

From the Author of A Violent Hope

A BIRD



ALONE

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A Note from the Author

When I was twelve, I was standing in Barnes and Noble, a melting Frappuccino with an extra shot of espresso in my hand, and there she was—Carson McCullers.

Her young, twenty-three-year-old self was on the cover of her book, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and when I realized this was the author, the writer of other people's loneliness, I thought to myself, this is what I want to do for the rest of my life.

So, I bought the book, and I read it. No, I absorbed it, and bits of said brokenness and loneliness were forever lodged in my heart.

And I had no idea what God was doing at the time, but why would I? I hardly acknowledged He existed.

But now I know that was a planted seed. It's a beautiful book, Ms. McCullers's novel, but what I couldn't understand then but understand too well now, is that the loneliness, the brokenness isn't the ending.

It's only the beginning.

And so, *A Bird Alone* pays homage to what was growing in my soul back then. Like *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, it follows the lives and minds of several people, people who are in no way alike but very much a part of one another. It touches on the fractured damage that comes when choices are made but God isn't followed. It shows how He redeems that damage, pouring more love into it than a person ever thought possible.

It's a testament to how out of control we all are, but how sovereign He is, was, and always will be.

It's the way the world works beyond what the eye can see, but what the heart knows all too well.

So, please pray that it's truly the "something" somebody out there needs to read to know, love, and follow the only One who can heal a broken heart.

- Ericka

To all the lonely people.

“I lie awake; I have become like a bird alone on a roof.”

Psalm 102:7

Prologue

The world is all color and sound, and it's terrifying. Garrett rests his head against the floor in the trailer's living room. The coffee table's his ceiling, and the carpet's the softness he can't see when he opens his eyes. His mother's bare feet scare him. Why doesn't she wear shoes, or socks maybe? Why does the subfloor squeak painfully every time she takes a step?

His favorite time is the alone time when his mother's in her bedroom and his sister's out somewhere, maybe with that girl with all the dark hair. He likes that girl—at least her hair, and how long it is, and the way the wind takes turns playing with it. His sister's hair is like the head of a mop. He doesn't like that either.

Sometimes in his alone time, his mother crawls up under her covers—all of them, even when it's not wintertime cold—and she moans like nobody's listening. *I'm listening*, Garrett says in his head because that's the only way he can say things. Her pain is musical, and he finds himself swaying to it slowly, thinking about the things that make him happy like the TV. The TV is color and sound, but the TV is color and sound he's come to expect and can even control. There's a button that turns everything off.

But right now, there is no alone time, so he studies the underbody of the coffee table and wonders at the sticky disks of color above his head. Gum. His mother and sister don't chew it enough. He loves gum but can only chew it if he finds it and keeps it to himself like a secret.

They're mad at him—at least his mother is. They threw him a birthday party and had some strange hope in their hearts that he would enjoy it. He did not. It was outside on the playground near their trailer, the one his mother calls "the park." They had decorated everything with streamers in the stinging cold, even the swings and the slide even though he never uses either of them. But it was the

principle of the thing. Why cover everything up, all that shiny metal in the sun so nobody could enjoy anything now?

He wanted to play in the wood chips. He wanted to build his piles and create his fort around him. He wanted to be the only one and everyone else to be turned away to the outside, keeping watch.

The only saving grace was that the girl with the dark hair was there.

When it was finally over and he came inside, the heater was on, making his cold body hot. He stripped off his clothes, so the carpet feels even softer.

His mother's down on his level now. Her body's soft with bigness, and he's so much smaller than her. She gets really close sometimes like she feels it's the thing she needs to do, but it's too much. The feelings are overwhelming, and it's worse than all the colors and sounds put together. And as angry and as mad as it makes him, he also gets lost in his deep well of sadness. *Something's not right*, he says in his brain but can never say to her.

"Come on, Garrett. I got you the fish sticks." He likes fish sticks. The birthday party was cake and pizza, and he didn't like the way the cake looked slightly lopsided on the picnic bench or the pizza that looked like bleeding skin. He likes the fish sticks, and how straight they are, and how easy it is to hold them. But he shakes his head back and forth real fast, his eyes tight. *No thank you. Not right now*, he says in his head.

"Please, Garrett," she says again, and her eyes are so close and moist. He keeps shaking and squinting and grunts out his words—*Oh, no thank you. I don't really want any right now*—but this only makes her cry. She gets up and slams the package into the freezer and goes to her room. She shoves the door closed, but its sound isn't as damaging. It's soft and pleasant like the carpet.

When he realizes this is it, that he's all alone, he rolls out from under the coffee table. He climbs onto the couch that is the color of

stale coffee, and it's not soft but scratchy on his naked skin. He likes sitting here though because he can look out at the world without the world looking at him.

And then he sees it—a bird. It pecks at nothing on the roof of the trailer next to them where that dark-haired girl lives. He watches it, wholly enthralled in the way the bird walks and pecks and walks and pecks. It stops near the edge of the roof. It spreads out its black wings, so shiny they almost look wet. And before time and space have the opportunity to make the next call, the bird looks at him, looks at Garrett. And Garrett suddenly knows how it feels to have all the sad fly away.

Part I

1986

Chapter One

Whitney was pregnant, which meant Whitney was dead.

She stared at the test in the locked women's restroom at Wendy's, a single room with one toilet. Her best friend, Stacey, had covered the seat with toilet paper and sat with her jeans still on. Stacey watched as her friend held the test in one hand and worried her forehead with the other.

"I take it you won't be joining me at prom?" Stacey said. Whitney, or some force that seemed to live outside of her conscious mind, shook her head "no" as her friend brushed the toilet paper off the seat and into the commode with her foot.

"This place is rancid," her friend said, the swirling water swallowing up her offering.

"Prom is for people whose mothers haven't murdered them. How am I going to tell her?" Marge's face wall-papered Whitney's mind. Whitney had always been the "good" one. Well, at least the easy one. Garrett—her brother—was the "walking demon" as that one woman at the Piggly Wiggly had not so quietly whispered under her breath. Whitney couldn't even hate her for it. It was a guilty thought that so often sprang from Whitney's own gut, she was afraid it would tear through her stomach.

"Whit?" Whitney looked up, and instead of Stacey's face, she was met with her Police t-shirt, a pensive Sting searching Whitney's soul.

"This is warped," Stacey said. Whitney looked down at the plastic wand in her hand, the two lines sealing her fate.

What isn't anymore? Whitney thought.

"Come on! I gotta piss." The bang on the door sent the pregnancy test sailing to the dirty floor. Whitney picked it up and shoved it into her backpack and watched as Stacey grabbed her bag. She remembered how they had celebrated their finds freshman year at St.

Andrew's two years ago. They had stood in line at the church a full hour together, waiting for the clothing closet to open its doors. And when it did, they went head-to-head with tired looking mothers and overworked women combing the bins for appropriate work wear. It was Stacey who had found them: two Jansports crammed underneath a mound of ugly women's sweaters. It was a miracle. And it also made Whitney cry that night knowing she was always forced to be grateful for the things other people didn't even want.

"Come on!" came the voice on the other side of the door. Whitney was loath to see the face that accompanied it.

"Uck, grody. I should have known you two sewer rats were the ones taking up space." Whitney stood in the moment where her eyes were still on the tiles. She exhaled a long breath only to have to inhale again and look Denise McGovern in the eyes.

"All yours," Whitney said. Denise was everything. She walked on a cloud the other students at Central High School were unable to see, hovering overhead and dictating the rules of the school. She was only a year older than them, but Whitney had the feeling even the teachers were scared of her.

"How's that boyfriend of yours, Nit Whit? I hear you two are on the skids again?" Whitney steadied her eyes at Denise as much as she wanted to run to the parking lot and vomit. But she couldn't let a girl like that win. She looked like Julie from *Valley Girl* or at least that was the rumor in the halls. Whitney had never seen the movie and neither had Stacey who begged her to sneak in when it came out three years ago, but the idea felt almost worse than not having enough money to go see it in the first place.

"We're perfectly fine. And how's that nose job of yours coming along? I see the swelling hasn't gone down yet." She could nearly feel Stacey's eyes bulging into her back. She'd never dared say two words to Denise before. Maybe it was the pregnancy hormones.

“Geez, Nit Whit, what’s your damage?” Denise shouldered her way past them into the bathroom, and the girls watched as the door was slammed in their faces.

“I don’t think you’re growing a baby,” Stacey said in her ear. “I think you’re growing some balls.” Whitney gave her a tiny smile.

“I’m just tired . . .” Whitney trailed off. She wasn’t sure of what exactly but hoped the “everything” was implicit. They walked out into the dining room, the soles of their sneakers fighting the stickiness of the floor. She felt like everyone was staring at her. Maybe they knew about the test in her bag. Maybe they didn’t. It never felt like anyone needed an excuse to gawk at her. They just did.

Whitney was small. She had been premature, the miracle baby that came when all the other babies her mother ever tried to have kept dying. Marge Marksmen didn’t have her daughter until she was thirty-four—an age where “you know better about life,” Whitney’s mother would say, her face a secret staring out one of their grimy windows. Whitney didn’t look like her mother. She looked like her father, Lenny, the man in photos that had long left their places on the wall. She remembered him in black and white now, not drawn to scale it seemed, because he loomed like an oak over everything he stood next to in those pictures. The car, the azalea bushes, Marge herself. Whitney remembered how warm and large his hand would feel on the top of her head.

“He was a terrible vacuum salesman,” Marge would say as if somehow his height and work ethic were connected. “Remember when we had that pile of them near the fireplace for eight weeks straight?” Whitney did, but for a six-year-old, an absurdity like that was a windfall. She had used her small body to race them around and pretend she was an ambulance there to save the day.

“Where did he go? Heaven?” Whitney had asked the next year after he died, coming to the startling realization that the man in the

photos didn't live in their house anymore and would never be coming back.

"Oh, no need to worry about something like that," Marge had said, her own worry eating a line between her eyebrows. But Whitney did worry. And eventually became very good at it.

"She's going to kill me." It was an absent thought floating above their heads, but Whitney pulled it down as she pushed open the glass door to the parking lot.

"Large wouldn't dare. Large knows how these things work. At least she's not like my dad, Mister 'You Better Not Kiss or You'll Get AIDS.'" Whitney looked at her friend, trying not to smile at the irony of Dan the Lady's Man warning his daughter to stay away from boys.

Stacey was kind of nuts, and sometimes that was a weird blessing. She was just as poor as Whitney but always managed to look like the star of a Pert commercial. Whitney had wondered what people thought about the two of them until the second week of freshman year she got to find out. A rumor had gotten started that they were lesbians. Stacey just laughed it off like Stacey did a lot of things. "Just another consequence of being alive in a world full of apes," she had said. But something about the whole thing grew slowly, painfully inside Whitney like a tumor. It was why she practically screamed "yes" when Jamal had asked her out.

"Large might know, but Large is still going to kill me." As they walked away from Wendy's down the sidewalk toward the "neighborhood" where they lived, Whitney felt like a traitor calling Marge "Large." It was Stacey's thing, a way for her friend to unwind all the worry that knotted ceaselessly inside Whitney's gut. But Stacey didn't understand what it was like raising two kids at fifty with no husband, one of those kids labeled "retarded" by the state, and another one now pregnant—the knowledge of that blissfully unknowable to Marge for the time being.

Whitney didn't either for that matter.

On the way to Sunset Village, they walked down South Height Road, and Whitney lost herself in the trees. She loved them, how they shot straight from the ground up into the air. They weren't aware of what was going on below them and didn't seem to care. They weren't privy to people's problems and had no intention of finding out.

They just were.

"Earth to Space Cadet." Stacey's fanning hand brought Whitney back to reality. "You going in?" Whitney looked up and realized they were at Jamal's house, the last house until the street gave birth to a string of mobile homes on both sides, one of which her mother and brother were tucked inside.

"No." She couldn't tell him yet. For some reason, she knew she had to tell Marge first. It felt the very direction of her life was dependent on one captain, and Whitney very well knew she wasn't it.

They hit Stacey's home, a brown and cream rectangular box with a front porch. They used to sit and color on that porch. They smoked their first cigarette on that porch when Marge was sleeping, and Stacey's dad was still out prowling like a tomcat. There was a whole history here Whitney never appreciated, and it felt like she was being shoved away from it, toward a very steep cliff.

"It's gonna be okay. I know you know that but refuse to believe it. But you're loved, Whit. Even if she does kill you, you know she'll throw you an awesome funeral." Whitney snorted and laughed, but then all her anxiety began to stream down her face.

"It's okay," Stacey whispered into Whitney's hair, blonde and crunchy like cotton candy soaked in hairspray. Whitney nodded at nothing as she released herself from Stacey's arms—that sullied blip of what the kids at school thought of them still on her mind—and watched her friend trudge her way to an empty home.

She walked a few more steps to her own and looked up at the grayish box before her—no porch, no shutters—and she let this last moment of the “before” soak her to the bone.

Chapter Two

Marge was mad. Today was one of those days she wanted to tape up in a cardboard box and ship to China. She had walked to the Piggly Wiggly with Garrett in tow because the Lincoln's transmission was out again, and Stacey's dad hadn't been home in three days.

"Anytime you need a looksie, Miss Marge, you just let me know." She loathed Stacey's father, and the way he constantly called her "Miss Marge" made her feel like the neighborhood's schoolmarm. She knew her disadvantages: mousy brown curls that had morphed into frizzy balls haloing around her head, a broken tooth that poked out the side of her mouth. And the weight. Lenny had always been onto her about the weight. But what else did she have to mollify her problems?

"Jesus." She could hear her mother's voice so clearly.

"Thanks, Ma," she said at the air, waving her hand like a bear swatting a hive. She sat on her bed, ignoring the way the cracker crumbs felt in the sheets under her legs. She rested her head against the faux wood-paneled wall behind her, and her eyes drifted to the ceiling. Another watermark had birthed next to the old one in the gypsum panel above her. She tried not to snort. It was a weird reaction to all the bad that seemed to creep up around her. But she had stopped crying a long time ago.

Like today, for instance. When Whitney was young, if something like what had happened earlier that afternoon had happened back then, Marge would have crumbled like a cookie. "Man up," Lenny would have said, and she would have ignored him like she always did. She wasn't sure why she only chose to listen to him now.

The walk earlier had been brutal. It was uncharacteristically hot at a record ninety-four degrees. She wore her flip-flops and suffered from feet sweat as she steered Garrett down sidewalks. He was in a particularly bad mood. Something "festered in his soul" as Marge's

mother would have put it as he started his morning routine with Richie Rich and ended it with The Littles. He'd do that sometimes—brood. And it worried Marge, the way there was something sinister inside of him she couldn't quite see.

"It'll be okay," she had said blankly to the shop windows as they headed down 10th Street. They had already been walking for half an hour. Garrett was tired and grunted his frustration at her.

"I know. But remember the ice cream," she kept saying, referring to the half-eaten carton of Rocky Road battling frostbite in the freezer. Times like this she cursed Lenny. She'd told Whitney once what a bad vacuum salesman he was, and it was true. He was dismal. But he had always found ways to put food on the table and a roof over their heads. A roof that wasn't plagued with urine-colored water stains.

What hurt hardest of all was what she really wanted to say to him when she closed her eyes at night. "Look, Lenny. Look at what I managed for you. I have a home, and I took care of your daughter, and we're doing just fine." But she couldn't because at the end of her hand was Garrett, a product of something that had nothing to do with her late husband. "A divine consequence," her mother might say, not with a clucking tongue but with deep empathy in her heart.

"A divine consequence," Marge repeated as she and Garrett finally stood in front of the pediatrician's front door.

The first thing Marge didn't like about Dr. Butler was his hair that flopped over his head. He grew it out for this purpose, creating a brown, silken wave that she often desired to rip out from the roots. It angered her that here was a full-grown man with hair like Samson, and she had to take to rubbing eyeshadow into the patches around her scalp because her hairline was withdrawing slowly to the crown of her head.

The second thing was the way he eyed her son.

“Hello there,” he said affably enough when he entered the room, but one watery blue eye remained glued to her child as if he was a bomb about to go off.

“They’re getting worse,” Marge said, trimming the fat and getting right to the meat of it. “I’m worried he’s going to hurt himself.”

“I’ve told you before, Mrs. Marksmen, we need to consider the other option. You don’t have the resources to appropriately raise Garrett and drugging him is hardly the right course. At his age, the medication could negatively affect his growth and overall health. I think you know where that leaves us.” Marge had told him countless times before to call her by her Christian name. But the good doctor refused, and she knew it was for good reason. Get too close, and the problems start to become yours.

“I can’t.” It was a simple answer, two words that she normally buried underneath a wet pile of organs. She had thought them all her life. How she couldn’t go on without Lenny even when she knew Lenny was as dead as a doornail. How she couldn’t go on after what happened to her that night coming home from the bakery. But this version was different. She had plucked them from somewhere underneath her appendix and offered them to the doctor with a side of resolve. She couldn’t and wouldn’t send her boy to the insane asylum.

“Well, I’m not sure what else to say. We just don’t have enough data about these things.” “These things” was her son who was rocking beside her and working his fingers in the air. He always seemed somewhat pacified at the doctor’s office, and Marge noted the sterile air and vacuous feel of a tomb. Maybe the trailer was too chaotic for him.

Marge sat in it now, exhausted from dragging Garrett all the way back home. She listened as her daughter crunched the gravel beneath her feet, making her way up the front wooden steps. She heard the screen door whine open.

“Hello,” Marge called, and Whitney appeared in her doorway.

“Hey,” her daughter said. She took in this small-framed child, the once dreaded feeling of letting her walk home from school dulled from exhaustion and a mind that was constantly focused on someone else. Marge felt so guilty for that and wondered what life would have been like with just the two of them. And she felt guilty for that too.

“How was school?”

“School’s school,” Whitney said, as she often did. She sat at the end of the bed looking like all the other kids these days. Marge couldn’t remember looking so ridiculous growing up. Her daughter’s hair was drenched in hairspray within an inch of its life. Her jeans were slightly oversized and ripped with holes, and Marge tried to pin down their heinous color or “wash” as Whitney had corrected her before. And that jacket. It was record heat in the city, and her daughter was wearing an oversized men’s blazer with the sleeves rolled up and covered in an array of buttons. The smiley face one seemed like it was challenging Marge.

“Fine,” Marge said, drawing out the syllable and reaching her eyes to the ceiling to hide her annoyance. “How’s Stacey? She hear from her Dad?”

“No. And some lady left her card in the screen door yesterday. Did you catch a glimpse of her?” Marge nodded, remembering “Ms. Fawcett,” a pinched young blonde woman in a cheap polyester jacket and skirt. She had “business” written all over her, even in the way she had piled her hair on top of her head with a toothy clip. Marge particularly remembered her because she had shown up in a dark green bug, and she recalled thinking how she’d never be caught dead in such a silly-looking car. Then she remembered her transmission was dead and that she didn’t have the option of sitting in any vehicle at the moment.

“What’d you say to her?”

“Nilch. I was corralling his majesty after he took his grievances out on that new box of crayons the social worker gave him.” Anna re-

ally was a peach. Some of those workers Marge knew were on some sort of crusade to satisfy their savior complex, but Anna was a young girl who didn't flinch when she saw their trailer. Marge expected it was because she'd probably been raised in a few herself. But Ms. Fawcett looked like a whole other sort. Poor Stacey.

Whitney went quiet. If she were a turtle, she'd be curled inside her shell. Marge wanted to hold her daughter and close her eyes to the water stains and ripped carpet and think about something different. There was this moment that lingered in the past at the bakery, the "before" hovering in the back of her brain. If she looked at it too hard, sometimes she would be taken to a different present, one where it's her, Whitney, and Walt—the second-best guy she ever met after Lenny (for all his faults and aggravating ways)—and they'd be in a different universe altogether. Maybe in one where God didn't hate her so much.

"I did something." They both took a breath and then all sound disappeared. "I'm pregnant," Whitney said.

Marge wanted to look at the ceiling again, but she was afraid she'd catch God's eye.

Chapter Three

In her room, the one she shared with Garrett, her brother was still noisily sleeping in his twin bed shoved against the window. She'd heard before that children looked angelic when they slept, but she couldn't say this about her brother. He looked like he'd been fighting a battle, first with sheets and then with air. He was on his back and his mouth was open. His body was big in his white t-shirt and under-wear, and sooner than later he'd be a full-grown man in a child's bed. When Marge had first told her about the Benadryl, Whitney had questioned her mother's sanity but only for a moment. How can you question the adults when the adults make the decisions? They were the ones in charge. They knew better. Whitney reprimanded herself with this logic every time she found her brother knocked out cold from the spoon and bottle. She figured it was easy to judge when she got to leave every day and would even have the option of leaving forever when the time was right.

Whitney thought Marge was going to kill her, but as she took off Jamal's blazer and wiped her hand against the back of her sweating neck, she felt for signs of life. She was still in one piece, no worse the wear. Her mother had just sat there, looking a bit perplexed like Whitney had told her she was thinking about sprouting wings and flying south for the winter.

"Pregnant." It wasn't a question for Marge but a statement she frankly left between them. Marge had picked up the Benadryl bottle and spoon, leftover detritus that often collected on her bed. "It's like a black hole," Whitney had said to Stacey once, and as Marge played the bottle and spoon against each other with her fleshy hands like two toy soldiers fighting on opposite sides, Whitney felt bad for the times her friend had called her mother "Large," and Whitney hadn't even thought twice. She loved her mother. She really did. She just didn't love the person she'd become.

Whitney had been seven when it happened. Marge worked at the bakery downtown after Whitney's father died. They had just moved into the trailer, and Stacey's mom, still a somewhat permanent fixture in Stacey's life, let Whitney stay the evenings with them next door while Marge worked. She got to sleep in her best friend's bed, giggling until sleep broke her down, and there wasn't any more room to laugh or cry that Lenny was gone forever. One morning, Marge didn't come to pick her up. She had been gone all morning, and Whitney suffered a panic that felt like termites eating her insides. Stacey's mom, Tabitha, kept saying, "Don't worry, I'm sure she's fine," while darting her eyes through the windows. She had a kid to get to school and a part time job as a legal secretary. She wasn't in the mood to be kept waiting. And the more she said it, the angrier the termites got, ripping through tissue and bone until Whitney imagined she looked like a hollowed-out jack-o-lantern. Finally, Tabitha made some calls to the police department and then the hospital. The only thing she would say was that Marge had had an accident, but that she was fine, everything was fine. It had been the same story Marge stuck to when she finally got home.

But a few months later, Marge's stomach began to grow, and Whitney questioned her about it. It wasn't so much her belly but the dead in Marge's eyes Whitney tried to decipher.

"A parting gift from your Daddy," Marge said, deadpan, even though he'd been dead a year by then, but Whitney was too young to understand. If that didn't stop the questions, then Marge's eyes certainly did.

Garrett was born, and that was that, except it wasn't. Naturally a bigger woman, Marge gained even more weight. She stopped working and got on state welfare. Whitney went from wearing K-Mart clothes to other people's worn-out scraps they donated to sorry sacks like themselves. And the hardest part was how Garrett never let them sleep. He would stay staring and moaning at the window or thwack

around so hard in his bed, Whitney was sure she'd fall out of hers. She'd sneak the Benadryl sometimes at night and often crave it during the day at school when she'd groggily watch some teacher try to prepare her for her future.

Too late now, Whitney thought. She felt like she was in one of those runaway coal carts she'd see on cartoons, hurling itself down a long steep path to the edge of a cliff. She had no control over it, and even though deep down she wanted this baby—despite the ever-present fear that Marge was waiting to kill her in her sleep—there was another fear there that made her feel ashamed, inhuman even.

What if her baby turned out like her brother?

Chapter Four

Whitney left. Marge jumped at the sound of the screen door slamming shut even though she was waiting for it. Marge felt like a beached whale if whales could sweat. She got out of bed with a heavy pant and put the Benadryl bottle and spoon away in the tiny medicine cabinet in their shared bathroom. She used to feel guilty about it. Now she panicked when the bottle ran low.

Garrett was up. He was waiting for her in bed, his face a full moon of wonder.

I love you, she thought.

“I love you,” she said.

She went to his bed and held him. He allowed this for a few seconds then removed himself from her. He grunted a rhythm that she decided meant he wanted to go outside.

“Let’s go to the park.”

The “park” was a small clearing behind the row of trailers next to Marge’s. It was surrounded by the tall trees that surrounded all of Sunset Village and featured a rusted slide and swing set as its main attractions. But Garrett was never interested in those. He liked to sit in the wood chips and work piles of them through his fingers like some sort of strange accountant. Marge would sit on the equally rusty bench that sprouted out of the ground, a lone metal flower in a sea of trees.

Pregnant. Marge chuckled to herself because crying was an island she had forgotten how to swim to. She sometimes felt like she had used up all of her tears and even considered asking Dr. Butler if this was possible. But she always stopped herself from doing so. It would be just another oddity that separated her from the rest of the world.

It was so hot, but the trees helped. Marge looked around, saw no one peeping out their trailer windows, so she took the bottom of her t-shirt and mopped her face with it. She always felt like an im-

poster in the clothes she wore because they were always somebody else's. She was thankful for the church—St. Andrew's—that regularly gave away clothing nobody wanted anymore except for the people who didn't have a say in the matter. But she never felt like herself, wearing men's sweatpants or tank tops a size too small.

Beggars can't be choosers, her mother said in her head. She wondered if her mother was looking down at her from heaven. Or if she could even see her at all. Marge was sure her seven brothers and sisters would have their own theories on this, but it had been so long, she knew she wouldn't be welcomed to the conversation. There was no concept of the prodigal son in her family. You were either one of them or not.

Her parents had been different though. Good people. They lived on a farm in Helena and grew cotton, which Marge hated because it meant she was forced to pick it. Her friend, Eugenie, lived on a soybean farm. *Lucky brat*, Marge thinks even now. As Garrett snuffs and snorts at his pile of wood chips, Marge recollects the way her parents made her feel. Loved, secure. They taught her about Jesus, and for a few minutes, Marge believed them. There was hope in Jesus. There was something different. She even got baptized, and read her Bible, and ignored the way some of the batty old ladies at their small church seemed to care more about the baked casseroles they brought for potluck than the people in the pews. She could dig through it and toss out the bad, keep the good. But then something changed.

Lenny.

Lenny had never been a praying man. He never forbade her to, but there's something about being married and in such close proximity to somebody else that changes who you are. Marge started to feel herself morphing into a different person completely. She obsessively cleaned the house the one time her parents drove up to visit them after they had gotten married. She pointed out things like Lenny's new Lincoln (which they had bought on credit and had started to

feel like a heavy noose around their necks) and the brand-new TV set that sat proudly next to the fireplace (also bought on credit). Her only regret was not being pregnant yet—a further dividing line between her and the rest of the Helena crew who had to suffer through cotton bolls pricking their fingers and long, boring Sunday services. Marge, on the other hand, knew the conveniences of frozen meals and fast-food joints and the lucrative air of the big city. She wasn't like the rest of them, and she was finally living a life that proved it.

She realized now how gracious her parents had been and how big of a fool she was. She had only wanted to impress them, but those dopey looks on their faces—the ones that quietly said "oh dear"—had been salt in her wounds. And she had so many looking back now, every one of them self-inflicted.

Marge sighed and rubbed away the sweat of her temple. She figured she smelled something awful and was thankful no one was around to confirm it. Before her parents left that evening to take the two-hour trek back to Helena, her mother had cornered her in the back bedroom where Marge had been telling them their future child would sleep.

"Margaret. I miss you," she said, placing her hand tentatively on Marge's arm. It was a move that suggested her daughter was a balloon just out of grasp, and if she didn't act now, she was fated to watch her float away.

"Miss you, too, Mom," Marge said. She did her best to mask the panic in her face, picking up the neutral yellow baby blanket that hung over the crib. Lenny had surprised her with a Sears catalog—told her to buy anything that caught her eye. Marge wanted to ask the question, "What if we can't have a baby?" but she felt like voicing it was an evil omen, a bad luck charm, so she stuffed it back inside and flipped through the pages. It had been two months and so far, no child to show for it. But these things took time, like Lenny said.

She never went back home, even when her mother had invited her on Sundays, or for one of her siblings' birthdays, or when her father had gotten sick. And then eventually, her mother had died, too, and all her siblings turned against her, an invite no longer extended. As her son tallied and demarcated piles of chips, Marge tried to find where she hid her anger, her sadness that life with Lenny had meant death to the life she used to know. But it was hidden so deeply within her, she didn't even know where to start.

Lenny had always promised everything. Even when the months passed, and she still wasn't pregnant, she never once considered that maybe he hadn't hung the moon. He'd come home in his shirt sleeves and black pants, smelling of hot pavement and carpet powder, a wry smile on his face.

"Soon, to the moon!" he'd say but only after two cans of Schlitz. And maybe that's where the image of him hanging it had come from. Sometimes, when a person believed too hard in something, it took less energy just to believe them.

The metal seat made her sore, so Marge moved from side-to-side to relieve the pain. She looked for the love she had for Lenny inside of her, and it wasn't as elusive. She first met him when he had traveled to Helena on a whim, thinking he could impress the farm wives into buying his wares, but instead of selling a vacuum, he stole a daughter, a sister, a farmhand.

It broke her heart to think maybe she hadn't been in love with Lenny as much as she'd been in love with what Lenny offered her: a steady income (more than her parents could ever make), children of her own, a new house, her own things she didn't have to share with her sisters. And every now and then, Lenny had gotten it right. But as for kids, they wouldn't have one of those until seventeen years later. And as for everything else, she had made their beds under a pile of debt and worried that Lenny would suffer a heart attack from taking on additional jobs just to make up for the disappointment that

came with his first. And he had, eventually. Whitney had just turned seven, and there were still birthday streamers in the kitchen where Lenny had fallen onto the floor, never to get back up. He had been half-dressed, his work pants on but his white button down still on the back of his chair.

Marge hadn't found him. Whitney had. Whitney, who had planted her face against her father's, her small body coiled next to him on the black and white tiles. *How disturbing*, Marge thought as Garrett threw a pile of chips in what she suspected was anger, this thought covering both decades and the weight of how Marge always seemed to feel.

She supposed when Lenny died her faith had too—not that the concept of hope was buried with him but that the act of believing in it was too daunting, too tiresome to think about. She had been all alone in the world with a child she needed to protect. What could be worse?

When she raised her chin to wipe the sweat from under her neck, Garret was staring at her.

Chapter Five

It was hot. Whitney knew this logically, but her body had a hard time understanding it. She was always cold-natured, probably due to being so small. Her bones were bird-like—that’s what Stacey always said—as if Whitney was poised to take flight. She wished it were true, that she could race atop the trees that surrounded Sunset Village and the road leading out of it. She felt imprisoned in the trailer. It was such a small space, and with Marge’s size and Garrett’s tantrums, it felt even smaller. She knew this was part of the reason she had done it. This was why she and Jamal had decided to have a kid.

That was the part she didn’t tell Marge because what was worse than your teenage daughter getting pregnant? Your teenage daughter getting pregnant so she could fly the coop. *There has to be a punchline in there somewhere*, Whitney thought.

As she slowly walked the short street that led to Jamal’s house, her stomach flipped. She loved Jamal so much. He was the only person she could be real with and unzip herself from head to toe without worrying about what he’d find inside. He was a gentle soul, someone born before his time. It was like he wasn’t even made for this planet.

As she got closer, she braced herself for Franklin who would inevitably open the front door. Franklin was Jamal’s father. He worked at the Timex factory with his brother and always came off as efficient as the women’s wrist watches he assembled by hand. His face was kind, but Whitney felt there was more to it. Franklin was no dummy.

She felt like he could smell her sins.

“Come in,” Franklin said and gave her a wary smile. He was in his shirt sleeves already. Even his after-work attire was formal and put together. He had been at the factory for years now and was given the luxury of picking his shift. He chose the second one, which gave him

plenty of time to spend with Jamal and eye the white girl who was honing in on his son.

“Thank you,” Whitney said, her hand instinctively covering her stomach. The motion felt heavier than she expected. Soon there really would be something to cover.

Franklin went to find Jamal. He wasn’t the kind of man to shout his requests, so Whitney made herself comfortable on the floral sofa in the front sitting room. It was one of many remnants of a “before” life when Jamal’s mother was still alive. According to the pictures on the wall and on the small mantle to Whitney’s right, the woman was beautiful. She had a type of delicateness that her only child had inherited, which is why Whitney always felt like loving Jamal was a lot like a race—an egg on the end of the spoon in her mouth. One wrong move, and she’d break the only thing that kept her moving forward.

“Oh hey,” Jamal said. Franklin wasn’t with him, having retreated to his bedroom to give them “space.” Whitney swallowed a nervous giggle. It landed hard in her stomach she still had covered with her hand. She had seen Jamal’s room, her other universe, where she could lie with him late at night when she snuck out of the trailer and into his house. She couldn’t read Franklin, if he really knew the truth or just sniffed around it like a Basset Hound. Part of her wanted to be found out and strung up by her toes. She was tired of everything she held dear being some sort of dirty secret.

Jamal’s face asked the question, and Whitney nodded. He sat down beside her, and she was caught in his arms. He smelled the way the feeling of warmth should smell, and his smile was in her mind even as her chin hooked around his neck. Whitney had stopped believing in God a long time ago. There were little fragments of Him growing up when Marge would take her to church in a haphazard pattern or mention something Gammy Ray used to say about Jesus back on the farm, but other than that, the thought of God had fizzled out. But Whitney felt sparks of the Divine when she held onto

Jamal, as if God was in the room ordaining this moment. *He can't like what this is all about*, she thought, knowing that sex outside of marriage was a sin and deception probably no better. But she hoped the root of herself was worthy of His love if He really did exist—that it outweighed the cost of all her mistakes.

They unlatched from each other, and Whitney took her husband to be in, the father of the child inside her. He was like her, small-framed, but his skin was a deep dark she often caught herself lost in. His hair was something else. It was cut tight but loomed a few inches above his head. There were notches at the side where skin showed. He got made fun of for it. He got made fun of because he was small like her, and they both were tormented because he was black, and she was white. Denise McGovern's crew would call out names, tell her what kind of lover she was—Denise herself keeping a curious eye on Jamal because Whitney was sure she was smart enough to see the same things Whitney did. And there was no one to call for backup besides Stacey who could only jut her chin out in retaliation. The black kids hated Jamal, too, because he was talented and drew beautiful pictures like some white, starving artist hippy. So, they were alone, on their own.

And the feeling fit perfectly.

“I love you,” he said, his lips dancing against his teeth. She caught a small chill, the fan above them working overtime and returned his smile.

“I told Marge,” she whispered. “And I’m still alive.”

“I noticed that.” He lifted her forearm and dropped it as proof. “I’ll tell Franklin.”

“He’ll flip?”

“Franklin doesn’t flip. He adapts.” Whitney found the truth in this. Jamal’s father seemed to live the sort of tiny life that rolled with the punches. “I get my diploma next week. After that, I’ll get in at Timex. Dad’ll help me snag a job, so don’t worry. We’ll have a

place before you know it, and you can get your GED before the baby comes. Everything will be good.” Jamal granted her wishes with a gaze that partly filtered through the back sliding glass door in the kitchen. She noticed him doing that sometimes—caught up in another life in his head, one where she hadn’t built prison walls around his future, around his art.

Don’t think like that, she scolded herself. Before she could let her worry grow wings, she embraced him again, placed her chin back in the hollow between his shoulder and neck.

“I love you too,” she said, the words like mortar.

Chapter Six

Jamal Barnes eased over to the side of his chair, but a paper football still landed in his hair. The pointy end got caught like a fish in a net. The laughter erupted behind him, but he didn't even consider turning around and staring down Denise and her crew. It was an anomaly how one person could hold so much sway over the school. It was even stranger the way she was always looking at him.

In the last four years at Central, he'd developed a kind of inner radar for uncalled-for attacks. He did his best to lay low and not look anyone in the eye, but sometimes that tactic made things worse. As much as the white kids were stupid and obnoxious, they were almost a welcomed relief to the utter disgust he received from the black kids who didn't understand him. "Why he think he better than us?" their faces seemed to say.

He didn't think that. He didn't think much of anything other than how much he missed his mother. But he never said that out loud—not to Franklin, not even to Whitney whom he loved, but more importantly, needed to protect. She was carrying his baby now, which meant he had to step up and be a man.

He imagined it was something his mother would have wanted.

When she had died, he was in the eighth grade and oblivious to how death could be nowhere near the equation and then suddenly enter it like an errant fraction. He wondered if it would have been easier if she had had cancer, a slow demise maybe where he could have made more sense of things. But he figured where death was concerned, nothing made sense.

She was killed at a crosswalk. Some bozo pummeled her and just kept going—out of fear or hatred Jamal wasn't sure. It depended on the day, but sometimes he imagined it was some sanctimonious white guy who cared so much for his guns and religion that he'd forgotten what it meant to love human beings. Other times, it was a kid

just like him, someone whose heart told him to slow down and stop but whose head kept propelling him forward.

Anette Fisher filled his brain space. He hadn't been there when she was hit or when his father was tracked down at the Timex factory and rushed to see her at the hospital. She was dead by then, a formality really. Jamal realized now how moments like those—seeing someone peacefully gone in a strange bed or beneath the weighty lid of a closed casket—were more for the living than the dead. And that's why he figured it was okay he carried his secret notebook with him, an ode to the different ways his mother must have looked, dead and alone without him.

Where was he the exact moment his mother died? Art class, he remembered now, studying the pointed football with his fingertips. Still art, a sad bowl of fruit Mr. Alberston had paid for with his own money on his desk was multiplied with paper and watercolor across the floor. They had all been sitting at their desks—the kind that you could lift the tops to store or hide things inside—that formed a horseshoe shape. He had been so enamored with what was coming to life on his paper, he hardly had time to notice Denise McGovern—the softer thirteen-year-old version of herself—watching him work his soul out in color, not for one second aware of that day's darkness.

Mr. Kramer walked into fourth period Precalculus, and the class settled down; even the animals behind Jamal had taken their seats. He wanted to turn his head and look Denise in the eye and challenge her. *Leave me alone. There's nothing for you here anymore.* But instead, he worked his fingers until the paper football unfolded, and there, neatly trapped inside the horizontal lines, was Denise's handwriting. *You keep ignoring me*, it said. The words weren't written flowery like he expected they'd be. They were sharp and biting and felt like they were shouting at him even though they were crammed in such a

small space. He was sure she was looking at him. It made his stomach hurt.

On the first day last fall, he wanted to switch math classes when he saw her sitting there. Mr. Kramer's Precalculus was an honors class, but Denise was as smart as she was evil. When Jamal had asked Mrs. Manderini, his guidance counselor, she told him tough cookies. This was the last math credit he needed to graduate.

He didn't know what it was about Denise. She was popular, and well-dressed, and lived snugly in a house her orthopedist father could afford, which most certainly didn't rub shoulders with a trailer park like Jamal's did. But she wasn't particularly pretty. Some people said she looked like that girl from that movie, but Jamal wasn't easily fooled. An ugly heart wasn't as deceptive as it thought it was.

But still. Everyone else loved her. Everyone except Whitney.

Whitney was like looking into a sea of faces and finding the only other set of eyes that were open. The rest were all closed, their minds asleep. They had no clue that life was so much more than sex, their next meal, making money, and harboring grudges that grew like tumors. Whitney understood the way high school ravaged a body with its manufactured lies. And soon, neither of them would have to be forced to believe them anymore.

His brief flame of hope was extinguished when the bell rang. He prayed Denise would stay with her toxic cluster at the back of the class, but soon, she was at his elbow. He caught her perfume that smelled like baby powder, a contrived innocence that didn't match the state of her soul.

“You read it and still you ignore me.”

“Not here,” he said. He knew Whitney was on the second floor, and their paths rarely met between classes. But he still looked for her and her best friend, Stacey, who upheld their best friend code with diligent acuity.

“Where then?”

“Outside. Four-thirty,” he said. He had art club every day after school. It was a small group of them who had been given license to hang out in the art room, drawing and painting until things didn’t feel so numb.

Denise smiled like the cat who knew the mouse better than it knew itself.

“I don’t know why you feel the need to play this whole charade with that poor white trash girl, but you’re going to break her heart, Jamal, when she knows what kind of web you’ve been weaving. It would be a whole lot easier if you were honest with her. Don’t they say it’s the best policy or something?” They came to his locker, so he turned to look at her, afraid his eyes would boil as if they were scanning the sun. She was all eyeshadow and lip gloss and wore a new white jean jacket that hardly anyone else could pull off. She stood too close, and his heart was in a panic, not wanting others to see what he didn’t want to admit.

“I’m surprised you know anything about honesty.”

“I know about a lot of things, Jamal. I could teach you,” said those lips, shiny with too much gunk. He rolled his eyes as she laughed at what he assumed was a joke, and she kissed the air twice before turning to leave. He didn’t look around to see who was watching. He pretended it hadn’t even happened for a moment. But the truth wasn’t easily swayed, and there it was, frank and dangling in front of his face. He forced his eyes shut just like everybody else.

Chapter Seven

Her jacket felt miserable against her skin. It had itched all day, her inclination to rip it off edged out only by her resolve to keep all eyes on her. They loved the jacket, the fringe that swung off the elbows just like Sloane's on *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. That's what she couldn't remotely figure out about the children she was constantly surrounded by: how they could be so easily swayed.

"It's a gift," her own mother told her once. They had been in their old pea-green Mercedes wagon, windows rolled down and the wind in their hair. Her mother had Stevie Nicks blasting on the radio, and they sang "Rhiannon" until their throats ached. How terrible the anomaly, Denise thought then and thought now, sitting next to a woman who was free only within the confines of her car. The windows were rolled back up and the radio turned off before they even hit their street.

"It's a gift," she remembered her mother's voice again. "It's a gift when you get a little time for yourself." And there, parked in the driveway, she scanned the front of their house for signs of something Denise couldn't see. Her mother's blonde hair was so hard from crop dusting it with Aqua Net. She reapplied the lipstick and smudged the remnants off her white teeth. Old pictures always told another story. Lucy McGovern had once been mousy-haired and somewhat dowdy. But at least there was a smile Denise always longed to see.

"Can't you have time for yourself all the time?" Denise asked. She didn't feel greedy asking it. Her mother had enough restraint for them both.

"Oh—oh," her mother laughed, but still, it wasn't like the smile in her old photos. It looked more like suffering and sounded a lot like "no."

Something inside Denise had always balked at that moment. It was a memory she freshly restored every so often and kept displayed

on the mantle in her mind. She loved Lucy McGovern, more than she thought was logically allowed. But Denise had lived a small lifetime becoming something much different.

Her back against the brick wall of Central High School, she breathed in air and pretended it was a drag off a cigarette. She'd been trying to quit. It was a nasty habit, but that wasn't the reason. Nobody cared that she smoked. In fact, the whole lot of goons who stole her air seemed to like that she did. But Denise had no control over the way it made her feel and that scared her.

The front double doors opened. Her heart quickened, but it was just one of the frazzled freshman teachers who seemed to be visibly contemplating leaving and never coming back. She didn't like this feeling either and tried to wave away the idea that maybe there was something deeply sick inside her for how Jamal always made her feel. *Or maybe it's the fact that you can't have him.* The thought ran wayward, and she chased it, suffocated it before she could agree with it.

"Well, here I am," Jamal said, appearing without warning. Something kicked in, and Denise did her best impression of the girl she never stopped playing.

"Took you long enough. Let's walk," she said, taking the lead. They walked the concrete paths from the front of the building to the sidewalk off South Park Street. Everyone had gone home, so it was just them and the open-eyed windows of the houses across the street. Denise looked at one accusing her from behind its awning.

"I need to get home." Jamal tugged his black backpack. She caught his profile and tried not to choke on her breath.

"Look, I know it's been forever. I know I hurt you."

"Well, good news about time healing all wounds. You're forgiven, Denise McGovern. I absolve you," Jamal said, making the sign of the cross over her. The sun beamed behind him, and it was hard to tell where Jamal began, and his shadow ended. She thought about her sins and how not even Jamal could help her now.

“I don’t need to be forgiven. I need you to use your head. You know me, Jamal. You were my best friend. I can’t watch you waste your life.”

“You know nothing about my life, Denise. You’re too busy piling up bodies and climbing the mound. You have no idea who I am anymore.” Jamal turned slightly, and his face was no longer in shadow. She wanted to turn away from him. She didn’t want him to see her eyes.

“I know you’re wasting it on that girl. I know tramps like her, Jamal. I’m sorry, but she’ll find a way to keep you here. You want that? You want to work at the Timex factory like your dad? Anette would never want this for you.” She was taking a chance mentioning his mother. But it felt like fair game considering Anette had mothered her more than Lucy ever had. It was hard raising a child while raising an addiction. Denise sometimes wondered if she changed her name to “Valium,” if Lucy would pay attention to her more.

“My mother is dead, Denise. What she wants isn’t even on the table. But what I want is. And what I want is to be happy with my girlfriend and raise our kid and have a job that pays and maybe just a small glimpse of what normal feels like. Not everyone’s like you. Not everyone has to have the best of everything and bonus points if you can make someone miserable in the process. I just want to be happy, Denise, and happiness has nothing to do with how you’ve imagined my life for me.”

“Kid?” Denise asked. She stubbed her toe against it and couldn’t shake off the sting. “You’ve got to be kidding me.” Jamal bit at his lower lip. He messed up, and he knew it. *Think, Denise.*

“Okay, no. You’re right. I don’t know you anymore, and I’m sorry. But you were my best friend, Jamal, and I don’t want to see you choose something that can ruin who you’re meant to be. You’re so talented. You should be going to college with me, not rotting away here. Think about what your future could be. And I know you think

you have to step up and solve somebody else's problem, but how do you know the kid's even yours? You can't trust trailer trash, J," she said, resorting to his nickname. There was an instant where his eyes focused on the future she couldn't see. It felt like watching a fish swim to the hook. But just as quickly, it changed course.

"What I might want or at least what I always thought I wanted isn't necessarily what's best for everyone, Denise. I know, mind blowing concept." He turned and left her there to stare at the back of him growing smaller down the sidewalk. She felt everything, including her jacket that was eating her skin. She ripped it off. She stomped on it. She made a hopeless sound like a kitten desperately trying to find its mother's teat. Her breath eluded her as she bent over, hands on knees and ignored the prying glass eyes of the houses lining the street across from her.

She found her car in the student parking lot, throwing her dirty jacket, backpack, and purse in the back seat. *Pregnant*. Denise laughed, and then it came to her like an overwhelming need to vomit because none of it made sense. Jamal was gay.

She popped in the tape of Stevie Nicks she had recorded off the radio, and Denise screamed "Rhiannon" at the top of her lungs, but nobody was there to listen.

Part II

1988

Chapter Eight

It was all Whitney could do to close her eyes and not hear ticking. It got so bad some nights, she borrowed Garrett's Benadryl and waited for her brain to get heavy. With Travis curled up beside her, she'd land somewhere hard in a dream and had an even harder time climbing out of it. Waking up was like being gut punched. Waking up was the reality check that never seemed quite fair.

She washed her face with tepid water and dragged her hair back into a ponytail. She brushed the night's film off her teeth and swiped on a little mascara. She put on her blouse and jeans and then the heinous blue lab coat all the watch technicians wore on the floor. Her lunch already made the night before, she stacked her purse and brown lunch bag on the little table near the front door.

Remember gratitude, she scolded herself because Mondays always felt like crying. But they still had a roof over their heads—a nicer one than the trailer now—and food to make lunches. She had worked hard for her GED, and Franklin came through with his promise—a job at Timex. Only, she was the one who had snagged it.

“Morning,” she said sleepily to the body at the coffee pot. Where the father of her child—the love of her life—should have stood was her mother. Marge lifted her chin, the weight of her now heavier and more substantial, especially in her wintertime pajamas. She wore a long fleece nightdress that made her seem like a multi-colored column. She gave the impression that her bones were made of concrete, and by contrast, Whitney shivered even though the heater was on.

“Morning yourself,” Marge said, scooping the Folgers into the machine in her bare feet. Whitney sat down at the breakfast table with no intention of eating. It was funny how they had more money than they had had in a long time—the pantry filled with name brand bread and crackers—but Whitney couldn't eat any of it. Her lunch consisted of a container of cabbage soup from the big pot she had

made the night before. The house still stunk of it, Marge's nose working overtime in the way it disapprovingly sniffed the air.

"If it smells this bad, I can't imagine the way it tastes."

"It tastes just fine," Whitney lied. She was tired and hungry and knew she looked the part. It was day four of this routine, and she was certain she would have either had the sense to give up or lose weight at this point in the game, but the scale refused to budge. Nearly two years later and the baby weight lingered in her stomach and hips, but she didn't even have a baby anymore. She had a toddler.

She told herself it was to get healthy. She didn't tell herself if she worked off the weight, she could gain Jamal's interest again when he'd come back home from school. But the idea still loomed large in the foreground of her mind.

"Will it help me swallow down this travesty?" Marge said when she sat down at the kitchen table, smacking the paper that was patiently waiting for her. "That other guy, he'd know how to help us."

Dukakis, Mother, Whitney thought but didn't say because it would kill her to correct Marge for the hundredth time. Instead, she shrugged and filled her mug at the sink. On one side, Whitney placed her lips against the rim, and on the other, there was a depiction of Charlie Brown and Lucy who was swiping the football away right as Charlie went in for the kick. He was right there hovering mid-air between two possibilities: flying into the ether or landing hard on his backside. Whitney felt bad already knowing his fate.

"Nobody cares for the little guy anymore," Marge said. They had both liked Dukakis's platform. And after Whitney had read his brochure aloud—the one Jamal had sent her from school—Marge was more than onboard:

He's invested in job training. Education. Small business. Health care. And a highly successful jobs program for welfare mothers.

As President, Mike Dukakis is committed to make these ideas and values work for the country. "I believe that every American, regardless

of who you are, where you come from or what the color of your skin is, should have the opportunity to succeed."

Marge had liked the sound of that. Maybe someone like her or someone like her grandson could finally get a fair shake, she had said.

"Just four more years. May the countdown begin." Whitney planted her lips against the part in Marge's hair, a wide berth that kept getting wider with each passing year. She took her coffee back into her bedroom and set it down on her side table and watched Travis sleep. He was small and peaceful in his footie pajamas. He had jammed his fist under his chin, forcing his lips to jut out in air kisses. She lightly ran her fingers across his hair, his daddy's hair that was the source of so many comments. Some kind, others not so much.

"Whose kid?" One lady had flat out asked at the park one Saturday, her face seemingly working out the scenario before her.

"Mine." Whitney had said and set the word down like a high wall between them. There was no further interrogation, just that familiar look of disgust that rang as loudly as the pink smudge of lipstick on the woman's teeth.

Marge wanted to kill people like that. "Had I been there, a head would have been busted, and your ol' mama would have been behind bars," she had said when Whitney got home and recounted the story. But Marge wasn't there because she was with Garrett in the backyard, digging at piles of dirt in what they called "the garden." As much as it hurt, and as much as it had angered her, Whitney couldn't hate that lady, especially watching her mother slap at the earth in the hopes of getting her son's attention. What if that lady was just mad because life hadn't smiled on her either?

She kissed Travis goodbye, thanking Franklin silently in her heart. He was the one who had gotten her on second shift so she'd be able to see her son in the morning and play with him in the evening. She was also thankful for her mother who—despite their substantial differences—could be trusted to keep Travis safe while she was at

work. Her only sense of bitterness she forced herself to swallow like room temp cabbage soup was the fact that Jamal had left them.

“I’ll be back for holidays and the summer. And we’ll talk every day. It will hardly even feel like I’m gone.” She snorted, placed her hand over her mouth as Travis’s little body responded to the noise. *What a crock*, she thought. Every second was a reminder of Jamal’s empty space. She couldn’t even go to the bathroom without there being a ghostly void walking from her room to the small half bath attached to the master. He had barely lived in the house. They had moved at the end of summer when Jamal was already itching to get back in action, living the tough life of an artist in training. He had been back for previous breaks. He had been back last summer too. But love felt a lot different when it was an obligation, not a choice.

She daydreamed sometimes about running away, and she hated herself for it. She wanted to go to college, but nobody had asked her what she wanted. And besides, how could she manage that? She had a kid. And technically, so did Jamal, but Jamal had her to keep things under control and their bank account plush while he got to rub elbows with the brainy, academic sort she’d never measure up to.

“I’m sorry I’m so simple,” she had said on a miserably hot day in July before he had packed up and gone back to the university. She was at the public park again, but this time she was there with Jamal, and Travis, and her brother who, at eleven, was quickly becoming formidable with every extra inch. Being there was almost like waving her middle finger at everyone. A lot of them pretended not to notice their ragtag gang as if that were some sort of favor, but others weren’t shy about their condescension. *Yup, that’s right. This one’s black and this one’s half black, and get this—he’s my son! And this one over here doesn’t even know what day it is. And don’t get me started on the teenage pregnancy! That’s right, get a good look, you dolts!* Whitney had felt like her mother thinking this way, which made her queasy.

“I like simple.” They sat at a wooden picnic bench next to the swings, and Whitney dug her thigh into the rough surface as punishment. Jamal had Travis in his arms, and it was a beautiful sight if the reality of it weren’t so blinding. Her mother had put that worm of fear in her ear. “He’s black, Whitney. Things will be rough.” She hadn’t even sugar coated it. But Whitney hadn’t cared. Love could solve any problem.

Whitney’s second alarm went off, reminding her that coffee time was now over. She looked down at Travis who was still sleeping soundly and kissed him on his cheek.

“See you soon, little man,” she said and headed to the front door for her coat, grabbing her purse and her mildly repulsive lunch in the process. “Heading out,” she called towards the kitchen and received a “Later, gator,” from her mother who was enjoying the last few minutes of freedom before she wrangled up her son and grandson for the day. As Whitney walked out the front door, it hit her how her mother had never once told her she loved her. She had seen it though, Whitney thought, the evidence of love. But the words were never lobbed between them.

Outside, she walked briskly to the Timex factory that was only half a mile from their house. It was November, and the heat had finally shown mercy on them. She wrapped her arms around her, although her coat was warm enough. It was a mauve, calf-length quilted jacket that was more like ankle-length on Whitney. Marge had picked it up at St. Andrew’s even though Whitney was convinced they could have splurged a little at K-Mart. “It’s talk like that that leads to the poorhouse,” Marge said. *You should know*, Whitney thought.

She kept walking—quicker, brisker strokes of thighs and calves and feet against the concrete sidewalk beneath her. She could feel what she’d been stuffing down the past several months bubble up in the back of her throat. She hadn’t meant to find out, and as much as

she loved Stacey, the telling hadn't felt so much like friendship. It felt more like an "I told you so."

"Are you sure?" Whitney had asked. It was three months ago in August, and Jamal hadn't even been back on campus three weeks yet. She sat on the step stool under the phone in the kitchen. It was a pea-green rotary phone, and sometimes she'd watch Marge stand guard as Garrett teetered on the stool, stabbing his finger at the holes in frustration.

"I'm not blind, Whit. I saw what I saw. And honestly, I'm not that surprised." They were both at the University of Arkansas now without her. She was angry enough with Jamal, but there was something even worse about Stacey going. Whitney had known it for months leading up to Stacey's graduation while she was at home battling mastitis. But the reality hadn't hardened yet.

Packing Stacey up at her trailer, Whitney felt like she was watching a bad dream. She should have been the one closing up shop in the dismal Little Rock heat and heading on towards her future. But her future was the child in her arms and the way Marge said, "I'm so glad that's not you. No clue what I'd do without you here." She felt a sense of panic that settled on her like the dust Stacey's tires had disturbed as she drove away in her father's Pinto.

"But he loves me," Whitney flung back over the phone line, a weak grenade. There were shades of love there, but they had somehow seemed deeper before Travis had come along.

"He can still love you and cheat on you, Whitney." Stacey said it so softly, it came off cruel. Whitney had wanted to spring back with something about Stacey learning a thing or two from her father, but she could never go there. She figured Marge's feistiness must have skipped a generation.

"But I don't believe this. Of all people."

"You know how women can be," Stacey said, willingly throwing their gender under the bus. But Whitney certainly knew what she

meant. She remembered when she was young, her mother seemed almost like a lost little girl to her, at least when her father was still alive. She took care of her father, almost to the point that it seemed like a show she'd put on for Whitney. There was the white apron tied against her house dress, and the tray she'd load with a mug of beer, and the meatloaf she had made for dinner. It was the Barbie version of Marge, complete with pearls and short-stumped heels. It was the seventies by then, but Marge was so behind the game—taking way too long to have a kid—that the game was just going to have to grin and bear it while she set their lives up like a scene from the not-too-distant past.

But then Lenny died, and the pearls and heels died with him. There was no more money for things like that, and after she stopped working at the bakery, Marge just didn't have the heart for that kind of stuff. Her mouth became base or maybe just honest, and she no longer bought dresses for Whitney either. So there Whitney was, used to playing one role only for the playwright to switch up the story. She imagined what it would be like to serve Jamal with a white apron around her waist, and the thought was as appalling as it was comforting.

Women, according to her mother's performance, could be anything depending on their circumstances.

“Yeah, but still,” Whitney said lamely into the receiver.

“Denise McGovern,” Stacey repeated, and that's all she needed to say. Whitney had excused herself, placing the earpiece of the pea-green phone back on the wall. She felt sick. She felt like the script had been switched up on her again, and there she was playing the wrong part.

She walked and breathed in a quick burst of cold wind. It burned her lungs, the insides of her. And she stopped for a second, overwhelmed by the crying that hadn't come in a while. She was aware of people in her vicinity, people on the edges of her bubble, so she

turned her face away to a set of trees that took pity on her. She rummaged around in her purse and found a chewed-up Kleenex and wiped carefully under her eyes and around her nose to not disturb the makeup she had put on for who knew what reason. She was stuck. There was no white knight looking to save her.

Whitney took a deep breath, put the tissue back in her purse, and picked up her lunch that teetered between her feet. The soup had leaked a little, and the stench of cabbage escaped the brown bag. And Whitney realized with little to no real recognition, so had the hate in her heart.

Chapter Nine

Travis was her window. When Marge looked at him, she somehow looked through all the bad that had accumulated inside her. There was a way out, for somebody at least. And maybe that's why she loved him so much.

His little body was sorting through his sleep, making piles of things he'd seen and heard. She tickled his fisted hand that punched the air. She turned to Garrett and pressed her finger against her lips although Garrett didn't understand her. He was still in his nighttime outfit: white t-shirt, underoos, and white calf-length socks. It had taken her forever to find the combination that sat right with him, and now it was a day-long journey just to get him to put on pants. She watched Garrett sit and rock on the floor. He liked the way the wood felt beneath him. It was something solid, and she liked it too, especially in the morning when she pressed her naked feet against it getting out of bed.

Her thoughts quaked, and there he was—the man who raped her.

“Come on,” Marge said to no one and squinted hard to wipe her brain clean. She didn’t want to think about him. Instead, she did that trick where she thought about Walt.

Walt. She pretended he was dead so it was easier. If she scooted out all other possibilities—including his being married, and having a family, and living life, and making decisions that had nothing to do with her—she could peek behind the curtain that shrouded her memories. She could remember his face and his soft, fleshy hands.

She had been in a bad way when they first met. Lenny was already gone. How was that possible? She knew it was because she had seen him sprawled out on the kitchen floor, those horrible streamers tickling her face and touching her shoulders. She knelt down to get things all sorted out. Lenny couldn’t be gone. He just fainted or

maybe it was a stroke, the kind people lived to talk about at dinner parties. But there was no breath in him, and she didn't know CPR. Her body took over as her brain went dull, and she managed to call 911. And that's when the stark reality had hit her: she wasn't alone in the kitchen.

Her daughter was so small, she almost missed her. Whitney had been hiding under the kitchen table, letting Marge take over with her big movements and even bigger sobs. And when Marge peered down and looked into her daughter's eyes, it was like holding the gaze of a frightened animal. But Marge wasn't sure if Whitney was scared that her father had died or if she was only scared of Marge.

Marge coaxed her out though, and then the ambulance came. And then they were at the hospital where Lenny was pronounced dead, and Marge had signed so much paperwork, her hand hurt.

And when they finally got back home, there were those streamers, none the wiser.

She had told this story a million times in group. It was a small gathering at St. Andrew's for those struggling with grief. The parameters were pretty general, but the six of them managed to have the same thing in common: they had all lost a spouse.

Walt always sat on her right. And he always got her a cup of coffee at the refreshment table in the church basement where they held their meetings. It was nothing fancy: a circle of metal chairs on a hard concrete floor. But it was the closest thing Marge had had to an extended family in a long time.

"I'm so sorry," his face would say when he handed her the cup. The coffee was always watery and bitter but tasted so much better taken from his hand.

He offered her a job that first night. He owned a bakery two blocks from St. Andrew's and was always looking for a hard worker. He didn't even know her, but Marge could already feel how much he loved her.

Walt was nothing like Lenny, so she felt guilty for liking him so much. His face was moon-round whereas Lenny's was angular, chiseled by an angry hand. Walt looked like the soft bread he baked, and Lenny looked like a thousand years of regret.

Walt looked her in the eye.

She knew Lenny had loved her, but she often wondered if he loved who he was in their marriage, in their family. She'd ask him to play with Whitney, and he'd lie there like a corpse on the floor, his eyes closed while Whitney would play doctor, beating his knee with a toy hammer. What had he been thinking about? Where had he been in his head?

And she realized she wasn't mad when he would escape this way or leave to go sell his vacuums nobody wanted. She was jealous.

At the funeral, nobody had come, but it wasn't like she had put an ad in the paper about it. She called home—a strange hope in her heart that one of her parents would pick up even though they were both already dead—and had to settle for her sister, Mae.

"That's terrible," Mae said when Marge told her about Lenny, but Marge remained unconvinced.

"It'll be at St. Andrew's, next Saturday at eleven. I hope you all can come."

"What kind of church is that?"

"Episcopal, I think." There was a long pause. Marge counted the breaths she didn't take.

"I'll tell the others. Take care of yourself, Marge." Again, Marge remained unconvinced.

None of them had shown. She might as well have had the thing out in the backyard and presided over by a witch's coven. Her family was Freewill Baptist, a flavor of Christianity for a practiced palate. She couldn't expect them to switch brands, not even on her account, she supposed. She was the prodigal daughter who had never learned her way back home.

So, it had just been her, and Whitney, and Pastor Luke whose kind face almost made up for everything. And then his wife, Agnes, who held Marge's hand, even though Marge definitely hadn't asked her to. When it was over, Luke and Agnes had invited her and Whitney over for lunch. Marge hadn't felt like eating, but the idea of sitting in her own kitchen was an even worse prospect.

"We have a group," Agnes said when the strawberry shortcake was served. It looked like hope, and Marge had shamefully hated it. She thought a dark chocolate pudding would have been more appropriate—somber in a gelatinous mound.

"What kind of group?" She tried not to eye her daughter down for taking generous bites, for swinging her legs in sugary delight. *She's just a kid*, Marge thought. *She doesn't know how to process this*. But then Marge felt just as guilty knowing her disappointment fell more along the lines that she wasn't a kid and didn't know how to process this either. But she was still expected to figure it all out.

"Bereavement. It's for those of us who have lost someone." Luke reached out and cupped his wife's hand. She was grasping her spoon that was still in her dessert bowl, so it looked like he was going to steal it from her. She smiled slowly, softly, and Marge was incensed at the line of tears in her eyes. What did this beautiful woman with her beautiful husband understand about loss?

"Yeah, I'll think about it," Marge said. She planned on not giving it another thought.

They thanked Pastor Luke and his wife for lunch, Marge's still half-eaten on her plate. They were on the receiving end of hugs and final requests to "just show up and see how you like it." But Marge remained firm in her resolve as she grabbed Whitney's hand and headed back home.

It's when they got there that things felt different. She had already taken the streamers down before the funeral, but that wasn't it. She was conscious enough to make sure Whitney brushed her teeth and

put on her night clothes. Marge got ready in the bathroom connected to her bedroom. She tried not looking at Lenny's toothbrush and his razor on the sink, but she did. She vomited in the toilet. She gripped the porcelain sides, and it reminded her of being pregnant with her daughter, how the morning sickness had plans of its own; she'd spend the whole morning sprawled out on the couch with a bag of frozen peas on her head. And sometimes, Lenny would be there with her, a cautious hand on her back or a delivery boy with a fresh bag of peas.

She tried to cry, but she couldn't. She figured she'd vomited everything out anyway. She put on her own pajamas and walked into the living room. She walked further, heading into the kitchen, and there she saw her daughter under the table, her cheek to the floor. She realized now that this must have been what Whitney was doing the morning Lenny died before Marge walked in. She must have been eye-to-eye with him—hers searching, his struggling. *How perfectly terrible*, Marge thought and laid down under the table next to her daughter. She pulled her in close as Whitney's body whimpered, but Whitney herself stayed silent. Marge knew the feeling. It was growing up and being different than everyone else and not being able to say a word about it. It was marrying a man you loved deeply but also hated on a horribly human level, not so much because of what he was but what you weren't. It was giving birth to a child way too late so none of it looked like you'd expected and having to swallow down the uncomfortable realization that nothing in this life should be about what you expect.

So, she held her close, both their bodies gently convulsing with the things they couldn't say.

In the parking lot, the night of the first meeting—after they finished their weak coffee and picked at stale Danishes—she told Agnes

goodbye, Agnes who led the group but never shared anything, even though she looked like a water balloon on the edge of popping.

“What’s her story?” Marge asked as she and Walt walked into the church parking lot. It was mid-July, some of the side neighborhood streets still littered with the bodies of dead fireworks. It had only been roughly a month since Lenny died, since Marge could feel her daughter’s sadness on the kitchen floor. That’s why Marge had eventually decided to go to the bereavement group at St. Andrew’s. Her daughter was like looking in a mirror.

“Who, Agnes?” Walt rubbed his neck as he walked. He looked like a person who took good care choosing his words. “She’s had a tough time with life.”

Marge snorted then quickly covered her mouth. “I didn’t mean that,” Marge said through closed fingers. She felt lousy and kept her eyes on the hot pavement. She had a problem with women like Agnes, not Agnes herself. The beautiful ones, the ones who were finely drawn with God’s own hand. They made Marge feel overly substantial. They made her feel the weight of her body, of every single one of her issues.

Marge paused at her car, and Walt paused with her. He was looking at her, and she was relieved to look up and only find gentleness there. “She can’t have babies. She wants children. On some level she thinks she’s broken, forever no good. But she knows the truth, logically. Christ died for her. He loves her so much. But she can’t help feeling she let Him down.” Marge felt Walt’s own story in the way he wove his words. He had shared his wife’s cancer, the way he measured her face with his eyes each day for changes. How in the end, losing his best friend was worse than losing himself. How he hated God but learned to love Him again because what was the alternative?

“I don’t believe in God.” She had wanted to say it during the meeting, but her mother had taught her better manners than that.

"I have a feeling He doesn't really care if you do or not," Walt said, his delivery like a pillow. She rested on it for a second. She supposed his logic wasn't that faulty.

"But you believe." She didn't ask it but declared it to confirm the chasm between them. She liked him, that being the first evening they had met notwithstanding, but she didn't know if she could be friends with someone who believed in fairytales. Maybe that's why she had stayed with Lenny for all those years. At least he had had enough sense to stare down reality.

"I do. Some days more than others. Not to say He ever changes. But my heart does if I'm not careful."

"You have control of your heart?"

"We all do. We have control of our hearts, our minds. It's the gift of free will." Marge stopped looking at Walt's face. There was an intrusive metallic taste in her mouth now. What choice did she have in the matter of her husband being dead? What choice did she have in all those miscarriages? And Walt didn't have a choice in his wife's death, she thought. She had heard him share his suffering. She had heard his wife's life painted in his words, the care he had for her, even when she was rotting away from cancer, and there wasn't a thing he could do about it. So why did he think he had control of anything?

"I like you, Walt. But you really don't make a lick of sense."

"I've been told worse." The taste dissipated, and when she looked back into his eyes, Marge saw the care he had voiced earlier in group. She tried hard not to blush.

"Look, I know things are rough for you right now, Marge. And I know what it's like to lose the love of your life." Marge didn't correct him. "But I want to help you and your daughter in some small way. I told you I own a bakery not too far from here. I was thinking maybe you could come work for me."

Marge touched the trunk of the Lincoln to ground herself. What type of person would offer her a job when they barely even knew

her? It was a moment her mother would have seen as miraculous. An answered prayer. But Marge blinked the intrusive thought away and saw this moment for what it was: a lonely guy giving her a chance in return for something he wanted.

“I couldn’t do that, Walt. I have no experience. I’d need child-care...”

“I’d pay you well enough for you to cover any expenses.” She looked down and noticed his hand lightly grazing the trunk too. “I’m not doing this because I have to, Marge. I just want to give you a gift. Like I said, I know what it feels like going this alone. And if I can ease that burden, then please let me.”

She had eventually agreed. Who was she to say no to a handout, especially when nobody else was beating down her door to work for them? That night, after driving home and picking up a sleeping Whitney from her neighbor’s house, Marge thought about all her burdens. How nice it would be if there was someone out there who could ease every single one of them.

Walt tried to give her the day shift, but she refused. Marge told him to treat her like he would any other employee, and she knew a new hire—especially an inexperienced one—wouldn’t have the choice in their schedule. He did need an extra baker in the evenings so the goods would be ready for when the shop opened at six. That settled it.

There was a crash course in understanding how the machines worked, how to even make dough in the first place. Walt came diligently to teach her—something she complained about at first, and then stopped when she realized he wanted to be there. His other nighttime employee, Minerva, was a quiet ghost working in circles around them to get the next morning’s goods ready for purchase.

Marge was a quick learner, and it became apparent after her first week that she wouldn’t need much more than Minerva’s silent exam-

ple to get the work done. But Walt would still pop in from time to time as the weeks wore on.

She still thought he lived in a fantasy world with all his talk about God and Jesus. Well, maybe just with God. With Jesus, there seemed to be a concrete thread, something that took that fantasy and placed it squarely in front of her. Marge was always aware of a “which door are you going to choose?” type scenario, seeing the underlying current of all Walt’s stories seemed to be, “Will you choose Jesus too?” Marge was too smart, too well-versed in church-speak to take the bait. She had spent far too many years in a pew to not know when someone was evangelizing at her, even when they didn’t really know it themselves. Her church, growing up, wasn’t particularly bent on welcoming newcomers to service or seeking out the lost, partly due to the fact of how small Helena was. Black or white, you belonged to a church—segregated, of course—unless you were like Hamish Johnson and took to your whiskey more regularly than you ever would a pew. But regardless, Marge could smell what wasn’t being said a mile away. Walt cared for her, but unfortunately, part of that caring was for her soul.

“I’m glad for you, Walt. I’m glad your god was there when Tammy died. I really do mean that,” Marge told him at one of their parking lot rendezvous after group. It was weeks after their very first, the black top no longer emanating heat but a brisk chill. Marge drew the edges of her sweater together, fighting the secret wish that they were Walt’s arms keeping her warm. She missed Lenny. She was intensely sad Whitney had lost her father. But working and directing daily life on her own terms had given her a sense of accomplishment. And even though life was still hard, it wasn’t impossible. “But I won’t be going to St. Andrew’s with you any time soon. I’m too busy sacrificing at the altar of bills and child rearing to have to sacrifice to another god too.”

Walt snorted. Marge looked and could see nothing but joy. “Who said anything about me inviting you along? Maybe I like spreading out in the pew and not having anyone borrowing my space.” Marge grinned at him and tried to desperately ignore the barrage of butterflies taking flight in her stomach. She noticed him studying his shoe, a white no-nonsense tennis shoe that glowed against the black ground beneath them. “I was wondering, though, if you’d like to have a meal one of these nights after group? Or maybe a lunch date one Sunday? I know it’s hard having to find a babysitter, but I’d like to cover that for you.” The butterflies threatened to fly away, taking Marge with them.

“Sure,” she said, a bit too clipped than she had meant to. “That would be fine.”

“Great,” he said. “Chinese maybe? Mexican?”

“You choose,” Marge said. Because it didn’t matter where they ended up going. It just mattered that they went.

They planned for next Saturday, for after they had heard stories of heartache and shared their own with the group. Marge looked forward to it all week. She’d catch herself planning her outfit at the laundromat or deep cleaning their new trailer home because she could no longer afford the mortgage on the house she had shared with Lenny. She told Whitney a little bit about the nice man she knew, the one who got her the good job that provided them food and the clothes Whitney wore to school. Marge was gentle and generous in her description of Walt, but really, maybe she underplayed who Walt really was. He was unlike any man she had ever met, except maybe her father.

The night her life changed forever, she kissed Whitney on her forehead. She hugged her daughter hard, the excitement reaching its crescendo because tonight was Friday evening and merely twenty-four hours later, she’d be with a man she could foresee loving one day, even if it meant re-examining the things she thought she knew.

She left Tabitha's—the neighbor who lived in the trailer next to theirs—and drove the Lincoln to Brightman's Bakery off Fourth and South Cross. She pulled up parallel to Brightman's big storefront windows, the early evening light glowing back into the passenger side of her car. She was there a few minutes early, so she closed her eyes for a second, leaning firmly against the headrest.

"I'm so sorry." It snuck out of her. As excited as she was a few miles before, Marge was now desolate. Maybe it was because she could still smell Lenny in the leather seats. It seemed like the stitching had absorbed the Old Spice, the peppermints he chewed with reckless abandon. Marge moved her finger half an inch down the groove of the middle seat and her sadness came unchained. It roamed mercilessly through her, her sobs like a herd of slow-moving elephants stomping from inside her chest to outside her eyes. When she looked up, there was a woman on the sidewalk leaving Brightman's trying not to stare at her.

It wasn't about Lenny, and yet, it was only about him. For a man she had known forever, she barely knew him at all.

"Or maybe I did. Maybe that was all there was to know," she gulped through the tears. It wasn't fair to Lenny, knowing Walt. They were night and day, two peas in very different pods. When she closed her eyes, there was Lenny's face, dead and vacant. And when she blinked and shut them again, there was Walt, telling her it would all be okay.

It took a few breaths and a few wipes of her face to look presentable. She didn't want Minerva to wonder about her. She went inside and set to taking her heartache out on the dough.

Towards the end of their shift, they looked like ghosts. Flour made itself comfortable in their hair, under their nails, in the gaps of their clothes. It was hard for Marge not to laugh at Minerva until the sobering thought of what she herself must look like kept her mouth shut.

There was one thing different that night. Usually, Minerva was the one who took out the day's trash bags to the alley, a whole affair that began with lugging everything out to the dumpster at the side of the building and then proceeding to lift every bag over its lip. That night, there were too many heavy things: empty glass bottles, a small mountain of crates, cardboard boxes that were cumbersome stacked all together. Minerva—a small woman—had a bad back, but she had refused until now to let Marge do trash duty. "Too hard," Minerva had told her the first night Marge worked at Brightman's when she had asked to help her with it; Marge was suspicious she just didn't want to scrub down the metal tables to remove the flour that always stuck like paste. Minerva immediately turned up her radio station, and that was the last of the conversation. But now, Minerva had to concede defeat, her five-foot-one inch frame no match for the formidable pile of trash near the back door.

Marge took care moving the garbage, trying to catch Minerva's eye now and again for approval. This job was a lot better than cleaning those tables that Minerva was now attempting to get into shape, working her rag in white circles and humming along to some kind of music she called "mariachi."

Marge chased down two loose soda bottles that had been purchased from the old timey Coke machine near the front door. The entrance to Brightman's was beautifully stuck in time. It had been left the same way his grandfather had designed it, Walt had said, with red and white checkered flooring and bright cream-colored paint reflecting the light streaming through the windows. The bakery reminded Marge of how she sometimes felt: the cover up of something warm and familiar on the outside and the truth lurking behind it: an ever-growing mound of garbage near the dumpster.

She closed the side door leading into the bakery so the cold wouldn't get in. She started with the bottles first, making sure they landed in their intended spots. She arced them like a basketball play-

er and relished the sound when one landed on another. Next were the crates. She balanced each one over her head and threw them in, the sounds of those not nearly as satisfying as the glass bottles. She had the first bag of trash in her hand when someone spoke behind her.

“Perfect timing.” For a second, she assumed it was Walt, but when she turned around, it wasn’t. It was the exact opposite of Walt.

“Can I help you?” Marge asked, trying to keep her voice calm, friendly. The man looked dirty, probably homeless but not like the usual men she saw on the street corners. Their faces were sad, hopeful maybe. There was no hope in this man’s face.

“Of course, you can.” He smiled too slowly. Her heart felt like it had watching the Munich Olympics in their living room, Lenny in his recliner and Whitney coloring on the floor. Marge couldn’t explain it, but she felt the terror before they even caught wind of it. She knew the outcome before it ever dared to rear its ugly head.

Marge ran to the side door, intending to beat her fists, hoping the music didn’t drown out the sound of her fear, but he was too fast. He grabbed her coat, and she tried to wiggle out of it, but he got her with his other arm. And then she felt something hit her temple, the feel of glass like confetti sprinkle down her shirt; the ground was cold beneath her.

She didn’t wake until she was in the hospital. She figured that was a blessing. From whose god she wasn’t sure because if it was Walt’s then she certainly didn’t want anything to do with him. Why did this happen? Why would God let this happen in his infinite wisdom, his supposed goodness?

She thought her first visitor was Minerva. The lady really did look like a ghost walking through the threshold to Marge’s hospital room. But no flour this time—just a pale, sick look comprehending what had happened just a few hours before.

“I thought you died,” Minerva said in stilted English.

“Me too,” Marge said because it had happened that way. One moment, she was looking at something inhuman, a demon maybe like the ones her father would read about, the ones who had relations with God’s people who then gave birth to the men of old, warriors of renown. *What a strange story*, Marge used to think, the bricks of her unbelief stacking up right there on the hardwood floor of her childhood home. But maybe not as far-fetched as she had once thought.

Minerva left a candle with a lady in a blue robe on it. Her hands were in prayer, a cherub rested beneath her feet and her face was meant to look peaceful, but Marge was afraid her eyes would flash open at any second. *Get a good look then*, Marge thought for no reason.

She checked with the nurse. Tabitha had been notified. Marge was thankful, and yet her gut still sunk. She didn’t know what to tell Whitney. Her daughter couldn’t see her like this.

“Oh, and your husband—Walt—he said he’d be back later. He waited a long time for you to wake up. Never seen a grown man cry that hard. You guys must love each other a whole lot.” The nurse checked Marge’s IV. She could smell the strong scent of vanilla on her brown skin.

“Did he say when?”

“When what, honey?”

“When he might be back?”

“Oh, I think he was just running back to get a few things to settle in here with you.” Marge allowed the lie to be reality for a moment. Walt loved her. Walt was her doting husband. Walt would hole up in this vile place to be with her. He’d do anything just to be with her.

“Tell him when he gets here to go home, please. I don’t want any more visitors.” The nurse nodded in a short, professional manner, but her face betrayed her. *Such sadness*, Marge thought. *Poor woman’s created a story that could withstand the horrible thing that happened to me, and I have to set everything straight.*

Marge felt terrible.

Tabitha took her home. When Whitney crawled into bed with her that first night, Marge didn't want to be touched, but she allowed it because she knew Whitney needed to be. She shut her eyes and prayed that sleep or death would take her.

A few weeks later, Marge learned she was pregnant. The doctor from the hospital called to let her know the results of the pregnancy test they had her take. She hung up the phone, her back to her daughter playing on the floor.

"You're cruel" she whispered out loud to the god she didn't believe in.

She was plucked out of her thoughts and into Garrett's strange world. Her son was at the edge of the bed, looking at Travis with a stern concentration. Instinctually, she knew she should stop him, but she didn't. She had seen this before—the way Garrett would get close to his nephew and find an unexpected peace in his face. She had thought about taking a photo when he did this, but then the shame melted her heart. How many other photos had she taken of him?

In the gentle twilight where Marge closed her eyes, she lived in the in between—in between Travis sleeping and waking, in between watching the kids and feeding them, in between remembering Walt and not remembering him. So as the seconds slipped from her fingers and the sun slipped through the blinds, she thought of his face and how she had to turn him away.

How she hoped he was happy somewhere, but maybe not too happy.

Chapter Ten

She saw Franklin sometimes but mostly in passing. There might be glimpses of him in the cafeteria where he sat with his brother, Edwin, who was a younger, boisterous version. Edwin was always smiling whereas Franklin always seemed concerned.

Whitney was scared of Franklin. She saw traces of him in Travis—in her son’s almond-shaped eyes and his hairline that cut a no-nonsense line straight across his forehead. This did nothing to ease her fears towards Jamal’s father who always seemed to be watching her. The hard part was the little spark of love she had for him. He was a good man; anyone could see it. If someone dropped their glove waiting in the lunch line, he would pick it up. When they all filtered out the front double doors at quitting time like blood cells in a tight vein, it was always Franklin holding the door for everyone. He reminded Whitney of a different time, maybe one that had never even existed.

So, it was terrible knowing what he must think of her. They still weren’t married, though through no fault of her own. Jamal kept talking about getting his degree first. It would be easier to concentrate that way.

“How so?” she had asked him that summer when she was still pregnant, and it felt like time had stopped. They sat in bed together. They looked at Mad magazine and laughed at the Seavers on the tiny television set on Jamal’s dresser. How would a wedding make things any different?

“School just takes up the space in my head. It’ll be better sooner than you think.” Sooner than she thought would be nearly three more years. Three years of him sitting next to her and then touching his empty space just to know what gone felt like. Their son was swimming there inside her, but she didn’t dare ask if there was any room

for him in Jamal's cluttered brain. She didn't want to have to hear him lie.

It was break time, and Franklin was sitting at a table alone. His head was lost in a cloud of smoke—a woman with thick red lips named Claire was puffing on a Virginia Slim at the table next to him. It was a nice day—a little warmer than usual—so the room was nearly empty, the other Timex workers taking their requisite fifteen minutes of personal time with the sun and sky. He practiced not noticing her, a book laid out before him. As she drew closer, she saw that it was the Bible. It made her stop for a second. It felt like a wall between them. She wasn't superstitious, but she almost believed that book knew all her secrets and held every single one against her.

"Hello," Franklin said, surprising Whitney. She figured he would have kept his head buried in all the words she didn't understand until she got the hint and moved away.

"Hi, Franklin." He nodded at the orange plastic chair next to him. Whitney remembered a story her class had read in fifth grade once. There was a man on a mountain with all the answers, and each person who attempted to find him got lost, or blown off the side of the mountain, or decided the journey was way too great of a risk to even set foot in the first place. But there was one person, a small girl, who finally got to meet the man with all the answers.

"Why doesn't your son love me?" It came out in a choked gasp, and Whitney wasn't sure words had even moved through her mouth. But Franklin's eyes were on her, trained to understand.

"He doesn't do love well. It has nothing to do with you personally. But it has everything to do with him." Franklin's hand looked as if it wanted to rest on her shoulder, but it retreated to his Bible. "You lost someone?"

Whitney cupped her eyes with her two small hands and rubbed the tears away. "What do you mean?"

"Someone you love. They die?"

“My father,” Whitney said, although she had a hard time defining if what she had felt was love. It felt more like not having anymore and not being able to shake the feeling. Lenny Marksmen wasn’t a bad man. He was just a man, and Whitney had always known that. Maybe that was part of the problem.

“I lost my wife, Jamal’s mother.” Whitney nodded. “She was like Jamal. So talented—artistic. So ready to take on the world. The only problem is that she had claimed a slice of it for herself with me, but that slice just didn’t satisfy her anymore. She loved me. She loved her son. But she didn’t know how to love well either. She spent most of our marriage seeing other men. I still don’t think Jamal knows that, and I pray to God he never finds out.”

His eyes were alarmed at what his mouth had said, but he kept going. “How terrible enough is it that she couldn’t keep a promise to me? But what about her son? Why couldn’t he be enough?” Franklin wasn’t looking at Whitney anymore. He tried to find the answer at the kitchenette against the wall, its sticky counters and half-full coffee pots. Whitney imagined the pair they made in their twin outfits—blue lab coats and grim faces. The intercom dinged. Break was over. She felt uncomfortable under the weight of the thoughts he couldn’t keep inside.

Whitney looked down at her empty hands. She’d forgotten to get a snack, a cup of coffee. But they were still filled with the question she didn’t want Franklin to answer.

“He’s cheating on me, isn’t he?” she asked. For a second, it looked like the dinging intercom had won his attention. He had closed his Bible, grabbed his empty cup, and his eyes found hers again.

“Not in the way you might think.”

In the Timex bathroom, she went numb. Franklin had confirmed a fear that had nothing to do with Denise McGovern.

Jamal was gay.

Whitney leaned against the stall, trying to find the irony in how she always seemed to be processing life-changing news in public restrooms. She needed to know more. Who was this miserable human being who had ruined her life? But as soon as her mind strung those words together, her tongue couldn't speak. A picture of her own face popped into her head.

Without warning the back of it met the steel wall, and she pummeled her skull over and over, hoping to forget her own name. But even that was a luxury. She had to get back to work.

Whitney went to her designated space, avoiding her supervisor, Lenora, as she walked in a daze, a few minutes late. Her row oversaw putting the tiny digital chip inside the Ironman watch. Her eyes in the microscope, the ball of her toe planted to keep her chair from rolling away, she plucked the chip from its plastic container and watched it hover like a bird mid-flight. She wanted to vomit or maybe rip everything off the formica desk she shared with the other female technicians. She wanted to go find Franklin and yell in his face. *Why did you tell me?* she screamed in her head as she delicately lay down the tiny brain that made the watch go.

Because now she had the bullet. She just needed the courage to pull the trigger.

Chapter Eleven

He heard from Whitney less and less. Jamal sensed relief in himself one second, panic another. It was a ticking time bomb, the truth. Just a matter of time until it lit the sky.

College was a safe haven. It was everything he thought it would be and more. Gone were the days of hard stares and slurs. He didn't have to watch for wayward feet trying to trip him or the random spit ball aimed at his head. He was just one of the art majors, one of those "out there" kids that had their own parties and lingo that kept them tight in a protective bubble. He had never felt so secure, except for when he was young, and his mother was still alive.

He had already done two art shows. The second one was the curtain he pulled away from his heart. He displayed the notebook pages of his mother he had amassed all these years.

"A quiet cruelty. So vivid. You can see it in the way her eyes are closed," a girl in his Drawing II workshop had said. Her name was Amaya, and Jamal thought she was an idiot.

"Sure," he jovially offered because he had a glass of champagne in his hand, and nobody had called him the N-word.

He saw Denise on campus sometimes. She wasn't like high school Denise at all anymore. Each passing day ate away at her. Even from far away her hair seemed oily. He noticed her scratching at a zit in the Union when he was headed to the bookstore for more shading pencils. Every time her eyes met his, her radar accused him of being a fraud. He'd hurry past her, worried some sort of red alarm would start whooping above her head.

I don't owe her anything. I don't owe anyone anything, he would think in his dorm room, sitting at his desk and stabbing his pencil into a fresh, blank book. Then he'd look down and see his son's face in the etches.

Jamal cried. He was in a single dorm room this year—luck of the draw, but it never seemed lucky. He'd think about his tears streaming hot and wet down his face and silently scream at his non-existent dorm mate, *do you see me?* because for all the times he had been seen and punished for it, it never felt like how being known should.

“I see you, Jamal,” his father would say on the phone. Jamal didn’t even have to say anything; somehow that man knew the shame in his heart.

“What’s that crazy talk, Pops?” he’d speak into the receiver, brushing off his vulnerability.

“You’re working real hard, son. But I see you, I love you regardless.” Jamal could feel the warmth in his eyes wanting to spread down his face, and he cursed under his breath.

“Well, thanks. Means a lot. Hey, me and the boys are gonna head out, get some pizza. We’ll talk soon. Love you, Pops.”

He swallowed down his frustrations as he heard his father say goodbye on the phone. There were no boys, just the budding truth Jamal had stumbled over at the age of ten. He was not like the others.

Nobody had ever known except Denise. Not even his mother. He wasn’t sure about Franklin. Of all people, Franklin was the sort who seemed to have a sixth sense. But he never said anything outright. He just loved Jamal until all Jamal could feel was guilt.

He knew what it looked like. He had trapped some girl into having his kid so he could get the world off his back. Black and an artist in Arkansas was bad enough. But a black gay artist? He might as well speed up the process and find a lake to drown in.

But it was something more than that with Whitney. She was no cover story. She was someone he knew he needed to protect. She was so small and fit so perfectly in his arms, he sometimes wondered if his body and his brain had somehow gotten things all wrong. Because his heart? All it knew was love.

There were splinters though. He'd catch himself with his head against the car window or looking out the back glass door at Franklin's house, still waiting for the final piece of the puzzle. If he were honest with himself, he knew what he was waiting for. For God to make him straight.

"Anyone catch your eye?" Denise had said when they had first stepped on campus last year, and she was still the high school version of herself. He had shouldered her off and pointed to a flyer for *A Christmas Carol* tryouts. But her words still pierced his skull.

In the past two years, there had been a few. Random names and faces because Jamal would never get too close. It was like buying the match and swearing you'll never use it, only to watch your whole house go up in flames.

There was something inside him that was wrong, all wrong. And on the one hand he wanted to run away, to go figure it out. But on the other was his son's beautiful face.

He loved Travis just as much as Whitney, maybe more but in a different way. Travis was small and slight, but there was something fierce about him that he didn't get from his mother or father. Jamal knew it was most likely some wayward farmhand gene from Marge's side of the family. For all that woman's faults, at least she was good with his kid. But he knew what she thought about him, about them as a couple. And even though he fully understood the truth in it, it was no picnic to have to hear.

Regardless, they were a family. A horribly dysfunctional, barely glued together family. Jamal was truly grateful for that, his heart brimming with gratitude as Fall break was around the corner. He tried to ignore whatever was inside of him that insisted on pulling everything apart.

Chapter Twelve

When she was a child, she got anything she wanted. But when Denise took stock of it now, she realized how little she actually desired. It was almost a game—see how much she got out of her father before he finally looked up and around. But his head was always down, examining the head of his 3-wood, admiring the shine of his shoes. He had a great pair of patent leather ones he wore to the country club's black-tie event. Her mother would have looked stunning in her pink floor-length gown if she had been anyone else's mother. But she was five-year-old Denise's who could sense Lucy's fear.

Denise scratched at the acne on her chin thinking about that fear, how she had absorbed it straight through her pores. *Never let them see you scared*, she singsonged in her head. It was the next day when her father was on the golf course and her mother was locked in her bathroom. Denise snuck in and stole the shoes peeping from beneath her father's side of the bed. It was the first time she stole the matches and watched something burn.

They didn't, not completely. They became a melted mess on the driveway that a tiny Denise doused with a wilted stream of water from the hose. A neighbor jogged by, and Denise waved, placing a determined hand on her hip as water splashed onto her saddle shoes. She half-buried the mess behind the pool shed where nobody ever went.

Never found those shoes, Denise hummed, digging a little deeper at her face. She lay on her belly on her bed, her roommate, Samantha, long gone doing whatever Samantha did. The girl was rushing as a sophomore, which Denise found embarrassing. Her last roommate, Diane, was a nerd and used too many words Denise understood but also found embarrassing. Both girls wore every inch of themselves on the outside, and it clawed at Denise's sensibilities. It's like neither of them had any shame.

And now Samantha—her “forever friend” as her nauseatingly peppy RA, Roberta, put it—was out with people who weren’t Denise. *No sweat off my back*, Denise thought, wondering how hard it would be to burn Samantha’s Nikes in a poorly ventilated room.

Denise flipped onto her back, wondering what her father was doing right at that moment. Probably romping around with his latest receptionist, whacking at grass with a long, shiny piece of metal. Her mother was probably doped out of her mind. There was something intriguing about the thought of calling her. Would she even be coherent enough to recognize the sound of her own daughter’s voice? But Denise had tried calling them the past three days to no avail. Twice Samantha watched her with her sorry green eyes, and Denise smiled and said, “Oh duhski. I forgot they’re vacationing in the Alps.” Samantha had replied with a slow nod of her head.

Maybe I should burn her loafers too.

She was so bored, Denise decided to wash her face. That’s another thing she loathed, communal bathrooms. She’d be minding her own business, removing her make-up an inch at a time to reveal her ugly, inflamed skin, when a herd of freshmen—bubbly and just smitten about who knew what—came prancing through the door. All of them always fresh-faced and cute. She loathed them because she used to be them, and now she was what happened when you ate too much ice cream in one sitting.

Her clothes were getting tighter. She thought about going shopping, but the thought of combing the racks at the mall in her dirty sweatpants was hardly appealing. She hated doing laundry, mainly because she was never taught how and had to figure out the whole mind-numbing process by stealing glances at other students who weren’t so pitiful. She felt like a stalker, sneaking furtive glances at the bottles of detergent, the loud metal machines, and the hands that folded everything into neat and organized piles.

“Stop staring,” one girl had straight out said to her. Denise rifled through her rolodex of comebacks only to realize her tongue didn’t work.

“Uh...t-kay?” She had managed, grabbing her sack of clothes and the half empty bottle of detergent she had swiped off the counter last laundry day. She went to her dorm room and borrowed one of Samantha’s metal forks to write on the underside of her desk. “STUPID” was still carved there, but whether it referenced the girl, the situation, or herself, Denise wasn’t sure.

But it was peaceful in the bathroom. It was early Saturday morning, so everyone was either hung over or still out living their lives. *Wonder what that’s like?* she sang in her brain. She rubbed a white mound of Noxzema into her face, rubbing, rubbing, rubbing like it would erase everything wrong with her life.

There were a few girls she used to hang with in high school who went to school with her. She had fully intended on leading them around freshman year like usual, but they acted as if that wasn’t an option. One of them, Julia, was annoyingly pretty and became a Chi-O. Now every time Denise saw her, she pinched herself hard in a hidden place so she wouldn’t scream “I made you!” in Julia’s face. The audacity that girl had to take a leap without Denise’s consent.

And look at her now. And look at you, the voice in her head lulled. The burning need to gasp and cry came on hard, and Denise didn’t fight it. *Let someone come in. Let them see what rock bottom looks like.* She rinsed the white residue off her face to find that she looked the same, if not worse. *Beautiful*, she thought and slammed the Noxzema bottle several times on the counter.

It felt like she couldn’t breathe. It felt like drowning and knowing she was drowning, but no one was around or cared enough to help. Jamal was gay. Her best friend was gay, but she wasn’t even his best friend anymore. The love of her life was gay, and yet another girl was in a relationship with him. They even had a baby.

The crying stopped, and the laughing started. *You can't get anyone to love you, can you?*

The heavy bathroom door squealed opened. Denise laughed, "No I guess, I just can't," to a dumbstruck Stacey.

Chapter Thirteen

Franklin was the serious one, his brother, several shades less serious. Edwin was the class clown, the man's man who could crack a beer as quickly as he could crack a joke. Franklin was the quiet one in the corner, clutching his Bible.

"Well, hey there, Mr. Holier than thou," Edwin said as the two of them walked together towards Franklin's Oldsmobile. It was a pet name, a term of endearment for all the times Franklin chose his Bible over standing outside in a stream of smoke with his brother during break time. It crushed all the soft parts of him. Couldn't Edwin feel it on him—the desire to be normal, like everyone else?

More often than not, Franklin read it with red-rimmed eyelids, tired from staying up late, reading it the night before. He'd comb over the same line three times in a row, skip a few verses and then begin again, taking the last line of a paragraph first and then reading it backwards. He was sure there was something secret there he just hadn't cracked yet. But who held the secret? He didn't know. Jacob and his twelve sons? Moses and his burning bush? Jonah resting woefully in the belly of his whale?

There were answers that were deliberately hiding from him.

Oh God, why did Anette have to die?

He never got a response. Not the night she passed that he spent outside trying to find her in the stars and not yesterday evening when he did the same thing—the old, familiar panic setting in as he remembered seeing her face again was not an option.

He had so much love for her and so much hate too. The bitterness would eat him alive if his anxiety didn't.

He hopped into the driver's seat while Edwin popped into the back. It started a few years back when Franklin had saved up enough to buy the car, and Edwin had just lost his license. Anette was in rare form, spending two to three days at a time away instead of her typical

Saturday no-show. The car was a necessity he told himself, a practical way to get their son safely to school. But Edwin smelled something else on him.

“Looks like somebody’s got a point to prove,” Edwin had said when Franklin was kind enough to pick him up from the drunk tank.

Now his brother sat like a king in the back, hands clasped behind his head.

“White girl looked pretty upset today,” he said. Franklin had given up on correcting him.

“Oh?” He had managed to avoid Whitney the rest of the day, shuffling out early and praying Edwin was in his wake. He didn’t know what had gotten into him. Why was he sharing these little shards of glass that tore him up, inside out? How cruel of him to share it with the poor girl who loved his son so violently that Franklin was scared of her. He had always wanted to do that too—love his son like she did, like Anette did. But all the words Franklin read forward and backwards in his leather-bound book seemed to always lodge deep within his head and never his heart.

“Boohooing and whatnot. Saw her coming out of the ladies. Your son up to his no-good tricks?” Edwin asked. Edwin always depicted Jamal as some sort of lothario—a man with romance on his mind just because he could draw a picture. Franklin thanked Yahweh that Edwin didn’t know the truth because Edwin would have sharpened it and stuck it under Franklin’s jaw.

“Nah. He’s a good boy. He’s half Anette, remember?” Franklin avoided looking into the rearview mirror. To Edwin—to everyone—Anette was a saint. It was mostly due to Franklin’s efforts in creating the wife he had always wanted. His parents were perfect people in a very imperfect world. They still lived in Elaine in the house right next to Pilgrim Guide Baptist. Before Anette had passed, he’d often take his family down there, Franklin watching with one

eye the way his parents loved each other with soft words and soft touches and the way his wife acted as if she'd been chained down inside somebody's dirty basement. His bird-heart would set off, battling its wings against his ribs as his mother tried to catch his eye, but he'd never let her. The woman had lived too long not to know heartache when she saw it.

His parents were both survivors of the Elaine massacre or just "the massacre" as the locals called it. It was a brutal event that had taken his grandfather with its evil claws. His father was three at the time. When he had his mother explain it to him because his father's face would never play ball, she talked about the sharecropping first. *What an odd thing to start with*, Franklin thought, his eleven-year-old self seated on their salmon-colored sofa next to his brother who was picking a scab on his foot.

"It started 'cause they be taking what was ours," his mother said. Their house was so small, it felt like the three of them might just burst out of it. But Franklin loved the feeling because the closer he felt to his parents, the less the ugly past had rights to his thoughts.

She went on and told him how hundreds were killed. "But that's the thing. They didn't say hundreds. They said less, like twenty, fifty. But there were so many that died." Her parents had died too. But his mother always had a steely resolve, an "it is what it is" type attitude that his father had never taken on for himself. His wound was as red and salted as the day he received it.

The white men were keeping the black families poor. They wouldn't give them what they were owed for the cotton they picked, and would you believe the chaos that comes when people actually stand up for themselves?

"All they did was organize. But the white man don't like a union he can't benefit from, I guess." Her eyes went darker than usual, so Franklin changed the subject. He'd ask again and again, picking up pieces to the middle and ending of the story. The ending was the

worst part. In the end, it wasn't even about the men who congregated at a church to talk about negotiating their fair pay. In the end, it was about white men with guns killing everyone in sight.

"The women and the children too," his mother said. But she would never say how she survived or how his father had either. The proof was evident. There they all were in their tiny little house, breathing.

Older, even more to the point, his mother graciously welcomed his wife. But her eyes were always on Anette as she sat tightly knitted together on the salmon-pink couch.

If only his mother had known.

In the back of the Oldsmobile, Edwin stretched and yawned, his white teeth set wide. Franklin loved his brother because he loved his parents. But there was something strange inside him that Franklin always kept tripping over. "Jealousy," Anette had said once when Franklin was musing aloud, and she walked right through his hovering thoughts.

"Jealous? Of me?"

"Because you have me. He's got Dolores. No competition." She slinked next to him on the bed, cradling his head and kissing him straight on the mouth. His first thought was to struggle, which he shamefully batted away. He loved her so much, but he knew what she did when she wasn't around. He couldn't ignore the truth that had become a noisy bedfellow. He moved his head away.

"Typical Frank," she sang, sauntering to the dresser to reapply her lipstick. "I kissed Baby. Tell him goodnight again for me. I'll be back. If not, well." She didn't even hide it anymore, and he had stopped asking where she went. He nodded his head at her, trying not to think of his parents. Trying to not think of everyone who had died before he was born.

“A saint,” Edwin said, referring to Anette. He would have made some off-the-cuff remark about her looks if she were alive. But even Edwin had some respect.

Franklin parked the car at the curb in front of his brother’s house. Edwin hardly ever asked him to come inside, which was just fine with Franklin. He had long passed trying to connect with his sister-in-law who seemed like a lost little duckling. Without Anette around, she had forgotten to brush her hair or put on lipstick and found a solid thirty pounds sitting on the couch, watching her soaps. Edwin didn’t really seem to mind, since he spent his nights out at the bar anyways. But Franklin couldn’t help feeling sad for Douglas, their eight-year-old son, whose eyes were staring at them through the living room window.

“He doing okay?” Franklin asked, his chin nodding at Douglas.

“Dougie? Why wouldn’t he be? He’s still a kid. Don’t even know what disappointment tastes like yet.” Edwin moved to get out of the car but stopped heavy in his seat. “If there’s trouble in paradise for them two, you need to nip it in the bud now or Jamal will never see his son again. Can’t trust them white women,” Edwin said, seemingly recalling his own experiences.

“They’re just fine,” Franklin said. He waved off his brother who was swaying towards his house with the sweet anticipation of happy hour. Franklin looked up again and caught his nephew’s eyes.

Chapter Fourteen

She was scared to tell her mother. Whitney marveled at her stupidity, at the brown paper bag in hand that held her soup container and metal spoon. She hadn't even thought that through—how she'd still need to carry that nasty, damp bag because she couldn't throw away the bowl or the silverware. This made her want to cry, but then it made her angry. Everything was out to fail her.

The wind tried to whip at her ankles, but her coat dragged long enough to spare them. She suddenly felt like she was walking in a sleeping bag, and everyone was judging her—the woman pushing the stroller with its wonky wheel, the kid who was walking home from the library. It was Friday and the whole world had plans that involved leaving their usual, typical messes for a small ounce of fun, but Whitney knew she wouldn't be receiving her share.

Her boyfriend was gay.

"No," she said, stopping and shaking her head. The woman halted the stroller slightly but then kept pushing, avoiding Whitney's eyes. "He can't be," she said. She didn't know who she was talking to because talking to herself would be almost as stupid as carrying a torn-up bag of nonexistent soup. She didn't even have leftovers, opting to pour the rest she couldn't stomach down the kitchenette's sink in the breakroom.

She managed to keep walking despite the stares, real or imagined. Despite the gnawing in her stomach where the acid fought boldly with the partly digested cabbage. How could she not have seen it? Even Stacey had been fooled.

That should have made her feel better, but it didn't. Knowing Marge hadn't sensed it didn't make her feel any better either. She felt like a dolt surrounded by dolts.

Her anger turned onto Franklin. How dare he tell her now when he could have told her earlier, at least before she'd given up every-

thing to help fund his son through school. She'd even cosigned a school loan, something she was thankful she could do because of her job at Timex. The thought made her sick.

By the time she got to the front door, Whitney's head felt like a wayward carousel. Everything spun, and she didn't know how to fix the spinning. She couldn't tell anyone—not her mother who would throw up her hands at the world's injustice, or her brother who wouldn't understand what she was saying, or her best friend who would only feel sorry for her, for trusting in something other than herself to change the scope of her circumstances.

For the first time, Whitney realized how disconnected she felt and spied a bird next to her, searching the ground for grubs. But then she remembered the gun in her mother's closet, a lone thought she pecked at. She wiped her face with the fist holding her lunch bag, opening the front door with the other.

Chapter Fifteen

Whitney was leaving. She wanted to go up to the university to spend some time with Jamal. “How romantic,” Marge had said, making kissing noises at her. She was expecting the typical response—a roll of the eyes, a petulant sigh. But her daughter just said, “Yeah, funny,” in a voice snipped from the rest of her body.

Whitney took Travis into her room and shut the door. And for dinner she complained of a stomachache from all that cabbage. *Told her so*, Marge thought, putting on *Webster* for Garrett as she grabbed for her basket of magazines. She tentatively sat on the couch, slowly settling herself on the opposite end of her son. It was something new she had been trying—getting close without him realizing it. He was so enthralled by the show, he didn’t notice.

The couch heaved beneath her weight. Marge had gained so much in the past several months that Dr. Butler had asked to take her blood pressure at Garrett’s last appointment. It had been offensively high, not just for the doctor but for Marge who felt personally attacked by the numbers. She had always been a bigger woman, and it seemed like nobody could leave her alone about it, not even useless medical equipment.

She hadn’t told Whitney. No need worrying her daughter about something she couldn’t control. *But you can control it, Mother*, she had heard back from the Whitney who lived in her head. It was the same one who berated her for eating an extra chicken leg or suggesting potato salad for dinner, the real Whitney’s face silently stony.

Marge hated that stoniness. It was always the undercurrent of every wave she rode, the fact that her daughter was sick of her. Maybe that was too harsh. But maybe it wasn’t. Marge hardly had a pulse on anything anymore, living constantly in everyone else’s world but wrapped tightly in her own little bubble.

“Isn’t that right?” She said aloud, almost scaring herself for having spoken. Her finger tracked the inside spine of a Southern Living magazine. She dared herself to look at her son, pretending that when she did, she’d see a face of empathy. *Don’t worry about Sis, Mama. She loves you. She just has a hard time showing it*, the other Garrett said. As mean as Whitney’s imaginary counterpart was, Garrett’s was the full-fledged opposite, loving Marge beyond what Marge deserved.

But when she looked up, her son was gawking at the television, still in undies and white tube socks because today had been a losing day, and no clothes were worn. She fought to find that tiny inchworm of love shoved deep in her gut, petted its head until it grew into a respectable size and shape for a mother to have towards a child. She petted and petted and ignored her envy of losing all sides of oneself to a blaring TV.

The next morning, Whitney was almost gone before Marge could say goodbye. Her daughter was already in her coat with a duffle bag at her ankles. She looked terrible, like a woman withering into herself. *That stupid diet*, Marge thought, cerebrally patting her back for a second before remembering how hard she herself must look. She had tossed and turned all night, catching a deep sleep but then being jarred awake by noises that seemed to come within her own room. Even the floor seemed to creak at one point, but in a mole-like state—her internal whiskers sensing something close but not seen—she had drifted off again, not too concerned if anyone had the intention of offing her. *Good riddance*, she had softly and sadly noted.

“Where you going, Whit?” Whitney turned around and looked even worse than Marge had first assessed.

“I told you. I’m going to see Jamal.”

“But you don’t look too good. And you said you were sick. Do you think—”

“I don’t think, I know, Mother. I can do whatever I darn well please, and I’d be grateful if you’d get off my case.” For a second, Marge wasn’t sure what she was looking at. It seemed like Whitney—the real one—but it talked like the angry one in Marge’s head. She had the deep desire to hug her daughter but felt like it would be akin to falling out of step in a chorus line. They both knew their moves. Best if they just stuck with them.

“All right,” Marge said, deciding not to point out that Whitney was leaving her son with her, so maybe Marge did have a right to a say in her plans. But she let it lie with an unrealized hug and watched her daughter make her way out the door.

It was cold, so the boys needed to be bundled up. This was easy with Travis who liked the warmth from the puffy blue coat Marge bought him with the small amount she was able to save each month from the cans she recycled. Whitney hated recycling days, claiming they didn’t have to do things like that anymore, but Marge was no stranger to the world letting her down. They may be on top now, but based on history, it wouldn’t be long before they found themselves firmly on the floor again.

Now that Whitney was technically an adult and raising a family of her own, the stress had eased up a bit on all levels. Not only was her daughter gracious enough to keep them fed and (mostly) well, Anna, their social worker, no longer came by to check on them. Marge, for the most part, missed these calls. They had made up a good portion of her week—getting their old trailer ready to look presentable, deciding what snacks she’d serve when Anna finally arrived.

“It’s a good thing, Mom,” Whitney had said, admonishing Marge even the tiniest bit of regret over leaving their old life.

"Sure, I know," Marge replied, pondering on how many facets "good" seemed to have.

But perhaps her daughter was right. At least she could afford to buy her grandson a new coat now, a grandson who looked as cute and cozy as a teddy bear. Once she zipped him up, she turned to the large trench coat she had found in St. Anthony's basement. It was black and made her son look like some sort of miscreant, but it was the only thing without zippers she could find. Garrett hated zippers. He panicked in last year's coat, acting like Marge was walking him to the guillotine each time the shiny metal came anywhere near him. So, she found this one, a hideous oversized number with a cloth belt that was somehow less intimidating. But Marge was in such a good mood, not even Garrett's ugly coat could throw her off. She had even managed to coax her son into a pair of khakis and a Lacoste polo, another basement find that was nearly perfect save for the small purple stain on the chest. Despite that, and the coat, and his bright white tennis shoes, he looked fairly put together. "Dare I say debonair," she said to Travis who was trying to eat a stray raisin off the floor.

She thought about calling Whitney. She had received a short call from her at a truck stop outside of Clarksville but hadn't heard from her since. She figured if there wasn't a message on the machine once they got back, she'd give Jamal a call. She tried to ignore the worry knotting her stomach.

She had become used to the feeling over the years. If she wasn't worried about her daughter, born so small and helpless, then she worried about her son who—although helpless—was no longer small. Where Whitney lacked in size, Garrett made up for it. And where Garrett lacked in general awareness—at least to Marge's very naked eye—Whitney was excruciatingly aware of the circumstances that always seemed to hem them in. And she always had been.

Marge had gotten used to being judged by her daughter whose pale blue eyes were an unwanted reminder that Marge's choices

didn't stop with herself. She had been a good mother, she told herself so, because what about all the nights she had made a roast straight from the oven and brought it to Lenny in one of her finest dresses? But even then, she remembered her daughter sitting on the floor, soaking her in. Even then, Marge felt the hard, hateful lump behind her breastbone that she tried her best to pretend wasn't there. It felt like Whitney was mocking her, and deep down, Marge knew it only stung because she believed her daughter was right.

"A sham," Marge said as she ushered Garrett out the door with Travis on her hip. She was wearing her soft gloves, neon pink and hard on the eyes, but the only pair Garrett would let her touch him with. She was even able to hold his hand, the look on his face one that she assumed was contentment, and she pretended Garrett was just that—content.

She wanted to go to the bakery. The feeling was an overwhelming sweep that must have been residing in the same dirty corners as all her other emotions. She just hadn't noticed it before. She thought maybe Walt would know how to sort her out. She knew he'd be willing to forgive her. And she was angry for thinking about him so much.

"Let that be a lesson to you boys. Never open the door, not even a crack unless you're prepared to get ransacked." Travis bobbed his little head up and down in agreement, playing with the scarf tied tight around Marge's neck, and Garrett was looking up at a flock of birds.

"South for the winter," Marge said, unable to elaborate. The walk was already taking the wind out of her. She paused for a second, Garrett still looking straight up at the sky and Travis bucking on her hip as if trying to make her go. She took a shaky breath and started walking again. She found herself pointing out things, especially when she felt the eyes of other passersby on her. *Look at that pile of leaves on the ground. Aren't those colors pretty? Don't worry, that man is supposed to be down there. He's probably just fixing something in the sewer.*

She played the part of the attentive grandmother, the panic rising in the back of her throat forcing her to prattle on. She knew what these people were thinking. They were judging her. And she had to keep talking to keep from setting her grandson down and knocking a few heads.

Nobody said anything. *Thank the heavens*, Marge thought, her feet and Garrett's landing perfectly inside a sidewalk square at the exact same time. And when she looked up, they were at the bakery.

She felt surrounded although nobody was near them. She wanted to duck down the alley but remembered what the alley was to her. When Whitney had first gotten her job, and they could afford to rent a nicer place, she found herself praying it would be on the other side of the world, or at the very least, a world away from the bakery. But they had moved within walking distance, her daughter seemingly unaware of how much this move had crushed her mother.

She was thinking about these things with her head bent and Travis holding on for dear life as he slipped down the side of her hip when she realized Garrett wasn't with them. She looked down the sidewalk one way and then the other, her heart whipping as fast as her head, but he was nowhere. Travis giggled, pointing a finger at the large, inviting windows of Brightman's Bakery where her son was trapped on the other side.

Chapter Sixteen

It was unreal, the way an entire body could be consumed by pain. Whitney was less flesh and more burn, her intense desire to get to Fayetteville outweighing any sort of common sense. She sped, going ninety to ninety-five and was mystified that a cop wasn't waiting around a corner to find her.

She had left her mother in a state of numbness, the both of them really—Marge unsure of what had come over her daughter and her daughter unsure of how the thing that was her life was her life. She had every good intention of living a much better one; now she figured her intentions were merely bricks paving the way to hell.

The night before, she had snuck into her mother's room. Marge had always been a heavy sleeper whereas Whitney was spooked by the sound of her own breathing. Still, she had tiptoed her way across Marge's squeaky wooden floors, past her thigh puncturing nightstand and into the closet where Marge kept an assortment of ill-fitting, lightly stained clothes. Up at the top of the wooden shoe cubby sat a shoebox. And inside that shoebox was Marge's gun.

Technically, it had been Lenny's gun. Lenny was always a strong proponent of the Second Amendment, even though he wasn't much of a proponent of anything else. But he felt strongly about personal safety and his desire to keep his wife and child protected. Thinking about it now, Whitney figured it was a lot easier to purchase a firearm than to play the role of an actual father.

You're just angry, she whispered in her brain, unwilling to challenge the theory that Marge could sleep through a level 5 hurricane. She was, and she didn't mean to take it out on her deceased father. Her body was charged with Jamal's secrets, with Denise McGovern's smug smile, with Franklin's brokenness. With her mother's substantial presence. She watched her mother in her bed, flat on her back. Her chin was raised up to the ceiling, her mouth open and a damp

line of drool having escaped from the side of her lip. Whitney was overwhelmed with grief. What had gotten them here, to the point where Whitney was so disgusted with herself, it turned her against the only person who had ever truly loved her? She wanted to lie down next to Marge and hold her tight like she did when she was a girl. But instead, she just sobbed quietly, jarringly as she covered her mouth with her one hand and held the gun with the other.

She made it out, placing the empty gun in her underwear drawer for safe keeping with the worn box of bullets that had accompanied it in the shoebox. *What are you doing?* was the song on repeat in her head. But she just blinked the refrain away, opting for sleep over any sort of self-reflection.

She had left, taking the Lincoln and leaving her son in her mother's arms. Her son. She wanted his face to stop her. She wanted his face to mean something. But her feelings were stacked so high, she couldn't even peek over them. So instead, she kissed him hard on his cheek and turned before she lost her footing.

She was two hours into the trip. Her bladder screamed, having packed up and left so quickly. She decided to stop at a Flying J and call her mother. The call was quick—she didn't need another inquisition—and she then went to relieve herself. She washed her hands in warm water and her face looked back at her dripping wet. Her blue irises looked faded as did her very pale skin. She wondered if it was because she was so odd looking that the father of her child would rather be with men.

A lady flushed the toilet and opted for the sink right next to Whitney. She had caught Whitney's eye, flashed her a big smile and asked, "Let me guess. Heading down for Thanksgiving? Isn't it a little early for the University to be out, Sweetie?"

"Yes, that's right. Heading back to see my family."

"Well, that's great. You have yourself a nice holiday."

“You too,” Whitney said as the woman and her damp hands left the bathroom. She turned back to look at what that lady must have seen—someone so tiny and small they must be afraid of their own shadow.

In the car—her hands wrapped around the steering wheel, knuckles threatening her thin skin—Whitney vowed to never look that way to anyone again.

Chapter Seventeen

Her son put his hands on the glass, his eyes pleading with her. She knew Garrett would never leave unless she went in to fish him out. He hated all glass doors. Sliding ones, revolving ones, ones that simply opened at their hinges. How he managed to walk through one without panicking was beyond Marge. He was good with windows though. He loved windows, and she'd often find him tucked in the chair underneath the one in their living room, looking at the sky. But now he was intensely staring at her, waiting to see if she was willing to bury her past for the sake of his future.

“Well, Trav, here goes nothing.” Marge propped her grandson up higher on her hip and cautiously walked to the front of Brightman’s Bakery. She did a quick scan as the sun broke off the windows and saw that the only person inside was Gerry, the woman who always worked first shift at the counter. She had never met Gerry officially, just knew of her through Walt who said she was a cherished family friend. Gerry was now inching her way towards Garrett, not getting too close. Something in her eyes said she understood.

“Okay, Garrett, time to head out,” Marge said, the inside warmth meeting her cheeks.

“Oh, he’s yours? I was just about to offer him a cookie. Would that be okay?” Ignoring the facts that sugar wasn’t Garrett’s friend and she wanted to leave the bakery as quickly as possible, there was something about Gerry’s kindness that made Marge shake her head “yes.”

Gerry brought out a plate-sized sugar cookie. Marge almost pointed out that Garrett would only eat chocolate chip, but he took it into his hands and put it immediately into his mouth.

“There you go. What a nice treat, huh?” Gerry said mildly with that warm smile still on her face. Marge felt exposed. She didn’t know what to say next or where to stand so she kept shuffling a bit,

knocking idly into Garrett and the mirrored pillar that took up space in the middle of the room.

“Why don’t you all come and sit up at the counter?” Gerry asked, noticing Marge’s discomfort, which made Marge even more uncomfortable. She put Travis on her lap, trying to steady the swivel stool with her hips. Travis turned to watch his uncle devour something delicious, and his hands went out to him. Garrett grunted in response.

“Is it okay if he has one too?” Gerry said, realizing the pickle she’d placed Marge in. Marge nodded, and Travis began to gum at his own large cookie. She decided to strike this particular detail off the record when she would later recount their Saturday outing to Whitney. Her daughter had a strong “no sugar” policy.

Gerry went to help the couple who had come in to survey the bread. Marge kept glancing at Garrett’s cookie, hoping it would disappear much quicker than it actually was. He seemed to have been taking a cue from his nephew, gumming it half an inch at a time.

When the couple left, Gerry returned. “So how are you guys doing?” she asked. She wiped a wet rag around the counter as she spoke, looking into Marge more than Marge would have liked.

“Oh, just great. Thought I’d take these two to the park. We really enjoy our Saturdays, don’t we boys?” Both boys seemed hardly aware she was even still alive as crumbs caked the corners of their mouths.

“Well, what a blessing to have two grandsons.” Marge opened her mouth, but the correction got tangled up in the back of her throat.

“My kids live in Indianapolis. Don’t get to see the little ones as much as I’d like. But I’m not sure I could ever leave this place. The Brightmans have always been family. And their son, Walt—he’s the owner now—what a peach of a boy. I just keep visualizing life in Indianapolis stuck in a recliner in my son’s basement. Just wouldn’t be the same,” Gerry said, winking at a practically sedated Travis. Marge

felt like she had just rubbed her finger against a broken piece of glass. Walt.

“How is...I mean, so Walt. Walt Brightman. You said he owns this store?”

“Yes, he does. You know him?” Gerry looked at Marge expectantly, as if everyone who knew Walt was in some kind of special club. She figured Gerry wouldn’t be too far off.

“No, no. Just curious as to who would own a joint like this. He a nice guy? Family guy?” Marge threw in, concentrating on the neon Brightman’s sign behind Gerry’s head.

“Walt? Oh no, he’s still an eligible bachelor. I tell him he needs to be on the lookout for a lady. It’s not fun growing old alone. I tell him, if I were ten years younger, he wouldn’t have this problem!” Gerry’s turtleneck and the large pearl earrings at her ears came into Marge’s view right then. She was a pretty woman, in a functional way. Short gray hair, clean, scratch-free glasses. Her nails were rounded and painted a pale pink. Marge waited for Gerry to probe into her own marital status and tried to not take it personally when Gerry did no such thing.

“How surprising. Never had a love interest then?” Marge asked. She wanted to hear about herself, the “before” version who could have made Walt an honest man and her life a less tragic one. *No such thing as tragedy*, she said in her head, worried she might have said it out loud because Gerry was looking at her funny.

“Well, speak of the devil,” she said as Walt took the empty stool at Marge’s side. In all the scenarios Marge had drafted up in her head about the moment she’d see Walt again, this one wasn’t one of them. First of all, she never had children in tow nor was she wearing a neon pink windbreaker with a broken zipper. But still, Walt looked at her like she was manna, the bread from heaven the Israelites had eaten in the desert. Sustenance.

“What are you doing here, Marge?” Walt asked. She could see he had snuck into the main area of the bakery from the door on one of the sidewalls—his office. He had shown off the place when she first started training with him. He called it his “palace,” a remark that got him a guffaw and a smack on the wrist because it was nearly the size of the small broom closet in Marge’s old trailer.

“What does it look like?” she asked, the words a wall against the heat in her cheeks. It was all too much. The boys were covered in crumbs, and Gerry kept staring from Walt to Marge, her head swiveling between their tennis match of words. And here was Walt, the man she had left in the dark as she licked her wounds and often wondered where he was now. And now she knew.

“It looks like you’re watching two hungry boys. They have breakfast yet?” Marge’s red cheeks blanched. She hadn’t thought about breakfast after conquering coats and mittens. Whitney’s departure had thrown her off, and all she could think about was leaving the house and burning some daylight so she wouldn’t have to think about her daughter’s strangeness and the divide between them.

“I was just heading out to eat,” Walt said, not waiting for her reply. “Why don’t you three join me? It gets lonely with just the paper and a cup of coffee.”

Marge would have said no—the prospect of a meal with her autistic son and a toddler not being the most ideal of situations—but she kept getting a glimpse of Gerry’s hopeful face in her peripheral and didn’t have the guts to say it.

“Sounds fantastic,” Marge said.

She waited for Walt to grab his coat and pretended to busy herself with the boys so she could avoid Gerry’s inquisitive glances.

“You two have fun,” Gerry said with a slight hint of glee, and Marge nodded her reply.

When Walt returned, Marge braced herself for Garrett’s meltdown with the glass double doors, but the combination of Walt

whisking it open and the little bell above it tinkling put Garrett in a slight trance. Marge took the opportunity to gently nudge her son forward and out onto the sidewalk.

The relief was bittersweet when she realized she'd have to explain who Garrett was.

"Bakery still looks good," Marge said, taking the reins of the conversation. She inwardly became slightly maniacal, creating a false reality where she could avoid all talk of the past and only choose bits and pieces she could swallow.

"Not too bad, right? Especially since it's been what, nine, ten years?" He said it in a way that indicated he knew exactly how many years it had been.

"Sure, something like that." She held Garrett's mitten hand and held Travis close as they crossed traffic to the other side of the street and walked down the sidewalk to the diner. It was one Marge had driven by so many times but never had the chance to try. She wondered if things had been different for her and Walt if this would have become their place.

Again, Walt opened the door for them, and again, Garrett walked through unscathed. It gave Marge a nervous sense of hope that breakfast might not be a total fiasco. A woman named Franny scooted them into a booth near the large front window. Marge let Garrett go in first and then cautiously slid Travis in with her, the table's edge nearly cutting her grandson in half.

"Booster?" Franny asked, going to get the kid's chair before Marge could tell her one way or the other. When she got back, Franny set it down at the only available space—next to Walt.

"I can take the little man," Walt said, his arms outstretched at her. Marge felt inept to make such a decision. But Travis made it for her, outstretching his own arms and whimpering in the confined space. Marge carefully lifted him out, and Walt took him and placed him in the booster seat next to him. After giving Travis a spoon to play

with, he turned to Marge. She waited for his questions. Who was the little black boy she was watching? Why did the bigger one not seem to notice anyone else was in the room? Marge was so used to fielding questions, she wasn't ready for a declaration.

"I've missed you Marge," Walt said. She knew if she looked into his eyes, she'd be a goner, but she looked into them anyways.

"I...uh..."

"Fried eggs, two strips of bacon and toast, no butter?" Franny said, morphing into existence at the side of their table. Marge wasn't sure what the answer was to a question like that, but Walt shook his head "yes." Franny looked at her expectantly as her right hand blindly filled their coffee cups.

"Oh, um. Pancakes? Two plates, and I'll just have a small plate of bacon." She knew Walt would pay no matter how hard she protested, but she still didn't want to rack up a large bill. She had her can money with her, most of it still jangling in her pockets, but she wasn't even sure if it would be enough to cover their part of the breakfast.

"And she'll have the waffles, too." Walt said. Franny nodded her head and took their unopened menus. Travis banged out his enthusiasm with his spoon.

"So, nice place here," Marge said, pretending to admire the diner's sticky floors and thick mass of patrons. She was silently counting ceiling tiles when Walt said, "Where did you go Marge?"

She had been praying he wouldn't ask, but why wouldn't he? He had every right to know what had happened to his employee, his friend.

"I just..." She looked over at Garrett. He was searching the street with his eyes, watching a bird hop over the cracks of the sidewalk. How to explain the terror one feels on the side of the cliff, each finger slowly pried off the edge. She had free fallen, that's what she wanted to say. She had fallen into a sea of bad decisions until she finally came

up for breath one day for no reason and found herself at the bakery again.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. He had tears in his eyes, and Marge had a deep desire to make fun of him for it. It was too hard watching his pain. It was too hard watching what she had done to him.

“This place got a john?” she asked, midway out of her seat. Her panic was stronger than her desire to worry about Garrett wandering off or Travis calling for her when she left. She walked to the back of the diner—the jingle jangle louder in her ears than it was before—and gratefully found the bathroom vacant. She locked the door, stuck two hands in a cold stream of water and patted her large, round face. She looked at herself, at every year that had left its mark and asked, “Marge, where’d you go?”

Chapter Eighteen

Whitney's mouth was leathery. She hadn't had a drink of water since leaving the house that morning. A part of her recognized this as punishment for her sins. *Turn back now*, this part said, but she marched past it as she eased her car into the gravel lot next to the stadium. It was the lot for commuting students and nearly empty. She grabbed the duffel bag and climbed out of the Lincoln. Her coat hung limp on her small body, and she worried about the kind of stares she'd receive as she made her way to Jamal's dorm. But there were very few students walking around at nine in the morning on a Saturday, and the ones who were looked like they were more concerned with the color of the concrete than anything Whitney was doing. Whitney relished the feeling, the complete anonymity in a crowd of people.

She realized she had Jamal's dorm name but wasn't sure where it was located. She had never visited him at school. He had never asked her to, and Whitney pretended she wouldn't have gone even if he had asked. She felt stupid, the knocked-up girlfriend working a nine-to-five and living with her mother. What did she have in common with people who had enough foresight to keep their legs closed or at least not throw caution to the wind? And how would Jamal even introduce her? The mother of his child? His high school girlfriend? There was something grainy inside of her, tumor-like maybe, that gave everything a negative feel. So even the fact that she was with a man who would be a college graduate one day wasn't enough to change her perspective.

A man who didn't love her.

Whitney felt for the belly of the duffel bag that swung on her shoulder. It frightened her knowing the gun was inside, but it was a consoling feeling too. All her life she had felt weak and unprotected. First, her father died, and then her mother stopped paying attention. And all Whitney ever wanted—craved on a visceral level—was

someone to love her and to do it honestly. And when she found that one person, it turned out she had been mistaken. He had never even existed.

There was a girl walking her way, a redhead who seemed bright and cheery and immune to whatever hangover seemed to plague the rest of the campus's Saturday morning crowd.

"Well, hey there!" Whitney said matching the girl's bubbly smile. "Do you know where Yocum is?"

"Oh yeah, you're actually right in front of it." Whitney looked up at what looked like a prison. The facade was a sea of cinderblocks the color of faded sand. And Jamal was somewhere inside of them.

"Thanks," she managed as the girl strolled away.

Inside, she asked strangers where the father of her child lived. It would have been embarrassing if her slight edge of fear wasn't pressing its hand into her back.

When she found his room, Whitney put her head against his door. She stood small and alone with the duffel bag at her feet. Her hand made a fist, a white rock against wood. She knocked and held her breath. She let it out. She knocked and held it again.

Chapter Nineteen

It was like being in a dream. Not necessarily a bad one, more like one of those strange ones where everyone spoke the same language except for her. Stacey blinked for a few seconds, hoping the night before would skitter back from where it had come from and help her process what she was looking at. But she had drunk too much again, and every little brain cell was calling “uncle.”

“You can’t what?” Stacey asked, her tongue a bit smarter than her brain at the moment. Denise had just made a statement. Something about how she just couldn’t do something. And her face—it was so red and raw, even more so than the times Stacey had spied her in the union. Denise had been crying.

“Nothing that would matter to you. Why are you here? Can’t imagine you have no life either.” Stacey didn’t know how to answer that. She very much had a life but wasn’t sure it was the one she wanted. Even though she lived only one floor up from Denise, they never crossed paths in Reid Hall. In fact, the only reason Stacey was there was because she had snuck some guy up to her room the night before, and she was hoping if she wandered around long enough, he’d be gone by the time she got back.

“Try me,” she said. Stacey lifted her hand to the pain in her temple. She wanted this mental image to last—Denise McGovern in all her acne-ridden glory so she could transfer the details to Whitney. She felt bad telling her friend that there was something going on between Jamal and Denise even though she had no proof. But a part of her needed to know someone was in as much pain as she was. She wanted to know she wasn’t alone.

“My parents are as good as dead. And I’m not even sure I mean that figuratively. They very well could be dead. I have no idea.” Denise lifted her chin at the fluorescent lighting, pausing for confir-

mation. When she didn't receive any she said, "Anyways, Whitney's boyfriend's gay."

"And you're sad about it," Stacey said, half her brain in the bathroom, the other half assessing whether the random guy in her bed had gotten the hint yet and left. "Because you love him." She hated that she felt for Denise. Her friend, Samantha, was Denise's roommate. She was rushing with Sam, two of the few sophomores to do so, and heard stories about the freak who practically hoarded jars of Noxzema. And Stacey loved to fuel the fire, talking about Denise's "better" years, when she stalked her prey with a fresh face and heart of stone. The girls couldn't believe it was the same Denise whose face looked like Mount Vesuvius,

"I'm sad about a lot of things," Denise said to her jar of acne cream. *Gay*, Stacey thought, but really couldn't think. The word was hazy inside her brain. She didn't know anyone who was gay. Her mother once told her that people who were gay burned in hell, but then she left and never came back so what did she know? And her father, her father definitely wasn't gay. He was wired too much the other way, to the point that he left, too, but not permanently, which was almost worse.

"Maybe we should start a club," Stacey half-joked. She knew what she looked like to everyone on campus. Fun-loving, beer in one hand, boy dangling from the other. Last night was "The Sock Hop," Sigma Chi's big fall party before Thanksgiving break. She had worn a pink poodle skirt she had found at Good Will and a pair of saddle shoes she had borrowed from Barb, Kappa Delta's fearless leader. "Look the part ladies," she had said as Stacey and a few others who still roomed in the dorms got dressed in Barb's room at the KD house. "Don't want to come off too slutty like the Chi O's." The girls all giggled, but Stacey had choked a little on hers. There was something inside her that liked the attention, that closed its eyes to the darkness when the lights were turned off. It was what she imagined a

bong hit was like, a strong toke that took over every inch of her until she was no longer in control. It was the shame that made her think twice sometimes. But fortunately, the alcohol kept that at bay, for the most part.

“I doubt you’re sad. You have people. I see you out with my roommate and all your other lackeys. What could you possibly have anything to be sad about?”

Stacey just smiled and shrugged. “Nothing, I guess,” she said, taking a stall and trying to remember Random Guy’s name.

Chapter Twenty

She finally went back to the table. She spent a few precious moments imagining what it would be like to dissolve into green slime and filter out the cracks in the walls like that monster she had seen in that movie, *Ghostbusters*. But Marge was still Marge, something she took note of drying her wet face. She took a deep breath and headed back out into the cafe.

She just wished Walt was the type to get mad. Maybe if he yelled at her for rudely leaving the table or vanishing for all those years, then she could get mad too. Anger was a language she understood, maybe because Lenny had spoken it so well. He had never raised his hand at her and barely raised his voice, but he didn't have to. Marge could feel his current beneath every word he spoke or look he gave. There was something mad inside him, and neither he nor Marge knew what to do about it.

So, they didn't do anything.

But Walt wasn't angry. His face was concerned when she came back to the booth and slid back in next to Garret. She expected her grandson's outstretched arms, or at least Garret's sharp grunts, but Travis was still learning to play his spoon, and Garrett was still enthralled with his window. *Traitors*, she thought.

She waited for Walt to lead the conversation, but he didn't. He just kept looking at her.

“What do you want me to say?”

“Whatever you feel you need to say,” he said softly. *Oh, just that then*, Marge thought. *You couldn't handle what I have to say. What about, “I want to gut the man who did this to me?” Or how about, “I’m sitting next to the product of something I couldn’t control, and he can’t even stand to look at me.”* She knew that last thought wasn't fair. Garrett hadn't asked to be born, and he hadn't asked to be made the way

he was. Maybe he couldn't stand her, but it wasn't her fault or his. *Then whose is it?* played in her brain.

God's, she whimpered to herself.

"You can't help me, Walt," is what she said instead. She waited for the triumphal protest in his eyes, his "try me," mentality, but she realized she was getting it all wrong. Walt wasn't Lenny. He knew his shortcomings.

"No, maybe not. But I can sit next to you. Will you let me do that, Marge?"

He sat next to her grandson, his eyes one shade away from pleading. As tough as it might have been to have this sit-down breakfast, it didn't look that tough at all. Her grandson played a happy tune. Garrett found life outside his window. And Marge found life in the man sitting across from her.

"Yes," she said as Franny set the bacon and pancakes down in front of her.

Chapter Twenty-One

When Walt had lost his wife, he lost the man he used to be. In group, he'd always let the grief do the talking, and he marveled at how people empathized with him when he felt as guilty as a murderer.

When Walt's wife, Tammy, was first diagnosed, it was a soft blip on his radar. She was fine because she looked fine. Tammy, a robust woman—not overweight but thick in her legs and shoulders—had the sort of ruddy complexion that feigned health. She looked like the kind of woman who could take on a bull and had the personality to match. It was Walt who was the weak one, the scared one.

And everything he was to his poor dead wife proved it.

His dad had been dead a few years, and then his mother had gotten the kind of old that didn't hold up well in a bakery. She couldn't be on her feet for long anymore, kept calling the crullers "croissants." This meant that his mother had to go to the home, and he had to be a permanent fixture in somebody else's dream, the thought a budding nightmare.

He wasn't his parents. He hated pastries. And how was it that every desire he ever had in his heart was doused by somebody else's bucket of water?

How had God gotten it so wrong?

These weren't things he spoke about to Tammy, Tammy who had a faith that was as girthy as her upper body. She would have told him to stop that pansy talk, to be more like her brothers and just accept what was real for once.

But what was real wasn't always easy to discern for Walt.

He had met Tammy in the sixth grade, the last place a man should look for a wife. She was just a smaller version of herself, and maybe it was the extreme differences in their personalities that drew him to her. She was rough and a little mean and never said no to a game of kickball. He once watched her chewing a piece of contra-

band gum in the school library only to remove it from her mouth and stick it under the table. He had been delightfully horrified.

It was all friendly and casual as kids, but then teenagedom fell upon them, and everything took a serious turn. That's what it had felt like—being strapped inside a car with the doors locked and no way to open them. His heart and his body were in love with Tammy Clutterbuck whether any sensible part of him liked it or not. They played with fire, metaphorically speaking, when it came to knowing each other in the marital way. His parents were lifelong members of the Church of Christ, and even though he had had a relatively easy-going childhood, there would have been nothing easy going about telling them his sins.

Tammy didn't get pregnant though. They were careful, as careful as two kids could be in the early fifties. He often felt like he had gotten away with something.

"There's a price on your head," he told himself a few years later when they were both at the University of Arkansas. It was something he had heard on *Gunsmoke* when he and a few of the other fellows were watching the coveted TV in the downstairs meeting area of their dorm. That's what it had always felt like. Like he was outrunning someone, and one day—whether he tripped over his own feet, or the other guy caught up with him—he'd be toast.

Tammy would have thought this kind of thinking was silly if he had told her. So, he didn't. He learned to be the kind of Walt that got to hold her hand in public and share the backseat of his car in private.

This worked for a very long time. They got married—something small at his parents' Church of Christ in Little Rock—and to continue the pattern, bought a tiny house on Blue Ridge Circle in Cammack Village. They had both graduated, Walt with an engineering degree and Tammy with hers in Chemistry. They found jobs, Walt helping to oversee the brand new L'Oreal plant and Tammy in a car-

diovascular research lab not too far from the plant. Tammy smoked like a chimney, a habit she picked up at school playing bridge with the girls in her dorm. He'd meet her for lunch sometimes, walking the six blocks to her lab and watch her from afar, standing with a group of her coworkers, the smoke floating signals above her head. In her white button-down and brown pencil skirt, she wasn't pretty; she was arresting—the kind of beauty that took a man a second to understand what exactly he was beholding.

They talked shopped at home over plates of American chop suey. Walt described the physical renderings inside the plant—giant machines that sounded like they could eat a man alive. And Tammy talked about the internal machine, the heart. She'd taken to stabbing devices into it and watching as the tissues reacted. Walt couldn't help feeling a lone ache in his own watching her excitement.

Their entire family waited patiently for them to have kids. It was a subject Walt poked around with his foot like a soccer ball, but Tammy hardly ever wanted to play. He couldn't understand it. *Don't you love me, Tammy? Don't you want that love to grow?* he always asked with his eyes but never his mouth.

He came home late one night. The eating machine had eaten someone, or at least attempted it. A factory worker had foolishly stuck his hand into the machine to fish out some lodged packaging and had managed to lose part of that hand in the process. It was terrible, working on the gears and removing the lost parts of somebody. Walt had managed to make a quick call but no answer. And as he put his key into the back lock, assuming Tammy had already buttoned up for the night, he could see her curled into herself on the loveseat near the window, a highball in hand. They had gotten that mini bar as a wedding present from Tammy's Uncle Alfie who none of the family loved, except for Tammy. And when they heard of the kind of gift she had gotten from him, they were practically leading prayer circles out on the Brightmans' front lawn. "They all could use a drink them-

selves," Tammy had said, laughing it off. But the bar had gone from a weekend treat to a daily habit. Walt didn't mind a martini on Saturday evenings when they'd watch Lawrence Welk, and Tammy would sashay across the floor as if she were dancing with the man himself. Walt would always sit, a secondary character in his own home. But it was okay. Tammy had enough heart for the both of them.

But as weeks wore on and stress from family gatherings at Thanksgiving or wayward comments from well-meaning aunts about the status of Tammy's womb flooded through the phone line, Walt noticed his wife drinking a little more than she should. He wanted to talk to her about this, but he only managed to toss it on the mound of everything else he hoped to one day talk about.

"How's your girlfriend?" Tammy hiccuped. She placed her hand, the one that was highball-free across her lips like a lady.

"Fantastic. Sent me home with a little extra cheesecake. Want a piece?" Walt slid into their usual banter as he slid off his shoes. Her eyes looked glassy, but she giggled a little bit.

"I bet she's a real Betty Crocker."

"And you should see the rugs at her place! Those carpets could be in a Hoover ad." He sat next to her—too close he could tell. And this time she didn't giggle.

"I can't help it, Walt. I can't help that I'm not like the other women." Walt didn't ask what she was talking about because they both knew what she was talking about. His wife was so intelligent and such a hard worker. And even though he, out of everyone, wanted her to stay home and raise his kids, her pain broke his heart. He would never have to make a choice and her life seemed like nothing but choices.

"I'm not a monster," she said, taking a hardy swig of her drink. She wasn't. Walt knew that. But he could recognize the feeling of being alone in a sea of people. Even in college, the women Tammy roomed with, went to classes with were either there to find a husband

or killing time until Mr. Right would one day show up. Tammy never thought that way. Her life was a grand symphony, and nobody had the right to be the conductor except her.

“Of course not. And besides, even if you were one, it’s nothing my girlfriend can’t fix with a little lemon meringue.”

“Oh, Walt,” Tammy said, rolling her eyes and sloshing her drink. Walt pretended not to notice when some soaked into her blouse.

Walt got up and kissed his wife lightly on her hairline. She closed her eyes a second too long with her head tilted up. When she opened them, she smiled.

In his room, Walt undressed and got ready for bed. He had made himself a sandwich as Tammy made another drink, and now as he was getting into bed, he could hear her laughing at the Red Skelton show. Under the covers he closed his eyes, making a list of all those things he’d get the nerve to talk to her about. One day.

It was unfathomable. His wife had cancer. Tammy, the solid oak of a woman he had kept happy all these years. He tried not to think about the cost of that happiness, how it had meant never having kids and never speaking his mind. It almost felt like they were on equal ground now, Tammy growing a tumor on her liver and Walt growing a phantom one in the back of his throat.

His parents were dead at this point. And the bakery was the crippled sibling he looked after day after day, having left the factory years ago. It didn’t struggle, it thrived. But only because Walt had severed off parts of himself so it could do so.

While Walt was at the bakery, Tammy was still in the lab. The TV shows changed but the highballs remained. Tammy went from a beautifully robust woman to one who looked slightly ill all the time. She was too thin but still big-boned, so there always seemed to be a

looming quality about her. If she hadn't felt like other women back then, Walt knew she certainly must not now.

At night, even before the diagnosis, he held her. She smelled of her whisky and all those years she believed she was right—that she wasn't like those other women.

But Walt knew better. He had seen her eyes when she held her sister's newborn baby. And when they'd stroll down the sidewalks, Tammy would train her eyes ahead as a stroller passed by. Walt knew Tammy was wrong. Maybe she wasn't exactly like other women, but there was a yearning there for a child. She was just scared. And that fear went from destroying her hope to destroying her liver.

So many years stacked up, and when Walt looked around, he was surrounded by baked bread and intense loneliness. They never made any real friends, at least not together. Walt had started going to AA meetings in the late seventies. He had become the foreman of the plant back then and convinced his wife he had to stay late once a week to sort through paperwork. But he was really sitting with a bunch of people just like his wife who let him ask his questions and share his pain. Each one of them—the greasy guy who delivered pizzas or that one woman, Rochelle, who got busted trying to sell her three-year-old for booze—each one of them became his wife, and once a week, Walt was able to bare his soul.

One day, Tammy coughed up blood. It was a sunny Saturday, and Walt was going through the motions, listing off things they could do together even though he knew his wife would inevitably opt for a nap. He was looking at her face, her pale-yellow skin, when she covered her mouth to burp. He was preparing to joke with her, say something about his girlfriend never exhibiting her bodily functions in his presence, when he saw blood on the hand she had covered her mouth with. She looked at it like it was the letter in the mail she had been waiting for.

When they went to the doctor, she asked him to wait in the car. And then she asked him to wait in the car every appointment after that. "How can she ask me that?" he said to Carmen, a young Hispanic woman in AA who was two years sober.

"Maybe she's ashamed," Carmen said in a way that indicated Tammy wasn't the only one.

The closer to death Tammy got, the more constricted Walt felt. The knot grew right out of his throat and into all the cells of himself. He was dying, maybe not literally, but everything he had never said was loudly breaking him down.

Eventually, she had to be hospitalized. And eventually, she was too weak to tell him not to come to the hospital. When she was sleeping or dazed from all the pain medication, he started to come unglued.

"How could you have been so selfish? We could have had such a beautiful life. Such a..." The beeps from the machines she was hooked to would throw him off. He'd come back to himself as if he were a stranger watching this interaction, shaking his own shoulders with disgust.

"I'm sorry," he'd say weakly, the "almost" of saying everything he never said strong enough to buckle his knees.

She died when he was alone in his bed. He had come home from a long shift at the bakery and played with the ideas of either going up to the hospital to berate her and ultimately himself or come home to sleep off the sympathetic looks his employees wouldn't stop giving him.

A nurse called. Walt remembered her voice. Soft and flat in his ear, like she had a whole list of deaths she had to get through.

Carmen from AA told him about St. Andrew's. He knew it as the beautiful church building downtown he'd often stare up at whenever Tammy was still willing to take walks with him. He called

and Pastor Luke's secretary, Dorothy, helped him set everything up, down to the undertaker who prepared his wife's body.

That body, when he saw it in the coffin, wasn't the body he had always known. He had already prepared himself for that, seeing her body hadn't been the one he'd known for a very long time. But there was something about her not being anymore that made Tammy look like a shell. Like Walt had her remade out of the thinnest of plastics.

Everybody came. The engineers from his old job and some of the plant workers, the bakery employees, and all the people who used to do strange things to hearts with his wife. Walt pretended it was because they were all close friends, that these were the people they had had barbecues with and had raised babies together. But neither of these things were true. These were the people who sensed a deep sadness in them both, and maybe this was a way for them to rid that sadness from themselves.

He went up, self-conscious of the sea of eyes on his back, but he bent over and kissed Tammy's forehead anyways. He took in every inch of the face that was no longer his wife's and said goodbye to all the things they never did. All those things he had never said.

After the funeral, and a few restless nights, and the sound of his unsaid things scratching at the back door, he decided to go to church. Pastor Luke was a likable guy, not too much machismo but not a ninny either. He stood at the pulpit comfortably but also with a sense of concern like he could feel the bits of broken his parishioners tried to hide in their pockets. He spotted Walt in the crowd, a small and patient smile on his face. After service, he didn't shake Walt's hand, he hugged him. And he told him about the grief group that met every week.

Walt started going and never stopped. For a few years, that group was a haven. And then his heart paused one evening when Marge walked through the door. Marge wasn't beautiful in a traditional sense, but also not in the way Tammy had been either. She was a large

woman, bolstered by her grief, and Walt felt like there was nowhere else to look. No one else had captured his attention like she had in a long, long time.

When he talked to Marge, he could sense her bits of broken that she kept in her own pockets. She had a knack for stuffing them down. But slowly, he slipped his hand in hers until she started to release a few.

He wasn't expecting what happened at the bakery. It ripped at him worse than if his own flesh had been torn off. He was the one who had asked her to work there. He was the one who didn't push back when she requested the night shift. He had just been grateful she wanted to work there at all.

And then their date. How he had longed to sit and just stare at her for a while.

He couldn't blame her for disappearing. He wanted to blame her. He wanted it to be like it had been with Tammy, frustrated cries at someone who didn't even know you were there. But he didn't get mad, he waited. He waited for her to show back up even though he had her address from her employment papers. He worked "73 Alberta Lane" through every inch of his brain until the words no longer made sense. He even went out there one night, just once. He drove through a trailer park and found a double wide that looked so dismal in the dark, Walt feared it wouldn't have looked any better in the daytime.

Oh, how he had wanted to go inside to find her. But it was nearly ten at night, and the only light he could see was a soft glow from one end of the trailer, presumably a bedroom. Walt knew then that Marge would never come back.

So today had been a head scratcher. After all these years, there she was on a stool, chatting Gerry up like they were old friends. He felt fortunate to have seen her first so he had the chance to gather his

wits about him in his office. He took in two deep breaths and then walked out to whatever the future might hold.

He didn't know what to say about the boys, so he didn't say anything. The one was so young, he supposed it was a grandson. He remembered Marge's daughter, Whitney, and figured she must be old enough now to maybe have one of her own. But the other boy—Garrett—Walt knew was somebody different. And he caught himself daring to do the math in his head.

“I miss you, Marge.” He made himself say it because for so many years he had missed a woman who was dead before she even started dying. If he would have been brave enough to say that to Tammy, would she be here right now? Would Marge never had to endure what she did in that alley?

These were answers only God knew, and even though everyone in their right mind would have been angry at Him if they had the same sort of questions, Walt wasn't in the slightest. Looking back, he had just been a man, lost in the sea of doing and saying. But now he was learning how to just be.

Walt gathered himself in his office, belly full of breakfast, and peeked through the crack in his office door. Gerry was sweeping the squeaky-clean floors and humming the *I Love Lucy* theme song. He smiled until that old familiar strain of fear reminded him of his promise to sit with Marge, to care for her.

He had failed before. Who was to say he wouldn't fail again?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Whitney. Jamal opened the door and there she was. She looked paler than usual, limp like a balloon somebody neglected to blow up. He picked through all his feelings but couldn't really sort them out. He was surprised, slightly happy. Concerned.

Why was she here?

"Can I come in?" she asked too loudly as he hugged her. Something felt off, so Jamal compensated with pressing his body against hers.

"Of course, yes. Travis—"

"He's fine." Whitney removed herself from his arms and went to Jamal's desk shoved against the window. She looked down at his drawings, all pictures of his son. He was silently relieved that some of the other ones he had drawn—the ones he knew he shouldn't have—were locked away in a drawer.

"I didn't know—"

"Are you gay?" Whitney said. She had her duffle bag up on the desk next to her. It looked as deflated as Whitney herself, and he wondered why she had brought it nearly empty.

"What? What do you mean? What does that even—"

"That's not an answer." *Oh*, a small voice in his head said. *Never like this, no.* Jamal had waited for this day to stalk him. He had looked behind closed doors and under beds, but he never thought it would show up so abruptly when his body wasn't tense with the anticipation of it. Who had told her? And who else knew?

"No," he lied. At that moment he wasn't thinking of his mother or Travis, not even Franklin whose somber voice lived inside the phone. Jamal was thinking of Denise McGovern of all people and her stupid white jean jacket. He was thinking how maybe she had told Whitney somehow, and now his life was over. But he was also thinking how he felt sorry for Denise because there had been such a

desperation in her the last time they had talked in high school. She had wanted what he couldn't give. And here was someone else who knew exactly how that felt.

"I'm not an idiot," Whitney said. Her hand was in the duffle bag, but she didn't move it. He half expected her to pull out a piece of paper that proved he was lying. The thought made him snort.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"No, no, it's just—this is all just silly. It's not true. And for you to have come up here over a lie—I'm so sorry, Whitney. I don't ever want you to be upset."

"Don't," she said as he moved toward her. "Your father told me."

"What? Franklin told you...that I was gay? Why? Why would he do that?" The rhythm of his panic was set in double time now. His father. He knew. Jamal couldn't even let his brain catch on to the fear in his heart. He'd never be able to face him.

"Because he couldn't carry that all by himself. And your mother? She was a cheater. She cheated on him, left you alone all the time. She wasn't the person you thought she was. Apparently, like mother, like son." It was incomprehensible all these things Whitney was saying. He could see her lips moving, but he couldn't fully weigh the words. He was looking too hard at her, manipulating all the ways this would break apart him and everyone he knew to notice the gun she was pointing at him.

"He can't know." His words stopped short when he saw the gun.

"Travis," she continued. "He can't know about you. It's hard enough, you know?" She shrugged a little at that like she was commiserating with Jamal. Like he'd have to agree she had no other option.

"Don't do this," he said. His voice was small and confused. What was happening? How could it have all boiled down to dying in a dorm room? The panic returned, and he struggled to make a plan.

Maybe lunge at her when she looked away, wrestle the gun out of her hands...

“Jamal?” she said. She looked so vulnerable then, like she really believed she was doing a favor neither of them deserved.

“What?” he asked, terrified at what came next.

“I’m so sorry,” Whitney said crying as she pulled the trigger.

Part II

1999

Chapter Twenty-Three

Denise smelled like sweat. She had drunk too much coffee again and could practically feel it leaking out of her pores. Her mind was a mess. The caffeine only served to further frazzle her nerves, and everywhere she looked in her cramp little office, things seemed to spin. Her leftover anniversary cake was sitting on the sheet in front of her, and her fist clamped her fork. There'd be no sensible dinner tonight with the caseload she was pawing through, so she opted for slightly stale cake over waiting on take out for the umpteenth time.

“Oh, now that’s just pitiful,” Branson said, poking his head through her cracked door. He always came around at the most inopportune times, but maybe that was easy because every time was inopportune for Denise. She pretended she couldn’t smell herself and said, “Cake is never pitiful.” She looked at Branson as she always did, slightly squinting like she was staring at the sun. He was pretty-boy good looking with a slight tan and honey wheat hair. His father played golf with her father on the weekends, which gave her father the bright idea to offer his friend’s son an internship at her firm. “Denise will show him the ropes,” he must have said with his million-watt smile, a watered-down Bloody Mary in hand. She had shown Branson the ropes, which made her aware of how weathered they were—how weathered she was. She was only thirty, but everything hurt, and it showed on her face. Whereas her biggest concern was a face full of acne in college, she now had the pleasure of battling crow’s feet and under eye circles that looked like they were going to consume her whole.

“Apparently you and my fifth-grade self would have gotten along.” Branson bridged the gap without asking and stood in front of her desk. “Jennings wanted me to get this to you. Said it was important. Something about doing a favor for a friend.” He plopped the file down on Denise’s desk, another case to add to the leaning tower

of lost causes. She forgot why she became a pro-bono lawyer in the first place. Oh right. To incense her parents, well, mostly her father. But nights like these, the prospect of him having to fumble through what his daughter did for a living at some fancy country club event was hardly worth it.

“Thanks,” she managed, wondering what would happen if she quit now and took a chance investing in Beanie Babies.

“You okay? You don’t look too hot,” Branson said with the precise hint of confidence of

a commercial model. Compared to him, Denise figured she probably looked like week-old roadkill.

“I’m fine,” she lied and made eye contact with her open door. Branson got the hint, which she knew he would—at least he wasn’t an idiot—and watched as he backed out of her office. “Drinks this weekend,” he said like he always did, the novelty of inviting her most likely akin to asking his babysitter to watch him play Super Ninten-do.

“I’ll think about it,” she said, knowing she wouldn’t. When he left, she went to move the file he had tossed in front of her, but something caught her eye. A name. “Barnes.”

The past came crashing down, and the pain in her neck that was only slightly irritating before managed to wreak havoc through her body. That day flashed before her eyes. News traveled fast on a college campus, so when a small-framed, white-blonde stranger killed a black student in cold blood, it wasn’t but mere moments until Denise had heard the chatter in the hallways of her dorm. It took a while for her to realize who had died, but once she did, and once she knew who had done it, she had vowed to do something with her life that she had never even considered before: protect the innocent.

She flipped open the file, and there it was, a picture. It was of a young man, practically just a boy, and it felt like Jamal was staring into her eyes. But this boy’s skin was the color of milk with a hint of

chocolate, and his name wasn't Jamal according to the paperwork. It was Travis.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Marge felt like her skin was on fire. At the lake, she had forgotten the mosquito repellent and watched as her flesh became one big buffet for a swarm of blood suckers. She almost admired their valiant efforts to feast, seeing that the days were so hot, the little buggers looked like their wings were sweating.

They were back home now, and even though the lake had been a beautiful reprieve, Marge felt the weight of reality as sharp as the stinging in her skin.

What would happen to Travis?

When she had gotten the call from Franklin, she could barely believe it. Travis was a good boy. He wasn't like his cousin, Douglas, who wore his pants practically around his backside and once pretended to shoot at her with his hand in the shape of a gun.

"I don't like that boy," she had told Travis, not caring whether or not Travis considered him kin. Marge knew what evil felt like, and she swore she could feel it emanating out of Douglas's pores. Travis had just shrugged, which told Marge everything she needed to know.

"He's getting the hang of it," Walt said, walking in from his session in the shed with Garrett. Garrett was holding a clay bowl delicately in his hands and gave what Marge suspected was the equivalent of a smile.

"Well, would you look at that," Marge said, studying the bowl's fine structure. The bottom was thick and round, and the sides seamlessly fanned out into the thin lip of the bowl. She never thought she'd see something like that, not from her son. But marrying Walt and having Garrett see a play therapist at her husband's assistance had changed the course of Garrett's trajectory. And here he was now, giving her a piece of himself.

"We need to paint it and then seal it, but it will be all good to set out soon. I told you that kiln wasn't a silly idea."

"Proved me wrong," Marge said as Walt stooped in to kiss her. He was still the Walt she knew, even if he'd managed a little wear and tear in the eleven years since they had rekindled their friendship. One bad back and two knee replacements later, he was the same old Walt, loving her through every hardship life had thrown her way. And boy, were there many.

Marge started pouring some Cheerios into a bowl for her son, no spoon. Garrett had come to hate the feel of utensils and mostly ate with his hands. He was no longer a boy but a full-grown man. He had turned twenty-three last fall, the kind of math Marge loathed doing because it always reminded her that her daughter was growing older too.

"So, what's the plan?" she asked her husband as he sat down and placed the clay bowl between him and Garrett. He looked refreshed, partly due to spending so much time at the lake teaching his adopted son how to fish and partly due to the way Walt could easily see the bigger picture.

"We can follow up with George. See if they've decided on a hearing yet." Marge's stomach went south for multiple reasons. She didn't like that they had hired George again. The man was a good man, someone Walt had known for a long time now, but his face was a reminder of what had happened all those years ago when they had needed his help the first time. Marge also didn't like the waiting. Her grandson was being held at some detention facility, waiting for a trial and Marge could do nothing about it but make futile calls to a lawyer who most likely hadn't heard anything. She got angry about it, and Walt was good enough to let her get it out. But he also didn't let her sit in it either. Hence the lake trip, which was worthwhile no matter how bad she itched.

"Stop scratching," Walt said, giving her a teasing smile.

"Oh, you couldn't tell I was scratching," she said.

“Says the woman about to knock over the table.” She smiled at him, wondering how God had managed to give her so much even in the midst of her storm. His face grew serious, and Marge prepared her body for what she knew he’d ask.

“Have you told her yet?” Walt asked.

“It’s only been a week,” Marge said, pretending to be enthralled by the back of the Cheerios box.

“Two. Two weeks, Marge. She deserves to know. He’s her son.”

The old Marge would have blustered back, “Don’t you think I know that?” But the new Marge, the one who had been re-baptized ten years ago, this time with the full intention of giving all her hardest parts to God, just said, “I know.” The news about Whitney and Jamal was so heinously devastating, Marge had lost all sense of herself. She was too numb to be grateful at the time, but she knew, looking back, that God had orchestrated her meeting Walt again at the exact right moment. Because if it hadn’t been for Walt, Marge was sure she would have died of a heart attack.

“I know you know, sweetheart. Just pray on it.” He got up from the table and kissed the top of her head. Garrett looked bored by his bowl of cereal, so Marge scooted it over and started picking at the little crunchy o’s. Walt took Garrett by the hand.

“Now if you don’t mind, the men have some painting to do.” Marge nodded and smiled, her heart still caught in the past. It was Franklin who had called. He had received a call from the Dean of Students after it had happened. He had described everything in his slow, straightforward way, but Marge still had trouble processing it. *A gun? Whitney? Murder?* She felt like a four-year-old trying to spell words for the first time. Nothing made sense to the point that she didn’t even wail her anger. She just told him thank you, like he had called to compliment her on her pot roast. She didn’t even have the brainpower to ask Franklin how he was doing or what was supposed to happen next.

It was when she had called Walt that evening—after he was back home from the bakery, hours after their breakfast date—that the wailing began. He had come right over and had done what he had promised to do. He sat with her.

The details were a blur. Walt had taken care of all of those right down to hiring his friend George Jennings, a defense attorney who Walt sometimes bowled with. It was something he didn't have to do but outright insisted. From there, they had the trial, and Marge mostly remembered the way her back ached in the wooden pew-like seats. She also remembered being cross-examined by the prosecutor who made her out to be nothing but welfare trailer trash who taught her daughter the fine art of revenge. Despite George's sound instruction before her time on the stand, Marge had been so flustered by that lawyer woman, she spit out a defense against her accusations and was threatened by the judge to be held in contempt of court. That had smoldered the flame, but it hadn't healed the burn.

They took her daughter. And Marge wasn't so blind to think it was all the court's fault. She knew Whitney had a heavy hand in it, probably Jamal too to some degree, not to mention an entire society that looked down on them. But most of all, Marge blamed herself.

It was why she couldn't gather the courage to call her daughter. She couldn't imagine her in a cell, small and cold and alone. She didn't want to think about the evil things that happened in a place like that, especially to somebody she loved.

So, Marge decided to write a letter.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The only thing that mattered were the books. They got to visit the library once a week, and the cart came around most days. That was like heaven, which was scary at first. The old Whitney never even read, at least not unless she had to. But the new one really didn't have any other choice.

She read all kinds of things until the words built up walls in her head. She felt protected inside there, reading any and everything, except poetry. But eventually she read poetry too. She found Plath, and every word felt like it was coming from the body that shared her cell with her. But the body belonged to Halo, a former prostitute who was as illiterate as she was arrestingly pretty. Halo had stabbed her pimp and spent her days as if the bars would magically open soon, and out she'd be, back on the streets doing what she had always done.

For someone so heavily steeped in make believe, Whitney was able to swallow a stronger dose of reality. She knew the bars wouldn't magically open. That was something that had been deeply ingrained the day she was convicted and given a thirty-to-life sentence.

No one ever asked why she had done it. But she knew Franklin knew. Franklin had been called to the stand, and he stayed loyal to his God, telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. But the prosecutor didn't grill him like she had Whitney's mother, Marge, who looked like one of those unhinged women gathering up tops at a half-price sale. Franklin was naturally calm and collected. He had told them everything exactly as it had happened, even down to the conversation he had with Whitney the afternoon before she left.

He just didn't mention the part about Jamal being gay. A withholding of information but not a lie.

Nobody knew that part. Whitney had tried for years to not know that part either. But that was the spider that stung her skin. Re-

gardless, her son could never learn what had led to this whole mess in the first place.

She had nothing but time, so she spent part of it wondering what would have happened if she had never driven to the university to confront Jamal. Maybe there could have been some sort of therapy or church camp that could have washed his brain, or maybe she could have withheld her own information and never spoken a word about what Franklin had said. But against her own intuition, she had more Marge in her than she had originally thought.

Her body couldn't keep in the truth.

The papers said she had snapped. The people who heckled her and spit at her as she walked up the steps of the courthouse called her nasty names. For several years, she believed that she truly was who they said she was. It was a convincing argument after all. Who else was wired to kill a man in cold blood, let alone the father of their child?

It made her mean. When she first got to prison, she made sure people could smell it on her, the acrid scent of her soul. She got solitary when she busted a girl's head against the faucet in the bathroom for looking at her wrong. Granted, the girl was roughly her age and just as skinny, but she had felt a power that made her feel six feet tall. She worked it in the cafeteria, squaring her shoulders and walking slow and steady against the Pine-Sol-streaked tile. Her reputation apparently preceded her because nobody came to mess with the newbie. In a way, Whitney was slightly disappointed because now she'd have to contend with herself.

So, she spent years doing that. It started one day when she saw the library cart. It squeaked past cell after cell until it reached hers. Halo was snoring, a loud repugnant snore that was at odds with her pretty face. Whitney got up and reached her hand into the pile, eyes closed, like she was making a wish, and out came *The Catcher in the Rye*.

This was one of those books she should have read in high school, but because she never finished and wasn't required to read it for her GED, it had never become a part of her life. Now, it seemed to be her whole world.

She was Holden, locked in her own version of a sanitorium, continuously swimming through her conscious thoughts and quilting them together like patches. How horribly unreliable Holden was. And that was probably the only reason Whitney trusted him.

Whitney didn't trust Gina who popped her cell door twice with her baton. "Up and at 'em," the woman said, her stringy voice inching through the cracks in the hinge. Whitney studied Gina's face. Long and angular. Her hair was brought back into a regulation bun to keep the inmates from tearing off her ponytail. She looked kind of like a man in the dark shadow of the small room.

"I don't want company," Halo mumbled, mouth against pillow.

"Not for you princess. For Squirrely, here." Whitney had trained her face not to move when Gina or any other of the prison guards called her that name. It started out as "Squirrel" when Gina was the one assigned to Whitney's orientation during intake. "You look so small and scared," Gina smirked, and it felt like a horse's head was sneering at her. The anger that pulled the trigger was lurking behind her sternum, and she was afraid it would soon travel to both of her hands. But she managed to leave Gina unscathed, and in return, herself out of trouble. "Squirrel" became "Squirrely" after her incident in the bathroom, and now even her fellow inmates called her that. But better to be crazy than a target.

"Who is it?" Whitney asked. She hadn't planned on anyone visiting her today, seeing visits were rare in general, but she figured it was her mother. Marge's letter bore heat through her pillow. Whitney had stuffed it under there after enduring everything Marge had written. She had no clue how it could have happened. Her Travis. Her baby. Her brain was on a fixed circuit, only producing images of

her son as he was the last time she saw him. But he was nearly fifteen now and locked up in juvie. It was insanity to think about. Was there something latent in both of them that suddenly sprung to life and made them monsters? And as much as Whitney's heart tore open knowing her son was in a similar boat, she shamefully allowed herself another feeling: a sense of not being alone.

She looked up at Gina's grim face as the woman picked something from her teeth.

“Some chick named Denise McGovern.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Travis was scared. He wasn't supposed to be because Douglas told him not to. "You done nothing," Douglas had said, and it was the first time Travis didn't trust his cousin. The only reason it wasn't Douglas sitting in juvie in an orange jumpsuit was because Douglas had decided it wouldn't be. When he had the opportunity to confess and clear Travis's name, he didn't. "You know what it would do to Mama," Douglas had said about a woman he barely acknowledged.

Travis didn't want to think about any of it, but he wasn't given much of a choice. When he wasn't worried about getting stabbed with a pencil in math class, he was sitting on his bunk, staring at the dirty ceiling above his head. How it managed to get so dirty when it was too high for anyone to touch was perplexing.

He'd count the damaged tiles while his mind worked out the details. The truth of the matter was that Travis was in the car when Douglas and his boys jumped that old white guy in the alley. The other truth of it was that Travis hadn't laid a finger on the man except when Douglas had shoved him into the back of the LeSabre. The man's face seemed at peace knowing this was the end of the line, and Travis had reached out instinctually to take his hand during the moments he had left. The man's eyes watered, confused at first that one of this vicious crew was capable of an act of kindness, but he must have seen something human in Travis, too, because he didn't let go.

Douglas and the boys used the hammers they had brought, beating the old man senseless in a random alley until he was dead. Douglas had taken the picture with the old school camera Travis's grandfather, Franklin, had bought him, and then they all piled back in to drive home. But Douglas had a different idea—said that he and the boys were going to make a quick pit stop and that he needed Travis to drive the car home. Travis didn't think about it because Douglas was always making "pit stops" to smoke crack or beat his chest in

front of the other Bloods. Travis never went into the smattering of apartments where Douglas performed for his fans, always opting to stay out in the car. It was okay for now, Douglas had said. “You’re still young, Baby T. I get it. But you’ll have to make a choice soon enough.”

Ironically, Travis was thinking about that choice he hadn’t yet made—to join the gang or cut ties with his father’s family—when he was driving the LeSabre from the alley back to Douglas’s parents’ house. He shouldn’t have been driving, being just shy of fifteen and not even having his permit yet let alone his license, but he was willing to go home if only to sit in the hot shower until his skin peeled off. He could still feel the old man’s touch.

He hadn’t known what Douglas had planned when he asked Travis to come along for a ride that morning, but Travis understood what the whole gruesome thing had been about. *Are you a real man?* He could practically hear Douglas asking it in his ear.

Travis hadn’t had time to answer the ghost of his cousin because blue lights flashed behind him. His whole body felt like it was going to implode. He knew this was a situation where he was too black and not white enough. There were always circumstances like that, and then there were others where he was too white, like when Douglas’s homeboys said he looked like someone had dipped him in bleach. Travis was always on a fine wire strung too high in the sky. Take the wrong step and down he’d go.

A busted taillight. That was why the cop had stopped him. But there was a suspicious smirk growing on his face as Travis’s own heart beat viciously in his ears.

“Wanna pop the trunk?” the cop asked, the “I gotcha!” dancing in his eyes. He looked young, the type of guy whose whole world existed in what his hands could do regardless of what his heart had to say about it.

The trunk popped and there were the hammers. Douglas was smart enough to have taken the camera with him, but that was of virtually no relief.

The arrest was violent as was to be expected. Travis found himself praying for a time it wouldn't have to be, that maybe one day, someone would see him as innocent until proven guilty regardless of how bleached white or coffee soaked his skin looked.

He read through his prayers against the back of his eyelids, stretched out on his back on his bunk. He recited what he knew God thought about him, the verses like salve on his anxious heart. But then he wondered what his mother was thinking, and the anxiety ate yet another hole.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Denise didn't want to do it, but she felt compelled to. She wasn't sure how long she had looked at the file, searching Travis's face for pieces of his mother. It had been a long time of hating and then doubting herself, then finding Jesus in college and giving it all up only to revisit it from time to time—a pinched nerve that aggravated her spirituality, but most importantly, her heart.

How was she to be a faithful servant when the thought of Whitney Marksmen made her sick?

The school went into an uproar over Jamal's death. The black kids called it a hate crime, and the school jumped on that track to save face. Never mind their facilities being slack as they were, a pint-sized mother of one could easily make her way into a dorm to off a student. There were even fights on the weekends on Dickson Street from the backlash, all out brawls that left people bleeding and broken. One guy lost an eye over it.

But Denise only heard about these things. She was nursing a bruised soul and a jacked-up face that throbbed every time she looked at it. She was drinking a bitter cup of coffee one afternoon in the lull of the day when either most kids were in class or passed out, nursing a weekday hangover. She sat alone in the cafe in the union where it was only her and a part-time student who kept wiping the counters down with a dirty looking rag.

“This seat taken?” A girl roughly her own age pointed at the empty chair at Denise's table. Denise thought she was being set up. The entire place was empty, and this jester was trying to sit with her.

“Yes, by my invisible friend, Jack,” Denise said, trying not to wince as she took another sip.

“Well, it's Jack's unlucky day. Beat it, Jack,” the girl said, pulling the chair out hard and sitting down across from Denise. She had such

long, thick, curly hair that it looked like she had fashioned a rope together and glued it to her head. Her face was plastered in freckles. *But at least they're not zits*, Denise thought, taking a prime opportunity to feel sorry for herself.

“I just wanted to introduce myself. I see you here sometimes.” The girl had a green Gatorade water bottle she accidentally slammed onto the table. It looked like it belonged to a football player, not a redhead with overzealous arm movements. “Sorry. I’m kind of nervous.”

“Why? Somebody tell you this was a date?” The girl looked shocked for a moment and then snorted.

“Oh, you’re joking.”

“Of course, I am. I don’t date redheads,” Denise said. The girl laughed again, completely missing the hostility Denise was trying to throw her way.

“Sorry, I’m Sarah,” she said, extending Denise a freckled hand. Denise took it and pumped it up and down aggressively. Sarah retrieved her hand as if she was worried she wasn’t going to get it back. “And you are?”

“The girl in the coffee shop you’ve been stalking apparently. If we’re not gonna date, then why are you here?”

“Good question. Um, do you know anything about Captains for Christ?” *Oh, here we go*, Denise said, her eyeballs rolling on their own volition. What a perfect afternoon. She was still struggling to even stay awake during the day since sleep was no longer an option at night after her ex-best friend’s brutal murder, and now some goody two shoes was going to introduce her to Jesus.

“Can’t say that I have and can’t say that I want to.”

“Oh, dang it, Sarah,” Sarah said to herself, slightly startling the both of them. “I didn’t mean to tell you that part yet. We need to get to know each other first.”

“We do, do we?” Denise said, swallowing down another piping hot mouthful of coffee. She was trying to make a mental list of all the places she needed to be at the moment but came up with zilch.

“I just mean, I want you to know I value you as a person...um...?”

“Tallahassee.”

“Your name’s Tallahassee?”

“I don’t see why it can’t be.”

“Fine, I can see you don’t care and—” There was a little part of Denise that went off into a panic. She didn’t have anywhere to go. And this was the first time she had been personally talked to—not counting class lectures or that guy who delivered pizza to her dorm who coughed out the price of her order—in three days. She didn’t care how awkward Sarah was. At least she was breathing.

“No. It’s fine. Go ahead.”

“Oh, okay then. I just wanted to say that you mean something, you know? I can tell that you’re sad. I’ve seen you, the way your face always looks so...dismal.”

“Well, keep the compliments coming.”

“You know what I mean.” Sarah said it softly and looked into Denise’s eyes like she was really looking at her. Everyone else either pretended she wasn’t there or stared at her skin, probably saying a silent prayer to God that they didn’t have to live her miserable existence. But Sarah was different.

“Maybe,” she said. “What does this have to do with Barons for Buddha?”

“Captains for Christ,” Sarah said, trying not to show her irritation. “It’s just a group of us on campus who get together and share our struggles, our heartbreak. So...” Sarah said, shooting a stream of water into her mouth that dribbled down her chin. “Want to join us?” she asked, wiping it with the back of her hand.

“Why not? You had me at heartbreak,” Denise said, trying to pretend being invited anywhere didn’t mean so much to her.

The first meeting was atrocious. It took place on a Wednesday night in the basement of the Lutheran church on campus. There were eight of them total, Denise included, and because Denise was the only special guest, it seemed the students gathered there took it upon themselves to all play the role of the overzealous host. It was annoying, for sure, but for somebody who had a vague notion of where her parents even were at the moment, it felt almost good being the center of attention, even if that attention was awkwardly thick. The next week, she toyed with the idea of not going back. Her face was particularly bad, which meant she just wanted to suck air under her pillow. But Sarah had somehow found her dorm room, and Denise didn't know how to communicate the fact that she didn't want to see anybody because her skin looked like it was eating itself.

Like Sarah, there was also something different about the seven captains of Christ who kept offering plates of chocolate chip cookies and room temperature milk. They didn't seem to care what she looked like. On the other hand, Denise was concerned that they were most likely a cult and just needed a warm body to fill up space even if that warm body was more hormonal than a thirteen-year-old boy.

But one night they broke off into groups. A few more of them had gathered for the meeting after arriving back from a mission trip somewhere in Missouri. She sat in a group of three other girls, three girls she assumed were as sugary sweet as the chocolate morsels lodged in Denise's teeth, but what they said was startling. One was pregnant, having just recently joined the group. She was baptized on the trip apparently, which Denise thought might be akin to some sort of sorority initiation, but she kept her mouth shut. This girl was knocked up and still had a smile on her face. She didn't seem worried in the slightest.

Another one talked about her brother who was so strung out on drugs, he attempted to kill her father the other night. It was like listening to someone read a trashy novel sitting in this tight circle of

young women, knee-to-knee. But it didn't end with their jaw-dropping confessions. It ended with prayer.

Sarah bowed her head and so did the other girls. Denise had followed suit, staring at her thighs threatening to bust through her sweatpants before closing her eyes. Sarah prayed for peace, a sense of reliance on Jesus no matter the outcome.

That had thrown Denise for a loop.

Why didn't Sarah pray—if she was even going to pray to anything at all—for everything to be better? Why did she just leave it up to some dude name Jesus and ask to be okay with whatever He decided? The thought edged on utter lunacy for Denise, so much so she couldn't stop thinking about it.

“My parents are major dirt bags,” she told Sarah one afternoon during coffee. They were at the same table where they had met, but Denise had cleaned herself up a bit. She wore a navy turtleneck that felt like a boa constrictor was trying to swallow her whole and had troweled on enough pancake make up to hopefully cover the crops of pimples on her face.

“Okay?” Sarah asked, waiting for the punchline.

“So, you're telling me, I'm supposed to pray to this Jesus guy and just hope He takes mercy on me, but even if he doesn't, I'm supposed to be okay with the fact that my mother can't get off sedatives and my dad loves his golf bag more than he does me?” It felt like she had just thrown up on the table, and Sarah was tasked with cleaning up the mess.

“I'm not telling you anything. Belief isn't a thrown-up prayer and crossing your fingers, Denise. It's an utter reliance on Jesus. It's trust that He knows better than we do. Can you say that you were there when the world was created? Did you set the earth on its axis? Then how do you even know what's right when this is the first time I haven't seen you wear dirty sweatpants since I've met you?”

Denise cocked her head and finished swallowing her coffee. “Well, that was bold.”

“I’m not meaning to be hurtful. I’m just telling you the truth, Denise. You’re not the best captain of your ship, but He is.”

Denise hid a smile. Every time anyone in their Wednesday night group said the word “captain” the song “Love Will Keep Us Together,” played a loop through Denise’s thoughts. But Sarah was infuriatingly right. Denise had been in control for so long, her back ached. And all she had to show for it was a friendless existence and painfully tender skin. Jamal was dead, and he wasn’t coming back, and Denise had no clue where he was. And that scared her.

“Fine. What’s this baptism thing all about?”

They did it the next day. They all gathered in the worship sanctuary, which felt like being a rodent and seeing the sun for the first time. The ceiling here was higher than in the church basement, and instead of speckled tile, the floors were covered in rich blue carpet. The water was cold, that’s the first thing Denise still remembered. The second was how everything seemed to fade away the moment she submerged.

She felt new, at least for a little while. She even convinced herself her acne was clearing up despite the flare ups whenever she ate dairy. She went home on breaks to a house that was practically empty save for DeAnne, their maid, and a reclusive version of her mother who sat in bed in her silk pajamas like some Hollywood invalid. She tried to tell her father once about the baptism. That was a mistake.

“They got you to join their little club, did they? Watch out. Those tithing fines are a tad bit more than the yearly ones I pay at the course!” He laughed and shoved more prime rib into his mouth as Denise sat stupidly silent at the end of their dining room table.

She started to doubt herself. She started to doubt Sarah and the cookies, and the way being washed in the water felt. Maybe it was just a hoax, a pyramid scheme of sorts where you needed to get more

bodies in just to boost your own cred. She called Sarah one evening, alone in her room at home. She had to wait until her mother stopped sobbing about how much everything hurt. At first Denise thought it was a show her mother put on to up the handful of pills she took daily. But she started to worry that her mother wasn't acting, that she had come to believe her body was rife with so much pain that she couldn't bear to live anymore.

"You haven't been reading, have you? Or going to church?" Sarah asked. Denise panicked for a second, thinking she missed picking up some sort of pamphlet that would explain the strange way she felt as a new believer.

"Your Bible," Sarah asked as if to clarify Denise's train of thought.

"Oh. Right." Her Bible was small and robin's egg blue. Sarah had bought it for her as a baptism gift, and it had set rigidly un-opened since that moment. Denise was intimidated. She never liked reading anything let alone a book that barely made any sense. She had barely grazed Leviticus, and the only thing she'd learn was to refrain from boiling any goats in their mothers' milk. If that was the test of a true Christian, she was doing splendidly.

"Psalms in the Old Testament, Matthew in the New. One chapter from each every day. Any questions, call me. And after you read? Pray. It doesn't have to be anything fancy, just a prayer that God will help you understand His word in your heart." Denise was impressed how authoritative Sarah was when there was an entire state between them. She could hear someone laughing in the background and Sarah laughing right back through her hand muffling the receiver. "Hey, I gotta go, but be sure to check out some churches too. You'll be heading back home during breaks so might as well find a good place down there." Denise dumbly nodded her answer as Sarah hung up. There was a stab in her heart knowing the only background noise she offered was a woman wailing about some phantom illness.

She did what Sarah had said, turning off her lights in her room and reading with a flashlight under her covers. It made her feel better to pretend her parents cared enough to enforce no lights on past midnight.

What she hadn't expected was the sadness. She met a bunch of goofy, smiling students at Captains for Christ, some who had more cookies to share than any real stories. Others were the real deal, but even they seemed to be infected by the corny cheer and camaraderie. It wasn't until she read Scripture that she understood suffering at a gut level. It felt like peace knowing she wasn't the only one calling out into the dark and faceless night.

David prayed the ground would swallow up his enemies and Jesus sweat blood from the fear of His own death. What was the saying? Truth was stranger than fiction? Stranger, yes, but also welcoming. She couldn't talk to her parents about anything, and even Sarah, who had a good heart, wouldn't have understood the way Denise fell apart at night, crying for anything to make it all stop. She did say her prayer. She said she was sorry, wrapped up under her covers. She asked for Jesus to hold her because nobody had touched or really talked to her or even truly loved her in what felt like forever. And she didn't know how to keep walking the face of the earth that had chewed her up and spit her out.

She slept so peacefully that night. She wasn't disturbed by her mother's tears or father's late-night sneaking back into the house. She was out like a baby. Like a child who knows nothing but trust.

Giving everything over to God was peace, but at times, it also hurt like hell. She had taken a mission trip to Haiti her senior year, and the air was rife with black magic. Denise could even feel it, and she had spent a small lifetime not trying to feel anything. Her dad moved out when she had gotten back, and then she had graduation, which he missed because he was out of the country with his receptionist, and her mother refused to come because of her pain.

“You know I’d be there otherwise, Lamb Chop.” Her mother had resorted to using pet names she had never used before, not even when Denise was a kid. Denise knew it was guilt, a dark monster who sat right next to Lucy McGovern, its teeth as sharp and invisible as the ones she felt digging into her skin in Haiti. The only good thing it seemed about graduating and moving on with her life was her face clearing up. And she supposed getting into law school wasn’t half bad either.

It was a grind though. She found herself sleeping in the shower standing up and waking up to shampoo in her eyes. Studying replaced breathing, and even though Denise always knew she was smart, there was this new recognition that she might not be as smart as she thought, being surrounded by people who seemed undeterred by the copious amounts of reading and case studies piled onto their plates. It was even harder coming home on weekends and holidays, caring for a mother who she didn’t think needed caring for as much as she needed a hard shake of the shoulders. She didn’t deny how crushing it must be to spend your entire life with a man who treated you barely kinder than he would a house plant, only to watch him walk away and lavish his love on someone twenty years younger than you. But Denise didn’t spend time on planet “woe is me” like her mother did, opting to find the hard truths and reality to this world in Scripture. There, it seemed everything hurt, too, but the hurt was growth, sanctification. A way for the soul to yearn purely for its Maker, not knock itself out with a handful of pills.

Her saving grace was St. Andrew’s. She found it one Saturday in the phone book, shortly after Sarah advised her to find a good church. She’d go to the early service on Sunday before her three-hour drive back to the University of Arkansas’s law school. During service, she would sing and take communion and bow her head in prayer. She listened to Pastor Luke’s sermons and wished her mother had found

a man like that once upon a time to marry. But there was no use in crying over what couldn't be changed.

Her father was actually good for one thing. He was able to get her the gig at a small law firm in Little Rock that did a lot of pro bono work. It was supposed to be a lesson for her. "Don't think just because I know every lawyer in town that you'll be starting at the top, my dear," he said at lunch with her once she was officially done with school and out on her own. He had brought the receptionist with him, a young thing that wasn't as pretty as Denise had imagined but figured her youth made up for that. Her father's plan had backfired though. Denise turned it into a punchline, opting to stay on and work for peanuts, which bugged her father to no end. Who wanted a kid with a law degree if you couldn't brag about what they did?

And that was what she was doing now, her mind working out the noise that erupted the moment she had opened Travis Barnes's file. Working for peanuts with sweat stains to boot. Last night, after she had worked out the day's residue with shampoo in the shower, she sat down to a cup of tea and a dog head in her lap. Benjamin was no longer a pup but a full-grown golden retriever who had loved her more than anyone she had ever known. She had found him as a puppy two years ago. He had no tracking device, no collar, and when the lady at the front counter at animal control had practically whispered "run" when Denise had taken him in, Denise had done just that. She had run all the way home to shower Benjamin with kisses, after of course stopping at the pet store for a few treats.

"Oh Benjamin," she had said absently, scrolling her laptop to catch up with the past. It stung, the wound Whitney had torn open the day she murdered Jamal. But Denise knew she had been no saint either. Her hardened heart had never been fair to the girl who barely looked like an adult, even now in the unflattering photo of her that some journalist had taken in a write-up he did on the anniversary

of the event. Denise clicked her mouse and started typing again and found Travis's LiveJournal. The deeply human side of her expected to see gang colors and lewd posts about drugs and women. And Denise felt ashamed when what she found was a young boy, barely a teen who deeply loved his grandparents and smiled for the camera with a young man in his mid-twenties who seemed to have a disability. If this was who Travis really was, what had gone so wrong?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Douglas Barnes hated his mother. At one point in time, this wasn't the case. During the day, they'd watch *Sesame Street* together, and she would point out the little black boy on the screen. "See, he knows his letters. You can learn yours too." They'd sit and sing the ABCs, and his mother kept her hair nice and sometimes even wore lipstick. But then something bad happened to Auntie Anette. She died and everyone was sad. He assumed his mother was, too, because she kept her pajamas on during the day, and instead of *Sesame Street*, she put on soaps that taught Douglas you could never really trust a person. They could pretend to love you and then end up having an evil twin sister they'd pay to finish you off.

The world was never predictable.

That's why Douglas had long ago vowed that he would control every inch of it he could. He started out doing that by getting good grades, relieved that he no longer had to be taught by Luke and Laura and the rest of the *General Hospital* gang, but soon enough he found a much easier and beneficial way to stay ahead of the game: call the shots and make sure others were listening.

As early as second grade he was rolling dice and taking bets at recess like he'd watch his father do in the backyard. It started with McDonald's happy meal toys, but soon the boys wanted Douglas's respect, so the winnings graduated to cold hard cash and even things they stole from their parents like earrings and wristwatches. He got found out eventually, which was his first (but certainly not his last) foray into the principal's office. Spellman. That was the guy who first had the honor of paddling his bottom so hard, it made Edwin laugh when he saw how cherry red his son's backside was.

"You better have done something worth the trouble," he guffawed and then shuffled out the front door to meet his friends at the bar.

At lunchtime, Douglas got the best picks. He even scored home-made chili once in exchange for a cheap peanut butter sandwich that didn't even have any jelly on it. They had run out, and he didn't bother telling his mother who had started to talk about things like hellfire and brimstone, having progressed from her soaps to TBN.

It didn't stop with the lunches though. Every time Douglas made a score, there was an eerie feeling in his chest, and sometimes, a voice in his ear. "Just a little more," it seemed to say, so he not only stole that forty in the fifth grade from the corner store but threw a rock through the window for good measure. It felt like feeding a hungry dog that wouldn't stop barking unless it got its fill.

He asked himself, "Where's Pop?" because moments would come along in middle school where his father was as present as smoke. Douglas could barely tie a knot, but his teacher, Mr. Klem, was a kind, older man and would invite Douglas to Boy Scout meetings anyways. They did a father-son camping trip, and when Douglas had to make some shame-faced excuse as to why Edwin couldn't be there, his teacher offered to fill the role, which was even more embarrassing, considering his kid was also attending the trip.

That night was one of the worst of his life. He had to sit there and see everyone so happy, even the guys who thought the whole thing was lame. At least there wasn't an empty space sitting next to them. Douglas had to share a tent with Mr. Klem and his son, both of whom fell asleep soundly while Douglas stared at the darkened walls of fabric, wondering why God had to hate him enough to make this his existence.

The next week, he quit the Boy Scouts and stole a gun that his friend's dad had left out on the coffee table. He didn't say a word, just picked it up, put it in his pants with his shirt tails untucked to cover it, and gave his boy the peace sign as he walked home, head held high.

Things were going swimmingly, but then there was always Franklin. Franklin had been around since he was a kid. He was Jamal's father—his Auntie Anette's husband—and spoke as much as a church mouse. That was another thing about Franklin. He seemed to love church, which Jamal loathed, not because he knew anything about it but because he didn't trust it. Church, or at least TV church, made his mother batty.

He was kind to Douglas, Franklin, and sometimes he and Jamal would come over, but that was only when Jamal was still alive. When he died, he was replaced by Travis, Jamal's son, whose skin looked like white bread. That's what Douglas would call him in his head, White Bread.

But he could never say it to his face. Travis was too small for that, an age where he didn't even understand what he looked like. So, Douglas started calling him Baby T instead. And Douglas's resentment slowly turned towards protection. He didn't want Travis to know what cruelty felt like and realized quickly his cousin would be nothing like him. Travis would never be able to protect himself.

So, it was Travis who Douglas told his secrets to, testing them out like it was nothing but a joke at first just to see what the young kid would say. But Travis always looked at him solemnly like he understood more than he let on. Douglas figured that's what happened when your daddy died, and your mama lived in the clinker.

They grew up together, Douglas being only a few years older than his cousin. He'd strut around his room showing six-year-old Travis the forty he stole, sneaking him sips of the drink, and then later, he'd let nine-year-old Travis practice walking around with Douglas's gun in his pants. Douglas could feel Franklin keeping his eyes on him, and it was something he hated intensely. When he was in the second grade, Franklin had gotten him a small Bible and told him all the stories of the great men in it—David and Samson and Moses. But then Franklin always shared the other side of their sto-

ries, their sins they collected like coins, only serving to sever themselves from their God. Douglas smelled weakness in it, asking questions like, "Then they ain't men, right? Bellyaching all the time." That last comment was borrowed from his father who didn't like whenever Douglas cried and needed a hug.

"Real men know their faults. They can say them out loud and ask for forgiveness," Franklin answered him. They were in the kitchen at the tiny round table next to the window. They could see Edwin stumbling up the walkway, checking for his keys in his empty pockets.

Douglas had held onto what his uncle had said for a few days until Max Archer brought in chicken and dumplings for lunch. Douglas had stolen them with relish, and figured he was too young for his sins to count.

Thinking about Franklin and Travis made him sad, but he swallowed down his sadness by studying himself in the mirror. He had ripped off a set of dumbbells that Antonne and Kelvin had helped him swipe, and now he had the privilege of looking at what a body of a god looked like.

"That's it, Douglas. We'll be catching that tail tonight." He splashed some aftershave onto his hands and patted it into his cheeks. Flashes of the old white guy's face hit the screen in his head. He blinked them away. All that crying and whimpering. It had almost made him angry. He wanted to tell him it wasn't personal—that in a way, he was sorry this was the world they lived in. But that was the truth: it was the world they lived in, and Douglas wasn't going to be taken for a fool.

He combed over the lightning bolts on the side of his head. He tried not to think about Travis, but the harder he tried, the more he lost that battle. His cousin was in a detention center somewhere, and because of him, would most likely be going to prison. He could even get the death penalty.

But Douglas shook his head, the lightning bolts striking the mirror one at a time. It wasn't his fault Baby T got caught. Sometimes things just happen, and that taillight—well, none of them had known. And Douglas had lived long enough to know that guilt was a useless emotion.

If you're going to do something, then do it. No use bellyaching over it.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Marge was a knot of worry. Her letter must have gotten there by now, but there was no word from Whitney. Her relationship with her daughter was obviously fraught with tension, but what made Marge so sad was the thought that they had never really been at peace. She supposed when Whitney was younger, before Walt had come along and after Lenny died, there was a small blip of time when it was just the two of them, and there was no way to avoid that fact. It had been good, those small moments, when she could hold her daughter's small body in her arms and sniff at the top of her head. She was so childlike, even more so than other children who seemed to be built like army tanks nowadays. She was delicate and soft. She was like Marge's little doll.

But now she was just a woman edging thirty in a high security women's prison, her delicateness a curse now more than anything. It pained Marge to think about it, to think about what her daughter had experienced that Marge couldn't muscle through and detract with a wave of her fist. It kept her up most nights while Walt was snoring in the darkness. She'd pad against the cold floor until her feet met carpet in the great room. They had that, a room they called "great." It was a luxury that came with marrying Walt, just like the new tooth she had implanted in her gums and the nice outfits from Dillard's that didn't stink of somebody else's body odor. She was what they called "moving on up," but Marge was in no position to enjoy any of it.

All she wanted was for her family to be together. And now her grandson had been taken from her too.

If Whitney's delicateness wasn't in her favor, she knew Travis's blackness would be similar for him, if not worse. She had known racism all her life being from Helena, and even though it never sat right with her, it was also something that had nothing to do with

her. She was a white woman. She had her own problems. But fate (or God's design as Walt would put it), had positioned her just so, and now racism wasn't just a thing that bothered her. It was the evil that would never stop breaking her heart.

Travis wasn't a perfect boy. She knew that. Nobody was. But he had such a good heart, and his grandfathers (both Franklin and Walt) had taught him all the things that kind of heart could cost him. But that cousin of Travis's, that Douglas, he was one of those people who was more snake than man. They slither into your space and won't be satisfied until their poison takes you down with them.

"What do I do, Walt? I hate that boy. Look what's he's done. Look how he's ruined us."

"Oh, Marge. We're not ruined. We've been given the opportunity to grow. We should take it."

"What's that you're Prattling about? Growing? We're not houseplants for goodness sakes!" They had been out shopping at J.C. Penney's with Garrett, trying to find him new pants that had buttons instead of a zipper. It was a harrowing feat, considering he was a full-grown man now. Marge knew some of the shoppers were staring at them, although now, years later, it didn't bother her so much. And it shamed her knowing it wasn't just because Walt was by her side. It was also because she had money and looked nice now, so for all their rude stares, it didn't matter. She had finally won.

"I mean this hurts. And sometimes the hurt is the proof that God is ripping away all the things that have been keeping you from Him."

"You mean like my grandson?" Marge said, holding up a pair of corduroys the color of cow dung against a moaning Garrett.

"I mean like your expectations for Travis and for Whitney too. The worst has happened, Marge, against your will. You can't change things. You're not in control." Walt mistakenly took the pair of pants out of her hands, thinking she was pleased with them. There was a

trapped rat feel in her bones. Control. She hadn't had it much with Lenny, and then some stranger came and took whatever she did have left right out of her hands. She wouldn't have thought it that way, though, after what happened in the alley by the bakery—that she was trying to gain control over either of her children, considering neither of them ever played ball. Maybe Travis was easier, especially once Whitney went to prison. Marge was the only mother in his life, save for the few trips she was able to take Travis to see her daughter. She was able to mold him into the good boy he was. Until, of course, he tried to prove he wasn't.

"Everything will be okay, Marge, just like it's always been. God hasn't failed us yet." Walt was the only person on earth who could bring God into a conversation without sounding trite. For Walt, God was literally there with them in J.C. Penney's just as concerned about how ugly those dung-colored pants were as Marge was. That was the God Marge wanted to know, but it seemed like knowing Him meant giving up those ties to the people she loved. *Ties or nooses?* a voice in her head had the audacity to ask. She ended up buying the ugly pants just to shut it up.

When they got back home, she thought about that growth. It was hard looking in the mirror and not thinking about it. It was like she had been a dying flower that was finally getting the chance to drink. And now that she was well fed and sitting in the sun, her hair had grown fuller where it once was sparse. Her complexion was healthier, and she had lost fifty pounds in the time she had been married to Walt. For so long, it had been him, her husband, her knight in shining armor who had been her saving grace. But he never saw it that way. According to Walt, it was Jesus who had made his heart pure, made him the kind of man to love a boy who had a hard time loving him back, a grandson whose mother was locked away, and a woman who felt as weak in the head as she did in her bones. But if Je-

sus was the reason the four of them had existed so long within Walt's love, then why was He so intent on tearing them apart?

Chapter Thirty

The prison wasn't far, just on the edge of Little Rock, but Denise felt a world away. She was briskly frisked and sitting in a waiting area with people who scared her. And Denise was hardly ever scared. But there was something deep inside the scars on their arms and the face tattoo the man across from her wore, his mouth a knife-sharp slit. It was the result of living the kind of life Denise had never known and never would. Where her heart wore raw when she thought of her father's neglect and her mother's despair, these people's hearts were scabbed over, crusted. They looked like they had taken to eating them for breakfast.

Denise had been here before, countless cases she waded through ankle-deep in her closet-sized office. But this trip rattled the nerves in her stomach. She felt an unfamiliar wave of panic about meeting the woman who killed her best friend. But it was more than that. How could someone so small and almost forgettable commit the kind of act that would make them never be forgotten? And then Denise shamefully thought of the answer—it was because sometimes, being forgotten was a pill that just couldn't be swallowed.

"McGovern." A woman as thick as a brick with a donut-shaped bun rocked Denise out of her reverie. She followed this woman and her baton to a small room much like the ones where she'd meet clients in the past. In fact, she recognized this one and tried to find comfort in the orange circular seats bolted to the table in the middle of the room and the cracked pane of window glass that sat behind thick crisscrossed bars, but she couldn't. She supposed she should be thankful to have a one-on-one sit down instead of being shepherded to the communal meeting area where all the people who scared her were talking, or laughing, or screaming at the ones they'd come to visit. Denise wondered which one of those she felt like doing herself. She wore her best outfit—a fitted skirt and jacket, both the color of

dusk and black heels, not too low, not too high. She looked professional but pretty, at least the version she could throw together nowadays. Somewhere inside her, she felt ashamed for getting all dolled up knowing all along she'd be meeting a woman who hadn't seen a tube of lipstick in the last ten or so years. It was stupid, immature. *Look at the fancy big shot I am now*, her clothes seemed to scream, and Denise knew it wasn't the person she was now who had gotten dressed this morning. It was the person she used to be.

What do you hope to accomplish? she thought, trying not to decipher what the white streaks coating the top of the metal table were. She knew, deep down, she wanted to ask for forgiveness. She knew, deep down, that who she used to be wasn't the type of person who went out of her way to encourage or comfort a person on the fringe. She took a broken swallow knowing the fringe was where she had always resided too. And so, she knew the answer to that question that rolled around the smooth contours of her skull. She wanted to be forgiven.

Chapter Thirty-One

Travis thought in quick sketches on paper. He had drawn so many people over the years, even ones he didn't know. He had a "disturbing" talent as his grandmother put it, practically a put down from anyone else's lips but not from hers. He knew Marge was the type of woman who found change and newness and unimaginable beauty to be quite formidable. So, when she had caught him doing it when he was seven, sitting down on the hardwood living room floor to sketch the face of his mother, that was the only word she could think of to conjure up. And Travis had taken it as the highest of compliments.

His grandfather Walt, on the other hand, said the things that needed to be said. He told Travis that his hands were proof of God's existence, that beautiful things grew on paper, and on the ground, and in people's hearts only because of Him. And that both awed and scared Travis, as if he had the power to darken his own hands and keep God from getting anywhere near him.

His other grandfather, Franklin, carried a similar ideology with him as cherished as his worn-out Bible. But he had a hard time looking at the pictures. He'd try to make his face work out a sense of admiration, but he always ended up looking pained. Travis knew now that it was because he reminded Franklin of his son, a man Travis barely knew but wore around his shoulders like a stuffy coat. For all its warmth and comfort, it was suffocating. He just wanted to be himself.

If he had to pin why he spent so much time with Douglas, it was because Douglas was the kind of person who was thoroughly himself to a fault. Douglas lived for Douglas, each moment a new possibility where he could either win or lose. Travis had never seen life like that before. He had spent so much time with his grandfathers growing up that he either looked at life like an opportunity to be saved and grate-

ful or saved and sad to where the sound of your own breathing had you searching the sky.

And it had worked for a time. He went to church Sundays and Wednesday nights at St. Andrew's and everybody loved him. He never felt like an outcast because of his skin. He told Franklin that once, and Franklin had nodded although he hadn't looked convinced. On the Sundays Travis spent with him, they'd go to Franklin's church, a black church on State Street, and Travis learned that Jesus loved him even if the white man didn't. It hardly made sense, and Travis, even at ten years old, wanted to raise his hand. He wanted to tell everyone about Walt so that everyone would be relieved. At least there was one righteous man still breathing, like Noah.

But Travis never said anything. He could tell there was tension, particularly between his grandmother and Franklin. Not that Marge didn't love Franklin—the years and the history they shared wouldn't see to it any other way. But there was an obvious divide between them. Marge's daughter was still alive, and Franklin's son wasn't.

Travis had lived in that divide unknowingly over the years. He could feel Marge's shifting gaze, could sense the way Franklin held his breath. They lived very different lives but believed in the same God. They wore different colored skin, and sometimes, Travis worried it made them understand the world in irreconcilably different ways.

But there he was, always in the middle.

"What 'sat?'" Roman asked, getting so close to Travis, he could smell the boy's unbrushed teeth. Roman was always looking over Travis's shoulder or trying to get him to talk. He was older than Travis, closer to Douglas's age, but he was behind the eight ball, mentally. Travis always tried to be kind, his heart missing his uncle, Garrett, and the unchained way he could watch life through Garrett's eyes. But Roman was a different type. He was in juvie because of his need to start fires and hurt animals. Travis couldn't stomach it, and

every time Roman opened his mouth, all Travis could think about was the old man in the back of Douglas's car, touching his hand.

"It's..." Travis wanted to say "nothing" and to shove the paper under his bed, but he let Roman sit next to him, watching him shade the light shadows of his mother's face. "... my mom."

"Mine's dead. Dad killed her," Roman said like it was an old story Travis should already know.

"My Dad's dead. And my mom killed him." It was uncomfortable having this much in common with a kid who'd light a bunny on fire given the opportunity. But Travis nodded anyway. He remembered what his grandfather Walt was always saying. That thing about extending grace to others like God did with each of them who believed. Travis did believe, but there was always something inside of him that tried to edge that belief right out of his body. It was like there were two voices in his brain—the one meek and barely audible that always wanted to do what was right and the other, a dark, deep voice that overtook the conversation. It always felt like that voice grew hands, pushing against his spine until he always seemed to be in step with Douglas.

"You ever kill anyone?" Roman said, his way of making conversation. Travis blinked away the old man's face.

"No. Technically, no." He didn't return the question. He didn't have the guts.

"Sometimes, I wonder what it had been like for my mama. For her breath to be coming in and out and then it get all caught up in her throat because of his choking. I done that. Not with people, but I done that, and you can feel it, you know. You can feel it come out, that energy, that sense of something inside them. And when their bodies go limp, it feels like their power is inside of you." Roman whispered it, but Travis almost expected a look of pride on the boy's face. But there was no pride. Only fear.

“It’s because it’s not yours to take,” Travis said, his pencil defining one of his mother’s curls. “The devil knows it, knows what will happen, so he makes you think you need it, that you actually want it. But what all you really want is a hug.”

“Devil,” Roman said, chuckling to where Travis could feel his body stirring on the bed next to him. “Devil nothing but my daddy. And he’s dead now too.” Roman quieted and looked ahead. “But I know what you mean. About the hug part. But no use wishing for something that won’t ever come.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

It was ridiculous. And if Whitney had been Holden Caulfield, she might have laughed out loud. Instead, she kept the miserable giggle on the inside, pretending not to notice as it brushed by a floating organ or tickled one of her ribs. Denise McGovern, all grown up.

She wasn't formidable by any means. She looked decent, put together in something one would imagine a lawyer would wear, but she wore it like it had taken her a painstaking amount of time to pick out. Even with a fresh coat of lipstick, Whitney could tell Denise was tired. She looked overworked like the guards that stalked the halls outside of her cell. As much as Whitney had feared this meeting the entire time she had followed Gina to this tiny room, that fear dissipated, and it was almost replaced with pity. Almost.

"Hello," Denise said in her best grown up voice, absent-mindedly extending her hand. Whitney raised both of hers, her wrists handcuffed in front of her and waved both hands at a slightly embarrassed Denise. "Yes, sorry," Denise said, awkwardly moving behind the table as Whitney sat down in front of her.

"Long time," Whitney said, surprising herself. She forgot about her voice, how she had found it in prison. Not only that, but the force of her hands. She wondered about that now, if she could take Denise McGovern head on even if her heart pounded so hard it was deafening. Gina might even give her a few minutes for the sheer sport of it.

"Yeah. Um, I'm sorry—"

"About which part? That I'm dying slowly in this hell hole or that my son is headed down the same path?"

"That I wasn't very nice to you." The sound was no longer deafening because Whitney's heart had stopped beating. All she could hear were the string of Denise's words, how there was no malice in them.

“Oh, I see. Guilt complex. You feel bad for going after the father of my kid, so you’ve come all this way to alleviate your precious brain from any ounce of responsibility. Well, guess what Denise? You didn’t kill him. You’re not responsible. This has nothing to do with you, which I’m sure is probably hard enough to swallow in the first place.” She enjoyed the muffled shock in Denise’s eyes. She danced along that nerve. “I killed him because he was gay. I mean, that sounds terrible, that’s not what I mean.” Her heart was at it again, so Whitney looked down, pausing to breathe.

“I killed him because he lied to me, because he tricked me into thinking I was worth anything more than a place like this. But he was wrong, apparently. And now his kid’s a monster too.” Whitney smiled. She wanted it to look maniacal, but she was afraid it would have looked that way whether she intended it to or not. “Something wrong, princess? This pity trip not panning out like you thought?”

Denise’s throat rose and fell with a swallow. She was working out something on the scummy top of the metal table. Whitney internally rolled her eyes knowing Halo and Rhonda from two cells over were tasked with wiping down the meeting rooms. Who knew what concoction they’d come up with and smeared to their heart’s delight.

“You’re right.” It looked like the whole world had dropped right there on Denise McGovern’s head. As much as Whitney wanted to poke at her pained face, she knew Denise wasn’t bluffing. She looked like she was going to be sick.

“What?”

“You’re right. I’ve been making this about me. I’m sorry.” It was almost deflating watching Denise McGovern say the words Whitney had always wanted to hear, if not from Denise, then from everyone who had ever broken her heart. “I’ve been really mad at myself and at you for so long. I blamed you. I thought you ruined my life, that you had taken away Jamal. And you did, but he wasn’t mine in the first place.”

He wasn't either of ours, Whitney thought. She kept her cuffed wrists in her lap, careful not to touch the disgusting table. Denise seemed to wilt in her suit.

"I used to dream about running away with him. It took me a really long time to figure this out, but I wasn't running away with him in my head. I was running away from all the things I hated in my life." Sucker punched. Whitney drew her lips together and kept studying her wrists, but it couldn't keep her from thinking about all the things she had tried to run away from too.

"My dad is a complete imbecile, and my mom needs to live in a perpetual rehab. I don't have anyone, except my dog. I have my church, and I'm thankful for that. But it's the feeling of utter loneliness, I just can't shake it. You ever feel like that? Like you're all alone and nobody even cares anymore?" Denise looked up, and Whitney steadily met her gaze. "Well, crap," Denise said, choking on her own foot.

Whitney wanted to hate her but couldn't. It felt like there was this lifeline between her and Denise. Even though Denise McGovern lived on the outside, and had her fancy job, and a dog who probably made a better roommate than Halo, her heart still hurt too.

"All the time," Whitney admitted. She thought of Marge without wanting to—Marge who lived in Walt's big fancy house with a child who hadn't murdered anyone lately. Whitney sometimes stroked the jealous demon in her belly late at night. Her eyes up to the cinderblock ceiling, she'd decorate a lovely little room in Walt's two-story. She lived there in her head, locked the door so nobody could even get in. Her mother and stepfather would beat on it, but she never would open it. She felt bad about this, but only for a second because she'd quickly realize she already had a locked door, but it wasn't anywhere near the beautiful home her family got to live in without her.

“Then why’d you do it?” It was a question asked so plainly, Whitney forgot she had ever been asked it before. But she had. On the stand and in newspaper articles and by people spitting it at her on the street. Even Halo had asked when they first met, not even a question of “if,” only “why.”

Whitney thought quietly. *Why, why, why.* She knew why. Jamal had lied to her, and she had tied her entire life to that lie. He was a boulder sinking in a stream, and she would have been dragged along with him if she hadn’t cut the rope. It all made sense in the neat and tidy spaces of her mind. Nobody questioned it, especially not anyone serving their sentences alongside her. But she was curious to know what Denise thought.

“I told you why. He was gay.”

“But that’s not why. Tell me the truth.” Acid on skin. Whitney could practically hear the sizzle. She didn’t want to have to say it out loud.

“The truth.” She breathed in deep, let it out. “I lost control.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

She smelled like fear and prison. Denise sat in her car, Stevie Nicks in her ear to settle her as she closed her eyes. She felt the aftermath of sitting in a small room with someone she never thought she'd see again. It was a ripple effect, hitting the top of her head and sending waves of panic down to her toes. Seeing Whitney felt almost unwanted even though she had been the one who had wanted it.

Denise had done what she had intended to do—plead forgiveness. But it felt trite, and Whitney had called her out on it. How could she even relate? As terrible as life had been with her parents, Denise had been well-fed and dressed and received her degree. She could work at any firm she wanted with her father's connections and would never know what it was like to sit in a room, not being able to leave.

It was disturbing how old Whitney had looked.

“Rhiannon” was over. Denise went to replay it, but let the CD continue, “Landslide” swerving through her ear canals. The thing Whitney had said about control, that was disturbing too. Denise had hardly ever felt in control herself, so how different would it have been for her to flip a switch and find herself on the other side of that metal table?

Sitting there, she had felt a fluttering behind her breastbone. It happened sometimes, when she was lost for words and just prayed to the Holy Spirit that whatever she said or did was exactly what God needed from her. She had made the mistake of recounting this process with her father once. He just shot her an incredulous look and looped his finger around the side of his head, his other hand slightly sloshing his martini. *And I'm the crazy one*, she had thought, thinking through all the decisions her father had made on his own accord and the way they had felt like nothing but death.

But in that room with Whitney, she hadn't felt crazy. The human side of her dripped through her pores, but the spirit side moved her tongue. She told this woman, her old nemesis, how she could help her son stay out of prison.

"Why? What's in it for you? Help some black kid and become community servant of the year?" Whitney said. The accusation stung because Denise hadn't even considered that angle. All she could think about was Jamal, how she had failed him, and if she had been a different sort of person, that maybe he'd still be alive.

"No. I just want to help my friend's son."

"I'm not your friend."

"I wasn't talking about you." Whitney stopped and chewed on that for a moment.

"Well, there she is. Good ol' Denise McGovern." Denise went to defend herself but saw the softness in Whitney's face. "I just needed to know your motive. Everyone's got one. And one thing I've learned in here is that not everyone can be trusted."

With that, Denise mapped out her plan. She wanted to take on Travis's case.

"But technically, we already have a lawyer. He's some guy my mom and her—Walt—know. George. George Jennings. He's my lawyer too."

"I know. I work for him."

Whitney laughed, her eyes rolling skyward. "Of course, you do. Anyway, I'm not sure how they'll feel switching players at this point in the game. And I doubt they'll trust any decision I make for my son, considering I apparently can't make a solid decision for myself. At least according to my mother." The heaviness of years past and unwanted conversations sat heavy in the air between them. Denise played it off, getting back to Travis. There was a reason George had Branson put that file on her desk. And if she could help Whitney's

son, maybe there would be trust there. Maybe she could even help heal Whitney's heart.

"I'll start making calls and getting things in order. I'm sure I can win this one, but I need you to do something for me for this to go according to plan."

"Look who put on her bossy pants this morning," Whitney said, arms locked across her tiny frame. "Shoot."

"I need you to pray." Whitney looked as if Denise had asked her to swallow the moon. And for Whitney, maybe the heaviness of Denise's request wasn't much different. She was in prison. She had probably prayed a million times in spite of herself. And where had it gotten her? Still in prison.

But Denise had seen the power of prayer. It had landed her a faithful furry companion, a job that sometimes felt like it was sucking her soul but always left her feeling fulfilled. It had led her to Sarah and Pastor Luke and broke her heart for her mother who often reminded Denise of the one lost lamb God was continuously seeking while the ninety-nine stood in wait.

And then there was her father. Well, God was still working on her there too.

Maybe if Whitney saw the grace in the valley, her heart would change. But to do this, Denise knew she would have to contend with the one person who kept Whitney locked up tighter than any prison cell: her mother.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Edwin always knew his brother was an odd man. Quiet, gentle, soft-spoken. “One of those sissy boys,” he’d tell his friends growing up, flapping his hand, and prancing around like a lady. They all laughed. They loved Edwin and the things his mouth would say that his heart would never stop.

He had a feeling he loved his brother deep down somewhere, but he never really liked him. He hated the way the boy would fawn over their mother like she hung the moon. Edwin found her mostly ridiculous—a walking, talking, movie screen that played the past on repeat. That woman would hardly ever shut up about “the massacre,” going on and on like it was the only piece of history she had ever lived. It wasn’t that Edwin didn’t feel bad for her or the family he never knew because of it. He just couldn’t see the profit in belly-aching about something you just couldn’t change.

He cried though when she died. His daddy died first, leaving his mama in their care, and Edwin nodded the whole thing off. How was he supposed to afford the gas to get back to Elaine on the regular just so she could fry him up some ham and collard greens and make him listen to the time the white man destroyed their hope? He didn’t blame her. He had seen too many white men in his own time giving him the eye or the lip or trying to knock his clock off at the bar for leering at their women. But again, Edwin knew better than to belly-ache. He wasn’t like everyone else on the planet with all that whining and suffering on. He knew how to count his blessings.

It was his brother, Franklin, who would take his family down to see their mother and then come back to brag about the whole thing like Jesus had asked him to dance across the lake with him. Always the sacrificial lamb, that one, while Edwin looked like the bad guy just because he didn’t want to spend his drinking money listening to the woeful tales of people he’d never get to know.

“She’s your mother though,” Franklin said to him one day when he had brought his son, Jamal, over. Douglas hadn’t been born yet, so it was a time when his wife, Dolores, was still interested in the concept of children, showing off the scarves she had bought from some infomercial she had seen on TV. She sat on the couch next to Jamal who seemed more interested in the Klondike bar he was gumming than Dolores’s desperate attempt to get someone to think she was interesting.

That was a little bit unfair, too, Edwin knew because he loved his wife like he loved his brother—the love just happened to have excised itself from him a long time ago and now floated in a deep, dark space somewhere in his stomach acid.

“I’m aware, Franklin. I’m no stranger to truth. But some of us got responsibilities and them responsibilities are starting to add up a bit.” He shot a look at his wife who was floating the scarves through her fingers while Big Bird stared through the screen and asked Jamal if he knew the alphabet.

“You don’t think I got responsibilities?” *I think you got a wife who loves you and a son who adores you*, Edwin said in his head. It was one of those things that wouldn’t get a laugh or hard pat on the back, so he kept it to himself. Besides, Franklin wasn’t the back-smacking type. He was the quiet older brother who got to be the winner in this life, his trophies a beautiful wife and adorable little boy. Anette, his wife, was one of the most good-looking women Edwin had ever seen, but not in some obvious way. She wasn’t the flaunting type. She was a good woman who loved her man and boy, and every time Edwin thought about her at night, Dolores groaning her breath through her nostrils, Edwin could feel any ounce of love in his acidic stomach start to deteriorate.

He had thought about it in the beginning when Franklin started dating Anette, bringing her around and showing her off in that absurdly innocent way he had. Dolores was a gut reaction to the dark-

ness Edwin felt. He refused to look like the loser younger brother, the third wheel following along like a lost puppy dog. Plus, he thought it better to have an excuse like Dolores around for when he pounced and made Anette his own.

It was early in the marriage, one of those times Franklin made his sacrificial trek back to Elena and Anette had refused to go. Franklin made up some excuse like she was feeling sick, maybe there was a baby in there, but Edwin knew it was because Anette was a smart woman who knew a lost cause when she saw it.

“Well, hey there, Eddie,” She had said and opened the door wide to him. She smelled like peach perfume, a fragrance his own wife had snatched up at the five and dime but had managed to make smell like spoiled fruit.

“Hey there, Anette.” She was a living doll with smooth skin and almond eyes. She was a tall woman, the word “lithe”—a word he had reluctantly read in a book once—came to mind. She moved with a forward sense of the future, not like someone stuck in her own past.

“Franklin ain’t here.”

“Oh, I know. I know he went to see Mama. I just was hoping you could help me with something.” He went there under the guise of “woman troubles.” It wasn’t a lie because his woman was trouble, but it wasn’t a problem he couldn’t solve. Give Dolores some cash and she would spin like a top, too focused on everything in her orbit for her to worry about him. But he was used to it, and even prided him himself on it in his backyard while shooting dice with Leo and Tony. The mouse could play whenever the cat was away spending his money.

Anette nodded and her face softened. He could tell she’d always liked him. Must have been a relief to know at least someone in the family could crack a joke.

Edwin watched his sister-in-law move smoothly to the kitchen towards the back of the house. They lived in a small, respectable

home edging close to a trailer park, but by the way Franklin carried himself, you'd think he was God's appointed. And that Bible he always had in his hand, worn in just a way that made you think it wasn't an act. Edwin wasn't sure what turned him off more, his brother's flagrant lack of self-respect or that old, tattered-looking book.

Anette made tea at the stove. It was a classy move, one Edwin admired. He admired a lot in the ladies he came to know as "friends." One of his friends, Margie, had an excellent way of tipping her chin skyward when she laughed. But Anette was more subtle, never brought attention to herself. If Margie was a cat, then Anette was most certainly a lioness.

"So, tell me about these troubles," Anette said, offering Edwin a delicate cup of something warm but bitter. He liked that too, how Anette hadn't even asked but just gave.

"Well, I don't know. I like to think I'm a good man, that I'm good to Dolores, but she be treating me something fierce. She don't love me like she should. She don't respect me. I work my behind off at Timex, and when I come home, she always has her hand sticking out at me. She's no saint, nothing like you, Anette." Edwin sheepishly lifted an eyelid, hoping the compliment had stuck. But that was Anette for you. She didn't even blink an eye. She probably ate compliments for breakfast.

"Are you a good man? Is there any such thing?" Edwin looked up to laugh at her joke, but he saw Anette wasn't smiling. She was studying the wet contents of her cup, little tea leaves drowning in their own sweat. How could he answer that? Here she was married, supposedly happy with his brother, a man whom Edwin nurtured a bitter heart toward but knew deep down was light years ahead in the "good" category.

"I care for her." Edwin mumbled under his breath. He didn't like to look at it, that word "care." Care was what his father had done

for his mother all those years. He had worked a hard life but made a home for his wife and his boys. He put food on the table. He never played dice and thought liquor was the devil. Edwin had felt suffocated growing up, looking at the three of them—his mother, father, brother all fitting into a life God had taken time to carve out with his own hand. And then there was Edwin, a leftover piece of clay drying alone and now too hard to fit where he knew he was supposed to belong.

“Care is a curious word, Edwin. We can give everything away to another person, and then we can still sit dry as a cistern. They can love us in their own way, never filling us up. Don’t you think that’s selfish, them not loving us like we deserve?”

Deserve. The word tumbled out of her lion’s mouth. Didn’t Edwin deserve real love too? For a moment, something clapped hard inside him, like a pair of hands grasping his heart. He blinked away glimpses of all those times Dolores’s face stared expectantly at him, hopefully, when she’d cry in their bedroom, and he was a man who couldn’t give her what she needed. He blinked away all those times his mother asked him to make biscuits with her, her broken heart floating above her shoulders when he’d laugh at her and run out the screen door. He was a weak man, and his weakness became the size of him, separated out until it was sitting right there next to him on his brother’s couch. And it was his weakness that said “yes” although his heart cried the soft tears of his mother’s stories.

“Then, come,” Anette said, her arm stretched out to him. He slipped his hand into hers as she led him down to the back hallway. It was like entering that space inside his heart and violating it with a knife.

After they finished, Anette stretched herself out on the bed and gave him a curious leer. She knew what he was now and had the proof. He kept mumbling about having to be on his way, trying to

gain the upper hand. But he knew that was forever lost now that he had slept with his brother's wife.

Edwin had spent all those years calling Anette a saint, convincing himself and attempting to convince Franklin she was something other than she was. Because what would happen if Franklin found out? What would have happened to Edwin?

Now, years later, his brother sat on his couch, and Edwin felt like Franklin was the one being punished. His wife was dead and his son too, and now his grandson sat rotting in a cell at the mercy of the law. And Edwin knew, as all black men knew, it wasn't a comfortable seat to take.

"What will I do." There was no question in it. Franklin said it declaratively like it had become a mantra he'd been whispering for far too long.

"Nah, man, no need to worry. Worry makes you looney." Edwin tried hard not to look at his bedroom door where his wife was watching the second TV, probably trying to send money to some preacher whose jet cost more than their house.

"I tell Him all the time that I tried my hardest. But it obviously wasn't good enough." Franklin smiled through his pain, the corners of his mouth reaching out towards Edwin's ceiling.

"Who? Travis?"

"No. God." Edwin took a swig from the beer bottle sweating in his hand. He had a hard and fast "no God talk" rule he wore like an invisible jacket, but he made a concession for his grieving brother.

"What does he say back?" Edwin asked, pretending the floor was much more interesting than the answer. It didn't allude him, this God thing. He probably even felt it more than Franklin, the boulder that he felt welded to. The weight of all the things he'd never done right.

His brother was a saint. A real one.

“I haven’t been able to hear Him lately.” Franklin said this like he was concerned for a friend. Edwin held in the giggle in his chest. His hands were uncomfortable holding his bottle that seemed to be crying more than sweating now. He tried not to make eye contact with his brother when Dolores whooped “Hallelujah!” from behind the closed bedroom door. He wanted Douglas to come in and break up the racing thoughts in his mind. But Douglas was a whole other side of the coin, one that scared Edwin more than he scared himself.

“What’s he sound like?” Edwin had meant for it to come out as a joke, but the heavy air made it land at their feet. How many times had his mother come in to kiss him on the forehead and to pray over him only for him to resent her. His lashes took to blinking again, this time sweeping away how she had smelled so close to him.

“Like something inside me pulling the strings. The wind. The way Anette used to feel in my arms.” Franklin looked like he wanted to reel that last admission back in, and Edwin wished he would. How many times had it been hovering over his shoulder, what he had done with his sister-in-law, to his brother, to himself. Edwin hated admitting that last part. He’d been with enough women to give Hugh Heffner a run for his money, all the time living the lie that his heart was still intact. But he could hardly feel it beat anymore, and there certainly wasn’t anyone or anything pulling its strings except for him. And look what good that did him.

“She wasn’t a saint,” Franklin said. All those years, Franklin had never said a word. So often Edwin would feel sorry for his brother, playing poker with the boys in his smoky kitchen or out with some honey he picked up at Ralph’s Bar. The man just didn’t know how to live. *The man was a cuckold, and if you don’t pounce first, the women-folk will*, Edwin thought, the shame in convincing himself looming eerily close to his worthless heart.

“She wasn’t a saint, Eddie,” Franklin said again, using the name he’d call Edwin when they were kids. It was a knowing look, and

for an instant, Edwin teased himself with the possibility of telling Franklin everything, this man of God who knew the sound of his creator's voice. But then Douglas did come in, shuffling around with his shorts hanging down his backside. Edwin had no patience for a man who didn't know how to dress right for the ladies.

And whose fault was that?

Chapter Thirty-Five

It had been a tough year. Walt sat on the steps of St. Andrew's looking out at the cars that brushed back and forth across the street. He had a meeting with a few members from their original grief group in the basement of the church, but he had left the house early so he could walk to clear his head. Pastor Luke joined them on occasion, his grief being closely tied to his wife's dwindling memory. Agnes wasn't quite yet a detriment to herself or others, but she routinely left water boiling on the stove or the front door wide open. Luke said she always played it off like she was the female Mr. Magoo. "But it's about that time, I suppose. No spring chickens," Luke said one evening into his tepid cup of coffee.

Agnes never came to the meetings anymore. Walt wondered if that was because her heart had healed or because she couldn't remember it needed healing in the first place. Considering his own problems, he said a small prayer of thanks to God. Marge wasn't the type to forget a thing, even if he'd want her to.

They had lived comfortably and relatively peacefully these past several years. That day Marge returned to the bakery had been a new sort of test that only brought them closer together. Nothing could have made Walt leave, not after years of nursing the new bruises to his heart, the ones derived from not being able to protect Marge in the first place.

There were bouts of anger he knew were fear based. One night, he punched the wall of his bedroom, the same room where his parents used to sleep, and left a raw blemish in the plaster. He had been thinking of the man that had done that terrible thing, the man that had ruined their lives and taken away all those years they could have had together. *Forgive*. It was the strange pulse, a feeling, a soft breath here, there, and everywhere. He wanted to punch the wall again, but his hand hurt, and the voice wasn't letting up. *Forgive*.

That night he combed his Bible for forgiveness. He read about Joseph and his brothers and God reconciling Himself back to Israel because of Moses's pleas. He realized that God was never going to leave His people. But He needed Moses to know it on a gut level too.

You're not going to try and leave me, too, are you?

No. Never.

The type of love he felt from God was beyond anything he had ever experienced, even from his own parents. And he took his time trying to explain this to Marge who just saw the world as a series of fires she was forced to put out. God wasn't the lover of her soul. He was an unwieldy arsonist.

The day was settling down and the light was a soft, warm glow above the edges of the buildings that lined Main Street. He sat watching people, one boy in particular who delighted in running straight into a few birds gathered at a parking meter. He instantly thought of Garrett, his son. He knew on some level Marge didn't see it that way. Garrett was hers, another problem to solve, and she wasn't going to cheat and ask for help. So, Walt decided to help regardless, taking Garrett under his wing and showing him what it meant to be a man. That's what Walt couldn't stand, how everyone (except Marge) seemed to write the boy off as if he were broken.

Garrett certainly wasn't broken. In fact, Walt often thought Garrett was the only of them who was getting it right.

He studied the boy sometimes, watched his movements like watching the flight pattern of birds. He wasn't disorganized. No, he was quite methodical, his brain working to watch the movement of the clouds or the fish flopping on the line at the lake. He wasn't constantly processing and working out his place in the world.

Garrett already knew, and Garrett was at peace.

The tantrums he threw with Marge were nearly nonexistent when they moved into Walt's house. Walt knew that bothered Marge, like she was being made a liar. There was a silent gratitude for

her life now, for how much easier things were between her and her son. But because Walt knew Marge so well, he also knew there was a tiny bud of resentment she had taken to nursing.

And boy did that bud grow when he taught their son about God. “Oh, he doesn’t understand all that,” Marge would say, verbally swatting away Walt’s attempts to read Genesis to Garrett at the kitchen table. But what Marge wouldn’t notice is how eerily calm the boy would get, his mind silently storing the reality of God’s initial world instead of rocking hard against the back of his chair.

Walt never held this against her. He knew the type of people her siblings were, wearing religion like a badge on their sleeve, but never really getting the essence of who Christ was. Same old story, same old tune. He prayed every day that God would open Marge’s eyes and see His love for her in the way Walt loved her even in the wake of her temper tantrums and hard headedness.

They weren’t always pleasant, but Walt was so grateful to witness them because it meant Marge was his to love and protect.

A car door slammed down the street. It was Luke parked in one of the parallel spots next to the sidewalk. The fresh young pastor Walt once knew was an aging old man with slumped shoulders and a penchant for studying the ground. He watched as Luke made his way down the sidewalk, the years of disappointment and fear slowly breaking down a once ironclad faith, and Walt prayed God would have mercy on them all.

“Hey there, Luke. Nice night,” Walt said, digging around and pocketing one of his usual go-to greetings. He shamefully understood how he didn’t want to get too close to Luke, not like this. He was afraid Luke’s fear was contagious, and he didn’t like the ironic taste of it.

“Yeah,” Luke said softly and looked for the night in the tops of his orthopedic sneakers.

They entered the front double doors, a small church people-wise, but quite large in the interior. It was the same as Walt had remembered entering it the very first day when he joined the grief support group, save for a few extra coats of paint. They weren't a struggling church, but they weren't well off either, and even if they had been, the building would have still stayed the same. Luke wasn't one for flair, another reason Walt had always admired him.

They were quiet as Luke unlocked the door to the basement and they felt their way down the stairs. Luke turned on the light and that's when Walt could see him clearly. He had been crying.

"Luke, buddy. You okay?" It was another dug-for bit of communication that sounded as trite as it felt. No, Luke wasn't okay. And Walt wasn't sure what to do about it.

"I think God hates me, Walt." Luke slunk into a lone metal folding chair that hadn't been stored away like the rest. Walt knew the feeling. The whole grief group knew the feeling. But Luke had never had to know how terribly hard life was when the only thing you had left was God. Luke had led a blessed life. Until now.

"No. That's a lie. Always has been. You see, He didn't create the hard stuff. I know that now." When Walt said it out loud, he felt it vibrate in his gut. His hand was on his stomach, the small paunch that would never cease to exist no matter how much walking he did around their block. The truth carried its way through his nerves and into the air where it hung between them.

"Then why does He let it happen? Why not remove it?"

"He already did, Luke. With His son." It was strange sharing the Gospel with his own pastor who couldn't have looked worse if he had been run over by a Mack truck. But it reminded Walt of the Israelites wandering the desert, sometimes in obedience to God, sometimes in complete rebellion. They always needed to be reminded of God's goodness. And Walt realized how often he did too.

"That doesn't change anything. Agnes is still sick. She has a hard time remembering who I am, Walt. I just don't know how I'm supposed to live through this and pretend I'm not mad at God."

"Then don't pretend. He can handle it." Walt was met with bad memories. There was an ocean of pain and panic that set in once Tammy had died. Everything he had ever known about love and hope had thrown themselves out the window, so there he was in his bed at night, praying to a God he hardly believed in to take him too. But then Luke reached out, the same man who kept rubbing at his face right now like he was rubbing away his existence. And Walt spotted it there in the balance between them—the aching heart of a man alone.

The group trickled in, and Walt kept his eyes on Luke the entire night. Part of him was afraid of Luke bolting out of the building and into oncoming traffic. Part of him was worried that the death in his pastor's eyes would permanently stay there.

When he got home, Marge asked him how it had gone. It was always a slight point of contention that he still went to group even though he'd "moved on with his life" according to Marge. He didn't tell her he was there to pray for everyone else and to encourage them because Marge would smell weakness in it. "Can't they all just stop belly aching and realize life could be worse?" He knew it was her way of protecting herself, simultaneously ignoring what happened in the alley and reconstructing the way she felt. Marge was as alone and scared as that night she had called him about Whitney's crime. In the beginning, he had placed a finger to the pulse of her fear, and it spooked her away. So, Marge loved him. Marge had changed a lot. But Marge was insistent on hiding the hidden parts of herself.

Oh Lord, soften her heart. It was a silent prayer he played on repeat. Sometimes it was a groaning of his soul when he had forgotten the words and watched her agitated hands cut potatoes for the pot

roast. There was a long line of nerve that ran through Marge, always on fire, and it would take an act of God for her to feel at peace.

“It went well,” he said, sitting on the side of the bed, taking off his red-striped tube socks, “old man socks,” Marge called them even though she was the one who bought them for him. She was already in bed in her night gown, a much softer version of herself than all those years ago. *Is this proof, Lord, that you’re working?* He ached to tell her about Luke and felt the words knocking on the door of his throat.

“Some hussy called tonight wanting to represent, Travis,” she said, and Walt carefully marched his words back to where they had come from.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The woman was a hussy. And Marge didn't feel bad saying so. She had finished up with dinner, scrubbing down counters with the wash rag and putting away leftover macaroni casserole—her boys' favorite—when the phone call came. She moved out into the hallway with the phone cradled to her ear so she could listen to Garrett shower himself in the downstairs bathroom. That was something his occupational therapist had taught him that Marge wasn't overly skeptical about. It was nice to know her son could tend to something like that without Marge having to drown in the tub with him anymore.

She almost felt bad for calling his therapist a witch doctor when she had first met him.

"Hello?" Marge waited until she received a, "Hi there, this is Denise McGovern with Jennings and Jacobs." It was a voice that sounded tired but still sweet, apparently relying on its own natural wickedness to get what it had come for.

"What do you want?"

"I'm calling in regard to Travis Barnes." So not only a hussy, but a tragedy chaser who smelled blood in the water. *Low blow, trying to wrench a case from your boss*, Marge thought, taking a deep breath and listening to Garrett giggle to himself to steady her nerves.

"And what about this Travis Barnes you're seeking?" The knife in Marge's mouth was so sharp, it bit into her tongue.

"Oh, I don't mean to bother you. It's just that I think I can help. With Travis." The hussy breathed in, took a drink of what Marge imagined could only be liquid courage, and began again. "I know your daughter, Whitney." Garrett howled fiercely to himself, the years sifting through his many sounds until Marge landed on "joy" rather than "pain." She shuffled back from the bathroom door and rested her back against the door frame of the kitchen.

“How do you know my daughter? Did George tell you about her?” The image was always a speeding bullet to the brain. Marge instantly remembered her small daughter under the table the night Lenny died, the one curled and breathing in her arms, and it was always this version of Whitney Marge painfully imagined imprisoned with all those monsters.

“We used to go to school together. I was there. When it happened.” The hussy didn’t go on, but Marge knew pain when she heard it. She had become well-versed in it, and as much as she hated this woman for bothering her evening routine, the worn-out mother’s heart in her chest limply beat for her too.

“Then what do you want with Travis then?”

“I know George is already representing him, but he asked me to help. I’ve already spoken with Whitney—“

“You have? Is she okay?” The words were out, and Marge’s cards were played before she got a chance to glimpse them. She worked on all the possible answers to that question, like considering the edges of a million puzzle pieces.

“She seems well. I wouldn’t worry.”

“Did I say I was worrying?” Marge nearly knifed her tongue through the phone. She imagined the drunken hussy cowering in the corner, the receiver inched away from her ear.

“No, you didn’t. I just...know what it feels like to not be in control when it comes to the people you love. That’s all.” The girl went quiet, and Marge went to speak but the sound caught in her throat. Then there was a strange licking sound in her ear.

“What’s that?”

“My dog.” At that point, the hussy became just another person who was so afraid of Marge, their dog had to calm them down. Walt had gently talked about this for some time, Marge’s “stalwart” demeanor. She knew this was code for “pain in the butt.”

Marge breathed through her nostrils so there was a whistling sound working in tandem with the dog's thorough licks. Garrett had turned off the water, and she could hear the act of finding his towel and opening the shower door.

“Okay,” Marge said, something beneath skin and bone giving way. But hours later, something about it incited her again as she replayed it out for Walt.

“Who does that woman think she is?” she asked for good measure, hoping Walt could give her a well thought out answer. Her husband was taking off those tube socks she found for him at the buy-in-bulk store. A gigantic half-opened pack of fifty lurked in their closet, waiting to make another debut. She hated how vulnerable this act made him look like he was just another old man on the planet who couldn’t right the wrong to everything.

“Sounds like she’s a lawyer. Do you know if she’s a good one? I imagine George wouldn’t have hired her if he didn’t think so.”

“Probably,” Marge admitted. “She seems to care. She knows Whitney,” she added as nonchalantly as she could.

“Has she talked to her recently? How is she?” Walt asked the questions from such a gentle place; Marge was afraid they’d break as he spoke them.

“Good. She seems good.” Walt nodded grabbing both of his knobby knees and then patted the space next to him. This meant Marge had to remove herself from the comfortable cocoon she had made underneath the covers on her side of the bed and shock the soles of her feet with the coldness of the floor. But she did it despite the surliness she felt doing so and sat next to her husband.

“I love you. No matter what,” he said.

“Why? What’s happening?” Marge braced herself for an answer that involved cancer or an affair.

“Does something have to be happening for me to love you that much?”

"I suppose not," Marge conceded. Walt was being Walt again. All this talk about his love for her made her uncomfortable. She loved him, too, and said it with a peck on his cheek. But Walt felt it, an immense ocean of feeling Marge often felt she was drowning in. He wanted more from her. He wanted the truth about what she was feeling. But Marge had a hard time even getting to that place, although she wanted to for his sake. And she tried to ignore why she always changed the subject or worried herself with her children. She was afraid.

"I won't stop, you know."

"I know."

"You ever feel tired, Marge? You seem to take the brunt of it without even realizing you can step to the side. I can help you." There they sat, both vulnerable now, Marge realized, and she was uncomfortable in this realization. She almost considered putting on her socks and shoes to alleviate some of her discomfort. Nothing could take you unaware if you were prepared for it.

"You have helped me," Marge said. If it weren't for Walt, well, she didn't like thinking about it because she would have to think about facing what Whitney did alone. What a horrible reality that would have been. Walt talked all the time about how God had intervened for her sake, and Marge's wrist had gotten sore from brushing it off. God wanted nothing to do with her, she had said. Just good luck, that's all.

But she didn't believe in luck either. To distill the entire world down to random chance seemed irresponsible, and as Walt often pointed out, misguided. The sun came up at the same time every day and the same with its setting. In a world so perfectly timed, how could everything rely on the beat of a bird's wing or an offhand comment?

There was too much consistency built into the world to suddenly stop relying on it.

“And all the time,” Marge said, letting Walt rub her back with barely a wince.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

It had taken half a bottle to get up the courage. She of course felt wrecked the next morning with Benjamin's dog breath in her mouth and a lone sock near her ear. But something had told her Whitney's mother would be scary. And her stray hunch was right.

Denise recounted the conversation with a palm full of Advil and a coffee, black. She had twenty minutes to get to the office, and she looked like had gotten ready in far less time than that. She considered the contents of her fridge but decided against cooking when her stomach rebelled against the idea of leftover Chinese or scrambled eggs. She had won a small victory but had never felt lonelier. She had looked the beast in the eye and won.

"Can't say many have managed that feat, Denise. I'm even scared of her!" George Jennings's voice felt like washing mud off her feet in a cool pond. She blushed at the odd thought, but George had always left her blushing, that thought causing her to blush even more. He was her dad's age for crying out loud. No, actually, he was twelve years younger but still managed to hang with the older crowd, his lion's heart earning him respect even with those who had hardly earned any themselves.

"Why'd you do it, George? Why'd you give me this case?" Denise rested her back against the refrigerator door, one she'd decorated in her father's post cards and afterthought magnets he sent from his trips. The corner of the Rocky Mountains poked her in the shoulder.

"Denise, you're the best I've got. I mean that. You work hard, you care. And considering I've got a lot going on right now, I figured I could trust you with this one." She could hear the swallow through the phone. George's wife, Bethanny, cheated on him, left, and still managed to weasel her way to a solid alimony package. But George never bad mouthed her or cracked jokes at her expense. Denise could

hear only sadness in him, and it frightened her that maybe it was because it was becoming the one language she knew best. "My buddy, Walt, is a good egg and is wrapped up in the family drama. If I can't be there to do him this favor, then I knew you could." Denise wasn't so sure, the memory of the phone call doing its best to make her doubt herself again. But there it lingered, George's sadness, and before she had the chance to blush at the thought of rocking him in her arms like a child, she softly got off the phone.

She moved to the couch partly numb and tried to imagine life as Marge Marksmen. It was a practice recommended to her by Pastor Luke. She used to visit him regularly in his office as she was completing her master's degree and every little sideways look or backhanded comment put her on edge. She once found herself trailing a little old lady who had refused to use her blinker when cutting in front of Denise. Not her finest moment, Denise mused as her head beat to the pulse of the memory.

Luke had been so kind. He found no fault in her, just in her reactions. He told her a story once about how he'd thrown a golf club through his living room window when he couldn't get cable to connect to their TV. Not his finest moment either, he had said. Lately, Luke had looked old and despondent, and Denise had heard the rumors that his wife, Agnes, wasn't doing so well. She wanted to go up to him and give him advice that would change his heart like his had changed hers. But what could she offer a pastor when her head killed from a hangover and the only sense of encouragement she regularly received was from a fifty-pound panting sack of hair.

"All right, all right, let's go." Benjamin sprung on his heels and pawed the air as Denise retrieved his leash near the front door. As he forcefully guided her outside and into Little Rock's stifling morning air, Denise put on the socks and shoes of Marge Marksmen and realized she had gotten off easier than was to be expected. Denise couldn't imagine raising an autistic kid, and then there was Whit-

ney's pregnancy. All those years raising your babies and then your grandchild and then your own kid goes and ruins everything with a bolt of hot anger and a stolen gun.

Denise marveled that Marge Marksmen hadn't lost her mind.

Benjamin tugged hard on the leash. "Okay, okay but just a quick walk. I'm gonna be late." Denise tried to ignore the fact that it didn't matter if she was late or not. She got there absurdly early to begin with and then felt like she'd hardly notice the rest of the day if it weren't for Branson whose primary concern was Whitney talking him up to the partners. She didn't know how to tell Branson that George wasn't the chatting-up type. That he was different, and the difference made her feel weak in the stomach.

When George had first hired her, she had thought that she was serving a purpose and simultaneously making her father cringe at her penchant for bottom-rung living. But she also knew her father didn't care and was too concerned with his child bride. And something deep down inside of her flipped its switch, and she was no longer at Jennings and Jacobs to torture her father but to remain closely in orbit with a man she was afraid she was in love with.

Denise shook her head hard on the sidewalk. She'd go by her mom's this weekend and recount happy memories that never existed just to see if she could get her mother to smile. There was a dark hole inside her mother that Denise was always quick to edge her away from. But at the same time, it always looked so inviting. Denise had her faith, and it saw her through, but faith was an act she practiced that never seemed other-worldly enough for her. It was like a heavy jacket she had to remember to put on but kept taking off when everything started to feel a bit too warm. Faith never seemed to get her closer to George.

Benjamin squatted and did his business before Denise realized what was happening. She had forgotten the plastic bag she usually brought to clean up the mess. But there was no bag now, just her

empty hand, and she tried hard not to link the mess before her with how she felt inside.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

It was visiting day, so everyone preened and primped in front of the plastic mirrors anchored around their collective room. The boys who bunked in the middle hogged them the most because they were the ones who had been there the longest and were apt to stick the same pen they were using for math homework into the side of your neck.

It just wasn't worth it.

So, Travis traced his pain instead, his mother's face in a small cell, her small body on a dreary bed. He felt more connected to her than he ever had when she was around. After a while, his grandmother stopped telling him things like how much his mom had always loved him and carried him around like a China doll. He harbored hate in his heart because those had been glimpses his mind and body craved, but now that he was older, he knew it was because it was hard for Marge to talk about her daughter, knowing she'd never get to see her in the same capacity that she used to.

She'd never get to love her the same either.

He had gotten a phone call. It was from some white lady who sounded both tired and overly caffeinated at the same time. Then Marge had called to reveal the same news, and boy was she mad when Travis told her the white lady had already called to tell him about it. It felt oddly good, like he was being fought over, never mind it was between his grandmother and some lady who exuded sweat even through the phone.

He was getting a new lawyer. He supposed he should be happy about that. But happiness was a whole other animal in a place like this. Happiness was an extra fruit cup at lunch because your boy doing his duty in the cafeteria hooked you up. Happiness was sitting down on the john and there still being toilet paper left even when yours was the last behind to be wiped. *Happiness is fleeting, never trust it.* His grandfather, Franklin, had said those words years ago

when Travis was stupidly grinning with an ice cream cone stuck in his face. He didn't like that, his grandfather restructuring his feelings so that now all Travis felt was a strong sense of guilt whenever anything was slightly better than intolerable. But he knew Franklin had a point. The man always did. But that point was still sometimes too sharp to swallow.

It made him worry about Douglas. Douglas was nothing but one big ball of happy, at least from appearances. But Travis knew there was a demon there deep inside his cousin, making him prance and stalk and worry only about the things of this world that would bring him pleasure. He knew though that Douglas hadn't liked killing that old man. That it wasn't pleasurable for him. But he did like knowing how impressed the Bloods would be and how quickly he would move up the ranks, clawing closer and closer within their pit of hell.

Then why do you follow him?

The question was almost as clear as if Roman's bad breath had given it life. But it hadn't come from the outside where the boys were clamoring for space to stare at their faces. It was a voice from within.

Travis looked quickly to his left, then his right, and whispered, "Who else am I supposed to follow?"

You know who.

He did know. He knew ever since he was a little boy and watched the way Walt loved his Uncle Garrett. It wasn't that he hadn't seen that same love in Marge, but Walt wasn't family. And he didn't rudely stare or laugh behind his hand when Garrett searched the sky like he had left his keys there. He had always loved his uncle, too, and knowing someone like Walt quietly took on the pain of loving someone forever at the mercy of a restless crowd made him admire him even more.

He had even talked to Walt once about Douglas. He threw things out there with no real agenda, just curious at what Walt would pick up and pocket or discard in a heap. But Walt would just nod his

head and look back at Travis and ask him what he thought. *What is it about Douglas that snags at your soul?*

“He’s blind to his own deception.”

“Come again, Cowboy?” Roman asked, his toothy face dangling over the edge of his bunk and into Travis’s.

“Nothing.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The boys couldn't get enough of the photo Douglas had snapped in the alley. In their eyes, Douglas was a regular beast who'd even beat an old man for the sheer pleasure of it. And Douglas played it up that way too, acting as if the very act had made him sprout wings and fly. But there were odd moments he didn't like so much like when his mother made him go get some milk from the corner store and his stomach got weak with the feel of hammer against flesh. He thought about vomiting on his shoes and then quickly forgot it when the clerk gave him a look. He knew that look. He'd been getting it since he was twelve.

But it was the clerk's lucky day. Douglas didn't want to steal anything. He just wanted the bad feeling to go away.

It got worse as each day strayed into the next, which was almost an anomaly. He had seen his own mother cry a certified river when her mother left this world for the next. But each day the tears ebbed, and she became more like the woman she used to be, give or take a few pounds from all that wailing. But then of course, she found them again.

But Douglas's angst only got worse, and he figured it was because he wasn't mourning as much as he was sweating. It was like the old man was a ghost who watched his every move, and even at night, he'd wake up from hooping and hollering, his father Edwin at the ready with his old Louisville slugger. Douglas played it off—a bad plate of nachos, sour milk in his cereal—but he knew it was whatever lurked underneath his surface, boiling beneath his skin.

He wanted to discuss this with someone, but Kelvin and Antonne were too stupid for words, and Travis was locked away due to the very thing that plagued Douglas in the first place. It was what his English teacher had once called "ironic."

Douglas tried not to investigate it too much, but still, it was always there. The day Franklin had come over to talk with his father, the feeling was intensified, like whatever was inside of him could sense it and willed itself to get out. Franklin had told him a story like this once, about some guy with a million demons in him, and when he saw Jesus, the demons started to freak out, asking Jesus what he was up to. It was a weird story to tell a little boy, but Douglas liked it at the time. He felt like a grown up trusted him enough to tell him grown up stuff. But now he just felt exposed.

He thought about telling Franklin, but his uncle was no impartial party. If Douglas even hinted he was involved in Travis's arrest, there would be hell to pay. His uncle was like that, a silent man. But you didn't want to stand opposite him once that silence was broken.

So, Douglas stood now in between the living room and kitchen, his right foot in one room, his left in the other, feeling as if he were motionless between two worlds. His body stiffened with the anticipation of movement, but he was stuck not knowing where to go or what to do. But then he heard tires and a car door slamming in the driveway. His father.

Chapter Forty

All those boys. Each one of them looked like they would cut her given the chance, but when she spied them out of the corner of her eye, they seemed to settle. They sat with family, friends, lawyers at their designated round metal tables and their shoulders slumped with the weight of reality outside of their bunks. They were just kids.

And so was her grandson. He didn't look deflated like the rest of them though. He looked good enough, a little skinnier, but there was a light yellowish bruise near one eye that he insisted was nothing. Marge didn't believe him, but every time she started in about it, she felt Walt's gentle but firm hand on her knee.

Leave it alone, Marge.

He said nobody bothered him (especially when they found out why he was there, which made Marge sadder than having to be pat down by that plain-faced woman a fraction her age in the lobby) and that his bunk mate wasn't too awful. Marge's eyes pleaded "why?" with him because time was short, and that lawyer woman would be there any second. It was a question that couldn't be quickly answered, and even if it were, Marge wasn't sure she wanted to hear it.

The lawyer woman did finally show up. She was a tired sort of pretty and made short excuses about the traffic and parking. She smelled lightly floral, assumingly trusting this scent to cover her overall sense of rawness.

It didn't work.

"I'm honored to meet you all. I'm Denise McGovern. I used to go to school with your parents," she told Travis who seemed a little blindsided by this information. Denise had trusted Travis's grandmother to deliver the news, but getting up close and personal with the woman, Denise wasn't sure trust was the way to go.

"What were they like?" Travis asked. Everyone stopped breathing except for Denise who slowly streamed her panic through her

nostrils like Pastor Luke had taught her. She looked at their boy, at Whitney and Jamal's. He was so much like her best friend, her former best friend, she reasoned in her head because Jamal wasn't there to defend himself against her. *But we loved each other once*, she said to God in her head.

I know.

And I'm sorry, she thought.

I know that too.

“Your dad was a brilliant artist. He drew a lot, in school too. And your mom...was strong. Is strong.” Denise talked to Travis’s case file until his grandfather, Walt, softly cleared his throat.

“So, like I said over the phone to Marge—”

“Mrs. Brightman.” Marge said. Denise stared a little harder into the files until she felt her cheeks calm down.

“Yes, Mrs. Brightman.” Denise paused again, her sweat glands flaring. “As I was saying before to your grandmother, I work at Jennings and Jacobs, and I received your case from a colleague of mine, your current lawyer, who happens to be your mother’s lawyer too. He thought I would do a better job of representing you given my ties to the family.” Denise had practiced this part in the car against Journey’s softly piped vocals. It wasn’t the entire truth. The entire truth was that there was a vacant sadness in George Jennings that Denise found she wanted to wade in, becoming that ultimate cliché of the young protégé in love with her boss. And that maybe on some level, that edged out even her purer motives to help Jamal’s son. But Denise didn’t say any of this. She instead sat and suffered in the dampness beneath her blouse.

“I’d be lying if I didn’t say I was happy about a switch up. George tried his best for Whitney, but that wasn’t good enough, and I doubt he could do much for Travis either. But he’s Walt’s friend.” Denise caught Marge’s emphasis on the last word as well as the slightly

pained look on Walt's face. She couldn't imagine what this soft-spoken man saw in a woman who made a freight train look tame.

"Well, I'll certainly do my best. We don't have much time today, so this is just a formal meeting, but I'll need to meet with Travis one-on-one to further discuss his involvement in Mr. Garrity's murder.

"He had no *involvement*," Marge spat while air quoting. "He was framed!"

"Mrs. Brightman, I understand how something like this can stir up passion—"

"Passion? You haven't begun to see passion. You're telling me you want to spend alone time with my boy, to what? Confuse him? Make him think he had something to do with all this and take a plea bargain? I know how you people work."

"I'm not confused." Again, breath stopped, and all eyes were on Travis. He had been watching the adults make sense of his situation, which troubled him even more. The spectacle reminded him of Aunt Dolores's telenovelas that she watched when she wasn't watching TBN. Never mind that she didn't know a lick of Spanish.

"I'm not confused," Travis repeated. He didn't see the old man's face when he closed his eyes. He felt him, like he had never stopped sitting next to Travis. What everyone at the table didn't even think to consider was how Travis felt knowing he would have to look this same man's family in the eyes. "I was there. I was with Douglas. I didn't kill the man, but I didn't stop it either."

Marge sounded like air quickly vacating a balloon. She looked at her grandson. "He's just a boy," she said, not to the table but to a cruel God who had taken Lenny, and let her be raped, and sent her daughter to prison and now her grandson. How could He do this? How?

"We have a good case," Denise said. She knew she could make sure the jury saw Douglas as the culprit and that Travis was the innocent victim caught in the crosshairs of gang violence, male bravado. She could make the fact that Travis was just a boy work for him.

But Travis sat, knowing he was no victim.

Chapter Forty-One

His son looked itchy. Edwin could spot that itchiness anywhere. He looked the way Edwin used to feel, coming home to Dolores after a night spent in another woman's bed. But eventually that feeling numbed with time, so there was only a faint sting whenever he left Dolores for the comfort of someone who didn't compare him to Jesus or his brother.

But his son knew no numbness. It was apparent in how he yelled in his sleep or looked all shifty-eyed standing in his boxers and tube socks like he didn't know how he had gotten from the kitchen to the living room and was concerned some sort of conspiracy was behind it. Edwin knew his heart was troubled, but he wasn't sure his son knew that himself. And Edwin was scared to question him about it because he already knew it had something to do with his nephew, Travis.

Travis was a good boy, which was par for the course. Made sense such a good man like Franklin would have such a good grandson. Edwin always tried to scrub the bitterness off his skin because it never felt right, but that dang stuff was resilient. He hated how Franklin could just send up a prayer to his God and everything turned out like roses.

But then he remembered Anette and Jamal. And then Edwin would set to scrubbing again.

Maybe Douglas felt that way about Travis. Maybe there was no winning whether Travis was walking the streets a free man or sitting in juvie. Maybe Douglas spent his nights scrubbing because there was something in Travis he wanted just like Edwin saw in his own brother. Goodness. And Edwin was ashamed that this was something he just couldn't offer his son.

He needed to talk to someone about it. He made the mistake of talking to his wife.

“You notice something wrong with Douglas?” He asked after a few too many cold ones. The smoke from his cigar was a soft snake in the night. He had lured her out with a few cat calls through the sliding glass doors after his boys had gone home. He could still charm the ladies, even the ladies who wished he were dead.

So now she sat next to him in one of their rusted-out metal chairs on the small piece of pavement that moonlit as a back porch. She was the type of old his mother used to be. There was a sense of awe there, of respect for what her body and her mind had gone through. But Edwin knew himself, knew there was also a slight repugnance that drove him into the arms of other women.

You drove yourself there. Edwin froze. He wanted to ask, “Who’s there?” because he knew Dolores didn’t say it. But he was sharp enough to not act like a crazy person.

“So why have you proposed this meeting?” Dolores asked. She sipped on one of his tall boys, a sight that was duplicitous set against her pious TV watching. But Edwin knew his wife. He knew she tried on identities like clothes and was apt to switch if something nicer came along. She enjoyed her drink with full lips and a breakaway stare that he often felt guilty of. He knew that look, like there was something else you were supposed to be doing, you just couldn’t remember what.

“It’s the boy.” They both knew that was inaccurate. Douglas was no longer a boy. He was a full-grown man. Sure, he wasn’t quite twenty-one yet, but he strutted around like what he thought a man was, and it was almost a heart break moment for Edwin to realize why he got the definition so wrong.

“What about him? The terrors thing? Oh, he be fine. I be praying to the Lawd about it.” The way she said “Lord” made Edwin swish his drink hard through his teeth. It didn’t fit her well, like a belt that was a bit too tight.

“And what did the *Lawd* say?” he lobbed right back at her. She gave him her bug eye but sipped another drink.

“He said you going right to hell if you keep up that smart mouth of yours.”

Edwin chuckled. “But really.”

“He’s gonna be okay, Edwin. Things always okay.” Edwin refrained from telling her how wrong she was. He knew she could feel it, how very not okay they’d been for such a long, long time. But not even he could put it into words.

He supposed it had started with marrying a girl so unlike his mother. When he had met Dolores, she was a smiley counter girl at Cohns, spraying white women with perfume. At the end of the day, she smelled like a bouquet and had a figure that stood up against the ice cream sodas he bought her with the money he won off his friends. But things changed, and now Dolores hardly ever went out, and the spread in her hips was no match for the bowls of Yarnell’s she made herself when stationed in front of their TV set. She hadn’t been a bad mom though. At least she had been there, looking Douglas in his face when he learned his ABCs and used the toilet for the first time. She wasn’t a glimpse of herself walking out the door, a stray shoulder as the rest of her walked out into the night and into somebody else’s arms.

Not like you, Edwin. You’re selfish.

That voice. He had done lost his mind, as his mama would have said. But he knew he hadn’t. He knew this was the way he had always felt even when he smiled and rolled his dice and lived out the life he conducted with his own hand. He knew this was the voice that lay dormant in his chest when he crept out of strange beds and caught the eye of women who could probably smell marriage on him but didn’t let that be a deterrent.

Who are you, Edwin?

That was the question that broke him, but he buried it deep under sternum and heart, his imaginary hands stained with his own blood as he looked at Dolores and tried to remember a time when he had felt securely inside of the man he had created for himself but couldn't.

“Say it again, Dee.”

“It’s gonna be okay, Edwin. Always is.”

“Yeah.” Edwin stuffed that promise in his ears, his soul turning its back on the voice. “But what we do? That boy looks like he’s in pain all the time. Think he’s messed up over Travis?”

“Course he is. He’s a good boy. Loves that boy like a brother. He gets his sensitivities from me.” He tried to ignore how big his wife was next to him and how small he felt.

“Think he had something to do with it?” Edwin winced and covered it up with another swig. He hadn’t meant to ask it out loud. It was an unspoken rule between him and his wife—they both knew the truth, no need divining it up just to break their hearts.

“Edwin Barnes, I hope you playin’ with me. That boy no saint, but he would never do something like that to an old man. Travis just got messed up with those gang thugs and happened to be in our car. Douglas a good boy like that, loaning it out. And I know, Travis too young to drive, but Douglas is a softie. Remember that kitten he tried to nurse back to life in the backyard? He’s got a good heart. He gets that from my side.”

Edwin remembered that kitten and the fullness of Douglas’s face when he stretched his arms out for his father’s approval. But all Edwin had mentioned was what a sissy Douglas looked like with that half dead cat in his hands, like he had any power of the outcome of life and death. Edwin had seen it the next day alone and at the edges of the bushes, its dead carcass surrounded by flies. That kitten haunted him—not then, when he convinced himself he had done his son

a favor, but years later when life in general started to itch like a wool coat.

That white man's face, the one he had seen in the paper flashed at him and then Douglas's, no longer so full and willing to restore the dead to life.

"But still," Edwin said, but his wife didn't say anything because she was already upright and humming her way through the sliding glass door to watch her TV.

Chapter Forty-Two

Denise felt triumphant. Even though it was the beginning of the war, she had won the most important battle, securing Travis as her client. She had defeated the beasts, both Whitney and her mother who would forever haunt Denise's nightmares.

Well now don't you think you're being a tad dramatic? Benjamin asked, looking pointedly at Denise and the bag of treats in her hand. She gave him one to quiet him.

"That's right, go find your comfy bed and leave the musings to the human," she said. She sat with a glass of wine in her hand and an open bottle on the sofa table. What had been a weekend treat had become a nightly ritual with Denise sitting in her loneliness, and the only thing to combat it was a glass of White Zinfandel and a judgmental dog. But she didn't mean to give Benjamin a hard time. At least he wasn't cruel like her father.

Her father had called earlier, which set off the night's freshly opened bottle. She could hear the happy family sounds in the background, and as she closed her eyes, she tried to transpose them over her own childhood but couldn't. She was left alone too often for noises like that to come into play. She toyed with herself, setting the scene that was playing out through the receiver of her phone. Her father, his new wife, their kids all somewhere where laughter was not just welcomed but expected.

A place Denise had never been.

"George said you picked up something recently. Another one of these charity cases. Denise, Denise, Denise..." he said, stopping to take a drink of something. It was so hot outside. Maybe it was hot where he was, too, and those noises were gathered around an open grill, a blue-faced pool. Denise closed her eyes and pretended she was there.

“Old friend from high school, his son. He got himself mixed up in some gang activity, but he’s too young to know any better. I think he was set up.”

“And there’s that bleeding heart again. You get that from your mother,” he said, just disdainfully enough for it to curdle in Denise’s ear.

“Doing what’s right isn’t a sin, Dad. Quite the opposite,” Denise said, filling her already overfilled glass. She tried to reason with herself. She was stressed. She needed to take the edge off. She blinked away Pastor Luke’s face asking her where her Bible was. The truth was, it was sitting on a bookcase with all the other books, and Denise hadn’t read it in a very long time. This was another thing she reasoned away because if God wanted her to read His book, He should have made more minutes in the day.

You have enough time to drink.

Denise blinked away the random thought and tried to concentrate on what her father was saying.

“Wait. What did you say?”

“Pregnant. Tara’s pregnant again. I was hoping to tell you in person but it looks like you’re swamped as usual. Maybe one of these days you’ll ease up on the workaholism and come see your ol’ dad.” Denise took a long drink from her glass, her lids working overtime against the memories of her father missing her life to lead one of his own. What a perfect “I learned it from you” moment, Denise thought but didn’t verbalize because realizing she was about to have another half-sibling at her age made her sick. Or maybe it was the wine on an empty stomach. Or maybe it was because her life was in shambles and her body just couldn’t process it anymore.

“I need to go.”

“I’m sure you do. Thanks for the congratulations. No worries, Tara will send you the link to our registry.” Wasn’t there some sort of rule against making people send you baby gifts after the first kid? But

Denise didn't say that out loud either because she had already hung up the phone.

She had the desire to call somebody, but as usual, there was no good person to call. She didn't want to bother Pastor Luke, his face a reminder that nobody was immune from this world, and calling Branson would probably end up with her vomiting in the toilet at some bass-pounding club. She thought about who she really wanted to call, taking a quick glimpse at Benjamin greedily licking treat crumbs off his snout.

Do it, his dewy eyes seemed to say.

“Okay,” Denise said, taking another gulp of liquid courage.

Chapter Forty-Three

Marge was hot. Her body was emanating heat she hoped her husband could feel in the driver's side seat, but it was more than just the outside weather boiling her blood. It was that hussy.

"Goes in there like she's going to save the day. All she's doing is getting Travis's hopes up. And then what? They pin everything on him and his whole world crumbles just because you can't trust nobody anymore." Walt sat quietly like he usually did during Marge's tirades. She didn't see them that way. To her they were simply matter-of-fact statements. The world was an evil farce, and the sooner you understood that fact, the easier it was to protect yourself.

The prayers Walt had offered God through the years had often centered on his wife's way of seeing the world. In the corner of his eye, his heart hurt for her. Her face was pinched and steely with resolve, which wasn't easy to pull off in a light peach pantsuit. But Marge was notably undeterred, flipping at the air vents like they were the cause of her discontent.

"Better than weakness, right? She seems like she knows what she's doing. And we want Travis to be encouraged. He has enough to worry about in there." Walt hadn't liked seeing his grandson in that place. The other boys there—Walt hated to think it, but they seemed like they were a good fit for a place like that. But not Travis. He looked like he had stumbled into the building and couldn't find his way out.

"Maybe," Marge said. She felt uncomfortable about the whole thing, and it didn't help Garrett wasn't in the car. It felt like a part of her body had gone missing. Gerry from the bakery was a good babysitter, regularly offering her services twice a month so Walt and Marge could go on dates, but it never eased the guilt and worry Marge suffered each time Garrett wasn't in clear view.

Walt told her all the time how she needed a break, that it was healthy. How even Jesus took naps and rested. And Marge would snort saying, "When I'm Jesus, I'll give it a try."

"I love you, Marge," Walt said because it was often the only thing that made sense. He did love her, amazingly so, and for a second, she let the warmth in his voice calm her. But then the irritation in her bowels fired up like it often did when she realized she wasn't in control. She had no say in how life would go for any of them, and the thought itched louder than all of her mosquito bites combined.

"It's too dang hot," Marge said, slapping harder at the vent.

Chapter Forty-Four

The best part about being crazy was that nobody wanted to know what that felt like. So, the rest of them huddled underneath the basketball goal while Whitney walked her laps freely around the yard. They peeked at her from time to time, especially when a newbie was thrown into the mix. She had become a tall tale, a cautionary story. A legend. She had become all the things she really wasn't.

She had thought about writing her mother back, but Whitney only grew angry each time she had sat down with her prison issued pen and paper. It felt like a farce. She could have been writing home to someone who loved her, but instead, she was writing to a coward who had turned her son against her and didn't even have the decency to say so to her face.

And that's why she had made the phone call.

Whitney never made phone calls because she never had anyone she wanted to talk to, but she also hated putting her head against the greasy receiver as she stood at the bank of telephones, watching the faces of the other inmates lined up for their turn. It was an intimate moment that said a lot more than a punch in the face in the bathroom or someone on cafeteria duty spitting in your food. It felt like watching kindergartners after school waiting for their parents to show up, their faces hopeful and expectant and not yet worn out by the idea of living. Even Halo looked like a lighter version of herself.

“Hello?” Whitney didn’t hang up because it wasn’t her mother. It was Walt.

“Good. Don’t tell her I’m calling.”

“Whit—“

“Don’t tell her, Walt.”

“Okay.” She could hear him making arrangements for that request and cerebrally navigated his migration away from where the

phone hung on the wall to the back corner of the kitchen towards the living room.

“Go ahead,” he said.

“What’s happening? How’s Travis?”

“He’s good,” Walt said softly. As much as she desired to hate that man, it never seemed to be possible. He was someone who dealt with her mother on a daily basis after all, something Whitney always had a hard time doing once upon a time. But he never left. He stayed. And he seemed almost grateful.

“We got a new lawyer for him. She seems to be the real deal. Your mother is beside herself, of course...”

“Denise.”

“Yeah. She said she knew you. You and Jamal.” Walt paused like he was trying to determine all the things he shouldn’t say. “She loves you. She’s just scared.”

“Walt, she’s not scared. She’s angry. None of this is going according to *her* plan. She’s selfish. If she weren’t, she’d...” But Whitney trailed off, not wanting to say the words, and not having the mental bandwidth even if she wanted to. The woman on her right was pleading in Spanish, hot tears rolling down her chin, staining her putty-colored jumpsuit.

“What do you even see in her?” Whitney asked. She had met Walt once when he came one of the few times her mother probably let him. He was a gentle looking man, the kind who knew life was bent on ruining him, but he routinely stepped out of the way. He was the type to win by default.

“I see someone who loves fiercer than she’s able to admit. I see someone who’s scared and does the things she’s always done to cope with that fear because she has a hard time embracing any other way. She doesn’t want to be hurt again.”

“She’s the one hurt?” Whitney snorted. The pleading lady paused, then continued her begging.

"She was, still is. Trauma is a funny thing," Walt said.

"Hilarious," Whitney said.

"It can't be easy being raped and then expecting to raise the child." It was something Whitney had figured out a long time ago, but no one had ever outright said it. She wasn't the young girl who still believed the baby in her mother's belly had lingered there from when her father was alive. She knew her mother's experience at the bakery had been a particular kind of viciousness that changed everything for them. But hearing it out loud was—

"Hurry it up!" Whitney looked over at Betty, a plump lesbian with the name "Rita" marked across her chest. Her bark was sharp, and Halo, standing in line in front of her, winced to prove it. Whitney didn't want to hang up the phone, but she knew Betty wasn't the type to play, even when it came to battling crazy.

"I gotta go, Walt. Tell Garrett I love him and Travis, too, when you see him again. I..." So many words but Whitney never knew which ones to choose.

"I know," Walt said, his gentleness soothing every ounce of irritation inside of her.

Out in the yard she paced her frustration. Her steps quickened every time Walt got to the part about the rape. She was angry her mother never spoke about it; angry it had happened at all. Angry she was too stupid to truly connect the dots, or maybe too scared. And that made her even angrier.

Her feet quickened and so did her heartbeat. As she looped around closer to the basketball goal there was such a strong desire to be alone. Whitney had never understood togetherness until she had gone to prison, and it had become her only option. But she wasn't sure she could bear the sounds and smells of other people knowing what had happened to her mother and there not being a single thing Whitney could do about it. So, she did the only thing that made sense.

“Hey Betty!” she said as she inched toward the fringe of the women gathered near the hoop. And as Betty turned, Whitney felt all her anger in the cock of her arm and then the punch of her fist and waited for Gina to take her to solitary.

Chapter Forty-Five

Walt had called and told Franklin that Marge was on her way over. It was a warning bell, and Franklin appreciated it. That woman had always had a mind of her own, and it took a good man to know when to say uncle. He imagined Walt was a good man, regardless.

Walt had said she wanted to talk about Travis, and Franklin didn't question him on why she didn't just pick up the phone. He knew if Marge was coming over, it was because something was spastic inside her soul. She was the type of woman who lived out what was going on inside, abruptly cutting people off or working herself into a tizzy. "People like that have no freedom," he could hear his mama say about the ones worked up over the Elaine massacre all these years later. Some things you just had to give over to God.

Franklin knew Marge knew God. Walt had done as good a job as any showing her the ropes. But Marge was the type to struggle against them, preferring drowning over letting herself be pulled up. She had been a head case over Travis, and even though Franklin was deeply upset over his grandson's situation and even more upset at his nephew who he was certain was behind it, he kept his thoughts tucked in neatly so as not to alarm others around him.

Marge had no such qualms.

"Well, there's a hussy involved now, so there's that," Marge said as a way of greeting him when he opened the door. He already had the coffee going and two porcelain teacups from when Anette had briefly desired to beautify their lives. He ushered Marge in, and she took her usual spot that lent her a wider view of his yard through the sliding glass window. She looked through it like there was something there to see.

"Who is this . . . hussy?" Franklin asked delicately, taking care and precision to accurately pour into the small vessels. Marge grabbed hers too quickly and with the force of her words, so a few

drops sloshed over the rim and onto Franklin's white tablecloth. He did his best to pretend not to notice.

"Some lady named McGovern who says she was friends with Whitney and Jamal, and so she thinks she's here to save all our lives. Thinks she can get Travis out too."

"Denise," Franklin said. He stared out the sliding glass door, too, now but saw things differently. There was Jamal, young, still a boy and a girl, a white girl named Denise who walked with him home sometimes after school. And Anette would sit right there in the fold out chair, long legs stretched out in the sun and smile at them while they played. A hurt budded in Franklin's heart, remembering something that at the time felt like it would have lasted forever. But instead, it was now shuffled in the "once was," and he had worked particularly hard to dig for it.

"How is she?"

"How is she? She's a sweaty mess of nerves and hair spray, that's how she is." Marge lost her footing for a moment. She did that sometimes, especially as she had gotten older. It happened for just a few seconds, but it was like Franklin could see into her past, too, and watch the child she used to be. Her face looked scared, and she kept sloshing her coffee to prove it.

"Oh, for pity's sakes..." she mumbled and went to get the dish rag herself. Franklin hid a tiny smile.

"You reading?" Franklin asked. He didn't have to say what because Marge already knew. It was a conversation they had whenever they saw each other during the holidays. At first, Franklin was inclined to say no to Marge's invites, not that he didn't want to spend time with his grandson, but he didn't want to spend time with the rich white people. It was a weird thought since he had known Marge before the rich thing had happened, but the white thing was always there, reminding him of their differences. Reminding him that she couldn't possibly ever know the pain that came with his blackness.

But as he got to know her, he realized, he'd never fully know the extent of hers either and that had been catalyst enough to try to understand what he knew he never truly would.

"No," Marge said like a child caught without her homework. But then she bristled, situating herself so that she took up the full length of her spine. "At a time like this? Really, Franklin? Our grandson is about to go away for who knows how long, and you're asking me if I'm over here memorizing Scripture?"

"Seems like a good time to me." He had, in fact, been doing that very thing. His panic attacks had been subsiding, which was odd. But he thought maybe it had to do with sitting in each verse and not telling it what to do. As he read, he realized he was reading differently too. Whereas before, he'd study the heroes of the Bible with each passage, each story, he now studied God's hand in it all. His quietness, His loudness, His inability to be moved. How no matter what humans were capable of doing to thwart His plans, those plans moved smoothly ahead like a knife through butter.

"There's never a good time. There's barely any time at all." Marge looked like a woman defeated. Franklin knew it must be hard raising her son while losing her daughter. She had mentioned before without meaning to, how she barely talked to Whitney anymore. And Franklin wasn't sure which could be worse, having a son who had been murdered or a daughter who had pulled the trigger.

"Maybe time is different than we think. Maybe it's slow and steady, and maybe we're the ones who are running out."

Marge snorted and sloshed another wave of coffee onto the tablecloth, but this time, she didn't get up.

"I'm sorry, Franklin."

"It's fine. It'll dab out too."

"No, not about this," Marge said, her large, thick finger pointing at the stain. "About Jamal." Franklin tried to place a time she had said it before and imagined she had. But her face had never looked like

it did now, like the weight of everything her daughter had done was chained to her wrists and ankles.

“You didn’t do a thing.”

“I didn’t do enough.” She smoothed the coffee stain with the same finger, and then she did something Franklin barely knew how to handle. Marge began to cry.

“Oh, Marge,” he said, a little uncomfortable. Franklin swallowed and asked God what to do. *Love her.*

“We both know,” Marge said through each gasp, “that Travis didn’t do it. So why is God punishing us?” Franklin had thought long and hard on that one. He knew God’s character. He knew the God of the Old Testament was the same God of the New, and everything He did for Israel, bringing them justice in the face of their enemies. He knew maybe this wasn’t a punishment as much as it was a consequence of how they’d gotten everything wrong. Maybe he should have faced Anette head on all those years ago and done a better job of putting an end to her infidelity. Maybe he should have spent more time with his son and got to know his girlfriend. Maybe Marge should have done the same. But Franklin tucked his “maybes” in the back closet of his brain because he also knew his God wasn’t a God of maybes. He was strong and definitive and knew what He wanted His people to do even in the midst of the chaos.

Love her.

Franklin did something that felt like his body was doing it for him. He scooted his chair back and stood up. He walked slowly to the other side of the small round table where Marge sat. She was so deeply inside of her pain that she didn’t notice him bending down. But she felt his arms around her, and instead of doing the typical Marge thing of swatting him away, she did a very untypical thing. Marge surrendered and let herself be loved.

Chapter Forty-Six

Denise had called a taxi because she was in no shape to be driving. The thought bothered her, so she did her best not to think about it anymore.

In the back of Jerry's Tercel, she closed her eyes. He seemed like a nice enough guy, chatting her up about his grandkids in Idaho and his son's inability to use a telephone. She was pretty sure he wouldn't end up murdering her in a back alley, so she kept them closed, willing away the tiny headache in her temple that reared itself whenever she had one too many glasses. She was going to see George Jennings, a notion that made her slightly nauseous. She knew him as her boss, her father's golf buddy. A married man.

They decided to meet at work. Jerry pulled up in front of a square, red-bricked office building that gave off a no-nonsense feel that Denise had always connected with the Depression Era in which it was built. She could see George's pewter-colored Lexus tucked around the back.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Jerry said. He was a man whose skin looked like leather, the pores deep and wide across his nose. He didn’t have a pretty face, an expected face, and maybe that’s why it was a comfort to Denise. It was everything she wasn’t supposed to be.

“What will?”

“Whatever this is. Whatever’s going on. I can sense your sadness.” Denise bobbed her head and plastered a smile that she hoped would throw Jerry off her scent. She paid him in wadded up bills and had to go searching on the ground for the coins that evaded her grasp. She tried her best not to think how Jerry saw her as he drove away, but that was next to impossible when she realized her skirt had hitched up too high on the back of her right leg. She yanked it down, silently cursing herself for wearing her work clothes at eight at night. She had thought they had given off an air of professionalism, but ap-

parently, they gave off the kind of air that made taxi drivers feel sorry for her.

"Hello," she called as she let herself into the building. George had unlocked it, and the hall was glowing softly from the light in his office. She took inventory of each of her nerves, but for some reason it felt like she couldn't find them. She felt almost at peace inside her office building knowing George wasn't too far away.

"In here," he called out. Denise took a deep breath and said a prayer in her heart that was part remorse and part hopeful. When she entered his office, he was sitting on the floor, legs splayed and surrounded by books. There was an opened box, and she could see one flap had "Geo" slashed across it in what almost looked like red lipstick. Denise also noticed a pillow and blanket folded and tucked into one side of the couch.

"Welcome to my abode," George said genially enough, but she could feel the pain behind it. She could only imagine what Jerry would think.

"Nice digs," Denise said, immediately regretting it. She was trying to play the part of the hip, young thing who wasn't just drinking alone in her apartment, but she was sure the bags under her eyes were testament to a different story. "I'm sorry," she said, cerebrally scanning a list of all the different things she could be sorry for.

"Don't be. It's...dismal. The whole thing, of course. But have you ever thought someone was one way and then they totally change on you? That's what it's like with Tina. When I met her, she, I don't know. She just loved me. But now I'm second guessing everything. She hates my guts. She's obsessed with something called Pilates and feels the people in her class are the only ones who get her." George paused, mindlessly thumbing through a copy of *Madame Bovary*. "You know what I think? I think I got old, and she doesn't want to play nurse." George tossed the book into one of his piles, the titles of

which didn't reveal which ones he was giving away and which ones he was keeping.

Denise didn't know what to say to this. She didn't see an old man in George. He was several years younger than her father, fit, well read. He seemed like someone who would like Benjamin and put his hands softly on hers to keep her from pouring another glass of wine. And maybe with him, she'd have no reason to.

"Why do you play golf with my father?" she asked. Or maybe more accurately, it seemed to ask itself. Why would anyone like George want anything to do with a man who couldn't even love his daughter properly. She took a chance and looked at his face.

"Who else would I play with?" Denise sat down slowly on the side of the couch that didn't have the pillow and blanket. His answer was honest, slightly confused.

"But he's not a good man."

"I'm not sure goodness is a requisite."

"He's hurt me all my life." Again, the words slipped out. She needed a needle and thread to sew up her mouth, but a part of her was glad to be rid of the burden. She'd told Pastor Luke these things, but she'd never told somebody who felt just as lost as she did at that same moment.

"There's no excuse for that, Denise. I'm sorry. You shouldn't have to feel that way, especially when it comes to your own family." Denise dared herself to look at George's face again, and there it was. Complete and total understanding.

"It's not your fault." Another thing wiggled against the insides of her mouth, too quick to catch with her teeth. "Was the only reason you hired me because my father asked you to?" She had known George all these years but never had the guts to ask him this or much else. He seemed different than her father but cut from the same cloth, a fabric she was only relationally familiar with. She wasn't like

the people her parents had always tried to be or imagined they were. She had always been herself, right on the cusp of everything.

“No. Requests like that are a dime a dozen. In fact, I had two other friends asking me a favor that same year. But I chose you because of what you told me.” Denise tried to shuffle and straighten the loose papers in her mind but ended up sitting in the mess.

“I don’t remember.”

“I asked you why. Why of all things would you ever want to be a pro bono lawyer. Nobody ever wants to be that. Nobody ever even wants to marry that. In fact, I’m starting to think poor Tina didn’t even know what ‘pro bono’ meant. But I wanted to, and I knew you wanted to too when you told me your answer.”

“What was it?” Denise asked like those words would hold the way back to herself.

“I want to know what real feels like.”

Chapter Forty-Seven

He started seeing things. They looked like monsters, felt like them too. But he couldn't put that into words. Who would he tell? His mother who would be convinced he was going to hell or his father who believed in no such thing?

Douglas was tired.

His nights were spent fighting the dark, and during the day, he zombied his way through, at first still clowning on Antonne and Kelvin with his other Blood brothers, but then dropping off the scene entirely, opting for the minimal relief he found in his room or even a soft place on the couch next to his mother.

It was only a matter of time until they came after him.

“What’s on your mind, son?” It sounded like “waxon ya mine” because Dolores was enthralled with a preacher with hair as oily as his smile. She took the form of a mystic woman, long ago forgoing actual clothes for the ease and comfort of satin muumuus, the colors of which reminded Douglas of random splotches of vomit.

“Have you ever...” The words were starting to build, but he certainly didn’t trust them. What to say? Douglas had been trying to press them into place, errant Legos all over his brain that he couldn’t quite grasp. His father. He had been trying to talk to him for days now, building up the courage and the sentences that would mean something to a man who didn’t seem to lean too heavily on meaning. His father was a man who existed and enjoyed his existence. And that was frankly that.

But his mother knew better. Even after all these years with Douglas full-grown, thoroughly filling out each of his twenty years, she still had that sense about her that mothers do. Even the ones who birthed criminals.

“You’re worried about your cousin,” she said, her eyes still on the oily man who had a Bible in one hand and the hood of his Bentley under the other.

“Yeah,” Douglas said, even though shamefully, that wasn’t the full story. Douglas was worried about himself.

“You’re a good boy. That’s why. Don’t want to see nobody get hurt,” his mother said, strictly clinging to the narrative she’d written about Douglas from the day he was born. He marveled at that, the lie of it. The naïve need for it to be true. Douglas had never cared about anyone before in his life, and yet somehow, his mother had mistaken him for Mother Teresa all these years. He envied her blindness.

“What will happen to him?” Douglas said, knowing perfectly well what would happen. Travis would be convicted because he was a black kid, and heaven help him if that wasn’t a crime in and of itself. He’d get an unfair sentence, and an unfair number of years to his name, and by the time he got out, he’d either live life struggling to keep up or wisen up to the fact that nobody was going to hand him nothing.

That his God that Franklin had taught both of them about was sitting pretty up there somewhere, chuckling.

“Oh, he be fine, baby. I been giving and giving, and this good man be praying for us,” she said, nodding at the TV screen image of a man whose socks were most likely purchased from Dolores’s donations alone.

Douglas felt a pull in his stomach. It was like someone had lassoed his waist and was dragging him off the couch.

“Good now, go get me some of that sweet tea,” she said, referring to the strawberry Kool Aid she had made that morning. He nodded and went to pour her a glass and in the framed window above the sink where his eyes rested on the top of his father’s head.

“On the counter, Mama,” he absently said, the lasso stronger now, his legs following suit. He was outside before he even knew what to say.

His father was a creature, something to behold before breaking the silence hovering between them. Douglas had never known what to say to Edwin in any situation. He had always felt like whatever came tumbling out of his mouth was the wrong thing, not so wrong it received the back of his father’s hand, but wrong enough where it garnered the sort of look that sized up your worth. Douglas did the same now, sizing up who his father was, had always been to him. A man who flickered bravado off and on like a switch but who looked very small sitting down in the light of day.

“You still here?” Edwin asked. Douglas didn’t have enough time to startle. He realized his father’s hands were empty. No beer, no cigarettes, and the man was cautiously moving them like a conductor. Like he had no clue what else to do with them.

“Yeah,” Douglas said. He wanted to be bold and go sit down beside his father. What a natural thing to do for other people but what a monumental task for him. He remembered watching the ease between his Uncle Franklin and his cousin, Jamal, before he died and then to watch the way Travis and Franklin eased into each other, picking up where father and son had left off. Douglas hadn’t realized the hurt in his heart all these years wasn’t an abnormality. It was envy.

“You been morose.”

“What?”

“Morose. Depressed. Sad.” Edwin listed them like a dictionary. He wasn’t a man with an extensive vocabulary, so Douglas gathered he must have heard it on the radio or maybe that TV preacher Dolores wouldn’t stop watching.

“Oh.” Douglas thought about that. He hadn’t had the chance to define how he’d been just that he’d been it. He picked it apart, dry

sheets of skin, to get to the pulsing underbelly. It felt like fear, like guilt. He could taste the “I’m sorry” but wasn’t sure he could even manage to say it.

“What’d you do, boy.” Edwin left off the question mark, so it wasn’t an ask, it was a conviction. It had teeth and tore through that soft underbelly, ripping and rippling through every ounce of Douglas. Morose. Sad. Depressed. These words seemed to barely touch the surface. *Alone*, Douglas thought, his knees buckling and his body taking refuge on the ground.

“Damn,” Edwin said, not even turning his head to look.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Travis was scared. The understatement of everything seemed to sink into his clothes, his dreams at night. There was a soft tickle of something he'd forget about, wincing through the pain of Roman farting in his sleep or as he felt the bristles of his toothbrush excavate his teeth. But then it would come to him, two fingers snapping sharply at his ear: he'd never get out of this place.

When the guard told him he had a visitor, Travis barely knew what to do with that information. He was tired and couldn't take his grandmother's worry or that lawyer's exhaustion and heavy perfume or even his grandfather who had lived a lifetime of disappointment, and here was his grandson, adding to the pile. So, Travis walked heavily from the room he shared with countless other boy humans who were treated to feel far less than such to the room where Douglas was waiting for him.

Douglas.

But Douglas wasn't alone. Travis's Uncle Edwin was there, too, but slumped in a metal chair against the wall, nodding a man-to-man nod at Travis who had never felt more like a child.

"Twenty minutes," the guard said, a generous number, but Travis figured it was due to there being no other parties present.

Douglas studied him as he sunk slowly into the chair across from him. His cousin looked like a nightmare. Douglas was always intimidating with his bulky build and all that weightlifting. But his demeanor, for the most part, was like his father's—cool and laid-back, his eyes catching on to the joke before you ever did. But now, he looked plain terrified.

"You okay?" Douglas asked although Travis felt like he should be the one asking it.

“Yeah, fine.” It wasn’t the truth, but Travis had given up on the truth for weeks now. He was existing. He made do like Marge would say.

“Good, good.” Douglas studied the hands in his lap, losing track of his thoughts. Edwin cleared his throat and nodded his head at his son who looked up and took Travis by the eyes even though Travis hated the feeling.

“I’m sorry,” Douglas said.

“For what?” Travis asked. It was an honest enough reply. Travis truly didn’t know why Douglas was here or what Douglas could be sorry for because Douglas had never been sorry for anything in his life. He just did things, and the people around him endured, no worse the wear, usually.

“You know for what.”

“No, I don’t. You got nothing to apologize for. Things are fine. I got a new lawyer. She says I’ll be out in no time.”

“I do. It was my fault, Travis. We both know what I did.” Douglas whispered this, and his eyes looked like he wanted to reel it all back. The image came full force—the small, old man in the back of the LeSabre. A scared bird in the wrong cage. Travis wanted him to reel it all back too.

Travis tried to assess the broken bits of feeling poking everywhere inside of him. He couldn’t hold onto anything but anger. How dare Douglas come in here and say “sorry” for something that was done, over with, finished. There was no going back. There was no bringing that man back to life. For an instant, Travis thought of Lazarus back from the dead, and oh how Travis prayed for a moment like that. He didn’t want to be in this place because of something so vile. He didn’t want his cousin looking at him.

“Then why? Why did you do something like that?” The question was unnecessary. Travis knew why. Even at fourteen, he could smell it on his cousin. The boy had no sense of who he really was.

Douglas looked for the answer in the cinderblock room, but he didn't seem to find it. It painfully reminded Travis of the time he found his cousin crying in the bathroom. He made no noise, just shoulders slumped and heaving up and down, and it was an out of place experience. Nothing had happened to warrant it, so Travis shoved it away into a drawer of things he wasn't sure he'd ever really seen.

"What else do I do? I mean...you're good, Travis. You've always been good. You have a good family. You got Franklin. People like you." Douglas no longer looked scared, which was even worse because he looked determined. And Travis wasn't sure he wanted to hear what he had to say.

"But me? What do I got?" Douglas deflated, all the words spent, his breath traveling after them. Travis tried to avoid the hurt in Edwin's eyes. Douglas's father pretended to be enamored with the broken chips in the thin tile floor. Travis knew all about him because he had watched his Uncle Edwin from when he was a boy, his comings and goings as harsh and creaky as the screen door he was always walking out of. He wasn't like Franklin. In fact, Travis had never known two brothers to be less alike. But there was a soft spot for Edwin just as much as there was a soft spot for Douglas within Travis's heart. Because Franklin had taught him about the curse the generations suffered, and his uncle and his cousin were like watching that pain in real time, and they had never even known it. Until now.

"Me," Travis said. He reached across to touch Douglas's hand, the guard now poking his head out into the hallway to talk to someone wrapped in shadow. Douglas tried to hide his wounded animal look, sucking in his cheeks and biting them hard on the inside, but there was no control there, just the simple act of receiving his cousin's love. So, he cried, much worse than that time in the bathroom because this time, he knew he was being watched.

Chapter Forty-Nine

She never cried anymore. In the dark hole of solitary, Whitney sat on the floor and became conscious of this fact. It didn't worry her, but she knew it should. But a lot of things were different now.

Reality doubled over her. Her prison had gotten smaller, and she had blatantly asked for it. But inside the dank little cell that housed nothing but concrete and her breathing body, Whitney was alone with her thoughts. She wondered what Halo was doing right now.

She scratched at the wall like she'd seen in the movies where people would mark the number of days they were locked in confinement. It was a lot harder than it looked, her weak fingernails bending and breaking with each attempt. If her mother knew how little she ate, the woman would lose it. But her mother knew nothing because they barely even talked. And the times that they had, Whitney on one side of the table, Marge on the other, were stone cold moments she'd rather forget. Instead, her mind drifted to Jamal, and she hated that too.

Like crying, her love had also abandoned her. She hardly felt anything thinking about his face, the way he used to move. His smell. Things that would well up hot tears in her the first year of her prison stay were non-entities now. The hate had eaten everything like acid.

She shouldn't have killed him. Whitney knew that. So, what if he was gay. He still loved her. She could have loved him too. She could have been gentle with his heart and grateful for his love and been safe enough for him to tell her the story that lurked deep inside him.

But instead, she killed him.

She rested her head against the wall and studied her hands. So small, white. They were non-entities too. She couldn't do a thing with them in this place. She was trapped. Useless.

Her mother. Her mother had suffered, that's what Walt was trying to tell her. *And what do you want me to do about it, Walt?* She

could barely urinate without an audience. How could she change the past or even the future? Walt was a God man. He believed in his Jesus and his miracles and a kind of hope that inflamed every raw place inside of Whitney.

And she didn't even bother asking herself why.

There alone, absorbing the dankness of the room around her, Whitney opened a little box in her brain. It's where she put Jamal's murder and her brother's autism and the fact that she'd probably never see daylight again. And she put that too—the thought of Jesus and miracles and hope—right where it belonged and locked up the box, threw away the key.

And only then did she think about crying.

Chapter Fifty

It would have felt more comfortable swallowing a bucket of knives. But no matter. Marge was in it now, and if Marge knew anything, it was that she wasn't in control no matter how hard she tried to right this ship. It wasn't a moment in the shower, crying in the hot water or a knees-to-chin type moment in her dark closet. It was as she was putting pants on her son, a grown man, who couldn't do the job without her. It was that act that taught her all she needed to know about God, and how she had always gotten it so wrong. God was the one dressing her, keeping her fed, keeping her whole and alive. And that face of her son's, how peaceful and reposed, not fighting or struggling against her like he once would have done. But accepting what this moment was between them and finding the peace in it.

How much she still had to learn.

She didn't mention any of this to Walt, one, because she didn't feel like having an "I told you so" moment. But deep down, she knew her husband wasn't the "I told you so" type. It was more that she didn't know how to put this revelation into words without the flood gates opening and all the shame in her heart drowning her where she sat in the passenger seat of their car. How terrible, all those years, fighting against the "wrongness" of life when really, she had been spared even through the hard parts. Time and again, God had delivered the life raft only for her to poo-poo it, eyes scanning for something better. Her parents' love, an ability to understand her siblings, Lenny's temperament, the night a random stranger turned her life to dust. How often had she combed through everything, straining to see the bad in it so she could face it head on and make it submit to her will. But nothing had. Not her son's condition, or her daughter's anger, or Walt's patient heart. The lesson Marge learned buttoning her son's pants and carefully taking him in her arms was one that was cellular. It was like God Himself had opened her up and put some-

thing new inside, fresh eyes to an outside world she had hated for so long. And Garrett didn't even move a muscle.

As Walt moved the car through the parking lot of the courthouse, Marge felt like she was sitting inside a shark on the move. They glided slowly, surreptitiously searching for ankles to bite, until they came to a nice wide spot near the front. Marge felt a spark of glee until the thoughts of why they were there tampered it down. Travis. Her heart was bleeding. There had been tiny slashes all these years she kept taping up, but when she went to Franklin's house to complain about the hussy—the lawyer—each one ripped away leaving her raw to the touch. But Franklin had hugged her anyways, and there was something about that she just couldn't fathom—the thought of loving something so unlovable.

She dreaded this. She dreaded that the entire family would be there. She dreaded seeing her grandson in a jumpsuit, baby-faced and scared. She dreaded seeing that cousin of his, Douglas, because she was scared of what she might do to him. She was scared of guiding her son through bright lights and squeaky doors and a metal detector that would certainly chirp at him. She was tired of the unpredictability of the world, as unpredictable as her own emotions. And now she felt like she didn't even have her old mask to cover the worry in her eyes.

“It will be okay,” Walt said, like gospel. And for once, Marge chose to believe him.

Chapter Fifty-One

He often wished his mother were alive, but today the thought hit Franklin particularly hard. He knew of all the people he had ever known, his mother would be viewing this trial from his perspective. He realized what a blessing that was—to have a person you knew, or once did, who could look at the world in the exact same way as if you shared a pair of glasses that nobody else knew about. He should have been sad that she wasn't with him in this moment, but he only had room for one emotion at a time, and right now, he was utterly devastated—a feeling that often came to him whenever he understood the only option was to place his life into the hands of God. Relief, he knew it should have been relief, and he would wait for that feeling to come, too, like it usually did. But sometimes, especially when it came to those he loved with the worst kind of longing, he felt an unravelling within himself having to trust anything other than himself to get the job done.

Franklin smirked at his sad audacity. When had he ever gotten anything right?

He tried not to think of Anette, which he often failed to do. She was the woman at his right, the ghost of someone he used to know but still did, maybe even more so than when she was alive. It was the luxury of getting to the root of her after all those years, stripping back the layers of the things she said. Of the things she did and didn't do, like the secret affair she had with his brother.

Neither of them knew he knew. But that's because Edwin and Anette were cut from the same cloth. They believed what was said mattered most, that words could paint any picture of reality they wanted. But Franklin was a man of observation. And he was aware there was a before time with his brother and wife and an after. And it had nothing to do with what they said but how they acted.

He spotted Edwin sitting on a bench outside the courthouse. It was a rare moment of Franklin walking up to his brother, not the other way around. Typically, Edwin appeared like the air itself, something unnoticeable until you did.

“Good of you to make it.” Franklin scooted in next to his brother who was wearing his weekend clothes. He looked like he was on his way to the club. Edwin didn’t answer him, just kept staring at his devastated son.

“Douglas here?” Franklin asked as a way of conversation. He was desiring a change in his nephew for the sake of his grandson.

“Car,” Edwin nodded, and Franklin spotted Douglas slumped inside like he was either praying or sleeping.

“Why did you sleep with my wife?” Franklin imagined the words like loose balloons. The adage about kicking a man when he was down popped up, but so did the one about everything dark coming to light. Franklin just wished he hadn’t been the one to drag it there.

“What you mean?” Edwin asked. It was the same voice he had used as a child when he stole the watch Franklin’s father had given him as collateral for a game of marbles. Edwin had lost.

“You know.” The air sat heavy as they watched Douglas pawing at the door handle with minimal interest.

“Why now?” Edwin said, his voice changing to the beat of truth.

“Why not?” Franklin asked back. *The best time for anything is right this moment.* His mother spoke from when he was a child and didn’t want to make his bed. *Right this moment*, Franklin repeated in his head.

“I’m bad, you’re good. Let’s leave it at that.”

“It won’t be left there. It can’t, Edwin. I’m bad too. Believe me.” Edwin snorted at him.

“Saint Franklin bad? Can’t fathom it. You’ve always been the good one, Franklin. Sometimes, we just can’t stop what we’re destined to be.” Did Franklin believe that too? He saw God’s hand in

everything. There was no separation between the seen and unseen, God's heaven and Franklin's earth. Everything intertwined at some point, but there was always that extra layer of truth that kept him from feeling like an automaton. Free will.

"God made you sleep with my wife then?" He could hear his brother stop breathing.

"There's no God in any of this Franklin. If there was, could you say he was good? Look." Edwin nodded at Marge who was coming around the building holding onto her son. It had been a while since Franklin had seen him, a big boy now, an adult. He loomed over his mother, but his face was someplace else, attracted to the black birds scattering and pecking at dried gum and cigarette butts on the covered walkway leading to the courthouse. Marge looked older than she had the other day when Franklin felt her in his arms. She was a substantial woman, but her grief had made her feel like any other human. And Franklin had asked the Holy Spirit to be who she needed him to be, if only for that one moment. For that right now.

"I'm not sure we're seeing the same thing, Edwin. I'm not sure we've ever had. Because what I see is the end of all this. I see you saying, 'I'm sorry' and meaning it. And I see me loving you anyways, even if you took something from me. And I see your son owning up to his wrong and my grandson going free because of it. I see God where God roams, and I can't stop seeing Him, Edwin. Because the moment I do, then that's the moment I stop seeing anything at all."

His brother considered this. Franklin could see it in his face. There was another "right now" moment, the way Edwin's eyes shifted over to the truth for a small fraction of time. His eyes hung there and so did his mouth that seemed to relax. But then he shifted back—*a dog returning to his vomit*, thought Franklin—and took in everything as he usually did.

"Must be nice that place in your head, big brother," Edwin said, his pinky ring clanging loudly against the metal bench.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Walt watched it all like a movie. His part was minimal. He sat next to his wife who seemed different than the wife he'd known days before. It was a soft change, something he'd prayed for, and watching it was an act of belief where disbelief threatened to rule his body. His son sat at his other side, an arrangement they often made in situations like these so he could lovingly distract Garrett and Marge could breathe. They had gotten there a few minutes early, so they lingered in one of the back rows, watching another child's trial play out before them. It was a fact—this was a child, a small girl in a jumpsuit who couldn't have been more than fourteen. Her hair looked unwashed but the defiance in her frame was threatening. *Kids nowadays*, Walt had often heard even from the likes of Gerry whose grandchildren seemed to be running a clinic up in Indianapolis. But Walt didn't think kids or that much of anything had changed. Throughout history there would always be hardened hearts who felt defenseless. And often, they were the most vulnerable and needed love the most despite the way they bristled towards it.

What a cruel trick in a bag of cruel tricks.

The girl was a shoplifter. Walt wondered what road had led her there. Perhaps parents who didn't care enough. But then he spotted a woman who was small and too thin in the arms of a man who looked like he had eaten the world away. They sobbed quietly, their frames undulating with the weight of their pain. The girl threw looks at them—*isn't this what you wanted?*—when obviously it wasn't what they had wanted at all. How many times had he sat patiently with Travis, telling him he was the sum of the five people he looked up to most. Considering that list seemed to include Marge, Garrett, and Franklin, and even Walt himself, he had never had to worry about the boy. Until the day he started to look up to Doulgas.

There, in the shadows of his father, Douglas moved his way into the room. Walt had only ever seen him in snippets, and mostly Walt kept his distance because Douglas was the fool Solomon had so often talked about. He was compelled by his own desires, and he had no understanding of his deceitful heart. But today, Douglas had the look of someone who understood a whole lot more than he had bargained for.

“What’s he doing here?” Marge’s whisper cut across her son to Walt who was wondering the same thing, the possibility of Douglas showing up now an unwanted reality. Behind Douglas came Edwin and then Franklin. They entered the opposite side of the courtroom, a few rows up from where Marge seethed and Walt unsettled.

“I don’t know.”

Chapter Fifty-Three

Her alarm went off, and she had a moment of wondering who and where she was. But Benjamin's morning wakeup call brought her back to reality as she wiped his slobber off her face. It was the day. The trial.

Denise showered, and in attempting not to think about George, she thought about George. He was certainly a gentleman, calling up another taxi for her so she could get home safely. They had talked for quite some time beforehand, and as her fog lifted in the shower, Denise thought about what she had said to him all those years ago that triggered her heart.

I want to know what real feels like.

She hadn't felt real lately. She hadn't felt real in a long time. But standing in his office, watching how "real" was slowly trying to devour him and seeing how his heart remained unscathed, Denise took a lesson that God had been trying to teach her for quite some time. You can do nothing about your circumstances, but if you're willing, you can let God use them to change you.

And now in the warmth and steam, she was changing. She thought of her father, and instead of growing angry, she just grew sad. Here was a man who had what she and everyone else thought was greatness. But he was nothing more than a man who traded in his family for his own sense of perfection. And there was her mother who wilted under the force of her former husband's choices instead of gathering her wits into her own corner and giving her pain over to something greater than herself. But by the world's expectations, what more could Lucy McGovern have done? And why shouldn't her ex-husband live the life he'd always desired?

The thought was pure nausea and a quick turn toward the Father who loved her. In the shower, Denise bowed to God, her head down, the water swirling around her toes. The trial. She would need every

inch of power He'd be willing to grant her. So, she confessed all the things she'd been doing wrong, all the hurt she hid at the bottom of a bottle, and felt for the first time, in a long time, clean.

She had left things platonic with George, but she could tell there were bits of something there being planted. Friendship. He said he had a light day today, would do his best to drop by and give her some encouragement. She took solace in that but knew even if he didn't show up, she wouldn't be alone in that courtroom.

She dressed, gathered her things, and headed first to the office, double checking she was prepared and had everything on hand she would need. She didn't know how it would play out but had made a significant promise to a boy who didn't deserve to be locked behind bars.

She gave Benjamin his goodbye kiss—her turn to slobber—and was greeted with "Rhiannon" blasting as she turned on her car.

Denise turned off the radio.

Chapter Fifty-Four

Marge wasn't sure what had happened. They were all sitting there in their respective rows when the judge dismissed the case. He didn't elaborate, just flicked his eyes at a piece of paper, made the call, and that was that.

The lawyer woman slumped a little, but then regained composure. She tentatively hugged Travis who buried himself in her hug but lent his eyes to Marge.

It took a second for Marge to process what was happening, but there across the room, Douglas was being arrested. It was odd watching all her dreams come true in that moment, but then her heart broke watching Franklin put an arm around his brother.

It was a quiet ride back, her grandson safely where he should be next to her son in the back of the car. Walt played something soft and low that seemed to carry their "I'm sorrys" for them. Marge was sorry her daughter wasn't in the car with them. She was sorry she had let a bad man make her make bad choices that drove her daughter away. She was sad she ever was broken inside for having a son who was the way he was, and she was sad that she was Travis's everything when the very thought went against nature. His parents were gone, and she had let him get arrested.

She knew Walt wouldn't see it like that. She knew in Walt's heart the only "I'm sorry" he had was that he couldn't make her see the way he saw the world. He couldn't infuse her with his joy and unrelenting hope and a hungry desire to love all he had ruthlessly like God had always loved him.

What is wrong with me? Marge asked but didn't say.

Her thoughts wandered off to Franklin and sitting in his house at the kitchen table. Her cheeks flamed thinking of how she started blubbering like a baby. But then he came to hold her, gently, and it felt like all those times she was empty, God was taking a moment to

fill her back up. She'd heard the phrase once, that hell was other people. And she had been a longtime subscriber to that way of thinking. But in that kitchen, with words lost and heart raw, she felt heaven in Franklin's two arms.

"I love you," Marge said to no one and everyone.

Epilogue

It was the first service after the lady passed away. The man there at the pulpit didn't cry though, "an act of God," Walt would say later, holding Garrett's hand. Walt stood up there the whole time with the man who didn't cry, and Garrett knew that was the reason.

The lawyer woman was there with someone, a man she worked with named George who was wearing too much brown for Garrett's taste. Travis sat on his right, drawing Garrett's favorite—birds, everywhere on the paper, wingspan wide and in flight. He usually had a hard time in service, which was often made better if Walt was sitting next to him, but on his other side was his mother who he loved very much but also rarely felt comfortable with. It was her energy, an invisible line moving through her, always electrified, agitated. He was scared to touch her.

But there now inside St. Andrew's, he could sense something different about her. She was calm and felt more like Walt whose energy was stilled water. Walt told him they were going to see his sister after church, and he reached for memories of wiry blond hair, and small bones, and a sense of sadness that plagued Garrett almost as much as when his mother felt like a live wire. But Walt's face was smooth and unworried, and it reminded Garrett of birds flying, real birds, not like the ones on Travis's paper. It reminded him of how there wasn't a Walt but then there was and how everything felt better and less strange after that. And now here was the woman whose naked feet used to scare him, and big body used to overpower him, and from where he sat taller in his older body, she looked small and loose like a balloon with no air.

And how Garrett was thankful for Walt, and change, and the flight of birds in a bare-skinned sky, and his own hand, reaching out, touching hers.

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