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DON'T GO UNLESS YOU MEAN IT: A NOVEL
WITH CRITICAL AFTERWORD:
HETERONORMATIVE MASCULINE PERFORMANCE IN
CONTEMPORARY FICTIONS OF THE RURAL
AMERICAN SOUTH

By

Nathan N. Gower
B.A., Campbellsville University, 2006
M.F.A., Spalding University, 2008

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
In Humanities

Department of Comparative Humanities
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY

May 2017

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A Dissertation Approved on

March 29, 2017

By the following Dissertation Committee:

Dissertation Director

Dr. Annette Allen

Prof. Brad Watson

Dr. Michael Williams

Prof. Paul Griner

DEDICATION

To Rochelle, for your fierce love and support, always.

To Ariana, Elin, Avelyn, and Finnegan for making all the work worthwhile.

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I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the many people who helped make this dissertation possible, a fraction of which I will mention specifically here. First, thank you to my dissertation director, Dr. Annette Allen, for being a constant buoy throughout my doctoral coursework and candidacy, and for being the best type of scholar possible: one that is simultaneously accessible and brilliant.

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Finally, I'd like to thank the Appalachian College Association, whose generous support of my project made it possible for me to complete my research and writing well ahead of what would have otherwise been possible.

ABSTRACT

DON'T GO UNLESS YOU MEAN IT: A NOVEL

WITH CRITICAL AFTERWORD:

HETERONORMATIVE MASCULINE PERFORMANCE IN
CONTEMPORARY FICTIONS OF THE RURAL
AMERICAN SOUTH

Nathan Gower

March 29, 2017

This dissertation consists of a full-length novel for an adult audience as well as a substantial critical afterword to elucidate and complicate germane thematic concerns of the creative artifact.

The novel, leaning on the rich traditions and many genre conventions of fictions of the American south, tells the story of an unlikely underground coal miner in Blue Banks, a fictional southern town set in the caverns and rolling hills of the western Kentucky coal fields. The narrative follows its fish-out-of-water protagonist, Cody Culver, a fledgling academic who thought he had escaped his fate as a third-generation coal miner when he left Kentucky for graduate school in Chicago, as he finds himself back in the small mining town of his youth, poverty stricken and desperate for work to support his new wife and baby on-the-way. When Cody meets a fellow outsider—the enigmatic Hunter McCready, who has just been released from prison for the attempted murder of Cody's older brother, Luke—they form a quick, unsettling bond that could turn Cody against his family and the close-knit mining community at large. When the

friendship eventually becomes sexual, the affair threatens Cody's reputation, his marriage, and even his life.

Along the way, Cody's identity is complicated, especially as he learns that Hunter McCready has Klinefelter Syndrome, a condition in which a phenotypic male has an XXY chromosome in place of the much more common XY (male) or XX (female); in other words, Hunter McCready is simultaneously male, female, and neither. If Cody Culver is attracted to, and in love with, someone who is "invisibly" intersex, what does this mean for Cody himself—a cisgender man—concerning his sexuality? Is Cody gay, straight, bisexual, or something else altogether? In what ways does it matter? Who gets to make that decision?

These rhetorical questions lead directly into the critical afterword, which is divided into three subtitled sections. The first section synthesizes work by Foucault, Butler, and Blank to consider constructed binaries of sexual orientation, gender, and biological sex. The second section suggests how those constructs interact with the rural American South, giving particular focus to conservative Christian influence. The third section uses examples from selected contemporary literature, including my own creative artifact, to argue the importance of challenging character archetypes in new fictions of the rural American South.

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CHAPTER 1

The truck's hazard lights blinked in steady cadence, their red glow slinging Cody's shadow against the tree line of the woods that banked the two-lane highway. He had walked behind the truck to check for damage, but instead found the dying deer itself, its mangled body meshed into the metal of the trailer hitch bar. Part machine, part beast. Its hind legs kicked against the box trailer, its bloodied face rested against the truck's tailgate. Hunks of its entrails hung down from its gaping belly and scraped the pavement. Cody lit a cigarette because he couldn't think without one. They were just four miles from reaching the Blue Banks city limits, and now this.

Maisie stepped down out of the passenger side of the truck into the punchy October air. She stretched her legs and threw on Cody's old University of Chicago hoodie, which she had claimed as her own shortly after they started dating two years ago. She flipped her dyed-purple hair into a messy bun and made her way towards the back of the truck. Cody held out a gentle hand to stop her before she saw anything.

"Hey, you might not want to go back there. It's bad." He took a long drag on his cigarette, and turned to blow the smoke opposite from Maisie. He'd been good about not smoking around her for the last couple of months, but he hadn't had a cigarette since they left Chicago six hours ago, and he needed something to clear his head so he could figure out what to do. Maisie held onto his hand, but angled around him to look behind the truck.

“Geez!” she said. “Mother of Ghandi!” She looked at Cody and then back to the mutilated animal. He took a final drag on the cigarette and flicked it into the gravel on the shoulder. The dark of the night whispered all around. It was well past 1:00am, and only a couple of cars had driven past them since the accident.

“We must have dragged the thing two hundred feet,” Cody said. The deer let out a pathetic moan, kicked against the trailer one more time, and then fell limp. It was still breathing, but it wouldn’t be long now. Cody fumbled with his cell phone, trying to come up with a plan. He had half a mind to snap some grisly pictures so he could post them online for his friends, but then he looked back at the deer and then at Maisie, and he felt bad for one of them but couldn’t quite figure out which one. “We’re gonna have to cut it off the truck somehow,” he said. He tried to think where they had packed the kitchen knives back in the U-Haul trailer, but Maisie had made sure everything was stacked so tightly back there—Tetris skills, she had said—that it would likely take a few hours to find the right box and then put everything back in place.

“You think she’s in pain?” Maisie asked, edging toward the deer’s face. “I mean, you can’t just cut her up. She’s still breathing.” Cody hardly ever noticed Maisie’s British accent anymore, but now that they were out of Chicago, it struck him as dissonant against the open Kentucky country of Blue Banks County. He felt a sudden pang of regret well up in him. This would not be an easy transition. Maisie inched her hand closer and closer, finally letting it rest on the deer’s nose. The animal whimpered, but didn’t flinch.

“Look, I’m gonna have to call somebody or we’ll be stuck here for hours,” Cody said. As he walked back toward the cab of the truck, he could hear Maisie humming softly to the deer as she stroked its nose. She was going to be an amazing mother, Cody

was sure of that much. In the two years that he had known her, Cody had witnessed it countless times: Maisie's ability to calm and soothe others, even if she was on the brink of her own personal crisis. She had a way of attracting the dying deer of the world, and she always knew just what to do when they found her.

Maisie hopped back into the cab of the truck and scooted next to Cody. She tucked her knees up into the oversized UChicago sweater.

"You get ahold of anyone?" she asked.

"Luke," said Cody. "He just got off swing shift at the mine. Said he'll be here in a few minutes." Maisie closed her eyes and rested her head against the back of the seat.

"You feeling sick again?" Cody asked. She nodded, so Cody eased her head down into his lap and rubbed her temples. Since about four weeks into the pregnancy, Maisie had unrelenting nausea. She threw up three or four times a day and had lost six pounds: enough to worry her doctor and land her in the hospital after she couldn't keep any liquids down for three days straight. Now that she had made it to thirteen weeks she was showing some improvement, but the slightest trigger could send her into a puking frenzy. The smell of cookie dough. The sight of raw meat. A mouthful of Greek yogurt. She had always suffered from carsickness on road trips, but now that the problem was compounded by *the fetus*—that's what they called it, always with a smile—she could only travel at night.

The glint of Luke's headlights caught Cody's eye in the rearview mirror as his older brother pulled his Jeep onto the shoulder of the road. Cody hadn't planned on seeing Luke until after he and Maisie had settled in, until he could work up the nerve to

deal with all of Luke's inevitable proddings about his failures. About how Cody had to come crawling back to Blue Banks begging for work. How the big-time college man was knocked out of the ivory tower and smacked down into the belly of the underground coalmines. But the deer's kamikaze mission had expedited the meeting, and now Cody had to posture himself to make it through the encounter the best he could.

"He's here," Cody said to Maisie. She was drifting in and out of sleep. "You just rest here while we take care of the deer." Maisie pulled herself out of Cody's lap.

"No. I should meet him. I want to meet him," Maisie said.

"No you don't," Cody said. "Not tonight. Not like this." He swung out of the cab before Maisie could protest. Luke stood at the back of the truck next to the animal, shining a flashlight on the corpse. Cody edged along the side of the truck and approached with the same caution he always used with his older brother. Luke Culver was a deep well, and Cody had learned long ago that it was always best to dip the first bucket with caution.

"You know what I said to myself this morning?" Luke asked. He flashed the light into Cody's eyes and then flipped it back down at the deer. "I said to myself, hey, you know what would be great? It sure would be special if Cody rolled in to town a week before he said he would, just drove right through the middle of the night without telling nobody." Luke swung his body forward, and that's when Cody first noticed the fifth of Maker's Mark gripped in his right hand. "And then I thought, you know, I'd be so happy if he exploded a damn animal all over the back end of his truck so he could call me up at two in the morning to come rescue his sorry ass." Luke stepped into the divide between them and sucked down a long shot from the bourbon bottle. The hazard lights strobed

against Luke's face, giving Cody just enough light to make out the contours of his pronounced cheeks. A scar ran the length of his face down his right jawline, the raised skin glistening in the red glow. He had lost a good deal of weight since Cody had seen him six months ago. He leaned in close to Cody's face, his breath so saturated with alcohol that the slightest spark could have set them both ablaze.

Cody wanted to say something, anything to diffuse the space between them, but before he could get out the first word, Luke broke into wild laughter. He stepped back and doubled-over against the truck. "C'mon, Cody," said Luke, trying to reign himself in, "I'm just messing with you, man." He threw back another shot from the bottle, wiped his mouth, and howled. Cody shifted his weight and tried to laugh, but what came out was something like a nervous sigh. Luke thrust the bourbon bottle into Cody's grip.

"Here, college man. Drink yourself some courage and let's go slice us up Bambi over there." Luke stumbled back toward his Jeep. Cody looked toward the cab of the truck and saw Maisie watching them from the rear window. He shrugged and blew her a kiss. She swiped at the air and caught the kiss, then made a show of sticking it in her pocket for safe keeping. Once again, it was Maisie to the rescue. If Cody had to shred up a deer carcass with his intoxicated brother at two in the morning, at least he could look at Maisie and know that somehow the world still made sense. He smiled at her, and then turned around to find Luke extending the handle of a cleaning knife toward him. Cody took the knife, and the two of them went to work on the deer.

"So where's your, uh, you know—your European?" Luke asked. He tried to slip into an exaggerated British accent, but he sounded more like an Irish-Australian hybrid, with a bit of Canadian mixed in for good measure. "Is she taking a spot of tea in the

truck? Having some crumpets and biscuits, eh?” Cody just laughed because there wasn’t much else to do concerning Luke. Bourbon or not, if Luke found his way into one of his “high spells”—Cody might have told him they were manic periods, but Luke was never one to listen to that *psychoanalytic horseshit*—you just had to go along for the ride. Cody knew he would come back down soon enough, and that’s when you really had to worry.

Cody poked at the deer while Luke made broad, sweeping cuts across the flesh. When the body had almost broken free, Luke grabbed the deer’s head, pressed his left foot against the truck’s bumper to brace himself, and yanked back. The carcass swung free in one clean motion and splatted the concrete. Blood pooled around Cody’s shoes, and that was that.

“How’s that for fun on a Friday night?” Cody said. “Now you get on back home to Candace before she thinks you’re out messing around on her.” Cody smiled, but Luke clenched his jaw into a rigid line. He swiped the bourbon bottle up from the ground a few feet away, lifted it to his lips, but then thought better of it and eased the bottle down onto the hood of his Jeep. Cody looked away. He knew nothing about Luke’s life anymore, nothing about Candace. Not even an hour into his new life back in Blue Banks and he had crossed a line he didn’t know existed. “Hey, look, I didn’t mean to—”

“Grab the legs down there and help me swing this thing into your truck,” said Luke. He bent down and lifted the deer’s head.

“You’re serious? I’m not putting a mangled deer corpse into my truck.”

“Of course you are,” Luke said. “I don’t know how y’all do things in Chicagoland, but us shoeless, backward Kentucky folks ain’t gonna let all that meat go to waste. I’ll come take it off your hands tomorrow.”

Cody looked at his truck window and waved at Maisie. He had brought her to Blue Banks. No turning back now. He let out a sigh, gripped the hind end of the deer, and heaved the carcass into the bed of his truck. Welcome home, he thought to himself. Welcome home.

Cody drives through Blue Banks. Or is it Chicago? No, a deserted highway. He notices the deer sitting in the passenger seat of his truck. He lets go of the wheel, punches at the deer to keep it away. The deer is strapped in with the seatbelt. Cody reaches back for the wheel, but it's gone. Maisie is on her knees before him, soft curls of purple hair brushing his legs. She kisses his inner thighs. Relax baby, she says, it's just a deer. The truck zooms on through the highway as she kisses. Cody tries to push the brakes but the pedals are gone. Relax baby, she says. Do you think she's hurt? Just enjoy the ride. When did she start sounding so Canadian? Cody looks to the passenger seat. Luke holds the deer. He tilts the animal's head back and slits its throat. Maisie looks up and gags. Dry heaves. Here it comes—

Cody startled awake and pushed himself off the sweat-drenched pillow. He heard Maisie retching somewhere—in the bathroom, he hoped—but he was still trying to take in his surroundings and remember where they were. Back in Chicago they had lived in a closet-sized studio apartment a block from the UChicago campus. Barely enough space for a futon, a writing desk, and Maisie's plants. Here, in the ramshackle farmhouse on Old Herrodsburg Road on the outskirts of Blue Banks, they had a maze of sprawling rooms, an embarrassment of space they could never fill with their smattering of mutt furniture and disparate knick-knacks. Nearly all of the house was badly damaged or in

disrepair; but they were living rent-free thanks to an agreement with Cody's mother, who inherited the dilapidated house at her uncle's passing nearly a decade ago. Even with the two large bedrooms upstairs being practically inaccessible—severe water damage from a leaking roof and years of neglect and vacancy had left most of the drywall and flooring a rotting, brittle mess—the house swallowed them up in the 2,000 square feet of the first floor. The house echoed with the clicks of shoes against the hardwood, it creaked when they moved through the solid-wood door frames from room to room. They didn't yet have the electricity turned on, so last night they had simply stumbled through the labyrinth of the foreign house, dumping the humble contents of their collective life onto the middle of the living room floor.

Cody stretched his back until he felt the satisfying *pop* of his spine, then rolled off the futon mattress, which they had thrown on the floor in the corner of the master bedroom when they were finally ready to crash around 5:00am. The morning sunlight poured into the room through the dust-streaked windows. The cream-colored walls were filthy and mottled with nail holes where pictures had once hung. Dingy baseboards. Cracked drywall. Cobwebs streaming down from the blades of a tarnished, once-gold ceiling fan. Cody was never the handyman like Luke was, but he was going to have to make this work somehow. He grabbed his phone from the floor to check the time, but the battery was dead. He peeled off his t-shirt and used it to wipe the streams of sweat from his chest and back of his neck. The crisp October air seeped in from the broken window seals and enveloped the room, and Cody stood in just his boxer briefs and let the coolness overtake him.

Maisie hobbled back into the bedroom wearing Cody's UChicago sweatshirt stretched down over her panties and the tops of her bird-bone legs. Her purple bangs swooshed across her face. "I was half-asleep and couldn't find the bathroom," she said, "so I puked in the kitchen. Mostly in the sink." Cody tucked Maisie's bangs behind her ear and kissed her forehead. He slid around behind her and slipped his hands up under the front of the oversized sweatshirt and let them rest across her bare stomach. She wasn't showing yet, but Cody could feel the subtle contour of a baby bump, her skin firm and taut just below her belly button.

"What does the fetus want for breakfast today?" he asked. As soon as the words came out they didn't feel quite right. They had joked this way since the *plus sign* first appeared on the pregnancy test, but that was back in Chicago, back where it was safe and they knew how to manage their own shifting lives. Maisie's body felt rigid in his arms, and suddenly the house seemed more vast and empty than before. "You feeling okay about all this?" Cody asked. "I mean, I know we agreed this would be best. But now we're here and it's real, and I just need to know you're okay with it." Maisie wrapped her arms across Cody's hands. It wasn't much, but it was all the assurance she could give him at the moment.

"Waffles," she said. She turned around and kissed Cody's bare chest. "The fetus demands waffles."

Cody flipped through the familiar FM radio stations of his old hometown as he pulled his truck onto Pike Lane, one of the two main drags of Blue Banks. The half-broken antenna on his '96 Chevy S10 only picked up five stations: three contemporary

country, one classic rock, and one gospel/country hybrid. Cody was about to flip to the AM dial to find some talk radio when Johnny Cash and June Carter started crooning “It Ain’t Me, Babe.” He cranked up the volume and let those two give him a guilty-pleasure welcome back into Kentucky life. Pike Lane stretched through the entire west side of town—the *old end* as the locals called it—and eventually joined up with the highway that would take you across the Ohio river and into Indiana. It ran parallel with the three-block stretch of downtown Blue Banks with its connecting storefront brick buildings. Most of the old downtown shops were boarded up and dank with disuse, but a few staples of the community clung to the old roundabout with the same stubbornness that characterized much of the little river town.

Cody set his blinker and turned onto Third Street, which took him past the remaining stalwarts of downtown: Chuck’s Hardware and Fine Gifts, Dreyer Brothers Furniture, and River View Bakery. At the end of the block, Cody squealed into a parking spot in front of Leon’s Family Restaurant. If the fetus wanted waffles, the fetus would get the best buttermilk waffles in western Kentucky.

Cody swung open the heavy door, and the welcome bells clanked against the glass, sending him back to the Saturday mornings of his childhood. His dad, known throughout Blue Banks as Coaldust Culver, made Saturday morning breakfast at Leon’s with his two boys a nonnegotiable weekend tradition until he died ten years ago when Cody was fourteen. “I work 70 hours a week underground,” Coaldust would tell anyone who would listen. “When I come out of the hole on the weekend, you bet your bottom dollar I’m going to spend it with my boys, whether they like it or not.” It was his unwieldy mantra of sorts, and one he stuck with for Cody’s entire childhood. Leon’s on

Saturday morning, bowling at Spinning Pins Lanes on Saturday night, and church on Sunday. A small chalkboard sign still hung behind the counter at Leon's with 382 scrawled in big, blue numerals: the number of weeks in a row Coaldust Culver sat in his front corner booth on Saturday mornings, a stack of buttermilk waffles in front of him and his two boys across from him. Leon presented the sign as a gift to the family at Coaldust's funeral, but Luke took it back the next week and hung it in its rightful place.

The restaurant was mostly empty. It was getting to be midmorning—the Kentucky Wildcats wall clock hanging behind the register said 9:45—and the breakfast regulars at Leon's were not the kind of folks to whittle away a perfectly good fall Saturday sitting inside a diner. A smattering of seniors sat at a row of tables against the back wall drinking black coffee and prattling about last night's Blue Banks High football game. A group of miners occupied a round table at the center of the restaurant. Cody had left town six years ago, but it was still just as easy for him to spot a gaggle of miners in Blue Banks, mostly because at least a few of them would be wearing some bit of clothing with the distinctive logo of the *Unified Partners* mine: a dotted triangle with "Energy" emblazoned at the apex, and "Family" and "Community" at the two lower corners. Last week, when Cody had finished the last of his underground mining certifications and signed his final paperwork to begin work at the mine, the HR rep tossed him a *Unified* ball cap and windbreaker. "The brand's important to us here," he said with a crooked smile, "and it's important to you now, too. Wear it with the same pride your daddy did." When Cody arrived back in Chicago later that night and walked through the apartment door wearing the cap, Maisie gave him a quick hug and peck on the cheek, then said she felt sick and needed to lie down. They started packing the next day.

As Cody stepped to the counter to order, he heard a familiar voice at the miner's table behind him: "You get my deer cleaned up yet?" Cody turned to see Luke lingering over a plate smeared with the remnants of biscuits and sausage gravy. If Cody didn't know Luke so well, he would have been surprised to see him in town so early after a night of hard drinking; but Luke had inherited his father's ability to turn his blood to bourbon night after night and still function the next day as if nothing happened. Cody never had much of a taste for hard liquor, and on the rare occasion he did drink, the alcohol lingered in him and made him worthless for days. Just one more way that the younger Culver boy didn't fit in, Cody often thought.

The other three miners at the table with Luke turned to look Cody over. Two younger guys around Luke's age—late twenties—and one in his fifties. The older man looked familiar, but Cody couldn't place him. Cody sidled up to the table and stood awkwardly, trying to figure out what to do with his hands. These were his *colleagues*. The word bounced around his mind as he nodded and waved, but he just couldn't make it line up with the men who sat before him.

"Geez. Small town, huh?" said Cody. He pulled an extra chair back from the table but didn't sit.

"It's Saturday," said Luke. "Don't act like you didn't know exactly where I'd be on a Saturday morning." He gave a quick nod at the chalkboard behind the counter. Luke and the three other miners stared at Cody until he could feel it, until he had to do something. Cody tilted the chair back on its hind legs just so his arms would have purpose for a few moments. "You gonna sit in that chair or dance with it?" asked Luke.

Cody leaned the chair back down and took a seat. He shook hands with the other three miners, starting with the older man sitting next to Luke.

“Cody Culver. Nice to meet you,” said Cody. The man smiled at him and gripped his hand.

“C’mon, Cody,” said the man, “You been gone for, what, six or seven years and suddenly everybody’s a stranger?” He tossed his napkin on his empty plate and leaned back, squinting at Cody. “You don’t recognize me, do you?” Luke chuckled to himself. Cody made a quick study of the man: his thinning brown hair graying at the temples, his reddened cheeks, his plaid, button-down shirt stretch over his bulging stomach. He certainly didn’t have a miner’s body. The timbre of his voice was familiar and gentle. He was a square peg at the round hole of this table, clearly out of place with the three others. Cody’s eyes grew wide with a sudden realization.

“Brother Jim!” Cody said. He shook hands with the pastor again, with vigor and a smile this time to make up lost ground. “I can’t believe I didn’t recognize you. Jesus.” As soon as the word slipped from his lips he wanted it back. If he hadn’t sinned enough by failing to recognize the pastor of Riverside Baptist Church—the same church where he spent every Sunday morning and Wednesday night of his childhood—he had secured his reservation in hell by taking the Lord’s name in vain right in front of the pastor. Luke smiled and slapped Brother Jim on the back.

“You’ll have to forgive Cody here, Pastor,” said Luke. “He hasn’t had to tame his tongue much in Chicago.” He turned directly to Cody, still smiling. “But he’s back in Blue Banks now, so I reckon he’d better learn how things work around here again soon enough.” Cody could feel hives vining up the back of his neck and around his ears. He

imagined himself running out the door, peeling out of downtown, grabbing Maisie from the old farmhouse, and burning up the road all the way back to Chicago. But he knew he was too much of a coward, and there was nothing waiting for them in Illinois but mounds of student debt, welfare housing, and sure bankruptcy. They thought they could survive on government benefits for a while, so they hurried to the courthouse for a marriage license the day after Maisie's pregnancy was confirmed; but living in the city ate every bit of money they made, leaving nothing at the end of the month to pay off debtors. No, running away wasn't an option this time.

Brother Jim pushed back from the table and tossed a stack of cash next to his plate. "Breakfast is on me this time, fellas," he said. "If I don't see y'all tomorrow in service, you boys be safe underground." He turned to Cody and gave him a wink. "Come on just as you are, young man. We've got a pew for everybody." He stuck a toothpick into his mouth and let the door chime usher him out. The two younger guys excused themselves as well, leaving Cody to face his big brother with the full weight of Saturday morning conversation pressing in on him from all sides. No midnight darkness to hide in, and no dead deer to catalyze the conversation. If he was ever going to make life work in Blue Banks, he was going to have to get used to interacting with Luke as an adult.

Luke slid a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and lit one up, and Cody's Pavlovian impulse led him to follow suit. "This right here might be the saving grace to living back in Blue Banks," Cody said. He held the smoke deep in his chest for a beat and then let it slide gently from his lips. "Smoking in restaurants—heck, smoking just about anywhere—isn't legal in Chicago anymore." He had thought of keeping a *pro-con* list about living back in town, and now he'd finally found his first *pro*. Luke tipped the burnt

ash from his cigarette into his empty plate and slouched in his chair. Cody knew his brother well enough to know something wasn't right, but he didn't know him well enough to figure out what was wrong. He wanted to know if Luke was spiraling into one of his low spells so he would know how to handle him. "How's Candace?" Cody asked. He had already picked at the wound last night, so he figured he might as well rip off the scab in broad daylight. Luke leaned forward and took another drag.

"Look," he said, "let's not pretend like you care about how Candace is, or how we're getting along. Outside of Christmas, we've seen you a half-dozen times in the last six years. If it wasn't important to you then, it's not important to you now." Cody used the dying embers of his spent cigarette to light a second one. He wasn't normally a chain smoker, but he wasn't sure when he'd get another chance to smoke indoors when he made it back home to Maisie.

"Fair enough," said Cody. He could have equivocated for a while and maybe convinced Luke that he did actually care about his life, that he cared all along even when he didn't show it; but he knew that Luke valued simple honesty above all else, and so Cody let the matter drop. "Well, I need to go grab some waffles before Leon runs out and get them back to Maisie," he said. "I'll be seeing you around the mines, I reckon." Cody jumped back at his own words. Did he just say *reckon*? He marveled at how fast he switched back into the western Kentucky vernacular after six years, whether he wanted to or not.

Just as Cody turned to leave, the door chime sounded again, drawing the attention of the brothers. At first, Cody didn't pay much attention to the slender man walking in, but when he noticed Luke glaring at him, clenching a white-knuckled fist around a butter

knife, he thought he'd better take a second look. Long wisps of black hair curled around his ears and framed his smooth, angular face. Intricate tattoo sleeves wrapped up his arms and disappeared beneath the short sleeves of a plain black t-shirt. Cody figured he was probably in his late twenties, but there was an unusual air of innocence and youth in his subtle movements, in the way he smoothed a stray curl away from his face, the way he scanned the room with cautious eyes. He stood in the frame of the door for only seconds, and when he saw Luke staring at him with a stone-faced glare, he backed out of Leon's as quickly as he came, an apparition, an omen.

Cody glanced once more at his brother, rigid and unyielding, an unmistakable hardness barely hidden behind his green eyes. Luke smashed the head of his cigarette into the glass ashtray on the table. "So what's with that guy—" started Cody, but his brother cut him off before he could make it any further.

"A bit of advice before you go, little brother," said Luke, looking away as he talked. "Don't go down in those mines unless you mean it. I know I give you crap about running off to Chicago, about studying psychology and other nonsense that won't ever pay your bills. But it's no joke underground." His posture relaxed, just a little. "Those mines will swallow you up the same way they did Dad, the same way they're doing me. Everybody goes down there thinking they're just digging through the dust until something better comes along, but nothing ever does. So make sure you mean it."

Cody stood still and let Luke's words fall over him. What did this have to do with the man with the tattoos? What was Luke not saying? Cody smashed his cigarette into the center of the ashtray and gave his brother a firm slap on the back. Nothing else to go on, they shared a moment of silence between them, a sort of unspoken acknowledgment of

what they both knew: there was no other way for Cody. Yes, the mines would devour him, partly because he was penniless and had a child on the way, but mostly because he was a Culver, and this was the path carved for him by the generation who came before, by those who knew the caverns under the western Kentucky hills better than they knew the world above, better than they knew each other, better than they knew themselves.

CHAPTER 2

As the mantrip jostled down the steep slope into the bowels of the mine, Cody watched the last pinch of light from the world outside squeeze down against the rocky earth. He sat with his metal lunch pail pinned between his ankles, his shoulders brushing against the two miners on either side of him as the covered vehicle descended deeper and deeper, down toward the No. 9 coal seam, some 400 feet under the surface. Like clockwork, every 20 feet farther into the mines his knees bumped against the legs of the man on his right in rhythm with the steady squeak of the hoist rope. His heart pounded in his chest, and he sucked in a deep breath to calm his nerves. He smelled the tinge of burning hydraulic oil, of hot brake pads, of coal dust. Mostly, though, he smelled his father.

After especially long days underground, Henry “Coaldust” Culver earned his nickname by often skipping the bathhouse after work, jumping into his rusted-out ‘79 Dodge Ram and heading straight home to see his boys. Sometimes when he worked swing shift he wouldn’t make it home until well past 1:00am, but no matter: he’d clunk into Cody’s room, still wearing his dust-smothered coveralls, and wake him up with a gentle hand on the back of his neck. Cody would startle awake and rub the sleep from his eyes, and his dad would always be ready with a story about fighting the mine monsters. Coaldust would make his eyes go big, and then he’d lean in close to Cody like he had a secret

“We made it all the way to the inner chambers of the mega-monster’s layer this time,” he would whisper. “The beast took three of our men, but I was able to make it out alive.” He always smelled like something Cody couldn’t name: an oily-sweet richness woven into the coarse hairs of his forearms, hidden in the soft folds of skin on his neck. The scent had made Cody feel safe as a child, but smelling it in its natural setting—here between the rocks beneath Blue Banks—only reminded Cody that these were the same underground caverns that killed his father. *Don’t go down in those mines unless you mean it*, he remembered.

Most of the miners in the mantrip, around thirty-five total, were minding their own business, but a few towards the front were cutting up about something that happened over the weekend. One of them, a short, wiry twenty-year-old was arguing with a stocky, bearded man twice his size, and likely twice his age. Cody watched as the younger man gave the older a shove.

“B-b-b-ack off, old m-man,” he said, his voice catching in a stutter. “You d-d-don’t even know what my s-s-sister l-l-looks like.” Cody noticed the other miners turning toward the two men, the drama unfolding before them. The older miner smiled and gave the young guy a slap on the back.

“You’re right, you’re right,” he said. “I don’t know what she looks like. But I could tell she was your sister by the way she was screaming *ha-ha-ha-harder!*”

The younger miner took a swing at the older man, and then a full scuffle broke out, everybody within striking distance trying to get a piece of the action. Cody hunkered down in his seat, trying to make himself as small as possible, and stared down at his brand new steel-toed boots while the hooting and hollering echoed around him. This

wasn't his world, and these weren't his people. He grew up hearing the stories about what happened in the mines, about the rough-and-tumble man's world rumbling underneath Blue Banks. Up on the surface, these men stroked their wives with quiet fingers, hoisted their sons and daughters onto their shoulders, repented of their sins in the blue pews of Riverside Baptist Church after one of Brother Jim's convicting sermons. But down in the humming underground darkness, stomping through the damp muck of the labyrinth of rooms between coal pillars, these men sucked in rock dust and spit out curse words. They bragged about the women they'd had and took bets on the ones they'd have next. They measured their worth in tons of coal, each unit trying to prove more worthy than the next, and each man jockeying for alpha position in his own crew.

The mantrip jolted to a stop, jerking the miners on the car forward. The scuffle died down quickly; it was little more than a good-humored way to get Monday off on the right foot. Cody watched in awe as the young stutterer shook hands with the older miner. They got off the trip together and walked in stride towards the shack, where all the men would leave their lunch buckets and have a pre-shift safety meeting before heading out to the coal face. Cody grabbed his own lunch pail and hopped out of the mantrip, hunching down as he walked under the five-foot ceilings of this section of the mine. The light on his hardhat lit the path before his feet, but he was disoriented in the darkness almost as soon as he left the vehicle. As he made his way towards the shack, he felt a gentle push from behind.

"You were awfully quiet back there, pumpkin head," said a weathered voice from behind. Cody craned his neck around to see who was talking to him and shined his hardhat light straight into the eyes of a stout, redheaded woman who looked to be in her

forties. Cody knew that *pumpkin head* referred to his road-cone orange hardhat: the color worn only by inexperienced miners who hadn't yet put in their ninety days. The woman squinted and slapped his hat so that the light shown in front of him again. "Look," she said as she walked along side him, "I was aiming to be nice to you today, and God knows you'll need it cause ain't nobody else gonna cut you any slack. But you try to blind me again and we're gonna have words." Cody was taken aback that his first confrontation in the mines was with a woman. He knew there were a handful of women working underground even back in his father's day, but usually only one or two per unit. Luke had told Cody recently that most of the women he had worked with quit before their ninety-day training period was over, but the good ones found a way to posture with the men and survive.

They moved into a clearing near the shack where the ceilings were a bit higher, allowing them to stand almost upright. Cody tried to aim the light away from the woman, but he kept accidentally sweeping the beam across her eyes.

"Sorry," Cody said, bobbing his head around in an attempt to control the light. "This thing has a mind of its own." The woman gripped his hardhat on either side and swiveled his neck so that the light angled just to the right of her face.

"Don't move," she said. "Got it?" Cody gave a quick nod. He kept his head steady but moved his eyes so he could look her in the face. He figured the way he was glancing at her cockeyed must make him look like some sort of creeper or serial killer. How did everybody else just walk around with these things so naturally? The woman chuckled.

"Geez, kid," she said. "I can tell you're a sweet one, but that don't get you too far down here." Cody felt hives vining up his neck and down the backs of his arms like ivy.

His hands hadn't even been streaked black with coal dust and he was already being called out. He had never felt this lost in Chicago, even when he sat in his first graduate-level psychology seminar as an undergraduate student. He always knew how to deal with books, with words—parsing the lines of even the most erudite texts until he could dig out something of value. He had felt out of place among the graduate students, sure, but his separation from them was a shrinking gap, each class closing the chasm between them like a string of stitches over an open cut. Here underground, there were no books, no words to break apart and splice back together. He was almost fluent in French and could speak a good deal of Spanish; but he didn't talk *Blue Banks* like his dad, like Luke, despite the fact that he lived here in town until he was eighteen years old.

“You want some advice?” asked the woman. Cody knew she was going to give it whether he liked it or not, so he just stood there, gawking at her from the corner of his eye like he was wearing a neck brace. “Make a few friends down here, and make ‘em fast. Keep your head down, work hard, and stay out of the way. You get a few of the guys on your side and prove you’re worth two craps, you’ll be just fine. Folks down here make up their mind quick, and there ain’t no making up for a bad first day. So don’t drag your feet.” She gave Cody a hard slap to the arm. His body jolted, but he was proud he was able to keep his light steady. In the distance near the door of the shack, a group of miners circled around as another fight broke out. The woman turned to see the commotion. “Oh, hell,” she said, watching from a distance with Cody. “What is it that you men are always trying to prove to yourselves? Ain’t nothing down here but a bunch of scared boys parading around in man suits.” Cody had nothing to say to that, so he slid his hands in the

pockets of his coveralls, kept his head still and his body out of the way, and watched the woman pull the pack of men apart like an incensed lioness separating her cubs.

When Cody pulled his truck into the gravel driveway back at the farmhouse on Old Herrodsburg road, he barely had enough strength left to push open the door and swing himself from the vehicle. Luke had warned him that the first days in the mines would ravage his body, but he felt like he had aged a year for every hour he was underground. His lower back throbbed from being hunched over for most of the shift, and his neck felt as if it were staked through with one of the three-foot bolts he had seen all day being pinned into the crumbling mine ceilings. His body would adjust; at least that's what everybody kept telling him. He knew that before he could get a less physically demanding position—running a scoop or shuttle car, for instance—he'd have to put in his time as a *general inside laborer*, which mostly meant he'd be shoveling tons of fallen coal back on the belt and watching how the rest of the underground world operated as he slowly developed the skills he'd need to advance.

As he limped along the cobblestone walking path from the drive to the house, he saw a neat stack of empty moving boxes, broken down into perfectly flat strips of cardboard, sitting at the edge of the rotting front porch. Maisie was on her knees planting a brilliant orange mum in the small patch of mulch adjacent to the porch. "So there is a grand total of zero places in this town where you can recycle cardboard," she said. She packed the last bit of soil around the base of the mum and stood up to brush herself off. "I must have called every government office in town, but they all just kept giving me directions to the dump." Cody pulled her into his arms and picked a small twig from her

hair where it had gotten stuck in her ponytail. “I even called your mother, but she couldn’t even understand what I was saying.” Maisie stepped back, put a sassy hand on her hip, and launched into her perfect mock-Kentucky accent, impersonating Cody’s mother: “Honey, you’re gonna have to talk slower cause don’t nobody around here speak foreign.” Cody smiled and examined the small flowerbed.

“Amazing what a little color can do. It looks great,” Cody said. He trailed his hands down the small of her back. “You look great, too.” He leaned in to kiss Maisie, but she stopped him just short of her lips.

“Close your eyes,” she said, “No peeking.” She led him by the hand up the porch steps and through the front door. She guided him through the living room, down a narrow hallway past a bathroom, and into the master bedroom. “Okay,” she said. “Take a look.” When Cody opened his eyes, he saw a transformation that was nothing short of a *Maisie miracle*. The hardwood floors shined with fresh polish. The baseboards had been scrubbed clean and painted white, and the walls were freshly painted a soft, olive green. Natural light poured in from the open windows and spotlighted their old sleigh bed and mismatched end tables. Maisie had repotted her house plants and hung Cody’s favorite painting—one that Maisie had done herself as part of her senior art show the University of Chicago—above the headboard of the bed: a woman twisting out of her skin, her soul flying blue across the orange-red dusk.

“I mean, the rest of the house is still rubbish,” she said with a smile. “But now we can shut the door and pretend that this is all there is.” Cody looked at her with wonder, then took her in his arms and eased her onto the mattress behind them. He lifted her shirt and placed his outstretched fingers across her belly.

“This is all there is,” he said. “This is all there is.”

After being back in town for nearly a week, Cody figured he couldn't put it off any longer: it was time to take Maisie over to his mother's house so the two of them could meet in person. Lori Ann Culver was a tradition, the embodied ethos of Blue Banks. She was southern grace and hard-packed bluegrass grit. The western Kentucky hills were the marrow of her bones, and the Ohio River coursed through her veins. She would tell anyone in spitting distance that she could trace her paternal line straight back to the settling of Blue Banks County in 1802, back to the very day the land was divided off from the adjacent county to the east. There was no doubt that Cody loved his mother, but the same distance that was between them now—the distance that sometimes felt further than all the miles between Chicago and Blue Banks—dated back to even his earliest childhood memories. Cody's dad was the bridge that spanned the divide, so when Cody lost his father ten years ago, he also lost most of his connection with his mother. Maisie had begged Cody to bring her home to meet Lori Ann from the very start; but even when Cody agreed, even when he called his mom on the phone to announce his intentions, she wasn't an easy sell. After a rare night of hard drinking just a couple of months into their relationship, Maisie worked up Cody's confidence enough to get him to make the call.

“You gonna marry this girl?” his mother had asked.

“We just started dating two months ago, Mom,” Cody said.

“You get her knocked up?” she asked.

“Jesus, Mom. What's wrong with you?”

“Jesus don’t have a thing to do with it,” she said. “Listen, you just bring her home when you’re sure you’re gonna keep her. Ain’t no use in wasting my time yapping with a *maybe*.”

Now that he had, indeed, gotten Maisie *knocked up*, bringing her home to meet his mother presented a new set of challenges, but ones that Cody knew he had to face head on. He parked his truck next to Luke’s Jeep on the blacktop driveway of his mother’s three-story Victorian house on the south end of Main Street. She bought the house with the settlement money from Unified Partners after Cody’s dad died. She had wanted to move almost immediately after Coaldust’s funeral, saying that she felt too isolated out in the old ranch house where Luke and Cody had grown up. In the new house on Main Street, from the big bay window in the third floor master bedroom, she could see the edge of downtown Blue Banks to the East and the river to the North.

Cody edged out of the truck, still favoring his sore back. He pulled the driver’s seat forward and helped Maisie crawl out from the half-sized backseat of the cab. Lori Ann and Luke sat on the front porch in a couple of woven rocking chairs, watching. Cody could feel the burn of their eyes as he took Maisie’s arm and led her up the sidewalk.

“Must be a Eu-ro-pe-an custom to make a woman ride in the back like a child,” said Lori Ann. She stood and came to meet them at the edge of the porch. “Honey, here in the States you can ride right up there beside your man. In fact, rumor has it that some women are even known to drive from time to time.”

Cody watched Maisie squirm as she tried to interpret the situation. He warned her that here in Kentucky there was a fine line between biting sarcasm and initiative joking, and he could tell from the way she was shifting her weight back and forth from one foot

to the other that she wasn't sure on which side of the line she was standing. Cody wasn't quite sure himself, so he thought he'd give the conversation a chance to find its path. "Oh, I've got wretched morning sickness," Maisie said, biting her lip and glancing at Cody for a cue. "Well, all-day sickness really. The dark windows in the back keep me from losing my lunch." Lori Ann took Maisie's hands in her own.

"Oh, right," said Lori Ann. "On account of that illegitimate child you have swimming around in there."

"Seriously, Mom?" said Cody. Even though he and Maisie were married now, it was no secret that the pregnancy came first, which was all the fodder Lori Ann needed to dig in her heels. Lori Ann shooed him away with her free hand.

"Oh, lighten up, Cody. You know I'm just foolin' with her," said his mother. She turned her attention back to Maisie and led her up the stairs and through the front door. "Do the Brits have a sense of humor nowadays?" she said. "Hard to survive around here without one." Before Cody could trail in behind his mother and Maisie, Luke grabbed his wrist and pulled him into the empty rocker beside him. He pulled a beer from a nearby cooler and thrust it into Cody's hand.

"If your first day underground was anything like mine was, you're gonna need something stronger than this," said Luke. "How'd they treat you down there?" Cody watched his brother swig from a flask and then chase the liquor with a gulp of beer. His eyes were already going glazed from the alcohol, and it was barely seven o'clock.

"Oh, they treated me like any other orange hat, I guess," said Cody. He looked through the storm door to see how Maisie was getting along inside alone with his mother. He saw Maisie standing at the kitchen counter wearing an apron and chopping some

onions. Lori Ann had put her to work right away, which was a good sign, an olive branch of sorts. Though Maisie had lived in the US for nearly eight years, her American experience had been almost exclusively in Chicago, with intermittent trips to New York, Boston, and the like. Still, Cody watched the way she chatted with his mother with grace and ease, negotiating social cues and blending in even better than he did in some ways. “I don’t know what I’m doing down there, Luke,” he said, turning back to his brother.

Luke laughed and slugged down half a beer. “You ain’t supposed to know anything yet. You’ve only been down there a day,” he said. “You’ll figure it out. You’re on a good unit. They pull in more tonnage than most everybody else, and that’s all anyone cares about.” Even though he’d only been on the unit for a day, Cody could tell Luke was right. For as much carrying on as the guys did before the shift began, they got down to business once they hit the coal face. As he did the grunt work, packing equipment from place to place and shoveling coal back on the belt, Cody watched in amazement as the miners had worked in perfect rhythm with each other and the ubiquitous machinery. Every man knew his job and knew it well, and the section mine foreman—or forewoman, he should say, since the job belonged to Spits Anderson, the hard-talking, redheaded woman who put Cody’s head on a swivel at the beginning of the shift—saw to it that conditions were kept clean and as safe as possible. His unit seemed a far cry from the dirty, potentially lethal underground world his father had mined.

Cody asked Luke questions about the mines—about certain machines and customs, about pecking order and relationship building—and listened as his brother went into expertise mode. Though he was still new to this way of life, Cody felt a satisfaction with himself for surviving the day, and relished the aches in his bones with a sense of

pride. If growing up in Kentucky had taught him anything, it was the appreciation of steady employment and the value of a hard day's work. Luke launched into a story about his own first day underground, and Cody wondered why he had never taken the chance to ask Luke about it before. He felt a kinship with Luke that he hadn't felt in ten years. Maybe that's why, when the conversation hit a lull, Cody felt emboldened to ask what he did.

"So what's the story with that guy we saw at Leon's?" Cody asked. He slid his cigarette butt into an empty beer bottle. Luke lit up a smoke of his own and gave Cody a stone-faced glare.

"You're just full of questions today, ain't you?" said Luke. He scratched his jawline, ran his finger down the seam of the scar that ran the length of his face. He stood, stumbling a little from the sudden movement, and then made his way through the door, mumbling something about needing another beer. By the time Cody had finished off his drink and started inside to rescue Maisie, Luke was on his way back out. He shoved past Cody, jumped into his Jeep, and peeled out down Main Street.

When Cody made his way inside to the kitchen, he saw an impressive spread on the table, the type of meal usually reserved for Sunday dinner: smothered pork chops, mashed potatoes and country gravy, bean salad, and deviled eggs. Cody knew his mother was a fickle woman and that her air of hospitality could blow downwind if he said as much as one wrong word; but Lori Ann seemed to be putting on a real celebration that he was back in town.

“Looks amazing, Mom,” said Cody. He glanced at Maisie, and she gave him a quiet nod to let him know she was doing okay. “Where’d Luke run off to?”

“Said he needed to go see what Candace was up to,” said Lori Ann. She poured three tall glasses of sweet tea and dropped a wedge of lemon in each. “That boy’s in a bad way right now. He ain’t been able to sit still since that good-for-nothin’ got out of jail two weeks ago.” Maisie shot Cody an inquisitive look, but Cody just shrugged.

“What are you talking about? Who got out of Jail?” Cody asked. He grabbed some silverware and set three place-settings at the table.

“Oh, you know, what’s-his-name. Candace’s ex-husband,” said Lori Ann.

“Hunter McCready?” asked Cody. As the name slid off his tongue, it dawned on him that it was probably Hunter who he and Luke had seen at Leon’s the week before. Cody had never seen Hunter in person, just his grainy mug-shot photograph clipped from the *Blue Banks County News* after his arrest. Lori Ann had mailed the picture to Cody in Chicago with her own caption scrawled in blue letters at the bottom: “here’s the SOB who nearly killed your brother.”

“That’s right. Hunter,” said Lori Ann. “Candace never breathed that boy’s name for the three years he was in the slammer, but as soon as he gets out, she can’t think of nothing else to talk about.” She slapped a gristly pork chop on Maisie’s plate, and then went to serve her the potatoes and bean salad. “And you know how Luke tends to get so low. I’m worried this thing here will send him off the edge.”

Cody thought a lot about Luke and that *edge* he was toeing over the next few weeks. He settled into a routine of rising before the sun and heading into the mines just as

the morning light began to peak over the rolling hills to the east. His body felt torn to bits for several days, but by the end of the first week, he was already getting used to the grueling work underground. Spits Anderson, Cody's face boss, liked to send him all over the mine to help other miners with various tasks and machines so she could give him gradual experience in every facet of underground coal mining. It was a vote of confidence from Spits, an investment in Cody's future. Every day on the job presented new and unexpected challenges, but Cody also knew he would spend several hours each shift doing mindless grunt work; and it was in those moments when he found himself worrying more and more about his older brother. Luke had settled into a pattern of peace since Hunter McCready had been in jail, and certainly for the past two-and-a-half years since Candace gave birth to Luke's son, Henry, the namesake of Cody and Luke's father. But for the past few weeks, Luke had a buzz about him like a live wire, and the hum of the voltage coursing around him grew louder each day.

Cody had made a habit of stopping by Luke's house to check on him a few times throughout the week, but each time he did so he saw Luke's Jeep missing from the gravel driveway. Once or twice he thought about going in to see Candace and to play with his nephew, but he worried that Luke might see such a visit as a betrayal of trust. He didn't know the full extent of the history between Luke and Hunter; he had only pieced together that Hunter and Candace had been high school sweethearts and married young, and at some point Luke got involved with Candace. The news clip that Lori Ann sent to Chicago reported that Hunter was charged with aggravated assault, which his lawyers pleaded down from attempted murder. Cody didn't want to get involved any more than necessary,

but he felt like Luke was on the precipice of making the news again, and this time the headline might be worse.

On Friday night, after his long first week of work was finished, Cody swung by Luke's one more time on his way home. This time, Luke was sitting on the front porch steps with a bottle of bourbon at arm's length. Cody pulled into the drive, hopped out of the truck, and approached his brother with caution.

"How about you come over and have dinner with Maisie and me tonight?" said Cody. He trudged through the high grass and fall weeds of the unkempt yard before finding the crumbling paving stones which created a path to the porch. Luke sucked down a long shot, and by the way the stream of liquor dribbled down his stubbled chin, Cody could tell he'd already had one too many.

"She took little Henry and went to stay at her mom's for the night" said Luke. "Said I was scaring her. Said she didn't want me around my son till I calmed down." He shook his head and pumped his arm like he was going to chuck the glass bottle against the chipped wood siding of his house. He thought better of it and set the bottle back on the porch. "You know damn well I'd never hurt her or my boy." He pointed a trembling finger at Cody, as if daring him to say otherwise.

"Of course I know that," Cody said, though he wasn't sure he believed it. He took a careful step back into the lawn, just in case. "Come on. Go put that bottle up and come with me to get some food."

Cody expected more of a fight, but within minutes, Luke had thrown on a clean shirt and a Cincinnati Reds baseball cap, and stumbled into the passenger seat of Cody's

truck. Even though Luke seemed stable for the moment, Cody knew the wrong word could turn the night ugly, and he didn't want to risk putting Maisie at the center of Luke's storm. He gave her a quick call and let her know he was going to take Luke to Lynn's Overlook Bar and Grill down by the river and get some food to sober him up. Luke didn't like the idea, complaining that the place would be aswarm with miners, none of whom he wanted to see; but Cody drove on anyway, and Luke let the issue drop.

No parking was available in front of Lynn's—no surprise for seven o'clock on a Friday night—so Cody parked the truck down by the boat ramp on the shore of the river, and the brothers walked the two blocks back towards the restaurant. The day had been unseasonably warm for a Kentucky October, but now the daylight was all but gone and cool air wafted in from the river making Cody wish he'd brought a jacket. Lynn's had a small indoor section with a few quiet tables, but people came on the weekends to sit and drink on the tiered deck out back, which had its own bar and a perfect view the barges on the river, which passed intermittently under the old train bridge downstream. Strings of oversized, multi-colored lights lined the perimeter of the outdoor seating area, and a small stage jutted out from the back of the building where local bands would play blues covers for tips on the weekends. When Cody and Luke approached, the place was in full swing with hardly an empty seat to be found. They surveyed the crowd, and sure enough, small groups of miners peppered the deck from rail to rail. Cody gave a quiet nod to a two guys seated up towards the stage, a couple of pinner who worked on his unit. Cody knew that Luke could name half the men in the crowd, but his brother pulled the brim of his cap down and lowered his head so he wouldn't be bothered.

Luke pushed his way to the bar and barked out an order for a double-shot of bourbon, neat. It wasn't clear that any of the bar staff actually heard Luke's order, so Cody grabbed a stool beside him and intervened. "How about we give the ol' liver a rest tonight?" he said. Luke said nothing, but pulled out a pack of menthols and lit one up. Behind the counter, a young girl with spiked black hair bounced over in front of Luke. She wore flaming red lipstick and layers of eyeliner, slathered on thick like stage makeup.

"Did I hear somebody needs a double-shot over here?" she asked, drawling out her words in a flirty accent. She tilted her head and winked at Luke, working hard on getting a nice tip from an easy mark. Luke took the bait and flirted back.

"You old enough to pour liquor, sweetheart?" he said. He took a long drag on his smoke.

"Honey," she said, leaning in close to Luke, "I'm old enough to do whatever you want." Cody cleared his throat and patted Luke on the back. He leaned in to get the girl's attention.

"Why don't you grab us some menus and two tall glasses of ice water," he said, giving his own sly wink to the bartender. She scowled at Cody and slunk away inside to the kitchen. Cody swiped Luke's lighter from the bar and lit up a cigarette of his own.

"Little brother to the rescue," Luke mumbled. Cody smiled.

"You know good and well she wanted nothing more than a twenty-dollar tip," he said. He scanned over the crowd again and noticed Spits Anderson having dinner with a couple of other miners near the center of the deck. Cody gave a quick wave, and then turned back to Luke. "Besides, you're a married man, and Candace is too good to you for

you to be doing any of that.” Luke winced at the mention of Candace’s name. He pulled a couple of sugar packets from a caddy on the bar and pinched the granules through the paper. “Look, I know her ex is out of jail. Mom told me the other night,” Cody said. He watched Luke for a reaction, but his brother just sat stoically and flicked the sugar packets.

“You should hear the way she says his name,” Luke said. “The other night we were lying in bed, just reading or whatever, and she just up and asks me if I think the jail time might’ve done him some good. If I think he could’ve changed. I mean, what am I supposed to say to something like that?” He stroked the scar on his face and clenched his jaw. The young bartender came back and plunked down two glasses of ice water.

“Here ya go, boss,” she said to Cody. Then she turned to Luke and placed her hand on his. “And you just let me know if I can fix you up something stronger when you’re done babysitting.” She slid her hand over his knuckles, but just before she pulled away, Luke grabbed her wrist. He pulled her in close.

“Listen here, jailbait,” he started, his voice quivering with a misdirected rage. “I got a beautiful wife at home and the best two-year-old boy you’ve ever seen. So you touch me again and you might not get those fingers back.” He released her wrist, and the girl hurried off like a wounded animal, bumping into another bartender on her way back to the kitchen. Cody eased back from the bar and kept an eye on Luke.

“She’s just looking for a big tip, Luke,” said Cody. “She didn’t mean any—”

“I need a drink, or I need to get out of here,” Luke said. His legs jittered against the frame of the stool. Cody threw a few dollars on the bar for a tip, adding a bit extra for the poor girl who didn’t know any better than try to get too close to his brother. Tension

fumed around Luke like the noxious methane gas in a hazard area under ground. Cody wanted to get him out to the truck before anybody ignited a spark; but when the brothers stood and turned to leave, Cody saw that a white-hot flame was already ablaze in the middle of the deck: Hunter McCready.

CHAPTER 3

Sunday mornings in Blue Banks were a whisper, a quiet prayer wafting ashore with the cool river breeze and settling across the countryside like morning dew. With the mines mostly vacant, many wives across the county—those women who woke up six days a week entangled in cold, lonely sheets—fluttered awake with their legs stretched across the aching bodies of their men. If they had no children to fend off, they'd stretch their limbs into one another as the morning light peeked under their covered porches and through their slatted blinds. They'd linger over utilitarian mugs brimming with black coffee, maybe work a crossword puzzle or flip through the ads of the Sunday paper. Then there was eleven o'clock church. Here, in the buckle of the Bible belt, the Sabbath was still a day of rest, a day of worship.

Cody awoke with a start, leaping out of yet another night terror. He had always had intermittent nightmares—vivid and colorful, usually moving into lucidity before they jolted him awake—but they were happening nearly every night since he had moved back to Kentucky. He peeled the sheet away from his sweaty torso, slid out of Maisie's embrace and stood to stretch himself awake. He tried to remember his dream, but like so many times before, he could only recall fleeting images, horrors flitting through his mind like a reel of film. A vision of a mine fire, a man with tattoo sleeves engulfed in the flames. Hunter McCready? Why him again?

It had been over a week since Cody and Luke had seen Hunter standing in the middle of the deck at Lynn's Overlook Bar next to the table where Spits Anderson sat, but Cody couldn't shake the feeling that the encounter promised something harrowing, something he couldn't name but could feel. He remembered the way Hunter had approached Luke that night, how he had stood with a gentle hand extended in front of him, a white flag of peace. Luke glared from under the bent brim of his Reds ball cap and clenched his fists in and out as if massaging a stress ball. Cody tugged gently at Luke's sleeve to reassure him that he was there; but that was all he could offer. If his brother was going to explode, all Cody could do was try to contain the shrapnel.

"Listen, Luke," Hunter said, easing his hands into his pockets. His posture was relaxed, a subtle, disarming gesture. "I've been in jail a good long while for what happened between us, and I don't want no trouble." His voice was earnest and warm; softer than Cody expected, and with a higher tenor. Cody watched as Hunter smoothed a strand of wavy black hair away from his cautious eyes. He had a childlike air about him, something that belied the brutal violence he had unleashed on Luke three years ago. "Look. We ain't got to pretend to be friends, but this town don't need to tiptoe around a couple of enemies."

Cody glanced around to make out a clear path to the exit. If things got messy, he would have to go into damage-control mode and get Luke out to the truck as soon as he could. He watched as Luke stared past Hunter, past everyone. To Cody's surprise, it looked as if Hunter's understated plea might actually work. Luke shifted his weight to his heels. The tension in his neck smoothed out. His shoulders eased from what had been a

fight-or-flight posture. If they had simply parted ways at that moment, everything would have been just fine.

“Seems like you’re getting along great nowadays,” said Hunter. He slid his other hand from his pocket just in case, as if he expected what came next. “I don’t want to mess that up for nobody. Especially Candace.” At the mention of his wife’s name, Luke lunged forward and caught Hunter by his shirt collar. The men stumbled backward together in stride into Spits Anderson’s table. An empty chair fell over, and just like that, every eye on the deck was glued to Luke and Hunter.

“Listen to me, you little shit,” whispered Luke. He leaned in close, a fist-full of Hunter’s shirt still mangled in his grip. “You breathe my wife’s name again and you and me are gonna have matching scars.” Hunter didn’t push back. He simply looked Luke calmly in the face, a glint in his eyes that wasn’t there before, a look lost somewhere between anger and regret. Cody placed a hand between the men, but Luke slapped it away. He turned once more to Hunter. “You might trick everybody else in this town, but you sure ain’t fooling me,” Luke said. His words slipped from his clenched teeth. “I know who you are, Hunter. And I know *what* you are. You keep that in mind, you hear?” Luke released Hunter with a firm shove, sending him stumbling back off his feet onto the splintered wood of the deck. Luke grabbed an unopened beer from Spits Anderson’s table, cleared his way through the crowd, and made for the exit.

Cody started to trail out behind his brother, but he couldn’t help but look back at Hunter, sitting there on the ground with the soft curls of his hair hanging down over his face as he stared at his feet. What did Luke mean by what he said? Who was Hunter McCready? *What* was Hunter McCready?

Cody poured the last bit of cereal into Maisie's bowl and topped it with a splash of milk. He would go without breakfast this morning, but he took comfort knowing that his paycheck would be coming in a couple of days, and since all the bills were caught up after he cashed his first check, their days of scrounging for food were nearly over. Sixty hours a week underground was hell on his body, but heaven for his wallet.

"I'm going to put in for some jobs this afternoon," said Maisie. She sat across from Cody on the yellowed linoleum floor where a kitchen table might go. Her roots had grown out in the last few weeks so that her natural blond hair burst into streams of purple just before her ponytail. "I've not heard back from the college, and I can't sit on my hands any longer." Maisie had made some inquiries into teaching freshman art history courses at Blue Banks Community College, but it was no surprise that she hadn't been called in for an interview. She had completed enough graduate credits to teach, but not enough to be an attractive hire, even for a low-wage adjunct instructor position.

"It's Sunday," Cody said. He pitched the cereal box and empty milk carton into the trashcan.

"Yeah. And?" Maisie asked.

"And this isn't Chicago. Nobody's open for business on Sunday around these parts. Except Wal-Mart I guess."

"Why not?" asked Maisie. She swirled her cereal around in the milk, but didn't eat. Probably nauseated again, Cody assumed.

"Thou shall remember the Sabbath and keep it holy," Cody said, paraphrasing from the book of Exodus, his memory roving over all those sermons he had sat through

as a child. “You have to remember that religion isn’t academic around here. People all over town are ironing clothes for Sunday church right now.” He watched as Maisie pushed her bowl away. She pulled her knees up under her and rested her head across her arms. She had been so positive about everything for the month they had been in Kentucky, embracing the culture where she could, accepting the way people snickered at her accent or scowled at her dyed hair. She had even gone a few times to the Blue Banks County Public Library to do some cursory research on the history of western Kentucky and its abundant coal fields; but Cody still worried that the moment would come when she would feel lost and alone, where she might regret moving to such a foreign place. He wondered if she’d even resent their choice to keep the baby. He wanted to give Maisie everything, but he could only offer her Blue Banks. There was no telling if it would be enough to keep her around.

“Maybe I’ll call a few folks and get some leads for you,” Cody said, trying to push hope into his voice. “Then you can do some applications this week.” Maisie shrugged. She was lost in thought somewhere.

“Well, why don’t we go to church then?” said Maisie. She pulled her bowl back in front of her and nibbled on a soggy bite of cereal. Cody looked at her cockeyed.

“You want to go to church?” he asked. “Seriously?”

“I mean, if I’m really meant to be in Blue Banks, I have to figure out how things work around here,” she said. “When in Rome, right?” Cody sat down behind her and ran his hands through her hair, massaging her scalp.

“You don’t need to try to be something you’re not, Mais,” said Cody.

“No?” she said. “I think we’ve crossed that bridge already, don’t you?”

A half-dozen Baptist churches sat between the farmhouse on Old Herrodsburg Road and the banks of the Ohio River, not to mention Sacred Heart Catholic Church on Pine Street or the lone Methodist church at the edge of Town Square Park. Cody had even heard mention of a new storefront community church on the North end of town next to Frank's Market where they didn't have pews or anything, just a big open warehouse with metal folding chairs and concrete floors. No matter how they dressed it up or down, no matter if they sang old hymns against the hum of the organ or blasted contemporary Christian rock in a dim auditorium like some Sunday morning nightclub, Cody knew the message was the same: the wages of sin is death, and salvation through Christ Jesus is the only way to avoid the fire and brimstone of hell and enter into eternal life with the Father in heaven. It was a message he had heard his whole life, a sermon he could preach verbatim even if he didn't know how much of it he believed. The Gospel was the hope of the county, the hope of this rural mining world where nothing else seemed very hopeful. Change was inevitable here in western Kentucky just like everywhere else, but the Good News of the church was invariable, the solid rock on which the people of Blue Banks built their lives.

Cody glanced at Maisie in the rearview mirror. She sat with her knees tucked into her chest in the small backseat of the cab, still too bothered by carsickness to join him in the front. He knew Maisie had been to churches before—she had given him sweeping descriptions about the beauty of St. Paul's Cathedral in London shortly after they met, ordering him to close his eyes as she painted a picture in his mind's eye, expositing on the church's rich history and little-known secrets—but what would she think about the

red-faced Southern Baptist preaching, the impromptu proclamations of “amen!” and “praise Jesus!” lifted from the congregation? How would she reconcile the privacy with which Cody held matters of his own faith with the shoutin’-from-the-rooftop “hallelujahs” echoing against the cracked-plaster walls of Riverside Baptist Church?

“You might hear stuff about me from people in there,” Cody said, easing the truck into the gravel lot of the church. “Some of these folks have known me from childhood. Brother Jim was at the hospital when I was born.”

“Brother Jim?” said Maisie. She caught eyes with Cody in the mirror and smiled. “Did you just call the pastor *Brother* Jim?”

“Laugh all you want, but you better get used to it. As soon as you walk through those doors, you’re gonna be *Sister* Maisie,” Cody said. He gave her a wink as he put the car in park. “And you just remember, you were the one who wanted to come to church.”

Cody helped Maisie from the backseat just in time to see his mother’s SUV screech into the parking spot beside his truck, gravel dust clouding up around the cars from the sudden stop. Lori Ann did everything in her life with resolve and purpose, and parking her car was not exempt from this rule. She swung her door open and lowered her head as she stepped down from the vehicle as not to smash the brim of her enormous, Kentucky Derby style hat. She grabbed Cody and pulled him tightly into her embrace.

“Praise sweet Jesus!” she said in a grand, mocking voice. “The prodigal son has returned at last.” On the other side of the small lot, Luke emerged from his Jeep and made his way to the open doors of the church. Lori Ann continued her drama and shouted, “Luke! Go get the purple robe and kill the fatted calf! Our baby boy has come home from his days of debauchery!” Cody looked over his mother’s shoulder and smiled

at Maisie, who was enjoying the spectacle. Luke scowled at the three of them and pushed through the doors of the church.

“Good to see you, too, Mom,” Cody said.

It had been nearly ten years since Cody had stepped foot into the church, but everything looked remarkably the same. Royal blue pews clashed with tattered orange carpet—carpet that the church had intended to replace when they installed the new pews. But since the members could never decide on a color—a fierce debate that nearly split the church—Pastor Jim convinced the congregation to let the old carpet remain until the Spirit led them in a unified direction. Apparently they were still waiting on the Spirit.

A couple of steep steps led up to an altar on the center of a small stage. To the left was a baby grand piano, and the old organ remained in the back right corner of the stage, still covered with the decorative tarp that was there ten years ago. The organ had been in disrepair since Cody was a child, but certain influential members of Riverside simply couldn't stand the thought of removing it from the place it had occupied since 1956 when the church moved from its makeshift founding location of the Blue Banks Junior High School gymnasium to its permanent home here, up on the hill overlooking the Ohio River.

Cody wanted to sit in the back corner, but Lori Ann wasn't having it. She grabbed him by the wrist and led him up the aisle like the boy he used to be, the boy who once walked the same aisle to the altar, tears streaming down his reddened cheeks, to accept the gift of Christ's sacrifice. “Ain't no backseat Baptists in my family,” said Lori Ann. She guided him into a pew near the front, but he was at least able to slide down the empty

row and settle into a seat on the edge by the stained glass window. Maisie slid in next to him, and then Lori Ann and Luke trailed in behind.

Pastor Jim, wearing an ill-fitting plaid sports coat and cowboy necktie, made his way up the stage and sat in the ornate pastor's chair facing the congregation. A young man whom Cody didn't recognize bounded up the steps and gave a hearty welcome to the congregation, inviting them with his booming voice to stand and sing "Be Thou My Vision." Cody reached for the hymnal in the seatback before him, but he looked around and noticed that everyone else seemed to be singing from memory; so he slid the book back in place, gripped Maisie's hand, and stood in silence while the congregation belted out a "joyful noise" around him.

Maisie's hand was tight and sweaty, but she hid her anxiety behind a quiet smile and welcoming eyes. Cody glanced behind him, scanning over many faces from his youth and some others he didn't recognize. At least half of the miners on his unit were scattered throughout the crowd with their families. Leonard Hanley, the foul-mouthed pin bolter that Cody often assisted underground, stood in a row near the middle of the sanctuary. He held his young daughter against his hip and crooned the hymn with passion, his eyes squeezed shut and his free hand lifted towards heaven with praise. Standing a few rows in front of Leonard was a terse scoop operator whom Cody only knew as "Big Nuts." Cody watched as the scoop-man swayed gently with the music, clenching the back of the pew in front of him with both hands and singing cautiously through slightly parted lips. Cody couldn't help but smile as he imagined Pastor Jim greeting the miner in the lobby after service: "Thanks for worshiping with us today, Big Nuts. You take care of that family, ya hear?" It was hard to reconcile what he knew about the men underground with these

church-going saints singing praise in the sanctuary. Which was the performance? Which was the real man? Did it have to be one or the other?

As the hymn ended, the young worship minister launched into a fervent prayer, extending his hands over the congregation. Cody bowed his head but couldn't bring himself to close his eyes. Even at twenty-four years old, he couldn't resist his child-like temptation to spy on the folks around him as they prayed. He watched Lori Ann as she simultaneously bowed in reverence and picked at the loose polish peeling from her thumbnail. Luke sat stoically, eyes open wide. He was at once refined and disheveled, his clean-pressed suit clashing with his two-day beard. From the corner of his eyes, Cody saw Candace quietly approach the pew with little Henry snuggled against her chest. She placed the boy on the ground, and the two of them scooted in beside Luke. Cody had seen pictures of his nephew online, but he hadn't seen him in person since Henry was a newborn. At two years old, his face was thinning out and it was clear that he would have Luke's strong jaw and slight underbite. Candace looked harried and tired, but no less beautiful than Cody remembered. Her auburn hair was cropped up short behind her ears, her brilliant green eyes popping in tandem with her yellow Sunday dress. Lori Ann reached over Luke to snatch little Henry and set him snuggly in her lap. Cody watched his mother tussle Henry's hair and kiss his cheeks, a *Nana* and grandson at play, and he realized he knew nothing about his family anymore. He was an imposter here in this church, here in this pew. He saw Candace whisper something softly into his brother's ear, and when she placed her hand on Luke's knee, Cody saw his brother smile for the first time in a month.

The service lingered on, hitting all the familiar beats Cody had expected: they sang a few hymns, awkwardly shook hands with people around them during a time of greeting, sang a few more hymns, and listened to a shrill solo performance of “How Great Thou Art” while the offering plate was passed around. With Maisie at his side, Cody had expected to feel embarrassed by church, somehow implicated by the widely held assumptions, thrown like a shroud over the rural South by most of the academics back in Chicago, that equated Evangelical Christianity with close-minded bigotry. He had joined in his fair share of church bashing when he was in the city, but even then he felt that he had a familial right to poke fun at the Church that his circle of friends and colleagues didn’t have. Cody was surprised that now, as Brother Jim delivered his message—an expository sermon on the inclusive nature of God’s love—he felt exhilarated that Maisie could share this moment with him, this part of his past that was inextricable from his present.

“The book of First John is clear on this point, Church,” said Brother Jim. He paced the length of the stage, dabbing the accumulated sweat from his forehead with his pocket-handkerchief. “We read in chapter two, verse nine that *He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now.*” He thumped the Bible down on the wooden pulpit in the center of the platform, working into his big finale. Cody loved the drama of the church, the spectacle of the preaching. “But the good news, brothers and sisters in Christ,” he continued, “is that verse ten tells us that *He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him.*”

A man shouted “Amen!” from the back of the sanctuary, causing Cody to glance back reflexively. He never saw the man who made the exclamation, but something

altogether different caught his eye: on the edge of the very last pew, seated a distance away from anyone else, was Hunter McCready. Had he been there the whole time? His legs jittered as Brother Jim preached, as if he was on the precipice of something. Church is the one place Cody never expected to see Hunter, but despite his nervousness, he somehow looked right at home. Hunter never looked up at the pastor, but sat quietly, thumbing through a pew Bible and scratching some notes on a church bulletin. Cody glanced at Luke and then back at Hunter. Surely they could keep peace in church, he hoped.

As Brother Jim lowered his fever-pitched voice and brought his sermon to a close, the young music minister joined him on stage to sing a solo of “Just as I Am” during a time of reflection and invitation. “With every eye closed and every head bowed,” said Brother Jim, launching into the familiar refrain that was surely ringing out in all the Baptist churches across the county at that very moment, “take this opportunity to pray on what you’ve heard today. If there be a sinner in this house who has never called upon the sweet name of Jesus for his saving grace, won’t you come now and be washed in the blood of the lamb?” Cody lowered his head, and old familiar feelings of guilt settled in his stomach like a heavy meal. Guilt for what, exactly, he was never quite sure; but sitting in the sanctuary of his childhood, listening to the words of a man who preached love and acceptance, it was only a matter of time before he would be led by the Spirit—or Shame, or Envy, or Something Else—down that aisle to repent of whatever it was that landed him back in this town where he felt so alone, back in this pew with the innocent woman he dragged away from a life that made sense to them both. He wanted to stand

and shout “God!” towards the heavens, but he couldn’t be sure if he meant it as a curse or a cry for salvation.

Just as the song of invitation came to a close, Cody was jolted out of his own confused prayer by what was happening in the center of the sanctuary: Hunter McCready inched deliberately down the aisle, past each pew, past Luke and Candace, and dropped to his knees in front of the altar. Pastor Jim signaled for the music minister to sing another verse, and then he kneeled down beside Hunter, placing a calm hand across his shoulders. Lori Ann narrowed her eyes and shook her head, mumbling profanities under her breath. Cody watched his brother to gage his reaction, but Luke never looked at Hunter; he kept his eyes on Candace. He watched her as she placed an anxious hand to her chest. She seemed to hold her breath as her eyes roved over the men at the altar.

Maisie leaned in close to Cody. “Who is that man?” she whispered. There was something in her voice beyond curiosity, something that struck Cody as odd, though he didn’t know why. He was surprised by the question at first, but then realized that Maisie had never seen Hunter, nor did she know anything about him other than his past run-in with Luke. No wonder she seemed confused by the obvious tension in the room.

“That’s Hunter McCready,” Cody said. “Candace’s ex.” As the words slipped from his mouth, he realized that he must have spoken too loudly. He could feel Luke and Candace’s eyes pressing in on him, but before long, the moment was broken by Brother Jim’s voice as he stood with Hunter in front of the congregation. The music faded away. Hunter stood silently by, hair in his eyes and hands in his pockets, as Brother Jim pronounced him a new creation in Christ, the old rags of his sinful flesh burned away in God’s all-consuming fire.

CHAPTER 4

It took less than a week for Maisie to find a job as a clerk at Blakely's Pharmacy and Fine Gifts, and soon thereafter she started beaming her brilliant Maisie smile around the house again. Working with the public energized Maisie in ways Cody couldn't understand. He would drag himself home from work feeling bone-tired and want nothing more than to smoke a half-dozen cigarettes, eat some cold pizza, and clonk out on the couch; but Maisie came home from shifts like a schoolgirl ready for afternoon play. She'd cook and clean, always lighting up the house with laughter while she talked about all the *Blue Banksian* characters she had met at the drug store counter.

"When we're rich and don't have to work anymore, I'm going to write a novel about these people," she said one day as she dumped a box of spaghetti noodles in a boiling pot of water. Cody was lying flat in the middle of the floor of the adjacent living room, trying to sooth out the pain in his back. "And not in a mocking sort of way, either. I mean, yeah, it's easy to laugh at the stupid ones, but most of them are so sweet and sincere." She stirred the pot with a wooden spoon, then came into the living room and straddled Cody's chest. He winced at first, but even in his discomfort, her body felt good and right pressed tightly against his.

"Honest to God, Mais, I don't know how you do it," said Cody. He put an open palm against her belly, which seemed to be popping out more and more with every passing day. They were coming up on eighteen weeks, so it wouldn't be long before they would know the baby's sex. When people asked what Cody wanted, he would always tell

them that he didn't care as long as the baby was healthy; but it was no secret between him and Maisie that they both dreamed of having a girl. "I really thought these people would have driven you out of town by now."

"Oh, they would run me out if I let them. And sometimes I think I will," she said as she rolled Cody onto his stomach. She massaged his neck, edging careful hands over the tight muscles of his shoulders and down his back. "But then I take a step back and remember that for a lot of the people in this town, the world begins at the county line and ends at the edge of the river. There's a certain amount of innocence in that, you know? Maybe mixed with equal parts of ignorance." Cody let out a deep breath and let Maisie's hands overtake his aching body. He was no longer surprised by her unrelenting insistence on seeing the best in people—this was the same woman, after all, who had once bought a homeless man dinner only moments after he had attempted to steal her purse—but Cody had seen enough ignorance underground to know that it wasn't always tied up with innocence.

Goosebumps flared down Cody's arms and legs as he felt Maisie's lips press against the back of his neck. She leaned down and whispered in his ear, "I need to tell you something. And I need you to promise not to get mad." Cody's eyes popped open wide, and he freed his body just enough to turn on his back and face Maisie once again.

"Okay. I promise—to try my best not to get mad," said Cody. He looked in her eyes to try to gauge the seriousness of the conversation.

"That's not what I said," replied Maisie.

"Well, it's the best you're going to get," said Cody. "Should I be worried?"

Maisie pressed herself off Cody's chest and went back into the kitchen to stir the pasta.

“The thing is,” she started, facing away, “I kind of, sort of, invited Hunter McCready over for dinner on Sunday.” She stopped stirring the pasta and glanced over her shoulder to see Cody’s reaction. Was it possible that he had heard her right? How would she have even had the chance, much less the desire, to invite Hunter McCready into their home? Cody started to ask these questions aloud, but Maisie preempted him. “He came into the pharmacy today and picked up a prescription for antidepressants,” she said. She talked breathlessly, as if she wanted to get it all out before Cody could make up his mind. “Of course, it’s illegal for me to tell you he picked up antidepressants, so don’t go spreading that around, but the thing is he looked defeated like some beaten puppy or something, and I just had this feeling in my chest like my heart was going to explode if I didn’t do something right then.”

Cody didn’t speak, but only nodded. This was Maisie’s way of living life. He knew her capacity for loving strangers was far greater than most people’s ability to love those closest to them. How could he be upset at such a thing? “I told him that I had seen him at the church service,” Maisie continued, “and I lied and said we were members there at Riverside and we wanted to follow-up with him. That’s what a church member would say, right? That they wanted to follow-up? Anyway, I invited him to dinner.” She blew a stray hair from her face and looked to Cody for a response. “And he said yes.”

When Cody and Luke’s father died in the mine accident ten years ago, Luke went missing for nearly a week. As soon as the dirt had settled on Coaldust’s coffin, Luke headed back to the house, grabbed his dad’s Remington 12 gauge from the gun safe in the basement, jumped onto his Yamaha Grizzly four wheeler, and disappeared onto the

winding back roads of Blue Banks County down towards the river bottoms. Nobody worried about him too much. Luke had made a habit of vanishing when he couldn't handle life; but he always came back, his return into the world as quiet and mysterious as his departure. As Cody came home from school one day the next week, he found Luke sitting on the porch swing, mud streaked across the navy blue button-down dress shirt he had been wearing since the funeral. He tapped the butt of the shotgun on the wooden planks of the porch to the rhythm of the swing like a metronome. As Cody approached, Luke stopped swinging and tilted the business end of the gun in his direction.

“You ever just feel like killing something?” asked Luke. His eyes were hollow. He never looked at Cody, but let the barrel of the gun linger in the air as a warning. Cody edged back down the driveway, hopped on his bike, and rode around town for the next two hours, tears streaking down his cheeks for his dad, for his brother, for everything. When he returned home later that night, he walked in the house to see Luke sitting at the kitchen table, showered and groomed, eating a heaping pile of macaroni and cheese like it was any other Friday night. Cody sat down at the table and talked to his brother about the Cincinnati Reds pitching rotation, about the weather, about the Blue Banks Blues Festival that was happening at the river the following weekend. But they never talked about their dad. They never talked about the gun. At fourteen years old, Cody was only then realizing that there were certain things he could never discuss with his older brother, that there was an ever-shifting line that he could edge but never cross.

Now, as he pulled his truck into Luke and Candace's driveway, he worried that he would have to cross the line whether he liked it or not. Hunter McCready was coming to Cody's house for dinner; and Luke had to know about it. There was no other way.

Cody grabbed his jacket from the passenger seat and slung it on as he stepped out into the crisp November air. The last few leaves of the season clung to the line of maple trees that hemmed in Luke's backyard, swaying in the breeze like starlings in murmuration. Through the gaps between the brilliant bursts of orange and red, Cody could see the rolling Kentucky hills dipping into the distance for miles like waves cresting against the purple-dusk skies. He had missed the peacefulness of those hills while he was in Chicago, missed sitting on the rooftop terrace of his mother's house and seeing the unspoiled land stretch out in all directions away from their little rural town.

Cody could never predict what might happen when he visited Luke's house, but he certainly didn't expect what happened next: before he had even reached the porch, his older brother swung the door open and beckoned him inside with a smile.

"Heard you parking that old clunker out there," he said as he put his arm around Cody's shoulder and led him into the family room: a rustic, wood-paneled den lit only by a reading lamp and the flicker of the log-burning fireplace. Little Henry poked his head out from behind a pillow fort, which occupied nearly all of the floor space of the small room.

"Hey there, buddy!" Cody said, trying to raise the tenor of his voice the way that he imagined a loving uncle should. Henry let out a shriek—whether from joy or terror Cody couldn't be sure—and then slid back under the cover of his fort. "Wonder if he'll ever get used to me," said Cody. Luke bounded into the nearby kitchen and emerged seconds later with a couple of Cokes. He tossed one to Cody.

"Oh, he'll come around," said Luke. "He's only seen you a handful of times. You're still a stranger." Luke peered into the fort to see where Henry was hiding, and

then put a finger to his lips to shush Cody. He got on his knees and crept around the perimeter of the pillows, letting the room go silent. Cody watched his brother lie in wait for the perfect chance to ambush his unsuspecting child. Somewhere tucked away in a long-forgotten fold of memory, Cody could barely tease out images of his own father stalking him and Luke around the makeshift forts of their childhood basement. Most of the time Cody saw nothing of his father in Luke; but this—the smile on his brother’s face as he rustled the edges of the pillows, the joy in his eyes as he listened to Henry’s delighted squeals from inside the fort—this was straight out of Coaldust Culver’s wheelhouse.

It only took seconds for curiosity to get the best of little Henry: he eased his head out of the fort, looked to the left and right, and then was promptly tackled to the boot-worn berber carpet. Cody sat on the edge of the sofa and watched as Luke played and laughed in ways Cody never imagined he was able. He might have assumed his brother was approaching one of his manic periods; but this seemed like a quiet, stable joy. Cody had adjusted to knowing Luke at the extremes, a man whose alcohol-soaked fuse burned at both ends; but the father before him now was different. Could this stable Luke stick around long enough to absorb the news about Hunter McCready?

When they were both out of breath, Luke held little Henry close to his chest and kissed the top of his head. “Alright, boy,” Luke said as he ran his fingers through his son’s sweaty hair, “you go check on your momma while Daddy talks to Uncle Cody. She’s taking a bath upstairs.” Henry squirmed out of Luke’s arms and dashed away, the patter of his footsteps disappearing behind him up the creaking steps. Luke made a show

out of collapsing on the couch in exhaustion. He grabbed his Coke off the end table, cracked it open, and slugged down half the can in one gulp.

Cody adjusted his position on the couch, but couldn't yet coax any words out of his mouth. He took a slow swig on his own soda to give Luke a chance to start the conversation. Small talk was always best before this type of thing, right? Maybe he'd feel out the situation a bit more and then bring up the news casually, like it just occurred to him that Luke might be interested in knowing.

"Well," started Luke as he turned to Cody and looked him squarely in the eyes, "are we just gonna sit here, or are you planning on telling me about your little dinner date with McCready?" Cody couldn't hide his surprise at Luke's question. He stuttered a bit, blurring out a string of incomprehensible utterances, and then took another drink of his Coke. He thought Luke might pick up conversation again if he just sat silently for a moment, but his brother kept his burning glare fixed on Cody's face.

"Yeah, we can talk about that," said Cody. "I mean, I wasn't trying to keep—" Luke burst out laughing, stopping Cody from making any excuses."

"Look at you, all jittery," said Luke, reigning himself in. "Oh, don't act so shocked. This is a small town, Cody. This ain't Chi-town. Didn't that Brit of yours figure I have friends at that pharmacy?"

"I don't know," said Cody. "I reckon she's not used to being spied on." There was that word again: *reckon*. Cody put a hand over his mouth as if to keep it from happening again.

"Oh, hell. This town ain't big enough for spying. You just have to assume that everything you say is being heard by people who don't mind repeating it." Luke left for

the kitchen again, this time returning with a couple of beers. He handed one to Cody, who then placed it unopened on the table beside him.

“Look, I don’t really know what to say here,” said Cody. “I don’t know why she invited him over. It’s just Maisie’s way. You’d have to know her to understand.” On second thought, a beer didn’t sound half-bad. Cody popped it open and took a gulp. “I just figured you’d want to hear it from me. That’s all.” Luke nodded in agreement, even smiled a bit. Cody couldn’t remember the last time he saw his brother truly sober. Luke pressed the cold can to his forehead to cool himself off.

“The truth is,” said Luke, “who you sit across from over a pan of lasagna ain’t my business.” As far as Cody could tell, his brother meant what he said. “Besides, I’ve been thinking,” said Luke. He lowered his voice and craned his head around to make sure Candace hadn’t come down the stairs. “It may not be a bad idea for you to get to know McCready a little bit. Maybe you can keep an eye on him for me. You know, keep your enemies closer, that sort of thing.”

“I’m not aiming to get mixed up in other people’s business,” said Cody. He wasn’t sure if that was true or not, but it seemed like something he should say.

“I’m not asking you to do nothing crazy,” said Luke. He popped off the tab on his beer can and chewed on it—an old nervous habit that he and Cody both picked up from their dad. “I guess I’m just asking you to make sure he’s keeping Candace’s name out of his mouth. You know?” Cody nodded. He understood perfectly. “Besides, word is that McCready is coming on at the mine soon,” said Luke. “Jail rat can’t get work nowhere else, and your faceboss felt sorry for him.”

“Spits Anderson?” said Cody. He thought back to when he and Luke saw Hunter standing next to Spits’ table at Lynn’s Overlook Bar. Were they together that night?

“She and him are blood somehow. Cousin or aunt or something,” said Luke. “The point is, if you keep a watch on him, I can keep some distance. Maybe I can keep out of trouble.” Cody watched Luke chew on the beer tab, and then he popped off his own and tossed it in his mouth, the metallic twang ringing against the fillings in his teeth. If getting close to Hunter McCready meant keeping his brother out of jail—or worse—then that’s exactly what he would do.

Just past Blue Banks Community College on the southwest edge of town, the highway narrowed and snaked through the hills for ten miles before leading across a rusted one-lane bridge over Broadridge Creek and into the next county. The stretch of road was only busy one day a week: Sunday, when Blue Bank County’s antiquated blue laws prohibited the sale of alcohol, forcing any ill-prepared residents to make a trek to County Line Liquors. Maisie sent Cody out to grab a bottle of wine—and some sparkling juice for her and the baby—in preparation for Hunter McCready’s visit. Cody didn’t mind making the trip, as it gave him a chance to smoke a handful of cigarettes to calm his nerves. He couldn’t figure out why he was so intimidated by McCready; or even if what he was feeling was intimidation at all. Why did he lie awake at night worrying about the dinner? What was it about this man that made Cody’s palms sweat at the mention of his name?

When Cody arrived back home, the sun had nearly dipped below the horizon, backlighting the silhouetted farm house with muted cobalt skies. As the headlamps of his

truck angled into the gravel drive, Cody saw a jet black 1980s El Camino parked in front of the house; and beside the car stood its owner, dressed in tattered jeans and a black t-shirt, smoking a blue-light electronic cigarette. Hunter McCready pushed the hair away from his face and blew a stream of e-cig vapor into the air around him. There was no turning back now.

Cody grabbed the bottle of wine from his parked truck and nodded at Hunter, approaching with an extended hand. Hunter gripped Cody's hand with a warm and firm shake, then took a long drag on his e-cig. The blue glow created a small halo of light around his face. He reached into the open window of his El Camino and pulled out a fifth of bourbon.

“In case we need something stronger,” he said, clanking the container against Cody's bottle of wine. As Hunter dismantled his e-cigarette and pushed it back into the charging case, Cody felt the silence of the night hovering all around them. He had the urge to make small talk; but what could he possibly say? The air was dense between them, as if they were tip-toeing around some dark secret that bound them together. Cody knew it was an illusory history—created in the wake of the violence between Hunter and his brother—but nonetheless he felt connected to this man with quiet gray eyes standing before him. They would have to talk about Luke at some point. “Just so we're clear,” Hunter said, “I didn't know you were a Culver when I agreed to come over here.” He looked at the house, down the street, back in his car—everywhere but at Cody. “Maisie seems like a sweet girl, and this town doesn't have too many of those. It's no secret that I ain't got many friends around here since I went to jail. So I agreed to come over here. But I don't want trouble with your brother. And I don't want trouble with you.”

“You don’t have trouble with me,” said Cody. “Come on inside.”

Since the moment Maisie announced that Hunter would be coming to dinner, Cody had gone through countless scenarios in his mind of how the evening would play out. Sometimes he imagined smashed dishes and fistfights. Other times he thought the three of them would just sit at the table for a torturous hour, silently staring at untouched plates full of pasta and salad. But what happened in reality was a total shock: after a few awkward moments of settling into the evening, Hunter blended into Cody and Maisie’s home like he was a long-lost friend, as if this night were merely one of a string of memories where they had become lost in each other’s presence over the years. Cody’s original plan had been to usher Hunter out the door as soon as the plates were cleared, but he found himself peeling the wax from Hunter’s bottle of Maker’s Mark and pouring drinks late into the night with this man, the unlikeliest of friends in his new western Kentucky world.

They lingered in the living room, Maisie stretched out on the floor and Cody sitting with Hunter on the blue-and-tan checkered couch that he recently picked up from Goodwill. The conversation roamed unwieldy paths around everything from philosophy and literature to the most recent recruiting class of the Kentucky Wildcats basketball team. Hunter McCready was as deep as he was mysterious, one seam opening into the next like the maze of underground rooms between coal pillars.

“So I have to ask, Maisie,” said Hunter as he slid his e-cig from sleek, black case, “how does a girl like you end up in a town like this?” His question caught Maisie off guard, as she had been quiet for a good portion of the evening. She was normally the one

who carried conversations for Cody, who preferred to blend in and listen for quiet moments to interject; but somehow Cody was more comfortable in Hunter's presence than he was in that of nearly everyone else in town, so he and Hunter had monopolized the evening.

"A girl like me?" she asked. "That's a bit of a loaded question, isn't it?"

"Sure, I guess. But aren't all questions loaded?" asked Hunter. He took a drag on the e-cig, the blue light glowing brilliantly against the black cartridge. Cody studied Hunter as he watched wisps of vapor escape from his lips. "The key is figuring out what they're loaded with."

"Oh, I could give lots of answers as to how I ended up in Blue Banks—each of them loaded in some way or another, too," said Maisie. "But I guess the easiest explanation is this." She rubbed her baby bump, stretching her shirt down to make it more pronounced. Hunter nodded. For the first time all evening, Cody felt the pang of embarrassment echo against his chest. He knew Maisie didn't mean it this way, but Cody heard her explanation as an admission that she was trapped, that he—or his child—had somehow anchored her in Western Kentucky. It was true enough, Cody thought, even if they never said it aloud.

"Well, congratulations," said Hunter. "I couldn't even tell. I guess that's a good thing." The room grew silent for the first time since Hunter had walked through the door. Many things about Hunter had surprised Cody, but what he found the most unexpected was the way Hunter's shy, hangdog demeanor changed when he was in a small intimate setting. He was no good in crowds, just like Cody; but give him a chance to chat one-on-one or with a small group and he would dazzle and charm. A classic ambivert, Cody

thought: caught between two ideas of what “normal” should look like. In a world of *either/or* Hunter was a *neither*: the type of person who seemed out of place no matter what. And Cody could identify with that.

Hunter threw back a final shot of bourbon, and with the alcohol twinkling in his eyes, stood up to leave. “I better call it a night while I can still walk,” he said. He stumbled a bit, but regained his balance. Cody caught him by the arm and let Hunter lean against him. His body was heavier than his thin frame looked, so the two men bumped against each other for a moment before they righted themselves, tangled in an awkward embrace.

“While you can still walk, huh?” said Cody. “Maybe we should have called it a night three shots ago.”

“Why don’t you just stay here for the night?” suggested Maisie as she stood to join them.

“Oh, I’ll be fine,” said Hunter. After a moment, Cody realized his arms were still lingering about Hunter’s shoulders. He gave him a quick pat on the back and stepped away.

“No, you should stay,” said Cody. “Look, Maisie’s the only sober one here. We should trust her judgment.” Cody couldn’t understand why, but he desperately wanted Hunter to stay the night. Today he had felt like his old self for the first time since he left Chicago. He knew it had something to do with Hunter, and he didn’t want that to end.

“Stay,” said Cody. “Please.”

CHAPTER 5

Some 320 million years before Cody made his first trip underground to rip coal from the seams of the earth, the land that was now Kentucky was much closer to the equator. During what geologists refer to as the Pennsylvanian Period, lush vegetation accumulated into pervasive peat bogs throughout the area, which would later be compacted by layers of sediment and turn to coal over many millions of years. Following the lead of pioneers before them throughout the world, the settlers of Blue Banks County began blasting tunnels to mine the soft bituminous coal of the western Kentucky coal field shortly after the county was founded in the early nineteenth century. The black rock lurking beneath the surface was the epicenter of the fledgling town's economy, but it was much more than that: it was a reason for community, an anchor of shared experience that gave the people of Blue Banks County a common heritage, their own rituals, even a unique language.

Mining practices changed throughout the decades, of course, but the workers of the *Unified Partners* mine currently underground agreed that one truism, among others, must have remained a constant since the very first tonnage was pulled to the surface: new miners must be hazed. In the six weeks Cody had been in the mines, he had been held down and stripped naked, sprayed from head-to-toe with neon orange safety paint, and doused with rock dust. The second week he was on the job, Big Nuts led him through a web of old mine tunnels, stole his helmet and light, and left him to find his way out. After he finally emerged from the darkness back into the dimly lit coal rooms, Spits Anderson

wrote him a safety violation for not wearing his helmet. When Cody tried to explain what had happened, stammering through breathless stutters, Spits winked at him, smiled, and handed him a hand-scrawled note on citation paper: *welcome to the underworld, bitch!* The rest of the unit looked on and cheered, then took turns slapping Cody on the back and tussling his hair. He was one of them now, welcomed in the same way his brother and father had been before him.

When Hunter McCready came onto the unit as a general laborer, Cody had warned him about what to expect, and he even looked forward to being on the other side of the ambush. But after a week went by without even the most benign of pranks, Cody realized there was something amiss, that the unit wasn't going to take to Hunter the same way they did to other orange hats. Maybe this had something to do with the fact that Hunter's hire was unexpected: there was no vacancy to be filled, just some of the higher-ups doing a favor for a relative of Spits Anderson. With all the news of mine closures, layoffs, and mandatory furloughs around the area—most of them blamed on the president by the men underground, whether his policies had relevance or not—many miners didn't take well to some ex-con coming in and scooping up paid hours that could be spread around to the folks who had put in their time. Still, there seemed to be something else, something deeper splitting the chasm between Hunter and the rest of the unit. Hunter's presence—held together by rumors of his mottled past and his nervous demeanor—put people underground on edge. The men on the unit only talked to him when it was necessary for a job, and the ubiquitous crude joking and laughter prevalent throughout the mines came to a screeching halt whenever Hunter was in earshot.

One day Cody decided he would try to break the tension between Hunter and the rest of the crew by initiating a prank of his own. When most of the men from the unit were in the bathhouse showering after first shift, Cody scrubbed the grime from his body as fast as he could and slipped out of the shower and into the adjacent locker room before anyone else. He found Hunter's clothes, wadded them into a tight ball, and shoved them into an open duffle bag in a nearby locker. Hiding clothes this way was a common prank in the bathhouse and was thought to be pretty harmless amongst the miners. Cody himself had been a victim of this gag during his first week on the job, when his own clothes had been stolen and placed in his truck in the parking lot. Bud Gibbons, one of the alpha-male operators of the continuous mining machine, had tossed Cody a hand-towel to cover up, and the entire unit hooted and hollered as they watched him dart from the building stark naked, shimmying between cars in the broad daylight.

After hiding Hunter's clothes, Cody threw on his jeans and hooded sweatshirt and waited, watching from a wooden bench in the corner as the men streamed out of the shower and started to dress. Following his normal pattern, Hunter hung back from the rest of the men, sneaking out of the shower, covering himself with careful hands. Drops of water streamed from his long wet hair, slid down his tattooed back and disappeared into the towel he wrapped around his waist. Hunter opened his locker to find it empty. He checked the number on the outside to make sure he had the right locker, then looked around the room with cautious eyes.

"What's wrong, McCready?" Cody shouted in an exaggerated voice from the corner, hiding among the taller miners standing around him. "Forget your clothes or something?" The room went silent. All eyes on McCready. This was normally when the

other men would join in the fun, snapping the victim with wet towels, goosing his naked flesh from all directions. But nobody said a word. The silence hummed around the room, settling in Cody's chest. He didn't know how or why, but he knew he had messed up. He had a sick feeling that things were about to get ugly.

"Where are my clothes?" Hunter asked. He spoke to nobody and everyone, his voice quiet and steady. A couple of guys nudged Cody to speak up; but in the dead silence of the room, he couldn't coax out the words. Hunter turned away from the gawking crowd to face the lockers. "One more time," he said, running a finger along the locker's edge, "who took my clothes?"

Echoing silence. A cleared throat. A creaking wooden bench.

Hunter drew back and punched the metal locker once, twice, three times. He rifled through the lockers on either side of him, slinging dirty coveralls and clean sweatshirts into the middle of the damp concrete floor. The men around him cleared from his path, watching him ravage locker after locker like a drug dog surrounded by bricks of cocaine. This was the Hunter McCready they had been tiptoeing around. This was the Hunter McCready who broke Luke's face in half and left him for dead. Cody had seen the other side of the coin—the gentle man with deep questions sipping bourbon on a quiet Sunday night, the repentant sinner seeking salvation in the aisles of Riverside Baptist Church. But this Hunter McCready was a caged animal gnawing through the lock.

With the contents of a dozen lockers strewn about the room, Hunter found his clothes poking out from the open duffle bag where Cody had stuffed them. He grabbed his belongings and slung the bag across the room into the shower area. Silence settled across the room again, everyone waiting to see what Hunter would do next.

“What the hell are you staring at?” asked Hunter, talking to everyone at once as if they were one body, one soul. A line of sweat slid from his temple to his jawline.

“Show’s over.”

“It w-w-was just a j-j-j-joke, man,” said Tony Hensley, the wiry stutterer who got into the scuffle on the mantrip during Cody’s first day. He was the smallest guy on the unit but never backed down from anyone. “Ch-ch-chill out,” he said. Hunter glared at him, then looked around the rest of the room to see everyone still staring at him. His eyes roved over every face, eventually settling on Cody’s. Something was hidden behind that stare, some quiet secret in his gray eyes. Cody remembered Luke’s foreboding words: *I know who you are, Hunter. And I know what you are.* For a fleeting moment, Cody had the unsettling urge to go to Hunter, to hold him, to somehow undo whatever dark truth hung over his life and distanced him from everyone around him. In a way Cody couldn’t articulate, he felt protective of Hunter, and responsible for whatever would become of this moment. Why did he care so much about a man who was still almost a stranger? Why was he haunted by a guilt he couldn’t name, a yearning he couldn’t understand?

Without warning, Hunter snapped his eyes away from Cody and lunged at Tony Hensley. He caught the smaller man by the throat and slammed his back against the row of lockers. The rest of the men stepped back and formed a loose semi-circle around Hunter and Tony.

“A joke huh?” said Hunter. He spoke through clenched teeth. A stressed vein popped out on Tony’s purpled forehead. “Why don’t you tell me the punchline again?” Tony tried to speak, but only spittle gurgled from his lips as Hunter clenched his throat tighter. The color drained from Cody’s face. He was responsible for this, and he knew he

had to end it, for better or worse, before Hunter ended up back in jail. He pushed through the crowd and placed a hand on Hunter's bare back. Hunter recoiled and turned to see that the hand belonged to Cody.

"C'mon now, Hunter. Let him go," Cody said. He spoke with a gentle voice, just above a whisper. "He didn't have a thing to do with it. Just let him go." Hunter sucked in a long breath while the other men in the room held their own. He eased his hand off of Tony's throat and let him slide out of the way. Hunter sat on the edge of the bench behind him and let the curls of his hair hang over his face.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to himself. He stretched his fingers apart and let blood pool between his knuckles from where he had cut them on the lockers. He gripped his split fist into his other hand. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry," he said, whispering to someone, somewhere. Cody stayed beside him, his cool hand burning against Hunter's scorching back, and the two waited together in silence for the rest of the men to clear the room.

On the rare occasion when Maisie had to work a late night at the pharmacy to help restock inventory, Cody had made a habit of having dinner at his mother's house. It was a win-win situation: he got a free meal, and spending time with Lori Ann helped him keep up with the quota of visits that she no doubt expected. He imagined his mom sitting at her old mahogany writing desk in her bedroom, meticulously logging his attendance in one of those big, red grading notebooks his teachers used to carry from class to class in middle school. He was getting more accustomed to living in Blue Banks with each passing day; but he still envied his old self back in Chicago, the guy who could make a thirty-minute

phone call once a week to his mother and rid himself of her guilt-trip for another seven days.

“I just don’t see why you got to be traipsing around town with that goodfernothin’ fool,” said Lori Ann as she slapped a salmon patty on Cody’s plate. She told him she’d been hearing through the Blue Banks gossip channels that he had been spotted with Hunter here and there over the past few weeks. “Don’t you know what that boy’s up to? Isn’t it obvious?” she said.

“Not obvious to me, I guess,” said Cody as he ladled a double serving of cream-style corn from his mother’s olive green casserole dish. “But hey, that’s why you’re here. To tell me what I’m missing.”

“You know good and well he’s just trying to snake into your life as a means to make things hard on your brother,” said Lori Ann. She sliced a wedge of cornbread from a cast iron skillet, slathered it with sweet cream butter, and thwacked it on Cody’s plate. Lori Ann Culver had a way of letting you know you were on her bad side even when she was serving you dinner. “Things look to be on the upswing with Luke and Candace. He don’t need to hear people talking about his little brother sleeping with the enemy.”

Cody fumbled his fork, clanking it against the edge of his plate. His mouth went dry, and the skin on his neck and behind his ears flared red. *Sleeping with the enemy*, she said. Cody knew she only meant he was hanging out where he didn’t belong; but the clichéd phrase made the salmon patty stick in his mouth, made his hands tremble as he tried to clear his throat with a gulp of sweet tea.

The night Hunter had come over for dinner, Cody and Maisie finally convinced him that he was too drunk to drive home. Maisie stretched a fitted sheet over their worn Goodwill couch, grabbed Hunter a clean towel and a couple of blankets, and announced she was going to bed. “I’ll leave you boys to polish off that bottle,” she said, mechanically rubbing her baby bump. “It’s no fun watching you drink when I can’t, and I can hardly keep my eyes open anyway.”

“I’ll be heading that way soon,” said Cody. He poured one last shot for himself and Hunter. He sucked his down and let the burn of the alcohol slide through his insides. Cody tried to hand Hunter his shot, but he waved it off.

“I’m not sure if I can even find my mouth at this point,” he said. Maisie said her goodnights and left Cody and Hunter to talk; but the two of them never spoke another word until morning. Lost in the fog of his every-shifting memories, Cody couldn’t be sure whether they both blacked out from the alcohol or simply drifted to sleep; but he did recall his dream that night, a dream that haunted him every day since. He dreamed of edging his fingers along the small of Hunter’s back, tracing his intricate tattoos around his waist until they disappeared below his beltline. He dreamed of a kiss, of a whisper, of hairs raised on the back of his neck.

When he startled awake, it took him a moment to realize he was lying in the middle of the living room floor. Hunter was balled up on the couch, snoring. Cody stretched the crick in his neck, took one last look at the stranger on his sofa, and wondered what tortured dreams were coursing through his mind at that very moment. Cody left the room in haste, slid into bed with Maisie, and woke her in the middle of the night with his hands roving between her thighs, his lips searching her neck.

Over the next month, Cody found himself spending time with Hunter several nights a week. At first he convinced himself that he was merely keeping an ear to the ground for Luke's sake; but after his unsettling conversation with Lori Ann, Cody began to accept that something different was happening, that he craved spending time with Hunter in a way that he had never experienced before with another man. The obvious question of his own sexuality lingered for a few days, but Cody knew he wasn't gay. It was a different sort of attraction, something that felt more spiritual than visceral. Always the academic, Cody couldn't help but put the analytical screws to his own psychological mystery. In an odd reversal of Freudian theory, he wondered if the explicitly sexual manifest content of his dream about Hunter was somehow a suppression of latent yearnings that had nothing to do with sex, that were somehow more powerful than sex.

But what was more powerful than sex?

One night, Maisie wasn't feeling well, so she took a cool bath and went to bed early. Cody texted Hunter and suggested they go hang out at the Blue Banks High School football game—where nearly half the town would be on a Friday night in November. Hunter showed up thirty minutes later; but when Cody jumped in the passenger seat of his El Camino, it became clear that the night would take a different turn. Hunter had a black eye and split lip.

“What happened to you?” asked Cody. He angled around to get a better look at Hunter's face.

“Oh, you don't worry about that,” said Hunter. He reached in the console between the seats and pulled out a small plastic bag of weed. “Just roll us up a couple of fatties,”

he said. He tossed the bag to Cody and slid him a couple of rolling papers. “It’s Friday night, and I’m in a good mood. We’re gonna do this up right.” Cody pinched the weed between his fingers. He’d only smoked one joint in his life, and he’d never rolled his own.

“You piss somebody off at the mine again?” Cody asked. He rubbed one of the papers between his thumb and forefinger, studying its texture.

“Cody,” said Hunter, a warning in his voice, “I said don’t worry about it.” Cody nodded and let it drop. Hunter reminded Cody of Luke in that they both had the emotional capacity to go from cloud nine to the ninth circle of hell in the blink of an eye. Cody fumbled with the weed and the rolling papers while Hunter cranked up the volume on the radio and tore through the back roads of Blue Banks.

After about twenty minutes, Hunter eased the car off the road and cut through the grass to park behind a line of trees at the river bottoms. Hunter killed the lights, grabbed the joints from Cody, and jumped out of the car into the bitter November night. Cody followed behind him and was taken by the beauty of the open night hanging over the river marsh. Leafless birch trees encircled the lapping water, and stars stretched in panorama throughout the cloudless sky. Hunter slid onto the grass, lit up a joint, and held the smoke in lungs like an old pro. Cody sat beside him and took a hit of his own, coughing and hacking as the bitterness hung in his mouth.

“You think God ever regrets us?” asked Hunter. He leaned back on his elbows and stared up at the crescent moon.

“Regrets us?” Cody repeated. He smashed out the head of his joint and slid it in his jacket pocket. One hit was enough for him to know he’d rather stick to tobacco.

“I mean, don’t you think the world was better before we were here?” he said. “Just look up there. How could we ever make that any better?” Hunter dabbed his split lip with his finger to check for blood, then took another drag on the joint. Cody started to say something—about God, about humanity—but before he could order his thoughts, Hunter stood and took off his jacket, then peeled off his shirt.

“What the heck are you doing?” asked Cody. “It’s freezing out here.” He was suddenly more aware of the November wind bending the reeds that stuck up from the river marsh.

“What does it look like, hombre?” said Hunter. “I’m going swimming.” Cody watched as he unbuckled his belt, as he slid his jeans past his hips and onto the grass. He stood in just a black pair of boxer briefs, stretching out his limbs, letting the crisp air whip over his flesh. He had always hidden himself with cautious hands under the threatening fluorescent light of the bathhouse, but here in the stillness of the open country, alone and isolated with only the whispering trees as their witness, he moved through the darkness with grace and freedom. As he stood at the edge of the water, Cody couldn’t help but to study the contours of his naked body, really aware of it for the first time. His chest and back were smooth, completely hairless even in places between the tattoo ink. His hips were broader than that of most other men, somehow more rounded and less angular than he expected. Cody watched as Hunter slid his boxer briefs over his thighs and past his muscular calves.

“I’m giving you thirty seconds to get in here before I throw you in myself,” Hunter said. He plunged into the water with abandon, yelping as the icy ripples overtook his body. As Cody stood to undress himself, a nervous excitement coursed through his

veins. He threw off his clothes as fast as he could, aware more than ever of Hunter's watchful eyes, and slid into the cover of the dark Ohio River waters. Cody howled, and Hunter echoed with a shout of his own.

"I haven't felt this alive in weeks," said Hunter, wading through the water closer to Cody. "Maybe years." He dunked his head under the surface, and lingered beneath the water for several seconds. Cody felt more exposed than ever waiting for Hunter to return. What was he doing down there? How much could he see under the murky water? Cody began to expect that he would feel Hunter's hands on his body at any moment; but then his head crested the surface, a splash of water flung back with his long black hair. "Alright," Hunter said. "It's too damn cold in this water. Why did you make me do this?" He smiled.

On the short drive back to Cody's house, the two men rode without talking, each enveloped in his own silence. Precisely what had happened at the river bottoms was a mystery to Cody, but he was sure that things were different now between him and Hunter. Between him and Luke. Between him and Maisie. Just before he turned the car onto Old Herrodsburg Road, Hunter let his hand slip on top of Cody's, let his fingers edge over his knuckles, just long enough to acknowledge what they both knew but could not yet speak.

Yes, the world was different now: bigger, uncertain, harrowing. But as he walked in the farmhouse and tiptoed to the master bedroom, he knew those thoughts would have to wait until he dealt with what was before him: Maisie, crying on the bathroom floor, bleeding.

CHAPTER 6

Situated directly between the oldest stretch of the town's little business district and the shore of the Ohio River, the neglected structure of the Blue Banks Regional Hospital was an imposing eyesore on what was once a pristine stretch of the river's naturally rocky coastline. Over the span of Cody's lifetime, the disrepair of the façade had become increasingly symbolic of the hospital's waning reputation. Constant rumors of incompetent management and patient neglect swirled through the town to the point that the people of Blue Banks came up with their own slogan: "Die at Regional, or die on your way somewhere else." The night Cody found Maisie curled up on the bathroom floor, he knew it wasn't her life in the balance, but the life of their unborn baby. As he sat in the small waiting area of the emergency room, he picked at the peeling fabric of the faded seafoam-green chair and replayed the night in his head.

When Hunter had dropped him off well past midnight, Cody eased past the crying hinges of the farmhouse's screen door, expecting his wife to be asleep. As he edged his way through the darkened kitchen to the hallway, part of him was still wandering the river bottoms, images flicking across his mind's reel: Water droplets racing down the small of Hunter's back. The points of jutting hipbones angling against gentle slopes of flesh. A trail of gossamer hairs beneath the navel, disappearing down, down, down to where he could not yet let his gaze linger. As Cody reached for the bathroom door handle, he could still feel Hunter's trembling fingers brushing across his knuckles. But

when he noticed the ribbon of light escaping from the bottom seam of the bathroom door, he was jarred back to the present. He knocked.

“Maisie?” he said, just above a whisper. “You in there?” When there was no response, he pushed open the door. She was on the floor, naked, resting against the bathtub. She looked at Cody with something like an apology hidden in her vacant eyes. “Jesus, Mais,” said Cody, “What’s wrong?” She opened her mouth to speak, but then clutched her stomach in pain and winced. That’s when Cody noticed the color of the bathwater still in the tub: a light shade of pink lapping against the beige porcelain.

When they arrived at the hospital, Maisie’s cramping was severe enough for the nurse to suspect an ectopic pregnancy; but when Cody said she was well into the second trimester, they knew such an issue was highly unlikely. Cody was instructed to stay in the waiting room while the nursing staff tended to Maisie and called in an obstetrician. With nothing to do but wait, Cody was left to deal with the flood of his own memories from the last time he had stepped foot into this hospital, just over ten years before. At fourteen years old, he had been young enough to still believe that doctors could fix anything, that they could save his father no matter how badly he was burned in the mine explosion. He remembered sitting beside his mother in one of the very same seafoam-green chairs he was in now. Lori Ann had handed him a TV guide.

“Go on and do the crossword puzzle in there,” she said as she folded a stick of Big Red cinnamon gum into her mouth. “Ain’t no sense worryin’ yourself. He’s in God’s hands.” She let out a labored sigh. Cody could tell—by how she aimlessly rummaged through her rhinestone-studded purse, by how she peeled the orange fingernail polish from her left thumb, by how she pulled at the loose curls of her thinning hair—that his

mother didn't believe in God in that moment, or at least didn't believe in a God who would intervene. Even as a young teen who grew up under the pulpit of Southern Baptist preaching, Cody knew his dad's life was in the flesh-and-bone hands of the doctors; yet he found this to be more comforting than putting his hopes on some ethereal, nameless Being who—from all he had learned in fourteen years of Old Testament Sunday school lessons—seemed to take equal pleasure in destruction as he did in creation. No, God couldn't fix this, but people could. People had blown up his father, and it was up to people to put him back together. He had always struggled to pray, but he'd never had a problem with faith. His dad would not die, because Cody had faith that people could save him.

But his father did die, of course, and in the intervening years between then and the moment he sat anxiously awaiting the news of whether his unborn child was dead, too, his faith in people had begun to slowly evaporate. It had condensed into cumulus clouds in the sky around him, and he knew it was only a matter of time before it would rain down as something else, something he knew he couldn't name until it covered him completely.

Life on the surface was ever shifting, but the underground coalfield was beginning to feel more familiar to Cody, a second home of sorts, though not one he would have chosen for himself. Spits Anderson had given him a break from shoveling coal and put him to work hanging ventilation curtains, a two-man crew with Hunter McCready. One day after a routine safety meeting, Spits had pulled Cody aside. She scuffed her boot across the dirt as she talked, making a figure eight pattern.

“Alright, there ain’t no use in sugarcoating it,” she said. “Nobody on the unit seems to want McCready down here, so I have to get rid of him or find some way to make it work.”

“Well, what does that have to do with me?” said Cody. His tone was abrasive. Spits looked at him cockeyed, and Cody took a step back. He always felt defensive when someone mentioned Hunter to him, as if they could see into his private thoughts, as if they felt the same unnamed longing that welled up in his chest and caught in his throat at the mention of Hunter’s name. “Sorry. I just mean, he seems like he’s doing good enough work to me.”

“Yeah, well, the work isn’t the problem,” she said, and Cody nodded in agreement. Hunter was still an outsider, and the men on the unit didn’t trust him, even if they couldn’t quite figure out why they didn’t. To Cody, even as he caught himself having frequent daydreams about what happened at the river bottoms, Hunter McCready was still a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces. “Look, McCready is blood to me, so I can’t put him out,” said Spits. She crossed her arms and looked him in the eye, as if they had come to an impasse. “He seems to do all right with you, so I’m gonna pair you two up on a rotation. You keep an eye out for him and maybe this will work out.” Cody knew that the closer he got to Hunter, the more he would distance himself from the rest of the mine crew. Spits knew this, too, and she acknowledged his sacrifice with a firm slap to Cody’s arm, a consolation. He felt something rising—around him, in him, through him. This underground world that was beginning to feel safe and familiar was about to blow apart like a methane ignition. But in that moment, Cody didn’t think about the other men on the unit or the risk he would be taking with his job. He didn’t consider the *smallness* of Blue

Banks or how reputations crumble under the pressure of the community. Instead, he just said, “Okay” and gave a little smile, knowing that now he had an excuse to spend more time with Hunter.

As if on cue, McCready approached with tools in hand, and the two of them set off to hang curtains. They hadn’t spoken since the late night at the river bottoms, but Cody knew he couldn’t let the flaring tension between them cloud his head as they went to work. The curtains had to be hung quickly and properly to ensure the airflow was directed to the coalface. Too many wrong moves could mean disaster.

“How’s Maisie?” asked Hunter as they made their way down a crosscut towards the coalface. “I heard you guys had a scare the other night.” Cody felt an inexplicable guilt rattle through his chest at the mention of Maisie’s name. He had the urge to change the subject, but he beat it back with an incantation of his will: *I have done nothing wrong. I have done nothing wrong.*

Yes, they had quite a scare. After waiting for nearly twelve hours in the emergency room, an ultrasound confirmed that there was a one-inch tear in Maisie’s placenta, which could cause off-and-on bleeding indefinitely. The baby was okay for the time being, but Maisie was ordered to bed rest for the remainder of the pregnancy. The on-call obstetrician assured them the tear should heal itself; but if it somehow worsened, it could terminate the pregnancy. That was the obstetrician’s word, *terminate*, which sounded to Cody both harrowing and ceremonious, especially in the doctor’s viscous Indian accent. On the drive home, Cody and Maisie had sat in silence, fingers intertwined

across the middle armrest. “I don’t want to call it *the fetus* anymore” said Maisie. “Let’s give her a name, and maybe she’ll want to stay.”

Yes, Cody thought, maybe she will. If the ultrasound couldn’t answer whether the baby would live or die, at least it answered something else: they were awaiting a baby girl.

“Is this really what my life has become?” asked Maisie, greeting Cody as he stood in the bedroom doorframe after a shift at the mine. She was slouched in bed with a carton of rocky road ice cream resting on her growing baby bump.

“Hello to you, too,” he said. He edged onto the bed beside her, which made her dip out of an indentation in the sagging mattress. She repositioned her pillows around her.

“I mean, it’s only been three days and this mattress is already contouring around my arse like a dental mold.” She made a show of trying to lean over and kiss him, but stayed stuck in the mattress. Cody met her halfway and kissed her forehead. He slipped a careful hand up under her shirt and rested it across her warm stomach. “Your mum dropped off dinner again,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“Something fried and brown. You know, the usual.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” said Cody.

“I’m not a beggar. And I’m not an invalid, either,” said Maisie. She leaned away from Cody and scooped in another heaping spoonful of rocky road. A string of marshmallow clung to her lower lip.

“She’s just trying to help, Mais,” he said.

“No, she’s just trying to feel needed.”

“Sometimes that’s the same thing,” said Cody.

“Maybe around here it is,” said Maisie. She let out a long sigh, an exhalation filled with a growing frustration that had been spreading like ivy through her for weeks, maybe months. Cody traced the edges of her protruding belly with his index finger as if building a hedge of protection around the one thing that tethered Maisie to him in this strange new world. He would never say it aloud, but what scared Cody most during the night in the hospital was not the thought of losing the baby, but the thought of losing Maisie; not losing her to death, but to that which is just as final: Desire. As he smoothed a strand of fading-purple hair behind Maisie’s ear, he breathed a silent prayer to her, to himself. It was not a prayer that could be spoken in words, but only through pulsing fingertips and drumming hearts. It was a prayer of contrition for acts not committed but only dreamed, for what he feared was coming but could not stop.

“Well, I’m starving,” said Cody, “so I’m going to go eat something fried and brown.” Maisie smiled as she spooned a glob of ice cream and raised it to Cody’s mouth.

“Trust me, this is better,” she said. “Just stay in bed with me and we’ll spend all night getting fat together.” Just as Cody was about to accept the bite, a knock at the front door startled them both: three close-fisted thuds on the sternum of the hardwood. There was an angry cadence in the knock that announced who was on the other side of the door as clearly as if his face had been caught on a security camera: Luke.

Cody was rarely surprised by anything his older brother did anymore, but he was taken aback when he swung open the door. Luke stood before him, shivering in the biting December wind, wearing nothing but faded blue boxer shorts. A six-pack of Pabst Blue

Ribbon beer dangled from his left hand. Cody stood in silence for a beat, trying to put words to what he was seeing.

“I was, uh, just in the neighborhood. Thought I’d stop by,” said Luke. He held up the six-pack. “Mind if I come in? I brought PBR.” Cody grabbed the beer from Luke and ushered him inside. Luke looked up and noticed Maisie standing in the doorway between the kitchen and small foyer. She measured up the situation, and then looked to Cody for an explanation. Cody just smiled and shrugged.

“Hi there, Maisie,” said Luke. He pulled the six-pack from Cody and covered himself awkwardly with the cans.

“Well hello, Luke,” she said, crossing her arms and leaning into the doorway. “You seem to have forgotten your pants.” She could have just turned and left the room, but that was not Maisie’s way. Cody noticed her sly smile and knew how much she was enjoying making his brother squirm. Luke looked down at his naked torso and legs, as if discovering them for the first time.

“Well, the thing is,” he said. “I suppose they don’t do it this way across the pond, but we’re pretty casual here in the Kentucky.”

“Are we?” Cody asked. He was enjoying this as much as Maisie. They both started laughing. Luke brushed past Cody on his way to the master bedroom.

“C’mon, man.” he said, “Just get me some damn pants.”

It wasn’t long before Luke told Cody what he had already suspected: Luke needed more than just *some damn pants*. Things had continued to go south for Luke and Candace, and she had finally kicked him out. Cody and Maisie agreed to let Luke stay

with them for a while until things settled a bit. His only other option was to go live with Lori Ann, and Cody didn't wish that on anybody. "I really don't understand myself," said Luke, sitting in the passenger seat of Cody's truck, wearing a pair of Cody's jeans and an old Kentucky Wildcats t-shirt, both of which were too small for him. He was drinking a warm can of the PBR he brought with him. Luke had shown up to the house sober, but he was three cans into the beer and didn't show signs of slowing down. They were headed south on Old Herrodsburg road back over to Luke and Candace's house to grab some provisions. "I mean, sometimes I get so pissed off at her and I don't even know why. I see myself standing there, like I'm outside of myself or something. And I'm looking down at some other guy who looks a whole helluva lot like me, and he's cussing and screaming about some nonsense that I don't care nothing about."

"Well, you know," Cody started, picking up one of the empty beer cans from the bench seat between them, "this stuff probably doesn't help you get any kind of clarity." Luke rolled his eyes and slugged down another half-can. Cody eased the truck into Luke's gravel driveway and parked a good distance away from the house. He wanted to give Luke a chance to gather himself before Candace saw them outside.

"And so I'm yelling at her and whatnot, and then I realize I'm not yelling at her at all," said Luke. "Nope. I'm yelling at McCready." Cody felt his face go flush at the mention of Hunter's name. It seemed that no matter where he went, he couldn't get away from it. "I see him in her eyes, in the way she looks at me." He plunked the open beer can on the dash in front of him and stared off beyond the line of trees that edged his yard. "Hun-ter Mc-Crea-dy," he said, drawing out each syllable. "I could destroy that freak, you know?" He glanced at Cody from the corner of his eye, baiting him.

“Luke, you don’t want to go and do something stupid and end up in jail,” said Cody.

“No, you don’t understand,” he said. “I ain’t talking about that kind of revenge.”

“I’m not following you,” said Cody. Luke turned and faced his brother.

“I *know* things about McCready,” he said, “Things he doesn’t want other people knowing. Things that would run him out of the mines and maybe clear out of Blue Banks.” He raised his eyebrow, reveling in the power of a held secret. Cody felt an ache deep in his gut, warning him not to press this thing forward. He slipped a cigarette from the pack in his shirt pocket and lit it up. He sucked the smoke deep inside himself and held it as long as he could. Luke was waiting for him to ask for more information, but he still wasn’t sure how to work out his feelings about Hunter, and he didn’t want to add another layer to that confusion.

“I don’t know anything about that,” said Cody, angling away from Luke, “and I’m not sure I want to know.” He cranked the manual window down a bit to let the gathering smoke escape. “You need to be careful, though,” he said. He pointed the glowing tip of his cigarette at the scar that ran the length of Luke’s face. “Run-ins with Hunter McCready don’t always end well.” Luke slapped Cody’s hand away.

“I ain’t scared of that sonofabitch,” said Luke, more to himself than to Cody. “But he should be scared of me. Only reason I’ve kept quiet about him is I promised Candace I wouldn’t say anything back when we first got married. I’m a man of my word, Cody. You know that,” he said. “But if things keep going downhill with me and Candace, I ain’t got nothing else to lose.” Luke gripped the door handle and started to get out, but Cody caught him by the arm.

“You’re not doing yourself any favors going in there drunk,” he said. “You stay here, and I’ll go grab your stuff.”

A few seconds after Cody knocked on the door, it jugged open unevenly, just enough for him to see inside past the small kitchen and into the wood-paneled den.

“Hello?” Cody called. Just as he was about to edge into the house, little Henry popped around from the other side of the door and giggled. “Whoa! Hey there, big guy!” said Cody. He pushed the door the rest of the way open, and just as he did so, Candace poked her head around the corner of the den, a towel wrapped around her wet hair like a beehive.

“Henry Thomas! You get away from that door!” she shouted. Cody stepped back onto the stoop, as if he and Henry had been caught conspiring. When Candace noticed Cody, she stepped back herself, embarrassed. “Oh, sorry, Cody! I didn’t hear you,” she said from behind the corner of the wall. “Come on in and get yourself some sweet tea while I go put myself together. I’ll be out lickety-split.” Cody looked back to the truck once more to make sure Luke was staying put, and then he went inside and closed the door behind him.

Little Henry chased his mother down the hallway to the back of the house, so Cody was left to wait alone in the den. He meandered along the edge of the room looking at family photos, pictures that suggested a different narrative of his brother’s life than Cody had ever known. Here was one of Luke pushing Candace on a tree swing, both of them wearing smiles broader than the Ohio River in the background. Here was another of Luke holding newborn baby Henry in the hospital, eyes red with tears and unspeakable

joy. Cody often thought that the happiness to which Luke clung in his life with Candace was only imagined, but evidence of a real joy stretched in panorama around him, a joy that was as tangible as the glossy surfaces of the photos smattered across the room.

Which was the real Luke, Cody wondered: the man in the pictures, or the guy who was, at that very moment, drinking himself into a lonely oblivion in the passenger seat of his pick-up truck in the driveway? He suddenly thought about Maisie curled up in bed at home, and he wished he had stayed with her to sit late into the night eating ice cream.

“You didn’t get you any sweet tea yet?” asked Candace from behind as she entered the room. “I can fix you a glass real quick if you want. Got lemon sliced up and everything.”

“I’m alright,” said Cody as he turned to face her. “I just came to grab some stuff for Luke. He’ll be staying with us for a while.” Candace nodded and looked at the floor, avoiding Cody’s eyes. He knew she didn’t like admitting she and Luke were having problems. She was already a divorcée once, and for a homegrown Blue Banks woman like Candace, the ability to keep a man happy at home was as tied up in her self-worth as closely as her call to motherhood. She sat down on the faux-leather sofa and grabbed an e-cigarette from the coffee table in front of her.

“Is he out there?” she asked, motioning toward the front yard. She screwed in the battery of her e-cig and took a hit, igniting the blue glow of the tip. Cody had never smoked an electronic cigarette himself, but he had watched Hunter light one up several times, and now he had a craving.

“Yeah, he’s sitting out in my truck,” Cody said as he watched wisps of vapor swim into the air around Candace. “You want me to go get him?” Candace shook her head with conviction.

“I got his clothes all boxed up in yonder,” she said, pointing back towards her bedroom. She studied her e-cigarette, rolled it between her fingers. “I just can’t get used to these things,” she said. “They say it’s better for little Henry to be around this than regular smoke, but it just don’t feel right in your lungs.” She looked up at Cody with longing in her face. “Some people make smoking these things look natural,” she said. She bit her lip and looked away. “You know anybody like that?” Cody could see where the conversation was going and knew nothing good could come from it.

“Look, I need to get on back home to Maisie,” he said. “So if you’ll just point me to the boxes, I’ll be on my way.”

“Just answer me one thing,” Candace said as she stood from the couch. Her hand trembled as she took another drag on the e-cigarette. “Does he ever talk about me? Mention my name or anything?” Cody feigned a puzzled look and tried to figure a way out of answering directly. “Don’t act like you don’t know what I’m talking about, Cody Culver,” said Candace. “Blue Banks is a small town, and I reckon I know just about everybody in it. I know you’ve been seeing a good bit of Hunter.” Cody nervously pulled a cigarette from his shirt pocket, but then slid it back away when he saw little Henry’s toys strewn about the floor.

“What do you want me to say, Candace?” he asked. “Your husband is 20 feet outside of this house. You’re putting me in a bad spot, you know?”

“C’mon, Cody,” she said, desperation stuck in her throat, “I ain’t asking you to betray Luke. This don’t have nothing to do with him. I’m just asking if Hunter ever thinks about me, plain and simple.”

“I don’t know what Hunter thinks,” said Cody, surprising himself with the anger rising in the timbre of his voice. He took a breath and softened his tone. “Look, he hasn’t mentioned you to me, but that’s probably just because I’m Luke’s brother and he doesn’t want to stir up trouble.” Candace nodded, as if she’d gotten the assurance she needed. Cody wanted to slip back to the bedroom, grab a box or two of Luke’s stuff, and get out of there; but he could see a longing in Candace’s gaze that he recognized in himself. She had unanswered questions balled up deep inside her, questions Cody couldn’t answer, but could listen to just the same.

“That’s fair enough,” she said, twisting a copper bracelet around her wrist. Cody could tell she wanted to say more. She needed to talk about this and had no other outlet than him. “I didn’t leave him for Luke, you know,” she said. “I didn’t leave him at all.”

“Listen, I don’t need to get into all of this,” said Cody.

“I mean, Luke tells it different. You’d think he won me like a carnival prize or something,” she said. “But the truth is, Hunter pushed me away. Pushed me right into Luke. It’s what he wanted.” A tear streamed down the side of her cheek, but she didn’t bother to wipe it away. “He thought I couldn’t love him anymore after he found out—” she said, breaking off and looking away. “Well, after he found out.”

“After he found out what?” Cody asked. He still wasn’t sure he wanted to know, but somehow it seemed like it would be easier coming from Candace than Luke. Candace just shook her head.

“He’ll tell you if he wants you to know,” said Candace. That felt right to Cody, like something he should honor. “Just do me one favor, and I swear I’ll leave you alone,” she said. “You tell Hunter that the world is changing. Tell him he doesn’t have to be so damn afraid anymore. He’ll know what I mean.” She turned and made her way back towards the hallway. “I’ve got to go check on Henry. The boxes are back in my bedroom, so you go on and get them.”

“Okay,” Cody said, but he didn’t move. He didn’t understand Candace’s cryptic message, but it seemed right for Hunter, like something he needed to hear.

“You’ll tell him for me, won’t you?” said Candace.

“Of course,” Cody said, though he couldn’t yet be sure if he was telling the truth.

CHAPTER 7

The first snowfall of the season fluttered down in quiet flakes all across Blue Banks County, coating the rolling hills with a crystalline glaze. The moonlight of the cloudless December sky refracted brilliantly off small drifts of snow, pushing the darkness out of the nighttime hours with the majestic winter glow only found in open rural country. On a winding stretch of highway 41 just outside the city limits, Cody pulled his truck onto the asphalt drive of a 1960s style A-frame house, and then edged into the snow-covered front lawn to park next to a baby blue Ford Ranchero in the yard's makeshift parking lot. About two car-lengths from his front bumper stood a gigantic, hand-scrawled sign lit with kitschy, multicolored Christmas bulbs: *Welcome to the 5th Annual SAVE THE TITS WITH SPITS Black Tie Christmas Gala.*

Every year, the Unified mine closed down for a two-week paid furlough during the Christmas season; and ever since the year Spits Anderson had a double mastectomy and went into full remission for the aggressive breast cancer that threatened her life, she used the first official night of the break to host a fundraiser for breast cancer research. She would open up her house and cook huge portions of smoked ham, inviting her men on the unit to bring a checkbook and a side dish. Cody didn't know quite what to expect, but he was told by many of the guys underground that the event was the most memorable night of the year. The truth be told, he was just excited to have an opportunity to wear his fitted suit that had been hanging untouched in the closet since they moved from Chicago.

He adjusted the knot of his silk skinny tie and looked at Maisie, who sat next to him in the truck.

“You sure you’re feeling up to this?” he asked. She was touching up her coral red lipstick in the visor mirror.

“Are you kidding me?” she asked as she snapped the visor closed. “That bed has been eating me alive.” A follow-up ultrasound showed that the tear in the placenta was beginning to heal, and Maisie’s spotting had become less frequent; but she was still spending most of her day sinking into the aging mattress, or—as they had begun to call it—the *pit of despair*. “Besides, this is probably the last time I’ll be able to fit into this dress.” She looked at Cody with raised eyebrows. “After the baby, it’s all mom jeans and sweaters. I hope you’re ready for that.” She smiled. Cody leaned in to kiss her, but she backed away and blew an air kiss, pointing at her freshly applied lipstick.

Cody held onto Maisie’s arm to steady her as she clicked her heels across the cleared sidewalk. Beside her, he trudged through the yard, wanting to feel the satisfying *crunch* of the untrodden snow crackling beneath his feet. As they approached the porch, Spits Anderson swung open the door, letting the Rascal Flatts version of *Jingle Bell Rock* fill up the space between them.

“Woooo-weeeeeee!” shouted Spits from the doorway, yelling back to the crowd inside. “You guys, come get a look at little Ryan Gosling over here.” She wore a flowing pink lace dress—punctuated with a confetti-filled coconut bra—and held a pint-sized Santa mug brimming with eggnog. She stepped aside to allow Maisie to enter, and then she reached out and tugged on Cody’s skinny tie. “Look here,” she whispered, “we have

some grown-up ties back in the closet. We'll get you fixed up." She winked, slurped down some eggnog, and belched.

"Merry Christmas, Spits," said Cody as he helped Maisie out of her lime-green pea coat. They had arrived ten minutes early, but the place was already packed with his crewmates, all of them looking awkwardly spiffed-up and clashing sharply with the abundant Christmas kitsch like well-placed dissonance in a musical composition. The floor plan of the house was wide open with rooms only separated by intermittent cylindrical wooden support beams, so he could see the entire first floor from the doorway. As he took in the scene, Cody could see the wiry stutterer Tony Hensley in the kitchen popping a handful of peanut butter balls into his mouth, and over by the natural stone fireplace, Big Nuts and his wife were loading some marshmallows onto roasting sticks. A group of guys in the dining area adjacent to the kitchen had circled around Jimmy Burrows—the shuttle car operator who once put wet Tootsie Rolls in everyone's clean underwear in the bathhouse—as he did some sort of party trick with a handful of candy canes. Cody scanned past each cluster of miners, resting his gaze on every face in the crowd until he found what he was looking for: through the living room's sliding glass door, floating above the snow-covered deck, was the familiar blue glow of an electronic cigarette.

"I didn't figure I'd see you here," said Cody as he shut the sliding glass door behind him. He gave a quick wave inside to Maisie, who was already warming the house with her presence. She was in her element, and she didn't need any handholding from Cody. He broke fresh patches of snow on the deck as he moved away from the house.

Hunter wore a striking black tuxedo and had his long hair pulled back into a tight bun. He stood facing the deck's railing, looking out across sloping acres of farmland and blowing billowy clouds of vapor into the northward wind, watching them carry off with swirling flurries. "Didn't think this type of party was your thing," Cody added.

"Yeah, well, Spits is just about all the family I have left," said Hunter, glancing at Cody and then peering back into the white field. "If it's important to her, it's important to me." The night at the river bottoms, Cody had tried to ask Hunter about his family, but Hunter shut the conversation down before it got started. Spits had mentioned that Hunter had fallen out with his parents when he was a teenager, but that was all Cody knew, and he didn't think it was smart to press it further. Cody leaned up against the railing of the deck and followed Hunter's gaze.

"You see them?" Hunter asked, pointing to a wooded area to the left of the field. Cody saw movement against the trees and then saw a small herd of white-tailed deer scatter out into the field. "Gorgeous, aren't they?" He asked. Cody nodded, but he couldn't shake the image of the dying deer crushed into the trailer hitch bar and back end of his truck when he and Maisie had first arrived in town. Cody squinted and watched as a colossal stag emerged in the front of the herd of does, enormous antlers protruding in every direction like exposed roots of a giant oak.

"The end of mating season," said Hunter, nodding towards the buck, "Otherwise, those does wouldn't let this guy hang around." Cody knew nothing about deer, despite being raised in rural Kentucky, where camouflage jackets and hunter orange hats were gifted at Christmas as often as neckties and socks. He had inherited a pacifist streak from

his father, who taught him to see the animals as sentient beings, not just meat. Something caught his eye at the edge of the woods.

“What about this one?” Cody said, pointing to a break in the trees as another deer came forth. It was about the size of a large doe—probably 100 pounds lighter than the massive stag—but it had a small set of fuzzy antlers, rounded and uneven like Cody had never seen on a whitetail before. Hunter squinted as he peered out over the still white drifts of snow, leaning onto the deck railing to get a better look. Cody watched as his eyes widened, a flash of recognition changing the contours of his face.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” said Hunter, just above a whisper. Cody flicked his gaze back out toward the deer and saw that he wasn’t the only one who had noticed the second buck. The large stag approached the smaller male and began to circle it, grunting and wheezing to posture for the does.

“What’s that buck trying to prove?” asked Cody. “That little guy is just a fawn.” He watched as the smaller deer angled away from the big buck, lowering his head in submission. Still, the stag inched forward, posturing for a fight.

“Nope,” said Hunter, shaking his head. “It’s a full grown velvet-horn.”

“A what?” asked Cody.

“See those fuzzy antlers?” said Hunter, nodding out to the field, never taking his eyes off the smaller deer. “When it gets this late in the season, normal whitetail bucks have already lost all the velvet. Their horns grow broader. Longer. They sharpen down into fine points.”

“So, this smaller deer is what—a different species?” asked Cody.

“Not a different species,” said Hunter, “just different.” He sucked in a steady stream of vapor and released it into the air around them both. He caught eyes with Cody, and then looked away. “You think it’s a male because of the antlers, right?” he asked. “Well, that’s what everybody thinks. Basic logic, I guess. Bucks have antlers, this deer has antlers, so this deer must be a buck. Right?” Cody didn’t answer, but he knew Hunter wasn’t looking for one. He didn’t know where this conversation was going, but it felt bigger than the deer, bigger than two miners standing in the snow outside of a Christmas party. After a few moments, the silence of the night grew too much for Cody.

“Sounds right,” said Cody.

“Yeah. And that’s the problem,” said Hunter. “It sounds right, but it ain’t.” He paused and glared out into the field, watching as the big buck circled closer to the smaller deer, nudging it with the angry points of his antlers. Cody followed Hunter’s gaze. One thing was clear: if the stag decided to fight, it would be no contest. “It’s not a buck, and it’s not a doe.” With no warning, the stag lowered his head and charged, his robust antlers encompassing the dull horns and head of the other deer. The smaller animal twisted its body to free itself, but couldn’t manage to unhinge from the lock of the stag’s bone-strong antlers. “Adult velvet-horns are both. Or maybe they’re neither. I don’t know,” he said, speaking softly as the big buck pressed in on the head of the smaller deer, angling it down to the frozen ground.

“Intersex?” Cody asked. He knew a bit about gender identity from his nascent graduate work in psychology, but he knew very little about physiological or biological intersex conditions.

“That’s the term everybody seems to like,” said Hunter. “Intersex. But to me, all that word means is this little deer is between two other things. It’s not this or that, so it must be somewhere in the middle.” The stag backed away and then lunged once more, mauling the velvet-horn’s defenseless body. The smaller deer tried to stand, but the buck’s large antlers pressed on, scraping its back, puncturing its neck. “Male is real, female is real,” Hunter said, never turning away from the grisly scene before them. “This deer is in some sort of hollowed-out space between the two. And nobody quite knows what to do with that. Maybe it doesn’t even exist.” The antlers continued to click together in the distance. The does had all scurried away, but the stag pressed on, gorging the lifeless deer again and again. Cody couldn’t see it clearly in the darkness, but he imagined the syrupy blood of the deer spilling against the sparkling snow crystals, a white canvas streaked with red. He wanted to say more, to ask questions about the deer or something else, anything that would help take the tremble out of Hunter’s voice. But the words didn’t come, so they both stood in silence for several minutes, and then worked their way back inside.

It took Cody a few minutes to find Maisie in the crowd, but he eventually heard her British accent clashing against the Kentucky drawl of a loose circle of miners and their wives in the middle of the living room. They were all eating pink-frosted cupcakes that were decorated to look like breasts, complete with robust fondant nipples on top.

“Okay, say it again, real slow,” said Chuck Smithhart, a middle-aged continuous mining operator who took the lead underground when Spits was away.

“Priv-a-see,” said Maisie, stretching out each syllable of the word *privacy* in her accent. The guys around her erupted in laughter, and Maisie was playing right along. “Okay, now let me see if I can get this right in my Blue Banksian accent.” She cleared her throat dramatically and pounded on her chest. “Pur-eye-vah-see-ah,” she said, lowering her voice, reaching down for a guttural twang. Cody watched in wonder as she spread her magic, the rest of the crowd clapping and hollering around her. Maybe things would be okay here after all, he thought. But even in that moment, the same unnamed yearning he had felt for the last month filled the powder keg of his gut, spread like a lit fuse outwards towards his limbs. He scanned the room and saw Hunter sitting at the Baldwin baby-grand piano in the corner of the room adjacent to the stone fireplace. Cody watched as he brushed his fingers over the keys, his right foot hovering over the sustaining pedal. He held his posture professionally, but didn’t dare draw attention to himself by playing. Behind Cody, Maisie followed his gaze over to Hunter and the piano.

“Now here’s something this party is missing!” she said, parting the crowd and making her way to Hunter. Maisie didn’t know about the mounting tension between Hunter and the rest of the men, so she drew them together in a way only she could. “Play us something!” she demanded. She punched out a quick scale on the treble keys and then nudged Hunter.

“Oh, be my guest,” said Hunter as he tried to edge off the bench. Maisie caught him by the arm and stuck him back in his seat. “Oh no you don’t,” she said. “I’ll do the singing, you do the playing.” She saw Big Nuts standing by the stereo. “Hey, turn off that music! We’re having us a sing-along.” When the music faded, an unsettling quiet hung in

the air. Maisie was trying her best to orchestrate some camaraderie, but Cody could tell that she was beginning to sense the tension in the room. Hunter cleared his throat.

“Look,” he said, “I’m really not any good at—” Before he could finish, Maisie put a hand against the piano, closed her eyes, and launched into an acappella first verse of “Silent Night.” She let the words hang in the quiet of the room, floating like lanterns away from her and gliding over every head. Nobody moved, nobody breathed, as if the slightest vibration could scare away the magic. Slowly, as she neared the end of the first verse, a solitary trembling piano note struck the air. Maisie opened her eyes, and those closest to the piano took a step back as if making room for the music to dance in front of them. Hunter placed careful hands on the keys, bent forward, and played. He started slowly, but after a measure or two his unsure hands crawled confidently across the keys. Maisie placed her hand across her belly, as if to invite the baby to be a part of the moment, and then let her voice blend with the music. The notes rose up to the A-frame vaulted ceiling and then fluttered back through the room. Cody watched as Hunter closed his eyes now, singing softly the harmony. Maisie’s eyes were closed, too, and Cody flicked his gaze back and forth between them, knowing that he was seeing something special. He wanted to sing with them, to be caught in the music in the same way they were, but he didn’t know how to get to that place. At the very least, he felt like he should close his eyes, that it was something he ought to do, but just before he did so, he heard the scraping of the front door opening across the jamb. The door then slammed, breaking the music, shattering the moment. Cody turned to look toward the front door with the rest of the crowd, and what he saw told him that, despite the remnants of the song still

hanging in the air, this night would be anything but silent: Luke, wielding a baseball bat, pointing at Hunter.

When Spits brought Hunter on at the mine, she knew it could not only cause problems between Luke and Hunter, but also create divisions among the majority of miners who felt the incessant need to choose a side, to be this or that, to be in Luke's camp or Hunter's. Luke held the same rank as Spits—section foreman, or face boss—so Spits went to the mine foreman and suggested that her crew be put on a schedule and section of the mine that would never overlap with Luke's. She couldn't have imagined, though, that Luke would show up drunk at her Christmas fundraiser looking to pick a fight.

“Well lookie here, if it ain't Luke Culver,” said Spits, trying to play it cool and ease the tension. Luke gripped the barrel of the bat and tapped the handle against the hardwood floors. “What brings you around these parts? You here to save some tits? Donation box is right behind you.” Luke swung the bat around and took hold of the handle. He pointed it at Hunter McCready.

“Why am I here? So glad you asked, Spits,” he said. The crowd shifted toward the edges of the room as Luke stepped forward. “To tell you the truth, I came here looking for this sonofabitch.” He let the bat linger in the air, and then in one clean motion, he swung around smashed through a crystal punch bowl full of eggnog, spilling the liquid across the floor with shards of glass. Cody instinctively shielded Maisie from the glass. She looked flush, and her breathing was labored. Hunter stood up from the bench to

prepare for whatever would come next. But then Luke faced Spits. “But maybe I should just be talking to the bitch herself.”

“Excuse me?” said Spits, genuine confusion in her voice. Despite the fact that she was Hunter’s aunt, she had never been dragged into the conflict between him and Luke before.

“Did I not speak clearly?” said Luke. “You’re always looking out for this boy like his mama, so if he’s a sonofabitch, what does that make you?”

“You watch what you say to her, Luke,” said Hunter, his voice controlled and resolute. He took a step towards Luke, but held out a careful hand. “You’ve got a problem with me, I get that. But dragging Spits into this ain’t right.” Luke smiled, and turned back to Hunter.

“It ain’t right?” he asked. “Let me tell the both of you what ain’t right. You get hired on at the mine to a position that don’t exist, just a favor for Queen Save-the-Tits over here. All the while, some deserving men—real men—are being cut out of a job.” He pulled the bat back and studied it.

“Well, I don’t know anything about that,” said Hunter.

“Well, here’s something else you might not know. Right now, while you’re over here drinking eggnog and singing Kumbaya around the piano—with my baby brother and his pregnant wife,” he added, shooting a sharp glare towards Cody, “two of the men on my unit are giving their wives pink slips for Christmas.” Cody watched Luke tighten his grip around the bat. Then he saw Hunter clenching his fists in and out. He knew it wasn’t his job to intervene, but he felt like he was the only one who could do so.

“Look, Luke,” said Cody, stepping between him and Hunter. “Nobody wants anyone to lose a job. Why don’t you just come outside with me and will talk for a bit. Before something happens that you can’t take back.” Cody reached to place a hand on the bat, but Luke stepped back and swung wildly, barely missing Cody’s face. Maisie shrieked and sat on the piano bench.

“Woah, easy,” said Cody. “Think about what you’re doing. Hunter didn’t cause those guys to get laid off.” Luke let the bat drop to his side at the mention of Hunter’s name, cocked his head to the side and studied Cody.

“My God,” he said, his expression lost somewhere between amusement and anger. “Look at you rolling his name off your tongue. Whose side are you on, little brother?” Cody wanted to say that there were no sides, or that he would always support his brother, but he no longer knew if that was true. The night when Luke had confronted Hunter at the bar on the river, Cody still believed his brother to be in the right, and he would have defended him no matter what. Now, he wasn’t sure, and as he looked back at Hunter, who always seemed displaced and unsure, he felt protective of him. When it was clear that Cody would remain silent, Luke stepped into the space between them, nose to nose with his younger brother. “It looks like you’ve made your choice,” whispered Luke. Without warning, he reared back and delivered a clean punch to Cody’s face, sending his brother reeling backward and crashing onto Hunter by the piano. The two men fell into an embrace on the floor.

Cody couldn’t be sure what happened next, as his vision blurred and darkness crept in from his periphery. He heard screams from somewhere, the scuffle of feet as several men pulled Luke away. He saw swirling images of his brother retreating out the

door, of Maisie crying on the floor, of the anger pulsing behind Hunter's eyes as he held his throbbing head in his lap.

CHAPTER 8

When Cody's eyes quivered open the next morning, he found himself lying in his bed, with Maisie studying his face from her own pillow next to him. She smiled and ran a finger over his right eyelid, bumping across each of the six stitches he had gotten as a result of Luke's knock-out punch. He winced from the pain. He hadn't felt too much of it after the prescription pain meds Hunter had given him on the way to the hospital and the numbing shot in the emergency room, but now a dull ache throbbed across his brow, punctuated by intermittent shooting pains behind his right eye. He had slept in fits all night, but it wasn't the physical pain that kept him turning. It was the anger he felt at Luke, rising inside him like the lye bubbles he had seen as a child popping on the surface of a vat of lard as his grandmother cooked her homemade soap. He had tried to be his brother's keeper since returning to town. He had kept him out of trouble and talked him down from the ledge, even given Luke a place to stay when Candace kicked him out. He had stood shoulder-to-shoulder with his big brother even when his gut told him Luke was in the wrong. But now Cody had been betrayed in front of his crewmates, in front of Maisie, in front of Hunter. He figured he would make a few enemies when he returned to Blue Banks, but he never imagined Luke would be one of them.

"I was wondering when you would wake up," said Maisie. The breath of her whisper drifted across Cody's face, yet her voice seemed distant, muffled by the Lortab that was still dampening his senses. Hunter had given him three pills, and he ignorantly took all three of them, not having any experience before with prescription painkillers.

The entire night was a blur. Unformed questions swirled in his brain like nebulous clouds, but he couldn't put enough words together to ask any of them. "Come on," said Maisie as she pulled the sheets from his torso and guided him towards the bathroom. "Let's get you a shower. You smell like sweat and eggnog."

He let the hot water pour over him and took deep breaths of the rising steam. Maisie stepped into the shower with him and massaged his shoulders from behind. After a minute of silence, Cody managed to piece together a sentence. "Is he still here?" he asked, his voice slurring. Luke had been staying in one of the musty, water-damaged rooms upstairs since Candace had kicked him out. But that was about to change, Cody thought.

"No. He didn't come back at all last night," said Maisie. "But we should probably talk about something else." Cody turned to face her. "You know how sometimes when I get panicked the only person who can calm me down is my mum?" she asked. "Well, last night I got panicked." Before Cody could say anything in response, he was startled by a knock on the bathroom door.

"Maisie?" said a bold voice from beyond the door. Cody recognized the voice at once from several phone calls and video chats. It was a sturdy voice with a formal British tonality, sharp around the edges unlike Maisie's accent, which had been softened by several years in America. "I've got eggies-in-a-basket going in the kitchen if you're hungry."

"Thanks, Mum!" Maisie yelled as she stroked Cody's arm apologetically.

"Oh, and good morning, Cody!" said Maisie's mother, "Excited to finally meet you!"

In the kitchen, Cody greeted Maisie's mother and gave her an awkward side-hug, then took a seat at the chipped wooden table. He found it difficult to look her in the eyes, embarrassed by his fresh stitches and swollen face. Even if he hadn't felt so disheveled, he couldn't imagine being comfortable around Emily Pearce. He had always found her to be an intimidating balance of confidence, power, and natural grace: qualities that Maisie had inherited from her mother in equal measure but smaller quantities. She worked as a solicitor in Brighton, England practicing family law, mostly divorce and custody cases. Cody had never met her in person—not even when he and Maisie got hitched, since they rushed into a courthouse wedding without telling friends and family—and so when he had interacted with Emily before on video chat or on the phone, he had always been able to temper his diffidence with the digital shield of technology and the miles of real space between them.

“You must be exhausted, Mrs. Pearce,” said Cody as Emily slid a plate of bacon and eggs in front of him. Maisie told him in the shower that after she had called her mom in hysterics, Emily had taken the red-eye from London to Chicago, made a connecting flight to Louisville, and then drove to Blue Banks all within the last twelve hours.

“Hey now, watch what you call me,” she said as she sat down at the table across from Cody and Maisie, “I've never been *Mrs.* anything, and I don't plan to start now.

“Right,” Cody said. “Sorry.” He looked at Maisie, embarrassed, but she only smiled.

“And besides,” said Emily, “If you're close enough to put a baby in my daughter, you're close enough to call me Emily.” Cody nearly choked on a piece of bacon, but

Maisie burst into laughter. The tables had turned on Cody: it was her mother making the uncomfortable jokes now, and she loved every second of it.

“I’ll try to remember that,” Cody said, and then he popped a couple of Tylenol in his mouth and washed them down with a gulp of orange juice. For the rest of the breakfast, he only nodded from time to time and watched as Maisie transformed back into a small child before Emily. She scooped in bite after enormous bite of her mother’s home cooking, throwing her head back and laughing with abandon as they chatted about family members “back home.” After she was finished eating, Maisie crossed her legs in her chair, tucking her arms around her belly as she talked about the baby, about life in Kentucky, about her artwork at UChicago and the community they left behind. Cody never felt excluded from the conversation or out of place; rather, he felt like his own counterpart was missing, as if the fourth chair sitting next to Emily should have been occupied by his father. He didn’t think of his dad nearly as often as he used to, but watching Maisie and her mother—the way they comforted one another with a quiet nod or creased eyes, the way their laughs melded together like woodwinds in an orchestra, the way they could pick pieces of food from one another’s plate as if it were their own—he felt the weight of his father’s absence pressing him down into the kitchen chair. As he struggled to lift that weight from his chest, he realized something for the first time: as much as he knew it was difficult for Maisie to live in Blue Banks, he had never considered just how hard it was for her to settle down away from her mother. The baby—the one who Maisie, at that very moment, was cradling with careful hands in her belly—had changed Maisie’s American narrative. Maisie had come to Chicago at the age of seventeen to attend a prep school and then stayed on to earn her BFA as an undergraduate

at UChicago; but just as her time in the States might have been coming to an end, she was settling down with her little American family in Western Kentucky. He was sure Maisie had felt the enormity of that shift, though now he was seeing it expressed for the first time in the way she held her mother's hand across the little kitchen table.

"We could probably do that, right Cody?" asked Maisie, pulling Cody from his thoughts back into the conversation. He tried to recall what they were talking about, but he was completely lost.

"I'm sorry, I zoned out there for a second," he said.

"I was just suggesting to Maisie that after the baby comes, she could come stay with me for a while in Brighton," said Emily. The words punched Cody in the gut, so he tried to steady himself with a long gulp of black coffee. He looked at Maisie, her eyes full of hope, full of longing.

"Just for a couple of months," said Maisie. "Long enough for me to figure out how to be a mum." Cody tried to say "okay," and at first he thought he had, but the word wouldn't come out. If Maisie left Blue Banks, would she ever come back? He figured this conversation might come up, but he always imagined that she would have asked him to go with her.

The steel-gray December sky loomed past the dipping hills on the horizon as Cody drove northward on highway 41 towards the state line. Hunter cracked the passenger window beside him to let the gathering vapor of his e-cigarette escape into the wind. Maisie had convinced her mother to stick around for a week after Christmas, so Cody took the opportunity to drive back to Chicago and retrieve some remaining pieces

of furniture they had left behind in a storage building. Hunter offered to come along to help with some of the heavier pieces and Cody readily accepted his offer, in part to spite Luke.

“I don’t know how much more of this town I can take,” said Hunter, running his hand through his hair. “Can’t move away yet because of my parole, but something’s got to change.”

“Why don’t you try to have your probation transferred to another state?” Cody asked, “Or at least another county?” Hunter laughed as he fired up his e-cigarette.

“It’s not as easy as all that,” he said. “If I want to move, I’ve got to provide justification for it. And since my only family is here, and my best chance of keeping a job is here, I can’t provide much of a reason.”

“Right. Well, maybe things will smooth out soon,” said Cody, though he didn’t believe it. The situation with Luke was growing more volatile every day, regardless of how much distance Hunter tried to keep between them. He knew he didn’t have any say in the matter, but Cody desperately wanted Hunter to stay in Blue Banks for as long as he and Maisie were still around. Hunter made the town feel uncertain, exciting, even bigger than its small-town façade. He gave Cody a reason to look forward to going underground each day.

“No,” Hunter said, shaking his head with conviction, “things haven’t smoothed out for the twenty-seven years I’ve been on this earth, and I don’t expect them to now.” Cody lit up a cigarette of his own and flipped on the windshield wipers. The flurries that had been falling were shifting into a steady snow. “You know, there was a time when I thought things were going to work out for me, when things were really looking up,” said

Hunter. “The first couple of years me and Candace were married. I was as close to happy then as I think I’ll ever be.” At the mention of Candace’s name, Cody remembered the conversation he had with her a few weeks before. She had wanted him to give Hunter a message, something about the world being a bigger place than it used to be. He couldn’t remember exactly what she said, and he wasn’t sure it mattered anyway; but he had the sudden need to know more about what split Hunter and Candace up. Maybe it would help him to better understand his brother. Or maybe it had nothing to do with Luke and he just wanted to feel more connected with Hunter.

“Look, it’s none of my business,” said Cody, trying to sound casual. He looked straight ahead at the road, avoiding eye contact with Hunter, “but I spoke with Candace the other day. She seems to think you guys were pretty happy together, too. So what happened?” Hunter grabbed his sunglasses from the visor and slipped them on. He might have needed them for the sun, but Cody had a feeling he was trying to cover up as much as possible, feeling exposed by the question. After a few moments, it became clear that Hunter wasn’t going to answer, so Cody pressed on. “I guess Luke is what happened,” he said. He glanced Hunter’s way now and saw him tighten his fist.

“That’s what Luke would like everybody to think,” said Hunter, “and that’s okay, I guess.”

“So it was something else?” Cody asked. Hunter reached out and put a hand on Cody’s leg. It was not an act of intimacy, but a warning. It was also a kind of bridge between their bodies, as if what he was about to say wouldn’t survive in the air, but had to pass between them physically.

“Look, Cody,” he said, turning in to him, “the best way I can describe it is that I found something out, something about myself. And I knew I wasn’t right for Candace. It was a fact. And I knew that fact was never going to change.” Cody glanced down at Hunter’s hand on his thigh, and then caught eyes with him. He placed his hand on top of Hunter’s, an assurance that what he asked next was not a question of condemnation, but curiosity.

“So, what then? You’re gay?” asked Cody. It certainly wasn’t the first time Cody had thought about Hunter’s sexuality, or even his own. He was vigorously attracted to Maisie, maybe more so than ever; so he found it even more perplexing that he felt a rush of excitement with Hunter’s fingers trembling against his thigh. “Look, man. It’s the twenty-first century. I don’t care if—”

“No, I’m not gay,” said Hunter, cutting him off and slipping his hand away. Cody felt a jolt of embarrassment course through him. Why was he disappointed with Hunter’s answer? “I’m not gay, and I’m not straight. I’m not this or that. I’m not one thing or another,” he said, growing frustrated. “I’m a—I don’t know. I’m a velvet-horn.”

“What do you mean?” Cody asked, though he was already making the connection.

“I’m something else, something in between,” he said. If you’re not male or female, you can’t be gay. You can’t be straight either.” Cody nodded. He was trying to put it together, but he couldn’t quite follow. He had seen Hunter naked plenty of times, but never up close. He had all the right parts, didn’t he?

Hunter took a deep breath. “After Candace had finished nursing school, we decided to have a baby. Only, she didn’t get pregnant. Not the first month, not the second, not the third. Then a year went by, and then another six months, and so finally we

went and got checked out, the both of us.” Hunter’s voice grew more faint. He spoke to his translucent reflection in the passenger window. “All kinds of tests. Scans, physicals, blood work, the whole deal. Candace was feeling all kinds of guilt. Said she felt like she was broken. Like she wasn’t a woman. But turns out, she was just fine. *Normal* is the word they used.” He sat in silence for a moment. Cody reached out and placed his hand over Hunter’s. He had never held hands with another man so intentionally, but it felt right. He gripped his fingers around Hunter’s knuckles with resolve.

“Is this okay?” Cody asked, giving his hand a shake. Hunter didn’t answer, but he didn’t pull his hand away, either.

“I remember sitting across the kitchen table from Candace when she got the call from the doctor,” he said. “She kept using that word, *normal*, saying it aloud to herself to make sure it was real. But she wouldn’t look me in the eye the rest of the night. I didn’t blame her. She just didn’t know how to deal with what we had both already figured out. If she was *normal*, that made me something else.” Cody let the cruise control pull them over miles of flat, Illinois highway into the distance. He let Hunter stay silent for as long as he needed, never prodding, never asking the questions he felt rising in him. This was Hunter’s story, and he would tell it in the way that made sense to him.

“I started pushing her away from that moment on, even before I had any sort of official diagnoses,” he said. He fiddled with the battery of his electronic cigarette as he talked, just something to occupy his hands. “They told me a bunch of stuff about how I’m wired, genetics and whatnot. This will help you understand who you are, they said. Always comparing me to what was *normal*. How *normal* people have XX or XY chromosomes, but how I have XXY. How *normal* males had broad shoulders and narrow

hips, but I had the opposite. They explained why I don't grow chest hair, and why I only have to shave my face every month or so." Cody traced his eyes over Hunter as he talked, studying the frame of his body, his smooth cheeks. "They gave me a label, Klinefelter Syndrome. But the only thing I really heard was *irreversible infertility*." Cody pulled the truck onto an exit towards a gas station, minding the low-fuel warning light that flashed on the dash. "So, what happened with me and Candace?" Hunter said. "We wanted a baby, and I couldn't give it to her. She needed a man—inside and out—and I couldn't be that for her. I didn't know what I was, really, but I needed to be alone while I tried to figure it out." Cody flicked on the turn signal and eased the truck beside a fueling pump.

"I see," said Cody. "I see." But he knew he didn't see, not yet.

It only took them about ten minutes to load the truck with the furniture from the storage unit—a beat-up mahogany writing desk Cody had picked up at a thrift store, a blue and tan checkered love seat from his old dorm, a couple of standing lamps, and an old innerspring futon mattress—but before they could get back on the road, the snow was blowing in sideways and covering the truck. Cody checked the local radar on his phone from inside the storage building.

"Getting close to blizzard conditions," he said as Hunter finished covering the furniture with a tarp and tied it secure with a rope. "Doesn't look like it's going to stop until morning." Hunter let loose of the rope and peered back inside the storage building.

"Well, I saw a box of blankets in there," he said. "Help me get this couch back off the truck. We'll wait it out." Cody looked down the long alley of uniform garages towards the city streets, blurring in motion.

“We could be here all night,” he said.

“You got anywhere you need to be?” asked Hunter. He was already unwrapping the furniture from the tarp. “I’ve been dying to go camping anyway.” Cody smiled and jumped onto the tailgate to help untie the rope.

Night fell.

The familiar sounds of innercity Chicago—mostly the staccato car horns and occasional blaring police sirens—reverberated down the corridor of metal doors and then died in the pillows of accumulating snow blowing in drifts around the half-open door of Cody’s own storage unit. Hunter had walked down the street to a convenience store on the corner to get some drinks and snacks, and in his absence, Cody had gone to work building a small fire out of some broken, dried-out shipping crates he found propped against the building under an awning. He placed the wood right at the edge of the building, and the little flames licked at the night air, sending wisps of smoke swirling with the snow into the famous Chicago wind.

As he warmed the palms of his hands, he thought about what Hunter had told him during the drive. He had never heard of Klinefelter’s Syndrome and had no idea how it was alike or different from any other intersex condition, but he couldn’t help but think that the tragedy of Hunter’s life was not who he was, but where he was from. The noises of the city echoing around him reminded Cody of just how different Chicago was from Blue Banks, not just in size or population, but in its spirit. During his undergraduate general education classes, Cody had sat in lecture halls that were a microcosm of the world’s diversity. Students from every corner of the planet gathered together around a

textbook, around an idea. They were a rainbow of colors, a prism of sexualities and genders. How different this world was from the one in Blue Banks, where—despite the best of intentions of most people who called it their home—the idea of diversity was merely a silhouette of *otherness* against a backdrop of *normal*. You were white or black, straight or gay, rich or poor, attractive or ugly, young or old, Christian or not. Hunter had been raised under this paradigm, and so it was no wonder that he didn't know how to define himself when he learned of his condition in his early twenties. It was also no wonder why somebody like Luke could hold Hunter's difference over him like the mark of the devil in the small Western Kentucky community that still believed genetic abnormalities were a sign of a curse from God.

Cody stoked the fire with a piece of fresh wood just in time to hear the approach of boots crunching through the fresh snow. Hunter slid into the storage unit with a couple of paper bags full of provisions. Just behind him, a tall, bone-thin woman clicked onto the dry concrete floor with her stiletto heels. Long, fishnet stockings stretched up under her purple skirt. She wore a hot-pink bomber jacket over her strapless shirt, and had a peach feather boa wrapped around her neck like a scarf.

"I brought some company," said Hunter as he inched closer to the fire. "Hope you don't mind." The woman stood at a distance in the shadows of the streetlight. She rocked back and forth on her heels and looked in all directions, trying to get her bearings and make sure she wasn't in danger. "This is, uh—" Hunter paused, motioning toward the woman.

"Cherry," she said in a soft, warm tone. Her voice was light around the edges but deep in the middle, as if she were masking a masculine timbre. Cody recognized the

flamboyant dress, the costume jewelry, the stage makeup, the hair extensions. He had passed by countless sex workers on the corners in this part of town, but he had never taken the time to talk to any of them.

“I’m Cody,” he said, extending his hand to Cherry. “Come on in and warm up.” She measured Cody with her eyes and extended her hand cautiously. She kept him in her periphery as she offered a limp hand, but she was still taking in the rest of the scene. Cody was cautious, too, as he wasn’t sure what Hunter had gotten them into. Hunter pulled a bottle of whiskey from one of the paper sacks and a bag of chips from another. He popped open the chips and extended them towards Cherry. She eyed the chips, parting her lips in longing. She looked weak, and Cody wondered how long it had been since she ate.

“Look, fellas,” she said, looking down like a beaten puppy, “I don’t take nothing from nobody before I know my terms.” Cody shot a look to Hunter, who shrugged.

“Terms for what?” Hunter asked. “You need to sign a contract to eat some Ruffles?” Hunter laughed, but Cherry just picked at her nails nervously.

“This is how I work, guys,” she said. “Better safe than sorry. I just need to know what you want before we get started.” She paused, waiting for a response. When it was clear she wasn’t going to get one, she sighed in annoyance. “Okay, so do you guys want it together or separate? You want to top me or play the bottom? Running a train’s gonna cost you extra, but we can talk payment after we work out the details.”

“Woah, woah there,” said Hunter, holding out a careful hand. He smiled apologetically at Cody, and then at Cherry. “No need for any trains or anything like that,” he said. “You just looked cold and hungry, so I invited you back to get out of the snow.

No strings attached.” Cherry studied him and then looked to Cody for validation. He nodded.

“Oh,” said Cherry, “Okay then.” Her voice was lost between confusion and gratefulness. Hunter sat out three small paper cups and poured a double-shot of whiskey in each of them. Cody and Cherry joined him beside the fire and drank. Cody watched as Cherry relished the liquor, tossing her head back in ecstasy. He couldn’t help but notice the large Adam’s apple bobbing in her throat as she drank. Hunter threw her a bag of chips, and she dug into them ravenously.

“Some snow, huh?” said Hunter, trying to break the silence that had fallen across the garage. They each turned and watched as huge wet flakes sparkled in the streetlight.

“Oh, it’ll pretty much stay this way on through February,” said Cherry, licking the grease from her fingers. “It’s bad for business. That’s why all us ladies are running around like squirrels, trying to store up our nuts for winter.” Cody grabbed the whiskey bottle and poured everyone another round. As he leaned in close to Cherry, he studied her full, rounded lips and her flat nose. He saw a few stray hairs she had neglected to pluck on her angular chin. “Sorry about my assumptions earlier,” she said as she accepted the whiskey. “But there ain’t many guys coming around here looking to chat around a campfire.” She downed another shot. With each passing drink, Cherry came out of her shell a little more. Before long, she was driving the conversation.

“You guys married?” she asked. Hunter looked away, but Cody nodded. “Let me ask you this, then,” said Cherry, leaning in toward Cody. “What is it about married men that always makes them want to get with a tranny?”

“I’m not sure I can answer that,” said Cody. He took a sip on his whiskey.

“Uh huh,” she said, smiling, “I’ll bet you can’t.” She leaned back and crossed her legs dramatically. “All these married men are the same way. They come looking for dick, but they want it on a woman,” she said. “Wanna prove they’re men. Real men. They need to know they ain’t gay, so they go get the girliest boy-toy they can find. They do their business with girls like me on Saturday, and then balance it out by watching an extra dose of football on Sunday.”

“Maybe they don’t know what they want,” said Cody. “Maybe they don’t know who they are and it scares them.” Cherry took off her heels and rubbed her feet.

“That’s it,” she said, pointing at Cody. “Fear. They’re all scared of me, all these married men. They’re terrified of me, and they want me at the same time. Yearn for me. Need me.” She pulled a cigarette from her bra and lit it up. “But they’re yearning for something else, too,” she said. “Something I can’t give them. I see it in their eyes.”

“Yeah?” Cody asked. “And what’s that?” Cherry blew a smoke ring into the frosty air.

“Hell,” she said, “If I knew the answer to that, I’d give it to them. And I’d be rich.”

After they had finished the fifth of whiskey between the three of them, they sat late into the night as the glowing embers of the fire slowly died out. Hunter fell asleep first, propped up against the side of the building and wrapped tightly in two jackets. When Cherry passed out, Cody stumbled over to her, brushed the hair away from her face, and tucked a blanket around her body like a sleeping child. He couldn’t be sure exactly when it happened, but he fell asleep, too, drifting in and out of tortured dreams

about Maisie, about Hunter, about falling head-first into a blazing fire and being burned alive, his skin peeling in flakes away from his melting body.

Then he felt the coolness of skin pressing against his own, a hand rising up under his shirt and around his neck. He tasted the bitter winter air through parted lips as the hand trailed back down toward his navel, further now, slipping past his belt and under his boxer briefs. He flattened his palms against the icy concrete and felt his legs twitch against something, against someone. Lost between sleep and wakefulness, he felt warm lips press against his neck, up now to his ear. They found his mouth, and now he felt a tongue pressing against his own.

“Jesus, guys,” he heard from somewhere, faint as a whisper in a distant field. “I’ll leave you to it,” the voice said, pulling Cody from sleep. As his eyes fluttered open, he felt the weight of someone’s body lift from his own. He saw Cherry trudging out into the snow under the moonlit sky. And he saw the flash of Hunter’s eyes, gleaming in the light of the streetlamp, as he scooted back into the corner of the building and covered himself once more with the jackets.

CHAPTER 9

In the first light of morning, the salty sludge of road-grime snow spun from the tires of Cody's truck as he pulled away from Chicago. The city skyline, silhouetted by shimmering marigold streaks of morning sun, panned to the right on his rearview mirror like a wide-angle film shot sweeping across a theater screen as he careened around a bend on Interstate 94 back toward Kentucky—back home, though he still couldn't use that word. Hunter sat in the passenger seat drinking black coffee from a gas station foam cup, his hair hanging down around his face like a shroud. They had worked in near-silence to reload the truck at dawn, saving their breath in an attempt to stave off the hangover headaches pulsing behind their eyes. They were also quiet for another reason, and it was this particular silence that filled the cabin of the truck, that stuck in Cody's mouth like phlegm.

“Take some of this,” Hunter said as he handed the coffee cup to Cody. “Tastes like crap, but it'll do the trick.” The timbre of Hunter's voice was the same as always—high and soft around the edges—but his tone was guarded and distant, the same way it was when they had first met in Cody's driveway months before. He took the cup, aware of how his pinky brushed the top of Hunter's hand, across his knuckles, down his thumb. He saw a small pool of the black liquid in a crevice around the opening in the cup's plastic lid, residue that had dripped from Hunter's lips and was now coating his own. He let the hot coffee linger in his mouth, swishing the bitterness between his cheeks and

eventually down his throat. His mind was still lost in the foggy labyrinth of the previous night's haze, but the coffee allowed his eyes to open a little wider.

"You get any sleep last night?" asked Cody as he handed the coffee back to Hunter. He needed to make sense of what happened, or at least to talk out his confusions to the only other person who might understand them, but he didn't know how to start that conversation. His jigsaw-puzzle questions had only been dumped on the table, and he was still searching for the first corner piece.

"Yeah. Best sleep I've had in a while, actually" said Hunter. He turned to face the window, which Cody took as a warning.

"Really?" asked Cody. "Because I couldn't sleep at all. Kept, you know, waking up." Hunter shifted in his seat, but Cody saw that he wasn't going to respond. He let the truck fall silent again, save the soft music crackling in and out as the truck's broken antennae tried with futility to grab pop songs from the air around them. "Look, Hunter. We should probably talk. I mean, there's no sense in—"

"That's too bad you couldn't sleep," Hunter said, cutting Cody off. "I mean, we had so much to drink and everything, I don't think I moved all night." He ran his fingers through his hair and then turned to Cody, giving him one sharp look in the eye. "And if I did move," he said, narrowing his glare, "I sure as hell don't remember anything about it."

Cody felt his neck flare red, not so much from anger as embarrassment. Ever since the night at the river bottoms, he had been longing for what happened last night. He had dreamed about it both waking and sleeping. Hunter wanted it, too—he *must* have,

Cody thought, since he was the one who came over, the one with the roving hands and warm lips. Was it possible it had all been just another dream?

“So that’s it?” Cody asked, loading his question as much as possible.

“That’s it,” said Hunter, his tone sharp and resolute. Cody took a deep breath, but before he could say more, he felt the buzz of his cell phone vibrating in his pocket. He checked the screen and felt a different type of shame and guilt stab through his chest. A text from Maisie: *where are u? I need to see your face. Luv U!!!*

Two years ago, on an unseasonably warm November day, Cody crunched through clusters of fallen leaves on the sidewalk in front of the imposing Oxford-style façade of Cobb Lecture Hall on the University of Chicago campus. This building—the one in which he had spent countless hours learning under some of the greatest social scientists in the country—had always been his favorite on campus, mostly because of its Gothic pointed arches and flying buttresses. The formal aesthetic of the building itself was a kind of validation of his hard work, as if the seriousness of his discipline was molded into the ribbed vaults. When he trudged through the echoing corridors, he felt as far away from his Western Kentucky heritage as he could be—a feeling that produced an amalgam of pride and shame. He paused near the steps as a group of prospective students huddled around their campus tour guide—a senior year student who, despite her unassuming stature, commanded the attention of the group with sweeping gestures and a steady voice.

“Completed in 1892 as one of the original buildings on campus, this is Cobb Lecture Hall, which is currently home to many of our humanities and social science classes.” Cody tried to turn in the other direction and leave, but he was pulled into the

tenor of the tour guide's voice. The flourishes of her British accent melded gracefully with the grandeur of the building, which was as irresistible to Cody as the way she tucked the flowing strands of dyed-orange hair behind her ear as she talked. He watched as she pulled the bottom hem of her maxi skirt off the sidewalk and climbed the first few stairs in front of the building so that her voice would carry to the back of the group. "You wouldn't guess it from its domineering veneer, but the classroom spaces inside Cobb are surprisingly utilitarian and serve a wide range of purposes for our students and faculty alike," she said. She glanced over the crowd and for a brief moment, her eyes locked with Cody's. In that instant, he felt the only thing in his life that had approximated the idealized notion of love at first sight: a piercing need to stare at his shoes until the threat of exposure was gone. "What is true for many things in life is true here at the University of Chicago," she continued, edging down from the steps and steering the group toward the adjacent sidewalk. "Appearances can be deceiving."

Cody tried to turn and leave once more, but he again found himself following the rest of the crowd, lagging far enough behind to not be noticed, but never too far to lose sight of the girl with the toothy Duchenne smile. He spent the next hour zigzagging across his familiar campus just so he could ask her if he could buy her a cup of coffee at the end of the tour. This was still the way he remembered Maisie, even now as he walked into the farmhouse living room and saw her stretched awkwardly in a prenatal yoga pose wearing a sports bra and unbuttoned jeans, sweat dripping between her shoulder blades. She was on all fours with her chin titled up and her belly sagging towards the floor.

“You look very comfortable there,” said Cody. He kissed her on the forehead and then wiped the beads of sweat from his lips. He tasted her own distinct salty-sweetness and craved more of her.

“Supposedly, this is a cat pose,” said Maisie. “Do I look feline to you? I don’t feel very feline.” He sat down on the couch behind her and watched as Maisie pulled herself from the ground and began to dry herself with a hand towel. “So how was camping in a storage garage?” she asked. “Was it everything you dreamed it would be?”

“Cold and dark,” Cody said as he pulled off his shoes and leaned back against the cushions. He and Hunter had spent almost the entire trip home in silence, but he still didn’t feel like talking, at least not with Maisie. Not about what he needed to say.

“Oh, it couldn’t have been all that bad,” she said as she peeled off her sports bra and started towards the bedroom. “You guys should have just gone all survivor-man mode and snuggled naked in a single sleeping bag.” The blood drained from Cody’s face. He resented Maisie for her joking, and he hated himself for feeling the resentment. *I have done nothing wrong*, he said to himself. *She has done nothing wrong*.

“You know, he can be a real jerk sometimes,” Cody called, more to himself than to Maisie. She was out of earshot and didn’t respond. Cody heard the shower turn on, and he was suddenly aware of his own filth—from sleeping on a dirty concrete floor, and from whatever else happened, whether Hunter would acknowledge it or not. He made his way back through the master bathroom, pulling off his clothes as he went. He flipped back the shower curtain in one clean motion, startling Maisie. She covered herself instinctively, as if shielding her body from the eyes of a stranger.

“Sorry,” Cody said as he stepped in the shower. “Mind if I join you?” He pulled the curtain closed behind him and scooted around behind Maisie, brushing her belly as he moved. The shower had only been big enough for one of them even before she started showing, but now they had to really dance around one another. Maisie turned awkwardly to face Cody, reaching behind him to grab a bottle of conditioner from a ledge behind his head. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her in to him. She gave him a dismissive kiss on the nose and pulled away.

“So how are things going for Hunter?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Fine I guess,” Cody said. He put his hands on Maisie’s shoulders and spun her around. He kissed her neck, tasting the shampoo residue. She pulled away once again.

“Things got pretty rough at the party last week,” she said. “I was just wondering how he was dealing with it all.”

“He’s a big boy,” said Cody. He took a deep breath. “He will figure it out for himself.” He pulled her back into him, tracing his hands down her sides and then back up to her breasts. She grabbed his hands, gave them a squeeze, and turned to face him once again.

“I just feel badly for him sometimes,” she said. Before he even realized what he was doing, Cody smacked the shampoo bottles from the ledge, slamming them into the porcelain tile around them.

“Can you stop talking about Hunter McCready for one goddamn minute!” he shouted. The room grew silent, only broken by the water pattering on the shower floor around their feet. Cody looked into Maisie’s eyes and saw fear. He saw it in the way her

quivering breath caught in her throat, in the way that she placed careful hands around her belly, as if to protect the baby. He pressed his forehead against hers. “I didn’t mean it,” he whispered. “I don’t even know what that was.” He kissed her forehead, and then her closed eyes. He kissed her neck and ears.

“I’ll let you have some space,” she said, pulling away from him. “I’m ready to get out anyway.”

“No,” he said, more sharply than he had intended. “Just stay.” He grabbed her shoulders again, this time swinging her around with force. He pushed her forward against the shower wall and thrust himself against her.

“Cody, what are you doing?” she asked in a careful whisper. He grabbed her hips from behind and tried to move inside her. “Cody!” she said again, her voice trembling in disbelief.

“Come on, Mais,” he said, putting his lips against her neck. “It’s been two months. I need this.” She tried pushing back, but he pressed on.

“But the doctors said we shouldn’t.”

“Come on, one time,” he said. His eyes were closed now. He grabbed at her flesh and felt his way forward.

“Cody, stop!” she said, her voice faltering. “You’re scaring me.”

“One time,” he said, “Just one time.” Maisie struggled in his arms, scratching down the backs of his biceps.

“You’re going to kill the baby!” she shouted. He still had his eyes clenched shut, and he roved his fingers between her legs and pushed them apart. He felt a sharp blow to his stomach as Maisie thrust her elbow backward toward him. He opened his eyes just as

she was wriggling free, and watched her get out of the shower. He swung the temperature lever all the way to cold and pressed his forehead against the shower wall, letting the frigid water pour over his head and down his back. From the bedroom, he heard the muffled sound of Maisie sobbing into a pillow.

When Cody was sixteen and had just gotten his driver's license, he used to sneak out late at night, jump into his dad's old GMC Jimmy, and burn up the moonlit country back roads down toward the river bottoms. He took the same path for weeks, and learned very quickly how to glide around each gentle curve at just the right speed to make him feel he was one with the road, his truck like a pinball winding between a track of perfectly fitted metal rails, coasting along the receding river's edge and then back up toward town. He had never felt quite at home with the people of Blue Banks, but these roads, this land—especially the marshy river bottoms with dancing reeds and floating lily pads—were the quiet part of his soul, the part he desperately needed to find again after what he had done to Maisie. He had groveled in apology and wept in her lap, but after she had settled into a quiet sadness, she still needed space and asked Cody to leave her alone for a while. He hit his familiar path, letting the bitter January wind overtake his body between the two open windows of his truck.

He muttered to himself an incomprehensible stream of curse words as he drove, punctuated by the intermittent blaring of his horn as he punch the steering wheel. He had never given anyone a reason to feel threatened by him in the past, and now he knew he had changed his relationship with Maisie forever. She couldn't trust him, and he couldn't trust himself. He hated himself, mostly because even in this moment of guilt and despair,

he couldn't stop thinking of Hunter McCready. When he reached the river bottoms, he pulled his truck into the cattails and peered out into the darkness hanging over the still, muddy waters. At one point in his life, Cody may have been able to whisper a prayer out into the river, fluttering it across the surface like a skipped rock, watching it sink into the shallow water, an offering to some god he couldn't name but could trust. But ever since his father died, he didn't know what it meant to pray. He could feel the weight of the words gathering in his gut like sunken pebbles, but he didn't know how to purge them.

He put the truck back into gear and spun the soil from his tires as he headed back toward town. He wended back through the same familiar road, but when he reached the city limits, he found himself veering in an unexpected direction. Instead of pulling onto Old Herrodsburg Road, he drove toward downtown, past the closed buildings, and up the hill on Second Street towards Riverside Baptist Church. He didn't know what exactly he was searching for, but when he found himself parking his truck in the gravel drive of the small parsonage at the back of the church, he knew what he had to do.

He walked up to the diminutive ranch house and rang the doorbell. After Cody spent a few awkward seconds scuffling his feet against the stoop, the pastor opened the door and stood before Cody in flannel pajamas and wool house slippers.

"Well lookie here," he said as he pulled an overcoat from a rack behind the door and joined Cody on the porch. "If it ain't Cody Culver."

"Sorry to bother you at night like this, Brother Jim," said Cody, suddenly wishing he was back down at the river bottoms where he felt safe, where he was less exposed. "I can come back some other time if this isn't good for you."

“Tonight’s just fine,” he said. “You can come on in the house if you want. But it ain’t too cold out here, even pleasant, so we can just sit here on the porch swing if it suits you.” He gestured over toward the swing and they both took a seat. “What can I do for you?”

“I don’t really know,” said Cody. He picked at some dirt underneath his fingernails. “I just needed to talk to somebody. To confess or something.”

“Confess? Heck, Cody,” said the pastor, stretching into a hearty smile. “I ain’t never been a Catholic and I don’t intend to become one tonight. The whole point of Jesus dying on that cross was to give us a bridge to the Father.”

“I don’t know what that means, Brother Jim,” said Cody.

“It means you don’t need some crusty old preacher standing between you and your God,” said the pastor. “You got something to confess, you take it to the Lord.”

“But that’s the thing,” said Cody, searching for words. “I need something real. Something tangible.” He could tell by the way Brother Jim squinted at him that he wasn’t getting his point across. “I need to be able to look somebody in the eyes and tell them the shit—sorry, the stuff I’m going through. And I need for them to tell me it’s normal. Or maybe that it’s not. Either way, I just need something I can touch and feel, you know?” Brother Jim nodded. “I mean, I’m not saying God isn’t real. It’s just that he feels so damn far away.” The pastor smiled and gave Cody a slap on the back. He gazed off into the distance, past the church where the road sloped down towards the river’s coast.

“You know, your daddy used to stop by my house on nights like this,” he said. “Sometimes he’d come straight from the mines, face streaked black with rock dust cause that fool never bothered to shower at work.” He rocked back and let out a belly laugh.

“That sounds about right,” said Cody. He hadn’t thought about it before now, but he realized that if his dad were still alive, he would be talking to him right now instead of Brother Jim. “What would he ask you about?”

“Oh, same stuff as this, more or less. How to feel closer to God, how to read a particular scripture. How to do right by his kids.” As he said this he winked at Cody. “Funny thing is, I reckon I learned far more from your daddy than he ever did from me. Taught me that there are always more questions than answers. And most of the time, the answers we think are right don’t fit the question we asked in the first place.” Cody collected a heavy sigh in his puffed cheeks, let it seep slowly into the night air through the pinhole-part in his lips. He always missed his dad, but tonight he felt it.

“Look,” said Brother Jim, “I’m your pastor, and if you really want to unload your issues on me, I’m ready to listen. But if you want something tangible—if you want to know how to pray and feel like somebody is actually listening out there—just start by talking to Coaldust.”

“My father’s dead, pastor,” said Cody. “That doesn’t feel very real to me.”

“Yep, he’s dead. No doubt about it,” said Brother Jim. “And he ain’t going to hear you. But you’ll say what you need to say, and sometimes that’s all that matters.”

“Yeah. I guess so,” said Cody.

“Just go find a quiet place and start talking out loud. Just a conversation. You need to picture something real? Picture that old man of yours wearing some dirty coveralls, coal streaked across his face. He’ll never hear you. But nothing escapes the ears of the God of all creation.” Brother Jim gave Cody a gentle pat on the knee, then

turned to go back in the house. “You stay out here as long as you need,” he said. “Or come on inside if you get cold. I’ll leave the door open.”

The pastor let the screen door latch behind him, leaving Cody to the stillness of the night and the gentle creaking of the porch swing. He cleared his throat and closed his eyes.

“Dad,” he said in a hushed voice, barely above a whisper, “we need to talk.”

CHAPTER 10

Over the next month, the cold hush of winter wrapped Blue Banks in a tightly woven cocoon. Cody awoke each morning before dawn and plummeted into the eternal night of the coal mine, worked a twelve-hour shift, and emerged back onto the surface just in time to look through the leafless tulip poplar trees and see the sun dipping below the western hills. He had never suffered from seasonal depression before, but the hour-by-hour darkness in which he was immersed had started to seep through his porous skin and absorb into the sponge of his soul. The trust he had shattered with Maisie was healing—slowly, like a broken limb set in a splint—but there were still days when the throbbing in his bones was too much to bear.

By the first Wednesday of March, the town was starting to wriggle out of its slumber, thawing like the steady drip of the icicle he now watched, clinging to the underside of a leaking gutter on the corner of Riverside Baptist Church. Cody sat in a musty room in the “old wing” of the church, gazing out the window as the water dripped from the ice in a staccato rhythm, as if from a leaking faucet. The crystalline ice glistened in the light of the setting sun, dazzling Cody into a sort of hypnotic trance, bringing him as close to a prayer as he could get. Fellow congregants at the small Wednesday night meeting lifted their voices all around him, a cacophony of supplication, distant and muffled to Cody in his trancelike state as if his ears were enveloped in cotton. Above everything else, whether real or imagined, he heard the steady drip of the melting water plunking into a puddle outside like pizzicato notes plucked by a violinist. The sound rose

with the fervor of the prayers around him, rushing now into his ears as if the droplets were cresting whitewater waves crashing down a river.

“Dear Jesus, hear the cry of your people,” one man said, somewhere to Cody’s right.

DRIP. DROP. DRIP.

“Heal the sick among us, Father God in Heaven,” said another. “Mend their broken bodies if it be thy will.”

DRIP. DROP. DRIP.

“Speak the truth of your holy sacrifice to the lost sinners among us, lest they suffer eternal damnation apart from you.”

DRIP. DROP. DRIP.

“And all God’s people said—” started Brother Jim, pausing for the rest of the group to join in with the thunderous last word: “Amen!”

“Amen,” Cody whispered under his breath, breaking from his trance. He squinted as the fluorescent light of the room seemed to pour into his corneas all at once. Taking in his bearings, he remembered that he was still in a small circle with seven other people, most of them his seniors by a good fifteen years. This Wednesday night prayer meeting had become the unlikeliest of routines, but he had remained faithful to it ever since the night he first knocked on the pastor’s door looking for guidance. The first week he had felt embarrassed for himself and everyone else in the room, but soon enough he learned that if he could quiet his mind and focus his soul on something—the fleur-de-lis pattern on the worn red carpet, the humming of the terminal heater in the corner, the dripping of

a melting icicle out the window—that he could almost encounter the Great Something that everyone else in the room seemed to take for granted.

“Alrighty folks,” said Brother Jim as he leaned back in his folding chair, bringing the front legs off the ground as the chair creaked under his weight, “What do you have for me this week?” At the end of each prayer meeting, the pastor opened up the floor for anyone to ask questions—anything from Bible interpretation to the Church’s responsibility in current events. Cody still wasn’t sure if he believed in God, but he believed in this pastor. He believed in his tender eyes and the uncertainty of his own open convictions. He believed in his quiet teaching that made room for other voices. He believed in the grace that resonated through his voice and the peace folded into the creases of his smile. This was a man who often preached that God performs perfect works through the flesh-and-bone lives of imperfect people; and if this were true, Cody could think of no better vessel for this work than Brother Jim. The pastor loosened his cowboy necktie and then strung it tightly back towards his collar: his habit when he was waiting for a response from the group. Marcus Bradstreet, a thirty-something mine shuttle car operator who worked on Luke’s unit, cleared his throat.

“Well, Pastor,” he started, placing the heel of one of his snakeskin boots across his opposite knee, “the other night I was up town at the little duplex I own, checking in on some of my renters who said they were having some issues with the pilot light. Anyway, I seen something that made my skin crawl. I’ve had this feeling in my gut ever since, like I’m about to puke.” He picked at an open sore on his right forearm and paused, looking for permission to go on. Brother Jim eased his chair back down to the fraying carpet and ran a hand through the fine strands of his graying brown hair. Bradstreet had a

habit of using the prayer meeting as a channel to spread gossip around the church, and subsequently around the town. Cody knew Bradstreet was close to Luke, and he was beginning to see that maybe that was another reason to be weary of him. Margie Dansworth, the sharp-tongued blue hair who ran the ladies quilting guild, leaned forward in her seat as if she were watching one of her made-for-TV movies on Lifetime.

“Hold on there, Marcus,” said Brother Jim, “Is this something that we should deal with privately?” He raised an eyebrow in warning.

“No, Pastor,” said Bradstreet, wringing his hands. “I believe the congregation needs to know about this so we can all be prepared.” Brother Jim folded his hands across his stomach and sighed. Bradstreet took this as permission to continue. “So I’m standing on the porch waiting to be let in, and something catches the corner of my eye in the old trailer next door.”

“Down in Weeping Willows?” asked Margie, “That old trailer owned by Harold’s people?” She wanted to get the details right in case of a juicy story.

“That’s right,” said Bradstreet, narrowing his eyes, “But Harold sold it a month or so ago to one of Anderson’s kin. The one that spent all that time locked up down at county jail.” Cody heard the exhalation of his own breath, the steady *whoosh* swirling around his eardrums as if he were snorkeling under water.

“Hunter?” he said, barely audible. He wasn’t sure he had even said it aloud until he saw Bradstreet eyeing him. After the incident in Chicago, Cody had asked to be put on a different rotation at the mine so he could distance himself from Hunter. He hadn’t spoken to him in over a month, but he still saw his face when he closed his eyes too long, still felt the warmth of his breath on his neck when he dreamed. He knew Hunter had

been staying with Spits for a while, and he had heard she had recently set him up in a trailer on the south end of town.

“That’s the one,” said Bradstreet. “McCready.” He slipped the last name through clenched teeth, as if the very word was a blasphemy and shouldn’t be spoken in the House of God. “Well anyway, I wasn’t trying to be nosey or anything, but the blinds were cracked open a bit.” He paused, drawing out the moment, building anticipation. It was a game everyone in Riverside Baptist Church knew well, and one that Marcus Bradstreet had perfected. “I don’t know exactly how to put this, but when I looked in, I saw that boy doing—well, doing something that a boy shouldn’t do. Something unnatural.” Margie Dansworth put a hand to her chest as if shielding her heart from whatever Bradstreet was about to reveal.

“Marcus, allow me to remind you,” started Brother Jim, “that Mr. McCready came forward in our very church a few months back to accept the call of Christ on his life. Now, I ask you to think long and hard before you say something here that you can’t take back.” Bradstreet put his hands up, as if proving them clean before God and his people.

“I understand that, Pastor,” he said. “But I know what I saw, and what I saw ain’t Christian. If that boy is a professing member of this church—well then, there’s even more reason to let the congregation know.”

“No,” said Cody, under his breath. Bradstreet picked off a piece of loose skin around his sore, balled it between his fingers, and flicked it away.

“What’s that?” he asked. “Speak up there, Culver.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” said Cody. “Whatever it was you think you saw, it was private.”

“Private. Is that right?” Bradstreet glared at Cody, measuring him up.

“That’s right,” said Cody, forcing himself to look the other man in the eye. “Can’t a man have some privacy in his own home?”

“Son, there ain’t a place on God’s green earth private enough for what that boy was doing,” he said, his voice trembling. “Now, I’m trying to protect this community. And it’s no secret that you’ve been seen around town from time to time with McCready, so if you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay out of this all the way around. You hear me?”

Brother Jim patted his hands against his knees to focus the attention back on himself and break the tension. “C’mon now, Marcus—”

“He was wearing a dress, Pastor,” exclaimed Bradstreet. “A goddamn woman’s dress!” He clasped his own hand over his mouth, as if trying to keep any more curse words from slipping out. Margie slipped a church bulletin from her bible and began fanning herself, mouth agape. Bradstreet continued, “I apologize for my language, Brother Jim, but—”

“That’s quite alright,” said Margie. “We forgive you.” She pruned up her lips like she had been sucking on a lemon. “Seeing something like that would set any one of us to cussing.” Cody surveyed the room in disbelief. Other than the pastor’s, each head in the room was nodding in agreement with Margie’s sentiment. Cody felt a stirring inside of him—a conviction of the Spirit, he might have said—to say something in Hunter’s defense, in the defense of the countless *Others* hiding in the shadows of Blue Banks. He

stood up to command the attention of the group, but just as he opened his mouth, he heard another voice he didn't expect.

"Cody! Thank God you're here," said Lori Ann as she burst through the door. She placed a hand over her heart and gulped great draughts of air, as if she needed a paper bag to keep from hyperventilating.

"Mom?" asked Cody. "Calm down. What's wrong?"

"Where's your phone?" she said, gasping for air. "I tried calling a million times." Cody reached in his pocket and slipped out his phone, which he had put on silent at the beginning of the meeting. There weren't a million missed calls, but fourteen were enough to make his palms sweat.

"Never mind the calls. What's going on?" he asked.

"Maisie's at the hospital," she said. "The baby's coming."

Cody veered his truck across the double yellow road lines to zip around cars on a one-lane stretch of Pike Lane. He slowed at an intersection once he reached the city limits, but he never fully stopped, leaning on his truck's horn and blaring past a red light.

"Take it easy, son," said Lori Ann. She sat in the passenger seat and had a white-knuckled grip on the middle armrest.

"She's only seven months along, Mom," said Cody, trying to steady the shake in his voice. "The baby's not ready." Lori Ann never met a situation she couldn't talk through, but for the moment she remained silent, offering only a gentle pat on Cody's knee. "The baby's not ready," he said again, as if he were waiting for someone to

contradict him, to give him the kind of false assurance people in his hometown so often felt obliged to give. Still, his mother kept quiet, and for that, Cody was grateful.

“Dear God,” he whispered to himself, trying to mimic the prayers he had heard so many times before. “Dear God,” he said again. But what could come next? “Dear God, dear God, dear God.”

When they arrived at the hospital, Cody had just barely thrown the truck into park before he raced towards the building, yelling back toward Lori Ann that he would meet her inside. When he entered the doors, his muscle memory sent him to the left toward the emergency room, but he stopped himself and headed straight ahead to Labor and Delivery.

“I’m looking for Maisie Culver,” he announced when he was still a good twenty feet from the reception window. “C-U-L-V-E-R.” The receptionist behind the glass, a woman with a red, beehive bun and a leathery face—one weathered by years of mustering patience to deal graciously with people who never extended the same benefit to her—tilted her head to inspect Cody over the rims of her bifocals as he approached. She slid a clipboard and a pen his way.

“You must be Daddy,” she said as she smacked on a giant glob of bubble gum. Cody waited for her to say something else. She didn’t. Instead, she blew a huge purple bubble, let it pop, and then sucked it back into her mouth.

“Where is she?” he said. “I need to be with her.”

“Oh, it’s too late for that, Sugarplum,” she said as she forced the clipboard in his hands. “They rushed her on back thirty minutes ago. They’ve already started. Now if you could just—”

“Started?” Cody said, eyes growing wild. “Started what? Where is she?” The receptionist put her hand to her chest in apology.

“Oh, Honey,” she said, removing her bifocals, “I figured you’d already been told. They’re taking the baby by caesarean.”

“But she’s only seven months,” he said, mostly to himself. The receptionist gave Cody a dismissive pat on the hand and pointed to the waiting area to his left.

“You go on in there and fill these out,” she said. “I’ll have someone come out as soon as possible to let you know what’s going on.”

From a quiet hiding place in a long-forgotten fold of his most distant memories, Cody was sometimes able to pull a withering recollection from his past, a grainy image at arm’s length that he could reach for but never touch, like a hologram. This time it was a pink stuffed bunny, wispy strings of thread unraveling at its seams. A bunny he snuggled at night and nurtured during the day, like a newborn child. A bunny he called *baby*—openly to everyone for his early childhood years, and then in quiet whispers to himself when he learned boys weren’t supposed to do such things.

The bleeding edges of that memory started to materialize, and he entered into its developing world, filling in the lost moments of the narrative with his own imaginings. Here it comes now, even as he sits eyes-wide-open in the middle of the hospital waiting room. He feels his father’s hand stroking down the back of his head, now his calloused

fingertips resting between his shoulder blades and guiding him through a massive crowd at the Blue Banks County Fair. He is four years old—or is he three?—his eyes level with his dad’s studded belt buckle. The flashing signs all around him draw him to the arcade stalls like a mosquito to a porch light, and he rubs the oily surface of a single dollar bill between his thumb and forefinger. This bill is the last of his five-dollar spending allowance at the fair, and parting with it seems as tragic and final as death.

“What about this one here?” asks his father, bending down to look Cody in the eye. He’s pointing to a little duck pond game where every player is guaranteed a prize.

“That game’s for babies,” says Cody. What he doesn’t say is that his toy chest at home is already loaded with the types of prizes offered by this kiddy game—Chinese finger traps, bouncy balls, plastic animals. No, he wants to risk his precious dollar on something worth having. “Can I do that one?” he asks. He points toward a milk bottle toss game where a group of teenagers are congregating. Larger-than-life prizes hang down from the ceiling: giant stuffed monkeys and snarling dinosaurs.

“That game’s a bit big for you, don’t you think?” says his father.

“You can help me,” says Cody, fingering the dollar bill in front of him.

“Well, it’s your money,” says Coaldust. “Go on.” Cody weaves between the towering adults around him and scuttles to the booth, holding his dollar out before him like a compass. The old carnie working the booth sidles up to the counter, leans forward, and blows his beef jerky breath across Cody’s face. He pulls the dollar bill from Cody’s grip and chuckles, spittle gathering in the corners of his mouth.

“Well then,” he says, his voice raspy and brittle, “let’s see what you’ve got, big guy.” He thuds a rubber ball on the counter before Cody, and then stacks the three milk

bottles in a pyramid on the platform behind him. Cody rolls the ball along the counter, feels the sticky residue of all the hands that have held it before him. He takes the ball in two hands and raises it to Coaldust like a sacrificial offering.

“You do it,” he says, raising the pitch of his voice at the end as if he were asking a question.

“You sure?” asks Coaldust. “You only got the one ball, you hear?” Cody nods, and places the ball into his father’s massive grip.

“Okay then, Pops,” says the old carnie, “Give it a go. You knock the jugs down, you get a small prize. Knock ’em clear off the platform, you get one of them big ones.” Cody watches in awe as Coaldust widens his stance and adjusts his grip around the rubber ball. He thrusts his body forward, punching his weight into his swinging arm, and lets the ball fly. It happens so fast that Cody’s mind has to catch up with what he just saw: the jugs flinging in all directions clear off the platform, clanking the shimmering metal sidewalls. It isn’t until he sees the smile on his dad’s face that he realizes he has won.

“Well alright then!” exclaims the old carnie. He reaches up and jangles the rope of an overhead bell to draw attention of the crowd to the winner. Cody takes his dad’s hand, studies it, wonders if he’ll ever grow that strong. Coaldust smiles down at him and tussles his hair. “Okay big shot,” says the carnie as he climbs on top of the counter to reach the prizes. “You want the T-Rex or the gorilla?” Cody studies the prizes, then looks to his dad.

“Can I have one of those instead?” he asks. He points at a pink bunny, one of the “small” prizes on the wall.

“But you won the jumbo prize,” says the carnie, a chuckle caught in his throat. “Don’t ya want this here dinosaur? He could make a lunch out of that little ol’ bunny.” Cody scuffles his shoes and looks away.

“The bunny will do us just fine,” says Coaldust. He gives Cody’s arm a shake and watches as the smile spreads across his face. Cody takes the bunny from the old carnie and gently squeezes it against his chest. He runs his hands up and down the ears, rolls the soft fur fibers between his fingers.

“Baby,” he says. “My very own baby.”

As he sat in one of the sea foam green chairs of the hospital waiting room, he could still feel the weight of the bunny in his outstretched hands. At that very moment, in one of the delivery rooms beyond the locked metal doors in front of him, his real-life baby girl was either crying or not, tasting the air of the world for the first time, or not. He tried to take a sip of the muddy black coffee Lori Ann had bought for him from the vending machine, but he couldn’t steady his hand enough to get the paper cup to his lips.

“C’mon now, son,” said Lori Ann as she reached around Cody and massaged his shoulders. “You try and stay calm. God is watching over that baby.”

“Is that right?” Cody said, pulling away from his mother. “He’s up there watching, huh? How does that work exactly?”

“Take it easy. You know what I mean.”

“No, really,” he said, turning to face her. “I need some help picturing this. So Jesus is up there on a throne—what? Looking down at some crystal ball? And he sees my baby. Is that right?”

“Cody, just—”

“And he’s watching. Just watching, right?”

“I’d like to think so,” said Lori Ann. She stared straight ahead.

“Then why the hell doesn’t he ever do anything?” asked Cody. “Watching didn’t save my father, did it? You mean to tell me that some God is up there—a God who can speak the whole world into existence—and he just sits by and *watches*? I mean, is he a god or a goddamn voyeur?”

“Jesus, Cody,” said Lori Ann, a sob caught in her throat. “It’s just something we say. Can’t you let me have that?” Cody sat the coffee cup on the ground beside him and rested his elbows on his knees.

“I’m sorry, Momma,” he said. He knew she didn’t mean any harm, and he knew that the anger he felt bubbling away inside his gut wasn’t just about the inaction of a supposed God here in the hospital. Where was this same God earlier at the church meeting? Didn’t he intend to show up amongst all that prayer? Didn’t that same God care that one of his children was being ridiculed just for living his life—for existing the way he was made? In the image of God—*Imago Dei*—Cody thought, remembering Brother Jim using the Latin in one of his sermons. Cody wished he could go back to that moment and speak up, but he still didn’t know what he could say. The truth is, what Bradstreet had claimed caught Cody off guard. He knew about Hunter’s XXY condition, but from what he looked up on the Internet, he knew the extra “x” didn’t necessarily mean anything about his sexuality or gender. Hunter had opened up to him, but Cody was beginning to see that there was more to the story, more that he may never learn. He wondered how much Luke knew. What other secrets did he still hold over Hunter like the

blade of a guillotine, sharpened by a town that stood ready to execute people they didn't understand?

“Cody Culver?” announced a nurse after she opened the steel door leading to the delivery rooms. She looked to be about Cody's age, but her eyes seemed much older. Cody tried to speak, but when he found he had no voice, he simply raised his hand and nodded. He stood and walked toward the door. “Right this way,” she said in a voice that was too quiet, too full of sympathy. She led Cody by the arm, barely touching his skin with cautious fingers, just enough to let him know she was there, just enough to make his mouth to run dry. He heard the clanking of the door shut behind him. He followed the quick steps of the nurse, zipping past open doors with beeping machines.

“Is she—” Cody started, trying to form the words. “Is the baby—”

“Here she is, Daddy,” said the nurse as she stopped abruptly in the middle of a hallway. Cody nearly plowed into her, but caught himself just at the last moment. He followed the nurses' gaze as she looked through a glass barrier, and there she was: the tiniest baby he'd ever seen in person, purple-red, wrinkled skin, arms and legs flailing in an isolette bed under the warm glow of a heat lamp. “I know it's tough to look at her like that, but most of this is just for precaution,” said the nurse. “She's actually doing quite well for being so premature. I'll have the doctor come speak with you as soon as she's able so she can explain more.” Cody saw all the tubes, the plastic bands, the white tape. But what he noticed the most was the curvature of her upper lip and the sharp slope of her nose—both of which she got from her mother.

“Maisie,” he whispered. He felt the warm rush of tears threatening at the corners of his eyes, and he pressed a hand against the glass. “Where is Maisie?”

“They’re still working to stabilize her,” said the nurse. She tried to remain clinical and distant, but Cody could hear the thinly veiled panic she held in her voice.

“What do you mean?” he said. “Is she okay?” The nurse spun her watch around her wrist.

“We hope so, Mr. Culver,” she said. “She came to us with acute preeclampsia—dangerously high blood pressure—and she was starting to seize.”

“God,” he said. There was that word again, though he wasn’t sure what he meant by it.

“She’s responding to treatment, so now that we’ve taken the baby, she should stabilize.” Cody figured that he must have looked as pale as he felt, because the nurse took him by the arm and led him toward a nearby waiting area. She said she would send someone for him as soon as Maisie was stable enough to be seen.

He leaned back on the headrest behind him and closed his eyes, trying to calm his racing heart by taking deep breaths in and out. In his own cocoon of darkness, he listened to the noises of the hospital around him: the squeak of a rolling bed, the ringing of a telephone at the nurses’ station, the beeping of a heart monitor, the gurgling of a ventilator. Slowly, rising over these rhythmical sounds, Cody heard the voice of a news reporter speaking from the television in the waiting room: “We begin tonight with breaking news out of the Unified Partners Mine in southern Blue Banks County,” began the voice. Cody opened his eyes and focused on the TV. “Less than an hour ago, emergency crews were called to the scene of a life-threatening accident.”

“No,” Cody heard himself say. He felt his grip tighten around the armrest of the chair. “No, no, no.” He grabbed his phone from his pocket and opened his contacts. He

let his finger hover over Luke's name, but then kept scrolling to Hunter's. He pressed the call button.

"Details of the accident are still developing, and WETV's Kelly Jacobson is at the scene to give us more." The phone rang once, twice, three times.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon," whispered Cody.

"That's right, Dan," started the young reporter at the scene. We're being told tonight that an accident involving a shuttle car has critically injured one man, a miner here at the Unified Partner Mine."

"Pick up the phone!" Cody said aloud. But the phone kept ringing. As soon as he hung up, he saw what he feared the most flash across the TV screen: a picture of Hunter McCready.

CHAPTER 11

Spring bloomed into western Kentucky, sweeping across the meandering banks of the Ohio River like a black-and-white film gradually wiping into Technicolor. Verdant canopies of fledgling leaves once again covered the russet hills, and front lawns all across the county popped with the brilliant pinks and whites of dogwood blossoms. The mustard yellow buds of hickory trees in Town Square Park complemented the burnt orange-red flowering clusters of sugar maples blossoming downtown. The miracle of life sprouted in every direction, and nobody felt the riches of its beauty more deeply than Cody, who sat on the porch swing of the house on Old Herrodsburg Road rocking his three-month old baby girl to sleep. The gummy heat of summer would come soon enough, bringing with it an onslaught of unrelenting mosquitoes that would run them back inside at this twilight hour; but for now, he could rock with little Lucie here as long as he pleased, humming quiet lullabies into the air around her, stroking the unwieldy patches of her strawberry blonde hair.

She was almost asleep when Maisie opened the screen door, the squeal of the hinges enough to jolt the baby wide awake and set her to crying. Cody eased Lucie's head back onto his chest and rubbed the tips of his fingers in tiny, counter-clockwise circles between her shoulder blades: the only motion that seemed to soothe her, as he had learned from countless nights of trial and error.

"I'm going to have bath and then get on to bed, I think," said Maisie. She'd been crying again. Cody could tell by the way she hung back in the darkness of the house and

spoke in muted tones, as if to hide the cracks in her voice. She held the screen door propped open just enough let him know she was still there. “You want me to take her in and lay her down?”

“No, we’re good out here,” said Cody. He knew Maisie was only offering to take the baby because she felt that’s what a good mother was supposed to do. “I’ll bring her inside in a bit. You go on and have your bath.” Maisie slowly edged away from the screen door like she wanted to say more but couldn’t quite think of what it was she wanted to say. “Hey Mais?” Cody called just as the door was clicking shut.

“Yeah?” she asked, speaking through the screen.

“We’re doing okay,” he said. “You know?”

“Okay,” she said, choking down a sob. She lingered in the doorway a moment longer, building the courage to walk away and take this time for herself, as if she needed permission to be alone. Motherhood squeezed Maisie like a Victorian corset, and she couldn’t bring herself to let Cody loosen the strings. For his part, he slipped fatherhood on like a tailored suit, one that stayed neat and pressed, sheathed in a vinyl garment bag hanging in the closet while he worked twelve hour shifts underground. He’d come home and put on the suit for a few hours before bed, never long enough for him to even feel the itch of the collar on the back of his neck, let alone the grip of the tie knotted around his throat.

“Your daddy loves you,” he whispered to Lucie. “Don’t you forget that.” He swung back gently one last time, then eased himself to his feet, moving with the continual motion of the swing as to not wake the baby. She still felt fragile in his arms, but he was no longer crippled by the anxious swell in his chest when he carried her up

stairs or across a concrete floor, where one slip of the foot threatened to crush her tiny bones to dust. Her weight had nearly doubled since birth—she was up to a pudgy eight pounds, six ounces—and the doctors had recently cleared her from sleeping with her apnea monitor during the night. No one could predict the issues she might have down the road, but for this brief moment in time, she was hitting milestones just as they had hoped. “Normal” was the word the pediatrician had used at her last check-up, but that was a word that held no meaning for Cody. *Healthy* and *happy* were words he whispered over Lucie while she slept.

He eased her into the portable crib next to their bed in the master bedroom, and then tiptoed backward, holding his breath, making his way toward the closed door of the connected bathroom. Once he was safely out of the danger zone, he let out his breath with great gusto, making a show of it for Maisie, who was soaking in a lavender-scented bubble bath.

“She’ll be ready to move into the nursery before too long,” he said, not whispering exactly, but just loudly enough to engage his vocal cords. Maisie’s only response was to lean up in the tub and hug her knees to her chest. “Then maybe we can lie in bed at night and talk. Loud enough where we can actually hear each other, I mean.” He sat on the edge of the tub and massaged her shoulders.

“What’s wrong with me, Cody?” she asked, easing her chin down to rest on her knees. Cody couldn’t see her face, but he knew her puffy eyes were teeming with tears, the same way they were most nights at this time. Cody let out a frustrated sigh, and hated himself for it as soon as it came out.

“We’ve talked about this, Mais,” he said, trying to reel in his own faltering voice. “Nothing’s wrong with you. This happens to a lot of new mothers. It’s perfectly normal.” There was that word again—normal. Such an innocuous sounding word, but he was beginning to know better. “I mean, the doctors said—”

“I know what the doctors said,” she interrupted. She shook her head, just enough for him to see her ponytail wiggle, the fine tips of her hair brushing across his fingers on her shoulders. He leaned down and kissed her on top of the head. He wanted to say more, but the past few months had taught him when to let the moment breathe. “I just feel so tired,” she said.

“I know,” Cody responded. “I’m trying to help out as much as I can.”

“No, that’s not what I mean.”

“I know it’s not.”

“You know it’s not?” she said, perplexed. “Then why do you—I mean, if you know that’s not what I—”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“You don’t know?”

“Look,” he said, standing up and backing away from the tub. “I’m going to run down to the store and grab a few things.” He was about to ask her if she needed anything when the baby started howling in the bedroom.

“No!” Maisie said. She covered her face with her water-wrinkled hands, “Not already. I can’t do this tonight.”

“I’ve got her, Mais,” said Cody, edging out of the room. “I’ll take her for a drive and let her sleep in the truck. You can get some rest here. The drive will do us all some

good.” The baby screamed again. “I’m coming, Lucie Hunter!” called Cody. “I’m coming.”

Lucie didn’t have a name for the first four days of her life. *Baby Culver*, as she was known by the nursing staff, spent most of her time squirming under a radiant heater in the NICU while the nurses pumped fluids and medications into her blood through an IV and nutrients into her sunken belly through a feeding tube. Cody’s time was spent torn between holding her kitten-sized hands—standing on aching feet beside the clear plastic walls of her isollette bed—and trying to comfort Maisie, who was recovering in the ICU clear on the other side of the small hospital. For those first four days, naming the baby seemed like the least important thing to do. Late on the third day, though, Maisie was moved into a recovery room closer to the NICU, and she was well enough for them to start looking towards the future. When Lucie was taken off of her feeding tube to attempt nursing the next day, they were ready to call her something other than *the baby*.

“The squint of her eyes reminds me of the pictures of my great grandmother,” said Maisie. She gazed down at her daughter, who was sucking in great draughts of milk, as if trying to make up for all the nursing sessions she missed while the two of them were apart. “My dad’s grandmother, Lucienne.”

“Sounds French,” said Cody.

“I should hope so,” said Maisie, looking away from the baby just long enough to smile up at Cody. “She was from Marseille.”

“Right,” said Cody, returning the smile. It was in moments like these when he remembered that he knew so little about Maisie’s family. “It’s a beautiful name.”

“Should we call you that?” she asked the baby, smoothing down a matted cowlick of hair on the back of her head. “Lucienne. Sounds lovely, doesn’t it? It means *Light*.”

“Lucie,” added Cody. “Lucie Culver.”

“Yes,” said Maisie. “That’s it.” Cody sat on the edge of the bed and held Maisie’s hand, mouthing the name to himself as he looked at the tiny infant, just under four-and-a-half pounds. The name felt foreign rolling off his tongue, but a perfect fit for his daughter, this baby girl with a frail body but the fierce light of life blazing in her sky-blue eyes.

“She’ll need a middle name, too,” Cody said. “Something strong. Something that shows she’s a fighter. I mean, I love *Lucienne*, but it’s awfully fragile.” He looked to Maisie and noticed a change come over her. Her eyes flicked away from Lucie and fixed on the wall, as if she could see through it to somewhere else, somewhere dangerous and painful.

“I was thinking,” she said, pausing while she gathered her words, “that her middle name could be Hunter.” Cody stood and took a step back, as if shoved in the chest. He wasn’t quite sure if he had heard her correctly, or if his mind had simply flashed back—as it was so prone to doing over the previous few days—to the image he had conjured in his own imagination, piecemealed from news clippings and phone reports from Spits Anderson, of Hunter McCready’s convulsing body lying underground in a pool of blood just beside the fresh tracks of a coal shuttle car.

“Lucie Hunter?” he said, feeling it out.

“I mean, she was born on the same day that—It just seems like a way to honor him, you know?”

“Lucy Hunter,” he said again, a bit louder, with more resolve.

“But if you think it’s too weird, we could have a think on it a bit longer.”

“No,” said Cody, sitting back on the edge of the bed. “Lucy Hunter.”

“Lucy Hunter Culver.”

“It’s perfect,” he said, still trying to convince himself. Like everyone else, Cody had begun to accept that Hunter McCready was going to die. The shuttle car had crushed his left leg and spilled nearly six pints of his blood. The doctors had called the family in to Louisville, where he had been airlifted, to say goodbye; and with Cody being unable to make the drive because of Maisie and the new baby, the only person at Hunter’s bedside was Spits Anderson. As Cody waited for the news of his death, he even began drafting out what he wanted to say at the funeral. But that call never came. Instead, six days after the accident came a text from Spits Anderson: *He’s breathing on his own gaddamit!!!!*
He’s breathing on his own!

With Lucie dreaming in the back of his truck—her infant car seat wedged into one of the little sideways-facing seats of the extended cab—Cody drove straight past Grigsby Food Mart where he had intended to stop and continued onto Pike Lane towards the south end of town. No way was he going to wake her up just so he could buy a bag of pretzels and a bottle of the Ale 81 ginger ale he had been craving. Besides, if he let himself get quiet enough to hear the swirl of his own thoughts, he would have known that he never intended to go to the store in the first place. He would have known he was driving the same path he had taken at least four nights in the past two weeks: south on Pike Lane for two miles, right onto Maple street just past the railroad overpass, and then a slight left

into the Weeping Willow subdivision, where the brick-front duplexes near the entrance gave way to a single line of mobile homes in the back, grandfathered into the location before new zoning laws would forbid them.

Hunter McCready's home was easy to spot. The first trailer past the duplexes, it was the oldest of the bunch, with faded yellow vinyl siding and a rusted metal roof. The placid spring wind fluttered across the garbage bags that were stretched over a broken window beside the door, secured by duct tape to the cracked shutters. Before the accident, Hunter had been fixing up the mobile home, starting with hanging new light fixtures on the interior and stripping off the early 1980s wallpaper that was original to the trailer. Two months later, the job was still half-done, with stingy snippets of flower-pattern wallpaper clinging to the bare walls in the living room and the kitchen, as if the trailer was frozen in time, a sunken ship.

Cody parked in a small patch of dirt where gravel once formed a single-car driveway and gently pulled Lucie's car seat from its base in the back of the truck. As he trudged through the small front lawn—his feet kicking across the sprawling dandelions and onion grass that were choking out the few remaining healthy patches of fescue—he dangled Lucie's seat away from his body as to not bump it with his knees and wake her. He rapped his knuckles on the door, and then gripped the handle and pushed himself inside without waiting for a response.

“Hey, it's me,” he called as he entered. He expected to see Hunter in his normal spot on the couch, his body awash in the sickly blue glow of the television in the otherwise dark living room, with his convalescing leg stretched onto the cushion beside him; but he was nowhere to be found. Coming from somewhere near the back of the

trailer, Cody heard stringed instruments carrying the melody of an airy classical piece, something that Maisie could probably name but he could not. As he took a careful step into the dark room and peered down the narrow hallway to the right of the living room, he noticed a ribbon of light coming from the cracked bedroom door at the far end of the trailer. He still felt weird about letting himself in, but the week before, Hunter had insisted that he do so, telling Cody that there was no sense in him having to hobble across the floor on his crutches to let him in.

“Hunter?” he called again. When there was no response, he eased Lucie’s carrier onto the ground in the middle of the living room, checked to make sure her blanket was tucked around her torso and away from her face, and made his way down the hallway to the bedroom. The music swelled to a crescendo as Cody approached, and when he nudged open the door, it spilled out into the hall. The notes overtook him, sending chills down his spine as they harmonized with what he saw before him: Hunter, facing the opposite way in front of a dresser mirror, wearing a form-fitting, navy and white sundress. His shoulder-length black hair was teased into sweeping curls, and the spaghetti straps of the dress accented his milky white skin and the feminine slope of his narrow shoulders and upper back. The soft amber glow of a desk reading lamp washed over the side of his body, casting the shadow of a slender woman against the wall, a projection of his soul. When it was clear that Hunter didn’t realize anyone else was in the room with him, Cody thought he might slip back down the hall, grab his sleeping daughter, and leave before he caused any confusion or embarrassment. But he couldn’t step away, couldn’t stop watching. He edged forward into the room, a cautious hand extended out in front of him. When he was within a finger-length of touching Hunter’s shoulder, Hunter

jumped away and turned around, as if an electric shock had bolted between them when Cody got too close. Hunter let out a scream, and then crossed his arms in front of him, as if to contain his exposure.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded, limping on his bad leg as he continued backing away, wedging himself in the corner of the room.

“I was just—we were driving by and—”

“We?” interrupted Hunter. He looked around Cody and down the hallway, trying to assess how much damage was done. He pulled at the straps of the dress, trying to cover as much of himself as he could. Cody was much more interested in looking at his face, though, noticing the neatly applied mascara and smooth strokes of metallic eye shadow.

“Just me and the baby,” said Cody, his hands in front of him, almost as if to show him he wasn’t wielding a weapon. “Look, I didn’t mean to barge in on you,” he said, making a point of only looking at Hunter in the eyes. “But for what it’s worth, you’re not going to get any sort of judgment from me. Shoot, you won’t even get any questions from me if you aren’t looking to answer them.” Hunter looked down at his feet, and let his hands slowly drop to his sides.

“I don’t mind if you have questions,” he said softly, just above a whisper. “But I probably don’t have any answers. The truth is, I confuse myself most of the time.” He looked up to catch eyes with Cody.

“Doesn’t everybody?” asked Cody, giving a little smile. He had an impulse to move towards Hunter, to embrace him, but he didn’t know if it would make things better or worse at this point. “Listen, I need to go check on Lucie in the other room. I can go

ahead and leave if you want. Or I can stay. We can talk.” He tried to infuse his voice with hope and acceptance.

“You don’t have to go,” said Hunter, stepping away from the corner. “But could we let Lucie sleep in another room? I don’t want her waking up and seeing me like this.” Cody couldn’t help but burst into a fit of laughter.

“Okay, Hunter,” he said, trying to reel himself back in. “You think she’s going to tell people? What’s she going to do, spell it out in her diaper?” Hunter shrugged his shoulders, and then smiled, in spite of himself. Cody watched as his posture relaxed, as he opened his stance, disarmed. Hunter’s smile grew broader, more natural, and he allowed himself to laugh. At least for this one moment, he moved with the freedom and confidence to be who he was—even if he didn’t know exactly what that meant—with someone else in the room.

Cody couldn’t be sure who took the first step, but the warm space between them began to shrink. Their laughter fizzled into a quiet longing, and suddenly Cody saw his own trembling fingers edge down Hunter’s arms, along his sides, and finally coming to a rest along his waist. He gripped a fistful of the dress where it gathered along Hunter’s hips and pulled him forward, a jolt of pleasure nearly buckling his knees. Hunter leaned his forehead onto Cody’s and then slowly drew his lips down closer, closer still, hovering an inch away, daring Cody to be the one to close the gap. Cody closed his eyes and parted his lips before the sound of a smashing window in the living room jolted both men apart. As they heard the squeal of tires and the roar of an engine outside, Hunter stumbled back on his bad leg and fell at the foot of his bed.

“Lucie!” Cody shouted. As if on cue, shrieks from the baby echoed down the hallway and filled up the bedroom. Cody ran out, nearly tripping over Hunter’s outstretched legs. When he made it to the living room, his boots crunched through shards of glass inches away from Lucie’s carrier.

“Come here, baby,” he said, picking her up from the seat. A few splinters of glass fell from her blanket, but she didn’t have any cuts on her exposed face or hands. Lucie howled from her gut, screamed with her whole being, wailed cries of terror that Cody had never heard from his baby before. He put her head against his shoulder and bounced gently to soothe her. He turned to see Hunter, who had made his way to the living room with the help of his crutches, stooping down to pick up a softball-sized rock, as mean and jagged as any stone Cody had ever seen, which landed about a foot behind Lucie’s car seat. It had a note strapped to it with a rubber band.

“They could’ve killed her,” Cody said, looking at the shattered window. He kissed Lucie’s head and stroked her back.

“It’s the second time in two weeks,” said Hunter, unstrapping the note from the rock. He nodded towards the adjacent window, which was covered in trash bags.

“Dear God,” Cody said. “What is wrong with people?”

“Oh, there ain’t nothing wrong with other people,” said Hunter, unfolding the note. “I’m the one with the problem. Don’t believe me? Just read this.” He handed Cody the note, edged onto the couch, and rubbed his leg. Cody held the note close to the light of a lamp and read: *get out of town u dick tucking faggot!!!* He read the words to himself again, not believing at first they could have said what he thought they said; but the second time through, the message was as clear and nasty as before.

“Who is it?” asked Cody. “It’s gotta be Bradstreet, right?” He remembered seeing the anger pulsing behind Bradstreet’s eyes at the church meeting, the hatred curled into his snarling lips when he said Hunter’s name.

“You don’t worry yourself about who it is.”

“Look, you’ve got to call the cops, Hunter,” said Cody. Lucie’s cries had died down, but her body was still jolting with intermittent sobs. Hunter laughed and shook his head.

“And you think that’ll put an end to it, right?” he asked. His face sobered, and he rested his head back on the cushion behind him. “Listen, maybe you should stop coming over here,” he said. He wouldn’t look Cody in the eye. “There’s no doubt they saw your truck out there. And you better believe that if they know you’re in here, you aren’t welcome out there.” Cody wanted to protest, but he knew Hunter was right. As he snuggled his sniffling baby girl to his chest, he knew that the risk he was taking was no longer just his own. And then there was Maisie, of course. He thought about her back at home, lying alone, curled up on the corner of the bed, making herself as small as possible, her cheeks gleaming with tears that he wasn’t there to wipe away.

CHAPTER 12

Blakely's Pharmacy and Fine Gifts was as much a museum of Blue Banks history as it was a drug store. Built in 1921 as one of the anchor stores of the "new downtown," the pharmacy had witnessed the city spread out around it like ripples from a rock plunked in water. Now in its fourth generation of family ownership, Blakely's had been hemorrhaging money for at least a decade, clinging stubbornly to its rightful place on the roundabout, gripping the ledge of the cliff of "modern progress" as the likes of Wal-Mart, Walgreens, and Rite Aid stepped on its fingers. The oldest living generation of folks in Blue Banks had seen countless homegrown businesses move into the connected brick-front buildings on either side of Blakely's, but they all failed in due time as the gravity of the big box stores pulled people towards the edges of the city and away from the town square, away from the little pharmacy that refused to die, a geriatric dinosaur that had somehow escaped the mass extinction of its peers.

Cody cradled baby Lucie against his chest as he swung open the door to the pharmacy, the welcome chimes clanking against the glass to announce his entry. Maisie had asked him to bring the baby by to visit at the end of her shift so she could show her off. He passed by the old soda counter at the front, which had been sloppily covered with a curtain affixed to the ceiling and converted to a makeshift storage area—holding boxes upon boxes, Cody imagined, of decorative vases, porcelain figurines, mahogany cigar boxes, and other useless trinkets that spoke of an illusory time-gone-by when the miners and tobacco farmers of western Kentucky imagined they would always have enough

money to spend on such inane luxuries. He remembered sitting at the soda counter as a child once a month on a Saturday afternoon while his father waited for his prescriptions to be filled. He would climb atop a shiny silver stool with a vibrant red seat and watch carbonation bubbles sputter into syrup as the soda jerk performed a dying ritual, replaced now by the plastic two-liter bottles of Coca Cola stacked in a display case at the far end of the counter.

“Well, would you look at that!” called the voice of a young woman from behind the drug counter. Cody figured she must have been talking to him since the store was deserted of customers. It was almost one o’clock, which was closing time on the weekend half-day. He looked up to see her coming through a swinging gate and down toward him at the front of the store. She looked to be in her mid-twenties with flame-red hair and a mesh of freckles stretched over her ghost-white skin. As she reached Cody, her name tag confirmed what he had already guessed: this was Anna Beth Perkins, the pharmacy technician who had become as close to a best friend to Maisie as was possible in this town. “Your baby girl is here, Maisie!” she called towards the back of the store. She wiped her hands on her smock and reached out for Lucie.

“Uh, you must be Anna Beth?” said Cody, instinctively pulling the baby back out of her reach. Anna Beth drew her arms to her chest, looking embarrassed.

“Oh, yes, that’s me. I’m so sorry. Maisie’s talked about this little one so much I feel like I already know her. It was an instinct.” She talked breathlessly, as if she had to meet a quota of words each minute. “You must’ve thought I was a psycho, reaching out for your baby like that. Did you think I was a psycho? I’m not a psycho, I promise, though I do come off a little strong sometimes on account of the coffee we make here—it

has extra caffeine. Double is what the bag says, but I bet it's more like triple. Wouldn't you say it's triple, Maisie?" she called behind her. Maisie appeared with a broom in her hand at the edge of a vitamin display on the other side of the store, where she had been sweeping.

"Is what triple?" she asked, propping the broom against the display and making her way to Cody and Anna Beth.

"Nevermind," said Anna Beth, turning back toward Cody, "Anyway, Maisie's told me so much about both you and the baby I plum forgot we've never met. I'm Anna Beth." She stuck her hand into Cody's and gave it a vigorous shake. "Okay, we got that out of the way. Now, can I hold her? Pretty, pretty please?" Cody shot a nervous look over her head to Maisie, who just smiled. He handed over the baby, easing her head gently into Anna Beth's palm. While Anna Beth was sputtering baby talk at Lucie, Cody went to kiss Maisie, but she turned at the last minute into an awkward side hug, and Cody's lips landed somewhere next to her temple.

"Hey!" she said, forcing a false excitement into her voice. "I'm glad you came."

"Everything okay?" Cody asked, feeling as if he was being brushed away.

"What? Yeah, of course, everything's great," said Maisie, looking down at the baby, but never at Cody. She was still being swallowed by her post-partum depression, and she was convinced that if she came back to work—only for a half-day shift on Saturday mornings, when Cody could be at home to watch the baby—she could start to pull herself out of the pit. Cody didn't like the idea, since he felt like they never got to spend any time together as it was, with him working sixty-plus hours a week underground. But the truth was, Cody knew they were drifting apart, and he doubted that

a few more hours on a weekend morning would make much of a difference. His mother had warned him that having a baby would change things, that the two of them would have to be intentional about carving out room in their lives for each other in a way that they never had to do before; but he never could have guessed that his marriage would feel so different in so little time. He and Maisie always seemed to be crisscrossing one another, occupying the same space on two different planes of existence, always within arms reach but never being able to make contact. It all seemed too drastic, too sudden for him to chalk it up to the normal evolution of a healthy relationship; and while he knew the baby had indeed changed their lives, there was something else altogether different poisoning the well of their marriage. Cody alone knew the source of the toxin, but he couldn't contain the leak.

“So Maisie tells me you might be able to help me out with a problem I've got,” said Anna Beth to Cody. She jiggled a pacifier in Lucie's mouth and made googly eyes at her while she talked.

“Yeah, and what's that?” Cody asked. He looked at Maisie for a clue, but she still wasn't making eye contact.

“Well, the Blues Fest is coming up at the end of this week, and I need me a man to dance with,” she said. “I know, I know, it's the 21st century and a woman don't need a man and all that, but just for one night, I need a man. I went last year by myself, and you ain't never seen a sadder sight than a 26-year-old ginger sitting in a camping chair eating a double-scoop of mint ice cream out of a paper bowl while everybody else is dancing around her.”

“I'm not seeing how I come into this picture,” said Cody.

“Well, seeing as you spend all day underground with a whole mess of men, I figured at least one of them must be desperate enough to take me dancing.”

“I was thinking about Hunter,” said Maisie.

“Ooooooh, yes, that’ll do just fine,” said Anna Beth. Cody looked at his wife and then back at Anna Beth.

“Hunter McCready?” Cody asked. “I don’t think that’s such a good—I mean, he’s not exactly the type of guy that you’d want to go dancing with.”

“The heck he isn’t!” said Anna Beth. “He’s a bad boy. I like bad boys.”

“Listen, he’s not what you think,” said Cody.

“You don’t know what she thinks,” said Maisie, a little more playful now. She always liked to see people squirm, and her own husband was no exception. Cody shook his head, but he didn’t know what else to say. Maisie waited for a response, but the words never came. “Then it’s settled. Cody will ask Hunter, and we’ll plan a double-date.”

“Oh, thanks Cody!” said Anna Beth. She handed the baby to Maisie and kissed Cody on the cheek. Then she licked her finger and smudged away the coral lipstick from the side of his face. “Sorry. I’m not good at the whole personal space thing.”

“Look, don’t get your hopes up,” said Cody. “I know Hunter pretty well, and he’s not going to say yes.”

After Sunday church the following day, Maisie said she wanted to drive home. Cody wedged Lucie’s carrier into the car seat base in the back of the truck and then hopped in the passenger seat. He leaned his head back against the cushion as Maisie

drove, already feeling the weight of a Sunday afternoon nap coming on; but then he felt the truck turn left when it should've turned right.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Anna Beth asked you to do her a favor, and you haven't done it," she said. "So I'm going to deliver you to Hunter's door, and you're going to ask him.

"C'mon, Maisie. I'll call him later."

"Why would you do that?" she said, smiling. "He's going to say yes in just a few minutes, and then you won't have to worry about it anymore." They were already driving under the train bridge—less than a mile away from Hunter's trailer—so there was no use in talking her out of it now.

"I just don't want Anna Beth to get hurt," Cody said. "You don't know Hunter like I do."

"Geez, Cody. She's not proposing marriage to the guy. She's just wants to go to a stupid music festival, eat some greasy carnival food, and dance a little. And she wants to do it without feeling so alone." An unexpected sob rose in her voice and caught Cody off guard. "Is that so hard for you to understand?" Cody put his hand on her knee as she turned into the Weeping Willow subdivision.

"I get it," he said. "I'm sorry, Mais. I understand."

"I'm not sure that you do," said Maisie. She grabbed a tissue from the armrest console and dabbed at the corner of her eye, catching the tear that threatened to fall.

"And besides, I don't think it's Anna Beth that you're worried about at all."

"What are you talking about?"

“It sounds to me like you’re worried about yourself. You don’t want to lose any of your time with Hunter to some girl, right? Anna Beth is just competition.” Cody felt a trail of sweat drip from his armpit down the length of his side. He loosened the tie of his Sunday shirt and unbuttoned his collar. Maisie parked the car in Hunter’s driveway and killed the engine.

“Competition for what? Exactly what is that supposed to mean, Maisie?” Cody cranked down the manual window to get some air. He pulled a cigarette from his shirt pocket, but then slid it back away when he heard Lucie cooing in the back seat. Maisie picked at a hangnail on her thumb.

“Look, I know you come over here a lot,” she said, nodding to Hunter’s trailer. “Luke called me. Said he’s been seeing your truck over here at night.”

“Luke? Why are you even talking to Luke?”

“That’s not the issue here, is it?” she asked. “I mean, I get it. Things haven’t been easy at home with Lucie and everything. And I know I’ve been a mess. You need space. You need time with a friend. I understand all that. I just don’t know why you feel like you have to lie to me about it.”

“Lie about what? When have I lied?”

“Please, Cody. Don’t do that,” she said. “Lies of omission. You tell me you’re going for a drive, you’re going to clear your head, you’re going to the store. Not once have you told me you’re going to see Hunter.” Cody realized he was holding his breath and exhaled slowly through slightly parted lips, as if he were a sagging balloon pierced with a pin.

“Look, can we just go home?” he asked. “Can we just talk about this later?” Maisie dabbed at her eyes once more, gathered herself, and nodded. But before she cranked the engine, the front door of the trailer swung open. When Hunter McCready peered out from the darkness of his home and gave a cautious wave, Cody knew that he would have to go inside and explain himself.

“Just couldn’t take my advice, could you?” said Hunter, limping over to the couch and plunking back down. “Look Cody, I’m serious. Coming over here—especially in broad daylight with your whole family in tow—is not a smart move. Lots of people in this town wish I had died in the accident. But since I didn’t, they’ve got to find another way to run me out. I don’t want you and yours to get caught up in something like that.”

“Don’t worry about us. I’ll be out of here in a minute. Maisie just wanted me to stop by and ask you a favor,” said Cody, standing by the door with his hands in his pockets. He didn’t want to get close to Hunter. He didn’t know what he was liable to do after what happened the other night in his bedroom. He sniffed the air, catching a whiff of a pungent, skunky-sweet odor he recognized but couldn’t place. “What’s that smell?”

“She can come in and ask me the favor herself, you know,” said Hunter, picking up a lit joint from an astray on the coffee table. “You ain’t got to leave them out sweating in the car like that. They’re welcome to come in and chat with us.” He took a succession of short hits, closed his eyes, and held the smoke in his lungs. When he finally released, his body folded back on the couch, relaxed. “Unless you got something to hide.”

“What? No,” Cody said, reaching for his cigarettes. He patted his front pocket and then his back, but no luck. “They’re fine out there. I won’t be here long anyway.”

“Lose your smokes?” asked Hunter. “Have some of this instead. It’ll take that shake out of your fingers.” He held the joint out to Cody, who shook his head and slid his trembling hands back in his pockets.

“It’s Sunday afternoon, Hunter,” Cody said. “Can’t you wait until the sun goes down at least?” Hunter took one final hit, and then smashed the roach into the ashtray.

“Hey man, I’m just gearing up for the main event.” He reached over the armrest of the couch to an end table and pulled up a syringe full of a milky yellow liquid.

“Woah!” Cody said, throwing his hands in front of him. “That escalated a bit quickly, don’t you think?” Hunter held the syringe up into the soft amber light of a standing lamp, flicking it several times to clear the air from the viscous liquid. “C’mon, Hunter,” said Cody, “Why don’t we just talk for a minute? You want to do that stuff when I’m not here, have at it, but why don’t we talk about it first.” He moved slowly toward the couch, as if talking Hunter down from a ledge.

“Well look at you, going all camp counselor on me,” said Hunter as he squeezed the air from the syringe, sending a honey-thick bubble of liquid dripping down the needle. He held the syringe out to Cody, the needle facing back toward himself. “I need you to do me a favor,” he said. “Go on. Take it.”

“I’m not touching that stuff,” said Cody. “Look, I know things have been rough lately, but you don’t have to—”

“Jesus, Cody,” said Hunter, cutting him off. “It’s testosterone.” He chuckled and shook his head.

“Oh,” said Cody, embarrassed. “Right. Of course it is.”

“You think I’m some sort of junkie, man? Don’t you know me better than that?”

“No. I mean, yeah,” said Cody. “It’s just, there was the weed, and then I saw the needle and everything. Sorry.” Hunter extended the syringe back toward Cody, and he took it, gripping it loosely between his thumb and forefinger. “What do you want me to do with it?”

“What do you think?” said Hunter. He stood and unbuckled his belt. Cody instinctively looked down at Hunter’s hands as he unfastened his jeans, then looked up and caught eyes with him.

“Oh, well, I don’t really know how to do that,” he said. As Hunter slid his jeans over his hips and let them fall around his ankles, Cody studied the needle, making a conscious decision not to let his gaze wander. Hunter stepped out of his jeans toward Cody. “I mean, can’t you do it yourself?”

“Yeah, I can,” he said. “But when I do it, I have to inject in my leg, and most of the time it hurts like crazy.” Cody continued to study the syringe, but looked up just in time to see Hunter roll his eyes. “Look, not that you care about any of this, but I don’t develop muscle mass like normal men, and if I stop working out even for a week or two, my muscles start to atrophy. Obviously, my legs have been weak since the accident. If I poke that needle around in a place without much muscle, sometimes I hit a nerve. The weed helps me relax and takes the sting out a bit, but I mean, if you’re here, you might as well help me out.” Hunter turned to face the wall, and then edged the elastic band of his black boxer briefs down just enough to expose where the needle should go.

“I’ve never—I mean, I don’t really know how to do this,” said Cody. His eyes traced the line of blonde hairs on Hunter’s lower back, fine and translucent like the ones he loved to touch on Maisie.

“Neither did I,” said Hunter as he opened an alcohol pad and swabbed a small area on his upper-right cheek. “I used to wear Androderm patches so I could avoid the shots, but my doctor moved me to injections after the accident so my muscles wouldn’t waste as much.” Cody remembered the patch he saw on Hunter’s arm the night they went to the river bottoms, the one he thought was for nicotine. “It’s not hard. I’ll walk you through it.” Cody angled the needle down to the place where he saw Hunter clean with the alcohol swab. He put his other hand on the Hunter’s underwear just below the needle. His middle finger twitched, rolling across Hunter’s bare skin.

“Is this okay?” asked Cody.

“Just stick the needle in quick. One clean motion. But don’t push the medicine in yet.” Cody held his breath, and punctured the needle all the way into the muscle. He felt a bead of sweat slip down his temple. “Now, draw back the plunger, just a little bit, to check for blood,” said Hunter.

“No blood,” said Cody.

“Okay. Push the plunger in slowly,” said Hunter. Cody did so, and felt an odd, tingling satisfaction as the thick liquid drained from the syringe and entered Hunter’s body, as if he were injecting himself. When the medicine was fully in, Cody withdrew the needle and watched as a tiny dome of blood bubbled to the surface. Hunter reached back and stuck a Band Aid over the blood, and then turned to Cody. He took the syringe from Cody and placed it on the table behind him. With his eyes turned toward the ground, his hair hanging over his face, he stepped forward, pushing his hips into Cody’s as he slipped his hands around his waist. Cody felt the growing bulge behind Hunter’s underwear pushing against the fly of his own dress pants.

“This can’t happen, Hunter,” he said. But he didn’t move away, not yet. He trusted his pelvis forward, a jolt of pleasure threatening to buckle his knees. “We can’t do this, and you know it.”

“Do I?” asked Hunter. He tilted Cody’s chin up and looked him in the eye. “And why not? Why can’t we?” He inched his lips closer to Cody’s.

“You know exactly why not,” said Cody, pushing himself away. Hunter slunk back and hung his head, looking defeated, looking like someone who had been rejected every day of his life and had the posture to prove it. Cody wanted to hold him, to kiss him, to understand him—but how could he? “Hunter,” he said, stepping back toward him once again, “it’s not that you’re—I mean, I wish that we could, but—I’m married.”

“Right,” said Hunter, “I get it.” He shook his head.

“I love Maisie,” said Cody, more to himself than to Hunter. He inched in closer, placing a hand on Hunter’s chest. “I love Maisie,” he said again. “I love Maisie.” As if on cue, the front door of the trailer swung open. The woman herself—silhouetted in the darkened doorway against the backdrop of the midday sun—stood watching as Hunter scrambled around her husband, frantically trying to put on his pants.

CHAPTER 13

As soon as Cody closed the screen door at the farmhouse on old Herrodsburg road, the rain came down in sheets, filling the clogged gutters over the porch at once, sending a waterfall cascading down into the flowerbed, pooling around the overnight blooms of orange-gold tiger lilies. Maisie hadn't spoken a word during the ride home from Hunter's trailer, leaving Cody in his own tortured silence, the crackling of the AM radio and the hum of the road the only sounds to offset the screaming panic echoing through his brain. He kept replaying the moment in his mind over and again: Maisie in the doorway, her face contorted with confusion as he stood, frozen, watching Hunter fasten his pants back around his waist.

"We need to beat the storm," she had said, calm and collected, as if the coming rain were her only care in the world. Cody looked past his wife into the darkening horizon, mean gray clouds gathering in the distance like smokestacks pluming into the sky from a coal plant. He began to stammer out some sort of explanation, but she cut him off, repeating once more: "We need to beat the storm."

Now back home, as he listened to Maisie's high heels click against the hardwood on her way to put Lucie down for her nap, Cody cranked open the bay window under the protection of the porch, letting the sharp, sweet smell of spring rain breeze into the house. The scent whisked him away to the shores of Lake Michigan, floated him back to the blustering night two years ago when he and Maisie had first slept together. After the day he first saw her on the steps of Cobb Lecture Hall, he became infatuated with this

confident girl, with her soft British accent, drawn by her infectious smile and effervescent spirit. When she had her senior art show less than two weeks later, he hung around each of the three nights of the exhibit, his real motive obvious not only to Maisie, but to anyone else who noticed him lingering by the refreshment table, never quite knowing what to do with his hands. Knowing almost nothing about art history or Maisie's own personal aesthetic or influences, he stayed just the same, watching as she dazzled the crowds not only with her chiaroscuro paintings (that's the word he heard them say, *chiaroscuro*, which he gathered had something to do with light) but also her wit and charm. After the show closed late on the third night, she grabbed him by the collar and pulled him into a vestibule outside of the building—either influenced by the lingering elation of finishing a successful show or by his own puppy-like persistence of trying to be noticed—and kissed him hard, pressing his body into the brick wall. Then she pulled him along the sidewalk and across campus to Ellis Parking Garage and her lime green Geo Metro.

“Where are you taking me?” he asked, as if he cared.

“To celebrate,” she said. She opened the passenger side door for him, “That's all you need to know.” He hesitated, just for a second.

“I mean, do I need to bring anything?”

“Look, Culver. You're either in or you're out. Which is it?”

“In,” he said. “Definitely in.”

They pulled out of campus at nearly eleven o'clock at night, so they were able to zip down highway 41 out of Chicago with almost no traffic, and then head up north of the city along the coast of Lake Michigan. Maisie flipped through her extensive collection of

old 70's and 80's rock, cranking down the window and blasting Journey songs out into the night sky. Every time Cody tried to ask her where they were going, she'd just sing louder with the music, closing her eyes a little longer each time. At one point Cody had to grab the wheel to keep them from veering into oncoming traffic. After nearly an hour in the car, Maisie lowered the music and killed the headlights, easing the car onto a private access road near the beach, crunching through gravel right past the "no trespassing" sign.

"So this is how you celebrate?" asked Cody. "By getting us arrested?" Maisie pulled the car into the driveway of a vacant, weathered beach house with a "for sale" sign staked into the front yard. She put her finger on Cody's lips to "shush" him and smiled. Once out of the car, Maisie grabbed a two-person pop-up tent from the trunk, and then Cody followed her lead, slinking down the side of the house, across a private wooden walking bridge, and onto the sandy shore of Lake Michigan. The storm was gathering even then, shimmering webs of blue lightning flashing over the lake far into the distance, but no matter: they danced along the water's edge, kicked sludgy sand into the air, pushed back against the swirling winds of the coming storm with outstretched arms. When the rain finally came, millions of droplets drumming across the water behind the thrust of the wind like a symphony of skipped rocks, they slid into the tent and listened to the thunder crackle around them. The wind whipped across the thin plastic of the tent as Cody put his hand behind Maisie's head, easing her back onto a pillow of their jackets. He tasted the salty-sweet skin of her neck, kissed along her collarbone and further down between her breasts, lifting her shirt to slide his open palm down her ribs and across her stomach. He finally rested his fingers on a constellation of freckles below her panty line on her right hip.

“I think I love you,” he said. Maisie laughed out loud, covering her mouth with her hand to contain herself. Cody thought he probably should have been embarrassed, but he wasn’t.

“No you don’t,” said Maisie as she pulled his shirt over his head and threw it in the corner of the tent. “But you desperately want to have sex with me, and sometimes that feels like the same thing.”

She was right, of course. In some ways, Maisie knew Cody better than he knew himself even then. Every day since, her insight into him grew more keen and aware, even as Cody himself—with all of his advanced training in psychology—felt like the task of deciphering his own confused thoughts was like trying to crack German Enigma code. As he stood looking out the window at the farm house, listening as small hailstones blew in sideways and plinked along the gutter downspouts, he wondered if he should just pull Maisie into the living room, sit her down and tell her everything: confess his confused longings for Hunter, admit all of his questions about his own sexuality, beg her forgiveness for letting someone else—male, female, or otherwise—draw him away from her when she needed him the most. It would be the right thing to do, he was sure of it; but he didn’t know what to say, or even what questions to ask. His own actions and cravings made no sense to him, so how could he begin to know how to talk about them with someone else, even someone as understanding as Maisie?

While he had a few fleeting moments of attraction to other men in the past, he had never felt drawn out of himself the way he was when he was around Hunter, which made him question everything. Hunter had said that his XXY condition meant that he could never really be straight or gay; but now Cody wondered what that meant for himself—a

garden-variety straight dude who felt pulled into someone who identified as intersex. Was he attracted to Hunter's sharp, masculine jaw, or to the feminine curve of his lower back? Did he yearn for his strong hands and broad fingers, or did he like the way Hunter tucked flowing strands of hair behind his ears with a careful touch? If Hunter had the "normal" 23rd pair of XY chromosomes like most men, would he still make Cody's palms sweat when the two of them were alone, the same way they did when he was first dating Maisie?

A brilliant orange flash lit up the sky as a bolt of lightning eviscerated a tree across the street. Cody jumped back away from the window, nearly tripping over Lucie's play gym stretched out in the middle of the floor. As he mumbled curses under his breath and turned to pick it up, he saw Maisie standing in the doorway wearing a white lace babydoll slip and string bikini panties—the same she wore on their wedding night.

"Come with me," she said, stepping forward and extending a hand to him, an offering, a white flag of peace.

"We should talk, Mais," said Cody. He took her hand and pulled her into him. He rubbed a streak of fading mascara from where it had smudged across her cheek.

"We can talk later. Come on." She started backing toward the bedroom, pulling him with her.

"I need to explain what you were seeing at Hunter's place," said Cody. Maisie cut him off, pressing her lips into his. As soon as she pulled back, Cody continued. "He has this condition. I don't know if I should talk about it, but I feel like I have to."

“Shut up, Cody,” she said. She kissed him again, thrusting her tongue into his mouth. They bumped the walls down the hallway and into the bedroom. Masie pushed him back onto the bed and climbed on top of him.

“Look, we really need to talk.”

“Enough, Cody!” said Maisie, sitting up, still straddling his chest. “Yes, we need to talk. And we will. But right now, I need you to want me.” She took his hands and cupped them around her breasts. She grinded her pelvis into his, but he didn’t move. “Do you hear me? I need you to fucking want me!” She hid her face in her hands and shook her head.

“Of course I want you,” said Cody, easing her hands down.

“Then prove it,” she said. She held her breath, catching a sob just before it snuck out, and waited for Cody to take action. He thrust her off of him, swung her around, and pinned her facedown on the mattress.

“I want you,” he whispered in her ear. He tugged at her panties, but they caught on her hips as he pulled, so he ripped the bikini string and flung them away. “I want you,” he said louder. “I want you!” He thrust himself into her from behind, the sound of the squeaking bed rising over the crashing thunder outside, over Lucie’s cries down the hallway, even over their own animal groans as they came together for the first time since Cody had met Hunter McCready.

According to the apocryphal history of Blue Banks passed down from generation to generation, the world renowned “Father of Blues,” W.C. Handy, put down temporary roots in the small western Kentucky river town late in the 19th Century while he

developed his signature style and lyrics that would help transform cyclical African spirituals and work songs from largely ignored fringe music to a force in mainstream popular culture. Handy was born in Alabama and spent relatively little time in western Kentucky; but as small towns in the South are apt to do, Blue Banks clung to their threadbare connection with the Blues star as a way to promote local pride, and mostly to give the town an excuse to throw the annual Blue Banks Blues Fest—the only civic activity of the year that brought in tourism dollars from out of state.

Cody was always perplexed by the fact that the Blues Fest—a celebration of historically Black music—was the cultural event of the year for a town whose populace, by his own estimation, waved as many confederate flags as it did Old Glories. As one of the northernmost states of the South, Kentucky had a complex, sometimes contradictory past when it came to African American rights, let alone appreciation of Black cultural expression. It was a state caught in the liminal space of the Civil War, and at the local level, Blue Banks itself was as torn as any Kentucky town. Still, like the small cities in the states of Kentucky's southernmost counterparts, systemic racism over the years had been buried into the foundation of Modern Blue Banks like the steel rebar in the sidewalks of Main Street. The White majority rarely acknowledged it, but it was always there under foot, always holding tight below the surface, underpinning the infrastructure of the town.

But the Blues Fest, now celebrating its 35th year, wasn't really about any of that, at least not for the locals who organized it. Rather, it was an excuse to shut down Main Street and River Road, to bring in rows of food trucks and carnival trailers. It was a way to cut work early, to eat funnel cakes for lunch, turkey legs for dinner, and fried Oreos for

dessert. It made it okay to slurp lemon shake-ups all day long and nurse cheap beer all night, before finally collapsing on the lush grass of Town Square Park to watch as the sky above the Ohio River was set ablaze with fireworks in June, while every other town had to wait for July.

“You really weren’t kidding,” said Maisie from the back of the truck. She was sitting knee-to-knee with Anna Beth in the little half-seats of the cab, insisting that Hunter sit in the front passenger seat next to Cody. “The whole town comes out to this thing. Literally, we’ve passed every single breathing person who lives in Blue Banks.” Cody finally found a parking spot after driving nearly five blocks into the open residential section of Main Street. It was nearly seven o’clock on the opening Friday night of the festival, so Maisie was probably right.

“Oh, Maisie, you’re gonna love this, I just know it!” said Anna Beth as Hunter helped her out of the back of the truck. “The food, the fireworks, the—ooh! Listen! You can already hear the music from way back here! Do you hear it? Oh, Gawd, this thing always makes me feel just like a kid again.” Maisie smiled at Cody as he took her hand and helped her down to the pavement. Anna Beth had been talking a mile a minute since they picked her up, so the rest of them had fallen into a pattern of just listening and nodding. Before they started the long walk down Main Street to the festival, Hunter braced himself on the truck and stretched his leg. His doctor had just cleared him from using the crutches, and he was still weak. “Goodness gracious, Hunter, are you sure you can make it all night? I just feel terrible that I dragged you into this,” said Anna Beth.

“Oh, I’m a little tight right now, but it feels good to get my leg back,” he said, putting his arm around Anna Beth. “If I get too tired, I’ll just lean into you.” He smiled at

Anna Beth and then winked at Cody—*just look how much fun I'm having*, he seemed to say. Anna Beth's cheeks lit up with a glowing blush, and for the first time all night, she didn't say a word. Maisie pulled Cody back, smiling as she let Hunter and Anna Beth have a bit of space in front of them.

“Just look at them!” she said, leaning into Cody. “I just knew they would hit it off. They look good together, right?”

“I guess so,” he said, slipping on his sunglasses to shield his eyes from the setting sun on the horizon. “I mean, it's a little early to say for sure, don't you think?” Even as Cody said this, he wasn't sure he believed it. He had thought Hunter would be put off by Anna Beth's incessant talking and pushy—if endearingly innocent—personality; but so far just the opposite was true. They had all gone to an early dinner at Leon's before heading to the festival, and Cody noticed the way Hunter would catch eyes with Anna Beth as she talked about her family (she had four siblings—all brothers, can you believe it?), the food (breakfast for dinner is the best because you always feel like you're breaking the rules and getting away with it), and everything else that happened to catch her fancy. She had stolen bits of food from Hunter's plate without missing a beat, like they were out for their first anniversary instead of their first date; and for his part, Hunter seemed comfortable around Anna Beth, smiling with ease, laughing with his whole body, touching her gently on the shoulder or patting her knee.

Cody desperately wanted to be happy for Hunter, but he couldn't yet untangle the knot of jealousy balled up in his gut. It was utterly illogical, he knew: what right did he have to be jealous of anybody? As he walked down the sidewalk arm-in-arm with Maisie, he was grateful that things had been good between them since Sunday afternoon. After

their make-up sex, Cody rolled off of Maisie, their blotchy bodies glistening with sweat under the swirling breeze of the ceiling fan. He stroked Maisie's back as she wept quietly beside him, tears of release and grace, tears that acknowledged Cody's failures but didn't put them on trial. He told her about Hunter's condition, told her that he was giving him a shot of testosterone just before she walked in. He didn't tell her about skinny dipping at the river bottoms, about the fuzzy night in the Chicago storage unit, about his confused dreams of unzipping Hunter from a flowing white wedding gown in the bedroom of his trailer. Maisie was the most intuitive person he knew, and he was sure she suspected there was more that he wasn't saying; but she didn't ask him to go on. Instead, she told him that she loved him and reminded him that he had a promise to keep to Anna Beth. Cody called Hunter that night and was grateful when Hunter agreed to the date. He hoped against reason that if Hunter became involved with someone else, it would be a splash of water to help extinguish the live coals burning beneath their feet.

Cody and Maisie caught up with Hunter and Anna Beth at the intersection of Main Street and River Road, where stacked bales of hay hemmed in the walking path, funneling the crowd into a bottleneck at the entrance to the festival before opening back up on the lawn of Town Square Park adjacent to the river.

"Is this Kentucky enough for you?" Cody asked Maisie as she absorbed the scene. People walked in every direction around them, clenching fistfuls of mini corndogs or fried pickles, holding pints of beer up into the air as they squeezed through the tiny rivulets of walking space in the forest of camping chairs and tents strewn across the park lawn.

“Follow us!” Cody called to Hunter and Anna Beth, yelling above the deafening music. He grabbed Maisie’s hand and pushed through the crowd, bumping past familiar faces from the mine and the church, finally making his way to the cleared space reserved for dancing in front of the stage. Just as they were able to spread out, the multicolored stage lights lit up, as the magic-hour twilight of the sky had finally darkened enough for the lights to be seen. As the front man of a Muddy Waters cover band crooned out an overstated version of “I Can’t Be Satisfied,” Anna Beth shot out to the front of the group with abandon, put her hands in the air, and swam through the music in ecstasy like a toddler dancing in the rain.

“Oh, no you don’t!” she said as Hunter ambled to the sidelines. She threw her arms around him and dragged him to the center, clearing out a space with her swaying hips and swinging arms. Hunter resisted at first—noting the watchful eyes of people around him, many of whom didn’t want him in Blue Banks, let alone their music festival—but Anna Beth’s sweet spirit seemed to free him to do things he wouldn’t otherwise do, so he followed her lead. He clunked awkwardly around the punchy rhythms and irregular plunking of the guitar, keeping his body stationary like the point of a compass as Anna Beth drew the circles around him. Maisie waved at Cody and then ran in to join Hunter and Anna Beth, twirling between them, rolling her back around Anna Beth like they were interlocking gears: she was a third wheel indeed, but one as fitting as that on a tricycle. Cody couldn’t join in—not from embarrassment, but from an overwhelming sense of regret, a sinking feeling that he had buried his joy for self-keeping over the last few months, and now he hadn’t the damndest idea where to dig it up. He flicked his eyes from Maisie, to Hunter, to Anna Beth and then back again,

watching as glistening sweat shimmered at their temples, their shirts clinging to their chests in the sticky June air. Lost in the maze of the moment, they took turns closing their eyes, giving themselves to the music, to each other. They seemed oblivious that the song was sputtering to an end, even as the crowd erupted in applause, even as the front man shouted an obligatory “Thank you, Blue Banks!” to the audience, even as Luke Culver stumbled into the hallowed space between them, a fifth of Jack Daniels clenched in his angry fist.

Ever since Luke had coldcocked him in the face at Spits Anderson’s Christmas party, Cody had made it a point to stay out of the path of his older brother, and for the most part, he had been successful. He had seen him coming or going from the mine on occasion, and once in a while—when Luke managed to stay sober long enough to sit through a sermon—he’d see him at church. The day after Lucie had been released from the hospital and was settling in at home, Cody noticed Luke’s Jeep parked a block away on the opposite side of the street. He couldn’t see his brother clearly, but he imagined him gripping the door handle, rapping his fingers along the bottom rim of the steering wheel, flicking through radio static as he tried to muster the courage to get out of the truck and knock on the door. But he never did. After nearly an hour, Cody was about to call the police when Luke revved the engine and peeled out, roaring past the house as if to announce that somehow it was Cody’s fault that he couldn’t meet his baby niece.

It wasn’t that he couldn’t forgive Luke for what he had done in the past; it was that he was terrified about what his brother may do in the future, really at any moment. He knew from the Blue Banks gossip channels that Luke had been growing more erratic

and volatile. He'd been drinking around the clock, and lately he'd made a habit of showing up late for work, or sometimes not at all. Cody's mom told him that Candace had finally filed for divorce and petitioned for a restraining order after Luke camped out in front of her house for two days, only moving off the porch to relieve himself on the huge sugar maple tree in the back yard, just spitting distance from where little Henry's toddler swing hung. Worst of all, Cody knew in his gut that Luke had been the driving force behind the venomous threats against Hunter. The whole town was beginning to feel it: Luke Culver was as tightly woven as the yarn wrapped around the rubber core of a baseball, and his leather exterior was about to split.

As the clapping died down and the band climbed off the stage for a scheduled intermission, Hunter twirled Anna Beth one last time, flinging her right into Luke's chest. Anna Beth giggled, and then embraced Luke, not knowing who he was, extending the same naïve graciousness she did with all strangers.

"Oh, geez!" she said, "You got more of me than you bargained for, didn't you fella?" Hunter reached for Anna Beth's arm and gently led her out of the way. Cody stepped between Hunter and Luke, drawing Maisie to his side in hopes that Luke wouldn't start anything in front of the ladies. Anna Beth sobered quickly as she looked at Hunter's face. "So, you guys know each other then?" she asked. Luke adjusted his Reds ball cap and wiped a stream of liquor from his chin where it had dribbled from his mouth and gathered in his beard.

"Honey, everybody in this town knows Mr. McCready here," said Luke, smiling with his mouth but not his eyes. He brushed past Cody and leaned in close to Hunter's ear and whispered, "Or is it Ms. McCready these days? You just never can tell, can you?"

Cody placed a hand on Luke's chest, a warning. Hunter took a deep breath and held it, but didn't move. When Luke saw Hunter wasn't going to take the bait, he changed his strategy. He took a step back and stumbled toward Anna Beth.

"And what's your name, baby doll?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm Anna Beth," she said, extending her hand towards Luke. When he didn't take it, she continued, "Look, I don't know what all's happening here, but don't you figure we could just go back to dancing and forget this mess? It's the Blues Fest, y'all!" Luke took a swig from the bottle and nodded. Maisie stepped beside Anna Beth and locked arms with her, ready to pull her away if things got ugly.

"Well then, Anna Beth. How much do you know about your boyfriend here?" he asked, flicking his hand toward Hunter.

"Oh, he ain't really my boyfriend. Not yet, anyway," she said, blushing.

"Is that right?" said Luke. He winked at Hunter, and then turned back to Anna Beth. "Well, my good buddy Marcus Bradstreet told me he learned something really fascinating about Hunter the other day. You might be interested."

"Oh, I'm sure I would," said Anna Beth. "There ain't nothing I've learned about him so far I don't like. But I don't need to hear what Marcus Bradstreet thinks. I'll just learn about Hunter first hand." Luke nodded and scratched at his beard. He let his fingers linger over the scar on the right side of his face.

"You got you a sweet one here, McCready," said Luke. He stroked a stray strand of hair away from Anna Beth's face, looking at Hunter the whole time. "Honestly though, she ain't much of your type, is she? Kind of like your ex-wife?" Hunter started to lunge forward, but Cody caught him by the arm.

“Walk away, Luke,” said Cody. “For your own good, turn around and walk away.” He felt Hunter’s bicep bulging under the pressure of his clenched fists. Luke’s feigned smile dropped from his face as he focused on Cody for the first time.

“Well look at you!” he said. “Turns out you still know how to speak to me after all.” He narrowed his eyes as he leaned close, the stench off his whiskey breath filling Cody’s nostrils. “You better watch yourself, baby brother. You’ve made your choice, and my people know it.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve got a message for your people,” said Cody, releasing Hunter’s arm and standing nose-to-nose with his brother. “Hunter hasn’t done anything to deserve this. So your people can go to hell.” Maisie reached out and touched her fingertips to Cody’s shoulder, a reminder that she was still there, a plea to not see this thing any further.

“I’ll be sure to pass along the message,” said Luke, taking a step back and speaking louder so everyone could hear. “And you take care of that baby, you hear? I’d hate to see her get hurt when the bricks start flying through your windows.”

As if it were playing from the soundtrack of Cody’s mind, a guitar chord blasted from the speakers on stage, sending the crowd into a frenzy as the front man grabbed the microphone and shouted something unintelligible into the black night. Cody reared back, ready to knock his drunken brother into the first row of camping chairs behind him, but he never got the chance: flashing into his periphery, Hunter’s fist came swinging by his head from behind, smashing into Luke’s mouth, splitting his lip and sending him reeling back onto the ground. Anna Beth shrieked, and Maisie tugged her by the arm out of the way and out of Cody’s view, lost in the sea of dancers pushing back toward the stage. The

music stormed out across them, and people flooded into the empty space that separated Cody and Hunter from Luke. As he pulled on Hunter's sleeve and led him back to the walking path away from the stage, Cody glanced back a final time to see his brother struggling to stand, only to be trampled back to the ground, shards of glass from his broken liquor bottle spread out around him in every direction like shrapnel from an exploded bomb.

CHAPTER 14

The week after Coaldust Culver's funeral, Cody was trying to catch up on math homework at the kitchen table of their little ranch house on the outskirts of town when Lori Ann returned home from the probate attorney's office and handed him a sealed manila envelop. Written in the big block letters of his father's unmistakable, shaky handwriting: *For my Cody, when I'm gone.*

"What's this?" he asked. He ran a finger along the long edge of the envelope, studying the writing on the front.

"Just what it looks like," said Lori Ann. "He wrote one for all of us years back and left them with the lawyer." She ruffled Cody's hair. "Go on and open it, son. Quick and clean like a Band Aid, that's the only way we're gonna make it through this." She gave him a final pat on the back and then left the room to leave him to it. He slipped the edge of a nearby butter knife under the seal and listened to the satisfying slice of the envelope, leaving a clean opening at the top. When the small note slipped out, he unfolded it with precision, took a breath, and read:

To my Cody Cub:

So I'm dead, huh? Well, that's unfortunate. I hope it wasn't an ugly death because you, especially you, don't deserve to go through something like that. You have a beautiful soul, Cody, with as much capacity for love as I've ever seen in a boy your age. I hope you're reading this many, many years from now, so far into the future that you

won't need my questionable fatherly advice. But just in case you're like me and still haven't quite figured things out, I'll leave you with just this one thing: in the end, you're not defined by what you say, but by what you do. So whatever it is you do in this world, make sure you do it on purpose. Be intentional. Live like you mean it. You do that, and well, even when you mess up—and you will mess up, Cody—at least you'll know you measured it out the best you could. That you held it in your hands and felt the weight of it. At least then you'll always know the problem was in your head, not in your heart. Sometimes that's all that matters.

Loving you from the Other Side,

Daddy

Even then at fourteen years old, Cody recognized the wisdom of his father's advice, but he always had trouble living up to it. His decisions rarely felt measured out. He always seemed to be a step behind his choices, scrambling to catch up. That was certainly the case for what happened the night of the Blues Fest. Just minutes after Hunter punched Luke and left him to be trampled, Cody grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him back through the maze of camping chairs to the small, standalone public restroom on the edge of Town Square Park.

“Are you out of your mind?” said Cody. “If anybody saw that out there, you could be in a world of trouble.” He pushed Hunter into the bathroom, followed him in, and locked the door behind him.

“I don't know. It just happened so fast,” said Hunter, studying his split fist. “And who are you to get all preachy on me? You were about to knock him out yourself.”

“Yeah, but I don’t have a parole officer breathing down my neck, do I?” said Cody. Hunter flipped on the cold water and washed the blood from his knuckles. “God, Hunter, it’s like you’re trying to get caught. Smoking weed all the time, punching people out in public. Jail must’ve been nice, huh?”

“What’s your problem, man? You’ve been acting like a jerk to me all night, and I’m getting tired of it,” said Hunter as he flicked his hands dry. “Get out of my way. I need to go find Anna Beth.” He tried to brush past Cody and head out the door, but Cody put a firm hand in his chest and shoved him back into the side of a metal stall.

“Anna Beth? That’s what you’re worried about right now?” he asked. “You could have the cops looking for you—or worse, Luke’s people could be waiting to break your legs out there.” He could have told him that Maisie had texted to let him know Anna Beth had been shaken up by the fight, so they hitched a ride with some friends to go home. But he didn’t feel like putting Hunter’s mind at ease at the moment. “She’s a grown woman, Hunter. She can take care of herself.” His hand was still pressed hard against Hunter’s sternum. He could feel his heart thumping against the tips of his fingers.

“Oh, I see what this is about,” said Hunter, just above a whisper. He studied Cody’s eyes, his flaring nostrils, the quiver at the edge of his upper lip. “You’re jealous.”

“Jealous?” Cody said, scoffing.

“That’s right. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it before, but now I see it plain as day.” Cody gripped a fistful of Hunter’s shirt.

“What the hell do I have to be jealous about, huh?” he said. “Have you seen my wife?”

“Oh, I’ve seen her,” said Hunter, placing his hand over Cody’s clenched fist. “Drop dead gorgeous, that Maisie. But this ain’t about her, is it? And this ain’t about Anna Beth either.” He leaned close, and Cody could feel the moisture of his breath on his ear. Did his lips brush his cheek? “This is about you and me. This is about wanting what you’re not supposed to want. It’s about that feeling you have right now—right this very second—knotted up right here.” He placed his palm over Cody’s heart. “And here, too,” said Hunter, moving the same palm down the length of his chest, slipping over his stomach and past the buckle of his belt, cupping it against the fly of his pants.

“I don’t want this,” said Cody, his eyes shut tight. “This isn’t who I am.”

“No?” said Hunter. He slipped a finger in the loop of Cody’s belt and tugged, flipping open the buckle. Cody felt the button of his jeans snap open, and then he heard the steady clicking of his zipper being lowered. The handle of the locked bathroom door rattled behind him, but still he didn’t move. “Then tell me to stop, Cody. Just say the word, and I’ll walk out of here.” Cody rolled the word in his mouth—*stop, stop, stop*—but he didn’t say it. His choice had been made—never measured out, never weighed in the palms of his hands, but made just the same. With his eyes still clenched and his back against the cold brick wall, he felt Hunter’s warm hand pull him out of his boxers, and just like that, his mouth was on him.

Hunter kept his head down and slinked behind Cody as they walked the five blocks down Main Street back towards Cody’s truck. They didn’t know exactly what to expect, but they both knew that when Hunter threw that punch at Luke, the unspoken terms of the ceasefire that had existed between them for the last few months had been

broken, and a full-blown war could erupt at any moment. It was only when they were safely inside the truck, heading to the south end of town towards Hunter's trailer, that Cody felt the full weight of what had just happened between them in the public restroom. And what was it that he felt, exactly? Guilt, elation, shame, love? He couldn't be sure, but noticeably absent from his confusion was a sense of regret. Good or bad, right or wrong: the thing had happened, and it had cut the tumor of anxiety clean away from the lining of his gut like the hand of a skilled surgeon.

"You got any gum?" said Hunter, rifling through the middle armrest between them. "Can't seem to get this weird taste out of my mouth, if you know what I mean." He winked at Cody, who felt his face burn red with embarrassment.

"Uh, I don't know—I mean, there might be a few sticks down there," he said, mumbling every other word as he fished a cigarette from his pocket with shaky fingers. He glanced at Hunter, who smiled at him and gave him a friendly shove.

"I'm just messing with you, man," he said. Still, he found a stick of Juicy Fruit and folded it into his mouth just the same. Cody knew this was Hunter's way of acknowledging the new contours of their relationship, his way of pushing back against the idea that they had to talk about it. Things were different, sure; but a smile and a jab could say as much as a thirty-minute conversation. Cody returned the smile, but it faded quickly just as he was about to pull his truck into Hunter's driveway.

"Stop the car," said Hunter. He pointed down the block to a black SUV silhouetted in the moonlight of the cloudless sky. Cody squinted just enough to see the dark figure in the car sitting behind the wheel, enveloped in the shadows cast by the stiff, sharp leaves of a nearby magnolia tree.

“They waiting on you?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but I’m not really in the mood to find out. Keep driving,” said Hunter. Cody spun the truck into a quick U-turn and peeled out in the opposite direction. Sure enough, the driver of the SUV cranked the engine and followed them out of Weeping Willows subdivision and back onto Pike Lane.

“Hold tight,” said Cody, buckling his seatbelt. When Hunter did the same, Cody pressed hard against the acceleration pedal, watching the speedometer needle climb to sixty, sixty-five, seventy. He barely slowed down around a bend in the one-lane road, watching the rear-view mirror as the powerful SUV gained on his little old truck.

“I can’t lose them,” said Cody. “Not like this, at least.” The SUV’s high-beam headlights flashed on and off as it approached Cody’s bumper. “Call the cops, Hunter,” he said. “I can’t lose them.” The horn of the SUV blared behind them as the lights continued to flash. Cody sat erect in the seat and had a white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel.

“I told you already, I can’t get the cops involved,” said Hunter. “That would only be bad news for me.”

“Well, do you have a better idea?” asked Cody. “We have to do something.” As they approached town, the speed limit slowed to 40mph, and a compact car pulled onto the road from a side street up ahead, blocking Cody’s path. He slammed on the brakes, skidding sideways into the adjacent lane before correcting back on the right side of the road, his front bumper mere inches away from the car in front of him. At the last second, he swung the truck onto the shoulder, slinging gravel into air and engulfing the road around him in a blinding cloud of dust. When the truck finally stopped, Cody glanced at

the rearview mirror and saw the SUV barreling toward them. He braced for impact, instinctively slinging his hand across Hunter's chest, but the vehicle screeched past Cody's truck and onto the shoulder in front of them.

"We'll just have to deal with this the old fashioned way, I guess," said Hunter. "Why does it always have to be this way?" he asked quietly. Cody watched him grip the door handle as he shook his head and took a deep breath. Cody knew his whole life had been a string of fight-or-flight decisions, and he hated Evolution for not providing a third option. The hazard lights of the SUV blinked in front of them, casting a yellow glow on Hunter's face. "You can stay in the car if you want," he said. "You've got a family to think about."

"No, I'm coming with you," said Cody. But before either of them had a chance to move, the front door of the black SUV swung open. Cody craned his head to the side, expecting to see the worst, maybe the business end of a handgun leading out of the SUV, or one of Luke's thugs wielding a tire iron. Instead, he watched as a sleek leg slipped from the car, and then another, followed by the slender figure of a woman. She stood with her arms stretched in front of her, empty and innocent. In the darkness, still hidden in the cloud of gravel dust, Cody could barely make out her face. "Wait a minute," said Cody. "Is that—"

"Yeah, it sure is," said Hunter. "Damn it, Candace. You always did know how to get my attention."

Twenty minutes later, Cody and Hunter sat in silence across from Candace in the living room of Cody's house, giving her the necessary space to pull herself together and

explain what had just happened. Cody expected to see Maisie at home, but he got another text from her saying she was leaving Anna Beth's apartment to go pick up Lucie from Lori Ann's house, and she'd be home shortly after. He poured himself and Candace a nightcap of bourbon, but Hunter declined, worried that his parole officer could be tracking him down at any moment after the scuffle at the park, and he didn't want to have any alcohol in his system. Candace sucked down her drink in one gulp.

"I'm sorry again for chasing you down like that," she said, twisting a copper bracelet around her wrist over and over again. "It's just that, I don't have your number, and what I have to tell you—what you really have to hear me say—is urgent." Despite the fact that she was clearly speaking to Hunter, she almost never made eye contact with him, glancing almost anywhere but in his direction.

"Okay," said Hunter, "I'm listening." Cody studied Hunter, noticing that he had no problem keeping his eyes on Candace, despite the fact that she couldn't return the gesture. He wondered if Hunter still loved her, if he ever wondered how his life would have been different if he had just let Candace accept him for who he was.

"You want me to leave you two alone?" asked Cody.

"No, that's okay," said Candace. "You probably need to hear this, too. In case something happens." She tilted her empty cup back to try to get the last drop of liquor. She held up the glass in Cody's direction. "Can I get one more? Sorry, this is more difficult than I thought it would be."

"Sure thing," said Cody as he poured her a double-shot.

“Look, Candace,” said Hunter, leaning forward on the couch, “If you’re here on Luke’s behalf, you can tell him he doesn’t have to worry about me. Things got out of hand tonight, but I don’t mean him any harm.”

“I’m not here for Luke,” she said sharply. She locked eyes with Hunter for the first time all night. “I’m here for you, Hunter.” She stood abruptly and moved to the couch next to Hunter. “I’m here because I’m worried about you. Luke’s in a bad way right now, and I’ve got to speak up before something worse happens.”

“Oh, I know all about that, believe me,” said Hunter.

“No, you don’t know the half of it. You need to listen to me.” There was a harrowing desperation in her voice, something that sent vibrations through Cody’s chest. “It’s about what happened to you down in the mine. The *accident*,” she said, hooking her fingers into air quotes as she emphasized the last word.

“What about it?” Hunter asked. He shot a look at Cody that said he didn’t like where this conversation was going.

“How well do you remember what happened that night?” she asked. She picked at flecks of peeling nail polish on her right thumb.

“Not a whole lot, honestly,” said Hunter. “I mean, I remember tripping over something. I stumbled back and heard the coal car screaming down at me. That’s about it. The next three days are completely blacked out.

“Tripped over something? What was it?” asked Candace. Hunter closed his eyes, trying to think back.

“I don’t know really,” he said. “Must’ve been a shovel or cable or something.”

“Right. Or something,” said Candace. “Do you remember who was close to you at the time?”

“I mean, I don’t really—”

“Trevor Adams,” said Candace, her tone flat and certain. “All I need to know is whether Trevor Adams was near you.” Hunter’s eyes lit with a flash of recognition, a spark of fleeting clarity, a stirring in the gut. Cody didn’t know Trevor, but he knew he was as close to Luke as anybody else down in that mine.

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Hunter. “I was pinning with Trevor that shift.”

“And let me guess,” said Candace. “The driver of the shuttle car was—”

“Marcus Bradstreet,” interrupted Cody. He remembered reading the incident report released by the mine following the accident. Bradstreet’s name didn’t sit well with him, but it didn’t strike him as necessarily suspicious at the time. He was a veteran of the mine and had been working the shuttle car for years. Still, his hatred for Hunter was only surpassed by Luke’s, and now Cody saw where this conversation was headed. Candace nodded at him, and then put a hand on Hunter’s knee.

“It was no accident, Hunter,” she said, tears filling her eyes. “Luke’s not just trying to run you out of town. He’s trying to kill you.” Hunter stood up and paced across the floor.

“But how do you know—I mean, Luke wasn’t even there,” he stammered.

“Of course he wasn’t,” said Cody, connecting the dots. “He’s not stupid. It would raise too much suspicion if he was down there himself, with your history and everything.”

“I don’t know,” said Hunter, shaking his head. “I get it that Luke hates me, but this doesn’t add up. You’re saying these guys are trying to kill me just because Luke asked them to?”

“There are lots of backwards people in this town,” said Cody. “It can’t be hard for Luke to convince them to fear what they don’t understand. And he knows things about you, Hunter, things that can make stupid people afraid of you.”

“It’s not just that,” said Candace. “He promised them money. Lots of it.” Hunter stopped pacing and took his seat beside Candace again. “A week before the accident, right before I kicked him out for the last time, he had Trevor and Bradstreet over for a poker game in the basement.” Now it was Candace’s turn to pace. She went to the bar and poured herself another drink as she spoke. “They got quiet down there—too quiet, you know? So I crept halfway down the stairs and listened. I couldn’t hear everything, but I heard enough. They were talking big money. Five figures. I didn’t put together exactly what they were talking about until I heard you were in the hospital.”

“C’mon,” said Cody. “Luke doesn’t have that kind of cash.”

“I thought the same thing,” said Candace. “That’s why I haven’t said anything to you before now. I convinced myself that I was dreaming up the whole conspiracy.” Hunter had retreated into himself, staring straight ahead. Candace sat beside him once more, and put her hands into his. “But last night, it hit me. I was going through some old documents trying to get some stuff to take to my divorce lawyer. I came across a big manila envelope that was marked for a life insurance policy. Your life insurance policy, Hunter.”

“Wait a minute,” said Cody. “Why do you have Hunter’s life insurance policy?”

“She’s still the beneficiary,” said Hunter. He leaned his head back on the couch, finally putting all the pieces of the puzzle together. “When we got divorced, I told her to keep the policy. I don’t have any other family besides Spits, and she don’t have a need for more money.”

“The paperwork was gone, Hunter,” said Candace. “Luke took it with him. He knows that if you die before our divorce is finished, he’s going to get half of that money. It ain’t a whole lot, but it’s more than enough to pay off a couple of thugs.” A calmness overtook Hunter. The sense of betrayal that Cody felt seemed to be absent in him, replaced by the quiet resignation of a person who had accepted time and again that no matter how many times he shuffled the cards, the deck was always rigged against him just the same.

“Anyway, I guess I just came to say you need to transfer the insurance money out of my name,” she said. “And be careful.” Candace checked her watch—the time was fast approaching midnight—and then gathered herself to leave. Hunter stood with her, giving her the kind of full-bodied hug that reminded Cody once more that he was a bit of a third wheel.

“Thank you, Candace,” said Hunter. “Not just for telling me this. For not letting me push you all the way away, even when I tried my hardest. He gave her a friendly kiss on the cheek, and then released her to the door.

“Take care of yourself, sweetheart,” she said as she gripped the handle. She paused one last time, locking eyes with Hunter. “Look, it’s not my place to say anymore. But you should know that Luke Culver doesn’t have any power over you. He can only keep you in the shadows as long as you refuse to step into the light. The world’s a bigger

place than it used to be, Hunter. You can either exist in this world as the person you really are, or let others keep telling you that you don't exist at all." As she opened the door to take her leave, Cody saw a flash of headlights as Maisie pulled into the driveway. Candace clicked the door shut behind her.

"And what kind of person am I, exactly?" Hunter asked to nobody in particular. It was an unanswerable question, not just for Hunter. It was one that was churning Cody's soul as well as he considered all that had happened in the last four hours. *You're not defined by what you say, but what you do*, his father had written. What was he going to do about his brother trying to end the life of his best friend? What was he going to do about his feelings toward Hunter McCready? Maybe most importantly, what was he going to do when Maisie found out what a fraud of a husband he truly was?

CHAPTER 15

Kentucky summer began its slow descent onto Blue Banks earlier in the year than usual, coating the middle of June with its gummy air and wavy heat, drying out late spring flowers and turning lush beds of green grass all across the county into crunchy brown clusters. The nights—illuminated by the magical glow of lightning bugs and campfires—were still cool enough that most of the central air conditioning units on the houses stretched down Old Herrodsburg Road remained quiet, not yet awakened from their winter slumber. In the farmhouse, Cody lay on top of the crumpled sheets of his bed listening to the cacophonous chirps of field crickets floating through the open bedroom windows. He felt the comforting warmth of Maisie’s body radiating through the thin sheet between them, but even this feeling, one that had eased him to sleep countless nights, was not enough to quiet his mind now, not after what Candace had revealed about Luke’s attempt to kill Hunter.

For the past week since the wild night at the Blues Fest, Cody stayed wide awake late into the night, sharp pangs of anxiety stabbing through his gut as he wrestled with the weight of his own responsibility in the situation. Hunter had been staying with him and Maisie for extra protection ever since Candace delivered the news, sleeping upstairs in the very same worn twin bed that Luke had used when he lived with them months before. Cody knew it was reckless to keep Hunter in his house—he had Maisie and Lucie to think about, after all—but he was entangled in the whole ordeal to the point that he felt he had no other choice. He looked at Maisie beside him, loose hairs flipped across her face

as she slept, and wondered if she knew just how entangled he had become. Surely she saw it in the way he stole glances at Hunter from across the room, or the way his voice faltered when he found himself saying his name too many times in her presence. Even now, as he heard the shifting of Hunter's bed through the paper-thin insulation between the ceiling and the floor above him, he knew that the tightening of his chest had less to do with the violence that Luke threatened than it had to do with his own longing to continue what he and Hunter had begun in the public bathroom in Town Square Park.

Hunter had been distant for the past week, coming and going from work without saying anything to Cody unless he had to, or even ducking out of the room quietly when the two of them were alone. Cody found that the more Hunter tried to ignore what had happened in the park, the more he felt drawn to him, the more he found himself daydreaming about their fleeting moment together. The legs of Hunter's bed scratched across the floor again, and Cody imagined him up there shifting his weight against the stiff springs of the old mattress. He clenched his eyes shut and pictured Hunter wiping beads of sweat from his bare torso, slinging the sheet away from him as the warm air from the open window breezed across his skin. Cody saw him slip his hand down under the elastic band of his boxer briefs, gripping a fistful of the comforter in his other hand as he roamed between his thighs. Cody became a mirror image of what he imagined happening upstairs, tilting himself away from Maisie, holding his breath as his hand moved back and forth, trying not to wake her with the rhythms of his body. Suddenly, his eyes shot open wide, as he was struck with an idea, one that could only be rationalized by a desperate man just before climax: if he wanted to finish what he and Hunter had started in the public bathroom, all he had to do was go upstairs.

As his weight lifted from the bed, Maisie rolled to the center. Cody froze as she let out a slumbering whimper, but when her breathing deepened into sleep again only moments later, he crept out of the room and rounded the hallway towards the stairs. He began his ascent—zigzagging in just the right careful pattern to minimize the inevitable creaks of the worn wood—and listened as the noises from Hunter’s room grew from small scrapes of the bed to full-bodied sighs and moans. Could it be that his imaginations about Hunter weren’t in his mind at all? Had he somehow attuned himself to what Hunter was actually doing above him?

When his foot hit the landing at the top of the stairs and the doorknob was within his reach, the fog of his mind cleared as if he had just crested the surface after being submerged in water, and he realized that if he opened the door before him, there could be life-changing consequences. What had happened between him and Hunter in the past—at the river bottoms, in Hunter’s trailer, even in the bathroom at Town Square Park—were spontaneous events, driven by honest curiosity and circumstance. But now he had a tangible barrier standing between him and his desire: a door that he could literally open in a moment, but figuratively never close for a lifetime. This was a decision he could measure out, that he could hold in his open palms and weigh. In one hand, he held Maisie—her trust, her dignity, her vulnerability, even her love. He held the time they spent in Chicago, the brave new world of this life with a baby daughter. He held their first kiss, their dreams and hopes, their whispered secrets.

In the other hand, he held something amorphous, something that sometimes looked like Hunter, but more often looked like a reflection of himself: his own confused desires, his selfish need to unearth a part of him that he had never acknowledged or

understood, that had been crushed under the weight of his childhood in Blue Banks like the bits of bituminous coal trapped beneath his fingernails. He held chance, risk, and *carpe diem*. He held *adultery* with its sleek, razor-sharp edges and glistening surface. He opened his palm to these things as if inviting them to leave, but still they refused. So he pinched them between his fingers—what other choice did he have?—and rolled them into a ball, tiny enough to fit in his pocket, but filled with such mass that it threatened to send him plummeting through the floor, smashing into Maisie, crushing her bones beneath its weight. There was a right choice and a wrong choice, but if he closed his eyes long enough and just tried to balance the weight in his hands, he couldn't tell much of a difference. So he breathed a silent apology to Maisie and edged open the door, just enough to see inside.

With a single eye peeping through the cracked doorway, Cody could barely make out the contour of Hunter's body rustling beneath the sheets, his bare feet extended out from the covers, hanging off the edge of the bed. He heard a low moan, almost a whimper coming from up by the pillows, a voice that seemed to be outside of Hunter altogether. He saw an arm flailing outside the covers near the top of the bed, and the hump of an arched body raising the comforter from the center of the mattress. It wasn't until his eyes had adjusted to the darkness of the room that he realized he wasn't only looking at Hunter's contorted body, but the entangled limbs of two people. A streak of moonlight sneaked past the bottom edge of the window curtain and illuminated Candace's face, her head resting against the pillow, her chin tilted up toward the ceiling as she squirmed. Hunter's body was enshrouded under the comforter, his feet still extended well past the edge of the bed, his face resting between Candace's twitching thighs.

Cody hesitated at the door only for a moment, and then found himself pushing into the room and clearing his throat—demanding to be seen, needing to be heard. Candace caught eyes with him, let out a shriek as she scrambled to pull the sheets over her bare breasts. Hunter jumped from the bed and stood, stark naked, between Cody and Candace, as if to shield her from his view. Cody let his eyes search over his body, and when Hunter followed his gaze, he grabbed a pillow from the bed and covered himself.

“Look,” said Hunter, glancing back at Candace, trying to figure out what he could say that would make sense, “it just kind of happened. I couldn’t sleep, so I started texting her and—well, here we are.” There was an apology hidden in Hunter’s voice as he spoke, but for exactly what he was sorry, Cody couldn’t be sure.

“Here we are,” repeated Cody. He glanced at Candace for a response, but she couldn’t look at him. “And why exactly are we *here*—in my house? Couldn’t you have at least gone to her place?”

“With Luke prowling around like he is?” asked Hunter. “C’mon, Cody. Don’t make this a bigger deal than it is.” But it was a big deal, especially for Cody. He had made his choice, betrayed Maisie, weighed out the consequences and decided Hunter was worth the price he would pay. He had only just realized that he never considered whether Hunter had made his choice, too. Nothing more to go on, Cody began to back out of the room, but not before something caught his eye glimmering from under the hem of the window shade: a radiant light, flickering with brilliance into the room. It wasn’t the steady glow of moonlight, but something erratic and dangerous, something that drew both Hunter and Cody to the window like mosquitoes to an electric zapper.

Cody flipped open the blinds and looked down to the street to see Hunter's jet black El Camino engulfed in fire, an empty gasoline can tipped onto the grass beside the front tire. They couldn't move yet, not even to call for help, but simply watched as the flames licked under the hood, swarmed around the engine block, sucked back into the fuel tank. The explosion was swift and strong, the violent boom reverberating up and down Old Herrodsburg Road.

Maisie sat at the kitchen table the next morning nursing Lucie while Cody filled a jumbo thermos with mud-thick black coffee. He inhaled the fumes, trying to climb out of the fog of a sleepless night. The fire department had extinguished the flames in no time, but everyone in the house was up all night talking to the police. Hunter filed an official report, but they all knew it would just be pushed into a cabinet at the police department and ignored. Nobody saw Luke or one of his men start the fire, and Blue Banks PD wasn't going to start a full-blown investigation when the victim was a convicted felon on parole.

"You're really going to work today?" asked Maisie. "After all that?" Cody dumped a heaping spoonful of sugar into his coffee before turning to her.

"I think I have to," said Cody. "I mean, Hunter wants to keep up a normal routine. You know, show Luke he isn't going away. He's out in the truck waiting for me right now." Maisie adjusted Lucie on her breast, never looking at Cody as she spoke.

"That's Hunter's choice. It doesn't have to be ours," she said. "And really, Cody, what is so wrong with going away at this point? I don't know how much more of this I can do." Tears glistened in her eyes, but didn't fall. "You're too wrapped up in all of this,

and it scares me. When we first moved here I never felt alone. Yeah, it was us against everyone else, but I always had you. Now I'm not sure what I have." She looked at him, only for a second, and then looked back down at her nursing child. "There's this distance between us, and it's getting bigger every day. You feel it too, right?" She paused, waiting for a response. But what could he say? How could he speak the truth and not push her further away? "Damn it, Cody! You're standing right in front of me, but I don't know where you are. What are you thinking?"

"I'm going to be late," he said, grabbing his coffee and heading toward the door. "Let's talk about this when I get home from work."

But he didn't go to work. As soon as he climbed into the truck, Hunter told him they had different plans.

"I need you to drive me to Louisville," he said, as if Cody had no say in the matter. "I've already called Spits and let her know we aren't coming in."

"What are you talking about?" said Cody "I just told Maisie we were going to work. You're making me lie to my wife now?"

"No, you didn't lie to her. That's why I didn't say anything until you got out here, so you wouldn't have to lie. But she doesn't need to know where we're going. Nobody does." Cody took the keys and tossed them on the dash.

"I'm not going anywhere until I know exactly what this is about," he said. Hunter's legs bounced anxiously in the seat next to Cody as he pulled out his e-cigarette and took a drag.

“I need a gun, Cody,” he said. “And if you hadn’t heard, they’re not exactly keen to let convicted felons buy those. I know a guy in Louisville from when I was in jail, and he’s going to hook me up. I’d just go by myself but, you know, your brother just blew up my car,” Cody rubbed his sweaty palms against his pants. He thought about Maisie sitting at the kitchen table, eyes swelling with tears as she gave her body to their daughter. What had he gotten his family into by moving back here? He wanted to plead with Hunter, to tell him that returning violence on Luke wasn’t the answer. He wanted to will himself out of the car, back into the house to hold Maisie, to tell her they were getting out of Blue Banks and never coming back. But he knew Hunter was desperate and he would find a way to get his hands on a gun one way or another, whether he drove him or not. At least this way Cody figured he could talk him down from any stupid decisions.

Hunter had him stop by his trailer on the way out of town so he could grab a duffle bag—just some stuff he needed for the trip, he told Cody tersely—and then they tore up the road to Louisville, going fast enough to make sure they would make it back in time to not raise suspicion from Maisie or anyone else. On the way, Cody tried to get Hunter to open up to him about the night at the Blues Fest, or even what was going on between him and Candace; but he wouldn’t bite, always shutting down the conversation before it had a chance to get going. Mostly they rode in silence, flipping through radio static as they passed from town to town. Cody found himself glancing down at Hunter’s hands by the armrest, wondering what would happen if he reached for them the way he had done before. But each time he worked up the courage to find out, Hunter instinctively pulled his arms back to himself, crossing them over his chest as if to remove the

temptation. Each time the conversation died out, the image of Hunter rising from the sheets with Candace flashed before Cody's eyes, and he wanted to punch something.

Following Hunter's directions, Cody turned down a dead-end street in Louisville's Germantown district and parked in front of a faded-yellow shotgun house sandwiched between two others that looked just like it. As soon as the car was in park, Hunter craned his head around in every direction to take in his bearings, as if the situation could be more dangerous than he had let on back in Blue Banks.

"How well do you know this guy?" asked Cody.

"Well enough to know he's got guns," replied Hunter, reaching into the back of the cab to grab his duffle bag. He ran his finger over the bag's long plastic zipper. "Look, you ain't gonna like what I have to do in there, but you need to understand I have no other choice. I need a gun, and this is the only way I know to get one right now. You can stay in the car if you want to, but if things get ugly, I might need your help."

"What do you—"

"No questions," said Hunter. His temples throbbed as he clenched the bag to his chest. "You're either in or you're out. That's it."

"I'm in," said Cody. "Whatever you need, I'm in." Hunter nodded, and they gripped the door handles in sync and stepped out into the humid midday air. Hunter opened the gate of a rusted chain link fence and led Cody over sunken stepping stones through a yard of overgrown summer weeds and up two rickety wooden steps to the front stoop.

“Keep your hands out of your pockets, and don’t speak unless he asks you something,” said Hunter. “Got it?” Cody took a deep breath and nodded, and then watched as Hunter gave three staccato knocks in the middle of the door. Cody looked up and saw a security camera in his periphery, but he didn’t look at it directly, as if doing so would have caused undue suspicion. As he heard footsteps approaching the door, he wished he had texted Maisie from the car, at least to tell her he loved her. He heard the sound of a series of bolts and latches being unlocked from the other side of the door, and then finally, the door swung open. He wasn’t sure exactly what he had expected to see, but the person who stood before them wasn’t it: a short, slender, clean-shaven man in his early fifties, his button-down white shirt tucked cleanly into his pressed black pants like he was a ten-minute commute away from managing a bank. He wore black-rimmed glasses, and his salt-and-pepper hair was folded into a stiff comb-over in perfect lines, the finest hairs on top so hard and brittle under the weight of his styling gel that Cody imagined he could snap one clean off without disturbing the rest. He roved his eyes over Hunter for a moment before turning his gaze to Cody.

“And who is this?” he said, his lips curling into a smile. His left eye twitched under his glasses. Cody cleared his throat and began to speak, but Hunter put a hand on his chest, as if warning him back.

“He’s with me,” said Hunter. “Name’s not important. He’s just here to keep the both of us honest. To make sure this works out like we agreed.” The man removed his glasses, closed his eyes to rub them, and then opened them again to study Cody.

“I trust that you don’t have any weapons on you, young man,” he said, still smiling. “Because if you do, things probably aren’t going to go so well.”

“He’s clean,” said Hunter. “If he had a gun, I wouldn’t need to be here.” The man winked at Cody, as if an agreement had been made, and then stepped aside to let them pass through the doorway. Hunter went in first, the duffle bag dangling at his side, and then Cody trailed in behind. After guiding them through a small entryway, the man led them to an ornate sitting room, impeccably clean and ordered in a way that belied the shambled exterior of the house. Two matching hard-leather sofas sat at the edge of a large area rug. In the center of the rug was a mahogany coffee table, on top of which lay a pair of semi-automatic pistols. The man edged behind the coffee table and motioned towards the guns.

“One’s for you,” he said, looking at Hunter. “The other is to make sure everything goes as planned.” He picked up the pistol on the right, motioning to Hunter with the barrel of the gun. “You can go get ready in the bathroom down the hall. And you, young man,” he said, pointing now to Cody, “why don’t you take a seat right there where I can see you.” Hunter nodded at Cody and then made his way down the hallway, leaving him alone with the man. Cody edged back onto the sofa, feeling the hard surface crunch under his weight.

“How about a bourbon?” said the man as he stood, gun still in hand, and made his way to the bar at the side of the room.

“I’m okay, thanks,” said Cody. As the man turned to face the bar, he found himself eyeing the other pistol on the coffee table.

“Nonsense,” said the man. He plunked a couple of large chunks of ice in two glasses and poured a double-shot in each. “That gun’s not loaded, by the way,” he said without ever turning around. “So I’ll save you the embarrassment of trying to do anything

stupid.” He turned back to Cody and handed him the glass of bourbon, and then took a methodical swig of his own.

“I’m not interested in touching that gun,” said Cody. “I’m just here because Hunter asked me to be. That’s it.”

“Oh, I’d like to believe that,” said the man as he took his seat behind the coffee table once again. “It’s just that you can’t seem to trust anybody nowadays. A man used to be bound by his word. If he said he was going to do something, he did it.” The man rattled his ice cube against his empty glass. “But you just can’t trust people these days, know what I mean?” He removed his glasses again, giving a hard look at Cody.

“Well, you can trust me,” said Cody. “And you can trust Hunter. I trust him enough to be here right now, and that’s saying something.” He put the bourbon to his lips and sipped in just enough of the liquor to wet his parched mouth. As he set the glass down on the table in front of him, he heard a door crack open from down the hall. The man put back on his glasses and eased backwards on the couch.

“Here comes the main event,” he said. He picked up a remote control from an end table beside him and clicked a few buttons. With the magic of technology, the lights dimmed, and slow jazz music streamed from the surround sound speakers overhead. As if on cue, Hunter emerged from around the corner of the hallway back into the room, leading with his clean-shaven feminine legs gliding underneath the swishing bottom of a royal blue a-line dress. His long hair brushed across the straps on his shoulders, swooping downward where the small buds of his breasts pushed out against the dress just enough to complete the illusion of a full transformation. The man let out a low sigh, long and measured, as he looked Hunter’s body up and down.

“That’s it, babydoll,” he said as he unfastened his belt. Cody shot a horrified glance at Hunter. What had he agreed to do? He gripped the armrest of the sofa, trying to figure out how he could get them out of this. Hunter held up a hand in assurance.

“We agreed to ten minutes,” Hunter said. “And no touching.” The man nodded, unzipped his pants, and pulled himself out.

“Twirl around for me, honey,” said the man. Hunter took a deep breath and spun, the hem of the dress lifting into the air just enough to expose the bottom seam of a pair of hot-pink panties. The man groaned as he rubbed himself, adjusting on the couch to spread his legs further apart. Hunter spun again, and then glided his hips back and forth with the music. Cody knew he shouldn’t watch Hunter, not like this, but he couldn’t help himself, and he certainly couldn’t look back at the man, stroking himself and moaning like an animal. As he watched Hunter sway and dance, equal parts awkward and erotic, Cody thought back to the night he and Hunter shared at the river bottoms. *Do you think God ever regrets us?* Hunter had asked. He never fully understood the question, but somehow it made sense now as he watched his friend being exploited for simply being who he was, transformed from a person into an object to satisfy the curiosity of a perverted middle-aged man.

“Now, slip those panties off, real slow,” said the man, taking his hands off of himself to make sure he didn’t climax too soon. Hunter stopped, embarrassed, and brushed the hair from his face.

“Look, we agreed to—” started Hunter, but he couldn’t get out the words before he heard the cock of the gun, the barrel pointed at his chest.

“Bitch, I have five minutes left,” said the man, “And I intend to make the most of them.” Cody started to stand, but Hunter waved him off.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay. Five minutes.” The man slid back down on the couch and watched as Hunter closed his eyes and slid his panties down his legs and onto the floor. Cody’s hands trembled against his legs, but that was all he could offer. He looked around the room to weigh his options, but he didn’t see a way out.

“That’s right,” said the man. “Now, lift up that dress so daddy can take a good look.” Hunter kept his eyes closed as he slid his hands down to the bottom edge of the dress, easing it up past his thighs, up over his hips, exposing himself. Cody hated himself for looking, but he couldn’t look away. It was the first time he had seen Hunter’s nude body in the light of day, the first time he noticed his tiny testicles—the size of those on a prepubescent boy—covered over almost completely by his average-sized, flaccid penis. Cody thought back to all the times Hunter had waited patiently for the showers in the mine bathhouse to clear out before he would enter, or how he would cover himself with unsure hands as he dressed.

“Well, now, I didn’t take you for a faggot, but I’ve been wrong before,” said the man. Cody broke his trance over Hunter’s body and glanced over to see the man staring him straight in the eyes, a crooked smile stretched across his face. “That’s right, I’m talking to you, faggot. I see the way you’re looking at my bitch here. You can’t keep your eyes off of this little freak.” Cody swallowed hard. There was nothing he could say that wouldn’t make the situation worse. “Well, how about we make your dream come true. Go suck him off, faggot!”

“We agreed to no touching,” said Hunter, dropping the hem of his dress to cover himself. “Besides, your time is up.” The man stood, his pants falling down around his ankles, and leveled the gun at Cody’s forehead.

“We agreed to no touching between us,” he said, winking at Cody. “But nobody said anything about your faggot here. He took a step closer to Cody, turning away from Hunter in the process, and placed the tip of the gun between his eyes. “You listen to me, faggot. You’re going to go suck him off, or I’m putting a bullet in your brain. Those are the new rules. You agreed to them when you showed up to my house uninvited.”

“Okay,” Cody said. “Okay.” He stood with his hands in the air. As the man eased the gun away from his head, Cody saw Hunter flash in his periphery, ducking behind the man and grabbing his neck. The bang of the gun sounded, a bullet ripping through the lampshade next to Cody’s arm and lodging in the wall beside him. In one clean motion, Hunter swung the smaller man around, slamming him face-first into the unyielding hardwood of the mahogany coffee table. The man’s face ricocheted off the table, and his limp body folded backward to the middle of the floor behind them.

“Dear God,” Cody whispered to himself, watching as Hunter towered over the man, smoothing out the wrinkles in his royal blue dress. His eyes were vacant as he picked up the loaded gun from the man’s open hand and held it to the back of his head. “No, Hunter!” said Cody, stretching out a careful hand, but not daring to touch him. “Don’t make it worse. Please, just don’t make it worse.” Hunter’s hand shook under the weight of his decision, wobbling back and forth against the man’s skull. After an instant that felt an eternity, he let the gun drop to the side, stood up, and fell into Cody’s arms, weeping.

CHAPTER 16

On Cody's tenth birthday, Lori Ann's uncle—the same one whose house Cody and Maisie lived in now on Old Herrodsburg road—gave him a Powermaster air gun and a comically-sized jug of bb pellets. Uncle Charles, who Cody remembered as a grizzled old man with a stooping posture as crooked as a question mark, meant the gift as a rite of passage, a rebirth into Cody's second decade on this earth as a man—partially defined in Blue Banks as *one who hunts*. Cody held the steel-plated gun in his lap, edging his fingers along the shiny surface. If he had known any better, he might have felt embarrassed that he was taken in by the sleek beauty of the apparatus, not by its ability to blast pellets through empty Coke cans, which his male cousins were balancing along the edge of the privacy fence of his childhood home at that very moment.

If anyone truly knew the mixture of awe and fear the gun inspired in Cody it was his father, whose brief stint in the army at the tail end of the Vietnam War had made him a quick study of the horrors that guns could inflict, and the symbolic power held by even the most toy-like air guns. He promptly took the gun from Cody after the party and locked it away in the imposing steel gun case in the basement, where he kept his two hunting rifles that he, too, had been gifted from Uncle Charles, but never used. The gun remained untouched until Coaldust died, growing more mysterious and mean shrouded behind all that steel with every passing year, an unseen monster feeding on the unchecked fears of a vivid childhood imagination.

The lurking monster before him now—the semiautomatic handgun Hunter was methodically loading in the passenger seat of the truck as Cody sped away from the house on the dead-end street in Louisville—terrified Cody not in any abstract way, but in what he feared the weapon could quite practically mean for Hunter, for Luke, for anyone caught collaterally in the space between them. When the gun was fully loaded, Hunter gripped it in his hand, turning it too freely for Cody’s comfort.

“Is the safety on that thing?” he asked, flinching each time the barrel swung his way. Hunter didn’t speak—he hadn’t uttered so much as a word since they fled the house—but he did glance down to make sure the safety was locked before he slid the gun in the glove box, out of the clear view of anyone who happened to pass by the truck.

“Look, I know you don’t want to hear it, but getting that gun was a bad idea,” said Cody. “I mean, let’s forget about the fact that both of our lives were in the hands of that pervert back there and focus on what happens next. What are you going to do with it, Hunter? Threaten Luke? Put a bullet between his eyes? Is that what you really want?” Cody’s voice grew louder with each question, rising now to a pitch that surprised even him.

“I don’t know what I want,” said Hunter, smoothing out the wrinkles in the royal blue dress that he still wore. He spoke calmly, his words even and measured in a way that rebuked Cody for the harshness of his own.

“Yeah, well, let’s try to figure that out before we make it back to Blue Banks and you start wagging that pistol around. Guns and indecision don’t go too well with one another.” He pulled the truck onto Bardstown Road towards the Highlands, a neighborhood in Louisville known for its emo-artsy flare and local vibe. “I just don’t

want you going back to jail,” he said. He never added that he didn’t want Luke to be killed, but he hoped that sort of thing was still understood without being spoken.

They stopped in at a local joint on Bardstown road—a little hipster hideout that functioned as a café by day and hookah bar by night—to get some lunch and shake off what had happened with the creeper back in Germantown. Hunter sat across from Cody, still wearing the dress and make-up he had put on back at the man’s house, exuding a natural feminine grace and warmth. When he ordered his food he had spoken softly, rounding out his vowels and working his voice higher than its natural pitch as to not raise suspicion, but otherwise, the looks he garnered from other customers peppered around the small café were not those of disgust or even curiosity, but the same reticent glances they would have given to any badass woman with tattoo sleeves wearing a form-fitting dress, sitting in the middle of a café sipping an iced tea. Cody couldn’t help but look at him, too, not unaware that he was privileged to see something truly special: Hunter braving the public dressed as a woman for the first time.

“Stop looking at me like that,” said Hunter, picking at his food, a shy smile growing across his face, despite himself. “You’re making me nervous.”

“Nervous? Could’ve fooled me. You look like a natural.”

“I am a natural, Cody,” he said, not in admonishment, but as a sort of confession, maybe even to himself. “This is a part of me, the real deal. Inside and out.” He flipped a stray hair away from his eyes, curling his wrist in a way that reminded Cody of Maisie. He wondered if Hunter was willing his movements to be more feminine, or if he just noticed them more because of the way he was dressed.

“I’m starting to get that now,” said Cody. This realization made him feel better about his own attraction to Hunter, too, but he didn’t say that. “Can I ask you a question, though?” he asked. Hunter gave a cautious nod. “Are you transgender? I mean, I know about the biological stuff with Klinefelter Syndrome, but I don’t know what that really means for how you see yourself.” Hunter picked at the crust of his roast beef sandwich as he thought about how to answer. Cody didn’t want to rush him, and he worried he had already asked too much. “Sorry, you don’t have to—”

“No, it’s fine,” said Hunter. He smiled at Cody to reassure him, as if now that he was wearing a dress he felt the pressure to appease and comfort others at his own expense, a feeling Cody had always imagined women must so often feel. “I’m not transgender. I don’t really feel like I can be. You know, since I’m not fully male or female, genetically speaking.” He rolled a straw wrapper into a tiny ball and pinched it between his fingers. “I’m not just one thing or another. Honestly, I don’t think anybody is.”

“I get it,” said Cody, and for the first time, he really felt that he did.

“I mean, I wish I just felt like a dude all the time. It would be easier that way. Clean and simple. Normal. And most of the time, maybe seventy-five percent, I do feel like a man. But sometimes I feel feminine, and wearing a dress like this is a way to acknowledge that part of me.” He stared off beyond Cody, even beyond the walls of the restaurant, lost in memory. “That’s hard for some people to understand.”

“Yeah, I guess it would be,” said Cody. He reached his hand across the table and let it rest on top of Hunter’s. “It’s not hard for me, though.” Hunter came back into the

moment and looked at Cody's hand brushing across his fingers. He smiled, locked his fingers with Cody's for a brief second, and then pulled his hand away.

"I'm lucky to have a few people around who get it, like you and Spits," he said. He paused and measured Cody with his eyes before continuing. "And Candace." At the mention of her name, Cody clenched his fork a bit tighter as he poked at a grape tomato in his salad. Hunter knew he was bothered by it, but that didn't keep him from going on. "She understands me, too. She always has. Maybe more than anyone else." He looked Cody in the eye as he delivered the last line, as if extending a challenge.

"Yeah, well, you should've just stayed with her then, Hunter," said Cody, trying to beat back the jealousy rising in his throat like acid reflux. "I mean, you're the one who wanted that divorce, remember? You could have saved people a lot of trouble if you just stayed with her in the first place." He leaned back from his chair and took a long swig of his lemonade, mostly to keep himself from saying anything else until he found a way to keep his emotions in check.

"People?" asked Hunter, burning a hole through Cody with his eyes. He wasn't going to let him off the hook now. "Who are we talking about here, Culver? What people have I troubled?" Cody put down his drink and wiped his mouth with a paper napkin.

"Nevermind," he said. "Forget it." He knew he must have looked like a beaten puppy, because Hunter softened towards him, giving in once more to the impulse to make peace even where it wasn't deserved.

"Look, I'm sorry I brought Candace into your house last night. I didn't plan it. It just happened, and now it's over and done with."

"I said forget it," said Cody.

“I heard what you said. But you need to understand that the stuff between me and Candace is complicated.”

“I get it,” said Cody. “You loved her but you couldn’t give her a baby, so you pushed her away. I know all that. So can we just move on?” Cody tossed his napkin on his plate, having lost his appetite. He stared out the window to the sidewalk outside and watched as a disheveled middle-aged man in a tattered three-piece suit paced back and forth with a gigantic wooden cross strapped to his back. Affixed to the top of the cross was a huge sign with red, hand-scrawled letters: *God is Love*.

“It’s not as simple as that,” said Hunter.

“Nothing ever is,” said Cody, still watching out the window as the man accosted people as they passed by, shoving gospel tracts into their hands. “Look at this guy,” he said, shaking his head. “What is he trying to prove?” Hunter was confused at first, but then followed Cody’s gaze out the window.

“I don’t know, man,” said Hunter. “I kind of admire him, to tell you the truth.” Cody shot him a confused look. They both turned back to look at the man and watched as a group of angsty teens knocked his tracts from his hands and ran away, laughing. “I mean, here’s a guy who believes in something so much that he’s bursting to tell everybody else about it. He’s willing to get ridiculed for it. Hell, I bet he’d die for it. He’s got more courage than I have any day, no matter what his message is.”

“Maybe so,” said Cody, considering it. “But that message is a pretty tough one to swallow. I mean, if there really is a god out there somewhere and he loves us as much as this guy thinks, he sure has a damn funny way of showing it. You should know that better than anyone,” he said, adding the last part as a sort of personal jibe.

“And why is that?” asked Hunter. “I don’t have some personal vendetta against God, if that’s what you’re aiming at. God didn’t make me the way I am, Cody. Biology did. Chance did. And that’s beside the point, anyway.” He slipped an elastic band from his wrist and pulled back his hair into a bun, revealing his angular, masculine jawline. “I don’t have a problem with who I am. Other people do, but that’s on them. I’m not the one with the problem.” As he tightened his bun, he stared off into the distance, a surprised look coming over his face like an idea had dawned on him for the first time. “I’m not the one with the problem,” he said again.

Hunter offered to drive on the way home, but he didn’t put up much of a fight when Cody declined and told him he should get some rest. Still wearing the same royal blue dress, he slept for nearly the entire two-hour drive, his head propped awkwardly between the headrest and passenger window, bobbing back and forth with every bump in the road. For Cody, the peace and silence of the open highway was nice, necessary even, as he worked out what he was going to say to Maisie when he got home. He knew their marriage was a runaway train, and after the confrontation he had with Maisie that morning, he wasn’t sure if he had much more time to pull the emergency brake. The worst part was that if Maisie decided to pack up and leave him, he knew she would be completely justified. Within the last twenty-four hours, a car was detonated like a bomb in front of his house, he had nearly been shot to death in the home of a convicted sex-offender, and he had blatantly ignored Maisie’s request that he distance himself from Luke and Hunter’s feud, putting his livelihood on the line at the same time by skipping work. Every misstep he had made since they came to Blue Banks was another loop in the

growing knot between them, and if he didn't start untangling it now, he wasn't sure the damage could ever be undone.

The drive had done him good, indeed, and as he parked the truck in Hunter's driveway, he had more clarity and resolve than he had in months: he would make things right with Maisie tonight, no matter what. He would confess everything—even the parts he didn't understand, talking them out in front of his wife, trusting that she could help put the pieces together with him, if not for him. As for work, he would ask to be moved back to another shift away from Hunter, and he would wash his hands of whatever it was that would happen between him and his brother. He would race home from work each night to play with Lucie, feed her, be the dad that Coaldust had modeled for him during his own childhood. Yes, on this most unusual June day where he had narrowly escaped death, he would commit once again to life, to love, to Maisie. And it might have gone just like that, if Hunter didn't startle awake from a nightmare, screaming.

“Get off me!” he shouted, still halfway immersed in his dream. His arms flailed upward, scraping the ceiling of the truck, and then he swung around and caught Cody by the throat.

“Hunter!” Cody shouted, pushing back. “Wake up! It's just a dream!” But he kept fighting, batting his hands at Cody.

“We didn't agree to this!” said Hunter. He released Cody as quickly as he had grabbed him, pulling back now and making himself as small as possible, curled up in the corner of the seat. “We said no touching!” His eyes flicked open, but Cody could tell by the way he was shielding his body that he was still trapped in the liminal space between waking and dreaming.

“It’s me, Hunter,” he said gently. He extended his hand in front of him and slowly touched his shoulder. He watched as Hunter’s eyes focused on his, as if the touch of Cody’s hand had pulled him back into reality.

“Cody?” he whispered, tears teaming in his eyes. Cody nodded. He moved his hand from his shoulder to his face, stroking the length of Hunter’s cheek. “Oh, God,” said Hunter, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” He put his own hand on Cody’s and held it there, steadying it against his cheek.

“Sorry for what?” Cody said. But Hunter never answered. Instead, he gripped a fistful of Cody’s shirt, pulled him forward, and kissed him hard. Cody jerked back away, watching as the edge of Hunter’s dress flipped up, exposing his smooth, feminine thighs. “Maisie!” said Cody, as if it were their safety word that would warn Hunter away. “Maisie,” he said again, softer, under his breath.

“I know,” said Hunter. But it was too late. Their bodies had already made the choice. The guilty throb they had beaten back for months had finally grown too large to control, feeding on shame and secrets. It pulled them from the truck in broad daylight, led them through the front door of Hunter’s trailer, bounced them against the hallway walls, and finally thrust them into the bed.

Cody rolled off of Hunter’s sweat-slick back, leaving him face down on the bed, his dress hiked up past his wide hips and slender waist. With the echoes of their animal groans still ringing in his ears, Cody stared at the ceiling, satisfied, confused, elated, regretful. He didn’t want to look at Hunter, didn’t want to find out if what he suspected were true: that once he was unbound from the sexual energy between them, the reality of

what he had done would gut his soul, changing forever the way he saw Hunter and even himself. But even then, as he felt his chest heave up and down with heavy, even breaths, as he steadied his mind by listening to the whirring of the push mower rumbling outside in the neighbor's yard, he knew he loved Maisie just as much as he did the day before, just as much as he would tomorrow. What made his legs tremble under the sheets of the bed, however, was the sudden realization that he may be falling in love with Hunter, too.

He leaned off the bed and grabbed his pants from the floor, rummaging through the pocket to find his cigarettes. When he sat back up and lit one, Hunter had slipped the dress over his head and turned to lie on his back, stretching his legs open to cool off. For the first time, he didn't try to hide the unusual contours of his naked body from Cody, giving him unimpeded access to look at his sloping hips and tiny testicles, his silver-dollar areolas and mole-hill breasts. He turned on his side, studying Cody's face.

"You know why I trusted you, right from the start?" he asked, his lips just inches from Cody's own. "Because despite the fact that you're Luke Culver's brother, you never once asked me to explain what happened between him and me. Why I went to jail, I mean." It took Cody a second to realize this was true, and only another moment to know Hunter was giving him way too much credit. He hadn't asked because he just assumed Hunter had beaten up Luke for luring Candace away.

"I figured you'd tell me when you were ready," he said, mostly telling the truth. Hunter took the cigarette from Cody's mouth and took a drag on it himself. He made a face in response to the taste, too used to the flavored vapor of his e-cigarette. He lay flat on his back once again and closed his eyes.

“After we found out I couldn’t give Candace the baby she wanted, I stopped sleeping with her. Just like that. Turned it off like a faucet,” he said. Cody watched as Hunter’s eyes flicked back and forth under his closed lids, scanning long-forgotten memories from the darkest corners of his past. “We never had sex again, actually. Well, not until—well, you know.” Cody nodded, though he knew Hunter couldn’t see him. “Anyway, I’d heard of Luke Culver from around town from time to time, but I never paid him any mind until Candace started spitting his name at me every chance she got. Luke this, Luke that. She was just trying to make me jealous, and I reckon if I would have just given her the attention she needed then things would have turned out differently.”

“But you couldn’t have known—” Cody started, but Hunter put a finger to his lips and shook his head.

“I don’t need you to try to make me feel better,” he said. “I’m just in a place I need to talk right now, and I need you to listen.”

“Okay,” Cody said. He lit another cigarette, settling in to hear him out.

“Well, she started screwing him. I knew all about it—hell, she told me herself. I couldn’t blame her. Honestly, even though it hurt to know she was out messing around on me, I thought it was the best thing. I was still trying to figure out who I was and how to make myself feel whole again, and I couldn’t see any reasonable way that me and her would stay together. I thought that if she got involved with this Luke Culver guy, well, at least I wouldn’t feel guilty for divorcing a woman who didn’t have no job and nobody to look after her.”

“Man, I wish I was around then to tell you to steer her towards someone else,” said Cody.

“Oh, I don’t know if it would have mattered,” said Hunter. “I think Candace knew he was trouble even then, but she could only take so much. She needed to be loved the same way we all do, and Luke was the one willing to give that to her.” Hunter put his hands behind his head and even smiled a little, walking through his memories with Candace. “She still didn’t give up on me, though. She was sleeping with Luke—had been for months at that point—but she was still coming home every night, still trying to convince me to stay with her, to love her.” Cody remembered the way Candace talked about Hunter the night he went over to get some of Luke’s stuff from her house months before, how she seemed to long for him even then, never willing to give him up completely even when she had married Luke and had his baby. Suddenly, Maisie’s face flashed in front of his mind’s eye, and he felt nauseated.

“Seeing as she put in all that effort,” Hunter continued, “I thought I’d give it one last shot. But I knew if it was going to work, she had to know about everything.” He picked up the dress from beside him on the bed, rubbing the fabric between his fingers. “So when she went out to the store one day, I put on one of her dresses, curled my hair and put on make-up, and waited for her to come home.”

“Oh, so Candace knows about this?” asked Cody, pointing to the dress Hunter had clutched in his hands. Hunter nodded.

“It was the only way. I hadn’t worn a dress since I was in middle school, since the night my dad caught me trying on some clothes I had stolen from Goodwill.” He paused, closing his eyes again, pushing away—Cody assumed—ugly memories of his parents. “I cut that part away from me, sliced it clean off. But then I had this diagnosis, this thing I could use to rationalize it. So I put on the dress, and Candace saw it.” Cody tried to

picture Candace walking through the front door, seeing her husband wearing her clothes. What would a moment like that possibly mean for her?

“That must have been terrifying,” he said, mostly to himself.

“Sure it was,” said Hunter. He flipped on his side again, facing Cody, his face lighting up into a smile. “But you should’ve seen her, Cody. Her eyes—it was like she was seeing me for the first time, like it was all coming together. She kissed me right then and there, smearing her make-up across mine. I’ve never felt more loved than I did at that moment.”

“Sounds beautiful,” said Cody. It really did, despite the jealousy he felt beating at the walls of his chest.

“It was,” he said, the smile fading from his face. “Until Luke came in. He was waiting for her in the car outside. With the shock of her seeing me like I was, Candace just forget he was out there, and—you know Luke—he had to come in and collect his woman.”

“Oh, God,” said Cody, imagining the moment.

“I thought he would laugh at me or tell everybody what a freak I was, but it was different than that. He shook with anger, like the very sight of me in that dress was enough for him to want to kill me. He punched me once, and I let him. I guess I felt like I deserved it. Candace kicked him out and told me she was done with him.”

“Sounds like everything should have worked out, then,” said Cody.

“Maybe it would have, but she was pregnant. She told me after Luke left.” Hunter leaned off the bed and opened the top drawer of his nightstand and pulled out a grainy, black-and-white ultrasound photo. He smoothed out the creases around the edges and

showed it to Cody. “She gave me this that night. We both knew the baby was Luke’s, but she tried to convince me to raise it with her. She said we didn’t have to tell anybody, that we could have everything we wanted and be a normal family.” Cody looked up and saw a tear streaking the side of Hunter’s cheek. “I don’t know if I would have done it or not, but in the end, I didn’t get to make the choice. Luke came back, drunk and belligerent, and started screaming at us through the window. Taunting us. If he was just insulting me I could have handled it, but he started in on Candace. He called her a dyke-loving whore, and I lost it. I grabbed my Louisville Slugger and went outside, and that’s when I blacked out. Next thing I remember, I’m handcuffed in the back of a police car and Luke’s being put on life support at the hospital.”

Cody realized he had been holding his breath and let out a tortuous exhale through slightly-parted lips. What happened the night Luke almost died—Hunter’s version of it, anyway—made him sick that he had every stood in his brother’s corner in the first place. It also made him realize just why the bitterness between Hunter and Luke had lasted as long as it had, and why Hunter felt like he needed to get a gun.

Hunter said he needed to take a shower and rolled out of bed, leaving Cody to deal with his own conflicted thoughts. Could he still go through with his plan to confess to Maisie, even after what had happened in the very bed in which he still lay? He didn’t have much time to make his decision before he heard his cell phone vibrate in the pocket of his pants on the floor. He picked it up to read a text from Maisie, one that would force his hand, whether he liked it or not: *I know where you are. I’m packing for England.*

CHAPTER 17

The week leading up to Independence Day had finally arrived, and with it came the annual summer paid furlough at the mine; so instead of slapping at the snooze button on his nightstand clock radio at the crack of dawn, Cody stretched awake to the warmth of sunlight seeping in through the slatted blinds of his bedroom window. The first few waking moments, as usual, were flickers of peace and promise, held together by his familiar, temporary morning amnesia that allowed him to forget about how his life was unraveling at a blistering pace, spinning out of control like a spool of string tethered to a kite soaring in gale-force winds. It all came back to him in pieces, though, as he listened to the spray of the shower in the adjacent bathroom, even more as each creak of the hardwood beneath his feet awoken his consciousness as he walked from here to there.

Here's how things could have gone: He might have pushed through the bathroom door to hear Maisie humming parts of "Spring" from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* like she had done nearly every morning during the first happy year of their marriage. He could have peeled back the shower curtain and slid in behind her, smelling the honey-suckle sweetness of the conditioner still lathered in her hair. They might have taken turns washing one another with the single luffah they shared, and then he could have told her that after the shower she should take some time for herself that morning—maybe grab an iced macchiato from Spurling's Coffee downtown and go read a book in the park—while he played with Lucie on this rare Monday when he could stay home and listen to her squeals, rather than the relentless grind of the continuous mining machine under ground.

But none of that could happen because it wasn't Maisie in the shower, but Hunter McCready. Maisie had made good on her promise—the one she had texted so succinctly one week prior as Cody lay naked in Hunter's bed—that she was going to Brighton, England to stay with her mother. It wasn't hard for her to track Cody down that day: after she couldn't chase away her lingering suspicion that he was still lying to her, Maisie had called Spits Anderson to make sure he was at work like he promised. When she found out he wasn't there, she made quick work of driving out to Hunter's trailer—where else would he be?—to discover Cody's truck parked out front in plain view, taunting her. When she and Lucie left two days later, Cody said his goodbyes as if it were temporary, as if Maisie was merely following through on a plan to visit her mother she had made way back when she was still pregnant. But she didn't offer a date when she would return, and Cody couldn't bring himself to ask her for one.

Cody peeled off his t-shirt and boxer briefs, flinging them into a nearby hamper on top of a pile of Hunter's clothes. He had stayed over for the past three nights, and his belongings smattered around the house—his work boots sitting beside the mudroom door, his toothbrush lying by the bathroom sink, his copy of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* lying on Maisie's nightstand where she used to keep her journal—seemed to suggest that he wasn't going home anytime soon. Cody caught his own reflection in the bathroom mirror as he brushed his teeth, and paused. This was what he had wanted, wasn't it? Didn't he know all along that this was the path he was on?

He edged into the shower behind Hunter, feeling a sudden tingle throughout his core as he brushed against him. Hunter's body—one that had seemed so exotic and mysterious with its hour-glass contours and soft edges—was becoming familiar and

comfortable to Cody, his hands roving it unapologetically as Hunter lathered his bath sponge. Hunter scrubbed his body with vigor, brushing Cody's hands off his chest in the process. Cody took this as a sort of game, wrapped his arms back around Hunter's waist and pulled him backward into his body.

"Not right now," Hunter said, irritation in his voice. He turned to quickly rinse the soap from his body, and then slipped out of the shower, leaving Cody alone.

"What's gotten into you?" asked Cody from the other side of the closed curtain. "Did I do something wrong?" He peered out of the crack in the curtain and saw Hunter standing at the sink, a towel wrapped around his waist, texting someone on his phone.

"What?" Hunter asked, distracted. "No, you didn't do anything wrong. I just didn't sleep well, that's all." Cody kept watching him, noticing that not once did he look up from his phone. He knew who Hunter was texting without having to ask: Candace.

"Well, maybe if you didn't stay up all night texting her you could actually get some rest." Hunter glanced up from the phone to see Cody glaring out at him through the crack in the curtain. He slapped the phone on the vanity and moved out of Cody's view as he slung off his towel and began to dress. He moved with swift, jerking gestures to make sure Cody knew he had pissed him off. "Look, I'm sorry. It's none of my business," Cody said. He heard the clanking of Hunter's belt as he put on his pants. He tried to change his tone, pushing a lighter inflection into his voice. "Hey, why don't we go somewhere for a couple of days this week while the mine is shut down? Louisville or Lexington. We could get a hotel." Cody adjusted the temperature knob, feeling the needle-prick heat replace the lukewarm water he had been standing under, sending goose bumps flaring down his side.

“And why would we do that?” said Hunter.

“So we could go out in public together, I guess,” said Cody. “You could even, you know, get dressed up. I mean, if you wanted to.” The bathroom fell silent, save the hiss of the shower faucet. Hunter had stopped getting dressed, stopped moving, and Cody felt it.

“I’m not your goddamn fantasy, Cody,” he said sharply. “But I guess you probably felt like that’s what this was, right?” Cody hopped out of the shower without even turning it off, dripping water across the floor as he approached Hunter.

“No, that’s not—I mean, I just thought it would be good for you.”

“How’s that? Huh?” Hunter said, stepping forward, glaring at Cody. “First you tell me who I should text, and now you’re telling me when I should dress up for your pleasure. When did you become such an expert on what’s good for me?”

“I just thought that if we got out of town, you wouldn’t have to hide. You could be who you are, that’s all.” Hunter’s eyes shot open wide and flicked across Cody’s face. Without warning, he picked up a nearby bottle of cologne and threw it against the wall, smashing the vial and sending shards of glass flying around the small bathroom.

“This is who I am!” he shouted. “Why can’t anybody understand that?” Cody looked away like a scolded puppy, the biting stench of the cologne stinging his nostrils. Hunter pulled his black t-shirt over his head and took a deep breath to calm down. “This is me. Right here. I’m raw, and angry, and masculine. And I’m soft, and caring, and feminine, too. I don’t have a switch on my back you can flip for your pleasure, man. And wearing a dress doesn’t make me any more of a woman than wearing a tie makes me a man.” He reached out and touched his fingers to the underside of Cody’s chin, tilting his

face up to look him in the eyes. “I am what I am. Sometimes that changes from moment to moment, but my body makes that choice. Not you, not anybody else.”

Cody nodded. He looked at Hunter, but he could no longer see him in that moment. Instead, he saw Maisie, saw himself running his fingers through her natural blonde hair, remembered the time he stood under a giant oak tree in the quad on the University of Chicago campus and told her she would look sexy with purple hair. How long had he used Maisie for his own pleasure? How many years had he thought of others as extensions of his will? How many degrees of separation were there between him and the sex offender who humiliated Hunter in Louisville?

“I’m so sorry,” Cody whispered, to Hunter, to Maisie, to God.

“We can’t do this anymore,” said Hunter. He began gathering his things from around the bathroom sink, and Cody was sure he’d soon be digging his clothes from the hamper in the closet. “There’s only one person in this world who has ever let me exist as the person I was meant to be, every flaw, every contradiction. It’s time I stop running away from that.”

“But what about Maisie?” said Cody, starry eyed, expecting Hunter to connect the dots. “She’s gone. I let her go.”

“Yeah?” he said. “Well, it sounds like you have some work to do, too.”

The sticky evening air was molasses-thick, the lingering daytime heat trapped in the settling moisture of the storm gathering in the gray clouds in the distance. Cody heard the first clap of thunder just as he pulled his truck under the carport at the back his mother’s house on Main Street. He grabbed the frozen banana cream pie he had just

bought from Walmart and rushed under the awning of the back porch to beat the rain.

After rapping his knuckles against the wood frame of the screen door, he pushed inside, then flipped his dirty shoes off in the corner of the utility room.

“Cody?” called Lori Ann. “Is that you?” The savory-sweet scent of honey-glazed ham pulled Cody through the den and toward the kitchen, where he saw his mother frying thick slices of peppered bacon in a cast-iron skillet. He kissed her on the back of the head and thwacked the rock-hard pie on the counter.

“An entire ham isn’t enough pork for you?” Cody asked, picking a crispy bit of bacon from the pan and popping it in his mouth. “You really need to top it off with more pig?” He poured himself a glass of sweet tea from the pitcher on the counter.

“You know good and well I ain’t never served a salad without homemade bacon bits, and I don’t plan to start now,” she said. Cody picked a crouton from the top of the mixed salad on the counter, only to have Lori Ann slap his hand with the back of her tongs. “You best get your fingers out of my food, Cody Alan, unless you’re aiming to lose a couple of them.” She winced as she turned back to the stove, rubbing her chest.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” asked Cody. “You don’t look so hot.”

“Oh, it’s just my flutter-bug acting up again,” she said. “I’ll take me a baby aspirin here in a bit.” Cody noticed beads of sweat gathering on her brow.

“This could be serious, Momma. And calling your heart a flutter-bug doesn’t make it any less so,” said Cody. “Why don’t you sit down and let me handle the rest of the cooking? Or better yet, we can call Brother Jim and say we need to postpone.” Lori Ann had asked Cody over to have dinner with her and the pastor—“I’m worried for your soul,” she had said after he hadn’t been to church in a few weeks. Cody bristled at the

idea at first, but he had felt so overwhelmed with guilt as of late that he actually thought it might do him some good. Besides, he always seemed at peace in the presence of Brother Jim, just like his father had.

“I’m fine, Cody. Just make yourself useful and set the table. Four places.” Cody grabbed a stack of plates from the cupboard overhead, but stopped suddenly as he had a realization.

“Four?” he asked sharply. “Who’s the fourth, Mom?” Lori Ann kept her back turned to Cody as she flipped the bacon, remaining silent. She didn’t have to say anything, as the answer was entering the front door at that very moment, dripping rainwater through the living room and hallway, finally standing in the kitchen doorframe.

“Well, shit,” said Luke. “I should’ve known this was a set-up.”

Brother Jim had a way of filling up a room with his presence, especially when sitting at a dinner table. He tucked his cloth napkin unapologetically into collar of his shirt and dug in, reaching this way and that across the table to get a buttered roll or the saltshaker. He laughed with his whole body—mostly at his own jokes—a chortle that started in his throat and ended in his belly. Cody and Luke sat at opposite ends of the long rectangular table, with Pastor Jim defusing the space between them, flicking his attention back and forth between the brothers as he tried to juggle two separate conversations. For her part, Lori Ann paced feverishly from the table to the counter and stove, refilling mason jars of sweet tea or spooning more cream-style corn on Brother Jim’s empty plate, regenerating the pastor’s food like manna from heaven while he did his part to get the brother’s to acknowledge each other.

“Alright, fellas, let’s cut to the chase,” said Brother Jim, leaning back from the table and loosening his belt. “I didn’t know I was signing up for an intervention when I came over here tonight, and I suspect you two didn’t know what you were getting into, either.” They all glanced at Lori Ann, who finally sat at the table, short of breath. Cody leaned over and felt her forehead with the back of his hand.

“You ever take that aspirin?” he asked. She took a long gulp of water and brushed him off.

“Don’t you pay me any mind,” she said. “Your pastor is speaking, son. You best show him some respect.”

“Now, look,” said Brother Jim. “You two ain’t the first brothers in history to not get along, but this thing don’t need to have a Cain and Abel ending, if you catch my drift.” The pastor chuckled, trying to ease the tension in the room, but it didn’t work. Cody caught eyes with Luke for the first time all night. He looked away just as quickly, watching Luke’s work-worn hands push his untouched plate of food away from him into the center of the table.

“All due respect, Pastor,” started Luke, gripping the handle of a serrated knife, studying the blade like he was discovering it for the first time, “you ain’t going to be able to make this right. See, my brother here, he ain’t been telling the truth.” He angled the business end of the knife down, pointing it directly at Cody. “Secrets, Brother Jim. He’s hiding, running scared. Like Adam after he ate that apple.” Cody went to take a drink of his sweet tea, but he couldn’t steady his hands enough around the jar to keep from shaking, so he busied himself by slicing through a hunk of pork.

“Well, there’s not a one of us who don’t have secrets of our own, Luke,” said Brother Jim as he served himself a heap of blackberry cobbler from the glass baking dish Lori Ann had set on the table. “Jesus warns us in the Gospel of Matthew about looking at the speck in our brother’s eye while ignoring the plank in our own. Start with yourself. And then, if you think Cody here is trapped in something he can’t see, I reckon the best thing you can do is pray for him.” Lori Ann picked up a cloth potholder from the table and fanned herself, catching Cody’s eye.

“That’s a good idea, pastor,” said Luke. He glared at Cody. “Hell, why don’t we just have us a prayer right here and now? You want to start us off, baby brother?”

“Mom, you need to lie down,” said Cody, trying to turn the conversation toward Lori Ann, who clutched her chest.

“No? Well, I’ll start then,” said Luke. He stretched his arms theatrically toward the ceiling. “Dear God, please forgive my brother for turning his back on his family, for sitting idly by while a convicted felon tries to snake back into our community.”

“Alright now, Luke,” said Brother Jim, putting up a hand to stop the show. “Taunting the Lord isn’t in your best interest, son.” Luke never even glanced at him, but stood up and closed his eyes, continuing on.

“Forgive Cody, Father in Heaven, for spending every goddamn waking moment with the faggot sonofabitch who nearly killed me.” Cody pushed back from the table, rattling the dishes as he stood. Lori Ann tried to say something, but she couldn’t catch her breath long enough to get the words out.

“That’s enough now,” said Brother Jim, now standing himself. “You’re upsetting your mother.” He stretched out his arms, an open palm facing toward each of the

brothers, as if he could somehow create a force field to keep them apart. Still, Luke went on.

“Absolve him of his sin, dear Jesus, for running his wife out of town just so he could play house with that cocksucking motherfu—” before he could finish, Cody leaned forward and grabbed him by the throat, catching his brother off guard. He yanked him back across the table, pulling the tablecloth and dishes with him onto the floor. Brother Jim tried to pull Cody off, but he got caught in the way of Luke’s kicking legs and was thrust onto his back in the corner of the room.

“Don’t you ever talk about him that way!” Cody screamed, holding Luke by the collar and punching at him with his other hand. They scrambled on the floor, neither of them able to gain traction. As Cody reared back to deliver another punch, Luke grabbed his arm and overpowered him, turning him facedown on the linoleum floor. He picked up a carving knife from the floor beside Cody’s head. Luke pressed his weight down on Cody’s back, leaned toward his ear and whispered.

“You did this to yourself, Cody,” he said, moisture from his hot breath flicking into Cody’s ear. Cody exhaled and felt his body go limp. He waited for the sharp sting of the knife, the piercing burn through his heart that he probably deserved, if not from Luke. But it never came. Instead, Lori Ann let out a shrill cry and collapsed to the floor beside the brothers, her contorted face landing on the dirty floor, just beside Cody’s.

“Jesus,” said the pastor, gasping for air from the corner. “Jesus, help us all.”

Cody followed the ambulance as it screamed out of downtown and up Pike Lane towards the hospital, but after he parked his truck and trudged through the rain to the

emergency room entrance, he couldn't bring himself to go inside, couldn't bear to sit in those familiar seafoam green chairs in the waiting room, picking at his fingernails and drinking vending machine coffee until some smug doctor came to tell him what he already knew: his mother was dead.

He sat on a bench under the awning of the walkway leading up to the door, pulled his cigarettes from his pocket, and lit one up. His heart would explode one day, too, from the cigarettes or something else. Some days he felt like it already had. And what did it matter, in the end? If it happened tomorrow, who would sit outside on this unyielding cast iron bench smoking a cigarette while a team of strangers tried to shock him back to existence inside? If he went on living, how long would it be until he no longer knew Maisie's address, until little Lucie only knew him as the abstraction he was becoming even then: the shell of a father she once had, existing only as an image of the man in the picture pressed in her baby book, who once held her inchworm fingers under the warm glow of the heat lamp in an isolette bed?

As he smashed the head of his spent cigarette into the ashtray on top of a trashcan beside the bench, he glanced up to see Luke emerging from the hospital door. He paused in front of Cody, let out a sigh, and then collapsed beside him on the bench.

"Got one for me?" he asked, motioning towards the cigarette. Cody fished one out of his pocket and handed it to Luke, who accepted it with a quiet nod. "They got her stabilized in there, believe it or not," he said. "They're gonna run some tests and figure out what's next, surgery or whatnot." He took a long drag on the cigarette and blew the smoke out toward the rain. The clouds were lighter on the horizon, promising an end to

the storm. A gust of wind blew a cool mist sideways under the awning, wetting Cody's bare arms.

"So you heard about Maisie, then?" said Cody. It wasn't a question as much as an acknowledgment of what Luke had said over dinner.

"Not all the details, but I know enough to figure it don't look good," said Luke. "Look, if it makes you feel better, McCready brought an end to my marriage, too." Cody clenched his fist together, fighting the urge to pick back up what they started at their mom's house.

"This isn't about him," he said.

"Oh, hell. Of course it is," said Luke, flicking his cigarette into the ashtray. He turned back toward Cody and looked him in the eye. "Look, I know things aren't square with us right now, but I need you to hear something. I never intended you to get mixed up in any of this. You're my brother. You're blood. That counts for something, especially now that—" He stopped and flicked his hand toward the hospital, choking up for a moment. Cody never remembered seeing his brother cry in his entire life, so the emotion caught him off guard.

"Yeah, I know," said Cody. He wasn't sure what exactly he meant, but it seemed like something he should offer. Luke wiped a stiff hand across his nose and over his eyes, as if he had an itch; but Cody knew the truth.

"This thing between me and McCready is coming off the rails," he said. "I can't stop it, Cody. Even if you're on the tracks with him."

“Can’t you see this is all one way?” said Cody, trying to get his voice level.
“Hunter’s staying out of your way. You’re the one pushing the issue here. He’s not some damn villain.”

“Is that right?” asked Luke. “Then why is his cell number splashed all over my wife’s phone bill?” Cody shot him a look, and Luke nodded. “You want my advice?”
Luke asked.

“Of course not,” said Cody.

“You need to get on a plane and make things right with your woman. If you know what’s good for you, you won’t come back at all.”

“Is that a threat?” Cody asked, staring straight ahead.

“No, I’m done with threats, brother,” said Luke. “It’s a final warning. The last thing I’ll say. You stay away from Hunter McCready. My divorce just went final with Candace, and I ain’t got nothing else to lose.” Luke gave him a firm slap on the back, and then ducked into the rain towards his Jeep in the parking lot.

After the hospital staff told Cody he wouldn’t be able to see Lori Ann until the morning, he drove home to the echoes of an empty house and tried to call Maisie. She told him she needed some distance, but no matter: he had only spoken to her once she left for England, and he couldn’t take it anymore. He tried calling three times with no answer before he finally realized she likely had her phone turned off, as it was approaching three o’clock in the morning in Brighton. Tomorrow, he thought. He would make things right tomorrow.

His resolve lasted long enough for him to take a shower and settle down in bed, but not long enough for him to fall asleep. Staring in the face of another torturous, sleepless night, he threw on his shoes and headed to see the one person who could make him feel better, despite his better judgment. As he bumped his truck over the train tracks near the entrance to Weeping Willows subdivision, a familiar black Jeep raced past his truck in the opposite direction, nearly clipping his side mirror. In the distance, he could already see the orange-red glow flashing up into the dark summer sky. When he pulled in front of Hunter's home, his mouth dropped agape as the flames licked around the trailer's frame, melting the aluminum walls, bending the metal roof into an upside-down apex. Cody slammed the truck in park and jumped out just in time to see Hunter himself emerge from the mouth of his crumbling home, crawling on all fours in the lawn. He stood, silhouetted against the brilliant amber glow, and turned to face the flames, his semi-automatic pistol dangling in his hand by his side.

CHAPTER 18

The first day after Hunter disappeared from town, Cody didn't think much about it. But when his phone calls and texts were still going unanswered on the third day, he began to worry that something else—something even worse than losing a home in a violent display of arson—had happened to Hunter McCready. Not even Candace knew where he was, so Cody found himself tracking down the only other person who might have an idea about where Hunter had gone: Spits Anderson.

She invited him out onto the deck overlooking her backyard, the bubblegum glow of evening dusk settling across the open country, and handed him a tall glass of lemonade. She plunked down next to him on a wrought iron deck swing and let out a labored sigh. They looked together out at the sprawling fields hemmed in by woods on either side, and Cody could still imagine the velvet-horn deer being mauled by the big buck in the snow at Christmastime. He suspected that if he walked out to the break in the woods, he might still be able to see traces of the deer's fractured bones.

"I reckon I know why you're here, Culver," said Spits as she slipped a shiny metal flask from her hip pocket, "but I don't have any answers for you." She unscrewed the cap of the flask and spiked her lemonade. Without even asking whether he wanted some, she poured a splash of liquor into Cody's drink as well. As the sun continued to dip below the western hills, the intermittent flashes of lightning bugs popped over the cattails at the back of the property. Spits took a long swig of the drink, and then went on. "This

ain't the first time my nephew has disappeared like this. I don't blame him, with all he's been through and everything. But to tell you the truth, this time feels different."

"I know what you mean," said Cody. "The night his trailer got torched, he had this look in his eyes—this vacant stare, like someone had finally managed to gut his soul." He remembered how he had tried to touch him, to hold him, only to have Hunter push him away. Cody begged him to stay the night at his place—in separate rooms even, he had added—but Hunter had pointed the gun at him and told him to leave, so he did, even before the fire department had arrived. "I just don't think he can take any more from this town. Nobody here understands who he is, or even wants to." Spits knocked back the rest of her drink, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and belched.

"Shoot, Cody, you don't understand who he is, either," she said. Cody started to contradict her in defensiveness, but she warned him back with a careful hand. "Now, I know Hunter has told you about his past, about his condition. About what all he's gone through because of it. But knowing about it isn't the same thing as understanding it, son." She took Cody's glass of lemonade from his hand, swished a giant gulp of it between her cheeks like mouthwash, and then slugged it down.

"Help yourself," said Cody, smiling. Spits kicked her feet against the deck and set them to swinging, just enough to feel a gentle breeze.

"He's been downright rejected his whole life," said Spits, swirling the lemonade in her glass, the ice cubes clanking against the sides. "He grew up east Tennessee with his folks—my brother and his wife. I wasn't in his life back then, but he tells me he was always in trouble, always getting picked on by other kids and then firing back. That's common with kids with his condition. Of course, his parents didn't know anything about

that. Nobody did.” Cody thought back to each time he had seen Hunter lash out and realized, perhaps for the first time, that Hunter was never the one to initiate the conflict, always reacting to someone else’s violence. He thought about Hunter holding the handgun in front of his burning trailer and wondered what his reaction would be this time.

“He had a pretty bad break with his parents, didn’t he?” asked Cody. Spits nodded, gathering her thoughts before responding.

“My brother is a hard man, always was,” said Spits. “He shut me out of his life long before Hunter was born, back when I first came out and showed up for dinner at his house with my girlfriend. Called me dyke and spit in my face. Then, the best part was he sent me a Bible in the mail two weeks later. That was the last time I heard from him for nearly fifteen years.” A smile stretched across Spits’ face as she remembered. “Then he calls me up late one night, drunk and mean as a snake, cussing up a storm.” She laughed to herself, and then launched into her best drunk-morally-righteous-brother impersonation: “*My boy’s wearing high heels, damnit! He’s got the queer gene just like you! What did I do to deserve this, Carol?*” She howled with laughter, tears gathering at the edges of her eyes. She snorted and slapped Cody’s knee, but quickly sobered.

“Nobody had called me Carol for more than a decade. It was right then in that moment, hearing all that bitterness and hatred curled up in his throat, that I decided Hunter was gonna have someone in his life who loved him. Unconditionally. Agape love, that’s what Brother Jim calls it. The love of God herself. I drove to Tennessee the next day and told him he could come live with me. His parents had his stuff out on the lawn within an hour.”

“No wonder he finds it so hard to tell people about—well, about any of it,” said Cody. Spits pulled her wallet from the back pocket of her jeans, rifling through it as if she were suddenly reminded of something.

“This here’s a picture I took of him the first week he was living at my house,” she said, handing the worn photo to Cody. It was of Hunter, wearing a flowing purple sundress, standing against the weathered wood of an old pole barn, staring wistfully at his feet as brilliant green blades of grass poked at his slender ankles. “Bought him that dress the day after he came home, but it took me a week to convince him to wear it in front of me.”

“He was lovely,” said Cody, using the only word that seemed to fit. He tried to give the picture back to Spits, but she waved him off.

“You keep it,” she said. “I don’t know why, but I feel like you should.” Cody fingered the creased edges of the photo as the lightning bugs continued to dazzle the dusk sky above the field, quieting him into memories of his childhood, of chasing fireflies between the trees of his wooded back yard, swiping them into a glass jar and cupping the top with his hand. The best part was feeling their tiny legs scuttle across his tender palm. He had read somewhere that you could distinguish different species of lightning bugs by the pattern of their blinks, their own evolutionary Morse Code. Some would signal only to attract mates, while others would watch the blinking patterns to hunt down and devour the weaker species. The meanest of the predators would blink in cadence with the peaceful fireflies, camouflaging themselves, pretending as if they were looking to mate only to lure in their unsuspecting prey.

“You don’t think he’d take off for good, do you?” asked Cody, suddenly thinking of Hunter. “I mean, if his parole officer finds out he’s skipped town, he could end up back in jail.”

“Your guess is as good as mine, Cody,” said Spits. She flung the remaining ice cubes from her glass off the porch and into the flowerbed. “I hope I’m wrong, but I just don’t know if he’ll be able to get past this one. Even if he comes back physically, you’ve got to wonder what something like this does to his mind. To his soul.”

The more Cody learned about Hunter and his past, the more he realized just how ignorant he had been. The night was closing in now, stripes of orange-pink sky closing into an azure haze over the beechnut trees beyond the property line. Some other night, he might have only felt the hush of a peaceful summer night, driven back to the farmhouse on Old Herrodsburg Road, and drifted off to sleep. But as he thought about Maisie tucking Lucie into bed halfway around the globe, as he pictured Hunter being ridiculed by his father, as he remembered Luke’s Jeep swerving down the road away from Hunter’s flame-engulfed trailer, he knew this night would be something else, something full of justice, if not violence.

Lori Ann was still in the hospital recovering from double bypass surgery, so she wasn’t home to see Cody pull his truck off of Main Street and into her driveway. She couldn’t have reminded him that he didn’t have to clamber on top of the low-sloping roof and squeeze through the second floor window, that it would have been easier to get the spare house key that was hidden under the Kentucky Wildcats garden gnome sitting beside the rose bushes. She didn’t have the chance to talk him out of going down in the

basement to his dad's dust-covered gun safe, taking his old H&R Handi Rifle, and shoving extra rounds of ammunition into his front pockets. Most of all, there was no way for her to stop him from driving out to Luke's rental home at the outskirts of town in the dead of night, from banging an angry fist three times against the heart of the door, from cocking the gun and waiting for his brother to answer, for better or for worse.

But Luke didn't answer. Instead, when the door swung open, it was Marcus Bradstreet who was staring down the barrel of the rifle, jumping back with his hands in the air as Cody's finger trembled against the trigger.

He let out a shout and then scrambled backward, ducking his head this way and that to get out of the gun's path. Cody was caught off guard, too, lowering the gun and peering into the ranch house to check for Luke. Once Bradstreet had gathered himself, he tried to slam the door, but Cody wedged his foot against the jamb and thrust it back open.

"Where is he?" asked Cody, raising the gun back up at Bradstreet, who flung his hands back in the air in defense.

"C'mon, man! Put the gun down," he said, backing against the wall. "You want to talk to your brother, all you have to do is ask. This ain't the wild, wild west."

"What's going on?" called Luke from the living room off to the left. Cody lowered his gun once more and stepped fully into the apartment, where he saw Luke sitting behind a folding table with a heap of poker chips stacked in front of him. To his left sat Trevor Adams, a mammoth of a man with a slick bald head and pillow-thick beard. Cody flicked his eyes back and forth between the three of them, realizing these were the exact men Candace had implicated in trying to kill Hunter down in the mine.

“Well hey there, baby brother,” said Luke, laying his cards down in front of him. He eyed the gun, but didn’t acknowledge it. “Grab a seat and we’ll deal you in. Buy-in is twenty bucks, but we’ll take an I.O.U. if you ain’t got it on you.” Trevor Adams scooted away from the table, glancing anxiously at Luke for a clue as to what to do.

“I’m going to ask you this one time,” said Cody. He lifted the gun to put Luke in his imagined crosshairs. “Where is Hunter McCready?” He glanced back over his left shoulder for a split second, just long enough to see that Bradstreet was still at a safe distance behind him.

“Let me see,” said Luke, squinting his eyes, rubbing his chin like he was hard in thought. A smug smile curled the edges of his lips. “You check the lingerie section at J.C. Penny’s?” Cody felt his nostrils flare and his lips twitch. He marched six paces forward and rested the barrel of the gun on Luke’s forehead. Trevor stood from behind the table, but Luke caught his wrist and then waved him off.

“Last chance, Luke,” said Cody. “You tell me what you did with him, or I’m putting a bullet in your brain.” Cody felt the shake of his own hands and wondered if his brother could feel the vibrations in the metal of the gun between his eyes. How did it come to this? How could it ever end? Luke locked eyes with Cody, and smiled.

“But that’s what you said last time, wasn’t it?” asked Luke. He either was truly convinced that Cody couldn’t do it, or he was really good at faking it. “You know good and well you ain’t never had the balls to shoot anything, much less your own flesh and blood.” Cody watched as Trevor Adams cocked his eyebrow and smiled, daring him to prove Luke wrong. Cody took one more step forward, pushing Luke’s head back with the gun to a 45-degree angle. He stood looking down at his brother, convincing himself that

he could pull the trigger if he had to. How much worse could jail be than the prison his life had become in Blue Banks? Would he really be any more lonely in a concrete cell than he was in that echoing, empty house on Old Herrodsburg Road?

“Hey, how about we make a deal,” said Luke, his voice cracking around the edges just enough to tell Cody he wasn’t so sure of himself anymore. “I’ll tell you where he is if you tell me something in return. You gotta be honest though. Scout’s honor,” said Luke. He narrowed his eyes and let Cody’s silence stand as agreement. “How does his dick taste? Was it worth losing your wife?”

Cody felt his shirt being yanked backward by Bradstreet, and that’s when the gun went off. The blast was stronger than he had expected, and in the split second before his logic could catch up with the situation, he felt as if he had been the one shot. By instinct, he jarred the butt of the gun backwards, catching Bradstreet in the gut and sending him flailing to the ground. Cody held the gun in front of him in protection as he backed toward a wall, making sure nobody else could get behind him. Shouts were coming from every direction, but nobody was quite sure where the bullet had landed. Nobody except Trevor Adams.

“He shot me!” he shouted, as if convincing himself it was true. “The sonofabitch shot me!” He clutched his right bicep with his left hand, pulling back his palm to see it dripping with blood. Cody bumped into the wall and could hardly stand.

“He pulled my arm,” Cody mumbled to himself. He had shot a man. He couldn’t take that back, even if he didn’t mean to. God forgive me, he thought, though he didn’t say it. There was no turning back, and he knew he had to see this thing through. He

steadied himself and raised the gun once more. This time, Luke wasn't making any jokes. He stood and raised his hands in the air.

"Jesus, Cody!" he said. "I don't know where he is, okay? What do you want from me?" Cody looked at his brother's quivering lip, his glossy eyes, and knew in an instant he was telling the truth. Maybe Luke had burned Hunter's home to the ground, but at least Hunter had left on his own volition. He was in control, and that was worth something. Cody dropped the gun to the floor and wiped a sweaty hand through his hair.

"He pulled my arm," he said again, this time louder. It was as close to an apology he could get. Bradstreet scooted to the corner of the room and propped himself up against the wall. Trevor Adams winced in pain, but a quick glance back down at his arm told Cody that the bullet had only grazed him. Thank God, he thought.

"I don't care what happened," said Trevor, dabbing at his wound with a paper towel he grabbed from the table. "You shot me, and I'm calling the cops." He reached for his cellphone with his good arm, but Luke swiped it from the table before he could get it.

"Nobody's calling anybody," he said. He came out from behind the table and walked over to Cody. He rested his hands gently on his shoulders and looked Cody squarely in the eyes. "This thing between us," he said in a measured voice. "Whatever it is, it's over. You understand that?"

"Nothing's over until I see Hunter back in town, safe and sound," said Cody. Luke shook his head and released Cody from his grip.

"I've never understood you, Cody. That's no secret," said Luke as he took his seat back at the table. "And we all know that you got lion's share of the book smarts between us. So before you go, do me this one favor. Help me see the logic of this thing from your

perspective.” Cody suddenly felt the weight of the spare bullets tugging at his pockets. It was enough to make him nauseated. Luke busied his hands by stacking the poker chips back in front of him as if nothing had happened, as if the game would just resume as usual. “Think about your life before you met McCready, and then think about what your life has become since,” he said. “Now tell me with a straight face that you really want him to come back.” Cody started to talk, to say something in defense of Hunter or maybe himself, but words failed him as they had done so many times before. The question wasn’t new to Cody: It was the same one that taunted him the last three nights as he twisted between the sheets of his bed. But now it was coming from someone else, and that was enough to make it hit just a little harder.

In the end, no answer he could muster would ever hold the whole truth, so he didn’t even try to give one. Instead, he pulled the extra rounds of ammunition out of his pocket, dumped them on top of the rifle, and went back outside to once again face the dead of night, alone.

CHAPTER 19

If a town's love of its country could be measured in American flags per capita, Blue Banks would have been the undisputed champion of national patriotism. The city government itself had just purchased 1,776 brand new Old Glories to display—on the old roundabout, in every city park and government building, and the whole of downtown—making good on Mayor Glensdale's campaign promise to bring in tourism dollars by rebranding the city with a new regional slogan: *Celebrate Freedom in America's Town: (Red, White, and) Blue Banks, Kentucky*. But the city council soon discovered that, beyond the clever connection to the year of the nation's founding, owning 1,776 flags represented a logistical problem. As one concerned citizen put it at a recent town hall meeting: *Where the hell you gonna put all them flags?*

It was no surprise, then, that on the weekend before Independence Day, temporary flagpoles were staked into the ground every twenty yards up and down River Road from one end of town to the other, starting at Regional Hospital and stretching all the way to Riverside Baptist Church. As Cody pulled his truck into the parking lot of the latter for a special "Faith and Freedom" Saturday night service, he felt like he could be the star of a country music video: a rusted-out old truck careening around bends on a winding road, stars and stripes flapping against a backdrop of the sunset over the river, as the little Baptist church came into focus on the horizon.

He would rather have been anywhere but church that day, but he came at his mother's personal request. She was released from the hospital the day before,

and Cody was eaten up with all kinds of guilt over his part in stressing her out to the point of a heart attack. He was still able to muster enough courage to decline at first, but then she mentioned—off hand, as she was apt to do when she wanted to close the conversation with a guilt-inducing zinger—that her primary physician had discovered the presence of atrial fibrillation in the upper chambers of her “flutterbug” while she was recovering. “Maybe we can go to the Faith and Freedom service next time,” she had said, clutching her chest, “That is, if the good Lord sees it fit to let me live another year.”

He sat in his truck until he heard the congregation crooning “God Bless America” from the inside, and then he slipped through the back doors, hoping he could sneak in during the song without being noticed so he wouldn’t have to speak to anyone. He should have known better, though: as soon as his foot hit the burnt-orange fabric of the sanctuary carpet, Lori Ann was waving her arms from the second pew on the right and hollering his name over the music, so loud that everyone in the three pews behind her stopped singing and eyed Cody as he walked down the aisle to join his mother.

“Settle down, Momma,” he whispered as he slid in the pew beside her. “You’re liable to give yourself another heart attack flapping your arms around like that.” He gave her a quick peck on the cheek, and that’s when he noticed Luke sitting stoically on the other side of her, his lips clamped into a rigid line while everyone else stood singing around him. Cody gave him a quiet nod and then instinctively glanced down at his own empty palms, still feeling the weight of the gun in his hands from the night before. What happened at Luke’s rental house had rattled Cody to the core. Perhaps even more unsettling than the shot he accidentally fired into Trevor Adams’ arm was the question Luke asked him about Hunter McCready, and the fact that nearly 24 hours later he still

didn't have an answer. As the song came to an end and the congregation clapped and shouted around him, Cody looked at his brother one more time and grabbed ahold of a realization he had beaten away all day: maybe Luke was right. Maybe Hunter skipping town was, by the grace of God, a chance for Cody to break free from him once and for all, and vice versa. Perhaps after the service he would drive back to the farmhouse, stuff the remnants of his once-happy life into a single carryon suitcase, and head to the airport to catch the first connecting flight to London, to Maisie, to his little girl.

Lori Ann pulled him back into the moment as she braced herself on his arm to ease back onto the pew, which told Cody that her body was still weaker than she let on. The wooden benches creaked all around the worship hall, groaning under the weight of the congregation as they sat in unison, waiting for Brother Jim to take his place on the pulpit. But when the room settled and the pastor had still not moved from his seat on the front pew, a disquieting hush engulfed the sanctuary, broken only by the shrill cry of a newborn baby echoing from somewhere near the back. For nearly two agonizing minutes, Cody watched as people shifted nervously in their seats, fanning away the lingering afternoon heat with crinkled church bulletins. With good reason, they had all expected the same upbeat, patriotic celebration of a sermon that had been the hallmark of the Faith and Freedom service for the past twenty years; but as Brother Jim finally climbed up onto the little stage—one careful, lead-footed step at a time—there was no question that he would deliver an altogether different sort of message. He cleared his throat and adjusted the microphone, sending a sharp squeal of feedback through the speakers.

“Freedom,” he said, gripping the ornamental wooden podium on either side of the microphone, “is a word that should mean more than fireworks and flags, especially to

believers of Jesus Christ.” He looked out over the crowd, searching every face, making eye contact with those brave enough to fight the urge to look away when his gentle gaze settled on them. “Fellow Christians, it is right and true that our nation’s independence is worth celebration, and it is good indeed that we have set aside the Fourth of July for that very occasion. But over the past three days, I’ve been witness to something—a resurrection of sorts, you might say. And during this process, I’ve been reminded of an important truth from the third chapter of Second Corinthians. *The Lord is the Spirit*, says verse 17, *and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*”

“Amen!” shouted a voice from far off to Cody’s right, a cry that stirred a timid round of applause from several uncomfortable folks trying to push energy back into the room. Brother Jim smiled and waved them off with a peaceful hand stretched outward toward the congregation. Cody didn’t know where he was going, but he already felt pulled into the pastor’s message as if it were tailor-made for him.

“The freedom of which I speak, brothers and sisters, is not about our country or any man-made declaration, but about the basic human right to exist freely under the sacrifice of the Living God, fully atoned by the blood of Christ.” As he paused to wipe the gathering spittle from the corners of his mouth, a stillness hung over the sanctuary like the Spirit of God hovering over the formless waters of creation in Genesis. This would normally be the time when the congregation would shout and clap, even holler out in a call-and-response with the pastor as he worked into a fever. But there was a fire in his eyes and a warning in his voice that kept them at bay. Cody glanced at Luke in his periphery, watching as his brother picked at a loose thread unraveling from the spine of the Bible he held in his hands.

“The promise of our freedom is not just for the afterlife, but for the here and now,” Brother Jim continued, pointing his finger out toward the congregation. “In Christ, you are free from the bondage of sin. In Christ, you are free from the slavery of your flesh.” He paused once more, looking now past the crowd, past everything. “And in Christ, you should be free to live as the person you were created to be. To love who you were meant to love.” His hands began to tremble against the sides of the podium, and his bottom lip began to quiver. He flipped the microphone away from his body, tilted his head back, and whispered a silent prayer into the air above him.

As the pastor continued to pray, Cody felt the vibrations of his soul deep within him, as if he were a tuning fork struck by the mallet of conviction. This was the Holy Spirit of whom he had heard about for so long, but never felt. For the first time in his life, he knew what it meant to pray, that it was never about his words, but about the attunement of his heart. He clenched his eyelids around the hot tears that threatened to fall, laying his hands on his lap, his palms open toward the ceiling, toward heaven, waiting to be filled. The rumble of the world around him softened into a quiet murmur, as if his ears were stuffed with cotton. If he weren’t so lost in the moment, he might have noticed the sound of the back door swinging open, the heavy wood plunking against the doorstep. If the Spirit hadn’t been searching his soul and dampening his senses, he would have heard the commotion of people stirring in the seats around him, or felt the grip of his mother’s hand tighten around the tender underside of his wrist. He could have watched, as did the rest of the congregation, as Hunter McCready made his way down the center aisle, eyes forward, head held high.

“Son-of-a-bitch,” Luke mumbled. Cody snapped from his meditative state, feeling the clash of Luke’s curse against the peace in which he had been lost. As soon as his eyes opened, he saw Hunter standing on the pulpit beside Brother Jim. His breath caught in his throat as he studied his friend, his former lover, as he looked him over to make sure he was okay. Cody hardly noticed Hunter’s clean-shaven head, or his flower-print skirt. He paid no attention to his black polo shirt or to his flawless eye shadow and blush. While everyone else gasped at how his rugged steel-toed boots belied the grace of the bracelets linked around both of his slender wrists, Cody only saw the light in his eyes and freedom of his smile.

As the initial shock of Hunter’s entry passed and the room settled down, the congregation waited with bated breath to see how Brother Jim would respond. He was their leader, a spiritual pillar of the community. Cody trusted his judgment—maybe more than he trusted that of any other living person—partly because he knew how much respect his father held for him, but mostly because Cody himself had, time and again, seen the pastor’s grace and love divvied amongst a community that had so little to offer in return.

But the pastor, in fact, did nothing. Instead, he stepped away from the podium, motioning for Hunter to take the microphone. So this was planned, Cody thought. Hunter had never disappeared from town at all, but instead sought refuge in the one place that was safe from the town’s judgment, safe from Luke’s harassment, even safe from Cody’s uncontrolled lust: Brother Jim’s parsonage, a stone’s throw from the church itself. Hunter stepped behind the microphone and adjusted it up so that he could speak. He cleared his throat and scanned the crowd, one row at a time. He gazed out at each face, each

furrowed brow, each set of eyes. When he reached Cody's row, he paused, letting his gaze linger. Without warning, he reached into the beige satchel strapped over his shoulder and pulled out the semi-automatic handgun. A woman cried out from near the back, and several people ducked under the pews in front of them. Hunter raised the gun high above his head, but just as folks began scrambling over one another toward the door, the pastor held both hands in the air.

"Wait!" he shouted. And they did, trusting him with their lives. Hunter stepped out from behind the podium and toward the front of the raised pulpit. In a slow, careful motion, he unloaded the ammunition clip. Then he took the gun and clip in his hands, lowered his body, and placed them gently onto the alter before the congregation. Cody felt Lori Ann's grip loosen around his wrist, and listened as she let out a slow, labored sigh. Hunter stood once more and faced the congregation.

"I forgive you," he said, just loud enough to be heard. Cody saw that he was looking in his direction, but whether his eyes were on him or his brother, he couldn't be sure. In the end, it didn't matter. "I forgive you all." The pastor stepped forward, grabbed Hunter by the shoulders, and turned his body to face him.

"Imago Dei," he whispered softly. "Made in the image of God."

Brother Jim pulled Hunter into a full embrace and wept. A handful of the eldest parishioners excused themselves into the aisle and left, unwilling to watch the type of love their pastor was able to extend to a convicted felon, to one who was as comfortable in a dress as he was in a three-piece suit, to one whose genetic code would simply never fit into the world they had created. Mostly, though, the congregation remained still,

offering as a living sacrifice the only thing they had to give: their faithful presence, a carved-out place in their hearts to make room for something they couldn't yet understand.

As for Cody, he knew he had more to offer. He wanted to stand with Hunter in public, to embrace him, to show everyone once and for all the convictions of his soul. But as he began to move into the aisle, someone else was already making her way to the pulpit, tears of joy streaked across her face. Cody stopped where he was and took a seat back on the pew, watching as Candace took little Henry by the hand and led him up the stairs. Just as Hunter had pulled away from the pastor, Candace fell into his arms, weeping. This must be right, Cody thought, this has to be good. But still, he couldn't bring himself to look. So he turned his head just in time to see Luke storming to the other end of the pew, stomping down the aisle to the back of the sanctuary, and pushing through the church doors, never to return.

Darkness came as it had the habit of doing, but tonight, Cody felt it. He sat out in his truck, parked a block away from Candace's house, drinking fireball whiskey straight from the bottle and making bets with himself about how many more shots he could take before he would puke or pass out, and in what order it would happen.

Back when Cody and Maisie had first moved into their tiny studio apartment in Chicago, they slept on a double-sized air mattress they had purchased for three dollars at Goodwill. Every night, just before they slept, Cody would fill it with air using an old bike pump that he had rigged to fit the mattress; and every morning they would stretch awake on the hard floor, a thin layer of rubber deflated under their weight. Only four hours removed from the Faith and Freedom service, all of the hope and renewal Cody had

stored up inside him had dripped out of the pinhole leak in his soul just like air from that old mattress, and he was searching like hell to find a patch before he hit the floor.

As he stumbled out of the car and toward Candace's house with the bottle still gripped in his hand, he had the sudden urge to call Maisie, so he did—why the hell not, right? Sure, the call would come at an odd time for her in England—he was in no condition to do the math, but he figured she'd be in the deepest sleep of the night—yet she was still his wife, and he needed her. The phone rang once, twice, three times as he slinked into the shadows cast by the long ranch house and across the front yard, hidden under the cover of the huge oak tree near the gravel driveway. The call went to Maisie's voicemail, so he hung up, took another burning swig of the fireball whiskey, and hit redial.

Cody climbed two short steps onto the front porch and peered through the bay window at an angle, where he saw the flickering blue glow of a television illuminating the living room. There was Hunter, just as Cody knew he would be. He sat upright on the couch opposite of the television, with Candace's head resting in his lap. Cody took one step back, and as soon as he stopped moving, the world seemed to spin around him. He braced himself on the back railing of the porch, making sure he was just out of view from the inside if Candace or Hunter happened to look out the window. He suddenly had no idea why he was there, the familiar feeling of guilt and shame mixing the liquor in his gut like the marble in a can of spray paint. The call went to Maisie's voicemail a second time. He let his finger hover over the *end call* button, but then thought better of it. Maybe he couldn't hear Maisie's voice, but at least she would hear his. That had to be worth something.

“Maisie. Mais-Mais-Maisie,” he started, maybe even before the *beep* of the voicemail signaled. He knew he had something to say, maybe even something important, but her name was the only thing he could work into his mouth. “I’ve been thinking about the night we got married. How we stayed up all night eating Ritz crackers and drinking sparkling grape juice we bought at the drugstore on the way back to the apartment.” He paused and closed his eyes, remembering. He could still see Maisie’s eyeliner streaked down her cheeks as she cried in the truck on the way home. She was okay with having a shotgun wedding—after all, she was the one who had suggested it to Cody after the positive pregnancy test. But after they had said *I do*, she hated herself for not at least writing her own vows. Their rings, she had said, would never be as important as their promises.

“We stayed up all night making vows to each other,” Cody went on, whispering into the cell phone as if it were her ear, as if he were lying beside her in bed, running his fingers through her tangled hair. “Post-wedding vows, that’s what you called them.” He smiled as he thought about some of the silly stuff they said that night, their promises getting stranger with each sleepless hour that passed. At one point, Cody was pretty sure he vowed to buy her a dairy cow so she would never have to go to the store to buy milk. “I don’t remember everything we said that night, but I do remember one promise you made. One vow that I tucked away deep inside me for safe keeping, because I knew I would need it one day.” He opened his eyes to see Hunter standing in the middle of the living room, his arm outstretched to Candace. He playfully pulled her up from the couch and drew her into him, spinning her now, dancing to music that Cody couldn’t hear, but could feel. Look at the size of his smile, Cody thought. He felt the burn of the liquor

making its way back up his throat, and pulled the phone away just in time to shield it from the spray of vomit that landed on the deck around his feet.

He wiped his mouth and continued talking, as if nothing had happened. “You promised me that night that you would forgive me for anything, as long as I really wanted to be forgiven.” Inside, Hunter dipped Candace, lowering her back parallel with the floor. When she came back up, they stumbled together, landing hard on the soft cushions of the couch behind them. Those smiles, Cody thought, those smiles. He felt lightheaded. The streetlight down the block sent rainbow prisms into his periphery. “I want to be forgiven,” he said, slurring his words. “Please, Maisie. Forgive me.” He tripped back off the stairs, landing on top of the soft, dew-covered grass. The stars stretched in panorama above the summer sky, swirling together into pinwheels of dazzling light. Those smiles, he thought once more, and then the light was gone, leaving only darkness, only night.

An airy voice called his name from somewhere far away, a feather floating in the breeze. He couldn’t yet crack his eyelids apart, but he felt a cool palm on his forehead, a finger stroking down the side of his face. The voice called out again—*Cody, wake up!*—closer now, but still a whisper in the wind. He parted his lips just enough to taste the air, just enough to push out a whisper of his own.

“Maisie?” he said, “You came back.” He reached his arms around her, placing a gentle hand on the back of her head, and pulled her down for a kiss. After their lips had just brushed, Cody felt a shove in his chest and his head thwack back against the wet grass once again.

“Damn it, Cody, wake up!” said the voice, in focus now, back in the real world. Once he was finally able to pry open his eyes, he confirmed what he already figured out: the voice didn’t belong to Maisie, but to Hunter. Cody eased up off the grass to take in his bearings. He saw Hunter towering over him with Candace’s house in the background. The fireball whiskey bottle was on the grass beside him, only a puddle of liquor still inside. “You want to tell me what you’re doing here?” asked Hunter. He kneeled down to look Cody in the eye, but stayed just far enough away to be out of his reach.

If Cody weren’t so drunk, he might’ve said that he just came to get some closure, that he needed Hunter to know that he never meant him any harm. He could have told him that he didn’t regret the time they had together—that even though they had done so much wrong, they needed to go through that place, hand-in-hand, to make things right. Mostly, he should have told him what he had been trying to say all along, what he could feel with every part of his being, but had never been able to articulate: I am sorry.

But the alcohol had eaten away his reason, his words, and so he was left only with this: “Why don’t you love me?” he asked. He shifted his wobbly weight to the balls of his feet and stood, facing Hunter. Cody focused on his shaven head for the first time, thinking it made him look more masculine, but no less beautiful. He had the urge to go to him and touch his head, to and feel the tingle of stubble beneath his palm, but he fought it back.

“I do love you, Cody. I think you know that,” said Hunter. He took a careful step back, just in case. “It’s just that the love between us—I don’t know. It just came out wrong, you know?” At his most rational moment, Cody might have understood him. But this wasn’t a rational moment.

“No, I don’t know. How was it supposed to come out?” he asked. He stumbled forward, gripping a handful of Hunter’s shirt. “What are you afraid of?” he asked, pushing a smile onto his face. “You don’t have to hide who you are anymore, not after what you did at the church tonight. You can be who you are. We can be who we are.” Hunter cupped his hands over Cody’s clenched fists and looked at him with tender eyes.

“But that’s just it, Cody,” he said, his voice measured and calm. “I’m already being who I am. And who I am is in love with the woman inside that house.” Cody saw only kindness and sincerity in Hunter’s eyes, and he hated him for it.

“Just give me one more chance,” said Cody. What was he saying? Why was he doing this? Hunter shook his head, but before he had a chance to speak, Cody lunged forward, grabbed him by the back of the head, and kissed him hard on the lips. Hunter wriggled free and pushed Cody back, sending him tripping over his drunken feet and back onto the ground. He placed a finger in front of him to warn Cody away.

“You’re no better than the rest of them,” he said, his voice breaking with anger. Cody climbed back to his feet, stumbled backward just once, and regained his balance.

“I risked everything for you, Hunter,” he said. “You made me like this! This is your fault!” He hurled his body forward, throwing a wild fist at Hunter’s face. Hunter dodged the punch and caught Cody by the throat, slinging him to the ground and landing on top of him with the full weight of his body. There was a madness in Hunter’s eyes, a crazed look Cody had seen before, but never directed at him. Hunter pinned Cody’s shoulders to the ground with his knees and grabbed the empty whiskey bottle beside him. Cody only flinched once, and then opened his eyes wide as day, welcoming whatever would come.

“Go ahead and do it, you little cocksucking dyke,” said Cody. The words were a double-edged sword, slicing back into himself with every thrust. Hunter’s lips trembled as he raised the bottle high above his head. “That’s it,” taunted Cody. “Do it like you mean it, you dick-tucking faggot!” but before he could move, they both froze in the white glow of headlights, as Luke’s jeep screeched off the road and through the front yard, coming to a halt inches away from where they lay.

CHAPTER 20

The glow of Luke's headlights beamed into Cody's eyes, blinding him for a moment. He felt the rumble of the Jeep's idling engine sputtering into the nighttime air around him, and the weight of Hunter's body pressing him down into the soft earth. Angling his head away from the light to let his eyes adjust, he saw the larger-than-life shadows of himself and Hunter slung onto the side of Luke's old house, darkened monsters scratching at the bricks, projections of what they had all become. Luke cut off the lights and killed the engine, leaving only the sound of Hunter's heavy breath to break the hush of the dark summer night.

As the front door of Luke's Jeep swung open with a squeal, Hunter gave Cody a final look, a last warning, and eased off of him, standing to face whatever would come. From his vantage point from the ground, Cody looked past the tires and underbelly of the Jeep to see Luke's steel-toed boots squish into the muddy yard. It wasn't until he had clambered to his feet to face his brother that Cody saw the other two men exiting the Jeep: Trevor Adams and Marcus Bradstreet, both wielding shotguns.

"I've got to say I'm surprised to see you here, little brother," Luke said as he approached the front of the Jeep. "I mean, I knew I'd find McCready snaking around my house, but I'll be damned if I didn't think you knew better by now." He took a firm step in Cody's direction and stood nose-to-nose with his brother. "I warned you, Cody," he said with a shake in his voice. "You've made your bed, and now you're gonna have to sleep in it."

Cody looked past Luke and into the glaring eyes of Trevor Adams, who rubbed his wounded arm and spat on the ground.

“Leave him out of this,” said Hunter. Cody and Luke both snapped their eyes in his direction. “If you’re so sure that this thing has to end with bloodshed, so be it. But Cody doesn’t need to be a part of it.” Hunter glanced Cody’s way for only a second, just long enough for the two of them lock eyes and for Cody to feel the hatred bubble back into his throat.

“I don’t need a hero,” he said, “And I sure as hell don’t need you.” Cody could see the hurt in Hunter’s eyes, in his drooping posture, in the way he hung his head. He wanted to make love to him and slit his throat at the same time, and if he hadn’t still been so drunk, he probably would have realized that none of this was Hunter’s fault. But once again, the alcohol had saturated his soul, bringing to the surface what he had so forcefully suppressed. “He tried to rape me,” he said below his breath, just above a whisper, as if he were testing it out.

“What the hell did you just say?” asked Luke, talking to Cody, but never taking his eyes off Hunter. Cody saw the throb in his temples, the hard swallow in his throat. He heard the violent cocking of Marcus Bradstreet’s shotgun.

“Don’t do this, Cody,” Hunter said. “Remember who you are.” But it was already too late. Cody wanted to hurt him, to punish him. But he also loved him so much he knew he could never do it himself. Luke would have to do it for him, and all Cody had to do was give the word, whether it held the truth or not.

“This faggot right here,” he said, pointing a shaking finger between Hunter’s eyes. “Just tried to rape me.” His mind flashed back to the night he had driven back from

Chicago and tried to force himself into Maisie. A surge of vomit scorched his throat, but he swallowed it back down. “You saw him on top of me, didn’t you?” he said, louder now. He had crossed the line, and there was no going back.

“This ends now,” said Luke. He clenched his jaw into a rigid line and motioned to Trevor Adams and Marcus Bradstreet. The two men raised their guns, but Luke waved them down. “No,” he said. “I want to feel his bones break with my bare hands.” Trevor and Bradstreet dropped their weapons and lunged at Hunter, grabbing him on either side. They braced for a struggle, but he didn’t fight back, never even tried to resist. Cody stood clear out of the way and watched as Luke’s first punch landed cleanly on Hunter’s face, splitting the skin above his eye. Luke stepped back and screamed into the night air, the piercing howl of a wolf claiming his territory. He threw a second punch, and then a third. Cody flinched with each *thud* of Luke’s fist crashing into Hunter’s bloodied face, but still he didn’t move. He thought of his father’s coal-streaked hands, of his baby daughter swaddled in a basinet. Somewhere in the distance, he heard the scream of bottle rockets slicing through the summer sky. Freedom, he thought. From whom? From what?

“Luke, stop it!” shouted someone, somewhere, snapping Cody from his trance. It was Candace, fresh out of the shower with a towel wrapped around her head like a beehive, screaming from behind the screen door on the front porch. “Let him go and get out of here before I call the cops!” Luke stepped away long enough to flex his bloody knuckles. He glared at Candace, a ravenous dog, saliva dripping from the corners of his mouth.

“Oh you go right ahead, sweetheart,” he said. “McCready here went to jail for me. The least I can do is return the favor.” He grabbed Hunter’s chin to steady his drooping

head, and drove his knee into the bridge of his nose. Cody imagined the velvet horn deer, resigned to death, letting the big buck gorge the life from his limp body. *Imago Dei*, made in the image of God, he thought. Candace cried out and ran back into the house, shouting once again that she was calling the police.

“Okay,” said Cody, just loud enough to be heard. “He’s had enough.” He felt outside of himself, hearing his voice as a distant echo, thunder beyond the hills, as if it were coming from someone else. Luke reared back to strike again, but Trevor Adams dropped Hunter’s arm and stepped in the space between them.

“Maybe he’s right, Luke,” he said, looking back as Bradstreet let Hunter’s other arm drop, letting his flaccid body splat into the muddy ground. “I don’t think he can take much more, and I’m not looking to go to prison.” Luke shook the sting from his fist and nodded, letting Trevor and Bradstreet back away from their victim.

“Alright, brother,” said Luke, looking at Cody as he stepped away from Hunter’s unconscious body. “Here’s your chance to get your revenge. Kick that dyke square in the teeth while you still have a chance. While he’s still breathing.” A cool westward breeze blew over Cody’s body like the Spirit of God had done in church. Dear Lord, he thought, what have I done? What have I become? As he approached Hunter, his legs trembled and finally gave way, sending him to his knees on the ground in front of his friend’s swollen face, as if he were offering a prayer.

“C’mon now, Cody,” said Luke, pacing behind him. “You’ve made your choice. Don’t back down now.” But Cody was hardly aware of Luke’s presence anymore, lost in the stillness of Hunter’s shallow breath. He placed a warm hand to his shaved head, running his palm over the pricking stubble. He leaned close to Hunter’s ear, floating a

whisper across his bruised cheek. “I’m so sorry,” he said, and he meant it with every fiber of his soul. “Forgive me. Forgive us all. One more time.” He pressed his lips gently onto Hunter’s forehead. It was this final gesture of love, of hope, one that Luke would never understand, that sent him over the edge.

“That’s it!” he screamed. “Playtime’s over.” Luke yanked at Cody’s collar, flinging him onto the ground, splitting the back of his head on a paving stone. The world swirled in Cody’s periphery as he tried to gather himself to stand, but he couldn’t make it back to his feet. All he could do was watch in hopelessness as Luke pulled a cleaning knife from the sheath tucked in his boot. Moonlight glistened off the mean blade as Luke turned it in his hand, as he flipped Hunter onto his back, as he kicked his legs apart one at a time. “You want to be a woman so goddamn bad?” he shouted, spittle slinging from his lips. “I can make that happen.” Bradstreet stepped toward Luke to try to stop him, but Luke swung around wildly with the knife, slicing his left hand.

“Jesus!” cursed Bradstreet, gripping his wounded hand with the other. “This has gone too far, Luke. I’m not a part of this.” He held his open palms before him as if showing them clean, a modern Pontius Pilate. Trevor Adams followed his lead, jumping into Luke’s Jeep with Bradstreet, firing the engine, and speeding away into the dark of night. Luke glanced back once more at Cody lying on the ground, shook his head, and then kneeled to unfasten Hunter’s belt.

“I’m doing this for you, brother,” said Luke as he tugged on Hunter’s jeans, edging them from his lifeless legs. “I’m doing this for all of us.” Cody tried to speak, but as he felt the blood trickle from his split head, he was sinking into the quicksand of sleep. He saw the flicker of fireflies overhead and wondered if they were blinks of love or hate.

He heard crackle of fireworks in the distance, and the faint cry of a police siren approaching, still miles away along this winding road on the outskirts of Blue Banks. Then all was calm, all was dark, as he floated away from the burden of consciousness.

A dead body is a haunting thing, especially for Cody, who had only seen one of them up close in his twenty-four years on the earth: that of his father, his bloated face slathered in waxy make-up to cover the burns, his mouth sewn into an expression of nothingness that belied the sweet spirit of life Coaldust Culver had always carried in his smile. The worst part, as he remembered it now, was watching his dad's hands folded awkwardly over his abdomen, held still by the death grip of rigor mortis, wiped completely clean of the grime of the earth, even under the nails. He looked closely at his chest for a heave of breath, at his neck for a fluttering pulse, but the only movements that came were conjurings of Cody's imagination, illusions that broke the stillness of death, if only for a moment.

The same stillness hung thick in the air now as Cody watched another casket being lowered into the earth, sweat trickling down his temple in the bullying heat of the July sun. Maisie stood by his side, leaning into his body as she wiped a tear from her eye. She had a habit of mourning deeply for others, even when the loss wasn't her own. It was one of the reasons Cody loved her so dearly, and hated himself for putting such a great distance between them. The fact that she was here at all—after jumping on the first flight back into the States she could get when he called her from the hospital, sobbing—was a testimony to her selfless devotion to the man she still chose to love, even as he deserved so much hate. *Agape love*, Spits Anderson had called it, *the love of God herself*.

“Come on now,” she said as she rubbed his arm and tugged at his sleeve. “We should get going. There’s nothing else we can do here.” Cody gave a subtle nod, watching as the top of the casket disappeared below the surface. Everyone else had already left, and the gravediggers stood by in the distance, waiting in obligatory respect for Cody and Maisie to leave before they heaved the dirt over the deceased. As he turned to walk toward his truck parked on the winding blacktop drive, even as he felt Maisie’s hand guiding his elbow, he was lost and alone.

“Luke should be here,” he heard himself say. As strange as it felt to acknowledge, he knew his brother should be standing with him, watching as Lori Ann was lowered into the family plot beside their father. After all, Cody knew in the deepest recesses of his soul that it was the feud between him and Luke that had put their mother in the grave, even if the doctors said it was a blood clot that formed after her surgery.

“Enough of that,” said Maisie. “Luke is right where he belongs.” Maybe so, Cody thought. But there wasn’t a passing moment in the last week he hadn’t wondered if he belonged in jail with him. He had tried to pray for forgiveness, but he couldn’t muster enough faith to believe that what he had done was redeemable. As they reached the truck, Cody placed his hand into Maisie’s to keep her from opening the passenger door. He couldn’t yet mourn for his mother, not while his heart was full of so much other unresolved loss.

“I’ve messed up everything, Mais,” he said. It was something they both already knew, but nothing he had said aloud until that moment. The grumbling whirl of a weed-eater broke the silence of the day: a cemetery worker off in the distance clearing the headstones of so many forgotten strangers, sleeping together for all eternity under this

blanket of earth. “There’s things you know about and things you don’t,” he continued, forcing himself to look her in the eye. “No matter how you shake it, things are bad, and I don’t know how to fix it.” An unexpected sob rose in his throat, choking his next words into a whisper. “I’m broken, Maisie.” He tried to turn from her, to hide his emotions the way he had been taught his whole life that men should do, but she wouldn’t let him. She turned his face back to her and tilted his chin with her thumb.

“We’re all a little broken, Cody,” she said. “The trick is keeping the pieces close by so we can put ourselves back together.” She pulled a handkerchief from Cody’s jacket pocket and wiped the remnants of his tears from his cheek.

“I won’t blame you if you leave me,” he said. “No questions asked.”

“Of course I’m leaving,” she said sharply, as if her decision had been made long before. “We both know I don’t belong here, and neither does Lucie Hunter.” Cody shuddered at his daughter’s name. Would that feeling ever go away?

“Right,” he said. “I get it.”

“But I don’t think you belong here either, Cody,” she said. Cody pulled back from her to see into her eyes. Her smile was caught between sympathy and hope.

“You want me to come with you?” he asked, choking back another sob.

“Honestly, I’m not sure,” she said, never taking her eyes off his. “But we can figure that out in England better than we can here.” She laid her head on his chest beneath his chin, wrapping her arms around him. “But you need to promise me one thing, Cody Culver,” she said. “Don’t you dare come with me unless you mean it. If you’re not ready to leave all this behind, don’t bother getting on a plane.”

“Okay,” he said, pulling her into him. For once, he didn’t even need to take the time to reconsider. She was offering him another chance, and he intended to cling to it. Off in the distance, a group of starlings swirled in murmuration, black flecks dancing in the light of the sun. “Okay.”

With the promise of a new dawn breaking across the sea, the sun still had to set on Cody’s time in Blue Banks. He had seen Maisie off on a plane to rejoin their daughter in England, but he couldn’t go himself until he had worked out his notice in the mines, until he had made arrangements for the execution of his mother’s will, and most of all, until he had said goodbye to the person he had chased nearly into the arms of death. As he pushed through the familiar revolving doors of Blue Banks Regional Hospital, he didn’t have to stop and ask where he could find Hunter McCready. He had paced the halls outside Hunter’s room three times in the last week, never gaining enough courage to push through the door. This time he felt the second hand of Time ticking away moments that he would never get back, and he knew it may be his last chance. Maybe he wasn’t yet ready for God’s forgiveness, but he didn’t know how he could leave town without asking for Hunter’s. He walked the hall with confidence towards Hunter’s door, but he was stopped in his tracks as he heard someone calling out from the small waiting room he passed along the way.

“The prodigal son has returned once again,” said the familiar voice of Brother Jim, loud and clear. Cody knew at once he was talking to him. The pastor waved him into the waiting room and patted the seat on his right with a gentle hand, inviting Cody to sit. “You don’t want to go in there just yet,” he said, pity in his eyes. “They’re helping him

go relieve himself. Poor guy can't do anything on his own. Not yet at least." Cody winced as he sat, his mind's eye roving back to the moment Luke flashed the blade of the cleaning knife, the sharp edge glistening in the moonlight.

"How is he?" asked Cody. "I mean, did he lose his—I don't know really know how to say—"

"Everything's still attached, if that's what you're asking," interrupted Brother Jim. "He has some pretty deep cuts and a whole mess of stitches, but the police got there in time to stop Luke from—well, you know." Cody nodded. He thought he should have felt a sense of relief, but a wave of nausea hit him instead. "So is it true?" asked the pastor. "You and the little lady moving to England?"

"That's the plan," said Cody, edging forward in his seat to rest his elbows on his knees, trying anything to settle his stomach. "Nothing's keeping me here anymore, especially with Mom gone." As soon as he said the words, he felt the weight of Lori Ann's death for the first time. He had so much regret, so many things to mourn. Where could he start?

"I suppose that's right," said Brother Jim. He picked a piece of lint from the knee of his pants and flicked it away. "Truth is, the Lord doesn't call everybody to a town like this. It's not so hard to believe he's calling you and your little family elsewhere." Cody thought back to the stories he heard his mother tell over the years, how she could trace her line clean back through the first settlers of Blue Banks when the land was broken off from the surrounding counties over two hundred years ago. With Luke likely to be sent to a federal penitentiary after his trial, Cody would be leaving little Henry as the sole bearer of the family name in Blue Banks.

“The calling of God, huh?” Cody said, shaking his head. He still believed in the pastor, but he was losing his grasp on the idea that there was some force of good still out there, still in control. “How do you know, Brother Jim? I mean, how are you supposed to cut through all the shit to ever know if you’re hearing the voice of God over your own confused thoughts?” Brother Jim tilted his head back and let out a low laugh, not one that mocked, but one that suggested the impossibility of answering the question. Cody expected the pastor to do what pastors do: to spit out some kind of platitude about faith and trust. But he didn’t do that. He just smiled and shrugged.

“This old pastor don’t have it all figured out, son,” said Brother Jim, scratching along the two-day stubble on the underside of his chin. He leaned back in the chair and stared blankly past Cody. “Just when you think you’ve got ahold of your faith, Hunter McCready comes along to shake it up.” He wasn’t talking to Cody anymore but to himself, maybe to God. Cody had heard the rumors around town that the church was split over how Brother Jim presented Hunter to the congregation. If he didn’t resign on his own accord, the pastor would likely be forced out. Cody wanted to offer some encouragement to Brother Jim, but he knew the pastor didn’t need it. He had done the right thing. That was enough.

Brother Jim placed a hand around Cody’s shoulder and pulled him into an embrace, one that Cody might have found embarrassing six months ago, but one he now found comforting, even necessary. “I’ll tell you this, though. The voice of God—if you’ll allow me to call it that—will always lead you to love. Never to hate. You keep that in mind, and I reckon you’ll know the difference.” He reached in his back pocket and pulled out a small copy of the New Testament. “The answers are in here,” he said, extending

the book to Cody. “But they ain’t always easy to find.” Cody had the impulse to tell him that he already had a Bible—heck, he had a whole mess of them smattered around his house tucked away in drawers or storage boxes—but he fought it back, accepting the pastor’s gift for what it was: an invitation to cling in the impossible hope that Love would one day come out on top.

“Thank you, Pastor,” said Cody, fingering the edges of the Bible. He took a deep breath and looked down the hallway in the direction of Hunter’s room. “They must be done in there, don’t you think?” he asked, standing to leave.

“Yeah, I figure they are,” said Brother Jim. “I’ll wait here for a bit longer. You go on in and say your piece.” Just as Cody was turning to leave, Brother Jim put a loving hand on his wrist, taking the cue from Cody’s defeated posture. “Christ himself told us the greatest of all commands was this: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and the second greatest is to love your neighbor as yourself.” He stood and faced Cody, pulling him into a hug. “So I’ll tell you the same thing I told Hunter when he stayed with me for those three days. If you want to love other people as yourself, well, you gotta find a way to love yourself in the first place.”

The door was already pushed ajar, so Cody rapped his knuckles lightly against the wood, took a final breath, and pushed into Hunter’s hospital room. He shouldn’t have been surprised to see Candace sitting on the edge of the bed—after all, since Luke was out of the way for the time being, there was nothing to keep them apart—but he was taken aback by her presence just the same.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to interrupt,” he said, shuffling backward toward the hallway. Candace stood to smooth her dress, temporarily blocking Hunter from Cody’s view, and looked with pity on Cody. She had always been warm and loving toward him, but not this time. How could he blame her?

“I was beginning to think you weren’t gonna show up,” said Hunter, peering through swollen eyes from behind Candace. She excused herself into the hallway, brushing past Cody without saying a word. He had prepared his mind and spirit for seeing Hunter again, even for seeing a different version of him; but the person he saw reposed in the hospital bed looked nothing like he expected. His face was a black-and-blue caricature of how Cody remembered it, a squiggly line of stitches stretching from the bridge of his nose and down the puffy slope of his right cheek. He fought the urge to look away with all the courage he could muster, mostly because he knew he was partially to blame for every cut, every bruise.

“I’m sorry, Hunter,” he said. He wanted to make sure those were the first words out of his mouth, in case he didn’t have the wherewithal to say them later. “For this. For everything.”

“C’mon, Cody,” said Hunter, coaxing a half-smile onto his swollen lips. “You’ve got plenty to be sorry for—I think we all do. But you sure as hell don’t have to be sorry for everything.” Cody moved into the room and edged onto the foot of Hunter’s bed.

“You can be sorry for what we turned out to be, but don’t be sorry for what we were.”

“It’s just, I never wanted—” he began, but Hunter shook his head, cutting him off.

“We don’t have time for any more of that,” he said. “I mean, you’ve got a plane to catch soon, right?” Cody looked at him through glossy eyes. He started to ask how he

knew, but Hunter went on. “Don’t act so surprised, Culver. You’ve been here long enough to know how fast news travels through this town.” Cody nodded. He lifted his hand to rest it across Hunter’s leg, but then thought better of it. Instead, he stood from the bed and reached into his back pocket, pulling out the worn picture Spits Anderson had given him of Hunter as a teenager.

“I brought you this,” he said, placing the picture in Hunter’s open palm. “Spits said you never liked to look at it as a kid, but I figure it would be important to you now.” Hunter studied the picture with a furrowed brow, worry lines growing across his forehead and the creases of his eyes, trenches of past hurts and haunted memories.

“Well, would you look at me,” he said, stroking the face of his former self with a steady index finger. The comfort he gave to the young boy in the dress seemed to transcend time and touch the older version of himself, a slight smile stretching onto his face, replacing the worry lines on his forehead. “I really was beautiful, wasn’t I?” he asked, probably to himself. Cody wanted to add that he still was, but he knew that wasn’t something Hunter needed to hear. The picture would speak more truth to him than Cody ever had, more than he ever could. Cody gave into a final impulse, leaning in to kiss Hunter innocently on the forehead. When he pulled away, Hunter touched him on the cheek and looked him in the eyes.

“Don’t come back, Cody,” he said. “Don’t you dare come back.” Cody gave a quiet nod and then mouthed “goodbye,” though he wasn’t sure the word ever escaped into the air. He knew with his whole being this would be the last time he’d ever see his friend. It was a decision he had made, one of which he was sure, even if the choice was unsettling. He turned and left, brushing shoulders with Candace on her way back into the

room, on her way back to begin her second chance with the person the world had tried so hard to take away from her. As Cody reached the revolving doors of the hospital, he looked out past the parking lot, over the rolling western Kentucky hills, imagining his new home across the sea where he would pick up the pieces of his life with Maisie and Lucie Hunter, one shard at a time.

CRITICAL AFTERWORD:
HETERONORMATIVE MASCULINE PERFORMANCE IN CONTEMPORARY
FICTIONS OF THE RURAL AMERICAN SOUTH

Earth-Bread

*Under stars cool as the copperhead's eyes,
Under hill-horizons cut clean and deft with wind,
Beneath this surface night, below earth and rock,
The picks strike into veins of coal, oily and rich
And centuries-damp.*

*They dig with short heavy strokes, straining shoulders
Practiced and bulging with labor,
Crumbling the marrow between the shelving slate,
Breaking the hard, slow-yielding seams.
Bent into flesh-knots the miners dig this earth-bread,
This stone-meat, these fruited bones.*

*This is the eight-hour death, the daily burial
In a dark harvest lost as any dead.*

James Still (21)

INTRODUCTION

Mining communities in the American South are stalwarts of narrowly defined male heterosexuality and—to use the term first popularized by Michael Warner in the early 1990s—heteronormativity. As Barbara Pini and Robyn Mayes assert—and as reinforced through the creative artifact of James Still's poem "Earth Bread" printed above—when one studies mining communities, one must often "approach the task from the perspective that the mining industry is gendered as masculine. That is, definitions of

mining mobilize around masculinized notions of physicality, technical competence with machinery, and strength, as well as emphasize the harshness and dirtiness of the work” (187). Furthermore, since mining has historically and pragmatically been associated with rural and remote regions (particularly if confining one’s study to the South), the masculinized world that Pini and Mayes describe surely crawls out of the caverns and into the above-ground communities that depend so desperately on the work the mines provide.

Don’t Go Unless You Mean It tells the story of one such community: a culture in crisis, forced to examine its assumptions not only about gender and masculinity, but also the ramifications of those assumptions as they apply to a systemically conservative worldview grounded in evangelical Christianity. Like so many of its real-world Southern counterparts, the fictional town of Blue Banks, Kentucky is only now opening its eyes to what gender theorist Judith Butler has argued since the emergence of queer theory in the early 1990s: gender—if it exists outside of the social construct at all—is largely performative and never easily defined.

That isn’t to say that the changing world has gone unnoticed by the South. As human sexuality scholar Sandra Samons asserts in her primer on sexual orientation in transgender people, *When the Opposite Sex Isn’t*, American society has found itself, over the last three decades, in the process of a gradual moderation in attitude, moving toward greater acceptance of human diversity, including those of gender expression and sexuality in a variety of forms (xxv). Evidence of this may be seen in the increased political advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights and in the burgeoning media portrayal of people of sexual difference, or those who don’t conform to antiquated gender norms, in a more

sympathetic light. However, as the recent viral interest in celebrity Caitlyn Jenner's transition from a celebrated male Olympian to a *Vanity Fair* "cover girl" suggests, American culture at large is approaching a conversation that is only now becoming possible about the sometimes perplexing relationships between biology, anatomy, and gender identity; and furthermore, there are telltale signs that suggest certain parts of the country are more resistant to this change concerning the public doxa about gender than are others. One such example of this resistance may be the proposal of backlash legislation concerning gender-specific bathrooms in several states in the South, most recently including Kentucky itself (Loftus).

My contention is that, given the rich history of arts in the South, contemporary fictions may provide an inlet to progressing necessary conversations about gender in areas where the academic discussion has failed. Indeed, it isn't just that scholarly arguments about gender binaries have been largely ignored in the rural South, but that they have been actively resisted by many people in rural communities who, often favoring conservative religious dogma, exhibit a general distrust of academia's ivory tower and the political machine (real or imagined) associated with that tower. This is an important consideration, as art often serves as liaison between academia and the "real world," especially via widely consumed mediums like upmarket literary fiction. A primary goal of writing *Don't Go Unless You Mean It*, then, was to build on the literary tradition—one particularly important in literature of the American South—of broaching a difficult topic through a non-didactic narrative where the issue might be both elucidated and complicated through verisimilitude and characters that reflect real-world people.

To be sure, I'm far from the first writer to attempt a novel inclusive of characters who are intersex—a catch-all term that denotes one who is intermediate between male and female. However, one of the unique interventions I have attempted in *Don't Go Unless You Mean It* concerns my choice of point-of-view: while there have been important, groundbreaking fictions about various intersex conditions—*Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides, *Annabel* by Kathleen Winter, and *Golden Boy* by Abigail Tarttelin to name a few published in the past fifteen years—these books are invariably told at least partially through the point of view of the intersex character. There are obvious and important reasons for this choice. Take, for instance, the most famous of all intersex narratives, Jeffrey Eugenides' Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Middlesex*. A pithy summary will simply not do for this complicated book—one that recounts the stories of three generations of the Stephanides family, taking the reader all over the world in the process; but importantly for consideration of narrative point of view, the novel is told from the perspective—sometimes real, sometimes imagined—of its intersex protagonist, Calliope Stephanides. This point of view was obviously a successful choice for Eugenides, and it allows for the reader to get an unimpeded perspective of a character with an unquestionably unique story to tell:

I was born twice: first as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974. [...] Like Tiresias, I was first one thing and then the other. I've been ridiculed by classmates, guinea-pigged by doctors, palpated by specialists, and researched by the March of Dimes. A redheaded girl from Grosse Pointe fell in love with me, not knowing what I was. (Her brother liked me, too.) An army tank led me into urban battle once; a swimming pool turned me into myth; I've left my body in order to occupy others—and all this happened before I turned sixteen. (3)

Eugenides delivers on each of the promises of this opening passage in the course of the nearly 600-page novel, and reading about each of these disparate events from the first-person perspective of the intersexual character is illuminating in many ways. Still, even now as I read back through the opening lines of the novel, I can't help but wonder: what were all those classmates thinking when they "ridiculed"? What was going through the minds of those doctors and specialists as they "guinea-pigged" and "palpated"? And perhaps most intriguing, and certainly the most relevant to the implications of my own novel: how would that redheaded girl have conceptualized her relationship with Calliope if she learned about Calliope's intersex condition?

By ruminating on questions like these and applying them to my own fictional world, my intention was to write a novel that complicates the public doxa concerning intersex individuals, and for that to happen, I wanted readers to come away from the book thinking about how intersexuality is a topic with great importance and implications for all of us, not simply for those who are most immediately affected. After all, according to even the most liberal estimates from prominent gender theorist Anne Fausto-Sterling, the prevalence of some form of intersexuality is seen only in approximately 1.7% of the population—though more conservative estimates place the number at "about 0.018%, almost 100 times lower than Fausto-Sterling's estimate" (Sax 174). Concerning Klinefelter Syndrome—the syndrome exhibited in Hunter McCready—"estimates vary, in part because diagnosis is so haphazard, but it is believed that as many as one in every two thousand people who are declared male at birth may in fact be XXY" (Blank x).

Regardless of the obviously significant disparity between these estimations, we must come away from these numbers with this salient point: for the vast majority of the

population—indisputably greater than 98 percent—intersexuality is a phenomenon we will encounter second hand, not first. It was with this information in mind that I decided to write from the perspective of one who discovers an intersex condition *in someone else*, rather than in himself. In this way, I have forced the protagonist to conceptualize the implications of intersexuality in the same way the majority of the population will: from the outside in, rather than from inside out.

It should be noted, however, that Cody Culver's conflict is only partially related to Hunter McCready's intersex condition. In fact, while Hunter's Klinefelter Syndrome is a complication in Cody's conceptualization of both his own sexuality and his relationship with Hunter, the most pressing conflict of the story results from Cody working toward a realization that the sometimes troubling ideals of the very community he thought he had left behind are in fact woven into the fabric of his own worldview: one that, despite the best of intentions, still allows his inherent privilege as a cisgender, genotypic and phenotypic male to define Hunter by his *Otherness* in much the same way as the rest of the community. To understand how and why this primary conflict functions in the novel, I will first consider constructed binaries of sexual orientation, gender, and biological sex. Next, I will suggest how those constructs interact with the rural American South, giving particular focus to conservative Christian influence. Finally, I will argue the importance of challenging character archetypes in new fictions of the rural American South.

BINARIES OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION, GENDER, AND BIOLOGICAL SEX

Michel Foucault, building in part on the structuralist framework of Saussure's semiotics, argues in *The History of Sexuality: Volume I* that for many centuries (but

especially since the seventeenth century), human sexuality was commodified as a currency of power, and the way to control that power was through language: “As if in order to gain mastery over [sexuality], it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present. And even these prohibitions, it seems, were afraid to name it” (17). Foucault goes on to argue, somewhat ironically, that in order to “extinguish the words that rendered [sexuality] too visibly present,” new structures around language—and new words entirely, in some cases—had to be created to build “an apparatus for producing an ever greater quantity of discourse about sex” (23), an apparatus that was, of course, built not for free use, but for more control. This discourse of control gradually shifted sex from a private to public matter, bleeding into all matters of social life including, perhaps most importantly, criminal justice: “The pettiness of it all; the fact that this everyday occurrence in the life of village sexuality, these inconsequential bucolic pleasures, could become, from a certain time, the object not only of a collective intolerance but of a judicial action, a medical intervention, a careful clinical examination, and an entire theoretical elaboration” (31). However, it is crucial to note that the discourse of control described by Foucault specifically applies to sex acts or behaviors, not to sexual orientation or identity. Why? Historian Hanne Blank, explicitly building on citations of Foucault’s work, argues that the reason circles back to language once again:

Prior to 1868, there were no heterosexuals. There were no homosexuals either, for that matter. For most of human history, love might have been romantic or platonic, brotherly or maternal, *eros* or *agape*, but it was definitely not heterosexual or homosexual, straight or gay. The names did not exist, nor did the categories they now describe. In the mid-nineteenth century, Western people in general were only beginning to think in terms

of there being different types of human beings who were differentiated from one another by the kinds of love or sexual desire they experienced. (1-2)

The date Blank argues as the birth year for coupling sexual desire with identity, 1868, corresponds with a German legal battle wherein Karl-Maria Kertbeny, “opposed ‘homosexuals’ to ‘heterosexuals’ as two parallel and, he implied, equal types of human beings” (17). We must be quick to note, however, that just because the labels of sexual orientation did not exist prior to 1868, this isn’t to say that certain sexual behaviors weren’t named, categorized, and judged; one example, of many, would be the antiquated term “sodomy,” which had been recorded and categorized for thousands of years. But as Blank goes on to argue, our modern habit of interpreting sexual desire as a manifestation of our identities, part and parcel of our individual human selves, is an historically nascent development:

By the end of the nineteenth century, Western culture had learned to view sexual desire and activity not as a unified field on its own, but as a collection of specific and distinctive desires and activities, each of which had a role to play in helping to define the specific and distinctive subtype of human being. [...] As these desires and acts were defined and characterized and written down in the right authoritative ways by the right authoritative people, they were used to help create another set of known entities: sexual types. Of these, the most powerful and important, and certainly the most enduring and culture-altering, were “homosexual” and “heterosexual.” (3-4)

Much has changed in the discourse of sexuality since then, but we are now so used to thinking of sexuality in terms of orientations and identities—“deviant” versus “normal,” as argued by Blank—that it hardly occurs to us that there might be a better approach to how we consider sexual desire and the implications that desire has on identity. While many may point to growing categories of sexual orientation—including monosexual, polysexual, and asexual variants—as evidence that the long held societal assumption of a

binary in sexual orientation is being undermined, it may be reasonably argued that the ever-expanding list of orientations simply perpetuates another fallacy: the so-called gender binary. Indeed, an agreement on one's sexual orientation can only exist in relation to an agreement with one's gender as a referent. As prominent philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler argues in what is perhaps her most influential work to date, *Gender Trouble*:

Gender can denote a *unity* of experience, of sex, gender, and desire, only when sex can be understood in some sense to necessitate gender—where gender is a psychic and/or cultural designation of the self—and desire—where desire is heterosexual and therefore differentiates itself through an oppositional relation to that other gender it desires. The internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality. That institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system (30).

It should come as no surprise, given the language above, that Butler rejects a gender binary, as it cannot exist outside of uniform heterosexuality. However, it is important to note that Butler is only building framework here as she works toward one of the seminal arguments of gender performativity—theorizations that “have been described as the *sine qua non* (i.e. the indispensable condition) of postmodern feminism” (Shildrick 117). Herein, we find that she not only rejects the gender binary, but argues against the idea that any construct of gender could ever be complete or static: “Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is as any given juncture in time. An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure” (22). If we accept this argument, then we may

also acknowledge that social gender performance is a reinforcement of the false dichotomy of the gender binary, and contributes to the poverty of language (to borrow a term from Virginia Woolf) surrounding gender.

To be sure, as we have seen in the arguments of Foucault, Butler, and Blank, language matters. In *Don't Go Unless You Mean It*, one of Hunter McCready's biggest problems is he simply doesn't have the words at his disposal to conceptualize himself. He doesn't identify as a man or a woman, and therefore can never identify as heterosexual or homosexual; and as Butler has argued, since constructs of sexuality and gender are mutually dependent, Hunter is equally confused about his gender. The following exchange between Hunter and Cody, with Cody speaking first, may serve as an example of this confusion:

“Are you transgender? I mean, I know about the biological stuff with Klinefelter Syndrome, but I don't know what that really means for how you see yourself.” Hunter picked at the crust of his roast beef sandwich as he thought about how to answer. Cody didn't want to rush him, and he worried he had already asked too much. “Sorry, you don't have to—”

“No, it's fine,” said Hunter. He smiled at Cody to reassure him, as if now that he was wearing a dress he felt the pressure to appease and comfort others at his own expense, a feeling Cody had always imagined women must so often feel. “I'm not transgender. I don't really feel like I can be. You know, since I'm not fully male or female, genetically speaking.” He rolled a straw wrapper into a tiny ball and pinched it between his fingers. “I'm not just one thing or another. Honestly, I don't think anybody is.” (219)

The inadequacies of language surrounding gender and sexuality are not confined to Hunter's fictional narrative, as they certainly create tangible barriers for people in the real world who identify as gender-queer or mixed gender. Consider what scholar and professor Telyn Kusalik writes in a personal essay about the confusions that binary

gender labels necessarily create in and around those who don't fall neatly into either category:

As a mixed-gender person, I am continually questioned about my gender identity. Sometimes people ask "How do you identify gender-wise?" or "What pronouns do you use?" More often, it's simply the less sophisticated "Are you a woman or a man?" If I were a woman, or a man, these questions would be easy to answer. Since I'm neither of those two things, my answer is always long and complicated, and leads to an entire conversation about my identity. (54)

To answer one of the questions Kusalik is often asked—"What pronouns do you use?"—is to further exemplify the restrictions of a binary gender system and the extent to which the assumptions of those restrictions underpin our language: Kusalik uses "ey" as a singular personal pronoun, and "eir" as the singular personal possessive (Bornstein and Bergman 287). Pronouns aside, however, many questions remain: what label should be assigned to Kusalik's gender? Should a label be used at all? Would the creation of a "third gender" label in turn create third-gender social performance? Could a third gender label ever actually serve as a catchall for any person who does not neatly fall at one of the binary extremes? There is, of course, no end to these questions, and most gender scholars would likely agree that these are the wrong questions to ask in the first place; after all, these questions can only be sustained inside a fixed, constructed gender binary system. The point, however, is that people like Kusalik in the real world and Hunter McCready in *Don't Go Unless You Mean It* are forced to examine such nonsensical questions concerning false and inadequate labels of identity—examinations which are excused by way of cisgender privilege for the vast majority of the population.

This privilege is at the core of Cody Culver's primary internal conflict, of course: a struggle he can feel but never fully name. As queer activist and writer Evin Taylor notes:

Cisgender people are those whose gender identity, role, or expression is considered to match their assigned gender by societal standards. [...] Gendered privilege is the collective advantages that are accepted, *most often unknowingly* [emphasis added], by those who are not positioned in opposition to the dominant ideology of the gender binary. Simply put: A person who is able to live in a life and/or body that is easily recognized as being either man/male or woman/female generally needs to spend less energy to be understood by others. The energy one need not expend to explain their gender identity and/or expression to others is gendered privilege. (268-69)

While Taylor effectively describes the cisgender privilege that most of Cody's community unknowingly enjoy, he also further problematizes the *trouble with gender*, as Butler would say, as related to body phenotype and biological sex. We have seen an argument started by Foucault and furthered by Butler that challenges long held Western assumptions about sexual orientation and gender, but we are only now coming to another complication that Hunter McCready must confront: how can *any* identity of gender or sexual orientation be sustained in someone who is intersex: one whose genotype and/or phenotype are caught intermediately between the male/female biological sex binary? As professor and gender scholar Sara Salih argues, building explicitly on Butler's work, "If we accept that gender is constructed and that it is not in any way 'naturally' or inevitably connected to sex, then the distinction between sex and gender comes to seem increasingly unstable. In that case, gender is radically independent of sex, 'a free-floating artifice' as Butler puts it, raising the question as to whether 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender" (49).

This position is not self-evident, of course. Arguments against a binary of biological sex still meet substantial resistance, mostly because a majority of people have long been taught that one's phenotype is necessarily and irrefutably an expression of one's genotype. To put it in the decidedly nonacademic terms of *Kindergarten Cop*, "boys have penises and girls have vaginas." However, as Blank notes, appearances are not always what they seem:

Many biologists, including Brown University biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling, have eloquently testified that humans have at least five major sexes—of which typical male and typical female are merely the most numerous—and that furthermore, human chromosomes, gonads, internal sexual organs, external genitals, sex hormones, and secondary sexual characteristics can appear in many different guises. The law, however, still acknowledges only two sexes. (xiii)

The law is certainly not alone, as most *individuals* only recognize two sexes as well. This comes as no surprise, especially since it might be argued that the reasonable-sounding assumption of a biological sex binary is actually reinforced, not undermined, by classically "hermaphroditic" intersex conditions where both the genotype and phenotype of the genitals are caught between male and female. This is specifically why I chose to write Hunter McCready as a character who has Klinefelter Syndrome, as I was interested in exploring the ramifications of gender and sex labeling in one who might be said to be "invisibly" intersex. To understand how the inclusion of a character with Klinefelter Syndrome problematizes the conflict of the novel, one must first understand what makes this particular abnormality unique in the landscape of intersex conditions.

Also known as *47,XXY* or simply *XXY*, Klinefelter Syndrome typically "results from the presence of one extra copy of the X chromosome in each cell" ("Klinefelter Syndrome"). In other words, people with Klinefelter Syndrome have a genetic pattern

that is simultaneously female (XX), male (XY) and neither. Physically, XXY individuals present as “complete” phenotypic males with unambiguous external genitalia, “although the testicles typically are small” (Sax 176). As Blank points out in a discussion about her own XXY partner, a number of physical symptoms may accompany this genetic pattern:

As an XXY individual who has chosen not to take hormone supplements, my partner’s naturally occurring sex hormones take a middle path. His estrogen levels hang out a little lower than mine, his testosterone levels a little higher. As a result, my partner, like other XXY people who don’t take exogenous hormones, has an androgynous appearance, with little to no facial and body hair, a fine smooth complexion, and a tendency to develop small breasts and slightly rounded hips if he puts on a little weight. (xi)

As with those of many medical conditions, the specific physical symptoms of Klinefelter Syndrome vary on a case-by-case basis, and in some XXY individuals, the condition may be practically “invisible” and go undetected. Indeed, Abramsky and Chapple have suggested that “many men with Klinefelter Syndrome are never diagnosed because they are phenotypically indistinguishable from normal (46,XY) men” (qtd. in Sax 176). Klinefelter Syndrome is only formally diagnosed through karyotyping the chromosomal pattern, most often because an affected individual seeks help for infertility issues.

It is important to acknowledge, especially in consideration of Abramsky and Chapple’s language above, that some scholars resist including Klinefelter Syndrome as an intersex condition, most often because of disagreements on the definition of *intersex* itself. In her vast body of work on the subject, most notably in her book *Sexing the Body*, Fausto-Sterling argues effectively that human biological sex is best understood not as a dichotomy but as a continuum, and that part of the constitution of that continuum is a broad definition of an intersexual as “an individual who deviates from the Platonic ideal of physical dimorphism” (Blackless et al. 161). As an extension of this inclusive

definition, Fausto-Sterling defines all sex chromosome complements other than XX or XY as intersex, which appropriately includes Klinefelter Syndrome. Other scholars, such as Leonard Sax, challenge this broad definition, going so far as to argue that a “clinically useful definition of intersex would include those conditions in which (a) the phenotype is not classifiable as either male or female, or (b) chromosomal sex is inconsistent with phenotypic sex” (174). Sax goes on to argue that Klinefelter Syndrome is not an intersex condition, somewhat bafflingly in contradiction to his own definition of intersex. If XXY individuals have a chromosomal pattern that differs from traditional male (XY), yet they present phenotypically as males, they necessarily fit the second of Sax’s two either/or criteria established in his own argument.

Regardless of semantics, it should be beyond dispute that XXY individuals may face social and relational hardships, especially in settings where the majority of the population not only view sexual difference as a biological dichotomy, but where binaries exist in gender roles and expectations. Surely such expectations exist in rural mining communities of the South.

PLACE, SPACE, AND SEX: CHALLENGES IN THE RURAL AMERICAN SOUTH

Don't Go Unless You Mean It is set in a rural mining community in the American South, which is not arbitrary or irrelevant. A region that is accurately portrayed as politically conservative and deeply religious, the South is also often debased and caricatured as being holistically backwards, ignorant, and rigidly intolerant. Furthermore, rural places—including small mining communities—in many ways may represent the far right of Southern culture. One of the most recognized aspects of this

brand of conservatism relates directly to how the dominant culture in the South views familial relationships and gender roles, and further, how those gender roles are irrefutably tied to biological sex. As place and space theorists Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst note:

For many years now research by rural social scientists on understanding gender has highlighted the importance of the . . . uncritical acceptance of rigid and stereotypical gender roles and relations within rural households and rural communities. [...] The persistence of highly traditional attitudes and expectations about masculinity, femininity, and family formations means that heterosexuality has become the dominant norm in many rural spaces. (96)

A culture that is rooted so deeply in these heteronormative assumptions presents an obvious problem for someone like Hunter McCready: as an XXY individual, he must not only overcome the challenges presented by binaries of both gender and biological sex—binaries that, by their very definitions, he could never be a part—but he must also cope with the idea that it is in many ways *impossible* for him to be absorbed into the heteronormative social practices about which Johnston and Longhurst speak in the passage above. As Blank suggests in a series of rhetorical questions, XXY individuals can never meet unbending definitions of heterosexuality, regardless of sexual preferences: “What does an unusual sexual biology mean for sexual orientation? Is it even *possible* for XXY people to have a sexual orientation in the way we usually think about sexual orientation?” (x).

In engagement with Blank’s provocative questions, it is not difficult to suggest how cultural assumptions of the South create problems for people who are gender queer or have biological identities not conducive to a binary system. Hunter McCready, for instance, not only must deal with the isolated reactions of other individuals, but he must

also have to learn (or re-learn) how to conceptualize himself as part of a community which misunderstands him at the very least, and rejects him at worst. As Johnston and Longhurst note, “Communities are about being on the inside, which means they are also ultimately about being on the outside. They are about belonging, which means they are also ultimately about being excluded” (61). Let us acknowledge, then, that the cultural norms used as a litmus for inclusion or exclusion are not simply external to the intersex individual, but may also create internal dissonance about one’s own identity. A passage from *Don’t Go Unless You Mean It* may serve as an example of this type of internal dissonance. When Hunter recounts the story of his Klinefelter Syndrome diagnosis to Cody, his language gives evidence that, despite the fact he is intersex himself, his understanding of masculinity is as culturally constructed as that of nearly everyone else in Blue Banks:

“I started pushing her away from that moment on, even before I had any sort of official diagnoses,” he said. He fiddled with the battery of his electronic cigarette as he talked, just something to occupy his hands. “They told me a bunch of stuff about how I’m wired, genetics and whatnot. This will help you understand who you are, they said. Always comparing me to what was *normal*.” [...] Cody traced his eyes over Hunter as he talked, studying the frame of his body, his smooth cheeks. “They gave me a label, Klinefelter Syndrome. But the only thing I really heard was *irreversible infertility*.” [...] “We wanted a baby, and I couldn’t give it to her. She needed a man—inside and out—and I couldn’t be that for her. I didn’t know what I was, really, but I needed to be alone while I tried to figure it out.” (111)

As the passage above suggests, internal dissonance may be amplified for XXY individuals who have been born and raised in a heteronormative, masculine-centric rural community, especially if those individuals have *come of age* before realizing the difference of their chromosomal anomaly, only to discover it later in life. After all, because of the phenotypically “invisible” nature of Klinefelter Syndrome, XXY

individuals are much less likely to discover their condition at an early age than those with ambiguous genitalia or those who present as classically “hermaphroditic.” Consider an XXY individual, for instance, who is reared as a male in a rural mining community, which is represented with haunting accuracy here in Barbara Smith’s poem “Digging Deeper”:

A car grumbles past my high window,
Gray with the lung-eating dust,
The bumper sticker grinning,
“Coal miners do it underground,”
And I think about the mantrip,
The raw, flickering bulbs,
The color-coded cables,
Wires carrying death or life,
The black and shining face
Promising treasure
Under a four-foot roof
Breaking six-foot bodies and itself
When no one is watching
How terror is buried
In four-lettered courage
And the shoulder-shrug
Claiming that it’s never raining
Under the ground. (61)

Implicit in the careful descriptions of this poem are signifiers of what masculinity looks like in the mines and the mining community by extension. These “six-foot bodies” must be “raw,” an extension of their own equipment. Like the wires they’ve installed, they are surely “carrying death or life,” and certainly burying their terror “In four-lettered courage.” Not only should these men shirk the fear they experience underground with a “shoulder-shrug,” but when they come to the surface, they must undermine their feelings further by sexualizing the experience: “The bumper sticker grinning, / Coal miners do it underground” (61).

Interestingly, the sexualization of work is common practice among miners, which often means that implicit heteronormative assumptions are made explicit underground, which in turn may further complicate an intersex individual's conception of his or her own identity in relation to the community. Especially problematic are the confrontations that would likely happen for an XXY individual underground, given that "the mining men use sexual banter to generate collective identification as masculine" (Pini and Mayes 195). In a less sterile description of this type of sexual banter and practice, Michael Guillerman, a retired western Kentucky coal miner, writes in his memoir about initiation pranks in the mines, most of which involve some sort of sexual humiliation. Sometimes these pranks are as mild as the practice of "cap-boarding," which occurs when "two or three men on the unit wrestled the [inexperienced miner] to the ground and, using a cap board . . . whipped his bottom hard enough to make him plead for mercy" (45). However, some pranks are much more disturbing for the "orange hats," a term used to describe the inexperienced miner:

The orange hat knew what was coming and frantically tried to break loose—which he couldn't do no matter how big or stout he may have been. The strong man then slowly and deliberately unfastened the miner's belt, unzipped his coveralls, and exposed his underwear. The harder the frantic orange hat struggled, the more intensely the two miners held onto his arms and legs. Shortly thereafter, the strong man, using cap board or rubber gloves—and sometimes Channellock pliers for special treatment—smeared the orange hat's genitals with grease, to everyone's delight except that of the victim. (46)

When reading Guillerman's account, one cannot help but detect a hint of unapologetic pride in the stereotypically masculine barbarism of the initiative practices, a sort of *you just had to be there* inside joke between he and his fellow miners. My own brother, a current underground coal miner working the western Kentucky coalfield, tells many

similar anecdotes with the same glint in his eye. When I wrote the scene of Hunter's bathhouse initiation—a prank-gone-wrong that is in many ways Cody's first glimpse into his own cisgender privilege—I wanted to simultaneously convey the frivolity of the prank as seen by the miners on the crew, as well as the serious undertones such an initiation may have for someone who is outside of the heteronormative masculinized world in which the prank takes place:

“It w-w-was just a j-j-j-joke, man,” said Tony Hensley, the wiry stutterer who got into the scuffle on the mantrip during Cody's first day. He was the smallest guy on the unit but never backed down from anyone. “Ch-ch-chill out,” he said. Hunter glared at him, then looked around the rest of the room to see everyone still staring at him. His eyes roved over every face. [...]

Without warning, Hunter . . . lunged at Tony Hensley. He caught the smaller man by the throat and slammed his back against the rows of lockers. The rest of the men stepped back and formed a loose semi-circle around Hunter and Tony. [...] Hunter sucked in a long breath while the other men in the room held their own. He eased his hand off of Tony's throat and let him slide out of the way. Hunter sat on the edge of the bench behind him and let the curls of his hair hang over his face.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered to himself. He stretched his fingers apart and let blood pool between his knuckles from where he had cut them on the lockers. He gripped his split fist into his other hand. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry,” he said, whispering to someone, somewhere. (67-8)

Hunter, like just about everyone else in Blue Banks, has learned what hegemonic masculinity should look like in the South, at least in our current cultural moment here in the early twenty-first century. As sociologist R.W. Connell notes, “At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which . . . guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men” (77).

One result of this Southern hegemonic masculinity, as evidenced by Guillerman's account of sexualized banter and initiations in the mines, may be that many miners are

roped into their own heteronormative trappings so much so that they cannot experience meaningful homosocial practice without explicitly dismissing the possibility of same-sex attraction. In his argument against such labels as *heterosexual* or *homosexual*, Michael Hannon implicates this very idea when he writes, “There are practical reasons to be wary of heterosexuality as well. Because our post-Freudian world associates all physical attraction and interpersonal affection with genital erotic desire, intimate same-sex friendship and a chaste appreciation for the beauty of one’s own sex have become all but impossible to achieve” (30). This argument contends that in heteronormative culture among men, particularly if applied to a hyper-masculinized world like rural underground mining communities, a requirement of male-male bonding is to establish—and continually reassert—what your relationship *is not*. Carving out this negative space leaves little room for intimate platonic same-sex relationships and further marginalizes those whose intersexuality makes creating such a negative space impossible.

The argument by Hannon—who has entered religious life with the Norbertines of St. Michael’s Abbey in Orange County, California—helps us to acknowledge what scholars of the South simply cannot ignore: the influence of conservative, evangelical Christianity on Southern culture. While Hannon himself rejects a binary of sexual orientation or gender, going so far as to argue, “The idea of sexual orientation is artificial and inhibits Christian witness” (27), we must be quick to acknowledge that the underpinnings of Hannon’s systematic theology are quite different from what many have come to expect from fundamentalist Christians in the South, especially from the denomination with the lion’s share of southern evangelicals: the Southern Baptists. In *Don’t Go Unless You Mean It*, I have attempted to subvert expectations with the Southern

Baptist preacher, Brother Jim, and I will examine this subversion more fully in a subsequent section of this analysis. For now, it is important to acknowledge how the Southern Baptist Church has implicitly and explicitly shaped cultural opinion on sexual difference. As John Howard notes in *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*:

The nation's largest religious body, the Southern Baptists, published relatively temperate articles on homosexuality during the late 1960s and early 1970s. While hardly accepting of homosexuality, Baptist writers advanced a policy of benevolent caretaking. Seen as either psychologically maladjusted or especially prone to sin, lesbians and gays could be accommodated within the church given they had humble attitudes and repentant hearts. By the late 1970s, however, as gay activism spread inside and outside the church, ecclesial statements became more caustic, focusing on biblical injunctions against homosexuality. The 1976 meeting of the Southern Baptist convention pronounced its "commitment to the biblical truth regarding the practice of homosexuality and sin," and discouraged congregations from hiring homosexual preachers or church employees. (242)

Since the 1970s, the Southern Baptists have made subsequent changes to their primary doctrinal statement, the *Baptist Faith and Message*, and with each revision, the language concerning sexual difference becomes more specific and narrow. With an amendment titled "The Family"—first introduced in 1998 and included in a full statement revision two years later known as the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*—Southern Baptists have left little room for dissent within the church on issues of sexual or gender identity:

God has ordained the family as the foundational institution of human society. It is composed of persons related to one another by marriage, blood, or adoption. Marriage is the uniting of *one man and one woman* [emphasis added] in covenant commitment for a lifetime. It is God's unique gift to reveal the union between Christ and His church and to provide for the man and the woman in marriage framework for intimate companionship, the channel of sexual expression according to biblical standards, and the means for procreation of the human race. ("Comparisons")

With statements such as this woven into the fundamental fabric of Southern Baptist belief, it is difficult to see such churches as anything but unbending in their exclusion of certain people based on sexual orientation or gender identity, regardless of what other beliefs in common those people may hold. To echo Longhurst and Johnson, if the *Southern Baptist Faith and Message* intends to coalesce a community, the hegemonic core of that community must ensure that certain groups are excluded. Recounting her own such exclusion based on her queer identity and sexuality, space and place theorist Laura Milner writes:

There is no place for nonconformists in the Southern Baptist Church and no legitimate place for women, so it's no wonder that I and others like me have fallen away. Perhaps fled is more honest. No mere backsliders, we are fighting for survival and looking for salvation in a culture that says female is bad and lesbian is out of the question. Add to this the schizophrenic pride and shame of being southern and the expectations for southern girls to be belles—smiling, self-deprecating women dependent (or pretending to be) on the trinity of Daddy, Jesus, and Hubby—and there's no place to go but insane or incognito. (185)

Among other things, Milner's language here suggests that—at least in her experience—the doctrine and practice of the Southern Baptists are not only restrictive when it comes to sexual orientation, but also in rigid definitions and expectations of binary genders. This is a reflection of what can be seen clearly in “The Family” section of the *Baptist Faith and Message* recorded above. For me, this was a most important consideration, and one I hoped to implicitly broach in *Don't Go Unless You Mean It*: sexual orientation aside, how could an intersex individual like Hunter McCready ever be accepted into a church that, through its own doctrinal statements on gender roles and familial relationships, rejects the idea of his very existence? If marriage is necessarily and irrefutably between “one man and one woman” and herein it is God's gift “to provide for the man and the

woman in marriage framework for intimate companionship, the channel of sexual expression according to biblical standards,” (“Comparisons”), Hunter McCready can only exist in the imaginary liminal space between two *real* things that he can never be. To put it another way, if the doctrine of the Southern Baptist Church suggests that the commission of any act outside of these limitations is sinful, Hunter McCready’s body is a manifestation of sin itself. This might be a natural end to what Foucault argues when he suggests that the Christian church has undergone a shift whereby the commission of sin has moved from the moment of action to the moment of desire:

A twofold evolution tended to make the flesh into the root of all evil, shifting the most important moment of transgression from the act itself to the stirrings—so difficult to perceive and formulate—of desire. For this was an evil that afflicted the whole man, and in the most secret of forms: ‘Examine diligently, therefore, all the faculties of your soul: memory, understanding, and will. [...] Examine, moreover, all your thoughts, every word you speak, and all of your actions. Examine even unto your dreams, to know it, once awakened, you did not give them your consent. (19-20)

If we synthesize Foucault’s partial argument with the doctrine and practice of the Southern Baptist Church, the end result is this: for a person like Hunter McCready to have *any sexual desire at all* is in direct conflict with strictures governing this brand of Christianity. It isn’t that Hunter McCready is a sinner; rather, it is that Hunter McCready is sin itself. What does the Church do with such a problem?

Indeed, in many ways the South is a culture in perpetual conflict. As we learn more about the nuances of sexual orientation, gender, and biological sex, the hegemonic power structures of the South—including the evangelical Christian church—will be forced to examine its own assumptions. Change does not happen on its own, however; and one way to accelerate a revision of the public doxa is through the creation and

consumption of new representations of sexual difference and queer gender identities in Southern fictions.

REIMAGINING GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN NEW SOUTHERN FICTIONS

As the discourse above suggests, hegemonic masculinity in the South is often unyielding and exclusive in our current cultural moment. However, as Connell has eloquently argued in *Masculinities*, the cultural exaltation of any one form of masculinity is subject to revision, as “hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual” (77); and furthermore, since “New groups may challenge old solutions and construct a new hegemony . . . hegemony is a historically mobile relation” (77). For any new group to challenge the old solutions of masculinity and gender expectations in the South, however, an existing queer subculture would need to be cultivated and empowered to have a metaphorical seat at the table; and one way for such an empowerment to come about is through legitimizing queer identities in cultural and artistic artifacts, such as novels.

Indeed, as queer historian Rictor Norton notes, “The placing of oneself within the historical queer cultural tradition is an imaginative act that requires only books rather than cruising grounds. Many have agreed with Oscar Wilde that ‘one had ancestors in literature, as well as in one’s own race, nearer in type and temperament’” (239). And as Gregory Woods says in *This Is No Book: A Gay Reader*, “Whether you live in the remote countryside or in crowded inner-city alienation, gay readings can turn your solitude into solidarity” (qtd. in Norton 239). But what should we hope to gain through new southern

fictions that challenge the current hegemonic ideal of masculinity, and what would such representations look like? To create a path for the future, one must first understand the past.

Eudora Welty once famously said, “One place understood helps us understand all places better.” Given the source of this pithy axiom, one might guess that the *one place* Welty had in mind was her own distinct slice of the American South. A geographical region that has—for many of the reasons noted in previous sections of this analysis—a complicated, sometimes contradictory heritage, the South is frequently represented in fictions as being as beautiful as it is ugly, and as welcoming as it is inhospitable. My own interests in the South involve places with their own unique histories that aren’t always included in discussions of literature of the American South—namely the coalfields of western Kentucky and stretching through Appalachian West Virginia—but the poem “Almost Heaven, Almost Hell” captures the dichotomous relationship people from this sub-region share with the rest of their southern counterparts:

Which
Part of

West, by God
Virginia

Do you
live in? (79)

Caught in the entanglements of this dichotomy are certain conventions and longstanding traditions which frequent the pages of fictions of the American South dating back to the “Old South” of the 19th century, the “New South” corresponding with American Modernism, and continuing on to the “Contemporary South” of today. While there is no litmus test for what classifies a fiction as “southern,” one may codify a loose canon of

works by looking for “the personal, almost intimate connection to place and to the past; the preference for the tangible over the abstract; a tempered, often tragic view of life; and eye for the peculiar or grotesque and an ear for the cadences of oral storytelling” (Andrews et al. xvii). In *Don't Go Unless You Mean It*, I have appropriated many of these traditions in hopes of joining a rich and important conversation about one place that, to echo Welty, might help us to understand all places better.

Even more important than leaning on established traditions, though, is recognizing the fact that contemporary fictions of the South demand new voices to complicate the narrative of this region, both in past and present. The success of my novel, then, depends in large part on whether I was able to build on the foundation of contemporary southern writers—a label used liberally to include those who have written since the end of World War II—who have been challenging and even subverting hegemonic southern cultural and character archetypes with increasing frequency. Specifically, I have attempted to challenge the archetype of the Southern Man (specifically the hegemonic masculinity associated with him) and of the Southern Baptist Preacher, since these archetypes, as discussed above, specifically relate to important thematic concerns regarding intersections of gender binaries, heteronormativity, and southern morality, as well as underpin current structures of hegemonic southern masculinity.

The first of these archetypes is admittedly, and intentionally, broad: the Southern Man. While successful fictions of the South—or anywhere, for that matter—will feature unique characters with distinctive individuality and personal yearnings, certain characteristics arise time and again in Southern fictions to emphasize a specific brand of

masculinity. Acclaimed feminist Dorothy Allison, who has challenged many southern archetypes in her own fiction, describes the Southern Man deftly in this passage from her most celebrated novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*:

Men could do anything, and everything they did, no matter how violent or mistaken, was viewed with humor and understanding. The sheriff would lock them up for shooting out each other's windows, or racing their pickups down the railroad tracks, or punching out the bartender over at the Rhythm Ranch, and my aunts would shrug and make sure the children were all right at home. What men did was just what men did. Some days I would grind my teeth, wishing I had been born a boy. (23)

In short, the Southern Man is rowdy, unpredictable, violent (often related to alcoholism), and as another passage from Allison suggests, the Southern Man is actively, demonstrably, and invariably straight: “A sad wounded man who genuinely likes women—that’s what Earle is, a hurt little boy with just enough meanness in him to keep a woman interested. [...] He liked women too, and that’s something I can say for him. A man who really likes women always has a touch of magic” (25).

Allison is speaking through character here and certainly doesn’t support such a narrowly defined masculinity; but her descriptions do suggest the image that even contemporary southern culture associates with manhood, particularly concerning the importance of an evident, even forceful, heterosexuality. As queer theorist Donna Jo Smith contends, “The terms *southern* and *queer* both come laden with a host of stereotypes, which we have all internalized to one degree or another. When combined, these stereotypes tend to conflict or conflate, depending on the perspective. For some, the notion of ‘southern queer’ is an oxymoron, conjuring up images of a drag queen with a pickup truck and gun rack” (370). Smith’s point, of course, is that images of southern masculinity—images that southern fictions may help to create or propagate—don’t leave

room for real consideration of difference; so challenges to the southern heteronormative landscape are seen as trying to force a square peg in a round hole from the start: the thing just doesn't fit.

Therefore, to challenge the archetype of the Southern Man with credibility, one must do so with an acknowledgment that hegemonic masculinity in the South is indeed rowdy, unpredictable, sometimes violent, and always heterosexual. This type of masculinity needs to be established in the text before any character can undermine it with verisimilitude. In an early passage of *Don't Go Unless You Mean It*, I've attempted to establish an accurate picture of the particular brand of masculinity in the underground mining community well before any such notion will be challenged in the novel. The following passage occurs on Cody's first day working in the mines, just after one of the men on his unit has made a crude sexual joke about another miner's sister:

The younger miner took a swing at the older man, and then a full scuffle broke out, everybody within striking distance trying to get a piece of the action. Cody hunkered down in his seat, trying to make himself as small as possible, and stared down at his brand new steel-toed boots while the hooting and hollering echoed around him. [...] He grew up hearing stories about what happened in the mines, about the rough-and-tumble man's world rumbling underneath Blue Banks. Up on the surface, these men stroked their wives with quiet fingers, hoisted their sons and daughters onto their shoulders, repented of their sins in the blue pews of Riverside Baptist Church after one of Brother Jim's convicting sermons. But down in the humming underground darkness, stomping through the damp muck of the labyrinth of rooms between coal pillars, these men sucked in rock dust and spit out curse words. They bragged about the women they'd had and took bets on the ones they'd have next. They measured their worth in tons of coal, each unit trying to prove more worthy than the next, and each man jockeying for alpha position in his own unit. (19-20)

In joining the tradition of southern literature and acknowledging the normalized hegemonic masculinity of the South, I've created an entry point to challenge the archetype of the Southern Man later in the novel. Of course, creating this type of

challenge to one-size-fits all masculinity is an act of walking a path that several important contemporary writers of the American South, like Allison herself, have carved before me. However, most often this challenge attacks the problem at a slant: rather than altering the image of the Southern Man, he is juxtaposed against a new type of Southern Woman, who blurs gender lines and heteronormative expectations. In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, for instance, Allison describes Aunt Raylene as someone who “had worked for the carnival like a man, cutting off her hair and dressing in overalls. She’d called herself Ray, and with her short, stocky build, big shoulders, and small breasts, I could easily see how no one had questioned her” (179). Similarly, Alice Walker, a renowned southern “Womanist” writer (a term Walker coined to mean “black feminist”) often crafted strong, masculine-presenting women, such as her character Mama, who describes herself as “a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands. In the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day. I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man. [...] One winter I knocked a bull calf straight in the brain between the eyes with a sledge hammer and had the meat hung up to chill before nightfall” (1018-19).

Noticeably, it seems that second wave feminism—as it pertains specifically to literature of the American South—freed writers to challenge the image of the feminine ideal, certainly subverting any lingering remnants from the “Southern Belle” of the early 20th century; but the Southern Man remained largely untouched. Even in more recent southern works—those that may be influenced by third-wave feminism and queer theory that blossomed in the early 1990s—the challenging of representations of the Southern Man, particularly in regards to sexuality, is still not done with great frequency. One book that does broach the topic is Carter Sickles’ *The Evening Hour*, set in a rural West

Virginia mining community. The story includes a stilted subplot concerning Cole Freeman's long-forgotten foray into male-male sexual experimentation: "He remembered what he'd never told anyone, what he'd never forget. Were they fifteen or sixteen? It happened only three or four times. They went camping up on the mountain. They had sleeping bags, they had the woods and the sky and the night animals. They slept close together and they put their hands on each other and the rest of the world disappeared" (308).

Interestingly, aside from this one direct passage, the rest of the book hints only occasionally at male-male sexual intimacy through innuendo and crude joking; Cole himself uses the word "faggot" on several occasions to insult others. The book does have an openly gay character; but he is predictably ridiculed and even beaten for his sexual difference. This demonstrates an important point about the current landscape of southern fiction: even when the Southern Man is challenged through male characters who embody sexual difference, these male characters aren't allowed to operate in the same open space as the rest of the populace, but are instead forced into secrecy.

As queer theorist Mathias Detamore points out, though, this expectation of queer secrecy in the South may be changing. In recounting his own public same-sex display of affection at a Kentucky music festival, Detamore notes:

In this public display, as I was making-out with a man that I had just met, I wondered how is it that rural gay folk . . . are somehow still thought of as mysterious and exotic—the way one might describe a Martian alien. [...] How can an open and visual display of queer attraction happen here? What does this say about the production of queer space in rural places—such as a hillbilly gathering in eastern Kentucky? (83)

To answer Detamore's rhetorical question, his experience *might* suggest that real-world southern culture is changing faster than the representations of that culture in literature.

Concerning my own fiction, one question lingered as I constructed the plot and characterization of *Don't Go Unless You Mean It*: even if southern culture is ready to acknowledge a public space for homosexual practice, can the same be said for intersexuality, and for those who love—and have sex with—intersex individuals, regardless of biology, gender, or anatomy? My intention was certainly not to provide an overly neat answer to this complex question, but merely to place a character in a situation that would force the question to be asked in the first place. At a crucial point of recognition and reversal for both Hunter and Cody, Candace broaches the idea that southern culture may be ready to accept Hunter's sexuality:

“Take care of yourself, sweetheart,” she said as she gripped the handle. She paused one last time, catching eyes with Hunter. “Look, it's not my place to say anymore. But you should know that Luke doesn't have any power over you. He can only keep you in the shadows as long as you refuse to step into the light. The world's a bigger place than it used to be, Hunter. You can either exist in this world as the person you really are, or let others keep telling you that you don't exist at all.” (199-200).

In the end, Hunter's ultimate act of defiance is also one of self-acceptance: standing before the congregation of Riverside Baptist Church wearing a mismatched smattering of gender-specific clothes, demanding an acknowledgment of his own unique personhood (249-51).

To be clear, such an act does not attempt to answer all of Detamore's questions about queerness in rural spaces; but it does address the enthymeme hidden in contemporary southern culture—and American culture in general, really—that even makes these questions relevant: the assumption that there are two biological sexes, and by extension, a definite, easily identifiable number of sexual orientations which will neatly correspond to the sexual dichotomy. The more we learn about the complex, sometimes

perplexing relationships between biology, anatomy, and gender identity, the more likely we are to challenge this enthymeme at its roots, which are often tied to the religious discourse that controls the public sphere of southern morality.

Herein we may find a bridge to the second, more specific, character archetype I have attempted to challenge in my novel: the Southern Baptist Preacher. In a previous section of this analysis, I cited space and place theorist Laura Milner's polemic against the Southern Baptist Church, based on her own rejection by the church because of her queer identity. Milner goes on, however, to suggest that "Courageous southern lesbians such as Dorothy Allison and Blanche McCrary Boyd, both raised Baptist in belle country, write stories about what happens when we stop feigning weakness and start taking responsibility for our lives" (185). Indeed, as suggested by the reference to Allison and Boyd, the Southern Baptist Church and its preachers have become emblematic of the debasements of Southern culture at large in many examples of southern literature, dating back to when Flannery O'Connor—a devout Roman Catholic—turned her scornful eye to the hypocrisies she saw between the words and actions of southern protestants. And since religious experience is largely inseparable from southern culture, fictions of the American South often employ preachers as characters and Baptist churches as settings, usually for both practical and symbolic applications. Furthermore, it should come as no surprise, given the context above, that the Southern Baptist Preacher archetype is an extension of the heteronormative male, made even more dangerous (it is often suggested) by the authority a community gives him in reverence for God.

In the previously referenced novel *The Evening Hour*, for example, Cole's grandfather is a West Virginian preacher who fits snugly into the archetypical mold:

“When his grandfather preached, he often went on for hours, He talked more fire and brimstone than most Holiness preachers, and his strict, dour ways, combined with his quick temper, also set him apart from the more joyous types. [...] He was the old-timey gaspy kind of preacher, sucking in and spouting out air” (47). Other passages in the book make clear that the preacher was verbally and emotionally abusive to his family, making his wife live in fear, while Cole himself seems to be emotionally stunted from his grandfather’s abuse. It is no surprise, then, that Cole’s grandfather would not accept Cole’s own homosexual experimentation as a teenager; and perhaps this rigid intolerance is an advantage for the verisimilitude of Sickles’ novel; but the Contemporary Southerner in me must ask: what if, for once, the preacher was *a good person*? What if the Southern Baptist Church was the Christ-like symbol of hope and life it purports itself to be? And what if, because of these qualities, a person of sexual difference found peace and comfort in the churches of the South instead of ostracism? Would a literary representation of such a place be believable?

I think it would. I myself am a product of Baptist heritage and church community in the South, and I don’t recognize the Church or its preachers as represented in the archetypes described above. Surely there is room for a southern preacher who approximates the inclusive theology of Hannon, the Christian scholar cited above, who argues that historically inchoate labels like “heterosexual” and “homosexual” should be discarded because of the harm such labels produce, going so far as to say that, theologically, the categorization of sexual orientation “is at odds with the freedom for which Christ set us free” (29). Hannon goes on to argue convincingly that in order to

survive, Christianity must come to a place of actively opposing binaries of sexual orientation and gender:

My own prediction is that we will see this binary thoroughly deconstructed within our lifetimes. But in my view, we proponents of Christian chastity should see the impending doom of the gay-straight divide not as a tragedy, but as an opportunity. More than that, I want to suggest that we should do our best to encourage the dissolution of orientation within our own subcultural spheres whenever possible. (29)

The inclusive discourse from Hannon and likeminded Christian scholars is surely piercing Southern Baptist churches, which is a foothold into the moral epicenter of southern culture. Like many writers of southern fiction, I have included a Southern Baptist preacher in my novel, *Don't Go Unless You Mean It*; but Brother Jim, as he is affectionately called by his congregation, proves to be an active hero in a town of inaction. After all, it is Brother Jim who ultimately gives Hunter the platform to declare his value as an intersexual before the congregation. Just before he does so, Brother Jim provides some theological underpinnings for why Hunter's emergence from the metaphorical closet is so important:

“The promise of our freedom is not just for the afterlife, but for the here and now,” Brother Jim continued, pointing his finger out toward the congregation. “In Christ, you are free from the bondage of sin. In Christ, you are free from the slavery of your flesh.” He paused once more, looking now past the crowd, past everything. “And in Christ, you should be free to live as the person you were created to be. To love who you were meant to love.” His hand began to tremble against the sides of the podium, and his bottom lip began to quiver. He flipped the microphone away from his body, tilted his head back, and whispered a silent prayer into the air above him. (258)

Though he must overcome his own narrow ideals, he eventually comes to a place to view both Hunter McCready and Cody Culver in the same way he views everyone else: with dignity, love, and respect, or as he would say, as persons who are *Imago Dei*: Made in the

image of God. While this interpretation of the Southern Baptist Preacher subverts the archetype, I don't believe it to be idealistic beyond verisimilitude; and since evangelical Christianity is so closely tied to southern culture, it is difficult to imagine the telos of a changed perspective of hegemonic masculinity without a direct challenge to this archetype.

CONCLUSION

Concerning his own fiction, James Joyce once famously said, "In the particular is contained the universal." My own hope is that the particulars of Cody's story in *Don't Go Unless You Mean It* are able to resonate universally. Questions of Cody's sexuality and his conceptualization of Hunter's queer gender and biological identity are raised both implicitly and explicitly in the novel, and it is my hope that the reader will be puzzling right along with the protagonist. After all, while these questions are particular to Cody Culver and his unique relationships with Hunter, Maisie, and the rest of his community, they are in many ways universal, even for people who do not have any day-to-day interaction with intersexuality. Consider that ever since Alfred Kinsey first introduced his now-famous 0-6 scale of heterosexuality-homosexuality in 1948, we have known that same-sex attraction and experience is more accurately a question of placement on a spectrum than an either/or question, and that high percentages of self-identified straight people do not approach uniformity on that spectrum. Even if we distrust Kinsey's methodology, as many scholars do, more recent studies suggest numbers in accord, if presented differently, with Kinsey's findings:

In conjunction with studies of bisexuality, researchers have begun to discuss the oversimplification of traditional sexual identity categories . . .

and to explore other potential subtypes of same-sex sexuality, paying attention to alternative categories that expand beyond even traditional conceptualizations of bisexuality. [...] A study using a national probability sample included *mostly heterosexual (straight) but somewhat attracted to people of your same sex* as a descriptive option (Udry & Chantala, 2006), finding that about one tenth of the young women chose this option. (Thompson and Morgan 15)

Additionally, Blank reminds us that recent surveys have agreed with Kinsey that at least 37 percent of men have at least one same-sex sexual experience in their lives (xvi). While none of these numbers are explicitly broached in *Don't Go Unless You Mean It*, I do hope that the ideas suggested here hover implicitly under the surface. "I'm more like Cody Culver than I would have thought," I want the reader to say, which may lead to a far more important question: "In what ways am I like Hunter McCready?"

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- Pancake, Breece D'J. "Fox Hunters." *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2002. 61-82. Print.
- - -. "Hollow." *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2002. 39-54. Print.
- - -. "The Scrapper." *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2002. 101-14. Print.
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CURRICULUM VITAE

Nathan Gower

Associate Professor of English
Campbellsville University
Division of Humanities
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EDUCATION

- **PhD, University of Louisville (2017)**
Program: Comparative Humanities
Emphasis: Aesthetics and Creativity
Dissertation: *Don't Go Unless Your Mean It: A Novel with Critical Afterword: Heteronormative Masculine Performance in Contemporary Fictions of the Rural American South.*
- **MFA, Spalding University (2008)**
Louisville, KY
Program: Writing (Fiction Emphasis)
Creative Thesis: Love, Unmistakably: Stories
Critical Thesis: "Why We Like the Story Anyway: Creating and Developing Unsympathetic Protagonists"
Advisors: Dr. Jody Lisberger, Mary Yukari Waters, K.L. Cook, Dr. Neela Vaswani
- **BA, Campbellsville University (2006)**
Campbellsville, KY
Major: English
Advisor: Dr. William Neal

PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS

- **Associate Professor of English, Division of Humanities (2015 – Present)**
Campbellsville University
Campbellsville, KY
Supervisor: Dr. Mike Page, Dean of Arts and Sciences

- **Assistant Professor of English, Division of Humanities (2010 – 2015)**
Campbellsville University
Louisville, KY
Supervisor: Dr. Mike Page, Dean of Arts and Sciences
- **English Instructor, School of Liberal Arts and Sciences (2007 – 2010)**
Ivy Tech Community College
Sellersburg, IN
Supervisor: Robert York, Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences

TEACHING AND ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE

- COURSES TAUGHT (Online and/or Face-to-Face)
 - Screenwriting
 - Writing the Short Film
 - Contemporary Drama
 - Creative Writing
 - Advanced Fiction Writing
 - English Composition I and II
 - Exposition and Persuasion
 - Literary Studies
 - American Literature II
 - World Literature II
 - Contemporary American Literature
- ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE
 - Currently on the board of the *Campbellsville Review* scholarly and creative publication
 - Past service as lead faculty of online English courses
 - Developed, staffed, and directed the Campbellsville University Louisville writing lab
 - Served on multiple committees related to curriculum development, online learning, student honors program, and faculty publication

PUBLICATIONS AND PRODUCTIONS

Critical Essays:

Gower, Nathan. "Why We Like the Story Anyway: Creating and Developing Unsympathetic Protagonists." *The Atrium: A Journal of Academic Voices* (Fall 2010): n. pag. Web.

- - -. "Madness Defamiliarized: The Value of Poetic Description of Mental Illness." *Expositions: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* 8.1 (2014): 29-37. Print.

---. "The Stories (and Life) of Breece D’J Pancake." *The Campbellsville Review* 7.1 (2014): 61-5. Print.

Fiction:

Gower, Nathan. "A Little Help." *Louisville Magazine* (December 2013): 95-99. Print. Web versions: <http://loumag.epubxp.com/i/214077>

---. "Digging the Hole." *Baltimore Review* (Spring 2012): 64-5. Print.

---. "Frozen." *94 Creations Journal* 2.1 (Summer 2012): Print.

---. "Heather." *Paradigm*. Weiss Issue (2010): n. pag. Web. 4 May 2010.

---. "Just Keep Digging." *Waterhouse Review* (Fall 2013). Web.

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---. "Love, Unmistakably." *Valparaiso Fiction Review* (Fall 2012): 87-121. Print. Web version: <http://scholar.valpo.edu/vfr/vol2/iss1/6/>

---. "Speaking Opossum." *New Southerner* (forthcoming, December 2014). Print.

---. "Uncle Freddy's Eulogy." *Connections Literary Journal* (Spring 2006): 21-24. Print.

---. "What's There to Talk About?" *Fried Chicken and Coffee*. N.p., 4 May 2010. Web. 4 May 2010.

Film (Screenplay Credit):

Gower, Nathan, Screenwriter (shared credit). *50 Kisses*. Dir. Chris Jones. Living Spirit Pictures, 2014. Film.

Gower, Nathan, Screenwriter. "Can I Have Your Number?" Dir. Evan Magruder. Campbellsville U, 2017. Film

Gower, Nathan, Screenwriter. "Colton's Big Night." Dir. Sebastian Solberg. Sunrock Productions, 2012. Film.

Gower, Nathan, Screenwriter. "No Crying Over Spilled Coffee." Dir. Keith Nixon. Depaul U, 2015. Film.

Poetry:

Gower, Nathan. "In This Light." *Birmingham Arts Journal* 8.4 (2012): 17. Print.
- - -. "The Water." *Connections Literary Journal* (Spring 2006): 12. Print.

GRANTS AND FELLOWSHIPS

Appalachian College Association Faculty Fellowship, 2016-17

University of Louisville Dissertation Completion Award, Spring 2017

CONTEST RECOGNITION AND AWARDS

2010 Barry Hannah Memorial Competition

Finalist, Runner-Up

Fiction: "What's There to Talk About?"

2012 50 Kisses International Film Competition

Winner

Best Overall Screenplay Nomination and Finalist

Short Screenplay: "Colton's Big Night"

2012 NYC Midnight Screenwriting Competition

Runner-Up

Short Screenplay: "The Warehouse"

2013 Louisville Literary Arts Fiction Award (Fiction)

Winner

Short Story: "A Little Help"

2014 72 Script Fest

Finalist

Short Screenplay: "How to Kill Yourself and Help Other People"

2014 Blue Cat International Screenplay Competition – Title Contest

Finalist (winning selection still pending)

Short Screenplay: "How to Kill Yourself and Help Other People"

2014 New Southerner Literary Competition (Fiction)

Finalist

Short Story: "Speaking Opossum"

PUBLIC LECTURES AND READINGS

Creative Publication Reading – Fiction: “Speaking Opossum” (January 2015)
New Southerner Literary Competition Recognition Reading: Louisville, KY

Creative Publication Reading – Fiction: “Speaking Opossum” (October 2014)
ANTLER Invitation Writing Retreat: Grand Rapids, MI

Creative Publication Reading – Fiction: “How We Go on Eating” (September 2014)
94 Creations/Iris Brown Literary Magazine Launch: Louisville, KY

Creative Reading – Screenplay: “Now Leaving Echo Heights” (September 2014)
Speed Gallery: Louisville, KY

Creative Publication Reading - Fiction: “A Little Help” (October 2013)
INKY Series Reading: Louisville, KY

Lecture: “Poetic Language and Mental Illness” (October 2013)
ANTLER Writer’s Retreat: Jeffersonville, IN

Creative Publication Reading – Fiction: “Frozen” (June 2012)
94 Creations Studio: Louisville, KY

Creative Publication Reading: “Digging the Hole” (May 2011)
Festival of Contemporary Writing: Louisville, KY

Lecture: “Taking Risk with POV: Indirect Narrative Discourse” (May 2011)
Spalding University: Louisville, KY

Creative Publication Reading: “What’s There to Talk About?” (May 2010)
Ivy Tech Community College: Sellersburg, IN

Lecture: “Seriously Funny: Humor in Literary Fiction” (November 2008)
Spalding University: Louisville, KY

Creative Publication Reading: “Heather” (November 2008)
Spalding University: Louisville, KY

STUDENT AWARDS/RECOGNITIONS

- Spalding University MFA Class Representative / Commencement Speaker (2008)
- Campbellsville University Valedictorian (2006)
- Campbellsville University Ruby Curry English Award (2006)
- Campbellsville University Servant Leadership Award (2005)