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LAST KIND WORD

by

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ABSTRACT

Last Kind Word is a novel that explores the ways people seek control and power in the face of the unknowable. Set in the fictional town of Thorpe, South Carolina, the story follows four main characters—Donna Neese, Melissa Burnside, Anthony Washington, and Jill McManus—struggling in the aftermath of biracial teenager Micah Burnside’s disappearance. They search for a replacement for the lost connection to Micah and for a sense of control at a time when their lives seem to lack it, when other forces, be they people or circumstances or spirits, hold power over them. In the midst of this, the four of them must decide what life will look like going forward.

In Thorpe, theories about what happened to Micah range from the plausible to the fantastical. Those closest to him have their own theories, too, although they are less inclined to share them with the gossip-hungry townspeople. Micah’s mother Melissa, reeling from the equally mysterious loss of Micah’s father Dan eighteen years earlier and the intense mood swings from her untreated bipolar disorder, is convinced that her son is alive, searching for his father in San Diego. Meanwhile, Micah’s grandmother Donna believes that he is dead, murdered by Nick and Nathan Goff, Thorpe’s not-so-secret meth dealers who come from a long line of rowdy and dangerous men. Jill, Micah’s ex-girlfriend and a recent college drop-out, worries that a prank they played on a hoodoo practitioner is somehow to blame not only for the dissolution of their relationship, but also Micah’s disappearance. Jill seeks the aid of a hoodoo conjurer to set things right in the spirit world and, hopefully, her life. Anthony is a black country and blues musician and small-time drug dealer. His work forces him into a tenuous and volatile friendship

with the Goffs, one that could explode into anger and violence at any moment. Anthony also thinks the Goffs have something to do with Micah's disappearance, but he believes his friend is alive, just laying low after a lie leads to the Goffs' arrest. These four characters must grapple with long-standing feuds, secrets, and family discord as they try to solve the mystery of Micah's disappearance and come to grips with the possibility that he may never be found.

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PROLOGUE

July, 1994

On the morning of the last day that Donna ever babysat the Goff boys, she sat with them at the kitchen table drawing pictures for their mother. Markers, crayons, and scraps of paper lay in haphazard piles around them as thunder knocked and grumbled outside. Nathan, who would start preschool at the Methodist church three days a week come August, drew a series of swirls and circles that he insisted was his mama and daddy in daddy's blue truck. Nick was six, about to start first grade, and drew a square house with an orange sun in the sky and red flowers poking out of a green scribble of ground. With a peach-colored crayon, he constructed two figures—one tall, one short, one with long brown hair, the other with yellow marks sticking straight up from the head. Between them, he drew a red heart. Under the short figure with the yellow hair, he wrote his name. The tall figure became Mama. "She likes flowers," he told Donna.

The boys' mother, Jodie, was Donna's best friend since the age of eleven. Both in their mid-30s, they had been with each other through three marriages, one divorce (Donna's), years of praying for babies (Jodie's), and the birth of Donna's grandson Micah. Now Jodie worked to support the children that had finally come to her and her husband while Donna kept them during the day.

Donna marveled at the differences in the boys' personalities. When Nathan cried, which was often, Nick would hit him—hard—and tell him to stop acting like a girl. But if anyone else, Donna included, tried to control or discipline Nathan in any way, Nick was his most ferocious defender. Once, when Donna scolded Nathan for wetting his pants, his older brother responded

by throwing a toy train at Donna's feet, screaming at her to shut up, and resisting so violently when she forced him into time-out that she worried he was going to hit her. Then there was the time they almost burned her garage down by lighting fire to a small pile of pinecones they'd made under her husband's work bench. Nick insisted that they were only pretending to be camped out in a fort on a desert island, and Donna worried that putting the matches and lighter fluid on a high shelf might not be enough. Nick was as smart as he was determined. Most of the time, though, the boys ran wild through the heat and hummocks of the sandhills just outside Donna's door. There were anoles to chase on the porch, honeysuckle blooms to pick on the back fence, and earthworms that dug out of the sand after a hard afternoon rain just to fry on the concrete driveway when the sun came back out.

But this morning, artwork would have to keep them entertained.

Donna moved between the boys at the table and the blanket on the floor where Micah played surrounded by plastic balls, stuffed animals that squeaked, and teething rings. His mother, who had moved back in when she had barely begun to show, was still in bed. Melissa hadn't spoken more than a few words in months and spent most of her time in her room, coming out only to use the bathroom or to make an occasional snack. Sometimes, in an attempt to shake Melissa out of herself, Donna forced her to help with Micah's diapers or coaxed her into giving him a bottle, but these tasks often fell to Donna, while Nick and Nathan helped her entertain the baby, who was new and brown, different, and so an object to examine, a toy. Donna always supervised this play, though. Nick's latest growth spurt made him look gigantic next to her infant grandson, and his angry tantrums came on too quick and too unexpectedly. Nathan, on the other hand, cried whenever Micah did.

After lunch, there was a break in the storms. It was wet out, the stand of pines surrounding the backyard soggy and dark. The boys wanted to play. They wanted to take the baby with them. Donna didn't have the strength for one more purple dinosaur song, so she put Micah in his walker and placed him on the deck. She went back inside and closed the sliding glass door, knowing she could watch them through it. She cleaned the kitchen and prepped for supper, listening to the shouts of the boys, Micah's squeals and laughter. She was peeling potatoes over the trash when she noticed it. The boys had been outside for the better part of an hour. She paused to stretch her fingers. No giggles, no talking, no whining even. The only sound came from the far-off rumble of thunder, so faint that it could have been a passing jet or a large truck. But not a sound from the children. As she turned toward the door, she heard Nathan's scared, high-pitched voice call out, "But I can't make it go!" She leapt the last several feet to the door and slid it open so hard the glass rattled and cracked in a jagged line. There on the deck, Nathan stood, his face tight with fear, holding a Bic lighter. Nick was next to him, whispering in his ear, his hand wrapped around his brother's, his bigger fingers flicking the spark wheel and moving the flame toward the mountain of pine straw on the tray of Micah's walker.

Donna moved without thinking, swatting the lighter out of the boys' hands and lifting the baby from his seat. She looked at Nick with unbelieving eyes. There was childish willfulness. There was boyhood rambunctiousness. Then, there was this, which was something else entirely. "What's wrong with you?" Donna screeched, clutching Micah against her chest. Nathan was crying.

At that moment, the cracked glass came spilling out of the sliding door frame in a loud, tinkling crash. Donna jumped at the sound, but Nick's head jerked toward it, and a slow, open-

mouthed smile spread to his eyes at the sight of the sharp, little prisms spread out on the deck and the kitchen linoleum. He looked back at Donna with what seemed to her pride and defiance. It was as though he was daring her to react.

Donna slapped him hard across the face, surprising herself as much as the boy. His eyes widened for just a moment, but became an angry stare as his cheek reddened. Nathan's cries turned into one long howl. Hands shaking, Donna commanded the children into the house. She kept a stern, silent watch over the boys while Melissa, annoyed to be woken out of her sleepy stupor, swept up the broken glass, mumbling something that sounded like "not my kids" and "just be left alone." When she finished, she took Micah from Donna's arms, cooing, "I won't let no one burn you up," as she walked with him back to her bedroom and closed the door.

Jodie arrived breathless in her American flag-patterned cotton scrubs from her job as a receptionist at a pediatrician's office. Her face was as flushed as her sons'. At first, her reaction to what Donna reported was expected—disbelief, fear, speechlessness. She stared at Nick, her mouth slack, but her eyes working, taking in every feature of the boy. Nathan was still crying, quietly now, just snot and tears.

"What did they do when you caught them?" Jodie asked.

"This one just been crying the whole time." Donna pointed to where the boys sat on the couch. "This one seems to think it's all pretty funny."

"Probably because he was playing." Jodie glanced at Donna, then corrected herself.

"Thought he was playing." Her tone was matter-of-fact.

But that explanation did not satisfy Donna. She placed her hands on her hips. "He tried to set my grandson on fire."

Jodie walked over to Nick and placed her hand gently on the top of his head. “He wouldn’t really have done it.” Her face was calm, almost serene, suggesting to Donna that Jodie had a complete and sincere belief in her own words. It reminded Donna of last year, when Nick was in kindergarten and Jodie had caused such a fuss when the principal wanted to suspend him for bullying and beating a classmate. Jodie took her argument, which was mainly that Nick was just a boy and that the other kid eventually hit him back, all the way to the school district superintendent, who overturned the suspension.

Nathan sniffled, then began to cough, which made him cry harder. He hiccupped and struggled to catch his breath. Jodie sighed. “Nathan, honey, you got to dry that up before we get home. You know how it drives your daddy crazy,” she said without removing her hand from Nick’s head.

Donna cleared her throat. Her jaw hurt from clenching her teeth so hard. “Jo, can you please take this seriously?”

Jodie turned to her with her palms up, a half shrug. “The pine straw was wet. It never would have caught. Quit making this bigger than it is.”

“If it’d been dry today, that pine straw would’ve gone up in a second.”

“I’m sure he didn’t know what he was doing.”

“Why don’t you ask him?” Donna wanted to scream at her, but she kept her voice flat, quietly challenging.

Jodie looked down at her son. She smiled and stroked his hair. “Boys are precocious. They experiment,” she said, still gazing at Nick. “Don’t you, son?”

Nick wasn't meeting her eye. He stared straight in front of him, his face still red. "Yes, ma'am."

Donna couldn't control her temper or her voice any longer. "He was going to light a baby on fire! How can you explain that away?"

At the sound of yelling, Nathan's spasmed crying turned to exhausted wails. Jodie's face lost its calmness. "Nathan, please!" Her tone matched Donna's, which only made Nathan cry louder. Jodie turned away from him. "Whose fault is this really?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Well, what I am paying you for?"

"Why don't you pay me for my back door?"

"Which, by the way, wouldn't a broke if you'd been doing your job."

Donna took a step toward Jodie and lowered her voice. "And maybe your kids wouldn't be dangerous if you were doing yours."

Jodie lifted Nick, placed him on her hip, and circled her arms around him. He put his head on her shoulder. She extended a hand to Nathan, still crying loudly, and led him toward the door. She turned to Donna as she left. "Twelve years I waited for these babies. You don't know what it is to wait like that."

Jodie did not bring the boys back the next day or the day after. They never came to Donna's house again.

CHAPTER ONE

July, 2012

Jill: One night, on the strip of asphalt behind the Winn-Dixie shopping center, strewn with bits of trash and sticky puddles of something that never seemed to dry, he appeared. It was dusk.

He waited for his friend Anthony to get home. Anthony lived in one of the old houses on the other side of the abandoned lot. “He turns his back porch light on to let me know when he’s there,” Micah had told her. “It’s just more comfortable to sit and wait here behind the stores than sit in that field and get fire ants up my butt.” One time he told her, “Anthony has an old upright bass that he lets me play. I think it was his granddad’s or something because it’s old as hell. Still sounds good.” Another time he told her, “I have to wait for Anthony to get home. Bad things happen when I’m at Anthony’s alone.”

She didn’t know what bad things he was talking about, but she knew that neighborhood. Everyone in town knew that neighborhood. One of the kids in her biology class swore it had a real life crack house. The two narrow streets that comprised the neighborhood, which, unlike the newer subdivisions, had no name, were a common haunt of Thorpe’s few cops, and more than once she had heard her father refer to it as a place that “got real dark at night, if you know what I mean.”

Over the weeks, Jill began to time her breaks with Micah’s arrival. Sometimes he showed up inside the store to make faces at her from behind a display of batteries while she rang up customers or knocked cereal boxes on the floor while she was trying to stock the shelves. That

first night, she had stepped out on break, hoping to find one of the stock guys so she could bum a cigarette, and was surprised to see him sitting on an overturned milk crate. He was smoking and gazing down at his scuffed black sneakers. His cargo shorts were frayed at the end and slightly lighter in color than his skin. The back of his shirt listed tour dates for a band she'd never heard of. She knew him from school. They both played cello in the orchestra. Unlike the teachers, who fawned over her as their star pupil, and the large group of other high-achieving students who pretended to be her friends, with whom she was always planning a pep rally or a service project or a student government meeting, Micah always seemed completely uninterested and unimpressed. She noticed him everywhere around campus. She was transfixed by his blond hair, the way it laid in tight curls against his scalp. She had seen black people with blue eyes, which gave them a startling and mysteriously alluring look, and there were a handful of biracial kids in Thorpe, but none with blond hair. She worried that one of these times, he would catch her staring.

That night she saw him sitting on a milk crate behind the store, she decided that she would make him notice her. "Give me a cigarette."

He looked up at her, eyebrows raised, and for a moment she worried if he remembered who she was.

When he didn't say anything, she rolled her eyes and let out an exaggerated sigh. "Can I have a cigarette *please*?" She held her hand out, palm up.

He nodded, pulled his crumpled pack out of his pocket, and held it open for her.

She took the cigarette and the lighter he offered. The exterior light cast a gray-green sheen on Micah's curls. She took a drag, then exhaled through her nose. "Camels. Yuck."

“You can give it back.”

“At least it’s not a menthol. I expected you to have menthols.”

Micah scratched the side of his nose. He didn’t look at her. “Why are you talking to me?” he asked.

She wasn’t sure how to answer that question. The truth was that he was a mystery to her, frustrating to the point of distraction. But she only took another drag and said, “I sit next to you in orchestra, remember?”

“I know who you are.”

She grit her teeth, then took another drag, exhaled. “Well, you’re really good.”

Micah looked up at her, eyebrows raised again.

“At cello,” she said.

“Thanks. You, too. Your vibrato has gotten better since school started.”

“You noticed my vibrato?”

They both agreed that keeping their secret was for the best. It had been his idea, and he had convinced her. He didn’t want their families asking questions. He didn’t want everyone at school getting in their business. And in Thorpe, interracial dating was still unusual, if not altogether taboo.

“You’re half white.”

“But I look black.”

“You have blond hair.”

“Let’s just keep this as a thing for us,” he said. “It’s for me and you and no one else. As long as it belongs only to us, no one else can mess it up.”

And he had been right. No one else—no one outside of them—had messed it up. It had been her. Even before that night at the bottle tree when she had been so stupid, so thoughtless, things had gotten messed up.

The first time she found herself on her back in the pine straw in these woods, he had been eager. He had tried to be romantic, probably the way he thought a boyfriend should act when virginities were being lost. She had been bored and looking for something exciting. But where Micah's affections had softened Jill, sex made her harder, meaner. There was power in the feeling of getting off, in getting him off. Everything she controlled—her grades, her reputation at school, her future—paled in comparison to the sense of command that sex gave her. Micah hadn't liked the change in her. She knew that. Micah had hoped she would become even softer, would begin to feel about him how he felt about her. Yes, she cared about him, but love made him needy and weak. She enjoyed absolute rule—especially when it came to their bodies—but it disgusted her, too. His weakness disgusted her. And so they fought.

The worst fight happened behind Winn-Dixie. They stood, arms touching, staring at the clapboard houses and the bottle tree on the far side of the field behind the store. An evening breeze brought the tinkling of wind chimes to them across the weeds. The first time Jill noticed the bottle tree, Micah had to explain it to her. The colored bottles attracted evil spirits in the night and trapped them. They were burned away and destroyed by the rising sun.

“How do you know that?” she had asked.

“How do you not?” he'd said.

That had been in the spring. The night they fought—this particular time they fought—was in the fall. There was a coolness in the air that everyone in town had been longing for during

the dragging, humid summer months. They held cigarettes and watched the late-September moonrise, watched exhaled puffs of smoke melt away. She turned to Micah and fondled a curl just above his ear with her free hand. He met her eye with a half-smile, leaned over, and kissed the tip of her nose. Then he looked away, and she wondered, as she had often done in the previous several weeks, what—or where—he was thinking about.

Silence settled over them, deepening like the dark purples in the sky. The breeze picked up again and with it, the sound of wind chimes. Micah now settled himself on a milk crate, and Jill stood, arms folded, with her back to him. She refused to believe there was any truth to his attack, so she just stared out at the old houses. The yards were mostly sand, some surrounded by bent and rusted chain-link fences. Miss Ernestine's yard was different—a tidy back porch with cushioned benches, a patch of mowed grass, garden rows, flowering hydrangea bushes in a row under the window, green potted plants taking up most of the porch, the bottle tree. Jill had never met Miss Ernestine, never even seen her. But Micah talked about her often and told of the zucchini and squash she brought from her garden to Anthony's house during the summertime. He told her that sometimes Miss Ernestine came to listen to them play music and try her hand at the harmonica. The tree appeared to have been, in life, one of the tiny, twisted scrub oaks that made the sandhills look strange and barren. It was dead, but still tiny and twisted and gray. Barely six feet tall. On the branches' ends were green, blue, red, and brown bottles of various shapes and sizes, the spouts pointed down toward the trunk of the tree.

“You think that stuff's real?” she asked suddenly. When she got no reply, she turned to face Micah. “You think it's real?”

Micah exhaled slowly, the breeze taking the smoke away from his face. “The tree?”

Jill nodded.

Micah shrugged and took another drag. He tilted his head from side to side. His neck made popping sounds.

Jill pointed at the tree. "If sunlight was all it took to destroy evil stuff, then nothing bad would ever happen."

Micah shrugged again. "Okay."

She took off across the field, her strides long and confident even though her shoes sunk in the sand.

"Where are you going?" he called after her.

She glanced over her shoulder. "To let the evil spirits out."

He threw down his cigarette and jogged after her. "Do you think that's a good idea? Even I don't like this neighborhood after dark."

"I guess we'll just have to be quiet then."

Micah was just steps behind.

Jill didn't slow down. He caught up with her and grabbed her arm. "I'm serious," he whispered.

She glared at him and wrenched her arm free.

They reached Miss Ernestine's yard, which she had cordoned off with a low row of cinderblocks painted white. It was fully night now and dark. Neither of them spoke, but stepped gingerly to avoid the sound of grass crunching beneath their feet. A dog barked a few houses down, and Jill froze. She heard a screen door open, a voice calling the dog inside. After a moment, she found her breath and continued slowly to the tree. Reaching up, she chose a curvy

blue bottle, slipped it off the branch without a sound, and handed it to Micah. “This one’s yours,” she whispered, then turned to pull a slim green bottle off another branch. It hit against the bottle next to it and made a *clink* as loud as a cannon shot in the silent yard. Neither of them moved. The breeze picked up, accompanied once more by the clatter of wind chimes. “This one’s mine.” She grinned.

Micah leaned toward her, his lips brushing her ear. “This is a bad idea.”

“This is a perfect idea.”

“Why do you want to do this so badly?”

She stared down at her green bottle. “Because I can.”

She grinned again and tiptoed over to the cinder block border. Micah joined her. “We’ll time it with the wind chimes.” She raised her bottle into the air and counted, “One. Two. Three.”

They sent their bottles crashing down onto the white cement blocks with an echoing clank, shards of brightly colored glass flying up like a swarm of sparkling insects around their ankles and falling in a blue and green mosaic on the grass. Jill threw the neck of the bottle onto the ground and darted back into the field. Micah was right behind her. They collapsed behind a thick stand of broombrush, giggling and trying to catch their breaths. Jill’s heart beat like a chimney swallow in her chest, and as she tried to get it back to normal, she glanced at Micah to gauge his reaction. His face was unreadable in the dark.

He opened his mouth to speak when Anthony’s porch light came on, flooding the yard with a harsh, white glow. “Get back to work,” he said, still out of breath. He grabbed the back of her neck, kissed her, and got up.

As he jogged toward Anthony's backyard, she called, "Hey! Don't let the spirits get you."

They both laughed.

CHAPTER TWO

December, 2012

The Goffs threatened Micah's life in front of a crowd of witnesses at the Crossroads Stop 'N Shop. The shop was a squat, cinderblock rectangle no larger than a garage or a woodshed. The asphalt shingled roof appeared to predate both World Wars and sagged at its corners and at one circular depression in the roof's middle where water pooled when it rained. It was still missing shingles in places from the tornado that rode a line of strong thunderstorms through the county in the spring of 1986. Mr. Branham, who had owned and operated the Crossroads Stop 'N Shop seemingly in perpetuity—no one alive could remember a time when it wasn't standing in that same spot at the corner of Highway 34 and Tackey Road or when Mr. Branham wasn't behind the counter working the cash register. And he loved to tell the story of how he'd hidden beneath a utility sink in the small back room while the storm raged outside the metal doors.

Starting in late fall and lasting until Christmas, Mr. Branham allowed Earl Belton and his nephew James to host a turkey shoot out back on Saturday night. It was Donna and Tammy's weekly ritual. They weren't afraid of a little shotgun blast, who didn't act like the sound startled them, who didn't mind a dirty joke, who weren't too dainty to chug Budweiser from a 22-ounce can. Sure, they could be dainty when the situation called for it, but they avoided those situations. The daintier women of Thorpe, meanwhile, avoided the turkey shoot. Some even thought that a turkey shoot was about shooting actual turkeys instead of glorified target practice where turkeys, or some other meat, were the prize.

When they pulled into the gravel lot next to the store, she was relieved to see that someone had already lit a fire in one of the rusted out burn barrels. The parking lot was not so much a parking lot as a sandy strip of land between the store and the road where people had pulled off so often over the years that the grass died and refused to grow back. Someone, perhaps Mr. Branham, had at some time thrown down some gravel on this spot as though to declare it the parking lot and thus make official what patrons had already done on their own.

She looked toward the dirty building as the side door opened, throwing a rectangle of light onto the sand and gravel. Two young women—Donna guessed that they couldn't be any older than 22 or 23—emerged holding Natty Light tallboys in their gloved hands, and she pushed away the sudden pop of jealousy that sprang up in her mind, the reminder of an unfettered youth she had never experienced. She made her way to the burn barrel to warm her hands and make her greetings.

The social space was behind the store on hard-packed clay, crowded with two rickety benches and scattered barrels, littered with broken oyster shells and crushed beer cans, and surrounded by a dense forest of longleaf pines and turkey oaks, Jessamine vines and wiregrass, the sandy rises cloaked in a thick layer of pine needles gray and wet and old at the bottom. Beyond the clay circle where folks warmed their hands over the barrel fires and drank beer and caught up with each other at the end of the week was the only patch of grass to be found, almost enough to be called a lawn. This is where Earl and James set up their turkey shoot. On one end of the small lawn, almost touching the bumpers of the trucks and SUVs and motorcycles parked in the lot, they would unfold a long rectangular table and arrange the prizes for the night. Only once in a while was the prize an actual turkey, although on occasion the prize was wild turkey

that someone had shot and sold them cheap. Sometimes they could get wild turkey for free if they were willing to clean and dress it. Same went for other wild game, like deer, which was abundant and easy to cook with, dove, and—once in a great while—feral hog. Usually he had store-bought meat, depending on what was on special at the Wal-Mart or the IGA.

Earl was setting up the night's shoot and called to Donna as she crossed the lot. "Miss Donna," he shouted, "you finally going to shoot tonight?"

She waved to him, but didn't veer from the beeline she was making for the fire. "I'm just here to drink beer and gossip."

Earl smacked his gums. "Right. Before you gotta be in church tomorrow morning." He cackled and went back to rearranging his meats—a five-pound package of Gwaltney bacon, a cleaned venison loin wrapped in wax paper, a bologna loaf, and half a dozen Cornish game hens that more than a couple people gathered around the fire that night wondered aloud if he pilfered from the Food Lion on Main Street.

Just as Donna expected, a smattering of familiar female faces surrounded the burn barrel, wives, girlfriends, and sisters warming their hands and clutching cold beers while the men that brought them stood off to the side loading their guns and comparing their pieces. Tammy was already there, and she usually had the inside track on all the stories and news circulating around town and was more than eager to share. This made Tammy similar to many of the middle age women in Thorpe—overly concerned with the lives of others and busy convincing their boyfriends to become their second (or third or sometimes fourth) husbands. Tammy didn't try to hide this fact or pretend that she didn't act this way. Tammy lifted her beer can and offered a

“Hey girl” when Donna joined the circle. Donna smiled and nodded, then smiled at the others gathered around the fire.

“Hey Miss Donna!” Brittany Jones, eighteen and pretty and hidden under a layer of thick makeup, greeted her brightly.

“Aren’t you a little young to be drinking a beer?”

Brittany held up her can and giggled. “Mr. Branham sold it to me.”

The sound of a gun shot rang like a crack through the thin winter air and echoed around them like the warning call of an angry animal. Donna had heard gun shots described as similar to the sound of fireworks or as quick, loud pops, but she always thought of them as the sound of something cracking, as though the air was shattering around the bullet. There was something violent, like an earthquake, about the motion of that crack, that sound, but Donna associated no fear with it. It was something that just was. A person got used to it.

Tammy poked Donna’s arm. “Let me tell you what Opal told me today about Heather Lancaster.” Then she launched into a story about pool league cheating and an unexpected pregnancy.

As the women told stories, they played a sort of ring-around-the-rosy, trying to avoid a face full of smoke every time the wind shifted. They huddled together on one side of the barrel watching the smoke and sparks of orange stars drift away from them. A shifting cast of characters trickled in and out of their circle as the night progressed, warming their hands so they could shoot better, taking smoke breaks while popping open fresh beers, turning their backsides to the fire to combat the cooling effects of the winter night. When they laughed and spoke, the air around their faces filled with clouds of breath. The sounds of laughing and joking, men

shouting and slapping each other's backs, rose like the smoke from the barrel and hung over them, far enough above the sound of gunfire to escape safely and drift out into the night.

Donna watched where the men had gathered, showing each other their firearms, raising them to their shoulders, looking down the barrels and aiming at nothing. Others were taking target practice between prizing-winning rounds of the competition. The fire snapped and popped as the wind picked up and wound its way through the small bullet holes in the barrel's side. When the wood popped violently enough, it rang off the inside of the barrel, giving the fire a metallic sound that echoed the gunfire surrounding them. Everything at the Crossroads Stop 'N Shop on turkey shoot night, it seemed, was hot metal, the chime of ricochet, a riot of sound and smoke, the violent ring of explosions.

Next to the table of meats was a weathered wooden counter of sorts that appeared to be older than anyone at the turkey shoot, Mr. Branham included. It was chest height and wobbled side to side if anyone leaned on it the wrong way. Here, participants could pay the entry fee, about five dollars depending on Earl's mood and how much of a cut Mr. Branham had asked for, and steady their guns. From here, they hunched over and aimed toward the paper targets hanging by clothespins on a line twenty yards away while Earl drank Evan Williams—straight—from a coffee mug.

“I've got to find some way to keep warm since none of y'all will let me have a long enough break to go stand by the fire and talk to them pretty girls y'all bring with you,” was what he offered as an explanation and a flirtation to any of the women in earshot, none of whom were interested in an old toothless drunk, but who giggled and called him Honey anyway.

Some brought rifles and shotguns. Others brought handguns. They were black and white. Some spoke Spanish, but a lot of the others eyed them sideways until they started speaking English or just left. When the actual competition wasn't going on, the set-up provided a chance just to shoot, to show off one's marksmanship (or lack of it), and to feel the heat and the vibration of the blast. When it came time for the real turkey shoot to begin, those with shotguns loaded them with bird shot, paid the fee, and lined up. Donna and Tammy were standing at the table, admiring Earl's assortment of prize meat when Micah arrived with his friend Anthony. Micah startled Donna by putting his arm around her shoulder.

"Something's wrong when you show up to a party and your grandmama's already here," he said.

"Does your mother know you're out this late?"

"It's only ten o'clock."

Donna looked down at her watch. "Is that all?"

Micah pulled a crumpled pack from his front pocket and fished out a cigarette. "Besides, what makes you think Mom would care where I was?"

He walked away, lighting his cigarette and ambling toward the other young people around the burn barrel.

"Smoking's bad for you," Donna called after him.

"I know," he said over his shoulder.

Later, when she saw him holding a beer, she pretended not to notice. Tammy did and raised her eyebrows at Donna.

“Nothing we weren’t already doing at that age,” she answered quietly. She threw back her head to catch the last drop out of her old beer and tossed the can in the fire. Its metallic thunk against the side of the barrel was followed by the plink and hiss of Tammy opening a fresh beer. Tammy burped quietly, her shoulders rising and falling in reflex. She shot Donna a sideways glance and smiled. Donna smiled back and said, “So ladylike.”

“That’s what you like about me.”

When the Goffs arrived, everyone around the fire seemed to draw their arms closer to their bodies in a sudden protective reflex. They all recognized Wayne Goff’s truck. The big gray Dodge’s engine rumbled like a train in motion and drowned out any conversation that hadn’t already fizzled. Only the sound of gunshots was louder than the truck.

Tammy sighed loudly then muttered, “Aw hell.”

Wayne climbed down from the driver’s side, singing the words to an old Kris Kristofferson song like his life depended on it. He was somewhere around Donna’s age—they’d been in high school together, but she didn’t know whether he was younger or older. He still had most of his hair, but it had all turned a dull pewter color years ago. Wayne told people his nickname was The Silver Fox, but he was the only one who called himself that. He hiked his too-small jeans over his hips, accentuating the prominent gut that hung over his belt buckle. Once adjusted, he stopped singing and called to the crowd, “How’re all y’all doing this lovely evening?” He laughed as if he had just told the funniest joke ever.

Donna breathed a sigh of relief. Wayne was in a good mood this night.

As expected, Wayne’s cousin Glen Boykin climbed down from the passenger side. Short but lanky, he was the polar opposite of Wayne in ways both physical and psychological. Glen

had always been the weak member of Thorpe's herd, using Wayne's friendship and family connection for protection. He got out of the truck without singing, without speaking. He only nodded to a group of men standing nearby.

Neither man closed his car door, though, and from the small backseat of the cab emerged Wayne's two adult sons, Nick, the older stockier one with a shaved head that gave him the look of a mercenary, and Nathan, barely old enough to drink—legally—and wound so tight he practically vibrated. Donna's neck muscles tightened again. The two young women she saw upon her arrival tossed their beer cans and began fishing in their purses for car keys.

Beside her, Brittany hissed like a possum under her breath. "Nathan Goff gives me the creeps."

"And his acne is gross," said another girl at the fire who looked too young to be drinking.

Tammy shot a sideways glance toward the new arrivals, then murmured, "That ain't acne, honey. Take a look at his teeth."

Donna relaxed again, but only slightly, when Wayne, his sons, and Glen walked over to pay Earl and James instead of joining them around the fire.

Donna went inside the store some time later to buy another round of Budweisers for her and Tammy. The inside of the Crossroads Stop 'N Shop was a cramped collection of junk food and soft drinks, beer and cigarettes and dip and rolling papers, ammunition, night crawlers during the spring when crappie fishing on Lake Wateree is at its best, fishing line, scent sprays to attract deer, and an assortment of auto supplies ranging from Rain-X to motor oil to flat repair. The scuffed tile floor looked a sick shade of yellow under the dirty fluorescent lights and probably hadn't been swept or mopped for the better part of a decade. But folks in the county

didn't shop there because you could eat off the floor. They came because they could usually find what they were looking for quick. Because the beer was cold and cheap. Because in the fall and winter months they could count on regular oyster roasts and target practice to create a welcome diversion during the long cold dark nights.

On her way out, she saw Nathan. He had cornered Brittany near a cooler full of energy drinks. She heard the rattle of pills, saw the orange cylinder. When Brittany reappeared at the burn barrel later, Donna took her arm and pulled her aside. "What was he trying to give you?"

"Xanax. Said it would help me relax."

Donna screwed up her lips. "Well, that's true. Is that what he's on tonight?"

Brittany shook her head. "He's sweating too much, and his eyes're all crazy."

"Lord, help us." Donna patted her shoulder. "Try your best to lay low tonight."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You don't do drugs, now, do you?"

"No, ma'am," she mumbled. She turned and walked away, head down.

When the commotion started, Donna was returning from the bathroom around the backside of the store. There was motion and raised voices near where Earl and James' meats were on display. Everyone else present, though, was as still as a stone, wide-eyed and gawking. Nathan had Anthony by the collar of his puffy winter jacket.

"Quit fucking with me," Nathan shouted. Beads of sweat dotted his temple in spite of the temperature. The veins and tendons in his neck stood out in stark relief beneath his pale skin. "You think you can steal from me?" Spit flew from Nathan's mouth and landed on Anthony's face.

Donna searched the crowd for Micah. By the swiveling heads around her it seemed everyone was trying to locate him, or someone, anyone who would come to Anthony's rescue. But they all knew the stories about Nathan. About all the Goffs. Donna said a silent prayer that Micah would stay lost.

Nick emerged from the crowd instead, his movements more deliberate but not less frenetic than his brother's. And he was no less intimidating. At his side he carried a handgun. From her distance, Donna couldn't identify it, but she knew what it meant. Nearby, someone whispered a low, "Oh shit."

Nick made eye contact with Nathan, who nodded. Nick turned around, his back to his brother, swung his arm up to chest level, and pointed the gun at the crowd of gawkers. "Where's Micah?"

No one moved except to cast their eyes to the gravel at their feet. Micah did not appear, and Donna continued to pray that he wouldn't. Without moving her head, she looked at the man standing beside her. He was holding a shotgun of his own. Why didn't he do something? It was as if they'd all been suspended in space and time, as if the Goff boys with guns somehow wielded more power than an entire crowd with guns. She knew that the Goffs could always be counted on to do more than just point their guns, but surely, she thought, somewhere in this crowd was a good ol' boy with enough beer-fueled bravado to take them on. Why didn't anyone help?

Mike swung his gun around and pointed it at Anthony.

Then Micah was at Anthony's side. Donna blinked, and he appeared. His sneer showed a fearlessness and anger that Donna remembered seeing on his face as a willful toddler, but not any time recently.

"Stop." Micah's voice was low, wavered for only a moment. It reverberated like the rumble of an eighteen wheeler.

Nathan didn't take his eyes off Anthony.

Nick snorted and trained his gun on Micah. "Fuck off." He stepped toward Micah, the barrel of his gun now touching Micah's forehead. An almost imperceptible flinch traveled across Micah's face and then was gone. Nick only raised his eyebrows, then relaxed them. A silent challenge.

That's when James, losing money every minute this continued, stepped out of the crowd and placed his hand on Nick's shoulder. "Hey man, think about what you're doing." His voice was soft, quiet, the way someone talks to an aggressive dog that's escaped from its pen.

In one swift movement, Nick shifted the gun to his left hand, punched James square in the jaw, and returned to Micah. If Donna hadn't seen it with her own eyes, she might've thought that the reason James lay sprawled on the gravel was his own clumsiness. A thought struck her. She didn't pause to consider it. She blurted, "This is ridiculous."

Whether it was what she said or the surprise in hearing a high feminine voice, both Goffs turned toward the sound. Energized, Donna pushed to the front of the crowd. "Did you hear me? I said this is goddamn ridiculous." It occurred to her that she may be drunk.

Before the brothers could react, their father appeared and blocked Donna's advance. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he said gruffly, "This isn't your fight."

“Like hell it ain’t!”

Nathan spoke over his father’s shoulder. “Let me deal with this motherfucker on my own, lady.”

Donna pushed Wayne’s hands off of her. “You’re too high to tell your ass from a hole in the ground.”

Wayne stepped so close to Donna that his pot belly touched hers. “Hey now—”

“Your wife would die right now,” she spat at him.

“Dad, you going to shut her up, or am—”

“Wayne, you going to tell your boy to go ahead and beat up this boy here if that’s what he’s aiming to do?” As far as Donna was concerned, if the Goffs wanted to pummel Anthony, they could have at it. He did nothing but cause her grandson trouble. She wanted only to get the gun aimed somewhere else besides Micah’s face.

“Fucking bitch,” Nathan said.

“Dirty cracker.”

Wayne’s face transformed at the sound of Donna’s slur, resembling suddenly the look of his sons. He pushed her back into the crowd where waiting hands caught her before she fell to the ground. “I told you to go on now!” he shouted.

Glen appeared behind Donna and moved in front of her. He brandished his shotgun, aiming it at Wayne’s chest.

“What are you going to do?” Wayne asked.

“I’mma make this into a bona fide standoff.”

No one moved or said anything. Glen looked fiercer than Donna had ever seen him, and she had to admit her assumption that Glen always existed in Wayne's shadow, along for the ride, unable to hold his own. She felt a surge of affection for him.

"Y'all leave," Glen said without lowering his gun.

Wayne deflated like an old balloon. Donna couldn't tell if he was ashamed of himself or felt betrayed by Glen, but Glen had won this fight.

"How you going to get home?" Wayne asked.

"I'll find a ride," Glen answered.

Wayne turned toward Nick, who did not appear as willing to concede as his father. Nick looked back at Micah and Anthony before lowering his gun. He tucked it into his waistband in the small of his back and pulled his coat over it. He turned to leave, then spun back around and stuck his finger in Micah's chest. "This ain't over."

"Fuck you."

"And your grandma." Nick shot Donna a parting glance, then stalked toward the truck, followed by his father. Visibly reluctant, Nathan lowered his hands from Anthony's coat and trudged toward the truck, the crunch of gravel the only sound. With the sound of the truck starting and pulling away, the observers in the crowd relaxed in one bodily exhalation and began to disperse. Some got into their cars and left, although most gathered around the burn barrel and lit cigarettes. They didn't talk.

The sound of the Stop 'N Shop's side door bursting open with a metallic clang made everyone jump. Mr. Branham came running through the sand and the gravel, shotgun in hand.

He looked around the way a squirrel keeps watch for hawks. He seemed surprised to see a calm and quiet crowd.

Tammy stepped up to him, suppressing a smile. “Missed the action again.” She shook her head.

Brittany caught Donna’s eye and whispered, “Miss Donna, I lied to you. Sometimes I smoke weed.”

Donna was exhausted and her small, safe house called to her, but she didn’t want to leave without talking to Micah. She found him leaning against the back of Anthony’s beat up car, beer in one hand, cell phone in the other. She wondered who he was texting. She wondered if he would tell his mother about what happened. She wondered if she should.

He lifted his eyes, now heavy with drunkenness, as she approached. She stood in front of him, hands on hips.

“I should tear your butt up.”

“Thanks.” He took a swig and went back to his phone.

“You’ve got to be more careful. You can’t afford to be running around with this low-life, not with your record.”

He looked up from his phone. “Those tweakers were ready to shoot Anthony. What was I—”

Donna held up her hand. “Getting mouthy will only get you in trouble.”

“You should know.”

“This ain’t about me.”

“No. Yeah. Message received. Leave your friends hanging to protect your own ass.
Loud and clear.”

“I’m your grandmama.” Donna sighed, relaxed her arms. “I gotta go. Love you.”

He kept at his phone. “Mmhmm.”

Donna walked to her car, worried she’d never figure out how to raise up kids the way she was supposed to. Being strict hadn’t worked. Now being lenient wasn’t either. She resolved to do better so she wouldn’t fail her grandson the way she’d failed her daughter.

In two weeks, Micah was gone.

CHAPTER THREE

Donna took them to breakfast at the Waddlin' Duck. Her stomach had been awake long enough to start rumbling and complaining, empty except for caffeine. She knew she looked like someone who had left the house in a hurry—dirty jeans and an old sweatshirt bearing a faded Dollywood logo, a stretched knit cap covering her unbrushed hair. And she had plenty of food in her pantry at home, but she couldn't face a cold, quiet house just now. Her mind was in the woods behind Hilltop Church, and watching her daughter nap on the couch all day, back turned to the living room, or brooding, morose, arms crossed, staring at the carpet while reality show reruns droned on unwatched, would be enough to make Donna scream or throw something at the kitchen wall or start the same argument she'd been having with Melissa for over a decade where she'd ask when Melissa was going to clean herself up and get a job, where Melissa would say that she couldn't work because of her medical condition, and where Donna would shout back that she wouldn't have to collect disability if she'd just take her meds like she was supposed to. They'd been circling that same mountain for years. Every strategy she had tried to help Melissa over the years since she had moved back from Columbia, pregnant and silent, but at other times hyper and grandiose, had failed. Donna only stuck with the shouting because at least it made her feel better. Living with Melissa was exhausting, was making Donna older faster.

Before, at least, there'd always been Micah. Raising him, loving him had sustained her through Melissa's moods, through the days when she had to get Melissa out of bed only to watch

her waste the day napping on the couch. With him gone, so too was the buffer between mother and daughter.

The inside of the Waddlin' Duck was as crowded on this Saturday morning as it usually was for Sunday dinner. Customers filled almost every table, and the waitresses darted around, harried but purposeful, usually smiling and always willing to stop and chat, pass on a compliment or a tidbit of gossip even if there was food in the window and an assistant manager yelling for runners. But the restaurant wasn't just busy this morning. It was electric, the patrons buzzing like hornets, bouncing from table to table like they were chambers in a nest. The restaurant had never boasted much in the way of atmosphere with its faded framed prints hanging on forest green wallpaper, paintings of Labrador puppies falling out of old boots, hunting dogs bounding across reedy lakeshores, and mallards taking flight over a blind, but this morning Donna found the sight of wood-paneled partitions caked with years of grease and dust and the mauve carpet matted black by a thousand muddy boots and spilled drinks unfamiliar and unsettling, the way her own home had felt for the past year. There was nowhere that offered respite, sanctuary.

The buzzing subsided as the hostess, a skinny high school girl wearing last night's make-up, led Donna and Melissa to a tiny two-seater by the front window. The sideways glances and whispers and pitiful head shakes mixed with the smells of melting butter and bacon and syrup. Donna began to think that queasy feeling in her stomach wasn't hunger.

Tammy Burnett, a waitress at the cusp of fifty, just a few years younger than Donna, approached the table holding a steaming pot of black coffee. She planted her hand on her left hip and said, "Holy hell."

“What now?” Donna asked.

“I figured you’d tell me.”

“About what?” She broke eye contact and looked to the empty mug sitting in front of her, hoping Tammy would get the message.

“I take it you just came from Hilltop.”

Donna glanced at Melissa, who sat, fingers tapping on the tabletop like drum sticks, and stared out at the parking lot. She turned back to Tammy. “How does everyone know already?”

“You really asking me that?” Tammy reached over and poured into each mug. “Trust me, if we had any Bailey’s on hand, I’d be dumping it in here.”

“Thanks.”

“What’d they say?”

“Nothing useful.” Donna reached for the sugar and added it to her mug.

“Is it true about it being clean? Folded up?”

“Damn.”

Melissa pushed back from the table with a start and rose. “People around here.” She stalked off in the direction of the bathrooms.

Tammy’s eyes followed her. “Having an episode?”

Donna clutched her mug. “Not sure. She’s been out of sorts since fall.”

Tammy cocked an eyebrow and pursed her electric pink lips. “Both of y’all have been out sorts. And with good reason.”

“Suppose so.” Donna took a tentative sip from the steaming mug.

An elderly man sitting across the room waved to Tammy. She gave Donna two quick pats on the shoulder and left, weaving through the crowded dining room, hot coffee held high above the patrons' heads. Donna surveyed the room as she took another sip and was simultaneously surprised and not to see that most of the other diners were staring at her. Knowing grunts punctuated sideways glances from retirees who looked away and shoveled half-congealed grits into their mouths when Donna made eye contact. Women tried to conceal their whispers with concerned looks, as though their consideration for Donna's plight was causing them real physical pain. Even the teenagers and children stared, the only difference being that their faces showed curiosity instead of judgment. And they did not avert their eyes when Donna stared back at them. Each one of them—the old men, the women, the young people—looked like they wanted to say something to her. This morning in the Waddlin' Duck, at least half the faces were unfamiliar, newcomers who saw Thorpe as one of Columbia's bedroom communities, lured by the cheap property taxes and large plots of land and privacy available in a rural county. They seemed to recognize her, though, and to read every wrinkle around her puffy eyes.

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Melissa was relieved to find the bathroom empty. She splashed water on her face and tried to stay ahead of her thoughts, which were already beginning to race roughshod over the morning's events. She could feel herself coming out of the fog. She couldn't be sure, but she'd been in it for the better part of the year. Her rapid cycling had stopped when Micah left. Even the holidays, which were usually enough to spring her awake and bring on a month or more of

episodes, had come and gone without any relief. Usually, she used the fact that her mania coincided with Thanksgiving and Christmas to her advantage, cooking massive elaborate meals that left them with far too many leftovers, decorating cookies and ornate desserts, stringing lights inside and out, mailing cards to her mother's friends with her mother's name signed in Melissa's hand, shopping for mountains of presents, picking out and putting up a tree. She watched enough TV—in fact, when she was between episodes, watching TV was pretty much all she did—to know that most folks felt sad or overwhelmed by the holidays. But not her. The weeks from Halloween to the New Year made Melissa come alive with purpose and energy. Those weeks provided an outlet for all the verve her body suddenly produced, for all the places her mind suddenly traveled, for the lists and ideas and images and urgency swimming in her head. Thanksgiving and Christmas kept her hands as busy as her mind, her mind too busy to meditate on the thoughts she didn't want to think, the thoughts that hung on her like lead weights on the days she couldn't get off the couch.

But this year had been different. Neither she nor Donna quite knew what to do with themselves. Without Micah around, there hadn't seemed a point to the holiday season. Donna had been invited to eat Thanksgiving dinner with some friends from church, but Melissa hated those church ladies, their wrinkled faces and bad dye jobs, their passive-aggressive insincerity. So she had stayed home, slept on the couch with the TV on low.

Melissa and her mother fought often, but never around the holidays. Between Melissa's manic state and Donna's genuine love for all of the festivities, an unspoken temporary truce settled over the little house each year. But this year, they did fight. Melissa had started a shopping list for Micah the day before Thanksgiving the way she always did, sitting at the

kitchen table, Black Friday ads from the newspaper spread before her. She planned, she maneuvered, she strategized. That was her favorite word for her Black Friday activities—strategize. She had a system. It excited her, and it worked. But as Melissa sat at the table this year, Donna emptied the dishwasher noisily. Huffing and sighing around the kitchen, she slammed cabinet doors, threw flatware into drawers. When she dropped a coffee mug on the floor, chipping its lip, she snatched it up and hurled it in the sink, where it shattered.

“What the hell?” Melissa had asked, looking up from her lists and plans.

“You’re planning to shop? Who for?” her mother shouted back.

Melissa just stared at her, perhaps she had involuntarily furrowed her brow. Surely she must have because that’s what a person does when they’re confused. Why shouldn’t she be shopping?

Donna picked up broken pieces of ceramic from the sink and held them in her open palms toward Melissa. “He’s not coming back. Something happened to him. When are you going to understand?”

Melissa just continued to stare, certain then that her brow was indeed furrowed. “Of course he’s coming back,” she said. “Eventually.”

That’s when her mother threw the bits of coffee mug back on the floor and let out a noise that was half cry, half throat-caught scream, her face glowing red, tears streaming. She stomped out of the room like an angry child, slammed her bedroom door for added effect, and, though Melissa wasn’t close enough to hear for sure, had likely spent at least a quarter of an hour wailing and sobbing. Melissa knew that she was supposed to feel guilty. That was her mother’s

goal. These theatrics had started long before Micah ever left. They just happened more often now.

Melissa knew that she was supposed to feel guilty, that Mama wanted her to feel guilty. Instead she was mad. Black Friday shopping was one of the few things that made her feel good. It set off over a month of feeling good, productive, energized. And her mother was trying to steal that from her simply because she watched too many cop dramas. She was overreacting, morbid. And out to get someone—or some ones—just because they caused a little trouble around town. Mom refused to listen to reason, to Melissa, who said last year she knew where Micah had gone. Told the police she knew where Micah had gone. No, she didn't know for sure, and, yes, she agreed with Chief Barber that it was strange for Micah to run away and leave his cell phone. But she assumed, and told as much to Dale, that Micah wanted to do this on his own. She knew better than anyone what it felt like to want to just be left alone. She wanted to extend the favor to her son. If he wanted to be found, he'd have made it so. And she was confident that as soon as he was done doing what he needed to do, he'd be back. Perhaps in time for Christmas, but if not, Melissa didn't want him to feel as though he'd missed out. His gifts would be waiting.

But all Donna had said—first when Micah didn't come home and later as the months dragged on without word—was that Melissa was the reason that the police wouldn't take her theories seriously. It was her fault that no one would investigate her suspicions. And she would alternate between crying in that whimpering puppy way and raging at Melissa, throwing and breaking things. She refused to trust Melissa's instinct. Wasn't it maternal, what Melissa had?

She had brought that up to Donna, but her response had been that Melissa hadn't done anything maternal in her life other than give birth.

Melissa spent the day after Thanksgiving on the couch, slipping in and out of sleep, waking with sweat on one side of her head, the strange metallic taste of daytime sleep in her mouth. The TV, though, was not on. She didn't want to hear all the commercials for all the sales she was missing. Early in the morning, while it was still dark, when it was the time she normally woke up to get in line at the big box electronics store in Columbia, she thought of going shopping anyway, just to spite Donna. But she suddenly didn't have the energy, weighed down by the magnetic pull of sleep. Her brain wasn't clicking into enthusiastic hyperactivity the way it normally did. Her mother was going to ruin the holidays, and Melissa knew it. She couldn't believe that her mother didn't trust her.

So the holidays had passed without fanfare, without Micah. And Melissa continued to feel drained, to feel like getting up off the couch long enough to pee and come back required more strength than she had. And the more time she spent on the couch, the angrier she got at her mother.

But this morning, standing in the bathroom at the Waddlin' Duck, Melissa felt her energy surging back. The hoodie would keep Donna occupied through spring. She would be off on a mission to solve the mystery and out of Melissa's way. Melissa felt her son's closeness, felt certain that if he wasn't back, he was on his way, that he had found what he was looking for. It was like he spoke to her across miles and said, "The news is good." It was the middle of January, but the holiday feeling was beginning to swirl through her.

She stared at herself in the mirror. The lighting in the tiny, dirty bathroom at the back of the restaurant was dim and yellow, but she could see that color was filling her cheeks. That feeling of planning, of strategizing was returning. She wasn't sure what she was strategizing for yet, but she felt certain that Micah would let her know one way or another.

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Melissa returned to the table and resumed her staring, her face strangely serene to Donna, as though she was anticipating some long hoped for thing. She spoke only to order French toast when Tammy returned to the table. When her food arrived, she picked at it with her fork, absent minded, her thoughts clearly not on breakfast.

Donna ate in heaping bites, greasy, ketchup-covered hash browns mixing with broken, runny yolk. When Micah had first gone missing, she'd had no appetite at all, had lost ten pounds that first month. Now she had days where it seemed like she couldn't eat enough, like no matter what she shoveled into her body, she was still starving. She had gained back the ten pounds and then some. The flesh around her middle drooped over the waistband of her pants, which were already two sizes bigger than she wanted them to be. The extra weight had filled out the folds of skin that had formed in recent years under her chin and begun to migrate down her neck. She looked like a frumpy old woman. She knew it, and she hated it. And here she was on display like a living, breathing worst case scenario. She squirted some more ketchup onto her hash browns and took another bite.

From the table behind her, she heard someone clear a throat. Then a woman spoke, the voice quivering with age. “I heard someone saw him in Charleston.” Another cleared throat. “Or maybe it was Wilmington.” The voice had the breathy quality of a whisper, but the full volume of one half-deaf old woman speaking to another.

“All that matters is that he’s alive,” the second female voice responded, just as breathy, just as loud.

“And they know it, too.”

“Just want attention?”

Melissa threw down her fork and glared at the two old women sitting with their backs to Donna. “I hate it here.”

Donna set her fork down gently and took another gulp of coffee. She was trying to calm her anger before she spoke. It was a practiced trait. She had been swallowing words for Melissa for years. “That smells great, Miss. Why don’t you try to eat a little more? It’ll make you feel better.”

Melissa tugged the rubber band out of her hair and just as quickly whipped it back up in a tight new ponytail. There was dirt under her fingernails. Donna stretched out her hand, but Melissa sensed her mother’s movement and jerked her elbow away. She slumped back in her chair with a loud exhalation and went back to staring out the window.

“We going to talk about this?”

Melissa did not look away from the window. She lifted a hand to her teeth and began to gnaw at a nail. The motion was automatic, one that didn’t require conscious thought. Donna had often wondered how Melissa retreated into these trances. She envied her daughter the ability to

shut down, her blind faith that someone else would just take care of whatever needed taking care of, whether it was buying breakfast or folding the laundry or paying the electric bill or handling the investigation.

Donna wiped her napkin across her mouth. "I guess not."

Melissa turned away from the window. She picked a torn piece of fingernail from the tip of her tongue and placed it on the edge of her plate. "What do you want me to say?"

Donna placed her napkin back on her lap and made a show of rearranging it.

"You don't believe me. You don't trust that I know my son." She picked up her napkin and began to tear off little pieces. "He'll be back."

"He is dead."

"You're wrong."

"And you're not being realistic."

Melissa threw down her napkin and stood. She held out her palm. Donna pulled her car keys from her pocket and placed them in Melissa's empty hand. Melissa turned and stalked to the exit. In her rush, her shoulder rammed Tammy's, who was walking around the tables, this time with a water pitcher. Melissa didn't pause in her retreat or glance back at the waitress.

"Excuse you," Tammy called after her, then made a beeline for Donna's table. "She leaving you here?"

Donna shook her head. "Just going to pout in the car. She'll be fine."

"And what about you?"

“That, I don’t know.” She lifted her napkin to her face again and wiped away the last traces of her breakfast, the breakfast that was sitting like a rock in her gut. “Will you go ahead and bring my ticket?”

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Jill pushed her scrambled eggs around on her plate. They were cold and the syrup from her French toast had drifted over to sweeten them and she hated that. She wasn’t hungry, hadn’t been hungry, when her mother insisted that she attempt a peaceable meal with her father. Avoiding eye contact with him as he sat across the booth for the past thirty minutes wasn’t doing anything to increase her appetite, either. And the heartwarming father-daughter conversation that her mother must have hoped they’d have had been nothing more than a “Pass the salt” and “No, I don’t take cream.” It was, admittedly, better than the previous week, which had consisted of one day of nothing but shouting, followed by another two days of nothing but a stonewall stare from him, and rounded out with the silent treatment, silent save for his disappointed sighs whenever she entered or exited the room. Jill’s thirteen-year-old sister had taken to eating all her meals in her bedroom, and even the family dog had started avoiding them. Her mother, however, was pulling out every stop she could think of to foster a reconciliation.

It’s not that Jill expected her father to take the news well. She was as disgusted with herself as he was that she wouldn’t be returning to the honors college in Columbia for the spring semester. Although it probably didn’t help that she had waited until the day before she was supposed to move back into her dorm to tell him. Her mother had known since she called Jill to

ask why she hadn't received a tuition bill in the mail. That had been in late November, and Jill had known since midterms that she wouldn't return. Now here she was, eating a greasy breakfast in the same place she'd eaten a thousand greasy breakfasts. The only difference was that now as she stared out the window to the gray January morning, she didn't have a plan, that singular goal she had worked toward for so long—*leave leave leave find a way to leave*. She figured, what? Get a job probably. Try to make her father like her again.

She was jolted from her brooding when she overheard their waitress whisper the name *Micah Burnside* at the next table over. She turned with such frantic force that she knocked her glass of ice water over, the drink flowing on to her already uneatable eggs.

"Whoa!" cried her father, reaching for the glass and dabbing her plate with a handful of paper napkins.

"Sorry," Jill mumbled, turning back to the table, yanking more napkins from the dispenser.

The waitress Deborah appeared at the table with a stained towel that may have been white last year, but was now the dingy gray of dishwater, pockmarked with grease stains and burns. She was skinny—too skinny—with bad teeth and perpetually smudged mascara, and Jill was sure she was younger than she looked, but she was such a good waitress that Jill's family asked for her every time they came to the Waddlin' Duck. "Whoopsee!" Deborah giggled. She held the empty glass in front of Jill and wiggled it from side to side. "Want another?"

Jill looked up at her, worried for a moment if it would be too obvious, but just as quickly decided to ask her question anyway. "Deborah, were you just talking about Micah Burnside?" Her father snorted in disapproval. Jill looked down at her hands. "I just overheard."

Deborah giggled again. “Ain’t no secret. Kyle Lancaster just came from Hilltop. They found his sweatshirt or something in the woods.”

“The woods behind Hilltop?”

“Yeah, the haunted ones.” Deborah’s eyes widened for effect.

Jill, mouth slack, breath caught in her chest, met her father’s eye for just a second. She felt her heart beating in her cheeks. She looked down again quickly, not wanting to appear more concerned than the average person, not wanting to give herself away. She didn’t want to cry. There could be no crying here. The grown-ups would misinterpret it. She was not just some weepy girl.

“Spooky, huh? Be back with water.” Deborah spun and was gone.

Watching her go, Jill exhaled as quietly as she could manage and turned to her father. “I don’t feel good,” she whispered.

“What are we going to tell your mother?” he asked.

She looked at him, blinked several times. It took her a moment to realize he wasn’t talking about Micah.

“Why are you doing this to us?”

Her head felt swimmy. It was so hard to concentrate on him. It had been hard to concentrate all semester.

“Your mama and I would’ve killed to go to college.” It was back to this. He had taken the victim tack since he found out. He acted like the hopes and dreams of the entire McManus family rested on Jill’s shoulders and that now she had ruined everything for all of them. “Are you doing this as some sort of rebellion? Are you made at us?”

“No, Dad,” she mumbled. “This isn’t about you.”

“Everything’s not always about you either.”

That wasn’t what she had meant to imply, so she stared at her hands again, now gripping the table to steady herself. She hated how being in Thorpe made her feel—helpless, passive. This wasn’t her. This wasn’t the girl who graduated fourth in her class, who earned a hefty scholarship and a spot at the state’s best honors college, who had always had a plan for her life that did not include growing old in her hometown. She shook her still spinning head. She had to find a way to get control of things again, to find a way back to who she had been before Micah vanished. Hell, to before she met Micah, before she shared that first cigarette with him, before the first time they skipped school together. She missed him. She was furious at him. “Can we just go?”

When her father didn’t respond except with another heavy sigh, she stood, correct in her assumption that he would follow her to the cash register if she started that way. She didn’t turn back to look. She could feel his presence behind her as she walked, the weight of his unmet expectations like a stone gargoyle on her back. *Leave leave leave find a way to leave.*

They had almost reached the front of the Waddlin’ Duck when a messy but good-looking blonde woman that Jill recognized pushed past her, hurrying in the direction of the parking lot. It was Micah’s mother, the one he always talked about as well-meaning but wounded. By what, he never said, and Jill had never met her. As her father paid the cashier, Jill wondered if Melissa Burnside recognized her. She wondered where Micah was, if it really was her fault that he was gone. She wondered—not hoped, she wouldn’t allow herself hope—if the discovery in the woods would bring him back.

*

Anthony aimed the pre-rinse faucet, spring-mounted and taller than he was, at plates stuck with egg yolks and cheese and grits turned to glue, the splash of water covering him in a fine mist. He was used to always being wet, but not even the hot water of a shift's worth of washing dishes could soften the calluses on his fingertips. He was pretty sure that the Waddlin' Duck's dishwashing equipment was as old as he was, and he was twenty-two. And most times they looked about the same—rusted, dark, and covered in grease and grime. But Anthony wouldn't be a dishwasher forever. Hell, he wouldn't even be a dishwasher for long. He had a plan. He had a harmonica. He had an old guitar his grandma had gotten at a yard sale with strings that never stayed tuned, but they played well enough for him. And that only provided better inspiration for the blues. That was how an artist looked at it.

Anthony was going to be a blues man, and he wasn't going to be in the background either. He was no drummer, no horn player. He wasn't going to play second fiddle. The band would be his, and he would be its leader. Anthony Washington and the Piedmont Blues Boys. He was Anthony Washington, and he had a plan.

He wasn't like his friends here in Thorpe. Every poor dumb motherfucker thought he was going to be a rapper. That wasn't Anthony's plan. Anthony didn't care about swagger. He had something better. He had greatness. Those nappy-headed country boys he went to school with cared about swagger, and where had it gotten them? Stuck in Thorpe with a kid or two,

run-ins with the police, drama like whoa. Anthony didn't have time for that. He was going places. He was a man with a plan.

What he didn't have anymore was a bass player. He didn't have someone to teach him about buying the right strings. He didn't have anyone to help pick out the perfect finger slide or write music with. He didn't have his best friend. Micah understood Anthony's plan. Micah shared his vision. Like him, Micah was on the cusp of musical greatness. But Micah skipped town a year ago, and Anthony hadn't found a musician like him since. And it wasn't for want of trying.

Tammy came bustling into the back, breaking his rhythm. Her arms were loaded with plates and forks and butter knives. A stack of used glasses was nestled between her upper arm and her bosom. "Ant, we're running low on silver," she said, dumping her load before him.

Anthony grabbed the plates as soon as she set them down and began rinsing. "I don't have that much to run. You've got to bring me some more."

"I said we're running low on silver."

"Maybe if wait staff stop throwing them in the trash on accident."

"We're slammed out there."

"So?"

"So why don't you come out from your wet little cave and help us?"

Anthony sucked on his teeth to show his displeasure, both with Tammy's bossiness and with the thought of the squish his wet shoes would make as he walked through the dining room. He knew that he and the line cooks always looked a mess, stained dirty aprons, gunk under yellow fingernails. He knew the customers didn't want to see that. He knew the customers liked

to think that it looked as pristine as a cooking show back here, even in a dumpy diner in a town as small as this. “I ain’t no bus boy. I don’t get tip-out.”

“Yeah,” Tammy said, throwing down the last of the plates in her hand and placing that hand on her hip, “but you do get paid.”

This is how the waitresses were allowed to treat him. He was at the bottom of the totem pole. He was the one always dripping, his shoes squishing when he walked, the soaked bottoms of his pants sticking to his ankles, going home smelling like the dingy water that lived in the very bottom of the dishwasher, bits of leftover food stuck on his arms and clothes like old vomit. He was the one the guys on the line made fun of, picked on, and pranked. They were the reason he had to smell his Coke if he walked away from it for too long. He learned his lesson quick after the time they seasoned his soda with a heaping of Texas Pete. But they sure liked him when they wanted cheap weed. They didn’t have Anthony’s ambition, his plan, his greatness. They’d be working in kitchens like this for the rest of their lives. Anthony could run this place. Hell, he could run the world. If he could just get the chance.

He sighed a quiet “Goddammit,” and shuffled over to retrieve an empty bus bin off the shelves. “I don’t know why we’re so busy anyway. It’s not like church just got out.”

But Tammy had already gone back to ignoring him. She was looking out the window of the kitchen door, spying on diners.

“I can’t believe Donna and Melissa showed up here this morning,” Deborah said to her.

“You should see how they are when I go up to the table. Donna looks about ready to throw up,” Tammy answered.

“And Melissa?”

“Off in la la land.”

“So, just a regular day for her?”

Tammy turned from the window and grinned. “She ordered French toast. I about asked her if she wanted a side of Zoloft.”

Both waitresses laughed. “Don’t be ugly,” Deborah giggled.

Anthony tuned them out. Those two could waste half a shift talking about their customers, complaining about bad tips, the newest assistant manager, slow cooks. He hefted his pants up with his free hand, bin in the other, and prepared to enter the dining room.

Tammy was brewing a fresh pot of coffee. “That news about Micah is making all my tables a little crazy this morning.”

Anthony turned at the door. “What’d you just say?”

Tammy and Deborah stared at him.

He looked from one face to the other. “What news?”

“I guess you haven’t heard,” said Tammy.

He wanted to smack the shit out of her. No, he hadn’t heard nothing. Why else was he asking?

“They found Micah’s hoodie in the woods,” Deborah said. “The ones behind Hillcrest.”

“Who?”

“The police.”

Anthony dropped the bus bin at his feet. “Damn.” He shuffled, dazed, back to his station, fishing for his cell phone in his pocket. He checked for new text messages, any missed calls. Only one—from his grandma. “Damn,” he said again.

Tammy scooped up the bus bin and dangled it at the end of her grip. Her other hand was back on her hip. “Uh, hello?”

He looked at her, through her. “That hoodie was left there for me.”

The guys on the line collapsed onto each other in exaggerated laughter. Tammy pursed her lips and cut her eyes at Deborah. “I’m going to bus since Mr. Local Celebrity over here can’t be bothered. You mind bringing coffee to fourteen?” She pushed the door open with the empty bin and was gone.

Deborah waited for the last of the coffee to drip through the brewer, then lifted the full pot from the warmer. She shook her head at Anthony and left. The line cooks were still laughing, muttering, “Aw shit,” and, “He think he special.”

They didn’t know what Anthony knew—or sensed, guessed, deduced—that Micah’d gone missing on purpose, had decided to lay low after he pissed off those crazy white boys, got one of them locked up for a minute. They didn’t know that, and no one was going to know that because Anthony wasn’t about to incriminate himself by telling the whole story to the police, wasn’t going to sell out his boy. If Micah was still gone, that meant he was still safe, that the Goffs hadn’t found him yet. But he was close enough to be leaving messages in the woods. And Anthony knew that message must be for him. He just had to figure out what Micah was trying to tell him. If only he’d found the hoodie first.

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Bill in hand, Donna approached the cash register by the door. The young hostess wore a broad smile while she rang up the meals. Donna was used to that smile. It was the one that everyone used to cover up their pity and the relief that what was happening to her family wasn't happening to them. She was tired of people being kind to her because it made them feel better. She wanted to be treated like any old stranger.

The hostess gave Donna her change, toothy smile still stuck on her face. "Here you go, Miss Donna. Just so you know, you've been on the prayer list at my mom's church. She goes to Mount Rehoboth."

Donna was certain she had never seen this girl before this morning.

She was tucking her money in her pocket and avoiding the hostess's eye when someone gave her arm a gentle squeeze. It was Loretta Jones, her boyfriend J.D.'s sister-in-law. She wore the same sympathetic smile as the hostess. "Just heard the news," she said. "How are you holding up?"

"Been better."

"Police know anything?"

"Not yet."

Loretta's elderly mother appeared from behind her and gave Donna's arm the same sad squeeze. "It's amazing what they found, isn't it?"

Donna looked down at the woman's hand, which still gripped her arm just above the elbow. The skin was wrinkled and blotted with liver spots. The nails were painted red, but the cuticles surrounding them were cracked and yellow.

"The police don't know anything yet," Loretta offered.

Loretta's mother nodded knowingly, as though she were an expert on these matters. "Take comfort in it, Donna. It's his spirit reaching out to you. And to Melissa. Telling y'all he's alright."

"His spirit?" Donna could not look away from the liver spots, the cracked cuticles on the manicured nails.

"Well, those woods are haunted, you know."

Loretta wrapped her arm around her mother's shoulder and led her toward the door. "Of course she knows, Mama." She shot an apologetic look over the white top of her mother's head and exited the restaurant.

Donna stood for a moment, waiting for the sting to subside. Tammy approached, her hands empty this time. She wrapped Donna in a quick, firm hug. "They'll find him."

"I'm about tired of being the subject of talk around here."

Tammy released her. "You're like me—prefer to participate."

Donna responded with a quick, quiet laugh and eyed the door.

"They ain't only talking about you," Tammy went on. "Nathan Goff was arrested yesterday."

At the sound of that name, Donna's attention, which hovered between the car idling in the parking lot and the littered woods on the way out of town, came rushing back to the restaurant. Nathan Goff—the son of an old friend. He and his brother were wild and destructive. And Donna was convinced that she and Melissa were living in the wreckage of one of their deeds. "For what?"

Behind them, a customer called Tammy's name. An old man was waving at her and pointing at an empty water glass. Tammy squeezed Donna's arm in the same spot where she had already been squeezed by Loretta and her mother. Tammy shrugged as she walked away to where the gasping man sat.

Donna left the restaurant before any more well-wishers could delay her and half jogged to where she had parked. Melissa had the car running, and it was warm when Donna took her seat behind the steering wheel. "Get comfy. We're not going home yet."

Melissa tapped her fingers on the armrest, still stuck in her trance. "What now?" she asked without meeting Donna's eye.

CHAPTER FOUR

Melissa's bed was made with clean sheets. On it was an open suitcase that so far held a couple pairs of pajama pants, jeans, three pairs of socks, and her favorite sweatshirt. She'd pack more as soon as all the laundry was clean and folded. In the meantime, she sat at the old desktop computer set up in the dining room that served as a home office, taking notes on a Hodges Property Service and Real Estate note pad. She would need to have the tire pressure checked, probably rotate the tires to be safe. Oil change. Have the belts looked at. She'd need to pick up a road map, too, just in case. Then there was the list of what she'd need to pack: pants, tops, shoes, socks, pjs, underwear, bras, toiletries. What about her belongings? Would she ever be coming back? Could her things—only those she couldn't live without—be sent to her later? She would have to figure all this out.

She had Google Maps open on the screen before her. She frowned when she saw the distance between Thorpe, South Carolina and San Diego, California. 2370 miles. A thirty-three-hour drive according to the website. That's if she drove straight through. In reality, she'd have to stop to eat and sleep. 2370 miles. That would be a lot of gas. But what if she packed a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter? And she could stay at KOAs instead of in a motel. She'd find that old tent out in the garage somewhere. She'd gone camping a couple times with her stepdad and brothers back when they were kids. She could do that again.

Melissa squirmed with excitement in the desk chair. She was back to strategizing again. Things were happening more quickly than she expected. She might hear from Micah again before too long, and she wanted to be prepared. She wanted him to be proud of her instead of

disappointed and angry, the way he had been after the first time he confided to her his plans to travel to San Diego. That had been a bad fight—one of their worst—and she would make it up to him.

The argument between Melissa and her son had taken on an all-or-nothing quality before she even realized that they were having a serious fight. It wasn't the same fight they always had—about taking her meds like she was supposed to, about getting up out of bed and living a life, any life, about being a mom instead of an overgrown child—yes, her teenage son had said that to her. That fight had been resurfacing with almost cyclic frequency in the past few years, ever since Micah had started high school and suddenly started caring about being like the other kids, which meant having a mom like all the other moms.

She had been in the kitchen, going through the cabinets and the refrigerator, not really seeing anything. It was movement of habit. Wake up and lay in bed awhile, eventually get so disgusted with yourself that you get up, but there's nothing worth doing around the house, so you wander into the kitchen because you know you should eat even though you're not hungry, you're never hungry, so you just open cabinet doors and stare at the food stored there until you're exhausted again and can't remember why you're even in the kitchen in the first place, so you go back to bed. Standing in the kitchen, staring at the pantry, is where Micah found her. He had been talking for several minutes, laying out plans for some trip, before she even registered that he had said, "I found my dad."

She turned and spoke. He may have been midsentence, but she wasn't sure and she didn't care. "Did you say you found Dan?"

"I found my dad."

She turned back to the stacks of cans on the second shelf. Tomato sauce, apple sauce, green beans, baked beans. “He’s dead.”

“He’s not. There’s a Dan Samuel on Facebook.”

Third shelf: the stuff they hardly ever used. Marshmallow puff, a bag of chopped walnuts, toffee bits, a bag of jelly beans left over from Easter five years ago. “There are probably a lot of Dan Samuels on Facebook.”

“But this one is my dad.”

“How do you know?” Potato chips, tortilla chips, box of pasta, Saltine crackers.

“For starters, he’s black.”

“So now you think every black man on Facebook is your father?” Melissa chose a box of chocolate chip cookies from the first shelf, regarded them momentarily, and placed them back in the pantry.

“He fits everything you’ve told me.” There was frustration in his voice.

“You’ve always thought I was lying.” She closed the cabinet and moved on to the fridge.

There had been a time in Micah’s life when he believed every word that Melissa told him about Dan and drank up her words with wonder and excitement and love. He was barely in elementary school when he began to ask about this father. At first, Melissa had evaded his questions. It was too hard, too painful to talk about Dan, to even think about him. His absence rose up like a lump in her chest, like a pill you can’t swallow, that sits in that spot where your neck meets your chest, and you drink and drink and drink water, but for whatever reason, that pill won’t go down. But eventually Micah wore her down with his sweetness. He had been sweeter to her than anyone else, certainly sweeter than Mama. On days that Melissa couldn’t get

out of bed, Micah brushed her hair. Aside from the yellow color, it was so different from his own, which curled in tight spirals against his scalp. He brought her water or ginger ale. When his grandmother had cooked a dinner that he especially liked, a dinner that Melissa had not bothered to come out of her bedroom for, he brought her buttered biscuits or a scoop of squash casserole on a small plate, a fork and a napkin. He was a good boy, and so she relented. She told him about his father, the soldier, the tank driver, who had been sent to Bosnia by the Army. But they had loved each other very much before he left, she told him. She had loved Dan very much. She told Micah about Dan's love for soft serve ice cream cones, how he always beat her when they played Hearts, but how she always beat him when they played Spades. She talked about Dan's Chicago accent and his promise to take her there someday when he would introduce her to his family. She talked about watching White Sox games with him, about how they were his favorite team. Some of the stories were true, based on what little she knew about Dan. The rest she imagined so that Micah would have a more complete picture of the man who would have—maybe—under different circumstances—been his father. Every time Micah did something sweet for her, she repaid him with another piece of information about his father. A favorite color. A favorite meal. A funny quirk. It became a game between mother and son.

Micah decided that the White Sox were his favorite baseball team. He also decided one fall to like the Chicago Bears. He collected Army men like a dictator. He told his teachers at school that someday he'd join the Army just like his dad. He asked his mother to buy him big black combat boots. He begged to go see the Fourth of July fireworks forty minutes away at Fort Jackson. She indulged him. She needed him to be happy.

Like most children, Micah had never asked easy questions, but the questions he asked about Dan were the hardest. “Are you sure my dad was a hero?” “What does MIA even mean? That he might not be dead?” “How long were you and my dad girlfriend and boyfriend?” By the time he hit middle school, the questions became accusations. “Was my dad actually in the Army?” “Did my dad even really love you?”

The questions felt like a punch in the gut to Melissa because she knew what they meant. Micah was beginning to believe that all her stories had been made up. He confirmed it for her one night when he was thirteen. She had been in bed all day, and he was frustrated with her. She tried to calm him by offering what had once been his favorite story, a story about Dan. Instead of crawling into bed with her, like he’d done when he was little, he’d protested that he was smart enough to figure everything out. “Stop treating me like I’m stupid,” he shouted. “I know how it must’ve been. He dumped you and left because you’re just white trash.”

“Don’t call your mother white trash.” Mama had appeared in the door of Melissa’s bedroom without either of them realizing it.

Micah’s shoulders were heaving now, tears forming. “She is. That’s what everyone says. At school.”

“About your mother?”

“About how she don’t work. About how she’s crazy.”

Mama grabbed him by his upper arm. Not fast or harsh, but tight. In a low tone she said, “You know better than to listen to kids at school. All y’all are ignorant about so many things. Apologize to your mama and go to your room.”

Micah struggled under his grandmother’s grip. “I’m not ignorant.”

She shoved him toward the bedroom door. “Get.”

Melissa’s head was bent under the covers. She was crying. She knew what the kids at Micah’s school said about her. It was the same thing that adults said, or thought if they didn’t say it out loud. That she was just lazy. That she had ruined Mama. That she had ruined herself by coming home to have a black baby. She didn’t like that Micah had to hear others say it about her. And now it was tarnishing his memory of his father. He didn’t believe any of Melissa’s stories any more. He thought his father was just another bad cliché.

And that was the problem: so did everyone else. But Dan wasn’t like that. Dan was, like she’d always told Micah, a hero. When she first came back home and folks in Thorpe whispered behind her back, it only made her love her new baby more, when at first it had been so hard to do so. In her youth, Melissa had never expected anything bad to happen to her or to anyone she loved. Sure, her grandparents, great-aunts and uncles, and eventually her own parents would pass on, but it would be expected, even appreciated if it happened after a long and debilitating decline. It would be after a life lived, genes and ideas and stories long passed down to new generations. But in her youth, especially after a youth passed in a place as unchanging as Thorpe, she never expected that people would pass in and out of her life as though they were only fleeting thoughts and not actual beings. People who rose up suddenly, meant so much, loomed so large in their brief existence, and then melted away just as suddenly.

This is how it had been with Dan. One day he did not exist in her life, and the next he was her life. She could not even remember the first time she saw him, met him. She just knew that for as long as she had been in Columbia—which was not terribly long—he was there. It was as though he was Columbia and came to her part and parcel with the city itself. The fact that he

told her that he hailed from Illinois did not dissuade her from this belief. Like the city, Dan held the promise of all that life had to offer a girl with the wherewithal to strike out from the town of her birth, her little rural county. Dan and Columbia held the key to everything she wanted, and when he mentioned once in passing that after Columbia there would be newer, larger cities, countries, continents, Melissa offered herself as the partner for that future. Savannah, Atlanta, New Orleans, Memphis, Chicago, New York, then Europe and Asia. But always Dan. He didn't even have to ask. In fact, he hadn't. But she offered because love meant sacrifice, and really it wasn't much of a sacrifice for her.

Instead she returned to Thorpe sooner than she ever planned. The return trip proved permanent. Dan had passed as quickly and mysteriously out of her life as he had entered it. And with him went all the certainty of youth, the strength of her convictions, everything she was pretty sure she knew was true. And in its place was this unknowing and the question of how to know the unknowable. And in Dan's place was a tiny stranger the color of dirty bathwater. Its eyes were dark, but its hair was hers, except for the curls. Those must have been Dan's. Where Dan had held hopeful possibility and a sense of sureness, this stranger—named by one of nurses in Labor and Delivery—was the embodiment of unanswerable questions, of foreignness, an alien that had come from her but did not feel a part of her.

This is not to say that she didn't have any affection for the thing. It's just that she knew—or sensed—that she was supposed to have more. The couple friends from high school who stopped by to lend what support they could told her that it could serve as a reminder of Dan—did its eyes favor him?—and all that they had shared, however brief. But the thing was not Dan. Dan was the color of stained mahogany, tall and thick, with a booming bass drum for a

voice. And this thing was the color of sand, of weak milk-diluted coffee or a dingy unwashed towel. It looked like a strange skinny hairless monkey, and the sounds that erupted from its toothless mouth were no sounds any human should or could or would make. This thing was not Dan. This thing was a reminder of all she had lost. A burden of heartsickness and fear and longing and never, ever knowing. It was a burden that belonged only to her and that is why she gave it her name and not its father's. Not Dan's. It was not Dan.

At first, like Mama, she couldn't seem to find it in her to hold the thing, to cuddle or coo. But she knew her reasons were different from her mother's. She left all of the usual infant interactions to Mama's church ladies, who came by frequently in the weeks after she gave birth, offering onesies and diapers and casseroles. They pretended to love the wriggling beige thing. They cuddled and cooed and reserved their cool judgment for her. One of them told her that she loved Melissa with the love of the Lord, even if she couldn't condone the actions that had led her to this predicament. That lady left enough chicken tetrazzini to feed four families and a bad taste in Melissa's mouth, both for the Lord and tetrazzini. She couldn't bring herself to partake of either after that. She listened from her bedroom as the church ladies fed the baby in the living room. She heard them cluck their tongues, could picture them shaking their heads in pious disappointment. They said how awful all this must be for Mama, how shocking and embarrassing. They said how sad for this poor little baby to grow up with no father, no legitimate name—so typical. Where would he fit in, they wondered, when he was neither white nor black. They had heard sad things, they told each other, about that in-between life. They said the worst, of course, was having such an ill-equipped mother, that Melissa wasn't fit to take care of herself, let alone a baby. Poor Donna, they repeated. Poor Donna.

Poor Donna nothing, Melissa had decided after that. That baby was hers, and she would prove all of them wrong by being an amazing mother and raising Micah to be the one who would shame them all. He was hers. All hers. She had never had anything that was all hers in her whole life. She had to share Dan with the Army and that family of his in Chicago. She had to share her own mother with boyfriends, two of which became stepfathers, her brothers, the real estate clients, and church members. But Micah belonged only to her, and she would keep herself free of distractions and be only his mother. That hadn't been an easy promise to keep given her condition, but they had managed. They had each other—unconditional, no questions, no accusations. They hadn't needed anything else. Of that she was sure. No matter how many times Mama said she was looking at things wrong. What did Mama know? Her sons had up and moved away the first chance they'd found.

And that was what made Micah's announcement in the kitchen so unfair. As he'd grown up, there had been questions and accusations. He had needed her less as she had needed him more. But that day in the kitchen was something new and unexpected. She didn't want to think about what Micah was suggesting. It implied a truth that frightened her, a truth she had refused to consider for seventeen years. This much she knew: Dan was dead. She had gotten the letter about his status from his sister in Chicago. Missing in action, she'd said. Somewhere in the Balkans. And would Melissa please stop sending so many letters, she'd said. Dan was gone.

If he was alive and living in San Diego, as Micah now claimed, it meant a pain she couldn't even think about. She opened the fridge and focused on the leftover dishes on its shelves so her mind wouldn't go there, knowing that she had never been terribly successful at controlling her thoughts. Mashed potatoes, pot roast in tin foil, spaghetti from three nights ago,

Dan on a sunny beach, Dan telling his sister to send that letter, Dan who wouldn't know he had a son because Melissa hadn't even known about her pregnancy until after he shipped out—to a place he was not authorized to tell her but that anyone who watched the evening news could make an educated guess about—and she hadn't responded to the sister's letter to let her know that the Samuel family would soon have a new, and lighter-skinned, member.

“Do you want some spaghetti?” Melissa asked.

“I'm afraid to talk to him,” Micah answered.

Chicken broth, carton of eggs, sour cream, cream cheese. She shifted items around to see what was in the back.

“I want to go find him.”

Melissa stood and turned to Micah. “No.”

“Don't you think he'd be happy to see me?”

“He's dead.” She knew this. It had to be true. It being untrue was too much to process.

“His profile says he's from Chicago. He drove a tank in Bosnia. His name is Dan Samuel.”

“How many Micah Burnside's you think there are on Facebook?”

“How many Micah Samuel's?”

She turned back to the fridge. She counted eight bottles of different salad dressings in the door.

“I'll be eighteen soon.”

“You can't go to San Diego.”

“What? Are you going to ground me?”

Melissa slammed the refrigerator door. She spun and got in her son's face. "Your father is dead." She enunciated each word, punctuated them, let them land on Micah's face slowly. "He died in Bosnia when I was still pregnant."

"And you ain't been right in the head since. I heard that story from Grandmama."

The lump that Melissa had been working to swallow since Micah had found her in the kitchen erupted from her face in tears and snot. "Why are you trying to hurt me?"

"I want to find my father."

She was crying harder. "He's dead. He's dead. He's dead," she kept saying. She coughed, and the cough turned into a gag. But her stomach was empty, so she didn't bother trying to make it to the sink. She cried and gagged and stood in the middle of the kitchen. "You used to be so sweet to me. You used to take care of me."

Micah was unmoved. "And now I have to take care of me."

"Your grandmother. Me. You are our life."

"I'm doing this. School will be over soon. I'll be old enough that you won't be able to stop me. I just wanted to let you know what I found out. I thought you should know." He turned to leave.

Melissa was torn between guilt—maybe she shouldn't have blindly believed the sister's letter, maybe she should have looked harder, maybe she should have forced the truth out of those people in Chicago—and fear, fear for her son and fear that he was right about this Facebook man in San Diego and fear what that discovery would bring. The fear and the guilt broke over her as anger.

Leaping forward, she pushed Micah in the back as he walked away from her. He sprawled out onto the living room floor, and she was on her knees, beating at his back, wailing, “Go on! Go on and go! Leave me! Disappear forever!”

Micah was twisting beneath her, trying to pull himself across the living room, trying to turn so he could face her and defend himself. He yelled for her to get off of him. They were both crying. She punched his legs with all her strength, but it was so tiring. More tiring even than standing in the kitchen deciding not to eat. The crying and the hitting were making her so tired. Micah kicked and pushed her off him, then pulled himself up to his knees. He was breathing hard, his face red. He wiped his sleeve across his nose. “Let me do this,” he pleaded. He sat back on the floor and put his face in his hands. “I’m not leaving you. But please let me do this.”

Melissa had curled into the fetal position, sobbing. Over her son’s request, she howled her own accusations, ones of abandonment, of never having received the love or the compassion or the help she needed, the help she refused to ask for or accept. They should know. They should see what she needed. And right now she needed her son to stay hers, not to belong to a California imposter, because if Dan didn’t die, he left. So she cried and cried and shouted at him that he never loved her, he never ever loved her even though she had sacrificed everything for him and he was Dan and he was Micah and she was crying to whoever would listen, to whoever might respond. Everyone had left her.

Micah pulled himself to his feet. “I can’t talk to you, Mom.” He left. She didn’t know if he had gone out or just gone to his room. She stayed curled on the living room floor, in and out of sleep while the light faded and the house grew dark.

But he was talking to her now. It had taken time, but the breach had finally been repaired.

After he left, she had been angry at him, just like that day in the kitchen. She stayed out of his room. She refused Mama's attempts to talk about him. All out of anger. He had left her, and it was so unfair. Unannounced no less. How could he just abandon her?

But all anger cools over time, just like her anger at Dan had. By Christmas, she missed Micah terribly. She was depressed and impatient. She entered his room for the first time in almost a year. It was exactly as he'd left it. Mama'd made sure of that. She entered his room to recapture some kind of closeness with him, to find that connection they'd shared when he was little, the connection that was only theirs. Instead, she found his objects. His cello leaning in the corner. His video game controller. His alarm clock and school books. She touched them, held them, but nothing happened. These objects wouldn't speak to her.

Until the hoodie. The hoodie in the woods. That changed everything. That spoke to her—patience rewarded. Now she would be prepared. When Micah spoke to her again, all she would have to do is grab the car keys and go.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jill poured tar-black coffee into a Styrofoam cup at the old Cheapo Gas and Food Store on Main Street, the one with the pumps whose displays were still the dials of numbers that rotated as you filled your car, where the parking lot was littered with wet trash that stuck to the pitted pavement, where the cracked sidewalk just in front of the door was dotted with old wads of gum that had long ago turned black with age and lost their stickiness. The inside was not much better—tile scuffed and cracked, wobbly shelves offering their wares of assorted snack food and toilet paper, one fluorescent light in the back corner that never stopped flickering. But it had everything a convenience store needed in order to be convenient.

Jill flinched when she took her first sip. The coffee scalded her tongue, leaving that burnt furry feeling in its wake, and it tasted like shit, too strong. Whatever store employee had made it simply didn't know how to measure out an appropriate amount of grounds. Jill glanced over her shoulder at the fat black woman behind the cash register who was filing her nails, a bored look on her face. The woman said "have a nice day" in monotone to all the customers as she handed them their change. She was unapologetic in her insincerity. Jill curled her lip, judged the woman a lazy idiot, and wondered if it would be asking too much for someone to open a respectable coffee shop in this town. For a moment she missed being on campus in Columbia, the conveniences and luxuries that city life afforded. She tried salvaging her cup of coffee with heaping amounts of non-dairy creamer and packet after packet of sugar.

Outside the smudged front window of the store, the late January morning was unusually cold, the wind chill below freezing. But at least it was sunny. Jill was glad for the sun today, for

the sharp sting of wind on her face. She had a job interview, and she needed every ounce of lightness she could get, especially since sleep wasn't coming easily, hadn't been for months.

The interview was for a position as an office assistant at Hodges Property Services and Real Estate. Donna Neese was one of the agents there. Jill kept telling herself that she wanted the job so that she could be working and not just taking up space in her parents' house, so that she wouldn't have to wait tables or go back to bagging groceries, but she knew her motivations were murkier than that.

"I know you." The male voice startled her. She turned and immediately recognized Micah's friend Anthony. She had been to his place a few times with Micah. They had smoked weed, and she had listened to them play together—weird, old blues songs she'd never heard of and jazz riffs that went on and on. She didn't know anyone who could play clarinet like Anthony. She didn't know anyone like Anthony who played the clarinet. It had been over a year since she'd seen him, but he looked the same—tall, skinny but toned, with a neatly trimmed fade. She thought he dressed like an idiot with his baggy black jeans and loose gray sweatshirt, but other than that, he could definitely pass for cute.

"You're Micah's girl," he said. "I remember you."

She bristled at the way he addressed her—*Micah's girl*. She tightened her grip on her cup and held it close to her chest with both hands. "You're the musician," she answered.

"Among other things." He scratched the side of his head, just above his ear. "How are you?"

"Fine, thank you."

He looked like he expected her to ask him the same question, but she didn't want to be having this conversation. He was the only person in Thorpe, as far as she knew, who had ever known about her and Micah. He had proven himself capable of keeping secrets, especially during the weeks after Micah's disappearance when the thought of the news of their relationship getting out made her breath come quick but useless. At the time, the police were asking questions—sort of—and his grandmother was asking questions—lots—and Jill kept replaying in her mind an awful scene of having to explain everything to her parents, of trying to make them understand that not wanting to answer questions or explain their feelings is what led to the secret in the first place. How could she ever make them see that she and Micah had just wanted something for themselves, something that they didn't have to share with anyone else? So she had kept her mouth shut. And apparently so had Anthony. She was grateful to him for that. But she didn't think that made them friends.

Unfortunately, it seemed Anthony wanted to do more than exchange greetings. He dropped his voice and leaned toward her. "What do you think about that hoodie thing?" He looked around, as if to check that no one was close by, spying on them. He seemed nervous. "Someone put it there."

"That seems obvious."

He leaned in closer. "I think I know who."

Jill raised her eyebrows in an unspoken question. She really hoped she wouldn't have to drag everything out of him.

"Micah."

She almost made a joke about how he had clearly been smoking too much something, but what he had just said was too crazy, too unbelievable to allow a joke. She couldn't even be mad because it simply wasn't true.

He continued. "It makes so much sense."

It did not make sense to her. Micah was gone, and it seemed by now that he would stay gone. Was Anthony messing with her? She began to turn away, but he grabbed her shoulder.

"I think it means he's back. He's close. But he's laying low." He looked around again. Was he worried that someone might be listening? To what? His delusions? "I don't know if Nick and Nathan still have it out for him, but you can never be too careful, you know?"

"Is that what you think? The Goffs?" Jill knew that something had happened between Micah and the Goff brothers. Something bad. But she didn't know the specifics. She knew it involved an arrest, some drugs, probably nothing worse than some weed. But the Goffs had bad blood with half the county. Even she tried to steer clear of them, and she didn't know them beyond physical recognition. But all that had happened before she and Micah ever got together, and either way it didn't matter because that had nothing to do with him being gone now.

Anthony was persistent. "What else would it be?" When Jill stared at him without answering, his assuredness seemed to seep out of him. "You got another theory?"

Of course she did, not that she would share it with him. In fact, everyone in Thorpe seemed to have his or her own theory of where Micah was, ranging from plausible to inane, hopeful to tragic. The town's residents bore their unique theories like fingerprints—personal, one of a kind. She knew hers sounded crazy. Who believed in evil spirits and magical nonsense? She certainly hadn't, but was now convinced by her own experiences, the strange nightmares that

weren't really nightmares—at least she didn't think. She knew better than to try to convince anyone else.

Anthony shifted, clearly unsure what to do with her silence. “How you been?”

“You already asked me that.”

“Right.”

She turned toward the counter, already digging in her purse for her wallet.

“We should hang out some time,” Anthony said.

She glanced up, eyebrows raised. He couldn't be serious.

“I'm probably having people over on Friday. Not like a real party or anything. People just always seem to show up.” He shifted again. He had the look of someone whose underwear was bunching uncomfortably. “You should come by. You know where it is.”

Something in his invitation made her shoulders relax. She appreciated what he was trying to do, and a part of her wanted to accept his invitation. But instead she answered, “I'm not Micah's girl. I haven't been for a long time.”

*

There was no receptionist at the office. Jill was greeted by one of the agents. His tone was curt, and he sighed a lot. He shook his head as he marked her name off a list, told her to sit and wait, and was gone before she had even settled into the short upholstered chair. Somewhere down a hallway, she thought she heard a door slam.

She looked around the office with its low ceiling, cherry-colored furniture, and fake ficus trees in the corners. On the end table next to her were outdated magazines. Log home design. Land for sale in Kershaw, Richland, and Sumter Counties. An apartment guide for Camden and Thorpe. Interior design. They were all at least a year old.

She looked up when she heard a door open. She expected Donna to emerge, greet her, invite her in. Instead, Brittany Jones was the one who appeared, walking forward, but looking behind her and waving. “See you this weekend, Miss Donna. I’ll tell Uncle J.D. you said hi.” When she faced forward, she saw Jill, paused as a flicker of delayed recognition moved across her face, then straightened and smiled. “Well, hi. Jill, right?”

Jill didn’t stand, didn’t offer her hand. “Jill McManus, yeah. I graduated a year after you.”

Brittany giggled. “That’s right. You were always running those pep rallies and service weeks and stuff.”

“I was on student council.” Jill picked up one of the old magazines from the table and began flipping through it.

Brittany moved her purse from one shoulder to the other. “Are you here to buy a house?”

Jill glared at her, but tried to smile. Brittany knew damn well she wasn’t buying a house. “I have an interview.”

Brittany dropped her jaw in mock surprise. “Here? Not for the office assistant job. That’s what I just interviewed for.”

“Same one.”

Brittany giggled again, adjusted her purse strap. There was a small diamond on her left hand. “I just can’t believe it. Weren’t you some kind of genius? I figured you’d be off at college.”

Jill licked her fingertip and flipped a few pages in the magazine. “I was.”

“Uh oh.” Brittany’s eyes widened. “Not pregnant, are you?”

Jill turned another page. “No.” She looked up, fixed a hardened gaze on Brittany’s eyes. “Not that that’s any of your business.”

Brittany smiled, and it was as fake as Jill’s had been just moments ago. “You’re right. It’s not.” She moved to the door and placed her hand on the knob. “Good luck on your interview.” Jill didn’t respond, except to turn another page, and Brittany swung open the door and left, leaving only cold air in her wake.

Jill snapped the magazine shut and tossed it back on the table. Brittany Jones. Jill hated her. Just another giggly country bumpkin with no higher ambition in life than to skate through high school, get a dinky job, marry the first boy who looks at her twice, and have babies as soon as possible. Jill hated her even more knowing that she was competing against her for work. Now she was no different from those bumpkins she had graduated with, looking for a dinky job, no prospect of ever leaving Thorpe. What was different about Jill was that she was smart enough to realize what a huge waste of her talents it was to stay here. Unlike Brittany and everyone else like her, Jill had ambition. At one time, Jill had plans, real plans, for moving out of Thorpe for good. She was too smart for this place, but here she was because of weakness, because she allowed Micah to draw too much softness out of her, and that softness had made his absence too much of a distraction. She was disgusted with herself, all the more now that she knew Brittany

would probably get hired over her. Her family was so close to Donna's they were practically related. Jill, on the other hand, had done very little to cultivate relationships in this town. She hadn't planned on needing them.

There had only been one relationship in Thorpe that had meant anything to her, and she wouldn't say she cultivated it. It had just moved like an avalanche plowing down a mountainside. She had just let it pick her up and carry her without question or consideration. She let herself enjoy the ride, the dizziness of it, the feeling of racing toward an end, the way Micah always acted so damned appreciative of her attention. Their relationship hadn't needed cultivating. It was effortless. It was completely theirs. Their secret gave them power. At least for a while.

What would he say now to her if he was here? He would tell her, as he had told her many times, that she was the smartest person he knew, that she was going to do great things no matter where she ended up. He would tell her to go into this interview and show his grandmother all the ways that he knew she was brilliant. But he saw things in her others didn't, not because she didn't show these things. She'd never known they were there. Micah, it seemed, interpreted her differently. He had said she was confident, ambitious, on a mission to change the world. But others knew her as cocky, arrogant, condescending, and while she resented that characterization, she was the one who had crafted it. She wanted her classmates to know that she knew she was better than them, smarter, more talented and ambitious. Only Micah saw her any differently. Because he was different. Because, like her, he wanted something different for his life. She was never entirely sure what that was because he never told her, but she could see it in the way he

would stare down the interstate like he wanted to keep driving. They were not meant for this place, but they were stuck here, at least temporarily.

Now she was back. Stuck. Micah had left, but not in a way she had ever anticipated. And more than that, she knew now that something existed in the air around her that was angry, both a part of her and something other. It visited her at night when she reached that place that wasn't quite dreaming and wasn't quite waking. It floated around her like an aura. It went wherever she went. Aside from shaking that aura, which she feared she had brought on herself, she knew of no way to improve her situation.

Donna appeared in the doorway to her office. She looked entirely professional in a pressed pantsuit and smart flats, but something in her appearance betrayed a weariness, a distraction. Maybe it was the way her hair jutted out on one side as though a child had been brushing it. Maybe it was the way her entire body seemed to sag as she stood there. "Are you Jill McManus?" she asked.

Inside Donna's office, Jill sat straight-backed in a chair that matched exactly the one in the lobby. The entire room was an exact match of the lobby, just smaller and more enclosed, complete with artificial ficus in the corner. The plastic blinds were closed.

"I apologize," Donna said. "Mr. Hodges couldn't be here today, so I'll be conducting your interview."

"Okay." Jill couldn't decide if this would help or hurt her chances.

"I've looked over your resume, Jill, and it's very impressive."

"Thank you."

"Why don't you tell me about yourself?"

There was so much Jill wanted to say to the woman sitting before her. Jill wanted to grab her hands, to say, “Ms. Neese, I’m so sorry. It was me. I was the one who made Micah leave. I don’t know how he left or where he is now. And now I don’t know if he’ll ever come back. Let me make it up to you. To him.” Instead, she told of her experience working at the Winn-Dixie, of how they trusted her enough to be a key holder, almost unheard of for a high schooler. She told of all her leadership positions in school clubs, her exceptional grades, all the things that had gotten her into college. She sold herself like she had been taught to sell herself. To list her accomplishments until someone asked, “When do you sleep?” That was the signal that she had nailed it.

But Donna didn’t say that. Glancing down at Jill’s resume, she said, “So you left Winn-Dixie in August. You don’t have anything listed after that. What have you been doing the past four months?”

Jill felt her entire body go warmer. “I spent a semester at Carolina.”

“Did you work?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Any activities?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Why do you think college didn’t work out for you?”

Jill felt a trickle of sweat migrate down the small of her back. She knew exactly why. She hadn’t been able to share that why with anyone—not her parents, not the few friends she had in high school and kept up with online, certainly not with the person interviewing her. It certainly wouldn’t help her get the job if she said that, after realizing that Micah was likely gone for good,

she'd tried to purge herself of guilt, of love—and anyway she couldn't tell the difference anymore. She only knew that partying most nights and sleeping with most boys didn't lead to good grades.

She had practiced an answer for this question, but sitting here before Donna, someone who knew Micah perhaps more intimately than Jill did, that answer felt hollow, like a cop-out. She repeated it anyway. “I feel that I am not ready for college at this time and would prefer to gain some real world experience instead.”

Donna nodded, apparently appeased by this answer. She clasped her hands in front of her on the desk and launched into a description of the job duties—answering phones, keeping up with the appointment calendars for the four agents who worked here, greeting clients, offering them refreshments, maintaining the break room, the contracts with the copier guys, fixing the copier when it breaks—because it will break—regularly checking the fax machine, maintaining correspondence with banks and mortgage brokers and attorneys, setting up closings, sending listings to the local magazines and papers, finding out about local networking events, keeping up with the advertising. Then she asked Jill if she had any questions.

“What happened to your last office assistant?”

“She moved away.”

*

Jill closed the door behind her as requested. She was seething. First Brittany, now Donna. Hiding accusations in innocent-sounding questions. Judgments is what they were. And

it meant that she probably would still be on the job hunt. She wanted to scream. She wanted to kick something or someone. But she knew how the game was played, so she stayed quiet, especially when she realized that someone was standing at the empty receptionist desk talking on the phone.

He was not the same angry agent that had welcomed her to the office. His back was to her, but she could tell by the cut of his khakis, his narrow waist, the muscles of his shoulders showing through his tailored shirt—the initials BRM embroidered on the cuffs—the smell of hair gel, that he was young, perhaps even close to her age. “Yes, ma’am,” he was saying into the receiver, “the Magnolia Trace property is still available, but it’s priced to sell, so I wouldn’t wait too long to make a decision on it.”

Jill could easily slip out unnoticed, drive home to sulk. But curiosity held her in place. She wanted to see what this agent looked like from the front. She listened as he told the caller to reach him on his cell phone before the close of business, made a joke about the winter weather, and said his good-bye. He hung up and turned toward Jill. He didn’t appear surprised to see her there. He smiled at her. “Are you one of our applicants?”

She shook his offered hand and nodded. He was attractive, quite attractive. She was immediately suspicious. And she worried about how sweaty her palm was. “I’m Jill.”

“Boyce Mims.”

“Boyce Mims?” she repeated. “Well aren’t you straight off the plantation.”

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “If you mean I have a very traditional name, then yes.”

She opened her mouth, but unsure of how to respond, shut it again. He was still holding onto her hand.

“I haven’t been here long, but it’s nuts not having an assistant. I bring in entirely too much business to be having to do all this other stuff myself.” He let go of her hand. “It’s not my job anyway.” He half sat, half leaned against the desk, shoulder cocked as he appraised her, an act he made no attempt to disguise. He could have been a catalog model. “The sooner you start, the better,” he said.

“How do you know I’m good for the job?”

“Just a feeling I get. I have a way of reading people.”

Jill was not impressed by his salesman act or any special skills he possessed. “I just interviewed. I wasn’t offered the job. Probably won’t get it either. Ms. Neese’s family friend left here just as I was coming in.

“Brittany? Dumber than a box of rocks, isn’t she?” He smiled, and it was a catalog model smile. And just as insincere. Boyce lowered his voice like a conspirator. “I told Donna not to hire her. Just because she’s practically family doesn’t mean anything. That’s what’s wrong with this town, why no one can get ahead. Keep doing favors for people who haven’t earned them.”

“It’s called nepotism.”

He leaned back, smiled again. This time his grin was smug. “I have a different take on things.”

“And what’s that?” She had lowered her voice, too. She wondered if he knew she was mocking him. Boy who looked like catalog models usually weren’t the quickest.

“I’m not from here.”

“I figured.”

“Because you’ve never seen me before?”

“Was I supposed to be on the look-out for you?”

Boyce straightened and smiled again with just his mouth. “From the next county over,” he said. “Finished up at Coastal last month. Came here because I can see the writing on the wall.”

Jill cocked her head to the side and thought about a sarcastic remark she wanted to make about speaking in clichés. She said nothing though. She still needed this job, and she decided that her silence was an exasperating enough way of avoiding the question she knew he expected her to ask.

“Thorpe’s Columbia’s newest bedroom community. Running out of room for shiny new subdivisions. And what was once shiny and new down there is getting old and ghetto. You know that though. You keep up with the news. I can tell.”

She bit her tongue to keep from rolling her eyes.

“So the new suburbs will be here. If you build it—and put in hardwood floors and granite countertops—they’ll come. And I’ll be happy to make that commission.”

“Sounds like you got it all figured out.”

“Something like that.”

“Must be nice.”

“It is.” He stood up from the desk, jiggled some change in his pants pocket. He looked her up and down again. “I get a good vibe from you. Seem like someone too good to be working the front desk here.”

She would not roll her eyes, no matter how badly she wanted to show him that she did not take him seriously. “I need a job.”

“Tell you what. I’ll put in a good word for you. Donna’ll hire you.”

“Boyce Mims—the most powerful man at Hodges. And so soon on the job?” Jill regretted the comment as soon as it was out of her mouth, but she couldn’t help it. This guy was begging for it.

“She always listens to me.” His smug grin was back.

“I’ll be sure to send a thank-you note.” She began toward the door.

“You can owe me later.” He put his hand out again. She shook it once, then released herself from his grip. She looked back as she exited. He was watching her go. As she pushed the door open, she wiped her right hand on her skirt.

*

It came to her like a lucid dream, almost every night since she had left for school. It was a dream, dark, full of thrashing and an ugly, otherworldly face just inches from her own, swinging back and forth, frothing at the mouth. On some nights, the face was clearer: cartoonishly wide grin with large square teeth in neat rows, fat red lips, mean and bulging eyes, but mostly that mouth taking up so much of the face, that freakish grin. It was laughing at her, gleeful in its ability to frighten her.

The first time it happened in the dark of her cinderblock dorm room, she tried to sit up, and she realized that she was in fact already awake. Awake, but not. Her eyes were closed, but

she could see. The face. A ghoul. Whatever it was, it commanded her vision. She could plainly see it leering at her, could feel it kneeling on top of her, its legs pinning down her chest and shoulders, its hands clawing at her throat, its head shaking back and forth in front of her, just inches, their noses practically touching. Her arms, legs, eyelids paralyzed. But she was awake. She knew she was awake. She had never dreamed like this, so conscious, so present. She had never been so entirely unable to move. To breathe. But she could see through her eyelids. She could see that face before her own. She could hear it now. Raspy, gurgling on its own frothy saliva. Laughing like a hell clown. It wanted to scare her. It delighted in scaring her. That made her angry. She tried to move, to push it off her chest, but it was too heavy. And it was cursing her. She could and could not hear it all at once. Somewhere in her consciousness she could feel that it was spewing filth and hate at her. She wondered why it hated her so much. And in her anger, her surprise, she tried to curse it back, but could not get her lips to move. So she cursed it in her mind, the same way it was cursing her. Consciousness to consciousness—because she was sure at this point that it was a conscious entity. She poured every ounce of strength into the words flowing from her brain, just as foul and hateful as the being's. All of her power. The full force of her thoughts. She pushed with imaginary arms. She kicked with imaginary legs. She fought back inside her mind against this grinning, slobbering devil. It was strong, but she was stronger. Of this she was sure. She was real. Flesh and blood and not a floating ether or magnetic anomaly or a fleeting soul trapped between electric bursts. She pushed, she strained, she willed her body back into movement, that grin, that tongue always in front of her.

Until all at once there was a release, like a burst, like the click of a lock unlocking. She bolted up in the bed, nothing around her but her dark room, her roommate asleep in the other bed. The grin was gone from in front of her closed eyes.

It was no different this night in Thorpe than it had been that first night on campus, no different from any of the nights in between—except for the ones when she drank enough to pass out or stayed out so late that it became early. On this night, as on all the others, she found herself sitting in bed. Her eyes were open and adjusted to the where she could make out the shapes of familiar furniture and the streetlamp shining through her window. The grin was gone. The bugging eyes were gone. That rasp, that sound, the drip of stinking spit. All gone. But her heart still beat wildly. Her breath came in gasps. And though the thing was gone from on top of her, she knew it was still in the room. So she hissed in an angry whisper, “Get out!” And in a few more moments, her heart rate slowed, her body cooled, her muscles relaxed, and the night went back to being just a cold night in her bedroom in her house in her town. As though nothing had happened. As though it had all been a dream, but she knew it wasn’t a dream. She’d never dreamed like that, not even in her worst moments. And she knew—no doubting, no wondering, no speculating—she had been visited—this night, just like every night—by something not of the physical world. Why did it try to scare her?

And she knew she could tell no one because they would tell her she was dreaming, call it night terrors, say she imagined it, she was dreaming, but she was not dreaming. She knew what a dream was like. This was something entirely different and new and she was not dreaming. She was visited, and it made her angry. It made her realize how angry she was. It made her realized she was always angry. “Get out. Get the fuck out,” she hissed again. She turned on the bedside

lamp, lay back on her pillow—no, on her side this time—and tried to calm herself back into dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER SIX

Anthony's coworkers were so used to following him home after work on Friday nights to smoke that it had become a sort of ritual. Sometimes it was just a few of them. Other nights, the whole crew. He sat on the edge of an old easy chair that clicked when it rocked, like something in its mechanism was about to break, with the scratched, hand-me-down coffee table pulled close. His coworkers—his friends—waited on the lumpy couch, joking, talking, anticipating.

That night was only DeVonte and Maurice so far. In front of Anthony was a pile of loose tobacco, brown paper curling at its edges that had once been a gas station cigar, and an open plastic bag filled with weed. He held a bud in his hand, breaking it apart and dropping it in a line on the brown paper. He studied it.

DeVonte got up and paced by the window, stopping every other moment to peek through the blinds. His restlessness did nothing to speed up Anthony's process. DeVonte was tall and incredibly dark-skinned. His head was shaved bald, and high cheekbones stood as two peaks on the sides of his face. He ran the fry station at the Waddlin' Duck and often gave Anthony a hard time. Anthony took his time with the blunt. It was his only revenge.

DeVonte looked through the blinds again. "There's some white girl coming up your walk."

Maurice, pudgy, in need of a shave, already high, and comfortably lodged deep in the broken cushions of the couch snickered. "Guess she don't know how business works around here."

Anthony got up and joined DeVonte at the window. Here came Jill, looking completely out of place in front of his rundown shotgun house, identical to the other houses on the street with its peeling paint, crumbling front porch, and weedy lawn that was more patches of sand than grass. It was an unusual place for her to be walking alone—day or night. Cars in various states of decay lined the curb, rusted, dented, worse for wear. Only one of the streetlights was working, and that was five houses up. Except for the occasional porch light, the rest of the neighborhood sat in thick winter darkness. Anthony was surprised and tried to hide his smile. “I invited her,” he said. He sat back down and resumed his ritual.

DeVonte swung the door open before she knocked. He grunted a hello, nodded once, and walked back to the couch, leaving her on the darkened threshold. Anthony’s porch light was never on. She peered in.

“Just in time,” Anthony greeted her. “Fixing to smoke this.”

She shut the door behind her. Maurice and DeVonte scooted to make room for her on the couch. They eyed her with an obvious mixture of disbelief and amusement. Maurice especially was too stoned to try to hide his reaction. Ignoring them, Jill looked around the small living room. She had only been there during the day, and only a couple times, and only with Micah. Back then she had commented on how clean and tidy and bright it was for a bachelor pad—her words. Anthony had told her that it threw the cops off. It was just as clean this night, the white walls glowing even in the dim light from the single floor lamp.

“Didn’t think I’d see you tonight.”

She didn't answer. When he looked up, Jill shrugged and hugged her purse in her lap. "You said there'd be a party," she finally answered. She gave the guys on the couch a disappointed glance.

Maurice giggled again. He hadn't taken his eyes off Jill since she came in. "Shit. She a cop or something?"

"She got a name."

"I'm Jill." She was staring back at Maurice, but she wasn't laughing.

Anthony pointed at her with a ripped up bud. "Friends with Micah."

Maurice looked at her as though seeing her for the first time. DeVonte looked suspicious.

Anthony went back to working on the blunt. "My boy can play now. Cello, bass, violin. He's crazy good. He plays cello for old white ladies at church on Christmas. Then he comes here and play all swampy. High as fuck. All them church ladies think he so sweet. They don't know shit." He stopped and looked up at Jill again. "Hey, you play cello, too, right?"

She cleared her throat. "I got a job. Today. Like, an offer."

"Well, then we celebrating," Anthony said.

Maurice nudged Jill. He held the baggie up to her. "Here. Smell this."

She stuck her nose in the bag, inhaled deeply, then smiled.

Maurice smirked and nodded. "Yeah, some of that stupid." Then he nudged DeVonte. DeVonte was still eyeing Jill, looking like he wanted to say something but remaining silent.

Anthony finished rolling the blunt. He lit the end, took a few starter puffs to get it going, and handed it to Jill. "Ladies first."

Jill met Anthony's eye as she gripped the unlit end of the blunt. She had a strange look to her, like she knew some secret and was trying to send it to him telepathically, like she was thinking of a private joke and expected him to remember it. Her face, her presence in his living room, confused him. She inhaled, holding the smoke in her lungs. Then she coughed, and coughed again. Maurice and DeVonte laughed, but Anthony nodded knowingly. "Been awhile," he said.

She nodded back, still coughing, one hand on her chest, the other holding the blunt away from her.

"Hit it again. The second one will be smoother."

She did as she was told, then exhaled slowly, the cloud coming out of her mouth obscuring her face. When it cleared, she was smiling again. Without taking her eyes off Anthony, she handed the cigar to DeVonte, then leaned back against the couch cushions. She sighed.

"Your boy's been a bad influence," Anthony said.

A scowl passed over her face like a shadow and was gone. Anthony suddenly felt like he should apologize, but he didn't know what for.

The four of them passed the blunt around several more times. Jill was quiet, quieter than he knew her to be, but the smirk forming at the edges of her mouth told Anthony that she was feeling the effects of the drug. He was feeling it, too. It was a satisfying drowsiness. The muscles in his face felt tight and relaxed at the same time. His heartbeat thumped fast and loud inside his head. It made him think of listening to the stereo with the bass way up. As he lounged, he fixated on Jill's lone dimple, the little divot in her otherwise smooth cheek. He had never noticed it

before. He had noticed other things about her before—the long brown hair that looked like it'd be soft if he touched it, her narrow hips. But the dimple he'd never noticed before.

Then Maurice began to laugh. Hard. Anthony didn't know why Maurice was laughing, but it broke something open in him. He began to laugh along. Then DeVonte let out a cough that became a laugh, like he had been trying to hold it in. Jill's smirk shifted. She giggled quietly, her hand over her mouth like she was embarrassed. Maurice was howling. He fought to catch his breath, to say something, but his words came out as a breathless, high-pitched gibberish. This made Jill laugh harder. Eyes squeezed shut, she laughed like someone who was making up for lost time. Then she snorted, which sent all of them into another fit. Then, eyes wide, she laughed until she looked on the verge of hysteria, hand clenched to her side. She rocked back and forth on the couch, still laughing, staring at Anthony. The others calmed themselves and watched her until she slumped back exhausted.

“Atta girl,” Anthony whispered and passed the blunt to DeVonte. “She's alright for now.”

*

Anthony's phone vibrated all night with one text message after another. With each one, he would rise, walk down the hall past the bedroom door and the bathroom where he hid his stash and out the back door where a customer would be standing just beyond the confines of his backyard in the dark vacant field between his neighborhood and the IGA shopping center. He didn't like people who were buying to stop at his curb, to creep by in their cars, to bang on his

door late at night. He was pretty sure that was how he got in trouble the last time, which was the first time. This night, on his third trip to the backyard, he ducked into his bedroom to grab the small handgun he kept around just in case. He loaded it and tucked it into his waistband, then covered it with his shirt. There was something about tonight, a strange electricity in the air outside. The dead grass in his back yard seemed like static-charged carpet ready to spark and ignite the whole town with each step. Anthony almost never got paranoid like DeVonte, but now that he had been stoned for a while, his nerves were thin and taut. And why had Jill actually shown up?

Back inside, the narrow house began to fill with people. The usual faces floated through the front door—more people from work, folks from the neighborhood, anyone from Thorpe who was under 25 and didn't have a kid or two and even some who did. They carried cigarettes and cell phones, some weed of their own to share, beer, liquor, sometimes pills. As they ran low, they bought more from Anthony. He didn't mind if cars parked and stayed awhile. He had decided way back that parked cars didn't look as suspicious.

Each time he came in from out back, rubbing his hands together and cursing “Fuck January!” there was someone new offering to match up with him. He rolled another blunt and then another until Casey Funderburk—when had he gotten here?—handed him a glass bowl and said, “Here, this is easier.” Anthony made a remark about hippy white folks. Or maybe he just thought it. He immediately couldn't remember. He knew it was stupid to smoke this much when his house was full of people, only half of whom he really knew as more than a familiar last name or face. But he wanted to shake the nervousness that had settled in after the first blunt. He didn't

want to have any responsibility for what was going to go down—he knew something was going to go down. His body seemed to know something he didn't.

The next time he came back in, he settled on the couch but didn't join in any of the conversations around him. He stared at the orange, brown, and cream textured plaid upholstery. It was ugly as sin, and he committed to buying a new couch soon. He became aware at some point that the television was on. He watched an entire episode of *Cops* to a soundtrack of dubstep-infused hip-hop before he realized that the music was coming from the stereo and not the tv. That made him laugh. He realized that he hadn't seen Jill in awhile.

The next time he came back in, he saw her. She had kicked aside some empty bottles and a pile of discarded cigar tobacco and was flapping around to a club song. She looked ridiculous, but she was smiling. Maurice and DeVonte stood by, cheering her on and laughing. Everyone was fucked up. Or maybe it was just Anthony. He was having a hard time figuring out if they were as far gone as him. The song ended, and Jill hopped down from the table. She was out of breath. Anthony pushed through the crowd. It felt like a crowd in the small space. Was it any more than ten people? Then he was next to her. He slipped his arm around her waist. She started, turned, and laughed again. She was very close. She smelled like fruit, like girly fruit shampoo, or whatever it was that gave girls that scent of oranges and candy. It mingled with a scent more earthy and humid, coming off her in waves. It was the smell of sweat and exertion, of her.

Jill's eyes were wide, but glassy, the whites bluish-gray. She studied his face as if trying to remember who he was or how she wound up next to him. She said nothing for what felt like a long time, then, "You have really long eyelashes." She had to shout over the stereo. "They almost look fake." She looked him up and down. "How old are you?"

Anthony tried to think of something to say, but it took him too long to process what she had just said to him. Then a response wouldn't come. Then he realized that he'd never noticed the crack in the wall just over Jill's shoulder and that he was suddenly hungry. So he just laughed. Jill drew back and stared at him like she was trying to figure out what was so funny. She looked surprised, then started laughing, too. "I dance like a white girl," she said. Then his phone vibrated again and he had to go.

The next time he came back in, Anthony found Jill on the couch next to Dalisa. He had gone to high school with her. She was explaining to Jill how hair weaves work. "Why don't white girls wear more wigs?" he heard Jill ask as he was summoned again to the back yard.

The next time he came back in, the crowd seemed bigger. Or was it that the space felt smaller? He hadn't lost the weird feeling. It was shrouded, but nagging. He looked again for Jill. He wanted to make sure she was having fun. He wanted to make sure she was holding her own in this crew of pill poppers and pot heads and petty criminals, the people who barely graduated from Kershaw County High School and some who had never made that walk at all, the people who would never leave Thorpe but would complain about nothing to do and roam until they wound up at Anthony's or another party like it. They always wound up there. Jill seemed better than this crowd. But here she was, getting just as fucked up as the rest of them, reveling in a few hours of chemical happiness. Maybe everyone in Thorpe was as aimless as the rest of them.

He found her in the kitchen staring at the beer bottle in her hand. Staring at her was Brittany Jones. Brittany's arms were crossed over her chest, hips cocked to the side. A small diamond solitaire sparkled on her left hand. Under Brittany's intense gaze, Jill traced the outline

of her lips with a fingertip. She did it slowly, as if noticing their existence for the first time. She began to giggle. She still stared at the beer bottle.

Brittany sneered. "How fucked up are you?"

Jill giggled again. She squeezed her eyes shut and whispered, "Stop it."

Brittany shook her head, arms still crossed. "And I'm the one who's still unemployed."

Jill's eyes were still shut tight. Anthony walked to her, put his hand on the small of her back. "You're okay," he whispered into her hair. She opened her eyes and again looked surprised to see him. It was like she kept forgetting he lived there. He felt her muscles relax beneath his palm.

Brittany's face registered surprise as well. "I'm learning all sorts of things about you tonight."

"We've never even talked before," Jill said.

Brittany rolled her eyes. "Slut," she muttered as she walked away.

Jill's face twisted at its center. Her lip curled. "At least I got a job." Anthony didn't think Brittany heard her. Girls and their rivalries always baffled him. He didn't even know why they were mad at each other. He let his hand fall from Jill's back. She turned to him. "I'm not a slut. I don't want you to think that I am."

"I don't."

"Good." She drank from the bottle, then walked to the living room.

*

Anthony couldn't shake the feeling that he was forgetting something, the feeling that there was something he was supposed to be doing that was important. He felt like he should be preparing for some disaster, but he didn't know what or why. He looked at the faces in his living room. There was a threat somewhere among them that he couldn't place. His body was tired and heavy, but he couldn't get comfortable. There had been a change in his ritual. The change was Jill.

The next time Anthony came back inside, the atmosphere had shifted again. The room suddenly felt volatile, as though while he was outside, someone had turned on the gas, opened the oven door, and was now about to light a match while everybody watched and waited. There was a hush almost like static. Anthony came up the hall. The crowd parted like he was in a movie. The thought almost made him laugh until he saw who was sitting in his broken recliner. Nathan Goff had arrived.

Anthony approached Nathan with a smile and offered a palm slap that turned into an informal handshake. He slouched onto the couch next to the recliner. "What's up?"

Nathan rubbed his eyes. There was dirt under his fingernails. "Smoky as shit."

Anthony looked around and nodded in agreement. The good news was that Nathan seemed relaxed, calm. Anthony wanted to keep him that way. "Eh, what you need, man?"

Nathan shrugged. "Nothing yet. This zannie's 'bout to wear off soon. Not sure where my brother is. What you got?"

"Want to smoke?"

"Don't think I need to. Contact just sitting here."

Anthony had more Xanax hidden in the back rooms. Oxy and Adderall, too. But that feeling that had been subdued to a nagging was back like a banshee, too loud to be ignored. He didn't want to let Nathan out of his sight. "Just chilling tonight. Smoke with me."

"Fine."

Anthony asked Casey for his glass piece again, packed it, and handed it to Nathan. "You start it." After they smoked, Anthony felt glued to the couch, catching only every other word that passed in front of his face. He was thirsty. His mouth tasted like stale cigarettes and stomach acid. But getting up to get a drink seemed like more effort than he wanted to expend right then. Nathan looked like he was enjoying a nice little buzz, too, and in his calm state, everyone else at the party calmed, too. This wasn't the Nathan who rocketed from place to place like a rabid raccoon. This was a Nathan people could get along with, that actually seemed fun, almost charming. He joked with everyone who passed by the recliner, and even though his body was small and withered, his laugh was big and booming and honest. Anthony finally decided that his thirst was more pressing than his concern about Nathan. He left to get a drink and returned with a plastic tumbler filled with warm Coke and cheap whiskey. Nathan was entertaining a small audience with a story about a possum and a tom cat. Sitting in Anthony's spot at the edge of the couch was Jill, an open-mouthed grin on her face. Nathan paused in his story, and Jill filled it with a loud and unintentional burp. Then she shrugged and dead-panned, "Your story needed sound effects."

"Who's this?" Nathan said to Anthony.

"You don't have to ask him. You can ask me." Jill slid to the edge of the cushion. Her eyes were still glassy. They shined. She flipped her hair back over her shoulder.

“Then who are you?”

“I’m Jill.”

“Damn, girl. Look at your eyes. You’re high as fuck.”

Jill screwed up her lips in a mock pout. “For a minute there, I thought you were going to compliment me. Thanks for nothing.” She laughed at her own wit.

Anthony coughed into his fist. Did she think Nathan Goff was funny? Was she flirting with him? Did she know who he was? Sure, he might be okay if it weren’t for the scars on his face, the sores that looked new. And he most definitely needed to get his teeth worked on. Anthony had never seen such fucked up teeth in his life. And maybe if he grew out that crew cut that showed all the scabs splayed out across his scalp like dots on a map. And maybe dye his eyebrows darker because the almost-white blond hair made it look like he had no eyebrows at all. But his eyes were too beady, too small and set too close together. And he was too skinny, his cheeks too hollow, his bones too sharp. And even at his best, he would probably carry that poor dumb redneck look with him everywhere. But right then he was the one sitting next to Jill, holding her attention.

Anthony turned to fiddle with the stereo.

*

Nick Goff blew into the house like a mean summer storm and caught Anthony by surprise. He was taller and bulkier than his younger brother. He took up more space, sucked

more energy out of the room. There was no look of an addict about him. He got high on the uneasiness of those around him, on the power that others' fear gave him. It was plain on his face.

Nathan stood and greeted Nick with a brief hug. Without speaking, he pointed to the recliner then backed away to lean against the wall. Nick swung his backpack off and set it in his lap as the chair clicked and creaked under his weight. No one spoke as Nick appraised Nathan for a moment. Nathan glanced at the backpack, then back at Nick. A slow, mischievous smile spread across Nick's face. "What it do, little brother?"

Something had changed suddenly in Nathan. He seemed to have grown since Nick's arrival. His voice dropped to a lower register. "Just been hanging out. Waiting for you. Hope you got good news."

Nick looked at Anthony. "What you got?" The Goffs bought a lot of their weed from Anthony since their trafficking in harder stuff took enough time and effort as it was. They made their money from the junkies and tweakers in their part of the county, but came to Anthony like the rest of Thorpe's party kids because he had the fun stuff.

"It's good this time."

"How much?"

"Seventy a quarter."

"Goddamn."

"I said it's good."

"I'll give you fifty."

"This ain't no negotiation. You should see this shit."

"Bring it here. Maybe I'll give you sixty for it."

Anthony made a sucking noise through his teeth. He shook his head.

Nathan straightened up against the wall. “What’s your fucking problem, Ant?”

“I don’t give discounts. He know that.”

Nick glared at Anthony. His sigh sounded more like a growl. “Fuck it,” he said, leaning forward and setting his backpack on the floor between his feet. “I can get better shit on my own. And for cheaper.”

“I doubt it.”

“Fuck it, I said. I can. Besides, I really just came here to show you something.” Nick unzipped the backpack and from it pulled a plastic Gatorade bottle. He set it on the coffee table. The clear liquid inside bubbled like boiling water. The bubbles spun and rose from a pile of white at the bottle’s bottom. Strips of black metal with a copper sheen floated in the mixture.

Maurice, standing near Anthony, pointed to the bottle and its witch’s brew bubbling on the coffee table. “What the fuck is that?”

Nick smiled at his brother again. Nathan smiled back with the eager fascination of a child shooting bb’s at an injured cat.

Maurice asked again, “What is that?”

“My new science experiment,” Nick answered.

“Holy shit,” Jill whispered.

“God bless the internet,” Nathan cooed.

“I can’t believe I didn’t try this sooner,” Nick said. “A baby could do it. Might be able to trash the trailer here soon. Damn thing makes me nervous about the cops anyway.”

“You cooking meth? Right in front of us?” Maurice asked.

DeVonte got up and walked to the kitchen, muttering curses under his breath.

Maurice started to pace behind Anthony. “Didn’t think I was gonna die tonight.”

Nick pursed his lips. “It’s not gonna blow up. I did it right.”

“How do you know?” asked Maurice.

“It’s bubbling, ain’t it?”

“But what if—”

“Listen,” Nathan said, launching himself from the wall and putting his face in Maurice’s, “it’s fine. This is how it’s done now. Quit being a little bitch.”

Nick and Nathan stood next to each other and towered over the coffee table and everyone sitting on or around the couch. Even Anthony felt small in their shadow. They stood like quivering, muscular pitbulls who eye their victims, stone still, for just a moment before some internal spring pops and they lunge forward in full attack, unable to be dissuaded or defended against.

On the couch, Jill belched again. Nathan snickered, and Nick began to laugh. “So what’s meth like?” she asked.

Nathan grinned and said, “Like no high you’ve ever felt. You’re so alive, you’re immortal. Invincible. You control the world.”

Nick nudged his brother. “But I’m the one who makes it. I guess that makes me God.”

Anthony couldn’t stand it anymore. The phantom electricity he’d been feeling all night was burning through his gut. He retreated to the kitchen like so many others. Maurice and DeVonte had already beaten him there and were trying to diffuse the bomb in the living room with their favorite party game—teasing the girls in the crudest way possible.

“I would never fuck you, Maurice,” Brittany squealed in mock offense. She knew how to play this game.

“Why not?”

“I’m engaged!” She held up her ring. Behind her, Casey reached into the fridge for another beer.

“You gotta have one last fling.”

“I can’t. You know what they say.”

“Once you go black?” DeVonte offered.

“No, I mean, you what they say about white girls who fuck black guys.”

DeVonte raised his eyebrows. “They smart?”

Brittany rolled her eyes. “That might be what y’all say, but in my circles it’s a lot different.”

Jill appeared at the kitchen door then, empty bottle in hand. Anthony nodded to get her attention, but she was watching Brittany.

“They’re sluts, trashy. They’ll fuck anything, especially if it’s got a black dick. White boys don’t want ‘em after that. Ain’t that right, Casey?”

Casey shrugged and drank his beer.

“Sorry. Don’t mean to be racist. But it’s true.”

“If white boys don’t want ‘em no more, it’s because they know they can’t measure up,” DeVonte said.

Jill turned and left the kitchen.

Maurice elbowed Casey. “Yeah, we’ll gladly take the white girls y’all don’t want.”

Everyone laughed.

Anthony stayed in the kitchen. He didn't want to deal with the mess in his living room, the plastic bottle and its swirling toxic mix. He didn't want to see the look on Jill's face after what she had heard in the kitchen, didn't want to wonder what she was thinking. And he didn't want to see her flirting anymore with Nathan. He snatched a garbage bag out from the box under the kitchen sink and began throwing bottles into it, the sound of glass bouncing off glass ringing through the house. When he heard the sound of bottles breaking, he threw them harder, willing them to shatter. He liked the sound of things breaking just then. He hoped the sharp shards would puncture the plastic bag. He hoped they would make a mess that he could blame on Jill. He ignored the others' curious stares. He ignored them when they slinked back into the living room.

He stopped when he heard a different noise over the thump of the stereo—a thump like something, or someone, falling on the floor. Some angry grunts. A shouted, “Hey!” The clatter of bottles falling. Another thump, and the house shuddered. Anthony dropped his garbage bag and was in the living room in one motion.

“Ant, man. Do something.”

Anthony looked from his coworker, his friend, to Nick and Nathan. They were not his friends. They were business associates at best, the most dangerous kind.

“I think you better leave.”

“That's fucking right,” said DeVonte, nodding, puffing up his chest, and advancing toward Nick and Nathan.

Anthony turned to him. “I meant Maurice.”

Maurice yelped in surprise. He sounded like a hurt puppy.

“The fuck?” said DeVonte.

“If you need to, you can go with him.” Anthony stood resolute between his fellow kitchen workers, his friends, and the Goffs. He stared at the front door.

DeVonte helped Maurice up. Maurice’s hands were shaking. There was blood. They both looked at Anthony like they expected him to change his mind or to break into a grin and say it was all a joke. But Anthony didn’t move. He didn’t speak. He stood with his back to the Goffs and his eyes on the door. When his friends realized that he wasn’t joking, their faces hardened. DeVonte helped Maurice out the door without another word.

When the door closed behind them, Anthony finally turned around. Nick was nodding his head, a mean, triumphant grin on his face. Nathan’s bloodshot eyes were troubled for a moment, then a cloud seemed to pass over his face and the troubled look was gone, replaced by the same ruthlessness his brother possessed. Nick’s eyes were clear.

“You need to keep a handle on those friends of yours,” Nick said.

“Listen, I don’t know what went on—”

“And you don’t need to know,” said Nathan. “But you keep them in line or you keep them away from us.”

“This is my money. I don’t like it when people fuck with my money.”

“I know. I know.”

“Do you? I’m beginning to see a pattern.” Nick looked Anthony up and down through narrowed eyes.

“You told me no harsh feelings about that. I wasn’t here,” Anthony answered, his voice sharp.

“But it’s worth bringing up.” Nick took a step toward Anthony. “I spent almost a year locked up because of that little shit high school kid. Your friend. Nathan, too.”

“Who are they talking about, Anthony?” Jill asked from the couch. He had forgotten she was there. He had hoped that she, like so many others there for the party, had left in the scuffle. He ignored her.

“Yeah, he was my boy, but I can’t be responsible for his actions.”

Nathan started to pace. “Little lying-ass piece of shit.”

Nick watched his brother. “Black people’ll do just about anything to get out of trouble, won’t they?”

The comment surprised and angered Anthony. He figured the Goffs to be just as racist as any rednecks in Thorpe, but they had never spoken their racism directly to him, just as he had never called them backwoods rednecks to their faces. They did business together, and in the interest of business there had always been an unspoken racial truce. This new boldness worried Anthony. “Being black ain’t got nothing to do with it. Most anybody’ll do what they need to to stay clean.”

Nathan stopped pacing. “But not snitch.”

“Half black,” Jill mumbled from the couch.

Both Goffs turned to her, as if also just now noticing her there. “What’s that?”

Jill stood. “I said he’s half black,” she repeated, louder. She turned and walked down the dark hallway. Anthony heard the back door open, then slam shut.

Nick snatched his backpack off the floor and set it on the coffee table. Carefully, he lifted the plastic soda bottle with its bubbling contents and placed it in the pack. “Looks like you gotta watch her, too.”

“She just fucked up is all.”

“You have a lot of fucked up friends.” Nick zipped the pack, lifted it, and slipped his arms through the straps. “I ain’t got time for this shit. And I gotta gas this bottle.” He made for the door.

“We cool?” Anthony asked.

Nick stopped. “For now. Long as you remember your place. And remember what I can do to any of your friends that fuck with me.” He turned and was out the door.

Nathan took one last glance down the hallway, then followed his brother out. Before the door closed, Anthony heard him say, “She kinda cute though.”

*

Anthony was alone in his house again. He locked the front door and turned off the stereo, decided he’d do the rest of the cleaning up the next day. Right then, he wanted to sit on his back porch, smoke a cigarette, and calm the electric burn at the ends of all his nerves. But when he got back there, he was startled to learn that he wasn’t alone. Jill was there with her back to him. She stood at the edge of his property staring into his neighbor’s back yard and the bottle tree the old woman kept. The multicolored bottles clung upside-down to the dead branches of an old crepe myrtle. Jill was motionless. The temperature had dropped probably below freezing, but she

didn't act like she was cold. He could see her breath in the clear night. The air smelled like wood smoke. Somewhere someone had a fire going.

“Those things attract evil spirits.”

She spun around, looking confused. She looked down at her hands and, finding them empty, began to search the ground around her. She located a lit cigarette in the grass, picked it up, and took a puff. Then she looked toward the porch. “Who's there? It's too dark to see.”

“It's me.”

She walked up on the porch.

“Got worried for a second. Thought you left without saying goodbye.” Anthony exhaled.

Jill squeezed her eyes shut. “Had to get out of there.”

“Why do you smoke those?” he asked.

“I guess I'm addicted.”

“No, I mean, why'd you start?”

She considered the white stick between her fingers. “I was bored.”

“Why'd you come here tonight?”

“Bored.”

“I think you want to wallow. You're a wallower. On both accounts.” He picked at some paint peeling on the rail. “You're not the only one who misses him.”

Jill was staring again at the neighbor's yard. “Brittany hates me. She already did, I think. Says she barely remembers me from high school, but that's a lie. She's lying.”

Anthony flicked the pieces of old paint off his fingertips. “I feel bad about what him being gone has done to people. You know, like his mom and grandma. And you.”

“My dad wants me to take classes at Tech. But I think I’d rather just work.”

“I feel like it’s all my fault that he left.”

Something caught in Jill’s throat and started a coughing fit. She beat her chest and threw her cigarette into the yard.

“Don’t you know why he got arrested?”

She stared at him. “That happened before we started.” Her voice and gaze trailed off, back into the neighbor’s yard.

“So you don’t know.”

“I never asked.”

“He took the fall for me. Actually, he took it and put it on Nick and Nathan. So I guess you could say—”

“Where’s your neighbor?”

“Not here. She ain’t been here in awhile. She sick.”

Jill’s breath caught again, but there was no coughing this time. She swallowed hard and hugged herself.

“What you keep starting at?”

“Where is she?”

“With her cousin, I think.”

“The cousin?”

“Yeah, her cousin. Dr. Luna.” Anthony picked another fleck of paint off the railing. “You heard of her?”

Jill chewed on her nail like she was trying to remember something he expected her to know. Then she went back to hugging herself. She sighed and turned to him. Were those tears in her eyes? It was hard to tell in the dark.

“Wow. You are really high.”

“I can’t remember.”

“Dr. Luna Quail. Come on. You’ve seen her little ad in the paper. The blue and white one. Dr. Luna Quail, prophetess, healer, conjurer, guidance, spiritual connection, roots and charms.”

“There are crows on it.”

“Yeah. Don’t make no sense. Should be quails, right?”

“Is that why Miss Ernestine has that?” Jill pointed to the bottle tree.

“I guess.”

“You think that stuff works?”

“In an emergency, yeah.” He took another drag from his cigarette. The smoke hurt his throat, which tightened in the cold air. He threw the cigarette into the grass. “Why? Do you believe in it?”

“Can you take me to her?”

“Dr. Luna?”

“And Miss Ernestine.” She turned her whole body to him. “I have amends to make.”

He could hear in her pleading tone that she believed. “Yeah.”

Alone in his bed later in the night, he wondered how Jill had known Miss Ernestine’s name.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Donna knew that her car battery's time on this earth was coming to an end. She hoped it would make at least until the spring, but in January's frost-covered mornings, her car struggled to turn over and on two occasions never did at all. Sitting in her driveway, trying to get to work, she cursed and pumped the gas pedal and rotated the key again and again, which brought her to Thorpe's only auto parts store on a Thursday afternoon. She was supposed to be showing a parcel of land to a Yankee couple close to retirement who wanted to build their dream home here and live out their last years, which could conceivably be last decades, in the warmth and peacefulness of the southern countryside. But their plane had been delayed by snowstorms in whatever god-forsaken frozen tundra they were currently residing in, so Donna had an afternoon to kill. And she wasn't about to go home and deal with Melissa, who acted as though some switch had been flipped that suddenly made her care very much for the cleanliness of the house. Donna had to admit it was nice to have the place looking so good, nice to have Melissa up and out of bed, but she would lose her mind if she had to endure one more moment of Melissa glaring at her, muttering, "Filthy," and walking away. So car battery replacement it was.

Donna parked her car immediately in front of the shop's doors and climbed out, thinking that her Yankee clients would likely be disappointed with southern living today. It was mid-afternoon, and the temperature had barely climbed out of the 40s. The sun glared, but did not warm. She hurried into the heated store. It smelled, as always, like rubber and metal. At the back of the store stood rows and rows of new tires, and next to them, rims and hubcaps hung on the wall. There was aisle after aisle of motor oil, wiper blades, floor mats, air filters, and spark plugs.

At the end of the aisles, metal hooks offered tree-shaped air fresheners, even though few of them were pine-scented. A bright yellow rearview mirror hanger that was shaped like a Christmas tree and smelled like lemons didn't make much sense to Donna.

But there were other things about her trip to the auto parts store that didn't make sense to Donna this time. It was brighter, for one, like someone had changed all the light bulbs. The floor seemed unusually clean, too. Replaced maybe. She looked down at the tile beneath her feet. Clean, no cracks, barely any scuffs. When she looked up is when she noticed the renovated counter that now ran the width of the store in bright laminate colors of red, white, and blue. A new logo. A national logo. That was strange. And then she noticed that she didn't recognize anyone behind the counter. She was used to seeing Mr. Amick, his sons, grandsons, nephews, even some nieces—familiar and friendly, a Thorpe staple. But here were a bunch of young guys she didn't know, all wearing black pleated pants with identical red, white, and blue polos tucked in, identical logos over the left breast.

She was upset to learn that the store had been recently bought out by a national chain. The transition was ongoing, but the new management was already in place. And when she learned that, unlike Mr. Amick, the new manager would not authorize the employees to switch out Donna's old, sputtering battery for the new one without charging a hefty fee, she argued, "For that price, I could've just gone to a mechanic."

The manager shrugged from his high spot behind the counter. "Company policy, ma'am. I'm very sorry."

"You ain't sorry," Donna declared as she lugged the battery off the counter. She held it in straightened arms against her belly and opened the door by pushing against it with her back. She

had barely turned back around and taken a step toward her car when Nathan Goff was upon her, lifting the dead weight from her hands and saying, “Here, Miss Donna, let me help you with that.” At first, she was too surprised to be scared, and in her surprise slipped into a quiet politeness. She found herself thanking Nathan before she even realized what was happening. Here was the man—no more than an overgrown boy, really—who she was convinced—no, knew deep down, more strongly than she had ever known anything before—was involved in the disappearance, likely murder, of her grandson, and he had her newly purchased car battery in his hands. He was setting it down on the sidewalk. He was lifting the hood of the car. He was detaching the dying battery from its nest of tubes and wires. And he was talking almost non-stop.

“Ridiculous how these new corporate folks won’t help a lady with her new battery, ain’t it? Can’t even help you carry it to your car. Don’t they see you struggling to lift it? Can’t they even hold the door for you? No manners, Miss Donna.” His hands were working as fast as his mouth. Donna could only stand and stare.

“City keeps coming to Thorpe, Miss Donna,” he said, turning to her for just a moment. “Used to be that you had to drive for miles before you hit the suburbs, even longer to hit Columbia proper. But they just keep stretching out. Cutting down more and more trees and buying up more and more land just to build a bunch of subdivisions full of cookie-cutter houses that got more space than folks need, more bells and whistles than they can afford.” He shook his head, but kept working. “Suburban sprawl. Soon, Thorpe’s just gonna be an extension of those suburbs. Strip malls and concrete and chain restaurants. Don’t need no Red Lobster or no Olive Garden. We got the Waddlin’ Duck and the Sonic and all the barbecue we need. You can keep

all that suburban sprawl, know what I mean?" He glanced at her again. She wrung her hands and nodded, unsure of how she was expected to respond.

Her implied agreement was all Nathan needed to continue his sermon and his work on Donna's car. "I don't like it. I want the country to stay country, you know? If I wanted to live with all those strip malls and all that traffic, I'd move to the suburbs. Or I'd move to the city. I'm a country boy, Miss Donna. Just like you a country girl. Well, lady. You a country lady. D'you hear that Miles Funderburk's grandkids are just waiting for him to die so they can finally sell that old hay farm of his? He been holding out forever against those subdivision guys. You know the ones who think we need more houses and more apartment complexes with pools in 'em. But driving by that farm's just about the prettiest thing you ever seen, all green and rolling and peaceful. But he dies, them grandkids of his—just my age, Miss Donna—gonna sell it out from under him before he's even in the ground, gonna let them build cookie cutters on there. It ain't right." By now, he had the old battery removed. It was sitting dirty and grease-covered on the sidewalk, its brand logo faded and indiscernible. He lifted the new, clean battery and placed it in the waiting spot. Nathan never stopped talking. He barely even paused for breath. "Pretty soon, us country folks are gonna have to move further out into the country. And the suburbs will probably still follow us. We'll just have to keep moving further and further out, and eventually there won't be no country left, just cities and suburbs. And then what would be the point, Miss Donna?"

She started with the realization that he had been referring to her as Miss Donna the entire time. This man was a drug addict, or so his arrest record would suggest. This man was violent, even towards women. This man had done something, probably something horrible, unspeakable,

to Micah. And here this man was, speaking to her politely, respectfully, replacing her dead battery with a new one without even asking if she wanted him to. This was the sweet old Nathan she had known in years past, the loving boy with the mighty laugh who went out of his way to help people, who loved his mama and daddy and his big brother, who helped Donna feed baby Micah. Donna's throat tightened at the memory of the little boy she had known.

As she watched him work, she knew she should ask about Micah. She needed to know about Micah. This was the opportunity that she had told Ed Turnbull to pursue. Question him, she had pleaded, because I can't get close to him. But here he was. Ask him. Ask him now while he's preoccupied. Or would that be rude? He was helping her, out here on this windy afternoon, his fingers probably aching with trying to work in the cold. She would appear ungrateful, single-minded in the worst way. And even though Nathan was being nicer than she'd known him to be to anyone in years, the worry and fear was creeping back, and she couldn't help but wonder what would happen if he reacted angrily to any questions about Micah. Besides, how would she begin a conversation like that? Hey, Nathan, did you murder my grandson? Do you know who did? Donna shook her head, then tried to make it look like she was shaking from the cold.

She tried to picture how Ed might handle this situation if he were here. He would probably just keep repeating the same old line he'd been giving her all year: she had no proof. It didn't matter that Micah'd had conflict with the Goffs before. Most people in Thorpe had. And most people in Thorpe did not go missing. And standing there on the cold concrete, Donna realized that Ed was right to a degree. She didn't have proof. All she had was a gut feeling. It wouldn't be right to stand here and accuse Nathan of anything right now, especially while he was being so helpful and nice. And chatty. He had not stopped talking. The talking, rapid and

hopping from one related idea to the next, seemed as necessary to him as his heartbeat. It reminded her for a moment of Melissa, so many times caught up in her body's machinations, powerless against the turnings of her own mind. The only difference here was that Nathan was high. He was this way on purpose.

Nathan paused in his homily, interrupting Donna's thoughts. "Alright, Miss Donna. You should be good with your new battery. But I'm gonna check some other things in here just to make sure. It's pretty dirty and nasty in this engine of yours." And without waiting for her reply, he dove back under the hood, picking up right where he left off in his country versus city versus suburbs discussion.

Then a thought occurred to Donna like an electric shock. The Goff brothers rarely traveled alone. If Nathan was standing in front of her, working on her car, Nick had to be close by. And he was someone she truly feared, someone for whom she would never have any pity. She had never been afraid of a child before, but she had been afraid of Nick Goff. And that fear never subsided. Now that she knew he lurked somewhere very nearby, she suddenly felt warm in spite of the temperature.

Donna searched with her eyes. She was afraid that swinging her head around would be too obvious. She wondered if this had all been a trick, if she was in danger. Was Nathan actually disconnecting her brakes while he was fiddling in her car? Did Nick put him up to this? As a way to get rid of Donna so she wouldn't ask questions about Micah?

Then she saw him. Sitting two spaces over in the driver's seat of an old, half-rusted Buick. How had she not noticed him sooner? The spaces between his car and hers were empty, and his mean stare shot across the space right to where Donna stood shivering and sweating.

No one in Thorpe, outside their own family, knew Nick and Nathan Goff like Donna did. She had changed diapers, kissed bruised foreheads, and bandaged scraped knees. They were country boys who liked to roughhouse, wander through the woods, and create adventures for themselves that often led to minor injuries. Donna was part babysitter, part triage nurse.

Nathan slammed Donna's hood. "There you go, Miss Donna."

Donna stammered, "Thank you."

He scratched his head, which was shaved bald. Donna wondered how he wasn't freezing. "You really ought to take this in to get checked out. You're probably 'bout due for a tune-up. Anyhow, better run. Got to pick up some new hoses for myself. Had a squirrel trying to build a nest in my truck. Eating up all kinds of stuff in there. So I need new hoses. Squirrel's not a problem anymore, though. Nick shot him."

Donna thought it best to continue with the polite act. She had the feeling that Nick was still watching her. "Yeah, who says pellet guns don't come in handy?" She knew her laugh sounded as fake as it was. It couldn't be helped.

Nathan didn't seem to notice. He shook his head and laughed. "Oh, no, ma'am. Nick didn't use a pellet gun. He used a real one. Buckshot. That squirrel exploded."

*

On her drive home, Donna couldn't shake off her thoughts about Nathan. Just now, he'd been polite, thoughtful. But he was also a violent, drug-addicted maniac always in trouble with the law. It certainly wasn't hard to figure out how he'd gotten that way. He was a victim of bad

influences beyond his control, pills and chemicals too easy to get and a gang of Goff fathers and uncles and grandfathers and brothers. He had his mama's nature, but she hadn't been there to encourage it. To protect him.

Donna and Jodie stopped speaking when Donna stopped watching the boys. They still hadn't spoken three years later when a drunk driver ran a stop sign and plowed into Jodie's car. And although Donna did not go visit her in the hospital, town gossip was enough to keep her informed of Jodie's condition. There had been head trauma, and Jodie had spent a long time in a coma. Wayne had been given the option of removing her from life support, but refused. And Jodie had lived, had come out of the coma eventually after several weeks in the ICU, had been sent for rehabilitation at a hospital all the way in Atlanta where they specialized in teaching adults to do all the things that they were already supposed to know—talking, eating, using the toilet. But Jodie's injuries had been so severe that she never learned to do any of these things again and came back to Thorpe on a stretcher. The insurance settlement gave the Goffs enough money to set up a hospital bed in their home, to hire a nurse to come for a few hours a day, and according to what Donna heard from fellow church members who brought over casseroles and sat with Jodie for hours at a time, life in the Goff home fell into a new routine, one where Jodie lay in bed like a zombie while her sons were encouraged in all their wildness by their father who felt that boys should run through woods and shoot guns and skin squirrels and become as feral as the hogs that tore across the land at night, leaving a path of scorched earth behind them. And no one else on the family compound reined them in. They were, after all, the long-awaited, essentially motherless sons of Wayne's middle age.

For a long time—years—Donna stayed away. She had long ago mourned her lost friendship. And it was so easy to get caught up in the everyday tragedies of her own life. Melissa roamed the house like a ghost, not talking, only shuffling from room to room. Her second husband became her second ex-husband, which forced her back to work and this time studying for the real estate exam, setting up her own business. She sent her sons to college in the Upstate, and they never moved home. In all this, Jodie's plight slipped from Donna's mind as it did from the entire town's. Time passed, and other crises emerged to steal people's attention, sympathy, and prayers.

Then, very suddenly, Donna got into her car one afternoon and drove to the Goff home before she even fully realized what she was doing. One minute, she was loading the dishwasher and thinking about Jodie, and the next she was sitting in Jodie's driveway.

The hired home nurse answered the door. She was a lovely young black woman who introduced herself as Leticia. She was slim and moved as comfortably through the house as she did in her light blue scrubs. She led Donna to the den, which had been converted to a hospital room—heavy drawn drapes that blocked out the sunlight, a mechanical bed, a television, a small sofa for receiving guests, and an antiseptic smell that barely masked a more sickening odor, that of sweat, urine, and something Donna couldn't place at first. Decay.

Leticia patted Jodie's hand and spoke to her softly, the smile on her face reflected in her voice. She was a good nurse. "Miss Jodie, you have a visitor."

Jodie's eyes were already open, a blank stare fixed on the tv screen, but when Leticia spoke, Jodie's eyes moved toward Donna. It was hard to tell if the flicker that passed over them

was one of recognition or of trying to figure out who this visitor was. Or some other emotion entirely.

“She can hear you, understand you,” Leticia said. “I’ll leave you two to visit. I’m in the kitchen if you need me. Just holler.”

“Where are the boys?”

“Next door at their grandmother’s. Probably won’t be back until after they’ve eaten dinner.”

Donna stood and stared for a moment. Jodie stared back. The way Leticia had talked to the bed-ridden woman was sweet, almost maternal. But Donna couldn’t speak to Jodie as though she was an infant. Donna slid down into the hard sofa. “Hey, Jo.” She looked around for a remote control, but not seeing one, she stood again and lowered the volume on the tv manually, then sat back down. “I’m sorry for not coming sooner. I wasn’t sure you wanted to see me.” She couldn’t be sure of Jodie’s reaction. She wasn’t looking at her. She was looking at her hands. “I wasn’t sure I wanted to see you, either. And not just because of,” she gestured toward the bed, the makeshift hospital room, “all this.” She looked now at Jodie, whose eyes were on Donna, but blank, and Donna wondered how Leticia knew that Jodie could understand. Small talk seemed inappropriate, but so did saying that she felt sorry for Jodie, that the car wreck and its aftermath seemed terribly unfair, that being in this room made Donna uncomfortable, afraid. “Micah’s in first grade now. Seems crazy, huh? That he’s that old already. Smart. He’s so smart. But quiet like his mother.” Then words began tumbling out of Donna’s mouth because she didn’t know what else to do with herself in that room with all that stillness. She told of her divorce, of her new career. She told about Melissa’s diagnosis, about the relief it brought to

know that there was something wrong that could actually be fixed, even if after several years they still hadn't figured out the right dosage and combination of drugs, one that would ease the mood swings without turning her into an emotionless mannequin or making her gain twenty pounds in two weeks or keeping her from getting any sleep at all. Turns out, Donna told Jodie, that mental health treatment was a matter of throwing a bunch of shit against the wall to see what stuck.

But once she had told about all those things, the stillness was still there. The only thing that moved were the bodies on the muted television screen. So Donna found herself admitting things to Jodie, whose eyes still followed the movement of Donna's lips, things that she hadn't admitted to herself, thoughts that hadn't even fully formed in her mind before she heard them coming out of her mouth. She told how relieved she was when her husband left. She admitted that Melissa would likely never leave her care. She admitted that her favorite thing about having Micah was that he gave her a second chance to get this mothering thing right, that she was old enough now to recognize the mistakes she had made in years past, and that she had promised herself not to make them again with her grandson. Though she also admitted that she worried about him, his preference for solitude, his unusual hobbies, his desire to always help the weak ones in his sphere, which she was sure would bring him grief later in life. She admitted how much she had missed Jodie, how it felt like she had died from Donna's life long before the car wreck, that she was sorry for what had transpired between them. She thought, but did not say, that she was not sorry for her concern over Nick's behavior, for protecting Micah first and foremost.

Donna was still talking when Wayne got home from work. He seemed surprised to see her there on the couch, and she was immediately uneasy. Without saying anything, he left. She heard him in the kitchen, thanking Leticia and dismissing her for the day. Then he returned holding a bowl and a spoon. He nodded at Donna. "Been awhile." His tone was gruff.

Donna nodded back. "Yes."

"Don't get a whole lot of visitors anymore." He crossed the room. "It's time for her supper. Hope you don't mind." He sat on the edge of the bed, set the bowl on the bedside table. From the couch, Donna could see that it contained a brightly colored mush, something like baby food. Wayne pressed a button on the bed's handrail, and the top half of the mattress lurched forward with a mechanical whine. Jodie's eyes shot around the room, and she groaned softly. Once the bed was upright, he stroked her hair. "I know. I know. But it's time to eat. Can you eat some for me?"

Donna watched Wayne feed his wife. It was a Wayne she had never seen. She was so used to the Wayne who was as loud, brash, and brutal as his sons that the man in front of her seemed to be a different person altogether. There was a tenderness to his movements as he spooned mush into his wife's mouth, as he held her head forward while she took small sips of water, as he wiped away the food that she allowed to dribble out of her mouth and down her chin. Throughout the feeding, he whispered little encouragements to her: "Yes, that's my girl. That's very good. Just a little sip for now."

He had managed to spoon about three quarters of the mush to her when she began to whimper, a sound half baby, half animal. She moved her eyes to the far corner of the room.

“Just one more bite,” Wayne coaxed. Her whimper became a whine. The inhumanness of the noise gave Donna goosebumps.

Wayne turned to her. “She gets bed sores. I don’t know how to keep her from getting them. I don’t know if it’s even possible. But they hurt her.” He plopped the spoon into what was left of the mush and set the bowl back on the bedside table. “I need to change the dressings.”

Donna took that as his polite way of asking her to leave, and she was relieved for the excuse. She rose and tried to make eye contact with Jodie, but her old friend was still staring at the corner and whining.

Donna never went back. She never tried to contact Nick or Nathan. They had family of their own. They were being looked after—in a manner of speaking. And they could have Nick. It was Nathan she always worried about. Still worried about, that worry renewed this afternoon outside of the auto parts store. His history didn’t excuse all the bad things he did, but it could explain it. He was at the mercy of his upbringing, of the unfairness of life, of the chemicals he poured into his body. The same way Melissa was the victim of the chemicals in her brain, beyond her control. Donna felt a wave of pity was over her for both Nathan and her daughter. Nathan was lost. And—she couldn’t forget—likely guilty of her grandson’s murder. But maybe it was time to rediscover some patience in another part of her life. Maybe she would try to be nicer to Melissa from now on.

*

Melissa was standing on a small stepladder set on the coffee table when Mama came in. She was cleaning the ceiling fan blades, thick wads of dust raining down around her like polluted snowflakes.

“Mama, how on earth do the baseboards get so sticky?”

“Sticky?”

“I just cleaned all of them, and they were sticky.”

“All the baseboards in the whole house?”

“They all had hair and dust stuck to them. Stuck. How did they get so damn sticky? What is going on around here?”

She felt sudden irritation with Mama. Why couldn't she do any of this cleaning when Melissa was in one of her off months? Okay, seasons. But that's just details. What she meant is that Mama needed to do some work around this house. It couldn't just be some occasional vacuuming and a cursory sweep with the feather duster. Filth. Filth accumulated over time, and that's what needed a good cleaning. More than once every two years. And Melissa got no help on this. She sighed in frustration. Fucking baseboards.

“And blinds.”

“What?”

“I'll have to get the dust off all the plastic blinds. Every window in the house. That's gonna take forever.”

But Melissa had time. She had so much time. Because she didn't sleep when she was in a manic phase. Sure, she wanted to, but she couldn't. It's like her brain just would not shut off. She could lie in bed for hours, compiling lists in her head. Stuff around the house to clean. Annuals

she wanted to plant along the front walk and all the things she would need to keep the weeds away. Types of weeds. Ways to smoke weed. Types of drugs. The list of drugs that she had been prescribed but didn't take. Ways you could get fat, including taking anti-anxiety drugs. The different anti-anxiety drugs she had tried over the last decade and a half. The movies she had seen over the last decade and a half. That was a hard list. Tough to remember *all* the movies.

“I don't want to talk about the house, Miss.”

“You could be appreciative.”

“You're right. I'm sorry. It looks much better in here. Thank you.”

“You're welcome. Course, it'd be nice if I got a little help now and then.”

M: We're going to be a family. Sure, there are all those lost years, years we can never get back, but we'll start fresh. The distance, the years apart. We'll have the most incredible story to tell.

D: We?

M: Mama, listen. Here are the things that I know. Dan went off to Bosnia, and then I found out I was pregnant. And then that lying, wannabe baby stealer called to say that Dan was missing in action. She pretended to be nice. She said, 'I thought you deserved to know.' But she hated me. I know that now. And then I came back home to have my baby. And because I was overcome with grief. Because I never thought to question the news from her. Why hadn't I, Mama? How could I have been so stupid? But it's finally all coming together for me now. So clearly.

D: I hear what you're saying, but I don't know what you're talking about. Who is she?

M: Dan's sister. I said that. But Micah—he's known for a while. He doubted. Maybe Micah felt that bond. A bond that children share with long lost parents. They can feel it across miles and miles. I read about that. Or seen it? An old episode of *Oprah* maybe? Doesn't matter. Micah was convinced. No, Micah *knew*. His father wasn't dead. He hadn't given up. Why had I given up?

D: Why don't you sit with me in the kitchen? I was thinking of making some hot chocolate.

M: But Dan didn't know about Micah. Of course. No one in Dan's family knows about Micah. And now that I know that that sister of his lied, I'm glad I kept Micah a secret. They would've tried to take him away from me. They didn't want Dan's son to be raised by white people.

D: Missy, look at me...Melissa...Think about what is real and what is not real.

M: That sister. What was her name? Sheila? Camille? Candace? Something like that. Candace had made it all up. It makes perfect sense, doesn't it? Candace didn't want Dan with a white girl. Candace wanted Dan with a nice brown-skinned girl, preferably from Chicago. Someone to make nice brown-skinned babies with.

D: Listen to what you are saying. You're doing that thing again. That thing we talked about. You didn't flush your meds again?

M: Mama, you're not listening. Candace tricked me. And when that happened, I was too shocked, too hormonal, too young and naïve and stupid to question Candace. If that's what her name really is. Maybe she lied about that, too.

D: Okay, then, if Dan is alive, why hasn't he contacted you? Why hasn't he called to say that his sister was lying? Why hasn't he tried to see his son?

M: That's what I'm trying to tell you. What I just figured out. When Dan did return, I was long gone. He must have assumed that I dumped him without really dumping him and, knowing nothing of Micah, he just followed his orders to wherever the Army sent him. Fort Hood, Fort Stewart, Fort Knox. Hell, I don't know, and it doesn't matter now. What's important is that I finally figured everything out. Dan is alive. He's probably waiting for me. He's probably wondering why I never wrote to him while he was over there.

D: Look at me. You're not remembering things correctly. You've got to get back on your meds. Then you'll remember better. We've talked about this. When you first came home, you never said you had a boyfriend, remember? This is something you've built up in your head. Remember? We've talked about this.

M: But Micah, he knew all along. Micah is the best of me. No, Micah is better than me. He never doubted that his father was alive. He saw right through my stories to the lies that Candace told us, the lies that I had been too upset to see. But Micah saw. He is so smart. That's something he got from his father. Sure, I'm smart. But Dan was smart smart. That's why he had gotten to be a sergeant so fast. Micah is smart like that. And driven. Self-sufficient. It makes sense now to me why he needed to leave, alone, without contact. I had been too blind. I hadn't believed him. But I believe him now.

Donna had been trying to stay calm this whole time, but she was losing her patience with Melissa's refusal to take her meds. This was not the first time she'd had delusions during manic cycles. Donna went berserk.

Melissa screamed. She howled with renewed rage and grief at herself for blindly believing the lies that everyone had always told her, for the years she wasted alone and lonely, for the life she would've had with Dan if only Candace hadn't ruined everything, for the father that Micah could've had if only Melissa had been smarter, shrewder. It was so unfair. She beat on the floor until she was sure she had bruised her fists. She yanked at her hair, heard the tearing, felt the sear on her scalp, saw the blond clot in her hand as she pulled it away.

As her tantrum waned, she lay on her side holding her knees to her chest. She worked to calm her breath that had become hiccupy and hard to catch when she cried. She sniffed globs of mucus back into her sinuses. She hummed to herself, a calming dissonant tune that she had never heard before.

Melissa sat up with a start. She needed to help him. Tracking someone down couldn't be easy, especially without a car or a cell phone. Melissa would help him. She was his mother. She had to. She would find Dan for Micah. For them both. For the family they would finally make.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jill walked without direction among the trees, pine needles crunching under each step. She had come to these woods—their woods—countless times in the months immediately after Micah’s disappearance. At that time, she wanted to feel him here, to sense that he was maybe even close by watching her. She had thought that if she spun quickly enough, she’d catch him unexpectedly around a bend. Maybe just a glimpse of his back as he retreated further from her view, and she would follow, a trick of the eye revealing a hand, a foot, a shoulder, the back of his head as he ducked deeper into the woods. She wanted to trail after him until the pines swallowed her, too, and took her to wherever it was they had hidden him. Or maybe she would come around a corner and see him full on, standing there, staring at her in that way he had, the way that forced her to pause a moment, and regain her composure and control of the situation. And she would say, “I’m sorry.” And he would forgive her, assure her, because that’s what he always did when he was still here. She would say, “I hate the people who say they have no regrets, don’t you?” Whether or not he nodded, she would say, “I do.” But he would be back, and she would make things right. She didn’t even need him to respond. She just needed him to be there.

Things were different now. She needed him to be gone, stay gone. She couldn’t continue in limbo like this. She walked in circles, and as much as she didn’t want to, she thought she could feel him in the air, in the tree bark, in the piles of pine needles. She knew now—she hadn’t fully realized then—that an entire invisible world existed around her, around and through the branches, in the sunlight filtering down, in the cold air that turned her breath solid. She didn’t

know that before. She hadn't taken any of it seriously. She called it superstition. She knew better now, but that knowledge only seemed to cause her more problems.

According to everyone in Thorpe, these woods were haunted, and everyone was probably right. But for Jill, the woods were not nearly as creepy as the path you had to take from the parking lot of Hilltop Baptist Church to get here. A crowded graveyard stretched away from the brick sanctuary and housed the town's former residents that had been born as early as the 1890s. It was dotted with plastic American flags stuck in the dirt and dead and dying bouquets of grocery store flowers. Long ago, some mourning relatives had donated ornate metal benches whose paint was now chipped and discolored, screws loose, legs shifty. A wind chime banged and clanked in the branches of a dogwood tree standing at the graveyard's center. It would be one of the first trees to leaf and bloom come March, and its petals would litter the ground around the graves like fat, white ashes. Now it was naked, bare. Jill stood there for a long time, reading the names and dates on the gravestones, wondering how many old spirits were hanging around. She could feel them, but they seemed like a faint echo.

It was different in the woods where the air buzzed. With a memory, a remnant or something alive, Jill didn't know. But it was there. She felt it in the sound of every snapped twig, every rustle of dry, dead leaves, when she ran her hand down the dark brown bark.

He had been as steady as these pine trunks. Strong enough to bend and sway in the most violent of winds, her most violent tempers, and spring back, unsplintered and willing to take more. She had been the unsteady one, the one with something to prove, unwilling to bend or budge.

When she came to their spot, the spot where they had always come to be alone, she laid down on the pine straw. On her back, she wriggled further into it. She put her arms out beside her, dug her fingers into the needles. “If you’re gone, stay gone,” she said to the air. “I need you to never come back. I can’t live with all this maybe. I need you to understand this.”

She listened for a response, a sound, a sign to which she could attach meaning. A song bird would mean forgiveness. A far off barking dog would mean not yet, but maybe soon. The crash of a dead limb falling through the canopy would mean that all hope was lost. But there was no sound in the woods. Even the wind was still. She held her breath so she could hear something faint, an earthworm moving through the soil underneath her, a line of ants hiking across the ground. Nothing. The silence was part of her punishment. She was sure of it. She had made him angry plenty of times, and he had always come back to her. Maybe he would again this time. Maybe he wouldn’t. She didn’t care. She had been angry now for so long. She had to reclaim something.

She was angry already when she first began to know him. She was sixteen, and her blood boiled. She hated everything. But he was mysterious. Everyone, everything in this town was the same, living out the same routines. But not Micah. He was different in ways she didn’t fully understand. He was so different that she didn’t know how to deal with him, to figure him out, what to make of him. The curiosity bordered on obsession. She knew of him, but they had never spoken.

Micah was gone before school started again in January. And before that, anything that they’d had together had melted away like cigarette smoke. Only then did she wonder if the joke had been a terrible mistake. Only then did she begin to question what she thought about all that

ghost and spirit nonsense, about silly stories of strange lights in the woods, about all those times people followed some crazy tale with “I swear it’s true.” Thorpe was full of folks who were superstitious to varying degrees. With Micah’s disappearance, she began to count herself among them. Difference was, hers was no superstition. She had cause and effect.

She stopped taking smoke breaks behind the grocery store. She couldn’t stand to look at that bottle tree. She didn’t see it again until she went to Anthony’s party. Outside on his back porch, the wind had stirred and brought with it the metallic bang of wind chimes. She knew the particular clang of those chimes, knew where they came from. Miss Ernestine’s yard seemed darker than when she had tiptoed through it with Micah. But the bottle tree shone bright, the multicolored glass reflecting a sliver of moonlight. The wind chimes drew her down the back steps, closer to its sound. She felt drawn in to the glint on the bottles, all clear and black in the night. They didn’t move, but it was as though something moved within them, the chimes not chimes at all, but the sound of their glass voices. They sparkled with sound, and Jill walked closer and closer to them.

Anthony had broken the spell, and Anthony had promised to help her, to take her to Luna Quail. Anthony probably didn’t know what Jill aimed to do—to appease the evil she had let loose and, in doing so, rid herself of Micah forever. Anthony thought Micah was coming back, but he was so wrong. Micah would never be back. It was unfair. It was her fault. But she was ready to be done with it.

Because he wasn’t completely gone. He lingered—some part of him—here in the woods, in her. If he wasn’t coming back, then all of him needed to go.

She cried. She didn't know where it came from. It wasn't something she did often. Almost never actually. She hadn't cried at all in the year since Micah vanished into the ether. But exhaustion overcame her, welled up inside her, and crashed like a wave out of her. She didn't breathe, just felt the tears fall sideways down her face toward her ears. And when she couldn't hold her breath anymore, her voice exploded in one loud sob that became a cough, then a hiccup. Then it was an uncontrolled thing, like she was possessed. There was a moan that she had never heard herself make before. It was the loneliest moment of her life.

CHAPTER NINE

Anthony arrived at his grandparents' house, less than a mile from the Waddlin' Duck, when it was not quite six. It was his night off, and stopping by to see Pop and Mawmaw every couple weeks or so had been part of his routine since the police showed up at the restaurant one afternoon looking for him. Mawmaw had called them, convinced of the worst when he hadn't checked in for over a month. Anthony had been relieved to learn that the cops had not been there to arrest him—his initial assumption and the reason he hid for several long minutes in the employee restroom and then lied about a stomach ailment—but frustrated when the assistant manager on duty had given him extra cleaning duties for causing a disruption and later when Mawmaw couldn't understand why anyone, especially Anthony, would think her actions unreasonable.

Their modest but well-kept two-bedroom home, less than a mile from the stoplight, was red brick with white trim that Pop repainted every two years to keep it, as he said, looking nice. The treeless yard was always mowed short, but the spaces where the lawn met the concrete was always in need of edging. There were no plants in the flower beds, just old wet pine bark mulch, an afterthought to stunt the weeds. The place was defined by tidy shabbiness. Anthony entered the side door without knocking. This was the house where he grew up.

Mawmaw was standing in the middle of the kitchen, an ironing board before her. Steam rose from the iron. A pile of laundry covered the kitchen table. Beyond her in the living room, Pop had his feet propped up on the recliner and the television set to a cable news channel. The lamps were all off, and he had the dusty velvet curtains closed against the fading daylight.

Mawmaw looked up from her ironing, the look on her face suggesting exasperation, maybe even impatience, at the interruption. She told Anthony she wanted him to come by, and often, but always acted put out when he did. She was, he felt, put out by his very existence on this earth. “You hungry?”

Anthony seated himself at the kitchen table and pushed aside the clothes waiting to be ironed. “Why you ask?”

“Cause you only come here when you’re hungry.”

“I can wait.”

“We already ate.”

“Already?”

“You know your grandfather don’t like to eat after the sun goes down. Gives him heartburn.”

Mawmaw placed the shirt she had just finished on a plastic hanger which she hung on the back of a chair. Sighing and walking like it hurt to, she crossed to the bread box on the chipped laminate counter and took out a loaf. She tossed it onto the table where Anthony sat. She snatched the peanut butter from the pantry and jelly from the fridge, which she set with a reverberating thud on the table. “Dinner,” she said, then went back to her ironing. Anthony got up to retrieve a knife from the drawer. He poured himself a glass of water from the faucet and sat back down to make a sandwich.

“How you doing, Pop?”

“The politicians.” Pop waved the remote at the tv screen. “Black folks wanting something for nothing. Making the rest of us look bad.”

Anthony licked the knife clean and pushed his two pieces of bread together.

“Bring your clarinet with you?” Pop asked, turning from the tv.

“Nah.”

“No, sir,” Mawmaw said.

“No, sir.”

Pop wheezed and grumbled and turned back to the tv. He pushed off on the arms of the recliner, trying to adjust the position of his hips. “Too bad. I just cleaned my trumpet.” Pop was the one who had taught Anthony to play and had given Anthony a used clarinet one year for Christmas. Eventually, Anthony had gotten good enough to play the old jazz standards while Pop improvised along on his dull, dented trumpet. Anthony still couldn’t forget the look on Pop’s face when Anthony arrived home after school on day with a pawn shop guitar that had cost all his allowance money from the previous six months. Pop seemed hurt by Anthony’s preference for old southern blues. That day, he’d told Anthony that blues was poor dumb nigger music.

“How’s work?” Mawmaw asked.

“It’s work.”

“They gonna let you cook soon?”

Anthony shrugged. She was looking down at the ironing board.

“You have to let them know you want to be on the line,” Pop said.

“I have.”

“You have to get there on time and work hard and not play around.”

“I do.”

“Then how come they ain’t moved you up yet?”

“I don’t know. I think the manager don’t like me.”

“You have to make him like you,” Mawmaw said.

“Don’t make excuses,” Pop said.

Anthony took a bite of his sandwich.

“You been studying those SAT books I got from the library?” Mawmaw asked.

“No.”

“Why not? You need a good score if you gonna get into college.”

“Who says I’m going to college?”

“Education,” Pop said. “That’s how a man gets ahead.”

“Pop and I didn’t get to go to college,” Mawmaw said.

“They got a school of music down there in Columbia.”

“What if I don’t want to study music? What if I want to major in business or astronomy or something?”

“You’re wasting your talent,” Pop said, eyes still on the tv.

“How come you don’t want to go to college?” Mawmaw asked.

“It’s expensive.”

“We got money saved up. We can help you,” said Pop.

Anthony took another bite and chewed slowly. Mawmaw focused on getting the wrinkles out of one of her church dresses. Pop muttered at the tv, something about the black man never being able to trust the government. Anthony finished his sandwich listening to a pundit’s outrage, watching the light from the tv flicker across the walls of the dark living room. No one spoke—except the angry people on the news show who interrupted and insulted and shouted

over each other, each statement more cutting than the last as if the point was to see who could be the meanest.

Mawmaw finished ironing the dress, put it on a hanger, and added it to the clothes hanging on the backs of chairs. As she reached for a pair of Pop's pants from the pile on the table, she said, "Your mama came by yesterday."

Anthony swallowed hard. Bread and peanut butter stuck to the roof of his mouth. "What she want?"

"What you think?"

"Did you give her any?"

"Do I ever?"

"Did she ask about me?"

Mawmaw shook her head and bent over the ironing board.

Anthony couldn't remember exactly when he saw his mother last. Two years ago—or three?—this spring. He didn't know much about her. He hadn't spent much time with her. He knew her name was Pam, and he knew she managed to stay clean during her pregnancy. He knew that because Mawmaw had told him how he was born healthy. She admitted more than once that she had hoped Anthony had been born a crack baby because then the county would have taken him away from Pam sooner. They wouldn't let a little addicted baby go home with his addicted mother. But he was clean, and so Pam took him with her when the doctor released them. She was living with friends. That was the only way Mawmaw could describe it because that was all Mawmaw knew. She didn't even know where this place was, whether it was a house or an apartment or a trailer, if it was in Thorpe or some far off spot in the county. Pam would

leave Anthony at Mawmaw's for days at a time. When Anthony was five months old, the county called Mawmaw. They had found the baby living in a dirty drug house way off Highway 34 somewhere. They had gone to serve a warrant on the man whose name was on the lease and found Anthony, feverish, in a dirty diaper, and covered in scabies. Anthony, of course, had no memories of these early events. Mawmaw's response to most of his questions was, "We all make our own choices."

When Anthony was a kid, Pam would show up sometimes in the middle of the night, talking loud and fast on the front porch. When that happened, Mawmaw would not wake him up, would not get him out of bed to see her. But he was awake. He could hear his mother ask for money, could hear Mawmaw tell her no, tell her to leave. On those nights he promised himself that even if he left his home at Mawmaw's house, he wouldn't leave this town, not as long as his mother was out there, needing help, needing him.

"Did you let her in?" Anthony asked.

"For what?"

"I don't know. Let her shower, get something to eat."

Mawmaw shook her head. "I pray for your mama every day. That about all I can do now."

"You could do more."

"It ain't help she asking for. She asking for the devil to work through me."

Anthony took another bite of his sandwich and smacked on it loudly.

"She asked me to do enough already."

"But you ain't done it."

Mawmaw set the iron upright on the board. She pointed her finger at Anthony. “When you was first born, I didn’t know where you were. Up nights worrying ‘bout where you was sleeping, what you was eating, how often somebody be changing your diaper. I ain’t never stopped caring. Not about you. I don’t never stop caring about nobody that still care about me.”

Anthony stood up from the table. “Night, Pop. Mawmaw.” He left the jars of peanut butter and jelly, the used knife, and a pile of crumbs on the table. He left the way he came in. He was tired of Mawmaw’s pious refusals of help. He was tired of Mawmaw and Pop worrying that he was just another dumb black Kershaw County fuck-up. He knew they worried he’d turn out like Pam. They had raised him, and he loved them for that. But he knew that his definition of love—love for family—was different than theirs, that their willingness to sacrifice had a limit.

The sun was gone by the time Anthony got in his car. As he pulled out of the driveway, his headlights swept across the house’s small front porch, which was otherwise dark. Mawmaw and Pop’s porch light was never on.

*

Anthony didn’t want to be at his grandparents’ house. He didn’t feel like going home to his empty house. But he didn’t have anywhere else he needed to be. He didn’t have anywhere else where he could drop in, where he’d be among friends. So he just drove, as he so often did when he was bored or lonely. Tonight, he was both.

He drove several miles down Highway 34 without thinking, his mind wandering with his radio dial. He was halfway to Fairfield County when he remembered that Luna Quail’s place was

somewhere out this way. He decided to find it, to see if he could remember. It'd been so long since he'd gone out there last, and he'd promised Jill he'd take her. Looking for Dr. Luna's place gave him purpose in his loneliness, the same way helping Jill gave him someone to care for who wasn't his mother—lost and probably not even wanting his help—or his grandparents—who probably didn't even know they needed help. Jill wanted it, sought it out, sought *him* out. And he knew she needed it. The way she stared at Ernestine's bottle tree that night at the party—it was creepy. Just thinking back to the way she'd been under a spell gave him goosebumps. They traveled in waves up his arms, across his chest, and over his head. He shivered and turned the heat up in the car.

Jill at the party was so different from the Jill who had come to his house the first time. She was with Micah. Micah'd already told him to keep his mouth shut, that no one knew he had this girlfriend. Anthony agreed to the secret, but he hadn't expected Micah to show up with a cute white girl. She looked like a goddamn homecoming queen. Anthony had been nervous to suggest smoking a bowl, part of his and Micah's ritual when playing music together. But she'd been the one to bring it up.

“Micah said you had weed.”

Homecoming queen was a little pothead. And feisty. Anthony liked her right away after that. He could tell that when it came to Micah, she was in charge. Micah's eyes followed her like a lost puppy. It could only mean one thing—Jill was giving it up, and it was good. By the look on Micah's face, it must've been damn good.

She came with Micah several times after that. They would smoke. She would get sarcastic and funny. And when he and Micah pulled out their instruments and began to play, she'd sleep stretched out on the couch.

Jill now—the Jill that showed up at Anthony's party—seemed broken. Instead of the sarcastic jokester, she seemed angry, lost. Anthony understood. He'd had the same feelings since Micah left. Jill though. She seemed to be taking things really hard. Anthony wanted to help her, to offer some kind of comfort. He wanted to do more, too. He wanted to know her the way Micah had known her. It was just a little innocent jealousy when Micah was still around. Now, with him being gone so long, Jill's neediness seemed like an opportunity he didn't want to pass up.

Anthony pulled off Highway 34 onto another two-lane country road that wound through the woods. He was pretty sure he was going the right way. It was hard to tell in the dark.

It struck him suddenly that when he arrived at the home of Dr. Luna Quail, he could ask her to help him with Jill. Matters of love and sex—love *or* sex—had to be common requests. Love spells, potions. Those things were as old as magic. No doubt they were Dr. Luna's bread and butter. But Anthony never had any trouble getting the girl. It was usually getting rid of them that caused him trouble. What he needed help with was the fact that the girl in question belonged to his best friend. He felt guilty for even thinking about Jill like that. Picturing Jill naked, which of course he'd done, several times, felt like a betrayal.

The car continued around dark curves and over small rises. He passed a sign warning of deer in the roadway. He couldn't help but picture Micah in the passenger seat next to him. He used to drive around with Micah all the time. They would get bored and roll through the wooded

sections of the county smoking neatly rolled joints, listening to music, talking about nothing. If Micah were here now, if he had returned now from hiding, what would Anthony have to say to him? Worse, what would he have to say to Anthony?

Anthony tried to form the confession in his mind. *I've been running around with your girl. Or to be truer, I've been trying to get your girl to run around with me.* How would he explain himself? *Things got weird after you left, man. You don't understand. We had to get by.* Or maybe he would turn the tables on Micah. *Why'd you leave without telling anybody? Why haven't you called or nothing?* Micah had betrayed him long before Anthony ever even thought about Jill as anything more than his best friend's girlfriend. So who was the guilty one here?

Anthony turned left at a four-way stop. The crossroad was narrower, the pavement rougher. There were no lines painted down the center of it or along the shoulders. He was still pretty sure he was going the right way. He turned on his high beams.

All these problems could have been avoided if Micah had just come back. If he returned soon, Micah could make Jill right again. And Anthony would get over it. There were plenty of pretty girls. Maybe the help Anthony should have been asking for from Luna Quail was in locating Micah, bringing him home. Anthony had had that thought before, but he'd never acted on it. Well, because last time hadn't gone exactly as planned.

Anthony couldn't remember how he'd ever first heard of Dr. Luna Quail and the services she offered. She was a bit of a Thorpe legend, and some folks didn't even think she was real. Stories about her had been whispered around town for so long that most people couldn't remember if the stories were based on fact or fiction. Finding out for sure required luck—you just had to wind up in the right conversation with the right person. And that's where Anthony

found himself one afternoon sitting at Ernestine's kitchen table. It wasn't long after the county cops raided his house, and he felt terrible that Micah'd been caught up in that mess. Miss Ernestine had fed Anthony some brown rice and cornbread, listened to his confession, then written down directions to a trailer way off Highway 34. As she slid that paper across the table to him, she said, "Bring cash. A lot."

It wasn't cheap to hire Dr. Luna to show up at Micah's hearing at juvenile court, but Anthony felt responsible, and Dr. Luna had promised that Micah would get out of trouble while the Goffs would go away for good. On the day of the hearing, Anthony stayed out of the county courthouse, but he parked across the street and was waiting when Luna Quail emerged wearing round sunglasses with blue lenses. She walked down the front steps looking straight ahead and came directly to where Anthony waited.

"All charges against your friend have been dropped," she said. The judge had let Micah go because he was a minor with no previous record. He'd never even had after-school detention. "The judge said your friend was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, and if he was guilty of anything, it was poor choice of friends." With that, she had nodded and said, "You're welcome." As she walked away, a flock of crows suddenly flew out of a tree in the courthouse lawn and flew over Anthony's car. He thought he should take it as a sign, but he didn't know of what. When he looked back down the sidewalk, Dr. Luna was gone.

She had been right in that the Goffs did go away—at least for awhile. The charges against them were complicated, especially for Nick, who was also up for resisting arrest. But the county solicitor's office took too long building a case and more pressing matters—worse crimes, like murder and rape and child abuse—came up. Eventually, the county, which had been so intent on

keeping Nick and Nathan locked up, just let them go. All charges were dismissed. There was never any trial, never any plea deal. Anthony didn't even know until that night at the turkey shoot. He'd been caught off guard by the Goffs' arrival and wondered where Luna Quail's work had gone wrong. And not long after that, Micah took off. Anthony had to admit he'd considered doing the same.

CHAPTER TEN

Melissa was at Wal-Mart buying supplies for her trip. Snacks, travel-size toiletries, first aid kit. She was planning for a trip. It was during the manic states that Melissa felt she could change her life, her surroundings, herself. Everything could change when she had the energy and ambition to make a start. She always started with the house, with cleaning, with trying to create order out of the chaos. Sure, life was generally chaotic—for everyone, not just manic depressives, this much she knew—but it was even more chaotic when she was manic. The thoughts that were normally disjointed, fragmentary during even her most quiet moments became fireballs hurtling toward Earth, sending sparks and lights and color burning through the atmosphere, exploding upon impact, relentless, one after another and none of them related. One moment, she was deciding to clean the grease off the stove hood with dish soap, and the next she was planning the baby shower she would have wanted (not the one Mama's church ladies threw her out of pity and the need to appear nonjudgmental and loving of all neighbors), then she was wondering how chromosomes really worked, then she was picturing cells dividing the way they had been drawn in her high school biology book and wondering had the pieces of her and the pieces of Dan divided into separate cells inside her son or if they someone shared the same space, if not in this space as she knew it, but microscopic landscape of Micah's body because if they were together in his cells then they were at least together. And then she'd be thinking about Dan and that phone call from the sister and her thoughts would become a strange mix of memory and fantasy and fact, and she couldn't tell one from another, she only knew the images that flashed before her and what parts had really happened? and what parts had she just made up

because she liked the ending better? And what part had Micah come from? And that was when her thoughts became a swarm of hornets and she had to bat them away and they stung and she cried and she didn't know what was what or who to trust or if she could even believe herself and wasn't there a time when her brain didn't work like this? Wasn't there a time when she was like everyone else?

She wandered into the auto section. Micah went missing on a Sunday morning. Actually, Melissa noticed his absence about that time. It was the quiet she noticed first. Not the quiet from him so much. He hadn't had much to say to her since their fight in the kitchen when he announced his intention to travel to San Diego after graduation. Oh, he spoke to her, but usually not more than to ask a pertinent question—"Are we having anything for supper?"—or to answer questions directed at him—"Fine." But on that Sunday morning, she noticed that she hadn't heard any music for days. No cello, no violin, not even the thump of bass from the stereo in his bedroom. Only once that noise was gone did she realize what an integral part of her life it had become. It had always seemed like background static. Mama was at church and wouldn't be home until noon at the earliest. So she went from room to room, looking for him. She peered out the window. His car was parked in the grass beside the narrow paved driveway. In his room, his bed was made, which struck her as odd. Teenage boys weren't supposed to make their beds, right? And she realized that she had never come in his room to know otherwise. He always kept the door closed, and she always respected that closed door. Looking around now, she was impressed by well kept it was. There were small piles of clutter, but on the whole it looked so clean. Where had he gotten that? Certainly not from her. His cell phone, wallet, and car keys

were on his bedside table between a lamp, an alarm clock. He wasn't in the backyard. If he had been, it would have been odder to Melissa than the made bed.

Mama came home and reheated chicken vegetable soup for dinner, warming the cornbread that she took out of its tin foil home in the toaster oven. She talked about the day's sermon while Melissa pushed carrots and celery around her bowl with her spoon. Mama did not ask about Micah, and Melissa decided he was likely out at his friend's house, spent the night somewhere or something. She was unsure of his normal movements. She spent so much time alone in her room or asleep on various pieces of furniture throughout the house. She felt bad about that. She thought about laying down on the couch to die.

When she woke up on Monday, the house was empty. It was ten o'clock in the morning. Mama would be at work. Micah would be at school. At two-thirty, the phone rang. In her newly felt worry, she answered it on the first ring. A recording from the school to let her know that her child had missed one or more classes today and that she needed to send him tomorrow with a written excuse signed by a parent or guardian. Was skipping school normal for Micah? She didn't know that either.

At supper, while she picked again at her food, she said to Mama, "Have you seen Micah?"

Mama raised her eyebrows but did not look up from her meal. "You ain't seen him? Did he come home from school?"

"The school called. Well, a recording called. From the school. They said he was absent today."

Mama seemed unperturbed. "Probably at a friend's house. He'll probably call."

Melissa scraped her fork against her plate. She wanted Mama to look up at her, to see how serious she was taking this. “I didn’t see him at all yesterday either.”

Mama did look up then, but only to stare off out the kitchen window. She was thinking, or maybe she thought she’d see Micah coming up the drive. “I got home from church,” she said slowly. “We ate soup, right?”

“For dinner, yeah.”

“Then I—I took a nap, I think. I laid down to read a magazine. Yes, and then I fell asleep. And then I got up, and you were in your room with the door shut, so I assumed you were asleep. So I went to Tammys’s to eat supper. And we watched a movie. And I came home and went to bed.” Mama took another bite and chewed it slowly, still thinking. “No, I don’t think I saw him at all yesterday.”

“His bed was made.”

“When?”

“Yesterday. You were at church. I looked for him.”

“Looked for him? Why?”

“It was so quiet.”

“D’you leave the house?”

“No.”

“So you looked for him in the house?”

“Yes. And his bed was made.”

Mama set her fork down and picked up her cell phone, which was sitting next to her plate. “No texts or missed calls.” She pushed a few buttons, and in another part of the house, they heard Micah’s phone ring.

“He left his phone.”

Mama hung up and replaced her phone on the table. Her lips twisted in confusion, maybe concern.

“His wallet, too,” Melissa offered.

“His car’s here.”

“I know.”

Mama pushed away from the table and hurried to Micah’s room. Melissa followed. The room was cold and dark. The bed was still made. Mama grabbed the phone from the bedside table. She pushed some buttons and sighed heavily. “It’s locked. Do you know his code?”

Melissa shrugged.

“Why would he lock his phone?” Mama asked. “What’s he got to keep secret?”

Melissa shrugged again, but could wager a few guesses. She wondered if unlocking the phone would reveal any communications with someone in San Diego. “He was mad at me.”

“Micah?”

Melissa nodded.

“When isn’t he?”

“What?”

Mama put the phone back on the table. “He’s doing that whole angry teenager thing for the past, oh, three years. Or haven’t you noticed?”

Mama ushered Melissa out of the bedroom and shut the door behind her. “He’ll probably turn up. We’ll give it some time.”

But when Mama got home from work the next day, there was still no Micah and Mama became frantic. She began calling all of her friends and acquaintances around Thorpe. Had anyone seen him? She called the grocery stores, the restaurants, the fast food joints. She left a message with the school. When that turned up nothing, Mama paced the kitchen thinking aloud. “I don’t know his friends. I should know who his friends are. I should pay more attention to these things. Why didn’t we do that?”

“Do what?” Melissa was on the couch, deep in her own thoughts, the realization of where Micah was just beginning to dawn on her.

“Pay attention, Melissa.”

“I am.”

“No. Why didn’t we pay attention? Why don’t we know who his friends are?” Mama now paced between the kitchen and the living room. “We just let him run amok. And even after he got in trouble. We should have clamped down. We should have kept a better eye out.”

But Melissa couldn’t focus on what Mama was saying. The full realization was upon her now, and she couldn’t believe that he would up and leave with only a few months left of school. He must have been very angry with her, so angry, angry enough to leave for San Diego without telling her, without taking any of his stuff, as though he was creating a whole new life for himself, one that didn’t include her or Mama or Thorpe or even his music. He left her without a word, leaving only lifeless objects behind. It wasn’t fair. She wanted him to wait. She wanted

him to give her the chance to get on board with this crazy idea of his. It just wasn't fair. She started to cry.

This started Mama crying. She paced and cried and continued to berate herself and Melissa for not knowing Micah better than they did. Finally, she picked up her cell phone and dialed. She said, "Can you send an officer? I can't find my grandson."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Winter light was different, more stark, the glare more severe, and Jill had to shield her eyes while Anthony drove her to the home of Dr. Luna Quail. Outside, it was windy enough to move the car around on the poorly paved roads. It shook the empty trees, kicked up dust, and even though the sun hurt Jill's eyes, it seemed very, very far away. Anthony pulled the car onto a dirt road lined with single-wide trailers, the sad neighborhood announced by a broken, faded sign: Sandy Acres. Jill wondered what these rusty trailers said about the doctor. If she was that good at what she did, wouldn't she be able to afford to live some place better?

The dirt road split, and Anthony took the path that wound to the right, driving them through yards littered with faded plastic children's toys, rusted animal cages, piles of shoes, and broken pieces of wood. The shades were drawn on each trailer they passed, and though the discarded, decaying toys suggested otherwise, there were no children anywhere to be seen.

As the road began to circle around, the trailers stopped and a thin, scrub oak wood grew to the road's edge. A few brown leaves clung to the short, skinny trees, but it was mostly bare branches that scratched the length of Anthony's car as they drove along. Then a break in the trees, and on a large patch of sand sat a wooden cabin. It looked as if once, a long time ago, it had been painted a gleaming white, but now that paint had peeled and drifted away, the gray wood showing from beneath. The shutters, one of which hung at a strange angle, were painted blue, as were the crooked front steps and the frame around the front door. The door itself was bright white, the paint fresh and unblemished. Although the yard, if a large blanket of mounded sand could be called a yard, was large, it did not extend all the way around the tiny house. The

bare, brown woods grew right up to the back of it. These were not the thick, dark woods that Jill imagined would surround the home of a witch. She had pictured darkness, thick forest, ghoulish mists, Spanish moss hanging low. She realized now how silly that fantasy had been. Even she knew that Spanish moss didn't grow around here. In the thin woods, a brightness surrounded Dr. Quail's old house, the harsh winter sun reflecting off what was left of the white paint. It was a garish light, unsettling, out of sync with its setting, like the light of a policeman's flashlight or a passing ambulance. It wasn't light that illuminated. It was light that blinded, obscured. It was light that made Jill uneasy. More uneasy than she already was.

Anthony pulled the car into the sandy yard and turn off the engine. "Having second thoughts?"

Jill shook her head and opened the door. Immediately she heard chimes clanging in the blustery wind and looked up to where they were hanging from the eaves at the far corner of the cabin. Next to them hung a plastic hummingbird feeder, empty, the plastic faded by exposure. It swung on its hook like it was trying to launch itself into the air. Next to the stairs, the dead remains of a summertime herb garden shivered and snapped with every gust. Pine straw and dried leaves swirled across the yard.

A little girl answered Anthony's knock. Her face was clean and her hair in neat braids. She didn't say anything, but left them standing in the front room while she disappeared down a dark hallway. After the brightness of the outside, it took a moment for Jill's eyes to adjust to the shadowy room. The room was gloomy and too warm. The clanging and knocking coming from the kerosene heater in the corner was loud enough to drown out the racket of the wind chimes outside. The smell of kerosene also drowned out the mustiness of the old brown furniture—a

threadbare plaid couch, a couple of rocking chairs with dusty pillows for cushions, an aged, stained quilt thrown over the back of one—and the dirty rug partially covering the wood floor. Jill ran her hand along the edge of a puffy easy chair that looked like it had spent some time on the side of the road. The house creaked with every gust of wind from outdoors.

“I thought it would look different,” Jill said to Anthony as she fingered the burlap tapestries that served as curtains.

“What d’you expect? A crystal ball?” He was inspecting a collection of menacing tribal masks hanging on the wall. Adorned with feathers and small bones, colorful artwork, Jill could see that many of them grimaced, mouths locked in an angry, accusatory frown. It reminded her of a face she had seen more than once in the midnight darkness of her bedroom. She decided not to answer Anthony, even though the answer was at least partially yes.

Now he stood over a record player, a warped album spinning and snapping on the turntable. It was an old blues record, a woman moaning then keening, accompanied only by a guitar whose eerie notes sounded metallic, as though the recording had been made in a room with tin walls. The singer’s voice was mournful, and she sang of dying. Her daddy, she sang, was gone off to war. He knew he would not come back. He wanted only to have his body sent to his mother, his soul left out, unburied and free to roam. Death dripped from every note, like the song was a march for a funeral already foregone, an elegy for someone not yet dead. Anthony surveyed the other albums in the shelved collection, his lips moving to the words of the song. It ended and he moved the needle back to the beginning.

“Don’t touch that.” Doctor Luna Quail appeared at the end of the hallway. She seemed to float into the room. She was a tall, bone-thin woman with light colored skin. Her dark hair,

puffy and kinked, was cut short against her skull. She wore a long-sleeved white cotton dress that came to her ankles. She had on pink bedroom slippers, and her toenails were painted bright red.

“Always having to replace the damn needle ‘cause folks always want to be touching it.”

Anthony obeyed and stepped back from the record player. The singer wailed on about crossing a river. “How your cousin?” he asked.

“She alright. Her daughter took her in, taking care of her. Doctor say she might learn to talk again. Someday.”

“What happened to her?” Jill asked.

“She had a stroke.” Doctor Luna looked Jill up and down, as if not believing she was really there. On the wall behind the doctor, the dead eyes of three mounted buck heads glared and glinted. They looked like a protective posse who did not welcome strangers. They had the same look on their faces that the doctor did. “Who’d you bring me?” she asked Anthony, eyes still on Jill.

“This Jill. My friend.”

“You been baptized?” she asked Jill.

“I’m sorry?”

“I asked if you been baptized.” She shifted in her stance, revealing an end table behind her that held a stuffed fox, an alligator head, and a sweetgrass basket full of chicken feet.

Jill realized a moment too late that she was staring at the chicken feet. “Oh. Yes, ma’am.” The ma’am wasn’t mere politeness. She could tell that Luna Quail was a woman who fully expected to be referred to as ma’am.

The doctor settled herself onto the sofa next to a fat orange tabby with unusually large ears. Its paws were tucked under its body, its head erect, but its eyes were closed. It purred quietly when Doctor Luna began to stroke its back. “Full immersion? Or that little sprinkling mess?”

“Sprinkled I guess. I was a baby.”

“What are you?”

“Ma’am?”

“What is your religion?”

“My family’s Episcopalian.”

“So what are you?”

“I don’t know.”

The doctor gave the cat beside her two more long strokes and a quick pat. Then she spoke to Anthony. “You go on and wait outside.”

“How come?”

“Because this is how I conduct business. You brung her. Now good-bye.” She dismissed him with a wave of her hand. Once again, he obeyed. She now turned her attention to the coffee table, which was littered with wares and supplies illuminated by the glow of three red pillar candles. Jill noticed a stack of colorful tarot cards and a handful of small sachets, or what appeared to be sachets. They were round, some the size of golf balls, others as small as a peanut, just little pouches of flannel or burlap, salvaged bits of fabric that looked like they’d be at home on some old lady’s quilt. “You believe in God?”

“I think. Maybe.”

“You believe in spirits?”

Jill shrugged.

The doctor got up and retrieved a small wooden bowl from a sideboard along the wall. With her back to Jill, she began to root around in the jars and baskets scattered about the room, picking up feathers, dried herbs, and a shedded snakeskin. “If you believe in God, but don’t believe in spirits, haunts, what have you, then you don’t really believe in God. And if you believe in God, but don’t believe in the folks who can commune with Him and other such spirits, conjure them, get them to do stuff, then you don’t really believe in God. Likewise, if you believe in spirits and haunts, you got to believe in God.” Supplies in hand, she sat back down on the couch. “Either they all exist or none of them do. Understand?”

Jill nodded.

Luna plucked a sprig of some herb Jill couldn’t identify out of the bowl and began to tear it to pieces. Those pieces, she rolled between her fingertips, creating a coarse powder. “What’d you do?”

Jill didn’t respond. She knew something was happening in her life where spirits were concerned, but she wasn’t sure yet if she believed this woman who called herself a doctor. Avoiding her gaze, Jill looked instead at the odd collection of decorations on the walls. Next to the mounted deer heads was a painting of a black Jesus with a heart glowing in the center of his chest adorned with a ring of brown-black thorns. Next to that was a collage of portrait studio photographs, school pictures, and snapshots of children in Easter bonnets, an old woman smiling from a hospital bed, and a bride with her maids.

“You got nothing to say for yourself?” Luna had now picked up the feather and plucked the strands away one by one. “Alright. You can go on and keep your secrets. But you can’t keep ‘em forever. I’ll figure ‘em out sooner or later. Right now I can tell you this. They all around you.” She pointed the half-naked feather just over Jill’s shoulder. “The spirits. And not the good kind neither. Something you did welcomed them in, and now they stuck to you like white on rice.” She shook her head like she was scolding a child. Finished with the feather, she lay the now empty quill to the side. “You been having hags visit you?”

“What?”

“The hags. Incubi. They come at night.”

Jill avoided her eye again. She fingered a piece of fabric resting on the tabletop and said nothing.

Luna nodded her head knowingly. “Mmhmm. That’s what I thought. But only recently, right?”

Jill gave her one terse nod.

“Fore that, other bad stuff been happening. Not to you, but folks in your life. Important folks.” The record came to a stop again, the sound of the needle skipping over blank vinyl blaring through the speaker. The doctor did not get up to switch it off.

Jill wanted to nod, but didn’t, afraid of what she’d be admitting to. She flicked the fabric with her fingernail.

“That’s right, that’s right. You got all these secrets from everybody, but not me. Not Luna Quail, honey. God has given me the gift of clairvoyance and prophecy. The doctor can see right through you, can see all around you.” She stopped, looked at her hands then into the bowl

like she forgot something. She rose, crossed to a shelf of jars, and chose a piece of blue broken glass out of one of them. It looked like a ragged gem. She returned to the couch and dropped it in the bowl. “And now you feeling guilty. And now you want me to fix it all for you. Let me see your hand.”

Jill hesitated.

“You want me to help you or not?” Her tone was still sharp and authoritative.

“I want you to help me,” Jill mumbled.

“Then start cooperating, girl. Or you can try and get your own self out of this mess, hear?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Jill extended her hand.

The doctor took it and examined it. Jill expected a palm reading, but the doctor looked at the back of her hand, too, examined her cuticles, searched for dirt under the fingernails. “This whole thing started with secrets. You keep secrets because you think you in charge.” She release Jill’s hand and stood again. She returned this time with salt. “I’m here to tell you you don’t control as much as you think you do. But I get the feeling you’re starting to learn that, aren’t you?” She shook the salt into the bowl. “A hard lesson, ain’t it?” She shook her head. “That’s life, baby.” She lifted the snakeskin out of the bowl and held it up for Jill to see. “New beginnings, see?” She tore the skin into pieces, dropping them back into the bowl. Next, she held up a cylinder that read Comstar International Pure Commercial-Grade Lye. “Cleansing agent.” She removed the lid and sprinkled a few crystals into the bowl. “Now tell me what you did. I know you did something, and eventually I can figure it out. But this will go faster and easier on you if you just come on out and tell me.”

Jill watched the doctor mix the bowl's contents with her fingers, then looked away. Her secrets, she decided, could stay hers. She noticed suddenly that even the corners of the room near the ceiling were decorated. In one a stuffed and mounted barred owl, wings spread like a cape, looked like a sentinel ready to attack an intruder. In another hung an old hornets' nest, its gray paper-thin layers unfurling like layers of dead skin from a healing burn. Jill imagined—wondered—if at night, on a solstice, under a full moon, all of Doctor Luna's dead animals came to life, filled with the wild spirits she conjured. Jill pictured entire covens of reanimated wildlife hosting their own demonic jamborees in the sandy woods behind the cabin, burning pine boughs and calling forth the invisible forces of the world to wreak havoc on the unexpected and not so innocent.

Doctor Luna stopped her stirring and shook her head again. "I hope you ain't a hopeless case." She plucked a square of fabric from the small pile, poured the bowl's mixture into it, collected the corners, and tied them with a black string. She handed it to Jill. "Wear this in your shoe for seven days. On the seventh night, I want you to burn it. Find you a place where the spirits seem the most present. That'll be a good place to do it."

Jill turned the sachet over in her hand. "Seventh night. Got it." It sounded crazy, all of it. But she was pretty sure, she knew, something strange had happened that night they'd broken the bottles on Miss Ernestine's tree. Micah was gone. Miss Ernestine was recovering from a stroke. Her own life was a wreck. She still wasn't sure she trusted Doctor Luna, but she was willing to follow her directions. At least this time.

Doctor Luna was up again rooting around in the sideboard. "And if that don't work, you got to make a peace offering of two live chickens."

“What?”

The doctor found a small glass vial of a golden liquid, opened it, and poured some on her hands. She rubbed her palms together. “It’ll work though. Long as you don’t go mess it up.”

“I won’t mess it up.”

Doctor Luna approached still rubbing her hands. “You got to make amends, recompense. Maybe then, once you’ve appeased those who need appeasing, you can get the information you’re seeking. A sign, at the very least.” She sat back on the couch. The cat stretched and rolled onto its side. “You won’t be able to move on, not one inch, if you don’t restore the balance that you upset, hear?”

Jill stood. She wondered if the doctor knew more than she was letting on. What else was Jill unknowingly betraying to this conjurer? She held up the pouch. “Thank you for this.”

Doctor Luna nodded. “No more secrets, hear? You got to come clean and get right with God. Your life depends on it. Others’ lives, too.”

Jill reached into her pocket and threw two \$20 bills on the coffee table. She jerked her chin toward Doctor Luna’s hands. “That some kind of special oil?”

“No, baby. The dry air coming out the heater. It’s murder on my skin.”

*

Anthony sat in his car with the heat on. He wondered how desperate Jill’s situation was, what Jill’s situation was. He was sure it had something to do with Micah, which is what had brought Anthony to Dr. Luna Quail the first time. And he had been pretty damn desperate. He

would never forget getting the phone call. He was standing in line waiting to buy cigarettes. The ID showed that it was his neighbor, an occasional customer of his. It was not unheard of for him to call, but unusual and unexpected enough for Anthony to step out of line and answer it.

“You got five-oh everywhere, man. Don’t come home.”

He spent the afternoon and early evening driving on back roads trying to calm down, cursing under his breath. His palms sweat all over the steering wheel. Micah had been there. He’d left Micah at his house. He thought he’d be gone ten minutes, tops, so he left him there with the Goff brothers. What’s the worst that could happen in just ten minutes? He had done it selfishly. He had left Micah there because he didn’t want the Goffs alone in his house. They showed up without warning, without invitation, looking for somewhere to get high. Anthony had just been about to leave. He was only going to be gone for a minute. So he left an inexperienced fifteen-year-old with a couple of tweakers and the entire Thorpe police force. All because he was out of cigarettes. Because he was sure that Nick and Nathan would rob him blind if left alone and high in his house. They didn’t know about the loose floorboard in his bedroom closet. As he drove around, he wondered if Micah knew about it. Did the police?

Anthony was sick to his stomach during those hours in the car. He kept imagining Micah being handcuffed, sitting in the backseat of a police car, being fingerprinted and processed at the county jail. He pictured swarms of uniforms, blue and gray of the Thorpe cops, black for the county deputies. Would they put him in holding with everyone else? Or separate him as a juvenile? How would Nick and Nathan behave? How would they behave towards Micah? Shit. Towards Anthony?

Worried that the cops might be looking for him, Anthony decided that being out on the roads was probably a terrible idea. Then it occurred to him that if the Goffs had bonded out already, they might be looking for him, too. And he couldn't decide who it would be worse to be found by.

He drove then to his grandparents' house and backed his car into the driveway so that his back bumper was just touching the front bumper on his grandfather's Oldsmobile. As he took the keys from the ignition, he wondered if the cops would come looking for him there, if they already had. He was about to start the car again and pull away and find somewhere else to hide out until everything died down, but he saw the light come on in the front window, then the porch light. Mawmaw and Pop already knew he was there. They would be suspicious if he drove off without coming in.

"You got good timing," Mawmaw told him, standing on the porch in her bare feet. "We ain't had supper yet."

He knew that. It was still light out. "It smells great," he answered, even though he couldn't smell anything out on the porch.

She grunted, as if she saw through the lie and it annoyed her. "You always seem to know when I'm frying pork chops. I just hope I cooked enough for three people."

He spent the night in his old bed. Grandma had turned the space into her sewing room, setting up her Singer machine in the corner where his dresser had stood for years. Where his desk had been, the one he rarely used for homework but used to hold little league trophies and a picture of his mother from before he was born, she had set up a card table now covered in bolts of fabric, a pattern cut out of tissue paper, and a plush tomato full of stick pins.

The cops had not come to the house looking for him. Mawmaw and Pop did not ask the reason for his visit, assuming he just wanted to mooch another home-cooked meal. Mawmaw had gone to bed shortly after dinner, worn out, she said, from having to do everything herself. Pop camped out with his cable news show for most of the evening, and Anthony was too keyed up to relax in front of the television anyway, so he went back to the sewing room, laid on his old bed, and stared at the stained popcorn ceiling. He kept checking his phone to see if he was missing calls without realizing it, but no one had called him. His neighbor hadn't contacted him with any updates. He had no idea if the police were still at his house, no idea if Micah was spending the night in jail. Around ten, he dialed the number to Micah's cell phone. A woman answered, demanded, "Anthony? Where are you?" And he hung up. He felt better, though, because if a woman—Micah's mother? grandmother? he didn't know—was answering his phone, then he was probably at home, on restriction.

A little after midnight, his phone began to vibrate, the noise of it next to his head waking him from a light and restless sleep, the kind where you know you've been dreaming nonstop, where you wake up tired, the dreams already gone from your memory. It was Micah. Yes, he was arrested. Yes, he was back home and grounded for life, according to his grandmother. She had been the one to answer the phone earlier, but now she was asleep. He told Anthony how the police had shown up, pounded on the front door three times to announce themselves, and before anyone could reach the door to answer it, they had kicked it in, guns brandished. Nick had bolted, making a run for the back door, but he was eventually tackled in the back yard by two officers. Nathan stayed in his seat in the living room, whimpering as more police cars arrived. He was crying when they led him away in handcuffs. The cops never asked for Anthony by

name, said they had only received a tip of drug activity occurring at this house and did Micah know anything about that? They had, at first, thought Micah was the house's occupant, but he had shown his ID as proof of a different address and of his young age. It had been chaos, everything happening quickly, but seeming to happen slowly, he said. First, they found the gun, freshly cleaned and sitting out on the kitchen counter. They took the eighth of weed from the coffee table. Everything changed, though, when one of the officers found the stash that Nathan had tried to hide by stuffing in the cushions of the couch where he'd been seated. Baggies of crystal meth, a dirty glass pipe, and an Advil bottle filled with pills that definitely were not Advil. Suddenly they evacuated the house, begin treating it like a hazmat site. Said they were worried there might be a meth lab inside. They handcuffed Micah because he had been there in the presence of drugs and drug paraphernalia. From his seat in the back of the police cruiser, Micah had watched as county cops showed up, zipped white hooded jumpsuits over their uniforms, donned gas masks, and re-entered Anthony's house. Of course, they didn't find anything—no empty blister packs of Sudafed, no lithium batteries—so they locked up and drove everyone away.

They questioned Micah at the county jail. He sat alone in a room with a folding table, a few hard plastic chairs, and glaring fluorescent lights. He sat alone for hours, wondering if they'd ever let him call his grandmother. He didn't know what time it was, but he was sure that she would be wondering where he was. The growl in his gut told him that supertime had come and gone. He sat alone until two officers, not in uniforms, came to question him. Don't worry, he hadn't told them anything. Just that Anthony's house was not a meth lab, that no one in that house did meth, that the Goffs had brought it with them, that all the drugs they had found, in fact,

belonged to the Goffs, even the weed. They again insisted that someone had tipped them off to drug-related activity going on at Anthony's house. They brought up the fact that the Goff brothers were there, and why would they be there if nothing drug-related ever happened in that house? The Goffs were music fans, Micah told them, and that they had come to buy a copy of the CD that he and Anthony had recorded a few months ago at a studio in Columbia. No idea that they'd show up with drugs. Micah was a good liar. Micah knew that besides an anonymous tip and the shit they'd found on the coffee table, they had nothing. Micah knew he looked young and innocent and that the Goffs looked guilty as hell. They looked guilty no matter what they were doing—pumping gas, standing in line at the grocery store, at home at night sleeping in their beds. What was Micah doing at Anthony's house without Anthony there? House-sitting. Of course. Anthony was in Georgia at a family reunion. The officer who questioned him couldn't tell him what would happen to him next. Micah was worried, he said, about what would happen in court. Might just get probation. Maybe just one of those drug and alcohol classes. But it might be worse.

Eventually, they did call his mother, and she showed up, along with his grandmother. His mother had been totally out of it, but his grandmother was mad as a hornet. Said he couldn't go over to Anthony's anymore. Said he'd be stuck in his house the rest of the summer.

Anthony said, "Probably best to stay out of sight for a minute." He fell back asleep feeling better about Micah and hoping that Nick and Nathan were still locked up, would stay locked up for awhile. If not, both he and Micah would have to watch their backs.

In the morning, Anthony drove home before his grandparents woke up. His front door jamb was shot to hell, which meant he'd never get his deposit back, and the couch cushions were

on the floor, kitchen drawers all open, but everything else seemed to be in order. He threw his keys and his phone on the kitchen counter and made a beeline for his room. He could tell that a cursory search had been conducted, drawers opened and hastily shut, items pulled out from under his bed. But the loose floorboard was still in place, a pile of old shoes sitting on top of it, and when he checked it, heart pounding, breath loud, everything was still there in the hole—over a pound of marijuana, the cash box, and two clips of bullets for which he now had no gun. He would never find out who called in the tip, but he was here, in his own house, and not in the county jail awaiting arraignment. Micah was home, but not mad at him. The Goffs were likely looking at drug charges thanks to Micah’s lie. The kid was a true friend. He had performed beautifully.

And he was smart enough to get the hell out of town when the Goffs were released. Anthony wished it hadn’t had to be that way. They had been surprisingly forgiving of him, but when it came to Micah, they—especially Nick—wouldn’t forget, wouldn’t let it go.

The car door opened and Jill slumped into the passenger seat. She cupped a small pouch in her hands like it was a piece of china. “We can go.”

Anthony pulled out of the sandy yard and drove them back through the trailer park. He had so many questions he wanted to ask her. He wanted to invite her over to his house. He wanted to hang out, maybe talk about her theories on the hoodie in the woods, but mostly talk about her. He was about to suggest going back to his place when she leaned over and yanked off her boot. She stuffed the root that Dr. Luna had given her into the toe, and then put the boot back on.

“I want to go home,” she said.

Anthony nodded and turned the car in that direction.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jill knelt in the pinestraw in the woods behind Hillcrest Baptist Church, those woods with their otherworldly activity, their mingling of the seen and unseen. She smelled wood smoke. It was the comforting fragrance of a home fire, of people gathered around a fireplace on a cold night. But here in the woods, the smell was mysterious. Jill always noticed it when she came back here, and she had been coming back here a lot lately.

She had followed Dr. Luna Quail's instructions. She wore the tiny root in her shoe for three days. On the third day, she found a spot—these woods had been her obvious choice—where the spirits seemed the most active, where a shift in the atmosphere signaled an intersection with the divine or the demonic or something not quite either but not quite human. She had chosen it also for its connection, her connection, to Micah. On this spot, after three days, she had cleared the pinestraw away, creating a little dirt circle on which she built a small fire, a funeral pyre for the root. As it burned away, she spoke a command to any spirits she may have released by breaking the bottles on Miss Ernestine's bottle tree, by convincing Micah to do the same. This is what Dr. Luna had instructed, although it was up to Jill to craft an appropriate speech and declare it to the unseen forces surrounding her, the forces that would, no doubt, be lured to her location by the fire. Dr. Luna had promised that. So Jill had stared at the tiny flames attacking the pouch of flowery fabric and its exotic, yet familiar, contents, and called to the air.

Jill had hoped for some sort of reaction, some discernible change, anything that would let her know the root had worked and that the angered spirits were appeased. A yellow warmth seemed to emanate right out of the air around her and wrapped her in an unnatural heat in spite

of the winter cold. It was all she needed, and she called out, “Thank you!” in a loud, jubilant voice to the spirits, the trees, the pinestraw, the birds and snakes and bugs and whatever other things, living or not, that might be watching her at work.

But the glow hadn’t lasted. It had, however, given Jill, if not a truly “second sight,” surely a heightened sensitivity to the spiritual things of this world, a peek into spaces beyond. That would explain the return of her nighttime visitations and her new and terrifying dreams. They were a form of communication from another place. She had felt it in the moment when she saw the bottle tree again, and she had experienced it again that day during and after the conjuration. She felt that something else was out there, and she had communicated with it, and it had communicated back.

She decided she would use the spiritual world to help her create her new life, not that she knew yet exactly what that life would look like or where it would even take place. She knew the first step: rid herself of every trace of Micah Burnside that had ever existed inside of her. The other steps would present themselves in due time. And she wouldn’t need Dr. Luna Quail for any of it.

It was getting on towards dark, darker in the woods than out on the highway where the sun’s last rays weren’t blocked by pines. It was barely the end of the working day. She knew her parents were just now making their commutes home up I-20 from Columbia, and she would be done, lightened and free, and home in time for supper.

Once again, Jill cleared a space in the carpet of forest litter until she had a flat patch of gray sand to work with. In the center of the space, she placed a tea candle. She struggled to get her lighter to produce a flame in the biting wind, and once she had one she struggled to get it to

light the candle's small wick. It would catch, then go out, catch again, and blow away. Finally, she pulled a hardcover book titled *Roots, Hexes, and Conjurations of the Hoodoo Tradition: Natural Magic and Spiritual Communication* from her bag. Found online, its battered fabric cover and crinkled pages, set upright in a little mound of sand for stabilization, made a useful and fitting windbreak for Jill's project. She was finally able to get the candle to stay lit.

Jill was performing the root required to rid oneself of a lover, although she had altered it for her unique situation. The book had offered multiple examples of every annoyance a romantic partner could supply: a faked pregnancy, running around with various lovers, tempermental fits, lazy mooching. The root could be used if the conjurer had simply fallen out of love as a means for sending the unloved partner off without hurting any feelings. And the root contained a speck of protection against the lover's return. "You will not be bothered again by the trifling or unpredictable machinations of your former beloved," the book promised. But Jill's situation was different, and thus required a slightly different approach. Micah was already gone, but not completely. If Micah could be literally spirited away to a different life, there was no reason, according to Jill, that she couldn't be either. It was time to purge. After this, there would be no such thing as Micah Burnside in her life.

Jill pulled a folded sheet of paper out of her bag. On it was written a modified incantation, one that would have the desired effect, and she began to recite it, barely audible to even her own ears, over and over again, sending herself into a trance that was part sleep, part ecstasy, her words sounding more like tongues. The wind picked up again, but she didn't feel it. Her candle remained undisturbed. She was in a cocoon of warmth, and in the shifting of the wind around her, she heard whispers of a familiar voice, familiar but unplaceable. Was it a memory?

Someone she knew? Or was it something that knew her? She hushed her spell-making to listen to its message, if it had one, but continued moving her lips, speaking the words in her head.

The whispering billowed to a crescendo around Jill, her supplies, the pine trees and vines and brambles. Then it died, indistinguishable from the rushing of the evening wind. That's when she saw them—the lights moving, flickering, appearing and disappearing in her peripheral vision. They only moved just beyond where she could see them. She wanted to see them. They were reassurance that she was making contact with something beyond what she could see, beyond whisperings and goosebumps, beyond anything anyone could explain away as tricks of the senses or overactive imagination or even hallucinations. The lights meant they were here, whoever they were. Who or what they were didn't matter to Jill. Only their presence was necessary. The lights meant they were listening.

The lights continued to dance just outside her field of vision, flickering white, sometimes green, sometimes blue. The flame on her candle cast a yellow glow. Everything was color. She closed her eyes to absorb it. Then came the prolonged hoot of an owl, like the sound of a dog barking far away somewhere, but with a lilt and a rhythm that no dog had. The call was echoed by another, from a different direction. Two owls in the darkness. They were speaking to each other. Were they saying hello or good-bye? Were they just passing each other in the approaching night? Were they partners helping each other in the hunt? Or were they partners warning each other to go far from here? The hoots of one owl sailed closer to Jill on the cold wind, clear and crisp and loud in the thin winter air. But the hoots of the other owl grew fainter, farther. The far owl was hooting back its good-bye in a mournful tone that shot right to the heart of Jill, who understood that good-byes could not always be spoken, apologies not always offered or

accepted, understood that everyone had reasons to ask for forgiveness and reasons to withhold it. Jill felt the pain in the calls of the owls, a splitting in her gut that ached like a long-formed sore, that cut and burned like a freshly ripped wound. The hoots ringing through the woods caught in her own throat, rang in her ears suddenly in a high-pitched squeal. She struggled for breath. Her head felt as though it was being squeezed from all directions, the pressure of noise and sorrow making it difficult to hold her head up. Her chin dropped to her chest. This is how it felt to finally say good-bye. A gag bubbled up from the pain in her gut and exploded out of her mouth. She heaved and vomited three times, extinguishing the candle and erasing the warm yellow glow that had been a comfort. She threw up on her hands and jeans, on her book and her bag. When she felt she was done, she sat up, wiping her hands on her clothes, wiping away the tears from her cold face. Her head still swam with pressure, but all sound had died. The owls were quiet, and so was the wind.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Donna was as uneasy about the coming darkness as Tammy was. Tammy was just being more vocal about it, huffing and sighing, trying to hum away her nervousness as they tramped through the woods behind Hilltop Baptist Church. She had already mentioned how cold it was three times, but stubbornly refused Donna's gloves when offered. Still, Tammy was there with her, had agreed to go on this scavenger hunt with her, would keep her mouth shut about it to others. She was, Donna had to admit, a good friend despite her current complaining.

Winter meant early nightfall, and even though the sun had not yet completely gone down now that it was dinner hour, it was essentially nighttime once they got into the thick of the trees, and what little warmth the distant sun had provided had long ago disappeared from among the pine needles and brown, leafless vines working their way through the thickets.

Tammy stuffed her flashlight under her arm and rubbed her hands together, like she had done only a minute earlier. "Why didn't you warn me to pack gloves?"

"I figured you'd be smart enough to know that you would need them."

"There you go giving me credit I don't deserve." Tammy pulled the sleeves of her sweatshirt over her hands. The sound of a truck racing down the highway, some quarter of a mile behind them, made Tammy jump. She shivered. "What if we get caught out here?"

Donna shrugged, sweeping the beam of her light around tree trunks. "My car's parked right there in front of the church for the world to see. The worst they can do is tell us to leave."

"Or arrest us for trespassing."

"The threat of arrest has hardly ever been a deterrent for you."

“For fun stuff. Not this detective mess. What if we run into some crazy people with guns?”

“This whole town is full of crazy people with guns.”

Tammy smiled for a moment, then hugged herself and shivered again. “Well, it’s still spooky out here.”

“Then go wait in the car.”

Tammy grumbled something unintelligible and walked off swinging her flashlight. She hummed to herself again. It was a choppy, tuneless song. It sounded like the body trying to swallow uneasiness. Donna knew that Tammy, like many people in Thorpe, didn’t want to be in these woods at night, that she was superstitious and believed in tall tales about ghost lights. Donna didn’t abide by that kind of nonsense. She was a Christian. She was almost certain that she wasn’t allowed to believe in that kind of stuff. And that lone butterfly knocking against her ribcage? That had nothing to do with fear, at least not with the fear of anything not of this world.

Through the trees, she heard Tammy’s humming stop. Then her footsteps did the same. “I think I found something,” she called to Donna.

“What is it?”

A pause. Then, “Yuck. It’s a used condom.”

Donna resumed her walk. “I said we’re looking for anything that might be useful.”

“I don’t know,” Tammy hollered through the trees, laughter at the edges of her voice.

“Semen always seems to be real useful on *Law & Order*.”

“I really wish you would take this seriously.”

Tammy came trudging through the thick mat of pine straw on the ground. “Alright.” She stopped in front of Donna. “Then let’s start where they found the hoodie.”

“I don’t know where that is.”

Tammy turned away, clearly trying to hide her exasperation. “So far, all we’ve seen is beer cans, cigarette butts, and one used condom.”

“We need to find things associated with Micah.”

“I don’t know what that is,” Tammy cried, rounding on Donna. “Do you?”

Donna puffed herself out and stood straighter. “I’ll know it when I see it.”

Tammy stomped off into the dark again. “That’s not what you told me to get me out here.”

“Are you accusing me of lying?”

“Misrepresentation,” said the voice through the trees.

They continued on. Donna couldn’t see Tammy, but could hear the crunch of her footsteps on the pine straw and dead leaves. Now and then, she’d glimpse the beam of her flashlight illuminating another pine trunk, a leafless dogwood or turkey oak. Sure, she had told Tammy with unwavering certainty that there were clues in those woods that the police were missing, that the police didn’t care enough to do a diligent and thorough job. She had told Tammy that she had it on good authority that there was information in these woods that could crack the case wide open. She did not think it necessary to tell Tammy that that good authority was Donna’s own intuition. She was sure. She knew it. There was something that everyone—the police, Ed Turnbull—was missing that could prove the Goffs were guilty. And it was probably right under their noses. It was that certainty that sent Donna to her car almost every

night last year, driving the back roads she knew so well, looking for anything out of the ordinary, praying that she would simply see her grandson standing on the shoulder, waiting for a ride home. It was that certainty that made her follow the boys in the truck they shared as they meandered across the county, smoking, drinking, and fighting. It was that certainty that made all those hours sitting in the lobby of the sheriff's office or the countless phone calls to Chief Barber worth it. She had never wavered in that certainty: the Goffs had killed her grandson, and all she had to do was find the evidence to prove it. Or convince law enforcement that they should. But now, out here in the dark woods, she felt her confidence weakening. What had it cost her in time alone this past year? And what had it accomplished? Micah was still gone. The Goffs were still roaming all over the county, bringing drugs and trouble with them wherever they went. And she really didn't have any idea of what she was looking for out here in the dark.

And now that Tammy had mentioned it, it was spooky. And cold. And Melissa, now fully immersed in one of her states, probably had cooked a five-course meal just to burn off some energy. It was probably waiting for her, steaming and gooey and delicious, in the middle of the kitchen table.

In her frustration, she threw her flashlight against a tree. It made a hard thunk as the impact lifted the bulb from its casing, throwing the shattered bits across the pine straw, depositing the heavy batteries at the base of the tree. Donna was shrouded in darkness, alone. Even the sounds of the highway were too far away to hear. She sank, landing roundly on her behind, the tears coming, her nose, already running in the cold, running more. She wiped it with her gloved hand.

Without the comforting beam of the flashlight, the darkness felt solid and heavy on her shoulders. There was a heft to it that she hadn't noticed before. Thoughts of ghost stories rose before her, of villains lurking in the woods. She felt immensely alone, vulnerable to whatever the shadows might be hiding, whether it was human or something not quite so. She felt once again that childhood fear of the dark, the worry that everything wouldn't turn out fine, the sureness that evil lurked in all the places she couldn't see. A cold wind rose up from the pinestraw carpet into the boughs high above her head and with it the hollow call of an owl. And with that sound, the woods and the darkness took on another weight, more sinister, more accusing. The wind became a breath in Donna's ear, the distant call of the owl became a pointing finger and then a pounding fist. The breath in her ear became the roar of a passing train, the thudding of her heart in her chest now a rocking inside her brain. The weight on her shoulders pressed down and the world spun wildly and all around her in the darkness was movement and noise. And out of the corner of her eye she thought she saw a flash of light. But when she turned toward it, she only saw thick darkness. But then there it was again, now slinking just out of sight on her other side. Again she was not fast enough to see it. And the owl got closer and the breathing got heavier and now there was a crashing, the crunch of pinestraw, the swinging of branches. Donna squeezed her eyes shut and cowered beneath her own arms. As the crashing got louder and closer, she shouted, "Jesus help me!" And then Tammy was holding her, rocking her, calming her the way her own mother had after the bad dreams of childhood. Despite the comfort of Tammy's closeness, Donna howled. She wanted to cover the sound of the owl, the woods, and the darkness with her cries, to cover the vastness of her own unknowing.

Tammy was still rocking, still shushing. “You might be wrong,” she whispered. “You could absolutely be wrong.” Tammy took Donna’s face in her hands and wiped the wet from below her eyes with her thumbs. They felt like ice cubes. “We never really know the people we think we’re closest to. There’s always hope.”

Donna sniffed, but her nose kept running. “And then there’s reality.”

“Well, he wasn’t some cute young thing plucked off the street by a sexual predator. And even then, they sometimes find those girls alive. Years later. You can’t assume the worst.”

“But if you assume the worst, it won’t hurt as bad when it happens.”

Tammy stood and pulled Donna with her. “Maybe I have enough hope for the both of us right now. Let’s keep looking.” She glanced around them. “What happened to your flashlight?”

The question brought a whole new round of sobs up from Donna’s belly, and Tammy was back to holding and rocking and shushing. Tammy said, “Never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

Tammy led the way now, one arm linked in Donna’s, who was still sniffing. Their footfalls coincided, and the methodic sound reassured Donna until her tears subsided completely. Her nose, now colder than before, continued to run.

“So where does Miss think he is?” Tammy asked.

Donna shook her head, but kept her eyes ahead of her in case something appeared in the light. “Out searching for his daddy or himself or the meaning of life or something. She says he’s fine, that he’ll make his way back when he’s ready.”

“Ever meet him?”

“Nah. By the time Missy came home pregnant, he was already long gone. Said he’d been killed in Bosnia.”

“You believe that?”

“Hell no. But the reasoning behind that story made a whole lot more sense when Micah came out brown-skinned.”

“But now she thinks the daddy’s alive?”

“Ain’t no telling what she thinks. She’s been spending an awful lot of time in Micah’s bedroom lately. Since they found the hoodie. I wish I knew what she was up to.”

They walked deeper into the woods, the whole time Donna wishing she knew where the hoodie had been found, what kind of clues she should be looking for. Wishing that they would come around the curve of a tree trunk and see him sitting in the pine straw, as though he had just been waiting for someone to pluck him out of the woods the entire time. She could see him smiling up at her in that way that looked like he was suppressing a laugh from a personal joke and saying, “Grandmama. What took you so long?”

Tammy swung the flashlight in a wide arc before them, and its beam lit on something small and light in color against the brown carpet of pine needles. When they reached it, Tammy bent and held it up for Donna to see. It was the rattle from a snake, old, almost papery and falling apart. Tammy made a face as if to say *Nothing interesting*, and tossed it back on the ground. But a few steps later, they came upon a pile of feathers that didn’t look natural. It was too tidy.

“I don’t think that came from a cat,” Tammy said.

In a few more steps, they saw the pine straw cleared away in a small patch, the blackened remains of a small fire on the bare sandy ground. In the ashes, something round, no bigger than

a chestnut. Tammy bent again, poked at it with her finger. It was cold. “It’s fabric. Like a pouch.”

Donna shivered. She couldn’t tell if it was the cold or the sudden eeriness of the woods and objects before them. The darkness was beginning to take on mass again.

“Holy hell,” Tammy murmured. Donna followed the beam of the flashlight to a pile of objects just beyond the fire ring. A few silver dollars, the shell from a gopher tortoise, a used up red candle, more feathers, an open can of lye, its granular contents spilled about, a burnt black unrecognizable bird foot, and a photo of Micah standing in what looked like a backyard. It had been burnt as well, whoever was standing with him in the picture lost to the fire. Micah was smiling, mouth open in the bright sunlight, wearing the shorts and flip flops of his summer wardrobe, his arm around a charred, warped mess. Donna felt the darkness drape itself around her like a velvet robe, heavy and suffocating. The sound of rushing wind returned. She couldn’t tell if it was the buzzing of her own confusion or if it was coming out of the trees themselves. The pressure on her chest and shoulders increased, and she sank to her knees next to Tammy. Mouth dry, heart racing, unsure whether this was evidence or something altogether different. The glow of the flashlight weakened before her, and the bursts of light in the distance returned, only for a moment, before reappearing again in a different spot. She turned to see them, always too slow.

Tammy’s breathing was suddenly audible above the rushing in Donna’s ears. “You see it, too?” she asked.

Through the trees came the sound of wind chimes, large ones that crashed with a deep and reverberating resonance. Donna turned, trying to locate the direction of the sound, but it

seemed to be coming from everywhere. She grabbed the flashlight, then Tammy's arm. They rose and ran all the way to the car, not stopping until they had pulled into Tammy driveway, breath still ragged, hands still shaking.

*

Jill was at Anthony's house again, and again he didn't know why. She moved in and out of his life without word or warning. One day she was there after days and days and days of nothing, of being gone. She always looked lost to him when she did show up, like she needed something. Today, she was especially distracted, almost fearful. Her posture was that of a nervous cat, eyes darting, a flash in her movements. She looked tired.

Needy or not, he was glad she was there.

She declined a drink, a beer, then a glass of water. She declined Anthony's offer of a freshly-rolled joint. She appeared to prefer to sit on a kitchen chair, knees pulled against her chest, brightly striped socks on her feet. She rocked herself so slowly that Anthony felt like she was slowing down time. He wondered if she might fall asleep and thought about turning the stereo down so she wouldn't be disturbed.

Her eyes stayed closed for a long moment, but her breathing never slowed, never found that rhythm that suggested sleep. She opened her eyes and said, "I had the weirdest dream last night. I was in a war, somewhere really third world, sort of like in a desert. In a camp or something."

Anthony was trying to clean up his kitchen as she talked. He was only ever embarrassed about messes in his house when she came over. He turned on the kitchen faucet. “So you were camping?”

“I don’t know, it might have been like a refugee camp. Or a prison camp. It was hard to tell. None of us who were there seemed to want to be there, but I don’t remember being forced to be there.”

“Us?”

“Yeah, just a bunch of people. But there was shooting. And I was surprised by that. Like, in the dream, I knew that a war was going on outside and around the camp, like I knew that at any time the war could spill into this camp, but I was still surprised, totally unprepared, when it did.” She paused and ran her hand through her hair. When she began speaking again, her voice shook just enough for Anthony to notice. “There was shooting everywhere and chaos, people running around, the sound of gunshots, smoke, maybe bombs going off. I don’t know. But I knew I was running for my life. And I was hungry. I remember looking down at my hands and arms, and I was so, so skinny. Skinnier than anyone should be, and I thought to myself, ‘My god, I’ve been starving here in this camp.’”

Anthony cut the faucet off and stared at her. She held her hands out before her and stared at them. He wondered if she even realized that he was still here.

“I was just running, but I didn’t know where I was running. I was following other people where they were running. At one point, I rounded a corner, and all these people were lined up against a wall. Like they were facing it. And opposite them were another line of people—soldiers—with guns aimed at them.” She closed her eyes and placed her hands on either side of

her head as if trying to hold down the memory of the dream. “And I ran again because I knew those people were about to be executed, and I didn’t want to see it. I think I heard the gunshots as I ran, but it may not have been *those* gunshots because there were gunshots going off everywhere in this dream.”

“This sounds more like a nightmare than a dream.” Anthony tossed a couple of empty beer bottles into the trash can.

Jill lowered her hands. She still seemed to be talking more to herself than to him. “At some point, I think I found a safe place to hide. I’m not sure. But then I left my hiding place. I don’t know why. I don’t know what made me get up and jump back into that fight. But this time I had a gun in my hand. I don’t know where it came from or how I knew how to hold it or load it or work it. In my dream, I knew. It had a shoulder strap and a wooden butt. It was a rifle I guess. I don’t know that much about guns. But it was big, and I felt safer with it. But then the bullets started coming like crazy, and people were dropping all around me. And I worried I was going to die. So I dropped to the ground, too, and pretended I was dead because a big group of soldiers was coming through and shooting anything that moved. Not like soldiers with uniforms and stuff. But you know what I mean.”

He did not know what she meant, and he did not know why she was even here telling him all this. He figured it was best to keep cleaning up his kitchen like everything was normal. He wet a dishrag that had dried on the counter.

“Like when you see on the news or in movies, in Africa, those groups of guerilla soldiers or militias or rebels or whatever they call them now. They wore regular clothes, but the clothes were dirty and didn’t fit right. They were those kinds of soldiers. So I laid there awhile waiting

for them to pass, hoping that they wouldn't take my gun because they thought I was dead and wouldn't need it. Then I realized that I liked laying there. I liked the rest. Because I was exhausted. I had been running around like crazy, and I was too skinny, too starved to maintain that level of activity. And while I was laying there, pretending to be dead, I enjoyed my short rest. And I thought about food because I was so hungry. And then, after the soldiers passed, I got up. The shooting was still going on, it was still smoky and chaotic, but I wasn't afraid anymore. I don't know what changed, but I wasn't afraid." She straightened her legs and placed her feet on the floor. "And then—"

"This is a long dream."

"Shut up and let me finish." She ran her hand through her hair again. "So the camp was in an area that maybe before the war was industrial or something because there were a lot of square, cinderblock buildings. Like warehouses, you know? So I went into one, and it was like being in a restaurant. Like one of those ones with all the junk up on the walls, real cheesy and shit. You know the kind I'm talking about."

This time Anthony did know what she meant and said so. He was still wiping down the counters.

"And it was packed, super busy. Tons of people who all looked American. And white. Not that everyone before had been black, but they had all looked—I don't know—run down, unhealthy, like they had been struggling for a long, long time. And inside this warehouse that turned out to be a restaurant, everyone was," Jill sucked on her bottom lip, thinking of the right word. "Healthy. Like, I mean, not starving and malnourished. And they looked happy. They were laughing and having conversations. And they looked surprised to see me. But the weird thing

was that I wasn't the only one from the war, from that camp, that was walking around in the restaurant. It's like these diners had no idea they were in the middle of a war. They were totally oblivious to what was going on outside. And I remember thinking, 'How did you get here, people? How did you get here without seeing what's going on outside?' But I was too hungry to ask them that. Too hungry to even be mad. I just wandered around the tables, looking at the food because I wanted it so bad. I got to this one booth, and I stood there for the longest time just staring at this girl's plate of chicken fingers." Jill covered her face with her hand and laughed, but it was a sad laugh, as if she was choosing between laughing and crying. "I don't even like chicken fingers all that much, but all I could think is that they looked so fucking good. I just wanted those chicken fingers so, so bad. And the girl must have looked at me, must have felt sorry for me, because she handed me one of the chicken fingers. I don't even remember if she said anything to me or not. Just that all of a sudden, I was holding a chicken finger, looking at it like it was God or something, and everyone at the table was smiling at me. Like the way you smile at a homeless person after you've just given them a dollar. Except the girl who gave the chicken finger to me. Her smile was real. It was kind."

Anthony rung out the wet rag in the sink. He hung it over the faucet to dry. When he turned back toward Jill, her eyes were red and wet. He wasn't sure what to do. It always made him uncomfortable when girls cried. He leaned against the counter and did nothing.

Jill either didn't notice his discomfort or didn't care. She just kept going. "And I was eating the chicken finger, and I just couldn't believe that she was being so nice to me after everything I had just experienced outside—the war and the bullets and the dead people. I was so

grateful, so overwhelmed by that act of kindness, that I burst into tears and kept saying, ‘Thank you. Thank you.’ I cried like a baby.” She sniffled.

Anthony took a few steps toward the table where she was sitting. He wondered if he should hug her or give her a pat on the back. But sometimes girls just wanted to be left alone. He didn’t know what to do.

Jill wiped her cheeks dry. “And then it was like, I had to go back outside again. Back into the war. But I felt energized now. I felt ready. There was something about that single chicken finger and that girl’s smile that encouraged me. I was ready. And I burst out of the metal warehouse door like a character in an action movie. You know, gun already firing as I come out, running and yelling, being all fierce and shit. And the outside was just like before—guns and bombs and smoke and people running everywhere and dead people on the ground and guerilla soldiers. The only difference was that this time, I was just as invested in the fighting as everyone else. I wasn’t just trying to hide and avoid. I was shooting people. I was killing people. And I was surviving. No one had shot me.” Her face brightened as she said this. A little bit of color appeared on her cheeks. “Then I noticed that the camp was starting to clear out. I don’t know if it was because so many people were dead or if people were getting the hell out of there. Like the way out was no longer blocked, so whoever wanted to leave could leave. Even the soldiers were leaving, like they were done doing what they had come to do. It was time to move on, to find a safe place. For everyone. But I didn’t want to go alone, you know? I kept looking for friends, people I knew. Not like people in real life. But friends in my dream. I thought for sure somewhere in this camp is an ally, a group I run with, friends I’ve made over time before the dream began. Like those unlikely alliances that form in movies? Those characters who maybe

don't like each other but are forced together and start to help each other out and shit? I was looking for people like that. But I couldn't find anyone."

"Then what happened?"

"I woke up."

"How did you feel about killing people?"

"I felt relieved."

Anthony felt like this story was serious enough to need a beer. She may not have wanted one, but he sure did. He grabbed a couple out of the refrigerator, popped off the tops, and sat down with her at the table. "Do you usually have dreams like that?"

"Like what? With war and guns and stuff?"

"No, like that complex, that long."

She shook her head. "Only recently. Usually my dreams are sort of nuts. And they jump around a lot. Like, I'm doing one thing, and then suddenly I'm doing something else. Like I don't know how I got from point A to point B."

Anthony took a sip from his beer. "That sounds about right."

Jill hadn't touched hers. "You, too?"

He nodded.

"Sometimes sort of normal things happen in my dreams," she said. "Like sometimes I dream that I'm doing homework." She laughed, but there was no humor in it.

"Sometimes I dream I'm at work. At the restaurant. Just washing dishes. On and on all night."

“That’s pretty bad.” Jill picked at the edge of the beer label with her fingernail.

“Sometimes I dream crazy shit, though. Like, scary shit.”

“Like scary how?”

“Ghosts and goblins. Demons, I think.”

Anthony swallowed a large gulp and set the bottle back on the table with a loud thump.

Where was she going with this?

She was still picking at the label. “Only, I can’t tell if it’s a dream or not. It feels like it’s really happening. And I wonder if it really is. Don’t look at me like that. I think I may not be dreaming that part. It’s too...real. I can feel it the way I can’t feel things in my dreams.”

“Feel what?”

“The pressure. It sits on top of me. Like on my chest and shoulders. It holds me down and gets in my face.”

“What’s it doing?”

“It’s trying to scare me.”

“What’s it look like?”

“A face. Almost cartoonish. But,” she waved her hand before her face, “scary.”

“Like an evil clown. Are you one of those people who are afraid of clowns?”

“No. I’m not. And not a clown. Cartoonish. Like its features stretch and move in ways that can only happen in a cartoon. But I’m not sure. It’s hard to describe. I’ve never seen it with my eyes open.”

“Then it’s a dream.”

“Right. That’s what I thought at first. But then it kept happening.”

“How often?”

“At first it was just like every few months. Then it started happening more. And since I’ve moved back to Thorpe, it’s been like two or three times a week.”

“That’s one hell of a recurring dream.”

“But I don’t think it’s a dream. It’s too real.”

“Your eyes are closed.”

She nodded, but not in agreement. Her nod only seemed to signal that she heard him and that his point was valid. She wasn’t looking at him. Her eyes were vacant, like she was focusing on something only she could see. “But it feels like they’re open. Like I’m seeing things that have always been there but could never see before.”

He shook his head and began playing with the salt shaker, twirling it around on its base.

“You’re talking about stuff I don’t know about.”

“But you do. You’re the one who took me to see Dr. Luna.”

“I ain’t ever had a dream like that.”

“I don’t think it’s a dream.” Jill sat for awhile, not saying anything, staring at that thing again, that thing that Anthony couldn’t see, that probably no one but Jill could see. Did she really think she saw demons? What had Dr. Luna said to her? Suddenly, Jill giggled and buried her face in her knees. Anthony stopped playing with the salt shaker and stared at her. Since the party, since taking her to see Dr. Luna, he had worried about the mess she was becoming. Now she appeared to be coming apart completely. There was something about her brokenness, her off-limitness, her compact little curves, that stirred something strange in Anthony, some kind of mix of lust and compassion. His inclination to soothe and save welled up in him like a crescendo of a

song. He knelt in front of her and hugged her. When she returned his hug, he wove his arms more tightly around her. She let out a small cry and buried her face in his neck. He rubbed her back slowly, conscious of the closeness of their bodies, of the placement of her hands on his body. She smelled like fruit and candy again, like shampoo.

She kissed his neck.

Startled but pleased, Anthony drew back. Her eyes were sad, but beckoning. So he kissed her lightly on the mouth. She pulled him closer and stuck her tongue in his mouth. It tasted like fruit and candy, too. She pulled her shirt over her head and threw it on the floor beside her. Her bra was the color of flesh, no lace or flower patterns or any of the things used to make lingerie exciting. He couldn't help but stare at her breasts, small but round, symmetrical. He wanted to touch them, but was unsure. The bra was a boundary he was afraid to cross. It didn't seem right. He looked away.

She touched Anthony's chin with a single finger and turned his face toward hers. Her eyes were watery again. She raised her eyebrows.

"Are you sure?"

"Please?" The sound was so tiny. Anthony thought she sounded like a baby bird that had fallen out of the nest, and he was compelled again to comfort her. There was comfort for himself in it. He lay back on the kitchen floor, pulling her on top of him.

He wanted to go slow. He wanted to linger. He wanted them to save each other. But Jill would not cooperate. She was urgent and rough. She was naked before he'd even gotten his shirt off. When she began to undo his belt, he rolled them over on his side and rubbed her arm.

"Wait," he said. He wanted to look at her, to savor her pale nakedness. As he ran his palm over

her hip, a disturbing thought flashed in his mind: how had Micah viewed this body? How had he touched her? Anthony withdrew his hand. In the moment of hesitation she had gripped his pants again and pulled them off. She tossed them behind her with the rest of their clothes. Then she was on top of him, and he was inside her. She moved against him with ease and expertise, but he could only concentrate on the hard, cold linoleum against his back. It hurt where his spine pushed against it. Jill's eyes were closed, a crooked sad smile on her face as she worked, and Anthony wondered if it was him she was thinking about or the person he was substituting for. His own mind wandered to Micah. He imagined his friend in his place, naked on the kitchen floor, giving Jill that sideways smile. Anthony covered his face with his hands.

Jill pulled herself off of him and lay back on the floor. She motioned for him to come to her. She looked perfectly focused on him, and he tried to return the sentiment. On her back underneath him, she looked small, breakable, already broken. When he entered her, she let out another tiny bird cry. As she focused on him, he tried to push thoughts of Micah away. He moved slowly, his hands in her hair, on her shoulders, her thighs. She sighed, but he couldn't tell if it was from pleasure or exasperation. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on immediate physical sensations, which, he had to admit, were great, but he couldn't shake the feeling that his friend was sitting just behind them, watching. He wanted to do right by Micah and by Jill. He wanted to give her what she so clearly needed. He kissed her again and again, close-mouthed, light, fluttering like the wings of a little bird. You are cared for, he wanted to tell her. You are safe.

But she grabbed his face, held his chin in one hand. Her grip was rough, hard enough that it could leave a bruise. "Fuck me already," she said.

Anthony looked over his shoulder. The chairs around the kitchen table were empty. So he did as she demanded, but he found no pleasure in it. She did amazing things with her hips, but he couldn't keep his mind off the feeling of his kneecaps against the floor, couldn't keep from looking over his shoulder.

After awhile, Jill pushed him off of her and sat up. "Enough. It's not going to happen for you."

Anthony leaned back against the cabinets. "Distracted, I guess. Sorry."

Jill was brushing her hair with her fingers. "Whatever."

"You weren't—"

"I wasn't close."

"Sorry," he said again. It wasn't just that he had failed to make her come. He had obviously failed at what he wanted to do—comfort her, fix her, save her. He wanted them to help each other navigate this weird space they filled, the space where Micah was glaringly absent. He had no idea if he also failed at what she wanted from him, which was to approximate the figure of her boyfriend, his best friend. He felt sick to his stomach.

She stood. The flush of sex was gone from her cheeks and chest, and she looked paler than he'd even seen her. She put on her panties and rummaged in her purse until she found cigarettes and a lighter. She handed one to Anthony, then sat back on the floor, her back against the cabinets, too. As they smoked, he stared at her. She stared at her fingernails, her hair hiding her face. He couldn't tell if she was sad or angry or just disappointed. He felt he hadn't measured up. He imagined Micah sitting at the kitchen table watching them, and he felt ashamed. "Sorry," he said again because he knew he had to say something, but he didn't know what to say.

“Don’t worry about it.” She tossed her lit butt in the sink, then finished getting dressed. “I know where else to get it. From someone who isn’t trying to play boyfriend.” She swung the door open and was down the steps and halfway to her car before it swung closed again, the cold air rushing in to fill the space in Anthony’s kitchen that just moments ago she had occupied.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Donna saw the black woman in the blue sunglasses coming down the baking supplies aisle at Winn-Dixie. She wasn't so much walking as bobbing slowly, like she was out on an afternoon stroll instead of in the middle of a grocery store. The woman wore all white—a long flowing skirt topped with a blouse with pleats on the chest. Over that she wore a faded purple winter coat, unzipped and ill-fitting. On her feet were Wayneclath house shoes, like she might begin practicing ballet in the middle of the bakery department. She was light-skinned and statuesque, cheekbones high and prominent. Her dark hair had gray roots and stuck out in every direction, kinky and stiff, long single strands creating a halo of raggedness around her calm face. The rest of her hair was pulled haphazardly into a bun at the base of her skull.

Donna expected to see someone like this at Wal-Mart, not the Winn-Dixie. This was Thorpe's nice grocery store. Lord, help this woman, she thought and turned to the bags of sugar lining the shelves in front of her, deciding which one she wanted to take home. When Donna had made her choice and dropped the compact bag in her cart, she looked up to see the crazy woman standing at the far end of the aisle, eyeing her over the tops of her blue lenses. Donna glanced quickly over her shoulder, but the other end of the aisle was blocked by a young mother with an infant and a full cart and an elderly woman in an electric wheelchair. Donna was trapped, and when she turned back around, the crazy woman had resumed her bouncing walk. She was heading straight for Donna.

Donna sputtered and gripped the handle of her buggy. She noticed then that her palms were sweaty. Who was this woman? What did she want? Why did these things always happen to her?

The woman stopped beside Donna, her skirt swirling to a stop around her ankles. She gripped Donna tightly around her upper arm, removed her sunglasses, and stared with an unsettling intensity into Donna's eyes. Donna stopped breathing, partly from fear, partly because she worried what the woman would say to her. She didn't want any more bad news.

But the woman didn't speak. She just stared at Donna, as though she expected Donna to speak first, as though Donna had been the one who sought her out. Donna wasn't sure what to do. The old lady in the electric wheelchair passed by them in a quiet whir, plucked a bottle of canola oil off the shelf, and rolled out to the next aisle.

"Can I help you?" Donna stammered.

The woman, eyes still intent on Donna's, blinked once, twice. "My name is Doctor Luna Quail. God has given me the gift of clairvoyance and revelation. I am a prophetess, and I have a word for you." Her voice was hushed and low, but powerful, like she sang baritone if the mood struck her.

"For me?"

"Our Father God, King of Heavens Armies, wants you to know this." She tightened her grip on Donna's arm and closed her eyes in fervent concentration. "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." She released Donna's arm, opened her eyes, and resumed her staring.

That was it? All that drama and strangeness just to quote the Bible to her? This woman was wasting her time. “Is that all?” Donna asked, hand on hip.

Luna Quail woman puffed her chest up and straightened her shoulders. “That is a word directly from the lips of our Lord and Father. You’d do well to listen.”

“I’ve heard that word before. It’s Ephesians.”

“Maybe you have heard it. But did you ever listen?”

Donna hated dealing with religious nuts. She puffed her chest up, too, straightened her shoulders, shook her head in a quick flick, as though preparing for battle. She set her mouth in a hard line and said nothing.

Luna Quail just nodded. “Mmhmm. I know you think I’m some crazy person. But let me tell you this, Miss Donna Neese.” She stuck her finger in Donna’s face. “I see more than ordinary people see. I know more than ordinary people know.”

Her name coming out of the mouth of this stranger startled Donna, and she felt herself slowly deflate. Her hand slipped off her hip and a strange fear welled up in her again.

Luna Quail lowered her finger and softened her voice. “I know you want to find that grandson of yours, dead or alive. And I know you think he’s dead. I been looking for you. I seen you here, and I had to tell you, to remind you what you’re really up against. There are things in this world that a lot of people don’t understand, don’t even believe in, and since you on a one-woman mission, I’m just telling you to be careful. Evil takes many forms. And sometimes what we think is evil ain’t. Just somebody as lost as the rest of us. So don’t be so sure of what you think you know. Everything done in the dark gonna come to the light eventually.”

“How do you know anything about this?” Donna asked.

“I done told you I’m a prophetess. We all get different gifts. That’s Romans.”

“Then tell me where Micah is,” she whispered.

Luna Quail shook her head. “I can only tell folks what the Lord God wants me to tell them. And I already done that here.”

“So you can’t help me?” Donna’s voice stuck in her throat, and in her efforts to contain her emotions she wasn’t even sure the entire question got out of her mouth.

“I already done helped you as much as it has been ordained I would help you. Now your help comes from Father God. You can ask him what to do next. Just remember what I told you.” She nodded to Donna, replaced her blue sunglasses, and bounced down the aisle. At the end, she turned the corner and was gone.

*

LC1: Hey, dish boy.

A: Stop calling me that.

LC1: Hey, dish boy, why don’t you sing us some that white folks music you make.

A: Fuck you, man.

LC1: The white folks like it? They think you sound good? Gonna make you an honorary white boy?

LC2: He got his eye on a white girl, that’s fo’ sho.

LC1: Aw damn. Niggas can’t be going after no white girls, least not ‘til they get rich first. Dish boy ain’t gonna get rich playing white folks music.

A: Don't call me that.

LC1: Hey, who your white girl is? She fine?

LC2: I seen her. She real fine.

LC1: You hittin' that, dish boy? You fucking that white girl?

A: Fuck y'all.

LC1: She ever fuck a black man before?

A: Man, I don't know.

LC2: Ah, he ain't fucking her. He only want to.

LC1: She want you, dish boy? Huh?

LC2: Pro'ly not. He a dish boy. White bitches only want them a rich nigga.

A: She ain't a bitch.

LC2: Ooh, he gettin' mad, y'all.

LC1: Aw, dish boy like himself a white girl. He gonna get all protective and shit. 'Don't be calling her a bitch. She a lady.'

A: I'm ignoring y'all, ignorant motherfuckers.

LC1: Oh, now we ignorant. But he over here playing white music, fucking a white girl. Might as well dye his skin like Michael Jackson.

LC2: Gonna get you a new nose, dish boy?

A: Stop calling me that.

LC2: Could dye your hair blonde, what like your boy used to do. The one that up and gone.

A: Don't talk about him.

LC1: Aw shit. Maybe he like that boy, too. What his name is? Micah, right? You ever fucked Micah, dish boy?

LC2: Dish boy a homo.

LC1: Dish boy can't make up his mind what he want. White girls or black boys.

A: Don't call me that.

LC2: Man, dish boy ain't fucking nobody. He only wish he was.

LC1: Yeah, I bet his mama be fucking people, ain't that right, dish boy?

A: Shut up.

LC2: His mama? She a ho? Yo' mama a ho, dish boy?

A: Shut the fuck up.

LC1: Yeah, she a ho. Crack ain't free. Ain't gonna pay for itself.

At this point, Anthony lost it and went for the line cook who asked, "What the fuck? I was just joking." Then the manager came in.

M: What in the hell is going on?

LC1: Man, dish boy here losing his mind.

A: I told you to shut the fuck up. I told you.

M: Hey, calm down. I said calm down, dammit! Anthony. Anthony. Calm down.

A: I'm calm. I'll be calm. Once these niggas leave me the hell alone.

LC1: Dish boy's feeling's hurt.

A: Man, fuck you.

M: Hey! Hey! That's enough! All y'all. That's enough. This is a place of business, not the high school parking lot. Get back behind the line and do your damn job. Go on. And quit talking foolish. Anthony, go on home.

A: Home? Right now?

M: Yeah, go on.

A: You firing me?

M: I don't know yet. I'll call you.

A: Call me?

M: I can't have my employees starting fist fights in the kitchen.

A: Man, they started it. They always fucking with me.

M: Then ignore them.

A: You try to ignore them.

One of the line cooks laughed.

A: Man, fuck you. I swear to God...

M: Anthony, that is it! Out! Right now. Take off your apron and go.

A: This bullshit, man.

M: No more outta you.

A: Fuck all y'all. I don't need this shit.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Anthony had lost Jill in the woods, not that she knew that. But he had been following her for two days, keeping a distance in his car, sleeping in the drivers seat outside her office while she was at work, cruising past her parents' house in the evenings to see if her car was there. When she parked at Hilltop Baptist Church, when the parking lot was otherwise empty, and marched into the woods with a clear sense of purpose, he followed. Just as he had followed her into the Winn-Dixie the day before.

Anthony understood that there was a creepiness to his actions. He had even laughed and, aloud, called himself a stalker as he watched her pick through the bin of apples in the produce section. He didn't understand what he was doing, but he also couldn't seem to stop doing it. Acknowledging the craziness of it all didn't seem break the spell that was controlling him. He knew—he admitted—that he didn't seem in control of himself. He was beginning to wonder if he ever had.

It was dark in the woods, and he tried to walk by the meager light from his cell phone display screen. It hadn't looked like Jill was carrying a flashlight either, just a backpack. She strode into the pines with such authority that she clearly knew her way, knew where she was going. She was like an angry ghost, and she could see in the dark. He may have seen her naked, been inside her, heard her gasp and felt her body tighten in pleasure, but he didn't know her at all. He wondered, not for the first time, if he really knew anybody in his life.

The pine straw, dry from weeks without rain, crunched loudly beneath his feet. He paused, listening if the needles would give away Jill's location among the trees. He heard a

rustling and followed. The air was clear and the night was cold and the woods were almost unnaturally dark. His eyes should have adjusted by now, but they couldn't find anything around which to fix their vision, so he groped as he walked, feeling for tree trunks and leafless winter vines. It was slow going, and the battery on his phone had already died, leaving him no means of lighting the way.

He knew about these woods, the stories, the legends, the tall tales of adventures that friends had returned with. He also knew that most folks his age in Thorpe just used them for getting high, drinking beer without getting caught, and fucking when your living situation prevented you from offering, "Your place or mine?" But even those stories were laced with a hint of the supernatural, the echo of ghosts, a thread of the unexplained. Sometimes it was noises that no one could place or explain. A smell that didn't belong in a pine forest. Some saw the lights. Others just said they thought they had. Anthony himself had always turned down invitations to party back here or go on an amateur ghost hunt. That was how teen horror movies started. He wasn't about to offer himself up to some crazed masked maniac. Or a bear or bobcat. There was the reason, too, he would never go camping.

But here he was now. Damn, why? Because this girl had him some kind of way. He thought he'd had her figured out and he had been wrong. Way wrong. He had never been treated that way by a girl before. It hurt and it thrilled. Except when he thought about his boy Micah, and then he just felt like shit. Micah would be back—eventually—maybe—and then what would Anthony have to say? What if he said nothing? He wasn't sure he could trust Jill to do the same. For some reason—he couldn't put his finger on the why—he suspected that she would use their tryst against him in some way. Would she do that? Play him and Micah against each other? He

had heard stories. He knew women were capable of some evil shit. He hadn't thought Jill was like that, but then again he hadn't thought she could be so blasé about sex, about sex with him. The whole time he had been following her these past couple days, he kept wondering if she had been the same way about sex with Micah, but every time he wondered that, a mental image of Micah on top of Jill flashed in his head, made him uneasy, like his imagination was spying on something he shouldn't be seeing.

It was that mental image, stuck in his brain again, that he was trying to shake when he saw a glow through the trees. He stopped again and listened. All was quiet except for the snapping of a fire. He took a step toward the glow, then stopped and listened once more. The snapping continued and in its drone rose up the small sound of a voice—Jill's voice. Only it didn't sound quite like Jill. Her sarcastic lilt, the rise and fall of her high female tone, was gone, replaced by something low, menacing, repetitive. She was chanting. This was too strange for Anthony, too unexpected. He was seized with a fear that what he was seeing and hearing through the trees was not Jill at all. Maybe these were the apparitions that others had talked about in Thorpe for decades. Is this what they meant by ghost lights? He contemplated turning and running back to his car. He did not want to be the dead black guy that every horror movie had. But his curiosity was too strong and along with it, his desire to figure Jill out, to ask her why, to get some answers.

Then he saw her and he wondered again if she was some kind of ghost. She was kneeling on the ground, the pine straw swept away to reveal the sandy forest floor, the discarded straw forming a barrier between her and the rest of the woods. Her eyes were closed and her words still tumbled rhythmically past her lips. She rocked in a way that was not on purpose. And in the

glow of the small fire jumping and popping before her, she looked as though she had always been there in that spot, conjuring a way out of these haunted woods. Her skin shone orange as shadows played across her cheeks, across the layers of fleece in which she had wrapped herself, the hood casting half her face in darkness. She was Jill but not Jill, and once again Anthony felt like he was spying on something he should not be seeing. He took a step closer and snapped a brittle branch beneath his toes.

Without looking up or opening her eyes, Jill said, “You’ve been following me.” Her voice was flat, dead-panned. It was not the low, rhythmic monotone mumbling prayers to the trees just moments ago.

Anthony froze again. His trek through the woods was beginning to feel like some weird stop-motion animation that someone else was directing. “You knew?”

“You’re not as stealthy as you think.” She removed her hood and stared at him. Static electricity sent strands of her brown hair dancing in the air. If she knew, she didn’t care.

Anthony shoved his fists into the pockets of his jeans. He was not dressed for the weather. He hadn’t expected to spend an extended period of time outside this evening. His hands were cold, he didn’t know what to do with them, and he didn’t know what to say to her. He studied the tableaux laid out on the ground before her. “What are you doing?”

“Something that requires a little privacy.”

“Sorry. I--”

“I’m sure you are.” Jill grabbed some small sticks from a pile beside her, broke them in her hands, and placed them on her fire. The flames receded for a moment, caught on the sticks,

and grew. “So do you need something, or are you here just to stare at me the way you did at the grocery store?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry--”

“You said that already. And I’m busy.”

“Why are you being like this?”

She gestured to her instruments—the small fire, an upturned turtle shell, some feathers and shells and rough stones. She gave him a look that suggested he hadn’t been adequately paying attention.

“That’s not what I mean.” He crossed his arms across his chest. He could be just as hostile as her. But he tucked his hands into his armpits. It was still cold as fuck.

“You should learn to be more specific.” She was digging in the pockets of her hooded jacket for something. He wanted her to look at him, to talk about their situation instead of around it, but she seemed to purposefully be avoiding eye contact.

“Are you always like this?”

She glanced at her tools with raised eyebrows, then finally met his eye. “No. They actually frown on building fires at work.”

“That. That right there is what I mean.” He puffed up his chest. “Are you always a bitch?”

She shook her head, clucking like a disappointed teacher. “Name calling.” She put the hood back on her head and brushed a few floating strands out of her eyes, then she went back to digging in her pockets. Her hands emerged with three small flannel pouches. She set them on the ground between her and the fire.

Anthony uncrossed his arms and crossed them again. “This is really fucked up.”

Jill pointed at the fire. “This.” She waved her arms over all her items. “This has been going on in America since probably the 17th century. In Africa for centuries before that. This is your people we’re talking about here.”

He took two steps closer. “You know what I mean.”

“I’m quite sure I don’t.”

“You’re pretending.”

She turned to him now. “Oh,” she drew out the word, “I think you’d know if I was faking.” She looked him up and down. “Right?”

“Why are you”

“Privacy. I told you. Do you mind?”

“I want to talk”

“I don’t.”

“I want to talk about Micah.”

“God damn why? That’s all you ever want to talk about.”

“Don’t you care?”

She reached into her backpack and retrieved a small gardening shovel, the kind Anthony’s grandmother used to even out the soil around her rose bushes. She began to dig a hole.

“You owe me an explanation,” he demanded.

Jill kept digging. “I don’t owe you shit.”

“I think you do.”

She paused in her digging to give him another once-over with her eyes. “Why? ‘Cause we fucked?”

The harshness of her word, the crass description of what they had done together, disturbed him. There was a masculinity in her that he had never noticed until now. He wasn’t sure he liked it, but he couldn’t deny there was power in it.

“Jesus.” She shook her head and went back to digging. “Could’ve sworn I was the only one here with a vagina.”

Anthony bent and in one swift motion grabbed a handful of dirty pine straw from the ground and threw it at Jill. It covered her in a slow-floating curtain of sand and straw. She raised her free hand over her face in defense and waited for the detritus to settle. The fire bobbed and flared. Without looking up, she continued to dig. Anthony turned and stomped away. Fuck her. He would leave her to her magic and hoodoo and disregard for others. Mean, spiteful. Fuck her.

But this dramatic exit left Anthony with the task of now finding his way out of the woods. To be honest, he wasn’t sure which direction to go to find the church parking lot. In his quest to find Jill, he had gotten himself turned around. It was dark and cold. He wanted to scream obscenities at the trees until they just opened up a path to him. He wanted to yell until they—or something, anything—covered in fear. He wanted to instill terror. For once in his damn life, he wanted something to be afraid of him. He was tired of always being the one who was afraid. He suddenly felt exhausted. He sat, plopped himself into the pine needles right where he stood, leaned his back against a tree trunk. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, willing his angry heart to calm its rapid beating, his brain to halt its confused racing. He felt like he had been running for miles, for ages, and maybe he had been. His whole life. From what or to what he had

never given any thought. Just running. Because that was what he thought he was supposed to do. But why? Who had told him to do it? But he had just been running in place. He never gained any distance. He always ended up on the same spot, pumping his legs, wasting his energy, with nothing to show for it. He had been doing it for so long that it was second nature, unquestionable, part of who he was. How fucking pathetic.

When Anthony first smelled the smoke, he thought it was just the scent of Jill's fire wafting through the woods. It was expected. It was not out of the ordinary. He focused still on calming his breathing. But the smell of wood smoke was stronger with every breath. When his nostrils began to burn, he opened his eyes. In the darkness, he could tell that clouds of smoke filled the woods. His eyes watered, his lungs burned. Something was wrong. What had Jill done?

Anthony stood, clutching the rough trunk of the tree in the throes of a hacking cough. Something was very wrong. He pulled his sweatshirt over his mouth and nose, blinked rapidly trying in vain to cool his eyes. Once more, he dove into the woods, one arm outstretched, groping blindly like swimming in a blackwater swamp, who knows what lurking in the darkness.

It did not take him as long to find Jill again as he feared. He had not gotten as far away from her as he thought, as he hoped. She was still kneeling, still working the earth with her little shovel. Her small fire still jumped and burst in sparks through the night, casting strange shadows into the billowing smoke that filled the woods like spotlights on a cloudy sky. But the smoke wasn't coming from this little conjuring inferno on the ground before Jill. It was no bigger than it had been when he'd left her to her hatefulness, her vindictiveness. Something was definitely wrong in these woods, but it wasn't this little campfire.

He dropped his sweatshirt from his face. “Jill,” he hissed, half whispered. She didn’t react. He said her name again, louder this time.

She turned to him, her face changed into a look that was half-trance, half-ecstasy. She smiled at him, but looked through him, like the person she wanted to see was standing just behind him. “It’s working,” she whispered. She took one of the flannel sachets and dropped it into the hole she had dug, small but deep. She shoved the grayish sand back into the hole with her gloved hand and patted it down. She moved with a practiced slowness that was at once graceful and robotic. She looked like a girl possessed, like it wasn’t Jill moving any more, but a nymph, a ghost, a demon that only looked like Jill. A shape shifter that had acquired her features. This was no Jill that Anthony had ever known, not intimately, not even a little. He felt again that he was spying, a witness who had come upon a horrific scene but couldn’t look away. “Jill?” he said again, quietly, tentatively. He realized it was fear that gripped him—for her and of her. “There’s smoke, Jill. There’s a fire.”

She nodded. She was digging a second hole next to the first. “Yes, I built it.” She was monotone. Her voice was low. She spoke as if chanting again.

Anthony shook his head and knelt beside her. “No. Look at all the smoke. A bigger fire.”

Jill kept digging. “I built it.”

“You set the woods on fire? What have you done?”

She looked up now, through him again. Her eyes were running. Surely they burned as much as Anthony’s. “They’ve done it. They’re speaking to me.”

“Who--”

She held her hand up to his mouth to silence him. Her gaze floated with the smoke to the tops of the trees. “Did you hear it?”

Anthony listened. He didn’t hear anything except the snapping and popping of the small fire before them.

“There it was again.”

“I don’t hear—”

“Shhh!” She flapped her hand before his face. “I’m waiting to hear the other one.”

Then he heard it, a sound like a dog barking far away. Except it was loud, close. Surely if a dog were that close, it would sound more like a, well, a dog. But there was the echo of sound traveling far through night. There was the mournfulness of a sad hound wailing to be let inside on a cold winter night. But it was close. A fear seized Anthony in the gut—was this one of the spirits known to travel through these trees, conjured by this crazy version of Jill next to him? He had to leave. He needed to leave.

The same sound. But quieter, farther away, muffled by the distance and the smoke that surrounded them.

“They’re here.” Jill’s voice was breathy with delight.

“Who?”

“They speak through the owls.” She turned to him. “You heard them. I can tell by the look on your face. Don’t be afraid.” Her face had the look of a practitioner looking upon the rapture, knowing it’s coming for her, welcoming it. He had seen that look on the faces of people at his grandmother’s church when the pastor had pointed out that the Spirit had come upon

them—a frightening mixture of pleasure and pain and euphoria and fear. The tears in Jill’s eyes were streaking down her cheeks. “They are going to do what I’ve asked them to do.”

“Which is...”

“Purify me. Rid me of unwanted memories.” She stared at him with sudden awareness. “Like you.”

She was speaking nonsense. Anthony just stared at her. How was he to reason with someone who had lost all hers? She looked away. She was listening again. Anthony did the same. But he didn’t hear the owls this time. He heard the sound of rushing, rising air, of louder pops and bangs, like trees exploding. The sound of it drowned the tiny sounds of the fire before them. The woods were on fire. It sounded big. There was danger here. He grabbed Jill’s arm and shook her. “We have to go. The woods are on fire.”

She was still in her trance. “Fire is the best way to clean something. For good. Burn all the bad away.” She gave a startled shrug, stared at Anthony as though she was seeing him for the first time, and began to dig furiously. “I have to finish.”

“You have to go.”

Either she didn’t hear him—which he thought seemed possible in her state—or she was willfully ignoring him. He shook her again. She shook her head in response. “I have to finish,” she repeated.

Anthony didn’t have time to wonder how the forest fire started, whether it was Jill or her owl spirits or something else. They needed to leave. Burning to death was not how he pictured himself dying. Not tonight. Not ever. He shook her again. “I can’t leave you here.”

She wrestled her arm out of his grip. “I have to finish before they get here. It won’t work if I don’t finish.”

Anthony sprang and wrapped Jill, arms and torso, in his arms and pulled her toward his body. He struggled to get them both to their feet. She was flailing her limbs, trying to smack him with her little shovel. She was screaming. “No. No! Please.”

“I have to do this,” he shouted over her. “I can’t leave you.”

“Why?” she shouted. “No,” she shouted. “Stop.”

“I have to take care of you,” he shouted.

She stopped struggling. They were standing now, swallowed in smoke, which was thicker, more opaque. The fire was getting closer. Jill’s trance seemed to be broken. At least her face was different. She was angry. She scowled at him. Her shoulders rose and fell in heavy, angry breaths. “Take care of me?”

Anthony was breathing hard, too, trying to catch his breath in the smoky air. “I—I feel a responsibility for you.”

She turned, knelt again, resumed digging.

“For Micah.”

She paused, but didn’t look up. She shook her head and kept digging.

“For me.”

She paused again. This time she put down her shovel and looked up at him.

“I’m with Boyce.”

“Who?”

“Boyce Mims. We work together. We are together. Now.”

“Now?”

“Have been. For awhile.”

“Were you already with him when you had sex with me?”

“Yes.” Jill turned and went back to digging. “It makes sense this way. I know for sure.”

For the second time that night, Anthony turned his back on Jill and walked away through the woods, the billowing smoke and encroaching fire at his back. He found his way back to the parking lot with little effort.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When Donna wheeled herself into Nick's room in the burn unit, he appeared to be sleeping, which only meant that his remaining eye was closed and he was breathing slowly and deeply. Where his other eye had been was now just a ragged, puffy scar, still healing, where the doctors had sewn up the hole. The skin around it was pink and new and puckered. It looked like the skin on Donna's right arm. She had heard from some of the nurses that for a while, they weren't sure Nick was going to survive. His chances were better now that he'd made it this long, but he'd lost some fingers and there was a good chance his hair would never grow back. Their concern now, just as it was with Donna, was infection. Still, the nurses said, he was lucky to be alive. Donna wasn't so sure.

By now, Donna could walk on her own, but the wheelchair was faster, and the attorney prosecuting her case had forbid contact between victim and perpetrator. Alleged perpetrator, the attorney had said. Donna hadn't seen Nick since they had both been airlifted to a special hospital in the next state after the fire. Now, she sat staring out the window, willing him to wake up. The baby leaves on the maples outside Donna's own window gave the woods a red tint. Outside of Nick's, a dogwood bloomed. His view was nicer, she decided, and that seemed unfair.

From down the hall, she heard beeping machines and nurses talking, footsteps and the creaking wheels of mobile beds. There was never a quiet moment in a hospital, day or night. She worried that a nurse or a tech would come soon to take a temperature or blood pressure reading, and she needed to talk to Nick, needed to ask him questions. She used her good arm to lift her hips and reposition herself in the wheelchair. She grunted with the effort, the discomfort, and

groaned as her body settled again. She went back to staring at the dogwood, wishing she could get outside the burn unit. At the beginning, when she was still on the morphine pump, she didn't notice the passing of days. Weaned off the pump, she now just took pain pills and slept. Her doctor, for now, said this was okay. Her body needed to repair itself, and soon she would start physical therapy to stretch her new skin and regain full use of her right arm. He said nothing of the scars. She knew they would be permanent.

Nick cleared his throat. "Guess you know I'm in a heap."

Donna looked from the window to him. He was watching her. She nodded. "Solicitor's office's been in touch." An attorney from the county had driven down to see her several weeks earlier, a young thing with a bland face and her hair pulled back in a low ponytail. Donna thought she looked like a tired mouse. The young woman said she wanted to make a personal visit to express her apology for Donna's condition, and promised to do everything she could for her, at least in terms of criminal legal proceedings. That had been the lawyer's exact phrase. She talked like that, in legal terms and phrases as bland and meaningless as her face. Donna didn't believe she felt sorry at all.

"As soon as Mr. Goff is well enough to appear in court, we will seek a charge of assault and battery of a high and aggravated nature. On top of all the drug charges, clearly. We plan to argue that your injuries are the result of a crime. If it weren't for Mr. Goff manufacturing methamphetamines, then you wouldn't be—" She waved her hand in Donna's direction as though she wasn't aware of her own condition.

Donna looked away, pressed the button on her morphine pump, and drifted into a sleep full of strange, bright dreams. The young, mousy lawyer left. She had never even sat down.

Donna tried to imagine that lawyer's reaction to her being in Nick's room now. Donna figured the lawyer would be mad at her, but she could only conjure that same tired, bland face in her mind.

"Sure dragged their feet on that manslaughter charge." Nick's voice was weak and raspy, like it hadn't been used a lot lately.

"Do what?"

"They were quick with all the trafficking in controlled substances stuff. And the assault charge with you. But it took them forever to come up with manslaughter. Not like Nathan was any less dead two months ago."

Donna had wondered which of her memories from the night of the fire were real, which were nightmares concocted by her anxieties, and which were opiate dreams from the tube in her hand. She remembered Nick's insistence on returning to the back room of the trailer. She remembered his howling, his screaming his brother's name. But she couldn't trust any of those images, that any of it had happened. She looked now at Nick, his face as blank as that young lawyer's. She wondered what was brewing behind that blankness, how many hours he had laid in his bed, thinking and thinking.

Donna had to itch under her bandage. She had already learned what a terrible mistake it was to scratch an itch on her new skin. She grit her teeth instead and tried once more to adjust herself in the chair.

"Why're you here?"

"Where's Micah?"

"Hell if I know."

“You’re lying.”

“Why would I lie? What’d be one more murder charge at this point?” Nick said flatly. He coughed, a dry cough that made his entire body jerk. One after another, each cough looking and sounding more painful than the last. Donna looked away, understanding how all that sudden, uncontrollable movement felt when your skin was tight and burning. When Nick’s fit finished, he took several deep breaths, his one eye closed. He reached for the small controller beside him on the bed and clicked the button. Finally, he said, “I wasn’t even around Thorpe then. Nathan and I.” He stopped. He closed his eye again, his breathing ragged.

Donna waited, the itch beneath her bandage still firing.

When Nick spoke again, his voice was thick with phlegm. “Nathan and I were in the upper part of the county, halfway to Lancaster. Staying with these guys who were into something out of Charlotte. Anthony’d been our guy for a long time, but we couldn’t keep using him after what all happened. I mean.” Nick coughed again. “He is lucky we didn’t kill him. And Micah. We sure thought about it. But Nathan couldn’t go long without using, and we needed the money. Stayed up there awhile, trying to get in good with the local boys. ‘Bout did, too. Was gonna start getting a ton of ‘scripts from them and start selling them all over Kershaw County, at least down around Thorpe and all. We wanted to put Anthony out of business, at least while we decided what we were gonna do about him. Seemed like it was all gonna work out just fine until one night we was riding around with this guy Kenny. Everybody just call him K. Big, black, mean son of a bitch. Wouldn’t think twice about killing no one, I don’t think. He was the one with the connection in Charlotte. He was the one who was gonna get us in. We stop at this gas station. Nathan and me, we just walking around, thinking about buying some beer. I look up and K’s got

a gun pointed right at the clerk, clerk pulling money out the drawer. Before we could say anything, K'd stuffed the money in his coat pockets. And then I watched him shoot that clerk right in the face. K takes off, so me and Nathan got to follow him. We're driving away. Nathan's freaking out. K's telling him to shut the fuck up. I thought he might kill us. When we got back to where our car was, me and Nathan left. Didn't even pack our stuff. By the time we get back to Thorpe, Micah was already gone."

Donna stared at Nick, her thoughts misfiring, not making any connections.

"I don't know where he is. And that's the god's honest truth." Nick went back to staring at the ceiling, his face blank once more.

Donna bent her head to her chest. She did not want to cry in front of him. She hadn't planned for this. She had been so sure. Where did this leave things? Where did this leave her?

"I know I done messed up that little story you got running up in your head about me. You always thought I was something evil just 'cause my family run a little wild. You always judged my mama for becoming a Goff. My daddy says so."

She glared at him, not caring now if he saw her face red and wet. "You had a reason to kill my grandson. And you almost did. Right in front of me."

"Even without all that, you would've blamed me."

Donna heard more footsteps and nurses' voices in the hallway, closer this time.

Nick's coughed once, twice. His voice came out scratchy, but stronger. "I may be a fuck-up. I may lose my temper. But I'm not a monster. Everything I did in that trailer, every time I drove all over the county trying to find pills, that was all for him. He needed that shit. Not me."

Donna snorted. "Didn't stop you from using it."

“Everybody’s got their crutch. Sometimes it’s pills. Or whiskey. Sometimes it’s cigarettes. Sometimes it’s Jesus. And if your crutch ain’t acceptable in the eyes of everyone else, well, then you’re just shit. Don’t matter you just trying to get through the day, no different than anybody. Ain’t none a’y’all that different from me at the end of the day.”

Donna grit her teeth again trying to hold herself back from shouting and attracting the attention of the nurses. “I never been in a fight. Or been to jail. Or smashed up someone’s car on purpose. Or broke into anybody’s house. You’re mean and violent. You don’t care if you destroy people’s property or steal what they’ve worked hard for or give drugs to their kids. I am nothing like you.”

“You more like me than you think. We all messed up, broken. We all got meanness in us. We all destroy the people we love one way or another.” Without taking his eyes off the ceiling, Nick pressed the call button on the railing of his bed.

*

Anthony didn’t expect to see Jill when he drove past her house. He had sort of hoped he would, but he didn’t expect to. She stood at the top of a wooden step ladder which she had set up next to a short, leafless tree, a green bottle in her hand. More bottles, all different colors, lay on the lawn around her. Anthony pulled his car along the curb.

Hands in his pockets, he approached, his steps making crunching sounds in the dead, brown grass. Jill turned at the sound, but didn’t say anything and went back to her task. Gripping

a bare branch and pulling it toward her, she slid the green bottle upside-down over it. Then she climbed down from the ladder.

Anthony toed a red bottle that lay in front of him. “This stuff working for you at all?” He was surprised that she was still at it after the fire in the woods. He was surprised that she took it so seriously at all.

Jill picked up the red bottle. “I’m getting better at it.”

“I didn’t realize it was something that took practice,” he said sarcastically.

She ignored the remark. Up the ladder again, the same process of choosing a limb. Back down again. That was fine. She could be mad at him, although he had more reason to be mad at her. All he had ever tried to do was help.

Anthony cleared his throat. “I’m leaving.” He looked back at his car, which was filled to the ceiling with packed bags, amps, and instruments. Jill looked, too, then climbed back up the ladder. “I’m going to Nashville,” he continued. “It’s time.”

She slid another bottle on another branch. It landed with a hollow *thunk*. “It’s time?”

“What are you gonna do?” His interest was genuine, but all the same he hoped she would say she was staying. Then he could feel like he’d won.

She was combing through the bottles on the ground. “I have a job.” She chose a blue one and held it up. “I have this.”

“You have an empty bottle?” he asked, trying not to smile.

“I see what you’re trying to do. But don’t act like you haven’t used a root before.” She climbed the ladder.

“I used it. But I don’t take it so seriously.”

She shook her head. “No, you don’t. You’re like those people who don’t go church, don’t act like they believe in God or nothing, but when things get rough, they start praying like crazy.” She placed the bottle and climbed down. “You only care when you’re desperate.”

“And what are you?”

She placed her hands on her hips and looked away, like there was suddenly something very interesting to see in the neighbor’s yard. “I’m staying in Thorpe.”

Anthony couldn’t hide a smirk. “That’s funny.”

“You can leave now,” Jill said flatly. She picked up another bottle.

Anthony took a few steps toward his car, then turned. “If I see Micah up there, I’ll tell him you said hi.”

“He’s not in Nashville. He’s not anywhere.”

“You think he’s dead?”

“I didn’t say that.” Up the ladder again.

Frustration welled up in Anthony. There was more he wanted to say. He wanted to yell at her, to shake her by her shoulders. He was leaving to get away from her, away from the ghost of his best friend, who—dead or alive or something else altogether—seemed to be haunting him. All the time he had stayed in Thorpe for his grandparents or waiting for his mother to come around or worried he wouldn’t have enough money to buy gas to get him to the Tennessee line, Jill was the one who finally forced him to leave. He wanted her to know that. He wanted to throw that in her face. Wanted to accuse her of making Micah go away, too. But watching her add bottle after bottle to that sad little tree, he knew that telling her those things wouldn’t make a

difference. She was too far gone. He could only hope that eventually she'd come around, and he took pleasure in knowing he wouldn't be here to see it.

The front door opened then, and a woman that he assumed was Jill's mother stood on the stoop. "What are you doing to my Bradford pear?" she called to Jill.

The interruption did not keep Jill from her task, just as Anthony's arrival hadn't either. When Jill didn't answer her mother, the woman came down the front steps and shouted at Jill to get away from her tree. Jill shouted back that this would help them. And Anthony decided that it was a good time to leave. They were still arguing in the front yard as he drove away.

He decided to take the long way to the interstate, driving through town down Main Street. The morning was bright and chilly, but buds were beginning to form on the trees. The fire station doors were open, a couple of the volunteers on lawn chairs looking at out the road. The parking lots of both the Winn-Dixie and the IGA were full. Anthony drove slowly until he reached Hilltop Baptist Church, the last landmark in Thorpe and the spot where the speed limit went from 35 to 55. He accelerated down the hill into the dark pine woods that lined Highway 1. The dogwood standing in the middle of the Hilltop cemetery, white blossoms closed and growing, was the last thing he passed.

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