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## Watch the Sky

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WATCH THE SKY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Kelly Curtis

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

WATCH THE SKY

by

Kelly Curtis

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE  
LITERATURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2014

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## ABSTRACT

### WATCH THE SKY

by Kelly Curtis

*Watch the Sky* is a coming of age novel that follows a young man named Eddie Leland. Sixteen-year-old Eddie lives in an isolated part of Southern Oregon. His father is dead and his mother, torn with grief, is unable to contribute to Eddie's development into manhood. For two years, Eddie has had one true companion, his father's hunting dog. When the dog is violently killed by his mother's boyfriend and his mother's life is threatened, Eddie takes drastic measures to preserve what is left of his family. As a result, Eddie must flee the only life he has ever known.

Eddie takes to the road with his older brother Ben, who is determined to make something of himself no matter the risks. Early in their escape, Eddie and Ben meet Terry, a misguided young woman who lives as close to the edge as they do. Together they travel the Northwest Coast seeking redemption and doing everything they can to survive the cruel, dark world they have entered.

The enormity of the life beyond his home and the eccentric characters Eddie encounters brings him face to face with his naiveté, his place in society, and a new understanding of his father's life and death. Eventually, Eddie must return home and face potential consequences, but first he needs to form a deep and honest connection with himself, his family, and the reality of his place in the world.

## DEDICATION

For Mom, Dad, Grama, and Jesse

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## PREFACE

My novel, *Watch the Sky*, opens seconds after Eddie Leeland, a poor, white sixteen-year-old from the high desert of Oregon, commits murder. In many respects Eddie is responsible for raising himself. He is isolated by the rural location of his home, and his teen years have been tumultuous and lonely. His father passed of cancer two years prior, and his mother has been consumed by grief. She has a deadly addiction to narcotics and has become helplessly involved with an abusive man named Mick.

Eddie's isolation against the desert landscape, coupled with Mick's cruelty and strangulation of the family dog, quickly dissolves into the biggest mistake of Eddie's young life. Still, he believes killing Mick was justified. Stash was his father's last hunting dog and Mick has been violent with his mother. Who is to say she is not next?

Perhaps this is the reason his older brother Ben, a rambler who refuses to spend any length of time at home, decides to assist Eddie with the cleanup of his messy crime. After this explosive first scene, *Watch the Sky* follows the boys' last-chance road trip and tells the story of two browbeaten brothers on the lam.

Almost immediately after hitting the road, the boys get a lucky break. To them, winning ten thousand dollars on a lotto scratcher is a windfall, a cash-flow that will allow them to run faster and farther, but to their acquired third-wheel Terry, it is an opportunity. The boys meet Terry when they stop at an Indian Casino for their first meal since the murder. They quickly learn that Terry is a hustler who is planning her own escape from an oppressed life. Terry, like Eddie's older brother Ben, is full of dreams about life on the road. She develops a plan for the trio that could make or break their freedom. Her



exuberant energy and cunning earns her a place on the road with the fugitives and, reluctantly, a place in the brothers' hearts.

Beneath the action and suspense of *Watch the Sky* is the story of a young man grappling with right and wrong. Can Eddie overcome his fears, tendencies toward violence, and me-against-the-world attitude? *Watch the Sky* reveals how a crime of passion shapes a young life forever.

As I wrote *Watch the Sky*, I hoped to employ clean prose with well-chosen details, and to develop scenes that will catch and keep reader attention. I created a third person limited narrator with the added challenge of including a secondary love story. As I crafted my novel, I looked to several writers whose work I find inspiring and applicable to my goals.

One of the authors I looked to as I shaped the style of the prose in my novel was Raymond Carver. Carver is an author known for sharing only the necessary details. While writing, I worked with particularity when including details in an effort to only use those that best communicated the tone and conflict of my novel. In an essay about choosing the right details, literary critic James Wood writes, "Literature differs from life in that life is amorously full of detail, and rarely directs us toward it, whereas literature teaches us to notice..." (64). Carver's stories often include so little setting details and physical description that it is interesting to see what his characters *do* notice in life. The details he chooses to include communicate quite a bit about his characters internal and external conflicts. For example, take the following from Carver's 1981 collection of short stories "*What We Talk About When We Talk about Love.*" The short story "A

“Serious Talk” is about a couple whose relationship is in shambles on Christmas Day. In this example, the last detail about the ashtray illuminates the protagonist’s misguided thoughts about what a serious talk is.

“He left through the patio door. He was not certain, but he thought he had proved something. He hoped he had made something clear. The thing was they had to have a serious talk soon. There were things that needed talking about, important things that needed to be discussed. Maybe after the holidays were over and things were back to normal. He’d tell her the goddamned ashtray was a goddamned dish for example (112).

Another characteristic of Carver’s prose that I hoped to employ is his method of writing dialogue that is often stifled, but still able to provide illumination of deep conflicts. With regards to dialog, critic James Wood reminds us what author Henry Green said in a 1950 interview with the BBC. Green maintained that dialog was the best way to communicate with readers, but that it should not include explanation that would give away too much insight into the characters internal lives. About including explanations with dialog Wood writes, “Green felt that such kind of authorial ‘assistance’ was overbearing, because in life we don’t really know what people are like” (214). Wood does add that “Green is not necessarily right to assume that ‘dialog is the best way for the novelist to communicate with readers.’ As much can be communicated with no speech at all” (219).

For an example of dialog that communicates the conflicts and discomfort of characters without explanation, or even an over-abundance of dialog itself, I look again at Carver's story "A Serious Talk." This scene occurs the morning after the protagonist, Burt, has overloaded his ex-wife's fireplace with wood and left her to deal with the oversized blaze.

"Burt said, 'I want to apologize to you for last night. I want to apologize to the kids too.'

Vera said, 'They're not here.'

She stood in the doorway and he stood on the patio next to the philodendron plant. He pulled at some lint on his sleeve.

She said, 'I can't take any more. You tried to burn the house down.'

'I did not.'

'You did. Everybody here was a witness.'

'Can I come in and talk about it?'

She drew the robe together at her throat and moved back inside.

She said, 'I have to go somewhere in an hour'" (107).

Though Carver is a master in creating dialog that speaks for itself, he also knew when to *not* use dialog to communicate with readers. In "A Serious Talk," the narrator tells readers the protagonist has "things he wanted to say, grieving things, consoling

things, things like that” (110), but later, he leaves his ex-wife’s house without saying much. Instead, he has cut the phone line to her house out of spite. The character’s inability, or refusal, to communicate relates more tension and conflict than if Carver had explained the protagonist’s actions and lack of self-expression. Carver had a restraint in dialog and in explaining dialog. This is something I hoped to achieve in *Watch the Sky*.

For scene writing that will drive the plot of my novel forward I look to J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. Odd magical things happen to and around Harry Potter in the first chapters of the novel, but it takes a few adventures before Harry finds his way to Hogwarts School of Magic. First, he must experience initiation to the magical world in Diagon Alley, the marketplace for supplies needed by witches and wizards. In the first true magical setting of the novel it would be tempting for Rowling to use long descriptions of the objects, people, and places seen by a wide-eyed Harry. Instead, she effectively continues the plot’s momentum forward by pushing Harry and his travelling partner Hagrid down Diagon Alley as they are headed to the goblin’s bank. Here is one of Rowling’s longest descriptions of Diagon Alley:

Harry wished he had about eight more eyes. He turned his head in every direction as they walked up the street, trying to look at everything at once: the shops, the things outside them, the people doing their shopping... There were shops selling robes, shops selling telescopes and strange silver instruments Harry had never seen before, windows stacked with barrels of bat spleens and eels’ eyes, tottering

piles of books, quills, and rolls of parchment, potion bottles, globes of the moon (89-90).

The level of control exhibited by Rowling in her short description of Diagon Alley helps to expose her prioritization of writing in scene and keeping the story moving. Perhaps because she is a writer for children, Rowling knows the importance of pushing forward the narrative and avoiding the slowdown that long descriptions and summaries often create. Another aspect of writing in scene that I hope to learn from Rowling is the ability to give just a few perfect, lasting details about each character. Of Hagrid, she writes, “A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair” (37.) Beyond these nuggets, Rowling trusts her readers and their ability to fill in the gaps with their own imaginations. It is these details and narrative movement that I strive for in *Watch the Sky*.

Lastly, I look to two writers who have excellent control of point of view in their work, Jesmyn Ward and Bonnie Jo Campbell. First, I look to the 2011 National Book Award winner, *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward, to examine how her first person narrator has the ability to tell not only her own story, but her brother’s as well. By using some of her first person narrator techniques with my third person limited narrator, I hoped to enable my narrator to tell two stories simultaneously, that of Eddie’s internal, post-murder experience, and that of his brother’s external, growing love for Terry.

*Salvage the Bones* is a novel in which a teenage girl learns she is pregnant days before Hurricane Katrina hits her family's rural home. The girl, Esch, has a wide perspective for a first person narrator. In *Salvage the Bones*, Esch spends as much or more time talking about her brother Skeetah and his dogs than she does about herself. This passage from *Salvage the Bones* shows Esch observing her brother with such subtlety that we forget who's telling us about Skeetah.

Bodies tell stories. This is what I realize then I burst in on Skeetah in the bathroom in the morning, bladder full with early morning pregnant pee, and see him standing in front of the mirror. Skeetah is shirtless. He is tracing cuts across his stomach with two fingers, the way he checks China's mouth after a fight for tears, missing teeth: lightly sensitively. The way other people put their fingers in cupcakes to lick icing (83).

The best example of this observant narration in *Salvage the Bones* comes from a long passage in which Esch is all but absent from the narrative. She narrates the chapter about the dog fights, "Make Them Know," from such a fly-on-the-wall perspective that readers forget they are reading first person narration. The chapter is dedicated to the experience of Skeetah and his pit bull, China. Esch is only present as the observer, the teller of her brother's story (153-176). My narrator only sees or describes what Eddie can see, but for the dual storytelling to work, my narrator must be as observant as Ward's. It is this method of observant narrating that I hoped to learn from Jesmyn Ward and apply in my novel.

After reading *Salvage the Bones* I briefly considered making my novel first person with Eddie as the narrator of Ben's love story with Terry. Eventually though, I decided on third person narration. For clues on third person limited narration, I examined the narrator Bonnie Jo Campbell creates in *Once Upon a River*.

One of the first things a reader notices when opening Campbell's novel is that it feels less immediate and somehow less dramatic than *Salvage the Bones*. The space given by choosing a third person limited narrator allowed Campbell to tell a slightly more hands off, bigger-picture story about her protagonist, Margo, an orphaned teenager surviving alone on a rural river. This passage shows an example of the bigger picture story I wanted to give Eddie:

Margo, named Margaret Louise, and her cousins knew the muddy water and the brisk current, knew the sand and silt between their toes... They hollowed out riverbanks, cut through soil and roots to create collapsing caves and tunnels... They spent summers naked or nearly naked harvesting night crawlers from the mossy woods and frogs' legs from goo in underwater snags... Once when Margo was eight and her favorite cousin, Junior was nine, they rescued an uncle who'd fallen in drunk (16).

Another advantage of the third person limited point of view is that readers get to understand more about the events occurring than the characters perceive. This allows for dramatic irony, a tool that enables readers to get scents of future danger, where often the protagonist does not. This allows for dramatic irony, a tool that allows readers to get

scents of future danger where the protagonist does not. For example, when Margo comes into contact with two gruff men and chooses to live with them, the reader can see Margo is making a mistake. Readers understand that she is forced into many choices, but still, when Margo takes “comfort in Brian’s shoulder like a sturdy wall beside her” (81), they know Brian is not a sturdy wall, but a statutory rapist. Like Campbell, I hoped to create this kind of dramatic irony in *Watch the Sky*.

In writing my novel, I hoped to tell a story, not just of revenge and being on the run, but a story that allows readers to recognize themselves the quiet conflicts between people, to fill in their own understanding of my characters and their actions, and to share the belief that in fiction as in life, nothing is black and white.



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## Chapter One

At sixteen, Eddie Leland has seen plenty of dead things. There've been snakes and deer with guts strewn out on the road, chickens dripping off the block, and pigs with their heads hanging after slaughter, but he's never seen a dead human body. Not even at a funeral. When his dad died, there was no body to recover, just bits of flesh plastered to the walls drying like jerky. That's what his dad's buddies said anyway, when they stood around drinking beer and shaking their sad heads, that the explosion was powerful enough to rip a man to bits the size of marbles.

Three years later, Eddie can't stop looking at Mick's tongue. It protrudes between his teeth like he's thinking hard, but Eddie knows he's not thinking. The eyes roll back, and show the whites, but they won't close. Half the skull is on the other side of the room. Small pieces of grey matter slither down the drywall. Eddie thinks he knows what the firefighters meant that day, about the jerky. He feels hot vomit push into his throat.

“Give me that.”

Eddie swings to face his older brother. The wooden gripped revolver points first at his feet, then at Ben's. It's ripped it from his hand. His twenty-one year old brother holds the weapon, finger straight like someone who knows what he's doing, like someone their dad taught to handle guns. Eddie will never learn what his brother learned. His stomach lurches.

Ben grabs Eddie's elbow and leads him out the door. "Swallow it."

Like a dog, he follows. Dog. He remembers why they're here. That morning he'd been sitting on the porch, choking down another piece of dry toast, and looking out on the property. He'd paced the drive for hours. He'd looked down the length of the barbwire fence. He'd watched the road and waited for the dust to swirl up around Mick's truck. He waited for Mick to bring home his dog.

Outside, the desert night is biting cold. The sweat on Eddie's pale skin feels like it will freeze. He shivers. Sweat runs into his eyes and stings. He swipes it away with the back of his wrist and looks down to find blood smeared toward his knuckles. He barely notices Ben go back inside and leave him alone in the infinite black night.

Whose blood is this? Eddie's not hurt. Neither is Ben. Mostly, Mick's blood travelled in the same trajectory as the bullet, away from the brothers. A thought comes to Eddie, one of fur and bones and dried blood on his arms. This is dead dog blood, brought back to life by his own sweat. He pukes on the gravel and tries to cover it by scraping dirt into a pile with his boot.

The screen door slams and Ben runs past Eddie, dark and shadowy, just a suggestion of Eddie not being alone. His feet crunch gravel down the road, away from Eddie, away from the house.

Something cracks behind Eddie and he turns to see orange flames lick the windows of Mick's house, staining them black with soot. A moment later, the glass

shatters and a plume of black smoke races upward to obscure trillions of stars in the night sky.

Eddie looks for his brother, whose footsteps have disappeared under the roar of the fire. Down the road he can see a black figure trotting away. He tries to disguise his vomit one last time before taking off after Ben.

The only thing Eddie does better than his brother is running. His long legs allow him to catch Ben and within minutes they're in sync down the narrow desert road. Nothing around them stirs. Not a cow, or a hawk, or a juniper berry on a stiff branch. Eddie feels as he always does when he's running, as if a bungee-cord has looped around his sternum and is guiding him forward. He doesn't think about the stretch and snap because the miles back to the truck are the best his legs have felt in months.

When the truck comes into view, Ben slows to a walk. Eddie feels like he has to clean something, make something right so he stops in the middle of the road and listens to his brother's feet crunch away on the gravel.

Eddie leans into his voice, his weight on his toes. "He deserved it."

Ben waves him off and keeps walking.

Though Eddie likes running, he can tell he barely does it. His lungs feel as if they will collapse when he calls after his brother. "He did." His voice screeches, halts and he pants in a whisper to himself. "He deserved it."

These are the first words he's uttered since the sky turned purple and he pushed himself from the grass and knew what he must do. Just an hour ago, Eddie had gone inside to find Ben alone in their mother's living room, puffing on a joint and listening to his radio show about extraterrestrial life. Eddie had flashed the revolver and Ben only took another hit. His face glowed behind the cherry and Eddie thought he'd have to do it by himself. He almost had.

Now, back at the truck, Eddie watches Ben place his hands on the tailgate. His back heaves with each breath and Eddie wishes he'd say something. Ben didn't have any words in the living room, or when he'd caught up to Eddie hiking along the dirt road, but he hadn't tried to talk him out of anything either.

When his breath calms, Ben peels off his plain-white shirt. Eddie, the baby, has always looked up to Ben, but now he's jealous and for reasons he can't explain, he's angry. In the last few years, Ben developed a V-shaped torso and muscles that roll beneath his skin. He'd gone from boy to man and left scrawny Eddie behind.

"Give my gun back." Eddie forces the words and spit lands on his chin. He wipes it with his arm, still bloody from Stash.

Ben pulls himself into the driver's seat and cranks the motor. "Get in the truck."

"Give it. I need to protect Mom." If he wasn't so on fire, he'd notice that job was already done.

Ben ignores him and slams the beast in gear.

“I got that from Grampa.” He wonders if Ben will remind him that he’d pocketed the piece after their mother’s father wandered into the desert and never came back.

Ben gasses the pickup so the back tires spin and kick up rocks. Eddie gives up and hauls himself into the cab by the handle at the door.

At home Eddie shoves his hands in his pockets and watches as Ben, illuminated by the headlights from the truck, emerges from the shed with the gasoline canister. He sets the can down by the fire pit and builds the logs up, cabin style as their dad taught them, before pouring a gallon over the knotty juniper branches. Ben strips his clothes and throws everything atop the cold pit. Standing naked and barefoot, dust circling up around his feet, he points at the pit and Eddie knows he’s to do the same. He takes everything off, even his shoes, and dumps them in.

Ben empties the gas over their clothes. “Crap.” He runs his hands through his dirty-blond hair and laughs.

Eddie cups his naked junk with his right hand. “What’s so funny?”

“There’s money and stuff in my pocket.” He looks over the stringent pile. “Hell, it’s not worth it.” Ben walks bare foot over the gravel toward the house, something Eddie could never do without stabbing pain.

Eddie hears the house door close and he knows he doesn’t have time to go to the truck for the gun. It’s as good as Ben’s now, so he uses a stick to dig through the fire pit

until he finds Ben's jeans. His nostrils burn from the gaseous vapors and he tries not to breathe. He pushes one hand into the full pocket and comes out with forty bucks, a lighter, and a dime sack of weed. He grips the currency in his oily hand and goes back to protecting his dick from the impending flames.

A minute later Ben shuffles from the house with an armload of their dad's clothes, what's left of their mom's cheap whiskey, and the long fireplace matches. He sets the clothes and whiskey on a wood round and holds the matches toward Eddie, but Eddie's hands are full. He wants to keep the money and herb and tell his brother to strike the damn match himself, but he looks at Ben and the fire pit. He knows Ben is helping him. He holds out the findings, palm up.

Ben looks confused. "You got that out for me?"

"No, I was going to keep it."

"Well, you can have it." Ben snaps the things away and sets them on a log. He points at the fire pit. "Strike the match."

Eddie takes the tube of oversized matches. "Why me?"

"This is your mess. Starting the fire means something." Ben thinks for a second. "Like, you're burning up your dumbness. You won't do anything this stupid again."

"Symbolic?" says Eddie. "That's the word you're looking for. Symbolic."

"Yeah whatever." Ben twists off the top off the whiskey and takes a long pull.

Eddie scrapes the match tip and it lights like a torch. He flicks the long match to the pile and it catches before it hits. A gust of hot, red air pushes from the pit and the smell of singed hair and sulfur burns high up in Eddie's nose, practically at his throat. He looks down to make sure his balls aren't on fire. In the headlights he can see his arm hair is black and sooty.

"Put these on." Ben tosses him a pair of pants. A flannel shirt floats toward him.

Eddie hops on one leg and then the other. The pants are baggy at his waist and down his skinny legs, but they're too short and stop above his ankles. He snaps closed the flannel's pearly buttons. He swims in its girth, but it barely covers his waist. He looks at Ben, who fits the clothes perfectly. He's about to ask why his brother couldn't bring out any of his clothes, when he realizes he was shorter than his dad when he died. Now he is taller. Would be taller. He sits down and pushes a fingernail down the length of his forearm. The dog's blood flakes off in tiny crystals.

Ben sits on a log and stares into the flame. He takes another pull from the whiskey and holds the bottle toward Eddie.

Eddie wrinkles his nose. "Whiskey tastes like moldy piss."

Ben shrugs, tips the bottle again, and caps it. When the coals glow red and purple, he stands and chucks more logs on the fire. Sparks crack and twist upward. He drags a bare toe back and forth in the silt before reaching into his pocket and pulling out the revolver. He holds the gun butt toward Eddie and nods toward the shimmering coals.



“No, that was Grampa’s.” Hot tears press at Eddie’s eyes. He clenches his jaw, but it vibrates anyway. He won’t cry.

Without hesitation, Ben tosses the revolver into the glowing pit.

Eddie pushes off the log seat and it tumbles behind him, but it’s too late. The wooden grip has already caught and begun to burn. He sits on his heels and feels the heat. It’s too hot on his face, but he won’t back up, because the pain on his cheeks feels better than the pain of his last glimpses of Stash.

Ben tells him what to do. The steel will glow and tomorrow Eddie’s fingertips will be sore from staying awake to put on leather gloves, pound the metal with a hammer, replace it, and remove it, until it changes into a blob, something Ben can throw into a lake or river.

Ben goes inside and leaves Eddie alone by the pit. Most people who know Eddie would say he’s a loner, but since the explosion, when the dog became his, he didn’t feel alone until this morning. He takes the bottle of whiskey from the stump and chugs.

The family has always lived in the same house, twenty miles from town, ten miles from the highway, three miles down a dirt road. The small home, located on fifty acres of cheatgrass and sage brush, is worth about thirty-grand in all. Since Eddie could remember, the house was always under some kind of construction. When his dad was killed in the station accident, he left everything in shambles, by no fault of his own.

There were tubs and toilets stacked around back, brackets and boards against the shed, and the bathroom had no sink. Their house wasn't one of those messy places seen from the highway with strips of blue tarp and rusting waste along the fence lines, but it wasn't like the school neighborhoods in town where manicured lawns practically glow and motion lights blink when someone walks by after sunset.

In the last year Eddie brought a few things home, a free faucet found on a corner, an oval mirror Mrs. Jameson gave him at her yard sale, but there is only so much he can take on the bus, and carry on his bike from the highway. Since his mom isn't leaving the property much, and Ben never really wants to come around, Eddie is the only person keeping the place from falling down.

He must be dreaming about home repairs when he's woken at dawn because he has a vision of nails pressing into his cheek and eyelid. He's barefoot, facedown by the fire pit and covered in desert dust. The vibrating truck sounds close, like it's about to roll over him, so he jerks to sitting and looks, but Ben is across the yard with the hood up and grease up to his elbows.

Eddie's head feels heavy, but loose, and his neck is stiff. His nose and lips are caked with dirt and he wipes sharp pebbles from his face. Like a newborn calf, he lurches to standing and wobbles on his feet. He goes to the spigot and cleans the dirt from his face. After drinking from the nozzle, he presses a palm to the house and waits for a wave of purple to pass before he can attach the hose end to the water source.

He drags the crimping tube into the garden, sets it in the approximate place and goes back to yank the lever. The hose jerks to life and water clicks around the weed-free garden beds. Eddie leans a shoulder against the house and picks paint flakes off his palm from when he touched the peeling siding.

Across the yard, Ben swears and Eddie looks up to see him lean into the motor. Within seconds blue diesel smoke shoots into the sky. Ben steps back and the motor slows and rolls at an even pace. Watching him, Eddie is reminded of their father, volunteer firefighter, part-time mechanic who wrenched on town rigs, and Eddie wonders if Ben will ever come around to his roots.

Ben sees Eddie is awake so he comes to lean against the house too and they watch the sprinkler turn a few revolutions.

“The garden looks good,” says Ben.

Eddie looks to see if he’s serious.

“First hang over?” Ben asks. “That piss bottle’s empty.”

Eddie looks at his hands.

Ben rubs his eyes and forehead. “Happy birthday. How old are you now?”

“Sixteen.”

“Jesus.”

“What?”

“Let’s go for a drive. For your birthday.” Ben rubs at the grease streaks on his forearms.

Eddie is distracted by the sprinkler position which isn’t quite right. He runs to the center of the garden and sprinkler water patters on his back. He moves the dented nozzle three inches to the left. Back at the house, he sees its better and he makes a note to put a stake there to mark the best place for the hose end.

“What do you say to a road trip?” Ben asks.

Eddie lifts the handle on the spigot a quarter inch and the water spouts a little higher. “Where?”

Ben shoves off the wall. Any hints of niceties are gone. “Someone is going to discover Mick. We need to go. Anywhere.”

He walks across the yard and shuts the truck down. On his way inside the house he calls over his shoulder. “I have to clear some stuff up with Mom. Then I’m leaving.”

Eddie looks down at his feet. They are grass and dirt speckled from running back and forth to the garden. It’s the only thing keeping him here. School’s out for summer and he doesn’t have any friends out this far. His dog is dead. He knows his mom won’t water, and the plants will wither and die if he leaves.

There are three rose bushes, one for each kid, and they line one edge of the pasture fence. Eddie snaps a rose from his plant and walks to the place in the garden where the wire fences meet and the ground mounds up over the dog he buried yesterday.

He puts the rose on the Stash's grave and lies down in the dewy grass. He buries his head in the crook of his arm. A straggling scent of diesel smoke meets him and for a second he thinks his dad will come outside and tell him not to worry.

The feeling passes as quickly as it comes and Eddie creaks to standing. He limps to sit on the front porch swing. The rotting porch planks bow beneath him and the swing groans as he uses his long legs to push himself back and forth.

Through the open kitchen window, he can hear their mother is up and slamming cabinets. She shuffles her slippers across the dusty linoleum and bangs the porch door open. It hits the side of the house and paint chips crinkle to the wood. Coffee-tin and spoon in hand, she scans the yard, looking for him in the garden, at the shed, and by the fire pit.

When she sees him sitting, not two feet away, she sighs. "Where's the coffee?"

"We're out." He pushes back, swings forward. "Like the butter, lunch meat, cheese. All we got is eggs and toast."

She leans against the door jamb and watches him, the way she does.

"Did Ben talk to you?" he asks.

"No, why?"

Eddie props the swing back. He reaches down to rub his calves. They've been sore. The school nurse said it's growing pains, but to him, his muscles feel like rocks grinding together under his skin.

"What happened to the door?" She taps the hinges with the spoon.

Eddie looks out to the pasture. Past the fence, the sage has already lost most of its green to summer, but today, small clouds dot the horizon. If they're lucky the clouds will gather and billow to become an afternoon thunderstorm. The garden would thrive on a few good thunderstorms before the land crusts over. Maybe, if he did leave, the plants would get hardy enough to last until he came home.

"Eddie, the door."

"Mom." He wipes his face with dry, dirt-stained hands, the kind of hands that run in the family. "Mick broke the door."

She scrapes her feet around to get a better look at the damage. "I told him not to come around no more, but he don't listen."

Of course he doesn't listen. The rocks rub in Eddie's legs. He stops massaging because that's started to hurt worse than leaving them alone. He winces and shifts in the swing.

"What's wrong with your leg?"

"Nothing."

“I told him not to come.” She rattles the spoon into the coffee can and goes back to the kitchen.

He follows her in and closes the screen behind him. The biting flies will be out once the day heats up. He goes in the kitchen and makes sure his mom hasn't unplugged the phone, not that it rings anyway. In the living room, he turns on the radio and lies on the couch so that his legs hang over the armrest.

Ben slams from the bedroom and sits at the coffee table. He shakes a few green-buds onto a magazine, breaks them with his thumbs, and starts to roll a joint. A peppy song comes on the radio and he reaches over to slap it off. A few coins tumble from his pocket and he ignores them. He licks the length of the joint and lights it. Ben looks at Eddie like he's going to pass it that direction, but thinks better of it and takes another puff.

“Did you talk to Mom?”

“Deciding how to put it real quick.” Ben wears new work boots, but probably hasn't worked in months.

The flowery smell of weed hits the whirring fan and jets into the tiny room. Eddie's stomach rolls and he knows all that's in the cupboard is canned corn and government peanut butter. Maybe he can eat eggs and toast for the millionth day in a row.

Mom pokes her head out from the kitchen. The bottom of her robe is grimy. She crosses her arms and looks like she's about to say something, but shuffles back into the kitchen instead.

"Look at her." Ben leans back in his chair and puffs. "She's still taking pills."

It's strange, but a few minutes later, the door opens to her bedroom and she comes down the hall in jeans and a huge sweatshirt. She sees the family picture on the floor, the one that Eddie had knocked off the wall the day before. She picks it up, comes to stand in the middle of the living room, and looks out the window. The sprinkler clicks outside.

"You went outside, around the house to your room?" Ben says. "Instead of walking past us?"

"So?" She clutches the photo to her chest and looks at the joint. "Put that out."

Eddie's surprised when Ben smashes the joint into an empty water glass.

"Sit down," he tells her.

"Why?"

"You heard about the dog?"

Her forehead wrinkles.

"You know Stash is dead?"



She hugs the picture and shuffles her feet so she can look past Eddie, out the window.

Eddie sits up and nods into his thighs. He rubs his calves and reaches his legs into the room, but that makes him dizzy so he moves them back, tucks his feet in by the base of the couch. He sees Ben watching.

Ben leans forward in his chair. “Bro, you need water.” He looks at the back of their mother’s head. “What’s there to eat around here?”

She huffs and shakes her head.

Eddie stares at the carpet, worn thin with years of people leaving.

“Mick’s dead,” says Ben.

She tightens her grip on the frame and whirs around to face him. “You did it?”

Eddie keeps his eyes locked on the fibers.

“No Eddie did it.”

Eddie sits up and feels a wave of nausea. “What? No.”

Ben leans forward in his chair so far the back legs come off the floor. He stares at their mother. “It’s your fault.”

She sits next to Eddie on the couch. “That’s a lie.”

“Stash was strangled and drug behind the truck.”

“You’re lying.”

“Eddie saw it. He had to bury the dog.”

She turns to Eddie. “You saw that?”

Eddie buries his head in a pillow between his knees.

“Tell her what you told me,” says Ben.

Eddie’s mouth is thick with saliva. He presses the pillow tight into his eyes to keep tears from coming. He can’t talk.

“He had blood up his legs,” says Ben. “His paws were ripped off in chunks.”

As if he were outside his body, watching himself yesterday, he can see himself slip the rope off the trailer hitch because he can’t untie the knot at the dog’s neck. He hefts Stash off the gravel and takes him to the shade of a juniper tree where he crouches. He sees himself trying to blow air into Stash’s nose, but the dog is stiff.

Mick had come over, patted Eddie on the shoulder and told him his mom better get what she owed or next time it would be her.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” She taps him on the back.

Eddie flinches under her touch. “I tried.” His words are muffled against the pillow. “But you were in bed.”

He sits up and sees she has the photo held in front of her like a shield. Ben reaches and snaps the picture from her. Eddie knows it's the one at the lake, taken a year before their dad was blown up. Eddie, Ben and their older sister huddle around mother and father. Eddie, thirteen at the time, smiles ear to ear. Ben, at seventeen, looks at something off camera. Sheila would be in her mid-thirties now, if she's not dead. She disappeared two years before their dad died. She didn't go to the funeral, come home, or ever call.

Ben sighs and gives the photo back to their mom.

"Maybe Stash was an accident," she says.

Eddie thinks Ben would burst out laughing at her excuses, if it wasn't so sad.

"It wasn't." Eddie stands up and his calves scream. He stiffens to regain his posture and places a hand on the pony wall to keep his balance.

She starts to cry. "I don't understand."

Ben stands and pushes his chair back into the corner where it belongs. "It's time to go." He reaches down and adjusts his pant legs to cover the tongue of his boots.

Eddie watches their mother's silent tears. They shake her so that her bun loosens. Her hair falls down to hide her face. "You can't go."

"We can't stay." Ben picks up Eddie's backpack off the floor.

Eddie hadn't noticed it sitting there, packed full and round. Before last night Eddie hadn't seen Ben in months. He'd taken to disappearing for long lengths of time. A year ago one of the old volunteer firefighters had warned Eddie not to spend too much time with his brother. He said he'd been hearing things, but wouldn't tell Eddie what.

"You can't take Eddie. You're the criminal. He's just a baby." She hurls the photo at Ben and he bats it away from his face.

"This is a family of criminals," he says.

"You don't talk about your father like that."

"Sorry," Ben's halfway out the door. "Dad was an angel."

Eddie follows Ben out, not knowing what he means about a family of criminals or about Dad.

After Ben tosses the backpack into the truck he comes back to the house. Their mom has followed them out and stands on the rotten front porch. Eddie watches as Ben reaches into his pocket and pulls out a wallet. He removes two one hundred dollar bills and chucks them at her face. She flinches and they fall to the porch.

"Get high or get help, it doesn't matter to me." Ben stalks past Eddie on the gravel driveway. "Because I'm never coming back."

Ben climbs in and the truck roars to life, the loudest thing for miles. He hammers it and the truck spins a half circle to point down the drive. He leans over and yells out the passenger window to Eddie. "Coming or staying?"

Eddie slinks toward the truck, one small step at a time. He pulls the passenger door open, but before getting in, he takes one last look toward the porch. She's still there, hugging the frame to her chest, and Eddie wonders if he'll ever see her again, or the house, or the garden. Filthy with blood and grit, he climbs in, clicks the door closed, and refuses to look back.

## Chapter Two

Once, when Eddie was ten, the family went camping in Lincoln City, Oregon. They loaded the station wagon and Ben helped their dad secure lawn chairs to the roof while Eddie stayed out of the way. The twenty-something Sheila had refused to come and Eddie remembers their mother having no problem with that. They hadn't been getting along. She'd been elbowing Sheila out of the house for months, but their dad stood his ground and let her stay. Eddie overheard him say something about knowing right where she'd go, and a few years later after the funeral, Eddie wondered if Dad was the only one who knew where to find her, and he was dead.

The Lelands camped at the beach for two nights. They had planned to stay four, but found the prices had risen from ten dollars a night to twenty. In the morning, their mom boiled water for oatmeal. At night, the boys cooked hotdogs over the campfire.

To Eddie, the highlight of that trip six years ago is something he can still see, clear as he can see the dog's torn feet of yesterday. As his skull rattles against the window of Ben's truck, his heart kicks when he remembers Dad throwing the duck-dummy and Stash running, like a missile, to the waves. When the dog came back, his long, white fur swayed with wet and sand. Each time the dog delivered the dummy at their feet he looked up with admiration only a dog can give, and bowed, ready for another throw.

At dinner Dad had bragged that Stash's mouth was the softest he'd seen. Later, in the tent, Eddie pressed Stash's doughy lips up to reveal the crisp-white teeth of the young

dog. Now, he frowns to think it took him a year to learn that soft mouth meant Stash carried ducks without mincing their meat.

For some reason, Ben is set on going way out to the coast. Eddie can't argue because he has no other suggestions, but he remembers when they got home from camping, Ben had complained that all they'd eaten while on vacation was the same stuff they eat at home.

Ben always wanted more. He wanted to go places Eddie only knew of from looking at the map at school. That was probably how Ben had known of those places too, because when their dad conceded to taking Ben with him on random big-rig deliveries, Eddie knew for a fact they never went to Panama or Guam. He never learned where they actually went though, because when he reached the age at which he would have been invited along, there wasn't anyone to take him.

They're almost to Lincoln City when Ben steers the red pick-up off the highway and navigates up a narrow, unpaved road. Eddie leans forward to look out the windshield. Tall trees reach up rocky hillsides and only a slat of sky can be seen above. It's not dark yet, but the land, thick with underbrush, is a grimy shade. The truck bumps over jagged rocks in the road.

Eddie leans back in his seat. "Where are we going?"

Ben doesn't answer. He shifts to a low gear and the truck revs to pull the hill.

After miles of climbing, the trees yawn open into a clearing. Several rotten trailers and a sagging home dot the woods' perimeter. A pit bull jumps and barks on a chain. With each lunge, the chain pulls tight and jerks the dog to the mud.

Ben shuts down the truck. He looks over his shoulder before sliding out. "Don't move. I'll check it's cool."

Eddie pops his door open. "I need to stretch."

"Don't leave the truck. I'll be right back." He trots across the moist driveway toward the pit bull. When the dog sees him it settles and stands still in the bare soil. Ben pats it on the head and climbs the shaggy steps. He knocks on a sliding glass door.

A few moments later, a bone-thin woman in her forties waves Ben inside, but not without a few words which Eddie can't hear. She looks toward the truck and stares at Eddie for a moment. She doesn't wave or acknowledge him. After a minute, the dog retreats to a plastic dog-house, its heavy chain still looped outside.

Eddie does a few stretches, but after a few minutes he gets bored of waiting. It's been hours since they stopped for fast-food so he looks in the cooler for the bag of snacks. It's empty so he lifts the tab on a soda can and slurps. He notices an old car parked beside one of the sheds. He wanders over and circles the rusty machine. Its tires are flat and cracked. The interior is filthy with tree debris.

He's lifting the door handle to get a better look when he feels something pointy at his back. He thinks it's his brother tricking him with a branch, so he turns around real



slow with his tongue sticking out. When he sees a bearded man and the gaping barrel of a twenty gauge shotgun, he drops his soda and it froths on the ground. He puts his hands up by his ears.

The man nudges Eddie's fluttering chest with the gun. "Who are you?"

"Ben's little brother." He points across the yard, toward the truck.

He doesn't take his eyes from the front sights. "Ben?"

Another man leans on the corner of the shed and watches with crossed arms. Beside the man, a ladder reaches up a tree where the men were working. Power lines run from tree to shed and back. The lines split from a transformer and head through the woods as far as Eddie can see.

"Whose brother, man?"

Eddie looks at the muzzle of the long gun. "Ben Leland."

"Lee?" The man looks toward the house where Ben disappeared ten minutes ago. "That piece of shit?"

"I guess."

With a flick of the wrist, the man swings the gun down and holds the stock in one meaty hand. "Your brother has some nerve."

Eddie nods. Sure, Ben has some nerve.

“It’s a sixty-six.”

“What?”

“The car, it’s a classic. Great shape.”

“Oh.” Eddie looks back at the vehicle. His curiosity is gone. It looks like a piece of junk to him now and he wants nothing to do with it, nothing but to get back in the truck and wait for Ben to return. “Neat.”

“It runs.” The man leans the gun against the back fender and cracks the driver’s door. “Want to see? You interested?”

“No, thanks.” Eddie bends to pick up his empty soda can and traverses the yard. Halfway across, he looks over his shoulder. The man with the gun has gone back up the ladder. The other man still stares. Eddie gives a short wave and gets no response. He climbs back in the truck and tries to ignore the aching in his legs.

Eventually, Ben’s face appears at the run-down house’s window and he waves for Eddie to come inside. Eddie steps onto the moist driveway and as he nears the house the mud becomes thicker where the dog has worn away the vegetation. It sticks to the bottom of his shoes and when he lifts his feet they come up with a small pop, like they had been suctioned to the ground.

He’s ten feet from the door when the pit’s bulky profile shows at the dog house door. The dog lunges. Eddie is able to take a backward step and escape the arena before the animal, jaw wide as an ax’s blade, jumps at him. The chain jerks and the dog’s head

is ripped backward, but his body continues forward. He twists and lands on his back with a grunt. It gets up and barks.

The woman comes out and the dog stops. “Topper.” She points. “House, now.”

Topper obeys, but she gives him no praise. Topper circles inside the dog house and lays down so that with wet eyes, he can watch Eddie go up the steps, pass the woman, and go inside.

The house is stifling hot. Though it’s not cold outside, a fire rages in a wood stove, and the humidity is so high, Eddie feels as if he will choke. The living room is more a jungle than the surrounding forest. Long tufts of drying marijuana hang upside from the rafters and it smells like damp skunk. Gallon sized bags of cured weed fill a bookshelf. Ten or more stacks of twenties sit on the coffee table near scissors and sticks waiting to be trimmed.

The thin woman with near-translucent, baggy skin takes a seat in a ragged arm chair in the corner. For lack of being invited to sit, Eddie remains standing near the door. Ben half-sits on a dining table and waits for the woman to give what looks like will be a verdict.

She chews her lip and squints at Eddie long enough for him to feel nervous. He gives her a tight smile.

After a while, she looks at Ben. “So this is Edward, so what?”

He looks at Ben. He'd practically forgotten that was his name. The last person to call him Edward was his father because he'd left water running all night outside.

Ben shifts his weight and sits on his other hip. He folds his hands and rests them on his thigh. He looks less relaxed than Eddie's seen him in a long time.

The woman plants her hands on the armrests and lifts herself so she can tuck her legs beneath her. For someone so gaunt and frail, she's stronger than Eddie expected. "Why bring him here?"

"I thought you'd like to meet him."

She doesn't look at Eddie. "No, you thought I'd take pity on him. You thought I'd change my mind."

"We need a front, Shasta, just for a week. I'll run fast."

She looks at her nails. "I can't trust you."

"Please." Ben has puffy bags under his eyes. "For my dad."

A corner of her lip pulls up. "You already played that card."

Ben shifts his weight again. He tips his chin down so they can't see his eyes beneath his hat. A bead of sweat lines his lip. "We need some money. Just a little."

"No."

"Can we stay here a few days? We'll work."

She presses herself to standing, glides to the door and slides it open. “Get out.”

“Please.”

She points to the door.

Eddie’s happy to leave the suffocating room. He steps on the porch and breaths.

Ben follows him outside and they circle the dog’s run on their way back to the truck. The man is still on the ladder. He tinkers with the wires. The shotgun leans against the shed and the other man stares.

They’re almost to the truck when Shasta calls to them. “You know what your problem is?”

Ben turns to look at her. He has the keys in his hand.

She pulls her hair up into a pony tail. She would look ten years younger were it not for the way her shirt lifts to reveal her skeletal hips. “You’re out of control, Benjamin, and taking your brother with you. You’ll never be half the man your father was. You come back and I’ll kill you myself.”

They ride silently and an hour later, Eddie can tell they’re getting close to the sea. The air smells moist and water molecules hang in the air. The headlights glow in the fog and light seems to surround the truck the instead of piercing forward. The air is so dense with moisture that Ben has to run the wipers periodically.

At the Lincoln City stoplight, Ben takes a left to stay on the highway. Two miles south, he pulls into an Indian casino. The plan is to get Eddie a steak for his birthday. If Eddie wasn't so ravished he'd rather forget it was his birthday and keep driving into the night, but they also need gas and supplies.

Eddie doesn't catch the full name of the casino, but it's something about a river and a feather. A sign blinks C-A-S-I-N-O and the letters flash red and yellow on Ben's face as he parks in the almost empty lot.

"It's always like this." He yanks the emergency brake. "Dead as a doornail."

Eddie slips off his seatbelt. "You're sure we should stop here?"

Ben pats his pants to make sure he has wallet and keys. "Yep."

"But is it a good idea?"

"Yep." Ben locks his door and walks towards the lights.

At the entrance, Eddie cranes his neck to watch the overhead chandelier. Hundreds of bulbs burn and a few blink like they are about to go out. The brothers make their way to the restaurant. Music plays overhead on low-quality. Imitation sounds of dropping coins, mooing cows and Elmer Fudd shooting a moose permeate the tall structure. They walk past an old couple that stares at the screens and jabs the buttons of their slot machines.

A waitress seats them in an otherwise empty restaurant and Eddie settles into the rubbery booth. Without a word, she slips the menus to the table and strides away on swirly carpet. Mirrors on every surface remind Eddie of the carnival that comes through town once a year, where wrinkled men with no teeth laugh and spin children on clanking rides. The smell is nearly the same too.

Ben pulls a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and slides it towards Eddie.

“I thought you quit.”

“They’re for you.” He clinks a lighter across the veneer table. “To make you look older.”

“I don’t smoke.”

“Well you better start, so we look like men travelling the country instead of a cradle robber and a runaway.”

Eddie rolls the weightless pack over in his hands. Lucky Strikes. He lifts the lid and sniffs at the sweet tobacco. He removes a slender smoke, taps it butt down on the table like he’s in the movies. He tries the lighter a few times with his thumb. Finally the filament strikes and he brings flame to tip. He chokes on the first puff.

He’s coughing his brains out when the waitress sloshes two ice waters to the table. “Your skin’s too nice to smoke,” she says. She takes a pad and pen from her apron. “We’re out of rib-eye.”

“Really?” Ben looks at the menu. “But it’s my brother’s birthday. He needs some meat.”

“So get him the chicken.”

Eddie tries taking another drag, but he can’t make himself inhale so he spits out the smoke and smashes the cigarette in an ashtray. “I’ll eat anything.”

“Two chickens.” The waitress replaces her empty notebook. “Drinks? Pop?”

Ben folds his menu and hands it to her. “Two beers.”

She squints, she’s going to ask for their IDs, but gives up and heads back to the kitchen, hunching over to light her own cigarette. She returns with what looks like two of the lightest beers she could find.

Ben downs his beer and leaves Eddie alone at the table. He sips the beer, which is more palatable than the whiskey. He looks around the half-lit restaurant and tries to believe in the box of Lucky Strikes. He’s been liberated from his old life. This is a new beginning.

He leans back in the booth and closes his eyes. Tomorrow he’ll be on the beach, sand kicking up from the soles of his feet as he runs. The sun will be out. It will be warm. Stash will run. His fur will be wet with sand. Eddie’s eyes snap open.

He’s examining his reflection in the glass that surrounds booth when Ben comes back and slaps ten shiny-faced lotto scratchers on the table.



“Nine for you and one for me.” He pulls two pennies from his pocket and slides one toward Eddie with his index finger. “Found this one in bathroom. You can have it.”

“Ha.” Eddie takes the other penny.

“It was heads-up.” Ben smiles.

Ben leans on his elbows and watches Eddie scratch at the unfolded accordion line of lotto tickets. Eddie reads each carefully to make sure he doesn't miss a prize. He's got one left when the waitress delivers plates of flat, white meat and scalloped potatoes with a couple green beans on the side. He's so hungry, he shovels the meal into his face without stopping. He pushes the plate away, and leans back having forgotten the last scratcher.

Ben looks around for the waitress. He points at his empty beer bottle and makes a circular motion with his finger. She brings him another.

Eddie takes several more sips from his own bottle. “Do you have money for this?”

Ben looks up and stops mid-chew. He nods. When he's finished eating he leans in and goes crazy on his own lotto scratcher. Waxy stuff flies all over the table and he blows it away with a giant breath. Nothing. “We got the worst luck, this family.”

The waitress comes back to take the plates. She stacks them together and clangs the silverware atop the pile. Eddie's last ticket is exposed when she picks up the flatware.

He scratches the ticket.

The waitress sets the check facedown. “Look at you, won three bananas.”

She has all the plates and is about to leave when Ben snaps up the ticket.

“Goddamn.”

“What?” says Eddie. “What’d I win?” He snatches the ticket back and races his eyes across it.

“Little pecker,” says the waitress. “I work in this god-forsaken place years, never win a thing, and a teenager comes in here and wins ten thousand dollars.”

### Chapter Three

Eddie takes a breath and stares at the ticket in his fingers. He rubs his thumbs across the top and the plastic coating squeaks. “What does this mean?”

“It mean’s your birthday just got better.”

“No really?”

Ben takes off his hat and scratches his scalp. “It means we have a chance.”

“Are you sure we should cash this? What if someone finds out?”

“You don’t sound like a guy who just won the lotto.” Ben puts a twenty on the table and scoots from the booth.

Eddie folds the ticket in half, tucks it in his pocket and follows his brother out.

They make their way to the cashier’s counter and Eddie suggests they wait to cash the ticket, but Ben insists they need the money. With ten thousand in their pockets, they’ll go further, faster. Eddie’s not sure if anyone is looking for them, or if they’ve discovered Mick’s house or body, but Ben says either way, it doesn’t matter. They can never go home. It seems like he wants Eddie to understand this.

They wait for the guy in the translucent-green visor to finish up with an overweight woman who wants her bills in a specific way. The cashier scribbles on a notepad while she counts on her fingers. “Three twenties, three fives, ten ones, and a bunch of quarters.”

“You want the rest in quarters?” asks the cashier.

“How much is left?”

The cashier looks over the woman’s shoulder at Ben. “It’ll be a minute.”

“I’m going to the bathroom,” says Eddie.

“Come back with that ticket,” says Ben. “Because we’re out of here.”

Eddie holds his warm beer and winds the isles of machines. By the bathroom, a gumball machine advertises a free gumball with a winner. He inserts the coin and twists the metal nob. The machine clicks and a ball spirals down the fat tube. It clinks against the door. It could have said nothing, but LOSER is written in faded type as if it wasn’t obvious enough.

He pops the ball into his mouth and bites down, but his teeth skate across the top, the ball spins, and he bites his lip. Salty blood mixes with the sugar. He gulps down the warm beer and tosses the bottle atop paper towels in the trashcan.

He takes another route back to the cashier and winds up in the tables section. There are five poker tables, but people only play at one where the dealer yawns and passes out cards. Five people play at the craps table and they explode into cheers and high fives. The poker players look over and rub sleep from their eyes.

A fat guy in his fifties stands at the head. He scoops up the dice and holds them so the young woman can blow into his palm. She looks Ben’s age, maybe younger,

eighteen. The man pitches the dice and again everybody cheers. He scoops, she blows, he throws again. This time there are sighs and the dealer rakes the chips. Someone else takes the dice and the man gathers his stack, turns his back to the girl and walks away.

She grabs his sleeve. "That's it?"

"Yeah that's it." He jerks away and walks toward the elevator.

She follows him. "Baby."

He shifts his enormous stack of chips to rest between a forearm and his belly. He considers her a moment and scratches a grubby beard.

"You're way up." She takes him by the arm again. "Don't you want to play a while? Aren't I your good luck charm?"

"Please." He bats her off and keeps going.

"To hell with you." She throws her hands straight up and bangle bracelets slip down her forearm to her elbow. When she puts her hands on her hips, the bracelets jingle back to her wrists. "Cheap bastard."

The man turns around and frowns. With his thumb, he flips her a red chip. It patters to the carpet, rolls toward her and stops at her dainty feet. She stares at him and waits until he turns the corner before folding at the waist to pick it up. When she stands, she pulls her mini-skirt down and sees Eddie watching her.

“What’re you looking at?” She crosses her arms and the bracelets press up into her chest.

He starts back toward the cashier. “I didn’t see anything.”

“Excuse me?”

Feeling a minor buzz, he plods away, back to the cashier where his brother argues with the man in the visor.

“Sir, it’s the rules,” says the man. “To cash that ticket, we’ll need your full name and social security number.”

“Just give me the cash.” Ben shrugs. “No biggie.”

The man sighs. “We all have to pay taxes.”

Ben slaps his hands on the counter. “What if I give you the ticket and you give me eighty-percent of the cash? Right now. You can do what you want with the rest, pay taxes or buy your wife a cubic zirconium.”

The cashier shakes his head. “No can do, pal.”

Eddie leans against the counter and looks at the old couple from before playing the slot machines. Ash an inch long dangles from the lady’s cigarette as she goes back and forth between two machines. Her husband hunches over a game about cats. Eddie looks around to see if there’s a game about dogs. There isn’t, but he does find a stack of

complementary matches. He uses them to light another cigarette. He lets the hot smoke run up his fingers before trying another drag.

The young woman in the miniskirt comes to stand behind Ben. She stares Eddie down until he looks away. When he looks back, she's gazing toward the empty stage.

"Sir, I'm only going to tell you one more time. I can't give you cash without your information." The man behind the glass places his palms on the countertop. "Goodbye."

"I'll pay the taxes in cash, right now." Ben's nose is about to touch the glass.

The cashier shrugs. "It's a state thing. You can't argue with the state."

"Come on man." The young woman pipes in. Her purse drops from her shoulder and she catches it in her hand. "We don't have all night."

Ben rotates to face her. He takes in her short span and lands on the on the scowl on her otherwise clear face. "Please. Be patient."

"Actually." She pushes past him and sets her meager chips on the counter. "You look done."

Ben steps aside and leans against the counter. He watches as she waits for her cash. She ignores him, so he takes a deep breath and leans in toward Eddie. "This is such crap."

Eddie looks over Ben's shoulder to see the girl looking down at the counter, twisting a bracelet around her wrist. He looks back to Ben. "We got enough for a couple days don't we?"

"Bro, this is money we could do something with."

"Like go back up to Shasta's?" Eddie's had enough death threats for an evening.

Ben crosses his arms. "She won't kill us if we come with money."

Eddie doesn't understand why they have to do something with the money, why they can't just survive on it. He pulls one more drag before smashing out the cigarette on the trashcan. He spits out the gum. When he turns around, Ben has his wallet out. Eddie is tall enough to count three hundred in cash.

"This is enough for tonight." Ben stuffs the wallet in his pocket. "We'll figure out the ticket tomorrow."

"You're going to spend all that tonight?"

"I promised you a good birthday."

Before Eddie can express that getting out of Lincoln City to do some free camping in the truck would be a fine birthday, the young woman's face pops into view over Ben's shoulder.



Her lips are a feather's distance from his jaw. "How much did you win?" Her red purse presses against Ben's low back. He has to take a step forward to maintain balance. She leans forward so that her small breasts skim the edges of his shoulder blades.

"Ten bucks," he says. "Besides, it wasn't me who won, it was my brother."

She takes her eyes from Ben's neck and looks at Eddie. She shoves away from Ben and he wobbles again. She's halfway out the sliding doors when she turns around. "Don't spend it all in one place."

She opens an umbrella and ducks under the fat rain drops that have begun to fall from the roof. She walks into the vacant lot and Eddie catches Ben watching her skirt shimmy over her ass.

The sliding doors close and Eddie is left with his reflection. He's lanky and wearing old clothes that don't fit. He's hunched over from the long car ride. His lips and teeth are purple from the gumball and yet, he feels like a million bucks.

Both boys get soaked on the run to the truck. The defroster is broken so Eddie has to wipe the windshield with a towel. He's swiping his side when he sees the girl, with her black umbrella, trudging through a puddle to cross a side street.

"Wait, stop." Eddie twists to watch her as they roll by. "Should we give her a ride?"

Ben looks in his rearview and presses the gas. “We don’t know where she’s going.”

“She has to walk in the rain.” He looks in the passenger mirror and tries to rub the purple from his teeth. “In those shoes.”

“Dude, she’s not your type,” says Ben.

“It’s not that.” Eddie folds up the mirror. “Besides how do you know?”

“I know girls.”

“Turn around, you don’t know her.”

Ben shakes his head.

Eddie tries one last thing. “It’s my birthday.”

“No.”

“We should see where she’s going. Look at us, she probably won’t even take the ride.” He points at the truck grease still on Ben’s arms.

Ben sighs and runs his palms around the steering wheel. As he pulls over, he grips either side as if they were driving fast. He points. She’s walking by, clutching her purse and leaning into the storm.

Eddie rolls down his window. “Hey, you want a ride?”

She jumps and turns. She sees it’s them and keeps walking.

Eddie pops open the door and steps into the rain. “Come on, how far are you going?”

“None of your business, asshole.”

Ben sighs and clicks his door open. He leans into the driver’s door jamb and calls to her over the hood. “Forgive my brother. He saw you in the rain and thought maybe you’d like a ride.”

“That looks like it sucks,” says Eddie.

She has goose bumps up her arms and water droplets shimmer up her calves in the orange streetlamp. Her waterlogged feet are red. She shifts her weight and looks down the street. “You know Minerva’s?”

Ben laughs and nods. “That’s where we’re going.”

“Big surprise.” From under her brow, she looks at his dripping face. She moves towards the truck, passes Eddie without acknowledging him, and climbs into the middle seat.

“They’re expecting me.” She presses her knees together and folds her hands over her lap. “I have a knife.”

Minerva’s is a brick building with a neon sign that’s shaped to look like a woman sitting on the bow of a sailboat half her size. The legs alternate illumination so it looks

like she's kicking. At the entrance, a big woman calls the girl Terry and waves her through. In the black-light, Terry's zebra-print skirt glows.

The big woman takes Ben's money and puts it in a cash box. The bouncer checks his ID and finds the ten dollar bill that's supposed to get Eddie in. The bouncer looks at Eddie, raises his eyebrows and Ben hands over another ten dollars.

The entryway is covered with flyers about local bands and flea markets. A few signs say Room for Rent. The stuff for sale looks rusty and faded, what Eddie thinks of as coastal. He stops, looks at the postings, and dreams of Lincoln City. He acts like he lives here and is interested in the goings-on. He acts like he needs to know about this stuff. He'd stand and look longer, but Ben goes straight to the bar and Eddie feels he should get all the way inside before the bouncer changes his mind.

With his hands in his pockets, Eddie wanders into the air-conditioned room. A topless woman in a black thong swirls her hips on stage. Terry sits front and center and she smiles up at the woman. Her teeth radiate in the black light. The lint on her shirt glows and her earrings sparkle.

All the building's chairs are located at the stage. Three guys and a ratty couple occupy most seats, the only empty ones being on either side of Terry. Eddie doesn't want to risk going near the bar, so he stands behind the empty chairs a moment, decides he looks like a lingering creepster, and takes a seat next to Terry.

Ben comes back with something in a glowing pink cup. He picks up the chair next to Terry and swings it around so he can sit on the other side of Eddie. He stuffs a small wad of ones into Eddie's chest pocket.

Terry looks towards the back, smiles, and waves to the waitress in a black leotard.

The waitress comes over and takes Terry's order. "I don't know why you come here on your days off." She turns her back to Terry and walks away.

Terry's smile fades and she looks back to the stage.

Ben folds a few one dollar bills lengthwise and puts them up. Eddie does the same. A new song starts and a different dancer pulls down her dress to reveal a bikini top. She goes to the guy farthest away and takes it off. She's wearing a black bra underneath. She puts her boobs in his face and tucks ones in her waistband. She makes her way around, taking off one piece of clothing at a time and just before she's naked, just before she gets to Eddie, a hand grabs him by the collar and pull him to standing.

Ben holds his drink up like he's toasting Eddie. "Ten minutes with Monica."

Monica leads Eddie to a corner of the bar that's separated from the main area by a half-wall. She sits him down and grabs his face to make him look at her. As she leans her hands on the back of the chair and puts her full tits inches from his face, Eddie finds his hands travelling to the small of her back.

She pulls away, shakes her head, and taps him 'no-no' on the nose. She sits on a chair in front of him kicking her legs for a while. Eddie gets the point and puts a few

ones on his knees. She hovers and grinds the air above his thigh. He can't take it. He puts the pads of his fingers on her thigh where it turns to ass. Monica stands and smiles. Eddie smiles back. She takes the bills from his knee and ruffles his hair. It hasn't been ten minutes.

He's watching her naked ass stroll away when a beefy hand slaps him upside the head. He's pulled from his chair and dragged by the ear to the door. Before he knows it, he is outside on the pavement picking gravel from the pads of his hands. Looking at his blackened palms brings back the gloves of blood he wore after pushing into Stash's rib cage, trying to bring him back. The ribs were stiff and rubbery, not pliable as they should have been. Nothing is as it should be.

He runs back to the swinging door, pushes it open and finds the bouncer looking at the flyers on the wall. He punches the bouncer hard as he can in the back of the head.

When he comes to, Eddie is face down in the bed of the truck, his scratchy Kermit the Frog blanket against his chin and a moist pillow beneath his swollen eyelid. An irregular crackling sound happens above him. His left eye opens a slit and he looks to see that he's been covered and the sound is rain pattering on a tarp. Slivers of light show at the edges. He fingers his teeth to make sure they're intact.

He shoves the Kermit blanket to the side and presses his feet into the tarp, one then the other, as if walking, so that it inches off him and reveals grey sky one step at a

time. Twinkling water droplets dribble from a sprawling cypress above, and he sees it's not actually raining, just dripping. He climbs over the side and sees Ben and Terry asleep against their respective windows in the cab.

Why Terry is here and not at home is beyond Eddie. Further beyond him is why they're still in the parking lot and not out of town. Still, he knows better than to shake Ben awake, so instead of sticking around to watch them snooze, he stuffs his hands in his pockets and walks the quarter-mile to the ocean.

He takes a flight of stairs to the base of a cove, where the rocks are black with moss and tiny muscles cling to the high tide line. A wooden dock extends from the cliffside into the stirring sea. A few small boats bob and jerk on the ropes that tie them to the cement pillars. Eddie walks to the edge of the dock and feels the wood rise and fall with the grey swells. A rogue splash of water hits the underside of the dock. The water squirts and bubbles through the wooden planks up towards his feet.

He thinks of his brother, back there in his truck, oblivious to the world. He smiles and remembers the first time Ben was arrested. Fourteen-year-old Ben had come home from school, put his feet up, turned on the radio and waited. When the police knocked it wasn't easy knocking. Ben ran, but deputy Big Leonard caught him at the fire ring. Ben kicked and screamed against Leonard's gut, told him it was in his blood, that he was a Leland and he couldn't help it. Big Leonard didn't care. Ben went to juvy and Eddie sat at the base of their shared queen bed, eating the Ho-Hos Ben had stolen at gunpoint.

The dock heaves and Eddie turns to see an old man with a galvanized bucket and lunch cooler has stepped on and begun to unravel the ropes and knots that hold his boat. The white-haired man assesses Eddie's full height. "Glad you're here, son. Second time this week I've needed another hand."

Eddie's isn't sure he should talk to the old man, but he's fascinated with how dexterously he's able to finesse the complicated knots. He watches the man tie and untie.

"So what do you say kid?"

Eddie looks up. "What knot is that?"

The man shakes his head and hefts his things to the blue wooden boat. The gold lettering on the side says *The Giving Sea*. It looks hand painted.

"Are you here to work or not?"

"I can't," says Eddie.

"Then why, son, are you on the dock?" The man climbs aboard, disappears into the hull with his cooler, comes back empty handed and begins organizing the ropes.

"You're a fisherman?" Eddie asks.

"You could be too, give you ten percent of the catch." The man looks up and frowns. "You're eighteen right?"

"No sir, sixteen." Eddie looks down at his feet and thinks maybe he should have lied.



“Shite. Come back in two years.”

With the ropes now coiled on the deck, the man goes to the glass-enclosed captain’s chair and fires up the engine. Smoke bursts from the pipes, but quickly disappears into the grey sky. While the engine warms, the man rummages for things on the floor, twists dials on the radio, taps on gauges, spreads and studies a map.

Eddie would like to be a fisherman. He would always be on the sea, never at the whim of anyone but himself.

The man gives a curt wave and putters from the cove.

## Chapter Four

Back at the truck Ben swerves on his feet and gives Eddie a hard time for disappearing. Terry sits in the passenger seat and wipes makeup from beneath her eyes. When she has the brilliant idea of going to the supermarket for raspberry Danishes, Eddie's regret in giving her a ride to the strip club is solidified. He's even further put out when Ben tells him to get in the middle so Terry can drive.

Eddie refuses to wait with her in the car while Ben runs inside. He pulls on a flannel and goes to the rock wall that overlooks a flat beach below where a couple in puffy jackets and bare feet walk hand-in-hand. The man lets go long enough to throw a tennis ball for a yellow Labrador retriever. When the dog crashes into the surf, the man picks up the woman's hand and they keep walking. The dog comes back, drops the ball at their feet and won't let them go forward until the ball is thrown again.

Eddie starts when a car backfires behind him. He looks at the car, then back to couple. They continue meandering along, unable to hear the blemish on their perfect morning stroll.

When Eddie looks back to the parking lot, anxious for Ben to return, he sees two police cruisers pull in and stop at the lot's edge. The cloudy sky reflects in their windshields so Eddie can't see if they look his way. He climbs off the wall and paces toward the truck, measuring each step to keep himself from breaking into a run.

At the truck, he yanks open the driver's door where Terry sits, playing with the dials on the radio.

"Get out," he says.

She looks like she can't place how she knows him. "No."

The police get out of their cruisers. They inspect another eighties-model Ford truck.

"I mean it." He grabs her by the elbow and tries to guide her from the seat. "You have no business with us."

She hangs on to the steering wheel and kicks him with her bare feet. "I disagree."

He tugs. "Come on."

She kicks again and lands a decent blow to his sack. He doubles over and she closes the door and locks it. She reaches over and locks the passenger door. The police look their direction. Eddie waves, smiles, and gets no response. They scribble on their pads.

They watch him cross the lot toward the store where Ben exits through the double doors carrying a plastic bag in each hand. Eddie jerks his head in the cops' direction.

"Look at me." Ben reaches into a bag and pulls out a carton of milk. He hands it to Eddie and when Eddie takes it, he doesn't let go, but pulls Eddie in close. "Stop."

"What?"

Ben lets the milk go and pats Eddie on the back. He smiles. “You haven’t done anything wrong.”

Ben leads Eddie to the truck where he places the bags in back. He never looks in the direction of the police, just shoves Eddie into the middle and tells Terry to drive back to the casino.

She slams the stick and the truck grinds gears. Eddie sneaks a peek backward as the pick-up jerks from the lot. One of the cops rips a yellow slip from his pad and places it under the windshield wiper of the other truck. The other stands and places his hands on his duty belt. They admire the steel boot placed on the other pick up, and get back in their cars.

An hour later, Eddie holds a bag of peas to his blotchy cheek and stares at himself through his one good eye in the room’s bathroom mirror. He rolls his tongue over the canker sore in his mouth from the gumball. He’s in a casino hotel waiting to die or be caught by the cops.

When they plopped down in the room, Ben was in such a bad mood that Eddie didn’t ask why Ben paid his last hundred bucks to the pimply kid at the counter. He didn’t ask why they weren’t out on the road, or why Ben got so drunk that he needs to sleep. He didn’t ask how Ben knows Shasta, or how Shasta knew their dad. He told himself it didn’t matter, but it could be that he doesn’t really want to know.

By the time Eddie comes out of the bathroom, Ben is passed out, face down on the pinstripe comforter. Eddie turns on the TV and slumps on the bed. He munches on the pastries and orange juice from the store. He stretches his legs and watches an hour about the Inuits of Canada. Turns out, the high desert winters aren't so different than the Alaskan Tundra. He flips to an hour special about killer cats.

Ben is still passed out at noon so Eddie goes downstairs to the restaurant. He orders a burger and a microbrew, but the new waitress won't bring him a beer. He pays with the money he found in Ben's pocket at the fire. He considers taking something up to Ben, but he decides Ben can buy his own damn dinner.

After consuming every last calorie, he wanders out to the gambling floor where the machines jangle and chirp. He makes his way to the tables section and isn't surprised to see Terry playing Blackjack. He goes over, sits beside her at the table and waits for the game to finish.

He's about to ask her if they can chat a minute when dealer tells him he needs to put a bill on the table or leave. He debates wasting the money, but figures it's worth the chance to ask what he needs to ask. A golden sign on the corner of the green felt reads Five Dollar Minimum. He puts five dollars down and gets one measly red chip. He places the chip in between the white lines as he saw Terry and the other players do. The dealer skims the cards across the felt to each player.

When it comes to the game, Eddie knows more or less what he's doing. He used to play twenty-one with his grandmother before she ran off to Texas with a trucker. They

bet pennies and wasabi snacks. He knows to tap the felt to hit. When he taps again, he busts and the dealer sweeps his one chip away. The difference is, Grandma would laugh when she swept the snacks away.

Terry hits, stays, and comes up five dollars. Without looking at Eddie, she slides a chip into his spot. He appreciates the gesture, but hasn't forgotten being kicked in the balls and wonders why she's chosen now to be nice.

He plays conservatively and hits once. He wins five and is able to play in silence next to Terry for an hour, though he holds strong at the one chip. She's up about two hundred by the time she announces, to no one in particular, that this is her last hand.

She breaks, scoops her chips, and slides off the stool. She tips the dealer two red chips, turns to Eddie, and truly acknowledges him for the first time since he sat beside her at the table. "What do you want?"

"We need some help," he says.

She starts toward the cashier. "Of course you do."

Eddie jogs to catch up. "It's nothing big."

She laughs, digs for something in her purse, and keeps walking.

"Wait."

She stops and pushes her hand deeper into her bag. Her tongue presses to her upper lip and she smiles. "Got it." She pulls out a green chip and starts walking again.

Eddie doesn't follow. He stands beside a goldfish penny slot machine. It repeats the same tune over and over. "Please, listen."

She turns around. "Look, your brother and I had a little fun last night, so what? That doesn't mean I'm getting wrapped up." She waves her hand. "Crap, even I know better."

"No," Eddie says. The slot machine bleeps in his ear. "This isn't about that."

Terry walks toward him. She stops inches from his face and presses a finger to his chest. "Then spit it out."

The fish bleep. He steps away from the machine, but the one across the aisle is just as penetrating. A fake drill buzzes into the earth and black oil spurts. Terry squints hard into his eyes. He can't bring himself to ask.

"I don't want anything to do with your brother." She crosses her arms over her chest. She's still in the clothes they met her in, same shoes and same bracelets. She turns and starts away. "Peace."

Eddie has a choice. He can go back to the room and wait for Ben to wake up. They can hit the road and it will be worse than this. They'll have even less than they have now.

"Let's make a deal," he calls.

Terry turns and rolls her eyes, like she's talking to a really dumb adolescent.

“What deal could you offer me?”

“We won the lotto,” he says. “And my brother wants to triple the winnings.”

“Thirty bucks?”

“You know it's more than that, or you wouldn't have taken the ride last night.”

She opens her mouth to say something, then stops and says something else. “How do you plan on tripling the winnings? More gambling?”

“I don't think so.”

She laughs. “You mean you don't know?”

He shrugs. “Ben's the man with the plan.”

“Sure he is.”

He follows her to the cashier. Thankfully, it's not the same guy Ben harassed last night. While they wait for the cashier to prepare the small bills she's requested Eddie whispers to her how it is. “He can't use his social security number to get the money and I'm not eighteen yet.”

She leans on the counter and watches the cashier count. “Why?”

“Why what?”

She sighs. “Why can't he use his number?”



Eddie pauses. "He's not a U.S. citizen?"

"Don't lie."

He smiles. "He just can't. Come on, I'll give you ten percent of ten thousand."

She eyes him and he knows his mistake right away. "No," she says. "I want in on the tripling. I want ten thousand."

Ben is going to kill him.

She lowers her voice and grabs his wrist. "I don't ever want to know what he did." She leans back and motions with her hand. "Now, give me the ticket."

Eddie pads his pockets. He'd changed into the pants Ben had been wearing because they were less like high-waters than his. "I can't. It's in my other pants."

"Go get it."

The cashier says he's ready and he counts the bills to Terry. There's something else he wants to ask her so he leans in the same place he did last night and is reminded he can light up a cigarette. Those are in the other pants as well. He watches Terry at the counter and fears this is his worst idea yet, worse even than killing Mick.

"You know what?" Terry shoves the wad of cash into her purse and looks at the big clock on the wall. "I have errands. Let's meet later. Say five?"

"Can I ask you something," he says.

“I don’t know, can you?”

He’s already in deep with his brother. “What about a dog?”

She stops messing with stuff in her purse and looks at him. “You tell me.”

“I want one.”

“What for?”

He shrugs and puts his hands in his pockets. “Why does anyone want a dog?”

She crosses her arms and frowns. He’s sure she won’t help him and that she hates him, but she relaxes. “Yeah, I know where you can get a dog.”

Eddie was one of those kids who only had a few friends on the school bus, friends who bragged about seeing boobs or how big their prepubescent dicks were, friends he didn’t like much, but was stuck with for twenty miles at a time. So when Terry pulls her white car into the trailer park, parks at the front and leads him down the alleys, past miniature lawns with miniscule picket fences, to number twenty-two, it’s not friendship he feels so much as appreciation. Though he won’t admit it to her, much less to himself, he appreciates someone paying his requests attention and helping him achieve something he couldn’t on his own.

“Be quiet.” Terry slips off her high-heels. They dangle from her fingers as she leads him around the side of a mobile home with peeling paint. She stops, bends at the waist to look under a bush, and points. “Right there.”

Eddie looks into the bush, but all he sees are aluminum foil scraps and a few crusty tomato plants. “I don’t see anything.”

She jabs her finger and points at the dripping bush. “There.”

Eddie bends down and his knees crack. He squints. “That garbage bag?”

She sits on her heels and takes a thin chain from the bare soil. She gives it a little tug. Nothing happens so she rummages through her purse and pulls out one of the complimentary cookies from the casino. She holds it out and forms her lips into an O shape. She tries to whistle but just blows air.

Eddie’s lip curls. “You can’t whistle?”

She glances at the aluminum back door of the home. “Yeah, you know this whole whistling thing, it’s been holding me back my whole life.”

She shakes the dry cookie at the bush and a moment later, a small, wire-haired dog creeps from underneath. The dog’s got a tan spot on his head and matching spot on his rump. It’s feet and belly are dirty. Terry tosses the cookie and the dog takes it back to its hiding place.

She stands up. “That’s Max. He’s yours if you want him.”

Eddie thinks Max looks like a yapper. “He’s a little small.”

“So?” Something clunks in the house and her eyes flick to the door and back.

“I want a hunting dog,” he says.

“He’s a Jack Russell.”

It’s clear that means nothing to Eddie so she goes on. “Rat terrier? He’s a hunting dog.” She sighs. “You want him or not?”

Eddie thinks of his garden back home, where the moles eat at the roots. Maybe a terrier would come in handy. He follows her eyes to the door where something clangs behind it. “They’re getting rid of him?”

“Yeah.” She bends down and pulls on the chain to drag Max out from under the bush. He plants his feet in the dirt to resist, but it’s no use, he’s too small. When he’s at their feet, Terry pulls another cookie from her bag. Max rears and puts his muddy paws on her leg. He’s only a foot tall. She picks him up, delivers him to Eddie, and unsnaps his collar.

Eddie holds the dog at arm’s length to get a better look. Tiny little runt. “Terry,” he says. “This dog isn’t for me.”

Eddie looks for Terry, but she’s already halfway out the yard.

Behind him, the door squeaks open and a big, tatted dude comes down the turf-covered stairs with a pipe wrench. He sees Eddie with the dog and Terry, who's running now, is almost to her car.

The man shakes the wrench. "Terry, god damn it!"

Terry sprints away and Eddie sees the bottoms of her feet are black with asphalt.

The guy raises the wrench over his head and though he's too fat to actually put up a chase, Eddie tucks Max under his arm like he's a football and starts to run. Ahead, Terry's feet slap the pavement as she slows down and pops her car door open. She climbs in and revs the engine. With the dog at his chest, even though the man has long given up, Eddie feels good. He's getting away and he has a new dog.

## Chapter Five

They drive the city streets and Terry has to tip her nose up to look over the steering wheel of her car. “I didn’t know he was a girl.”

“Max is Maxine.” Eddie picks the terrier up, spins it in a one-eighty on his lap and does it again.

The dog tries to escape into the back seat, but he holds her down and scratches between her ears. She closes her eyes and presses her nose into his belly like she hasn’t had her ears scratched in a long time. When he lets her go she launches from his lap to the back seat. She climbs up by the speakers and watches the trees go by overhead.

Terry pulls up to a shabby house with overgrown grass and weedy flower beds. The foliage twists itself around a decrepit picket fence. Trees lean against the gutters and deep, empty holes about the size of human bodies have been dug into the soil.

“Last stop.” Terry gets out and calls Max, but she’s already out on the sidewalk.

“Should I come in?” asks Eddie. His adrenaline is still flowing from the chase.

Terry looks from him to the house and back. “I guess.”

For some reason, maybe it’s the peeling paint or the sink in the yard, the house reminds him of this place he went once with his dad in the desert. One weekend a year the volunteer firefighters disperse and drive hundreds of miles in all directions. They arrive at lonely mobile homes and trailers which are surrounded as far as one can see by

sage and silt. The firefighters arrive with donated lumber, hammers and nails to secure the homes from blowing over. It doesn't happen often, but every now and then a trailer topples from a rogue gust of hurricane force wind and traps someone inside for days. Sometimes people are so isolated, they aren't found for months.

Eddie was six the year his dad took him along. At first he didn't tell Eddie what they were doing or why. They drove two hours, across dry, flat lands with sharp rock outcroppings. When they pulled up to the single-wide home, a wrinkly, Native American woman came to the door. She didn't say anything and it scared Eddie to have the woman look at him so blankly. His dad introduced themselves as part of the fire department and said they were here in response to an application someone had helped her file to have her home secured. She stared until he pointed to the emblem on his shirt.

While his dad cut and hammered, the woman sat inside at her table. Eddie had been told to sit in a lawn chair and not move, but that lasted a half hour. He got up and circled the house. A wide trash pile was stacked against the back. A piece of metal siding had been ripped away by the wind to reveal pink insulation that had thinned. About fifty feet from the home was an outhouse and a hundred feet in the other direction a pipe stuck up from the ground. A faucet was located about halfway up and a shower head topped the pipe. Next to the pipe, a kitchen sink was propped up by two-by-fours. Clean dishes were dried in a rack.

When it was time to leave the woman limped down the wooden steps. She held a paper plate of potato chips toward Eddie's father. Eddie was about to say no thank you,

because he was scared they were dirty, but his dad took the plate and expressed gratitude. The woman's dark eyes bore into Eddie and he stepped back.

On the drive home his dad munched on the chips and said they were her way of saying thank you. He said it was a big gesture for her to offer them food. She didn't have a car and relied on someone to get her groceries. She was Piute and lived so far out because she was squatting there. It wasn't her property, but she lived there for free. It was so far out, so desolate, and she wasn't hurting anyone. The government overlooked people like her.

Eddie took a potato chip and let it melt on his tongue.

A few miles before the fire station, where they were planning to stop for a free barbeque dinner, his dad pulled the truck over. He looked so intense that Eddie became afraid of what he might say. Would they have to move even further from town because they were poor? But his dad told him that he'd taken him along because he wanted Eddie to know how much they had. The six year old Eddie nodded, but didn't really understand. He was sick of eating rice and beans.

So now, standing outside the run-down house on the coast, gazing at the trash and baby toys in the yard, he's reminded that he didn't have it so bad at home, that dealing with Mick was the worst of it and since he doesn't have to do that anymore, he wants to go back, water his garden, and see his mom. He wants to get his license and drive to school and the store, but Ben says he must adjust to this life instead.



Terry leads him inside and a woman sits on the couch and even though she's in sweats and day-old makeup, Eddie recognizes her as Monica, the dancer who got him kicked out of the club last night. Probably because he's got his black eye, she doesn't recognize him so he doesn't say anything. Terry doesn't bother introducing them either. She goes over to a pile of clothes in the corner and starts digging through it. Max sniffs the room.

“You got Darren's dog?” Monica itches her arms.

“Yep.” Terry digs through the pile.

There are holes in the drywall and a power cord runs through the siding from outside. The incessant buzz of a generator seeps through the walls. The carpet is stained with greasy handprints and shoe marks, and splatters from spilled drinks. Places in the carpet are cut away and someone has removed the molding from the doorways.

Monica pulls a broken light-bulb and a torch lighter from a drawer in the table.

“What's that?” Eddie asks, surprised when she sprinkles a few crystals in the light bulb.

Monica grunts. “Fancy salt from the Himalayas. Thousands of years old.”

It's the first time Eddie's been around meth. His mom's drug of choice is pills or anything that will make her sleep. His mom isn't into hyper-living; she's into being half-dead. He's pretty sure the only thing Ben does is toke the stinky green.

Monica shakes a few more crystals into the bulb. “Want a hit? Five bucks.”

Terry talks over her shoulder. “That’ll rot your face off Mon.”

Monica puts a torch to the base of the bulb, looks like she’s about to say something, but thinks better of it. She moves the lighter back and forth under the contents of the bulb and when the yellow goop inside begins to boil she sucks at the brown smoke with a straw. She looks up and sees Eddie watching her. She holds the stuff toward him and chokes on her hit.

Eddie shakes his head.

“What? You want to judge me now, little pecker?”

Eddie stifles a smile and crouches down. Max runs to him so he can scratch her between the ears. “I’ve just never done it before.”

Terry, who’s been stuffing clothes into plastic bags, stops and looks at him.

“Never?”

He shakes his head.

“Does your brother?”

“I don’t think so.”

Monica crumples her upper lip and reignites the torch. The meth boils again and she sucks at the brown smoke. It smells like pee. She coughs and exhales. “Try it kid. Free base. First hit’s free. Next hit, five bucks, five bucks, five bucks.”

A soft thump comes from the bedroom and a man cusses. Eddie thinks about going outside and waiting for Terry, but he decides the faster they both get out, the better. He kneels next to her and helps her shove things into the garbage bags.

Terry grabs a pair of jeans and pulls them up under her miniskirt. She unzips the skirt and drops it to the floor. She pulls a baggy sweatshirt over her head, picks up the skirt and holds it towards Monica. "Here's your skirt back."

The man emerges from the room. He looks a little older than Ben. He doesn't wear a shirt and his blond hair is clumpy. He doesn't even look at Eddie who decides that's fine with him, but he does eye Maxine who's sniffing again at the pile.

"Darren will split your lip." He scratches at his navel.

"I don't care, Randall." Terry picks up a couple bags and takes them outside. "I'm leaving town."

This is news to Eddie. Does she think she's coming with them? Is this is why she's packing her bags? He's not going to argue with her here. Eddie picks up two bags and follows.

Randall sees him, like he's just noticed another guy in the house. "Who the hell are you?"

Eddie ignores him and keeps going. It's not the first time he's been asked that in the last two days. At the door he looks back to see if the guy follows. Monica leans forward and cranes her neck to look out the front door, but she stays seated on the couch.

She bounces her leg and holds out the light bulb and torch out to the guy. He takes it and starts the fire under the bulb as he watches Terry pack things into her trunk.

They have to go inside for one last load.

“Where are you going with Darren’s dog?” Randall picks at his belly button.

“None of your business.” Terry passes him on her way into the kitchen. Eddie follows to see what she needs help carrying.

Monica stands from the couch and leans against the door jam. She watches Terry bang the cupboards. “You’re going with him?”

“Yep, and his hot brother,” says Terry.

None of the crap in the kitchen is worth sticking around for, but Randall has come into the doorway. He blocks their exit.

Monica rips the bulb from him and takes another hit before setting it on a small stand. “When this Okie drops you in nowhere-ville, you can whore yourself for money and come home.”

Randall paces the hallway to the living room. He runs his hands through his greasy hair and mumbles something about calling Darren and telling him about the dog.

Monica picks up a plastic sheet and covers the stove. “All this will wait for you.”

Terry turns from the cabinet and holds up a scratched up a pot and pan. “Look what you did to my Teflon.”

“Those were crap before you got here.” Monica finds a roll of duct tape and rips a piece off. She plasters it over a hole in the drywall.

Eddie’s about to tell Terry the same thing, to hell with the pots and pans, let’s just go, when he hears the man in the living room on the phone.

Monica covers another hole with the tape. “You’re not even trying to get her back.”

“You shut up.” Terry tosses the Teflon pan to sink and it clangs against the filthy dishes.

Monica swirls the tape roll on her index finger. “Does this guy know?”

“No Mon, but everybody else knows. That’s why I’m leaving.” She tries to leave down the hallway, but Randall blocks her way.

“Darren’s on his way. He wants his dog back.”

“Let me pass.”

He steps aside, but when Eddie tries to sneak by, avoiding eye contact, he steps into the hallway and puffs up. He’s shorter than Eddie, but stockier. Eddie weighs his options. He’s still tender from his round with the bouncer and he doesn’t want a fight, but since Randall’s eyes are two dark pills and he has the feeling there’ll be one.

Eddie’s foot reaches back to steady and he kicks the stand containing the light bulb of meth. The bulb smashes to the kitchen floor and sludge oozes on the linoleum.

A smash comes at his temple and then the stars. He's able to land a decent hit to the man's jaw, and he's about to rip back for another when Terry screams. Both guys turn to see she's crouching over Maxine. The dog's paw is covered in a sticky syrup and Terry keeps her from eating the meth, but it looks like Max has already taken a few good licks. Monica pushes past Eddie, worried about her wasted drug. He turns back in time to see Randall has found a fire poker. Eddie bends at the waist and closes the distance so the weapon can't be swung. He takes a sharp jab on the spine before his shoulder strikes the lower ribs.

Randall falls back and gasps. His lips pull back to reveal decayed teeth. His face is scarred and his veins are blue and thin under his skin. Mick is dead. Mick is dead. Randall starts to his feet. He's going to kill Eddie.

Before he knows he's doing it, Eddie's on top of him, sitting on his chest, smashing his bruised knuckles into Mick's face. He feels his right hand crack so he hits with his left. When Terry pulls him off, blood reaches up Eddie's arms, and smears into the man's ears and across his teeth. Monica screams in the corner and Terry drags Eddie from the house by the neck of his shirt.

She shoves Eddie down the steps and cradles Maxine in her arms.

Monica comes to the door and screams. "That's why they took her baby away. That's why."

Eddie looks at Terry, waits for her to refute the claim, but she has wet streaks on her face. She goes to her side of the car. “People can change, Monica.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

They get in the car and Terry throws Maxine onto Eddie’s lap. “Don’t let her lick.”

Monica races down the cement path in bare feet. “Darren’s going to kill you.”

Terry starts the car and jerks it into the road. She presses the gas down. A minute later, she looks in the rearview and she sees they aren’t being followed. She looks at Eddie who holds the shivering Max to his chest. Eddie shivers too.

“What the hell was that?” she says.

He stares straight ahead. “I don’t know.”

Back at the hotel, Terry rinses Max’s foot under the sink in the bathroom and Eddie sits in the chair shaking from the adrenaline that still courses through his system. Eddie explains that everything was in self-defense, that the blood crusting over on his hands was the other guy’s and that all the bruises and cuts on his face were from last night.

Ben hasn’t asked about the dog or how Eddie and Terry had linked up in the first place, or what Eddie was doing outside the hotel room. He grabs Eddie’s hand from the

armrest and holds it up to show Eddie something he hadn't noticed. His pinky finger is the size of a Ping-Pong ball and the whole outside of his hand up to his wrist and forearm is swelling into a sausage. He drops Eddie's hand and rubs at his temples. He paces the room and finally lies down on the bed and stares at the ceiling.

Terry comes to sit on the bed with Maxine wrapped in a towel. The dog is soaked with sweat and curled nose to stomach. Terry sits on the corner of the bed and sees Eddie examining his hand.

"It's fine," she says. "You need to wrap the fingers together."

Ben sits up. "He doesn't need to go to the hospital?"

"If his pinky is all that's broken." She sets Max in Ben's lap and kneels in front of Eddie. She squeezes his elbow and down to his wrist. She yanks on his hand and pokes at the fine bones. She tugs on his pinky finger and shakes the whole thing side to side.

Finally, he can't take the pain anymore so he jerks away.

"You're fine." She goes back to the bed and sits next to Ben. She takes Max off his lap and holds her to her chest. Max shakes harder. "Just get some tape."

Nobody says anything for a while. Eddie cradles his hand at his heart and Ben stares at him. He looks pissed.

"What?"



Ben leans forward and puts his elbows on his knees. "Couple things."

Eddie waits.

"Where did that dog come from?"

Eddie looks at Max, curled in Terry's arms. "That's my new dog."

"The hell it is." Ben won't look away.

"What's the other thing?" Eddie asks though he knows what Ben is thinking.

She points with his thumb at Terry. "What's she doing here?"

"She's going to cash the ticket."

"And I get thirty-three-point-three percent off what you earn," Terry adds.

"Excuse me?" says Ben. "What is your name again?"

She frowns.

"So," says Ben, looking back to Eddie. "What's your plan?"

"Shasta. Terry's going to help us get the cash."

"Fine, but this?" Ben rubs his forehead and gestures to Maxine and Terry. "This is a problem."

"Hey," Terry says. "I hate to break up your brother-love fest, but we need to get out of here."

“And why is that?” asks Ben.

She goes to the window and pulls back the plaid curtain. She scans the parking lot and lets the curtain drop. “They found my car. God, I hate this place.”

“Who did?” Ben gets up and pulls the curtain back.

“See that fat guy in the Camaro?” She rubs Maxine’s ear. The dog shakes.  
“That’s the owner of this girl.”

“Good, go give it back.”

“And the other guy your brother just beat the living dog crap out of.”

The curtain drops closed. Eddie is thankful Ben doesn’t lay into him for screwing the situation. He does go back to pacing the room. He wears new clothes, like he went out and bought some while Eddie was out. There is nothing for Eddie, just the same clothes he changed into at the fire pit and the blanket that made his backpack look full.

“We need your car,” Ben says.

“What?” says Terry.

“We all three can’t fit in my pick-up.”

She holds up Maxine. “Four.”

“So you get my point. We’ll cash the ticket down the road.” Ben paces. A line of sweat has formed between his shoulder blades. “We still need to dump the truck.”

Terry watches him, but he won't explain. After a moment, she picks up his coat and puts it on. She zips it so that it holds Max to her chest and leaves her hands free.

“We need to go now.”

Eddie shoves his toothbrush, hat, and blanket into his backpack. He empties the pockets of his old pants, including the lotto ticket and shoves everything in the pants he's wearing. He decides to leave them because they don't fit in the bag. He makes sure there's nothing else in the room.

He stands at the hotel room door and prepares to throw it open. Ben, because the men wouldn't know or recognize him, has taken the bags out and driven the truck to the other side of the casino. Terry has her keys ready. Once Eddie's around the corner, and hopefully the guys will have followed, she can sneak out and drive south on the highway to meet them at the edge of town.

There are many things that can go wrong with the weak plan. All of them involve their being separated and alone, but before he can think too much about them, Eddie nods to Terry who looks pregnant with the small dog under her coat. He remembers what Monica said about her having a baby taken away and it deflates him right before he's supposed to cut out.

“One, two, three.” Terry flings the door open and it slams back against the wall.

He wasn't quite ready and he stumbles over the metal threshold and falls. The cement scrapes his forearms. Still, by the time he hears the old car rev to life, he's sprinting through the lot. He risks a look back. Both men are still in the car, so Terry should be alright to escape.

Eddie kicks so hard that he slips on a line of paint still wet with rain. He falls on the broken pinky and electricity shoots to his elbow. He gets up and the car has gained on him. They're going to run him straight over. He comes around the corner at the front entrance so fast, that he runs into an old lady. It sends her bumping into her husband, and Eddie realizes it's the old couple from the night before, the one jabbing the machine and letting her cigarette run.

"Hi," he says. "Are you okay?"

She laughs. "Oh yes."

"Security," the husband yells and while she was fine a moment ago, she suddenly thinks there's a threat and grips her purse.

The car skids into the loading zone and Eddie takes off through the casino. He dodges a cocktail waitress in spandex. He runs right around the man in the grey suit with the baton. His shoes grip the carpet so well that by the time he glances over his shoulder to see Darren and Randall pushing aside the guard, he has time to stop, walk, and give them the middle finger with his good hand, before slipping out the door to where Ben waits with the truck.



## Chapter Six

They ride into the forest and follow Terry up a dirt road. Eddie finds himself thinking about a kid he knew who got ahold of bad drugs and stabbed his own mother with a screwdriver. That was the story anyway, that it was the drugs' fault, but people get ahold of bad drugs all the time. They don't all stab their mother twenty-three times.

Marty was a normal kid, or so everybody said. He was a couple years older than Eddie and they'd played baseball together when Eddie's dad was still alive and could drive him to the games. Marty was a normal, run of the mill, small town kid, who went haywire one afternoon, but now, Eddie wonders if Marty didn't go haywire, but maybe started out that way.

The day he heard Marty flipped out, Eddie was in the library, which shared a building with the two-cell jail. Sam Rubenstein, the kid everyone assumed would be the one to do something like that, announced that Marty was in handcuffs and there was blood all over. Sam's eyes were wild with pleasure. He was the first to give the news and the news was gruesome. Sam said he'd kill Bobbie for making that bad batch and doing this to Marty.

At the time, Eddie agreed that Marty got a bad deal. But now, he thinks maybe people flip out because something inside them lays dormant until a switch is triggered by something like drugs. His question is whether that something is inside everyone, or just certain people.

If it's just certain people, is he one of those people? Is he on a bad trip because Stash was strangled? Did Stash's death trigger that switch or was it waiting to be triggered this whole time?

Eddie could ask Ben what he thinks, but Eddie is still too mad about having to dump the truck. Though he knows it's the smartest move, and actually his fault, the idea of dumping the truck to rot in the woods makes him feel almost as bad as discovering Stash crusted over and heavy with death. He would never admit it to anyone, but his father's image has become sketchy over the years. The one place he can still see him is coming home from a long haul, dust spinning up from the tires, reaching out the window to wave as he pulled up and set the brake.

"Do you remember when this truck was shiny?" he asks Ben.

"Yeah, why?"

"Remember when Dad came home so tired that one night he put the front tire in the fire pit and mom came out screaming he was going to burn it down?"

Ben laughs. "He did that twice."

Eddie was pretty little when their dad was hauling frequently and thinking of those days gives him an innocent feeling he wants to stick with. "Where did he go all those times?"

Ben takes a deep breath. He looks tired. "I don't know."

“You got to go sometimes, where did you go?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he says.

Hurt, Eddie stares out the windshield. In front of them, Terry’s sedan, bumps and heaves up the forest road. “He used to go out for Larry Reardon.”

Ben glances at Eddie for the first time. “What do you remember about Reardon?”

“Just that Dad used to take hay and stuff east for him.”

Ben doesn’t say anything. He drives, stares ahead and leans into his door.

“You were lucky to go with Dad.”

Ben doesn’t appear to have anything to add to the subject, so Eddie decides to drop it. They continue to climb and after a while, Eddie gets bored of looking at the dense vegetation. Everything on the coast is thick and green and claustrophobic. He’s used to the open high desert where one can see for miles and the flat horizon is the only thing blocking the view. Back home the blue sky spreads over the landscape, but so far, on the coast, he’s been lucky to see a sliver of sky. Here, plants creeps at him and the air is heavy with humidity. It’s almost hard to breath.

“What’s that called?” Ben says. “Like an impulse buy?”

“What?”

“The dog.”



“She was free.”

“You can’t have a dog man, that’s Terry’s dog.”

“I know.” That was clear from the moment Terry snatched Max at the tweaker house and took to cleaning and babying her at the hotel.

Eddie watches Terry’s taillights blink against the dark forest. If Max was his dog, and if he goes to jail, Maxine will go to the pound. She’s old enough that she won’t get adopted, just put down. It would be his fault. That is, if she lives through her meth high. Eddie looks at his hands. They quiver on his lap and he tucks them under his thighs. He can feel Ben watching him.

“Do I have to explain why you can’t have a dog?” says Ben.

“No, but don’t you think Terry will get just as busted if she’s with us?”

“That’s her problem, not ours.”

“But don’t you think she has a right to know who we are?”

Ben snaps to look at Eddie. “Who are we?”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t.”

Eddie thinks he shouldn't have to explain this to Ben if Ben doesn't have to explain about the dog. They ride a few minutes longer and he remembers something that came and went from his mind so quickly a few hours ago he'd almost forgot.

"Terry had her baby taken away," he says. "I think from drugs."

Ben doesn't say anything at first. He drives with his hands at ten and two. After a few minutes he relaxes and leans back in his seat. "We're not bad guys."

Eddie isn't sure who he's talking about, or even who he's talking to.

Terry slows when the canyon narrows and they approach a creek crossing. Eddie is surprised to see a stone home nestled beneath the rock walls. It looks like the canyon has been crumbing for eons. Ben slows and cranes his neck to catch a glimpse an outdoor patio.

An umbrella stands in the center of a glass table. Candles burn at each place setting and Eddie can see the table has artsy ceramic plates and fabric napkins. A man stands at a smoking grill and a woman opens an oversized wooden door. She comes out with a plate of lettuce and tomatoes. The man takes her by the chin and tips her face up for a kiss. She sets the tomatoes down and ruffles his hair before going back inside.

"Barf," says Eddie.

Once they cross the creek, and are out of sight of the house, Ben pulls over and parks on the side of the road. Terry, in her car, keeps climbing, up toward the campground where she said they could move all their belongings to her car and dump the truck.

Ben creaks his door open and steps quietly onto the gravel. He looks hard at Eddie. "Stay here," he says and leaves.

Through the back window, Eddie watches Ben walk toward the house.

For what feels like forever, he sits in the truck thinking about how in another few minutes, he'll never see it again. It doesn't help that S Sitting in the truck, thinking about how he'll never see it again, Eddie catches a wiff of grilling meat. It's not long before he's sick of waiting for Ben, so he slides out to go see what his brother is up to.

When the house comes into view, Eddie stops and stands behind a tree. He watches the grilling man, illuminated in the glow of a yellow porch light, as he tends the shiny BBQ. Buns sit beside the grill on a plate, buttered and waiting to get toasted. Burgers have been browned to perfection. Slices of cheese rest like French hats on a few plump patties.

Something moves to Eddie's right and he sees Ben, also behind a tree watching not the house, but Eddie. He thinks Ben is as enamored with the meal as he is, until the woman comes back to the porch. She's blond and tall. Her thin legs spike up and disappear into a pair of shorts that barely cover her ass. She delivers a bowl to the table

that looks like it contains potato salad and the man sticks a finger up one of the shorts' legs. She smiles and swats him away.

“Bro.” Ben whispers. “Did you not hear me?”

Eddie smiles and rubs his hands together. “Those burgers look good.”

Ben takes off his hat and runs his fingers through his greasy hair. “Listen. I’m going to scout that woodshed and bring you an armload if it’s clear. You go back to the truck and I’ll get another.”

Eddie salutes. “Whatever you say.”

Ben traipses off toward the shed and Eddie looks back to the house. The broad-backed man closes the lid on the grill and goes inside. It would be damn easy to sneak over and take one slab of meat. No way would that guy notice one burger missing. Then he could help Ben with the wood.

Eddie’s legs haven’t hurt badly since he left home. He’s not sure why, but thinks it has something to do with eating more, or a wider variety of foods than he’s had in a long time. He tells himself a hamburger would be good for him.

Ben is still in the shed, so Eddie breaks from the tree and rushes to press himself against the side of the home. He crouches down and creeps along its length, placing his feet so he can move quietly and quickly. He hears voices inside the kitchen. He has time to get in and out without being noticed. He’s two feet from rounding the corner and

snagging the grub when he hears heavy footsteps on the patio and the barbeque lid squeak up.

He's screwed. He sighs and is about to turn around and meet Ben with the wood when a woman's voice calls from inside. "Honey, you forgot the goat cheese."

"Honey, you're right." The man's footsteps limp away.

Eddie rounds the corner, takes two more steps and stands over the open grill. He inhales. Smoke curls into his nose and soaks his t-shirt. He reconsiders how many he should snatch. There's Ben, Terry and Max to think about. They're going to need buns.

From behind, a voice sings like a bird. "Daddy."

Eddie whips around to see little girl beneath the glass table. She has her legs tucked beneath her and she holds a roller-skate Barbie by the head.

Daddy steps into the door frame, sees Eddie, and disappears into the house.

Eddie has one shot. He makes a pouch by folding up his t-shirt and swipes all the burgers and buns from the grill. Flames lick his fingertips and hot grease spreads against his belly. He waves at the little girl before making a bee-line back toward the truck.

He's about to jump the stream when Ben comes around the corner with a chainsaw and an armload of wood. He looks confused. Why would Eddie already running?

A soft, woofing sound comes from the house and something whizzes past Eddie's ear. Daddy's shooting at them with a BB gun. Another shot woofs.

Behind him, Ben cuss and the wood tumbles to the road. Eddie looks back to see Ben grab his shoulder and pull away. There is blood, but not much. Ben tucks the saw to his chest and runs. Another woof and Ben cusses. He drops the saw and grabs his leg. He limps to gets in the driver's seat. Eddie cradles the burgers while Ben gasses the pickup so hard, the back tires spin and they fishtail up the road.

Ben races so fast, the truck slides around each turn. He's silent. His lips press into tight line. He slams the stick shift and his knuckles are white on the wheel.

Eddie sits in the passenger seat and tries to keep his head from bashing into the window on the tighter corners. He's afraid to say anything, let alone eat a burger or offer Ben one. They cool in his lap.

After downshifting again, Ben places one hand at the top of the wheel and the other goes to his shoulder. He looks down at the swelling lump and squeezes it like a zit until the pellet pops out. Red blood flowers on his white t-shirt. He grimaces and flicks the pellet at Eddie's face. It bounces off his eyelid.

Ben reaches to his calf and squeezes, but the BB is embedded. He crushes the muscle, trying to force the pellet out and the truck swerves. He leans forward to get a better grip.

“Maybe you should pull over.” Eddie looks back through the rear window. “No one’s behind us.”

“Shut up.”

A brown sign appears and indicates a picnic area. Ben slows and leans his chin on the wheel and squeezes at his calf with both hands. The truck creeps into the area where Terry is parked. She’s down at the lake rinsing Max’s foot. Pine trees, picnic benches and fire pits with BBQ grates surround her. Things a normal family would come here to enjoy.

The truck rolls in and Ben keeps at his calf. Eddie watches as the BB appears and disappears beneath the skin. Finally Ben gives up and parks the truck. He leans back in his seat and rubs his temple. He chews on his bottom lip.

Eddie looks down at pieces of desert grit on the floor boards. The burgers are cold. He’s not hungry anymore.

Ben gets out and meets Terry as she comes up from the lake. He whispers something to her and she looks around him at Eddie in the truck. She nods and pops her trunk, then puts Maxine on the Kermit blanket on the backseat.

Ben goes to a picnic table and sits on a bench. He takes out his knife and starts digging at the back of his leg. His lips pull back with pain and show his teeth.

Eddie gets out and goes to check on Max. She’s curled up in the blanket and still shivering. Her pads and nose are wet with sweat. Eddie offers her a piece of hamburger.

The dog lifts her nose and sniffs at the meat, but she tucks back in, underneath her paw, without taking a bite.

He offers Terry a piece, but the meat is cold and covered in lint. She shakes her head. Eddie has a grease stain on his crotch. He throws the whole lot into the woods.

Ben comes back and says nothing. He starts taking things from the truck and putting it into Terry's trunk. He's got a sleeping bag in one hand and the cooler in the other when he sees her trunk is full of trash bags and clothes.

She reaches in and tries to smash her things deeper into the trunk, but they don't budge. She steps back and considers her belongings. She starts taking bags out.

"I don't need all this garbage."

"Stop," Ben says. "We'll do something with it later. Leave them for now."

She sweeps her palm to indicate full trunk. Bags are stacked to the roof in her passenger area. There isn't anywhere for them to sit, let alone put a few things.

Eddie has an idea. He runs over and grabs his brother by the shoulder. Ben flinches and Eddie retracts his hand.

Ben looks at him like it better be good. "What?"

"Can we talk a sec?"

"Um, I'm kinda in the middle of something," says Ben. "Like getting us out of here before the cops show up because you were hungry."



Terry is half way in the trunk. “I don’t think anyone’s coming.” She digs through her bags. “I’ll just leave a few things here. Like this.” She holds up giant Mexican hat.

“Okay, but no girly things.” Ben starts toward the picnic table. He passes it and starts up the hill at the edge of the lot. “Make it look like it’s just two guys.”

Eddie starts up the hill behind his brother. He slips on pine needles on the steep incline. He’s about to ask why they’re climbing the hill when he remembers Ben has to move when he’s pissed. He thinks of the hole in the drywall in the room they used to share back home. Their dad didn’t repair it because he told Ben to use it as a reminder to go for a walk before hitting something.

As they walk, small rocks and debris spit from Ben’s boots. He climbs, and climbs, and Eddie is forced to look at the round hole in his calf, now bubbled over and puffy. After about ten minutes of climbing, Eddie begins to fantasize about walking away from Terry and the mess below, walking until they reach the ocean highway, and hitching somewhere, anywhere, like Mexico.

They crest the hill and Ben stops. “What?”

Eddie leans against a tree to catch his breath. He snaps a twig off and breaks it into small pieces. He looks west and can see an orange glow spread from Lincoln City upward into the damp sky.

Eddie finishes breaking the stick and takes another. “I’m sorry about the BB.”

Ben leans over and puts his hands on his knees to rest. “Spit it out, brother.”

“I have an idea,” Eddie says.” I’ll drive the truck and you and Terry go in her car. That way, we have all our stuff and if I get caught, it’s just me. Then I can keep the truck.”

Ben watches him a moment to be sure he’s serious. “Are you slow?”

“Why not?”

“You are.” Ben crouches and sits on his heels. He looks at the orange glow.

“Then, I have to go back for the sombrero,” says Eddie.

Ben squints at him. “What?”

“If we hitchhike to Mexico.”

“You think this is a joke?” He stands up.

Eddie breaks another stick.

“Pretty funny, ha-ha. You kill a guy, I save your ass and you make jokes?” He steps toward Eddie.

Eddie steps back. “Come on. Don’t be like that.”

“You beat up a tweaker and steal a dog? It’s hilarious?”

Eddie looks down at his hands and the stick. It’s covered in bright green moss.

Ben slaps the stick from his hand. “You steal a hamburger, I get shot, and you’re funny?”

“You stole that saw.”

“Because we need money. Because I’m trying to protect you.”

“I got Terry and she’ll exchange my ticket.”

“You want to talk about Terry?” Spit flies from Ben’s lips. “The third party you invited on our goddamn getaway?”

Eddie wonders if they’re technically fugitives because they haven’t been caught yet. Doesn’t one have to escape jail or detainment to be a fugitive? He decides it’s not the best time to ask.

Ben starts back down the hill. “We don’t have all night. You want to bag out? Take the truck and run? You can. It’s all yours.”

Eddie can’t do it by himself. He doesn’t have any money. He’s desperate for food. He can’t imagine running without Ben. His dog is dead, his dad is dead. The idea of being alone is too painful.

“Wait,” he calls. It’s almost too dark to walk without a flashlight.

“Come on.” Ben keeps walking. His feet press into the pine needles and he sounds soft as a deer.

“It’s weird, all of a sudden I feel like I don’t know Dad.” Eddie’s shoulders fall and he wasn’t sure he was going to say it, but he did.

Ben stops and takes a breath. Eddie watches his back. The blood on his shirt is darker now. Ben takes off his hat and runs his hands through his hair. “That’s what this is about?”

“I don’t know.” Eddie looks at the neon-green growth on the trees. “I mean I knew him.”

“There’s nothing else to know,” Ben says. “You remember him driving the truck? You liked it when he trained dogs? He fixed up the house? That’s what happened.”

Eddie doesn’t budge from the top of the hill. “But how does Shasta know him?”

Ben starts back down the hill. “We need to get on the road.”

“Tell me,” Eddie races to keep up. “Who is Shasta?”

Ben stops and grabs Eddie by the shoulders. “Listen to me. Everyone in that game is a liar and a cheat. You can’t trust anyone.”

“Dad?”

Ben shakes his head. “No, that’s not what I meant.”

“What about you?”

Ben takes careful steps down the hill. “Just have a little faith, man.”

## Chapter Seven

Eddie rides in the back seat with Maxine curled in his lap. Terry drives back down the road, past the stone house, and north on the highway. Eddie looks out the window. The ocean swishes by and white threads of moonlight dance on the wave sets as they roll in. Ben sleeps in the front seat. They were able to dump most of Terry's belongings in a trash bin when they stopped for tacos. She kept her best clothes and camping supplies. Now there's room for Eddie to lie across the back seats if he wants to, but he goes back and forth between staring out the window and watching Terry's face glow by the red light of the dash.

Her eye makeup is smeared and she's changed into baggy sweatpants. She's pulled her blond hair back and tied it with a bright pink rubber band.

"Where are you going to go?" he asks.

Startled, she takes a deep breath and takes a backward glance, like she's been thinking about something else, like she forgot he was there. It takes her a while to answer. "What do you mean?"

"When you get your money."

"I hadn't thought about it."

She's lying. He can tell. He checks on Max to make sure she's still breathing. "Are you going to keep Max?"

She looks at him in the rear view. “You don’t want her?”

“I can’t.”

She nods. “I’ll keep her.”

They ride in silence for a long while. Terry looks lost in thought so Eddie closes his eyes, but he can’t sleep. He thinks about this place he liked to visit back home. He’d walk a mile up the road where an old barn was in the process of falling down. He’d sit in the shade of the old building and eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich before taking a nap in the grass. Stash would chase ground squirrels until they stopped coming up from their dens and the pair would go home. The damn place will probably be flat on the ground by the time he sees it again.

Terry breaks his thoughts. “Why, where are you going?”

He stops and frowns. “I don’t know, I never thought about it.”

She looks back at him. “There’s nowhere you want to go?”

“Well, we just finished seeing Lincoln City.”

She laughs, but he’s only half joking.

“Really,” Terry says. “You never wanted to go on vacation?”

Eddie looks out the window. It’s dark and they’ve moved away from the ocean.

“I never thought I would.”

Ben stirs and sits up. “This ain’t no vacation.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

“Pull over, I need to piss,” says Ben.

“Ew,” says Terry. “You don’t need to explain that this isn’t a vacation when you talk like that.”

He pulls a map from the glove box. He looks at a few passing road signs and finds their location. “There’s a campground in a couple miles. Let’s stop. We’ll make Shasta’s in the morning.”

The road to the campsite goes up and down like a roller coaster for fifteen miles before depositing them at a beach campground. Only one other camper occupies a site and it looks like they’re in bed. Terry and Max sleep in the back of the car, while Ben and Eddie throw tarps out on the dunes. Eddie curls up against a rippling pile of sand and uses a sweatshirt for a pillow.

When he wakes up, the sky is mute and covered with a thin layer of fog. The cool moisture on his face makes him feel safe, like he’s being taken care of by Mother Nature. Ben starts a fire and Terry makes hot chocolate. Eddie would stay here forever if there was something to eat.

While Terry and Ben go through her car and decide what to trash, Eddie goes out to the dunes for a walk. Max feels like following and the dog dabs her feet into the sand for a while before stopping and looking at Eddie with dry eyes. He picks her up and



carries her out to watch the waves, but the ocean is further from the campsite than he expects. He walks for half an hour and only makes it halfway. He can hear the ocean and see its thin horizon and that's good enough. He sits atop a dune and that's held in place by grass. He sets Max down and lets her wander and sniff nearby.

He pulls the cigarettes from his pocket and the gold foil glitters in the sun. He lights a cigarette and puffs. He chokes and coughs on the sharp smoke, but he inhales again and again.

Halfway through his second smoke he hears a tiny voice over his shoulder. Max pulls her nose out of a plant and looks up. She sprints off toward the voice and Eddie's glad she's feeling better. Ben crests the highest dune and he's waving his hands overhead, screaming something Eddie can't hear over the distant ocean and rolling breeze.

Eddie takes his time making his way back to the campsite. When he gets there, all their things are strewn on the table and in the dirt by the car. Terry picks up a pair of pants and checks the pockets. She picks up another pair.

Ben sees Eddie and runs to him. He grabs Eddie by the shoulders and searches his eyes. "Where's the ticket?"

"I have it right here." Eddie reaches into his pocket, but there's nothing there, just the smokes, matches, and the rest of the money and weed Ben gave him.

“When?” Ben shakes. It’s been years since he looked like he was about to cry. Eddie hasn’t seen him this upset since the explosion. “When was the last time you saw it?”

Eddie pats his pockets. “They must be in the other pants.”

Ben turns back to the car. “Where are they?”

“I left them at the hotel.”

Ben paces the space behind the car. “You left the ticket in your pants?”

“No.” Eddie bites his knuckles. “I mean I don’t think so.”

Ben crouches on his legs like a frog, winces in pain at his swollen calf and stands up. He tugs at his hair. “It can’t be at the hotel. We looked. It has to be here.”

“We have to do this systematically.” Terry walks over and puts a garment on the next picnic table. “That one’s done.”

Eddie goes to the trunk and gets his backpack. He turns it inside-out and shakes loose his toothbrush and deodorant. He flaps the Kermit blanket. Nothing. He looks at Ben. He’s done searching his belongings. “Could it in the truck?”

“I don’t know.” Ben has quit helping. He paces the campsite and observes each move Terry and Eddie make. His head swivels as they methodically search every one of Terry’s bags. When the done-pile heaps over the picnic table, and Max sits atop it like a queen, Ben goes back to the car and pulls out the floor mats, looks under the seats, digs

through the glove box and the console. When everything is out of the trunk, he rips out the carpet, takes out the spare tire and jumper cables. He tosses out a flare and set of matches. He puts his hands up on the trunk lid and leans his forehead against the metal.

“We can go back to the truck,” Eddie says.

“No.” Ben’s voice is muffled against his arm says. “We can’t.”

“Is there a way it’s in the hotel? Maybe Terry has a friend.”

“My friends keep that business to themselves.” She sits down at the table and the clothes tower over her. “I would have.”

Ben shoves away from the car and goes to the pile of Terry’s junk. He picks up her purse, takes out his pocket knife and cuts the lining. He pulls it inside out and digs around the interior of the bag. It looks like she’s been hiding a few hundred in cash, but no ticket. He leaves the money and slams the purse on the table. Max jumps.

“Screw you.” Terry starts toward the bathroom. Her voice is choked.

Ben strides toward her and grabs the back of her t-shirt. He holds her in place while he shoves his hand into her sweat pockets. He runs a finger around her waistband and lets her go.

She spins to face him. She pulls up her shirt to show her naked torso. She’s skinny but Eddie thinks her boobs aren’t bad and she’s not hiding the ticket in a bra. She lets her shirt drop and she watches Ben.

“Sorry,” he says.

She smacks him and he keeps his eyes on the gravel. Eddie has seen Ben take worse hits than that, but this might be the first that’s stopped him. Terry spits at his feet before going in the bathroom and turning the bolt behind her.

“You fellas lose something?”

Eddie turns to see an older man with white stubble sitting on the step of his trailer. He’s the only other camper and he’s parked right next door drinking a cup of coffee in his flannel pajamas.

Ben moves and starts taking loads of Terry’s stuff to the trashcan at the bathroom. It doesn’t seem like the best time for Eddie to tell him Terry is going to be pissed when she sees he’s thrown all her stuff away.

“Yes sir.” Eddie opens the car door and sits in the driver’s seat, his legs reaching out the side. If he hadn’t gone to find Terry, or left the hotel room in the first place, this wouldn’t have happened. They would still have a ticket. If he hadn’t killed Mick, they wouldn’t need a ticket. His legs start to ache, so he gets out and paces the campsite.

“Couldn’t have been too important.” The man lifts his mug in a toast and takes a sip. He sighs. “Few things are.”

Eddie stops pacing and looks at the man to see if he’s serious. “It was pretty important.”

Ben ignores them and hefts another load of clothes to the trashcan on the other side of the campground because he's filled up the one at the bathroom. Halfway across the campground, he trips on a pair of shimmery girl-pants and swears. They drag in the dirt behind him.

The man watches Ben stuff the things into the small hole atop the can. He raises his eyebrows and looks in his cup. He tips it all the way up. It's empty. "Nothing that can't be worked around."

Eddie looks away from Ben, who has to put things in one at a time. "What?"

"I said, 'work around it' chap." He stands and stretches. His pants are too short for him too. He's taller than Eddie. He holds out his mug like a question mark. It's ceramic and the handle is a whale's tail. "Cup?"

"Of coffee? No, thanks."

"We have things harder."

Eddie shakes his head and the man disappears inside his trailer. Terry's still in the bathroom. Ben is on his way back from the trashcan. He could have driven the crap over there, but Eddie guesses Ben needs some time away. When they were kids, they played like best friends until somebody snapped from being together too long. Usually, before Eddie knew it, Ben was on top of him doing Chinese torture on his sternum. Eddie half expects that or the dripping loogie for losing the ticket. He hates the idea of ruining Ben's life. He can see the ticket fluttering to the ground in their haste to dump

the truck, because he had stolen a couple hamburgers, or because he punched someone he thought was Mick. What had that been about anyway?

Terry opens the bathroom door enough to let Max out, but closes it and stays inside. There isn't much she could be doing. There's a sink with cold water and a toilet. There isn't even a good mirror, just reflective plastic that distorts one's features. Eddie can't see her looking in that too long. Max hops up and sits on the table. Eddie scratches her between the eyes and thinks about how screwed they are.

The door to the trailer swings open and hits the side with a lazy ping. The man stands in the doorway and tries to adjust the swing limiter with one hand because he's got the full whale tail mug in the other. Coffee splashes onto his wrists and he gives up. He resumes his seat on the step and his knees reach up practically to his ears.

Eddie has fixed a door like that a million times. "You have to pull that tab out and secure it with a piece of wire," he says. "That's the easiest. You can use a spring, but it's more expensive."

The man looks up. "What do you secure it to?"

"The hinge." Eddie stands and puts his toes on the steel fire pit and stretches his calves. "It won't open as far, but it will stop denting your trailer."

"I'll be damned." The man toasts his coffee again. "Told you stuff can be worked out."

Eddie looks down, trying not to roll his eyes.

“I’m Higgins by the way.”

Eddie switches legs and stretches the other side. “Pleased to meet you.”

The man doesn’t ask for Eddie’s name. “So what? Somebody die?”

Eddie looks up. “Excuse me?”

“Only one thing can’t be worked around and that’s death.” The man considers this. “And it has to be your own and even then, who the hell knows?”

Eddie has no comment. He wants Ben to come back, but he’s sitting on a far table, and Terry’s still in the bathroom. Eddie doesn’t feel like walking back out to the dunes, so he’s stuck with the old man who’s full of it. He stands, goes to Max’s water dish and refills it, thankful she’s drinking. He offers her a potato chip and she takes it beneath the car.

“That your dog?” asks the man.

“No.” Eddie gets on his hands and knees to look under the car. Max guards the uneaten chip between her front paws. She growls.

“That your brother?”

“If he doesn’t kill me.”

The man laughs. “I had a brother try to kill me when I was your age. He came at me with a knife because I stole his woman.”

Eddie gets up and knocks the dirt from his pants. “What happened?”

“She became my wife and he moved to Montana.” A mosquito lands on the man’s arm and he slaps it. “She passed this winter. This was her favorite place. Been too damp for my arthritis to get out till now.”

“Did you ever talk to your brother again?”

“Oh yeah, we moved out to Montana to be with him when he got cancer in his balls.”

“Did he die?” asks Eddie.

“Heaven’s no, he just has one now.” The man smiles into his cup. “But you’d think he did, the way he talks sometimes.”

“Someone killed my dog,” says Eddie. “I can’t get around that.”

“Then you’re going to have to go over it, or under it.” He gets up and starts tinkering with the door. “Hell, just go through it.”

“Go to hell man,” Eddie says.

Higgins stops and lets his arms hang. He has brown eyes with wrinkles at the corners. So far, the wrinkles have been turned up, but now they form deep lines down his face. He reaches up and his thin fingers twist the protector.



“I don’t mean to diminish your situation.” His breathing becomes labored as he works over the mechanism. “I’m not saying you won’t be in pain, but time rebuilds the broken.” He points to the fire pit at Eddie’s feet. “Give me that piece of coat hanger.”

Eddie looks down and sees that one of Terry’s hangers has broken and an eight inch piece now lies in the ash. He picks it up and takes it to Higgins.

The old man breaths with the effort of the work overhead. “There’s a Leatherman on the table.”

Eddie bends a loop on each end. He stands on a step and hooks it to the slider and the hinge, just like he did at home every time Mick broke the door.

He steps down. “Time doesn’t fix broken stuff, I do.”

“Fair enough.” Higgins lets his hands drop. He sweats even though it’s a cool morning. “Then fix what you broke.”

The bathroom door squeals open and Terry comes out.

“About time,” says Higgins.

Eddie turns to see him strapping a pair of sandals to his feet. He stands and walks stiffly toward the bathrooms.

Terry’s eyes are red and swollen. When Ben sees her, he gets off his perch on the far picnic table and goes to meet her at the outside faucet. She has trouble turning the knob, so Ben does it for her. He puts a hand on her back while she bends down. Eddie

can't hear what he says, but Terry presses the heels of her hands into her eyes. When she sees her clothes in the trash can she screams.

"I'm going to buy you new ones, I promise," says Ben.

"Are you kidding?"

"Trust me," he says. "I got rid of mine too."

She starts picking things out of the can. "Fool."

"No listen, please," he says. "I like you."

"Amazing way of showing it."

"It's like." He looks around for the right word. "No baggage. I promise I will buy you new clothes, a new car, new everything someday, just please, can you and I start over?"

"By throwing away all my stuff?"

"I know you're mad, but you'll see."

Eddie decides he can help. He calls over the hood of the car. "It's not you, he's big on symbolism."

Terry stares at him and goes back to picking through the can. "I need a few things."

An hour later, the three of them sit at the picnic table, afraid to drive aimlessly because they're low on gas. Terry lies flat across the picnic table and Max climbs on her back and lies down along her spine. Ben straddles the seat and studies the grain of the wood with his fingertip. Eddie looks between the two, wondering why Terry hasn't gotten in her car and left, or at least said she'd deliver them at the highway because she's going back to resume her life in Lincoln City.

It takes Eddie a long time to say it. "I have an idea."

Terry lifts her head to look at him.

"It's crazy," he says.

"Come on."

"We steal it."

Nobody says anything. Ben freezes and stares at Eddie.

"Steal what?" Terry says.

"Shasta's weed."

"You want to steal product from Shasta?" Ben stands and turns a circle. "You're losing it dude."

Eddie rubs his hands together. "Why?"

"Who's Shasta?" says Terry.

Eddie shrugs. “Who knows?”

Ben paces the length of the picnic table. The fog has burned off and the late morning is sunny. The reflection off the car strikes his eyes.

“Those are the most dangerous people I know,” he says. “They probably have forty bodies buried up there.”

Eddie laughs and Ben slams his hand on the wooden picnic table. Eddie flinches at the thud.

“People have tried to stealing from her before.”

“Who’s Shasta?” repeats Terry.

Ben kicks some ash that’s escaped the fireplace. A puff of grey opens into the air by his feet. “Don’t worry about that. Worry about her fortress, the dogs you didn’t see.” He points at Eddie. “The swinging logs and bullet holes the size of Donkey Kong’s dick. We’re not going there.”

Terry laughs. “Sounds like a gladiator competition.”

“It’s not a joke.” Ben stares her down. His shirt is stained with sweat and blood.

They go back to lying around in the searing heat of the sun. Max begins to pant and jumps off the table. She goes under the car and lies in the dirt.

“I don’t have anything to lose,” says Terry. “I don’t care if I die.”

Her announcement is so shocking that nobody has a reply. Ben opens a pocket knife and begins carving in the wood. He picks away grey chips of weathered wood to reveal fresh blond wood beneath.

“Me either,” says Eddie after a while.

“Shut up, both of you.” Ben keeps carving.

“I would like to go to the Grand Canyon first,” Eddie says.

Ben looks confused. “Why?”

“Dad wanted to go before he died.”

“You’re not going to die.” Ben pulls the knife away from the wood and wipes it clean.

“They don’t allow dogs.” Terry doesn’t bother to lift her head from her armpit.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Well, they’re allowed, just not on trails.”

“Enough,” Ben says. He dusts the wood chips from his carving. In an artful scribe he’s written their last name, Leland.

“What about my name?” Terry asks.

Eddie stands and goes to the backseat. He gets in and puts on his seatbelt. Maxine follows. "So it's a plan then?" he says. "We'll go to Shasta's and the Grand Canyon."

Terry looks at Ben and he shakes his head. "No, I'm not getting my little brother killed."

"I got somebody who owes me," she says. "I can probably get a front for a few days but you have to get rid of it."

"Who?"

"A friend in Arcata."

"You told me you've never been there," says Ben.

"What does that matter?" She makes her way to the passenger side of the car and gets in. "You in or not?"

"I don't like dealing with people I don't know."

"What choice do you have?" She moves slowly to the car as if she has an ache in her hip. "Besides, I'll do the dealing."

Ben runs his hands through his hair. He rubs his forehead. Finally, he makes fists with his hands and lets the fingers spread all at once like he's decided something. "Fine."

As they pull from the campground, Eddie leans his head against the headrest. He looks at Higgins, still in his pajamas, tinkering with a wind-up radio. He waves as they

pull away and Eddie thinks about what the old man said about time and getting through.

He can't say he believes in any of it.

## Chapter Eight

Arcata is one of those towns where every house is a different color and ninety-nine percent of the homes' trim doesn't make sense with their siding. A yellow house has purple trim and a purple house has neon-green trim. One house is electric-blue and another is sunset-orange. Eddie would laugh and make fun of the hippies, but they have such nice yards. He's floored by the foliage and how much of it there is, how difficult it is to tell whose plants are whose.

Back home, yards are denoted by a distinct line. If one person waters their grass, but their neighbor doesn't, there's a line. If one neighbor fertilizes and the other doesn't there's a line. It's obvious who has how much, but here, the yards share their wealth. Birds of paradise reach through the fences. Rhododendrons bow over the roofs. Succulents creep next door as if to whisper a secret.

Eddie watches his brother navigate the narrow streets and misinterpret roundabouts. Ben had always wanted to get away from home, but he can't even figure out one-way streets. Would he ever be more than a Leland? And are the risks he takes to push his boundaries worth it?

They park outside a house with a rainbow painted on the front and a worn-out screen door. Terry tells Ben and Eddie to stay put, not to get out of the car or try to come inside, or go anywhere else. She says it might be a while, but they need to hold their ground and be patient.



“Fine.” Ben leans his seat back and puts his feet on the dash. He takes his hat from the shifter and puts it over his eyes.

Eddie watches Terry go to the front door and knock tentatively. A smaller guy in a knit hat and tie-dye shirt opens the door. He’s hesitant to let Terry inside, but he does.

He looks over her shoulder as he closes the door behind her. “Who’s that?”

“Nobody,” he hears her say.

Eddie sits for a while. An hour goes by and he realizes Max probably needs to pee and besides, his own legs have started to feel like ants are crawling on the bones. He slips the leash over her head and gets out. The air is cool and he looks west to see fog rolling in, its tendrils reaching over the town. Down a steep hill, a few lights blink and there’s a big sign shaped like a doughnut. He’s still got a few bucks so he heads that way.

He can’t get over the plants. Big leaves and big flowers. If he can’t be a fisherman, he’ll come here and be a gardener. A girl passes him on the street and looks down. She’s about Terry’s age and she has a backpack. Terry had said something about this being a college town. Another girl comes trudging up the hill in a flowing skirt and tank-top. A guy goes by in cords with holes. Nobody looks back at Eddie. He doesn’t know how, but they know he’s not one of them.

He tries to imagine himself with a backpack full of textbooks, real ones, walking to school to listen to a professor talk about whatever they talk about. He has a hard time

seeing it. Sure, he's good at school, but that's because he has nothing else to do. The counselors have encouraged other kids to apply for scholarships, kids with the same grades as Eddie, but he was never called into the office for more than to pick up his meal coupons. More college students file by. He looks down at his pants, complete with a place to hang a hammer.

A dog barks from behind a fence and Max skitters. A few blocks later they arrive at the doughnut shop and Eddie wants to buy one of each flavor, but he settles for a maple bar, pink sprinkles, and a cardamom jelly stuffed whole-wheat thing.

They don't last long, especially because he gives Max a bite of each. He walks a little farther and arrives at a town square of some kind. Raised beds full of chard and kale stand at each corner and a plaque reads 'community garden' with benefactor names in bronze. Storefronts, bars and restaurants border the square. A crepe stand on wheels sits at one corner. Eddie has never had a crepe. He doesn't even know what a crepe is, but he counts his money and decides to splurge. Who knows if they serve crepes in jail.

He orders a cheese crepe for the dog and a strawberry one for himself. It turns out a crepe is just a pancake stuffed with whatever he can think of and it's delicious. On his third crepe, one full of bananas, he adds cinnamon and chocolate powder. Once he's stuffed and broke once more, he sits on a bench in the middle of the square and pats his belly.

He's about to go back to the car when a group of kids his age wander into the square and sit in a circle on the grass. They wear black and their hair looks matted and

dirty. It's funny, he does remember one thing about his sister Sheila and that's what she was doing to her hair before she disappeared. She called herself a dreadie.

As a kid Eddie had dreads, but that's because he wouldn't let anyone touch his hair. It was thick with snarls and oil until his dad had Ben hold him down while he buzzed it off. Eddie kicked and screamed but when they were done, his head felt like a baby chicken and he couldn't stop touching it. He still shaves his head because it feels good and it's free.

He watches the kids in the circle, thinking they're local kids out of school for the summer, but an older boy, maybe nineteen or twenty looks like the leader. The others crowd around him and they pass a joint. A woman with a colorful basket walks by and a girl with purple braids holds up a sign that says, Please Change for Dog Food, and Eddie laughs because the sign is written stupidly, like the woman needs to change her clothes, or her attitude, so the kids can buy dog food. Still, the woman drops a few coins into the girl's palm.

When he catches himself wishing he was hanging with them in the coastal sun by a community garden and a crepe stand, Eddie gets up to leave, but Max only lifts her head and lays back down. Eddie's sick of the car as well so he sits and crosses his legs. He thinks he'll watch a while longer to see the cops come bust their party. How they get away with smoking and begging in the middle of town is beyond him. Once, a few kids from town started a band. They played drums on the bottom of five gallon buckets in the

grocery parking lot. Everyone agreed they were good, but by noon on their first day, they were busted on noise complaints.

He's laughing to himself about Donald's rebuttal to the noise complaint, something about the town paying them to make it a more desirable place to live, when the kids' wolf-dog, a husky or something, lifts his head and sniffs at the wind change. Without warning it sprints from the center of the group and jumps on Max.

Eddie instinctively grabs behind the dog's neck to pull him off, but he's latched on. Max screams and tries to jump, but she's a Jack Russell with a wolf on her. The hippy kids laugh and pass their joint. He tries to grab again, but there's too much fur, the dog doesn't even feel it. He's furious that the kids laugh and he doesn't know why until he sees the husky's penis protruding from its fur.

Eddie socks the filthy husky in the back, but it won't stop. He socks it again and it yelps. It gets off Max, but continues to circle and jumps back to Max who cowers between Eddie's legs. He punches the dog in the head again and it whimpers.

"Woah, Buddy." The leader in back rags makes his way toward Eddie. "There's no reason to hit."

"Get your dog."

"He's only trying to get laid."

The group of kids laugh, but the guy stares at Eddie. Eddie's about to pick up Max's leash and walk away, but the guy won't stop staring at him. For a second Eddie

wants him to come. He wants a reason to sock him in the face, but then he remembers what Ben said about staying out of trouble. The husky circles and Eddie picks up Max and holds her under his arm.

The guy steps to Eddie. "Violence isn't the answer, pal." His eyes are blue but still dark. Eddie can tell he isn't the care-free hippy the others think he is.

A thin hand with green nail polish comes between them. A voice delicate as flowers comes next. "Sorry about that."

The girl with the purple hair reaches in to pet Max. She nods at the rest of Eddie's crepe. "Are you going to eat that?"

The guy huffs and goes back to his protective circle. Eddie waits to be sure he isn't going to be blind-sided before turning his attention to the girl. Stray curls reach from her forehead into the breeze. She's short and compact, and he kind of wants to pick her up. She smiles and looks at the rest of the banana crepe.

He watches her a moment, unable to look away from her moist lips. He bends and picks up the plate. "All yours."

She doesn't take it. "You're not from here. Us neither, we're travellers."

Eddie's not sure what that means or how to reply. He wishes she'd take the plate so he can leave.

"Where are you from?" she says.

“Oregon.”

“I love Oregon.” Her eyes get bright. “It’s so green.”

Eddie shakes his head and looks up. “You’ve never been where I’m from.”

“How do you know?”

“Oregon is half high desert,” he says. “Sage brush is only green for a little while.”

She doesn’t say anything, just looks up at him and smiles. Her teeth are straight and white.

“Well, here.” He nudges her with the paper plate. “I have to go.”

She picks up the crepe, folds it, and takes a bite. “But you saw the forest right?”

Eddie still holds the plate. “What?”

“You went for a hike in the forest.”

He looks around. The whole town is practically forest. “Just this square.”

She chews and swallows. “Your poor dog.”

Eddie thinks of Ben, who’s probably got Terry and is now waiting for him in the car, fuming. “I really have to go.”

“You can’t leave.”

Eddie laughs. “Who says?”

“Destiny.”

Destiny, as she calls herself, leads him to the edge of town and up a narrow trail lined by giant redwoods. Max runs off leash and bounds from log to log. Eddie enjoys the movement and challenge. He’s surprised someone with short legs can hike so fast. They’re deep into the giant trees when she breaks into a run and she stops at a flat stump that’s as big as a king bed and climbs up. She lies on her back with her knees bent and catches her breath. Eddie has never seen anything like it, the stump or the girl. He uses the old saw cut and climbs up to sit next to her.

After a minute, she sits up and tucks her knees into her chest. She pulls a joint from her shirt pocket and lights it. She passes it to Eddie and he takes a hit. They watch the trees and breathe. They are the freshest breaths Eddie’s taken, ever.

Max splashes in a creek.

“She likes the crick,” he says and instantly, his insides light up with shame. He waits for her to call him any assortment of cracker names, but she only looks at him and smiles. “Where are you from?” he says. He passes her the jay.

She sighs and lays back. “Everywhere.”

He lays back too and stares at the shreds of sky through overlapping trees. The stump feels wet beneath his shirt. He wants to ask her why she's here, what she's doing with those kids, and what she means by being from everywhere, but he knows to keep the questions to a minimum.

She looks at him. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen," he lies. He resists the urge to pull the smokes from his pocket to prove it.

She rolls onto her side. She wears a thin, loose sweater and her boobs fall to the side. She's not wearing a bra.

"So you're traveling," she says.

He's not sure how to respond so he doesn't.

"What from?" she asks.

"What?"

"Most travellers are runaways."

Eddie notices a silver locket hanging from her neck. He picks it up from the log and examines the detailed inlays. "No, we're going to the Grand Canyon."

She looks a little disappointed and Eddie realizes the kids in the square were a pack of runaways. Were any like him? Killers? What is she running away from? He



forces himself to keep his eyes on the locket, away from her body and breasts. She rolls onto her back and he has to let go of the silver weight.

“Where are you going next?” he asks.

“San Francisco.” She watches him a moment. It’s almost like she’s deciding which version of the story to tell. “There’s a house party at Geary and Eighth on Saturday. You should come.” She gets up and extends a hand to help him up.

They’re almost to town when she grabs the crook of his arm and pulls him toward her. She points to something between the trees. A yearling buck’s fuzzy rack glows in a pool of sun. He flips his ears to listen as Max lets loose down the trail and keeps on going.

“It’s a sign,” she says.

“Meat all winter,” says Eddie.

She looks at him and he knows he’s said the wrong thing. “The deer is the heart chakra animal,” she says. “He flits from place to place, the challenge of the heart.”

She starts off down the trail. “I can tell which chakra you live from.”

No way will he ask her what the hell that’s supposed to mean. The bump in his jeans gives him a pretty good clue.

They pop out onto streets and, through his sense of direction, Eddie walks right back to the house where he expects Ben to flip a lid because he's been gone for hours. He's still down the street when he looks relieved to see Terry is just now exiting the house. She struggles to get a giant suitcase down the crooked cement stairs. The hobbit-guy puts one more suitcase on the steps and closes the door behind Terry without saying goodbye. Ben goes to help her with the bag.

He picks it up and sets it back down. "Oh hell no."

"That's my brother," Eddie tells Destiny as they approach the house.

"Put it in the car," Terry says.

Ben crosses his arms. "This wasn't the deal."

"You didn't know what the deal was." She takes a duffel bag from her shoulder and puts it in the backseat. She points to the two suitcases. "Put them in."

Ben sighs and sees Eddie coming toward him on the sidewalk. He doesn't say anything, just picks up the heavy bags and loads them into the trunk.

He finishes and looks at Eddie. "Where've you been?"

"For a walk in the woods."

"Well, it's time to go."

Destiny looks down the street, back toward the plaza where the other kids were.

“This is Destiny” says Eddie. “She’s on her way to San Francisco.”

“Good for her.” Ben crosses his arms and leans against the car.

Terry coos to Max and puts her in the back seat. She ignores the new girl, gets in and checks her makeup in the mirror. She starts the car.

“There’s a party there on Saturday,” Eddie says.

“That right?” Ben’s eyes travel Destiny’s curvy body. “I like your sweater.”

She stares at him and smiles. She removes the roach from her pocket and lights it.

“What kind of name is Destiny?” he asks.

She takes a hit and blows it out the side of her mouth. “You look like a guy who knows better than to ask.”

She passes him the roach and he takes a hit and passes it back. They skip Eddie. It’s fine. His eyes are tired from the hits before.

“Fair enough.” Ben opens the passenger door and gets in.

Eddie’s about to get in when she slides her hand into his. Her skin is soft as honey-butter against his callouses.

“Encantado.” She reaches up and gives him a peck on the cheek. She turns and her small feet flash against the cement as she walks away.

“An-ka- what?” Ben says.

Terry puts the car in drive and steps on the gas. “Stay away from girls like that, Eddie.”

“She’s a runaway,” he says. “Like me.”

“Did you see those teeth,” Terry says. “The girl’s got money. She’s a fake runaway, one of those girls who goes on the road to find herself and wires home for money when she’s tuckered out.”

“You’re full of it.” Eddie thinks of the locket, but he clings to the belief that she’s like him. Not like it matters. He’s not going to see her again.

He tries to lie down across the seats and perhaps fantasize about being back on the stump with Destiny, but the leather duffel bag sits in the seat next to him and blocks his way. He thinks he’ll just use it for a pillow, but when he hits it to form something his head can rest on, his fist contacts hard, boxy things like giant Legos.

## Chapter Nine

“What the hell is this?” Eddie pulls a nine millimeter handgun from the duffel bag. It’s light and feels unloaded. He tampers with the slide and nobody stops him.

Terry’s knuckles are white from gripping the wheel. She goes back and forth between staring straight ahead and watching the speedometer.

Ben watches her drive. “It’s bullshit.”

Eddie digs into the bag and counts fifteen guns. “I thought we were moving weed.”

“These will pull more money,” says Terry.

“If my guy will take them.” Ben watches a speed limit sign go by. “You’re going too slow.”

“I’m going the speed limit.”

“Yeah, too slow.”

Eddie examines the weapon. He likes its weight and black frame. His old gun fit in the palm of his hand, but this one is much bigger. His infatuation with the cool metal frightens him so he puts it away and zips the bag.

“I didn’t know you could buy guns in Arcata,” he says.

“That’s all he had, okay?” Terry’s voice is an octave higher than usual. “He got them in a trade and we’re lucky I could swing anything, so shut up.”

Ben nods the way he does when he feels like he knows more than the people around him. “He didn’t want to get rid of two suitcases of guns either.”

She stares straight ahead and they drive in silence for a while until Ben says he still can’t believe they’re transporting weapons that will certainly kill people someday. Eddie sinks into the seat and listens to them argue about whether there’s difference in ethics between selling guns and drugs. He’s about to fall asleep when the car lurches and a loud thumping starts under his ass.

They wait two hours for a tow truck, and Terry spends fifty dollars on a tire that can’t be changed until tomorrow. She spends seventy-five on a hotel room that advertises a color TV and in-room coffee. That leaves about twenty bucks for dinner and gas and they’re out of money again.

When Eddie pushes the button on the remote, he finds the TV doesn’t work. When Terry goes to make coffee, she finds its instant and hot water is from the tap. To top it off, the room smells sticky, like burnt cotton candy and Terry says that’s the smell of old meth. She says it makes her sick to think of her old life, but Eddie wonders how old that life really is.

Eddie doesn’t care about the smell because he’s drained. He takes the comforter off the bed and spreads it on the floor. He’s almost asleep when Terry emerges from the

bathroom with one towel piled on her head and another wrapped underneath her arm pits. He notices three things. First, the towels cover less of her than the skirt and tube top they first met her in. Two, Ben has to open the phone book and look for take-out to keep from looking at her body. And three, she's used two towels. Ben will use the other and that leaves Eddie a hand towel for his shower in the morning.

When Terry turns her back on them and digs through her garbage bag for clean clothes, Ben looks away from the phonebook and up the back of her legs.

“What looks good?” says Eddie.

“Hmm?” Ben looks back to the phone book. “They have Chinese.”

“You sure you don't prefer American?”

Ben looks up. “Not after getting shot for it.”

Terry disappears into the bathroom with a tiny bag of girl stuff that doesn't look like it could occupy her for more than three minutes, but it does. She hogs the bathroom long enough for the Styrofoam dish of chow mein to arrive. When she reemerges, she's wearing another pair of blue sweats and has her hair up, Eddie wonders how she can spend a half hour in there and come out looking no different than before.

Next, it's Bens turn to bogart the bathroom. He's in there with the water running so long that Eddie has to go to tell him hurry up, he needs to take a poop. He swings the door open and finds his brother sitting on the edge of the tub, pants rolled up rinsing out

his calf. The shoulder looks okay. A scab has formed over the lump, but his calf is raised, stiff, and purple. A blotchy pink circle has grown around the wound.

Eddie gets the same feeling as he did after he shot Mick. A hot boil pushes into his throat and he thinks he's going to spew the noodles. He slams the door behind him and lies face down on the floor.

Shooting Mick felt like a physical instinct of survival, but stealing and trafficking, and running, getting his brother shot, and getting Terry involved—these feel like things he's doing for personal gain and greed. He's no longer afraid someone is going to kill him or his mom. He isn't even afraid he's going to be hungry forever. What he's really scared of, is that his brother will go down for him or that Terry will never get her baby back, that maybe she doesn't want to. He's afraid all this trouble won't give him a new life and that soon, he's going to find out what it really means to be a Leland.

Ben comes out of the shower and sits on the corner of the bed drying his hair with the cheap towel. By this time, Eddie is too tired to take a shower, so he rolls over and pretends to sleep, but something in him aches, not physically, but it's like he's lying on a blunt object and can't get comfortable.

A while later he hears the bed sheets rustling..

“Will you hold me?” Terry asks Ben. “I'm sad.”

It's quiet for a long time and Eddie is about to dose off when Terry says, “Where are you going after this?”



Ben's voice is softer than Eddie is used to hearing it. "What's it matter, girl?"

"It doesn't. I was just wondering if you'd go home."

"I don't got a home."

Eddie's about to call Ben out, but he sees him so little these days. He only comes home when he needs something from the house. When Stash died, Eddie was lucky to get ahold of him by calling the girl he sometimes stays with in town. Eddie would never consider Ben homeless because he can always come home, but maybe Ben doesn't feel that way.

"Home," Ben says, like he's trying on the word. "I don't even know what that means."

Neither says anything for a while and Eddie thinks they must be asleep.

"Who was that guy?" Ben says. "Your baby's dad?"

Eddie hears Terry move away from him on the bed. "How did you know?"

"I could just tell," he says. "There's like, a magnet between people who've had kids together. It's disconcerting."

"Big word," she says.

"It's not mine, I don't even know what it means."

Eddie wonders why Ben would say that, or how he would even know something like that. Ben doesn't have a kid.

"Does he know you have a kid together?" says Ben.

"I was waiting to get the baby back, but that seems like it's getting further and further away."

Ben doesn't press her, but she goes on, either because she feels a need to explain, or to simply get it off her chest. "They took her at birth, because I was high right?" she says. "Which, fine, I get it, but I haven't done it since. Now, they say, 'your lifestyle isn't conducive to raising a child.'"

Eddie stares at the ceiling. There are water marks from leaks in the roof. The bulb overhead is bare.

"I wonder where that lotto ticket is," she says.

"I know." Ben sighs. "I hope someone's on their way to Kazakhstan."

"Where's that?"

"I'd go on a motorcycle."

"Doesn't sound like a place you can."

The sheets rustle and Eddie hears Ben kiss her much like he did in the car. "I'd buy it once I got there."

Outside, a big rig rolls by with the engine brake on. The walls rattle and something in the corner of the room falls to the floor.

“So why can’t you go home?” asks Terry.

“Two years ago my mom told me I wasn’t welcome, said I was a nuisance and bad influence for my little brother.” He takes a breath. “And she’s right. I should have never come home.”

They’re quiet and Eddie thinks they’ve dosed off. He hates to think that Ben blames himself. Everything that Eddie has done, he did on his own accord.

“My mom called CPS,” Terry says. “I hate her.”

“You win,” says Ben and he pulls her back across the bed.

It’s the saddest thing Eddie has ever heard. His mom might be a loser right now. Maybe she doesn’t get him enough food to eat. She snorts pills and sleeps all day. She invited Mick into their home and closed down after Dad died, but Eddie could never hate her. Nobody talks and Eddie drifts to sleep with his face pressed into the crusty carpet.

They get the car back from the tire garage and Ben drives while Terry polishes her toenails. She puts her feet on the dashboard and rummages through a make-up bag for the right color. She holds blue to the window and shakes her head. She holds up a gold color and shows Ben.

“What do you think?”

He takes a quick look at the bottle and shrugs. “I don’t know.”

She turns around and holds it towards Eddie.

“That’ll make your toenails look yellow.”

She frowns. “I never thought of that.” She chucks the bottle back in the bag and pulls out another. “Corvette Red?”

“You wish.”

She opens the bottle and brushes the paint on her toes.

Eddie rolls down the window. “That stinks.” He holds Max’s nose to the fresh air because the dog has had enough poison for one lifetime.

“Sorry.” Terry rolls her window down a smidge, but keeps on painting like it has to happen now or never.

A few minutes go by and she finishes, caps the bottle, waves her fingertips at her toes like that’s going to help them dry. She rolls her window down all the way, then back up as if that was going to get the smell out. Eddie keeps his window down and the dog’s nose up. Max’s ears blow back and her tiny jowls flap.

Nobody says anything for a long time. They continue driving south, listening to the local country station until Ben slaps it off. They ride in silence and the miles spool. Ben pulls over at a place that advertises smoked salmon and espresso. It’s a disgusting

combination if Eddie's ever seen one and he says so. Terry tells him he doesn't have to have them at the same time.

Everyone gets out and stretches. Eddie takes Max to pee. Ben says he really needs a cup of coffee so he scrounges on the floorboards until he finds enough change. When he gets his cup, he runs across a slow spot in the highway and stands in the middle of the field with his back to them, watching a herd of elk.

Eddie smokes a cigarette and Terry gives him a dirty look.

"What?"

"Why are you smoking?" she says. "That's bad for you."

"You trapped me in the car with paint fumes."

"Please." She rubs her eyes.

He can't believe she's telling him what to do. "It's just fun, something to do, you know something about that."

"I don't have any fun."

"No?" he takes a drag.

She ignores him and looks across the highway at Ben watching the elk. Eddie can barely hear the elk mewling. He's always surprised how delicate their conversations are for animals the size of a small horse.

Eddie smashes out the cigarette. "I hope Ben doesn't get attacked by a wild elk."

"Put that in the trashcan." Terry points to a sign that says NO BUTTS.

"What's your problem?" Eddie asks.

"I think your brother's sick."

Eddie looks at Ben. He's running back across the highway, tipping up the last of his coffee. He limps a little on his bad leg, but it's no big deal. Eddie remembers Ben couldn't get the BB out of his muscle, but wouldn't it just grow over? When Eddie was eight, he fell in the backyard and a shard of glass the size of a pencil erasure punctured his hand. Nobody could get it out and he screamed at the mention of doctor and they didn't have health insurance anyway. He could still feel the glass when he pressed on that part of his palm, but he was fine.

They get back on the road and it starts to rain, slowly at first and then in force.

Two hours later Terry leans over and asks how much gas they have left. Ben says it's low, but the light hasn't come on and they only have about fifty miles left so they should make it. Terry sits back and says her gaslight doesn't work.

"Oh lovely," says Eddie. He's not sure why Terry is suddenly on his nerves so bad, but she is.

Ben pulls into a gas station and turns around. He turns around and looks at Eddie.

“Give it to me.”

“What?”

“That stuff you stole from my pocket.”

“You said I could have it,” Eddie says.

Ben holds out his empty palm. “Whatever.”

“I tried to give it back to you.”

Ben wiggles his fingers. “I need it now.”

“What stuff?” says Terry.

Eddie glares at her while he pulls out the smokes and retrieves the small cellophane bag of herb he rummaged from Ben’s pocket the night they had the fire.

“You’ve been holding out on me?” she says.

“Where’s the cash?”

“I spent it on crepes.”

“What the hell is a crepe?”

Rain pounds on the metal awning over the pumps. Ben takes the bag and jogs through puddles. He swings the door open and eases his way to the counter. The

attendant, a girl about twenty sits on a stool chewing gum. She stands when Ben leans against the counter. Her yellow shorts leave Eddie aching for her to hinge at the hips, just a little further, so he can see a little cheek.

Ben says something apparently hilarious and the girl laughs.

Terry frowns. She sees Eddie watching her and turns away, but she can't keep from looking back.

Ben slides the sack across the counter. The girl shrugs and puts her hands out like there's nothing she can do. Ben motions for her to come forward and she leans down to place her elbows on the counter. Eddie watches, transfixed. The girl's face is inches from Ben's. She shakes her head and slides the sack back to him a second time. They continue to talk, their faces creeping inward, her staring at his lips, she staring at his. He whispers in her ear and she smiles.

They look like they're having a dandy time and Eddie's stuck out here with scowling Terry. He's about to pop the door and get out, pretend he has to go to the bathroom, when suddenly Ben takes the girl's chin and brings her lips to his. She's going to pull away, she has to pull away, what girl wouldn't, but she doesn't. She doesn't even flinch when Ben's hand relaxes down to her side and swipes slowly up to her boob which is hardly covered in a white tank-top.

"She must be freezing," says Terry.



The girl and Ben part. She slips the tiny sack in her pocket and types a few things on the register. Ben comes out and goes straight to the pump.

Eddie gets out and stands next to him. “What was that all about?”

“What?” Ben unhooks the pump handle and knocks on Terry’s window. “Pull the gas cap.”

She stares at him before leaning over and pulling the lever.

“How did you do that?” Eddie watches the numbers spin on the tank. “How much did she give you?”

“Six bucks should get us there.” The pump stops and Ben hangs up the handle. He goes around to the driver’s side and gives a small wave to the girl inside. She smiles and blows a bubble with her gum.

They pull from the station and turn onto the highway. Eddie is less concerned with how far they’ll get than with how Ben got the hot cashier to kiss him and give him free gas. “Really, how did you do that?”

Ben looks in the rearview. “I sold her the bag.”

“But you kissed her. And she kissed you back.”

“Give me Max,” Terry reaches her hands around and takes Max off Eddie’s lap.

“She said she’d give me an extra dollar,” says Ben.

“You whore.” Eddie is so shy with girls, but if he could sell kisses for gas, his life would improve dramatically. “Really, how did you do it?”

“I don’t know. Because I’m cute?”

“Please.” Terry holds onto Max.

“You don’t think so?”

She looks at him like he’s gum on the bottom of her shoe. “You’re scruffy.”

Ben looks at the road. “Some girls like that.”

“I bet Destiny likes scruffy guys,” says Eddie.

“Who?” asks Ben. “Oh you mean the girl in the sweater? Yeah, she does.”

“That girl doesn’t know shit,” says Terry.

“Oh and you do?”

“I told you,” Terry says. “She’s a yuppy with cold feet.”

“She has problems like everybody else,” says Eddie.

“You know what her problems are?” Terry turns around in her seat. Max jumps away and sits on the speakers behind Eddie. “Stanford will be too constricting and her husband will wear boring polo’s. She’ll get sick of driving the kids to soccer practice and something will happen to her automatic bill pay and she’ll get a late fee. But don’t worry, she’ll talk her way out of it.”

“She told me she was abused.” Eddie lies, not just to defend Destiny, but to prove Terry wrong and perhaps to convince himself that she was like them. She wasn’t just an angsty rich kid on the road. She was poor, hungry and running from something genuine.

Terry narrows her eyes. “That’s a fat wad of crap. Ninety-five percent of the girls I know were abused.” She puts ‘abused’ in air quotes. “They were raped by their boyfriends, fingered by their dads, fondled by the school counselor.” She makes air quotes again. “‘Destiny’ hasn’t had a finger laid on her. I call them like I see them. She’s scamming you Eddie.”

“Like you?” It slips out and he wishes he could take it back, but his anger is like a steam train and it must go forward.

Terry narrows her eyes and Eddie fears she’ll hit him. “What did you say?”

“Sit down.” Ben grabs the waistband of her sweatpants, but she ignores him and continues to lean over the seat. She bites her lower lip like she’s thinking about how to best handle Eddie’s disrespect.

Ben keeps both hands on the wheel. The road becomes curvy and narrow. He glances at Terry. “Please sit down.”

“The lotto ticket, the weed, these stupid guns.” Eddie knows his words aren’t fully true, but aren’t they half-true? “You’re using us.”

“This.” She gestures between herself and Ben. “Is a partnership.” She jabs her finger into Eddie’s chest. “Besides, you lost the ticket.”

They go around a corner and she falls into Ben. The car swerves. He grabs her sweatshirt and tries to sit her down, but she gets up and faces Eddie in the back seat.

“You’re jealous,” says Eddie.

“Of who? That girl in Arcata? At least I’m honest about who I am. I know my place on the bottom. I’m trying to make my life better and girls like her are making theirs worse.”

“You’re not honest.” Eddie can feel a hardening in his chest. Destiny liked him and he needs to be liked. He needs to know he’s not a bad guy. He leans forward and quietly talks into Terry’s face. She has stripped him of the one thing he wanted.

“Did you play your baby’s daddy for those guns?” he asks. “Is that even true? You made up the baby story? Is that how you know Destiny so well?”

Terry leans away from him and looks at the things in the back seat. She looks at Max in the back window, the duffel bag of guns, and her make-up bag in the foot-well. She turns around and sits in her seat, puts her seatbelt on and stares straight ahead. Eddie has won.

Ben risks a backward glance. He takes a breath and rubs his forehead.

It’s quiet until Terry unsnaps her seatbelt. “Pull over.”

Ben looks at her. “Here?”

She looks straight ahead. “Pull over.”

He looks around. There isn't a shoulder. It's a blind curve.

"Pull over."

"There isn't anywhere."

She pushes at Ben with her hands. She leans back and kicks him. "Get out."

"It's not safe."

She opens her door. Max rushes forward for the fresh air. Ben stamps the brakes and the truck behind lays on the horn and passes on the double yellow. Ben steers the car into the blackberries as far as it will go. She can't get out her side so she reaches over him and unlocks his door. She shoves at his shoulder and tries to push him out.

Ben won't budge. He looks at her. His forehead is crumpled in worry. She climbs over him, but he holds her waist and won't let her out. Another car rushes by on the horn. The wind blows her loose hair. The rain comes in. She wrestles free and climbs through the seats into the back. She kicks Eddie on her way out the back door.

Once outside, she opens the driver's door and pulls Ben out by the T-shirt. Another car swishes by and spray comes off the tires. He pulls her in to keep her from getting hit. She struggles and he pins her arms to her side and picks her up. He carries her behind the car and Eddie watches through the back window as she kicks and screams.

He realizes this is how his mother should have acted when his father died. She should have fought for her life and her sons. Eddie has never seen this kind of rage.

He's entranced by Terry's wildness and jealous of her love for her child. His chest hurts and he wants to curl up and die already.

He watches Ben hold her until her energy is out. Finally, she falls limp in his arms. She finds her feet on the road and backs away. Wet strands of hair are plastered to her face. Eddie can't tell which are tears and which are rain. He wants to get out and apologize, but he's too ashamed.

A car comes and slows. It stops beside them and puts on the hazard lights. A woman rolls down the window. She looks at Ben and speaks to Terry. "Honey, are you okay? You need a ride?"

Terry makes eye contact with Eddie through the back window.

"Miss," the woman says.

With his eyes, Eddie tries to tell her he's sorry, but she looks away and faces Ben.

"I'm fine," she says.

Ben touches her, tries to wipe the wet hair from her forehead. She hits his hand away and wipes the hair herself.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, lady, I said I was fine." Terry steps around Ben and gets in the driver's seat. The woman drives off, lights blinking. Terry pulls far enough from the bushes that Ben can get in.

“Listen.” Ben leans back in his seat and Terry steps on the gas. “We’re almost done,” he says. “We’ll deliver this tonight, you can have your cut and be on your way. Just please don’t pull a stunt like that again.”

“Me?” says Terry.

Ben shakes his head. “Both of you.”

When Eddie was nine years old, his parents hosted a big wedding on the property. All kinds of people showed up, folks from town and folks he’d never see again. Firefighters, their wives, and kids in diapers camped on their lawn for two days. Even the bride, bulging at the belly, smiled and danced. They had barbeques and bonfires. The music was loud. People stumbled and lifted glasses.

Eddie watches Terry as she drives. Rain pounds. Wipers swish. The bushes on the roadway arc in the wind as the car goes by. Her tears stream down her cheeks, but she doesn’t sniff or wipe them away. Eddie wonders if any of them will ever experience something like that wedding again. If he had to guess, the answer would be no.

This is why he apologizes to Terry. Not because he’s sorry for the mean things he said, which he is, but because he’s sorry she may never have those carefree moments where she knows many people love her.

Ben watches to see if she’ll answer. She stares straight ahead. For the first time she smears a tear mixed with rain from her cheek. Eddie goes back to staring out the

window and stroking Max's fur. He notices that even though they've only had her a few days, he can feel less of her bones, less of her spine protruding along her back.

A car passes them going the opposite direction and Eddie looks up to see it's a highway patrol. He wonders what they're doing on the back roads. Terry must think the same thing because her knuckles get tight on the wheel.

"Only another mile or two, right?" she says.

Ben pulls down the passenger mirror so he can look behind them.

Eddie keeps his eyes forward. "Are they turning around?"

Ben closes the mirror and sets his hands on his lap. He takes a deep breath.

Terry wipes away her tears and puts her hands at ten and two. "They're on my ass."

"Drive normally," he says. "How fast are you going? Go the speed limit."

She gives it a little gas.

Eddie risks a backwards glance. The cop has the radio to his lips. He makes eye contact with Eddie and squints. He replaces the mouthpiece and flips on the red and blue lights. Eddie faces forward and can almost feel the lights' heat on the back of his head.

He wants to tell Terry to step on it, that they've been caught for murder, but he follows Ben's cues and he is quiet. He chews on the inside of his cheek.



“There’s nowhere to pull over.” Berry bushes line either side of the narrow road.

“Please help me find a place.”

Eddie chooses not to mention the irony.

Ben points at a frontage road.

Terry slows the car and the possibilities run through Eddie’s mind. Terry’s ex-boyfriend narked them out. They found the truck and her finger prints. The man with the BB gave them Terry’s plate number. The tweaker called them in. Max’s old owner wants his dog back. They found Mick’s burned house, his teeth and the melted lead.

Eddie wants to run. He can sprint through the forest and he can lose them. He can make it to the ocean and swim. He will swim until he dies.

“Nosy cunt,” says Terry.

At first, Eddie thinks she’s talking about the cop, but Ben puts his hands on her knee and gives it a squeeze.

“Be cool,” he says. “You have to admit you didn’t settle her fears.”

He turns to face Eddie. Ben looks tired, not twenty-three, but thirty-three and like he hasn’t slept in days. He looks like Dad. “Be cool.”

The cop knocks on the window. He’s got plastic over his hat like an old woman in a shower cap. Terry rolls down the window an inch and the rain pours in. The cop gestures for her to roll it down further. He leans in and looks around the cab. He looks at

Ben's muddy pant legs and wet shoes. He looks at Terry's rain-soaked sweats and bare feet. He looks at Eddie and the dog on his lap.

"License and registration."

Terry reaches to her glove compartment and hands him the paperwork. He nods at Ben. "You too."

Ben pulls out his flat wallet and hands him his Oregon driver's license.

The cop looks at Eddie. "I'm waiting."

Eddie shakes his head. "I don't have ID."

Thankfully, the cop doesn't ask for his name. He takes Ben and Terry's IDs back to his car where he sits down and closes his door like he's going to be there a while.

Eddie's heart thumps. This is the time to run.

"Ben?" he says.

"No."

"But."

"Don't move, Eddie."

The humidity is choking and Eddie feels like he'll pass out. His legs begin to scream and ache. He reaches down to rub them. He stretches them across the seat. They do not feel better. He cracks the door and starts to get out.

In a flash, Ben reaches back and snaps his wrist. "Shut the door."

Eddie squeaks like a twelve year old boy. "My legs."

"No."

"Please."

It's the first time Ben has looked worried throughout the ordeal. "You have to stop."

The cop sits in his car, radio covering his mouth. His hat shades his eyes so that Eddie can't see a hint of what's going to happen. Finally, the cop steps out and tells Terry to roll her window down. He bends so he can look at Eddie's twisted face.

"There a problem?" the cop says.

"My brother gets growing pains."

The cop looks at Terry. "Miss Hill, are these men bothering you?"

She shakes her head and tries to laugh. "You want to know the truth?"

He's not amused. "They weren't bothering you up the road? I have a report of two men trying to abduct a young woman."

"Oh, it's just female trouble." She looks at the ring on his finger. "You understand."

He stares at her.

“I’m fine,” she says. “It was a misunderstanding.”

The cop sighs and returns Terry’s ID. He looks at Ben. “Mr. Leland, what are you doing so far from home?”

“Short vacation, sir. I was laid off from work.”

“That so.” The cop studies Ben’s face. “Where are you headed?”

“The Grand Canyon, sir.”

“And what brings you out to the coast?”

Ben looks at Terry. He tries to smile, but his eyes are watery and red. “I met a girl.”

The cop watches him. “Are you feeling alright Mr. Leland?”

“Yes, sir, why?”

The cop nods to Ben’s leg. Ben has rolled up his pants because the wound had swollen and was being restricted by the fabric. “What happened to your leg?”

Ben looks down. “Poked by a stick.”

The cop holds the ID out, but when Ben reaches for it, he doesn’t let go. He stares at Ben. Finally, he releases the ID and it snaps toward Ben’s face.

“Have a nice day.” He goes back to his cruiser, gets in and talks on his radio. He waits for Terry to pull away.

## Chapter Ten

Two hours later, they arrive at an isolated shack in the hills of Mendocino County. The shack is built of wooden shingles and the porch sags, but the yard is tidy and looks well maintained. A grey-muzzled Golden Retriever greets them with a wagging tail. The dog is shaved except for her ears and tail. She looks like a fat poodle with a bad haircut and she prances circles around the car until Eddie opens the door and Max launches from the backseat. The dogs sniff noses and the Golden follows Max while she sniffs the perimeter of the yard.

Eddie is relieved to press his legs into the earth and stand. He folds and stretches and his heart cools a shade. He inhales the fresh, damp air. Finally, it's stopped raining, but residual drops still fall from the trees and spatter on his shoulders. He watches Ben use his arms to lift himself from the car. His skin is ashen and his t-shirt is soaked with sweat.

A man pulls back a window shade and peers out at the car. Hopefully, Ben knows him well. Anyone who's gone to so much trouble to live this far out, like the Lelands, wouldn't want unannounced visitors. The man lets the drapes fall. He comes to the front door with a smile.

“Hell of a guard dog that one.” He shakes his head and looks at the Golden.  
“Sorry you have to see her like that. She's got her summer cut going, you know, it really does change their personality to be all naked like that.”

The man limps down the stairs. He wears a camouflage hat with an Airborne Ranger patch. Ben goes to shake his hand, but the man gives him a hug and won't let go. "Be damned if you don't look more like your old man every hour."

Ben smiles. "I haven't seen you since before he died."

The man holds Ben at arm's length. "God, I wanted to go to the service." He shakes his head and looks choked up. He takes a deep breath and releases Ben. "Damn, you know how it is."

Ben gives him a small smile that looks like, no, he doesn't know how it is, but he's willing to move on. He points at Eddie, who stands on the other side of the car. "Dad's pride and joy right there."

"No," says the man.

"Yep," Ben waves for Eddie to come forward. "Eddie this is Matt. He was friends with Dad in the Army."

"Hot damn." Matt hugs Eddie so hard his ribs flex. He steps back to look at him. "I never thought I'd meet you son, but here you are. Boy, your Daddy talked about you."

"He did?"

Matt has a wild smile. "You still running, boy?"

"You knew my dad?"

“Course I knew your dad. We served together, man.” Matt’s eyes get big and wide. “Vietnam.”

Eddie didn’t know his dad was in the military.

“Matt,” Ben interrupts. “This is Terry.”

Terry stands at the corner of her car door. She’s wet and muddy. Her hair hangs in strings.

Matt, burly as he is, waddles toward her. He shakes her hand and points at Ben. “What the hell happened to him?”

“Matt,” says Ben. “Eddie and I need a place to stay, just a couple days.”

Matt steps back. “What about her?”

Ben has to against the porch rail. “I think she’s going home.”

Matt looks at Eddie and takes a breath. He lets it out through pursed lips. “You know she won’t like this.”

“To hell with her,” Ben says, but they aren’t talking about Terry. “We brought you product. Not the usual, but it should work.”

“Sure thing.” Matt’s voice is soft. He puts a meaty arm around Eddie. “Well, let’s get you in the house. We can talk business later.”

The living room has orange carpet and veneer walls decorated with army flags and dream catchers. House plants fill every corner and window sill. The furniture is old, but soft and comfortable. Eddie is invited to sit in a tattered armchair and from where he sits, he can almost see the whole house. A kitchen with minimal appliances sits to the left. Two bedrooms and a bathroom are located down the hall.

Matt heats water on a camp stove that's fueled by propane. He whistles while he brews a pot of tea and pours a cup for each person. He starts a fire in the woodstove and gives Ben a camouflage sleeping bag. Terry curls up on the end of the couch and sips her tea. She looks around the home and its eclectic assortment of decorations. Ben lays on the couch with his feet at her hips. He falls asleep with his face buried in the back cushions. It looks like the first time he's relaxed in days and it doesn't look good on him.

Eddie goes back and forth between watching the fire, his brother on the couch, and Matt as he rattles around the house. He picks up and folds blankets, hand-washes dishes, and adds wood to the stove. Eddie wants to ask questions about his father, but Matt is quiet. He looks busy as he prepares a chicken dinner, and besides, Eddie isn't sure what to ask.

An hour goes by and it gets dark outside. The small living room has warmed and Eddie is dozing, when headlights cast shadows around the house. Eddie starts and is halfway to standing when Matt tells him to relax. He studies Eddie as the footsteps come to the door.



The woman stops, halfway inside. She has a bag of groceries in one hand, her keys and purse in the other. She wears a long, flowing white dress. Her hair is blond, down to her waist like it hasn't been cut in years.

Eddie doesn't remember much about her, but he's studied that broken family photo a hundred times before replacing it on the wall. Still, he can't believe he's face to face with his sister Sheila.

She looks first at Matt who shrugs. Her eyes skim past Eddie. She doesn't recognize him. She looks at Terry and finally at Ben lying on the couch.

"What are you doing here?" she asks.

Eddie looks to Ben to see if he recognizes Sheila, to see if he's surprised to see her. He's not. He just rubs his sleepy face.

Matt steps up and takes the load from Sheila's hands. "Now, that's no way to treat a guest."

"You can't bring trouble around here, Ben." She closes the door behind her. "We're not in that game anymore."

Ben sits up, and what little color he's gained seeps from his face. Before he has a chance to reply, she goes to the kitchen and starts putting away the groceries. She slams cabinets and the small propane fridge door.

Ben struggles to his feet. He stands behind Eddie and puts his hands on his shoulders. "Can you stop being pissed for a second?"

She turns and sees the way he's standing. She knows. "You've got him mixed up in your mess?"

"I haven't even seen you," says Ben.

She waves a hand over her head to emphasize a point. "Your name is out there, Ben."

"Sheila." Matt puts an arm around her. "Have some compassion."

She rolls her eyes and leans in the kitchen doorway. "So, what did you bring?"

"Unregistered guns."

"Guns." She slaps her hands on her thighs. "What the hell am I supposed to do with guns?"

"We'll find them a good home," says Matt. He nods at Eddie. "Just enjoy your family."

She crosses her arms and studies Eddie like he isn't capable of noticing her gaze. For a second he thinks about shaking his head and telling her Ben is an idiot, a joker, that he's not the little brother.

She smiles and a few wrinkles turn up at her eyes. She must be over thirty now and Matt must be thirty years her senior. Eddie wonders how they got together and he

realizes it must have something to do with their dad. That means his dad knew she was alive this whole time. Well, until he died anyway, but Ben knew. Did mom? Why didn't anyone tell him?

She pulls her long hair to her side. A tribal necklace hangs at her neck. She doesn't wear a wedding ring. "What do you like to be called now? Ed? Edward?"

"Eddie," he says. After eleven years all she wants to know is how to say his name?

She sighs and turns her back. She goes back to the kitchen. "You look so much like Dad."

Matt tends the fire and Ben sinks back to the couch. How many other things does he know? He puts his feet on Terry's thigh. She looks away from the Lelands and pets Max, who sits on her lap.

"What else are they saying about me?" asks Ben.

She calls from the kitchen. "I just heard about the thing with Shasta."

"Which thing?"

"There's more than one?"

"Did you hear I was there a couple days ago?"

"I'm surprised you lived to tell about it."

Ben laughs and rolls so his back presses into the cushions. He looks at Eddie and chews his bottom lip.

Eddie knows what he's thinking. People know where they've been travelling. People have been talking. What other news has preceded them?

They eat dinner in silence. The fire burns and the room, full of bodies, becomes stifling hot. Matt opens a few windows, but there is no breeze to let in. He refuses Ben's offer to help with the dishes. Sheila tells Terry she can take a shower and Terry disappears into the bathroom, probably thankful to escape the awkward, stale air. Eddie sits on his questions, too hurt and embarrassed at his ignorance to press any issues.

Sheila breaks open the conversation while Ben snores in a deep sleep.

"I was in touch with Dad until he died," she says. "He used to come out here, brought your brother sometimes."

Their dad was one of the people who supported the idea that Sheila was gone forever. All that time he knew she was alive, down here blending into the hillside in this broken-down house. He knew she was holed up with his old friend from the war.

"Why didn't you come to the funeral?" he asks.

"I wasn't invited." Like any other Leland, her face betrays nothing. She watches Ben sleep.

Eddie tries to break her façade. “But you knew he was blown up, right?”

“I didn’t know for a week.” She nods to Ben. “He looks like hell.”

Ben wakes and looks around like he can’t remember where he is. He rolls over.

She looks back to Eddie. “We both got dad’s height, huh? Ben’s as short as your mom.”

He’s not sure what to say. He’s still shocked that he’s been in the dark and he doesn’t know who to be angry with.

“Wait?” he says. “My mom?”

She looks at him, again with her studying gaze. Even though it’s not criticizing, it’s enough to make his skin crawl.

“A turn of phrase,” she says.

Terry comes out of the bathroom in a different sweat suit, pink this time. Her wet hair is tied into a bun. She resumes her place on the couch.

Sheila smiles and gets up. “Goodnight, Eddie.” Her dress flows behind her as she makes her way down the hall, goes into her bedroom, and closes the door.

Terry squishes her way onto the couch beside Ben and falls asleep. Max lays on the rug by the fireplace. Eddie vacates the winged back chair and lays beside her so Matt

can sit when he comes from the kitchen with two whiskeys. He hands the smaller glass to Eddie who sits up.

Matt raises his glass and the ice clinks. "It's not much, but it's something."

Eddie takes a tiny sip and the dry taste settles in the back of his throat. He doesn't want more, but something about holding the glass and the drink opens a window for conversation.

"How did you know my dad?"

Matt looks up under his eyebrows. "I told you, we went to war together."

"But after that, you guys stayed in touch." Eddie looks into the glass, through the liquid, to the carpet underneath. "I mean, he came out here. He brought Ben." He has a hard time keeping spite from his voice.

Matt shifts in his chair. "Your dad was a good guy."

"I don't even know what that means, good guy." He thinks of Mick and he thinks of Ben. He looks at Matt. Is Matt a good guy?

Matt nods at Ben. "What happened to him?"

"He's got a BB lodged in his calf."

Matt chuckles and lifts his drink.

"What?"

“I’ve never seen nobody die from a BB.”

“He’s not going to die.”

“He’s a sick looking kid.”

Eddie doesn’t want to talk about Ben. He sits back from the fire, his elbows looped around his knees, back bowed, his drink in hand. He nods toward the bedroom.

“My dad used to bring her here? That’s how you met her and now you bang her?”

Matt is slow to respond. “She showed up on my doorstep one day, on her way to San Francisco. She went down there for a while. Ran around with ribbons in her hair. She came back.”

“Why did my dad come here?”

Matt scratches the corner of his mouth. “Same reason your brother does, I guess.” He thinks about this. “Only different. Your dad was more about the family. Ben is entrepreneurial. Or he was anyway. What are you two into?”

Ben stirs on the couch. “Shut up, Matt.”

“I don’t mean nothing by it,” Matt says. “Guys like us get by anyway we can.”

Ben tries to sit up, but between being sick and Terry smashing him, he looks too weak. “Talk about something else.”

“The boy’s old enough to talk like a man.”

“No.” Ben manages to squirm out and goes to the kitchen for a glass of water.

“Mind your own business.”

Terry sits up and rubs her eyes.

Matt tips his glass back and stirs the fire. “The kid has a right to know.”

“Know what?” asks Eddie.

Ben slams his water glass on the counter. He keeps his back to the conversation.

“He doesn’t want to know.”

“Who’s Shasta?” asks Eddie.

It’s time to press Ben about everything he’s been reluctant to tell him. Sure, Ben is exhausted. Eddie has put him through the wringer, but these questions seem bigger than either of them. Besides, it was just a damn BB gun.

Matt leans back in his chair and stares at Ben. “He’s a man now, Ben.”

Eddie considers this. Is he a man now? He’s killed. He’s buried a father. His dog was strangled because of family debt. Still, he doesn’t know everything his brother knows. He’s also still a virgin and with the way things are panning out, he will be forever. He knows that if it wasn’t for Ben, he would be in jail now, but they’re only putting off the inevitable.



Ben lies back on the couch like he can't handle the immaturity, the neediness, whatever is bubbling and taking over. "Why can't we just let the little brother believe that dad was a hero?"

Eddie stands from the red and black rug. He leans over Ben. "You're the hero, aren't you? Look what you did the other night."

Ben closes his eyes. "Eddie, go to bed."

"What did you do?" Terry asks. Her knees are curled into her. Her small feet show beneath the blanket.

Ben puts a pillow over his eyes. "I don't have it in me to fight about this, Eddie."

Eddie rips the pillow away from Ben. His brother's face is pale, but he doesn't care. Matt sits in the corner watching the family drama play out.

"You'll get the money and leave. At least dad was dead when he deserted me." He throws the pillow at Ben. "You help me one night, but when you're stuck with me, you won't tell me anything. Sorry I roped you into my life."

Eddie starts toward the door. He needs some fresh air. His hand is on the knob and the door's half open when he sees Ben has stood. Ben presses his fingernails into the palms of his hands, like he's trying not to hit something. Eddie wishes he would punch him. It would be nice to feel something. Perhaps that's why he wants to know.

"Tell me who she is," he says.

The room is silent. Ben's breath is fast. Matt looks into his drink.

"What did you do?" Terry asks.

Eddie steps to Ben. Cold air rushes in from outside. "Tell me."

"Friends with benefits," Ben says.

"What?"

"Shasta was dad's friend with benefits."

Eddie is relieved. He shrugs. "So Dad dealt weed?"

Ben nods and gives Eddie a hard look. "They did that together too."

Eddie looks at the rug. It has bands of fabric looped together and a sun-faded strip shaped like a rainbow. He wants to kill his brother for spreading such lies. "You're a liar."

Heavy with illness, Ben steadies himself with a palm on the side table.

Eddie shoves his chest. "Liar."

Ben squints with the pain, but he won't fight back.

Eddie shoves again. "Liar." He shoves.

Ben's chest caves with each hit. Eddie ignores how sick he looks, wet strands of sweaty hair meander down the bridge of his nose. His eyes droop. He's limp with each hit.

"That's enough, son," says Matt.

Eddie shoves again. He shoves again and again until he feels the Matt's heavy arms loop around his waist. When he's pulled away from Ben, Eddie swings. "Liar."

He gets a tap on Ben's jaw before he's on the porch, in the night air. The stars are out for the first time since he killed Mick. He tries to race back into the house, but Matt blocks his way so Eddie yells around him. "He's a killer."

Matt grabs Eddie by the throat. "Get yourself under control."

He wriggles and tries to shove, but Matt knocks him to the porch and plants a knee on his sternum. The heavy man looks like he's done this before, like he's waiting for Eddie to squirm the wrong way, or make the wrong move.

Eddie stops and his breath slows. Matt's knee presses harder. It becomes hard for Eddie to breath. He spits. He's angry with this person who knew his dad before he was a dad or a husband, or a cheater. He's angry this man got to see his father be young and heroic.

Matt's knee lifts and Eddie's ribs regain their shape, but Matt stays over him.

Sheila appears in the doorway. "What's going on?"

“You’re hers, aren’t you?” Eddie tastes salty bubbles at the corner of his mouth. Still, he won’t cry.

“What happened?” says Sheila.

Matt presses his knee just enough to remind Eddie he’s there. “Are you chillin?”

Eddie nods and he’s released. He scampers back to lean against the rail and pant.

Terry comes outside. Eddie won’t be surprised if she sneaks out to her car and disappears, goes back to her horrible life in Lincoln City. She has no friends and no baby. She can’t trust her own mother, but even that is better than spending another minute with them.

Eddie risks a glance through the door. Ben leans against the side table. His chin dips to his chest and he can’t catch his breath. Still, Eddie sees Ben as he always was: older, stronger, more resourceful and handsome. Ben never needed him. Eddie sees Ben as he was the night he helped with the murder. He gets Eddie. He understands why. He stood with him, shirtless by the fire, and Eddie was envious of his strong muscles. He was envious the next day as Ben worked on the truck, grease up to his elbows so they could get away.

Eddie takes one look at the warm home. Terry watches him, her forehead wrinkled. Max sits on the back of the couch, curious about the noise.

“I’m sorry,” he says. He goes to the car and gets his thin backpack.

He's almost to the highway when he hears someone calling his name, sprinting down the muddy drive. Eddie turns to see Sheila in her white skirt, the Golden Retriever at her heels. Her legs and skirt are filthy with grit when she catches him.

"Where are you going?" she asks.

"I don't know," he says, but that isn't true. He knows exactly where he's going. He's just not sure how he'll get there. He starts again and she has to run to catch up.

She grabs his elbow and makes him stop. "Tomorrow I'm taking Ben to the hospital."

"You can't do that."

"Tell me why."

He starts again.

"Talk to me."

Eddie's twenty paces away, when he turns around. "Why did he lie?"

She watches him, the flashlight trained on his face. It's blinding, but he walks towards it.

He's even not sure who he's talking about, Ben or his dad. "Why?" The strength of his voice is absorbed by the trees.

She clicks off the light. She's tall, and because of her height, she's one of the only people he knows that he can look straight in the eye, but his eyes are yet to readjust to the dark.

"I can't answer that," she says. "I don't know."

She presses something to his belly and he reaches for it. He feels a paper envelope. "What's this?"

"Your share. Three thousand in twenties. It's dirty, but you probably don't care."

He doesn't even know what that means. She's right, he couldn't care less because it's everything they've been working for. Terry can get her baby back. Ben can buy her new clothes and a car. He can take her on vacation to the Middle East and Eddie won't be around to share in any of it.

"Where are you going?" she asks.

"San Francisco."

"I'll tell Ben to meet you there in three days. At the Greyhound. I think he'll be feeling better."

"No, I don't want to see him again."

She sighs. "Eddie, he's sick."

"Screw him."

“Okay, there isn’t time to argue. Once you get to town, there’s a bus station on the west side of the street. It’s hard to see. The bus comes through at midnight, that’s in two hours and you have that long to walk. I won’t give you a ride and don’t come back if you miss the bus.”

“Why?” he says. Not that he wants to.

“If you miss your meeting with Ben, go home, everything will be fine.”

How can she know that? He decides she can’t.

“Go or you’ll miss the bus.” She puts her hand on his shoulders and turns him to face the road. She gives him a shove at his shoulder blades and runs up the road toward the glowing home. Her white legs flash against the dark forest night.

When he steps into the night and starts down the gravel drive, he nearly wishes Ben will come after him, but he won’t. This time, Eddie goes alone.

## Chapter Eleven

Eddie pulls three twenties from the envelope and pays the bus driver, who doesn't have change but says she will get it at the next stop with a booth. He makes his way down the aisle and looks at the shadowed faces. Dim blue lights run the length of the bus showing the all the passengers' blemishes. A man with a tear tattooed at the corner of his eye stares. An older woman pulls her bag toward her. A child lies over a young mother's chest. Girls are crunched against the window by big men they're sit with. Eddie secretly looks for Destiny.

One of the last empty seats is beside a woman in her mid-twenties. She shuffles her legs into the aisle so he can climb over and into the window seat. She doesn't look at him. When he sits, his long legs reach up the seat in front. He wishes he had some of Matt's whiskey. He remembers the cigarettes and pulls them from his pocket. He'll take anything to distract him from the crawling that reaches toward his chest. The woman points at an overhead sign. No Smoking. He slips the pack into his backpack.

He wants to count the money and see what three thousand dollars looks like, but he'll have to wait until it's safe. He still can't believe he has that much and he questions if his share is even fully there. He's never dreamed of that much cash. Even when they won the lotto ticket, it was just a piece of paper. He slouches, presses back, sits up straight, and get a dirty look from the woman beside him. He waits out the ride with nothing to do. He thinks about Stash, Mick and Ben.



Downtown San Francisco has a smell Eddie could never have experienced in the high desert. It's not particularly bad, but waste, exhaust, cooking oil, and colognes mingle with saltwater to create one distinct scent. The morning is bright and the fog has lifted since their bus careened down the East Bay and across the Bay Bridge. Eddie has been sitting on the same Embarcadero bench for hours, unsure of where to go next.

It's his first time in a real city and the sounds are new too. He's been listening to one in particular because he can't determine what it is. There are the obvious sounds of cars and horns, airplanes taking off, people yelling in many languages. Across the street he watches as men drop a crate of milk. The plastic explodes and milk runs down the pavement. He knows the men swear, but he can't hear them over that other sound. A boat idles in the bay. A garage door opens on a pier building. A car backfires, but all these sounds are lost to that one sound. It's overhead, around him, in all the air, and under the ground.

Behind him the green waters of the bay lap at the piers. Mussels cling to the piles reaching far into the earth. In front of him, concrete buildings narrow and become points in the sky. Glass covers most surfaces and reflects both cold architecture and warm, moving life. In one window he sees a woman in polka-dots pushing a baby stroller before she strides by him on the sidewalk. In another he sees an industrial machine and bright oranges rolling down a chute. Men hustle across the streets with shiny briefcases that match their shoes. They wear thin, black ties that contrast their stark-white shirts.

Something rattles toward him on the sidewalk and he looks to see a man pushing a shopping cart full of cans and bottles. He sees another person, bundled and sleeping on a bench. A couple sits on the cement and leans against a shop window smoking. The shop owner chases them off with a broom. They laugh and move further down the street, only to sit against another shop and relight their joint. Not one person looks at him, not even the cops, who sit across the street in their patrol car, staring blankly out the window, looking like they'd rather be sleeping, or eating, anything other than watching people pace the busy street.

Relieved, he leaves the bench, unsure where to head next, but knowing he must find a place to take cover. He knows he must move, but doesn't know in what direction. Something skitters toward him on the pavement. He bends to pick up a newspaper clinging to his feet. It's a section from last week, advertising the city's chic hotels. He releases it into the gentle breeze.

He stops into a coffee shop and buys a smoothie and doughnut. After he eats, he goes in the bathroom and counts the money. It's all there. He sits on the toilet seat and sees his reflection, dirty in his father's clothes, his hat greasy and salted at the brim with sweat. The redness at his eye has dissipated, but a thin purple line swipes beneath. The swelling at his lip has gone down to reveal a thin, crusty split. He sits up and feels somehow less beat.

An atrium reaches up the center of the first hotel he steps into. He's admiring the hanging plants when a woman on the fourth floor exits her room and peers down to the lobby. She wears long, shimmering earrings and her hair reaches over the balcony. Eddie gives her a small wave, but she disappears back behind the railing. A moment later the elevator dings and she steps onto the marble floor. She walks crisply to the exit. She pulls a bag and glances his way. She rounds the corner and doesn't look back.

He could sleep in the lobby chairs for a week, but he decides not to sit down because everything about them is creamy like the milk and everything about him feels soiled.

He has trouble finding check-in and asks directions from a black man in a red uniform with gold buttons. The man smiles and leads him down a wide hallway. When he delivers Eddie to the woman at the counter, he nods and leaves. The woman dips her chin and tells Eddie the cost of a single room, no view. She smiles.

He slaps four hundred on the counter and says he'll take the room with the view. He waits for his key.

"Thank you sir." She spins a star shaped broach on her suit lapel. "I'll just need a credit card for incidentals."

He thinks back to a word his dad used. "I don't have incendiaries."

"No, it covers an accident." She folds her hands on the desk. Her nail polish matches her purple outfit. "If something gets broken."

He stares at her. Of course he doesn't have a credit card.

"It's a requirement for the computer to move forward," she offers.

"But, I'm paying cash. I'll give you cash if something breaks."

"I'm sorry, sir."

He thinks for a moment about asking for the manager. He thinks about offering her a bribe. He wants to stay in the hotel, not because he's suddenly developed a taste for fancy things, but because he doesn't want to walk away, doesn't want her to stare at his back as he leaves.

Every hotel he stops into requires a credit card. He continues his walk west, past flower stands, coffee shops, blues houses, and bars until he finds himself in an area where people are thinner, where they have more tattoos and their dress is less refined. They look more like Eddie. They line the sidewalks and carry plastic bags.

He enters a hotel that advertises the cheapest hourly rates. He's met with brown carpet and the smell of cigarettes. A large black woman sits behind the counter and files her nails. She looks twice at Eddie, but accepts his cash. She asks him if he wants a towel, or soap, perhaps some shampoo, and she tells him it will be extra.

As she gathers the items behind the desk, Eddie thinks about how many people of color he's seen since he got on the city-bound bus. In fact, since he'd entered this

neighborhood, he'd become the minority. He thinks of the day their Dad came home and told them he'd been washing a truck outside the station when a black couple came to play a game of tennis on the courts across the street. They drove a Mercedes with Washington plates and he'd guessed they were passing through and had stopped for a little exercise. Dad washed the truck and they played tennis until the Carpenters drove by in the beat up truck they still hadn't fixed from the time they rolled it out on county road twenty-eight. The truck flipped a U-turn. The Carpenters parked and climbed up on the roof. They crossed their arms and stared until the couple got back in their car and drove away.

The receptionist slides the key and the supplies under the iron bars. Eddie makes his way down the hall to his room. He is younger, though not by much, than the people sitting in the halls smoking pot, cigarettes, and acrid things. Looking at the pocked faces and bone-thin arms, even in his dirty clothes, and beat face, he can see that he has something, just a little something more. The people watch him pass, watch him walk all the way down the hall. It's not until he slips the key in the door and sets the latch that he feels their eyes slide off him.

He wakes up and doesn't know what time it is. His room has no windows, clocks, TV or phones. He makes his way down to the reception and there is a different woman behind the desk. He asks her directions to the nearest mall, and she laughs like she's never been asked such a question.

Eddie's never owned new clothes except for a few sweaters his Grandma knitted which hardly count because the yarn was recycled. He has no idea where to start so he steps into the first store where a few kids his age shop together. They're gathered at the shoe wall and when he passes them he swears he can feel their eyes take in his lankiness, his bruised eye and split lip.

He's standing at a rack of shirts, dizzy from the multitude of choices in plaid when the shop girl peeks over the racks.

"Finding everything okay?" She wears dark, plastic glasses and a sideways hat.

He's not sure how to answer that question. His usual staples are nowhere to be found.

She steps around the rack. She wears a hoodie that covers her chest and arms, but her shorts reveal strong thighs and a round ass. She takes a shirt and holds it up to his chest.

"You're tall."

"Sorry."

She laughs. "Don't be sorry, just go over there. That's the big and tall section."

He looks up. "Big and Tall?"

She laughs and points.

He looks, but doesn't see anything special about the clothes on the other side of the store.

She smiles and rolls her eyes. "Follow me."

He watches the backs of her knees as she walks. He wants to run a finger up the back of her thigh.

She holds up another plaid shirt. It's red and yellow.

"Do you have anything black?" he says.

"Yes." She hangs up the shirt. "I hate all these ugly colors."

She picks up a dark grey and black striped shirt.

He takes it and she offers another size to try on.

She looks at the rest of him and up to meet his gaze. "You need pants."

She takes a few things off the shelf and says she'll put them in a dressing room.

The other kids have gravitated to hats so he checks out the shoes. He takes a shoe off the wall and slips it on, but it's too small. The kids laugh and he turns to see they're looking at something in the glass case.

The girl comes over. "Do you need another size?"

He flips the shoe in his hands. "Do you have another?"

The kids laugh and he looks, but they aren't looking at him.

In the dressing room, he slips a few shirts over his head. Most fit well, but the long-sleeved one is too short at the wrists. He looks at himself in the mirror. He isn't sure if he should change back into his old clothes before going for another size, or if he should go out in the shop's shirt and try to find the rack where she picked it up. The predicament exhausts him so he sits on the small corner bench, leans his head back and closes his eyes.

"Everything okay?" Her voice is a butterscotch candy.

"This shirt is too short."

He can see her checkered shoes under the door. "Hand it out and I'll get you another size."

He slips the shirt over his head and hands it over the door.

While he waits, he looks at the price tag of the things he's picked. The cost of one outfit is well over one hundred dollars.

She brings a bigger size and another shirt she thought he would look good in.

"Do you want a second opinion?"

He looks in the mirror. He's head to toe in black. The hat she brought shadows the injuries on his face. He opens the door and lets her look him over.



“Wow.” She comes into the room and adjusts his collar. “Better. You’re like a new guy.”

When he walked in here, he wasn’t good. He knows that, but by now, he also knows a change of clothes won’t make him better or new.

She seems to feel the uncertainty radiating from him. She leans against the wall of the dressing room. She puts her fingertip on the fabric of his shirt, inside, so that her knuckles graze his bicep. Her hands are cold and when she lets the back of her hand slide down to his elbow, it feels like an ice cube melting a hot day.

He want her because in his old clothes he never could have. He places a hand high on the wall behind her. He wants to be better.

She looks up at him. “You shouldn’t wear shirts tucked in.” She pulls the shirt from his waistband and stuffs a hand down his pants.

He traces the line of her lower lip with a rough thumb. He lets his hand continue to brush her cheek and cup the back of her neck. He slides his middle finger down the length of her spine to the center of her shoulders. She leans back so his whole palm presses flat against her ribs.

She lets him place his other hand between her breasts. His hands, inches apart, encase her ribs. He holds her flesh and bones. He feels her heart. He leans down to kiss her and she tips up her chin, but when only a thin line of breath separates them, all he can do is breathe. He can’t remember the last time he was touched.

She becomes rigid. She takes a deep inhale and her chest hardens against his touch. She offers to throw away his old clothes and he hesitates, but allows it. She leaves.

He doesn't see her again. When he leaves the dressing room, the shop is closing. He pays the other girl at the counter. She makes his change and opens the gate just enough for him to slip under and leave.

When he finds the party's address and knocks on the door, a shirtless guy in daisy dukes answers. The boy, his age, looks him up and down, and for a moment they are two different species. The house is full of people sipping from red cups. Rainbow and neon colors swirl in the background.

Eddie leans back and checks the house number. "Is this Geary?"

"No, I'm Gary."

"Oh," Eddie steps back on the porch and looks out at the cars parked on the street.

The guy rolls his eyes and swings the door open. He grabs Eddie by the front of his shirt and pulls him inside. "Yes, this is Geary."

"Is there a girl named Destiny here?"

"There's like, ten."

Gary, if that's his name, closes the door and gestures for Eddie to follow. They walk down a narrow hallway that opens into a large living room with tall ceilings. Lace doilies and old pictures line the Victorian's walls, but music pumps and vibrates the floorboards. The kid disappears into the crowd and Eddie's just as glad. He didn't need to follow a shirtless guy into a party, but now he looks around there are a bunch of shirtless guys, girls, and some of them make out in corners.

He finds the kitchen where a tall, angry looking girl with black make-up asks him if he wants to buy a cup. "Five dollars, unlimited keg access and two tickets for Popov and Tang." She gestures to the corner of the kitchen where a girl in a tie die one-piece struggles off the floor after slipping in what looks like a mixture of ice, beer, and bodily fluids.

He pays her for the cup. "Do you know Destiny?"

A new song comes on and she wiggles. "Which one?"

Eddie holds his hand out to indicate this Destiny is short.

She shakes her head.

He fills his cup and wanders the house. A girl in a purple skin-suit pushes past him. Everybody pushes past him and it doesn't take long for him to get crammed into the one corner where people aren't making-out. It's too well lit.

An organic blob of dancers ebbs and flows in the center of the room. The people move in synch to the music, like it's the one element that keeps them alive. The people smile and spill their drinks. Nobody cares.

A few songs later, a baby waddles from the crowd. She's alone, laughing, wading through the legs as if they were a bamboo forest. She disappears back into the mob. Eddie loses sight of her until a guy in a tight camouflage shirt emerges holding the baby away from him, as if it touches him, he will become infected. The guy looks for somewhere to deposit the baby and he sees Eddie alone in the corner.

"Hold this," he says and disappears back into the crowd.

The kid squirms and tries to get away, but Eddie holds him tight and looks around for someone else to take the baby. He would go and find the parents, but doesn't even know how to carry a child this size so he holds the kid by the armpits and waits for the parents to come to him.

The baby relaxes and before long nods off so Eddie removes a lamp from a side table, lays the baby on top and stands so it can't roll off. He doesn't mind keeping the baby from falling because it's a good vantage point for which to look for Density. From his perch he can see the whole room and anyone who comes or goes.

People come by and tell him how nice he is. They bring him beer. Two lesbians kiss him on the cheek. Someone gives him a glow necklace to wrap around his head.

He's just about had enough, and has given up his search for Destiny, and begun to look for child's mother instead when a young woman, probably eighteen, wet with sweat and body paint, comes over. She takes the sleepy kid, wraps a rainbow blanket around her shoulders and fumbles to get her boob out so she can nurse.

"What do you think?" she says.

Eddie pushes away from the table and starts away. "She's cute."

"Technically he's a boy," she says.

Eddie looks at the child's pink shoes.

The mom switches the two-year old to her other arm. "He hasn't developed a gender yet."

Eddie has no idea what a gender is. He doesn't care. All he knows is that, the shock of half-naked guys has worn off and it's time to leave. He reaches up to the stair banister behind him and hangs on it to stretch his chest. He closes and rubs his eyes. When he opens them, someone in neon war paint is two inches from his nose.

"Jesus, you scared me."

"It is you." She blends into the crowd so well, he never would have seen her. Gone is the earthy girl with the purple braids. In her place is a raver in baggy pants and a pink tank top. Her hair is in blond pig tails and rainbow ribbons stream from almost every lock.

“Did you just get here?” he asks.

“I had this weird feeling I would see you again.”

He’s not sure if she means that in a good way. Did she invite him because she thought he wouldn’t come?

“Is your brother here?”

It’s the one question he didn’t want to hear. He’s been trying not to think about Ben or his father. He shakes his head. “Nope.”

“And that girl you were travelling with?”

“Nope.”

She looks toward the back of the house. “I was on my way to smoke.”

He wants to follow wherever she goes, but he’s also begun to fear being jerked around. He’s quiet for so long that she begins to look concerned and he figures that’s a good thing. He gives it another second before doing what he knew he’d do anyway.

He gestures toward the back porch where he’d seen people smoking earlier.

“After you.”

She smiles and turns away. “That’s sweet.”

Outside, he pulls his smokes from a pocket and leans against the peeling railing. The air is warm and heavy with water, fog he thinks, but to him fog is so rare he can’t be

sure. Whatever is hanging in the air makes him sweat and he feels damp from head to toe. It makes him heavy and slow to move, but that could be the alcohol.

Destiny springs up and sits on the railing which sways with her movement. She smiles at the others who look older, in their early twenties. Two people back away from a keg, breaking a tight-knit circle. Destiny introduces Eddie to one of the guys who lives here, Brad. He's about Ben's age and wears a collared shirt with a little horse on it. He and Eddie are practically the only people at the party not dressed in costume. Brad pumps the keg and pours himself a cup, letting the beer run down the side of the glass, but it still foams because he pumped it way too much.

Brad wipes foam from his upper lip. "So, where are you from?" He watches Eddie like he already knows.

Eddie isn't sure how to answer the question. He doesn't really want to lie. He wants to tell this prep that he's from the rugged cuts that he's scrapped against the landscape to survive, but he can't ever tell the truth about where he's from. So he says he's from Lincoln City.

"Oregon sucks," Brad says. He pumps the keg a few more times and when he's done, he slips his hand around Destiny's waist. "What brings you to the city?"

Eddie decides to answer as Ben would. "I'm on business."

“You’re on business?” Brad turns his face to Destiny’s and brushes against her neck. She watches Eddie. If she didn’t look awkward in Brad’s arms, Eddie would think she invited him only to hurt him.

“Yeah, actually,” says Eddie. “That’s why I’m at this party.”

Destiny gives him a look and shakes her head. A few of the others have stopped talking and now watch him and Brad.

“Really?” asks Brad. “Care to elaborate?”

Eddie needs a moment to find the right words. He turns a circle on the porch and wiggles the loose porch railing. “You’re in violation.”

Brad finishes sniffing Destiny’s neck and looks at Eddie. “Bullshit.”

“No.”

“The railing?” Brad laughs. “Nobody cares about that.”

Everyone on the deck has quieted down to watch, but they laugh when Brad laughs. Destiny looks nervously at the faces. After all, she’s the one who invited the weird guy.

“That’s true. Nobody cares about the deck.” Eddie leans back to look in the kitchen window. In his memory, he’s found the speech his dad gave after watching a news report about a club collapse in Chicago where thirty people died. “But you’ve got a



hundred lawyers and legislators college-age babies dancing up a house built the thirties that hasn't had any fire or earthquake improvements.”

Brad and the others stare to see if he's serious.

Eddie goes on. “Someone might be interested in the illicit drugs and the grow-lights pushing through the floorboards from the basement.”

“What are you, a cop's kid?”

“Worse.” Eddie bites his lip and nods like he knows what's worse than being a cop's kid.. After everything he's been through tonight, he just wants to get back to his hotel, but Brad sees his indifference as something else.

Brad sets his beer on the railing and takes his hands from Destiny. “What's your problem, man? I get a sense of violence, like you want to fight me.”

Eddie looks at Destiny. She's shuffled a few feet away and watches intently. Is this a test? He remembers the incident in the park when he met her. Does she want to see him fight or back down? Which would make her leave the party with Eddie? He decides it doesn't matter. He has to go with what he wants. He has to be himself.

“Actually, my work is done here,” he says.

The guy steps to him again and puffs up. “You're not a cop.”

“That's true.” Eddie gives a small salute to Destiny and leaves them on the porch. He goes back through the water puddles and the pulsing bodies, down the long hall and

past the baby sleeping on the table. He closes the front-door behind him and the orange lights from the street are bright in his eyes.

He takes the steps down to street-level. Aside from a couple smoking weed on the front lawn, he's the only person outside. The music pumps softly from the house's seams. He's treading across the dewy grass, trying not to get his new shoes wet, when the red and blue lights of two police cruisers come from either direction on the narrow street.

He debates to run, but the cars jerk to a stop and the floodlights blind him.

"Eddie." He hears someone behind him. It's her.

The cops get out and black muzzles point his direction.

He puts his hands up.

"What's going on?" Destiny says from the porch.

"On your knees," the police say.

He bends and his knees press into the wet grass. He twists to look at her over his shoulder. His torso is exposed to the guns. "Go inside."

Her silhouette is illuminated by the pulsing lights.

Suddenly, the police charge past Eddie and go inside. He's not keen on sitting around to find out why they're actually here. Maybe a neighbor got sick of the music, or

another firefighter saw the danger and called, but maybe they know there's a killer nearby. He gets up and starts down the road.

Destiny follows. "Where are you going?"

"To my hotel."

She comes out to the sidewalk. He knows he should get his things and leave tonight on the next bus out of town, but he waits to hear her response.

"Can I come?" She tugs at his sleeve.

His heart skips at the words he wants to hear. He shrugs. "If you want to."

"Let me get some things."

He looks at the house. He can hear the music has stopped as the police have begun looking for their target. That wasn't an ordinary noise complaint.

"Hurry up," he says.

She smiles and trots off.

He goes around the side, into the shadows, and decides he'll give her three minutes. She's back in a minute and a half with her backpack.

Destiny is good with the city. He tells her where his hotel is and she's able to lead him right to the front door where he turns the key and leads her through the lobby,

up the carpeted stairs with the gum spots, and down the stained hallway. The hallway has fewer people now, but still several line the halls and sleep with backpacks as pillows and grey clothes for blankets.

Inside the room, Destiny drops her backpack on the sagging chair. “Do you mind if I take a shower? It’s been a few days and that bus ride was really gross.”

He lies on the bouncy bed and folds his arms behind him. “Sure.”

“Ew.” She pulls her t-shirt over her head to reveal a thin, white bra that shows her round nipples. “Didn’t anyone tell you to strip the comforter in these kinds of places? They’re covered in cum. There’s a special on TV where they go in and show all the human fluids in cheap hotel rooms.”

He needed the distraction, or he would be caught staring at her tits. He gets up and strips the comforter.

“Blanket too.”

From the corner of his eye, he can see her wiggling from her jeans. He strips the blanket and to keep busy, inspects the pillowcase which looks clean enough.

He hears the shower start in the bathroom and marvels that she’s left the door open. Her bra and panties are on the chair. She must have gotten naked while his back was to her, nothing separating them except the direction of his eyes.

A few minutes later, she comes out in a towel and lies down on the bed next to him. The slit of her towel exposes a soft thigh. He notices she has perfect feet and toes and a freckle in the middle of her right calf. She props up and looks at him, hasn't said a word and Eddie can tell she expects him to touch her. He presses a thick strand of wet hair into her shoulder. It spreads and water seeps across her skin. When he lets up, the water absorbs back into the strand.

She watches him a minute longer, waiting to see what's next. He wants to pull her over him and she looks as if she expects it. When he doesn't, she reaches out, takes the front of his shirt and pulls him towards her. He shifts her direction on the bed. She slips a hand beneath his shirt to his thin waist and goose bumps rise on his torso and arms. Her fingers travel up his spine and she tugs at his shirt so he sits up and takes it off.

She floats onto her back and pulls him on top to kiss her, but again the touch brings feelings of shame. To keep from scaring her like he did the shop girl, he lies down beside her and pulls her in close. He smells the shampoo in her hair, the fragrance of her clean skin, and thinks she is the freshest thing in his life ever, the cleanest element to come his way. Ever since he can remember he's had dirt under his fingernails, and clothes that never came clean in the washer, but the girl laying in his arms, fresh as a summer thunderstorm, makes him want to keep her that way, to save her from his dirty touch.

“Are you still going to the Grand Canyon?” she asks.

He hadn't thought about it. After learning about his father's double life and all the lies, he hadn't even wanted to. He's supposed to meet Ben tomorrow, per Sheila's orders. When he left, he thought it was all lies, no way, never will he meet his brother, but after spending two days in the city as an outcast, he can feel himself begin to seek the comfort of someone who knows him, even if it is someone he can't trust.

Destiny sits up and flips her hair. "I'd like to go."

"You would?"

"Yeah. Where are your brother and that girl? Weren't they going to take you?"

"I'm supposed to meet them tomorrow."

He's relieved to have an excuse to meet Ben and see if his brother is feeling better. He'll tell his brother that he's not forgiven for all the lies, but that Eddie still needs a ride to the Grand Canyon. Ben owes him.

"Well?" she says. "Can I go with you guys, or not?"

He watches her face, vulnerable with eagerness to travel, and he'd like to have her with him. He wants her more by his side more than anything, but what happens when she finds out the lies he told her in Arcata? What happens if he gets caught by the police? Where will she go? Who will protect her?

She seems to take his silence as rejection. She stands and lets her towel drop. She pulls on a pair of shorts. She smooths lotion over her legs and brushes her hair. As

he watches her organize her bag, he wonders what's the worst that could happen? What if she carried his memory of Mick, knew about the crime, about Stash and the dirt? Could she help him shoulder and pack his pain until, like dust, it was taken away by the wind as they walked?

He leans up on an elbow. "Come with me."

"I don't know," she says. "Let me think about it."

He's stung, but he must persist because she is the answer.

"I have an idea," he says. "You want to go to Coit Tower? Tomorrow. I'll buy you a bread bowl of clam chowder."

Those are just places he's heard of and he's not sure if they're even in San Francisco. Coit Tower was a place his father had mentioned visiting while in the Navy. Days ago, in the incessant rain, Ben had said something about a bread bowl. Even though Eddie has rejected his father, he's not against using him to win Destiny over.

She puts a hand on her hip. "I've already been there and the clam chowder is nowhere near North Beach."

He sighs and lies back in bed, feeling lame for mentioning touristy places.

"But you can take a cab." She zips up her bag and comes to sit on the corner of the bed. "I don't have money for that, but if you haven't been to those places and want to go, I'll show you that and more."

Of course, he has money and of course, he'll spend it all on Destiny if it means she'll be his guide.

In the morning, they eat bagels with cream cheese and lox. It turns out lox is just salty-ass salmon, which Eddie hates, but he chokes it down because Destiny said he had to try it. They hop the trolley to the Wharf where he eats three bowls of clam chowder. He buys them a cab to the Golden Gate Bridge and is about to find some towels so they can go to the Sutro Baths when she tells him they are actually bath ruins. On Market Street, he buys Destiny a set of turquoise earrings.

They're on their way to Coit Tower when they pass a bookstore where a crowd of people has gathered. Destiny wants to see what the commotion is, so she begins to push through the crowd. Eddie's never been a fan of big groups, but he can't resist her tugging and soon they're at the front of the ebbing mass. Three cop cars are parked in front of the store and the policemen crouch behind the doors with their guns drawn. One officer tries to string yellow tape and keep the crowd back. He looks young and his efforts are futile against the crowd from which Eddie gets a strong sense of distain and anxiety regarding the police.

"We should get out of here." Eddie has to yell into Destiny's ear for her to hear over the growing murmurings of the crowd.

"No way." She's smiling and looks wild with excitement over the drama.



Through the bookstore window, Eddie can see a young, black man holding several books under a sweatshirt with a stenciled image of Malcolm X on the front. A white store-clerk crouches under a table with her hands over her eyes. Suddenly, the black man clambers onto the table spilling books everywhere and dropping the ones he was apparently trying to steal. He throws his empty hands in the air and pulls up his shirt to show he has no weapons.

The crowd goes wild and begins to chant. “Power to the people, power to the people.”

Another police car slowly parts the widening bulk of protestors. The crowd begins to yell and raise their fists. Again, Eddie tries to pull Destiny away. He tells her this is dangerous, but she appears to be enjoying the hysteria. She begins to chant with the crowd and raise her fist overhead, not angry like the others, but smiling.

Suddenly, the black man jumps down from the table, and darts from the bookstore. He rushes into the crowd, but doesn’t get far, because three police officers tackle him and press their knees into his back. As suddenly as he went down, he’s pulled to standing. His face is abraded and bleeds down to his chin. He bucks against the police and writhes in the handcuffs.

He smiles and chants with the crowd. “Power to the people.”

Destiny raises her fist and joins the crowd. “Leave him alone.”

Eddie gives up the gentle prodding and grabs her by the elbow. He pushes her through the hostile gathering.

“Bullies!” she yells over her shoulder.

They’re almost through when the crowd’s pressing is too much. He trips and accidentally pushes her to the ground. She goes down to her knees, but he pulls her back to standing. She puts her hands on his shoulders and jumps so she’s on his back and can raise her fist into the air. She shouts about police brutality.

He carries her, forcing his way through the crowd. Finally, once he’s covered in his own sweat and that of others, they pop onto the other side where the sidewalk merely has a few curious onlookers. He sets her down and sees she’s laughing. Eddie puts his hands on his knees and tries to catch his breath.

Destiny sees the sweat on his forehead. “What?”

He pants and looks up at her. “That could have been dangerous.”

“What?” She frowns and bends to tie her shoe. “You’re scared of the pigs?”

He stands and leans against the door of a restaurant yet to open. “I don’t think that’s it.”

“You are, aren’t you.” She watches him.

He closes his eyes. Perhaps, next time, it will be him in handcuffs with a damaged face. Maybe he is scared of the police. Maybe it had nothing to do with the

angry crowd. Maybe people all over the world are fighting for fairness and justice and they're getting punished for it. Maybe he's not as alone as he thinks.

He opens his eyes and she's before him. She tips her chin up and kisses him on the cheek. "You were protecting me."

Eddie looks back to the dispersing scene to see a policeman standing high on a lamppost. He watches the cop watching him as he leads Destiny through the tables and chairs and around the corner.

He lies and tells her they better save some cash and get back to the hotel so they can get their things to meet Ben and Terry. Truthfully, he doesn't want to go to Coit Tower and think about his father as a young man. She nods and maybe Destiny can tell he's spooked, but she doesn't say anything to make him feel better or worse. For that, he is thankful.

At the hotel they pack their things and Destiny tells him he should leave a tip for the housekeeper. He leaves five dollars on the lampstand by the TV and leads her down the dark stairwell so he can turn in the key and be through with San Francisco.

At the bus station, they sit on the hard plastic seats and Eddie thinks of Stash. Something about being with Destiny has unlocked his yearning for a partner with whom to spend his days. She sits beside him and looks out at the street where the sidewalk and the road meet. He wants to tell her about the horizon where he's from. There, it's twenty

miles off and he can see it in every direction. Here in the city, the horizon is at the sidewalk and the street and its twenty feet away.

“Look.” She points at a sea bird and six babies trailing along behind her. “That’s so cute. They’re thriving.”

The baby birds look soft and round. For city-dwelling birds they look healthy, but Eddie wouldn’t say they’re thriving. Not because they aren’t, but because he doesn’t believe something so delicate can thrive in a place where the furthest distance one can see is down the block. He thinks they’ll probably get hit by a car.

“I saw a possum who’d been hit by a car once,” he says. “She had five babies clinging to her chest and one was still alive.”

Her face wrinkles and he’s not sure why he said it. He thinks about the road where he’d seen the possums. It’d been during a drive Ben took him on two years ago. They’d driven an hour to the oasis-like forest, the only place for miles that had spring-water and trees taller than twenty feet. They’d been going out to target shoot Ben’s twenty-two rifle. Eddie had surprised Ben and brought the old revolver, but Ben said the ammo was specialty, and expensive, so he made Eddie put it away.

They came upon the possums and Ben slowed. Eddie made him stop and he got out to make sure they were all dead and they were, except for one. It couldn’t have been a week old. Its bare, pink legs kicked slowly and its small hands squeezed open and shut. It may not have been dead, but it soon would be. He couldn’t save it. What was he

thinking? He knew nothing about baby possums. Nor was he brave enough to put it out of its misery. He got back in the truck and told Ben to drive. He felt sick to his stomach for a week and the image didn't leave him. Still, he can see the small hand.

If life couldn't thrive in a forest where humans came and went less frequently than even range cows, how could life thrive in a city? Or maybe Eddie's thinking has been backwards this whole time because he sure isn't thriving back home, he thinks.

They wait another hour and the meeting time comes and goes. In a way, while Eddie feels an irritating worry about Ben's health, he's relieved. The fear of the mob and the violent arrest has begun to fade, and his confidence in finding the path out of the dark without Ben or his dad has rebuilt around watching Destiny's dark eyelashes against her peachy skin.

He bends to kiss to her cheek. She turns and their lips linger against one another for some time. Suddenly she snaps away with a pop like a bursting and his fears of isolation stab, but she lays her head on his shoulder and a few stray hairs tickle his jaw.

When the waiting becomes unbearable, he stands and shoulders his pack. "Let's just go. We'll buy a ticket or something."

"What about your brother?"

"He's not coming." Eddie chooses to thin Ben is an asshole. The alternative would make him sick to his stomach.

She looks up at him. "I don't have money for a bus ticket."

He reaches to her, and pulls her off the bench. "I'll buy your ticket. We have to get there together."

Truth be told, he doesn't even care about the Grand Canyon. He just wants to spend more time with Destiny.

The ticket agent helps them piece together tickets to Flagstaff, Arizona, and says from there, they'll be on their own. Right before she prints the tickets, she narrows her eyes and says they'll just need to confirm they're eighteen years of age. Destiny reaches into Eddie's money envelope and takes out two twenties. The agent says that will do.

The bus doesn't leave until midnight, so instead of waiting at the station, Destiny suggests they get a hotel and kill the time there. Her one condition is that it's a nicer hotel than the one they stayed in last night. Eddie tells her he would buy her the nicest hotel in San Francisco if he had a credit card. She smiles and says she has one for emergencies, but that nothing can be charged to it because they'll find her if she does.

Eddie wants to ask her who will find her and why it'd be such a bad thing. He decides asking can wait, but he feels bigger than before, like he has a new mission in life that means protecting Destiny from dark days like his own.

The hotel with the atrium is even nicer than he expected. The ceilings are tall and decorated with crown molding. The lamps have crystals dangling from the shades and the bed is so puffy that when Destiny throws her pack on it, it sinks inches into the soft

foam. Eddie has never been in a room so clean. Everything is crisp-white, cream, or silver and he feels afraid to touch anything until Destiny strips her clothes and invites him into the shower.

He loses his virginity in the one place he'll never be back to and later he'll wonder if it even happened, because as he moves on top of her, under the light comforter, in the soft lamp glow, it's like a dream. Her pink lips and angelic hair are as foreign to him as her sweet sounds. When they're done, he lies down and presses the length of his body against hers because if he doesn't, he will float away.

Somehow, while he is light as a paper airplane soaring from the highest point in the city, she is solid and relaxed. She closes her eyes and falls asleep. Eddie watches her and traces her collarbone thinking about the reasons she could have left home. He remembers her reactions to the police, the way she despised their presence, and he wonders if her reasons for being on the road could be the same as his.

He decides to tell her. He's heard about people who hike for days into the Grand Canyon's depths. They carry enough water and food to survive the cruel, desert elements. They see the canyon's narrow bottom, swim in the river, and trudge back to the top changed people. He decides that if he and Destiny are going to gaze into the earth's abyss together, if they are going to embark on a life-changing journey, they need start on the same ground. He thinks he's already been to the bottom and that he's returned safely to the surface. He thinks he has brought something with him to give, something she wants and needs.

She wakes and takes a deep inhale. She places an arm over his stomach and smiles. She adjusts her hair so that it fans over the pillow.

“Why did you run away?” he asks.

She studies his face. “The same reason everyone leaves home, to seek the truth.”

He’d thought he wanted the truth, but the truth had cost him his brother, Terry, and any possible relationship with Sheila. Now that he had the truth about his father, he wasn’t sure what he was going to do with it.

“Did you find it?” he asks.

She sighs and closes her eyes as if she’ll fall back to sleep. “Not yet.”

He admires the impossible white of the pillow case. “What truth are you looking for?”

She keeps her eyes closed. “Oh, I’ll know when I find it.”

“I found a truth I didn’t want,” he says. “I hope it’s not the only one because it kind of sucks.” He waits for her to ask what he found. Then he can tell her the story that will lead her into his depths so they can come out together.

She opens her eyes. “Who said it about the unexamined life?”

“What?” He shrugs and the covers slide from his shoulders. “I have no idea.”



“Well, they said it’s not worth living,” she says. “I believe that if I can’t handle reality than I have no business being alive.”

He’s stung, but perhaps she’s right. He doesn’t know.

“Why did you leave home?” she asks. “I’m guessing it wasn’t the Grand Canyon.”

A gust of wind comes up from the bay waters, circles the tower and makes a gentle whooshing sound as it enters the cracks of the closed window.

He can give her one truth and for the first time since listening to her talk about it, he realizes there might be more than one. He fears he hasn’t reached the bottom of anything, but he knows to come up and be a changed person, that he must go deeper down.

“I killed someone.”

The wind swirls and pushes its way inside. Eddie looks toward the window. The sun has set and the sky has turned from blue to grey and will soon be black.

Destiny laughs. “That’s the weirdest thing I’ve heard someone say in a while.” She swings her legs over his and they warm him instantly.

“We killed him,” he says.

“What?”

“He killed our dog and was going to kill our mom.”

There is stillness and he can feel her watching, but he keeps his eyes on the ceiling tiles. Finally, he looks at her. “I promise he deserved it.”

“What are you saying?” She takes her legs off his. She spins so she’s sitting and can hang her legs off the side of the bed. Her bare back faces him. She has a small mole below her shoulder.

“My mom’s boyfriend killed my dog. On purpose.” He feels light again and the only thing that keeps him down are the words as he says them. He tells her everything. How Stash came home, how he buried him, and how he was going alone, but Ben came too. He tells her they cleaned up with the fire.

She’s quiet. After what seems like forever she asks, “Who did it?”

“We did.”

“Who?” She turns to face him and her face has changed. “You or Ben?”

“We did.”

She pulls the sheet tight over her chest. “Who pulled the trigger?”

“It’s not about who pulled the trigger. It was the right thing to do.”

“Who?”

“I did.” It’s the first time he’s owned it, taken responsibility. “I killed, but I’m not a killer.”

A long time passes before she lies back down and pulls the covers up to her chin. Her voice rises and lifts into the sky. “How do you know? How can you say you won’t do it again?”

He thinks of the switch and maybe he can’t be sure. “I had to do it.”

She stares at him and he knows she’s searching. There is nothing left for him to give. After a while she lies down. She pulls the covers up to her chin and reaches for his hand. They lie on their backs and stare into the darkening room. When he hears her breathing come soft and regular, he thinks he’s been forgiven and the weight of it all comes down. It settles him and he falls asleep.

The breaking dawn wakes him. He launches from the bed. They’ve missed the bus. Eddie tosses clothes into his bag and waits for Destiny to return from the bathroom. He paces the room thinking maybe they can make a connection in Sacramento or Fresno. Perhaps the woman at the ticket counter will give them a break for another twenty bucks. He paces and waits, paces and waits. No sounds come from the bathroom. No running water or the click of a hair brush being set down, no makeup bags zippered up or shuffling of feet. He stops pacing and looks around. Destiny’s things are gone. He knocks on the bathroom door and it glides open to reveal an empty marble countertop and a towel discarded in the tub.

He tears the comforter from the bed. He looks beneath the frame, in the drawer at the end table, on the sofa, between the cushions, but his envelope of money and the bus tickets are gone. He sits in the upended room until it's time to check out. Maybe she'll return, regretful, and he'll forgive her and she'll have forgiven him.

At noon, the only regrets are his. He should have never told her the truth. Terry was right, Destiny didn't want the truth. She wanted more and he had nothing more to give.

Finally, he shoulders his pack and takes the stairs twenty flights down. He walks toward the Golden Gate and crosses it. He walks into the hills and when he's had enough walking, when he knows where he's going, he puts out his thumb and waits for a ride.

He's not going to the Grand Canyon. He's not going to see the colors or the layers. He's not going to be changed by its vastness, but he is going deep down to a place that's cramped and darker than he's ever been before.

## Chapter Twelve

When he arrives at Shasta's property, he moves slowly through the forest. The night is coming on, and when the driver he'd thumbed a ride from dropped him at the gravel road, it was already dusk. He crests the hill and he circles the property, watching for booby traps and men with guns. He comes across a clearing with small outdoor plants that look only a few weeks old but are already tall and spindly. They are guarded by a sleepy man with a twenty-two, not because they're near ready for harvest, but because there is the potential for competitors, people who will rip the plants from the ground or spray them with herbicide.

Eddie would not have seen the guard if it weren't for his fire, a stupid choice this late in the day. The rifle is slung over his shoulder, even as he sits on a wood round heating beans in a can. Eddie backs slowly away and circles back to the shed. The electricity hums and crackles in the wires stretched across the forest air. An armed guard stands at each door, meaning there is only one place to go for crop.

At the back of Shasta's house, he removes his pack from his shoulders and unzips as silently as he can. He unwraps the tri-tip he was able to snag from a grocery store where he waited for a ride. When he tosses the slab into the circle of dirt, hoping it will occupy the pit-bull for at least fifteen minutes. He hopes the dog won't bark or break his neck, and he wishes his plan didn't rely so much on hopes and wishes, but then again, he doesn't have much to lose.

A massive paw emerges from the dog house and squishes into the mud. The chain slinks and drags as the pit searches for the source of the scent. The small eyes on the giant head scan the yard. His perky ears flip. The dog sniffs the meat suspiciously, then looks into the woods for his benefactor. When he sees Eddie, he lowers his head and stares.

“Hey Topper. Remember me? You love me.”

The dog takes quick snorting breaths. He steps to the steak and swallows it in one gulp. He saunters to the edge of the mud-ring where Eddie crouches behind a tree.

Eddie believes dogs have emotions similar to humans and that they often feel the same as the people around them. Perhaps this dog, on his short chain, confined to a small area and a tiny house, is more like Eddie than any of the people Eddie has seen in the last week. Topper could be more like him than his brother who believes he can make something of himself, more like him than Terry who has something she wants beyond material wealth, and more like him than Destiny, who in the end had a choice of leash or no leash.

Eddie risks the bite, the bark, and all the repercussions when he reaches out and touches the dog on the head. It bows, closes its eyes and pushes his nose into Eddie's forearms. After a few moments, he turns, and without looking back, saunters into his dog house and lies down with a sigh.

There are no lights on in Shasta's house, no TV on, no radio, no smell of cooking food. There are no cars in the driveway, except the old one rotting at the grow house, which supposedly his dad loved. Eddie assumes Shasta is out, down the hill, or visiting another house on the property. Perhaps she's tinkering with her plants somewhere as he would be if this were his place. Perhaps she is at home. Either way, he doesn't care.

He hugs the side and makes his way onto the porch. He finds the slider is unlocked and he pulls it open just enough for his slim frame and empty backpack to fit through. It takes a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dark, but when it does, he finds the house is just as it was a week ago. Drying herbs hang from the ceiling, others are set into tall jars. But he's not here for the weed. He's here for the cash and then he's going to find Terry.

The cash no longer sits on the coffee table, but there is a safe in the corner of the room and it's ajar. He takes one step onto the carpeted floor and another. He's midway into the room when he hears the sound of a handgun being loaded, the magazine already in place, the slide racking back, then springing forward to pick up a bullet. The only thing left, would be to fire.

"I won't ask what you want because I already know." Shasta's voice is rough from years of smoking.

Eddie isn't going to beg for his life. He's not going to plead or argue. He's simply going to state the facts. "Fuck you."

He sees a shadow of her skinny arm reach up and switch on a lamp. She looks worse than when he saw her a week ago. More thin if that was possible. More of her collarbone shows and her eyes are deeper in her skull. The gun rests on the armchair. It lies on its side and the chair holds its weight, but still, her finger is on the trigger.

“I told your brother I’d kill him if he came back. Did he send you?”

“No. I came on my own. I don’t know where Ben is.”

“Don’t lie,” she says.

“I’m not. Have you been sitting here in the dark? Waiting for him?”

“No, I’ve been sitting here waiting to die.” She takes her hand from the gun, reaches to the coffee table and picks up a roach. She lights it. “You could have waited a week to rob me. I’m going on vacation.”

“I’m not Ben.”

“Aren’t you?”

He’s not sure what she means, but he thinks it might have something to do with the night they killed Mick. There was no way for her to know about this, but he remembers she’s in communication with Sheila. And maybe he is like Ben but with different motives.

She inhales and with a choked exhale says, “I’m happy to tell you, your brother is going to be fine.”



“Why did you do it?” he asks.

She inhales and exhales. She takes her time as if she doesn't have much for his childish questions. “Do what?”

“My dad all those years.”

“I'm not a home wrecker if that's what you're implying.”

He backs up to the wall. “Aren't you?”

She leans back, the nine millimeter inches from her wrist. “I don't have the energy to argue.”

He doesn't care if she shoots him. “Aren't you the reason my dad was always gone? My mom is hooked on pills, aren't you the reason for that? The reason I had to kill her drug dealer so he wouldn't kill her? Isn't that your fault?”

She watches him a moment like she's determining if there's truth in his words. She won't indulge him either way. “I'm sorry you had to learn about life this early on, but it's for the better.”

“Just tell me why.”

“Here's the thing.” She struggles to her feet and folds at the waist to smash out the joint. “It wasn't my responsibility to keep your home together, it was your father's and your mother's.”

“But you knew he was married, that he had me and Ben. Why not let him go?”

She steadies herself with the chair. “He left me and then he came back for the money. If it makes any difference, I loved your father. We made mistakes, but I think he loved me too.” Any color she had is gone from her cheeks. “If you must know, he loved you more.”

“Why do you need all this? The cash, the weed? Other people’s loved ones?”

“For the same reason you do. I’m past having a beautiful life, so I’m going to have a beautiful death.” She stops and looks at Eddie in the corner, like she’s deciding if she needs to go on.

“I sell my herb to some messed up people like your brother, who just want to get ahead in life, but I also sell it to sick shits like me, who feel better when they smoke.”

She sits back down and wheezes. She waves her hand over the gun like she doesn’t want to pick it up again because it’s too heavy, like the stress from firing it would kill her too. “Now get out of my house. Go home.”

He watches her and feels the weightlessness of his pack. He didn’t get what he came for and he still doesn’t understand, but she had used that word love, a word his dad never used lightly, a word that was saved for special occasions and rare moments.

He steps back into the cool night. He passes the dog, who looks sadly at him from the doghouse. Eddie stares down the guards who watch him walk from Shasta’s home unharmed. He crosses the driveway, and starts down the road. The forest is cold

and damp and he feels translucent against its trees, dirt and moss, like he's invisible to the world as he starts the long walk home.

He sleeps by a riverbank on a pad of leaves and grass. In the morning, he removes his shoes so that he can soak his swelling feet in the cold water. He watches the stream ripple against his calves and knows Shasta will die soon. With her she will take memories of his father he never knew existed until now. She will take his transgressions, his lying and cheating, and his ugly double life, and she will die.

But, she will take other pieces of him and they will be gone forever. She'll take moments where he smiled and laughed, and did strong things like hammer, build, and carry. She'll take songs he sang, dinners and parties he attended, wine he spilt. She'll take grease on his arms and tears in his flesh. She'll take his smarts and his problem solving and his jokes and tears. She'll take his insecurities, his shame, and his pride. She'll take things Eddie never saw, and a man Eddie never knew. She'll take his dad, before he was his dad, a man Eddie could have known and respected and laughed with in another life.

Eddie stands and presses his feet into the muddy bank. He takes off his shirt and pants. He folds them neatly and places them on a dry rock. He wades into the cold water and his flesh rises as his feet search for the best rock on which to step. He splashes water onto his face and runs wet hands through his hair. Still he cannot cry. He's alone, but he feels the world watching, waiting for his next move, waiting to see if he will thrive.

He lays face down and holds a heavy rock to keep him from being swept away by the shallow waters. The chill washes over him and rinses the deep cuts and bruises, the ones that aren't on his flesh, but on his soul. The water rinses and rinses and makes him raw. He begins to cry and must lift his head and kneel on the slippery rocks to keep from choking on the very water that cleans him, but it's not cleaning him of his home, or his life there, or killing Mick, or the father that lived two lives. It's cleaning him of the shame that Eddie feels about those things.

He pushes his face into the moving water and screams. He screams for the dad he never knew. He screams for the one he did. Again and again he dunks and screams. He comes up opening his chest to the forest and he curls back down to the water, as if he is in prayer. He screams that his mother is not more of a woman and he screams because he loves her anyway. He cries because Terry lost her baby and because Ben loves her through her flaw. He cries because Shasta will die and Sheila will lose her mother. He screams until he is numb with cold.

Finally when he can't feel his fingers or toes or the skin on his bones, he makes his way to the beach, lays on the peat moss and stares up at the sky through the trees. Puffy clouds move overhead and he knows it will be a while before the next rain. He lays exposed on the river front for a long time and watches the sky move slowly overhead. The stars spin above even though he can't see them. The sky is blue because its reflecting us back to ourselves. He watches for a long time and when he can feel

himself again, he puts his clothes back on and gets ready to face what he thinks is inevitable.

## Chapter Thirteen

It takes him all day to hitch fifty miles. He rides in a motorhome and makes okay progress in a VW Bug, but when he's dropped at an onramp in Salem, he gets passed by people in BMWs, Mercedes, convertible Mustangs, and other cars he'll never ride in.

After a while, a Greyhound bus pulls into the nearby park-and-ride and passengers get off. The brakes squelch and the driver lumbers down the stairs for a break. He cups his hands to light a cigarette and looks up to see Eddie watching him. Eddie turns back to the flow of rush-hour drivers who zoom past.

After about fifteen minutes, he sees the driver check his watch. No other riders have boarded the bus. Instead of wading through the mud puddles, he waves Eddie over.

"Boy, you ain't ever going to get a ride standing there." The driver hauls himself up the stairs. "I'll give you a ride to Klamath Falls. Damn thing is practically empty."

Eddie sleeps on the long ride to Klamath. When they arrive at dawn he thanks the driver and freshens up in the station bathroom. He pats his face dry with a paper-towel and thinks about how he'll complete the last leg of the trip. If he goes out to the highway, there's a good chance he'll see someone he knows, someone who's come out to do their weekly shopping in the big city and will give him a ride home. However, he's not sure what the people back home know or what they've been saying and he's not quite ready to face his consequences.

He decides he'll walk the rest of the way. If the sixty mile walk in the desert kills him, at least he'll die trying to get home. He figures he can do it in two days and sets off through the city. When the pavement ends he travels the fields that run parallel to the highway. His mind is quiet and he can walk in peace.

When the sun is low, his feet are sore and he needs water badly. When he arrives in Beatty, population one hundred and fifty, he goes to the empty school playground to fill up his plastic water bottle and rest until the sun goes down. He'll start walking again in the cool evening air. Out on the highway cars zip past one every half hour. He lies down on the play structure platform and closes his eyes.

When he hears a car slow and stop at the school fence, he sits up to see who's stopping and if he's the cause. The car has California plates and the typical Mercedes hood ornament, but the Benz is circa fifteen years ago and dusty as hell. The brakes squeak and the driver's door groans open and a Jack Russell bounces from the back seat. It's Maxine. She sees him sitting on the structure and sprints across the yellowing grass to jump in his lap.

"I knew it was you." Terry gets out and leans against the dusty window. She crosses her arms and calls over her shoulder to Ben. "Told you."

Ben pulls himself from the passenger seat and looks over the roof to make sure it's Eddie. He sees him sitting on the platform, legs swinging forward and back.

Eddie's happy to see Ben, Terry and the dog. The last days have been long and tiresome. He sets Max down and she sniffs around the structure for treats the kids may have left behind. Terry makes her way over and gives him a tight hug. Her grip hurts and he realizes his body is sore and feverish. She puts the back of her hand against his forehead and frowns.

"Give him some crackers." She hollers to Ben who hasn't budged from the side of the car. She hugs Eddie again, sends him away, and climbs on a swing.

Eddie walks to the car and sees that Ben's color has returned. He's not sweaty or sickly, though he has bags under his eyes and leans on the car like he's exhausted. They stand on either side until Eddie gives up and goes around the front. Ben limps to meet him halfway and they stand together.

"You got a new car." Eddie pats the hood and leaves fingerprints in the dirt.

Ben's throws his arms in the air and lets them drop. "Had to, hers took a dump."

"You've always wanted a Mercedes."

Ben kicks the loose bumper. "This isn't quite what I had in mind."

Eddie wants to apologize for the truck, but something stops him. He has a lot to apologize for. He ran off in the middle of the night when Ben was sick. He was the one responsible for the BB in Ben's leg, and he couldn't even keep the lotto ticket that could get them out of trouble. He guesses he's not quite ready to ask forgiveness because he's awaiting an apology for the way Ben broke the news about their father.



“I went up to Shasta’s,” Eddie says.

Ben raises his eyebrows and waits for Eddie to indulge him with the details.

Eddie points to the back seat. “Can I get in? I need to sit down.”

Ben opens the back door and Eddie slides onto the cool leather. He sits sideways so he can face the field where Terry swings and Max sniffs.

“How’d you know where to find me?” he asks.

“I knew you’d go home.” Ben looks down the highway. “It’s where you belong.”

Eddie nods and sips water. Ben gives him the crackers and with each crunchy bite, he feels a little better.

“Why are you going home?” he says. “I can make it on my own now.”

Ben shuffles his feet on the gravel by the road. He begins to trace lines in the dirt with his toe. “Why do I ever go home?”

A small breeze picks up and circles the cab of Ben’s new car. He’s always said he only goes home for his little brother.

Eddie eats another cracker and passes the bag to Ben. “Shasta said she loved Dad.”

Ben takes a cracker from the stack. “Sure, what’s not to love?”

Eddie can feel Ben watching him, waiting for a reply, but there isn't much else to say so he shifts the focus. "I feel bad for Sheila."

Ben shakes his head. "No kidding. She didn't even know her mom was sick. I told her that night, after you left."

Eddie frowns into the water bottle and waits for Ben to say something else about how that night went down. "She says she wants to come see you, after Shasta passes."

Eddie sighs and pulls the pack of cigarettes from his pocket. "I have to ask mom."

Ben studies Eddie as he folds the pack over in his hands. After a while Ben goes back to watching Terry and Max. "No family is perfect."

"I know." Eddie tugs out the last cigarette he'll ever want to smoke and the foil comes with it. "I just miss him is all."

He unfolds the foil and something drops to the carpeted floorboard. He looks down and the lotto ticket, pure as the day he won it, lies face up on the floor. He reaches for it and tucks it back in the pack along with the cigarette and the foil. He smiles at Ben over the seat and Ben smiles back, unaware of the finding.

Eddie thinks of all the things he can do with the money. Fix-up the rest of the house, build a greenhouse and put in sprinkler line, save it until he finishes high school and can move to Lincoln City to be a fisherman. He could go back on the run, or finally

take Terry and Ben to the Grand Canyon, but none of those ideas sound quite right, so he leans back in the seat, closes his eyes, and keeps it to himself.

They sit for another minute until Terry and Max trot back to the car. Ben settles into the driver's seat, starts the engine and pulls out to the road.

The last miles roll by and Eddie feels the need to sleep, but he won't. He wants to see the landscape and listen to Terry talk about how beautiful it is, how it goes on forever as far as the eye can see. He knows he'll get home and Ben will drive off and take Terry far away, or if she wants, back to Lincoln City. Eddie will be arrested and the world will say he was a nice kid who snapped one day. He just wants to enjoy his last moments of freedom.

Ben takes the driveway slowly. Ben's in no hurry to be home, and Eddie has a feeling once they arrive, he'll be in a hurry to leave. The slow driving is fine with Eddie. He's in no hurry either because he has no idea what's waiting for him. The police? An overdosed mother? An empty house with no food or running water? He watches the barb wire fence-line go by. A cow looks up with wet eyes.

Ben's driving so slow that their mom doesn't see, or hear them at first. She's outside with her hair piled on her head and loose strands blow in the evening wind. Her bathrobe drags behind her as she crosses the driveway. It's dirty at the bottom and she wears her snow boots, though it's not cold or wet. None of this surprises Eddie.

What does surprise him is that she's dragging the hose across the yard and she's headed toward the garden. It looks like she's been watering the whole time they were gone. Ben slows to a stop and they watch her place the hose and return to the faucet. She turns it on and it misses half the garden and runs into the drive. She turns it off and goes back to move the sprinkler. On her way, she trips and stumbles over her robe, but it stretches and she's able to stay upright.

Eddie gets out of the car and goes toward her. "Mom, there's a stake for the sprinkler."

She turns and sees the Mercedes, but doesn't recognize them at first. She drops the hose and waves her hands back and forth to make him stop coming toward her.

"Oh no. No." She heads toward the house. "I have nothing to say."

Maxine jumps out the window and heads across the driveway toward her. Their mom turns just in time to see Max get low on her haunches, creep a few steps, and spring forward to nuzzle the furry boots. Mom looks up again and sees Eddie standing by the car. She sees Ben getting out of the driver's seat.

"What the hell are you two doing here?" She crosses her arms over her chest and frowns. "I thought you were the cops. They've been coming here you know."

Eddie collects his bag and goes to the side of the house to fill a bowl of water for Max. "Missed you too."

“I didn’t tell them anything.” She pats her own shoulders like she’s giving herself a hug. She looks Eddie up and down. “You look like you got bigger.”

“I was gone a week.”

“Still.” She uncrosses her arms just long enough to point at Terry. “Who’s that?”

Terry comes forward and shakes her hand. “I’m Terry, ma’am. It’s nice to meet you. You’re sons are pretty exciting boys.”

“Oh.” Their mother stares at Terry. Ben’s never brought a girl home. “Nice to meet you.”

Terry smiles sweetly and goes to sit on the hood of the car to watch the first stars emerge. The sky feels close tonight, like it’s dropped down around the property to keep their words quiet and between the family.

Eddie goes to stand next to his mom and lowers his voice. “Ben has to go. He was just dropping me off.”

She watches Ben pull himself from the driver’s seat and limp over. He winces at the pain still in his leg. Her voice is pleading and not as hard as Eddie thought it would be. “They’re sure he did it.”

Ben comes to stand close. Their shoulders almost touch and their small circle forms a warm place in the chilly night. “Tell them I did.”

“What? No,” says Eddie.

Ben picks a burr off the lapel of his mother's robe. "I'm sorry. For everything I said about you being a bad mom. That's not what I meant."

He turns to Eddie. "I'm sorry for the way I told you about Dad. I should have known you didn't need protecting and I should have told you sooner."

Their mom clasps Ben's hand to her shoulder and holds him there. "They keep coming around. Ben, you have to get out of here."

Eddie's palms feel clammy and he pushes them through his hair. "No."

Ben leans in and hugs his mom. He pulls away and his eyes are glassy with tears.

"No." Eddie's crying again. Since the river, his tears have come freely whenever they want. Surprisingly, he never cried over Destiny, but the people who love him make his heart ache the most.

Ben takes a last look at the house and pulls Eddie aside. They stand by the fire pit, now cold and black. Eddie decides to build a fire later and feed it until it glows.

Ben takes him by the shoulders. "Finish school and make something of yourself. Something real."

"I don't want to." Eddie presses his thumbs into his eyes and tries to stop his crying. "It's better if they catch me. I need to pay for my crime."

"Look." Ben presses his fingers into Eddie's shoulders so it hurts. "Self-defense is not a crime."

Eddie takes his thumbs away from his eyes and sees Ben smile.

“Besides.” Ben pulls Eddie’s forehead down so it presses against his. “They’re never going to keep me down. I’m a Leland.”

“I’m sorry.” Eddie wraps his arms around Ben. “I’m sorry for everything.”

Ben takes a deep breath. He pulls away and looks back to Terry who’s sitting on the car, head propped in her arms, looking into the sky.

“Damn.” Ben starts to laugh and he pats Eddie hard on the back. “Best thing ever happened to me.”

Eddie follows him back to the car and Terry slides from the hood and pulls the brothers into a group hug. Eddie notices that she hugs like a sister would, or a mother. They part, say good bye, and the night is so quiet Eddie can hear Ben and Terry’s seats squeak as they get in and shut the doors. Ben starts the car and it rolls forward.

“Wait.” Eddie chases and almost runs into the back as the brake lights flash red. “I almost forgot.”

He pulls the pack of cigarettes from his pocket. “I found the lotto ticket.”

Terry and Ben look at one another.

“Seriously.” Eddie hands them the cigarette pack. “It’s here. No joke.”

Ben reaches for the pack and opens it to be sure. He sees the ticket and passes it back. “I’m not taking that. It’s yours and we have enough between us.”

Eddie looks over his shoulder at his mom sitting on the porch swing. She's been watching them say goodbye. She waves her hands like Ben needs to hurry up and go.

"I can't let her cash it for me, you know? Besides, I'm not giving it to you." He reaches across Ben and presses the pack into Terry's hands. "Maybe you can get your baby back. I hope this helps."

Terry opens the box and takes out ticket. She stares at it a moment and finally pushes it into her bra where it will be safe. She reaches up and squeezes Eddie's hand for a long time. Tears wet her cheeks and drip from her chin. She releases him and reaches in the backseat where Max has settled in. She pulls Max from her little bed and holds the dog out to Eddie. He takes her and presses his lips into the space between her eyes.

Ben takes his foot off the brake and the car glides forward. Next time Eddie sees his brother, Ben will probably be imprisoned or in a casket.

Eddie goes to the porch and sits down next to his mom. Together, they watch the dust swirl up from the back tires. The car disappears, the dust settles, and the dark comes on.

Hours later, after Max has run the property and come back to settle onto a blanket his mom brought outside, they continue to sit on the swing, look out onto the night and listen to the sprinkler click. It's a black night and the stars are fully out before they feel the need to say anything.



“Is he in love?” she finally asks.

Eddie thinks of the first time he saw Terry, in her miniskirt and heels. “Yeah.”

“Good.” She gets up and goes to turn of the sprinkler, cursing as she walks because she trips over her robe in the dark.

When she comes back, Eddie has gotten up the nerve to ask her a question he’s needed an answer to. “Mom, why do you take all those pills?”

She watches Max breath on her little blanket. Her tiny ribs lift and release faster than Stash’s did. “I bet she’ll kill the moles in the garden.”

Eddie gives her a moment to watch the small dog. “Mom? Is it because you miss Dad?”

She bends, picks up Max and puts her on her lap so she can stroke her ears. “I stopped taking them when you left.”

“But you have to think about Dad too.” He considers why she has to think about her dead husband and how he knows that. “To heal, I guess.”

“Are you healed?” Her voice is curious, not accusatory.

“No, but I’ve been thinking about Dad.” He reaches over and pets Max.

“Remember that time he drove the pick-up tire into the fire pit? How mad you were?”

She laughs. It’s the first time he’s heard her laugh in a while. “Those were brand new tires.”

“They were?” Eddie squeezes Max’s tiny toes. She kicks him away and nuzzles into his mother’s belly. He leans back in the swing. “Mom, is it okay if Sheila comes out later this year?”

She looks up and frowns, studies him like she wants to ask what he knows, but decides to leave it for later. “Of course, I always liked that girl. Her mother was a real work of art, but Sheila was nice. Matt too.”

Eddie thinks over time he’ll ask her all the questions he wants and the space between them will close. The land around them is enough to hold all their pain once they’ve taken it away from the house.

She stands up and hands Max to Eddie. “I haven’t eaten yet, have you?”

He shakes his head.

“There’s corn and I can fry up some eggs. I’ll fry one for the dog.” She scoots off in her slippers and the door swings back to bang the house. He’ll have to fix it, hopefully for the last time, but he has to admit, corn and eggs has never sounded so good.