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The Golden Country

Jennifer Robinette

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THE GOLDEN COUNTRY

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

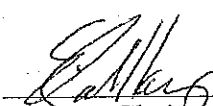
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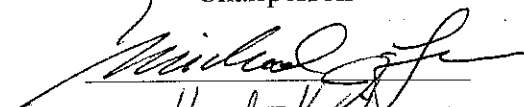
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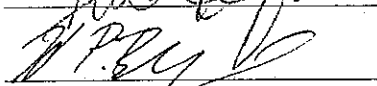
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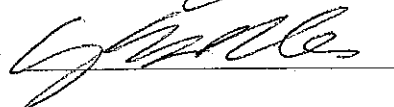


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This dissertation meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

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Jennifer T. Robinette
April 20, 2012

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ABSTRACT

This novel, *The Golden Country*, owes its structure primarily to the tradition of the female quest narrative. Set in April of 2003, an outward journey provides the framework for an exploration of a young woman's evolving consciousness and developing identity. Ava, the twenty-four-year-old protagonist who narrates the action, joins her mother and another character on a journey across Pennsylvania to locate her missing brother. While the main action of the novel is presented chronologically and occurs over a brief span of time (several days), the characters' motivations and family dynamic are heavily informed by back story. Absolutely crucial to both plot and character is the death of Ava's father – the result of leukemia contracted from Agent Orange while serving in Vietnam – when she was a small child, along with her mother's subsequent immersion in a grief which takes the form of mythologizing her dead husband. In this context, Ava's journey evolves into a series of complex revelations regarding the other characters. Ava discovers that some interpretation of the truth about her family, and thus about herself, can only be arrived at through an engagement with narrative – specifically, through piecing together her version of the truth from the other characters' stories. Along with the novel itself, the dissertation includes an introduction that reflects on female quest narratives and places my manuscript in the context of contemporary American letters.

INTRODUCTION

While this dissertation has undergone some significant transformations in the past few years, in the most fundamental ways I have remained true to my original conception of this project. For instance, I knew from the beginning that I wanted to attempt a novel rather than a collection of short stories. This is not to belittle the compact poetry and dramatic power of the short story form, without the knowledge and practice of which I never would have been able to shape the individual chapters in this novel. My point is, rather, to affirm the deep pleasures of sustained engagement with a fictional world and its characters. These are pleasures I have known since I first picked up *Bridge to Terabithia* in my third-grade reading classroom and absorbed its 100-plus pages while I was supposed to be doing vocabulary worksheets. When I began thinking about my dissertation, I suspected that the joys of reading a novel would also be present in the writing of one. Five years and many revisions later, I am happy to say that my assumption was correct.

In addition to the overall novel form, several other important aspects have survived three different titles and countless other changes. All of these aspects reflect my personal experience and my strengths as a writer. First, I wanted this novel, like most of my previous fiction, to be a family story. I also knew that my book would have something to say about dealing with the inevitable fact of death within this family context. In addition, the Pennsylvania, year 2003, setting would play an important role in

shaping the characters' lives and relationships, and would even emerge as a character in its own right. Most importantly, the protagonist would be a young woman in her twenties, who would spend the novel searching for identity, belonging, and purpose.

To that end, it made sense to parallel her inward journey with an outward one. In one of its earlier incarnations, the novel was titled *Missing in Pennsylvania*, and I was leaning strongly toward a picaresque plot involving a trio of travelers – the protagonist, her mother, and a family friend – searching for a missing brother/son/friend, and in the process meeting up with absurd characters in mythic rural towns. As the novel developed, I retained the trio – protagonist Ava, mother Bethany, and friend Steve – along with the missing young man, Elliot, but dropped the picaresque and mythic elements, for the most part. As it turns out, small Pennsylvania towns require little in the way of blatant symbolism, heavy-handed style, or bizarre characters to emphasize their everyday strangeness or aching beauty.

As for myth-making, I soon became more interested in exploring this process through the action of the novel than engaging in it myself. As I began to develop this family's back story and current relationships, the creation and consequences of family and personal myths emerged as a major theme. For example, the character of Ava's father, a Vietnam War hero who died of cancer when she and Elliot were very young, cannot possibly live up to the legend that has been built up around him by his widow and the other residents of their small college town.

From this theme of myth-creation came this dissertation's current title, *The Golden Country*. This title refers to an empty lot where Ava and Elliot play as children, pretending that this field is where the spirit of their father lives. The nature of this

“pretending” is complex. Neither of the children actually believes in the Golden Country; rather, it is a game invented by Ava, based on the actions of the plucky orphan heroine of one of her favorite childhood books. In effect, the children are enacting a parody, one which nevertheless points to the more serious and influential heroic myths which their mother, Bethany, has used to exalt and obscure the memory of their father. Bethany, in fact, becomes more wrapped up in the myth of the Golden Country than the children, showing how strongly these illusions have defined her life and, subsequently, affected the formation of her children’s personalities and motivations. This theme of myth-making and its consequences is sustained throughout the novel as, in their desperation to lead lives that matter, the major characters variously turn to spirituality, political ideals, and especially romantic relationships, often becoming so involved in these pursuits that they create incomplete or illusory personal narratives surrounding them. In this way the Golden Country, an empty lot which has been transformed into holy ground through a powerful combination of imagination and longing, represents the primary conflicts and desires that fuel the novel’s action.

Although *The Golden Country* does not hesitate to depict the pain and confusion that result from the stories its characters tell themselves and one another, this is not ultimately a novel of disillusionment. It is true that this book owes something to the typical *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel, the plot of which involves a young man learning the truth about the world and being forced to reorder his goals, ideals, and identity accordingly. In the case of this novel, however, “the truth” comes to mean the family’s past, which can only be known through synthesizing various conflicting stories whose contents and attitudes shift based on the teller’s beliefs and preoccupations. This

task of synthesis belongs to Ava, who serves as the novel's narrator as well as its protagonist. In piecing together her version of the truth from the narratives of the past which surround her, Ava is also building up her identity as a story-teller. Although Elliot's mysterious departure sets the journey plot in motion, for Ava the trip across Pennsylvania ultimately becomes a quest to find her voice as a writer. Discovering this focus for *The Golden Country* has allowed me to place this novel in its proper context as a female quest narrative, a literary tradition in which finding a narrative voice is a common concern for both women protagonists and their creators.

This concern with self-expression in female-centered quest narratives is not surprising, considering the historically troubled relationship between quest plots and female characters. Questing women are noticeably absent from the earlier epics; sympathetic female characters exist primarily as muses and motivators for the seeking male. In the realm of folklore, tales driven by female desire usually end in marriage, a pattern which is repeated in female-centered eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels written by both men and women. European and American novels of the late nineteenth century increasingly depict female protagonists as rebelling against their domestic roles, questing after release from their mundane, hypocritical, bourgeois lives by escaping into the arms of a lover (or several). The most well-known examples of these femme fatales are Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina, whose quests ultimately destroy them and yield dark visions of humanity. The nature of their journeys, however, is quite different from that of their male counterparts in literature of this time period; the quests of these women are structured around the search for love and sexual fulfillment rather than for truth or identity.

While women novelists of the late nineteenth century were likewise concerned with the often-tragic quest for love, they revealed themselves to have other preoccupations as well, infusing their female protagonists with heroic yearnings which had previously been reserved for male characters. One prominent example is Edna Pontellier of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. It is clear that Edna cannot reconcile her obligations to her family, particularly her children, with her need to possess an artist's defiant soul – both are all-consuming, and she cannot split her soul in two. Because of Chopin's emphasis on spiritual privacy and artistic identity in this novel, Edna's suicide by drowning has been interpreted by novelist and critic Marilynne Robinson as a Romantic crisis (ix).

In the pattern set by pioneering women writers like Kate Chopin, female protagonists are given room to embark on heroic searches for meaning and identity in the same manner as male protagonists, but in ways that explore what it means to be a woman in a particular context. In women's quest narratives of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the search for love and/or sexual fulfillment has remained a major motif, as has the evolving question of what it means to be a woman artist. Women novelists as diverse as Virginia Woolf, Zora Neale Hurston, and Erica Jong have written within the quest tradition, using the structure of an outward and/or inward journey to examine the complexities of sexuality, motherhood, and artistic identity.

Despite this strong showing, Lillian S. Robinson, feminist critic and author of *In the Canon's Mouth: Dispatches from the Culture Wars*, has argued that the quest plot is an essentially male myth which has been, for the most part, unsuccessfully appropriated by women writers (85-6). Citing the Greek myth of Procne and Philomela and using

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* as a contemporary example, Robinson instead identifies the central female myth as one of enforced silence, followed by finding a voice through writing (90-1). I would argue, however, that the search for narrative voice fits into the quest structure, particularly when this search focuses on the special concerns of the female artist. Whatever else these women protagonists are looking for, most of them are also discovering a means of expression through narrative language, as are the women novelists who created them.

For evidence of this, one needs to look no further than a text which, by Walker's own testimony, was a major influence on *The Color Purple*: Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This novel has a highly mythic quest structure which features its protagonist, Janie, as the heroine who returns home to share her story with her community. The complexities of Hurston's point of view are in line with the novel's overall obsession with the quest for a usable narrative voice, one which honors both individual and community, both oral and written, and also employs a strategic female silence with its own communicative power. While the overall point of view in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* can be described as third-person omniscient, the "literary" narration continually cedes control to the voices of the characters, particularly to that of Janie. Hurston weaves the spoken dialects of African-American speech communities into the narration, using a method that critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. refers to in *The Signifying Monkey* as "free indirect discourse . . . a bivocal utterance, containing elements of both direct and indirect speech" (208). Hurston, in rebelling against the reigning social-problem aesthetic of African-American (male) literature of the time to tell the story of a woman's mythic quest for fulfillment and identity, and in further defying

her audience's expectations by blending black vernacular with literary language, found her own idiosyncratically powerful voice through the act of writing.

In focusing and refining *The Golden Country*, one of my goals has been to emulate Hurston and other writers of women's quest novels by using my protagonist's search for a narrative voice as a means to discover and develop my own. My exposure to Hurston's point-of-view techniques has been liberating for me as a writer, triggering the realization that this search can be as complex as I want it to be. I have explored the option of blending voices, of mixing different registers of discourse. I have not been tied down by strictly first- or third-person narration. Along with the freedom these techniques have given me, I have tried to make the point of view work on a thematic level, to complement and enable my protagonist's discovery of her identity as a writer, a teller of her own and other people's stories. Just like Janie's voice in *Their Eyes*, Ava's narration is in some sense communal, not, in this context, to highlight the importance of oral tradition, but to show fiction-making as a process which forces a writer to collect, interpret, shape, add to, and pass on the narratives of others – in this case, of other characters – as her personal truth.

Understanding the complex joys of this process is crucial for Ava, a twenty-first-century female artist whose family life has been drastically affected by the Vietnam War. Add to this legacy her mother's religious fanaticism and the related heroic myths with which Bethany has managed to co-opt the memory of Ava's father, and it is easy to see why Ava has an ambivalent relationship to language. In the prologue of the novel, twelve-year-old Ava loves the "music" of language but distrusts its communicative, distinction-making, and ideological functions. She thinks:

Music brought bodies together, touching. My mother and father, dancing to jazz on the radio, the light from the streetlamp reaching through the living room window and crowning my father's dark head – a memory I didn't even know I had until that moment on the playground. But I couldn't trust this memory, just like I couldn't trust the words that my mother used to resurrect my father. Words, words like "God is love," forced a wedge between my father and mother, helping her to remember and forget at the same time. (18)

Coupled with this distrust of language, Ava's role as the daughter of two musicians – her father was a university band director and local celebrity in Pinestead, her mother his student – leads her to rule out the possibility of writing as a serious pursuit at an early age, even though her sixth-grade teacher says she has "a way with words" (18). Still, the idea of voice remains important to her, and to the novel, as she goes on to earn a degree in Vocal Performance and continues to experiment with language in a very private, tentative way, never quite making the connection between these two pursuits. In the first chapter she admits that, since childhood, she has "written out of sheer compulsion," describing her writing as "linguistically competent little sketches" about the exploits of an unnamed character who is an idealized version of herself and who, depending on what is happening in Ava's life, operates within either "a tightly controlled world that was easy to navigate, like the set of a sit-com" (27) or "vibrant and exotic" settings filled with "espionage and/or international politics" (28). Ava knows there is some important element missing from her writing, and is almost ashamed of it: "I never showed these pieces to anyone. They weren't stories. They were manipulations. They

had nothing to do with my life or the people I knew. They were wish-fulfillment, pure and simple” (27). Of course, there is nothing wrong with wish-fulfillment in and of itself, or with writing about the unfamiliar and extreme. The point is that Ava lacks the confidence in her own skills, and in language itself, to write with emotional honesty about the people, places, and events that matter to her. Although an accomplished singer, she has yet to find her narrative voice.

The novel’s quest plot challenges Ava’s narrowly negative view of language’s powers and immerses her in the crucial stories that shape her personal and familial identity. As the journey to find Elliot turns into a series of complex revelations regarding the other characters – Elliot’s motivation for leaving, Steve’s feelings for Elliot, her father’s imperfections, and her parents’ past – Ava finds that some version of the truth about her family, and thus about herself, can only be arrived at through an engagement with narrative, specifically with the other characters’ stories. Even while telling her own story, Ava encounters the other characters’ narratives and presents them to the reader. At these times she disappears as a first-person narrator, losing herself in others’ stories until it is difficult to tell whose language is being used or whose emotions are being depicted – hers or the other characters’. She filters their narratives through her sensibilities, blending their language with her own through free indirect discourse, much as Zora Neale Hurston’s omniscient narrator does in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

An example of this technique occurs during a scene where Ava’s abrasive friend Julie, referencing an incident in Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, challenges Ava and Steve to tell stories about “the worst thing they’ve ever done” (86). To start them off, Julie offers a story of her own, which Ava begins to relate to the reader:

When Julie was a little girl, her father had a mistress named Celine. Celine lived next door and was good friends with Julie's mother, who didn't suspect a thing. Celine was married, too, and the couples used to vacation together with their kids. The families went to Virginia Beach, Disney World, the Grand Canyon, even a Carnival cruise. And all the time her father would be banging Celine any chance he could get. Julie knew because her father always seemed so happy during these vacations, and he never looked at her mother the way he looked at Celine. Julie didn't blame him. Her mother was, to put it mildly, a bitch. And she wasn't pretty like Celine. Her mother had spreading thighs and knees like sandpaper. Celine, on the other hand, was blessed with soft creamy skin, natural blonde hair, and a warm, buttery voice. Julie wished that Celine was her mother. (87)

Here Ava disappears as a first-person narrator and begins to "write" Julie's story using the conventions of third-person-limited narration. Readers familiar with this convention trust her knowledge and truthful reportage of the events related, respecting her prerogative to employ her own language. At the same time, however, most readers are at least subconsciously aware that third-person-limited narration at its best and most interesting is a complex negotiation between the character's oral language and the implied author's written language. This awareness is heightened in a case like this scene, where an oral voice is implied by the story-telling frame (just as in *Their Eyes*, where Hurston frames the novel's main action through Janie's telling of her story to her friend Pheoby.) In the above passage from *The Golden Country*, we hear Julie's voice running

like an undercurrent through Ava's narration, but it is not quite possible to tell exactly which words belong to which character. Based on the usual distinctions between oral and written language, readers may suspect that the words "banging" and "bitch" belong to Julie, while some of the more literary description – "spreading thighs and knees like sandpaper" – belong to Ava, but the distance between writer and character (or, in this case, between character and protagonist-as-writer) is decreased to the point where it ceases to matter.

Paradoxically, it is when Ava merges her voice with those of other characters that she most fully achieves her identity. Along with increasing her (and the reader's) empathy for the other characters, immersing herself in the stories of others becomes a way for her to work through her self-doubt and cynicism toward language to achieve a new sense of purpose as her journey progresses. This is shown in her account of driving through the Pennsylvania countryside the morning after the story-telling session with Julie and Steve: "With each farmhouse we passed, I imagined the lives of its inhabitants. What might they be doing, saying, thinking, or dreaming at that moment?" (118). This is a moment of calm introspection for Ava, occurring while she is literally in the driver's seat and, for the first time since the search for her brother began, is starting to feel that she is an active agent with something at stake in this journey. This is because Ava's quest for personal fulfillment can only be realized through a discovery of her identity as a synthesizer, creator, and purveyor of narrative – that is, as a writer of fiction, with a developing voice that allows her to explore the complex relationships and histories that shape her perspective.

In this way, Ava's journey parallels and enables my own quest to find a comfortable, flexible narrative style which incorporates multiple voices, owes its value and meaning to everyday spoken discourse as well as to literary tradition, and uses the quest plot to explore a young woman's developing consciousness and identity. Although *The Golden Country* is in some ways similar to the typical male coming-of-age narrative, I believe that my novel has special implications for twenty-first-century women novelists like my protagonist and me. The quest for truth, identity, and self-expression is still, to a large extent and in ways that are specific to our diverse contexts, complicated even further by women's particular concerns regarding sex, love, and motherhood. Both Ava and her mother risk subsuming their identities for love, a risk which socialization still ensures is taken more often by women than by men. In addition to the problems raised by the search for love, the troubled nature of the mother-daughter bond informs Ava's quest at every turn. This bond is rendered even more problematic by Bethany's overbearing manner, secretive nature, and clear favoring of the male child who physically resembles her dead husband. One of Ava's challenges as a narrator, in fact, is to tell Bethany's story with a kind of dispassionate compassion. As the book draws to a close, Ava's developing sense of herself as a fiction writer becomes more closely intertwined with her growing need to repair her relationship with her mother. In the final chapter, the two of them begin to build a foundation for at least attempting to understand each other. This scene is directly followed by an act of writing on Ava's part, one which she immediately understands to be critically different from her previous endeavors:

The sky grew lighter as I hugged my knees and thought about what I'd just written. The story of my parents? Not exactly, although that's what I'd

set out to do. The emotions were the same, but the situation, the characters, were altered. Just an outline, really, far from perfect, far from finished. But this was different from anything I'd written before. Still a manipulation of reality, but it felt like more than that. Partially it was like singing, but there were other voices in there besides my own, and there was something else – maybe a kernel of truth? I wasn't sure. The only thing I was sure of was that I'd finally written a story. (196)

Ava's journey and the stories contained within, stories in which she has a vested interest, have allowed her to make this leap in her writing, to begin to develop a more authoritative and honest narrative voice. Although not explicitly stated in this final revision of the novel, readers may infer that Ava might someday produce a book like the one they have been reading.

The Golden Country in its current form is very close to what I had hoped it would be. It is a journey narrative, a family story, a novel about a specific place and time, and a book about a young woman's search to find her voice through fiction writing. Experimenting with and refining this voice has allowed me to make my own discoveries and to hone my craft as a writer, as someone who is still fairly young and very much indebted to the women novelists who shaped me as surely as I created Ava.

PROLOGUE

Mr. Jameson never held auditions. He picked kids in grades four through six for the bell choir based on their performance in music class – kids like my brother Elliot, who always had the answers when Mr. Jameson held up the big flashcards of musical notes positioned on the staff. To me, lines and spaces and measures had nothing to do with the music that came from Mr. Jameson’s fingers and made me shiver.

I would lie awake in bed, fingering the sweaty collar of my nightgown and thinking about Mr. Jameson’s hands. They were covered in coarse black hairs, and his fingers were long, with nails pared down well below the fleshy tips. When he played “Amazing Grace” on the grand piano at assemblies, his tuxedo tail hung down almost to the gym floor, and it seemed like his fingers barely touched the shining keys.

Mr. Jameson always acted like he didn’t see me. In the rare event that I did volunteer in music class, he’d look right past me while I answered the question, then down at the floor while he told me whether I was right or wrong. The only time he’d really spoken to me was on the first day I was ever in his class, and then he said the same thing people were always saying to me: “You look just like your mother.”

“I think he’s a snob,” Mom said about Mr. Jameson the first time I didn’t make the bell choir. “I don’t know what he’s so cocky about. He’s only second cello in the symphony. Your father knew how to play almost every instrument, not just cello and piano.”

“Maybe Mr. Jameson knows how to play more instruments, too.” I imagined a violin pressed to the stubble of his chin, or his full lips pursed wetly as they blew into the mouthpiece of an oboe.

My mother’s smile was tolerant and pitying. “Oh please, Ava. Have you ever *seen* him play anything else?” I admitted I hadn’t, which seemed to satisfy her. At that time Mom was earning her M.A. in theology, and in spite of this, or perhaps because of it, she had a very logical mind. For her to take something on faith, it usually had to pertain directly to either Catholicism or my father.

I could have pointed out that I’d never seen my father play *any* instruments, though I’d heard recordings of the legendary Mike Bertram, the man whose skills as a musician, conductor, and director allowed him to triple the size of the Pinestead University of Pennsylvania marching band within a four-year period. Everyone at PUP and in the small college town of Pinestead still talked about my father. He’d actually taught Mr. Jameson. He taught my mother, too – that was how they met. She was a flutist back then, but she stopped playing after my dad died. I didn’t remember ever watching her play, but I somehow remembered the sound of her playing: a low buzz that would crescendo to an insistent trill and then descend to a warm hum in one fluid motion, like the flight of some erratic yet graceful bird.

In our parlor was my father’s old practice piano, cheap and boxy like the one in Mr. Jameson’s classroom. The wall above the piano was plastered with framed photos of my father, a shrine that never failed to spook away the men who came over to eat Mom’s *pierogi* and sit close to her on the couch while watching old movies. Even creepier was Elliot’s growing resemblance, unmistakable even back then, to the person in the photos:

glossy black movie-star hair, dark Greek skin, yellow cat's eyes. Mom was in some of the pictures, too. She looked the same as always, tall, fair, and sturdy, her sharp chin jutting forward as if she'd just decided on something. In one photo, she stood with my father in front of Niagara Falls on their honeymoon. They both wore oversized souvenir t-shirts. He was grinning at the camera, but she was looking at him, her closed mouth a thin, straight line.

I didn't remember my father much, but I remembered going to the hospital to visit him while he was sick, and whispered words: *Agent Orange, bone marrow, radiation*. I didn't remember the funeral either, but my mother told me that I begged Grandma and Grandpa Bertram to lift me up to the coffin to stare at his body again and again.

I did remember that my mother brought Elliot home soon after I realized my father was missing. The timing made me suspicious. Had Mom traded my father in for this crying blue-and-white blanket, which, on closer inspection, was a dark dwarf of a stranger, wrinkled as an old man? I also remembered Grandma Bronsky coming to stay with us, and the fuss she made about the water stain that appeared on the ceiling above the kitchen table. Grandma claimed the stain was the exact shape of Christ's profile. She told Mom that it was a sign from my father, his way of letting us know that he was in heaven. Then my mother told her, in a voice like cracking ice, that she didn't need a sign to know *that*.

What would my mother say if I failed to make the bell choir yet again? That September morning in sixth grade was my last chance. I couldn't eat breakfast; I gave my two Eggo waffles to Elliot, who devoured them along with his own. When we got to school, I ran ahead of Elliot to the music room, anxious to see the list that Mr. Jameson

always scotch-taped to the door. A crowd of kids clogged the hallway. I stared at the glossy backs of their heads, not wanting to elbow my way through. Glad for once to be taller than everyone else, even the boys, I stood on tiptoe and scanned the list. Bertram! There it was, right under the Last Name column. First Name: Elliot. Grade: Four.

My stomach churned. Hollow. The skin of my forehead felt too tight against my skull, and the back of my throat itched. I didn't look to see if Elliot was behind me. Instead, I pushed through the crowd to the drinking fountain. The water was so cold that it hurt my gums. Then I went to my homeroom and sat down at my desk. I opened my reading book and stared at the words without seeing them.

Throughout the morning I would yawn in order to keep from crying, a strategy that had always served me well. By afternoon recess I felt like I had things under control. The day was bright and warm. As always I hid in a crevice of the wooden playground with my friends, Mavis and Roberta, while the other kids played tag above and around us. Secretly, I hated them both and was sure they felt the same about me. But as the only girls in our grade with strange names, we felt exposed among all the Jennifers and Sarahs and Megans. So we clung together for support.

None of us had been chosen for the bell choir. Mavis, who had an IQ of 160 and never let anyone forget it, asked me if I was "terribly disappointed." I shrugged and stared through the cracks between the two-by-fours of our hideout. Elliot was across the playground, climbing up the slide by bracing his dark, skinny legs against its wooden sides.

"I don't care either," Roberta said, raking a hand through her loose, messy curls. "Mr. Jameson thinks he's so great."

“I need more time to work on my science fair stuff anyways,” Mavis said. “And Ava, you don’t need to bother with music. Mrs. Jarvis says you have a way with words.”

Words. Words were like wrapping breakables in tissue paper, packing them in clearly labeled boxes, and shipping them across empty space. Music was different. My father must have known that.

I’d once asked Mom if my father was a Christian. “Essentially,” she said.

I asked her if he’d believed in Jesus.

“He believed in music – rhythm and harmony. Those things are love.”

I thought I knew what she meant. Rhythm wrapped around the guts and squeezed. Harmony rose warm into the brain like a pinched flame and stayed there.

“Love,” I repeated.

“Yes. And God is love. And Jesus is God. So, essentially, your father was a Christian.”

She paused. Her mouth looked funny, like smiling and frowning at the same time.

“Even if he didn’t know it,” she finished.

Music brought bodies together, touching. My mother and father, dancing to jazz on the radio, the light from the streetlamp reaching through the living room window and crowning my father’s dark head – a memory I didn’t even know I had until that moment on the playground. But I couldn’t trust this memory, just like I couldn’t trust the words that my mother used to resurrect my father. Words, words like “God is love,” forced a wedge between my father and mother, helping her to remember and forget at the same time.

But I couldn't explain that to Mavis and Roberta, so I just shrugged again and said, "Whatever."

After school, Elliot and I walked home together. We gossiped about teachers, friends, and kids we barely knew. We did not talk about the bell choir. Elliot could always sense my moods, and my mother's. He knew better than to press us.

The trees that lined the cracked sidewalks showed tints of red and yellow. The haze of the afternoon sun had settled on the hills, and I thought I heard a faint silver buzz coming from that direction, like the tap of a spoon on glass. Bells and hills. Hills and bells. Words and music.

If we turned to our left and crossed the highway, we would be in the backyards of the hill-people, as Mom called them. But I remembered her warning: "They've all got pit-bulls and rifles, and they're not afraid to use them."

We came to the creek that ran through the woods behind our church, parallel to the railroad tracks that hadn't been used for three decades. I wondered what it would be like to follow the tracks all the way out of town, to a place where nobody knew I was Mike Bertram's kid. Three ducks were skimming across the creek in triangle formation. These same ducks were always there: one with bright green feathers, the other two dull brown. One male and two females, according to my *Peterson's Guide to Birds*. I always thought the two females must share the male.

I stopped, hands on hips. Elliot walked a few steps ahead, then turned around and asked me what was wrong.

"I don't want to go home yet."

"What do you want to do?"

“I don’t know. Let’s go down to the creek or something.”

Elliot agreed – he always had faith in my vague plans.

In the woods, sunlight filtered through the yellowing oak leaves. We came to a path that ran dark and narrow through two rows of tall pines. The unnatural straightness of these rows always terrified me. It was the same with topiary. I would shudder to see certain bushes in our neighborhood, clipped to look like castle turrets and baby deer, hideous in their bright green perfection. I wanted to attack them with hedge clippers, mutilate them, make them uglier, more real. At the same time, I was drawn to these bushes. I would ride my bike past them again and again, staring. Something about them made my chest ache, like the feeling I got from thinking about Mr. Jameson’s hands.

I ran through the avenue of pines and down the small slope of the gorge to the water. I could hear Elliot behind me, legs brushing against ferns and sneakers thumping on moss. We stopped on the dirt bank, breathing hard together.

“Now what?” Elliot said.

I pointed to a thick log, probably felled by an August storm, stretching across the creek to the far bank.

“Let’s cross on that,” I said.

“Can’t we just wade across? It’s shallow here.”

Elliot was right. Stones cropped up out of the water every foot or so, and we could probably cross without even getting the bottoms of our shoes wet. But I loved crossing on logs: the concentration of centering my body, the precision of placing one foot directly ahead of the other, defying the gray space on either side of me. I had a good

sense of balance. Elliot, on the other hand, couldn't even ride a bike without training wheels.

"Do whatever you want," I said.

I strode across the log without once looking down. I stepped onto the bank, whirled around, and let out a yell of triumph. By the time I saw Elliot close behind me, he had already jumped backward in fright. He slipped on a patch of mud left by my sandals and fell sideways into a thorn bush halfway down the gorge. He lay there motionless, his small, narrow face pointed at the sky.

I jumped down from the bank and pulled him up. A trickle of blood ran from his scalp, past his closed eyes, and mixed with the tears and mud on his cheek. His lips were pressed together, but a short, ragged sob broke through. Elliot hardly ever cried.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't move.

"I want Mom."

So we walked home, first through the woods and then the streets. People in cars slowed down to stare. Elliot was quiet. I held my hand out to him, but he didn't take it.

We found Mom in the kitchen, making grilled cheese sandwiches for supper. When she saw the blood on Elliot's face and shirt, she sucked in her breath with a hiss.

"He fell in some thorns," I said.

Without a word, she grabbed his shoulders and steered him to the bathroom. I stood at the open door, watching as she ran water in the sink and slowly peeled off Elliot's shirt. He whimpered and shook. Red welts covered the soft olive skin of his back.

"I know, baby," she said. "I know it hurts. Just stay there a minute, okay?"

I asked if I could do anything to help.

She ran to the hallway linen closet, almost knocking me down. She flung open the closet door, stooped down, and grabbed a washcloth.

“Please,” I whispered. “I want to do something.”

She wet the washcloth under the faucet, lathered it with soap, and began to wash Elliot’s back. He didn’t make a sound, but tears streamed down his filthy face.

I watched them, a strange ache starting in my chest and spreading through my body to the tips of my fingers and toes. This was the feeling. Mr. Jameson playing “Amazing Grace” on the grand piano. The silver song of bells. Haze on the hills. Hills and bells. Bells and hills.

Thin red stripes on Elliot’s dark body. His gleaming teeth, strong and straight, clenched to keep from crying. The smooth skin broken open. I wanted to touch him, to wash him, to paint peroxide on his sharp, quivering shoulder blades – but our mother was doing all that.

I thought she might question me that evening, but she took no notice of me at all, not even to ask if I’d made the bell choir. Elliot may have told her during the hours she spent in his room, bringing him food and comic books, changing his bandages, reading to him. Before I went to bed, I asked Mom if Elliot wanted to see me. She frowned and looked past me. Then she said that he hadn’t mentioned me and was already sleeping. I went to the practice piano and tried to play “Amazing Grace,” but I couldn’t.

The next day on the way to school I told Elliot to walk on ahead of me so I could go back home for a book I’d forgotten. But instead I ended up at the railroad tracks. That was the day I found out that if you follow them far enough, they disappear near the

edge of an empty lot, sunken beneath soil and tall grass, and you find yourself still in town, at the foot of the hills. So you turn around and follow the tracks to the place you began.

When I asked Elliot about it years later, he didn't remember falling into the thorns that day. But he did remember the Golden Country.

We were sitting in a ratty Perkins booth at 3:00 a.m., both a little drunk. I was in my last year at PUP, where Elliot and I had free admission because Mom was a Professor of Religion and Philosophy. We were both in the Music program; his major was Piano, and mine was Voice. I was what the instrumentalists called a Throat. I'd learned diction and breath-control and posture. I'd learned how to project my voice. As part of the requirements I'd fiddled around, embarrassingly, with various instruments. I sang Soprano in the ensembles, including PUP Chorale, which Elliot accompanied. Sometimes I had a solo, if the part fit my voice. In her jury critiques my advisor, Dr. Levinson, never failed to write that my voice was "accomplished but immature." Mr. Pepperidge, the Chorale director, was more blunt: "You sound like a very loud bird." Considering some of the things he said to the other singers, I took that as a compliment.

Though sight-reading was still a challenge for me, singing was like breathing: natural, unconscious, and best when I didn't have to think about it. And, like breathing, it was hard to see how I could make it a career.

Since it was fall of my senior year, all this was on my mind. But that's not what Elliot and I were talking about as we waited for our greasy food. Instead we engaged in sibling talk – comparing notes, griping, making light of things that still cut deep. Shared

experience, to be sure, but we'd felt it differently, and now we remembered it differently. When I reminded him about falling into the thorns, I was glib about my disappointment, my jealousy and guilt. But it bothered me that he didn't remember.

"You were hurt pretty bad," I said. "I think I'd remember something like that."

"It is kind of weird that I don't," he said, stroking his chin. "But yet I remember the only time Mom slapped me, and that hardly hurt at all."

"When did Mom ever slap you?" She'd never hit me, and I was always the troublemaker.

"I don't remember how old we were. But it was because of the Golden Country. Remember how we used to play there?"

I did remember, though I hadn't thought much about it in years. The Golden Country was a field in our neighborhood. It was still there, actually, a few blocks from our house at the dead end of a dirt road. No one ever used that property, and in the summer it was alive with long grass and wildflowers. Now it was just a field like any other, but it seemed different when we were kids – a free space, where we could do whatever we liked. There we chased butterflies, watched clouds, and built a treehouse in a magnolia at the edge of the woods bordering the field.

We called this place the Golden Country because I'd read the name in a book about an orphan girl who wrote letters to her dead father. The name, and its association with that book, suggested another function for the G.C.; so we pretended that the spirit of our father lived there, and that it was the only place we could truly communicate with him. In the treehouse we left notes full of updates about our lives, things that were important then: "Elliot just got an A on his math test; yesterday Ava caught the biggest

crayfish we've ever seen; Mom just bought us both new shoes because we're growing so fast." Sometimes we would just be lying in the field when the wind would come up and I'd remember to say, "What's that, Dad? Oh yeah, we love you, too."

We didn't really believe in it, of course. At least, I knew I didn't. It was a game to us, a kind of pretending.

"I remember Mom found out about it and told us to stop," I said, "because Dad was in heaven, not a ghost, and there's no such thing as ghosts."

"Yeah, but she found out in the first place because she caught me writing a letter to Dad."

I groaned and shook my head. "Didn't I tell you to write those in private? Somehow I figured it would set her off."

"Well, I must have forgot. So anyway, she asked me what I was doing, and like an idiot I told her. She kept asking me questions, and the whole thing came out. When I finished explaining, she got real quiet. I remember she was holding a glass of milk, and she dropped it on the floor and it broke. Then she came right over to me and slapped me in the face, hard. I wasn't hurt – mostly surprised because she'd never done anything like that before. What was more scary than the slap, actually, was when she shook my shoulders. She shook me hard and yelled, 'Do you have any idea what you're playing at? Do you?' And she just kept shaking me. Eventually she calmed down and apologized, but it was kind of messed up."

I stared hard out the window at the parking lot flooded with artificial lights. It was November, and soon it would begin to snow. What was taking our food so long?

When I looked back at Elliot he was leaning forward, yellow eyes glowing in the restaurant light. “But do you know what the weird thing was?” he said. “A few days later I was riding my bike past the Golden Country, and Mom was sitting there with her back against the trunk of the magnolia tree. She had her eyes closed, and her lips were moving. I stopped there for a minute or two, but she never saw me.”

CHAPTER ONE: PINESTEAD

Two years and five months after that conversation at Perkins, I was living and working in Pittsburgh, biding my time, figuring out what came next. The only singing I did was in the shower, or on the rare occasions that a vague sense of guilt, coupled with an even vaguer sense of tradition, drove me to the tiny church a few blocks from my apartment. My life was consumed by my low-paying yet demanding job, and by my boyfriend, Drew, who'd been living with me for three months – practically since I'd met him.

When I had time to myself, which was not very often, I spent it reading novels checked out of the Carnegie Library, or writing in an unlabeled composition book with a mottled black-and-white cover. Since I was a kid, I'd written out of sheer compulsion – linguistically competent little sketches featuring a protagonist who resembled me but was more intelligent, athletic, and confident. This unnamed character lived in a tightly controlled world that was easy to navigate, like the set of a sit-com. She had relatable, humorous problems and always came out on top. Not quite heroic, since her conflicts were so banal, but admirable.

I never showed these pieces to anyone. They weren't stories. They were manipulations. They had nothing to do with my life or the people I knew. They were wish-fulfillment, pure and simple.

Since I'd begun dating Drew, however, the tone of my writing had changed. The settings were vibrant and exotic, and my heroine now had excesses of feeling. Recent plots involved espionage and/or international politics – things I knew nothing about. Like my earlier sketches, they were a kind of wish-fulfillment. The difference was I never knew how they were going to end. I hadn't been able to finish one yet.

At that time Elliot was still at PUP, but almost finished with his degree. Even though Pittsburgh was close to Pinestead, we rarely saw each other anymore; we were both too busy. And we both hated talking on the phone, so I had no idea what was on his mind, or why he decided to disappear when he did.

His motives were unclear, but later I was able to piece together some facts.

Nine p.m. on a Monday in late April, 2003: Elliot and his friend Steve walked into Wiley's, my old watering hole, my kryptonite, the setting of all my own sleazy undergraduate exploits. Behind the counter stood the owner, Curt Wiley, an aging, overgrown frat boy who insisted on turning his dive bar into a "club" on weekends. Then he would wear a plastic Viking helmet – horns and all – and shoot reams of cheap toilet paper into a crowd of gyrating college kids. Meanwhile, the barely-over-age bargirls paraded around in skin-tight theme costumes, balancing trays of Jell-O shots and glow sticks. At exactly midnight, Curt would crank the music up to a painful decibel level, scream "drink fuckers!" into a plastic bullhorn, and spray down the cage dancers with soapy water from the super-soaker his parents bought him when he was ten.

But this was a Monday night, so Wiley's was nearly empty. After getting their drinks – a pint of Yuengling Lager for Steve and a rum and coke for Elliot, both watered

down by Curt – the boys took their seats at a corner table, directly beneath the fiberglass coyote’s head protruding from the wall. Steve smoked while Elliot stared into space. The jukebox was going, playing country as always. The music was worse than silence. Neither of them spoke of Saturday night, about which they were both brooding.

There’d been a party at the apartment of their friend, a chubby girl named August (the month in which she was conceived, she would tell everyone) with ratty white-girl dreadlocks. The party was pretty standard, but what happened afterward was a problem the boys could not solve. They hadn’t spoken since, which for them was strange. After Steve got off work at Sheetz gas station Monday afternoon, he weighed his options. He could either call Elliot, or sit in his tiny apartment and drink an entire case of Milwaukee’s Best by himself. So he called Elliot.

As they sat in a dim, smoky corner of Wiley’s, Steve broke the silence.

“So,” he began, “how’s your girl?”

Elliot was examining the tips of his long, slender pianist’s fingers. “Who?” he said.

“What’s Her Name from Saturday night – Rachel.”

“I don’t know, man. I haven’t talked to her since.” Elliot leaned over the table so that his longish hair covered his face, then put his lips to his straw.

“Really? She seemed kind of into you.” Aware that he was over-doing it, Steve blushed and let his eyes wander. Curt stood behind the bar with a clipboard, taking inventory with a business-like precision that belied his weekend Party King persona.

Elliot looked up slowly from his drink. “Yeah. Well. She’s just another Pinestead slut, isn’t she?”

Shit, thought Steve. “Look, when I say stuff like that, I’m just being drunk and stupid. You know that, right?”

“I know, I know. It doesn’t matter, anyway. It’s all a waste of time – just like everything else I’m doing. It’s all meaningless.”

“What are you talking about?”

Elliot shook his head. “I don’t know. Never mind. It’s not important.”

“Obviously it is.”

Elliot pushed his chair back as he stood up. “Let’s play pool.”

After Steve had beaten Elliot in three straight games, he started to get bored. They were about to begin another game when an older guy approached and asked if he could join them. He was dressed in work boots and flannel shirt like a typical Wiley’s regular, but he wasn’t anyone they knew. His short-cropped silver hair, along with the decisive way he moved and spoke, seemed out of place at Wiley’s.

Steve told them to go ahead and play a game without him – he needed some fresh air. He walked a few blocks up the dark street at a fast clip, head down. He didn’t even know where he was headed until he heard a throaty voice call his name.

He came to a halt in front of August’s house. She was sitting on the steps of her sagging white porch, smoking a joint. Sitting next to her was the spiky-haired boy from Saturday night.

“Hey, Stevey. You remember Tim?”

Steve smiled. “Of course.”

An hour later, Steve was ambling back to Wiley's, humming some jam-band tune that had been playing in the background at August's place, feeling much more relaxed than before. Sex with Tim was better this time, less drunken, more playful and familiar. Much more satisfying for both of them, he was sure. Steve closed his eyes and lifted his head to sniff the sweet night air, only slightly corrupted by car exhaust. Was he finally coming to his senses? He opened his eyes and saw the half-moon sitting low in the sky, almost touching the crest of a hill. No – here he was yet again, going back down that same road to that same bar to that same person. He shivered a little in his thin t-shirt, rubbed his bare arms, and walked faster.

Wiley's was empty except for Curt, who looked up from his *X-Men* comic and said, "He's not here."

"Where is he?"

Curt set down his comic and leaned back in his chair, clasping his arms behind his head. "He left with that guy. The one y'all were playing pool with."

"Did you see where they went?"

Curt shook his head.

"Mind if I use your phone?"

"Can't you use the pay phone in back? And why don't you get a cell phone like your little friend, if you're so worried about him all the time?"

"Jesus Christ, Curt, it's a local call. It won't cost you a cent."

Curt got up, grabbed the small cordless from the wall, and tossed it on the bar.

Steve dialed Elliot's number. In few seconds he could hear Elliot's ring tone – some classical tune – coming from somewhere inside the bar. He looked at Curt. Curt

shrugged. Steve let the cordless keep ringing and tried to locate the source of that faint music. He followed the music to a trash can near the front of the bar, where he found the phone sitting neatly on top of a pile of cigarette butts. He picked up the phone and turned it off. After staring at the phone for a few moments, he pocketed it and left the bar without saying a word to Curt.

CHAPTER TWO: PITTSBURGH

When my mother called me at work the next day to tell me that Elliot was missing and it was my fault, I felt a strange sense of inevitability. I did not defend myself by stating the obvious – that I was in Pittsburgh and hadn't spoken to Elliot since January. I remained silent, waiting to be told why the guilt was mine, knowing that the reason did not matter.

“He never would have started going to that bar if it weren't for you. You and that crowd of low-lives.”

I stood at the wall phone in one of the classrooms at Benevolence, a family support center on the north side of Pittsburgh. The after-school kids had just begun to arrive. A pudgy little girl in a pink spring jacket came over and tugged on my shirt with a honey-colored hand.

“Miss Ava, my zipper's stuck.”

I put my hand over the receiver. “Not now, Tina. Ask Miss Jean, she's right there.”

“But I don't like Miss Jean,” Tina said in a loud, breathy voice, a child's idea of a whisper. Jean's skeletal back stiffened, but she continued sharpening pencils in the corner. Jean was a middle-aged woman from the suburbs with a brand-new teaching degree. She made it very clear that she was just slumming it here at Benevolence until

she could find a better job in a safer neighborhood. She had little respect for the kids, even less for their parents, and it showed.

I told my mother to wait a second and laid the receiver on a desk. I freed Tina's zipper from its sticking-place in what felt like slow motion.

I picked up the receiver again. "Mom?"

"You tell them you have to go home to Pinestead and you'll need some time off to help look for your brother."

"Mom, what happened? Why don't you call the cops?"

"Don't you think I tried that already?"

"But what did they *say*?"

"There's no time to talk now. You need to go back to your apartment and pack. I sent Steve to pick you up. I want you two to help me look for your brother."

"And you want me to take time off? How long do you think it's going to take?"

"How on earth would I know that if I don't know where he is?" It sounded like she was gritting her teeth. "Why can't you just cooperate with us?"

"And what about you? What about your classes?"

"I got someone to cover for me for the rest of the week. How hard would it be for you to do the same?"

"Look, I can't just take off work to go looking for Elliot when you won't even tell me what's going on. If the police don't think he's in any danger . . ." I couldn't finish. There was silence on the other end of the phone. For a second, I thought she might be crying, but then I remembered she only cried when she was angry.

"Please, Ava. We have to. I can't just sit here and worry about him."

I sighed. “All right.”

“I’m going to that bar to get some answers.” She said she loved me and hung up before I had a chance to reply. That was the way she always ended her phone calls to me. I think she wanted to eliminate the possibility that I would follow her routine endearment with silence.

By now the kids were seated at the long, low tables, noisily occupied with crayons, board games, and the good-natured insults they always shouted at one another. I hung up the phone and walked over to where Jean was still sharpening pencils. Without turning she said, “If you need time off, go talk to Brenda.” Brenda was our supervisor, a blunt, heavy-set black woman who routinely accomplished more in one day than I had in the past three years.

“I was going to, but first I wanted to make sure you’d be okay here without me for a few days.”

Jean finally turned to face me, hands full of No. 2 pencils and voice shaking with scorn. “Why wouldn’t I be? You think you’re the only one who can handle these kids?”

“No, of course not,” I stammered. “I was just asking.”

Jean glared at me. “Yeah, well. Okay. Go talk to Brenda.”

I wanted to say goodbye to the kids and tell them I’d be back in a few days, but to prevent myself from annoying Jean further I slunk out of the room and up to Brenda’s office on the third floor.

Benevolence used to be an elementary school. The school was shut down about fifteen years ago due to lack of funding, and the building was soon purchased by a non-profit community-resource organization. Benevolence Family Support Center looked

like a prison on the outside but was much more cheerful once you were inside. The lighting was generous, and plastered on cork-boards throughout the hallways and stairwells were children's drawings and collages, along with photographs taken during various Family Fun Nights: Spring Fest, Kwanzaa, and Family Basketball, just to name a few. Benevolence served the surrounding neighborhood, a racially mixed group of mostly single mothers and their children. The Center offered GED classes and other kinds of tutoring for kids and adults, along with day care, after-school, and special evening and weekend community events.

I was involved in pretty much everything, but my main job was with the after-school program. I'd enjoyed it until about five months ago, when they'd hired Jean. Since then, I'd seen kids who used to behave almost perfectly become criminals-in-training: stealing from backpacks, fighting in the gym, and cussing each other out. And it wasn't just Jean they targeted; one older boy who used to be friendly with me had recently accused me of calling him "stupid." What I'd actually said was that he should stop talking about things of which he is ignorant (in this case, a particular sexual term). Trying to explain the semantic differences between "ignorant" and "stupid" did no good – he remained convinced that I'd called him stupid and told his mother so. Fortunately, when the whole story came out she was so upset with him for talking about sex, and especially for using a certain word "in polite company," that her anger with me was minimal.

It wasn't even that Jean was especially strict; the kids just sensed that she expected them to act a certain way, and then they did so. I got the impression that Brenda knew what was going on, but was waiting until she could scrape together the funds to

hire someone else with Jean's credentials. I knew it must look better on grant proposals to have someone here with an actual teaching degree instead of just me, with my useless B.A. in Music Performance.

Brenda was on the phone when I entered her office, so I sat in a corner chair and pretended to be interested in the child psychology and urban sociology books that lined her shelves. Mostly, though, I was listening to her conversation.

"No," she said. "I don't see how we can. We're already over budget as it is."

A long pause. Brenda sighed and said, "I understand. I'll see what I can do." She hung up and put her head in her hands. "Money, money, money," she groaned. "Why can't we just go back to the hunter-gatherer way of life?"

"Is Benevolence broke?"

Brenda lifted her head and smiled. "Worse. Leroy's class is going to Hershey Park, and it's going to cost three hundred for the bus ride, the food, and all that."

Of Brenda's four sons, Leroy was the youngest. She always said she spoiled him, and I could guess that he wouldn't stand for being left out of his class field trip.

"But what's up with you?" Brenda said.

I asked her if I could have some time off.

"How much?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe a few days?"

Brenda frowned. "Ava, what's going on? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

I hesitated; Brenda already knew much more about my life than I wanted her to. "My mom called to tell me that my brother was missing, but I don't know exactly what that means. She was really cryptic."

“Are you worried about him?”

Until she asked that, I hadn't realized that I *was* worried. “I don't know enough about what's going on.” I paused and looked down at my hands, which were folded in my lap. “But in general I worry about my brother.”

“Why?”

“I don't know – because he's younger, I guess.”

When I looked up, Brenda was staring hard at me. “And who worries about you, Ava?”

I laughed uncomfortably. “What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said.”

“I suppose my mom worries about me.” This was true. Mom always said she prayed harder for me than for Elliot because, according to her, I was the one who got myself into “situations.” Some nights I'd walk past her bedroom door, open by way of setting an example for her children, so we could see her kneeling by her bed, clutching the blue-glass beaded rosary that had belonged to Grandpa Bronsky, offering up Our Fathers and Hail Marys and whatever other prayers were in her repertoire. Prayers for both me and Elliot, but more for me. I used to relish the fact that, in this way at least, I commanded more of her attention than Elliot. But now I felt vaguely embarrassed by the idea of my mother, or anyone, praying for me.

“What about you?” Brenda said. “Do you worry about yourself?”

“Not really.” I made a show of checking my watch. “I really need to get going so I don't miss my ride home.”

“Your bus doesn’t come for another forty minutes.” Brenda leaned forward and clasped her hands on top of her desk. “Which is good because I’ve been wanting to talk to you for awhile now.”

“Look, if it’s about that whole ‘stupid’ thing, I already spoke to Mike’s mother, and everything’s been smoothed over –”

“The fact is, *I* worry about you. This kind of work is draining on anyone, but some people are more cut out for it than others. You are not one of those people.”

“But –”

Brenda lifted her hand to silence me. “Just shut up and listen, okay? You’re doing a fine job. That’s not the problem. But I always saw this as a temporary position for you, and now you’ve been here almost two years.”

“Are you firing me?”

“No. I’m suggesting that you seriously consider where you want to go from here.”

“What would be the problem with doing this as a career? I mean, look at you.”

Brenda laughed. “Didn’t you just hear that phone conversation?”

“I don’t care about money.”

“I was kidding. This isn’t about money. It’s about what makes you happy, what satisfies you. And you are not satisfied.”

“I never said so.”

“I can tell. You walk around here with this big smile pasted across your face, but your eyes – you look like you’re in some kind of permanent haze. And I understand. I

really do. It's comforting to have something to do every minute of the day, to have so many other people to think about that you never have to think about yourself."

I felt pressure behind my eyes, so I forced myself to swallow hard. Then I yawned and laughed nervously. "But if I listen to you, then I'm still not making any decisions for myself, right?"

Brenda sighed. "I'm sorry. I guess I just don't feel right if I'm not mothering everyone."

"It's okay. I'll think about what you said. Seriously." I looked at my watch again. "Can I go now?"

"Of course." I rose and walked toward the door.

"Oh, just one more thing."

I turned around. "What?"

"Just a question. How are things with Drew?"

I thought for a second. "Terrible. And wonderful." I turned my back on Brenda and left before she had the chance to ask me anything else.

I stepped off the bus on Forbes Avenue in South Oakland, just a few blocks away from my apartment on Lawn Street. The air was warm and hazy with car exhaust. Down the street in the opposite direction from where I'd come, the University of Pittsburgh campus buildings loomed over the restaurants, bars, small shops, and convenience stores. I could see the ugly, perfectly rectangular dorm buildings, Towers A, B, and C; the thin spires of the Newman Center Chapel; and the Gothic Cathedral of Learning, which I'd heard was the tallest contiguous education facility in the world. On the icy January day

that I met Drew, we'd taken refuge on the first floor, with its high, echoing ceilings and darkly polished, solid oak furniture. On the outside of the building, the cement blocks of the first few floors were stained black from decades of industrial pollution.

South Oakland was a mix of college students, anarchist squatters, and immigrant families. My mother, whose paternal grandparents emigrated from Poland, grew up here, close to where South Oakland turns into North Oakland. At the edge of a vacant lot nearby was a small, faded wooden sign that read, "Welcome to South Oakland, childhood home of Andy Warhol and Dan Marino." The grass around the sign was always littered with garbage, just like the streets. It was dangerous to walk there whenever a strong wind would lift flat pieces of thin, discarded metal and whip them at unfortunate ankles. When we visited Grandma Bronsky as kids, we always loved on calm days to ride our big-wheel bikes up and down the narrow streets, which boasted even curvier curves and hillier hills than our neighborhood in Pinestead. I'd be on my pink bike with the yellow-and-white-streamers, followed by Elliot on his red bike with black-and-green streamers. We were always on the lookout for Rosalie, the old Ukrainian woman who lived across the street, hoping she would come out and sit on her porch. Rosalie had false teeth and a wooden leg that she liked to show off to children. Even better, she always had a bag of butterscotch on hand. Further up the street lived Mrs. Durkel, her thirty-year-old son, Thomas, and what seemed like fifty snarling dogs. The entire outside of their house, including the windows, was covered in ivy. Thomas was always sitting out on their tiny, ravaged front lawn in a camp chair with his shirt off, playing with the dogs. If you went past he would keep the dogs at bay and yell a friendly greeting, but if you came too close he would tell you to "mind your business." When we asked Grandma about the Durkels,

she told us that we shouldn't go near their house because their ivy was actually *poison* ivy. When Elliot asked her why anyone would grow poison ivy, she said it was because they were bad people. When I was thirteen, a few years after I'd learned how to identify poison ivy and confirmed my growing suspicion that Grandma Bronsky was not only a liar, but a bad liar, the Durkels were arrested for growing marijuana in their basement.

Rosalie was long dead, and the Durkels were most likely dealing meth in some obscure rural town in Central Pennsylvania. But Grandma Bronsky lived there still, in the same house for over fifty years. Like most of the older houses in South Oakland, hers was tall and narrow and hadn't seen a new coat of paint since the '70s. Her house, like the Cathedral of Learning, was covered with black residue, a shadow that worked its way up from the foundation and faded away toward the roof as a phantom reminder of the once-thriving steel industry which had demanded my grandfather's lungs in return for his stake in its prosperity.

In the two years I'd been living here, I'd gone to see my grandmother exactly twice, both times on October 18th, her birthday. The first time might have gone better if I'd called beforehand.

When she answered the door, I greeted her with the standard "Happy Birthday." She stood on tiptoe and peered over my head, scanning her stoop, the sidewalk, the street. Her face went slack with disappointment.

"Where's your Ma?" she said.

"In Pinestead. She had to work late, for some reason. I mean, she's working on an article for publication. It's on transubstantiation or something like that."

Her mouth worked slowly, deliberately, as if she were forcing herself to chew something bitter. “What about your brother?”

“He’s got mid-terms. They said they’d call later. Look.” I held out the boxes in my arms, wrapped in soft, inoffensive pastels – “old lady colors” was how I always thought of them. “I brought you their presents. Mine, too.”

She ignored the gifts, keeping her sharp blue eyes on my mouth as it sputtered excuses and platitudes. “Well, why are you here, then? Ain’t you got something better to do, too?” The air was thick with the incense-fumes of Blame, Guilt’s Polish-Catholic mother.

“Uh, no. I mean, I live here, Grandma. In Pittsburgh.” Best not to tell her how close.

“Since when?”

“The end of August.” Then inspiration struck with the excuse that would serve me well for many weeks to come. “I would have come over sooner, but I’ve been volunteering at the Red Cross on weekends – sorting through children’s letters to the families of people on board Flight 93.”

This was true, but I didn’t let on that it was actually part of my job. Right after September 11th, all the staff members at Benevolence were required to respond in some helpful way to the crash in Somerset County. But my grandma didn’t need to know this. She also didn’t need to know that “sorting through” meant disposing of letters with offensive content – images of burning skyscrapers and airplanes, pictures of brown people in turbans with crosshairs or bullet wounds drawn over various points on their mid-sections, or wherever the child-artist knew the human heart to reside, all done with

the most vivid variations of red, orange, yellow, and purple that Crayola has to offer, and with stunning detail. The images were enhanced by slogans ripped from the pages of comic books and blockbuster movie scripts: “Vengeance Will Be Ours!” “Death to Bin Ladin!” and “Terrorize This!”

But never mind what I left out. My grandmother’s eyes softened with tears, and her face crumpled like burning paper.

“Oh, Ava, you’re an angel. Bless your heart.” She stepped back into the dark innards of her house and motioned for me to follow.

“I’ve been so scared since the attacks,” she said.

She’d had chest pains, insomnia, nightmares filled with exploding grenades and machine-gun fire. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, she believed that Pittsburgh was the intended target of Flight 93. Grandma was not the first or only Pittsburgh native to harbor this delusion. The most common form of mental illness in Pittsburgh was perpetual entrapment in the Steel Curtain of the ‘70s, when the city reigned supreme in football and had barely begun failing in commerce.

Grandma Bronsky never forgave my mother for choosing to live somewhere else. The drive from Pittsburgh to Pinestead was less than two hours, but it may as well have been two hundred as far as my grandmother was concerned. Grandma always thought she could connect my mother’s bad choices in a straight line, something like Biblical lineage: enrollment at a state college instead of Pitt, a private university, begat relocation to Pinestead; begat a relationship with one of her Music professors, a Vietnam vet ten years her senior; begat early marriage against my grandmother’s wishes; begat early

widowhood; begat years of rural poverty while working as a substitute teacher and taking out loans to earn her graduate degrees; begat a lonely life as an academic.

Thinking about Mom and Grandma, I walked at a fast clip over to Lawn Street, a peaceful road that wrapped around the side of a hill overlooking the Monongahela River. When I arrived at my apartment, which was the bottom half of a typical tall, narrow South Oakland house like my grandmother's, I saw a blue pickup parked in my driveway. Steve sat in the back with the tailgate down, feet dangling, smoking a cigarette. He sent a spray of spit in a perfect arc that landed between my sneakers.

I've counted Steve as a friend since I was fourteen. That was when he started spending so much time at our house, playing video games and faux-wrestling with Elliot, eating our chips and drinking our pop, that it was like having a second little brother.

I stopped a few feet in front of him. He wore jeans torn at the knees and his Steelers windbreaker, much too heavy for the day's spring warmth. He had one blue eye and one brown, and his brown eye was twitching. Apart from that, he seemed almost calm.

"What's going on?" I said.

Steve took a long drag on his cigarette and expelled the smoke through nearly closed lips so that it came out in a long, thin cone.

"You talked to Bethany?" Steve was the only friend of Elliot's or mine that was allowed to call my mother by her first name.

"Yeah."

"How much did she tell you?"

"Almost nothing."

“Right. Well. I’ll tell you on the way. You’d better get your stuff together.”

I motioned to the apartment. “Wasn’t anybody home?”

“Who would be there? I thought you lived alone.”

“I did, but my boyfriend’s been living with me for awhile.”

“I didn’t know you had a boyfriend right now. Anyway, nobody answered the door when I rang the bell.”

I sighed. “Oh yeah, I forgot. That doesn’t mean he’s not home. Drew never answers the door, or the phone. He – doesn’t like to.”

“What is he, the elephant man?” Steve threw down his cigarette and ground it into the pavement with the heel of his sneaker.

Although the words I was about to say gave me a certain thrill, I somehow couldn’t look at Steve while speaking them. So I stared at the placid Monongahela. “He says he has enemies.”

Steve snickered. “Enemies? Is he wanted by the FBI or something?”

“It would take too long to explain.” A barge came into view, moving slowly down the muddy river. “Anyway, I better get ready. You want to come in?”

“Can I smoke in there?”

“Not cigarettes. Drew’s allergic.”

“Then I’ll stay out here.”

I let myself in and went through the living room into the kitchen, where Drew was sitting hunched over my tiny, faux-wood thrift-store table, writing furiously on a yellow legal pad. He wore nothing but a pair of baggy cargo shorts, and his shoulder blades stuck out like wings from his gleaming white back. I sat across from him; he continued

to write without looking up. Watching his slim, almost transparent left hand moving over the yellow paper, I forgot what I was going to say. His dark head was bent in concentration, and his pale, sunken cheeks sported week-old stubble. Most of my time with Drew I wasted staring at him, like one day he might not be there and I'd have to rely on memory. A photo wouldn't be enough to remember someone like Drew.

He laid down his pen and examined me with large, pale blue eyes that were somehow alert and soulful at the same time. "Sorry – I just had to finish that thought."

"What are you writing?"

He smiled significantly. "A plan of action."

"I wish I had one of those."

Drew reached across the table and took my hands in his. "It's not hard, Ava. You just have to stop over-thinking everything and *do* something."

I snatched my hands away. "I've had enough unsolicited advice for one day."

Drew's eyes turned frosty. "Isn't it awful that there are people who want to help you?"

I laughed without smiling. "Yeah, well, maybe I would know what to do if those people didn't contradict each other. Today my supervisor told me the opposite of what you just said – to stop *doing* so much and *think* about myself."

"Well, then I guess you'll just have to figure things out for yourself."

"I guess so."

We sat glaring at each other. At least half of our conversations went something like this. The other half were always about how much we loved each other – those ones usually took place before, during, or after sex.

Drew was the first to shift his gaze. “Someone rang the doorbell about half an hour ago,” he said.

“Steve.” In talking to Drew I’d forgotten all about my brother’s disappearance.

“Who’s Steve?”

“A friend. I’ve told you about him before. Anyway, I’ve got to pack. Come with me.”

Upstairs in the bedroom, Drew sat on the edge of the bed and listened to my explanation while I emptied my backpack of Benevolence-related notebooks and folders and replaced them with clothes, toiletries, and my black-and-white composition book.

“But you can’t take off just like that.” Drew crossed his arms over his bare, smooth chest. “What about the meetings tomorrow and Wednesday?”

“I’m sure you can find someone else to help.”

“But I thought you were committed to these organizations.”

I flung my backpack over my shoulder. “I’m committed to *you*.”

Drew stood up and took a few steps closer to me. “If that’s some loaded comment about what happened last week – I thought we were over that.”

I cupped his rough chin in my palm. “Let’s not leave each other like this.” My fingers traveled to his lips, which were soft and pliable, like wet clay. He kissed my fingertips. My throat constricted with a vague panic that I would never see him again. But that happened nearly every time I left Drew, even just going to work in the mornings.

“I’ve got to go,” I said.

“If you need to talk to me,” he said, “leave a message and I’ll call you back.”

“Right.”

Instead of following me downstairs, he lay down on the bed. I stared hard at his pale, upturned face, which had already lost its look of concern. Then I turned and left.

CHAPTER THREE: THE ROAD TO PINESTEAD

The vinyl seat squealed as I slid closer to Steve, leaving enough room to put my backpack between us. He gunned the motor and sped down the residential street.

“Steve, it’s almost five. You’re going to hit traffic anyway. You might as well slow down.”

A cigarette burned in his left hand, while his right one gripped the steering wheel so hard that his knuckles stood out in white relief from its navy blue surface. He didn’t speak, but he did drive slower. Soon we were on the highway, stalled in a crawling line of commuters in their SUVs. I wished Steve would turn on the radio, since he wouldn’t talk. Finally, we were coasting through the Squirrel Hill Tunnel.

“Me and Elliot always used to try holding our breath until we got to the other side,” I said.

“Did either of you ever make it?” Steve said without looking at me.

“Not once. This tunnel’s longer than it looks.”

“Bet you could do it now.”

“I haven’t tried recently.”

He glanced at me, smiling with his thin lips. Then his smile dissolved. “Do you know how sorry I am about all this? I can’t help feeling responsible, you know?” Then he told me about the night before, how confused he’d been as he left Wiley’s. Why would Elliot have trashed his phone like that? At noon Steve had gone to my mom’s

place to see if Elliot was home. His car was there, but Elliot himself was nowhere to be found, and my mom was at her office. Then Steve called Little Caesar's, where Elliot's manager said he was supposed to open the store at 10:30 but never showed, never called. After that, Steve drove around town for awhile, stopping at some friends' places to ask about Elliot. Nobody knew anything. Around 2:00 he decided to call my mom at work.

"Of course she panicked," Steve said. "Elliot's like the apple of her eye. Plus, she thought he was with me this whole time."

"So his car's still there," I said. "Do you think he left town with someone?"

"I don't know. Curt said he left the bar with that guy, but that doesn't mean he stayed with him. He could have gone to another bar, met someone new, could be passed out in somebody's bed. That's what the police think happened, anyway. They said there's no evidence that he left town, or that he's in danger. Your mom tried to tell them that he doesn't skip work or stay away from home too long without calling, but they don't buy it. To them, all PUP students are irresponsible drunks. But Elliot couldn't have had more than a couple drinks in the time that I left him."

"What about that strange stuff he was saying before you left the bar?"

"Yeah, but Elliot does that sometimes – talking all mysterious. You do it, too. I never know if you guys really mean anything by it."

"But what about that guy Curt said he left with? Was he creepy?"

"He seemed all right."

"Steve, everyone at Wiley's seems all right. Until they try to stick their hand down your pants and then stalk you through town for months."

“Funny, that’s what your mom said. Well, not in those words. And not specifically about Wiley’s. Anyway, she went there to talk to Curt, see if he knows the guy and where he lives. Funny that I didn’t even think of doing that. But I think Curt would have told me if he knew anything about the guy. He’s got a big mouth.”

I pictured my mom standing at the bar at Wiley’s, wielding her enormous pleather purse like a weapon. She would probably be wearing her mother-of-pearl crucifix and redundant “Pro-Life Feminists for Life” t-shirt, perfectly fitted to show off her still-superb figure. I could see her shaking her golden, impeccably styled teacher-curls at Curt as she tried to get some answers. I had no doubt she would.

“So how’d you meet this new boyfriend?” Steve said.

I hesitated at this change of subject. I never really liked to talk about Drew with anyone. “At a protest in January.”

“What were you protesting?”

“What do you think we were protesting? The war.”

Steve shrugged. “I didn’t even know we were calling it a war. I thought it was ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom.’ And besides, it hadn’t even started in January. We just invaded last month.”

“That’s the point. We were trying to stop it *before* it started.”

“Well, obviously it didn’t work.”

I stared at him, mouth open, about to launch into a diatribe about the power of organized dissent. Then I saw something in Steve’s face that let me know he was joking. I began to laugh. Steve laughed with me. In a few seconds we were howling.

“It’s good to laugh about it,” I said, wiping moisture from my eye.

We passed the first of about twenty adult video stores between Pittsburgh and Pinestead. The jagged rock formations seemed almost soft in the late afternoon sun, their orange and gray layers sliding into each other and blending to a warm brown.

“Nice day,” I said, glancing at Steve. He was sealing a cigarette with one side of his long tongue. “Probably too hot for that jacket.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not wearing anything underneath. I don’t have any clean shirts. They’re all in the wash at your mom’s place. She says I might need them if we have to go somewhere.”

“Where do you think we’ll be going?”

“Depends on what Bethany finds out.”

“But the fact that he threw his phone out –”

“Means he doesn’t want any of us to contact him,” Steve said. “Yeah, I thought of that, but I didn’t want to say that to your mom. And whether Elliot wants us to find him or not, I still think we should try. He’s supposed to graduate in a few weeks. But then again, so was I.”

Steve had dropped out of college the year before and started working at the Fourth Street Sheetz gas station. Outside of work, he spent most of his time with Elliot in various stages of drunkenness. I knew he wouldn’t leave Pinestead until Elliot did.

“You said you got into a fight or something Saturday night,” I said. “What was it about?”

Steve stared straight ahead. “Nothing. Just drunk shit.” His jaw was working strangely, as if he were having trouble swallowing his saliva. “I don’t know, there was this girl – it’s hard to explain.” I stared intently at Steve as he shifted in his seat and

coughed. “Anyway,” he said, “I don’t think that’s why he took off. If he wanted to avoid me, he would have left Sunday morning, or he wouldn’t have answered my call Monday night.”

“Maybe he’s nervous about graduating.”

“That’s possible. He doesn’t know what he’s doing after this. He hasn’t applied for any jobs, or grad school, or anything. I don’t think he knows what he wants. But he says he doesn’t want to end up like you, with some random job that has nothing to do with his degree.”

I turned my face toward the window. The rocky crags were dark scars in the cliff’s side. “Well.” I sniffed. “That’s encouraging. Does he realize I’m just trying to help people?” My words sounded phony, even to me.

“Sorry, but that’s what he said. He also wants to get the hell out of Pinestead.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Your mom, for one. If you ask me, you and Elliot rushed through college. Almost no one finishes in four years anymore, especially not Music majors. All those summer classes you guys took. You want to get out of that town so bad, and then when it’s time, you don’t know what to do.”

While he was talking, Steve had inched out of his jacket. I glared at the smooth skin of his back – no freckles, no pock marks, no pimples. At least none that I could see. Just two perfectly symmetrical bumps where his shoulder blades were. At that moment, I wanted to draw a line between them, cutting through all the way to the bone, halving him.

“It’s hot in here,” he said. “I couldn’t take it any longer.”

“You know what I can’t take? Advice from a fuck-up like you.”

Steve gave me a curious look and pulled over to the side of the road. He unearthed a dusty roll of toilet paper from beneath his seat and handed it to me.

“I didn’t mean to piss you off,” he said. “Maybe you should blow your nose or something.”

Until he said that, I didn’t even know I was crying.

CHAPTER FOUR: PINESTEAD

It was nearly seven o'clock when the Pinestead Super Wal-Mart came into view up ahead on our left. We passed the auto-body shops, housing complexes, and beer distributors with the word "University" gracing their signs. Wildflowers along the railroad tracks passed by in a blurred blue-white-yellow line. Tree-covered hills closed in on all sides, misty from factory pollution. As always, Pinestead was beautiful in an aching, claustrophobic way.

Steve parked his truck in front of the house where I grew up on Washington Avenue, an oak-lined street close to campus. Its split-level houses sheltered both college students and families, sometimes under the same roof – a volatile mixture. My mother never understood why I didn't want to save money by living at home during college, instead opting to get my own apartment as soon as I could afford it. I'd felt slightly guilty about leaving Elliot behind, knowing that he'd never be as callous as me and move out while he still lived in town. But I was nineteen and could no longer handle the weekly screaming matches with my mother. The argument was always the same; she didn't approve of my "lifestyle choices." I wasn't even doing half the things she thought I was. Shortly after I turned eighteen, I was possessed by the urge to shock this woman I'd spent my entire life up to that point trying to impress. So I not only told her what I was doing (booze, pot, premarital sex – the usual), but I would also hint at much darker, completely fictional misdeeds. At one point I even had her convinced that I regularly

participated in orgies. I wasn't sure why I did this. Even at the time, I recognized within myself two conflicting desires, one for attention and another for independence. But I think what it really boiled down to was a desire to expose her weakness and hypocrisy, to prove once and for all that her entire belief system was outdated and judgmental. But of course I didn't prove anything except that I wanted out of the house.

When Steve and I left the car, my mother strode out, ignoring the screen door that never shut all the way. She stood, hands on hips, and looked us over.

“Ava, I never realize how much I've missed you until I see you.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said. I didn't ask if she'd found out anything more about Elliot's whereabouts; I knew she would take charge of the situation as usual.

I caught the unmistakable scent of *pierogi* as we followed Mom across the threshold and through the familiar living room. There were the photographs, none more recent than ten years ago; the tasteful religious artwork on the walls; the cozy blue sofa and recliner. In the kitchen, Mom motioned for us to sit down at the rickety table. Then she stood at the stove, talking with her back to us. She had some useful information, she said, not as much as she'd hoped, but something was better than nothing. She set plates steaming with *pierogi* and baked beans in front us and sat down next to me in the same motion. She waved my hand away from my fork and began to pray: “Dear Father-Mother God, we thank you for this food.” Steve and I bowed our heads belatedly. Then she said the traditional Catholic blessing in a loud voice: “Bless us, O Lord . . .” Steve mumbled along, but I didn't even move my lips.

As soon as she had crossed herself, she began to divulge. “No one at Wiley's knew anything, of course. I'm surprised that any of that crowd knows enough to get up

in the morning. And Curt's the worst. His niece is in my class, you know. I was sure to remind him of *that*."

We chewed. She continued, "Steve had told me that the man they were playing pool with said something about being a veteran, so I went next door to the American Legion." Her logic, as usual, was impeccable. Willie Travis, a hairy-eared, purse-mouthed World War II vet we used to run into at the downtown library, had been sitting at the bar when Elliot walked in with the older man.

According to Willie, the man had a strong handshake – the kind of man you could trust. The guy didn't talk much, just listened to Elliot, smiling, putting in a question here and there about Pinestead, the University, Elliot's talents and studies. Willie heard the guy say that Elliot could use a challenge, "something new," the guy said, something that would make a contribution to society, but Elliot already knew that, the man said, they'd already agreed to that at Wiley's. Elliot said sure, something new, and drank more beer. Willie thought they were talking about graduation, that made sense, everyone knew Elliot was about to graduate. Willie had never seen the guy before, knew he wasn't from around there, and so he asked the man what brought him to Pinestead. "Business, gotta be on the road soon," was all the man would say. Willie asked where to. "Home, by and by. But Surrey first – business there, too." The man had an easy way about him, Willie said, a way that charmed, so Willie just assumed that he didn't want to bore nobody with the details of his business. If he'd known that something wasn't right, he would have called my mom right away.

Steve, red-faced, banged his fork down on his plate. "Sounds like that skeeze was way too interested in Elliot."

My mother was staring into space, spoon dangling from her white hand. She'd sounded positive, almost triumphant, when she began repeating her conversation with Willie. As she'd gone on, though, her face became blanker, her voice softer, more uncertain. Something about this information was eluding her, I could tell, some idea that her mind rejected, and I thought I knew what it was. So I reminded her about how Steve found Elliot's phone in the trash.

"Whatever this guy's playing at," I said, "Elliot must be going right along with it. Voluntarily, I mean."

Mom gazed at me as if she didn't know who I was. Then she began to shake her head from side to side, shaking angry tears out of her eyes in the process. "No, no, no. *No*. Ava, you don't know what you're talking about. Those idiot police said the same thing; they had me file a Missing Persons Report, but that was it. 'No evidence of foul play,' they said. 'An adult not even gone for a full day. Probably Volunteer Missing,' they said. But Elliot wouldn't do that. He wouldn't just go off without telling *me*. Without wanting me to know. Not Elliot. I don't want to hear you say that again."

I felt my cheeks get hot. "Well, the alternative is worse. Just think about *that*."

She crossed her arms over her breasts and glared at me.

Steve cleared his throat. "We don't have to figure that out now," he said. "Either way, we know what we have to do, right?"

Mom nodded, keeping her blue eyes locked on my gray ones. "We go to Surrey," she said.

"Now?" I said. Surrey was about one hundred miles southeast of Pinestead, close to the West Virginia border.

Mom sighed and turned from me to Steve. “We’ll take my car.” She paused.

“You’ll both need to call off work.”

“They’re not expecting me back for the rest of the week,” I said.

“And they fired me,” Steve said, “because I went to get Ava instead of coming in for my shift.”

Mom didn’t say anything, but her mouth crinkled up at the corners in grim approval. Her gaze shifted from me to Steve, then back to me. Her eyes said, “See? See what Steve is willing to do for your brother?” Then she stood up and began to clear the table.

CHAPTER FIVE: SURREY

The drive to Surrey was an hour and a half of twisting two-lane highway and dark shapes of trees. Rabbits and deer leapt at us from either side of the road at surprisingly regular intervals. Steve would swerve at the last possible second, as if he was toying with them, or with us, and I wondered if my mother or I should drive. We'd taken my mom's Plymouth Voyager mini-van, but Mom and I both hated night driving on these dark rural roads. I'd been up since 5:30 that morning and felt that strange alertness which is only possible on the other side of extreme fatigue. Already my life in Pittsburgh – Benevolence, South Oakland, Drew – seemed anomalous, like a speed bump on the highway. Every time Steve took a curve too fast, the small, barely conscious animal in my chest stirred awake and rejoiced in its own breathing. Then the tires would settle back into their rhythm – *not safe, not right, not safe, not right.*

From the back seat I could see Steve's white neck, thin and exposed above the collar of his navy polo shirt. When I was a kid, I always wanted to slap the necks of old men sitting in front of me in church. They had red, fleshy skin that stretched tight against their starched white collars, just begging to be slapped. But Steve's neck was supple, mobile, and from time to time he would rub it with a hand that appeared strong and delicate at the same time – a hard, calloused palm and long, slender fingers. My mom sat erect in the passenger seat, staring straight ahead, bony fingers tapping her knees. Her mood, as always, was infectious. While in Pittsburgh I'd mostly been going through the

motions of concern for my brother and duty toward my mother, the entire enterprise of finding Elliot had now assumed a monumental importance.

Out of deference to my mother, Steve did not smoke or turn on the radio; I wondered how long he'd be able to keep that up. Mom did not rebuke him for speeding – the situation called for haste.

We arrived at Surrey, a town smaller and poorer than Pinestead, shortly after ten o'clock. The dingy glow of street lamps illuminated billboards and convenience stores along the outer edge of town. Soon the highway became the town's main drag – post office, library, churches, bars, bars, and more bars. Our plan, so obvious that it was impossible to know which of us had spoken it first, was to visit the American Legion. We found the place sandwiched between a nightclub and a law office about a quarter mile before the squat, run-down buildings of Surrey gave way to woods and farmlands.

Crouched beside the entrance to the Legion was an old woman with long tangles of iron-gray hair. She sat back against the building and hugged her knees, the folds of her long skirt dragging in the mud. As I followed my mother and Steve up the shallow cement steps, the woman muttered something in a language I didn't understand. Her forehead and eyes were obscured by shadow, but there was pure symmetry to the wrinkles creasing the lower half of her face, as if her nose and mouth were accidents. The wrinkles reminded me of Rosalie, the woman with the prosthetic leg who had lived near Grandma. I still kept the prayer card from her funeral in my wallet, with its picture of the Virgin dressed in a blue robe.

Inside the Legion, my mother was introducing herself as the widow of a veteran to the man behind the bar. No, she didn't want a drink; she wanted to know if he had

seen her son, who was missing, maybe kidnapped. She reached into the depths of her purse and pulled out Elliot's high school graduation photo, in which he looked absurdly clean-cut and wore a close-mouthed smile that I'd never seen on him in real life, a smile that was somehow both serious and mocking. As Mom slid the photo across the counter toward the bartender, I stared at a stray puddle of beer on the bar, feeling like a character actor in a bad movie.

The man frowned and shook his shiny dome of a head. "Nope. Haven't seen him. But I wasn't working last night, or this afternoon. You should talk to the regulars."

Steve tapped me on the shoulder and told me he needed a drink. "You want one?"

"Not really," I said.

My mother was questioning the old men clustered around the bar, her voice pleading and commanding at the same time. How did she do that? I stood close behind her, a sullen shadow of her strength. The men were shaking their heads, their eyes full of disinterested pity.

Then a man with unnaturally long arms and a bristly gray chin spoke up. "You should ask the Phantom." The other men nodded and murmured "yeah, yeah," as if they had all been on the point of suggesting the same thing.

"Who?" I said, although I knew even before the man closest to me answered:

"The woman sitting outside."

My mother crossed her arms over her breasts and blinked furiously at the men.

"Why do you call her the Phantom?"

“Because she’s barely a person anymore,” the long-armed man said. “She has no home, no family. Her husband died in Korea, her son in Vietnam. She grieved so much that she let their farm go under. She can’t read or write – she used to be able to speak English, but now she only remembers Russian.” He looked around at the other men, who were nodding.

“She sits out there all day, every day,” the bartender said. “Some people bring her food. Someone must take her in when it’s really cold, but I can guarantee you she’s been out there all this week. If anyone saw your boy, it was the Phantom. You should go talk to her.”

“But none of us can speak Russian,” I said.

“That’s not true.” Steve was beside me, beer bottle in hand. “I can. Common speech, anyway – nothing too fancy.”

“Yeah, right,” I said.

“Ava, he’s serious.” My mother turned to Steve. “Your grandmother was Russian, right?”

He nodded. “That woman had vodka running through her veins. She used to watch me while my parents were at work. She spoke Russian at least as often as English.” I stared at him as he sipped his beer thoughtfully, lost in memory for a brief moment. He smiled fondly before continuing. “She taught me a lot of curse words,” he said. “Anyway, I spoke Russian with her right up until she died, which was only a couple years ago, so I should still remember.”

I didn’t know what to say. Why hadn’t I known this about Steve? What was Steve to me, anyway? Elliot’s friend, my friend, a nuisance when I was in high school,

an asset when I was in college. Steve knew where to get good weed, had connections with the queer crowd, could party for days without stopping, was essential in a crisis because he didn't judge anyone – unless someone hurt Elliot, and then he lashed out at that person with a brutality beyond judgment. Steve entertained us with his sexual exploits, his drunkenness, made someone like me feel chaste and sober by comparison. But when had I ever actually *talked* to Steve? If Steve was my friend, why had it never occurred to me that he might have a life apart from me and Elliot? Yet my mother had known this. As the three of us left the Legion, I was aware of my monstrous height, my broad shoulders and hips. I felt like a tall, ugly building that blots out the sky. It didn't help that my mom, as we crossed the threshold into the muggy night, hissed in my ear, "You should learn to trust people!" I sank down on the steps and rubbed my palms against the cement, its rough coolness a welcome distraction.

Steve squatted beside the Phantom, rocked back on his heels, and began to speak slowly, haltingly. The old woman cocked her head to one side and grunted. My mother handed Elliot's photo to Steve, and he gave it to the Phantom. She bent her head over the photo, matted hair combining with shadow to hide her face completely. Then she let out a low moan. The hand that held the photo trembled, and she began to chant the same word over and over in a hoarse voice. I soon recognized the word, the name – Peter. She thrust her head forward so that her face was illuminated by the Legion's exterior lights. Tears shone on her cheeks, collecting in the deep troughs of her wrinkles. Her eyes were bright orbs. Steve shuffled closer to her and reached out, grasped her trembling hand – a gesture that seemed impossible to me – and spoke calm words. Not Peter, he must have been saying, not your son. Elliot, my friend. Did you see him last night, today, tonight?

My friend, the woman's son, the girl's brother, did you see him? He is missing, taken from home. Yes, like Peter, young like Peter, but not Peter – Elliot. Did you see him?

Then came a flood of her words, spoken at a normal volume, not muttered. While the woman spoke, my mother's lips kept pursing and parting, her strong jaw working on some kind of hope. When the Phantom stopped talking, Steve said something that must have meant thank you and tried to put money into her hands, but she let it fall into her lap and stared at the wrinkled bills as if she didn't know what they were. Steve only shook his head, stood up, and gestured that we follow him away.

We stood around by the van, Steve leaning against the hood, smoking a cigarette.

“She hasn't seen him,” he told us. “Or, if she did, she doesn't remember. She only wanted to talk about the past, about her son.”

My mother frowned and said, “hmp.” I looked away at the dark, wooded hills in the distance. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, my mother reached into her purse and took out her keys. She unlocked the driver's side door of the van and said, “I'll drive us to a motel. We'll keep looking in the morning.”

I did not sleep well that night. My mother, with whom I'd been forced to share a bed, snored heavily, something I didn't know about her. Would I snore like that someday? In the half-light of the television, her up-turned face was the color of skim milk. Wrinkles webbed at the corners of her mouth and eyes.

For some reason, I remembered an article titled “My Mother, My Hero” that I wrote for the church bulletin when I was in fourth grade. In the article, I listed all the reasons why I wanted to grow up to be exactly like my mother. Now, fourteen years

later, I couldn't remember any of them. I'd almost forgotten that article existed, even though Mom had put it up on the fridge for a few years.

I'd never shared a hotel room with my mother. We never vacationed as a family. Elliot and I both went on trips with friends throughout high school and college, leaving Mom alone in Pinestead. She never went anywhere, that I knew of. She always found some form of work to do in the summer: teaching courses, writing or editing scholarly articles, leading support groups for bereaved women. What would she do without work? What if she had time to think about other things?

I turned over in the bed, facing away from her. Feeling both chilled and sweaty, I watched the red-glowing minutes slide by on the clock radio. It must have been 5:00 before I finally fell asleep.

Less than two hours later, Mom woke us up to begin our day, which consisted of an exhausting tour of nearly every business in town. She would drive through the light drizzle, then park somewhere and lead us on foot through the neighborhoods. At one point it occurred to me that we should have brought three pictures of Elliot so that we could split up and cover more ground, but I didn't say this out loud because Mom was already gritting her teeth in frustration. Steve, for his part, had begun the day with a determined stride, but as morning turned to afternoon, his feet began to drag. Everyone we talked to in Surrey hadn't seen anything, or thought they might have but hadn't been paying enough attention. I was disgusted with their pity, wanting to punch every head that shook with a pretense at sadness. I knew they were only calculating the number of seconds it would take for us to give up and leave, allowing them to go on with their lives.

I was wet and cold, and starting to wonder if we shouldn't go back to Pinestead and wait for Elliot to return, as he certainly would soon.

Around 4:30, it began to pour. We took refuge in a small store with a rustic wooden sign that read *Bargain Books*. There was only one person inside, a middle-aged woman with frosted hair who sat behind the counter. My mother, armed with the ever-present photo, questioned her while Steve and I pretended to browse. I pulled a book at random from the shelf and stared at the words on the dust jacket without reading them, preparing myself for more disappointment. Then the bookstore owner's voice rang out high and musical: As a matter of fact, she *did* remember the boy from yesterday.

I dropped the book that I was holding, picked it up, and returned it to the shelf. Steve and I moved closer to my mother as the owner continued to speak. She remembered the boy because he bought a book about fish anatomy; now wasn't that strange? And he was with a man, a man wearing big boots. She had supposed they were father and son. They weren't in any trouble, were they?

"Oh, how awful!" she said when my mother explained the situation. "Why, I never would have thought – they seemed so natural together. But I think I can help you a little. Yes, since I never saw either of them before, I asked what brought them to Surrey. The man said it was business, but they had to be on the road again soon. He needed to be at a convention – he didn't say what kind – in Hillsboro today."

Hillsboro was a mid-sized town about three-and-a-half hours east of Surrey, and Steve knew how to get there. Mom would drive, and he would navigate. After we ran the five rainy blocks to the car, I stretched out with relief in the back seat and prepared to sleep. The donuts from the motel's continental breakfast were achieving a new kind of

density in my abdomen, a heaviness like wet clothes. Elliot was pulling us further east, closer to Philadelphia and my father's family. What did this mean? But soon the rhythm of the tires had lulled me into restless dreams of fish speaking Russian, being cut open, disemboweled, and reassembled. At one point I thought I felt my mother pulling a blanket over me, tucking me in up to my chin, but then I decided that this was just part of my dreaming.

CHAPTER SIX: HILLSBORO

Lack of motion startled me awake. A blanket was spread over me; I threw it to the floor and sat up. I coughed and rubbed my calf, trying to work out the cramp I had from sleeping in the back seat. It was almost dark out, and no longer raining. My mother was slumped against the steering wheel, resting her forehead in the heels of her hands. Steve was looking out the passenger-side window, his face turned as far from my mother as he could physically manage. We were parked on the side of a wide, four-lane highway. A dark line of trees stretched ahead into the dusk, and the stillness was embarrassing.

“Why are we stopped?” I said in a voice hoarse from sleep.

Steve continued to look out the window. My mother straightened up in her seat but did not look at me when she said, in a monotone, “We’re out of gas.”

“Huh? Weren’t you paying attention to the gas gauge?” My words came out sounding more critical than I meant them to be, and I expected Mom to snap back with one of her handy truisms: “Nobody’s perfect,” or “It’s easy to criticize.” Instead she mumbled, “I guess not.”

“What about you, Steve?” I heard the petulant whine in my voice, and hated it.

Steve did not look at me either. “I noticed that we were running low, yeah. But I thought we could make it to Hillsboro. I’m not used to this car, remember? My truck’s tank is bigger.” He rolled down his window and lit a cigarette.

“Neither of you have a cell phone, do you?” Mom managed to say.

“No,” Steve said.

“What about Elliot’s phone?” I asked. “Didn’t you find it at Wiley’s?”

Steve gaped at me, then groaned. He turned back to the window and slumped in his seat. “I left it on my dresser at home, like a fucking idiot.”

“What about you, Ava?” Mom said.

“Of course I don’t. I can barely afford my rent.” I huffed. “Well, this is just great.” For some reason, this situation annoyed me more than anything else that had happened. Why were we going to all this trouble anyway? Elliot was almost twenty-two; couldn’t he take care of himself? Why couldn’t he leave Pinestead without telling Mom and Steve? He would come back eventually, anyway. The woman at the bookstore had seen him just yesterday, intact, and with enough presence of mind to buy a book that he wanted. He’d never expressed an interest in fish anatomy before, but people pick up new hobbies all the time. And if this sinister guy planned to hurt Elliot, he would have done it already. On top of that, I still couldn’t figure out why Steve and I had to come along on this journey of futility, since my mother was obviously running the show. I opened my mouth to say all these things, but then thought better of it and said, “I’m starving. Are we just going to sit here, or what?”

Steve flicked some ash out the window. Then he turned and looked into my face.

“A cop might pass by,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“Or a cop might *not* pass by.”

He sighed. “Well, what do you think we should do?”

“I . . .” I stopped and stared at the back of my mother’s head. Her curls all seemed vaguely out of place. I thought she might make a suggestion, but she didn’t.

“How far are we from Hillsboro?”

“Two, maybe three miles.”

“I say we walk. At least that’s doing something.”

“Ava’s right.” These words came out of the darkness and seemed disconnected from my mother, as if she’d never said them before. Maybe she hadn’t. “If we start walking, then someone might see us and stop.”

Steve shrugged. “Whatever you say.”

So we left the car and walked single-file on the side of the road: Mom, me, and Steve. Semis shrieked past at twenty miles over the speed limit with a hot rush of wind that made me dizzy. Steve pointed out that it would be safer to walk in the ditch, closer to the trees, and so we did. By now it was completely dark, except for the high beams and the half-moon that hung low, silvering the clouds that stretched thin across the sky. Now and then a bat would rustle the soft leather of its wings close to my ear and then zip into the trees before I had time to be afraid.

Back in college, I used to take long walks through campus and town in the middle of the night, half-drunk, oblivious to the very real danger of rape, twenty years old and invincible. The town that oppressed me by day always seemed weirdly beautiful at night. I would stop in front of an oak tree and rub my palm up and down its soft, flaking bark, and wonder why people always say that tree bark is rough. Then I would make my way to the cemetery, not the one near campus where my father was buried, but the older, smaller graveyard on the other side of town. There was a small, phallus-shaped

monument at the entrance, inscribed with about twenty names of men who had been killed in some mining disaster. These names seemed to leap out of the darkness with strange significance, and I would stand in front of that monument repeating them to myself like an incantation – these long, deliciously foreign names of immigrant men who had died underground with no sunlight, no air. Then the wind would rustle the oak leaves, and death seemed impossible, something that happened to people in books or on the news or to people I hadn't known, not really. It seemed like I could feel the heat of my blood circulating, and I wondered why people were ever afraid of anything.

Elliot was the only one who knew about these late-night walks, but not because I told him. One night I bumped into him, literally, as I was heading back to my apartment. I was walking through a residential area peppered with street lights, and I had been watching my own shadow slide toward me along the backyard fences, like a separate person, and then it *was* a separate person, my brother, whose hand I brushed as I hurried past. I walked a few more steps before I realized who he was, and then I turned back and spoke to him. He hadn't recognized me either, he said, because I looked different – happier. I told him I was happy. He said he couldn't sleep. He looked different, too, his dark face flushed with the activity of walking, the light of the street lamps reflecting from his yellow eyes. On a whim I told him about the cemetery, the monument, the names, and how it all made me feel. It sounded stupid when I said it out loud, but Elliot said he understood. "I'm suffocating in that house," he said. "I had to get out." Then we walked together for awhile and talked about the future, and how we wanted to make music. He didn't want to be a band director like Dad, he said. He wanted to compose songs for me to sing, and his wife – whoever she might be – would play the piano, and we would be a

team and not live anywhere near Pinestead. His eyes looked wet, and I wondered if he was drunk.

We often walked together at night after that, sometimes visiting the old cemetery, always talking of the same things. But the closer I came to graduating, the less I wanted to talk about the future. The names of the dead immigrants became a prayer I'd recited so often that it had lost all meaning, and that prayer was a song, and I was sick of singing, sick of performing and being lectured on technique and theory and history. And soon the walks and talks stopped, not through any conscious decision on my part or Elliot's. I still hung out with Elliot nearly every day; we took shots of vodka together, sang Simon and Garfunkel at karaoke together, gossiped and shared joints and talked about school and even about our sex lives. But there were no more walks, and no more talks about the future. I still wasn't sure which of us had abandoned the other, but it was around that time that I began to understand fear.

Now, walking at night in the ditch along the flat highway, I felt less afraid than I had in a long time. I knew I should feel the opposite, considering our situation and Elliot's disappearance. Even so, it was a pleasure to move my legs purposefully, to breathe the warm night air, fresh from the day's rain. Between cars, everything was so still that I could hear the water dripping from the trees.

My mother was walking fast, far ahead of me with her head down. Steve came up beside me and said in a low voice, "She feels guilty."

I didn't say anything.

He tried again. "I mean, you can't blame her for being too distracted to notice the gas gauge. She's so worried."

“Did you ever stop to think that maybe Elliot doesn’t need us?” I said. A bat squealed overhead.

“What do you mean? Of course he needs us.” Steve sounded like he was trying to reassure himself.

“Maybe he needs you. I can only speak for myself.”

“Don’t be like that. You’re his family. Do you know how much he talks about you now that you’re never around? Every girl he’s with, he compares to you.”

A sudden breeze raised bumps on my arm, and I shivered. “Now you’re just being sick.”

“I’m not. I don’t mean it like that.” He leaned forward and squinted. “I can barely see your mom anymore.” We walked faster. “Look,” he said, “I don’t have a sister. But I can imagine it’d be like that. You grow up with this example of what a girl is, and then it seems like that’s how all girls should be.”

I laughed, a sharp little bark. “So Elliot’s problem is that he’s surrounded by too many women?”

“I didn’t say it was a problem. It’s just family, you know? I wish I had what you guys have. All I’ve got is my parents. They’ve been divorced a long time, and I’m not that close to either of them. And then there’s Elliot . . .” He broke off with an uncomfortable laugh. “Sorry. I sound like an idiot. Must be the goddamn moonlight.”

Now my mother was just a few yards ahead of us. Steve stared at the ground. I walked a little slower, and he matched his pace to mine. He was walking with his head down, sandy hair hanging in his eyes, lips pursed thoughtfully.

Steve and I had kissed dozens of times, very publicly, always as a drunken joke, although now it was hard to remember why we found this so funny. I did recall, though, that his lips always tasted slightly of cinnamon and, of course, cigarettes. But that was all a couple of years ago, and if he remembered kissing me, he never let on.

We passed a sign that said it was a half-mile to Hillsboro. Now my legs were beginning to ache, and I was anxious to get there. Lights smoldered up ahead, around the curve of the exit, beacons announcing the presence of fuel and fast food. They looked much nearer than they were, and it was as if I could hear the neon buzzing. My mother slowed down to walk beside me.

“We’re almost there,” she said. The hair around her temples was damp with sweat. “Once we get to a gas station, I’ll call Triple A so we won’t have to walk back here.” I felt bad about giving her such a hard time earlier, but I didn’t say anything. I realized that I was sweating, too, despite the fact that it was getting colder.

The closest station was a tiny BP right off the Hillsboro exit. A young girl wearing a green uniform shirt stood outside under the lights, smoking a cigarette. Beside her lounged an old man with a dirty mustache and a Phillies cap that did not help to hide the largest, most pustule-covered nose I’d ever seen. They talked and laughed as we made our way to them across the parking lot.

“Are you almost done with that cigarette?” the man roared at the girl. “I want some fucking coffee.”

She tossed her head so that her long red hair cascaded down her back. “I told you, we’re out of fucking coffee. And I’m on my fucking break. Why don’t you go home, anyways? I thought you said there was a woman in your bed.”

He grinned, which made his nose look even more enormous. “Oh, there is. But she can’t do nothing now. She can’t even move.”

“Yeah?” The redhead dropped her cigarette on the concrete and ground it out with her sneaker. “I’ll bet she can’t. I’ll bet you took good care of her.” They both laughed.

The old man and the girl stopped talking and stared at us. Our clothes and faces, grimy with dust and sweat, told the story of our three-mile hike so clearly that they did not even ask us what had happened. The man touched his cap politely, then leered at me and softly began to whistle the tune to “Cocaine Blues.” He sauntered toward his banged-up Chevy, still whistling, apparently having decided that it would be best to drive home to the woman who couldn’t move. We followed the girl into the building, where she stood behind the counter, waiting. She watched my mother dig around in her huge purse for loose change. “You can use my cell phone,” the girl said with a sympathetic smile.

“Oh, yes, thank you,” my mother said, taking the phone. “Hey, maybe I should get one of these,” she said brightly, trying to make a joke. “Then we wouldn’t be in this mess.” The girl just looked at her. Embarrassed, Steve and I stared at the racks of magazines, candy, and condoms as my mom flipped through the contents of her wallet, looking for her AAA card.

Outside there was a screech of brakes as a red Camaro skidded to a stop right in front of the BP. The girl behind the counter rolled her eyes. “Oh, Lord. Get a load of this bitch. She’ll crash that car when it’s icy this winter. Some people just don’t deserve

what they got.” I nodded my agreement and then turned to Steve to ask if he wanted some food. But before I could say anything, I heard a disturbingly familiar voice.

“I don’t believe it – *Ava?*”

CHAPTER SEVEN: PLEASANT VALLEY

She stood a few feet away, looking washed-out under the buzzing fluorescent lights of the convenience store, her black eyes shifting between me and Steve, dismissing him and settling on me.

“Julie,” I said.

She took a step closer and crossed her arms. She wore a trim maroon leather jacket and sleek black pants. She was thinner than I remembered, and had dyed her wispy hair; the dark roots were just starting to show beneath the bleached blonde façade. In her spiky red heels she was almost as tall as me. “What a surprise! It’s great to see you!” She let her arms fall to her sides, and for a second I was afraid she would try to hug me. Instead, she put her hands on her hips and shook her head, a bemused smile on her lips. “Isn’t life full of surprises?”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, it is.”

Julie had her back to Steve, whose face was frozen somewhere between amusement and irritation. Behind the counter, the red-haired girl was biting her lip while pretending to be interested in the newspaper unfolded in front of her.

My mother looked up from rummaging in her purse and stared at me. “Ava, you know this girl?”

“Oh – yeah. Mom, this is Julie Dwyer.” I flailed an arm in Julie’s direction. “We went to college together.”

“You must know Steve, then, too,” my mom said.

Julie turned to Steve as if noticing him for the first time. “Of course. Steve and I go way back.”

“Yeah,” he said, his voice flat, a carefully neutral expression on his face. “Way back.”

“So what are you doing in Hillsboro?” Julie said.

“We’re on our way to visit some relatives in Philly.” It was the quickest, most natural-sounding lie I had ever told. My mother stared at me and mouthed the word “What?” I glanced at her sideways and shook my head slightly: We didn’t want to tell our business to Julie Dwyer.

But we could use some help. And there was something in Julie’s face, in her thin lips and the barely concealed challenge in her calculating eyes – something I’d been missing without even knowing it.

“Our car ran out of gas a couple miles west of here,” I said.

Steve and I sat crammed in the tiny back seat of Julie’s Camaro, so close that our thighs touched. Mom sat in the passenger seat with a plastic gas can and listened to Julie talk about her job. She worked at an advertising agency in Hillsboro. It was her job to bring in clients. “I know what clients want,” she said. “I know what they *need*.” My mother nodded and made polite noises.

Soon we reached our car. I unbuckled my seat belt, cleared my throat. “Thanks, Julie. That was a life-saver.” Mom had already left the car and flipped the seat forward so that Steve could get out.

“Wait a minute, Ava.” Julie turned around in her seat. “I haven’t seen you in years. And you’ve got to see my place. Why don’t you guys come over?”

“We’re all really tired,” Steve said slowly.

“You can sleep at my place, then, save you the price of a hotel. I’ve got a guest room.”

My mother stood on the side of the highway, still holding the car door. The high beams of a passing truck traveled briefly across her face and were gone before I could read her expression.

“Mom, what do you want to do?”

“Find a bed as soon as possible.”

Steve drove, following Julie’s car to her house in Pleasant Valley, which, as she had explained, was twenty-five miles north of Hillsboro. “Real estate values in the Valley have been going way up,” she’d said.

I thought that my mom was sleeping in the back seat until she spoke. “So this girl is a friend of yours?”

“She’s someone we used to hang out with.”

“*You* hung out with her,” Steve said.

“She’s interesting,” I said. “I could tell you stories.”

“Don’t,” Mom said. “I’m not in the mood.”

There was the time when Julie’s wallet was stolen at an outdoor concert one sticky July night. On our way to the police tent, she noticed a face in the crowd, a guy

who'd been standing next to her earlier. That was when she knew – he was the thief. She went over and spoke to him. He was clearly high on something. She told him that she thought he was sexy, and that she wanted to sleep with him. He believed her. She asked him his name, address, phone number, college major, etc. She meticulously wrote down each piece of information. Then she told him that she knew he had stolen her wallet, and she wanted it back. He began to cry. The sound of his sobs mingled with the noisy guitar feedback and sloppy percussion of the band. She repeated her threat. He handed her the wallet with all her money and credit cards still inside. She turned him in to the police anyway. It was exciting to watch. The whole group of us – me, Julie, and two of Julie's friends that I barely knew, were so pumped with adrenaline that we stayed up all night drinking cheap beer in the Bi-Lo parking lot to celebrate our triumph. At dawn, we all went out for pancakes.

Julie could always talk her way out of speeding tickets.

Julie once slept with my brother while I was out of town, visiting a friend in Baltimore. She plied him with liquor, is what I heard. But I didn't hear about it until a year later, long after Elliot had been forced to remind her gently but firmly that their night of passion had been a mistake, and long after she had begun spreading the rumor that Elliot had a small penis.

"She always knows how to get at you," people would say.

One Friday night, Julie and I were at Wiley's, standing near the back, trying to talk over the thumping bass of the dance music. She was holding someone else's cigarette, using it to emphasize her gestures. At one point, she accidentally brushed the lit tip against my face. "Oh Ava, I hurt you." But I didn't feel any pain. She put a cool

hand to my cheek, then leaned forward and kissed me full on the lips. Only then did I feel my face burn beneath her hand.

The three of us – Steve, Julie, and I – were lounging around Julie’s living room, drinking some kind of white wine and talking. An empty pizza box lay on the floor at our feet. My mother, claiming she wasn’t hungry, had gone directly to the guest room after briefly admiring the lawn (perfectly manicured) and the furniture (black leather sofa, love-seat, and recliner; glass coffee and end tables).

“And remember that girl who used to walk her pet ferret around campus on a leash?” Julie was saying, her face red with wine and laughter.

Steve and I laughed, too. We did remember that girl. The wine was making me feel warm and loose, pleasantly fuzzy. Even Steve seemed to be having a good time. I settled my body deeper into the soft leather couch and let my head fall onto his shoulder.

“So what have you guys been up to lately?”

“If you must know,” Steve said, “I’m a grease monkey, and Ava’s a baby-sitter.”

Julie stared at him. “You’re not serious. I mean, you, that’s not a surprise – you’re still in school.”

“No I’m not,” Steve said.

She ignored him and turned to me. “But Ava.” She searched my face with those eyes of hers. “Come on. Get real.”

I lifted my head from Steve’s shoulder and sat up straight. “I’m not a baby-sitter. I—”

“How much do you make?” she said.

“Why is that important?”

“Oh, please. Do I have to tell you?” She set her wine glass on a pewter coaster and stood up from the recliner. She made a sweeping gesture to indicate the room.

“Need I say more?”

I looked around. “What? You mean the big-screen TV? The crystal chandelier? The fucking *furniture*?”

Julie snorted with laughter and shook her head. “You just don’t get it, do you? I’m not talking about *stuff*. I’m talking about *security*.”

“Lay off her, will you, Julie?” Steve patted my knee as he spoke.

Julie sighed and sat back down. “Fine. Look, I’m not trying to brag. I just want to help you, Ava. I don’t like to see you wasting your time.”

“I’m not wasting my time,” I said, without much conviction. How many times would I have to say those words, in my head or out loud, before I would believe them?

She shrugged. “Have it your way. I’m sorry, all right? We won’t talk about it anymore.” She stood up again. “I need to use the bathroom. Help yourselves to more wine, or anything else you can find.”

When she was in the bathroom with the water running, Steve looked at me and said, “You okay?”

“Never better.” I went to the kitchen and poured myself another glass of wine. Out the window Julie’s dark backyard stretched out behind the house for what seemed like miles. I wished I was out there, lying on my back in the damp grass and waiting for the moving clouds to reveal the stars.

I sipped from my glass and set it down on the counter. I stared at the yellowish liquid for a second, then picked up the glass and poured the rest of it down the sink. I carefully wrapped the glass in paper towels as if I were about to pack it into a box. Then I threw the towel-wrapped glass into the trash under the sink and went back out to the living room.

“She’s sure taking her time,” I said, sitting next to Steve again. I could still hear the water running.

“Maybe she drowned,” Steve said.

I punched his arm lightly. “You’re bad.”

Julie emerged from the bathroom. Her walk was unnaturally stiff, her eyes wide.

“Here we go,” Steve whispered.

Julie went straight to the kitchen. Glass rattled and cupboard doors slammed.

“Come out here and take a shot with me, Ava.” Her voice was loud. I glanced at the door of the guest room.

“I’d better not. We’ll be visiting with family tomorrow. And don’t you have to work?”

“What about Steve?” she shouted. “Does he want a shot?”

“Not right now,” Steve said.

Julie came into the living room with a bottle of vodka and three shot glasses.

“Hey, wait a minute.” Her eyes darted feverishly from me to Steve, then back to me.

She spoke fast. “How come Steve’s going with you? He’s not in your family. And why couldn’t you wait for the semester to end so Elliot could come, too?”

“Our grandma is on her deathbed,” I said. “It couldn’t wait.”

“I’m just helping them drive,” Steve said.

“That doesn’t make any *sense*,” Julie insisted. She was right. Even when she was high, she was as logical as my mother. But she suddenly seemed to forget her suspicions. She let the shot glasses fall to the carpet, so thick the glasses didn’t make a sound, and she chugged some vodka straight from the bottle. Then she took her seat in the recliner again. She leaned back and smiled at us, a smile that scared me.

“You know,” Julie said, “this vodka has given me an idea. She turned to me. “Ever read *The Idiot*?”

“A few years ago. I don’t remember it that well.” Where was she headed with all this?

“You know, Myshkin? The Idiot? He always kind of reminded me of Elliot.”

“Hey now,” Steve said.

“If I’m remembering it right, that’s a good thing,” I said. “Myshkin was kind-hearted and innocent. A Christ figure.” I smiled. “But Elliot’s hardly Christ-like.”

“Forget about all that,” said Julie, dismissing Dostoevsky’s symbolism with a wave of her skinny arm. “Ava, you remember the part where each guest at Natasya’s party has to tell a story about the worst thing they’ve ever done? And they have to be absolutely honest? We should try that right now.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

Steve was watching us curiously, as if we were both behind glass in a museum.

Julie picked up the vodka bottle, set it down without drinking any, and said, “I’ll start.”

When Julie was a little girl, her father had a mistress named Celine. She lived next door and was good friends with Julie's mother, who didn't suspect a thing. Celine was married, too, and the couples used to vacation together with their kids. The families went to Virginia Beach, Disney World, the Grand Canyon, even a Carnival cruise. And all the time her father would be banging Celine any chance he could get. Julie knew because her father always seemed so happy during these vacations, and he never looked at her mother the way he looked at Celine. Julie didn't blame him. Her mother was, to put it mildly, a bitch. And she wasn't pretty like Celine. Her mother had spreading thighs and knees like sandpaper. Celine, on the other hand, was blessed with soft creamy skin, natural blonde hair, and a warm, buttery voice. Julie wished that Celine was her mother.

Still, she wanted to catch them in the act. She needed to show them that she knew what they were up to, that she could not be as easily fooled as her mother.

The Carnival cruise was where she caught them. Her mother and sister had gone to spend their usual three hours at the pool while her father was supposedly meeting someone for coffee and "business." Eleven-year-old Julie feigned illness so that she would be left behind in the room. She guessed that her father would be returning to their room with Celine, so she hid under the bed and waited for them. Sure enough, she soon heard furtive footsteps, the door creaking open and shut. From her hiding place, she could see two pairs of sandal-clad feet, her father's long, hairy toes and Celine's slim ankles. Soon the feet left the sandals, and clothing began to appear on the floor: a red polo, a green sundress, lacey white panties, khaki shorts, gray boxers. Then the feet disappeared, and the bed began to creak. After a few minutes, Celine began to cry out in

a high, sweet voice that Julie didn't recognize. It sounded as if she were singing. Julie wondered why her father didn't silence her the way he shushed his daughters when they played too loudly in the basement. She decided that he must like Celine's noises better; also, it was clear that the affair had gone undetected for so long that her father had become reckless. Really, how could her mother be so fabulously *stupid*?

When the creaking and the singing had reached what seemed like a pitch of particular urgency, Julie rolled out from her hiding place. Celine was on top, her pale, arched back to Julie. All Julie could see of her father was two sun-browned hands reaching up, cupping Celine's small white breasts. Then Celine clutched the bed sheet and went strangely silent. Julie thought she might be dead until she began to make a noise that didn't seem human, and then kept this up for some time. Julie wanted to cover her ears, but didn't. Instead, she stood there and waited until Celine lay panting in her father's arms. Their eyes were closed. Julie cleared her throat.

Again the bed became a flurry of activity – gasping, pulling sheets up over naked bodies, grabbing at the floor for articles of clothing, weeping, promising, threatening.

Finally, they arrived at a compromise. If Julie agreed not to tell *anyone*, her father would make it worth her while. He'd raise her weekly allowance, give her anything she wanted whenever she wanted it. But if she ever told, the deal was off, no more special treatment.

“And I kept my end of the bargain,” Julie said, “until I was seventeen and my mom made me a better offer. The dumb bitch had finally started to figure it out. She said that if I told her everything I knew about my father, and then if I would say those

same things in court if she asked me to, I would never have to pay a cent of college tuition. She was that desperate. Some family, huh?”

Julie was silent, sitting there looking sad and thoughtful. The room was so quiet that I could hear the wind pick up from outside and the wine gurgle in my stomach. I felt suddenly nauseous.

“That was an interesting story.” Steve shifted his legs and looked up at the ceiling.

Julie perked up. “I’ve got an even better one.”

“But you already had your turn,” I said.

Ignoring me, Julie assumed a mock-dreamy expression and began to speak in a sing-song voice. “Once upon a time in a small town, there lived two boys who did everything together. Best friends. And they would have been happy except for one little problem – one of these boys was in love with the other one.” She stopped speaking and stared directly at Steve, as if waiting for a reaction.

I laughed. “Come on, Julie. I’m sure Steve couldn’t care less about your gay jokes. Everyone knows he sleeps with guys. He’s been open about it since –” I stopped as Steve stood up, fists clenched at his sides, face flushed. His anger struck me with genuine surprise, followed by a realization so strong I almost gasped. How could I not have seen it before?

“What is it, Steve?” Julie said. “You want me to go on? But I don’t need to, right? Because you know how it has to end.”

“Stop it!” I said, leaning forward.

“It’s okay, Ava.” The flush was gone from his face, which had gone paler than I’d ever seen it. “It doesn’t matter anymore.” He sank into the leather couch beside me and looked at the ground. Then he raised his head and smiled sarcastically. “Good for you, Julie. Even he didn’t know until the other night. He might have suspected, but he didn’t *know*. And it *has* ended. Since it appears to be story time, let me tell you all about it.”

“Steve,” I said, “You don’t have to –”

“Let me tell you about Saturday night. Saturday night at August’s apartment.”

Elliot had spent the whole party obsessing over some trendy girl with dark hair. He sat next to her on the couch, talking for two solid hours. He was in love again, or at least that’s what he told Steve when he pulled him aside in the hallway during the party.

Steve’s reply: “I’ll bet she’s been screwed by every other guy in this room.” He chugged beer from a plastic cup. It was only ten o’clock, and he was already sick of this scene.

Elliot grimaced. “You don’t even know her.”

Steve shrugged. “You know this town is one giant circle-fuck.”

“Maybe for you it is.”

His words sounded sharp and hollow, like a basketball hitting pavement. Steve hated it when Elliot called him a slut. Like it wasn’t Elliot’s fault. Steve walked away, into the bathroom. It felt good to piss out this cheap beer. When he came out of the bathroom, he peered into August’s bedroom through red and yellow strands of beaded

curtain. The usual crowd sat in a circle and passed a bowl. Steve went back to Elliot. He always went back to Elliot.

Elliot put his hand on Steve's shoulder before once again joining the trendy girl on the couch. Steve went to the kitchen and poured himself a shot of tequila. He watched as Elliot talked to the girl, his lips wet with beer and excitement, moving fast, words coming out, words he couldn't hear above the bass thumping from the stereo speakers. Elliot put his hand on the girl's knee, and Steve poured the hot liquor down his throat.

He knew how this would end. Elliot always did this. He met some girl, charmed her pants off, and then scared her away by telling her how much she meant to him. What their future would be like together. How he'd love her forever and so on. He wondered what Elliot's voice sounded like when he said these things. Did it quiver? Did it sound just a little sad? Or did he say these words steadily, triumphantly, like the only true thing he knew?

When they were in high school everyone thought Elliot was gay, probably because he was a gentle hippie and played the piano. He always got bullied for it. Mike Firman once pushed him off the gym bleachers. Elliot was standing about four steps up, not high enough to get seriously hurt, but his tailbone was bruised so bad he had trouble sitting for weeks. Mike didn't even get in trouble because the gym teacher thought it was funny. When Elliot told Steve, Steve jumped Mike after their football practice. Mike played quarterback, and Steve was a wide receiver. They made a good team, him and Mike, but nobody fucked with Elliot. Steve punched Mike hard in the face. Broke the kid's nose. Got suspended from school and kicked off the team, which was hard

considering how much he loved to play. He still thought of that lost senior-year season with longing. He liked to think it was worth it, but on nights like this it was tough to see how.

He set the shot glass on the sticky counter. Elliot and the girl on the couch were kissing like porn stars. Time to go on the prowl.

There was a kid standing alone next to the stereo, looking through the CD collection. He was tall and skinny with bleached hair gelled into nervous spikes. Looked to be about eighteen or nineteen. He'd do.

Steve went up and asked him for a light. The kid's watery eyes darted around the room, once in awhile coming to rest on Steve's face, while they dragged on their cigarettes and made casual conversation. Steve pretended he cared about Political Science, the kid's major. He leaned closer and said something that made the kid laugh. The kid shook Steve's hand and introduced himself. Steve forgot the name instantly and didn't tell him his own.

They ended up in a small, empty bedroom. Steve pulled the kid closer and kissed him hard, biting his lower lip until he tasted blood. His mouth was slack, unresponsive, dribbling. Steve shut the door and pushed him face-down onto the bed. He left the lights on while he fucked him. The kid arched his back, moaning and whimpering. Poor bastard, Steve thought.

Steve's stomach turned over as he came. When he was finished, he said thanks. The kid grunted, zipped up his jeans, and hugged Steve lightly, his sweaty fingers grazing the back of Steve's neck. Steve raised his arms instinctively, but let them fall to his sides before they could touch any part of the kid's body.

“That was good,” the kid said. He stepped back and checked his watch. “I got somewhere to be. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

“Sure.” Steve followed him out of the bedroom.

The living room was empty, except for Elliot and his girl, who were still locked together on the couch. Steve watched his spiky-haired boy stagger out the door.

Elliot surfaced from the girl’s embrace. “Hey Steve. C’mere.”

Steve sat on the couch so that Elliot was between him and the girl. “I want you to meet Rachel,” Elliot said. Steve reached across Elliot’s lap to shake her hand. Dozens of jelly bracelets dangled from her wrist. One of her metal rings bit into the flesh of his knuckles.

“Charmed,” Steve said, and the girl stared past him.

“We’re about to go jump off the bridge,” Elliot said. “You should come with.”

He was talking about the highway bridge over Twolick Lake; kids were always jumping there. Rachel said she could drive, but first she had to get August from the smoke room. Steve didn’t feel much like jumping into a lake on a chilly April night, but he told Elliot he’d go. Elliot, all keyed up, paced the living room, hands deep in his jeans pockets, caressing his own thighs. He grinned at Steve, deep dimples forming in each cheek.

“She’s amazing,” Elliot said. “Smart – into photography and everything. She’s going to show me her pictures of Spanish architecture. She’s been to Spain.”

“Yeah? Well, don’t fuck it up with this one, all right? Remember that women like it if you treat them like shit sometimes.”

Before Elliot could argue with him, Rachel and August were there in the living room. Rachel was excited and talking fast. August was grinning, too stoned to say much.

And soon they were all sitting in August's little hatchback, smoking with the windows open. August drove, and Rachel sat in the passenger seat. The girls sang along to some chick-country song blasting from the radio. They drove through the main drag of town, past the bars and restaurants and shops. They stopped at a red light, and Elliot's smooth face glowed orange in the neon lights of an Exxon station. His eyes were half-closed, his lips curled into a dreamy smile.

Steve punched his shoulder. "Wake up, Sleeping Beauty."

His eyelids flickered open. "I'm awake. Just thinking."

Steve snorted. "Sure, thinking. All you ever think about is pussy." The girls were still singing at high volume, ignoring the back-seat conversation. They passed a house with a single lit window. Steve wanted to believe that more than one person in that house was awake, that maybe two people were in that room together, talking, smoking, touching each other if they were lucky.

"Why do you bother with women, anyway?" Steve said.

"I like women."

"I like my dog, but that doesn't mean I sleep with it." Steve did fuck girls from time to time, and Elliot knew it. But if the entire female population were suddenly wiped off the face of the earth, Steve wouldn't have shed too many tears over the loss – not on that particular night, anyway.

“I heard that.” Rachel, who had just stopped singing, turned around and blew smoke in Steve’s face while Elliot laughed. She turned to August. “Did you hear that? A classic example of gay male misogyny.”

“You don’t even have a dog,” Elliot said to him, still laughing.

“What was that last word?” Steve said, feigning ignorance. “Misogy-what?” Elliot laughed harder.

They left town and turned onto a curvy back road, headlights cutting through the blackness to reveal thick forest on either side of tar and chip. Elliot leaned into Steve and rested his head on his shoulder. Steve didn’t move. Elliot’s breathing was slow and deep, and Steve tried to match it. The car bounced as they hit a pothole, and Elliot stirred awake. But then he leaned back into Steve with even more pressure from his body, his head, and Steve slowly brought his arm up behind Elliot’s back until it encircled him. Steve stroked Elliot’s dark hair. Elliot sighed. Steve’s arm tightened around his friend’s shoulders, and he moved his fingers down past Elliot’s temple to his soft cheek, his even softer lips. Elliot’s body stiffened; he sat up. Steve’s arm fell.

Elliot shifted away. “C’mon, Steve. You’re drunk.”

They turned onto the two-lane highway. The street lights hurt Steve’s eyes.

Elliot shook his head and faked a laugh. “Besides, I wouldn’t want to end up as one of your conquests.”

They stared at each other. Strangers. Shadows of trees moved across Elliot’s face.

“You’re right,” Steve said. “I’m just horny as usual.”

“Don’t worry about it, man.” Elliot glanced at Rachel, but she was still talking to August and hadn’t noticed anything. The guys were silent. Steve kept his head turned into the wind, even though it stung his eyes.

August pulled over and stopped the car. As soon as she turned off the radio, Steve could hear water lapping and small animals darting around in the undergrowth. August reached back and pulled her shirt over her head, revealing a large Celtic cross tattooed on her fleshy back. The rest of them followed her lead, peeling off articles of clothing and scattering them over the floor and seats of the car. They walked single file toward the side of the road. Steve fell behind. The others cradled their arms against their chests, but he didn’t feel the cold. The lake was a bright spot in the darkness; it was easy to see the shore they would need to swim for. The crescent moon hung above the pines, and the pavement was rough against his feet.

They slid between the railings of the bridge and carefully spaced themselves along the concrete overhang. The wind that buffeted Steve’s body carried the fresh-water smell of the lake. Lined up to his right were three other bodies, gleaming naked white, poised for jumping, and Elliot’s was suddenly no more beautiful or desirable than the other two. They were all sad and solitary, these human animals. Steve could hardly believe he was one of them.

Nobody gave a signal, but they all somehow jumped at the same time. Steve’s stomach lurched. His ears popped. He pedaled his legs. The water must have been cold, but he couldn’t feel it. He opened his eyes but saw nothing. His body felt awkward, too angular for the water. He let his arms drop to his sides. He wanted to be streamlined. He wanted to fall.

Then he was rising. He didn't want to, but his body must have been doing something to cause it. His head broke the surface. He treaded water, spinning in circles – there was the shore. He swam for it, aware of the others splashing behind him.

CHAPTER EIGHT: PLEASANT VALLEY

Silence. Julie sat looking down at the vodka bottle in her hand, her expression difficult to read. I didn't know what to say.

"Jesus," Steve laughed, "who died in here?" Julie still didn't look up.

"You cheated, Steve," I said. "That story wasn't about the worst thing you've ever done."

Steve smiled. "Wasn't it, though?"

Julie finally broke her silence. "Which part do you mean? Making a move on someone you had no chance with, or wasting years of your life on someone you had no chance with?"

"I don't consider that time wasted," Steve said, "so probably the first thing you said. In fact, definitely the first thing you said." He looked at the ground, then up at us again. "Bringing it out in the open like that seems to have scared him away."

"I doubt that's why he disappeared." I wanted to reassure Steve, but I wasn't so sure myself. What, after all, did I know about my brother's motives?

"Wait a sec," Julie said. "What's this about Elliot disappearing?" She glared at me. "I knew it! You were lying about going to Philly! You guys are running around looking for Elliot!" Julie was irritable and self-righteous in the way that only someone coming down from a quick high can be. I sat quietly, unable to come up with a defense or deflection.

“Hey Ava,” Steve said, speaking quickly, “it’s your turn to tell a story.”

I turned to him and mouthed the words, “Thank you.” Then I said, a bit too loudly, “Oh yeah, that’s right.” I paused. I knew that once I made the decision to tell what had been buried in my mind for days, I’d have to follow through with it. I exhaled and began, speaking fast. “Mine also happened just last week, with my boyfriend, Drew. But you’ll have to bear with me because it requires some set-up.”

“No fair,” Julie grumbled. “I could have told a lot more about my dad and Celine.”

“I’ll keep it as short as I can,” I said. “But Drew’s the kind of guy you need to explain to people.”

It was January 26th, a snowy Sunday afternoon, and there was a peace convergence in South Oakland. Thousands of people, some from as far away as upstate New York, had traveled to Pittsburgh in order to march the streets with homemade signs that said things like “No Blood for Oil” and “War is Bad for Children and Other Living Things.” I’d heard about the rally from Brenda. A few years ago I would have avoided anything that might involve a police confrontation, but I’d developed something like a social conscience since I’d been working at Benevolence.

It was about four in the afternoon. I’d been outside marching and yelling for hours, and my sneakered feet were numb with cold. Promising myself that I would soon invest in a pair of boots, I separated myself from the rest of the group and found a spot on the edge of a snowy Pitt campus lawn, the Cathedral of Learning looming at my back. There I kicked my feet out and wiggled my toes. By that time the pain was nearly

unbearable, by my weak standards, and I didn't care how ridiculous I looked. Suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder. A stranger, a young guy, stood at my side. He wore a bandana and leather jacket, both black, and had a scraggly goatee (also black) on his sharp chin. But his pale face and large eyes were surprisingly childlike and earnest.

"I'm Drew," he said, as if that should be enough for anyone, and offered me a Styrofoam cup of hot chocolate. While I drank, he squinted at me and said, "What are you?"

I was confused.

"I mean," he said, "what group are you with?"

I said I was there by myself.

"Well, what's your philosophy? Communist? Socialist? Anarchist? Or just plain Leftist?"

Still confused, I began tearing off tiny chunks of Styrofoam from the rim of my cup and filling the cup with them. I leaned back a little to read the words spray-painted in red on the back of his jacket: Fuck Racist Bigots.

"I try not to affiliate myself with any particular group or philosophy," I said.

"So you're a non-conformist, then?"

"I guess so."

"But even that's a label."

Who did this guy think he was? I shrugged in the general direction of the Cathedral. "Why don't we continue this conversation in there?" I said.

So we entered the spacious first floor with its arches and pillars and echoing footsteps. After being out in the cold for so long, the polished wooden benches on the

first floor seemed to radiate warmth and light. We sat together in front of a thick stone pillar, separated from the nearest quietly working Pitt students by a twenty-yard radius of nearly empty space. Without prompting, Drew began to tell me every single vital piece of information about himself.

He had just come from York – arrived that very day, in fact. He'd actually walked to Pittsburgh from there, trying not to attract too much attention on the way. He had to leave York like that, he said, because a group of people that he used to belong to were out to get him. And as long as he was telling me all this, as long as he'd decided to put all his cards out on the table, he didn't mind telling me that they were neo-Nazis.

"I haven't had anything to do with them for three years," he said. "I don't want to explain why I joined them in the first place, or why I quit them. I'm done with explanations, done with regrets, done with feeling ashamed. I've got nothing to hide."

He paused as if he expected me to say something, but I was too fascinated to interrupt. It was like talking to a character from a movie, or a play.

"Anyway, they left me alone until a few months ago, when I joined the Anti-Racist Action League. That was too much for them. I mean, here was one of their own, going over to the other side! Since then, it's been constant threats and harassment.

That's why I had to get out of there. You don't know what those people are capable of."

I wasn't sure whether to believe him, but what would be his motive for lying? He didn't even know me.

Evidently encouraged by my silence, Drew began to tell me more. He was an anarchist, and yes, he understood the irony of belonging to organizations when he was technically against systems of any kind, but until some healthy, functioning chaos was

established there was no way around it. He was young, only twenty-one, but he'd slept with thirty-four women and wasn't ashamed of it. He'd been engaged twice, but both times his fiancée turned out to be dangerously psychotic. He'd been arrested four times and was currently on probation for assault (defending himself against one of his neo-Nazi enemies). Three of his good friends had committed suicide – but York was like that. He'd come here to get away from all that, to lead a life of “complete commitment to permanent and positive ideals and individuals.” He knew people like that here, people he could stay with until he found work, and he was meeting up with them after the rally.

I couldn't figure him out. He spoke so matter-of-factly, as if there were nothing strange or dramatic about his words. He didn't seem to be seeking sympathy or approval. But maybe it was all part of an act. Maybe that was how he'd scored those thirty-four women.

“Why are you telling me all this?” I said.

He grinned. “I don't know. You asked if I wanted to talk. Those are the things I have to talk about.”

It was like he'd passed through experience and come out the other side to innocence. He'd been so damaged that now he could only be perfect.

Still, I withheld information about myself until Drew began to make more sense to me. And he didn't ask me anything beyond my name. That was one thing I liked about him; he didn't press, he wasn't pushy – not then, at least.

At Drew's suggestion, we left the Cathedral and went back out to the street, marching side-by-side. He reached for my hand, and I let him hold it. The march ended about twenty minutes later with a demonstration in front of a Carnegie Mellon University

science building where weapons research was conducted. About a hundred people lay down in the street to stop the flow of traffic. Drew and I did not join them; he was on probation and didn't want to press his luck, while I just didn't feel like lying down on the icy pavement. As it happened, nobody was arrested because it was Superbowl Sunday and the cops wanted nothing less than to process paperwork instead of going home to watch the game. After about an hour the demonstrators stood up, and people began to leave. Drew and I joined the general flow of sidewalk traffic and walked back toward South Oakland. We were standing in front of the Pitt Law Library at an intersection, waiting for the light to change, when he reached out his gloved hand to stroke my face with a cold leather finger. Then he leaned forward and kissed me. He tasted like grape Kool-Aid, which had been served at the non-violent resistance workshop earlier that afternoon.

“I know you're supposed to meet up with your friends,” I said, “but maybe you could stay at my place instead. At least for tonight, I mean.”

Two hours later we were sitting on my bed talking, this time about me – my family, my job, college, music. I told him about when I had to perform in front of people and how it felt disconnected and strange, like it was someone else singing instead of me, and how it was different when I was practicing alone, and I could hear *me* in my voice, and it was the only time I ever really felt like myself.

Then somehow we were naked, and he was on top of me. He had a concave stomach. I didn't come that first time, but it was good just to touch him, the fever of his cheeks, the moles that stood out in relief from his white back. I grabbed a tuft of his dark, baby-fine hair and said “Drew.” When he came, his face turned even paler. I slid

out from underneath him. Then he buried his face in my pillow and sobbed. His entire body – the whole skinny, gleaming white thing – shook. I'd never seen anything like it. I asked him what was wrong.

He flipped over onto his back, and I held his face in my hands. Snot ran in two fine lines from his nose to his mouth.

“No one's ever called out my name during sex before.” He sniffed.

I laughed, giddy, and told him I thought that was only polite. When he began to cry again, I kissed his forehead, triumphant.

And just like that, Drew became a fixture in my apartment, and in my life. He was nothing like guys I'd dated in Pinestead. He had a kind of intensity I'd only read about in Russian novels. He was unpredictable, swinging from goofy cheer to raging indignation to cold pride to wrecked vulnerability in the space of fifteen minutes. Within a few days, I was surprised by my ability to match his passion. We soon declared our love for each other a spiritual force (although Drew was, in theory, an atheist). On some level I knew it was silly to believe that what we felt for each other was at all unique or somehow above the rest of the world, but I didn't care. This very awareness of my faith's absurdity increased its force, and for the first time I understood my mother's devotion to Christ, and to the saint who used to be my father. Transcendence turned out to be the best drug I'd ever tried.

And then there was the sex. Although my physical pleasure increased exponentially as the weeks went by, each encounter had something of the urgency and desperation of that first time, as if our coming together were inevitable. There was an overwhelming sense on both sides, I think, of submitting to fate. No matter how

miserable we might be (and we often were), things were as they should be, as they *must* be.

Drew's favorite method of foreplay was to tell me about myself. He would say things like, "You have such a big heart, there's room in there for so many people" or "You're equally afraid of success and failure" – things that could be true of almost anyone. But in the bedroom they seemed shockingly profound and insightful, increasing my belief that Drew was the only person who truly understood me.

I stopped referring to myself as "I." Brenda was the first to notice this after we'd eaten a quick lunch together in one of the classrooms at Benevolence.

"What's all this 'we' stuff?" she said. "'We went to the library. We had pizza for dinner. We think that everyone should have free health care.' You sound like someone with multiple personality disorder."

I stammered an apology and tried to talk without saying "we," but found that the word "I" was now almost impossible for me to utter. After my fourth or fifth, "w – I," Brenda said, "I can't take it anymore – come see me when you're ready to talk about yourself," and left the table.

But as it turns out, Drew and I *were* two different people. This became most apparent when Drew, having forgotten, seemingly, his former plan of seeking employment, instead threw his energies into establishing two activist groups and assuming a leadership role within them: the Pittsburgh Anti-War Network (PAWN) and the Pittsburgh Anti-Racist Action League (PARAL). Both of these organizations met evenings – PAWN on Tuesdays and PARAL on Wednesdays – at shifting locations on Pitt campus. At first I was glad to be involved, and admired Drew for his commitment to

local activism. By the second meeting of PAWN, however, the inevitable cynicism had begun to take hold of me. At this meeting, there was a disagreement between the anarchists and the socialists regarding the precise wording of the group's mission statement. The debate quickly turned into a shouting match and ended abruptly when the anarchists decided to walk out, with the intention of forming their own organization. Drew was torn between joining them and working within the group as a more moderate representative of their ideology, and, after much soul-searching, decided on the latter. But even with his guidance, the group, at its most recent meeting, had not yet finished composing its charter. Meanwhile, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq had begun.

But ineffectual PAWN did not disturb me nearly as much as over-zealous PARAL. The righteous indignation of its members far outweighed anything I'd ever experienced in the Catholic Church. I was surprised to learn that Drew's story was far from unique: Many of the people who joined PARAL were former racists. Now they cast bigotry aside with noisy violence, like sinners at a tent revival renouncing Satan. They immediately planned a counter-protest to an upcoming Klan rally outside the synagogue in Squirrel Hill. The Klan, ever the champions of free hate speech, had been able to get a permit for their rally under the guise that they were in support of a Palestinian state (as if they didn't hate Palestinians the same way they hated everyone else). PARAL, on the other hand, was unable to get a permit because you had to apply for it months in advance. So on the day of the rally, mounted cops in full riot gear herded us into a rhombus-shaped area of yellow police tape across from the synagogue. At least half of the police were black, and their painfully neutral expressions showed their full awareness of the irony at work here. We were allowed to make as much noise as we wanted, but under no

circumstances could we go anywhere near the street, where the Klan members in their dull business suits were gathered with banners and bullhorns.

Drew and the others ran up to the police tape and proceeded to wave their homemade signs, screeching, “Die, racist scum!” with a collective anger and fear I’d only ever seen in film depictions of the French Revolution. I hung back, quietly considering the literal meaning of their words – commanding these people to die, *wanting* to see them all dead. Before I could shout along with them, I needed to ask myself a vital question: Did I, in fact, want the Klan members to die, right there in front of us? Did I want to watch them bleed, hear them gasp their final breaths, or feel their pulses slowing under my fingers?

I did not. I ducked under the police tape and headed toward Pitt campus, which I could make out in the clear light of the early March afternoon; Drew’s back was to me, and he didn’t notice me leaving. I walked the three miles to my apartment, stopping only for a six-pack of Rolling Rock on the way.

Drew was frantic when he returned that evening. “I was looking for you everywhere,” he said. “I was afraid the Klan might have done something to you.”

“Why would they?”

“You just don’t know, Ava. They do things like that. After the rally they were following one of our girls who was riding home on her bike – five big Klan guys intimidating this defenseless girl. We had to escort her home.”

“I just wanted to leave, and I didn’t want to interrupt you.” I tried to explain how I’d felt about the whole thing. As I went on, Drew’s serious face took on a bemused look.

“Oh, Ava.” He shook his head. “You’re such a gentle soul.”

“Don’t patronize me. Tell me the truth – do *you* want them to die?”

Drew sighed. “It was just an expression. Just words.”

“Oh yeah? Let’s see, what other words can we come up with? How about ‘nigger’? Or ‘spic’? ‘Chink’? ‘Gook’?” I spat out each of these slurs with unnatural emphasis, and with each one Drew flinched as if I’d struck him. “Shall I continue?”

“I think you’ve made your point,” he almost whispered, head down. Then, louder, looking me straight in the face, “I respect your compassion for your enemies. And it makes sense with the way you were raised. Turning the other cheek, and so forth – it’s a very Christian attitude, isn’t it?”

“Do *not* bring religion into this.”

“Look, Ava, you have to understand that these people would have no qualms about killing us if we got in their way. You have to trust me on this. I know what I’m talking about.”

I wasn’t sure what to think. Part of me suspected that Drew was just being dramatic. But Drew had experience with this sort of thing. Not knowing what else to do, I began to cry. When Drew put a comforting hand on my shoulder, I shrugged him off.

“I hate that you make me question myself!” I sobbed, and ran upstairs to the bedroom like a hormonal teenager. Of course, he followed me there, we had make-up sex, and everything was all right for the time being. I kept going to PAWN and PARAL meetings and observing quietly, telling myself that any new organization would need time to find its footing. But about a month ago, when Drew found out that some of his “enemies” from York had taken up residence in Pittsburgh and were looking for him, he

went underground, meaning he rarely left the apartment anymore. Drew dictated everything from behind the scenes, and I'd found myself acting as his mouthpiece at the evening meetings. For me this was an uncomfortable position. Add to this the fact that Drew could no longer go out and look for work even if he wanted to, and soon the burden on my time, energies, and finances was putting a definite strain on our relationship. And every time we fought, he became more distant, probably afraid that I would turn into a psychotic like his former girlfriends. For my part, I'd begun to understand why they'd gone crazy with Drew. But the more trapped and confused I felt, the more desperately I clung to him.

Which brings us to last week, Monday morning. I'd just gotten out of the shower and was standing in front of the bedroom mirror in my underwear, hooking my bra. Drew was lying face-down in bed, naked, legs splayed, taking up so much room that I wouldn't be able to go back to bed even if I didn't have to get ready for work. He was still as a corpse, and suddenly I was afraid. I walked over to the bed, leaned down and stared at his face until I saw his nostrils quiver with the intake of air. My fear was replaced by irritation at his peacefulness. I reached down to stroke his fine hair, which, in the semi-darkness of the bedroom, resembled inky calligraphy strokes drawn onto his white forehead. He stirred awake, rolled onto his back, and stared at the ceiling.

"Jesus," he said, then propped himself up on one elbow and stared dully at me.

"What time is it?"

"Six-fifteen," I said, sitting beside him on the bed and caressing his back.

"Well, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. Nothing's wrong."

He groaned and rolled over again, burying his face in the pillow. His muffled voice said, “Then what did you wake me up for?”

“I didn’t mean to.” My voice was breathy, girlish. “I just wanted to touch you.” The tears started to come, an automatic physical response, like the empty feeling in my gut.

Drew surfaced from the pillow and encircled me with his thin arms, bringing an end to the tears and the emptiness. Pressing my cheek against his scrawny chest, I thought about how our roles had reversed since that first time we had sex. A laugh escaped from my throat.

Drew must have mistaken the laugh for a sob because he said, “Something must be wrong. What is it?”

“I – I think I might be pregnant.”

Drew was silent and still, so still that I wondered if he’d gone back to sleep. I began to speak in a rush, words spilling out one after another. “I’m two weeks late. I’ve been trying to put it out of my mind, but I can’t, so I’m going to buy a pregnancy test after work today, and that should clear everything up, but I just thought I should tell –”

“You can’t be pregnant,” Drew broke in. He released me from his arms and turned his stunned eyes to mine. “We always use condoms.” His voice sounded somehow foolish.

“Not that one time right after my last period. Remember? You said you wanted to feel what it was like to be inside me without one, and that you would pull out before you came, but then we both got too excited – remember?”

Drew didn't answer, so I continued, this time with reassurances. "I'm probably not pregnant. It's almost impossible to get pregnant right after your period, and besides, I'm always a little late –"

"Then why tell me? Why bring it up at all?" His voice was cold, and his usually wide eyes were sharp, glittering slits.

"I just thought you should know," I said lamely.

"But *why*? Why not wait until after you take the pregnancy test, when you know for sure?"

"Because I'm scared."

"Do you feel less scared now that you've told me?"

"No." Now we were glaring at each other. "I feel *more* scared because you're not being very supportive." Again the tears came, and again he held me.

"Shhhh," he said, as if there were already a child in the room who might be disturbed by my weeping. "It's okay. Whatever you decide, I won't think any less of you."

I struggled out of his grasp. "What do you mean, 'whatever I decide'?"

"I mean," he said stiffly, "that it's your body and your right to choose and I trust you'll choose what's right for you."

I gaped at him. "I don't believe it."

"What don't you believe?"

"You're actually spouting *rhetoric* at a time like this!"

"I thought I was being supportive." His quiet voice was shaking with an anger that belied his comforting words.

“Supportive! Saying ‘I won’t think less of you’ is *not* the same as saying, ‘I’ll stick by you and help you raise our child.’”

“It shouldn’t come to that.”

“What are you saying? What happened to this being ‘my choice’? You know what – fuck that! This is our choice. We decide together. What do *you* think we should do?”

His Adam’s apple moved up and down as he swallowed hard. “Ava, it’s really not my place.” A pause to gather steam for his discourse. “I’m not a woman, I couldn’t possibly understand –”

“Spare me the bullshit!”

He swallowed again. “Okay. Fine. If you are pregnant, I think you should get rid of it.”

“Why.” A statement, not a question, but he took it as one.

“We’re too young.”

“Not that young. At least, I’m not.”

“All right, then, I’ll only speak for myself. *I’m* too young. And what if we need to . . . you know, go our separate ways? What then?”

I was unable to speak. Was this the same man who, three nights ago, traced the symbol for infinity on my forehead while he was inside me?

Drew, mistaking my silence for acquiescence, gained courage and momentum.

“And what about you, Ava? Stuck raising some guy’s child for the rest of your life? Sacrificing your own desires and plans because of some silly Catholic superstition about life beginning at conception? Honestly, I thought you were more liberated than that.”

He smiled, evidently relieved that he had once again managed to retreat behind some kind of ideology. I finished dressing silently and grabbed my backpack. He called after me as I left the bedroom, but I ignored both him and the familiar empty-gut feeling and hurried out the front door to catch the bus. I arrived at work an hour early and spent the time writing the first lines of angry poems and then crossing them out.

That night, after I showed Drew the twin minus signs on two different EPT tests, after I tried explaining how a woman like me might feel about bearing the child of the man she loves, after my explanation ended up sounding foolish to my own ears, after Drew apologized for “saying the wrong thing,” we had tentative sex, using a condom *and* spermicide. In the bathroom afterward, I noticed menstrual blood on the toilet paper.

Julie was leaning forward in her leather armchair, glaring hard at me. “I should have known,” she said. “This is exactly what happened in *The Idiot*.”

“What do you mean?” I glanced at the wall clock, which read 4:00. Outside, tree branches were beginning to take on more definition, and the gray sky matched the low hum in my fatigued head.

“In the book, the first person *actually* told about the worst thing he’d ever done, while the other guests just told stories that made them look good, like you and Steve did.”

Steve made a noise in the back of his throat. “I don’t think I came out looking very good in mine.”

“Well,” Julie said, “you came off as the victim, at any rate. Just like Ava.”

“That’s because I wasn’t finished,” I said. “I was saving the revelation for the end.”

“I think that’s sneaky.” Julie sniffed. “Anyway, what’s the big secret?”

I stared above her head and out the window, watching a star fade from the sky as I spoke. “I knew I wasn’t pregnant. I’d taken a pregnancy test the night before, and it came out negative.”

“That’s not such a big deal,” Julie said.

“But why’d you do it?” said Steve. His voice sounded unfamiliar, as if he were someone else. I found myself unable to look at his face.

“I’m not sure.” I continued to stare out the window at the brightening sky. “It might have been that I *was* actually worried about being pregnant, for about a week before that. After the test I felt relieved, but also a little disappointed – it’s hard to explain. But maybe I started to wonder how Drew would react to the whole thing.”

Julie nodded and smiled. “You were testing him. Nothing wrong with that.”

“As the representative male in the room,” Steve said, “I have to disagree.”

“Maybe I was kind of testing him. But it’s more complicated than that. It wasn’t premeditated. The words just started coming out of my mouth, I don’t know why, and in the moment I was saying them I actually believed I *was* pregnant, like maybe the test was wrong, or maybe I’d seen it wrong and the minus sign had really been a plus. I don’t know, I don’t know what I was thinking.”

I stopped, breathless, and looked directly into Steve’s mismatched eyes. He stroked my hot cheek with one finger and murmured, “It’s okay.”

“Steve’s right,” Julie said. “If that’s the worst thing you’ve ever done, then you’re practically Mother Theresa. Besides, it sounds like you had your reasons.” Julie gave us a significant look, rose from her chair and stretched tall, almost touching the

ceiling with her fingertips. “Well kids, it’s about that time. Some of us have to work for a living.”

“Right,” I said. “Thanks for letting us stay here.”

In the doorway of her bedroom Julie turned back to us and said, “By the way, I made up that thing about spying on my dad.” She gave us a little wave. “Safe travels,” she said, and closed her bedroom door.

CHAPTER NINE: HILLSBORO

I became conscious of Steve's arms around me and his warm, stale breath in my ear. I peeled my sweaty face from the leather of Julie's couch, sat up, and looked around. My mother was seated at the kitchen table with a cup of tea and a newspaper.

"Mom?"

She looked up. "Oh good, I was about to wake you anyway. You just missed Julie, she had to run to work. We chatted a bit. She said to tell you to keep in touch, and to have fun visiting your family in Philadelphia." Mom laughed. "I don't know why you had to lie like that – what could it possibly matter if Julie knows about your brother? Anyway, you should wake Steve. If we hurry, we can get to Hillsboro by nine-thirty."

She spoke quickly and almost too cheerfully, as if she were hiding something. Maybe she was embarrassed that she'd caught us spooning on the couch. Or worse, maybe she'd heard everything we said last night. But she looked too well-rested to have stayed up all night listening to us. More likely, sleep had given her a renewed sense of hope that we would find Elliot.

"I'm going to brush my teeth," she said.

While she was gone, I shook Steve awake. He rubbed his eyes, stretched, and sat up. His hair was a thick matted mess, which made him look like the boy he still really was. A warm, familiar ache rose in my chest, and I felt suddenly protective of this boy

who had loved Elliot so long and so hopelessly, and still loved him, and maybe always would.

“We’re leaving soon,” I said. “Julie’s gone already. She wants us to keep in touch.”

Steve yawned. “You mean she wants *you* to keep in touch.” A red spot stood out on his cheek from where his face had pressed against my shoulder.

“True enough. But you know, I actually might call her sometime. Just to see what’s up.”

After an awkward pause Steve said, “Do you think she really made up that story about her dad?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. I think she just said that to mess with us. Or maybe she wanted us to think better of her. I don’t really know.”

Mom emerged from the bathroom and renewed her offer of tea, this time to Steve.

“I’d just as soon get going,” he said.

“I’ll drive,” I said, surprising myself. Two years ago I’d sold my station wagon to pay the security deposit on my apartment, and I’d barely driven since. As I grew older, driving made me more and more nervous. Every time I got behind the wheel, worst-case scenarios would pop into my head, visions where I was always the purveyor of death; whether through carelessness, poor judgment, or pure chance, the scene would always end with me mowing down innocent pedestrians, blood all over the road, gawkers glaring at me, assuming the worst. These visions began around the same time that my walks with Elliot stopped, around the same time that I began to feel alone and helpless in a world where random, terrible things could happen to anyone. Although everything was the

same as it had always been, I felt like I was living in some kind of bland nightmare over which I had no control.

But this morning, for some reason, I wanted to drive. Steve sat up front in case I needed a navigator, but all I had to do was backtrack our route from the night before, and it wasn't far. I hadn't driven on a highway since I'd sold my wagon, but it took only a few minutes for me to recapture that sense of power that comes with controlling a car at highway speeds. I could swear that the vibrations beneath the tires, the rush and rumble of the road, feel more immediate, more real, when you're in the driver's seat. The morning was clear and breezy, full of the exhilaration that comes from glimpsing the double movement of wind-tossed trees flying past your windows, from knowing that you'll never view that exact scene again in your lifetime. With each farmhouse we passed, I imagined the lives of its inhabitants. What might they be doing, saying, thinking, or dreaming at that moment?

We passed the exit for York, and I thought of Drew. His past, if it was truly as he'd described it, was too far outside my experience to comprehend. Although I suspected that Drew had exaggerated certain parts of his story for dramatic effect, I had no doubt that the substance was true. Such things *did* happen, after all, especially to someone like Drew. But how would I feel if I found out that his entire past had been fabricated? I'd be irate, sure, but part of me would admire and envy his God-like ability to surround himself with such an elaborate mythology, to create an identity from scratch. I knew that Drew's tortured past was a large source of his attraction for me, but I had never considered the fact that it might not matter if his story were true. Maybe the story itself was enough.

Or maybe not.

When we arrived at Hillsboro it was almost 9:30, just as my mother had predicted. She told me to pull over at the same BP we'd walked to last night. This time the dirty old man and the red-haired girl were nowhere to be seen; instead, there was a middle-aged black woman staring at a tiny portable television on the counter in front of her. She paid no attention to us, and when my mom asked to use the phone book, the woman managed to find it and hand it over without once removing her eyes from the TV.

Mom told us that she was going to call the Hillsboro Information Center to find out which conventions were in town and where they were being held. Steve and I strolled the aisles as my mother spoke monosyllables to one recording after another. Voices blared from the tiny TV, chipper morning show hosts and guests, saying things like "This piece is a beautiful addition to your living room decor" and "Try this yourself if you're feeling creative." Despite my lack of sleep, I felt energized this morning, and in need of sustenance. After conferring with Steve, I bought a chocolate-chip muffin for each of us. By the time I received my change, Mom was finally talking to a real person and scribbling down information on a yellow legal pad. Then she hung up the phone and loudly ripped a page from the front of the phone book, almost as if she were trying to be indiscreet. The black woman's gaze shifted, landing pointedly on my mother, but then went back to the TV.

As we hurried out to the car, Mom said, "They hardly ever have conventions in town during the week, and the only thing right now that could be considered a convention is some taxidermy competition that began yesterday and ends at noon today. It's at the

Lakeside Lodge and Supper Club, the man said. I already found it on this map.” She proudly shook the torn phone book page in my direction.

I handed Mom her muffin as she climbed into the front seat. “Just tell me where to go,” I said, finally beginning to feel like I had a stake in all this.

As it turned out, the name Lakeside Lodge was a lie – no lake in sight, just acres of mixed forest stretching out behind the back porch. Otherwise, the Lodge was exactly what you’d expect: a rambling structure built of lumber stained a warm honey color for maximum aesthetic pleasure. It was a faux-rustic establishment built for the specific purpose of eating industrial beef while gazing at the mounted heads of wild deer and elk.

Beyond the lobby was a spacious dining room with a number of round solid oak tables. A young, full-figured waitress with a jaunty ponytail was setting silverware, glasses, and pitchers of water out on the tables. When we asked her about the convention, she gazed at us with sleepy brown eyes and told us it was pretty much over.

“All’s that’s left is the complimentary brunch,” she said, putting her hand up to her mouth to contain a yawn. “The judging was yesterday, but some of them left their whadda-ya-call-‘ems out back. You know, their stuffed animals – but they get mad if you call them that. I made that mistake last night when I was serving their drinks.” She grimaced and continued in an aggrieved voice. “They stayed down here until two-thirty. I kept hoping they’d get tired and go to their rooms, but they just kept drinking and talking about molds and mounts and habitats and whatever. I live in Green Creek and didn’t get home until four.” The girl rubbed her eyes and peered at my mother. “Are you a taxidermist? There weren’t any lady taxidermists here last night.”

“We’re looking for someone, actually.” Mom handed her Elliot’s photo, which she’d been clutching at the ready since we left the car. “Did you see him here last night?”

The girl squinted at the picture and shook her head. “Nope, but my shift didn’t start until six. He could have been here earlier in the day.” She handed the photo back to my mother. “Hot guy, anyway. He your husband?”

A spot of pink appeared on each of my mother’s cheeks. “He’s my son,” she said curtly. Then, softening her voice, “Is it okay if we look around?”

The girl shrugged. “It’s not like I’m in charge, but I think it’d be all right.” She gestured toward a long buffet table set up against the far wall, complete with gleaming covered dishes paired with sets of silver tongs, and a tall stack of white plates. “The brunch is just for the taxidermists, though, so you have to pay if you want some. They’ll be down in a few minutes, if you want to ask them about your son.”

My mother thanked the girl, and the three of us began to wander self-consciously around the high-ceilinged dining room, silent but for the echoing clatter of silverware on the oak tables. Curious about the “stuffed animals,” I headed out the back door to the huge covered porch. The taxidermists’ handiwork was displayed on several rows of long card tables, with quite a few empty spaces indicating those competitors who’d already packed up and left. I was surprised to see that, although there were a few deer, elk, and antelope heads, the majority of the animals were fish. I recognized trout, bass, and even swordfish, along with a number of species which were unfamiliar to me. Most were mounted on wooden wall plaques, but some were suspended on pedestals, which made them look as if they were swimming through the air. They were surprisingly lifelike,

their scales glinting silver, orange, and blue in the rays of morning sun which penetrated the porch's deep shade at its edges. I examined one fish, a largemouth bass with a small, spiky fin protruding from its back. The bass regarded me with round, fishy eyes: a dead, frightened stare, a plea for help that would never arrive. On impulse I reached forward and stroked one of the eyes – only glass, of course, but I shivered anyway. I remembered my dream about the Russian-speaking fish, and at that moment I turned to find Steve at my elbow. He gazed intently at the fish and muttered something.

“What?” I said.

“Fish anatomy,” he said, this time louder than necessary. “Remember, in that bookstore in Surrey? The lady said Elliot bought a book on fish anatomy. Taxidermists have to know about the anatomy of the species they work with.”

I considered this. “What do you think? That he ran away and quit school to go and be a taxidermist?” I snorted. “It sounds crazy when I say it like that, doesn't it?”

“Crazy is right. Fucker must be crazy to go and do a thing like this to himself. To *us*.”

“I think that's the first time I've ever heard you say a nasty thing about Elliot,” I said.

Steve didn't answer. Instead he lit a cigarette and stood at the porch railing. He glared out at the trees as he smoked.

I joined him at the railing, leaning out toward the woods and thinking about his words. Elliot was *doing* this to us, he'd said. Was Elliot targeting one of us, or all three of us, with his disappearance? Was it a punishment of some kind? Or was it a message,

a way of communicating something which would otherwise get crossed in the wires of daily life?

I remembered something Elliot had told me during one of our walks. Maybe it was on that first walk, when we bumped into each other. A Saturday night, definitely, because he said he knew what would happen if he stayed out all night and missed church the next day, for the third week in a row. The same thing that always happened.

“You don’t know what it’s like, Ava,” he’d said. “With you, she just lectures or yells or gives you the silent treatment. With me, I get this sad expression. I’ll come through the front door, and she’ll be sitting there clipping coupons or something. She’ll look up at me all slow and sad. Then she’ll make some tea, and I’ll have to sit down with her and make conversation. The weather, our plans for the rest of the week. We’ll *chat*, for God’s sake, like some old married couple. And I just started to think – that’s what she must have done with Dad. You know, whenever he hurt her somehow. Just sat down at the kitchen table and talked about something else.”

Then Elliot stopped walking and stared down at the cracked sidewalk, shaking his head, twisting his fingers together. “When I think about all that, the drinking tea, the small talk, the kitchen table – you have no idea. It’s like I can’t breathe. That table, God, that *table*.”

As I remembered all this, I tried to make it fit with Elliot’s sudden disappearance. He could leave Pinestead soon enough after graduation, so why now? Was this some kind of pre-emptive strike, a way to make sure his leaving got done? For the first time, I thought about what Elliot moving out permanently – leaving Pinestead – would mean to my mother. Both children gone. All her old gentlemen friends having moved on, tired of

trying to outlast her devotion to my father. She had her work, sure, but did that compensate for a newly empty house?

Mom had never put any outward pressure on either of us to stay, but it was there nonetheless. There was never any question of me staying – she knew I wouldn't – but for Elliot? Had they even talked about him leaving, or was it just understood? Steve and I both knew he didn't want to stay, but did she? And if she knew, did she accept it?

The silence was broken by my mother's voice behind us. "People are starting to arrive for brunch," she said.

Back inside the Lodge, a dozen or so men were lined up at the buffet table scooping eggs, biscuits, bacon, sausages, and pancakes out of the steaming silver dishes and onto their identical white plates. A number of other men were trickling in from the lobby area, hassling each other good-naturedly and wisecracking about their hangovers. Most of the men appeared to be in their forties and fifties, and were in various stages of balding, graying, and widening. We scanned the crowd for Elliot, with no luck. Soon the stragglers had all arrived.

A group of men claimed spots at the table nearest the buffet, and my mother wasted no time in zipping across the dining room to them. Steve and I followed in her wake.

"Good morning, gentlemen." My mother smiled her first-day-of-the-semester smile. "I was just admiring your work out there," she said, even though she hadn't been. "Do you mind if we sit down?"

The men made polite noises of assent. I wondered what my mother was playing at. With everyone else we'd questioned she was blunt, forthright, and righteous as ever.

Why sweet-talk these men? Did she sense that we were close to the edge of something, and must proceed with caution?

There were four men at the table: a heavy-set man with huge purple lips and a perpetually amused expression; a younger, wispy guy who was focused on dousing his pancakes with many intricate layers of butter and syrup; a man with a face exactly like that of a pug dog; and an older black man who was, in some clear yet indefinable way, the leader of the group.

“So,” my mother began, “do you get many younger kids, you know, just out of college, at these gatherings?”

The pug-faced guy swallowed a mouthful of scrambled eggs. “Not a lot of young kids, no. It takes awhile to perfect the craft, so they don’t often compete. But sometimes they come to competitions in order to network and learn some pointers.”

“As a matter of fact,” the heavy-set man broke in, “there was a young guy here yesterday, seemed real interested in the tricks of the trade.” He speared two dripping sausages on his fork and admired them before taking a bite.

My mother quickly crossed and uncrossed her legs, a sure sign that she was working hard to contain her excitement. “Did this young man have dark hair and yellow eyes?” she asked, almost panting.

The wispy guy looked up from his elaborate pancake ritual and said, “I didn’t notice his eyes, but he had dark hair all right. You know him?”

Mom removed the photo from her purse and handed it to the wispy guy. “This is a picture of my son, who’s been missing for two days. Is this the boy you saw here yesterday?”

The other three men stopped eating and leaned toward the wispy guy to look at the photo. Then all four of them exchanged those enigmatic glances that men always manage so well, having watched male actors look at one another that way in countless Hollywood movies.

The black man, their leader, finally spoke. "This is the boy that was here yesterday. He came with Richard Sterling. They left here at five-thirty, right after the judging."

"Richard Sterling." My mother repeated the name as if it belonged to a criminal she'd just read about in the paper. "Do you know him?"

Their leader nodded. "Not well. Mostly by reputation. But I've talked to him." He gestured to include the entire dining hall. "We all have."

My mother opened her mouth to speak, but Steve beat her to it. "What do you mean, by reputation?" His thin lips were set in a glower of suspicion. "What sort of a reputation does he have?"

Once again, the men exchanged glances full of indecipherable meaning. Then the pug-faced man said, "Nothing bad, really. It's mostly a professional thing."

"His mounts are terrible," said the wispy guy with sudden passion. "They're not lifelike."

"But his clients love them," put in the heavy-set man.

The wispy guy rolled his eyes. "Always the devil's advocate," he said, pointing his fork at the heavy-set man.

"I'm not justifying what he does," the heavy-set guy said. "I'm just stating a fact."

“What do you mean they’re not lifelike?” It was the first thing I’d said during this interview, and it seemed stupid as soon as I said it. What did Richard Sterling’s talents, or lack thereof, have to do with finding Elliot? But I was genuinely interested.

“What he means,” their leader said, “is that Richard’s mounts are idealized. They do look like the animals they’re supposed to look like, yes, but like ideal versions of those animals. He cheats a little here and there, making the colors a bit brighter, or giving the animal a picture-book pose.” He paused. “It’s not quite natural.”

“It’s probably not noticeable to anyone but a professional,” said the heavy-set man. “I don’t think his clients realize the difference. All they know is they love the end result. They had no idea the animal they killed or caught was so beautiful. It flatters them to see it.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “How can you *change* a real animal? Don’t you have to work with the animal they give you?”

The wispy guy shook his head and sighed. “See,” he said, “this is what I’ve been talking about. People still don’t understand what we do.”

“The art has changed a lot over the last century or so,” their leader said. “It involves mostly man-made materials, and requires sculpting and painting and woodworking and such. For instance,” he gestured toward the porch, “all the saltwater fish out there are completely synthetic. The molds are fiberglass, which means they’ll last for centuries after we’re all dead and gone.”

My mother, impatient, shifted her weight in her chair. “This is all very interesting, but what about this Richard Sterling? Is he dangerous?”

“That depends on what you mean by dangerous,” the pug-faced man said. “I probably know him better than anyone in this room, but that’s still not very well. I live about twenty miles from his place, and I’ve been out there once or twice to look at his mounts and talk shop. He’s ex-military, so there’s that. Saw a lot of guns around the place last time I was there.”

My mother’s face turned a shade paler. “A lot of guns,” she repeated in a quiet monotone.

“Yeah. And he’s been known to threaten poachers. But I can’t really blame him. He’s got a big, beautiful piece of land, quite a bit of game. I’ve never heard about him causing any real trouble for anyone.” He paused and fixed his innocent dog-eyes on each of us in turn: my mother, me, Steve, and back to my mother. “He’s just – well, it’s hard to describe. He’s real quiet. Keeps his cards close to his chest, so to speak. But he’s kind of charismatic, for a quiet guy. Sure of himself. Good at persuading people. Hell, after spending a couple of hours with him, he’d almost convinced me that his God-awful way of mounting was the right way.” His laugh rattled like a dried-out gourd being shaken. “No wonder he sells so many mounts.”

“He’s like one of those TV preachers,” their leader said, addressing the table at large. “You get the feeling that he believes what he says, but you’d still be better off not trusting him.” The other men nodded their agreement, and he turned to my mother. “You don’t think Richard kidnapped your son, do you? The boy seemed pretty happy to be here, but you never know.”

Now Mom’s face was flushed. “Not kidnapped. Not exactly. But maybe, you know, this man Richard persuaded him, like you all were saying. Persuaded him to leave

home. Could Richard have drugged him or something, do you think?" she asked the pug-faced man.

He shook his head, pug-eyes filled with bafflement. "Like I said, I only know him in a professional capacity. You never know what any man's capable of in his private life, and that goes double for a man like him, a man that's hard to know."

"Did he say where he was going from here?" Steve asked them.

"I got the impression that he was going home," the heavy-set man said. He stroked his chin in thought. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure I remember him saying that he couldn't wait to get home and relax in his favorite chair." He looked around at the other men, but none of them had different information to offer.

"Would you mind telling us how to get to his place?" Mom asked the pug-faced man.

"Well, that depends. Richard's no particular friend of mine, but I do have a sense of professional loyalty, and so far you have no proof that he's done anything wrong. Now, you're not going to sic any cops or detectives on him until you've surveyed the situation, are you?"

My mother closed her eyes and breathed deeply. I knew she was slowly counting to five in order to calm herself, a habit she'd attempted – without success – to instill in me. "I've already tried to involve the police, and they won't help me. As you said, there's no proof. I just want to go there and talk to my son, see if I can get him to come home." She paused to wipe a drop of sweat from her eyebrow. "He's supposed to graduate from college very soon. His senior recital is next week, and he's been working very hard on his degree for four years now." Mom leaned forward and looked hard into

the man's eyes, as if he were a recalcitrant student who needed to be convinced that her course was worth his time. "Please help us."

Not many men can resist such a plea from an earnest, pretty woman, and this pug of a man was no exception. "Okay," he said, and Mom began writing down his directions to Richard Sterling's cabin in the Poconos.

We had thanked the men and were getting ready to leave when their leader said, "Just one thing before you go, ma'am."

"What's that?"

He gestured at Steve. "It's a good thing you brought along this guy here. He seems like a scrapper. You might need someone like that."

Mom cocked her head like a dog that hears danger in a far-off vibration. "What do you mean?"

"What I mean is this: be careful."

CHAPTER TEN: THE POCONO MOUNTAINS

My mother's van climbed through an endless procession of pines, lakes, rivers, and waterfalls. Scenery so gorgeous it made me dizzy. Mountain laurel bloomed on both sides of the winding, two-lane highway. I didn't quite trust this heavy-handed beauty. I closed my eyes and called to mind a vision from the Pittsburgh city bus: the evening sun striking the side of a run-down warehouse at just the right angle, lighting up one dingy window with orange fire. When I opened my eyes to mid-afternoon, to spring, to the sun-spangled mountain forest spreading in every direction with a hard, showy cheerfulness, I felt light-headed and panicky.

Maybe it was just the altitude.

Whatever it was, my confident, purposeful mood of this morning had worn off. I took up space in the passenger seat while my mother drove, observing the thirty-five-mile-per-hour speed limit on this mountain road with deliberate care in spite of her obvious agitation. I glanced back at Steve, who sat tense in the back seat. Despite our late night, sleep was not an option for him, or for me. We were almost there.

Richard Sterling's cabin was located about halfway between Mt. Pocono and Lake Wallenpaupak. I wasn't sure exactly what we'd do once we got there. Try to bring Elliot home, yes, but how? Reasoning? Bribing? Appealing to his better nature? Trying to enlist Richard Sterling on our side? No doubt Mom would initiate a combination of these tactics, looking to us for support.

My mother spoke for the first time in over an hour. “Do you remember coming here, Ava?”

“What?” I said, startled. “You mean the Poconos? I don’t remember ever being here.”

“It was a couple years after your father.” She never said *after your father died*, just *after your father*, as if his departure from this world were an event that changed the way time was measured: Before Mike Bertram and After Mike Bertram.

“You were almost five, I think,” she continued. “We’d gone to visit your grandparents in Philadelphia, and I decided we should take a side trip up here to the mountains. Things were a little rough back then, and I needed some beauty in my life.” Her voice sounded wistful, nostalgic. “We hiked the trails near the Delaware Water Gap, but you kids were too young to do much climbing. In fact, I had to push Elliot in the stroller most of the time. We looked at the waterfalls. So clear and cool and rushing, all that spray.” She peered over at me to see if I was listening. “It was the Fourth of July weekend, and there were a lot of people vacationing here. Hikers would stop and admire Elliot, and remark about how cute he was in his stroller.” She smiled, but her voice shook a little.

Something stirred inside me, an envy I hadn’t felt since high school. Here was my mother, talking about this big important memory of the three of us in the mountains as a family, before all the conflicts and divisions of school and friends and developing personalities set in, probably the closest we’d ever been and ever would be. And what did it all lead up to? The usual. Elliot the adorable. Elliot the perfect. I felt like I was eleven years old again, being passed up for the bell choir, and I wanted to say childish,

sulky things to my mother. I wanted to say that if Elliot was so perfect, then how come he ran away? I wanted to tell her that Elliot and I were so much alike, and in fact were becoming more alike as we grew into adulthood; she was the only one who insisted on some essential difference between us. And the most childish part of me was a four-year-old bawling wordlessly for attention, the four-year-old who had to hike through the July heat on stubby little legs while Elliot got to ride in the stroller, the four-year-old who was too tired and dirty and crabby and sour-faced to be petted and admired by vacationing strangers.

“Actually,” I said to my mother, “I think I do remember that trip.”

Pebbles sprayed up from the narrow dirt road and plunked against the van with sharp, metallic insistence. The trees huddled together on both sides of the road. It was like traveling through a tunnel, except for the shafts of sunlight that broke through the canopy of trees. Branches scraped the rearview mirrors, and our tires crunched the outer edges of the undergrowth. Through the half-opened windows wafted the thick scent of soil, of growth and decay.

This was the last leg of the journey to Richard Sterling’s. This bumping, grinding road, or driveway, or whatever it was, seemed to go on forever. And then, suddenly, the end announced itself with a trumpet blare of sunshine. Steve gave a little gasp from the back seat, and my mother made an ambiguous clicking noise with her tongue.

We had come to an immense clearing, a meadow, really, where the driveway continued to run through knee-high grass and wildflowers, up to the side of a cabin that looked like a smaller version of the Lakeside Lodge. The meadow was isolated,

surrounded by forest on all sides, the only visible entrance the one we had just used. Facing the cabin's front porch was a small man-made lake, round as a pizza plate, glinting in the afternoon glare. Clustered around the other three sides of the cabin were tall pines, which gave way in back to God-knew-how-many acres of mixed forest. Perfectly white smoke curled from the chimney and evaporated into the perfectly blue sky. Larks skimmed over the meadow grasses, while a heron fluffed its wings dry at the far shore of the lake.

Steve whistled. "Looks like something out of a fairy tale."

I pictured Elliot trapped inside, gorging on pastries and chocolate, waiting with stupid faith to be saved by his plucky sister before the witch stuffed him into the oven.

We pulled into the driveway behind two cars parked side-by-side, a standard black Ford pickup and an antique white convertible, maybe from the 1950s. Both cars appeared to have been washed recently, not to mention waxed. We'd barely left the van before a man with a silver crew-cut came out onto the porch. He wore jeans, heavy work boots, and a nondescript navy sweatshirt.

"Richard Sterling?" my mother asked.

"Yes, that's me." His warm baritone was both smooth and clipped, like a news anchor's voice. "I heard you coming from miles away." His smile was crooked, charming, and boyish. "It's so quiet out here, you see."

My mother halted at the bottom of the porch steps. "Mr. Sterling, I'm Bethany Bertram. My son, Elliot Bertram, is missing, and I thought perhaps you would know where he is. He was last seen with you, you see," Mom finished, mimicking Richard's syntax, perhaps unconsciously, perhaps out of malice.

Richard continued smiling, unperturbed. Almost everything about him – his unlined face, his clothes-rack posture, his well-groomed black eyebrows – seemed to belong to a much younger man. “Well, Elliot’s just inside.” He gestured toward the front door. “Come on in if you like. Bethany, is it?”

“Yes,” said my mother, blinking back tears of mingled anger and relief. As we ascended the porch steps, she had the presence of mind to introduce me and Steve.

“I had a feeling that you folks might be coming to pay me a visit,” said Richard, rubbing his hairless chin. “Elliot’s told me so much about all of you.”

Was it just my imagination, or was there a hint of mocking hostility in his Ted Koppel voice, in his eyes the color of the lake he’d dug for himself? Those eyes were ringed in shadow, the only sign of age other than his silver hair.

The interior of the cabin was not what I expected. Beyond the standard wood floor of the hallway, the living room was thickly carpeted. Rather than a profusion of deer head mounts, the walls were lined with bookshelves and framed prints of cheerful, light-infused Impressionist paintings. The furniture was modern, all cream and beige. A worn copy of the *Iliad* rested on an end-table near a leather recliner. An ancient, exhausted beagle lay in a plush corner, jaw drooping over crossed paws, glaring like it was our fault he’d forgotten how to howl. A flat-screen TV, muted, displayed the flashing images of a Mel Gibson action-revenge movie. When we walked in, Mel was gleefully punching a weeping elderly man in the face.

“Elliot must be downstairs,” Richard said. He led us down a steep, narrow staircase to the basement, where we were met by a musty smell and a steep drop in temperature.

This was more like it – fur, antlers, horns, and scales everywhere. I’d never seen so many dead/fake animals in one place, not even at the Lakeside Lodge. They took up all the wall space, and nearly every available inch on the cement floor, save for a narrow path leading down the center of the room to the back wall, where a space was cleared in front of what looked like a closet door. The door was shut.

“This is where I keep my mounts,” Richard said, as if we couldn’t tell. “I killed all these myself.” He led us through his personal museum to the closed door. “Elliot must be in the workshop. He wanted to help me with some coloration.” Richard paused with his hand on the doorknob. “The kid’s a natural,” he said, winking at Steve. I heard my mother sniff in front of me, but she didn’t say anything. She was being careful again. She knew well enough to size up the situation, not to mention this man Richard, before acting.

Inside the workshop, Elliot sat with his back to us at a cluttered table, painting fish scales with a tiny brush. He must have been concentrating too intensely to notice our entrance right away, or maybe he just wanted to finish the section he was working on. Maybe he wanted to gather his defenses before we confronted him. Personally, I think he was just relishing the suspense he was creating for us. In any case, it took him at least thirty seconds to turn his head and acknowledge us.

“Wow, all three of you.” Elliot turned fully around in his folding chair, straddling its metal back. “Don’t you guys have better things to do with your time?”

“Don’t be a dick,” Steve said, for once not waiting to follow my mother’s lead.

“Yeah,” I said, encouraged by his example. “You had to know we’d come after you.”

“Uh-huh. And I’m sure it was all your idea.” Elliot glanced at my mother.

“Anyway, this isn’t about you. Any of you. It’s about me. It’s about what I want.”

“What *do* you want?” my mother asked, her voice surprisingly gentle.

Elliot looked sheepish. His cheekbones reddened as he tried to project defiance.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

Steve snorted. “What, are you trying to decide if painting dead fish is your life’s calling?”

A vaguely threatening noise issued from Richard’s throat. Up to this point, he’d been standing quietly in the corner with his arms folded across his chest. We all looked at him, expecting him to defend his profession, but he remained silent.

“I’m not trying to become a taxidermist,” Elliot said. “I’m just keeping busy while I decide what to do next.”

“It’s pretty obvious what you should do next,” Steve said. “Play your recital. Finish your finals and graduate. Then you’ll have plenty of time to figure out the rest of your life.”

“I – I needed to get away,” Elliot said, staring down at his beautiful pianist’s hands. “I can’t make any big decisions around you three – you’d just try to influence me.”

“Of course we’d try to influence you,” I said. At the same time my mother, finally losing patience, said between clenched teeth, “And what about *him*?” She flung an arm out in Richard’s direction. “He’s a complete stranger, and he’s obviously influencing you.”

In response to her accusation, Richard came forward and clamped a hand on Elliot's shoulder. My mother lunged toward them and yelled, "Who the hell *are* you?" Steve and I stepped forward in synchronicity, flanking her like bodyguards – though I didn't know what we planned to do if things turned violent.

Mom breathed deeply to compose herself. When she spoke again, her voice betrayed only the slightest trembling. "What interest do you have in my son?"

Richard spoke in the quiet, controlled voice of a traffic cop handing out a speeding ticket. "I was in Pinestead on business and happened to be at the same bar as this young man." He squeezed Elliot's shoulder. "He looked so much like Mike Bertram, I knew he had to be his son. We started talking, and I discovered my hunch was right." Richard cleared his throat and assumed a solemn expression. "I was your husband's friend, ma'am. Probably his best friend."

The color drained from my mother's face. "He never mentioned you," she whispered. "Not once."

"We served in Vietnam together, same Company."

"Mike didn't like to talk about the Army, or the war." Mom's voice was gaining in speed and volume. "Those memories were upsetting to him."

Richard exchanged a glance with Elliot, a look that clearly meant, *See, this is what I've been telling you*, and cleared his throat. "With all due respect, I think you're mistaken. Mike looked back fondly on those years. He told me so, many times. He said he always knew where he was, and who he was, when we served together."

Mom blinked ferociously at him. "Well, he never told me any of that."

"Maybe he didn't think you'd understand," Richard said with a tight smile.

Mom looked like she was holding back from strangling him. “You weren’t at his funeral,” she spat.

“I lost touch with him before he got sick. I figured he was just busy starting his new family. I didn’t even find out he had leukemia until I heard the news of his death, months after it happened.”

“What about our wedding?” My mother worked her face into the proper shape for sarcasm. “I don’t recall seeing you there.”

“I got an invitation from Mike, all right. Not a formal one, you understand, but a phone call. I was talking to him almost every day at that time, so I knew what was going on.” Again, he exchanged a meaningful glance with Elliot. “To be frank, ma’am, I didn’t support the marriage. I thought it was a mistake. I couldn’t attend that wedding in good conscience, and that’s what I told Mike. I do regret it now, though, because we never spoke again after that. He probably felt it would be disloyal to you. You were his wife, after all, and Mike was always a big one for loyalty, not to mention keeping up a good image. It’s a lot easier, and more seemly, to ignore someone who lives across the state than to risk upsetting a woman who shares a bed with you. I could have called him, I guess, but I was too proud. I wasn’t accustomed to people ignoring my advice the way he did when he married you.”

During this speech, I watched my mother’s face grow remote, dangerous, and beautiful as she inwardly prepared her answer. Now that her initial surprise and rage had passed, she was strategizing again, a circling hawk about to drop.

“How dare you say these things in front of my children,” she said in a steady voice.

Richard shrugged. “You asked a question, and I gave my answer.”

“And we’re not children anymore, Mom.” Elliot stood. “We deserve to know the truth. Richard has been telling me things.” He turned to me. “Things it might interest Ava to know as well.”

I took the bait, as Elliot surely knew I would. “What things?” I looked at Richard, Elliot, and Mom, whose face had turned gray and immobile. Steve had receded into the background, distancing himself from our family and its secrets.

“You kids have no idea who Mike really was.” Richard pointed a finger directly at my mother’s chest. “*She* won’t let you know.” His words hit their target with precision; my mother flinched.

“We don’t have to stay here and listen to this,” she said, but without much conviction. Nobody moved to leave, and Richard, calm and relentless, kept on talking. As he gained momentum, he assumed the sanctimonious, omniscient tone of high school history textbooks.

“Your father was an amazing soldier, incredible morale, and deadly with an M-16. There’s no one I would have rather had at my back than him. We had the kind of friendship you can only come by in the Army.” He paused and looked pointedly at Steve. “Mike was also a lady killer of the first degree, and he didn’t have to pay for it, or force it either.” The clipped edges of his voice began to soften and blur as he slipped into the harsh, poetic language of combat. “He was one suave son of a bitch. And he did it all with class, no obnoxious bragging or acting like a pimp. He was so graceful about it that no one could be jealous of him. That’s how he was able to keep up the same act with his

students, including one Bethany Bronsky, the poster-child for blonde ambition, who went to Pinestead to get her MRS degree.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mom said in a small, anemic voice. “He stopped all that when he was with me.”

“No, he didn’t.” A flat, authoritative contradiction. “I happen to know for a fact, because he told me, that he was doing three girls at that time, including you. But you’re the only one who conveniently got pregnant.”

My throat tightened. “Mom,” I croaked, “if that’s true, it means that I’m . . . I was –” I couldn’t finish. I was surprised at how easily I’d slipped into the soap operatic role of illegitimate child. People did actually talk like that in these situations, as it turned out.

“Not you, Ava,” my mother said. Evidently succumbing to whatever was happening here, she exuded an aura of sorrow and bitterness. “You would have had an older brother.”

An older brother. I tried to imagine how things would have been different with an older brother – the three-way games of catch, the casual bullying, the alliances that would have developed and evolved with another sibling in the mix – but my head buzzed, and for once I couldn’t retreat too far into fantasy. This was all too real, too urgent, for that.

“I miscarried in my sixth month,” Mom said. “Three months after we were married.”

“A marriage of convenience,” Richard intoned, too deep in his own narrative for cruelty or kindness to matter. “Mike never wanted to marry anybody. He told me that dozens of times. That was one thing we always agreed on. Marriage was not for us. But

along comes Bethany Bronsky, in pursuit of her college professor, and gets herself pregnant so he has to marry her. Otherwise, she could create problems for him. Best to legitimize the whole thing. He certainly didn't marry her out of love, whatever that is, no matter what she's been telling you." My mother sank to the floor, head in her hands. Richard continued, either oblivious to, or enjoying, her suffering. "That's why I was against the whole marriage from the start."

My mother lifted her head. She was crying now, finally. "You don't know what went on between Mike and me after he stopped talking to you. You don't know anything about my motives, how and why I got pregnant. You don't know me. You've never met me, or my family. I don't need to explain myself to you." She rose to her feet and took a step toward Elliot. "But I do need to explain myself to my son."

"Just him?" I said. "What about me?"

She ignored me, instead addressing my brother. "If you leave here with us, I can explain everything. I'll tell you everything you've ever wanted to know about your father and me."

It's no small feat to sneer at a crying, pleading woman, especially one who gave birth to you, but Elliot somehow managed to do so. "I can't trust you," he said, and I felt a strange surge of pride in him at that moment.

"Come on, man," Steve said. "She's your mom. Show a little compassion."

Elliot looked at the ground rather than Steve. "It's not just the lying. It's exactly what I said before – I'm trying to decide what to do." He looked up. "I think I want to join the Army."

Mom stopped crying and stared at him. "What?"

“I’m considering joining the Army,” Elliot repeated slowly. “And I know I can’t make a decision I can be comfortable with if I’m around you.”

So that was it. Richard Sterling wasn’t the wicked witch of the gingerbread house; he was the Pied Piper. “Are you serious?” I said. “You really want to join the Army? After war’s just been declared?”

“Yes.”

“Well,” I said, “that’s about the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Elliot’s face flushed. “No dumber than giving up singing to go save some ghetto kids.”

“But Elliot,” my mother said in a choking, strangled voice. “Your father –”

“Loved being a soldier,” Elliot finished, looking to Richard for approval, which he found.

“But this whole war is a mistake,” I said.

“How do you know?” Elliot countered. “Are you a military General, or a CIA agent, or even a historian?”

“I know what I know,” I said lamely.

“And even if it is wrong,” Elliot continued, “now that we’re in it, *someone* has to go over there and help. With all this going on, everything else just feels so trivial. I just want to do something that matters.”

“But you *can’t*,” my mother said, breath coming fast.

“Again, with all due respect,” Richard said – apparently forgetting that he’d long given up all pretense of respecting my mother – “Elliot is of age. He’s a man, and this is

a man's decision, to be made by him alone. I just supplied him with information about my own experience, and his father's."

"I'm not talking to you," my mother said to Richard, then turned back to Elliot. "Honey, *please*." Her voice rose in both pitch and volume. "Isn't there anything we can do to change your mind?"

Elliot sighed. "I haven't decided yet. I just need some time to think this all out on my own. Just leave me alone for a few days. I promise I won't go anywhere until you come back, no matter what I decide. Just leave me alone."

And so we left.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE POCONO MOUNTAINS

I lay staring up at the wooden ceiling beams of the tiny cabin we'd just rented, listening to the rush and squeal of water running through pipes. Steve had been in the shower for awhile, evidently savoring the hot steam and the purifying powers of soap and water as much as I had. My hair was still damp, and there was something I liked about the familiar spreading of that dampness to my t-shirt collar and pillow. I tried to concentrate on things like that, immediate sensations and impressions that would keep me from thinking about my mother in the cabin next door. Even so, I couldn't help but wonder what she was doing. Crying? She hadn't shed a tear since we left Richard Sterling's place. Sleeping? Maybe, but I had my doubts. Praying? That was probably more like it.

"She's most comfortable while on her knees," I muttered into my pillow. Even though no one had heard my words, guilt and pleasure washed over me at having said them.

We were somewhere near Mt. Pocono. The drive here from Richard Sterling's had been nearly silent. In the rearview mirror I could see my mother slumped in the back seat, propping herself up on one elbow and staring at the upholstery with unseeing eyes. I couldn't look at her, couldn't talk to her. Bitter, biting words came to mind as I sat in the passenger seat, but she was already so defeated that reproaches seemed pointless.

More than anything, I was frightened to see her like this – no longer in control, no longer in the right.

Steve took charge automatically. As worried as he must have been about Elliot, he was still the outsider, the one least affected by Richard Sterling's revelations.

"We should find somewhere to stay near here," Steve had said as he drove out of the green tunnel of Richard's driveway into the now-diminishing sunlight. "We'll give Elliot some space for a few days, like he said, and then go back there." He looked at my mother, then at me. "Unless you guys have a better idea."

Mom raised her eyes to Steve and shook her head.

"Do you think we're even welcome back there?" I said.

Steve's profile turned rigid. "I'd like to see that guy try to stop us." He exhaled, relaxed, and glanced over at me. "I don't think he sees us as much of a threat, actually. He even gave me his phone number as we were leaving, while you guys were outside. Although, even that was a little sinister because he said something about how he wanted us to call ahead instead of 'ambushing' him next time we come. Like he needs to prepare or something."

I watched my mother in the mirror. She didn't appear to be listening to us, but just then she looked up and mumbled, "I should have bought a track phone."

"What?" Steve said.

She spoke louder. "I was in such a hurry to find him, but I should have bought a track phone first. That way, we could have given Elliot a number to call us at." She lowered her voice to almost a whisper. "If he wanted to."

“I don’t think he’d call us anyway,” Steve said. “You heard what he said about wanting to be left alone.”

“But we should get a phone,” I said, making a point to speak to Steve rather than my mother. “In case we end up stranded again, or have some other kind of emergency.”

So we got off at a nearby exit and made an awkward, silent stop at Wal-Mart, followed by an awkward, silent stop at McDonald’s. My mother sipped at a cup of water while I choked down a few chicken nuggets, and Steve set a world record for fastest inhalation of a cheeseburger. By the time we got back on the road it was almost dark, so we stopped at the nearest place with beds, a rustic campground/resort called Pocono Haven.

As we stood in line at the checkout counter, Steve asked us if we wanted two rooms.

“Yes,” I said. “And I’m staying with you.” I didn’t look at my mom, but I could feel her silent presence at my back.

Steve looked uncomfortable. “Ava,” he said, with a jerk of his head in Mom’s direction, “are you sure you want –”

“Absolutely,” I said. I finally ventured a sideways glance at my mother, who avoided my eyes by staring intently at a rack of pamphlets across the lobby. “And I need to borrow the phone for tonight,” I said to no one in particular. By then Steve and I were standing at the checkout counter. Mom’s arm shot forward and placed the phone on the counter. I picked it up and stuffed it in my backpack without comment.

Now, as I lay on the big wooden bunk only a couple of feet below the ceiling, I pulled the phone out of my bag and dialed my own number in Pittsburgh. After five dial

tones, I heard my own cheerful, professional, utterly false voice telling me to leave my name and number.

In my mind I'd composed and rehearsed a message which went something like this: "Drew, it's Ava. I really need to talk to you right now. I love you so much. Call me back at such-and-such number." But instead of leaving this message, I ended the call before the beep.

Steve came out of the bathroom wearing green boxer shorts and a faded black t-shirt. I crawled to the foot of the bunk and lay on my stomach, supporting my torso with my elbows and propping my chin on my interlaced hands. Steve sat on the creaky metal cot near the door of the cabin. I wanted to say something to him, but I didn't know what. He seemed very far below me. He shifted his weight on the cot and stretched out on his back, hands folded on his stomach. One knee was in the air, his bent leg forming an isosceles triangle with the cot.

"This is really uncomfortable." Steve wiggled his shoulders. "There's a fucking metal bar right in the middle of my back."

"You can come up here," I heard myself say. "This bunk is huge. There's plenty of room." And this is how it begins, I thought. With a clichéd this-bed-is-so-uncomfortable move, followed by my automatic feminine yielding.

"Okay, then." Steve climbed the wooden ladder and settled in next to me. I adjusted my position so that I was lying back on the pillow again. Beads of water from his dripping hair glittered on his neck. He'd forgotten to turn off the light, but it didn't matter. We both stared up at the wooden beams for some time.

His breathing slowed. I felt simultaneous relief and disappointment. I should follow his lead, try to sleep. I closed my eyes and was almost there when Steve's voice brought me back.

“Are you ever going to start talking to your mom?”

I turned to him. His eyes were on the ceiling – his strange, incompatible eyes – but I wondered if they'd been watching me.

“There's a bug on your leg.” I pointed at a long black beetle resting on his green shorts. Steve sat up and slapped the insect with his palm, crushing it. The dying beetle lit up, sending its final spark into the air.

“Shit, a firefly,” Steve said. “I wouldn't have killed it if I'd known.” He picked the still-glowing bug from his shirt. He held it as if it were something fragile, something he could save, but then gave up and flicked it over the side of the bunk.

“Don't feel too bad,” I said. “Hey, remember that time in high school when we went out to that old covered bridge with Elliot?”

“I remember.”

“And there was that field with all the fireflies? I'd never seen so many fireflies. I still haven't.”

“Me neither.”

“And then I wrote that poem for Elliot. You know: ‘A field of fireflies mirrors the stars.’” I quoted my first line in a mock-pretentious voice, my arm extended like that of Hamlet cradling a skull. “So stupid. And you totally called me out at Elliot's birthday party. Told me I was too cheap to buy him a real present.” I laughed. “I was so pissed at you then, but you were right.”

“Well, I’ll let you in on a secret.” Steve leaned in close to me. “I was jealous of that poem. I wished I’d written it.”

This show of vulnerability was too much. My hand cupped his cheek as I leaned toward him. We kissed. This kiss became a series of linked kisses. Then his mouth left mine, and he began to work my ear with his tongue and teeth. That was it for me. I was gone. I stripped off my shirt, then his. His hands warmed my shoulders, my breasts, my stomach. I thought of Drew’s cold hands, his thin body, and the message I hadn’t left for him. I loved him, but at that moment this love was something I knew, not something I felt. Right now, Drew existed only in my mind, while Steve was in my bed, warm and solid. The shape of his need familiar as my own. I would regret this later, but that didn’t matter now.

I gently bit Steve’s neck and began to pull down his shorts.

“Wait.” The word came ragged but firm from his panting mouth. “We shouldn’t do this.” He pulled away from me and hiked up his shorts.

The hot, sweet feeling in my loins and chest turned cold and sour. I laughed.

“Since when are you so coy?”

“I’m serious, Ava. I’m in love with your brother.”

“That never stopped you before.” My voice pulsed with anger and humiliation. Never in my life had a man withheld sex from me. I crossed my arms over my breasts and wouldn’t look at him.

“This is different, and you know it. You’re his sister.” He reached out to touch my shoulder, but I backed away.

“Whatever,” Steve muttered, then turned as if to climb down the bunk ladder. But he faced me again, scowling. “Don’t you have a boyfriend, anyway?”

“He won’t be there when I get back.” As soon as I said this, I knew it was true. In saying good-bye to Drew on Monday afternoon, I’d been saying good-bye for good.

“How do you know?” Steve was close to me again, watching me with eyes both alert and tender. Eyes that would have been exactly like Drew’s if they’d both been blue.

“I just do.” I did know. And in that moment I knew two other important things with absolute clarity. I knew that even though Drew was gone, I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from loving him, that for months afterward, no matter what I was doing or who I was with, his absence would cause me an almost physical pain.

And I knew that my family would never be the same after this.

For the second time in three days I began to cry in front of Steve, and this time he held me. I buried my face in the wiry brown hairs of his chest and sobbed.

He was still holding me when I woke the next morning.

CHAPTER TWELVE: THE ROAD TO PHILADELPHIA

I stood outside the cabin shivering, hands stuffed in the front pocket of my hooded sweatshirt. I'd gotten tired of lying in the bunk, waiting for Steve to finish conferring with my mother in her cabin. The wind blew right through my sweatshirt and settled in my bones. What had happened to all that warm weather of the past few days? I tried to remember what day it was. Friday – bagel day at Benevolence – right about now Brenda would be distributing them to all the classrooms for morning break. My students, mostly teenage mothers, would be dutifully hand-writing their GED practice essays on cheap notebook paper. I would wait until time was up, then stop them and hand out their bagels as a reward. As we ate I'd go through their essays, marking places that needed clarification or development, correcting the worst of the grammatical and spelling errors. Then I'd hand back their papers and give them a chance to read my comments. I tried to picture my students' faces but could only remember hairstyles and clothing. I wondered without much interest if I'd ever teach any of them again. For now it didn't matter. This was all there was: the freezing wind, the gathering clouds, the smell of rain about to drench the mountains. We'd be in this place forever, waiting for Elliot to make his choice.

Steve emerged from my mom's cabin, chin huddled low inside his Steelers windbreaker. Since I'd woken up in his arms that morning, the air between us was intimate but not charged. There was an unspoken understanding that we were in some

kind of holding pattern of possibility, desires deferred until an unknowable time when the world felt right. At the moment, it was hard to believe such a time would ever come.

“Your mom has a new plan,” Steve said. “She wants to drive to Philly and see your grandparents.”

“Why?” I couldn’t even remember the last time we’d visited Grandma and Grandpa Bertram. “How will that help?”

“She thinks they might know something about Richard Sterling that will make him look bad. She wants them to back her up, you know, join her side. Maybe even come with us when we go back for Elliot.”

I wasn’t so sure my grandparents *would* be on her side. They were hard to read, especially when it came to my mom. And now I had a good idea why. “Are we leaving soon, then?”

“That depends on you. She wants to know what you think of her plan.”

“She wants to know what *I* think?”

Steve exhaled in a way that let me know I was trying his patience. “She wants to make it up to you, Ava. She wants you to talk to her again. *I* want you to talk to her again. If you haven’t noticed, I don’t exactly enjoy being caught in the middle of this.”

“Fine,” I said, and went to knock on the door of my mother’s cabin.

She opened the door before I’d even finished knocking. She looked like she hadn’t slept: greasy hair, half-closed eyes, gray face full of shadows.

“You look terrible,” I said.

She actually smiled. “Well, at least that’s a start.”

“Let’s go to Philly,” I said, and walked away.

We were back in the van: Mom (replenished by tea) driving, me in the passenger seat, Steve in the back. It was quiet except for the hypnotic whoosh of the windshield wipers. I turned on the radio and found a classical station, all soaring violins mixed with static. I tried adjusting the dial and then finally turned it off.

Mom cleared her throat. "At least give me a chance to tell my side of things."

"Are you talking to me, or Steve?"

Color rose in my mother's cheeks. "Don't you think I've been punished enough?"

In a way, I was comforted by her anger. Still, I couldn't let her off that easy. "I thought I was one of those people you didn't have to explain things to."

"I never said that."

"You implied it."

"*Don't* make assumptions about me!" She was shouting now. Steve stared hard out the window.

"Fine," I said, giving in to my curiosity. "Tell me whatever it is you want to tell me."

Her father, my grandfather, died of lung disease when she was fourteen, leaving her alone with her mother, Bernadette, who saw to it that grieving would become a full-time occupation for both of them. She immediately purchased the cemetery plot next to her husband's and had her own tombstone installed there. The stone was standard – smallish, squarish, and gray. Identical to her husband's. Bernadette would insist that they bring flowers to the gravesite on Sundays and holidays, including Christmas. Bethany

would stand there in the snow, rain, or sunshine and watch as her mother wept noisily, wiping at her puffy cheeks with a soiled white handkerchief and occasionally blowing her nose with a sound like a trumpet. She would try to cry, too, but nothing seemed more removed from her father, with his gruff charm and his way of telling jokes that she never understood but laughed at anyway, than this ritual of standing and staring at a stone, of feeding the stone with cheap flowers that her father would have had no use for while he lived, much less in death. Her mother kept a small flower garden on both sides of their front steps, but her dad had preferred to tend vegetables in a corner of their tiny backyard. There, tomato plants climbed the chain-link fence, and lettuce grew in such profusion that Bethany couldn't look at it without thinking of the word "crisp."

She remembered helping her dad weed the garden every spring; they would kneel together in the new grass, pawing through the soil. Her dad didn't like to use trowels because, as he said, "the whole point of gardening is to get your hands dirty." Though generally a talkative man, he didn't say much while weeding – he liked to lose himself in the work. But over the dinner table, as they munched on salads that her mother had prepared from garden tomatoes and greens, he would extol the virtues of growing their own food. He would talk about retiring in ten or fifteen years and buying some land in the country.

"I don't know if we could be completely self-sufficient," he would say, "but we could sure as hell try. What do you think, Bernie?"

Her mother would invariably say something encouraging, but punctuate it with a dreary sigh. Once, though, she asked him if he wouldn't "miss his community."

“What community?” her dad snorted. “You mean the idiots at the mill who don’t know their asses from their elbows? Or the old-biddy church ladies who would probably lock Beth up in a convent if they could, just because they’re afraid of what might happen if their sons see a pretty girl for once?”

Her mom laughed so hard that she almost choked on a chunk of tomato. When she managed to stop laughing she said, “I guess you’re right, Stan.”

But Bernadette’s sense of humor seemed to die with her husband. She couldn’t laugh, and Bethany couldn’t cry, not at the cemetery, anyway, and outside of that she didn’t have time. She had to take care of her mother.

Here, Mom paused and gave me a significant look. “By the way, if you’ll remember, I *never* made you kids visit your father’s grave. Never.”

“I know,” I said, wanting her to get on with the story.

“And even if you weren’t as young as you were, I would never have broken down so completely that you had to take on responsibilities you weren’t prepared for.”

“I get it,” I snapped. “You were a better mother than Grandma.”

“Ava,” Steve said with a flat tone, “you’re supposed to be giving her a chance right now. You treat criminals and Nazis better than this. Give the woman a break.”

I glared at him. “Okay. Fine.” I crossed my arms against my chest and nodded at my mother. “Proceed.”

I didn’t want to admit it, but the story was getting to me. When her own husband died too young, Mom had tried so hard to grieve on her own terms. But grief is grief,

whether its form is obsessive mournfulness or blind idolatry. And grief is generational. Maybe Drew was right – better to kill our daughters before they're even born.

After spending her high school years making sure that her mother got up in the morning and ate her meals, Bethany had had enough. She was going to PUP to study the flute, and her mother could do nothing to stop her.

Other students might have been homesick at first, but not Bethany. Pinestead meant freedom, and freedom meant many small but important things, like meeting friends at greasy chain restaurants whenever she felt like it, or sleeping in on Saturdays, or even practicing the flute until her lips felt numb. She tried to feel guilty about deserting her mother, but she was young and deserved a life of her own. Besides, her mother was better off now that she was forced to rely on herself. She might never fully recover from her grief, but at least she was beginning to take an interest in church and bridge club and other things that older women did to pass the time. Bethany didn't need to concern herself with her mother any longer.

There were too many other things to think about – for one, her marching band director, Professor Bertram. *Amazing* was the word the girls used to describe him, and some of the boys, too. It wasn't just that he was a terrific director, although he was certainly that. And it wasn't that he had charisma, although he certainly did. It wasn't even that he looked like a movie star. There was more to him than that, and Bethany thought she knew what it was. He genuinely loved what he did, and it showed in every gesture he made, in every word he spoke to his students. He didn't have to yell, threaten, or cajole like her high school band director in order to get results. All he had to do was

speak to them calmly in a voice that projected equal parts joy and seriousness. They lived for his praise and did all they could to avoid his kind, sad words of reproach.

As with any young, attractive professor, information and misinformation grew up around him and spread through campus. He'd only been teaching there a year and had already made tremendous progress with the band. He was so good at what he did that he'd gotten the job right out of grad school. He was a known war hero; a sophomore boy knew someone who knew a guy whose life he had supposedly saved. A junior girl claimed to have gone on a date with him. According to her, he'd driven her to Punxatawney one Saturday afternoon, where they'd gone bowling and eaten at a buffet-style restaurant. He'd dropped her off at her dorm by nine o'clock and had behaved like a perfect gentleman, she told everyone.

There were other, darker rumors that he'd had his way with a number of girls on campus, but the students who made these accusations were never able to produce any evidence, or even come up with specific names. The girls in the band listened to these rumors with both fear and longing, unable to decide if these anonymous females were unfortunate victims, or the luckiest women alive.

Bethany wasn't sure what to believe, but she did know one thing: whatever Professor Bertram had or hadn't done, he'd never meant to hurt anyone. If you were around him for more than five minutes, you could tell how much he cared about his students, the band, the university, even the town.

Bethany found herself thinking about Professor Bertram often, especially when she was practicing the flute. She hadn't played solo for him since her audition, when

he'd asked her about her high school marching band and complimented her technique, but she pictured him as her audience whenever she played.

She even thought about him when she went out on dates. She'd be eating spaghetti across from some eager boy with hair halfway down his neck, when a few bars of the standard Italian music being pumped into the restaurant would make her think of a tune they were playing in marching band, which would in turn make her think of Professor Bertram. Her date would try to make conversation, his speech alternating from awkward to boastful and back again, and she'd be too busy thinking about Mike Bertram's confident grin, and his kind yet mischievous yellow eyes, to respond.

She began to get a reputation as a white whale – a girl who wouldn't give in, a girl just asking to be conquered. She used religion as an excuse, but no one was buying it. Most of her friends were regular church-goers, like her, but that didn't stop them from being on the pill. Bethany was sincere in her faith, but even she suspected that she was acting according to an even higher, more sacred principle – her gut. None of the boys she dated felt right to her, even those who claimed they were willing to wait. She couldn't get serious about any of them, and she told herself that she was too wrapped up in her studies, in music, to care about romance. And there was nothing wrong with that. After four years spent caring for a grieving mother, she relished her space, her freedom. But sometimes she wondered if there were something wrong with her. Wasn't she at an age where women were supposed to feel a great deal, even excessively, at all times, about many people? No one felt very important to her – not her friends, not her boyfriends, not her mother. Was she incapable of harboring deep feelings for another human being? Was she incurably selfish, a cold fish, a self-centered monster?

She pushed these fears to the back of her mind and concentrated on music. Her flute technique was improving rapidly, and her junior recital went so well even her mother admitted that maybe her music degree wasn't a complete waste of time. At the beginning of senior year she tried out for section leader. When she finished playing her audition piece, she looked up from her music and saw Professor Bertram looking at her with an unreadable expression, so unlike his usual grin.

“Was it that bad?” She laughed nervously.

“Bad?” He looked down at his hands, then back up at her. “No, not bad. That was quite good. Your timing has improved since last year. There are still a couple more people auditioning for the spot, though. I'll let you know.”

She did end up getting the position, but her confusion over Mike Bertram's behavior at her audition overshadowed her excitement at being section leader. Perhaps he'd just been having a bad day, but she wondered if she'd done something to upset him.

That fall a new restlessness interfered with her concentration. The ache in her chest wouldn't go away, and her hands shook when she held her flute. She had trouble sleeping and took long walks in the middle of the night.

One Sunday afternoon in early October she decided to walk to Mitchell Park. She was too anxious to study, and besides, it was the first nice day following a solid week of wind and rain.

The air smelled of clean mud and wet leaves. Practically overnight the oak trees had turned a piercing red. The streets were nearly empty, even though it was almost one o'clock; everyone was still recovering from last night's parties. The clomping of her feet

seemed unnaturally loud, like an auditory expression of the dazzling sunlight. All of her senses were heightened and sliding into one another with jangling clarity.

Mitchell Park was close to downtown and wasn't much, really – just a municipal park with some benches and a monument of a man on a horse. Bethany liked to sit alone in the graffiti-covered gazebo and look at the trees. But today somebody was already in there.

For some reason she wasn't surprised to see Mike Bertram sitting on the bench inside, legs crossed, hands folded over one knee. Somehow this seemed right, like they'd arranged to meet there and were merely keeping their appointment. He was staring at something across the park and didn't seem to notice her approach. He continued staring even after she entered the gazebo and sat next to him. She didn't know why, but she felt that it wouldn't be right to greet him until he'd acknowledged her presence. They sat for a few minutes in total silence, with him staring across the park while she stared at him. But there was no awkwardness between them. This was supposed to happen, Bethany felt.

Finally, he spoke. "See those over there?" He pointed at a patch of grass crowded with tall, slender white mushrooms.

Bethany leaned forward to get a better look. "They look like people huddled together at an outdoor concert or something."

"Yeah, they all spring up in the same place. They don't like to spread out." He turned his eyes on her for the first time, and she felt a jolt of recognition, and something like fear. This was how he'd looked at her at the audition, and now she understood what

it meant. “You know, the funny thing about mushrooms is that nobody knows why they grow where they do, or why they come out at certain times and not others.”

“It’s a mystery,” she said, and then felt ashamed for blurting out the pat response that came into her head. She rushed to cover up her mistake. “Maybe the rain had something to do with it.” This was even worse. Of course the rain had something to do with it. Why were they talking about fungus anyway? Suddenly she felt like the very young, very inexperienced girl that she was.

He must have sensed her embarrassment because he changed the subject. “Have you ever listened to a phonograph record?”

“No.”

“Would you like to?” His face flushed with an almost boyish excitement. “I bought a phonograph at the Salvo yesterday. An amazing find – in really good shape, sounds wonderful, even. I almost swooned.” Bethany couldn’t imagine any of the boys she went out with having the confidence to say, “I almost swooned,” without a hint of irony. “My house is right across the street, if you want to have a listen. They even threw in this gorgeous record of *Scheherazade*.”

Her stomach plunged. She knew where this was headed, and she couldn’t pretend that she didn’t want it to happen. Even if she was just another notch on his belt, she knew what she wanted. She’d been waiting for it, holding out for this man. She had to follow her gut, that sacred principle.

“I’d love to hear it.”

I couldn't help breaking into Mom's story with a groan. "So you're telling me that Dad was a creep who came at you with some cheesy line about phonograph records? And you bought it?"

"Weren't you listening to anything I said? I just explained that I knew what I was doing. I made a choice. I wasn't a victim. I wasn't deluded, even if I *was* young." She turned her eyes from the road and used them to bore into me. "Younger than you, in fact. And totally conscious of what I was doing."

At that moment it occurred to me that Mom didn't even know about Drew. And if she did? I thought about all the outlandish things Drew had told me when we first met. I thought about – and not for the first time – the fact that I'd never met any of the people he claimed he'd come to Pittsburgh to stay with. But so what if he was using me for a place to stay, a warm body, a fresh start? Wasn't I, a sensation junkie, using him for the highs and lows he gave me? Did the fact that we both needed something from each other mean that our feelings weren't real? Because he did feel something for me, I knew. I didn't know how I knew, but I did.

"Well," I said in my most casual voice, "at least he didn't ask you to listen to Rachmaninov, or *Romeo and Juliet*."

They did actually listen to the record, as it turned out. Mike even behaved like a teacher, pointing out tiny flaws and embellishments, giving a running commentary on the conductor's choices. She began to feel foolish. Maybe she'd been imagining things.

After *Scheherazade*, Mike made some tea and switched to playing vinyl jazz records. They sat across from each other at a small round table, something like how

Bethany imagined the tables outside a Parisian café. They drank their tea and talked. Or rather, she talked while Mike listened. She talked about classes, friends, and other nonsense, all the while wondering just how stupid she sounded. But he was such a good listener that she kept going, talking about her mother and father, and her dream of playing in a major symphony orchestra. At that point she thought he might say something to encourage her, but he just smiled and nodded and asked gently probing questions to draw her out. She was running out of things to say, and the more she talked, the more his face absorbed all of her attention. She lost her train of thought.

“What did I just say?” she asked, blushing.

“You were saying that you’ve been having trouble concentrating lately,” he repeated back to her.

“Oh,” she said. She waited for him to ask her why she was so distracted, but he did not. He was giving her no help at all: no flirting, no leading questions, not even a gesture or movement to initiate what was by now obvious and inevitable. He did nothing to decrease the space between them. Everything was up to her, then. She felt a rush of fear, followed by an intense excitement, at being in control. At that moment it didn’t cross her mind that his restraint might be a tactic, a studied technique perfected to give her the illusion of control. Later – much later, when it was much too late – she would consider this idea and dismiss it as irrelevant, but for now there was just this pulsating fear and excitement that, together, felt something like joy.

She liked to think that he tasted this joy when she took his hands, leaned across the table, and kissed him. A soft, low sound, half-sigh and half-laugh, rose from his throat and sent tiny vibrations into her mouth. She pulled back from the kiss and stared at

him, at last drinking in his face unabashedly. Close up this face was not as beautiful. He had dark circles under his eyes and needed a shave. A tiny crater graced his cheek just below his right eye, a dent probably left over from childhood chicken pox. She stroked this scar with one finger.

Then there was a flurry of awkward yet unconscious movement, and somehow the table was no longer between them. Her arms were around his neck, her face buried in his chest. Up against him like this, she was surprised by how slight, how delicate his body was. He stroked her hair and murmured that she was beautiful.

“Everyone loves you,” she answered. Not until the following day, when she went over everything that had happened between them in her mind, savoring every small detail, did she realize that she had said “everyone” instead of “I.” She could never be sure what she had really meant to say, or which phrase came closest to what she’d felt at that moment. Not that it mattered; her voice was muffled by his chest, and he didn’t seem to hear her.

Miles Davis played in the background as they commenced to doing what they had both come there to do.

“I never regretted any of it.” My mother kept her eyes on the road but tilted her head in my direction. “I never regretted anything that had to do with your father.”

“Why should you regret it?” Steve’s voice from the back of the car sounded rusty and choked. He coughed. “Why regret something you couldn’t help?”

Mom's head bobbed in agreement. I glanced back at Steve. He looked away immediately, but not before I'd seen his face. I wanted to comfort him as he'd done with me, but now was not the time.

At the beginning she had no expectations, no particular hopes for the future. She lived entirely in the present, and that was enough. Enough to slow-dance with him in his living room, to laugh in the dark together, to exchange subtle, meaningful glances during rehearsals and football games. They were both too busy to see each other as often as she would have liked, so she made the most of their time together. Oddly enough, she no longer had trouble concentrating. She was motivated to finish her school work so that she could be with Mike, and to practice her flute so that she could sound her best when she played for him at his apartment. These private concerts gave her more joy than just about anything they did together; she loved watching his face grow more animated as she played. Sometimes he would play his practice piano, and she would sit close beside him on the bench, turning pages and watching his hands dance over the yellowing keys.

Even at that stage she noticed that Mike almost never talked about himself. He talked about music, about marching band and wind ensemble, even about departmental politics – but never anything personal. Whenever Bethany asked questions about his family and childhood, or about fighting in the war, he would give the briefest of answers, then laugh and tell her there wasn't much else to say.

“I honestly never think about the past,” he said once, after she had questioned him along these lines. “That stuff doesn't have much to do with my life now.”

“But sometimes I feel like I barely know you.”

“What’s to know?” He laughed. “You know, people get all these ideas about musicians, not to mention war vets. Like I’m supposed to have all these complications and traumas.”

“I didn’t mean anything like that.” She stroked his arm. They were sitting on his couch listening to Bach, her head resting on his shoulder.

He pulled away and turned to face her. He was grinning. “Would you believe I’m actually pretty content?”

“Of course.”

“I mean, sometimes I wonder about it myself. Like maybe I’m shallow or something. I guess technically I *am* shallow because everything’s on the surface. I play music. I teach. I enjoy the company of beautiful women.” He laughed and kissed her forehead. “I enjoy being with you. That’s it. What you see is what you get.”

“And I love that about you,” she said. This was true, as far as it went. His simplicity, though at odds with his intelligence and talent, felt safe and reminded her of her father. But part of her wondered if he was holding something back. Maybe he thought that giving too much away would be like a promise to her. She couldn’t help noticing how careful he’d been so far. He hadn’t told her he loved her, hadn’t mentioned being exclusive (or otherwise), hadn’t intensified his behavior toward her since that first night. No verbal contract had been made, no pledge signed. He’d been nothing but attentive, kind, and tender – even passionate at times. She believed that he genuinely liked and respected her. But was this enough for her? She told herself that it was. She knew she loved him, couldn’t help loving him, couldn’t help wanting to be with him, to give all she had to him. She had already committed herself to following this love, no

matter what the consequences. But she also knew that her love did not obligate him in any way. Knowing this, she should just seize whatever joy that she could.

The days grew colder. Fall semester finals came and went. Bethany went home for Christmas break and longed for Mike the entire month. Her mother seemed even more melancholy than usual, and dragged her out to the cemetery in the middle of a Christmas Day blizzard to shiver and pray. Bethany had never felt more disconnected from her mother's grief, or from her life in Pittsburgh. Every day during the cheerless, routine gatherings of relatives, Bethany wondered what Mike was doing. Every night she knelt by her childhood bed and thanked God for creating Mike Bertram, and for granting her the capacity to love him.

After about two weeks of this, however, other elements began to enter her prayers unbidden. Without any conscious effort, her litanies of praise and thankfulness were shortened to make room for the begging of favors. At first her petitions were all for him: "Please keep him safe, please make sure he's happy." Soon, though, she found herself filling her prayer space – which, as it turned out, was finite – almost exclusively with her own desires: "Please make him love me, please let us be together our whole lives." When she tried to stop praying this way, she discovered that she could not pray at all.

When she returned to Pinestead for her spring semester classes, things between her and Mike had changed subtly. At first there was a new intensity; clearly, he had missed her (as much as she had missed him?), and accordingly they spent almost twice as much time together as they had previously. And during that time she felt what she believed to be a deeper connection with him. They had passed the initial phase of pulsing

excitement and had entered a new stage of familiarity, shared jokes, and comfortable silences. Later Bethany would remember these few weeks as the happiest of her life.

Soon, though, they began to see less and less of each other. Mike always seemed to have some perfectly legitimate excuse: lesson planning, conferences, practicing, arranging, composing. This baffled her, as he'd always seemed the type, super-human, to execute his work without apparent effort. Why so much work all of a sudden? But she banished her suspicions and instead concentrated on another feeling: desperation. She was wild to see him more, and to achieve the greatest possible intimacy when she did see him. She did not try to hide this feeling from herself, but did struggle to keep it a secret from Mike. Even so, she knew that her desperation showed. Every time they hugged good-bye, she could feel her arms tighten involuntarily around his neck, could feel his body (was it her imagination?) stiffen against her and grow cold, distant.

She was losing him, but what could she do? On some deep, barely conscious level she had always known that this affair was temporary. She tried to accept this fact and get the most out of their connection while it lasted, but she could not stop the panic that clutched at her chest, rising to block her throat and clog her head. Soon this panic consumed her. She moved through her days in a nightmarish fog. Her classes were a blur. The girl friends she'd blown off for Mike so many times no longer bothered with her. Her flute lay untouched, despite her upcoming senior recital.

Mike seemed to sense that something was wrong. Now his face when they were together wore an uncharacteristic expression of thoughtfulness (or was it sadness?) But his response was to distance himself even further, to see her even less, perhaps hoping to wean her from him and make it easier for her in that way.

Things went on in this manner until the second of March, a day that Bethany would always remember as cold, wet, and windy. A day shivering on the verge of spring but not quite making it there – an angry, frustrated day. At around 7:30 in the evening, Mike called and asked her to come over. She couldn't remember the last time he'd called her, rather than the other way around. Something in his voice – some element she'd never heard before and could not identify – scared her. Was it a hint of sorrow? Of guilt? In her present state of panic she assumed the worst: he was going to end it with her.

Of course she obeyed his summons. She walked to his house through the dark, wet streets, avoiding the puddles suspended in the deformed sidewalks. She felt terrified but relieved. At least now the suspense would be over, the axe would fall, and that would be the end. At least he had the decency to break it off with her face-to-face. She would expect nothing less of him.

The last thing she expected was that he would immediately envelop her, whispering, "I need you," in a raspy voice she had never heard. But this was exactly what happened.

Bethany was not prepared for this. After that first time with him, she'd gone to the doctor and been fitted for a diaphragm, which seemed to her less morally suspect than the pill, with all its connotations of absolute freedom and promiscuity. She'd told Mike about the diaphragm, and after that he acted on the assumption that she always used it. This device was now sitting on her bedside table. She could not have said exactly why she'd left it there. She'd been agitated, in a hurry, convinced that she was rushing to her doom. Did she simply forget it, or did she think of it quickly and dismiss it as

unnecessary, under the circumstances? She could not remember her thought process as she'd left her dorm room. She did not know her own mind, which was still in a kind of fog that evaporated more and more with each kiss and caress, with each article of clothing Mike removed from her body. He needed her, and his need became hers.

Afterward, when their sweat had cooled and their panting had slowed, Mike told her that a friend of his from the war had killed himself yesterday. He'd just found out that morning.

"I felt bad that I'd lost touch with him," he said. "I mean, I probably couldn't have done anything about it. No one could. You have to think about it philosophically. Otherwise you'll go crazy, too. But I still felt bad, mostly because I forgot all about him until I found out he was dead. And that made me think. I'd hate if people forgot about me like that. Then I started to feel guilty for thinking about myself instead of my friend."

"Everyone does that when people die," said Bethany, thinking of her mother.

"I know, but I still felt bad. So I called another guy from our Company, one of my buddies. He wasn't much help. Said the guy who'd killed himself was weak, and I should forget about him. But that was just the trouble. I'd already forgotten about him, before he killed himself. I couldn't feel the same way about it that my buddy did."

"Of course you couldn't." Bethany stroked his hand.

"Anyway, I didn't want to sit here alone tonight, thinking about that kind of thing."

"So you called me."

“I called you.” He kissed her mouth. They kept kissing, and soon Bethany forgot all he’d been telling her about remembrance and guilt. She lost herself in his body, once again helping him to affirm his life in perhaps the only way that he knew.

“Was I the only woman he called that night? Was I the one he needed, the one he chose to help him?”

I didn’t answer my mother’s question, which I knew was for herself, not me.

“I believe I was,” she said in a strong voice, with the emphasis on *believe*.

Somehow Bethany knew she was pregnant long before she had solid evidence. She knew the very next morning, in fact. At first this knowledge produced very little emotion in her. Like her love for Mike, pregnancy seemed inevitable, a fact of life to be neither desired nor feared. When her occult knowledge was confirmed with scientific certainty, what troubled her most was not the fact itself, but the isolation in which she was forced to absorb it into her reality, her sense of the future. Her school friendships, which had never been very deep to begin with, had evaporated into nothing. Her mother was in another city and no help at all. Since that night, she and Mike had been seeing each other regularly but not excessively, just as they had done last semester. But she could not tell him. She was ashamed, almost as if she’d planned the whole thing. At any rate, she was at fault – she’d known about the risk that night but hadn’t told him. Faced with his need, nothing else seemed important. Perhaps he would have taken the risk anyway, but it didn’t matter. The blame, the guilt, was all hers. And buried beneath both loneliness and guilt was another feeling, one which seemed to justify the guilt. She could

not quite name this feeling, but it was almost like triumph. Now, even if she lost Mike, she would always have a piece of him.

Maybe she would never tell him. Wouldn't it be unfair to tell him? Wouldn't it be like a trap? But he would find out anyway, if he did not end things with her soon. And since that night, *the* night, he had shown no signs of making this move. She was not capable of making it herself, not when she loved him the way she did. Her vague ideas of honor and selflessness were no match for her concrete longing to be with him.

He finally gave her an opportunity one Saturday – April 30th to be exact – when out of nowhere he asked about her future plans. They were out of town, twenty miles away at Pine Lake. The afternoon was hot, the lake very still, and they sat cross-legged on the small strip of sand that passed for a beach. More than a week had gone by since her senior recital, which was good but not great. Only Bethany knew that Mike's presence in the audience – encouraging, challenging – was what saved her from disaster. Afterward he praised her just like everyone else did, but she could tell he was disappointed. It occurred to her that she hadn't played for him since the beginning of the semester.

This trip to Pine Lake was supposed to be a reward for finishing her recital, for taking a step closer to graduation. Maybe Mike had this transition in mind when he asked the question about her plans. Or maybe he could tell that something was wrong. A dull, stifling sense of dread had buzzed in Bethany's head all day, and maybe he saw this. Maybe he asked her out of professional concern as her teacher. Maybe he was just making conversation. In any event, the tone in which he questioned her was nonchalant, mildly curious at most.

As she stared out over the flat, hazy expanse of the lake, the buzz in her head disappeared. She felt a deep calm. With an empty mind, and in a carefully controlled voice, she looked him in the face and told him.

The car was silent.

“Well?” I said.

“What?” My mother wouldn’t look at me.

“What happened next? How did he react?”

She exhaled in a slow hiss. “I’m not going to talk about that.”

“Mom. You have to.”

No answer.

“Mom.”

“I can’t.” A monotone, rehearsed voice.

“*Mom!*” I was nearly shouting. Until now I’d had no idea how much I needed to hear what happened next. A sound of throat-clearing came from the back of the car. I’d forgotten that Steve was even there. I breathed deeply and made an effort to lower my voice. “Mom. Please.”

She finally turned to me with eyes more tired than I’d ever seen them. “All right.”

She’d pictured this moment so many times. She’d imagined him reacting with shock, denial, rage, frustration, annoyance, kindness, delight – sometimes all in the same scenario. She’d imagined him begging her to get an abortion, threatening to break it off

with her if she refused. She'd imagined him getting down on one knee and proposing in a voice quavering with equal parts affection and pity. The only thing she hadn't imagined was the blank, empty look in his eyes, the absolute suppression of any real emotion.

"What do you want me to do?" His voice was mechanical, automatic.

"I—" she stammered. "Whatever you want."

"I want whatever you want." His face, unreadable, reminded her of the way he'd looked during her audition back in the fall. How long ago that seemed!

"Um. I'd like to be with you." She wouldn't allow herself to say *get married*.

"That is, if you love me." There. She'd finally said the word *love* to him.

He kissed her with lips that held none of the day's heat. Then he smiled and said, "Of course I love you," in the same voice that he might have said, "Let's go eat." His eyes were flat yellow discs. She knew he was lying, and this lie hurt far more than the truth.

In that moment of pain, Bethany understood that exposing his lie would do more than humiliate him. Telling him what she knew would destroy his entire idea of himself as a man who was strong and kind enough to help a young woman in a bad situation.

A fat gull hopped over to them. Mike shooed the bird away. Then he turned to her with his usual cheerful grin, manufactured for her benefit. "We'll get married if you want to."

"Yes." She spoke to the lake, smiling, hating herself. "I'd like that."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: PHILADELPHIA

The city was in sight. From this distance, its skyline was indistinguishable from that of every other city in the country, maybe even the world. It was the tail-end of lunch time, so the heavy traffic was just beginning to thin out. The streets were slick with the rain which no longer fell.

My mother had almost finished her story. She didn't say much about the miscarriage. "I honestly can't remember it very well," she said.

"Can't – or won't?" I said. The words were vicious, but my tone was gentle, and for once Mom understood my intentions.

"Both, I think," she answered. "It was a horrible time, worse than when your father left us. That, I was prepared for. There was enough time to get used to the idea, but not enough time for him to suffer greatly. When we lost the baby – we were going to call him Mike – it was such a shock to both of us." Her voice shook. "Most people think it's easier if the pregnancy is unplanned. My own mother . . ." She stopped and cleared her throat. "I'm surprised she managed to keep it secret from you kids all these years." She laughed bitterly. "She was ashamed, that's why."

"To be fair," I said, "so would you be if the same thing happened to me."

I thought she would be angry, but instead she just shook her head sadly. "No. Not ashamed. Disappointed, but not ashamed."

"Is there a difference?" I said.

“Yes. Shame lasts. True forgiveness is more difficult when shame is involved.”

She was in full theological mode now. I wanted to ask her if she’d ever been ashamed of me, and if there was any action that would put me beyond the possibility of her forgiveness. But I didn’t want her to lose the thread of her story.

“So then what happened?” I said.

“Like I said, I can’t remember much. I think it’s because I’ve never really talked about it before. For a long time, it felt like I was underwater. Everything muffled and blurry. When I finally came up again, Mike was still there.”

“And did he love you then?” Steve said.

Mom sighed. “I don’t know. We were closer than before, that was clear. He’d suffered, too, though not as much as I had. Later when he got sick, it was my turn to help him. And by the end he did love me. I don’t know at what point it happened. Maybe it was a gradual thing. But I know he loved me. I could tell.”

I didn’t argue with that – who could? Instead, I asked her if she had anything left to say.

“Nothing I haven’t already told you,” my mother said. “I know you think I’ve exaggerated your father’s good points, but he really was patient and brave during his illness. He hardly ever complained. Not that he didn’t have his moments of despair, like every cancer patient. But I think he didn’t want to waste the time that he had left.”

She was right. I knew this part of the story, and so did Elliot. Even Steve probably knew. How my dad kept playing music until it was no longer physically possible, how he kissed my forehead and sang to me every time Mom brought me to the hospital, and how bittersweet it was for him to learn that my mom was pregnant with

Elliot. My mother had recited these stories to us for as long as I could remember, in the same lilting voice she used when reading the Bible. Her account of my father's last days had long passed into myth, emptied of any emotion that wasn't reverence.

I couldn't think of anything else to ask my mother; besides, we were almost there. I watched the skyscrapers draw nearer against the gray background of the sky, then swoop behind us as we turned toward South Philly. Even after living in Pittsburgh for two years, the sight of a city still made the blood pump a little faster in my chest.

Grandma and Grandpa Bertram lived in a run-down neighborhood with narrow driveways and side streets. The houses varied greatly in size, shape, and composition, but all the yards were small and fenced-in, mostly un-mowed since the melting of the snow. In the sunshine that now broke through gaps in the clouds, their street was cheerful enough.

Two cars occupied their driveway, so we parked on the street. Their pale yellow house had only one floor. My father and his three younger brothers had grown up in a larger brick house closer to downtown. After Dad died, my grandparents moved here. They said they'd been planning to move to a smaller place for awhile, since all their kids had moved out of the house, but Mom said it was because they couldn't handle the memories. She always said this with an air of superiority, after which she would deliver a speech about how important it was for us to remember Dad and all his accomplishments. At any rate, the house where they used to live was torn down and replaced by the parking lot of a hospital's mental health wing.

A brick path led through the scrubby front yard to their cement stoop and olive-green front door. I arrived there first and rang the doorbell.

The door was opened by a woman I'd never seen before, a tall, statuesque elderly lady. She wore a long dress of light-blue denim with matching socks and canvas shoes. Thick white hair hung halfway down her back.

She smiled and welcomed us into the house. "Lydia is expecting you."

"Yes, I called earlier," my mother said.

"I'm her sister, Myra." She shook hands with each of us in turn.

"Please come into the living room," called a calm, deliberate voice. I'd recognize Grandma Bertram's voice sooner than her face, since I talked to her on the phone far more often than I saw her. But here she was, slim and slight in black slacks and cherry blouse, sitting very straight in a blue wing chair.

"It's good to see you all." She smiled without warmth, tucking a stray lock of dark hair behind her ear. She had my father and brother's complexion, only the slightest bit grayed with age. "I apologize for not getting up to greet you, but I'm rather tired from lack of sleep." Grandma Bertram had a careful, proper way of speaking that probably owed something to the years she spent as a welfare case worker after her children left home. Her trick of concealing her emotions most likely came from the same source. You never really knew where you stood with Grandma Bertram. In this respect she was different from Grandma Bronsky, who never left you in any doubt as to what she was thinking or feeling, and what she expected you to do about it.

After Steve introduced himself, we all sat in the living room, including Myra. She perched on a high stool near Grandma's side. As we talked she rarely spoke, just watched Grandma's face with a practiced alertness that showed no trace of anxiety. She

was simultaneously peaceful and ready for action – an oddly familiar attitude. I tried without success to remember where I'd seen it before.

“How are you, Ava?” Grandma said.

“I'm okay. Still living in Pittsburgh.”

“Is Walter here?” Mom asked.

“He went to get lunch for us at the Greek place,” Grandma said.

“He didn't have to do that,” Mom said.

“Oh, it's no trouble. He was going there anyway.”

Walter, my grandfather, was a retired dentist. He was a kind, gentle WASP from an old Philadelphia family, which, according to my mom's various sources of knowledge regarding the Bertram family, wanted to disown him for marrying Lydia Vascos. Until they all fell in love with her Greek food, that is. Then they cut him off financially, but still came sniffing around their place on holidays. Grandma's food was legendary, and despite everything else that was going on, I was disappointed that she wouldn't be cooking for us. She had made a point of doing so the other (admittedly few) times we'd visited. She must have been tired to send Grandpa for take-out.

“This is a nice place,” Steve said. He wasn't just being polite, either. Despite their tiny house's less-than-promising outer appearance, the interior was tasteful and artistic. Paintings, plants, and furniture had all been chosen and arranged to create a sense of symmetry and balance.

“Thank you,” Grandma said. “I tried to make it more livable when we first moved in, but it still needs work.” She said this as a blunt statement of fact, devoid of either pride or humility.

“Did you draw that?” Steve pointed to a chalk portrait of Grandpa in middle age, complete with large glasses and receding hairline, which hung above the bookcase.

“Yes.”

I’d seen the portrait before but never paid it much attention. I knew that Grandma had dabbled in drawing but never tried to sell any of her pieces; judging by the way she’d captured her husband’s essential, ordinary decency, her gifts would not have been appreciated in their time.

“It’s good,” I said, ashamed that I’d never complimented her on it before.

Grandma shrugged. “Walter likes it. That’s the important thing.” Again, her attitude was not so much self-deprecatory as remotely disinterested.

We sat in silence for a minute. Mom seemed a bit lost; now that we’d found Elliot and he’d banished us from his presence, her actions did not carry the same urgency. Finally she said, “Lydia, aren’t you wondering why Elliot isn’t with us?”

Grandma shook her head. “No. I assumed he was at school. He’s a senior in college, yes? At least, according to your last Christmas letter.” Was Grandma smirking at Mom’s inane year-end updates, accompanied by the seven-year-old photo of me, Mom, and Elliot wearing hideous Christmas sweaters? I couldn’t be sure.

“Yes, he’s a senior now. But he’s not at school.”

“Oh?” Grandma ignored Mom’s significant pause, refusing to take the bait.

“He’s with Richard Sterling.” Another pause to let this information sink in.

“Richard Sterling,” Grandma repeated, carefully pronouncing the name. “I’m afraid I don’t know who that is.”

“Are you sure?” Mom said.

“Yes. Did you come all this way to ask me about this person I don’t know?”

This time I was not imagining the smirk. “Why didn’t you just call me?”

“We – we wanted to see you and Walter.”

“Yes, of course.” Grandma dismissed Mom’s lie with a flick of her thin, almost skeletal, wrist. “So what is going on with Elliot and this person I don’t know?”

“Richard was a friend of Mike’s. From the Army.”

“Yes.”

“Elliot ran into him in Pinestead.”

“Yes.”

“He’s trying to convince Elliot to join the Army.”

“Yes.”

For a second I thought Mom might take the glass of water that Myra had brought her and throw it in Grandma’s face. Instead she took a deep breath and smiled sweetly.

“Well, we can’t let that happen.”

At that moment the front door opened and Grandpa Bertram walked in with a large white paper bag.

“Let me just set this down.” He placed the bag on the coffee table. My mother and I stood to receive our customary hugs from him. Steve introduced himself and shook his hand.

“Hello, Walter,” Grandma said. Grandpa leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. “Bethany was just telling us that Elliot wants to join the Army.”

“Does he, now?” Grandpa straightened up and clapped his hands together.

“Well, good for him. I can’t believe he’s already at that age.”

Mom looked like she was drowning. She had no weapons to combat what was happening here. She and my grandparents weren't even speaking the same language.

To my own surprise, I rushed to the defense. "But Grandpa, there's a war on. And do you really think Elliot's cut out for the Army?"

Steve, bless him, backed me up. "And he should at least wait until he gets his degree. He's only a few weeks away from it."

"And he's doing it for the wrong reasons," I said.

"I wonder what the right reasons are," Myra said, almost under her breath. These were the first words she'd spoken in a long time. She evidently did not expect me to answer because she went on to say, louder this time, "My husband was in the Army." Although we all stared at her for several seconds, she did not elaborate.

"So was mine," Mom finally said. She aimed a ferocious look at Grandma, who said nothing.

Grandpa cleared his throat. "Let's have some lunch. We'll eat out here, I think. Myra, can you help me with the plates and silverware?"

Myra rose. Her movements were graceful as she followed my grandfather into the kitchen. She stood sedately beside him while he opened the cupboards. I was surprised to see her reach over and rub his back as he leaned forward to grab the plates. I looked around to see if anyone else had noticed. Mom was still staring down Grandma, while Steve was examining the contents of the white paper bag.

"Here we are." Grandpa and Myra returned to the living room and distributed plates and silverware. Grandpa passed around the take-out bag, starting with my mother.

“Gyros for everyone.” When Myra gave the bag to Grandma, she passed it right back to her without taking anything.

While not as spectacular as my grandmother’s food, the gyros were still delicious. As we ate, Grandpa made small talk with me and Steve. Mom, I could tell, was using this time to re-think her strategy. She finished her food and waited for a lull in the conversation. This time, she ignored my grandmother altogether, instead addressing Grandpa on the subject of Richard Sterling.

“Sounds familiar,” Grandpa said. “Mike may have mentioned a friend named Richard, but I don’t know anything about him. Didn’t even know he was in the Army.” He swallowed his final bite of gyro. “And now you say he wants Elliot to join?”

“Yes,” Mom said. “He has a lot of influence over Elliot because of his acquaintance with Mike. He’s convinced Elliot that it’s more important than anything else he’s doing right now.”

“And you don’t think it is?” Grandpa leaned forward, bald head shining, more agitated than I’d ever seen him. He’d served in WWII, his two oldest sons in Vietnam. He considered himself a patriot.

Mom locked her hands together in her lap before she spoke. “That’s not the issue. You heard what Ava said. He might think he’s joining for the greater good, but he’s young and confused. I think he’s doing it to get back at me.”

“Get back at you for what?” Grandpa said.

Mom’s eyelids fluttered, but she was prepared for this. “Richard told him about my first pregnancy.”

My grandfather's eyes slid over to Grandma, but she kept hers on my mother. I thought I saw a smile flicker in them.

Grandpa turned his attention back to my mom. "And you never told him."

"No," Mom said, meeting his gaze with difficulty. "And I never told Ava either."

I avoided my grandfather's eyes by staring at his chalk portrait. I suddenly wanted no part of this conversation.

"So Elliot is angry." Grandpa's voice was matter-of-fact, neutral.

"I think so."

"And is that the only reason he wants to join?"

"I don't know, but I think it's a big one."

Even as I spoke up, I wasn't sure why I was doing so. "I think he wants to be like Dad."

Grandpa leaned back in his chair and stroked his chin. "I've definitely heard of worse reasons for signing up."

"But he's *not* Mike," Mom said.

I wondered if she really believed that. Regardless, I chimed in, "He doesn't belong in the Army."

Grandpa sighed. "You're probably right. You know him much better than I do. But what do you want us to do about it?"

"Something!" Mom was on her feet now, red-faced and shouting. "How can you two be so – I don't know what! You lost a son to war! Do you want the same thing to happen to me?" She began to cry.

Grandpa sighed and looked at the floor. My mother's sobs filled the room. Grandpa hauled himself up from his chair, went to my mother, and touched her shoulder awkwardly. "Of course not, Bethany. I just don't know what we can do. Please calm down."

Mom shook off his touch and backed away from him. She sank back into her chair and buried her face in her hands. The rest of us were silent, staring straight ahead as people do when someone in their midst cannot be comforted.

Mom shuddered and lifted her head, face streaked with tears. "I just didn't know what else to do. I don't know what I expected. Maybe that you knew something about Richard, or about Mike. Some information we could carry back to Elliot."

Grandpa shook his head. "Like I said, I don't know anything about Richard. And you knew Mike as well as anyone."

My grandfather was a generous person.

"I'll tell you what," Grandpa said. "There is something I can do for you, even if it's not what you came for. We have a few boxes of Mike's old things, from when he was a kid, in the storage room. We didn't even know we had them until we moved. We kept meaning to give them to you, but we forgot every time you came to visit. Would you like to come and look through them?"

"Of course," Mom said quietly.

"They're on the top shelf of the closet, though, and I can't lift them out with my bad back."

"I'll do it," Steve volunteered.

“I’ll stay here and keep Grandma company,” I said. I wasn’t feeling particularly sentimental about my father just then, not after hearing Mom’s story. Looking through his childhood junk was the last thing I felt like doing at the moment.

“I’ll go fix us some dessert,” said Myra. She went out to the kitchen while Mom and Steve followed Grandpa through the hall and into one of the three bedrooms.

I was alone with my grandmother, who was still sitting very straight in her chair, but with closed eyes. I decided to let her sleep, since she was so tired. I started browsing through a small stack of paperbacks on the end table, most of them historical novels and legal thrillers, which my grandfather enjoyed.

Among the books was a slim, pale-blue pamphlet. The author was someone named Barbara Karnes, and the title was *Gone from my Sight: The Dying Experience*. On the cover was a simple sketch, in black ink, of a sailboat moving toward the horizon, leaving behind a crooked wake.

I looked up from the pamphlet at Grandma, whose eyes were now open and watching me. “I don’t have much use for that kind of thing myself,” she said, “but Walter seem to take some comfort in it.” She paused. “You won’t tell your mother, will you? I don’t want a lot of fussing around. She’ll find out soon enough anyway.”

“No, I won’t tell her.” I didn’t know what else to say. I was more curious than sad. I’d never known Grandma that well, but now I wanted to.

Pans rattled out in the kitchen. “Did Myra used to be a nurse?” I asked.

“Oh, yes. She does a good job. More importantly, she’ll be good for Walter.”

“Is that all right with you?”

“It’s the main reason I asked her to come stay with us. She’s been here for six months now. They seem to get on well. Her husband has been dead five years, and her children have all moved away. She’s healthy, and six years younger than me. No reason they should both be alone, now is there?”

“I guess not.” I felt ashamed that I’d only ever appreciated Grandma Bertram for her cooking. And even now, I was about to use her for my own ends – to understand the past, to finish the story which had been growing around me all week. And I had a suspicion. I couldn’t help myself.

“Grandma, do you think that you knew my dad better than anyone?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

She closed her eyes, then opened them. “I didn’t know the details of his life. He didn’t tell me everything. Boys don’t tell things to their mothers – not when they’re older. I wasn’t lying when I said I didn’t know who Richard Sterling was. But I understood Mike. Who he was. He was my first-born. We were very much alike.”

My mother’s voice, high and excited, came from the storage room. Grandma’s head bobbed in that direction. Then she turned back to me and said, “We never believed in God. We believed in ourselves, and in making the most of our lives.”

“What about art?” I said.

“Art?” Grandma looked confused for a second, then gave a tired wave. “Oh yes, of course. Art. Music. That’s important as well.” For the first time since we’d arrived, she sank back into her chair.

Afraid I was losing her, I changed the subject. “Did Dad love the Army? Did he have a good time at war?”

She sat up again. “Is that what this Richard told you?”

“Yeah.”

She looked thoughtful. “He never complained. But I wouldn’t say he had a good time. Your dad was the type to put all of himself into whatever he was doing. I think he felt that way about fighting and even killing. It was a job to him, and he did it well. But he wasn’t one of those who came back and didn’t want to do anything else. Teaching was perfect for him. He was always a leader, but music came more naturally to him than fighting. He never bragged about anything he did in the war.”

Not to you, I thought. I switched to a topic I sensed she knew more about. “Did Dad ever love my mom?”

This might have been the first time I’d ever seen Grandma look surprised.

“That’s quite a thing to be asking me.”

“I want to know. And please, no sugarcoating. I’m old enough to take it.”

“Just out of curiosity, what did Bethany tell you?”

“She says he didn’t really love her when they first got married. But she thinks he loved her later. She doesn’t know exactly when it happened, though.”

“Well, I can do her one better there.” Grandma’s smile was genuine, but slightly smug.

“You mean he did love her? And you know when it happened?”

“Of course I know when.”

When Bethany handed him their newborn daughter, Mike didn't feel anything at first. She was impossibly small, and bald, and looked just like every other baby. Her umbilical cord had been snipped off, and she'd been wiped clean and placed in her mother's arms. Despite being weak and covered in sweat, Bethany looked happy – although she didn't have that ecstatic glow that women were supposed to have after giving birth. Mike thought he knew why; some small part of her was still focused on their lost son. She'd shut down completely after the miscarriage and had just started acting like a living person when she found out she was pregnant again. Her reaction to the news was pleased but cool, like she didn't want to get her hopes up again. But she was still young and by nature optimistic – one of the things he liked about her – so she handled this new pregnancy like a champ, growing visibly happier as the due date approached.

And now they had a daughter. She'd just stopped crying, and Bethany took advantage of that opportunity to hand her off to him. The baby squinted and moved her mouth. He thought he'd be awkward handling her, since he'd hardly been near a baby since his youngest brother was born, but she fit naturally in the crook of his arm, close to his chest.

He certainly wasn't opposed to babies. Even under the circumstances, he'd been a little bit excited about Bethany's first pregnancy. Passing on the DNA and all that; isn't that what we were supposed to do, our natural instinct? He reasoned with himself that fathering a child was only a matter of time for someone with his sexual record. Better to do it while he was still young and had the energy for kids. Before the miscarriage, he'd imagined teaching things to the boy, like how to throw a ball and play the piano. But

still, the kid hadn't been quite real to him, not the way he was to Bethany, and it was hard to get too upset when she lost him. He was mostly just worried about her; she took it so hard that for a long time he didn't know if she'd ever be the same person again.

The baby in his arms blinked at him, and that's when the reality sunk in. The reality of her. This new person in his life. Who already – he could see it now in her cheeks and nose and chin – looked like Bethany. Beautiful Bethany.

“Are we still going to name her after your mother?” Bethany sat up in bed and waited for an answer.

Mike shrugged, looked down at the baby again. “She doesn't look like a Lydia.” He stroked his daughter's ridiculously soft cheek. At his touch, she made a sound. Just air escaping from her mouth, but it was beautiful, like singing. It reminded him of something he'd read.

“How about Ava? It's Farsi for ‘pleasant sound.’”

“I like that,” Bethany said. She smiled and waved at the baby. “Hello, Ava.” Then she smiled up at Mike and stretched out her arms for the baby, for Ava, and that moment washed away any stray regret he may have felt over marrying her. In that moment when he handed her the baby, he fully loved Ava's mother for the first time, and he knew that he would keep loving her for a good long while.

Grandma Bertram sat with her hands folded in her lap. She looked very tired, very far away.

I'd already known that my father named me, and what my name meant. But Grandma's revelation about my birth as the starting point of my father's love for my

mother – that was new. I didn't know if it added up with everything else, if I could trust it.

From the bedroom I could hear the shuffling of boxes, Mom thanking Grandpa. We didn't have much time.

“Grandma,” I said, “did he tell you that's when it happened?”

Her eyes traveled in the direction of the bedroom, then refocused on me. “He didn't have to. It was obvious. Your mother must have been blind not to see it.”

“Selective blindness,” I mumbled, just as Mom and Steve and Grandpa entered the room, arms laden with boxes.

Grandma Bertram closed her eyes and let her head fall back against her chair.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE POCONO MOUNTAINS

That evening we were back at Pocono Haven. While Steve was in the shower, I slipped out into the darkness and knocked on my mother's cabin door. She answered wearing an old blue-and-white flannel as a nightshirt, which made her look like a young girl. Her trim legs were exposed to mid-thigh and covered in blonde down.

I came in and sat on the cot. "I've never seen you wear that shirt before," I said.

"I found it in one of the boxes Walter gave me." She sat next to me. "It was your father's," she continued, as if I didn't know.

"It looks good on you," I said.

She made a clicking noise with her tongue. "There it is, the famous Ava sarcasm."

"No, I mean it," I said.

"Well, thanks." She gestured at the pile of clothes, books, and records stowed beneath the bunk bed next to several stacked cardboard boxes. "I'll have to sort through all that tomorrow. Something to do while waiting."

"Yeah." I wasn't sure what to say next. Honestly, I wasn't sure what I was doing here.

Mom was looking at me intently. "Is there something else you wanted to ask me?"

"Not really. Maybe. Yeah, I guess. Do you remember when I was born?"

She laughed for perhaps the first time since Elliot had left Pinestead; being surrounded by my father's property must have given her strength. "You don't forget something like that. Believe me, you'll find out. You tend to block out the labor pains, but unless you're heavily sedated, which I wasn't, you remember what comes after. You remember holding your baby for the first time." She sighed and shook her head. "It's not really something I can describe without getting sentimental, and I know you hate that."

I looked at the floor. "I'm not as cynical as you think I am."

"Well, you've certainly done your best to make me think that you are." Her words came faster and louder as she launched into a monologue that was familiar to us both. "I've tried to know you, Ava. Honestly, I have. But you cut me out of your life as soon as you became an adult, and –"

"Mom." I put up my hand, cutting her off. "We've been down this road before. It leads nowhere. You accuse me, I accuse you. Let's take a different track this time."

She didn't look at me. When she spoke, her voice was barely audible. "I'm not sure I know how."

"That makes two of us," I said.

We sat in silence, avoiding each other's eyes.

"I don't even know what's true," I said finally.

I expected her to say something about God, faith, or love. Instead she said, "I know what I know, and you know what you know."

"So what do we do with that?" I said.

She raised an eyebrow at me. “We try to have some knowledge in common.” She was being a teacher now. “Then we build on that.”

This was supposed to be my opening to tell her things I knew: how Elliot felt trapped, how I loved Drew, how I was getting closer to Steve. What my grandmother had said. But I feared her disapproval, or worse, her misunderstanding. I was accustomed to these things from her – I’d even provoked them with my exaggerations and lies – but I didn’t want that now. Not anymore. I looked down at my hands and coughed.

“You say you’re not as cynical as I think you are.” Mom’s voice shook; she was no longer the Professor. “But I’m not as narrow and rigid as *you* think *I* am.”

Our eyes met and held: blue swallowed gray swallowed blue, in an endless watery loop. We would both drown if I didn’t throw out a life preserver.

“For what it’s worth,” I said, “Grandma Bertram told me that he did love you.”

The blue dissolved into surf, and the gray followed.

That night I couldn’t sleep. I lay nestled against Steve, listening to his slow, rhythmic breathing. Of course we couldn’t spend the remainder of our lives chastely sharing a bed – I pictured this with a wry smile – but for now it felt right. Comfort in solidarity.

Comforting, yes, but sleep still wouldn’t come. My mind was filled with my parents’ past, with all of the different, interlocking versions. Mom’s. Grandma Bertram’s. Richard Sterling’s. What could I make of all this?

As quietly as possible, I left Steve's side and climbed down the bunk ladder. I retrieved my backpack from its spot on the floor and took it over to the cot. Sitting there cross-legged, I fished out my black-and-white composition book, filled with self-satisfied comic sketches and still-born thrillers, the margins and half-pages at the ends of these pieces dripping with aggressively bad poetry and desperate rants about Drew. I'd wasted no space, and this notebook, my latest in a series of nearly identical composition books stretching back to my childhood, was barely half full.

I found a pen in my backpack and switched on a floor lamp next to the cot. Starting at the first blank page, I sat and wrote through the night.

It was just past dawn when I stopped. I pulled on my hooded sweatshirt and stepped out into the chilly gray light. Birds called to one another, or to the surrounding woods, or maybe to the morning itself. The trees and rocks and dirt paths answered with the silence necessary to all music.

I sat on a boulder at the edge of the woods, breathing deeply, filling my lungs with the morning. The sky grew lighter as I hugged my knees and thought about what I'd just written. The story of my parents? Not exactly, although that's what I'd set out to do. The emotions were the same, but the situation, the characters, were altered. Just an outline, really, far from perfect, far from finished. But this was different from anything I'd written before. Still a manipulation of reality, but it felt like more than that. Partially it was like singing, but there were other voices in there besides my own, and there was something else – maybe a kernel of truth? I wasn't sure. The only thing I was sure of was that I'd finally written a story.

I went back into the cabin and fell asleep on the cot.

That day became a cool one of spotty sunshine and fast-moving clouds, a day my mother spent holed up in her cabin, sifting through memorabilia. I wanted to talk to her again, to tell her more of what mattered, but she was far too occupied with Dad's past, and I wasn't sure I was ready.

Steve and I hiked around. We didn't talk much. After years of knowing each other, the past few days had finally driven us to that point of intimacy where speech is unnecessary.

That evening during a big steakhouse dinner, we all agreed that returning to Richard's place early in the morning was the best course of action. My mother was even willing to skip Mass to do so.

During the night I could hear heavy rain on the roof of our cabin, where Steve and I still slept in the same bed, holding each other – but no more than that. The rain stopped by morning. After we checked out of our cabins, Steve called the number Richard had given him and left a message saying that we'd be there around 10:00.

Then we were on our way.

Mom sat up very straight in the driver's seat, mouth pursed, chin thrust forward. Although she was right next to me, I couldn't tell what she was feeling. Probably anxious to bring her boy back home, but afraid he wouldn't leave with us. Or maybe she was drawing comfort from the boxes in the trunk, packed with treasures from her husband's past. Maybe she was thinking about what I'd told her the other night and gathering strength from this confirmation of her belief in Dad's love.

I couldn't be sure. At the moment my mother eluded me, although I could usually read her. She was, after all, someone I'd known since the beginning.

Yet for all her familiarity she'd always been strange to me, like seeing my own image in rippling water. Maybe she saw me the same way, but even more distorted. The story she'd told about her and my father, no matter how incomplete or warped, was at least an attempt. And there would be time for me to continue my own attempts, which, however stumbling, would confer their own manner of grace.

The tires rumbled on the highway as the land opened up to green mountains and valleys. By now the scenery was more familiar, less showy. I'd come to terms with this beauty, and why not? It was just as real as anything else. I opened my window to the morning and drank in the smell of damp soil, of things being born. I looked back at Steve, who shrugged as if to say, "This is it; all we can do is try."

I smiled at him and faced front again. We were gaining altitude, but I was suddenly in no hurry to get back to Elliot – even with my life on hold back in Pittsburgh, even with my own fears about my brother's safety. As much as I knew this feeling wouldn't last, at that moment I wanted nothing more than for the three of us to leave everything behind and keep driving into some fresh, empty landscape. What might happen there, I could only imagine.

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