd bought, getting a little creative, fashioning a few monkeys, cats, and dogs from scraps of mix-matched edges in order to use every last bit of fabric I'd bought. I started early in the morning, only taking breaks to fix meals.

Richard insisted on helping with the chores. He attempted to wash the dishes and sweep the floors so that I could have more time to work. What he didn't know was that I had to fix the mess he'd made trying to help whenever he left the Inn. He would leave smears of butter on the edges of plates and pieces of carrot wedged in the spaces between the fork prongs. Sweeping he did all right except he never really quite got the corners of the room and didn't even think to run the broom under the beds or the edges of the rugs. I was proud that he was trying though, and didn't want him to stop putting forth that little bit of effort, so I didn't say anything.

I would watch him while sewing the arms and legs to the bodies of the toys, snickering to myself as the big man swayed and whistled in front of the sink or swung the broom that only ended a few inches above his belly button. He looked like he was spending his time on playthings, delicate and silly in his big hands. It reminded me of the tea parties he used to have with the younger girls after he'd sworn them to secrecy. Richard hadn't been goofy much since

then. He would practically shake when he talked about the business we were getting ready to start, almost like he was filled with a fluttering.

The body puppets didn't look anything like the toys you'd buy in the stores. They didn't have any fancy plastic wrapping or nylon machine-printed tags sewn in the bottoms, but they were neat and clean and each unique to itself. Homemade toys made masterfully could go for quite the pretty penny, and I knew just as well. My mother had taught me to sew when I was six years old, and I'd been practicing ever since, making my own prom dress and then all the kids' church show costumes. You could say that my work was rather adequate. The skill would work over and over I knew, sewing that is. You could never go wrong knowing how to fix and make all the little things.

Saturday morning we all got up early. I had everyone dress in their best, the kids wore their shiniest shoes. I slipped on my own black heels, bottoms worn thin from years of occasional wear, but toes still shiny with minimal scuffing. I told the kids that we would take the body puppets up to Pike Place and sell them. I needed everyone polite and happy today, nothing else would work, and I promised them treats if we could sell all six of the stuffed critters.

We walked a mile and a half to the ferry. The ride would be almost an hour long and after docking there would still a few miles to walk the market. Since it'd take us a good two hours or so to make it to the market we decided to catch the first morning ferry. We rode

surrounded by tourists in big sunglasses and businessmen in tailored suits. The air was cool with salty mist, refreshing. I clung tight to the large paper bag containing the body puppets, tucking it as far underneath my jacket as I could manage. The water was a beautiful gray, fading into the mist ahead of us. I wanted so badly to go hang on the railing of the large ferry and peer into the water to look for dolphins and jellyfish, though I wasn't quite sure they even lived in the frigid water. I couldn't risk getting the bag wet though, and the mist was already clinging to my fingers and cheeks.

Jessie fidgeted in her clear jelly shoes, her ruffled dress looked awkward and resting above her boney and bruised knees. She swung her heel back and forth, squeaking it with every movement, a thin line of dusty watered-down mud slicking into a small arch beneath her. Robin clung to my leg, fussing about the motion of the boat. Her tiny body helped to keep the shiver away. I hoped I was keeping her from being cold too. Rob and Mary moved just ahead of us and rested on the outer railing, mouths moving but words unheard above the boat cutting through the cold water.

Mary's red tinted hair blew back in naturally messy tussles and her cheeks prickled pink from the breeze. She reminded me of myself sometimes, or maybe what I thought I would be. She didn't look down at the water like I would. She gazed forward, squinting her eyes as if she could find her own way through that dense mist. I had no doubt that she could.

When we docked we rushed off with the sea of people, somewhere in the middle of the shoulder-bumping crowd. Our walk across the city was bustling and exciting, vendors searing fresh seafood and huge hotdogs nearly everywhere. I handed each of the kids a body puppet

and asked them to wear them for the rest of the trip. I figured that way if something happened only one or two would be ruined. If I wasn't holding the bag I couldn't be blamed for dropping the whole darned thing on the way. I pushed the younger girls along in front of me as we trailed behind Richard, body puppets strapped around each of us.

As we grew closer to Pike Place Market the crowd began to grow. Even before we got to the long street of the pier the market thrived. There were artists and vendors everywhere. A man sat on a bench, quickly twisting and tying bundles of grass into the shape of roses, selling them for a dime a piece. A blind woman smeared charcoal over repurposed canvas with her fingertips, the pieces around her of astonishing landscapes. I wondered if she had ever been able to see. Caricatures and foreign food stands were scattered about. Tourists swarmed, dropping coins loudly into cans and cups and buckets while the businessmen rushed by, eyes low.

We were surrounded with the talented and the outcasts, everyone so different than each other but seeming not to realize. It was enthralling the diversity I would have never imagined before. My heart raced. Dancers twirled small hoops around on their arms and legs to the rhythm of their friends, drumming on upturned buckets at every corner.

We rounded the corner when Richard stopped. He approached a man who was tall, white, and thick with muscle.

"That'll be \$20 for the day." The man had seven or eight men around him. They all wore aprons that reminded me of the ones that woodworkers wear. One stood in front of an old, heavy register and sign that read 'Vendors'.

“I got a friend right up there that’d told me we could sell with him.” Richard pointed a finger somewhere in the distance through the immense crowd. “He sells antique junk out of a big ole’ black trunk. You oughta know him.”

“No joint entrance for vendors, sir. I’m sorry.” The man looked down on him, arms crossed. “Now, that’ll be \$20.”

Richard stomped his foot, turning to me. His face was red and sweaty from our walk. He looked at me and then the kids, plush around out neck and waists. He started back at the man.

“Come on, now. You ain’t got room for one little family from far away? We ain’t here but a day. We’ll be gone before you know it.” He tried to push by the men but was knocked back by another bulky man that I hadn’t noticed before. Richard stumbled against his bad foot, grappling with his crutch as he fell back onto the concrete. His face flushed as he scrambled to his feet again.

“We don’t need you anyways, fucker! Ain’t got no heart at all! People like you put good families like us out on our asses, starving our children while you sit there, you happy fuck, while your fat wife feeds you damn steaks.” He wagged his finger at the man.

The first man looked back at his friends, arms uncrossing and flexed. “We got another one, boys.” He looked back at Richard. “Listen here, you pay the fee and you’ll make twice that out there. Everyone out here is from far away. Got to pay your dues, sir. Come back next week. We’ll talk again if you can fix the attitude.” He looked ready to put down Richard if need be, but spoke in a tough, reasonable tone.

Richard's face reminded me of Mark when he didn't get his way. "This world ain't got no room for people like you, naw. I'll see you in hell." Richard spat at their feet, I hoped the men wouldn't beat him to a pulp.

Richard pushed by me, nearly knocking me down. I looked at the strong wall of a man, eyes wide. He had just been doing his job. The man stood like a boulder. Robin clung at my knees, sobbing quietly and hiding her face, she shook with each gasp. Jessie and Rob ran after Richard. Mary squeezed Robin's shoulder.

"I am so sorry." I said to the man. "I am so, so sorry." My face was hot with pressure. Though I wanted everything in the world but to be seen with a man throwing a tantrum we followed after Richard. He paced awkwardly against his crutch back and forth on the sidewalk, smoking a cigarette about a block down the way we'd come. Jessie was sitting on the ground near him, face red and puffy. Her eyes welled, so far from her usual demeanor. As we grew closer, I saw she held a body puppet in one hand and its severed leg in the other. Stuffing was strewn all around her.

"We ain't fuckin' good enough, Esther Ann. This was a shit idea. Stupid as shit." Robin cried harder as she sat beside Jessie, the girls hugging the now-tattered homemade doll I'd spent hours on.

My hands tightened into fists. "You know what, Richard? No. Look at me." He kept pacing back and forth, puffing his tobacco nearly constantly.

"Fuckin' stupid."

“Richard. Look at me.” He didn’t. I stepped close to him, snatching his wrist and grabbing the cigarette from his fingers. I threw it to the ground and put it out under one of my good shoes, worn so thin I could feel the heat of the spark go out beneath my toes.

“I said look at me.” My voice raised sternly, but I didn’t yell. I wouldn’t do that. “The only thing stupid here is the way you’re parading around like a toddler, smashing things and shoving people. You want to fix this, or you want to throw a fit?”

He stared at me, the edges of his mouth pressed down. “It ain’t worth it no more, Esther. I don’t know what I was thinkin’ that we could sell those damn things.”

I huffed at him, practically laughing out loud. “You know, I don’t know what you were thinking either. But you were thinking it hard enough to ask me to put a weeks’ worth work in it. You thought we were goin’ to sell these things? It’s not goin’ to be me, not after the fit you threw with those men!” I didn’t know if I wanted to cry or yell. I decided not to do either. “Just doing their job, like you’re going to. You got five left now, and you’re going to sell them. I don’t care if we got to go door to door all day. We’re going to make that entrance fee and show them men the way we should have to begin with, by coming back next week well and ready. You got that?”

Richard nodded slowly, reaching into his pocket for another cigarette. He looked tired.

“Good. Let’s go then.” I bent down and brushed the girls off, promising to fix the puppet when we got home. Then we were on our way. We walked down the richer neighborhoods a few blocks away. Two and three story houses, shiny cars sitting out front.

Kids played in the yards, bouncing basketballs, skipping rope, or scribbling chalk on sidewalks. Their play shoes didn't look too far off from our good ones. We picked the houses together, but I made Richard do the talking. He stumbled over his words at first, but slowly caught on. I watched his embarrassed clumsiness morph into something closer to a charismatic perseverance. It wasn't but two hours before we'd sold all the body puppets except the torn one, asking \$10 a piece, about half of what we would have charged on the pier. We took the ferry back home, feet aching from the fit of our hardly worn shoes, legs throbbing sore.

That evening I went back to the store, buying more material with the money we made. This time I also bought some beef and cheese as well as penny suckers for each of the kids. I snuck a few dollars of the remaining change into the waistband of my pants, later tucking it into my new emergency fund in my underwear drawer.

We ate well for the rest of the week. While I worked hard at making more body puppets Richard went to the city every day to spread the word of our spectacular and unique homemade toys and making friends with other vendors. Miss Mary came to visit several times that week.

"It worked then, did it?" She sat with me at the big kitchen table while I sewed. I was getting used to the pattern again, never pricking myself this time around.

"Sure did." I was prideful, something I tried to watch, but for now I was allowing myself to feel it for a moment.

Mary smiled. "Guess that means you're kind of in charge here now, don't it?" She nudged me under the table, a wide grin on her face.

“Mary! No, no. Nothing like that.” I thought of the work Richard did, walking door to door, and now all around the city with fliers we’d printed two for a penny at the local library. “We’re a team.”

“Sure, sure you are.” We joked for another hour or so, and Mary promised to come back the next day after the market closed. I rather enjoyed her company and she always brought fresh produce. It’d been a long time since I’d had another woman to talk to. Life was changing, and for once it seemed to be of my doing and for the better.

We had done it, and we would keep doing it, even if I had to be the one to pull us up by our bootstraps and push forward. I hummed to myself as I worked underneath the lamp light, in the benches of Jessie’s sports games, and beside Miss Mary at the local market where I’d watch her sell her vegetables. The next week we would be ready for the market, I would be sure of it.

Content continues with Chapters 5-10. See appendix.

Robin

Chapter 1

Gravel dust flew, tiny pieces of rock flying up and bouncing off the body of Shaun's black 1985 Grand am. Windows down, the early summer air spun through the cab, the green aroma of the knee-high corn stalks warmed us. It was Friday afternoon and school had just let out.

Shaun smirked at me, pressing the gas pedal down. "Keep your pants on back there, and hand me a beer," Shaun laughed. Nick was Shaun's cousin and his best friend, who just so happened to be dating my best friend, but it wasn't that weird. Small town like this, we're all bound to marry someone's cousin. We were just lucky we all happened to get along. It just kind of worked, you know. The four of us were practically inseparable, without all the drama and jealousy other kids in my school seemed to have.

We spent most weekends like this- cruzin' and boozin'. Nick pulled his hand out from under Becky's skirt and popped open the cooler behind my seat, dripping ice water across the backseat, passing two cans up. Becky laughed as she wiped the smeared nude pink lipstick from her chin, grabbing her own drink from where it had been wedged beside her.

"So what are the plans, guys?" I cracked the first can, foam spilling out the top with a crack and hiss. I sucked the stale, icy foam from the rim before it could spill onto the pleather

seats. One of my legs crossed beneath me, the other fixed against the center console to keep myself steady over the rough faded gravel backroads.

“Drink! Dance!” Becky bounced her feet excitedly. “Your parents are out of town, right Shaun?” She smacked him upside the head.

“Yeah, that far back barn fell in earlier this week, so we got plenty of wood. I figured we could burn that this weekend. Give me a few hours, I’ll be back around to pick you guys up.”

Nauvoo-Colusa High School was a county building located in the middle of nowhere, ten miles from Nauvoo and twelve from Colusa. Almost everyone within a 60 mile radius went there, most of us country kids too poor to go to the only other school in the area, a private Mormon school. After class Shaun would pick us up, taking the back roads all the way to town while we smashed a drink or two. Most of the time he’d take everyone home before dropping me off at work. I’d put in a couple hours at the St. Mary Monastery before he’d pick me up again and we’d go back to Shaun’s parents’ house to drink and dance in the open, rickety loft of one of the old barns on the family farm.

Shaun pulled up in front of the Monastery, taking the half empty beer from my hand. He leaned over the center console to kiss me. His hand lingered in my hair, his blue eyes bright. “I’ll see you soon.” I hopped out of the car and scurried up the entrance stairs, I knew I had to be a few minutes late.

“Robin Leigh, should I tell your mother you’re late again?” Sister Clarisse pretended to be harsh but as I knew she secretly liked me. She was always threatening to turn me into my dad, the county Sheriff. I knew she wouldn’t. I suspected that she hadn’t always been a nun. Sister Clarisse tucked a new wad of chewing tobacco behind her bottom lip.

“Time to clean your bucket already, Sister?” All the old, batty nuns spit tobacco. I was expected not to tell, so I didn’t. They were all crooked and bent over, gray hair wild, sticking out from beneath their veils, wire rimmed glasses sitting lopsided on the middle of their noses. They must be miserable running this nunnery. No wonder they wanted to spit tobacco. They good well deserved to do it too, the kinds of lives they live, teaching the younger nuns-in-training.

Most of the young nuns there were only in attendance because their parents had sent them here to save their souls. I was in charge of bathing them twice a week. There was some rule about them not being allowed to touch their own bodies or something. Hell, they were only allowed a tiny face mirror mounted on the bathroom wall, they couldn’t even look too good at themselves! I wondered what they’d do with a nice full length mirror, like the one in my room.

The old nuns didn’t know their students snuck out of the windows at night to meet the local boys, or at least they pretended not to know. The girls were notorious for stealing boyfriends. I knew it wasn’t just rumors though. I saw the hickeys during washing day.

“No, no.” Sister Clarisse spat, missing a little, brown liquid oozing down the oxidized metal can. “I got that new girl to do it earlier. Just get on with the rest.” She waved me on. I

was glad. I hated cleaning that old tin. It reeked like the old bag of Dad's tobacco I'd found in the back of our garden shed, long forgotten, molded over. I had tossed that bag before Dad could find it and blame one of us kids for trying to hide it, being that we all wanted him to stop smoking. I hoped cleaning the old nun's tin would become a regular task of the new girl I'd yet to meet.

I made my way down the barren, windowless hall back towards the young nuns-in-training quarters. Room check was mostly an excuse to chat with the girls. I was just supposed to make sure their rooms were made up and decent, corners folded nicely into the beds, and gowns hanging in order, pressed and clean. Of course, I was supposed to look for other things too, you know, of the inappropriate nature: alcohol, dope, pills, or any other things beyond the bare minimum needs. The nuns kept a huge clear jar in their quarters, filled with all the mix-matched items I'd confiscated like half-used lipstick tubes and lace panties. I figured it was to torture them with longing whenever they were called in for a scolding. Sometimes I felt really bad for the girls since they couldn't really have anything to make them feel nice or brighten the dull gray walls in this place. Nothing to really separate them. They weren't even allowed to tell me their names.

I grabbed the first door frame and swung around into the first room. "You know what time it is!" The girls groaned. Six of them were piled into the small room, sprawled across the two small cot-blue beds, the kind you would imagine to see in a prison. "I'm not sure the Sisters would agree with all this... suspicious rendezvous." I smirked and waved my hand

around the room. “Don’t you guys have some verses to read or some shit?” The room ignited with giggles, the youngest of the girls blushed, the oldest rolled their eyes.

“You’ll be outta here the second one of them Sisters hears you talking to us like that,” said one of the older girls, long brown hair curling over her shoulder. She chomped noisily on a blob of bright pink gum. Gum wasn’t allowed, but I didn’t say anything.

“Oh no, Miss Clarisse loves me too much, more than all of you, that is.” I winked at one of the younger girls, I wasn’t sure if the new ones knew that I meant no harm. Feigning an inspection, I glanced over the armoire, pretending to care about the order and neatness of the hanging clothes. The Sisters only double checked my inspections when something major was reported, and I didn’t really care about the order the long gowns hung in.

“God, Robin, tell me! Have you heard anything from John? It’s been two weeks!” The brown haired girl threw her head back in exaggeration and groaned loudly. She seemed to be the ringleader, chomping loudly on her gum.

“Nope. No John. He’s at his normal business, it seems. I told you not to mess with him. He’s a tramp.”

“On to the next!” One of the middle girls shoved her. This one had been a regular, in and out over the past several years. I wasn’t supposed to really get involved deeply with the girls. Since they couldn’t tell me or any of the other non-Catholic employees their names, I didn’t see how I could even try to make friends with any of them. The nuns probably thought we might taint them or something, though I wasn’t really sure how knowing someone’s name could mess anything up for them. My mom was afraid it might be the other way around, that

I'd be brought down by the girls, and if I had a chance at another job she'd've insisted I quit this one. I had started going to a modeling retreat every month for a year now, but it hadn't paid even paid for itself yet, not close to good enough to leave the Monastery. "But Robin here has one of the stars of them all! What was his name? Stan? Simon? Steven?"

I bent over to check beneath the bed and saw a small bottle sticking out beneath the wire springs. I pulled it out, a half empty half-pint bottle of cheap vodka. The girls watched as I tucked it into my waistband, the curved bottle hugging my hip and hidden beneath my baggy shirt. I never turned the liquor over to Sister Clarisse if I could help it. "Come on, guys. If I can find it, they can."

"Jeeze, I knew you wouldn't want to talk about it. But your man is fine! He come 'round here last weekend with those two other boys. He fit his skinny little ass right up through this window." She sneered, exposing her grayish teeth, clicking her tongue and winking. I wondered if the nuns let them use toothpaste. "Shaun! That's his name. He mentioned you while we played a game of Spin the Bottle."

My heart dropped, cheeks flushed hot. "What's your name?" My face and fingers tingled, purple sparks teasing in the corners of my eyes.

"You know I can't tell you-"

"What's your name?" I repeated, looking her in the eyes. She was plain. Not all that pretty. Her eyes were dull and empty, her shoulder length sandy brown hair hung without any shine or body. No one you would want to play spin the bottle with.

"Samantha." The grin faded from her face, eyebrows furrowing.

“Is this your bunk, *Samantha*?” The name felt dirty slipping out of my mouth, like a curse word muttered during a sermon. Samantha nodded. I moved to the edge of the bed and gripped the carefully folded sheets tightly, yanking as hard as I could. When the bedding didn’t give I grabbed Samantha hard by the back of the neck and pushed her to her knees in front of the bed. She squealed like a prodded hog and sat there while I tore apart her bed, leaving her mattress askew and sheets crumpled in a corner. “I don’t want to hear another word about Shaun, you hear?” I grabbed her and made her look me in the eyes. The nuns weren’t allowed to hit the girls anymore so I didn’t know the last time she’d felt pain, and I really hoped I had hurt her. She nodded affirmatively. Marching out of the room I felt all six pairs of eyes on my back, the girls’ jaws hanging, air silent and breathless.

“Sister Clarisse?” She was still sitting near the entrance, lounged behind a simple desk. I touched the old woman’s shoulder, squatting to meet her old, worn eyes. “You may want to check on Samantha. She’s totally destroyed her room. I heard her cursing up a storm and she’s being a devil to the other girls. I think she may need your... guidance.” Sister Clarisse nodded, adjusting her glasses before standing to make her way to the first room. I hoped they would be punished with the task of writing a hundred verses. As I finished my final tasks I’d decided on the verse I thought they should be forced to write a hundred times, or maybe a thousand. Corinthians 7:1 ‘It is good for a man to not touch a woman’. Perhaps if God couldn’t be kind, he could be cruel.

Shaun's faded blue jeans felt soft and feathery beneath my bare thighs. I'd changed into some cutoff shorts and his sweatshirt after work. The ladies at the modeling retreats told me it was a look that really flattered me.

Becky was dancing around the fire, beer can held high, skirt askew, the orange light dancing off her pale skin. Nick's eyes smiled, watching her hips move to the music. I wished I could know what it felt like to be looked at like that, with a hunger. There were more people here tonight than normal. With Shaun's parents gone him and his siblings must have invited more people. What was normally a quiet weekend scene with just a few people was now growing into a serious party.

Grabbing my hand, Becky pulled me from Shaun's lap. Her voice was soft and elated. "You said you'd dance. Dance! You need to loosen up, chica! I'm starting to think you're turning into one of those nuns you scrub up after." I scoffed and rolled my eyes heavily, but I danced, hoping Shaun would watch. I couldn't look back as Becky and I danced.

Other girls joined in, a few of the senior boys, one of Shaun's brothers. People moved in and out, drinking, laughing, and enjoying Today's Top Hits blaring from the cab of someone's old, orange pickup, doors wide open, squeaking every time someone bumped them in passing. There had to be fifty people there, and I still couldn't look at Shaun. My chest grew warm, either from the alcohol, or from the fear that Shaun would be watching one of the other girls if I looked back. I'd not ever worried much about Shaun's faithfulness, but Samantha's Spin-the-Bottle accusation rang in my mind.

I was always afraid, for as long as I can remember. In most of my earliest memories I was curled into a ball, struggling to breathe, purple sparks blurring my vision. I hated to be afraid.

I was young, maybe about six or so. Moving across the country was one of the first things I can remember. I don't remember a whole lot about the trip besides that we were in an old school bus and I got to sleep in a bunk bed, which I thought was the coolest, until the bus started moving.

The bus was so big, one long room with clattery-clanking noises all around. My heart pounded in my chest as the beast growled to life, my dad behind the wheel. He was so big, but the bus was big enough that it swallowed us whole with everything we had. We didn't really have much. I only had the doll I took to grandma's house the day our house burnt down. Everything else in the bus was foreign to me. Big and new and scary.

When the bus started moving I couldn't help it. I shook hard, gasping for breath. I clutched my doll and curled into a ball on the old blue canvas couch my parents had screwed into the floor. I wanted out. I wanted to go home. I wanted to lay in my bed and look at my books and play with my doll and pet my dog. My dog was my best friend and no one would tell me where he was, but I was afraid to ask or cry or stomp my feet because I was scared Dad would get mad.

That first time the bus started up, I curled into my ball and gasped hard and fast for my breath, scared. Scared and shaking so hard I swear I could see my cheeks turning purple

through my tightly squeezed eyelids. Purple and blue sparked everywhere, making me even more afraid because Jessie had once told me if I held my breath long enough I'd turn blue and die. I didn't want to die. I tried harder to breathe. I couldn't.

The drive felt like a million years. Every now and then Mom would sit next to me and rub my back until my muscles relaxed one by one and my heart stopped pounding in my ears. New land flew by outside, faster than I'd ever seen it go before. Grass and fields of weird plants I didn't recognize. Cows, pigs, horses, everywhere. For a little bit I'd play cards with Jessie or talk with Mary or kick Rob's shins, and feel maybe even a little bit like a bird floating in the air, you know, when they're just kind of hanging there up high and not really flapping their wings or moving or anything, just watching.

But we weren't floating, we were moving, and we were moving fast, ricketing back and forth and bouncing over lines in the road. When the wind would hit the bus hard there was a whistle and a woosh and the whole thing would sway. I'd hold my breath and cry and pray we wouldn't die and then it would start all over again and I'd be curled back in a ball. Safe in a haven with my spine out against the world, and purple sparks everywhere, whispering quietly to myself: "Dear God, Please keep us safe. Please don't let us die today. Please don't let me die."

The songs blurred together, and so did the beers. I forced myself to breathe, drink one and then another. I had been afraid of everything for as long as I could remember, but not tonight, I decided. Not anymore. Not in front of this fire and Shaun, filled with beer and

nicotine and a new sense of confidence. Becky and I danced and talked with some of the other people. My brother, Rob was there with his girlfriend. She spent most of the evening clung to my side or Rob's, but I'd learned to ignore her over the past few months, her shrill laugh and nasally voice didn't take long to get on my nerves. Not since she called me ugly last time she showed up for family dinner, already drunk and loud. I stayed away from them for most of the evening, checking that my lipstick was in place with my little pocket mirror before they approached.

When the fire began to fade to a glow, people trailed off a few at a time. Engines started, quickly growling into the distance. Eventually the orange pickup left, cab and bed piled mostly with people I knew from school, leaving us just with the music of the cicadas and low chatting of the few remaining guests. My head swirled in one direction, the space in my chest went the other, making my walk more of a swaying meander. Shaun found me and pulled my waist against his, cupping my face to look up towards him.

“Our place?” His hands were hot and dry, his face was soft and felt like home.

I nodded. We waved goodbye to our remaining friends, and left the fire smoldering. Nick and Becky had already gone inside where they would stay the night. Shaun led me to one of the barns towards the back of the property. This land had belonged to his family for almost two centuries, most of the original barns still stood, leaning with age, light falling through the spaces the weather had eaten between the boards. For the past year or so that we'd been together we would come here to the old, emptied hayloft on the second level of the rickety

barn. It looked like it had once been painted white, but now it sat a dull color somewhere between brown and gray, like an old oak faded a few years beyond death.

Afraid to fall, I gripped the wooden ladder tightly. I climbed behind Shaun to the upper level. He pulled out a pack of Camels, balancing one between his lips, lighting it and taking a drag before handing it to me and lighting one for himself. He sat, legs dangling over the edge overlooking the acreage. “What was up with you tonight?”

I took a deep drag, flicking the cigarette, ashes dancing to the ground. “Nothing. I was just having fun. I don’t get to spend much time with Becky anymore. Work and school and modeling, you know.”

“That’s it? I don’t think you said one word to me all night.” His face looked troubled, glowing in the silver moonlight.

“I don’t know.” Recounting for the hundredth time, I thought about Samantha. Her thin neck bending in my grip, plain sandy brown hair slicked between my fingers, her tousled sheets. I wanted to hurt her so badly then, now I wasn’t sure. “Have we ever played Spin-the-Bottle?”

“Eh.” His blonde hair looked gray in the slits of moonlight that illuminated the barn. “Don’t think so.” I stared at him for a few moments and he sat in silence. I thought back to that first move and the purple sparks, my soft doll cradled tight in my arms.

“You know that worn old doll I keep in my room? The stained up one with the torn dress and matted hair?”

“That one on your dresser? All tore up and shit?” He put his cigarette out on the board beside him, the moist wood hissing against the heat before reaching into his pocket and retrieving another, striking the lighter twice before getting it to spark.

“Yeah, that one.” I smoked slowly, the nicotine swirling my mind heavier than before, rocking my body like the bus when a gust of wind hit it. Dizzy. Purple shimmered each time I blinked. “Well, have I told you why I keep her around?”

Shaun shook his head.

“The dumb little doll is the only thing I’ve had for forever. She might not look like much, but she survived the fire, then all the moves. Since I was little I slept with her. Got in trouble at school for sneaking her in my bag. Mom new damned well if I left her somewhere we’d better head back.” I laughed in spite of myself, taking another drag, the glowing tip nearing my fingers, warm enough to radiate towards my knuckle. “I grew up, but I kept her around. And she’s the only thing. Nothing else. I had nothing else.”

“That’s rough.” Shaun stood, the wooden boards creaking and shifting beneath him as he came and put his arm around my shoulder, kissing the side of my head.

I shrugged, pulling out from underneath his arm. “That’s just what it was. Didn’t seem so sad until now. But that’s not the point. When you have something good, you should hold onto it. You don’t go around messing with it. You put it somewhere safe and don’t just throw it away. Then it will always be there.” I was drunk, and I knew it. Talking about my doll made me feel silly, but I hoped Shaun would understand what I was trying to say.

“Okay.” His eyebrows furrowed. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I love you. And I’m going to hold on. When there’s someone worth holding onto, you just hold on.” I stared at him. He stared back. A good liar, just like Dad had said, a smooth guy. “You don’t go messing around and playing in places you shouldn’t. It’s not right. It’s sick.”

He kissed me, pulling me against his warm body. The swirling in my chest slowed and ignited. I kissed him back. “You know I’d never do anything like that. I’m not going anywhere. Put me on your dresser and call me Sally.” His lips spread into a grin. “I’ll be your new babydoll.”

I fell into him and believed. He’d been there in that room in the nunnery, I swore I thought it. Now I wasn’t so sure and hated myself for doubting him. Samantha had to have lied. Shaun wouldn’t lie, and even if he did I knew he wouldn’t do it again. We would hang on and push through. He wouldn’t do it again. He’d get better and we would be fine, completely and totally fine. Wouldn’t we?

Chapter 2

We weren't fine. Things were on the brink of changing forever. It wasn't but a few weeks after that party that our lives got upturned. Two lines brought us closer than ever before, but farther apart in some senses. Who knew how much two tiny pink lines could change?

Shaun sat on the shining pleather couch next to me, my legs draped over his lap. The dark brown couch practically swallowed you when you sat on it, full of cotton or cushion or extra springy springs so tiny you couldn't even feel them. It was really the only new thing in our house.

We'd decided to get married a few hours after I told Shaun I was pregnant, which of course meant we needed to live together, so we found ourselves a little house just inside of town on foreclosure. We had to get a loan from the bank, but the house was a little run down and outdated we got it pretty cheap. We couldn't be a real couple living apart anyhow, and since he got me pregnant I thought it was time that we made things a little more steady.

I'd told him I was pregnant on a Saturday morning. I went to his mom's house and took him out to the loft in our barn. We smoked a cigarette together.

"I've got something to tell you." The pink lines sat behind my eyelids, flashing bright in my mind every time I blinked. My face flushed and my heart raced. My chest was hot and bubbling and I thought I might throw up.

Shaun took a drag of his cigarette. I did the same, hoping it would calm my nerves. It didn't. My stomach twisted in knots, acid rolling somewhere between my throat and lungs. I

put mine out against the loft floor, met with the familiar hiss of moist wood. He wouldn't look at me. He took another drag.

"I'm pregnant."

Shaun's eyes snapped at me, his arms dropping to his side. "Shit. Are you sure? Did you take a test?"

"Yeah, I mean. I took four. I haven't seen a doctor or anything, but them tests are as good as anything from what I've heard." Shifting my weight from leg to leg I looked everywhere but right at Shaun, who couldn't stop staring at me now. He seemed to take inventory, looking from my face to my breasts, then my stomach. He stood unblinking, ash growing unflicked at the end of his cigarette. "What?" I stammered.

"I dunno." Shaun threw the cigarette to the ground, half unsmoked, leaving it burning in the dust and dirt of the loft. "I gotta go."

Like that, he was gone. He rushed down the old ladder and off to his car, leaving me in the old loft of the barn. I stomped out his smoke on the wood boards. Unsure what to think I went and spent a few hours with his sister and parents inside, until Shaun's dad offered me a ride home. Their family was a bit untraditional, but so was mine. I was sure his parents could handle the news and even help me try to understand Shaun's reaction. I didn't tell them anything, though. This was between just Shaun and I for the time being. Shaun's dad drove slow, not speaking much, letting the pastures and fields pass nice and gradual. He was calm and cool, but comfortable, like the air on the ranch, the first home I really remembered.

“No, no, Robin. You’re close baby. I need you to put your feet in the stirrups here.”

Mom secured my small tennis shoes into the leather-wrapped stirrups, adjusted as high as they could go on Bruce’s worn saddle. I felt like I was sitting on the very top of a mountain in the middle of a field, a mountain that could move and run and buck me off whenever it wanted.

“Now, hug your legs against him. You won’t hurt him, I promise. You need to let him know you’re holding on real good.”

I couldn’t speak, so I just nodded. Bruce was big, real big. I hardly came up to his belly. Mom promised me he was really nice, but every time he breathed his ribs pushed out and pushed my legs out with them. I was uneasy, purple sparks flashing with each breath I took and each time Bruce drew a breath.

“You got the reins?” Mom was standing close, one hand steady on Bruce’s flank, the other on my leg, nearly wrapping around my thigh.

I nodded again.

Mom smiled. “You can do this, baby. There isn’t a whole bunch to it. Just relax. You hold those reins real loose. If you want him to turn you just pull the opposite way, so his head turns the way you want him to go. See?” She took the soft leather straps from my hands, showing me how it worked. I tried to steady my breath and take in every word and movement Mom made. I didn’t want to forget and fall off.

Jessie yelled from across the pasture. "I learned before you! Two whole years ago! Back at home! Don't be a sissy!" She sat on the gate twenty or so feet away. She didn't help none. I was afraid that all my nervous shaking was bringing my shoe laces loose.

Mom shot her a look, cold and like a parrot, I thought, lips tight and eyes sharp. It almost scared me. I never really liked birds, and I really didn't like it when Mom got mad. She looked back at me soft and hopeful, cheeks rosey from the work of the afternoon. "You got this, Robin. I'm right here."

"Momma?" My voice squeaked. Mom squeezed my leg and looked at me again. "Don't let go."

Mom nodded, taking her hand off my leg and placing it on Bruce's neck. She stepped forward, and Bruce followed. My weight shifted with each movement of his hips. I gripped my legs tighter and clung to the horn of the saddle, reins twisted in my hands. Bruce pulled his head back, shifting his weight to his back legs, he shook and whinnied softly.

"Loosen them reins, baby. Let go." I did. The reins fell on either side of his neck, nearly brushing the ground. Mom picked them up, ducking beneath his neck, I was afraid Bruce would run right over her and splatter her guts on the ground. He didn't. "You've got to let go of that horn. Hold the reins tight in your hand, but let them loose on his neck. You see the U here?" She pointed to the shape they slacked before they connected to the bit in his mouth. "Let them stay real loose. When you pull them tight, you're telling him to stop or back up. Loose, Robin. All the control you have going forward is right here." She patted my waist. "Balance right here. In your hips and feet. Your hands don't have nothing to do with it."

I tried to swallow the lump in my throat, and nodded again. The pasture we were in was real big, but I couldn't see any of it anymore. All I saw was Bruce right beneath me and the ground below him. His hooves pressed hard in the dirt, leaving half-moon prints every time he shifted. Mom started leading us again. This time I was careful to balance myself in my rear and heels.

After a few minutes my breathing steadied and my heart slowed. The longer Mom led Bruce, the more proud I felt of high I was, Mom's head steadily moving just in front of my knees. I was still on top of a mountain, but this time I felt like I'd climbed all the way up by myself. Like I deserved to be up there. Slowly the purple sparks threatening in the corners of my eyes began to fade and my feet felt as firm in the stirrups as Bruce's were in the dirt.

"Robin, how you doing?" Mom looked back at me, a few strands of her ponytailed hair falling in her face beneath the western hat. "You ready to go a little further?"

"I'm good, Momma." My voice wasn't shaking any longer. Mom let go of Bruce's neck, and he moved forward on his own. For a second my heart quivered, but it quickly steadied again. My legs hardly wrapped half way around his belly, but I knew I was safe. I tapped him gently on the side with my heels and held on with my thighs. Bruce sped up, just a bit.

Mom slowly walked backwards, never breaking her sight on me until she reached the fence where Jessie sat. She hoisted herself up. "You got this, Robin! You got this!"

I did. I had this. I nudged Bruce again, steering him side to side like Mom showed me, around and around the pastured area. We galloped and trotted, Bruce's immense body

quicken and slow when I motioned him with the reins and my heels. I felt like hollering and singing and dancing. I don't know how long it had been when we came to a stop by the fence. Mom beamed, her eyes full, legs dangling against the thick metal bars.

Jessie shifted. "Maybe you ain't as much of a sissy as I thought."

That day Shaun's dad dropped me off at my parent's house. A few hours after dinner Shaun pulled into my parent's driveway, slowly without the flying gravel that was usual for the Grand Am. I had watched for him all day and ran out the door when I saw him coming down the road, leaving my Mom, Dad, and sisters playing cards at the kitchen table.

I slid into his passenger seat and eyed him carefully. His eyebrows furrowed, hands folded in his lap, the car hummed in park. We sat for several moments, Shaun wringing his hands in his lap, shifting them quickly to my leg, squeezing just above my knee, then back to his own lap. I didn't dare say a thing. I tried my best to look at him but I couldn't. Instead I stared at my chipping teal painted nails, watching him from the corner of my eye.

"I think." Shaun coughed, clearing his throat. "We need to get married." He was staring at me now, eyes wide and dark rimmed. His hair was tousled and face shiny, like he'd just run all the way here instead of driving. "So?"

My heart pounded in my chest so hard I swear I could see my nose moving with each beat. Purple sparks flickered in my peripheral and I couldn't breathe. I nodded, quick and short. Yes, I thought, but my lips pressed tight. I couldn't breathe.

“All right. Okay.” Shaun reached into his pocket for a cigarette. “We’ll talk more tomorrow, okay?” He reached for a second cigarette, glancing at my belly he closed the thin cardboard lid and shoved it back into his pocket instead. “I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

I nodded again, hands shaking to grip the door handle. Shaun drove away quickly, his car moving forward before my door had even shut. After a deep shaking breath I went back inside, stomach curling somewhere between happiness and nausea. My parents and both of my sisters were still sitting at the table, hands full of cards. Jessie bounced her daughter who was now almost six months old on her knee. Mary laughed as she threw down one of her cards.

“You high or somethin’?” Jessie grinned. “Or did you just have some *alone* time with that boy of yours?” Mom furrowed her brows and wacked Jessie on the side of her head, hard enough to make her grimace and giggle, knocking her frizzy blonde hair askew.

“No.” I was practically floating, though I didn’t know yet if I was going to throw up. “I just got engaged.” I slammed the door and that was that. No explanation, no arguing, even though I knew both Mom and Dad would want to. I shoved the crib aside that sat between my bed and Jessie’s.

Jessie had been married and moved out about a year ago, but as soon as the baby was born her husband disappeared without a word, let alone a divorce. Six months later and Jessie was still holding onto hope, thinking he’d just taken job since he was some sort of travelling construction worker as far as I knew, and forgotten to tell her. The rest of us knew he was gone for good.

I was just glad I would be out of there soon. I loved Jessie to the ends of the world, and her daughter was as good as any other baby. She cried a lot and had numerous health problems but she was all right, I guess. Sharing a room with my sister and her daughter was not my idea of a good time, though. My chest tightened and I bit my bottom lip, sitting on my mattress with a loud squeak. I had always wanted a real proposal. Dreams of romantic settings like the beach or even the old Mississippi at sunset, since it was right down the road. I rubbed the ring finger of my left hand, a ring would have made it feel a little more real. But it was real, right? I threw myself back on my bed, happy and content, wishing I could see the faces of my mom and dad outside the door. I bet they were stunned, dumbstruck. The card game sounded like it had dissipated, only the quiet voice of my mother and father seemed to move back and forth.

I think they had hoped I was joking. A week later Shaun pulled in the drive to take us to our new home. The foreclosed house was a pale yellow, two floors with a lot of narrow windows. I was most excited about the screened in half-wrap porch that wrapped around most of the exterior of the house. It was a great house for what we paid and bigger than any other house I'd ever lived in. Plus, I wouldn't have to share a room with my sister and her kid. Anything was a move up from there. I hadn't told my parents about the house until we'd already signed, Shaun and I together. In fact, I didn't tell them until about an hour before he was set to take me to our new home. They weren't very happy about it.

"I don't really care." I planted my foot hard against the hollow, uncarpeted ground. "I'm going to be 18 in just a few months, anyways. I'll marry him then! Just sign the papers. There's no stopping us." I knew it. I'd be his regardless of the timeline. Whether I'd marry him

tomorrow or in a few months, I'd make it happen. I wasn't going to let them control when I was going to leave, even if they wouldn't let me get married right away. Seventeen years old, I was basically an adult.

"Please." Dad's eyes were big and low. I was his baby, the youngest of the brood, and we all knew he favored me. I tried to let his words slip over my back. "Robin, baby. You don't know what you're doin'. Them Balmer boys are real slippery. Lyin' all the time. Shakin' the law."

"He wouldn't lie to me." I dug my foot deeper. My knee ached and so did my back. Short hair tickled against my jaw, slipping into my vision I didn't dare to move it from my eyes. I hated that the agency talked me into cutting all of my hair off, but I hoped I looked like one of those girls in the movies, tough and strong, jawline set without looking too masculine. Strong and beautiful. In reality, I couldn't see much in front of me, my bangs and the line of my chin-length hair falling in my eyes all the time. All the better, though. I didn't want to look at them too bad anyway.

I could see my mom standing right behind Dad, hand rested on his shoulder, but thick strands of dark hair kept me from seeing her face, though I could guess that it was set and hard, unwilling to move in expression, and even further from actual words. I used to call this her parrot face, sharp and unforgiving. Mom didn't say a damn thing. Nothing at all, and that flickered hot in my chest. She never said anything anyways, not when the cashier shorted her change at the grocery, not when my friend's mothers made fun of her calling her simple and dumb, and not when my dad jeopardized our house and his health and hers, ours. My poofy

permed hair kept me from seeing her face, but it was better that way. I wouldn't be able to see the look on her face that would make me want to scream inside at her to speak her mind.

"Robin, listen to me." Dad stood big and tall. "Your Mom and I went through this all too, ya know? We've told you the stories. Your heart isn't always right." He looked sad, like he wanted to beg. Like he begged when Mom threatened to leave him years ago. "Just think about it. You can't marry him."

"Like hell, I can't!" I threw my duffel over my shoulder looking at the cluttered counters and over-full cabinets hanging a smidge open. Everything was full, things everywhere. "I'm not you. I won't be like you. Never." I shoved past him, his arms hanging helplessly at his sides. I threw the packet of marriage parental-consent papers I'd printed that morning at the library on the table. It landed heavily with a smack, sliding to hang a little off the edge. Rushing out the door, I slammed it behind me. Quickly it creaked open behind me.

I turned, my mom grabbed my arm and stopped me. She let the door close behind her. She didn't look mad. She looked old and worn, her light brown hair fading gray at the roots.

"Robin." She let go of my arm. Her voice was quiet, but steady and strong. "I love you."

I nodded and charged down the driveway, closing the passenger door hard behind me. I had been exhilarated and tough, but in the car I wasn't too sure how I felt. I glanced at Shaun, whose eyes were glued to the road. He was still wearing his button down and nametag from the car dealership he worked at. I picked at what was left of my nail polish, leaving bright

teal chips on my lap. Shaun's wheels threw gravel before anyone could chase after us as we flew down the road towards our new home.

My legs slinked over Shaun's lap, we watched some news, fuzzy and jumbled on the old box TV we'd found in his parents' basement. We'd fashioned an old wire hanger out the back of it, but no matter how we angled it the television only seemed to pick up a staticky channel or two. He sipped on a large glass of bubbly Coke. I wondered how much rum he'd mixed with it. I stretched my legs out further over him, reaching for a cigarette from a pack on the coffee table just in front of us. As I lit up he glanced at me warily, swigging from his big mug.

"I've got another photoshoot this week." I said, dragging in the nicotine, my head danced. "Some sort of shorts ad or something."

Shaun stared at my stomach for several seconds, something he seemed to be doing more often now. I turned onto my side, tucking my legs below me I hoped he'd shift his eyes elsewhere. He did. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I flicked my ash into the flower pot on the coffee table. I didn't know what the flower in it was, but it was half dead anyways. A sickly light orange flower was half bloomed in it, but the leaves and stem were gray, drooping and disappointed in our choice of ashtray. I didn't really care, flowers belonged outside anyway. "I made an appointment at the clinic for the day after."

Maybe Shaun looked at my face, but maybe he stared at my stomach again. I couldn't bring myself to look at him again. "Oh," he said. He gulped again, his cup now half empty, he wrung the ring finger of his left hand, rubbing it nearly raw.

"I mean, that's the best thing to do. I'm still in school. No one wants a fucking round model." I took another drag, not so nauseous this time. "Better take care of it now, you know, before it gets feelings and stuff."

Shaun shifted so that my knees weren't touching him, hand tightening around his mug, he downed the rest of the soda-mystery drink and set the empty glass back down with a loud *thunk*. "Kind of defeats the whole purpose of getting married, don't it?" He turned to meet me, sitting up and squaring his shoulders. "I mean, if we don't have a kid, what's even the point?"

I felt my face drain cold, the pleather squeaked below me as I moved to meet his stare. Be strong, I thought, be present. Mom's face flashed in my mind, worn and tired the last time we'd spoken when I left two weeks ago. My hands started to shake, my breath uneasy. I took another drag to steady myself. "Maybe I thought you loved me as much as I love you. Kid or not, I'm down. I'm down for us, forever. This is what I want. I thought that was what you wanted too." My voice started to bite at the end.

"Really?" His eyes were bright blue as ever, but his eyebrows furrowed and his head cocked to the side, like he was thinking of something that hurt. "You didn't think that maybe it would be better to move in together after you graduate? I mean, maybe I wanted to go to college or something? A house payment kind of gets in the way of all that. You don't think we

should have talked about whether or not you'd kill our child just so that you could take a few more local publicity photoshoots? Do you even have the money for the clinic? None of this shit is free, you know?"

My eyes welled, a knot sat heavy at the top of my throat. I put my cigarette out in the plant before it could burn my fingertips. Swallowing, I fought to steady my voice. "Can't afford a house and school, but think you can handle a house and a kid? A house is the next step, living together. And it ain't even like it's a kid yet! We wouldn't be killing no one. It's just a bunch of cells. Nothing more. Not yet."

"You just don't get it." He stood, leaving his glass where it sat. "I can't tonight, Robin. Can't." He grabbed his jacket and went out the back door. Grappling for the remote I muted the television until I heard his car rumble off. I wasn't really sure where he'd be going, but I assumed he'd head to Nick's house, or maybe his parents'. I fell asleep on the couch, waiting for him. He wouldn't come home that night. I couldn't count on him, I couldn't count on anybody anymore.

I had always been able to count on Jessie, even when I didn't want to. She drug me places, wherever she went. It started because Mom wanted someone to watch over me while she was at work or church or her volunteer group. I don't know why she kept me around once I could take care of myself, though. She didn't really seem to like me that much. But I loved her, even if it was a secret. Being the Sheriff's daughters made us a bit of an oddity. It was a risqué thing for us to be at a party, but in a way everyone thought was cool. We never snitched,

but I guess they just thought there was a risk when we were there. I mean, either way it was cool. There was a party or two we were turned out of in the beginning, when Dad first took the job, but after a few weeks Jessie and I were invited everywhere.

Jessie's best friend, Anne Kelson, threw parties once or twice a month. Those were the ones I felt a little weird at. I loved Anne and all, but I was only fourteen at the time and her parties seemed to go a bit beyond the whole drink and blaze thing. I mean, I don't smoke unless I know what I'm smoking, and I don't think I'd ever really take pills, but everyone else seemed real happy when they were high.

I didn't follow the rules of Anne's parties, and neither did Jessie most of the time. Typically we'd come in together, drink a bit and dance a lot, then just hang out. People would kiss and dance and spazz out, do their own things. Then they would all leave and Jessie and I would stay at Anne's. I mean, Mom knew the Kelson's were nice religious people, but she didn't know that Anne's parents were gone two weeks out of each month. Either way, it was nice to get out and forget about everything every now and again. I was the youngest, a kid that most everyone ignored. I mean, I'd get the attention of someone now and then, but usually people were all preoccupied with themselves.

Anne threw a party two weeks after my first high school homecoming. I thought the first weekend after people were probably too hungover, but two weeks after people were ready for the next go-round. Jessie and I weren't the first ones there. There were already ten or so people mingling around the house. The night went on just about as normal. Anne played loud music in her parent's house, tens of people swaying back and forth against each other in the

living room and dining room. Halls filled with casual chat and the backyard was scattered with couples tangled in one another and small circles of jacketed people, puffy smoke clouds rising and fading over them. I liked to find my spot in the kitchen, drink in hand I sat in the corner on the counter between the kitchen and the short hallway that led to the living room. I liked to watch people sway together, the ebb and flow all night of dazed heads forgetting where they were. Plus, it always made great gossip with Becky the next day when I could see who left with who.

Jessie was off with this week's boyfriend somewhere. Probably down by the river teaching the boy to "fish" I thought, giggling to myself, my head swirling with cheap vodka and blue Kool-Aid. I didn't do a great job at keeping track that night. I had just made it into high school and didn't know anyone beyond who Jessie had introduced me to and she was rather anti-social. Anne was there, of course, and she checked on me a few times, her boyfriend standing behind her with his hand on her waist. He was always touching her. Attached at the hip, shoulder, lips. They seemed happy. His name was Joe or John or something. He seemed nice.

I had dozed off balanced against the wall, legs crossed on the counter top. Every now and then someone would bump against me and I'd shake myself awake, pulling out a pocket mirror to wipe away smeared makeup and reapply new lipstick. I had just started going to a modeling school a few towns over, and they stressed looking good at all times. I didn't leave the house without my makeup and mirror. I fixed my lipstick and adjusted my long hair, sipping my drink and watching people until I dozed back off.

No one was left when I woke up around 3am except a few people passed out on the floor and couch. The radio still blasted with Today's Top Hits in the living room. I sat for a moment before sliding off the countertop after realizing how bad I had to pee. I bounced back and forth against the walls, my hands buffering my way back to the bathroom. It was a door just past Anne's on the left. I could hear two voices back and forth as I drew closer. Quietly as I could, I closed myself in the bathroom. It sounded like Anne and her boyfriend.

"You don't even have any idea, Anne!" The voices were mumbled, but tough and angry. The wall between us was mixing their words. I couldn't be sure what I was hearing, I tried to convince myself. "Fucking hell! Fucking hell." That part was more clear.

I heard the muffled voice of Anne, much lower and calm, quiet enough I couldn't make out what she was saying. Whatever she said didn't seem to make Jessie or Jon or what's-his-name too happy.

"Fucking fine then! Just leave! I won't be here when you get back, swear it! Fucking bitch, what a cunt!" He was practically screaming. There was no longer any mistaking his words. Anne's bedroom door slammed shut, and then there was silence. For a moment I didn't know whether it was Anne or her boyfriend who had left. Before long I heard her boyfriend ranting, his words incoherent again. I moved quietly to lock the bathroom door, something about his voice made the hairs on my arms stand up. I fought to stand straight, gripping the porcelain sink I looked at myself in the mirror. My permed hair was more frizzy than anything else. My lips were stained a faded red, eyeliner and mascara faded below my eyes despite my effort. I stood, staring at my teeth and the huge pores on my forehead and cheeks, blackheads

burrowed into my nose and chin. I listened to the man in the next room shuffling about for several minutes.

There was a slam against the wall accompanied with a grunt, then another. “Fuckin’ fine.” This time quieter than before. Something made me feel my way against the flowered wallpaper on the wall separating us. I pressed my ear flush against the cool paper. “She don’t want me then. Fuckin’ fine.” It was quiet again, but I sat against the wall, listening.

Suddenly there was a knocking, over and over and a wailing moan, loud and inhumane. It sounded something like an animal trapped in one of my dad’s hunting traps, desperate and bleeding. My breath froze and my heart pounded, purple sparks consuming me behind tightly closed eyes. I wanted to go see but instead I pulled away from the wall, scooting tight into the farthest corner. The banging didn’t stop. Something scratched, scraped, wailed, moaned and screeched, loud and wild. I wanted to yell and I wanted to scream that something wasn’t right. I couldn’t. I couldn’t even see beyond the purple sparks and my arms and legs wouldn’t move, my heart building pressure in my chest and face and toes, I curled into myself. No, no, no, not again, not here, I thought. But I did, and I couldn’t breathe. I don’t know how much longer after that I lost consciousness, but I know exactly when I woke up.

“Jake. Jake? Oh my God, Jake!” His name was Jake. I remembered now. Anne’s voice was clear now, the orange light of dawn starting to pour through the little window in the bathroom behind me. “Jake! Oh my God, Jake!” There was shuffling against the wall and she screamed. Again and again, she screamed his name. I couldn’t take it, I didn’t want to know. I stood slowly. My head pounded, but I could walk straight. I cracked open the bathroom

window, popping the screen out and throwing it out through the opening. I lowered myself out onto the shimmery dew soaked grass. “Jake! My God, Jake! No, no, no.” Anne’s voice pricked into my spine as I made my way down the road. I wouldn’t look back, I couldn’t.

Jessie came home later that day, dark circles beneath her eyes, tear stains on her cheeks. Jake was dead. Suicide. I pretended not to know anything, the knot in my throat grew again. Dad came home a few hours after Jessie. He had been the one called in on the case. Jessie was somewhere with Mom when Dad came into my room the next evening. I had spent most of my day in bed, the knocking, pounding, wailing caught in my head over and over again.

“Robin, I got to ask you.” He looked tired, sad even. “You know anything about Jake and last night? Did you hear anything weird at Anne’s house? Another boy or anything?” I stared at the lump of blankets right over my knees. I was warm but I couldn’t stop shivering.

“No.” I barely choked it out, my chest collapsing. I couldn’t bring myself to breathe back in. Dad looked at me, his dark eyes welled, and then I couldn’t help it. Sobs fell from my chest and he held me in his arms, tight against his scratchy canvas uniform. I wasn’t sure, but I thought I could feel him cry too.

We would never tell anyone. Dad wiped his face on a rag he pulled from one of his pockets before kissing me on the forehead and leaving my room as quietly as he came in, door clicking behind him. The house was consumed by quiet, an unusual and empty silence.

Chapter 3

Our new home was often silent. Shaun was gone a lot for work. I wanted a cat to keep me company while I wasn't at school or work, but Shaun said we couldn't afford one. I tried to keep myself company by blaring my music, planning outfits and locations for photoshoots, and counting down the days until my appointment.

The week after Shaun stormed out I had my photoshoot for the agency. It was shorts and cropped off shirts. I was so thankful that I wasn't showing yet. If anything, my boobs were bigger and the photographers loved that. Since the shoot was a few towns over I'd talked Becky into coming with me and making a day out of it. She didn't really like the modeling, but she borrowed her parent's car and agreed anyway.

The photoshoot was outside. The photographer had two people with him carrying umbrella lights. One was a pimply boy, the other was a short, simple girl about the same age. We took some photos down by a creek. The photographer had me climb into a tree and lean on a branch out over the water. He kept yelling at me to be casual as I slipped against the bark. Becky laughed and made fun of me and I responded by sticking my tongue out and giving her the bird. Candid. The photographer loved the energy.

After a few outfit changes, three locations, and endless fake flirtation between Becky and the pimply boy, Becky and I got out of there headed to the big outlet mall in town. I fasted the whole day before the shoot like I usually do before any gigs the agency scraped up for me. I was starving. I knew that when I saw my hips a little more prominent than normal when the

photos were released that I would be okay with it, but with the photoshoot over I was ready to eat.

“You know,” I muffled through a half mouth full of sweet and sour chicken, “That photographer would have probably made you join in if you’d’ve just done your makeup today.” I picked up my napkin, blotting away rice and red sauce, careful not to smear my lipstick.

Becky looked great, as usual, but she was a little soft on the edges. Her hair was perfect for today’s fad, shoulder-length and naturally curly, but she always let it frizz too wild. I tried to teach her about how concealer worked to cover up blackheads. When that didn’t work I showed her how to make a face mask from egg whites, a trick I’d learned at my bimonthly modeling retreat. She wouldn’t listen. Becky was really pretty from a distance, especially when she wore loose skirts and clingy sweaters. They worked for her body type. She wouldn’t listen though, she left her hair frizzy and her eyes unlined. At least she wore mascara and lipstick, they did a lot of good for her.

“We’re not all hinging on eyeshadow and high heels, you know?” Becky looked at me from under skeptical eyebrows. “Think of all the books you could read in the time you spend on your face.” I tossed a balled up napkin at her and it bounced off her face onto the floor. We laughed and left it there. Becky leaned in close and whispered, “Think of how many times you could have fucked.”

“Becky!” I squealed, rice damn near spewing from my mouth. She winked at me and laughed, taking another bite.

“Alls I’m saying is I don’t put near as much shit on my face and hair and I still got a man who’d die for me. What else you got, girl? Couple more cute pictures and some cheekbones? No thank you, ma’am! Damn camera will steal your soul.”

I laughed with her. It was all in good spirit. We were different, but we knew that. It was all good. Until my stomach started to turn, hot acid burning at the back of my throat. I felt my face turn red. I stood fast enough to nearly knock my chair back, muttering to Becky I’d be right back. I ran for the public restroom tucked back between the sandwich counter and chain burger joint. Making it just in time, I lost my lunch. My hands and vision shook, my head was light and spinning. I sat on the bathroom floor. The thought of the gross germs on the cold tile floor climbing on my legs, on my skin, making me unclean made my stomach turn again. I tried to bring myself to a crouch, but I couldn’t steady my shaking enough to balance on the rubber toes of my heels. Defeated, I sat on the floor feeling helpless, helpless and hungry and nauseous.

“Robin, are you all right?” I saw Becky’s legs from the shin down, her old black sneakers were wearing thin in the toe. Becky peered under the stall door. “There you are. Open up.” I listened, and she came in with a wad of paper towels and a wet wipe from the Chinese counter.

“Thanks.” I took the wipe and ran it across my forehead, fanning myself, willing my body to cool, wiping my mouth before tossing the wipe into the toilet.

“Told you we should have gotten the sub. The Chinese place is always iffy. You never know what you’ll get. The owners aren’t even Chinese!” Becky crouched, offering some paper towels.

I breathed deeply, my chest still bubbling hot with heartburn. “No, It’s not that. Chinese is fine.”

“Catch a bug then? Sitting on that floor won’t be doing you any favors.”

“No.” I met Becky’s eyes and watched as they grew. “I’m not sick.”

“You aren’t.” Her mouth gaped wide, lips curling into a smile. “No. You aren’t!” She was practically shouting. “Pregnant! Shut up. Shut up! No. Really?”

“Shh!” I glanced beneath the stalls to make sure no one else was in the restroom.

“Don’t be shouting like that. Yes, for god’s sake. I am. Now be quiet.”

“Pregnant. Oh my god, is it Shaun’s?” She whispered loud and quick.

I shoved her with my elbow. “Of course it’s Shaun’s. What kind of girl do you think I am?”

Her eyes darted over me, pausing a moment over my chest and landing at my stomach. Why do people always do that? The second you tell someone you’re being mooched off by a pack of cells they can’t help but staring at your belly every time you enter a room. She grinned and met my eyes again.

“How long have you known? Do you know if it’s a boy or girl? You’re not showing at all, except maybe in the boobs. I mean, how could I not see? Names! You’ve got to name it after me. No, no. Just let me help pick one! I’m going to be an aunt! Oh my god, your mom!

What does she think? Jessie and her baby and all, and now you?” Her voice grew from an excited whisper to a gleeful squeal.

“I just found out a week or so ago. I haven’t told anyone. Stop. Quiet.” I dry heaved again, the gross tan-white stall blurring in and out of focus. The toilets were clean at least, but the tinge of toilet bowl cleaner and dirty diapers in the garbage bin was not helping me calm my hijacked body. “It doesn’t even matter. I’ve got an appointment tomorrow.”

Becky looked confused, lips still curled into a smile.

“At the clinic.”

“Oh.” Her smile faded and she looked at the ground. “Okay. That’s okay. Good.”

I stood up and walked by her, leaving her in a crouch. My stomach had settled a bit. I splashed my face with lukewarm water from the sink, blotting at it with scratchy brown paper towels. Red blotches formed on my cheeks and my lipstick smeared enough that I decided to wipe it off. It left a light stain. I blotted some more, this time with a little soap from the dispenser, giving up after a few attempts. Becky lifted herself onto the counter, facing me, her legs swinging and hands curled around the edge. I didn’t want to look at her. Instead I tried to wipe the mascara that had smeared a bit below my eyes.

“God, I look like I was beaten.” The lipstick may have stained, but the mascara wiped off after a few tries. “Can we just go home?”

“My house? Girls night?” Becky nudged my shoulder. “My mom’s making lasagna.”

I wanted to say yes but Shaun would be at home by six. His sales job kept him pretty busy and he'd been coming home late more often than not, but he promised tonight. "How about next week? Or better, you could stay at our house and we can get wasted."

"You just want to make sure Shaun comes home tonight." Becky knew me. Her eyes were steady but wary. "You know I love you both, but he's been pretty weird the last couple weeks. Are you guys okay?"

"It's probably just the baby." I turned, heading to leave. "That won't be a big deal much longer."

Becky took me home. The drive seeming longer than normal. I'd never noticed how many signs covered the billboards saying things like 'Thank God Your Mother Chose Life' and 'God Hates Abortion'. They'd been there as long as I could remember, but I'd forgotten the tens of signs stuck in the farmer's ditches, stretched across billboards, and painted on the slanted roofs of old barns. It had to be because the county was super religious and the only clinic in the state was just over the county line. I tried to ignore it. I just wouldn't look.

Becky pulled into the driveway and stared at our back door. I sat for a moment, waiting for her to say something before grabbing my modeling duffel and opening the door. I knew she wanted me to ask her to come in.

"Well, I'll see you in a couple days. Thanks for tagging along. You always make these things more fun." I stood there, hand on the door. "Just please don't tell anyone about... you know."

Becky smiled at me, looking tired and kind. “I won’t. And hey, Robin? You know I’m here for you, right? No matter what you choose.” I nodded and blew her a kiss before slamming the door and rushing to the house.

My throat was heavy, like an orange had lodged itself right inside of it. I wanted to cry.

“God damned hormones.” I muttered, struggling with the lock.

I grabbed a sleeve of saltine crackers and ran myself a bath. I spent the rest of the afternoon staring at the interior of our house. The wallpaper was dated, striped, and ugly. We would have to redo it. Half the drawers in the kitchen were missing their knobs, and the carpet in the back bedroom needed to be replaced, it had molded against a wall. The floors were hard wood, some floors were covered in light blue square laminate with little pink flowers at the corners of each square, that was nice, really easy to clean. A few hours and I was tired of planning. It was nearing dinner time but we didn’t have much in the house, so I figured I’d make some grilled cheese for dinner when Shaun got home. All there was left to do was wait, so I buttered the bread and set out a frying pan and waited.

It was nearing eight when I started to worry. We had a landline, but when the dealership closed their phones went dead for the night. There was no use in trying to call. I made myself a grilled cheese and laid on the couch, watching something fuzzy and upbeat that the hanger-wire antennas picked up off of a local channel. I sat and I waited some more. Waited and waited until I dozed off on the couch, thinking Shaun would wake me when he got home. Only Shaun didn’t come home. I would wake up in the dark hours of the morning cold and alone on the couch, waiting, drifting in and out of consciousness.

“Robin, baby. Time to get going.” Shaun sat on the edge of the couch, body grazing gently against mine. I looked at the clock just above the buzzing television. It was six in the morning.

I sat up, rubbing my eyes. “Where were you?” I hadn’t slept well. “You promised you’d be home last night for dinner.”

“Yeah, I know. Work just was crazy. Boss asked me to stay late and do some papers. Plus, my mind’s been all sorts of busy. Figured I’d just be here to pick you up in the morning.”

“Work?” I was skeptical, he’d never spent all night at work before. But he was still wearing the button down he left with the morning before.

“Sorry.” His eyes darted from my stomach to the couch, his hands and back to me. He wouldn’t look me in the eyes. “Come on.” He patted my leg. “We got to get going. I’m going to shower.”

I stretched my arms, my back popping, joints loose and cracky. “Want some company?”

“No.” Shaun didn’t hesitate. He must have seen the hurt on my face. “I mean, we’re kind of in a hurry.” I brushed it off and put on some clean sweatpants and a T-shirt. They said to dress comfortably, but I still did my mascara, it wouldn’t run bad like eyeliner. My hair was too short to tie back now.

“It’s in style, Robin,” I muttered to myself. “You’ll be booked nonstop if you just cut it all off and perm it, they said, models got to keep up with the big thing.” I clipped my hair

back out of my face, thinking about the fit the agency would throw if they saw me in public like this.

I wasn't really sure what to expect with the appointment. I was just glad I wouldn't have to go alone. I was sure I wanted to do it. I didn't want to have to face my mom and dad, and I definitely didn't want to quit modeling. We left about a half hour later.

The drive there drug on forever. The same signs I saw yesterday were still there, each shouting at me as we sped past. Shaun stared hard at the road, his jaw set sharp in its place. The yellow lines blurred together, sliding effortlessly behind the car. I fought to keep my breath steady and colors from sparking in my vision.

We had to drive past the clinic to get to the parking lot half a block down. As we rounded the corner we saw eight or ten people bustling around the entrance on the sidewalk. One had a small table, the others held bright signs, red and black. They were silent, not like the protesters in the movies. They stood, signs in hands, watching as the cars drove by. My heart dropped into my stomach.

"You've got to be shitting me." Shaun glanced at the protesters, shifting his face away from them like he was hiding. He pulled into the parking lot and cut off the ignition. "How long is this supposed to take?"

I choked down the stubborn lump in my throat. "Just an hour is all." I grabbed my bag and reached for the door handle. Shaun sat still. "You coming? We're going to be late."

"No."

"What?"

“I said no.” Shaun shifted in his seat, but his hands gripped tight against the steering wheel, eyes fixed foreword like we were on the highway again. But the car wasn’t moving, and neither was he. “I’ll be here when you’re done.”

“I don’t want to do this by myself.” I felt my eyes puff hot, my breath quickening again. “Don’t make me go in there alone.”

Shaun glanced at the silent protesters on the street. One stared directly at us. “You wanted this. Not me. If you’re going to do it, you’re doing it by yourself. I won’t go in there. What if someone saw me? My parents would never forgive me.”

“Forgive you? For knocking me up or handling it like an adult? You’re supposed to be my fiancé.” I was mad now, my voice shaking louder than I’d meant.

“God, Robin. *Handling* it? Like and *adult*? An adult wouldn’t run off and have a god-damned abortion and go back home like nothing happened. An adult wouldn’t manipulate their way into marriage. An adult wouldn’t pretend like we didn’t just go through this whole damn mess of buying a house and planning a wedding just to say we did it.” He looked at me now, his eyes ice blue and welling, red-rimmed. “If you’re going to go, just do it. I’ll be here when you’re done.”

I couldn’t look at him any longer. I didn’t want to. Quick as I could, I got out of his car and shut the door behind me. As I walked towards the clinic the protestors broke their silence. The whole group of them yelled and shouted as I walked towards them. “Miss, did you know your baby can already feel pain?” One woman waved a sign at me with a picture of a

fetus floating in an animated womb. Another shouted, “If you don’t want your baby we’ll take her!” and yet another “This is a sin that God could never forgive. You still have time!”

I pushed past them, grazing against a woman who had glasses much like Sister Clarisse. I hadn’t seen Sister Clarisse in months. I quit the job at the nunnery when I started modeling more often. The woman’s wire glasses made me sad. I wondered what the Sister would say if she was here, probably something tough and smart. I pushed past the small crowd anyway avoiding all further eye contact. Inside it was silent. There was a second door with a buzzer.

“Name?” A monotone voice came over a loudspeaker. I pressed a button near the door and gave the woman my name. She buzzed me into the waiting room and handed me a packet of papers, waving me to sit with three other women in thinly padded rubber-like chairs, the kind that clean up real easy when you spill on them. Most had a tear or two in them exposing yellow-white cotton lining beneath. I quickly filled out the paperwork and took it back up to the counter. “Take a seat and we’ll call you back for counseling in just a moment.”

“Counseling?”

“Mandatory counseling before all procedures, ma’am. Take a seat.”

I listened and sat, tucking loose bits of hair behind my ears. The metal chairs and their blue plastic cushions didn’t seem to match anything. There were a few prints of paintings hanging on the wall in cheap plastic frames with no glass covering. The carpet was gray but it was clean.

A woman at least eight months pregnant sat across from me in the small, square waiting room. A man sat beside her, rubbing her belly and resting his hand on her leg. She was

swollen everywhere you could see, her cheeks and ankles round and pink even though you could see she used to be skinny from the size of her shoulders. She was pretty, but looked so tired that you could forget it. The man and her whispered quietly back and forth, laughing and kidding each other. I wondered if the mob of sign-waving people outside realized the clinic took care of more than just those of us that wanted abortions. I was hopeful for the front-heavy woman as she waddled through the swing door with her husband when her name was called.

Another woman sat in the corner. She looked younger than me, but her face was pressed with lines and her hair strung out dark at the roots and bright blonde everywhere else, so I could've be wrong. I figured she was here for the same reason I was. I ran my fingers just under my eyes, clearing any makeup that could have run in the car. I wondered if Shaun would really still be there when this was all over with.

A nurse in light blue scrubs called my name. Her top had pretty light pink flowers on it that reminded me of our laminate floors. She led me back to an examination room, taking my height and weight. She was sweet, asking me questions about school and what I did for fun. She asked when my last period was and if I'd taken any tests at home, but she never mentioned the thing growing in me. I was grateful for that. My hands began to shake. I clasped them tight together to try to hide it. The nice nurse lady left me in a room with a table and big box computer with two chairs, one sat so that a small wall obstructed the view of the screen. She had handed me a gown that looked like the kind you get at the hospital and told me to undress and tie it in the front.

Then, for a moment, I was alone. The small room had three walls covered in posters of labeled parts, like the kind we saw in health class in middle school, except now the women in the pictures were pregnant, smiling down on their big, transparent bellies. Instead of having the ovaries labeled there was a watermelon sized fetus pictured, smiling, thumb in its mouth like it was having a good dream or something. The poster made me uneasy, so I looked back to the ground. There wasn't any carpet back there. After dressing in the gown I sat up on the edge of a table like a sick kid waiting for the doctor, except this table didn't have a step stool. Instead, there was a stirrup like thing on each side. I didn't want to look at those either.

There was a soft knock on the door before it opened again. This time a soft middle-aged woman walked in. She had light skin and dark hair, purple glasses with thick rims sat at the top of her narrow nose. "Robin? How are you doing today?"

I shrugged. She seemed rather cheery despite the circumstance. I wondered if she was pretending.

"All right, sweetie. If I could have you lay back on that table there, we're just going to do a quick ultrasound to make sure that you are pregnant and that everything is in all the right places, all right?" She stood beside me, rubbing a wand with a clear jelly. "Now, you don't have to look at the screen. I won't say anything if that makes it all easier. I have to ask, though. Do you want to see the screen in any case? Whether everything's healthy, there's multiples, or something is not the way it's meant to be?"

My heart was racing now, my hands still clasped tight together. "No." I hoped she couldn't see how nervous I was. "No, thank you."

The goo wasn't too cold against my skin. The woman had tilted the screen away from me but I wanted to make sure I couldn't see it so I just squeezed my eyes shut. Shaun should be here.

It was only a few minutes before the woman wiped my stomach clean and told me I could sit back up. She told me to wrap up and sit in the chair blocked from the view of the screen. Slowly, I made my way there, covering as much skin as I could with my gown.

“So it is positive. You are pregnant. The next step here is basically like an interview. Have you ever had an interview, dear?”

I nodded. My throat was dry. I tried to clear it.

“Very good!” The woman smiled at me. She didn't have much a reason to be so nice to me, but I was really happy she wasn't as cold as the secretary. “Okay, sweetie. I need you to tell me why you are choosing to have an abortion. I'm very sorry, but the state requires we ask these things.”

I cleared my throat again. “I just don't think we're ready. I mean, I don't make too much money and I'm still in school and Shaun, oh Shaun.” I thought about him in the car, hiding from the protesters. He couldn't come in with me, or he wouldn't? Would he be there when I got out?

“That's well enough, good. We can move on.” The woman tapped her fingers against the keyboard. “Are you being bribed, forced, pressured, or coerced into getting an abortion by anyone?”

“No. I mean, no one would be happy either way. But no one told me to be here.” In fact, my fiancé doesn’t want me here and my best friend was upset and I’m damn near sure my parents would disown me.

“So you are here of your own free will?”

“Yes.”

“All right, dear. That’s it, the big scary interview. Now, I’m going to let you know that you can back out at any moment before the procedure is started. The doctor will warn you before he reaches the point that there’s no turn around. You will be numbed, so there shouldn’t be any pain, but you may feel some discomfort. We’ll be sending you home with some ibuprofen and male contraceptive. We suggest to abstain from intercourse for at least six weeks. Do you have any questions?”

I shook my head no, the room getting a little fuzzy around me. My hands were still shaking, but now they were clammy too. The woman left, clicking the door shut behind her. Within moments a doctor and two nurses came into the room. They told me to lay back down on the table and put my feet into the stirrups. The older male doctor was explaining how things would go, but I couldn’t really hear him. Everything was muffled and I couldn’t breathe, shimmery purple sharks dancing in the corners of the room. Shaun should be here. Would he be there when I got out? The doctor motioned, saying something about numbing, he put his leg on my inner thigh, his calm toned voice did nothing to level my head. If Shaun was there when I got out, would he really be here for us? Would there be an us with no baby? Could I live with myself knowing I’d given up our relationship? Our chance? Our home.

“Are you ready?” The doctor looked at me.

I nodded my head yes and squeezed my eyes shut for a moment. Purple sparks filled my vision. “No! No, wait. Just please wait, just a minute, please.” The doctor listened, stepping back. I swung my legs down and cradled my head in my hands. I couldn’t help it anymore, I sobbed, black stains falling from my eyes into my palms. “I change my mind. I change my mind! Oh my god, am I too late? I change my mind.”

The next few minutes blurred. The doctor and his colleagues left the room and the first nice nurse came into the room. She told me it wasn’t too late. Everything would be okay. She helped me get dressed, and I let her. She wiped my face clean and smiled at me, handing me a brown paper bag full of pamphlets and prenatal vitamins and gave me a date that I should come in for another well-check appointment. She told me I could go home. Home.

I rushed out of the clinic. The protesters met me with different phrases this time. “Killer!” one woman shouted, another simply asked, “How does it feel knowing you’re damned to hell?” I didn’t care. They were wrong. Shaun was wrong, too. It wasn’t wrong to be here, and it wouldn’t have been wrong to get an abortion. They didn’t know a thing and they sure as hell didn’t know I was running out of there fetus intact.

When I got to the car Shaun was there, flipping through a book. I climbed in the passenger seat and looked at him, but he wouldn’t look back at me. He through the book in the back seat and started the car.

“I kept it.”

He looked at me, eyebrows furrowed. “What?”

“I couldn’t do it. I’m pregnant. We’re pregnant.”

Shaun kissed me hard, hand running through my hair. “Really? No joke?” I nodded, he hugged me tight, nearly pulling me into his seat, a grin across his face. “We’re going to do it right this time.” He kissed me again. “Let’s go home.”

Six days after the appointment I stripped the old red and white striped wallpaper from the living room wall. Shaun told me not to worry about it, that he’d do it when he got home from work. He wasn’t working late nights anymore, but picked up a Saturday shift. He was supposed to be home around noon and I wanted to surprise him. We’d had a lot of fun lately, talking about the changes we wanted to make in the house. He’d even brought home left-over baseboards from his dad’s last project to put in the kitchen.

The living room looked cleaner, the ugly paper pulled a few strips off the wall at a time, even though it left a fuzzy tan residue behind. I thought about asking my mom to come help, but she still wasn’t talking with me much. I hadn’t even told her I was pregnant yet, and the waiting was killing me. Almost all the paper was stripped when Shaun pulled in.

“Hey, baby.” He came in the back door with his work blazer carried in the crook of his arm. “I thought I told you I’d do that.” His button down was a teal blue, and one of my favorites. He started to unbutton it, grinning. “But we both know you don’t listen too well.” He tossed his button down in the dirty clothes hamper, hanging his blazer with the other jackets.

I was in shorts and a sports bra and still hot. The air was too expensive to run this time of year. I wiped my brow on the back of my arm. "I'm about done, now. That don't mean you can't come help me hang the new paper."

The metal of Shaun's belt clinked as he undid it. He went to the bedroom and came back out in his boxers. "All right, then! Let's do this."

"Hey!" I rushed, pulling him to the ground. "The blinds are open! What do you think the neighbors would think?"

"I think," Shaun hugged me tight against him, "they see a happy couple laying some new wallpaper. Plus, who wouldn't want to look at all this glory?" He held his arms out and did something like a shimmy. I laughed and he kissed me. "Let's put on that new paper."

We spent all afternoon listening to the radio and laying the new paper strip by strip. I spread the plaster-like glue and he pressed the paper where it needed to be, right up against the corners, edge to edge with the strip before. We went through together, sliding all the bubbles and wrinkles out with old, flat pieces of scrap baseboard.

It was nearly time for dinner when we were done. We collapsed on the floor tangled in each other. We admired the job we did. A pretty, plain lilac color, the paper had a slightly off-tone polka dot pattern so subtle you could hardly see it. Smearred in plaster and paper scraps, I was content. We were working to make our house a home, one that we could grow and love in.

Content continues with Chapters 4-10. See appendix.

Maddie

Maddie Synopsis

This will be the third section told in the point of view of a girl named Maddie. Maddie is Robin's daughter. This section will be written in a slightly different style, with its own unique voice. In comparison, this voice is similar to Esther in its interiority, but has different focuses. Maddie likes to think about things metaphorically and in more complex terms and has done so since she was a child. She's been told her whole life to keep emotions inside and not talk about certain things, especially those that need talking about. Esther instilled this idea into Robin, to be self-reliant and tough and not rely on communication. Robin followed this familial trend, adding in the complication of judgement by others.

Maddie begins her journey-of-self with believing what those before her have said, and in turn, doesn't believe she can or should verbally communicate. Instead, she decides to begin writing. She writes stories and journals about the complex ideas and feelings she experiences. She focuses a lot on nature, humanity, implications, and the meaning of things, though she seems to believe that there is no divine meaning. She grows as a person and a writer, realizing that speaking about issues and sharing experiences can be far more empowering and important than feigning strength and bearing life alone.

The rough outline for the Chapters 1-10 can be found in the appendix.

Appendix:

The following is a rough outline for the future content of the manuscript in completion.

Esther:

Chapter 5

- The family is back on the way home to the Midwest. This time they travel like a “normal” family, having traded in all they had for an RV.
- Esther reflects on their final few months in Tacoma, selling body puppets at Puget Sound every weekend
- Internal dialogue on why they are going home- Esther’s mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer and her father can’t take care of her alone. He needs help.
- Richard got hurt again doing side work with a car mechanic a few blocks down and wouldn’t be able to make or sell body puppets with Esther going home to take care of her mother. Richard now can’t stand the thought of being away from Esther for an extended period ever again.
- Esther fondly remembers leaving for the grocery store while Richard watched the kids when Robin was still in diapers. She returned home to find him attempting to change a diaper with two pails of water, a towel, and scrubbing brush, panicked. Esther realizes he wouldn’t be able to handle the kids full time without her, even for a few weeks.
- The family only has to stop overnight once this time. Esther remembers this stop from the bus trip. They no longer have a sprinkler system.

- o While at this stop, Esther and Richard get into a discussion about how they will make it, and whether or not they will be able to find work when they get home. Richard results to returning to the police force, and the family will live between the RV and Esther's Mother's house until they can find a place of their own.
- On the trip home Esther takes the material that she bought for Body Puppets and hand crochets it into rugs instead, thinking about the next place they will call home.

Chapter 6

- Years later, opening with Esther recounting the days she took care of her dying mother, and how the conversations with her father were harder.
 - o Esther's mother was ready for death, peaceful once Esther came home. Ma could be odd and had a mind of a different class before death, but the closer it grew the longer she hugged her grandkids.
 - o Esther's father falls apart, convincing Esther that her mother was the strongest all along. Esther's father passes a few years later, suddenly.
- Richard is now in the run for county Sheriff, and is pretty stressed out. Though he is not a mean man any longer, he is very controlling on Esther's whereabouts, Esther excuses it as protectiveness.
- Rob is now graduated High School, taking after his dad, he is a deputy in the next county over. Mary is away at some sort of non-traditional college, she's picked up

an interest in holistic healing. Both come home for the weekends and camp out in the living room

- o Home is a small, but comfortable two bedroom house right on the Mississippi River, just twenty miles away from where they both grew up- far enough for Esther to feel safe from the memory of Mark
- Esther volunteers through a church that doesn't completely meet her beliefs, but she feels that they have good intentions and wants to work towards their efforts. Extra time and money is put towards these efforts, and Robin gets bitter about it.
- Jessie is pregnant, Robin is a 'hormonal' teenager, still "fire and ice" as described by Esther
- o Jessie's baby is born with a hole in the heart. Esther thinks this is because of Jessie's baby's father, a travelling construction worker who was never really a nice man. Jessie has bad taste in men.
- o Esther talks to Jessie, urging her to be strong and pull through for her baby. Reflects back to her life with Mark and the constant control of men. She thinks that maybe this baby will be okay, vows to take care of her daughter and first born granddaughter if it kills her.
- Richard is elected county sheriff

Chapter 7

- A year later, Esther thinks about her friend Miss Mary and wishes she could find another woman similar to her. She has friends now, but not anyone she can really

talk to. She's hopeful about a cousin she grew up with who plans on moving back to the state. She still writes to Miss Mary once a month, mostly about Jessie and Robin and Jessie's baby.

- Robin has now been modeling for about a year, it might be good for her, Esther's on the fence. But she doesn't like her boyfriend, Shaun. He isn't physically abusive like Mark, but has the same look on his face when Robin asks him where he's been after he's late to a family dinner. Esther knows.
- Esther has been working part time at a local candy shop. She loves making things and seeing the tourists happy with the treats she's made from scratch.
- Esther is promised a job as an EMT if she can pass a course. This causes more internal dialogue on her experience with livestock, her own children, and Jessie's baby, which she had to resuscitate once herself.
 - Decides to go for it, dedicates herself to studying and training. Richard doesn't think she can do it. Jokes about how it's a "man's" job. This is what causes the extra push for Esther, knowing she's done every bit of man's job there is to do.
- Esther studies hard, struggles to let the girls fend more for themselves as she's busy more often.
- Esther passes the test and starts a new chapter in her life.

Chapter 8

- Now about 10 years later

- Esther now works full time at a Candy Shop, making and selling homemade fudge and candies. She often makes extra orders for the store's busy season at home, though she isn't expected to. She never really likes to sit still, and the grandkids like helping.
- Esther quit her EMT job. She felt she was getting too old. She had stayed with the job through her own breast cancer treatment. She had to have a mastectomy but she doesn't really want to talk about that.
 - She still has nightmares about some of the scenes she was called to.
These are the same scenes Richard would show up to usually after her team had arrived. They shared the experiences, but they never talked about them.
- Richard and Esther are much happier since she's quit the job. He checks on her throughout the day and always knows where she is. Esther gets annoyed with this sometimes, but isn't bothered enough to argue.
- Jessie's daughter, Lauren now lives with Esther. Jessie has three more kids and has been married and divorced three times. Lauren was beaten by both of Jessie's husbands and treated like a nanny and maid while the adults worked. Esther stepped in and told Jessie that if she couldn't treat her oldest daughter (still only 10) with care, then she would take her. Jessie decides she can't handle that. (This will be a scene).
- Robin has since been married and divorced, much like Esther predicted. She now had two daughters, Maddie, who was Shaun's biological daughter, and Kayla who

is David's. Both of Robin's girls come to Esther's house every weekend and after school on weekdays until Robin got off of work.

- o Esther likes the way that Lauren and Maddie get along, but gets nervous about the violent relationship between Maddie and Kayla. She sees a lot of dynamics that were there with Jessie and Robin.
- Rob and Mary have both been married for 8 or so years and have kids. Mary moved to Missouri, so they don't come home much. Rob tried to visit from the next county over, but didn't make it more than once a month or so. They have their problems, but seem all right. Jay has moved back home, bringing a wife and kids with him. Jay and his family visit every Sunday.
- Richard still smokes heavily, developing a thick cough. His age has come with a round stomach, but his body was still strong and his hair never grayed, still a thick, shiny black. He's got a softness towards the grandkids that he didn't have towards his own children.
 - o Scene of Richard playing with the young kids, rolling in the grass and undressing every toddler and baby that looked uncomfortable or scratchy in poofy dresses. He insisted they should run and play and be comfortable, babies don't have no sense being dolled up if they can't roll and crawl and eat some dirt.

- Esther seems to work the opposite way, and feels guilty about it. She would rather hand a baby off to someone else and take them back once they were three or four.

Chapter 9

- Another 2 years later. Esther still works at the Candy Shop, living in the same house.
- Richard is diagnosed with COPD and is told he won't have much time if he doesn't stop smoking. If he stops, it could extend his life another 10 years. Richard tries to stop, but gives up quickly.
 - (scene) Esther catches Richard smoking in the bathroom, three days after he's 'quit' for the second time. He's pulled back the curtains, hiding half his body behind them, blowing smoke through the window screen. Esther is ticked. She snaps at him, scolding him for hiding his smoking and stinking up the bathroom curtains she'd made herself. She makes him put out the cigarette in the sink. She talks calmly then, but stern. She reminds him of his children and grandchildren, the repercussions of not giving up the damn smokes. When she's done she tells him to clean up the mess he's made in the sink and leaves, struggling to hold back her own emotions, she washes dishes loudly to seem like she's more angry than upset.
- (Scene) Robin rushes through the door, kids in tow. Her husband is drunk and angry again, Robin claims she doesn't know why. David isn't far behind them, driving

like a madman in his loud old pickup. The kids are terrified. Richard rips his truck through the yard, tearing up the grass and flower bed. Esther is afraid he's ruined her vegetable garden, too, but it's too dark to tell. Richard gets up from the table and goes out, confronting David until he stops his truck and gets out, where there is a yelling match. Finally, Richard physically subdues David and threatens to take him in for assaulting the Sheriff and property damage. They try to talk like adults, but voices raise. Maddie and Kayla curl together like Robin used to. David screams at Robin, saying that she's killing him. He repeats, "I'm dying!" several times throughout. Richard, who hasn't told anyone but Esther about the COPD is visibly stricken by those words.

- Richard ends up taking David home, the girls all camping out in the living room. Esther wakes up before everyone else, slipping out the door and heading to church before anyone wakes. Instead of working downstairs in the kitchen through service to prepare the post-service lunch, Esther sits in the very back pew. Here she doesn't really listen to the words of the man at the front of the congregation, but she enjoys the light white light the windows let in, and the content air. She resolves to push through Richard's illness and support him in whichever decisions he made, even if he was going to smoke himself to death. All she could do was keep herself and her kids safe. She decides to skip the luncheon all together, and resolves to go home. It's time to tell the family about Richard.

- Richard has survived 10 years with COPD, but has gone so far downhill that he is bedridden. Esther has been at his side for 6 of those years, growing increasingly more needy. She hasn't been allowed to leave the house further than the baby monitor she has for him will reach. When she isn't rubbing his shoulders, making him meals, or cleaning his bedpan, she's in the garden or in the kitchen or crocheting another baby blanket for new grandkids, and now a few great-grandkids.
- Esther has started to resent Richard, dying to walk to the gas station down the street or drive to the grocery store just a few blocks away. Richard won't let her. He's terrified that he'll die if she leaves. We hear a bit of dialogue between Richard and Esther, he asks her if she thinks he'll go to heaven. When answers by rubbing his shoulders and wiping his face with a rag he cries that he doesn't want to go without her. Esther lets herself cry in front of her husband for the first time since her mother died. She doesn't want him to die either, but she can't keep living like this
- The day Richard dies is cool and pleasant, early spring, just after the snow has melted. Things had gotten so tough for Esther that Esther and her kids had taken Richard to a nursing home. Esther hadn't slept in days, Richard keeping her up day and night. He didn't know who anyone was and kept telling stories about his military experience and time on the ranch when he can catch his breath well enough. Esther spent all day at the nursing home with him, only leaving when the nurses told her to go get some rest. She stayed with Jay since his house was closest. On the second night at the nursing home, Richard passed away, alone at 5am, an hour before Esther showed

up with a pan of fresh baked cinnamon rolls. She leaves the rolls with the nurses who cared for Richard and thanked them again and again. Kissing Richard's forehead one last time, she goes home where the rest of the family meets her a few hours later after they had gone to the nursing home themselves. Esther couldn't bare to call them herself.

- Healing and a little lost, Esther lives by herself for the first time in her life. She keeps many of Richard's important belongings, but donates what she doesn't need and what the kids didn't want. She misses him dearly and thinks a lot about their first years together. She spends a lot of time with the TV or radio on in the background, but mostly focuses herself on mending and making, baking for others, and going about whenever she can. She's rescued a dog with kind eyes and frisky heart. She vows to live until the day she turns 100, and not a day longer. She wants to keep her mind. Her and her daughters have booked a ticket on a cruise out of the country in the summer. She promises she'll make it to Europe within the year, just to see it. Travelling to watch her grandkids graduating college and having children, she feels fulfilled in the family she's built, though they all had their struggles becoming what they are. She's content.

Robin

Chapter 4

- Robin's baby, Maddie, is two months old. Robin is struggling to imagine herself as a good mother. She doesn't like to get up in the night to care for Maddie. She's bitter about her "ruined" body, even though she's almost back to her original size. She follows all the necessary steps to fulfill motherhood, but she doesn't have the instant love of motherhood that she feels like she's supposed to have.
- Shaun does really well with Maddie, but doesn't have a whole lot to do with Robin anymore. Robin excuses this as adjusting to the baby, until Shaun kicks Robin out.
 - Scene: Robin comes home in the evening after a shift at the local grocery store. Shaun is sitting on the couch, Maddie asleep in her bassinet in the bedroom. Shaun simply states this isn't working and he wants Robin out the next day. Robin, who has ignored and excused all of the relationship problems before this is dumbstruck. She argues and demands to know why. Shaun says he just doesn't love her anymore, and hasn't in months. He says he thought having a baby together would change that, but it's not. Robin doesn't argue any further, she sits on the couch and cries. Shaun leaves, reminding Robin to feed Maddie throughout the night since he's not coming back. He tells her to be out by 3pm the next day.

- Robin's parents are visiting friends in Wisconsin, so Robin and Becky move her necessities back into her parent's house. Robin chooses to leave most of her things at the house she and Shaun bought. She argues with Becky that he just needs some time to think and they'll be back soon. Becky cautions Robin about Nick's claims that Shaun's cheating.
- Robin doesn't believe the allegations until she drops Maddie off a few days later so Shaun can watch her while she works, and she sees the girlfriends' truck parked behind the house. She painfully ignores this, until the third night when Shaun won't even let her past the porch to pick Maddie back up. Robin gets angry and lets her emotions out through yelling and arguing with Shaun, who doesn't argue back. She realizes it's unlikely that Shaun got a new girlfriend in a matter of days and has a passionate, desperate one way fight with Shaun before ultimately leaving.
- Three days later the divorce papers are served. Robin tries to talk Shaun into couples therapy. She's done being angry, and on to being hurt. She can't believe she couldn't see it. Shaun refuses and insists on shared custody. He wants to keep the house, but gives her both cars and says she can take everything in the house, except the crib his father made for Maddie.
- After a short court battle, everything is settled just how Shaun wanted. Maddie, now 9 months old spends days with Robin or her family while Robin takes her GED classes, and evening with Shaun while Robin works, traditional every other weekend agreement.

- The chapter ends with Robin leaving Maddie with Esther while she goes on a week trip to Florida with a late-middle aged man as a full-paid guest. The man always takes a young, pretty girl on his business trips, and it's platonic with the agreement the Robin models for a few photoshoots for him and attends the required dinners. Robin writes a letter to Maddie in case she never comes back.

Chapter 5

- Maddie is now almost 2. Robin now has her GED and is saving up to go to the local community college. She's still working at the grocery store in the afternoons and evenings, but sends Maddie to daycare during the morning when she works at the candy shop with her mom.
- She's been dating a few different men. They all have a suave, very handsome. The Wonderbread man from the grocery store has taken her out a few times, but he's a bit younger than she is, and she's not sure he'd be ready to raise a kid together. Robin loves her time out and alone, but loves her daughter dearly and lets all the men she's dated know that they are a package deal. There's one man who stands out to her, and is the ultimate reason she has stopped dating the others.
 - David. This man is hard working. He works with his hands as a mechanic and farmer, reminding her a lot of her own father. He is quiet and caring, though he likes to drink and can have a quick temper. They've been on quite a few dates alone, but he prefers to do things that Maddie can come

along with, even if that means spending time at Robin's family's house.

He's asked Robin and Maddie to move into his apartment, and she's seriously considering.

- Robin starts to miss Maddie after long days away and thinks back to the Ranch, where her parents would leave her all day long. She remembers her imaginary friends and how important her doll was to her. She thinks back to the things that she used to do during the day, and how her mom didn't know the way she'd cry in the barns when she missed her. She remembers waiting at the gate for an hour everyday, searching for her family coming in on horseback in the distance, and how she'd scramble up Bruce to give her mother a hug.
- Robin makes the rash decision to quit her grocery job and stay home with Maddie during the day. She buys a doll from the store on her way out.

Chapter 6

- David proposed to Robin, kind of. They're engaged now. He took her to their favorite restaurant. All of the tables are taken, so they have to sit at the bar. David was nervous and sweating, not talking much at all. Robin was afraid he was going to dump her. David takes Robin's left hand and slips a beautiful, but simple ring on her finger without a word. Robin says yes, disappointed for a second, thinking back about her first engagement and wondering if she'd ever get a real proposal. Realizing that at least she's been given a ring this time, she says yes.

- David and Robin buy a house together, in a small town twenty miles away where it's 'safer' to raise kids and the house prices are much lower. The previous owner was an elderly couple who went to an old folks home, so the family agreed to leave most of the furniture and an above ground pool in the backyard. Robin is ecstatic that Maddie has her own room and there is room to run and play. The first thing Robin does in the new house is rip out all the wallpaper and cover the wall in light-colored paint. Wallpaper is too old-fashioned anyway.
- Instead of going to the community college, Robin has picked up a job a block away from their new house, doing secretarial work at the big Corn Elevator that all the local farmers sold their corn at. She still goes to town early in the morning to help make fudge at the Candy Shop and drop Maddie off at Daycare, coming back to her new job at 9am, and picking Maddie up by 3pm. She's working hard, but happy.
- David leaves at the same time as Robin in the morning, coming home at 6pm when the season is slow, and other times staying out in the farmer's fields overnight during harvest, sleeping a few hours now and again before plowing some more.
- Robin finds out she's pregnant when Maddie is three and a half. She's excited this time, and even more excited when David is ecstatic about it.
- Becky is still Robin's best friend. They get together a couple times a month. When Robin tells Becky about the new pregnancy, Becky gets very excited and tells Robin she's pregnant too. They make plans to raise their kids as best friends.

- Closing scene: Robin, David, and Maddie go to Robin's parents house for family dinner. They are having a great time, Maddie and Lauren behave like best friends, even at a young age. Richard comes home from work late, walking in sat and angry. He tosses his sheriff's hat on the table and rubs his eyes. Robin recognizes the look on his face from that day years ago when she was 14. Something is wrong. Richard tells Robin he just responded to an accident and she needs to head to the hospital. Some of her friends were in a serious accident. Nick, Becky, Shaun, and two other people Robin graduated with were driving through the country and didn't stop to cross some old tracks that didn't have cross arms. The car was nicked by a train, not crushing it, but sending it rolling into a wooded area. Shaun, Becky, and one of the other boys are in the hospital. Nick and the other girl didn't make it. Robin rushes alone to the hospital, terrified, in shock, and thinking about a certain dead calf.

Chapter 7

- Robin's second baby is born, healthy and fat. David is great at helping out at night, and his love is obvious for both the girls. Shaun moved to Florida after the accident, giving up all rights to Maddie. Maddie calls David Daddy, not knowing any difference.
- Robin is shocked when she returns from her 6 week unpaid maternity leave and she's been replaced. Her old boss apologizes, but argues that he can't be going and firing people who show up to work and decide not to have kids. He likes Robin a lot, and promises her a job as a financial advisor if she goes and gets herself a 'numbers'

degree. Robin is bitter, taking a package of printer paper and a cup of company pens on her way out.

- After a few weeks of job hunting and not finding anything that would pay well enough to cover daycare, let alone anything else, Robin talks to David about getting that degree. He agrees, but he's tired. He's been pulling double shifts and picking up any extra work he can to pay the bills and buy formula. Robin's still working at the candy shop before they open. The owner lets Maddie and Kayla stay in the office area, as long as the shop is closed and there's no one else there. The family is struggling to stay afloat.

- Robin starts night classes. She's surrounded by high school kids and women in their thirties, no one her age there. She befriends a two women in their thirties, both mothers. They are the first friends she's had that also have kids. Becky miscarried after the accident.

- After the first 6 months of class, Robin's learned enough to be certified as a financial assistant, and finds a in-home job she can do, double checking numbers for a local tax advisor. She continues her education to get the full degree.

Chapter 8

- Robin has a job, and David is working all the time. David has become bitter and angry about always working, but knows it's necessary. He's started drinking every night and gets mean after the first few drinks. He never hits her or the kids, but he likes to flip tables and throw things.

- Robin has met more people through work and school, and likes to have her friends over and go to their places. She's worried about money. They are paying for necessities, but David has a way of spending money beyond their means. He bought a boat on credit, saying he needed something for himself. Despite David's growing flaws, Robin knows that he loves her and the girls very much. She's not so sure she loves him back anymore, but decides to stay because of everything he's given and pretends everything is alright. Fake it till you make it, right?
- Robin buys a horse at an auction to get back at David for buying a camper, on credit. She knows it's silly, but misses horses dearly. She finds a nice 6 year old gelding named Gabe, and talks David into fencing in most of the back yard. She teaches Maddie to ride on the weekends and after work, filling her head with big dreams about riding in the rodeo someday.
- At first, David is mad about the horse. He flips the table, breaking Robin's favorite figurine, storming out of the house and disappearing for the night. He comes home the next day and helps with the fencing, but doesn't apologize. He never does. Robin wants to talk, desperately, but David refuses. Robin had a computer put in her office in the house for her tax work, getting internet in her home for the first time. She has been chatting online with a few different men, but it's all innocent in her mind. She just wants a connection with someone, she validates her innocence to herself by only choosing men from far away and never meeting anyone in person.

- David comes home exhausted and late one night. He's been working all day and overnight plowing fields and hasn't seen the girls in three days. Robin is surprised when he wants to talk. David was talking to an old friend who was visiting the farm he was working on. He was bragging about working on the railroad. Great money, and though it meant being on call and several days away from home, it also meant several days home after each trip. The salary was twice what David was making now. David was hopeful and wanted to go. They would have to move four hours away, which wasn't far, he argued. They could get a new house in a bigger town with a better school. Reluctantly, Robin agrees. She hopes this will be a new start and a chance for them to fix all the problems that haven't even been talked about. It only takes a few weeks to sell the boat, camper, horse, and house, and they are on their way.
- A few days after moving, Robin finds out Esther has been diagnosed with cancer. She wants to move home and regrets the move, feeling like her whole life has been led by bad things and wrong turns.

Chapter 9

- They'd been living in the new town for a year, finally finding a house within their budget after living in a tiny apartment. Robin got a as a secretary, working while the kids were in school.
- She hoped this move would make things better, but it didn't. She was planning on telling David she wanted a divorce after he returned from his next trip. Unlike the railroad promised, David was only home 6-8 days a month, and was always on call, so

they couldn't get out and do much. He had a cell phone for work and called a lot when he was on trips. He was desperately working to find another job that paid enough and let him be home more often. Though he had years of experience, he wasn't educated, and in bigger towns like this you needed a degree for anything that paid.

- Robin had started seeing another man. She was eaten up with guilt about it, but convinced herself she was doing David a favor by staying with him and breaking it slowly rather than divorcing him shortly after the move. She felt bad about the kids, and thinks back to her own dad and the jokes that he had kids on every continent after his time in the navy. Maddie had been confused, but all right when she found out that Shaun was really her dad when she was 8.

- David came home early from his trip. This surprised Robin when she came home from the grocery store and David was reading a card in a bouquet of flowers that Robin had forget to remove from the counter. David is mad, demanding who the unsigned card was from that read "much love, until next time" the only signature a heart. Robin excuses it as from her mother, but David isn't so sure. When Robin wakes up the next morning she sees David is going through her phone. He knows.

- There is a violent breakout, Robin breaking two fingers and a toe in the scramble for her phone. Somehow she get David locked out, barefoot, in the snow. He takes both cell phones, her car, ad the keys to his truck. Robin makes Maddie run through the snow in her pajamas to the neighbor's house to call the police. David is found house later and arrested for domestic violence.

- Angry and lost, David loses everything in court and moves home 4 hours. He's been ordered to stay away from the girls for 90 days, due to his threats and harassment.

Chapter 10

- Three years later, Robin and her boyfriend are now married. Robin has moved up the line at the business she started as a secretary at. They say she's on fast track to the top.
- Kayla is bitter about everything.
- Maddie is upset about the rules that the new husband brought into the house with him.
- To help clear her conscience, Robin has turned back to religion and finds a light and peace in it that she's never had before. She's tries to fix things in her life with rules and religion. Maddie is a very distant and quiet kid, never fitting in with the people at her school, she spends most of her time in the woods near the house, writing or drawing in her room, or blaring music loud enough to shake the house. When Maddie won't talk, Robin makes her sit on the couch with them until she does speak, sometimes making hours of staring at the floor.
- The family is together, and functioning, which feels like enough to Robin, as long as she's got everything in control. She's started to really believe that she's smart and beautiful, and in control. She feels like she can conquer anything with her husband and God at her side.

Maddie:

Chapter 1:

- Maddie is young, about 6 years old. Her little sister is 2. Maddie lives in a small town house with Robin and David and spends quite a bit of time alone. Her only real friend is a pet bunny named Tweety Bird. They do everything together, and even share a bed at night.
- David comes home angry one night, deciding that the rabbit is too stinky to stay inside anymore and makes Maddie move the cage outside. Grudgingly, she does so.
- A few days later Maddie rushes out to get the bunny like she does every morning, but is stopped by her parents who seem to be acting weird. They won't even let her look out the window. While Maddie tries to eat her pancakes quickly to go get Tweety Bird David goes outside. Robin makes Maddie wait until he comes back in.
- When Maddie finally rushes outside, there is no Tweety Bird in his cage, which has been left wide open. Maddie comes inside distraught, where David tells her she should have taken care of the bunny better and locked the cage tighter. Robin hushes David and tries to comfort Maddie, promising to look around the block with her after her little sister finishes eating.
- Maddie walks around the block looking for Tweety Bird, but knows the truth. David had forgotten to pick up a little bloody white paw sitting near the porch. The neighborhood menace dog has claimed another family pet.

- Once they get home, Maddie is sad and distraught. Already a quiet, tender hearted child, she's lost without Tweety. Robin tells Maddie to be hopeful, Tweety probably just ran away with his wild bunny girlfriend.
- David gets angry and leaves, slamming the door behind him. Later in the afternoon he pulls back into the driveway and tells Maddie to grab a few things from the shed and come with him.
- They take the truck out to some farmland that David works every year. David has Maddie grab a spade and a shovel. David drops a heavy tarp to the ground, barely exposing dirty black nose of the out-of-control german shepard from down the street.
- Maddie doesn't say anything, but thinks a lot to herself about all the other things that might be buried out here. David doesn't make her help dig, but tells her to help shovel the girl on top of the dog beneath the black tarp.
- They finish their trip by picking some ripe apples in silence, dragging several big buckets back to the bed of the truck.

Chapter 2

- Maddie is now several years older and spends much of her day hiding in her closet or at the top of a tree on the edge of the property reading or writing. She has a few friends, but lives in a small town outside of where she goes to school, so she spends much of her time alone or with her little sister.
- Maddie is hiding in her closet, reading by a sliver of light coming through the door. David, who Maddie has recently found out isn't her 'real' dad steps in and asks

her to come out to the kitchen. On the table are a bunch of Kayla's coloring books.

David asks Maddie to sit at the table and color with him. She obliges.

- After awhile, David has an emotional breakdown in which he tells Maddie that he and Robin are getting a divorce. He holds Maddie tight and sobs, promising that he loves her more than the world. Unsure how to feel about emotion she's always been kept from, Maddie lets David hug and cry into her, not saying a word, wishing she could go back to the book in her closet.

- Robin and David don't get divorced, like planned. They seem to work through things and instead, decide to move four hours away, where they promise Maddie there is a good school and lots of money to be made, so Maddie could join dance or something again.

- It isn't but two or three weeks before they are on the road to their new home. Robin can sell anything, and fast. Two Uhauls, they head from their several acres of land to a two bedroom apartment, where they live while occasionally attending open houses.

- As school moves closer, Maddie is nervous. She dresses different than the other sparkly girls her age. She's made a friend in the same grade as her, a boy that lives in the same apartment complex. He says he's got a crush on her, but he's not very nice.

Hopeful and anxious, the summer comes to an end.

Chapter 3:

- Maddie doesn't fit in here. She's made a few friends, or at least people she can eat lunch with, but they are mean girls. The boy from Maddie's apartment decided on the first day of school that he didn't like her anymore. Maddie assumes this is because she's the new girl, and no one likes a new girl.
- She wears baggy sweatshirts and jeans. Doesn't feel comfortable dressing like the 'cool' girls, who wear low rise jeans and shirts that leave an inch or two of skin exposed on their bellies. They glitter their eyes and chests, especially the girls who have a bust. Maddie's mom won't even let her shave yet, since she's only 12, even though every girl Maddie knows has been shaving for years. When Maddie attempts to fit in by putting glitter on her eyelids. Robin makes her wash it off, telling her she looks like a whore.
- Things haven't been as great at home as promised. David is always gone, and Robin is always leaving Maddie at home to watch Kayla. Maddie has a feeling that something is wrong, but isn't sure.
- One morning, in the winter, Maddie is woken up by loud noises upstairs that sounds like wrestling. When she hears yelling and a slamming door she decides to go upstairs and check it out. Mom and Kayla are curled into a corner in the kitchen. When mom sees Maddie she says "Come here, and don't you dare look out that back door. Don't look." Maddie listens.

- Mom tells Maddie she has to go outside to check a cord near her bedroom window on the outside of the house. Mom needs to call the police, but the landline isn't working and David took the cell phones. Terrified, Maddie checks it. It's been broken completely, along with her bedroom window.
- Going back inside, Mom makes Maddie go to the neighbors house to use their phone. It's still pretty dark, the sun just starting to rise, and there is over a foot of snow on the ground. In her pajamas and slide house slippers, Maddie runs to the first house, scared that David is after her. She sees the neighbor through the window sitting on the couch reading a newspaper. When she rings the doorbell again, the neighbor peers past his paper, meets Maddie's eyes, and goes back to reading.
- Angry, shaking, and desperate, Maddie curses and runs to the next neighbors house, falling and gashing her leg open on the first neighbor's porch. She's somewhat satisfied that she's bled all over the fresh snow in his yard and hopes it ices over and freezes there for the rest of the winter.
- Thankfully, the next neighbor answers the door and lets her in. He's an older man. He asks her to sit down and gets her a cup of coffee and a rag for her knee, asking her to slow down and take a deep breath and talk to him. He calls the police for her, calmly relaying her story while Maddie breathes in the coffee steam.
- After bandaging her knee, the man drapes a coat over Maddie's shoulders and walk her home. She cradles the coffee mug in her hands, and the neighbor only returns home after the police have arrived.

Chapter 4

- The last two years have been rough. The bullying at school hasn't gotten any better, especially since David and Robin divorced. David lost his mind to begin with, and threatened to kill everyone. He would drive hours to do burnouts on the street in front of the school and Mom's work. Mom almost got fired. Mom's boyfriend moved in and brought his guns with when David started stalking the house at night and making threatening phone calls. Sometimes Maddie would get called to the office and be told there were officers outside the school after the final bell that would take her home, just in case.
- Of course, this didn't help at school. Maddie's one good friend got mad at her and told everyone in the locker room after gym "Maddie's own dad didn't want her. Neither did her stepdad. Why would we want to be her friend?"
- A group of five girls steal things out of her locker, take the papers she's turned in from the box during lunch and shreds them, makes up rumors (an especially popular one is that Maddie is a prostitute in her free time).
- To combat the loneliness and alienation, Maddie writes a lot. Poetry that her mother will never understand, stories that are laced with magic, some 40 pages in length.
- One particular story caught the attention of Maddie's Language Arts teacher. The story was about two young girls who were best friends and get abducted. Their abductor tortures them in the middle of the woods, and one girl gets away, but the

other is murdered. The man is caught, but it can't bring back the main character's best friend. The story ends with a poem written to the lost girl. After taking her turn to read this story aloud to the class, Maddie is sent to the school counselor.

- After meeting with the counselor, Maddie's mom gets called in and has to read the story. Robin argues that Maddie isn't disturbed. The counselor eventually agrees and talks to another teacher, skipping Maddie 2 grades in English and allowing her to take independent creative writing classes. The two hours a day Maddie is given in this classroom, writing whatever she wants, is what saves her sanity and sharpens her need to be a writer someday.

Chapter 5

- Now that Robin is married again, she's become strict. Maddie has now found her place in a group at school. The group is made up of a bunch of kids who didn't quite fit in any other group. This makes it diverse and interesting. But if Maddie wants to do anything she must call and ask her second stepdad first. She's only allowed to go if he's met the people she's going with, and she has exact times things will happen. Maddie gets annoyed, especially when she and her friends catch a ride to the mall and she has to borrow a cell phone just to ask if they can walk two blocks to get some food, then again to see if they can go back to the mall. Even worse, when Maddie is with her new friends, their favorite activity is walking around town, since there's nothing much to do in a small town, and Maddie must call Peter every time they walk to a new location.

- Maddie feels suffocated. Peter checks at the school to see if her bike is parked in the rack at the exact time she's said. One time she was grounded for two weeks because he claims the bike wasn't in the rack, when Maddie knew it was.
- Because Maddie saw how happy her mom was, she didn't complain and raise hell. Instead, Maddie journaled. Everything was in her journal, from struggles with body image, to feeling so numb emotionally that she turned to cutting herself. Maddie didn't think it was a big deal, she learned it from a friend. It kept her in control of her feelings, because when she got to the point of not being able to feel anything, mistakes would be made.
- One thing Maddie journals a lot about is the dissatisfaction she gets from being forced to practice a religion she doesn't believe. She feels fake having to attend church two days a week and study the bible with her family every night.
- Maddie comes home one day from school. Sitting on the counter is her journal, with a sticky note sitting on the top of it that reads "You don't have to be FAKE anymore!" signed in Peter's name. Maddie is livid, throwing the book across the room and screaming until she can't anymore. Kayla is terrified. Without permission, notes, or phone calls, Maddie takes her journal and speeds off on her bike to a creek that runs through town. She sits by the creek and watches as her journal floats away, taking all her secrets with it. She vows to play the game, follow the rules of the house, and not step on anymore toes, then she'll leave the day she turns 18 and move across the country, as far away as she can get from the town that treats her horribly, the

mother she loves who seems to have forgotten herself, and the stepfather who had his finger on every move she made.

Chapter 6:

- The beginning of Junior year High School, Maddie has begun her search for a college away from home. She's got her heart set on a writing degree in the south.
- Everyone warns her that she won't ever make any money writing. They tell her to use her brain for a more useful degree. She's defiant, and swears she'll be a writer someday despite what everyone tells her. She doesn't care if she never makes a dime. She writes stories that no one wants to hear, but someone needs to hear. She wants to change the way people think, and maybe help someone feel not so alone.
- Maddie has also picked up an appreciation for art, and likes to paint conceptual things.
- Maddie now has a boyfriend. He's a nice guy who's been through a lot. Not ideal from her parent's point of view, considering he'd dropped out of school after his dad died to take care of his mother, but that's why she didn't tell them.
- Maddie has stopped harming herself physically, not that anybody but Peter ever knew, and he never said anything about it. She found other things to make her feel. Mostly, this was liquor, cigarettes, and marijuana. Her parents didn't know about any of this either.
- As long as her grades are high, guaranteeing Maddie a way out, she does whatever she wants. But grades come first.

- Maddie leaves her boyfriend, after he tells her he loves her so much that he wants to move across the country with her. Maddie swears she won't be like her mother, and thinks the best way to do this is to leave whenever things start getting too serious. She knows she's broken a few hearts, and feels a little bad. She's noticed she usually leaves her boyfriends in the low weeks, where she feels numb. She wonders if it's just her body's self defense, or something completely wrong.
- Maddie says she only wants to get married once, and never divorced. She doesn't want any kids. She doesn't even like them.
- Shortly after her breakup, a new, insistent man named Will pops into her messenger. He's different than the slightly older boys she's dated before. He seems interested, and won't leave her alone even when she ignores him for weeks. At first she's annoyed, but then she gets curious. She agrees to a date when he visits home on his leave from military.
- Maddie doesn't commit herself to any relationship, staying open to other possibilities. She casually dates a girl who has been a good friend of hers through High School. Her friend understands Maddie's commitment to her future, and isn't hurt about the casualness of the relationship.
- Maddie's male partner writes her letters, an old fashioned effort that melts her heart. They also video chat several times a week. He is very adamant about being serious, and for the first time ever, Maddie feels open to commitment.

Chapter 7

- Senior year, Maddie has received news that she's earned a full tuition scholarship across the country. She opens the letter when Will is visiting over Christmas leave. He watches as she excitedly dances around the kitchen and calls her mom. She's relieved and so excited that all the hard work paid off.
- Maddie has graduated early and plans to work for the last semester before college. She has begun the search for a job. Promise is everywhere, and she receives several call-backs and job offers. Will is visiting, and Maddie has committed to a relationship, though she promised herself years ago that she wouldn't, especially to a man whose job required him to be gone much of the time.
- Robin has started to get bitter about Maddie moving to the South for school, she's convinced that Maddie has chosen this location because Shaun lives nearby. She cries and gets angry, claiming it's not fair for Maddie to live close to him when she was the one that raised her.
- Maddie feels free with Will. They have their differences, but are similar in that they are both strong, silent types who love adventure. Maddie's parents are lenient for the first time and allow Maddie to stay the night with Will for the next two weeks, only requiring that she checks in with them every few days. Maddie is happy, and decides three days before Will flies back to the West Coast that she wants to accept Will's marriage proposal. They tell the family, and the family is excited. Maddie packs her bags a month early.

- The night before Maddie leaves to drive the 25 hours to the military town right outside of Tacoma, she feels unsure. She drives to her best friend's house and talks, smoking a few cigarettes. Her best friend doesn't want her to leave. Maddie is excited and nervous, feels mixed and starts unpacking her bags in the dark, winter night. Robin comes back out and has a talk with Maddie about broken promises and commitment. She helps load Maddie's car back up. Maddie gives everyone hugs and tells them goodbye before heading to bed. When Maddie gets up to go, everyone is still asleep. It's 4am and freezing out. Her car takes several tries before starting up. Before long, she's on the road, getting ready for the longest trip of her life, and ready to do it alone.

Chapter 8:

- Washington is a lot different than Maddie expected. It's beautiful and doesn't rain as much as people said it would. Even when it does, she enjoys it. Will and Maddie live 20 minutes from the beach and 20 minutes from the mountains. The land is beautiful.
- However, the job market isn't, and prices here are higher than she's ever seen. She's been applying for places for weeks, but there's so many overqualified people that interviews are done competition style, where 10 or so people compete for jobs flipping burgers. Maddie attends, but is the only one without a college degree, and usually gets passed over.
- At home, Will is gone most of the time. He works long days and gets sent away for weeks at a time training. Maddie can't seem to find any friends, again, and spends a

lot of her time alone and exploring the land nearby. She doesn't feel herself slipping back into the dark.

- Maddie writes. A lot. She's written the first hundred pages of three novels but can't finish them. She starts an anonymous blog where she talks about things she cares about, things her family wouldn't approve of. She hopes to make a difference.
- As lonely as she is, Maddie dreads the day she'll have to leave for college. Will will follow her eventually, but has to wait several months for his transfer and doesn't even know the report date. They plan to see each other in four months, over Thanksgiving break. Their goodbye is hard, the drive back home longer and harder than the drive there. The toughest part for Maddie is not knowing when they will be back together. Will is rough around the edges, but Maddie loves him, he's her best friend.

Chapter 9:

- Maddie starts her college career as the weird girl who can't decide if she's from Iowa or Seattle. Her tattoos make her stand out here in South Georgia. She's quiet and anxious, but hopeful.
- Maddie continues to write. She works hard in all of her classes, though her personal life has started to slip. She gets in with a bad crowd and has started to drink several days a week much like in High School, Maddie shows up and puts school first, but the rest has started to fall apart. The numbness has began to set in.

- When October comes around, Maddie hasn't spoken to her mother, husband, or best friend from back home in two weeks. She ignores their messages and calls, she's living day to day doing what she has to and sleeping. She's even stopped seeing the less-than-savory friends. Her blog has gone radio-silent. Everyone is worried.
- Will flies down to check on Maddie and discovers the state that she's in. He can only stay for three days, but spends every second of it with her. He talks her into getting help.
- Over Christmas break, Will and Maddie meet back in Iowa to spend time with their families together. Maddie has been diagnosed depressed and is now on medication to help regulate herself. Things aren't easy, but their better. Maddie regrets the decisions she made while she was in her numb state, and with the help of a therapist, discovers different triggers and signals that she's starting to fall again. Slowly, they work their way back to content.
- Robin asks if Maddie has told anyone about her diagnosis, and is grateful she hasn't. She tells Maddie never to tell anyone about it because they might judge. Over dinner Peter makes fun of people that self-harm, eating his lasagna and running his fork over his wrists, mocking "Oh, look at me, look at me! I want attention, watch me cut myself." Robin smiles politely, but everyone else just stares at the table.
- Maddie decides that it's not okay to not talk about these things. She may not be very good at the spoken word, but she knows her strength is in writing. She brings her blog back to life and even picks up a gig writing for an online blog. Neither are

private. She ditches the pen name, and attaches all of her articles to her Facebook. She can't be silent anymore.

Chapter 10:

- Just when everything seems to be going better, something happens. Will has moved to Georgia, and they now share an apartment again. Class is going great, and Maddie's blog is thriving. She's even writing fiction again. After a 2 week missed period, and daily vomiting, Maddie takes a pregnancy test. It's positive.
- Maddie has internal conflict, she swears she'd never be like her mom, but here she is at 20, pregnant, and married. But, she realizes that she's in a different situation, though there are some similarities. When Maddie tells Will, he's ecstatic. He celebrates by literally jumping up and down and exclaiming. Maddie knows it's going to be hard, but is ultimately excited and confident that she can handle anything with Will by her side.
- Two months later, Will gets deployment orders. He's leaving in a month and isn't due to come back until after the baby is born.
- Distraught, Maddie struggles to see how she's going to make it by herself. She has lost many of her college friends. Since she's announced the pregnancy people have stopped inviting her to do things.
- With nausea and morning sickness so bad that she can't work 10 minutes without vomiting, she's asked to quit by her manager.

- Maddie decides to start a support group for people in similar situations for herself, paving the way for herself and others. She continues her blog, not skipping the depression and isolation that comes with young motherhood. She speaks with her mother and grandmother frequently, keeping herself in check of her depression most days.
- Starting her own business to keep afloat, Maddie devotes her time to the things that are necessary. She learns to live on her own much of the year. She fights to overcome her social anxieties and talk about problems that need to be discussed.
- Will returns just before the baby is born, and Maddie is a changed, self-reliant woman who is no longer afraid to talk.
- This third section ends with Maddie and Will, imperfect young parents. Maddie dedicated to her family and school, despite many friends and family telling her to drop out and move home. She has a revelation about her mother and grandmother, realizing that despite the similarities in their marriage and childbearing ages, that things are getting better. She sees that the stereotype of motherhood is wrong, and vows to prove that it can be empowering. Though she is untraditional, and doesn't do all of the things that she imagined she would, she has done far more in different ways. She's got a voice, and she's going to use it.

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