



By the Author of *A Violent Hope*

DEAR *Hearts*

By Ericka Clay

Dear Hearts

Ericka Clay

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events
are entirely coincidental.

DEAR HEARTS

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Written by Ericka Clay.

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A Note From the Author

"Everything is meaningless."

- From Ecclesiastes 1:2

I can't help thinking about this verse as I've been rewriting *Dear Hearts*. I first wrote this book as an atheist, and I'm sure you can only imagine the type of scenes I worked through this story.

It scared even me.

But I took it as a challenge from God to rewrite my characters' story in a way that still highlights their brokenness yet is still accessible to the average adult reader. There are still some hard themes in this book, and it definitely won't win me Clean Christian Book of the Year. But this book is truth. This book is what happens when you stop leaning on God to only lean on each other.

Disaster, my friends.

Mitch and Elena are two people who have been broken since childhood and are merely playing at adulthood without the benefit of true healing. When we live life through our own volition and refuse to submit ourselves to God, everything truly is meaningless.

Everything truly is just dust in the wind.

As you'll see as the story unfolds, there are hard consequences to Mitch and Elena's choices. Despite believing they're victims of circumstances, they, like all people, have been given the gift of choice by God. Instead of asking God to help them make the right decisions for themselves and for their family, they seek self-satisfaction, whether it be satisfying a sexual temptation or attempting to purchase an alternative reality that will never truly exist.

I pray as you read this book, you understand the heart behind it and take this cautionary tale for what it is: an attempt to pull back the curtain on man's selfish desires and to exhibit what life is like when we rely on other human beings to "fix" our wounds and not the Father who made us.

- Ericka Clay

ONE

Mitch

People do things out of love, I guess, but I also got this theory that you do them because there's a story building. It starts when you're born, cut out of your mother's gut, pushed through her privates—what have you. And it continues, spiraling like yarn around a finger until you're choked up into it, and you realize no matter how hard you pull, strain your muscles, maybe even break a bone to free a hand, that you are as much a part of it as it's a part of you.

But I'd never say any of this out loud. I'd get my clock cleaned.

"Legs on that one," Jimmy says. It's no longer a command like, "Hey, check out the legs on that one." Mainly it's just a fact of life. Women have legs, and Jimmy loves that fact.

We're in the parking lot of Double Dee's, but it's a secret though because Jimmy's wife, Pam, hates the place, and Elena pretends she hates us coming here too, mimicking Pam down to the cocked head like she's listening to God. "It ain't church right," Pam usually says through a nostril because she's always got one clogged due to allergies. And Elena just nods along to her nasally whistle. But later on, when Sela's asleep and we sit on the couch and drone out to *20/20*, Elena will laugh—the whiskey fresh on her breath—and call Pam "a bonafide nag." It's my favorite thing about her: the fearless taste of her honesty.

"Whatcha leaving for baby? Just got here!" Jimmy says to the short-skirted waitress in the parking lot and leers at her unfortunate state. She looks like a wilting plant left out in the sun, her slick forehead shining with afternoon sweat.

"Why you think I'm hurrying?" she answers back but winks as she crouches down into her dinged up Impala. There are puddles in the pockmarked gravel, and the light shines up bright against her. And that's when you can see the cracks in her pretty face, a dry sort of sad-

ness breaching through her skin and expanding to the childless car seat in the back.

Sometimes, I feel like I can see what everyone else can't. Or won't.

"What I wouldn't give," Jimmy mutters. Jimmy's one of those people I've known forever, which means I can't unknow him. I tried once right after Elena and I got married and moved out to White Smoke to start our waterproofing business, but Jimmy caught wind that I was getting the heck out of dodge—also known as Helena, Arkansas—and he thought that would suit him just fine too. Fast forward to our first wedding anniversary, which Elena spent mopping up Jimmy's celebratory vomit on our kitchen floor. Unknowing would have been a blessing.

"Work," I say, nodding at the wooden double doors up ahead. "But yeah, nice legs," I add and drag on my Marlboro before grinding it senseless with the heel of my boot.

The door opens to a blast of fried air from an overhead vent. It's subzero as we fork our way through the waitresses and the truck drivers hounding the waitresses.

In the back, there's a greasy little office that houses the greasy little manager, Louis MacArthur, who everyone calls Louie Mac. When I knock on the office door, I hold my breath.

"You two knuckleheads again," Louie says with affection. His face is a mask of hair, and I can't tell if he's actually talking. But then he starts to hock something up in his throat, and it's hard to miss the noise grunting right out of him.

"Mmm..." Louie says, chewing down whatever it is he's just spit up. "Listen now, fellas. I think we've got ourselves a warranty issue on our hands." He lifts his own hands that are rust-colored with barbecue sauce.

"I told you, Louie. This one ain't a warranty. We just went around back and checked the pipe penetrations we did two weeks ago. They're all good to go," I say. The word hurts. "Ain't." It slices off my tongue and

feels like it's taking a part of me with it. But I smile, relax my face. I want Louie to believe we bleed the same blood.

"Now, now, Mitch. I know you guys, trust you guys, but that was a dang crazy storm we got last night. Even The Super Duo has to admit that." I try not to wince at the nickname Jimmy uses whenever he introduces us to a new customer. "I'm Jimmy, this here's Mitch, and after we plug up that son of a gun leak, you'll be calling us two The Super Duo."

"Louie, I get it, but I swear, it's not a warranty. I'll go show you out back." I make to leave the rancid little office and its dully piped Tim McGraw tune, but Louie stays in his place and only moves to cross his hairy arms against his chest.

"I really don't want to have to get Elmer involved here," he says. I look at Jimmy for back up, but he's busy eying a series of group shots of the waitstaff over the years. The one labeled 1986 is a teased hair, blue eyeshadowy mess, but Jimmy isn't taking note of their faces.

"No need to call, Elmer," I say, and a shot of the old man blinds my eyes for a minute. Elmer's our contact at Setting Sun Properties. Fat gut, fat head, fat tuft of white hair poking out of one nostril. You hear nothing but the n-word every time the man opens his mouth. Each time I come face-to-face with Fat Elmer, I want to scream "Shut up!" just like I want to do now to Louie who's excavating his fly with a finger to check if it's unzipped. But I don't. There it is ladies and gentlemen, the story yanking at my fingers and toes: I never do a darn thing.

"That's what I thought. So now you boys, you go and fix it up real nice, and then get back here for a free lunch on me," Louie says, smile a mile wide, and I catch a shot of his barbecue-stained teeth.

"Sure thing," I grunt, Jimmy breaking his lady spell behind me, and we make our way around back again to sweat a few buckets and fix whatever needs fixing. I don't look Jimmy in the eye once.

"You still baby trying?" Jimmy asks later as we eat our free Double Dee's lunch special. He wipes a stripe of mustard off his chin while I try to decipher the question.

"Baby trying? Oh, are me and Elena still trying to have a baby?"

"Yup," Jimmy says, his chin taking a dip.

"Yeah, you know not rushing anything. But yeah." It's been seven months this go-round. Seven months of sticks and pee and Elena wiping her nose on her pink, puffy robe. "Maybe something's wrong with me," she says sometimes, and the rotating fan puffs up ribbons of her hair, so I have a clear shot to her neck, press my lips against it. *Nothing's wrong, baby. Nothing's ever wrong with you.*

One time Sela walked in. She was quiet, a fifty-pound ninja. She didn't say anything, and Elena didn't see her, but I did behind Elena's curtain of hair. She curled her hand and clawed at the air a little. *Hello*, I mouthed back and prayed she wouldn't tiptoe into our bathroom and spy the toilet filled with blood.

But I don't mention any of this to Jimmy who has three boys and would knock out cold if I even hinted at bodily fluids.

"Earth to Gomer. You done 'bout pass out from all these broads?" The table of camo at our right overhears Jimmy's quip and starts throbbing with laughter. Hunters, sitting sore thumbs in their sticky red chairs. I don't have the heart to tell them deer season is five months away.

"Nah. Just thinking," I say.

"Don't hurt yourself," pipes up one of the goofier-looking ones with a cocked Browning cap on his head.

I'll try not to.

#

There's a leak at a church, a leak at another church, and then there's a leak at Jugs McCormick, the strip club over near the hangar. The call came in while Jimmy was taking a leak at The Philips station, and when he got back in the truck, and I told him where we were heading next, it was like watching a kid on Christmas.

After work, we grunted our way through unloading the truck at Triple A storage, lining up the water blaster and caulking guns on the metal racks we rigged up when we finally moved our shop out of Jimmy's garage.

And now I'm headed home after dropping Jimmy off, waving at him and Pam who I'm sure got a nasally whiff of the lunch beers on Jimmy's breath. They live in the woods, Jimmy and Pam, so my truck rides out the bumps in the back dirt roads until I'm up on pavement again. I head to Arrow Wood Hills, the neighborhood where my house sits on a cul-de-sac that the trash guys miss roughly three times a month.

I think about it: a decent day's work, really. Made eight-fifty split two ways. But I don't really think in money, more in terms of dance shoes and doctor's appointments and all those pee sticks, snapping together like a ladder, one you could easily fall off if you weren't careful.

When I walk into the house, the smell of clean hits me, which is a relief on one hand—no more scent of women with the bodies of goddesses and the eyes of a broken heart—but on the other, I know what Elena's done all day. It can get really bad when the OCD hits her, and by the glimpse I get of her worn-raw cuticles as she wraps her arms around my back, today is one of those days. Her hair reeks of bleach.

"Jimmy still alive? All those ladies didn't give him a coronary, did they?" she whispers because Sela is down the hall humming. I picture her forking her fingers through Barbie hair.

"He's something," I say and smile, greedily taking in Elena's face. It's wrong of me because I know I should turn on my heels and lift up my daughter like other daddies do—the kinds in movies with the shirts and ties and briefcases. But I'm not like those movie men, so the only thing that settles me is Elena's face, the pale moon shade of it, the vulnerable line of tears at her lids she dutifully keeps in check.

"I made the appointment. Two months from now, but still, we got in." The tears grow stronger, and I hug her, her body smaller than mine but tougher because she's willing to undergo appointments and proce-

dures to have a child, to give Sela a sibling. Her lips graze at my neck even though I'm rough with grit and sweat.

"Go see her," is soft in my ear, Elena always knowing what's best for me. I walk slow though, preparing in my mind a question—"How was your day, pumpkin pie?"—because it sounds like something a little girl would want to hear. But before I can ask it, there's wailing in Sela's room. A single, long shriek cuts out of the threshold and into my heart. So does the stink of urine.

"Oh no, oh no!" Sela says with horrified eyes when she meets me in her doorway. I'm seeing something I'm not supposed to see: a seven-year-old girl who's just lost her bladder like a baby and has her blanket wrapped around her waist to hide it. It's something that's been happening a lot—twice at school, three times at home—and it's just another reason that makes it difficult to sit and hold her like a good daddy would.

I can't fix her.

"Here, let me," Elena says, and she softly shoulders me out of the way. She sends me a look—a "leave, leave, leave" look—because our little girl's panicking and she needs someone who knows how to whisper out the fear.

So, I do. I leave.

#

She eats dinner in her room, Sela. She's too embarrassed, even too embarrassed for me to softly kiss her forehead. So, I wait until there's no noise in her room, and after I change into the worn house shoes Elena bought me three Christmases ago that make me feel like I'm padding through an insane asylum, I inch open her door.

Sitting on the edge of the pee blanket—now scented with a heavy dose of Ivory soap—I watch Sela's face move and jerk, responding to the trail of images in her head. Her eyes run like lines of traffic beneath her lids, and I know she feels a good deal more than she lets on. I can

see it already—the story’s tentacles growing, driving a wedge between her and possibility—and as her pupils skate against the back of her eyelids, I can’t keep it stowed in my stomach any longer.

I crouch down and whisper in her ear.

“Run.”

#

I pad into the kitchen, watch Elena take the whiskey from a back corner cabinet while I tear the flimsy lid off a pudding cup. I suppose if anyone would stumble into our home at ten at night, they’d think everything’s on the up and up. One small bottle of booze, one seven-year-old tucked in her clean, safe bed. But there’s only one bottle because we can’t seem to keep any more in the house.

And some nights it’s all right. We drink, not too much, just enough for the buzz. Just enough so when I hold my wife against me, I don’t mentally whimper like I’m conjuring up some past that doesn’t want to stick. Some nights it’s all in good fun.

But then there are the other nights. And a little later, we find ourselves smack in the middle of one of those. Elena drags on the cigarette I’ve left burning in the lopsided ashtray. It’s the one Sela made for me in art class, and when she had brought it home, I asked if it was a coffee mug then watched her cry.

“Let’s see, I remember, she always smelled like apricots? That’s what you said once. Apricots.” Elena’s voice is quieter now, her toes are naked, the pudding cup empty. I told her to wear shoes, and she told me to go stick my head in the ground.

The only relief is the fact that Mrs. McMorro has turned off her kitchen light, and I can’t see her cotton candy head peeking out her window anymore. But the downside’s a lot worse: that consequential lack of trust.

“I was a stupid kid. It wasn’t love. I mean not like with you.” We’re having the same argument we usually do when things get this unde-

fined, and as soon as I say it, I know it's the wrong thing. Her face prunes up, the lips shrivel into themselves, and the whimpering begins. I know what this is now. We've practiced this dance so many times my feet have blistered a revelation of sorts: this isn't the way it was supposed to be.

The fence behind Elena's head is a solid block of light, the outdoor bulb above me flickers until everything's on fire, and I feel like stepping into the flames.

"And then those strip joints. I bet they don't even have any stinking leaks." Her words are whispered with another drag, a tear encroaching on wrinkled terrain. When we do this, I blame the alcohol the next day because it throbs along the ridges of my brain, but I know it's something more for Elena. I know she's hinted the scent on me for years, but she hasn't quite grasped what it is she's searching for. And if there's a God in heaven, I pray she never does.

The flames seem brighter now. I pour another double, and it burns, burns, burns, and so does the fence behind Elena's head. She's glowing, my beautiful wife. Barren and beautiful and counting her mistakes like dirty coins.

Elena rubs her nose, and a sticky mess of snot and tears stains her cheeks. I want to clean her up and make her shine.

"Why?" she asks.

"I just don't know." And I don't. The girl went to high school with us. Her name was Virginia Sewall. I know it like it's tattooed to my eyelids. Her face was sculpted by God himself, and there was a rumor going around that she wanted me. She wanted *me*. Elena and I had been together for years by then, the kind of kids who get married at three and can never sever that vein of understanding. And I didn't sever it, not with Virginia and her cherry chapstick lips, but with a boy named Brooks Lloyd who was Virginia's cousin and came to work her father's farm the summer I turned sixteen.

The bleach is still strong on Elena's skin as she skims the top of her glass with another generous pour.

"You never do," I think she says but can't be sure because now her face is attached to both her palms. Noise comes that seems other-worldly this far into the bottle. It's the glass door behind us sliding open.

"Again," Sela says, stepping outside, bringing the scent of urine with her. Her face prunes up just like her mother's.

TWO

Mitch

It's possible to love more than one person at the same time. This is what I can't say to Elena.

"Trudy's," my wife says in the morning after our whiskey-soaked night. We put on our "happy parents" routine even though we're both throbbing in the head and neither of us took a shower after soaking Sela's moonlit sheets.

"That should be fun," and I look over at Sela, a questionable smile on her face. Her friend Trudy of the coke bottle glasses reminds me of a mosquito bite, questions constantly itching my skin and no good way to satisfy them. "Hey Mr. Reynolds, why does your breath always smell funny?" Years of regret. Ba-dum-dum.

Frozen waffles, glasses of pulp-free juice—Elena places them at the table but doesn't sit with us. She wedges her small waist into the corner where both counters meet, her pink, puffy robe snaking out around her hips. Her naked toes look at me accusingly.

"What about you?" she asks.

"Work."

"The whole world's leaking," she says and gnaws a little on a bone-chilled waffle. My waffle is cold through the center, but I don't even think about confronting her at the microwave.

Dishes in the sink, bodies in the shower. Sela is wet-haired and sitting on the couch in our living room after I've dressed.

"No cartoons? It's Saturday," I say by way of conversation. It's my usual go-to with her, TV.

"I'm sorry," she says. She's crying, and it's a mirror image of the mess I've just left in the bathroom: Elena shouldered against the shower, sliding down its glass face. Her towel gave up and there was her cesarean scar smiling at some silent joke. "A heartbreak thing," Daddy's voice

said in my head, and it was the same thing he had said when he found out that my sister, Tammy, was pregnant at seventeen and then again after she had the abortion.

“Never be sorry.” My arm wraps around Sela’s small frame, and like that—her close to me and no words being made—everything makes a lot more sense. We sit still on the burgundy and forest green striped couch. We sit in a room with dried flowers on the mantle, half-burnt candles on the mantle that smell like engineered vanilla. I close my eyes and think about my younger self, a boy with a quiet, gin-soaked daddy and a mama who took her anger out with her hands. And I used to think, if I had a glimpse of this future, wouldn’t I be happy to know I’m safe now? The hardest part is knowing the answer.

“There are my two favorites,” Elena says. She’s dried and dressed, and her eyes don’t betray her. A boy seeking his future would say she’s the most beautiful woman in the world. That boy would be right.

#

I don’t have to work today. If Elena asks Pam, they’ll be on the same page: the Dynamic Duo working hard for the money, keeping White Smoke drip-free on a Saturday afternoon. Jimmy and I stash some extra cash on days like these so we don’t go home empty-handed because if there’s something both our wives have in common, it’s that they don’t like empty hands.

In reality, neither of us is working, and I know for a fact that Jimmy is hightailing it across the Oklahoma state line to play a little blackjack and shoot the breeze with Darlene, a dealer at the Cherokee who keeps her players happy and her shirts barely buttoned.

It’s like they say, you’re only as sick as your secrets. And I guess this means Jimmy and I are practically invalids since I keep Jimmy’s secrets, and he keeps mine, even if he doesn’t know exactly what they are.

“Golf again? I keep telling you the tables are hot over here. Don’t know why you’re messing around with those white-collar jokesters.

‘Don’t trust a man who can’t get his hands dirty’ like my Papaw used to say.” Jimmy’s Pinto is growling through the cell phone attached to my ear, The Beast eating Oklahoma’s dismally flat pavement.

“Yeah, well, they’re the dads of Sela’s friends. But Elena would kill me, so keep it quiet,” I mumble into the cell. “Pulling in now.”

“See ya, Chief.” I can almost see Jimmy next to me, wry smile on his face wondering what color blouse Darlene will be wearing today.

I snap the phone shut and pretend I’m taking stock of a wall of brightly colored cracker boxes. There are too many to choose from: fat free, low fat, low sodium, taste-free. I spy the clock above the double doors at the Piggly Wiggly, and even though I’m too far away to hear it, the ticking is perfectly tuned to the beats in my chest.

It isn’t the first time I’ve done this, but it might as well be because I have a “first time” sheen of sweat on my forehead that I lightly press with the handkerchief shoved in my back pocket. A fat woman with hair freshly dyed the color of chocolate purses her two pink lips at me as if to say, “Leave this nonsense alone, Mitch.”

“There you are.” Aaron’s behind me now, facing the wall of cookies parallel to the crackers. I turn and watch him dip his head at the fat lady who breaks out into a face swallowing smile. He waits until she turns out of the aisle to lightly brush my hand.

THREE

Elena

Sometimes, I wake up, and it's just a little headache. Like if someone was pressing down too hard on my temple with their pointer finger. And then other days, there is no headache, but my stomach is sick, and I snap at Sela: "Get your bag, hurry it up. We're late for school!"

Mitch leaves early during the week, still dark most days so it's easier to act like a normal human being when he's not in the room looking at me. But on the weekends, when he's home, I work it like the Christmas play I did every year at St. Ann's back in Helena. Remember your lines, remember your cues. Don't fail because people are watching.

"You are a sight for sore eyes!" Ronnie says when she opens one of the front doors. They're wooden, six feet tall. Their handles are brass and curved into two ferocious lion's heads, and every time I walk through the threshold, I imagine them roaring.

"Is that what the Florida sun does? Work the eyes a bit too hard?" I say in my stage voice. I kiss her cheeks like I'm supposed to. I gulp her expensive perfume like I'm supposed to. I pretend this has nothing to do with charity.

"That and then some," she says, which really doesn't make sense, but that's something I've come to gather after knowing Ronnie for the past two years. You don't have to make sense when you have more money than you know what to do with.

Her feet are bare, and they're stationed in first position on one of the foyer's black and white tiles. The tops are kissed with sun, evidence of their return from Destin where the Gibsons keep a second home. "A 900-square-foot condo," Mitch always corrects me like he has an issue with the concept of people living in more than one place.

"So how was it?" I ask. Sela slides around me and meets Trudy at the bottom of the curved staircase. They rush upstairs giggling and

their noise pings off a mix of surfaces: marble in the dining room, the silver candlesticks on the entryway table. "Only you would notice stuff like that," Mitch says somewhere behind the finger in my temple.

"Sun, sand, the usual. Although Luke lost his trunks out in the surf. That was new." Ronnie laughs, and I join in, stacking my worn sandals one on top of the other near the door.

"Shoes, Sela," I call up the stairs.

"Oh, don't worry about it," Ronnie says, although I know she's exactly the type to worry about it and complain to her Junior Leaguers later. But maybe not. I'm paranoid, always have been really. And the feeling's been multiplied since meeting someone like Ronnie who lives in Avon Estates, has a maid who stops by weekly and enough money to make fun of the huge homes being built out near the golf course, saying things like, "I bet they give off a new money stench." She's the kind of person I see when I close my eyes and look at the mirror in my mind. The person I'm supposed to be.

But I'm not.

"Coffee's a-brewing," she says. Her kitchen is all white except for the floors—a dark bamboo like the coffee's spilled and has soaked through the planks. There are pigs that line the counter, but they're not garish because they're white porcelain, and Ronnie told me how she had them special ordered from France.

"How's the bed wetting?" Ronnie says. There it is, what sums it all up: Ronnie has a second home, and I have bedwetting.

"She's getting better. Dr. Mailer found us someone to talk to." Not "us." Sela. The worst part was when it happened at school, and I had to change her in the bathroom. It reminded me of the time she messed in her panties at the mall when we were potty training, and I was at the nut stand, warm salted almonds in one hand, a child leaking from her diaper in the other, and I started crying until an older lady came by and led me gently by the elbow. She held the almonds while I cleaned up Sela in the bathroom. And at St. Bonaventure, in the tiny stall where

I removed Sela's clothing to change her into a fresh uniform, she was small-boned in my arms, her breath warm like when she was younger. But she was the one crying this time.

"Good. If anyone's going to help you out, Mailer's the guy. His wife used to have a huge crush on Luke back in the day. Total sorostitute," Ronnie says. I realize for the first time as she lightly tugs on her short ponytail at the nape of her neck, that Ronnie's not a real kind of pretty, only the type of pretty that comes with a hefty paycheck. Her dress is expensive, I'm sure, but it's Barney purple, and light violet flowers march down the front. Her throat is choked with blue baubles the size of my thumbs.

"Sorostitute?"

"Oh right, a college thing," she says, like I can't even fathom what college must be like in my little acorn of a brain. That's not fair. I'm only in a rotten mood because my husband put me in a rotten mood. Which I guess really isn't fair either. The same fight we always have played last night on repeat, and whiskey was the offending record player, as usual.

There was this girl, one of *those* types of girls who used to live in our town. Virginia. She was always up on Mitch, touching his shoulders, winking at him, and pursing her lips. There was a rumor that she was molested by an uncle growing up, which didn't help matters, and once upon a time I used to feel sorry for her. But then she developed, and just as the story usually goes, she developed a taste for men, too, specifically mine.

"A sorority girl who acts like a prostitute," Ronnie says. She ducks down and roots into one of the white cabinets. She's lifting a lid off an All-Clad pot, and I know this because it's what's done every Saturday morning. Our little ritual.

It's strange, rituals. Like how a lot of mine are fixed around the ankles of the two people I love. It's like I'm being dragged behind a truck, my belly receiving the worst of it: pebbles, rocks, the occasional broken bottle. All I want is to be fully in my life, like I'm really in it. No scripts.

No cues. I want another baby. I want the past to stop chasing me. I want to stop drinking and wear pretty clothes and save up our money for a 900-square-foot condo in Florida. I want to start over.

“Let's stop pretending,” Ronnie says, placing the peppermint schnapps and a package of Virginia Slims on the marble island.

Fine by me.

FOUR

Mitch

When I was a kid, I'd plant my face against the black hole of the universe—stand outside, face up—and wonder if there was someone else out there whose ribs ached, welted, still warm from his mama's favorite spoon.

"You git what you git, and you don't throw a fit," she'd say, and that spoon would come down, wood against skin, against small strips of muscle. My daddy would sit in his chair, conducting the sound of each thwack with his booze-addled hand, fingers gliding through air—unless he was snoring.

"What I do?" I asked one time. She didn't answer. Didn't have to.

She was an old woman at that point even though I was only twelve. Her leg dragged a little from the gout, and every time she'd yank my head back, my vision would catch in her wiry mass of nostril hair. You'd think a twelve-year-old boy would be able to shoulder off someone like that, especially if his daddy was too drunk, too weak to intervene anyways. But in a strange way, I relished the thought of "thwack, thwack, thwack." Of splinters grazing, wet eggs of sweat on Mama's upper lip because we both needed a little redemption when coming to terms with who I really was: a queer.

"What's she like?" Aaron asks. Outside on his back patio, we're just two buddies to the golfers on the green, downing beers, shooting the breeze. Aaron lives on the golf course outside of White Smoke, his three-floor townhouse sidling closely to the sixth hole. This is the third time I've been here, and this is the part of our game we've never played before. Question and answer time.

"Who?"

"You know." He means Elena. Oh my, how to explain an entire world. I think if I wasn't like this, it would be easier: "Good in bed,

good in the kitchen, good where it counts,” and then one of those soul sucking winks. But it’s only a hat I wear in public, and sitting with Aaron, his words still stinging my skin, it doesn’t fit like it should.

“She worries a lot. She cleans when she worries.” I swallow beer, feel Aaron’s eyes on the side of my face. “She smells like bleach.”

“Bleach?”

“Just when she worries. Other times like vanilla, I guess.”

“Okay.” I can feel Aaron smirking at me. I hate that we’re here. I hate that we’re doing this. And I don’t love that he thinks he’s better than me. But still, I don’t leave.

“I have a wife and a kid. Not a disease.”

“Okay,” Aaron says again, this time holding his hands up, but the smirk’s still there.

“So what’s it like to be you, Mr. Big Shot Little Rock Accountant?” I glance over at the house next to Aaron’s townhome where Greg Mainhardt and his leaky basement live. It was in Greg’s backyard—pretending to be concerned about the elitist jerk’s water damage—that I spotted Aaron outside on his deck.

I think of all the stupid, usual tropes about time stopping, the air freezing, the moments between us staggering like an old man having a heart attack. But nothing about any of that is real. What’s real is the way Aaron looked at me, like unlocking the bolt in my chest to read the words between my ribs: *I have a wife. I have a child. And I’m attracted to men.*

“Beautiful, painful, disgusting, an absolute dream. Isn’t that true about any life?” he says, another swallow of beer on his lips.

“Okay, sure, but tell me something real.” The golfers have left, and nobody’s out in Mainhardt’s backyard, so I brush my finger up and down the back of Aaron’s hand. He looks at me, and now it’s his words I’m reading.

“You know that thing you told me about your mom? How hard she was on you?” I shake my head.

“My parents were different. They were wonderful. But they had the worse gaydar,” Aaron says, snorting a little. His Adam’s apple undulates with another cold swallow of beer, and I want to place my fingertips on it.

“They loved me so much, you know, like their faucet was broken, and they couldn’t turn that thing off. But then the day came, and if you ever decide to embark on ‘the day,’ let me give you a piece of advice: you’re a fool to think you can handle the reactions you’ll get.” He took another long pull on his bottle, and I wait, but he doesn’t continue.

“So, your parents?”

Aaron shrugs and moves his hand as a new group of golfers drives up the cart path.

“I fixed their faucet.”

#

“You have to leave,” Aaron says later in the foyer. He doesn’t ask it like a question, but we both know it is. At least in an alternate universe it would be, and I would roll it around in my head, and then say, “No, I can stay,” already thinking about Chinese takeout and curling up on the couch. But just not in this one.

Aaron draws me in with his arms, a feeling that’s still as unwelcomed as it is welcomed. It feels like eyes are on us, the word “fag” guts me like a fish. But there’s no one here but Aaron, his shirt unbuttoned to his chest, a faded scar where his heart is.

“Did it hurt?”

“Bet your backside,” he says and smiles. It thumped wrong as a kid. “Ebstein’s Anomaly” he told me last time. I said it out loud three times so I’d remember.

“Everything hurts,” Aaron says as I walk out his door into the edge of evening.

Bet your backside.

#

The cash is already wrapped in rubber bands in the console. Sometimes we get paid in this backwoods way, but cash is cash, and nobody complains about that fact. So, when I go inside looking like I just robbed a bank, Elena will kiss my cheek and say, “Nice work.”

But I don’t go in right away. Instead, I sit in the cab of the truck and think about Elena’s voice on my cell, a quick call after I had splashed water on my face in Aaron’s marble bathroom.

“How’s everything?”

“Good. Gonna be a long one though. When it rains it pours,” an old joke I offered up as an apology for Aaron humming “A Hard Day’s Night” in the kitchen. I had muffled the phone with a nervous hand.

“Good. Listen, I just wanted to say sorry.”

“No need.”

“Yes, there is. I think we need help.”

“We’re fine.” I said it with too much force, the “not fine” easily detectable in my voice.

“We drink too much.”

“Everyone drinks,” I said although we both know it’s not true wedged this deep inside the Bible Belt.

“Can’t we be better?” she asked, and I could tell she was crying. Aaron had stuck his head out the kitchen’s doorway. He was pointing at a pan with his spatula. “Omelet?” he mouthed.

“Listen, I’m dealing with a real piece of work right now, and I don’t just mean Jimmy. What’s that Jim? You got something to say?” Aaron rolled his eyes, and I turned my back on him, wondering if Elena could hear the tears in my voice too.

“It’ll be okay,” I whispered into the phone.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you more,” because sometimes, I think it’s true.

FIVE

Elena

We drink spiked coffee, smoke outside. Ronnie's backyard is more like Disney Land, so there's always something to gaze at when she talks about her procedures or why her Mexican neighbor bothers her, which has nothing to do with the fact that he's Mexican. Allegedly.

Why are you friends with her? It's the question my husband originally authored and rings through me every time I sit and smoke and drink with a woman who knows the different shades of Lexus colors by their specific names (Neptune Blue is her favorite). I try to dig out an answer that doesn't make me seem like a crazy person, but the only thing I got is that when I go over to Ronnie's, it feels like I'm wearing my perfect skin. Her home, her things, her Botox injections - they all could have been mine if the universe had swayed just a few inches to the left.

"So, who's right?"

"Sorry? About what?"

"The crow's feet? Luke says he can't see them, but that man is blind as a nearsighted bat." Ronnie is poking her pointer finger at her eye, and I can tell she's gotten too close to her target because she blinks a little.

"He is, of course. You're crazy if you're going to let them slice and dice you up like a plate of sushi," I say. She laughs, and I feel warm for a second.

"See, this is why I like you so much, Elena. You never feed me baloney." Like her other friends, she's thinking. The charity thing still gnaws at me, but it's my country roots, my deep South "take no nonsense" attitude that Ronnie laps up like her kicked-up coffee. It's hard being a princess twenty-four seven. That's why she has me. And the affairs.

"How's Mitch?" she asks. She stretches out her feet, still bare, and grazes the chiminea with her toe. She has astoundingly ugly feet for someone who likes to show them off so much.

"Mitch is Mitch."

"You always say that."

"It's true."

"You don't even realize how lucky you are." One of the ugly pair is now resting on her leg, and I watch her dance her fingertips against her sole. She drags on her Virginia Slim, and I imagine the smoke crawling down her throat and nestling in her lungs. I think about writing that image down, but I don't have any paper. And really, it's a weird thing to do anyways.

"How so?"

"You have a man who loves you. No, screw that," and her head swivels, searching for little ears. "You have a man who is in love with you, Elena. I mean by his very definition; he shouldn't be a man. An alien maybe."

"And you'd put Luke in a different category altogether?"

"I'd put Luke on the moon if I could. He's in love with making money, with the idea of his happy little family. But me? Nope." There's a gazebo out in the middle of the yard and in front of it, a stone bird bath. A writhing medusa acts as the pedestal, and her hair—snakes for strands—curve up and form into a bowl. There's a red-breasted robin flapping its wings in the water, and a spray of droplets catches the sun, and that's when I'm taken by the way Mitch's arms feel when I stand at the toilet and look into the "what could have been."

Lucky? Yeah, real lucky.

"Well, not that I really care. I have my fun. You should try it some time," she says with a wink.

"Cheating? I'd rather take a nap."

"Gosh, you make it sound so dirty. Not cheating. Just company," she says. The latest is Sean, the kid who manages this unending mecca

they call a yard. Not really a kid—more like twenty-three—but considering I'm edging thirty, have a daughter, and a nine-year marriage under my belt, I could easily be his grandmother.

"I don't need company," I say. I go to say what it is I really need, but I stop because I can't find the words, let alone stack them up right. I want another baby. I think. I want to stay with Mitch forever. I think. I want to get in my car and not stop driving until I see the surf and taste salt every time I breathe.

I want a time machine.

"Everyone needs company. You know what I deal with? Between the twits at Junior League, and my husband, Sergeant Moneybags, and my daughter who has the vision of a seventeen-year-old beagle, I need a little time to myself, you know? I need a little Ronnie time." I have a feeling she'd be slurring at this point if it weren't for the caffeine in the coffee.

"Fair enough," I say. I'm not nearly as gone, and I hate knowing why. For Ronnie, drinking is a Saturday morning ritual. For me? It's a way of life.

Noon hits sooner than later, so I nominate myself coffee cup holder while Ronnie tries to balance her way into the house on her ugly feet.

Before we leave, she shows off the new Beamer they bought, but she does it while chewing on her thumbnail. She's snockerred, and at this point is prying Trudy's hair from her scalp, believing she's gently running her fingers through it. Poor Trudy has tears in her eyes behind those awful coke bottle glasses, and every time I look at her, I can't stop picturing a geriatric dog.

"This has been fun," Ronnie says as we stumble into a hug. She kicks up the blackened sole of her foot, and I breathe in our smell, a noxious combination of Donna Karen and the bleach I used to scrub the bathroom grout yesterday that's stood the test of my morning shower.

"It always is." Something grabs my hand, and I almost swat it away, but I see it's Sela shouldering close to me. She's mousy in a way that's

cute now but won't be when she's older, and I pray she isn't cursed like Mitch's sister, Tammy, who looks like a stillborn kitten. That woman is hairless and loud-mouthed and one of sixty million reasons I'm glad I got the heck out of Helena. But sometimes, when I look down at the crown of Sela's head, it's like I never moved an inch.

"Where we going?" Sela asks when I loop around the Gibsons' circle drive in my GrandAm. Ronnie pirouettes a final goodbye, and the sun strikes hard against Trudy's glistening bug eyes.

"Mall," I say. Mitch leaves cash wadded in the console of his truck, and I sometimes sneak out there late at night to swipe a few bills. The trees aren't diving toward the ground, and lightning isn't striking me dead, so it's no big deal. Seriously.

"What are we getting?" she asks.

"Whatever we want."

#

I bought a TV. I didn't mean to, but then Sela and I were standing in Radio Shack at the White Smoke Mall, and our faces were blown up around the room. She started jumping up and down, waving her hands. Her face was happy, and for a second, I forgot about her bed wetting, her school wetting, the fact that she might one day end up like Mitch's used up sister, Tammy, so I bought the dang TV.

"Oh no," I say as we drive around in circles for a while.

"What's wrong, Mommy?" Sela asks. I look up and see a small fraction of her face in the rearview mirror. She looks a little like me at this angle.

"What's not wrong, really," I mumble. "Hungry?" I rack my brain for places I can stash the forty-inch, flat-screened mammoth that's lightly bobbing in the trunk of the Pontiac. The dang thing hardly fits even after I spent twenty minutes and half a nail bungee cording it shut.

"Mmm, Happy Meal," she says in that way that annoys me. Just ask for the thing, kid. But I agree and smile because I read on the Internet

how you always have to smile around children. They absorb sadness like sponges.

We start-stop through the line, and I order her a Happy Meal, me the chicken nuggets, and chow down like there's no tomorrow. She doesn't ask, but I know she wants to eat inside and play on the disease-infested jungle gym with the other children. But it's too loud in there, too bright. I feel like I'm up on stage in that place, and I'm liable to trip and spill our food for an audience of fat-gutted looky-loos.

"What did you and Trudy play?"

"House. She made me be the Dad."

"Her home, her rules."

"Yeah, but she always makes me be the Dad."

"Well, then do her the favor. Might be the only time in her life she knows what it's like to have a husband." I shouldn't talk this way about her friends. I really shouldn't talk this way to her period. But she has these doe eyes, this simple way of opening them up like she wants to know the truth. Goodness knows no one else does.

"She can be mean sometimes," Sela says. And that hurts my heart, like "knock it hard with a hammer and watch it crumble" hurt.

"Everyone can be mean sometimes, Sela, but not everyone can be good. Not like you." And I smile at her again. But I really don't feel like smiling.

We coast down Pyle Drive after I snatch at the lone fry that fell to the passenger side floorboard and plop it and the rest of our trash in the outdoor trash bin. I coat my hands in hand sanitizer and do the same to Sela's because greasy hands roughly the size of half dollars are one of my triggers. I don't want another bleach day.

We sail down through a green light, pass Fox Funeral Home, and that's when I see it. A1 Storage. I hook a right and land next to a banana yellow station wagon with a bumper sticker that reads, "American by Birth, Southern by the Grace of God."

My TV has a new home.

#

They were running a special, so the first month's rent is only a buck. The manager—Lara, according to her name tag—helped me lug it to the unit, and I have a feeling she doesn't do that for all the girls.

She gave me her card, all business of course, but kept nodding her graying shaved head at me like everything I said was coming from God himself.

"Where's your toilet?" must have sounded like "Want to run away with me forever?" to her pink-tinged ears because she walked us there herself.

"I don't have to go," Sela said when we went into Lara's "personal throne."

"I know, but Dr. Mailer said to make sure we go every couple of hours." There's that "we" again. It's something my mother use to do that would royally perturb me, as if me being the only one of her kids who shared her mutual anatomy meant we were the same dang person. *We would like a Dr. Pepper. We want to go see Aunt Earlene. We just got our period!*

"But I don't—"

"Just go, Sela! Please? *Please?*" I hiss it, and the finger drills into my head again. She looks up at me, and the worst part is that she doesn't cry. She's not even shocked anymore because this is her mother. The nightly drunk who's generous with her "we's" and has a knack for ruining her entire day.

"I'm sorry."

"I know," she says.

She finishes up, and I flush while she lets a wimpy trickle of water clean her hands. I scrub mine too with the rose scented soap Lara has filled with water to stretch a dime. I use my nails—always use my nails—and when I'm finished my hands are streaked with angry stripes, and I try not to notice that Sela's are, too.

Outside the bathroom, Lara is stacking up empty boxes in the front window display. She's rolled up her sleeves to show off a thick layer of fat that I'm sure she hopes I confuse for muscle.

"Thanks," I say.

"Any time, be sure to call if—," but the door swings shut behind us before I let her finish. There's still a couple of hours to pack tight with "activities." That's another thing they say online about kids—that they always have to be doing something so that their brains work right. And sometimes I have to laugh at hogwash like that because my mother put Dr. Pepper in my bottle when I wouldn't take the formula, and I turned out just fine.

But I can't laugh at it because there Sela is, strapped in her booster chair in the back, and her face is expectant-like, waiting for me to make the call. That's another thing about kids. It doesn't matter if you have a headache or you can't get pregnant again or that all you want to do is recount the years in your aching head and pinpoint the exact moment life's sweater began to unravel. You're still in charge. You still have to play the game even if you don't feel like it.

"Park," I say. "Let's go to the park."

#

I don't hate having a kid as much as I hate that other people have kids. Other women, really. Besides Ronnie, I don't hobnob with the local females who all seem to congregate at the holy church of Target. Instead, when we go to the park, I sit on the bench while Sela swings on her belly like Superman, and I pretend to read a tattered copy of *Great Expectations*. I've stop-started this book roughly forty-five times in my life, and a lot of it I blame on conversations like the one happening right next to me.

"Oh right, yes, totally. I practically fainted when Trenton told me that. I mean, who does that little brat Henry think he is telling Trenton not to touch his stuff? Free country." I side-eye the talker, and she's thin

with a long shiny ponytail and a face that screams late thirties, although I'm sure she's closer to my age. Sun damage. I apply SPF so often, I sweat it.

"It's the mother, always the mother. Abby, Gabby, whatever the heck. She's always talking about boundaries, so the kid thinks he has license to be a jerk." The woman next to McSkinny is bigger-boned and her drawl is more noticeable. She's wearing a Razorbacks sweatshirt and yoga pants, but the diamond in her engagement ring is about the size of my knuckle. I hate that. I hate the "I'm a bum for a day" look, and I hate it even more when I glance down at my feet, at last year's wedges. The red leather tops are scuffed, and there's a chunk of cork missing on the inside heel. "You look nice," Mitch said last weekend before we went out to Red Lobster with Jimmy and his heinous wife, Pam. He was wearing that stupid Polo of his, the green one the color of a Christmas tree with his black belt and brown shoes. And I was wearing these busted up wedges and a white blouse that has a light ketchup stain near my belly because Sela hugged me right after meatloaf a few nights before. It kept digging at me—the Christmas tree polo, the stained-up blouse—so when we finally got to the restaurant, I washed my hands so hard in the bathroom that the side of my thumb began to bleed.

"Sometimes, I wish I could teach a course on how to be a good mother," McSkinny says, and I think she glances at me when she says it, but I can't be sure. Oh, I get it. I'm supposed to be pushing my child on the swing or at least looking lovingly on from afar or gabbing it up with a big-boned, sweatshirt-wearing best friend to be a "real" mother. My mind breaks a little, and the pieces scatter at the base of my skull. And I feel like I'm inhaling the pieces, choking on them. I have to get out of here.

"Sela," I say, and she looks up, but I don't wait for her. I beeline it to our GrandAm and ignore the stupidly shocked faces of Big Bones and McSkinny. I can only breathe again when I'm inside the car and hours old French fry smell replaces the pieces stacked high in my lungs.

"I thought we were going to play," Sela says when she gets inside and buckles herself into her booster seat.

"You thought wrong." I back out of my sandwiched spot between their cars—an SUV on steroids and a brand-new Prius—and I try to fragment together what Big Bones and McSkinny must be saying now.

Some people just shouldn't have kids.

#

At home Sela plays with her Barbie who she's made the Dad. I can hear her telling it to take out the trash while she makes the spaghetti, and I remember to grab the camera that's always shoved in a mystery drawer whenever I'm looking for it. But when I get to her door, she's given up her game and is curled up on her comforter, her breath heavy. She does that sometimes, just runs out of battery, and her body goes still with sleep. I sit on her bed and lightly scratch her back, and I start crying until it hurts even farther into my brain than where the finger in my temple is.

Sometimes when I call my brother Hank, and I talk to his wife Belinda, I use the same voice I use with Ronnie, that "my poop don't stink" voice that gets on my own nerves. And I can hear it in their own voices, that tiny shred of pity they have for a grown woman who's playing out her childhood dream even though her reality is a short fall from a nightmare.

Screw them all.

Sela stirs a little, and I stop my fingers that are digging too hard in her back. I kiss her temple, shut the door. I go and get the bleach.

I did Sela's bathroom yesterday, so I do mine today. It's not just the scrubbing I like but the burn I get from inhaling it. Now don't get it wrong, this isn't about getting high. This is about cleaning what's dirty. What's very very wrong.

I do such a thorough job, that my brain starts singing that B-52's song, and I can't shut it off. When I'm done, I strip and change into

my robe. I put the bleach back, my grout scrubber back and put my clothes into a trash bag that I throw in the garbage at the side of our house. Sometimes, if I'm not careful, that stuff takes the color plum out of everything. I used to worry that Mitch would notice, but God love my husband. The poor man never notices a thing.

The shower is hot, and I make it hotter until I whimper, and then I make it colder again. My brain feels clean, and I feel better. My headache is gone.

I grab the phone from the kitchen and let my wet hair dry from the overhead fan in our bedroom. I blast it high and listen to the ringing and wonder if he can hear his phone or if he's water blasting and maybe the sound is lost on him. But he picks up, and when he talks, I know he's inside somewhere, although he pretends he's working.

He's cheating on me—"spending a little Mitch time" as Ronnie would put it. It's been going on a few Saturdays now, and there's a switch in me that just won't click over. I'm supposed to be angry, but I guess it's more like I'm sorrowful because I know now that it's not just me. He sees it, too: this isn't the way it's supposed to be.

But it doesn't matter because that's not why I'm calling.

"I want to quit drinking. AA," I say, and at first, he says we're fine, and I want to laugh. But I know I've planted the seed in his brain and that he'll come around. And he does, saying he'll go at the exact same time that I look into the mirror above our dresser, and when I see myself, I see my future self in a 900-square-foot condo on the beach, my beautiful bare feet caressing the bamboo flooring in the living room.

My TV will look lovely in there.

SIX

Mitch

“They bought a new car,” Elena says.

Dinner is a sloppy pot roast, potatoes drowning in a thinned-out sauce. She’s a good cook, my wife, but then I think about the Roquefort served with nuts and honey on the sideboard in Aaron’s dining room—a dish I still can’t pronounce, but I’m mentally holding onto because Elena’s meat is a brick wall in my colon.

“Color?” I ask.

“BMW,” is the reply, which tells me what kind of evening it’s going to be. I sometimes think when you’re dirt poor, you end up in either two camps: wants for nothing or wants for everything. I know all too well which one Elena’s in.

“Well, some people work hard and get BMWs in this life.”

“You work hard,” she says. She plops another dose of potatoes onto Sela’s plate, although she doesn’t ask for them. Our daughter sits between the two of us, her chair slightly closer to me. I notice her mimicking me, not in a silly laugh out loud way, but as if she’s trying to commit me to memory.

“Did you see Trudy’s new car, honey?” I ask Sela, ignoring Elena’s stab. *You work so hard, Mitch, but it’s like we don’t even get to see any of it.* That’s the plight of owning a small business, I always tell her when there’s still energy in my lungs. Bills, car insurance, health insurance, clothes for school, clothes for dance, food on the table. You’d think she’d understand by now.

“Blue,” Sela says, already anticipating my follow-up question. I smile at her, and it hurts my cheeks. I watch, and she smiles the very same way.

“Blue,” Elena says quietly and takes a bite of her pile of bricks.

I expect to meet her at the kitchen cabinet later—after the dishes and Sela are put in their proper places—but Elena's not there. The whiskey's left out though, so I find an old cup from Floyd's—the Razorback worn to the point of looking more like a hedgehog—and fill-er-up. No more need for chasers, just a quick hot swallow. I think of all the times Jimmy has tried to get me to drink during lunch, and I always shake my head and say, "One of us has to be able to run this business." Like refusing a drink mid-day makes me any less of an alcoholic.

The thought burns down with the whiskey and pounds my cranky gut awake. It's one of those things I don't talk about—how drinking this much feels like I'm getting an ulcer—not even to Elena because we have to be in tip-top baby making shape. The hypocrisy of it all is likely to kill me before the alcohol does.

I take one more before gliding quietly down the hallway. Our bedroom door is closed, and I calculate the percentages of getting my chewed butt out if I go in. But I open the door anyway out of habit.

She's in bed. I'm embarrassed thinking of how long she's been there, waiting for me to find her.

"It's time?" I say, trying to remember the ovulation schedule, but the whiskey makes it and everything else a little murky.

"No," she says.

"Then?"

"Can't you just hold me?" she asks and rolls to her side. Her hair curls around her shoulder, and I can tell she's put on lip gloss. I fall into bed next to her, just like that. I place my head into her neck, and right now, she smells like vanilla.

"Are you crying?" She lifts my face and shame washes my cheeks, makes its bed in my stubble. She rubs my skin dry as I close my eyes, and we're fourteen again.

"I'll love you forever," she had said once, up on my daddy's tractor. She was behind me, her arms tight like a belt as we pulled the planter along, cotton seeds diving into the furrows. The cows with their bul-

bous eyes were watching us, and I remember thinking, *Y'all are my witnesses*.

I don't know what it's like for other men. But I do know when your heart's wired wrong—and your mother hits you because she knows it, too—it's an easy feeling being loved. Even if it is by the wrong person.

I take in the clean earth scent of that day again as I hold her tight and kiss her shoulder. I pay Elena every ounce of kindness I owe her.

#

At St. Bonaventure, there's a penny in one of the brick posts that supports the covered entrance. Our group gathers here after Sunday Mass: me, Elena, Sela, bottle-lensed Trudy Gibson and her parents. The topic of discussion is the new BMW, and I grind my nail into Abraham Lincoln's face. Sela watches me, grazing her thumbnail against the pad of her pointer finger, in tune with my rhythm.

"Ever gotten behind the wheel of a Beamer, Mitchy?" Luke asks. His hair is fashioned after one of Sela's Ken dolls, and he smells like a perfumed paper ad in the pages of Elena's Cosmo. He also has a thing for nicknames.

"Well, Lukey-boy, I have to say that's a negative." Elena shoots me a look, and Luke clears his throat and nods. The other parishioners buzz around us, and my bare arms brush against blouses and sport coats too hot for this weather. "You should wear your sports jacket," Elena had said earlier, supporting her reasoning with the reliable, "I'm sure Luke will be wearing one," which made me automatically reach for my polo. Clips of the homily (what love thy neighbor means in the twentieth century) play at our shoulders, but a good portion of talk is centered on deer season (led by Father John, as if he believes I need yet another reason to hate church).

"Not everyone's thing but that engine—wooh does she purr!" Instead of slapping Luke, I smile and nod back, solely for Elena's sake. She's all roses this morning, flushed cheeks, last night's lip gloss making

a reappearance. But I can tell by the way she's grinding her black sandal into the stone walkway like she's killing a cigarette that last night's "I love you" won't be.

"Well, we better head to Luke's parents," Ronnie says, brushing back her sleeve to reveal a gold Rolex with a face the size of my head. "They're time sticklers," she adds, dramatically whispering behind a manicured hand.

"I heard that!" Lukey-boy says and squeezes her shoulder. I glance at Trudy who has her finger jammed up her nose.

"What about you guys? Heading anywhere special?" Now this is the kind of stuff that annoys me about Ronnie, the questions she asks like she didn't see us roll into the parking lot in a '92 Dodge Dakota. And then there's Elena who makes it even worse by pulling the good student act, reciting the acceptable answer.

"Oh, probably just grab brunch at New Hampton. I love the omelets." And it's embarrassing because I'm sure the Gibsons go there weekly and have realized by now that we've never set foot in the place. But Elena's still grinning like the prized pupil, and I hate myself for somehow making omelets unattainable.

"So do we! Well, you all have fun, all right?" Ronnie smiles and places a hand on Sela's shoulder, an act of kindness I'm sure people pay kids with delusional, underpaid parents.

"We will!" Elena's glossed lips are stretched so wide, I'm afraid they'll snap like rubber bands. As soon as the Gibsons are out of sight, she sighs, and her eyes go to Sela and she sighs again.

"You'd think that girl would have the decency to remove her finger from her nose for two seconds," she says. She keeps looking at Sela, and I know what she's thinking. Here's a beautiful girl, a girl who deserves omelets and ponies and two parents who don't mess everything up for her. But Sela has this pleasant look on her face like today's just Sunday. Today's just another day she gets to hold her parents' hands.

When I look up, I see Elena looking at me this time, and again, nineteen years loving the same person, it's like her thoughts send a drumbeat through my brain. *AA*, she's thinking.

Fine. I'll go.

SEVEN

Elena

I'm in love with a man who doesn't love me, not like he did when we were kids. When we were kids, love was an easy drug to take when you couldn't find it anywhere else. Mitch's mother would beat him with a spoon, and the first time he told me he loved me, he showed me the welts on his ribs. I jumped my fingers against them like skipping rocks in a river. And then I showed him what I liked to do against the back of my thighs with my mother's razor.

"Does it hurt?"

"Yes. Thankfully," I had said when we were thirteen and his finger explored where the blood had braided into thin red lines.

That's sick, right? What's even sicker is knowing that my husband just doesn't love me that way anymore, but I still keep wishing I can change his heart just by loving him. At the very least, I know I can change his mind about AA.

I smell like my body splash, sickly sweet vanilla, and I've soaked my raw hands in lotion, glossed my lips. Sela is asleep so I slide under the covers, and I wait until he stumbles into the bedroom because I need to seal this deal. I need to get clean.

After he falls asleep, I'm jailed in his arms. I think about the woman he's cheating on me with and want to stab him in the eye with the nail file I keep in my nightstand. But I don't. I stay there. I stay jailed. I think about my TV and how the colors will feel flashing on my face as Mitch snores and his breath invades my brain.

I pretend all the pieces fit.

I break free from the breath and the snores and walk to the bathroom. I lay down on the floor, press my nose against the grout and smell the tile.

The cutting came before the bleach, and I still think about it, the thin strips of pain on the back of my thighs. I'd lay on my belly on my bed while my brothers blasted Remote Control in the living room of our doublewide and stroke my legs with a blade I'd remove from my mother's razor with her sewing scissors. Or sometimes I'd use the blade from a pencil sharpener I'd pick up at the Five and Dime when my mother was having one of her "spells" and wouldn't leave her bedroom, which was unfortunately situated across from our only bathroom.

But I stopped when I knew Mitch loved me because he made it feel like forever. But forever can easily be a nanosecond when the only person who loves you forgets to do exactly that.

I think about the woman he loves now, taking that love while I soak my worries with lungs full of bleach.

#

Church is suffocating. I always plan two bathroom breaks with Sela so she doesn't have an accident, and so I can stand up on the heater and put my mouth at the cracked open window near the ceiling in the women's restroom.

She used to ask what I was doing, but she doesn't anymore. "Bird watching," is what I said the first time.

Our church is ornate, and Mary watches you from a number of different niches. She's beautiful, Mary, or at least the artist's rendering of her is beautiful. I wonder what she looked like in real life. I wonder if her face was as perfectly sculpted or if she had to tug on stray hairs sprouting out near her eyebrows like I do...

My arm is jolted, and it's Mitch stabbing me with the offering basket. Sela drops a dollar in it, the bill folded so no one can tell it's just a buck. The homily was about loving thy neighbor, and I think of loving my husband last night and how I tried to hold on to that moment and shape it into something that felt like real love. But this morning, when I woke up, he chose the Christmas tree polo, and I chose another

pair of wedges—black this time but just as scuffed up—and I remembered all the moves to our usual dance.

After Mass, I hold my breath. We stand tight-circled with the Gibsons and talk BMWs. Mitch tries to make a crack, but I think it's fortunately lost on Luke who can't seem to find it in himself to be offended by people who drive a hand-me-down Dodge Dakota. But I'm sure Ronnie caught it.

I choke on Donna Karen because Ronnie and the gang have to head out to Little Rock to visit with Luke's parents, and when she hugs me, I pretend we're changing bodies so I don't have to stay here. And that's when I say the stupid thing when Ronnie asks what we have planned.

"Oh, probably just grab brunch at New Hampton. I love the omelets." Everyone pretends this is the truth, and it goes quiet until Ronnie saves the day and savages the church parking lot with her Prada heels. Then the Gibsons are off in their BMW because they can afford a BMW and enough omelets to kill a small elephant.

I look at them, my little family: my cheating husband and my daughter who really is beautiful despite resembling her father's trashy sister. She's digging her thumb into the penny in the post, and I suffer a little knowing the only plans we have today involve leftover pot roast.

EIGHT

Elena

I got us the baby appointment because that's what women do, they have babies. But I also know I'm not like the other women because somewhere on Pyle Drive a rather macho Lara is keeping an eye on a storage unit that houses my brand-new TV, and that's not something other women do, buy secret TVs. I keep thinking we'll see the doctor, we'll get pregnant, and then all the junk that builds up higher and higher until we start scaling junk mountain will suddenly disintegrate, and then we'll be back on solid ground. Maybe then I can be happy. Maybe then I can stop living lies.

Maybe then he'll stop cheating on me.

"Do you have this in a size two?" says a woman who would be a size two if size two decided to eat nothing but donuts for the rest of its life. I smile until my cheeks hurt, tell her I'll go check in the back, and then I stay there for ten straight minutes and light up one of the cigarettes Tanisha thinks she artfully hides behind a box of deformed sports bras.

Everything in here is either used or manufactured with defects, hence the name Hattie's Half-Priced Fashions. The place stinks on both the literal and figurative levels, so I keep gulping on the smoke to rid myself of the soiled armpit stench in the backroom. I only smoke at work or at Ronnie's, or sometimes, late at night, I'll bum a draw off Mitch's cigarette. But I generally don't like the idea of sucking on things like I'm an infant in need of a pacifier.

"That my cigs?" Tanisha says, and she says it all bossy-like because everybody's supposed to know you don't mess with Tanisha. But she likes me because I let her use our address to get her daughter into White Smoke Elementary which is pretty much Harvard compared to Oak Forest. And I like Tanisha because her life makes mine look like I'm freaking Jennifer Aniston.

"That my coffee mug?"

"Touché," she says but pronounces it like "touch." I don't correct her because even though Tanisha might like me, I saw her beat on her boyfriend in the back lot of Half-Priced once, and by the way she left him staggering near the side of that Town Car of his, I'm sure the man still has a hard time sitting. And I happen to like the way I sit just fine.

"When does Queen Bee get back?" she asks and gently shakes my "World's Best Mom" mug so that I can hear the ice clink. She drinks Mountain Dew every morning, and I told her once she'll turn radioactive from that trash, but then she asked what radioactive meant, so I dropped it.

"Soon, probably. Bank stuff," I say, referring to Hattie herself, the crotchety owner of Hattie's Half-Priced Fashions who has a mouth like a sailor and is willing to dock your pay if you're five seconds late for work. But I deal with her because she pays me in cash and knows how to keep a secret.

It was...what's that word? Kismet? It was kismet finding this place because I had to pee like a racehorse on my way back from dropping Sela off at school. I went in, thought I'd see if I could find some sort of cheap alternative to Ronnie's Gucci bag, and after I choked down the sweaty scent of pre-worn clothes, I saw the sign on one of the registers. "Help Wanted." It might as well have said "Elena's New Job." It was the day I found the text on Mitch's phone that said "Meet me." The number had been saved as "Accountant." Holy-rolling Pam did (and still does) our taxes, so this was someone else. Someone new.

"What would you bring to the table at Hattie's Half-Priced Fashions?" Hattie had asked me in the back room of the shop. We sat at the round table pushed so close to the counter that Tanisha had to sidle her way between my chair and the sink to grab a mug, her backside squeaking me forward.

"Excuse me, Tanisha. Do you mind? We're having a little meeting?" Hattie said, and I knew she was saying it in the way a black widow must

sweetly murmur to its victim before killing and eating it. But I didn't care because Hattie offered the cash deal and besides, you have to respect a "bee" who knows what she wants.

Tanisha grabs the pack from me and takes out the lighter jammed down between the cigarettes. She lights one up and takes a long, slow draw with her eyes closed.

"You're lucky you're married," she says. I snort, and she gives me a set of bug eyes. "I'm serious. Jonesy don't have no job, don't think he needs one because he 'ain't no chained down man.' Whatever that means. Men play with your head, take you to bed, and then give you 'ol the sayonara." She sucks on her cigarette, and I refrain from congratulating her on knowing what "sayonara" means.

"But the worst part? Tasia never gonna know a real daddy. That man be full of it from day one, and it's all his fault." She reaches down for my World's Best Mom cup, shakes the ice. "Mine, too," she says.

"You ever think of having an affair?" I ask because I think of Ronnie and her yard boy. I think of my husband who's hurting my heart, and I think of my heart that's too scabbed over to hurt anymore.

This time, Tanisha is the one who snorts. "Yeah, sure, all the time. Just drop off Tasia with the nanny and have my driver drop me off at Mr. Money Bucks' mansion. We have a grand 'ol time." When she laughs, I see the gold caps in the back of her mouth.

"Hello ladies!" Hattie says from out in the showroom. She does that, chats up the customers like they're old friends from bingo, when really, I know she just sees them as walking dollar signs. Hats off to Hattie.

"Aw, man," Tanisha says and crushes the cigarette under her patent leather boot. She scoots the remains across the concrete into the vent near the floor.

"You're horrible," I laugh.

"Somebody's got to be." She shrugs and puts my mug on the counter near the kitchen sink and heads back out to deal with women

who believe the mirrors are lying to them. Everyone's a size two at Hattie's.

I grab the mug, slowly rinse it. It's the one Sela bought for my birthday two months ago when Mitch took her on a shopping trip. She picked it out at the store all by herself, and that's what she told me when I opened it. And I remember hearing her words and not being able to concentrate because her skin smelled like ammonia. Like urine.

I look at the lettering—how the “M” has chipped off a little bit—and I help it out with the sponge and soap and hot water until it says World's Best Om. I dry the mug with the damp kitchen towel somebody—probably Tanisha—left wadded up near the fridge, and then I place it back with the other mugs.

I close the door before I can process what I've done.

#

When my shift is over, and I've begun to smell exactly like the back-room, I wash up in the bathroom until my hands hurt. I take out the bottle of vanilla body splash from my faux leather bag, the one with the pebbled skin that Mitch said reminded him of me. Leathery, wrinkly, crinkles when opened. Thanks, Mitch.

I stole this latest bottle of body splash at the White Smoke Mall when the lady said they weren't having their two for one sale unless you were a member of Bath and Body Works which I know is a bold-faced lie because she winked at the lady before me and threw in the two for one like it was their little secret. But apparently it wasn't our little secret because her nose kept snarling slightly, and I think it may have been because I was wearing my faded Helena High School sweatshirt that still fits, *thankyouverymuch*. Not like Ms. Snarly Nose gave two hoots because she called out “Next!” before I could even get a word in edgewise. So, I put the bottle in my bag without anyone seeing me except for Sela who said, “Don't you have to buy that first?” I smacked her on the back of the head, but smack is an over exaggeration. Light tap, maybe.

I only work from 9 to 2, so Mitch is long gone by the time I head to work, and Sela is already at school and doesn't have to be picked up until after 3:15. That means I have an hour and fifteen minutes after work for myself, and I use this time to get plastered at the mall. I stop first at Floyd's Gas Stop and get one of those giant plastic cups filled to the brim with Dr. Pepper, and then I head over to Bubba's Beer and Booze and get me two tiny bottles of whiskey and dump them into my drink. I swish, swish, swish the concoction around with my red straw and take a deep drink and don't stop until I get that warm feeling—that feeling where my limbs melt, and I'm more a part of the car than I am myself. Sometimes I make the mistake of looking in the rearview mirror and watch my eyes blink, an intense blue that Mitch used to say was “clear as the ocean.” And I look deep into them, but I don't really see anything. I glance at Sela's empty booster seat, and then I try not to feel anything either.

I coast down and park at the mall that is stupidly busy for a weekday. Welfare checks being burned, teenagers skipping school, harried mothers with screaming balls of snot in strollers. It's a mess inside, but it's a fun mess when you're buzzed.

I'm already halfway through my drink when I think about getting something to eat, but then I see Bath and Body Works and Ms. Snarly Nose, so I decide to park myself on the bench just outside of the store. There's an older woman in a tracksuit tending to her knitting and a guy standing near her peripheral in white sneakers and white high socks barking into his cell phone. I can't tell if he's angry or laughing.

I watch Ms. Snarly Nose for a second and try to picture her life: single, lives in a one-bedroom, possibly a two-bedroom with a roommate. Goes into Little Rock on the weekends and wears cute little outfits, dances with cute men.

She thinks she's better than me.

The clouds open, and a miracle practically strikes me down. It's quitting time for Ms. Snarly Nose, and instead of navigating the web

of back hallways connecting all the stores in the mall, she exits out the front of Bath and Body Works, and I decide to follow her trail. She has a red lunchbox strapped onto her shoulder, and a bag from Dillard's in her hand. She's wearing cute leather sandals, a sundress that shows off her bare arms. Her hair is blonde, an obnoxious shade. I have dark hair. Can't lighten it.

I take another crucial swallow of whiskey-Dr.Pepper and the burn propels my feet. I bump into a pig-faced teenager who's moping behind her prettier friends, and she apologizes like it's her fault.

"Watch it, Fatty," I say, and her friends start to giggle. I feel horrible, the hole in my heart widening, but I'm not really talking to the girl. I'm talking to Ms. Snarly Nose who's click-clacking in her beautifully heeled sandals.

She goes to the Clinique counter to make a return. She has a bottle of perfume—"Happy"—that she upgrades for the larger size. And that really grinds my gears, like she's waving it in my face: "I don't even have to wear that stupid body splash I sell. I wear real perfume like an actual adult."

"Can I help you?" I turn, and a woman with slick red lips and bottled brown hair squirts at my eyes.

"Passionate," she says and takes an exaggerated whiff.

"I'm sure," I say and turn on my heels because Ms. Snarly Nose has already taken her newer, bigger bottle of perfume and is skirting around the purses to the exit. I follow behind—not too close—and when she stops to tug at the heel of her shoe, I start to finger a turquoise smock with flowers chasing each other around the neckline. It looks like something Jimmy's colorblind wife would wear.

Out in the parking lot the sun is unforgiving, and I go rooting around my bag for the pair of sunglasses I picked up from Wal-Mart but told Ronnie I got from Target. There's a long scratch in the middle of the right lens, so it looks like Ms. Snarly nose is cut in half, a magician's trick. She's standing at the curb outside of Dillard's, and I pretend to

be waiting for my ride, too, letting the last droplets of Dr. Pepper and whiskey cool my tongue.

“Why are you following me?” I glance over, praying that I’ve heard her wrong, but she’s facing me now, beautifully slim in her red dress with printed white flower heads the size of my fist. And my left hand is curled tight, mimicking the flowers, so I take a few breaths until my fingers relax.

“I wasn’t following you.”

“Yes, you were. From when I got off work. And I know you. You’re that lady that stole the body splash.”

“What? I never—I don’t do that. Don’t steal.” There’s no trash can, so I place the drink down at my feet and try to play sober. It’s not working because my hands are moving, and I have no place to put them. And I can tell Ms. Snarly Nose has caught on because she gives me the same face I received the last time something like this happened. I had gone to the library instead of the mall and picked out some books for Sela because kids need books, they need to read to grow their brains, and the librarian had that sadness in her eyes like her heart was ripping for me tissue by tissue by tissue because I couldn’t quite stack the books right and walk out the library without bruising my hip against the double doors.

And Ms. Snarly Nose keeps staring the same way, and I start sweating because Hattie makes us wear pants to work even though it’s hotter than a billy goat’s rear in a pepper patch. And I don’t know why I think of that saying, of my mother’s hand wiping sweat off her doughy forehead on our old front porch. In my head she’s dressed for church, that ridiculous hat with the fake petunia stuffed under the ribbon. There’s pain in my palms because I’m digging my nails into them—two fists now—and when I look at Ms. Snarly Nose’s “I feel sorry for you” face, I step forward to end my misery, but a car pulls up to the curb.

“Hey there!” comes a voice from the driver's seat. It's a man with dark hair, and he waves at Ms. Snarly Nose, one of those puny waves you give a child. Through the back window, I see a baby.

“Hey, sweetie,” Ms. Snarly Nose says, her eyes still on me. But her trance is broken when the baby's wail sounds through the opened passenger side window, and she begins to say, “It's okay, Teddy. Mommy's here.” Mommy.

She gets in the car, and they drive away, and I watch the shadowy back of her head, her arms orchestrating the conversation she must be having about “the drunk crazy lady.”

I stumble-walk to my car that's parked over near the food court. I melt in my pants, in my stupid pea green ballet flats—another glorious Wal-Mart purchase—and hope to God I get hit by a car before I form a puddle on the sidewalk.

I find the GrandAm and drive to St. Bonaventure, windows down, slamming my head to Metallica. I hate Metallica, but I hate the quiet even more. I hate the soul crushing smell of old French fries. I hate my mother. That stupid hat.

I play sober driver to the best of my ability and only skim the walkway a tiny bit with my front tire in the carpool line, but by the way the kid in the Buzz Light Year backpack reacts, you'd think I was trying to gun him and his whole family down.

I put the car in park, music now shut down to a soft hiss, and I try staring at the sun until Sela pummels the car door with her hand, trying to wrench it open.

“Mommy!” she says when she gets into our oil-fried car.

Mommy. I try not to cry.

NINE

Mitch

She finds one that meets Wednesday nights, which means a stony silent truck drive into Little Rock. We can't join White Smoke's AA because Elena's convinced the town already knows the color of our underwear, and truth be told, I really can't argue with that logic.

"She'll be okay, right?" she asks, and the quiet crumbles, her voice chipping inside the cave of my ear. I eat the blast of cold coming through the A/C because she's always too hot.

"She'll be just fine." Pam and Jimmy are watching Sela while Elena and I are at "the Spaghetti Factory." They've been given the comprehensive guide on evening urine cleanup, which will most likely be Pam's jurisdiction considering Jimmy doesn't "deal with piss."

But Sela likes Uncle Jimmy, smiles at him a lot because he acts like he was dropped on his head one too many times as a baby. I caught myself studying him earlier when Jimmy came into the house smelling of Dial soap and something stronger. I watched him take a coin from his pocket and place the dirty piece of metal behind Sela's ear, and she laughed, a happy little clam. How easy it looked.

When we pull up to the Franklin Center, I cut the engine and survey the other cars owned by the miserable lot inside—the jokers I'm supposed to open my heart to. There's an El Camino parked in front of us with a Jesus fish that's grown feet stickered to the bumper. I imagine its sloped little head turning to me, saying, "Mitchie, you can't do this."

"You can," Elena says, doing that mind reading thing again. We've dressed up in our "church clothes," but this time Elena doesn't say a word about my missing jacket, and I'm glad because I have a feeling we're already overdressed.

Healing Haven, the place where the group meets, is in the Franklin Center strip mall. The "H" in "Haven" is going bad, blinking fresh light

against Elena's worry lines, and I get out of the car just so I don't have to stare at them anymore.

Taking her hand, our shoes travel over dead cigarettes and dried up gum. There's a restaurant a few window fronts down—an Italian place—and people are outside stinging the night with their chuckling. *Idiots*, I think for no good reason as I pull open Healing Haven's glass door. A bell rings over our heads.

"New member gets their wings!" a woman with rose-colored clown cheeks calls at us and lifts a Styrofoam cup in the air. Elena and I move in—guilt at our backs pushing us forward—and coming closer, I can see a name tag. "Peg." I can also see this woman's appearance is not normal because her lipstick and eyeshadow are permanently tattooed onto her face. We saw a special awhile back on *20/20* about makeup tattooing and drunkenly mused over the amount of real life clowns this new fad is encouraging. It's odd meeting one in the flesh. It's also odd thinking how I'll never drunkenly do anything again.

"Names, names, names," the woman says, blinking in rhythm with her words. For a moment Elena blinks back, probably trying to digest the woman's eyeshadow.

"Elena Reynolds, my husband, Mitch." Elena extends her hand, but Peg is busy with a styrofoam cup and a ridiculously big chocolate chip cookie, so she curtsies and bobs her head. She smells like food.

"Sorry about that. Blame it on Georgie and his delicious cookies," Peg chirps, the last line so intolerably high-pitched, I'm sure even a deaf dog could hear it. A man in a fishing hat with a full-on Jerry Garcia beard tickles his fingers at us. "Elena, Mitch, welcome to the circus!" Peg says.

"I prefer 'jungle.'" Georgie hands Elena and me our own cookie, these two with the letter "N" marked on the tops in blue icing. "For 'newbie,'" Georgie says. "My theory is that anyone who takes a bite of my famous homemade Death by Choco-chips will ditch the newbie

status and come on back next week.” I take a bite of it and try to smile even though I’m pretty sure it’s store bought.

“Mmm, so good,” Elena says, and I can tell she thinks it tastes like chalk.

We’re ushered to the front row. “Reserved for newbies,” Peg’s tattooed mouth whispers behind her cookie-crumbed hand, and the only other people sitting in this row are a young guy and girl with rings in their noses and their lips attached to each other.

“No PDA,” Peg barks, and the couple breaks apart, which is fortunate, then spots us at their periphery, which is not so fortunate.

“I’m Ricky,” the male one says. He gives me his hand, and it’s punctured swollen with holes in the wrists. The fingernails are dirty.

“Jessamine,” the girl says. She’s young, straddling somewhere between teen and young adult. She’s blonde, white, but Ricky isn’t. I can feel Georgie and his tray of cookies giving Ricky the evil eye from over near the snack table.

“Mitch,” I say. “So, what made you guys come here today?” Elena looks at me, and her face muffles her surprise. I’m point-proving talking to these burnouts, I know that, but I’m sure as heck not going to be lumped in with people who think face tattooing and store-bought cookies are good ideas.

Ricky laughs, “The cookies.”

“Starving, man,” Jessamine says, and I look at the plate in her lap stacked high with the letter, “N.”

“We hit the big ones, but this is our first time at this place. I just say stuff like my father beat me as a child, and they shake their heads, and then afterwards, we fill our plates back up.”

I have to admit, it’s not a bad idea, but I don’t say it out loud because Elena’s here and this is our ticket to normalcy. Hopefully.

She’s been acting strange lately, and at first, I started to panic that she found out about me and Aaron, but it’s more of a good kind of strange. She won’t sit out on the patio with me anymore. And she made

these packets for Sela, thickly stapled sheets she printed off the Internet that list activities to do with a seven-year-old. She's changing, and it's a good change, but it also feels like watching your boat drift away while you're still standing on the shore.

"They like knowing you're as messed up as they are," Ricky says and steals one of Jessamine's cookies, crams it into his open mouth.

I consider this information. There's a podium in front of us, and I imagine myself standing there, talking at a room full of screw-ups about having an affair with a man and raising a daughter with a disgruntled bladder. About loving people to the point of it seeming like I love nobody at all. I imagine talking about the wooden spoon, my mother's fear. I imagine I'd get a standing ovation, maybe even a crown. Mitch Reynolds, King of the Screw-Ups.

"Don't listen to them," Elena says. Her breath is silk on my neck. I glance over at the drugged-up duo next to us, Ricky's hand sneaking around Jessamine's thigh. I mirror the movement, grab for Elena to see how that feels, but her eyes dart around, and her mouth whispers, "Stop." And I know the inside of me feels nothing at all the way Ricky's does.

Others come, and the air is noisy. Metal chairs scraping against floors, sneakers squeaking against the linoleum. There are eyes on us—a silent game of "Who's a Newbie?"—and I try to keep the agitation from quaking my nerves. Elena is sitting as close to the edge of her chair as she can.

Finally, Peg and her tattooed face stand up on the mini-stage, her permanently mulberry lips leading the meeting with a fervor rivaling the one she has for Georgie's cookies.

When it's time to introduce myself I say, "Hi, I'm Mitch, and I'm an alcoholic."

My liar's heart begins to beat because I know I'm so much more.

TEN

Elena

I had a dream last night that a tattooed clown was chasing me through a courthouse where I was supposed to show up for jury duty. I think it had something to do with that dreadful woman's face—Peg, I think—who decided a needle was a better idea than replacing a tube of lipstick.

It's been over a week, and I still want to shower it all off. Those two bridge-dwelling individuals who stole nearly all the cookies, that man in the fishing hat with the name of a four-year-old boy, and my husband, Mr. Popular, owning the place with his crybaby face. Geez, I sound like a real nag, but really, here the man is sharing his soul with a room full of strangers, and they eat up that garbage like that greasy street urchin in the chair next to us said they would. But of course, Mitch leaves out the most important part: he's cheating on me. He's breaking our family.

When we came home, he wanted to make love. He called it that, too. Love. I refused and stayed up, eyes open all night, staring at the fan that adjusted into a twirling shadow in the dark. And he got up around one—didn't even bother to check to see if I was asleep—and left the house for an hour. I didn't hear the car, so I think he hoofed it. Next time, I'm going to follow him.

"Stand still for crying out loud," Ronnie says and shoves a polka dotted jumper against Trudy while the kid has another unlucky finger jammed up her nose. There's something that's pleasing to think about: money can't force your kid into cuteness.

We're in Dillard's, and my stomach's a little funky about it. Doesn't help that I took the liberty to pour myself a secret double serving of Schnapps before we left for the mall. They talked a lot about personal responsibility in that meeting, how the alcohol skews your understand-

ing of right and wrong. But I can't do the mall sober because I never do the mall sober, and you just can't reason with habit.

Trudy is cut free from her mother's badgering, and she and Sela take turns sitting Indian style in front of a mirrored pillar in the children's section, making funny faces. Sela copies whatever face Trudy makes which starts to itch at the back of my neck.

"Make your own face," I say, but "face" comes out as "space," and I've scratched the back of my neck so hard, I'm afraid it's going to bleed.

"What?" Ronnie asks, but she doesn't wait for my answer because she's holding up the blue and white polka dotted jumper with the red and white one.

"I like both," I lie, and Ronnie says, "Me, too," so she drapes both over her bangled arm. Her dress isn't nearly as ugly today, and her feet are shoved into a pair of slingback flats, so at least I don't have to look at them. She drove us all in the new Beamer because Luke was working from his home office. I sniff at my wrist to see if I can pick up the hint of new car smell.

"Are you okay?" she asks. It's the type of thing usually tipsy people ask when they're sober, as if their on-a-whim sobriety makes them better than you. She didn't make herself a "special" drink this morning but left the stuff out for me. And that irked me, the fact that she thinks I need to drink even if she doesn't.

"Just fine, sweet cheeks," I say and muffle a burp behind my hand.

"Uh, okay. Listen, I need to tell you something." We move away from the girls who are playing one of those handclapping games, and Trudy keeps jerking Sela's hands in the right position because she's supposedly doing it wrong. I've never wanted to deck a kid harder in my life.

I look at Ronnie, and her face is drowning in smile. She takes my hands in hers and bounces them a little and the bangles attack my arms like a steel drum.

“Okay,” she says and sighs. “I’m pregnant!” She squeals, looking like the pot-bellied pigs on her kitchen counter. Trudy snaps her head around, and behind her bug-eyed lenses are a watery set of eyes.

“No,” she says, quietly like a tiny serial killer. Then “No, no, no, no, no!” until it punctures like the nails against my neck. She gets up and lunges at her mother’s stomach, and Ronnie tackles her into a half-hug. The jumpers fall to the ground, and Sela runs to me, grabs my hand. I squeeze it a little.

“Great news,” I say, but my voice is somewhere lingering near the flowery headband display. I blink in time with Trudy’s clawing, Ronnie’s frustrated gasps. *Bloodied toilet*. Blink-blink. *Wounded gut*. Blink-blink. *Cheating husband*. Blink-blink.

I’m walking backwards, gently tugging Sela along. “We’ll see you soon!” I say, like we’ve agreed to meet up for tea and biscuits at a later time.

“But I drove you here!” Ronnie says, and I keep fluttering my fingers at her and turn with Sela toward the open cavity of the mall.

“What happened?” Sela whispers. She looks up, dwarfed in her Minnie Mouse t-shirt my mother sent her that’s two sizes too big.

“Nothing. She’s just a crazy lady,” I say, catching my reflection in a mirror on the Clinique counter.

#

We’re stranded, so I buy us lunch in the food court. I call Mitch on his cell, but he doesn’t answer, and I do that thing where I picture his mistress, the color of her hair. Horrible word, “mistress.” Let’s go with “super skanky homewrecker.” Much better.

Sela is sulking in her chair and won’t touch the sub I bought her. Can’t blame her. The gyro I ordered is a slaughtered mess on a bun.

“Are you going to divorce Daddy?” she asks, and I feel like I’ve swigged down another shot. My head is light, and my stomach is in full-on queasy mode.

“Why. Why would you ask that.” Declarative, right? A sentence with no question mark. I stab my eyes into Mickey with his ridiculously white hands and concentrate the vomit back down.

“Because the yelling.” The yelling? Oh. At night. Outside. She can hear us. Funny how whiskey blurs those edges down into a dream-like state where no one but you exists.

“I’m sorry,” I say. The vomit’s settled, but the tears have stirred, and I smother them all in my tzatziki¹-covered napkin. I kept calling that sauce “mayonnaise” at the Little Rock Greek Festival, and you would have thought I was threatening to gut Mitch’s entire family alive. *Tzatziki² for crying out loud, Elena. It’s called tzatziki³.*

I wait for Sela’s “it’s okay,” but it doesn’t come. My phone buzzes near my Dr. Pepper, and I answer it without looking at who it is.

“We need help,” I say.

“What happened?” His words are soft, but then I think of his mouth. Where it’s been.

“We just need you to pick us up, okay? The White Smoke Mall.” I strain my ears through the phone, and it sounds like he’s at a restaurant. The call came in this morning. They got the St. Bonaventure job, sixteen grand—the largest job we’ve gotten in the past two years. They’re supposed to be at a meeting with Father John, so I ask him about it, measure his response.

“It’s going well. Just hashing out the details,” he says.

“I bet.”

“Are you okay? What’s wrong with the car—”

1. <https://www.google.com/search?espv=2&biw=1536&bih=854&q=tzatziki&spell=1&sa=X&ved=0CB0QvwUoAGoVChMI4oPbzqzJxwIVAqceCh2qmAPb>
2. <https://www.google.com/search?espv=2&biw=1536&bih=854&q=tzatziki&spell=1&sa=X&ved=0CB0QvwUoAGoVChMI4oPbzqzJxwIVAqceCh2qmAPb>
3. <https://www.google.com/search?espv=2&biw=1536&bih=854&q=tzatziki&spell=1&sa=X&ved=0CB0QvwUoAGoVChMI4oPbzqzJxwIVAqceCh2qmAPb>

"Ronnie drove us. She's pregnant," I say. His "Oh, Elena," tastes like love even if it's a tiny crumb in my mouth. But I savor it. We've been weaving something since childhood—this understanding of each other's pain—and sometimes that's what I think I'm going to miss the most. There's no one on this planet, in this universe, more willing to kiss my scabbed-up soul.

"I'm coming. I'm leaving now," he says.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to screw up your meeting." He doesn't say anything for a second, and then I know. "Can I talk to Jimmy for a second?" I say to make sure.

"Oh, uh, he's in the bathroom. I'm leaving now."

I finger my soul, pick a scab.

"I love you," he says and hangs up before I can.

#

The seats in the truck are stained with dried caulking that has broken apart, so it roughs up my skin when I twist in my seat.

"You all right?" Mitch asks, and I nod. I glance behind me, and Sela is wiped out. Seeing her friend melt down like a psychopath must have taken it out of her. There's no booster seat in the truck, so she's slumped over in a position that's almost painful. I touch her knee, watch her nostrils slightly flare. Kids need booster seats, and it's like a check mark in my mind. I'm failing. Again.

"So, sibling rivalry already?" Mitch says, and I nod, thinking of Trudy.

"Little brat doesn't like the idea of not having Mommy and Daddy's full attention, I guess. She likes an audience when she's jamming that finger up her nose."

"I bet. She creeps me out, that kid. She's not like Sela." It starts to sprinkle a little, one of those odd sun showers that freak me out because to me, sun and rain don't mesh. Mitch puts on the windshield wipers, and it feels like a pulse beating through the cab. The details in this mo-

ment start to add up: the quiet, Sela's slight snoring, the fact that we're together and whiskey isn't stealing the show. But I can't say it. I can't tell him how my fear tastes. That if he leaves me, I'll be left with empty bottles and an unused TV. That I don't know how to do anything without the boy who used to trace our future in the palm of my hand: two kids, one house, and us, forever and ever.

But forever's a pipe dream.

"So, she doesn't know," he says.

"Know what? Oh, and let's throw in a 'who' for good measure."

"Ronnie. You haven't told her? About us trying?"

"Oh yeah, she knows. But she doesn't know about—"

"The miscarriages."

"I hate that word. Let's go with deaths. Or disappointments. Or tiny little steppingstones to hell..."

He's quiet. I've done that thing where I've pushed too hard, and he doesn't know what to do with me, which is a scary proposition since I hardly know what to do with myself.

"We'll figure it out. We have the appointment," he says. I suck on it like a lozenge. The appointment, the "maybe." It claws a little and then harder, so I start to say it, "Are you ch—"

"Here we are," he says, pulling into the Gibson's driveway behind my GrandAm. "I can go ahead and take Sela home so she doesn't wake up," he says.

"Yeah, alright." I'm half out of the truck, half in it, and I linger there. *Just say it, Elena. Just say what you want to say and stop being such a scared little girl.* But then I think of me at seven when the cutting first started, and I see Sela's face, clean of worry. And so, I don't say the thing that's weighing on my every organ because if I do say it, her worry will become an animal that follows her everywhere, and it will be something far worse than peeing herself in public.

"I love you," I say and suck until I taste the truth in it.

ELEVEN

Mitch

The church is up on a hill, and I keep imagining it rolling down like a stone and pinning me and Aaron where we lay in the unclaimed cemetery. Not the one owned by St. Bonaventure with the old outhouse at the side of it where the two rabbits mate like rabbits and everybody knows about it by Spring. But the one with a small cluster of headstones breaking the earth like teeth.

"I've always wanted to get married," Aaron says, his wine-soaked lips pressed to my ear.

"There's still time." I smile—I can feel it crawling and quaking through my lips—but happiness isn't a threat. Three weeks. It's been three weeks since our first meeting at the Franklin Center. Three weeks of avoiding telling Aaron about AA. Three weeks of going to bed hours after Elena and only hitting the sheets when sleep begins to feel like a small and merciful death. Three weeks of knowing therapy bills will be added to our growing heap of payments because Sela's pediatrician has recently recommended a child psychologist who specializes in "frequent elimination." Sure, my heart's a mess, but my mind? My mind is the equivalent of a dog yacking up something it just can't hold down.

"I'm in AA." Quiet. Aaron disconnects his lips from my ear and turns over onto his belly. He brought a picnic blanket, and it lies beneath us here in the small clearing. I know about this place because it's one of the stops during the church's annual Haunted Hayride, and it's where Sela, Elena and I stood still in the shadows last Halloween, a family of vampires waiting for our next feast.

"Elena?" he asks. His eyes are on me now. I'm a lake, and Aaron's the straw. I imagine hovering high beyond the trees and spying our breathing bodies, the two empty wine glasses at our sides.

"Elena thought we were...unraveling."

"At the seams."

"Yes, there. At the seams. Everywhere really. It got to the point we couldn't even sit outside on the back porch without yelling at each other." I think of her naked feet, which is a stupid, stupid thing to do. I hate that—when something comes tearing out of you and blinds your eyes. I blink hard and look at the sun.

"Yelling about what?" Aaron perches his head in his hand. Glimpses of golden light filter through the space his arm makes. I want us, but I want us in a different time and place. There they are again, her toes, her arches...

"The past. She thinks I cheated on her with a girl when we were in high school." The woods are silent, but they're also not silent because twigs crack under the weight of stalking deer. Live it up, I think. It's not your season.

"I don't think you're the type," Aaron says.

"What type am I?"

"Gay," Aaron says and laughs into my shoulder. I laugh, too, but the word is a steel blade between my teeth.

"It's not the worst thing in the world," he whispers when met with the look on my face. He glances at two lone tombstones on the outer banks of the toothy circle. Alistair and Bonita Jenkins are the names of the man and woman rotting in the ground a few feet from our blanket.

"Look, we can breathe, can't we? We can walk and talk and take a dump like every other man, so here's to us!" Aaron grabs me, and we roll beneath truth and light and birds flapping through the leaves.

To us.

#

Later, we're all business. Aaron folds up the blanket and puts the empty bottle of wine into the otherwise untouched picnic basket he brought. I glance at my cell and pray Jimmy is still out picking up the material. St. Bonaventure's roof is leaking, water flooding through worn holes

around the steeple, and Jimmy agreed to pick up the flashing grade while I agreed to walk the roof, prepare the holes and not think about the edge butting so perfectly close to the sky.

"You first or me?" Aaron asks.

"Me. Jimmy should be heading back now if he hasn't already."

"Don't get in trouble," Aaron says and kisses me on the lips, but before he does, he takes off his sunglasses.

"I love you." I've had dreams before, these dreams where I'm supposed to dance, and there's this instructor who has my mother's face and a switch in her hands. She smacks it back and forth and the thwacking sound is hard to handle, so I try to move my feet like she tells me to. But I just can't. And I feel the same way now.

"I hope so," stumbles out of me and my shoulders shrug. My eyes are boiled from the sun as I walk through the cemetery—the one with the mating rabbits—to the blacktop that leads back to the church. Aaron is behind me and stares at me for a minute before getting into his car. I think he's waiting to say something. I hope he says something, but his door shuts.

I've hurt his heart.

I eat the gasoline-streaked air on my return to the church, to the ladder I made a big show of propping up as Jimmy was leaving. "Yup, I'll just be up here seeing what I see," I said before Jimmy sped away, and I headed off in a dead sprint to meet the man I love.

And it is love, on some blatant level. Because in the night, or morning, when 3 a.m. reaches for me, I sit outside, back against the house with the phone in my hands, and I think about being the kind of man who calls and says, "I wish everything were different" even though "different" is fear streaming beneath my skin like veins pumping blood.

I climb the ladder, and at the top, I skim out beyond the edge of the roof, a foot loose in the air, but pull it back as Jimmy squeals through the gravel and slams into a paved parking space next to the church.

“Hope you had a better time up there than I just had. Nothing but a bunch of goons who can’t tell their asses from their elbows,” Jimmy says, the tailgate slamming down. Buckets of material scrape across the truck’s metal bed.

“Hardly,” I say, only recognizing Jimmy as a glimmer of movement and light. I didn’t mean to fall in love. I didn’t mean to do anything, and now I do nothing but feed on that fear. I think maybe that’s what love is: fear released and streaming like an open wound. And up here, back on the roof, mere seconds from the sky, it hits me—a warm pulse of love.

But maybe it’s just the wine.

TWELVE

Elena

I've been avoiding Ronnie. Her snotty-nosed daughter has been calling Sela out the past two weeks, taunting her with "Daddy doesn't love you!" and "Little baby Sela!" because Sela made that vital mistake of trusting a mean girl with her fears. The other day she comes home, and she smells to high heaven, and I know it's happened again. I ask her why nobody called me, and she said because she went to the bathroom and cleaned herself up. She didn't want to be a baby.

I cried so hard that night that I threw up on my pillow and worried what Mitch would think. But he had left again when the crickets stopped chirping, and I only felt his body when he got up in the morning for work.

"Poor, Sela. I know it's not your thing Elena, but our women's group discusses this kind of stuff. I mean, Marjorie Hemphill—okay I know the group is a trust circle and whatnot, but I know that God forgives me saying this if it helps you—well, Marjorie recently found out she has an STD, and the good Lord knows that woman isn't the roaming type. Good Christian, solid soul, that one. So, she shares this, and we all just hug her. Just start hugging the poor woman who's sobbing, and then everyone starts sobbing, and it's just this powerful moment of knowing we're not alone, you know?" I look at Holy-rolling Pam's wonky eyebrow, the one she penciled in a bit too much so the question she asks me is permanently planted on her face.

"Mmm-hmm," I say and hope it stops there. What's that word? Proselytizing. I heard it on Dr. Phil once and thought, *Gosh darn it, that's what Holy-rolling Pam does.*

"Just think about it. I know you don't like the Jesus talk." Yes, Pam. That's it. I hate Jesus, being a born and raised Catholic and all.

"Will do," I say. I snap open the platter of cut veggies, pretending it's Pam's skull. She invited me over to meet with her group because the power of prayer can heal anything, even a "wayward womb." She's sincere, Pam. She has short blonde hair that fringes near her ears and her nostrils are always a light shade of pink during allergy season. And she's wearing this green smock dress with buttons down the front that makes her look like she's about to take my order. But that doesn't make me want to stab her in the throat any less.

"Pam. Pam, it hurts." I look up from the sour cream I'm dumping into a bowl of ranch dressing mix, and there's "flu-infested" Jimmy who has his hand on his privates. See, this is why I really feel sorry for Pam. We both may be getting played by our husbands, but she's the one who's too stupid to notice.

"Here, let me get the sink going again. Hot water, eucalyptus. God's own miracle cure," Pam says, and Jimmy and I watch as she scoots out of the kitchen and to their bedroom.

Jimmy tries to not look at me, and I know I make him nervous. That kind of power is delicious, I guess. There's just something about a man who fears you more than you even do.

He squirms around for a minute and sticks his finger into the bowl of jello Pam was about to dress with a heaping spoon of whip cream. He sucks on it like a blonde toddler then notices me staring at him.

"Is he cheating on me?" I look for Pam who's still humming to herself in the back bathroom, and I know that Sela and the boys are upstairs. With each beat, I feel a rib crack and wouldn't be surprised if my heart plopped into Pam's tainted jello.

"Who? Wait, what?" Jimmy says, removing the finger. I study his face because it's something you can do in children, and really, Jimmy's just an overgrown version of one, so I look hard to see that first initial reaction, and his face is clear as day. Mitch may be keen on cracking my ribs open, but Jimmy has no clue about it.

"All ready for you, Mister," Pam says and playfully swats Jimmy on the butt. He grabs at his pants again, but this time he's not whining about it. He's still looking at me funny.

"Watch it there," Pam says when Jimmy turns to leave and hits the door frame.

She laughs a little, sticks a wooden spoon in the jello and says, "You know, for all our problems Elena, it's nice to know we landed two good Christian men to stand by us."

And I only nod because Pam is planted square in front of the knife drawer.

#

"Oh, it's a terrible thing. Burns really, I mean when I, you know, peepee." I can't really look at Marjorie, the one with the chlamydia because she has a tiny speck of ranch dip at her lip that no one's talking about. Which is weird really because we're discussing burning urine. We're practically sisters now.

"Okay, so Lynette, your turn." Pam bites her lip when she says it, so I look to Lynette, shoulder length hair and a stretch of brown bangs that hang too close to her eyes. She's wearing a turtleneck that's the same shade as her hair, and I'd imagine she's burning up in that ugly thing except for the fact that her wrist bones pop through her skin. And she's shaking.

"Oh, I don't know," Lynette says. She takes a sip from her water glass that's etched with marching ducks, the one that Pam swears is a collector's item. I can hear glass hit teeth.

"It's okay. We're all here for you." I look around the small circle, at Holy-rolling Pam and her Holy-rolling friends. And I have a sharp stab of guilt, that born and bred Catholic feeling that I can never shake loose from my bones. They have each other at least.

"It's in me. Inside me? That's a weird way to explain it."

"No, it's not. You're doing great," Pam says. She's hunched over and the material of her smock buckles and her right breast is there in its blinding white bra, and I almost want to laugh because the air is so tight. Lynette starts to cry.

"It's inside of me, his eyes, I can see them. And his fear. Oh God, Jesus, if I could have swallowed it for him, if I could have swallowed it—" Her body is its own earthquake, her limbs loose, and she hunches over in the recliner. Her shoulder blades look dangerous stretched against her turtleneck.

Pam goes to hug Lynette, and Lynette starts breathing again, a short breath, then two long ones with her eyes closed. She opens them again, and I'm close enough to see the color. A light shade of violet.

"His friend. Um, they were friends, you know. And maybe there was more there, I don't know. But that doesn't mean he had to suffer." Another gasp, a hard rub at her nose. Her face is inflamed, swollen with pain, and I'm so close I could touch her.

"I know it's wrong. Being gay, I know, in my mind. My heart even. But how could I let something like that push me away from him? He was my son. And then those bastards, oh God forgive me. Those kids, they think it's okay to take him from me? To beat him, oh, no, no, no..." She whispers it, and my face is warm. I place my fingertips to my cheek and stroke away tears. She's hunched completely now, and Pam is rocking her softly back and forth. One of the women whimpers. Another blows her nose.

"I loved him," is muffled by Pam's shoulder, but we all hear it.

There's quiet until Pam suggests a prayer. She's sitting on the recliner's armrest, Lynette's broken body attached to her side, and we all join hands to say the Our Father. I say the words, and they link us, chain us to each other's pain. I think of Sela, her small face. How big she'll be one day and how that bigness will in no way protect her from this world.

After the prayer and the quiet reemerges, Pam asks if I'll help her refresh everyone's drinks.

"Sure," I say and take glasses from the other six women who are shelled versions of their previous selves.

"What's going on?" she asks, and she's frantic about it. I think she's referring to Lynette, but then she starts dumping red solo cups into the sink with such force that two ice cubes pop out onto the counter.

"What do you mean?" I drop the ice down the garbage disposal, and that's when I see she's clamped her fist around the cross at her neck.

"Jimmy told me when I brought his soup to him earlier. That you think Mitch..." she trails off, and her face is pained like she's the one with a wounded child, a wounded gut, a secret job. Like she's the one who loves a man who's kissed her scars and who has now taken to making them.

I look around, and I know I'm going to see the pig even though I hate that beyond awful thing. But there it is, dressed in its chef's getup, waving a whisk in one hand, spatula in the other. Its mouth is so wide it gives off a frenzied kind of happiness that could only be managed if you were ceramic yard sale swine and nothing else was real. But everything is real, and right now I'm too sober to deal with it. Lynette has shattered me.

"I have to go," I tell Pam. She wants to ask more, prod with her fingers and shake religion into my wounds, but now my own hands are shaking, and I hate that this happens sometimes because it's like they're saying, "Look at you, you crazy mess. Go get the whiskey. Go make this worse."

She hugs me and rubs her raw nose into my cheek until it's wet. Pam calls for Sela, and she comes downstairs, her face shocked from her rough and tumble cousins who were once caught trying to feed a lit firecracker to their next-door neighbor's cat.

“Ready?” Sela shakes her head “yes,” and I grab my purse that's hanging on the banister. “Tell them...something,” I say, nodding at the women in the living room, still nursing on quiet prayers.

“I will,” she says. As we head out, I grab Sela's hand, feel her pulse in my palm.

THIRTEEN

Mitch

I can't say "I love you," but I can say "yes" when Aaron invites me to his office. He's an accountant for a mortgage firm and throws around strings of letters like "PCAOB" and "GAAP" that have no real context for me, but I welcome them during our rigid elevator ride.

"Calls?" Aaron asks a woman in a blue button down, and I trail behind, overgrown puppy at his heels. There's a stain on the woman's breast, and when she follows my gaze, her cheeks grow pink.

"No, no calls," she says. She picks at her mousy hair and mutters "dang it" under her breath.

"A milk cow," Aaron says when we're inside his office, the heavy wooden door shut behind us. "They go and have babies, and I get to witness nature at work. You'd think with all the powdered garbage on the market today, they'd stop making wet nurses of themselves." I nod along, blink back an image of Elena with her hair down, short and neat above her shoulders, Sela at her breast. That sucking sound. That quiet.

"Yeah, so...will she think it's weird?"

"Who, what?" Aaron places his bag behind his desk. I'm supposed to be finishing up a small job at One Union National Plaza because Jimmy's home sick with what he's told Pam is the flu and what he told me is some sort of "vicious love killer" that he's sure that dealer at the Cherokee gave him. But instead, I'm in the National Metropolitan bank tower a few streets over from One Union National Plaza, watching Aaron loosen his tie. It's my birthday today, and celebrating is an exercise in lying. Elena thinks I'm working, and then I'll meet her at Sela's therapist for a family cryfest which will be followed by fried rice and knife throwing at Benihana to honor the day.

And Aaron thinks I'm leaving my wife.

"The woman out there, the one who's...leaking. You know, do you think she thinks it's weird I'm in here?" I whisper.

"Tricia? We kind of have a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy at Willard. Tricia don't ask, and I don't tell." My lip hurts because I'm torturing it with my teeth.

"Ha, relax. I told her you're checking out the ceiling for water damage." He signals at a corner of the drop ceiling above our heads, and there's a stain there that looks like two half circles hashing it out.

"I think the birthday boy needs a drink," Aaron says. Thirty's an age that's supposed to be ancient. And it does feel ancient to me after years of working in the sun, carrying buckets up a ladder, crouching down on a hot roof, skin to heat, sweat in my eyes. Last night was a hot bath and Elena rubbing icy hot into my shot muscles and useless spine, and the menthol is lingering. So is the feel of Elena's hands.

I'm not leaving my wife.

Aaron pours, and his eyes flicker, the fluorescent light dancing across the curve of his eyeball. I finally did it. Last night, no liquor, 3 a.m. and stone cold sober. I called Aaron to tell him I was sorry. That I love him. That we'll storm through life, just us. Together.

Aaron waits until the whiskey burns through me because AA is just a thing my crazy wife makes me do. And then he unbuttons the collar of my shirt, and his lips meet my collar bone.

"With you, it's not a want thing," he says. He holds my hand, and green eyes are all I see. "It's a need thing. A forever thing." And his lips return to my neck, and I stare at the framed picture of Aaron smiling with his parents, the parents who know he's gay and were the first to throw a stone when they found out.

Aaron turns the door's lock, and there's typing leaking through the small cracks where door meets wall. He places a finger at his lips, long, thin, trimmed cuticle. No ring. And then my eyes meet ceiling, those two dirty circles still brawling it out, and I think, as Tricia with the

leaky chest *type, type, types* our background noise, how nothing is forever.

#

I'm spinning, sailing, swimming. Everything with an "s." Aaron's lips are still on me, and when I lick my own, I taste him. Feel him. I'm on top of the world, but I'm also buried in it, in the past. In that moment when Elena wrenched me free.

My mama hurt. Physically mostly, but it was the head stuff that was the worst. She never said, "I love you," never showed up to school for class plays or that one time I was awarded a blue ribbon for a poem I wrote about the way wheat looks in a windstorm.

And sometimes people would call me a fag. Mostly the guys in my class, but I got the impression that they couldn't really smell it on me. More like they hated that I did well in school, that I landed Elena and that Virginia Sewell wanted me too. They hated all that, but then one day, junior year, when a ragtag group of them came skidding in front of our house and threw that rock through the front window with a piece of notebook paper taped to it, the word "faggot" written out in Sharpie, my mama made me put it in my room. She brushed off my desk, the blue ribbon trampled under her thick feet and placed it next to my book of Longfellow.

"Don't forget what you are," she said.

The first time Elena came over, Mama was out taking Daddy to the doctor. This was before we knew about the lung cancer, so he'd shake the house with his hideous cough, and Mama would say things to me like "See what you done?"

I hid Faggot Rock under a pile of clothes in my closet, but Elena stubbed her toe on it searching through the board games I kept on the top shelf in there. Elena lived in a trailer, so her closet was nothing more than a cramped pocket of air with an accordion door. She was impressed that she could fit her whole body in mine.

"Who did this?" she asked when she unveiled the rock. She cradled it in both hands and winced at the words.

"Jerry Edelson. His crew," I said and shrugged it off. No big deal. Ain't nothing to do with me.

"Why'd you keep it?" she asked. At this point she knew about the spoon. She knew the map of pain on my body, and I had memorized hers. So, I told her, "My mother made me." How pathetic.

But Elena nodded and got this glint in her eye, the same glint she'd get when she'd kiss my lips at the drive-in or slyly lift her skirt at me in the dirt patch that posed as a parking lot at school.

"Well, then. Let's teach her a lesson."

That night, things were quiet. I made sure everyone was in their correct positions watching *Dallas*, and that's when I heard it, rubber squealing against gravel. Elena's two brothers were whooping it up in their truck, and then a rock, a new rock, tore through our living room window.

It said, "Child Abuser."

My mother said nothing, threw it in the black Glad bag and sat back down to watch JR's tired face. From that point on, she stopped checking to make sure Faggot Rock stayed on my desk.

I asked Elena later how she got Hank and Bobby to do it. She said she had found their stash of dirty magazines, so they owed her.

My cell vibrates in my pocket, and as I fish it out, I'm about to say, "Miss me already?," but fortunately, I do a quick screen check first. It's Jimmy.

"We've got a problem," he says.

Oh dang.

#

"I want to begin the way I start all my family sessions and have everyone tell me how their day's going. Let us all know what you did, what you're going to do, how you feel. Just a simple exercise to break the ice,"

Dr. Kathy says. She's large a woman, but she's not afraid of her width. She spreads out her legs, rests her forearms on her massive thighs and hunches over like a man. There's a mole on her face, a focal point that helps me avoid Elena's glances that make me wonder if she can smell Aaron on my clothes.

"It's a good day," Sela says. Elena and I both glance at her. She sits straight and tall in the middle of us on the blue and white striped couch. She's practiced and beautiful and her hands are finger-locked and resting in her lap like she's waiting for her turn in the spelling bee.

"And why is it a good day, Sela?" Dr. Kathy's voice is upbeat but not condescending. She looks Sela straight in the eye.

"It's a good day because they're both here," she says. I jump a little. Elena's hand has found my wrist.

"And it's Daddy's birthday, so we get to go eat, and he said in the car that I can go watch the fire."

"The fire?"

"At the restaurant," I explain, and I'm sure my face is the color of the blood-red Razorback pennant on Dr. Kathy's wall.

"Happy birthday, Mitch."

"Thank you." And I like her in this moment, but then she says the next thing: "How's your day so far?"

The like is replaced with panic. I rehearsed in the truck after Jimmy called: leak in the men's bathroom at One Union National Plaza, easy job, cranky businessmen, ate lunch in the truck while listening to some Republican spout off about some Democrat. We didn't have time to discuss details when I met Elena and Sela who were already sitting in Dr. Kathy's waiting room. And the receptionist kept glancing over at us every time I tried to open my mouth so there was just this stony silence until now. Elena's holding my hand.

I try to find the mole again but instead I find Dr. Kathy's gray eyes, and every false detail is concrete hardening.

"Rough," I say.

Dr. Kathy smiles and looks at Sela. “It’s playtime,” she says, and Sela beams. She takes Sela’s hand, and they walk to a door in the wall with a two-sided mirror. Elena and I get up to follow them, but Dr. Kathy smiles again and motions us to sit back down.

“Sela’s just going to play with Sarah and the other dolls for a moment. Sela, I’m going to talk with your parents for a little while and then have you come back in, okay?” Sela agrees and the door is closed, and now Dr. Kathy spreads her hips, reattaches her forearms to her thighs in the blue and white striped chair that matches the couch.

“Why rough?” she says.

“You know, life’s hard.”

“I don’t know. Tell me about your life,” she says. I look at Elena and figure she must feel it, too. The way Dr. Kathy’s eyes are kind of like a hand removing the sheet from our naked bodies.

“It’s hard. Scary sometimes. Like when I’m standing on a roof.” The thud is everywhere, echoing off the ceiling, and I don’t know if Dr. Kathy is listening to my words or my heart.

“Why do you think it’s scary?”

I don’t know what happens. I can’t find the mole, the grey eyes are still turning into me like a knife tip, and Elena’s hand is no longer on my wrist. I keep hearing Jimmy in my head— “She knows, man. Jig is up”—when I tried to deny it, and then I hear Elena’s “We teach her a lesson,” and I get a mental glimpse of Mama’s face when she was bested at her own game.

And then I think of Aaron. How he loves me the way I fully want to be loved.

How I’m a coward.

“I’m cheating on my wife,” I say.

But then again, maybe not.

We go out to eat only because it's a promise to Sela, so the whole time the chef is massacring shrimp and steak in a fiery ring, Elena sits on the other side of our daughter, not saying a word. She orders a Mai-Tai, I order a beer, and we don't talk about that either.

"Who is she? Who is she?" over and over again, but there was no time to answer Elena because Dr. Kathy kept saying "breathe." And then she said we needed to compose ourselves— that it was time to bring Sela in and work with her, focus on her problem. She suggested couples counseling and gave us the name of her colleague in the office next door. We're supposed to go in once a week, and all my misguided mind can think about is more bills, more gas money, more time sputtering through my tightly gripped fingers.

Elena killed the tissue box on the coffee table between us and Dr. Kathy, so her face was eerily reminiscent of a Picasso painting. And it wasn't until Sela asked, "Please?" that she agreed to go inside the restaurant with wiped clean cheeks and a flesh-colored mouth.

And what am I supposed to say? "I like dudes, get on board with it?" So, I'm drinking a beer, and there's a lady sitting across from us with a guy next to her—an oily-haired, pony-tailed biker type. She's drinking the same beer as me, and her lips curl around the glass shaft, and for an instant I think like an ordinary man, a man that's not doomed to be called a fag for the rest of his life. And as I drink and will the buzz to swallow me whole, I call her Sheila in my head, some bimbo I picked up at a bar one weekend when I was supposedly working. It could fit. I take another swig. It does fit. And when I look at my wife who's statue still, staring into the oily flames, I think about her naked feet, her ruthless love. My dismal life.

FOURTEEN

Elena

Secrets are no longer secrets, except for mine, of course.

Mitch comes clean, but I hate saying it like that because when he tells me about Sheila, I feel like I've taken a mud bath.

He finds me out on the patio, and I close my eyes when I hear his sound. I think, *Go. Please just go*, but he scrapes the empty metal chair across the concrete and sits in it. Looks at me. There's no whiskey because we've already run out.

"What's she like?" I ask. There's a Mai Tai in my system—the only alcohol I've had all day—but that's been quickly absorbed, slurped up by my blood, and now my shaky hands are taunting me.

"Not you."

"No duh." Blonde, just some fling, he tells me. I look up, and he's crying. The traitor has the audacity to cry.

"Oh, yes, this must be so incredibly painful for you." The ice in my voice chills even me. It's strange how quiet we are when usually we go at it so hard, our neighbor pokes a glaucomic eye through her blinds.

"Elena." That's all he says. My father left when I was seven. Sela's age. My father left for a woman he met two counties over while taking our steer to market. Her name was Angela, burnt red hair, painted nails to match. She looked like one of the women in my brothers' dirty mags. He brought her over to meet us when he knew our mama would be cleaning over at St. Ann's, and I was actually grateful he did something so perverted like that. Teach the "we" master a lesson.

But then it was time to go after he sucked down one of the beers he brought for my brothers, and after Angela glossed my cheek with her sticky red lips, it was time for him to say goodbye. He looked good. Handsome. Happy. Everything that comes from leaving the ones that grasp your limbs and weigh you down.

"Elena," he had said, brushing my hair with his hand. And then he was gone.

I hear whimpering, and it's my husband. He reaches for my hand, but I smack it like one of the mosquitoes circling our heads.

"Don't be such a faggot," I say.

#

I save up the money I get from Hattie's in an old jar of Jiffy peanut butter that I keep in the empty spare tire well in the Grand Am. I take it out for oil changes or on the off chance that Mitch fills up my car, which he hardly ever does. He knows the Grand Am is an extension of me, and you just don't touch the extension.

I think about Mitch now as I'm dressing the mannequins on the display near the front of Hattie's. Our weekend was a pretty rough one as far as actually associating with one another goes. He left, in fact. Said he was going to stay at a hotel which I know is code for "meet with my side piece." But I didn't care. I didn't want to look at his face, and frankly, I was afraid of what I'd do to him in his sleep.

"Thinking deep thoughts, huh?" Tanisha says, dumping another box of warped winter coats at my feet. That's another thing about Hattie's, nothing is ever in season, so I'm left to dress a series of blank-eyed dolls in soiled jackets that smell slightly better than a fat man's armpit.

"Something like that. Mitch left." I say it because I need to say it. Pam and Jimmy know it's all hit the fan, but I can't quite bring myself to talk to them about it. And as much as Jesus may have an opinion on the matter, I really don't want to know what it is.

Sela knows, too. Sela's bladder also knows because it kept me up half the night, scrubbing sheets in our coffin of a laundry room.

"Ain't that something," Tanisha says and squats down, pretending to rifle through the box because Hattie is sharking through the snow boots at the back of the store, asking customers if she can show them anything.

Tanisha's decked out in her gold lamé pants, her "fancy pants" that she wore the day I applied to work at Hattie's. I was wondering why on God's green earth Hattie hired someone who looked louder than a siren, but Tanisha knows how to sell. And besides, most of the clientele are Tanisha look-alikes anyways.

"Yup. I'm leaving him."

When Tanisha opens her mouth I see the tiny glints of gold that match her pants.

"Careful now," she says. "I'm thinking maybe we go with the purple windbreaker for the middle one," she adds for the sake of two-ton Tammy who has a "Southern, Loud and Proud" t-shirt on and is harboring close to our right. When she moves away Tanisha hisses, "The kids. The kids feel it most." And I know that. I've got Barbie sheets mildewing in my washer as proof.

"What do I do then?" I say. "Just Another Manic Monday" is leaking down the walls, and I think of that word, "leak." "The whole world's leaking," I say to him sometimes, and for us, that's a good thing. It means money. And I think of my jar of peanut butter, my measly lump of bills in it and my stupid TV in the storage unit that started to depreciate the moment I bought it. I can't raise Sela all alone.

"You guys need time for yourselves. That's what I do when things get heated with me and Jonesy. There's an old woman who lives on the floor below us, and I send Tasia down there to count pieces of butter-scotch or whatever the heck they do while we work things out. Helps," she says. I'm not so sure seeing that Tanisha comes off as the type of girlfriend you get a restraining order against, but I nod. She might be right, and considering she's the one doing this parenting thing solo, I figure she doesn't have the time to be wrong.

After work and after I start to smell faintly of old cheese, I grab my purse and leave my "Ask Me How I Can Help?" tag in my locker in the backroom. I spot my Mom mug with its missing "M," and consider how a Dr. Pepper and whiskey would change my life in the most amazing

way. But I fight the tug by calling the one person who screws up my life harder than any drug. My mother.

#

Keeping my eyes on the road ain't easy with the devil in my ear.

"Well, I'll b—"

"Save it," I say. "Tell me about Daddy." I can hear her breathing as I whip down Pyle Drive and stop short at a light that turns red way too fast. Pain shoots down the back of my neck, but it's nothing compared to the way I feel when she speaks.

"What's there to say when nobody loves you?" Ugh, her voice. Nails on the chalkboard of my life. It's at least three octaves higher than most women's, and she does this thing where she whispers at the end. Like she doesn't want me to know what she's really saying. I wave my middle finger around my head at the car in front of me that's still idling even as the light turns green, but that doesn't even make me feel better.

"He loved you. You drove him away," I say. It was pathetic to watch. Even at five, when Daddy was still at home, I could taste my mother's desperation slick in the folds of her skin. "Here's the ham, Harold. Glazed just like you like it, Harold." Her words gave me cavities.

"I did no such thing," she says, and "thing" is barely audible. Here comes the guilt. Wave after wave, pounding and breaking into me. But then I remember the nail polish incident. How after he said her pot roast tasted like an unwashed foot, I went to her room and found her nail polish in an old, empty egg carton shoved under her bed. I took out the red and started painting my dolly's nails in my room, door closed. And after my father had left to wash the taste of feet out of his mouth at the bar, she found me and "the whore's paint" and ripped it out of my hand. She scrubbed me so hard in the bath my skin rubbed raw against my sheets that night, and I cried for Jesus to save me.

"You drove everyone away," I say. She laughs, and it flutters about like a mosquito.

"I didn't drive you away. Y'all left. Y'all just got in your trucks and zipped on out, and here I am left to make stories up when the women at Mass ask how my little Elena is. How the hell should I know?" The cussing means she's scared. It's like spooking a rat into a corner, nudging it a little with a sharp stick. So, I nudge a little harder.

"I think the funniest part is that you didn't realize he was cheating on you. Like you were just too stupid to see it." I'm on the tail of the guy in front of me, Mr. Sleeps at Green Lights. I'm so close I can taste his back bumper, and I think of doing it. Slamming hard into him, running him off the road.

"You don't know what it's like." She breathes "like," and I inhale, break a little and let Mr. Sleeps at Green Lights speed off. This time his finger is the one making the rounds.

"I do," I say, and the break is real this time. The TV floods out of me, my secret job, the pain of raising a child whose face is the perfect blend of mine and Mitch's and how hard it is to look at her sometimes, to know that one day she could be in her car and have the relentless thirst to ruin the life of the person in front her. I don't talk about Mitch's affair.

"It's okay, baby, it'll be okay." I'm crying so hard I have to pull over into the parking lot of BJ's Buffet. I wipe hard at my face, pretend I'm tuning the radio dials so the black guy leaving Jester's Pawn Shop doesn't see I'm crying. I reach into the glove box for a leftover McDonald's napkin and make the mistake of looking in the rearview mirror. Atrocious.

"You know, Mitch isn't your father. And heaven knows you ain't me," she laughs. That laugh. That was always a good thing, much better than her voice. It was real; it was from somewhere low, deep. Maybe her spleen. It came out that time I told her that I met a guy named Dave and was going to shave my head so I could live as his wife at the commune. She laughed so hard, I thought she'd chip her tooth.

"You're better Elena. You are. And God knows your child has a better set of parents than you did, so guess what? She'll be better than you, and she'll live her life knowing she has two parents who love her so much that they worry about every little thing when it comes to her." I nod to no one, to everyone. There's a couple walking into the pawn shop now—barely twenty, I guess—and I think I'm being generous. She pushes the stroller, one of those cheap contraptions, and I can see the baby is only in a diaper, naked feet. But the guy's arm is around her shoulders, and he leans in, kisses her on the cheek. The woman laughs.

"I don't want to tell you what to do, and I've had more than enough experience knowing you wouldn't follow my advice anyways. But I just want to tell you, don't be like me or your father. Try, Elena. Just try as hard as you can."

When the phone is quiet, and my mother is where she should be, crying in her kitchen in Helena and no longer in my ear, I think about the other time. The time we made blackberry jam—just me and her—and how out in the sunlight, the rays spoking through the trees, she said I was the prettiest thing she'd ever done. That I was the prettiest thing she ever would do.

I think of Sela, and I already know.

I have to try.

FIFTEEN

Mitch

I'm cocooned in the down comforter, and my belly is full. General Tsao's, Aaron's favorite and mine now, too. We don't eat out a lot besides the occasional birthday dinner, Elena and me, so being wrapped in the blanket of someone who calls The Dynasty Diner his "place" and who knows the number by heart lights a thrilling match down my spine. Right before the guilt comes to snuff it out.

"Thoughts?" Aaron asks me when he catches me in the hallway. He's holding Top Gun in one hand, Risky Business in the other, and I nod my head at the DVD case with Tom Cruise on the cover, his shades pulled down and the young blond chick leaning against the hood of a car. "Legs on that one" comes hurtling like a train, and Jimmy's string of words sears a path behind my forehead.

I told Jimmy the same story: some blond that didn't mean anything. But of course, I had to juice up the details for my sensory-obsessed friend: long legs, little waist. A smile that says she wants no one but me.

"Dang," was all he said, and I knew it was meant as one part remorse, one part jealousy. "Is it over?" he asked, and I said it was, for Pam's sake and for Elena's who would probably receive the squeaky-clean version from Pam. More fudged details: *I'm in a hotel room in Shiloh. I need to clear my head for the weekend. No, but thank you, Jimmy, thanks for the offer. I'd just rather tough it out on my own. Yeah, I've got condoms.*

He did ask why I didn't tell him about Sheila and sounded wounded like a cartoon dog. While I plucked my tongue at a strip of chicken between my teeth on Aaron's king-sized bed, I thought up an answer: "Because you're like a brother, Jimmy. And I didn't want you to have to shoulder the burden of lying for me."

“Thank you, Mitch,” he said, and the whisper of guilt formed into a full-fledged windstorm.

We agreed to take the weekend off and shore up our repairs through the week before starting St. Bonaventure’s roof leak next Saturday. It seems a world away, sitting next to Aaron in his boxers—his scar, an old friend on my mind, the little mound of flesh where past hurt braided into itself. Reformed itself.

I pad like a Greek in my white comforter toga to the living room where Aaron has opened another bottle of wine. He fires up the TV, and we drink and watch for a while—Tom gliding his white socks across the wood floor—when Aaron grabs the remote and dials down the volume. Green eyes. They’re always a surprise to look into.

“How are you really?” he asks. The wine has warmed him up. When I first called him from the parking lot of a Chevron outside of Little Rock to see if I could stay at his place, he didn’t ask any questions. Just said, “Of course,” and picked me up on his way home from work. And we were too busy with the Chinese chicken, the first bottle of wine, the way his sheets felt as we tumbled under them to talk about it. Until now.

“Like my wife caught me cheating.”

“She caught us?” I look up, but his face isn’t concerned. In fact, there’s a slight smile there, and I want to point it out, but the chicken, the way the comforter is keeping me warm against the steady stream of air conditioning, the fact that tonight is my choice, and it feels pretty darn good to make my own choices stops me. And it’s worse knowing what that smile means. He thinks he’s won.

“No. Well, she thinks you’re a blonde with big boobs so in some insane, untrue way, yes.”

“I’ve always wanted highlights. The bosom, not so much.” He leans in and kisses my neck, and I close my eyes to the feel of it. You can do that with moments. Block out the dirtiest parts of your world and fall

victim to the current rush of skin against skin. I've built a whole life around moments like these.

"It's serious. She kicked me out. I mean, I let myself out for the weekend. I'm not sure what I'll be going home to."

"Then don't." Here's another moment, but it's not skin against skin. It's Aaron in his boxer shorts wanting me to redirect my entire life down his path. Stark flashes of future me: the doting husband at the Christmas party, buying our first puppy (a Scottish Terrier because Aaron mentioned once how he's always admired Jock from Lady and the Tramp). There's love for the future me. There's a lifetime of "finally." But there's also quick jabs to the heart when I think of Sela and how I've done nothing but let Elena down.

"Wait here," Aaron says, and it's just me and Tom in his underwear. He goes to the master bedroom, so I close my eyes. I open them when I see Elena crying against the back of my lids, and now Aaron is standing in front of me.

"I'm sorry for you, for your pain, Mitch. But I'm also not sorry because I love you." I look again at the green in his eyes, and all I can see is honesty. There's his mother who doesn't love him anymore. And his father who doesn't love him anymore. And then there's his heart, layer after layer scalped away, a twist of knotted skin that proves the damage. And then there's his truth: I am his Elena.

He has a blue box, the top opened and the contents hovering in front of me. I look at them, the rings. "Brushed tungsten," he says to say something I guess, and then I look at the one already on my finger, old and gold and inscribed with "TEAM ME," because Elena and I were drunk the day we went to the jeweler's and thought it would be funny. Team Mitch and Elena. Forever and ever.

I take off the gold band after a few awkward tugs and wait.

But the moment's gone.

I leave Sunday morning with kisses on my lips and a new ring on my finger. The car ride to the Chevron station is as quiet as when Aaron had picked me up, but this time he's silent because he's satisfied, and I'm silent because I'm lying.

He thinks I'm going to leave my wife.

"Until this weekend," he says into the dusky Sunday evening. He gives a wave because there are people around, a black woman with a tangle of children around her legs and a man who leaks a stream of gasoline down his pants and hocks a swear at the ground. I wave back, and off he goes, back to White Smoke where in his head we're together, and in my heart, we're not.

I'm not leaving my wife.

My phone is choked with voicemails, all of them Jimmy, one from Elena. She wants to try, to start over. My new ring burns my skin.

And then there's the one from Sela.

"Hi, Daddy. I miss you. Come home because Mommy says when you come home, we can have ice cream." Then there's a crackling like Elena is taking the phone, and I hear her breath for a moment like she's going to say something, but she doesn't.

In the cab of the truck, I spot a trash can over where the gasoline-soaked man is standing, an older gentleman with a longish beard and a belt buckle the size of both my fists. I walk over, and he nods at me, and the ring lands in the belly of the barrel, rests on wadded up paper towels and the half-eaten contents of a Taco Bell bag.

Scarred skin, new rings, green eyes. I blink them all away.

Because I miss her, too.

SIXTEEN

Elena

“What about the TV?” Her voice is like the one always zigging and zagging its waves through my chest, but I hardly hear her. I’m thinking about the baby appointment we have scheduled later today. And I’m also thinking “heartbeat” because there Ronnie is in the corner with her bug-eyed child, pecking in a circle with the other mothers who keep sneaking peeks at me.

“Mommy?” I look at Sela, and her face is still saying “TV,” and I tell her it’s fine. It’s still in storage, and no, we still don’t need to tell Daddy. She thinks everything is good, that Mitch and I have made up, which we have to some degree. I don’t like thinking about last weekend, where he was, who he was with. So, I hold on to that tiny speck of power I have left: the TV. My one thing. But Sela wants me to come clean about it because that’s what people do when they make up. When they’re in love.

“Do I look okay?” she says, and I nod because it’s time to herd her with the rest of her class near the stage. Tater tots. It smells like tater tots and juice dried on the concrete floor. And it’s ten in the morning, so they haven’t even fired up the stoves yet, which means this smell has just been doubling over on itself week by week, and everyone has these slick, lipsticked smiles, like the fact that old tater tot oil seeping through their beautiful clothes doesn’t faze them for a minute. I guide Sela by her white-coated shoulders, a pharmacist’s coat that Pam sewed, and Sela drowns in. It’s career day, and St. Bonaventure Elementary had this fantastic idea of hosting it during school, so I can’t even stand next to my husband, shield myself behind his shoulder so I don’t have to look at Ronnie while listening to Principal Geyser mispronounce “cardiothoracic” because someone’s little offspring wants to be a surgeon.

The tater tots. They go to my head when I look at Sela and how she's unfortunately standing next to Trudy. But on the plus side, I'm sandwiched between Marlene—Bud's mother who smells like fermented apples—and Allie's father because he got laid off from Tyson and everyone tries to pretend something like that is not the end of the world.

But then there's the other smell. Bleach.

I did it this morning when Sela was asleep, and when Mitch woke up, I had sprayed half a bottle of body splash, but he still knew. He kissed my cheek, and the “I love you” seeped through my skin with his saliva. The word “but” was there, but I didn't say it. You love me, but you cheated on me. You love me, but you left last weekend. You love me, but, but, but...

It will be okay. We'll go to a meeting.

He thinks it's about the alcohol.

“My name is Sela Reynolds, and I want to be a pharmacist.” I wait for the silly grin like the ones delivered by the five kids who went before her, but her lips knead into one another, and her eyes are only good for searching. I still don't get one when she finds me, just a nod. Just a face that says, “thank you for not leaving.”

It's Trudy's turn, a mini-marine biologist. Stupid. We don't live anywhere near the ocean, and I'm sure that kid's first reaction to seeing water would be drowning.

I feel Ronnie, and that feeling turns up my heart. Sela's okay. She's okay and doesn't need me. I think “water” and then quicker than my feet can shuffle, I'm in the girl's bathroom, the faucet in the tiny white sink turned up so hot I have to muffle my yelp.

In a storage unit, there's a TV I own. And at work, my boss is pissed because I took the day off to be with my daughter. And in my gut, the whiskey burns, breakfast of champions.

And my husband cheated on me with a man.

I splash the hot water on my face, and it hurts. It blurs my eyes, mascara melting into my lashes, and I blink hard, but everything is black in the tiny mirror. Even Ronnie's face when I look up.

#

"I like you, you know. I still do." The A/C is frigid in Ronnie's Beamer, and I love the feeling. It dries up my blurry face. The new car smell has replaced the tater tots so my heart slows down a bit, and finally, I can open my eyes.

"You must have a thing for crazy people," I say. She snorts and shrugs, taps out a Virginia Slim from the pack she keeps hidden under the seat. We're parked at the side of the church. I think of my husband high in the sky and let the sun stab my eyes.

"I'm a real piece of work," Ronnie says and blows the smoke straight into my nostrils. I want to say smoking is bad for babies, but Ronnie knows that. She's on numero dos, so no need to remind her. Plus, I have bleach and whiskey bottles back home that sit a little lighter this morning, so I'm in no position to point out the obvious.

"No. It's not your fault."

"Yes, it is. I guess, I didn't think it through. The toll it must take on you. I shouldn't have dumped the news on you like that." Looking her in the eyes is as bad as staring at the sun, so I look at the vent instead, take on that puff of air like the one the optometrist shoots into your eyes. A toll. Yes. It's a toll, a burden I've tried to wash clean with the bleach. The whiskey. But the real thing is the guilt of knowing I'm trying to start over. I'm wishing on one hand that Sela never existed, that I would have chosen another life, and I'm wishing on the other that I never existed because then I wouldn't have these monster thoughts. Because deep down, it's not about growing our family. It's about erasing reality and dulling the point of a new pencil.

"I'm happy for you." I wait a beat. "And sad for me. But for other reasons, too." Today, Ronnie is wearing a sheath dress, geometric pat-

terns the color of salmon. My side eye concentrates on those patterns as my words click together.

"Mitch cheated on me."

"Oh, sweetie." The words drip with smoke, and now my chin is on her shoulder. She hugs me hard, and I look out her window to the edge of the woods, and there tucked back behind a scattering of tree trunks is a wide-eyed doe.

"With a man." That shuts her up. There's a difference between fun and dysfunctional, I know that's what Ronnie's thinking. But when I look at her, past the smoke and swirling salmon circles, her face is how my heart feels. Hurt.

"Tell me," she says. So, I do. I tell her about this morning, that's where I start. How Mitch left, how I dropped off Sela and headed back home for an hour or two before career day started. I told her about my secret job and how I'll probably be fired because Hattie's a REAL see-you-next-tuesday. I tell her about Tanisha and Tanisha's hoop earrings. I don't know why I tell her that part.

Oh yes, I do. I tell her because my tongue is as scared as my heart, and if I say the bad thing out loud then it's true. It was there, I suppose. I think about that faggot rock that some of the boys from school threw through Mitch's window and how his mother wanted him to keep it, his sins in stone as a reminder. And I remember thinking it was horse manure. It was all just a bunch of horse manure contrived by a bunch of scared boys and drilled in by a mother who doesn't know how to love her child. But it's bleeding into to me: motherhood, hate, disappointment, bed wetting, the child in the pharmacist's coat that's one size too big. My hands still sting from the faucet's hot water.

"This man rings the doorbell. Says his name is Aaron," I say. I was barefoot when I answered the door, which still irks me to no end. You need to be dressed, prepared for an attack like that.

"I should be at work." That's the first thing he says like I know who the heck he is or what the heck he does for a living. Then he gives me his

hand, and I shake it, and there's a little part of me that dings in my head, that warning bell. You're alone Elena. Strange man at the door, Elena. But then he starts crying, and dang it, Ronnie, if there's one thing I can't take in this world, it's a man crying." I snort, laugh a little because my insides are turned out, and I'm afraid they'll stain the leather. She draws again on the cigarette, and I take a deep breath of dirty air.

"I love your husband. And he was going to leave you, but he didn't. And that's ruined everything in me." He whispered that part, the "ruined." And then he says he just thought I should know, and then he walks to his car and drives away." I choke on words and teary phlegm. "You know the worst part?"

Ronnie dips her head at me, says, "What?"

"I didn't even have the satisfaction, that small moment of thinking, 'This guy's mental, and he has the wrong house.' He was wearing a t-shirt, flip flops. Pajama bottoms. It was like he was wearing a sandwich board that read, 'Mitch Reynolds has Really Taken Me for a Ride!'"

"So, what are you going to do?" she asks, and again, her face. My eyes are no longer dry, and the mascara pools up again.

"Ronnie, I think I might kill him," I say.

"Which one?"

I haven't decided.

SEVENTEEN

Mitch

She cancelled the baby appointment. Of course, I didn't actually know that until I drove all the way to Little Rock just to be told I could go home, there'd be no need helping us conceive a second child today.

And I didn't call her either. I just drove home numb because there was something wrong, and I prayed it wasn't my worst fear. But that's an irrational thought. She will never know about Aaron.

Because I called him last night. And he promised me.

"I've known men like you, Mitch. But geez, I didn't think...I'm just so stupid," he said. It rained last night, and my hand was so slippery, I nearly dropped the phone twice. Two in the morning, hoofing through rain puddles. Going nowhere.

Elena was asleep when I left, konked out from our pillow talk. Promises of another AA meeting this week, a therapy appointment the next. The constant living with and loving each other for Sela's sake. How easy it was to agree to everything before the slippery phone was in my hand, and Aaron's pain was on the line.

"I'm sorry. Okay? But, come on, Aaron. I mean...I mean... did you really think it would work out? Did you think springing that dang ring on me was a good idea?" Slap-slap-slap in my work boots that I had thrown on in our garage. Water flashing at my ankles in spurts and an angry belly growl of thunder up above. "You're right. Maybe you are stupid," I said, but I didn't believe what I said. What I believe is this: I created something with Aaron because I'm afraid of failing my family. And as much as I may sometimes want that alternate universe, I live in this one. And I promised to live in this one before God and my wife.

"Screw you Mitch, and your secret dollhouse life. Something bad will happen. When people keep living their lies something always bad

happens.” The angry growl of thunder boiled in my chest, leaked up my throat like acid.

“I can’t, Aaron. I’m sorry, I know you’re angry, and you have to believe I didn’t want to hurt you. But I can’t do that to her.”

“Elena.”

“No. Sela.” I was in a work shirt, a clean one I struggled over my head before bed and my gray sweatpants, blackened with rain and a moonless sky. He went quiet, understanding, because Aaron isn’t heartless. Quite the opposite. He was given more than his fair share.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay, you won’t ever hear from me again.” I nodded and then remembered to talk into the phone.

“Okay,” I mumbled, then an “I’m sorry,” as the angry growl boiling my chest cavity was screaming “I love you!” in my ears.

I hit “End,” and then there was that moment when the pad of my thumb knew my reality before my head could wrap around it. It was over.

So today was all about going through the motions. Kissed Elena on the cheek, hugged Sela so hard I think I heard a joint pop. Picked up Jimmy and repaired a new leak at Jugs McCormick and stood idle as Jimmy shoved himself between me and any possible view I could get of the dancers on stage.

“Don’t want you getting any ideas,” he joked, jaw open and whispering, “Well, looky there,” as a ginger-haired stripper gave him a wink.

I think about it now—bloodless knuckles wrapped around the steering wheel—how she didn’t mention the appointment this morning like she normally would. No “Don’t forget!” or “You better be there!” And I didn’t think to say anything because maybe on some level I did want to forget. I didn’t want to be there.

And now my tires creep up the driveway, and I click the garage opener, and the door goes up too slow. *I need to take a look at it some time*, I think, and then I start crying. Because there Elena is, my beau-

tiful Elena and a bucket full of bleach, scrubbing the garage floor on hands and knees.

This is what I've done.

EIGHTEEN

Elena

I'm married to a fag. I know it's not PC to say, it's not Christian. But I imagine my brothers chanting the word over and over in my head, and that's what gets me. Them knowing they're better than me. And me knowing it, too.

I let Ronnie take home Sela, an impromptu middle of the week sleepover that makes Sela's face look like I'm selling her to the highest bidder.

"It will be fun!" I say, my skin scrubbed free of any last trace of makeup in the jammed hallways of St. Bonaventure Elementary. "Miss Ronnie will be back here to pick you up at three, and I'll have a bag packed for you." She's unsure, and I know it's because she's scared she'll pee herself in the middle of the night, and then it will be front page news tomorrow morning thanks to Trudy's unhinged jaw, but she can't be there when I talk to Mitch. Scream at Mitch. Kill him.

I want to kill him so bad.

I drive home shaky and have a "might as well" moment. My wheels scream into McDonald's, and I get a large Dr. Pepper, and then I head to Bubba's Beer and Booze and doctor it up with two tiny bottles of whiskey. Then I head to the mall. He won't be home for hours, and there's something cracking at my skull, at the bones in my wrist. I'm breaking apart bit by bit, but first, I need to see Miss Snarly Nose one last time.

I need to tell her something.

I've gotten down three-fourths of the drink, so as I swerve into the parking lot near the food court, my idea has become one of those brilliant ideas, and if I had an arm long enough and could walk a little straighter, I'd be patting myself on the back.

There's a blast of noise and cold air and a smell that's kind of like the aftermath of a cinnamon roll and Philly cheese steak making a baby, and the image makes me laugh. I go to turn and tell Mitch my joke, or maybe I think Ronnie's with me. And when I see no one's standing next to me, I wipe at my eyes even before the tears come.

I keep walking, and when I see the security guard chatting with a group of sloppy looking teenagers, I throw my shoulders back and lift my chin with so much force, my spine starts to ache.

I sniff her out really, because as I walk out of the food court and into the mall, I find my way by scent, by the perfumey cloud hanging around the doorway of Bath and Body Works. And then I take my bench, but afraid that she'll see me, I go and stand around the side of the store, pretending to look at my phone. I check the time—quitting time has arrived—and count out the Mississippi it takes for her to head toward Dillard's.

I've sucked the last drops of Dr. Pepper/whiskey and quietly trash the cup and clench my purse against my side. I pretend it's an arm guiding me through the gut of the department store, nimbly dodging the ladies with their glass bottles aimed at my face.

I pass the old maid dresses, over-sized handbags, shoes emitting the stench of dead leather and then emerge into the open air of Wednesday.

"You've got to be kidding me." I look, and there she is. She's about my height, but that's all we have in common because she's wearing a belted jean dress with the same wedges as last time, and her hair sits high on her head in a slicked back bun. I have a toothpaste stain on my black pants, and I can feel the deodorant smearing into my sleeveless button down. The stray clump of hair in my mouth tastes like whiskey.

"I just want to talk," I say.

"What? What can you possibly have to say to me? I mean you're the crazy mall lady. That's what my husband and I even call you!" She raises her hands, and the sun shines off her gold rings, the red lunchbox

smacking against her hip. There's a purse slung on her other shoulder, and I pray to God she doesn't have any mace in it.

I walk slowly to her like she's the wild animal, not me with whiskey flavored heartburn and a smelly belch in my throat. I hug her, and maybe she's too scared to move because her body goes stiff, and she's not yelling for help.

"Love her. Love him," I say. I look out, and here comes the car carrying her husband and her baby, those things that make her scream and cry inside herself at night, that make her feel selfish because she doesn't want them, but she doesn't want anyone else to have them either. I pull back, and her eyes are scared, and I know I've lost her because I never had her in the first place.

So, I take off, summer wind whipping at my face as I toe-heel it back to the other side where the food court is and my car waits. But it's okay that she calls me "the crazy mall lady," Miss Snarly Nose with her red lunchbox and flaming gold rings. Because what she doesn't realize is that I was her once, a blank sheet of paper barely written on.

And soon she'll learn there are things you just can't erase.

#

My hands are pink. Sore. Numb. They look like they're rotting off my body. I didn't open the garage door because I don't want the neighbors to see, and I also want to die. I take in large gulps of chemically sweet air, and each time the exhale is deep-chested tears, the kind that quake the cartilage in my joints. When he finds me, I'm hands and knees and concrete. When he finds me, I'm disappointed I haven't died yet.

Mitch walks in, and it's his work boots that keep my focus. Splotches of caulking on the toes and the frayed ends of his shoelaces. The smell of them almost takes over the bleach.

"What happened?" His lips on ears, his hands on shoulders. That feeling of being lifted foot to spine to head, snapped straight up and into his arms.

"Aaron," I say. And just like that, he's the one who quakes.

I go over to the garage door button drilled near the door that leads into the house and close the scene on our miserable little play.

"How?" But then real quickly, "I'm so sorry." Look, I get it. All the anger and the vile taste that's been in my mouth all day—and my hands, my horribly chewed up hands that I can't quit rubbing raw—all these things should be stacked like blocks, like bricks so I can drag his body up them and push him off the side. But then see, I can't. I just can't do that. Because looking at him isn't looking at him now. Looking at him is looking at him in his room in Helena, a rock with "faggot" on it in his hands and his brain struggling to process and refuse what his heart is telling him.

He's her father after all.

He's there near the bucket of bleach, near the sponge that's barely sponge and more like a holey mess. This time, it's my arms around his shoulders, lifting him up. Keeping him on his feet.

NINETEEN

Mitch

The night ran long, and it's embedded in the skin under our eyes. We look like crack addicts or alcoholics, I guess. We look like alcoholics.

Sela had a sleepover, and the first thing I wanted to do was drink like a fish in that garage, even grab that bucket of bleach and start guzzling. She knew. She knows. Elena. Man, I'm so sorry.

She was holding me, bleach going to our brain cells, and I changed my thinking. A twist, a turn, click-click. Just like that. I told her I wanted to go to a meeting with her.

And we're here now, our bleached-up brain cells helping us shower, dress and coat my poor wife's hands in a nearly fatal dose of Aquaphor.

We ate Georgie's bad cookies, and now Peg and her tattooed eyebrows are standing at the microphone. She calls me up, and I'm tugged back for a moment and that's when I see Elena's hand is still attached to mine. She squeezes it. One time. Two times. And then I float away.

Standing at the podium, the microphone hotly buzzing, I want to say things to them like love is the reason the sun glints its edge into my eyes and why my hands feather out into wings against a slow stream of wind. That the earth is small from the top of a roof and how it's never looked more manageable.

But then I'd have to clean my own clock.

And honestly, it's not even love, not love at all. It's more like a base condition that has no cure, and when I reach for my heart, it's not there.

Instead, Sela's in its place. Elena, too.

I twist them deep into my thoughts until my thoughts take to unraveling and silently say the only thing that comes to me, thinking of two people who have given me a lifetime supply of hope.

Don't run.

TWENTY

Elena

Music's up, windows down. Gloria Estefan is blasting through the GrandAm's speakers, and I don't even go to change it. I'm in that good of a mood.

I sleep better without drinking, that I've known for a long time. But I also slept better after last night, underneath Mitch's body, relearning what we've already learned. I know there are splintered parts of him that love me—the physical kind of love—and I think maybe I can glue them back together, slowly but surely, and maybe somewhere down the line, I'll be the only woman, person, he needs to love.

Maybe.

“What's in it?” Sela asks. I picked her up from Trudy's, from “girl's night” as Ronnie kept saying with so much saccharine, it nearly rotted my teeth. But God bless her for trying and being my friend even through the worst of my storms. She also gave me a box of clothes she no longer needs and that she thought might cheer me up. So, God bless her again.

And now Sela's strapped in with Mitch's lunch cooler on her lap because Jimmy had to take the truck home and lay a whooping on Brent, his eldest, for smoking a joint in the woods behind their house. I'm sure Pam's called on Jesus more times than she can count today. Oh, Pam.

We pull in, get out. I slam my door shut and then bump Sela's with my hip when it won't close all the way.

“Mitch?” I call out but no answer. I think about yelling out again but don't want to startle him.

“Here,” I say to Sela, handing her the cooler. “Stay here, and I'll bring him down.” She stands at the pillar with the penny and holds Mitch's lunch in one hand and scratches at poor Abe's face with a free finger. She's like a mini-version of her father.

The ladder's at the side of the church, and I make my way up. It reminds me of when we moved to town, Jimmy not quite on our heels and Mitch needing a little extra help with his very first job. It was the funeral home over on Pyle Drive, and the woman who ran it reminded me of a fox with her thick, red ponytail. It was my first time up on a ladder, and Mitch showed me how to patch the roof, and it was kind of nice. Just the two of us and a long strip of sun-streaked sky.

I'm thinking about that day because the sun is glowing much the same way. And when I reach the top, his hands are at his side, and he's looking up at the sky, too. But it's not Mitch.

Oh no.

He turns, and his face is broken—that look when something awful has happened, and your body is finally accepting it.

“I didn't mean to,” he says. “I didn't. It was—you just have to understand.” Aaron's whispering now, and my body plays catch up, and I think my legs will go loose on the ladder. I think I'm going to vomit.

“I'm so sorry,” he cries, his face now shielded with his hands.

“I'm sorry” echoes inside of my head. What Mitch said last night, face and breath warm in my hair.

Aaron creeps towards me from near the steeple, and there's a bird trapped in my chest. I think about yelling down to Sela, but I don't want to scare her, and I don't want to scare myself. He takes my shoulders, and he's heavy with sadness, and I want him off me. I want my husband. I want Mitch.

Aaron dry heaves and cries, and there's snot on my shoulder. He's noise and force and weight, and then suddenly he's movement, his arms pressing hard into my shoulders, and my new sandals Ronnie gave me sliding against the metal ladder.

It's true, you know—that card trick of moments that flicks at you right before it ends. I see Mitch and his hands and my thighs and the razors and my daughter the time I told her to hurry it up because I needed to get my hair trimmed and soiled diapers, soiled panties, soiled

hands, and the taste of bleach, of booze, of kisses, my lips in Sela's hair,
her heart in my ears.

And then the white spaces between each card, the lost moments I
spent denying myself the pleasure of feeling any of it.

I don't even think of my TV.

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A large, elegant, handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ericka Clay". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Ericka" and "Clay" being capitalized and prominent.

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