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## Goodbye Town

Kathryn M. Barber

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Goodbye town

By

Kathryn Michelle Barber

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of  
Mississippi State University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
in English  
in the Department of English

Mississippi State, Mississippi

May 2014

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2014

Goodbye town

By

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My collection of short stories is set in the fictional town of Lockwood Gap, Tennessee, and centers around the lives of four women. Through various points of view and story lengths, I interweave several story lines to span over a time period of about twenty years. Themes of change and regret are prevalent in these stories, as each of these four women must make, or refuse to make, choices that will impact their lives. I modeled my collection after Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, using individual short stories that share the same group of characters to tell a novel-length story. The ten stories included in my thesis will comprise about three-fourths of the novel, and I will add several more to it following my graduation.

## DEDICATION

To my two biggest supporters, my mother and my uncle.

I love you both.

and

“to the town my life has abandoned.”

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincerest thanks goes to my mother, who has been telling everyone since I was five that she would one day line her office walls with my novels, and to my uncle, who has read every word of every draft I've ever written—this project would never have succeeded without you two. Many thanks for the support given to me by my father; my sisters, Callie and Meredith; my “aunt and uncle,” Beeb and George; and my best girl, Mary Beth Ballinger (Day). Thank you to Becky Hagenston, for directing my committee; Dr. Michael Kardos, for cleaning up my creative messes; and Dr. Kelly Marsh for reading on my committee. Katelyn Bland-Clark and Robin Walden, thank you for being my original editors. Cody Quillen, thank you for taking me to the swinging bridge in Hiltons, Virginia that inspired numerous scenes in this novel, and for reading a hundred terrible drafts—I love you, Dawson Leery. An additional thanks to Isharah and Shane McCracken, for getting me to Wilmington; Vallie Lynn Watson, for her help and support; the editors of *Cape Fear Review*, for soliciting the first section of “Maybe Not Today” for their first edition; Mark Schwan and Kevin Williamson for creating characters that changed my life; and Jamie Perry and Jennifer Mullins-Tate, for being my high school English teachers, my coaches, my inspiration, and my friends.

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## CHAPTER I

### THEMES OF CHANGE, REGRET, AND MEMORY IN SMALL TOWN TENNESSEE

“Things are always different than what they might be... If you wait for them to change, you will never do anything.”

--Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*

*Goodbye Town* is a novel of linked short stories centered around four women living in the fictional town of Lockwood Gap, Tennessee, located near Chattanooga on the Tennessee-Georgia state line. The various stories span a time period of about fifteen years, tracking the similar struggles of Katie Cockerell, Jenna Anderson, Kelsey DeVinney Whitman, and Natalie Parker Whitman. Unlike the residents of most small towns found in fiction set in deep in the mountains, the 2,034 residents of Lockwood Gap are almost entirely upper-class and well-educated people, who simply seem to have a difficult time navigating their way out of their hometown. As Katie Cockerell's husband tells his students at Lockwood Gap High School, there are more bodies buried in the town than there are living within it. Filled with superstitions about graveyards and deaths, Lockwood Gap is a town most residents find themselves content to live in their entire lives, never wishing to venture outside of Hamilton County. Though some do move on to other places, Lockwood Gap seems to call back those who have left.

The theme of memory plays a large role in the stories; characters often make decisions in the present because of memories from their pasts. In an interview with Lee

Smith concerning the role of memory in her novels *Black Mountain Breakdown* and *Oral History*, Smith says, “We’re brought up to think that we ought to be able to gain some sort of strength from the past, but it doesn’t seem to work that way a lot of the time... Where else are you going to look, though?” (Tate 4-5). My characters struggle with this idea as well, as they constantly look backward instead of forward. While some characters are able to gain strength from their pasts, such as Kelsey and Natalie, others, such as Katie and Jenna, are ruined by it. Regret and change also become important, as those who long for change attempt to cope with the messes they have made of their lives, and those who fear change must become content with their own poor decisions that they refuse to address. Katie, Jenna, Kelsey, and Natalie’s stories are interwoven, and the four women are closely related to one another—some more so than the rest of the town realizes. As they are all faced with somewhat similar choices, the themes of memory, regret, and change determine different outcomes for all four women.

I chose to structure this work as linked short stories that function as a novel so that I could focus on important moments rather than move swiftly through fifteen years in a more standard novel format. Using linked stories allows me to focus on a handful of characters at a time while still having a rather large cast of characters that runs throughout the novel as a whole.

When I began writing, I found myself continually drawn to the same characters. I found Kelsey appearing in Natalie’s stories, and Katie in Kelsey’s, Jenna in Katie’s, and so on. Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* largely inspired the structure of my novel. Growing up in a small town on the state line of Tennessee and Virginia, I contemplated how closely entangled my relationships and friendships are with residents

of my hometown. Combining character models and themes from Henry James's *A Portrait of a Lady* and following the structure of Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, I entwined the lives of four women and their families to write *Goodbye Town*.

Although my chapters can be divided into separate stories, the majority of which do or will eventually stand alone, these stories function as a novel in a way that Egan's does not. While I have arranged my chapters so that one leaves questions another answers, several main story lines flow throughout the collection. While Egan does not bring all of her characters or their situations full circle, leaving some unanswered while fully developing others, I have attempted to maintain a story line that is intended to operate as a novel does, beginning with the problems and desires of characters and answering those questions by the novel's ending. As the novel opens, for example, Kelsey has divorced her husband and been disinvited from his sister's wedding. By the final chapter of the novel, all of the circumstances and pieces leading up to these events will have been filled in and answered. The first chapter also sets up Katie Cockerell as a fairly unstable woman who has attempted to kill her husband. The chapters that follow fully develop their relationship and explain how she came to this point. The linked characters do not exist in order to provide an excuse for all of these stories to exist within the same collection, but rather to develop the characters over a long period of time in an unconventional manner. In following Egan's structure of linked stories but maintaining the same story lines throughout each one, I feel that my work is more accurately labeled a novel rather than a collection of linked stories.

## **Primary Influence: Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad***

### **Linked Stories: Memory and Connection**

In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan tells stories that span a period of over twenty years. Egan maintains several loose story lines throughout her work, one of which is Sasha's. Sasha's stories are largely connected by the use of memory. Many of her stories raise questions that are not answered in one story, but are answered in another. Egan connects several of Sasha's stories through use of flashback or a brief memory embedded within the story.

The collection opens with Sasha, a young woman who steals various objects from people she encounters and keeps them on a table in her apartment. As she explains to her therapist, "[s]he kept the stolen objects separate from the rest of her life: because using them would imply greed or self-interest; because leaving them untouched made it seem as if she might one day give them back; because piling them in a heap kept their power from leaking away" (Egan 16-7). Sasha narrowly escapes being caught as she attempts to extract a woman's wallet from the woman's purse in the bathroom of a restaurant. Egan also provides hints that this impulse has ruined friendships in Sasha's past. Here, she shows memories Sasha has of her friendship with a girl named Lizzie, but does not explain the circumstances of the ruined friendship. Sasha's memories and her connections with her past provide an element of suspense.

Egan returns to Sasha in the tenth chapter, where she introduces Lizzie, the friend mentioned in the first chapter. This story shifts the focus off of Sasha and onto her friend, Rob, who drowns himself by the chapter's end. Rob is friends with a younger college-aged Sasha, and he provides pieces of Sasha's character that contribute to what Egan has

already shown. Rob provides a small backstory that explains Sasha's beginning of shoplifting at thirteen with her friends, "hiding beaded combs and sparkly earrings inside their sleeves, seeing who could get away with more, but it was different for Sasha—it made her whole body glow" (Egan 194). Sasha continued this until she went to Naples, where she was forced to steal things and sell them in order to survive. This mention is brief and does not elaborate on how Sasha came to be in Naples, how she put herself in such a position, or how she recovered from it and returned to the States. Instead, the section is cut off by Rob saying, "She was better now, hadn't stolen anything in two years" (Egan 194). How Sasha managed to stop stealing and what happens between then and the time in which the first chapter is set is unclear, leaving another gap to be filled in. Through the usage of memories of the characters and moving in and out of the present, Egan connects these stories to provide a more complete composite of Sasha.

"Out of Body" ends with Rob's plea for help as he drowns in the river, and "Good-bye My Love" moves backward in time to Naples, where Sasha's uncle is looking for her. Ted locates the missing Sasha and is appalled to discover how she is surviving. While at dinner one night, she takes his wallet, showing the return of her stealing habit. While "Out of Body" merely mentions her experience in Naples briefly, this account from Sasha's uncle provides a more detailed description of what happened to her, as well as how she came to be there.

Egan maintains a sense of suspense by structuring her novel achronologically because each story links to at least one other. Once the reader understands the structure of the book, Egan gains the reader's trust and is able to leave questions unanswered in one story because the reader trusts they will be answered later in the text. By using this

structure, she is also able to juggle her large cast of characters. Were the chapters in chronological order, it could become confusing as to why one story contains characters the previous one did not. In jumbling the stories much like jumbled memories inside one's head, she is able to gain more freedom with the ways in which she divides the characters and focuses on different characters depending on the chapter. Though Sasha is both the main character and narrator in the first chapter, in chapter ten, she becomes a secondary character and loses her voice of narration. In the following chapter, she is still the subject and focus of the story, but Egan allows for another voice to tell her story. The organized chaos allows for more freedom in choosing which stories to tell about which characters and breaks the form of a smooth flow from start to finish that would be necessary were the stories arranged by timeline.

By arranging her novel in separate stories rather than flowing chapters, she can create a cast of characters, all related to one another in various ways, focusing on only about two to six characters at a time. Because each story is a moment or smaller time period in a specific character's life, not all of the characters need to be accounted for within every story. In having a large number, she is able to demonstrate the idea of people being closely linked, even if by having a person or two in common, without restraining herself to showing all of these characters in one place at one time.

Though the stories are not chronological, Egan does frame the collection with one idea. Egan begins with Sasha, who brings a man she has only just met back to her apartment in New York. After Sasha has slept with her date, Alex, who is now fascinated with her bathtub, the narrator says, "It jarred Sasha to think of herself as a glint in the hazy memories that Alex would struggle to organize a year or two from now: *Where was*



*that place with the bathtub? Who was that girl?"* (Egan 14). In the closing chapter, as Alex is now working with Bennie Salazar, Alex reflects to himself how he came to know Bennie and remembers that the first time he learned of Bennie was from a girl he had dated briefly. His thoughts are interesting when compared to Sasha's comments in the first chapter:

The girl had worked for [Bennie]... but it was practically all he could remember; her name, what she'd looked like, what exactly they'd done together—those details had been erased. The only impressions Alex retained of their date involved winter, darkness, and something about a *wallet*, of all things, but had it been lost? Found? Stolen? The girl's wallet, or his own? (Egan 311)

Egan refers all the way back to her first story, confirming that Sasha has indeed slipped from Alex's memory. She is wrong, however, about what he will remember. Rather than remembering the bathtub in her apartment, his memory has lingered on the wallet—though he is incorrect on both accounts. The wallet was one Sasha attempted to steal from a woman in the restroom. In tying these small pieces together, Egan not only is able to demonstrate memory and how it alters over time, but she is also able to find a linking point between the beginning and end of her novel.

I have structured my stories similarly, arranging them achronologically, featuring only a few characters at a time, and framing the stories with a connecting idea. The stories out of time order follow Kelsey's marriage and her relationship with Russell Jennings, Katie's mental and marital decline, Jenna's flight and return, and Natalie's stability. I am using the first and last chapters to frame the collection, and within these

two stories, nearly all of the characters are present. The first chapter takes place on the night of Logan Whitman and Seth McCord's rehearsal dinner, and the last (not included in my thesis), takes place the day after their wedding.

Though Egan does not have all of her characters appear in one place, I wanted to show the closer and more direct connection my characters have compared to hers. All of the other stories except these two feature a smaller number of characters, about five or so at a time. I used Egan's idea of framing the collection with the same idea, but I took this a step further in having all of my characters in one place to establish the closer connection.

### **Point of View and Narration**

Throughout *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan inventively varies the point of view. While several stories are third-person, one is told in second person point of view, a few in first, one in alternating close thirds, and one even in PowerPoint presentation slides. Her story "Out of Body" is told in second person. Though Sasha and Bennie are the two main characters whose stories interlace throughout the novel, Egan does not restrict herself to their points of view. She ranges from a simple first, second, and third, to extremely close and multiple third-person points of view. She also is careful to vary her narrators, balancing first person narration with third. While "Found Objects" centers on Sasha in third-person, "Out of Body" discusses Sasha, but from a second-person viewpoint. "Good-bye My Love" is from her uncle's point of view, though about her. Likewise, Bennie's stories are told from his point of view, his wife's, his high school friends', and eventually a coworker. Egan varies both the narrators and the points of view to reveal them through multiple lenses rather than only through one narrative voice.

After reading “Out of Body,” I wanted to attempt a story in second person. I chose to try this with “The Art of Leaving,” playing again with the idea of memory. Often, when remembering something from the past, I tend to place myself as a third person observer rather than placing myself within the memory and looking at it from a first person standpoint. I tried to convey this idea with Kelsey in “The Art of Leaving” by having her narrate the memories that drive her to leave her Manhattan apartment in second person. In the second person, she can distance herself from her memories while still detailing them, and she can remove herself from the story just as she attempts to do with Lockwood Gap.

“Safari” from *A Visit from the Goon Squad* details a vacation a father takes with his two children and girlfriend. Rather than maintaining one third-person narrator or choosing a first person narrator, Egan chooses in this story to shift among various close third-person viewpoints. At some points, she briefly retells a piece of the story from a different character’s point of view. Though none of these characters directly speak for themselves, the narration is so close that Egan can still convey each character’s viewpoint. I used this technique in two different forms in two stories. “Wilmington, Off-Script” shifts between the characters of Kelsey, Russ, Seth, Nick, and Logan, but keeps a close third-person throughout. In “Maybe Not Today,” I changed the story, originally only from Alyssa’s first-person point of view, to a shifting first-person, divided into sections. I also overlap brief sections so that they are told more than once from two different characters. Referring to Egan’s various viewpoints helped me choose my narrators and influenced my decision to vary the viewpoints and narrators as much as possible.

## Other Influences

### Themes of Change and Regret in *The Portrait of a Lady*

“The Fifteen-Year Line” centers on Katie Cockerell, perhaps the only main female with a direct link to every other main character. Katie roomed with the eldest Whitman sister, Andie, in college and has remained important to the other Whitman siblings. Katie’s three favorite students, Kelsey, Natalie, and Nick, are also very tied to the Whitmans. Natalie and Kelsey marry the Whitman brothers, while Nick remains a close friend to their family. Katie is Jenna’s biological mother, Karen Anderson’s best friend and old roommate, and Corey Cockerell’s wife. Though she remains important to all of these other characters, she views herself as trapped in Lockswood Gap, by her husband, a secret, and by her own will. I used Henry James’s character Isabel Archer as a starting point for Katie Cockerell.

In Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*, his protagonist, Isabel Archer, undergoes tremendous change throughout the course of the novel. Isabel begins as a bright and independent young woman who values nothing more than the power to make her own decisions. She repeatedly turns down suitors in order to assert herself and prove that she is capable of choosing, and therefore within her rights to reject. She has “only one ambition—to be free to follow out a good feeling” (James 293). Similarly, in a conversation with Mrs. Touchett, Isabel affirms that she is very fond of her own ways, yet she always wants to be informed of the things she should not do. When Mrs. Touchett inquires if the reason for this is so that Isabel can then do the very things she is told not to do, Isabel responds by saying, “So as to choose” (67). In exercising this right to choose,

however, she continually rejects suitable men and marries Gilbert Osmond, who changes her entirely and provides her with immense regret.

Following her marriage to Osmond, Isabel abandons her once valued independence and becomes content with her misery. Caspar Goodwood remarks to her at their meeting following her marriage, “You’re the most unhappy of women, and your husband’s the deadliest of fiends” (487). In spite of her own acknowledgement of her unhappiness, Isabel refuses entirely to take action and change or improve her life. Instead, she resigns herself to being nothing more than an additional piece of Osmond’s art collection, and the vibrant woman becomes an empty shell. James writes that “Isabel could perceive, however, how it had come over her dimly that she had failed of something, that she saw herself in the future as an old woman without memories” (473). Not only is Isabel declining in her own character as she continues in her loveless marriage to Osmond, but she also begins to lose herself, to transform so much that she even views herself as being in danger of becoming an old woman who has no positive memories. She sacrifices her memories as well as her happiness for a man she is convinced she loves, and ultimately she loses herself and her will to act.

In reading this novel in my Form and Theory of Fiction class my first semester as a graduate student, I was especially struck by Isabel’s own acknowledgement of her error and unhappiness contrasted with her unwillingness to take any action to change her circumstances. She evolves from a woman who defines herself by choosing to become a woman who refuses to make choices at all: “She lived from day to day, postponing, closing her eyes, trying not to think. She knew she must decide, but she decided nothing” (481). I wondered while reading this novel what would have happened if Isabel had

continued down her path of independence, if instead of simply acknowledging her errors, she had taken the initiative to alter the course of her life in attempt to regain her happiness. As I began Fiction Workshop the following semester, I found this to be a theme in the stories I was writing: the act of choosing or refusing to choose to alter one's unhappy circumstances and the regret or independence that follows.

I began with a character whose mold is a modern Isabel Archer. Katie Cockerell marries Corey Cockerell after he has asked her to abort their daughter. Through a well-timed job opportunity in North Carolina and with the help of two friends, Katie is able to carry her baby through full-term and give her up for adoption, believing that Corey is under the impression throughout their marriage that she did indeed abort the child. What she doesn't anticipate is the adopted daughter's move with her parents Lockwood Gap or how the action will cause her to despise her husband. Katie, like Isabel, acknowledges her own misery, yet she stays in a marriage to which her husband is unfaithful. Though Lockwood Gap, Tennessee is not her own hometown, she isolates herself from her own family and forces herself to adapt to his small-town life. Her refusal to take action on her own life and decision to continue in loneliness and unhappiness eventually cause a breakdown, resulting in her attempted murder of her husband. Though she carries regret with her, she, like Isabel, has given up the luxury of making decisions, and, instead, lives day to day without accomplishing anything.

Katie's mirror character is Kelsey DeVinney, who grows up as Katie's student and eventually becomes her close friend following Kelsey's high school graduation. Though, like Katie, Kelsey settles in her marriage, Kelsey leaves her husband for a job in New York City, abandoning both her marriage and her hometown. Prompted by

memories and regret two years later, however, Kelsey returns home to Tennessee to attempt to repair her marriage. She is met with intense regrets upon her return home and is forced to come to terms with the decisions she has made. Though not unlike Katie, she makes a number of decisions she regrets, Kelsey continues to attempt to change in hopes of making a better life for herself, regardless of the cost.

Other characters in my novel also addresses themes of regret and change, and many are continually tested with decisions regarding whether or not to leave home, whether or not to stay in a marriage or relationship, and whether or not they should have made a different choice. Memory also plays a significant role, as several characters are prompted to make choices based on remembering a significant event in the past. Nick McClellan, in “Undeserved Elegy,” makes a decision about whether or not to sit through his best friend’s funeral when his anger overpowers his sadness concerning her suicide. Kelsey is prompted to return home to Tennessee to her husband as she contemplates moving from New York to London with her boyfriend and reflects on nights she spent in the rural setting of Lockwood Gap.

Kelsey and Katie serve as fractures of the same character inspired by Henry James’s Isabel Archer. While Katie is a more modernized wife whose husband is obsessed with coaching football as Osmond is art collecting, Kelsey is a modernized version of who Isabel might have been had she chosen to take action upon her own life. As Ralph reflects in *The Portrait of a Lady*, “The free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something. What did Isabel represent? Ralph asked himself; and he could only answer by saying that she represented Gilbert Osmond” (331). In the same manner, Katie becomes only a

representation not only of her selfish husband and his actions upon her life, but also of an embodiment of the suffering Lockwood Gap can inflict upon a character's mind. Kelsey, on the other hand, through taking initiative each time she finds herself unhappy, becomes a symbol of ultimate independence. Though she frequently finds herself drawn to the ghosts she feels still haunt her from her hometown, she refuses to return to a life that made her unhappy, and instead, chooses to rebuild herself in a small coastal North Carolina town. In making the decision to change and face her regrets, rather than building her life on her own regrets, as Katie does, she is able to reject the Isabel Archer mold Katie conforms to. Rather than being representative of someone else, Kelsey is representative only of herself and the choices she has made instead of the choices she has refused to make.

### **Large Casts: *Bleak House***

The first of these stories I wrote were "The Mean Reds" and "Eric Parker's Daughter." Originally, the main characters in these, Natalie and Lindsay Parker, were not sisters. I also did not know when I wrote "The Fifteen-Year Line" that Katie's friend was Karen Anderson or that I intended Jenna Anderson, Natalie's friend, to be the daughter that Katie gave up. When I began writing "Wilmington, Off-Script" shortly after finishing "Maybe Not Today," however, I found that I could not separate myself from the characters of Kelsey Whitman and Nick McClellan, or the settings of Wilmington and a small Tennessee town. I felt like Natalie's small town was the same one Kelsey lived in, and I continually had characters navigating toward Wilmington, the same flawed teacher and mentor character, and the same themes driving the characters. As I started to piece them together, connecting "The Mean Reds" and "Eric Parker's Daughter" with the



family of the Parkers and “The Mean Reds” and “The Fifteen-Year Line” through the Andersons, I began to accumulate a rather large cast of characters. Additionally, I found myself needing small stock characters, such as grill workers, a policeman, and town figures. I began to feel uneasy about how many characters and relationships I was juggling, but I also felt that in a town like this, these overlapping and complicated ties and relationships are quite real. After reading Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*, I was able to better understand the art of balancing a large cast of characters and their overlapping relationships with one another.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Charles Dickens’s novel *Bleak House* is the extensive number of characters he uses to tell the story of Esther Summerson and the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. While the primary characters are the wards in the case, Ada Clare and Richard Carstone, Esther, and their caretaker, John Jarndyce, the pages of *Bleak House* are filled with more than one hundred characters. The novel opens by focusing on Esther, Ada, and Richard’s move from their various homes into that of Mr. John Jarndyce, but then rather abruptly begins to shift focus onto the life of Lady Dedlock. For a portion of the novel, it is unclear why Lady Dedlocks’ narrative is woven in with that of Esther Summerson, until the numerous connections between the two groups of characters is clear: Mr. Jarndyce is friends with Lawrence Boythorne, with whom Sir Dedlock has an ongoing dispute; Mr. Boythorne was once involved with Esther’s caretaker, Miss Barbary; Mr. Guppy works for Kenge and Carboy, the same company that provides the Dedlocks with their legal documents; and of course, most importantly, Lady Dedlock is Esther’s biological mother.

Though the majority of the story is focused on Esther and Lady Dedlock, the wide array of more minor characters is also equally important. Dickens continually uses the same handful of minor characters to populate the streets and serve as sub-plots running beneath the main plot. For instance, though Lady Dedlock and Esther discovering their relationship is one of the primary plotlines, numerous other plots interweave beneath that to provide pieces such as motives for Mr. Tulkinghorn's murder. In order to properly establish the mystery of Mr. Tulkinghorn's murder and to provide suspects for the crime, Dickens needs the relationship of Madame Hortense to Lady Dedlock and Mr. Tulkinghorn; the circumstances of the debt between Mr. George Rouncewell, Mr. Smallweed, and Mr. Tulkinghorn; as well as the relationship between Lady Dedlock and Captain Hawdon, which resulted in the birth of Esther.

In order to connect major characters, Dickens also employs very minor characters to establish bridges and allow for certain circumstances. On an outing with Mrs. Pardiggle, Esther encounters an extremely poor family whose young child has just died in its mother's arms. As an act of kindness and sympathy, Esther places her handkerchief over the dead child's face. Later in the novel, when Lady Dedlock is searching for answers concerning the character of Captain Hawdon, now known as Nemo, she meets the same family and retrieves her daughter's handkerchief. Likewise, the character of Jo is important to numerous major characters. Captain Hawdon is kind to Jo, and so Jo reacts with great sadness when he discovers the Captain's death. Jo's connection to Hawdon is noticed by Mr. Tulkinghorn, who asks Jo questions concerning the life of the man known as Nemo. It is also through Jo that Lady Dedlock is able to discover the

living quarters of her former lover, as well as where he is buried. Without Jo, a connection would be lost.

In order to visualize all the characters present within *Bleak House* and their relationships between one another, I formed Mind Webs to demonstrate their multiple interconnections with one another.



Figure 1 Bleak House Characters

I then used the same program to demonstrate the complex relationships existing between my own characters. Much like Dickens's cast of characters, my cast is stacked with a level of main characters and sub-main characters, but I also populated the town with the same characters repeatedly.



Figure 2 Goodbye Town Characters

The MindWeb demonstrates the large number of characters and their connections to one another. While I wanted to represent a small town well, I also wanted to incorporate something like Dickens’s outer circle of minor characters to fill in various gaps in plot or to simply show the size of the town, as the same characters crop up in various stories. The character of Mr. Broadwater, for example, is relatively minor, in that he never actually speaks or is directly spoken to. However, Katie has a life-changing realization in Mr. Broadwater’s drugstore in “The Fifteen-Year Line.” At Natalie’s mother’s funeral in “Eric Parker’s Daughter,” Mr. Broadwater is present in the cemetery gathering, and he is also mentioned by Katie Cockerell and others throughout the various stories. Sheriff Patterson is another example of a minor character who supports various plot points without having a major role. Sheriff Patterson arrests Tommy Blackwater when he attempts to shoot Eric Parker in the First Baptist Church of Lockwood Gap, and

he is also the one who is able to locate Jenna after she has been missing for several years. His son, Evan, also gets into a lot of trouble following Jenna's disappearance. Likewise, the character of Andie Whitman, though not often present in the stories, provides an important link between Katie Cockerell and the Whitmans. Karen Anderson, Katie Cockerell, and Andie Whitman were college roommates, allowing for further reason Katie has visited Lockswood Gap, the reason she is close enough to the Whitmans to be in attendance at Logan's wedding, and solidifying the connection among these three families. By having a large cast of major as well as minor characters, a novel is able to function on several different levels that demonstrate the complex relationships tying all characters to one another. It also serves as a way to represent a large number of people in one place without having to provide extensive background and story for each one.

### **Character and Scene Development: Various Craft Texts**

In studying the craft of writing, I found several craft books very useful. In his book *The Art and Craft of Fiction*, Michael Kardos lays out the foundation for what makes a compelling story and a strong character. A compelling story must have "high stakes... neither terrorists nor Earth's imminent destruction. For the stakes to be high, a story needs only for a character to care a great deal about something" (Kardos 115). Robert Olen Butler uses the term *yearning* in his craft book *From Where You Dream*, which points to the same idea: "Desire is the driving force behind plot. The character yearns, the character does something in pursuit of that yearning, and some force or other will block the attempt to fulfill that yearning... This dynamic beneath the story is plot: the attempt to fulfill the yearning and the world's attempt to thwart that" (Butler 42). In

order to begin painting a character, a scene, or a story, the writer must decide what is at stake, what the desires of the character are, and what that character yearns for.

In each story, I asked myself what each character yearned for, what singular idea drove him or her throughout the novel. Katie Cockerell, for example, longs for the attention of her husband and to be able to identify herself in Lockwood Gap without him. Jenna longs for freedom and autonomy, while Natalie longs for consistency and to fill in the relationship gaps left by her mother and sister. Kelsey longs for something more than Lockwood Gap, a better future, and once she has ended her marriage and residency in Lockwood Gap, she longs for a way to repair her mistakes. Lindsay Parker longs for a life outside of her identification as Eric Parker's Daughter. Jack and Karen's longing for a child drives them to engage in a secret adoption with Katie Cockerell. Many of the men in Lockwood Gap are driven by their desire to contain one of the main female characters: Charlie wants to tame and keep Jenna; Evan wants Jenna to stay in Lockwood Gap and be faithful to him; Aaron wants Kelsey to value their marriage more than her career. Each character must be driven by some deep-rooted desire. Applying this seemingly simplistic idea of yearning and desire of the character helped me to better understand my characters and the goals they are each trying to achieve.

Following ideas of desire and high stakes, Kardos introduces what he calls "the motivational continuum," which lays out where a character's driving points should be in a compelling story (Kardos 117).

Dreads ← Fears ← Expectations → Hopes → Dreams

Kardos argues that the more compelling stories tend to venture in the realms of dreams and dreads, on the outer layers of the continuum, rather than more toward the

center. Rather than simply focusing on a character's expectations, a writer should branch further into the territory of the deeper emotions of the character, such as what he or she dreads or dreams. These dreads and dreams are what ultimately motivate characters to act, and by understanding what a character expects, fears, hopes, dreads, and dreams, a writer can more successfully attempt to drive the story in the direction of dreads and dreams to create a more active protagonist (118).

Applying this system of dreads, fears, expectations, hopes, and dreams was also useful in creating each of the many characters in my stories. It is important when developing a new character not only to understand what his or her hopes and dreams are, but also to understand a character's dreads and fears. In continually asking questions such as, "What is this character afraid of? How does this affect the character's expectations or hopes?", I was able to devise plot points around these decisions, as well as better understand my characters.

### **Fictionalized Small Towns**

Two Appalachian writers I greatly admire are Lee Smith and Adriana Trigiani. Both were born in small town Appalachia, and both have published novels set in their home towns. Adriana Trigiani wrote the trilogy *Big Stone Gap*, which is set more specifically in the town of Powell Valley, Virginia. I find the setting and the manner in which she fictionalizes it important and interesting because Powell Valley is not only my hometown's legendary rival, but it is also the basis for my fictional rival town of Gadsten Valley. Though Trigiani refers to many true-to-life places and ideas (such as the poor performance of the Rye Cove High School football team), she also fictionalizes various locations and ideas. In using some true-to-life facts about the town, yet not limiting

herself to each factual detail, she is able to create a place that both is and is not Big Stone Gap, Virginia. For example, she references actual places, such as the Carter Fold: “Friday nights are football-game nights, and Saturday nights find everyone in town over at the Carter Family Fold” (Trigiani 56). Though the Carter Family Fold does attract a large crowd on Saturday nights, she fictionalizes this idea somewhat, because in order for those living in Powell Valley or Big Stone to actually attend Saturday nights at the Fold, they would have to travel two hours, as the Fold is located just outside my hometown of Gate City, Virginia.

In her interview with her own fictional character Iva Lou, Adriana addresses this idea of geography and the fictionalization of Big Stone Gap. She answers Iva Lou’s question concerning whether the geography discrepancies are intentional:

Fiction gives the writer license to invent, rearrange, imagine. I moved things in my imagination, so it’s a mix of the real and true and the Big Stone Gap of my heart, which is a kind of Brigadoon to me. It’s not a physical place, as much as it’s an emotional place; a place I grew up in with my family and friends. (Trigiani Interview”)

Setting a novel in an actual place can be limiting in many respects, but here Trigiani justifies her right to mentally alter geography (as well as people) in the pages of *Big Stone Gap*. She further notes in the same conversation that although her ideas for characters may begin with one or two true-to-life residents of Powell Valley, they are often a compilation of multiple people, and the character typically ends as its own person entirely.



Lee Smith, who grew up in Grundy, Virginia, not far from Big Stone Gap, has written numerous novels set in Appalachia, such as *Oral History* and *Black Mountain Breakdown*. Smith also takes a few creative liberties in her Appalachian settings. For example, in *Oral History*, my hometown of Gate City, Virginia is mentioned briefly as being Gate City, Tennessee. In an interview found in *Conversations with Lee Smith*, a book of interviews compiled by Linda Tate, Smith explains that in her novels, especially *Black Mountain Breakdown*, she avoids painting direct pictures of real-life Grundy residents, but frequently uses the surnames of the larger families that make up the majority of the small town. Though many of my main characters received their last names at random, my minor characters all serve as tiny tributes to large families in Gate City who have been around for decades: Broadwater, Draper, Kilgore, McClellan, Jennings, McConnell, Clark, Brickey, McDavid, Vineyard, and Perry.

### **Conclusion**

Though Jennifer Egan serves as my primary influence for this work and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* as my reference for interlocking my stories and characters, many other authors and works have influenced me as well. I have incorporated stories with various points of view in various time settings and from both older and younger characters, male and female. By the end of the work, I hope for each main character to have a story that largely or partially focuses on them. Unlike *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, not all of my stories (yet) stand on their own. Jennifer Egan has published the majority of the stories in her novel separately, creating them so that they both stand alone and intertwine. While some of my chapters can function separately, others are in place only to support the action in the novel. I hope to eventually modify the chapters that

currently do not function alone by deleting the linking information so that they are able to be published separately from the rest of the stories. Unlike Egan's novel, I set up the majority of the characters in one venue together, introducing briefly their complex relationships and small town drama. I intend to frame the collection with stories in which the majority of the characters appear rather than not having a single story that incorporates the entire cast. The first chapter is set on the night of the rehearsal dinner for Logan Whitman and Seth McCord's wedding, and the final chapter will take place the day of their wedding. Using Egan's novel and others as models, I hope to add more stories to this collection to form a complete novel.

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## CHAPTER II

### RIVERSIDE REHEARSAL

There are more people buried in Lockwood Gap than there are living in it. Kelsey stares at the clock behind the bar, willing it to move faster, as she remembers her old high school history teacher back in Tennessee telling her class that a hundred years ago, the town officials had bulldozed the largest of the eight cemeteries because the graves were so old that one could identify the names on the markers. Downtown sits on that property now, resting on the bones of no one now knows. Or at least, that's what Coach Cockerell had told them. *No one ever leaves Lockwood Gap*, he had said. *We're still running out of cemetery space*. Kelsey wonders now if that's true. She decides that even if Lockwood Gap isn't built on a cemetery, it is one.

Barrels protrude from the back wall of Fat Tony's, each one listing the name of a local beer in neon pink chalk: *Weeping Willow*. *Sweet Josie*. *Shotgun Betty*. *Old Town Brown*. It reminds her of the barrels on her father's farm back in Lockwood Gap, the mason jars of moonshine he would line up on the barrel tops in the barn in the middle of summer. She shifts on the barstool and drains the last of her martini, trying to push her hometown from her mind. Leave it behind like she did when she drove away from it almost two years earlier. Her fingers are tracing the rim of the empty glass when an olive lands in her hair.

“Hey, Whitman,” the bartender, Dirty Dave, calls from a few feet away. He flicks a second olive in her direction. “You about done nursing that shit, or are you going to babysit a second one while you sit over there and brood?”

“Go fuck yourself, Dave,” she calls back. Dave, or Dirty Dave, as most downtowners refer to him, is an abnormally tall ginger with a bushy beard and a reputation for taking his pants off when he gets drunk. He’s also the best bartender in town.

“Here, have a shot,” he pours whiskey in a double shot glass and slides it over.

“I don’t want that shit,” she says, and slides it back.

“Well, I hate sad, sober Kelsey. She’s pissy and boring.”

“Drunk Kelsey makes terrible decisions.”

“Yeah, I know.” Dirty Dave nods to the large hole in the plaster wall behind her, a blinking neon sign advertising Bud Light hiding part of it. She had started a bar fight with two regulars and let them finish it. “You still haven’t paid for that shit or those glasses you threw earlier this week when you climbed up on the bar and announced to the entire bar that the Hell’s Kitchen bartender has herpes.”

Kelsey shrugs her shoulders, letting the straps on her top fall down her arms. “It was relevant information. And that’s not the kind of bad decisions I was referring to.”

“Well, Plan B is over-the-counter now, so...” He slides the glass toward her again, and she turns it up, cutting her eyes at him through the bottom while she drinks it. “Don’t you have some wedding rehearsal dinner or whatever Russ was rushing off to?”

“I was uninvited to that a few weeks ago.”

“I know I’m going to regret asking this,” Dave says, leaning over the bar and resting chin on his folded hands, mocking Kelsey’s posture and batting his thin, blonde eyelashes behind thick rimmed glasses. “But why is Russ invited and you’re not?”

“Russ is the best man. And I did something. Something bad.”

He opens his wide lips in a grin, and Kelsey wonders how he can possibly have white teeth living on beer and cigarettes. She can smell him from where he’s standing behind the bar, the tobacco on his clothes, the seafood he had for dinner on his breath. “Something dirty?”

She doesn’t answer.

“Tell me,” he says.

“Give me another drink,” she says, and she glances down at her watch. Half past six. Just across the Cape Fear River, her ex-husband’s sister’s wedding rehearsal dinner is in full swing. She imagines the gold-lit trees next to the gazebo, the paper lanterns Logan probably insisted on hanging from the gazebo’s ceiling, the protests Logan’s fiancée, Seth, likely spat out: *These lanterns make it look like our dinner was decorated by some dumb college girl.* And then Logan, in her knee-length, shoulder-covering cocktail dress would roll her eyes, spit back something snarky, and tell him (with all her Christian-like grace) to shove it. It makes her think about argument she had with her own husband, Logan’s brother. Ex-husband. Ex-husband.

A woman a few barstools down is singing Johnny Cash loudly and slinging the bangles on her arm while Dirty Dave tries to take her order. Kelsey thinks about how Logan and Seth’s wedding in Wilmington, North Carolina has infiltrated the calm, new life she’s molded for herself miles away from the life back in Tennessee she destroyed.

She expected to be a lot of places at twenty-four, but not sitting alone at a bar with Dirty Dave while everyone else—her best friends, former teachers, and ex-husband, his new wife— toasted a wedding from which she'd been uninvited.

She started the apology to Logan and Seth, all of them, in her head so many times that night:

*The reason I lied about it was because I wanted to protect my family.*

*I know I asked him to, but Russ told the same lie I did. We had to. You have to understand why we did it.*

*I'm sorry I hurt you, Logan.*

*It wouldn't have mattered if I'd told you the truth. It only would've made things worse. The truth doesn't change anything.*

But all of those apologies were shit, so she had chosen, instead, not to say anything.

Dirty Dave reappears, not with another martini, but with a tray of seven whiskey shots. "I don't want fucking whiskey, Dave, I want—."

"Shut up," he cuts her off. "Here's what we're going to do. You're going to tell me all about this wedding shit, and for every time my reaction is 'Get over your sad, pathetic life,' you have to take a shot. And if we hit all seven before your sob-story is over, you have to go crash that party. Deal?"

She looks him up and down. "Are you drunk already?"

"I'm always drunk."

"Your pants are still on."

“Huh?” He shakes his head. “Whatever. Tell me something. Why is your entire hometown having a wedding *here*? You’ve lived here for two years now. Doesn’t that make this your home court or whatever?”

Kelsey shrugs, leans back on the barstool, pulls her long, black hair back into a ponytail and then lets it down. “It was their place first. I just made it out of Tennessee before they did.”

Seth and Logan spent the first week of every July in Wilmington, North Carolina. Two summers ago, Kelsey had come with them. That was the first time she had met Seth’s best friend, Russ, a Pentecostal pastor’s son who wore bow ties and button-ups in seventy-degree weather and constantly talked about sexual tension. Russ had joked all week about how they would get married, she and him, start some crazy life together far away from Tennessee, fall in love, have kids. He’d gotten part of it right, at least.

Dirty Dave slides another glass toward her. “You moved here knowing that months later, they’d all be here for some big destination wedding?”

Kelsey doesn’t answer, and instead, keeps thinking again about the dinner across the river. She wonders if Aaron is sitting with their friends from high school, or if he and Brandi have ostracized themselves and are whispering alone. She tunes Dave out, situates the characters in their places, setting the stage for a scene she’s missing. She images that Logan has constructed a very careful seating chart, separating the Cockerells from the Parkers and the Andersons, placing Nick and Russ away from Aaron. Are Russ and Nick being polite, or has one of them punched Aaron by now? Is Brandi trashed yet? Kelsey knows Logan and Seth would never dream of serving alcohol at their dinner, but Kelsey consoles herself with the image of Brandi sneaking in a flask in her oversized bag,



pouring it into her punch, losing her footing in a pair of those high heels she can never manage to walk in properly, and tumbling into the Cape Fear River.

“You aren’t drinking,” Dirty Dave says.

“I just need a minute.”

Dirty Dave ignores her and keeps firing questions. “How old were you when you got married?”

“Eighteen, right after high school graduation. Same as most everybody in Lockwood Gap. You get married, you get pregnant. Sometimes not in that order.”

“Stupid-ass life decision. Drink. How long were you married?”

“Four years.”

Dirty Dave pauses, looks at her hard, blinks a few times. “What happened? He catch you in bed with one of the other farmers down in the holler?”

She shakes her head. “No. I just left, or he left—I don’t know, somebody left. He got remarried. I moved here with Russ.”

“So your husband caught you banging Russ, basically,” Dirty Dave guesses.

“I’ve told you a hundred times. We’re not together. We just left home together.”

“Your life is a teenage soap opera, you know that?”

Kelsey considers tossing one of the remaining shots in Dirty Dave’s face, but doesn’t. “Why are you such a dick?”

He shrugs, pulls a towel out from behind the bar, picks his glasses up off his nose, and wipes his face as though she really had splashed the whiskey on his face. “Same reason you’re such a bitch, I suppose.”

When all the shots are gone, Kelsey sways on the barstool, singing, "I'm gonna crash that motherfucking party." She points her index finger up in the air while she moves. "I'm gonna crash it and push that cunt in the river, high heels and all." The last time she had this much whiskey, she threw up on the bushes in front of the Catholic Church on Third Street. "I need a cigarette," she tells him, holding out her hand. He fishes in his blue jeans pockets, produces a half-smoked pack of blue Pall Malls, and Kelsey wrinkles up her nose, but takes one anyway. "I need a second one for later."

"You're so needy," he complains, but he hands her two anyway. As she walks back toward the restaurant's back porch, she sees a frat guy who reminds her of Russ, except he has a cigarette tucked behind his ear, so she puts the second one behind her ear too.

She was still mad at Russ for going to the rehearsal dinner without her, for planning to go to the wedding while she sat at the bar, again, alone. *We crossed this line together, Russ*, she had said to him earlier that night. *This was your lie same as mine.*

*You dragged me across the line, Kelsey. We should've been honest about the whole thing from the beginning. You made me keep this secret*, he had argued.

*So you're going, then? You're going to let them ostracize me, and you're just going to go? And leave me here to do what? Drink with Dirty Dave?*

*Come on, Kelsey. You've been doing a lot more than drinking with Dirty Dave.*

She had pushed him out of their apartment door, throwing his suit jacket out at him, and slammed the door in his face.

The porch behind Fat Tony's overlooks the river. She stumbles as she climbs onto one of the wooden picnic tables, still wet from the rain that soaked Wilmington that

morning. She pulls a lighter from her purse, lights her cigarette, and stares down at the water. She tries to see through the darkness, across the water, tries to make out the shadows at the dinner on the Battleship Park.

The stringed lights draping the porch hang over her like artificial stars, and she looks up at the sky, remembering a night when Seth commented that you can't see the stars at night in Wilmington. Tonight, at least, he's right. Even though she's lived in Wilmington for two years now, she often finds herself gazing at the Cape Fear River, pretending it's the Moccasin River back home. Thoughts of Lockwood Gap consume her: the last night she sat out in the field and looked at the clear sky, the last lie she told Logan, and the last cigarette she'd smoked with her Katie Cockerell, her former teacher, before she'd finally left.

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Even in high school, before she was allowed to call her by her first name, Kelsey considered Katie Cockerell a friend before a teacher. They always had secrets, even when Kelsey was Katie's student. Katie knew Kelsey and Aaron snuck out of fourth block every day to sit behind the stadium bleachers while Aaron played his guitar and Kelsey read, and Kelsey knew that when Katie told her students she was running to the little girls' room, it really meant she was going to smoke a cigarette in the boiler room.

That's why when Kelsey found out she was pregnant at the end of the summer, the one with the beach trip, she hadn't told anyone but Katie. When she'd shown up back at the high school during Katie's planning block, she hadn't said anything at first, just looked at Katie and said, "Can we smoke a cigarette in the boiler room?"

When Kelsey told Katie she was pregnant, Katie had pulled the cigarette from Kelsey's mouth, shoved it against the cement step. "Why are you smoking, then?"

"I'm not keeping it, Katie. I can't."

Katie's brown eyes had looked Kelsey up and down, like she was looking at someone she wasn't sure she recognized. Katie had grown thinner over the past few years. Her forearms were flat and bony and her clothes hung looser. With the exception of the pencil skirts, silk blouses, and high heels Katie wore every day, she looked more like a student than a forty-something-year-old teacher. She had a jaguar tattooed on her right foot that peaked out from the top of her shoe, and in all the years Kelsey had known her, Katie would never tell her what the tattoo meant.

"You don't know whose it is, do you?" Katie finally guesses.

Kelsey shook her head. "Aaron's. Or Russ's. I don't know."

"It's between your ex-husband, who is now engaged, and a guy you barely know?" Katie paused for a minute, then, "That's not really like you, Kelsey."

Neither said anything for a while, and then she had traded Kelsey a secret for a secret, like always. "I was pregnant once."

Kelsey's broke eye contact with the jaguar staring back at her from Katie's foot and met Katie's eyes instead. "You were?"

"Little girl." Katie blew smoke out and took another long drag before she continued. "I gave her up for adoption." Katie's voice had been regretful, slow, but steady, like she'd told this story a hundred times, only Kelsey didn't think she had.

"Was it Coach Cockerell's?"

Katie's brown ponytail had swayed back and forth when she nodded her head. "Yeah. It was his," she said, staring at the cigarette in her hand. "Before we were married." She shrugged as she looked away from Kelsey. "He didn't want her."

"Did you ever meet her? Did she ever come find you?"

A sound came out of Katie's throat, a combination of a snort and a sarcastic laugh. "Yeah. She did. She's dead now."

They were both quiet as Katie lit another cigarette, throwing the pack off to the side. Kelsey stared at Katie, not sure what to say. When she sensed Katie didn't want her to say anything about it, Kelsey broke the silence with, "You think I should keep it."

Katie shook her head, shrugged her shoulders again. Her eyes drifted to the rafters that echoed their voices, lingered there, like she was looking for God. "I think you should get out of here. It was a mistake for you to come back."

"I came back for Aaron."

"You and Aaron were over the minute he realized you could live without him. Aaron needs someone who's going to fall to pieces when he walks out a door, someone who can't live without him. You always could. He's moved on now. You need to quit saying you've moved on and actually do it. And you shouldn't do it in Lockwood Gap."

"Where should I go, then?"

"The last place you were that felt like home."

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Across the water, Kelsey can see the lanterns just as she imagined, the shadows playing their part in some performance she is not a part of, as she strains to hear the faint murmur of voices navigating their way across the divide. She thinks about Lockwood

Gap, about the cemeteries and the town superstitions. People say you're an outsider if you move there, an outsider if you leave and try to come back, and you're left without a place to call home. She remembers Katie saying once that even if by some grace of that God they all pray to you actually do make it out, you'll always be left with ghosts and demons that follow you. She watches her ghosts and her demons line up on the water's edge across the river as she flicks her cigarette off the balcony.

*Logan, just hear me out. I didn't tell you because...*

Blue lights slipping over the roof of Fat Tony's, and sirens start wailing somewhere behind her downtown. The sound of an ambulance a couple blocks away or so rips through the bar noise flowing out from the back door. She doesn't move. Instead, she squints in the darkness, still fixated on the Battleship Park, rehearsing over and over in her mind an apology she knows she'll never deliver.

The bridge over the Cape Fear looks like a postcard glowing over the blue water, and it occurs to Kelsey she's lived here for two years now and has no idea what the name of the bridge is.. Russ told her once, when they were here with Seth and Logan watching the Fourth of July fireworks, that the Cape Fear River flows north and south, changes direction with the high tide. The strong, metal bridge over this river reminds her of the unsteady swinging bridge back home that stretches across the Moccasin River. There's a plank halfway across it that Aaron scratched their names into the summer after graduation, after he'd proposed. His knife had been dull and his handwriting poor, but Kelsey summons the image of the wooden board that reads "KDW+ABW *me and my girl were the modern day Bonnie and Clyde*. She's spent more nights than she can count on

and beneath that bridge, and it suddenly occurs to her she's never even walked all the way across it.

She stumbles back into the bar where the Friday night crowd is starting to trickle in. The Indian man who works at the market down the street, the one who always kisses Kelsey's hand after she makes a purchase, is sitting at the bar yelling at the television and doing shots. The man in the cowboy boots who always stands by the fireplace and sips his Josie draft is clinking glasses with a young blonde at the table next to him. Kelsey salutes him on her way back to her barstool.

He nods back, winks at her.

"What's going on outside?" she asks him.

He shrugs. "Wreck, I think. Peaked my head out earlier. Looks like it's right in front of Hell's Kitchen."

She nods, like she's already forgotten what she asked him, then downs the last shot Dirty Dave has left for her at the bar. "I'm going, Dave! I'm going to crash that party now!" He gives her a thumbs up and a grin.

The sirens and blue lights are still finding their way through the door as it opens and closes, but Kelsey ignores both as she makes her way out onto the cobblestone sidewalk. She starts walking toward the Third Street, intent on crossing the bridge and making her way to the party, when she notices the crowd circled near the corner of Princess and Front, a block down from Fat Tony's. The cowboy is right. It's right in front of Hell's Kitchen.

As she gets closer, she can see the wrecked black Jeep, driver side door bashed in, and the silver Altima aiming its headlights at the Jeep's door. She pushes through the

people, bumping into an older woman in a skin-tight red dress that shows too much of her fat, causing the woman to spill her wine on a man in front of her. She's too drunk to apologize.

After a few minutes, she sees Russ across the street, red-faced, like he's been running. His black hair, which he spends fifteen minutes gelling every morning, is flattened by the wind.

"Kelsey!" he calls out, running toward her. When he reaches her, he moves the straps from her top back on her shoulders and looks her up and down. "How drunk are you?"

"Pssssh." She holds up her thumb and index finger.

"I tried calling you," he starts to say.

She pulls her phone out of her bra and hands it to him. "I turned it off."

He nods, doesn't look at her. Instead, he's looking over her shoulder at the police cars that are leaving, the two cars still sitting in the middle of Princess Street in front of Hell's Kitchen. "Did you see what happened?"

Kelsey shakes her head, and Russ pulls a piece of something out of her hair. Part of an olive. He flicks it on the ground, but doesn't ask.

"I'm still mad at you," she tells him.

"I know," he tells her, his hands on her shoulders, but his eyes on the wreckage.

"Is the dinner over?"

"It is now." Shards of mirror and glass stare back at Kelsey from the street, and she watches the light reflect off of them. The crowd is starting to disperse now, and she looks back at Russ, his normally smiling, teasing face now wrinkled, his thick, black



eyebrows burrowed together. His bow tie has come undone, his shirt soaked with sweat, his suit wrinkled, she guesses, from running.

“What happened?” she asks.

He points at the silver Altima, runs his hand through his hair, and looks at her hard. “Katie. She ran the red light.”

Kelsey turns slowly to look back at the accident. She notices the Tennessee license plate now, even in the dark, the Blue Devil football sticker on the cracked back windshield. “Wait. Didn’t they drive here separately? Is that—is that Coach Cockerell’s Jeep? Did she hit Coach?” Kelsey whips back around to Russ. “Are they—” her words stick in her throat, and she wishes she had the whiskey to wash them back down—“Are they okay?”

“She is. But that wasn’t Coach’s car.” He pauses for a minute, like he’s not sure he should say what he’s thinking. “I think maybe she thought it was.”

\*

Russ finally convinced Kelsey there was nothing she could do about Katie, especially considering how drunk Kelsey is. Kelsey finally agreed to go home with Russ. Kelsey pulls the extra cigarette from behind her ear and flicks her lighter in Russ’s car as he drives down Front Street, the tiny flame in the darkness causing him to jump. Normally he would react with a *Kelsey, how many times have I told you not to smoke in my car?* But tonight, he doesn’t say anything.

They pass the empty space on the corner of Grace and Front, and as Russ slows at the four-way stop, Kelsey leans out the window, peers into the dark window the café used to sit in. Before she and Russ left, Logan and Seth and a few others used to talk about

buying the empty lot and starting their own café. It would have given them a reason to move to Wilmington, all of them, a reason to get out of Tennessee—together. That was the important part. They would've been together.

“Are you sorry we ended up here?” Kelsey asks Russ.

He looks over at her, sighs, doesn't answer immediately. “No.”

She blows her smoke out, drags it again, then turns to look at him. “I think you're full of shit.”

They pause at a traffic light, and she watches the glow on his face changes from red to green.

He shifts gears, looks over at her. “I'm sorry about a lot of things, but I'm not sorry we ended up here, Kelsey. I'm sorry Aaron is married. I'm sorry you can't go to your best friend's wedding. And I'm sorry I have to go and watch the only person I've ever loved marry my best friend tomorrow.” Even in the dark, she can see the seriousness he rarely asserts take over in his brown eyes. “Sometimes I think regardless of all the bad choices we've made, you and I would've always ended up here, us separated from them.”

“Maybe so,” she whispers back. She turns away, stares out the window, watching the old historic downtown houses pass by. “Remember when your dad asked if I believe in God and you told him some days?”

“Yeah. You told me that right after I met you.”

“Well today I don't.”

“She's going to be okay, Kelsey,” he says.

Kelsey laughs, a weird, throaty sound from smoking more cigarettes in the last week than she has since leaving home. “You don’t know a goddamn thing about it, Russ.”

“On Monday, everything will be the way it was, just you and me. No more weird love triangles. They’ll all go home.”

“It’s not a love triangle when no one’s caught in the middle. When you love someone who loves someone else, it’s not a triangle, it’s just sad.”

“Whatever. Monday. No more weddings, no more getting shitfaced at bars. No more car crashes and drunken teachers. No more of you and me fighting over stupid shit. And no more of your nasty cigarettes.” As he stops at another light not far from the police station, he leans over and pulls what’s left of the cigarette out of Kelsey’s mouth and tosses it out the open window.

“Fuck Monday,” she says, struggling but finally succeeding in opening the car door. She stumbles out in to the street and slams the door. He rolls down the window.

“Where are you going?” he asks. “Get back in the car.”

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “No, I don’t want to go home with you.”

The light changes to green. “Kelsey, get in the damn car.”

“No. I’ll have Dirty Dave drive me back home. I’m going back to the bar,” she calls out, waving her hand over her head. She knows Russ is pissed as he speeds through the light, but she doesn’t care. She doesn’t want to think about the wedding, the lies, or the secret she made Russ keep all this time. All she can think about is Katie Cockerell.

CHAPTER III  
THE FIFTEEN-YEAR LINE

“This damned indifference is worse than the vilest abuse.”

—*Love in Excess*, Eliza Haywood

The lights at the football stadium are shining as brightly as they were the night she gave her baby away. Chants of “Go Big Blue” ring through the hills, and she thinks about the nights she was once content listening to their battle cries from up on Gated Hills, on Karen’s top porch deck that received the sound waves just as clearly. That was before she knew what loss meant, back when Andie and Karen and the weekends they brought her home to visit their hometown of Lockswood Gap were all she had. That was before she met Coach Corey Cockerell.

*Third down, just eight yards to go... And touchdown, Lockswood Gap.*

Her body jumps and her voice screams for the junior in her English class who scored, but her heart despises the delighted expression on her husband’s face, who told him to run that play. Corey has been running that same goddamn play for the past eleven years. Just once, she’d like to see it fail.

“What are you thinking about, Katie?” Lacey yells at her over the noise.

“Football. We’re watching a football game,” she replies, rolling her eyes.

“You’re thinking about something else,” Lacey insists.

“No, I’m not.” Lie. What she’s really thinking is that she wishes her husband was as dedicated to their marriage as he was to that pigskin flying through the air.

*First and ten Gadsten Valley.*

Katie’s eyes keep moving through the crowd, looking for her. She would be fourteen years old, almost fifteen. She wants her to be here as much as she doesn’t. She’s never even seen a picture. But she must be here. She has to be. Football is in her blood, after all.

“Are you looking for someone, Katie?” Lacey questions.

“No, Lacey,” she shakes her head. “Not at all.” Another lie.

Lacey is Coach McCoy’s wife. She drives Katie absolutely insane. The coaches’ wives of Lockwood Gap have a long-standing tradition of sitting together at home games, and somehow, no matter how hard she tries, Katie always ends up sitting next to Lacey. There was something both comforting and frustrating about Section H, Row 5, where Katie has sat for the past sixteen years. Some nights, she smiles at the characters who illustrate the pages of Lockwood Gap. Mrs. Elliot, who must be almost ninety by now, rings her cowbells over the side of the railing. Mr. Draper, who has been sitting in Section H even longer than Katie has, yells, “One more time, Blue!” from behind her at least once every fucking down. Every week he buys her a bag of peanuts and hands it to her at kickoff. And then there’s Gary, who wanders the streets of Lockwood Gap, and even though no one really knows where he lives, everyone knows who he is. He usually dresses in a sailor’s outfit, and for some reason, a cowboy hat that doesn’t match, and at football games, he walks back and forth, tipping his hat to everyone who walks by. Some nights, it comforts her to know that Mrs. Elliot will always be there with her cowbells,

that Mr. Draper will always yell, “One more time, Blue!” even when they have little hope of scoring again, and that Gary will always be wearing that stupid hat. Other nights, like tonight, she finds herself enraged at these people to whom change has never occurred because it’s just what they’ve always done, and it’s never occurred to them to do anything else.

She hopes they lose this game. She studies the banners hanging from the fences, some now torn and dragging the concrete track. Her eyes drift across the stadium to the brick wall of the field house, where all of the classroom door banners are proudly displayed after the contest for the best homeroom door had been judged. Hers had won Best Homeroom Door of 2006. “Highway to Hell,” it reads, with the blue-bricked road Ashton McDavid painted so skillfully, the flamed gates waiting at the end that Nick McClellan was so excited to add orange glitter to, and a big Blue Devil head in the center. She’s ashamed of herself, praying her own students lose their homecoming game to their rivalry team, just so she can bask in the disappointed look on her husband’s face when he gets home. But she does.

He wasn’t always so bad. He drove all the way from Lockswood Gap to Knoxville for their first date, and when the boat rental he had arranged fell through, they had “borrowed” one resting at the dock with its keys abandoned in the engine and returned it after watching the sun set on the Cherokee Lake. That was the first night he kissed her, told her she was someone he could fall in love with, that he would change her life. Back then, she used to catch him staring at her while she was studying, cooking, or dressing in the morning, and when he would smile at her and she would laugh, he would tell her he couldn’t believe she was his. Back then, she knew he meant it.

The change was subtle, so subtle she didn't notice at first: the first time he lost his temper around her when his pit-bull vomited and stained the carpet; the first time he got angry at her, put his hands on her arms and shook her hard; the first time he bought her roses as an apology for scaring her and causing her to drive all the way back to Knoxville in the middle of the night; the first time she caught him looking at porn while she was asleep on the couch beside him. The outbursts were always followed by his apologies, her hopes it would change, and eventually, her understanding that it never would.

She remembers the day she started to hate him. They were sitting in the back of Broadwater's Drugstore at the grill, exchanging the usual banter with Mildred, the eighty-something-year-old lady who had worked at the grill since before anyone could remember, when the Kilgores walked in with their twin boys. The boys were about five then, and as they climbed up on the stools, Mildred's usual sour face went soft. She loved the Kilgore twins.

"How are you today, sweetie pies?" she asked them. "Well, Michael, I guess you did one thing right," Mildred said, as she replaced the coffee pot. "You do got one beautiful family."

"A compliment from Mildred?" Michael Kilgore gasped as he laughed. Amy Kilgore was beaming down at her twin boys, one of those overdone smiles like the ladies in the laundry detergent commercials.

"Don't get used to it," Mildred snapped.

"Hey, Mildred, what's on a grilled ham and cheese sandwich?" Michael asked.

"Ham and cheese. From the grill."

Katie watched the simple exchange with tears in her eyes, studying the smiles on the boys' faces as they laughed at Mildred, noting Corey's complete disregard for the scene, and realized she would never have a family—just a husband who spent more time at the gym and in the field house with those boys than he did in their own house. A husband whom she had once loved so much that she traded their child just to be his wife. And she hated him for it.

She replays that night over and over in her head, wondering if she'd known what she did now, if she would've made a different choice. Of course she would have. Or at least, she'd like to think she would have. That if she'd known about the nights he would spend at the field yelling out plays to boys who would shuffle in and out of his life while she was constant and home alone, or about the blonde from over in Gadsten Valley he thought she didn't know about, she would have left him long before he had the chance to destroy her.

She remembers that night better than she remembers the day she had married him. Now, with the sun sinking behind the stadium stands, deaf to the screams rising around her, she replays that night in her head. With Corey at football practice, she had gone over to Karen and Jack's for dinner one night in the fall. When she arrived, the three of them had been connected by Jack's friendship with Corey, Karen's college friendship with Katie. When she had left, they were connected by much more.

Karen and Jack lived in a three-story brick house on Gated Hills, the richest community in Lockwood Gap. They served dinner on fine china with glasses that belonged to Karen's great-great-something. Karen had long blonde hair that made her look younger than she really was. Even in college, Katie had never seen the woman in a



pair of sweatpants. She was always put together. Karen married Jack right after college graduation and moved into the house built with his parents' money. Everyone in Lockswood Gap had money, Katie was starting to realize.

Jack was stern, serious, while Karen was flighty and often absent-minded, but they were a unit, Jack and Karen. She was glad she had come with Karen to Lockswood Gap after college, glad she had been offered a teaching position at the high school alongside Karen. Once, a long time ago, she was glad when Karen had introduced her to Corey Cockerell, too.

Katie wrung her napkin through talk of jobs and students, left her wine untouched, and waited for Jack to go into the kitchen to prepare dessert plates. When he finally excused himself, Karen placed her hand on Katie's.

"Okay, let's have it. What's going on? Why were you so upset all day?" Karen asked.

Katie didn't hesitate or hold back. "I'm pregnant, Karen."

"Oh. God. Have you told him yet?" Karen stammered.

Katie nodded, kept her face calm. "Yeah, I told him. I knew he had left the girl he dated before me because she wanted a family and he didn't, but we've been together for two years now, and I thought... I don't know, I guess I thought it would be different if it was me."

"Well what did he say? Was he okay with it? Excited even a little?" Karen prodded.

Katie shook her head, but still didn't cry. "Well, no. He told me... He wants me to get rid of it, Karen."

Karen's hand flew to her mouth. "No. Are you serious? But he loves the kids he teaches and coaches. They look up to him. He's so great with them. I always thought Corey would be a great dad. I mean, even back when we were kids..." She trailed off. "No. Sorry, not helping."

"It's fine," Katie grimaced. "It's just that I was cleaning out his truck the other day when I had to take it that day the rain froze the back roads over, and I found a ring in his hunting boot. If I tell him I want to keep the baby, and he doesn't, what if he decides not to give it to me?"

"Katie, I think you have to decide what's more important to you. I wish I could tell you Corey Cockerell changes his mind, but he doesn't. He didn't want a baby with Samantha, and he loves you way more than he ever loved her. I think maybe you have to decide what's more important to you. Having a family or having Corey."

"I had a shitty mother, Karen. You know that. I don't know how to be a mother any more than Corey would know how to be a father. I thought maybe we could figure it out together, but I don't know that I want to. I do know I want to be with him. And I feel like it took me this long to find someone I love as much as Corey. I can't give him up. But I can't have an abortion either. It's not right."

"Has it ever occurred to you that maybe Corey's not who you're supposed to be with?"

Katie paused, turned it over in her head like that night on the boat when Corey had turned her hair over in his fingers before they had jumped over the side and swam from the boat to the river's edge, jumped off the rock with the swinging rope attached to a dangling tree branch. "Remember in Dr. Wheeler's class, reading Plato's *Symposium*

and the Onlies? Every creature used to have another half and that's why we spend a lifetime trying to find ours?"

"Yeah?"

"He's mine. He's not perfect, but neither am I. We'll get there. We're still growing up. I know he'll be a good husband. There are more good times than bad. We'll get through it."

Karen nodded, taking it all in. "So you're going to have the abortion?"

Katie's lips almost smiled. Almost. "No. I can't do that. But I also can't lose Corey."

"I don't get it."

"Karen, you've had three miscarriages in the past two years. You want a baby. I don't. I want you and Jack to adopt my baby."

Karen knocked her glass of wine over as her hand went to her mouth, but she didn't move to stop the red liquid from staining the white tablecloth.

"Okay, I've got lemon icebox, pecan, and—" Jack stopped short, holding a slice of pie in each hand. He looked from a red-faced Katie, hand on her stomach, to his wife, mouth dropped open. "What the hell did I miss?"

*Second down, forty yard line, Lockswood Gap.*

Gadsten Valley's defense causes Will Perry to fumble. Katie smiles as she fumbles with the diamond ring on her finger, the one she had found in Corey's hunting boot fifteen years ago. She thought about the grand proposal he'd made—he'd had his players decorate the field with Christmas lights, and asked her to meet him at the stadium after practice one night, where he'd been waiting in the announcer's box. He made his

speech over the loudspeakers, said, “Katie, will you marry me?” and then appeared on top of the bleachers holding a ring as she’d gone running up to meet him.

She thought about all the little decisions that had led her to Lockwood Gap, how even just one small and different choice might have saved her. The weekend her grandfather died, she had driven back to school to stand in line and pick up her student tickets for football season. If she hadn’t, if she’d stayed at the hospital, she wouldn’t have had a ticket to that game against Auburn. If she had remembered to shove her own flask into her purse before that game, she wouldn’t have followed Karen to that tailgating tent to drink Karen’s brother’s beer, and she never would’ve laid eyes on Corey Cockerell, never would’ve gone to that football game in Lockwood Gap two months later hoping to catch a glimpse of him again. If she had left the first time she caught him cheating on her. If she had walked out the minute she realized she would never mean as much as football. If she had grown more cautious the day she realized he didn’t know her favorite band, her favorite book, or why her first fiancée had left her. It was a million little decisions that had led her right here, to these sidelines, this field, this marriage. Just one might have changed everything.

Down on the field, Corey jerks his hat from his head and throws it on the ground, yelling something as they run past him. Gadsten Valley is winning. *Touchdown, Gadsten Valley.*

She had pulled it together long enough to tell Jack that she was seven weeks pregnant and wanted him and Karen to take and raise her baby. Without Corey knowing. A broken saucer, three untouched slices of pie, and a whole lot of arguing later, Karen

had convinced Jack to consider Katie's proposition and Katie and Karen had come up with a plan.

The plan had worked. Katie had an uncle who worked for Screen Gems Studios out in Wilmington, North Carolina. East Hollywood, he called it. Katie spent her summers with him on Wrightsville Beach, standing quietly on the sidelines of sets while her uncle worked during the mornings, and splashing in the waves each night. It was Karen's idea to enlist the help of Katie's Uncle John, who got her a job as an intern on some television show "about a bunch of teenagers and a creek," as he had put it. Katie would make an appointment at an abortion clinic that she would miss, tell Corey a couple weeks later she was struggling with having terminated the pregnancy and needed time alone to cope with it, and finish the pregnancy in North Carolina. Instead of being angry with her as Katie feared, she almost thought she saw tears in his eyes as she confessed she was struggling with the decision she'd made. He kissed her on the forehead, pulled her close to him, and said, "Thank you, baby. I'm sorry, and I love you. Take all the time you need."

When it was time for her to have the baby, Karen and Jack flew out to be with her and finalized all the adoption arrangements. Jack put in for a transfer from the Chattanooga Marksmen to a branch in Texas, and if he timed it right, they should be moving right before Katie had her baby. Katie would move back to Lockswood Gap with Corey, like it had never happened and Jack and Karen would raise a daughter in Texas no one back in Tennessee would have ever met.

It was a Thursday night when Uncle John drove Katie from his house on Wrightsville Beach to the hospital downtown, where they were met with an anxious

Karen and Jack only a little later. She knew that back in Lockwood Gap, Corey was already holding tryouts for next year, oblivious to everything his three closest friends had been up to for the past seven months. During the few minutes she held her daughter in her arms, she almost changed her mind about how much she loved Corey James Cockerell. And then, she let her go.

She remembers the conversation the three of them had as she transferred the baby girl from her arms to Karen's. She remembers the anxious look on Jack's face, a mixture of happiness at the thought of finally having a daughter and uneasiness at the lies they had all told:

"This is insane, y'all," Jack said. "This is crazy. We are insane and desperate people."

Karen nodded in agreement as she kissed the baby's forehead. "Yeah. We are. But we're three crazy and desperate people who are all getting exactly what we want."

Gadsten Valley scores. Coach Cockerell isn't happy with his defense. Katie smiles.

She wonders sometimes if Jack was right. On nights like this, she comforts herself with the thought that she hadn't aborted the little girl. She couldn't stand the thought of giving her up, never knowing where she was or who she was with. Katie still didn't know what her daughter looked like, what interests she had developed, if she read books. Even though the adoption had meant ending her friendship and communication with Jack and Karen, she had gotten exactly what she wanted, and they had gotten exactly what they wanted. She's certain they got the better end of the bargain.

The sun is gone completely now behind the mountains, casting shades of orange, pink, and purple just like it had the night the ring from the boot had finally found her finger. There were nights she'd sat in the ocean's tide, pregnant, wishing she could trade the saltwater for those purple mountains. Wishing she could escape to their security. Now, they enclose her, like a trap, and she finds herself closing her eyes and missing the saltwater kissing her feet—not because she likes the ocean more, but because that was a time without Corey.

*Action Jackson on the play.* Mr. Fritz's voice comes over the loudspeaker. *Pookie Clark reaches, he almost has it... Pass intercepted.*

She excuses herself and climbs over Lacey, carefully placing one high-heeled boot in front of the other as she makes her way down the concrete steps, then down the wooden ones, and onto the track, heading for the concession stand. Her eyes are still scanning the crowd, and it finally occurs to Katie maybe she doesn't want to find the girl. They're back, Jack and Karen. Marksmen had agreed to the relocation on the condition they could move him back and forth as needed. They needed him back in Chattanooga, just half an hour from Lockwood Gap. Karen had phoned her a month ago to tell her they were coming back, and that she was so sorry.

"Mrs. Cockerell!" she hears a voice shout out.

Katie and Karen's third college roommate, Andie Whitman, has two younger sisters, one of whom is in Katie's English class. She turns now to find Logan and Alyssa Whitman with Kelsey DeVinney, who had just joined Katie's theatre festival team. "Hey girls, how are you?"

“We’re good. Hey, Mrs. Cockerell, I forgot, what chapters of that book were we supposed to read?” Logan asks.

“*A Portrait of a Lady?* Up to chapter forty-four,” she tells her.

“Thanks,” Logan says.

“What’s that book about?” she hears Alyssa asking as the three of them walk off.

“Some girl who marries the wrong guy but doesn’t have the courage to leave him,” she hears Logan reply.

As she approaches the concession stand, she passes Gary in his hat, and he tips it and winks at her. She pays Ashton McDavid three dollars for a Coke (it’s the girls’ cross country team’s turn to run the concessions, and Coach Hall is shouting out orders; they’re all wearing their “JANA HALL FOR PRESIDENT shirts again), and walks slowly back to her seat. 47-35, Gadsten Valley. Her eyes still scan the crowd, wondering if every stranger could be her daughter.

“Katie?” she hears another voice from behind her.

She turns slowly, recognizing the voice immediately. Karen Anderson. She wants to be angry with her, to tell her she regrets asking her to take her child. Instead, all she feels is glad to see her. “Karen,” she sighs as they embrace.

“I missed you, Katie,” Karen says, arms still around her.

They step back and study each other. “How are you?”

“Good, good,” Karen nods.

Silence. *Will Perry on the play. Pass intercepted.*

“I’m sorry,” Karen finally offers.

“I know. Is she...here?” Katie asks.



Karen hesitates. She points up in the stands, in Section A, to a girl in a blue hoodie sitting by herself. Her pointed cheekbones are resting in her hands, and she looks bored. She has dark hair, like Katie's, not like Karen's; naturally tanned skin, like Corey's, not Jack's. Even though she's sitting down and bundled in a blanket, Katie can tell she's tall and thin, like her. Katie can't see what color her eyes are from where she's standing, but her breath gets caught in her throat when the girl looks down from the stands at her mother and her mother's college roommate. She holds up a hand and almost waves, but doesn't smile. Katie can almost see Corey staring back from her eyes.

"I'm so sorry," Karen is saying. "I tried to get her into the private school in Chattanooga, but they're full and there's a waiting list... This won't be permanent, Katie. This wasn't supposed to happen."

"Convenient to move back in the middle of the fall right when Tanya Gillenwater has to take pregnancy leave. I guess you're just filling in her job now, right? Freshman and junior English classes?" Katie asks.

Karen nods. "Yeah, well, they offered, so..."

"Which means she'll get put in one of my freshman sections. She can't be in yours."

"I'm sorry, Katie, I tried."

Katie nods again, silent. She can't even bring herself to say the girl's name—especially since it ends with Karen's last name instead of hers. "Does she know?"

"No. Does Corey?"

"No."

"Karen, we're not going to be able to keep this secret much longer."

Ten seconds left in the fourth quarter. Gadsten Valley on the second yard line. They score and make one final field kick, bringing the final score to 54-45, Gadsten Valley. Mr. Fritz's voice over the loudspeaker says, "And that's the ball game, Lockwood Gap. Gadsten Valley takes the victory." Katie smiles to herself, happy for the loss her husband experienced tonight, a temporary compensation for the loss she will be faced with Monday morning.

## CHAPTER IV

### WILMINGTON, OFF-SCRIPT

“Sometimes the beauty is in the attempt.”

—*One Tree Hill*

#### **Kelsey with the Walk of Shame**

The first thing she notices when she wakes up is that she isn't wearing panties. Shit fuck. She slips out of her king-sized bed, careful not to wake him, and begins throwing articles of clothing across the carpet that is coming up at the edges. His boxers. Her shorts. Her bra (need that). His belt. His boots. Her high heels (need those).

When she comes back from the bathroom, fully clothed again and still wearing last night's makeup, she whispers, “Aaron, Nick is going to be here any minute to pick me up. You should probably go.” Her ex-husband rolls over, but doesn't get up yet. She's leaving to spend the week in Wilmington, North Carolina, with Aaron's sister, Logan; Logan's boyfriend, Seth; her own best friend, Nick; and Seth's friend Russ, whom she and Nick only know in passing. Nick is supposed to be there to pick her up at 7:00. It's 6:55. Aaron lays there another minute, then gets up and starts pulling his things out of the clothes pile on the floor. She doesn't watch him get dressed. He opens the door, then stops in the doorway of her bedroom.

“Kelsey?” he says, looking back at her.

“Yeah?”

“This never happened.”

She grimaces. “I know.”

“Okay,” he says, nodding, still hesitating to go. “I’ll uh... I’ll let you know what I decide, Kels.”

Aaron’s truck pulls out of her driveway minutes before Nick’s car pulls into it. Nick comes in without knocking and stops short at Kelsey standing in the living room with a bag slung over her shoulder.

“You have lipstick smeared all over your face,” he says flatly.

“Are you wearing mascara again?” she shoots back.

“My eyelashes are thin,” he says.

“Well, I can tell.” He’s wearing khakis, loafers, and a Polo with the collar popped up. He looks more like a frat boy than the youth intern who got fired from the Lockwood Gap Baptist Church last summer for admitting he was gay and dating a boy from over in Gadsten Valley.

“Are you ready? You look like I caught you in the middle of a walk of shame,” he says.

“I’m ready.” Nick raises an eyebrow, and she bites at her lip.

“You did that thing.”

“What thing?”

“The lip thing. You always bite the lower left corner of your lip when you’re nervous.”

“No, I don’t.” He knew her too well. She thought briefly back to the moment they first met in the drama club in high school for tryouts of *The Suessification of Romeo and Juliet* (talk about a tragedy—that play was tragic), and how he’d been the Jack to her Jen ever since.

“Yes, you do,” he argued. He stopped, a smile like the Cheshire Cat’s creeping across his stubbled face. “Where is he?”

“Where is *who*?”

“Aaron.”

She grabbed her bag from him and swung the front door open as he laughed behind her. “I knew it! You’re totally screwing your ex-husband!”

“Just pop the trunk and shut up,” she told him, wincing as the gravel digs into the soles of her bare feet. “Is this really going to take ten hours? Why couldn’t we just go to Florida?”

“Kelsey. This is East Hollywood we’re talking about. If it ain’t filmed in LA, it’s filmed in Wilmington. The whole place is like one big dead movie set. It’s awesome. Mrs. Cockerell spent like, a whole year there once working for Screen Gems. It’s badass. So stop your bitching. Don’t you wanna have a drink in Hell’s Kitchen where Joey worked in the last season of *Dawson’s Creek* and get coffee from Tree Hill Café?”

“Whatever. I voted for Pensacola. Where’s, uh, Russ? Is that his name?”

“Picking him up next,” Nick says, siding into the driver’s seat.

“He seems like a dick,” Kelsey says. “His dad is that crazy Pentecostal pastor who yelled at Logan last year for painting her nails because it was vanity. All I’m saying is I

don't see why Logan and Seth had to go two days ahead of us and make us drive with him."

Nick adjusts the rearview mirror so he could look at himself. "Can you really tell I'm wearing mascara?"

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The drive from Lockwood Gap to Wilmington, NC took more than ten hours, mostly because Kelsey made Nick stop so she could pee at least once every two hours. At the state line of North Carolina and Tennessee, they chugged tall boys behind a gas station and made Russ drive until they got to Raleigh. When they switched drivers, Russ called Kelsey "honey," and she punched him in the stomach. He told her not to worry until he called her "baby," and Nick retaliated his annoyance with Russ by rolling tobacco into rolling paper and smoking it like a joint with the windows rolled down while he sang "Because I Got High" as loudly as he could.

By the time they arrive at their condo on Carolina Beach, Logan has called six times to give them directions and inform them of the *One Tree Hill* filming location itinerary she had been putting together since last week. Kelsey wants to complain about Logan's tour and the six flights of stairs that stretches between their condo and the carport, but her irritation is gone when she can finally feel the waves on her feet. She tries to ignore the fact that Russ won't stop tripping her, or trying to throw her into the ocean. She really doesn't like him.

She watches the waves striking the sand, the line of white shining on the green water. On days like this, she believes in God. The guys are trying to throw Logan into the tide, and she's shrieking. Russ and Seth's pants legs are soaked at the bottom and so is

the tail of Logan's maxi dress (that covers her shoulders, of course). Well. Maybe not a God who gives a shit about skirts being knee-length or scissor-virgin hair, and maybe not the God Lockwood Gap believes in either. But a God.

They walk along the beach until they can't see each other anymore, and as Kelsey continues shoving Russ away from her, rolling her eyes as he laughs at his own attempts to piss her off, she thinks about Aaron. She wonders if he is in his own bed or Brandi's.

### **Russ with the Confession**

Russ watches Kelsey stare out at the ocean the next afternoon like she's never seen it before. Her black hair is braided on one side, and she's wearing a bikini despite the gang of Pentecostals she is with. Her stomach isn't flat, but she doesn't seem to care. She's attractive. Annoying, but attractive. They trail behind the others, letting Logan lead the way down the beach, two and half miles, to see a beach house Screen Gem Studios used for filming. Kelsey is holding her sandals in one hand, walking in the tide, lingering, and he walks with her, quiet at first. He thinks the five of them, this group and this trip, could be a television episode on their own. He can't imagine in what other reality the five of them would have ever been friends.

KELSEY: How does she know where all these *One Tree Hill* filming locations are?

RUSS: [smiles] This is the third time I've come with them. She looks some up, stumbles on others. She's obsessed with finding the houses, the diners. All of it.

KELSEY: What guy watches *One Tree Hill*, Russ? Honestly?

RUSS: [shrugs] None that will admit it, I guess. This is Logan's thing. We're just here for the beach.

KELSEY: Right. So your dad's the crazy Pentecostal pastor, right?

RUSS: Yeah, I suppose that's accurate. He is a little nuts. [pauses] You don't believe in God, do you?

KELSEY: Some days.

RUSS: Today?

KELSEY: Today.

RUSS: Why did you leave New York?

KELSEY: That's really none of your business, is it?

RUSS: Why don't you like me?

KELSEY: I think you're a dick.

RUSS: I think you're a bitch.

KELSEY: I've never heard you cuss.

RUSS: You've known me for two days. Why did you leave New York?

KELSEY: [pauses] I came back for my husband.

RUSS: Who is dating Brandi Blackwater.

KELSEY: Right. But he's leaving her. He will.

RUSS: Why did you get divorced?

KELSEY: [hesitates] We were living in New York. I wanted to stay. He didn't.

RUSS: And the rumors about the guy in New York everyone said you were sleeping with?

KELSEY: Do you have a boat to go drive somewhere? What is this hat, Gilligan?

[she pulls his hat off and tosses it into the sand]

RUSS: And the rumors about you sleeping with your ex-husband? [picks up hat]



KELSEY: [pauses] Where did you hear that?

RUSS: His car was parked outside your place all night.

KELSEY: Says who?

RUSS: Mark Kendrick, goes to our church. He lives across the street.

KELSEY: I don't even know who the hell that is.

RUSS: [shrugs] You loved him first, right?

KELSEY: I guess so. [pauses] So Seth is planning to propose to Logan.

RUSS: Yeah. Do you think she will say yes?

KELSEY: Of course she will. They've been together for four years. [looking him up and down] So do you have a girl back home?

RUSS: Something like that. I guess. No, actually, no, not really.

KELSEY: [feigns disgust] Who *is* she?

RUSS: Doesn't matter. One of those stupid love triangles, you know? Except the kind where you're in it, and the other two have no idea.

KELSEY: I have no idea what the hell you just said.

RUSS: I think in another life, we could've been friends, you and I.

KELSEY: You think so?

RUSS: I do. We both know what it's like to love someone who's with someone else.

KELSEY: Aaron will leave her.

RUSS: If he doesn't, maybe you and I could get married instead. [winks at her]

KELSEY: Not even responding to that. So this girl. You haven't told her?

RUSS: No. Can't do that.

KELSEY: You should tell her.

RUSS: I can't.

KELSEY: [shoves him, laughing] Why not?

RUSS: Because I think I'm going to be the best man at her wedding. And that's just a little cliché, don't you think?

### **Seth with the Engagement Ring**

They eat dinner at The Pilothouse on the Fourth of July. All Seth can think about is what happens after dinner. They have a plan: Kelsey and Nick will stage a fight, Nick will storm off from the restaurant, and go retrieve the ring from the car and signal to the two guys waiting with guitars that Seth found playing on the streets two days earlier and hired to start playing Logan's favorite song. Finally, Kelsey picks a fight with Nick about Obama (the easiest way to get Nick upset), and he throws his napkin and a twenty on the table and leaves.

They walk down the boardwalk, Seth holding Logan's hand, Russ behind him with his arm around Kelsey, and for the first time, Seth realizes he is nervous Logan won't say yes. He can hear Russ saying to Kelsey, "Sweetheart, you and me are gonna be the next ones to get married. We'll say it all started right here, on this dock, you and me. We'll tell our kids about it." Seth rolls his eyes. Russ is always saying shit like that to women. He doesn't think Kelsey is stupid enough to play into it. But she does.

Seth looks over his shoulder to see Kelsey pushing Russ off, but she's laughing.

"See, you feel this, between you and me? It's called sexual tension."

Just further down the boardwalk, Seth sees Nick leaning against the railing, and he can make out two shadows behind him. The shadows move away from Nick, and they begin playing Gavin DeGraw's "We Belong Together."

"Oh, I love this song!" Logan squeals. "Honey, they're playing Gavin DeGraw."

Seth smiles and takes her by the hand, gets down on one knee. She will say yes. Of course she will. He can't remember what he said, if he stumbled on his words, or how fast he said it, but after some lesser version of the speech he has prepared, he takes out the ring Nick had slipped him without Logan's noticing only seconds prior, and holds it out to her. "Logan Whitman, will you marry me?"

For a second, he swears she looks over at Russ before she screams, "Yes, yes!" and throws her arms around him. If he had looked at Russ after she answered, he would have seen the defeated, but strong expression cloaking Russ's face, and Kelsey's hand laced through his, her other hand squeezing his arm.

They sit on the barrier between the river and the sidewalk, watching the navy North Carolina sky explode with bursts of glitter in yellows, greens, reds, whites, and blues. Nick, Kelsey, and Seth are fixated on the color eruptions in the sky. Russ is watching Logan as she moves her ring in and out of her face, studying the reflections of the colors on the diamond perched on her finger. There's a sailboat resting on the water, punching out a boat-shaped hole in the sky across from the Battleship Park. A man is rowing slowly down the river in a canoe. Russ puts his arm around Kelsey and moves his eyes away from Logan. "Did you know this river runs forward and backward, depending on the ocean's tide?"

“Sure didn’t,” Kelsey replies, lighting a cigarette. Russ moves his hand in front of his face.

“When we get married and move here, Whitman, we’ll sit down here on the river every night, just you and me, and you’ll stop smoking cigarettes and I’ll start drinking whiskey.”

She puts her cigarette out on his khaki pants, and it burns a whole straight through to his leg. He doesn’t get mad, though, just brushes his pants off and throws her cigarette butt into the water. “That wasn’t very nice,” he says, laughing. She takes the cup of Rita’s yogurt out of his hand and tosses it in the water after the cigarette.

### **Nick with the Cigars**

On the porch of their condo later the next night, Nick pulls out the pack of cigars, lights one, and hands the pack to Kelsey. He watches the way she looks at Russ before she lights hers, like she’s afraid he’s going to get up and walk inside if she smokes it. It’s weird. He turns his glass of wine up, trying to finish his before Kelsey finishes hers so he can pour the remainder of the bottle into his own glass.

“Cigar, Russ?”

“No.”

“Didn’t think so,” Nick says, smirking. Kelsey swats his arm. “*Twat* do you think you are doing? *Cunt* you just leave me alone?”

She smiles at him. “I hate you.”

“You think it’s funny, don’t you? Our religion?” Russ asks Nick.

“No. I just think it’s judgmental. I don’t see the point in all the rules.”

Russ shrugs. "I don't either. It's my family's religion; it's not mine. Just because you follow the rules doesn't always mean you believe in them."

Nick thinks Russ looks like he belongs on a commercial for a yacht club. He wears khaki pants and a button up every day with loafers. It's balls hot outside. Nick thinks he looks like maybe he drives his boat to school, parks it outside, and goes to class. Nick stares at Russ until Russ feels uncomfortable, which is Nick's intention, and Russ excuses himself to go inside, where Seth and Logan are watching the last season of *One Tree Hill*.

"You know what I think?" Nick asks Kelsey once Russ is inside. "I think you're growing rather fond of our friend Russ."

"I am not. I'm going home to Aaron. He's going to leave Brandi."

"Kels, do you remember that scene in *When Harry Met Sally* where Sally keeps telling Marie that Arthur is ever going to leave his wife?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So Aaron is never going to leave Brandi. This is the part where you say 'You're right, you're right, I know you're right.'"

"You didn't hear what he said the other night," she objects, shifting in her seat.

"I don't care. He won't. Was it before or after you slept with him?"

"I didn't sleep with him."

"You're such a liar."

"Okay, but Nicky and Terry finally find each other after not meeting on top of the Empire State Building. Maggie Carpenter quits running and marries Ike. Ross and Rachel

get over the whole ‘We were on a break’ thing after ten seasons. Westley rescues Buttercup from the evil Prince Humperdinck. Sometimes, things do work out.”

“And Jack Dawson drowns, Mitch Leery gets hit by a freaking car while eating an ice cream cone, Gatsby gets shot in the back, and Richard watches Ilsa fly away in a plane with a prick. Not every love story has a good ending. Your life isn’t a movie.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Kelsey says, glaring at him, shifting her eyes to the ocean rolling in on the sand below their deck. She pulls her knees up to her and sucks on the cigar.

“It’s not a matter of confidence. It’s reality. He’s not coming back to you. Get over it.”

Kelsey stands to her feet, picks up her wine glass, and lays the cigar by Nick on the porch’s railing.

“When are you going to stop acting like your life is a goddamn movie, Kelsey?” Nick shoots out before she can get in the sliding glass door. “Why do you always have to create conflict? Why can’t you just let yourself be happy for once?”

She hesitates, considers walking back inside, sliding the door shut, and locking him out. “For the same reason you think Brooke Davis is more beautiful when she’s crying than when she’s laughing; for the same reason your favorite episode of *One Tree Hill* is the one where Dan shoots Keith; for the same reason Gale Leery cheats on Mitch with Bob the co-anchor. Because as much as we say we are a society in the pursuit of happiness, we love conflict. It makes the plot exciting, and it makes the audience give a shit, and we don’t know how to be content with pure, unaltered happiness. Because maybe the one thing I’m more scared of than ending up alone is being bored. I don’t

know how to be content, Nicky, and I don't remember how to be happy, but I know my future doesn't lie with some asshole I barely know."

### **Logan, on Front and Grace, with All the Dreams**

*If there was one thing you could do, one last thing you wanted, what would it be?  
Close your eyes. Do you have it? Good. Now believe it can come true.*

Wilmington is a ghost town and filled with life at the same time. It's on a river, but a twenty-minute drive from the beach. It's a downtown filled with bars and excitement, but quiet and still during the day. When they aren't filming new movies, new shows, there's this nostalgia that envelops the whole place, like she's walking back through time and into a place that exists only on her television screen back home. It's the place where fiction meets reality.

Logan stands on the corner of Grace and Front situating *One Tree Hill* characters into their places. Mouth McFadden sat by that window and ate breakfast with Skills. Brooke Davis turned that Port City Java into Bakerman. Peyton Sawyer dropped a water balloon on Dan Scott's head from that rooftop over there. Logan felt alive when she stood on these streets, felt like something mattered—felt in a way that she didn't in Lockwood Gap. And as many times as she has stood on these cobblestones, marveled at the ghost of the television sets that were here years ago, she still gets higher off of it than anything else.

Logan pauses in front of the closed doors of the building that was once both Karen's Café and Clothes Over Bro's, peering in, like maybe if she looks hard enough, the bar from the café or the shelves with the clothing will materialize inside. Her future rests on her hand, her dreams contained inside a diamond in an Eiffel Tower setting. A

wedding in the gardens, she thinks, near the fountain where they scattered Haley's mom's ashes in season six. A lacy white dress that smells of hope, a canopy of stars that feel like the security she longed for, flowers lining the wooden white chairs in rows of precision that taste like a future she always wanted as she walks down a scattering of pink and red rose petals to her favorite hymn.

But if she is so in love with Seth, why is it that the only smile she sees standing at the end of the clearing, all wrapped up in a tan tuxedo, is Russ's?

They're standing in the window of Port City Java, just across the road, Kelsey's hand on Russ's shoulder, his eyes fixed on her laugh. A river rushes through her, like the rapids that embrace the rocks on the creek back home behind the house, like the wave that knocked her into the sand yesterday morning. She realizes it's jealousy.

"Hey, you guys," Nick is shouting from across the street, holding a flyer. "There's a place called The Cellar that has Sex Bingo on Friday nights! Like Bingo, but with sex toys for prizes! There's this dude called Dirty Dave, and if you call a bingo and don't have one, you get whipped with a huge, flimsy black dildo in front of the whole bar. And at the end, everyone guesses the color of his boxers and he takes his pants off!"

Kelsey brings her coffee to her lips and points at Nick. "You got all that from a flyer?"

Nick shrugs. "Yeah. Wanna go?"

"Hell, yeah," Kelsey cheers.

"I think Logan, Russ, and I will sit this one out," Seth says, laughing.

"Shock face," Nick mumbles.

"Honey?" Seth calls to her from just a few feet away. "Are you coming?"



“What if we owned this place?” she blurts out. “What if we moved here and opened a café, no beer or anything, just pastries, and coffee and that kind of thing. Wouldn’t that be something, honey?” She stares back inside its emptiness, like it’s waiting for her to fill it.

“Live here, downtown?” Seth laughs. “You can’t even see the stars most nights here.”

“We’ve seen them all before,” Logan whispers, tilting her head up toward the sky.

Russ and Kelsey are walking toward her, arms linked, laughing. Logan wonders what it must feel like to wear the shorts that stopped below Kelsey’s butt cheeks, to laugh at whatever inappropriate joke she had likely just told Russ. To play Sex Bingo at the Cellar with Dirty Dave.

Her brown eyes linger on the shop’s empty window, and in her mind, she writes the words “McCord Café” on the window, setting herself and Seth inside, waiting tables, and pouring coffee. She is wearing shorts—no, a skirt. had to be a skirt—and even though it’s summer, he’s wearing pants. Then she scribbles the words “Jennings Café” across the window, and lets herself wonder, just for a minute, what it might be like to hold Russ’s arm instead, if he would ever tell her that her short-sleeved top showed too much of her upper arm.

She closes her eyes after gazing into the empty store through the window one more time, reminding herself of her favorite, though cheesy, *One Tree Hill* quote and whispered to herself, “Believe that dreams come true every day. Because they do.”

### **Russ and Kelsey with the Mistakes and the Moon Pies**

Kelsey walks into the living room, crying, and Russ thinks about how Nick keeps saying Brooke Davis is prettier when she's crying. He thinks the same thing about Kelsey. She's a bitch, kind of, well, maybe not, no, she was, but he feels things for her he doesn't mean to.

She sits next to him instead of Nick and he folds his arms around her. "Aaron proposed to Brandi," she whispers. Logan's mouth drops as she looks at Seth.

"Did you know he was going to—" Seth starts, but Logan shakes her head before he can finish.

"Mrs. Cockerell just called and told me," Kelsey says to Logan, speaking barely above a whisper. "Your sister called her."

Russ is embarrassed as he realizes there is a part of him that is jealous that at least Kelsey can act sad. He had to smile when Seth proposed to Logan. Everyone is quiet. He tries to think of something, anything, a *One Tree Hill* quote that Logan would quip out, a Bible verse that Seth might offer, a vulgar comment Nick would contribute. Instead, he just says, "Do you want a Moon Pie?"

He heats the last one in the microwave and serves it to her with a glass of milk. When she is done, she pulls her feet up underneath her, and leans against him again. Seth, Logan, and Nick watch the whole scene, quiet: Logan raises an eyebrow, Seth looks disappointed (he really thought Aaron would leave Brandi), and Nick is expressionless, like neither the engagement nor Kelsey's seeking comfort in Russ rather than himself surprises him.

"Can we watch *Dawson's Creek* instead now?" Nick asks.

\*

The next morning, Kelsey sleeps in while Logan gets dressed and goes down to the beach. She gets up to make coffee, head spinning like she's hungover, only she isn't, when she bumps into Russ in the hallway.

“Jesus!” he exclaims. “I didn't know anyone else was still here.”

“Me either,” Kelsey stammers.

One minute they're awkwardly staring at one another in the hallway, Kelsey with an empty coffee cup in her hand, and the next, she's lost her panties for the second time that week, but this time, they're somewhere in Russ's bed.

They don't talk about what it means, or how it changes things because they both know it doesn't matter. Kelsey is still in love with Aaron, and Russ is still in love with Logan.

An hour later, they walk onto the beach, Kelsey giving Russ a ten minute head start before she follows after him. Kelsey swims with Logan (who still wears her sundress in the ocean) and drinks wine out of the Bubba keg with Nick. Russ takes the skim boards out with Seth in the tide and grabs Kelsey out of her beach chair and dunks her in the ocean. It's like it never happened.

\*

They say that you find hope in the strangest places, and Kelsey figures maybe that's true. She rolls over the next morning to see Logan still sleeping soundly beside of her, the sun not yet creeping in through the cracks in the blinds. She doesn't want to go home today, back to Lockwood Gap. She wants to stay here, where everything is better and everything is safe.

When she peeks into the boys' room and finds Russ's bed empty, she goes out onto the porch, and she can see him standing on the shore below her. She walks out of the condo and down the pier to him. He lifts his arm, and she fits herself against him.

"Kels? Let's not tell anyone what happened yesterday, okay?"

And she didn't tell anyone, not even Nick, for a long time. Not until seven weeks later, when her period was late and the stick had two lines and all she could remember was losing her panties twice in one week.

"Deal," she agrees. "Guess all that sexual tension is over now, huh?"

He laughs as he faces the sky that is turning Sunkist orange, watches the bright amber color that floats on the salted waves. "I knew you would fall in love with me before it was all over."

She digs her elbow into his side. "I am *not* in love with you."

"Not yet."

He's quiet, and she knows he is thinking about Logan. "You never even told her, Russ. You can't consider what you didn't attempt a defeat."

When he doesn't say anything, she looks up at him, remembering the douchebag in the car with the smirk and the bow tie, contrasting him in her mind with this expression. She thinks of Logan asleep and engaged, thinks of Aaron sleeping beside Brandi back in Tennessee, thinks about the swinging bridge where Aaron proposed to her years ago. As she watches the waves splash against the sand, watches a crab move slowly through the packed wetness, watches Russ's face staring at the sun, she closes her eyes and thinks about Lockwood Gap, Tennessee.

## CHAPTER V

### THE MEAN REDS

When we were kids, a bunch of us would walk home from church together the long way, across the railroad tracks. There were always trains coming through Lockswood Gap Sunday mornings, on account of the coal mines, and we'd take turns daring each other, stand on the tracks in our Sunday best and wait for the approaching train cars. We'd jump out of the way at the last minute, scream and laugh. Sometimes the boys would even jump, grab hold of a handle bar on a car, ride it down the track a few blocks before jumping off. We didn't know how dangerous it was, not then. I remember one Sunday morning, walking home, my head filled with my daddy's sermon on not grieving those who've gone to be with Christ, not long after my mama had gone off her rocker and shot herself in the head, I stood there, lingered a minute too long on the tracks. Somebody pushed me out of the way, and I landed on my ass in the rocks, ripped my dress.

That's what being friends with Jenna Anderson is like. It's like standing on the Lockswood Gap train tracks, eyes on an approaching car, convinced you'd let go of the train cars you were riding before the tunnel, that you'd be out of the way long before the impact. Except with Jenna, it was always too late. You could never get off the tracks in time. But every Sunday, you'd walk back onto them, stand there, same as you did the week before, and wait, sure this time would be different. It never was.

My best friend, Nicky, says the only thing that's consistent about her is that she's inconsistent. From the town Jenna calls home to the brand of whiskey she drinks on Friday nights, Jenna is the most inconsistent person I've ever known. She carries herself with this confidence that radiates from her skin, like she's carefree, untamed, like life is an effortless waltz she mastered a long time ago. One night, she's sitting next to you at a bar, laughing over margaritas, and the next, she's gone. She'll show up, weeks, sometimes months later, back from God only knows where. Never an apology, never an explanation. Just waiting for the next time the train hit you, the next time she ran. That was thing the about Jenna—sooner or later, she always ran.

\*

The first time I met Jenna, I was fourteen years old. Her mama and daddy lived in Lockwood Gap their whole lives, until right before Mrs. Anderson got pregnant with Jenna. They moved to Houston because of Mr. Anderson's job, and when I was fourteen, they moved back to Lockwood Gap. There are three churches in Lockwood Gap: the Pentecostal and two Baptist Churches, one on Main Street and one downtown. My daddy was the pastor of the Main Street Lockwood Gap Baptist Church. Even though I'd never met the Andersons, the whole church was excited about their return, the daughter they'd never met.

Our youth group had Sunday School in the basement, the room with the carpet that forever smelled of burned queso after the Fellowship Fundraiser disaster dinner of 2001. She walked in that Sunday morning in skinny jeans and high heels, sticking out next to the rest of us in our carefully selected Sunday dresses and suits, popping her gum and dangling a Versace bag from her arm. She didn't bring a Bible. I remember studying

her, tuning out Al, our youth leader, who was once again preaching on the danger of having sex and how it ruined lives.

“You shouldn’t hold hands either, guys, because then you realize how much you like touching each other, and if you touch each other, you’ll realize you like it because it *does* feel good, and you’ll want to keep touching each other. Things can escalate. This is the reason opposite sexes can’t sit together on the church bus on our mission trip next week. 87% of teen pregnancies happen in the back seat of a church van,” Al was saying.

“Hey,” she said, taking a seat on the floor next to me. “I’m Jenna.”

“Natalie,” I whispered back, forcing a smile, but not breaking eye contact with Al.

“I’m late,” she said, making a face.

“I see that,” I replied.

“Is this guy for real?”

I just nodded. I thought about leaning over and whispering the story about the time at summer camp Al had given all us girls an Advil each, made us sit with our legs crossed and the pill between them. If we moved our legs enough that the pill fell, we weren’t sitting lady like. I turned my attention back as Zack, a seventh grader, raised his hand and said, “So what about me and Sammy Louise? We’re cousins. Can we sit in the back seat together?”

Al hesitated, looked at him firmly. “No, Zack, because sometimes things happen.”

Jenna covered her mouth with her hand, smiling. “What the hell kind of place did I just walk into?”

I smiled too but didn’t answer as Al reiterated that hand holding really can lead you down a path of destruction that ends with herpes and pregnancy. I looked around the

room, noticing everyone else was focused on her instead of Al's morning lecture. Maybe it was because I was the only one who really spoke to her, but she kept sitting beside me each Sunday. The week after that, Al started carrying on about how he'd seen Zack Jenkins and Aiden Jacobs sniffing dry-erase markers, and how dangerous drugs were. I stopped paying so close attention and we started laughing together at Al under our breaths, exchanging looks and notes and drawings of Al with a big cartoon penis and a Sharpie up at his nose standing in front of a church van.

She didn't seem to make any other friends except me, maybe because the other girls were jealous of her and it never occurred to me that I should be, too. Though I rarely saw boys talking to her, and even though she said she had a boyfriend back in Houston, I occasionally saw her emerge from the storage room downstairs, hair tussled, fingers laced through those of a different boy than last time, a red kiss mark on his face that matched the shade on her lips.

I clung to Jenna and to her mama. After Mama killed herself in our living room, Daddy was left alone with just me and my big sister, Lindsay. My sister went to church because Daddy was the pastor, but she hated him more than anything else in the world. She loved making him angry by smoking cigarettes at school and throwing condoms I wasn't sure she was really even using in her bathroom trashcan. I didn't have a mama anymore, and I didn't really have a sister, so instead, I had Jenna and Mrs. Anderson.

Jenna's mama sold beauty products on the side. I wasn't allowed to wear makeup, so Mrs. Anderson put samples on me at their house—green and brown eye shadows, champagne blush, boosting mascara (although I never really did understand exactly what boosting mascara was), moisturizers and foundations. When I was tired of hearing my



daddy and my sister scream at each other, I walked the few blocks to Jenna's house and let Mrs. Anderson transform my face while Jenna and I talked about her new boyfriend, Charlie, and we read Cosmo articles out loud and listened to Jay-Z.

The first time she left, we were sophomores. She called my house, like she did most nights, but instead of getting the newest version of the Charlie-Miller-is-cheating-on-me-with-that-skank-bitch-Hannah soapbox, I got this:

"I just wanted to let you know I've decided to move back to Texas. I'm going to stay with my parents' best friends and their family until I finish high school there. I just called to say goodbye, Nat."

She was calling from Texas. She had left three days ago. I crawled out onto the roof through my bedroom window, cringed at the screams of my daddy and sister finding their way through the thin walls of our house, and watched a meteor shower as I let my boosting mascara travel down my cheeks and ruin my champagne blush.

\*

It was three years later when I saw her again. I was with my boyfriend, Ryan Whitman, at a Starbucks near UT Chattanooga when a tall, skinny girl with long, brown hair caught my attention as she was standing in the line, tapping her heel against the floor. The way she wore her high heels with skinny jeans and a t-shirt reminded me of Jenna. She placed her order and walked toward a guy sitting down who looked like an older version of Charlie Miller.

"Jenna? What are you doing here?" I gushed as I threw my arms around her.

"Oh, well the city just got old, you know?" she said, laughing. I didn't know. I'd lived on the state line of Tennessee and Georgia my whole life. MTSU was the farthest

I'd ever gone. "I'm going to school here now. I moved back earlier this summer," she said, bringing her coffee to her lips and getting red lipstick on the top. I noticed the ring.

"Oh, my *God*, you're *engaged*?" I blurted out.

"Yeah," she nodded, laughing. She gestured toward Charlie, who I halfway waved at. "Isn't that great?" I didn't really think it was, but I smiled and nodded.

We exchanged new phone numbers and promised to keep in touch. I promised to visit her next time I was home on the weekend from school. I called her two months later, and in the same flat, uncaring voice she had used to tell me she had moved back to Texas with her parents all those years ago, she explained that she decided she didn't want to marry Charlie, so she had packed up her things, gone to stay with friends in Atlanta (I don't know who the hell she knew in Atlanta, anyway), left school without so much as formally withdrawing, and taped her dorm key to her RA's door.

I got used to the back and forth. It was what Jenna did, who she was. That's why I wasn't surprised when a couple months later, she was back. I wondered why her parents put up with her comings and goings, why they let her gallivant all over the southeast like they didn't give a shit. But I never asked or anything. Evan, one of Ryan's best friends, was throwing a party one weekend while his mom and stepdad were out of town, and it would have been like a high school reunion except no one ever left Lockswood Gap, so every party was a high school reunion. Nicky was there, too; he and I had been best friends since junior year of high school when we both almost got fired from the Food City because the front-end manager overheard us plotting to burn the place down and thought we were serious. He had come out by then, which wasn't a big surprise to anyone. Ryan's friends seemed oddly cautious of him, except for Evan, with whom he

had recently formed some kind of bro-mance, and Evan kept calling him “little buddy” even though we were all the same age. I invited Jenna through a half-hearted text message, not expecting a reply, let alone for her to show up at the front door, towel in hand, swimsuit already on.

I led her to the patio by the pool, and I noticed all of Ryan and all his friends were gone. “Guys? What the hell?”

“Jesus,” Ryan said, sighing, as he and all the others emerged from various hiding places. Evan was cradling his moonshine like a newborn. “We thought you were the cops.”

I rolled my eyes. “Why? And like we don’t know every cop in this town anyway.”

I asked the guys if they remembered Jenna from middle school while she lit a cigarette, shuffled her feet, and smiled. They just stared at her. That was the first time it occurred to me to be jealous.

“Hey, Nat,” Evan said hours later, slinging an arm around my shoulder. “Hook me up with your friend.”

“You smell like sweat and liquor,” I’d responded.

“Whatever. Hey, did you see Aiden? He fell asleep with his hand down his pants again. Ryan’s taking pictures.”

That night was the beginning of the four of us: me, Jenna, Nicky, and Evan. We sprawled ourselves on the beer-soaked kitchen floor, cups and ping pong balls littering the ceramic tile, Evan playing Jason Aldean on his guitar while we turned up the rest of the moonshine. We slept there, in a pile, Evan’s voice singing “Constellations” slipping into my dreams.

By my sophomore year of college, my sister, Lindsay, had long disappeared. She left Lockwood Gap one afternoon and never came back, and nobody, including me, missed her. Or at least, that's what I told myself. Weekends at Evan's were better than any drug I could've bought on my college campus. I came home every Friday night, stopped going to Chattanooga to visit Ryan, and we broke up not long after that. I didn't care. I didn't need Ryan. This is what I needed: beer pong, Guitar Hero, campfires, Evan's parents' hot tub in the dead of winter, moonshine. I needed those nights where the four of us danced in our swimsuits in the living room to country songs about trucks, boots, and whiskey, lined up every kind of liquor we could think of on the pong table. Evan's mom and stepdad knew we did nothing but get fucked up in the basement, but they kept to their side of the house, and we kept to ours. Jenna was more steady than she ever was. She still disappeared from time to time, gone for a few days, a week maybe, before she resurfaced. We didn't know where she went, and no one asked.

When we were too drunk to move, we resigned ourselves to the sectional couch that was stained with beer and reeked of weed. We'd watch cartoons until someone led the march to Evan's bedroom, and would all pile in his king-size bed, sleep in a heap. Somewhere between the whiskey and beer I chased it with, I knew, unlike before, I would still be standing on the tracks when the impact hit, and would be left shattered and destroyed. I knew it was a matter of time before she left again, and I knew it would break the rest of us entirely.

We were driving home from Waffle House one night, the one just across the state line, when Evan swerved into a ditch of the A. P. Carter Highway, slammed on his brakes, and demanded we all get out. It was the middle of winter, and starting to snow.

“Evan, what the *fuck*?” Nicky screeched. “I’m wearing my good shoes, and it’s muddy.”

“Where are we going?” Jenna whined, pulling her coat tighter around her tiny body.

And then I saw it. The swinging bridge. The swinging bridge I played on in middle school. The swinging bridge my sister had been baptized underneath. The swinging bridge we would spend the rest of that night on, swaying, laughing, throwing cigarettes in the river, Evan chasing Jenna up and down the broken planks, and me and Nick chasing whiskey with beer. The swinging bridge we would spend more nights on after that than we could have possibly counted. The swinging bridge we would all be sitting on not too far into the future with bottles of whiskey trying to convince ourselves we didn’t miss her. The swinging I hadn’t been to since before Ryan and me broke up, since the night his brother had proposed to Kelsey DeVinney standing underneath it. The swinging bridge I would find Jenna on right before she left, and the place I would find her when she finally came home years from then. The swinging bridge that would be more of a magnetic north, more of a place we would keep returning to, than we could have ever known.

“Wanna take a walk?” Evan asked with a grin.

We walked through the mud, to the side of the river, where the steps to the swinging bridge led up from the ground. Nicky lit a cigarette as he stepped onto the bridge, handing his lighter back to Jenna. “I almost forgot about this place. I haven’t been here in so long. It’s gorgeous out here,” I marveled, staring up at the sky. You could see every silver dot in the sky.

Evan elbowed me and smiled. “Thought you might think so,” he said with a wink. “Crazy thing is, you walk a little less than a mile that way,” he pointed east of the bridge, “and you’re in my front yard.” Jenna sprawled out on the old wood and let her feet dangle off the side, still smoking her cigarette.

Jenna squealed as the bridge swayed rapidly back and forth. She held onto the sides, screaming when Evan jumped behind her and grabbed her by the waist. They smoked their cigarettes, and I sat in silence, feet over the edge, remembering a time before this when I spent weekends out here with Ryan and his brother and their friends, swimming in the river and forgetting there was another world outside of Lockwood Gap, Tennessee. It seems like another lifetime ago.

Jenna, Evan, and Nicky, this carefree, intoxicated state of mind where nothing else mattered, had consumed me. I followed her, as I always had, plunging head first after her, hanging on the hope that when I came out at the end, I would have something left.

\*

“Four is whores,” Nick said as we sat on the floor around a deck of cards, playing our favorite drinking game. Jenna and I raised our bottles in a toast and took a drink.

“It’s your turn, Nat,” Jenna told me, as I sat my bottle of Southern Comfort down on the carpet. I drew a Jack.

“Oh, seriously? Let’s just skip this one,” I complained.

“No!” Nicky protested. “ You can’t just skip ‘Never Have I Ever.’ It’s the best part of Kings.”

I groaned, and put up my three fingers. “Fine. Never have I ever been gay.”

“Screw you,” Nick said, as he put down a finger.

“Never have I ever kissed a dude.” Evan grinned.

We all scowled at him and put down a finger. “That’s getting lame. You say that every time!” Jenna grumbled. Evan just laughed and put a hand on her back. She rolled her eyes.

“Go, Nicky,” I said.

He smiled and looked straight at Jenna. “Okay. Never have I ever slept with Evan Patterson.”

My mouth dropped as Jenna squealed, “You little bitch!” as she lunged at Nicky. I just stared at her, wondering how everyone knew something I didn’t.

“I, uh... I have to pee,” I mumbled as I got up and walked out of the room.

“Don’t break the seal!” Nicky called after me.

Jenna followed me, as I knew she would. Before I could reach the bathroom door, I turned and looked at her. “You slept with Evan? And I’m the only one who doesn’t know?”

“Look, don’t blow this out of proportion,” she said, unconcerned. “I was going to tell you, we just hadn’t had a chance to talk yet.”

“You’re going to ruin everything,” I blurted out. “You’ll get bored. You’ll cheat on him, dump him, skip town. It’s what you do. You always run. And when it happens, you’re going to ruin everything.”

She narrowed her eyes at me and walked away, back into the living room, where Nicky was yelling, “Guys, get in here, now!” Nicky yelled. “It’s snowing outside!”

We ran back into the living room and to the window where Nicky and Evan had pressed their noses against the cool glass to witness the falling white flakes traveling

from the sky to the ground, jumping up and down like we were in the seventh grade and had never seen snow in the mountains of Tennessee.

Jenna smiled at me from across the yard and laughed. She came running at me full speed, and tackled me into the snow, laughing, shouting over and over, “You’re my best friend; you’re my best friend!” We were snowed in for two days.

\*

I started counting the weekends after that, waiting for her to leave again, waiting for the whole thing to be over. My phone rang one Thursday night at two in the morning. It was Jenna, begging me to come home, to meet her at the bridge, and I drove all the way from Middle Tennessee State to Lockwood Gap in the middle of the night. I could see her silhouette when I arrived at the bridge, her feet hanging over the side, a puff of smoke above her head. It was almost sunrise. I sat down beside her and slid my arms around her. For a long time, neither of us said a word. She ran the palms of her hands over her face, wiped a tear beneath her eye, and looked at me. With a snuffle, she asked me, “You know on *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* when Holly tells Freddy she has the mean reds?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you ever get the mean reds? Where you’re afraid and you don’t know what you’re afraid of?” Then I saw the second engagement ring I’d seen on Jenna Anderson’s skinny finger.

“Did Evan give you that?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I just didn’t know what to say, and his family was watching. You can’t say no to somebody when they propose in front of their family. Jesus. I don’t want to marry him.”



“So what, you’re marrying him out of politeness?”

“Charlie is going to kill me if he finds out,” she whispered.

“What does Charlie have to do with this?”

“I’ve been sleeping with Charlie for the past three months,” she said.

We sat in silence for a long time, her chain smoking, me just sitting beside her, before I drove her home. Six days later, she was gone.

\*

There are four empty bottles of whiskey rolling softly back and forth on the swinging bridge as it sways from the movement of my feet dangling over the edge. There’s one bottle for each of us—one for me, one for Nicky, one for Evan. One for her, even though she’s gone. I take a draw from my cigarette, only halfway smoked, and then throw it in the water anyway, listening to the hissing it makes when it hits the water. I never smoked until she left.

Evan’s nearly passed out a few feet away, legs hanging over the side of the bridge, facing the stars like he’s looking for her in them. Nicky is sitting up, quiet, and I know he’s thinking the same as me, that he misses her, even if he doesn’t say it.

I spot a last shot of whiskey in one of the bottles I thought was empty, reach over and turn it up to the skies. Evan is still studying the stars intently, like there’s an answer for all of us spelled out in the heavens somewhere. I’m grateful for the burn that travels down my throat as I toss the now empty bottle into the river and look over at Nick.

“Nicky?” I whisper.

“What?” He doesn’t turn to look at me.

“She’s done this before. Maybe we’ll wake up tomorrow and—”

“Don’t, Natalie,” he cuts me off. “This isn’t like other times. She’s never gotten on a plane. She’s never left a note. She’s never been gone longer than a couple weeks. And maybe she’s left without saying bye to you before, but she always tells me. Can we just not fucking talk about it for once? God.”

“She’s our best friend, Nicky.”

“Not anymore.”

“Admit it, Nick. Out loud. Say you miss her.”

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “I won’t. And I don’t.” He still won’t look at me.

I think of the note we found last week when we went to pick her up for the weekend road trip to Tallahassee. Four unused Maroon 5 tickets still sat in a sealed envelope in Nick’s car. The note wasn’t even addressed to us; it was to her mama, who was out of town until the following Monday. We found it when she didn’t answer the door and I used the spare key under the garden gnome to let myself in. It was sitting on the kitchen table, like a casual note that might read *out for a jog*, but instead: “*Mama, I’m so sorry to leave you like this. I have to leave, to start over somewhere else, and I can’t say goodbye. I took Daddy’s truck to the airport. The keys are in the glove compartment and the passenger door is unlocked. I’m sorry. I love you.*” I had memorized that note, read it over and over in my mind.

I throw another one of the bottles in the river. The sound of the glass breaking against the rocks echoes in the still woods. I try to push the memories from the airport out of my head, but they surface anyway: Evan plowing through the checkout line and bribing Allison McArthur with a fifty dollar bill and the promise of a joint to tell him which plane Jenna got on. The look of disdain Nick wore as we stood there and watched

Evan crumple onto a bench when we saw the schedule that read *Atlanta Flight 674, American Airlines, Departed*. Me, holding all six-foot-five feet of Evan in my arms while he kept repeating, “We were gonna get married,” over and over. Me, being able to muster no encouraging words, nothing except, “She was my best friend.”

Evan’s not crying now though. I am. Nicky takes two cigarettes out from the pack sitting beside the empty Crown bottles. He hands me one and puts the other between his lips. He moves closer and slides his arm around my shoulders.

“I miss her too, Natalie,” he finally says.

I puff smoke in his face but don’t apologize as I lean my head on his shoulder and swing my feet over the edge of the bridge. It moves back and forth, back and forth, and it reminds me for a moment of when my mama used to rock me to sleep when I was little. I close my eyes and move back and forth with it, like it’s trying to rock me in a vain attempt of solace.

\*

I stand on the railroad tracks in the darkness, adjacent from Jenna’s parents’ house, nothing but the sound of the crickets and the still of the night. I can see one coming in the distance, the light piercing through me. I squint. I stand with one foot on either side of the track, barefoot, so my boots don’t slip. I wait.

Just a few feet away, I fall off the side, land in the rocks, let the swift motion blow like wind through me. I stand to my feet, slide my boots back on, wait for just the right second, and jump. I cling onto a handle on a car and ride the train from Jenna’s house back to mine.

## CHAPTER VI

### ERIC PARKER'S DAUGHTER

#### **Woman Found Dead in Home**

November 14, 1998

Lockswood Gap Times article by Amber Stevens

Yesterday afternoon, November 13, Reverend Eric Parker's wife, Marcia Parker, was found dead in her home. Parker died from a gunshot wound. Police believe her death to have been a suicide, and Sheriff Patterson has closed further investigation.

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She always smelled like cigarettes. When Lindsay Parker came to church every Sunday morning, her hair, her clothes, her skin filled the surrounding air with the stench of Marlboro Lights. She never tried to cover the smell, like maybe she wanted people to notice during fellowship time, to crinkle their noses in disgust as they stuck out their hands and greeted her out of obligation. Like she wanted them to notice that she reeked like an ashtray. Even now that she's gone, years later, I still associate the stench of cigarettes with her each time I catch a whiff of it in the crisp fall air at a Friday night football game or sitting at the one bar within driving distance of Lockswood Gap. Sometimes I buy a pack, smoke them real slow, sniffing my hand and my clothes after I flick out the butt and pretend it's her hands and her clothes I'm inhaling.

*Have you been smoking again, Tommy?* my wife will say when she comes home. I always lie and say no, just like I lie when I tell her she's the only girl I've ever loved.

I called Lindsay Marcia Parker my best friend for almost twenty years. I don't remember how we met, the first conversation we had, or when I realized I was in love with her, but I do remember playing house when we were in kindergarten in the same living room her mama shot herself in when we were fourteen years old, and I do remember sitting next to her at that funeral while she wailed louder than anyone I've ever heard in my life. I held her hand at the cemetery as they lowered her mama's casket into the dirt, listened to her daddy read from Psalms. Half the town showed up. Sheriff Patterson put his hand on his heart, and I watched tears fill his eyes; Mr. Broadwater's lip trembled when Reverend Parker said "amen;" and Lindsay's sister, Natalie, was standing next to Mrs. Cockerell and holding Mrs. Cockerell's bigger hand in her tiny one, not understanding that her mama wasn't coming back.

I think that was when Lindsay really started to hate Lockswood Gap. This town is enclosed in the mountains, locked away like a safe haven where nothing can destroy you like it can out there in the big world. I love the smell of the river after it rains, sitting on the creek in the woods in the summer, driving four-wheelers down the A. P. Carter Highway. I love the downtown that's been in near-ruins for the past two decades and the ghost stories about the courthouse being built on an old cemetery. They say more people are buried in this town than living in it because no one leaves. Folks might talk about leaving, might scheme it up, but they don't, and even if they do, they come back. Lindsay was the first person I ever knew who was consumed with thoughts of moving away from

here. I knew one day she would make it out of here, and I knew that one day, when she did, I would be able to let her go somehow.

She wasn't always like that—smoking cigarettes before church, getting drunk on Saturday nights, fucking any guy who would climb on top of her in his truck. When we were kids, back before Mrs. Parker died, she was this perfect, follow-the-rules type of girl. She didn't swear like the other kids in the fifth grade, right after we'd learned what damn, fuck, and bitch meant and dared to speak them out loud for the first time. She carried a Bible around, like she was afraid her daddy might catch her without it. After that funeral, the sweaters and past-the-knee skirts were gone, and instead, she started short skirts and high heels and low-cut tops. Mr. Brickey, the principal at the middle school, told her daddy she'd been sneaking clothes in her backpack and changing in the girls' room before class started, and that those weren't clothes a fourteen-year-old ought to be wearing. Reverend Parker tore Lindsay's ass up for that one, but she kept doing it, kept getting sent to the principal's office until eventually, I think maybe he gave up. Her tight bun was gone, and her hair was as free as she was, and even at fourteen years old, I knew I'd never see another girl as beautiful as she was.

There's an old picture frame underneath my mattress my wife and I sleep on every night. Smiling back from the photo behind the glass, the glass that sometimes reminds me of a museum case, like it's fossilizing our friendship, are me and Lindsay, my arm around her, standing on the football field in my uniform after we won state our junior year. When my wife isn't home, I take it out, stare at it more than I should, and wonder what would have happened if I had married Lindsay instead, when I had the chance—if I even did have the chance. I think about how much I knew about her, and yet,

how little I still knew her. She didn't believe in anything; she had no hope. She was dark and cold, and even though I spent most of my life as her best friend, I have a hard time remembering the warm child she once was. I knew her favorite color was red and her favorite band was Mayday Parade. The polish on her fingernails was always chipped, and the necklace she wore around her neck with the silver half-circle was the one I watched her lean over and remove from her mother's corpse after the funeral was over. I knew that before her mother died, they used to watch *It's a Wonderful Life* every Christmas Eve, and that until she left Lockwood Gap, she continued that tradition alone in her room every year. I also knew that even though the whole town believed Marcia Parker killed herself, she didn't.

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#### **Police Interview, November 13, 1998.**

**Sheriff Jim Patterson:** What is your relation to the Parkers?

**Carol McMurray:** Oh, I've been their neighbor for years.

**JP:** And you heard the shot fired yesterday afternoon. Is that correct?

**CM:** I did. I heard it and at first thought maybe somebody was just shootin' targets or somethin' in the backyard, but then when I come outside, I seen Reverend Parker outside running towards the front door on his porch.

**JP:** And then what happened?

**CM:** I heard a holler from him, and then some kids cryin'. Went to the door to see what was goin' on, and I seen Natalie, Lindsay, and that Blackwater boy she's always with, and they was standin' in the living room over Marcia's body. Awful. Imagine comin' downstairs from playin' and seein' yer mama dead there on the floor. Selfish woman.

**JP:** Do you believe Mrs. Parker was stable? Did you ever see anything that suggested otherwise?

**CM:** That woman was plumb nuts, I'm tellin' ya. Reverend Parker is a saint for stayin' married to 'er. She was havin' some kinda affair if you ask me.

**JP:** Why do you say that?

**CM:** She had bruises sometimes and such things, and you know Reverend ain't layin' a hand on her. Somebody else was, maybe. I don't know, but she seems like she ain't all there, if you know what I mean. Seemed.

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I was there in the house the day Mrs. Parker shot herself, but I wasn't downstairs. Lindsay was. Reverend Parker didn't know that, but Lindsay was crouched at the top of the stairs, and she heard everything. She saw most of it, too. He was just too distracted to notice. It was a month after the funeral before Lindsay told me what she saw.

She climbed in my bedroom window one night from the tree that stood beside it and knocked on the glass. I remember getting out of my bed and turning on the lamp and seeing her face pressed against the closed window. "Open up," she said through the barrier.

I opened the window, and when she climbed inside, I saw blood all over her t-shirt, stains on her jeans. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Got in a fight," she mumbled as she pulled her sneakers off her feet and threw them at the foot of my bed.

"With who? Is your nose broken?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes, my dad gets mad at me."



“Your *dad* did this to you?” I looked her up and down, blood on her clothes, bruises I hadn’t noticed before on her upper arms. “Why would he do that? How long has he been hitting you?”

“Since Mama’s funeral, pretty much.” She said it flatly with a shrug, like she thought no one cared and no one should.

“Why? Has he...touched you—or, you know—anything?”

She shook her head. “No, not like that. He got mad at me after the funeral, and we’ve been fighting since then. When he gets really mad, he just...”

“Beats you?” I interjected, not understanding why she was so calm.

“Yeah, I guess. Yeah. It doesn’t hurt that bad.”

I wanted to ask her why she hadn’t told anyone, why she was so passive about it, why she was climbing in my window instead of going to the police station. Instead, I asked, “Why does he beat you?”

“Because I told him I saw how Mama really died.”

“Your mama killed herself, Lindsay. Everybody knows that. The paper said it.”

“That Stevens girl writes all kinds of shit that isn’t true. That newspaper doesn’t even sound like a real damn paper.”

“Lindsay, what are you even talking about right now?”

“Mama didn’t kill herself. Dad killed her.”

I stopped for a minute, staring at her, trying to wrap my fourteen-year-old brain around what she just said. “Your dad was outside, Lindsay,” was all I could whisper.

“No, he wasn’t. He was inside. He was inside, and they were arguing, like they always did, and she was crying, and he pushed her. She hit the wall really hard and fell

down, and he went over and started kicking her while she cried. I think they'd been fighting for a while, but maybe we couldn't hear it upstairs because we had the TV on so loud because I could still hear the movie from the stairs. She kept crying, and he told her to stop, but she didn't. She said she was going to leave him and take us with her. I watched him, Tommy; he slapped her again and left her there on the floor in the living room, and when he came back, he had two of his handguns with him..."

I watched her remembering as she trailed off. She sounded like someone repeating back a dream they couldn't quite remember all the details to. She sat up in my bed, pulled her knees up to her chin.

"And then," she continued, her voice shaking, "then, he held one to her temple, and made her put her hand on the other and shove it in her own mouth, and he told her either she pulled her trigger, or he was gonna pull his. He was right by the side door. He stood on the back porch with his gun pointed at her and the back door open, and when she pulled hers, he went running around the side of the house like he'd been outside the whole time."

"Holy God." I didn't know what else to say, and I don't know why I asked the next question, but I did. Maybe I thought she was making it up. "What did your dad do with his gun, then? The one he was holding?"

"Threw it under the porch. I saw him crawl under there and get it later that night, and I told him I saw the whole thing. That's when he started hitting me."

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked her. I didn't know what to do, how to answer, how to process what she was telling me.

“Because I can’t tell anyone else. No one else would believe me. The police aren’t gonna believe a fourteen-year-old girl that everybody knows has never gotten along with her dad anyway. And Sheriff Patterson is my dad’s friend and a deacon at church. Why do you think the case got shut so quickly? He’s won’t believe me over him. But I knew you would believe me.”

“What about these bruises, all this blood? Wouldn’t they believe you then?”

“Fourteen-year-olds don’t turn their daddies in for child abuse, Tommy.”

She was right. I don’t know if it was because I respected her decision to keep it between her and her dad or if it was because I was too scared to turn him in myself, but I never told anyone about Mrs. Parker’s death or Lindsay’s bruises. I think maybe for a while at least, I thought she was lying about the whole thing, until I was at her house one day and heard her in the next room exchanging screams with her father. I heard him hit her, heard the impact and noise his hand made on her flesh, heard her yell but not cry. I heard her threaten to go to the police about his killing Mrs. Parker, and I heard him laugh and tell her the day she told anyone was the day he’d kill her too. *No one would believe you anyway*, he said.

And so for years, I let her walk around town with her head held high with clothes that covered bruises and scabs while all the girls called her a whore, all the boys screwed her and bragged about what an easy lay she was, and all the women followed her with their disapproving eyes and gossiped, calling it “a prayer request.” She didn’t have any friends; she didn’t have anyone or anything, save me. She’d get drunk on Saturday night, sleep with some sleezebag, and then show up at her father’s church Sunday morning. I think it was her way of proving they didn’t get to her. It made them uncomfortable to see

her in church each week, and yet they would have condemned her even more if she wasn't there. She didn't sing the songs, didn't listen to a word her father said. It was about the presence, about letting them know that she knew what they thought, and she didn't care. And for years, I let her follow that routine, never telling her how desperately in love with her I was, never trying, not really, to get her out—because I knew once she was gone, she'd never come back.

The day Lindsay was baptized, back in the fourth grade, the water was high and muddy. It had just rained the whole week before, and it caused a lot of the dirt and mud to wash down into the Moccasin Creek. We congregated right by where the swinging bridge stretches across, to watch the pastor baptize his daughter; and even though the water had turned a light brown color, they went through with the baptism as planned. When Lindsay came up, washed anew in the blood of Christ, her clothes were soiled with dirt. Sometimes I think maybe that afternoon should've been some kind of omen. Like maybe you can't blame her for being ruined if you baptize her in dirty water and kill her mama a few years later.

She made it out eventually, made it as far as Pittsburgh. I drove her and left her there with all the money she had and some of mine. I visited her once after that, three or four years after she'd left, drove all night not long before I proposed to my wife. I had to see her one more time. I remember walking into the Déjà Vu club and staring at the glitter all over the floor. I'd never been in a strip club before that.

After ten minutes of begging and persuasion, I convinced a waitress who looked oddly familiar to go backstage and tell Lindsay Tommy Blackwater was here. I was afraid she wouldn't care, wouldn't come out at all, but she came running out, dodging the

tables and the drinks, the men whistling and hooting, dressed in a sequined lingerie outfit. A squeal escaped her throat, a noise I hadn't heard since we were fourteen years old. We spent all night together, wrapped up in each other, and I promised her I was going to back long enough to straighten out my affairs, and then I'd come back for her and we'd go somewhere together. I told her I loved Lockwood Gap, but I loved her more. She kissed me, and I drove off in my car, headed back for that Tennessee- Georgia state line. That was the last time I saw her alive.

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### **Local Missing Girl Found Dead in Pittsburgh Dumpster Behind Bar**

April 23, 2013

Lockwood Gap Times article by Amber Stevens

Pittsburgh police found a woman Thursday afternoon in a dumpster behind the Déjà Vu night club. Lindsay Parker, listed for the past five years as a Lockwood Gap, TN missing person, was identified two days later by Déjà Vu manager Cassie Thomas. Parker was reported to have marks around her neck police believe to be rope burns. Police believe Parker's death to have been a result of a drug deal disagreement. They are further investigating the murder. Parker was the daughter of Lockwood Gap Baptist Church's Reverend Eric Parker.

### **Man Enters Lockwood Gap Baptist Church with Rifle and Fires Shots**

June 23, 2015

Lockwood Gap Times article by Amber Stevens

Yesterday morning at Lockwood Gap Baptist Church, churchgoers were sent into panic when Tommy Blackwater interrupted the service by coming in the main

entrance holding a hunting rifle. Blackwater fired three shots at Reverend Eric Parker before he was apprehended and arrested by Deacon/Sheriff Roger Patterson. Reverend Parker was mildly injured by the second shot and transported to Chattanooga Hospital. Sheriff Patterson reported that the first and third shots fired hit the baptistery, which in turn flooded the front of the church. The Lockwood Gap Baptist congregation asks for donations to repair the flooring and baptistery damaged by the incident.

## CHAPTER VII

SNAPSHOTS: BY JACK ANDERSON<sup>1</sup>

### **Your Brother's Wedding**

When your brother got married, you stood up as the best man, hands folded tight, watching vows exchanged. You told me later that before he walked out with the groomsmen, he let a tear slip down his face, into his beard, and you hit him on the back and told him to “man up.” There was no appropriate place for a man to cry. When I stood up as your best man, years later, watched you exchange the same vows with Katie, your face was stone cold: no smile, no warmth, cloaked in obligation rather than love. Her voice shook when she said she promised to love you all her life; I could've heard the smile in her voice even if I wasn't able to see it spread across her face.

### **Tractor**

That tractor in your daddy's barn is the same one that killed your Uncle Gerald. Sometimes you still get on it and ride around in the backyard that's no longer a farm.

### **Braves Game, 1980**

We were just kids when my daddy took us to that Braves game in Atlanta, the one where they beat the Marlins by one run in the ninth inning. It rained during the fifth, and

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<sup>1</sup> after Michael Ondaatje

most people went home, but we didn't—my daddy asked a janitor in the stadium for two huge trash bags, and we poked holes in them for our arms and heads, like ponchos, waited out the rain. We were glad, too, because that last home run Dale Murphy knocked out was beautiful. I still have the picture we took on that day, and I still remember walking to the car, talking about baseball, the girls we were gonna marry one day, and the lives we were going to lead. We were still best friends then.

### **Fried Corn**

You were eight when your daddy started hitting your mama. I came home with you from church for lunch. I saw the whole thing. She yelled at your daddy to quit watching football, told him lunch was ready. When he didn't come, she yelled again. When he got up and starting hitting the shit out of her, striking her in her ear that she can now only partially hear out of, she took the fried corn off the stove and poured the hot, slimy corn mixture over his head. I looked at you, terrified, and later when I asked you if you were okay, you told me you were. You said your mama deserved it.

### **Secret Habits**

I know that when you're self-conscious, you put your right hand on your belt buckle. When you're trying not to be sad, too proud to show your thoughts, you dig the heel of your hunting boot into the dirt, or slide it across the floor. You shoot deer in the woods not because you like the taste of the pulled meat in your stew, but because you're angry.



## **Overheard**

I came into the weight room during your planning period one Friday before a big home game, heard: “Oh, yeah, right there.” And then there was screaming, moaning. The sound of her ass being slapped repeatedly. I don’t know who it was, but I know it was a student. And I know it wasn’t your wife.

## **The Baby Your Wife Gave Away**

It was my wife’s idea when Katie got pregnant to send her to live with her uncle, telling you she had taken that internship in North Carolina. She promised she’d be back in seven months, and when you didn’t try to visit, she thought it was because you didn’t care, but you proposed to her when she got back. They still think it’s a secret—my wife, and your wife. They think you don’t know that the daughter Karen and I are raising is yours and Katie’s. But I told you; I told you the night she told us she was pregnant, the night your wife convinced us to adopt your baby so you would stay with her. You wanted to leave her; you told me you did, but I told you you couldn’t leave a woman who loved you enough to let her best friends adopt her baby. You were glad when we packed up our lives, moved to Texas. You didn’t show it then, and you didn’t show how devastated you were when we had to come back, when we told you your daughter would be attending the school you taught at, would be in your history class and Katie’s English class. Her adoptive mother two doors down from her birth mother’s. Katie believing neither she nor you have any idea. Sometimes when I come to the school to bring Karen lunch, I pass by your classroom door on the way to hers, and I see the way you look at our daughter: like maybe you wish you could undo it.

### **State Championship, 2009**

You led those boys to the first state championship since we were Blue Devils. I stood in the stands, thinking how for just a moment there, watching that smile erupt on your face, I could see the little boy from the Braves game nineteen years ago. You hung that championship banner high in the gym, next the All-State one from decades before with your name on it. I was proud of you, Corey.

### **Just My Opinion**

I think somewhere underneath that hard, leather exterior you built for yourself; somewhere past the Skoal-soaked cans, the beer bottles in the trash can, the screams you unleash on your wife; somewhere behind that cocky smile reserved for those you feel you're better than, you're a human being, maybe, that just wishes he could have done things differently.

### **Five-Piece Dining Room Set**

I was thirty-seven when you started hitting your own wife. I came over one afternoon when you weren't home yet, walked into the house through the dining room at Katie's invitation. Here's what I saw: five chairs sitting at a table, the broken wood and legs scattered across the stained wood floor. I didn't ask her what happened. I could see it, playing out like a movie in my head: you slapping her across the face; her, defiant, like your mother, bringing the sixth chair down over your head, not bothering to pick up the pieces. I didn't speak to you for weeks, and I kept thinking how if I'd been there, I would've smashed the remaining five over your head, too.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THIS ROAD THAT LEADS TO NOWHERE

“Want to fly, you gotta cut loose all the shit that weighs you down.”

—*Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison

Lockwood Gap, like everywhere else in the South, was segregated downtown until the mid-sixties. We didn't have buses and trains to write “Black Seating” or “White Seating” on, but there were separate benches in the courtrooms, separate sections in the drugstore's grill. Separate pews in churches. If you look closely, you can still see the imprints where the signs discolored rectangles on the opal white courtroom's wall, the ones that whisper to you we aren't segregated like that anymore. Back then, you were black or you were white, and even if you were in between, you still had to choose one side or the other to sit on. They think it's different now, that they aren't segregated there anymore, that they're much more civilized, but they're wrong.

Now, it's not a matter of black skin or white skin because they all sit together in the only three churches that stand in Lockwood Gap, Tennessee. Now, it's a matter of which of those churches you go to—one of the two that both claim they're “First Baptist Church of Lockwood Gap,” or the Lockwood Gap Pentecostal. But you're denomination or the other, you choose one side to sit on, because just like you couldn't have an in-between skin tone back then, you can't say you don't believe in God now. It's just a matter of which church you sit in.

Lockswood Gap doesn't see in color, and they never have. They see in black and white, and I reckon they think that's all there is. But there's always a black to match that white, and more than that, there's a gray that blends them together.

Evan Patterson was the white. Charlie Miller was the black.

I'm the gray.

I'm tired of feeling like I have to choose one or the other. Like there's no third choice. So I ran. *You always run, eventually, Jenna*, Natalie said once. She was right. I always do.

Being with Charlie Miller is like watching a hurricane from the roof of a building. You know you should be hiding indoors, or miles away, even, but you're not. You're watching the storm, fascinated with where the winds lay the trees, where the lightning strikes, what the sky does after thunder shakes it. You crave it, want to be a part of it, until you find yourself diving head first into the waters that threaten to fill your lungs. You start to drown, come up for air, and you could swim to shore—but there's this part of you that loves the feeling of drowning. So you take a deep breath, and go back under.

Evan Patterson is that breath you manage in the middle of it all.

I left home almost two years ago, a third choice, running from the ring Evan left on my finger, the baby Charlie left in my stomach, and the feeling that there was more to life than smoking pot in a cornfield in Lockswood Gap. I left the keys to my daddy's truck in the glove compartment and boarded a plane that saved my life. There are things I wonder about: if Mama and Evan still go to dinner every Tuesday night at Broadwater's without me. If they still leave my tree stump I sat on every night by the bonfire out in the

field open, or if someone else sits there now. If Natalie ever forgave me. If my mama cried when she read my note. If Evan still loves me. I don't have to wonder about Nick.

The day I boarded that plane, I saw them. I had missed the flight to Houston, the one I wanted to be on. I was glad; it was too obvious anyway, so I was waiting for the flight to Charlotte. When they raced into that tiny airport parking lot, ran inside the double glass doors, like maybe they thought they were somehow going to catch me and stop me, I was still standing outside with my single suitcase, smoking a cigarette, debating which plane to buy a ticket to get on: Atlanta. Memphis. Charlotte. There were only so many connecting flights from the Gadsden Valley Regional Airport. They ran right past me. Not much earlier, when the blonde at the desk informed me I couldn't buy a ticket to a connecting Houston flight until later that afternoon, I paid her fifty bucks to tell anyone who came and asked that I had gotten on a plane to Atlanta.

I watched the exchange as they moved the short distance from that desk to the nearest flight departure screen. My best friend held my fiancée while he sobbed, and Nick watched them, disgusted, and I knew in that moment he would never forgive me. I walked half the circumference of the building, entered from the bottom near the baggage claim, and waited until I could see them splitting up in the parking lot, Evan in his own truck, Nick and Natalie in Daddy's truck. And then I walked back upstairs and bought a ticket to Charlotte.

The first thing I did was pawn the ring. The second thing I did was climb onto a cold table, listen to a vacuuming noise that came from a machine shoved up inside of me. That was the second of Charlie's babies that had lived inside of me, and the second to not make it out alive. The first time had been an accident. I hadn't even known I was

pregnant until I had miscarried. This time, I wanted to make sure it was gone. *You're tough as nails, baby*, my daddy used to tell me. I remembered that as I reached out for Natalie's hand and realized she wasn't there.

I was in Charlotte for seven months, working as a bartender at the TGI Friday's in the airport. I thought about a lot of things as I poured scotch for men in suits on business trips, Cosmopolitans for women in red lipstick having affairs with men who weren't their husbands, margaritas for sorority girls who had just turned 21. I thought about Natalie pouring beer into the creek over the swinging bridge and pretending like she had drunk it. I thought about the God they all believed in, about the first time I had met Natalie, at youth on Sunday morning at First Baptist Church of Lockwood Gap. About Al, the youth minister, telling us all not to touch each other because we would like it, grope each other, and fuck in the backseat of the church van. Maybe he was half right. One Wednesday night, Al caught me coming out of the storage room with Aiden Jacobs. I overheard Mr. Jacobs tell Aiden in the parking lot later that night that he shouldn't "associate with girls like Jenna Anderson." I thought about the day I decided I don't believe in God anymore, that maybe I just had one brain cell too many to buy into the bullshit Natalie's father preached every Sunday morning. And then, I thought about the one person who would understand exactly how I felt: Lindsay Parker.

It didn't take me long after my plane landed in Pittsburgh to find her. Lindsay was technically still a missing person in Lockwood Gap, but a few years back, Tommy Blackwater was at one of the bonfires out on the Canter Farm, and he let slip that she was in Pittsburgh. I don't think many people heard it, save me and maybe Aiden Jacobs and Daniel Clark, but I knew Natalie and Evan hadn't heard him. I knew Natalie had no

idea where her older sister was, and I knew she didn't care to know. I found Lindsay at the Déjà Vu club, working as a stripper. She didn't recognize me at first; I hadn't seen her since I was in middle school, before I'd left to move back to Texas. Three days later, I had moved onto the couch of her two-bedroom apartment she shared with another girl who worked at the club, and I was working as waitress seven nights a week.

Lindsay was as close as I could get to home without going home. She understood how you can hate the streets that all wind together into one huge circle, despise the two and half traffic lights Lockwood Gap was home to, yet miss watching the sun creep above the mountain's skyline in the morning. She didn't see life in black and white the way they did. She understood why my disbelief of God had changed from a disbelief of to a disbelief in—and what the difference was. She knew what it was like to pray to a God you hated, a God you blamed for everything that went wrong, a God you couldn't reconcile yourself with because he was the God of that town.

After almost a year in Pittsburgh, I stopped worrying Charlie would come to find me. For months, I was afraid every time I boarded a bus alone or walked down the street by myself after dark. I finally stopped being afraid he was going to round every corner, until one night when Tommy Blackwater showed up in Pittsburgh.

Tommy walked into the club one night and grabbed me by the arm, asking if I knew Lindsay Parker. I could tell he recognized me, but not even to place me in Lockwood Gap. I went backstage and sent her out, but I spent the rest of the night watching the doorway, terrified Charlie was going to walk in after him. I was afraid all the time.

I convinced myself I was losing it, told myself I needed to stop snorting so much coke after work with Lindsay, and then one night not too long after that, she came running over to me, nearly ripping her stockings on the edge of the bar and knocking over the tray I was carrying.

“Jesus, Lindsay, what the hell?”

“Your ex, Charlie. What does he look like? Don’t turn around, look at me, Jenna.”

I looked her in the eyes, and I could see the storm that was Charlie Miller. I couldn’t say anything. I pictured him, looming in the doorway, scanning the crowd. “Tall, big arms, black hair, sleeve tattoo...”

“Which arm?”

“Both.”

I didn’t have to look behind me to know he was exactly where I pictured him. I don’t know how I got from standing by the bar to the back alley where Lindsay’s hands were on my shoulders as I threw up in the dumpster. I woke up the next morning on Lindsay’s couch, watching her pack all of my things in my suitcase and two of her bags.

“What are you doing?” I asked her.

“Packing your stuff. I bought you a ticket to Tampa. Your flight leaves in four hours. He won’t think to look in Florida. God, no matter how far you run from Lockwood Gap, it’s never far enough, is it?”

I thought of her when I sat in the back of the taxi car that carried me from the Tampa airport across the Tampa Bay to Clearwater. I could see her face in the water as I stood in the Gulf waters, Natalie looking back at me out of her sister’s eyes, understanding me in a way Natalie never could. Lindsay understood that I needed to keep



running, and we didn't need to have a conversation about it. I didn't have to tell her I loved her, thank you, or that I would miss her. She knew all of that already. Lindsay didn't need every last detail of what Charlie had done to me: the night he forced me to take Molly with his friends and then put me in the bathtub and left me there when I wouldn't wake up; the miscarriage and the abortion; the first, second, or tenth times he had hit me; the nights I'd gone to Nicky's with bruises up and down my arms. Lindsay knew I was afraid of him, and that was enough for her to understand I needed to keep moving.

I called our old apartment five months after I had left Pittsburgh, and the third girl who lived with us, Amy, answered the phone. I didn't even know why we had a landline phone, but we did. "Is Lindsay around?"

"Jenna?"

"Yeah, girl, it's me. Is Lindsay there?"

"Jenna, baby, you didn't hear?"

"Hear what?"

"Where are you, anyway?"

"It doesn't matter. Just let me talk to Lindsay."

"Jesus, you don't tell someone this shit over the phone."

"Tell me *what*?"

"Lindsay's dead. They found her in dumpster a couple blocks away from the club not long after you left."

"What?"

“I don’t know, Jen. There was glass in her scalp. Red marks on her neck. Said she was probably strangled. Empty coke bag stuffed down the front of her dress. Police are saying it was a bad drug deal.”

I could hear the anger in my own voice when I said, “And why are you so goddamn calm about all this? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I’ve had my time to deal with it. I’ve had almost five months. You weren’t here. If you had been, you’d have had five months to deal with it too.”

I didn’t say goodbye to her. I hung up the phone. I didn’t change into my bathing suit either, but I walked down the pier and into the ocean’s tide, welcoming the sweat running down my face because it felt like the tears I couldn’t cry. For six days, I did nothing but sit in the tide in my clothes, watching the purple, blue, and green swirl together. I was running out of money fast, but all I could think about was Charlie in the bar, how he must have seen me talking to Lindsay, must have made eye contact with her, must have seen her take me outside. How he must have found her later, questioned her outside about where I was, and when she refused to tell him, how he must have taken a bottle out of the dumpster, brought it down over her head, spread the glass across her skull, and choked her until she couldn’t breathe anymore. I didn’t need Amy or the police or anyone else to fill in those blanks for me. Charlie Miller knew Natalie, and it’s likely he would’ve known what Lindsay looked like. Posters of her face were plastered all over town after she went missing. He found her. He killed her. And I knew it.

It probably hadn’t taken him long to figure out Lindsay had bought a plane ticket to Tampa and that she herself had never gotten on that plane. When I heard the door of

my small apartment open one morning as I lay on the bed with my back to the door, I didn't have to look to know it was him.

\*

When he first got here, I started counting the days. After forty-seven, I lost count, and now I don't know how long he's been here, but he's touched me every single day. All the running, all the plane tickets, all the people I hurt along the way, it was all for nothing, because now I'm back to the beginning. No matter where I run, I always end up right back here.

"Jenna? Jenna? Where the hell you at?"

I don't reply. I just sit on the couch, staring ahead at the wall. I think I've lost weight, but we don't have a scale, so I don't know how much. My clothes don't fit anymore. At least I don't think they do. I haven't gotten dressed in days. I don't remember the last time I showered or brushed my hair, but I think it was at least a week ago. I don't care.

"Jenna? You better answer me."

But I don't.

He finally finds me sitting in the living room. He looks angry, but I don't bother to ask why. He's always angry.

"You look disgusting," he whispers.

I just nod.

"Go get in the shower and clean yourself up. I want you to look nice tonight."

I get up and walk slowly into the bedroom, the bedroom that used to be mine. Now it's ours. I pull a nice dress out of the closet, some clean underwear from the dresser, and a towel from the closet in the hallway. I pull the bathroom door shut.

I'm glad when I don't have to look at him. I can barely even feel the water running over me. I'm almost positive he put something in my breakfast again this morning. I'm not going to ask. It doesn't even matter at this point. I don't remember when I stopped fighting, when I gave up hope the cops would come and find the pills and the cocaine in the dresser and take me away, too. I'd rather be in a jail cell than in this apartment. I dry off and dress myself, trying to remember how I got like this. Where I fucked it up. But it really doesn't matter, does it?

"Aren't you ready yet?" he yells through the bathroom door.

I open it, nod, and let him take me by the hand and lead me outside to his truck.

He starts driving toward the beach, but he doesn't say anything, and I don't either.

"Jenna? Jenna? Jenna!"

I finally pull my eyes away from the palm trees framed by the passenger window.

"What?"

"You don't wanna be with me anymore, do you?"

I don't say anything.

"Jenna, you fucking answer me. Why don't you wanna be with me?"

But I can't tell him, and I never could. That's why I left instead. He pulls over on the side of the road, turns around, and starts fishing in the back for something. I don't turn to look.

He pulls out a gun, points it at me, and cocks it. “Jenna Anderson, you better fucking answer me.”

I look at him, search him over, trying to summon up the first time I fell in love with him. Trying to figure out why I do still love him. Trying to remember why I can follow this road that leads to nowhere up and down the east coast, but I can’t open the truck door and walk away. “I’d rather die than be with you, Charlie. Go ahead. Pull it. Do it. I want you to.” That’s half true.

Instead, he turns the safety back on, shoves it in the floorboard under his legs, and keeps driving. “You know what? Here’s what we’re gonna do. I’m gonna drive us up here to that park you like so much, the one by the water. When we get there, I’m gonna sit there in the parking lot and pull this trigger. I don’t wanna be with someone who don’t love me back anyway, so I’ll put the bullet in my own head, and you can drive the truck back. I want you to live without me, and you can be responsible for my death and carry that around with you same as you do that stripper from Pittsburgh. What do you think about that?”

When we get to the park, he shifts the truck into park and looks over at me with his eyes all filled with tears, and for the first time, I realize I hope he does shoot himself. I decide not to care if he does or if he doesn’t. I watch him, like it’s playing out on the drive-in movie screen back home in Tennessee, like I’m not a part of it, just watching from a distance. He puts the barrel to his temple, and then the feigned tears start to move out of his steel gray eyes and land in his beard. He’s so caught up in his own dramatic monologue, so fucked up on the pills he swallowed before we left the apartment that he doesn’t notice when I reach behind my back and my fingers start to fumble with the lock.

I wait a moment, wait for him to close his eyes, ready for him to pull the damn trigger already, and as he cocks it, I jerk the door handle and start running as fast as I can. The *bang* I hear isn't the gun though. It's my own skull hitting the concrete.

\*

The darkness looks like my bathroom. I don't know how long it's been since I jumped out of the truck. Days, maybe. I resign myself to the darkness, too dizzy to stand up and turn on the light, ignoring my stomach that feels like it's eating itself from the inside out. I close my eyes, watch the reds and blues and yellows and greens swirling against the backs of my eyelids. Somehow, it reminds me of watching the fires we built out in the field. I open them again, focus on the white dots I can't see on the ceiling, but that I know are there. I place them above me, connect the dots like constellations in the sky, thinking about the Jack Johnson song Evan always sang, about watching the stars fall during the meteor shower that glittered over Lockwood Gap three years ago, think about lying on a beer-soaked kitchen floor and falling in love with Evan.

Charlie opens the door maybe every day or so, shoves a sandwich or something inside, and closes the door back. He's putting something in it, crushing pills and shoving the powder into the bread, maybe. It finally occurs to me to wonder where he's been using the bathroom or showering if he has me locked in here.

I decide to test it, and the next four sandwiches he shoves at me, I eat the meat inside and flush the bread down the toilet. I start to feel sober again. I wait until I hear the front door slam, hear him lock it from the outside, and then I flick on the lights and rummage through the cabinets. Toilet paper. Q-tips. Shaving cream. Empty shampoo

bottles. A flashlight. Soap bars. I settle on the flashlight, perch on the edge of the bathtub, and wait.

The door opens away from the bathtub, and when he opens the door what must have been hours later and sees that I'm not on the floor, he comes inside. I know the flashlight won't knock him out for long, but I don't need long. I just need to catch him off guard. He flicks on the lights, trying to figure out "where the damn fuck you're hiding," and I smash it on his head before he turns around. There's a wet rag in his hand, and I'm not sure what's on it, but I can smell it from across the bathroom. I lay it across his face.

His phone is plugged up by the bed, and I know I wouldn't get far on my own, so instead of going for the door, I go for the phone. He got rid of mine weeks ago. I don't know why I dial Nick's number instead of 911, but I do, and when he answers, I spit out the address of the apartment we've been living in, and hang up. When I turn around, Charlie is almost to the doorway of the bedroom, rag in hand. He smiles at me, shrugs, and holds up the cloth. "Did you think I was getting fancy, using Chloroform or something? It's just a rag. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

The next time I wake up, I'm in the bathtub, and this time it's filled with water. Did he drown me? Am I finally fucking dead?

I can't keep my eyes open. Try to stand up, but can't. Throw up. Head still hurts. Throw up again. Think of Natalie. Evan. Nick. Can almost hear Nick. Screaming. Sounds like Sheriff Patterson. Constellations. Dream of constellations. Can almost hear Nick screaming my name.

When I wake up this time, I'm in the back of an ambulance, Nick, Evan, Natalie, and Sheriff Patterson sitting beside me. The next time I wake up, I'm in my daddy's car,

watching the palm trees turn to pine trees, the beaches to mountains, and Clearwater, Florida, to Lockwood Gap, Tennessee. I don't remember being in the hospital in Florida or when my parents got there. I do remember waking up at my parents' house every night after that for two weeks straight, afraid Charlie was going to show back up on the front porch.

They told me Nick had panicked after my phone call and called Sheriff Patterson, Evan's daddy. Jim Patterson had driven all the way to Florida with Nick, Natalie, and Evan to find me. They'd called the local cops after Sheriff had busted the door in, found Charlie passed out on the bed and me unconscious on the bathroom floor. Charlie's in jail, awaiting a court date, still in Florida. Restraining orders are in place, and I'm not supposed to worry. But every time Mama drives down Lincoln Street, I'm fifteen years old and in love with the senior from two towns over in the Def Leopard t-shirt. Every time we pass the tattoo parlor that used to be the butcher shop by the Main Street First Baptist Church, I can see every line in those two sleeve tattoos, every color etched in his skin. I can smell him when I step outside in the mountain air. I can see Lindsay Parker when I pass the Baptist's Church's steps and when Natalie looks at me. Charlie, the memories of the past two years, they're everywhere, threatening to return and promising to stay gone, and I don't know which one I'm more afraid of.

As we sit around the same fire in the same field toasting with the same flasks, I realize I don't want this life anymore. It's not mine. It's tainted. I can't look at Natalie anymore knowing I'm the reason her big sister is dead. I can't look at Evan anymore and pretend like I don't see Charlie instead. And I can't look at Nick and convince myself he'll eventually forgive me. Most of all, I can't hear Def Leopard on the radio and not miss



Charlie because as much as I hate him, as much as I wished him dead, now that it feels like he is, I don't know how to live without him. I'm not sure how I ever did. I sip my whiskey, laugh like I always used to, and never tell them about the ghosts I see circling behind them, waiting to come for me.

I wait until they're all asleep on Evan's living room floor, like we're still in college or something, and I go into the bathroom. I shut the door, lock it tight, and pretend Charlie is on the other side. I open the mirror cabinet where Evan keeps all of his medicine and scan the bottle labels until I find the one I know he's not supposed to have: Oxytocin. I take it, shut the door, shove it in my jeans pocket, and go out the back door that faces away from my friends and the fire. Evan's house is close to the woods.

The walk to the swinging bridge is longer than I thought. The wind is hissing, warning me to go back, but I don't listen. The trees are swaying like they know what I'm going to do, but I tell them it's okay. I've thought this through already. I have.

I look up at the stars as my feet sink into the mud that leads up to the bridge. Careful. One foot in front of the other. The stars above me make a picture, like in the song. Maybe Evan will see me in the stars one day, too. Or maybe he already does. I'm not sure anymore.

It still creaks, just like it used to. Sways. I pretend like I can hear the sound the cigarette made when Nicky threw it over the side, like I can see Natalie's feet swinging back and forth, back and forth. Back and forth, just like the bridge. I kneel down, one hand clinging to the side to make sure I don't fall off. I don't want to drown.

I twist the bottle lid off and throw it into the water. I crush a few, snort them until my nose burns, then swallow the rest. I stretch out on the bridge before I lose

consciousness. I wonder how many times since I left this god-awful town I've woken up in strange places, and as I look up at the skies, I wonder where I'll wake up next as the bridge sways back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

## CHAPTER IX

### MAYBE NOT TODAY, MAYBE NOT TOMORROW

#### I. Alyssa Whitman

I shouldn't have called Kelsey, and I know it. She's my brother's ex-wife (almost), and the last thing he needs is his ex-wife meeting his girlfriend while his dad is dying in the hospital, but I had to. I need her. I put my phone back in my purse, and I sit by Dad's bed, holding his hand. The doctor says he doesn't have much longer. There are tubes and wires running everywhere, and I don't know what they do, but I know they're all that's keeping him alive. It makes me remember the nights we had to cook dinner for ourselves because he was passed out drunk, the months during high school we had to pay the rent on our tiny house out of our part-time job checks from Pizza Hut because he forgot. He's my dad, and I love him, I do, but maybe there's a part of me that's been ready to let go for a while now. Maybe there's a part of all of us.

"She doesn't need to be here, Alyssa," my older sister, Logan, says. She has an opinion about everything. The past week in the hospital with her has been exhausting, and I'm over it.

"Logan, she's our sister too, and she had a right to know Dad was dying," I argue, squeezing Dad's hand. I keep waiting for him to squeeze back.

“She’s our sister-*in-law*, ex-sister-in-law at that, and I didn’t say she didn’t have a right to know; I said she had no business being here and you had none calling and asking her.”

“It’s been two days, Logan, she’s probably not coming anyway. But I knew she wouldn’t come if I didn’t ask her to,” I tell her. She’s starting to seriously piss me off.

“That’s my point, Lyss,” she says. “When Andie gets here, she’s not going to like this.”

Our oldest sister, who couldn’t afford to take off work just yet to drive here from Birmingham, is waiting by the phone hours away. Logan is right. Andie will be pissed. I knew calling Kelsey and not just telling her, but asking her to come, had the potential to set off Whitman World War XVII, but I did it anyway, and I’m not sorry. My mom had left my dad when I was in the fifth grade, married Jennifer McConnell’s daddy, and ever since then, it’d just been me, Logan, and our brothers, Aaron and Ryan, living with Dad while he drank himself stupid and played the keyboard he had set up in the living room. Andie was off at college by then, so Logan took care of us, dressed us for school, and made us go to church every morning, even when we had to walk there. Then when Aaron was a freshman, he started dating Kelsey, and since Logan had always been more like a mother, Kelsey became more like a sister. She helped me with my homework after school; she fixed my hair for my eighth-grade prom; and I had been her maid of honor when she married my brother after their high school graduation. Even though I’d spent the last three years without her, I knew there was no way I could survive my dad finally dying without her. So I wasn’t sorry.

Logan's quiet now, playing with one of the bows on her skirt. Logan still wears skirts every day because we grew up Pentecostal, and even though Dad was a drunk, we were still expected to follow the rules. Aaron and Ryan didn't have to follow any rules, but we did. I stopped last year because I decided I don't believe it anymore. I believe in God and all, but Kelsey says God doesn't care whether I wear a skirt or jeans, and I think she's right. I wonder what Dad would think if he could see me now. He was in the nursing home for over a year, and when we did go see him, he didn't remember. I study him, gray hair, wrinkled skin. He was always so old.

"I miss her too, you know," Logan says quietly, and I figure she must mean Kelsey.

"No, you don't," I argue, crossing my arms across my chest, cleavage sticking out, and rubbing my red lips together. I wonder if she's jealous she can't wear colored lipstick. That's what happens when you decide not to be Pentecostal—you can wear whatever color you want.

"Yes, I do," she insists. Logan's wearing her serious face now. "Does she even know about Brandi?"

I nod. I told Kelsey about my brother's girlfriend the last time I talked to her, maybe a couple months ago, but I got the feeling she already knew. "She knows."

"Is she actually coming?"

I shrug. "I don't know. Maybe."

It's almost midnight now, and I know Logan has to work in the morning, so I tell her to go home, and I'll stay with Dad tonight. She hugs me, kisses Dad, and promises that she and her boyfriend, Seth, will be back the next morning. I curl up in a chair, trying

not to think about how this is my second semester of college, and I'm missing my finals; trying not to think about how much different everything would have been if Kelsey hadn't taken that internship in New York three years ago; and trying not to think about how much I miss my brother since that bitch of a girlfriend of his pulled him away from us, until finally, I drift off to sleep.

"Lyss?" I hear someone whispering my name, feel my hair moving off my face, someone's fingers stroking my head. I don't open my eyes just yet because I'm afraid if I do, it'll be a dream, and she won't be here.

"Kelsey?"

"I got here as fast as I could."

\*

We stay up the rest of the night talking, eating the Ben and Jerry's we went across the street to get from the quick stop that stays open 24/7. We sit by the window, eating Half-Baked and Cherry Garcia, me asking her every question I can think of, even though I know the answers to most of them already. I don't think I really believed she would come, and now that she's here, I can't remember what it was like before she left. I'm sitting sideways in my chair, licking my spoon, while she sits across from me, legs crossed, hands in lap, sitting real straight, all proper, and I think maybe that must be what she sits like at her real job. She has on a tight black dress even though I know she just got off a plane, all her makeup is on, and her hair is so perfectly curled that it looks like she touched it up in the airport bathroom. The Kelsey I remember was a mess. This one is so put together.

"Nice pants, by the way," she says to me with a wink.

“Why, thank you,” I say with a laugh. They’re the same pair she gave me years ago after I first told her I didn’t want to be Pentecostal anymore. All that time, and it took me until recently to be able to wear them in front of my sister, and stop sneaking them in my backpack to school every day and changing.

“How much longer until the divorce is final?” I ask her.

“Next month,” she tells me, swirling her fingers in her hair like she does when she’s thinking real hard about something.

“Why did you wait so long after he left to file the divorce papers?”

She shifts in her seat like she’s nervous, then says, “I wanted him to file them first.” She looks at her shoes. “He’s the one who walked out and moved back home without me.”

I don’t respond to that because I know my brother’s version is different, and I don’t want to argue about who left who anymore. “Why does it take so long? The divorce process?”

“You have to be legally separated for so long before the actual divorce goes through.”

You’d think I would know all that already, but I don’t, because ever since Brandi came along, Aaron doesn’t tell us anything. I watch Kelsey, looking out the window, and I wonder if she’s thinking she’s sorry. Sometimes when I think about how she left my brother, all of us, I want to hate her. I’m so pissed off when I remember how she missed my senior prom, my graduation, how she wasn’t there to help me move into my first dorm room last semester. I can’t really hate her, though. Not really.

“Did you let Aaron leave because you were having an affair with that editor guy?”

I ask.

She doesn't say anything back, just keeps staring out the window. I drop it.

“I'm sorry for not being here,” she finally says, almost in a whisper. I try to change the subject.

“Even Dad knew you would get out of here one day. Remember? You're pretty, young lady,” I say, imitating Dad's voice. “You wanna go to New York, huh? You look like you belong in New York.”

She laughs, and joins in with me: “The girl from New York is here! Aaron, you better marry that girl before she runs off to New York and leaves you behind!” We both stop suddenly, exchanging looks. “Guess that part's not funny anymore.” She hesitates a minute, then: “I worry sometimes about how people here talk about me. About me leaving him.” I ask what she means. “What do they say?”

I stare at her hard, thinking. “They say Kelsey DeVinney always does what she says she'll do. People talk about leaving, starting over. No one does it. You're the girl who got out.”

“I'm the girl who left your brother,” she argues.

“You're the girl who follows her dreams rather than her heart,” I correct her. It sounds cheesy, but it's true.

“Why aren't you mad at me, Lyss?”

“Why should I be?” I know why, but I ask anyway to show her how much I'm not.

“It was fucked up. All of it. What I did, all I put him through. It's so fucked up.”



It was fucked up. I don't answer her though, just stare at Dad. Before I realize it, I'm starting to cry, and she's behind me, arms around me. She doesn't say "It'll all be okay," or "Everything happens for a reason." She just says, "I love you, Alyssa."

\*

Kelsey's at her parents' house, Logan's pissed, and I'm in big trouble. "What do you mean, she's here? Have you told Aaron? Because I'm not going to do it."

"I'll tell him, Logan," I say, rolling my eyes. I have on pink lipstick today, big gold earrings, and really tight pants. I bet she's mad about that too.

Seth walks in and watches her doing her pacing routine. He's been carrying around a ring in his pocket for over a month and she doesn't know it, but I do—I helped pick it out.

"What did I miss?" he asks, confused.

"Kelsey's back," Logan blurts out.

"Does Aaron know?" His eyebrows raise up.

"No," Logan and I say together. I hate when we say stuff at the same time.

"Oh, this is going to be great!" Seth laughs, pumping his fist up, and setting his coffee down. "Brandi is going to *hit the roof!*"

"This isn't funny, Seth!" Logan snaps, still pacing, heels clicking on the floor. Her skirt is a few inches above her knees today. I wonder if Seth has already said something to her about it.

"Yeah, actually it is pretty funny," Seth says with a shrug, grinning.

"I can see her face, Seth," I tell him, picturing it like a bad Jerry Springer episode.

"What do you mean, Kelsey's here?" I screech in my best Brandi voice. "I'm

from Cantersville, bitch, and I'll fu—" Logan's long, brown hair snaps around as she turns her head and squeals:

"Language!" But I've pretty much gotten over that rule too. She always says that when I swear now, so sometimes I do it on purpose just because she's funny when she's mad. And also because I've decided I like the way the words sound coming out of my mouth.

"Isn't Cantersville the school where they shoved the broomsticks up their—" Seth starts.

"Yes, Seth, we've all heard the story, thanks," Logan cuts him off.

But Seth's moved on from the broomstick story, and now he's snapping his fingers, kicking his feet in his loafer shoes, singing, "Cruella Deville, Cruella Deville, if she doesn't scare you, no evil thing will. Something, something, something, something... *chill*. Cruella, Cruella, Deville..." He stops and turns to me, and says, "Too bad she didn't go on that fishing trip with us last month. Maybe we could have casually bumped into her and forgotten to throw her a lifejacket."

I cup my hands around my mouth, and shout, "Bitch overboard! Bitch overboard!" Seth and I are almost in tears, and I'm standing with my back to the door when he suddenly stops laughing. I jump and turn around. Aaron and Brandi are here. I think about how only skank-sluts spell names that should end in "y" with an "i" instead, and remind myself to tell Kelsey later.

"What's so funny?" Aaron asks, his hands shoved into his pockets. Brandi's are folded across her humongous boobs, and I'm pretty sure she isn't even wearing a bra. She's so gross.

“Nothing,” Seth says, shaking his head.

“We weren’t laughing,” I say, and then I wonder why I said that.

“Right,” Aaron says, moving towards Dad’s bed. It occurs to me that with all of the yelling about Kelsey and Brandi, we forgot about Dad, who’s right behind us. I feel bad for not focusing on him, but I’m also glad for the distraction. I don’t want to think about him dying.

“You look nice today, Brandi,” Logan tries. I wonder why she bothers.

“Uh-huh,” is all Brandi says, and she takes a seat under the window, props her feet up, and opens a magazine she pulls out of her Mary Poppins-sized purse. I wonder what else she’s got in there. A Nicholas Sparks book (Kelsey says that’s not real literature). Cheap lip gloss. A human heart, maybe.

“I like your shoes,” Logan tries again.

“Thanks,” Brandi replies without looking up from her copy of *Cosmopolitan*. I cringe at the caption “How to Arouse Him with Your Tongue,” and try not to think about my brother. So gross. Gross gross gross gross.

“Where are they from?” Logan keeps trying.

“Burlington,” Brandi says, rolling her eyes, licking her lips, and keeping her eyes on her nasty article. I wonder if she’s been divorced twice because she’s just such a bitch, or if there’s more to it than that. I decide it’s just because she’s a bitch.

“Whatever,” Logan mumbles, finally giving up.

“Has anyone else been by to see Dad?” Aaron asks. I look at Seth, who looks at Logan, who excuses herself to go get coffee downstairs.

“Like, uh, who?” I ask, trying not to bite my nails. I always do that when I’m nervous, and Aaron knows that. I shove my hands in my blue jean pockets, thankful I’m not Pentecostal anymore, and that I have pants with pockets to shove my liar hands into.

## II. Seth McCord

Aaron is here, and Alyssa looks guilty. She shoves her hands into her blue jean pockets, the ones Logan and I have tried to get her to stop wearing.

“I don’t know, it was just a question,” Aaron says, raising an eyebrow.

“Russ was here earlier this morning, but that’s about it,” I tell him.

“Why are you acting weird?” Aaron asks, directing his question to Alyssa, scrunching up his round face and glaring his eyes at her. I look down at him, his flannel shirt, his cowboy boots, and then down at myself in my button up shirt and khakis. I always feel dressed up next to him.

“Why are *you* acting weird?” Alyssa shoots back. I resist the urge to bury my face in my palms. She sounds like a third-grader. Aaron ignores it and goes to sit beside Brandi.

“Way to go, Alyssa!” I hiss once Aaron is on the other side of the room.

“Oh, right, because you’re such a good liar!” she shoots back.

I put my hand over my heart and feign shock. “I am a man of the Lord; I am not supposed to be a good liar!”

She waves her hand out in front of her, like a welcoming motion. “Okay, then, you should be the one trying to maintain peace, Man of the Lord.”

I look over at them, his hand on her knee, and for half a second, I think about it. She’s not Pentecostal, but unlike Kelsey, she makes us feel uncomfortable because we

are. “You know, some people are just too far gone, and there’s really nothing we can do but pray.” I move my hand from shoulder to shoulder, then head and stomach.

“We’re not Catholic,” Alyssa laughs.

“I know,” I say with a shrug. “It just seemed appropriate.”

And then, Holy God, Brandi speaks: “I really love that eye shadow, Alyssa,” she says. “What color is that?”

I look to Alyssa, cringing at the stupid, fake compliment exchange that is the extent of their conversations every single time, and I pray she won’t say something stupid, but of course, she does. “Bronze Ambition. I love your hair color, what number is that?”

“Okay,” I say, grabbing her by the arm and pulling her toward the door. “We’re going to go find that coffee!” Once we’re out in the hallway, I watch her still laughing, pleased with herself. I guess I shouldn’t come down on her too hard because I guess I was doing the same thing, just not as up front. “How old are you?” I ask her anyway.

“How old is she?” she snaps back at me. “She’s like 30 years old or something, divorced old hag. You’d think she could be respectful for just a minute.”

“Just try, okay? And I will too,” I promise her.

“Whatever,” she says, shaking her head, causing her earrings to hit the side of her face over and over. I remember the day she came home with pierced ears. Logan cried.

“Aaron was better off with Kelsey,” she’s saying. “I’m going to tell him she’s here.”

I put my hands on her shoulders and look her in the eyes. “Alyssa, do you remember when Aaron came back from New York? Do you remember how he showed

up drunk almost every night he came home, the flowers he sent her a year after he'd left, how he wore his wedding band even after the papers had been signed?"

She nods at me, and I know she is remembering the drunken mess of Aaron we all took care of after Kelsey refused to come home. "You remember the Kelsey that braided your hair, answered your calls in the middle of the night, the things she did for you growing up. But Aaron—Aaron remembers wearing his wedding band when he didn't have a wife."

Logan appears behind her, and asks, "What are y'all doing out here in the hall?"

I shake my head, and Alyssa nods hers toward the room. "Cruella," she says.

"You know, if I wasn't a God-fearing Christian woman, I'd smack the you know what out of her." I'm taken aback to hear these words come out of my girlfriend's mouth, but all I can do is laugh at the mental image of her whacking Brandi upside the head one good time.

"I believe the word you're looking for is hell," Alyssa says, "and I think God would forgive you."

We all know what's coming next, and sure enough, Logan takes her cue: "Language."

The doctor comes in a few hours later to tell them he doesn't think their dad will make it through the night. He tells them they should call anyone they need to, and I'm torn up inside as I watch Logan crying, holding her dad's hand. I wish I could do something, but I can't, so instead, I just hold her other hand.

Alyssa hangs up her phone and slides it in her back pocket. "Did you just call Aaron?" Logan asks her. I know she didn't, though. I know exactly who she had called.

“It was Kelsey. I need her. She’s on her way,” Alyssa tells us.

Logan’s too upset to protest. “Fine. Call Aaron and tell him she’s here and that he needs to be, too.”

Alyssa crosses her arms across her chest, and I try not to look at her cleavage she’s pushing up. Her neckline is entirely too low, and I want to tell her, but of course, I don’t. “I don’t want to,” Alyssa finally says. I expect a fight to break out between them over who has to call Aaron, but it doesn’t. Instead, Logan takes her phone from the side table, taps the screen a couple times, holds it to her face, and waits.

“Aaron? ... Yeah, it’s Dad. You need to get here as fast as you can... Yeah, they don’t think it’ll be much longer...I’m okay. Lyss is here... Okay... And Aaron—look, I don’t know how to tell you this, but uh—it’s Kelsey. She’s uh... Well, she’s here, Aaron.”

### **III. Nick McClellan**

I found Jenna lying unconscious on the swinging bridge over the creek four days ago. She had left Evan’s house in the middle of the night, stolen pills from his cabinet, and walked all the way down to the bridge. He said there were fifteen pills in the bottle the day before. When I found her, it was empty, and I didn’t know how many she swallowed, how many she snorted, and how many fell off the bridge and into the water.

Natalie, Mrs. Anderson, and I watched the them carry her off the bridge and onto a stretcher, put her in an ambulance, and the three of us, along with Natalie’s husband Ryan, have been sitting in this hospital room every day since. Well, alternating between Jenna’s room and Roger Whitman’s, Ryan’s dad. He had a stroke a few days before we

found Jenna. Evan won't come; he blames himself, says he can't look at her. I told him if she hadn't found his pills, she would've found them somewhere else.

She was missing for over two years, run off to Jesus-knows-where, and I've been fucking pissed at her every day she was gone. And then she calls me from Clearwater, Florida, of all places, after all that time, and we have to drive all the way there from Tennessee to find her. We pulled her out of a bathtub in some cheap apartment building, her boyfriend, Charlie, passed out drunk in the bed. She was locked in the bathroom. I don't remember how we got her out of there, or how we even found her, like I've blocked it out mentally or something. But I do remember Evan's dad, Sheriff Patterson, calling the local police and them arresting Charlie, and I remember the silent ride back to Lockwood Gap with a disoriented Jenna. I remember the dead stare in her eyes for the three weeks that followed. I knew she was going to do something dramatic. I just wouldn't have guessed snorting Oxy on the swinging bridge in the middle of May.

I look back at Jenna now, mumble to Mrs. Anderson and Natalie that I'm going down the hall to see the Whitmans, and shuffle out of the room.

Kelsey is back, too. I swear to God, it's like the few people who do leave this place always come back. Like a magnet that pulls them back in. She shouldn't have come home. She won't say it, no one will, but she's here for Aaron, and we all know that. She should have gotten on that plane to London and never looked back, changed her name again, and moved on with her life. She's too good to end up stuck here after everything she went through to get out.

When I walk into Roger's room, I find Kelsey and Alyssa wrapped in each other's arms like some dramatic *One Tree Hill* moment, and I remember how things were before



she left three years ago. How things were when we were all friends, when we could all be in the same room: me, her, Alyssa, Logan, Seth. Aaron. I walk over to the sink, quietly lean against it, not wanting to interrupt them. She's been in and out of here for days now, and I don't know how Aaron and Brandi haven't caught her here, but I hope they do. And then, right as I think it, Aaron appears in the doorway behind them, and I hold my fist to my mouth while he just stares at them, like he's trying to decide who he's more pissed at, his sister or his wife. I think it's his wife.

Kelsey looks at Aaron, but Aaron doesn't look at Kelsey as she makes her way over to me. Ryan walks up to his brother, hugs him, and looks over Aaron's shoulder at me. I try not to laugh. Instead, I lean over to Kelsey and whisper, "So, this is awkward."

She smirks, but doesn't look at me. "You know, nothing makes a situation more awkward than someone stating that it's awkward."

"The last time you saw him was when you signed the papers, right?"

She nods, looking at him across the room. "Yeah."

"How do you feel seeing him now?"

She lets out a small laugh and turns to me. "I've missed you, Nicky."

"I've missed you too, bitch. This is just one of those things where the circumstances surrounding it are so awful, you have to find something to laugh at," I tell her.

"I'm glad my life amuses you."

"It does," I assure her.

"I shouldn't be here. If she shows up here, all I've done is open the door for drama."

“Cruella, you mean?”

“Cruella? Brandi?”

“Yeah. That’s what we call her.” Kelsey claps her hand over her mouth, and I can see the corners of her mouth turned up behind it.

“Sure. Cruella.”

I put my arm around her, glad to have one friend home even if the other is comatose in an ICU room, and I say, “Kels, just because you open a door doesn’t mean a bitch has to walk through it.”

#### **IV. Aaron Whitman**

I stop just outside the hospital room and put my head to the wall. I think about praying, but I don’t. I wish I had a cigarette. Or a dip. But Brandi made me get rid of all that stuff. I haven’t seen her, Kelsey, since the night I threw my beer bottle at the wall, asking her—no, demanding her—to tell me what was going on with her and that editor. She just stood there, didn’t say anything, while I pleaded with her with my words and with my eyes. She hadn’t confirmed it or denied it, just said, “I don’t want to go home. I want to stay here. In New York.”

“Why, Kelsey?” I had asked her. “What’s here for you?”

“I want to take that full-time job. Harvey says if I want it, I need to go with him and the other junior editors on the trip to the London office. I want to go to London. I want to edit books. Everything is here for me. There’s nothing in Lockwood Gap.”

“If you go on that trip with that asshole editor, so help me God, I’ll be gone when you get back,” I had told her. I did her one better. I packed my bags before she packed hers, and I left. I told her if she didn’t follow me before that trip, I was done. She got on

her plane. I got on mine. She didn't want to leave New York then, so what the hell is she doing here now?

I smooth down my shirt, slap my face, and walk into the room. She's standing there, in a red dress, hair pulled back in a tight ponytail like she used to wear it when she would leave for work in New York, and I think about how she used to always wear it down, flying everywhere, tangled half the time. Her arms are wrapped around my sister, and it makes me angry all over again that she would stand there, comforting my sister, after she walked out on our family. She doesn't know I'm here, I realize, and I just stand there, aware that Seth, Logan, Nick, and Ryan are all watching me watch her. Alyssa looks up and sees me, and I take her in my arms for a minute, but I'm so mad at her, I let her go just as quickly, and I walk across the room to Dad.

"Hey, Nick," I try to say casually, since I haven't seen him in a while.

"Hey," he returns.

"Haven't seen ya in a while, buddy," I say, trying to smile. Don't look at Kelsey. Don't look at Kelsey.

"Haven't called me in a while, buddy," he snaps back. "Like two years a while."

She's looking at me, and I wonder if she's wondering why I cut Nick out of my life when she left. It doesn't matter.

I stand beside Dad, thinking of all the warnings he gave me about Kelsey DeVinney. He told me to marry her before she moved off to New York and left me, but that happened anyway. He told me she would never last in Lockswood Gap, Tennessee, and he'd been right about that, too. I stare at him now, and I feel bad that I'm not sad to see him in the hospital bed. I am, maybe, a little, but I'm also relieved. When I remember

my dad, I remember the birthdays he missed, the football games he was too drunk to come to, the mornings Logan made us walk all the way to church because Dad couldn't get out of bed and we couldn't drive. I think of that tiny house back near Moccasin River, falling apart at the foundation, the one we grew up in because he couldn't get off his ass and put down his whiskey long enough to go get a job. I love him. But I hate him as much as I love him. And maybe that's the way I feel about Kelsey, too.

I shove my hands in my pockets, wishing again I had a can of Red Seal in there to curl my fingers around, and I try not to look at her. She's smiling at Nick, and her lips are this deep color of red that matches her dress, and it reminds me of the night we all spent out on the river at the Canter Farm after graduation in those awful camping tents. She had been wearing red lipstick that night too, and I couldn't stop looking at her. I realize now I'm looking up at her more than I should, and I glue my eyes to the floor. My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I look down to see Brandi's face on my screen, calling. Shit. I'd forgotten I was going to have to tell her. Instead of answering it, I grab Alyssa by the arm and drag her out into the hallway, slamming the door to Dad's room behind me, suddenly even more furious than I had been when I'd gotten the call from Logan that she was here.

"Geez, Aaron, what gives?" my little sister whines, holding her arm.

"What the hell is she doing here? Why would you do this?" I yell.

"She's our sister; she deserves to be here!"

"She's not your sister, Alyssa. She's my ex-wife. She is not a part of this family anymore. Why is that so hard for you to understand?"

Alyssa doesn't say anything, just stands there, and it occurs to me I've never been able to make out the distinct shape of my sister's ass before, and it makes me uncomfortable. Her arms crossed over her chest, and I can also see way more of her boobs than I'm comfortable with. I wonder when she's going to get over this "recovering Pentecostal" stage. I'm tired of hearing Logan and Seth bitch about it.

"I love Kelsey," she finally says. "I will always love Kelsey."

"Let it go, Alyssa. It's over. It's been over. Dad is dying, and you had to drag her into all this and stir shit up. Tell her to get her ass back on a plane to New York before Brandi shows up here and freaks the fuck out."

"No."

"Alyssa! Brandi hates Kelsey! She *cannot* see her here!"

"Brandi doesn't even know Kelsey."

"You know what I mean. Get rid of her."

"I don't care if it upsets your little girlfriend. Kelsey stays."

"Alyssa—I love Brandi. I am going to marry Brandi, so you better get used to it and let go of whatever it is this is with you and Kelsey. I don't want Kelsey around. Period."

My little sister looked up at me in a way that almost broke my heart, or would have, if I hadn't been so pissed off. "You're—you're going to marry Brandi?"

I shrugged. "Yeah. I am. I love her."

"Why? She's awful."

"She's not awful. If the three of you would get over this fight, you would see that Brandi is kind, and generous, and—"

“Yeah, I’m sure I’d say that too if she gave me an iPad for my birthday and let me live in her three-story house in Colonial Heights for free. Generous.” She snorted.

“That’s not what I meant,” I tell her.

“I know what you meant. She takes care of you. You get to skip all the shit you and Kelsey went through. No loans, no tiny-ass house in Lockwood Gap up by the post office, no debt, no bills. You get to skip the messy part of being a newly married couple, Aaron. I get it. Brandi has money. Whatever.”

“I don’t love her because she has money,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Then what?” she starts to yell. “What is it? Why do you love her?”

“Because she would never leave me!” I scream back before I realize what I’ve said.

She stares at me, like she can’t believe what I just said. I look at her, pleading with her, and say, “Please. Please tell Kelsey to leave. I don’t want to tell Brandi she’s here.”

My sister looks back hard at me, her blue eyes forming ice inside of them, and she says, “I don’t give a fuck.” She walks back in the room, and I stand outside, imagining the look on my girlfriend’s face when I tell her my wife is back in town.

## **V. Logan Whitman**

I’m sitting with my boyfriend and my little sister in Dad’s hospital room, just waiting, like we have been for the past week. I’m tired of both of them and I’m tired of Kelsey being here. God says we shouldn’t hate, but right now, I hate Alyssa for calling her. She may have forgiven Kelsey, but I haven’t.

“Do you think he’s told her yet? About Kelsey?” Seth asks, popping M&Ms in his mouth. He only eats the green and blue ones. I love him, I do, but he is so odd sometimes.

“I don’t know, honey,” I say, rolling my eyes as I flip through pictures on my phone. They’re old ones. Of before Kelsey left.

“Has anyone been down the hall to check on Jenna?” Alyssa asks.

“Still unconscious,” Seth tells her. “Talked to Ryan this morning. Speaking of which, has anyone heard from Aaron today? Or Cruella?” he asks, throwing a red back in the bag.

“Stop calling her that,” I scold him, cutting my eyes at him. “It’s not nice.”

“She’s not nice,” he grumbles.

“Oh, just admit it, Logan, she’s a bitch,” Alyssa says with a smarty-pants tone.

“Language,” I tell her for the tenth time that day.

“Bitch,” she repeats, “she is a bitch.”

“Fine.” I give up. “She is. She’s a...B.”

“Bitch.”

But now I’ve already started, and I can’t stop, and it’s not very Christian-like, but I say, “She’s awful; she is, she’s Cruella Deville and if I wasn’t a God-fearing Christian, I swear, I’d—”

“Jesus would forgive you, dude,” she interrupts. I hate when she does that.

“I just can’t believe she would come in here and act like this.”

“I can’t believe Aaron is planning on marrying her,” my sister says. I stare at her.

“What did you say?”

“I can’t believe the two of you haven’t noticed what’s been going on for the past four days,” Seth interjects before Alyssa can elaborate.

“What are you talking about?” I snap.

“Kelsey still loves Aaron,” Seth says, then he pauses, like he’s waiting for a big reaction.

“What’s your point, honey?” I ask him, massaging my temples with my fingers. All this is making my head hurt.

“There’s a solution to all of this,” he tells us. “We get Kelsey and Aaron back together, and Brandi is skanky history, like Cantersville and their broomsticks.”

“Bitch overboard?” Alyssa grins, sitting forward in her seat, eyes big.

“Witch overboard,” Seth nods, grinning.

“Just say bitch, Seth,” Alyssa tells him as she rolls her eyes.

\*

We’re all sitting by Dad’s bed three nights later while Seth is at the church getting ready for the service in the morning, so for once, it’s just the three of us.

“The point is you could save us from the Wicked Witch of Cantersville with a simple yes or no,” Alyssa is telling Kelsey.

“Come on, no one can be that bad,” Kelsey protests with a laugh.

“The other day, she told Aaron he isn’t allowed to buy any books published by Raymond Brothers Publishing, just because you work there,” I tell her.

“He doesn’t even read,” Kelsey points out, but Alyssa tells her that isn’t the point.

“Fine,” she gives in, “I still love him. Okay? Are you happy?”

“Why did you leave then?” Alyssa bursts out.



“It doesn’t matter. He’s in love with what’s-her-face. And that’s fine.”

“Say her name, Kelsey,” Alyssa tells her.

“Fine. Brandi. He loves Brandi.”

“Not as much as he loves you,” I tell her. She looks at me funny, and I realize this is probably the first time I haven’t acted mad at her since she got here. “Kelsey,” I say, placing my hand over hers, “he does love Brandi. But he loves you more. He always has. And we—” I stop for a minute, because I feel like I’m betraying my brother, “We all love you, too.”

She smiles and says, “I’m sorry, Logan. I am.”

“I know you are,” I tell her. “I’ve been mad at you for a long time, Kels. But that doesn’t mean I don’t love you. And it doesn’t mean I don’t believe at the end of the day, New York aside, you’re the one who loves my brother and who he should be with.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” she says with a sniff.

I look at Alyssa, and she nods. “Yeah, it does. We kind of have an idea.”

Before I can get it out though, I see Brandi bounce down the hallway, and I wonder what the heck she’s doing here in the middle of the day when she should be at work. Kelsey. Brandi. Same place. Not good.

I don’t say anything though, not yet. Instead, I study Kelsey. Her dark, straight hair is lighter and has a little bit of wave now. Her skin is paler, like maybe she spends more time indoors now. I guess she probably does. Her earrings and her necklace are from Tiffany’s; I can tell, and I wonder if that editor guy everyone says she was cheating on my brother with bought them for her. Kelsey’s skirts are always too short, but even

still, she's much better put together than Brandi is. I think maybe she's lost some weight since she's been in New York, and it looks good on her.

And then I think about Brandi, with her short fake blonde hair and "poop brown eyes," as Alyssa calls them. I don't think Brandi would ever leave Aaron the way Kelsey did, but I also don't think he will ever love her like he loved Kelsey. I think he knows it, too. I wish my brother would turn Brandi into a Pentecostal. At least she might dress better. I wear modest tops, long skirts, and the tiniest bit of makeup, and I still look better than she does.

The door opens, and Brandi's standing in the doorway. "Shit," I whisper.

"Language," Alyssa hisses back, but she's looking at Brandi.

"What is she doing here?" Brandi asks, pointing a long fingernail at Kelsey.

"My father-in-law is in the hospital," Kelsey says flatly. Brandi looks infuriated. Kelsey looks bored.

"He's not your father-in-law," Brandi says.

Kelsey looks at her watch. I want to say something, but I can't. I just watch the train wreck in front of me. I'm mad Seth isn't here to watch, too. "He is for another twenty-three days," Kelsey says with an overdone, sarcastic smile. "How's your boyfriend?"

"Oh, that's real classy," Brandi snaps back.

"Classy? Huh. I heard you left your husband for a guy you met at the gym."

Alyssa's hand is clapped over her mouth, and I can tell she's struggling not to laugh. I pinch my lips together and act like I'm rummaging through my purse. Brandi looks like she's about to come across the room at Kelsey, who's sitting perfectly poised,

hands in lap, an amused look on her face. Before Brandi can make it any worse though, Aaron appears behind her, and looks over her shoulder. He looks from Kelsey, to me, to Alyssa, to Brandi, his gray his big and wide. I can tell he's blaming it on me, thinking I should have prevented the encounter. I just smile at him.

He clears his throat. "Logan, has anyone called the room today? The pastor at Brandi's church said he was going to stop by earlier."

Kelsey stands to her feet and looks my brother in the eyes, something she hasn't done since she got home. I've been watching. "No, but the CW called. They want their drama back."

Alyssa finally lets the laughter fall out of her, and so do I. I watch Kelsey push past my brother and Brandi in the doorway, and I watch the anger crowd my brother's face as he takes Brandi by the hand and turns the opposite direction out of the room.

\*

Late that night, Andie arrives from Birmingham, and we all say our goodbyes to Dad (except for Brandi, who doesn't have anything to say), and the next morning, Dad's gone. Alyssa told Dad she was sorry for being mad at him for so many years, and for running away to Aunt Jan's when she was fifteen. I overheard her tell him after that that she was sorry for not being Pentecostal anymore, and she hoped he wouldn't be mad if he could see her. She left a kiss print on his cheek. Andie cried when she told him she was sorry she couldn't be here all week with him. Ryan's goodbye broke my heart. I overheard him tell Dad Natalie was pregnant, and they hadn't told anyone yet. Dad was able to die a grandfather and not even know it. Aaron didn't say much of anything. I cried as I held his hand, and I told him I loved him, and that even though things hadn't been

easy growing up, I knew he loved us. I knew I wouldn't have traded him for the world. Even though we grew up mostly without him, I can't imagine life without him in it—even life without being able to visit him at the nursing home. I overheard Kelsey's goodbye too, and I wish Aaron had been standing outside the door—she told him she was sorry, that she loved him and she loved his son, and that she would never forgive herself for not being here to take care of him the two years he'd been in the nursing home. She said she wished she could take everything back. I wished she could, too.

We're all standing out in the lobby now while they clean his room. We're not sure what to do now, where to go from here. Aaron is angry, Alyssa and Andie are crying, Kelsey is comforting, Natalie is sitting with Ryan, Ryan is distant, Seth is quiet, Brandi is gone, and I, for once, am numb. We'd been distracting ourselves with this whole Operation Get Kelsey and Aaron Back Together to try to keep from thinking about the fact that Dad was dying, and it had worked. But now there's no distraction. Now he's dead. And I don't know what to do. I have no idea how to process this—how to come back from this.

I watch Kelsey hug Alyssa and slip out of the waiting room. Alyssa comes up behind me, puts her arms around me, and I hold her while she cries. I still can't. I haven't cried since they told us he was dead, and all I can think about now is how if Seth proposes to me, I won't have anyone to walk me down the aisle at my wedding.

"Kelsey's leaving," Alyssa says through her tears. "She says Aaron won't want her at the funeral, so she's going back to New York tomorrow afternoon."

I'm stunned. "Just like that, she's gone again?"

Alyssa looks up at me. “She’s going back to pack up her apartment. She’s moving back home, Logan.”

I smile. I’m glad. I’ve just lost my father, but I take the tiniest comfort in the fact that maybe, just maybe, I’ll get a sister back. I look over at Aaron, who’s sitting in a chair, slumped forward, head in his hands. I go and sit beside him, put my hand on his back. “Aaron?”

He looks up. “Hey.”

“Go get your wife.”

“Excuse me?”

I look at him hard, say a quick prayer for strength, and tell him, “Aaron, she came back for you. Don’t let her walk out of your life twice. Go get her.”

“Don’t do this to me, Logan. Dad just died. This isn’t the time or the place. Just don’t.”

“No,” I argue. “This is the time and the place. We just lost our father, Aaron. Your wife, my sister, is walking down to the parking lot about to get on a plane and go back to New York.” I leave out the part where she’s going to pack up her things and come home. “Aaron, y’all were young. You made a mistake and so did she.”

“She left me,” he says. “Why does everyone forget that?”

“You were Bogart putting Bergman on a plane three years ago. Don’t do it again.”

“What?”

“Richard put Ilsa on the plane and let her go. You let her go too easy. She came back for you. Now you need to go stop her.”

“Can we please ditch the Casablanca metaphor?” I smile, because I did it on purpose—I knew that would get him. Kelsey made him watch it on their first date when they were in the ninth grade. She’d always been into old movies.

“What’s the finish? Does it have a wild ending?” I quote.

“I love Brandi,” he tells me. “The divorce is going through.”

“I’m not saying stop the divorce. I’m saying go talk to her. She misses you. She told me so. Just go talk to her. Tell her you hate her, tell her to go home, tell her to stay. Say anything. Just go.”

And he does.

## **VI. Kelsey DeVinney Whitman**

I’m sitting on the hood of my car in the parking lot, and I don’t know why I haven’t left yet. I think about them standing up there in the waiting room, Alyssa crying, Seth not saying anything, Jenna in the room just a few doors down, Ryan losing his father and waiting with his wife while her best friend died too, Logan for once the only one not crying, and Aaron, Aaron sitting there quiet and alone, sad and pissed all at the same time. I didn’t know it would feel like that to see him again.

I crush another Marlboro Light under the toe of my high heel and watch it flatten. I pull another out of the pack in my back pocket, hold it between my lips, and flick the lighter. I don’t know how many I’ve smoked now. I think about seeing Alyssa for the first time last week in almost two years. It was like I’d almost forgotten how much I love her, and I’d remembered all in one moment.

I screwed it all up. I wanted a new life: I wanted out of this town. This town was like a trap, and once you were in, you couldn’t move. You wanted to go, you dreamed of

it, but you couldn't. Or if you did, it didn't last. And the way I saw it now, this was why: even when you do leave, there's a part of you that lives on within the confines of Lockswood Gap, Tennessee, and it tugs at your heart until all you can do is go home. There's a new gas station by the high school, and the Subway had closed down. They'd gotten a new scoreboard at the football field. The steak house on Stone Drive over in Gadsten Valley is a bar now. But mostly, everything was just as I'd left it. I breathe in my cigarette, and I breathe in the Tennessee and Georgia air, and I've never been so messed up, and so oddly at peace as I am now, in this hospital parking lot boarding the state line.

I consider going inside, running in to tell him I'm sorry, that I came back for him. But I can't do that. I can't stand the thought of him with her, but I let him go, and she found him. It's only fair. I remember the flowers that had arrived at my apartment the Valentine's Day after he'd gone home, the lyrics to Casablanca's "As Time Goes By" written on the card without a signature. I'd cried for three days and left them in my room until they died and crumbled a petal at a time onto the floor. I throw that cigarette down on the ground, crush it like the petals, and quickly light another, but I decide I can't stay here anymore; I can't be this close to him. I start to cry again when I think about Roger, about how I wasn't there for him, about despite everything he'd done, how much I loved him. I hope he heard me when I told him I was sorry and that I loved him, because God, I'm so fucking sorry I can't stand it. I climb into my car, cigarette dangling between my lips, and I crank it. Before I can close the driver's door, I see Aaron appear just a few feet away from me, and I'm not sure how I didn't see him walking up to me. He stops, just stands there, looking through me rather than at me.

"Hi," he says to me.

“Hi,” I say back.



## CHAPTER X

### UNDESERVED ELEGIES

They say death comes in threes in Lockwood Gap. One of those old town superstitions that was probably started by the Asian woman who sells the little boxes of sushi out by the Chevron station or Mrs. Broadwater whose son opened the drugstore downtown, but that nevertheless, has stuck. If two people die at the beginning of the week, a third will follow before church Sunday morning. Evan Patterson's granddaddy died Sunday afternoon and Roger Whitman died the following Wednesday morning. Jenna died that Friday night. Mr. Patterson and Mr. Whitman were in their seventies. Seventy-year-olds have heart attacks and strokes. Your twenty-five-year old friend isn't supposed to come home after being missing and commit suicide.

I sit in the back pew of the Carter Funeral Home, fiddling with my bow tie, still debating if a bow tie is even appropriate attire for a funeral and wishing the visitation would start so I can carry her casket to the cemetery and leave her in the ground. I stand to my feet, brush off my coat, and decide I'm not sitting through her funeral. I don't want to miss Jenna anymore. Mrs. Anderson, her mother, walks through the door as I start making my way down the aisle. I sit back down on the front row and drill a hole into her casket with my eyes.

I think a lot about the last time I saw her alive before she ran off. That was...  
God, that was years ago. I came home after church, and she was sitting on my front

porch, cigarette already in hand. It was hot outside, but she was shaking. Her phone was in three separate pieces on the porch floor beside her.

“Jenna? What are you doing?” I asked her.

“Smoking a cigarette. Want one?” She handed the pack to me, and I slid one out and sat down next to her. We sat in silence, crushed our cigarettes against the wall, and then I asked:

“Why is your phone in three pieces?”

“Because I broke it.”

“Why?” I prodded.

She broke eye contact with me, and I followed her gaze to a bird hopping in the grass below us. “I didn’t want to talk to Charlie anymore.”

When I asked her why she was still talking to her ex-boyfriend, Charlie, she told me flatly she’d been sleeping with him for the past three months, despite the relationship she was in with Evan Patterson. Jenna disappeared and reappeared constantly; she was impossible to keep track of. Evan was determined to keep her, even though I told him he was a motherfucking idiot for thinking he could control a girl like Jenna. She wasn’t the type of girl you stuck in a kitchen and expected to cook lunch on Sunday afternoon after church. Jenna would chuck that apron out the window and climb out after it. That was when I noticed the scratches across her face, the greening skin on her upper arms. It occurred to me they were the same scratches and bruises she claimed to occasionally obtain from riding four-wheelers in the creek behind her parents’ house or falling off her horse riding in the woods.

It was a question I should've asked weeks before that night. "How long has Charlie been hitting you?"

And then she told me about the first time, when she went to visit him in Gadsten Valley a few months ago, and found him snorting cocaine and doing Molly with some of the other guys from the factory he worked in. It was the first time she'd seen him since they'd broken up months before. She snorted it, passed out on the couch, and woke up soaking wet, face down, on the kitchen floor the next morning. When Charlie couldn't wake her, he'd put her in the tub, turned on the shower, soaked her, and then left her on the kitchen floor. Told her she was taking up space on the couch passed out like that.

I walk slowly up the aisle now to her open casket and think how now everyone can see the secrets she tried so hard to keep. The scratches I'd seen on her face that night have scarred, and even through the thick mortician's makeup, I can still make out their trails. I lift her hand and hold it inside my own, touching the scars I knew were on the inside of her wrist, and wonder what the hell made a girl like her snap the way she had. I don't want to remember anymore. I want to block it out. To mourn her, to move past my anger. I study the crucifix hanging behind the pulpit in the chapel, trying to distract myself from what's going on around me. I try to convince myself I believe in God and that she's in some kind of heaven, but I believe that as much as I believe that I'll make it through this funeral service without walking out those double French doors. I look at my watch, wondering how late my boyfriend is going to be to the service. I look at the bulletin, her face huge on the cover, smiling. Flipping through it, I try to find grammar mistakes or spelling errors in the printed text even though I know Karen proofread it

carefully as I pace up and down the aisle. Check my watch again. Keep watching the door. *Stop remembering*, I tell myself. *Just stop*.

She was missing for almost three years. We went to her house to pick her up for a concert in Tallahassee one Friday afternoon, and she was gone. She'd disappeared before, but this was different. I didn't think she would ever come back. We didn't know if she was dead. Some days, I didn't give a damn anymore.

She showed back up a month ago, like none of it ever happened. We had all moved on with our lives. Natalie married Ryan Whitman. I moved in with my boyfriend. Evan got out of rehab for the fourth time and was finally sober. Then she appears, like a ghost on one of those scary movies she used to always watch. She shows back up and kills herself on the swinging bridge in the middle of the goddamn woods.

We'd gone back to Evan's, our point of origin, always our starting place. We'd drank all night, like we always used to, fallen asleep on the floor, like we always used to. I woke up somewhere between the crickets that fill the fields at night and the sun that comes up right behind Evan's daddy's barn, and she was gone. It was a dream, her coming home. It must've been. She'd been next to me, asleep, and then she'd evaporated all over again.

I woke up Natalie, made her put pants on, left Evan sprawled out, snoring, on the couch. The leaves had crunched under our feet, like they were warning her we were coming to find her. We walked through the woods, up the hill, down to the river. Even in the slow dawn of that summer morning, I could see the imprints her high heels left in the mud. Nobody but Jenna would be wearing high heels walking through mud in Lockswood Gap.

The bridge was creaking; we could hear it before we could see it. I stared down the line of the bridge, looking for the cloud of smoke that was ever-present above that girl's head. I didn't see it. I stepped out onto the planks, and a whiskey bottle started rolling back and forth, but didn't fall off the bridge. "Jenna?" I called out.

Natalie saw her before I did: same jeans and Pink Floyd t-shirt she'd fallen asleep in, one leg stretched out on the bridge, black heel still attached to her foot. The other foot was bare, hanging off the side. Her left arm was neatly displayed across her stomach, kind of like her arms are in her casket now. The other arm swayed off the bridge with her misplaced foot. The way her brown hair was framed around her reminded me of a painting I saw once of Ophelia immersed in the water she drowned in. She looked like she was sleeping, like maybe she'd just had too much whiskey, fallen asleep on a stretcher above the river. She was dead. I didn't have to stand beside her, kneel over her to know that.

Natalie moved slowly down the bridge, trying not to make it move too much. "Jenna?" she whispered. "Jenna. Wake up."

We stood back on the ground a few minutes later, and I slid my arm around Natalie, let her get my shirt all wet with her tears, as I watched Jenna's arm swinging back and forth over the side of the bridge. The ambulance came; the sirens sounded like tauntings in my head, telling me I should have known better than to think she would return intact. Jenna had never been fully stable. We crouched beside her hospital bed for days after they'd pumped her stomach and the Oxy powder was out of her nostrils. She never woke up. Every day I stood over her bed, like Natalie had stood above her on the bridge, and I remembered the way the wind had whistled through the trees that morning,

like they were all singing an elegy for her that she didn't deserve. I wonder if you still write elegies for someone if you're glad they're dead.

"You were so reckless," I whisper out loud to her corpse.

I return to my seat as people start to trickle in, and they form a line that snakes around the chapel. Mr. Broadwater is here with his mother. Mr. Draper. Several teachers from the high school. Eric Parker. Coach Salyers and Coach McCoy. The Duncans, who own Café Brown. I realize that most of the people here weren't friends of Jenna's—they're friends of Karen and Jack. Jenna didn't have friends, except for us. There aren't any other kids from high school here. I watch the Andersons from my seat, and I remember what Karen said when she arrived at the swinging bridge and saw her only daughter sprawled out on the connected wooden pieces, still swaying back and forth in the breeze: "Why am I not surprised?" I can tell that underneath the grief, past the handkerchief Karen is using to dab the tears occasionally pricking her eyes, her heart is as hard and angry as mine is.

I decide the bow tie wasn't the best dress option, and I consider calling Daniel to bring me a necktie from our apartment. I stop short when I see Natalie enter the funeral home, in a black dress I'm certain belonged to Jenna, Evan holding onto one hand, and her husband, Ryan, holding the other. Evan's got tears running through his beard, and he looks like he hasn't bathed or showered in weeks. I think about an afternoon years ago when I had asked Evan what the hell he was doing fucking Jenna.

"I love her," he'd said.

"I don't give a shit if you love her," I told him. "It's not going to work out."

"You don't know that," he'd responded coolly, spitting in his dip can.

“I may not know specifics, but let me give you a summary. You fall even more in love with her than you already are, she breaks your heart, she leaves you, our group of four goes straight to hell, and I have to pick up your sad, pathetic pieces.”

“Why don’t you turn your sassy gay shit off?”

“She’s not the kind of girl you make a housewife out of, Evan.”

Evan didn’t speak to me for days after that, and I enjoyed the silence. I don’t know how to be his friend now. After she ran off, he lost his scholarship, started messing with drugs, got kicked out of school. She ruined his life, and here he is, at her funeral, sobbing like she was still his fiancée. I watch them both hug Karen, who is still poised and playing the perfect southern hostess at her own daughter’s funeral. Her tears are gone, and she’s grinning as she embraces all three of them, touches Natalie’s cheek, and then Natalie’s starting-to-pooch stomach, like she’s privately grieving the baby Natalie wanted Jenna to be godmother of. Like she’s not thinking what a shitty godmother Jenna would’ve been. Like maybe she’s remembering how long it took her to conceive Jenna, all the doctors my mama told me they saw back then. All that effort to have a baby—what must it feel like to have that baby grow up and commit suicide on a bridge with a bunch of stolen pills?

I asked Jenna once if she thought homosexuals could still go to Heaven. She said she didn’t see why not. I want to ask her now if she thinks people who commit suicide go to Heaven. If she even cares. No one will say it, but half of us are thinking it, I’m sure: half the town won’t show up today because every church in town preaches you go to hell for killing yourself.

I see Natalie's eyes scanning the accumulating crowd, looking for me. I shift in my seat, not ready to face her or Evan, wondering if she's still mad at me for storming out of the hospital when the doctor came and told us Jenna was dead. I decide to be like Jenna and not care.

"Hey, there you are," I hear as someone sits down beside me. It's Kelsey.

"You don't have to be here, you know," I mumble. "You weren't even close to her."

"But you were, and so was Natalie, and I love you both."

"Thanks, I guess."

"Nick?"

"What?"

"We're at a funeral. It's not a time to be pissy. This isn't about you."

I shift in my seat again, knowing she's right, watching as Katie and Coach Cockerell enter the room. "Looks like Katie finally showed up," I say, half under my breath. "I always thought it was weird how much she loved Jenna."

Kelsey nods, watching Katie hug Karen. "I mean, Jenna was her student, too."

"Yeah. But so were a ton of other kids in Lockwood Gap. Did you not see the way Katie started screaming and sobbing in the hospital after they brought Jenna in?"

Kelsey nods again. "Yeah, I guess so. But Karen's her best friend."

We both watch Katie lean over the casket, and I shiver as I think of Jenna's skin deteriorating, her bones vanishing into dust. I resolve to stop reading so much Faulkner. Coach Cockerell stands behind Katie, sullen, emotionless as always, hands folded behind his back. He nods at Jack Anderson, then pats him on the back. He doesn't seem sad at



all. He looks bored. Like he's got somewhere more important to be. I wonder if he's just a really good fuck, because I can't figure out why the hell else Katie is still with him. I watch him glance at the coffin, and for a fleeting moment, it's almost like grief takes him over. And then just as quickly, his face scrunches back up, eyebrow reknits itself, and he looks like the douchebag coach my favorite teacher married again. I wonder if Coach Cockerell's ever beat Katie like Charlie beat Jenna, and for some reason, I'm certain he has.

I look from Katie to Coach and back to the mahogany box that will imprison my friend's remains in the ground, and I feel suddenly uneasy, like there's something I've been missing, or something I've always known. Katie to Coach to Jenna. Jenna to Coach to Katie. I think again about the night Jenna sat on my porch, rocking, bruises and scratches covering her skin, trembling, and I replace her shaking body with Katie's, situate Katie in my mind on that same porch in the same chair. I think about Charlie Miller, the absent expression always cloaking his face, and I look at Coach Cockerell, and think how maybe he's capable of being the same kind of heartless bastard Charlie was.

"You know," Kelsey whispers, interrupting my thoughts, "something's always bothered me about the relationship between the Cockerells and the Andersons."

Before I can respond, the sanctuary stops as Katie lets out a wail that would've put Diane Keaton's screaming in *Godfather 3* to shame. I'm over this. I'm furious at Jenna; Katie is already getting on my nerves, screaming like a damn fool, like it was her daughter that died or something; and I wish Kelsey would just shut the fuck up and leave me alone. She didn't know Jenna. None of us did, I guess, but she was an acquaintance to

Kelsey. She never hurt Kelsey. I let go of Kelsey's hand, stand up, and walk out of the church. I'm not sitting through Jenna's funeral, and I'm not carrying her body into a cemetery.

\*

I stand on the swinging bridge in the spot Natalie and I found her. I light a cigarette and pull my flask out of my pants pocket, thinking of the nights the four of us spent on this bridge together. How we played on it as kids, rediscovered it as teenagers, used it as our hideaway spot to drink and smoke pot and cigarettes. I move from side to side, rocking it back and forth. What must it have been like for her to die here? Was she scared? Did she wish in the middle she could take it back, sneeze the powder out and vomit the pills? Did she think about me?

Natalie, Evan, and I spent two weeks straight out here, after she was gone, drinking whiskey, staring at the sky, drawing constellations with our eyes, not speaking.

A puff of my cigarette. A sip from my flask. A sigh of relief.

"I'm glad it's over," I whisper. "I can breathe again with you gone. No more elegies, Jenna. I won't mourn for you."

The bridge starts to sway faster, and I turn around to see a composed Karen Anderson standing behind me. Her black lace dress isn't even wrinkled, and she's standing on the bridge in tall heels, just like Jenna used to do. It's the first time I've seen her blonde hair down and curly and not in her usual tight bun in years. She looks better than she has since I was in high school. "Can I have some of that?" she asks me, motioning for me to hand her the flask. I do, and she turns it up and empties it.

“What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

I shrug, rub my short beard with my hands. “You mourn at funerals. She was selfish.” I look at her, waiting for her to stop me, to scold me, to tell me I’m rude and insensitive. She doesn’t. So I keep going, letting the words tumble out of my mouth like the water stumbling over the rocks below me. “She was reckless, careless, and selfish. I’m not sad; I’m just angry. I’m angry at her for not caring, for being—”

“She was cold and uncaring in her attempts to be free,” Karen cuts me off. But it’s not defensive. It’s just matter-of-fact. “She never cared who she hurt, as long as she was happy.”

“What if I told you I was glad she’s gone? That I can sleep at night now not wondering if she’s okay? It’s like she had already died so many times, and I’m tired of letting her go over and over again. What if I said I just needed her death to let go because hating her is easier than mourning for her?” I spill out, flicking my cigarette into the water, remembering how she loved the hiss it made when it hit the flowing stream, lighting a new one immediately.

Karen motions for my pack and lighter. “What if I told you I feel the same way?” she asks as she lights one.

“She was your *daughter*, Karen.” She just stares at me. Doesn’t say anything. “Wasn’t she?” I’m not sure why I asked that.

Karen shakes her blonde hair, the blonde hair that doesn’t match Jenna’s. “Jenna was my daughter legally. But no. No, Jenna wasn’t my daughter.”

As I stand staring at my former teacher, at my former best friend's mother—or, not?—I hear Katie Cockerell screaming in the hospital, see her collapsing in the waiting room, replay her bordering on obnoxious wails at the funeral home minutes before. And then I get it.

“Jenna is Katie and Coach Cockerell's daughter, isn't she?”

Karen drags her cigarette and laughs—a weird laugh, the kind that comes out of you when you don't know how to cry anymore. “Did you know the morning y'all found her was the day before Mother's Day?” She holds up my flask to the air, like a cheers to Jenna, and tosses it in the water.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE ART OF LEAVING

You started writing down the stories from back home because you're afraid of forgetting. You're terrified the lights of New York City will shine so brightly you won't be able to see the stars dotting the navy tapestry behind the Tennessee mountains back in Lockwood Gap. You started writing them down like this because sometimes you're afraid to admit this girl was you, this girl who fucked up her life and who wishes she could go running back, rewind the tape, and film the whole thing over again with all the deleted scenes and the alternate ending. You think maybe though, maybe, even if you had it all to do all over again, you would do the exact same thing. You would still leave. And maybe that's the worst part, knowing you would do it anyway, knowing how it ends, where you end. Sometimes it's easier to pretend she's someone else.

This is where you are: Harvey's living room, sitting on the sofa, sipping a Cosmopolitan. Harvey, your boyfriend, is reading a manuscript spread out on his lap, hand on his chin, thinking. You wonder why he isn't packing for London; you both leave in two weeks, for good. You'll be sad to leave New York, but there's this part of you that wants to put as many miles between you and Lockwood Gap, Tennessee as you possibly can. You're afraid as long as you're this close, you'll pack up one day and go back, and you can't do that. London, you figure, is the answer, and you don't really love Harvey, but you figure it's okay, because you know he doesn't really love you either. You've both

known it for a long time, but you don't say it, because you want to move to London with him, and he doesn't want to go alone.

This is where you can't go: back home, sitting by the fire in your (almost) ex-husband's yard, his sisters (Logan and Alyssa) throwing soda bottles in the fire and watching them explode, his best friend throwing beer cans in the creek and playing Jack Johnson from the stereo in the garage; you, content with the life you know only because you've never been anywhere else and you couldn't possibly have known any better.

Here's what you have to do: Write down everything you remember about the day your husband left you because of this same man, this same job. Or maybe you left him. Or maybe you just left each other. You aren't really sure anymore. You have to keep reminding yourself it was the right thing to do. Going back home, back to Lockwood Gap, would have been the biggest mistake of your life, a bigger mistake than if you'd stayed with your husband, Aaron.

You remember this: He was drinking a Miller Lite as you sat down at the dinner table and told him about the job Harvey had offered you. You'd been interning at Raymond Brothers, New York's fastest growing small publishing house, for the past summer (Harvey being the youngest Raymond brother), your husband finally agreeing to leave Tennessee behind for that one summer. You had to take it one step further, and when Harvey offered you a full-time job, you had to take it. You had to. You didn't want to go back home, not yet, and now it's all you can think about.

"They're opening the office in London, and they need help," you explained.  
"We're just going to help Harvey; that's all. That's it."

“Yeah?” he yelled. He rarely yelled. “And then what? What happens when you come home, Kels?”

“I want to stay,” you said with a shrug.

“You promised,” he said, wiping the dip off his mouth. “You promised it was just this internship, that that would be enough for you, and then we could go home, back to our normal lives.”

“I didn’t think I’d get offered a real job.”

“He doesn’t want you to go to London to help with some opening,” he accused you. “He wants you to go because he wants your ass. That’s it.”

“That’s not fair,” you argued, but you didn’t deny it, because maybe you knew then it was the truth. He’d thrown the beer bottle against the wall, and you watched it break into tiny brown mirrors that stared back up at you from the ratty carpet.

“If you get on that plane and go to London, if you accept the job here, I’m done. I’m going home. Come, or don’t, but so help me God, Kelsey, if you get on that plane, I won’t be here when you come back. You love that fucking job more than you love me.”

You weren’t sure he was wrong. He packed his things and left days before you’d gotten on the plane. You didn’t stop him. He accused you of sleeping with Harvey to get the job, but you hadn’t, not yet. Not until weeks after he’d left. You waited for Aaron to file the divorce papers, and when you hadn’t heard from him for several months, you finally did it yourself, and it just a few days, it’ll be final. You never did look back.

Except for today. Today, you can’t stop looking back.

All of this had been bigger than riding four-wheelers through cow patties and creeks like you and your friends had done back in high school, before all of this, and you

couldn't go back to the A. P. Carter Highway, the one where you always got stuck behind the tractors right in front of the old Quillen barn they'd turned into a Saturday night concert arena for local bands. You couldn't go back to smoking pot in a cornfield, listening to those bigots and their goddamn guitars around a circle carved out in the field where grass didn't grow anymore because of all the campfires you'd burned it with.

Here's how things go in Lockwood Gap: they know when you miss church, and they know when you don't participate in the Relays for Life at the high school. They know each time you go to your mama's house to sleep on the couch when you're pissed off at your husband because he'd rather sit in a field shooting foxes and bobcats than sit at home with you for dinner. You're married before you're 22, kids before 25. That's just how it is. You end up living your parents' lives all over again, your grandparents lives, you all do, like some book you've already read seventeen times, but you think maybe on the eighteenth time, the ending will change. But it doesn't. It never does. You couldn't go back to that. You just couldn't.

Here's what happened in London after Aaron left: you went with Harvey and the other two interns, and you played assistant, ran errands. You took off your wedding ring. Harvey kissed you in front of Westminster Abbey. You told him not to do it again. He did it again at a bar in Hammersmith. You let him that time.

Here's what happened when you got back to New York: you called Aaron, but he didn't answer. Your parents wouldn't pay for your rent past that short-term three-month lease. You moved in with Harvey. A part of you hoped Aaron would come back, but the other part of you wouldn't go home anyway. Sometimes you aren't sure if you miss Lockwood Gap or Aaron, but most days you know the answer is neither. You went



home, finally, to sign the papers. Aaron wouldn't look at you. He was still wearing his ring.

The differences between Aaron and Harvey: Aaron shot rifles; Harvey shoots emails. Aaron wore t-shirts and blue jeans; Harvey wears suits. Aaron made you laugh, but Harvey doesn't make you cry. Aaron made you egg sandwiches for breakfast; Harvey buys you bagels and coffee at the stand you pass together on your way to the office. Aaron was loud and always the center of every room; Harvey is quiet, serious, thoughtful. Aaron knew your favorite television show is *Friends*; Harvey doesn't own a television. Aaron's favorite band is Creed, and Harvey listens to Broadway show tunes. At restaurants, Aaron ordered ribs, and Harvey orders salmon. Aaron knew about the time you got your period in front of everyone at the football game sophomore year, but Harvey knows your favorite place to sit in Central Park and that you read *Jane Eyre* twice a year. Harvey has read every word you've ever written. Aaron never asked you what you wrote about. Harvey knows you prefer Chardonnay to Merlot, but Aaron thought your favorite drink was beer. Harvey sees you for who you are, not who you've always been.

You remember things like this: coming to Aaron's house on a Monday afternoon, he's still at football practice, his sister, Alyssa is crying. She's holding a pair of jeans in her hands, and when you ask her what's wrong, she says: "I'm afraid they won't love me if I wear these jeans, but I don't believe God will love me any different if I don't wear skirts." And you stand behind her as she admires herself in the mirror, and it will take her years before she has the strength to wear them in front of her Pentecostal sisters, but she will. The three of you used to pile in Aaron's bed and watch *Mad Men*, and Aaron would always throw shit at you for asking too many questions. Aaron's dad didn't notice when

you spent the night in high school, so sometimes you did, and his oldest sister, Logan didn't like it, but Alyssa didn't mind. You would sneak out of his room at night and lie in bed with Alyssa and listen to her explain what she thought about God. She was the first person you admitted to that you didn't really believe in God anyway. That's just not something you say out loud in Lockwood Gap.

You remember nights with Aaron that weren't important more than the nights that were. The first night you broke into the high school and fucked on the gymnasium stage and smiled at each other during assembly the next morning when Principal Brickey slid on the condom you couldn't find after you were done. The night you let all of the pigs loose from the Canter farm because Aaron found out Caleb Canter had been taking Alyssa to the backseat of his Cadillac after Friday night football games. Skinny dipping by the swinging bridge and camping by the riverside even though Aaron's house was within walking distance.

The swinging bridge is where he proposed to you, but you barely remember because of all the Nattie Light you'd had before he asked you. You remember there was a campfire, all of Aaron's friends, and a poorly delivered speech. You remember throwing Aiden Jacobs's guitar in the river not long after Aaron had put the ring on your finger. That was the night after high school graduation.

You knew what happened after graduation. They would all get married, probably to each other, and you would all move into various neighborhoods in Lockwood Gap; and the ones who moved up on Gated Hills—Splitville Hill, as you all called it, because *everyone* who lived up there got divorced, eventually— would end up arguing over who got the china they once hated when it was given to them as a wedding present; and the

ones who moved up on Snob Knob (Pine Acre Estates) would drown when it rained, because their noses were sticking straight up. Or at least, that's what your grandmother always said. You would all still have campfires at the Canter Farm every winter, just where you weren't the kids anymore, but instead, brought your own kids.

Here's what you would do if you'd stayed: tell your kids not to swim in the river when it was cold, even though you had all spent half your winters swimming naked in that river, wearing nothing but floatation devices so you could use your hands to hold beers. Your son would be the one who, like Jared Salyers, would drive his daddy's tractor to the high school, triggering an announcement by Principal Brickey, something to the effect of "Whoever drove the tractor to school, you've left your lights on." But that's okay, because the time Jared Salyers did it was hilarious, and you would laugh, too. Or maybe your son is like Aiden Jacobs, who moved Coach Cockerell's Jeep every morning while Coach was fucking Mindy Jefferson in the weight room during last period. That would be okay, too. Until it isn't anymore. Until none of those things are funny, because years after graduation, they're still doing shit like that. Then it isn't funny anymore. Then you'll want out.

One of your favorite memories: the graduation party that followed a month after the proposal, the one with the snipe hunting and the bands that played on the wagon trailers. When the bands finished playing and everyone was drunk off the cheap kegs, you all told Mindy Jefferson and Stephanie Vineyard that Caleb's farm had snipes everywhere, and when they asked you what snipes were, you all described a small furry creature that was impossible to catch, and you told them that anyone who caught one got their picture in the paper, and that no one had done it since Daniel Clark's dad fifteen

years ago. You led Mindy and Stephanie deep into the woods that bordered the river, and then at just the right moment, you all slowly abandoned them one by one in the woods; then you played a game of tag on the hay bales after you'd all popped whatever pills Daniel Clark had brought with him that week, and you were all drunk and high out of your goddamn minds by the time Mindy and Stephanie finally made it back.

It started raining that night as you pitched tents by the river while Tyler McDavid and Amos Stevens unloaded more cases of beer, and then you all sat in the cheerleaders' tent and drank vodka straight from the bottle you all passed around. Beer before liquor, never sicker.

The three Kaylas were laughing, cheersing you and your vodka, and you couldn't imagine ever leaving the town where everybody went to church and poor meant your house had fewer than two stories.

You wore white four months later in late September, and your daddy walked you down the aisle to Aaron, and you beamed at his sisters lined up beside yours in maroon bridesmaid dresses.

You remember the secrets, too. The night he told you the real reason his mama left them, that she didn't run off with anybody; she was sitting in a jail cell somewhere in South Carolina for killing a man in some Motel 6. Or the first night you and Aaron found the empty whiskey bottle in his daddy's room and the stacks of porn under his mattress.

Here's what you do now: you excuse yourself from Harvey and his living room, and you go into the bedroom, open the box on the dresser, move the necklaces and beads from the bottom, take out the two rings hiding underneath. You told Aaron you would love him forever, and that part was true, because you do still love him, or at least you

think you do. Maybe you do still love him. Maybe you're more terrified of a life in a new place than bored with a life you ran away from. But you can't go back there, or back to Aaron because you lied about the part where you said "'til death do us part," and now you think maybe you should have said "'til New York do us part."

You think again about the day Aaron left, how red his face was, the black suitcase he packed up. You think about the day you moved into Harvey's apartment, with its perfectly painted coffee brown walls, bookcases stretching from floor to ceiling, marble countertops and a view that overlooks East Manhattan. You didn't love Harvey then either.

Do this: put your wedding ring on and stare at your hand. Wish you'd gone home with him sometimes, like tonight, but know you're glad you didn't. Think how maybe you would've blown your brains out living in that town for all of your life.

Most people from Lockwood Gap will say they want to leave, go somewhere, be somebody, but it's easier to stay. It's just easier. You didn't settle. You're sure of that. You want to go home, mostly. But you don't have a reason to. You have a reason to go to London. One of them is to keep you from going home. You can't go home, Kelsey. You just can't.

Put the ring back in the bottom of the jewelry box, move the necklaces and beads back over it so Harvey won't see it if he opens it. He probably wouldn't anyway, but just in case.

Go back in the living room and sit with Harvey. Wish he would just tell you he doesn't love you, so you could tell him he isn't obligated to stay with you. But you don't say it either, so you understand why he doesn't.

You have never wanted to go home more in your life than you do in that moment. You want to go to London. You want to go home. You don't know what to do. What are you going to do, Kelsey?

Here's what happens while you're sitting with Harvey, thinking about the kiss in front of Westminster Abbey: your phone rings and displays the name "Alyssa Whitman." She hasn't called you in weeks.

"Hello?" you answer.

"Kelsey?" She's crying.

"Lyss?"

"It's Dad," she tells you. "He's in the hospital. It's bad. You need to come home."

"I can't, Alyssa," you tell her. Because you can't. You're moving to London.

"Kelsey, I need you to come home."

And so here's what you will do: you'll lie awake in bed all night beside Harvey, whose snoring is louder than the traffic outside, and you'll think about the swinging bridge, the tents pitched by the river, the maroon bridesmaid dresses. You'll think about how you used to ride around the river when your thoughts became too much for you. But you can't do that anymore. You'll think about how angry Aaron will be if you go home. You can't go. You won't go. You swore your feet would never touch that Tennessee mud again.

Here's what you *should* do: close your eyes, dream of London, move with Harvey Raymond.

But here's what you *will* do: pack your life into three suitcases, and board a plane the next morning connecting in Charlotte that will then fly to the Gadsten Valley Airport, just thirty minutes out from home; and leave New York, London, and Harvey behind.

And here's what will happen just a few months out: you will have left Aaron for Harvey, then Harvey for Aaron, and you'll end up without both of them, stuck in Lockswood Gap, Tennessee.