

HARRIS, KERRY ANNE, M.F.A. *Kaleidoscope*. (2015)
Directed by Craig Nova. 75pp.

Kaleidoscope is a coming of age novel for women in the twenty-first century.

This thesis contains the first three chapters of that novel, and it embarks on the premise of the book:

When the spirited and quirky Julia, 21, returns to The Bradford Boarding School to carry on her mother's teaching legacy, she doesn't expect to fall for her colleague, Reagan; but on the first day of school, Julia realizes she's made a terrible mistake. Reagan's not a teacher; he's a senior in her class. In the wake of a previous sex scandal at Bradford, Julia must navigate her first year teaching, her feelings for Reagan, and her relationship with her boss and mentor, Joan Bates. The stakes are high—if Julia's caught with Reagan, she'll lose everything, and she'll take Bradford down with her. But what does it mean to love? What does it mean to have one life and to live it well? Julia doesn't know yet, but she does know this—The Bradford School is full of secrets. And here, nothing lies like the truth.

KALEIDOSCOPE

by

Kerry Anne Harris

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by KERRY ANNE HARRIS has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
I. JULIA	1
II. JULIA	34
III. JOAN	55

CHAPTER I

JULIA

Not again, Rusty. Don't even think about it. Not when we're this close. I pushed the gas. Nothing. The station wagon rolled backwards down the hill. I slammed the brakes. The back entrance to The Bradford School was the fastest way to Conley Dorm. But here, no lampposts lit the road, no halos of light warded off darkness. On my right, the Connecticut River was black and moving fast. Rumor had it that a student found a dead body in there once, but the case never went to trial. Instead, Bradford got the Ricky V. Vancini Building. On my left, the Lassiter Forest marked the edge of campus. I'll say this about those woods—if pressed, I'd take my chances with the river. I tapped the gas. Rusty sputtered, bucked. Then smoke curled out from the hood. I put the car in park, turned off the engine, and walked around front.

You should probably know I have this thing about driving—it's that I'd rather walk. I think Rusty suspects my true allegiance. Not that Rusty's all bad. For one, he's paid for. For two, well, he's paid for. Ten years ago, Rusty took my family from Bradford, Connecticut down to North Carolina. Before we left, my mother, father, and I stood in pretty much this exact spot and looked back over campus at the grey stone buildings with gargoyled steeples, and the grove of trees down Main Campus Drive, and the chapel with its bell tower peaking above the horizon.

As we waved goodbye, my mom leaned down to me and said, *Chin up, the world doesn't stop for tears*. And you know what? That really ticked me off. I'm not a crier. A shouter, yes (I'm Italian). A talk-backer, sure (I'm Irish). An occasional liar, of course (I'm a formerly subjugated Eastern European). But I'm not a crier. When we left, I was eleven. I was heading to middle school. I knew how to conjugate verbs better than my mom's freshman. And if there's one thing I couldn't stand, it was condescension.

But she was dying.

That's why we were leaving.

So I squeezed her hand and looked as sad as possible for her. And then my dad kissed her. I mean really kissed her. The kind of kiss that's gross if it's your parents and you're eleven. The kind of kiss you shouldn't see. The kind of kiss that means: don't leave me, I love you, we'll make it through this. Even then I knew it was the kind of kiss you could spend your whole life searching for and never find. Then my father took my mother's hand and led her to the car. The sun was setting, and it streamed through the chapel's stain glass making patterns on the grass like northern lights. As we drove off, a sculler rowed down the river. My mother never looked back. I never looked away.

Now, ten years later, the world was dark. A blanket of clouds covered the moon and all of the stars. Behind me a branch cracked. I jerked around but only saw darkness and the yellow flashing of hazard lights. But then I heard it again. Something rustled along the river's bank. My shoulders tensed. It was too big to be a coyote, too loud to be a buck. What else is there to fear in Connecticut?

Bears.

As a dark shadow emerged from the riverbank, I said, “Stay back!” It kept coming. Rule Number One of not getting attacked by a bear: Don’t startle it. Great. Seeing as I had that going for me, I moved onto Rule Number Two: Don’t run away; speak loud and make yourself look big. I climbed onto the hood of my car and spread my arms wide. Then in a loud, low voice I made a wooing noise like a fire engine, or a deranged baboon. In the distance, the bear stood on its hind legs. Sizing me up. Getting ready for the kill.

Except the bear was too thin to be a bear and walked too straight to be a bear. I dropped my arms as it approached—*it* being the operative word—for *it* just so happened to be a man in a gray t-shirt that stretched across the contours of his chest and tugged around his biceps. I can’t begin to tell you why it didn’t occur to me that the rustling in the bushes could have been another human—or at the very least some teenagers making out. But it didn’t.

“I’ve been known to have an effect on women,” said the obviously not-bear man. “But I’ve never seen *that* before.” The moon peaked beyond the clouds, revealing that this man was not only a *man*, but a young man with grey-green eyes and a strong jaw line and wavy brown hair that flipped out behind his ears. He smiled at me—a crooked smile. I wished I’d been eaten by the bear.

“As you can see,” I said, looking for a spot to jump down. “I have highly developed survival skills.” He offered me his hand, but I didn’t take it. I jumped off myself. “I thought you were a bear.”

“Right,” he said. “Highly developed survival skills. And also strong gorilla-imitation skills. Really strong. But yes,” he said. “I’m not a bear. I’m Reagan.” He stretched out his hand. I shook it. It was steady, warm.

“I’m Julia,” I said. “I’m new.”

“And punctual,” he said. “You do know you were supposed to get here a few days ago, right?” I stared at him. “Right, well...” He nodded to the white smoke still leaking from Rusty’s hood. “Want me to take a look?”

“If five mechanics and a whole credit card worth of repairs couldn’t fix Rusty, I don’t think you can.”

“That’s your first problem.”

“The mechanics?”

“You named your car *Rusty*.”

“It was Trusty, actually. He’s recently been demoted.”

A smile crept across Reagan’s face. I couldn’t tell if he was mocking me or trying not to laugh. Maybe both. “So where are you and Rusty headed?” he said.

“Conley.”

“That’s not far. Want to push it?”

Want was not the operative word, but I didn’t see a better option, so as Reagan went around back, I put Rusty in neutral and hand-cranked down the window. I held the steering wheel with my right hand and gripped the car’s frame with my left. Reagan counted to three. Then he heaved, and I heaved—though my heaving was more like a five-year-olds equivalent of heaving. You need someone to explain the metaphorical

significance of a Shakespearean sonnet? I'm your gal. You need someone to push heavy things? Not so much. My brand of athleticism falls more into the "runs-only-when-chased" category. But on three we pushed, and we pushed, and we pushed again in unison, with the steady rocking of slow progress. Reagan grunted with each step until we reached the top of the hill. Then all at once, the car gained momentum. It rushed forward, almost out of control, and I ran down the hill beside it until the road plateaued. By the time the car slowed to a stop, I was in full wheeze mode. I looked back at Reagan. He was out of breath, too, but trying not to show it. Boys.

"So what were you doing in the woods?" I said, once I could breathe again.

"I was actually down by the river," he said. "There's a bench out there. I go there after coach's meetings." I knew the bench. My mother took me there once. We sat on either side of it with a plaque between us that read: *In memory of Evelyn Rose: 'All the darkness in the universe cannot block out a single star.'* The bench overlooked the point where one of the larger tributaries met the Connecticut River. I watched the water fold into itself, lose itself. My mother looked up at the sky and said, "There's something I need to tell you."

"You go to the bench alone?" I said to Reagan.

"Yep. That's the goal. You ready to keep going?" I nodded and repositioned my hands. Then we stepped forward together on cue. "So what brings you to Bradford?" he said as we plodded along. "The championship sports? The college acceptance rates? The abundance of strapping young men?"

“If I find any strapping young men, I’ll let you know.” He laughed an unencumbered laugh that echoed off the river, and I couldn’t help but congratulate myself on my momentary wit. “I grew up here actually” I said. “My mom taught English at Bradford for fifteen years. She was...” I trailed off. I never spoke about her. Tried not to think about her. But suddenly, back at Bradford, she was everywhere. So what would I say? That she loved Keats and Yeats and peanut butter-and-butter sandwiches. That she was brilliant—in the book smart way, but also in the way that shone light. That she saved every last dime for my college education, but that her treatments drained the whole account. That in the end, she screamed that she hated my father; that she asked me who I was.

Reagan and I mounted the last hill before the straight shot through campus. My arms and thighs burned. I hated the burn; I wanted more of it. I drew a sharp inhale and thrust the car forward.

“If we can get the car over the hill,” I said. “I think there’ll be enough momentum to get it started.”

“Go for it. But you’ll probably have to swing inside.”

“I think you forget who you’re talking to. I have mad gorilla skills, remember?” I gripped the car frame and shoved my whole weight against it. We crested the hill, and just before the car took off, I jumped inside. I turned the ignition. The engine caught. I stuck my hand out the window and waved as Reagan grew smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror.

I followed River Road past Main Campus Drive (our founding fathers were quite inventive with the naming). But before I pulled up to Conley Dorm, I drove by the English Department. Architecturally, the English Department resembled all the other buildings on campus with its stone walls and its marble pillars, but somehow it loomed larger than the rest—maybe because of its great oak door that took two hands to yank open, or maybe because of the wall of students who'd become senators and ambassadors and Nobel Prize winners, or maybe because the corner office belonged to Ms. Joan Bates. And that night, her light was on. What was she doing working till 9:00 on a Saturday? Before school even started? I knew I should go in there. I knew I should apologize in person for being so late and missing the teacher orientation meetings.

But there's something you should know about Bates. For the past 150 years, The Bradford School has put on a Shakespeare play each spring. (Before girls came in the 70's, the freshmen played the women parts—real authentic—one of the old trustees even used this fact as a reason why Bradford shouldn't admit women. Tradition, don't you know?) Anyway, the last year my mother taught at Bradford, the play they did was *Macbeth*.

My mom made us sit in the front row—she was a Front-Row-Person. You know the type. Very punctual, very proud, very non-Soviet-era Eastern European. I must inform you that never, of my own freewill, have I chosen to sit in the front row. Not only do I consider it an invasion of personal space because whoever's talking or lecturing or acting is most certainly talking or lecturing or acting *directly at you*. But there's also no escape. Think you can zone out into your own happy thoughts? Good luck with that.

Think you can pretend to go to the bathroom and not come back? Think again. If I had been older than eleven, I probably would have had the wherewithal (or at least the sass) to protest. But I didn't, so I got sucked in, and then the curtain dropped, and then there was nowhere to go, and there she was: Ms. Bates—in full lead witch attire with her crooked nose and her wiry, grey hair and her cackling laugh. And when she cast her double, double toil and trouble, she cast it right at me. I mean—Right. At. Me. The whole school was in the new auditorium. All five hundred students in their perfectly pressed uniforms and their shining Bradford buttons, and Bates-the-witch looked at me.

I used to think it was a hyperbole when people said you were so scared, you peed your pants. Let me just clarify for you. It's not a hyperbole. It's a verifiable fact. And once you pee your pants, you think you can zone out and think happy thoughts? You think you can pretend to go to the bathroom and not come back? Yeah. All of which is to say, the lead witch fit Bates so well I never quite got over it. Now she was the Chair of the English Department. And the Dean of Faculty. Super.

But if Bates was working tonight, I figured she'd be working again tomorrow. Plus, who knew if Rusty would start again once he stopped? Really, it was a matter of vital importance to press on to Conley Dorm. So I did, and soon enough, I arrived.

Conley's the oldest building on campus, and it stands in an L shape at the far end of River Road. Conley has survived epidemics, floods, and the arrival of women on campus. It's cold in the winter, hot in the summer, and leaks in the rain. Though it should have been torn down ages ago, instead, it has been fortified for the sake of

tradition, and it now houses the lowest ranking members on campus: the freshman girls. And me.

I'd packed everything I owned in Rusty, and I could still see out the back. After I parked, I decided to take my box of books up first since that seemed like the romantic thing to do. The box held all the essentials: *The Norton Anthology's of British Literature*, *American Literature*, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, and Judy Bloom's *Are You There God, It's Me Margaret*. One of these things is not like the others. Which is true. One of these things is greater. Perhaps not for the world, but for me, and I shall here and forever after contend that the best works of literature are those read by children, for that's when the heart is molded, that's when the spirit is formed, and if your mother has just died, and your father spends so much time drinking that he forgets to take you to school, and you don't know anyone in your new town but your Grandma Alma who's losing her mind, then children's books may save your life. Margaret spoke to me, and I spoke to God asking, are you there? I still haven't heard an answer.

Conley Dorm smelled of burnt hair and peach perfume, and the cardboard flower nametags on the girls' doors were covered in glitter. The freshmen were at orientation, so for the first and last time that year, the hall was quiet. In front of my door, I paused to savor the moment of metaphorical significance when I, Julia Ray, crossed the threshold into my first apartment—crossed the threshold into my new life. To open a door is to open a world. Didn't someone important say that? *To open a door is to open a world?* If not, they should have. If not, remember I said it, so when it's all said and done, and

I'm forgotten, someone who has never known me will quote my words out of context and think of me fondly.

My new apartment reeked of mildew. I mean reeked—like the breathing-into-the-elbow-of-your-sleeve-so-you-don't-throw-up kind of reeking. The ceiling drooped, either from something in the attic, or from just being old—neither of which was very comforting. A stain the shape and color of a baby elephant covered the bedroom floor, and the adjoining bathroom was only slightly larger than airplane-sized. And the kitchen (if you can call a three-foot wide strip of tile a kitchen) had a mustard yellow refrigerator that might have been popular in the 1970's, but most likely had never been popular. Ever.

But the worst part of the whole place wasn't the place itself. I worked as a Resident Assistant in college for the free housing. The university provided the bed, dresser, desk; I provided the sheets, clothes, and my assistance. So that's what I brought to Bradford: sheets, clothes, assistance. I didn't bring a kitchen table or chairs. Not even a mattress. I didn't own them. The tiniest part of me—that delusionally hopeful part that breeds on naiveté and the confidence that good things must happen to good people—that part knew that all the rooms at Bradford came fully furnished, and hoped that mine would be too. But as I looked from the empty floors to the stark white walls, they stared back as if to say, welcome to adulthood.

I'd run out my credit on Rusty. I had two weeks until my first paycheck.

So I did what any adult would do. I got the heck out of there. And I headed to the bench by the river.

The next morning when the Sunday bells tolled for chapel service at 10:00, I didn't go. I hadn't gone to church since my mother died, so going now felt hypocritical. Plus as a new English teacher, I'd told myself it was romantic to live in the oldest building on campus and that the metaphorical significance alone would be enough to get me through the first few weeks. Let me tell you, metaphorical significance is highly overrated. There is absolutely nothing romantic about rolling off your blankets in the middle of the night onto a rug that feels like steel wool and smells like cat pee. If I had been too proud the first day to ask for a spare mattress, well, cat pee can do a lot to humble a person.

So, I attempted to sleep in a little more, and then I headed to the English Department to find Ms. Bates. That morning, Ms. Bates' door was closed all but a crack, and when I knocked, it creaked open. Bates sat behind her desk on the telephone. Her face was lean with deep-set wrinkles—not crow's feet from years of laughter, but harsh lines around the mouth and brow from years of thinking deeply and never being satisfied. I knew the look—it was the same one as my father's. But when she smiled at me, her gaze was unexpectedly warm. She covered the receiver with her hand and whispered to me, "Just a second." She pointed outside, and I retreated into the hallway. I closed the door, but not all the way.

Ms. Bates spoke in a hushed whisper. "What do you mean it's worse than we expected?"

I leaned against the wall. Stones have the benefit of being solid; but nothing sticks to them, not heat or light. They shed noise like water. I inched closer to the door.

“I understand that, but the repercussions for Heath, as well as for the school...After school tomorrow? I understand... I look forward to seeing you, too.”

Bates hung up. There was a moment's pause, then a sigh. Papers shuffled, a chair rolled, and kitten heels clicked on the slate floor towards the door. It swung open, and Ms. Bates greeted me with a firm handshake. Her fingers were frigid.

“Ms. Ray,” she said. “It's so nice to see you again. I'm sure you hear this a lot, but you bear a striking resemblance to your mother.” I did not hear it a lot. It's been my experience that people don't like to talk about the dead. But I didn't correct her. Ms. Bates is not the type of woman you correct.

“So, have you settled in?” she said. Was that a trick question?

“No, ma'am. I arrived late last night.”

“You should have come by. I was here.”

“You were? I didn't...um, I didn't realize that.” I shifted my weight and tried to look Bates in the eye. “I just wanted to come by and apologize first thing this morning. I am so, so sorry that I missed the orientation meetings.”

“I got your messages. Car problems. These things happen.” She took a seat behind her desk and gestured for me to sit in across from her. “But,” she said. “Nothing of the sort can happen again.”

My seat appeared to have the well-worn quality of being squishy and warm. False. The chair was stiff and cold, and the cushion oozed dust and smelled of old cheese.

Across from me, Bates sat as straight as the wall of file cabinets behind her. I sat up straighter, as if she'd glued a ruler across my shoulder blades.

"Here's the Bradford School Handbook," she said. "Read it. All of it. Cover to cover. Especially the section on Faculty Conduct." I took the book from her. It was shrink-wrapped and unexpectedly heavy. I almost dropped it.

"The rules are the rules at Bradford," Bates said. "And no one is above them—not you, not me, not God Himself." She cleared her throat and looked down her crooked nose at me. If there had been a clap of thunder, a flash of lightning, I wouldn't have been surprised. "I cared about your mother," said Bates. "And I care about you. But if you get into trouble again, there's not much I can do to help you. Do you understand?"

Great. I hadn't even been back 24 hours, and I was getting the ultimatum. And what did Bates mean *again*? My car broke down. How was I supposed to prevent that? You know what I wanted to say? That she could take her self-righteous pity and cram it. But I wasn't an idiot. And in spite of myself, I had spent the past ten years in the south, so I smiled my politest smile and said, "Yes, ma'am."

"Good." She strummed her fingers on a stack of papers on with official Board of Trustees letterhead. Upside-down, I'd gleaned *board meeting* and *urgent* and *Headmaster Allen*. She cleared her throat and looked right at me. I mean, Right. At. Me.

"Julia," she said. "I'm going to be straight with you. I don't know if you've heard, but there's been an accusation of sexual assault against Heath Longmire. He's a teacher in the English Department. I don't know what it means yet. But it's a mess. It's not good for you. It's not good for me. It's not good for Bradford. I know we've

arranged for you to be my assistant in the English Department after classes. If you hear anything about Heath, you let me know. If you hear anything related to any kind of student-teacher scandal, you let me know.”

“Of course.”

“Good. You’re my eyes and ears out there.”

With that, she stood, so I stood, and she led me to the door. Before I left, I thanked her—not because I was thankful, but because I didn’t know what else to say. Then I headed to the dining hall for Sunday brunch before the student rush after chapel. When I was little, I used to imagine that the dining hall was a huge upside down ship with the hull made entirely of mahogany and vaulted ceilings that stretched three stories tall. Light always streamed through wall-length windows and brass chandeliers dangled above the square mahogany tables. A six-foot tall school shield hung above the entrance, and oil paintings of old headmasters decorated the wall that separated the seating area from the food lines.

That morning I walked past the old headmasters, but instead of bee-lining to the hot food line with French toast and eggs benedict, I chose to make chocolate chip pancakes on the far griddles because 1) I freaking love pancakes. On the list of food I cannot live without, pancakes come in a close second. 2) It seemed like a legitimate excuse to eat chocolate for breakfast. But mostly, 3) I wanted to find Reagan without looking like a stalker. While I was waiting, I made a lot of pancakes—like an embarrassing amount of pancakes. I ate two and I “accidentally” burnt two more so I

could throw them out and not go to the faculty tables with that many pancakes. Yet still, no Reagan.

Eventually I headed to the drink stand and grabbed some grapefruit juice, because obviously, the grapefruit juice negated the pancakes. (The math, in case you're wondering: [7 chocolate chip pancakes] – [1 glass of grapefruit juice] = [zero sum game]. And now, you quantifiably understand why I majored in English.) As I made my way to the teacher's section along the back wall, several men were talking.

"But this is Heath we're talking about," said one man. "There's no way he would do something like that."

"I heard Heath was reaching for a book, and everything was an accident," said another man.

"Everything was an accident? You've got to be kidding me," said the only woman at the table. She looked young—maybe a few years older than me with dark hair and dark eyes. She had a New York accent and red lipstick, and she looked like someone who got into trouble—looked like someone I wanted to know.

"I still don't believe he did it," said the first man. "I mean, it's *Heath*."

"Come on, Tim," said a man with a mustache. "You've seen those shirts Kaylee wears." He leaned back out of the woman's line of sight and gestured in front of his chest like he was grasping two watermelons.

The woman glared at him. Then she looked away from the table, and when she saw me, she said, "Free seat over here." I sat down beside her, and she stretched out her hand. "I'm Luz Sanchez. You must be Julia."

“How’d you guess?”

“The lost doe look. Plus, I’m the other Conley Dorm Head, so your picture’s on the bulletin board by my room. I saw your light on last night, but figured maybe you’d want some space. How are things?”

How are things? I’m sleeping on cat pee. On top of all my college loans, I now have thousands of dollars of car repairs to pay off. Apparently, I’m Joan Bates’ new liaison. And, by the way, school starts tomorrow, but instead of having a few days to adjust and prepare for classes, I only have this afternoon.

“Things are fine, thanks,” I said.

“They probably suck. But at least you’ve got a good attitude.” I loved this woman. We were going to be great friends. Luz turned from me to the table and pointed to the men from left to right: “Julia, meet Mark, Ashton, Jamie, Tim, and Nate. Everyone, meet Julia.” They all said hello, and I promptly forgot who was who—except for Nate. He was the blonde on my right.

“So you’re the one who missed Joan’s faculty meeting,” said Nate with a grin.

“That takes balls,” said the man with the mustache.

“Or, as we non-chauvinists like to call it, feminine audacity,” said Luz.

“Or car problems,” I said.

“Hear that—car problems,” said Luz. “Leave the Newbie alone, Nate. It’s her first day for Christ’s sake.” She winked at me and then turned back to the men across the table. I wanted to ask her what Heath had done exactly. If it was sex. Was it appropriate

to ask about sex on my first day over breakfast? I felt like no, so I ate a few bites of chocolate masquerading in pancake form.

“Look guys, it doesn't matter what Heath did,” said Luz. “He’s a perv. If you ask me, he had it coming to him.”

“You think everyone has it coming to them,” said Nate.

“That’s because they probably do,” said Luz.

“What do you think about all this, Nate?” said the man with the mustache.

“You’ve been awfully quiet.”

“I can’t really talk about it.”

“Right, the faculty representative at Board meetings.” The man with the mustache said this in a mocking tone, and a few other men snickered. What was this? Middle School?

“All I’ll say is this,” said Nate. “Whatever Heath did or didn’t do, the Board’s bringing up accreditation, so that means money’s involved.” Nate pushed out his jaw and tapped his thumb on the table. “And with the budget the way it is. And enrollment stats. They’ll hold a hearing for him, but...” He looked at Luz, and she nodded.

“Shit,” said one of the men. Nate stopped tapping his thumb. So that was it? They were just going to fire him?

“I’m new here,” I said. “But isn’t the point of the hearing to hear both sides of the argument and *then* make a judgment.”

“Hypothetically,” said Nate.

“That doesn’t seem fair,” I said, which sounded naïve. So I followed it up with, “Does anyone know what really happened?”

“Does anyone ever know what really happens?” said one of the guys at the table.

“Welcome to Bradford,” said Luz. Her fork and knife clattered onto her plate, and she stood up. After a moment alone among all the men, I stood, too. I dropped off my plate on the dish washing conveyer belt and trailed Luz out the back door. It was a straight shot to Conley if we cut across the grass; Luz led us down one of the winding pebbled paths.

“So you don’t believe Heath?” I said.

“You do?”

“I don’t know even know him. But it seems like somebody ought to figure out what actually happened. You know, before he’s fired.” On either side of the pebbled pathway, metal signs read: “Do not tread on grass”—which was ridiculous, and which made me glad that the leaves had already begun to fall, muddying the diamond-patterned greens with specks of brown. Autumn always came early to Bradford.

“Look, Newbie, somebody’s already figured it out. It just may not be what you want to hear. The world’s a messed up place sometimes. Good people lose. Bad people win. And the truth matters a hell of a lot less than money.”

“That can’t be true.”

“Maybe. But I’ve got enough to deal with without sticking my neck out for Heath.” Luz opened the door to Conley. Wafts of burnt hair and extra-hold hairspray overwhelmed us as if the girls were practicing for prom. Luz’s apartment was located

just to the right of the entrance. She stopped and pulled out her keys. “See you at the dorm meeting at nine, Newbie?”

“See you.” And with that, she left. I didn’t know if *Newbie* was meant to be endearing, or an insult. Maybe both.

That afternoon I re-read college notes on how to teach, and I rehearsed my first lecture over and over to my mustard-colored refrigerator, whom I named Custer—because something that ugly deserved a name, and because I liked the alliterative Custer-custard combo, and also because I believed history repeated itself whether we studied it or not, and the delusionally hopeful part of me wished this Custer too would soon make its last stand.

At nine o’clock that night, the freshmen filed into the common room where the furniture looked like it had been handed down from a dog shelter (or a boys’ dorm) because every coffee table was scratched and every couch cushion was sliced through at least once with stuffing puffing through the tears. The girls took their seats by some unspoken primordial code, whereby the fully developed girls claimed the couches and the flat-chested girls sat on the floor (or were adopted onto couch-sitters’ laps). An older girl with cream and coffee colored skin and cropped hair walked up beside me. She held a clipboard and introduced herself to me as Jasmine Brown, Conley Dorm Prefect.

“I live in Room 130 on the opposite end of the hall from Ms. Sanchez,” she said.

“That’s great,” I said.

“Not really. Nobody really wants to be the Conley Prefect. They have to bribe us with the single.”

“Oh.”

“It’s pretty nice though. Newly renovated.”

“You don’t say.” I really wanted to like Jasmine—to give her the benefit of the doubt—but she was wearing glitter eye shadow, glitter lotion, and glitter nail polish. Then when Luz asked the glitter queen to introduce herself, she said, “Hi! I’m Jasmine, and I’m so excited to be your Conley Dorm Prefect! We are really going to sparkle this year, I just know it!” It was really all too much. Congratulate me for not laughing in her face. But some of the freshmen seemed to like it. Especially the ones on the floor.

On the plus side, I figured if the girls liked Jasmine’s speech, then they were absolutely going to love mine. I’d practiced it to myself at least twenty times on the drive up to Connecticut. In my mind, I’d captivated each and every one of their fresh faces with my tale of overcoming adversity and fulfilling my life-long dream of coming back to teach at Bradford. Every time I ended the speech, the girls applauded in a standing ovation and then ran to hug me—their beloved new Dorm Assistant and shoe-in for Faculty-Member-of-the-Year.

So, when Luz said to me, “Why don’t you tell everybody a little bit about yourself,” I smiled and said, “Hey everybody, I’m Ms. Ray, and I’ve come to teach at Bradford because I grew up here. My mom used to teach freshman English to girls just like you. She got sick and had to quit, but before she died I told her that one day I would come back to Bradford and teach just like she did. So, I studied really hard in school, and I pursued my dream, and now, here I am!”

The slow drip of the water fountain echoed around the room. No one moved—except for one string bean of a girl who gripped herself by the elbows and started to whimper. Then a girl in purple pajamas raised her hand. She was in the couch-sitter clique. I called on her.

“How old were you when your mom died?” she said.

“I was twelve.”

“I’m thirteen,” she said.

“I’m thirteen too,” said the girl beside her, and then another one said, “I’m almost fourteen.” I’ve only ridden one roller coaster in my life, and I contend that the scariest part is not the drop. The scariest part is the slow and steady climb up to the top, where the gears click into place one after another, pulling your cart higher and higher as the world below grows smaller and smaller, and the drop must be coming, you know it must be coming, but it’s not there yet, and the low rumble of the conveyer feels a lot like feet hitting the floor when girls stand and shuffle toward each other and then toward the door, leaving behind scratched tables and ripped cushions with stuffing puffing through tears, and quivering chins, and tears.

I really hope you are never standing in the doorway between eighty hormonal teenagers and the telephones they need to call their mothers. Not even the glitter queen could stop the stampede of couch-sitters who looked like they would shove a knife in my gut if I didn’t get out of their way. So I did. I got out of their way.

But then Luz stepped in front of the door and shouted, “Yo! Here are the rules: Number One: Boys are gross. They pick their noses and wear dirty underwear and they

smell like farts.” Clearly this was not true—at least not always true—but the room quieted, and the crying softened. Everyone stared at Luz.

“They do smell like farts,” said the girl in purple pajamas, and she said it so matter-of-factly that a few of the girls giggled, and then some more giggled, and then the giggling took over the crying, and the whole room tottered on a precarious see-saw of teenage hysteria.

“Exactly,” said Luz. “Boys are totally gross and smell like farts, so remember that when you think about bringing them into this dorm because they are NOT allowed.” I saw what Luz was doing, but I wouldn't have taken it that far. The male species did have some redeeming qualities. Sometimes they made jokes about your gorilla impersonation skills, or they shared their bench with you so you wouldn't have to be alone, or when they said goodnight they stood close to you, almost too close—close enough that you could feel their breath upon your skin, but they didn't kiss you, but maybe you wanted them to, and maybe boys were pretty great sometimes.

Luz continued down the list of rules: Study Hall from 7:30-9:30pm, Free Time from 9:30-10pm, Dorm Room Check-in at 10:00pm, and Lights-Out at 10:15pm. Finally she clapped her hands and said, “That's it. We're doing check-in here tonight, so sign your names and then lights out in 30 minutes.”

After the last girl signed her name, Luz took up the sheet and whispered to me, “Jesus. You're supposed to say you like rocky road ice cream, or singing in the shower, or something like that. These are freshmen. They're hormonal and neurotic and away

from their parents for the first time—some of them ever—and the first thing you tell them is about your dead mother?”

“Sorry.”

Luz closed her eyes and shook her head. “I’m having a glass of wine. You want one?”

As I followed Luz to her apartment, girls scurried past us carrying toiletry baskets full of hairbrushes and perfume and contact solution, and every time the bathroom doors swung open, high-pitched chatter and wafts of apricot face wash flooded the hall. But when we entered Luz’s apartment, I felt like I’d stepped out of Conley Dorm and into a European flat from a fashion magazine. Framed posters from Sevilla, Barcelona, Buenos Aires, and Rio de Janeiro hung on the walls, and books of famous Spanish artists sat on the coffee table. All of Luz’s furniture was black—the leather couches, the dining room set, the kitchen cabinets—but instead of looking too dark, it looked chic. And then there was the kitchen. What a kitchen! It had a quartz countertop and brand new stainless steel appliances. It must have been a sign of my declining mental health that I experienced extreme kitchen envy. Luz laughed at me as I rubbed my hand along the counters.

“I lived in your apartment the past three years,” she said. “They give that shithole to the youngest female faculty member. It’s like initiation. Or some kind of sick hazing. You think it’s bad now, just wait until it rains.”

Luz opened the cabinet and pulled out a double bottle of Shiraz. She poured two tall glasses and kept the tallest one for herself.

“The girls seem sweet,” I said.

“Sometimes they’re sweet. Sometimes they’re little shits.” Luz spun the wine in her glass and took a large sip. “They prey on the weak just like everyone else at this school, so if you don’t know something, make it up. And never, under any circumstances, let them see you cry. Same goes for your classroom.”

Luz sat on the couch and curled her legs under her body. She had an exotic quality that men must find attractive. She also had these long, graceful legs. I have little stumps for legs, so when I leaned back into the sofa, I couldn't touch the floor.

“You’ll be on dorm check-in duty Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays,” she said. “And we’ll alternate who’s on weekend duty. I’m teaching five class periods and coaching varsity field hockey, so I’m not here to hold your hand. But I do have your back, and as far as I’m concerned, your word’s the law with these girls.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.” Luz leaned forward and stretched out her legs. God, she had nice legs. “I hear you’re teaching Senior Comp. Is that your specialty?”

Nothing was my specialty. I student-taught freshmen English because that’s what my mom taught. That’s what I wanted to teach. That was also about as far from Senior Composition as Bradford’s English Department could manage. I shook my head and thumbed through the coffee table books—Picasso, Dali, Goya. They were vibrant. Also creepy. The Goya one was the least creepy.

“Don’t worry,” said Luz. “My first year, I got stuck with Spanish and French 101. I’ve never taken French in my whole life. We ate a lot of cheese and baguettes. But now I’ve got two AP Spanish classes and three honors classes. You’ll work your way up to

what you want. Plus Heath taught sophomore English, so there's going to be a shakedown in who's teaching what this year. He also ran the literary magazine, I think. God. What a disaster."

If Heath was innocent, then I didn't want him to get fired. But I'd never even met the guy. And if it meant I could switch classes, well... There wouldn't be charges against him if he hadn't done anything wrong, right? I was about to ask Luz when we'd find out about Heath when a black cat leapt from behind the couch onto Luz's lap.

"Fitzzy witzzy!" Luz said in a baby voice. She stroked the cat's fur, and he arched his back, nuzzling into her lap. "Fitzzy, do you see our new friend?" The cat looked at me and hissed.

"Fitzgerald," Luz said. "Be nice." She took another sip of wine. "Anyway, I for one think it's about time some of the men are getting what's coming to them. You know Bradford has mandated male ratio of 51% men to 49% women, right?"

"I didn't know."

"That's for the students. Faculty's even worse. It's like 65-35% or something ridiculous—that's not in the bylaws, but that's how it is." Luz pushed Fitz off her lap. She stood with her empty glass and walked back to the kitchen. She held up the double bottle. "Want some more?"

"No, I should probably head home—first day tomorrow and all."

My fingers tingled, and my legs felt heavy as Luz walked me to the door. Before I left, I thanked her and instinctually I hugged her goodnight because in college girls hugged goodnight like the French gave each other a kiss on each cheek. But halfway into

hugging Luz, I realized that hugging may not be a New England thing, that here it may be an invasion-of-personal-space thing. Oh God, I was *that* person. Luz stiffened at my touch and patted my back with her fingertips like I had the plague. I pulled away and Fitz slunk between Luz's legs. He poked his head out, and offered a goodbye hiss. Right back at you, buddy.

But before Luz closed the door, she said, "You'll do great." I don't think either of us really believed that, but it was still nice of her to say. Then I left. But I didn't go home.

I went out to the bench by the river. It was dark, and I didn't see Reagan as I approached. Maybe he was still at his dorm meeting. But as I walked closer, I heard:

"If I wasn't so level headed, I'd think you had a thing for me."

I walked around to the riverside and crossed my arms in front of my chest. "Let's just be clear," I said. "I came out here for the bench. And I know it's somewhere in your white-male DNA to think you have a claim to everything you step foot on, but you don't."

He stretched both arms over the back of the bench and settled into it. "Good thing I'm sitting then." He raised his eyebrows as if in a dare.

The bench felt cool and wet against my bare thighs. I leaned back. My neck brushed against his arm. I sat forward.

"How'd the dorm meeting go?" he said.

"Oh, you know." Horrible. "Good."

"You're a good liar."

"Yeah?"

Reagan shook his head and laughed a mocking laugh. “No.”

We were far enough from campus that the lighted windows in the dorms looked like yellow sugar cubes. Maybe Reagan was right. But how far did I need to go from Bradford to tell the truth? Was truth a matter of distance? Was it a matter of time?

“I kind of created a stampede,” I said, and then I told him what happened. But I didn’t stop with what I told the girls. I kept going about how the doctors said sometimes people live five, ten, even twenty years with ALS; how they told us that some people are turtles and others are rabbits, and she could be a turtle. But she wasn’t a turtle.

“There were signs,” I said. “There are always signs, looking back.” I paused. The moon was full and bright, and the tributary reflected its light like a moving mirror, a sliver snake. “She tripped sometimes—but we just thought she was clumsy. And her students couldn’t read her handwriting—but that wasn’t new either. But then she couldn’t button her coat. And then after school one day, I found her on our back doorstep crying because she couldn’t get into the house. I told her it was okay, that there was a spare key under the angel statue. So I got it and let us in, and she thanked me as she set her keys on the kitchen table.” What was I doing? I’d just met this guy yesterday, and I was spilling my guts. Very coy. Very hard to get. Let me tell you, the definition of sexy, if there ever was one, is some sap talking about her dead mother. But I couldn’t seem to stop.

“The thing about dying isn’t the dying itself,” I said. “It’s that the dying takes away who you are when you’re alive.” Ahead of me, reeds waved in the wind. They rushed like the river. Mingled with it. Where did they stop and the water begin? Where did life stop and death begin? Is it slow, or all at once that your mother stops smelling of

honeysuckle and roses, and starts smelling like latex, like urine? When do you notice that her weird Japanese spa music with its cymbals and little bells has turned into a ventilator that sounds like a dentist's drill? I couldn't look at Reagan, but I couldn't stop talking. So I just kept talking, and the reeds kept waving.

“When she was in hospice, she got bedsores—deep, nasty bedsores, and bruises that wouldn't heal, that never healed. That I was afraid to touch.”

Stop! Why couldn't I stop? Was it the wine? Was it something stronger than the wine? Was it distance? Was it time?

“On the day she died, the nurse told me I could hug her goodbye, but I wouldn't touch her. I was afraid to touch her. So I never did.”

It was true, every bit of it, but that's not why I said it. Why did I say it? I listened to Reagan breathing slowly in and out. Then I focused on my own breathing until the knot in my throat dissolved, until my eyes stopped burning, until my inhales matched Reagan's inhales and we exhaled together.

“I don't know why I said that,” I said. “I'm sorry. I've never told anyone that. I'm going to go.” But I didn't go. I looked at Reagan. “Say something. Don't just stare at me. Say something.” He said nothing. “You think I'm weird.” Of course he did. He was probably fighting every fiber in his being not to hightail out of there.

“No,” he said. “I mean, maybe. I mean, not everybody demotes the name of their car or causes a stampede of freshmen. So yeah, maybe. But, weird's okay. Weird's kind of cute.”

(FYI: a cute weirdo, is still a weirdo.)

The river was high, and the night spread softly around us. A warm breeze blew my hair over my shoulders and pushed at my back like a gentle embrace; the wind smelled of gardenias, of the peace before sleep, of home.

“Do you know Goya?” Reagan said.

“The painter?” Thank God I just saw it at Luz’s. Usually the universe conspires to make me look like an idiot. This was a sign.

He nodded. “When I lived in England, the National Gallery was only a tube stop away. They had this Goya exhibit last spring. I didn’t want to go home, so I went there. Got obsessed with him. The thing about his portraits are the eyes—they look real, like they mean something, or feel something. Everybody used to go to the famous paintings, but I went to the ones no one stood around, and I would get real close—I mean real close. Like not touching cause they’ll bust your ass for that, but just about as close as you can get, so I could see down to the brush strokes, down to where I couldn’t see the whole painting, just one eye at a time, just one stroke at a time. And the trick?” He paused and looked at me. There was a gleam in his eyes, the reflection of the moon.

“There was always a stroke of white paint beside the darkest lines. Right where you’d think it didn’t belong, there it was. Up close, the strokes looked wrong. But from far away, that’s what made the eyes look real. It was the contrast, the simultaneity. You’d think it shouldn’t be there, but that’s what made it right.”

I liked Reagan. I liked the way his sentences ended on an upbeat. I liked that he said things like *bust your ass* in the same breath as *simultaneity*. I liked that he hadn’t

recoiled at death, and he hadn't said he was sorry. I liked that he coached, and that he'd found one place to be alone at Bradford, and that he didn't ask me to leave.

Reagan's hand rested beside mine on the bench, our fingers almost touching, but not quite. I pushed my hand onto his. It was warm. There's something about the night sky that makes you think about when the world began, about darkness begetting unquenchable light, about worlds unfolding before our eyes. The river smelled of jasmine and mud, and above us the night was alight with stars. Reagan turned to me, his eyes wide and full of desire.

“Julia, I...”

I knew what he was going to say. He was going to say that he knew we just met and that he didn't want to rush things, but that he'd never felt this way about anyone before. I knew it because I felt that way too. So I leaned forward, and I kissed him, softly, my lips just touching his. At first he didn't kiss back. Maybe I made a mistake. Maybe I was wrong. But then he wrapped his arm around the small of my back and pulled me towards him. Pulled me into him. He was strong but gentle. And when he kissed me back, he kissed me with the kind of kiss you can spend your whole life searching for and never find.

When I lay down to bed that night, I couldn't sleep. My mind kept replaying Reagan beside me on the bench, then Reagan with his hand around my back, then Reagan pulling me towards him, and me pressing my body against his. But tomorrow was my first day teaching, so I needed some sleep. I tried all the tactics. I counted sheep. I performed muscle-relaxing techniques from my toes to the tips of my fingers. I tried to

name animals from A-Z, and then books, and then countries (by the way, in case you're ever stuck, D not only has Denmark but also Djibouti, which sounds like "ja-booty" and can really save your ass). Still, I watched my clock hit eleven thirty, then midnight, then one and two. When I finally fell asleep, it felt like a blink until my alarm went off. So I snoozed it. Then I snoozed it again. Finally, I shot out of bed at seven fifteen with precisely forty-five minutes to get my butt ready and standing in front of my classroom. I know I create these problems for myself, but how was I supposed to know that my stilettos would stick into the pebbled paths every couple of feet, so that by the time I huffed up to the English Department, I had five minutes until class started, and I had pit stains on my new silk blouse and mud on my shoes (which obviously, is how one imagines looking on her first day of work).

My classroom was on the third floor. Dr. Martin (who's like ninety and uses a wheelchair) occupied the elevator, so I was guilted into taking the stairs. On the plus side, by the looks of things—in spite of myself—I would be in pretty good shape by the end of the year. I paused on the third floor stairwell to catch my breath. Graduating a year early from the University of North Carolina had not just been a practicality; it had been a necessity. My roommates told me I was missing out—that college wasn't just a time for studying; it was a time for freedom, for friends, for finding myself; it was a time for love. I went on dates. Kissed a bunch of frogs, so they say. But the day my father's paycheck stopped covering my mother's medical bills, it started covering my grandmother's. I calculated tuition my freshman year, and even with scholarships, each class I attended cost approximately \$100. Some students skipped lectures. I couldn't afford to. But now

I was closer in age to my students than to any other faculty member. Plus, the only class I'd ever taught was to freshmen, alongside a faculty advisor, with a premade syllabus. As I stared down at my self-designed curriculum, my hands shook. Pull yourself together, Julia.

Even though I'm not religious, I prayed. I rested my head on the stone wall. I closed my eyes, and I saw my mother sitting beside me at *Macbeth*. When I was too afraid to look at Bates conjuring evil magic on the stage, I watched my mother lip-sync all the lines--"Fair is foul, and foul is fair" along with Bates, and "Life's but a walking shadow" along with the student who played Macbeth, and all the other lines too. I adored her. I wanted to be just like her. As she beamed at her students—so proud, so happy—I knew that there could be nothing better in the world than to teach at Bradford.

The bell rang. I inhaled, exhaled, cracked my knuckles. Then I turned the corner and saw my classroom for the first time. In last seat of the forth row sat a student with broad shoulders and grey-green eyes that matched the faded mint color of the walls. He was a head taller than all of the girls surrounding him, and he smiled a crooked smile. I blinked hard, as if my vision had suddenly failed me and in time would correct itself. It didn't.

That was Reagan. Apparently not coach-teacher-Reagan. But student-Reagan. Student-in-my-class-Reagan. No. No, no no! Fuck. FUCK.

I darted back into the stairwell. It had been simple. He sat on that bench after coach's meetings. And he looked old—older than I was. But why didn't I ask? Why did

I just assume he was a teacher? Why didn't he tell me? How could I have been so stupid?

The late bell rang.

Oh God. I kissed him. And when I kissed him, he wasn't thinking that we'd just met and he was madly in love with me; he was thinking I was his teacher. I was worse than Heath. Bradford was going to fire me. Maybe I should quit. But no other schools would be hiring the first week of September. North Carolina schools had already been in session almost a month, and even if other schools were hiring, I didn't want to teach there. I wanted to be here. Bradford was my home. And I hadn't done anything wrong because I didn't know... I didn't know ...

So maybe I'd flirted with Reagan, but that had been before school, before I knew. Had anyone seen us? It was dark. Nobody could have seen us. I didn't do anything wrong. Maybe I'd had a feeling about Reagan, but I would stop it right then, right that very instant. I had no other choice.

Reagan was a student. I was a teacher. And this was The Bradford School.

I stepped forward, left the stairwell, and turned the corner. My high heels clicked on the linoleum as I strutted through my classroom door. Without a second glance around the room, I walked straight to the white board, and with my marker already in hand, I wrote in scrawling cursive: *Ms. Ray. English 401. Senior Composition.*

CHAPTER II

JULIA

I smacked my marker against the board, and the room fell silent. (I learned that trick in student teaching. Hormonal teenagers, much like baboons, are attracted to loud noises.)

“As you can see,” I said. “I’m Ms. Ray, and this is Senior English Composition. If you don’t like me, that’s too bad because I’m the only one teaching this course. If you don’t like this course, that’s too bad, because you’re required to take it.”

Also like baboons, teenagers respond best to an alpha. Though I was neither male nor hairy (with the exception of the winter pants season—don’t judge me), I’d come to Bradford to kick some pedagogical ass. I dropped packets of syllabi on the first chair of each row with a loud thump. The students took one and passed the rest back.

“This is your fall semester syllabus,” I said. “On page three you’ll see my one and only rule. It is, simply, don’t piss me off.” A few boys in the back row snickered, and a girl in a bubblegum pink dress cringed. “How, you may be wondering, do you not piss me off? Easy: When I’m talking, you’re not. Otherwise, do your reading, do your homework, and don’t, under any circumstances—EVER—plagiarize. We good?”

I kept moving, kept talking, kept making loud noises, and mostly kept my trembling hands behind my back. Jasmine Brown sat at the front desk in the row closest to the door. She was not bedazzled with glitter today (thank God). I tapped on her desk.

“Starting with Jasmine,” I said. “We’ll go around the room with introductions. State your name, where you’re from, and something about yourself.”

Jasmine announced herself as the Conley Dorm Prefect from Midland Park, New Jersey, and something about herself? (Her favorite accessory was glitter? Just kidding.) She’d been to Paris seven times. After Jasmine, introductions snaked around the room until they came to Reagan.

I must be an idiot. Seriously. An absolute moron. Because instead of wanting Reagan to say something about being a normal teenager who liked mint chocolate chip ice cream or the Beatles or something, I wanted him to say he didn’t know I was a teacher; I wanted him to say that meeting me meant something to him, because it meant something to me.

See? Insane.

“I’m Reagan Willis,” he said. “I’m not really from anywhere. My Dad’s an Admiral in the Navy, so we move around every year or two. My fun fact is that since I’ve transferred schools so much internationally—Canada, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, you name it—I’m probably the oldest student here. I turn nineteen next month.” He looked straight at me when he said it. I wanted to ask more.

Instead, after introductions, I explained how Senior Composition meant *composition*. The students would have an essay due each Friday, and every day we

would start class with a ten-minute journaling exercise in response to their reading and the weekly quotation. As I spoke, a girl in a crocodile-skin headband leaned towards Reagan. She whispered something to him from the back row. He smiled. She giggled.

I wanted to crush her, but I couldn't remember her name, and you can't very well crush someone if you don't know her name. (So much for all my mnemonic devices.) As I turned to the whiteboard to write the first journal quotation, I glanced at my roster. That's right. Alexandra Hunt. (Crocodile-skin headband; crocodiles are basically alligators; crazy people hunt alligators; Hunt Alligators; Alexandra Hunt).

My quotation for the week had been something inspiring about new beginnings. Instead of that, I wrote: *Take nothing on its looks; take everything on evidence. There's no better rule.* Then I swiveled and glared across the room.

"Ms. Hunt," I said. "Do you know where this week's quotation comes from?" She sat back in her chair and looked at the notebook on her desk. "No?" I said.

"Then Mr. Willis?" Reagan looked straight at me. He opened his mouth, but then said nothing. There was no reason they should know this quotation. It was obscure. I hated when teachers pulled stunts like this, but now I knew why.

"*Great Expectations*, Mr. Willis." I said. "It comes from *Great Expectations*. Do you need me to go back over the rules?"

"No, ma'am."

The air conditioner rattled in the corner. A girl in the back row picked up her pencil scribbled down notes. Maybe I shouldn't have been so hard on him, but I would

not be taken advantage of. Every single eye was upon me. My hands stopped shaking. My voice grew loud and clear.

“Everyone take out a sheet of loose-leaf paper,” I said. “From now until the end of class, you’ll write a response to this week’s quotation. It won’t be graded, but I will collect it before you leave. Any questions?” No one raised their hands. But not a single pen moved. For a moment, there was a quantifiable stillness in the room—and it felt pretty good; it felt like pedagogical asses being kicked, if I do say so myself.

“Then, let’s get started,” I said. The students wrote, and I walked around the room trying to memorize names. When the bell rang, everyone turned in their papers and filed out of the classroom—everyone except for Reagan. He lingered in the back. I approached him, but I stood at least an arms length away. The appropriate distance. The distance I would have to keep from him for the rest of the year.

“Did you know?” I said, in a voice lower than a whisper.

“Not at first.”

“But soon. You figured it out.” The air conditioner blew cold air between us. It rattled and dripped. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why’d you lie to me?”

“I didn’t lie.”

“You didn’t tell the truth.” My voice rose. I looked over my shoulder to the door. Outside, students shuffled down the hall. “We can’t talk about this here. I don’t know if we can ever talk about this.”

“No one saw us,” he said. “I’ll never tell.” Right. I bet that’s exactly what Bonnie said to Clyde before everything went awry.

“You know I could lose my job? That this could ruin my career?”

The first student entered my classroom for next period.

“Thank you, Reagan,” I said, in my cheeriest teacher’s voice. “I look forward to reading your response.” The new student took a seat in the front row. As he pulled out his notebook, Reagan handed me his paper. It was folded in half.

“It’s true,” he said, nodding to the paper.

“I don’t want to hold you up,” I said. I turned from him toward my desk, and I did not look around until he’d gone. Then I set the stack of papers down and unfolded Reagan’s response. The first line read: “Dear Julia.” I looked up. The boy in the front row stared at me, and more students were filing inside the classroom. I folded Reagan’s letter quickly and hid it amidst the stack.

When classes ended, I headed to Bates’ office for my afterschool assistantship. Bates’ door was closed, so I waited outside beside a man with red cheeks and blue eyes. His shirt was tucked in, and his face was freshly shaven, or maybe never shaven; maybe he just had peach fuzz on his baby face. He was the kind of guy I’d expect to teach an English class, the kind of guy in college who would have been my friend.

“Hi,” I said, “I’m Julia.” I shook his hand.

“I’m Heath,” he said. What? No way. By this point, I imagined Heath Longmire to be a total creep with pimples and scars on his face and dark brooding eyes. But he just

looked like a normal guy. I must have stared at him a moment too long because he said, “You’ve heard?”

“Hearing things doesn’t make them true.”

“You must be new.” Heath raised his eyebrows in a way that made me smile in spite of myself. “You see that man in Joan’s office?” He pointed through the side glass to a tall man with greying blonde hair. The man had his back to us, so that’s pretty much all I could see of him, but Bates’ forehead was creased with deep wrinkles, and her eyebrows drew down toward her nose.

“That’s Percy Conley,” said Heath. “He’s the Chairman of the Board of Trustees.”

“Conley,” I said. “As in Conley Dorm?”

“Conley as in Conley Dorm and Conley Field House and Conley Boat House.”

Heath talked to me with the odd familiarity of a two people at a bar several drinks in.

Heath was the old guy telling about his life, and I was the young guy listening. “They’re scheduling my hearing,” said Heath.

“That’s good, right? You get to tell your side of the story.”

Heath shook his head. “Apparently Bradford’s already on probation from the accreditation board, and Kaylee Brooks is saying she’s been assaulted, so that’s it. Game over.” Heath looked down and shook his head. This would have been the time he ordered another round. “I’m not an idiot,” he said. “I know it’s easier just to get rid of me. But the thing is, I never touched her. I swear I never even said anything to her.”

I would like to state that generally speaking I have keen gut reactions about people. Apparently that’s been off as of late, seeing as it would have been nice to know,

for example, that the new love of my life happened to be a student in my class. (You can't win them all.) So with Heath, I was reserving judgment just yet.

“What happened?” I said. “Between you and Kaylee. What really happened?” Heath paused too long. Maybe I shouldn't have asked. Maybe that was too direct. Maybe we weren't long lost bar buds, and I was just a nosy Newbie who couldn't keep her mouth shut. But I wanted to know; I needed to know.

“Kaylee stayed after class to ask a me question about her paper,” Heath said, finally.

“And you were alone?” I said.

“I'm alone with students a lot.” Oh jeeze. “I mean not *a lot*. But you know what I mean. She stayed after class, and we were alone, and she says I touched her, sexually. That I rubbed up against her and made a move on her.” Which is obviously a big no-no. Teachers should not make moves on students.

“What if you didn't intend to do that?” I said. “If you didn't know, then they can't blame you for it. Right?”

He looked me in the eyes. He didn't fidget, or look down, or mumble. “It doesn't matter what I intended. It only matters what Kaylee says and how it will make the school look. It's just her word against mine. And her Dad's an alumnus.”

“So no one else saw?”

“No.”

“But you didn’t do it?” I said. Just then, Bates’ office door opened. She stepped outside in her kitten heels. Her bifocals sat on top of her grey bobbed hair, pushing her bangs up like the plume of a cockatoo. Percy Conley remained inside.

“Heath,” she said. “Please come in.” She held the door for him, but before Heath walked inside, he turned to me.

“It was nice to meet you, Julia.” Then loud enough for Percy Conley to hear, he said, “No. I didn’t do it.”

Still in the hall, Bates closed the door slightly behind her. “Julia, why don’t you wait for me in your office? This may take a while. I’ll come get you when I’m finished.”

I didn’t have a choice. I had to go. But let me tell you about the pure joy that was my office. If the space had one desk, one chair, and one window, it could have offered a certain cozy charm; the office had two desks, two chairs, and instead of a window, it had a thin man with metal-framed glasses. He was prematurely bald with a comb-over, and although he had certainly shaved that morning, the prickles of a five o’clock shadow were already appearing over the dimple in his chin. If he’d remained seated, we both would have fit in the room. He stood and shook my hand.

“I’m George Applegate,” he said. “I’m so pleased you aren’t fat.” Clearly this man had not spent much time around women. Or other humans.

“Me, too...?”

“As you should be, certainly, as you should be. But me, I’ve been worried sick all summer that my new office mate was going to be oversized like Mr. Marchmen—may he rest in peace—and I would have to suffer through yet another year of the intolerable

airplane-seat-situation.” He paused and stretched his arms to touch both sidewalls at once. “As you can imagine, it would have been a shame if you were the reason I once again had to avoid my own office.”

As you can imagine, Mr. Applegate was a real winner. I’ve been wondering for some time now why we don’t teach Social Skills 101 as a required high school course. Mr. Applegate could be Exhibit A. Without another word, he took a seat, crossed his legs like a woman, and immersed himself in a book of Anglo Saxon. Or Klingon.

I squeezed into my chair and pulled out my hundred-page stack of student responses. Reagan’s was on top. I didn’t know Heath well enough to believe him or not to believe him. What I did know was this. The thing about two drinking buddies at a bar is that when the old man tells the young man about his life, the young man doesn’t stop to think, if I don’t watch out that could be me.

There was a way out of my situation. I could cut Reagan out of my life. Entirely. I could never be alone with him. I shouldn’t even talk to him outside of a professional setting. If Heath did get fired, which he probably would, I’d ask Bates to switch my classes up front. Then I wouldn’t have to grade Reagan, or really be around him; then when I pulled out the stack of compositions every Friday, Reagan’s paper wouldn’t be folded on the top.

Still, there’s something about a letter that pulls you toward it, that compels you to read it. Its secretness is magnetic. I glanced at Mr. Applegate.

“Don’t you have after school activities?” I said.

“Club crew doesn’t start until next week.”

“Awesome.”

A letter’s secretness does something else, too. It makes whatever you read sacred and private and solely yours. I stuck Reagan’s response in the sleeve of my planner to read later.

By the time Ms. Bates came to my office, I’d finished reading all but a handful of response papers. It was after five, and even Mr. Applegate had left to get ready for Formal Dinner. Bates’ news: Heath’s trial would be on Friday afternoon; I would arrange papers for the meeting; had I read the handbook yet?

“Yes ma’am.” (Most of it. Some of it. A few pages. As soon as she left I tore off the saran wrap of my handbook and flipped to the faculty section.)

“Good,” she said. “Then I’ll see you at Formal Dinner for the Opening Ceremony.”

Bates had left me with approximately five minutes to go all the way across campus to Conely, freshen up, and get back to chapel. There was a reason email was invented. Or if that was too new-age for her, she could have written me a note. Or heaven forbid, she could have just told me tomorrow. But no. Thanks to Bates, I had the pleasure and the privilege to wait over two hours beside Mr. Applegate who smelled of mothballs and body odor and occasionally stretched himself in yoga poses behind my chair. Was there room for him to stretch in yoga poses behind my chair? You tell me: would you like having a man’s elongating groin behind your head?

When I left the English Department, students had already filled into chapel, so I had to forgo the trip home. My sweat stains from the morning had dried and left

darkened rings below my armpits, but I'd spilt ketchup all down the front of my blazer at lunch, so it was either hold my arms close or tempt people to stare at the blood-red stain on my chest. I opted for the tucked arm approach. I snuck in the back, and prayed no one got too close—because of the pit stains and my frizzed hair and also because I could smell myself, and I smelled like Mr. Applegate. The keynote speaker's address was on serving others and letting go of materialistic and superficial desires. Easy for him to say, he probably smelled like pine trees and the fresh ocean breeze.

By the end of chapel, I'd made up plan B: Conley was only one building past the dining hall. If I sped out of the chapel, cut across the grass, and dashed upstairs to my room, I could change and run back to Formal Dinner in proper attire before all the students were even seated.

This did not occur.

What did occur was that Mr. Applegate, perhaps attracted by his own body-odor-and-mothball smell, rooted me out before I even left the chapel. He then took it upon himself to introduce me to the rest of our colleagues in the English Department with this precursor: "When Joan called Julia's name at faculty orientation, and she wasn't there...I do have to say, I was pleased it wasn't me. Weren't you Jill?" And then, weren't you, Bill? And then, weren't you, Marty? Mr. Applegate and I were the last ones to leave the chapel. And, let me tell you, everyone was very pleased they weren't me.

By the time we trailed into the dining hall, the chandeliers were dimmed for the Opening Ceremony to begin. Navy tablecloths covered the square mahogany tables and white cloth napkins, folded like hats, perched on top of the china. Formal Dinner for the

Opening Ceremony is much like every Thursday night after chapel when Bradford students dress in their school uniforms (coat and tie for boys, dresses to the knee or blazer suits for girls), and sit at assigned tables with their faculty advisors. For these occasions, food is served family-style instead of the usual cafeteria free-for-all, and special Dining Hall Monitors patrol for dress code violations. The whole student body was already seated and staring when I scurried past the paintings of old headmasters to my advisee table at the farthest corner of the hall.

I only had one advisee. I was supposed to have two, but apparently my second advisee took one look at Bradford and decided she'd rather go to public school. If I'd already made the first down payment, I would have told her to suck it up. But that's probably why I'm here and she's not. Anyway, that left me with one advisee, Alisha Patel—the string bean freshman who was the first to cry at the dorm meeting (another success on my part, I know). I was fully prepared to have a nice quiet dinner at a tiny table in the back. I was not prepared to see Alisha surrounded by five other senior guys. Including the one I'd sworn off.

“What are y'all doing here?” I said to the seniors when I approached the table. “Y'all aren't my advisees.” Nate Simmons, who sat at the table beside mine, leaned toward me. He tossed his blond hair to the side like boys do when they emerge from swimming—he made one quick neck jerk and then the tuft of hair followed. Perhaps he thought this was attractive.

“Julia,” he said. “I hope you don't mind, but I've got an overload of advisees, so we share with the adjoining tables.” Maybe I wouldn't have minded. Maybe it would

have been fine if I'd had time to process all my non-feelings for Reagan. Not that I had any feelings for him. I didn't.

"Can't your advisees sit at another table?" I said. Maybe Luz was right. Maybe Nate assumed that he could force his advisees onto my table without even asking because I was new, or because I was a woman, or both.

"Forgive me," said Nate. "Ms. Bates said this one had room."

"Of course she did." Or maybe Ms. Bates was just out to make my life miserable.

Ms. Bates' voice boomed over the loudspeaker. "Is there a problem in the back there, Ms. Ray?" I forced a smile and sat down. Nate leaned across the aisle.

"I think there's been a little misunderstanding," he whispered. "Two of my boys are on the Senior Council, so one of them will bring your table food first. Really, it's a good deal for you."

I nodded thanks as Bates came over the loudspeaker again. "Good evening everyone," she said. "Welcome, and welcome back. I hope this year you'll mind your manners, avoid demerits, and steer clear of the Dean's Office. We have several new rules this year, which we will discuss at length this evening." A groan murmured around the dining hall, and when my stomach rumbled, I was a tiny bit glad we'd get first dibs on food. "But before we go into too much detail," Bates said. "I know you're all hungry, so let's begin the evening with an address from the headmaster."

The first time I met the headmaster, I was seven, and I didn't so much meet him as spy on him, which is always a great way to make a first impression. I was in the chapel, looking through the stained glass, pretending the world was blue, then pink, then

yellow, when suddenly the back door creaked open. The headmaster walked in holding a single yellow tulip. I ducked. He didn't see me as he headed past the organ to the garden out back.

I shouldn't have been in the chapel in the first place, but I was more curious than good, and one yellow tulip is a most curious item. I followed him. I peaked through the cracks in the back door, where outside, the headmaster set the tulip on a flat stone. I realized in the way children realize things too late and with too much emotion that the garden wasn't a garden; it was a cemetery. The headmaster leaned over the grave and spoke in a gentle, lulling voice. I couldn't hear exactly what he said, but as I listened, I grew very cold. I hid behind the door until long after he'd gone. Before I left the chapel to meet my mother, I walked out to the cemetery to touch the flower's silky yellow petals and to read the name on the grave, *Evelyn Rose*.

Now standing in front of the hall, the headmaster's shoulders slumped and his hair had gone completely grey. But when he took the microphone, he commanded the attention of everyone in the great hall.

"May God bless our food, our friendship, and our future year together," he said. "Senior Council may get their food."

Students erupted in applause and cheers of BRAD on the left, echoed by FORD on the right, which grew louder with every back and forth wave until the Senior Council emerged from the central cafeteria carrying overflowing platters of chicken breasts, gravy, steamed broccoli, and mashed potatoes. Dinner went about like this: I tried to avoid eye contact with Reagan; Alisha tried to avoid eye contact with me; the other football players

kept leaning over to talk to Nate's table; and every question I asked Alisha was met with yes, no, or my personal favorite—the blank stare.

Before dessert, I excused myself to regroup in bathroom before the saga that would be Formal Dinner Part Two. But when I returned to the table, Alisha was laughing. Reagan leaned towards her, and Alisha's cheeks and eyes lit up with delight. I took a seat.

"The worm is a formidable choice," Reagan said to Alisha. "But I for one prefer the bear." He turned to me. "What about you, Ms. Ray. What's your favorite candy?"

"Hands down, black licorice."

"Eww," said Alisha, which I supposed was progress.

"Of all the candies in the world, *that's* what'd you choose?" said Reagan.

"That's not even candy colored," said Alisha.

"It is candy colored," I said. "Because it's a candy."

"I'm going to have to go with Alisha on this one," said Reagan. He nudged her with his elbow, and she nodded vehemently.

Just then, just when dinner started to go well, one of the Formal Dinner Monitors approached. Formal Dinner Monitors are a rare breed that did not get appointed to the Senior Council, and thus clutched their insignificant dress-code enforcing power with the bull-headedness of DMV attendants. This Monitor in particular had tan lines and perfectly straight blonde hair, and she wore a flamingo-pink sweater tied over her shoulders. When set her hand on Reagan's shoulder, Alisha's slumped and made a dimple in her potatoes with her spoon.

“Hey Reagan,” said the Monitor. “Is this your advisee table?”

“No, actually I’m with Coach Simmons, but there wasn’t enough room at his table.” Alisha withdrew further, as if her blazer would swamp her whole torso. Thank God Alisha was following dress code. The sooner I could get this Monitor to leave, the better. I cleared my throat and stared at the girl. Her hand trailed off Reagan’s shoulder. She crossed her arms in front of her chest and looked down her nose at me.

“Are you trying to get on my bad side?” she said.

“Excuse me?”

“The dress code. Ever heard of it? You need to wear a blazer with dress pants. You can either go back to your dorm and change, or you can get a demerit.” Oh, no she didn’t.

“Who are you?” I said. The girl pursed her glossed lips and raised her eyebrows at me with the confidence that comes from money and a good pair of shoes.

“I’m Penny Paddington. Formal Dinner supervisor. Best dressed in the senior class. Head of the fab-five. Who are *you*?”

By this point all of my table, and Nate’s table, and the two tables adjacent to us were all starting. Alisha couldn’t physically slump any lower. I folded my napkin and set it beside my plate with unexpected force, which made a smacking noise that echoed in the back of the hall. I pushed my chair out to stand, but Nate was already leaning into the median.

“Penny,” said Nate. “I see you’ve met *Ms.* Ray. *Ms.* Ray is the newest member of the English *Faculty*. She teaches Senior Composition.” Penny turned paler than the

white buttons on her sweater. I felt my face flush. I could fight my own battles, thank you very much. Now everybody around us thought I was just some helpless damsel in distress. Gross.

“I’m in the *AP* section,” said Penny, emphasizing the *AP* as if it stood for the Nobel Prize in Literature. “That’s why I didn’t know.” Penny turned on the points of her stilettos and stomped off. Slowly, the heads around us refocused on their own tables. Alisha stayed partially submerged like a turtle. I took a large sip of water, and became fascinated with my rhubarb pie until announcements began. As usual, they droned on too long with nobody really listening—because it was tradition, because the way the school did things in the 1800’s was obviously the way we should keep doing them now. If I were in charge, I’d bribe volunteers to report each piece of news with a get-out-of-Breakfast Club pass, or one-free-demerit, or a Bradford t-shirt from the student store. Alas, I’m not in charge, so like everyone else, my mind drifted. And it drifted to Reagan. Across from me he sat tall with his shoulders back, though angled slightly toward Alisha, and he looked at Bates as if he really were paying attention. The light of the chandeliers shimmered in his hair, and when he turned to me, the light caught his eyes. For a moment, the distance between us ceased to exist. We were back on the bench, and his hand behind my back, pulling me towards him. For a moment, I forgot where we were, and who I was, and all that mattered was Reagan looking at me. But only for a moment. I looked away.

When the headmaster finally dismissed us, students and faculty alike let out a collective sigh. Then plates clattered, chairs scraped, and bodies rushed outside to

freedom. I moved fast. I would not be caught next to Reagan. Nate approached me in the stampede of students.

“Long day?” he said.

“You have no idea.” Nate and I walked side by side out of the hall to where Penny Paddington stood in front of us on Senior Grass. Senior Grass is no different than any other grass except that it blocks every logical path out of the dining hall and only seniors can walk on it. Penny patrolled the edge ready to humiliate her next victim.

“I’ll buy you a drink if you step foot on Senior Grass,” said Nate.

“As much as I’d like to rendezvous with Penny Paddington, I think I’ll pass.”

Penny had just waved Reagan onto the sacred pasture. She leaned toward him, giggled, and hit his arm playfully. First thought: Excuse me, while I go vomit. Second thought: Pull your shit together, Julia. Those kids are in HIGH SCHOOL. You are a TEACHER. Third thought: An attractive, appropriately aged man is walking right beside you. Focus.

Nate lived in the all boys dorm at the front of campus. He turned down the path to Conley with me. “I think we got off on the wrong foot earlier,” he said. “First the table thing. Then Penny.” His eyes were crystal blue and kind, and none of that was his fault, really. “First days are the worst. The Yankee Doodle’s only just over the bridge. I’ll still buy you that drink if you want. No grass-treading required.”

“Thanks, but I’ve got a ton of work to do for tomorrow.” This had been my go-to response in college when I wasn’t interested. But maybe I should have said yes. Reagan was still on the grass. I looked back at Nate. “Some other time though?” I added.

“Definitely.”

In my apartment that evening, I finished reading my student responses, and I also read the handbook pretty much cover to cover. So at nine o'clock I decided to treat myself for surviving the first day. Stewart's Sweets was only a short walk over the one lane bridge, and they made homemade black licorice. (Side note: I know Alisha and Reagan and probably a lot of other people think black licorice is gross, but I love it. I can't tell you why I love it, but I do. Depressingly, the FDA warns that eating too much black licorice can actually cause your heart to beat off rhythm—but that's mainly for people over 40, so I still have 19 years to go). I bought a bag for myself and a half-pound of gummy worms for Alisha. I planned to eat my share by the river's point, but about a hundred yards away, I saw Reagan sitting there. Of course he was—that's where he went every night. But somehow I wanted the bench to be my place, or my place and his place, which could have been different than our place, but not different enough. So I took my licorice upstairs and ate it alone. But then I remembered I hadn't finished reading all of my response essays. I pulled out my planner and removed a folded sheet of paper from the front pocket. I unfolded Reagan's letter, and began to read:

Dear Julia,

I know what you must be thinking but please hear me out. I realized you were a teacher the first night when you sat beside me on the bench and I didn't tell you right then because you were beautiful. Maybe that doesn't count enough to you. But it's true. You were beautiful and smart and funny and I just kept thinking how I'd been at Bradford for

three weeks and hadn't felt as happy as I had beside you. How I hadn't felt that way in a long time. And I didn't want you to leave.

Then on Sunday, I should have told you, I planned to tell you. I knew you thought I was a coach or something and I didn't correct you and that was wrong and I'm sorry. But the reason I didn't was because I loved talking to you and maybe we could still talk sometimes because I don't have anyone I can talk to here. But then what happened happened. I wasn't expecting it, I didn't plan it. I would never do anything to get you in trouble. But it was amazing. And I wanted you. And you wanted me too. And I still want you, I think I will always want you. And that's why I didn't pull away.

Then I started thinking that I'm about to be nineteen and you're barely three years older than me and if we were anywhere else we could just be together. So why not here? I mean that—anywhere else. If we were in college, or if you were working at a different school, or if I hadn't grown up overseas then I'd already be in college, or if any of the million other scenarios were true then we could just be together. But then I was thinking that if any of those things were true I wouldn't have met you how I met you and I wouldn't change how I met you because it was perfect. Because you are perfect to me. I know you can't be with me right now, I know that, but I don't really understand why. If two people are meant to be together, aren't they meant to be together—whether the world says they are or not?

I won't tell anyone. I promise. Never. I know you wanted us to write about this quotation--Take nothing on its looks; take everything on evidence. There's no better rule. But sometimes looks are true and sometimes evidence is deceiving and sometimes there

are reasons for things that we don't understand. I would never do anything to hurt you. You don't have to take my word for it, I'll prove it to you. Please don't stop talking to me. Please don't stop visiting the bench. I know you probably will. But I'll be there. Waiting. In case you change your mind.

Reagan

I read the letter a second time, then a third. By the time I'd finished my bag of licorice, I'd decided a few things. First, I desperately needed to work on Reagan's grammar. Second, who was I to judge what happened with Heath? As far as I knew, maybe Heath and Kaylee had an instant connection, but then something went wrong. Maybe Kaylee set him up. Maybe she fell in love with him, and when he didn't return the feelings, she made up a scandal to get him fired. Or maybe Heath was just a creep. Maybe he'd actually done it. Whatever had happened, the situation was complex and convoluted and impossible to understand from the outside. It was also dangerous. The way Reagan's letter was dangerous. But Reagan wasn't Kaylee, and I wasn't Heath. At least I thought so. At least I wanted to believe that. The truth was, I didn't know Heath and Kaylee. And I didn't really know Reagan—but I wanted to, and that was the most dangerous thing of all.

CHAPTER III

JOAN

Every morning, fog lingers in the valley above the river, among the chapel. Steady and thick, it is something to count on. On the first Saturday of the school year, I walked through it, into it, up to the chapel where stones as old as time held memories they could never share. The sanctuary was cold. It was always cold, yet also filled with golden light. I kneeled at the front bench. The wood was worn and warming underneath me. It would hold my heat even after I was gone—not forever, but for a little while.

Light streamed in through the stain glass, casting striped shadows on the altar. In 1973, my first classroom had vertical blinds that ran from the ceiling to the floor, lighting the room in stripes not unlike the stain glass shadows. Memories work like striped light—hidden for a time, and then in a flash, fully remembered. In 1973, The Bradford School for Girls was new and so was I, and I'd practiced my first lesson in the mirror so many times that I memorized it.

The first thing I said once the bell rang was, “Why do we study Literature? Why are stories important?” I looked around the room, and the girls looked back at me—their faces afraid and unknown, but also known. “Your story didn't begin with your birth,” I said. “You are part of a world that came before you and will go on after you, but while

you are here you have the opportunity—the choice—to write your chapter. The Bradford School for Girls is new. With our lives, we are writing the story of what this school is—of what this school can be. But how do we do that? How do we succeed? How do we transmit what we know, what we've seen, what we've learned to girls who will come after us?" My voice echoed around the room in a deep tremor, as if the words hadn't come from me, but rather, had become me; I had become them.

"Pull out your copies of *Hamlet*," I said. "And please turn to Act 2, Scene 2, line 183." The boy's school would put on *Hamlet* as their spring play that year. My girls would try out, and I'd be damned if one of them didn't get Ophelia. I called on the lanky girl with glasses in the front row.

She stated her name, Carolyn Clark, and then she said, "All it says is, 'Words, words, words.'" Carolyn glanced to the girls beside her, then back at me, her brow raised in confusion and innocence and the desire to see the world anew. I loved her then.

"Precisely," I said. "Literature is nothing but lines, that make up letters, that make up words, that make up the meaning of all we are and all we could ever hope to be. Words, words, words. That's what makes us different than animals. That's what makes us in God's image. We are creators. We are meaning makers. We are lovers and studiers of literature. And it all begins with words, words, words."

And it all ends with them.

In the chapel, I shivered. My knees ached and pinched with pain. I pushed myself back onto the bench. Kaylee said Heath touched her; Heath said he didn't. The hearing began in thirty minutes. Behind me a door creaked open, and Headmaster

William Allen emerged from the back garden cemetery. I blessed myself, and stood to meet him.

“I didn’t expect to see you here this morning,” he said.

“But I expected to see you.”

Our footsteps echoed in the nave. We didn’t speak, the way old friends don’t need to speak, the way not speaking says more than words ever could. William opened the chapel door for me, and as we stepped outside, a young man in jogging clothes ran up the hill towards us. I’m always glad to see the new teachers exercising. It keeps them fit, keeps them from becoming depressed. I stopped growing older on my fortieth birthday; the new hires, on the other hand, grew younger and younger each year. First Julia, and now this man.

William called out to him, “Good morning, Reagan. I hope you’re not using up your legs for tonight.” Thank goodness. He was a student.

“No, sir.” The young man slowed to a stop. “Just got to move. Gets the jitters out.” He’d sweat through his shirt but was not out of breath.

“I understand,” said William. “It’s a big game. Maybe the biggest of the year.” William patted the boy on the shoulder and looked him in the eye. “You can do it, son. We believe in you.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Reagan, and then he nodded to me and said, “Good morning, ma’am.” Then with that, he ran over the hill and down the other side. I smiled as I watched him go, for I do appreciate a good formal address. It’s rare, but always appropriate.

William turned to me with a childlike giddiness. “This could be our year, Joan. The Hotchkiss-Bradford Spoon has been absent from my office for far too long.” According to tradition, when the Bradford headmaster’s wife invited the first graduating class of Hotchkiss School over for dinner, a Hotchkiss student stole one of her silver spoons. Hotchkiss, liars as they come, denied the accusations. Instead, to settle the debt, Hotchkiss proposed a football game—if Bradford won, Hotchkiss would procure a silver spoon “replacement”; if Hotchkiss won, Bradford would cease its slander. Bradford would have been out a spoon, did we not cherish two things more than life itself: pride and money, and Hotchkiss had affronted us on both accounts. We won that year, and thus the tradition began.

“You think Reagan will help us win?” I said to William.

“I know so. If he weren’t going into the Navy, he’d be drafted by the NFL. I honestly don’t know how Nate recruited him. But I don’t care.”

I came to love football like one comes to love coffee. At first it is bitter, distasteful, a necessary evil. But over time, its repugnance shifts to normality, and then normality becomes desire, and then desire mingles with dependence, such that at a certain point one comes to realize that life would be incomplete without it.

William and I walked side by side down the hill to the administration building. He opened the door there as well, and then he offered me a cup of coffee. I accepted. Black. He took two creams and sugar, which I feel says much about who we are. As he prepared his official documents for the hearing, I waited for Heath and Kaylee on the mahogany bench outside the Board of Trustees Room. The floors, ceilings, walls, and

benches in the administration building are all made of pure mahogany, and on more than one occasion when our annual budgets have run red, I've informed William that we could pay our bills for the next several years if we stripped the building and replaced the mahogany with pine. Pride, of course, prevents this. Though last year, I believe William genuinely considered it.

Heath entered the waiting room. He greeted me but then said nothing more. He remained standing. In my forty years at Bradford, we have faced occasional episodes of student-teacher misconduct. Until now, the incidents were handled with a reordering of class schedules and a quiet and subdued reprimand, so that the calm façade of school life continued in such a way that nearly everyone believed it to be true. But not with Heath, and this was why: the endowment was down, as was enrollment, as was alumni giving; and most importantly, we might lose our accreditation.

Last year, the New England Accreditation Board found some of our facilities, particularly Conley Dorm, below standard. They granted Bradford one year to return campus to a passing level, or they would revoke accreditation. Without accreditation, parents wouldn't pay to send their children to Bradford; the school would shut down; Bradford would cease to be. But from where should we procure funds? The endowment? Enrollment? Alumni giving? Still, Bradford would survive; we always had. What we couldn't survive was a scandal.

Soon Kaylee arrived to the administration building alongside our Dean of Students, Dean Rizzo, who bore a striking resemblance to Albert Einstein although contained none of the wits. As the four of us waited, the grandfather clock ticked with a

hollow brass echo. The steady, grating noise filled the room, yet left us all emptier for its presence.

Finally, Nate summoned us into the boardroom where velvet emerald curtains covered the windows, blocking out even the slightest rays of light. The chandelier was not lit, and though the giant fireplace on the interior wall could have filled the room with heat and light, its hearth was black and empty. Two onyx lamps lit the conference table where Nate, William, and all nine trustees sat with their backs to the curtains. Heath, Kaylee, Dean Rizzo, and I sat across from them. Then Percy Conley opened an emerald folder and commenced the proceedings.

First Kaylee produced this written statement: *On April 29th of last year, Mr. Longmire asked me to stay after class. When he gave me back my paper, he stood too close to me, and he rubbed against me with his body. His fingers touched my waist and groped my chest.* Next, Heath vehemently rebutted the statement, saying Kaylee stayed after class of her own accord, and he never so much as looked at her inappropriately. For the next three hours, the trustees asked follow up questions in this vein.

“Heath, is it common for you to have a student to stay after class?”

“Not every day, but it does happen.”

“On the occasions it does happen, are you alone with them?”

“Not when new students come in for the next period.”

“But you *are* alone, for a time.”

“Well, yes, but...”

I've never been cave diving. I've never been afforded the opportunity, but if I were, I'd turn it down because of an exaggerated, and perhaps unfounded, fear of drowning in a rising tide. In a cavern, there is no sky. Death neither comes slowly, nor all at once. It is a process that one must watch, yet can do nothing to stop. In the dark, the window of air grows smaller, traps one tighter, leaves one gasping, grasping for a foothold. Until the darkness wins. I squeezed Heath's hand, but it was limp, lifeless. When the Board finally satisfied their requirements of due diligence, Percy Conley dismissed the witnesses. I stood to leave with Dean Rizzo, but Percy said, "Joan, please stay for a moment."

I returned to my seat. A tunnel of light flooded the Board Room when Dean Rizzo opened the door, but when the door closed, the Board Room looked even darker than before. Across the table, Percy stared at me. He had a square face, clear blue eyes, and thick strawberry blonde hair that only greyed above the ears. He would have been handsome if he didn't bear such a striking resemblance to his father.

"We are letting Heath go," he said. "As I'm sure you well know." Three hours of deliberations, and the Board of Trustees wouldn't even discuss the evidence? Did they think Heath was guilty? Did it matter? I knew I shouldn't refute their decision. I knew that responding would only enflame the Board and bring their wrath upon me. But I had a voice and Heath did not, and what will the world become if those with the power to speak say nothing?

"I did not 'well know' that," I said. "And I don't believe any of you should well know that either."

“Don’t be naïve, Joan.” One can’t hold a son responsible for the sins of his father, so over the past ten years, I have striven to see Percy Conley as his own man. But just then he sounded very much like Alfred. Very much like him. And neither money, nor family heritage, gives one the right to be a chauvinistic ass.

Behind me, the gold-leafed school shield hung above the fireplace with Bradford’s Latin motto: *Honos, Officium, Constantia*—Honor, Duty, Self-reliance. For full disclosure, I must admit I have never liked that motto. But a woman must use the tools at her disposal.

“Is honor naïve?” I said. “Is Duty? Is moral integrity?” I turned and pointed to the shield. “No gentlemen, that is not naïve. That is what Bradford School aspires to be. And as a member of this school, Heath has the right to a fair trial because career is at stake; his life is at stake.”

“The future of Bradford is also at stake,” Percy said to me. “And you have failed in your duties.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re the Dean of Faculty and the Chair of the English Department. It’s your responsibility to prevent a scandal like this from escalating so far. Now if the New England Accreditation Board finds out, we’ll lose our charter.” His voice resounded off the empty hearth, growing louder and more final in its duplicity. I stared at him, my mouth slightly agape. I gripped my hands tight under the table and wrung them. They tingled and trembled with rage. Surely he did not think this was my fault.

“Surely you don’t think this is my fault,” I said, for it was all I could think to say. Though I spoke loudly, I could not mask the tremor of doubt in my voice. I looked to William.

“Of course it’s not your fault,” said William. He flushed and leaned forward, almost out of his chair, so as to look Percy in the face. “Percy, don’t be unreasonable. Joan had nothing to do with this.”

“But it is her job to oversee her department and to counsel and censure the faculty. It is, is it not?”

William, his fists clenched, said nothing.

“I did oversee my department and counsel Heath,” I said. “I held private meetings with both Heath and Kaylee last April, but the evidence was inconclusive. Heath worked directly under me for seven years without a single ill report, whereas Kaylee was caught and sentenced twice with illegal intervisitation in a boys dorm.”

Percy held his hand up to stop me. “Enough,” he said. “We’ve already heard all the evidence in the trial.”

“Apparently you didn’t listen to it.” I sounded frantic, high pitched. I could not control it. Across the table, all nine trustees drew back from me. They wore nine grey suits with nine Bradford ties because that’s what Percy Conley wore. Because that’s what Alfred Conley wore. Percy wasn’t his own man. He was his father’s son. Percy folded his long fingers on top of the emerald Bradford binder and glared at me.

“The trustees have come to a consensus,” Percy said. “We’re not holding you responsible for Heath’s actions, but nothing of this sort can happen again. To ensure it doesn’t, we’ll be holding you accountable for any future faculty misconduct.”

“What do you mean *holding me accountable*?” I said.

“We mean that you need to keep your house in order. We mean...” Percy paused for emphasis. “Layoffs. We mean you’ll be accountable.”

Heath’s hearing had been a charade. I was next. Maybe the trial was more for me than for Heath. As a warning. Nothing like this would ever happen if I were on the board, or if anyone were on the board with a vision of what the school could be, instead of what it once was.

“What do you expect me to do?” I said.

“Whatever you need to do,” said Alfred Conley’s son. “Bottom line, Bradford needs to survive this year, and it’s your job to make sure that happens. Are we clear?”

I’d dedicated over forty years of my life to this school. Over forty years, and in one morning, the Board threatened to strip it all away. Above me, the iron chandelier was dark and bare; a stark skeleton of what it could be, what it wanted to be, what it was made to be. Its gnarled knuckles held bulbs but no light. A thin chill spread across the room. I looked past the trustees to the drawn curtains that trapped me in the only world I had ever known to love.

There was more to Bradford School than just keeping its doors open. There was honor and duty. There was the ideal, that here, we were part of something that was

stronger and better than any of us could be alone. If Bradford lost that, then what did it have left?

When the meeting adjourned, I went to the Dean's Office, not out of desire but out of need. The school needed me, and I needed to work. Work was constant. Work was steady. Hard work was the only thing that would see me through this; it was the only thing that ever had.

The Dean's Office is two stories tall with five offices, upstairs and down, and a central staircase that winds around the fireplace. The hardwoods creak, the soot tracks from room to room, and when someone walks heavily on the second floor, dust falls from the ceiling—often upon my desk. But compared to the English Department, the Dean's Office feels like a home, for indeed it was the old headmaster's home before the old headmaster built that new monstrosity by the girl's soccer fields. There is a small kitchen in the back with a small pot of coffee, and it is not good. But my eyelids drooped with the emotional exhaustion one feels after a long cry. I desired nothing more than to go to sleep, or to eat an entire chocolate chess pie. All I had was bad coffee. I poured my cup to the brim and took it to my desk. Dean Myers thundered across his upstairs office. Dust fell upon my shoulders like flurries of brown snow.

Over the next few hours, I pulled all of Heath's files. I made and printed charts of Heath's class schedules, his afterschool commitments, his dorm duties, his advisee students, and all of his responsibilities at Bradford. Then I stacked and ordered the tasks meticulously, for it has long been an axiom of mine that action in spite of fear replaces fear; that in shaping the task at hand, one shapes herself.

I didn't hear Julia when she knocked.

"How did it go?" she said.

"We have a lot of rearranging to do," I said, still stooped over my desk.

"Oh." Julia stared at the piles of papers on my desk and fidgeted with the pen in her hand, clicking it out, and in. Out, in. Out. "I just wanted to let you know," she said. "I'm more than happy to switch my class load and take over sophomore English. I am better trained for that anyway."

"That's kind, Julia, but we don't want to cause any more stress than we need to in the department." I picked up the class schedule matrix. "Though you may pick up Heath's 5th period until we can hire a replacement. Then if Mr. Applegate takes on his third and potentially his sixth period, we'll just have to figure out who can take his first period. Maybe me."

"Are you sure? I really don't mind switching. It sounds like that will free up different blocks, so you wouldn't have to fill in."

"I'm sure," I said. "You'll stay right where you are. Plus, I need your talents elsewhere. Heath ran the school literary magazine, *Kaleidoscope*. You're the only English faculty member without a student-dependent activity in the afternoons, so starting this Monday, you'll be the new Faculty Advisor for the magazine."

Julia frowned. When she saw me looking at her, she smiled, but her smile didn't reach her eyes. I invited her to sit, and when I sat across from her, suddenly she wasn't Julia, but her mother. And not her mother either, but one of the hundreds of women who'd sat across from me over the years with youthful gloss dimming from their eyes;

with the darkness of disappointment and growing older and still not knowing who they were, who they would become.

“You’ll do great, Julia. You worked as an editor in college, and the magazine is a well-oiled machine.”

“It’s not that. I just...” I waited for her to say more, but she didn’t. Some things are too close and too large to say aloud. Was she thinking of Heath? Or her new assignments? Or leaving me?

“I know this is a lot to take in,” I said. “But I’ll still be in touch with you.” She nodded. Pressed her pen out and in. What did young people talk about these days? “At least we have the Spoon Game tonight. Are you going?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Are you?”

“Wouldn’t miss it. This could be our year. I hear Reagan Willis is a great ball player.”

“Is he?”

“The headmaster sure seems to think so. Isn’t Reagan a student of yours?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“He’s a fine young man.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

A silence fell between us, punctuated by the clicking of a pen—out, in, out in. Out.

“Enough with the pen,” I said. My voice was too harsh. Julia recoiled. She twisted her hands in her lap and looked down at them. “Well,” I said, in an unnaturally cheery voice. “Let’s start drafting an announcement about Heath to the faculty.”

After Julia left at five, I did not go to dinner. I went to the river's point, past Evelyn's bench, to where mud lined either side of the black water and the roots of trees protruded from the banks, spiderlike and dry. There was a time, not so long ago, when the banks were bare and pure, and Evelyn knew every one of my secrets, and I was in love. I tried to remember the woman I was then, but I could not bring her face to mind.

I leaned down to the water and cupped the river in my hands. It dripped through the cracks in my fingers, slowly, then in streams, then slowly again until only droplets fell, bright in the light of the afternoon sun. I held my hands cupped until all the water was gone. A river in my hands was not a river. What made a river a river was the banks, the shore, the hard rocks, and the muddy bottom. In a river, the water passed through; the banks remained, giving everything they had.

I've long known one can be alone and not lonely; one can be lonely and not alone. I dropped my hands and brushed them dry on my hips. I looked across the water. It pulled at me, drew me towards it, drew me out of myself, so that for a moment I flowed with the water beyond the borders of the school, beyond the banks, beyond the trees, beyond the waterfall and the fall and the horizon of everything I could see, until the world was bright and empty and full of loss.

Then behind me, a branch cracked. I jerked around, back in time, back to the banks of where I stood. Gene Humphrey leaned against the bench. He was a well-built man, and though his hair was grey and thinning, he had not, in all the years I'd known him, lost a shadow of his former handsomeness. I've always found it particularly unfair

that men tend to grow more attractive with age, while women, of no fault of their own, tend to shrivel with it. (Hence, why I chose to stop aging at forty.)

“I haven’t seen you out here in a long time,” said Gene. At first I did not respond. I gazed back at the river, hoping to hold onto the fullness of my solitude, but it was gone.

“You’re early,” I said, not facing him.

“I’m here for the game. Figured I’d catch a part of it at least, before the night shift.” He moved closer to me, but not too close, as if there were an invisible and impossible distance between us. “I’m about to head that way, if you’re interested.

“I’ll wait a bit more,” I said, and again I turned away from him to the river. It lulled by with the occasional splash. Gene didn’t leave. He didn’t speak. I wondered if he was watching me. I knew he was. I breathed slowly, heavily, as if I were tired, as if I were out of breath. Still, Gene did not leave.

Then, unexpectedly he said, “It’s ten till. Just so you know.”

“Already?”

“Yep. But you can wait a bit more. Kickoff’s not your favorite part anyway.” He knew very well kickoff was my favorite part. No other time is the school so full of hope, so full of promise, so full of pride. I brushed my hands off, even though they were dry. Then I tugged down my blouse and walked slightly past Gene.

“What are you waiting for?” I said, and he followed me down River Road to Campus Drive where the grove of trees overlapped overhead. The sun had set behind the mountains, but the lampposts hadn’t yet turned on, so the webbed branches cast shadows

in our path. We spoke little—about the weather, about Hotchkiss, about Reagan Willis—and then we spoke of nothing as we walked past the barren practice fields.

When we emerged from the tunnel to the game-day football field, navy and white clad Bradford fans covered the five-tier stands and encompassed the home side of the field. Gene and I paused before the bleachers. He stood close to me. Without thinking, I said, “Would you like to sit with me?”

“I’ll just be in the back. I have to dodge out once my shift starts.”

“Of course.” I felt a rush of heat and embarrassment, and then more heat for the embarrassment. Then relief. Then unexpected sadness. I mounted the stands and took my seat beside the headmaster in the front row. He turned to me, his face drawn and serious. He spoke in a whisper, and I had to lean towards him to hear.

“Joan,” he said. “You must know that I didn’t know about earlier. You must know that I wasn’t involved in that coup.”

“It’s okay, William. It’s just like the old days. You and I both know when money’s tight, it certainly brings out the best in the Board.”

William laughed, but caught himself and looked over his shoulder. Then in a low voice, he said, “You should have a preemptive attack—host ethics conferences, hold one-on-one meetings with the faculty, root out anything that seems fishy. Really, do anything that will cover your bases. Don’t worry. I’ll protect you. But those things can’t hurt.”

But I knew he couldn’t protect me, not if Percy Conley wanted me gone. The field lights shone so white they looked blue. They lit William’s face sharply and cast deep shadows under his eyes, making him look old and worn and unwell; and for a

moment I wondered if he knew he couldn't protect me either. Tonight, though, the game was about to begin. Our ram mascot cartwheeled in front of the bleachers. Bradford had no cheerleaders—something I consider a personal success. Instead, senior girls painted their faces and duct-taped the players' numbers on their backs. The crowd roared so loud it grew quiet. Then the whistle blew.

The center snapped the ball to Reagan. He pivoted, dodged a rusher, and threw the ball to the running back who caught it at the forty yard line. Then the running back took off down the field to the thirty, the twenty, the ten. The stadium erupted in chants of “Hotchkiss. Butt-kiss. Hotchkiss. Butt-kiss,” which I will deny until the day I die, but just so happens to be my favorite cheer. And then, touchdown! The scoreboard flashed thirty-five seconds down. Reagan had just set a Bradford record—maybe a league record.

William gripped me in a side hug. “What did I tell you, Joan? This is our year.” I have learned not to put much stock in William's hope; historically, it is inaccurate to the point of delusional. While we at Bradford excel as Nobel laureates, senators, and even Olympic rowers, we tend to be stringy and brainy as a whole. Thus, in the hundred years we've played Hotchkiss, we've only won thirteen times. Perhaps this is also why I prefer the kickoff. That night, however, by the end of the first half, Reagan had thrown three touchdowns, and the Bradford defense had only let by one field goal.

When we started with the ball in the second half, though, everything went wrong. As the Bradford center prepared to hike the ball to Reagan, Hotchkiss shifted their defensive formation. The corner back and the safety realigned to blitz Reagan, but neither Reagan nor his linemen detected the change. Nate shouted and waved his hands,

but the boys could not hear him over chants of “Hotchkiss, Butt-kiss.” Bradford’s center hiked the ball. The Hotchkiss defense broke through Bradford’s offensive line. The three biggest Hotchkiss players triple teamed Reagan—the first one hit Reagan straight in the stomach, plunging him to the ground; the second one tackled Reagan from the right, hitting him mid-fall and curving Reagan’s body in a U; and the third opponent sacked him from behind. All four bodies crashed to the ground, trapping Reagan at the bottom. An eerie, piercing scream echoed around the stadium. The student section fell silent and still. When the Hotchkiss defenders pulled away from Reagan, he lay limp on the ground.

I blessed myself, and prayed. When I looked up, all of our players were huddled around the bench, but none of the Hotchkiss players had moved from their spots on the field. William breathed slow and deep beside me. The physical trainer shouted, “Someone call 911,” and Julia ran onto the field holding her cell phone.

“William,” I said. “Do you think we should go down there?”

“There is nothing we can do that they aren’t already doing.” He was right, of course, but I do not like to sit idly about when there is work to be done. Julia was already on the field. Good for her. She was exactly what Bradford needed—someone who was not afraid to stand up and act in an emergency, someone who would not cower to the Board or to men like Percy Conley. If Julia was on the field, I at least deserved to know what was happening.

“I’m going to get a closer look,” I said.

William knew better than to stop me. Students parted to let me through on the benches, but along the sidelines I had to clear my throat to disperse to a few senior girls.

Soon I reached the roped edge of the field where Reagan lay on his back just a few feet from forty-yard marker. Reagan's eyes were closed and drool dripped from the side of his mouth. The physical trainer, Mr. Martin, gently touched Reagan's fingers, then Reagan's legs. Julia set her hand on Nate's shoulder. As students withdrew and whispered around me, I leaned forward toward the field.

"Is he okay?" said Julia.

"We don't know," said Nate. "He's not responding."

"Reagan?" said Julia. "Reagan, can you hear me?" At her voice, Reagan twitched. He mumbled and struggled to open his eyes. Julia kneeled. In the distance, a siren echoed across the river valley, and soon the ambulance's red and white lights flashed through Bradford's iron gate.

Mr. Martin turned to Julia. "Thank you for calling 911," he said. "But you can head back now, Julia." As she stood, Reagan opened his eyes. He tried to speak, but he garbled his words.

"What is it, Reagan?" said Nate.

Again Mr. Martin said, "Julia, you need to go. The professionals are coming, and we don't need anyone in their way."

"I gave my name to 911 as the contact person. I need to stay to confirm the EMT's arrival." Good for you, Julia. You hold strong among those men. Before Mr. Martin could protest, the EMT's rushed the field. In perfect synchronization, they strapped a brace around Reagan's neck, rolled him onto a stretcher, and loaded him into the ambulance.

“Who’s his advisor?” said the chief EMT.

“I am,” said Nate.

“We need you to accompany him to the hospital and sign consent forms.”

“Coach Simmons and I have to stay for the game,” said Mr. Martin. I don’t fault Mr. Martin for his dedication to Bradford or for his desire to win back our long awaited Spoon. But what in the hell was he thinking? What if Reagan was paralyzed for life? What if he was bleeding internally? I’d personally witnessed over thirty-four Spoon-game losses. One more for the sake of a student’s safety was well worth it. I expected Nate to say the same.

Instead, Julia said, “I’ll take him.”

“You will?” Nate said. Julia had initiative, spunk, but for the sake of school policy, Nate should take Reagan. If not Nate, then Dean Rizzo. The last thing I needed was the Board to conflate the act of a Good Samaritan as a reason to fire me. But where was Dean Rizzo? Why did we even pay that man?

“Of course, I will,” said Julia.

“Okay. Keep me posted,” said Nate. “I’ll meet you at the hospital right after the game.”

As Julia looked from Nate to the ambulance, I noticed something in her eyes—something that struck me, something I couldn't ignore. It only lasted an instant, but an instant was long enough to reveal the glimmer of fear and shame and desire. I knew the look because I’d once felt it myself. I knew the look because it was dangerous—far more dangerous than anything I’d ever seen from Heath.

When Julia stood and ran with the EMT to the ambulance, I grew suddenly cold. Her look haunted me. It lingered in my mind the way a nightmare does upon first waking. I didn't want to see what I had seen, but I couldn't pretend I hadn't seen it. I drew a sharp breath and hurried to the hole in the roped-off sideline. But before I broached the field, before I could find Dean Rizzo or stop Julia, the back door of the ambulance slammed shut. The siren sounded. Then with great speed, the ambulance drove out the Bradford gates and disappeared down the valley. Its alarm echoed even after it was gone—not forever, but for a little while; for long enough to wonder what I was going to do, and how this all would end. Julia, I thought, I'll be watching you. Before the last sirens faded into the night, I prayed, *Dear God, help me*. And then, *Dear God, help us all*.