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NO PLACE FOR BIRDS

by

Kenneth M. Thomas

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

No Place for Birds is a novel that follows Cameron Oren, its defiant, emotionally damaged protagonist, into his life and struggles at a home for boys. While the plot trajectory of the traditional bildungsroman follows an arc toward a loss of innocence, marking the threshold between juvenile and mature, this novel is a coming-of-age story, but one moving in an alternative direction. It begins with a disillusioned, broken protagonist and moves through doubt, pain, and guilt toward inward healing and the reanimation of destroyed trust, toward hope. The novel, set in the desert southwest Mojave region, explores through three points of view the intersectionality of juvenile, minority offenders and poor, white juvenile offenders in a system built to house and auspiciously rehabilitate them. Consistent themes, found within all three points of view, include loss and the forms of grief it manifests, self-doubt, acceptance of hard, ugly truths and the rediscovery of identity.

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Chapter 1

Whim and Wyrd

July 1, 2014

The morning breeze pattern in Saragossa, Texas was a quick dot then a long, soft dash, an exhale, almost cool. Cameron Dugan, unaware Dugan was not his actual surname, crept from the motel room carrying his sneakers with one hand, bare chested, his arms in the sleeves of a Western style shirt, his bottom half in jeans in need of washing. Cameron, who had just turned sixteen in mid June, woke with a strong urge to take matters into his own hands. Something went down last night. He was out getting pizza and came back to Susan with black eye and an angry road rash up her right arm from wrist to elbow. Susan Dugan, Cameron's mother, had denied anything was wrong.

Susan Dugan, like most of the town, was still asleep.

They had been staying in room 2-B of Sam's Motor-lodge a day short of three weeks, far too long for his comfort.

Cameron believed in signs and synchronicity, and observed his wyrd through his lucky numbers, 1, 3 and 5—potential, unity and harmony. If fate were a computer program, wyrd would be its coding. 'You find what you're looking for,' his mother liked to say. His first sign had come this morning.

It was the first day of the month *and* there were three slices of pizza left, not two like he thought—a 1 and a 3. Sitting in boxers too small and a sleep shirt too large, he had a cold slice for breakfast. He felt the tingle in him that meant it was a good day to test his fate against his numbers. Today, he'd shake his mother out of her complacency.

He hadn't expected the truth, last night, though he might have on 6/30, which naturally divides into 3 threes. He kept in reserve a small hope because potential is universally ever-present, but he knew it wouldn't be spent, knew how Susan's world had always worked and never would change. She hadn't so much as mentioned Paul, his father, in over five years now. He didn't think he was involved in last night's assault, and whether he was, it might not matter after today.

Cameron sat on an iron bench, situated outside the reception office, his brown, high top sneakers flopped when dropped on the worn concrete between his socked feet. He joined the mother-of-pearl snaps, closing his green and white plaid shirt. Under his right shoe, he found a nickel, face down, a negative sign, disharmony. He left it.

As he tied his shoes, he knew what he would do. When he did it, would depend upon the signs, but soon—if not today then maybe three or five days forward. Susan would not change, that much was certain. He craved an orange, preferably a navel because that kind didn't have to be ripe to work. He entered the lobby, saw no one at the desk, and went to the continental breakfast bar. The oil in the skin was his secret. With his Swiss Army knife, he'd peel it away from the fruit in a spiral, leaving the white part still on the fruit. With an orange of the size in his hand, if he could maintain the cut around its whole surface, he'd have his fire starter.

Δ

He put the baseball-sized orange in his pocket and left the motel grounds the back way, on a semi shaded footpath under a row of four Southern Live Oaks, avoiding their low, wandering limbs, bounding the property, leaves trembling, ticking as another long sigh of breeze

blew slightly warmer. With both hands, he put on the drugstore version of aviator sunglasses that he kept in his shirt pocket and walked a few blocks, passing the local grocery, Boles Bros.

Cooperative, since 1910.

1+9+1+0; 11—nothing of five.

He thought about what had happened the night before.

He had come through the door with a cheese pizza for dinner, set it down and turned around to find Susan standing behind the door, wild-eyed with her pale hands wrapped around two-plus feet of galvanized pipe, held ready.

She hadn't bothered with a story. She simply caught her breath, lowered her weapon and leaned it near the door on her way toward the pizza. With a folded slice of triple cheese in her hand, she tried to smile. Cameron left the room for ice and when he came back with some from down the lobby, she said everything was fine. A simple misunderstanding, she insisted.

△

Cameron got a funny look from an elderly man crossing the street as he stopped to decide his path. He studied how July's furious Texas heat visibly belted a near-empty parking lot. Eastward was Sam's Motor-lodge and due west was where the big rigs delivered. East was going along to get along, the danger of being found out, becoming known and run out; and west, was a possible remedy for that—with some luck, the sure bet. 'Go west, young man,' his mother liked to say, so westward, toward the mills, he went.

He left the road, walking into a scrub lot that stood between town and the mills. As he turned the orange in his hand, warming it so it would be easier to peel correctly, he couldn't banish the nagging thought that leaving two days ago, definitely before Susan was rolled, would

have been a lot better. He regretted he hadn't pressed the issue, consoling himself with his resolve of doing exactly that today.

There wasn't much to guess about what happened, even if she wouldn't say, because late last night, after she thought he was asleep, he had seen on her laptop screen that she'd gotten refunds on their bus tickets to Santa Fe.

She'd been robbed, he realized at once, and couldn't pretend anymore he wasn't scared. He had begged her, it was past time to get gone.

"There's no way. I'm waiting on the last pickup."

"Set up a drop."

"Not with these guys."

She was beyond listening to reason. A harmonious departure, as in waiting until day-five, would require agreement and that wasn't happening. Was today his last chance, he wondered? Had he missed something? Had he acted sooner, would that act have prevented the violence done against his mother?

One more day, at most two, she promised. If he added it up, which was dangerous to do with Susan's promises, he found another three. He didn't resort to burning, he reminded himself, until there was no other way to get the message to Susan to hit the road—before they were known, became regulars anywhere, before the locals figured out what she was doing in that motel room, before someone recognized her from one of her films, before he fooled himself into thinking he liked this strange little town and then made friends and his heart broke again when Susan took work elsewhere, as she was wont to do.

There had only been one orange in the bowl. One, a genesis number, the potential for a new beginning. It was a sign, or he made it one.

△

Bounding the first mill yard he encountered, was a chain fence with a gap he could get through, snug against a sedge row, thick and tall enough to offer light shade. ‘Beware of easy,’ his mother liked to say. He’d wait and watch, he thought. It wasn’t too hot, yet.

Several hundred yards away, four gleaming, aluminum Quonset huts stood side-by-side, perhaps thirty feet apart, their yellow windsocks flopping, a hazed patch of glare otherwise still as nail. At distance from them, out in the open, a mound of dark material fed the huts with a network of conveyer lines.

On the fence in front of him, just above place where the links separated, was fastened a sign, No Smoking. The receiving yard, not paved and barely graveled was populated with several aluminum bins, low, rectangular boxes held inches off the ground on long skids. An old blue and white Ford tractor, fitted at the rear with skid forks, sat feet from him, parked against the fence. He spotted more No Smoking signs twenty yards distant, fastened to locked shipping containers, three of them blue and four of them, set at right angles to the blue ones, were newly painted bright white.

Nimble as a spider, he parted the sedge and dipped into the gap in the fence. He walked past the tractor, toward the low bins. There were a dozen, about three feet high and eight feet long. Once he was close enough to see their lids, he judged they were about six feet deep, as well. Seeing they were numbered, in order, one through thirteen, he went in search of an affirmative five.

The hinge, blackened with use, didn’t make a sound when he drew it up. Inside was stuff that looked like dryer lint. He opened his Zippo and sparked its wheel without thinking. He closed the lighter again and enjoyed the whiff of spent lighter fluid. He held a generous bunch of

the stuff pinched in his fingers and put flame to it. It smoked a lot, smelled like burnt hair, and it wouldn't keep a flame when he pulled the lighter back. The smoking fluff made a trail going to the ground when he dropped it. He stepped on it.

It was starting to get hot and he wasn't sure what else to do but rethink the whole project. He started back toward the gap in the fence.

"The objective," said to himself, "would smoke do it?"

Maybe, he thought, "If I can get it going."

He brought the orange from his pocket and judged its size and skin quality. If he was very careful spiral-cutting the oil-laden peel away, he'd have between eight and ten inches of starter. "Probably not enough," he heard himself say. Disappointment crept closer and would have had him had he not looked up at that moment and seen on the tractor, between the fender and the driver seat, a blue fuel can about nine inches round and a foot tall. He heard liquid moving as he hauled it out by its wire handle. He uncapped the spout and gasoline fumes rose. He screwed the cap back in place and shook the cylinder, estimating it had about a quart in it. There was no mistake. No doubt; today was the day.

Somewhat less anxious about his timing, he sat under the tractor in shade, peeling his orange, and thought about the best way to coax his good fortune into a result that got the message through to Susan. He began to think a little gasoline with a lot of lint would get up enough smoke to get the fire department involved, and when he told her why she'd heard sirens Susan would move quicker.

Most of the orange peel had been curl-cut and rested in his lap when he spotted someone pushing a heavy cart headed his way. It was a boy his age, wearing a Budweiser ball cap over bushy, brown hair. He spotted Cameron and walked over, pushing his cart.

The boy wore a limp, faded yellow uniform shirt with the sleeves cut off. Over the breast pocket was a white, oval-shaped name tag; its red script spelled, 'David.' His shorts were cutoffs, Army surplus fatigues, at Cameron's guess, that went to his mid-calf. On his feet were dirty sneakers, low tops, the color the same as his blackened ankles. Laid over his load was t-handled hayfork. The stuff under it looked like the stuff in the bins. His eyes were bright.

"Betcha need a real sharp knife to do that number," David said.

"Swiss Army," Cameron said.

"There ain't really anybody supposed to be out here," David said.

"What are you doing then?"

"My family cleans out the ventilation, over yonder. I help in the summer."

Cameron held his orange peel up at eye level then put it into his shirt pocket. He cleaned his knife blade on his shirt sleeve and folded it closed. He handed the gadget to David, who admired several of its features and handed it back, especially impressed with the tiny scissors. Cameron split the orange in two and gave David half of it, apologizing for leaving all the white part of the skin. David shrugged and peeled away a segment with his teeth.

He spoke while he chewed. "Ain't you got no better place to be?"

"Not really. It's not bad out here, good shade, windbreaks. Hard to complain," Cameron said.

"You're homeless," David said.

"I'm also Cameron," Cameron said.

"Right. Sorry," David said.

David put the fruit in his pocket and turned his cart toward the bins. Cameron went with him. Lining up on bin number three, he then lifted its lid until it stopped and began forking lint

into it. The second time the wind slammed the lid closed, Cameron climbed up and sat on the bin beside the opening and held it open.

“If you ain’t smoking or anything like that, I won’t say nothing about you being out here,” David said.

Susan will see sense, he thought, as David hauled his cart away with one hand and fed himself the orange with the other.

From his shirt pocket he took the orange peel, which he planned to use as wick to get the gasoline going on delay, and set it on top of bin #5. Taking the fuel can with him, he crawled into the bin which wasn’t near half full, and broke the seal on the spout, filling the tight, dark space with heavy fumes. Against the bin’s far side, he soaked a patch of lint with the gasoline.

Outside again, he bent at the waist, half his body in the bin, to place his wick into the depression made by his feet, somewhat to the rear of the lid opening. He fluffed lint near it, so it would burn well enough to eventually reach the gasoline.

Smoke would do it, he thought. Smoke was enough to move Susan. And there was a little, a strange curl, like a djinn leaving its lamp, smelling—of all things—like dirt and sage. He got away to the sedge to watch, unthinking of the fuel can he’d left inside the bin until two things happened at once.

David came into view, pulling another load, and the wind blew down the lid on bin #5. The scent of smoke diminished and within seconds of David’s arrival, had vanished altogether. Cameron breathed deeply, at once relieved and disappointed. If this didn’t work, nothing available to him today would. He’d got it wrong and, seeing David, thought that, all things

considered, this outcome was just as well. Maybe Susan would keep her word this time. Maybe that's why this was so hard. 'Only the Universe knows,' his mother liked to say.

David stopped at bin #3, leaned his hayfork and lifted the lid. He looked around.

Cameron shrank further into the sedge.

David forked lint into the bin.

Cameron caught the scent of oily sage and his heartbeat quickened. The sweat on his face ran cold when he saw David mopping his brow with the inside of his shirtfront as he walked toward the wisps of smoke escaping bin #5.

Wind gusted against Cameron's back. He didn't think. He left the sedge and was under the fence in a second, running, shouting.

"No! David, don't!"

David looked up as he hauled the lid open. A deep thud punctuated the atmosphere and David screamed. Reeling backward, his hair and shirt, on fire, he fell down, rolled enough to put the fire out and wasn't moving. Cameron stopped, went back to the sedge, dropped his sunglasses into it and ran.

Chapter 2

Lunchroom

Friday September 4, 2015

The lunchroom and cafeteria were located in a building, more or less central to Mander D. Everette High School's sprawling campus. Built in 1969, according to the plaque at its main entrance, the white, brick structure was originally the administration building. In 1977, it had been refitted as a cafeteria and all its windows and doors were updated in 1983. The Coltrane Foundation, his benefactors, donated a new roof and skylights in 1987.

Cameron now understood the science behind the fire. It was done large when the fumes reached the burning orange peel and David lifted the lid at just the wrong moment, adding a rush of oxygen. He couldn't help noticing everything about the fire was like his presence in this school. Gasoline, for instance, expands as it evaporates. In a closed, hot space, the flammable carbon eventually partners with every available molecule of oxygen, such as it had that day. With the right fuel-to-air mixture, the vapor is more explosive than dynamite.

All the high schools he'd ever attended were already like those fumes. This one was no exception. Something effused in secret, maintaining an invisible, entirely local atmosphere of unknown composition, one spark away from blowing up in his face.

Coltrane Home boys attended public school, under certain terms. First, if for any reason, any should be expelled from school, the resident would then become ineligible to continue the program. Second, they were to adhere to Home dress code while at school. Third, any physical dispute with a non-Home resident student while at school or during a school function may result in the immediate termination of program.

He was wary of making friends, even ones of convenience, terrified of too much contact, too often—afraid of volatile mixtures. He'd be careful, here. Some mixture was inevitable, but even if there was friction, nothing would explode if he kept his temper in check. If he kept a cool distance and a low profile he felt sure that eventually others, more like him than unlike, would find him. He caught his reflection at distance in the glass doors and tried imagining how David, the boy hurt in his fire, was doing. It should have been Cameron that was hurt and just as easily could have been. Cameron hadn't known the danger, hadn't put together meaning from combination of warnings, those posted in plain sight and those less obvious. But David had trusted Cameron. For that kindness, his reward was grave injury. Cameron looked past his reflection in the glass of the door into the lunchroom as he reached for the handle, forcing himself to walk a little taller, a little harder on the outside.

Cameron couldn't have lived with himself if he hadn't pushed back at the dress code bit. All week he'd kept his shirt buttoned up, tucked, like he was supposed to do. He'd held his secret, allowed the power of being something other than what he appeared to build. Today, anyone with interest and brains operating in the same moment would realize he was more than he seemed.

He went at the pace the lunch line allowed, his tray sliding on the stainless steel serving board of hooded steam tables. He had his red and black flannel shirttail untucked, shirtfront open to his t-shirt and his cuffs turned up. Out in the dining room, students stood and sat down and stood up again at long tables, chaos ebbing and flowing in packs of the restless and angsty, at once everything like the mess halls in lock up and nothing like them at all.

A queue of exiting diners dumped the contents of their orange plastic trays into trash bins and filed out, free to go where they wanted. Freshmen clumped together like turkeys, pointing, snickering, speculating. Cameron was starving.

Two decent things about Mander D. Everett High School were the mac and cheese and potatoes au gratin. One or the other seemed to be always available at lunch. The rest of the food wasn't bad, either. Green beans with chives, mashed potatoes, grilled onions, peppers and tomatoes, soup, crackers, fruit—all of it very fresh, and twice so far, there had been hushpuppies.

He picked up an extra mac and cheese and a serving of chili lime jicama, passing on boneless pork ribs, when he heard behind him a voice he recognized. “Who dresses like that?”

From somewhere pretty recent, he thought.

A drier, deeper voice answered the first one, “Lumberjacks.” Chuckles, fishing for cracks.

Cameron wore what he was issued. All week, hidden under buttoned, tucked shirts had been his t-shirts, lettered with his rage in laundry marker.

He felt his general disappointment in the human race reaffirmed. Some remark seemed always waiting on lips of other students when any Coltrane kid happened nearby. The teases didn't rattle him, and this was good for the health and longevity of his apparently fragile probation. The line suddenly thinned. Only one person was ahead of him, a girl with dark hair. She made a gap by skipping all the hot food in favor of sherbet and fruit.

“Maybe he's . . . Hey! Move up, dip shit,” the voice that wasn't familiar, said. Lunch line chatter lulled a few heartbeats then began again. One spark away.

“White wetback. His daddy leases avocado trees—I'd put money on it.”

The unintelligible buzz in the immediate vicinity dipped again.

“He’s one of them trash pickers in that home for kid criminals,” familiar voice said.

Somewhere very recent.

Cameron kept himself settled, refusing to look at them. To him, unless he took the bait, these two were harmless and just didn’t know it yet. He asked the lady on the service line about whether the navy beans had any bacon or fatback.

“Them beans? No, child, they navy beans—butter, salt and pepper been cookin’ slow since breakfast time,” she told him.

Cameron thanked her and added a bowl to his tray.

“Now them greens there—they had a jowl in the pot wit’ em’,” she said.

“Look here, Kid Crim watches his weight.”

Kid Crim. Cute. Five points for Slytherin, Cameron thought. He placed a cup of rainbow sherbet on his tray, pulled his flatware and peeled off the serving line into a cloud of people crisscrossing the lunch room. He didn’t look back, though if he had, the hand grabbing his elbow wouldn’t have surprised him and he might have saved more of his lunch. Startle reflexes, he said to himself, looking at the bowls and food at his feet. He turned and faced the voices.

Their full frontal appearance was uninspiring. They were jocks. By their sixth grade-level jabs, he had pegged them for younger, but they were his age, worrying themselves with his clothing. Pity. Cameron didn’t remember setting his tray down, but his hands were free when he looked up at the hulking, blonde boy standing almost over him. The leaner boy with the familiar voice was Andrew Tull.

His mother, Mrs. Tull, not Ms., she’ll have you know, operates a sauna spa out of a guest house at the rear of her property and likes to call the police to complain when the litter-pickup crew lingers long taking the time to pull trash that has blown into her latticed, masonry wall. The

apparent brains of today's duo, Andrew, watches for the cruiser and calls for his mother when it arrives. This coward stood behind and off the shoulder of his large friend.

It's funny, Cameron thought, one day you have sense enough to know when to keep your silence and let them wonder, and then the futility of the exercise hits you, and for some crazy reason you pretend showing a little spine will matter, willing for a mad, mad second to open that furnace door and drag everyone into it with you. For once, he didn't think about what might happen next.

"Your ape made a mess, Tull," Cameron said.

The big one stepped up closer, which Cameron hadn't thought until it happened getting closer was possible. The mixture could blow right here, right now he thought, just like the fire. A hard check on the impulse to raise a sharp knee to the groin and put the corn fed behemoth in front of him on the floor coughing up a testicle, registered just enough. Cameron hesitated. Revoked probation brought him back to El Pasco County, marching to and from school manacled, through chain link passages topped with razor wire corridors, ushered to and from common rooms, baby blue Melmac sporks and the anti-claustrophobic pastels of locked cells. Not a terrible existence, nor was it one he preferred.

Tull stepped a little further aside from his friend.

Before being locked up almost a year, waiting for his court dates, violence wasn't part of him. But he learned.

"I think it likes me. How much will you take for this one?" he said.

Then Rudy was beside him. He had scooped Cameron's tray off the table with one hand and grabbed his elbow, turned him, and marched toward the de facto Home table. Mick and

Farrell saw them coming and lifted their legs over the benches then their trays off the gray-topped table. "You two, sit," Rudy said pointing at them.

They stayed, and returned to eating.

"I'm kinda confused here, Rudy," Cameron said.

"I'll beat dat ass m'self," Rudy said.

Cameron leaned away at the waist. "Sell tickets, motherfucker," he said.

Rudy let gravity have the tray. All three remaining crockery bowls clinked. He pressed Cameron to sit with a hand on his shoulder.

He sat, but Rudy kept his hand firm.

"You makin' us trouble, Buck."

Farrell and Mick nodded but didn't look up from their meal.

All eyes, as far out as Cameron dared focus, were on this table.

Shoving off Cameron's shoulder, Rudy walked around the table and sat in front of him. He hadn't gotten a tray.

Cameron ate his mashed potatoes, glad he also had one mac and cheese and the jicama. He had a bite in his mouth when he felt someone next to him at the same moment Rudy's attention snapped in that direction.

Beside him, a tray loaded with fruit and sherbet slid onto the table. The girl in front of him in line, medium height, black hair, slim, sporty and very pretty, sat down and spooned sherbet into her mouth.

Rudy, Farrell and Mick stared.

She gestured with her spoon that Cameron should open his shirt.

He looked down at his chest and, lifting his flannel away, and let her read what he'd written on a clean, white-t last night, in rough black marker: *Support the Implosion*.

The girl's smile began in her eyes.

Chapter 3

The Facts of Life

Saturday afternoon, September 5, 2015.

Cameron had been seventeen days in the custody of the Coltrane Home For Boys, a so-called special intervention program, located in the Arizona Mojave Desert Region, in the state's northeast corner. He went about his chores, unaware he had run the clock out on completing his intake sheet and that as a result, a process had been initiated in the offices upstairs.

He stood at the locomotive bell, yoked to a steel post installed at the foot of the back stoop; it was his day to shine it. The wind's shifting angles drew from him a longing for a soft, southern glide into autumn, a vain wish in this extreme place. Then the back delivery gate was opening. The girl from the lunchroom walked through, carrying a red, plastic rack of bagged bread and tortillas. She was in a green, close-fitting body suit and an oversized, black windbreaker. Cameron noted her expensive, purple running shoes as she passed him, grinning on her way up the stoop. She hesitated at the door. Cameron went up and held the door for her and went back to his chore.

The wire handle of a dented, scuffed tin of Brass-O Duralite polish hung in his hand, bouncing against his leg while he decided how best to go about keeping the chemicals off his clothing. He was about to decide it didn't matter if he started at the bottom or the top, the real question was did he prefer dry petroleum contamination or wet? Dry probably wasn't flammable. Until this morning, until seeing the girl again, which he couldn't discount as coincidence, he hadn't had a reason he should care about the agenda chosen for his life in the name of his best interests, and he'd begun to think about leaving and living in the desert or finding ways to get sent somewhere else.

Rudy Greene's pancake hand slapped his shoulder. It barely stung, but it was loud. He said nothing when Cameron caught his face, where he now stood, on the opposite side he had slapped. He then had Cameron's arm in his grip, dragging him into the sorting yard. The tin of Brasso swung at the end of the boom Cameron's arm made. They stopped in the middle of the aluminum, bundled for pickup. Rudy let Cameron have his arm again.

A full foot taller and muscled, wide shoulders, Rudy towered over Cameron. His mud-brown eyes, somehow widened and sharpened at the same time, were fixed upon Cameron. He kept Cameron's gaze trapped in his.

"We gon' talk. Follow," Rudy said.

He went at a rapid clip through the twist maze of the number three plastic bins then number four and finally, in the far southwest corner of the yard, through the number fives and beyond to the side fence, a weather-gray wood barricade.

"Don't no staff know nothing about this place," he said. Half of him lengthwise disappeared, then he was gone. Cameron stopped walking. Rudy was there again. Cameron saw it then, how the trick was done.

"See this here, this blind," he said. Rudy placed a hand on a length of fencing offset a couple feet from where it was originally installed. He pointed under that arm, to behind him.

"Moved these pickets off that corner," he said. "Nice and private gettin' to her."

"Her?"

"It's a place. Special. You'll see."

"I don't understand."

"You won't till you see it. Look, you need a place to be private. I'm giving you mine."

Cameron's interest was piqued, but he was loathe to follow. The space between his "blind" and the rest of the fence was pretty tight, and he had no idea what was beyond, and he very well knew anything could happen in tight quarters. He'd seen five-second battles, the fury of arms and legs, bone to bone bludgeon fought in block-wall corridors that left the loser stitched and splinted in the infirmary. Out here, no one would see it happen.

Rudy had gone again.

The moisture had left Cameron's mouth, reassigned to every pore of his skin. His thumbnail rubbed the seam of his pants. He took a breath then another. *Rudy wouldn't.* As Cameron rounded a bend on a thin dirt track, he saw Rudy lifting a brown canvas tarp.

"I got some wax inside. Keep a little on this and it will last," he said. "Jes' rub it dry an' let it melt."

Behind the tarp was a way into a pile of cars. Cameron had seen the sun's glare off the roofs before, but hadn't let himself get curious because it was off the property. He ducked his head and went in.

Sunlight, allowed in high overhead through openings, lit the odd-shaped space. "This place almost sound-proof, but also nobody live in the house up there—not for a good bit now. Used to charge my stuff here with a cord run up there."

"What are you doing?" Cameron asked.

"You gonna do what you you gonna do."

"What?"

"I saw you with her," Rudy said. "Saw how she look at you. School, then here. It ain't hard to guess what's next."

"For what?"

“Lemme ask you, Buck, lemme ask, all right. That good thing we had going that I mentioned that first day, showin’ you around, okay? Remember that?”

“I told you then I didn’t care what the rest of you got up to. Sell your weed. I still don’t care.”

Rudy stepped in close with his hand lifted and struck. The slap, the same little bit of sting as earlier on the shoulder, made more noise against his cheek than it caused pain.

Cameron felt his face reddening. He was angry at himself for failing to see this coming, for getting it wrong and making it impossible to prepare, for getting soft at predicting outcomes and losing his edge. Anger pounded his eardrums. He lost his count of the times the pail of Brass-o bumped his thigh.

“Your main, goddamn issue is everyone else is an idiot,” Rudy said.

Big guys didn’t scare Cameron. There weren’t many that a can of beans in the bottom of a pillow case, or a pail of Brass-o across the face couldn’t make humble. Rudy stepped in closer and struck him again, a glancing swipe against his other cheek and again, it stung no more than the slap at the bell.

Cameron swung the Brass-o and Rudy, ready for it, trapped his arm and pinned it between his arm to his side. The wire handle left Cameron’s grasp. The lid popped off, sang its tin song, as it rolled on the hardpan.

Rudy had Cameron’s jaw in his other hand and pushed him backward.

“You want it hard? Here’s hard—walk around like you know somethin’ nobody else does, somethin’ real special. We all brown, and so what we call a good-thing-goin’ has to be drugs, right? That what you be thinkin’?” He delivered another open-palmed attention-getter to Cameron. “We ain’t white so that must be it, right?”

Immediate shame stabbed Cameron. He realized, standing there, his breath shortened, limbs tingling, that Rudy had a point. And if he had a point about this, and Cameron, meanwhile, for weeks, had failed to catch a clue with fishing net, what else did Rudy see that he didn't, maybe couldn't? Rudy raised a hand for another swipe.

Cameron met Rudy's eye and shook his head.

"I get it," he said.

Rudy eased his arm down to his side. He said, "Sponsors." And waited as if that might mean something. "You don't know because you ain't done your sheet. The good thing we talkin', is our good reputation. We get sponsors—and they pay—for trim hedges, raked sand in they courtyards, sweepin' shops, whatever, odd jobs. Pay goes in a trust. We keep them happy and we get money to start out right when we done here. Now, the sticky part is you carryin' on like you is, gets eyeballs on us we don't need in no kinda way, if you feel me."

Cameron betrayed nothing.

"If these staff look hard'nuff they gon' find shit. *Because*, Rock Star, we don't like being here neither. Pretty soon points is going away and then it's all about our reputation. But right now appearances, gets the points and points make the way smooth for ever-body. And here you is, makin' up the bunk you sleep in every other day at best, can't be bothered to wash your hands and face for dinner. It ain't you that's gonna take the hits. It's us, been us. We ain't havin' that no more."

Pockets full of stones

"This is all about that girl and you know it," Cameron said.

"She another thing entirely. Ain't even had the time to get to her, yet."

“That sponsor shit is work without pay and if you think anyone is gonna cut you a check on some magical day of freedom, you don’t know how the world works. We are marked. Get used to it, bro,” Cameron said.

“You one dense motherfucker. Got you the chance same as these guys—aging out, no record hangin’ on you, no skeletons, and you hell on fire to keep that life.”

Rudy stepped back out of Cameron’s space. His tone changed.

“Keep yourself whole. You don’t gotta explain shit,” he said. “He gon’ ask you do one thing. And by ask, I mean tell. Don’t try makin’ lip. He know,” Rudy said. “We don’t call that man The Rope cuz it’s cute.”

From his shirt pocket, Rudy pulled a form printed on a laminated, green card stock, a reusable counsel-call card that staff members sent whoever was handy to deliver when they wanted to see a resident in person, in private. Held between his fore and middle fingers, the three inches by five inches covered in clear plastic winked a glare of light. Rupert’s name, in black stroke, occupied a line on it, below it, also in grease pencil, Cameron’s name. “You see this? All right now, you had your big statement.”

“It’s fine. I know what he wants,” Cameron said.

“Don’t go with that mind, Buck. Everything he say up there in that office to your face is law-bound,” Rudy said.

“Sure. Back to you. Back to why you’re doing this. What do you get?” Cameron quoted his mother, “Favors come with prices tags.” He watched Rudy’s face, looking for a change in his quizzed expression.

As if on cue, Rudy joined his hands at chest height and rubbed the palms together. “You gonna make me spell it out?”

“I just—want to know who I’m into and for how much.”

“Okay. Okay.” His eyes flashed. “We do it that way. Yeah. Here now, you get your game together, stop your shit and this place is yours. I see how this going and it’s probably way too late you’ll listen to sense, so here it is,” Rudy said.

“You know, why this, why now? You guys... it’s like if I’m not doing it like you do, I’m making you a problem. What’s changed?”

“Where anybody, and I mean anybody in town might see, keep it cool with the girl.”

“You’re way ahead of me, dude. I don’t even know her name. She hasn’t said a word to me.”

Rudy’s gaze went past Cameron. He pointed over his shoulder and glided his body around Cameron’s in that direction.

He stood now several feet away, at the broad side of an auto body panel, door-less and apparently its front and back seat benches were used as storage. He pointed upward. “You see daylight peeking in, fill the hole or you have bats before you know it.

“The batteries I had out here for this charger are p’robly dead. Needin’ music, you want new ones of these first. I think six.” He held up a C-cell battery then tossed it back. “There’s an iPad and if you act right, Manuel will show you how to rip music off the web for when you can’t hop onto a wifi.” He retrieved a flashlight from a rear panel floorboard, its button clicked clean and crisp, but it wouldn’t work.

“Well anyways, there’s a real good crank-up lantern in there somewhere and some speakers, adapters and some other stuff. Anything you wanna keep cool, this is a good spot. That long part of sun can’t reach much this side. The wax for the door is in there, is another thing. I

had chairs, over yonder.” He pointed vaguely behind them, “but the joints gave out. Check the hammock good. It was getting brittle before I stopped coming out here.”

“So this was your booty hut?” Cameron said. “A guy sits next to a hot girl and you jump—

“Holy hell, shut up,” Rudy said. “If you go for this it does us all a favor, brother. You ain’t gonna break, you cain’t, not right now. We thought maybe you’d bend instead. Don’t none of us pretend we don’t get it. We just know how it go already and if you can’t at least play the part keeping your heart out of it, shit’s about to get super real for you.”

“How did you do all this, when did you?” Cameron asked.

“Accident. I was looking for a private place. I got here young, barely thirteen. It was the last thing I needed, solitude, but everything else scared me to death. I needed walls around me.”

“I need to understand the catch and I’m pretty sure no one is going to just tell me what it is. I gotta tell you, how you guys close ranks around policy is disturbing.”

“I used to think by coming out here, I was protecting everybody from myself.”

“Were you?”

“I’m not sure if I was, but if you go for this, you sure would help us.”

“Okay, stop. Just chill a second. Thank you, I think? But what the fuck?”

“You gonna take a minute to decide on being sensible. I been where you at—know how it go. It’s a big world out there to try and remake it without no tools.”

“What the hell?” Cameron asked.

“There’s timbers over yonder and that big spool on its side there makes a good table,” Rudy said.

Rudy paused and something like a grin spread over his face. “I’m aging out into a real good situation soon, considerin’. Top pay, head start, maybe college, after Rupert gets my record expunged.”

“Expunged?”

“It was rough for a while there, Buck. I stole a truck while I was here, wrecked it. Consequences.”

“Damn.”

“Listen, that man up there is sharp, an’ if you cross him, nasty as a bear shit biscuit. He serious business. It ain’t the smart thing go up and find cracks in what he say. He puts your ass out—and he will if thinks you fuckin’ ‘round with his reputation—and then what?”

Being so tall, Rudy’s habit when he spoke to people was to gradually pitch his shoulders forward. Cameron preferred towering over looming.

Rudy caught himself and stood a little straighter. His face, lean and handsomely sculpted, wore a thinking expression, appraising Cameron.

His creased, brown Thorogoods had been well-maintained, but had seen their last resole. The long-sleeved shirt, its pearly rhinestone snaps run up his torso, the white and black plaid broadcloth, lengthened him in a way that recalled a scarecrow that his long legged, faded jeans exaggerated.

“I can’t tell what you want, and you don’t know neither.”

“I’m breathing; I have all I have a right to want,” Cameron said.

“Would you stop with that shit and listen. What you don’t want is for me to leave here thinking you a hater.”

Cameron stood silent, his eyes never leaving Rudy’s pacing.

“You ain’t the type what repeats what his momma boyfriend say. White as fuck, and sharp, too, you might be a secret hater, like our dandy esquire upstairs, no idea it’s hate that eats him up.” He stopped in front of Cameron to say his next, pointing four closed fingers at Cameron’s chest, sawing the space between them, syllable by breath. “And-Im-ma-tell-you something you don’t deserve to know.” He stopped jabbing his hand. “We done this shit before. It’s a thing. The white guy starts acting out and the staff starts in dreaming up how the browns ones, sneaks they think we are, is doing worse out of sight.” His volume had risen to shouting. “Okay, so it ain’t about no damned side-hustle, Buck. It’s about them sponsors. Get none then what? Yeah, like you we’ll age out, then hustling to get along. How long you think it go good like that? Figure it in a day and age. The brown ones, you can bet, will goddamn earn it twice, but ain’t no other place stepping up like this. Race, my friend, is the oil that ran the machine way before we got here. But here’s the difference between us; here’s the reason you have power—and I swear to god if you ever make me regret telling you this, you dead to me.”

Cameron didn’t know what to say so he nodded.

“All you really gotta do is find a way to lean in just a little and they will get things to go good for you. Go with it, however you gonna do, and we all good.”

“So I’m privileged, you’re saying.”

“I can tell by how you be acting that’s a new idea. Things are real different here. And worse in a way; they think they doing us a big favor and got no idea that just makes them better shitlords than most.”

△

Cameron walked up the stoop and into the main house without ringing himself in. Before the back door shut, he smelled coffee, a hint of Murphy’s oil soap, and under that, old

house. The bell struck, a single, clear clap. Cameron couldn't quite figure Rudy out, but in puzzling why he had bothered to cover him by ringing him in, it hit Cameron that all the time he'd spent resisting meant nothing. Three strides brought him clear of the washroom.

His intuition had gotten dull. Signs that meant anything seemed rare, which made it hard to feel he needed improvement on the minimum—being fed, well-clothed and moderately equipped for the terrain. In style, he wasn't given a choice, but the fact was he'd never owned so many clothes at once in his life. He'd never eaten fresh food that wasn't fast food so regularly.

He was through the dominantly yellow kitchen with its brown and white checked linoleum and into the dining room walking past the grand, black walnut dining room table, before he knew it. Bent over a notepad, his pen in hand, writing, Cody didn't notice him. The bald spot on top of his head, surrounded by short, white hair didn't move. A mug of coffee steamed at his elbow. Cameron took the least squeaky route over the hardwood toward the stairs off the front foyer. Two at a time, he took them, quick and quiet.

It was the Bat's voice, high and clear. "I'm not sure about that, Rupert. I think he he's under several layers of compulsive distrust. It's how he's survived."

Cameron froze on the staircase. At eye level was the second floor. Four feet over, across the hall from the top tread and slightly right, the dark green edge of Rupert Coltrane's office door stood ajar. Beyond it, he saw a deep green and red carpet and a cherrywood, burnished furniture leg, of either a desk or a chair, he guessed. He buttoned up his shirt.

If he were to go right at the top of the stairs, and down the hall, he'd find two bedrooms that, resulting from prior inspection while looking for Betsey's office, he guessed were for staffers with overnight duties.

Movement in the bedroom with its door standing open caught his eye but when he saw how the curtains moved with the breeze, and how the sun came in, he decided that must have been what he'd seen.

At the opposite end of the floor was a bathroom and across from it, The Bat, also known as Betsey Cooper, LCSW, had her office.

Being called with a card meant whatever came of the chat, went into his record. It mattered to the system. Cameron vaguely registered reading this in the handbook, but hadn't until this minute given it any thought. His strategy was to get what he needed from this place and give fuck-all the rest. Near panicked, he understood with sudden, hyper-clarity, that whoever put that manual together had meant every word of it.

Rupert's voice carried, speaking a few words Cameron didn't catch but at the end of his string, Cameron thought he heard the words, 'about the letter.' Rupert spoke louder after a few seconds. "There's no other option, Betsey. Get her on board, or we have to kick him back to El Pasco County."

Betsey answered. Cameron couldn't apprehend a meaning.

"That . . . No. Rudy's case is a special circumstance," Rupert replied. "And clearing?"

"She hasn't given me a consult date. I can't imagine she's eager."

"You say she's moved back?"

"In the process now, I understand."

"Make a house call. Tell her we'll stand good for what Texas won't pay."

The door opened further and closed harder than needed and didn't catch. Betsey's rolled denim cuffs and scuffed black flats flew past at Cameron's eye level. Her office door slammed.

Cameron proceeded up. Rupert's door was mostly closed, so he knocked on the privacy glass below the flowing script painted there in gilded gold, jet-trimmed calligraphy, "Rupert A. Coltrane, Esquire." Under that, "Director, CHB." He tapped twice with two soft knuckles. He was about to try again, sure Rupert hadn't heard his first knock when the man answered.

"Come in."

Cameron pushed the door open wide enough to get into the room and stood there. Rupert sat behind his desk in a brown vest, and lavender shirt, its French cuffs neatly turned to the mid forearms. His purple tie and collar were loosened.

"Come in," he said, pointing with his pen. "Get the door first, then have a seat. I'll be with you in a moment," Rupert said.

Keeping Rudy's cautions in mind, he kept his eyes downward and did as he was told. Closing the door, he stood still a moment, bearing the sudden weight of his wrecked strategy.

"Do sit, Cameron," Rupert said. "We will be a minute."

Cameron walked around to a green, cushioned armchair and remained standing. *Get the door, Do sit. Rupert's a flexer.* There had to be some something anyone looking could see, the catch no one will say is a catch.

Rupert finished whatever he was doing, turned to Cameron, took off his reading glasses and set them on the blotter pad in front of him. He leaned into the back of his ample chair and shrugged his shoulders, looking at Cameron.

Cameron held his back straight while he eased himself onto the edge of the seat cushion and folded his hands between his knees, hoping the gesture would distract attention away from the nervous grin he was unable to keep off his face. Rupert opened his lap drawer and removed an envelope. He leaned over his desk, holding it up for Cameron to read.

“What is this?” he asked.

Cameron leaned forward.

“It appears to be a letter addressed to me that someone has opened and taped closed again.”

“Addressed to you. Good. And who is it from?”

“Apparently, my mother.”

“And you’re aware the judge ordered no contact, yes?”

“I haven’t had contact.”

“Did you address the Safe and Sound notification to your probation officer?”

“Seems like a question for him.”

“What troubles me about that answer is you don’t seem know if you’ll participate in the program or you won’t.”

“Didn’t one of you tell me, uh wait, that was my P-O, never mind. I know he doesn’t count unless I royally screw up, but something he told me sticks. Can I tell you what sticks, Mr Coltrane? I promise I’ll never bring him up again after this.”

“Tell me.”

“He said the court uses completed intake sheets to determine the suitability of the program to the minor’s needs. So far, not so good.”

“You violated your probation.”

“Technically, no. I only wrote on the back of that postcard what the handbook says to write, ‘This is to inform the recipient their ward/child is in the residence and care of the Coltrane Home—’”

“I know what it says,” Rupert said.

“It also says right on the front that the card is official communication from the Coltrane Specialized Intervention Home for Boys,” he said, “Do your own office work if you don’t like it. I haven’t had contact.”

“Cameron, listen carefully. I’ll have her arrested if she comes near this town. And you’ll go back. The court has found her criminal neglect mitigates most responsibility for your crime, or you’d have gone another, much harder-to-escape, route through the system. Now, son, there’s a lot of caring people who’ve put reputations the line, believing in you, but if I find out you’ve been in contact with your mother, things won’t go well for you.”

“Why does it matter?”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Why does it matter that I’m here?”

Rupert A. Coltrane took a breath and fiddled with his reading glasses tapping the temples on the blotter. Taking a breath, he put his palms flat on his desk.

“What’s your plan?” he asked, “You’re too smart not to have one.”

“Complete honesty: to age out and bounce,” Cameron said.

“You’re misinformed if that’s what you actually think. Your behavior in evidence suggests that is exactly what you think and that’s why you’re here, in my office, this minute. It isn’t that simple.”

“You can’t keep me.” He heard the plea in his hollow words. If they wanted to, they’d find a way, and he knew it.

“True,” Rupert said.

“What then,” Cameron asked.

“There is the matter of restitution,” Rupert said.

“Sir, yes. There is, and I’ll pay it,” he said.

“How, Cameron? Have you done the math?”

“I will if what that book promises actually pans.”

“Hear me when I say none of the cases we accept can possibly pay all their own restitution. Those other boys out there you share a dormitory with are in a worse spot because they were born the wrong color. You’re right, it would be very difficult and expensive to force you to stay once you emancipate, true enough—but unpaid restitution along with how it was levied, can and, in your case, will follow you into adult life,” Rupert A. Coltrane said. “Do you want to do this kind of work all your life? Or would you rather live up to your birthright?”

The surprise on Cameron’s face at what it meant to carry an unpaid restitution balance into legal adulthood covered his horror at the clue that had fallen from the man’s mouth. Rudy was right. What Rupert meant was did he want to work like minority or advantage his whiteness to get along in the adult world?

“I didn’t know that,” Cameron said.

“I didn’t think you did, acting how you have. Intake sheets are supposed to take a week at most, and allowance for longer usually has a court order behind it. El Pasco is wondering.”

Fuck, he thought.

“All right. Real talk. I can do everything on that list and have it done with a bunk and locker inspection in the morning. I can shave and wash-in, even ring in, but I cannot sign up for football-baseball-basketball. I have a personal issue with bullshit franchise sports,” Cameron said. Really, he had a problem being *told* to do anything.

Rupert opened a file folder, fitted his readers onto his face and scanned something inside the two brown, fiberboard leaves.

“According to the log, you told Neil on August thirtieth that you’d consider playing baseball.”

“I say to Neil, as I trust you would, whatever will get his foul breath out of my air,” Cameron said.

Rupert winced.

“Your main problem, Cameron, is you believe you have rights. You’ve misapprehended why you are here. You’re here to get your rights back by assuming responsibly for your actions. You do that by showing active interest in your rehabilitation. As your legal guardian and court advocate, I am here to help you. I cannot do what I’m here to do without you wanting it as much as I do.”

“There it is, ‘personal responsibility is the very essence of this program,’” Cameron quoted.

“So you’ve read the handbook,” Rupert said.

“The foundation-whatever statement says a team sport—not football or baseball or basketball—just a team sport.”

“That’s fair, but let’s get back to the math. If you work with the crews, the credit to your account every two weeks will be seven hundred-fifty dollars. It’s the same for everybody. You aren’t paid by the hour. You’re paid to assume responsibility for your obligation. You’re paid to fully participate in your own rehabilitation.”

“I’m training with the crew on the streets. They say the sorting yard part is next.”

“I’m aware you’ve been diligent in part, but I’m not sure you understand the program is a whole unit. You will not graduate the program by working the crews and boycotting everything else.”

“I don’t have to graduate.”

“You’re right and you’re wrong. At fifteen hundred per month credit toward your restitution, come June 17 next year, you will still owe over eighteen thousand. The terms of your probation and suspended sentence, are so ordered that if you don’t graduate our program, when you emancipate, you will answer, as an adult, to El Pasco County.”

“You’re saying working your business, making you money won’t pay that eighteen-large, like the handbook says it will? I believe the word used is guarantee.”

Rupert chuckled and closed the file in front of him and placed it in a stack. He swiveled in his chair to a credenza behind his desk and lifted a bundle from it. He turned, holding a tied, brown document jacket in his hand.

“You’re to read these. Every word. Take them with you. They are by-laws, the rules that the Coltrane Foundation board of directors require we follow to deliver on our guarantees. But let me tell you, before you pick through this and dream up an alternative motive, what inspired how we work here.”

He stood and carried the document jacket around the desk. Setting it in Cameron’s lap, he took the chair next to him.

“Something like seventy percent of kids enter the system and never get completely free of it and it’s not because they don’t want to. They can’t and the system makes sure of it. We can’t change the system in time to give anyone not in our care a fair shake at life after the system. But, in this Home, and only if we work together—you and me—we can make sure you have a decent shot,” Rupert said.

“How?” Cameron asked.

“If you graduate our program, whatever part of your debt to the court that remains, the Coltrane Foundation satisfies. We make sure they get it in time before your eighteenth birthday. We pay the full restitution order and all fees. The day you turn eighteen, you are free—if you work with me.”

“You can’t keep me,” he said.

“If you fail the program, you’re betting El Pasco won’t.”

“A judge said it wasn’t my fault,” Cameron said.

“A judge said it wasn’t *all* your fault. There’s a difference, especially when there’s a victim. Right now if we stood in front of judge I couldn’t say you won’t do it again. Cooperate with the program and I can, when that day comes.”

“It was an accident, what happened,” Cameron said

“An accident that left David Huntington a month in the hospital. You’re damned lucky you didn’t kill the boy.”

“I know,” Cameron whispered.

“Sleeping well at night is important to me. I’ll help you but I won’t lie for you. Graduate with a paying job, and we provide ninety days free room and board and half the market rent for another year after that, if you need it. You’d stay in one the rooms at the end of the hall, up here,” Rupert said.

“And if I don’t?” He had to hear it.

“If you don’t, you’ll fail the program and therefore become ineligible for the grant that satisfies your restitution order and court costs. We’d go back to court where I’m required to report your progress or lack of it to the judge and he or she decides how to proceed. In the best settlements of cases like yours, the juvenile record becomes an adult record.”

“So you’re saying I’m screwed unless I sell my soul.”

Rupert looked perplexed and Cameron couldn’t fault him. He’d just told his ward how to un-screw himself and Cameron couldn’t force himself to trust it.

“Cameron, if this intervention fails, you’ll be emancipated, but the law won’t free you unless your debt to society is paid in full. And for someone like you, that matters.”

“You mean someone white.” Cameron said. His face was hot.

Rupert blew past that. “Until you complete intake, your account will not be credited with pay. Once you complete intake, I will do everything in my power to ensure that you enter adulthood, independent and with a clean slate. In fact, this morning, anticipating your cooperation, I’ve been on the phone with board members and they’ve given us until spring to get you involved in a sport,” Rupert said. “Choices are wrestling, swim or track and field.”

Cameron turned to look toward the knock at the door, behind him. The Bat poked her head in.

“Friday, after school.”

Rupert nodded and thanked her. She ducked out again, easing the door closed.

Rupert leveled his gaze upon Cameron.

“We’re going to try something new. You have a sponsor waiting—a good one. Anyone here would love this position. Normally, we require residents to finish intake to be eligible, but I believe what you’re saying.

“Okay,” Cameron said.

“You need a reason all of this matters; heard. Vivian Rivera badly needed your help a week ago. So here’s what’s going to happen. When you’re done here, you’ll drop those by-laws at your bunk and forget about them until tomorrow. You’ll walk down the hill on Main. You see

it right away, on the left a big, old red brick building, at the bottom of Main—that's the Rivera Family Bakery. You'll meet Vivian, your sponsor. You will apologize for keeping her waiting. I will ask her if you did. It's a regular appointment, regular hours throughout the week, so work out a schedule you can keep."

"Okay," Cameron said

"You can stay three hours today. Then you'll have your intake sheet done by Tuesday morning at bunk inspection time. We'll discuss spring sports."

As Cameron rounded the second staircase landing going down, Mick, another resident he knew very little about, except that he was unusually thin, whistled a tune leaving the last tread, and headed into the dining room.

Chapter 4

Hearts and Minds

Early Saturday, September 5

When her father decided it was time to include Vivian Rivera in the bakery routine, he took his nine-year old daughter to get ice cream and explained her job would be to carry orders between the torch man, which was him, and her sister, Celeste, who operated the gas valves. To be included in the family business was a high vote of confidence that he could teach yet another of his offspring to handle the family business after him. She knew then that this was as close as it got to having her father's full acceptance. At first, Vivian spent most of the routine jogging between her father and Celeste, who both seemed to enjoy the pointless ritual much more than she. Celeste would sometimes pretend not to have gotten word which valve was next, forcing Vivian to run the order again, only to find the oven in question had actually fired. It was soon obvious to young Vivian that, in the three years Celeste had been in the kitchen ahead of her, that Celeste and Papa could fire the ovens in their sleep, if they had to. Her father said his knees thanked her, or he'd be doing the running, but he always winked when he said it. Celeste insisted Vivian was to be Papa's safety in case the gas flashes. Stay close but don't make it obvious, he's touchy about that, she would say.

So she'd trot up with the valve order and hurry back, going to and from like a bee bouncing petal to petal in the garden until all ten clay ovens were lit.

Running was standard to the job until Vivian started using hand signals instead of going all the way back to her sister. Celeste never said a word about the change. Her father finally insisted she get back to him slower. He looked her deep in eyes that mirrored his and told her it

was in case something blows and someone who isn't hurt could get help. It was the purest concern for her she'd ever heard from him.

Bedridden within months of Vivian's twelfth birthday, congestive heart failure took Papa within a year. For her part, Celeste coped by associating with worse and worse company. More and more she stayed away. For almost seven years, Momma and Vivian ran the bakery. Then it was Vivian alone until Renee moved in.

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She had hoped to enjoy the simple ritual with Renee, but her new wife seldom was in the mood at four in the morning, even if she had been in her studio all night, painting. So, shortly before Celeste's two-year toddler, Alyssa, came to live with her and Renee, Vivian had an electronic ignition system installed. Key strokes, sensors and electronic igniters replaced the need for human communication between the valves and the ovens. When Alyssa was old enough Vivian revived a version, and as a bonus, it allowed Vivian the peace of mind of seeing her niece before her morning runs. They shared a video call through the process.

Terra-cotta oven baked goods and fresh daily flour tortillas was what the Rivera bakery was known for. Alyssa helped fire the kitchen, Monday through Saturday. Normally, while Vivian stood at the keypad, Alyssa peered into the oven mouths and ensured each one lit, and telling her so, a task for her just as unnecessary today as when Vivian's skinny legs carried her between her now deceased father and currently incarcerated sister.

There were times, and recently more of them, when Alyssa had trouble leaving her bed at the early hour, but today wasn't one of those. She had skipped firing the kitchen to make a statement, to protest that she wouldn't be running this morning, even though it was delivery

morning. Alyssa, stubborn as ever, had worn a one piece, form-fit tracksuit, twilight purple, scored with bold, black slashes, speckled with fine white dots.

“We talked about this, Lys,” Vivian said.

“Just let’s go,” Alyssa said. She slid off the stool, her slender fingers trailing the far end of the stainless steel pastry prep table, her small feet, heavy with half-tied hikers, clomping against the red clay tile floor, dragging her jacket. She shuffled past Vivian, slipped into her military surplus-style jacket and grabbed a fried pie. Though Vivian hadn’t expected her help loading the van, a dozen feet later, she put a hand to the blue stack cart wrapped in cling plastic, the tortillas, and leaned into it. She lifted the apple glazed to her mouth and took a bite. The rack’s slight wobble, because she used one hand to push rather than two, continued up the corridor through the back door and out to the dock.

They worked, nothing said.

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Alyssa had just turned three when Vivian and her wife, Renee, with a cardiologist's help, figured out why Alyssa sometimes turned gray and fainted. It was especially acute when she sprang from bed, as she loved to do at first light. She was, beyond all reason, a very happy, eager child, a bright piece of sunshine in her surrogate parents’ lives. Alyssa met the day ready for what wonderful thing was next and as she became more convinced that blacking out might be what was next, it crushed her. By that time, Alyssa’s mother, Celeste, had earned a year against her sentenced 33, waiting for a state penitentiary bunk. They’d also just gotten news she’d soon be arraigned on a second round of charges. Vivian was still paying the first trial lawyer.

Alyssa would go along this morning, Vivian thought. Supervision during her runs was non-negotiable. She would push back with everything in her because that was who she was, but Vivian was firm: her niece would only run when someone could take her routes with her.

Watching her plod behind another rack she pushed, listening to the rattle in a worn caster as it fishtailed, brought a wave of sadness over Vivian.

Alyssa's boots thudded, heels scuffing to and from the back door and the panel van. Vivian stood in the doorway, queued racks to her. Both were silent. Alyssa hadn't been resigned since she was three.

Vivian reflected on the immediate. The situation at hand was complicated, but getting the hire scheduled was the grease in her machinery. She had saved profits from tortilla sales for months to afford the enrollment fee, and in the end, Rupert Coltrane wouldn't take her money. He had a boy, he said. Reminded him of another resident—a resident, he said, he had waited too long to go the extra mile for. Damaged kid, that one. Not like most of his boys—a little structure, consistent follow-through and the program worked miracles. No, this kid, he said, was bad broken inside. Better, now, salvaged, at least. But here he had another, the same in many ways, except for the color of his skin. It wouldn't do, he said, to have him all over town—he needs a regular schedule, regular supervision and regular joe kind of work. He doesn't adapt well, kind of lives in his own world. Vivian would be doing the Home, and more importantly, the boy enormous service. Should she take him on, he had but one request, to keep him busy for at least 20 hours a week.

Vivian, queueing racks, rolled the front casters of the sweet rolls out the door, kept open with a rubber wedge. There the green, wrapped, baker's rack waiting to be loaded, partly blocked Vivian's view of Alyssa trudging back from the old Mercedes panel van. The rack jiggled,

jimmying the rear casters over the threshold as Alyssa pulled it. One-armed, she dragged it over the concrete dock. Vivian, noting the concrete needed a new epoxy coat, maybe blue this time instead of gray, went for another rack.

Four weeks ago, Dr Wolcroft, Alyssa's cardiologist, had made his last stand for a transplant. Alyssa had held firm, no surgeries. It meant a lot more leaving her mouth at near eighteen than it did when she was fifteen. Vivian and Alyssa had to sign a lengthy waiver acknowledging their choice was legal but acted against indicated medical advice. And he had wanted to see her again in three weeks. Out in the hallway, while Alyssa, sitting in the examination room, used a prep pad to get the EKG lead goo off her chest, Dr Wolcroft and Vivian talked.

Eventually, he said, and stopped. He started again. The medication's effectiveness was already tapering. Best to keep up with that, at least. He said he didn't understand it, but her running was helping, keeping the muscle elastic. But, running by herself, as she had been doing, was now out the question. If she goes down, there are only a handful of minutes that matter. Keep the kit charged. She'll want more sleep, he said. Good food. Organic, if you can. No white sugar.

Vivian remembered as if it were happening again. Alyssa opened the door and walked out between them declaring she wasn't giving up her sherbet. Four weeks it had been since her final decision and Alyssa had been a wall of silence. For once, Vivian was unsure what was going on with her.

At first, Vivian had shadowed her runs, at distance, in the electric Rhino. It was governed. It could climb an electrical pole, but it was slow to reach its top speed, and when it did, it barely kept pace with her niece. For that reason, and the fact that her running time had

been scabbed together based on delivery routes, she was getting to school late, a lot. Alyssa refused to acknowledge the difficulty continuing. There was constantly being behind in the baking, then the ovens not rested enough have to be relined or replaced early, killing her income for at least a week. Once she was caught up again, maybe on weekends and evenings, assuming Alyssa still refused a running partner, they could do long ones. Vivian would drive the Rhino. For now, three morning runs in a work week was the best Vivian could do. She felt the guilt in making the alternative to the boy's help really suck, but not much of it. There was more at stake than at first Vivian realized.

During the delay in receiving the boy, she'd had time to more carefully read his file, and especially note among the sections covering his education and social profile, what wasn't in it—a home address or next of kin beyond his mother. The facts and what they must mean had gone round and round in her head. She recognized in the picture of him provided with the file a flicker of something good that would soon die without light. Weirdly she knew that kind of light wasn't hers to give. She felt strongly he required Alyssa's special sunshine, her zeal for life.

The file from the Home, that she'd meant to bring but couldn't find this morning, mentioned the boy was a distance runner. Handy, because she meant eventually for running with Alyssa to become his main job. She veered her thoughts away from this hope, as it wasn't the discussion to have this morning. This morning was about the phone call, yesterday from Dr Wolcroft's office, ordering her off the clock. Alyssa hadn't kept her follow-up.

“Are we taking that one,” Alyssa asked.

Vivian tore her attention from her feet.

“Are you okay,” Alyssa asked.

Vivian ran her fingers through her short, black hair. “Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine,” she said.

“So the orange rack? Guessing Grinder’s subs,” Alyssa asked.

Vivian slipped her iPhone from her back pocket. “Lemme check,” she said.

She tapped her invoicing app with her thumb and typed the first three letters G-r-i and Grinder Junction appeared top in a drop box of choices, lettered in green. The account was current.

“Yes,” Vivian said. In motion putting her phone away, she looked up and Alyssa had gone without the sourdoughs.

Vivian wasn’t prepared for her niece as she climbed into the cab. She turned the key and let the glow plug warm. Like most of the large equipment the bakery owned, her father had purchased the van from a cousin in Mexico. It was his way. Vivian remembered it wasn’t new the day Papa’s cousin, Hector drove it home and stayed a week, flirting with her mother. The panel van, though reliable, was vintage, now.

Vivian unnecessarily studied the dashboard. Soon, she thought, maybe two more decent months, with help coming on board, and Celeste’s lawyer will be satisfied. Soon, she thought, imagining the custom interior van she had designed and saved on her tablet—right this minute laying on her bed. Soon the racks and bins will fold, ball bearing glides, rubber mats, lighting, the whole package. Alyssa cast a sharp eye at her aunt, deadly ready for her.

“You cannot,” Alyssa said.

She sat in the passenger seat, her heels crossed on the dashboard, the free toe winding its nervous circle.

“Lyssie.”

“No. Cameron is trouble and not how you think I mean it. People fuck up, so what.”

“You know him?”

“I’ve only seen him. We haven’t exactly spoken.”

“You know his name,” Vivian said.

Alyssa lifted the open file Rupert had given Vivian from her lap and put it down again.

Vivian blanched, remembering she’d left it in the passenger seat last night.

“Listen to me, Aunt Viv, there’s something in him that pulls me.”

“I know,” Vivian said. “Me too.”

“He’s different.”

“And, I could use his help,” Vivian said.

“Please don’t.”

“Why Lyssie? The bakery can’t pay full wages. You know that.”

“Doing what?”

“Tell me why, first.”

“It’s stupid. And weird and I don’t want it to be right, but also I do. I feel like I know him, knew him for a long time, a past life or something. I can’t shake it off, Viv.”

Vivian turned the ignition key and the engine came to life.

“Doing what, I haven’t decided—tortilla dough or machine maybe, both if he’s quick,”

Vivian said, “and Dr Wolcroft’s nurse called yesterday,” Vivian said.

“Shit. I’ll call her.”

“Tests are back. She left orders. You aren’t clear to work anymore,” Vivian said.

The blinker ticking filled the silence in the cab until the panel van left Rivera Bakery’s back lot, purring onto Fischer’s Trace under the gray-pink of a Mojave dawn. “Speaking of . . .”

Vivian was going to ask if she’d like her to set an appointment, but stopped herself.

“So he’s firing the ovens, too?”

“Of course not.”

“Kinda sounds like it.”

“You know better.”

“Fine. Okay. You ready?”

“For what?”

“The weirdest lunch period ever.”

“When?”

“Yesterday.”

“He’s wearing, this guy you’re hiring, what they all do, those stiff-ass Carhartts, a flannel and timber boots. Pretty sure it isn’t allowed because the rest of them don’t, but his red and black checked shirt is unbuttoned, showing the white tee under it marked, *Support the Implosion*. I’m in the lunch line, and there he is.” She tapped the photograph stapled to the file with her finger. “Anyway, he’s chatting with one of the lunch ladies about butter or something while, Aunt Viv, *while* two seniors, Andrew Tull and Lewis Broadburn, in fact, are talking shit to him. He doesn’t even look at them, Viv. It’s like, to him, those assholes aren’t even there. Everyone is looking around expecting something to happen then it doesn’t. Minds blown.”

“What did you do?”

“I move with the girls in front of me. Before I decide on pineapples or peaches, they’re off the line probably so they can see better. Then I’m like fuck this and I’m looking for a place to sit where I normally sit when I look back, and those jocks are still at him and there is a gap in the line behind and ahead of the three of them. He’s just taking their shit. No that isn’t right, now that I say it out loud. He wasn’t taking any of it.”

“What did he do?”

“He finishes getting his lunch, puts some flatware in his back pocket and goes looking for a table. But they aren’t having it. Everyone close enough is still wondering what is happening. I can’t do anything but watch. Lewis goes after the guy, err, Cameron, grabs his arm and tips his tray. Somebody says something I miss. I don’t know how, but he still has some food on his tray and while I’m trying figure that out, I look up and Lewis is in his face. I watch the boy think about what to do, like, Viv, I see his wheels turning for a second, you know? If it was anybody else, anybody, Viv, Andrew and Lewis would had the fight they picked right on the serving line, loud and proud. That look on his face, his eyes—grave and something else I’ve never seen. It’s super tense even where I stand.

“I can’t make out the words, but that tone is there; this Cameron guy cracks a joke. He’s the fucking Joker, now.” Alyssa held the sides of her face in both hands, shaking her head. Her hands flew out, grasp at empty air. “I can’t. I cannot.

“There is a bustle and heads bob into the scene and dude is gone. Then I see him. One of his own, has him, tall black guy, leading him away.”

“And?”

“And we didn’t talk but I sat with him and a few other Home kids after that. He showed me his shirt. There was a moment.”

“Tarot?”

I was afraid to until this morning.”

“And?”

“And I’m mentioning it so you already know. Ace of Cups.”

“Somebody has to train him, you know. And I can easily see myself, like, not at all having the time.”

“The rom-com is dead,” Alyssa said.

“He could run with you, every morning and evening if you want. Says there he’s a long distance guy. I’ll train him on the defib-kit.”

“You absolutely will not put that on him. If we need it at this point... hard no, Viv.”

“I need him on your job, and then I’m good. If I mix the dough, that’s eight hours a week once he’s learns The Old Man. I’ve almost finished paying off the lawyer and that will free funds for somebody part-time at the coffee counter when it matters, in spring, when the trains are moving ore again.”

“It’s creepy, Viv, the timing. And that pull. . . I feel I have to give what it asks. I can’t tune it out for very long at all.”

Vivian studied her profile in the rising morning light, her nose, not Roman, more delicate, fine, black hair, naturally ringlet, religiously straightened and severely tied back out of her way. A gasp escaped her late adolescent lips, glossed in bruised strawberry. Angry and scared, this was the most Alyssa had said to her aunt in weeks.

“I’m not replacing you,” Vivian said. “The ovens . . .”

“Just stop. I know already. You don’t need me for that. Never have.”

“Dr Wolcroft says the running helps,” Vivian said.

“Makes no sense that helps but working doesn’t.”

“Can’t be both, Lys. And doing how we have won’t work forever. You and the ovens need need more rest.”

“Rest seems a convenient theme,” Alyssa said.

“It’s reality, Lys.”

“So, I might be in love against my better judgement and you’re going on about the ovens.”

Vivian eased to a stop in front of Junction Grinders and put the van in Park. She popped her door latch, but didn’t get out. “Put a pin in that,” she said and left the cab.

The back door hinges moaned. Cool air chilled her back, moving through the racks to the cab then the doors banged closed and the loose latch clanked. Perspiration wicked away from Vivian’s skin and she regretted not grabbing her beanie.

Alyssa went straight at her when she climbed back into the cab. “You treat me like something fragile, and when a real fragile moment happens it’s off and away from anything with feeling about it. The goddamn ovens this time.”

It was Vivian’s turn to be angry. Louder than she wanted, she said, “No, Alyssa. It’s you. I’m worried about you, okay? I’ve supported your choice. It’s insane, but there I am, right there with you, okay? I’m scared just like you.” Vivian held her tears. Under her, the truck purred, changing tone when she clutched for turns.

“You’re wrong,” Alyssa said. “Dying is not what has me scared.”

Vivian, eyes misted, half laughed saying it, “Of course; you’re afraid of nothing.”

“Not true,” Alyssa said. “I’m horrified by a life only possible with surgeries and pills. But, Viv, this pull, this ask, it scares me a lot more.”

“Who is asking?”

“He is, but not with words.”

Chapter 5

Sea Change

Saturday Evening September 5, 2015

Vivian imagined Alyssa's reaction to the likely delay in the evening run she had promised her niece—*One word, two syllables, Viv. DUMP-STER.* Yet what was even a messier situation than the bread crusts and white insides of loaves scattered behind the bakery, let alone the fact that she'd get much less from the guy who bought the waste; she recognized the culprits.

Alvia, older now, her curled foot and faltered step made identification positive. Hugh, her partner, could not be far. Alvia and Hugh were Renee's rescued ravens and had been living with her sister, Sabine Cleary who, apparently until recently had been living in Memphis, Tennessee.

Renee, may she rest in peace, believed cages were no place for birds, but without Sabine's help there was no other choice at the time. Allowed complete freedom, they contaminated the kitchen. Renovations were needed. Sabine had agreed to help by fostering the ravens until renovations were complete.

After taking the birds to Memphis four years ago, Renee returned home and was hit by drunk tow-truck driver while walking home from the library. Alyssa had just turned fourteen. Sabine, herself grieving and believing the birds were safer caged and since the renovations were not done, wouldn't return the ravens. In the months following, Vivian pleaded with Sabine, who eventually stopped taking her calls and wouldn't respond to texts.

Tears threatened Vivian's composure as Hugh came into view. Both he and Alvia, nest mates, Renee used to call them, worked a ring clamp open on another fifty-five-gallon steel drum.

Vivian angled the Rhino cart she had loaded with bakery waste closer, watching. Alvia negotiated the tarmac, inspecting, pecking scattered tufts of bread, tasting some, tossing others. Her head was hunched between her wings, held ready for a lift, should the left foot throw her balance. Vivian was torn between being happy to see them and enraged she hadn't had her wife's birds all this time. Her head pounded remembering.

△

She'd been cited several times and the ravens having free access to the kitchen from overhead and through the open plan, it became clear, they could very well put her out of business. The simplest solution was to put walls around the kitchen, but she'd been warned against doing so. Several entries in her father's notes detailed how the building was designed so that the cycle of the ovens warming and cooling is the key to the ideal humidity and airflow or the ovens will crack. An engineer friend of hers agreed. Whatever was to be done, it had to allow for original design. It was immediately an expensive problem that would take months to save up the thousands needed for a code-compliant column enclosure around the kitchen extending four floors to the roof. There was no other option unless she was willing to sell the building and open shop elsewhere. And she was not willing to do that. Vivian suggested closing off the attic and there was a huge fight.

The morning after the fight, Vivian, up at three on weekdays and in the kitchen on Tuesdays until at least eleven, had finished all the baking except the pies. She turned the gas to low and lined several ovens with pies before going upstairs for lunch.

She found Renee's note, under a magnet on the fridge, saying she and the ravens were spending a month, at least, with her sister, in Memphis. The writing, in brown ink, was done in a

shaky hand. A tear or drop of coffee, Vivian wouldn't let herself decide which, stained the page at Love, R.

Once in Memphis, Renee wasn't talking to anyone. Literally, not one living soul, according to her sister. Then Vivian woke one morning to a text from Renee and it wasn't long after that they were talking. Then, after a week of hearing her voice several times in a day, Renee withdrew again to text-only, back to silence. It's a vow this time, might have been the first time, Sabine told Vivian when she would Skype her into Alvia and Hugh. Respecting that is a good thing, Viv, Sabine would say. Skyping in for the ravens only when she isn't talking is not good. Ever the therapist, Sabine. There's this festival, a week of live music, Beale Street, Sabine said. You should join us.

She winced, remembering.

It's amazing! Renee said. You should fly out. And they were talking again. I can't, Vivian remembered saying; Alyssa had school, a cardiologist appointment, too. I can't, Vivian had said without a second's hesitation. Nothing like, I'd love to if I could... just *I can't*. She had felt helpless and trapped in a duty to keep things running on normal and part of her wanted Renee to feel the guilt too. Renee came home, without Alvia and Hugh, in time to make Alyssa's appointment, which turned out exactly like the rest of them. The day after Alyssa's appointment, at 8:17 pm Renee was pronounced dead at the scene, killed while walking home from the library by a man in a tow truck, on Vicodin and four times the legal limit of alcohol in his system. Had Renee done what she wanted and stayed in Memphis for that music festival, she'd be alive today. Her killer didn't even remember the accident.

Had she not so casually evoked her ready excuse—she might have found a way to join her. Alyssa could have gotten herself to school, fed, and as for her appointment, it could have

been rescheduled since its outcome was all the same: the doctor would talk surgery and Alyssa, then 14, would either dog her heels on the point or walk out, same as always. Then, it was too late to ever talk about anything again.

Sabine had begged her, she remembered, to spare the family. It matters to us but not to them. Let them have their memories, please, Sabine had pleaded. So, Vivian had spent a week getting okay with letting Sabine hold the wake and showing up, keeping secret the deceased had been her wife. She wanted the ravens immediately and how she would have housed Alvia and Hugh and kept the bakery open, too, was a problem devoured by her grief.

Having arrived for the wake, she hesitated half up the granite stairs, wishing she had risked another citation from the Health Department. Renee was gone and the ravens never came home. Betrayal, dressed as love waited for her inside. In exchange for keeping the secret; when Vivian was ready for them, Sabine would return Alvia and Hugh. Vivian, at the doormat, rang the bell to the massive Cleary family home, where Sabine and Renee had been born and raised.

A young boy, with neat red hair and wearing a black suit with a white shirt, had answered the door. Vivian hadn't recognize him. He pointed solemnly at the standing flower wreaths that trailed through the foyer and curved left into the study.

Vivian soon stood beside her casket, alone with Renee, resenting Sabine's theatre but pleased that her family had at least picked Renee's all-time favorite color, that big, summer blue of the high desert sky. Alvia and Hugh, were in a large, domed cage, hung on a stand, each perched high enough that they could see their deceased rescuer if they looked. They huddled together, each with a beak under the other's wing, backs turned to the room, withdrawn, inconsolable. Tears broke then.

A large group of relatives began filling the room behind Vivian and she soon spotted Sabine, gliding through the growing crowd, serving drinks. The fiddlers drew their bows, and pipers, one standing, tapped a beat and one sitting licked his lips. The music started and a proper Irish wake was underway. From the foyer, the high, clear voice of senior Ms Cleary penetrated the bittersweet melody calling for more chairs. The crowd grew in number, hugs and handshakes, back claps, faces merry and sad.

Vivian, remembering it all, felt now she should have waited to make her case for homing the birds. She and Sabine may have healed, if she had.

As it was, Sabine, forgetting Vivian didn't drink, offered her a neat whiskey and triggered Vivian. You know, I'm not surprised, Vivian shot. Look at this, look at them. Miserable, caged. She'd never . . . Do you even know us?

Not now. Not today. They don't know, Sabine pleaded. The senior Ms Cleary walked up to Vivian. A spark of recognition surfaced in the old woman's eye.

The damage might have been contained had Vivian not shouted louder than the "Danny Boy" the musicians played for all their worth, "Last I looked, spouses were next-of-kin."

She might have retained an ally in Sabine had she not demanded the ravens in front of everyone.

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A voice behind Vivian, pulled her into the present.

"Hey, uh. I'm supposed to ask for a Ms Vivian Rivera. And I'm supposed to apologize for not having my shit together so I could be here last week?"

Vivian had been told to expect Cameron Oren from the Home that afternoon and it had gotten so late, she had forgotten.

He was lean and his light brown hair grazed his shoulders. The white tee under his shirt had angry, black lettering on it, but between the shirt covering some of it and the fading daylight, Vivian couldn't read what it said.

“You're Cameron, right? Come, sit.”

For a moment, they watched the birds, Vivian forgetting to nourish her secret grudge against Renee for dying. Cameron sat silent next to Vivian.

Hugh was suddenly visible, his feet nimble over the blacktop, his wings half extended and his head low, his legs moving at an overland run. On a collision path with Alvia, he squawked rapidly.

Hugh averted before impact, threw his wings open and flapped once. Alvia startled, opened her wings to correct and seemed to realize her mistake; Hugh's wake pushed air into her parted wings. She stumbled and recovery of her balance forced her into the air. Hugh had won the round.

Alyssa, standing in running gear on Cameron's side of the Rhino, spoke. “You're doing this, then. After all that.”

Alvia and Hugh waddled toward the conversation, picking at torn bread, eyeing the three people. Vivian eased the cart closer to the open drums then left the driver seat before Cameron thought to help. She rolled three industrial sized garbage bags off the cargo platform in back.

“You can operate this cart?” Vivian asked Cameron.

“Yes ma'am. I can even caddy.”

“Good. I'm getting this mess up before we have coyotes over for dinner. Follow my niece. Don't let her out of your sight.”

Alyssa, grasping her aunt's meaning sooner than Cameron, placed her earbuds and hard-trotted off, quickly increasing her pace.

"Follow her where?"

"Where she runs. Go."

Alyssa leaned into her right turn, disappearing into the deep shadows of old-growth cedars darkening Fischer's Trace, the lane running behind the Rivera Family Bakery. "Keep up or shut up," she shouted over her shoulder.

Cameron scooted over the bench seat from the passenger side and looked at Vivian, surety absent his expression.

"Go, already," she said.

The boy punched the accelerator and the Rhino lurched forward, two jerky course corrections later, he had found his confidence, turned on the headlights and was easing onto Fischer's Trace after her.

Chapter 6

Too Late

Alyssa was angry. Her legs pushed, lungs filling with her stride as the orange glow on the horizon grew colder. She changed the song playing to “Cosmic Love,” Florence + the Machine, set it to repeat on loop and sang with it, making the turn out of the bakery lot and into the cedars on either side of Fischer’s Trace.

“A falling star fell from your heart and landed in my eyes.”

She couldn’t believe it. Vivian was serious. She’d hired him. She had. She’d done it knowing Alyssa’s feelings, her fears.

She had started too fast and without need; the Rhino, once owned by a daycare, was governed to build speed slowly. Heeling back half a beat every few strides until she found the right bass line, she sang,

“No dawn, no day, I’m always in this twilight . . .”

Because Vivian was lately such a pain in the butt, it had been weeks since she’d conquered the hill to run the historic district and anyway, that morning she’d had no run at all. To make up for that, she’d go left up the old hill and take Victoria Row instead of going right into an alley without a name that spilled into the flatland, unofficially known as Newtown and its boring chain store plazas. It was a perfect evening for a run through the hospital grounds—Vivian wasn’t around to say no, and her new hire hadn’t yet been told she shouldn’t.

“The stars, the moon, they have all been blown out . . .”

Alyssa pumped her arms, lifted her knees and tightened her core, outpacing the reach of the Rhino’s steady headlights as its electric motor low-torqued against Windsor Lane’s steep grade. Let him keep up, if he can, Alyssa thought. She wanted to show Cameron something. His

response to it would tell her something, though she wasn't sure what. The bench was about seven miles distant and she didn't stand a chance of more than half that distance if she didn't find an ideal pace soon.

Her entire body busy taking the hill, there was no way to change the song to something slower. She kicked herself for that dramatic protest, marching away from a decision she had opposed on grounds she wouldn't say exactly but had made clear. She avoided admitting to herself that neither Cameron nor Vivian likely had any clue about Florence. Boy with Coin, next on her playlist, may have served better for the hill but then, parts of it, the clapping for sure, were still a little fast.

She wasn't only angry. She hurt, too. She had shut down feelings she felt in the lunchroom only the day before and couldn't stand the feeling of loss. It took effort to get anything done. And the pull never stopped anyway. Being very honest with herself early that morning, while stretching—before she remembered she wasn't to run—she saw the danger in Cameron, whose name she hadn't known until she found his file in the truck. Between her and this boy worked a strange, watery magnetism. She knew that no matter what, she'd look for him at school. She fretted what her obsession meant. She'd made an elaborate fantasy, built overnight of their "chance" encounter while she was out on a random morning run.

She would begin with "Seven Devils," the subtlest beat. Seven Devils because, if she timed the hill right, when the song looped for the second play, she'd be belting "holy water" past the Cleary house, a manse of large gray stone, it seemed, plucked straight from Bourbon Street, and dropped here, on Victorian Row. How the music fit the scene pleased her.

She'd take the left on Upper Main, downhill, and finish the song with those birds following at distance. She didn't know what the feud was about between Sabine and Vivian, but

she knew it was about the birds. For their part, since Sabine moved back, the birds took no sides. They'd often pick her up and glide in lazy circles behind her as she led them into the municipal plaza and its clay tile lanes. They would do so that fated morning, too. "Howl," she decided, would be up on the playlist by then and she'd sing every word.

Shortly, she'd find him, oblivious to even her singing voice, dawdling far behind his companions, working pinchers, picking up trash like a robot. One of the ravens flanking her would throat a call and snap him to the world around him. Past that, she was not sure how to proceed because she did not know if he would follow her and couldn't decide if she wanted him to.

Her pace evened. The Rhino growled behind her, its headlight beams like a tide, rose up her backside then receded away into the descending darkness. When she reached the hilltop a half-step faster than she wanted, she skipped until she landed on beat and opened her lungs for another line.

"I screamed aloud as it tore through them and now it's left me blind. . ."

Elated, she set a rhythm through the rest of the first leg, past the wide frontages of the Victorian Row, topping Windsor Hill, a mile stretch, before she'd cross Old Main. About three blocks on from there, and a mile into the route, marked leg two, where balusters restricted motor traffic into the walking plazas around the boutiques.

The third leg of her run, still ahead, would put her at the rear corner of the hospital grounds, a park of preserved native growth surrounded conspicuous, green lawns.

She was curious whether he'd follow her through the vehicle barrier, the cynic in her believing he'd give up and her other part, perhaps her center, perhaps the permanent inhabitant of the place she visited when she looked herself in the eye and spoke truth whether it hurt or dulled,

or left a hole in her—that part wanted to think he'd stay with her. She had come to trust this other part.

She used to think it was, but the running, the sheer physicality of it, wasn't the most important part. The right heart rate was essential, but basic furniture compared to what happened when she added song to the routine. Her heart strengthened, beat strong, unfaltering for hours after runs when she sang through them.

Since discovering running empowered her to capably run from death, she had not missed an opportunity. But with singing, she ran from nothing, rather she went full speed toward life. What she thought Cameron's choice this evening might prove or disprove she wasn't sure, but a choice, hers or his or both of theirs, whatever it was, felt significant.

"You left me in the dark / No dawn, no day, I'm always in this twilight/ In the shadow of your heart," Alyssa sang.

Vivian would have told him to stay within line-of-sight because forward in her aunt's thinking, as Vivian has said so many times it hurt to think it, was that in an *event*, every second counts. Sure, every second of life does count, but in a very different sense than her aunt, or even most people thought. She was certain Vivian hadn't told Cameron anything of importance on safety or risks and the omissions angered her doubly—imagine if the new hire watches her die, scarred for life.

Vivian seldom said all she knew. Take for example, her plan all along to use this boy's time, not hers, to supervise runs. Goddamn, give the boy a phone, or do the least, brief him. Instead she had left him helpless. She didn't know where she stood on what to tell him and what to keep secret, but there was nothing, except who she'd chosen, that Alyssa liked about how her aunt had handled this. Yes, her aunt's choices were natural response to Alyssa's disregard for

sound medical advice. And it was a lot to ask of Vivian to understand that her niece knew the risks and she chose them over defeat. Not a fair ask, or was it? Had she hired Cameron, who happened to also be a distance runner, because she actually did understand?

The stars, the moon, they have all been blown out/ You left me in the dark/

No dawn, no day, I'm always in this twilight. . .

The Rhino couldn't legally cut an angle over Old Main Street onto North UMBER Lane with the same ease as someone on foot. he'd have to cross at the next intersection up. Though her track toward the historic district was lit by pink sodium street lamps, she slowed, knowing her pursuer would be minute negotiating the Rhino. She began a slow springy trot, barely keeping her heels off the paving, waiting for the Rhino, conserving her energy, deciding to use a down beat to cadence her next two blocks.

She sang, I tried to find the sound / But then it stopped, and I was in the darkness // So darkness I became.

She felt him near her seconds before he turned on the headlights again, and made a moving silhouette of her. His presence pulled or was it her that drew upon him? She didn't want to care, didn't need what came with it, couldn't do that to someone, not now. She had to know, though she wasn't sure why it would matter, whether his pressure instinct moved him toward maximum effort or minimum. Maybe Vivian needed to know this, too, which would be why she did it this way.

The Rhino's lights exaggerated the gangly height of her shadow as she trotted, holding her pace until she saw the balusters separating the plazas from the road. She changed the song playing to "Boy With Coin," Iron & Wine and heeled her speed down in front of the balusters at the last minute, giving Cameron signal enough to see them, too.

Slipped through the vehicle barrier, she was equal parts thrilled and terrified hearing him, over her music, shout, “Shit.” She turned the song off when she reached her best rhythm for the leg, letting her body carry her forward into the lanes and channels of the quaint shops, listening for his boots to strike the herringbone brick under their feet. Waiting.

She had gone over a mile, winding through the close lanes, lined with cafe-stationary stores, tea shop-lounges and the whole, bourgeois community of shops and stops of their kind. And again, she felt him coming before she heard him. He fell in, three strides behind, off her left elbow and stayed there regardless how she toyed with pace, winding their way some three more miles to the train depot.

She set “Cosmic Love” on loop, as she took the hard left onto a freight service alley marked “Southern Rail.”

Dimly lit, leg three ran between two warehouse complexes, almost a straight shot of flat, gray tarmac that emptied out across the street from the hospital. Alyssa sang the entire route and Cameron kept up, easy and quiet as a quartz pebble.

She fell back to Cameron’s side.

“I like to give this last stretch an extra ten percent,” she said.

Cameron, shined with a thin sweat, nodded. “I got you,” he said.

The pair made no effort to move off one another’s elbows as he matched her increasing speed stride for stride. She reached her top and he fell back a pace.

She smiled, thinking how fair his caution was and continued toward a fork, still ahead. One option was a winding, pea gravel stream bed through a vast stretch of very green grass. The other was a sure-footed way through a plot of adolescent Joshua trees, laying faint, spiny

shadows on the bare ground, tops fading silhouettes against the thin, copper wire of dusk at the edge of the world.

She took the Joshua tree plot and led Cameron to the remotest adobe on the grounds, a landmark too old and fragile for use, and cool as its history was, not what she wanted to show him.

A walking path hugged one side of the bungalow and emptied into a courtyard where there was a bench hewn of white granite next to a hand-pumped well. It was dry now but the iron apparatus remained, its moving parts welded so the display evoked pump action. Once, there had been a sculpture of blue resin as flowing water into a pail set under the spout, but it had been missing for years. It was crazy. She shouldn't, she told herself, and she also had to do it. He needed this, whatever it was and . . . so did she.

She slowed by half, cooling down, continuing to halve her speed until she came to an easy stop within a few feet of the stone bench. It was full dark by now and a chill crept up her calves. She rested hands on knees, letting her heart keep singing the way it did when the run had done what it was supposed to do. The quiet was tangible.

“You okay?” Cameron asked. “What’s your name anyway?”

“Alyssa,” she said as she shoved her hands off her knees, whipping her long ponytail.

“Never better,” she said, “I want to show you something.” It was too late for her; she was doing this.

She sat on the bench and patted a place next to her. Cameron, a little winded—and if she wasn't mistaken, favoring his right foot—walked over and stood off, looking at her for a moment. The granite and his denim whispered their secrets to her hand when he sat next to her.

“What the hell,” Cameron asked.

“Shh,” Alyssa said. “What do you hear?”

“Nothing,” Cameron said.

Alyssa put the heel of her left hand on the edge of the stone seat between her leg and his.

“It’s quiet enough here. Put your left hand like so,” she said. “Hurry.”

Cameron looked at her hand placement and did the same.

“Now you kinda lean like this so you strain a little. Get your ear onto your shoulder. Lean over your hand.”

“What am I . . .”

“Shh. Listen,” Alyssa said.

Alyssa wished she had thought to situate so could see his face when he first heard it.

“Heartbeats,” he said.

“Which is mine? Can you tell,” she asked.

“Probably the even one, sounds stronger.”

“If you had sung you wouldn’t be able to tell.”

Chapter 7

The Score

Sunday September 6, 2015

Cameron Oren, Dugan until last year, was in a mood. Though all the windows in the dormitory opened, being off the desert floor at a height convenient to capturing heat rising off it all night long, the place desperately needed air conditioning. He hadn't slept well, and on his mind that morning was to shake off, if he could, what had happened the night before. And if he couldn't shake it, then plan some action, dare a revenge that he wouldn't have to explain to a judge.

Δ

Finishing his shower last night, he squeezed water from a handful of hair with one hand, and reached past the brown, vinyl shower curtain for his towel. He had just come back from the bakery. His timing, he thought, had been flawless. Finishing his shower fifteen minutes before hot water was available would place him in front of the dryer, in the main house, pulling his laundry from it, while everyone else was here, in the bunkhouse. It was no secret he wasn't liked and mostly, if that's how it had to be, Cameron felt okay about it. 'You work your own karma,' his mother liked to say. His fingers found a bare brass knob instead of terry cotton. *An ounce of prevention.* The towel must have fallen.

The curtain swished aside. Warm laundry hit his chest. His hands and arms were occupied with the bundle, as two sets of shoulders plowed him to the back of the shower stall. The laundry fell at his feet.

Manuel, lean and tall was on the left and Farrell, tall but also very overweight, was on Cameron's right. They held each of Cameron's arms, keeping his back pinned against the

sunburst yellow tile wall and their backs mashed against the gray, granite dividers separating this and the five other shower stalls along the same wall.

Cameron's towel was in Abel's hand, "Oren, C.," stenciled in black laundry marker, swung upside down, back and forth. Abel's every movement demanded the world move out of his way. His mustache, thick enough that he had to have started shaving in second grade, bristled upon tightened lips. When he moved his head, the ends of his straight, black hair, swept his cheeks above his tensing and releasing jawline. He hung the towel where he'd found it, and leaned into the stall, holding its ends, locking eyes with Cameron.

He moved into the crowded stall, flexing his fists, pumping the veins in his arms. Making more room for Abel, Farrell and Manuel squeezed Cameron tighter between them.

Abel licked pale, dry lips and looked at Manuel.

"*El bobo* making problems, *esé*," Abel said. "You see him Friday?" he asked Manuel.

"Man, that kinda shit, the Rope hear about it."

"I'm not hurting anybody," Cameron said.

Abel sent his fist into Cameron's diaphragm.

Cameron bent far forward, mouth gaped, drooling on his laundry, gulping back wave after wave of nausea. His head swam.

"You ain't the only fucker here what needs his clothes washed," Farrell said.

Enraged but unable to stand, Cameron looked up, reaching inside himself for a glimpse to show Abel the thing they both might regret waking.

Abel's eyes, almond and catlike, might have cut Farrell's throat the way they flashed.

"Shut up," he said, "This ain't about that."

Cameron got his breath back and stood.

Farrell found the laundry suddenly fascinating. Manuel dead-eyed past Cameron's face, his gaze upon nothing or the whole cosmos, it was hard to tell with him.

Cameron looked Abel in the eye.

Abel, while looking at Farrell, curved his hand around the back of Cameron's neck and brought his fist upward into Cameron's gut again, harder.

The blow forced Cameron to bend, but he twisted away from Able's hand and straightened.

A grunt left Abel. Farrell sucked air through his wet teeth. Manuel held his breath.

"We got us a good thing here, a little honest work, what's it called, eh, like, a leg up, yeah?"

"Do you fucking know me, dude? I don't—I don't care what any of you do," Cameron wheezed.

Abel looked at the shower divider, the profile of his expression unreadable. Planting his back foot, he angled into a navel shot, much lower than the first two, sending cold lightning into the bottom of Cameron's bowels.

Manuel and Farrell let him go. Cameron's arms slipped away from theirs and he crumpled onto his laundry. A hand reached in and turned on the water.

"You messing with futures," Abel said. "Cuz you want to impress a piece of ass."

On top of his clothes, Cameron put his chin between his knees. A day's growth on his face scrubbed his legs. His dishwater brown hair fell over his face, pushed there, and he felt safe for a moment from outside dangers. He listened to water smack the tile, soak his laundry. He closed his eyes and the clothes became a mossed rock and the tile, stones below a battering cataract. There, he listened, drawing upon the empty place within, waiting for the pattern of his

wyrd to emerge. He had nothing to hold onto but his heartbeat and he remembered the white granite bench.

Δ

Since his second day here, he had made a habit of being up before dawn for clear air and solitude outside the planed cedar log structure that was the dormitory. He was groggy when he forced himself out of his bunk, dragging fingers through the tangled ends of his dishwater hair on his way down the dormitory stairs, heading outside. Weeks into the program, having the benefit of a handbook, the by-laws and face-time with head honcho, and Cameron still didn't understand how it all worked, or if, in the end, it mattered much if his record followed him. 'Wherever you go, there you are,' floated his mother's words. He'd be felon, he thought. Always, maybe not on paper, but even if no one in the world knew what he'd done, David's scream followed him.

The handbook lay against his leg on the bench. In it was supposedly everything he needed to know to successfully complete the program here. He wasn't sure he was game. The numbers in this place were off, or, like lock up, too hard to find in the absence of chaos. He wasn't sure which it was. Even the ravens appeared at the dumpster some mornings and not others, utterly without pattern or rhyme.

Once dawn pinked the landscape east of Coles Junction, from a bleached, oak bench, backed against a red cedar log wall, he would watch for the ravens. For now, he'd sit in the semi-dark and wait for the desert to call to its own.

He had completed his intake. It was a to-do list. Like, item number 3, find the hygiene supply closet, which was a French armoire by the window in the front parlor, and write on the form taped inside its door what he took and get a staffer's initials on the form. Item number 8, he was to find get the director's signature though they'd already met at his interview, and their

come-to-Jesus sit-down. He had also checked in with Betsey Cooper, LCSW, the in-house social worker, and got her scrawl on the line right after Rupert's. He had asked Rosa, the cook, for her kitchen and dining room rules. Then set up two different times to train, one for wait service and the other for kitchen duties and got her initials. Item eleven, he helped wash and detail one of the Home's vehicles and got initials from the resident he helped, and Cody, the duty staff guy. The sheet had a place where he was to initial the notice that participation in school team sports was mandatory. Instead of his initials he wrote "spring" in the blank, and Rupert hadn't say anything about it. Ironically enough, item 12 prohibiting all forms of bullying.

He closed his eyes and listened.

In that enchanted moment when the dew point consummated the Mojave's chill, he felt after a world of small, innocent stirrings. As the last heat released its hold on the desert bed, he imagined every heartbeat responded, from the kangaroo rat's to the javelin pair. Every night gatherer and predator of the desert floor and its air; cats afoot, its owls aloft, are drawn from their nocturnal labors toward home, to burrows and dense brush, to hollows and holes, for sleep in the cool, sound and safe. The coyote rests. Bats beat stitched paths home. Somewhere in the stand of the Joshua Trees next door, the Inca dove sighed, entering her dreams while her kingdom below rests, relieved. Mothers and newborns breathe the same breath. Why sleep in the dorm had to mean torture, when simple air conditioning could make it bliss, was utterly beyond him.

There were no forward steps to take until he could think straight and see everything for what it really was. Really, really. If he got moving too fast in the stream of what was expected of him, going along to get along, he'd miss things, and little by little, be left with no choice but to act as if he had information he didn't have and couldn't get in time for it to matter. The fire was case-in point. Susan had taught her son well. There's always a catch, a price paid, due when it's

too late to say no, and before he went full force, no matter how good the promises sounded, he'd know that cost.

He'd escaped from his mother. He realized that now. The relative absence of chaos was still new and he wasn't sure he'd ever get used to it, but more every day he felt the benefits. Clothed and was fed on the reg, he had a coat to wear when it was cold and shoes that fit. If he got sick he could see a doctor. Still, he couldn't make himself trust that all he had to do to keep these things was stay put and lean in. If there was a catch here, if this was the same operation as his mother's, a better funded, more sophisticated method of control, and he didn't spot it's levers before diving in, he'd never forgive himself.

It was what he didn't know and couldn't divine that scared him. He realized sitting there, hoping hard the ravens would visit, that it was critical to his sanity that he use Rudy's secret place for real talk with himself. He knew this as surely as he knew the rising smell of unwashed, recycled plastic in the sorting yard meant it was past the time the ravens would show.

He would go about the day beating back his desire for revenge, but the urgency to acquire privacy would not relent. Revenge, he would finally decide, was best had through the survival of his sanity.

He was interested in very soon making sense of this place, in finding some kind of footing, because if he failed to see how being here mattered. . . he was terrified of that ignorant darkness. Of bad choices, piled onto Susan's idea of freedom, wine before food, earrings and bangles before his running shoes, her standard lines, 'Freedom is for taking,' and 'do as I say, not as I do'—he'd lose his mind if watch something burn. He sat there, reflecting, searching, wondering what had happened to his edge. He wasn't sure why, but, since living away from Susan he'd had no urge to burn.

The pipes carrying hot water into the dormitory moaned under the driveway between the dormitory and the main house. The others would already be up, he thought, getting ready for breakfast, then work after that. He was to work with a litter patrol this morning.

Δ

That afternoon, it was clear to Cameron that his only ally in this place was Rudy. He with the others, were at this moment in the lavatory, shaving and washing up for dinner. Cameron found himself with plenty of time for a walk outside. He wasn't particularly interested in roast beef, so whether he was on time or if he wasn't mattered less to him than staying away from gatherings, especially in close spaces, like the lavatory. He'd go back after they were gone. It was clear the others didn't like him much and it bothered him only a little that he'd probably not eat with them this evening, because late arrivals were to eat in the kitchen. He heard talking behind him somewhere, distant, but getting closer. He kept going.

It didn't seem to matter that he had read the by-laws and the fifty-something-page manual twice since talking to Rupert. Some of it, honestly, didn't make a lot of sense, like the particulars of how the restitution payment thing works or any actual reason sports participation was mandatory, or how it was he'd work twenty-plus hours a week and get twenty dollars allowance for it. In time, if he was only patient, the truth about these things would reveal itself, but the manual, such as it was, wasn't much help. The by-laws were worse. Yada, yada; blah, blah, so far as he was concerned. What he wanted to know, and he now felt silly for expecting to find, was how things really worked, how the other guys operated—how they worked the staff, because that's how it's done. He had almost decided this place would never make sense.

The number of hours residents were allowed to work were capped, per handbook. The company, name forgotten, owned by the home, or the foundation or some-damned-body, had a

contract with the city of Cole's Junction for litter clean-up and recycling. This, according to the by-laws, was where the restitution payments came from. If he was being honest with himself, none of that actually bothered him right now. What bothered him was he had counted on a certain amount of resistance, a certain chaotic element that he could draw from his co-felons and what he found, what had him scared, was any chaos there was came only from him. He was doing to these guys that his mother had done to him.

Near the west fence, a picket barrier several inches higher than six feet, he walked a path wide enough for a panel truck.

Among the salvaged appliances he'd wandered into, was the smell of rust and wild sage and behind those, a hint of dry-rotting rubber. He paused to gather his bearings. In front of him there were two ways he could go. One path went left, running between hog wire bins of numbered plastics, steel and glass. The other way went right, and shortly committed to it, bent right again, eastward, toward the dormitory. He took the right hand path.

- I saw him—the wood fence

Closer, or maybe not, because the wind played tricks with sound, another voice, its shortened echo effect, like the first.

- Imma fuck him up

They weren't far.

- We just talkin'. Swear me, esé

Cameron turned around to look and snapped straighter when he saw Manuel, tall but not broad, hands like a piano player's; his skin, light tan; black, wavy hair, combed straight back. He wore a t-shirt tucked into his jeans. He somehow gave elegance to the clunky, brown Thorogoods all residents wore. "Abel," Manuel shouted, "I got him. He's here."

Cameron's skin crawled.

"Where?" Abel asked.

"Here," Manuel said.

Abel stepped from behind a wire bin of scrap appliance hoses.

Cameron had noticed his width before because no one can help noticing. His actual height—he somehow thought Abel was taller—surprised him at 5-5 or 5-6. Cameron considered the numbers potentially significant. Abel and Manuel shared a hesitant nod.

The tension of the undecided hung heavy between the three.

So, a conversation, Cameron thought.

Abel had been to Cameron's bunk. In his hand was a manila folder, in it, a list he'd made on yellow legal pad paper, under the heading, "Evidence the Coltrane Home for Boys is a Cult." Abel had this list in his hand as he handed the folder off to Manuel.

-All wear same clothes and look like rodeo circuit Mormons

-No dating allowed (and the rest seem fine with this, saltpeter?)

-The director's actual name isn't used in conversation

-The program only takes juveniles estranged from their parents

(the better to eat you, my dear)

"What the fuck is this?" Abel said.

"Rudy knows." I said.

"Bitch, do you see Rudy?" Abel said.

"Rudy knows a lot of things," Manuel said.

"And I do not," Cameron said.

They moved closer. Cameron took a step back.

Abel fanned Cameron's note at his face then held it out for Manuel to take from him.

"Rules here ain't no hard thing doing," Abel said. He shifted his attention to Manuel.

"You make us trouble and she way outta your league, *ese*."

"What the fuck do you know about me?" Cameron said.

"What's that?" Abel was keened.

"What is your problem?" Cameron asked.

"You gonna fuck us all up, actin' how you do," Abel answered. "You and that *chica*."

"Dude, she's my boss's daughter."

Baffled by rows of recycling bins, the dim, two-clang call for dinner sounded a mile away.

All three of them paused.

"Didn't I call it?" Abel said.

"You know though, *jefe*, it don't matter, not really. Remember wha's his name, uh, Cliff?"

"Clifford," Abel said.

"So see, so see this one the same—he got the game or he don't. Nobody here knows nothing till they do," Manuel said. Manuel was allegedly from Chicago. "It's like I been sayin,."

Abel stared at Manuel for several seconds then went for Cameron, raising a right hook aimed at his jaw.

Between instinct and panic, Cameron somehow deflected most of the blow with his deltoid. His eyes closed tight, he swung back, and his fist collided hard with Abel's forehead.

Abel shook it off. His normal, guarded expression broken, he reeled off expletives, in English and Spanish. He shook his arm like a boxer would while warming up. A red print of

Cameron's knuckles rose on his forehead. Cameron held his feet apart and his fists so tight they went numb and sanguine.

Abel looked away from Manuel and Cameron, toward the looming fall of a heavy red evening. Cameron imagined he thought of the demerits he and his friend would both earn for being late. Also there was the happier alternative for them, a hot roast *especiale* waiting this minute in the dining room with the other bounties afforded those punctual and clean. Abel sucked his teeth and shook his head as he walked away. Manuel drew off several steps backward, dropped his eyes then turned and trotted after Abel.

Cameron took his time getting inside, disappointed he had been right about the others and relieved he'd not have to look at them while he ate. The big sky panned high and wide over his head, its horizon aglow red, gradient upward to azure. Sirius would shine first. He smiled at that, thinking he might linger long enough at the stoop outside the door to catch its first sparkle, but he checked that impulse. He would go hungry if he didn't get inside before wait service ended. Rosa's rules.

Rosa's refried beans, if she hadn't made them with lard, would be tasty. He didn't understand why Rupert hadn't yet approved his diet, which he and his probation officer had stressed from the first minutes of the intake interview. Rupert had assured them it would be no problem. So far, it had been nothing but. Anyway, some food was a lot better than no food.

He found the security light burning blue-white along the frontage of the dormitory. He saw no one, but hadn't time to clean up and besides it didn't matter if he wasn't to use the dining room. He paused at the bottom of the stoop and looked at his misshapen reflection in the crown of the brass locomotive bell, his funhouse body next to the dying red glow of the desert sky.

Inside, standing in the passage between kitchen and washroom, he saw Rudy walk by, a white apron tied to his waist. It was apparently his serving night.

Rudy turned about when he saw Cameron.

“I ain’t giving you a damned thing till you wash up,” he said.

He pulled a Bic razor from his pocket, thrust it at Cameron, and pointed to behind him.

“Wash-in, Buck.”

Rudy carried out a platter of hash browned potatoes. The double hung door thumped once, twice and came to rest. The door remained still, it seemed, two or three slow heartbeats before flying open again. Rudy bustled in, passing Cameron with two trays full of empty serving bowls.

“I’m not making your problem,” Cameron said.

His arms freed at the dishwasher, Rudy pivoted to a countertop nearby and a cluster of bowls sitting there filled with roast, gravy and the potatoes and peppers cooked with the beef.

Cameron spoke to his back.

“Abel and Manuel had words for me,” he said.

Rudy loaded his platter.

Carrying food past the kitchen table he said, “Wash,” and disappeared, back first, through the double hung doors, into the dining room.

While Rudy was gone, Cameron walked into the mudroom and pulled the chain that turned on the light and looked at his ragged face in the mirror. He washed and, though he really wasn’t feeling it, used the razor, too. When he returned to the kitchen table, a big, red plate of browned potatoes, grilled vegetables, refried beans and Spanish rice sat, cling-wrapped. In

Rosa's hand, his name appeared in black marker on the clear, tight plastic, with a note below it: *no lard*. Tortillas sat in a blue, crockery warmer and beside it sat a large, brown, serving bowl piled with fresh, chunky salsa. The double hung door bumped open again, whump-whump.

"Sit," Rudy said.

Rudy went to the refrigerator for pitchers of tea and was at the door again pushing into the dining room backward. His next return to the kitchen, he brought two glasses with ice to the table and filled them. He sat across from Cameron. The ice tinkled in his glass while Rudy sipped.

"You be playing it smart, yeah?" he said. "We have a deal."

Resting in Cameron's lap, the hand he used to hit Abel throbbed.

Chapter 8

Susan

Saturday, September 12, 2015

Cameron had seen many bright, overcast skies, like the one that day, as the last of summer became something like the first breath of autumn. The day was significant, its numbers, 9 and 12 both neatly broke down to 3, unity. He'd heard nothing more from his mother since the letter in Rupert's office and hadn't been allowed to read that one. He should have heard by now if she'd gotten the order changed like she promised. Cameron imagined keeping that promise was gonna be a hard to do from jail. It was time to let that life go. This is how it was, how it would be. Time to move forward. He knew enough, had done enough around the Home to know the territory well enough to get through. He knew to expect that from time to time leverage of one kind or another would be applied.

A black feather floating past the dormitory window on a breeze absorbed all his attention, piloting itself southeast on a mission to somewhere beyond the sorting yard's back fence.

On the first floor, the others showered, getting ready for the football jamboree hosted at the high school. The white ten-passenger Ford van that was his to wash and vacuum on Sundays, sat parked in the driveway with its side doors open, gleaming like a cop car.

Cameron stood alone in the bunk room with all the windows open.

Wind chimes on the front porch of the main house tickled the breeze and made melody that he imagined was constant through the town, and that, without wind, Cole's Junction would be quiet as rust, still as the distant Black Bluffs in its backdrop. To his right, the sun seemed stalled on the latest hour of afternoon. The feather, aloft, fell and rose, tracking steadily toward the shipping-recieving gate at the back of the property.

The gate's two green-and-rust panels scissored a little. Chain securing them rattled against the uneven sheet steel. Cameron's face hardened. The panels parted forward the limit of the chain and stopped.

A woman of slight frame, wearing a bright dress under a wilted denim jacket, wedged her body into the gap. Her head—once a flame, now a flicker of red, so grayed and thinned it was, bent in and dipped, slight shoulders followed. Hesitation. Her hair had caught in the chain.

Fear layered quickly into anger. A sudden realization, before this second stupidly discounted, shot him with adrenaline so hard it hurt. He had an instant headache.

He threw on his boots, pulled the laces once and tucked the ends. He left the second-floor bunk room. Outside, there was no avoiding being seen from the second floor by anyone who happened to look out, but, just so he felt better about his insane decision, he kept the most possible number of sorting bins between him and the sight lines of the main house. He hurried toward the shipping gate. A puff breeze brought to him his mother's brand of perfume, Styx by Coty, then it was gone. He drew near the struggling figure, familiar and strangely not.

Her back was to him making her profile visible to anyone looking from the house. A sundog glare on that backdoor glass made him uneasy, as he couldn't tell if anyone were watching. She made such awful racket, Cameron was certain a staffer was due out the door any second. He watched her strain, huffing, though the black canvas duffel bag didn't seem too large to come through the opening. Frustrated, she gripped the handles in both hands, placed her foot on the gate and heaved harder. Vertebra and her ribcage plotted the denim fabric of her jacket. Her burden freed of a sudden, sending her scrambling on her heels backward on the hardpan. She would have fallen had Cameron had not stepped up from behind and caught her.

She leapt away from him and spun around as if she had backed into a hot stove pipe.

Her eyes, tiny and dulled, were haunted in a way he'd never seen. Restless, she rocked her feet toe to heel, her feet, in turquoise, Converse high tops eager to be anywhere else.

He wondered what was wrong. She was supposed to be in jail. Also, her bag was large, but not half full. She acted like it was filled with bricks. When she set it down, it collapsed on the mica hardpan. She stood upright, sent her arms up high over her head, stretching her spine. She dropped her arms then rolled her shoulders back, tilting her face up to the big sky and drew breath.

All his life Cameron had watched his mother's metaphor performance, her symbolic theatre of gathering her thoughts into ideas the mere mortals surrounding her might comprehend, but that day was different. That day, she was to fill lungs with air, if she could. Still gray in the face, but more composed, she produced from her dress pocket a sheer, purple headscarf printed with a spray of gold stars.

She tied the scarf over her head. Her rainbow of flea market, laser-etched bangles were missing. It felt strange to Cameron that she wore bandanas, orange and yellow on her wrists, instead.

"Susan," he hissed, "What are you doing here?"

"Nice to see you, too, Cameron. It so happens, your new digs are on the way to a gig—a, uh, therapy resort—and I thought I'd stop by." Her voice had cotton balls in it.

In the leaner, better times, when she didn't play domestic, Susan's mentionable trades were two. She either moved marijuana for suppliers, whom she seemed to know everywhere they ever stayed, or she read tarot cards to strangers, usually at resorts but not always. Cameron hadn't asked in along time about the next gig or the inevitable bus out of town or the road taken by foot because whatever she might've initially been hired to do, business, when she got at it,

was always brisk. She made it work wherever she plied her trades. When she couldn't handle one more damp underpass, she exercised a third option, one Cameron hadn't then permitted himself to give a name, though he lived with its images. She could never plan under that option or dream of where-to next because she wouldn't know until, being spent on that kind of work for a while, the road welcomed her again.

He glanced back at the main house, weighing the risk. He pushed the gates together, looking through the opening as he did. Satisfied they hadn't, at least, been seen from that direction, he reached for her wrist.

She jerked away, clutching the gym bag higher to her chest. Cameron took her elbow.

He regretted his choice already. "This way," he said.

He led her, the back fence tight at his left elbow, on the direct path to the southwest corner of the sorting yard.

"I need you to hold onto something for me," Susan said.

Under her denim jacket, she wore a loud, psychedelic sundress. Lemon rind glow and preternatural fuchsia led the assault.

"Wait," she said. "I'm cold."

Cameron allowed his hand to drop from her and set his hazel eyes onto the sapphire sky. She opened her bag and the immediate vicinity cloyed with the sappy, green aroma of marijuana. She produced a gray, wool thing that might have once been a sweater and threw it around her neck and shoulders.

"You can't be here," Cameron said.

"I'm your mother. The universe allows," Susan said.

"You're in trouble," he said.

“I am not. Why are you freaking out?”

“There is a court order.”

“Saragossa was an unfortunate misunderstanding.”

“That they locked you up for,” he said.

“We could leave right now. You’d know how,” Susan said.

And this was the problem with Susan Dugan. If indeed she loved her son, that affection was divorced from any practical idea at all what was good for him. He could have walked away; this was both true and not a foreign idea. If he were planning an escape, that almost-evening, as everyone piled into the van would have been the perfect opportunity. But what then? The black hole that is his mother’s life, that’s what.

“You don’t get it,” Cameron said.

At the end of the path there was Rudy’s blind, and behind it, the space under the cars. They entered. Susan went on about how clever and smart and proud she was of her boy, unaware, or she didn’t care that her presence poisoned him. He dragged around the railroad timbers, stacked them and arranged with a flattened cardboard box a place for her to sit.

“Kinda like when we’d go camping,” Susan said.

“Living under bridges and camping are different things,” he said. “Stay here. Right here—you hear? Don’t smoke anything out here.”

“Okay,” Susan said.

“Five minutes, tops.”

He resented his mother for forcing him into dealing with her and needed a minute. The others were still showering. Half of them would soon finish, but there was a minute there in which he could remind himself that here was the best place to be.

Upstairs at his bunk, pulling hard on his stiff, brown laces to tie them, he watched his fingers whiten as if they were someone else's. Cameron pushed against what he wanted to say. He wanted to ask her what the hell she was thinking? Did she not realize she'd done more than enough and that none of her good intentions mattered anymore? He settled his mind. In reality, this very kind of thing was typical Susan. He thought of the feather earlier.

He knew that no matter what he tried, there was never a safe distance from her. He had no right to be surprised she had turned up, thinking the best she could do from jail was write. The judge had made the right call.

He let his boot sole off the foot board, closing the door to the room in his mind where he is his mother's son. He lifted the other foot and pulled the laces tight.

One of his mother's producers, or directors, (they gave themselves different titles), once said to him that a man in boots is a man about his business.

Descending the stairwell, he tried cycling his shaking breath. His heart still hammered outside as he made toward the thinking hole.

Susan spoke to the lifting tarp.

"It's not what you think," she said.

She had remained, which at once saddened and made Cameron happy. He paused half a heartbeat and stepped inside. The tarp raised a cloud of dust as it fell closed. He remembered what Rudy said about the wax.

Her gym bag sat in her lap. Her hands wrung its limp handles.

"Tell me what I think, Susan," Cameron said.

"You think it's pot I need you to hold."

"What do I smell, huh? What, did you walk all the way here?"

“I have a bus ticket, thank you very much, and what you smell is an ounce-minus that I’ll be taking with me. I could leave you a little though.”

He refused to acknowledge she’d spoken and silence flooded the space.

“I’m using a new deck,” Susan said.

The breath he drew was too weary for depth, and gazing upward, he found himself pinching the bridge of his nose, exasperated. There was no expansive sky to rely upon for comfort, to freshen delusions of endless possibilities, no breeze to power another hopeful tale. No. Here was his mother risking everything and his headache and the rusted insides of eighties models luxury imports. There was no telling his bat-brained mother one, damned thing.

“I want you to have my old one,” she said.

“Mom,” he said.

“It’s the one we used on the road,” she said.

“What about Dad, Paul—whatever we’re calling him now,” Cameron asked. “Anything?”

He knew as the words left his mouth he wasn’t getting a straight answer. Susan Dugan was big on running streaks and had never broken this one.

She’d spoken to him recently, she said, something about drilling oil in Argentina and something even less rational about Paul’s reason for staying out of the country. Somebody was lying or part of the story was missing. His money was even on both.

“Are you okay,” he asked.

“Cameron, I’m fine. Will you keep the cards?”

“Susan, you could not have picked a worse time. I really do not need this.”

“A pound of prevention.”

“It’s a pound of cure. Ounce of prevention.”

“It’s not either.”

“Listen, Susan, I cannot tell you all the myriad ways things could go bad for me if they find out,” he said.

“As for Paul, trust me, he’s not interested, never really was.”

“If I take the cards will you go?” he said.

The bell pealed. Two hard claps, reached Cameron’s ears.

“Shit,” he said. They must be doing an early dinner because of the jamboree, he thought.

“Stay here. Promise me,” Cameron said.

“Promise,” she said. She raised a scout’s honor with the wrong hand.

Walking through the sorting yard, he gathered plastics from the different wire bins and cradled them, creating the impression that the bell had found me doing something, even if it was wrong. Nobody would ask, but if anyone did, lies are better seen than heard.

Rudy rounded a corner on Cameron. “Are you just that motherfuckin’ crazy,” he demanded. He wore a maroon and yellow-lettered CHB sweatshirt like the ones staff wear and his head was still wet.

“Apparently. Look, I made a mistake. On me, a hundred percent. I’ll fix it,” Cameron said.

“I’ll say you helping me move my gear to the main house, which you are, after you clean this up. Pizza, later.”

“Wait. What’s this gonna cost me?”

“Buck, listen man, there’s so much more on the line than favors can cover. This ain’t good, what you doing here, but it gets a lot worse if any-body, finds out she here.”

“I’ll handle it,” Cameron said.

“Do us right,” Rudy said.

Cameron tossed his plastic collection into an unsorted bin and hurried back. The first thing he noticed, as the tarp crumpled behind him, and after the fact that she had run off had settled in, was how fast it got dark under the cars. The gloom of his competing relief and anger left him feeling empty. A deck of Rider-Waite tarot lay upon a rumpled brown paper bag where she'd been sitting. Hugh, his marbled eye initially facing Cameron, took his good eye off the cards and watched Cameron.

As he reversed and dropped the tarp again, a gust of wind lashed his face, driving something into it. It felt like a wasp had stung his cheek. His hand went to the biting thing intent to catch and crush. Instead he trapped a black feather no larger than a digit of his finger.

Not the scar paths between bins nor the lane along the steel fence, nor anywhere he walked and walked again through the sorting yard betrayed a direction his mother had gone, and all the desert's breath in that maze brought him back to his thinking hole, to the trace of Styx by Coty left with the cards. Hugh had gone.

There was a linen envelope under the deck. Her graced script with the flair of a fancy dinner invitation, in the blackest, black ink, his full name, Cameron Oren.

He struggled within, turning over the letter front to back to front again, thinking about the extra care taken with his name. It was unusual for Susan, when the typical “C.” would do. He put the envelope in his back pocket and gathered the cards, counting out seventy-eight to ensure a full deck and rolled them inside the paper bag Susan left. *7+ 8; 15: 1+ 5, genesis plus harmony, 6, two 3s, unity twice over.* He didn't understand, didn't yet see the genesis, the unity or the harmony, but he felt better knowing they might be out there. He tucked the deck into his front

waistband and stepped out under the big, umber-blue sky. He made his way to the dormitory in search of Rudy.

Chapter 9

Transitions

Cameron's bunk was number five in a line of six. Rudy's was number six. His stand-up locker doors stood wide open. From the bottom of his locker, he moved a pile of Carhartt jeans to his bunk. Rudy's version of a grin danced across his lips when saw Cameron.

“When I first got here, I was wound up so tight. My momma, well we cain't call her a good woman, she loved me though, and she said certain things like ‘cleanliness is next to godliness’ and that's all I had of her, see, so I was a nut about keeping my clothes clean. I mean a little bit scary-like. Made me some problems. That's all there was for me in the beginning, and old me had to break before I could cope. Anyway, I take real good care of my clothes and they last.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Cameron asked.

He had dragged his trunk by the open lid around to locker and was transferring clothing directly to it. “Because starting tomorrow, I'll be the one driving all of you whenever there's driving to be done,” he said.

“What?”

Rudy bent into the trunk to arrange what he'd put into it tighter.

“I can do that,” Cameron offered.

Rudy waved him off. “For a minute, there was a social worker here, Celine, I think her name was, someone real, but she was just filling in for the Bat. I was caught, locked into acting a certain way because my pride wouldn't shut up long enough for my brain to hear good sense. Miss Betsey had no idea I needed the kind of help that other lady give me. I kind of snapped when she left suddenly.”

“When was this?”

“I got here, I was thirteen.”

“Fuck.”

“Betsey went on a long vacation maybe a week after.”

“Thirteen, though.”

“After Celine left, I stole one of the route trucks and some camping stuff out of the warehouse and lived rough in the desert almost two weeks.”

“Damn.”

“Wrecked the truck, running from deputies.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, worse choices after bad ones.”

“What the hell happened?”

“I told you. I snapped when Celine left. Not sure that’s her name though. Don’t sound right.”

“But after that?” Cameron asked.

“The truck was leased. The leasing company and the insurance company filed charges. I had violated my probation, committed grand theft of an automobile and destruction of property and the only way the companies could recover losses was to charge me because they couldn’t sue a minor.”

“What a shaft.”

“That way of thinkin’ worked me over for a long time, Buck. Thing was, the way out of it was right in my face the whole time. I done them things. It don’t matter to the Man why. There was nothing left to do but own it and work the program.”

“What got you here?”

“Luck, if you want the truth. Ain’t many gas station robberies done by twelve-year olds. I would’na thought it was so uncommon. Seemed like, at the time, it was the only choice we had—every-body hungry, rent past due. Almost got by with it. Took police a minute to wrap their minds around it then they was mad they been got.”

“How the hell is that luck?”

“Think about this. If I had got by, then what? Next time is bigger and easier. I look back, see how stealing bikes, buying dollar Cokes whilst carrying forties from the gas station under my coat for my uncles, shit like that made my way. What next after robbery and the next thing after that? Look at me. How long before the world take notice and decide I can’t live outside a cage?”

“It followed you, your record, you’re saying?” Cameron asked.

“Wouldn’a if I’d seen sense sooner.”

“So, you work for the Home. As a driver, even. Irony.”

“It ain’t perfect, but they tryin’ to do right. Work here a couple years, get my restitution paid, expunge that record and I can get into the Air Force. Takes a minute longer, but I get there.”

They each took an end of the trunk, gripped the handles and lifted.

Cameron pointed with his free hand. “What about those, there?”

“Those stay. Some of them jeans will fit you, shirts, too.”

“I don’t get it. They screwed you. The system, Rupert fucking Coltrane, that fucking counselor, for sure, the Bat.”

“Thing about ignorance, Buck, is you don’t know what you don’t know. Without hindsight and the will to make wrongs right, we’d all be lost.”

Δ

Cameron and Rudy had topped the first stair landing in the main house when they heard the others, Farrell, Mick, Manuel and Abel, disagreeing about where the bed should go.

“Just because your new house-momma knows design don’t mean you do,” someone shouted.

“Have you met yours yet,” Abel asked.

Rudy and Cameron reached the second floor.

“Nah, she still in Africa or somewhere. Jes’ the *hombre*. Old man, and he don’t like me too much,” Mick said.

“Maybe stop listening to his phone calls,” Farrell said.

“Shut up,” Mick said.

“Between the windows, on angle,” Farrell said. “Like this.”

“That might work. Put his night table in the gap,” Manuel said.

“Not like that,” Abel said.

“You shouldn’t have made it up all military-tight first. Just saying,” Manuel answered.

“No, put the head west,” Mick said.

“For what?” Abel asked.

“I don’t know. Table fits better?”

“No, yeah. See the door? More balance,” Farrell said.

“Hey, does it lock?” Mick asked. “Like, real privacy?”

“I don’t know,” Abel said.

Cameron and Rudy were about to bump the door open and go inside.

“It locks,” Rudy said. “Now, move your ass.”

Abel and Mick moved aside, laughing.

“Our driver is here,” Abel said.

Rudy and Cameron set the trunk down, between the chest of drawers and the closet, left of the door.

“Congrats,” Manuel said.

“Yeah, this a good thing now and better coming from it” Farrell said.

“You good wit’ this?” Abel asked.

“It’s all right,” Rudy said. “It’s a clean way through.”

“Air Force is gonna be lucky to have you, though,” Mick said.

“Is it weird wearing the shirt?” Manuel asked.

“I’m gonna bounce,” Abel said. “I’m supposed to paint a great room tomorrow.”

“Man, you lucked up, Abel,” Mick said. “Pool, cabana, tamarind trees, big-ass hacienda, prob-ly a huge TV in that palace somewhere.”

Abel paused at the bedroom door. “And an Xbox, but there’s a catch, homie. The man’s a landscaper.”

Farrell glanced at Cameron then Rudy. “Imma get outta here, too,” he said.

“Come on, Mick,” Manuel said.

Mick watched for a cue from Rudy, trying not to seem obvious.

“We about through the worst,” Rudy said to Mick.

Mick’s easy nod was one of trust as he turned toward the door.

“Close the door behind you,” Rudy said.

“What was that?” Cameron asked.

“That’s them having the good sense to let me handle this.”

“Handle what?”

“Mick was in the main house for wait service duty. He was at back door and saw you catch your mother when she almost fell.

Cameron didn't understand how his mother literally crashing the gate to visit him made a problem form any of them. She had soon disappeared, as she always could. The difference was, this time, he hadn't disappeared with her. He was done with disappearing acts, at least. He reached into his back pocket for the envelope his mother left him and handed it to Rudy.

Cameron answered his quizzical expression.

“Susan left it,” he said. “She left a tarot deck that I'm keeping for my reasons, but that,” he said, aiming down his index finger at the envelope in Rudy's hand, “needs to be away from me. Consider it my bond. Forward from here. Best I can.”

Rudy turned the envelope over and read the name, seemed impressed and contemplated. Slight nods went with folding the envelope in half and putting it in his front pocket.

“All right.”

“Make the peace, Rudy,” Cameron said.

“Don't let Neil find them cards,” Rudy said.

Chapter 10

Evaluation

Friday September 18, 2015

Hearing from Betsey Cooper at all was a shock. Being asked to help with anything connected to the Coltrane home was absolutely seismic. She hadn't left her previous employment with CHB on exactly good terms. On her walk toward the Coltrane house, down Victoria Row, she reminded herself that an evaluation was all she had agreed to provide, though she still felt that it could have waited a week.

She was still sorting, painting and unpacking the rooms she'd finished. She felt no particular urgency to complete these chores, as doing so would seal the permanence of her move back home. The only reason she hadn't rescheduled this was she unable to think of better timing than the immediate to do something she'd rather not. It was only a short walk to the Home.

Her mint top and very faded jeans had been smudged with French gray, the paint color of her dining room. Sabine hadn't bothered with completely scrubbed hands. Besides not having the time today, in general, she found that a casual, unguarded interview was more revealing, and in this case, may lead to a quick determination. She inclined toward no, because she hadn't planned to take new cases for several more months and because she wasn't sure she would ever accept any clients on CHB's referral.

Though her own time on its payroll had been mercifully brief, the Coltrane Home had been in existence in some form since the early 1900's and local lore traces its legacy' even further back to The Western Expansion, when Bernard Andrew Coltrane, a young banker and his wife Sarah Braden (on the Railroad side of the Braden branch) began taking in orphaned boys. It wasn't until the nineteen twenties that courts started sending troubled boys.

It was Friday evening, about six years ago. Sabine had just graduated with a master of science in social work from Benedictine University that Wednesday, and her lease was up the coming Sunday. The day her lease was up, she'd parked the rental, packed to capacity with the boxes containing her material life, and hadn't yet wheeled all her luggage inside, when her mother waved the cordless phone in her face. It was her mentor, Betsey Cooper, pleading.

Sabbatical. It's technically part-time. Top pay though. Health and dental. One year, Bean. I need it. You'll do right by the boys, she said.

The following morning, her framed credentials still in transit, conflicted, Sabine Cleary entered Betsey Cooper's modest office, sat down at the desk and checked the appointment book, which she found exactly where Betsey said it would be. Rudolf Greene, aged thirteen, was due in at nine a.m..

Δ

Nothing about the house had changed since then, the proud, sandstone griffins left and right of the stairs at the front porch, still stood weather worn to one side, the foyer and staircase, gold fleur de lis on pumpkin background wallpaper; the weird, stained glass mission medallion still hung on a brass chain, facing the foot of the stairs. The hardwood, it seemed, creaked underfoot the same way and in the same places. The front door still wandered open unless finessed so its latch caught.

Now, very experienced working with traumatized youth, Sabine Cleary sat again in one of the two wing-backed chairs in the front parlor, waiting for Cameron Oren.

The client, escorted by another boy, appeared in the foyer. The escort vanished.

About five feet-ten, he was of average build. The ends of his brown hair touched but didn't sweep the shoulders. His green and white flannel was buttoned to the open neck but was left untucked—half compliant to rules.

He remained where the other boy had left him, straight as a bolt, as if fastened by the feet to the floor. Only air stood between them when Sabine stood, crossed into the foyer and extended her hand. "I'm Sabine Cleary. I'm a licensed clinical social worker," she said.

Cameron studied her hand, then her face, but didn't return the gesture.

"Cameron Oren. High school student, t-shirt artist and felon."

"I'm here because Ms Cooper asked me to evaluate you."

"Evaluate."

"I don't know anything about your case other than she's concerned that you aren't adjusting well."

"I had no idea it was that simple. Adjust. How'd I miss that?"

Even Betsey's justification for asking of Sabine this favor had been too much information. Sabine had insisted on cold interview. Sarcasm, she noted, besides intelligence, belied latencies; frustration, superiority, rage. Deployed in this situation, it indicated to her the collision of chronic frustration and the client's desperate need for control. "Lets sit," she said.

Sabine reclaimed her chair backed by tall, heavy drapery, its panels not quite pulled together. Weak light seeped past the backing sheers. Cameron took the wingback opposite hers, and kept himself forward in the seat.

"Where are you from," Sabine asked.

"We traveled a lot. Saragossa last."

"Military?"

“No, homeless,” Cameron said.

“What do you enjoy?”

“Mornings, outside as the sun is coming up.”

“Tell me about that.”

Surprise traced through his expression. Wordless, he stared at the rug, then the white oak coffee table leg. Sabine had almost decided to move on when Cameron spoke.

“This is confidential? I don’t want this used on me by these dick holes.”

“One-hundred percent.”

“It’s quiet. No one else is awake. It’s safe. I think. Listen. Watch and see if the ravens come.”

“Where is your family, your mom, dad?”

“No known siblings. Susan, jail. Paul, no clue.”

“Who took care of you?”

His thumb searched for a flat seam.

Likely trauma around the parents, Sabine noted. She stood, perhaps too suddenly because, though he almost covered it with a hand to his mouth clearing his throat, he flinched.

“Would you be open to taking a walk with me?”

The same hazards to her good mood that had followed her here, the prospect of a client she probably shouldn’t take, a bleached sky and winter’s baby teeth in the autumn breeze met her again on the covered front porch, with one addition. She stifled a gasp. Now wasn’t the time to stray into Renee territory, but she couldn’t help thinking the timing was extraordinarily coincidental.

Δ

They were in high school, Sabine a senior accepted to Benedictine, Mesa and Renee a junior at Mander D., dating Vivian, a senior. Sabine hadn't, at first, wanted to be involved in the raven rescue. She had a thousand reasons. A few were lice, mites, legionnaires disease, ticks in the pines where the nest was. Renee answered them all with one line, *they'll die if we don't*.

Sabine felt that same feeling now as when she saw the poor things. *They might die anyway*

On the beak of one of the griffins flanking the porch stairs, stood Hugh, adjusting his wings, making a fuss of settling in for a long roost in the meager sun. Though she hadn't yet seen Alvia, it was plain that Renee's birds, had escaped the aviary, and likely had been doing so before today. That's how they were, and it occurred to Sabine as she stared at the male of the pair, fighting panic about what to do with her sister's last living memory, they might not ever be content with safety.

She had no confidence in animal control and, besides her fear they would be hurt during capture, she would also have to dig for the permits to house and maintain the two migratory birds and since they were out, risk a fine. The priority was to get Hugh and Alvia to follow her voice to the safety of their enclosure. The professional, reasonable thing to do was to cancel—send the boy back inside before he realizes why. Yet, she hesitated. Already, she saw why Betsey was so perplexed with this boy. Already, she saw his pain.

Her palm laid over the print of her phone through her jeans as she considered asking Vivian for help, but there were issues with that idea, too. The biggest, most immediate one, was the risk of stirring bad blood between them. Though Sabine felt no particular ill will toward toward Vivian, she had no idea how Vivian felt after all this time and begging for her help was not the way to begin that conversation. Then there was the other factor, that Vivian shared

Renee's mind on the matter, that birds, especially smart ones, don't belong in cages. Vivian might get them into the aviary and she might decide the front porch was close enough.

Cameron watched her stare while she thought the problem through. He made no comment, had no animation to his face, but was no doubt aware something troubling had seized the better part of her attention. He was a consummate survivor, she thought. Pretenses, fake excuses wouldn't do.

"Would you mind helping me with something?" she asked.

His head tilted and he blinked a few times, searching the empty air to one side of him.

"Maybe."

Sabine took the stairs down to the walk and pointed at the bird, who faced the brightest part of the sky. He had raised the feathers under his bill and down his breast to sun-soak. "This is Hugh. He has a mate, Alvia, who is no doubt somewhere close by."

Cameron joined her on the walk, watching Hugh. His eyebrows drew together for a second and relaxed.

"I know them. I mean, not their names, until now. But we hang out. The other one has a bad foot?"

"The female, yes. My sister and I rescued them from a cat."

"The Common Raven is rare around here."

"When did you first notice them?"

"Uh, I got here August nineteenth, so, mmm, about three, four mornings, after that."

"Help me get them home."

Alvia appeared, perhaps from behind the other statue, Sabine hadn't seen where she had kept herself.

Wary, Cameron's thumbnail worked at the outside seam of his pants. Sabine made for the sidewalk in front of the house. He followed.

"What brought you here?" she asked.

He swallowed hard and his face panned toward his feet. He swept hair from his face and didn't seem to notice it had fallen right back.

"Don't you have my file?"

"I have your name and Ms Cooper's concern and that's it."

It wasn't completely true; she also knew how the Home operated and in the brief time with this client, already had her doubts about how normal operations would benefit this boy.

"They say I wasn't responsible or not totally. I'm not sure how it all works."

"Stick with what you know."

Hugh flew in front of them and lighted upon the Reynoldses iron fence, four houses from Sabine's, fixed on Cameron. Alvia came from another direction, joined him and barked as she settled. He saw them. Something in Cameron seemed to lift.

"There was this container of lint and I torched it, somebody was hurt pretty bad, and I have this huge restitution, now."

Sabine nodded, recalling that the home only accepted clients with impossibly large restitution orders. Her jaw tensed.

"This was in Texas?"

"Saragossa, yeah."

"Had you lit fires before that one?"

"Only small ones and only when I thought I'd go nuts if I didn't."

"What was happening when you felt that urge?"

“I . . . Don’t know how to answer that.”

“That’s fair.”

Something troubled him as they rounded the hook in Sabine’s cobblestone driveway. It was slight, barely registering in the way his steps weren’t as sure. Cameron was taken with what must have looked to him a strange sight. Four white oaks, beginning to loose their leaves, shaded a canopy of steel netting arranged around and supported by the trunks. The edges of the net were attached to the tops of all four salmon stucco walls around her backyard. Sabine and Cameron faced one another while she put her hand on the gate latch. “Here, go this way. They trust you or you’d never see them at all,” she said.

Cameron seemed frozen to his spot again. Hugh and Alvia alighted upon the gate column nearest him, one after the other.

He finally spoke, “This is your house, then?”

Adept he was, she observed, at hiding how he felt. The faintest, broken flicker conflicted him, hope cemented to the expectation it would fail him.

“Should I worry about that?”

“Can I tell you something?”

“Anything.”

“Susan, my mother, came to see me, here.”

Sabine opened that gate and invited Cameron to walk through. Hugh and Alvia hopped to the ground and followed him. Sabine closed the gate behind her, observing Cameron as he watched the birds show each other fallen twigs a few feet from him.

“I’d like to see you at least twice a week for a while. How do you feel about meeting Saturday mornings and Wednesday afternoons?”

“Saturday, like, tomorrow Saturday? I have work.”

“Where do you work?”

“Rivera Family Bakery. Early mornings and evenings. Mornings, I train cross country with Alyssa then make tortillas.”

“Tomorrow, yes. Come between ten and eleven, after work.”

Chapter 11

Power

An hour after sunset, when everyone else was normally either upstairs or in the main house in front of the TV, Cameron was outside with the tarot deck his mother left behind and a blanket wrapped around him. Orion dusted the night, a waxing Gibbous peaked in the sky and would set before midnight. He couldn't stop thinking about Alyssa. He had drawn one leg under him and let the other dangle from the oak bench fronting the dormitory, shuffling the deck under the blanket. Loss was loss and according to the Empress, who turned up regularly in his spreads; it should be mourned. He wasn't there yet. He was still relieved, still emerging, beginning to trust and still scared it could all go away in a blink.

Cameron's special program requirements included one litter patrol a week, on Saturday afternoons. Yesterday was his first patrol with the crew since the change. The others had been civil but distant, informative but something other, too. The truce Rudy had brokered held; he did his chores and kept the rules, tried earning his way. But there was a subtle tension, always present in the look of an eye, a setting of the chin, in silence at the dinner table. And it was worse when Neil was on duty because he shamed every brown person's English.

The others said the Saturday afternoon route was the worst during busy season but right now, with it getting cold, it wouldn't be really bad until spring when the trains start again.

Δ

Cameron started at Rudy's voice behind him. The Rider-Waite deck he'd been absently shuffling almost slipped through his fingers.

"We think you ready. Here's your coat."

For the first time since arriving, Cameron was truly angry. He took his coat and walked without enthusiasm behind Rudy on a path through the bins, into dark corners of the sorting yard. Orion dove into the Black Bluffs at their backs, oblivious to the designs or the angsts of the six boys, or their conclave gathered on a speck called Earth, in an atom called Cole's Junction.

Cameron was thinking there was enough chill in the air that even the heavy coats provided by the Home wouldn't keep the wind out for very long, when he smelled woodsmoke.

At the meeting spot, thin sweat shined on serious faces gathered around a steel half-barrel with a fire in it. Cameron stood beside Rudy as the wind lulled and gusted, stoking the growing flames. His heart sank a little, realizing he wouldn't see Alyssa until their Monday morning run because he wasn't scheduled at the bakery tomorrow. It felt to Cameron like a storm had caught him in a boat without oars.

Farrell fed another scrap of pallet wood to a burning half-barrel surrounded with chairs taken by Mick, Manuel and Abel.

Rudy invited Cameron to sit.

"How this go," he said, "is you speak your mind. Anybody interrupts somebody speaking, they can't talk after that till the referee say. I'm the ref this evening."

Cameron didn't understand why working his way through the program, on his own, if he went by the rules, was such a big, hairy issue. Baffled, he looked around. Flame lit blank faces staring back at him. Farrell broke the spell when adding more wood made the barrel gong and sent embers climbing into the night, sizzling to soot. The others settled into disaffected slouches, some shoving hands into brown barn coat pockets. He wondered if Hugh and Alvia might draw near.

Farrell looked at Cameron. "Don't nobody, like this place," he said. "He don't know."

“Problem is he act such a fool you can’t guess what he knows,” Abel said.

“You guys are tripping me out right now,” Cameron said. “Like, what the actual fuck?”

“He shoulda got it by now” Manuel said.

Abel sunk into his coat. “I ain’t sold on this.” He said. “Your momma being here coulda gone real bad. It’s only luck it didn’t and how mucha that you think the rest of us can count on?”

Mick’s leg bounced. “What gets me is if it had gone to ass, none of his shit rolls on him. It’s us,” he said.

Abel’s face drained of patience. His chair squeaked as he shifted his weight.

“Man, Rupert was here, Bats, Neil, too. If she’d been seen . . .” Manuel complained.

Cameron sat straighter, pushing his elbows against the arms of the plastic lawn chair where he sat. “Okay,” he said, “You know what?” He nodded, wagging his jaw, while getting up his courage to tell them how weak they were, how nobody hangs for his crimes but him, how insipid it was to be always afraid, always rolling over for Establishment. He’d tell them, dammit, and be doing them a favor. Just maybe not today.

“I handled it,” Cameron said.

Abel moved to stand. Manuel, sitting next to him, put a hand out and held his friend’s arm. An odd expression played across his face. Abel sighed and settled again.

“And you did good but—there’s more risk than you know,” Rudy said.

Cameron pointed at Rudy, “So you,” he swept his finger at every face, “and all of you,” he said, “thought it would be a good idea to get up a meeting and hassle me while I’m trying to get my head together for another day in this hell. Brilliant.”

“It ain’t like that,” Rudy said. “You ass over elbow, here on this one, Buck.”

“Look—she’s gone. Won’t be back. I handled it. She was here for maybe twenty minutes.”

“Shut up, man,” Abel pleaded. “We doin’ this now, this way—your fucking way—outside in the dark, all private and shit, giving you respect you ain’t earned. So jes’ listen for once,” he said.

“Oh is that what we were doing in the showers that time?” Cameron said. “Note to self.”

“There’s things you don’t understand and you ain’t gonna till we break it all down,” Manuel said. “After this, you need something, come find me. This a good thing tonight if you let it be.”

Mick spoke with his ankle resting on his knee, foot going up and down, his hands drawn into the sleeves of his coat. “They got him a special therapist. Heard the Bat talking about it on the phone.”

“Mick likes to catch conversations,” Rudy explained.

“I have a talent,” Mick defended.

Cameron shrugged. The specialist was old news and he couldn’t imagine how they’d think it wasn’t.

“Now you listen good this time, Buck. This what I’m talking about before. You only gotta try a little bit hard,” Rudy said.

Cameron shifted in his chair. His palms were damp and his mouth dry. A pressure of crushing magnitude was coming. It was too late to stop it, but not too late to brace. There were two ways through it, accept the crush and pass out right in front of everybody—and he wasn’t doing that, or he could push back and spend a little hope.

“I can’t help it. What the fuck,” Cameron said. He tensed, though he wasn’t sure why. Another beating was probably not in the cards.

Manuel spoke. “Listen, man. None of us are saying it ain’t fucked up. That’s what makes it so hard to get into. It shames us.”

“What the hell are you saying,” Cameron shouted.

“It’s like this,” Rudy said. “And don’t ask me to explain it more, cuz when this done out here, we ain’t got a better shot at this place than to get back to pretending—you feel me?”

“Sure, yeah. Whatever,” Cameron said.

Abel spoke up, waving his finger. He stood. “Oh, no. No,” he said. “It ain’t like that. You messin’ with futures, now.”

The blood left Cameron’s face as he remembered his cold shower, the desolation and disregard, that humiliation. His face, like theirs that evening, warmed in the gentle glow of fire, their lives like his, the losses dancing softly in their eyes, he saw their scars then. They’d all fought the terms of living in this place, suspicious, distrusting, enraged, same as he. But unlike Cameron, long before they ever knew this place, they had grasped how total was the control the system plied against them.

Rudy had the letter Cameron’s mother left him, out for everyone to see. Everyone got quiet-- not tense quiet, but cooperative quiet. He shifted the subject as he refolded and returned the envelope to his coat pocket. He lifted an open palm and indicated Manuel. “Whatchu gonna do with your clean record when you roll?”

Manuel tipped his head toward Abel and a pleased expression eased his strained features. “My cousin’s husband in Hoboken has a luxury car mechanic shop, high-end clientele, also an

apartment over where I'd work. Learn a trade, place to stay and good pay. I can move my mom and sister out of Chicago in a year."

"What about you, Mick?"

"I'm getting a CDL and my dad is setting me up with him to run mail for the postal service from San Francisco down to Santa Barbara. Sweet deal. He has apartments in both places. He says the contracts pay crazy good.

"Farrell, you?" Rudy asked.

"Imma get me car and then I'm gonna fill it with gas and go east till I run out, start there," he said.

"Why east," Cameron asked.

"Ain't none of my people out east," Farrell answered. "Imma find a college to take me, if I hafta beg, and study poetry."

Abel passed when it was his turn to share plans.

"What about you," Cameron asked Rudy.

Rudy opened his mouth to speak when Abel interjected, "The ref don't share," he said to Cameron. "Keep this simple, *jefe*?" he asked Rudy.

"No, tell him," Manuel said. "Might as well. The whole fucking problem here is new-guy has no idea what's going on. It's been a tragic sitcom. For fucks' sake, if Rudy's new job ain't part of it, I can waste better time moisturizing."

"Hold up, ya'll, hold up. I'll tell him, but not now. He get the point. We have plans," Rudy said.

Great for them, Cameron thought. How was their delusion with this fairy tale trust fund and the insane promises the foundation makes his business?

Abel looked at Cameron. “You got any, *ese*? Plans?” he asked.

“Oh, loads,” Cameron said, “They all involve NASA...no, I don’t have plans. Plans make you expect things, then you have needs and when you have needs, it gives away leverage and that makes you weak.”

“He’s not wrong,” Mick said.

“Explains a lot,” Manuel said.

“I feel a verse in that, Farrell said.

“He don’t know to use it, though,” Abel said.

“Not yet, he don’t,” Rudy said. He turned to Cameron. “You read the handbook, the bylaws,” He put a finger to his own head, “you got the whole picture sitting in your head right now.”

“You holding a prime sponsor spot, work a different program than everybody, and, you have a goddamn phone,” Abel said.

“Only at work,” Comer said.

“Still,” Manuel said.

“There’s reasons,” Cameron said.

“Don’t matter. None of us are allowed, for any reason. Now here it is. It’s one point per job in town. You gotta spend one to work one, right?” Rudy said.

Cameron nodded. “Hey look, staff don’t exactly know about the phone, but I get you. They don’t not-know about it either.”

“Them points is the bitch of it,” Mick said.

“Not if he do right. If he do right, we bank up rep and then, bam, that fuckin thing they doing new—we set, don’t need points anymore,” Manuel said.

“Yeah,” Farrell said.

“All I know is that fucking circus they call the merit system is losing its monkeys and it can’t happen quick enough,” Abel said.

“Okay, on point,” Rudy said. “New program is months off. The way it is now you do a job and to get back out for another one, it cost another point, yeah?” Rudy said.

Everyone nodded.

Rudy pointed at Cameron. “Okay, it cost a point a day to work your regular job and several a day to work the odd jobs the rest of us get. One job: one point.”

“Costs you more points to get the same as me,” Cameron said.

“I knew there was a brain in there,” Abel said.

“Now listen to me, Buck. They gonna look at your points before they decide ours. You gotta do a little better than the minimum you need, cuz they gonna trend our points around yours. Your few little points you need won’t get us out for enough work,” Rudy said.

“All right,” Cameron said, and with more conviction again, “All right.”

Chapter 12

Consultation

Monday Midmorning September 21, 2015

Sabine Cleary liked to use matches to light her cigarettes because she enjoyed their loose shuffle in the box and the sharp smell when she struck one. The morning light had just begun to wax golden, its copper dawn, overcome. In the den window, Hugh, unnoticed by her guest and former mentor, Beatrice Cooper, stood on the sill outside at Sabine's left. Betsey occupied the corner of the couch not piled with folded bed linens and made her case.

Seventeen, medium to lean build, distance runner, a vegetarian, when he went, okay grade-wise in school. Physicals he had had, for a handful of track and field coaches, and a procedure to correct bowel obstruction while his petitions adjudicated through the El Pasco system comprised his medical record. Standard immunization spectrums were administered for the first time since early childhood at El Pasco County Juvenile Center. His intelligence hadn't been tested but, Betsey insisted, it was up there.

"Irrelevant right now," Sabine said. She imagined the wood matches, red tipped, within arm's reach, the rattle inside their blue and white box, the dry sound they'd make if she obeyed her urge and lit a cigarette right now. She played with a loose button on her long, taupe sweater.

That was another advantage to matches, no one thought a thing about an inconspicuous box of them laying around with incense and candles about.

"Are you smoking again?" Betsey asked.

"I thought we agreed not to make this a session," Sabine said, "unless we're discussing your complicity with institutional abuse. Jung would, of course, inform."

“Look, I’m coming clean here.”

“Actually, it sounds like the opposite. It sounds calculated. I—me of all people—must help or the client is doomed. And your reluctance to provide clinically relevant detail on the program, given the stakes you claim, is highly ironic.”

“I already told you I can’t give those specifics.”

“Then why are you here?”

“You insisted.”

Elbows on knees, she had leaned into the space between her and the formidable Beatrice Copper, LCSW. She tipped her head and nodded, pushing off her knees. Sabine realized she had hunkered down to fight and it had dredged the lake where she’d buried her failure with Rudolf Greene. She looked at the ceiling, white plaster between dark cedar beams, nearly one hundred-thirty years old, and drew a calming breath. She settled facing Betsey.

“I need to feel better about taking the case. I think you knew when you asked this wasn’t a gimme and I’d need peace of mind.”

Betsey drummed her fingers over the teacup she cuddled in her hands. Poker faced, thinking, she stared at either the wad of newspaper that had padded the cup she held in her hand to move it from Memphis to here, or the stack of diagnostic manuals on the floor next to it.

“Look,” Betsey finally peeped. “I don’t know anymore why I stay. Maybe it’s for ones like this, I can’t say. I care. Sue me. Now, look, listen to me okay? Just for a minute. Relevant. You didn’t hear this from me. They’re changing everything, housing, grant program requirements, starting a weird buddy system and the work allotments are different. The whole structure will change.

“Okay. What about it?”

“It won’t do for this client. Not at all.”

“Structure. Explain.”

“The new rules are being worked through, but the rubric would include about four hard mandatories from headquarters, like the school sports requirement, and the everyday ones are down to the house parents.”

“The sport rule fits. Decentralized, they’re outsourcing providers of structure. Tell me about the house parents.”

“A lot of them are sponsors, or were. Some are donors, several are board members. Don’t ask me how that conflict of interest is handled. This thing they’re doing involves substantial real estate acquisition and requires pretty massive fundraising. My guess, if they hold their pattern, is they’ll auction the boys’ labor somehow, something like the city contract they hold now. Anyway, Cameron Oren has barley adjusted to the current, simpler format. I think his response to this new thing will put him out of anyone’s reach for a very long time. He may even run.”

Sabine dragged her eyes to the window beside her and shook her head. Hugh had left. “If he can’t adjust, he’s null for change in a new environment,” Sabine observed.

“He’s done his intake. He’s a quick study, but does the minimum.”

“Hygiene?”

“I understand he prefers cold showers.”

“Does he stink, Bets. That’s all I need to know.”

“No.”

“I haven’t had a cigarette yet this morning,” Sabine said, “You’re being difficult, so my guess is you haven’t either. I’m making coffee. I can’t stand hot tea. You can sit here or join me

in the kitchen.” She grabbed the box of matches and shook them, speaking as she walked away.
“I left working for CHB for reasons that had little to do with your return from sabbatical, Bets.”

“I know,” Betsey said.

Sabine tossed her matches on a yellow pine dinette with dark green legs. Betsey pulled a matching chair and sat. Sabine brought a can of Bustello Special Roast down to the gray marble countertop from the sunflower cabinet over it. The cabinet door closed without a sound. She lifted a blind over the sink, expecting to see Alvia or Hugh, following the conversation, but neither were there.

“Rupert says they’ll pay whatever Texas won’t,” Betsey said.

“I don’t give a damn about how this invoices right now. And you’d know that. What are you not saying right now?” She let the scoop fall back into the dark grind.

Betsey watched her fingers drum the tabletop; she’d left her teacup in the den.

“You’re good,” Betsey said. She flattened both hands on the pine tabletop.

“Yeah well, when you work enough tough cases, you get good. I’m not in love with this; I need data, Bets.”

“I brought his file.”

Sabine faced Betsey with a full, plastic 7-11 cup in her hand. “Would you rather tell me for free over coffee or make me read it and get a bill for research hours?”

Sabine put her back to Betsey and poured water.

“The petition that carried all the way through adjudication was destruction of major property- Misdemeanor b,” Betsey said.

“He said someone was hurt. How did he pull a misdemeanor?”

“A judge ruled his mother’s chronic neglect was primarily responsible for conditions leading to the incident.”

“He thinks he’s a felon. What about her?”

“Barred from all contact, without prejudice.”

“Geezus.”

“She, uh, she’s something. She sent a letter. Rupert is alarmed that she knows where he is.”

“She should know where her son is, without regard to what Rupert Coltrane thinks.”

“Try harder for middle ground. It will make what we have to do a lot easier.”

“Who the hell is we?”

“Sabine, if something isn’t done, this kid is gone.”

“Fine. Compulsion with violent features aren’t what I handle.”

“He trusts no one. I suspect it his mother’s treatment that has locked him down so tight. He performs compliance without engaging the program. He’s quiet and an active loner that makes personal statements on his t-shirts with his laundry marker.”

Sabine spun a kitchen chair around backward, opposite Betsey and straddled its seat with her arms over the back.

“You should relax the pitch, I’m taking him. When was he assigned?”

“19 August. Same day you moved back.”

“That’s under a month. What’s the hurry? If he’s clinically oppositional, anyone with training knows going in, he’ll need more time.”

Betsey asked Sabine for a cigarette. “I’m not sure that’s it,” she said.

Sabine stood, swiping up the matches from the table, sweeping the hem of her long sweater over the seat she left. She let the box fall into her long sweater pocket. She went to the countertop in front of the coffee machine and poured two cafeteria mugs full, noting how the morning light set the loose strands of her hair on fire. She handed Betsey a mug and carried her own, steaming, out to the back porch.

Sabine closed the door behind her guest and gave the porch a scan. Though it hadn't been part of the original aviary back when she and Renee still lived at home, the porch was now screened in with two layers of wire mesh allowing the ravens closer contact, but safe from escape attempts. She never understood how Renee managed them loose, not knowing where they were or if they were safe. There were shutters for when it got very cold, now lifted and latched, hook and eye, to the white wainscoting cladding the overhead. Perches, spanned between cat scratching posts set in three corners and networks of suspended poles crossed the ceiling strung with Mardi-Gras beads. On the end of the porch opposite where they'd sit, was old furniture, a football, a dodge ball, bean bags, repurposed couch pillows—to the normal raven, an enviable play place. Her sister's ravens were not normal.

Betsey went ahead several feet then stopped and turned, watching her protege with a confused look on her face.

"I have to make sure they aren't up here before I close the way to the aviary. They hate cigarette smoke," Sabine said.

"Oh the, uh, birds."

"My sister's."

"Yes."

Sabine closed the top half of the Dutch screen door between the porch and the larger enclosure and continued from there to sit beside Betsey.

“I’m not getting into it,” Sabine said.

Sabine offered Betsey a cigarette from her pack then shook one up for herself. She fired a match, lit hers and offered Betsey the flame cupped in her hand.

Betsey drew once, exhaled. “Yet, you’re back,” she said.

“I know what I’m doing.”

“When have you not?”

“When I decided to keep them. As it turned out, I could have endured two years of mother’s nonsense. So, what’s the hurry, Bets? What about this program overhaul,” Sabine demanded.

Betsey’s flats slapped the hardwood decking as she recrossed her legs. She drew on her cigarette, exhaled.

“Fine,” she said. “Fine. Remember what I said about real estate? The board will charge the Home rent for each house. The home then adds rent and wages earned by house parents to state invoices. That’s the sort of double dipping that makes multiple locations worth it.”

“How does this fit into the minors’ best interests?”

“‘Joint Jeopardy Avoidance,’ they call it, a transition to real world accountability and implied consent schemes, they say. It’s worse than bullshit. There are no more points or minor milestones, no more personalized incentives to meet goals. To quote Rupert, ‘no more participation trophies.’ It’s a buddy system. They go everywhere, do everything together, homework, school, sponsor work, other outings, everywhere: they aren’t allowed to be anywhere, except at home, without their buddy. If one gets into trouble, the duo suffers together.”

“When is this going down? I mean, surely, they have current contracts to complete.”

“They’re transitioning everyone. There’s a work program already underway that pays boys to work painting and decorating their new residences. New intakes will follow a similar pattern, trying out at different homes, doing chores, having meals in town with different house parents and residents, while living in the dormitory until their intakes are done and they’re placed.”

“Can’t fault that,” Sabine said.

“For most, but we’ll lose this client like that.”

“You talk like he’s suicidal.”

“He isn’t, exactly. My impression is he believes he has nothing to lose.”

“Uh. Yikes.”

“He torched a bin behind a fiber processing plant, in Saragossa, Texas—the kind of town that’s only alive when the cotton gins run. Used gasoline. His mother, meanwhile, was moving substantial amounts of marijuana through the motel room where she and the client had been staying. The local fire chief said in his report that he doubted the fire he investigated was the minor’s first burn because he used accelerant.”

“How old is he?”

“Emancipates June 17.”

Registering the brief window, Sabine tucked her chin.

“Apparently, the mother kept them on the road a lot. He’s got records from six different high schools, many more middle and elementary.”

“Wants and warrants?”

“El Pasco suspected that because she had an altered Certificate of Live Birth for the client and had fake shot records in her possession, but no. She’s just a mess.”

“Altered?”

“Probably to conceal the father’s name. He uses his legal name now.”

“What?”

“I told you she was a mess.”

“Where is she now?”

“Reeves County, Texas as far as I know, unless she’s been kicked up to penitentiary.”

Sabine was livid. “I—I’m at a loss. How the hell does any court think a boy damaged by his mother, isn’t going to need therapy with her to get healthy? Bets, explain that to me,” Sabine said.

“You and I know how these cases go,” Betsey said.

Sabine looked at the floor and shook her head. It was true, she did know how these cases usually go.

“He was in the adult role, best we know,” Betsey said.

“Because that makes it better,” Sabine said.

“He’s high-functioning.”

“Stop selling me. You suck at it. Violent, High-Functioning and Mommy Problems do not make good roommates.”

“I like this new Sabine. That boy has been through it,” Betsey said. She crushed her cigarette out.

There are no tame rebels. Renee would say that. We are conflicted, tortured beings—wild things, with questions, pissing people off for having them. It’s our job, Bean, she’d say winking.

Everybody's dying, Sis, for some, maybe who know it's happening, its slow enough they learn to live. For others, for those in denial, it's faster.

"He's a survivor," Sabine said.

"Hey, is that your doorbell?" Betsey asked.

Sabine pulled herself into the moment and heard the faintest trill of the front bell's ring. Her delivery instructions had been ignored. "Seems it is," she said, "probably UPS. I'll be right back."

A shadowed figure holding what seemed to be a large package on the other side of the frosted panes in the door, confirmed her suspicion. Glad the luggage lost on her flight weeks ago had finally arrived, Sabine unbolted the door and opened it wide.

Stunned, with nothing between them but air, Sabine found her arms folded, silent and staring until the woman in front of her, Vivian Rivera, Renee's wife spoke.

"Renee's things, from when she was little. Thought you should have them."

"This is twice in an hour that I don't know what to say."

"Nothing. Say nothing. Take the box, so I can go, before it gets weirder."

Sabine hesitated, un-nested her arms—halting her reach while gesturing for the burden. "Would you like to see them?" Sabine asked.

"Another time, maybe."

"Sure. Sure. Uh, let me give you a card," Sabine said.

Vivian put the box down and backed away from the door. "I can Google," she said, "Baby steps. I'll see you." And she left, fast feet down the stone stairs and a quickly to her van that she had left running at the curb. Sabine brought the box in, closing the door with her foot.

Betsey shook the matches at the edge of the foyer.

“Okay. So that happened. You win Weird for the day, but you should know something,” Betsey said.

Sabine set the box with others near the door that were still taped closed. She used her thumb to move a thick strand of red hair that had fallen over her face to behind her ear and as she stood straight again, looked at her guest, waiting.

“That woman is Cameron’s sponsor,” Betsey said.

The relationship between Vivian and Sabine would have been obvious to anyone willing to see. Yet here was a native, with no idea Vivian Rivera was her sister-in-law. The Cleary family itself, except Sabine and her mother, had no idea Renee had ever married. “Ah, Mother. Of course no one knows,” Sabine heard herself muse.

“Payroll or invoice?” Betsey asked.

Is there an empowerment clause in his order?”

“There is.”

“I’m relieved to hear that and not, because what that means is El Pasco’s best interest ruling was to kick this kid like a can to somewhere else.”

“They’ve made it clear he’s not one of their own and not wanted back.”

“Well, there’s your hell. Geezus fuck, Bets, you guys know how to pick them.”

“It comes with the specific profile of client we accept.”

Sabine’s eyebrows shot up. “Back up,” she said.

She shook another cigarette loose and held it between her fingers. “You said earlier something about auctioned labor.”

“The city contract provides the main funding for the foundation that guarantees these kids’ restitution is paid if they meet requirements. And before you judge, know that to my

knowledge, no one else is doing this, Sabine. This is more than three hots and cot—it isn't perfect, but I've seen it work. Most cases coming through the Coltrane program graduate into productive, adult lives and a big part of that comes from the ability to walk away with a fresh start."

"And what about sponsors you mentioned?"

"It's a program, cooperative with city and county government. Don't ask me how they pulled it off. Business owners get a tax incentive to host boys as employees. Payroll responsibility is split sixty-forty, owner-foundation. The Home holds almost all the boys' wages in trust until they graduate. All this is mandatory program participation."

"Betsey—this—is not okay—it's toxic, the power balance alone—there's no room for him to make developmentally appropriate mistakes. I don't know this Betsey Cooper. How do you?" Sabine raised her voice further. "The answer, okay—the solution, right—is courts forgive those impossible sums. This—holy fuck, Betsey, holy-actual-fuck. I can't believe you don't see—this program supports litigious abuse of the most vulnerable children in State care. These kids are made to fund their prison masters. I don't know how it gets more fucked up."

"When you put it that way it's a mess."

"A mess. Do you realize what you're asking me to do?"

"Do you realize what it has cost me to stick around long enough to make the ask? Look, if he can be reached, if it isn't already too late, you can put your activism to actual work. The system forces these providers into practices that fund contractual obligations and rehabilitate the minors in their care with the same money. Yes, okay, it's a mess, and yes that's a polite term for the reality, but there's no choice. Save some or lose all," Betsey said.

The women sat silent for a moment.

“There’s a high risk he’ll reject therapy without his mother’s endorsement.”

“Contact is barred, not stayed, meaning—”

Sabine shook her open hand beside her face, squeezing her eyes shut.

“I—I know the difference, Bets. Just get me his brief and don’t hold your breath.”

Chapter 13

Re-association

Sabine woke to a text from her website's email service, craving a cigarette. She hit the link. The message was from Vivian, 'text me when you get this.' There was a number. She dropped the phone on her chest and reached over her head for the nicotine gum blister pack on the end table. Her neck was stiff and she wore the paint-lashed clothes she had been when she collapsed onto the sofa. She chewed. The gum bit back her desire to smoke. She sat up and admired the morning sun's glow in her finished reading room for a moment before rising and heading downstairs, looking at her phone screen. Her thumb hovered at the number Vivian provided. There was really no telling what might happen if she responded. Time only heals the closed wound. She had planned to work out re-homing Alvia and Hugh when she moved back. Trouble was she hadn't shared that plan with any but Alvia and Hugh.

She set her phone on the dinette table and set went into her kitchen to make coffee, regretting that she hadn't dealt with custody of the ravens ahead of her move. It would have been the perfect opportunity to talk a bit about the rest from a comfortable distance.

Now, the birds were integral to her client's therapy, and if Vivian asked for them again, Sabine would have to decline and cite confidentiality when she demanded to know why. She fought a fierce urge for a cigarette when she smelled the coffee brewing. She chewed harder and shook a matchbox laying next to the coffee machine, one of several laying around the house, for re-association purposes.

Coffee in front of her, she opened the number, selected text and typed,

'hey girl it's been a minute' then deleted it. She typed another message, 'surprised to hear from you' and deleted it. Vivian said she can Google. And she's nothing if not resourceful. Can't

be surprised. She typed again, ‘just got this. . . coffee at Bedo’s??’ and felt it communicated readiness and took a little bit of risk. She sent it.

After a few minutes she got a reply, ‘Waiting on repair crew. My bakery 30 mins?’ appeared on her screen.

Sabine showered, dressed, put extra nicotine gum in two pockets, fretted and mentally prepared a compromise about Hugh and Alvia, then she went.

Δ

Sitting on stools at a prep table, fresh coffee and blueberry tarts served, Vivian broke into Sabine’s gesture. “Actually, I didn’t contact you about the birds,” she said. “I want to talk to you about Cameron Oren.”

“Oh.” Sabine heard the surprise in her voice. “Uh, I . . .can’t. Privilege.”

“Yeah, I-I know. I do. Information here is one-way. He’s a mess but there’s a lot of good in him, kinda buried or crushed maybe—from day to day it’s hard to tell, ya know?”

“He’s . . . Complex,” Sabine agreed.

Vivian’s eyes misted. “And you know about Alyssa’s condition.”

Sabine thought for a moment and recalled Alyssa’s hardening mitral valve issues. “Yes,” Sabine said.

“Has something changed recently?” Sabine asked.

“She still runs. Doctor says it shouldn’t, but it helps keep everything elastic . . .”

“Is there a donor. She’s got to be at top of the list with her age and healthy habits,” Sabine said.

“She won’t and she insists on a do-not-resuscitate order. Anyway, she’s in love with the boy and I think it’s the real thing.”

“Does he know?”

“Guessing, I’d say he doesn’t. Sabine. I thought you should know.”

“I appreciate that. It’s good to know these things.”

They sipped their coffee. Sabine complimented the tart. Vivian promised to send her with one and they sipped more coffee.

“What are we talking, here? Months, weeks?” Sabine asked.

“We don’t know.”

Awkward silence stretched on.

“I’m sorry,” Sabine finally said. “She’s beaten every prognosis for so long.”

“Don’t be. I just wanted you know that when that time comes, I’m here for that boy. Anything I can do.”

“Same for you. I’m here. Uh, about Hugh and . . .”

“Stop, okay? I understand. I want them, but you need them. And they don’t care either way. They’re fine where they are. It wasn’t easy getting here but I’m finally good where I am, too.”

“You’re ahead of me, then,” Sabine said.

Chapter 14

Get Gone

February, 2013

Weeks of Cameron wearing his pants legs above his ankles, rolled so it looked on purpose, though he didn't have shoes Bohemian enough to rock that look, had drawn from Susan promises to buy him new jeans and shirts the minute she was paid. Cameron was in blue boxers, standing on a cushioned dinette chair. His mother had a tailor's tape, a new, Ticonderoga pencil tucked behind her ear and scrap of blank, sky-blue paper on the table. A deft seamstress when determined, Susan had thrown the yellow tape around her son's waist. Fine fingers negotiated the strip. As he watched her thumbnail pass black tackmarks, numerals, stop at 28, the evening took a hard turn. Monte Fielding, his mother's current producer, entered through his back door, wobbling after stomping the dust off his boots in the mudroom. He dangled an eight ball of cocaine in zip bag between fingers and fisted a 750 of Crown with the other hand, then his eyes got wide. His big-idea-grin beamed, flashing in the middle of his full, brown beard, pink lips, gums and super-white teeth.

"Oh my god," he said, reaching for his camera, "leave that pencil, everything, right where it is." His niche was domestic erotica, a softer genre—thick on suggestion, light on the graphic detail, though not without its demands for titillation. He was fond of shooting in the kitchen, while she washed dishes or chopped vegetables, stirred the soup at the stove, made a grocery list. Also in the mud room at laundry, and it didn't matter to him what his subject's son might witness. In a few she would make her excuses, Cameron thought, promise him he could be late to school while she shopped for his clothes. She'd plead the big paydays as justification—four

times the take than dancing, she'd say. Trade eight weeks for a year anytime, she'd say, and then somehow she'd weave in to it that he would thank her someday for showing him what real freedom looked like.

The blinking red light on the camera almost didn't pester the corner of his eye that evening, but Susan blanched. Quicker than Cameron to comprehend, she wadded the tape into her hand and shooed her son off the chair and out of the kitchen.

On his way up stairs, he glanced in her direction. Bright yellow ends of the tailor's tape sprouted from a gray knit pocket as she put the chair back. Monte walked in behind her, towering, filming, baring her shoulder. She demurred, her hand went for her pencil. He stopped her, said something close to her ear. Cameron took his cue to get gone.

Outside his bedroom door, he listened. There was argument—acting or real Cameron wasn't sure—then the dinette table leg scooted over the stone floor. Laughter and then talk and finally, the abrupt quiet that he always imagined was the sound of a trap set; a spring extends as the jaws pry open, the tensioner clicks, like Susan's bare, quick feet taking the tile steps to the second floor. Cameron knew what was next and didn't want to hear it again, so, to speed things up and keep the hugs and the tears and the promises that will never be kept out of it entirely, he walked into the bathroom. His fingers snapped the lock in place and his back made a soft thud against the painted, pine door.

They had come to Tulsa seven weeks ago for a shoot that was to go a year or almost—three fat checks, maybe a fourth. Six weeks was a long stay for Susan, and not near enough time for Cameron, aged fifteen, to find his kind of people, but if she'd keep her word, he still had some time. The consumers of his mother's work were seldom his age and never girls.

Susan knocked. Cameron wished he'd have more than the wind for company that night, wished for friend's house to sleep over, or camp in a backyard, maybe, but it was not be. It always took outsiders a good while to break in. He'd almost done it, in different places, a few times. From the other side of the door, Susan made her case. Every time was always the last time.

His skin, bare against the cool bathroom door, his feet made colder by red granite tile that had lost its top finish, he postured his mind for gathering only the facts immediately affecting him, and to let the door be the hedge that held away the empty word. There'd be people over. It was work, yes, but not the kind for kids to around while it's done. Come back at dawn, when it was safe.

The park, outside the subdivision, on the other side of the tracks, would have to do, he thought. There was deadfall to be had. Maybe the culvert was empty, tonight—or, with a fire going, he might attract another of the displaced. He'd share. Maybe the night would be kinder, now closer to March, than it was earlier in the month.

It was too early in the evening for any oilfield activity and besides there were no places in the fence he could cross. The the culvert in the park was the best protection from wind. Out of habit, he gathered burnable bits, sticks, paper and dry grass that grew in little clumps at chain link fences. Pickings were slim. He had almost filled a coat pocket when he noticed a streetlamp, which he hadn't seen lit before, had revealed an abandoned building he had noticed before. Cameron walked around the side of the structure, wondering if there was way inside.

There had once been a painted sign on the brickwork, dark green against a light background. Perhaps it once advertised the business done here, but he couldn't read it. Windows on the second floor, a line of ten, multi-paned and tall as doors, were intact but lightless. The

grand old doors, probably eight feet high with large brass handles had chain run through them. The racket he made, while he inspected the lock, triggered a sudden instinct to hold still. He couldn't tell if he was being paranoid or he felt someone watching him. Cameron walked back up the sidewalk toward the street lamp. By chance, he glanced at movement behind him. Whatever was here it didn't matter anymore, the culvert, he already knew; it was cold even with a fire, but it was safe. He knew better than to run; if there were others, he'd not see them in time. He made the streetlamp at the bend and walked a little faster.

“That culvert with the sycamores. That's where you headed, isn't it?” someone said behind him.

Cameron walked faster.

“It's running with water,” the voice shouted.

Cameron slowed and finally stopped walking. He turned around. The young stranger had moved closer. Cameron's face betrayed his crisis.

“Don't be so surprised. Water, not you or me, is what it was built for.”

He tried but couldn't decide whether the person speaking was male or female.

Cameron pointed at the building. “Is it warm?” he asked.

“What's your name?” she asked.

“Cameron,” he answered.

“Joan.”

Δ

When he woke, Joan was no where around. He returned to Monte's house, surprised that the door was not locked and that he didn't have to get on the roof to climb through his bedroom window. Monte was passed out downstairs at the kitchen table. Actual breakfast was out of the

question. Only his jacket made any sound as he took the stairs. At the top of the stairs were two bedrooms, one his and one Susan's. Between them was the bathroom. The door to his mother's room was closed, but that didn't mean she was in there asleep, especially this close to a payday, but then again, Monte's state suggested she might be, and if the door was closed and she was in there, it was locked, too. He went straight into his bedroom and laid down, tattered brown hightop Converse and all, pulling a blanket over him. He was soon warm enough to sleep.

It was late morning and overcast in this flat suburb when he woke. He stood at his window, raisin-almond granola crumbs shuffling in his palm, kicking himself for eating his emergency food stash in non-emergencies. He watched Susan come, carrying two large shopping bags, in miniature because of the distance and his second-floor perspective, her arms hung with weight. Cameron wondered if she might have done better bringing food. He knew that would mean admitting a problem, but it was also possible she wasn't aware of Monte's crash site. Not that it mattered very much; either way she would play as if what was next was perfectly natural, and there still wouldn't be any breakfast. It would be nice, Cameron thought, if she had bought him shoes, too, though he didn't get his hopes up because she hadn't asked his size. Then, just as he heard the gate latch clack and she cleared the hedge overgrowing its post, he realized that the three shirts and two pair of jeans he was promised would fit in the bottom of one of those huge, full bags. Half up the walk, the garage cut her from his sight and he waited there, looking at the haze over the oilfields, listening for the door.

He often stayed in his room, enjoying the novel security of four walls, the plain and neutral tan that they were, dry and warm. It was of modest size. A twin bed could have gone on any wall, the same with the little writing table and its cane seat chair. There was an unused dresser, next to the window, facing the oilfields not extremely far east. Cameron preferred to

keep his things in his travel bag, where he was sure not to lose them. The air through his open window was only fresh at night, when the breeze blew against the smell of raw crude and spent gasses. Sometimes, at night, workers would flame off gas vents and he would sit in his chair, mesmerized by the reflection of flames in the field afloat on his window, wishing he could be one of those men with the power to send a column of fire thirty, fifty, sixty feet into the air whenever he wanted. Theirs was the power let rage have its way.

He heard her getting through the door downstairs, rustling, then a pause, perhaps hanging her coat. Barely a whisper, she took the stairs. She knocked. Cameron opened.

She had his shopping in one hand and a new pair of sneakers in the other. Her eye sockets were dark. Her red hair was tied back tight. Her skin looked papery, just in from the cold. She worked her best distraction, trying to hide that all five feet of her slight frame trembled, fussing with a scarf. Under it, a dark bruise crawled up her neck. Cameron stepped aside and closed the door behind his mother.

“We’re taking one bag and we’ll take turns carrying,” Susan said. “We’ll be frontier people again. It will be fun.”

Cameron breathed, seeing she was serious. He loosened his grip on hope they’d stay the year, he’d finish tenth possibly with a girlfriend, enjoy a summer. There’d be none of that nonsense, of course, and it was just as well, all things considered.

“I have a history midterm on Monday.”

“I’m sure, under the circumstances...”

“I was gonna maybe see about track, because my grade average is solid.”

“Listen to me, Cameron. It’s not safe here anymore. Okay, honey? We have to go before he wakes up. I have decent work out west. Trust Mommy. One last time, I swear.”

He shouldn't have understood, but he did. The open road was her only escape, and anyway, life braving the byways actually wasn't that bad when it was just the two of them against harm, thirst and hunger. It was better this way, Cameron thought, get gone before anyone at school recognized her.

Chapter 15

Acceptance

She must have slipped into horticulture class unnoticed. James Battenfeld, Cameron's bench mate, tapped his arm and left the bench, on lookout for the teacher, Mr Thames. Alyssa took Cameron's hand and they slipped outside the greenhouse.

"Well?" she asked.

He'd been running with her since she showed him the heartbeats. He tried to remember the exact start date, but too much had happened between then and now. It must have been mid-September. He was confused by her behavior. They had developed a schedule and Vivian arranged work in the kitchen around it. He'd fully accepted already what she felt the need to formally address. And why now, in mid-October? If he was honest, and he wasn't quite willing to show it if he was, he was offended. He had agonized for days how talk with her, since she insisted on an answer, bearing a strange sense his decision, now that it was demanded, was the border between opposites. What opposed what, he still hadn't sorted.

He looked into her troubled eyes.

"Look, I'm not mad or anything like that," Cameron said. "I guess . . . I kinda considered it a done deal from the night at the bench, is all."

"The deal was done that day on the lunchroom, Cameron. When I read your shirt, that was it for me, but on this I need a commitment—sorry if that's weird."

For days, the old tracks brought the same cargo, the sayings hauling guilt and anger, all bound for him, but he wouldn't be boarding the same old train today.

His numbers hadn't made themselves known so he wasn't certain he walked the right path. Yet, without much from him, things were working out, strangely and in unexpected ways.

His intuition spoke up. Today, his mother's way would not win. Today, he would do what he should have for David; he would return the trust placed in him.

"Okay," Cameron said.

"You sure? Kinda seems like you're not."

"I wasn't at first, but not because I didn't want to do it. I wanted to right away."

"I know."

"I'm in. I guess, thinking about it now, I just had to get something right in my head first."

"I totally get that. It's a lot."

"Look, I'm sorry."

"Why sorry?"

"I didn't...talk to you about it. I let you hang."

She moved closer to him, put a hand on his hip.

"You did. But we're good now, right?" she said.

"You know, it might sound really weird, but I am now that we talked. I never do that."

"I know," Alyssa said. "I'm glad you did this time."

"It doesn't come naturally."

"Come on. Thames has already taken roll."

"What? Where?" Cameron asked.

"Farley's, for ice cream."

"Rupert goes there, Neil, too," Cameron said.

"I'm starting to think I'm the problem."

"Not for me."

Alyssa quizzed him with her eyes.

“Okay, okay. I promised I would keep us a secret from Home staff.”

“Um. Okay. Why?”

“Dating isn’t outright banned, like I thought, but it’s not encouraged either. It makes staff look closer at curfews and outings and it gets harder to earn points and everything else goes to hell after a while; it gets pretty ridiculous for everyone. Eventually, they call the girl’s parents.”

“I can tell you now, Viv would tell them step by step how to fuck off.”

“Still, it’s the others, too. It’s weird, I know.”

“Hold on,” she said. She took her phone out and scrolled, then dialed. When the other end picked up, Alyssa selected the speaker option, “Farley’s Old Fashioned, how can I help?”

Alyssa affected a business tone. “Hey yeah, I’ve tried cells and got no answer. Need to follow up . . . I’m looking for a couple peace officers, Rupert Coltrane or Neil—don’t know his last name, brownish gray hair, square-ish glasses, works at that home on the hill, on Old Main . . .”

The woman knew Neil, but also couldn’t recall his last name. “Neither one’s here right now, ma’am,” she said.

“Thank you,” Alyssa said. “You have a great day.”

“Uh, huh, hon, you too,” the woman said.

Alyssa disconnected the call. “You game?” she asked Cameron.

Chapter 16

Office Visit

Cameron liked the therapy sessions feeding the ravens and grooming the aviary at Sabine's house much better than those in her office. Less talking. He stood on a lane that ran along the backs of historic adobe houses that the hospital had repurposed into stand-alone offices. The front yards and courtyards in town had sand, raked in swirls around the adamant, native flora; yuccas, cacti, mesquite and the occasional, perennial mimosa, and wherever one may have sprung a thousand years before, the Joshua Tree, the Mojave's immortals. There were lawns in town. Owing to the value of water, they were small feats of horticulture, pampered oddities of ornament, perhaps status, almost petty. Here, in this so-called reserve, ornament took nature and history hostage.

He'd seen around town a few cultivars, some he knew and others he didn't. The tamarind tree, he knew from Texas; several of these grew here, old enough they had knuckled limbs. Stunted grapevines also grew, airy and now bare, forming a hedge, a natural fence, if the imagination allowed, against the enormous lawn surrounding. There was a subtler, more grotesque corruption represented in the grounds of the hospital than in town, nature in reserve is caricature.

He followed the gravel until to a scratch no wider than a rabbit is long, a cut through a reservation of desert grasses, barrel and pancake cacti which he loathed walking through.

Someone called out.

He looked up and saw Sabine, whose red hair, brown suede skirt and leaner build than he ever noticed before somehow reminded him of Susan. He found himself struck and standing fast

at his spot because at no other time working with her had there been any such association. Today, he distrusted her for no reason. Nausea rose.

Today, he wasn't keen on catching the hair-like needles offered by several clumps of waist-to-ribcage-high pancake cacti hugging the cut. Neither was he willing to roll his sleeves down, because for one thing, the shirt was thin and wouldn't protect him anyway, and for another, he would be keeping his dignity.

The specialist walked out of sight toward the entrance to the adobe. Clear of the cacti, which he had passed with his arms raised over his head, he stood on the red brick walk. He saw her, waiting at the front door. When Cameron was close, she motioned him to stop.

"Honesty is key, Cameron."

"One would think," he answered.

She moved away from the narrow, garrison-style front door, moving to one side of the brick walkway winding past a stand of tall Joshua Trees. She motioned Cameron up to walk beside her. He didn't want to. This was weird. He usually just walked inside and sat down.

She stopped at a timber picket gate set between two, short columns of concrete, painted beige. "I want this understood going forward. Truth and fact are different things. We're after your truth, here, and it only works if you agree to always try to get there."

She leaned in and grasped the black iron latch and lifted.

It was warm and muggy inside. She hadn't yet settled in. The air conditioner pushed not quite cold air. A plaque, brass, engraved and in need of shine, set at the corner of the desk on an odd angle; it read, Sabine A. Cleary, LCSW. On the stained concrete floor, a square clock with nickel finish hands and quarter bars for its face, leaned against her desk. Its second hand swept.

A rolled rug leaned against the built-in shelving and a trio of heavy-looking boxes were grouped on the waxed, slab floor next to it. Though she had placed three desk lamps around the office, the walls, a deep mud red and the shelving woodwork and around doors and windows, blackened with age and oils, absorbed their glows.

Sabine sat behind her desk making a brief notation then leaned back in her chair.

Cameron sat, swaddled in an olive drab, rip-stop nylon camping chair, sweating and thinking over the prior five minutes. Listening through the laboring window unit's hum, he imagined the clock's tick.

Sabine drew the pad from her desk into her lap and made notes, then, placing it back on the desk, she stood and brought her folding chair around and sat opposite Cameron. Arranging her suede skirt over her crossed legs, she spoke. "Here is the question that matters most. What made Cameron Dugan into Cameron Oren?"

"How's that?"

"Tell me, if you can, who you are and how you became yourself," Sabine insisted.

Cameron thought for a long time how to answer.

Before all this, he had called himself Cameron Dugan all his life. Susan had a birth certificate, apparently fake, saying that was his name. His mother also liked to say they were Irish gypsies, except to real Irish gypsies.

"It was July 17, exactly two weeks after my birthday, last year in Saragossa, Texas: things changed for me then and there."

A pumper truck's horn dogs his ears as he sprints away from the smoke, toward Sam's Motor Lodge, to room 2-B, where he and his mother were staying.

“We were leaving soon—had tickets laying on top of the TV for a 9:10 bus out to Santa Fe before my mom got robbed.” It rushed upon him again, remembering the blood drummed through his ears, rushed as he ran from deputies, repeating to himself, over and over David was all right, David would live.

“There was this guy, my age with a rolling bin, he sees me, we even talk, but I’m not worried. We are all but gone and it takes a long time for a local to get where they know your face. I smell like gas, have lint all over me—then I’m running.

“In the shade behind a shopping center, I get in behind a trailer parked there. I don’t wait long before I hear the deputy who was chasing me catch up. I take off my shirt, wrap my hands in it to hide the smell, praying I won’t get caught. I’m thinking if I hold my breath and can’t smell it, that this deputy might not either. All I want is for them to lose interest.”

The smell of smoke hung in the air, stiffer gusts brought wet soot smell, too.

“I have one job at that point. One job.”

His throat felt dry. He’d said more than he wanted.

“What happens next,” Sabine asked.

Wariness tugged him, a dull alarm, guilt he hadn’t decided to heed, the rote parade of Susan’s wisdom. He couldn’t stop himself.

“To my left,—more than ten yards off—guessing—a mounted deputy comes in off Manilou Street, trots his mare around the end of the shopping center, up a slope there. He comes to a halt. I watch from under the trailer. The mare whickers, horseshoes grind concrete. The lawman who’d run after me, approaches the mare. The deputies talk.”

The deputies turned heads and pointed, explaining, reporting from the directions they'd traveled, agreeing they hadn't seen their suspect. Their radios barked, echoing cold sounds, unintelligible to Cameron.

"I can't make out what they say."

"One of the deputies answers his radio then both walk together toward the street, back the way the mounted one got back here, still talking. I pull my hand free and feel under my waistband where I had tucked my room key. My key is gone."

Fear's cold finger reached him again, sitting in front of Sabine Cleary, retelling the fact.

"I wrap my hands again and wait with the skin on my back against the trailer's tire . . . for probably half an hour."

"Then what," Sabine asked.

Cameron recalled the steel, slat fence around the motel and two ways into it. The driveway, off Manilou—to be avoided—and the other way in was around back, under the oaks, through the gate near the office.

"Before I know it, I'm hurrying behind the motel. The iron gate to the pass-through is tied open. Then I can't see the 2-B stencil on the second door down because it's open and a deputy stands there. Susan's voice sounds serious and strange."

A bulky deputy, wearing brown cowboy boots, jeans, a tan uniform shirt and a black ball cap, stood with his back to the doorframe, arms folded over his chest, watching up and down the walk. Two Reeves County Sheriff's Deputy cruisers, their metallic green tops with sand fenders and door panels, idled nearby.

“I hear radio static and then a run of words that don’t make sense. I hear a horse chuff but can’t see it. Another deputy, round through the middle and balding, walks out of the room saying something to someone still inside. Huffing, he steps past the guy on watch. The watchman spots me, drops his big, folded arms and walks my way. He’s blocking my view of another deputy assisting Susan, in handcuffs, into a waiting cruiser. You don’t want to see that, he says.”

Cameron remembered looking at the deputy’s smooth, shaven face and feeling right away he was an honest man. His name tag read R. Mendez.

“Deputy Mendez dangles my lost key on the green fob. ‘Put your shirt on,’ he says. I’m doing it while he asks if there is something I’d like to tell him.”

Thinking about it, telling the story out loud to someone, Cameron felt a cringe keener than in the moment it had happened. He had known better than to say anything, but like now—spilling his guts to a relative stranger—once he started talking, he couldn’t stop.

“I get exhausted with talking after a while and stop. The entire time, Deputy Mendez says nothing. Then I have to know what is happening, what comes next. I ask where they were taking her. To jail, he says. I keep asking what happens next.”

Mendez placed a large hand Cameron’s shoulder and Cameron, sitting there remembering, he was still surprised he hadn’t flinched. “Let’s sit,” he remembered Mendez said.

“There is a wrought iron park bench sitting on the same wall as the lobby door. We sit side by side, staring ahead, breathing gasoline fumes coming off my hands. Deputy Mendez says a boy was hurt in my fire. I tell him I never meant to hurt anyone. Mendez says he has a question, says I don’t have to answer it. He leans forward and looks me in the eye and asks if I

know my mother was moving marijuana through our motel room. I tell him I didn't know exactly what she was doing, but everybody has to eat."

Mendez held Cameron's gaze an instant and broke it, settling back against the curved, wrought iron backrest of the bench.

Retelling, Cameron heard not the unhung clock ticking near the floor, nor the window unit's hum change pitch. He heard instead a new thought, the sound of something he still didn't know what, but it was new. A detail he'd glossed past now emerged.

"He asks me when was the last time I ate a hot meal. Out of his cruiser he digs a sweatshirt for me, bags my shirt. And we go eat. I'm up front, looking at the shotgun bolted to the dash, and radio and he says somebody's coming from El Pasco. He says his jail can't safely house juveniles and I kind of wish it could."

"Pause there," Sabine said.

It took Cameron a minute of silence to gather himself from the place in his mind where he'd been. He was glad for two reasons Sabine had stopped him. One, it rattled him how she'd drawn that much from him by asking a question he didn't quite know how to answer. He just knew she'd turn him out and that would be that. And the second reason was, he would never admit to anyone how much it scared him he was never so happy as he'd been in the weeks following that fire.

He had quickly made his peace with almost constant supervision, with rules and shower shoes and coarse socks, even the chaffed ankles that shuffling in manacles caused, didn't much bother him because though he walked through fenced corridors topped with byzantine wire, and the whole way, his too-small black, canvas sneakers pinched his toes. Regardless, he walked to

school every morning. He felt shame in his satisfaction using Pepsodent tooth paste and was thankful for plentiful, if cheap, deodorant. He felt safe behind dead-bolted doors. Then the bland food, the main object of scorn with everyone else in the place, and there he was grateful for every bite, feeling safe in a cage.

“I think that’s a good start, Cameron. Saturday, let’s continue. Would you prefer morning or afternoon?” Sabine said.

“Saturday,” Cameron asked.

“Yes. Going forward, I’ll want to keep the Wednesday and make Saturday appointments earlier. How is nine-thirty?” Sabine said.

Cameron’s thumbnail found the denim seam at his thigh. “I can ask,” he hedged. “I work at the bakery five to eleven Saturdays, which is pretty cool because I miss Field Day entirely.”

Sabine stood, walked around behind her desk and bent over her notepad, writing.

“The earliest you can get free then. We have lots to do. I’ll call Ms. Cooper,” Sabine A. Cleary, LCSW, said.

Chapter 17

Theories

Until Cameron's evaluation, Sabine hadn't been certain Hugh and Alvia were regularly getting out, though it was no shock. She had unnecessarily complicated the day appointed to brief by phone Betsey Cooper on Cameron Oren. She was irrationally determined to prove a thing she already knew was true.

A political commentary podcast played in her coat pocket as she walked to her new office. Hugh and Alvia must have left the aviary before dawn. If they were out, they'd come to the voices, she hoped. Sabine anticipated the day in front of her, already planning what wine to pick up on her way home. The memories wouldn't go back to sleep.



Seeing Renee to her flight from Memphis back to Flagstaff, Sabine drove straight home from the airport, 98.1 The Max played, whispering stray melody and lyric into road noise. She was hoping her sister's ravens wouldn't have to stay with her for long, but felt good about being helpful. Once home, she shuddered when she checked Hugh and Alvia's room, ashamed, thinking how once more, she and her mother would agree; kept animals require safekeeping. Dependence brought a basic obligation to ensure their safety, she would say.

The senior Ms Cleary had the aviary built, not because she cared about the birds but because she wouldn't have the ravens loose in the house and she wouldn't have them coming and going through Renee's bedroom window. Once they had been moved outside, Renee still let them come and go.

Sabine went through her second floor apartment, with all-purpose cleaner and paper towels, looking for things fiddled with and bird poop, resolved to defy her sister's wishes that Hugh and Alvia at least have the run of her apartment, if they couldn't go outside, when a close colleague dropped by and invited Sabine to brunch on Beale Street.

It was the last day of Memphis in May and she'd wanted to spend time with Gina Bradley, her closest colleague, and she thought, what the hell. She checked the raven's room, a small bedroom that had been her study before she'd agreed to foster the birds. They were perched next to separate windows. She made double sure the finch wire screens, installed in the three windows were secure and that the birds were watered, had toys available and had food. She and Gina went.

What Sabine had planned to be a late morning on the town turned into the thick of an afternoon before she remembered the ravens had been alone for several hours.

It was simple before Renee died. Sabine agreed to foster Alvia and Hugh, because it would give Renee and Vivian time to work out their raven problem, together. A few months at most, was the plan.

There wasn't a plan for what Alyssa told her that evening. Only emergency leave, a plane to Flagstaff for her and the birds and a rental to Cole's Junction. Sabine still remembered little more of that day.

She remembered arranging the wake, the flowers and food, the booze, everything ordered and every detail set. The kitchen help hummed over glazed hams and baked potatoes. The valets had quartered off, red coats and clad in creased slate blue, worsted wool trousers—stuffed men, silvered temples. Her mother's fainting spell had occurred in the convenient presence of Dr Wolcroft.

Sabine, sensing her moment, slipped into the butler's pantry adjacent the study. She set down a round platter of whiskeys and slipped both hands from her black satin gloves, breathing to thank she'd thought to powder her hands. She pressed the brass button in the pocket door, and the latch snapped. Her hands placed high against the door, she took a breath. She had decided the birds would be happier with Vivian and Alyssa in their home, with Renee's things, her smells, sounds and people most familiar to them, tender voices the birds had heard all their lives. They needed their family. The only problem was doing it discreetly, because so far as the senior Missus Cleary had known, Vivian and Renee had been friends and business partners, nothing more. So, the only difficulty Sabine had no answer for was how to explain giving the last of her sister's living memory to a business partner? She was terrible at the clandestine, horrid. She tried removing a business card she planned to give Vivian from her bra, as she would have to while carrying the drink tray. Damp with perspiration it, hung. That will never do, she thought, banishing the image of one of her breasts debuted to a room full of uncles. She removed it and tore it half. The half with her cell number, she folded and tucked it under lace. She put her gloves back on, lifted the tray of whiskeys and unlocked the opposite pantry door, the one leading into the study, where Renee lay, pretty as ever, as if asleep, in her sky-blue casket.

Δ

She dumped on herself again, unable to leave the trenches of her regret, robbed of the yellow oak band of sunrise bumping the gray-black cloud ceiling, regretting again she hadn't thought to meet her sister's wife somewhere in town before the wake. She'd have remembered Vivian didn't drink. She cringed recalling clearly the locked, rosewood cabinets of the butler's pantry, the shelves and their tea cups, saucers, decanters, and the hard, folding stool where she

sat, resolved to find a way to get Hugh and Alvia home, where they belonged, then remembered how that sentiment was ruined.

She saw, now, that Vivian, like herself, had been in deep shock. Confused and in unimaginable pain, offended and for good reason, Vivian had come nonetheless and braved the ignorance because that day wasn't about herself or anyone still among living; for Vivian it was all about Renee, who went to the library and then was gone. It was about saying goodbye too soon, and about rage and denial and wounds left open and all the little things Vivian loved in Renee being blown loose of the tree that was their life. It was too late, but Sabine, on hindsight, saw it all.

This morning, back in Cole's Junction, Sabine walked. On the podcast playing on her phone in her pocket, a National Public Radio panel discussed China trade deficits and the Trans Pacific Partnership. She was about a mile from her house and hadn't seen the ravens. She began to be afraid it was Memphis all over again and didn't understand why Hugh and Alvia felt the need to escape any attempt made to keep them safe. They were impossible and they made her crazy and she loved them because Renee had loved them.

△

Gina dropped Sabine at her apartment. Inside, she was only mildly surprised to find the door to her former study open and the birds gone, probably through her bedroom window, though the kitchen window was up, too. She made a mental note to have double screens installed.

If Alvia and Hugh had been not missing, Overton Park would have been beautiful. She thought for a moment, trying to wedge something positive into her panic, and decided whether

she was out in search of her sister's birds or not, evening walks in May were the best. She had fallen in love with the evenings of Midtown. So graced, the city made for the eye blues of its air and golds of its dust. As she cleared a walking trail, the sunlight had taken orange into its palette and her silhouette spanned the paved path with the long shadows of trees. She tightened the band holding her humidified hair and rested her hands on her hips. She threw her shoulders back, fighting panic, forbidding tears. She would find them, she knew, but she found herself very afraid of the space between then and now.

Though Renee had believed differently, Sabine knew there wasn't a magical reason why Alvia and Hugh responded to human speech. Still hatchlings when she and her sister rescued them, her sister had maternally bonded with them. A human voice is to them safety and plenty. The birds' response was hardwired. Whether the birds had the power of reason, as Renee had often insisted they did, was not what bothered her about luring them out of Overton Park with voice. What bothered her was that she'd adopted into her speech the softer tones of southern charm, and to get her sister's ravens to safety, she'd have to affect her hometown's flat inflection. Every feeling that went with that made finding the birds almost not worth it.

Δ

Sabine chided herself; it was ridiculous, to put herself through this every time they left the enclosure, yet in her deep soul she couldn't bear it if anything happened to them. Concentrating on her first task of the day, she resolved that there had to be a way to reach her client and that she'd find it.

She suspected that deeper down than most people have ever seen, Cameron wanted to talk about his mother. Sabine suspected the topic was wrapped in loyalty barriers and some

maternal idolization and couldn't be demanded of him. The fires portended the need for control and might indicate sexual abuse. She'll tell Betsey he is likely highly observant and predict he's typically horrified if caught off guard. Both therapists had seen this before; fortification against risk was a defining trait of parental neglect survivors. The work will continue exploring survival as a concept. With his mother barred, ideal resolution was not to be had. The alternative was off to a good start. Her client would know well what to avoid, denying access into his relationship with his mother, steering their time into anything else. Betsey would know that with Sabine brutal frankness was always out front, being that most adolescents, and especially those with defiance issues respond well to it. She told herself that this, and not some other agenda, was likely why they contacted her and not someone else.

Sabine would propose using the birds in treatment. She wondered, reflecting upon how Hugh was especially interested in Cameron, if her sister's birds and her client shared an affinity; they both longed to leave their cages.

Turning onto the path through the hospital's so-called nature reserve, the podcast still playing, there was no sign of Alvia or Hugh. Renee always said she could feel them near. Sabine made no such claim, but she knew from experience they could be close or nowhere near and that she'd not see them until they wanted her to, or one of them, often Alvia stumbling, made a sudden move. If they were out, she reasoned, experience told her that eventually they'd show themselves to her. The gloat was part of the game.

The process of attracting their attention was something that combined hide-and-seek and Marco-Polo. She reasoned she had imposed it, unintentionally, as an effective means to get them to safety. If they showed themselves, it was because she had trained them to and if they didn't, it was because they had fooled her into thinking they'd escaped the aviary and were actually at

home. Either way, when they were missing, it was hard denying their intelligence, even if her training contradicted it's existence.

She found her assigned, squat adobe and unlocked the door. Inside the door, she dumped her coat into an overstuffed chair and set her thermal mug and keys on the table beside it. Pushing the door closed, she didn't notice it hadn't latched because she was focused on getting sunlight, meager as it was today, inside. She crossed the room and pulled open the old, hinged shutters covering the window beside her desk, letting the day's platinum overcast inside. She opened the shutters behind her desk, higher and wider. The adobe's original architects had intended this south-facing window to provide light to read by for most of the daylight hours. A copy of Coltrane Special Intervention Home for Boys handbook lay on her desk. Opened shutters lightened her mood, working wonders against the gloom of red on the walls she hadn't yet had time to correct with a fresh coat of paint. She made a note to hire a painter and invoice it to the hospital. She pulled Cameron's brief file from her desk drawer and set the folder open on her desk and read each page again. She thumbed through the handbook and placed Post-it notes. She fished her phone out of her coat pocket, paused the podcast and dialed Betsey Cooper's personal cell. She picked up on the third ring.

"Sabine, hi," Betsey said.

"Tell me the idea behind the sports requirement," Sabine demanded.

"Good morning to you, too."

"What is it? Everything about it in the handbook is vague."

"The truth?"

"Yes. The truth—for fuck's sake—why would I want anything other?"

“Excellent optics. Some of the best there is for guys like this, if I’m being honest. Judges, victims, if there are any, community and donors, especially like to see it. Rupert’s interest in baseball and football is about keeping everyone on the same schedule.”

“So if I rewrite his treatment what kind of grief am I gonna get?”

“I guess I wasn’t clear when we spoke. You do what it takes. Rupert knows you were right about Rudolf Greene.”

“There isn’t much time, Bets. Nine months. If he were younger by a year, even, not so hard yet . . .this one. . . may need years.”

“It’s none of your business today if he does.”

Sabine cringed.

“I’ve already logged a follow up appointment. I’ll break billing the diagnostic session into payments on the next several invoices and not bill research hours. Gives Texas time to cut a check.”

“Rupert insists upon the Board issuing you a retainer against slow payment.”

“I’ll pass. Ethics. And if he refuses to understand that, try stronger language. I’ll accept pay at public agency rates. I can explain it him in person, but I’m betting you’d rather I didn’t.”

“Can you help him?” Betsey asked.

Sabine saw Hugh’s shadow fall on the polished, concrete floor ahead of his good eye peeking inside the door.

“Maybe,” Sabine said. “I’m re-writing his plan, today, front to back. It’s been a minute since I’ve seen trauma like this when beatings didn’t feature.”

“Near as we know, there wasn’t any of that, thank goodness.”

“That doesn’t make it better, Bets. Trauma, no matter what incited it, takes up residence in the body.”

Sabine’s phone screen showed a missed call from Rivera Family Bakery.

Chapter 18

Guards Down

Tuesday, October 20, 2015

From two stories up, in the catwalks that gave access to the oven stacks, distanced enough from him that the urge to touch him was pleasanter deferred, Alyssa's hands rested on a guardrail as she watched Cameron, working below. He'd been on for four weeks and still resisted help learning how to use their ancient tortilla machine, affectionately known as The Old Man. Though he had produced the quota of two hundred-forty most days and hadn't burned a single one, he worked harder than he had to and it took longer than it should have. The Old Man needed coaxing and was a leisure art when you knew the machine. He wouldn't learn it; he only knew how it fired and got to temperature, how its rollers and trays and chains worked, what its wheels and levers did, which was a sad situation not unlike playing a chess tournament only freshly acquainted with the rules. Today, the release for both catch trays were being stubborn and though he tried everything but the remedy for several minutes, he ultimately left the trays out of his breakdown routine. He now swept the floor below her. He was methodical and thorough, she thought. Neat lines of debris became little piles. It was the tidiest way she'd ever seen a floor swept, but the job was wrong. He hadn't put down desiccant and dry-brushed the clay tile first. Vivian would mist with disinfectant later, after they left for school, and was sure to find the tile gummy, again. Mystery solved, she thought. Not slime, as Vivian feared, just gluten. She left the catwalks by way of the ladder down into the kitchen.

Cameron filled a dustpan, nearby.

"You know, you scared the shit out of my aunt," Alyssa said.

He stood with a full dustpan. "What, how," Cameron asked.

“It’s not all bad though. One thing for sure, she trusts you. She never once thought you weren’t doing something right and that was why the floor was filmy.”

“Filmy?”

“She was obsessed. Thought it was slime or some other bad thing too expensive to fix. Turns out, you’ve been skipping a step.”

“Only when I’m running out of time,” Cameron said. “I swear. I’m sorry. I just can’t work fast enough or something.”

“What if I show you how to get The Old Man to cooperate better?”

“Okay but, what if we did tortillas in the afternoons, before your run, instead?”

“We used to. I’ll see what Viv says,” Alyssa said. She reached for him, hesitant, stroked his arm. “Will you let me help you?”

A storm of conflicting impulses clouded his face. He wore a white apron tied at the waist. Today’s t-shirt read *Hope Responsibly*.

“I think if I don’t, I might get fired or something.”

“At worst, you’d be sent off with a PB&J for lunch. But that’s if she figures out about the floor and I’m not telling her.”

“I will.”

“After we fix it,” Alyssa said.

Cameron looked at the broom handle in his hand, then the floor, quiet for an awkward moment.

“What’s with the phone?” he asked. “I’m not supposed to have one.”

“Music, text and talk.”

What he wanted to know was why he needed a phone, and how he wasn't going to be in trouble for it, but he wasn't sure how to say so.

"I have to know something," Cameron said. "I need the truth."

"Because that's all I do is lie."

"You know what I mean."

"Why does Vivian... why do you care?"

Alyssa searched his eyes and he didn't look away. "Can you hold on a minute," Alyssa asked. She swept her hand into her pocket and out with an iPhone in it, scrolling. She lifted the phone to her ear. Georgia Bennett, Alyssa's best friend since second grade, let her line ring twice.

"You do know what time it is, right?" Georgia said. Alyssa imagined her frizzy brown hair, a bush tied back away from her face with a bandana or underwear, depending, and her too-large Charlie the Unicorn pajamas, her head under a pillow, phone on speaker.

"You're awake? We can FaceTime."

"Heathen. What do you want?"

"Make sure Cameron Oren and me are present today," Alyssa said.

Completely awake now, she wanted to know all about Cameron.

"It's important. Promise," Alyssa said.

"I got you," Georgia said. "You owe me deets though."

Alyssa promised Georgia the details later and they said goodbye. She slipped her phone out of sight as she rejoined Cameron. "I want to show you something," she said. "Upstairs."

He followed her up a set of stairs off the kitchen. At the top, they continued down a narrow passage. “My grandfather used to house all his workers, family mostly. I have my own apartment.”

“Cool,” Cameron said. “Must be nice.”

“Well, I say apartment, but there’s no stove. Aunt Viv says it was grandpa’s trick to get everyone into the kitchen on time.”

Cameron checked his watch.

Alyssa snatched a floral kimono robe draped off the back of her berber sofa and tossed it toward a hamper inside the bathroom door while stuffing the lace bra she found laying under it, behind the cushion. “I can microwave some tea,” she said.

She lifted the blinds on windows overlooking the loading dock, the scrap bins in the lot and Fischer’s Trace. She had had the option of being late, so she could run along with the delivery van on Vivian’s short route this morning. She had chosen this instead. It was a lot of energy with him and her she couldn’t explain away, respect, understanding, acceptance; she had these for Cameron in abundance where he utterly lacked them for himself. She felt for him very like she felt for herself, knowing today may be her last, joy and grief in the same beat; found love, lost in the same stroke. She was crazy for doing this, she knew. It was heinous. But then, if she paused on it long enough, she knew he was dying, too, in a whole other way. He was too beautiful to be a statistic.

Alyssa stood in front of her window. “Alvia and Hugh were my mom’s ravens,” Alyssa said. “I’ve watched for them at night, from here, since knowing, my other aunt was back in town.”

“I have to be leaving here for school in, like, two minutes.”

“Do you have any tests today?”

“No. Why?”

“I was thinking we could take day. It will take at least a day to answer your question.”

Cameron seemed to absorb her meaning.

“Skip, you mean?”

“I have a friend in the attendance office and Vivian is on her route. If we leave now, no one will ever know.”

As he had the day she met him in the lunchroom, when faced with choice obvious to most, he stalled. The guys would know when neither of them turned up in the lunchroom, she thought. He walked over to a bookshelf over a small writing desk housing sketchbooks. He pulled one down, “What’s this?” he asked.

Near the door, Alyssa slung a bag onto her shoulder and held a jacket by the loop in its collar.

“Bring it and I’ll tell you,” she said.

“Where are we going” he asked.

Chapter 19

Skip Day

Alyssa shook car keys loose of the jacket pocket. “Bring the other brown one, too.”

Outside, the security lights still burned as Alyssa took his hand and led him through employee parking, a nook of gravel, with an exit onto Corporal Y’annah Lane, somewhat separated from the receiving area behind the bakery by a shipping container Vivian used for extra storage space. She stopped to unlock the door of a white, vintage Mustang and slipped into the driver’s seat. It seemed all one motion when she flung her jacket and bag over the seat and kept leaning until she forked two fingers under the knob and lifted the passenger side lock.

Two turns, it seemed, and they were out on a thin ribbon of highway through desert, headed east.

“Vegetarian, right?” Alyssa said.

“Never less than that again.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s stupid.”

“It isn’t.”

“I think it’s cruel to eat animals.”

“I agree.”

“But sometimes, being with my mom, I had to.”

“There’s a little place, El Tamina’s in a town called Rice. Best veggie breakfast wrap anywhere,” Alyssa said. “Traditional coffee. Mm, I can’t wait.”

Energetic silence. For a moment, perhaps it was light being just right, or his company, but as he took in the black cloth, white-stitched bench seat, an upgraded, aftermarket instrument

panel and baby blue neoprene headliner and its slight new-car smell, she sensed something so simple and basic to him—what she saw matched what she felt—he was real if he was anything.

“Animals are all I really care about. Animals. Is that weird?”

“Not really. Animals won’t burn you,” Alyssa said. “Like, the human race doesn’t deserve dogs, you know?”

“Exactly,” Cameron said.

“I’ve seen it go the other way too.”

“What do you mean?” Cameron said.

“When we stop,” Alyssa said.

After a minute she lit up again, a big smile and bright words. “Have you ever done this,” she asked. She cranked down her window and allowed her hand to glide, rolling down and up on the air hurtling past the car.

“Window porpoises,” she shouted above the gusting inside the car. “Try it,” she urged.

“What if something hits my hand?”

“It would hurt, but seriously what?”

“It could happen.”

“And I could die tomorrow. If it was dark, I’d give it to ya, because bats at night are thing. Just try it.”

Cameron looked over the delicate hands on the steering wheel, her black hair tied back, the profile of her face in the morning light. He had the window down, feeling silly but willing. Air whipped his sleeve as he lifted his hand into the buffeting force.

“Like this,” Alyssa shouted, “make your hand flat. Pull your thumb in.” She winked at him.

Cameron adjusted, his stiff hand positioned parallel to the road just higher than the sideview mirror.

Alyssa divided her smile between the road and coaching Cameron.

“Now relax your wrist a little and move your elbow up and down—just a little. That’s it,” Alyssa said. “Window porpoise!” she shouted and laughed.

“How does anyone. . .” Cameron began asking. Maintaining control of his wrist and elbow, he watched his own hand rise and dive on the wind, restrained but free, forced but willed. He raised his voice above the road noise. “Who showed you this?” he shouted.

Alyssa became quiet. Her smile softened, the eye staring straight ahead, pooled upon pain and a tear may have slipped.

“When we stop,” she said.

Cameron drew his hand inside and closed the window. Alyssa turned off the highway and in a few short miles they had entered the town of Rice, Arizona, some twenty structures huddled against a bleached county road. Her zeal for the outing had returned as she cruised the length of town, and turned back. She wanted to parallel park in front of the place. But she cruised to the other end of town without stopping and turned around again. “They had a sign—I thought. Hole in the wall, easy to miss. The best though. It was... oh, no.” She pulled over and left the car, leaving her door open over the sidewalk.

Cameron stayed in the car.

Her back was toward him. “No,” Alyssa whined. She turned from the narrow, dark blue door and came back and sat at the wheel with foot on the sidewalk. “There’s a notice. They’ve been shut down.”

She pulled her leg in and closed her door. “Egg rolls it is,” she said.

“Guaranteed the greasiest, most irresistible taste of Asia you’ll ever put in your mouth.”

She parked and Alyssa held the chainlink security gate open and motioned for Cameron to push through the glass door behind it and go into the convenience store. Alyssa went to the counter. Cameron looked through the top glass of an ice cream case. A clerk appeared.

Alyssa called over her shoulder, “How many do you want?”

“I don’t know—a couple.”

“We’re getting ten,” she said.

“Okay.”

“You’ll see.”

“Ten of these, please,” she said to the clerk. “And duck sauce, lots of duck sauce.”

Cameron held up a pint of rainbow sherbet. “And this?” he asked.

Bouncing with excitement, she waved him over.

“Those are big,” Cameron said.

Alyssa’s eyes never left the hands wrapping her order in newsprint. “I know, right?” she said.

She asked for double paper bags and paid. Cameron bought the sherbet.

She pulled a fat handful of big, white napkins from the dispenser at the register and ran back to the car like she’d stolen something, laughing. Cameron left his change and hurried after her.

They were on the highway again, laughing.

“What did she do?” Alyssa asked.

“She dead-faced her closed drawer and shrugged, like meh.” And at this Cameron began laughing and couldn’t stop.

Laughing herself but not yet breathlessly, Alyssa made it worse doing versions of dead-face. “Like this or this? This one. Oh here’s one.”

He seemed to forget himself for a moment. Sailing away from his darkened life and somehow got above its clouds, unburdened and completely free. Short of breath, he begged her to stop making faces. She wouldn’t, so he closed his eyes.

He pushed hysterical tears clear of his eyes and sat fully upright, breathing easier, his laughter tapering off. There was a comfortable, smiling quiet holding them in the moment.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“It’s not far.”

“You’re sure about your friend, right?”

“Georgia is solid,” Alyssa said.

“It’s just . . .”

Cameron started a little when Alyssa laid her hand his knee.

“Hey, I know. I got your back,” she said. She drew her hand up to his cheek and stroked it with the back of her fingers.

Far off the highway, a lone rock formation rose above the desert floor, and as the road brought them nearer to the reddened and ancient spire with a hole through its base, Alyssa assured Cameron the car path went all the way to it. Her Mustang miniaturized next to the natural monolith, she parked on its shaded side and pointed upward through the passenger side window.

“When I was little my mom and I used to climb there and reach the Needle’s eye, up there, that hole you saw.”

“Your mother must have been special. I wish mine was like that.”

“I want to tell you something that might sound weird.”

“Do you know me?”

“Renee was a mother to me. The woman who birthed me is in prison for drug smuggling and things—I’m not actually sure what-all, and I don’t care. She’ll never get out, I know that much. Vivian is her younger sister and she was there for me in a different way, but Renee, Vivian’s partner did the mothering. I come here when I miss her.”

“It’s nice you had a mother you miss,” Cameron said.

Alyssa blinked, put her eyebrows together. “How’s that?”

“My turn for weird, I guess. My mom, Susan, I didn’t know for a long time that what she was doing was wrong, all wrong how she did me. I trusted her, I guess, or didn’t know not to. She’s not legally allowed contact with me anymore. And, like, I missed her at first, a little—but now. . .”

“You don’t,” Alyssa said.

“No. And it’s weird. She showed up not long ago, just bam, there she was literally crashing the delivery gate. I was so mad.”

“That isn’t your fault.”

“Maybe. It’s still on me to fix it though.”

Cameron looking anywhere but at Alyssa, spotted the sketchbooks at his feet and retrieved them from the floorboard.

“Anyway, what are these?”

Alyssa smiled the same way she had out on the road talking about Renee. “Those are how I got through losing my mom.”

Cameron opened the top book to a sketched woman, hair French braided handing someone off the page an apple. Alvia, hunched and ready as she often was, perched on a sill in the background.

“Charcoals,” Cameron remarked lifting a a page. A little girl on a park swing, her heels as high as they’ll go, the same hands that held the apple, pushed the swing from the edge of the drawing. A candle burned while a woman in a robe brushed her hair in the dark at a stool in front of a mirror. An easel and rearview of an artist with her hair tied, a crooked kerchief, a brush pointing at the floor in her hand rested at her thigh, her thumb through a smeared color palette held out in the other hand. Hugh stood next to her, as if looking at the painting, too.

“These are beautiful,” Cameron said.

“They are what I remember, the pain and the joy, all the in-betweens. You need all, you know, to live full. And she did, faults and all. Just not for long enough.”

“Did she read to you,” Cameron asked.

“Oh, all the time when I was little.”

“Yeah mine, too.”

“So she wasn’t all bad.”

Alyssa unwrapped an egg roll and gave it Cameron with a packet of duck sauce. She tossed him two napkins. “Ration these,” she said.

“No one is all bad. She taught me to read early, she said, because people judge you by the words you use and you have to start getting them early to have enough,” Cameron said.

“She’s not wrong.”

“Here’s a weird part. I thought she meant people only judge you by your words. I thought that all the way up to about thirteen.”

“You trusted her.”

“I shouldn’t have.”

“You couldn’t know that until after.”

“I should have. It’s so obvious now that it hurts all the time how stupid I was. I don’t miss her and I don’t care if I should.”

“I know what you mean. I barely remember my mother. Aunt Vivian and I are close now, but we weren’t. We bonded when we lost Renee only because we had to get along somehow.”

“Renee,” Cameron said.

Alyssa nodded. “Renee made that happen or it probably wouldn’t have. Viv and I share an acceptance of one another that seems like it should have been obvious all along. Then, it was so simple and imperfect and weirdly normal after, that I felt like shit for everything before. Guilt isn’t the same as stupid, but its close. Renee also did a stupid thing, something she should have known better than to do.”

Cameron waited.

“She cared more about, more for Alvia and Hugh, Vivian and me than she did herself.”

“The sherbet,” Cameron said. “Crap, I forgot spoons.”

“Oh my god. You know what that means, right?” Alyssa said.

“My stupid is showing?” Cameron said

“It means we have to eat dessert right now.”

“How?”

“We improvise.”

She turned onto her knees in the driver seat reaching into the backseat and hauled up her backpack. She took a pen from an outside pocket and dropped the bag into the backseat again. She turned around and held the pen up, miming a stage magician as she made unwanted parts disappear into the back floorboard somewhere. She was left with the empty barrel in her hand that she announced with flourish was the transformation of writing implement to drinking straw.

They passed between them the sherbet, each stirring the rainbow colors together. Alyssa's phone played music by artists Cameron hadn't heard before.

"So, you sing and draw and run marathons. Is there anything else I should know," Cameron said.

"I only draw when I'm sad and I'm not allowed marathons."

"Well that sucks. You'd kill it."

She chuckled. "Or it, me," she said.

"Mind if I look at more sketches?"

Alyssa drew close, touched his face with her fingers then her lips to his.

Chapter 20

Informed

Still fuming from a fight she and Vivian had just finished, Alyssa let Cameron wait outside, unsure how she'd tell him what he needed to hear from no one but her. Standing in her dinette, looking out the box window that afforded a slant view of the delivery bay behind the bakery, she watched the heels of his boots bump the face of the concrete dock. They had run that morning and everything seemed fine then, and it didn't seem not fine now, but something was up. He waited but it hurt a little, too, and she guessed he probably didn't know why it should. His hand went to the place she'd kissed his cheek earlier, reassurance she'd only be a few minutes. He lifted his arm to read his wristwatch. He had an appointment at eleven, she recalled.

Earlier, before the sun was up, Cameron had stood behind her to change out of boots and jeans into running shoes and pants. She was a little gladder to see him than she'd expected and when her hand met his handing over the pedometer she discovered a need to never again be far from his touch. She ached for him. They got a late start.

They had begun at a walk, increasing pace, until, at almost a mile, they reached an easy trot and leveled into a rhythm. Alyssa coached him in the method. He listened, especially when she switched to explaining how to level The Old Man before running a batch and to crawl under and lift the trays at their centers when they get stuck.

She left her apartment and approached him.

She placed her hand on his back, and in a flash, was sitting next to him.

"You're still wearing your apron," she said.

Cameron chuckled, pulling the ends of its tie strings. He moved to take it to the wash bin and Alyssa stopped him with a hand on his thigh.

“There’s a couple things you should know,” she said. “You might have guessed, but you need to hear them from me.”

Cameron’s casual attitude melted as his shoulders sank.

“Don’t be like that,” Alyssa said.

“I’m bracing myself.”

“Look, I know you’ve been through it hard. Seen it. Lived it. I feel it, and just when I think it will pull me under for the last time, I see you again and I’m okay.”

“Wow,” Cameron said.

“Yeah, so I need you need to step away from the ego so no one gets hurt, if that makes sense.”

“Perfect sense.”

“You’re not the only one affected, okay?”

“I get that.”

“My aunt got a note from the Home about your appointments so she could schedule around them. Your therapist is my aunt, by marriage, Viv’s sister-in-law to be exact.”

“Okay. Much smaller town than I realized, but no bleeding yet.”

“She and Viv are on their way back to speaking terms.” She paused, irrationally waiting for an invitation to elaborate.

“Why not,” Cameron asked.

“Okay so, I was like 14 when all this went down, maybe 13—I don’t really remember because I had ninety-nine of my own browser tabs open a hundred percent of the time back then.”

Her frankness drew a smile from Cameron.

“The ravens you and Viv were watching that first run in the Rhino, they were Renee’s. Back in high school, she and Sabine rescued them. Something happened that Viv won’t talk about, so I don’t know what exactly, but I know Renee went on a trip, took the birds and came home without them. A few days later she was killed.”

“Mothers are overrated.”

She shot him a look.

“I was kidding.”

“You weren’t.”

“You got me. I’m an asshole. Go on.”

“Anyway, Viv tried getting them back after the funeral and couldn’t. I remember helping with a staple gun in the attic until my hands cramped, but it was for nothing because Sabine wouldn’t even answer texts.”

Relieved this was all much less about him than he’d learned to expect, he lightened his tone. “So a feud?”

“Less revengy than that, more butt-hurtsy. Viv won’t talk shit about her, so that says something. Anyway, Viv and me got in a fight because I thought you needed to know about any potential drama between the people you work for and your therapist and she’s being weird about it. That and we’ve been fight about the other thing, too.”

“Why do I need to know this?”

“Because I’d be a hypocrite if I only told you only one source of big drama by itself.”

“And what is that?”

She pointed her finger at him and herself a few times. “This, whatever is happening between us, I want to let it grow.”

“I want that, too.”

“Stop talking,” she said. “You might save room to change your mind.”

“Okay.”

“I’m dying.”

Cameron winced. “What do you mean?”

“You know, that thing that happens, heart stops, then breathing, you get cold and follow the white light?”

Cameron’s hazel gaze travelled down to the tarmac in front of his feet.

“I was mad at Viv for a while, for not telling you. Then I was going to and didn’t. Then I wanted her to again. Anyway that’s how you ended up with a phone. I was really mad at Viv until I realized it was way too late for you to get news like this secondhand. But then I was afraid if you knew, if you’d been told up front, would we be where we are?” she said.

“I don’t know,” Cameron said.

“So probably not.”

“I didn’t say that and I don’t know why you were mad at Vivian. I don’t know why you didn’t tell me before.”

“I don’t either, but I’m telling you now. I have a rare congenital condition with a long name that I hate saying, but it means one day, without warning, my heart will stop.”

“That’s everybody, Alyssa.”

“Except, not everybody has a genetic kill switch.”

“Maybe not genetic so much.”

“I’ve already outlived every prognosis.”

“So the doctors are wrong.”

“Not...totally.”

“Damn. Okay.”

“So, yeah, if you want out, I get it.”

“That... no, where do you get that idea?” Cameron said.

Chapter 21

The Thinking Hole

Since they had been properly introduced, Cameron made it a point to use the ravens' names. "So it's weird, right? I'm not sure how I feel about it yet, Hugh. Actually, yes I am. Maybe."

Cameron spoke without much aim, not closer or further from the truth of how he felt about Alyssa. "It's different and scary, too—I don't have to thank her for sharing my air. I can be having a good day or a bad one and she's still be there either way. I don't understand her, like really at all, but there's trust and I can't really explain that either."

Alvia preferred wide perches with something to her back and didn't have a problem going to ground. Hugh preferred to perch where he could feel important and pretend to see everything.

"I feel you, Hugh. But you'll never see everything coming, most things actually, especially with just one eye open. Alvia's strategy makes more sense, cover your back and stay ready."

It was Friday. The rest of the crew was at the dormitory now, doing an early field day. They mopped locker areas, cleaned the shower room, windows, walls, blinds, polished floors, the works. "They will do this all day, you know. I mean there's clean and there's crime-scene-clean. Soon as Cody Hershel lets go the hot water, they'll switch."

He lifted the tarp behind him and emptied a jar of food he'd saved from scraped dinner plates doing kitchen chores the night before. Homestyle bean dip, fajita-grilled chicken some sour cream and broken tortilla chips. The ravens alternately eyed the food and Cameron's face until he stepped back and dropped the heavy canvas tarpaulin, hiding the food from their sight.

He went forward, stepping into the open space of the thinking hole Rudy had gifted him, relieved to be enclosed.

“They’ll be ironing shirts and starching jeans, shining boots, showering, shaving and snapping towels, because tomorrow they have a big Do out in town. Respect, a hundred percent. Still, I think they’re all cogs in a cult fundraising machine, but what do I know? I’d have to go if not for the bakery.”

He saw movement at the tarp, but they were not there. He lifted a stick and used it to reach cardboard covering a window, and let in light. The shaft of sunlight angling down onto the cool, hard floor. He heard the birds rustling and croaking within the car bodies, bypassing the food, which proved, again, hunger wasn’t why they came. “Can anybody tell me how picking up litter is rehabilitative? Like, if you want to teach poverty, ask someone to expect apathy of the world, place upon him the burden of its remedy and punish him for refusing to accept responsibility that isn’t his, until he breaks.”

He had heard something between breaths, and he wasn’t really sure what he should think it was. He listened for a long time, while, in his mind he replayed the sound he’d heard, trying to imagine how wind, or air humming through a stack of car bodies, wondering if a change in temperature might explain it, reaching for any rational explanation for what he heard. He failed convincing himself the creepy, toneless sound were not the spoken words, *You’re sure about that?*

Alvia came into the light, struggling with her foot, righting her balance. She left her wings ready in case. She looked to her left then right, appraising. Her jet plumage, draped with a single sheet of sun, iridescent, not a yard from his feet. Her roughness reminded Cameron of a rough character. He imagined a stub cigar in her beak and flattop hair job.

△

It was a session caring for the raven he recalled.

“Slow down. Remember. Someone walking straight at them is scary,” Sabine said.

“Yes. Sorry.”

“You’re sure about that?”

Said the same way, he thought.

He’d carried the food while Sabine dragged the charged water hose. It was best to set each dish of the meal well apart. That evening, there were cheese cubes, gherkin pickles—Alvia’s favorite—sardines, and some stale Triscuits Sabine had in her pantry.

“Hey, stop. Look at me. What’s going on today?” Sabine said.

“We have to feed them,” Cameron said.

“Set it down right here.”

“The whole tray?”

“The whole tray.”

“But . . .”

“They’ll manage. Lets go.”

Cameron set the tray down on a thick patch of mulch.

“I got some news,” he said.

“Share.”

△

He smiled, having no reason to be nervous, and realized it had been a very long time since he had done that. He thought how he might arrange his thinking hole.

“Alright, the basics. Light from the south wall. The overhead is tarred and mortared—god that must’ve taken forever.”

Rudy’s work and lot of it, had rendered a ceiling pitch as midnight even with every cardboard blind opened wide. “A table. Better seating for sure. I think I can make a print rack for shirts. I just need some plywood—no I have that spool—and something to make stays with. Good cardboard might work—paint it with primer—no slip. See, when you have a shirt stretched and flat and the marker drags... it’s bad, my dude. And I only have six t-shirts, see. I get an allowance, but also more clothes in spring. Hold the cash. It’ll be great, you watch.”

His present known furniture inventory was an old cable spool, three railroad cross ties, two broken chairs and a few barricade fencing pickets. He had cardboard for blocking or filtering sun in through passenger windows of the sedans forming the south wall. He had a broom handle with a screw through its tip for moving that cardboard aside. He began to think what else he’d need.

“Need is a tricky thing. If you only need a little, you’re only a little weak. All I really wanted was to stay at one school for a year. Train, compete in cross country. I mean I told her, yeah? I don’t think she got it. And the wrong name-birth certificate-thing plays in somewhere. There’s no way it doesn’t.”

He heard wings rustle, familiar, now, as Alvia’s mode. Somewhere else in the dark recesses, a squawk sounded like, *Meer-Irk*. He went for the broom handle, raised it and opened all the cardboard shades, flooding the north side of the space with light. Hugh hopped and flapped once, keeping his balance on an upended backseat bench Cameron hadn’t seen before. Seating wasn’t the only thing stored in the structure or tucked in beside it. There were fencing poles, another cache of large cardboard pieces, coffee cans of various sizes filled with screws,

another with a putty knife stuck in cured, adhesive tar and sand mixture, a decent shovel and a pick head on half a handle. There was a pan, like the kind used to find gold, with a dry, orange bullet hole through it. In jars with lids he found various baubles all worn with desert blast, agate pearls, all of them candy-shelled red to lemon and sugar-dusted. There were snips of galvanized barbed wire specimens, their barbs dulled to nubs with wind and rust. One had a USA Brand ring, once red, another, US Parks Service, green, now both faded things, taken away things, still important yet no longer what they used to be.

Δ

“It’s stupid. I barely know her.”

“You owe the Jar a nickel.”

“Shit. For what?”

“How you feel is never stupid.”

Cameron took a long breath and let it out slow. He believed her, but he was angry. His gaze lost in the empty air in front of him, he breathed deep again. Sabine seemed to him far off and insignificant when he thought of his world without Alyssa in it.

“She’s dying. Alyssa. She told me it could be any day. Don’t know which way is up right now.

Chapter 22

Hope

Wednesday, November 4, 2015

Cameron rang the doorbell and a few seconds later, Sabine opened the door just long enough to direct him around to the back porch.

The gate stood open with a note on a sheet of copy paper tacked to it, 'Leave me Open,' it read. Stepping between the gate's pillars, he continued several feet under the aviary's wire mesh roof, studying the four oaks that were its posts and then let his eye travel the top of the wall enclosing the yard. Something made him visibly uncomfortable. From the window, Sabine couldn't guess what had turned his face from curious to dreadful, but his response to whatever it was moved him quicker toward the porch.

Top and bottom halves of the screen door also standing open, he wasted no time with the stairs and showed no reaction to the chaos of the porch itself. At the far left end, though Sabine couldn't see the furniture from her vantage point, he spotted the four-piece matching wicker set, three chairs and a round table, and soon left her line of sight.

She poured coffee into two mugs, set the mugs on a tray with, a spoon, vanilla creamer and sugar. She stepped onto the porch.

"Good morning," Sabine said.

"It feels like two in the afternoon."

A response in full sentence, she thought, was a good sign.

"Coffee?"

"Sure."

“Before we start, today I think it’s important to talk about adjusting the goal of therapy to include Alyssa. We can even have a session with her.”

“Okay,” Cameron said.

“I want a clear understanding between us,” she said. “I think your trauma intersects with your mother. She waited for response.

“Maybe.”

“Going forward, your mother should come up. She isn’t my concern; you are. Say what needs saying, as in what won’t go away unless you do. If you start avoiding again, or stop trying to reach into pain, I won’t be able to help you,” she said.

Cameron sipped his coffee and set down the mug.

“Why is Alyssa Rivera so important to Cameron Oren?”

Cameron’s thumbnail found his pocket seam.

“How did you feel when she told you?”

“You know what? You might be right. I’m probably on my own with this one.”

“That isn’t an answer and doesn’t change how you felt,” Sabine pressed.

“I was, uh—surprised, hurt, hopeful, sad, aching and angry all together.”

“Why surprised?”

“I should have seen it, sensed it,” Cameron said.

“Unless you weren’t to know. Have you thought about her privacy? What if you had known? Would it be the same, what you and she share now?”

“I don’t know.”

“If you could travel back in time would you change anything?”

Cameron didn’t hesitate. “No.”

“And the anger?”

“My mother taught me well. Eventually everyone leaves and you have a choice—go with or stay.”

Sabine caught sight of Alvia, dragging a blue and yellow rope toy across the yard. Relieved they had come back, she stood and scanned for Hugh. After a moment of searching, she spotted him on a branch near the opposite end of the porch, his one good eye fastened upon his mate’s every movement.

“They came back because they heard us talking, didn’t they?” Cameron asked.

“Every time,” Sabine said.

Δ

An old friend, Shame, traced his every vein, with its long cold fingers, with a warning to get gone, to leave the session, walk back through the yard and take off toward his thinking hole. But it was too late, the blood had gone from his legs and his lips.

“It’s not fair,” he said. He winced, hearing himself shout. His lungs reached for breath. His vision narrowed into hazy circles. His lips paled and with both hands, he gripped the wicker chair’s armrest.

Δ

“Hey! Cameron! Hey! Breathe!”

Her client blinked several times.

Sabine shook him, gentle hands on his shoulders. “You’re okay. Deep breath, now,” she said. “That’s it.”

He focused on her face and seemed to come around. His grip on the chair relaxed. He shook his head. He was pale and a thin sweat had shined on his face.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to make trouble.”

“There is nothing you just did that merits apology,” Sabine said. “You had a panic attack.

“We’re going to feed the ravens. How’s that sound?” Sabine asked.

Hugh and Alvia were on the porch near where they sat. Sabine removed the red lid from a glass dish of cheese cubes and tossed each raven one. Cameron’s expression brightened.

Handing the dish to him. She sat down again, leaving the three mutually absorbed with one another.

That’s it. We’re feeding birds and everything is okay. It’s nice out, the walls block all the world outside them and nothing is coming down on your head; you’re safe.

Chapter 23

What Matters

Saturday, November 7, 2015

His only litter patrol of the week was the late Saturday afternoon route, covering the historic district. A clutch of boutiques and shops catering to out-of-town spa and retreat customers, it had only light foot traffic that time of year.

Dusk in November began drawing its long yawn at about four p.m.. He put his melancholy mood that day down to being outside that time of day the sun made copper everything it touched, when he was normally running with Alyssa. The crew all carried safety-yellow mules, stiff poly-fiber sacks with a shoulder strap for the trash they picked up. They crinkled in chorus with the legs they swiped as the crew of three walked through their route, covering gutters and walks down one side of a street and up other side. Wearing reflective vests, armed with lances and grabbers for collecting litter, they worked the streets lined the booksellers, the traffic circle around the town fountain, aiming to finish and get out of sight as the coffee confectioners bid goodnight to their last customers, closing the iron gates to the patio courtyards, frontages bounded by low, pastel walls. The route wasn't residential and didn't have attached to it a strict no-talking rule.

He looked up from bagging a purple-stained popsicle stick and Rudy was probably organizing the next pass a block over, but—it was Alyssa, out on a run, who had captured all his attention. In her own zone, she was unsurprisingly oblivious to their presence as she passed on the other side of the street, at speed, singing.

Rudy was shouting Cameron's name.

Δ

“We’ve discussed this, Cameron. I mind the time and, in exchange, you’re free to end the session early for any stated reason.”

“The Great Compromise. How silly of me.”

“Sarcasm is indicative of latent rage.”

“You’re repeating yourself, Doc.”

“And you’re trashing settled territory hoping to avoid something new. I’m not a doctor—we’ve discussed this and agreed upon acceptable address to one another. I am the session’s timekeeper, and lastly, sarcasm is only okay if you’re willing to unpack it. Now, unless you’d rather end our time today, what are you trying not to say?”

Cameron scored the seam of his pants leg with his thumbnail, looking hard at the floor between his feet. His jaw clenched and released. His thumb traveled again up and down over denim. He felt his face begin to stiffen. Cold darkness trickled down his back, into his toes and leached into the concrete floor of Sabine’s office. Every digit of him would later feel today’s session.

“I can’t say what I want to.”

“You are safe here, Cameron.”

“It isn’t that. I have it, running around inside, screaming sometimes, but not the words. I can’t get the things I really think to my mouth in one piece.”

“Would you tell me something, Cameron?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“What matters to you today?”

Δ

Vivian scooted by, trailing her niece in the Rhino, waving at Cameron.

“Oo! she one fine piece.”

“That’s who he be getting a ride to school with.”

“Gimme some o’that, say yeah.”

Cameron, listening to her sing verses from Simon & Garfunkel’s “The Sound of Silence” watching Alyssa’s flawless form keep its rhythm, her ponytail swaying across her shoulder blades printing under her suit, he hadn’t bothered to determine who was saying what behind him. When she had made her turn, out toward the warehouse district, and Vivian was completely out of sight, he turned on his crew.

“Never talk like that about her. You have no idea.”

Δ

Sabine pressed Cameron to stay with her.

“What matters? Like how do you mean?” he asked.

“Is there anything you care about that you’d move heaven and earth to protect?”

“That’s complicated.”

“Share.”

“It’s complicated because it’s how I felt about Susan, once, a really long time ago. The bakery and her. . . is going good, better than good and it scares me but that isn’t the complicated part, or . . . maybe it is—not sure.”

“Stay with what you know.”

“That’s it isn’t it, the great, big rub in it all. Nobody knows anything.”

“Think local, not global, Cameron.”

“Okay-okay. Fine. I’d do anything for Alyssa . . .and Vivian, basically.”

“That kind of regard usually goes both ways.”

“I want it to, I just can’t figure out why they care. I mean, mornings, like, my hours make it so I have to eat breakfast there, okay? Alyssa is vegetarian too, eats eggs though—I don’t. Vivian notices, never says anything—I sure didn’t—and hands me a grilled cheese when she makes Alyssa eggs. Like, what is she doing, why? What does she want?”

“Cameron, listen to me. Sometimes we punish everyone for the crimes of some. Vegetarian to Vivian meant what she experienced with her niece. She adjusted to meet your need. She wants you to eat breakfast and she’s found a way.”

“Yeah but why does she care so much?”

“It’s probably because she sees worth in Cameron Oren.”

Sabine’s level, gray eyes widened as she lifted them from the notepad resting on her knee. She clicked her ballpoint pen closed and open again. Her lower jaw went sideways before she could stop the tell.

“What?” Cameron asked.

Sabine Cleary didn’t answer, standing then walking to her desk. She bent a little to open its lap drawer and dropped her pen and pad into it. She closed it and faced Cameron.

“Why do you care about Alvia and Hugh?”

“Umm, at first, it was because I thought they needed me.”

“And when you found out they didn’t, did you lose interest?”

“No. Opposite.”

“Why?”

“Well, if they didn’t need the food and they had a safe place to be, then they were hanging out because they wanted to.”

“Our time is almost up, and I want to end on this.”

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No, Cameron. No. Quite the opposite. This is progress, a win. I’ll see you Wednesday.”

Chapter 24

The Need

Tuesday, November 10, 2015

Long before the sun was up, Cameron was in his thinking hole, checking his phone, as he had every morning since Vivian insisted he have it. It was dead. The portable charger must have needed charging. He checked his watch, 4:35. *12; 1+2; 3, unity.* He'd meet her, he decided, at normal time, change into running gear in her apartment, apologize if she wanted him there earlier. No big deal, he told himself. Can't see everything coming.

Cameron and Alyssa called the path a dozen feet east of the tarp door "the cut." No more than a gap between walls and fences of properties backed up to one another, it was not properly an alley, more a footpath down the hill. It emptied onto Fischer's Trace, almost directly across the street from the bakery.

The walk took eight minutes. *4:43, 11, completion.* Standing on the loading dock, he debated knocking on her door before regular time. If she had messaged him and gotten no answer, she would have met him in the cut if she wanted him. She'd done it before.

November mornings lingered long under twilight in Cole's Junction. Interior light coming through the small security glass in the delivery door told Cameron Vivian was in the kitchen. She wasn't expecting him until 6:05, after Alyssa's run.

He took the stairs off the loading dock and crossed into the gravel lot, where Alyssa and Vivian park their personal vehicles, making his way under the bright, white security light flooding the foot of the black iron staircase that led to Alyssa's apartment.

He thought of them dressing together, of her smile, like a secret between them, wondering how they were possible, never before dreamed. *Where have you been*, Cameron often mused with her fingers running through his hair. It would keep. He'd wait. She would have met him if she had more in mind than a run.

The box window of her apartment was dark at 4:49. She often dressed in the dark. She'd have had a light on for him. Congratulating himself on his instincts, he sat a few steps up the open, iron staircase, content to wait eleven minutes. He thought about trying out for the track and field team, come January.

Rudy had a point. Everybody won out if he just went with it.

Alyssa, he realized, had made trusting Rudy, and to some extent the rest of them, easier.

The last of a moon, waning toward new, had risen past a clear, cold horizon at 4:54. He moved to the first landing and waited, listening for Alyssa to unlock her door, the signal she gave for him step inside and change. Cameron smiled to himself, anticipating the sincere good morning she'd wish him and the smile that went with it, infecting afresh him with her love for life, for whatever was next. He climbed the remaining, grate-work stairs, but at 5:00 there was no light on inside. He wondered if she was still asleep. Trying the door handle, a note fell when he cracked the door open.

Babe,

Messaged you but it was early, early. Not running today. Didn't sleep well. Taking a long walk instead. I'm down for the long way to school, if you want.

* Winks awkwardly *

A.

Cameron, though excited at Alyssa's suggestion, was conflicted. He read his watch. Clocking into the kitchen an hour early to make sure that slow route to school happened would lead to questions and something told Cameron Vivian wasn't aware her niece had broken routine, or that her niece and Cameron were intimate. She said she was not running, but Cameron had doubts. She didn't do anything at walking pace. She wouldn't, he told himself. Surely not.

From below him, he heard a door moan on its hinges and bang closed. He saw movement in the lot and crouched low, looking through the grate of the landing and scanning between balusters wrought after ivy. It was Vivian, wearing a heavy, corduroy coat and a scarf.

She moved with nervous purpose, fast-walking a straight line to Alyssa's Mustang. She unlocked the driver side. Aggressive. The interior dome light lit her strained face as she dug through the glove compartment. He almost gave in to a twitch to flee inside, when she closed the car door and turned her attention to Alyssa's apartment door, sliding something like a document, a paper, into her coat pocket. Cameron froze, staying low, his back glued to the wall, not a couple feet from the door. Vivian headed his direction. He'd never seen Vivian act this way. She hesitated at the foot of the staircase, had her phone in her hand. Vivian, almost directly below him, leaned her hip against the handrail, rested one foot on the bottom tread and held the phone to her ear. Her free hand in her coat pocket, she bent somewhat at the waist, looking at her feet.

Inside, near the door where Alyssa kept her keys, Cameron heard the distinct heartbeat vibration pattern of her phone. A cold, soft breeze moved her scarf. Alyssa's phone stopped buzzing.

He had another chance to get inside when Vivian pulled the phone down, looked at the voicemail screen half a moment and disconnected the call. He didn't move. She scrolled, then raised the phone to her ear again. "Pick up, *mijo*," he heard her say.

Voicemail picked up.

“Cameron you have to call me, please, when you get this.”

Something about how she sounded filled Cameron with dread. Before he thought better, he stood and called to her, “I’m here. My phone died, so I came at normal time.”

“Where is she?”

Cameron cringed inside. He might have winced. “Her note said she was taking a long walk this morning. Said she wasn’t running.” Now she’d want to see the note, he thought.

“Get in the car,” Vivian said. “Right now,” she ordered.

The classic purred to life and Vivian handled it like an old friend. They turned left on Main and went into the city’s flats. Vivian’s deep brown eyes flared, quaking and red. “Did you stand her up?” she demanded to know.

Cameron spoke before he thought about his tone. “What?” he asked.

Vivian came back sharper. “Last you knew, were you supposed to run with Alyssa this morning, yes?”

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“She must have messaged me about walking and I didn’t get it. I don’t think. . . She said she didn’t sleep well.”

Cameron smoothed the paper folded in his coat pocket, the note, with his thumb and finger, fighting back panic. She was out for a walk. Vivian was overreacting, right? She just forgot her phone. “You wanna see the note?”

“Watch your side,” Vivian said.

Cameron scanned the sidewalks cloaked in predawn gray for movement, a flash of the reflective on Alyssa's runners, the sway of her ponytail.

"You don't think . . . I mean she knows—she wouldn't . . ."

"Let's just find her, okay?" Vivian said.

Vivian took a right turn into the municipal plaza and eased toward the curb in front of DMV.

"I can drop you here and meet you where the walking plaza lets out on the other side," Vivian said. An ambulance approached ahead of them, passed and opened its siren. Vivian paled. Cameron stiffened.

She made a three point turn. Soon, the siren was loud and steady, as red and yellow strobes pounded reality into the car's interior. They said nothing when the siren stopped and the ambulance met a man from the fire department who lifted the vehicle barricade to the nature reserve behind the hospital. Vivian, staying close to the ambulance, left the fireman shouting at the barricade. The ambulance passed the footpath to Sabine's office traveling the same lane Cameron and Alyssa had run so many times to reach the bench and compare heartbeats. Cameron's insides went cold. He trembled. The ambulance slowed, turned aside and stopped at the footpath leading into the last abode's courtyard. Vivian had the Mustang parked and had left the car before Cameron got free of his seatbelt. Short of breath, he followed her.

One of the ambulance attendants, a small woman moving like she was full of fire stepped into Vivian's path with her hands raised. "Ma'am. Ma'am," she said. Vivian hesitated then tried ducking past her, a bad strategy against someone half her size. Cameron found his feet rooted in place. They talked.

Behind the women, two men negotiated a gurney, rattling its joints over the hard path. Cameron wasn't ready to admit there was no way she had walked this far from home. The shortest route here from Fischer's Trace was six miles, over an hour, walked. Walking bored her. He stymied such thinking, recalling the note. She couldn't sleep, it had said. She'd left early, he told himself. He stayed there on that toehold, digging in, terrified, he might fly apart. Facts alone seldom make a truth, he thought. Even Sabine thought so.

His feet were moving, following Vivian. The fiery woman followed, carrying gear. "Ma'am, I understand, but paramedics aren't authorized," she shouted.

Vivian had Cameron's hand, and they got around the wide bend before them.

Cameron stopped when he saw the two joggers in black running suits, a man and a woman. The man kneeled with his back to the bench, at Alyssa's side, counting, "... nine-ten-eleven-twelve. Breath," he said, and leaned back, flexing his fingers. The woman, doing Alyssa's breathing for her, blew into Alyssa's mouth four, hard breaths.

Vivian stood next to Cameron, horror engraved on her face. One of the paramedics handling the gurney tapped the man's shoulder and took his place. The man looked at his watch as he moved aside, "Twenty-nine minutes," he said.

2+9; 11

The paramedic nodded, lacing his fingers, raising his body, and rolling the heel of his hand into place. "One, two, three, four. . ."

The other paramedic took the other jogger's place. He also mouthed the count, tilting her head back a little more. The small woman, working around the others, had scissored through

Alyssa's green and orange suit along her rib cage and chest L-fashion and applied a pad under her arm, another on her chest. She pushed a button.

“Charging,” she called. “Clear in three, two—”

The other rescuers went back on their heels, hands up. The charge seized Alyssa and dropped her.

The airway paramedic placed two fingers on Alyssa's neck and shook his head. He gave her two breaths and the two began again counting breaths and compressions.

“Charging,” the defibrillator operator said.

The woman jogger, now standing, walked straight to Vivian and forced her into a hug. Vivian embraced her and shook without a sound leaving her. The woman held her tighter.

The man stood with Cameron. Checking his watch, he placed a hand on Cameron's shoulder and tried nudging him away.

Cameron removed from him and went closer, watching the defibrillator light blink, slower than it had the first time. He'd only seen her that still while she slept.

“Clear in three, two—”

Charge number two arched her and let her collapse.

“I got nothing,” airway paramedic said.

The defibrillator operator checked her watch and announced the unit charged as she stood, shaking her head. Cameron didn't notice she'd walked past him. He heard her and Vivian exchange words while he watched the blinking charge light struggle to get bright. A third would do it, he told himself. It could not be that Alyssa was beyond his reach. It could not. It wouldn't be real. It would be a bad dream—the worst—but not real. The defibrillator operator walked past Cameron again.

“Call it,” she said.

The airway paramedic, ready at Alyssa’s head, dropped back on his heels, wiping perspiration from his face. He looked at his watch. “T-O-D: 5:24 a.m..”

Vivian had her arms around him. He struggled but couldn’t get free.

“They can’t just quit like that! She can come back,” she shouted.

She held him, turned him around so he faced the ambulance, spoke into his ear.

“Hey, hey. Listen to me. Let me get you to Sabine,” she said. “You don’t have to do this by yourself.”

It was not through his own eyes that he saw paramedics loading Alyssa, under a blue sheet, into the ambulance, nor through his own ears that he heard heavy doors *clunk, clunk*.

“She was walking. If she was running she’d have been on the bench.”

“How do you know?” Vivian asked.

“I just do,” Cameron said. He felt numb and removed from the world, as if the hand on the Mustang’s door handle wasn’t his, it wasn’t him sitting in the seat, putting on the seatbelt, hearing it click from far away.

△

“I need a restroom,” Cameron said. He’d leave, he thought. To where, he was sure. Everyone flies, sometime, he thought. Maybe from home or in search of one, maybe from failure or toward it, from death or toward it but it was, in some form, inevitable for everyone. He had to leave while he still had fight in him.

The morning had turned burnt gold when Vivian pulled into Dino’s Corner Mart and parked. Cameron went inside and came back out. He carried a ping-pong paddle, the men’s restroom key, attached around the side of the building. He’d leave, he thought. Leave the key

in the door and get gone. To where he didn't know, to find his mother or David Huntington, maybe both. He'd tell his mother she was wrong about freedom, it was not free for the taking and never without consequence. Cages are no place for birds. And David—Cameron had to see him. Realize what he'd done and promise him he'd never forget.

He slid the key into the lock, took his hand away and froze facing the door. Go, he told himself. Go while she can't see. But he couldn't get his feet moving.

Someone was talking. "Hey, I forgot to tell ya," the clerk said, "the light isn't working."

Cameron turned the key and pushed. "Thanks," he said. He went inside and wedged the door open enough for light with the paddle.

On the sink, mired in dispensed soap was a curled, black feather the size of his thumb. He ran water at the sink's tap, letting it run until it was coldest and splashed his face with several handfuls. He looked at his reflection, into his eyes, remembering their first time.

She wanted to know him, all of him, she said, laying on the quilt tucked into a cove in the eye of the Needle. Driving back to Cole's Junction, she counted, "Three, two, one." He heard her giggle as if she was standing there.

They cranked their windows down together. Why window porpoises, he'd asked.

For fun, she'd said, as if everyone knew that.

He had looked at his curved hand in the wind, restrained but free, forced but willed and had seen for a moment what he could be. Her practiced hand rode the wind streams just like a dolphin playing in surf. He'd never forget that smile, that wink.

He'd stay, and the part of him new to weakness would seek solitude and shatter again.

